

Edu World 2016
7th International Conference

HOW COULD TAI JI QUAN IMPROVE OUR ABILITIES?

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Abstract

To practice sport in the western meaning is action of our body that has benefice in growing and better function. It is well known also that the sport can improve our rational mind, make it clearer and improve self-control. Ancient Asian sports require more then to use notion of body or conscious/ rational mind. The philosophical assumptions in Western culture and in Eastern culture are different regarding mind or body, even Chinese researchers are using Western scientific paradigm nowadays. Due to this, their experiments sometimes remain inconclusive. The topic of his article will be Tai Ji Quan, the “soft sport of mind”, which, they say, has unbelievable achievements. We will to discuss Chinese philosophy background regarding sports try to emphases, that to practice of Taiji requires mostly the use of internal part of mind, as unconscious mind, meditation or intuition. Based on new assumptions, clarification of some concepts and transfer/interpret of meaning from one culture to another, plus our experiential practice, we think is possible to explain how a person could become a very powerful and moral one. Also we will show some educational benefices at psychological and behavioral level.

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Keywords: Culture; psychology; sport education.

1. Introduction

Tai Ji Quan is focused in softness; it is a special Martial Art. We try to claim here that Chinese had discovered the power of unconscious mind centuries before European. The experiments realized by scientists in China, we’ve learn about and the practice we’ve done, make us think there are something more involved in this kind achievements of Tai Ji. There is something about holistic explanation regarding couple mind-body by assuming the quantic hypothesis model explanation of the brain processing. “The brain processes of perception are formed by several stages of transformation, each of



which might have roots at the quantum level of inquiry”. (Pribram, 2011, p. 374) We are aware of language and cultural barriers, incompatibility of concepts, misunderstandings produced when we are transferring/ interpreting from one culture to another, specifically from Chinese culture to Western culture. In this paper we are focused on possible psychological and behavioral benefits. In order to stress some points, this article is settled to have three parts: the first is philosophical background, the second refers to some linguistic transfer of meaning and the last part is experiential. We will be focused in achievements especially in education, based only on observation and comments made by people we have met in China, who gladly accept to share information on this topic. Of course, we will discuss an interesting experiment designed by Chinese researchers and some descriptions and reports of scholars and practitioners involved in decipher this astonishing culture.

2. Philosophical Background

Tai ji quan as many others Kung fu arts is rooted in the beginning of Chinese philosophy. The start point of Chinese philosophy is in early Zhouyi, known also as Yi Jing or Book of Changes (Wilhelm, 2012). “From the perspective of existence, Zhouyi consider everything in the world as having *taiji* and the purpose the Universe as a whole is also to be a *taiji*” (Wen, 2010, p.11). The Chinese philosophy assumes that the Universe starts with an original *qi*, which is malleable to transform into *Yinqi* and *Yangqi*. Yin-Yang duality is expressed in its unity as movement. (Wen, 2010) This interrelated and continuous duality is expressed linguistically by the metaphor of Yin-Yang and used by all scholars and practitioners to describe and explain martial arts. We can understand this like a dual mechanism yin / yang, soft and hard as qualitative dimensions. Yin is *soft* because is light, clear, weak, feminine, rising to sky and Yang is *hard* because is heavy, forcible, falling down to earth, masculine. (Wen, 2010)

Applied to Martial Arts these concepts become the distinction between *wen* and *wu*. In the process of cultural transferring, what we call mind/ spirit/ culture they call *wen* and what we call brain, body/ force/ action is *wu*.

3. Some Details Regarding Terminology

How can we read and what is the meaning of the Chinese concepts beyond metaphors? In traditional Chinese books “the cultural (*wen*) is the foundation (*ti*) and the martial (*wu*) is the application (*yong*)”. (Boedicker, 2014a, para. 2) This foundation (*ti*) translated as “principals” we can call in the cultural transfer much better as “theory”, and application (*yong*) as “empiric, practical action”. In such context we can understand the sentence like this: “The cultural *wen* without the martial *wu* is like the foundation (*ti*) without application (*yong*).” (Ma, Xu, p.12, as cited in Boedicker, 2014a, para. 6). Or conversely, it is like doing action, do something without any theoretical background, knowledge. It could be exercise like gymnastic, improving straight, muscles, but never be totally efficient as mind-body achievement. We miss the whole image of ourselves. Philosophical background is settling this whole image and language/ words/ concepts make details.

So, for Chinese thinking separation doesn't work as method; using only the body/ force means violence without any moral sense of fighting (like self-defence or serve/help others). Using, again, our

concepts we can comment that the cultural (*wen*) as “internal principals”, knowledge is as theory and create theoretical skills for rational mind, but also for irrational (unconscious mind). The “external principal” is what we can call nowadays the “competence”, ability, external skill, manifesting force, improving strength, doing well, proper what we have learned, have internalized. *Wen* and *wu*, *ti* and *yong* should work always together otherwise is wrong. (Boedicker, 2014b) Therefore harmony, balance become the universal law and here is applied at human level. After all we are still confused. Is not very well explained, scientifically speaking, how a trained person in Tai Ji can win in confrontation.

The use of both metaphorical concept of *wen* and concept of *wu* is an explicit topic in various works of the classical literature. (Boedicker, 2014a, para.1) Nowadays, the meaning of *wen* is applied in a narrower sense to *physical education (ti yu)*, that we have found in schools curricula. In the wider sense it refers to *moral education, self-control, totally full mind, virtue*. In contemporary times also in textbooks and books regarding Chinese culture it is shown that, by virtue of their education, Tai Ji masters attained position as state officials or became university lecturers in modern time. (Wen, 2010, Boedicker, 2014a, para. 3, 4)

My master, Mr. Zhang Qing Wu and colleagues from China have explained to us that to practice Tai Ji requires a lot of conservative rules but also improvisation (many styles) and made a description using old books and quotes on stamp and picture hanging on the wall of his place during trainings. Tai Ji Quan had been a challenge to all martial art with the idea of *mental force*. The meaning of the word “Tai Ji” stands for *the ultimate possible fist*, unbelievable realization. The more you practice, the more it becoming a lifestyle for practitioner who lived a long happy life. All movements, actions express the goal to develop a mutual *exchanges of roles of yin and yang* (meditation and action, soft and energetic, psychological treats and physical as well, continuum from one to another). Tai Ji Quan is like the whole Universe in action. (Personal communication with Taiji coach & colleagues, August 2012) The action and thought must be correlated, should be fluid and calm; all movement must be coordinating each other by “xin”.

Again, we encounter a difficulty, because Chinese are using for mind/heart as composed concept “xin”. “In classical Chinese philosophy the meaning of the Chinese word xin [...], which literally refers to the physical heart, is not limited to its common connotations. Unlike Western definitions, the Chinese metaphorical understanding of this notion is not only denotes this organ as the center of emotions, but also as the center of perception, understanding, intuition and even rational thought [...]” (Rošker, 2014, para 1) Usually “xin” means double correspondence mind/heart, but in Tai Ji terminology is referring at interpenetration, of mind/heart/body working together. All it is about is actually how Chinese thinking is assuming the inseparability of the human being parts.

4. The “Mystery” of Tai Ji - an Inconclusive Experiment

Making this short excursion in the topic, as we can see only using these concepts of Chinese theory and philosophy it is possible to accept that kind of explanation. For Western Culture and scientific paradigm all this kind of concepts sometimes are not workable at all. The “qi” is not material part of our body, blood or nerves. Also Concepts of “yin” and “yang” have no reference.

In contemporary China, science is developing using also Westerner tools and theories. Therefore, to be more specific and very scientific, Chinese researchers from (CISS) Chinese National Institute of Sport Science from Beijing, known for their researches on Chinese champions as well, designed a lot of experiments in order to find out if and why the punch of a Tai Ji practitioner in Chen style, master Zhang Zhijun, is indeed so powerful, or it is just a legendary myth? (The science of Taijiquan, 2015). Researchers' main assumption has been that to opposite to a high level force, somebody must use some kind of physical force, too. The hypothesis has been the following: If Mr, Zhang is older and weak, he cannot defeat his stronger opponents. They try to measure with high technological modern equipment and chose carefully the opponents as young, powerful trained sportsmen. In all these experiments and measurement of muscles, strengths, Mr Zhang got the lowest scores or above. The only differences in score he got were the highly score for coordination, almost instantaneously of group muscles involved in combat. The results had astonished researchers. Why in combat always the old man in his 65 years put down the youngsters, well trained opponents in different kind of physical sport? Opponents report also that they felt a kind of energy which paralyzed them! It seems to be like magic!

We have some comments here. This scientific research didn't explain too much using westerner methodology and assumptions (separation of mind/body). Actually, the researchers were using methods and measurement for external skill, force produce by muscular mass. But the paradigm of our science of sport and pure physical explanation couldn't give a proper answer. So far, the experiment remains inconclusive. Even we can measure some kind of muscle energy, it seems something is missing. And how we can get such instantaneously coordination and force of kick in a right moment, right point or redirect vibration of energy? Nobody can say what "qi" is and how can it works. Only they can say is that power were gained by diligently practice for long, long time. Accordingly to Chinese tradition, mind is one; is though/ ration and heart/ emotion together; rational coordination and emotional involvement.

First of all, in Asian paradigm that mind can perceive the body as totality, non-duality mind and body, conscious and unconscious. Pribram (1919-2015) in all his life claims that the objects transmit holographic waves to mind and mind can perceive holographic the things. According to Pribram, this phenomenon is possible at quantic neuronal level. (Pribram, 2011) If we corroborate this new theory maybe we can explain better what is "qi", realized as synergetic communication, entanglement of all cells and neurons in our body. There are also opinions that conscious mind and unconscious mind, in Westerner terminology, or yang and yin, in Easterner terminology, cannot talk without a "mediator". They have totally different languages. Our Si Fu (coach) said, during the trainings, that that mediator is our body. If we present (by senses) to our body different sign and analogy with natural things, the body can translate to the yin/ unconscious what is about and to the conscious/ rational mind the knowledge how to proceed. Only the body can translate the meaning for these tow part of our mind. The body can works with both. (Personal interview with Si Fu, August 2012) If it is so, Chinese discovered a different mechanism to use unconscious mind – soft movement of the body.

Holistic conception, where everything is related to everything, makes possible the theory of Tai Ji. Therefore, keeping in mind this belief and working hard it is possible to reach the supreme, ultimate state of mind/body. Tai Ji, more then other sports, starts with cultivation of mind and finish as multiple benefits. (Zhu, David, & Xia, 2010)

5. Educational Benefits of Tai Ji Quan Practice

We can only emphasize and summarize in this chapter some abilities we had observed being improved to ourselves after practicing every day and talking with people that use to be practitioners of this soft sport. It could be possible many others, which we didn't yet, discovered. This paper has only descriptive purpose and observational dimension and it is still required to make some measurements by psychologists and physicians in order to become more accurate. We have only hypothesized that centuries ago Chinese were interested in reveals unconscious mind, self-psychoanalyze and introspection. In the list below the order has no relevance and is just a part of possible abilities gained by practicing this soft sport.

a) The abilities to move easier and faster in different contexts. It is very useful when someone is driving a car, catch a ball, or a glass falling under the table. Hands and feet seem "to think together" at the right moment.

b) Tai Ji increase attention, concentration on the tasks. If you are not focused you cannot "absorb", memorize, number and adjust the kick at the right moment. Coordination of different part of the body requires the increase attention as much as possible.

c) Tai Ji increase memory as repeating the routines. Sometimes if we cannot practice physically the exercise we can practice in mind, visualizing the actions. After the student watches the coach actions, he must think and represent in his mind everything. Si Fu's instructions are not very detailed in his explanation and always ask student to think himself how to do.

d) Tai Ji increase volition, perseverance by practicing again and again for a perfect posture or action. The posture seems never be perfect and you can keep practicing.

e) Moral education means cultivation of modesty and appreciation for others achievements. We learn to show much appreciation for champions and their performances; show respect for achievements and cooperation. Respect for elders and siblings, correct evaluation and self-esteem. A very Chinese person always has such moral code.

f) Self-control means awareness of every piece of our body and though of our mind. It also means to be empathetic with others companion or to make a quick analyze of distance and period of time by intuition. This is self-perception and extended perception beyond rational mind.

g) Si Fu always explains that we must be detached from any possible troubles. Hard physical training is, from time to time, replace by session of meditation using music or water sound around. Watching and hearing water help practitioners to understand the metaphor (unconscious mind works with metaphors and allegories). With the metaphor in mind they must act like water and remind quotations from classics like Lao Zi where is appreciated softness and force of water. Water always find the way, people always find solution.

h) We had observed that Tai Ji increases the handwriting abilities. We are not sure if it is available for all kind of letters, but Chinese calligraphy is related very much with coordination of actions. Practitioners of Tai Ji always have very good hand writing and practice diligently Shu Fa (calligraphy).

l) People report that they are feeling better, having good mood after lessons (every day in the early morning or early night).

m) Chinese people are convinced that Tai Ji increase, vitality, immunity, metabolism etc. In our group has component of different children, teenagers and elders.

n) Esthetic and ontological view about the world are part of the training. If we are Westerners we can change the view about the pattern of the things, seeing fractals more than linear geometry! Si Fu explains at the beginning that human body is round and asks to imagine the round circle around us. Very interesting part of the training are the lessons when Si Fu asks students to watch flowers, vegetables and notice the spiral, the round petal, the arrangements of leaves explaining that the flow of energy is like in us. (Personal interview, 2012)

What other kind of abilities more than can improve practice of Tai Ji, the soft sport? Actually, any we want and we can point out in our life: attention, volition, intuition, self-control, writing, dance, play piano, singing. It can also help athletes or other sportspeople who want to have high score of their performance because the training of the mind can train the body.

6. Conclusions

This soft martial art is much a personal development, than military or sport training. It is philosophy in practice, psychoanalyses in practice, moral education and physical education as well. In such a case doing exercise only as gymnastic is sport, but if is doubled by psychological education, it is much more. It can help improve sport training very much. The only condition is to learn something about Chinese assumption, scientific or not. It is a different paradigm and paradigms and philosophies as well have no true or false values, they just guide us. For schools consideration, we can use it as extra-curricular subject if we cannot introduce in an official compulsory curriculum. It is without doubt there are a lot of benefits for children, youngsters or adults as well.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express many thanks to Minnan University from Zhengzhou, Fujian, China (2008, 2012) and highly appreciations to our Si Fu, Mr. Zhang Qing Wu, from Henan province, for his patience in teaching and constant guidance.

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