

LET A HUNDRED FLOWERS BLOOM!
A PROFILE OF TAIJIQUAN INSTRUCTION
IN AMERICA

by

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ABSTRACT

Let A Hundred Flowers Bloom! A Profile of Taijiquan Instruction in America is a qualitative and quantitative interpretation of data collected by mail-return questionnaire on the background, attitudes, and teaching methods of 216 Taijiquan (T'ai-Chi Ch'üan) instructors. The survey was organized around three questions: who is teaching in America, what is Taijiquan according to those teachers, and how are they teaching it.

Six thematic categories, distinguished within respondent definitions by inductive analysis, led to a comprehensive formula: "Taijiquan is an energetic, relaxational, mentative, healthful, martial, and unitive art of movement." The adjectives are placeholders for descriptive elements. For example, "relaxational" represents the complementary conditions of relaxation and awareness implied in the Chinese concept *sung*; "mentative" is a placeholder for descriptions of Taijiquan as applied philosophy, or the application of mental constructs to physical action. Unitive language (e.g., integration of body, mind, spirit) was the largest category.

Other data yielded description of an "average" instructor, recommended book lists, and top health benefits by consensus. Data also revealed the need for better understanding of physical dynamics, especially considerations of strength, structure, and configuration as related to the knee. Four approaches to the problem of unqualified teachers are discussed: formation of a national

professional association, closer supervision of students, community outreach to isolated or less-experienced instructors, and development of teacher standards. A comprehensive systematic classification (taxonomy) of effective Taijiquan teaching methods was also educed. Taxonomic categories were: Receptivity, Demonstration, Repetition, Individualization, Verbalization, Visualization, Variety, Empowerment, and Mutuality. To further characterize respondents, Martial, Reflective Teaching, Lineage, Magical Thinking, Culture, and Openness indexes were constructed. Scores on these indexes were correlated, and comparisons were run on groups, such as those defined by gender, income, and style.

Mao Tsetung used the slogans “let a hundred flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend” to encourage expression of divergent views. Mao said “words and actions should help to unite, and not divide.” The aim of this study was to encourage players to strive for fellowship and harmony based on a willingness to value divergent approaches to Taijiquan. Appendices include data and the survey instrument.

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KEY TERMS

DANTIAN (*tan t'ien* in Wade-Giles): an energy center in the human body; usually the center in the abdomen that is the point of organization and collection for physical life force, *qi*. Also used for the major energy centers between the eyes and at the heart area as well as the abdomen: “upper, middle, and lower *dantian*.”

GONGFU (*kung fu*): a high level of achievement or skill, clearly the result of long, hard work. Sometimes used as a synonym for *wushu*, martial arts, especially in reference to external styles of Chinese martial arts.

INTERPLAY: used to refer to the activities commonly known as “push-hands” or *tui shou*: the interaction of two or more players practicing Taijiquan principles through planned or unplanned exercises involving physical contact.

JIANHUA: simplified, or synthesized. Used to describe forms created with movements from traditional routines by committees of experts in China.

JINGLUO: “main and collateral channels [in the human body], regarded as a network of passages, through which vital energy circulates and along which acupuncture points are distributed” (Gu, in *Chen Style Taijiquan*, 1984, p. 4).

PLAY: the practice of Taijiquan, the performance of forms. One respondent was bothered that “people are ‘playing’ Taijiquan... most people are ignorant of the true power, potential, and responsibility of the art” (335). Point taken. But “play” suggests a willingness to experiment, to be creative, as well as a sense of perspective: “seriousness” can be a deadly form of double-weighting. In the West, play is associated with sports and games; but also with childhood and innocence: with the state of “beginner’s mind.” Play also carries the meaning of “theatrical

performance,” and reminds us that all the world’s a stage. This last suggests *lila* or *leela*, Sanskrit for “play:” the play of the Eternal in the forms of the Ephemeral. The word “play” for the practice of Taijiquan was used in Horwitz, Kimmelman, and Lui (1976).

PLAYER: a practitioner of Taijiquan (see PLAY). Player is particularly useful as a unisex term that can be used to refer to practitioners at any level of experience. Masters, instructors, and students are all “players.”

QI (*ch’i*): life energy or vital force, possessed by all things: the manifested essence of the unique inner vibration of a being that gives it its characteristic nature and life. Yang (1989) refers to it as “bioenergy” (p. 15).

QIGONG (*ch’i kung*): a systematic approach to the cultivation of *qi*, or to work with that energy. Taijiquan employs certain methods of *qigong*, but *qigong* is also a distinct discipline with many styles and applications.

SUNG: a state of relaxed awareness.

WUSHU: Chinese term for “martial arts.” While it has become associated with modern efforts to promote the arts as performance sports, the term is still generic.

NOTE ON THE ROMANIZATION OF CHINESE WORDS AND NAMES

Many systematic attempts have been made by linguistic specialists to represent the sounds of the Chinese language with the symbols of the Latin alphabet, a process known as *romanization*. The different codes used by these systems do not in any way affect the meaning of the Chinese word being represented. Yet it is easy for those who are unfamiliar with the Chinese language or with the process of romanization to believe that the apparent differences in the codes of these systems represent real distinctions. One instructor once told the researcher that his teacher taught “Taiji,” not “T’ai-Chi.” Others believe that since “Taijiquan” is a more recent transliteration, it refers to the combined and *jianhua* (simplified or synthesized) forms being sponsored by the State Physical Culture and Sports Commission of the People’s Republic of China, while “T’ai-Chi Ch’üan” (Wade-Giles system) refers to the older, family forms. This was not the intention of the developers of the romanization systems. “Taijiquan” (Pinyin), “T’ai-Chi Ch’üan” (Wade-Giles), and “Tai-Ji Chywan” (Yale), for example, all refer to the same thing: [*characters, below]. Further, though they look different because the designers of the different systems chose different codes, *they are pronounced the same way*.

Taijiquan instructors should keep in mind that the art they teach is “correctly” written only when it is written in Chinese characters. The letters of the Latin alphabet, when used in romanization systems, should be seen as elements of a code which can only be interpreted properly by those who have

studied the code. The letters are used to symbolize the sounds produced by native speakers of Chinese, and do not necessarily represent the sound values which they possess in spoken English. In the widely used Wade-Giles system, apostrophes are critical. The “T-apostrophe” in *T'ai-Chi* is pronounced with a “t” sound, while “T (no apostrophe)” in *Tao* is pronounced with a “d” sound. The “chi” in *T'ai-Chi* and the “ji” in *Taijiquan* are both pronounced like “gee” in “gee whiz”; while the “ch-apostrophe” in *ch'i* (Wade-Giles: energy) and the “q” in *qi* (Pinyin: energy) are both pronounced “ch.” In the Pinyin system, the “q” in both *qi* and *Taijiquan* is pronounced like the “ch” sound in “China,” not like the “q” in “quibble.” The umlauted ü, present in the Wade-Giles romanization *T'ai-Chi Ch'üan* and implicit in the Pinyin *quan* of *Taijiquan* indicates that the “u” is pronounced more like “ewe” than “oo,” and the final *an* is not pronounced like the preposition “on,” but more like the article “an” or “en.” Chinese, in any case, is an inflected language: each syllable has a certain tone or pitch which is as much a key to meaning as the orthographic representation of the sound. *Tai* is said with the pitch of the voice falling (fourth tone) and *ji* and *quan* are said with the voice rising (second tone).

Few materials published on Taijiquan in English have observed the standard code of any romanization system. Many authors seem to pick a spelling that suits them, and some even insist that the correct way to pronounce the name of the art follows their own idiosyncratic orthography. One popular writer presents “ti che choowon” as if it were the correct pronunciation; and in fact, because of the appearance of the Wade-Giles romanization, this mispronunciation is common among non-Chinese speakers.

In a mistaken desire for simplicity and compromise among all the ways that [*characters, below] has been romanized, “Tai-Chi Chuan” and the shortened version “Tai-Chi” were used in the survey instrument for this research. However, one teacher with over thirty years experience, upon receiving the instrument, responded with a short, sharp note: “Do not expect a reply from me in respect to your research. If you were doing a paper on *T'ai-Chi Ch'üan* (never leave out *Ch'üan*) I would gladly help you.” This lesson has been gratefully incorporated herein.

It is better to adopt one of the standard romanization systems than to try to compromise between existing systems or to invent new spellings. Most of the books on Taijiquan available in this country up to this time, with the notable exception of recent books originating in mainland China, have used variations on the Wade-Giles romanization. So “T'ai Chi Ch'uan” (*u* rather than the correct *ü*) or “Tai Chi Chuan” (Wade-Giles denuded of its linguistic markers) probably have the highest popular recognition value. Nevertheless, because it is the official system in use today in the homeland of Taijiquan, Pinyin is employed throughout this dissertation. Even in quoting respondents, Chinese words romanized according to other systems have been replaced by their Pinyin forms. Zee (1990) in “A Word about Pronunciation,” concludes:

While linguists can go on debating the relative merits of Wade-Giles versus pinyin, the rest of us are just devoutly hoping that a uniform system will be adopted, once and for all. In fact, pinyin is already widely used in the West; major Western publications such as The New York Times have all subscribed to this system. I am among those who hope that we will finally have one single undisputed system of transliteration, although, of course, there will still be confusion about words transliterated from a dialect other than Mandarin... (pp. 17-18).

One further note is necessary. The nickname “Taiji” or “T’ai-Chi” is a Western invention. Though *taiji* forms a part of the term for the art of Taijiquan, it properly refers to a metaphysical or philosophical concept, not to the art which has incorporated the concept into its name (see the Mentative section of Chapter III). When we are talking about the metaphysical concept, we may rightly use *taiji*. When we are talking about the art, to avoid confusion and imprecision, we should use its full name: *Taijiquan*. Those who object to *quan*, fist or bare-handed fighting style on the grounds that they are not practicing Taijiquan as a martial art would do well to explore the term more deeply. *Quan* grounds the metaphysical concept *taiji* in the human body, symbolized by the “hand,” with which we make or do things. Taijiquan is thus, etymologically, the doing or physical practice (*quan*) of the concept *taiji*. Consequently, except in a few cases where change would create confusion, the full name for the art is used in all references contained herein, including citations from my respondents who may have used the nickname. *Taiji* is used only when the usage clearly is intended to imply the concept, rather than the art.

The researcher begs forgiveness in advance for errors and inconsistencies in romanization.

* characters: 太極拳