

## CONTRIBUTOR

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# MARX, MYTH AND METAPHYSICS CHINA DEBATES THE ESSENCE OF TAIJIQUAN DOUGLAS WILE

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## ABSTRACT

This article traces the mythologization, demythologization and remythologization of the origins of taijiquan in China. It describes the association of legendary immortal Zhang Sanfeng with the creation of an 'internal' martial art by Ming loyalists during the Ming-Qing transition, the historization of the origins by progressive intellectuals during the late Republican and Mao eras, and the reemergence of the cult of Zhang Sanfeng in the present period as a kind of fundamentalist revival. Using anonymous online informants, it documents the recent appearance of new language and philosophical paradigms – materialism and idealism, physics and metaphysics, and self-defense and self-cultivation – in debates around taijiquan's true essence. Further, extrapolating from the latest ideological spectrum surveys, the article attempts to divine correlations between views on taijiquan's essence and general alignments on a 'liberal-conservative' axis. The study concludes with an exploration of the special elusiveness of taijiquan as an object of definition and the potential for modern movement science to throw light on its essential uniqueness.

## INTRODUCTION

As China marks its tenth year of annual rejections by UNESCO for the recognition of *taijiquan* as 'intangible cultural heritage', this leaves Korea's *taekkyeon* as the sole Asian martial art to receive this honor. Now, adding insult to injury, both Japan and Korea are poised to apply for recognition of their own national versions of *taijiquan*. This revives painful memories of similar rebuffs for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which included both judo and taekwondo, and karate's inclusion for 2020 (now 2021). Only sumo wrestling, taekwondo and capoeira enjoy the status of 'national sports' in their respective birthplaces, while China's unofficial national sport is table tennis. The grounds for rejection of China's UNESCO application has been that the language is 'too vague' and a tendency to 'define concepts with other concepts'. This highlights the urgency the Chinese feel to gain recognition for their origination claims and to more clearly define the essence of the art.

In the twentieth century, the Nationalist overthrow of the Manchu dynasty, the Nationalist-Communist united front against Japan, and the Communist victory in the Civil War determined that China would enter the modern era as an independent nation, with a one-party state and socialist economy. Marxism would replace Confucianism and the Nationalist Party's 'Three Principles of the People', and a 'cult of personality' would grow up around Chairman Mao, surpassing even that of Generalissimo Chiang. China's unique culture would no longer be the gift to humanity of mythological figures like the Yellow Emperor, God of Agriculture, or Fu Xi, but a product of the genius of the Chinese people, who would now take credit and rightful ownership.

After 1949, both the means of material production and intangible cultural heritage were nationalized. Thus, literary Chinese would be preserved, but the *baihua* vernacular would become the style of everyday written communication; local dialects would be preserved, but *putonghua* (Mandarin) would become the *lingua franca*; the *logographic* (characters) writing system would be preserved, but strokes simplified; *Hanyu pinyin* would replace the myriad Western romanization systems, and the whole country would go metric. Illiteracy would be 'swept away' (*saomang*) through universal education. In the realm of martial arts, family styles would be preserved, but standardized and brought under the aegis of national physical education institutes. Secrecy, mythology, and claims of invincibility and immortality would be banished, replaced by openness, history, and science.

Taijiquan's popularity in China, its global dissemination and its reputation as a repository of the quintessence of Chinese culture has made it a kind of contested 'Holy Land', fought over by shifting factions in China's ongoing culture wars. Taijiquan's origins, once

hotly debated between modernizers and traditionalists, became by the second half of the twentieth century a matter of settled history. Owing to interventions by May Fourth Movement anti-feudalists, and later, official Communist endorsement, pride of progeniture was stripped from fabled Daoist alchemist Zhang Sanfeng and awarded to late-Ming local garrison commander Chen Wangting. However, in the current 'reformed and open' martial arts marketplace, there is no monolithic standard of authenticity or truth, with a return to localism, lineage and even myth.

Today, in the midst of heated controversies over whether martial arts should be promoted for health or self-defense, and which style is most effective in combat, it is easy to forget those periods when its having any role in a modernizing China was called into question. During the early twentieth century, some progressives saw it as a feudal remnant, rife with magical thinking and, at best, irrelevant for the modern battlefield. During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards condemned all physical education as 'bourgeois decadence'. Morning calisthenics were replaced by 'Little Red Book Exercise' and 'Little Red Book Martial Art': recitation of passages from *Quotations of Chairman Mao* with expressive gestures. Now, with global acceptance of taijiquan's benefits for health and self-development, it has become a source of national pride and private profit.

Following Mao's death in 1976 and overthrow of the 'Gang of Four', through Deng Xiaoping's 1978 policy of 'restoring order' and 'reform and openness', to today's 'China dream', 'go global', 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', 'harmonious society', and 'civilized society', China in the twenty-first century has become a mixed economy of state-owned and private enterprises. This duality plays out in the martial arts marketplace as the parallel development of standardized forms and national sports academies with a resurgence of legacy-brand family styles and local for-profit taiji tourism. While the former fault lines between mythologizers and historicizers reflected Nationalist versus Communist sympathies, today's divisions are not so easily reducible to a simple one-dimensional political binary. Current debates are no less acrimonious, but new language now dominates the discourse: materialist versus idealist, physics versus metaphysics, and self-cultivation versus self-defense.

## MYTH VERSUS HISTORY

One would think that Tang Hao's, 'Let us rise up together in the great task of establishing Chinese martial arts on a scientific basis' [Tang 1930: 3] and Zheng Manqing's, 'Qi cultivation is the basis of self-strengthening and hence of national salvation. May my people rise again!' [Zheng 1946; Wile trans., 1982: 6] would make them natural allies in the movement to promote Chinese martial arts. Both were born during the waning days of the Manchu dynasty and lived through the Nationalist Revolution, Communist Revolution, Civil War and Japanese invasion. For perspective, American readers should imagine themselves living through the Revolutionary War, Civil War, World Wars I and II, Korean War, and Vietnam War, all in one lifetime, and in your own backyard (except that the Chinese Civil War lasted 20 years, and the Japanese invasion lasted 50). Both Zheng and Tang served in state-sponsored martial arts institutes, but gravitated to opposite poles of the political spectrum and ultimately died on opposite shores of the Taiwan Straits. Zheng served as personal physician to Madame Chiang and cultural ambassador from the ROC to the Chinese diaspora, and after 1949, Tang joined the PRC National Physical Culture and Sports Committee as special consultant. In normal times, the worlds of martial artists and intellectuals would rarely intersect. However, just as with the extraordinary times that produced Huang Zongxi and Qi Jiguang's embrace of martial arts during the Ming dynasty, engaged twentieth-century intellectuals were forced to choose sides and cross class boundaries to study with martial artists from the *jianghu* and enlist them in the cause of national salvation.

A critical interrogation of the two quotations cited at the beginning of this section would call our attention to the two words: 'scientific' and 'self-cultivation'. Although Tang and Zheng were both passionate advocates for martial arts, these words betray fundamental differences. For progressive Tang, 'scientific' was code for historicity, popularization, and universality; for conservative Zheng, 'self-cultivation' was code for 'render unto Caesar', turn inward, and native tradition. Students of Chinese intellectual history may also hear echoes of the Cheng/Zhu School of Principle, emphasizing discovery of the *dao* through objective observation, versus the Lu/Wang School of the Mind, emphasizing discovery of our innate goodness through subjective introspection. However, with Japan eager to make China the 'jewel in the crown' of its empire, it is not surprising that sincere Chinese patriots had divergent visions of how to save the nation.

Both Tang and Zheng spoke apocalyptically about 'annihilation of the nation and extinction of the race' (*guowang miezhong*) and linked national survival with preservation and promotion of the martial arts. However, Tang concluded that the first step in preserving the baby was

to throw out the bathwater: charlatanry, superstition and professional jealousy. An iconoclast but no nihilist, Tang was a lawyer by trade, who knew the difference between fact and fiction, and how to build a case based on historical documents and field investigations. His 1930 *Shaolin Wudang kao* was a shot over the bow to the conservative martial arts community and established him as the Lu Xun of Chinese martial arts history – a man prepared to wash China's dirty linen of self-delusion and superciliousness in public and let the slings and arrows be damned. His *Shaolin Wudang kao* exploded myths and exposed ideological fault lines. It threatened the mystique and rice bowls of professional martial artists and polarized martial arts partisans and policy makers. Although no one dared to say this out loud, some may have noted that Japan was able to reconcile emperor worship and Shinto war gods with radical modernization of the economy and military; why deny China its Daoist immortal Zhang Sanfeng and Chan Buddhist patriarch Bhodidharma?

The association of legendary Daoist alchemist and immortal Zhang Sanfeng with the creation of taijiquan begins with late Ming dynasty Huang Zongxi's 1669 'Wang Zhengnan muzhiming' (Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan) and son Baijia's 'Neijia quanfa' (Martial Art of the Internal School), where we are told that the principles of a martial art based on 'softness overcoming hardness' were revealed to Zhang Sanfeng in a dream by Xuanwu, the God of War. The name Zhang Sanfeng, and its several homonyms, was a magnet for attribution by various esoteric practices, including martial arts, inner alchemy, bedroom arts, and even calligraphy. Thus, by a thin tissue of associations, Yang family literati patrons connected the soft-style theory of the 'Martial Art of the Internal School' and the Wang Zong of its genealogy to the trove of texts serendipitously 'discovered' by fellow Yongnian townsman Wu Yuxiang in a salt shop and credited to Zhang Sanfeng and Wang Zongyue.

Finally, we are told, Wang Zongyue's teachings were transmitted by disciple Jiang Fa to the Chen family of Chenjiagou, Wen County, in Henan Province, where their servant Yang Luchan absorbed them by spying on his masters. The name 'taijiquan' does not appear in the Huang texts or in the Chen family biographies or form manuals, and one is at pains to discern any soft-style language in the early Chen family writings. As the generations that follow Chen Changxing and Yang Luchan continued to modify and transmit the art to 'outsiders', we witness an explosion of new family-name styles – Wu (Yuxiang), Wu (Jianquan), Hao, Sun – and mass-market publications, each featuring different, and often contradictory, accounts of origins and the cast of characters. Details apart, what is relevant for the present discussion of the dialectical divide between mythologizers and historicizers is the reactionary resurgence today of taijiquan creation myths.

Invoking a supernatural source and soft-style martial art by the Huangs and Yangs coincides with periods of aggression by 'hard' invaders – Manchus, Europeans, and Japanese – and begs the question of whether this should be interpreted as an allegorical strategy for cultural survival under colonial occupation, and whether mythological genesis encourages an enduring legacy of magical thinking in taijiquan culture? It reappears once again today in the midst of unprecedented prosperity and absence of military threat: the unholy alliance of mythos and marketing has seemingly not lost its appeal. Tang was criticized from his left by those who thought martial arts were feudal dregs, and Zheng, for his part, was criticized from his right by those who saw shortening the traditional form as heresy. In a further ironic twist, today's advocates of historicity and science are now called 'conservative' (*baoshou*). The best analogy for Western readers would be creationism and evolution, where both views continue to coexist in the culture. From the beginning, then, the myth versus history, Shaolin versus Wudang, internal versus external, and hard versus soft dialectic has had very political meanings in China, meanings which may not be readily apparent to Western students.

In 1943, Chen Gong opined: 'Whether Zhang Sanfeng or someone else, whoever invented this subtle and profound martial art must have been an ancient Daoist possessed of the highest wisdom and could not possibly have been a common man' [Wile 1983, Translator's Note, n.p.]. Fast forward to the present, a poster on the Taijiquanba blog informs us that, 'Zhang Sanfeng is an incarnation of Xuanwu, the God of War' [Yingxiong 2019], citing as proof his own personal visitation in a dream by the immortal and his karmically fated discovery of Ming dynasty relics in a cave associated with Master Sanfeng's alchemical practices. The poster obviously takes the notion of immortality and ongoing revelation literally, but feels obliged to rationalize his belief by interpreting this as 'qi (energy) and the effect of quantum entanglement'.

Zhang Sanfeng's reemergence as the creator of taijiquan seems part of a broader movement to reconstitute his cult, along with claims by various individuals to teach the 'original' taijiquan, or even that Zhang created a martial art far deadlier than taijiquan, but so arduous that none dared to study it. The 2019 Baidu.com online encyclopedia entry for Zhang Sanfeng, running to over 10,000 words, treats the figure as if historical, complete with exact birth date and ascension (*yuhua*); being immortal, of course, there is no date for the death. Hagiography becomes biography, fiction becomes fact, and immortality becomes possibility. Most of these hagiographies place Zhang in an unbroken lineage from Laozi, who himself is the subject of a similar process of reification and divinization, complete with imperial honorifics and biographical details that span the centuries of the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. The encyclopedia entry includes long disquisitions on

Zhang's 'philosophical thought' and 'martial arts thought', and concludes on a note of patriotism, saying that his teachings allow us to 'defend ourselves against violent attack and resist foreign aggressors' [Baidu baike 2019].

Reacting to the historicizing push by progressives, Zheng Manqing disingenuously asks: 'Some people have indulged in wild slander, claiming that taijiquan was not created by the Immortal Zhang Sanfeng. I do not know what their motives are' [Wile 1985: 11]. However, in his preface to the *Shaolin Wudang kao*, Tang Hao explicitly stated his motivation:

**My purpose in writing this little book, on the one hand, is to inform readers about the nature of so-called Shaolin and Wudang, and on the other hand, to address the conflicts and jealousies between professional martial artists in both camps. For more than ten years, they have engaged in incessant squabbling. After reading this little book, perhaps they can take a more expansive view, rise up together and work for the establishment of martial arts on a scientific basis.**  
[Tang 1930: 7-8]

Tang paid a personal and professional price for his dissent during the Republican period, when his views were considered pro-communist and subversive. Far from seeking to consign traditional martial arts to the dustbin, however, Tang Hao hoped, by putting them on an historical and scientific basis, to assure their survival in the modern era. Like Nietzsche's 'God is dead', Tang Hao's 'Zhang Sanfeng is dead' aimed to ennoble human creativity and not denigrate it. He went on to produce voluminous studies of China's physical culture, and lived to see his findings become official history, and to be honored as the father of modern martial arts studies.

As the Shaolin-Wudang paradigm took on a life of its own, it played out as the organizing principle behind the departmental structure of the Central Martial Arts Academy, where rivalry between Shaolin and Wudang departments became a virtual parody of professional pettiness. An epic challenge match between Wang Ziping (standing in for the elderly Sun Lutang), and representing the Wudang faction, and Gao Zhendong the Shaolin, was officially declared a tie, when the referee pulled the contestants apart, fearing a fatal outcome. The year was 1928, two years after the Northern Expedition against the warlords, one year after the Shanghai Massacre of Communists and unionists, and the outset of the Civil War. This embarrassing contest must have been fresh on the mind of Tang Hao when he wrote his 1930 *Shaolin Wudang kao*, and was a microcosm of the divisions tearing China apart even as the wolf was at the door and unity was most needed.

In the current economic environment, marketers see no harm in encouraging consumers to equate antiquity with authenticity, including supernatural origination and attenuated lineages, in the public's endless quest for 'the real thing'. Whereas old cleavages may have reflected political sympathies, today's remythologization movement has been reinvigorated by famed novelist Jin Yong's *Shendiao Xialu* (*The Condor Heroes*) and *Yitian Tulongji* (*Heavenly Sword and Dragon Saber*), and Jet Li's portrayal of the immortal Zhang in the film *Taiji Zhang Sanfeng* (*The Taiji Master*). Once again, the old alchemist is very much alive and well in the popular imagination, enjoying a hyperreal revival. Of the several paths to apotheosis – mythology, heredity, and folklore – Zhang seems to have leapt from folklore to fiction to immortality. This demonstrates two basic strategies for instilling value, power and confidence in a practice: one is to credit it to a supernatural source, and the other is to credit it to human creativity and testable efficacy. The resurgence of Zhang Sanfeng, Wang Zongyue and Wudang Mountains origination myths would have pioneering historians Tang Hao, Xu Zhen and Gu Liuxin turning over in their graves, but resurgent cultural fundamentalism seems to be one of the side-effects of late-stage modernity.

The Wudang Mountains, the Immortal Zhang's putative haunts, has joined Wenxian and Yongnian, hometowns of the Chens and Yangs, as taiji tourist destinations, with considerable investment in human resources, schools, accommodation, museums, and even commemorative monuments. They are in competition with the state-sponsored physical education academies that teach the simplified and standardized forms. There have always been rice bowl issues in martial arts styles, but the policy of 'zou chu qu, yin jin lai' (go global) has made the stakes much higher.

Tracing the two competing narratives in semi-official reference works shows a gradual but marked softening trend in the treatment of the Zhang Sanfeng legend. The 1987 *Zhongguo wushu dacidian* (*Chinese Martial Arts Dictionary*) cites Tang Hao's findings and calls the Zhang Sanfeng tale 'ridiculous' and a 'fabrication' [Chinese Martial Arts Dictionary 1987: 15]. In their 'Preface', the editors explain the difficulty of bringing martial arts into the modern world with 'feudal' retentions on the one hand and 'radical left' forces on the other, together with a tendency to value practice over theory. As we enter the next decade, Xi Yuntai's *Jianming wushu cidian* (*Abbreviated dictionary of the martial arts*), acknowledges the mythological versions in a single neutral sentence, but goes on to promote the Chen Wangting line as 'generally accepted' [Xi 1990]. A decade later, the *Zhongguo wushu baikeshu* (*Complete Chinese martial arts encyclopedia*) references the Tang dynasty Xu Xuanping and Ming dynasty Zhang Sanfeng theories, but says that Chen Wangting is accepted by most today as the historical creator [Encyclopedia 1998]. Similarly, the current online Baidu baiken

encyclopedia gives both Wangting and Sanfeng versions (in that order), but shares nothing disparaging about Sanfeng accounts. More tellingly, the entry devotes extensive coverage to development projects in Wen County to create a center for Chen style training, research and to lobby for UNESCO intangible cultural status. It notes that these efforts have received increasingly high-level recognition from official bodies in both martial arts and cultural departments. Although myth and history have not quite achieved intellectual parity, there is a decided shift from ideological to economic interest.

A high-profile case of remythologization is Ma Yun and Jet Li's collaboration to create a syncretic quasi-religion based on bits and pieces of various gongfu, qigong and taijiquan styles, together with elements of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism to form Taiji Zen. They eschew the language of idealism, materialism or dialectics, seeking instead to leverage their economic clout and media star power to influence the Olympic Committee to accept taijiquan as a regular event, to offer a healthy spiritual home for China's youth and to reassure the world of China's peaceful intentions. Ma tells us that his personal three-word mantra, taken from the taiji classics, is centering (*ding*), following (*sui*) and surrendering (*she*). Their ambitious project includes a gongfu fantasy film, *Gongshoudao*, starring Ma himself in the role of a middle-aged man who dreams he becomes a martial arts superhero, as well as a Taiji Zen Institute to propagate 'taijiquan culture' nationally and internationally.

Comrade Ma is a confirmed member of the Communist Party, which apparently sees no contradiction in clutching billionaires to its bosom. For Ma, then, taijiquan embodies his personal ethic and the ethos of the Chinese people, and *Gongshoudao* is an allegory for China's peace-loving global posture. From the Boxers to Falun dafa, from the Democracy Wall Movement to the Hong Kong protests, from *laogai* reeducation through labor to the Cultural Revolution's rustication campaign, there is a strategy of reform and transformation through immersive kinesthetic experience. Whether it is apparatchiks and intellectuals 'sent down' to participate in manual labor or protestors dodging the police, or the more obvious qigong practices of the Boxers, Falungong, and today's Taiji Zen/*gongshoudao*, we can see lessons learned from the playbook of religions, that have long used *mudra*, genuflection, davening, and prostration, as well as ecstatic and ritual dance, to transport the faithful and engage the total person.

To summarize this section, we have seen the mythologization of taijiquan's origins and efficacy in the 'invented tradition' of Zhang Sanfeng, its positivist demythologization as a modernizing project and the current attempt at remythologizing as a fundamentalist reaction, featuring divinization, revelatory epistemology, and mediatized re-enchantment in a newly industrialized and free-market environment.

## IDEALISM VERSUS MATERIALISM

The campaign that Tang Hao and his successor Gu Liuxin waged in the early twentieth century to ground taijiquan in history and rescue it from mythology plays out today in the battle between idealism (*weixin zhuyi*) and materialism (*weiwu zhuyi*). Formerly confined to rarified philosophical debates, this more classical dichotomy harkens back to Plato and Aristotle. But why this sudden shift in discursive register in China's taijiquan polemics? Plato's Forms are eternal, ideal exemplars, existing outside of space and time, just as it was believed that the human soul is qualitatively distinct from the body and strives to free itself from its material prison. Aristotle, however, held that the qualities of things have no abstract, independent existence outside of substances, and that the human mind proceeds from perception to conception, finally testing theories against the objective world.

Much of Judeo-Christian theology is underpinned by idealism, and as a preoccupation of philosophy, it resurfaces in the late eighteenth century with Kant's transcendental idealism and Hegel's absolute idealism. Hegel's dialectical method was reframed by Marx in the form of dialectical materialism, which in turn was embraced by Chinese communist thinkers, who interpreted all of intellectual and political history in terms of class struggle: idealism representing the interests of the ruling class and materialism the oppressed. Although Existentialism's attack on theism, and Postmodernism's attack on structuralism and essentialism continued the anti-idealist tradition, it is still chiefly through Marx that today's Chinese positions are articulated.

For Marx and Mao, idealism is no innocent intellectual thought experiment, but, often in the guise of religion, a tool of the privileged to justify all forms of inequality and exploitation. Idealism offers teleological explanations for natural phenomena and seeks to regulate social behavior by appeal to revealed scripture. It explains our station in life by reincarnation or predestination, and dictates the most intimate details of sex and diet, enforced by omniscient surveillance. Based on our deeds and faith in this life, it promises rewards or punishments in an afterlife and seeks to interpret the dispositions of the gods by divination, oracles, omens and prophecy, and to influence them by prayer, supplication and sacrifice. It supports a class of priests, monks, and shamans, while rationalizing class and caste hierarchies, and taxes the poor to underwrite awe-inspiring architectural and artistic projects, and conscripts them to fight in its holy wars. The ruling class co-opts religion to buttress its claim to rule by divine right, while religion benefits from imperialism to carry out mass conversions by the word or the sword. Materialism, by contrast, according to the Maoist interpretation, seeks to empower the oppressed in their struggle for equality and dignity by directing attention to improving conditions in this life and throwing off the yoke by any means necessary.

Hegel's idealism expressed itself as a teleological view of history, which he considered the unfolding of Spirit in time. If we divide idealists into subjectivist and objectivist, epistemological and ontological, today's Chinese advocates of taijiquan's idealist essence are chiefly of the objectivist/ontological stripe, meaning that they locate the ultimate reality and authority above the world of empirical experience. Confucius's 'mandate of Heaven', Mozi's 'will of Heaven' and Mencius's 'Heavenly nature', all locate a controlling principle above the material world. Buddhism's 'emptiness' can be approached both from an objectivist or subjectivist perspective, as can the *Daodejing*'s 'infinite', 'dao' and 'mystery', which can be seen as descriptions of the natural world or as a noumenal realm above the natural world. Both are nontheistic. Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism placed *li* (principles) as prior to and above the natural world (*qi*), that they govern. The Lu-Wang School of the Mind posited that, apart from the mind, there are no *li*, *wu*, or *shi* (principles, things, or phenomena), thus falling into the subjectivist/epistemological category. Materialist-idealist theory was pervasive in the early decades of the People's Republic, as Marxist historians sorted traditional schools of thought – Confucian, Daoist, Legalist and Moist – into progressive or reactionary according to their proto-materialist or idealist tendencies.

With the establishment of 'the theory of Marx and the thought of Mao' as ideological orthodoxy, idealism became a strongly pejorative term, surviving on the margins of Mainland China as an anti-communist statement in Taiwan, Hong Kong and overseas Chinese communities around the world. Thus, for some it is a badge of honor, and for others a crown of thorns. The history of established ideologies in China goes back to Legalism during the Qin, Confucianism during the Han and Neo-Confucianism during the Song. Dialectical materialism is simply the latest iteration of established ideology. With dialectics as the gold-standard of truth, both idealists and materialists claim yin-yang cosmology as the primitive version of their metaphysics and proto-science. The cosmology that idealists embrace as China's metaphysics, dialectical materialists hold up as evidence of China's early dialectical thinking. The sway of the yin-yang paradigm and Marxism in China is comparable to the intellectual hegemony of monotheism and democracy in the West, where even patently polytheistic religions are forced to argue that the many are all manifestations of the One, and even the most authoritarian regimes display some trappings of representative government.

How does idealism play out in the debate over the true nature of taijiquan? There are two ways: the first is the proposition that principle is prior to practice, and the second is that mind (*yi*) is prior to and leads the body. Moreover, these principles are revealed to humankind by demigods Huangdi and Fu Xi, sages Confucius and Laozi, and immortals like Zhang Sanfeng: they did not require *a posteriori* knowledge derived

from practice. Zhang Xiaoping states the first argument of the idealist case most succinctly when he says, ‘The art of taijiquan is based first on principles, and technique follows. It derives from the *Yijing* [Book of Changes], and its principles are based on traditional Chinese medicine’ [Zhang 2013: 52]. Idealism is a time-honored strategy for conferring gravitas and infallibility on what might otherwise be dismissed as mere matter of opinion.

The second aspect is addressed by an anonymous author writing under the pen name Lingdong Taiji, who rhetorically asks how important is the classics’ injunction to ‘use the mind and not force’. He concludes, ‘Although it is said that existence is a precondition for consciousness, nevertheless, by the same token, consciousness can influence the body, as, for example, when the mind directs the *qi* to sink to the *dantian*’ [Lingdong 2019]. He reminds us that taijiquan’s slow motion is intended to facilitate mental control over movement, and that achieving relaxation is a function of the imagination. Just as in medical practice, where psychology is critical to the healing process, he says that without the role of the mind, taijiquan becomes no different from dance or aerobics. Taking it a step further, an anonymous poster on the ‘Dongfang Zixun’ blog warns, ‘I believe that zoomorphic postures are harmful to taijiquan principles and that they will inevitably result in emphasis on the physical body in combat situations, which, in reality, is tantamount to recommending hard-style techniques’ [Anon. 2019]. He says that it is the spirit of the animal that should inform the movement, and not a crude imitation of the outer form or brute force. Embodying the spirit ensures that taijiquan does not descend to the level of ‘external’ styles, but rises to the *Xue Taijiquan Xu Lianshen Juqi Lun*’s teaching that, ‘Studying taijiquan is the foundation for entering the *dao*’. In sum, then, the idealist case rests on the assertion that taijiquan’s principles precede practice, and that the mind leads the body.

By contrast, the materialist case is a form of valorization by empiricism. Given the prestige of dialectical materialism in Mainland China, it is not surprising that attempts to align taijiquan theory with materialist ideology far outnumber the idealist. If there is any nuance of difference among proponents of taijiquan as an example of dialectical materialism in action, it is between those that emphasize the ‘material’ aspect and those that emphasize the ‘dialectical’ aspect. Representing the material side is an anonymous author, whose ‘Taijiquan yu bianzhengfa’ (Taijiquan and dialectics) says, ‘These opposing but mutually dependent elements are objectively real, concrete entities, and not empty and void. They are observable, visible, tangible physical entities and not formulas, invisible, intangible mystical entities’ [Anon. 2018c]. This is clearly a rebuttal to idealist attempts to ‘spiritualize’ taijiquan.

A classic expression of the dialectical emphasis in relation to taijiquan is Cao Degui’s :

**From beginning to end, the movements of taijiquan reflect the glory of dialectical philosophy. Every posture is the physical image and artistic expression of the dialectical method. The Chinese are a hard-working and intelligent people, who produced brilliant ancient culture, the principles of primitive dialectics, and taijiquan as the embodiment of the dialectical method.**  
[Cao 2010]

This echoes the words of President Xi Jinping himself, who in a *Qiushi* article entitled ‘Dialectical Materialism is Chinese Communist Party Members’ World View and Methodology’ declared: ‘From earliest times, China was aware of the concept of contradictions, as in “Yin and yang, this is the *dao*” [Xi 2019]. Completing the trifecta of dialectical materialism, the Party, and taijiquan, Li Yingjie offers this paean to taijiquan and to the Party: ‘The whole nation strives to achieve good health, and taijiquan is as precious as gold. [...] All of us martial artists are one big family. Perfect your taiji and follow the Party’ [Li 2015]. The Party is the keeper of the flame of dialectical materialism, and taijiquan is one of its sacraments.

Amplifying the dialectical aspect of dialectical materialism and its relationship to taijiquan is He Xianquan, who gives us a primer on classical Marxist dialectics and how taijiquan exemplifies its three laws: the unity and interpenetration of opposites, the transformation of quantity into quality, and the negation of negation. According to He’s analysis, movement and stillness, fullness and emptiness, opening and closing are examples of the unity of opposites, and ‘hardness in the midst of softness, and softness in the midst of hardness’ are seen as the interpenetration of opposites. The quantity of repetitions in practice gives rise to qualitative progress in skill, and the negation of negation reveals itself in the endless process of correction and progress through criticism and self-criticism [He 2018].

Finally, dialectical materialism is the standard by which Chinese culture itself is validated, as the ‘Preface’ to the *Chinese Martial Arts Encyclopedia* says: ‘Chinese culture is a high culture that emphasizes dialectics. Although dialectical materialism is a foreign concept, our culture has many examples [...] together with the principle of the unity of man and nature, and body and mind’ [Ed. Com. 1998]. However, while the editors assert that traditional Chinese medicine is superior to Western medicine, socialism is superior to capitalism, and, of course, Chinese martial arts are superior to Western martial arts, they allow that these exist ‘on different levels’ and must, in effect, be judged by a double standard.

In the debate between idealists and materialists, are we dealing with a ‘chicken-and-egg’ dilemma, or a classic case of existence and essence?

Before the first man realized that cords or columns of air of different lengths produced different pitches when vibrated, one could argue that the basic physical principles of acoustics already existed and did not come into being only after the first string was plucked or reed was blown. Then people began to make music, and finally the principles of melody, harmony and rhythm were organized into what we call music theory. Thus, Mersenne did not dictate to the universe that a string half the length, four times the tension, or one quarter the mass produces an octave. Similarly, the laws of biophysics were *discovered* by man but not *invented* by man. The question comes down to discovery by trial-and-error or by divine revelation, just as with evolution and creation, and this is where ideology and politics enter the picture. Is there some synthesis between these theses and antitheses?

## PHYSICS VERSUS METAPHYSICS

Before addressing the question of physics and metaphysics in the taijiquan debate, it is perhaps necessary to examine the more fundamental question of the appropriateness of considering metaphysics at all in analyzing Chinese thought. Since the 18th century European Enlightenment, there is a long lineage of thinkers who, disillusioned with Church teachings and religion in general, have sought out examples of other cultures whose best minds were free of metaphysics. Famed sinologist Joseph Needham says:

**We believe that the Chinese mind throughout the ages did not, on the whole, feel the need for metaphysics; physical Nature (with all that implied at the highest levels) sufficed. The Chinese were extremely loath to separate the One from the many, or the spiritual from the material. Organic naturalism was their *philosophia perennis*. [Needham 1969: II, xxiv]**

In discussing Heidegger's indebtedness to the *Zhuangzi*, Reinhard May says that he is 'neither indebted to Aristotelian logic nor receptive to an ontology involving a subject-object dichotomy, nor, above all, being conditioned by any theology' [May 1996: 229]. However, the intellectual freedom that Needham and Heidegger applaud as superior, Hajime Nakamura decries as 'a lack of general laws', 'grammatical ambiguity' and 'failure to distinguish *genus* and *differentia*' [Nakamura 1964: 532]. Not sparing his own Japanese language, he finds it inferior to Greek, Sanskrit and German, and inadequate for rigorous philosophy. Precisely the opposite view is expressed by MD, TCM doctor, and taijiquan practitioner Huang Mingda, who denies that China lacks metaphysics, declaring that yin-yang theory not only qualifies as advanced cosmology, but is more intellectually sophisticated than

Western science. He argues that Chinese health sciences are not limited by the narrow perspective of Newtonian physics but play by the rules of 'organicism, entropy, and nonequilibrium thermodynamics', making it a third epistemological model, somewhere between science and philosophy, but closer to metaphysics [Huang 2008: 1-61]. Among these cross currents of opinion, we have seen those that hold that China lacks metaphysics to its credit, lacks it to its shame, and owns it to its glory.

An anonymous poster on the 'Taijiquanba' blog stakes out a pro-empiricist position that nevertheless maintains a cautious skepticism of science. He says that those who try to analyze taijiquan with the tools of Western science are ignorant of taijiquan, science and history, and insists that taijiquan is a purely experiential fighting system that includes physical and psychological factors that defy current scientific investigation [Anon. 2013a]. Another anonymous poster on the same thread joins the chorus of pro-empiricists, when he adds, 'The taijiquan classics are the summation and fruit of practice, and it is an error to mistake the fruit for the process' [Anon. 2013b]. Here, of course, what is meant is that practice is the process, and theory the fruit; metaphysics makes the mistake of putting the 'cart before the horse', confusing 'existence and essence'.

Seeking a way out of this metaphysical morass, Lingdong Taiji offers three reasons why taijiquan has no need for mythical and metaphysical aggrandizement. First, in its three-hundred-year history, there are continuous lineages and a rich literature of theoretical texts. Second, yin-yang is a thoroughly scientific concept and should not be considered some kind of occult knowledge. Third, now that taijiquan has been widely popularized and practiced in public places by millions, there are no secrets or miraculous powers. He concludes that the current wave of mystification has taken place because of gongfu fantasy novels and films, exaggerated claims by self-styled masters, and the expectations of longtime practitioners who, failing to manifest super-powers, are convinced they must be missing some closely held secrets [Lingdong 2019].

Recent reality checks for the 'internal' martial arts have resulted in public relations disasters, prompting anti-metaphysical critics like Zhang Feng to comment, 'Comparatively, Chinese martial arts still contain too much mysterious stuff. For example, what is the actual power of so-called "gongfu"? Does the fabled "internal energy" really exist? Apart from flesh and bones, when you strike a blow with the fist, what other spiritual force is there?' [Zhang 2017]. This echoes Jet Li's assessment of soft-style martial arts as nothing but 'flowery postures' (*huajia*), or, in the vernacular, 'beancurd boxing' (*doufuquan*).

A perfect example of the starry-eyed student that the anti-mystifiers target is Ai Xiaofeng, who says:



When you have really penetrated this art and understand its principles, then you will have a completely new understanding and impression of whatever you experience. Now, when I listen to the dialogue in gongfu films, I feel that the actor's lines have acquired profound meaning, and are absolutely not wild imaginings or gibberish, but full of lessons on the most advanced training methods and techniques. Even the most fantastic scenes do not appear miraculous or unrealistic.  
[Ai 2020]

Two cultural phenomena have become lightning rods for the anti-mystifiers: gongfu fantasy films and public demonstrations of non-contact repelling (*lingkong fajin*, or *geshan daniu*). An anonymous poster who writes under the pseudonym Tianyi eschews the terms of metaphysics or idealism, but says that taijiquan evolved from a combat art, to a health practice, to a recreational activity, but promising miracles only hurts the reputation of the art. Citing physics to rebut metaphysics, he says that, 'using four ounces to deflect a thousand pounds' is objective bio-mechanics, and can indeed allow a smaller person to overcome a larger one, but should not be oversold or mystified [Tianyi n.d.]. A similar theme is struck by an anonymous 'Guizhen Quanshe' poster who ridicules 'non-contact strikes, miracle cures, developing *qi* in months or days, and opening the microcosmic orbit, all without sweat or fatigue' [Anon. 2018a]. He blames gongfu novels, videos, exaggerated claims and the antiquated language of the classics, and general fascination with all things metaphysical and mysterious, citing the proverb, 'The truth fits on one piece of paper; deceit fills volumes'. He says that while it is true that the mind directs the body, it is not a disembodied force.

There are two types of criticisms of mystification in taijiquan. The first is wholesale condemnation, and the second attempts to explain it as a kind of semantic misunderstanding or parapsychological phenomenon. An example of the first is Wan Shengting's:

**The private martial arts scene has descended into chaos, with people making wildly exaggerated claims for taijiquan, promising non-contact striking and curing all illnesses. They mystify the teachings, foster religious devotion to the organization, and worship the master. A healthy cultural art does not indulge in 'closing the gates and proclaiming oneself king'.**  
[Wan 2017]

In this assessment, Wan offers a very dismal diagnosis of the state of the private taijiquan marketplace. The second type expresses equal revulsion, but offers a more sympathetic explanation. For example, Li Chengyin attributes belief in non-contact and minimal-contact

repelling to people taking literally what they see in gongfu films and misinterpreting the function of slowness and avoidance of force in the classics. He says that taijiquan's effectiveness is simply a subtle application of the natural laws of physics [Li 2012]. An author who writes under the pseudonym 'Taijizhe' adds a tone of sarcasm in a post entitled, 'To all of you grandmasters, talking about "*qi*" to beginning taijiquan students is pure deceit'. Attempting to bring the discussion back down to earth, he says:

***Qi* is simply power, and it would be preferable to call it such. What we have traditionally mystified as 'spirit', 'mind', and 'qi' is simply a method for concentrating the power of one's whole being on one point. [...] During the 1970's and 80's, taijiquan was transformed into a kind of qigong, and the path of power came to be described in terms of *daoyin*, meridians, acupoints, and breath.**  
[Taijizhe 2017]

Here, Taijizhe attributes the turn in taiji to adopting the language and goals of qigong with its acquiring the mystique of inner alchemy. Similarly, apologists for what looks like staged demonstrations of non-contact uprooting (*bengtiao*) attempt to psychologize the phenomenon by citing a kind of 'resonance' between minds that only works when masters and disciples are 'on the same wavelength'. Thus, they claim it is not willful deception but a kind of parapsychological cooperation.

Another writer who deploys neuroscience to demystify *song* (relaxing), and goes by the pseudonym Biwugong, says we should not obfuscate *song* but consider it a natural progression on the path to skill mastery. He compares it to the difference between marching and strolling, or the stages of mastering the biomechanics of bicycle riding [Bi 2006]. Chen Shiping interrogates the classic injunction to 'use the mind and not force', finding it the source of taiji's detour into metaphysics and failing to understand that it refers only to local force rather than rooted, whole-body force. This integrated, coordinated movement produces a feeling in the sensorium that came to be called *qi* or *jin*, which is simply the Chinese name for that feeling and should not be mystified [Chen 2019]. Chen Shiping thus makes the same link between biomechanics, psychophysiology, and peak experience that Csikszentmihalyi calls 'flow' and what Tillerman calls 'entrainment'. Similarly, Chen Xiong quotes Zheng Manqing as saying, 'Taijiquan corresponds perfectly with the laws of mechanics because it is based on nature [...] Although taijiquan derives from philosophy, it can be proven by science' [Chen 2018]. Biwugong is content to give a perfectly naturalistic explanation, without embroidering, whereas Zheng accords science the role of corroborating what was already apparent to 'philosophy'. This exemplifies the different approaches of physics and metaphysics.

## SELF-DEFENSE VERSUS SELF-CULTIVATION

Martial arts and calligraphy are two functional activities – self-defense and written communication – that have been highly aestheticized and spiritualized in East Asia. There are as many distinctive styles of calligraphy as there are martial arts styles: both are used as meditative practices, requiring a kind of calm concentration, and both combine self-cultivation with performative self-expression. Self-cultivation (*xiuyang*) is generally understood to encompass *yangsheng* (physical health) and *xiuxin* (spiritual cultivation), with the two coming together in the practice of taijiquan. Shao Duorong highlights these dual aspects when he says, ‘Master Zhang Sanfeng created taijiquan, an art that ‘combines *dao* and skill’, to not only train the body and eliminate illness, but to cultivate the mind and nurture the spirit in order to banish falsehood and preserve truth, with the aim of achieving a high level of virtue’ [Shao 2018]. Most authors emphasize the original unity of self-defense and self-cultivation as a distinguishing feature of taijiquan, although in practice, individual styles and schools will often focus on one aspect at the expense of the other. Is the acquisition of skill in fighting an end in itself, or is realization of the *dao* an end that uses training in skill as a means? This is the question that lurks behind many debates about taiji’s essence. During the era of simplification and standardization, the pendulum swung decisively in the direction of health and recreation, but today, there is a strong push to return taijiquan to its more combative roots.

Proponents of taijiquan as a fighting art do not disavow its health benefits, as the results of thousands of studies conducted by such prestigious institutions as Harvard, Mayo, Oxford, National Institute of Health, etc., consistently show positive benefits for sleep, balance, cognition, stress, blood pressure, blood sugar, osteoporosis, as well as attention deficit in children and athletic performance. For taiji fighters, however, health benefits may be a side-effect of training but not the prime motivation. Many in China and abroad practice only the form as an abstract qigong routine and are unaware of, or not interested in, the self-defense applications. If you accept ‘health’ as the standard, then it must be compared with yoga, Pilates, Alexander, Feldenkrais, etc. If you take fighting as the standard, then it must be compared with karate, taekwondo, capoeira, etc. And if you take spiritual practice as the standard, then it must be compared with meditation, or even religion. What is unique about taijiquan is precisely its ability to be all things to all people.

Claims for the health benefits of taijiquan may be couched in either traditional Chinese medical or Western biomedical language. Of the hundreds of thousands of articles on the health benefits of taijiquan, one would be hard pressed to find a single negative review, but a few

that warn against exaggerated cure-all claims. Representative of the biomedical paradigm is an anonymous poster on the 360.com website who summarizes the health benefits of regular practice in these terms: ‘It balances the central nervous system, strengthens the cardiovascular system, improves the respiratory system, and promotes mental health’ [Anon.c 2018]. The case for taiji’s health benefits expressed in terms of traditional Chinese medicine is made by Yezi, who explains:

**Taijiquan is perfectly adapted to nurture the ‘three treasures – *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*’ [...], it addresses inner and outer, yin and yang, and maximizes the stimulation of *qi* and blood, while minimizing waste and loss to the body’s reserves. [...] It smoothes the flow of *qi* in the twelve regular and eight extra channels, with special focus on the *dantian*, *weilü*, and *changqiang* acupoints.**  
[Yezi 2019]

Safety, efficacy, and economy are common denominators for both paradigms.

The Chinese custom of full-contact public *leitai* competitions, formerly banned as decivilizing, have made a comeback of late, and even taijiquan, arguably the most ‘civilized’ of all the martial arts, has been caught up in the trend. However, in the wake of a series of ignominious defeats in the ring, an article on the Tengxunwang website asks: ‘Why Can’t Taijiquan Defeat Thai Boxing; Isn’t It True That Softness Overcomes Hardness?’ Predictably this elicits a flood of posts and is just the latest in a series of soul-searching responses to much-heralded matches between taiji standard-bearers and exponents of other Asian martial arts, Western boxing, and mixed martial arts [Anon. 2019c]. Echoes of Ah Q’s ‘art of spiritual victory’ are everywhere in this debate, as taiji apologists seek to capture the high ground by claiming moral superiority.

In spite of government calls for a ‘harmonious society’ and a ‘civilized society’, advocates of taiji’s fighting essence feel that now is their moment. Chen stylist Ma Hong is one of the leaders of this offensive and he suggests that all theoretical discussions of taijiquan are a form of mystification [Ma 2004]. He says that nowadays in taijiquan circles, there is endless talk about health benefits but very little on self-defense, resulting in ‘a monotonous drum beat of articles that are flowery with no substance, making it more and more mysterious and misleading sincere students’.

Interestingly, Ma characterizes this trend as ‘conservative’, as if popularization and medicalization have become so normalized that what was once radical is now reactionary. He points out that ‘force’

is only negative when it is unaccompanied by suppleness. Similarly, slowness is simply a pedagogical strategy for teaching and should not be taken literally in combat. Dissenting from official policy, he adds: 'Promoting simplified forms has given taiji a bad name and is not progress but regression (resulting in the loss of its true meaning)'. He advocates (a la Confucius's 'rectification of names') calling the true taiji 'taijiquan' and the simplified version 'taijicao' (taiji exercise). He laments simplification, mystification, and the proliferation of 'beancurd styles'. Seconding this anti-simplification sentiment is Zhenxuan Caoren, who pleads with his readers not to forsake taiji's martial roots and turn it into an exercise system. He blames simplified forms and points out that foreigners who go to China avoid these and seek out the traditional lineage masters, who preserve 'the real taiji', quoting the aphorism, 'The uninitiated look at what's flashy; the initiated look at authentic art' [Zhenxuan 2014]. His argument appeals to foreign approval and traditional wisdom as his standards of value.

Ma Changxun is a thoughtful pro-pugilist, who takes a reformist stance, straddling both self-cultivation and self-defense camps by injecting health benefits into push-hands practice. He decries the current state of push-hands, driven by its inclusion in martial arts competitions and unbecoming descent into wrestling and grappling. Like the form, push-hands can be done in a constructive way without degenerating into brutishness. Push-hands can be a way of applying and sharpening the experience of principles but not in the context of wrestling matches. Real push-hands is a form of self-cultivation and somatic sensitivity training, Ma insists, and even spectators can derive health benefits and pleasure from a kind of kinetic empathy, much like the esthetic experience of watching dance. He says that push-hands is unique for its civility, safety, and philosophical content, enabling practitioners to transcend egocentric competitiveness and react spontaneously without mental calculation. He says that 'qi' is simply the pleasurable feeling from letting go, releasing tension and combining skill and spontaneity in a flow, much like partner dancing. Likewise, when uprooted by a partner/opponent in a relaxed, cooperative way, it is healthy and pleasurable to both participants. Ma's compromise, then, reconciles extremes and seeks to reform, preserve, and restore push-hands to its status as a true internal art. In a similar vein, an anonymous poster on the 'Tianya shequ' website takes a non-dogmatic, common-sense approach when he says: 'If you say that taijiquan is good for health, I believe it; if you say it is powerful, I believe it; but if you say that it is miraculous and that Western boxing is nothing, I absolutely disagree' [Anon. 2013]. The moderates, then, would honor the full spectrum, avoiding the extremes of declawing or depacifying.

## LIBERAL VS CONSERVATIVE

We arrive now at the seemingly more familiar category of liberal and conservative, only to learn that in the current Chinese political context, habitual Western associations must be abandoned. As employed today in China, 'conservative' denotes orthodox Marxist/Maoist ideology, and 'liberal' is closer to our notion of libertarian. The man-in-the-street metaphor circulating in China compares the economy to a cake: the liberal/free market view favors baking the whole cake and then dividing it, whereas the conservative/socialist view favors first dividing the cake and then baking the slices, the former representing, perhaps, the Chinese version of 'a rising tide lifts all ships'. Can we divine whether liberals or conservatives are more likely to practice taijiquan in China, or whether their interpretation of its meaning would be expressed in terms of the dichotomies we have outlined above?

New investigative instruments and mathematical modeling embolden us to begin asking such questions. Moreover, increased information porosity occasioned by two-way tourism, student exchanges, and above all, social media have given us access to a wide spectrum of thought on contemporary culture and institutions. Still, we are often looking through a glass darkly, and it is always instructive to remember that Deng Xiaoping, the architect of the current Reform Era, was also the one who called in the tanks to crush the Democracy Wall Movement. Chinese politics are usually analyzed by who's up and who's down, slogans, like 'revolution is no crime, rebellion is justified', and mass movements, such as the Great Leap Forward or Cultural Revolution. From these, analysts construct hypothetical factions, such as the 'princelings' or Communist Youth League, competing regional models of development, such as Shanghai, Chongqing and Guangzhou, and ideological configurations, such as Old Left and New Left, Liberal and Conservative, and so forth.

Social media gives us access to the private opinions of ordinary citizens, with anonymity allowing for considerable freedom of speech. This medium has afforded us a glimpse of a passionate and highly partisan debate over the origins, function, and ultimately essence of taijiquan. Recently, however, a new instrument – the social survey – has provided unusually candid, and often confounding, insights into popular opinion on a variety of topics. Launched from the West, these surveys aim to capture a cross-section of public opinion primarily of interest to economists and foreign policy makers. As a result, the Ash Center social survey (2003–2018), Hu Fu's Asian Barometer Survey (2019), and Andreas Mulvad's interviews with 28 Chinese intellectuals are limited in their usefulness for our purposes. However, Jennifer Pan and Xu Yiqing's Ideological Spectrum Survey, first deployed in 2014, and with successive waves, includes several questions intended to elicit views on

traditional culture, that, although not specifically related to martial arts, might allow us to extrapolate with cautious confidence. Of the total of fifty questions, the handful addressing attitudes towards traditional Chinese medicine, the *Yijing* (Book of Changes), Confucianism, simplified characters, and role of the ancient classics in the school curriculum are most relevant for our speculation here. The authors of the survey summarize the new alignments that their data reveal:

**Individuals who are politically conservative, who emphasize the supremacy of the state and nationalism, are also likely to be economically conservative, supporting a return to socialism and state control of the economy, and culturally conservative, supporting traditional, Confucian values. In contrast, political liberals, supportive of constitutional democracy and individual liberty, are also likely to be economic liberals who support market-oriented reform and social liberals who support modern science and values such as sexual freedom.**

[Pan & Xu 2016: 1]

Mulvad's 'two-dimensional' model attempts to complicate the 'monochrome' picture of authoritarian state socialists versus democratic liberals by accounting for strange bedfellows like Neo-Confucians and the Old Left, who find themselves in agreement, for example, about paternalistic leadership but split over property rights. Thus, although it seems logical to assume that those who believe that the *Yijing* 'can explain many things well' in the Pan and Xu survey would naturally be in agreement on the foundational role of the *Yijing* in taiji theory, we know from our findings that both idealists and materialists claim the *Yijing*, based on its dialectical method. Again, even before 1949, all but the most radical leftists were in favor of preserving the traditional martial arts, so there is no clear left-right cleavage from the beginning of the modern period. Similarly, is it safe to say that someone who 'strongly disagrees' with the proposition that 'simplified characters should be promoted' would also oppose simplification of taijiquan forms, or is the question moot, since both 'simplifications' are *fait accompli*? In any case, it appears that Mulvad is correct in sensing that we need 'two dimensions' to capture today's configurations, and with our findings, it may even require a third. As ever, 'politics makes strange bedfellows'.

Meiji era Japan, Nationalist era China, and Deng era People's Republic have all sought to soften the shock of modernization with the salve of Confucianism, seen as providing continuity with tradition. Today, while Party rhetoric continues to insist on the ideological orthodoxy of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', the country hurtles headlong into the embrace of its two former heresies: capitalism and Confucianism. After all, if Christianity can make its peace with

capitalism, why not Confucianism with Marxism? If Inoue Tetsujiro could insist on an unbroken line of descent of 10,000 years from the Sun Goddess to the Japanese imperial family, what is a mere 1,000 years from Zhang Sanfeng to the present?

For us, though, how would advocates of rehabilitating Confucianism align with the various positions on taijiquan? Of course, the teachings of the old Sage have been around for two and a half millennia, and with the exception of the 'burn the (Confucian) classics and bury the (Confucian) scholars' policy of the short-lived Qin dynasty and 'criticize Confucius and Lin Biao' campaign of the Cultural Revolution, Confucianism has managed to accommodate itself to a variety of regimes. Indeed, Confucianism seems to be the 'God of the gaps' whenever East Asia faces a spiritual vacuum.

Dialectical materialism in the context of utopian socialism provided an optimistic, millenarian vision for a time, but poverty and ideological purity lost their charm after the Cultural Revolution, and the conspicuous consumption of the current *nouveau riche* generation is not sustainable. The recent rehabilitation of Confucianism reflects a nativist impulse, but splits into two strains: one stresses the authoritarian, statist, hierarchical aspect, and the other, adopted by New Left progressive Confucians, stresses the ethical aspect of benevolence, righteousness, and even self-sacrifice in opposing tyranny, very much in the mould of Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao and Tan Sitong more than a century earlier. Although 'Confucianism' is indisputably 'ancient', and taijiquan's pedigree is largely 'invented', both share a claim to embodying China's essence. It is not surprising, therefore, that valuable properties like Confucianism and taijiquan are such hotly contested cultural assets. After all, if philosophy and the arts can never be separated from politics, why should the martial arts?

## CONCLUSION

Thinking about taijiquan's essence, or true nature, begs the questions of whether it is inherently more multidimensional than other martial arts, or whether its popularity attracted more attention and made it a site of hotly contested claims. Certainly, Japanese martial arts have similarly evolved to embody national ethos and a 'way of life'. Or, is it that martial arts, as a kind of performing art, are intrinsically more resistant to fixed definition than written texts or plastic arts? Debates in China today divide sharply over origins, philosophical orientation and role in society, but they are strictly structuralist, assuming that taijiquan is a stable entity with definable parameters that distinguish it from other martial arts. Is the search for taijiquan's essence infected

with essentialism? This is a bit like archaeologists unearthing an axe and arguing over who made it and for what purpose – utilitarian, ritual, decorative – while agreeing that it is an ‘axe’.

Comparison undoubtedly serves to highlight difference, and difference can perhaps advance our search for essence. It is common to compare taijiquan to other martial arts, and as such, assume it is a survival skill, usually called ‘self-defense’; but for heuristic purposes, let us compare taijiquan to a physical activity without roots in survival, say tennis, for example. As competition, tennis is a kind of push-hands sparring *with* a ball, while push-hands is like rallying *without* a ball. Having said that, we immediately confront the distinction that many practice taijiquan exclusively as a solo form, while tennis has not evolved a similar shadow practice. In other words, tennis’ eight strokes: service, overhead, forehand, backhand, lob, drop, slice and volley, unlike taiji’s ‘eight techniques’ – *peng, lü, ji, an, cai, lie, zhou, kao* – did not become the elements of a choreographed routine.

On the social level, both can provide the organizing principle for social life, and exclusive country club memberships are as coveted as ‘indoor’ discipleships. Club professionals and pro-tour stars are analogous to ‘masters’ and ‘grand masters’, although tennis rankings and titles are determined by objective criteria, and material compensation is not remotely comparable. On the biomechanical level, virtually all of taijiquan’s techniques are reducible to forehand and backhand mechanics, issuing force either through the palm or back of the hand, while ‘borrowing energy’ in tennis is a function of ball compression and string elasticity, rather than *peng* in the body of the practitioner. Tennis performance has undoubtedly benefited from advances in kinesiology, biomechanics and sports medicine, while taiji practice has been enriched by traditional medicine, qigong and meditation.

In tennis, preoccupation with the scoreboard militates against entering the ‘flow’ state, while taijiquan explicitly encourages subjectivity and awareness of ‘internal’ sensations. Nevertheless, on the psycho/spiritual level, although orientalist creations like ‘the Zen of tennis’, ‘inner tennis’ or ‘mindful tennis’ are appropriated as a kind of self-help therapy to address personal issues, the native Chinese approach to taiji is more often framed in terms of transpersonal goals. As a pro-longevity practice, few would say that their understanding or performance of tennis improved in old age, whereas many longtime practitioners of taiji would report a deepening of understanding and an open-ended experience of progress in performance.

Advances in tennis are based on insights from movement science and exercise physiology, on the one hand, and on political struggles for racial and gender equality, on the other, while taijiquan in China

today looks backward to a mythical past and forward to exploiting new opportunities for commercialization. Modernizing trends in taijiquan have mainly played out in the form of simplification and popularization, whereas distinctions of ‘classic’ and ‘modern’ in tennis are based on biomechanical technique. Finally, tennis has no body of classics, and no claim to be the summation and symbol of everything fine in the culture. Few in China would be embarrassed to say that their spiritual life was fulfilled by taijiquan, whereas few Westerners would make that claim for tennis.

Taking our thought experiment one step further, tennis belongs to the general category of racket sports (badminton, ping-pong, squash, etc.), and as such, shares some basic body mechanics; taijiquan belongs to the general category of martial arts, and as such, shares at least the external form of some basic body mechanics. Let us say further that what distinguishes taijiquan from other self-defense systems is a common movement vocabulary across various styles (single whip, cloud hands, snake creeps down, etc.), distinctive movement qualities (softness, slowness, sinking, continuity) and movement principles (full and empty, root, waist rotation, single-weightedness, etc.) and a phenomenology of internal awareness akin to meditation (breath, pulse, acupoints, qi-channels, etc.). In push-hands (*tuishou*) and sparring (*sanshou*), the watchwords are: yielding, borrowing, sticking, listening, following and deflection. Finally, taijiquan boasts a normative, pre-modern textual tradition which is rich in abstract yin-yang cosmology and concrete metaphors that serve a mnemonic function, linking intellect and imagination with physical realization.

Having described a martial art that seeks to cultivate an inner ecology of energy over force and mind over matter, what then do we make of the ‘external’ stylist, or indeed, tennis player, who performs their art with these same ‘internal’ movement qualities and awareness, versus the ‘taijiquan’ practitioner who performs the taiji form without root, waist rotation, single-weightedness, softness, slowness, or inner awareness? The principles revealed in the taijiquan classics are generic descriptions of body mechanics, movement qualities, and internal cultivation, which could be applied to any martial art or athletic activity. Let us say further that among the various taijiquan styles, there is a shared vocabulary of techniques and fealty to the ‘classics’, but what is the irreducible minimum to qualify as ‘taijiquan?’ Is slowness alone sufficient, or the familiar repertoire of postures?

Or, let us take a song, for example. The irreducible essence of a song is its lyrics and melody; musical arrangement, i.e., harmony, and performer’s interpretation, might differ, but it would still be recognizable as the same song. For the sake of argument, let us say that the ‘thirteen postures’ of taijiquan are analogous to the twelve tones of

the Western musical scale, and that the movement principles of the taiji 'classics' are analogous to diatonic harmony theory in Western music. Is the same lyric set to a different melody the same song? Is soccer still soccer if you allow all players to catch and throw the ball? Is blank verse poetry; is free verse poetry; and if so, how do they differ from prose? Is this all a case of Justice Stuart's, 'I can't define pornography, but I know it when I see it'?

In philosophical terms, slowness, continuity, and so forth are *universals* and can be found in many activities, but what are the *particulars* that distinguish taijiquan? Or, from the Buddhist perspective, are the 'eight techniques', and 'five stances' like the 'five skandhas', producing the illusion of a unique and permanent entity called taijiquan? Some will only be satisfied with a definition of taijiquan that includes the belief that it is uniquely capable of cultivating internal potential energy (*qi*) that can be expressed (*fa*) as force (*jin*) to repel opponents, withstand blows, or therapeutically, to heal patients by touch or remote intention.

What are the criteria for judging kinetic performance? Kinetic performance can be measured on the stopwatch, scale, or scoreboard. Native ability – strength, speed, endurance, coordination – can carry the day in the schoolyard, but coaching can make the difference when all participants are athletically gifted. Social dance prizes grace and spontaneity, and stage dance unites efficiency, emotion and esthetics in an art of mute story-telling or abstract design. Ballet makes no pretense of natural movement, imposing *pointe*, turn out, line, and extension. The taijiquan form is, perhaps, closer to mime than to any other art, with each posture mimicking a specific self-defense technique. With no objective accountability, however, the only distinguishing characteristics to the casual observer may be slowness and a kind of faux fluidity, exhibiting synchronicity but not causality, that is, with 'open kinetic chain' movement, or 'independent arm action' – the tail wagging the dog, or simply wagging itself. However, when performed with full closed kinetic chain connection and mental absorption, the reward is rapt entrainment, like the *Zhuangzi*'s 'free and easy wandering'.

Our investigation began with two quotations that express the same patriotic sentiment from opposite sides of the political aisle, and we end with another pair, two centuries and two worlds apart, that express the same biophysical formula:

*Taijiquan jing* (The classic of taijiquan): 'The root (of force) is in the feet, develops in the legs, is directed by the waist, and projected through the fingers.'

[Wile 1983: 102]

Dr. Aaron Sciascia: 'Force is developed in the legs and trunk in a closed kinetic chain fashion, energy is funneled through the scapula, and the energy is then transferred to the arm...'  
[Sciascia 2017]

Failing to embody what the *Classic of Taijiquan* calls 'one continuous flow of *qi*', or what kinesiology calls the 'closed kinetic chain', begs the questions: Is it simply bad taiji, or not taiji at all? It is possible to throw a baseball a short distance using only a flick of the wrist, or only articulating the wrist and elbow, or only the wrist, elbow and shoulder, but a pitcher who initiates the wave from the foot, legs and torso, adding kick, stride and weight shift can launch a baseball a hundred miles an hour. Taiji *taolu* practice has no reality check in the form of a ball, and push-hands often degenerates into a contest of brute force or simply weight advantage.

Debates in China over ideology or Western fantasies of 'the little old Chinese man' [Frank 2006] make for interesting social science, but ultimately do not advance the art as much as revisiting the classics in light of their prescient consonance with modern movement science. We began our inquiry with the observation that taijiquan has been a political football in China for more than a century, and that recently the terms of the debate had changed, reflecting, perhaps, new realities and new cultural or political configurations. Certainly, taijiquan is not the flash point for political or philosophical controversies in the West, but 'national sports', like baseball and football, international sports like soccer, cricket and rugby, and, of course, the Olympics, are seldom free of political passions. Definition represents a kind of ownership, and the intensity of debates over ownership is a tribute to taijiquan's success.

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