

# A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF TAI JI QUAN AND QIGONG

*Borislava Lecheva*

**Abstract:** *The paper analyses Tai Ji Quan and Qigong, two of the traditional Chinese types of exercising, from four different perspectives: philosophical concept; history; training principles; health benefits. After an extensive review of literature, the study shows that despite of differences in origin and choreography Tai Ji Quan and Qigong share similar theoretical roots, their training methods are overlapping so are the health benefits related to their practice. The purpose of the paper is to serve as an accurate source of information for people involved in the practice of Tai Ji Quan and Qigong as well as to contribute to their overall popularization.*

**Keywords:** *Tai Ji Quan, Qigong, Chinese culture, martial arts, health*

## **1. Introduction**

China is a country with rich history and ancient traditions, whose cultural impact has spread worldwide throughout the ages. Yet, martial arts are what have long fascinated people's minds and remain undoubtedly the most recognizable aspect of the Chinese culture. Among the hundreds of martial arts styles, however, one in particular has gained enormous popularity in recent years. The matter in hand is Tai Ji Quan or most commonly known as Tai Ji. It is practiced in more than 140 countries around the globe and its popularity continues to grow.

The practice of Tai Ji Quan is often combined with that of another traditional Chinese type of exercising called Qigong. Unfortunately, there is still certain confusion about both the regimen and their interconnection. Therefore, the present paper deals with the differences and similarities these two practices share in terms of philosophy, history, training methods and health benefits. Throwing more light on Tai Ji Quan and Qigong would contribute to their popularization as part of the traditional Chinese culture and would also raise the awareness of how the health regimen could improve one's physiological and psychological state.

## **2. The Concept of Tai Ji Quan and Qi Gong**

### **2.1. *Tai Ji and Tai Ji Quan***

Tai Ji is usually translated as “Great Supreme” (太 tai highest, senior; 极 ji extreme). It is a universal principle, part of the traditional Chinese philosophy, which was first mentioned in Yi Jing, Book of Changes. The principle of Tai Ji is strongly related to the balance of Yin and Yang – forces opposite to each other, yet completing each other. Due to the holistic approach of the Chinese culture towards understanding the world this principle could be used to explain events within nature, society as well as within one’s body. That is why different aspects of the Chinese culture, Taoism, TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine), cuisine, martial arts, have adopted it into their own practices.

Tai Ji Quan is an internal martial arts style, whose soft and relaxed movements have turned it into a preferred stress-relieving and health-improving practice for millions of people around the world. Due to its long history, unique movements and undisputable health benefits Tai Ji Quan became part of China’s national intangible cultural heritage in 2006 (Qiu, Zhu 2012, 4). This martial arts style received its name thanks to Master Wang (Wang Zongyue) who used the principle of Tai Ji in his essay “On Tai Ji Quan” in order to better explain its boxing methods. Different styles and schools of Tai Ji Quan have been formed throughout the years. However, the main and most popular styles are Chen, Yang, Wu, Wu and Sun. Chen style Tai Ji Quan is the oldest one, whereas every other style is a modification of the previous one. Despite of the different styles the movements of every Tai Ji Quan practitioner should be soft, relaxed and continuous and combined with the right type of breathing.

### **2.2. *Qi and Qigong***

Qi is a concept of the Chinese culture, which is also present in other Asian cultures such as the Indian concept of Prana and the Japanese understanding for Ki. The character for Qi stands for air, breath, but its meaning as cultural phenomena transcends this definition. According to the Chinese philosophy Qi is “the source of the constitution of the world and the material basis of vital activities” (Yu, Wushu Exercises for Life Enhancement, p. 3). It is something that cannot be easily seen or explained, yet something that is present in every living thing. Therefore, the term used to best describe this concept is vital energy or life force.

According to TCM one gets born with an original vital energy responsible for the health condition, disease disposition and adaptability to the outside

world. This original energy, however, could be easily damaged due to different factors including emotional distress, overwork, lack of exercise, inappropriate eating or drinking habits. Thus, the people of ancient China developed different strategies to cultivate or train Qi, one of them was called Qigong.

Qigong is an umbrella term referring to different sets of exercises designed as a way to balance Qi and preserve one's health. As mentioned above, Qi is defined as vital energy, while Gong refers to any skill acquired through steady practice. Hence, Qigong can be translated as the skill to cultivate one's vital energy. Qigong encompasses more than 100 health regimen. Some of them were adopted or developed by different martial arts schools and practitioners as a supplementary training method. Others, however, were created by scholars or doctors with the single purpose of strengthening the body or curing a certain disease. In general, the exercises of Qigong can be static, performed in a standing or sitting position, or dynamic. They require a relaxed state of body and mind combined with a rhythmic breathing.

In conclusion, both Tai Ji Quan and Qi Gong are ancient practices, whose theoretical roots lay in concepts representative for the traditional Chinese culture – Tai Ji and Qi.

### **3. History**

#### **3.1. Origin**

Although Tai Ji Quan and Qigong originated in different periods of time, they both were developed as a way to preserve health and enhance life. Qigong as an umbrella term appeared first in the end of the Qing Dynasty (164–1922). This type of exercising was previously known as Lian Qi and Nei Gong in the martial arts (Wushu) circles and Dao Yin or Xing Qi for the common people. However, Dao Yin, the first known Qi Gong form, appeared during the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period (770–221 BC), centuries before Qigong was established as an official term. Other popular forms developed in ancient times include Wu Qin Xi, Ma Wang Dui, Da Wu, among the more recent ones are Ba Duan Jin, Shi Er Duan Jin, Dao Yin Yangshen Gong.

In comparison, Tai Ji Quan originated centuries after Dao Yin. It was created during the late Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) by Chen Wangting (~1600–1680). An interesting fact to mention is that during the late Ming and Qing Dynasties many TCM techniques including Qigong routines were incorporated into the Wushu practice. A retired general himself, Chen Wangting combined his military experience with his knowledge of TCM and created his unique style originally called Paochui, which is still being practiced today. Other forms of

this style were developed later within the Chen family, whereas the other family styles appeared during the Qing Dynasty as follow: Yang style created by Yang Luchan, 1799 – 1872; Wu style created by Wu Zhenquan, 1870 – 1942; Sun style created by Sun Lutang, 1860 – 1933; Wu stle developed by Wu Yuxiang, 1812 – 1880.

### ***3.2. Development***

Rapid changes happened in China in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which had a major impact over the development of Tai Ji Quan and Qigong. The monarchy was overthrown and Western ideas started to infiltrate the Chinese society. Different Western methods in different areas including the practice and promotion of Wushu and Qigong were adopted by the Chinese. Consequently, the martial arts were carefully classified and standardized, they became part of schools and universities curriculum; competitions, demonstrations, seminars and training courses were organized.

In the second part of the century the state took the control over the practice and promotion of martial arts and health regimen. Even though the access to them was somehow restricted for a short period of time, their actual practice had never stopped. Moreover, a great deal of attention was paid to them as a national form of exercise for health improvement. The idea about including Tai Ji Quan along with another martial arts style (Changquan) in the Olympics was started.

### ***3.3. Present Situation***

As a result of the efforts made for popularizing Wushu and Qigong within and outside China the International Wushu Federation (IWUF) and the International Health Qigong Federation (IHQF) were founded 1990 and 2011 respectively. The current number of IWUF country members is 147, while 87 organizations and countries belong to the member list of IHQF. Nowadays, a great number of international activities are annually held including competitions, seminars and training programs. Furthermore, many countries around the globe and their respective federations organize events on national level contributing to the popularization of Wushu and Qigong. Tai Ji Quan and Qigong are no longer mysterious practices accessible only to family members. Instead, they are considered a valuable tool for health-improvement and life-enhancement. In addition to its role as health-related practice, Tai Ji Quan, unlike Qigong has been developed as an elite sports discipline which is trying to become part of the

Olympic family since the Beijing Olympic Games 2008. Nevertheless, both are still somehow misunderstood due to the numerous legends surrounding their origin and the great number of supernatural abilities associated with their practice. That is why developing new and adequate strategies for their promotion is a prime task.

To sum up, both Tai Ji Quan and Qigong have a long history and their development has been influenced by changes occurred within the Chinese society. Despite of their growing popularity there is still a certain misperception related to their history and functions. Thus, promoting them as ancient practices for health improvement is the main task in the context of their present development.

#### **4. Training Principles**

天人合一 is the ground principle of the Chinese culture. It can be translated to mean “oneness between nature and human”. In accordance to this principle, there is an original state of harmony within nature; human as a part of nature is perceived as a harmonious being as well. Everything that disturbs this state of initial balance within nature and within human is considered unhealthy and dangerous to one’s wellbeing. Therefore, a guiding principle in every form of physical activity including Tai Ji Quan and Qigong is that of harmony between body, mind and breath. Translated into practice, this principle refers to harmoniously coordinated movements of arms, legs, waist and eyes, which in the same time are to be performed with the right type of breathing. The simplest combination of harmony between moving and breathing is to inhale at the beginning of the movement and to exhale at its closure. This process of harmonization requires a devoted practice and is achievable only through the careful guiding of the mind.

Both Tai Ji Quan and Qigong intend to balance the energy within one’s body and to develop a certain awareness of how it circulates through it. Hence, there are many similarities related to their training process. Both of them start from the inside out. It means that a great deal of importance is laid to relaxing the body and stilling the mind before starting the actual practice. In addition, the movements are performed in a slow manner so that the practitioner would be able to trace the process and increase or stop the tension when needed.

In general, despite of the different choreography, the movements of Tai Ji Quan and Qigong are performed in a similar way which reflects the principle of harmony between body, mind and breath.

## **5. Health Benefits**

The scientific literature concerning Tai Ji Quan and Qigong is focused mainly on their health-improving function. There is an enormous amount of evidence suggesting their positive effect on various types of diseases or health related problems such as low-back pain, high blood pressure, metabolism and immune system problems, osteoporosis etc. However, the focus of the present paper is not to summarize or add up something new to these studies but to present a simple explanation of how Tai Ji Quan and Qigong preserve and improve one's health.

First, both practices lay stress on breathing. The breathing process is unconscious and continuous. It is an energy producing process related to all the bodily functions such as heart peace, blood circulation, hormone release and metabolism. According to TCM, Qi, the vital energy, delivered to the body through breathing is responsible for one's health condition. Thus, learning how to manipulate and control the air flow through specific exercises is vital for preserving and improving one's overall health condition.

Second, Tai Ji Quan and Qigong include slow stretching, rotations, different transitions between positions, balancing postures, gentle or vigorous body shaking. Executing such exercises has a positive effect on bone density, coordination, muscle elasticity and strength, muscle endurance etc. In addition, it creates an overall sense of wellness and satisfaction.

Third, these types of exercising affect positively one's psychological state as well. On the one hand, they both advocate stilling the mind. The routines are to be performed in a relaxed way, so that one could easily calm the mind. On the other hand, improved bodily functions lead to improved psychological state. In keeping with the Chinese culture, body, mind and breath are inseparable. Consequently, the improvement of one's physiological functions goes hand in hand with an improvement in one's psychological state.

To conclude, both Tai Ji Quan and Qigong can be seen as body-mind practices which have beneficial impact on one's physiological and psychological state.

## **6. Conclusion**

In conclusion, Tai Ji Quan and Qigong are products of the traditional Chinese culture and its holistic approach towards understanding the world. Hence, there are many similarities between their philosophical concepts and training principles. Although these health regimen originated in different times and with different choreography, both of them were developed as health-preserving and life-enhancing methods and the health benefits related to their practice are overlapping.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**FLTRP.COLLINS 2011:** English-Chinese Chinese-English Dictionary. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2011.

**Guo et al. 2013:** Guo, Yuchen; Qiu, Pixiang; Liu, Taoguang. Tai Ji Quan: An Overview of its History, Health Benefits and Cultural Value. – In: Journal of Sport and Health Science, Vol. 3, No. 1 (March 2014), p. 3 – 8.

**Henning 1981:** Henning, Stanley E. The Chinese Martial Arts in Historical Perspective. – In: Military Affairs, Vol. 45, No. 4. (Dec. 1981), p. 173 – 179.

**Jahnke et al. 2011:** Jahnke, Roger; Larkey, Linda; Rogers, Carol; Etnier, Jennifer; Lin, Fang. A Comprehensive Review of Health Benefits of Qigong and Tai Chi. – In: American Journal of Health Promotion, Vol. 24, No. 6 (July 2010), p. 1 – 25.

**Meng 2010:** Meng, Tao. Learn and Practice Wushu (Bilingual Instructions in English and Chinese). Beijing: Beijing Sports University Press, 2010, p. 31 – 47.

**Qiu, Zhu 2012:** Qiu, Pixiang; Zhu, Weimo. Tai Chi Illustrated. USA: Human Kinetics, 2012.

**Yu 1991:** Yu, Gongbao. Wushu Exercises for Life-Enhancement. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1991.

**Wang 2010:** Wang, Guangxi. Chinese Kung Fu: Masters, Schools and Combats. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1992, p. 72 – 79.

**Wu et al. 1992:** Wu, Bin; Li, Xingdong; Yu, Gongbao. Essentials of Chinese Wushu. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1992, p. 40 – 49.

**Zeng, Liu 2002:** Zeng, Qingnang; Liu, Daoqing. China's Traditional Way of Health Preservation. Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2002, p. 250 – 372.

<http://iwuf.org>

[http://ihqfo.org/en/index.php?p=news\\_show&id=131&lanmu=10](http://ihqfo.org/en/index.php?p=news_show&id=131&lanmu=10)

<http://www.jinli.com.au/blog/the-health-qigong-duan-wei-system-why-and-how>