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SOMATIC APPROACHES TO TEACHING ASIA ONLINE

A CASE STUDY OF TAIJIQUAN TRAINING FOR ACTORS

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In the time of pandemic, many of us find ourselves caught between the choices of either teaching our subject online or not at all. In this essay, drawing upon the example of a college-level theatre course called Tai Chi for Actors, I will make the case that somatic pedagogies offer useful alternatives to traditional lecture and discussion formats for teaching about Asia online.¹ While my focus in the chapter is on a college-level course, I conclude with several modifications for teaching younger students.

Somatics: Definitions

The term “somatics,” originally coined by philosopher Thomas Hanna,² generally refers to psychophysical practices that enhance awareness of the body from a first-person, or insider, viewpoint. As Hanna wrote in 1986:

Somatics is the field which studies the soma: namely, the body as perceived from within by first-person perception. When a human being is observed from the outside—i.e., from a third-person viewpoint—the phenomenon of a human *body is* perceived. But, when this same

human being is observed from the first-person viewpoint of his own proprioceptive senses, a categorically different phenomenon is perceived: the human soma.

Hanna explains this proprioceptive element—i.e., stimuli perceived internally—in terms of the relationship between the “sensorium” (the sensory apparatus as a whole) and “motorium” (the parts of the organism concerned with movement, as opposed to sensation). He notes, “It is not possible to have a distinct sensory perception of any external objective situation without having a distinct motor response already established.”³ This process, he postulates, is a selective one whereby the internal awareness one places on, for example, a knee requires relaxation of the motor neurons around the knee while inhibiting the other neural areas of the body. Thus, consciousness “is not a static ‘faculty of the mind’ nor a ‘fixed’ sensory-motor pattern. To the contrary, it is a learned sensory-motor function. And the range of this learning determines 1) how much we can be conscious of, and 2) how many things we can voluntarily do.”⁴

Somatic Pedagogies in the Arts and Humanities

As a broad conceptual approach that associates practiced, first-person understandings of bodily experience with movement, somatics has become particularly well-known in three areas: healing arts, performance arts, and social sciences, chief among them somatic psychology, of which there are at least half a dozen doctoral-level programs in the United States. A brief discussion about each of these areas will provide a pedagogical context for the more recent trend of applying somatic methods to traditional liberal arts and humanities subjects.⁵

In his lifelong work on somatics and healing, Hanna took a particular interest in the body awareness and healing methods of Moshe Feldenkrais.⁶ Along the way, he also brought attention to the deep tissue massage method known as Rolfing; to the Alexander Technique, a nineteenth-century body retraining method initially developed to address actor vocal issues; and, as Mullan notes, he indirectly brought attention to Pilates and other methods steeped in the German physical culture tradition.⁷

In the realm of the performing arts, dance has been the focal point for somatic training methods, though music, theatre, and opera have all taken up the somatics banner in one form or another.⁸ Dance and somatic therapist Martha Eddy, writing at a fairly early stage of the somatic dance training movement, noted, “In the past decade ‘somatics’ has burst onto the dance scene. With the recent proliferation of practices, somatics has become an accepted mode of dance learning. However, despite the recent popularity of the term and its growing practices, somatics is not a monolith.”⁹ In the past two decades, writing and research about somatics and the

application of somatics to dance have indeed proliferated, covering such topics as “somatics as radical pedagogy”¹⁰ and “ecosomatic” pedagogy in dance training.¹¹

In the social sciences, humanities, and other fields, somatic pedagogies have also generated substantial interest. Summarizing the results of an interdisciplinary symposium on somatic pedagogies, Belmar decries the classroom as “a site of ‘from the neck up’ processing, where the body fades into the background of all that mental labour.”¹² Rigg applies Buddhist mindfulness techniques to management training.¹³ And Shusterman, writing about the application of “somaesthetics” to the humanities, argues “that because the body is an essential and valuable dimension of our humanity, it should be recognized as a crucial topic of humanistic study and experiential learning.”¹⁴

“Taijiquan for Actors”: A Case Study in Somatic Pedagogy

Taijiquan (aka “tai chi”) is a Chinese martial art most commonly taught for health, meditation, and self-defense.¹⁵ It has also gained some traction as an actor training method, and several college and university theatre programs in North America offer taijiquan courses or incorporate taijiquan into movement training for actors.¹⁶ In spring 2020, I taught Tai Chi for Actors for the first time as a one-credit elective for theatre and film majors at the University of Central Arkansas.¹⁷ The class met twice weekly from early January through mid-March, when it went entirely online due to COVID-19. As of this writing, Tai Chi for Actors will be offered as an entirely online, asynchronous course during the fall 2020 semester. I begin with a summary of the spring 2020 course and a discussion of how the obstacles encountered in that course (both related to and aside from the pandemic) led to a course design that more firmly integrated Chinese philosophy, medical theory, poetry, and painting. I then describe the plan for the fall 2020 revision of the course.

Tai Chi for Actors: Spring 2020 Version

The initial objective for Tai Chi for Actors was for students to learn about a third of the 108-move Wu (Jianquan) style of taijiquan by the end of the sixteen-week term.¹⁸ The first several weeks of the semester focused on taijiquan movement principles, such as holding one’s head erect as if suspended by a string, relaxing the shoulders, dropping the tailbone, and clearly differentiating between the weighted and unweighted foot. Students also learned the opening move of the Wu style solo slow form, “raise hands.” Reference to basic movement principles opened a door for discussion about the name “taijiquan” and the Daoist principles the name evoked. Most of the students were already familiar with the *taijitu* (“diagram of the supreme ultimate,” or, colloquially, “the yin-yang symbol”), and we were able to use the symbol as a common reference point to understand movement principles like “empty vs. full,” “soft vs. hard,” and “energized vs. collapsed.”

As the semester progressed, we developed a system of repetition that allowed us to emphasize movement principles and internal body awareness. Key to this approach was the requirement for students to keep a notebook, turned in weekly, where they could describe technical problems (such as forgetting a move), as well as somatic experiences (e.g., warmth or tingling flowing throughout the body during practice).

In mid-March, the university moved entirely to online classes. For a movement-based class, this presented unique challenges. Not only did students have to struggle with varying degrees of internet access and camera quality, they also had to contend with the confusion and depression that immediately hit so many of us during that period. At the same time, it became clear that online delivery entailed pedagogical and safety challenges that I had not previously considered. To at least partly address those concerns, I enrolled in a remote seminar on teaching movement arts online conducted by Jeremy Williams of Convergences Collective. A number of other companies also offered online trainings and workshops to assist faculty suddenly thrown into the deep end of the COVID-19 swimming pool. Following training, the focus moved away from learning Wu style taijiquan and toward learning some much simpler, easier to remember energy development and deep relaxation forms (*qigong*, or “vital energy work”). Aside from simply acknowledging the technical difficulties of teaching taijiquan online, I also felt compelled to teach the students exercises that would reduce, rather than exacerbate, their stress and that might conceivably build their resistance to illness. Recording and sharing the short qigong sets in advance, I was able to teach these both asynchronously and synchronously, and students learned a basic set of about eight movements by the end of the term.

Tai Chi for Actors: Fall 2020 Version

For fall 2020, I have both flipped and enhanced the course content so that students are introduced to basic conceptual frameworks concurrently with their movement practice. The course is now divided into four three-week units that can be taught online, are largely asynchronous, and involve at least two hours of independent work outside of class each week. Each unit has specific movement objectives and accompanying Asian Studies objectives. Each also includes a specific, asynchronous online component. The units include the following:

1. Somatic Toolkits, Ancient and Modern

Movement Learning Objective: For students to acquire a habit of attention regarding where their body is located in space. The practices of *waigong* (basic warm-ups and stretches) and *zhan zhuang* (literally, “standing like a stake”; standing meditation) are emphasized during the first three weeks. Students are asked to practice at least two times per week outside of class and to briefly respond to journal prompts. Journal

prompts ask students to differentiate between third-person viewpoints of their bodies (for example, by using a mirror to describe their standing posture) and first-person viewpoints (for example, describing specific areas of tightness or pain, odd sensations of electricity or warmth, etc.).

Asian Studies Learning Objective: To provide historical context for Chinese martial arts and to introduce basic cosmological principles, e.g., *wuji* (devoid of extreme; “beforeness”), *taiji* (the extreme of the extreme), yin-yang theory, *qi* (air, energy), *yi* (mind-intent), and *xin* (heart-mind). In journal entries and group discussion, students interpolate their somatic understandings of these concepts with dictionary definitions and historical-cultural contexts. The idea of taijiquan and qigong as “invented traditions” is also introduced.¹⁹

Online Obstacles/Solutions: Based on a two-unit class, students meet online synchronously once every two weeks for experience-sharing drawn from their journals (at my university, using BlackBoard or Zoom). Twenty-minute movement lessons are recorded in advance, viewed by each student asynchronously, and taught individually once per week online in twenty-minute sessions. Students may also join a synchronous group practice. In addition, students are asked weekly to draw upon and briefly write about short YouTube videos dealing either with movement concepts or Daoist concepts introduced during the unit.

2. Poetry and Painting in Motion

Movement Learning Objective: The emphasis for this three-week unit is “moving naturally.” We explore what “natural” and “nature” (*ziran*) mean from a Daoist standpoint and continue practice of basic taijiquan and qigong movement principles in light of those ideas. Students continue with zhan zhuang and new qigong postures are introduced.

Asian Studies Learning Objective: The Tang-period poetry of Du Fu and Li Bai is introduced as well as nature-inspired painting from various periods. Students are also introduced to calligraphy and begin to connect the movement of taijiquan and qigong with the movement of the calligraphy brush.

Online Obstacles/Solutions. Students continue with their online learning and meeting schedule. In response to a journal prompt, students write a “Daoist” nature poem based on a personal memory or experience. An experienced calligrapher joins the group discussion and teaches an online calligraphy lesson. Students share their poems and discuss how poetry and calligraphy inform and comprise their internal bodily experience.

3. Kung Fu Philosophy

Movement Learning Objective: Understanding stillness in movement vs. movement in stillness. Through continued standing meditation and qigong practice, we focus on the function of intention in movement and how the somatic experience of stillness informs the quality of movement for the actor. Introduction of the first three movements of a six-move, abbreviated version of Wu style taijiquan. During one-on-one sessions, in addition to reviewing new movements, students will be asked to perform a one-minute monologue, attending to the movement principles they have been exposed to thus far.

Asian Studies Learning Objective: A deeper look at Chinese Buddhism, as well as religious vs. philosophical Daoism (*Daojiao* vs. *Daojia*) and the intellectual history of how these concepts were introduced to the West through popular culture forms like kung fu movies and TV shows.²⁰ Through journal prompts, students are asked to identify and discuss their own preconceptions about Chinese philosophy and religion.

Online Obstacles/Solutions: One-on-one lessons continue. Students will also asynchronously watch excerpts from King Hu's *A Touch of Zen* as well as Stephen Chow's *Shaolin Soccer*. Synchronous group discussion will focus on the films.

4. Traditional Chinese Medicine and the Energy Body

Movement Learning Objective: Our focus in this unit is on further, gentle opening of the joints, relaxing the hips, and understanding how the various “bows” of the body act like springs or rubber bands as we move. No new postures are introduced. In one-on-one sessions, students will perform monologues through exercises that emphasize elasticity and energized movement. (These exercises are particular to the course and serve as the explicit bridge between taijiquan movement principles and the actor's art.)

Asian Studies Learning Objective: Students will be introduced to basic Chinese medical theory and the concept of qi from a medical standpoint. They will learn about acupuncture, moxibustion, and qigong in the context of healing. They will also learn about the *qigong re* (qigong fever) of the late 1990s in China that resulted in mass arrests of qigong practitioners. In journal prompts, students will be asked to make connections between somatic concepts (e.g., proprioception) and traditional Chinese medical terminology.

Online Obstacles/Solutions. Students will be assigned short videos on Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) to be watched asynchronously. We will also be joined during one group by a local TCM practitioner for a question and answer session.

5. Review and Final Exam

The final three weeks of the course are devoted to review. The final exam will be a performance of the one-minute monologue in three different ways, each incorporating a different movement principle or Asian Studies concept introduced in the course.

Adapting Somatic Methods to Varying Age Groups and Curricula

At the risk of waxing Pollyannaish about the rich opportunities that disease and economic destruction lay at our feet, the pandemic has indeed forced teachers of Asian Studies content at every level to reassess how we are to deliver our subject. For many teachers and students, Zoom and other online platforms have become little hells to which we are condemned for hours a day, draining the lifeblood and passion out of teaching and learning. Through careful course design, somatic pedagogies can reinject life into the online teaching of Asian Studies. These may be as simple as asking students to stand up and stretch during class or may be as complex as teaching taijiquan to actors. Tai Chi for Actors offers but one model for incorporating somatic methodologies into teaching Chinese humanities. Whatever the emphasis or combination of subject matter, the key to the successful use of somatic pedagogies is providing checkpoints throughout the course where students can reflect on somatic experience and connect lecture and reading to bodily experience.

Finally, while Tai Chi for Actors as described here is a college-level course, components and principles noted in this essay are adaptable to any age group. Over the years, I have frequently been invited to teach taijiquan to elementary and middle school students, and as long as the emphasis is on playing, stimulating the imagination, and creating a safe atmosphere for discovering movement, somatic methods will be successful with younger students. For a middle school teacher introducing a China unit as part of an online world history class, asking students to pick up a pen and experiment with Chinese characters can be rewarding for both teacher and student. Without anyone looking over their shoulder and without peers making fun of them, many students will take more chances online than they might otherwise in the classroom. While I am not advocating for the abolition of in-person teaching in favor of Zoom hell, there is something to be said for carving out space for the shy or insecure young person to fully express themselves and fully engage their senses without judgment.

Notes

¹ For more on teaching Asian Studies through experiential methods, see Adam D. Frank, “Taijiquan: Teaching Daoism through Experiential Arts Learning,” *Education about Asia* 15, no. 2 (2010), 31–34; Adam D. Frank, “Re-thinking Asian Studies in the Interdisciplinary Honors Setting,” *Honors in Practice* 7 (2011), 71–85; and Adam D. Frank, “Shadow ‘R & J’ and ‘The Girl Who Flew’: Introducing Asia through Theatre in an Interdisciplinary Honors Program,” *Education about Asia* 21, no. 1 (2016), <https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/shadow-r-j-and-the-girl-who-flew-introducing-asia-through-theater-in-an-interdisciplinary-honors-program/> (accessed July 12, 2020).

² Thomas Hanna, “What is Somatics?” *Somatics Magazine: Journal of the Bodily Arts and Sciences*, 1986, <https://somatics.org/library/htl-wis1>; Kelly Mullan, “The Art and Science of Somatics: Theory, History, and Scientific Foundations,” MA thesis, Skidmore College, 2012.

³ Thomas Hanna, “What is Somatics?”

⁴ Thomas Hanna, “What is Somatics?” For more on the principles and history of somatics, see Martha Eddy, *Mindful Movement: The Evolution of the Somatic Arts and Conscious Action* (Chicago: Intellect, Ltd., 2016); and Kelly Mullan, “The Art and Science of Somatics: Theory, History, and Scientific Foundations.”

⁵ The terms “somatics” or “somatic pedagogy” may include a wide variety of experiential learning methods but generally refer here to bodily practices specifically intended to enhance body consciousness or bodywork techniques that promote healing.

⁶ Thomas Hanna, “What is Somatics?”

⁷ Kelly Mullan, “The Art and Science of Somatics: Theory, History, and Scientific Foundations.”

⁸ Andrea L. Kleesattel, “Applications of Somatic Practices to Cello Playing and Pedagogy,” PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2012; Heather J. Buchanan, “Body Mapping: Enhancing Voice Performance through Somatic Pedagogy,” in *Teaching Singing in the 21st Century*, edited by Scott Harrison and Jessica O’Bryan (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer Netherlands, 2014), 143–174; Christina Kapadocha, “Toward Witnessed Thirdness in Actor Training and Performance,” *Theatre, Dance, and Performance Training* 9, no. 2, 203–216.

⁹ Martha Eddy, “Somatic Practices and Dance: Global Influences,” *Dance Research Journal* 34, no. 2, 2002, 46–62. <https://www.continuummovement.com/docs/articles/somatics-and-dance.htm>; see also Martha Eddy, *Mindful Movement: The Evolution of the Somatic Arts and Conscious Action*.

¹⁰ Sara Reed, “Dance Somatics as Radical Pedagogy: Reflections on Somatic-Dance Practice within UK Dance Higher Education and Training,” in *Practising Dance: A Somatic Orientation*, edited by Jenny Coogan (Berlin: Logos-Verlag, 2016), 176–180; Donna Dragon, “Creating Cultures of Teaching and Learning: Conveying Dance and Somatic Education Pedagogy,” *Journal of Dance Education* 15, no. 1, 2015,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/273914422_Creating_Cultures_of_Teaching_and_Learning_Conveying_Dance_and_Somatic_Education_Pedagogy.

¹¹ Rebeca Enghauser, "The Quest for an Ecosomatic Approach to Dance Pedagogy," *Journal of Dance Education* 7, no. 3, 2007, 80–90.

¹² Sima Belmar, "Somatic Approaches to Academic Pedagogy: Notes from Somatics, Scholarship, Somatic Scholarship: Materiality and Metaphor," *Performance Matters* 2, no.1, 2016, 92–98.

¹³ Claire Rigg, "Somatic Learning: Bringing the Body into Critical Reflection." *Management Learning* 49, no. 2, 2017, 150–167.

¹⁴ Richard Shusterman, "Thinking through the Body, Educating for the Humanities: A Plea for Somaesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 40, no. 1, 2006, 1–21.

¹⁵ Adam Frank, *Taijiquan and the Search for the Little Old Chinese Man* (New York: Palgrave, 2006); Peter A. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012). In general, I employ the pinyin system of romanizing Mandarin Chinese. Exceptions occur when a word or name has come down to me with a different style of romanization, or I have treated a term as a borrowed word and opted for the more popular usage (e.g. using "tai chi" in place of "taijiquan" in a course name).

¹⁶ A sampling of North American theatre or dance programs that incorporate taijiquan or other Chinese internal martial arts practices into their actor training curriculum include Chapman University (Tai Chi for Theatre), Tufts University (Tai Chi: An Experience of Time and Tempo), University of Hawaii (Taiji for Actors), and the University of Ottawa (various, under Daniel Mroz).

¹⁷ My own background in taijiquan includes more than forty years of practice in the United States and China and over twenty years teaching the art.

¹⁸ It quickly became apparent that the goal was overly ambitious. The revised syllabus instead emphasizes *qigong*, *waigong* (basic stretches), standing meditation forms, and a half dozen movements from the Wu style taijiquan. In order to learn the complete form, a minimum one-year program would be required.

¹⁹ Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

²⁰ "Kung Fu" is the common English romanization of the mandarin *gongfu* 功夫, a term that generally refers to "skill" or "skill acquired through hard work," but it has also come to be used (in both Chinese and English) as a catchall term for Chinese martial arts. "Kung Fu philosophy" is a term used by respondents in previous fieldwork (see Adam Frank, *Taijiquan and the Search for the Little Old Chinese Man*) to describe a frequent encounter, starting in the late 1960s, between Chinese immigrant martial arts teachers in the US and non-Chinese students who equated martial arts with traditional Chinese philosophy. The course uses *wuxiapian* (knight errant films) and *wudapian* (contemporary stories involving modern renditions of martial skills) to underscore the social and cultural origins of basic assumptions American students bring to the study of Chinese martial arts.