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Translating Tai Chi and Transforming Qigong in British Media Culture

Paul Bowman, Izzati Aziz and Xiujie Ma

Abstract:

There are a growing number of studies of the history and spread of taijiquan and qigong. However, there are few studies of taiji or qigong in the media. Based on a study of British media archives, this article traces the construction and representation of taijiquan ('tai chi') in British media. In doing so, it establishes and evaluates the meanings and values that have been imputed to the practice in British media discourse. It first examines key representations of tai chi before the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, but proposes that the pandemic changed its status. It argues that popular understandings of COVID-19 as a *respiratory* infection led to an upsurge of interest in 'breath-focused' practices. In this context, taiji could have stood to gain in popularity. However, the article suggests that the difficulties of learning taiji – especially during a time of social isolation – meant that it was not taiji but the related and hitherto lesser-known practice of qigong that saw an increase in popularity. It concludes with a reflection on 'authenticity' and the status of some new translation-constructions of hybrid taiji-qigong practices.

Keywords: Tai Chi, Taiji, Qigong, British Media History, COVID-19

Author Biographies:

Paul Bowman is Professor of Cultural Studies at Cardiff University.

Izzati Aziz teaches in the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University.

Xiujie Ma is Professor of Traditional Sport (Chinese Martial Arts) and Physical Education at the Chinese Guoshu Academy, School of Martial Arts, at Chengdu Sport University.

Corresponding Author: Paul Bowman: BowmanP@cardiff.ac.uk

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Introduction: Tai Chi before Taiji

In 2019, British television showed a new commercial. This featured three CGI pandas, standing on small rocks in a tranquil pond, performing the smooth, flowing movements of what is widely referred to in English as ‘tai chi’. Upon establishing this scene, the advert flips from animation to film, as a voice-over says, ‘Well, that was soothing!’ At this moment, we see a parent applying a medicated barrier cream (‘Sudocrem’) to their child. Then, the advert ends. Thus, it presented an image (tai chi pandas), gave it a meaning (soothing), and associated all of this with a product (medicated cream). Phrased in reverse: the cream was positioned as ‘soothing’, and ‘soothing’ was condensed into the image of pandas performing tai chi in an oriental garden. This illustrates what we will call ‘cultural translation’.

‘Tai chi’ is the most popular transliteration of the Chinese 太極拳. Historically, this term was written in English using the Wade-Giles system, which rendered it as *t'ai chi*. The full three syllables of 太極拳 became *t'ai chi ch'üan*. The Wade-Giles system has been supplanted by pinyin, which transliterates the characters as *taijiquan*. In what follows, we use both spellings – ‘tai chi’ and ‘taiji’ – to refer to different contexts. We use the pinyin terms *taijiquan* or *taiji* to refer to the actual physical practice. By contrast, we use the popular spelling ‘tai chi’ to refer to media representations. Thus, for the purposes of this discussion: taiji/taijiquan refers to real-world embodied practice; tai chi refers to media representations.¹

Whether approached as taiji or tai chi, this entity has the status of what Adam Frank calls the quintessence of ‘Chineseness’ (Bowman 2015; Frank 2006). It is regularly employed as a symbol of Chinese cultural or national identity, and frequently employed by the PRC as part of its public relations or semiotic ‘soft power’ strategies (Eperjesi 2004; Frank 2006). In the rest of the world, it conjures up the very quintessence of the orientalist sense of the mystical, magical East (Bowman 2017; Goto-Jones 2015, 2016; Palmer and Siegler 2017; Said 1978).

As a practice, taiji has often been regarded as eluding capture by Western categories – as something that overlaps with, yet remains irreducibly other and different than, more than one practice at a time. Taiji is regarded as simultaneously similar to and yet other than, for instance: athletics and meditation, spirituality and gymnastics, calisthenics and ritual, cultivation and combat, isolated introspection and public practice – and often, all at the same time. Accordingly, taiji has been regarded as difficult to ‘translate into’ (or to fit neatly within, without lack or remainder) extant Western categories. Hence, tai chi as representation and taiji

as practice often encapsulate ‘Oriental Otherness’ as such. Arguably, this has changed recently, with the mainstreaming of ‘mindfulness’ and the development and circulation of such notions as ‘well-being’ and ‘wellness’ (Doran 2018; Stanley 2014) – a process arguably accelerated and intensified in public discourse in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, through 2020–21. However, before the recent mainstreaming of ideas about the value of holistic mind-body practices that are neither simply physical nor exclusively psychological, taiji (and tai chi) always seemed both less and more than – spanning multiple – established Western categories at once.

Nonetheless, ‘translation’ always occurs. The Other, the foreign, *will* be ‘translated’ into domestic linguistic, cultural and conceptual contexts. Such translation or meaning-making will always be a complex process involving the interaction and interplay of alterity and familiarity (Krug 2001). Sometimes alterity will prevail, sometimes familiarity (Benjamin 1968; Chow 1995). Sometimes this will involve a violent wrench of mistranslation – or, as Stuart Hall once put it, the illegitimate and unjustifiable ‘reduction of the new to the known’ (Hall 1992). Sometimes the new interpretation or representation, in a new language or cultural context, may feel adequate; at other times, inadequate. Our question in this article is how tai chi (and, by implication and association, the physical practice of taiji) has been ‘translated’ – or rendered meaningful – in mainstream British media.

As such, our focus exceeds linguistic considerations. The cultural translation into ‘English’ of tai chi (representations) and taiji (practices) is no mere matter of linguistic transliteration. The very appearance of the word in the English language indicates the arrival of a new or different cultural practice in a specific cultural and social field. In this appearance, complex social and institutional processes develop: authorities are established and hierarchies are forged, organising who is entitled to make authoritative statements, establishing senses of what is correct, what the entity is, what it ‘means’, what its essence is and limits are, and so on (Bowman 2015; Frank 2006). The linguistic appearance of a foreign word or image (cluster) registers the appearance of a new difference, conceptual field, institution(s), and more. It is both *intervention* and *translation*: the appearance of something whose arrival alters a cultural context and is itself altered in the process.

Thus, we approach tai chi (and implicitly taiji) as a matter of *cultural* translation (Benjamin 1968; Chow 1995). We make a schematic distinction between media representations (tai chi) and bodily practices (taiji) in order to be clear that this is not a study of the ‘true’

history or ‘correct’ practice of taiji (of which there are many). Rather: this is a study of *media construction and representation*. We make no reference to some ‘original’, ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ taiji, existing elsewhere before the moment of its construction in the British media context. This is for two reasons: first, to devote space to our primary concern (tai chi as seen on British screens and press pages); and second, because the ‘history of taiji’ in and around China has never been unitary or univocal anyway: it has always been the *histories* (plural) of *taijis* (plural), marked by constant ideological and practical transformations, discontinuities and displacements, regional and stylistic drifts and differences, political interventions, institutional standardisations and frequent reinventions and reconstructions.

Furthermore, we do not presume that the appearance of tai chi in British media necessarily signifies the incorporation of authentic or actual Chinese culture into Western society. ‘Chineseness’ may often be evoked as a semiotic dimension, but ‘Chineseness’ is often pure connotation with no relation to reality (Barthes 1957; Bowman 2017, 2020a; Frank 2006). Hence, we approach tai chi in British media as a *construction*, whose appearance registers (and may be a response to or form of engagement with) specific contemporary ‘British’ issues, whether relating to ‘modernity’ (Chow 1995; Lau 2000), or to fitness, health, well-being, boredom, uncertainty, or other. Nonetheless, in approaching tai chi as a ‘discursive entity’ (Bowman 2021) in the British media, at least part of our aim remains to increase our understanding of how this ostensibly ‘East Asian’ cultural practice is constructed within a Western context.

To clarify: are our CGI pandas ‘*really* Chinese’? No. They are a hyperreal evocation of Chineseness, in a simulacrum of ‘digital Asia’ (Goto-Jones 2015; Schneider and Goto-Jones 2015). Here, pandas merge with tai chi, on still waters, accompanied by clichéd sounds of Chineseness,² near pagodas and cherry blossoms. Both pandas and tai chi are symbols of Chineseness: the Chinese state has long worked to construct the panda as a paradigmatic symbol of China and Chineseness (Songster 2018). And, clearly, this effort has worked. For, in this British advert, via intensive semiotic condensation, the digital animation constructs a heightened, hyperreal sense (or structure of feeling) of ‘Chineseness’ – albeit against a backdrop of generic Western clichés of ‘Asianness’ (Baudrillard 1994; Goto-Jones 2015; Williams 1977).

Whilst experts and aficionados may regard such constructions as outrageous ‘mistranslations’ or even ‘abuses’ of taiji, our own interest is not to judge in terms of veracity,

but to establish the semiotic range of representations of tai chi in the British context. This Sudocrem advert, for instance, involves a deft process of cultural translation through *condensation* and *displacement* (exemplary of what Freud [1976] called the dreamwork). Each side of the advert translates into the other, with the transfer and sharing of meaning and value: tai chi shares in semiotic connections with medication, caring, soothing, calming and well-being; while Sudocrem shares in the connection with – ultimately – an orientalist construction of tai chi as a kind maternal or feminine healing magic.³ Our interest is in the media history that has led to the overdetermined intelligibility – the transparent ‘obviousness’ – of this kind of construction, and to establish whether this is the only or the dominant way that tai chi has been translated into the British context.

To research this, we examined the archives and databases of Cardiff University and other international libraries to search for references to and representations of tai chi (via all of its variant spellings) in the British national press, British news and television, as well as internationally circulated English language films, especially those that could be called ‘well known’ in Britain (e.g., Hollywood films such as *Easy Rider*, *Road House*, *Lethal Weapon*, etc.). In particular, we leaned heavily on resources such as LexisNexis for newspaper items and Box of Broadcasts for occurrences of tai chi on British television, along with the History of Advertising Trust archives of British TV adverts, in order to establish the broad contours of the main styles of representing tai chi in UK media. We also dug into and built upon the knowledge base established in our earlier research in closely related areas of the media history of martial arts (Bowman 2010, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2020a, 2021).

Spiritual martial dance

The history of tai chi in British (and international English language) media is more long-running in certain contexts and less so in others. British newspaper features depicting taiji as a novel and characteristically Chinese way to ‘keep fit’ only started to appear regularly in the UK during the mid-1970s. Prior to this, BBC and Pathé news had occasionally featured tai chi (spelled in various different ways, including ‘Tye-Jee’) in a range of items – most commonly as being something of an interesting curio. Such stories were normally drawn from the then-British Crown Colony of Hong Kong.

In the 1970s, taiji began to be advertised (as ‘tai chi’ or ‘t’ai chi’) in the classified pages in British newspapers, indicating its real-world growth. In the same period, it began to be

discussed by newspapers, usually in the context of reviews of dance and theatre productions in the UK. It was not until around 1977 that the first stories of British public figures incorporating taiji into their daily life of exercise practices began to appear.

This period also sees the first depictions of tai chi's double-status as both ancient (elsewhere) and new (here). This double-status as both ancient and new will endure: many articles continue to treat tai chi as ancient (there) but new (here) to this day. This enduring style of representation was prominent in the 1970s and continues today. In some contexts, little has changed since *Stage and Television Today* told us in 1977 that 'The "new" dance is a real breath of fresh air' (11 August 1977). The subheading of the article also emphasizes newness, as does the ensuing article. But, apart from being 'new' (in terms of its arrival in Britain and its quality), taiji is also linked to terms such as 'stimulating', 'original' and 'ethnic dance'.

A major moment in tai chi's media history was undoubtedly when it was featured with a range of other Asian martial arts in a prominent 1982 BBC television series, called 'The Way of the Warrior'. The follow-up book was subtitled *The Paradox of the Martial Arts* (Reid and Croucher 1984). This subtitle was chosen because both the book and the TV series chose to emphasize the 'paradox' that training in (and ostensibly 'for') 'violence' led people to both become peaceful and, indeed, to attain inner peace.

This connection of taiji with both 'peace' and the 'warrior paradox' had already been registered in Western media and popular culture in various ways for several decades. This connection, too, was destined to endure. The 'existentialising' and 'spiritualising' of Asian martial arts was a mainstream preoccupation of British media discourse, especially in the early 1980s (Bowman 2021: 101). This is strongly connected to the influential 'philosophical' rendering of David Carradine's wandering Shaolin Monk, Kwang Chai Caine, in the 'Eastern Western' TV series *Kung Fu* of 1972-75 (Iwamura 2005, 2011; Taylor 2011).

The influence of American screen constructions of Asian martial arts on their perception in the UK cannot be overstated; so, at least some US TV and film productions should be mentioned here. The internationally successful 1969 film, *Easy Rider*, showed what is perhaps the first Western cinematic appearance of something broadly recognizable as a tai chi form – appropriately enough, performed by a member of a hippy commune.⁴ Later, the 'warrior paradox' was registered in other Hollywood movies. For instance, *Lethal Weapon* (1987) contained dialogue which positioned taiji as being a large part of what made the 'weapon' of

the film's title 'lethal'. This is because the 'weapon' evoked in the title, *Lethal Weapon*, was police detective Riggs (Mel Gibson), a widowed former special forces soldier with mental health issues caused by the tragic death of his wife. As his partner, Murtagh (Danny Glover) says to him when they first meet: '[the] file also said you're heavy into martial arts, tai chi and all that killer stuff. I suppose we have to register you as a lethal weapon' (Bowman 2019). We never see 'tai chi' in *Lethal Weapon*, but it is registered prominently in the dialogue as something that is 'lethal'.

The 'lethal' character of tai chi remains aligned with its orientalized and hence 'feminine' status insofar as its deadly potentials are not blatant and brutal, but subtle, nuanced, quasi-mystical and effectively imperceptible to all but the initiated (aka 'internal'). Hollywood attempts to show something of this two years later, in the 1989 action film, *Road House*. This focuses on a nightclub bouncer, Dalton (Patrick Swayze), who, although ruthlessly efficient in dispensing violence, evidently does not relish it. One scene shows him practising tai chi alone by a lake. The scene does not add anything to the forward movement of the narrative, but indubitably adds to the connotations of 'depth' and 'mystique' to Dalton's character. Furthermore, his expertise in such exotic arts is implicitly connected to the unconventional lethal fight moves Dalton can dispense (such as ripping out an enemy's throat at will).

The trope of taiji as 'killer stuff' – or, phrased in reverse: the question of whether taiji is an effective martial art – is familiar in Western discourse. This is an interminable debate within martial arts practitioner circles, of course, but it also occasionally makes its way into the mainstream. The principal polarities of the debate about the combat value of taiji are concisely captured in the novel, *Angry White Pyjamas: A Scrawny Oxford Poet Takes Lessons from the Tokyo Riot Police* (Twigger 2000), in which one Western martial arts aficionado in Japan states that taiji is predominantly a practice of 'grannies', but that 'in the hands of a true master', it can be 'the most lethal martial art'.

Of course, the public verification of taiji's combat status has never quite confirmed this belief. A 2017 fight between Chinese MMA fighter Xu Xiaodong and taiji 'master' Wei Li went viral online after Xu knocked out the taiji master in 30 seconds. This was not the first such bout, nor has it been the last, but it currently remains the most (in)famous. It also produced a new theme for journalists, one that made it into the mainstream of British news media: in May 2020 (during the darkest days of the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic), the mainstream national newspaper *The Daily Mail* published a story under the heading: 'Self-

proclaimed Tai Chi master who vows to “defend traditional Kung Fu’s reputation” gets knocked out by a kickboxer within 30 seconds in a duel.’ It is surprising that such a story was published in the early days of the (inter)national lockdown. But the prominence of such a story in this mainstream newspaper suggests a wider-than-normal interest in taiji at this time.

Arguably, tai chi was definitively well-known in the British mainstream before the turn of the century. In 1999, the British national newspaper, *The Daily Mirror*, reported on new entries in the Encarta World Dictionary. One new entry was ‘tai chi’. *The Daily Mirror* notes that Encarta included it because it believed the term ‘tai chi’ to be understood by around half the English speaking population as ‘some kind of Chinese martial art’. Shortly after, in 2003, the BBC showcased tai chi in an ‘i-dent’ (a short film played between programmes while a voice-over announces forthcoming programmes). Then, in 2004, the BBC3 magazine-style TV series, *Mind, Body and Kick Ass Moves*, featured an episode in which the host, Chris Crudelli, learned a number of combat applications from different styles of taiji.⁵

Age and gender

The key contours and coordinates of the mainstream kinds of cultural literacy about taiji in the UK can also be inferred by studying the kinds of stories and items published about it in the national press. A recent study revealed that taiji is often the most frequently mentioned martial art in national UK newspapers such as *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Mirror* (Bowman 2021: 123–30). That study also proposes that (until recently) there were only three main kinds of stories that newspapers such as the *Mail* and *Mirror* ever print about taiji. The first is that it is an ancient Chinese martial art involving yin and yang. The second is that *women* ‘should’ do it – to find ‘balance’, to ‘balance’ their ‘energies’, and suchlike. And the third is that *the elderly* ‘should’ do it. This is because, we are told, taiji promises longevity, health, balance and physical energy. For younger women with busy lives, it also offers *metaphorical* balance (Bowman 2021: 124).

The same study also showed that *The Daily Mail* – one of the largest circulation newspapers in the United Kingdom – made the most mentions of taiji, and that all were explicitly positive. These appeared in health and well-being stories, all of which, again, were explicitly directed at women and/or the elderly. In *The Daily Mail*, there were no negative stories about taiji. The closest it came to anything remotely like a negative statement was in

one article that suggested that younger people should *also* do more vigorous exercise (Bowman 2021: 124).

The same study also noted that stories about taiji (and related practices like qigong) in such newspapers are of a qualitatively different order to items about other martial arts. Other martial arts are principally mentioned in the context of stories about someone famous, or as an aside. But when taiji appears, it is the main focus of an article, and it is always viewed positively. Articles about taiji often advocate that people try it. It often appears in the ‘Women’s’ or ‘Health’ sections, and is often positioned as something that prevents osteoporosis, improves joint health, mobility and balance, and helps combat stress. It is positioned as explicitly healthful, implicitly feminine, and always aimed either at women or older readers (Bowman 2021: 125).

However, both the *Mirror* and the *Mail* are also enamoured of taiji’s meditative dimensions, which they depict as helping to de-stress, combat hypertension and improve well-being. Interestingly though, these papers tend not to move into explicitly orientalist or mystical discourse. Rather, one sees taiji constructed as a feminized, deracinated and only ever slightly orientalist, or loosely connected with ‘new age’ sensibilities. In contrast to earlier (and) American constructions (Lau 2000), taiji, yoga and mindfulness in British newspapers such as *The Daily Mail* and *The Daily Mirror* have come to be presented as sensible and practical antidotes to stress, ageing and infirmity (Bowman, 2021, 126). So, rather than being *completely* ‘orientalized’ across the range of UK national newspapers studied, taiji is mainly simply *feminized*, and depicted as being primarily for women and old people (130).⁶

Unsurprisingly, then, taiji’s combative or martial status is rarely prominent in British media discourse. Rather, in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 – and indeed during and after 2020 – taiji was mainly a periodic feature of health-focused television programmes in the UK (often presented by medical doctors). Most commonly, it would feature within ‘experiments’ in which taiji practices and exercises are evaluated in terms of their effects on health indicators such as heart rate, blood pressure, cholesterol and so on.

Given the threat to medical, mental and emotional health posed by the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, one might therefore expect taiji’s status as a therapeutic and complementary health and well-being practice to have been preserved or enhanced in British popular consciousness. However, things are more complicated.

COVID concerns

The World Health Organisation was formally informed of what would become known as COVID-19 on 31 December 2019. This was first identified in Wuhan, China. The subsequent epidemic was quickly recognized as being of serious concern around the world. Nonetheless, the early weeks and months of what was soon to become a global pandemic was a time when many countries were unsure about what measures to take in the face of the gathering storm. All the while, the media showed and reported stories of serious illness, suffering and death, first in China and then in ever more countries.

In the early days of the pandemic, there were few positive signs. COVID-19 was associated with extremely serious illness, intensive care and probable death. However, on 14 February 2020, *The Daily Mail* published a story under the headline, ‘Chinese medic in hazmat suit teaches coronavirus patients martial arts to keep them active during quarantine.’ This was the first of several features that were to circulate internationally about the teaching of taiji and its closely-related art of *qigong* (*chi kung*, *chi gung*: 氣功) during the early months of 2020. In these stories, taiji and qigong implicitly and explicitly stand out as glimmers of hope for recovery.

Taiji and qigong took their place in a growing interest in the potential value of practices that focus on the control, training, exercise, refinement and *command* of *breathing*. This interest was not surprising during a viral pandemic whose principal or primary target was the *respiratory system*. COVID-19 arguably provoked an explosion of interest in matters such as ‘strengthening’ the immune system and ‘strengthening’ the respiratory system. Practices ranging from yogic pranayama breathing to anxiety-reducing mindful breathing, and onwards to new innovations such as the Wim Hof Method of breath control and cold exposure – along with taiji and qigong, with their focus on breath and relaxation – all saw a spike in popularity during this time (Nestor 2020). In terms of psychoanalytic cultural theory, this interest might be regarded as ‘overdetermined’ – characterised, as the times were, by uncertainty about the future, fear of a potentially lethal or life-changing respiratory infection, anxiety about everything from health to family to employment, and physical and social isolation and enclosure, often in very limited indoor physical space (Bowman 2020b).

Inevitably, times of challenge are also times of opportunity. In the realms of physical culture, entrepreneurs acted to capitalise on people’s enforced isolation and confinement. With

gyms and classes closed, physical culture became more mediated: teaching moved online, and entrepreneurial instructors transformed themselves into ‘content providers’. Pre-established clubs, groups and networks attempted to continue via real-time online classes, while more ambitious entrepreneurs offered pre-prepared online/downloadable courses.

This environment arguably precipitated a reconfiguration and refocusing of attention, value and practice in the realms of taiji. Taiji of any style is always a complex and precise movement system, whose execution requires long periods of mimesis (copying the movements of others around you) and close, often corrective, tactile attention from instructors and senior students (Nulty 2017). Without regular physical correction, it is hard to learn taiji – at least, not from scratch. Other movement (and stillness) practices – such as yoga, meditation and qigong – arguably fare better. This is because they involve discrete, *static* postures, or short movements between A and B, rather than the many-minutes-long, complex, intricately-linked, continuous movements of taiji.

Entrepreneurial instructors appeared alert to this, and the initial pandemic period saw a proliferation of ‘new’ movement, agility, health and well-being systems, many of which distanced themselves from recognizable and established forms, such as yoga and taiji.⁷ Some focused on ‘functional agility’ (such as GMB Fitness), combining yoga and gymnastics; others focused on ‘well-being’, combining elements of taiji and qigong, such as White Tiger Qigong, or Hayo’uFit – which claims to be the first online qigong platform.

It is interesting that, despite huge crazes in China and elsewhere in the past (Palmer 2007), qigong has hitherto remained both marginal and subordinate to taiji in the UK. This is reflected in the familiarity of the term. The Oxford English Dictionary states that ‘tai chi’ (in any of its spellings) is a type of word that occurs ‘between 0.1 and 1.0 times per million words in typical modern English usage’. Such words are ‘recognizable to English-speakers, and are likely to be used unproblematically in fiction or journalism’. On the other hand, qigong is a category of word that only occurs ‘between 0.01 and 0.1 times per million words in typical modern English usage’. Such words ‘are not commonly found in general text types like novels and newspapers, but at the same time they are not overly opaque or obscure’.

Our claim here is that during the pandemic, this status started to change. We suggest that this is because it is easier to teach and learn static postures and repetitive single movements over a computer screen than it is to learn the complex, subtle and precise choreographies of

taiji forms. Because of this potential change in relative accessibility or viability of qigong versus taiji, we will close by considering the case of just one example: Hayo'uFit. Hayo'uFit was an early responder to the new conditions created by the social isolation and anxieties around well-being generated by the pandemic, claiming to be the first online qigong platform. Its branding and marketing also illuminate the semiotics involved in the cultural translation into anglophone popular culture of qigong at this time.

Lockdown breathes life into Qigong

The promotional text and press statements around Hayo'uFit claim that the name derives from Chinese characters meaning 'well you' (Stacey 2018). No textual evidence or Chinese characters are ever given. This is because the real point of the name is to *sound* Chinese (in much the same way as 'chopstick writing' font (Molasky 2018) is taken to evoke *Chineseness* (Bowman 2020a) in adverts or signs for Chinese restaurants, recipes or Asian martial arts), while also sounding very much like certain strategically selected English words. That is, the strange-sounding 'Hayo'uFit' also very much (looks like it) sounds like: 'Hey, You, Fit!', which in terms of connotations and associations (or, more precisely: *interpellations*), hits all the right rallying calls. The 'method' of Hayo'uFit is badged as qigong. However, as mentioned, qigong itself is not as widely known as taiji or yoga in the British context. So, the first questions that one might have when encountering an advert for Hayo'uFit in a social media stream or elsewhere online could include 'what is qigong?' Or, for those who already know of it, the question might be: 'why should I choose this style of qigong?'

The landing page of the website has already changed several times since we first accessed it in 2021, but each iteration seeks to captivate as quickly as possible. It tells us first that Hayo'uFit is 'the future of fitness', and only thereafter that Hayo'uFit is qigong, and that qigong is 'often called "Chinese yoga"'. Thus, *this* qigong is presented as both new *and* ancient, and explained via reference to the more widely understood concept of 'yoga' along with the rather vague but familiar notion of 'fitness':

Meet Hayo'uFit. The future of fitness. Practice wherever you want, whenever you need with live courses and flows.

Qigong combines considered movements with breath and mental engagement. Often called 'Chinese yoga', Qigong encourages the free flow of energy around the body. (Hayo'uFit 2021b)

Akin to the case of taiji in the 1977 representation discussed earlier, Hayo'uFit qigong is presented as simultaneously *established* – in fact, *ancient* (sometimes called ‘Chinese yoga’), and yet also ‘the future of fitness’: something that is being introduced here for the first time. This paradoxical double-status is simultaneously played and erased across the pages of the website. For instance, in the ‘Meet our Founder’ section, we read: ‘Discover an entirely new approach – from one of the oldest healthcare systems in the world’ (Hayo'uFit 2021c). This qigong is ancient and established yet emergent and revolutionary.⁸

The paradox can only be dissolved when qigong is understood not as a new invention but as a new arrival – a cross-cultural traveller, only now appearing on the Western scene. In this, the product is positioned precisely according to the classic Western structures of both *allochronism* (Fabian 1983) and *orientalism* (Said 1978). In allochronism, ‘different’ and ‘other’ cultures and practices are presented as if ancient, timeless and unchanging, from the mists of time (Arjana 2020; Iwamura 2011; Lau 2000).

Thus, it is temporal and geographical distance and difference from the modern West and its practices that provide the credentials or cultural capital of the ‘new’ practice. Its newness is said to inhere in the difference both of the old Chinese approach to fitness, and in the unique new ‘platform’ created by Hayo'uFit. Of the old/original Chinese qigong, we are told: ‘Qigong nourishes and strengthens all of the organs – but, unlike strenuous [Western style] workouts, doesn’t strain them’; and: ‘Largely undiscovered in the West, Qigong is quite simply the ultimate self-healing technique’ (Hayo'uFit 2021d). This is because:

It was invented as ‘dynamic meditation’, to allow Taoist masters to keep their muscles relaxed, supple and strong after hours of sitting meditation but without breaking their focus. Its roots can be traced as far back as 8000 years. By the 3rd century BCE, this practice had crystallised into the beginnings of qigong as it is today. Despite its ancient roots, it’s as relevant to modern life as it has been for millennia. (Hayo'uFit 2021a)

This evocation of ‘history’ is, of course, entirely mythological (Bowman 2017; Judkins 2021; Palmer 2007). It is exemplary of orientalist physical cultural mythology today. In it, *actual* history is irrelevant. What matters is the poetic evocation of myths of history and their ability to captivate imaginations, hopes and dreams – like this:

Qigong leaves you feeling fit, energised, sculpted and strong. But more importantly, it works to encourage restorative sleep, good digestion, better mood and vitality. Shrouded in mystery in the East and undiscovered in the West, Qigong is quite simply the ultimate self-healing technique. (Hayo'uFit 2021b)

As such, qigong is pitched as an exemplary positional good of both hip and vaguely countercultural consumerism, one that confers not only good ‘feeling’ but also ‘healing’ and the potential kudos or cultural capital of a kind of eco-countercultural chic (Heath and Potter 2006). It is not simply said to be *ancient*; it is also positioned as ‘relevant’ to our times. Hence, lists of the health benefits of qigong for modern people in the modern world are given. But crucially also, within and alongside some of the more ‘medical’ lists one encounters on the website, i.e., those designed to attract people who may be worried about their own mortality or health, certain subtle cues are also added, clearly designed to attract those more concerned about their *visible* or *visual* ‘health’ (on visual ‘healthism’ see Spatz 2015). Thus, as is apparent in the passage above, we are told that qigong will leave us not only ‘feeling fit’ and ‘energised’, but also ‘sculpted’ and ‘strong’.

The term ‘sculpted’ derives from and refers directly back to the visual aesthetic concerns of contemporary mediatized physical culture, in which image is everything (Baudrillard 1994; Debord 1998). To present qigong as a way to ‘get sculpted’ is unusual in the main established discourses about it: qigong is normally connected with ‘internal’ health, not ‘external’ visual forms. In the ‘internal’ martial arts discourse around practices such as taiji, *qi* as internal strength or energy is typically distinguished from *li* as external or muscular strength. However, on this website, ‘sculpted’ is associated with qigong via the deft repackaging, reconfiguring or ‘reterritorialization’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1984) of qigong as a segmented field of practices, that can be made applicable to *anyone*, including those who want an explicitly ‘external’ – i.e., physically demanding – workout.

The page ‘Find The Perfect Hayo’uFit Course For You’ enumerates a catch-all list: there is a course for older people, a course for younger people, a course for couch-potatoes, a course for families, a course for convalescents, and – of course – a course for gym-bunnies going stir-crazy in need of a workout but trapped at home during the lockdown. In fact, theirs is the first course described in the all-capturing list:

Are you usually a gym-goer, addicted to the burn and missing your endorphin fix in lockdown? Then start with the Animal Play sequence.

Animals is a seriously dynamic workout. If it’s that exercised, sculpted and defined body you are after, this is the course for you. Deeply energising, challenging and ‘yang’ in nature, this sequence works more on the exterior than other forms of

Qigong. Each stance, from the strength of the tiger to the balance of the crane, activates the external structures of the body such as muscles, ligaments, tendons and fascia. Increase mobility, agility, balance and strength. So, if you like the yoga physique, or want to lose a few ‘Covid pounds’, this is for you. (Hayo’uFit 2021e)

Given the explicit compartmentalising of different forms of qigong for different demographics, and hence different market segments, Hayo’uFit follows a predictable marketing strategy. In it, a practice is transformed (translated) into a spectrum or suite of distinct practices, each of which is aimed at capturing different demographics, hence bringing as many new practitioners as possible into the fold – men, women, children, old and young. (Taekwondo marketing operates in the same way [Bowman 2016].)

In this respect, Hayo’uFit is no different from an ever-growing range of dynamic movement courses and products. But its defining characteristic is its resolute *orientalism*. It is orientalist through and through. It evokes ‘history’ only in its mythic, poetic mode; it relates qigong to other ‘ancient oriental’ practices, and articulates it as the *most* ancient, it makes a sharp differentiation between these Eastern practices and ‘modern Western’ practices, and then invokes a different orientalist cliché by flipping register and declaring this modern Western translation of an ancient Eastern practice to be ‘the future’.

In answering the question ‘What is Qigong?’, the Hayo’uFit site expounds:

There are a lot of studies that show tai chi and qigong are incredible for health; the two are often used interchangeably in research. They have been shown to have a positive effect on muscle strength, flexibility and balance, to improve fitness and the endurance levels of the heart and lungs. One 2013 study concluded that tai chi was nearly as effective as jogging at lowering the risk of death! The Chinese government has recently adopted tai chi as a solution to help cut stress in the workplace. (Hayo’uFit 2021a)

Appraised in such terms, it all sounds too good to be true. One would be a fool to ignore such an invitation to practice such a panacea. Surely everyone will turn to qigong now. Hence, one wonders: why *isn’t* ‘everyone’ doing qigong? And why are we only hearing about it now? Why is it ‘shrouded in mystery’ in China (even though it has also been instituted in the Chinese workplace by the Chinese government), and why is it (supposedly) unknown and undiscovered in the West?

The origin story given on the website tells a tale about Hayo’uFit founder, Katie Brindle. This narrative differs somewhat from others, given before the pandemic, in that it locates the

birth of Hayo'uFit *after* the start of the pandemic and, indeed, gives the pandemic a starring role in the origin story of an enterprise that actually predates the pandemic. We read:

When lockdown started, Katie decided to share her daily Qigong practice on Instagram. It was an instant hit, with hundreds (including wellbeing experts and tastemakers such as Jasmine Hemsley, Trinny Woodall and Yasmin Sewell) finding life-changing benefits from her free live classes.

People kept asking for more. And Katie had been dreaming of launching online Qigong classes for a long time. And so, Hayo'uFit was born.

Described as 'energising', 'transforming' and as 'the only thing that's ever worked', Hayo'uFit is a brand-new platform based on the principles of Chinese medicine. Qigong is not about calories in versus calories out. This is a practice designed to replenish rather than deplete your energy levels. Discover an entirely new approach – from one of the oldest healthcare systems in the world. (Hayo'uFit 2021c)

In this account, what shines through is that qigong is arguably 'of the now', right now, not because of much that is inherent to it in a timeless or eternally relevant sense. Rather, it became 'of the now' precisely when people were locked down, isolated, with limited space, and only a broadband connection and a desire – precisely – for nothing short of *magic*.

Chris Goto-Jones has argued that, historically, orientalism and magic have often merged. Indeed, he argues explicitly: orientalism *is* magic (Goto-Jones 2016). Qigong can be made to sound like magic in promising health benefits without sweat, psychological benefits without company, sleep improvements even after inactivity, blood pressure reductions during times of great stress, and so on. To this extent, whatever degree of sustained popularity qigong comes to gain after this pandemic period, lockdowns and social distancing, it is clear that even the 'universal and timeless' only becomes relevant and timely for us when it answers some perceived needs and desires of the moment. Whether qigong is to be regarded as somehow of the lockdown or pandemic *zeitgeist* is debatable. But it certainly ticked a lot of boxes in terms of being something people might feel able to do safely and rewardingly during the time of lockdown, with enforced private living and the isolation of social distancing.

Conclusion: Transforming Taijiquan into Qigong

An expression that circulates in some taiji practitioner circles relates to the transformation or conversion of tai chi chuan into tai chi kung (or taiji-*quan* into taiji-*gong*). This transformation refers to the surpassing, sublimation or escape from the purely martial dimension (*quan*) into a kind of healthful or even spiritual energetics (*gong*). The phrase works best when it is spoken by

a non-Chinese speaker or written in English using the loosest form of Wade-Giles-inspired transliteration. This is because the loose Wade-Giles transliterations ‘t’ai chi ch’uan’ and ‘chi kung’ both *seem* to share the word ‘chi’. However, the ‘chi’ sound in qigong is 氣, while the (presumed) ‘chi’ sound in taiji is actually 極.

Such drifts, displacements and distortions occur not only in the linguistic realm, but also in the realms of practice. Thus, videos and images illustrating the postures and movements of Hayo’uFit (among a growing number of other online qigong courses) present stances and sequences taken from elsewhere – from taiji forms and taiji silk-reeling exercises, as well as from other, unrelated practices such as baguazhang, wushu and even ersatz versions of wing chun kung fu – as if they are all ‘qigong’.

While it would be eminently easy to judge much of this harshly when appraised from a taiji or qigong practitioner perspective, our interest in this study has been in the spectrum and transformations of representations of (first) tai chi and (second) qigong. In scouring mainstream British media archives, it is possible to glean a clear understanding of the shifting coordinates of ‘understandings of’ and ‘interests in’ tai chi in different cultural moments. These discursive coordinates have shifted around somewhat during the long march of tai chi into mainstream British consciousness since the 1970s, although tai chi has tended to remain firmly feminized, even when not fully orientalized. Even when presented as ‘killer stuff’ that might make a man into a ‘lethal weapon’, tai chi maintains its feminized, orientalized semiotic charge – as occult, mysterious, deep, magical: all qualities associated with the ‘orient’ (Said 1978).

With the development of discourses of ‘wellness’, ‘well-being’, ‘mindfulness’ and so on, the status of taiji has tended to improve – regularly featuring in health-focused items across media. However, with the arrival of the lockdowns, anxieties, concerns and social distancing of the COVID-19 pandemic – indeed, at precisely the moment and in precisely the circumstances in which one might expect a practice like taiji to thrive – it seems to have been overtaken by another practice. Arguably, this is a practice very much ‘*like* taiji’: namely, qigong – or, at least, something that is at least ‘like’ qigong. In the end, Hayo’uFit and other online qigong (and taiji) products are hybrid constructs that mine the ‘portable practices’ and ‘transposable messages’ (Palmer and Siegler 2017: 12) of an imagined otherworldly taiji-qigong nexus. In Hayo’uFit, what are selected are simple yet visually interesting, aesthetically exotic yet practically achievable and non-challenging yet imaginatively pleasing postures and movements.

Whether all of this is real or fake, authentic or invented, is entirely secondary to the fact that it exists, is happening and is a sphere of processes from which we can learn much about the shifting cultural dynamics of fascination and fear that influence the way something is translated/constructed, and what it is taken to ‘mean’, ‘do’, and ‘be’.

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¹ The spelling 'tai chi' is most commonly used in British media. We found that from 2000–2020, the spelling tai chi is used consistently across British media, although the Wade-Giles transliteration, *t'ai chi ch'üan*, was sometimes used before the 1990s.

² It starts on a phrygian dominant scale, and resolves to a major scale tonality on the same root note. The sounds include the Japanese *shakuhachi* and *koto*, accompanied by heavy synthesizer drones. (Thanks to ethnomusicologist Colin McGuire.)

³ In his study of the history of magic, Chris Goto-Jones has argued explicitly that orientalism can be understood as magic (Goto-Jones 2016).

⁴ The 2016 documentary about taiji teacher Zeng Manqing (*The Professor: Tai Chi's Journey West*, directed by Barry Strugatz) notes that many of the first students of taiji in the West held countercultural beliefs.

⁵ See the history of martial arts in the British media in *The Invention of Martial Arts* (Bowman 2021) for discussion of more examples of tai chi in British media.

⁶ This can be connected to the representation of tai chi as dance, which emphasizes the quality of gracefulness associated with women. In many items, taiji is presented as a practical solution to ‘female’ health and beauty issues.

⁷ Of course, online yoga courses also proliferated. However, despite its enduring popularity, yoga has arguably come to be regarded as a bit *passé* – arguably a victim of its earlier successful positioning as middle-class, white, and feminine (Alter 2011; Singleton 2010).

⁸ Jane Park argues that, in Hollywood, ‘Asia’ often simultaneously represents the most ancient mystical past and the most technological sci-fi future (Park 2010).