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TRANSLATING CHINESE TRADITIONAL CULTURE INTO INSTITUTIONAL SPORT AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF TAIJIQUAN IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

This article presents three different sites of taijiquan practice in the People's Republic of China, where this traditional practice is organized by state institutions. This introduces new representations and norms related to modern ideas of sport as well as of national culture. By observing taijiquan practices in institutionally diverse settings, this paper explores the dynamic process by which Chinese state institutions and practitioners articulate specific understandings of traditional culture with a certain idea of national governance and the modernization of society. While institutions rely on taijiquan body technics and theoretical elements to promote an orthodox traditional cultural landscape, practitioners also actively articulate traditional values and modes of socialization when taking part in institutional activities. Throughout the discussion of the three ethnographic case studies, this paper reflects on the ways that the broad idea of Traditional Culture is accommodated by various social actors in today's People Republic of China.

INTRODUCTION

From October 2019 to February 2020, I have been a keen observer of the daily training and social life of athletes within the taijiquan group of the Beijing elite wushu team. In the evening of December 9, after his afternoon training, one of the elite athletes invited me for a meal and to meet a former athlete who is now a coach in the National Sport Centre in Beijing. During dinner, the athlete turned to me and recalled: 'When I was young, big brother Zhao would look after us. When we were watching him train, we were all very impressed. It gave us the strength to train hard'. He continued: 'From time to time, I invite my big brother to share a meal. It is a kind of politeness. It shows respect and gratitude. *This is Chinese traditional culture.* We strongly respect our elder peers. You see, we are practicing a traditional Chinese sport, so in our everyday life we are more inclined to behave in a traditional manner'. Throughout the months we spent together, the athlete developed a keen understanding of my research topic and the kind of questions I deal with. Later that same evening he told me that my research should reflect what he had spoken of earlier. In this paper, I will follow the advice he gave me that evening.

I start this contribution on taijiquan in the PRC with this short anecdote in order to provide the reader with a concrete example of how I encountered the category of 'Chinese Traditional Culture' (*zhongguo chuantong wenhua* 中国传统文化) during my fieldwork in the PRC. Indeed, most of the actors I observed – individuals and institutions alike – relied on this category when defining the practice of taijiquan and more broadly Chinese martial arts in general. I will go back in detail on the situation of the taijiquan elite sport team and the position of this specific discipline in terms of the umbrella concept of Chinese martial arts (or *wushu* (武术), as they are referred to in the PRC institutional discourses). Before entering into these details, I would like to deepen the interpretation of what the athlete was referring to by 'Chinese traditional culture' (CTC) and how it is significant in a reflection about what this category means in mainland China today.

First of all, the athlete was referring to the very common and mundane experience of inviting his 'big brother' to dinner and the specific table manners he would display on such occasions. During such evenings, the athlete was spending time catching up with a past fellow teammate – his behaviour being shaped through Confucian representations of social norms: the young athlete displays respect and gratitude to his elder by inviting him to dinner. The athlete is performing here 'old customs and beliefs handed down from generation to generation, such as 'respect one's elders', [...] without being actually aware of the Confucian nature of these customs and beliefs' [Zlotea 2017: 295-296]. The athlete also associates this kind of behaviour to the practice of taijiquan as both

embodying Chinese traditional values and way of life. The reference to Chinese Traditional Culture (CTC) implies that these customs are shared among the Chinese national 'imagined community'. The athlete interprets his experience through the prism of what Anderson would call the 'national consciousness' [Anderson 1983]. His discourse thus reveals how he articulates ideas of national belonging and identity into his daily life and his martial arts practice. Of course, these ideas are shaped by the broader political and ideological context of the PRC in which the athlete evolves.

As a professional athlete, the practitioner is actively engaged in activities organized by national state institutions and it is interesting to interpret his dialogue and the emphasis on the Traditional Culture in the light of the nationalist rhetoric of PRC state institutions – what Anderson refers to as 'official nationalism' [Anderson 1983]. The sinologist Muger Zlotea notes how 'There is almost no speech made by China's top leaders that does not contain at least some references to the 'outstanding traditional culture' (*youxiu chuantong wenhua*)' [Zlotea 2017: 295]. Zlotea describes how the current PRC president Xi Jinping while recurrently citing classical literature, including the Confucian Classics, carefully omits any mention of Confucius and other historical figures, placing together these various philosophical traditions and the individual figures who are associated with them under the broader and vaguer concept of Chinese Traditional Culture. Zlotea argues that by doing so, the CCP avoids any potential rivalry between these philosophical movements and Marxism as it is wielded within the broader framework of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics.¹ Of course, the recurrent reference to traditional culture in CCP leadership is part of a larger political process, what Anderson would call the 'official nationalism' of the Chinese government where the national state governance relies on the 'image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation' [Anderson 1983: 44]. In the light of this process, it is interesting to see how the athlete – who participated in institutional activities on a daily basis throughout his professional training – is appropriating the dominant category of CTC when reflecting on his daily life experience along with a (Swiss) anthropologist.²

1 On Zlotea's analysis of Confucianism within CCP discourse, see also Zlotea [2015].

2 Of course, the fact that I am not Chinese must have had an influence on the events as they were related. However, I think my observer status as an anthropologist outgrew my status as foreigner in my interactions with the team members. I will reflect in more detail on this issue in the methodological section.

A few months later, I questioned him again on his understanding of how Chinese Traditional Culture was playing out in the daily group life of the team. When asked specifically about the relationship between Confucianism and the symbolic brotherhood between team members, the athlete insisted that 'Confucianism is one branch of traditional Chinese culture, but there are many more' (*rujia shi zhongguo chuantong wenhua Zhong de yige pai, haiyou hen duo* '儒家是中国传统文化中的一个派. 还有很多'). In this specific example, the practitioner's dialogue is reminiscent of that of the state institutions. The broad category of Chinese Traditional Culture (CTC) seems to provide the athlete with a more malleable tool to describe his social experience than complex references to literary classics. CTC is understood as a diverse array of customs and norms that structure the social life. Moreover, the athlete's words also refer to a wider phenomenon than the local group (here the team). CTC is understood as shared by the whole national community and thus becomes a pivotal element in the making of national identity. And finally, the athlete's discourse has to be interpreted in the light of the political context of the PRC in which state institutions actively reclaim the category in their rhetoric.

PROBLEMATIC

This contribution will reflect on the notion of traditional Chinese culture in the context of taijiquan by looking at both the concrete social phenomenon it refers to within practitioners and institutional communication and the broader national ideology of the PRC that frames this communication. It will focus on three case studies, namely the Beijing Elite Wushu Team (*Beijing zhuan ye wushudui* 北京专业武术队), the taijiquan training program held by Xicheng District Sport Bureau of Beijing Municipality and Chinese martial arts research and teaching activities within the Sport and Physical Education College of Beijing Normal University. These studies will provide insights, from three different perspectives, into practices happening within strongly institutionalized setups.

Through ethnographic description, I will argue that the formalization of traditional martial arts by Chinese institutions into nationally shared and standardized practices has opened up a new field of national debate over the meanings of these practices and thus the meaning of traditional culture itself. In order to interpret these studies in light of the broader national context, I will briefly present what can be called the 'traditional transmission framework' of Chinese Martial Arts which offers interesting counter-narratives to the institutional discourses. Indeed, the formalization of practices by institutions does not always reflect the original practices spread out within the population. However, as we

will see in the case studies, the institutions are also actively adjusting both practices and communication in regard to the critical elements brought up by grassroots practitioners. In this paper, I will thus try to highlight a complex circular process where institutions and grassroots practitioners maintain a (sometimes precarious) dialogue in order to 'accommodate' [Bugnon 2018] the various and conflictual views of how Chinese martial arts and the traditional culture they represent should be understood and performed. The paper will highlight what Florence Graezer Bideau outlines as 'the dynamics of cultural categories that are constructing themselves through a constant exchange between elites and social actors' [Graezer Bideau 2008: 59].

METHODOLOGY

The overall argument in which this paper would like to position itself is related to the broad concept of Chinese martial arts. However, this paper would rather focus on practices referred to as taijiquan for analytical and practical reasons. It is therefore worthwhile to reflect here on how the concept of Chinese martial arts will be used in this contribution and how taijiquan fits within this broader concept.

Chinese martial arts or wushu as they are referred to in mandarin, describe today in the PRC a large array of practices related to combat, combat training or combat performances and also include what is categorised as ethnic minority sports such as Mongolian wrestling. The CWA, the organisation responsible to 'federate all the professionals and amateurs of the country' [CWA Constitution] defines wushu by distinguishing between traditional wushu and competitive wushu. This broad definition of Chinese martial arts (CMA), used at an institutional level, reflects the Chinese government's political project to include national minority cultures in its definition of Chinese culture – defining Chinese culture as a multi-ethnic concept united under the common umbrella of the Chinese nation. However, in reality, this inclusion remains at a rhetorical level, as the concept of CMA, in its most common understanding, usually describes a much narrower array of practices. These are divided into styles which are linked into a specific lineage of masters going back to the founder of the style. Throughout my ethnographic enquiries in the PRC, I have observed groups of practitioners in Hebei province practice *bajiquan* from Wu Zhong lineage, Wu family taijiquan from Wu Yuxiang lineage. In Fujian province, I have observed the *meihuaquan* style from Wang Ding lineage.

Taijiquan holds a special status within the spectrum of practices under the umbrella of the generic term wushu in the People's Republic of

China (PRC). In 1956 – two years prior to the creation of the Chinese Wushu Federation (CWF) in 1958 – the National Sport Bureau had created a ‘simplified taijiquan’ set for the purpose of mass transmission within the Chinese society with a focus on fitness and health. The PRC also specifically promoted taijiquan in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) framework. As of today, eight different lineages of taijiquan have been registered as National ICH items for a total of 10 entries³ [Chinese ICH Website: project]. Taijiquan was also inscribed on the Representative List of ICH of Humanity in 2020. [UNESCO Lists] Taijiquan is also an independent competition category within the ‘wushu sport’ (武术运动) framework, unlike the other two main categories, namely *changquan* (长拳) and *naquan* (南拳) that are mashup of different styles. [IWUF Sport Wushu] On a technical level, one could even argue that taijiquan competition routines share more resemblance with their traditional counterparts than for example *changquan* with *chaquan* (查拳)(which was reportedly the style that inspired *changquan* routines).

I will come back on these various aspects of taijiquan along the discussion of the case studies. What I want to convey here is that among all the styles of Chinese Martial Arts, taijiquan is one of the most largely practiced and recognisable by the large public.⁴ It also holds a specific place within institutions as it is widely promoted as mass sport, ICH item, and competitive sport event. As an ethnographer, taijiquan allowed me to navigate through very different social settings following the same style of martial arts. This offers me the opportunity to create a continuity in the discussion of isolated ethnographical sites that would have been more complicated with the other styles I observed. Taijiquan will thus function as a case study to shed light on the broad process by which Chinese authorities have appropriated martial arts practices in general in their cultural policies, creating new ways of practicing and representing these arts.

3 Some lineages have several entries associated with different locations in China. I also don't include the 'Wudang wushu' entry that includes practices usually referred as taijiquan

4 I would say that Shaolin martial arts share the same amount of recognition in the large public. However, in Shaolin technical system, there is no equivalent to the 'simplified taijiquan' created and promoted by institutions almost exclusively for fitness and health purpose.

MARTIAL ARTS TRADITIONAL FRAMEWORK

Throughout the various fieldwork projects from which I derive this contribution, I purposefully conducted observations within practitioners operating in institutional setups (similar to those of this paper's three case studies) as well as what De Grave would call the ‘traditional transmission framework’, which describes groups of practitioners structured around ‘the elderly/youth relationship especially the parent/child relationship, which express the relationship built between the master and his/her disciples’ [De Grave 2007: 3]. This idea is reminiscent of the kind of Confucian based kinship articulated by the athlete in the opening example and I will return to it later. In the case of CMA, there is a growing corpus of academic literature focusing on the study of ‘folk martial arts’ (*minjian wushu* 民间武术) that explore various aspects of the social dynamics of these groups.⁵ The transmission mode is commonly understood as the ‘apprenticeship of the art through the ritual of praying for a master to accept oneself as his/her disciple’ (*baishi xueyi* 拜师学艺). As the disciple performs the ‘ritual of praying the master to accept oneself as a disciple’ (*baishi yishi* 拜师仪式), he symbolically enters the master's household (*rumen* 入门) as a symbolic son or daughter and is thus bonded with other members of the genealogy with a symbolic kinship. As a result, the disciple is entitled to access the technical knowledge transmitted by the master and father figure. It is interesting to note that this system of knowledge is not so much presented as traditional (*chuantong* 传统) by the actors themselves but rather ‘transmitted by previous generations’ (*laoqianbei chuan de* 老前辈传的). I will not go into the details here of the social dynamics of the traditional mode of transmission and the groups in which this mode reproduces. For the purpose of the current argument, I would like to highlight how the traditional framework focuses on lineage and kinship among members of the community of practice and that this structure – which is much related to Confucian social hierarchy – is the one feature that is referred to as traditional or folkloric by academia. And in return, practitioners tend also to adopt this point of view.

In regards to this traditional framework, there is another common aspect that it is important to highlight here; this is the focus in technical

5 This academic trend primarily concerns Chinese publications. Gong Maofu [2017] notes ‘the attention gradually paid by a handful of researchers on folk martial arts in recent years’ and continues by providing a list of important works in this field of research. The same author published five years earlier a detailed monograph about these kind of communities. In English publications, the work of Thomas A. Green is noteworthy. The author also uses the category of ‘vernacular martial arts’ to emphasize the orality of the transmission in opposition to written standards and manuals of the institutions. See for example: [Zhang et al. 2016: 18-29]

training on what can be badly translated as the 'striking force'. Each style of CMA (and perhaps each master) has its own way to theorize the body mechanics allowing the practitioner to produce the correct force in order to strike an opponent in a combat situation. In Mandarin, the most common word I encountered during my fieldwork was the concept of 'jin' (劲). It was common for a master to comment on his/her disciple's movements in terms of 'having jin' or 'not having jin' (*you jin/meiyou jin* 有劲/没有劲). One master very distinctively separated the 'training of taolu' (*lian taolu* 练套路), as a first step of the apprenticeship and the 'training of jin' (*lian jin* 练劲), as a second step which came with very different training exercises. One master spoke about 'internal jin' (*neigong* 内劲), understood as a force produced by an internal process of the body (such as organs, but also qi), as opposed to external muscular strength (*liliang* 力量). In one instance, the 'use of jin' (*yong jin* 用劲) during taolu exercises was directly associated to the 'development of gongfu' (*zhang gongfu* 张功夫), gongfu here taking a very similar meaning to jin itself. Often also, practitioners used the word 'explosive force' (*baofali* 爆发力) to describe the same kind of embodied knowledge. The purpose here is not to dive in detail into the extraordinarily complex and diversified 'CMA Theories' (*wushu lilun* 武术理论). What I want to highlight here is that a large number of individuals who choose to take the very serious and demanding path of the martial arts apprenticeship often do so primarily to master jin, gongfu or the explosive force. Hence, these skills are being seen as the core defining element of the art transmitted from previous generations of masters. And through the semantic shift that defines martial arts as a representative of traditional Chinese culture, so are considered these specific skills: the representatives of an authentic Chinese Culture.

What I wanted to highlight with this over-simplified description of the 'traditional' transmission framework of Chinese martial arts is that for those who take on the apprenticeship and follow one master for many years, the elements seen as traditional are the Confucian style kinship among members and the lineage-based community, on the one hand, and the mastery of the specific embodied knowledge of the striking force, on the other. It is worth noting here that the mastery of the striking force is primarily articulated through the idea of combat efficiency but not exclusively as it is also believed to provide physical and mental health.⁶ One can therefore describe the meanings and values associated with Chinese Traditional Culture in Chinese martial arts as articulated in this framework through the ideas of filiation (to the lineage), kinship (between members) and martiality (combat efficiency).

6 On this aspect, see Partikova's interesting reflection on 'mental toughness' [Partikova 2018].

TAIJIQUAN IN THE PRC SPORT POLICY

In recent years in the People's Republic of China, the 'promotion and safeguarding of outstanding traditional Chinese culture' (*tuiguang yu baohu zhongguo youxiu chuantong wenhua* 推广与保护中国优秀传统文化) has been an important feature in the political rhetoric of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). As many observers have noticed, the authorities of the PRC within their political project have elaborated a discourse on the traditional culture that has led to the standardization of practices into nationally shared and politically acceptable forms [Bugnon 2018; Durand-Dastès 2014; Graezer 2003; Graezer Bideau 2008; Micollier 2007]. Elements labelled as 'feudal' (*fengjian* 封建) or 'sectarian' (*zongpai* 宗派) have been proscribed by state institutions, such as national sports associations. These institutions are thus shaping the framework of 'orthodox' practice showing 'their will to keep control over the meaning' of these practices [Graezer 2003: 294].

In today's People's Republic of China, the notion of traditional Chinese culture is in one way or another always underpinning discourses about Chinese martial arts in general and taijiquan in particular – both for grassroots practitioners and state institutions: 'The formation of taijiquan is inextricably related to traditional Chinese culture and has a deep cultural basis' (太极拳的形成发展与中国传统文化有着千丝万缕的联系, 拥有深厚的文化底蕴) [Lü 2018: 2]. The scientific project of documenting martial practices from Chinese antiquity to the present day has become a dominant representation of Chinese martial arts [Gianni 2017; Lorge 2012, Wushu Research Institute 1996], embedded in the common motto: 'Wushu has five thousand years of history, its culture is broad and profound' (*wushu you wuqian nian de lishi, wenhua bodajingshen* 武术有五千年的历史, 文化博大精深). This historical approach, initiated by the Chinese historian Tang Hao during the republican period (1912-1949), has debunked creationist myths of the origins of Chinese martial arts including the attribution of the creation of taijiquan to the Daoist monk Zhang Sanfeng [Bowman 2016; Wile 2016]. However, as Lorge [2012: 3] reflects: 'The modern understanding of martial arts as only unarmed fighting skills for self-defence, abstracted movements for self-cultivation, or the wielding of archaic weapons for aesthetics or improved health is a modern perspective inconsistent with earlier practice'. Therefore, the historiography of wushu over thousands of years is not about the origins of contemporary phenomena but rather the understanding of past practices of which some elements have been passed down to the present. If not carefully reflexive about its object of study – the historical approach that focuses on the 'historical process of "development"' (*lishi fazhan guocheng* 历史发展过程) of present practices, introduces an ideological paradigm representing the history of current Chinese martial arts as a continuum necessarily linked to

the existence of China and Chinese culture itself. This process tends to essentialize contemporary phenomena by presenting them as an ancient and broad 'Chinese martial arts culture' (*wushu wenhua* 武术文化). In turn, this culture becomes an umbrella concept to refer to the heterogeneous frameworks of practices, values, social networks, etc. that today fall under the category of Chinese martial arts – from the most institutionalized instances, such as elite sport teams, to the most popular and traditional, such as the apprenticeship by a master through a ritual initiation.

Today, the classification of taijiquan in PRC institutional discourses is centred around the category of 'traditional sport' (*chuantong tiyu* 传统体育) and encompass a broad definition of what a sport can be. As we see in the three cases developed in this article, taijiquan currently exists in PRC institutions as a form of elite and competitive sport discipline aligned with the Olympic ideology, as a widespread form of fitness exercise for health purposes and a part physical education in public schools. The common denominator is that the practice embeds the spirit of the Chinese nation as well as its people and its culture. Even before being officially registered as Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2006, taijiquan and other martial arts styles were represented as what Pinson would call 'heritage sport' which is intermingled with 'folk customs' (*minjian fengsu* 民间风俗) and ethnicity (*minzu* 民族) [Pinson 2017].

At the foundation of the PRC in 1949, martial arts had been present within the population for at least one century [Judkins and Nielson 2015]. Moreover, they had already been reframed as an institutionalized and national practice during the nationalist period (1912-1949) [Lorge 2012: 223-225]. Inspired by the budo movement in imperialist and militarized Japan [Garcia 2020], influential reformers reframed martial arts in their political project as a tool for the construction of what Anne-Marie Thiesse refers as a 'patriotic body' embodying the nation [Thiesse 1999: 242]. In 1958, the Chinese Wushu Association (CWA Ethics) was created under the supervision of the National Sport Bureau. Its mission was to 'federate all the professionals and amateurs of the country' and 'put in order' (*zhengli* 整理) the numerous systems of techniques that are then sorted together under the generic term of wushu (武术) (CWA Constitution). Two years prior, the National Sport Administration had already compiled a new 'simplified' (*jianhua* 简化) sets of techniques becoming standardized (*biaozhun* 标准) on a national level for the nationwide mass dissemination of this body exercise [Lorge 2012: 234-235].

The first decade of communist rule can be interpreted as the continuation of this movement within a Marxist framework. Following the Yan'an conference on literature and art, traditional culture is conceived as a practice that is familiar to the masses and can thus be

used to achieve the socialist revolution [McDougall 1980]. Traditional and ethnic sports were thus mobilized to strengthen the masses' bodies. According to testimonies I had the opportunity of recording in the Fujian Province, local wushu associations were very active in the organization of activities between 1955 up to 1962-64. All members of lineages present in Fuzhou City and nearby were invited to present their taolu during these gatherings and would be offered a modest meal as a reward. Practitioners were aware of the aesthetic criteria that would be applied in the events, as only taolu technics were performed. However, specific rules to designate winners (as in modern sport) were not yet articulated. If the state promoted the kind of activities that were framed inside the institutional grasp, the traditional social networks of master and disciples were merely tolerated and looked upon with suspicion by the Communist Party because of the fighting skills of the members of these communities. The traditional transmission framework represented a threat for the authorities as some groups could effectively 'resist the government at the local level' [Lorge 2012: 226]. The ritual mode of initiation by a master – who then has authority on the techniques and their associated meanings – was labeled feudal and was replaced in the institutional discourse with the rational elements of modern sport. After 1962, the activities organized by local institutions declined and all activities stopped until the end of the Cultural Revolution.

Taijiquan is also largely integrated into what is called mass sport (*qunzhong tiyu* 群众体育) with little to no focus on competitive or aesthetic elements, rather solely concentrating on fitness and health benefits. From the opening era and through the next two decades until 1999, scholars note a boom in many religious, spiritual or health practices. In parks and public squares, groups of practitioners gather in public places to practice taijiquan and other Chinese calisthenics focusing on health and spiritual benefit [Palmer 2007]. To this day, it is very common to see groups of individuals – often elderly people – practicing taijiquan and qigong in urban public places. In 1999, following the crackdown on Falun Gong practitioners, this kind of neighbourhood urban activity was impacted. A system of 'social sport instructor' (*tiyu shehui zhidaoyuan* 体育社会指导员) was implemented to monitor the activity of central members of these groups and a new compilation of authorized qigong routines grouped under the name 'qigong fitness' (*jianshen qigong* 健身气功) was created and promoted throughout the country and abroad to be practiced alongside standardized taijiquan. These new norms and standardized contents to be performed during gatherings have an impact on the social fabric of these groups and the dynamics in which they reproduce themselves. Practitioners must, on the one hand, actively articulate this new framework of rules and contents in their daily practices and, on the other hand, state institutions negotiate with these groups' members the

technicalities of the policy implementation. The following section will explore how this dynamic plays out in the management of taijiquan activities in the Xicheng district of Beijing Municipality.

RE-INTRODUCING TUISHOU EXERCISES IN TAIJIKAN XICHENG DISTRICT TUISHOU WORKSHOP

Tuishou (推手), usually translated as ‘pushing hands’, is a very common exercise in taijiquan. Despite many variants among lineage and practitioners, the most basic principle is that two practitioners use their arms to push each other while maintaining their wrists in contact following a regular pattern of attack and defence where they take turns to assume one of these two roles. In the Wu lineage that I have observed in detail, tuishou was practiced on a daily basis most of the time when the master wanted to make a point and show the effects of a technique when applied on an opponent. More generally, tuishou exercise is associated with taijiquan martial efficiency. It is a way for the practitioner to both train and evaluate their mastery of the martial aspects of taijiquan.

While tuishou is a central part for many taijiquan practitioners in China – especially in the apprenticeship framework – it is surprisingly absent in many institutional practices and discourses. In the competitive sport framework, tuishou events can be observed during traditional sports gatherings. However, tuishou is almost never performed in elite competitive sport as it is not a competitive event either in the national championship or international ones. Taolu athletes occasionally perform a few choreographed push-hands movements during public performances or in the new competition event called ‘couple-taolu’ (*hunhe shuangren taolu* 混合双人套路), but do not integrate this exercise in their daily training routine. The ranking system implemented by the Chinese Wushu Federation also does not include tuishou exercises in its official teaching manual and rather replaces tuishou by choreographed sparring sequences as well as a section on ‘technique explanations’ which present how to apply particular techniques in combat but without providing a systematic training method or specific exercises to improve this aspect [Wushu Research Institute 2011].

On September 5, 2019 the *Xicheng district wushu sport training promotion ‘taiji tuishou’ basics workshop* (*xichengqu wushu peixun tuiguang ‘taiji tuishou’ gugan zhuancheng* 西城区武术培训推广‘太极推手’骨干专场) was held. My research partner informed me of the special status of Xicheng district within the Beijing Municipality as many national-level government offices and personnel are located there. As such,

district level sports associations are not typically allowed to organize events such as competitions or other kinds of meetings. In the case of wushu, instead of such events, the district Sport Bureau provide the local wushu association with funding to organize training programs for local practitioners. The district government also provided a wushu hall in the basement of the very modern and comprehensive District Sport Centre. The training hall itself has a large space with enough room for competition carpets and with high ceilings which are particularly convenient for training with long weapons. Near the entrance, the wall was decorated with many posters that depicted the wushu culture in the Xicheng district. On the other side, gym ladders as well as other gymnastic devices are stored in a small extension. Overall, the hall is a perfect location for wushu training.

The local sports bureau has hired Teacher Zhang⁷, a Beijing-native who has practiced taijiquan since his teenage years with several local masters without having the opportunity to formally enter any lineage through the master-disciple ritual. Teacher Zhang has a successful taijiquan institute in Beijing’s outskirts and has collaborated with the Xicheng District sports Bureau for many years. A few days prior to the event, the Sports Bureau director set up a meeting inviting Teacher Zhang and another *baguazhang* (八卦掌) master⁸ along with two local contractors in the media industry in order to discuss potential future projects. During the meeting, Teacher Zhang highlighted the value of tuishou exercises in taijiquan to the bureau officials and the local entrepreneurs. His presentation, mixing verbal explanations with applications on both me and my research partner, emphasized on how the practice tuishou can help the individual to develop awareness of their own body and the environment, and how this benefits wellness and health in general. He also explained how tuishou is rooted in Chinese culture, borrowing its principles such as transformation of yin/yang, the five elements (*wuxing* 五行) qi and internal energy. Teacher Zhang also emphasized that tuishou is an integral part of taijiquan and how every taijiquan practitioner should train this exercise regularly. Unlike the tuishou I’ve observed in the Wu lineage of Guangfu, Teacher Zhang focused on loosening up movements instead of the hard pushing of the Wu lineage.

We arrived at around 8:30 – along with my research partner – in the vast complex of the Sport Centre of Xicheng district. Making our way through the long and large corridors of the compound, we arrived at the centre’s wushu hall where about 50 participants were keeping themselves occupied while Teacher Zhang and his students

7 I use here an alias to protect the identity of this actor.

8 Literally, the **Palm of the eight trigrams**. It is a relatively popular style in Beijing and elsewhere in China.

were preparing the technical apparatus required for the teaching. Participants were mainly elderly with a prominent number of women. As my research partner remarked: 'It's a Thursday morning, you cannot come if you work... except for us whose work is to come here!' All the participants seem to know each other and a very friendly and relaxed atmosphere is present in the wushu hall. Although some of the participants seem suspicious about me and avoid interacting, I had many occasions to exchange informal talks or even to exercise tuishou throughout the duration of the workshop. One student noted, 'It's great that you are so passionate about Chinese traditional culture. I haven't had the opportunity of learning taijiquan when I was young, but now I practice every day and it makes me feel extremely well'. Another participant observed, 'I have known Teacher Zhang for a long time. I come to every workshop. It's very useful to have an expert to learn from. And we all meet here together. It's a lot of fun!'

After a theoretical introduction – whose contents were very similar to the speech at the Sport Bureau – Teacher Zhang and one of his senior students climbed up on the stage and started to show the audience the basic movements of tuishou. He insisted on loosening limbs and articulations through the continuous flow of movements. Participants then paired up in small groups of 2-3 people and started to exercise while a few students of Teacher Zhang walked around the groups to provide corrections. Teacher Zhang remained on stage where participants could join him for a short session of tuishou. Seeing participants practicing in pairs, it seemed to me that they weren't competing against each other as I had observed in Guangfu, but were rather focusing on the collaboration between each other to successfully perform the jerk-free movements. The focus was not to unbalance the opponent but rather to find together a free flow of movement.

This session was the first of a series of 10 weekly classes dedicated to tuishou training. Participants can register through an app for a modest 40 yuan (around 5 euros). People who live outside of Xicheng district could also register but it seems that the program was not advertised outside the local channel of the Xicheng Sport Bureau thus keeping the meeting attendees mostly within Xicheng borders.

In his description of taijiquan practitioners in public parks in Shanghai, the anthropologist Adam Frank highlights 'the dynamic construction of identity that arises out of daily practice' [Frank 2006: 55]. As he states: 'The art of taijiquan provides a medium for a social-sensual construction of identity that is heavily attached to modernist notions of Daoism and historically rooted in specific conceptions of ethnic identity' [2006: 3]. Although Frank describes lineage-based practices, we see that in Shanghai as in Beijing, taijiquan practitioners who occupy the public urban space are involved in community building: a sense

of belonging is built within the group of practice through the mode of socialization related to taijiquan training. Moreover, the taijiquan representations of Chinese traditions that emerge through the practice of these movements provide the practitioners with a symbolic link to an idealized past constituting the origin of an authentic identity. Because of this so-called 'profound cultural significance', many taijiquan practitioners don't feel the need to rigorously train the martial aspect as long as the practice is embedded in traditional values. As Frank observes in a group of retiree practitioners:

Without the burden of intensive push hands training, which always seemed to breed competition, this group was almost completely without ego in the way they approached learning taijiquan. For me, that became the most important lesson I learned from Chen and his retirees. Despite my pretences to master taijiquan's martial aspects, I came to appreciate it here as art, as a creative act that people practiced for the joy of it. [Frank 2006: 92]

It is also interesting to look at the tuishou seminar in the light of the recent controversies that started in 2017 when Xu Xiaodong, a Beijing-based boxer, began to defeat traditional martial artists in public matches [Atkin 2019]. The story of Xu Xiaodong, and other similar stories that occurred in its wake, started a national debate in official media, social networks and of course among martial arts practitioners. Xu Xiaodong was taking on traditional culture, showing some of its contradictions. He was proposing an alternative discourse to the official one, in which a martial art's value as outstanding traditional culture was not simply taken for granted but rather tested and earned in the ring. Martial arts are not inherently good because they represent Chinese culture: their values have to live up to their legacy, namely combat efficiency. The authorities condemned and censored Xu Xiaodong but they also adapted the modalities of the institution's management of martial arts. As one taijiquan master involved in ICH program told me: 'Since the Xu Xiaodong affair, the authority requests me to go at least once a year in all the affiliated schools around the country to make sure that all the students receive a training in the entire system of taijiquan'. In this context, the Xicheng district Sports Bureau has probably felt the same kind of incentives and thus organized this tuishou seminar to reintroduce this exercise – one that points to the importance of self-defence – as a way to educate practitioners on this often neglected aspect of taijiquan.

ACCOMODATING TRADITIONAL VALUES IN ELITE SPORT SETTING BEIJING ELITE WUSHU TEAM TAIJIQUAN GROUP

According to Pinson [2017], sport is about deciding a winner and also implies the presence of an audience; a competition event is thus framed as a spectacle to be enjoyed by the public. Jaquet, Sorenson and Cognot [2015: 25] use the definition by Sport Accord which insists on competition without any element of luck as well as the safety of athletes and participants. These are especially valid in the context of competitive sport such as the disciplines of taolu and sanda in the case of wushu sport. This kind of competitive event, in today's China exists both as a heritage sport event – where non-professional athletes from traditional lineages can compete – and as an elite sport event based on the Olympic model.

At the end of the Cultural Revolution, in 1976, the National Sports Bureau restarted its programs nationwide. In Fuzhou, the provincial elite sport centre opened in 1978 and wushu taolu was directly incorporated into the disciplines constituting the centre's core. The first generation of coaches and athletes started to rearrange movements and the way they were performed in order to become more theatrically spectacular and to create the modern nanquan and taijiquan disciplines. Soon competition rules and judging criteria were formalized, and standard and compulsory competition taolu were arranged and spread nationwide. During this period, competitive sport received special attention from the state in its project of becoming a 'strong sport nation' (*tiyu qiangguo* 体育强国). Chinese authorities implemented that what Fan and Zhou refer to as the 'elite sport first' policy in order to train athletes to be able to compete and win against their international peers, especially American and Russian athletes. By competing equally during international competitions, China reaffirms its place as a powerful nation [Lu and Fan 2014: 103-105]. Through the same dynamics, Chinese authorities also developed competitive disciplines for its traditional martial arts and promoted an international framework with the objective of promoting their inclusion on the Olympic Games, thus attempting to affirm the universality of Chinese culture [Theeboom, Zhu and Vertonghen 2017: 5]. According to Song and Yue [2016], this new 'wushu sport' (*wushu yundong* 武术运动) – intermingled with the Olympic ideology – has been the main discipline supported and promoted by state institutions until today.

The creation of a competitive sports framework for Chinese martial arts introduces a paradigm shift within the traditional transmission framework. Martial knowledge is no longer legitimized by the figure of the 'master' but rather by national standards and regulations. Individuals are no longer bound by symbolic ties within a specific lineage but rather by the instrumental purpose of their training within a sports

team. The emphasis is put on performance. As one athlete stresses: 'What defines our sport is the Olympic motto: faster, higher, stronger. We train to win medals'. Meanings associated with the techniques also shifted. In the taolu categories, emphasis is put on the aesthetic aspect of movements rather than the combat efficiency. In sanda, on the contrary, it is solely combat efficiency that is prioritized over the technical identity of one combat system.

This section will reflect on how individuals within the elite sport framework are re-articulating categories conceived as Chinese traditions – such as brotherhood and lineage – and the way these categories and values are structuring relationships and representation within these groups of practitioners. In addition to the example of the Beijing team, I will also rely on observations conducted in the elite team of the Fujian province. As we will see, this site – through its specific history and place within the national elite sport circle – provides a vivid example for the process of navigating traditional categories and sport-oriented practices.

The sport-oriented framework has been implemented with the general purpose of introducing national and rational standards into martial arts while minimizing some of its traditional elements conceived as incompatible with the party's orthodoxy. One might ask then how these traditional elements could coexist with the newly implemented sports practice. Accordingly, let us deepen the analysis and examine precisely what kind of values are associated with traditional culture and conveyed in the sports teams.

BROTHERHOOD

The traditional framework of Chinese martial arts emulates family ties where the master is acting as a symbolic father and the other disciples as brothers and sisters. Through my observation of the athletes' group dynamics, I came to interpret their relationship as structured through the same kind of bonds. First of all, the vocabulary used to refer to other athletes is the same. Similarly to members in the same lineage, athletes refer to each other as 'brother in teaching' (similar to brother-in-law)⁹ – even to those who have already left the team. The word *duiyou* (队友), which can be translated by teammate, is sometimes also used which is a term also used in other team sport as well as in the

9 In more details, an athlete would refer to other teammates according to four categories differentiating gender and age, namely younger and older brothers (*shixiong/shidi*) and younger and older sisters (*shijie/shimei*).

military. It is interesting to note that the sister/brother terminology is also used in academia, especially at the master and doctoral level within research groups where students under the same supervisor also refer to each other using these terms. However, in these situations, the teacher figure is referred as teacher (*laoshi* 老师) or coach (*jiaolian* 教练). But this brotherhood type of relation is also constructed through the social interactions between athletes. As the sociologists Harrington and Fine suggest: 'groups exist not only to get things done, but also to maintain themselves as social units' [Harrington and Fine 2000: 321]. During my fieldwork with the Beijing team, I observed that the cohesion among the group of athletes was not only created by the instrumental purpose of their training but also by an affective culture where they share a genuine sense of fraternity and mutual assistance. By developing a friendship beyond the sole sport training, individuals 'see their group as a desirable arena of action' [Fine and Corte 2017: 65]. Through this process, elite athletes are emulating the traditional brotherhood relationship and the Confucian set of behaviour associated with it. As the sinologist Muger Zlotea argues, there can be what today people call 'popular Confucianism' – this is 'the Confucianism that existed as a set of rules and values, as patterns of behaviour among the people and still exists today. It is what scholars call 'the Confucianism used daily by the masses without knowing it' (*baixing riyong er bu zhi de rujia*)' [Zlotea 2017: 295-296]. Athletes, when integrating the new life environment that is the sport team, reproduce values and behaviours learned in their families and other social contexts. One could also formulate the hypothesis that athletes acquire these values through their consumption of martial arts fictions and emulate in their social life the collective imagery related to the heroes of these stories and the *jianghu* (江湖)¹⁰ world they live in.

These values are also explicitly put forward in athlete discourses when reflecting on their life within the team. As in the case of the Beijing athlete's discourse, other interviews also highlight the idea that 'elders protect their younger peers' (*da baohu xiao* 大保护小) and that 'the student respect the teacher' (*xuesheng zunjing laoshi* 学生尊敬老师). These values can be interpreted as filial piety (*xiao* 孝) although participants don't explicitly use this category in their own discourse. Also, when specifically asked whether these values ought to be considered Confucian, one interviewee responded, 'Confucianism is one branch of Chinese traditional culture, but there are many more!' (*rujia shi zhongguo chuantong wenhua Zhong de yige pai, haiyou hen duo* 儒家是中国传统文化中的一个派. 还有很多!)

10 Literally, the world of the rivers and lakes. In martial arts fictions, the word describe a kind of underworld where the martial arts experts heroes have to take on themselves to fight injustice.

So, we see how a set of behaviours and values, associated in participant discourses not only as being Confucian but also Chinese in a broad sense, plays out in the dynamics of group life of the Beijing taijiquan elite team. On the one hand, these values provide individuals with a framework to map the way into the group and also the way the individual fits in by acquiring a sense of belonging and identity (as in: I'm a Chinese athlete who practices a Chinese traditional sport and I have a specific position in the fraternity). On the other hand, these values also have a material efficiency in structuring the group which becomes an effective social unit where individuals can efficiently train to win medals.

THE LINEAGE OF THE TECHNICAL TRANSMISSION

Let's now discuss a second aspect in the athletes' communication that could be a link to traditional culture. The technical knowledge is transmitted from the master to the disciple creating a lineage. Most of the athletes I interacted with would present their technical knowledge as embodying a 'particular and personal style' (*ziji dute fengge* 自己独特风格). The acquisition of this style is often reflected as being the result of the athlete's own search, their coach's guidance and the influence of one or various other athletes seen as a guiding figure and big brother or sister. Often these guiding figures are found within the team or in the athlete's direct circle. It could be either an older and more experienced athlete or a former athlete who is now retired but still keeps connections with the team's social life. Through this process, the athlete's personal style and thus identity as a martial artist is configured within the genealogy of the coach and older peers within the team. The team thus embeds a sense of continuity and becomes a stable institution providing the individual with a shared and communal identity. The example of the taijiquan group of the Fujian Province team particularly highlights the notion of lineage understood as something that passes from one individual to another, creating a continuity and a stable and identifiable institution, being the lineage in the traditional framework or the team in sports practices.

Within the circle of Chinese elite athletes, it is common knowledge that the Fujian province wushu team excels in the categories of taijiquan and nanquan. In the case of taijiquan, two athletes, Chen Sitan and Gao Jiamin (from the first generation after the creation of the team in the late 1970s) were very successful athletes and became prominent institutional figures after their competitive careers. A later generation of athletes, such as Zhou Qing and Huang Yingqi in the 2000s, and Chen Zhouli in 2010, also followed the same path in becoming national top athletes and later nationwide renowned experts. And this process is continuing in the present day with athletes

such as Huang Zhikun and Gao Haonan. As one former athlete who was active in the late 1990s recalls, 'We cannot not recognize them! (as our mentors, added by the author). In the beginning, they were our coaches so, of course, they transmitted to us their specific styles. When they started their international careers, new coaches and other members would continuously mention them'. Moreover, former athletes even though not officially hired as coaches would regularly come back to the team and provide teaching. Finally, these athletes all keep an informal relationship and friendship outside the training hall. According to my interpretation, beyond the brotherhood relations, the framework of transmission of the technical knowledge is also building a sense of belonging which is very similar to the one encountered in the traditional lineages. Individuals identify themselves with the former athletes and in terms to them belonging to the team. In this case however, the setup is different, instead of a ritual initiation that bonds the individuals within a symbolic family, it is the institution of the elite sports team that structures their relationship as a family.

TEACHING AND RESEARCHING TAIJIQUAN AT BEIJING NORMAL UNIVERSITY

During the autumn semester of the 2019 academic year, I was an exchange researcher within Prof. Lü Shaojun's research group at Beijing Normal University. Since 2017, Prof. Lü has been in charge of the newly created Traditional Sports Culture Promotion Centre in the College of Physical Education and Sports. The research group was roughly divided between researchers in health science and researchers that conducted ethnographies in martial arts communities or other traditional sports setups. This division reflects Prof. Lü's research interests as I will describe below. In addition to regular teaching and research work, the group was very active in organizing academic events such as international conferences, round-tables and other kinds of workshops. In the following section, I will present the teaching and research activities of Prof. Lü and his team.

Prof. Lü actively participates in the 'Taiji for health project' (*taiji jiankang gongcheng* 太极健康工程) launched in 2013 following the State Council's initiative regarding the 'promotion of the health service industry'. This initiative itself follows the general idea of 'fitness for all the population' introduced in 2012 during the 18th plenary session of the CCP. The following year, Liu Peng – Head of the National Sports Administration – presented his general strategy during the National Conference on Mass Sport including 'using the specific calisthenics cultural resources of taijiquan [in order to] operate a shift from 'technical teaching' to 'cultural promotion' and 'health service' [Lü 2015: 16]. The taijiquan for health project focuses on 'the creation of a

taijiquan system as public service [and] calisthenics cultural brand' [Lü 2015: 17]. At the same time, this project also tackles recent taijiquan stereotypes. It has aimed at changing the public perception of taijiquan as a 'slow gymnastic' for old people by coming back to taijiquan's core cultural meaning, such as boxing principles and training methods as well as tuishou exercise. This broad project led to various research in health science including clinical studies. During my stay in BNU for example, a small team of researchers were collaborating with several hospitals where they would teach taijiquan to patients in order to prevent symptoms of chronic diseases and would collect data of the process.

Prof. Lü was the main coordinator for the creation of the *bafa wubu* 八法五步 – a new short sequence of taijiquan compiled around taijiquan's eight core hand movements (*bafa*) performed through five steps (*wubu*). The *bafa wubu* system of exercises – including the 'standing still exercise' (*zhuang gong* 桩功) and 'marching exercise' (*xing gong* 行功) – was compiled 'on the basis of the existing 24 Form [as] a set of taiji routines for popularization characterized by culture, fitness and simplicity' [Lü 2018: 16]. The sequence is meant to introduce beginners to the core techniques within taijiquan boxing theory while being very accessible. Moreover, like the taijiquan 8-step sequence, *bafa wubu* does not require much space to be performed and can be thus trained in all kinds of locations. During my stay at the BNU, Prof. Lü was regularly traveling around China to promote *bafa wubu* and train experts such as university teachers, elite athletes and coaches. In his preface of *bafa wubu*'s technical manual Prof. Lü states: 'As a kind of mind-body technology, [taijiquan] exerts inestimable influence on fitness, medical rehabilitation, longevity and temperament cultivation' [Lü 2018: 8].

During the 2019 autumn semester, Prof. Lü and one teaching assistant taught two weekly technical martial arts classes for bachelor degree students in Sports Education. One course was dedicated to 'wushu fitness' (*jianshen wushu* 健身武术) and the other to 'taiji fitness' (*jianshen taiji* 健身太极). The contents for the taijiquan course were the 16 movements routine which is a slightly shorter version of the 24 routines without any major change in the routine's use of space or choreography. Students had to be able to perform the routine with a minimum technical requirement in order to validate the credits. The class was held in a dedicated 'wushu hall' (*wushuguan* 武术馆) which was also equipped with sanda equipment. The class would start with the standardized 'baoquan' (抱拳) salute followed by a light warm-up and the 'standing still' exercise. After this introduction, the group would form two lines and walk across the hall with the basic step of taijiquan performed first without hand movements then with the first technics of the routine. The group would then rehearse the contents of the previous classes with the teacher leading them. The teacher would then go on to teach more techniques and eventually split the group

up allowing him to monitor the technical progress of students group by group. Prof. Lü and his teaching assistant were very reflexive on the process of knowledge transfer, carefully planning how to combine verbal explanations with body performance, how to efficiently split up and manage groups and other pedagogical protocols. Occasionally, the last minutes of the training would include short tuishou sessions in small groups. These sessions would usually focus on the reproduction of the technical requirements – learned with the sequence – in terms of body posture and flow of movement without the competitive aspect of trying to unbalance the opponent.

Reflecting on how taijiquan is categorized within the research and teaching work of Prof. Lü and his team, it is interesting to note the emphasis on health within taijiquan activities. Some researchers were conducting specialized research in Health Sciences and the Bafa Wubu routine is integrated in this line of research. During the teaching, a special focus was put on fitness and well-being, too. The classes and the techniques that were being taught were similar to how athletes in elite sport team would train. The difference was the focus of the Sport on fitness rather than competition. In this context, traditional elements of taijiquan are thus primarily associated with the promotion of health. This trend is very common and a dominant representation of taijiquan as a traditional practice. It is for example one of the core defining element of taijiquan as it is promoted in the ICH framework. [UNESCO Lists]. It is noteworthy that the taijiquan file on the UNESCO representative list does not make any reference to the idea of martiality or combat skills. It seems that these two diametrical concepts are not reconciled within this institution, yet. In BNU though, the focus on health did not (entirely) overshadow the idea of martiality and combat skills as a traditional element of taijiquan. Through ethnographic studies of folk communities, some researchers were documenting this aspect from a sociological perspective. Discussions were also held about how to improve the teaching in regard to this aspect, especially to raise the interest of students in learning taijiquan. Prof. Lü also explains how the process of creation of the Bafa Wubu routine was inspired by the will of highlighting the core elements of taijiquan combat theory.

CONCLUSION

How do traditions and traditional culture translate in taijiquan institutional activities in the PRC nowadays? The observation of the three case studies offers a glimpse into the many facets of taijiquan and how the understanding of its traditional elements by different actors varies from case to case.

In the case of the tuishou workshops organized by the local government in Beijing, practitioners primarily represent taijiquan as a soft fitness method framed within the Daoist idea of *yangsheng* (养生), which relates to the ‘cultivation’ of health. Practitioners also associate the practice of taijiquan with social relationships, but interestingly without reference to the Confucian values of family and lineage but rather as a kind of modern urban neighbourhood leisure activity. In this context, authorities actively promote the introduction of combat elements and exercises well known in the traditional framework in the wake of controversies around the lack of combat efficiency in taijiquan and wushu in general.

In the elite sport teams, taijiquan as a practice is intermingled with the modern idea of competitive sport. Compared with the traditional framework, the technical skill here is not so much related to combat and martiality but rather conceived in its gymnastic dimension through the lens of acrobatic performance and esthetical criteria. Nonetheless, actors still conceived the movements in the continuity of the traditional framework, as one coach states: ‘all movements performed by athletes come from traditional taijiquan’. In this context, taijiquan’s traditional element is primarily understood by actors through the lens of their social relationship which is framed through the same kind of values, namely the symbolic family and lineage, which structures communities of master and disciples in its traditional framework of transmission.

At the Faculty of Sport in Beijing Normal University, taijiquan is, on the one hand, interpreted through the lens of the academic discipline of Health Science. Here, the traditional element of the Daoist idea of *yangsheng* is translated into a scientific discourse coming along with its rational legitimacy. On the other hand, taijiquan is also translated into the modern idea of physical education. Here, characteristics of the competitive sport seen in the elite sport team are articulated with the idea of fitness and martiality through the lens of pedagogy science.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm [1983: 14] informs that ‘modern nations and all of their impedimenta generally claim to be the opposite of novel, namely rooted in the remotest of antiquity and the opposite of constructed, namely human communities so natural as to require no definition other than self-assertion’. The production and re-production of national traditions, such as taijiquan, tend to establish a sense of continuity with the past. The case studies discussed in this contribution shed light on the dynamic process through which actors within PRC national institutions actively articulate the continuity of tradition. The ideas and practices of martiality, lineage, Daoist health exercise, all reference an ancestral past whose historicity is not necessarily the focal point but rather provides grass-roots practitioners and government officials with a resourceful framework of reference to define what is traditional Chinese culture.

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