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TÀOLÙ

THE MASTERY OF SPACE

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DOI

10.18573/mas.111

KEYWORDS

Chinese martial arts,
tàolù, theatre, religious
self-consecration, spatial
perception

CITATION

Mroz, Daniel. 2020. 'Tàolù – The
Mastery of Space', *Martial Arts
Studies* 10, 9-22.
doi 10.18573/mas.111

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experience of space afforded by the practice of *tàolù* 套路, the prearranged movement patterns of the Chinese martial arts. It examines the roots of *tàolù* in Chinese martial preparation, religious self-consecration and theatrical performance. It develops the structure and phenomenology of this practice with special attention to its exponents' perceptions of negative space. Following an interdisciplinary approach, the author contextualizes embodied, martial knowledge in terms of Chinese social history, theatre and religious praxis.

PREAMBLE

The only persistent problem for the artist is to express a subject which is always the same and which cannot be changed, by finding a new form of expression each time.

Francis Bacon, speaking with Michel Archimbaud in 1992
[Bacon 1992: 80]

My own persistent problem is the mysterious nature of *tàolù* 套路,¹ the choreographed movement practices found in the martial arts of China. After 26 years of study, I continue to find every scholarly and practical explanation of their nature inspiring yet incomplete. The following continues the examination of this subject that I first shared in 2011 in *The Dancing Word*, my book on Chinese martial arts and performer training; in my examination of actor training in the Chinese and European traditions [2014]; in my chapter on acting teacher Michael Chekhov, Rudolf Steiner's mysticism, and the cosmology of *qìgōng* 气功 [2015]; in my co-authored study of the practices of Chinese *dǎoyīn* 导引 and Tibetan *trulkhor* [2016]; and in my recent paper about *tàolù*, drawn from my keynote address at the 2016 Martial Arts Studies conference in Cardiff [2017]. This paper expands my presentation at the 2020 online Martial Arts Studies conference, hosted by Aix-Marseille Université.

INTRODUCTION

Tàolù are tools for mastering space. They train us to project our imaginations into the negative space around our bodies, and to intentionally manipulate that empty space as though it were a positive object or substance.

Tàolù can be seen as proto-combative behaviour, a level of practical coordination that can be put at the service of combat. The martial movement they express exists prior to the context that will eventually give it meaning as warfare, hunting, duelling, self-consecration, meditation, sporting competition, aesthetic performance or a host of other possibilities. *Tàolù* are the human performance of combat and include, but also go beyond human performance in combat.

1 Where available, Chinese characters are provided when a name or term is first introduced. Mandarin is Romanized using Hanyu Pinyin. Cantonese is Romanized according to popular usage, with the Jyutping Romanization provided when a term is first used. Sanskrit, Tibetan and Thai terms have been Romanized according to popular usage.

Culturally, the martial movement of *tàolù* is found not only in Chinese martial arts, but also in Chinese theatres and religious practices, current and historical [Mroz 2011: 22]. They are acts of self-consecration that express martial religiosity using theatrical means. In this paper I will explore their conjoined combative, religious and theatrical expression.

CUNNING AND SURPRISE

Tàolù teach us how to create surprise. In fighting, surprise enables victory, or the transformation of disadvantage into dominance. In theatre, surprise is used to lead the attention of the audience. In religion, surprise creates insight when we consider the meaning of the two experiences we often prefer not to think about: death, and more critically, life.

It may seem paradoxical to associate the repetitive and formal *tàolù* with surprise. However, the set structures of *tàolù* create the possibility of mental space. In following their behavioural prescription, we accept external standards of movement. In doing so we can transform, suppress or at least negotiate with our movement habits and preferences. Having externalized our decision-making process by following the rules of *tàolù*, we may notice that some of our constant mental chatter and our physical tics are silenced. In this silence, lateral thoughts and unusual movement impulses can arise, and novel avenues of perception and action become available to us. We can see beyond our usual horizons and can act in new ways. As Brian Eno advises in his *Oblique Strategies* for artists, repetition is change, as reexperiencing patterns to saturation alters our perceptions [2005: unpaginated]. While the pattern of the *tàolù* won't change in practice, each inspiration that arises offers a new variation when we move without the constraints of routine practice. It may not be obvious in contemporary curricula, but *tàolù* should serve to facilitate creative, free movement which can be improvised alone, in free play with a partner, in performance, in sporting competition, or in combat.

Describing the Chinese martial arts, Kāng Gēwǔ 康戈武 writes that they are characterized by *qiǎo* (巧), which his translator renders as 'ingenuity' [1995: 1].² I suggest that 'cunning' is a better word for combative training that lets us reliably engineer surprise. Nevertheless, the modernist lens through which we view the Chinese martial arts can make it hard for us to think in terms of cunning.

Our contemporary experience leads us to imagine these systems in two ways: as symmetrical sporting contests, or as responses to asymmetrical

2 As does Andrea Falk in her English dictionary of Chinese martial arts terms [2019: 70].

self-defence situations. We cannot ignore the powerful and positive effect that the first of these assumptions has had on the practical skill levels seen in combat sports today. From boxing and wrestling, through Judo, Sāndā 散打, Muay Thai and BJJ to the worldwide proliferation of MMA, aggressive competition and training guided by sports science has created consistently improving competence in unarmed fighting.

Since the rise of MMA in the 1990s, *tàolù* and their related partner training practices have fallen into some disrepute. Learning elaborate choreographies and playing flowing, collaborative martial games do not appear to be of immediate use in a fight. Most of the extraordinary players in contemporary combat sports do not train this way.³

To employ *qiǎo* however we must not think like contemporary combat athletes. Rather we should emulate Odysseus, the archaic trickster archetype. Certainly, there was close, hand-to-hand fighting after the Greeks emerged from the Trojan Horse, but as soon as that horse was behind Troy's walls, the war was effectively won. In the Chinese martial arts in and military strategy more generally, excellence in fighting is secondary to trickery and wisdom. As far back as the *Liù Tǎo* 六韜, a military manual from the Zhou Dynasty, deception and surprise hold pride of place as the superior fighter does not engage in battle [Sawyer 1993: 34, 69].

Ideally, *qiǎo* dictates the fundamental elements of an opponent's experience before physical conflict can manifest. Contemporary Taiwanese Bāguà Quán 八卦拳 teacher Hé Jìng'hán 何靜寒 explains, describing the attitude he believes his grand-teacher Yin Fú 尹福 to have held:

We modern people have the wrong idea about the old masters, somehow thinking that they were always fighting. No! People such as Yin Fu, who was a bodyguard for the Empress [Dowager], would maybe have had three fights in their entire life and only then when there was a very good reason and when they were sure they would win. If Yin Fu had to fight, already he had failed. His job was to keep the Imperial family safe, not to get caught up in violence. He would have been expert at all kinds of terrain, geography, weather patterns, local customs, and much more, all kinds of strategy and ways of travelling, to ensure he never had to fight.
[Hé, in Kozma 2011: 158-159]

³ Current research suggests that blocked practice, the rote movement training that characterizes *liàn tàolù*, is less useful in the acquisition of agonistic, interactive movement skills than random practice characterized by variability, improvisation and high rates of failure [Schmidt, 2008: 257].

We might also add the mastery of social interactions and cultural forms to this formidable list of necessary survival skills. As Sixt Wetzler proposes, these things we messily call 'martial arts' are our attempts to tame the chaos of violence, transforming it into patterns that allow us to perceive it more clearly [Wetzler 2018: 131-132].

CHINESE RELIGIONS AND WAR MAGICS

For millennia, and up until 1912, China explicitly understood itself as a religious state. The patterning Wetzler evokes developed over thousands of years within the larger design of Chinese religious practice. John Lagerwey describes this world view in terms of two major spiritual forces: the environment experienced as deities and spirits, and humans honoured as ancestors. In such a system, conflict was managed and understood using two kinds of rituals of propitiation. The Daoist and popular religious approaches were exorcistic, martial and earthy, associated with place and with space. The Confucian and Buddhist approaches were preoccupied with human genealogies, hierarchies and texts, and associated with ancestors and with time.

Rulers preferred the stability of Buddhist and Confucian texts that reinforced the social order. The people preferred the informality and idiosyncrasy of Daoist and popular embodied rites that exorcized troublesome spirits and directly appealed to the humble earth gods for protection and good harvests. The Daoist and popular religious rituals were more influential and widely practiced but also more poorly recorded [Lagerwey 2010: 7-13]. Even seemingly agnostic events or individuals could not escape the consequences of this binary as these understandings were deeply embedded within both local and elite cultures.

Further describing these fundamental cultural patterns, Lagerwey contrasts *dìyuán* 地緣, a Daoist China of space and cosmos with *xuèyuán* 血緣, a Confucian China of human lineages [2010: 19]. *Dìyuán* plays a vital role in the constitution of Chinese martial arts and the practice of *tàolù*. *Dìyuán* is home to natural forces understood as spirits, and coincides totally with the actual physical environment in which conflict occurs. In this worldview, physical, tactical fighting and rituals exorcising and blessing space are in fact the same subject. In other words, martial arts are war magic, containing both physical and metaphysical techniques [Farrer 2016: 1]. The distinction between the two is a modern one that reflects Western assumptions and a fundamentally secular world view that would have been alien to most residents of imperial China.

Concretely, war magic could have included defenders stockpiling weapons, making a large offering to a local deity for protection and prominently wearing the talismans produced during that rite while patrolling their territory. The enemy encountered on such patrols was likely from nearby and would share in the same ritual culture. The defenders' gambit was that their potential raiders would be cowed by the talismans and the good morale produced by such magical protection. An aggressor would not do something as pointless as attacking an enemy rendered invulnerable by a talisman. Should violence nevertheless erupt, the defenders could pragmatically fall back on their physical, tactical training. However, they acted magically first because it projected their power further out into space, into the territory that they wanted to secure.

This kind of war magic is usually identified with 19th century rural peasant groups such as the *Hóng Qiāng Huì* 红枪会 (Red Spear Society) or the *Dàdāo Huì* 大刀会 (Big Sword Society). Elizabeth Perry describes the spread of the Red Spears' rituals in the 1800s as the popularization of previously marginalized practices [1980: 256], but the magic performed by these radical groups is far from peripheral to the history of Chinese martial arts. Meir Shahar recounts how imperial troops seeking supernatural protection petitioned their tutelary deities Guān Yǔ 关羽 and Mǎ Shén 马神 the Horse King in the 1500s, three hundred years earlier. War magic is a perennial aspect of Chinese martial cultures from the conventional centre to the idiosyncratic margins [2019: 378].

The success of Chinese war magic depends on its antagonists' mutual participation in the shared world of the *dīyuán*, and on it's being deployed with *qiǎo*. Perhaps the most famous failure of war magic was experienced by the *Yìhéquán* 義和拳 fighters of the Boxer Rebellion of 1899 who discovered they were not impervious to the bullets of Western colonial powers. The occupying forces didn't participate in the *dīyuán* of the rebels and worse, the Boxers did not deploy their magic with *qiǎo*. Instead of tricking the colonial forces into believing that shooting at them would be useless, they foolishly exposed themselves to enemy gunfire. Unlike Odysseus and Yín Fú, the Boxers had not won before they fought. This created a *false connection* between martial ritual and actual combat [Farrer 2018: 37]. Despite such false connections, we cannot simply dismiss the *dīyuán* as a mere world of make believe that is of no consequence to 'reality'.

These ideas may be counterintuitive to our usual ways of thinking about the Chinese martial arts. While most of the systems that are practiced today were secularized and largely reinvented between the 1910s and the 1950s, they preserved deeper cultural practices that were created in accordance with a millennial, religious worldview that is

now largely forgotten. We cannot grasp the social meanings and skilled fruition of even the most 'modern' practices without first dealing with this neglected inheritance. In imperial China, the martial arts had the following general characteristics that are now unfamiliar to us:

- Chinese martial arts idealized cunning and taught the use of trickery before tactics and spiritual combat before physical combat;
- Chinese martial arts took place in a real, material space that was also simultaneously a religious space governed by shared cultural values, including belief in the supernatural;
- *Tàolù* expressed this shared vision of China as a religious space, by theatrically creating physical narratives that were experienced by their players and received by audiences.

I am not diminishing the tactical brilliance of the Chinese martial arts overall or the fighting skill of the many capable exponents with whom I've had the good fortune to study. Rather I point to the history and sources that can explain the nature of *tàolù* and the attributes that their practice cultivates.

To make an analogy, we could elect to discuss the works of J.S. Bach (1685-1750) strictly in terms of their formal musical structures with no reference to religion. Bach however was a practicing Christian who worked in a church. In his lifetime his music was received as religious expression. Furthermore, the standardized tuning named A440 which is used to play his music today, was only adopted in the 19th century. If we don't know these things, we will still be able to enjoy contemporary performances of Bach, but we will remain ignorant of the factors that shape our experience of his music. If we attempt to speak with authority on the nature and origins of his music, we will simply be wrong.

MARTIAL MOVEMENT

Please watch the video demonstrations: ⁴ vimeo.com/439431373

Let us observe the movement that makes up these ritual, martial and theatrical activities. In the video on the left, two recreational martial artists who are students of a present-day, international *Choy Li Fut Kuen* 蔡李佛拳, *coi3 lei5 fat6 kyun4*⁵ lineage perform a choreographed fight using double sabres and spear. Simultaneously on the right are two professional teachers of *Jingjù* 京劇 or 'Peking Opera', from the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in Beijing, demonstrating basic phrases of fight choreography with the same weapons.

There is a slight difference in the tempo-rhythms of the two choreographies, as one is a real performance by amateurs and the other is instructional material presented by professionals. The *Jingjù* weapons are made of light and resilient wood reinforced with twine or fibreglass. The *Choy Li Fut* weapons, while still light and maneuverable, are made of heavier wood and metal and the spear is about one third longer. Yet these two presentations are virtually interchangeable. The contexts may be different, but the physical culture and martial movement displayed are the same. Why might this be so?

THEATRE, RELIGIOSITY, AND CHOY LI FUT KUEN

The Hung Sing Choy Li Fut Kuen School was perhaps the first martial arts studio that a contemporary person would have recognized as such. As such it is an interesting test for understanding the worldview of even relatively modern Chinese martial arts. *Choy Li Fut Kuen* was founded by Guangdong native Chan Heung 陳亨, (*Can4 Hoeng2, Chén Xiǎng*), 1805-1875, in 1836. He presented his style as a synthesis of three

4 The **Choy Li Fut Kuen** video was created by the Plum Blossom International Federation and uploaded to YouTube (youtube.com/watch?v=5tXl6xv8Sks). It was retrieved on June 24, 2020 at 17:22 EST. The *Jingjù* video comes from VCDs I acquired in Beijing in the spring of 2013.

5 I practiced *Choy Li Fut Kuen* intensively from 1993-2005. It accounts for at least 10,000 of the 20,000 or more hours of instruction I've received in Chinese martial arts. I've written in detail about this transmission and about my teacher, Sui Meing Wong 黃小名, Wong4 Siu2 Ming4, Huáng Xiǎo Míng, in my book, **The Dancing Word** [Mroz, 2011: 66-68 & passim]. Sui Meing Wong is heir to Leung Kai 梁啟, Loeng4 Kai2, Liáng Qǐ, himself a student of Fong Yok Su 馮育樞, Fung4 Juk6 Syu1, Féng Yù Shū, who studied with Chan Koon Pak 陳官伯, Can4 Gun1 Baak3, Chén Guān Bó the son of *Choy Li Fut*'s founder.

earlier practices. In 1848, Chan's representatives opened branch studios in various locations, including Guanxi Province and the Guangdong city of Foshan. In his early career Chan was sought after as a teacher of martial arts and militia drill for smaller communities in the Pearl River Delta region. However, his creation of a chain of studios teaching a standardized curriculum, which individuals could join by paying or bartering, was a new development in the region. The Foshan *Choy Li Fut Kuen* schools were closed when the Red Turban Revolt (or Opera Rebellion) of 1854 was put down in 1856, and when the style resurfaced in the city in 1867 it was as the main activity offered by the newly reformed Hung Sing Association [Judkins & Nielson 2015: 97].

The Hung Sing Association was a fraternal organization that catered to the lower, working classes of Foshan, who sought social respectability through participation in an increasingly influential group. In addition to martial arts instruction, membership offered individuals a network of social connections and negotiating power in their dealings with landlords, employers, gangster-run protection rackets and the state. At its height in 1920, the Hung Sing Association had some 3000 members in Foshan, a town of about 300,000 people. Judkins and Neilson estimate that 4% of the adult, male population under the age of 40 were members and consequently had some experience of *Choy Li Fut Kuen* [Judkins & Nielson 2015: 97].

Although *Hung Sing* membership required the practice of *Choy Li Fut Kuen*, the association also offered other group physical activities, including military drill. In situations of violence, such as the Hung Sing Association's involvement in the militarized aspects of the 1925 Hong Kong general strike, members armed with rifles were deployed to the picket-lines. They grabbed their guns and left *Choy Li Fut*'s powerful punches and its vast arsenal of archaic edged weapons behind in the studio. While violence and hand-to-hand combat were certainly a feature in the lives of the people practicing *Choy Li Fut Kuen*, when push came to shove, they used firearms and group action to defend their persons and their socioeconomic interests. As Ben Judkins clearly affirms, China's modern schools of hand combat were all created in the era of firearms [Judkins & Nielson 2015: 40]. Like the vast majority of Chinese martial arts extant today, *Choy Li Fut Kuen* was never used on a battlefield, nor did it descend from practices that were. While its exponents may have used it for skirmishing, its principal relationship to violence was in the civilian context of duelling, and in self-defence against the kinds of limited social conflicts that Patrick McCarthy has called Habitual Acts of Physical Violence [2005: 2].

While the *Choy Li Fut Kuen* practiced by the members of the Hung Sing Association undoubtedly helped them to negotiate individual social positions through fisticuffs, it also intersected visibly with religious

behaviour. Choy Li Fut exponents playing *tàolù* enacted a magical, religious role in and for their community. The play of *tàolù* and Lion Dancing in a seasonal calendar of popular festivals demonstrated the adepts' martial prowess while earning spiritual merit for the entire community. By practicing and demonstrating the arduous and humbling physical training Choy Li Fut requires, these performers consecrated and re-consecrated themselves to what Daniel Amos refers to as a *religion of the body* [1997: 31-61]. This self-consecration made them spiritually inviolable and venerable in the eyes of their community. Their demonstration of skill acquired through perseverance, or *gōngfū* 功夫, was a meritorious act performed on behalf of the collective. This was one of the ways that the Hung Sing Association's plebian students could achieve status within their broader social system.

This self-consecration was also tacitly expressed in theatre. Theatre permeated public and private life in 19th century China. While professional actors belonged to a marginalized underclass, people loved the entertainment they provided and hired them not just to perform but also to teach and coach amateurs. For professional, amateur and private groups, the learning, rehearsing and presentation of theatre was beloved, constant and intense. While non-actors would never play professionally, virtually everyone was involved in performing at some level. Given its spectacular nature and emphasis on dramatic fights, it comes as no surprise that Chinese theatre, or *xìqǔ* 戲曲 employs many training methods that are virtually identical to those used in martial arts. While it would be possible to provide multiple examples, Jo Riley relates a particularly interesting case:

In 1991 I filmed a *wǎshù* club training in the village temple in Zhong Suo village in Guizhou under their master Lu Huamei, who was also the head of the village theatre company. Lu teaches *tang quan* style, which is in the middle level range of skills, and over three hundred villagers train regularly with him (nowadays girls included). Six small boys also take part in the training, the youngest of whom is ten years old, and the skills they learn from Lu are also observed from standing on the stage with the village theatre company when they perform. As in many villages, the village temple, martial arts training and performance indivisibly form the cradle of acting in and spectating theatre.
[Riley 1997: 17]

Whether amateur or professional, actors portraying deities and ancestors on stage would achieve an exponential self-consecration: the actors performed martial movement and in doing so self-consecrated. Their performances presented the stage figures of ancestors and deities, a further act of self-consecration. These stage figures in turn performed

martial movement within the fiction of the dramatic narrative, self-consecrating for a third time.

The Red Turban Revolt of 1854 gives some sense of the theatre's public value in 19th century China: in an altercation over taxation with the faltering and distant imperial Qing government, a theatre troupe leader named Li Wen Mao joined forces with a secret society gangster named Chen Kai and other malcontents, eventually capturing the city of Foshan. Li's revolutionary actors turned their rebellion into a theatrical performance, fighting and then governing in costume. Dressed as the folk-heroes, deities and ancestors they would normally play onstage, they brought the archetypal, outsized and chaotic world of myth and fiction into everyday politics in the most direct way imaginable [Lei 2006: 160-161]. When the rebellion was quelled in 1856, those actors who didn't flee or hide their identities were massacred. Local theatre was banned for a period of 10 years.⁶

The Hung Sing Association reopened its Choy Li Fut Kuen studio in 1867, eleven years after the Opera Rebellion and one year after the theatre ban was lifted. Given the sheer density of theatre being practiced in Chinese culture in the 19th century it is easy to imagine all of that commitment and effort being transferred from theatre to martial arts, bringing with it a wealth of martial choreographies.⁷ Regardless of the details of how this came about, the Choy Li Fut *tàolù* are theatrical artefacts, and demonstrate a discreet yet robust site of resistance to imperial power: 'No officer, of course it's not theatre, it's Kung Fu!'

6 The ban was not only meant to punish the actors who had risen above their station. The secret societies resisting the Qing government conducted their ideological teaching and initiations through elaborately produced amateur theatre productions, further stoking the imperial ire against local theatre artists.

7 In 2013, a day after arriving in China, I visited the class of my friend and colleague Prof. Lǚ Suōsēn 吕锁森 at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in Beijing. He introduced me to his 30-odd Jīngjù students as a visiting theatre artist and immediately had me learn a partner stage-fighting choreography for the *qiāng* or spear, which his Finnish student, Antti Silvennoinen, taught me on the spot. Because of my previous training I learned the short, paired set very quickly. He called all the students over to watch while giving them a most thorough scolding, pointing out that they had failed to memorize the series in question after three weeks of work, whereas I, a foreigner who had arrived in Beijing the day before and who barely spoke Mandarin, could already perform it! I'd never done any Jīngjù before, but I had of course trained in Choy Li Fut Kuen and its spear-play forms. I explained this to Lǚ, but he didn't choose to enlighten his stunned students any further.

STRUCTURE AND PHENOMENOLOGY OF MARTIAL MOVEMENT

More recent concepts used in the teaching of Chinese physical culture may help us to further understand the theoretical and historical propositions outlined above. What makes us move? *Tàolù* always imply the presence of another body, even if the practitioner is training or performing alone. The impetus for movement in Chinese martial arts comes from outside of the exponent's body. They may begin the process of movement because of an imagined natural force, an ancestor, deity, teacher or opponent. They may even have a real teacher or an actual audience to salute, but from there on in they are moving in response to the prompts and demands of an attacker, present or implied [Mroz 2017: 48].

This extroversion is fundamental to all of the developmental agendas we might attribute to Chinese martial movement. To respond competently to violence, I must reject my instinctual or preferred reactions in favour of responses that help me neutralize my aggressor using my environment. To perform capably in a martial competition or demonstration, I must externalize my decision-making process to respond to my partner's actions and timing. To self-consecrate through training I must abandon my self-involvement and conform my body to pre-existing ritualized shapes and sequences. This rejection of habit and preference is accomplished using a durational training that, over time, changes how I perceive my body.

The externalization created through this training process is practical. When called upon to respond to an outside stimulus, such as dodging a ball, I will move faster than if I am asked to merely move as quickly as I can without the stimulus of the ball.⁸ In the absence of an actual ball, the solo-movement training process of the Chinese martial arts teaches me how to construct movement tasks for myself that allow me to use my imagination to access abilities normally recruited by real stimuli. I achieve this by learning to project my imagination outwards into the space around my body.

Both the Chinese martial and theatrical arts describe externalization using the five-character formula *shǒu yǎn shēn fǎ bù* 手眼身法步, 'the method of integrating the hand, the eye, the steps and the body'. In the theatrical version, the character for body is replaced with *zhǐ* 指 or finger [Riley 1997: 88]. Some martial arts formulations add the character for loosen or *sōng* 松 [Childs 2020: 84]. The formula denotes the elements that need to be differentiated and individually emptied of habitual reactions, and then reintegrated to produce an expert level of performance.

8 I owe this clear example to my friend and collaborator Scott Park Phillips.

A practical example: we use our hands to eat. As we prepare to take a bite, we lean forward and drop our head while we move our hands towards our face. As a result, when we begin to learn martial movement, any action of our arms unconsciously pulls our heads forward, sabotaging our balance and disturbing our peripheral vision. In swordplay this tendency allows our training partners to tap us on our fencing-masks every time we move our sword, as our heads come forward automatically, presenting themselves as easy targets. Consciously separating the actions of the head from those of the hands is essential in learning martial movement.

Mid-20th century martial practitioner Tāng Rú Kūn 湯汝昆⁹ describes how mastering the five characters actually feels. Tāng was a teacher of the 20th century Chinese martial art named *Yì Quán* 意拳, founded by Wáng Xiāngzhāi 王薊齋, 1885-1963. Tāng writes that martial training produces *qì gǎn* 气感 or 'the sensations of the life force', which are heat, weight, vibration and expansiveness [Tāng in Cohen 1997: 270].

Qì is a term with many meanings, and its use in the discussion of Chinese martial arts is contested. It's been described by Chinese experts as everything from the *sine qua non*, to nothing but *bogus talk* [He 2006: xxvii]. For our purposes *qì* is a phenomenological correlate to the circulation of blood. My blood is a material substance with an obvious location and flows along predictable paths. When I practice the basic exercises of Chinese martial arts that realign and strengthen the tonic, supportive muscles of the body, both my circulation and the depth of my felt-sense of heat, weight and vibration will improve dramatically. To use Tāng's terms, as my body empties of compulsion, it can fill with *qì*.

The last term on Tāng's list is expansiveness, a euphoric *subjective feeling of blending into the environment* [Cohen 1997: 271]. As our experience deepens, rather than being hypnotized by ever smaller physical sensations, we reverse our inward focus and project ourselves out into the space that surrounds us. This reversal should emerge tacitly from training and then be supported directly with visualization.

Like the externalisations mentioned above, expansiveness is practical. Our ability to orient ourselves has been developed through the practice of stances, postures and stepping. We can predict the shape of our space and our position in it using our felt-sense of the position of our feet, the distribution of our mass and the orientation of our bodies. We have also learned to measure the space around us using the body of another, through partner training and collaborative martial games. Using

9 Tāng was the *Yì Quán* teacher of Ken Cohen, who is in turn my teacher. He also gave Ken a copy of his book *Yì Quán Qiǎn Shì* 意拳淺釋.

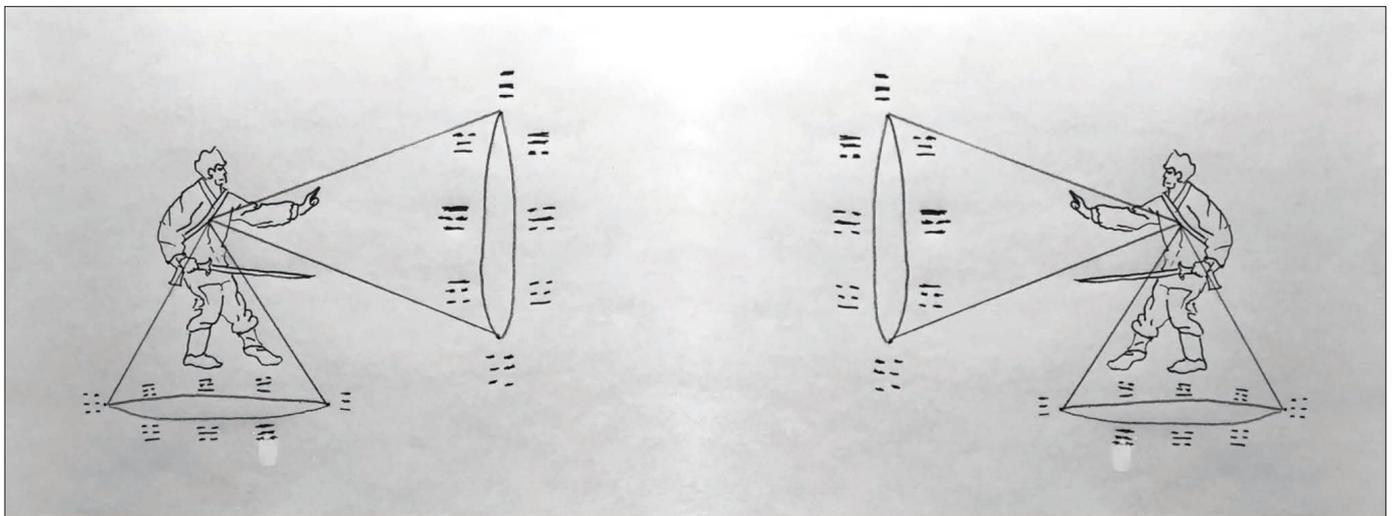
the body of another to measure space is called *extended physiological proprioception* or EPP, and we experience a version of it every time we write with a pen and feel the surface of the paper through the stylus we are holding [Simpson 1974: 146-150]. In expansiveness we combine the potential of all of these capabilities to create an imaginal rendering of the space we are moving in. We experience our body inside our mind, which is co-equal with space.

SPATIAL PERCEPTION

How much space can we embrace with our minds? I was introduced to three magnitudes of space in my training in the swordplay of the *Wūdāng Dàojiào Xuán Wǔ Pài* 武当道教玄武派.¹⁰ The first distance was the range at which I can, with a leap, strike my opponent with my sword, but where I hope they cannot reach me. The second distance allows me to touch my opponent with one hand while also striking them with my sword, while at the third distance, I can strike them with both my elbow and my sword.

These three concentric spaces are named after features and phases of Chinese cosmology. The first range is named after the *bāguà* 八卦, the second is referred to as the range of *tàijǐ* 太极 or *yīnyáng* 阴阳 and the third is called *wújí* 无极. These cosmological designations are surprisingly tactically concrete.¹¹ At the *bāguà* range, there are many possible striking actions available. At the *yīnyáng tàijǐ* range, those possibilities have been curtailed to a few binary options and at the *wújí* range, I cannot differentiate clear striking lines as my limbs are entangled with those of my opponent.

Visualization is used in solo and then in partner practice to map the space of play. As part of my training in *Wūdāng* swordplay, I memorized the octagon of the *bāguà* and practiced projecting it outwards in front of me to encircle my training partner. I also learned to project it downwards towards the ground to encircle myself with the eight principal directions of movement. Lastly, I was asked to visualize the vertical circle in mirror image, to be able to see how my training partner was seeing me.



10 I studied this approach privately with Ismet Himmet in Berlin, in the fall of 2018, for 30 hours. Ismet learned from Yóu Xuán Dé 游玄德, the head of the *Wūdāng Xuánwǔ Pài* in China. My recent studies with Ismet supplemented my earlier work with Chinese sword-play teachers Jason Tsou (2013), Chang Wu Na & Mei Hui Lu (2013 & 2015), and regular fencing practice with my mentor Michael Babin (2012-2018).

11 While readers will recognize these cosmological elements as a part of Chinese religion, we must recall that the ostensibly Daoist students of this swordplay system would be effortlessly familiar with such references and find them easy to recall and project.

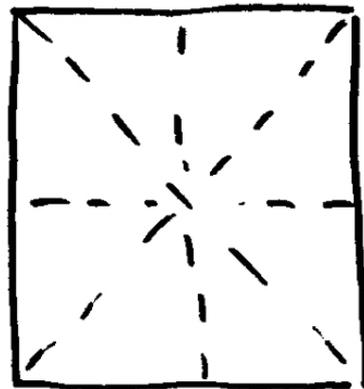
These projections were preceded by a series of meditations done holding the *jiàn* or straight-sword in lying, seated and standing positions. In these *shēn jiàn* 身劍 or 'body and sword', meditations, the student practices merging the felt sense of different parts of their body with the felt sense of the sword they hold. Initially the student imagines breathing in, to their lower abdomen, and breathing out along the blade of the sword, which is imagined to extend infinitely.¹² Gradually, increasingly complex feelings and intentions are asked of the student. During training retreats, for example, students are expected to sleep beside their swords, holding a particular body shape corresponding to the handle, guard and blade of the *jiàn*.

The three ranges of *Xuán Wǔ Pài* swordplay correlate well with the general categories of spatial perception posited by neuropsychology. Extrapersonal space, corresponding to the *bāguà* range, is the space that occurs outside of our reach. Peripersonal space, corresponding to the *yīnyáng* or *tàiji* range occurs within the reach of our limbs. Percutaneous space, corresponding to the *wúji* range, occurs at and just above the surface of our skin, where even if there is no contact, we will sense heat and motion [Elias & Saucier 2006: chapter 10.1]. A contemporary, if reductive interpretation of Tāng's evocative term expansiveness casts it as the ability to transfer the immediate sensitivity we have at close tactile and visual range to spaces further and further from ourselves.

12 Having practiced these methods almost daily since the fall of 2018, I have noticed a marked improvement in my ability to manipulate the *jiàn* in solo *tàolù*, in practicing cuts and thrusts on a swinging, suspended brass pendulum and in free swordplay using limited targets and light protective equipment. Heavier gauntlets seriously inhibit EPP and I do not yet notice much improvement in 'all in' swordplay from this particular practice. I don't spend much more than 20 minutes a day doing these meditations and I am surprised at their effect given they are static and do not model swordplay movement or fighting in a direct manner at all.

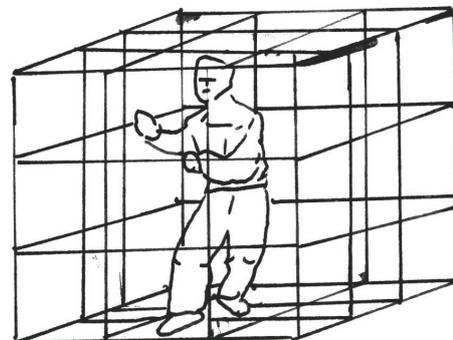
FIRST PERSON EXPERIENCE

In my fifth year of martial training I began to experience an expanded sense of the space around me. I began to automatically project a grid onto the floor of any space I worked in, divided along the diagonal and cardinal lines. The area of the grid was defined by its geometric center and its peripheral boundaries, either lines on the floor for sporting play or actual boundaries such as walls or level changes in the ground:



Asymmetrical, curved or random shapes were adjusted in my perception to angled two dimensional figures such as squares, rectangles and triangles. My training partner defined a second, mobile and dynamic centre to this area.

I also began to sense the position of the ground and objects in the environment through the play of tensions in my training partner's body during controlled, collaborative free-play partner drills such as *tūi shǒu* 推手. I used my partners' bodies to develop extended physiological proprioception to parse the space around us in into three-dimensional cubic cells, through which I perceived their movements:



Over years this awareness developed to the point where I perceived the empty, or negative space around people and objects as a positive object. It felt as though the space was full of a thick, viscous fluid that flowed around me and my training partner, forming a vast, abstract Henry Moore sculpture made of liquid metal. Swordplay further clarified this experience as I used the positive, solid shape of the sword to craft the shape of this negative space ‘sculpture’, determining the pathways of movement of my training partner.

In my professional work as a theatre director, choreographer and teacher of stage movement I discovered that I was developing performances from beginning to end by making sequential changes to the overall shape of the negative space on stage. My mental picture of the stage space, the initial positions of the performers, the viewpoints of the audience, the height of the ceiling and the objects I had planned to use as the set were enough to set the ‘sculpture’ in motion. The change of emphasis from the positive objects I engaged with in the early years of my training to the negative space that currently preoccupies me seems characteristic of training in Chinese martial arts.

REVERSALS IN TRAINING, REVERSALS AS TRAINING

When we begin to learn traditional Chinese martial movement, we are extroverted. We hope to be able to defend ourselves from others, to demonstrate martial skill in competition or performance, and perhaps in doing so to self-consecrate in ways our community will find meritorious. Once initiated into practice, we experience a first reversal. We are asked to differentiate our bodily movement, to breathe with the abdomen in mind, to focus on the personal and internal world of sensation. When we come to express the results of this withdrawal into our soma, we encounter yet another reversal. The self-sensing that we have refined through inward focus becomes an outward projection of perception and action.

Such reversals are fundamental to the Chinese religious practice of *jīn dān* 金丹 or the cultivation of the golden elixir, which dates from the around the 2nd century [Pregadio 2019: 2]. It is found in Daoist and other branches of Chinese normative religion.¹³ It is composed of

13 For example, the practice of *jīn dān* and the worship of Zhāng Sān Fēng were essential elements of the heterodox Sānyī Jiào 三一教 sect created by Lin Zhao'en (1517-1598) whose most distinguished follower was Qī Jiguāng 戚繼光, 1528-1588, the Ming general today celebrated as a possible source of the martial art that became Tàijí Quán. Scott Park Phillips made this discovery correlating the religious studies archive with the more commonly trawled military history one [Phillips 2019: 48-64; see also Dean 1998, for a history of the Sānyī Jiào].

physical exercises and visualization, or *cún xiǎng* 存想. It is undertaken with the view that engaging with our mortality can lead to us towards agency and meaning, rather than to banal social and material careerism. While not literally concerned with the transmutation of metals, *jīn dān* takes its name and its metaphors from alchemy, comparing the reversal of the normal process of human maturation and decay with the transformation of dross into gold.

The reversals of *jīn dān* are also expressed in the narratives of folktales and popular theatre through the trope of divine madness. Consider Zhāng Sān Fēng 張三丰, the Daoist immortal and *jīn dān* master that folk tradition credits with the invention of the supposedly peaceful and enlightening martial art of Tàijí Quán 太極拳. Despite that fact that he is a spiritual being and thus an example to be imitated, he tests the tolerance and openness of all who encounter him by appearing as a filthy, contrarian drunkard who likes nothing more than a good brawl [Phillips 2019: 42-48]. While this perspective resembles a conventional, literary trope such as Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, it is important to keep in mind that *jīn dān* existed as a widely distributed technical and embodied process, not just as a funny story. Its reversals are specific procedures that produce particular psycho-physiological effects. For instance, in the Wūdāng Xuán Wǔ Pài, an oral transmission attributed to Zhāng Sān Fēng, offers advice on adapting training to various climactic conditions:

1. Waxing Moon – practicing sword enhances *qì*,
2. Waning Moon – practicing slow, even open-hand movement develops force or *lì* (力),
3. Windy Night – hike and climb uphill to train the endurance of the lungs,
4. Rainy Night – read Daoist texts and contemplate them,
5. Midnight – meditate to become aware of our ‘human qualities’, chief among these, our mortality and our tendency to deny it.¹⁴

While still quite general, the specification that training should take place at night reverses the social norm of being active by day and sleeping after dark, setting the would-be student of martial arts on the path towards *jīn dān*.

This reversal using internalization followed by spatialization is also found in the two formal Daoist *jīn dān* practices I have learned, as well as in the principal *qìgōng* (氣功) system I practice. In the *Dàojiào Qì*

14 I received these instructions from Ismet Himmet, October 2018, Berlin.

Pán Dà Zuò 道教七盘大坐 of the *Wūdāng Xuánwǔ Pài*,¹⁵ one passes through seven levels of consciousness by visualizing and inhabiting their representative bodies. In the *Huāshān* 花山 tradition one moves from dynamic movement, sound and breath-holding called *Qì Fā Gōng* 气发功 to the circulation of *qì* in the *Xiǎo Zhōu Tiān* 小周天 or the small circuit of the heavens meditation; to the raising and lowering of *qì* in the *Jīn Guān* 金光 or golden light meditation; to the concentration of *qì* in the *Jīn Zhū* 金珠 or golden pearl meditation. All of this results in the creation of the *Yǐng Xíng* 影形, the projected self.¹⁶ Finally, in a reversal worthy of *jīn dān*, *Zhìnéng Qìgōng* 智能气功 begins with a visualization where the body expands to the ‘top and bottom of the universe’, starting, rather than closing with spatial projection.¹⁷

While all these practices are relatively quiescent, they nevertheless assume the martial movement found in *tàolù* as a prerequisite. When meditation or *qìgōng* students lacked this training, all of the teachers I’ve studied with would introduce them to some kind of fundamental martial movements, to allow them to make the process of externalization and its reversals clearer for themselves.

CORRELATION WITH TIBETAN YOGA

As is now well-known after forty years of unprecedented study of religion in Chinese society and history, we Westerners have a congenital incapacity to see the religious dimension in China.

[Lagerwey 2010: 1]

The same is not so of South Asia, where the Western imagination has not just noticed the religious dimension but magnified and exoticized it. Turning to India, we see that *jīn dān*, wherever we may find it in the practices of China, is comparable to a Yogic path. It is a series of *disciplined and systematic techniques for the training and control of the human mind-body complex, which are also understood as techniques for reshaping human consciousness towards some kind of higher goal* [Samuel 2008: 2].

Textual references to a wide variety of practices all named Yoga abound in Indian history. Much like the Chinese martial arts, however, almost all of what is practiced as Yoga today dates from the 1800s.

15 From *Yóu Xuán Dé* via Ismet Himmet, since 2018.

16 From Ken Cohen, since 1998.

17 From Liú Yuán Míng 刘垣明 via Sui Meing Wong, since 1993.

The Tibetan Six Yogas of Naropa is one of the few extant pre-19th century traditions of Yoga. It follows a comparable series of reversals to the ones found in *jīn dān*. The practice begins with intense physical training, called *trulkhor*, that includes extensive martial and theatrical movement [Phillips & Mroz 2016: 148]. The heat, weight and vibration experienced in *trulkhor* is turned within using visualization and breath retention to produce heat in the body, called *tummo*. The resulting expansiveness is used to project the imagination out of the body, into a variety of spaces. The adept visualizes and projects multiple bodies for themselves. They project themselves into the liminal space between life and death, and subjectively experience of the ejection of their consciousness into pure space [Baker 2019: 200-210].

The correlation of this process with *jīn dān* is unmistakable. Historically, Vajrayana Buddhism has identified with Indian sources to discourage Chinese territorial claims. Culturally however, Tibetan Yoga was strongly influenced by Chinese *Chán* 禅 Buddhist and Daoist methods developed on Mt. Wutai in Shanxi province [Baker 2012: 222]. Further, the subtle body system of energetic centres and channels or *chakras* and *nadis* now considered characteristic of Yoga and Tantra writ large, also appears to have entered the Indian tradition from China in the 8th century [Samuel 2008: 278-282].

Perhaps our easy acceptance of the religiosity of India and Tibet, and the documented influence of Chinese religion on these cultures can allow us to further explore the Chinese martial arts as religious expressions.

CONCLUSION

Tàolù are ingenious acts of martial preparation, religious self-consecration and theatrical performance. The practice of *tàolù* can train us to project our imaginations into the negative space around our bodies. This perception may allow us to intentionally manipulate that empty space as though it were positive object or substance. To develop this skill, we transfer the immediate sensitivity we have at close tactile and visual range to spaces further and further from ourselves. Extended physiological proprioception, cultivated in both the open-handed and armed collaborative partner games of the Chinese martial arts, seems to play a major role in this process. As our sensitivity expands, we experience our mind occupying all of the space which it can encompass, perceiving and moving our bodies as though from outside. This phenomenological experience has its roots in the Chinese religious conception of *dìyuán*, the Daoist China of space and cosmos, and was originally actualized with cunning or *qiǎo* in the physical and metaphysical practice of martial arts as war magic.

Tradition does not provide a single term or definition for this unusual skill or attribute. Daoist traditions speak of the projected self or *yǐng xíng*. The martial manual the *Tàiji jīng* 太极经 describes this ability as the state of enlightened *shén míng* 神明, literally a ‘radiant spirit’ [Doherty 2009: 64; Masich 2020: 1; Zhang 2016: 68-70]. Oral tradition in *xìqǔ* calls it *gǎn tán chàng* 感坛倡, ‘the sense of the stage’ or the ability to control the audience’s experience of space and time, creating suspense and entertainment. Turning to contemporary authors, D.S. Farrer describes the feats of spatial memory performed by the *Coffee Shop Gods*, the master martial artists of Singapore [Farrer 2011: 203-237]. Scott Park Phillips proposes the *tangible imagination* as the field in which this perception and action takes place [2019: 221]. Writing about the correlate ability of perceiving trajectories in space as tangible geometric shapes, Soviet sports psychologist Grigori Raiport describes the *objective imagination* [1998: 50-51]. All these terms are compelling, but there is still much research to be done: for now, we must be content to know that *tàolù* cultivate a very special spatial sense, about which we can always learn more.

Tàolù call upon us to examine the unseen. The implied but absent elements suggested by these choreographies are signs of their combative, theatrical and religious nature, but also of the presence of *qiǎo* in their design. The fighting usage of the movements has to be filled in by the individual player or their audience. If the shape the player takes is a character from Chinese theatre, it is the viewer who recognizes that figure and places it into a story or a fragment of a story. Visualizing the fictional assailant trapped within our limbs makes us aware of the empty and the full, the *xū* 虚 and *shí* 實 or the imaginary and real elements found in our peripersonal space. This implies a larger realization of the complementary relationship between form and emptiness and the fundamentally composite nature of our reality. A well-presented *tàolù* might convince us that its player has fighting ability they in fact lack, or that they are in possession of special skills or war magic, where in fact there is none. From the perspective of the performer or the witness, we can experience violence transformed, exorcism, trickery, entertainment, ritual and increased depth, all because of the evoked unseen.

Tàolù play a ubiquitous, symbolic role in Chinese culture, not unlike the *lóng* 龍 or dragon. The *lóng* is a composite creature with the head of a tiger, the horns of a ram, the body of a snake, the claws of an eagle and the scales of a fish. It represents the original fusion of the nomadic hunting tribes who merged to practice agriculture along the banks of the Yellow River, becoming the Han people [Tu 1997: 4]. In the calendrical cycle of totemic animals, each creature has its own pattern of behaviour, characterized by a quality of energy or *qì*. The *lóng* is described as moving up, out and down, over and over, in an

undulating sine wave that mirrors the progressive reversals of *jīn dān*. The cultivation of the spatial sense is one of the many coils revealed by this endless dragon. In combative training, theatrical performance and religious expression, the practice of *tàolù* actualizes this unusual and powerful experience.

Acknowledgements

Video Artist: Richard Cousins.

Research Assistant: Rex Li 李泽轩.

Readers, Teachers and Friends: Laura Astwood, Art Babayans, Michael Babin, Ian Baker, Graham Barlow, Chang Wu Na & Mei Hui Lu, Chen Zhonghua, Ken Cohen, Guy Cools, Gordon Cooper, Erick Desjardins, Chad Eisner, John Evans, D.S. Farrer, Richard Fowler, Adam Frank, Victor Garaway, Ismet Himmet, Damon Honeycutt, Badger Jones, Ben Judkins, Vera Kérchy, Alex Kozma, Ma Yue, Chris Manuel, Stefan Marcec, Sam Masich, Jared Miracle, John Pence, Scott Park Phillips, Jo Riley, Jack Rusher, Geoffrey Samuel, Debbie Shayne, Mike Sutherland, James Tam, Marc Tellez, Jason Tsou, Doug Woolidge and Sui Meing Wong.

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湯, 汝昆. 意拳淺釋. Publication information unavailable.

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Journal DOI

10.18573/ISSN.2057-5696

Issue DOI

10.18573/mas.i10

Accepted for publication 30 October 2020

Martial Arts Studies

Journal design by Hugh Griffiths

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