

**A Theology of Taijiquan**

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## Introduction

The term “Tai Chi” is apt to conjure an image of the elderly folks doing slow and smooth movements in a park. This is a narrow understanding of a practice that is more diverse and significant than that. I have been practicing Tai Chi (also known as taijiquan), in one form or another, for twenty years. Over those years, my faith identity has shifted from Christian to agnostic to Wiccan and back to Christian. Throughout that time taijiquan connected me to the divine or the sense of something more than the material world. I have often thought of my taijiquan practice and its connection to my faith. In this paper, I will form a foundation for a theology of taijiquan. I will begin with a brief overview of what taijiquan is before moving into a review of theological literature helpful in developing a theology of taijiquan. I will then share some reflections of my personal experience before concluding with some questions for further reflection and areas of further research.

### 1. An Overview of Taijiquan

#### 1a) Romanization of Chinese Language

The Chinese alphabet is distinct from the alphabet many English speakers use, and the Chinese language relies on pronunciation to convey intended meaning. As such, two systems of romanization have been developed. The first system, known as Wade-Giles, was developed in the early twentieth century by English scholars who had no prior work to guide them nor much assistance from native speakers of the language. This system was not accurate in capturing different pronunciation of similar characters. The second system, known as Pinyin, was developed later by Chinese scholars. Pinyin solves many of the problems of Wade-Giles. For instance, *chi kung* becomes *qigong*, *kung fu* becomes *gong fu*, *tai chi* becomes *taiji*, and *tai chi chuan* becomes *taijiquan*. Pinyin also creates new problems as some arrangements of vowels and

nouns have rules that are misleading to English speaker. For instance, *peng* is pronounced “pung”. For the remainder of this paper, I will favour the Pinyin system as it is, on the whole, more faithful to the original languages.<sup>1</sup>

### **1b) Developmental History of Taijiquan**

Taijiquan is a martial art of Chinese origin. It is classified as an internal style (*neijia*). Folk tradition attributed its development to the thirteenth century Daoist monk Zhang Sanfeng whose historicity is debatable. The work of scholar Tang Hao in the early twentieth traced the development of taijiquan to Chenjiagou and the Chen family in the seventeenth century. This is now the majority opinion among martial arts scholars.<sup>2</sup>

Taijiquan was created specifically by Chen Wangting, who was a garrison commander and government official of the Ming Dynasty. He was forced to flee back to his home village when the Qing Dynasty took power. During the latter years of his life, Chen Wangting synthesized several existing fighting systems, ancient health cultivation methods, and Daoist theories and cosmologies. The results of this synthesis were five taijiquan routines, including a Long Boxing (*changsong*) routine which contained 108 movements and a Cannon Fist (*paocui*) routine. For five generations, these routines were taught only to the Chen family who often worked as hired guards, protecting merchant transports from bandits and raiders.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Chen Changxing synthesized the existing taijiquan routines into two – the First Routine (*yilu*) and the Second Routine (*erlu*). He was also the first to teach the Chen family martial art to an outsider. This outsider was Yang Luchan who first popularized taijiquan through the rest of China, though Yang Luchan and his sons modified the art for more popular

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Lin, *Tao Te Ching: Annotated and Explained*, (Nashville: Skylight Paths, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Davidine Siaw-Voon Sim and David Gaffney, *Chen Style Taijiquan: The Source of Taiji Boxing*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Reading, UK: D&D Publications, 2020), Kindle.

consumption. Yang style taijiquan is now the most widely practiced art in China and around the world. It wasn't until the early twentieth century that Chen Fa-Ke introduced Chen style taijiquan to the wider martial arts community in China.<sup>3</sup>

Chen style taijiquan was kept alive at great risk to the practitioners during the Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong when the practice of traditional martial arts was banned. Practitioners were forced to meet and train in secret and were subject to hard labour and public shame when caught. Fortunately, in the late nineteen-seventies with a change in government leadership practice of traditional martial arts was permitted openly again. Beginning in the nineteen-eighties, the four practitioners who became acknowledged as the leaders of the Chen family in their generation began spreading Chen style taijiquan around the world. This group consisted of Chen Xiaowang, Chen Zhenglei, Wang Xian, and Zhu Tiancai and were collectively known as the Four Buddha's Warrior Attendants (*si jingang*).<sup>4</sup>

### **1c) Taijiquan Today**

My taijiquan instructor (*sifu*) describes Chen style taijiquan as simultaneously a martial art, a health cultivation practice, and a practice of cultural and spiritual significance. Taijiquan is a physical manifestation of Daoist concepts like *yin* and *yang*, *taiji*, and *qi*. As a martial art, taijiquan is a complete and comprehensive curriculum consisting of forms (*taolu*), meditations and skill building exercise such as Standing Pole (*zhan zhuang*) and silk reeling (*changsong*) partnered exercises to develop sensitivity and combat applications called "Push Hands" (*tuishou*) and free sparring (*sanshou*). The forms include several barehanded routines such as Old Frame First and Second Routines (*laojia yilu* and *erlu*) and New Frame First and Second Routines (*xinjia yilu* and *erlu*). Other forms include various weapons routines including the straight sword

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<sup>3</sup> Sim and Gaffney, *Chen Style Taijiquan*, 27-30

<sup>4</sup> Sim and Gaffney, *Chen Style Taijiquan*, 58-59.

(*jian*), sabre or broadsword (*dao*), spear (*qiang*), and the spring and autumn broadsword (*guan dao*).<sup>5</sup> Training is life-long and there is potential to become a highly skilled martial artist. Effective combat ability is slower to develop in taijiquan than many other martial arts, but the end result is considered well-worth it.

## **2. Literature Review**

The current literature on the theology of taijiquan itself is lacking. As such, I have looked at literature on topics relating to taijiquan practice that will form a foundation for further reflection on a theology of taijiquan itself. The two fields I focused on were the literature of comparative religions and the literature of intersectional theology.

### **2a) Comparative Religions Literature**

Barnard highlights the benefits of using taijiquan and other practices as a pedagogical tool in comparative religions. Taijiquan provides students with an experiential practice that can inform students about Daoism in an experiential way while also being a practice that does not necessitate Daoist belief. Barnard shares from his personal experience as an instructor in a comparative religious classroom. Themes that arise in his work include considerations of cultural and religious appropriation which he addresses by limiting the practices he introduces to his students to those that are belief optional. He also identifies practical constraints such as the ideal group size for such exercises to be successful in a classroom setting.<sup>6</sup>

Cibotaru focuses on the experience of *qi* in Chinese martial arts. She includes historical-cultural background and context about the concept of *qi* as well as personal testimony from her study participants. She identifies several themes in common with their practice. I found three of

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<sup>5</sup> Sim and Gaffney, *Chen Style Taijiquan*, 301-328.

<sup>6</sup> William G. Barnard, "Meditations and Masks, Drums and Dramas: Experiential and Participatory Exercises in the Comparative Religious Classroom," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 2, no. 3 (1999): 169-172.

those themes important to developing a theology of taijiquan. Firstly, *qi* is felt through bodily sensations such tingling, warmth, and a “flow of energy”. These sensations can occur in various localized parts of the body or throughout the whole body. Second, *qi* is understood to be directed by the intent or will of the practitioner, which can be achieved with the aid of physical movement and visualization. At higher levels, the divide between the intent and *qi* is minimal and as a result it can feel that the *qi* itself is moving the body. Finally, during the practice of arts like taijiquan a practitioner may feel very aware of the *qi* in one’s own body as well as a cosmic connection to other people, the world, and even the divine.<sup>7</sup>

LaRochelle explains how the taijiquan martial arts manuals produced in North America in the latter half of the twentieth claimed to include traditional Daoist concepts. He asserts that, in reality, they were modified for the North American context. He includes historical and cultural context, linguistic analysis, and literary analysis methods such as reception history. LaRochelle asserts that Daoism in these manuals was “Protestantized”. By this, he means that the liturgical and clerical aspects were excluded, the texts were limited to a few philosophical texts like the *Dao De Jing*, and *Yi Jing*, and the practices were largely individual. He argues that the effectiveness and authenticity of practices like taijiquan were made through appeals to Western medical science in order to highlight the health benefits and quantum mechanics in order to connect with Daoist cosmology and concepts like *taiji*, *yin* and *yang*. LaRochelle maintains that part of the motivation in doing so was that North Americans viewed practices like taijiquan and the Daoist concepts underlying them as alternatives to inherited religion and the God presented therein. In the process, the North American taijiquan manuals depicted as Daoist concepts that

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<sup>7</sup> Veronica Cibotaru, “The Spiritual Features of the Experience of *qi* in Chinese Martial Arts,” *Religions* 12, no. 836 (October 2021): 1-15.

emphasized individuality, self-development, and spiritual enlightenment. This move excluded the broader, deeper, and more complex Daoist context in which taijiquan was developed.<sup>8</sup>

## **2b) Intersectional Theology Literature**

Kim draws parallels between the concept of *qi* and the Holy Spirit and suggests they may be different terms for the same thing. She draws on her lived experience as an Asian American woman, using tools like linguistic and etymological analysis, historical and cultural context, and thematic comparisons to make her case. She identifies similarities with *qi* in the description of the Spirit in both the Old and New Testaments, and similarities in the range of meanings and etymological development of *qi*, *ruach*, and *pneuma*. She asserts maintains that recognizing the possibility that the Spirit is not unique to Christianity but manifests as similar phenomena in other faiths and cultures around the world is a vital step to developing a pneumatology that will allow for a Christianity that is more open to diversity within itself and in its relationships with other faith communities.<sup>9</sup>

Kim and Shaw further develop the concepts introduced by Kim in her earlier works to develop an introductory guide for intersectional theology. They use insights from Christian and Jewish traditions as well as feminist, womanist, queer, indigenous, and liberation theological and analytical insights to develop their framework, leaning heavily on the intersectional model and praxis first articulated by Kimberlee Crenshaw in 1980. They assert that syncretism has been integral to the development of Christianity, and this must be continued for Christianity to remain relevant. They include the pagan influences on Christian observances and practices, the openness

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<sup>8</sup> Dominic LaRochelle, "Making the New Appear Old: The Daoist Spirituality of Chinese Martial Arts in *Taiji Quan* Manuals Published in North America," *Nova Religio* 12, no. 3 (2014): 64-83.

<sup>9</sup> Grace Sun-Ji Kim, *The Holy Spirit, Chi and Other: A Model for Global and Intercultural Pneumatology*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), Kindle.

to wisdom from other cultures in the wisdom texts of the Old Testament, and the association of Jesus with Lady Wisdom in early Christian communities.<sup>10</sup>

Seanwoo outlines how a practical application of intersectional theology can be used to develop a more accessible and intercultural worship experience. He shares from his personal experience as a pastor and taijiquan instructor in a diverse worship community. In his role as a pastor he uses one version of taijiquan rhythm to structure his worship services. The taijiquan rhythm he uses is *wuji*, loosen, empty, push. In a worship service, this can be manifested as a time of preparation and call to worship, a time of worship music and sermon, a time for collection and gathering, and a time for closing and benediction. By using the metaphor of the taijiquan rhythm, the services become more understandable and easy to follow for a congregation audience familiar with such *taiji* and Daoist concepts.<sup>11</sup>

## **2c) Literature Review – Summary of Themes**

There are five main themes from this review of the literature that I will emphasize. First, while taijiquan is developed around Daoist concepts, themes, and beliefs, the practice and instruction of taijiquan does not require a belief in Daoism. Second, practices like taijiquan often lead practitioners to experience what they identify as *qi*, a “force” or “energy” that is omnipresent in the universe. Third, the experience of *qi* can include a feeling of connection to the wider world including the divine. Fourth, the language and effects of *qi* bear strong points of similarity with the Spirit of Christian theology. Finally, the practice of taijiquan bears strong potential for intercultural dialogue and interreligious engagement.

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<sup>10</sup> Grace Sun-Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), Kindle.

<sup>11</sup> Hyuk Seanwoo, “Finding Rhythm for Multicultural Worship,” *Religions* 13, no. 410 (April 2022): 1-15.



### **3. My Experience: Finding the Divine in the Practice of Taijiquan**

I consider my taijiquan practice a spiritual discipline that enriches and informs my faith. There are three main ways it does this: the production of good fruit, the approach to conflict resolution, and the focus on embodiment.

#### **3a) Good Fruits**

My taijiquan practice produces good fruits. By this, I mean it yields results in alignments with the fruits of the Spirit outlined in the New Testament. There are five main ways in which it does so. First, my practice of taijiquan often includes a felt presence of the divine. Second, it reduces my anxiety, depression, fear, despair, and anger so that I hear the guidance of the Spirit more clearly. Third, it has increased my sensitivity and awareness of myself and the people around me. This includes an expansion of somatic vocabulary that allows one to be mindful of non-verbal bodily dynamics. Fourth, it has developed my patience as the practice requires consistent and diligent practice to cultivate skill. Finally, it has cultivated my humility as one is required to be open to regular correction from one's instructor.

#### **3b) Conflict Resolution**

My taijiquan instructor asserts that martial arts can be thought of as approaches to conflict resolution. It is accepted as an axiom that avoiding conflict is not always possible, so the focus is on how to resolve conflict when it does arise. While that axiom may be an area to critique, it is one that I personally accept on the basis of morality and political theory, though I am not able to address it in this paper.

Taijiquan's combat philosophy is fundamentally defensive-oriented and two basic principles must always be observed. First, never become unbalanced. Second, never respond to force with force. Instead, the goal is to connect with an incoming force and sense its intent. Then

one follows that intent, yielding until the incoming force is unbalanced. Once the incoming force has lost its balance, a range of options are available to resolve the conflict including strikes, joint locks, and take-downs. This is a system where it is recognized that skill overcomes raw power.

Taijiquan is also fundamentally practical. It is recognized that it is better to avoid conflict when possible and that you cannot help anyone else if you are injured or dead. The expanded somatic vocabulary that the practice of taijiquan develops often helps to avoid conflict in the first place. If one is in a serious combat situation, then one has the skills to resolve the conflict efficiently so that the opportunity for harm to be caused is minimized.

### **3c) Embodiment**

Taijiquan incorporates Daoist concepts and cosmology that recognize the unity of the body and mind. Through my taijiquan practice I have increased my knowledge, control, and ability of my whole being. This has acted as a corrective to my early years where my disabilities caused me to hate my body and also guards against Neo-Platonic, gnostic, and dualistic influences. I have also found several Daoist concepts introduced in my taijiquan practice facilitates my understanding of similar concepts in the Jewish and Christian scriptures and in the texts and practices of other faiths.

### **Conclusion**

My taijiquan practice informs much of who I am. I find it a practice of deep spiritual significance that resonates with my faith, facilitates my relationship with the divine, and empowers me as a servant of the Spirit. I will continue to think through the theological implications and resonances of my taijiquan practice especially as to how it can serve to increase my empathy with other Christians, and how some of the conflict resolution theory can be applied to non-combat situations. I would like further literature to explore some of the practical

applications of the benefits of *qi* and taijiquan for intersectional theology and interreligious dialogue. I would also like further literature to develop a more robust theology of martial arts and the role of pneumatology when engaging with practices like taijiquan.

To conclude, I offer a passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes that I often reflect upon when considering the relationship of my taijiquan practice to my Christian faith:

<sup>1</sup>For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven:

<sup>2</sup> a time to be born and a time to die;  
 a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
<sup>3</sup> a time to kill and a time to heal;  
 a time to break down and a time to build up;  
<sup>4</sup> a time to weep and a time to laugh;  
 a time to mourn and a time to dance;  
<sup>5</sup> a time to throw away stones and a time to gather stones together;  
 a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing;  
<sup>6</sup> a time to seek and a time to lose;  
 a time to keep and a time to throw away;  
<sup>7</sup> a time to tear and a time to sew;  
 a time to keep silent and a time to speak;  
<sup>8</sup> a time to love and a time to hate;  
 a time for war and a time for peace. (Ecc 3:1-8, NRSVue)

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