

Traditional Taijiquan's Three Evolutionary Forms and Characteristics in Their Development

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Abstract—Chinese martial arts both reflect the lifestyle of the Chinese people and serves as an important link in understanding local cultural life in China. With Taijiquan's recent recognition as an intangible cultural heritage by the UNESCO, the guardians of traditional Taijiquan now face the question of what to protect, how to protect, and how to develop and preserve its history. This paper uses literature reviews and logical analysis to resolve the development of Chen-style Taijiquan and explains how traditional Taijiquan has evolved into three different forms; traditional, competitive, and health-oriented. It analyzes the characteristics of the three evolutionary forms and proposes that in this era, the protection and inheritance of traditional Taijiquan as an intangible cultural heritage should highlight the cultural core elements within the Taiji record, and it is necessary to study the effect, and the crucial link between martial arts and health, in order to continue to preserve its legacy, and permit its future developments to all future generations, worldwide.

Introduction

Taijiquan is an important part of Chinese traditional culture, it embodies traditional culture and it sits at the core of many current martial arts, in many different schools. It is loved by the masses for its ability to improve fighting skills, its ability to improve one's health (in some cases it has helped people recover from diseases and injuries), it cultivates temperament, and it can also help

prolong life. Today, it is estimated that more than 300 million people practice Taijiquan worldwide, and it was included in the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage in the year 2020; and the mystique of Taijiquan has attracted scholars, both in China and abroad, who not only practice it for fitness, but to also explore the essence of Chinese traditional culture.

Traditional Taijiquan has a long cultural history that goes back at least 400 years. From the surviving literature¹, it originates from a complex overlap between the basic theories of ancient Chinese philosophy, traditional Chinese health preservation, and Chinese medicine. It reflects the flow of traditional cultural ideas and interprets the cultural connotations of form and spirit, self-cultivation and health preservation. In some ways, it is a microcosm of China's 5,000-year culture.

Perhaps because of a response to the continuing progress of society and the development of new technologies, and the sometimes harsh collisions and exchanges between world cultures, many newcomers have become interested in practicing traditional Taijiquan routines to help relieve their stress, while others simply wish to study the martial arts techniques, and to discuss the many ideological theories contained in Taiji culture. As a result, with its gradual globalization, both its legacy (which can be described as its impact on the world) and the methods employed in the transfer of traditional Taijiquan ideas are slowly changing.

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The Origin of Traditional Taijiquan

According to the research of Tang Hao, a prominent Chinese martial arts historian, the earliest person to teach Taijiquan was Chen Wangting from Chenjiagou (Chen Village) in Wen County, Henan Province, during the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties, which was between 1618 to 1683. He absorbed the 32 movements of the Long Fist of Qi Jiguang and many other famous boxing techniques which were in use at that time, and combined them with ancient Chinese health preservation techniques to aid guiding and regulating the meridians. In doing so, he created the Chen Style Taijiquan which is famous for emphasizing the use of softness to overcome hardness^{2,3}.

This new martial art was kept a closely guarded secret in Chen Village, and it was not until the 6th generation that descendant of Chen Wangting, a person named Chen Changxing, that the art of Taijiquan was passed outside of the family to Yang Luchan, a non-relative from Yongnian, Hebei. With new input from other martial art experts the form then gradually evolved, to create the Yang Style, Wu Style, and Sun Style and it began to spread throughout the China⁴.

In the autumn of the 17th year of the Republic of China, Chen Fake, the 17th generation descendant of the Chen family, and his nephew Chen Zhaopi brought the Chen Style Taijiquan out from its birthplace, in Chen Village, to Beijing, Nanjing and to many other cities. After Chen Fake passed away in 1957, his son Chen Zhaokui then popularized Chen Style Taijiquan in Shanghai, Nanjing, Zhengzhou, Shijiazhuang, and Jiaozuo⁵. This was then followed by Chen Fake's students Gu Liuxin and Shen Jiazhen, who compiled the book "Chen Style Taijiquan" which was based on the postures and photographs of Chen Fake and Chen Zhaokui.

As a result of the production of this first pictorial book, the Chen Style Taijiquan became more wide-spread both in China and then ultimately all around the world, and with the various pressures of many different needs, traditional Taijiquan has undergone further changes, some being subtle and some

perhaps not so subtle, in its evolution and development.

2. The Characteristics of Traditional Taijiquan

2.1. Technical Characteristics of Traditional Taijiquan

Today traditional Taijiquan can be roughly divided into two primary forms; Traditional Taijiquan, and Competitive Taijiquan. Traditional Taijiquan is based on combat, and although it has diversified over time, as long as it is labeled "traditional," it cannot ignore the pursuit of combat attack and defense. Because of this, traditional Taijiquan can be defined as a combat skill that is characterized by "using softness to overcome hardness; which can be described in more esoteric terms as to wait for movement in stillness, turning circles to neutralize straight lines, using small movements to overcome large movements, and using weakness to overcome strength." The physics behind these Taijiquan techniques has been discussed in some detail in Volume 1 of Journal of Taiji Science⁶ and they emphasize the unity between martial arts attack and defense techniques. This is also the core content of Taijiquan.

Traditional Chen Style Taijiquan maintains the inherent combat characteristics of Taijiquan, such as lightness and heaviness, the combination of softness and hardness, fast and slow movements, and the use of spiral movements, but very few practitioners can actually master the real combat skills.

2.2 The Training Characteristics of Traditional Taiji's Waist Techniques

Traditional Taiji emphasizes using stillness to control movement, using softness to overcome hardness, avoiding the strong and attacking the weak, borrowing and generating force, and advocates starting from objectivity, being responsive to the opponent's movements, and being flexible in oneself.

To achieve this, traditional Taiji places great emphasis on "listening to the opponent's
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energy," which at the simplest level means accurately judging the opponent's movements and responding accordingly.

Before the opponent launches an attack, one should not act recklessly, but rather, use various techniques to provoke the opponent, to test their strengths, and find their weak points.

Then, once the opponent attacks, one must quickly take the initiative, "following their slightest move while leading them with one's own," and "striking first after waiting for the opponent to strike."

By doing this skillfully, one can lead the opponent off balance, or disperse their strength, taking advantage of their weakness and striking back with full force.

This advanced technique focuses on the core parts of the body, aiming to maintain stability of the body's center of gravity and to achieve the best functional benefits during movement. When encountering various unexpected environmental and unfavorable conditions during movement, one can effectively control the stable posture of the pelvis and trunk muscles, to create a fulcrum for the movement of the upper and lower limbs, which provides a source of force, and achieves the best functional state for force generation, transmission, and control⁷. Therefore, traditional Taiji places special emphasis on training the waist.

In boxing theory, there are many common sayings such as, "without training the waist, it is difficult to achieve high proficiency in martial arts," "the source of fate is at the waist," "the waist is the ruler," "the waist is the driving force," "the source of movement is from the waist, turning into the thighs and arms," "paying attention to the waist's every moment," "starting from the legs, passing through the waist, and manifesting at the hands," "driving with the waist, no movement is without movement." These all show that Taiji places great emphasis on waist (trunk) training⁸. In fact, the traditional Taiji's training skills for the waist are distinctive and highly relevant to core stability and strength training.

2.3 The Training Characteristics of the Traditional Taijiquan's Entwining and Coordinated Techniques

Traditional Taijiquan emphasizes the martial art's technique of attack and defense, and it stresses the organic unity of force and technique.

It also places substantial emphasis on the stability of the body's center of gravity, the coordinated use of the muscles throughout the body, and on the difficult principle of using just the right amount of force, without the use of over-rigid or unnecessary force.

This complex balance is achieved by the active muscles exerting just the required force, passive muscles should exert no force, and the coordinated muscles maintaining exertion.

The traditional Taijiquan frame exerts the core stable power transmission function from the pelvic and trunk muscles⁹.

The Taijiquan's boxing technique is reflected in the entwining of the limbs, the circular route of the movements, the constant changes between "empty and full", and the smooth and continuous flow in the practitioner's movements.

This multidimensional entwining technique can exercise each core muscle group and maintain balance between the muscle's tensions, which allows the trunk to generate bending, lateral bending and twisting movements, and also produce explosive integrated force. It is especially useful for the training of deep small muscle groups in the pelvis and the trunk to overcome the centripetal contraction of self weight and static contraction of head fixation, and it improves core strength and helps maintain a stable posture¹⁰.

The principles and techniques of Taijiquan's martial arts are thus reflected in the essentials of push-hand training and routine movements, which can not only train people's reaction speed, ability, strength, but it also can have great significance in both attack and defense-based combat training.

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3. The Characteristics of Competitive Taijiquan

3.1 Technical Features of Competitive Taijiquan

After the establishment of New China, Taijiquan saw several new developments, including the emergence of Competitive Taijiquan to meet the needs of martial arts competitions. This form of Taijiquan was developed from traditional Taijiquan to create a new form of routine that is in line with modern, open, and free thinking.

In general, competitive Taijiquan is deeply influenced by the Western philosophy of movements that are "faster, higher, stronger" and as a result it advocates for movements that are "higher, more difficult, more beautiful, and new, with a very high demand for physical fitness. Under the restrictions of these new competition rules, many moves are now standardized, more difficult, performative, and they contain artistic features that are not essential, or required in combative martial arts.

In essence, competitive Taijiquan is a modern product that combines a historic martial art with the modern, competitive sports culture, and it can only exist in the form of routines, which are mainly used for competitions, and for performances.

Although the form has the external appearance of traditional martial arts, and it is true that the hand, eye, body, method, and step are largely the same, underneath it has rapidly evolved into a formalized and artistic movement, to meet the needs of judges, who need and are required to identify very clear, understandable movements, that can be used to reliably score a performance, or a competitor at a competition¹¹.

To adapt to the needs of martial arts competitions, performances, and also the promotion of the sport, the National Sports Commission asked various experts to compile the "Simplified Taijiquan," "42-Moments Taijiquan and Sword," "4 Movements Taijiquan," "28-Moments

Comprehensive Taijiquan and Sword," and today's highly appreciated self-designed and selected competition routines¹²⁻¹⁴.

3.2 The Development and Direction of Competitive Taijiquan Boxing

Competitive Taijiquan now has a scientific training system, and there are rigorous evaluation standards, as well as competition rules; and it now firmly belongs to the category of competitive sports. In 2003, after revision of the competition rules of Taijiquan¹⁵, competitive Taijiquan integrated various schools of Taijiquan movements; added various elements of Long Boxing; and established difficulty-movements and connecting-difficulty levels.

The classification and score of difficulty-movements were also determined, which led to the development of Taijiquan towards higher intensity and a general increase in difficulty. Self-selected Taijiquan routines quickly became the mainstream of the competition¹⁶.

As a result, competitive Taijiquan has now become separate from offensive and defensive combat martial arts, and is more similar to Chinese style martial arts gymnastics and figure skating, and there has formed a complete training system for competitive sports. After this reform, contemporary competitive Taijiquan now differs greatly from traditional Taijiquan in terms of movement, content and also artistic appreciation¹⁷. Competitive Taijiquan is currently the only Taijiquan event in the national and international Taijiquan championships with designated difficulty levels.

3.3 The Differences between Competitive Taijiquan and Traditional Taijiquan

Due to the very different goals being pursued, Competitive Taijiquan largely directs Taijiquan towards performance and art, and has gradually shifted Taijiquan towards its "appreciation" value. From the sociological perspective of Taijiquan

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development, the learning and practice of traditional Taijiquan embodies the Chinese way of life. Traditional Taijiquan is both a sport and a culture, in which great emphasis is placed on its cultural identity. Its technical system includes boxing, weapon, techniques, and principles, making it a more complete system. In contrast, Competitive Taijiquan only has one form and it lacks the characteristics of "combining physical training with martial arts." The result is its emphasis on "formalization" weakens or drops the core values and content of Taijiquan, which results in a disconnect in the three aspects of boxing principles, techniques, and pushing hands, in the development of Taijiquan¹⁸. Although Competitive Taijiquan and traditional Taijiquan are not two opposing aspects, they are now two different systems, with significant differences in practice process and technical details.

4. The Characteristics of Health Preserving Taijiquan

Taijiquan not only express the body, it is also a form of expression of Chinese philosophy and traditional culture, in which there is the Daoist techniques that guide the techniques of breathing. Buddhist Yi Jin Jing (The Buddhist Book of Changes), and other physical fitness methods have had many important influences on the health-preserving foundation of Taijiquan. In the modern development of Taijiquan, to better adapt to the fitness needs and also the abilities of many different groups and to highlight the health preserving value of Taijiquan, a third form of Taijiquan, called health-preserving Taijiquan, has emerged.

The number that has chosen to learn and practices this form of Taijiquan is by far the largest, with currently more than 300 million practitioners worldwide. They learn and practice traditional Taijiquan and various competition routines, but for this group the purpose of practicing Taijiquan is different from the first two types of Taijiquan. In this case, the techniques do not require offensive and defensive skills, but rather the focus is on the internal breath and the health preservation effect of strengthening the

internal organs. They practice to improve sub-healthy physical signs, and practice is accompanied by slow music during the exercise. Over time, it has become a health-preserving Taijiquan that is used by ordinary people, for daily fitness. The aim of the vast majority of practice groups is to achieve the fitness and health benefits of eliminating diseases and to nourishing the body and mind through both learning and practicing health preserving Taijiquan. In this case. the primary characteristic of the technique of health preserving Taijiquan is it has "Taijiquan", but the concept of "Quan" has basically disappeared.

5. Analysis of the Core Elements of Inheritance and Development of Taijiquan

With the development of different needs within the martial arts community, the author believes that Taijiquan should revolve around two core elements of inheritance and development, in order to not depart from the precious cultural wisdom left by the predecessors of martial arts; and to allow this knowledge to be retained for use by future generations. The first is Taiji, and the second is Quan.

5.1 Emphasizing the Cultural Core Element of "Taiji"

Taijiquan is important, it has rich connotations and profound knowledge, that is deeply rooted in the vast and profound fields of traditional Chinese philosophy, traditional health-preservation, traditional medicine, traditional military science, traditional psychology, and traditional aesthetics. "Taiji" is one of the core elements of traditional Chinese culture, a philosophical concept, a guiding ideology, and even a way of thinking, which is used to guide people's practice of martial arts.

The author believes Taiji is a philosophical concept and a way of thinking, and that Taiji culture is the theoretical foundation for the emergence and development of Taijiquan. The Taijiquan theory also elaborates the offensive and defensive methods of Taijiquan, and practicing Taijiquan can deepen one's understanding and cognition of

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traditional culture. In fact, it is recognized that some scholars at home and many scholars abroad first begin to experience and understand the essence of Chinese traditional culture through their practice of Taijiquan.

They experience the Taijiquan theory of being upright, light and flexible, soft and slow, open and close in order, and the harmony of softness and hardness in the natural and elegant movements of "flowing clouds and flowing water", accompanied by music rhythms. They also understand the philosophical connotation, the artistic style of the Quan Jia, and the poetic imagery of Taiji culture, reaching the highest level of spiritual comprehension.

5.2 Emphasizing the Offensive and Defensive Essence of the Combination of Understanding and Application of "Quan"

"Quan" is both an offensive and defensive technique, consisting of Understanding and Application, which are closely interrelated.

When practicing Taijiquan, one must grasp the unique offensive and defensive combat techniques of Taijiquan. Practicing the Taijiquan routine is the "Understanding" part, which can master the techniques of offensive and defensive combat.

It improves the body's fitness and flexibility, and helps people achieve relaxation, softness, roundness, and agility. This is the foundation of practicing martial arts and is the foundation of knowing oneself.

The Taijiquan pushing hands mainly focuses on "Application", seeking ways to achieve practical applications. The techniques include Peng, Lu, Ji, An, Cai, Lie, Zhou, and Kao. Through long-term practice of the techniques of pushing hands, which require relaxation, softness, roundness, and agility, one can become proficient in the application of the eight types of energy of Taijiquan found in all Taijiquan styles: Peng, Lu, Ji, An, Cai, Lie, Zhou, and Kao. First, one must stick, connect, adhere, and follow, without losing or resisting, accurately judging the direction and size of the opponent's energy,

and achieving the effect of "drawing in and letting go" with the strength of "four ounces can deflect a thousand pounds." Secondly, the eight types of energy can achieve lightness and flexibility, follow the opponent's momentum, borrow their strength, sacrifice oneself to serve others, draw in and let go, without resistance or forceful clumsiness, and understand the energy. Finally, through the techniques of dissolve, draw, take, and release, one can achieve the level of "the opponent does not know me, but I know the opponent." The exquisite techniques and magical effects of Taijiquan can then be experienced.

Conclusions

In the author's opinion, the true direction for the development of Taiji is to promote the artistic quality of traditional Taiji routines based on its martial art essence, so that its martial, fitness, and artistic aspects can all be fully developed.

Practicing Taiji is not only for physical fitness. It should also be for cultivating ideal personalities and higher spiritual realms.

Because of this, the charm of Taiji continues to attract more scholars and practitioners around the world, and its great vitality will become increasingly clear to humankind.

Some even predict, with good reasons, that starting from the 21st century, Taiji will become the most popular and most widely practiced sport in the world. Taiji contains the cultural essence of the fusion of "Taiji" and "quan" (fist), embodies the attack and defense essence of combining "body" and "application," and is the crystallization of unique training methods and health effects from the wisdom of the Chinese people.

Practice has proven that sticking to Taiji training has an irreplaceable role in improving human health and enhancing quality of life. It is imperative to fully utilize the many functions of traditional Taiji in the world's fitness campaign, making it a significant contribution to humankind.

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