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TAIJIQUAN IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND IN TAIWAN: A COMPARISON OF MOTIVES AND EXPERIENCES OF PRACTITIONERS¹

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1. Presentation of the Topic

Taijiquan (henceforth abbreviated as *taiji*) has been a Chinese martial and movement art for centuries. It is an exactly choreographed sequence of movements, which are carried out in a contemplative manner and in slow motion. In self-defense, the movements are carried out with resilience and punch. For a long time, *taiji* was passed on only from one generation to the next and was kept – as it were – a “family treasure”². In the 1920s and 1930s the practice of *taiji* spread for the first time when in China one became increasingly aware of one’s own culture³. Then, in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), *taiji* was promoted as part of socialist education⁴; the practice was propagated as fitness training and has since become a “popular sport”⁵. The interesting question arises: Has the meaning of *taiji* in the course of this evolution in the PRC changed in such a way that we can recognize marked distinctions from (the meaning of *taiji* in) Taiwan today?

To give a definitive answer to this question, one would need appropriate empirical studies of the time before the establishment of the PRC. This, of course, is illusory. We can try, however, to give indirectly an answer to the related question: What reasons can be found for potentially ascertainable differences between practitioners of *taiji* in the PRC and in

- 1 Translated into English by Joe Berghold and Laurie Cohen (New York).
- 2 The main styles of *taiji* – that is, Ch’en, Yang, Wu, and Sun – are “family styles”.
- 3 ANDERS F. (Hg.) 1987, *Taiji – Chinas lebendige Weisheit. Grundlagen der fernöstlichen Bewegungskunst*. Köln, S. 12.
- 4 CHEN W.J. 1988, *Zur Grundlegung chinesischer Kampfsportarten (Wushu). Leibesübungen – Leibeserziehung (LÜ – LE) 42 (5): 107-111. S. 108.*
- 5 In the meantime, there are roughly 200 million active participants of *taiji* in the PRC, according to estimates (DeMARCO M.A. 1985, “Tai Chi Chuan: Why do 200 million people practice it in China?” *Black Belt* 23 (12): 62-65). In the course of this popularization, an incredibly vast variety of new styles and forms of *taiji* developed, aside from the old main styles (KOBAYASHI P. 1989, “Lebenskraft durch Bewegung”, *Esotera* 4/1989: 43). The distinctions between the various styles and forms can be disregarded for the purposes of the present paper.

Taiwan regarding their motivation and training experiences? One now has to take into consideration, however, that in Taiwan too - in the course of societal modernization - there might have been changes in the meaning of the training. At any rate, a comparison between people practicing *taiji* in Taiwan and in the PRC is of considerable interest from a sociological perspective.

The intention of the present study, therefore, is to investigate to what extent possibilities of experience specific to *taiji*, as well as usefull effects of the exercises, appear similarly or differently for practitioners in the PRC and in Taiwan. Above all, the relevance of the political context factor (Taiwan versus PRC) is of interest here, in comparison with other sociological factors - such as gender, age, education, and employment - to explain for the motivation and experience of the practice of *taiji*. We thus want to investigate whether the variations in motivational qualities of the *taiji* experience, according to these socio-demographic features, are less significant than the differences that correspond to the political context (Taiwan - PRC).

2. Methods

A questionnaire was used to collect the data. This questionnaire, which was compiled by the authors on the basis of a qualitative preliminary study, contained multiple-choice questions on motivation, habits, experience, and understanding of practice, along with questions on socio-demographic data; there was also a short-essay question on the useful effects of practice⁶. The survey was made in 1987-88 in Taiwan (mainly in Taipeh; n = 121) and in the PRC (Fuzhou; n = 46), among practitioners in parks and in *taiji* studios⁷. The practitioners were asked to complete the questionnaire and return it. These procedures yielded a 60 % return rate in Taiwan. In Fuzhou nearly all the questionnaires distributed were returned. The subjects were predominantly persons who practiced regularly.

6 The questionnaire (written in Chinese) will be mailed to interested readers.

7 Fuzhou was selected because researchers could win a *taiji*-teacher to organize and conduct the research there. Research resources did not permit drawing a greater sample of practitioners in the PRC. In order to build a representative sample in Taipeh we selected parks and *taiji* studios as the sampling unit; this procedure is similar to that of Mathes and Battista's using lecture halls as the sampling unit (MATHES S.A., BATTISTA R. 1985, "College men's and women's motives for participation in physical education", *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 61: 719-726).

3. Socio-demographic Description of the Samples

The majority of those surveyed are males: 71 % of the Taiwanese respondents and 57 % of the Fuzhou respondents. The Taiwanese respondents average 49 years old and the Fuzhou respondents average 29 years old. Almost half of the Taiwanese sampling are college graduates; nearly two-thirds are employed. Two-thirds of the Fuzhou respondents are university students.

4. Motives and Experience

The surveyed Taiwanese and Fuzhou, as regards their motives for practicing *taiji*, do not (or only insignificantly) differ from each other. They give the following as the most important reasons: preservation of health, well-being, harmony of mind and body, relaxation, enhancement of powers of concentration, and proof and improvement of physical ability. Other reasons of considerable importance are improving posture and physique, gaining cosmic energy, and increasing self-defense skills. The practitioners are less motivated by the possibility of giving expression to their own feelings and thoughts, of mastering the breathing technique, of being able to move without perspiring, and of making friends (“in order to make new contacts”). Motivations like “to do something in a group”, “to do something with my family”, or “to be like my *taiji* teacher” have significance only for very few active participants.

Likewise, in the analysis of the experiential content and of the perceived useful effects of the practice, no clear differences between the Taiwanese and Fuzhou practitioners come to light. Those surveyed know and experience for themselves that the exercises are healthy and vitalizing and increase their energy potentials and powers of concentration. The carrying out of the exercises gives rise to feelings of physical ease and pleasure in the aesthetics of movement.

Important are the meditative qualities of the experience of *taiji*. A large majority of the surveyed Taiwanese and of the Fuzhou respondents has “experiences of complete merging” in the carrying out of the movements; the majority has a “sense of the flow of energy in the body” (*chi* experience). In addition, the exercises convey spiritual experiences of nature, god, or cosmos (feelings of unity with the ultimate) to almost half of each group. Meditation momentarily has an effect of relaxation,

calming, and clarification. Our evidence contains indications⁸ not only of these immediate effects, but also of long-term changes of personality traits⁹ as a result of regular practice of *taiji*. Thus, strong minorities of the surveyed Taiwanese and Fuzhou indicate that *taiji* has enhanced their self-confidence and will-power, and that through regular exercise they have become more balanced and composed; they also see their life and the world around them in a more optimistic way. In meditation, one basically is alone with oneself; only few practitioners have a sense of belonging to a group/community during the exercises, although most active participants practice in groups.

Analyses of variance (ANOVAs)¹⁰ show that education, above all, has statistically significant effects on motivation and experience of practice. It turned out that those who had a university education agreed markedly less on a number of reasons for practicing *taiji*; thus, they perceive the motive of self-defense of traditional *taiji* only to a smaller degree. Well-being, harmony, and gaining cosmic energy - emotional states, then, that are difficult to define, or benefiting from a source of energy so far unidentified scientifically¹¹ - play a less important role for them as incentives to practice.

These findings point to a tendency towards a modern (rational in the Western sense) understanding of the practice on the part of academically-educated active participants. Moreover, it appears that among practitioners with university education, motives of making contacts and the model of the *taiji* teacher find even less consent than among less-educated active participants. Likewise, the former, while practicing, experience to a clearly smaller degree a sense of belonging to the group. Thus, once again, it turns out that education parallels individualism.

- 8 These indications result from the evaluation of the responses to the short-essay question about the useful effects of *taiji* and of spontaneous comments offered at the end of the questionnaire.
- 9 CARRINGTON P. 1988, "Meditation: Innere Ruhe, die befreit", *Psychologie heute* 15 (11): 58-63; PRESTON D.L. 1988, *The Social Organization of Zen Practice. Constructing Transcultural Reality*. Cambridge, New York. p. 75-77.
- 10 For every item about motivation, experience, and understanding of practice, analysis of variance (ANOVA) has been calculated. In each of these ANOVAs, aside from the political context (PRC - Taiwan), the socio-demographic variables were included as independent variables. With the help of ANOVA it can be determined for every independent variable if it has a "net effect" on the dependent variable - and if so, to what extent (Multiple Classification Analysis). The corresponding tables are available upon request.
- 11 CARRINGTON, op. cit., p. 62.

The differences in motivation and experience of practice according to age and gender are relatively smaller; for older people (those over 40 years old), “to be at one’s ease while practicing” is a stronger motive for practice. The state of “unison with nature, god or cosmos” is then more likely to arise. Relatively more males than females surveyed indicate that they “sense the circulation of energy in the body” during practice and have the feeling that they are “healthy”. Consequently, *taiji* appears – especially for the male active participants – as an opportunity to experience intense body feelings. After all that has been written about gender-specific distinctions with regard to motivation for practicing sports, however, one could certainly have expected more differences between male and female *taiji* practitioners. Almost no differences appear according to employment.

5. *How Participants Understand Their Practice*

To Taiwanese as well as to Fuzhou practitioners, *taiji* appears as a combination of “sport” and “art”; in their eyes, the practice is “in union with nature”, “gentle”, “soft”, but also “achievement-oriented”. Likewise, both of the investigated groups agree in the characterization of *taiji* as “creative”, “varied”, “philosophical”, and “traditional”. Nevertheless, given all of the corresponding motivational quality of experience and understanding of practice, the Taiwanese and Fuzhou practitioners differ quite clearly in two aspects, as secured by analyses of variance:

(1) The Taiwanese practitioners believe that *taiji* is “entertaining”; the Fuzhou active participants do not consider it so. This corresponds with findings of DEPEI¹², according to which “Chinese students lack the profound understanding of the functions of entertainment of sports. They have been receiving the education of ‘improving physical fitness through sports’ from childhood”. It seems that the Fuzhou respondents reflect this education in their evaluation of *taiji*.

(2) The Taiwanese find that *taiji* is rather for “individualists”, whereas the Fuzhou practitioners believe that the exercises fit “individualists, as well as people who are fond of being in groups”. Evidently, this can be

12 DEPEI L. 1988, *The Differences of the View of the Value of Sports among the College Students of China, Japan and Austria*. Paper prepared for the IX. International Workshop of Sport Sociology in Japan on Sport and Humanism. Tonzanso, Japan, Sept. 1988. p. 5.

explained by the socialist education and by the popularization of the exercises in the PRC.

Aside from these politically explainable distinctions, differences appear in the characterization of *taiji* according to socio-demographic features. The practice is thought to be “in union with nature”, especially by those surveyed who do not have a university education. Men see more “creative” features in *taiji* than women. The practice is “traditional” especially for people over 40 years old.

6. Summary, Conclusions, and Outlook

The analysis yielded remarkable concordances among *taiji* practitioners in Taiwan and in the PRC regarding the motivation of practice, experiential content, perceived useful effects, and the understanding of practice. Some clear differences appeared according to socio-demographic features of the practitioners; by far the most frequent differences appeared between persons with and without academic training. Thus the answer to the question raised at the outset - if political context (Taiwan versus PRC) or socio-demographic factors differentiate more clearly concerning the motivational quality of *taiji* experience - is unmistakable. As is the case with various other attitudes and areas of behavior¹³, here too, the socio-demographic features appear as the much more weighty determinants. It can be said that the orientations and forms of experience of *taiji* active participants are largely independent of changes in the political environment.

In the orientations of the active participants, however, there are also indications of change, which - in the long term - could lead to a reduction of the variety and of the breadth of the experience of *taiji*. Thus, even now, some of those surveyed complain about a trivialization of *taiji* to mere physical fitness training; they say that the exercises are carried out “as nothing but movement and therefore superficially” (“many people just dance around”). The growing Western cultural contact increases the danger of “sportification” of *taiji*. Some survey-participants, then, also criticize the “sportive colonization” of China. A representative comment: “*Taiji* is the best of our culture; one should spread *taiji* instead of foreign sports”.

13 HO D.Y.F. 1989: “Continuity and Variation in Chinese Patterns of Socialization”, *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 51 (February): 149-163. p. 159f.