

## Young Taiwanese *Dizi* and the Tai Ji Men Case

Huang Pin Chia

*Graduate student, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan*

clare88318@gmail.com

**ABSTRACT:** The author is part of a generation that was not born when the Tai Ji Men case started in 1996. As both a graduate student interested in the condition of Taiwan's youth and a Tai Ji Men disciple (*dizi*), she reflects on four circles of her generation's experience. The first is Taiwan's interest for global human rights, and the strategies the U.S. and Taiwan's government promote in relation to freedom of religion or belief (FORB). The second is the Tai Ji Men case. The third is the experience of young Taiwanese practicing martial arts and qigong. The fourth is their interaction with international scholars and human rights activists who study and advocate for the Tai Ji Men case.

**KEYWORDS:** Tai Ji Men, Tai Ji Men Case, Freedom of Religion or Belief, Religious Liberty in Taiwan, Democracy in Taiwan.

### *Introduction*

Much has been written about the Tai Ji Men case, and there is always the risk of repeating what others have already said. I am a 23-year-old student at National Taiwan University, and a Tai Ji Men *dizi* (disciple) who was not even born when the case started in 1996.

In preparing this paper, I have interviewed several *dizi* who were there in 1996. Some are getting old, and the case has been around for so long that some Tai Ji Men grandmothers and grandfathers, who preserved a vivid memory of these days, already died. However, they had passed their memories to their children and grandchildren.

My paper focuses on how my generation sees the Tai Ji Men case within the context of contemporary Taiwan and of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Being a

young Tai Ji Men *dizi* means being part of four different circles I will shortly discuss: the circle of the widespread interest in Taiwan for human rights; the circle of those participating in the Tai Ji Men protests; the circle of martial arts and qigong practitioners; the international circle of those studying and at the same time advocating for the Tai Ji Men case. Being inside these circles, mine is an emic perspective, although one also informed by my experience as a college student and my interaction with academics.

### *The First Circle: A Global Interest for Human Rights*

On February 24 of this year, the Russo-Ukrainian war began when Russia invaded Ukraine. The war in Ukraine is followed with great attention by young people in Taiwan. On the one hand, this depends on the peculiar geopolitical situation of Taiwan. On the other hand, there is a real empathy with the Ukrainian people, a feeling of outrage at the human rights violations, and the idea that when a sovereign country is brutally attacked, all countries should stand up and voice out to safeguard peace in solidarity with their conscience and humanity.

The Ukrainian war made young people in Taiwan even more interested in human rights. Everybody understands that they include freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, which are protected as fundamental rights by Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Young people are idealistic, and naturally enthusiastic about justice, injustice, and violations of human rights. However, in the case of freedom of religion and belief (FORB), this interest is also fueled by the strategies of world leaders.

The United States pursues a freedom of religion strategy, first because religious liberty is an integral part of the American ethos since the Constitution, and second because insisting in FORB allows the U.S. to occupy a higher moral ground with respect to superpowers it sees as antagonist such as China and Russia.

In his statement on the eve of National Religious Freedom Day 2022, President Biden underlined once again the primacy of religious freedom for the United States. In his remarks, he made three points. The first was that religion is a sign of hope and inspiration. Mentioning his personal experience (as a Roman

Catholic believer), Biden said that, “In my life, faith has always been a beacon of hope and a calling to purpose, as it is for so many Americans” (Biden 2022).

Second, the U.S. President stated that, regardless of whether or not people believe in religion, ad no matter what their religion is, the United States will protect their rights. He said:

We must continue our work to ensure that people of all faiths—or none—are treated as full participants in society, equal in rights and dignity. We can only fully realize the freedom we wish for ourselves by helping to ensure liberty for all. On Religious Freedom Day, let us rededicate ourselves to these fundamental principles (Biden 2022).

Third, and a point that is perhaps less obvious for non-Americans, Biden reiterated that the United States sees as its mandate to defend freedom of religion or belief not only at home, but everywhere around the globe:

My Administration, he said, remains steadfast in our efforts to lead and advance human rights including the freedom of religion around the globe at a time when many people are subject to horrifying persecution for their faith and beliefs (Biden 2022).

When the leading United States authorities speak about human rights, their statements resonate in Taiwan, as young (and old) people try to read in these words a commitment to help Taiwan protect its democratic and human-rights-based system.

These words by President Biden and his predecessors are also considered with attention by Taiwanese politicians. They understand that the United States expect from their allies that they support their global campaign to affirm FORB and criticize those who deny it.

In fact, the administration of Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen made three main moves to participate in this campaign. These moves were emphasized in the 2020 periodical report on how Taiwan implements the two United Nations Human Rights Covenants, which it incorporated into its domestic law in 2009 (Introigne 2022a, 2022b).

First, while the United States have promoted three “Ministerials to Advance Religious Freedom,” two in Washington DC and one in Warsaw (and a fourth in July 2022 in London), inviting the foreign ministers of many states, experts, and human rights activists, Taiwan has organized in March 2019 a parallel regional initiative called “Civil Society Dialogue on Defending Religious Freedom in the Indo-Pacific Region.” The initiative was opened by a speech by President Tsai,

and efforts were made to bring to Taiwan some of the same international experts who had been invited by the United States in the two Ministerials that took place in Washington DC, including Massimo Introvigne and Rosita Šorytė.

Second, the United States has an Ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom, and encourages other countries to institute a similar office. President Tsai also appointed an Ambassador-at-large for religious freedom, a distinguished Taiwanese Christian scholar called Pusin Tali, whose mandate has been renewed for a second term.

Third, the Taiwanese government makes an annual contribution to the U.S. Department of State's International Religious Freedom Fund, beginning in 2019.

The Taiwanese government hopes to demonstrate to the rest of the world that it values religious freedom as a source of personal and national stability, and that it is vigilant in protecting religious freedom, in an effort to demonstrate that Taiwan is on the same side of all democratic countries and participates in their global efforts for promoting FORB throughout the world.

### *The Second Circle: The Paradox of the Tai Ji Men Case*

I am not suggesting that these efforts are not sincere. Both the government and the youth in Taiwan perceive their identity as defined in opposition to two "others." We are not like our neighbors who do not respect human rights, and we are not like the past generations who in Taiwan during the Martial Law era lived under the shadow of the authoritarian government and its White Terror.

However, this self-definition is not totally in accordance with the reality. My second circle consist of my fellow *dizi* who participate in the protests for the Tai Ji Men case. The case is well-known enough in Taiwan because of the massive street protests, but a larger part of the population feels that the path to democracy is not yet complete and find obstacles in corruption and the excessive power laws and regulations give to bureaucrats in several fields, including taxation.

The Tai Ji Men case went through four phases. I know the first one only because I interviewed those who were there in 1996, as I am too young to have lived it personally. It was a time of anguish, when the Tai Ji Men academies were raided, the *Shifu* (Grand Master), his wife, and two *dizi* arrested, and a virulent

campaign of slander directed at the movement, which was even ridiculously accused by Prosecutor Hou Kuan-Jen, the main instigator of the persecution, of raising goblins. It was a time of immense suffering for the *dizi*, who were discriminated even by their own friends and relatives who believed in the slander campaign (Chao et al. 2021).

The second time was the one of the great legal victories, which culminated in the 2007 decision of the Taiwan Supreme Court, which ruled that the Tai Ji Men defendants were innocent of all charges, including tax evasion. They even received national compensation for their previous unjust detention. This second time was one of excitement and celebration. Many *dizi* believed they had been vindicated and their problems were over (Jacobsen 2020).

The third time, which in fact started before 2007, was the use of taxes as a tool to continue the persecution and harassment of Tai Ji Men. Ignoring the decision of the Supreme Court, the National Taxation Bureau (NTB) continued to issue ill-founded tax bills. This is a time I and thousands of younger *dizi* personally went through. It was an endless cycle of protests, promises by politicians and bureaucrats that the case will be solved, new tax bills, and new protests. It would be wrong to conclude that Tai Ji Men did not achieve anything. The tax bills for all years except one, 1992, were reduced to zero. The one for 1992 was maintained due to a technicality, even if obviously nothing different had happened in 1992 with respect to all the other years (Chao et al. 2021; Chen, Huang, and Wu 2021).

The fourth time of the Tai Ji Men case is still very much in my mind and my heart. It started in 2020 when, based on the 1992 tax bill, the National Enforcement Agency auctioned off, unsuccessfully, and confiscated land that for Tai Ji Men is sacred as it is intended for a self-cultivation center (Chao et al. 2021, 152–59). New massive protests followed, and they continue to this very day.

### *The Third Circle: Practicing Qigong*

How young Tai Ji Men *dizi* react to this stressful situation leads me to examine the third circle, centered on the cultivation of mind, practice of qigong, martial arts, and purification of the soul. It is an experience other young people from

Taiwan share if they attend one of the other qigong and martial arts schools, many of which exist there. Interestingly, they remain popular with the younger generations as well.

One martial arts movie that has been very successful with Taiwan's youth is "The Grandmaster." It was scripted and directed by Hong Kong director Wong Kar-Wai and released in 2013 (Wong 2013). It tells the story of Yip Man (1893–1972), aka Yeh Wen, a Chinese master of the martial art known as Wing Chun, who is famous because actor Bruce Lee (1940–1973) was his pupil.

It is not a movie featuring martial arts action only. In fact, it received good reviews as one of the best movies that tried to convey the philosophy of traditional Chinese martial arts. Its message is that one had reached the highest spiritual level when martial arts are used to defend the country and its people, and embody values of loyalty and righteousness. Grand Master Yeh Wen claims in the movie that there were three stages in his martial arts training: learning to "see" (i.e., to perceive the essence of) himself, to see Heaven and earth, and to see all beings.

The movie resonated with me and my fellow Tai Ji Men *dizi*, as we understood it expressed our experience of protesting the persecution as well. The first stage of Yeh Wen's martial arts training, "seeing" himself, corresponds to a first stage of our protests, when we were children and teenagers and went to the protests with our parents. We saw ourselves as capable of behaving as adults, putting fun aside, and doing what was right. "Seeing" ourselves meant coming of age in a situation of crisis.

In the second stage, the Grand Master of the movie sees Heaven and earth. For our generation of *dizi*, this was the stage when we started college, and we saw the Tai Ji Men case in a broader perspective. We felt we were part of a broader social movement for FORB and for legal and tax reform. We spent a lot of time protesting in front of the Presidential office and the Five Yuan, but we also explained to our friends and fellow college students that the Tai Ji Men case was part of a larger problem of democracy and human rights in Taiwan.

In the third stage, Yeh Wen "sees all beings." Many Tai Ji Men *dizi* of my generation went through this passage. We realized that the tax case was not preventing Dr. Hong from continuing his world tours teaching values of conscience, peace, and love. Many of us became volunteers and joined him, preparing cultural performances that we took to all continents. We understood

that this is our true goal while the tax case is simply a product of fate and circumstances.

Perhaps our opponents hoped that by harassing and persecuting us, we would stop teaching our path and values. Not only this did not happen, but we multiplied our efforts to carry our message to the world. This is the meaning of learning to “see all beings,” not only our own problems.

### *The Fourth Circle: International Mobilization*

In the last few years, as Tai Ji Men continued both to protest the tax harassment and to tour the world with events and performances of peace advocacy and education, something we had not fully expected happened.

Tai Ji Men saw scholars and human rights activists from all over the world mobilizing and joining their request that their case be solved. There had been precedents, such as the 1503 complaint on the Tai Ji Men case filed on November 9, 2010, with the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva by Dr. René Wadlow, the Vice President of the ECOSOC-accredited NGO Association of World Citizens. A 1503 procedure is a complaint denouncing a case of violation of human rights and inviting the Human Rights Council to investigate. The Human Rights Council has no direct relations with Taiwan, and no action was taken, but the 1503 complaint was widely publicized and marked the beginning of the internationalization of the Tai Ji Men case. In 2012, Wadlow followed up by visiting Taiwan and meeting with the President of Taiwan’s Control Yuan, Wang Chien-Shien, asking for a solution of the Tai Ji Men case (Introvigne 2020). Kenneth Jacobsen, a professor of law at Temple University, Philadelphia, also studied the case and read some of the first papers on it (Jacobsen 2020).

However, it was since 2020 that regular seminars and webinars started being organized every months on the Tai Ji Men case, and dozens of articles were published, thanks to the efforts of CESNUR, the Center for Studies on New Religions, *Bitter Winter* magazine, and the Brussels-based NGO Human Rights Without Frontiers (see *Bitter Winter* 2021). The case was also the focus of sessions in international academic conferences and events such as the third Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in 2020 in Warsaw (Bovolenta 2020), the International Religious Freedom Summit in 2021 in Washington DC

(Introvigne 2021a), the 2021 Parliament of World's Religions (Introvigne 2021b) and others. Between 2021 and 2022, the ECOSOC-accredited NGO CAP-LC (Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, Coordination of Associations and Individuals for Freedom of Conscience), filed four written statements at the United Nations Human Rights Council on the Tai Ji Men case (Introvigne 2022c), and international scholars and NGOs sent several letters to the President of Taiwan and other authorities.

All these initiatives are extraordinary, and have created a global community of scholars and activists who follow the development of the Tai Ji Men case almost on a daily basis, thanks also to the recently inaugurated Web site TaiJiMenCase.org. Young Taiwanese *dizi* also feel that they are part of this community, that they are not alone, that what some might consider a local administrative case in fact is regarded as a key FORB issue by scholars from Italy to Canada and from Ukraine to Brazil, Mexico, and United States.

This is the globalization of human rights issues in action, a living and moving experience for many young Taiwanese. It remains for Taiwan's government to also take note, and understand that solving the Tai Ji Men case is a necessary part of a process that will persuade those young women and men in Taiwan passionate for human rights that rhetorical statements about protecting freedom of religion or belief are not mere words.

## References

- Biden, Joseph R., Jr. 2022. "A Proclamation on Religious Freedom Day, 2022." January 14. Accessed June 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3OGK6Y6>.
- Bitter Winter*. 2021. *The Tai Ji Men Case in Taiwan: The Path to Religious Liberty & Human Rights. A Bitter Winter Anthology*. Turin: *Bitter Winter*, and Taipei: Grand Justice Publishing.
- Bovolenta, Daniela. 2020. "Tax Justice, Religious Freedom, and the Tai Ji Men Case." *Bitter Winter*, December 4. Accessed June 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3nkN20Q>.
- Chao, Kai-Hsin, Chang Mei-Ying, Yu Yi-Sheng, and Ann Chen. 2021. *Who Stole Their Youth? 24 Years of Persecution: A Battle for Human Rights & Tax Justice in Taiwan*. Taipei: Grand Justice Publishing.



- Chen Tze-Lung, Huang Chun-Chieh, and Wu Ching-Chin. 2021. "The Tai Ji Men Case: A Legal Analysis." *The Journal of CESNUR* 5(4):77–99. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2021.5.4.3.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2020. "2010: The First Tai Ji Men Report at the UN's Human Rights Council." *Bitter Winter*, September 27. Accessed June 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3QNL1Ib>.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2021a. "A Tai Ji Men Side Event at the International Religious Freedom Summit." *Bitter Winter*, July 16. Accessed June 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3bvUGrw>.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2021b. "Tai Ji Men Case Discussed at the Parliament of the World's Religions." *Bitter Winter*, October 23. Accessed June 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3HWEx5D>.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2022a. "An International Review of the Implementation of the Two Covenants in Taiwan: A Missed Opportunity?" *Bitter Winter*, May 19. Accessed June 24, 2022. <https://bit.ly/3HXFYAE>.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2022b. "The Tai Ji Men Case: A Test for Taiwan's Compliance with the Two Covenants." *The European Times*, Special FORB Edition, June/July, 10–1.
- Introvigne, Massimo. 2022c. "Tai Ji Men: Taiwan's Problems with the 'Two Covenants' Discussed at the U.N. Human Rights Council." *Bitter Winter*, June 16. <https://bitterwinter.org/tai-ji-men-taiwans-two-covenants-at-un>.
- Jacobsen, Kenneth A. 2020. "Abrogating the Rule of Law: The Tai Ji Men Tax Case in Taiwan." *The Journal of CESNUR* 4(5):101–20. DOI: 10.26338/tjoc.2020.4.5.6.
- Wong, Kar-Wai. 2013. *一代宗师* (The Grandmaster). Film. Hong Kong: Block 2 Pictures, Jet Tone Films, Sil-Metropole Organisation, Bona International Film Group, and Annapurna Pictures.