

On Chinese Tai Chi Culture: Contemporary Values and International Communication

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Abstract

As one indispensable part of traditional Chinese culture, Tai Chi has a long history with more than five thousand years. Today as society is developing in such a fast pace, Tai Chi is also displaying its unique contemporary values, mainly including the aesthetic value, the medical value, the economic value, the psychological value and the interpersonal value. Tai Chi is not only a type of martial arts, but it also represents a philosophical viewpoint, a rewarding way to keep health, a medical treatment of various diseases, an unconventional life attitude. However, Tai Chi not only belongs to Chinese people, but to all people in the world. To promote the international communication of Tai Chi culture, five effective approaches are to be followed, mainly in terms of academic communication, governmental cooperation, non-governmental cooperation, combination of theory and practice, and development of Tai Chi cultural industry.

Keywords: Tai Chi, contemporary values, international communication

1. Introduction

With the trend of globalization of economy and culture, the high proficiency in cross-cultural communication has been an indispensable element for successful international trading, for working and living in a foreign country. Without enough contact with the alien culture, one will never really know the way the people think, speak or behave. Tai Chi, as one of the most essential parts of traditional Chinese culture, has attracted an increasing amount of attention from the world for its unique features. China calls for more understanding from all other countries, and the world also wants to know China better. There have been an increasing number of scholars who have been concerned with issue of Tai Chi, while few of them have an overall understanding about it, which is definitely a big obstacle for the international communication of Tai Chi culture. Particularly, the contemporary development of society has added new values to the ancient Tai Chi culture, which deserve researcher's reconsideration. In this article, the focus is put on the construction of a system of contemporary values of Chinese Tai Chi culture and the effective approaches to spread it into the world.

2. An Overview of Chinese Tai Chi Culture

To obtain a thorough understanding of Tai Chi, whether researchers or practicers, they should have a profound knowledge about the essential features and history of Tai Chi. However, today there exist a large number of people in the world who assume that they have known quite well about Chinese Tai Chi, but actually know little or even misunderstand it.

2.1 *The Definition of Tai Chi and Tai Chi Culture*

How can Tai Chi be defined? Frankly speaking, it is not an easy task. Actually, Tai Chi is quite hard term to be explained, which may need to be analyzed from the following two facets at least.

First, it is most widely accepted that Tai Chi is a type of internal Chinese martial arts practiced for both its defense training and its health benefits. In this sense, Tai Chi may be better referred to as Tai Chi Chuan, or Taijiquan. Though originally conceived as a martial art, it is also typically practiced for a variety of other personal reasons: competitive wrestling in the format of pushing hands, demonstration competitions, and achieving greater longevity. As a result, a multitude of training forms exist, both traditional and modern, which correspond to those aims with differing emphasis. Some training forms of Tai Chi are especially known for being practiced with relatively slow movements.

Second, Tai Chi is conceived as a philosophical term. It first appeared in *I Ching*, a Chinese classic book, as a Chinese cosmological term for the “Supreme Ultimate” state of undifferentiated absolute and infinite potential, the oneness before duality, from which Yin and Yang originate, contrasted with the Wuchi (“Without Ultimate”). Common English translations of the cosmological Tai Chi are the “Supreme Ultimate” (Blanc 1985, Zhang & Ryden 2002) or “Great Ultimate” (Robinet 2008); but other versions are the “Supreme Pole” (Needham & Ronan 1978), “Great Absolute”, or “Supreme Polarity” (Adler 1999). To put it simply, it refers to the source or beginning of the world. Tai Chi creates yang and yin: in movement it generates yang; in tranquility generates yin. Movement and tranquility, in alternation, become the source of the other, which explains the principles of all the changes and developments in the world.

If Tai Chi can be defined both as an internal Chinese martial arts and as a fundamental principle used to explain the creation of the universe and all the movements and changes within it, then Tai Chi culture may refer to those theories, ideas, activities, productions that closely connected with the concept Tai Chi, such as the theory “unity of heaven and man”, the idea “peace and harmoniousness”, the living attitude “health maintenance” and relative books, movies, TV shows, and etc. Only by understanding the rich variety of cultural forms, spiritual and physical, can one really understand the essence of Tai Chi.

2.2 *The Origination and Development of Tai Chi*

The concept of Tai Chi has been widely accepted as the core of traditional Chinese culture. It has been generally believed to be originated from the ancient era when Fu His (about 5,000 BC), a legendary emperor of China, created *The Primitive Eight Trigram*, which brought much enlightenment to the later development of Tai Chi. Then at the end of ruling period of Shang dynasty in ancient Chinese history, Ji Chang (1152-1056 BC) wrote *I Ching* and created *The Posterior Eight Diagram*. Lao Zi (580-500 BC) obtained a thorough understanding of *I Ching*, and created the classic work *Tao Te Ching*, in which the theory of Yang and Yin, and the view on the world and life were delicately depicted. It was also generally viewed as the most important theoretical basis for the Chinese martial art Tai Chi Chuan. Besides, the great master Confucius (551-479 BC) also gave a unique interpretation to *I Ching* and Tai Chi concept. During more than two thousand years that followed, Tai Chi diagram and culture were discussed from the different perspectives. The representative figures mainly include Chen Tuan (871-989) in Tang Dynasty, Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073) and Zhu Xi (1130-1200) in Song Dynasty, Lai Zhide (1525-1604) in Ming dynasty, Duanmu Guohu (1773-1837) in Qing dynasty, and so on.

When it comes to the martial arts Tai Chi, or Tai Chi Chuan exactly, it was largely believed to be created by Chen Wangting (1600-1680) at the end of Ming dynasty, although others insisted that it was brought into being by Zhang Sanfeng, a legendary figure at the end of Yuan dynasty. Since the creation of Tai Chi Chuan, Tai Chi culture has been perfectly reflected in Chinese martial arts. Through learning and practice of Tai Chi Chuan generation after generation, Tai Chi spirit and values have been passed down, not only within China but also all over the world.

3. Construction of a System of Contemporary Values of Tai Chi

3.1 *The Aesthetic Value*

As the excellent traditional Chinese culture, Tai Chi has its unique features to attract attention of millions of people all over the world. One of the essential factors lies in the aesthetic value of Tai Chi, which is mainly embodies in external form and internal harmony. Take Tai Chi Diagram for example, which has been widely recognized as the most important symbol for Tai Chi culture. Although there have ever existed various types of Tai Chi diagram, the basic element remains unchanged. In those diagrams, the sense of beauty will be easily aroused, mainly in terms of the circular shape, the sharp contrast of black and white, the combination of motion and stillness. For the modern Tai Chi Diagram in particular, the white fish and the black fish are exquisitely put in a perfect circle, the heads and tails of which connect each other in beautiful shape. More important is that the diagram reveals the basic principle of *yin and yang*, which explains how the world develops harmoniously.

For the martial art Tai Chi Chuan, the beauty of Tai Chi culture is more vividly reflected. Although it only has a short time of several hundred years, compared with the five thousand years of Tai Chi culture, it is the most popular form to represent Tai Chi culture. Tai Chi Chuan is a beautiful form of exercise which can be practiced by anyone regardless of age or physical ability. Based upon observations of animals, Tai Chi movements alternate between slow and quick, gentle and firm, rising and sinking, contracting and expanding. These continually spiraling, coiling, flowing movements train both body and mind in balance, coordination and control. The upright posture, stretched limbs, open clear mind, and beautiful nature all express the aesthetic value of Tai Chi culture.

In modern society, the aesthetic value Tai Chi culture has also been applied in many respects, such as graphic artistic design, costume design, and theatrical performance as well.

3.2 The Medical Value

Tai Chi is practiced as an exercise to promote good health, memory, concentration, digestion, balance, and flexibility and is also thought to improve psychological conditions such as anxiety, depression, and declines associated with aging and inactivity. Health risks in the elderly, including cardio-vascular disease, their enhanced risk of falls, osteoporosis and subsequent bone fracture, have been attributed to a failure to maintain exercise earlier in life (Terrio & Auld, 2002). A good supply of blood and oxygen is essential for maintaining your health and for healing any disease. By strengthening muscles, you can keep your joints stable and protected. Of course, you need your muscles to move and when you move, the muscles pump fluid and blood throughout the body, improving the functions not only of the organs and joints but also the entire body.

Balance function begins to decline from middle age, deteriorates in older age, and increases the risk of fall and injury. Suitable exercise training may improve balance function and prevent accidental falls. Studies found that Tai Chi has favorable effects on balance function and falls prevention in the elderly (Wolf, et al. 1996). During the performance of Tai Chi Chuan, weight shifting, body rotation, and single-leg standing in different positions are frequently practiced. Delicate joint control with muscle coordination is required during motions, and hence balance function may benefit from long-term practice of Tai Chi.

Besides, exercise therapy is a safe adjunct therapy that can mitigate common treatment-related side effects among cancer patients. Additionally, exercise has beneficial effects on certain domains of health-related quality of life including physical functioning, role functioning, social functioning, and fatigue. Tai Chi has been reported to be beneficial for physical, emotional, and neuropsychological functions in patients with breast cancer, lung cancer, and gastric cancer (Ching et al., 2013).

To sum up, since Tai Chi Chuan is a low-cost and easily implemented exercise without any special facility or expensive equipment, it is widely recognized to be most effective in promoting health for patients with certain chronic diseases.

3.3 The Economic Value

As the cross-cultural communication is greatly strengthened, an increasing number of people choose to go abroad to experience alien culture. To come to China to learn Tai Chi Chuan is a case in point. The values of Tai Chi culture are not only involved in aesthetics and health maintenance, but also in economic benefit which can never be neglected. One of the direct benefits that the internationalization of Tai Chi brings about is the rapid development of international tourism. To understand traditional Chinese Tai Chi culture is one of the essential purposes for the foreign visitors. Wudang Mountain, renowned for the practice of Tai Chi and Taoism as the Taoist counterpart to the Shaolin Monastery, will be one of the most popular scenic spots. Besides, Chenjiagou in Wenxian, Henan, which has been widely recognized as the birth place of Tai Chi Chuan, is also an important tourist attraction. Another economic benefit Tai Chi may bring about is involved in other cultural industries, such as publishing, film and TV, Tai Chi training, artistic designing and so on. Therefore, in modern society, Tai Chi is not only a set of theories that explain the principle of formation and development of the world, a martial art people practice for health, but it has also turned to be a cultural industry, which greatly influences life styles of modern people.

3.4 The Psychological Value

Today doctors consider stress and stress-related illnesses as “the number one killer”. Stress can trigger heart attacks and strokes, and has also been linked to diabetes, high blood pressure, a weaker immune system, ulcers, and infertility. Particularly, psychological stress is one of the biggest troubles for people in the rapidly developed contemporary society. Tai chi can not only promote physical relaxation, but also emotional and mental relaxation. Negative emotions and energies can get trapped within the body. Relaxation of physical tension allows for the release of emotional tension as well. Tai chi is about being in the flow of the movement. When practicing tai chi, the focus is on the present move, rather than the upcoming moves of the future, or the completed moves of the past. This gives your mind space to focus on the task at hand, in the present moment. The mind is able to calm down and to see things more clearly. When there is stress, the mind will have many jangled, confusing, and conflicting thoughts. Doing tai chi in a slow and grounded way causes energy to drop from the brain to the rest of the body. At the same time, the profusion of conflicting thoughts will also fall away. In a word, Tai Chi plays an essential role to promote reduction of psychological stress nowadays when a large number of people are living restless, overburdened, and spiritually exhausted lives.

3.5 The Interpersonal Value

Since Tai Chi Chuan is often practiced in groups in public places such as community centers, parks, and plazas, it offers a unique opportunity for the exchange of ideas, social networking, and developing social and personal relationships among practitioners. Its increasing popularity internationally has made Tai Chi Chuan a resource for promoting cultural exchange and appreciation. Although Tai Chi is mainly viewed by many people as a martial art, it is never a pure martial art. It is actually a philosophical idea which guides people's attitude toward life. Its essence does not lie in suppression and control over others by force, but in keeping a peaceful inner heart.

4. Effective Approaches to Spread Tai Chi to the World

To promote effective international communication and create a harmonious global environment for world development, Tai Chi may help people around the world work together and create a peaceful world. Here are several approaches to promote the international communication of Tai Chi culture.

4.1 To Strengthen the Academic Communication and Understand the Essence of Tai Chi

To gain a better understanding of Tai Chi in the world, it is essential in the first place to strengthen the academic communication. Firstly, scholars both in China and in other countries should devote more time and energy in the research of the ancient history of Tai Chi. Only by obtaining a correct and full-around understanding of its birth, different stages of development, people may come closer to the real Tai Chi. Secondly, scholars, particularly studying in translation and cross-cultural communication, should bring Tai Chi into the world through different ways, for example, by translating it into English, French, and other languages. Tai Chi not only belongs to China, but it also belongs to the world. Thirdly, it is important to launch some forums with Tai Chi as the focus topic, in which scholars from the different countries may exchange ideas with each other and then reach the consensus.

4.2 To Adopt Specific Measures Officially and Intensify the Cooperation among Governments

Chinese government should actively adopt favorable measures to encourage the international communication of Tai Chi. The first is to promote the internationalization of Tai Chi by making full use of the Confucius Institutes in the world. The key lies in that the internationalization of Tai Chi is rendered not by force but out of interests and willingness. Secondly, Chinese Ministry of Culture and its affiliated departments should hold various types of communicative activities, such as cultural-year activities, to give world people a chance to appreciate the charms of Tai Chi culture.

4.3 To Conduct More Effective Activities among Non-governmental Organizations

Non-governmental communication is also quite important to the popularization of Tai Chi culture. Nowadays, Tai Chi Chuan is the best form that represents Tai Chi culture. During recent years, lots of masters of Tai Chi went abroad to establish their personal clubs to teach local people Tai Chi Chuan. Not only can they enhance their living quality by earn some money, but they may also make a great contribution to the international communication of Tai Chi culture. Besides, some people, who love Tai Chi very much, are actively involved in teaching Tai Chi as volunteers, not for money, but out of interest. Apart from teaching and learning Tai Chi, non-profit organizations may hold various types of performances to attract people's attention, such as Tai Chi Chuan, Tai Chi dance, Tai Chi sword and etc.

4.4 To Combine the Practice of Martial Art and the Learning of Chinese Culture

To gain a thorough understanding, learners should not only practice Tai Chi as a martial art, but also know something about Chinese culture, since the latter will be very crucial to the former. That is why the really skillful senior Tai Chi masters usually have got a thorough understanding of the life and of the world, physically and spiritually. For beginning learners of Tai Chi, suggestions will be usually given that adequate time and energy be spent on reading classical books of Tai Chi culture. Without knowing culture, Tai Chi is nothing but a set of harmful or brutal movements.

4.5 To Bring Economic Benefits by Developing Tai Chi Cultural Industry

To enhance the internationalization of Tai Chi culture in the world, another effective approach is to encourage the international development of Tai Chi cultural industry. Today, cultural industry has been viewed as one of the most potential industries, usually to promote the comprehensive development of national culture, economy and politics. Strategically, integration of training resources, the enhancement of cultural products development, and the upgrading of the tourism-centered industrial structure should be taken into full consideration (Gao, Hao, & Wang, 2011). And specifically, some favorable measures should be taken into force to create more opportunity for those developing cultural corporations, such as corporations of publishing, of TV and movie, of tourism, of

sports, of clothes designing, of graphic artistic designing, of handicraft making, of health care, of leisure and recreation and etc. If the Tai Chi cultural industry can be developed in a smooth way, it is not only beneficial to the internationalization of Tai Chi culture, but it will also bring a lot of economic profits to the individual corporations.

5. Conclusion

It is widely accepted that Tai Chi, originated from the ancient China, is one of the most essential parts of the traditional Chinese culture. In the contemporary society, Tai Chi is not supposed to be viewed only as a type of Chinese martial arts, but it also has philosophical, medical and even interpersonal connotations. Besides, it is beneficial to give people enlightenment about how to protect our planet environment and how to live a peaceful harmonious life in the present world. In addition, Tai Chi not only belongs to Chinese people, but to all people in the world. More efforts should be made to promote the international communication of Tai Chi culture. It is firmly believed that the internationalization of Tai Chi culture will be universally rewarding.

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