

JEAN DEBERNARDI AND WU XU

THE REVIVAL OF WUDANG DAOIST MARTIAL ARTS

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we seek to write the recent history of the revival of Wudang Taiji Boxing from the perspective of individuals closely involved with that revival. In 20th-century China, first reformers, then communists stigmatized traditional martial arts. But after China's leaders, led by Deng Xiaoping, initiated a new era of reform and opening up in 1978, all that changed. In 1980, a member of the Qing royal family who had spent seven months at Wudang Mountain in 1929 performed the form of boxing he had learned at Wudang at a national sports event. In so doing, he helped spark a revival that led to the formation of the Wudang Taoist Martial Arts Academy in 1989, and the formation of other academies and performance groups. Modern narratives of martial arts history often simplify that history and their heritage, describing orderly lines of master-student relations that transmit ancient practices in an unbroken line. But the modern history of Taiji Boxing is not only the history of a martial arts form, but also the history of the secularization of Chinese ideology and suppression of religion, the reworking of traditional practices of self-cultivation as exercise and competitive sport, and the commercialization and commodification of martial arts for a global audience.

CONTRIBUTORS

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KEYWORDS

Wudang Martial Arts; Taijiquan; Taiji Boxing; China Daoist Association; Daoist martial arts

This paper seeks to write the modern history of the revival of Wudang Daoist martial arts, including Taiji Boxing, from the perspective of individuals closely involved in that revival. Since the 1980s, Wudang Mountain has become a 'mandatory destination' for those who want to explore internal martial arts at the place 'where according to legend these practices originated' (Alpanseque, 2017).¹ The Wudang Daoist Martial Arts Academy near the Purple Empirium Palace and the Wudang Mountain Daoist Traditional Wushu Academy near Yuzhen Palace are popular destinations for international martial arts tourists, who visit to train in martial arts as 'apprentice pilgrims' (Griffith and Marion, 2018).

Mathew Polly critically observed that 'For a Buddhist monastery, there wasn't much Buddhism happening at Shaolin Temple' (Polly 2007, p. 135). By contrast, Wudang Mountain's temples and martial arts academies both remain closely identified with the Daoist religion. Master Zhong Yunlong and his students Master Yuan and Master Gao are ordained Daoist priests, as is the current head of the Wudang Daoist Martial Arts Academy, Master Zhong Xueyong. At the same time, most members of the Wudang martial arts performing group, which like the Shaolin has toured internationally, are chosen for their athletic ability and are not priests.

The Wudang Daoists claim Taiji Boxing as their tradition, but they do so in a period in which Chinese martial arts have been transformed. Far from being the sole heritage of Daoist priests and nuns, Taiji Boxing is taught in school athletic programs, performed on stage in cultural shows, and taught to individuals who aspire to careers in film or policing. As Paul Bowman has well-documented, traditional Asian martial arts has also been the subject of considerable myth-making, in particular through film and literature, and has 'also moved into discourses of lifestyle, belief-systems, self-improvement, and of course, self-defence' (Bowman 2016, p. 926). Although Wudang martial artists were aware of and perhaps even contributed to the myth-making that Bowman and others have described, they connected the modern fate of martial arts to twentieth century political and social currents, mass media, and global travel.

ON ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH AT WUDANG MOUNTAIN

Co-author Jean DeBernardi first visited Wudang Mountain in 2002 to explore the possibility of doing research on international religious pilgrims to Wudang Mountain, one of Daoism's most famous sacred sites. She and her Chinese coresearchers stayed at the Tian Lu Hotel, chosen because it was a ten-minute walk from the Purple Empirium Palace. This temple is one of Wudang's ancient buildings, protected as UNESCO World Heritage since 1994, but also restored as a monastery and a living religious community. There, they met with Abbott Li Guangfu (李光富, 1955-), priests and nuns, local and international tourists and pilgrims, and observed magnificent Daoist rituals performed in the ancient temple shrine rooms and courtyards.

On our arrival DeBernardi's co-researcher observed that the Wudang Daoist Martial Arts Academy (*Wudang Daojiao Wushu/Gongfu*² *Xueyuan* 武当道教 武术/功夫 學院) was directly beside the hotel, and urged DeBernardi to enroll as a student. She argued that this was after all, what foreign visitors to Wudang Mountain did. DeBernardi had no prior training in martial arts, but she signed up for individual lessons with Master Gao Weilin (高伟林, 1973-). During that 2002 visit, training at the academy gave us opportunities for informal conversations with teachers and international students, who shared stories about their lives and training. In 2002 we also interviewed then-director Master Zhong Yunlong.

The martial arts experts whom we interviewed came to practice martial arts during different historical periods and by different personal paths. Some were ordained Daoist priests, others were not. They provided diverse perspectives on the reconstruction of Wudang Daoist martial arts, and the growth of international connections and opportunities. In writing up what we learned from them, we have not tried to synthesize their accounts into a single historical narrative. Rather, we present perspectival accounts based on their conversations with us that we contextualize in Wudang Mountain's modern history.³

1 The creator of Wudang internal martial arts is said to be Zhang Sanfeng, and the story is told that he observed a snake and a crane fighting. Every time the bird attacked, the snake twisted to avoid it, and finally bit the snake. According to Wudang lore, the snake inspired Zhang to create the soft and flexible form of martial arts known as Wudang Taiji Boxing.¹ Some practitioners assume an unbroken transmission of Wudang boxing from Zhang Sanfeng's era to the present. This statement from a Seattle website is typical: 'The [Wudang Martial Arts and culture] system was founded over 500 years ago and has been passed down through the ages without cease' (Anon. N.d.).

2 The term 'martial arts' or Wushu (武术) was written on the building, but contemporary websites give the name as Gongfu (功夫).

3 DeBernardi's 2004 book on Chinese popular religion in Penang, Malaysia similarly focused on the teachings and practices of four individual spirit mediums, offering readers a 'colloquy of particularities' that affirmed 'religious and human particularity' (see Hopkins, 2011).



Figure 1. Ven. Li Guangfu (李光富) (right), then President of the Wudang Mountain Daoist Association and now head of the China Daoist Association, together with actors and crew visiting Wudang to make a Wuxia/Martial arts film, at a ritual at the Purple Empirium Palace. Photograph: Wu Xu, 2003.

ON THE SHAOLIN TEMPLE BOXING REVIVAL

When we discussed Taiji Boxing with people we met at Wudang Mountain, they often cited a popular saying: ‘The south respects Wudang, The north worships Shaolin’ (*Nan zun Wudang bei chong Shaolin* 南尊武当北崇少林). One form of martial arts is associated with Daoism, and the other with Buddhism, one with health and bodily self-cultivation practices (*yangshen* 养身), the other with fighting skills that are paradoxically at odds with Buddhist ideals of nonviolence (see Shahar, 2008). Despite their differences, the two are often compared.

In 1982, the movie *Shaolin Temple* (1982) was filmed at Shaolin, and soon after tourists began to visit. The local government took note, and lent support to the restoration and reconstruction of the temple buildings (Su, Song & Sigley, 2019). In 1984 an estimated two million tourists visited Shaolin Temple, and by 2014 that figure had reached an incredible one billion visitors (Hung et. al., 2016; Su, 2016). The growth of martial arts pilgrimage coincided with Shaolin’s commercial development as a tourist destination.

The temple had lost most of its buildings to a 1928 fire, then lost most of its lands after the 1949 revolution. By 1953, only a few monks remained in the temple (Lu, 2018). Some monks settled in the nearby villages, where they taught and performed Shaolin martial arts to make a living. For that reason, local residents who were not monks were able to learn Shaolin martial arts. But in the

period between 1966 and 1976, the practice of Shaolin martial arts was restricted both inside and outside the temple (Su, 2016).

Su Xiaoyan reports that in 1979, a prominent teacher taught ten disciples, selected in the traditional way, in his home. But soon after the film’s release, no fewer than thirty-seven commercial martial arts schools opened within one kilometre of the gate of the Shaolin Temple scenic area (Su, 2016).⁴ Most of the students likely were Chinese, but pilgrimage to famous martial arts centers like Shaolin, described as travel to ‘the source’, also became increasingly popular with international martial artists (Cynarski & Swider, 2017).

For many years location and relative ease of access favored Shaolin Temple becoming China’s premier destination for the study of martial arts. At the same time, many observe that commercial development has threatened Shaolin Temple’s reputation for authenticity and its viability as a sacred religious site (Hung et. al., 2015). Some of the international martial artists whom we met at the Wudang Daoist Martial Arts Academy had studied at Shaolin, but came to Wudang in search of a more authentic experience.

Like Shaolin Temple, Wudang Mountain is world-famous, providing the setting for the martial arts novels of Jin Yong and the closing scenes of Ang Lee’s 2000 film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. But until recently, Wudang Mountain was far more difficult to reach. While the 1982 movie *Shaolin Temple* was filmed on site, the ‘Wudang Mountain’ scenes in *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* were filmed in Taiwan precisely because of the difficulty of transporting equipment to Wudang Mountain. Since 2000, travel infrastructure has rapidly improved, and in 2009 scenes from *The Karate Kid* (2010), starring Jackie Chan, were filmed there.

Wudang Mountain is now served by an international airport and highspeed trains. In 2018 and 2019, the number of tourists ranged from 1 to 1.5 million, with limits set for major holiday weeks like National Day (National Cultural Heritage Administration, 2020). In 2023, an estimated 100,000 overseas tourists visited Wudang, including 5,000 who studied martial arts (*Global Daily*, 2023). Tourist developments like hotels and martial arts schools are concentrated in the Wudang Residential Area outside the entrance to Wudang Mountain, ensuring distance between commercial enterprises and Wudang’s Daoist Temples and sacred sites.

4 Su Xiaoyan observes that modern Shaolin Buddhists have taken a martial arts form that was practiced locally and recreated its cultural meaning within the framework of Chan Buddhism in order to claim intangible cultural heritage status for Shaolin martial arts (Su, 2016). Su concludes that Shaolin martial arts have been ‘lifted’ from the local community, and describes them as a modern invention and lacking in authenticity.

ON THE REVIVAL OF WUDANG MARTIAL ARTS



Figure 2. Teacher Zhao demonstrating martial arts at the Purple Empirium Palace for a group of martial artists from Italy. Photograph: Jean DeBernardi, 2004.

In 2004, DeBernardi and Xu went to Danjiangkou, formerly known as Jun County, about 55 kilometres from the entry to the Wudang Mountain UNESCO World Heritage Site. According to Daoist hagiography, Zhenwu, Wudang's patron deity, was born in Jun County to royal parents. In Danjiangkou we visited the studio of Zhao Jianying (赵剑英, 1926 – 2011), a famous female martial artist, whom people respectfully addressed as Teacher Zhao (*Zhao Laoshi*, 赵老师) (see Fig. 2). In 2006, Wudang martial arts were included in China's first list of national intangible heritage, and Teacher Zhao won exceptional recognition as the representative inheritor of this tradition (Wang 2010). She was also the head of the nineteenth generation of the Wudang Longmen School, a position that she passed on to her youngest son in 2011 (Anon, 2011).⁵

We also went with her and a friend to buy back issues of *Wudang Magazine*. Teacher Zhao introduced us to Tan Dajiang (谭大江, Daoist/pen name: Kongde 孔德, 1947-2016), the magazine's deputy editor-in-chief until his retirement in 2007. Tan provided us with detailed background on the history of Wudang martial arts based on his research, as well as a copy of his book, *Secrets of the Wudang Internal Martial Arts Sect* (Tan, 1997). He and Teacher Zhao also responded to our questions about the revival of Wudang martial arts, and Teacher Zhao's friend occasionally added a comment.

According to an article by Wu Zhenzi 务真子, Master Tan was born in Danjiangkou City in 1947, and when he was twelve years old his father was imprisoned. Tan was unable to continue in school and for the next twenty years he worked as a farmer, studying literature, art, and music on his own, unable to complete his education. In the late 1970s, recognizing Master Tan's

achievements in the face of these personal hardships, the local government gave him an exceptional opportunity to work in the Wudang Mountain Cultural Management Institute. He was transformed from a manual worker to a cadre without any physical labor, and became convinced of the importance of *qigong* exercises to maintain health at that time. For five years, he had a room at the Purple Empirium Palace and helped the old Daoist priests copy scriptures, learning about traditional Daoist health practices including *qigong*, and promoting a program of 'immortality studies' (Wu, 2011). As Ute Engelhardt recalls in an obituary published in the *Journal of Daoist Studies*, Tan began to regularly visit Germany in 2010 to teach *qigong* exercises from the Wudang tradition, and was a 'great teacher of Qigong, Wudang martial arts, Taijiquan, Inner Alchemy, and numerous Yangsheng exercises' (Engelhardt, 2012).

A NEW HISTORY OF TAIJI BOXING

We began by asking Master Tan about the history of Wudang martial arts. Most of the people we asked had explained the recent history of the revival by identifying the masters who had taught a new generation of students. By contrast Master Tan provided us with a comprehensive China-wide history that traced the origins to Zhang Sanfeng, and explained how different styles of Taiji Boxing had been widely diffused. Master Tan noted that in China's Taiji Boxing circles, people remained loyal to the traditional narrative, and recognized Zhang Sanfeng as their founder.

Based on their research they had concluded that Taiji boxing had developed into three main schools that had spread from Wudang temples into the wider society: the Northern School, the Southern School, and the Native Mountain School. Master Tan offered this genealogy of the northern school: Zhang Sanfeng → Huang Zonglue (in Shanxi) → Jiang Fa (in Zhaobao, Henan) → Zhaobao style, Chen style, Yang style, Wu style and so on. Tan concluded that the southern school developed during the Zhengde Period (1506-1521). Zhang Songxi had received training in Taiji boxing in Wudang from Zhang Sanfeng and returned to his hometown south of the Yangtze River. Later Zhang Songxi integrated the eight boxing styles practiced south of Yangtze River into Taiji Boxing and formed a new boxing school called Songxi style. Zhang Songxi's school is the southern school of Wudang Taiji Boxing.

He claimed that Zhang Songxi was a real person in history. But as for the stories about Zhang Songxi in Jin Yong's martial arts novels, Master Tan added, most were made up by Hong Kong author Jin Yong (Louis Cha Leung-yung), whom he described as 'talented at making up stories for historical figures'. Zhang Songxi's southern school of Taiji boxing was handed down, and in the early Qing Huang Baijia was one of the few successors. At the

5 For additional background on Teacher Zhao, see also '功夫大师赵剑英 Kung Fu Master Zhao Jianying', a video made by the Foreign Cultural Liaison Bureau of the Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国文化部对外文化联络局, N.d.). Accessed August 26, 2022.

end of the Qing, the southern school of Taiji boxing diffused into Sichuan.

Tan identified Wang Weisheng as the most famous contemporary master of southern Taiji Boxing. Wang lived in Sichuan, but during the early 1980s Gu Liuxin had invited him to Shanghai. He observed that although there are still many successors of southern Taiji boxing in Nanchong, Sichuan, the influence of the southern Taiji boxing was not great at the national level.

He also identified a third branch of Taiji boxing that he called the 'Native Mountain School' (*ben shan pai*, 本山派). The editor offered three other names commonly used for the Native Mountain School: Zhang Sanfeng Taiji Boxing; Pole Star Five Element Boxing (*Taiyi Wuxing Quan* 太乙五行拳); and Great Harmony Boxing (*Taihe Quan* 太和拳), which took its name 'Great Harmony' from the temple complex on Wudang mountain's Tianzhu Peak (*Tianzhu Feng* 天柱峰). The peak is the Pillar of Heaven, the world axis connecting Heaven and Earth, and 'great harmony' alludes to the harmonious relationship between heaven and earth that ensured dynastic legitimacy.

As the editor described it, the Native Mountain School spread first among the Daoists in Wudang temples, then during the Qing Dynasty to outside communities. Their research also had traced the Youlong (遊龍, Swimming Dragon) style of Taiji boxing to Wudang temples. His history of Swimming Dragon Taiji Boxing was precisely detailed: in the Qing dynasty, a Wudang Daoist priest Yang Luchan (楊露禪) taught Youlong Taiji boxing to Shi Kingsan in a princely court of the Qing royal family in Beijing.

In light of a recent two years' investigation, they also concluded that another style called *Zhangzu Yihe Taiji* boxing also belonged to the Native Mountain School. During the early Nationalist period, a soldier had learned Taiji boxing from a Daoist priest at Laohekou [a small city near Wudang Mountain] then transmitted it outside of Daoist circles. Transmission from the temple to the wider society was relatively rare, but provides important evidence that Wudang martial arts had continued to be practiced by the Daoists in their remote mountain temples and monasteries.

He then introduced us to Tang Hao's critical debunking of martial arts traditions. Tang Hao (唐豪, 1896-1959) was a lawyer and martial artist who had studied martial arts in China and Japan. Chinese biographical sources describe him as a pioneer who introduced a scientific approach to the study of martial arts history. He was appointed director of the editorial department of the National Nanjing Central Martial Arts Museum in 1928. In 1930, Tang published a book entitled *Investigating Shaolin and Wudang* (*Shaolin Wudang Kao* 少林武当考) in which he provided historical evidence (or the lack thereof) to debunk traditional narratives about both Shaolin and Wudang martial arts (Alpanseque, 2017). He sought to replace the traditional narratives about the Bodhidharma and Zhang Sanfeng with a new historical account of the origins of these martial arts traditions based on his own empirical research.

Master Tan explained Tang Hao's critique of the traditional claims regarding Wudang Taiji Boxing as the consequence of the modern movement to overthrow traditions:

In the 1930s, Tang Hao, one editor at the Central Academy of Chinese Traditional Boxing and Fencing (中央国术馆), was influenced by the May 4th Movement [c 1919]. At that time a lot of so-called patriotic intellectuals who had learned about Western cultures returned to China to promote that people should suspect ancient thoughts. They suspected everything and opposed everything, and promoted the slogan 'down with Confucians'. They overthrew the traditions. So did people in the martial arts circle. The traditional idea that Bodhidharma (*Damo* 达摩) had created Shaolin temple *gongfu* while Zhang Sanfeng had created Wudang Taiji boxing was treated as superstition. Tang Hao, as a representative of these intellectuals, claimed that it was working people rather than Damo or Zhang Sanfeng who had created these boxings. Then he needed evidence for this argument.

People like Tang were always preoccupied by a certain [theoretical] framework and then went to look for evidence. This was the reason why he went to Chenjiagou (陈家沟) village in Henan to do fieldwork. Then there appeared the version that 'Chen Wangting created Taiji Boxing'. In fact, even in their fieldwork, they could not make their statement consistent. However, the general public opinion at that time was anti-traditional oriented and Tang controlled the editorial board of a publication on traditional boxing, which had actually become an outlet for his personal opinions. Subsequently, Damo and Zhang Sanfeng were denied and their roles were replaced by Chen Wangting from Chenjiagou village.

This false interpretation of martial history lasted for over 50 years. During those 50 years, class struggles and political movements were frequent, and few people dared to practice Taiji boxing. Whomever practiced it would be labeled feudalistic-capitalist-revisionist. Teacher Zhao suffered greatly for practicing martial arts and can serve as a typical example.

He added that during the ten year period from 1966 to 1976, nobody could practice martial arts openly, although some hidden practitioners took political risks by teaching and studying secretly. This situation had lasted until the early 1980s when the new open door and reform policies appeared.

Master Tan spoke of Tang Hao's historical account as having lasted 50 years, which implies that by the 1980s it had been disproven. But when Taiji Boxing was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2020, the nomination form traced its origin not to Wudang Mountain but to Chenjiagou village in Henan Province, not to an elusive legendary founder who lived in the Yuan and Ming dynasties, but to the mid-17th century inventor, Chen Wangting 陈王廷, 1600-1680). Daoism is only mentioned once as an influence shaping the development of Taiji Boxing (UNESCO, 2019).

Douglas Wile has described the dispute over Taiji Boxing's origins as 'a major theatre in China's culture wars for nearly a century' (Wile, 2007). He accepts the modernist critique, and proposes that Taiji Boxing's connection to Daoist spirituality was not founded by Zhang Sanfeng but rather was made in the period between the first Opium War (1842) and the outbreak of the Taiping Rebellion (1850) when a book allegedly written by Zhang Sanfeng was published. This book was not an ancient text but rather was composed through so-called spirit writing and then attributed to Zhang. A Daoist sect in Sichuan claimed to communicate with Zhang 'face-to-face', probably through spirit possession, and also through planchette divination, a technique in which the deities were believed to convey written messages to their devotees. In this period of social disruption and national crisis, Wile concludes, *Taiji* Boxing was spiritualized as an expression of Chinese identity, and the invocation of Zhang Sanfeng became a 'coded gesture of patriotism' (Wile, 1996).

Wile observes that in the modern period, Taiji Boxing has played many roles, including 'national self-strengthening, reviving the martial spirit, surviving Manchu, Western, and Japanese imperialism', adding that today some Chinese view it as a 'vehicle for raising respect for Chinese culture' (Wile, 2007). Dominic LaRochelle further notes that however convincing the modernists' critique may be, Western martial arts manuals have accepted that *Taiji* Boxing has an ancient Daoist origin and a spiritual dimension precisely because it meets Western practitioners' expectations about spirituality and what Taiji Boxing should be (LaRochelle, 2014). Meanwhile, while modernists may have convinced some that Zhang Sanfeng is no more than a legendary figure, at sports events in China Wudang *Taiji* Boxing, performed by 'alleged Daoist priests' wearing flowing white robes, is still introduced as 'the original *taijiquan*' (Frank, 2006).

Although Wile's discussion of Taiji Boxing's modern history is compelling, nonetheless there is no doubt that many forms of Taiji Boxing existed in different historical periods and locations, and that these forms included some that were transmitted within Daoist temples as one among many forms of life-preserving practices. Researchers observe that in Chenjiagou Village the masters collected and preserved manuals, which provide important documentation of the history of this martial arts form. Apparently no ancient written manuals exist that could prove the historical claim that this form of martial arts was invented or at least practiced at Wudang Mountain in the Yuan or early Ming dynasties.

But also, the Wudang martial arts experts whom we interviewed observed that the teaching of martial arts depended on verbal instruction and demonstration not manuals. Master Tan, for example, commented that '...the diffusion of martial art has heavily depended on teachers' word of mouth and their own example rather than written language'. And Master Zhong Yunlong observed that the Daoist master taught not through

lessons in books but by demonstrating for the student, and that the student learned according to their personality. DeBernardi's Taiji Boxing teacher in Beijing Zhou Qingjie also observed in an interview that *wushu* must be practiced, that it was 'on the body not in a book', and that the embodied aspect of learning was very important.⁶ We conclude that the absence of written manuals at Wudang Mountain does not disprove claims of a deep history for Wudang Taiji Boxing, but does make those claims difficult to prove.

THE REVIVAL OF TAIJI BOXING

Master Tan credited mass media with promoting the revival of martial arts in China. He observed that when the movie *Shaolin Temple* (released January 1982) was made in Henan province the Shaolin temple was dilapidated and no monks lived there. No one practiced temple *gongfu*. But the movie set off an upsurge of enthusiasm for the study of martial arts and stimulated the local government to pay attention to this temple and its traditional boxing. In December 1982, the Danjiangkou government established the Wudang Mountain Wudang Boxing Research Association (*Wudang Shan Wudang Quanfa Yanjiu Hui* 武当山武当拳法研究会), and Danjiangkou country began to research and sort out traditional martial arts (see also *Wudang Shan Daojiao Xiehui*, 2019).

They asked where they could find these traditional martial arts preserved? Who knew them? Master Tan recalled:

At that time, we did not have any clue even after a long time of investigation. The first person to make Wudang martial arts public was Mr. Jin Zitao (金子涛), whose merit cannot be ignored. Jin had another name: Aixin Jueluo Puhuan. In the 1981 National Martial Art Games in Taiyuan, he performed a set of boxing on behalf of Zhejiang Province. He explained that this set of boxing was created and handed down by Zhang Sanfeng at Wudang. At that given moment, one needed plenty of guts to say such words because all people had lingering fears resulting from previous political campaigns. His first announcement about the origin of his boxing attracted the attention of the Martial Arts research group of Hubei. Later Mr. Jin was invited to Hubei.

Teacher Zhao added that during the 1987 Taiyuan Martial Games, she had participated as a performer on the Hubei team:

Before the games, my team and Mr. Jin's were assigned to the same training ground. When he learned that we were from Wudang, he became on intimate terms with us. He also placed one copy of his report about the origin of his boxing at my place. I later turned his report over to our prefectural bureau for sports. I began to learn this kind of Wudang boxing, which was called Pole Star Five Element Boxing (*Taiyi Wuxing quan*), from Jin at Taiyuan.

6 On Chinese martial arts as embodied martial knowledge and theatrical performance see the publications of Daniel Mroz (2009, 2020).

Jin Zitao was in fact a member of the Manchu ruling clan of the Qing Dynasty. Later she added more details about his life:

Just now, we mentioned Mr. Jin. Why did he know about Wudang martial art? He and the last emperor of Qing dynasty were sons of the same father but of different mothers. Why did he begin to learn martial arts? His wife died of difficult labor. In the past, people were generally superstitious and Jin felt his personal fate was not good and that his fate might have affected his wife's fate. So he decided to go to a temple. He went to Wudang but they turned him down. The Daoists in Wudang did not believe in him since they thought that a man who had grown up in the royal court would never be able to stand the hardship of Daoist lives. The Wudang Daoists persuaded him not to stay at Wudang.

Today, Wudang Daoists never worry about their food and clothing. But in the past, they had to grow vegetables, to cut firewood, to make meals by themselves. Therefore, all Daoists came from poor families. Jin also went to Guiyuan Temple in Wuhan City. Later, he made a third trip to Wudang and lived there for 7 months. During this time, he learned *Taiyi Wuxing* Boxing from a Daoist priest.

Until 1981, for 50 years, he had never taught this form of boxing to others, since Wudang Daoism had a rule that the Wudang martial arts could not be casually taught or studied. In this respect, Wudang is more conservative than Shaolin. But Jin kept practicing *Taiyi Wuxing* Boxing secretly until 1980 when he first made public that his boxing was from Wudang.

Master Tan offered a different interpretation of Jin's motives in studying martial arts at Wudang. He observed that because Jin was not a legitimate son, there was no position for him in the royal court, and that this made him angry. For that reason he went to Wudang, where he studied this martial arts form with a Daoist priest.

Master Tan noted that after the National Wushu Athletic Games in 1980, the country started to respect *wushu*. In the past martial arts had been deemed an improper activity (*buqiadang* 不恰当). But after they held a national competition, things started to change. In particular, Jin's performance had an immediate impact since they concluded that because he had learned it at Wudang Mountain, it was unique to Wudang Daoist martial arts:

After Jin's performance, no similar boxing routine could be found. After this was publicized, he was interviewed. At that time, we had sent a coach to represent Hubei Province, to participate and compete. After he returned, they named this place the Sports Bureau. In order to promote Wudang Mountain and Wudang *wushu*, we invited Jin here. He taught us and lived with us for over two years teaching Wudang *wushu*.

The athletic bureau sent Teacher Zhao to study with him. He trained many disciples besides her. But he assigned her to be his successor of *Taiyi Wuxing* Boxing. The movement scope is

not big, you can do it in a small space. There are differences from Shaolin Boxing and other boxing. There are many schools, based on the body's age and health condition. Studying this boxing is very suitable. It promotes health, and also is defensive.

According to Master Tan, the situation of Wudang martial arts changed immediately after Jin announced the origin of his form of *Taiyi Wuxing* Boxing. Hidden martial practitioners, especially those who wanted to make a profit with martial arts, began to claim a genealogical relation with Wudang.

He next explained that they had launched a new journal in 1983 and begun to do intensive research at that time:

In 1983, we started a journal entitled *Wudang* to fit this new situation. After starting this journal, we first went to Zhaobao (赵堡), Henan, to excavate the martial history of Wudang. This *Zhaobao Taiji* Boxing is quite an interesting topic. In Henan, people discriminate against this boxing. Why? Because the boxing practitioners always had the idea that this boxing was handed down from Wudang. Henan province holds to the value of localism, namely, if you claim your boxing is native to Henan then they will support you, otherwise no support is available. Taiji Boxing practitioners at *Zhaobao* proved to be stubborn: no matter how you suppress us, they responded, we will never say anything to deceive our master and ignore our founder.

During the Anti-Japanese War, several famous boxers, such as Zheng Wuqing, Zhen Baiying, and Hou Chunxiu, etc., spread this *Zhaobao* Boxing to Xi'an city. It was spread among all the social classes in Xi'an starting in the 1940s. In fact, it is fair to say that the whole diffusion, domestic and abroad, of *Zhaobao* Taiji Boxing was started from Xi'an. Now the influence of *Zhaobao* Taiji Boxing is great.

In the past 20 years, there continually appear clues for our investigations on Wudang martial art. We found that there have been nearly 100 boxing varieties originated from Wudang. Throughout our investigation, we also found some unusual situations. We found that unlike other cultural traditions, the diffusion of martial art has heavily depended on teachers' words of mouth and their own examples rather than written language. Some martial schools' origins and histories are clear, but some schools became disorderly. Also, since today Shaolin and Wudang boxing are valued, some people just fake a history for their school to 'fish in the muddied waters'. In the process of our investigation, we will not make public a school's origin until we have found enough evidence to support its claimed history and origin.

He also described modern forms of Taiji Boxing that had been created by Chinese sports committees, who asked well-known Taiji Boxing teachers to help them create simplified forms that could be taught to ordinary people. He concluded, however, that these new forms lacked essence:

In the early 1950s, China's leaders announced the slogan 'building up people's health'. One of the ways to build up people's health was to promote traditional Taiji Boxing by simplifying the Yang style. This simplified Taiji Boxing was designed to make the performance and competition of Taiji Boxing easier.

However, rethinking this 20-year-history of simplified sets of Taiji Boxing, the sport bureaus ignored something essential to Taiji Boxing. The simplified Taiji Boxing was formalist oriented and became what people called 'Taiji exercise / gymnastics' which assumed presentable looks. In contrast, the traditional Taiji Boxing stressed the content. Every movement of the boxing contains its built-in functions. However, this simplified Taiji boxing lost these contents.

Now, even foreigners, westerners, realized that they should come to China to learn traditional Taiji Boxing. They do not like the simplified ones promoted by the bureaus. People of insight in China proposed to pay more attention to studying, promoting, and spreading traditional Taiji Boxing. Only this way could the essence of Chinese traditional culture be embodied. When we spread our culture to the world, we should include the culture's essence.

The 24 style or 48 style, among others, are all simplified and without the essence that the traditional styles should have. Why simplify? Some people feel that the 72 style or 108 styles, for example, are too long and that people do not have time and patience to finish them, so they produced a simplified version. Thus, this simplification has both good and bad effects. The traditional things cannot be embodied simply by simplification. Ancient people who created the 72 style or 108 style did not create these styles casually; they had their reasons. The traditional style followed a natural law of boxing. Probably today's simplification gets rid of its soul.

Teacher Zhao added that repetition was necessary to prepare for fighting; Master Tan compared it to repetition in music:

I can give an example. After we sing a song, we still can remember that song, right? Why? This is because this song has a main melody. The main melody is always repetitive in a song. Whether being merry music or sad but stirring, there is always a main melody woven in the song, which leave a strong impression on you. So it is with Taiji Boxing. The repetitive movements have special significance. The repetitive actions are the key points of a set of boxing, which make you repeat them to understand them. Also, the repetitive actions train your ability to defend attacks from both sides. These repetitive actions were not to make things unnecessarily mysterious but determined by the natural rules of boxing.

Teacher Zhao observed, however, that some styles had been developed not because they were effective fighting techniques but because they looked good:

In addition, all simplified styles, may it be the 48, 88, 66, or 24, were finished by integrating representative movements from

several Taiji Boxing schools like the Yang style, the Wu style and the Su style. Later, in order to cater for new fashions, people added some movements to the simplified boxing. For example, in the traditional boxing, when one fought and kicked, the leg should be lower than a height of one's knee. Why? A kick which is higher than the knee implies one gives one of his legs to his rival. The rival catches one of your legs and another leg cannot support you any longer. But now, the higher a kick, the better it looks. The fighting technique was added with artistic flavor. The traditional boxing was very strict on this awareness of attacking and defending.

I began learning martial at age of 6 and a half, and I had heard that the traditional Chinese martial arts could be performed in a very small place like a cattle stall. But today's boxing forms are all long boxing, which require a large practice ground, and most movements follow straight lines. Only the movements of Wudang boxing cut on the diagonal, and defend attacks from eight directions. This boxing consists of movements which aim to pinch the rival's [acupuncture] points and movements for both attacking and defending. This boxing stresses the elimination of rival's attacking strength but not one's own attacking. Let one's opponent attack first and then get the better of his attacks. When you attack me, I can subdue you by taking advantage of your attacking strength, but I do not need to kill you or to defeat you. Because of this, Wudang martial art is considered to be good for keeping good health.

She continued with a further explanation of the special characteristics of Taijiqian:

The merit of inner boxing is that it follows the Daoist philosophy. Why is it called Taiji Boxing? *Taiji* means a state of 'neutralization', no extreme. This philosophy was integrated into boxing and the boxing into a regimen. If there is no regimen, then there is no boxing. Boxing is just one by-product of the regimen. The ingenious art of Wudang boxing lies in its reasonable use of the human body structure to cleverly defend and attack, and on the premise of keeping good health. I think this is the core of Wudang martial arts, which is surely profound and can be studied from various levels.

As Master Tan's introduction to the history of Wudang martial arts suggests, Teacher Zhao was one of the individuals who was instrumental in the modern revival of Wudang martial arts. On website histories of Wudang martial arts, she is often described as one of a small number of martial arts teachers who helped revive martial arts at Wudang Mountain.

THE WUDANG TAOIST MARTIAL ARTS ACADEMY

The history of martial arts at Wudang Mountain is also a history of the creation of a martial arts academy not far from the Purple Empirium Palace. In 1989, the Wudang Daoist Martial Arts School (*Wudang Daojiao Wuxu Xueyuan* 武当道教功夫學院) was opened, with Master Zhong Yunlong as their head. They accepted

40 students a year and foreign students for short stays (Ching and Yun, 2003). Master Zhong often is described as the 14th generation inheritor of Wudang Sanfeng Pai, and the successor of both Guo Gaoyi and Zhu Chengde, a skilled martial artist and herbalist.⁷



Figure 3. Wudang Daoist Martial Arts Academy.
Photograph: Wu Xu, 2003.

In the 2000s, the martial arts academy was a large school with dormitory rooms, classrooms, and a computer room, fronted by a large paved yard facing the road to the Purple Empirium Palace (Fig. 3). The school stood beside the Tian Lu tourist hotel, a ten-minute walk from the Purple Empirium Palace, Wudang's main Daoist monastery. The coaches taught foreigners, but also young Chinese students, both male and female, who were students of martial arts and who also took regular courses at the school. Some trained to be coaches in schools, while others imagined a future as performers in a troupe or in martial arts films. From time-to-time the young students and their coaches went to the courtyard of the Purple Empirium Palace or the Tian Lu Hotel and performed for visitors (Fig. 4).

Zhong Yunlong was not available, so we made an appointment with DeBernardi's prospective teacher, Master Gao Weilin 高伟林, who was from Gaosheng'an Village, in the Ganzhou district of Gansu province, one of China's poorest regions (Tao, 2020). We met around a conference table in the academy office, where he laid out the costs and benefits of training, including that DeBernardi could go home and use the credential of having studied with him to open her own martial arts academy. Most of the foreign students were there for one purpose only, and trained for the full

day. But he agreed to giving two hours of instruction each morning.

When he taught Master Gao wore flowing white shirt and pants, made of supple thin fabric. His hair was long and tied in a topknot in the style worn by Daoist priests (see Fig. 5). We addressed him as 'master' (*shifu* 师父), a term of respect, but DeBernardi noticed that often people referred to the teachers as 'coaches' (*jiaolian* 教练). The early generation of martial arts who participated in the launching the revival had studied Daoism. But others were athletes and performers not priests.



Figure 4. Students at the Wudang Daoist Martial Arts Academy demonstrate Taiji Boxing in the courtyard in front of the Purple Empirium Palace during the fall pilgrimage period. Photograph: Jean DeBernardi, 2004.

7 In 2003, Kungfu Magazine published an interview with Master Zhong, imprecisely described as the 'chief priest of Wudang Mountain'. The details offered in this interview differ in some respects from our interview with him, supplying some details lacking here, but also shaping the narrative in ways that seem to minimize some of the modern aspects of Master Zhong's life history. See Ching and Yun (2003).



Figure 5. Master Gao Weilin (front row, second from left) resigned from the Wudang Daoist Martial Arts Academy in 2002, and the following year brought his Wenzhou students to the Purple Empirium Palace at Wudang Mountain. They are photographed here with some of the actors filming a *Wuxia*/martial arts film at the temple and project researcher Pang Lijun (fourth from right), who had taken lessons from Master Gao in 2002. Photograph: Wu Xu, 2003.

MASTER ZHONG YUNLONG

At her first visit to the Wudang Daoist Martial Arts Academy, DeBernardi explained her interest in Wudang Mountain and the globalization of Daoism to Master Gao, and we learned that the martial artists had just traveled to the United States for the first time. Later the director of the academy Zhong Yunlong agreed to an interview, and we learned more about the revival of martial arts at Wudang Mountain and their international aspirations.

In 2002, DeBernardi and her co-researchers interviewed Master Zhong in a large, comfortable sitting room at the Wudang Daoist Martial Arts Academy. He wore the clothing of a Daoist priest, his long hair twisted into a topknot under a priest's cap. We had not planned this interview, but when we went to his office to request the key to the computer room, we met him and found him willing to talk.

Master Zhong had been born in 1964 in Huangshi City in northeast Hubei Province, on the border with Jiangxi province. When we asked why he had become a Daoist priest, he responded that he had been interested in martial arts (*wushu*) since childhood due to family influence. His grandfather's brother, who was a farmer, could do martial arts, and Zhong studied with him. *Wushu* is very common in the countryside, and he observed that for people interested in martial arts, the atmosphere was good.

His father (whom he mentioned was over 80) was educated and had been a teacher in a private school. He was well-connected, and recommended his son to a friend in Jiangxi who was familiar with martial arts. When he was thirteen, he went to Jiangxi to practice martial arts with him. ... He lived with his master (*shifu* 师父) but could not study openly. He was in Jiangxi for three years. By 1980, martial arts had become more open, and he invited his master to Hubei. His Master lived there for three years and taught them martial arts.

We asked him how he came to Wudang? He responded that his Master had advised him that if he wanted to continue his study of martial arts, he needed a better Master. Shaolin and Wudang were both famous. In Spring 1983 – the year after the Shaolin movie was released – he went to Shaolin, where he heard that a master was teaching the lion dance, and where it was acceptable to perform all kinds of martial arts. In winter 1983 he went to Wudang and renounced his family. He stayed there until 1985.

Master Zhong had wanted to develop Wudang martial arts but observed that the old Daoist priests had gone to 'other mountains'. He sent some priests to find the old priests and collect Wudang martial arts.⁸ He also returned to Shaolin, where he learned *ying gongfu*, *weijia chuan*, and *yangsheng* (养生) martial arts. With 'life nourishing' martial arts, he explained, you could hurt people but you don't do so.

He recalled that in 1983 there was a competition of Wudang martial arts at a stadium, and they started to develop schools. He added that China's martial arts were not the only martial arts, observing that the martial arts are related to strategies, military arts. Daoist martial artists follow Laozi's teachings, and Daoism forms the essence of Taiji. He observed that the common people might have some prejudices about Taiji, and shallow knowledge.

We did not explore the topic further in our interview, but later learned that only a few years earlier in 1999, Master Zhong had performed Taiji boxing for President Jiang Zemin. When Jiang died in 2022, the Wudang Mountain Daoists posted on their website an essay describing his visit.⁹ After greeting Abbot Wang Guangde by shaking hands, he asked Abbot Wang to show him how Daoists greeted one another with clasped fists. President Jiang then recited sentences from the *Daodejing* while they walked up the steps to the Purple Empirium Palace. When they entered the main shrine room, the Daoists were performing ritual music, and President Jiang praised it, later commenting that 'Religious culture is the art of the upper class'.

They next went to the reception hall, where President Jiang lectured the Wudang Daoists on Daoist culture and the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi. Afterwards Master Zhong performed Taiji Boxing for him. Jiang praised his performance

8 In an article in Kungfu Magazine.com (Ching and Yun 2003), the authors describe the old priests and their martial arts styles in detail, claiming that Master Zhong studied these forms with all of them. But other reports indicate that as per his interview with us, he dispatched others to study these martial arts forms. The accounts agree on the point that the traditions were recovered by traveling to other places to study them with older priests who had left Wudang Mountain and not returned.

9 Yi Jiang Zemin Zhuxi zai Wudang Shan. 忆江泽民主席在武当山 (Recalling Chairman Jiang Zemin at Wudang Mountain) (Wudang Shan Daojiao Xiehui, 2023).

but also boasted that he had excellent skills himself, and he demonstrated a move. Abbot Wang informed him that Wudang boxing had been introduced in the Shiyan schools as physical education, and that Daoists at Wudang also practiced Taiji, to which Chairman Jiang replied, 'That's good!' President Jiang clearly sent a message that the *Daodejing*, Daoist martial arts, and Daoist music were acceptable to China's central government. As DeBernardi's research shows, all three have assumed an important place in modern official Daoism, promoted in conferences, publications, cultural performances and museum displays.

Returning to our interview with Master Zhong, DeBernardi next asked him what he thought of a book that she had found in a local shop that taught how to perform Taiji Boxing (Liu, 2000). Today books and audiovisual resources showing how to perform Taiji Boxing abound, but at that time she had only found one book, and a bilingual dictionary of Chinese martial arts terms that included a section on Taiji boxing terms (Xie & Li, 1989). The teachers working with international students found the glossary useful, but when she had shown the other book to Master Gao, he had been dismissive.

She asked Master Zhong why that might be? He replied that different people had different personalities and understandings. He also observed that different schools focused on different parts of Taiji Boxing. He focused on Zhang Sanfeng, but other schools also were identified by the surname of their founders: Zhaobao, Heshi, Chengshi, Yangshi. He also observed that the Daoist master taught not through lessons in books but by demonstrating for the student, and that the student learned according to their personality.

He explained:

Taiji Boxing is the essence. You use softness to conquer stiffness, you use stillness to conquer movement. You can spend a little strength and conquer a strong enemy. *Yin* is soft, *yang* is hard, feminine and negative, masculine and positive. The Great Ultimate (*taiji*) is a small part of real Taiji Boxing. Many mistakenly think that the Great Ultimate is major part of Wudang martial arts. Other parts include: Laozi ideology, *qi*, vital breath, this is the main idea, *qi* circulates throughout the whole body, *taiji* emphasizes the movement of vital breath. We focus on three levels

1. directing and guiding (*daoying* 导引)
2. gathering (*caiqi* 采气)
3. original chaos (*hunluan* 混乱)

Hunluan is the highest level. *Yin* and *yang*, hard and soft (*gangrou* 刚柔), are harmonious (*hexie* 和谐), the martial artist can move *qi* freely without constraint. This is traditional martial arts (*chuantong wushu* 传统武术).

The Daoist master takes a student, he demonstrates it to show the student, the student looks at the master, then learns it themselves. The master does not explain, but lets you understand. The person learns Daoism, taiji, according to their personality. Self-understanding. If they are taught too much, the student can't control their vital breath. It's not secret because people are afraid that the student will go teach others, but because they don't want to harm people.

As noted above, a number of individuals, including Teacher Zhao and *Wudang Magazine* editor Master Tan, participated in the restoration of Wudang Taiji Boxing. But the Wudang Daoist Martial Arts Academy played an important role in globalizing martial arts by developing a performance group that travels widely. Since 1993 the Wudang performance group has regularly visited Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia.

They only performed in North America for the first time in 2002 just months before our first visit. Only two teachers and two students had been able to go, and Master Zhong was one of the four. According to him, from July 30 to August 31 2002 they visited New York, Texas, and San Francisco, on a tour set up by three organization. In San Francisco, famous martial arts persons from 19 countries participated, and there were details posted on the Internet. In the US, Master Zhong recalled, they communicated with overseas Chinese, but most of the time they stayed in places where Americans lived, not in Chinatowns. In his view, they were not doing enough to propagate Wudang martial arts in the US.

MASTER ZHONG XUEYONG

When we visited the martial arts academy on October 11, 2004, Prof. Dong Luo, DeBernardi, and Xu discovered that Master Zhong Yunlong had left the school. Master Zhong Xueyong (钟学勇, app. 1976-) had been appointed Dean of Teaching and Reception, and had also taken over as head coach of the Wudang Daoist Gongfu Academy a year earlier in 2003. As of 2023, he is director of the Wudang Mountain Daoist Association and intangible heritage inheritor of Wudang martial arts. In media reports, he explains that Daoist martial arts is one form of health nourishing (*yang sheng* 养生) practice, and that students should expect to study Daoist scriptures as part of their training.

Like Gao Weilin and Zhong Yunlong, he was one of the early individuals to train at Wudang Mountain. He also was one of the four martial artists chosen to go to North American in 2002. DeBernardi's research explored Wudang's growing global connections, and Master Zhong shared information about the Academy's international students, whose numbers had greatly increased under his leadership.¹⁰

We also asked Master Zhong how had come to study martial arts? He explained that he had come to Wudang Mountain in 1991 at a

10 Master Zhong Yunlong is described on the school website both as Master Yuan's master and as a Grandmaster at Master Yuan's academy. <https://wudang.academy/study-with-grandmaster-zhong-yun-long/> Consulted 9 February 2020.

young age because he worshipped martial arts. His home town in Yangxin County, a rural region of Hubei south of Wuhan. As a child his body was weak, and after studying for a week he would have to rest for a month. His stomach hurt and he saw a doctor, but the doctor could not diagnose his illness. He didn't study after middle school, then his uncle decided to look into sending him to Wudang Mountain to study *gongfu*. Without telling him, he discussed it with the master, then returned and took him to Wudang Mountain. At the age of 15 or 16 he went up to Wudang Mountain. In the first half year his body was too weak, but by 1994, 1995 he was better.

At that time, practice was very hard. In the second year he had a cold and he lost consciousness for a day. Gao Weilin carried him on his back to the Purple Empirium Palace for an injection. Gao waited there until he woke up and asked him one question:

'Are you going to die?'

I replied, 'I will not die!'

He said, 'If you don't die you must train!'

I was still coughing, I didn't eat medicine or get injections, but I still recovered.

He noted that in the early years, a student only had to study one year and then they could perform. By 2004, students had to study for two or three years. Also, when he first came, there was no phone or internet. Students wrote letters, and only went down the mountain three or four times a year. Every day they practiced for 9 or 10 hours. They also cooked their own meals and had to collect firewood in the mountains for fuel at night in the dark. In 2001 they moved to the new school, and things got better. He observed that their Chinese students hoped to join a performance group, and if they did well, they could teach or even become actors, but he added that some would not realize their goals, or might have different goals. Others would become security guards or soldiers.

He himself had been one of the fortunate teachers chosen to go the United States in 2002. This was the first time the Wudang martial artists had gone to America, and he recalled that they met with a congressman, and also UNESCO representatives. They gave many performances, and as he described it they were a sensation (*hongdong* 轰动). He also taught students in Long Island for two weeks.

He also mentioned that they visited the American Shaolin Temple. He probably referred to the USA Shaolin Temple in New York, which was founded in 1994 by Shifu Shi Yang Ming (1964 -), who had come to the United States in 1992 on tour with a group of Shaolin martial artists and remained. Although USA Shaolin Temple appears to be an entirely independent initiative, other teachers had mentioned to us that the government promoted the teaching of Shaolin martial arts overseas, and wondered if they could find support to teach Wudang martial arts abroad.

Master Zhong observed that while the Master was from Shaolin Temple and was Chinese, the students were all foreigners, adding that they also studied Wudang martial arts (i.e. Taiji Boxing).

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Prof. Dong asked him if the Daoists ever fought the monks? 'No!' he responded, 'They don't fight! A better question would have been, did they aspire to teach Wudang martial arts overseas? If so, what plans did they have to prepare themselves to teach foreign students? Most of the martial arts teachers had not studied any foreign languages, and most of their foreign students could not speak Chinese, making their efforts to train them more challenging.

The most interesting part of our discussion however concerned changes in the academy. On arrival we had seen a martial arts performance at an Autumn Moon festival gathering sponsored by a group of Taiwanese pilgrims. We were surprised at how different the performance was from the ones we had seen two years earlier, which featured the slow, flowing movements of Taiji Boxing rather than exciting fight scenes.

An observant American student had told us that they had hired a coach from Shaolin Temple, and also brought over Shaolin students, restructuring the school as a business. On their arrive, the Shaolin students had short hair (as practitioners of Buddhist martial arts, their heads were shaved), but on arriving at Wudang Shan they grew their hair long, and the first one had just put up his hair in a top knot. He predicted that in ten years it would be a tourist trap.

The performers now did flips and acrobatics, incorporating Daoist Eight Trigram and Taiji Boxing forms with these dramatic movements. At the performance we had seen on the night of our arrival, they had amazed the audience by lifting up a performer on spear heads so that he floated in the air. The American student concluded that they had changed the forms to look better, but that this was not better for *Taiji* boxing or for fighting.

We asked Master Zhong about this, and he explained that when they performed traditional Wudang Internal Alchemy (*Neidan* 内丹) martial arts, people complained, saying, 'When I look at your Wudang-style performance, I fall asleep'.

When we perform for laymen, we wanted to amaze and excite them, to elevate their heart rates. After they've been amazed then the performance can become soft and feminine (*yinrou* 陰柔). Then just when their heart has calmed down, we give them another powerful 'fire burst' performance, like a face-to-face fight.

When they trained, he asserted, it was different. And when they performed at events attended by martial arts experts, then their performance was like the performances we had seen in 2002—just the same. They adapted their performances to different audiences, and gave them what they wanted. Prof. Dong protested, 'We thought it looked like Shaolin martial arts!' He responded, 'That's because you know Wudang traditions.... We need to adapt, otherwise we cannot progress.... If you want *wuwei* (無為, a Daoist

concept, literally ‘non-doing’) then you will lose your culture. We need to continually change, but our core doesn’t change’.¹¹

MASTER YUAN XIUGANG

In 2004, we also interviewed one of the most popular teachers with foreign students, Master Yuan Xiugang (袁修刚, Daoist name *Shi Mao* 师懋, 1971-). In 2002, he was one of the teachers who had taken over instructing DeBernardi and Pang when Master Gao had abruptly quit and returned to Gansu. At that time foreign students had been few and finally she was the only one remaining. For a week or so DeBernardi was the only international student, with four teachers sharing responsibility to teach her the final movements of the lengthy 108 form. This likely was the lowest point in their international outreach.

But when she and Xu visited the Wudang Daoist Martial Arts Academy in 2004, they found that Master Yuan was teaching a number of international students, including students from the United States and Russia. That year, Master Yuan launched a new martial arts school in Wudang town, the Wudang Mountain Daoist Traditional Wushu Academy (*Wudang Shan Daojiao Chuantong Wushu Guan* 武当山道教传统武术馆). Although he is an ordained Daoist priest, Master Yuan left the sacred mountain to teach ‘outside’, establishing a school that is well-known and popular with international students.

We do not focus on international students in this paper. But some students whom we met and interviewed at the Wudang Daoist Martial Arts Academy were highly trained martial artists who owned martial arts studios in their home communities. Students of Taiji Boxing visit Wudang to learn new skills. But they also acquire social and educational capital that they could not obtain at home when they visit the birthplace of Wudang martial arts and study with famous teachers. Apprenticeship pilgrimage, as the practice has been termed, like religious pilgrimage, has a serious, even sacred dimension (Griffith & Marion, 2018).

Some international students asked their teachers to give them Daoist names, and one young American even claimed to have been ordained in at the Purple Empirium Palace. For these students, their ‘shared commitment system’ extended to the practice of the Daoist religion, and they sincerely venerated Zhang Sanfeng as their ancestral god. As both priest and martial artist, Master Yuan offers international students both the possibility of advanced training and an authentic experience of Wudang Daoist traditions, neither of which could easily be found in their home communities.

More recently, some of Master Yuan’s international students have opened schools to teach internal Wudang martial arts in their home countries. For example, Austrian martial artist Michael König-Weichhardt, whose Daoist name is Wei Mao Zi Ji, identifies himself as a disciple of masters Yuan Xiugang and Chen

Shiyu. He is part of a small cohort of European and American students of Master Yuan’s who describe themselves as belonging to the sixteenth generation of the Sanfeng Pai lineage, which respects Zhang Sanfeng as its founder (König-Weichhardt, N.d.).

In our 2004 interview with Master Yuan, we asked him about his own training. He recalled that the first time he came to Wudang Mountain, someone fooled him, telling him to go to the Golden Peak to find a Taiji Boxing master. But once he arrived, people there told him that he needed to go to Purple Empirium Palace, so he went down the mountain to the temple. By the time he arrived it was already dark, so he slept there.

Once it was daylight, he learned that there was a Master named Zhong Yunlong. Zhong heard that he had come but refused to take him as a student. Yuan continued to stay at the temple, and every day hung around and tried to call on Master Zhong. The master finally decided that he was serious and allowed him to study with him. This was September 1992.

Master Zhong had ten to twenty students, and Abbot Wang picked some for the martial arts performing troop. In 1994, Master Yuan entered the *dao* and became a real Daoist priest, and got his *hukou* [Chinese domestic passport]. He also continued to study martial arts with Master Zhong.

He commented that the first generation had trained at this academy, but that all had left. Master Gao had moved to Wenzhou, and Master Yuan described him as teaching Taiji Boxing ‘outside’. He added that the Wudang Mountain Daoist Association’s martial arts performing group had eight members, but that only one of them was a real Daoist priest. The rest were chosen from elsewhere.

DeBernardi asked about their travels for performance, and he recalled that the first time they performed outside was at Liangshan in Shandong Province, at a Water Margin Cultural Festival. In the second year, they went to Taiwan. The next time, they performed in Singapore, in Southeast Asia. And in 2002, some of the performers had gone to the United States, including as mentioned Master Zhong Xueyong. He mentioned that he had been away from Wudang Mountain teaching in a small town near Beijing, and when he returned the people who went to the US had already been decided.

Since we first met Master Yuan, he has become famous. When the *Karate Kid* (2010) was filmed at Wudang Mountain in 2009, with Jackie Chan in a leading role, Master Yuan was featured in a cameo role performing Wudang martial arts. In 2017, *Gong Fu Tai Chi* magazine published an article entitled ‘Enter the Wudang: The Revival of Wudang Martial Arts’, based on an extended interview with Master Yuan, and featuring his photograph on the cover. The article’s author, Emilio Alpanseque, described Master

11 Master Zhong and others expressed the hope that Chinese martial arts would become an Olympic sport. Although China was allowed to organize an international martial arts event during the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, to date this ambition has not been realized, although wushu will be included on the program of the Dakar 2026 Summer Youth Olympics.

Yuan as 'one of the most prominent experts of his generation' (Alpanseque, 2017).

Master Yuan's review of the recent history as reported by Alpanseque provides much valuable detail and insight into the revival of Wudang martial arts. Like Master Tan, he described Tang Hao's 1930s research on traditional martial arts as promoting 'misinformation', and provided detailed evidence to refute the claim that there was no boxing tradition at Wudang (Alpanseque, 2017). In Master Yuan's detailed account of the recent revival, he relied on research done by the Wudang Mountain Daoist Association (est. 1984), whose members had consulted the inheritors of these traditions as part of the work of restoration. These inheritors included Teacher Zhao and Daoist priest Zhu Chengde (朱成德), who was well-known both for his martial arts and for his expertise in traditional Daoist medicine (see DeBernardi, N.d.). Master Yuan has contributed to an important chapter in that recent history, teaching Wudang Taiji Boxing to increasing numbers of international students and travelling overseas to teach. In May 2022, he was chosen for the sixth batch of representative inheritors of provincial intangible cultural heritage in Hubei Province (Hubei Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, 2022).

CONCLUSION

Daoist martial arts have undergone a major revival since the 1980s. Factors include movies and the romanticizing of Daoist martial arts, the nationalist support for Chinese martial arts, and globalization and the growth of martial arts tourism and international study. Adam Frank goes so far as to identify Taiji Boxing in the early twenty-first century as a master symbol for the conflation of national and racial identity in China, while becoming a sensual experience of Chinese-ness for Chinese Americans (Frank, 2006). Modern practitioners of Daoist martial arts connect themselves to the past and tradition at the same time that they innovate and find ways to transmit their traditions to new audiences, far outside of Daoist monastic temples.

In a 2007 interview, Zhou Qingjie observed that there were four kinds of martial arts in China: traditional martial arts, which he described as hard to find since the traditions had been passed on secretly and many of the practitioners had died; official martial arts, taught in schools and performed in competitions; people's martial arts, which were widely popular in the countryside; and performance martial arts, which he described as a profession just like a factory job.

The Beijing coach observed that urban youth had many options for sports activities, including Japanese martial arts, but also found Taiji boxing with its 108 forms difficult and tiring. Peasant youth, by contrast, were more likely to learn *wushu* in their communities, and some went on to study stage *wushu*, hoping to make a living from martial arts. He regarded performance martial arts as non-traditional and compared stage performers to actors or dancers. Like Master Zhong, he emphasized the need for 'progress' and the creation of new forms. But he lamented the loss of heart that

followed when culture became commercialized, and money had too intimate a relationship with society.

Most of the Chinese teachers and students whom we met at Wudang Mountain came not from China's major cities but from small towns and villages in rural areas. Those who succeeded are now linked into global martial arts networks and have performed on stages world-wide, including Taiwan and Singapore, San Francisco and New York. No factory job would have given them such opportunities.

Modern narratives of martial arts history often simplify that history, describing them as orderly lines of master-student relations that transmission ancient practices in an unbroken line. But the expert practitioners of Taiji Boxing whom we interviewed for this program of research were aware that there are many forms, and many histories. The modern history of Taiji Boxing is also the history of the secularization of Chinese ideology, the reworking of traditional practices of self-cultivation as exercise and competitive sport, and the commercialization and commodification of martial arts for a global audience.

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