

Dancing with the Dragon: Holistic Education and the Tai Ji Men Crisis in Taiwan

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ABSTRACT: The traditional Chinese dragon dance is an important part of the performances Tai Ji Men presents throughout the world. Studying how the dragon dance is prepared and performed by Tai Ji Men introduces us to the essence of its concept of holistic education. When confronted with the problems determined by its conflict with the tax authorities in Taiwan, Tai Ji Men applied the same holistic principles and tried to convert the crisis into an opportunity.

KEYWORDS: Dragon Dance, Tai Ji Men, Hong Tao-Tze, Tai Ji Men Case, Holistic Education, Freedom of Religion or Belief in Taiwan.

Introduction

My paper starts from the dragon dance, a traditional Chinese performance that is ubiquitous among Chinese communities (Edwards 2013) and is also part of what Tai Ji Men, a Taiwan-based spiritual movement, proposes during its international events. I argue that the dragon dance is representative of Tai Ji Men's holistic approach to culture and education. Tai Ji Men is also confronted with a crisis caused by its conflict with tax authorities in Taiwan, on which a sizeable scholarly literature exists (Jacobsen 2020; *Bitter Winter* 2021; Chen, Huang, and Wu 2021; Tsai 2021, 2022; Chen 2022). The holistic approach reflected in the dragon dance also inspires Tai Ji Men's reaction to this crisis.

I approach my subject both as a Canadian scholar specialized in the biomedical field and as a *dizi* (disciple) of Tai Ji Men. The topic of medical pluralism has been increasingly discussed in the field of medicine and healthcare in Western

countries such as Canada. Traditional Chinese medicine and accredited/licensed naturopathic doctors have been gaining recognition and popularity in Canada in the past couple of decades.

Medical education, a field I am personally involved in, has been growingly perceived as a way of training healthcare professionals to provide health services to the whole person. This means that they should consider the patient's psychological, mental, environmental, and social circumstances, rather than focusing only on the symptoms of a disease. Such an approach to health management is termed "holistic medicine" (McGuire 1993).

A holistic view of nature has been part of Taoism and traditional Chinese medicine for thousands of years. In the past several decades, as a result of globalization, people in the Western countries have grasped the Eastern holistic concept quickly, and it has significantly gained momentum during the COVID-19 crisis.

I searched the keyword "holistic medicine" in the Pubmed/Medline database, the most widely used reference and abstract search engine for health professionals on life sciences and biomedical topics. It is maintained by the United States National Library of Medicine (NLM). I found that the number of papers with keywords "holistic medicine" published started from under 200 per year before 1990 (with the first one dating back to 1952). It reached about 1,000 papers published per year in 2014. Then, the number jumped to over 2,500 per year in 2020, and close to 3,200 in 2021. A very similar trend is shown with keyword searches for "holistic education," "holistic health," and "holistic care." Globalization and current world crises likely play a role in this phenomenon.

What I would like to discuss in this paper is:

(1) what type of education Tai Ji Men provides, a topic I will approach through the example of the dragon dance; and

(2) why the group choses what I would call an original holistic approach to resolve the Tai Ji Men crisis in Taiwan.

As mentioned earlier, mine is an emic perspective, since I am both a scholar and a Tai Ji Men *dizi*. I was born in Taiwan and joined Tai Ji Men in 1995. In the same year, soon after I turned 18, I moved to Canada and completed my post-secondary education, as well as graduate degrees on the Canadian East Coast. In

the past 27 years, I have practiced Tai Ji Men qigong and meditation on a daily basis. Whenever time allows and opportunities arise, I volunteer and join cultural, spiritual, and social events organized by Tai Ji Men's *Shifu* (Grand Master), Dr. Hong Tao-Tze. Therefore, what I offer here is also based on my personal experience.

1. Tai Ji Men's Holistic Education and the Dragon Dance

Tai Ji Men, whose features have been presented in several self-presentations (Members of Tai Ji Men 2022) and scholarly studies (e.g. Introvigne et al. 2021), embraces a holistic approach to education. The teachings transmitted from *Shifu* to *dizi* at Tai Ji Men are unlike the classes taken at modern-day yoga studios, martial arts dojos, or gym fitness sports centers, where there is a curriculum set up for instructors to teach certain knowledge or skills to students. The *Shifu* of Tai Ji Men tries to transmit a “culture” as a whole, encompassing all life. Therefore, it is not limited to teaching the skills needed for practicing qigong or martial arts, or for singing or dancing. The lessons also include the beliefs and philosophies of Yin and Yang, how to be healthy, live happily, be in harmony with ourselves, others, and the environment, keep peace in dire situations, become the best version of ourselves, and find the true meaning of life (Members of Tai Ji Men 2022).

This may seem a program too vast to be effectively taught. However, I will take dragon dance performances as an example to demonstrate what holistic learning is like in Tai Ji Men. The magnificent dragon dance is a traditional performance in Chinese culture. It is most often seen in festival celebrations. Tai Ji Men included it in many of its worldwide cultural exchange programs. The dance team needs to learn not only physical strength, but also integrated teamwork. Each member must work in unity to move the dragon in such a way that it would appear lifelike and harmonious.

Therefore, dragon dance requires a training that is not only physical but also mental and spiritual. Trainees should achieve an adequate harmony, both within the individual and between team members. During the training, Dr. Hong presents the principles of Yin-Yang philosophy, and explains to the dance team the meaning of the dragon's true qualities: compassion, courage, and wisdom. He emphasizes that,

Only with compassion, can human beings truly love the world; only with courage, can humankind dream to achieve peace without fear; and only with wisdom, the humanity knows how to stop wars and realize the idea of One World (Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy 2015: Dr. Hong's speech was delivered in Washington DC at Capitol Hill on March 22, 2000).

With this teaching firmly implanted in the mind of each dancer, the Tai Ji Men dragon dance, as some who have seen it reported to me, “really warms the heart of the audience with its energy,” and “nourishes the soul of those who encounter it.”

Moreover, what also sets the Tai Ji Men's dragon dance apart from performances of the same dance by other modern martial arts or cultural groups is the fact that the dragons are designed and built by the *dizi* themselves (Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy 2020). It would be easier to order a dragon from one of the companies that supply them, and have it made with modern and lighter materials such as aluminum and plastics. However, Dr. Hong is determined to follow the traditional craftsmanship and preserve the cultural heritage without shortcuts. Therefore, the dragons are made of wood with bamboo hoops on the inside and covered with a rich fabric, although this makes them heavier and trickier to maneuver.

In addition, the bamboos used do not come from a factory, but are picked up for the purpose from mountain bamboo forests. Describing all the details of this craftsmanship would make for a very long paper. Actually, it is a very time-consuming process. The fabric used to cover the body of the dragon has thousands and thousands of shiny glittery scales. Mrs. Hong, Dr. Hong's wife, works with *dizi* for months, and they hand-sew them one by one. The two longest dragons used in the performances (Golden Dragon and Azure Dragon) and made in-house are 144 meters long and consist of 60 segments each, with the dragon head weighed at 30 kg, the body measured at 90 cm in diameter and covered with approximately 250,000 scales.

Each dragon has its unique character. For example, the Golden Dragon symbolizes love and is a messenger of light. The Azure Dragon brings peace and justice. Experienced *dizi*, both male and female, will pass on their knowledge and skills to the younger generations. They believe this will offer an opportunity for the youths to learn how to be respectful of both the elderly and tradition.

This dragon-making project seems to be an unbelievably slow business, especially when contrasted with the fast-paced rhythm of contemporary world. However, this is exactly how Dr. Hong wants to pass down the traditions and wisdom of esoteric Taoism in a comprehensive and wholesome manner to his *dizi* at Tai Ji Men. To Dr. Hong, the long time spent in these endeavors is not wasted. First, *dizi* learn to appreciate nature when they have to hike up a mountain to find a suitable bamboo forest. Second, only bamboos of the right size and age are manually harvested. The other ones are left untouched. Hence, the concept of environmental sustainability is taught in a real-life situation. Third, such a project requires teamwork and good communication skills. It offers an ideal circumstance to teach how to create harmony and balance.

A good part of the life lessons, wisdoms, and moral values taught at Tai Ji Men, while in my opinion essential for all world citizens, are not being taught at a school system and higher education institutes these days. Dr. Hong often tells his *dizi*, “I am here to guide you so you can be the teacher for yourself (for the rest of your life).” This is the core of Tai Ji Men’s holistic approach, and is also applied to problematic situations such as those connected with the Tai Ji Men case.

2. A Holistic Approach to the Tai Ji Men Crisis in Taiwan

Taoist medicine takes a holistic approach to wellness and medical care. It focuses on the mind-body connection to treat a person, and insists on fixing the cause of the ailment and on disease prevention, not just on relieving symptoms. Tai Ji Men takes a holistic approach to help “cure” the Tai Ji Men crisis in Taiwan. I distinguish between three stages: diagnosis, healing, and prevention. This is a logical rather than a chronological distinction. During more than twenty-five years, the three stages occurred simultaneously.

2.1. Diagnosis—Observation and Detection of Problems

On the surface, it seems like there are two major problems in the Tai Ji Men case: (a.) tax discrimination; and (b.) government officials who abused state power and fabricated a case. As Tai Ji Men *dizi* went through the legal battle, they observed government officials making false statements, committing perjury, and

breaching the law in many different ways (Chao et al. 2021). These were the symptoms only, and indicated a much deeper illness at several levels: individual, governmental, and societal.

At an individual level, the fundamental issue is that too many government officials proved to be dishonest, greedy, ignorant, and careless. At the governmental level, the main problems are the existence of a bonus system quickly rewarding tax bureaucrats who issue bills, a dysfunctional administrative remedy system, and powerless disciplinary sanctions against tax officers who misbehave. At the societal level, the root causes of the problems include that the general public lacks understanding of what true democracy is, does not know basic human rights, feels powerless in the face of social injustice, does not want to appear different, and is afraid of speaking up.

2.2. Healing Processes—Problem Solving and Crisis Resolution

How do Taiwanese citizens try to solve similar problems? As mentioned earlier, the general public in Taiwan is afraid to speak up and demand its own rights to be respected. When facing an unfair tax bill, the average Taiwanese would likely do the following: (a) if the amount is affordable and small, they would just pay, without questioning the tax authorities; (b) if the amount is affordable but non-reasonable, they would double-check with the tax authorities and try to get a better “deal” on a new more affordable amount to pay; (c) if the amount is unaffordable, they might choose to go to court to resolve the dispute, but the chances of winning in the administrative court are very slim; (d) sadly, but truthfully each year, many taxpayers get ruined and some even choose to take their own life as a result of unjust tax bills. It is also true that many business owners, facing an unfair tax system plus a dysfunctional administrative remedy model in Taiwan, choose to end their business or not to start it at all.

Tai Ji Men chose to fight against the unjust tax bills, knowing it would be a long journey. Meanwhile, they kept the door of their academies in Taiwan open, and also continued their international outreach, all this while dealing with the legal procedures. Dr. Hong, however, also continued to examine what the roots of the problem were.

Part of the healing processes required strengthening Tai Ji Men from within, reinforcing the solidarity of the group, and promoting individual inner peace through a healthy body, mind, and spirit. It may sound simple, but it was in fact a complicated and painful process. Dr. Hong turned the crisis to an opportunity to teach and educate his *dizi*. He initiated what he called the World Peace and Love Movement in 1999, less than three years after the Tai Ji Men case had started. On August 1, 1999, he gave a speech entitled “A World of One Heart, A Well-Spring of Happiness” in San Francisco (see Tai Ji Men Qigong Academy 2017). He was talking to the world, but also to the Taiwanese. He wanted not only to put the frightened hearts of his *dizi* at ease, but also rectify the crisis of taxation system in Taiwan as part of larger global troubles.

Tai Ji Men believe they fight a battle not only for themselves and for those who live in Taiwan today, but also for future generations. Not only should problems be solved. They should not come back.

2.3. Preventative Measures—Compassion in Action

How can we be sure that, once overcome, the crises will not reappear in the future? Tai Ji Men’s answer is education. The education movements Dr. Hong initiated have a global scope. Yet, he believes they will also be instrumental in solving the Tai Ji Men case and the crisis of tax bureaucracy in Taiwan.

Dr. Hong believes that teaching about human rights, freedom of religion or belief, tax justice, and what a true democracy is, are largely missing from Taiwan’s educational system. He also advocates for a conscience-based education. Tai Ji Men collaborates closely with educators, scholars, and experts from different fields, and spreads the idea of a holistic education through a variety of tools.

It also publishes books documenting its own case such as *Who Stole Their Youth?* (Chao et al. 2021) and educates Taiwanese on their rights as citizens and taxpayers, something which is new and unprecedented in Taiwan. Street protests are also part of this campaign, and in December each year since 2010, and even outside the December yearly protest since 2016, supporters from the Tax and Legal Reform League that Tai Ji Men helped establish pitch tents and camp outside the Presidential office in Taipei to protest the unjust tax system. Volunteers reached all neighborhoods in Taiwan collecting signatures for

petitions. And millions of people signed international petitions Dr. Hong proposed on behalf of world peace and love.

This is a real-life example of how Tai Ji Men use a holistic approach to promote human rights and conscience-based education, fight injustice, denounce fake news, and resolve crises.

Conclusion: Holistic Education and Sustainable Future

One can argue that this is a long shot, and promoting conscience and love internationally would not solve the Tai Ji Men case. However, from a Taoist perspective, “All is One.” *Dizi* believe that the brightness Tai Ji Men brings to the world shall eventually shine back and dispel the darkness surrounding their case in Taiwan, although the process will be painfully long and slow.

Tai Ji Men *dizi* would answer objections that their approach is unrealistic by countering that in fact it is the only realistic path, reaching for the source of problems rather than remaining at the surface and looking for quick fixes and cosmetic repairs. The comparison with the dragon dance performance explains their attitude. From dragon making to dancer training, the success of the enterprise is guaranteed by the fact that no shortcuts are taken for the sake of just quickly preparing an acceptable show. A really holistic approach requires a coordinated action and preparation at all levels.

Concluding with a personal experience, I attended many international conferences featuring Dr. Hong as a speaker over a period of more than twenty years. The first large conference was the 2001 World Citizens Assembly hosted by the Association of World Citizens in Taiwan when I was in my early 20s. The main theme was how a holistic, conscience-based education is essential to prepare world citizens, and achieve the goal of a sustainable development emphasized in United Nations documents. The experience made a magnificent impact on my young self. It helped me seeing our world from a deeply holistic and meaningful angle.

It has always been part of this holistic experience to cooperate with other religious and spiritual groups. I learned that large or small, each group has something valuable to offer, and there is some truth in all of them. They also have

a right not to be discriminated. As Albert Einstein wrote in his last unfinished manuscript (1955),

In matters concerning truth and justice, there is no difference between large and small problems for issues concerning the treatment of people are all the same (Einstein 2007 [1955], 506).

In the end, it is all about the dragon's spirit, which is traditionally said to consist of compassion, courage, and wisdom. Tai Ji Men speaks of love, peace, and conscience—but the essence of the holistic teachings is the same.

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