

Tai Chi in Performance

There is an element of theatre in martial arts in general. From the ritual warrior dances which permeate world culture to modern wrestling and free fighting spectacles which grace countless television screens, the bond between the martial and the theatrical seems compelling, even inevitable.

In China martial artists have traditionally accepted this apparent paradox with relative ease, and variations on the theme of martial theatre abound. Martial arts street performance—a kind of Kung-fu busking—for example, has borrowed from and contributed to traditional Chinese opera which has in turn drawn many of its themes from martial motifs which dominate much of the nation's historical literature. Indeed the top film and television stars of the Chinese martial arts genre, *Bruce Lee* and *Jackie Chan* grew up in opera families. Others such as *Li Lianji (Jet Li)* were raised in an environment of performance related competition martial arts.

Being a Chinese martial art, and also so dance-like and ritualistic in appearance, one might think it would come as no surprise that Taijiquan is sometimes expressed as a performance activity. But for many there is a problem with the notion that the art can be used or expressed in this way. For those inclined toward the self-cultivation aspects of Tai Chi for instance, even graceful and virtuosic performances can seem immodest or vulgar, while for those more martially inclined, theatricality seems ridiculous if not egregious.

But is it really so bad? One might think, based on the outbursts of some commentators, that all is about to be lost as the twin travesties of performance and competition irreparably erode tradition. They see this especially as diluting the art for the sake of its exploitation. Of course, and this is self evident, if a practitioner concentrates exclusively on the performance features his or her art, consequent understanding and cultivation of other elements will be commensurately curtailed. And naturally if all practitioners approach their work from this perspective the art is likely to suffer in the long run.

But for those self proclaimed 'traditionalists' who take almost hostile umbrage with the notion of martial play-acting, we might ask whether their lack of good natured tolerance isn't designed to self-promote in some other way. Self-validation through the belittling of other paths doesn't *necessarily* produce better martial results and such indignation can become histrionic in it's own right. After all, performance, even in the guise of competition, requires real skill and, while perhaps not entirely focused on the martially functional, demands *something* in the way of training and coordination that can be of real value to the serious martial artist. While strength, power, agility and flexibility do not necessarily guarantee reliable martial skill, neither does a wagging, critical tongue. Perhaps putting a few of the the art's possibilities for expression into some kind of larger context might help the tolerance factor within the Tai Chi/martial arts community.

Tai Chi forms competitors can be considered for example, *athlete/artists* involved in an *aesthetic-sport* which is itself only one aspect of a traditional art that embraces a great range of concerns. Push Hands (and other forms of sparring) competitors are involved in *sport* in the better understood sense of ‘points accumulation through contest’. The purpose of ‘sport’ in this sense can only be realized by strategic means within a set of procedural expectations.

To appreciate Taijiquan in its competitive and performance aspects it might be helpful to look at a range of categories of martial-movement activities in affiliation with other movement activities—and as we are speaking of a martial art—particularly the relationship between *art*, *sport* and sports’ sabre-toothed uncle, *war*. On the extreme ends of the spectrum though *War* and *Art* we see *martial-combat* and *martial-performance* respectively.

Martial (武) ----- Art (术)

War martial-combat ‘functionally’ aesthetic	Sport martial-contest incidentally aesthetic	Aesthetic-Sport martial-portrayal partially aesthetic	Art martial-performance wholly aesthetic
invasion, military occupation, insurgency	football, basketball, track & field, hockey	gymnastics, diving, figure-skating	dance, mime, clown, (physical-)theatre, film
martial combatant (soldier-warrior)	martial athlete	martial athlete-artist	martial performance-artist
‘Wins’ by material ‘victory’, control of territory, resources, political influence. Evaluated culturally via relative casualties. Pronouncement of conquest often defines success for the victor.	Wins by points (eg. goals) accumulation, distance achievements, time superiority translated into ‘place-value’.	Wins/‘succeeds’ by a combination of judge (& possibly audience) appreciation & awarding of points translated into ‘place-value’.	‘Succeeds’ by audience appreciation & by subjective definitions. External indicators include attendance, applause, popularity. Internal satisfaction often defines success for the artist.

War, the most questionable of martial activities but the one that defines martiality most overtly, differs vastly from sport in its aims. Within martial arts circles the opinion most generally expressed is that war, conflict, battle, unless absolutely necessary, are activities to be avoided to whatever extent possible. Scholars of Chinese language argue in fact, that the character for ‘martial’—Wu (武) comprised of ‘spear’ (戈) and ‘stop’ (止) refer either to ‘*stopping the spear*’ or ‘*using the spear to stop*’, both concepts having to do with ending violence. ‘Martial arts’ then, are not so much acting in the interest of furthering war but rather of preventing or ending it. It might be remembered here that many sociologists regard sport as a way of expressing or sublimating violent and warring instincts into a socially acceptable form—or at least one less harmful—which can be of potential value in community and inter-community relations.

The extremes: War and Art

Whereas criteria for evaluation of success are relatively clear in sports such as hockey or even figure skating, 'winning' in war is accomplished via highly questionable procedures, and definitions of 'victory' can be likewise subjective. In this sense (only) war is much like 'art' which shares highly subjective and/or popular definitions for success.

Martial-*combat* achieves its aims through beating an enemy *actually*, as compared to the figurative beating of an opponent in a sporting martial-*contest*. In this sense it is more 'real' than sport or aesthetic sport which *demonstrate* victory or superiority without actual destruction of the adversary (even in the most violent martial-contest events opponents are released after submission which is taken as an admission of defeat).

Martial-*performance* at the other extreme, involves the *depiction* of martial activity. It can convey the values, methods, essence or spirit of martial practices to the uninitiated and depict war without inflicting the recklessness and cost upon observers. While martial-performance may in some guises be highly stylized or caricaturish, it can also be brutally and hauntingly accurate. In this sense it can approach through 'realism' the extreme nature of war and battle in ways that sport or aesthetic-sport can not. Though choreographic in method, purely artistic depictions of violence can invoke an understanding of the seriousness of mortal combat moreso than the renditions offered by martial sport with its trivializing prize-awarding mentality. In this second sense 'art' is much like 'war' offering up through *realism* a sense of reality.

The capacity to portray war may be one of the most powerful cautionary tools humans have at their disposal when it comes to warning us away from the trumpeting overtures of those who would profit by idealizing war as a noble endeavour. There is of course, a mixed potential in offering up such representations. Glamourized depictions may enamour some toward the activity but even in these the potential for sublimation of violence away from its actual expression can be of potential value. For those truly interested in excelling as martial-performance artists, it may even be worth deepening involvement and understanding of related theatrical aspects, considering performance from the perspective of author-composer-choreographer, director, performer, stage manager and audience.¹

The middle ground: Sport and Aesthetic-sport

The value of sport, here martial-contest, varies, both based on approach to the activity and attitude of the individual. For those involved in competitive, point based sports—in the case of Taijiquan, Push Hands competitions—there is a possibility, within a limited set of parameters, to evaluate some aspects of one's abilities against

¹ Keeping in mind especially, that for martial artists, the only thing more painful than war and violence are poorly choreographed and performed depictions of war and violence!

a skilled opponent. While it is generally acknowledged that there are limitations to this in terms of realistic progress evaluation, it is generally conceded that such competitions do rouse improvement in competitors, even with respect to traditional martial arts practices. With the right attitude, one may use such competitions as a means to deepening understanding of the art, testing one's mettle and better understanding the nature of competition.

Aesthetic-sport or *martial-portrayal*—and in the case of Taijiquan, 'forms competition'—fulfills somewhat different functions. The purpose of an 'aesthetic-sport' can only be realized in reference to the aesthetic manner of achieving it, thus a clear understanding of the *spirit, aesthetic, and power* of the art must be exhibited by the participant. 'Martial-portrayal' means here: the activity of representing the martial art and its salient features with finesse in an expressive fashion. In this regard the martial 'athlete-artist' shares a great deal in common with what we have been calling the martial 'performance-artist'. The difference however lays in the strictness of the competition parameters which confine the depiction to traditional, or at least, guideline approved, forms of expression. Martial aesthetic-sport activities suffer similar limitations to their martial sport counterparts in that they can, at best, suggest only aspects of the fullness of the art they depict. Mastery can be fostered within these limitations however as athlete/athlete artists must seriously develop important fundamentals to participate in a viable way.

Additionally, with respect to martial-portrayal via forms competitions, much maturing can go on within the individual in terms of developing self-control, poise and capacity for expression through the art. It is very common in fact to find athlete-artists make their way from the competition arena into the performance environment in some capacity. Many individuals involved in various aspects of theatre, film and television have traversed the path from competition carpet to stage and set. At a more basic level, even 'in-school' performances for the benefit of students, friends, or to interest the public require some small degree of theatricality and it is difficult to find a club anywhere in which some form of demonstration is not injected somehow into the proceedings. Participating in forms competitions can be helpful in strengthening community spirit and encouraging some individuals to move beyond personal limitations in a safe environment.

Advice for sages

The chart and discussion above do not directly reflect the spiritual-cultivation aspects of Taijiquan. One might say that this discussion contains yet another batch of variations reflecting the activities of the human ego. While there may be truth to this notion, it could also be argued that participating in the art in its performance, portrayal and competitive modes can provide real tests of one's ability to express the art in situations where one's ego attachments become clear. It is one thing to practice ego-less Taijiquan in one's back yard and another to practice it in a Push Hands competition's final match. There is no reason why participating in such activities can not contribute to such cultivation.

And while there are those that eschew the footlights in favour of no-nonsense, 'real' martial arts, it might be wise to remember that short of war or life threatening combat, all martial arts practices are at best simulations of 'the real thing'. Though most serious martial training in Taijiquan is directed toward the idea of a real fighting situation with one or a few opponents, it still tends to exist somewhere in the cracks between martial-contest and martial-combat. The more real things get, the more the rules go out the window and the less relevant formal martial training becomes. Flexibility of mind and attitude can often prevail, and it is perhaps here, when things get most martial, that the more artistically creative mind triumphs.

In any event, it is no truer to say that Taijiquan can only be represented genuinely by mastery of its martial-application aspects than to say that it can only be expressed by its performance permutations. At the very least, there is no reason why these activities should not be considered valid forms of Taijiquan practice from the standpoint of either historical tradition, martial training or self-cultivation.

6/13/06