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International Communication of Tai Chi Culture: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

As China's economic strength and political influence have been greatly increased during the past decades, Tai Chi culture, which has been long viewed as one of the very essential parts of traditional Chinese culture, is being given a golden opportunity to step into the world. Tai Chi contains a variety of values that are quite beneficial for people all over the world to live a peaceful and healthy life. Actually it represents a life attitude that stresses the harmony between man and nature, which is obviously significant in the contemporary society. Today with the intensification of globalization, Tai Chi culture cannot and also should not be restricted only to Chinese people. Instead, it should belong to the whole world. However, the international communication of Tai Chi culture meets both challenges and opportunities. Some myriad stereotypes, misperceptions, and distortions about China may hinder the cultural spreading. The conflict and competition between Tai Chi and other cultures are another problem. In addition, lack of theoretical study of international communication systems should be taken into serious consideration. On the other hand, the culture communication is faced with a favorable internal and external political and economic environment. Besides, practical demands in strained life of contemporary society also call for the wide spreading of Tai Chi culture. In short, joint efforts should be made to overcome the challenges and make full use of the opportunities so as to promote the worldwide spreading of Tai Chi culture.

Key words: Tai Chi culture; International communication; Challenges; Opportunities; Values

1. A GENERAL INTRODUCTION TO TAI CHI CULTURE

1.1 The Definition of Tai Chi Culture

There are various types of ways to define culture. According to the anthropologist E. B. Tylor (1974), it means "the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society." In the *Cambridge English Dictionary* it is explained as the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs, of a particular group of people at a particular time. To put it simply, culture is viewed as a whole integrating spiritual and material wealth. Tai Chi culture, therefore, mainly refers to the system which includes knowledge, concepts, art, values, habits, and practices related to Tai Chi, spiritual and material, traditional and contemporary. Today Tai Chi is mainly understood as a Chinese martial art, Tai Chi Chuan, from the physical perspective in the west, which only depicts one part of the whole picture of Tai Chi culture. Actually, Tai Chi culture is such an inclusive term that can be referred to in the perspective of philosophy, martial art, health maintenance and others.

1.2 A Brief History of Development of Tai Chi Culture

To obtain a proper understanding of Tai Chi culture surely depends on the thorough interpretation of the core concept Tai Chi. Then how can Tai Chi be defined? It is really a hard job to do. Actually, it has been more than 2000 years since Tai Chi was first definitely used as a cosmological term in *Zhuang Zi* as in "大道，在太极之上而不为高；在六极之下而不为深；先天地而不为久；长于上古而不为老", translated as "It (the Way) lies above the zenith but is not high; it lies beneath the nadir but is not deep. It is prior to heaven and earth, but is not ancient; it is senior to high antiquity, but it is not old." (Mair, 1994, p.55) Then in "Appended Judgments" commentary to *I Ching* (or the

Changes), it was further expounded as “易有太极, 是生两仪; 两仪生四象, 四象生八卦”, translated as “there is in the Changes the Great Primal Beginning. This generates the two primary forces. The two primary forces generate the four images. The four images generate the eight trigrams.” (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1967, pp.318-9) Since then the term Tai Chi has been heatedly discussed by thousands of scholars of different disciplines. As one of the very essential elements of Tai Chi Culture, Tai Chi diagram, or Taijitu, which illustrates the subtlety of world changes and balance keeping, has been discussed from the different perspectives. The representative scholars mainly include Chen Tuan (AD871-989) in Tang Dynasty, Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073) and Zhu Xi (1130-1200) in Song Dynasty, Lai Zhide (1525-1604) in Ming dynasty, Duanmu Guohu (1773-1837) in Qing dynasty, and so on (Lin, 2016).

Apart from the philosophical interpretation, Tai Chi is gradually applied into some practical fields such as traditional Chinese medicine and Chinese martial art Tai Chi Chuan. The concepts of “unity of man and nature”, “transfers between yin and yang” and “mutual generation and restriction among five phases” originated in Tai Chi culture gradually become core concepts in traditional Chinese medicine. That is why the traditional Chinese medicine has been putting much emphasis on disease prevention, non-chemical curing approaches, integrated diagnosing methods, people-centered curing ideas (Xu, 2008). Taking in the theory of yin and yang in Tai Chi culture, the traditional Chinese medicine views the human body as a balanced individual system. If the balance is broken, the illness will come into being. External natural forces in different seasons such as wind, cold, heat, humidity, dryness, and tiredness, and internal elements such as anger, depression, sadness will cause the breaking of the balance. Doctors of traditional Chinese medicine will accordingly differentiate the symptoms and carry out treatments. In a word, if one wants to have a thorough understanding of the traditional Chinese medicine, Tai Chi culture will never be ignored.

The greatest influence Tai Chi culture has exerted upon people in contemporary society is none other than the Chinese martial arts Tai Chi Chuan. Based on the theory of transfers between yin and yang, Tai Chi Chuan, created supposedly by Cheng Wangting in Qing dynasty, is featured by transformations between slow and quick, gentle and firm, rising and sinking, contracting and expanding (Zhang, 2012). Besides, the combination of the term Tai Chi and Chuan (fist) produces the martial art's name Tai Chi Chuan, showing the close link and use of the Tai Chi concept in the martial art. Enlightened by the Tai Chi spirit of “unity of man and nature”, Tai Chi Chuan also places emphasis on the link between people and nature. Therefore, Tai Chi Chuan, usually practiced in a natural peaceful environment, helps to adapt to changes

in life and balance the opposing forces that give existence to life. What is more, Tai Chi Chuan is also increasingly viewed as one of the most effective ways to reduce pressure and keep health in the fast-paced contemporary society.

To sum up, Tai Chi was evolved from a cosmological idea into a rich and coherent philosophical system, and then was deeply involved in the traditional Chinese medicine and the Chinese martial arts. It clearly illustrates the origin and evolution of the universe, and also provides guidance for profound understanding of formation and development of various types of social practices, such as social reforms, environmental changes, interpersonal relations, international policies, occurrence and cure of diseases, health maintenance, martial arts practice, artistic designing and so on.

2. THE CURRENT SITUATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION OF TAI CHI CULTURE

From the philosophical perspective, Tai Chi, as a traditional Chinese culture, has attracted attention of the world from the early time (Wilhelm & Baynes, 1967, Needham & Ronan, 1978; Blanc, 1985; Adler, 1999). However, their studies did not involve a systematical depiction about the origin and development of Tai Chi culture and at the same time did not fully expose the values newly produced in the contemporary society. Therefore, one of the important tasks for Tai Chi cultural communication is none other than the establishment of a theoretical system of Tai Chi.

In the sense of health maintenance, it cannot be denied that Tai Chi cultural communication has gained a great success all over the world. As the specific embodiment of Tai Chi culture, Tai Chi Chuan is now widely performed around the world. There are about 300 million people practicing Tai Chi Chuan constantly in the world, and Tai Chi Chuan has been one essential part of their lives, particularly in USA, UK, Canada, Australia, Malaysia, India and etc.. For instance, in the USA, communicators, the local white, the older are the main groups as well as the major followers, among whom the most are highly-educated people, engaged in education and health care industry. Interpersonal communication and running business organizations are the main spreading ways. However, the spreading of Tai Chi Chuan is only concerned with the physical exercise practiced in accordance with simple instructions, rather than paying attention to connotations of a certain movement. The other problem is that some communication individuals and groups care too much about their commercial interests but ignore the original intentions of cultural communication.

3. CHALLENGES OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION OF TAI CHI CULTURE

With the intensification of globalization, a country is admittedly unable to exist isolatedly in this world. It has to be associated with others from various perspectives such as economy, culture, national safety, environmental protection, and so on and so forth. As is known to all, China has gained rapid development in economic strength during the past decades. However, Chinese national culture is not familiar to people of the world. The integrating process of globalization requires not only that China knows more about this world, but also that the world knows more about China, and particularly of Chinese Tai Chi culture. Nevertheless, it is not easy for people in other countries to gain a proper understanding of Chinese Tai Chi culture. The international communication of Tai Chi culture has to be confronted with the following challenges.

3.1 Myriad Stereotypes, Misperceptions, and Distortions About China

For some economic and historical reasons, there has ever been a deep impression left in minds of people of other countries and regions that China is a large poor country with a substantial number of uneducated people, well known for some unique Chinese characteristic social concepts including Guanxi (relations), Mianzi (face) and so on. Take the term Guanxi as an example. The issue of guanxi as a form of government corruption has been raised into question over the recent years. This is often the case when business officials interpret guanxi's reciprocal obligations as unethical gift giving in exchange for government approval (Harding, 2014). However, Guanxi is not in fact unethical, but is rather wrongly accused of an act thought unethical in the eyes of those unacquainted with it and Chinese culture. Just as how the Western legal system is a reflection of the Western ethical perspectives, it can be said that the Eastern legal system functions similarly so (Steve, Simmons, & Kali, 1999). In a word, cultural misperceptions will definitely cause the emergence of the false negative images of China, which directly hinders the international communication of Tai Chi culture. In addition, there has been a global trend of demonizing China by some countries, particularly by developed countries. Groundless arguments about issues such as human rights, environmental pollution, and military threats do bring forth a great challenge to the establishment and acknowledgement of Chinese culture and Chinese national spirits. Actually, China has long been a nation in persistent pursuit for peace and friendliness, and with a long history of excellent national culture of tolerance and benevolence as well.

3.2 Conflict and Competition With Other Cultures

Introducing Chinese language and culture to foreigners is a good idea, while the aggressive attempt to do so via Confucius Institutes has proved problematic. The Hanban—the Chinese government body that operates the Confucius Institutes—often gives one the impression that it is carrying out a worldwide ideological campaign (Xie, 2014). Consequently, China's effort to project soft-power had suffered serious setback after the University of Chicago and the Pennsylvania State University announced to close their on-campus Confucius Institute because of an apparent disagreement over Chinese government controls (Foster, 2014). Chinese government has to be frankly faced with the problem and finds out proper solutions to deal with it, although the criticism is not all grounded. China is not carrying out a policy of cultural imperialism, which is usually implemented by dominant culture. Instead, as one of the dominated culture in the contemporary world, Chinese culture is expected to do nothing but to be admitted as one of the members of world national cultures, free from the restriction of dominant cultures.

In contemporary society, Tai Chi tends to be interpreted from the perspective of physical exercise, health maintenance and psychological pressure reducing, which plays similar roles as Yoga from India. As a result, those who understand Yoga well will usually question and even reject the effectiveness of Tai Chi. Therefore, the uniqueness and strengths of Tai Chi are required to be dug out and introduced to the world. However, it should be noted again that all national cultures are created equal. The final goal of international cultural communication lies in cultural diversity rather than cultural imperialism or cultural dominance.

3.3 Lack of Theoretical Study of International Communication Systems of Tai Chi Culture

Communication is a process by which meaning is assigned and conveyed in an attempt to create shared understanding. Cultural aspects of communication are of great relevance in today's world which is now a global village, thanks to globalization. According to the communication mode by Harold Dwight Lasswell (1948), the leading American political scientist and communication theorist, the communication studies should cover the five aspects including "who", "says what", "to whom", "in what channels" and "with what effect", which focus respectively on five elements such as communicator, message, audience, medium and effect. However, when it comes to the communication systems of Tai Chi culture, there is yet not any complete and systematic theoretical study. Actually, the issue of communication of Tai Chi culture is mostly discussed only from the perspectives of practical activities, without adequate concern over the theoretical construction.

4. OPPORTUNITIES OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION OF TAI CHI CULTURE

In spite of the challenges stated above, the international communication of Tai Chi culture will have important opportunities, which mainly include the following two perspectives.

4.1 Favorable Internal and External Political and Economic Environment

Any successful cultural communication in the human history will not be fully explained without taking the social background at that time into consideration. For instance, in Tang dynasty of Chinese ancient history when the economy and culture were well developed, Chinese culture was brought into Japan and exerted a great influence upon the development of Japanese culture, particularly in the perspectives of law, tax system, costume, and Japanese characters and so on (Shi, 1990). Obviously the economic strength and cultural influence greatly promoted the cultural communication into Japan. It is also true for another great cultural spreading of western science and technology into China during Ming and Qing dynasties. It has to be admitted that the successful international communication was attributed to the advancement of western culture and the actual demands for Chinese social reform. Today China's economic strength and political power have been greatly improved, which provides a favorable internal and external environment better than ever before. During the process of globalization, the Chinese policy of "One Belt One Road" will greatly promote the friendly cultural blending as well as economic cooperation.

What is more, the spreading of Chinese Tai Chi culture around the world meets the needs both of China and of all the countries involved. According to the essence of Tai Chi culture, man should live in harmony with nature. The idea is sure to be suitable for every country when people are being troubled by a series of global problems such as environmental pollution, climate change, and overuse of resources. The pursuit of world peace is another major concept of Tai Chi culture, which is very essential for fighting against various forms of anti-violence involving military actions and terrorist attacks.

4.2 Practical Needs in Strained Life of Contemporary Society

Apart from the favorable internal and external environment, practical benefits of Tai Chi culture can also set a good stage for its successful spreading around the world. Specifically speaking, Tai Chi Chuan, sometimes referred to as Tai Chi, has been well known for long as one of the excellent Chinese martial arts, which is actually one of the very significant elements of Tai Chi culture. Tai Chi Chuan has been proved to be very beneficial to

reduce stress, which is considered by western doctors as "the number one killer" today since stress can trigger heart attacks and strokes, and has also been linked to diabetes, high blood pressure, a weaker immune system, ulcers, and infertility. Therefore, the regular practice of Tai Chi Chuan will keep one health both physically and mentally. Besides, Tai Chi Chuan has gained a great amount of reputation in curing diseases such as osteoporosis, arthritis, high blood pressure, heart attack and cancer (Ye et al., 2014; Yan et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2015). In the contemporary society without worrying too much about material life, how to maintain health and improve the living quality becomes a major goal for people. Considering the actual needs for Tai Chi culture stated above, it is safe to say that the international cultural communication of Tai Chi culture has met with such a good opportunity.

CONCLUSION

Tai Chi, as an inclusive Chinese culture, is involved in many aspects in people's lives, such as philosophy, martial art, disease curing, health keeping, art designing, pressure reducing and so on. It was originated from the ancient time, but is showing great values in contemporary society, physically and mentally. As the world turns more and more globalized, Tai Chi is gradually known and reevaluated by an increasing number of people within and outside of China. Meanwhile, favorable internal and external social environment provide a solid base for the international communication of Tai Chi culture. It has been increasingly realized that the fast pace of contemporary life, which usually involve pressure, pollution, violence, destruction, is in urgent need to be reevaluated. China is also making great effort to show a true picture of Tai Chi in front of the world people. However, the intercultural communication of Tai Chi still meets some challenges. Stereotyped images and misperceptions about China held by people in some countries or areas will be one of the large barriers for the successful communication of Tai Chi culture. The conflict and competition between Tai Chi culture and local cultures of some countries or areas is another problem. In addition, the theoretical system of Tai Chi culture communication should be further expanded and clarified. In spite of these difficulties, Tai Chi culture is most likely to be understood and welcome by more and more people and become a great necessity for people's life in contemporary society.

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