Taijiquan and the Search for the Little Old Chinese Man

Understanding Identity through Martial Arts

Adam D. Frank

Taijiquan and The Search for The Little Old Chinese Man

Understanding Identity through Martial Arts

Adam D. Frank

palgrave
macmillan

TAIJIQUAN AND THE SEARCH FOR THE LITTLE OLD CHINESE MAN : UNDERSTANDING IDENTITY THROUGH MARTIAL ARTS

First published in 2006 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS.
Companies and representatives throughout the world.

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4039-6828-9
ISBN-10: 1-4039-6828-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Frank, Adam D., 1961-
Taijiquan and the search for the little old Chinese man : understanding identity through martial arts/by Adam D. Frank.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-4039-6828-4 (alk. paper)
1. Tai chi. I. Title.

GV504.F73 2006
613.7'148—dc22 2006043153

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Macmillan India Ltd.

First edition: October 2006

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

Abrahams, Roger D
1993 Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics. *Journal of American Folklore.* 106:3–37. Reprinted by permission of Journal of American Folklore.
Chen, Nancy
2002 *Qi* and Masculinities in Post-Mao China. *In* Chinese Femininities/Chinese Masculinities. Eds. Susan Brownell and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, eds. Pp. 315–329. Berkeley: University of California Press. Reprinted with permission of University of California Press.
Painter, John
1988 Public lecture, July 3, Winchester, Virginia. Tape-recorded. Printed with permission of Dr. John Painter.

For Michael Phillips, Oscar Brockett,
and Deborah Kapchan, three
teachers who pointed the way

Romanization and Pronunciation Guide

I generally use the Chinese pinyin romanization system throughout the text. This is the system used in the People's Republic of China and also widely used in scholarly publications in the United States (other common systems include Wade-Giles and Yale). In some cases, I maintain transliterations that have, through force of habit, maintained their presence in American usage. For reasons that will make sense in context, I occasionally use both the colloquial and the pinyin form of the word (e.g., "kung fu" vs. the pinyin form "gongfu"). Finally, I standardize systems within direct quotations: words and names that originally appeared in another romanization system now appear in pinyin. Titles mentioned within the text and bibliographic entries are the exceptions to this rule.

Mandarin Chinese has four tones (five if one counts the neutral tone). I have not included the standard diacritical marks to indicate tone. The following pronunciation guide, however, should prove useful to the non-Mandarin speaker. I have adopted this guide from *The Pocket Interpreter* (Chen and Ying 1988).

Initial sounds

b, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, s, t, w, y	roughly the same as in English,
ch, sh	but curl the tongue up toward the roof of the mouth while pronouncing the "ch" or "sh" sound
c	ts as in ca*ts*
q	ch as in *ch*eese
r	zhr as in pleas*ure*
x	sh as in ban*shee*
z	ds as in car*ds*
zh	dg as in fu*dge*

Final sounds

a	ah
ai	eye
an	ahn
ang	ahng
ao	ow
ar	are
e	uh
ei	eigh as in sl*eigh*
en	un as in r*un*
eng	ung as in h*ung*
er	cross between ar and er
i	*ee*, but after c, ch, r, s, sh, z, and zh, it is silent
ia	*ee*-ah (quickly, as one syllable)
ian	*ee*-an (quickly)
iang	*ee*-ahng (quickly)
iao	*ee*-ow (quickly)
ie	*ee*-eh (quickly)
in	*ee*n as in s*een*
ing	ing as in r*ing*
iong	*ee*-ōng (quickly)
iu	*eo* as in L*eo*
o	o as in *or*
ong	ōng
ou	oh
u	oo as in m*oo*
ü	cross between *oo* and *eew*, as in French t*u*
ua	wa as in *wa*sh
uai	why
uan	wahn, as in *wan*der
uang	wahng
ue	weh
ui	way
un	won
uo	wo as in *wo*re

Acknowledgments

A project of this scope involves a cast of thousands. My apologies in advance to anyone whom I may have omitted. Apologies also to those I remember but cannot name for reasons of confidentiality, especially to the taijiquan teachers who patiently and with considerable good humor transmitted their substantial art. My special thanks to the members of the Shanghai branch of the Jianquan Taijiquan Association, particularly to the late Ma Yueliang and Wu Yinghua, without whom the art of Wu style taijiquan would not be nearly so rich. Without the support and approval of the Ma family in Shanghai, the project would have stalled in the early stages of fieldwork. I also owe a great debt to my teachers in the United States over the years: at the University of Texas, my dissertation committee chair, friend, and teacher, Deborah Kapchan, gave enthusiastic encouragement and insightful criticism throughout the research and writing, as did Avron Boretz, James Brow, Ward Keeler, Pauline Turner Strong, and Nancy Chen at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Douglas Foley provided early mentorship and encouragement. My Chinese teachers Camilla Hsieh, Wenhua Teng, Zhu Minqi, and Wang Jian provided me with the tools and a deep love for the Chinese language. Without theatre historian Oscar Brockett's invitation to come to the University of Texas, and his open-minded encouragement of my interdisciplinary interests, the project would never have gotten off the ground in the first place. John Nelson and the members of his 1997 seminar on ritual pointed me toward the discipline of anthropology in general and this project in particular. The book would not have come to fruition without the critiques and support of a writing group that included Jessica Hester, Brandt Peterson, David Sandell, Peter Kvetko, Peter Siegenthaler, and Michelle Wibbelsman. Nancy Chen's groundbreaking research on qigong and psychiatry continues to inspire my work. Stephen Field at Trinity University in

San Antonio reminded me over the years that there was a legitimate place for academic research on taijiquan. In the "real" world, thanks to Michael Phillips, my first taijiquan teacher, for setting me on a path that I never imagined would be so long and arduous; Saul Krotki in Seattle; Larry Wong, Henry Look, and Fong Ha in the Bay Area; John Painter, Tom Gohring, Kade Green, and Johnny Lee in Texas; Tsoui Woon Kwong in Hong Kong, who introduced me to the Wu style; Jay Boyle and Gelan in Shanghai for their kindness in putting a roof over my head for a time; and Sam and Jeremy for humoring a man with two hats. At Palgrave Macmillian, thank you to Anthony Wahl and the production team. Weekly opportunities to practice with push hands groups in Austin and Silver Spring, Maryland, considerably enriched the project. In that regard, special thanks to Steve Zoraster, Nat Wofford, and Joseph Suida in Austin, who provided feedback on both the writing and the practice. I also wish to thank my friends in Shanghai parks for their mentorship, especially my retired friends for helping me keep things in perspective. For funding the research and writing, my thanks to the Academy for Educational Development and to the University of Texas at Austin. For sponsoring the research in China, I thank the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. The project could not have been completed without the generosity of Wittenberg University and the Freeman Foundation in granting me a one-year Freeman fellowship. Special thanks to James Huffman, Stephen Smith, Marcia Frost, Bin Yu, and Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, and particularly to Shelley Chan for advice and critiques; Leo Yip at Gettysburg College; Howard Choy at Georgia Tech; and Douglas Wile at Brooklyn College. At the Honors College of the University of Central Arkansas, thanks in particular to Tom Bertram for invaluable assistance with photo imaging and to Director Rick Scott for granting a course release to help me complete the manuscript. And thanks to Scott Holly, Jay Ralph Purdy, Matthew Davis, David Liu, and my sister, Elizabeth Frank, for pushing me on request (literally) over the years; to Zoe Davis and My Nga Le for moral support; to Neill Hadder at the University of Texas for taking time away from his own work to provide an invaluable, detailed critique of the manuscript; and to Anthony Webster at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, for reminding me of the value of poetry and intellectual rigor. Thank you to my brother, W. Scott Frank, for being a writer.

Thanks to my parents Milton Frank and Kay Richter for their comments on the writing and support in the research stage and, most of all, to my wife, Mya Sandi Aung, and daughter, Zabei Luiza, for their love, patience, and support throughout this project. Needless to say (but I'll say it anyway), any mistakes, misconceptions, and mysterious bends in the road are mine and mine alone.

Contents

List of Figures

Introduction

I

Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II

I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

—*Wallace Stevens, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"*

It was March 4, 2000, in Shanghai, and a forty-six-year-old teacher of the martial art of taijiquan named Pang Tianzhu had finally obtained his passport. At the American firm where he worked, one of Teacher Pang's foreign taijiquan students shook his hand and wished him luck. Within a few minutes, Pang found himself on the subway speeding toward Shanghai's American consulate, a letter of invitation to the United States ensconced in the pocket of his jacket. Like every other glistening subway car, this one sported advertisements for health formulas, real estate opportunities, and government-sponsored public education campaigns of one kind or another. Pang scanned these as he carefully buttoned his jacket, checked that his cell phone was fully charged, and anxiously attended to each station so that he would not miss his stop. Exiting at Hengshan Road, he bought two vegetable steamed buns, headed past the TGIFridays, and, moments later, found himself waiting with dozens of other visa applicants in the long line that snaked alongside the consulate.

A soft, fragrant rain began to fall. Those fortunate enough to have remembered umbrellas popped them open with a light symphony of snaps, while others either purchased one from a nearby street hawker or simply endured the rain as the price they had to pay for the possibility of a coveted tourist or student visa. It seemed that everyone—nouveau riche businessmen, poor students, and working-class stiffs alike—had to suffer an occasional muddy splashing from a passing taxi or a curious, perhaps even jealous, glance from a pedestrian. Nevertheless, the mood was a positive one. Nervous as they were, everyone smiled, exchanged tales of previous visa attempts, and joked about whether the future would hold riches or dishwashing opportunities.

At 2:15 p.m. Pang's number came up. As the guard waved him through to the consulate's visa section, his hands began to sweat a little. The situation—standing here at last in the American consulate on this rainy day—did not seem quite real. Pang suddenly realized that he was luckier than most. His dream had at least come this far. His thoughts drifted back to times that were both difficult and sweet. In memory, Pang watched his teacher, Master Ma Yueliang, effortlessly drifting through the taiji spear form, spinning, whipping, full of power and life, yet quiet. Smiling, Ma stopped, put his spear aside, beckoned Pang over . . .

"Please move quickly, Sir." The sound of one of the consulate's American staff speaking in heavily accented Chinese jerked Teacher Pang out of his reverie. The man led him to an inner room and pointed him toward a middle-aged white woman with a tall pile of files in front of her. Though polite, she seemed irritable to Pang, as if she had not eaten yet that day. He was about to offer her the remains of a steamed bun in his pocket, but the visa officer had already launched into questions about his employment, previous travel experience, number and location of family members, and purpose in traveling to the United States. It took a moment for Pang to get used to her accent, but in this regard, his experience with foreign students served him well. Pang showed the officer his letter of invitation from Seattle and said that his friend, an American citizen, had invited him to come to the States to practice taijiquan with him for a short time. Asked if he intended to return to China before his potential American tourist visa expired, Pang assured the visa officer that he would return. He had a good job in China, and his young son

had not yet graduated from middle school. Ever helpful, Pang added that he himself was a taijiquan teacher and that he hoped to teach taijiquan in the United States one day, but that for the present, he wanted only to pay a short visit to a friend.

Since consular officials seldom volunteer the information on which they base their visa decisions, it is generally difficult to say exactly why a visa officer rejects an application. Normally, such rejections hinge on the applicant's inability to prove that he or she intends to return to China. The U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (INA) places the burden of proof on the applicant to show that he or she does not intend to immigrate to the United States. U.S. consulates in China and the Citizenship and Immigration Services (formerly the Immigration and Naturalization Service [INS], now housed within the Department of Homeland Security) in the United States have experienced instances of organized attempts to circumvent U.S. law by smuggling Chinese into the United States under false pretences. The most infamous case, the "Shanghai 32," involved a group of student visa recipients who, in an apparently well-organized alien smuggling operation, fled from the Los Angeles airport just before they were supposed to return to China. Since that incident, and even more so after September 11, 2001, visa applicants at consulates all over China have faced ever-higher hurdles in meeting the burden of proof. Decisions are made at the discretion of the officers who interview them. As a result, the standard for meeting the minimum burden of proof requirement is not uniform among consulate staff at a particular consulate and is even less so between the various consulates scattered around China. Taijiquan teachers are only one among many groups that have been informally blacklisted by some visa officers. But Teacher Pang had no reason to believe that any of these concerns applied to him since he intended only to visit a friend and then return.

On this particular day, however, the visa officer took the unusual step of revealing at least part of her rationale for rejecting Teacher Pang. "Mr. Pang," she politely explained, "I'm afraid your story just doesn't ring true. Taijiquan teachers are old. You're obviously too young." At this, Pang could only scratch his head, politely thank the visa officer, and exit into the drizzling spring afternoon.

***

This book is an attempt to understand identity as it is both sensually experienced and culturally constructed through martial arts practice in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the United States. Through the vehicle of taijiquan, a once-secret martial art that is primarily pursued as an exercise form and has mushroomed in worldwide popularity over the last twenty-five years, the book describes a personal journey toward an understanding of identity as a dialogue between space, history, economic relationships, collective forms of expression, and individual sensual experience. More succinctly, my fundamental proposition can be expressed in two words: identity moves. In its broadest terms, the book focuses on how human actions and interactions in the world are always in motion; therefore, how one sees oneself and others is likewise always in motion. In other words, we define ourselves in relation to one another and to our physical, social, and political environments, which are themselves in a state of constant change. A major task of the project is to lay out the details of how martial arts, as conduits for the mutually constitutive construction and experience of identity, actually move transnationally through people, media, kung fu movies, novels, and martial arts tournaments, and how they function both personally and socially in the very different contexts of urban China and the global diaspora of Chinese people and public culture.[1]

Because the scope of such a project requires certain limits, I am unable to make more than passing reference to the unique situations of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia. Nor do I deal in more than a cursory way with the large population of immigrant martial arts teachers in Canada, Australia, and Europe and the significantly different rules under which they cross borders. It is also important to state at the outset that I do not take Shanghai to be representative of all of the PRC. On the contrary, Shanghai is in the odd position of being both aberration and trendsetter. In places as widely separated as the tourist city of Zhuhai in the south and the ancient city of Kaifeng in the north, one can find clothing stores advertising "Shanghai style" goods. Yet, owing to their relative wealth and to their public discourse about themselves as the most cosmopolitan of Chinese cities, Shanghai people sometimes suffer estrangement from their compatriots. As far as possible, therefore, I treat Shanghai as Shanghai.