

# “CHINESE BRIDGE” SUMMER CAMP FOR YOUTHS OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE PARTNER COUNTRIES – AN OVERVIEW

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**Abstract:** This paper is an overview of the Summer Camp Chinese Bridge for Youths of the Belt and Road Initiative Partner Countries organized in China from August 2nd to August 15th, 2019. The summer camp was themed “Experiencing Chinese Martial Arts – Tai Ji” and was hosted by Beijing Language and Culture University and Henan Polytechnic University. This study discusses the summer camp program, the participants’ study background and the importance of such exchange activities in the near future.

**Keywords:** BRI, Tai Ji Quan, Chinese martial arts, Chinese language, cultural exchange

## I. Introduction

In May 2019 the Confucius Institute Headquarters announced a “Chinese Bridge” summer camp for students of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) partner countries. The main focus of the program was Tai Ji; Beijing Language and Culture University and Henan Polytechnic University were selected as hosting institutions.

The Confucius Institutes Headquarters is known for its wide range of exchange activities including themed summer camps and annual Chinese language and culture experiencing courses. However, this year’s summer camp was the first one to bring together students from the BRI partner countries in the birth place of Tai Ji Quan. Given the fact that China has started the Belt and Road Initiative a few years ago and that the popularity of Tai Ji Quan is rapidly growing, it was only a matter of time for a Tai Ji Quan based activity to be launched.

The following paper is a part of an ongoing study on the development of Wushu within the BRI. It highlights the purpose of the summer camp, the study background of the participants and the future directions for exchange between the BRI partner countries in the field of Wushu.

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## II. The Participants

50 students from the BRI partner countries between the age of 18-35 were invited to take part in the two-week “Chinese Bridge” Summer Camp in China in August 2019. The candidates had to meet two major requirements outlined by the Confucius Institute Headquarters: first, to have a Chinese language learning experience; second, to send a 3-5 minutes video clip of Tai Ji practice or performance along with the application form. Eventually, 30 students from 18 different countries were selected to join the exchange program. Although they were predominantly Asians, Kenya was the only country to be represented by 5 students followed by Bulgaria, Ukraine and Vietnam represented by 3 students each. A questionnaire related to the students’ style of Tai Ji Quan and years of practice, Chinese language experience, competitive experience and experience in other martial arts was designed. Its main purpose was to evaluate the Chinese language and Tai Ji Quan degree of development among the group. In relation to the Chinese language and Tai Ji Quan background, the participants vary from experts in either Tai Ji Quan or Chinese language to novice. However, the majority does have a basic or above basic knowledge about the language and the martial arts practice in general. Regarding the different Tai Ji Quan styles, Yang style is the most popular one among the students followed by Chen style (see Table 1-4).

Country	No. articipants
Kenya	5
Bulgaria	3
Ukraine	3
Vietnam	3
Laos	2
Russia	2
Chile	1
Dominican Republic	1
Ecuador	1
Fiji	1
Indonesia	1
Pakistan	1
Portugal	1
Samoa	1
South Korea	1
Sri Lanka	1
Uruguay	1
Uzbekistan	1
Total	30

*Table 1 – participating countries*

Experience in	no	1 year or less	more than 1 year	Total
Chinese Language	3	18	9	30
Tai Ji Quan	6	17	7	30

*Table 2 – participants' study background*

Experience in	yes	no	Total
National competitions	8	22	30
International competitions	6	26	30
Other martial arts	17	13	30

*Table 3 – participants' martial arts experience*

Tai Ji Quan Style	No. practitioners
Yang	13
Chen/ Yang	5
Chen	4
Wu	1
no	7
Total	30

*Table 4 – popularity of Tai Ji Quan styles*

### III. The Program

The duration of the program was two weeks, 2-15 August 2019. It was themed “experiencing Tai Ji” and its main focus was Chinese culture and Tai Ji Quan. Thus, Beijing Language and Culture University, BLCU, and Henan Polytechnic University, HPU, were selected as hosting institutions of the event. The week in Beijing included sightseeing, traditional Chinese crafts and group activities. The sightseeing part included visits to the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Capital Museum, the Hong Qiao Silk market, where a bargain competition between the students took place and the Confucius

Institute Headquarters with its modern display of traditional Chinese culture and interactive teaching materials. In addition, traditional Chinese crafts such as Moon cake making, ink painting, Beijing opera and tea ceremony were introduced to the students as well. Furthermore, leaders of the Confucius Institute Headquarters and BLCU and embassy officials of the BRI partner countries attended the opening ceremony on August 5<sup>th</sup>. Meanwhile, different group activities were organized throughout the week. The students were divided into small groups, each group had to prepare a presentation related to China and their experience in the country. The final presentations were followed by a performance called “Beijing Night”. It included traditional dances from Chile, Bulgaria, Kenya, Laos, Samoa and Fiji and a demonstration of martial arts such as Tai Ji Quan, traditional Sri Lanka fighting techniques, Taekwondo.

The week in Henan started with a trip to Zhengzhou, Henan’s capital, where a visit to 11<sup>th</sup> Middle School and Dongwu Tai Ji Institute took place. Afterwards, the students were brought to the second hosting institution – Henan Polytechnic University in Jiaozuo. Before continuing with the program details, it is necessary to share some important facts about Henan Province. First, Henan is considered one of the cradles of Chinese Civilization, four of the Eight Great Ancient Capital Cities are in this province –Luoyang, Kaifeng, Anyang and Zhengzhou. Second, the province is home to the world-famous Shaolin Temple. Third, Chenjiagou, a village near Jiaozuo, is the place where Tai Ji Quan was first developed. In the light of these facts, it is no surprise that HPU whose specialty is Tai Ji Quan was selected as the hosting university for the Tai Ji Quan week. Throughout the week the students attended Tai Ji Quan classes under the excellent guidance of the university teachers and coaches. Alongside them, the participants also took music classes where they learned to play Xun, an ancient Chinese flute, and eventually received one as a present. The leisure activities during the second week included a trip to Chenjiagou and to Yun Tai Mountain, part of the UNESCO world heritage; visits to market places, shopping malls and gardens were part of the program as well. The closing ceremony took place on August 14<sup>th</sup>, when the summer camp participants organized a Tai Ji performance for the HPU leaders and officials.

Overall, the summer camp activities, the organization and logistics and the hospitality of the universities’ staff and students were excellent. This allowed the students to learn and improve their Chinese language and martial arts skills in an international environment yet surrounded by the traditional Chinese culture.

#### **IV. Discussion**

During the analysis an interconnection between three variables was established – BRI, Chinese language and Chinese martial arts. On the one hand, the BRI was started 2013 as way to promote international and intercultural exchange. On the other hand, Chinese language and Chinese martial arts have always fascinated people from around the globe. Moreover, people of different ages and background have used them as a way to build bridges between cultures and nations. Hence, the “Chinese Bridge” Summer Camp is a natural result of the BRI idea of bringing people together and of the people’s love for Chinese culture. In other words, China appears to be highly efficient in promoting its own culture and using it as a way to attract people and engage them in various sorts of exchange activities. Looking back to history, the 24 Movements Yang Tai Ji Quan was the first form to be developed by the National Physical Culture and Sports Commission on behalf of the Chinese government as a way to promote health exercise and competition. This happened in the late 50’s and nowadays Yang style Tai Ji Quan is the most popular among the internal martial arts styles, which explains its popularity among the Summer Camp students as well. As a matter of fact, it attracts the majority of the competitors on various competitions. Moreover, Yang Tai Ji Quan is the backbone of the most commonly practiced form on competitions, 42 Tai Ji Quan, and of the most of the optional Tai Ji Quan Taolu routines on major championships like the World Wushu Championships and the World Tai Ji Quan Championships. However, Chen style Tai Ji Quan is making its first steps on the world stage and initiatives such as the Chinese Martial Arts Five-Year Development Plan, 2016-2020, the Ten-Year Planning of Promotion of Wushu Duan Wei System, 2014-2023, Healthy China 2030 can only contribute to its further popularization and dissemination. In fact, many of the program’s participants did express their admiration for this particular style. In addition, during the two-week summer camp discussions between the participants occurred on numerous occasions which threw light on how students feel about Chinese language and martial arts practice. Apparently, they are seen as activities whose combined learning gives a broader perspective towards Chinese culture and facilitates the cross-cultural communication. Furthermore, Chinese language is perceived as a keen factor for one’s career and many of the participants did express a desire to continue their study in China. This, however, is not an exception but more of a trend among people along the BRI.

## V. Conclusion

In a nutshell, we are witnessing the first steps of a long way towards mutual acceptance and understanding. Exchange events on various levels and in different fields of activities are highly anticipated and globally welcomed. Their importance lies in the fact that big projects can only happen after simple people-to-people exchange. Seeing it from this angle, the summer camp has been a great success in the sense that the participants, foreign and Chinese, did use the chance to exchange ideas, views and experience in martial arts, Chinese language, study- and work-related opportunities. Its major significance, however, is also connected to the fact that this year’s summer camp is the first one to put Tai Ji Quan on the spotlight which eventually paves the way for other martial arts related activities along the BRI.

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