

Examining the reasons for the popularity of Tai Qi, Qi Gong, Martial Arts.

HPCH5010/6010 Chinese Wellbeing: from Philosophy and Religion to Culture.
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Introduction - a historical context.

The Martial Arts of China are over two thousand years, one of the earliest artifacts being the Daoyin Tu dated 168 BCE¹. Daoyin was the precursor to Qi Gong. This study will focus primarily on Qi Gong but will refer to other branches where necessary. We are searching for a causal connection between these practises, collectively referred to as Wushu, and individual well-being as being the driving force for their rise in popularity.

Popularity in China:

The rise of the Martial Arts in China was unique. Popular western entertainment would identify Japan more often than China as the source of these disciplines; for example in *Kill Bill* I², the protagonist travels to Okinawa, Japan to advance her sword training. But the truth is that the scale of the Martial Arts and their penetration into early governance had a much more profound effect on the development of China. A compelling argument is put forward by Peter Lorge that the two became entwined very early on:

At the end of the Qing dynasty, the value of Chinese martial arts in self-cultivation became wrapped up with a rising discourse of nationalism. Self-cultivation through the martial arts became firmly based in a nationalist desire to cultivate a truly Chinese self.³

Accurate historical data is difficult to find and consequently rumours abound and scholars disagree; therefore we have to start by looking at more recent history.

Popularity and reasons for initial growth in the West:

Although martial arts have been an integral part of Chinese society for centuries, awareness and interest in the West has been a more recent phenomena, certainly starting post World War II. Popular films and then television first brought general awareness and the appreciation for the art. Perhaps the earliest movie was *The Seven Samurai*,⁴ which although Japanese in origin, was a seminal work and very firmly established in the popular imagination the power and effective application of the martial arts.

Appearing much later, but with far greater impact on Hollywood and popular culture was Bruce Lee⁵, who's highly acclaimed movie *Enter The Dragon*, was a master class in demonstrating the outer power of the martial arts and to a lesser extent, the inner power. Lee struggled and ultimately prevailed

¹ Yiyang Jiao, *Chinese Wellbeing: from Philosophy and Religion to Culture*. [Lecture to Chinese Wellbeing Module], HPCH5010/6010, *Chinese Wellbeing: from Philosophy and Religion to Culture Week 3-2* (2021). P.5. <https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=10235> [accessed 08/08/2021].

² Quentin Tarantino (dir.), *Kill Bill I*, [Film], (New York, Miramax, 2003).

³ Peter Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity To The Twenty-first Century*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 202.

⁴ Akira Kurosawa, (dir.), *The Seven Samurai*, [Film], (Japan, Toho Company, 1954).

⁵ Robert Clouse, (dir.), *Enter The Dragon*, [Film], (Hong Kong, United States, Warner Bros., 1973).

against the xenophobic, racist establishment of Hollywood, but he was also the uncredited founding father of the landmark TV series *Kung Fu*, given that he effectively wrote the 'show bible'⁶ for the program.

Lee had begun to test racial barriers, but he didn't know what he was up against until he conceived and developed a television series that would become "Kung Fu." He filled up legal pad after legal pad of insights about martial arts for the show," Mr. Cohen says. "He had sketched out plot lines, characters." And he always believed he was going to star. Instead, a Caucasian actor -- David Carradine -- got the part, and Lee never saw a dime for his labours. "There's a saying that Hollywood encourages people to death," Mr. Cohen says. "Bruce Lee got encouraged to death."⁷

The Kung Fu series was even more influential than the movie, it ran for three years and sixty three episodes between 1972 and 1975. By May 1973 Kung Fu had become the most watched show on 'Merican tv, regularly attracting audiences of over 28 million viewers. The show was discontinued in 1975, because Carradine had suffered several injuries and did not wish to continue. Carradine then spent virtually the rest of his career promoting the macho image of martial arts, a caricature much more fitting to the American psyche and Lee migrated his career back to Hong Kong.

This popularity resulted in people actively learning different martial arts, with many schools becoming established and thriving, not only in America, but all around the world. Estimates count 15,896 martial arts schools in America in 2016.⁸ The numbers peaked prior to the financial crash of 2008 which had a negative impact on all small businesses. Extrapolating from American data⁸, approximately 150 million people worldwide regularly participate in a martial art, including Qi Gong.

Changing times and changing reasons:

The level at which the martial arts had been understood and appreciated by American culture is perhaps best represented by Carl Douglas's *Kung Fu Fighting*,⁹ a piece of light, really light, popular music, it was positive, hopeful, benign and innocent. However, that cultural innocence and hope was soon to be crushed by Rupert Murdoch's campaign to have the 'Fairness Doctrine'¹⁰ repealed in America.

⁶ 'How To Write For TV: The Ultimate Step -By-Step Guide', (24th May 2017)

<https://www.scriptreaderpro.com/how-to-write-for-tv/> [accessed 08/10/2012].

⁷ Terry Orme, 'Jason Scott Lee Portrays Bruce Lee (No Relation) In "Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story." Fact, Myth And Bruce Lee', *The Salt Lake Tribune*, Edition 7th May, (1993), (p.3).

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/288591882/fulltext/8D347C02949A4503PQ/1?accountid=130472>

⁸ Glofox, *The Martial Arts Business Statistics That You Need To Know*, (2019)

<https://www.glofox.com/blog/martial-arts-business-statistics/> [accessed 08/10/2021].

⁹ Carl Douglas, *Everybody Was Kung Fu Fighting*, [video], (2014)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmfudW7rbG0> [accessed 08/10/2021].

¹⁰ Cato Institute, *Why Conservatives Forget The History Of The Fairness Doctrine*, (2021)

<https://www.cato.org/blog/when-conservatives-forget-history-fairness-doctrine>
[accessed 08/10/2021].

Repealing the Fairness Doctrine in 1987 enabled the rise of conservative-dominated talk radio with vast political consequences.¹⁰

It not only gave rise to the right wing talk radio, but also the abandoning of any notion of press impartiality from the mainstream media, the divisive and toxic effects of which lead to the destruction of the American manufacturing economy and with it the middle class and worthwhile public education.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to detail the social decline America that was started in the 1980's, however, suffice it so say that the notion of a "post truth era" is the main stream media's attempt to obfuscate the economic realities of the right wing's political actions.

The decline in living standards and general quality of life has produced a sense of despondency and inner desperation in those unfortunate enough to be born in or after that era. Add to that the effects of social media, the psychological and economic depression of the global pandemic and you have a divided, leaderless mess. "We don't know what to believe" has become the mantra of an entire generation.

Without trust in leadership, there is a need for introspection and the search for self-knowledge. Self Help books have become a category in book stores, offering lots of directional advise, without necessarily providing accessible advice. For example:

Tables such as the 'The Six Elements Of Wellbeing'¹¹ :

- 1) Self acceptance.
- 2) Personal growth.
- 3) Purpose in Life.
- 4) Positive relations with others.
- 5) Environmental mastery.
- 6) Autonomy.

Whilst it's true that having a purpose in life makes a huge difference to every aspect of one's well-being, for those of us that don't have one it then becomes necessary to find one, but without guidance, how is one expected to do that? This is where self-help books often fail.

In the more advanced Martial Arts literature the inner journey is so well articulated that of course it is attracting adherents again, but this time because people are searching to add depth and meaning to their lives, very different reasons from wanting to fly or avenge one's ancestors¹². In his analysis of Martial Arts and Chinese traditional medicine, Anthony Schmieg points out the importance of the inner path over the external training by defining self defence thus:

Although defence of the self is the fundamental function of martial arts skills, it is nonetheless the domain of low boxing.

¹¹ Guy Robertson, *The Ten Steps Of Positive Ageing: A Handbook For Personal Change In Later Life*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2021), p. 65.

¹² RT Documentary, [Video], *The Secrets Of Wudang Wushu: Chinese Monks Perfect The Grace And Power Of A Chinese Martial Art*, [Video], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xk_H263yJ-Y [accessed 08/10/2021].

He goes on to argue materialism cannot provide everything necessary for spiritual development, which is an important point to acknowledge, should one wish to meaningfully further one's journey.

In order to realise our human potential, we must acknowledge our spirit: that immeasurable, unquantifiable, artistic aspect that is denied by materialism. So whilst modern mankind torments itself, bearers of ancient wisdom, dispersed around the globe, continue to nurture this spirit.¹³

These practises and disciplines have persisted over literally thousands of years and whilst changing somewhat to adapt to the needs of society¹⁴, their core or fundamental content is unchanged. If we refer back to the discourse of martial arts in their Motherland, we can see that these problems have already been faced and solved:

Although Confucians did practise archery, they carefully separated power and skill. The prize went to the one who could hit the target without penetrating the hide. In other words, the mind that aims the arrow is superior to the martial power that pierces the target. The mind has a virtue of its own and does not require force to be effective¹⁵.

But without mastery of the mind, the individual is adrift in today's world. Scientific materialism denied any beneficial effect of meditation and other aspects of traditional Chinese medicine for a long time, but even that changed, lead perhaps by those scientists studying the quantum realms where causality ceases to be a linear process. The *Delayed Choice Quantum Eraser* Experiment is a version of the double slit experiment in which a measurement made on a photon in the present changes an event that has already occurred¹⁶.

It is difficult for materialism to maintain its position as the arbiter of truth when reality is not only more complex than expected, but also defies 'rational' or material explanation.

Health Benefits:

Numerous scientific studies detail the physiological benefits of regular mediation. Not only that, but those scientists that do study the phenomena associated with meditation/spiritual practise effect on well-being are beginning to realise that not only are the beneficial effects real, but they make truly profound differences to both mental and physical functionality.

Meditation and tai chi don't just calm the mind – they seem to affect our DNA too. There's evidence that such "mind-body practices" dampen the activity of genes

¹³ Anthony L. Schmiege, *Watching Your Back: Chinese Martial Arts And Traditional Medicine*. (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005). pp 177 – 185, p. 185.

¹⁴ RT Documentary, [Video], *The Secrets* (20210).

¹⁵ Barry Allen, *The Dao Of Ancient Martial Arts: Themes From Chinese Philosophy*. (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2015). p.135.

¹⁶ Wikipedia, (2021), *Delayed Choice Quantum Eraser*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delayed-choice_quantum_eraser [accessed 08/10/2021].

associated with inflammation – essentially reversing molecular damage caused by stress.¹⁷

There is also evidence it increases longevity:

People with a greater sense of purpose live longer, sleep better and have better sex. Purpose cuts the risk of stroke and depression. It helps people recover from addiction or manage their glucose levels if they are diabetic. Meditation might even slow the ageing process, telomeres, the protective caps on the ends of chromosomes, get shorter every time a cell divides and so play a role in ageing¹⁸.

This study showed that levels of a telomere related enzyme were higher in people who attended a three-month meditation retreat than in a control group. There is huge scientific interest in longevity, given the worlds' ageing population and so scientific attention is finally being given to Tai Chi, Qi Gong and meditation.

And finally, some reflections from practitioners themselves, or one, at least. I interviewed an elderly friend who started learning Qi Gong four years ago, at which time she was sixty five. I enclose this quote because it expresses more perfectly than I can one relevant answer to the title of the essay and it is a paraphrase of what was said.

I took up Qi Gong because I had been chronically unwell and I realised I needed to do something to support my health. My health care practitioner was a Qi Gong instructor and her treatment was so effective that I eventually joined her class. I didn't feel the benefit immediately, in fact it was hard work for the first year, but since then it has felt amazing.

The thing that left the greatest impression on me was that it was about Qi and not the body. You extend your Qi by stretching with the mind, not the body. It took me a very long time just to master the basic standing position, but today if I don't do it for a couple of days my body feels like it's seventy. Once I resume, my body feels like it's fifty again. I do preliminary stretching every day, and a bigger session about once every four days.

Now the most overriding impression is that of feeling clean. I feel cleaner after doing Qi Gong than I do when I've had a bath. It is outrageously effective, it gives a very refined feeling, very clean, as if I had been oiled internally disproportionate to the time that I spent. It has made a huge difference to my life.

¹⁷ New Scientist, *Mindfulness And Meditation Dampen Down Inflammation Genes*, (2017)

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/2137595-mindfulness-and-meditation-dampen-down-inflammation-genes/> [last accessed 08/10/2021].

¹⁸ New Scientist, *A Meaning To Life: How A Sense Of Purpose Can Keep You Healthy*, (2017)

<https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg23331100-500-a-meaning-to-life-how-a-sense-of-purpose-can-keep-you-healthy/#ixzz78jY52Oxh> [last accessed 08/10/2021].

In conclusion:

The reasons for the popularity of the Martial Arts have changed over time and are a reflection of the times and how those times change. Although always present in China, their influence on the zeitgeist of the West in the latter half of the 20th Century and beginning of the 21st Century has been substantial and benign and never more sorely needed.

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