

ISSUE 12
Summer 2022
ISSN 2057-5696

EDITORS
Paul Bowman
Lauren Miller Griffith
Benjamin N. Judkins



MARTIAL ARTS **STUDIES**

SPECIAL ISSUE

WHERE MARTIALITY AND RELIGION MEET: HEALTH, SPORT, WAR

EDITORIAL
**GABRIEL FACAL AND
LAURENT CHIRCOP-REYES**

MEDIEVAL MARTIAL ETHIC AS
A CONCEPTUAL REPOSITORY
FOR JUST WAR THEORY
MACIEJ TALAGA

FRAMING SPIRITUALITY
IN MARTIAL ARTS: AN
EMBODIED COMPREHENSION
THROUGH PHENOMENOLOGY
THABATA C.B. TELLES

THE KALARIPAYATTU
SALUTATION: MOVEMENT
MAKES MEANING
GITANJALI KOLANAD

TRANSLATING CHINESE
TRADITIONAL CULTURE
INTO INSTITUTIONAL SPORT
PIERRICK PORCHET

TAILORED FORMS OF
TAIJI FOR DEPRESSION
JOAN LISTERNICK

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Martial Arts Studies is an open access journal, which means that all content is available without charge to the user or their institution. You are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles in this journal without asking prior permission from either the publisher or the author.

The journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Original copyright remains with the contributing author and a citation should be made when the article is quoted, used or referred to in another work.



Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

Martial Arts Studies is an imprint of Cardiff University Press, an innovative open-access publisher of academic research, where 'open-access' means free for both readers and writers.
cardiffuniversitypress.org

Journal DOI

10.18573/ISSN.2057-5696

Issue DOI

10.18573/mas.i12

Accepted for publication 24 May 2022

Martial Arts Studies

Journal design by Hugh Griffiths

ARTICLES

- 1 Editorial
Where Martiality and Religion Meet: Health, Sport, War
Gabriel Facal and Laurent Chircop-Reyes
- 8 **'Have the Highest Righteous Fencer in Your Mind's Eye'**
Medieval Martial Ethic as a Conceptual Repository for Just War Theory
Maciej Talaga
- 19 **Framing Spirituality in Martial Arts**
An Embodied Comprehension Through Phenomenology
Thabata C.B. Telles
- 26 **The Kalaripayattu Salutation**
Movement Makes Meaning
Gitanjali Kolanad
- 33 **Translating Chinese Traditional Culture into Institutional Sport**
An ethnographic study of taijiquan in China
Pierrick Porchet
- 47 **Tailored Forms of Taiji for Depression**
Joan Listerick
-

Martial Arts Studies is part of a network of projects that connect academics, practitioners and institutions as they contribute to this rapidly expanding field of studies.

MARTIAL
ARTS **STUDIES**
JOURNAL

Open access peer-reviewed journal published twice a year to share the latest research and scholarship in the field
mas.cardiffuniversitypress.org

MARTIAL
ARTS **STUDIES**
RESEARCH NETWORK

Connecting and engaging researchers and practitioners to shape the multidisciplinary field of Martial Arts Studies
mastudiesrn.org

MARTIAL
ARTS **STUDIES**
MONOGRAPHS

An academic book series of Martial Arts Studies monographs from Rowman & Littlefield International
bit.ly/2LsRiHf

MARTIAL
ARTS **STUDIES**
CONFERENCE

The Annual International Martial Arts Studies Conferences
bit.ly/2Me52Xq

Gabriel Facal is an anthropologist and research associate at the Southeast Asia Centre, CASE, Paris.

Laurent Chircop-Reyes is a researcher and chief editor for China Perspectives at the French Centre for Research on Contemporary China in Hong Kong, and is associated with the IrAsia research unit in Marseille and the CECMC, Research centre on modern and contemporary China in Paris.

EDITORIAL

WHERE MARTIALITY AND RELIGION MEET: HEALTH, SPORT, WAR

GABRIEL FACAL AND LAURENT CHIRCOP-REYES

DOI

10.18573/mas.150

KEYWORDS

martial arts, religion, health, sport,
war

CITATION

Facal, Gabriel, and Laurent
Chircop-Reyes. 2022. 'Editorial:
Where Martiality and Religion
Meet: Health, Sport, War'. *Martial
Arts Studies* 12, 1-7.
doi: 10.18573/mas.150

ABSTRACT

This editorial presents the main questions that drive this themed issue on the links that exist between martial arts practices and religion. How can terminological, categorical and definitional boundaries be delineated to frame the two notions? What are the contemporary dynamics that redefine their relationships, from the processes of formalisation and specialisation, to the phenomena of patrimonialization, crossbreeding, hybridisation and (re)invention? How might martial arts become a practice of peace? The various contributions in this collection provide several elements of an answer to this question, by offering insights into the violent and conflictual propensities of martial practices but also into their ethical, ritual, performative, therapeutic and regulatory dimensions.

This themed issue of *Martial Arts Studies* has its origins in a research group initiated and co-organised by Paul Bowman (Cardiff University), Laurent Chircop-Reyes, Jean-Marc de Grave, Gabriel Facal (Aix-Marseille University) and DS Farrer (Palau University). The group aimed to research the links between martial arts and religion. A first workshop was held in 2019 in Aix-Marseille Université,¹ entitled 'Terminologies and categories of martiality: Etymologies, religious and secular dimensions, and related practices'. The workshop sought to frame the ways that categories and terms are constructed in different socio-cultural contexts, both academic and cultural. Case studies included India, Indonesia, Brazil, France, mainland China, Taiwan, and Japan.

Inevitably, questions of an encompassing denominative category also arose. An idea was formulated to use a conceptual category that could incorporate different degrees and contexts of what the term 'martial' expresses. The term 'martiality' was proposed.

This workshop prefigured the 6th annual Martial Arts Studies International Conference, scheduled for 2020, and entitled 'Martial Arts, Religion and Spirituality'.² The conference ultimately took place online, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was co-organised online by Laurent Chircop-Reyes and Gabriel Facal, under the guidance of Paul Bowman, Jean-Marc de Grave and DS Farrer.³

Martial Arts Studies is an emerging field of research at the crossroads of several salient research areas of the humanities and social sciences. This research nexus includes studying questions of the transmission of knowledge and skills, embodied knowledge, physical culture and sports, relationships to authority, security, commercial exchange, ritual and initiatory activities, mystical and spiritual practices, existential philosophies, and more.

1 10–11 July 2019 at Campus Schuman, Aix-Marseille Université (AMU), Aix-en-Provence. The event was made possible thanks to generous financial and scientific supports of the Aix-Marseille University (AMU), the French Asian research unit (IrAsia/CNRS – Institut de recherches Asiatiques, UMR 7306), and the French Academic Network for Asian Studies (GIS Asie).

2 6th conference of the Martial Arts Studies Research Network, 15–16 July 2020, IrAsia, Marseille.

3 The project was funded by IrAsia, AMU, and the GIS ASIE. We are thankful to all the partner institutions, to the scientific committee as well as to the chairpersons. Around 50 participants, including presenters and discussants, were able to discuss in nine panels focused on 1) Performing arts 2) Cosmologies 3) Classical and popular representations 4) Ethics and moral values 5) Popular religions, health, globalisation 6) Asceticism 7) Channelling violence in collective rituals and sport 8) Ethno-religious identities, nationalism and politics 9) Methodological issues. For more details about this series of prefigurative events see Jean-Marc de Grave [2020].

Regarding the last themes in this list: martial arts are sometimes interpreted as paradoxical 'paths to peace' [Ueshiba 2002], following the example of religious ideologies that convey messages of peace but serve as a support for political and warlike conflicts [Judkins and Molle *forthcoming*]. This apparent dissonance may be observable in the great diversity of traditions and forms of combat. This tension between martial/peace, and violence, reveals to some extent that the martial efficiency generally invoked cannot be completely separated from social, moral, ethical and practical values. Learning is part of a process – initiatory and ritual to different degrees – aiming as much at the incorporation of techniques as at the integration of ideas and values [Svitych 2021].

It is in this general perspective of linking the apprehension of warfare and peaceful pathways that this special themed issue section seeks to question the relationship between martial arts and religion. By approaching martial practices through the notion of 'martiality', we consider a wide scope of dimensions, including codified agonistic practices, self-defence and combat sports competitions. This range and scope allows us to better reflect on the heuristic implications of the links of martial practices to religion.

To approach this second term, we chose to use the notion of 'religion' in the singular, the intention being to provide it the capacity to relate to *le fait religieux* (lit. 'the religious fact'). In *An Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, Claude Lévi-Strauss described what he had understood of the 'religious fact', through Mauss's perspective, as follows: we are dealing with an order of facts, he writes, 'which should be studied without delay: those facts in which social nature is very directly linked to man's biological nature' [Lévi-Strauss 2013: 10].

Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) defined this sociological object through a concept that 'seemed to allow him to bypass the obstacle of ethnocentrism: the sacred' [Husser 2020: 8-11]. The author of *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* defined religion as 'a system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred, i.e., separate, forbidden things, beliefs and practices which unite those who adhere to them in a single moral community called the Church' [Durkheim 1960: 65, quoted in Husser 2020: 8-11]. Prior to any mythical or doctrinal discourse, therefore, religious beliefs, practices and institutions find their foundation in a collective emotion, the experience of an impersonal force that is projected into 'sacred things' that each culture names and organises in its own way [Husser 2020: 8-11].

Accordingly, in this themed issue, we conceptually understand religion as the essence of what is religious in different cultural contexts, beyond possible formalisation and institutionalisation. As a result, religion

can be grasped in its multiple aspects, including through secularity and secularism [Cibotaru 2021].

These broad understandings of martiality and religion are considered through the variety of methodological and analytical approaches, both disciplinary and interdisciplinary, that the authors develop in the following articles. These approaches concern ethnology, social anthropology, psychology, history, philology, sociology of sport and historical archaeology. They translate in methods of participation-observation, the study of ancient texts, the analysis of cosmological patterns and the sociological analysis of body techniques.

The issue falls into two sections. The first covers different geographical and temporal contexts. The second applies its insights to a specific case, focusing on Chinese martial arts.

Historical archaeologist Maciej Talaga's article opens the first section. It is titled, "Have the highest righteous fencer in your mind's eye": medieval martial ethic as a conceptual repository for the just war theory'. This article aims to question the role of violence experienced on the personal level in shaping conceptualisations of waging war, from the perspective of discursive memory, in the 14th/15th century Late Middle Ages Germany. Based on the qualitative study of the so-called Nuremberg Codex, Talaga explores the ethical and moral conditions of a just war, underlining the modalities of this ideology. He finds that the axiological dimensions were embedded in wider social considerations, such as how a particular understanding of war enabled one to gain honour, a core value at the centre of upward social mobility. Talaga also stresses that restraint in combat was not only linked to manhood and proper conduct, but also to martial strategy and efficiency. Self-control and measure ensured fencers' strength, speed, precision and rapid footwork. Overall, what emerges through the study of ethics in combat at this period is that 'martial prowess alone did not guarantee success in combat': the fighter also required God's favour. For example, in duels, both parties took oaths of innocence, sanctioned by God through the final fate of the duellist. Talaga concludes that research on martial arts ethics may adopt a counter-intuitive stance by taking into account how bottom-up flows of ideas, rooted in first-hand experience of combat, inflect ethical conceptualisations.

The second contribution is 'Framing Spirituality in Martial Arts: an Embodied Comprehension Through Phenomenology' by psychologist Thabata Castelo Branco Telles. This work mobilises Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to highlight both the pre-reflexive dimensions of fighting techniques in motion (that she refers as 'awareness') and reflexive relation with the object (what she terms 'consciousness'). Through philosophical and methodological perspectives,

phenomenology enables one to describe how spirituality in martial arts entails a tension between the embodied experience and the reflective-introspective philosophical life discipline (an existential philosophy).

There are at least two implications for martial arts practice. First, many martial arts encompass the practice of trance, possession, or mystical states (which she describes as 'pre-reflexive') and either the acquisition of invulnerability or extraordinary destructive power. Through the martial practice, there is the construction of bodily intelligence, and the synchronisation between body and mind/spirit; their boundaries are blurred; their unification is looked after, particularly in the mystical practice – what is called the 'state of flow' in modern sports.

A second category of martial practices attempts to reconcile the practitioner with the inevitability of their own death and to cultivate peace and socio-cosmic harmony. Employed as a spiritual pathway, daily discipline, body-mind control and social relational harmony entail a phenomenological consequence: the practitioner is shaped through the practice, their body and state of mind being progressively transformed. Martial practices often encompass both ritual and religious dimensions, complementary to each other.

In 'The Kalaripayat Salutation: Movement Makes Meaning', Gitanjali Kolanad asks us to consider how a kick might come to transcend its ordinary signification and take on ritual meaning, and how this meaning may be influenced by Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. Through in-depth ethnography, the author describes several variations of the *Kalaripayattu* ritual salutation, called *vanakkam*. The devotional character of the salutation is expressed in both representational movements (the offering of flowers, bowing) and in the combat movements, practised under the auspices of tutelary deities.

The movements mobilise both individual and interpersonal codes of behaviour, which unite particular sets of gestures, footwork and choreographies with external attitudes and internal states of mind. Thus, movements intended for combat are not dissociated from an internal struggle for self-control and discipline. At the highest levels, this embodied mastery enables the practitioners to overcome their limitations and progress along their devotional path. These internal features are reflected in symbols and aesthetic signs whose interpretation varies according to the religious tendencies (whether Hindu, Muslim, or Christian) of the practice centres, the *kalaris*. The polysemy of the movements is complicated by the continuities existing between kalaripayat, theatrical performances and dance forms, showing the holistic background of these martial-devotional practices.

In the second part of the issue, two authors offer contrasting perspectives on Chinese martial practices. Chinese non-military practices, designated by the generic terms of 'martial arts' (*wushu* 武術), 'art of fist'/boxing (*quan shu* 拳術) or by the more popularised term *gongfu* or *kung fu* (功夫: lit. skills, time, work or effort), can be observed in many forms. These terms refer to a large variety of heterogeneous practices and meanings. In China, martial arts are practised by a vast part of the population, who lack any direct links with the security professions (such as police, military or security, etc.).

Access to martial knowledge was in the past partly organised by state or private military structures [Lorge 2006], such as armed escort companies [Chircop-Reyes 2018, 2021a], secret societies and sectarian organisations [Esherik 1988], or rural people concerned with the protection of villages [Kennedy and Guo 2005], and partly in the domain of 'popular' forms of martial practices performed in the street [Graff and Higham 2021: 110]. Today, Chinese martial arts are practised and transmitted by diverse parts of the population. They have been reimagined as combat sports in both amateur and professional contexts, gymnastic demonstrations (such as *taolu* 套路) or curative practices (*yangsheng* 養生) [Despeux 1981].

It is also important to note that the expression of martiality is observable in different religious contexts such as those reported by Fiorella Allio [2000] and David A. Palmer and Martin Tse [2021]. Traditional martial arts practices are often transmitted through local networks consecrating the relationship between master and disciples (*shitu guanxi* 師徒關係). Through an initiation ritual, the initiate enters the fictive lineage of the master and is therefore bound to the community by symbolic family ties. Individuals identify themselves with regard to their position in the lineage but also by their belonging to this community in contrast to other lineages.

Following this is Pierrick Porchet's 'Re-Appropriating Traditional Chinese Culture within the Wushu Elite Sport Context: Continuity and Rupture'. This study develops the idea that the creation of a competitive sport framework for Chinese martial arts has introduced a paradigm shift concerning the traditional transmission framework.

The final article focuses on the art of *taijiquan*. In 'Tai Chi Forms Designed to Treat Depression' Joan Listernick investigates whether specifically tailored forms that fit better into Western perspectives on treating illness could be more readily assimilated into Western healthcare systems, and whether they provide improved outcomes for the conditions targeted. She raises the question of the usefulness of such forms for patients with comorbidities, and whether tailored forms 'treat' one illness, but have less effectiveness in preventing the onset of other

illnesses. In addition, she also asks what may be lost in the process of simplification or targeting. Ultimately, argues Listernick, the analysis of the creation and dissemination of tailored forms is significant for understanding the history and development of *taijiquan*.

Collectively these articles provide insights on different levels in which martial arts and religion connect, disconnect and intermesh. While martial arts have emerged across vast areas of geography and time, their relationship with religion and spirituality remains a *longue durée* social phenomenon. Indeed, ritual and initiatory, alchemical, shamanic, hygienic and ascetic endeavours combined with martial arts practice are born and structured around conceptions of the human body and spirit based on contextual cosmological and ideological principles which vary between cultures. In our conference, a panel titled 'Ethnoreligious identities, nationalism and political uses' focused on the construction of social groups through martial arts practices and their religious references. The topics of those papers ranged widely from local groups seeking cohesion to defend minority rights and marginalised communities, to nationalist militias and vigilantes defending exclusionary ideologies within advanced developed countries. We find these trends in numerous national contexts across the world: in Indonesia, with Islamist-nationalist militias linked to ruling oligarchies [Facal 2020], or in Japan, where in the 1920s and 1930s martial art names became standardised in public discourse by adding the suffix '-do', in order to disguise a coercive agenda by presenting *budo* primarily as a spiritual endeavour [Bodiford 2010: 361].

Seized in their diachronic dimension, these practices show that they are accompanied, to different degrees, by religious sentiment as soon as the practitioners are concerned with establishing, maintaining or reconstructing an ideological and social coherence. *Le geste martial* (lit. 'the martial gesture') [Jaquet and Kiss 2015] becomes ritualised, while martial thought is structured around rules, codes as well as ethical and moral values developed by the social groups concerned. Through mystical experience and related ascetic practices, existential philosophies are put to the test [Farrer 2009]. In parallel, war and combat are trials to the apprenticeship of daily discipline and training. The different temporalities and intensities of both religion and martial arts can contribute to their intermeshment, as found through the identity between the religious centres and the martial initiation ones. Apart from the well-known monasteries in China (Shaolin and Wudang, for example), the Malay world hosts Islamic boarding schools that are also martial initiation centres and that can serve as training places for religious and anticolonial rebellion [Facal 2017].

This intermeshment opens the question of the original conditions of the intersection between religion and martiality. J.-M. de Grave offers

propositions to help envisage this historical encounter. In his closing remarks to the 6th Martial Arts Studies conference, he cited the work of the anthropologist Robert Creswell about the importance of the storage of grain in the development of human civilisation during the Neolithic era. For him, this technological advance is at the centre of the social specialisation of the religious. From the moment a religious clergy asserted itself as a particular social category, to establish links with the entities protecting the products of the harvest, something fundamentally new existed. This clergy had to resort to other social categories, like the police, as guarantor of the grain protection, and later, to the State, to advance itself. Through this historical development, we see how the division of labour was progressively imposed on a large scale and, with it, technical specialisation.

This social and technical fragmentation can be put in perspective with the specialisation found today within martial arts: health, gymnastics, self-defence methods, sports combat, and so on, develop in parallel with processes of classification – including the process of making them classical – and of patrimonialization. The practices are then absolved of some of their constitutive dimensions, of ritual, political, martial order, as well as of their social ‘relevance’, i.e., the values conveyed that are or were important for people. In the end, it may be this that determines the continuation or disappearance of the activities.

The following contributions to this discussion also illustrate the processes of innovation and hybridisation, as well as fragmentation or patrimonialization, and individual incorporation, interpretation, dynamic creation of meaning and initiatives for sharing and transmission. Through this diversity of processes, the reader is invited to reflect on the ongoing shifts of both martial arts’ and religion’s social relevance. These sometimes result in increasing fragmentation, technical specialisation, loss of global coherence and, finally, the disappearance of the practices. Certainly, these are all fears that have been referenced in regard to the current state of the traditional Chinese martial arts. On the opposite end of the spectrum, some articles show how martial arts can become resources to build community cohesion, to fix collective points of reference, and to shape common directions by blurring between social categories (e.g., priest and warrior). This special issue thus leads us to ask: Where is the religious in the coherence of martial arts social groups? And how can we observe and think about these things?

When we consider the diachronic transformation of the relationship between religion and martiality, another interrogation arises. What were the conditions for the emergence of war as a specialised field of activity? In this regard, De Grave mentions the Amerindian Achuar for whom there is no word designating peace, because vendetta is

central and war permanent [see Descola 1993]. In modern ideology, the notion of peace is, on the contrary, central, but one never acquires it completely. A final question then arises: how might martial arts become a practice of peace?

The various contributions in this collection provide several elements of an answer to this question, by showing how ethical codes are formalised and give rise to a warrior ethos that guarantees certain forms of social stability [see Talaga, this issue]. In connection with this historical heritage, we observe, today, new ways of transmitting, living and applying martial techniques, particularly in the course of the ‘invention of martial arts’ through popular media [Bowman 2021]. The traditional ritualised, lineage-based and confidential art of combat is now an integral part of an inclusive popular culture and can now be practised as a support for personal development concerns that are less warlike than spiritual. The idea of ‘mindfulness’, for example, is being applied in a variety of contexts from the commercial to the medical and therapeutic.

On the other hand, we can see that the alliance between religion and warfare do not always convey ethics of harmony and peace and spirituality. On the contrary, they can also express intolerance and violence [French 2017]. This lethal alliance is manifested in contemporary times, with the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar by the military, with the help of extremist Buddhist monks [Arnold and Turner 2018]. The relationship between religion and conflict, in the broad sense of the term – including war, brigandage, looting, etc. – can sometimes manifest in unexpected inversions of status, when, for example, the priests become war makers and martial arts practitioners guarantee forms of social stability and cohabitation [Chircop-Reyes 2021b]. The literature has already produced fine-grained studies on the role of combat sports institutions to regulate urban violence [Wacquant 2000] and, suggested poor supervision of these structures can provide springboards for violent extremist cells [Chapitiaux 2016].

From the perspective of the applied social sciences, the articles in this special issue may be useful to practitioners themselves. Yet they could also give policymakers better tools to understand martial arts phenomena as they emerge in different parts of society. Finally, this issue prefigures particular questions that will be raised during the 2022 Martial Arts Studies Conference (Lausanne, Switzerland, 29th June – 2nd July 2022) on the tensions and creations that emerge at the crossroads between tradition and globalisation.

- Allio, Fiorella 2000. 'Marcher, danser, jouer: la prestation des troupes processionnelles à Taiwan'. *Études mongoles et sibériennes*, 30–31: 181–235.
- Arnold, Dan and Turner, Alicia. 2018. 'Why Are We Surprised When Buddhists Are Violent?'. *New York Times*, 5 March.
- Bodiford, William M. 2010. 'Belief Systems: Japanese Martial Arts and Religion since 1868'. In *Martial Arts of the World: An Encyclopedia of History and Innovation (Volume 2)*, edited by Thomas A. Green and Joseph R. Svinth, 382–395. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Bowman, Paul. 2021. *The Invention of Martial Arts: Popular Culture Between Asia and America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA.
doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197540336.001.0001
- Chapitiaux, Médéric. 2016. 'Fraude, crime: de l'impunité du sport à la sécurité sportive'. *Sécurité globale* 2–6: 9–19.
doi.org/10.3917/secug.162.0009
- Chircop-Reyes, Laurent. 2018. 'Merchants, Brigands and Escorts: an Anthropological Approach to the Biaoju 鏢局 Phenomenon in Northern China'. In *Ming Qing Studies*, edited by Paolo Santangelo, 123–151. Rome: WriteUp Site.
- Chircop-Reyes, Laurent. 2021a (forthcoming). *Maîtres-escortes. Trajectoires d'une martialité, du corps social aux savoirs du corps. Chine du Nord (XVIIIe-XXe siècles)*. Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose/Hémisphères, coll. 'Asie en perspective'.
- Chircop-Reyes, Laurent. 2021b (forthcoming). 'Le 'parler noir', heihua 黑話. Étude du jargon des caravaniers et des brigands en Chine impériale tardive'. *Études Chinoises* XXXVIII.
- Cibotaru, Veronica. 2021. 'The Spiritual Features of the Experience of qi in Chinese Martial Arts'. *Religions* 12 (10): 836.
doi.org/10.3390/rel12100836
- Descola, Philippe. 1993. 'Les Affinités sélectives. Alliance, guerre et prédation dans l'ensemble jivaro'. *L'Homme* 126–128: 171–190.
doi.org/10.3406/hom.1993.369635
- Despeux, Catherine. 1981. *Taiji quan: Art martial, technique de longue vie*. Paris: Guy Trédaniel.
- Durkheim, Émile. [1912] 2014. *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie*. Paris: CNRS éditions.
- Esherik, Joseph W. 1988. *The Origins of the Boxer Uprising*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Facal, Gabriel. 2017. 'Technical Continuities of the martial ritual initiations in the Malay World'. *Martial Arts Studies* 4: 46–69.
doi.org/10.18573/j.2017.10186
- Facal, Gabriel. 2020. 'Islamic Defenders Front Militia (Front Pembela Islam) and its Impact on Growing Religious Intolerance in Indonesia'. *TRANS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8 (1): 7–20.
doi.org/10.1017/trn.2018.15
- Farrer, D. S. 2009. *Shadows of the Prophet: Martial Arts and Sufi Mysticism in Malaysia*. New York: Springer.
doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9356-2
- French, Shannon. 2017. *The Code of the Warrior. Exploring Warrior Values Past and Present*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Graff, David A. and Higham, Robin. [2002] 2012. *A Military History of China*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Grave (de), Jean-Marc de. 2014. 'Javanese Kanuragan Ritual Initiation. A Means to Socialize by Acquiring Invulnerability, Authority, and Spiritual Improvement'. *Social Analysis* 58 (1): 47–66.
doi.org/10.3167/sa.2014.580103
- Grave (de), Jean-Marc de. 2020. 'Colloque "Martial Arts, Religion and Spirituality (MARS)", 15–16 July 2020, Institut de Recherches Asiatiques (IRASIA, Université d'Aix-Marseille)'. *Archipel* (100): 23–25.
- Husser, Jean-Marie. 2020. 'Le 'fait religieux': de quoi parle-t-on?'. *Les nouvelles de l'archéologie* 160: 8–11.
doi.org/10.4000/nda.9822
- Jaquet, Daniel and Kiss, Dora. 2015. 'L'expérimentation du geste martial et du geste artistique: regards croisés'. *e-Phaistos IV-1*: 56–72.
doi.org/10.4000/ephaistos.657
- Judkins, Benjamin. and Molle, Andrea. (eds). 2022, (forthcoming). *Identity, Nationalism, and Security: The Politics of Martial Arts*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Kennedy, Brian and Guo, Elizabeth. 2005. *Chinese Martial Arts Training Manuals. A Historical Survey*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.

Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 2013. *An Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* [digital book]. Taylor & Francis.

doi.org/10.4324/9781315005102

Lorge, Peter. 2006. *War, Politics and Society in Early Modern China. 900-1795*. New York: Routledge.

doi.org/10.4324/9780203969298

Palmer, David A. and Tse, Martin. 2021 (forthcoming). *Civil Buddhism, Martial Daoism: Text and Drama in the Jiao Festivals of the Guangdong Village of Xicun*. Hong Kong.

Svitych, Alexander. 2021. 'Northeast Asian Modern Martial Arts: An Embodied Synthesis of Virtue Ethics and Deontology'. *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 38 (7): 751–767.

doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2021.1887143

Ueshiba, Morihei. 2002. *The Art of Peace*. Boston and London: Shambhala.

CONTRIBUTOR

Maciej Talaga received his MA in archaeology (University of Warsaw) in 2012 and joined the 'Nature-Culture' PhD programme at the Faculty 'Artes Liberales' in 2018. His research interests revolve around pre-modern European martial traditions, with particular focus on late-medieval Central Europe and the so-called 'German school of fighting' (Kunst des Fechtens). His doctoral thesis project focuses on developing a methodical framework for practical reconstruction of the martial arts system contained in the anonymous manuscript HS 3227a (Germany, ca. 1390).

'HAVE THE HIGHEST RIGHTEOUS FENCER IN YOUR MIND'S EYE' MEDIEVAL MARTIAL ETHIC AS A CONCEPTUAL REPOSITORY FOR JUST WAR THEORY

MACIEJ TALAGA

DOI

10.18573/mas.154

KEYWORDS

historical European
martial arts, martial ethics,
interpersonal violence, just
war theory, medieval Germany

CITATION

Talaga, Maciej. 2022. 'Have the Highest Righteous Fencer in Your Mind's Eye': Medieval Martial Ethic as a Conceptual Repository for Just War Theory'. *Martial Arts Studies* 12, 8-18.
doi: 10.18573/mas.154

ABSTRACT

In many cultures, war has been seen as something best avoided but also inevitable. Hence, legitimate reasons for waging war have been sought and conceptualised in different cultural contexts. According to current scholarly wisdom, all such conceptualisations are socially constructed and draw from cultural resources available in a given time and place. A question which has so far received little to no attention, however, is the role of violence experienced on the personal level in shaping these conceptualisations.

This question is applied to the Late Middle Ages and a unique German martial arts treatise, called the 'Nuremberg Codex' [HS 3227a]. A qualitative content analysis of this manuscript reveals an interplay between pragmatic observations obtained through martial practice and axiological frameworks. Through discussing the broader historical-cultural context of martial arts in late-medieval and early-modern Germany as well as the late medieval just war theory, three conclusions are proposed: first, restraint in combat was seen as both a pragmatic and an ethical necessity; second, moral conduct was an integral part of martial technique; and third, axiology found specific somatic manifestations.

INTRODUCTION

The question of how to tame humans' proclivity for violence is a very old problem, possibly even one of the original problems faced by any culture [Campioni 2007; Van Vugt 2012]. Diverse philosophies, mythologies, and taboos are introduced in order to present human life as precious and killing as wrong. These, however, must be reconciled with sociocultural reality, which has never been free from violence [Campbell 1999]. There has always been a need for what is now called 'just war theory', a concept named after, and developed from, its medieval predecessor, known as *bellum iustum*.

In the literature on the history of international law and military theory, *bellum iustum* has been considered mostly in its relation to Antiquity [e.g., Hoben 1983], medieval crusades and legal systems [e.g., Campione 2007], its modern reworkings [Benziger 2006], and contemporary reception [Kolb 1997; Simon 2018]. Discourse around it has revolved around questions pertaining to Christian ethics, religious dogmata, and power structures within the Latin world (especially as elucidated by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas), as well as to the notion of the natural law whose development happened largely due to the debates about just wars. Its political entanglement in the medieval and post-medieval periods has also been scrutinised, especially in the context of the dynamics of Spanish conquests of the Americas or Germany's eastward expansion in the Slavic and Baltic territories and the increasingly sophisticated resistance strategies employed by these lands' native elites [Ehrlich 1955; Bishko 1975; Tamm 2013; Johnson 2014].

Just war theory's philosophical roots and framings, as well as its politically charged and ethically questionable applications, are well known. However, these observations refer to the macroscale decisions taken by temporal or spiritual rulers and enacted at the community or strategic levels. At the same time, the question of these concepts' relevance for, and circulation at the grass roots level – namely choices made by individual combatants in violent encounters on and off the battlefield – is left virtually unaddressed.

This omission is all the more puzzling if we consider that much of medieval warfare consisted of confrontations between individuals rather than masses [Mondschein 2015]. Moreover, interpersonal violence was endemic throughout the Middle Ages and well into the early-modern period and had its own unwritten ethic combining Christian spirituality, pre-Christian martially-flavoured notions of honour and masculinity, and common sense [Tlusty 2011]. If these grass roots cultural encapsulations of bloodshed had remained entirely detached from their higher-order renderings, it would be quite surprising.

Small wonder then that scholars have found traces of just war theory in medieval didactic literature directed at young knights – future leaders and combatants [Johnson 2014]. The question remains, however, whether this was only a top-down process – from learned jurists and theologians, usually recruited from the clergy, to lay poets and knights of the order of the *bellatores*. What if we hypothesise that the flow of ideas also had an opposite, bottom up direction? Was it that just war theory was imposed on everyday martial praxis or the other way round, with experiences and conventions of interpersonal violence informing the theory of war on a grander scale?

METHODS

In order to address this question, this article proceeds in three sections. First, it presents the defining features of the late medieval just war theory as reconstructed from the existing literature. It will not trace the whole historical development of this concept as that would move beyond the scope of our current discussion. Next, to avoid vague generalisations and ground its observations in the actual statements made by medieval people, it focuses on a case study rooted in a particular period (the turn of the 14th/15th century), a particular place (Southern Germany), and a particular text (the martial arts treatise from the Nuremberg manuscript Hs3227a). The article's second section introduces the chosen manuscript and examines its content as it relates to the research question. Finally, it proposes conclusions based on my theory-driven reading of the source. In order to explore its conceptual structure, I used the Qualitative Text Analysis method assisted with the MAXQDA software for qualitative coding visualisation [Kuckartz 2014].¹ Apart from looking for text fragments corresponding to the elements of the just war theory identified in the previous literature, I investigated the entire work and coded other topics discussed in it. This way I hoped to be able to reveal not only the explicit, but also the implicit interrelations between ethical and practical aspects of personal combat as presented in the investigated source.

1 Qualitative coding is a research procedure used for methodical analysis of non-quantifiable data, such as historical narratives. While an investigated text is read through several times, its particular fragments (chapters, paragraphs, sentences, etc.) are marked with 'codes', i.e. short captions highlighting relevant aspects of the data material. Hence, as put by Kathy Charmaz, qualitative codes act as 'the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain these data. Through coding you define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means' [Kuckartz 2014: 23].

INTRODUCTION TO JUST WAR THEORY

As already mentioned, the historical notions of just war theory – i.e., conceptualisations of circumstances in which it would be ethical to resort to violence or even kill other human beings – have already been considered in numerous studies. There is no place here to discuss even the major works, much less all of them, so instead I will quote two important and relatively new contributions which not only engage and reference the older literature, but also provide fresh and useful perspectives on the subject.

James Turner Johnson, in the latest edition of his classic work [Johnson 2014], argues that although the roots of the Western just war theory can be traced to pre-Christian times, it was not given definite and sophisticated legal, ethical, and theological framing until debated by Christian theologians, starting from Augustine through Gratian to Thomas Aquinas [Johnson 2014: xxii-xxv]. He also carefully distinguishes between two major pillars of the just war theory: the right reasons to wage war (*ius ad bellum*) and the right ways to wage war (*ius in bello*).

In its mature form, *ius ad bellum* would usually include:

- just cause, *causa iusta* (ethically justified reason to wage war);
- right authority, *auctoris principis* (war declared by an anointed ruler and not opposed by their people);
- right intention, *intention recta* (war waged with an honest will to stick to its just cause);
- proportionality (waging war has to bring less harm than restraining from violence);
- violence as the last resort (war only when other attempts at peace-making failed);
- war meant to achieve peace (war's only goal is to restore peace). [Johnson 2014: xxii]

As such, *ius ad bellum* contained purely ethical conditions, informed by their authors' Christian faith and theological formation. On the other hand, *ius in bello* concentrated on more practical aspects of war:

- discrimination/distinction (who and to what extent should be excluded from wars);

- proportionality (how to adjust the use of military means to a given situation in order to minimise harm). [Johnson 2014: xxiii]

Unlike the moral criteria listed in *ius ad bellum*, those required for a war to remain 'just' once it started required good practical knowledge of warfare. Let us mark this observation, as it will become significant later.

In another work, Marek Tamm [2013] offers a study of how the just war theory and the idea of the crusades were reinterpreted and contorted since the 12th century to justify the expansion of the Teutonic Order, as well as German and Polish principalities, towards the northern and eastern pagan territories, such as those of the Polabian Slavs or Baltic Prussians. Tamm notes that the 'ordinary' crusades were easy to present as just wars – they clearly had a defensive cause (defending the Holy Land from the pagans) and right intention (reconquest, glory of God, and salvation), were declared by anointed authorities (Pope and Emperor), followed diplomatic attempts at persuading pagans to return Jerusalem, and aimed to ensure peaceful pilgrimage and worship for Christians. The so-called 'Baltic' or 'Northern Crusades', on the other hand, presented a much greater challenge in that regard. The pagan lands had neither any Christian historical sites nor relics to defend or reclaim, and no Christian population to protect. Therefore, just reasons for invading and conquering these lands could come only from two situations:

- a pre-emptive attack aimed at stopping future pagan raids into the Christian territories;
- as a means to protect peaceful missionaries and new converts living in the pagan territory.

As convincingly shown by Tamm, both ideas were skilfully juggled by late-medieval political leaders in Italy and Germany to garner popular support for military expeditions into the Slavic and Baltic lands. On the other hand, such raids were also met not only with military resistance, but also theoretical resistance – i.e., legal and theological. For instance, the practice of framing the Teutonic Order's expansion as a crusade and thus as a just war in the 15th century was met with elaborate and seminal opposition by Polish academicians, most notably Stanisław of Skalbmierz and Paweł Włodkowic of Brudzeń, who argued for the right of pagans to have their own states and lands independent from the authority of the Papacy or the Empire, as well as their own religious beliefs [Ciosek 2009; Ożóg 2009].

This observation makes it clear that pre-emptive aggression against the pagans was not universally supported within Latin Christendom and stances towards it varied depending on socio-cultural and political contexts, such as the conflicting international agendas of the

Teutonic Order and Poland. However, as announced at the beginning, I would like to pay some more attention to the grassroots level of this phenomenon. Let us start by asking why was it so easy for ordinary German knights and men-at-arms to accept that a defensive war could include a pre-emptive offensive and even conquest of the enemy's territory? Is greed for land and loot really a sufficient explanation? Leaving it this way, as proposed by many modern historians [Niewiński 2019; Catlos 2014], would imply feeble significance of the metaphysical factors affecting fighting men's decision-making, such as the hope for achieving salvation for their pious lives and repentance from sins. This, in turn, would contradict the whole body of research arguing for the contrary, based on evidence from other areas of medieval life [Hirsch 1996].

One could of course argue that knights, and especially the young or impoverished ones, were interested in the northern crusades, because they offered an opportunity to win honour (*êre* or *tugend* in medieval German), which was a crucial asset in upward social mobility [Jones 1959; Gassmann 2015]. However, this could be objected to on other grounds. For instance, as shown by Barbara Ann Tlusty [2011], in her extensive review of the period's judicial and administrative documents, in order to maintain or gain honour through combat, early-modern German men had to follow an unwritten 'martial ethic'.² This ethic would involve:

- seeking mediation or other peaceful means to resolve the conflict;
- fighting only in defence of life, honour or repute;
- warning before resorting to violence, sometimes trying to deter the adversary by a harmless display of martial prowess;
- ensuring equality in numbers and weapons;
- employing proper fighting technique, such as not using thrusts with the sword or by hitting with the flat of the blade, especially against fellow countrymen;
- abstaining from using magic or charms [Tlusty 2011: 96–102].

All the above rules show significant overlap with the just war criteria, with the first three resembling some of the *ius ad bellum* components, and with the final three smoothly fitting the *ius in bello*.

2 For the sake of clarity, Tlusty's work is centred on the early modern period, but she convincingly shows that this martial culture was firmly rooted in medieval traditions.

Interestingly, these unwritten rules, solidified as tradition and actively practised, were often at odds with official legal regulations formulated under the influence of the leading moralists of the time who, as a rule, were adamantly opposed to the very idea of 'setting the record straight' through combat. Even more importantly, though, as late as in the 16th century, a German noble or burgher who fought for honour against the law but followed all the rules of the 'martial ethic' could still reliably count on leniency from the judges, who by definition were themselves men of honour socialised into the martial culture [Tlusty 2011: 96]. This observation would suggest that experiences of personal combat – conducted in person or even just spectated – may have influenced the reception of the just war theory outside the academic and clerical circles, or perhaps even informed the theory itself. In order to explore this hypothesis further, I decided to examine the conceptualisation of martial arts, in regard to both their praxis and axiology, as preserved in one of the so-called 'fight books', or *Fechtbücher* in German – that is, written manuals discussing such arts as sword-fighting or wrestling [Forgeng 2012].

RESULTS

The fight book in question is a part of a larger codex, known under its inventory number Hs3227a, or various other names, such as the 'Nuremberg Codex', 'Codex Pol' or, erroneously, 'Döbringer Codex' [Żabiński 2008; Burkart 2016; Vodička 2019]. It is currently held in Nuremberg but probably originated somewhere in Southern Germany. Its dating is disputed, but can be reasonably approximated to 'around 1389' [Burkart 2016: 453]. There is no room here to provide a detailed overview of this source, but it is important to note that the martial arts teachings contained therein are quite unusual, since unlike other similar works from the period, they offer a wealth of remarks not only on the kinaesthetic, but also philosophical, ethical, and tactical/strategic aspects of armed combat. Moreover, it is often considered the earliest witness to a larger corpus of similar writings, all of which are connected by the fact that they quote certain 'Grandmaster Liechtenauer' and his martial teachings as their source of lore and legitimacy. Finally, this manuscript is believed to have involved the work of a martial art practitioner who at the same time had originated from, or been influenced by, the scholastic tradition [Acutt 2016; Burkart 2016]. As such it seems the perfect vantage point for tracing any potential crossover between pragmatic martial lore and academic just war theory.³

3 For a different perspective and dating, see Vodička [2019].

QUALITATIVE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS ⁴

A qualitative textual analysis performed on this book immediately revealed certain interrelations between its discussion of martial practices and martial values. By employing these methods, it was even possible to establish such connections in cases where they were not made explicit by the author himself.

A theory-driven reading of the fight book found no direct references to medieval just war theory, but yielded several fragments which can be convincingly classified as matching some defining components of it – namely *causa iusta* and *intentio recta*. Table 1 (opposite) shows these fragments (first two columns). It also includes passages (third column) which illustrate the leading strategic idea of the book – that the only sure defence can be achieved by a pre-emptive attack. The latter quotations will become important later in the discussion.

Another interesting finding was an apparent contradiction between the aforementioned oft-expressed need for an offensive fighting attitude – swiftness, bravery, and proactivity in seeking the first strike (*Vorschlag*)

4 The term 'qualitative' here is used to distinguish the employed text analysis method from quantitative approaches. In particular, it is to emphasise that I did not focus on determining word counts for relevant terms used in the investigated source, or their collocations, and performing statistical analyses. Instead, I worked with the whole text following the hermeneutical principle. For more on the distinction between qualitative and quantitative text analysis methods, see Kuckartz [2014: 1–13].

Figure 1:
Map of the density of interactions between qualitative codes referring to martial praxis and axiology identified in the fight book from the manuscript Hs3227a. Codes crucial for the present paper are marked with red boxes. The grey lines link codes which collocate in the same fragments of the source, with the thickness of the line proportional to the frequency of collocations. Only links with >2 collocations were marked. Note that in the majority of cases, the code 'measure' corresponded to the word *moße* in the original text of the source. Compiled by the author using the MaxMap function in MAXQDA.



– and the measure, self-control, and consideration in combat advocated by the author of the fight book.

However, as illustrated by the conceptual map below (Fig. 1), consideration and self-control (*klugheit*) are seen by him as connected to measure (*moße*), which in turn is understood as a quality ensuring fencers' proper choice of strength, speed, or distance for given combat situations. Measure in this text is also tightly connected to footwork (*schrete* or *treten*) and through swiftness (*rischeit*) and consideration – to good spirit and bravery (*gute mute* and *kunheit*). This way, although not explicitly, the author of the manuscript demonstrates how swift and audacious offensive fighting style (*Vorschlag*) is rooted in careful consideration, foresight, cunning, and well-managed footwork – a paradox well known also in modern sport fencing literature [Szabó 1997; Czajkowski 2005].

This remark seems worth making, because it so happens that the concept of measure (*moße*) was also central to German didactic literature throughout the whole medieval period. Traditionally, this has been connected to the influence of Christian axiology and classical philosophical traditions and thus interpreted as a theme repeated in chivalric or martial texts after clerical moralists [Kellet 2016: 76–82]. However, if we consider that the importance of measure, understood as an ability to act deliberately and precisely, is also highlighted in our contemporary and strictly pragmatic texts, such as the quoted influential sport fencing manuals by Zbigniew Czajkowski [2005] or Láslo Szabó [1997], it becomes necessary to ask whether the flow of ideas may have had an opposite direction.

<i>Intentio recta and discrimination/distinction</i>	<i>Causa iusta</i>	<i>Preemptive attack</i>
<p>'In all fencing requisite is: the help of god of righteousness' [Hs3227a, fol. 17r]</p>	<p>'If this happens and no man attacks for no reason / If you wish to succeed In all fencing, I advise / really do not rely too much upon your art. And have the highest righteous fencer [i.e. God – MT] / in your mind's eye, so that he may protect you in your art. And practise your art for emergencies / in the right way. And not for nothing or out of foolishness, / so you may succeed always / because a fencer / is a good and righteous man.' [Hs3227a, fol. 44r]</p>	<p>'When he / Begins to fence with / So he drives-in [i.e. attacks – MT] with correctness / continually and decisively / bravely one [strike] after the other. / Stay in a rush / Without intervals, immediate. / So that the opponent cannot come / to strikes. / (...) I say to you truthfully, the opponent does not defend themselves without danger. If you have understood this, he cannot come to strikes.' [Hs3227a, fol. 17v]</p>
<p>'I will give you the third advice / you should not learn fencing to overpower someone with your art / for unjust reasons furthermore you should not / fence with a pious man / except there is real need.' [Hs3227a, fols. 43v-44r]</p>	<p>'And also it happens often that a man has to stand for his honor, body and goods. If he is then victorious with his art in a knightly manner and with God and rightfully I praise.' [Hs3227a, fol. 44r]</p>	<p>'Gloss, etc. Here he [i.e. Master Liechtenauer – MT] names the four positions or four guards. About them, little is to be held. Instead, in any confrontation, a person shall absolutely not lay too long therein. For Liechtenauer has a particular proverb: Whoever lays there, they are dead. Whoever rouses themselves, they yet live. And that pertains to the positions that a person shall preferably rouse themselves with applications. Because he that idles [in] the guards, he might preclude the moment of truth with that.' [Hs3227a, fol. 32r]</p>
<p>'Fencing has been invented / to be seriously practised And in good real grace / because it brings agility wits and smartness.' [Hs3227a, fol. 44r]</p>		

Table 1:
Fragments of the fight book from the manuscript Hs3227a which correspond to elements of the medieval just war theory.
Compiled by the author.

DISCUSSION

NAVIGATING THE AXIOLOGICAL-PRACTICAL NEXUS OF LATE-MEDIEVAL MARTIAL CULTURE

Ethics as martial technique

Meticulous analyses of moralist writings of the period, such as that by Kirsten Fenton [2007], often challenge more traditional views on chivalric concepts of masculinity, which tend to accentuate ferocity and brutality as its driving tenets, at least regarding chivalry's martial aspects and relations between men. In contrast, Fenton argues for a more complex interplay between the harsh reality of martial formation and the need for restraint and self-control as factors influencing knightly ideas of manhood and proper conduct [Fenton 2007: 760–769]. Similar conclusions were proposed in another work by Tlusty [2016] which traced analogous notions unfolding within early-modern urban martial circles. To illustrate, she quotes several instances of burghers involved in fatal cases and facing lenient treatment at court, because they managed to adhere to proper 'martial ethic' and restrained themselves from certain prohibited combat methods. Such was the case, for instance, of certain furrier (*kürschner*), Samuel Probst, who accidentally killed his opponent during an urban fencing contest (*fechtschule*) but was absolved by judges when the fencing masters in charge of the event testified that he fought with restraint and struck the victim with the flat of the sword,⁵ according to the custom [Tlusty 2016: 563].⁶ This suggests that the martial lore informed by actual experiences of interpersonal combat may have indeed shaped or at least influenced the medieval didactic and moralist discourse.

This idea may be corroborated, if we notice that the author of the discussed fight book apparently understood that martial prowess alone did not guarantee success in combat – needed was also a certain amount of God's favour, or luck as we would nowadays call it:

5 Striking with the flat of the sword is not discussed in the known German fight books before the 16th century but appears later, which can be considered as an indication of the influence of the *fechtschulen* on the general martial discourse and praxis of the time [Farrell 2015: 222, 228].

6 Another account could be quoted here since it witnesses an application of this kind of martial ethic in a legal context already in the 15th century – in the year 1444. At the time, a fencing master named Conrad von Siebenbürgen was challenged by another unnamed master in Rothenburg. In the course of the fight, Master Conrad swung his sword in such a way that he missed the head and wounded his opponent's hand. This was proclaimed 'dishonourable' (*unredlich*) and resulted in Conrad's brief imprisonment, despite his 'victory' [Schubert 1995: 241; for a digest in English, see Kleinau 2012].

Whatever he wishes [to do against] someone just as if he would say: 'This I mean to truly conduct' and so this shall and must go forward with the help of God, so it might fail him in nothing. He does what he should when he bravely hurries and charges there with the fore-strike [*Vorschlag* – MT], as one will often hear hereafter.
[Hs3227a, fol. 16v]

Lack of this determination and divine support, as the author observes, 'often results in a peasant slaying a master, because he is brave and won the fore-strike [*Vorschlag* – MT] according to this precept' [Hs3227a, fol. 20v]. And winning God's favour required one to fight a good fight, which brings us back to the notion of just and unjust wars. This suggests that, at least for the author of the investigated fight book, ethical conduct was a substantial part of martial practices, because it had direct influence on the outcome of any potential violent encounter. By writing that 'practice is fully sufficient without art, but art is not fully sufficient without practice' [Hs3227a, fol. 15r] he emphasised that martial skill and theory needed regular training to be efficiently used, but his remarks about the 'help of God' and the 'peasant slaying a master' make it clear that no skill, physical preparation, or weaponry will ensure victory, if the Providence is against the fighter. This may lead to a conclusion that what the fight book in Hs3227a actually describes is ethics as an integral part of martial technique.

Surprising as it may seem at first, the above inference is in fact quite in line with the logic of a medieval mindset. Due to the limited scope of this paper, let it suffice to quote the custom of judicial duels or *duellum*, a form of argumentation in a court trial known from the earliest Germanic laws and still included in German legal regulations in the Late Middle Ages [Lampart 2013]. It was a sanctioned duel, preceded with both parties taking oaths of innocence, in which a particularly serious case would be decided by combat. The reasoning behind this solution was that God would not allow an oath-breaker to prevail and so the winner was to be considered innocent. Regardless of the actual prevalence of such practices [Elema 2019], their common inclusion both in period legal documents and martial writings, such as those of Master Hans Talhoffer [Lampart 2013: 73] leaves no doubt about their vivid presence in medieval German *imaginarium*. Hence, they may serve as an extreme example of the ethical being tightly interwoven into the martial.

Expression of restraint in interpersonal combat

Apart from the above, two more things seem worth noting while reading the fight book from a just war theoretical perspective. First, the lack of any reference to the right authority (*auctoris principis*) – the same aspect also differed between the just war theory and the unwritten

'martial ethic' described by Tlusty. Unlike the former, the latter lacked any official 'governing body', 'authorities', or written canons, but instead was largely formed as a bottom-up social process influenced by different cultural pressures and embodied in practices, not documents. This would suggest that the teachings preserved in the 'Nuremberg Codex' were closer to the actual grassroots martial praxis of the day than to the academic theories of combat. Second, the preference for attacking as a means of defence, so prominently expressed in the source, remained a characteristic feature of many German sword-fighting traditions at least until the end of the 16th century and perhaps even well into the 21st century – with the latter period represented by the practice of *Pauken* or *Mensur*, i.e. formalised form of duelling with sharp weapons still taking place at some German universities in which technical and tactical focus is placed almost exclusively on offensive cuts.⁷ Such a long life of certain themes already present in the discussed source, as well as in the broader 'martial ethic' in which it was presumably immersed, may be evidenced by 19th-century accounts on German fencing coming from the Germans and foreigners alike. In this regard, a telling account comes from *Ökonomische Encyclopädie*, a voluminous German encyclopaedia compiled between 1777 and 1858, and more precisely from its entry for *Stoßfechten* ('thrust-fencing'):

Meanwhile, fencing with the thrust [*Stoß*] in military academies and institutes [...] is still regarded as the fundamental school of fencing, resembling the role of *minuet* in dancing, and for this reason it used to be taught by the best fencing masters. At German universities, they practise thrusting, or fence with the thrusts, only in Jena, Erlangen, and Würzburg, but even in the last of these universities this manner of swordplay has already been partially replaced by cut-fencing [*Hiebfechten*], because thrusts [*Stoßen*] are considered unmanly [*unmännlich*], whereas cuts [*Schlagen*] are knightly [*ritterlich*].
[Krünitz et al. 1840: 669]⁸

7 I am not aware of any comprehensive works on *Pauken* in English, but a good digest of German works can be found online here: <https://deacademic.com/dic.nsf/dewiki/943793> [accessed on 14 Dec 2020].

8 Translated roughly by me from the German original: *Indeßen ist das Fechten auf den Stoß in den Militär-Akademien und Instituten, wie schon oben erwähnt worden, immer noch als die Grundschule im Fechten, wie die Menuett im Tanzen, betrachtet, und deshalb auch von den bestallten Fechtmeistern gelehrt worden. Auf den Hochschulen in Deutschland wird nur noch in Jena, Erlangen und Würzburg gestoßen, oder auf den Stoß gefochten, aber auch auf der letzten Universität ist es schon theilweise durch das Schlagen oder Hiebfechten verdrängt worden, indem man das Stoßen für unmännlich, und das Schlagen für ritterlich hält.*

Very similar observations were published in *Historia i psychologia szermierki* (English: 'History and Psychology of Fencing') by a late 19th-century Polish scholar from Lwów (Lviv), Aleksander Raciborski. When describing the state of fencing in his century and comparing Italian, French, and German schools of swordplay, he noted the following:

The thrust finds no use there [in Germany – MT], neither in duels nor *assaut* [practice bouts], albeit some *maitres* [fencing masters] mention it briefly; therefore, their play tends to be heavy and broad, with strong cuts delivered in a curved manner, their attacks can be very firm and deep, often even vivid and swift ripostes, but their game is mechanical, they cannot guard themselves from simultaneous hits (*coups fourées*)⁹ nor parry thrusts, and they try to explain to everybody that the thrust is not as important or dangerous as it would seem. [Raciborski 1894: 29]¹⁰

Similar accounts could be found in numerous other places. When we add to this that at least since the late Middle Ages, and likely throughout the entire history of Germany, fencing held a prominent place among exercises (*übungen*) meant to develop physical fitness [Schultz 1903: 373], in the 19th century jointly labelled as gymnastics (*Turnen*), it becomes clear that the ideas about martial ethic as something unique to the German nation and based upon restraint from certain 'dishonourable' practices was by all probability not just a vague cultural code or purely literary *topos* inherited from the chivalric past, but something embodied in popular ludic practices and transmitted directly, from one generation of practitioners to another. It seems all the more interesting, therefore, that what the Germans saw as a form of restraint and noble self-control could be criticised as recklessness by others, such as Raciborski, who faulted the German fencers with excessive focus on offensive manoeuvres and negligence of their own defence. This may bring us back in time, to German knights eagerly accepting preemptive

9 Raciborski explains elsewhere that *coup fourée* means a situation in which both adversaries hit each other at roughly the same time, regardless of how it happened, and considers it a damnable practice to be avoided by serious swordsmen.

10 Translated by me from the Polish original: *Pchnięcia, w pojedynku mianowicie i w *assaut*, wcale tam nie używają, jakkolwiek niektórzy metrowie w zasadzie coś o niem wspominają; ztąd bywa ich gra zazwyczaj ciężką i szeroką, silne cięcia dają w łukach, ataki miewają bardzo stanowcze i głębokie, często nawet energiczne i szybkie riposty, ale gra ich jest mechaniczna, unikać cięć równoczesnych (*coups fourées*) parować pchnięć nie umieją, usiłują też wytłumaczyć każdemu, że pchnięcie nie jest tak ważne i groźne, jakby się zdawało.*

missionary expeditions against pagan Slavs, Prussians, or Livonians as defensive, just wars. It also renders the 'Nuremberg Codex' even more worth re-reading from a somatic-ethical perspective, since it clearly advocates the use of thrusting and, therefore, sheds light on an earlier stage of development of German martial traditions when thrust lacked the negative connotations known from later periods¹¹. Hence, unlike in the 16th century when fighters showed proper restraint by avoiding the use of the point of the sword, the 'measure' (*moße*) and 'consideration' (*klugheit*) described in Hs3227a seem to have had a different kinaesthetic manifestation.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the investigated fight book provides a window into late-medieval conceptualisations of martial arts in their ethical dimensions. By doing so, it reveals how this axiology was rooted in down-to-earth, pragmatic realities of combat – the centrality of measure (*moße*) in the martial arts system of master Liechtenauer does not have to be seen as a trope borrowed from period didactic literature or academic discourse, but may well be a practical principle distilled from actual martial practice. Similarly, the same experiences may have served as an epistemic residue which provided a foundation for the development of the just war theory. This seems all the more probable, when we consider that as a rule medieval thinkers – philosophers, jurists, and other clergymen – were socialised into the 'culture of the sword' [Tlusty 2011] and possessed at least basic practical martial formation. So much so that there are confirmed historical instances of fencing masters belonging to the medieval *oratores* [Cinato 2016]. (In that respect, quoting Plato's wrestling background as a famous example, clear continuity can be traced from Antiquity well into the modern period.)

Hence, re-reading the medieval and early-modern fight books from a perspective focused on their somatic and axiological aspects promises important insights into the often neglected 'bottom-up' flow of ideas – from violent, martial experiences of individuals to socially constructed ethical and didactic conceptualisations. Such approach used in the case study presented here suggested the following hypotheses:

1. The importance of restraint and self-control in combat is not a theme projected upon martial teachings by their author's internalised moralist and didactic discourses of the period, such as the academic just war theory, but rather a pragmatic prescription derived from first-hand experiences of combat (or a tradition of such).
2. Ethical conduct was seen as an integral part of martial training because fighters' morals would be pivotal for their efficiency in combat – without divine support even well-practised martial techniques were bound to fail.
3. Some of the ethical and spiritual underpinnings of medieval and early-modern European martial arts had specific and tangible somatic manifestations, as exemplified by the changing attitude of German fencers towards the use of thrusting in swordplay.

Obviously, however, due to the preliminary character of this study, additional research would be needed to substantiate these hypotheses further. In particular, a broad-based comparative study of the German corpus of fight books would help verify the validity of presented conclusions in regard to this cultural circle; on the other hand, inclusion of foreign martial writings, perhaps also non-European ones, might offer an avenue for tracing major patterns in how axiologies and somatics shaped each other and were expressed in the realm of martial arts.

Conflict of interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Source

Hs3227a, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nürnberg

digital copy available online: <http://dlib.gnm.de/item/Hs3227a/html> (accessed on 22 May 2022); transcription by Hagedorn D and modern English translation by Trosclair C, available online: [https://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Pol_Hausbuch_\(MS_3227a\)](https://wiktenauer.com/wiki/Pol_Hausbuch_(MS_3227a)) (accessed on 22 May 2022).

11 It seems worth noting that at least some of the 16th century German martial practitioners, such as Master Joachim Meyer, were aware of the fact that thrusting used to be seen in a positive light by their ancestors [Adamson 2011].

REFERENCES

- Acutt, J. 2016. 'Aristotelian Science behind a Medieval European Martial Art'. *Bulletin of the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education* 71, 10–27.
- Adamson, W. C. 2011. 'The Nationalism of Joachim Meyer: An Analysis of German Pride in his Fighting Manual of 1570'. *Electronic Theses and Dissertations* (East Tennessee State University), <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/1286/>
- Benziger, W. 2006. 'Zwischen bellum iustum und modernem Völkerrecht. Überlegungen zum Denken über Krieg und Frieden am Ende des Mittelalters'. *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 65(1): 131–152. doi.org/10.1524/mgzs.2006.65.1.131
- Bishko, C. J. 1975. 'The Spanish and Portuguese Reconquest, 1095–1492'. In Hazard, H. W. (ed) *A History of the Crusades, vol. 3: The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 396–456.
- Burkart, E. 2016. 'The Autograph of an Erudite Martial Artist: A Close Reading of Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Hs. 3227a'. In Jaquet, D, Verelst, K, and Dawson, T (eds) *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 449–480. doi.org/10.1163/9789004324725_017
- Campbell, A. 1999. 'Staying alive: Evolution, culture, and women's intrasexual aggression'. *Behavioral and brain sciences* 22(2): 203–214. doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X99001818 PMID:11301523
- Campione, R. 2007. 'The Nomos of War: historical evolution of Bellum Iustum'. *Rechtstheorie* 38: 537–554.
- Catlos, B. A. 2014. *Infidel Kings and Unholy Warriors: Faith, Power, and Violence in the Age of Crusade and Jihad*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Cinato, F. 2016. 'Development, Diffusion and Reception of the "Buckler Play": A Case Study of a Fighting Art in the Making'. In Jaquet, D, Verelst, K, and Dawson T (eds), *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 481–546. doi.org/10.1163/9789004324725_018
- Ciosek, I. 2009. 'Universalism and Particularity of the Polish Political Thought'. *Dialogue and Universalism* 19(6/7), 105–114. doi.org/10.5840/du2009196/737
- Czajkowski, Z. 2005. *Understanding fencing: The unity of theory and practice*. Staten Island: SKA Swordplay Books.
- Ehrlich, L. 1955. *Polski wykład prawa wojny XV wieku: kazanie Stanisława ze Skarbimierza De bellis iustis*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Prawnicze.
- Elema, A. 2019. 'Tradition, Innovation, Re-enactment: Hans Talhoffer's Unusual Weapons'. *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* 7(1), 3–25. doi.org/10.2478/apd-2019-0001
- Farrell, K. 2015. 'The Kölner Fechtbuch: Context and Comparison'. *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* 3(1), 203–235. doi.org/10.36950/apd-2015-007
- Fenton, K. A. 2007. 'Ideas and ideals of secular masculinity in William of Malmesbury'. *Women's History Review* 16(5), 755–772. doi.org/10.1080/09612020701447822
- Forgeng, J. 2012. 'Owning the Art: The German Fechtbuch Tradition'. In Capwell, T. (ed) *The Noble Art of the Sword: Fashion and Fencing in Renaissance Europe 1520-1630*. London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 164–175.
- Gassmann, J. 2015. 'Honour and Fighting. Social Advancement in the Early Modern Age'. *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* 3(1): 139–181. doi.org/10.1515/apd-2015-0005
- Hirsh, J. C. 1996. *The boundaries of faith: the development and transmission of medieval spirituality*. Leiden: Brill. doi.org/10.1163/9789004477674
- Hoben, W. 1983. 'Bellum Iustum. The Theory of the "Just War" and Its Practical Significance for the Foreign Conflicts of Rome at the Time of the Republic'. *Philosophy and History* 16(1): 43–45. doi.org/10.5840/philhist198316117
- Johnson, J. T. 2014. *Just war tradition and the restraint of war: a moral and historical inquiry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jones, F. G. 1959. *Honor in German Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Kellett, R. E. 2016. 'Only a Flesh-Wound? The Literary Background to Medieval German Fight Books'. In Jaquet, D, Verelst, K, and Dawson, T (eds) *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*. Leiden–Boston: Brill, 62–87. doi.org/10.1163/9789004324725_006

Kolb, R. 1997. 'Origin of the twin terms jus ad bellum/jus in bello'. *International Review of the Red Cross Archive* 37(320): 553–562.
doi.org/10.1017/S0020860400076877

Kleinau, J. P. 2012. '1444 Two fencing masters in Rothenburg'. <https://talhoffer.wordpress.com/2012/12/03/1444-two-fencing-masters-in-rothenburg/> (accessed on 14 Dec 2020).

Krönitz, J. G., Floerken, F. J., Flörke, H. G., Korth, J. W. D., Hoffmann, C. O. and Kossarski, L. 1840. *Oekonomische Encyclopädie*, 174. Berlin: Leopold Wilhelm Krause.

Kuckartz, U. 2014. *Qualitative Text Analysis. A Guide to Methods, Practice, and Using Software*. London: Sage Publications.
doi.org/10.4135/9781446288719
PMid:25393934 PMCID:PMC6869726

Lampart, F. 2013. 'Judicial Duel in the Spiš Law'. *Cultural History/Kultúrne Dejiny/Kulturgeschichte*, 4, 64–78.

Mondschein, K. 2015. 'Weapons, Warfare, Siege Machinery, and Training in Arms'. In Classen A (ed) *Handbook of Medieval Culture, Volume 3*. Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 1758–1785.

Niewiński, A. 2019. 'Inter arma enim silent leges (In times of war, the laws fall silent). Violence in Medieval warfare'. *Teka Komisji Historycznej Towarzystwa Naukowego KUL* 16(1): 9–31.
doi.org/10.18290/teka.2019.3

Ożóg, K. 2009. *The Role of Poland in the Intellectual Development of Europe in the Middle Ages, Volume 1*. Kraków: Societas Vistulana.

Raciborski, A. 1894. *Historia i psychologia szermierki*. Lwów: Drukarnia Władysława Łozińskiego.

Schubert, E. 1995. *Fahrendes Volk im Mittelalter*. Bielefeld: Verlag für Regionalgeschichte.

Schultz, A. 1903. *Das häusliche Leben der europäischen Kulturvölker vom Mittelalter bis zur zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts*. München-Berlin: Handbuch der mittelalterlichen und neueren Geschichte.
doi.org/10.1515/9783486733884

Simon, H. 2018. 'The Myth of Liberum Ius ad Bellum: Justifying War in 19th-Century Legal Theory and Political Practice'. *European Journal of International Law* 29(1): 113–136.
doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chy009

Szabó, L. 1997. *Fencing and the Master*. Staten Island: SKA Swordplay Books.

Tamm, M. 2013. 'How to justify a crusade? The conquest of Livonia and new crusade rhetoric in the early thirteenth century'. *Journal of Medieval History* 39(4): 431–455.
doi.org/10.1080/03044181.2013.833541

Thlusty, B. A. 2011. *The martial ethic in early modern Germany: Civic duty and the right of arms*. New York: Springer.
doi.org/10.1057/9780230305519

Thlusty, B. A. 2016. 'Martial Identity and the Culture of the Sword in Early Modern Germany'. In Jaquet, D, Verelst, K, and Dawso, T (eds) *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 547–570.
doi.org/10.1163/9789004324725_019

Van Vugt, M. 2012. 'The male warrior hypothesis: The evolutionary psychology of intergroup conflict, tribal aggression, and warfare'. In Shackelford T K and Weekes-Shackelford V. A. *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Perspectives on Violence, Homicide, and War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 291–300.
doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199738403.013.0017

Vodička, O. 2019. 'Origin of the oldest German fencing manual compilation (GNM Hs. 3227a)'. *Waffen- und Kostümkunde*, 61(1), 87–108.

Żabiński, G. 2008. 'Unarmoured Longsword Combat of Master Liechtenauer via Priest Döbringer'. In Clements, J. (ed) *Masters of Medieval and Renaissance Martial Arts. Rediscovering the Western Combat Heritage*. Boulder: Paladin Press, 59–116.

CONTRIBUTOR

Thabata Telles is a postdoctoral researcher in Physical Education and Sport at the University of São Paulo (EAFERP) and the University of Paris (I3SP). She is a psychologist (MSc and PhD in Psychology) and her main research consists of exploring martial arts and combat sports through a phenomenological approach, with particular interest in embodiment and perception-action processes. She is currently the vice-president of the Brazilian Association of Sports Psychology (ABRAPESP).

FRAMING SPIRITUALITY IN MARTIAL ARTS

AN EMBODIED COMPREHENSION THROUGH PHENOMENOLOGY

THABATA C.B. TELLES

DOI

10.18573/mas.153

KEYWORDS

phenomenology; martial arts;
embodiment; perception-action;
spirituality

CITATION

Telles, Thabata C.B. 2022. 'Framing Spirituality in Martial Arts: an Embodied Comprehension Through Phenomenology'. *Martial Arts Studies* 12, 19-25.
doi: 10.18573/mas.153

ABSTRACT

This study aims to frame the notion of spirituality in martial arts through a phenomenological perspective as a philosophical and a methodological point of view. It considers martial arts as embodied experiences based on pre-reflexive acts in fighting processes. In these practices, the body constantly moves and there is not much time for the practitioner to reflect before choosing and executing each technique. Thus, it is a reflection on unreflected action, linked to an understanding of spirituality based in phenomenology. As discussed by Merleau-Ponty, a movement is not only related to what we think about the world, but also to what we can do in it. This involves not only perceiving the object, but also a specific situation and how to be able to do something in a certain time and space. This phenomenological understanding suggests that a movement is never randomly executed: we do something, always engaged in a specific situation. Through this perspective, when framing spirituality in martial arts, we highlight the relationship between subject and things considered meaningful to enable or enhance such practices. This sort of experience (spirituality in martial arts) consists of an act of which one may not be consciously aware.

INTRODUCTION

Spirituality has been conceptualised as informing a wide range of embodied practices. Nevertheless, its definition and characterisation remain imprecise. It is tied to ideas of non-physical aspects of human experience, as something powerful, 'supernatural' or 'sacred', and it is often related to religion, meditation and rituals [Maliszewski 1996]. However, while these latter practices can be seen as part of spiritual experiences, they cannot be considered synonyms.

Despite its conventional association with religion, this article proposes that spirituality can be better understood from a phenomenological perspective. At least as far back as thinkers like Stein [1917/1998] and beyond, spirituality has been proposed as a fundamental dimension of the human being. This work adds that it also relates to the possibility of creativity, through openness to others, the world, and ourselves. Indeed, it might even be argued that it can be connected to the experience of certain kinds of freedom [Coelho Jr. 2006].

Fighting practices have been attached to ideas of spirituality throughout their historical development in several countries and regions. Strong relationships between fighting practices and spirituality can be found in many different regions of the world [Green and Svinth 2001]. For instance, there are the well-known martial arts of the Korean peninsula, China and Japan, where the notions such as *mu* and *budo* have been developed through an intertwinement of physical and spiritual virtues in *budoka* training. In Southern and South-Eastern Asia, with the ancient traditions in India, Thailand, and the Malay world, *pencak silat* has prospered, spreading through different versions in Malaysia, Indonesia, the south of Thailand and the Philippines and Brunei Darussalam. These practices are predominantly linked to religious training and ritual initiation. There are traditional fighting practices in Europe, such as in Turkey (oil wrestling) and in Greece, especially Ancient Greece (pankration, wrestling and boxing) whose origins can be connected to spirituality: in the latter, the ancient Olympic Games were organized in honor of the Gods, stressing again a relation with religion. In the African continent, some fighting practices are also tied to spiritual and religious experiences, such as the Senegalese wrestling and the Catch Fétiche (or Voodoo wrestling) in Congo. And so on.

These quick examples show the diversity of spiritual aspects that can be present across martial practices, whether they be religious, ritual and even ostensibly secular. Arguably, spirituality can be experienced even when mystical or religious dimensions are absent. In order to try to comprehend this phenomenon and its manifestation in martial arts and combat sports, this study aims to describe and analyse how the spiritual dimension can be discussed through a phenomenological approach.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND FIGHTING PRACTICES

A phenomenological perspective is adopted here as both a philosophical and a methodological resource. Initiated by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology aims at comprehending the phenomena in our lived experiences. It flows between subjective and objective, refusing pure idealism as a way to comprehend phenomena around us. The phenomenological perspective also criticizes the idea of an intended scientific neutrality. Phenomenology is, rather, an attitude, a particular way to observe the world and grasp the structure of each phenomenon around us [Merleau-Ponty 1945/2000]. Fundamentally, a phenomenological attitude is guided by the concept of 'bracketing'. This involves an attitudinal stepping back from our taken for granted assumptions of the world. Starting from our lived – often unique – experiences, it is nonetheless possible to see common structures among differences. The phenomenologist is then engaged in an operation of translating and bridging different orders of meaning as a way to render the intelligibility of what is experienced. In martial arts studies, this operation is valuable and pertinent because of the agonistic situation of martial arts. This puts practitioners to the test, pushes people to their limits and forces them to innovate in order to find practical solutions to challenges. Although phenomenology is centered in lived experiences and on investigating subjective processes, according to Martínková and Parry:

it is not a kind of subjectivism. This it shares with qualitative research methods, which (in the main) try to do social science from the first-person perspective. However, phenomenology is non-subjectivist in a different way. While it also investigates the first-person perspective, it has to do with the universal-personal, not the particular-personal.
[Martínková & Parry 2011: 94]

Moving from singular experiences to larger structures is important. For example, every martial artist fights in a particular way. Precise observation and description of this across individuals could form the basis of a phenomenological investigation, in order to grasp the broader structures of fights or specific aspects of fighting. Trying to follow this direction, this study explores the phenomenon of fighting to frame the experience of spirituality in martial arts practices.

This study proposes that framing spirituality in martial arts is best approached through the idea of intentionality, i.e. the relationship between the subject and things considered meaningful, which enable or enhance such embodied practices. As mentioned, spirituality can be defined from a phenomenological perspective as a creative way of connecting the inner self, others and the world [Coelho Jr 2006; Stein

1917/1998]. When explored in relation to martial arts, such a process is strongly related to how someone perceives the opponent, the situation, and is able to respond to this environment through an embodied process. In order to understand phenomenologically how the body moves while fighting, including the spiritual dimension, these three important processes will be first approached: *perception-action*, *otherness* and *habit*.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND FIGHTING PRACTICES: PERCEPTION-ACTION

Perception-action processes were explored by Merleau-Ponty [1945, 1953/2011] in the fields of philosophy and phenomenology, and they have also recently been studied by neuroscientists and researchers interested in embodied cognition and body-mind-environment issues [Gallagher 2005; Leder 1990; Nöe 2004, 2009]. These studies highlight how situated our bodies are. In recent research in phenomenology, neuroscience and cognitive studies (especially studies of embodied cognition), perception is often considered to be a type of action. Such acts are then considered in terms of perception-action processes [Noë 2004 2009]: once we perceive something, we act towards it, always in a certain way, time, space and situation. This is not a mere passive process. Moreover, it is from perception that the body starts to move.

According to Merleau-Ponty [1945], perception is the originary way in which we access the world. What we believe to be true and real is based on how we perceive. Perception is not only related to a perceived object, but also to a specific time, space, orientation and situation. We perceive something, here and now, but we are orientated by what we have previously perceived. However, once we perceive something for the first time, we become able to perceive even more, improving neuroplasticity. Approaching the mind-body-environment issue, perception-action processes are related to specific objects in a certain environment, in a mind-body-world intertwinement [Noë 2009]. Perception is fundamentally our way of accessing the world through the body and the mind.

Another important aspect of perception-action processes is that we are able to move towards something even if we cannot see the entire object. According to Merleau-Ponty [1953/2011], we can globally recognize something in opaque contours, enabling our actions from apparently separated information (hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, tasting). For example, I can recognize a friend by smelling his scent, hearing her voice or touching their arm. Even if these actions do not happen simultaneously, we can recognize an object or a subject by 'connecting

the dots'. Within martial arts, there is no way to wait for the opponent to finish a punch (for example) before defending against it. An experienced fighter is able to choose a defense by feeling the intention of the other's hit before their action is complete.

Perception-action is also a critical moment. As an originary process, we do not consciously choose to perceive something or not. We perceive and then are able (or unable) to react. If we hear a sound, we might choose to turn our head towards it. Furthermore, sense perception attests to an important difference between consciousness and awareness. When we move, we are not necessarily conscious as 'the body is in action before being conscious of it' [Andrieu 2017: 23]. Consciousness implies a reflexive relationship with the object while awareness can happen through a pre-reflexive act. We first perceive, then act and finally reflect on what we have done. This is crucial in starting to frame spirituality as something which is lived and perceived, although it is sometimes hard to recognize and describe.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND FIGHTING PRACTICES: OTHERNESS

In extant phenomenological research, otherness has been fundamental to the idea of a contest [Barreira & Telles 2019]. Within the martial arts there can be no fight without an opponent, even if they appear only in our imaginations, e.g. in karate kata or taijiquan forms, among others [Barreira 2017a & b; Telles 2018]. Along with perception-action process, the role of the other is crucial in fighting practices, enabling the fighter to deal with unexpected situations. Otherness can be characterized as something/someone different than myself. Even if both fighters come from the same modality and follow the same rules, it is not possible to predict exactly how the opponent might move or hit because they are different than myself. There is a silent challenge starting from recognizing the other near us. Even if they do not move, their presence is felt as a sense of vulnerability, because otherness is something beyond my control or knowledge. Thus, this intercorporeal relation during the fight is characterized by an attempt to accommodate these differences through combat, which directly relates to the idea of spirituality as a creative connection between the inner self, the other and the world.

According to Leder [1990] when we are used to specific moves and situations, our body seems absent. For example, if one is an experienced fighter, a defense against the opponent's attack can be made without thinking about one's own body. It is not the arm that blocks, but an entire body that is capable of moving quickly to defend. However,

exceptions are created when someone is hit, immobilized or feels some pain. Then, according to Andrieu [2017], there is a return to oneself and to one's own body. This is also described by Gallagher [2005], who notes that discomfort is a way to turn our attention to our bodies.

The more we are exposed to these unpredictable situations and discomfort, the more we are able to deal with these aspects of combat. In other words, the more we fight, the more we learn how to fight. An interesting aspect of dealing with such challenges is the ability to anticipate the other's moves in order to be effective in our techniques. It implies an observation of the opponent's previous movements during the fight and connecting these observations with those I am able to do: 'in most intersubjective situations we have a direct understanding of another person's intentions because their intentions are explicitly expressed in their embodied actions, and mirrored in our own capabilities of action' [Gallagher 2005: 224].

Thus, fighting involves a dynamic of letting the body act out previously learned movements while being placed in unexpected situations and relations with the opponent. It implies accruing bodily knowledge of what has happened and learning to anticipate what is likely to come, which emerges from a kind of bodily listening. This expression can refer to the ability of feeling the other through the body, as an openness to otherness. In this sense, the experience of spirituality can be related to the feeling of vulnerability and unpredictability while facing otherness as an unforeseeable object.

It is noteworthy that fighting practices become standardized and codified [Gaudin 2009]. However, due to the place and role of otherness, even with a rigid set of moves and rules, fighting remains unpredictable. There is a flow between expected movements and unforeseen ones, along with a specific space-time dimension intertwined with one's perception of the opponent. While fighting, a body is required to feel the other as an indispensable presence that moulds the ensuing moves, progressing via a sensible norm [Barreira 2017b]. Such pre-reflexive experience can be understood in terms of spirituality as a phenomenon with an important aspect of ineffability. This is because 'feeling' the opponent is necessary for achieving flow in fighting, and this is sometimes characterised as an indescribable experience.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND FIGHTING PRACTICES: HABIT

In order to perceive and act towards the other in/and/as the situation, one needs to learn how to fight until it becomes a 'natural' habit. This process is strongly related to the notion of body schema, characterized by 'certain motor capacities, abilities, and habits that both enable and constrain movement and the maintenance of posture' [Gallagher 2005: 24]. Such phenomena are also related to an ecologization process, once the body is able to perceive the environment and select the best ways to inhabit that space [Andrieu 2016].

Again, an opponent is fundamental in this process, as the other helps the body to generate new iterations of what one already knows how to do, challenging the body schema and developing further motor capacities and abilities. Body schema can also be considered as a marginal awareness of the body, as we do not usually access it, although it is always there. As Gallagher puts it:

Ordinarily, I do not have to attend to putting one foot in front of another when I'm walking; I do not have to think through the action of reaching for something. I may be marginally aware that I am moving in certain ways, but it is not usually the center of my attention. [Gallagher 2005: 28]

Similarly, most techniques in martial arts are studied precisely so that they can become habit, so that one does not need to consciously pay attention to the legs or the hips, to kick, or to take a look at the fingers, to make a good grip, and so on. These abilities and motor actions can only be carried out spontaneously once these movements are learned and processed as a habit, in which there is no need to reflect before taking the decision to move in a specific way. When referring to the phenomenon of habit, it is important to define it neither as an automatism nor a conscious knowledge, but as something tied to a bodily intelligence [Saint-Aubert 2013]. The habit enables further actions, in a motor and perceptive way.

Developing a habit is not an easy task and is related to training, confidence and embodied memory. Through the repetition of techniques, proprioception can be improved in order to allow the body to move without thinking before choosing the movements. According to Andrieu [2017], through the repetition of bodily practices one is able to know how their body moves as an embodied experience, in which different actions are possible depending on each situation.

For Saint-Aubert [2013], these characteristics of repetition in the phenomenon of habit allow the body to be able to anticipate and adapt

to new situations. It is a motor as well as a perceptual process. Thus, habit becomes an anchoring mode, enabling the development of a sense of trust in one's own body to engage in an appropriate way in a given situation. Habit is also a fertile way of forgetting – '*oubli-fécond*' [Saint-Aubert 2013: 98], manifest in the development of a style, a particular way of moving without prior reflection. Thus, it is also through habit that one can experience spirituality phenomenally, as being able to transcend the conscious self in a free and meaningful relation to the other and the world.

Once certain moves are exhaustively repeated, one is able to forget them and oneself in doing them, to act in accordance to others or the environment. The passage between the learning processes and the experience of habit involves the following steps in terms of an intentional relation to a specific movement: (1) thinking on how I can do something (learning) => (2) knowing I can do it (developing self-confidence) => (3) doing it (flowing according to the situation). Habit is the way of being bodily familiar with something. For example: (1) a novice first thinks of how to accurately posit the posture and the guard, training a specific gesture; (2) they pay attention to different parts of the body and repeat the move until it is learned and incorporated; and (3) once familiar with the new technique, the attempts to use it in a fight situation become more frequent and, little by little, there will be no need to think or pay attention to specific parts of the body to be able to do it. Finally, such gestures will naturally flow as a perception-action process that is possible through a specific body schema and habit towards the opponent in a particular situation.

TOWARDS A PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRITUALITY IN MARTIAL ARTS

Approaching perception-action, otherness and habit phenomenologically, fighting practices can be understood as both reflexive and pre-reflexive. The latter stresses that, while fighting, the body constantly moves and there is not often time for the practitioner to reflect before choosing and doing each technique [Telles 2018; Telles, Vaittinen & Barreira 2018]. Once we propose spirituality as phenomenologically involving a dimension of openness to a specific situation, it can be regarded as intentionally lived during a martial art encounter. Thus, spirituality is experienced as a perception-action process, tied to otherness and habit, and it is also related as an almost unrecognizable and sometimes indescribable force that leads us to do and keep doing something. Considering martial arts as embodied experiences, the phenomenon of spirituality can be grasped and understood during such practices through both reflexive and pre-reflexive acts.

Either in reflexive or pre-reflexive acts, a phenomenological approach relies on the notion of intentionality, stressing that a movement is not only related to what we think, but also to what we can do in the world – and through it [Merleau-Ponty 1945/2000, 1953/2011]. Thus an action is never randomly executed, but always related to an object and to a perceived part of the world. Even if we are not conscious of it, our body is aware of the environment, continuously engaged in a specific situation through perception.

Spirituality in martial arts can be understood as a phenomenon that one may not be able to describe. On the other hand, if there is no reflection about these acts, they will not be identified as such. This is why it is important to approach this experience in terms of both reflexive and pre-reflexive modes. Moreover, the phenomenon of spirituality does not refer specifically to a mystical or religious experience nor does it depend on a rough philosophical description. It can be usually lived as an 'I do it and can't describe it' or a 'it's so strong I can't describe' experience, which is related to something intangible, but strong enough to enable further and meaningful actions. These latter expressions were found throughout existing research especially in capoeira and karate [Telles 2018].

Spirituality can be regarded as one of the dominant themes of modern karate-do 'philosophy'.¹ This is amply illustrated, for instance, in the widespread idea that fighters must 'empty' themselves in order to be able to fight properly [Telles, Vaittinen & Barreira 2018; Telles 2018]. This concept of emptiness not only relates to the calm management of emotions, but also to the experiencing of otherness as a presence that is felt and turned within one's own possibilities of action. Similarly, the atmosphere of capoeira performance, which includes dancing and singing, can be understood as a way to feel both the rhythms and some sort of 'magic' through the body [Telles 2018; Valério & Barreira, 2016a & b]. Such descriptions have been made of the experience of playing in the *roda*, the organization of people in a circle format that enables practitioners to fight and dance in its center. Although it is not mandatory that one experience spirituality in capoeira, its practice is sometimes tied to mystical experience, especially related to Afro-Brazilian culture.

What these examples illustrate is that such practices must be lived bodily and not merely theorized through the explanation of techniques. The notion of embodiment as developed within the field

1 Considering changes in karate during the 20th century, one might underscore the conceptualization of modern karate as a 'dô', which emphasizes the spiritual aspect of such practice. This remark also relates to the idea of 'emptiness' as typical of such recent thought.

of anthropology [Csordas 1990, 1993, 2008] forwards the sense of the body as a subject in action in the world, not merely an inert object of research. Spirituality can be felt in and as embodied practice, but it cannot be taught via mere abstracted or isolated technique. In sum, one can only learn how to fight when fighting and embodied practices are experienced as pre-reflexive processes. Accordingly, framing spirituality within reflexive acts must also be considered as a reflection on the unreflecting [Barbaras 2008]. This claim acknowledges that while spirituality is not a simple technique to be taught, it remains a relevant dimension of the experience of fighting and fighting training. Through spiritual experiences, one is able to feel the other and the situation while fighting in a more creative and personal way, relating pre-reflexively to both dimensions.

Such moments are characterised by a marginal awareness, often without conscious perception. However, what happens when this moment ends, when we are not moving anymore? According to Andrieu [2017], when an embodied practice is finished it takes a while for the practitioner to elaborate a progressive (re)appropriation from the sensorial to the conscious, in order to allow reflection on what has been practiced. In addition, some psychophysiological procedures might help to turn from a pre-reflexive to a reflexive moment, such as regulating the body temperature, and paying attention and controlling one's breathing. Moreover:

there is always a reflexive gap between bodily experience and bodily practice. Even didactically prepared by the guidance of the intervention sciences, a bodily practice cannot produce the same bodily experience for everyone, placing each one before a personal elaboration of his own gestures: self-reflexivity favors in the course of action a modeling of his gestural style and the various associated experiences. ... Thus, as it is not enough to see an exercise to imitate it perfectly, it is not enough to live a physical practice to feel all the subjective interest.
[Andrieu 2017: 34-35; my translation]²

2 In the original: 'il y a toujours un écart réflexif entre l'expérience corporelle et la pratique corporelle. Même didactiquement préparée par la guidance des sciences de l'intervention, la pratique corporelle ne peut produire pour chacun la même expérience corporelle, plaçant chacun devant une élaboration personnelle de ses propres gestes : l'autoréflexivité favorise dans le cours d'action une modélisation de son style gestuel et des différents vécus associés. Cet écart entre ce qui est vivant en nous et ce qui est vécu par nous prouve combien le corps ne vit pas de la même façon ce qui est mis en activité physiquement en lui que nous comprenons par l'explication technique de nos gestes et le vécu associé à cette conscientisation. [...] ainsi, comme il ne suffit pas de voir un exercice pour l'imiter parfaitement, il ne suffit pas de vivre une pratique corporelle pour en ressentir tout l'intérêt subjectif.'

Specially related to the experience of spirituality in martial arts as embodied practices, such an awareness refers not only to a creative openness to the opponent and the situation, but also to oneself. The key point here is not whether we are embedded in a reflexive or pre-reflexive situation but when, where and how we must rely on each of them when considering the spiritual dimension. The lived reality of spirituality in the martial arts is to be bodily immersed in a pre-reflexive experience, and then later struggling to reflect on an aura now passed.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Using a phenomenological perspective, we have claimed that the experience of spirituality in martial arts does not refer only to the mystical or religious aspect of these practices. Such an important dimension within embodied activities might be understood as a creative connection among the practitioner, the opponent and the situation they are in. This study may assist further investigations on the relationships among martial arts, phenomenology, embodiment and spirituality, especially regarding the relation between the body and pre-reflexive and reflexive processes in movement practices. Moreover, future research on the topic may include the relationship between spirituality and important concepts in sports psychology, such as the state of flow and the management of cognitive processes, e.g. perception, attention and memory.

Spirituality has also been considered here as a lived (albeit difficult to describe) experience which can challenge both fighters and coaches. As we have argued throughout this study, spirituality can be understood as a by-product of the embodied nature of the martial arts that is strong enough to enable certain movements and behaviours, even without prior reflection. However, once we are able to recognize such dimensions within our daily practice it may encourage practitioners to better deal with the aspects of spirituality that emerge through long-term training. Considered as a rich and meaningful connection between practitioners and their environment, spirituality can be experienced, lived and sometimes even described. Yet it cannot be taught as a mere technique. It is an aspect of the fighting experience that should not be neglected in training and can be experienced daily. It may even be a vital key to consistency and perseverance in the hard path of martial art practices.

Acknowledgements

I thank the research group on Phenomenology and bodily practices at the School of Physical Education and Sport of Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo (EEFERP-USP) for the continuous and fruitful discussion on the topic of Martial Arts Studies.

Funding Information

This study is part of a postdoc research fellowship funded by FAPESP (The São Paulo Research Foundation) – process nº 2019/03947-5.

REFERENCES

- Andrieu, B. 2016. *Sentir son corps vivant – émersiologie 1*. Paris: Vrin.
- Andrieu, B. 2017. *Apprendre de son corps: une méthode émersive au CNAC*. Presses Universitaires de Rouen et du Havre.
- Barbaras, R. 2008. 'Motricité et phénoménalité chez le dernier Merleau-Ponty'. In Saint-Aubert, E (org.). *Maurice Merleau-Ponty*. Paris: Hermann Éditeurs.
- Barreira, C.R.A. 2017a. 'The essences of martial arts and corporal fighting: a classical phenomenological analysis'. *Archives of Budo* 13, 351–376.
- Barreira, C.R.A. 2017b. 'A norma sensível à prova da violência: o corpo a corpo em disputa sob a ótica fenomenológica em psicologia do esporte'. *Revista da Abordagem Gestáltica* 23 (3): 278-292, doi.org/10.18065/RAG.2017v23n3.2.
- Barreira, C.R.A and Telles, T.C.B. 2019. 'Reflexões sobre a violência no esporte'. In: Rubio, K. and J. Camilo, J. (Orgs.). *Psicologia Social do Esporte*. 1ed.São Paulo: Képos, 79-104.
- Coelho Júnior, A.G. and Mahfoud, M. 2006. 'A relação pessoa-comunidade na obra de Edith Stein'. *Memorandum*, 11, 08–27.
- Csordas, T. 1990. 'Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology'. *Ethos*, 18(1): 5–47, DOI: 10.1525/eth.1990.18.1.02a00010. doi.org/10.1525/eth.1990.18.1.02a00010
- Csordas, T. 1993. 'Somatic Modes of Attention'. *Cultural Anthropology* 8(2): 135–156. doi.org/10.1525/can.1993.8.2.02a00010
- Csordas, T. 2008. *Corpo/significado/cura*. Porto Alegre: Editora da UFRGS.
- Gallagher, S. 2005. *How the body shapes the mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi.org/10.1093/0199271941.001.0001
- Gaudin, B. 2009. 'La codification des pratiques martiales'. *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 179: 5-29. doi.org/10.3917/arss.179.0004
- Green, T. and Svinth, J. 2001. *Martial arts of the World: an Encyclopedia*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara-Oxford – 2 vols.
- Leder, D. 1990. *The absent body*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Maliszewski, M. 1996. *Spiritual dimensions of the martial arts*. Tokyo: Tuttle Pub.
- Martínková, I. and Parry, J. 2011. 'An Introduction To The Phenomenological Study Of Sport'. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 5(3): 185-201. doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2011.602571
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 1945. *La phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. 2011. *Le monde sensible et le monde d'expression* (Cours au Collège de France – notes, 1953). Geneva: Métis Presses. doi.org/10.5840/chiasmi2010127
- Noë, A. 2004. *Action in perception*. Cambridge, Massachusetts. The MIT Press.
- Noë, A. 2009. *Out of our heads: why you are not your brain, and other lessons from the biology of consciousness*. New York: Hill & Wang.
- Saint-Aubert, E. 2013. *Être et chair – du corps au désir: l'habilitation ontologique de la chair*. Paris: Vrin.
- Stein, E. 1998. *Il problema dell'empatia*. 2ª ed. (E. Costantini, Trad.). Roma: Edizione Studium. (Original publicado em 1917).
- Telles, T.C.B. 2018. *Corpo a corpo: um estudo fenomenológico no karate, na capoeira e no MMA* [*Corps à corps: une étude phénoménologique au karate, à la capoeira et au MMA*]. PhD dissertation. Universidade de São Paulo, [s. l.].
- Telles, T.C.B., Vaitinen, A and Barreira, C.R.A. 2018 Karate, capoeira and MMA: a phenomenological approach to the process of starting a fight. *Revista de Artes Marciales Asiáticas*, 13(2), 114-130. doi.org/10.18002/rama.v13i2.5119
- Valério, P.H.M. and Barreira, C.R.A. 2016a. 'O sentido vivido da capoeira: cumplicidade, risco, autenticidade e criatividade'. *Revista Brasileira de Psicologia do Esporte* 6(1), 88-108. doi.org/10.31501/rbpe.v6i1.6723
- Valério, P.H.M. and Barreira, C.R.A. 2016b. 'A roda de capoeira: uma vivência comunitária'. *Memorandum* 30: 177–198.

CONTRIBUTOR

Gitanjali Kolanad is an independent researcher in Toronto, Canada. She was involved in the practice, performance, and teaching of bharata natyam for close to forty years and has written numerous articles on aspects of Indian dance. She co-founded IMPACT, which teaches and promotes Indian martial art forms in Toronto. As professor at Shiv Nadar University, she developed their performing arts program. Her first novel, *Girl Made of Gold*, set in Tanjore in the 1920s was short-listed for Tata Live Novel of the Year.

THE KALARIPAYATTU SALUTATION: MOVEMENT MAKES MEANING

GITANJALI KOLANAD

DOI

10.18573/mas.151

KEYWORDS

kalaripayattu, Natya Shastra, bharata natyam, choreography, martial arts, salutation, Kundalini

CITATION

Kolanad, Gitanjali. 2022. 'The Kalaripayattu Salutation: Movement Makes Meaning'. *Martial Arts Studies* 12, 26-32.
doi: 10.18573/mas.151

ABSTRACT

Vanakkam is the ritual salutation performed during the learning and practice of *kalaripayattu*, the martial arts system of Kerala. All vanakkams are united by their devotional character despite using expressly martial movements such as kicks and blocks. At the same time, there are differences in style, structure, and the interpretation of symbolism and significance even among Hindu *kalaris*, with even further greater variation in the vanakkams used in Muslim and Christian *kalaris*. Moreover, each weapon of the *kalaripayattu* form has its particular and specific vanakkam. This article uses the conceptual terms in the Natya Shastra, *natya dharmi* (what is suitable for the stage) and *loka dharmi* (what is suitable for daily life), introducing a very early binary of categories as separate classifications of movement. It looks to Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's 'From Movement to Dance' as she examines 'how meaning emerges in dance' to decode the process of representation as it applies to the *kalaripayattu* vanakkam. It then goes on to analyse vanakkams through their shared choreographic structure in order to show how context affects the way movement vocabularies are read. How does a kick take on ritual meaning, and how is this meaning influenced by Islam, Hinduism and Christianity?

The meaning of the word *vanakkam* is 'salutation'. It is used casually in everyday spoken Tamil, together with the gesture of palms pressed together, as a greeting suited for most occasions. In *kalaripayattu* the same word is used to designate a sequence of movements from within the body vocabulary of the form's fighting technique (with some exceptions) directed towards the south-west corner if performed in the *kalari* (the place of practice), with the look, stated intention, and animating principle of ritualized obeisance to the presiding deity. This is usually Kali (in a Hindu kalari), Allah (in a Muslim kalari), or the Christian God (in a Christian kalari).

This article explores how the devotional meaning is communicated through movement. The *Natya Shastra* (the Sanskrit manual of performance practice and theory, traditionally attributed to Bharata Muni), even though not directed towards martial arts, makes a useful distinction between two categories of movements. There is *loka dharmi*, or the actions appropriate to real life, what one does without instruction. This is considered in opposition to *natya dharmi* – what one must do correctly along with several parameters; what is codified, stylized, and therefore suitable for the stage.

The conceptual categories of *loka dharmi* and *natya dharmi*, as defined by Bharata Muni in the *Natya Shastra*, seem especially relevant to *vanakkam*, as it straddles this binary. The hypothesis of this article is that an analysis of the movements and the choreographic shape of the *vanakkam* can yield some insight as to the ways meaning emerges in movement, the ways that movement becomes performative, and under what conditions such transformations take place.

MY PERSPECTIVE

I began studying bharata natyam at the famed dance school Kalakshetra in 1970, at the age of sixteen. I went on to train in this dance style with well-known and well-respected gurus for many years, and eventually began to perform, in India, Europe and Canada. During the years I was living and practicing in New Delhi, in the late 1980s, I stumbled upon *kalaripayattu* at a workshop conducted by Kavalam Narayana Panicker, a brilliant Kerala theatre director who used it as an actor training technique. Even in India at that time, it wasn't a well-known form, and I had to go to Kerala to train in it, which I did sporadically at first, until I found a teacher in Chennai, where I went regularly anyway for my dance training. Master P. A. Binoy was a strict taskmaster, and wouldn't teach me unless I practiced regularly. But we practiced in my living room, not in a kalari.

When Master Binoy left Chennai to work with the theatre troupe Zingaro in Paris, he put me in touch with his own guru, Vasu Gurukkal of Kaduthuruthi. It was there that I first stepped down into a mud floor kalari, watching and learning among a group of young male students with oiled bodies wearing only the wrapped and tied loin cloth. Vasu Gurukkal also gave me the fourteen-day massage with the feet, which is said to prepare the body for the rigours of *kalaripayattu* practice, as well as special herbal oil treatment for my left knee, which had been causing me problems in my bharata natyam practice. Thus, I was initiated into *kalaripayattu* as it existed within a community of practice and as a holistic healing system. My knee got better.

When Vasu Gurukkal stopped teaching to concentrate on the healing aspect of *kalaripayattu*, I came to Vijayan Gurukkal in Calicut; now I train under the watchful eye of his son, Vikas Gurukkal. I have made time for the massage with the feet every year since that first time, (except for the year of Covid).

After more than fifty years involved in the practice, performance and teaching of bharata natyam, with about thirty of those years similarly connected to *kalaripayattu*, I write from the perspective of a practitioner. As someone immersed in South Indian performance forms, so much so that I take for granted their history, sensibilities, and aesthetic theories, terms from the *Natya Shastra*, the Sanskrit text on dramaturgy that I learned in relation to my dance form, seem natural to use in discussing and conceptualizing *kalaripayattu* as well. Respect for the guru and the place of practice, emphasis on maintaining a tradition, and on the age of that tradition, even though in fact the forms we now practice are relatively modern, are other commonalities between the dance and the martial art form. Some of these I refer to in detail in this essay.

THE KALARI AS THE PLACE OF PRACTICE

The very name of the form 'kalaripayattu' – meaning 'technique practiced in a kalari' – marks the space of practice as significant. One enters through a low door, bowing, and stepping down, to six feet below ground level, into an earthen floor rectangle that is twice as long as it is wide. Even in the daily practice of *kalaripayattu*, a ritual of 'paying respect' before beginning is an imperative.

I first entered a kalari in the early 1990s, when I began to practice with Vasu Gurukkal, my guru's guru, in Kaduthuruthi, Kerala. He took me through the process, making sure I entered with the right foot, not stepping on but stepping over the threshold, descending one step and

again making sure it was the right foot that first touched the earth; that I bent to touch the beaten mud floor with the right hand, and brought the fingers to the forehead and heart, before walking with my natural gait to the main altar; paying respect there before preceding around the periphery of the whole space; paying respect with a hand to each installed deity at specified points, then forehead and heart; before finally making my way to the master, paying respect to him by the same gesture, this time at his feet; receiving his blessings and beginning the practice.

The *puttara*, or seven-stepped main altar, is set in the south-west corner of the kalari. Some form of the female divine energy, Shakti, sometimes in the form of goddess Kali, is believed to reside here. The seven steps are often related to the central channel of the spine, the *sushumna*, through which the *kundalini*, energy visualized as a serpent, moves. The practise of kalaripayattu awakens this energy and raises it through the *sushumna* awakening the *chakras*, or energy centres as it moves. The kalari is thus a macrocosm of the human body's energy system [Zarrilli 1998: 71].

Vasu Gurukkal directed me verbally, with instructions like 'Take the blessing of Kali' and 'Take the blessings of the lineage of gurus'. Some of these important locations in the kalari are marked by images that specify to which deity one is bowing. The terrifying goddess Kali is shown with a red tongue extended. Ganesha is the familiar elephant-headed god who is worshipped at the start of any venture. The lineage of gurus often has iconic photographs of Kanaran Gurukkal, an old man seated with a sword and small round shield, and C.V. Narayanan Nair – young, handsome and posing with a sword – as these two are considered to be the architects of the modern revival of the art form in the 1930s. There may also be pictures of those in the direct lineage of the present guru. Other places are marked only by an impersonal rounded stone smeared with red kumkum powder and turmeric paste and a lit lamp.¹

As we made our way around, Vasu Gurukkal instructed me to walk backwards away from one deity, before turning and walking towards the next deity. We ended with the deity at the northwest corner.

1 The concept of cardinal points having a presiding deity is well known through the practice of *vaastu*, or auspicious construction, which, like feng shui, pervades the culture. However, there is not an exact correspondence between the deities at the cardinal points of the kalari, and the deities at the cardinal points of space in general. For example, south-west according to *vaastu* is governed by Rahu and Ketu, south is marked by Yama, west by Shani. But in the kalari I attended, south-west is Kali, west is Ganesha and the lineage of gurus, and south is Dhanvantari, the sage of medicine. We go on to bow to the presiding god of each of the other directions – SE, E, NE, N, NW – but no other deities are specified. When no other god or goddess has been placed there, the default becomes the god of that direction according to *vaastu*.

Beyond that verbal instruction, he didn't direct the manner in which I took the blessings. The movements are part of any Indian Hindu's range of movements, inculcated by example and minimal instruction from childhood. Though I am not Hindu, I had already been practising *bharata natyam* for more than ten years by that point, so I did the movement in the way that I had learned to do it as a dancer.

Even Christian and Muslim kalaris have a *puttara*. While the explanations are different, and the rituals are different, the fact that there are rituals remains a constant. For example, in the Muslim kalari I visited – KKA Kalari, Kannur, run by Sherif Gurukkal – there are no deities, but there was a lamp placed in the south west corner that students stood before in a moment of prayer, and after circling the space, they did not bow at the master's feet, but shook his hand.

MOVING THROUGH THE SPACE

After the ritual of obeisance, several different kinds of movement take place in the kalari: warm-ups, drills, standing and waiting for one's turn, practice with a weapon with a partner, collecting oneself before a sequence, and regaining one's equilibrium after completing a difficult pattern.

Students mark the importance of the *puttara* throughout the practice session. For example, each of the *meipayattus* – the choreographed sequences of attack-and-defence movements with imagined opponents – ends with a gesture of salutation to the *puttara*, where the student goes from moving along the straight line connecting north and south, to the diagonal line, marking the south-west north-east axis.

The significance of the diagonal is marked in these several ways, which are all parts of the daily routine of practice. The first is the only one that depends on the actual space of the kalari containing the ritually installed objects of worship, the pictures of the lineage of gurus, the lit lamps, the weapons. That is, one doesn't go around and offer obeisance at each corner if one happens to be practising in a gym or one's home, or on a stage.

One does always end the *meipayattu* with the change from the vertical line to the diagonal, no matter where one is practising, and even if that doesn't mark the actual southwest direction.

The first circumambulation is an example of *loka dharmi*, the natural movement of the body in real life. There is a great tolerance for individual expression. No two practitioners do this first ritual entry

the same. Certain aspects of the ritual, such as the manner of reaching the hands to the deity, touching forehead and heart are markedly individualistic, with wide-ranging variations in actions such as the walking backwards, exactly which places should be worshipped and so forth, while the ritual itself, the order in which actions are performed, the direction of the movement, is compulsory.²

The beginning ritual salutation is the natural movement of the practitioner, moving as they would do in a temple or while taking part in any other simple ceremonial act, in the socially acquired but not necessarily explicitly taught manner, what Marcel Mauss [1934] calls 'habitus'. It embodies devotional meaning, which students express to varying degrees, some performing the actions with deep mindfulness and others going through the motions perfunctorily.

The movement at the end of the meipayattu, a long, deep lunge with the arms fully extended and palms together, on the other hand, is a stylized movement, that is part and parcel of the skill acquisition of the meipayattu, explicitly taught and corrected to conform to an ideal image as instilled by the teacher. Though it is performed in the direction of the puttara, and though the movement itself has a devotional character expressed by the gestural quality of palms pressed together, the devotional element is secondary to the athletic, and it quickly morphs into the splits. But both movements are, according to Mauss's definition, 'techniques of the body' in that they are 'effective' (being well-coordinated movements directed towards a goal), and 'traditional' (in that it has in some manner been transmitted and taught to the practitioner, implicitly or explicitly).

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, when discussing the same binary pointed out in the *Natya Shastra*, distinguishes everyday movements from performative movement thus: 'unlike an everyday movement that is complex, the dynamic complexity of dance is not a matter of doing something or accomplishing something' [Sheets-Johnstone 2012: 46]. She shifts the emphasis from the movement itself to intention – what the movement does. This seems to be the distinction Paul Valery made in his essay on the philosophy of dance, defining it as 'an action that

derives from ordinary, useful action, but *breaks away* from it, and finally *opposes it*' [Valery 1964: 205].

In martial arts, it may be considered that such a distinction can't be made, since the movements of kalaripayattu are at least nominally directed to 'doing something or accomplishing something', a block or an attack, in the meipayattu itself for example.

THE VANAKKAM

There is another form that the ritual salutation to the puttara takes, and that is the explicitly named *puttara vanakkam*, which more closely matches the criteria for classification as *natya dharmi* and approaches the condition of performative movement as defined by Sheets-Johnstone and Valery. Here, a series of movements that are considered useful and purposeful – that are 'doing something or accomplishing something' when they appear in sequences of attack and defence, such as high kicks and twisting evasive movements of the upper body – take on a different quality when combined and performed with a directional awareness of the puttara, whether it is actually there or not, moving the body towards and away from the real or imagined object of focus. There are many variations. They are not necessarily part of everyday practice, though they can be.

The one taught to me in Madras by Master Binoy, my first kalaripayattu teacher, and a student of Vasu Gurukkal, has a twisting sinuous quality and athletic movements such as the dive into the position called fish, demanding a high level of skill. Within the sequence, there are movements unique to the vanakkam – the stylized action of touching the ground, forehead and heart, the movement of the arms to touch the shoulders, knees and to move up over the head in a gesture of offering flowers. The sitting position that looks somewhat like a meditative pose appears in fighting sequences such as in the curved *otta*, and the high kicks and twisting changes of direction are part of many fighting sequences both with and without weapons.

The kalari vanakkam associated with my present school, CVN Kalari East Hill, in Calicut, taught to me by Vikas Gurukkal, shares many of the same qualities, and while there are marked differences, they are stylistic, varying in an analogous way to a difference of accents. The structure remains the same. There is a movement towards the puttara, high kicks, a purely devotional movement of the arms repeated three times as if throwing flowers, while seated in a meditative pose, a full body extension similar to that of paying respect to a deity in a temple or a highly respected person, a turn that takes the practitioner in the

2 When I came to the kalari where I now practice, the CVN Kalari East Hill in Calicut, I did the ritual of entry and circumambulation exactly as I'd done it at Vasu Gurukkal's kalari. No one said anything or corrected me in any way. I didn't notice for quite some time that at this kalari there is one more stop, in the middle of the west-facing wall, where there is a painted image of the sage of medicine. Having done it so long my way, I was too embarrassed to change and add this deity. So all these years, I've simply continued to do it the way I was first taught while those around me do it slightly differently. I have never been corrected.

opposite direction along the same axis, and a return to face the puttara for the final touching of ground, forehead, and heart.

Both Vasu Gurukkal, Binoy's teacher, and Gopalan Gurukkal, Vikas's grandfather, learned from the same teacher, Kanaran Gurukkal. Therefore, it is not surprising that they share many features in common, nor is it surprising that they are no longer identical after two generations of separation.

The vanakkam taught by Sherif Gurukkal in the Muslim kalari has no gesture of hands to knees and shoulders, and the movement to the ground is reminiscent of the ritual bowing in the mosque rather than the full body stretch that Hindus make at the feet of highly respected people or in front of deities in the temple. There are no kicks or overtly martial movements, but the leg positions of elephant, horse and cat, which are all used in the fighting sequences, appear here as well. The way in which Sherif Gurukkal teaches this vanakkam includes specific instructions regarding inhalation, exhalation and holding the breath. This is the vanakkam that Phillip Zarrilli adapted and taught as part of his psycho-physical actor training, one reason being because it doesn't require the same leg extensions and flexibility and can be learned more easily, making it therefore more accessible, to a wider range of abilities.

At the other end of the spectrum are movements of an overtly martial nature performed quickly and forcefully in the *varma adi* style associated with Tamil Nadu, which nevertheless capture the devotional nature of vanakkam, and demand the student's remembering and correctly performing martial manoeuvres according to a strict and well-defined choreography. These vanakkams also start facing in one direction, perform the same movement facing the opposite direction, and end in the first direction.

Each weapon also has a unique vanakkam that is taught when the student is first initiated into that weapon. The weapons are taught when the teacher recognizes that a student is ready to advance, functioning in a similar way to the belts of other martial arts. The progression is through the wooden weapons, going from a long stick, to a short stick to a curved stick, and when these are complete, to the iron weapons, dagger, sword and shield, and spear. These vanakkams for the weapons are often done with the teacher and are rarely practised after the ceremony of initiation. Unlike the puttara vanakkam, where the movement choreography is directed to the main altar, in the vanakkams of each weapon, it is the weapon itself that is the focus of devotional attention.

MARTIAL ARTS OR DANCE?

When dancer and choreographer Chandralekha began her process of reimagining and reinventing the Indian dance performance, one of her first productions used Vasu Gurukkal's kalari vanakkam, performed by trained bharata natyam dancers rather than kalaripayattu practitioners, which I saw when it was first performed in Chennai (Madras at the time, 1987). It travelled to the Festival of India, where Kavalam Narayana Panicker saw it and described to me in personal conversation, the unease he felt at seeing it out of context. We discussed whether it was ethical to take the vanakkam out of the kalari, put it on the stage and claim it as 'choreography' by an individual, even though Chandralekha hadn't actually choreographed anything beyond slowing it down, and changing the direction of movement so that instead of all being focused in one direction, the dancers faced each other.

The sleight of hand being practised by taking movements that constitute part of martial art practice and changing nothing much except their context to make the same movements acceptable as dance represents by that action an existing underlying question: is there a real difference? Once the fighting applications of martial arts are rendered obsolete by modern fighting implements, such as guns, then where does the difference actually lie?

Dance itself must struggle to find a definition that includes the self-consciously conceptual, such as Jerome Bel (taking off one tee shirt after another on stage), Marie Chouinard (peeing in a bucket), and the strictly codified forms of Indian dance, that include both pure abstract movement and mimetic story-telling, such as *bharata natyam* and *kathakali*.

The movements and structure of the vanakkam fit the definitions of performative action as defined by the Natya Shastra, being natya dharmi, not loka dharmi. While the same body postures, kicks and evasive actions of the meipayattu, (which is, in this formulation, loka dharmi) are used, here they are no longer 'doing anything or accomplishing anything'. In fact, we can observe exactly that process whereby the 'ordinary, useful action' of the daily ritual of salutation to the deities of the kalari, and the 'ordinary, useful action' of the daily kalaripayattu drills of attack and defence, 'break away' from those forms, as well as that 'ordinary, useful' way of paying obeisance, and we can observe how, in the final analysis, they stand in opposition to each other.

According to the Natya Shastra, the performer should be trained in the codified stylized enactment of emotion, termed *bhava*. The particular movement sequence of puttara vanakkam approaches the point on

the continuum where martial art ventures into the performative. The kalaripayattu practitioner's movements can't avoid emotion since, in the words of Sheets-Johnstone:

What becomes apparent on the basis of both the empirical and phenomenological evidence is that a dynamic congruency exists between movement and emotion. Dynamic kinetic forms articulated in and through the qualities of movement as they are created in the very act of moving are congruent with dynamic forms of feeling.
[2012: 52]

CONCLUSION

The actuality of performing a codified sequence of movement is common to both martial artists and performing artists, whether dancers or actors. So where is the difference? According to Phillip Zarrilli: 'The martial artist performs his art as an actual and as himself. The performing artist also performs his art as an actual, but appears to be not-himself' [1984: 191] That is, the martial artist is performing an actual skill acquired by long practice, while the actor is an actual actor, but may be only 'acting' any martial art moves. This is a subtle difference, a fine line that may be crossed in a sequence like the kalari vanakkam that already has elements that take it beyond strictly useful martial arts moves.

If 'a body's movements express the knowledge of its being' [Katan-Schmid 2016: 15], then, knowledge of the puttara as an external manifestation of the human body as conceived and understood in kalaripayattu, and especially of the spinal column, the centres of energy, the chakras, and the rising Kundalini metaphorically expressed as a snake, is being expressed through the vanakkam. The sinuous shape of the vanakkam can thus be understood as the body in the act of symbol-making.

When the vanakkam is taught, my teachers did not explicitly assign any meaning to the movements, but when I asked they only said what was obvious, for example, that the movement of the cupped hands up from below the navel along the centre line of the body above the head is 'offering flowers'. This level of meaning is so literal as to be banal. Moreover, it is quite far from the loka dharmi manner of offering flowers in a ritual of worship in the temple. The chakras or energy centres along the central line of the body are visualized as lotuses, so the gesture of taking the cupped hands along that line can be seen as offering oneself as the flower. It is therefore left to the practitioner

to discover the meaning in the doing. Some practitioners, like Phillip Zarrilli, may emphasize the meditative aspects of the vanakkam, while others, like Master Binoy, maintain the athleticism and explosive power of the movements without losing any of the devotional quality.

In moving through the sequence, the practitioner is both 'signifying by instantiating' [Sigman 2000: 31] that is, in actual gestures of palms pressed together as one does in real life and 'signifying by representing' [Sigman 2000: 32] in movements of offering flowers and bowing that are representations of devotional actions.

Zarrilli doesn't make a sharp distinction, saying that both martial artists and performers are trying to achieve a 'certain type and quality of relationship between the doer and the done' [2009: 213]. According to him, the accomplished practitioner, whether performer or martial artist, is 'one who is able to manifest in practice a certain (internal and external) relationship to the specific acts' [34]. While this relationship is 'culture, genre and period specific', both performer and martial artist share the belief that 'practice is palpable, visceral and felt' [34].

The kalari vanakkam provides a form within which we can examine and test these insights. The vanakkam illustrates that moment when a movement loses its intention, the kick no longer a kick, the feint no longer a feint. When one is kicking the leg in the meipayattu, and kicking the leg in the vanakkam, the muscles may be engaged in exactly the same movements, but the feeling that one has while performing that movement or watching that movement for that matter, has changed. The same kick, embedded in the two contexts, engenders an entirely different feeling. At the same time, the ordinary movements of offering flowers to the god, or paying respect to one's teacher are now strictly choreographed and stand in opposition to the everyday relationship one has with such movements. The ordinary movements in the daily paying respect to the gods and goddesses of the kalari, and the purposeful kicks of the meipayattu are recognizable in the stylized movements of the vanakkam, but they've been transformed.

REFERENCES

- Katan-Schmid, Einav. 2016. *Embodied Philosophy in Dance; Gaga and Ohad Naharin's Movement Research*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-60186-5
- Mauss, Marcel. 1935. 'Techniques of the body'. *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique* 32: 27–93.
- Sheets-Johnstone, Maxine. 2012. 'From movement to dance'. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 11(1): 39–57.
doi.org/10.1007/s11097-011-9200-8
- Sigman, Jill, 2000. 'How dances signify: Trio A and the myth of ordinary movement'. *Journal of Philosophical Research* 25: 489-533.
doi.org/10.5840/jpr_2000_12
- Valery, Paul. 1964 'Philosophy of the Dance' The Collected Works of Paul Valery, Volume 13 translated by Ralph Manheim. London: Routledge.
- Zarrilli, Philip B. 1984. "Doing the Exercise": The In-Body Transmission of Performance Knowledge in a Traditional Martial Art'. *Asian Theatre Journal* Vol 1, No 2.
doi.org/10.2307/1124564
- Zarrilli, Philip B. 1998. *When the body becomes all eyes: Paradigms, discourses, and practices of power in kalaripayattu, a South Indian martial art*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Zarrilli, Philip B. 2009. *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach After Stanislavski*. New York: Routledge.

CONTRIBUTOR

Pierrick Porchet is a PhD candidate and research associate at the Confucius Institute of the University of Geneva. Inspired by reflexion and methodology of Chinese Studies and Anthropology, his research project focuses on the impact of current sport and culture policies on Chinese martial arts practitioners in the People's Republic of China.

TRANSLATING CHINESE TRADITIONAL CULTURE INTO INSTITUTIONAL SPORT AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TAIJIQUAN IN CHINA

PIERRICK PORCHET

DOI

10.18573/mas.155

KEYWORDS

Chinese martial arts, Taijiquan, Sport, People's Republic of China, Traditional culture, State policy

CITATION

Porchet, Pierrick. 2022. 'Translating Chinese Traditional Culture into Institutional Sport: An ethnographic study of taijiquan in China', *Martial Arts Studies* 12, 33-46.
doi: 10.18573/mas.155

ABSTRACT

This article presents three different sites of taijiquan practice in the People's Republic of China, where this traditional practice is organized by state institutions. This introduces new representations and norms related to modern ideas of sport as well as of national culture. By observing taijiquan practices in institutionally diverse settings, this paper explores the dynamic process by which Chinese state institutions and practitioners articulate specific understandings of traditional culture with a certain idea of national governance and the modernization of society. While institutions rely on taijiquan body technics and theoretical elements to promote an orthodox traditional cultural landscape, practitioners also actively articulate traditional values and modes of socialization when taking part in institutional activities. Throughout the discussion of the three ethnographic case studies, this paper reflects on the ways that the broad idea of Traditional Culture is accommodated by various social actors in today's People Republic of China.

INTRODUCTION

From October 2019 to February 2020, I have been a keen observer of the daily training and social life of athletes within the taijiquan group of the Beijing elite wushu team. In the evening of December 9, after his afternoon training, one of the elite athletes invited me for a meal and to meet a former athlete who is now a coach in the National Sport Centre in Beijing. During dinner, the athlete turned to me and recalled: 'When I was young, big brother Zhao would look after us. When we were watching him train, we were all very impressed. It gave us the strength to train hard'. He continued: 'From time to time, I invite my big brother to share a meal. It is a kind of politeness. It shows respect and gratitude. *This is Chinese traditional culture.* We strongly respect our elder peers. You see, we are practicing a traditional Chinese sport, so in our everyday life we are more inclined to behave in a traditional manner'. Throughout the months we spent together, the athlete developed a keen understanding of my research topic and the kind of questions I deal with. Later that same evening he told me that my research should reflect what he had spoken of earlier. In this paper, I will follow the advice he gave me that evening.

I start this contribution on taijiquan in the PRC with this short anecdote in order to provide the reader with a concrete example of how I encountered the category of 'Chinese Traditional Culture' (*zhongguo chuantong wenhua* 中国传统文化) during my fieldwork in the PRC. Indeed, most of the actors I observed – individuals and institutions alike – relied on this category when defining the practice of taijiquan and more broadly Chinese martial arts in general. I will go back in detail on the situation of the taijiquan elite sport team and the position of this specific discipline in terms of the umbrella concept of Chinese martial arts (or *wushu* (武术), as they are referred to in the PRC institutional discourses). Before entering into these details, I would like to deepen the interpretation of what the athlete was referring to by 'Chinese traditional culture' (CTC) and how it is significant in a reflection about what this category means in mainland China today.

First of all, the athlete was referring to the very common and mundane experience of inviting his 'big brother' to dinner and the specific table manners he would display on such occasions. During such evenings, the athlete was spending time catching up with a past fellow teammate – his behaviour being shaped through Confucian representations of social norms: the young athlete displays respect and gratitude to his elder by inviting him to dinner. The athlete is performing here 'old customs and beliefs handed down from generation to generation, such as 'respect one's elders', [...] without being actually aware of the Confucian nature of these customs and beliefs' [Zlotea 2017: 295-296]. The athlete also associates this kind of behaviour to the practice of taijiquan as both

embodying Chinese traditional values and way of life. The reference to Chinese Traditional Culture (CTC) implies that these customs are shared among the Chinese national 'imagined community'. The athlete interprets his experience through the prism of what Anderson would call the 'national consciousness' [Anderson 1983]. His discourse thus reveals how he articulates ideas of national belonging and identity into his daily life and his martial arts practice. Of course, these ideas are shaped by the broader political and ideological context of the PRC in which the athlete evolves.

As a professional athlete, the practitioner is actively engaged in activities organized by national state institutions and it is interesting to interpret his dialogue and the emphasis on the Traditional Culture in the light of the nationalist rhetoric of PRC state institutions – what Anderson refers to as 'official nationalism' [Anderson 1983]. The sinologist Muger Zlotea notes how 'There is almost no speech made by China's top leaders that does not contain at least some references to the 'outstanding traditional culture' (*youxiu chuantong wenhua*)' [Zlotea 2017: 295]. Zlotea describes how the current PRC president Xi Jinping while recurrently citing classical literature, including the Confucian Classics, carefully omits any mention of Confucius and other historical figures, placing together these various philosophical traditions and the individual figures who are associated with them under the broader and vaguer concept of Chinese Traditional Culture. Zlotea argues that by doing so, the CCP avoids any potential rivalry between these philosophical movements and Marxism as it is wielded within the broader framework of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.¹ Of course, the recurrent reference to traditional culture in CCP leadership is part of a larger political process, what Anderson would call the 'official nationalism' of the Chinese government where the national state governance relies on the 'image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation' [Anderson 1983: 44]. In the light of this process, it is interesting to see how the athlete – who participated in institutional activities on a daily basis throughout his professional training – is appropriating the dominant category of CTC when reflecting on his daily life experience along with a (Swiss) anthropologist.²

1 On Zlotea's analysis of Confucianism within CCP discourse, see also Zlotea [2015].

2 Of course, the fact that I am not Chinese must have had an influence on the events as they were related. However, I think my observer status as an anthropologist outgrew my status as foreigner in my interactions with the team members. I will reflect in more detail on this issue in the methodological section.

A few months later, I questioned him again on his understanding of how Chinese Traditional Culture was playing out in the daily group life of the team. When asked specifically about the relationship between Confucianism and the symbolic brotherhood between team members, the athlete insisted that 'Confucianism is one branch of traditional Chinese culture, but there are many more' (*rujia shi zhongguo chuantong wenhua Zhong de yige pai, haiyou hen duo* '儒家是中国传统文化中的一个派. 还有很多'). In this specific example, the practitioner's dialogue is reminiscent of that of the state institutions. The broad category of Chinese Traditional Culture (CTC) seems to provide the athlete with a more malleable tool to describe his social experience than complex references to literary classics. CTC is understood as a diverse array of customs and norms that structure the social life. Moreover, the athlete's words also refer to a wider phenomenon than the local group (here the team). CTC is understood as shared by the whole national community and thus becomes a pivotal element in the making of national identity. And finally, the athlete's discourse has to be interpreted in the light of the political context of the PRC in which state institutions actively reclaim the category in their rhetoric.

PROBLEMATIC

This contribution will reflect on the notion of traditional Chinese culture in the context of taijiquan by looking at both the concrete social phenomenon it refers to within practitioners and institutional communication and the broader national ideology of the PRC that frames this communication. It will focus on three case studies, namely the Beijing Elite Wushu Team (*Beijing zhuan ye wushudui* 北京专业武术队), the taijiquan training program held by Xicheng District Sport Bureau of Beijing Municipality and Chinese martial arts research and teaching activities within the Sport and Physical Education College of Beijing Normal University. These studies will provide insights, from three different perspectives, into practices happening within strongly institutionalized setups.

Through ethnographic description, I will argue that the formalization of traditional martial arts by Chinese institutions into nationally shared and standardized practices has opened up a new field of national debate over the meanings of these practices and thus the meaning of traditional culture itself. In order to interpret these studies in light of the broader national context, I will briefly present what can be called the 'traditional transmission framework' of Chinese Martial Arts which offers interesting counter-narratives to the institutional discourses. Indeed, the formalization of practices by institutions does not always reflect the original practices spread out within the population. However, as we

will see in the case studies, the institutions are also actively adjusting both practices and communication in regard to the critical elements brought up by grassroots practitioners. In this paper, I will thus try to highlight a complex circular process where institutions and grassroots practitioners maintain a (sometimes precarious) dialogue in order to 'accommodate' [Bugnon 2018] the various and conflictual views of how Chinese martial arts and the traditional culture they represent should be understood and performed. The paper will highlight what Florence Graezer Bideau outlines as 'the dynamics of cultural categories that are constructing themselves through a constant exchange between elites and social actors' [Graezer Bideau 2008: 59].

METHODOLOGY

The overall argument in which this paper would like to position itself is related to the broad concept of Chinese martial arts. However, this paper would rather focus on practices referred to as taijiquan for analytical and practical reasons. It is therefore worthwhile to reflect here on how the concept of Chinese martial arts will be used in this contribution and how taijiquan fits within this broader concept.

Chinese martial arts or wushu as they are referred to in mandarin, describe today in the PRC a large array of practices related to combat, combat training or combat performances and also include what is categorised as ethnic minority sports such as Mongolian wrestling. The CWA, the organisation responsible to 'federate all the professionals and amateurs of the country' [CWA Constitution] defines wushu by distinguishing between traditional wushu and competitive wushu. This broad definition of Chinese martial arts (CMA), used at an institutional level, reflects the Chinese government's political project to include national minority cultures in its definition of Chinese culture – defining Chinese culture as a multi-ethnic concept united under the common umbrella of the Chinese nation. However, in reality, this inclusion remains at a rhetorical level, as the concept of CMA, in its most common understanding, usually describes a much narrower array of practices. These are divided into styles which are linked into a specific lineage of masters going back to the founder of the style. Throughout my ethnographic enquiries in the PRC, I have observed groups of practitioners in Hebei province practice *bajiquan* from Wu Zhong lineage, Wu family taijiquan from Wu Yuxiang lineage. In Fujian province, I have observed the *meihuaquan* style from Wang Ding lineage.

Taijiquan holds a special status within the spectrum of practices under the umbrella of the generic term wushu in the People's Republic of

China (PRC). In 1956 – two years prior to the creation of the Chinese Wushu Federation (CWF) in 1958 – the National Sport Bureau had created a ‘simplified taijiquan’ set for the purpose of mass transmission within the Chinese society with a focus on fitness and health. The PRC also specifically promoted taijiquan in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) framework. As of today, eight different lineages of taijiquan have been registered as National ICH items for a total of 10 entries³ [Chinese ICH Website: project]. Taijiquan was also inscribed on the Representative List of ICH of Humanity in 2020. [UNESCO Lists] Taijiquan is also an independent competition category within the ‘wushu sport’ (武术运动) framework, unlike the other two main categories, namely *changquan* (长拳) and *naquan* (南拳) that are mashup of different styles. [IWUF Sport Wushu] On a technical level, one could even argue that taijiquan competition routines share more resemblance with their traditional counterparts than for example *changquan* with *chaquan* (查拳)(which was reportedly the style that inspired *changquan* routines).

I will come back on these various aspects of taijiquan along the discussion of the case studies. What I want to convey here is that among all the styles of Chinese Martial Arts, taijiquan is one of the most largely practiced and recognisable by the large public.⁴ It also holds a specific place within institutions as it is widely promoted as mass sport, ICH item, and competitive sport event. As an ethnographer, taijiquan allowed me to navigate through very different social settings following the same style of martial arts. This offers me the opportunity to create a continuity in the discussion of isolated ethnographical sites that would have been more complicated with the other styles I observed. Taijiquan will thus function as a case study to shed light on the broad process by which Chinese authorities have appropriated martial arts practices in general in their cultural policies, creating new ways of practicing and representing these arts.

3 Some lineages have several entries associated with different locations in China. I also don't include the 'Wudang wushu' entry that includes practices usually referred as taijiquan

4 I would say that Shaolin martial arts share the same amount of recognition in the large public. However, in Shaolin technical system, there is no equivalent to the 'simplified taijiquan' created and promoted by institutions almost exclusively for fitness and health purpose.

MARTIAL ARTS TRADITIONAL FRAMEWORK

Throughout the various fieldwork projects from which I derive this contribution, I purposefully conducted observations within practitioners operating in institutional setups (similar to those of this paper's three case studies) as well as what De Grave would call the ‘traditional transmission framework’, which describes groups of practitioners structured around ‘the elderly/youth relationship especially the parent/child relationship, which express the relationship built between the master and his/her disciples’ [De Grave 2007: 3]. This idea is reminiscent of the kind of Confucian based kinship articulated by the athlete in the opening example and I will return to it later. In the case of CMA, there is a growing corpus of academic literature focusing on the study of ‘folk martial arts’ (*minjian wushu* 民间武术) that explore various aspects of the social dynamics of these groups.⁵ The transmission mode is commonly understood as the ‘apprenticeship of the art through the ritual of praying for a master to accept oneself as his/her disciple’ (*baishi xueyi* 拜师学艺). As the disciple performs the ‘ritual of praying the master to accept oneself as a disciple’ (*baishi yishi* 拜师仪式), he symbolically enters the master's household (*rumen* 入门) as a symbolic son or daughter and is thus bonded with other members of the genealogy with a symbolic kinship. As a result, the disciple is entitled to access the technical knowledge transmitted by the master and father figure. It is interesting to note that this system of knowledge is not so much presented as traditional (*chuantong* 传统) by the actors themselves but rather ‘transmitted by previous generations’ (*laoqianbei chuan de* 老前辈传的). I will not go into the details here of the social dynamics of the traditional mode of transmission and the groups in which this mode reproduces. For the purpose of the current argument, I would like to highlight how the traditional framework focuses on lineage and kinship among members of the community of practice and that this structure – which is much related to Confucian social hierarchy – is the one feature that is referred to as traditional or folkloric by academia. And in return, practitioners tend also to adopt this point of view.

In regards to this traditional framework, there is another common aspect that it is important to highlight here; this is the focus in technical

5 This academic trend primarily concerns Chinese publications. Gong Maofu [2017] notes ‘the attention gradually paid by a handful of researchers on folk martial arts in recent years’ and continues by providing a list of important works in this field of research. The same author published five years earlier a detailed monograph about these kind of communities. In English publications, the work of Thomas A. Green is noteworthy. The author also uses the category of ‘vernacular martial arts’ to emphasize the orality of the transmission in opposition to written standards and manuals of the institutions. See for example: [Zhang et al. 2016: 18-29]

training on what can be badly translated as the 'striking force'. Each style of CMA (and perhaps each master) has its own way to theorize the body mechanics allowing the practitioner to produce the correct force in order to strike an opponent in a combat situation. In Mandarin, the most common word I encountered during my fieldwork was the concept of 'jin' (劲). It was common for a master to comment on his/her disciple's movements in terms of 'having jin' or 'not having jin' (*you jin/meiyou jin* 有劲/没有劲). One master very distinctively separated the 'training of taolu' (*lian taolu* 练套路), as a first step of the apprenticeship and the 'training of jin' (*lian jin* 练劲), as a second step which came with very different training exercises. One master spoke about 'internal jin' (*neigong* 内劲), understood as a force produced by an internal process of the body (such as organs, but also qi), as opposed to external muscular strength (*liliang* 力量). In one instance, the 'use of jin' (*yong jin* 用劲) during taolu exercises was directly associated to the 'development of gongfu' (*zhang gongfu* 张功夫), gongfu here taking a very similar meaning to jin itself. Often also, practitioners used the word 'explosive force' (*baofali* 爆发力) to describe the same kind of embodied knowledge. The purpose here is not to dive in detail into the extraordinarily complex and diversified 'CMA Theories' (*wushu lilun* 武术理论). What I want to highlight here is that a large number of individuals who choose to take the very serious and demanding path of the martial arts apprenticeship often do so primarily to master jin, gongfu or the explosive force. Hence, these skills are being seen as the core defining element of the art transmitted from previous generations of masters. And through the semantic shift that defines martial arts as a representative of traditional Chinese culture, so are considered these specific skills: the representatives of an authentic Chinese Culture.

What I wanted to highlight with this over-simplified description of the 'traditional' transmission framework of Chinese martial arts is that for those who take on the apprenticeship and follow one master for many years, the elements seen as traditional are the Confucian style kinship among members and the lineage-based community, on the one hand, and the mastery of the specific embodied knowledge of the striking force, on the other. It is worth noting here that the mastery of the striking force is primarily articulated through the idea of combat efficiency but not exclusively as it is also believed to provide physical and mental health.⁶ One can therefore describe the meanings and values associated with Chinese Traditional Culture in Chinese martial arts as articulated in this framework through the ideas of filiation (to the lineage), kinship (between members) and martiality (combat efficiency).

6 On this aspect, see Partikova's interesting reflection on 'mental toughness' [Partikova 2018].

TAIJIQUAN IN THE PRC SPORT POLICY

In recent years in the People's Republic of China, the 'promotion and safeguarding of outstanding traditional Chinese culture' (*tuiguang yu baohu zhongguo youxiu chuantong wenhua* 推广与保护中国优秀传统文化) has been an important feature in the political rhetoric of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As many observers have noticed, the authorities of the PRC within their political project have elaborated a discourse on the traditional culture that has led to the standardization of practices into nationally shared and politically acceptable forms [Bugnon 2018; Durand-Dastès 2014; Graezer 2003; Graezer Bideau 2008; Micollier 2007]. Elements labelled as 'feudal' (*fengjian* 封建) or 'sectarian' (*zongpai* 宗派) have been proscribed by state institutions, such as national sports associations. These institutions are thus shaping the framework of 'orthodox' practice showing 'their will to keep control over the meaning' of these practices [Graezer 2003: 294].

In today's People's Republic of China, the notion of traditional Chinese culture is in one way or another always underpinning discourses about Chinese martial arts in general and taijiquan in particular – both for grassroots practitioners and state institutions: 'The formation of taijiquan is inextricably related to traditional Chinese culture and has a deep cultural basis' (太极拳的形成发展与中国传统文化有着千丝万缕的联系, 拥有深厚的文化底蕴) [Lü 2018: 2]. The scientific project of documenting martial practices from Chinese antiquity to the present day has become a dominant representation of Chinese martial arts [Gianni 2017; Lorge 2012, Wushu Research Institute 1996], embedded in the common motto: 'Wushu has five thousand years of history, its culture is broad and profound' (*wushu you wuqian nian de lishi, wenhua bodajingshen* 武术有五千年的历史, 文化博大精深). This historical approach, initiated by the Chinese historian Tang Hao during the republican period (1912-1949), has debunked creationist myths of the origins of Chinese martial arts including the attribution of the creation of taijiquan to the Daoist monk Zhang Sanfeng [Bowman 2016; Wile 2016]. However, as Lorge [2012: 3] reflects: 'The modern understanding of martial arts as only unarmed fighting skills for self-defence, abstracted movements for self-cultivation, or the wielding of archaic weapons for aesthetics or improved health is a modern perspective inconsistent with earlier practice'. Therefore, the historiography of wushu over thousands of years is not about the origins of contemporary phenomena but rather the understanding of past practices of which some elements have been passed down to the present. If not carefully reflexive about its object of study – the historical approach that focuses on the 'historical process of "development"' (*lishi fazhan guocheng* 历史发展过程) of present practices, introduces an ideological paradigm representing the history of current Chinese martial arts as a continuum necessarily linked to

the existence of China and Chinese culture itself. This process tends to essentialize contemporary phenomena by presenting them as an ancient and broad 'Chinese martial arts culture' (*wushu wenhua* 武术文化). In turn, this culture becomes an umbrella concept to refer to the heterogeneous frameworks of practices, values, social networks, etc. that today fall under the category of Chinese martial arts – from the most institutionalized instances, such as elite sport teams, to the most popular and traditional, such as the apprenticeship by a master through a ritual initiation.

Today, the classification of taijiquan in PRC institutional discourses is centred around the category of 'traditional sport' (*chuantong tiyu* 传统体育) and encompass a broad definition of what a sport can be. As we see in the three cases developed in this article, taijiquan currently exists in PRC institutions as a form of elite and competitive sport discipline aligned with the Olympic ideology, as a widespread form of fitness exercise for health purposes and a part physical education in public schools. The common denominator is that the practice embeds the spirit of the Chinese nation as well as its people and its culture. Even before being officially registered as Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006, taijiquan and other martial arts styles were represented as what Pinson would call 'heritage sport' which is intermingled with 'folk customs' (*minjian fengsu* 民间风俗) and ethnicity (*minzu* 民族) [Pinson 2017].

At the foundation of the PRC in 1949, martial arts had been present within the population for at least one century [Judkins and Nielson 2015]. Moreover, they had already been reframed as an institutionalized and national practice during the nationalist period (1912-1949) [Lorge 2012: 223-225]. Inspired by the budo movement in imperialist and militarized Japan [Garcia 2020], influential reformers reframed martial arts in their political project as a tool for the construction of what Anne-Marie Thiesse refers as a 'patriotic body' embodying the nation [Thiesse 1999: 242]. In 1958, the Chinese Wushu Association (CWA Ethics) was created under the supervision of the National Sport Bureau. Its mission was to 'federate all the professionals and amateurs of the country' and 'put in order' (*zhengli* 整理) the numerous systems of techniques that are then sorted together under the generic term of wushu (武术) (CWA Constitution). Two years prior, the National Sport Administration had already compiled a new 'simplified' (*jianhua* 简化) sets of techniques becoming standardized (*biaozhun* 标准) on a national level for the nationwide mass dissemination of this body exercise [Lorge 2012: 234-235].

The first decade of communist rule can be interpreted as the continuation of this movement within a Marxist framework. Following the Yan'an conference on literature and art, traditional culture is conceived as a practice that is familiar to the masses and can thus be

used to achieve the socialist revolution [McDougall 1980]. Traditional and ethnic sports were thus mobilized to strengthen the masses' bodies. According to testimonies I had the opportunity of recording in the Fujian Province, local wushu associations were very active in the organization of activities between 1955 up to 1962-64. All members of lineages present in Fuzhou City and nearby were invited to present their taolu during these gatherings and would be offered a modest meal as a reward. Practitioners were aware of the aesthetic criteria that would be applied in the events, as only taolu technics were performed. However, specific rules to designate winners (as in modern sport) were not yet articulated. If the state promoted the kind of activities that were framed inside the institutional grasp, the traditional social networks of master and disciples were merely tolerated and looked upon with suspicion by the Communist Party because of the fighting skills of the members of these communities. The traditional transmission framework represented a threat for the authorities as some groups could effectively 'resist the government at the local level' [Lorge 2012: 226]. The ritual mode of initiation by a master – who then has authority on the techniques and their associated meanings – was labeled feudal and was replaced in the institutional discourse with the rational elements of modern sport. After 1962, the activities organized by local institutions declined and all activities stopped until the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Taijiquan is also largely integrated into what is called mass sport (*qunzhong tiyu* 群众体育) with little to no focus on competitive or aesthetic elements, rather solely concentrating on fitness and health benefits. From the opening era and through the next two decades until 1999, scholars note a boom in many religious, spiritual or health practices. In parks and public squares, groups of practitioners gather in public places to practice taijiquan and other Chinese calisthenics focusing on health and spiritual benefit [Palmer 2007]. To this day, it is very common to see groups of individuals – often elderly people – practicing taijiquan and qigong in urban public places. In 1999, following the crackdown on Falun Gong practitioners, this kind of neighbourhood urban activity was impacted. A system of 'social sport instructor' (*tiyu shehui zhidaoyuan* 体育社会指导员) was implemented to monitor the activity of central members of these groups and a new compilation of authorized qigong routines grouped under the name 'qigong fitness' (*jianshen qigong* 健身气功) was created and promoted throughout the country and abroad to be practiced alongside standardized taijiquan. These new norms and standardized contents to be performed during gatherings have an impact on the social fabric of these groups and the dynamics in which they reproduce themselves. Practitioners must, on the one hand, actively articulate this new framework of rules and contents in their daily practices and, on the other hand, state institutions negotiate with these groups' members the

technicalities of the policy implementation. The following section will explore how this dynamic plays out in the management of taijiquan activities in the Xicheng district of Beijing Municipality.

RE-INTRODUCING TUISHOU EXERCISES IN TAIJIKAN XICHENG DISTRICT TUISHOU WORKSHOP

Tuishou (推手), usually translated as ‘pushing hands’, is a very common exercise in taijiquan. Despite many variants among lineage and practitioners, the most basic principle is that two practitioners use their arms to push each other while maintaining their wrists in contact following a regular pattern of attack and defence where they take turns to assume one of these two roles. In the Wu lineage that I have observed in detail, tuishou was practiced on a daily basis most of the time when the master wanted to make a point and show the effects of a technique when applied on an opponent. More generally, tuishou exercise is associated with taijiquan martial efficiency. It is a way for the practitioner to both train and evaluate their mastery of the martial aspects of taijiquan.

While tuishou is a central part for many taijiquan practitioners in China – especially in the apprenticeship framework – it is surprisingly absent in many institutional practices and discourses. In the competitive sport framework, tuishou events can be observed during traditional sports gatherings. However, tuishou is almost never performed in elite competitive sport as it is not a competitive event either in the national championship or international ones. Taolu athletes occasionally perform a few choreographed push-hands movements during public performances or in the new competition event called ‘couple-taolu’ (*hunhe shuangren taolu* 混合双人套路), but do not integrate this exercise in their daily training routine. The ranking system implemented by the Chinese Wushu Federation also does not include tuishou exercises in its official teaching manual and rather replaces tuishou by choreographed sparring sequences as well as a section on ‘technique explanations’ which present how to apply particular techniques in combat but without providing a systematic training method or specific exercises to improve this aspect [Wushu Research Institute 2011].

On September 5, 2019 the *Xicheng district wushu sport training promotion ‘taiji tuishou’ basics workshop* (*xichengqu wushu peixun tuiguang ‘taiji tuishou’ gugan zhuancheng* 西城区武术培训推广‘太极推手’骨干专场) was held. My research partner informed me of the special status of Xicheng district within the Beijing Municipality as many national-level government offices and personnel are located there. As such,

district level sports associations are not typically allowed to organize events such as competitions or other kinds of meetings. In the case of wushu, instead of such events, the district Sport Bureau provide the local wushu association with funding to organize training programs for local practitioners. The district government also provided a wushu hall in the basement of the very modern and comprehensive District Sport Centre. The training hall itself has a large space with enough room for competition carpets and with high ceilings which are particularly convenient for training with long weapons. Near the entrance, the wall was decorated with many posters that depicted the wushu culture in the Xicheng district. On the other side, gym ladders as well as other gymnastic devices are stored in a small extension. Overall, the hall is a perfect location for wushu training.

The local sports bureau has hired Teacher Zhang⁷, a Beijing-native who has practiced taijiquan since his teenage years with several local masters without having the opportunity to formally enter any lineage through the master-disciple ritual. Teacher Zhang has a successful taijiquan institute in Beijing’s outskirts and has collaborated with the Xicheng District sports Bureau for many years. A few days prior to the event, the Sports Bureau director set up a meeting inviting Teacher Zhang and another *baguazhang* (八卦掌) master⁸ along with two local contractors in the media industry in order to discuss potential future projects. During the meeting, Teacher Zhang highlighted the value of tuishou exercises in taijiquan to the bureau officials and the local entrepreneurs. His presentation, mixing verbal explanations with applications on both me and my research partner, emphasized on how the practice tuishou can help the individual to develop awareness of their own body and the environment, and how this benefits wellness and health in general. He also explained how tuishou is rooted in Chinese culture, borrowing its principles such as transformation of yin/yang, the five elements (*wuxing* 五行) qi and internal energy. Teacher Zhang also emphasized that tuishou is an integral part of taijiquan and how every taijiquan practitioner should train this exercise regularly. Unlike the tuishou I’ve observed in the Wu lineage of Guangfu, Teacher Zhang focused on loosening up movements instead of the hard pushing of the Wu lineage.

We arrived at around 8:30 – along with my research partner – in the vast complex of the Sport Centre of Xicheng district. Making our way through the long and large corridors of the compound, we arrived at the centre’s wushu hall where about 50 participants were keeping themselves occupied while Teacher Zhang and his students

7 I use here an alias to protect the identity of this actor.

8 Literally, the **Palm of the eight trigrams**. It is a relatively popular style in Beijing and elsewhere in China.

were preparing the technical apparatus required for the teaching. Participants were mainly elderly with a prominent number of women. As my research partner remarked: 'It's a Thursday morning, you cannot come if you work... except for us whose work is to come here!' All the participants seem to know each other and a very friendly and relaxed atmosphere is present in the wushu hall. Although some of the participants seem suspicious about me and avoid interacting, I had many occasions to exchange informal talks or even to exercise tuishou throughout the duration of the workshop. One student noted, 'It's great that you are so passionate about Chinese traditional culture. I haven't had the opportunity of learning taijiquan when I was young, but now I practice every day and it makes me feel extremely well'. Another participant observed, 'I have known Teacher Zhang for a long time. I come to every workshop. It's very useful to have an expert to learn from. And we all meet here together. It's a lot of fun!'

After a theoretical introduction – whose contents were very similar to the speech at the Sport Bureau – Teacher Zhang and one of his senior students climbed up on the stage and started to show the audience the basic movements of tuishou. He insisted on loosening limbs and articulations through the continuous flow of movements. Participants then paired up in small groups of 2-3 people and started to exercise while a few students of Teacher Zhang walked around the groups to provide corrections. Teacher Zhang remained on stage where participants could join him for a short session of tuishou. Seeing participants practicing in pairs, it seemed to me that they weren't competing against each other as I had observed in Guangfu, but were rather focusing on the collaboration between each other to successfully perform the jerk-free movements. The focus was not to unbalance the opponent but rather to find together a free flow of movement.

This session was the first of a series of 10 weekly classes dedicated to tuishou training. Participants can register through an app for a modest 40 yuan (around 5 euros). People who live outside of Xicheng district could also register but it seems that the program was not advertised outside the local channel of the Xicheng Sport Bureau thus keeping the meeting attendees mostly within Xicheng borders.

In his description of taijiquan practitioners in public parks in Shanghai, the anthropologist Adam Frank highlights 'the dynamic construction of identity that arises out of daily practice' [Frank 2006: 55]. As he states: 'The art of taijiquan provides a medium for a social-sensual construction of identity that is heavily attached to modernist notions of Daoism and historically rooted in specific conceptions of ethnic identity' [2006: 3]. Although Frank describes lineage-based practices, we see that in Shanghai as in Beijing, taijiquan practitioners who occupy the public urban space are involved in community building: a sense

of belonging is built within the group of practice through the mode of socialization related to taijiquan training. Moreover, the taijiquan representations of Chinese traditions that emerge through the practice of these movements provide the practitioners with a symbolic link to an idealized past constituting the origin of an authentic identity. Because of this so-called 'profound cultural significance', many taijiquan practitioners don't feel the need to rigorously train the martial aspect as long as the practice is embedded in traditional values. As Frank observes in a group of retiree practitioners:

Without the burden of intensive push hands training, which always seemed to breed competition, this group was almost completely without ego in the way they approached learning taijiquan. For me, that became the most important lesson I learned from Chen and his retirees. Despite my pretences to master taijiquan's martial aspects, I came to appreciate it here as art, as a creative act that people practiced for the joy of it. [Frank 2006: 92]

It is also interesting to look at the tuishou seminar in the light of the recent controversies that started in 2017 when Xu Xiaodong, a Beijing-based boxer, began to defeat traditional martial artists in public matches [Atkin 2019]. The story of Xu Xiaodong, and other similar stories that occurred in its wake, started a national debate in official media, social networks and of course among martial arts practitioners. Xu Xiaodong was taking on traditional culture, showing some of its contradictions. He was proposing an alternative discourse to the official one, in which a martial art's value as outstanding traditional culture was not simply taken for granted but rather tested and earned in the ring. Martial arts are not inherently good because they represent Chinese culture: their values have to live up to their legacy, namely combat efficiency. The authorities condemned and censored Xu Xiaodong but they also adapted the modalities of the institution's management of martial arts. As one taijiquan master involved in ICH program told me: 'Since the Xu Xiaodong affair, the authority requests me to go at least once a year in all the affiliated schools around the country to make sure that all the students receive a training in the entire system of taijiquan'. In this context, the Xicheng district Sports Bureau has probably felt the same kind of incentives and thus organized this tuishou seminar to reintroduce this exercise – one that points to the importance of self-defence – as a way to educate practitioners on this often neglected aspect of taijiquan.

ACCOMODATING TRADITIONAL VALUES IN ELITE SPORT SETTING BEIJING ELITE WUSHU TEAM TAIJIQUAN GROUP

According to Pinson [2017], sport is about deciding a winner and also implies the presence of an audience; a competition event is thus framed as a spectacle to be enjoyed by the public. Jaquet, Sorenson and Cognot [2015: 25] use the definition by Sport Accord which insists on competition without any element of luck as well as the safety of athletes and participants. These are especially valid in the context of competitive sport such as the disciplines of taolu and sanda in the case of wushu sport. This kind of competitive event, in today's China exists both as a heritage sport event – where non-professional athletes from traditional lineages can compete – and as an elite sport event based on the Olympic model.

At the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1976, the National Sports Bureau restarted its programs nationwide. In Fuzhou, the provincial elite sport centre opened in 1978 and wushu taolu was directly incorporated into the disciplines constituting the centre's core. The first generation of coaches and athletes started to rearrange movements and the way they were performed in order to become more theatrically spectacular and to create the modern nanquan and taijiquan disciplines. Soon competition rules and judging criteria were formalized, and standard and compulsory competition taolu were arranged and spread nationwide. During this period, competitive sport received special attention from the state in its project of becoming a 'strong sport nation' (*tiyu qiangguo* 体育强国). Chinese authorities implemented that what Fan and Zhou refer to as the 'elite sport first' policy in order to train athletes to be able to compete and win against their international peers, especially American and Russian athletes. By competing equally during international competitions, China reaffirms its place as a powerful nation [Lu and Fan 2014: 103-105]. Through the same dynamics, Chinese authorities also developed competitive disciplines for its traditional martial arts and promoted an international framework with the objective of promoting their inclusion on the Olympic Games, thus attempting to affirm the universality of Chinese culture [Theeboom, Zhu and Vertonghen 2017: 5]. According to Song and Yue [2016], this new 'wushu sport' (*wushu yundong* 武术运动) – intermingled with the Olympic ideology – has been the main discipline supported and promoted by state institutions until today.

The creation of a competitive sports framework for Chinese martial arts introduces a paradigm shift within the traditional transmission framework. Martial knowledge is no longer legitimized by the figure of the 'master' but rather by national standards and regulations. Individuals are no longer bound by symbolic ties within a specific lineage but rather by the instrumental purpose of their training within a sports

team. The emphasis is put on performance. As one athlete stresses: 'What defines our sport is the Olympic motto: faster, higher, stronger. We train to win medals'. Meanings associated with the techniques also shifted. In the taolu categories, emphasis is put on the aesthetic aspect of movements rather than the combat efficiency. In sanda, on the contrary, it is solely combat efficiency that is prioritized over the technical identity of one combat system.

This section will reflect on how individuals within the elite sport framework are re-articulating categories conceived as Chinese traditions – such as brotherhood and lineage – and the way these categories and values are structuring relationships and representation within these groups of practitioners. In addition to the example of the Beijing team, I will also rely on observations conducted in the elite team of the Fujian province. As we will see, this site – through its specific history and place within the national elite sport circle – provides a vivid example for the process of navigating traditional categories and sport-oriented practices.

The sport-oriented framework has been implemented with the general purpose of introducing national and rational standards into martial arts while minimizing some of its traditional elements conceived as incompatible with the party's orthodoxy. One might ask then how these traditional elements could coexist with the newly implemented sports practice. Accordingly, let us deepen the analysis and examine precisely what kind of values are associated with traditional culture and conveyed in the sports teams.

BROTHERHOOD

The traditional framework of Chinese martial arts emulates family ties where the master is acting as a symbolic father and the other disciples as brothers and sisters. Through my observation of the athletes' group dynamics, I came to interpret their relationship as structured through the same kind of bonds. First of all, the vocabulary used to refer to other athletes is the same. Similarly to members in the same lineage, athletes refer to each other as 'brother in teaching' (similar to brother-in-law)⁹ – even to those who have already left the team. The word *duiyou* (队友), which can be translated by teammate, is sometimes also used which is a term also used in other team sport as well as in the

9 In more details, an athlete would refer to other teammates according to four categories differentiating gender and age, namely younger and older brothers (*shixiong/shidi*) and younger and older sisters (*shijie/shimei*).

military. It is interesting to note that the sister/brother terminology is also used in academia, especially at the master and doctoral level within research groups where students under the same supervisor also refer to each other using these terms. However, in these situations, the teacher figure is referred as teacher (*laoshi* 老师) or coach (*jiaolian* 教练). But this brotherhood type of relation is also constructed through the social interactions between athletes. As the sociologists Harrington and Fine suggest: 'groups exist not only to get things done, but also to maintain themselves as social units' [Harrington and Fine 2000: 321]. During my fieldwork with the Beijing team, I observed that the cohesion among the group of athletes was not only created by the instrumental purpose of their training but also by an affective culture where they share a genuine sense of fraternity and mutual assistance. By developing a friendship beyond the sole sport training, individuals 'see their group as a desirable arena of action' [Fine and Corte 2017: 65]. Through this process, elite athletes are emulating the traditional brotherhood relationship and the Confucian set of behaviour associated with it. As the sinologist Muger Zlotea argues, there can be what today people call 'popular Confucianism' – this is 'the Confucianism that existed as a set of rules and values, as patterns of behaviour among the people and still exists today. It is what scholars call 'the Confucianism used daily by the masses without knowing it' (*baixing riyong er bu zhi de rujia*)' [Zlotea 2017: 295-296]. Athletes, when integrating the new life environment that is the sport team, reproduce values and behaviours learned in their families and other social contexts. One could also formulate the hypothesis that athletes acquire these values through their consumption of martial arts fictions and emulate in their social life the collective imagery related to the heroes of these stories and the *jianghu* (江湖)¹⁰ world they live in.

These values are also explicitly put forward in athlete discourses when reflecting on their life within the team. As in the case of the Beijing athlete's discourse, other interviews also highlight the idea that 'elders protect their younger peers' (*da baohu xiao* 大保护小) and that 'the student respect the teacher' (*xuesheng zunjing laoshi* 学生尊敬老师). These values can be interpreted as filial piety (*xiao* 孝) although participants don't explicitly use this category in their own discourse. Also, when specifically asked whether these values ought to be considered Confucian, one interviewee responded, 'Confucianism is one branch of Chinese traditional culture, but there are many more!' (*rujia shi zhongguo chuantong wenhua Zhong de yige pai, haiyou hen duo* 儒家是中国传统文化中的一个派. 还有很多!)

10 Literally, the world of the rivers and lakes. In martial arts fictions, the word describe a kind of underworld where the martial arts experts heroes have to take on themselves to fight injustice.

So, we see how a set of behaviours and values, associated in participant discourses not only as being Confucian but also Chinese in a broad sense, plays out in the dynamics of group life of the Beijing taijiquan elite team. On the one hand, these values provide individuals with a framework to map the way into the group and also the way the individual fits in by acquiring a sense of belonging and identity (as in: I'm a Chinese athlete who practices a Chinese traditional sport and I have a specific position in the fraternity). On the other hand, these values also have a material efficiency in structuring the group which becomes an effective social unit where individuals can efficiently train to win medals.

THE LINEAGE OF THE TECHNICAL TRANSMISSION

Let's now discuss a second aspect in the athletes' communication that could be a link to traditional culture. The technical knowledge is transmitted from the master to the disciple creating a lineage. Most of the athletes I interacted with would present their technical knowledge as embodying a 'particular and personal style' (*ziji dute fengge* 自己独特风格). The acquisition of this style is often reflected as being the result of the athlete's own search, their coach's guidance and the influence of one or various other athletes seen as a guiding figure and big brother or sister. Often these guiding figures are found within the team or in the athlete's direct circle. It could be either an older and more experienced athlete or a former athlete who is now retired but still keeps connections with the team's social life. Through this process, the athlete's personal style and thus identity as a martial artist is configured within the genealogy of the coach and older peers within the team. The team thus embeds a sense of continuity and becomes a stable institution providing the individual with a shared and communal identity. The example of the taijiquan group of the Fujian Province team particularly highlights the notion of lineage understood as something that passes from one individual to another, creating a continuity and a stable and identifiable institution, being the lineage in the traditional framework or the team in sports practices.

Within the circle of Chinese elite athletes, it is common knowledge that the Fujian province wushu team excels in the categories of taijiquan and nanquan. In the case of taijiquan, two athletes, Chen Sitan and Gao Jiamin (from the first generation after the creation of the team in the late 1970s) were very successful athletes and became prominent institutional figures after their competitive careers. A later generation of athletes, such as Zhou Qing and Huang Yingqi in the 2000s, and Chen Zhouli in 2010, also followed the same path in becoming national top athletes and later nationwide renowned experts. And this process is continuing in the present day with athletes

such as Huang Zhikun and Gao Haonan. As one former athlete who was active in the late 1990s recalls, 'We cannot not recognize them! (as our mentors, added by the author). In the beginning, they were our coaches so, of course, they transmitted to us their specific styles. When they started their international careers, new coaches and other members would continuously mention them'. Moreover, former athletes even though not officially hired as coaches would regularly come back to the team and provide teaching. Finally, these athletes all keep an informal relationship and friendship outside the training hall. According to my interpretation, beyond the brotherhood relations, the framework of transmission of the technical knowledge is also building a sense of belonging which is very similar to the one encountered in the traditional lineages. Individuals identify themselves with the former athletes and in terms to them belonging to the team. In this case however, the setup is different, instead of a ritual initiation that bonds the individuals within a symbolic family, it is the institution of the elite sports team that structures their relationship as a family.

TEACHING AND RESEARCHING TAIJIQUAN AT BEIJING NORMAL UNIVERSITY

During the autumn semester of the 2019 academic year, I was an exchange researcher within Prof. Lü Shaojun's research group at Beijing Normal University. Since 2017, Prof. Lü has been in charge of the newly created Traditional Sports Culture Promotion Centre in the College of Physical Education and Sports. The research group was roughly divided between researchers in health science and researchers that conducted ethnographies in martial arts communities or other traditional sports setups. This division reflects Prof. Lü's research interests as I will describe below. In addition to regular teaching and research work, the group was very active in organizing academic events such as international conferences, round-tables and other kinds of workshops. In the following section, I will present the teaching and research activities of Prof. Lü and his team.

Prof. Lü actively participates in the 'Taiji for health project' (*taiji jiankang gongcheng* 太极健康工程) launched in 2013 following the State Council's initiative regarding the 'promotion of the health service industry'. This initiative itself follows the general idea of 'fitness for all the population' introduced in 2012 during the 18th plenary session of the CCP. The following year, Liu Peng – Head of the National Sports Administration – presented his general strategy during the National Conference on Mass Sport including 'using the specific calisthenics cultural resources of taijiquan [in order to] operate a shift from 'technical teaching' to 'cultural promotion' and 'health service' [Lü 2015: 16]. The taijiquan for health project focuses on 'the creation of a

taijiquan system as public service [and] calisthenics cultural brand' [Lü 2015: 17]. At the same time, this project also tackles recent taijiquan stereotypes. It has aimed at changing the public perception of taijiquan as a 'slow gymnastic' for old people by coming back to taijiquan's core cultural meaning, such as boxing principles and training methods as well as tuishou exercise. This broad project led to various research in health science including clinical studies. During my stay in BNU for example, a small team of researchers were collaborating with several hospitals where they would teach taijiquan to patients in order to prevent symptoms of chronic diseases and would collect data of the process.

Prof. Lü was the main coordinator for the creation of the *bafa wubu* 八法五步 – a new short sequence of taijiquan compiled around taijiquan's eight core hand movements (*bafa*) performed through five steps (*wubu*). The *bafa wubu* system of exercises – including the 'standing still exercise' (*zhuang gong* 桩功) and 'marching exercise' (*xing gong* 行功) – was compiled 'on the basis of the existing 24 Form [as] a set of taiji routines for popularization characterized by culture, fitness and simplicity' [Lü 2018: 16]. The sequence is meant to introduce beginners to the core techniques within taijiquan boxing theory while being very accessible. Moreover, like the taijiquan 8-step sequence, *bafa wubu* does not require much space to be performed and can be thus trained in all kinds of locations. During my stay at the BNU, Prof. Lü was regularly traveling around China to promote *bafa wubu* and train experts such as university teachers, elite athletes and coaches. In his preface of *bafa wubu*'s technical manual Prof. Lü states: 'As a kind of mind-body technology, [taijiquan] exerts inestimable influence on fitness, medical rehabilitation, longevity and temperament cultivation' [Lü 2018: 8].

During the 2019 autumn semester, Prof. Lü and one teaching assistant taught two weekly technical martial arts classes for bachelor degree students in Sports Education. One course was dedicated to 'wushu fitness' (*jianshen wushu* 健身武术) and the other to 'taiji fitness' (*jianshen taiji* 健身太极). The contents for the taijiquan course were the 16 movements routine which is a slightly shorter version of the 24 routines without any major change in the routine's use of space or choreography. Students had to be able to perform the routine with a minimum technical requirement in order to validate the credits. The class was held in a dedicated 'wushu hall' (*wushuguan* 武术馆) which was also equipped with sanda equipment. The class would start with the standardized 'baoquan' (抱拳) salute followed by a light warm-up and the 'standing still' exercise. After this introduction, the group would form two lines and walk across the hall with the basic step of taijiquan performed first without hand movements then with the first technics of the routine. The group would then rehearse the contents of the previous classes with the teacher leading them. The teacher would then go on to teach more techniques and eventually split the group

up allowing him to monitor the technical progress of students group by group. Prof. Lü and his teaching assistant were very reflexive on the process of knowledge transfer, carefully planning how to combine verbal explanations with body performance, how to efficiently split up and manage groups and other pedagogical protocols. Occasionally, the last minutes of the training would include short tuishou sessions in small groups. These sessions would usually focus on the reproduction of the technical requirements – learned with the sequence – in terms of body posture and flow of movement without the competitive aspect of trying to unbalance the opponent.

Reflecting on how taijiquan is categorized within the research and teaching work of Prof. Lü and his team, it is interesting to note the emphasis on health within taijiquan activities. Some researchers were conducting specialized research in Health Sciences and the Bafa Wubu routine is integrated in this line of research. During the teaching, a special focus was put on fitness and well-being, too. The classes and the techniques that were being taught were similar to how athletes in elite sport team would train. The difference was the focus of the Sport on fitness rather than competition. In this context, traditional elements of taijiquan are thus primarily associated with the promotion of health. This trend is very common and a dominant representation of taijiquan as a traditional practice. It is for example one of the core defining element of taijiquan as it is promoted in the ICH framework. [UNESCO Lists]. It is noteworthy that the taijiquan file on the UNESCO representative list does not make any reference to the idea of martiality or combat skills. It seems that these two diametrical concepts are not reconciled within this institution, yet. In BNU though, the focus on health did not (entirely) overshadow the idea of martiality and combat skills as a traditional element of taijiquan. Through ethnographic studies of folk communities, some researchers were documenting this aspect from a sociological perspective. Discussions were also held about how to improve the teaching in regard to this aspect, especially to raise the interest of students in learning taijiquan. Prof. Lü also explains how the process of creation of the Bafa Wubu routine was inspired by the will of highlighting the core elements of taijiquan combat theory.

CONCLUSION

How do traditions and traditional culture translate in taijiquan institutional activities in the PRC nowadays? The observation of the three case studies offers a glimpse into the many facets of taijiquan and how the understanding of its traditional elements by different actors varies from case to case.

In the case of the tuishou workshops organized by the local government in Beijing, practitioners primarily represent taijiquan as a soft fitness method framed within the Daoist idea of *yangsheng* (养生), which relates to the ‘cultivation’ of health. Practitioners also associate the practice of taijiquan with social relationships, but interestingly without reference to the Confucian values of family and lineage but rather as a kind of modern urban neighbourhood leisure activity. In this context, authorities actively promote the introduction of combat elements and exercises well known in the traditional framework in the wake of controversies around the lack of combat efficiency in taijiquan and wushu in general.

In the elite sport teams, taijiquan as a practice is intermingled with the modern idea of competitive sport. Compared with the traditional framework, the technical skill here is not so much related to combat and martiality but rather conceived in its gymnastic dimension through the lens of acrobatic performance and esthetical criteria. Nonetheless, actors still conceived the movements in the continuity of the traditional framework, as one coach states: ‘all movements performed by athletes come from traditional taijiquan’. In this context, taijiquan’s traditional element is primarily understood by actors through the lens of their social relationship which is framed through the same kind of values, namely the symbolic family and lineage, which structures communities of master and disciples in its traditional framework of transmission.

At the Faculty of Sport in Beijing Normal University, taijiquan is, on the one hand, interpreted through the lens of the academic discipline of Health Science. Here, the traditional element of the Daoist idea of *yangsheng* is translated into a scientific discourse coming along with its rational legitimacy. On the other hand, taijiquan is also translated into the modern idea of physical education. Here, characteristics of the competitive sport seen in the elite sport team are articulated with the idea of fitness and martiality through the lens of pedagogy science.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm [1983: 14] informs that ‘modern nations and all of their impedimenta generally claim to be the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remotest of antiquity and the opposite of constructed, namely human communities so natural as to require no definition other than self-assertion’. The production and re-production of national traditions, such as taijiquan, tend to establish a sense of continuity with the past. The case studies discussed in this contribution shed light on the dynamic process through which actors within PRC national institutions actively articulate the continuity of tradition. The ideas and practices of martiality, lineage, Daoist health exercise, all reference an ancestral past whose historicity is not necessarily the focal point but rather provides grass-roots practitioners and government officials with a resourceful framework of reference to define what is traditional Chinese culture.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Atkin, N. 2019. 'Censored MMA fighter Xu Xiaodong says he'll leave China to become an Australian citizen'. *South China Morning Post* 19 June. Available at: <https://www.scmp.com/sport/martial-arts/kung-fu/article/3015125/xu-xiaodong-says-hell-leave-china-and-become-australian>.
- Bowman, P. 2016. 'Making Martial Arts History Matter'. *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 33(9), 915–933. doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2016.1212842
- Bugnon, P. 2018. 'L'art d'accomoder les ancêtres de la nation: Analyse du patrimoine culturel musulman en Chine'. *Tsanta* 23, 99–103. doi.org/10.36950/tsantsa.2018.23.7311
- Chinese Wushu Association. *Constitution*. Available at <http://zgwx.wushu.com.cn/xhzc.asp> [Last accessed 20 November 2017]
- Chinese ICH Website. *Project*. Available at <https://www.ihchina.cn/project.html> [Last accessed, 14.04.2022]
- Chinese Wushu Association. *The rules of martial ethics*. Available at http://zgwx.wushu.com.cn/w_wdsz.asp [Last accessed, 20.11.2017]
- De Grave, J.-M. 2007. 'L'initiation rituelle javanaise et ses modes de transmission: Opposition entre javanisme et islam'. *Techniques & Culture [En ligne]* 48–49 : 1–28. doi.org/10.4000/tc.3032
- Durand-Dastes, V. 2014. 'La Grande muraille des contes'. *Carreau de la BULAC*, 1–57.
- Fine, G.A. and Corte, U. 2017. 'Group Pleasures: Collaborative Commitments, Shared Narrative, and the Sociology of Fun'. *Sociological Theory* 35(1), 64–86. doi.org/10.1177/0735275117692836
- Frank, A.D. 2006. *Taijiquan and the Search for the Little Old Chinese Man: Understanding Identity through Martial Arts*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. doi.org/10.1057/9780230601529
- Garcia, R.S. 2020. 'The long-term development of Japanese martial arts'. In: Fan, H. and Lu, Z. eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Sport in Asia*. Routledge. New York, 54–63. doi.org/10.4324/9780429061202-8 PMID:33277229 PMCID:PMC7556806
- Gianni, T. 2017. 'Tang Hao and the quest for the origins of traditions'. *Imas Quarterly* 6(1), 15–31.
- Gong, M. 2012. *Structure and modes of diffusion of Chinese folk martial arts*. People Sport Press. Beijing. Gong, M. 2012. *Zhongguo minjian wushu shengcun xianzhuang ji chuanbo fangshi yanjiu*. Renmin tiyu chubanshe. Beijing. 龚茂富. 2012. 中国民间武术生存现状及传播方式研究. 人民体育出版社. 北京.
- Gong, M. 2017. 'The practice of legitimacy and the festive spirit of folk martial arts within folkloric life'. *Cheng Sport College Journal. Minsu shenghuo zhong minjian wushu de quanlishijian yu kuanghuan jingshen. Chengdu tiyu xueyuan xuebao*. 龚茂富. 民俗生活中民间武术的权力实践与狂欢精神. 成都体育学院学报.
- Graezer, F. 2003. 'Le Festival de Miaofeng shan: culture populaire et politique culturelle'. *Etudes chinoises* 22, 283–295. doi.org/10.3406/etchi.2003.1333
- Graezer Bideau, F. 2008. 'L'instrumentalisation de la culture populaire. Le cas de la danse du yangge en Chine'. *TSANTSA* 13, 52–60.
- Harrington, B. and Fine, G.A. 2000. 'Opening the "Black Box": Small Groups and Twenty-First-Century Sociology'. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63(4), 312–323. doi.org/10.2307/2695842
- Hobsbawm, E. and Ranger, T. eds. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- International Wushu Federation. *Sport Wushu*. Available at <http://www.iwuf.org/sport-wushu/taolu/> [Last accessed, 14.04.2022]
- Jaquet, D., Sorensen, C.F. and Cognot, F. 2015. 'Historical European Martial Art: a crossroad between academic research, martial heritage re-creation and martial sport practices'. *Acta Periodica Duellatorum*, 5–35. doi.org/10.36950/apd-2015-001
- Judkins, B. and Nielson, J. 2015. *The Creation of Wing Chun: A Social History of the Southern Chinese Martial Arts*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Lorge, P.A. 2012. *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139029865
- Lu, Z. and Fan, H. 2014. *Sport and Nationalism in China*. New York: Routledge. doi.org/10.4324/9781315857053

- Lü, S. 2015. 'Taiji For Health Project: Core concepts for its implementation'. *Beijing Sport University Journal* 38(9), pp 15-19. Lü, S. 2015. 'Taijiquan jiankang gongcheng' shishi de hexin neirong. *Beijing tiyu daxue xuebao* 38 (9), 15-19. 吕,韶均. 2015. '太极拳健康工程' 实施的核心内容. *北京体育大学学报* 38(9), 15-19.
- Lü, S. 2018. *Taiji Bafa Wubu*. Beijing Sport University Press. Beijing. Lü, S. 2018. *Taiji bafa wubu*. Beijing tiyu daxue chubanshe. Beijing. 吕,韶均. 2018. 太极八法五步. 北京体育大学出版社. 北京.
- McDougall, B.S. 1980. *Mao Zedong's 'Talks at the Yan'an conference on literature and art': A translation of the 1943 text with commentary*. Center for Chinese Studies, The University of Michigan.
doi.org/10.3998/mpub.19066
- Micollier, E. 2007. 'Qigong et 'nouvelles religions' en Chine et à Taiwan: instrumentalisation politique et processus de légitimation des pratiques'. *Autrepart* 2(42), 129-146.
doi.org/10.3917/autr.042.0127
- Palmer, D.A. 2007. *Qigong fever: Body, Science, and Utopia in China*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Patrikova, V. 2018. 'Psychological Collectivism in Traditional Martial Arts'. *Martial Arts Studies* 7, 49-59.
doi.org/10.18573/mas.72
- Pinson, J. 2017. 'Heritage sporting events: theoretical development and configurations'. *Journal of Sport & Tourism* 21(2), 133-152.
doi.org/10.1080/14775085.2016.1263578
- Song, J. and Yue, H. 2016. 'Considerations on Wushu's national culture characteristics'. *Asia Pacific Journal of Sport and Social Sciences* 5(1), 28-34.
doi.org/10.1080/21640599.2016.1145940
- Theeboom, M., Zhu, D. and Vertonghen, J. 2017. "Wushu belongs to the world". But the gold goes to China...: The international development of the Chinese martial arts'. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 52(1), 3-23.
doi.org/10.1177/1012690215581605
- Thiesse, A.-M. 1999. *La création des identités nationales: Europe XVIIIe-XXe siècle*. Editions du Seuil.
- United Nation Education, Science and Cultural Organization. *Lists Taijiquan*. Available at <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/taijiquan-00424> [Last accessed 14.04.2022]
- Wile, D. 2016. 'Fighting Words: Four New Document Finds Reignite Old Debates in Taijiquan Historiography'. *Martial Arts Studies* 4, 17-35.
doi.org/10.18573/j.2017.10184
- Wushu Research Institute of the National Sport Administration. 1996. *History of Chinese Martial Arts*. People Sport Press. Beijing. Guojia tiyu zongju wushu yanjiuyuan. *Zhongguo wushu shi*. Renmin tiyu chubanshe. Beijing 国家体育总局武术研究院. 中国武术史. 人民体育出版社. 北京.
- Wushu Research Institute of the National Sport Administration. 2011. *Teaching Manual of the Ranking System of Chinese Martial Arts: Wu lineage Taijiquan*. People Sport Press. Beijing. Guojia tiyu zongju wushu yanjiuyuan. 1996. *Zhongguo wushu duanweizhi xilie jiaocheng : wu shi taijiquan*. Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe. Beijing. 国家体育总局武术研究院 2011. 中国武术段位制系列教程: 武氏太极拳. 高等教育出版社. 北京.
- Zhang, G., Green, T.A. and Gutierrez-Garcia. C. 2016. 'Rural Community, Group Identity and Martial Arts: Social Foundation of Meihuaquan'. *Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology* 16 (1), 1829.
- Zlotea, M. 2015. 'Weaving Confucianism into the Official Party Discourse: From Hu Jintao's "Harmonious Society" to Xi Jinping's Communist Junzi'. In: Rosker, J. S. and Visocnik, N. eds. *Contemporary East Asia and the Confucian Revival*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing., 149-170.
- Zlotea, M. 2017. 'Confucian revival: a top-down or a bottom-up movement?' In: *A Festschrift for Florentina Visan*. Editura Universității din București, Bucharest, 295-312.

CONTRIBUTOR

Dr Joan Listernick has been a student of taijiquan for over 20 years. She has been certified to teach taijiquan through the teacher-training program of the Tree of Life School run by Dr Peter Wayne. She has also taught French at Boston College and Boston University. Her doctorate in Romance Languages and Literatures is from Boston College, and her undergraduate degree magna cum laude in the same field is from Harvard University. She has completed a post-doctoral fellowship at Harvard Divinity School.

TAILORED FORMS OF TAIJI FOR DEPRESSION

JOAN LISTERNICK

DOI

10.18573/mas.156

KEYWORDS

tai chi, taiji, depression, Aihan Kuhn,
Albert Yeung

CITATION

Listernick, Joan. 2022. 'Tailored Forms of Taiji for Depression'. *Martial Arts Studies* 12, 47-56.
doi: 10.18573/mas.156

ABSTRACT

This paper intervenes in the debate about the effectiveness of 'tai chi' (henceforth *taiji*) forms tailored for specific illnesses by looking at the example of their use in the treatment of depression. In the efforts to bring taiji to the West, one movement has been toward simplification. Another is the development of tailored forms. This paper analyzes two new forms of taiji for depression, created by contemporary American teachers Drs Aihan Kuhn and Albert Yeung. I argue that studies are needed to compare the medical effectiveness of tailored forms with more traditional forms. Questions to be explored in such studies would range from the clinical to the sociological. Do tailored forms of taiji provide improved outcomes for the conditions targeted? What about the usefulness of such forms for patients with co-morbidities? Do tailored forms 'treat' one illness, but have less effectiveness in preventing the onset of other illnesses? And finally, would tailored forms better fit into a Western perspective on treating illness and therefore be more readily assimilated into the Western health care system? The analysis of the creation and dissemination of tailored forms is significant for understanding the history and development of *taijiquan* in a global context.

INTRODUCTION

In the West, *taiji* has established itself as a holistic approach to personal development and health. While it may not have been designed as a specific treatment for disease or ill health, it is currently undergoing rapid evolution in this direction. Part of this evolution is a movement to create taiji forms designed to treat specific health problems. Even a quick search on the internet reveals titles such as *Tai Chi for Arthritis and Fall Prevention Handbook* [Lam 2017], *Tai Chi for Heart Conditions* [Lam 2018], *Tai Chi for Parkinson's Disease* [Loney and Rodgers 2014], and so on.¹ By contrast, general discussions of the impact of new/ tailored *taolu* or 'solo forms' are far harder to locate. Certainly, tailored forms for depression have not yet been studied comparatively, either for their efficacy or for their role in the evolution of the martial art. In the 2019 article 'Treating Depression with Tai Chi', Jian Kong et al. (Kong is an Associate Professor at Harvard Medical School whose research focuses on using brain imaging tools) argue that there is an urgent need for tailored forms of taijiquan for the treatment of depression [Kong et al. 2019].

Significantly, at least two such forms already exist. Kong's article mentions, first, the innovative form of Dr Albert Yeung (a psychiatrist based at the Massachusetts General Hospital)² and another solo set designed as therapeutic for depression created by Dr Aihan Kuhn (a doctor of Chinese medicine based in Sarasota, Florida).³

1 Dr Lam's arthritis protocol has been extensively studied for its efficacy in its target population. Among the studies on this protocol see Song et al. 2003; Fransen et al. 2007; and Callahan 2016. For a full list of studies on this protocol see Lam, *Tai Chi for Health Institute*.

2 Dr Albert Yeung is Director of Primary Care Research of the Depression Clinical and Research Program the Mass. General Hospital and associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. His focus in treating depression includes integrating primary care and mental health and employing complementary and alternative methods for treating mood. Dr Yeung completed his medical degree at the National Taiwan University. His Doctor of Science degree with a concentration in epidemiology is from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health [The MGH Center for Cross Cultural Student Emotional Wellness].

3 Dr Aihan Kuhn has trained in both conventional and traditional Chinese Medicine. She graduated from the Hunan Medical University, Changsha, China. From 1983–1988, Dr Kuhn practiced Ob/Gyn in Chinese Hospitals [Schools and Colleges Listing, Dr Aihan Kuhn]. She has written several books including: **Natural Healing with Qigong** [2004], **True Brain Fitness** [2010] and **Simple Chinese Medicine** [2009]. Besides her work in natural healing, Dr Kuhn is a teacher of taiji and qigong, and offers certification programs for instructor training [Dr Aihan Kuhn, Natural Healing Education, 2021].

In other words, while this emergent domain in medical studies seeks to understand and describe the effects of taijiquan on health, there are significant gaps in our knowledge about the effectiveness of forms tailored for specific health issues, such as depression. Against this backdrop, this article presents suggestions for future research seeking to bridge these gaps. It singles out depression because in 2017 the World Health Organization released data finding clinical depression to be the world's single largest contributor to global disability. Depression is also the major cause of suicide, claiming 800,000 lives per year [WHO 2017].

Pharmacological treatments for major depressive disorder have been criticized for such reasons as intolerance, side-effects, delayed therapeutic response, limited effectiveness and high relapse rates [Penn and Tracy 2012]. Interestingly, much research on taiji and depression has focused on severe depression, also called major depressive disorder [Lavretsky 2011; Yeung 2012]. This may be because in this population the use of antidepressants alone has had limited effectiveness in leading to remission [Corey-Lisle 2004; Trivedi 2006]. To avoid medication side-effects in pregnant women, another area of research has focused on taijiquan for prenatal depression [Field 2013].

Some studies have pointed toward the potential of these practices as an adjunct therapy to pharmacotherapy and/or psychotherapy. Evidence has included improvement on standard scales used to measure depression, such as the Beck Depression Inventory and other similar scales [Wang 2009]. Two measures of inflammation, c-reactive protein and interleukin-6, biomarkers for respectively major depressive disorder [Chamberlain 2019] and mood disorder [Hodes 2016], have been known to decline after patients practice taiji.

However, the evidence for the effectiveness of taiji on depression has more recently been called into question. Seshardi et al [2021], in a review article, look closely at three studies which attempt to establish an association between the practice of taiji and a reduction in symptoms among patients who suffer from depression [Yeung et al. 2012; Yeung et al. 2017; Lavretsky et al. 2011] and conclude that the evidence from these studies is 'insufficient to draw conclusions' [e8]. This assessment may have been inevitable given that the two studies included by Yeung et al. were pilot studies with small sample sizes. The gap between the conclusion of Yeung et al. [2017] (that 'the primary treatment, taiji improved treatment outcomes for Chinese Americans with MDD over both passive and active control groups') and the very different conclusions of Seshardi et al point to the need for larger studies.

TWO NEW TAIJI SETS FOR DEPRESSION

Both Aihan Kuhn and Albert Yeung have written books on the treatment of depression. They use different approaches. Their explanation of why these approaches are valuable varies, and this variation leads to differences in the sets they have created. Both situate the healing qualities of taiji in a larger context. The modifications made by both Kuhn and Yeung have at their root deep compassion for the depressed person and the desire to make taiji both accessible and effective. In her book, *Tai Chi for Depression* [2017], Kuhn presents her tailored form for depression.⁴ She sees the practice as an important component of a balanced lifestyle, along with diet, Daoist study, and a general attitude of letting go of negative thoughts and memories to help avoid 'qi stagnation'. More specifically, in the creation of her set she has combined Chen and Yang style material along with movements from qigong practices [Kuhn 2020b]. Her clinical understanding of depression is rooted firmly in her training in Chinese medicine.

The models of depression in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Western medicine are based on different theoretical and cultural frameworks. In TCM, depression is sometimes referred to as *yu* or *yu-zheng*, which indicates that *qi* is 'not flowing, entangled, blocked or clogged' [Ye et al. 2019: 2]. In TCM, the onset of emotional change is closely related to the health of the viscera. More specifically, the onset of depression is fundamentally linked to stagnation of liver qi, then also to dysregulation of the spleen and the heart. In TCM, the heart, in addition to its role as the circulator of blood, regulates mental activities through its role as storing *shen* (consciousness, emotion and vitality) [Ye et al. 2019].

Kuhn explains that she has created a taiji form with the desired effect of opening the liver energy, elevating heart energy and harmonizing spleen energy. Thus, her primary explanation for how her form reduces depression is tightly linked to TCM theory. She further explains that her goal is to produce a 'smooth chi flow through the whole body' and to 'nourish the organ systems' [Kuhn 2020a]. It should be clarified that the organs in traditional Chinese Medicine, as referred to here, are not understood as the Western organs. As Ted Kapchuk explains in *The Web That Has No Weaver* [Kapchuk 2008], there is no simple correspondence between the Chinese and Western medical systems of classification.

4 The movements of Kuhn's form for depression are: Taiji Preparation, Parting Wild Horse's Mane Empowers Dan Tian; Step Forward, Brush Knee; Step Back, Open Energy Channels; Circle Hands, Punch Forward; Circle Hands, Squat, Left Fist Upward; Turn Body and Lead Energy, Push to Right; Circle Hands, Squat, Right Fist Upward; Turn Body and lead Energy, Push to Left; Circle Yin-Yang, Side Fly, and Elbow Strike to right; Circle Yin-Yang, Side Fly and Elbow Strike to Left; Fair Lady Moves the Shuttle (in Three Directions); Left Kick, Right Punch; Elbow Strike Back; Circle Arm Forward and Punch Up; Circle Arms, Empower Dan Tian; Taiji Ending [Kuhn 2017].

Suffice it to summarize for our purposes, that the Western organs are somatic structures, while the organs in Chinese medicine are defined by the activities associated with them.

In Western terms, Kuhn emphasizes the importance of vagus nerve stimulation [personal correspondence, June 2, 2020]. The vagus nerve is a cranial nerve complex which relays relaxation from the central nervous system to the body. It is regulated by breathing. Various forms of meditation and mind-body exercise produce an increase in vagal tone. The explanation of vagal nerve stimulation as the mechanism of action of taiji for depression follows Gerritsen and Band, as a general explanation for how contemplative practices such as meditation, yoga and taiji affect health, including cardiopulmonary fitness, immune function, psychological health, anxiety and executive function [Gerritsen and Band 2018]. In contrast to the TCM theory explanation, where certain movements are directly related to counteracting depression, the model of vagal nerve mechanism of action is a more generalized explanation, but one widely accepted in Western medicine through our understanding of stress reduction.⁵

In contrast, in the book *Self-Management of Depression* [Yeung 2009], Yeung bases his study on a Western understanding of the etiology of depression. His approach focuses on empowering the patient to self-manage depression by providing tools to 'reset priorities in their lives, challenge maladaptive and irrational thinking patterns that may undermine self-care, and discover the motivation to accomplish goals they set for themselves' [Yeung 2009: 12]. In his model, the physician's role shifts from *authoritative* to one of *partnership*. Along these lines, noting that depressed patients have difficulty remembering complicated transitions and long forms, Yeung's taiji form for mood follows a model of teaching taiji elements without transitions, as introduced by Peter Wayne in *The Harvard Medical Guide to Tai Chi* [2013].⁶ Thus, Yeung's form could perhaps be compared with more traditional qigong practice. The distinction might, in part, depend on the way in which his form is taught: the demonstration of martial applications, for example,

5 Although the exact mechanism by which the vagus nerve would mediate an effect of taiji on the nervous system has not yet been determined, Shenbin Liu et al's recent research demonstrating an anti-inflammatory response to low intensity electroacupuncture stimulation via the vagal-adrenal axis in mice may eventually contribute to our understanding of this pathway. Liu is a postdoctoral fellow in the lab of Qijufu Ma at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute and the Harvard Medical School [Liu, Wang, Su et al. 2020; Liu, Wang Su et al. 2021].

6 Here is the link to view Dr Yeung's form, called 'tai chi for mood'. This can be found embedded in Jian Kong's 2019 article, 'Treating Depression with Tai Chi: State of the Art and Future Perspectives'. It is also on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08IFKIXb3bA>

would link the practice more strongly with taijiquan. But, overall, the evolution of tailored and simplified forms may serve to blur the traditional distinctions between taiji and qigong.

Interestingly, at a lecture at McLean Hospital (January 22, 2020), Yeung was asked whether he designed his form to emphasize the opening of energy of any particular meridian or organ. Yeung replied that he had not but had instead chosen aesthetically pleasing elements and combined them in a way that would be easy to remember.⁷ This is consistent with his goal to empower the patient to function as independently as possible and to have self-efficacy in their own healing. Rather than relying on TCM theory to explain how taiji and qigong help lift depression, Yeung looks to Western research on the benefits of mindfulness. Western models on meditation show an attenuation of the stress response (where the sympathetic nervous system stimulates the adrenal medulla to produce adrenaline and noradrenaline) through, what Herb Benson has coined, the 'relaxation response' [Benson 1975]. According to Yeung, 'the exact mechanisms of qigong's and Tai-Chi's effects on physical and mental well-being are unknown', so he looks to the stress reduction model to provide a theory for the effectiveness of the meditative movements of taiji [Yeung et al. 2018].

Conclusion: Possible Future Directions for Research

Some directions for future research follow. To my knowledge, no one has asked in a systematic way whether tailored forms of taiji for depression are more effective than traditional or simplified forms. However, Kuhn has observed some shifts in her students after they practice her form for depression. Kuhn writes that after they study her tailored form, students show 'great improvement in overall emotional health: more laughter, joking, happy, more positive, better social skills and more creativity' [Kuhn 2020a].

7 The moves Yeung has included are: Beginning; Grasp the Sparrow's Tail; Single Whip; White Crane Spreads its Wings; Brush Knee and Step Forward; Wave Hands Like Clouds; Part the Wild Horse's Mane; Strike the Tiger, Left and Right; Appears to Close; Draw the Bow and Shoot the Tiger; Embrace the Tiger and Return to the Mountain; Cross-hands and Closing. His Beginning is similar to Wayne's Raising the Power except that in Yeung's presentation, as the hands come up, the legs straighten, while in Wayne's move the opposite is true. One way in which Yeung's form for depression differs from Wayne's approach, is that Yeung generally alternates doing a move on the left side, with the right side, while Wayne repeats one side many times before shifting sides. Both rely on simplification to make taiji easier for Westerners to learn and so to obtain the benefits of practice.

Her comments are provocative and researching them may yield some insights. Kuhn's observations might be grouped into three categories: joy and humor, social skills, and creativity. All three categories of effects could be distinguished and explored separately. For instance, creativity has been described as having a dichotomous face in psychology. It has been associated with both well-being and certain types of mental illness [Fink et al. 2014; Crabtree and Green 2016]. Art history abounds with cases illustrating both. Many claims have been made that taiji increases creativity, and these associations call for research in their own right [Feurst 2014; Wayne 2013].

The very concept of designing a tailored taiji set for depression, as it is put into place by Kuhn, seems to suggest that various postures or movements alone can elevate mood. In their article, 'Can Tai Chi and Qigong Postures Shape Our Mood? Toward an Embodied Cognition Framework for Mind-Body Research', Osypiuk, Thompson and Wayne [2018] suggest that there may be a reciprocal relationship between posture/movement and mood in taiji and qigong. The authors summarize studies that look at postures of pride/powerlessness and anger/joy/sadness, as well as movement studies that examine smoothness/sharpness and shapes [going towards or away from the body] and their relationship to mood. The postural and movement categories analyzed in the West include 'slumped' versus 'expansive postures', and the victory shape commonly made by athletes after winning at their sport [Hall, Coates, and LeBeau 2005; Raney et al. 2015; Cuddy 2018; Tracy and Matsumoto 2008]. These are very simple postures in comparison with the refined and subtle movements of taiji.

In books on medical qigong, as in Kuhn's book on depression, a link is suggested between taiji movements and their effect on specific organs (in the Traditional Chinese Medicine understanding of them). But these associations are descriptive only: there is no research data yet to support them. Thus, there remains a philosophical and cultural gap between what is experienced in the Traditional Chinese Medicine system, and what is known in Western medicine.

As explained above, Yeung's form for depression does not emphasize any specific moves or shapes, but instead simplifies. Future research could explore whether his goal in creating this form is met. Do depressed patients indeed find his form easier to learn? Does it take less time for them to do so? Do more patients stick with classes in his form and do they continue to practice at home? Six months after the classes, what are the effects? Does doing Yeung's tailored form thus increase the efficacy of doing taiji, for depressed patients?

The innovation in both Kuhn's and Yeung's forms concerns the sequence of movements, or the external form. But, taiji practice also has

an internal aspect. One element of this internal cultivation is known as *song*.⁸ *Song* is defined by Payne and Crane-Godreau in their 2013 article, 'Meditative Movement for Depression and Anxiety', as relaxed and well-rooted, and 'grounding', or stably connected to the ground [Payne and Crane-Godreau 2013]. They hypothesize that grounding might help stabilize mood swings and reduce depression and anxiety. In fact, it seems that there are several different traditions of *song*. According to Marceau Chenault – training manager at Shanghai Qigong Research Institute and author of *La danse du souffle: globalisation d'une pratique de santé: la tradition chinoise du qi gong* [2020] – 'song is taught by many teachers or masters, and many schools have their own method of fang song' [personal communication, October 31, 2021].

I have not found any study in English that compares the various methods of *song*, but I have found references to at least two different traditions. According to George Ho – a chiropractic doctor from Vancouver and author of many articles for *T'ai Chi Magazine* – and his co-authors Rebecca and Jennifer Ho: Master Yang Chengfu (1883-1936) passed a tradition of *song* to his student Zheng Manqing. It is this tradition of *song*, presumably passed to Wayne through his teacher, Robert Morningstar, a student of Zheng Manqing (1902-1975) that I have been studying. Based on Wayne's description in his book and my personal experience in classes he has taught, I would define this practice of *song* as a sinking of energy and attention into the *dantian* area. Both qigong and taiji are ideally practiced in a state of *song*.

In traditional texts on taiji, the *dantian*, is located about 1.3 to 3 inches below the navel and behind it. According to Mantak Chia [2002], in *Tan Tien Chi Gung*, the *dantian* is, in the Taoist energy paradigm, the storage place for qi energy in the body, and the 'center of awareness' [Chia 2002: 3]. Bringing one's focus and attention to this area is the foundation of rooting. George Ho, Rebecca Ho and Jennifer Ho explain

8 In a typical presentation, the teacher explains that the Chinese character of *song* represents a woman pulling out her hair pin, so that the hair can cascade down. Scott Park Phillips – author of *Possible Origins, A Cultural History of Theatre and Religion* [2016] and *Tai Chi, Baguazhang and the Golden Elixir* [2019] – in his blog [Phillips 2014], explains that male hairstyles in China, particularly during certain periods, were highly regulated. Furthermore, according to Marc Abramson, hairstyles were viewed in both Inner Asia and China as 'markers of political allegiance' [Nicola DiCosmo and don Wyatt 2014: 125]. So, Phillips explains that a man's pulling out the hairpin could be interpreted as 'dropping in rank' or 'choosing to give up status' [2014]. Phillips sees the implications of the act of a man letting down his hair with a wider lens and interprets it as 'to let go of social obligations, social stresses and social conventions' [2014]. As the character for *song* has no gender in and of itself, the teacher's choice of imagery – describing either a woman or a man taking down their hair – determines whether *song* is related only to the personal, or also to the political.

that *song* has martial arts implications: 'Master Chengfu Yang referred to "song kai" as a mental and physical state that was ready to process the force from an opponent. If the mind and body are tense the body cannot react in a taiji manner and will be reactively defensive to the incoming force' [Ho et al. 2019: p.21].

Marceau Chenault explained to me that another tradition of *song* (or more fully, *san xie fang song gong* – 'relaxation method with the three lines') was developed at the Shanghai Qigong Research Institute in the 1950s and is well-known because it was researched for clinical use. Although the method is described as having been created at the Shanghai Institute, Chenault writes that perhaps a better description of its history would be as a process of 'revival'. He further explains that 'Fang Song practices are probably as old as Taijiquan or Qigong' [personal communication, October 31, 2021]. This method has been described by Kenneth Cohen, in *The Way of Qigong: The Art and Science of Chinese Energy Healing* [Cohen 2000], as a qigong method of deep relaxation used successfully at the Shanghai No.6 People's Hospital for the treatment of asthma. This qigong exercise or series of exercises includes a body scan and the releasing of tension from various parts of the body.

Following Payne and Crane-Godreau's [2013] hypothesis, one research question could be whether explicit training in *song* enhances the effect of the external moves in relieving depression and balancing mood. In including *song* in a research study, the choice of which style of *song* practice to be included would need to be explored and might in part be based on the available teachers' and researchers' training. A methodological difficulty that could arrive in exploring this question is whether *song* must be explicitly taught for students to experience it when doing taiji. The other side of this question is whether we can establish that there are physiological changes that take place during the experience of *song*. How would we measure whether the student has learned to shift into a state of *song*? In their 2018 article, 'Qigong and Tai Chi for Mood Regulation', Yeung et al. cite a potential correlation between patterns of electrical conductivity and expected patterns of qi. But, according to Yeung, the 'reliability and quantifying [of] qi remain to be verified' [Yeung et al. 2018: 42]. These questions are related to the multiple areas of complexity present in measuring the outcome of taiji practice.⁹

Another area of research on forms of taiji created to focus on helping depression could study the problematic aspect of the single disease framework. On the one hand, tailored forms might better fit into

9 Many of the obstacles in taiji research have been described in the companion articles: 'Challenges Inherent to T'ai Chi research' [Wayne and Kaptchuk 2018].

a Western perspective on treating illness, and so be more readily assimilated into the Western health care system. On the other hand, several authors have critiqued treating any single illness in isolation. They point out that behavioral medicine and health psychology have historically ignored the co-occurrence of multiple chronic conditions, especially among the elderly [Parekh 2011; Suls 2016]. Is this a drawback to teaching a form of taiji tailored to treating depression? Would tailored forms of taiji for depression be appropriate for patients with comorbidities? If there is something to be gained by focusing on one illness, how do overall well-being ratings compare when following traditional versus tailored taiji? From a practical point of view, should tailored forms be taught alone or in combination with other qigong practices for a more holistic approach?

Another research area concerns at what point in treatment it would be best to include taiji. It might seem natural to offer taiji from the outset as an adjunct therapy for depression. But Yeung [2010] draws our attention to the study of Blumenthal et al. [1999] on the effect of either exercise, antidepressants or a combination of both on depression. In this study, the authors found that ten months after the study concluded, participants in the exercise group showed lower rates of depression than those in the combined exercise and antidepressant group. The authors do not offer an explanation for this phenomenon. One hypothesis would be that having to do both exercises and take medication reduced compliance in the long-run, and that the simpler, or more streamlined intervention was actually more effective. This research needs to be replicated in the specific case of taiji. Subjects in the long term need to be asked the reasons for their continued compliance or noncompliance with the program. Yeung uses Blumenthal's study to argue for a sequenced, rather than simultaneous, series of interventions. Further research needs to ascertain whether this is correct.

To put my study into a historical context, the innovation of tailored forms is not the first time Chinese martial arts have undergone a transformation. Indeed, there have been several watershed periods of adaptation of traditional Chinese martial arts. These include the Ming-Qing transition (ca 1644), where sects and secret societies used martial arts to protect members; the 1920's and 30's, which saw new types of organizations created (including some which integrated martial arts into the education system) and the introduction of *jingwu*, a unique approach to teaching martial arts, which instead of the prior guild system designed to restrict knowledge, had as its goal the producing of martial arts instructors, and *guoshu*, an effort to nationalize the martial arts and unify them as a sport [Filipiak 35-9; Morris 220-1; Judkins 2012]. Thus, what we consider 'traditional' arts are already the result of a process of adaptation which took place over 100 years ago and continues to this day. The development of tailored forms is not

comparable to any of these in scope, but there is a comparison to be made: in a historic shift, taiji is now being presented (or packaged) as a health treatment for a specified condition.

As for the impact of taiji on health, two overall research approaches are possible to move the field forward. One is to call for studies of comparative effectiveness, as outlined above. Which form of practice is more helpful for depression –traditional taiji or 'taiji for depression'? Another approach is to focus on documenting the pathways that are being changed through taiji practice. Wayne proposes a theoretical framework where eight active ingredients function simultaneously to improve the practitioner's health. Further research might identify the elements that mediate clinical outcome specifically in the case of depression. In this domain, Kong has begun to lay out some possibilities to be explored: including attentional control, stress reduction, modulation of the inflammatory system and increased vagal modulation of the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous system. Kong et al. [2019] note that although these are all potential channels for the effectiveness of taiji practice in reducing depression, the exact mechanism of action remains unclear. In the end, both research on comparative effectiveness and pathway of action may emerge as critical and fruitful directions of inquiry.

REFERENCES

- Anon. 2017. 'Depression and Other Common Mental Disorders. *World Health Organization*. Available at: https://www.who.int/mental_health/management/depression/prevalence_global_health_estimates/en/ [Last accessed April 14, 2021].
- Benson, H. and Klipper, M. 1975 *The Relaxation Response*, New York: Quill.
- Blumenthal, J. A. et al. 1999. 'Effects of Exercise Training on Older Patients with Major Depression.' *Archives of Internal Medicine* 159(19), 2349-56.
- Callahan, L. et al. 2016. 'Evaluation of Tai Chi Program Effectiveness for People with Arthritis in the Community: A Randomized Controlled Trial.' *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity* 24,101-110.
doi.org/10.1123/japa.2014-0211
PMid:26099162
- Chamberlain, S.R. et al. 2019. 'Treatment-resistant depression and peripheral C-reactive protein.' *British Journal of Psychiatry* 214(1), 11-19.
doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2018.66
PMid:29764522 PMCID:PMC6124647
- Chenault, M. 2020. *La Danse du souffle : Globalisation d'une pratique de santé : la tradition chinoise du qi gong*. Checy: Carnets de sel.
- Chia, M. 2002. *Tan Tien Chi Kung: empty force, perineum power and the second brain*, Chiang Mai, Thailand: Universal Tao Publications.
- Cohen K. 2000. *The Way of Qigong*, New York: Random House International.
- Corey-Lisle, P.K. et al. 2004. 'Response, Partial Response, and Nonresponse in Primary Care Treatment of Depression'. *Archives of Internal Medicine* 164(11), 1197.
doi.org/10.1001/archinte.164.11.1197
PMid:15197045
- Crabtree, J. and Green, M.J. 2016. 'Creative Cognition and Psychosis Vulnerability: What's the Difference?' *Creativity Research Journal* 28(1), 24-32.
doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2015.1030305
- Di Cosmo, N. and Wyatt D. (eds.) 2010. *Political Frontiers, Ethnic Boundaries and Human Geographies in Chinese History*, London: Routledge Press.
- Cuddy, A.J., Schultz, S.J. and Fosse, N.E. 2018. 'P-Curving a More Comprehensive Body of Research on Postural Feedback Reveals Clear Evidential Value for Power-Posing Effects: Reply to Simmons and Simonsohn (2017)'. *Psychological Science* 29(4), 656-666.
doi.org/10.1177/0956797617746749
PMid:29498906
- Filipiak, K. 2010. 'From Warriors to Sportsmen: How Traditional Chinese Martial Arts Adapted to Modernity'. *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* 19[1], 31-53.
- Fuerst, M. 2013. How Tai Chi Can Improve Your Writing. <https://writenowcoach.com/how-tai-chi-can-improve-your-writing-by-mark-l-fuerst/>.
- Field, T. et al. 2013. 'Tai chi/yoga reduces prenatal depression, anxiety and sleep disturbances'. *Complementary Therapies in Clinical Practice*, 19(1): 6-10.
doi.org/10.1016/j.ctcp.2012.10.001
PMid:23337557 PMCID:PMC3730281
- Fink, A. et al. 2014. 'Creativity and psychopathology: are there similar mental processes involved in creativity and in psychosis proneness?' *Front. Psychol.* 5:1211.
doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.01211
PMid:25386152 PMCID:PMC4208394
- Fransen, M. et al. 2007. 'Physical activity for osteoarthritis management: a randomized controlled clinical trial evaluating hydrotherapy or Tai Chi classes'. *Arthritis Rheum* 57(3), 407-414.
doi.org/10.1002/art.22621
PMid:17443749
- Gerritsen, R.J. and Band, G.P. 2018. 'Breath of life: The respiratory vagal stimulation model of contemplative activity'. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 12.
doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2018.00397
PMid:30356789 PMCID:PMC6189422
- Hall, J.A., Coats, E.J. and LeBeau, L.S. 2005. 'Nonverbal Behavior and the Vertical Dimension of Social Relations: A Meta-Analysis'. *Psychological Bulletin* 131(6), 898-924.
doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.131.6.898
PMid:16351328

Ho, G., Ho, R. and Ho, J. 2019. 'The Correct Interpretations of Two Important Tai Chi Concepts: '鬆開 Song kai' by Yang Chengfu楊澄甫 and Peng jin 棚勁, the Peng form of concentrated Tai Chi.' 1-110. Independently Published.

Hodes, G.E., Ménard, C. and Russo, S.J. 2016. 'Integrating Interleukin-6 into depression diagnosis and treatment.' *Neurobiology of Stress* 4, 15–22.

Judkins, B. 2012. Reevaluating Jinwu: Would Bruce Lee have existed without it? Available at <https://chinesemartialstudies.com/2012/08/15/reevaluating-jingwu-would-bruce-lee-have-existed-without-it/> [Last Accessed 9 May 2022].

Kaptchuk, T.J. 2008. *The web that has no weaver: understanding Chinese medicine*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Kong, J. et al. 2019. 'Treating Depression with Tai Chi: State of the Art and Future Perspectives'. *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10. doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00237. PMID:31031663 PMCID:PMC6474282

Kuhn, A. 2004. *Natural healing with qigong: Therapeutic qigong*. Boston, MA: YMAA Publication Center.

Kuhn, A. 2009. *Simple Chinese medicine: A beginner's guide to natural healing and well-being*. Roslindale, MA: YMAA.

Kuhn, A. 2010. *True brain fitness: Preventing brain aging through body movement*. iUniverse Inc.

Kuhn, A. 2017. *Tai chi for depression: A 10-week program to empower yourself and beat depression*, Wolfeboro, NH USA: YMAA Publication Center, Inc.

Kuhn, A. *Natural Healing Education*. Available at <https://draihankuhn.com>. [Last accessed April 14, 2021].

Kuhn, A. 2020. *Natural Healing Newsletter*. <https://draihankuhn.com/tai-chi-for-depression/>.

Kuhn, A. 2020. 'Why Tai Chi and Qigong Assists (sic) in the Healing of Depression'. YMAA. Available at: <https://ymaa.com/articles/2020/01/why-tai-chi-and-qigong-assists-in-the-healing-of-depression> [Last accessed April 14, 2021].

Lam, P. 2017. *Tai Chi for Arthritis: And Fall Prevention Handbook*. Narwee, NSW: Tai Chi Productions Australia and International.

Lam, P. 2018. Tai Chi for Health Institute. <https://taichiforhealthinstitute.org>.

Lam, P. 2018. *Tai Chi for Heart Conditions*. Tai Chi Productions USA LLC. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b-iFQjVbp7o> [accessed 14 Apr. 2021].

Lavretsky, H., Alstein, L.L., Olmstead, R.E et al. 'Complementary Use of Tai Chi Chih Augments Escitalopram Treatment of Geriatric Depression: A Randomized Controlled Trial'. *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 19(10), 839–850. doi.org/10.1097/jgp.0b013e31820ee9ef PMID:21358389 PMCID:PMC3136557

Liu, S., Wang, Z., Su, Y. et al. 2020. 'Somatotopic Organization and Intensity Dependence in Driving Distinct NPY-Expressing Sympathetic Pathways by Electroacupuncture.' *Neuron* 108(3), 436-450e7. doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2020.07.015 PMID:32791039 PMCID:PMC7666081

Liu S, Wang Z, Su Y et al. 2021. 'Neuroanatomical basis for electroacupuncture to drive the vagal-adrenal axis.' *Nature* 598(7882), 641-5. doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-04001-4 PMID:34646018

Loney, D. and Rodgers, R. 2018. '*Tai Chi for Parkinson's Disease*'. North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing.

The MGH Center for Cross-Cultural Student Emotional Wellness. Available at <https://www.massgeneral.org/doctors/17075/albert-yeung>. [Last accessed April 14, 2021].

Morris, A. 2004. *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China*. Berkely, California: University of California Press.

Osypiuk, K., Thompson, E. and Wayne, P.M. 2018. 'Can Tai Chi and Qigong Postures Shape Our Mood? Toward an Embodied Cognition Framework for Mind-Body Research'. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 12. doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2018.00174 PMID:29765313 PMCID:PMC5938610

- Parekh, A.K. et al. 2011. 'Managing Multiple Chronic Conditions : A Strategic Framework for Improving Health Outcomes and Quality of Life'. *Public Health Reports* 126(4), 460–471.
doi.org/10.1177/003335491112600403
PMid:21800741 PMCID:PMC3115206
- Payne, P. and Crane-Godreau, M.A. 2013. 'Meditative Movement for Depression and Anxiety'. *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 4.
doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2013.00071
PMid:23898306 PMCID:PMC3721087
- Penn, E. and Tracy, D.K. 2012. 'The drugs don't work? Antidepressants and the current and future pharmacological management of depression'. *Therapeutic Advances in Psychopharmacology* 2(5), 179–188.
doi.org/10.1177/2045125312445469
PMid:23983973 PMCID:PMC3736946
- Phillips, S.P. 2014. 'Song May Not Mean Relax or Sink'. <http://northstarmartialarts.com/blog1/2014/9/30/song-may-not-mean-relax-or-sink.html?rq=song>.
- Phillips, S.P. 2016. *Possible origins: A cultural history of Chinese martial arts, theater, and religion*. Louisville, CO: Angry Baby Books.
- Phillips, S.P. 2019. *Tai Chi, Baguazhang and the golden elixir: Internal Martial Arts before the boxer uprising*. Louisville, CO: Angry Baby Books.
- Ranehill, E et al. 2015. 'Assessing the Robustness of Power Posing'. *Psychological Science* 26(5), 653–656.
doi.org/10.1177/0956797614553946
PMid:25810452
- Says, T. et al. 2015. 'The Tao of Creativity: Taoist Techniques to Help Your Writing and Art'. *Inspire Portal*. Available at: <https://inspireportal.com/the-tao-of-creativity-taoist-tools-to-help-your-writing-and-creative-work/> [Last accessed April 14, 2021].
- Schools and Colleges Listings, Dr Aihan Kuhn. <https://www.schoolandcollegetlistings.com/US/Sarasota/50750392842/Dr.-Aihan-Kuhn>
- Seshardi A. et al. 2021. 'Exercise, Yoga, and Tai Chi for Treatment of Major Depressive Disorder in Outpatient Settings: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis'. *Prim Care Companion CNS Disord* 23(1), 20r02722.
doi.org/10.4088/PCC.20r02722
PMid:33389843
- Song R. et al. 2003. 'Effects of Tai Chi Exercise on Pain, Balance, Muscle Strength, and Perceived Difficulties in Physical Functioning in Older Women with Osteoarthritis: A Randomized Clinical Trial.' *The Journal of Rheumatology* 30(9), 2039–44
- Suls, J., Green, P.A. and Davidson, K.W. 2016. A Biobehavioral Framework to Address the Emerging Challenge of Multimorbidity. *Psychosomatic Medicine* 78(3), 281–289.
doi.org/10.1097/psy.0000000000000294
PMid:26867072 PMCID:PMC4889007
- Tracy, J. and Matsumoto, D. 2008. 'The Spontaneous expression of pride and shame: evidence for biologically innate nonverbal displays'. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 105(33), 11655–60.
doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0802686105
PMid:18695237 PMCID:PMC2575323
- Tracy J. and Matsumoto, D. 2008. 'Correction for Tracy and Matsumoto, The spontaneous expression of pride and shame: Evidence for biologically innate nonverbal displays'. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105(50), 20044–20044.
- Trivedi, M.H. et al. 2006. 'Evaluation of Outcomes With Citalopram for Depression Using Measurement-Based Care in STAR*D: Implications for Clinical Practice.' *American Journal of Psychiatry* 163(1), 28–40.
doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.163.1.28
PMid:16390886
- Wang, W.C. et al. 2009. 'The Effect of Tai Chi on Psychosocial Well-being: A Systematic Review of Randomized Controlled Trials'. *Journal of Acupuncture and Meridian Studies* 2(3), 171–181.
[doi.org/10.1016/s2005-2901\(09\)60052-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2005-2901(09)60052-2)
- Wayne, P. and Kaptchuk, T. 2008. 'Challenges Inherent to T'ai Chi Research: Part 1 – T'ai Chi as a Complex Multicomponent Intervention'. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* 14 (1), 95–102.
- Wayne, P. and Kaptchuk, T. 2008. 'Challenges Inherent to T'ai Chi research: Part 2 – Defining the intervention and Optimal Study Design.' *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* 14 (2), 191–7.
doi.org/10.1089/acm.2007.7170b
PMid:18446928
- Wayne, P. and Fuerst, M.L. 2013. *The Harvard medical school guide to tai chi: 12 weeks to a healthy body, strong heart, and sharp mind*, Boston: Shambhala.

World Health Organization. 2017. *Depression and other common mental disorders: global health estimates* (No. WHO/MSD/MER/2017.2). World Health Organization.

Ye, J. et al. 2019. 'An East Meets West Approach to the Understanding of Emotion Dysregulation in Depression: From Perspective to Scientific Evidence'. *Frontiers in Psychology* 10.
doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00574
PMid:30984060 PMCID:PMC6447656

Yeung, A. et al. 2012. 'Tai Chi Treatment for Depression in Chinese Americans'. *American Journal of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation* 91(10), 863–870.
doi.org/10.1097/phm.0b013e31825f1a67
PMid:22790795

Yeung, A.S., Feldman, G., and Fava, M. 2009. *Self-management of depression: a manual for mental health and primary care professionals*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.
doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511642128

Yeung, A. et al. 2017. 'A Pilot, Randomized Controlled Study of Tai Chi With Passive and Active Controls in the Treatment of Depressed Chinese Americans'. *J. Clin Psychiatry* 78(5), e522-e528.
doi: 10.4088/JCP.16m10772
PMid:28570792

Yeung A. et al. 2018. 'Qigong and Tai-Chi for Mood Regulation'. *Focus* (Am. Psychiatr Publ) 16 (1), 40-47.
doi.org/10.1176/appi.focus.20170042
PMid:31975898 PMCID:PMC6519567

MAS.CARDIFFUNIVERSITYPRESS.ORG

TWITTER.COM/MASTUDIES

MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

EDITORS

Paul Bowman
Lauren Miller Griffith
Benjamin N. Judkins

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Wayne Wong

To discuss publication or to submit
a paper please contact:

BowmanP@Cardiff.ac.uk

EDITORIAL ADVISORY PANEL

Oleg Benesch *University of York*
Stephen Chan *SOAS*
Greg Downey *Macquarie University*
D.S. Farrer *University of Guam*
Adam Frank *University of Central Arkansas*
Thomas A. Green *Texas A&M University*
T. J. Hinrichs *Cornell University*
Leon Hunt *Brunel University London*
Felipe P. Jocano Jr *University of the Philippines*
Gina Marchetti *Hong Kong University*
Meaghan Morris *The University of Sydney*
Daniel Mroz *University of Ottawa*
Meir Shahaar *Tel Aviv University*
Dale Spencer *Carleton University*
Douglas Wile *Alverno College*