

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS IN LIGHT OF THE CHINESE BRIDGE PROFICIENCY COMPETITION – A CASE STUDY OF BULGARIA

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Abstract: The paper analyses the popularity of Chinese martial arts and health regimen (Wushu and Qigong) among competitors in the Chinese Bridge Proficiency Competition in Bulgaria from 2019 to 2022. The study indicates that Chinese martial arts and Qigong are relatively popular among Bulgarian students, Taijiquan and Kung Fun Fan being the most popular styles to be presented. Furthermore, the study gives a broader perspective of how different aspects of the language and culture of China are perceived by students.

Keywords: Wushu; Chinese martial arts; Chinese Bridge; Chinese language; cultural skills

I. Introduction

The Chinese Bridge Proficiency Competition is a one-of-a-kind language competition, whose purpose is not only to test foreign students' language skills but also to encourage their enthusiasm for learning and understanding Chinese culture. The first Chinese Bridge Competition was held 2002 and since then has been an annual event organized by Han Ban and its affiliated institutions.

The competition itself consists of three stages – preliminary, semi-final, final – and three main components – Speech, Test, Cultural skills. The preliminary round takes place on local ground where the two best students are selected and sent to China to continue their participation. The semi-final and the final take place in China; both are broadcasted nationally. As to its components, the speech, which is prepared by the students themselves and is related to a certain topic, accounts for 40 % of the total score; the test serves as a check-up for the students' knowledge about Chinese culture and life and accounts for 25 % of the total score; the final round represents the students' mastery of a certain Chinese

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cultural skill such as dancing, martial arts, recitation, music, paper cutting, calligraphy, painting. Apart from adding a certain flavor to the competition, it also adds 35 % to the participants' total score. There are three age groups that can join the event – students between the age of 5 and 14, 15 and 18 and 18 and 35 years.

The Chinese Bridge Competition in Bulgaria has been held for more than two decades. The Confucius Institutes in Sofia and Veliko Tarnovo take turns in its organization. So far numerous teaching institutions including three universities and several foreign language high schools from five major cities have taken part in it. Bulgarian students often rank first among their European counterparts and join the finals in China – Lora and Stanislav 2018, Radoslav 2019 and Betizhe 2023 among others.

In a nutshell, the Chinese Bridge Proficiency Competition is a unique combination of a language competition and a talent show which reflects the Chinese understanding of a global community united by common values and sharing similar ideas about friendship and harmony.

II. Goals and Methods

The goal of the present paper is to examine Chinese martial arts' popularity based on the students' choice of cultural skills between the years of 2019 and 2022. Data was provided by experts from the Confucius Institute in Veliko Tarnovo and participants in the competition itself. The Chinese Bridge Competition was not held in 2020 due to emergency circumstances, while the competition in 2021 was held online and all the videos are available online.

III. Results and Discussion

The results of the study can be divided into three categories and are to be summarized as followed:

- Female participants prevail over their male counterparts;
- There are five main centers of Chinese language in Bulgaria – Sofia, Ruse, Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, Plovdiv;
- Dancing and reciting rank first in the cultural skill list, while singing, combination and Wushu/Qigong are relatively popular among students.

In relation to the male-female ratio, numerous studies have explored the gender and language-learning connection suggesting that there are different factors influencing this trend such as social environment, motivation, and learning strategies (Khedder, Rouabhia 2023: 97 – 111; Liu, Zhou 2023: 947 – 955). Conse-

quently, it is generally believed that the language world – teachers, professors, interpreters, and translators – is dominated by females. Although stereotypes are to be avoided, this trend is more than noticeable in the Chinese Bridge Competition in Bulgaria, the only exceptions being the elementary school students, where male participants are prevailing (see Table 1). Whether this is the case in Bulgaria only or when it comes to the Chinese language itself or why elementary students differ from this trend remains an unexplored field for the moment.

Table 1. Participants

| 2019 | 2021 | 2022 |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Elementary school students | Elementary school students | Elementary school students |
| Male: 0 | Male: 13 | Male: 10 |
| Female: 11 | Female: 8 | Female: 11 |
| Total: 11 | Total: 21 | Total: 21 |
| Middle school students | Middle school students | Middle school student |
| Male: | Male: 2 | Male: 1 |
| Female: | Female: 7 | Female: 12 |
| Total: | Total: 9 | Total: 13 |
| University students | University students | University students |
| Male: 1 | Male: 2 | Male: 1 |
| Female: 4 | Female: 5 | Female: 5 |
| Total: 5 | Total: 7 | Total: 6 |

As for the Chinese language centers in Bulgaria, those are Sofia, Ruse, Varna, Veliko Tarnovo and Plovdiv – five major cities which offer a greater choice and more versatile opportunities for specialized education in different areas, including foreign languages. Although many Bulgarian towns offer the opportunity for Chinese learning to their citizens thanks to the Confucius Classrooms organized by the Confucius Institutes in Sofia and in Veliko Tarnovo, the only schools where Chinese is taught as a first foreign language are in Sofia and Ruse (Legkostup 2017: 25 – 59).

In regard to the cultural skills, fifteen different skills were presented by students of all ages for the period between 2019 and 2022 (see Table 3). Dancing and reciting rank first in the list followed by singing and combining two different skills such as dancing and singing, dancing and reciting, calligraphy and reciting, singing and playing music. Wushu and Qigong rank relatively high in the list of skills and the most popular style among them is Taijiquan and the

Kung Fu Fan form developed on behalf of the Chinese ministry in relation to the bid for the Olympic Games in 2008.

Table 2. Skills 2019–2022

| Skill | Primary school | Middle school | University | Total |
|---------------|----------------|---------------|------------|-------|
| Dancing | 6 | 11 | 6 | 23 |
| Recitation | 16 | 4 | 3 | 23 |
| Singing | 9 | 3 | 2 | 15 |
| Combination | 5 | 5 | | 10 |
| Wushu/ Qigong | 1 | 4 | 2 | 7 |
| Sketching | | 2 | 2 | 4 |
| Playing music | 1 | 1 | | 2 |
| Tea ceremony | | 2 | | 2 |
| Paper folding | 1 | | | 1 |
| Lion dancing | 1 | | | 1 |
| Hair styling | | 1 | | 1 |
| Painting | | | 1 | 1 |
| Calligraphy | 1 | | | 1 |
| Dubbing | | | 1 | 1 |
| Opera | | | | 1 |

There is an increase in Taijiquan popularity in recent years (Lecheva 2018: 207–213; Lecheva 2019: 260–254). Moreover, it was listed as UNESCO Intangible Heritage in 2020. There are two main reasons for this trend. First, stress and poor health have led people to search for alternative approaches to wellbeing. This includes eating and drinking habits, physical activity, life-style and measures for countering stress. Ancient practices such as Taijiquan and Qigong do appeal to today's people who are overcome by constant anxiety plus a lack of sufficient physical activity and meaningful relaxation. Consequently, the ever increasing popularity of Taijiquan is not surprising. Second, there is the strategic importance of Taijiquan for China's domestic and foreign policy. Although it has had its fair share of ups and downs with its borders which kept changing over the centuries, China somehow managed to not only survive but to rise from the ashes of foreign wars and domestic struggles in order to gain a much deserved place on the world map as a global super power and as one of the UN Security Council permanent members. After centuries of progress and hardships the country has realized the importance of preserving its authentic culture as a way to, first, boost its national pride, and second, strengthen its cul-

tural impact on the rest of the world. Yet, Taijiquan has been carefully selected as “exchange currency” for it represents the essence of the Chinese culture and its understanding that softness overcomes hardness and harmony is achieved through balancing out inner and outer pressure in the process of its practice. Furthermore, the practice of Taijiquan requires years of devoted training in order to properly grasp and master its movements and the meaning behind them which corresponds with the long-term policy developed by the Chinese nation. It could be even stated that Taijiquan is China’s soft power and the new century belongs to the Taiji diplomacy as Taijiquan is being used in a great deal of local, national and global events which unite people of various backgrounds in one cause – to achieve harmony and maintain balance – the very basics of the traditional Chinese culture.

IV. Conclusion and Further Suggestions

In conclusion, the Chinese Bridge Proficiency competition is a unique combination of a language test and a talent show which aims to promote knowledge of Chinese language and culture. At the same time, it brings the young people together with the idea of achieving friendship and harmony through learning. The analysis of the cultural skills for the period between 2019 and 2022 shows that martial arts are relatively popular among students, whereas Taijiquan and Kung Fu Fan are the most popular styles and forms. However, it remains unclear whether similar studies have been conducted in other countries as well. If not, the Chinese Bridge competition remains an unexplored field for researching the trends in Chinese language learning.

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