

TAIJIQUAN

Teaching Daoism through Experiential Arts Learning

By Adam D. Frank



DVD cover art from the 2008 release of *The Tai Chi Master*. ©2008 Dragon Dynasty Films.

In Jet Li's classic, pre-Hollywood film *Taiji Zhang Sanfeng* (1993, aka *The Tai Chi Master* and *Twin Warriors*), the young monk Junbao (portrayed by Jet Li) and his trouble-making best friend, Tianbao (Chin Siu Ho), are expelled from the Buddhist Shaolin monastery, the famous and infamous cradle of China's most popular martial arts. Unfamiliar with the ways of the world, the two soon find themselves assisting a band of anti-government rebels. Tianbao becomes disillusioned and decides to join the government forces, at which point the friends go their separate ways. Before long, Junbao finds his rebel band under attack by a Tianbao-led army. Junbao is so crushed by his former friend's betrayal that he suffers a nervous breakdown. While recovering under the care of his fellow rebels (including one played by Michelle Yeoh), he finds himself standing next to a well full of water in which an inflated ball is floating. He offhandedly pushes the ball down into the water. It pops back up. Realizing that an interesting dynamic is at play here, he repeats the exercise several times until he finally makes the connection to all his past training in martial arts and meditation practices. Here, he realizes, is the essence of a new kind of martial art that favors softness and flexibility over hardness and rigidity, one that favors inner buoyancy over muscular strength, one that promotes both inward peace and outward power. Conceiving this art as the embodiment of the *Dao*, Junbao dubs it "*taijiquan*" ("supreme ultimate fist"; spelled more commonly in English as "tai chi"), taking the ubiquitous yin-yang symbol (*taiji tu*, diagram of the supreme ultimate) as the handle on which to hang his new art. Spoiler alert—you might have guessed anyway—Zhang ultimately defeats the evil Tianbao and the rebels triumph.

In part because of popular film, taijiquan is now ubiquitous in the US. A Chinese martial art characterized by slow, dance-like movements that utilize the principle of overcoming violent force with softness and flexibility, taijiquan is ultimately aimed at increasing the practitioner's health and longevity. The art provides an attractive window through which to view Chinese history, philosophy and religion, poetry, visual arts, and contemporary popular culture. It provides an experiential "hook" that is especially useful for engaging students who have had little or no exposure to Chinese culture or language. It also provides a space for service learning opportunities that can transform a rather esoteric course into a highly practical one.

In this article, I use the martial art of taijiquan as a case study culturally, historically, and experientially situating Chinese and Western conceptions of Daoism. However, as I will elaborate in my conclusion, the art in question might just as well have been calligraphy, painting, drama, or poetry. The choice of the particular artistic experience on which to focus is very much dependent on the artistic skill set accessible to particular instructors, whether these are skills the instructors themselves possess, are available from fellow faculty or staff, or are present in the wider community outside the school.

TAIJIQUAN AND DAOISM A Marriage of Invented Traditions

Taijiquan provides a rich opportunity for introducing students to the "facts" of Daoism—terminology, basic principles, and debatable divisions between religious and philosophical Daoism. Just as important, through learning about taijiquan, students can better understand how the everyday, lived experience of Chinese religions is situated in social and historical contexts. Douglas Wile argues, for example, that taijiquan is to some degree an invented tradition of nineteenth century Chinese literati seeking a sort of post-Opium War re-emasculatation through practicing and writing about martial arts—in other words, pushing an agenda of strengthening the national body by strengthening the mind-body through "traditional" methods.¹ It was this group of literati who began to link, through their writings, a previously very practically-oriented martial art with esoteric Daoist principles, cosmological notions of "vital energy" (*qi*), and actual meditative practices that had already been associated with Daoism for centuries. By way of proof, Wile notes that the term "taijiquan" does not appear in written texts until the mid to late nineteenth century, though there is some evidence that some form of martial art based on similar principles of "softness overcoming hardness" has existed in China since at least the early 1600s.

The "facts" of taijiquan's origins, however, are perhaps less informative than the several different origin tales about the art that refer to the natural environment, to Daoist hermit-immortals, and, indeed,



Taijiquan is particularly associated with nature, as is Daoism, and practitioners often do the exercise in parks in order to benefit from nature.

Top left: Man practicing Taijiquan in a park. Top right: Chinese senior citizens perform morning exercises at the promenade on the Bund against the skyline of Pudong's Lujiazui Financial District in Shanghai, China. © 2010 Imaginechina.

even to martial arts movie star Jet Li. In the most popular origin story, the Daoist adept Zhang Sanfeng one day spotted a crane engaged in battle with a snake. As the crane struck with its sharp beak, the snake used softness and suppleness to avoid the beak. The crane exhausted itself and, depending on the teller, the snake then consumed the crane or escaped into the grass. In another version of the story, the idea of taijiquan came to Zhang in a dream. For some tellers, the two stories are conflated to Zhang dreaming about a snake and a crane.

In contemporary China, such older origin tales often become mixed together with current popular culture. During my dissertation fieldwork on taijiquan practice in Shanghai in the early 2000s, one practitioner told me the story of how Zhang Sanfeng, a former Shaolin monk, broken-hearted from the betrayal of a good friend, hit upon taijiquan when he pushed a ball down into a pool of water and it bounced up (sound familiar?). As he told this story, my practice partner put a hand on his “cinnabar field” (*dantian*), a point about two inches below the navel, emphasizing its significance in creating a sense of buoyancy. When I mentioned that the film *Taiji Zhang Sanfeng* depicted a similar story, he admitted that he had drawn his own tale directly from the film but argued that it seemed as good an account as any of the origins of taijiquan.

Regardless of the story to which a particular practitioner refers, the common thread is a contemporary impression of, perhaps even desire for, taijiquan to be “Daoist.” In other words, beyond the obvious Daoist principles of yin and yang that the art explicitly embodies through shifts of weight from “empty” to “full” and avoiding hitting hard parts of the body with other hard parts of the body (yin and yang balanced even in terms of striking and kicking), practitioners in mainland China tend to imbue the art with a relatively non-descript spirituality that cannot be easily linked with practices the Chinese Communist Party may have deemed heterodox.² Taijiquan is particularly associated with nature, as is Daoism, and practitioners often do the exercise in parks in order to benefit from nature. The oft-commercialized image of old people wafting en masse through their slow-motion taijiquan forms surrounded by traditional Chinese gardens does not seem far from the truth when one wanders into a Shanghai Park early on a spring morning.

Yet, evidence points rather firmly not only to a fairly *recent* connection of taijiquan to Daoist notions of nature, but also to large groups of practitioners performing taijiquan’s solo, slow-motion, empty-handed or solo weapons forms primarily for health benefits and peace of mind. This emphasis on health contrasts with the “advanced” self defense methods or the intensive, yoga-like joint opening exercises that dominated pre-twentieth century practice of the art, which continues to be of interest to a minority of “serious” practitioners up to the present. How and when did this shift from “taijiquan as devastating martial art” to “taijiquan as healthful, senior-oriented exercise” come about?

By most counts, taijiquan’s “coming out party” coincides with the establishment of the Chinese Republic in 1912. Bent on China becoming an equal partner in the community of nations as quickly as possible, the new government saw sports, particularly Chinese participation in international sporting events like the Olympics, as useful, even necessary, arenas for establishing China’s credentials as a modern state. However, as Andrew Morris notes, the government also understood that “physical culture” in China was relatively undeveloped in terms of Western sports, yet highly developed in terms of indigenous martial arts—what came to be referred to as “the national art” (*guoshu*).³ The Republican Government encouraged well-known martial arts teachers to establish schools in China’s urban areas, particularly Beijing, Nanjing, and Shanghai. Perhaps from a combination of economic incentives and patriotism, many teachers responded to this call. A case in point: in 1920, the tenth floor of Shanghai’s YMCA featured taijiquan and other martial arts classes taught on the same day at different times by Yang Chengfu, Sun Lutang, and Wu Jianquan, three of the most famous taijiquan instructors of their day.

But famous teachers such as Yang, Sun, and Wu were selective about the information they shared and with whom they shared it. In effect, there were two tracks for studying taijiquan at this time. First, the exercise-oriented middle class could study the art at their leisure, and what they studied was likely a slowed down, standardized, less rigorous form of the explicitly martial variety of taijiquan. Second, the “serious” practitioner could pursue the martial arts and would be introduced in advanced classes to basic two-person applications and sparring tech-

niques. A “third track” might include disciples (*tudi*) in the teacher’s inner circle who would learn advanced meditation and yoga-like techniques to enhance their martial skills—and perhaps make a spiritual connection of sorts as well.

Alongside swimming, tennis, and other Western sports, the art steadily gained in popularity in the 1920s and 1930s until it fell on hard times during World War II and the Chinese Civil War. Banned with other martial arts under the Japanese occupation, taijiquan practitioners in Japanese-held areas practiced at their own risk, though teachers continued to teach and to organize guoshu tournaments in unoccupied areas. In the 1950s, in a second surge of government interest, this time under Chinese Communist Party leaders intent on preserving Chinese folk practices of all kinds, taijiquan underwent further growth and popularity, including the development of some standardized forms that stood entirely apart from the family-based practice that still allowed taijiquan to persist as somehow essentially Daoist. During the Cultural Revolution, taijiquan once again came under attack, this time as “feudalistic,” and mainland practitioners either fled to Taiwan and Hong Kong, ceased teaching, or taught in secret. As a result, taijiquan practitioners in Taiwan and Hong Kong thrived, continuing the guoshu tradition while, in many cases, emphasizing Daoist associations with the art as well.

In the post-Cultural Revolution period, taijiquan once again saw resurgence on the mainland, a continued steady interest in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and explosive growth internationally as changes in immigration laws allowed more taijiquan practitioners to emigrate from the PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong and start taijiquan schools of their own. This post-1980 period has also been characterized by a re-embrace of the family-based styles in the mainland (part and parcel of a general re-embrace of traditional arts that followed the decimation of those arts during the Cultural Revolution), as well as a kind of New Age-tinged flirtation between taijiquan and Daoism. Compared to the West, however, that association has remained purposefully fuzzy for mainland practitioners.

The “qigong fever” (*qigong re*) of the 1980s and 1990s that spawned mass interest in quasi-Daoist or quasi-Buddhist meditative practices like Falun Gong, banned outright by the Chinese government in the late 1990s for its perceived excesses, was frequently seen as anathema by taijiquan practitioners, many of whom took pains to distance themselves with statements like “taijiquan is not qigong” and “taijiquan is a martial art, not a religion.”⁴ Today, taijiquan is comfortably “Daoist” in the mainland as long as “Daoism” refers to the somewhat hermetic practice of an art primarily geared toward physical and emotional health. (Hermits, after all, do not start revolutions.) While there are styles of taijiquan that specifically reference Daoism in the mainland—Wudang style, centered at the famously Daoist Wudang Mountain, comes to mind—these styles are not presently seen as a threat to the Party.

For most contemporary practitioners of taijiquan, especially for those outside of Asia, the claim that the art is “Daoist” manifests itself in general ways more often than specific ones. Because the diagram of the supreme ultimate (*taiji tu*, or “yin-yang symbol”) is the most famous symbol of Daoism, the name itself calls out to some fog-en-shrouded, mystical Daoist origin. Likewise, concepts like yin and yang play key roles in daily practice. For example, in the Wu Jianquan family style of taijiquan, a palm facing down is a “yin palm” and a palm facing up is a “yang palm.” Teachers admonish students if they are too yin (soft to the point of being collapsed) or too yang (stiff) in their

movement or martial applications. Practitioners also refer to feet in terms of yin (empty of weight) or yang (full of weight). While it may be something of a chicken-or-the-egg question, taijiquan’s claim to Daoism is an inevitable feature of the practice.

GENERALIZABILITY

Teaching about Chinese Religion and Philosophy through Experiential Practice of Chinese Arts

The basis for this article is my experience teaching the University of Central Arkansas Honors College course “Chinese Humanities through Taijiquan,” a sophomore course that introduces visual arts, poetry, religion, and philosophy to Honors students with minimal background in Asian studies. My intention, however, is not to limit the focus to the college level, but to offer a template for igniting interest in Asian religions at all grade levels in a variety of academic settings—a template that can and should be modified based on the instructor’s individual goals, resources, and ability to devote time to the topic.

To use the college course as a starting point, aside from completing regular writing assignments and short research papers associated with the course content, students divided into three “service” groups, each responsible for developing a fifteen- to twenty-minute lesson on their topic with the intent of presenting their work in an end-of-semester public workshop at a local senior center. Starting from the first day of class, all students began learning an abbreviated version of the Wu family style of taijiquan, focusing for the first several weeks on principles of movement, progressing to learning a repeating sequence of half a dozen movements, and, in the last few weeks, learning the basics of the two-person taijiquan exercise called “push hands” (*tui shou*). At the senior center, students presented basic elements of

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Chinese poetry, visual arts, and philosophy, then collectively demonstrated their taijiquan, inviting audience members to participate in a short lesson on using taijiquan to improve balance. In each version of the course I have taught, the students leading the demo were specifically tasked with connecting the previous arts and philosophy discussion with the taijiquan practice, and in each case, the audience followed up with questions regarding these connections.

After teaching several versions of Chinese Humanities through Taijiquan, it is clear that the “slippery slope” of including a heavy dose of experiential learning in an academically-oriented course (as opposed to, for example, a martial arts class) is that the course may short shrift the art, the academics, or both. If the course is intended to stress academic content, as is the case with the college course, then the challenge is to maintain the art as a baseline rather than allowing it to become, in students’ perceptions, an interesting, but not particularly well-integrated add-on. In our course, the sequence of academic units began with religion and philosophy. However, if the instructor had been well-versed in Chinese calligraphy and/or painting, visual arts might have provided an equally appropriate entry point.

Regardless of one’s area of expertise, folding experiential learning into a discussion of Chinese religion and philosophy, particularly for students new to these subjects, can have the positive effect of transforming abstract, sometimes frustratingly inaccessible ideas into a powerful sensual experience. As an art form, taijiquan opens an experiential door through which students can address questions of intellectual history, spirituality, aesthetics, and, perhaps most significantly, alternative views of the self.

Finally, while the basis for this article is my own experience as the instructor of a college course, the basic approach of teaching about Chinese philosophy and religion through the *experience* of arts and practices that reference them is, of course, applicable to any level. It is especially useful for high school world history instructors faced with a class full of students who, approaching the topic for the first time, demonstrate a healthy skepticism. Indeed, I have modified specific

units from the college course to teach workshops and short courses on Chinese philosophy and religion to high school students at Arkansas Governors School and to high school World History classes in Tucson, Arizona; to secondary level participants in University of Central Arkansas’s annual Humanities Fair; to middle school students at Wittenberg University’s academic summer camp; and to a middle school World History class in Conway, Arkansas. From an admittedly unscientific perspective, the results have been generally positive in these encounters—not as measured through exams or papers, but through a palpable transformation of yin and yang: the transformation of healthy skepticism into energetic, even inspired engagement. ■

NOTES

1. For scholarly treatment of taijiquan’s historical and cultural characteristics, see Douglas Wile, *Lost T’ai-chi Classics from the Late Ch’ing Dynasty* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996). Much of the historical discussion of these topics that follows is treated from a contrasting perspective in Adam Frank, *Taijiquan and the Search for the Little Old Chinese Man: Understanding Identity through Martial Arts* (New York: Palgrave, 2006).
2. For a discussion of taijiquan as a non-religious alternative to Falun Gong, see Adam Frank, “Falun Gong and the Threat of History. In *The International Political Economy of Religious Revivalism*,” in *Gods, Guns, and Globalization: Religious Radicalism and International Political Economy. The International Political Economy Yearbook*, eds. Mary Ann Tétreault and Robert Denmark (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2004), (13): 233–266.
3. Andrew D. Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
4. See Nancy Chen, *Breathing Spaces: Qigong, Psychiatry, and Healing in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); David Palmer, *Qigong Fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

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