



Taijiquan as a way of life: The philosophy of Cheng Man-ch'ing

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ABSTRACT

Cheng Man-ch'ing (1901–1975) is as responsible as anyone for the wide popularity of *taijiquan* in the West. While his stature as a master and teacher of *taijiquan* is legendary, he is less well-known as a philosopher. Yet Cheng wrote a number of philosophical commentaries on Chinese classics that shed light on his understanding of *taijiquan*. In this paper I propose that a consideration of Cheng's philosophical reflections shows him to be a twentieth century Neo-Confucian who saw *taijiquan* as a key component of the overall aim of moral self-cultivation. In transmitting *taijiquan* to his fellow Chinese and to the West, Cheng was attempting to convey traditional Chinese thought and action as expressed in Neo-Confucian moral ideals. For Cheng, *taijiquan* was more than a martial art of physical exercise; it was a way of life.

KEYWORDS

Cheng Man-ch'ing; Zheng Manqing; taijiquan; Confucianism; Neo-Confucianism; Asian martial arts; philosophy as a way of life

Introduction

As is true of the Indian practice of hatha yoga, the Chinese martial art of *taijiquan* (*t'ai chi ch'uan* 太極拳) has been growing in popularity around the world as a gentle, meditative physical exercise. And just as yoga springs from Indian philosophy and spirituality, *taijiquan* has deep spiritual roots in the Chinese philosophical tradition. This unity of body and spirit is exemplified in the work of the man who is responsible perhaps more than anyone else for introducing *taijiquan* to the West, Cheng Man-ch'ing (Zheng Manqing 郑曼青).¹ Cheng taught hundreds of students in his New York City studio and many of these students have gone on to make Cheng's thirty-seven posture simplified version of the Yang-style form of *taijiquan* the most widely taught version in the U.S. and Europe (Tai Chi Foundation 2020). In addition to his status as master and teacher of *taijiquan*, Professor Cheng, as he was known to his students, made his living as an art instructor and practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine. He was also a scholar of Chinese philosophy. While his written works on *taijiquan* are now themselves classics (see Cheng and Smith 1966; Cheng 1981a, 1982, 1985), less well-known are his philosophical essays on the traditional Chinese classics (Cheng 1995, 1997). A principal aim of Cheng Man-ch'ing's work, however, was to teach traditional Chinese philosophy through the practice of *taijiquan*.

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In the introduction to the recent film about him—*The Professor: Tai Chi's Journey West*—his son reflects on his father's teaching and says, 'I think he was teaching more than just tai chi as a martial art; he was teaching tai chi as a way of life' (Strugatz and Van Sickle 2016). This echoes the claim made some years ago in the memoir of Cheng's student, Wolfe Lowenthal, who commented, 'Even more than self-defense, more even than its health benefit, he taught Tai Chi Chuan as a *Tao*, a "way of life"' (Lowenthal 1991, xvi). The idea that ancient philosophy in the West, similar to the Eastern traditions, was primarily a way of life that involved rigorous discipline, including 'spiritual exercises,' has been established by the work of Hadot (1995). It is also true that bodily disciplines, such as athletics or martial arts, themselves often reflect East and West ancient philosophies, and, as such, give expression to philosophical ways of life (Reid 2010). This is especially so in the Chinese tradition (Allen 2015; Ni 1996; Sukhoverkhov, Klimenko, and Tkachenko 2021; Wang 2010). In this paper I attempt to bring together the *taijiquan* master and the philosopher by highlighting the philosophical dimension of *taijiquan* in the writings of Cheng Man-ch'ing. What emerges is a view of *taijiquan* as a way of life that, for Cheng, embodies the wisdom of traditional Chinese philosophy, particularly Neo-Confucianism, in a form that could be transmitted effectively to the modern world.

Brief Biographical Sketch of Cheng Man-ch'ing²

Cheng Man-ch'ing was born in 1901 in Yongjia, present day Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province, China. In his early years he was taught poetry and calligraphy by his mother (his father died when Cheng was quite young), and when he was ten years old, he studied painting with master Wang Xiangchan. As a teen, he spent time in Hangzhou with a circle of literati studying painting, poetry and calligraphy. At eighteen he moved to Beijing where he taught poetry at Yu-wen University and in his mid-twenties became a Professor of Painting at Shanghai School of Fine Arts. In 1930 he founded the College of Chinese Culture and Art in Shanghai where he served as vice president. Prior to this, as early as 1926, Cheng had undertaken studies in traditional Chinese medicine, and in the years 1928–1935, he studied *taijiquan* with Master Yang Chengfu, grandson of Yang Luchan, the founder of the Yang school of *taijiquan*, perhaps the most widely practiced *taijiquan* style in the world. Cheng became devoted to *taijiquan* during this time as a way to overcome tuberculosis, which he did, attributing his success to the years practicing *taijiquan* under Yang Chengfu's tutelage. Cheng writes, 'I have great affection for t'ai chi's therapeutic powers. Only China's t'ai chi thoroughly exemplifies Lao-tzu's principles of rejuvenation, and the slightest practice of t'ai chi benefits your entire body' (Cheng 1995, 154).

Yang Chengfu was one of the first to attempt to popularize *taijiquan*, and his book, *Essence and Applications of Taijiquan* (*Taijiquan Tiyong Quanshu* 太極拳鐵永泉樹), was originally published in 1934 with a preface by Cheng (Yang 2005). In the same year, after retiring from his position at the College of Chinese Culture and Art in 1931, Cheng began teaching *taijiquan* at the Central Military Academy in Nanjing. He had spent the previous three years studying the Chinese classics with Qian Mingshan until, as he put it, he 'entered the Tao of knowledge' (Cheng 1981b, 238). This philosophical knowledge informed his poetry, painting and calligraphy, as well as his practice of Chinese medicine and *taijiquan*, and he became known as a Master of these Five Excellences.

Cheng left China in 1949, relocating to Taiwan along with the Nationalists with whom he served in 1946 as a Member of the National Assembly for the construction of the Constitution for the Republic of China. In addition to numerous art shows, Cheng held many important positions in cultural organizations and was eventually named Director of Fine Arts of the American branch of the Republic of China Cultural Renaissance Movement. He also established the Shr Jung School of T'ai Chi Ch'uan in Taipei, and later, in 1964, in New York City, where he was one of the first teachers of *taijiquan* to open his studio to non-Chinese students. It was during the last ten years of his life in New York that Cheng wrote most of his philosophical works, spending much of his time in the East Asian Library of Columbia University.

Cheng Man-ch'ing's *Taijiquan*

Taijiquan was taught by Cheng Man-ch'ing ostensibly as a gentle exercise that consists of a series of bodily movements or forms (*taolu* 套路), based on self-defense postures, that flow slowly into one another in a set, choreographed pattern. It is often regarded as a moving meditation and has been described as 'swimming in air.' The key to understanding Cheng's *taijiquan* as a philosophical way of life is how these movements, and the attentiveness that accompanies them, embody fundamental Chinese concepts, in particular, the balance or harmony (*he* 和) between heaven and earth, indeed, within all things in the universe, and the harmony between persons in the social sphere made possible by the moral value of selflessness.

Taijiquan is part of the Chinese martial arts or *wushu* 武術, with its roots in the internal version of this tradition or *neijia* 內家. The internal martial arts of China de-emphasize the use of physical force to focus instead on the awareness and control of a subtler kind of energy known as *qi* 氣. Within Chinese philosophy, *qi* is the universal energy or life-force—often identified with, but not limited to, breath—which flows through the body, as it flows through and unifies all things. Chinese medicine is based on the principle that health requires the proper quality, balance, and flow of *qi* in the body. For Cheng, a practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine, *taijiquan* aids in the maintenance of health by helping to circulate *qi* throughout the body. In this sense, *taijiquan* includes *neigong* 內功 or *qigong* 氣功, the long-standing Chinese practice of *qi* cultivation through specific postures, bodily relaxation, and meditative breathing. But the value of *qigong* is not limited only to promotion of bodily health; it has a moral or spiritual dimension as well.

What links the solo practice of *taijiquan* as a meditative exercise routine and its employment as a martial art in such practices as push-hands (*tuishou* 推手) is the relaxation of muscle tension. Expressed as *song* 鬆, this special felt-sense of sinking and relaxing is characterized by a kind of loose, supple, or soft quality of the muscles as opposed to the tense, taught, hard quality of the more external martial arts such as karate. It is this relaxation that makes possible the flow of *qi* in the body without blockages while also allowing the corresponding quality of 'yielding' when engaged with partners or opponents, enabling one to 'listen to' and 'receive' the incoming energy rather than resist it with physical force. This is the key to the 'inside-outside connectivity' that unifies the internal awareness and external movements of practitioners and brings them into harmony with the wider environment and their partners (Yu and Ilundain-Agurruza 2016). *Song* is the primary principle of Cheng Man-ch'ing's

taijiquan, which perhaps more than any other version of the art, emphasizes the quality of softness. The quality—indeed, virtue—of softness is clearly extolled in philosophical Daoism where we read in the *Daodejing* how ‘the soft overcomes the hard’ (*Daodejing* 2008, 78). In Cheng’s philosophy, we find that softness, and the quality of yielding which emerges when this softness is employed in relation to others, is integral to the Confucian moral value of selflessness. Captured in the phrase, ‘investment in loss,’ the Confucian moral practice of ‘subduing the self’ is the foundation of the way of life Cheng attempted to transmit through *taijiquan*.

The Philosophy of Cheng Man-ch’ing

While it is the Daoist tradition that is generally thought to be the primary philosophical influence on *taijiquan*, with legendary 12th century Daoist monk Zhang Sanfeng as its purported founder,³ Cheng Man-ch’ing’s philosophical perspective, we maintain, is primarily Confucian. Confucius (551–479 B.C.E), the Latinized name of *Kongfuzi* 孔夫子 or Grand Master Kong, better known by the Chinese simply as *Kongzi* 孔子, is perhaps the most influential person in Chinese culture. It would not be an understatement to describe Chinese civilization, indeed, all Far Eastern civilizations, as Confucian cultures. Confucius was the founder and leading figure of the school of philosophy known as *Rujia* 儒家, or the School of Literati or Scholars. Teaching during a period in Chinese history characterized by incessant warfare, Confucius shared the aim of most of the ‘one hundred philosophers’ of this era, namely, to bring peace and order to society. As the name of his school suggests, Confucius sought to achieve this social and political aim by transmitting the learning embodied in the ways of a glorified, indeed, mythologized past. While the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), the book of sayings of Confucius collected by his students, included the notion of heaven (*tian* 天) and the need for balance or harmony between heaven, earth and human beings, Confucian philosophy is primarily ethical in nature (Confucius 1979). For Confucius, the way to perfect society is to perfect human beings. This requires a process of moral self-cultivation, whereby persons are molded and refined, through education and enculturation, into virtuous individuals modeled after the sages and kings of old.

In essence, Confucian training in moral character is designed to produce a *junzi* 君子, a ‘gentleman’ or a noble person, a term that has its origins in the feudal system of ancient China for a member of the aristocratic class, literally, a ‘son of the ruler.’ In the Confucian classic, the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), we find a reference to one of the songs from the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經) which states, ‘Here is our elegant and accomplished prince. [His personal life is cultivated] as a thing is cut and filed and as a thing is carved and polished. How grave and dignified! How majestic and distinguished!’ (quoted in Chan 1963, 88). Confucian philosophy aims to transform all persons into elegant and dignified persons of noble bearing by carving and polishing their ethical character through moral education and practice until their virtue (*de* 德) shines forth. In general, the *junzi* is courteous, proper, broad-minded, diligent, kind, respectful of tradition and others, sincere, calm, and seeks to ‘enlarge’ or aid others. As such, the *junzi*, rather than seeking self-gain at the expense of others, practices what Cheng calls ‘investment in loss’ and stands in contrast with the small person or *xiaoren* 小人, who seeks only his or her own profit or self-interest.

This quality of selflessness is captured in the highest virtue of Confucianism, namely, *ren* (jen 仁), usually translated as ‘benevolence’ or ‘human-heartedness,’ but which can also mean ‘love’ or ‘kindness.’ *Ren* sometimes simply means ‘virtue’ for Confucius. The virtuous person is not only benevolent or kind but also possesses a sense of righteousness (*yi* 義) expressed primarily through the qualities of conscientiousness or loyalty (*zhong* 忠) regarding the welfare of others, and altruism or reciprocity (*shu* 恕) whereby one does not do to others what one does not want done to oneself. Since virtue must be learned, it is essential that the virtuous person develop, early on, a sense of ritual propriety (*li* 禮) derived from an adherence to the rites and rituals of civilized conduct. This requires, above all, the virtue of filial piety (*xiao* 孝), which is essentially reverence for one’s parents, and by extension, one’s ancestors. For Confucius, moral self-cultivation begins at home, as the respect for one’s parents extends to all elders and all family members and eventually, all persons in society. It is also aided by the arts of peace (*wen* 文), such as music, poetry, and calligraphy, among others, which helps one develop self-discipline while instilling a sense of harmony and an appreciation for proper, ritualized action. It all adds up to a person who has been refined and cultured, whose character is such that he or she could live well in civilized society and serve as an example for others. Indeed, the goal of Confucianism is to produce persons much like Cheng Man-ch’ing himself, universally regarded by his students as the epitome of the traditional, cultured Chinese gentleman. As martial arts historian Robert W. Smith, a student of Cheng, recounts of his character, ‘what I got from the outset was the quality Mencius made so much of—*ren*, loving kindness’ (Smith 1999).

In terms of his philosophical outlook, according to Mark Hennessy, translator and editor of a number of Cheng’s philosophical writings, Cheng is a ‘modern traditionalist’ who interprets the classics in terms of their relationship to the cultivation of *ren*, which Hennessy acknowledges is ‘the central idea of Confucianism’ (Cheng 1997: xii). Douglas Wile, another prominent translator of Cheng’s works, suggests that ‘Zheng was a cultural Confucian, who used the Chinese arts to preserve Chinese identity and to earn respect for Chinese culture in the Western world’ (Wile 2007, 67). Writing in the 1960s and 1970s, as a Confucian traditionalist, Cheng’s philosophical efforts are largely consistent with the ‘Cultural Renaissance’ effort called for by Nationalist leader of the People’s Republic of China (Taiwan), Chiang Kai-Shek, in response to the ‘Cultural Revolution’ of Chairman Mao. Indeed, Cheng had previously played a role in the Kuomintang government of China and, as personal physician to Chiang, was involved to some degree in the implementation of the policies and practices of the so-called ‘New Life Movement’ from 1934 to 1949 (Dirlik 1975). According to Cheng, ‘A cultural renaissance is our most urgent task to date,’ (Cheng 1997, 95) and he was convinced that the restoration of the Chinese people and the preservation of Chinese culture required the revival of traditional Confucianism. Cheng was also convinced that the practice of *taijiquan*, despite its typical linking with philosophical Daoism, was very much part of this effort at reviving and transmitting the Confucian tradition.

A case could be made that, in terms of his philosophy, Cheng is perhaps more properly regarded a Neo-Confucian, although he is critical of what he regarded as overly metaphysical interpretations of Confucian tenets in some strands of orthodox Neo-Confucianism. As Wile puts it, ‘For Zheng, the dao of Confucius was not intended to lead us into cosmology, metaphysics, or theism, but simply to teach us right from

wrong as a lived discipline' (Wile 2007, 57). Indeed, Cheng's philosophical perspective seems very much in league with the 'New Confucianism' that emerged in the early twentieth century in response to the May Fourth Movement in 1919, which was critical of traditional Confucianism as a barrier to social progress and largely responsible for China's political weakness following the disintegration of the Qing Dynasty in 1911 (Yu 2002, 127–146). In some ways, as Wile suggests, Cheng may actually be closer to late twentieth century New Confucianism or the 'Boston Confucianism' of a thinker such as Tu Weiming (1985), who advocates a form of Confucian spiritual humanism that could serve as a vibrant, contemporary moral philosophy for both non-Chinese and Chinese alike (Wile 2007, 63–65). In either case, both early and late twentieth century New Confucianism depart from the earlier Neo-Confucian orthodoxy that dominated Chinese (and also Korean and Japanese) thought and culture for hundreds of years.

The previous Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, which was the target of the May Fourth Movement's 'New Culture' critiques, stems largely from the work of the twelfth-century philosopher, Zhu Xi. It was Zhu Xi, for example, who established the Confucian canon of the Four Books, including the already mentioned *Analects and Great Learning*, as well as the *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子) and the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), which became the basis, along with his own commentaries, of the all-important civil service examinations in China from 1313 to 1905. Zhu Xi himself revitalized the syncretic philosophical movement we know as Neo-Confucianism that emerged a few centuries earlier with the work of the Cheng brothers, students of Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073), among the first to attempt a synthesis of Confucianism and Daoism. The Cheng-Zhu school emphasized 'the investigation of things' (*gewu* 格物) in order to find the ultimate principle or *li* 理—similar to the *dao* 道 of Daoism—that governs all things. It is regarded as the 'Rationalist' form of Neo-Confucianism in contrast with the less-dominant 'Idealist' Neo-Confucianism of Lu Jiuyan and Wang Yangming which focused more on the intuitive understanding of *li* within one's own 'heart-mind' (*xin* 心) achieved through 'quiet sitting' (*jing zuo* 靜坐), a practice strongly influenced by the seated meditation of the Chan School (*Chan zong* 禪宗) of Buddhism.⁴

Twentieth century 'New Confucianism,' with which Cheng may be grouped, minimizes the importance of Zhu Xi, no doubt in large part due to the association of Zhu Xi's thought with the established social and political structure of pre-Modern China. Cheng, for example, believed that Zhu Xi was wrong to interpret *gewu* as 'an exhaustive study into everything knowable' (Cheng 1995, 42). Rather, he thought it should be interpreted as 'eliminating excessive material desires' which, for Cheng, is consistent with the Confucian phrase 'curb your desires' from the *Book of Changes* or *Yijing* 易經, and also the phrase 'overcome yourself and return to propriety' from the *Analects*. For Cheng, 'Ke Wu [*gewu*] means simply, self-cultivation' (42). Similarly, the New Confucianism movement generally attempted to side-step the May Fourth Movement's critiques by bypassing Zhu Xi and looking instead to Zhou Dunyi and his metaphysics of *Taiji* 太極 or Supreme Ultimate, while also extolling the perspective of Lu Jiuyan and Wang Yangming. Indeed, in sympathy with the Lu-Wang school, Cheng himself was an eclectic thinker, absorbing influences from both Daoism and Chan Buddhism, philosophies that attracted him in his youth. Cheng himself tells us that, after an initial preference for Daoism due to its

potential health benefits, he studied Wang Yangming's collected works in 1925. This led him to study with Master Qian Mingshan in his Chi Yuan study hall where he states, 'I discovered Confucianism's true relationship to men' (Cheng 1995, 154). He would eventually write commentaries on the principal books of the Confucian canon.

In true Neo-Confucian fashion, Cheng always strove to reconcile Daoism and Confucianism, although it might be more correct to claim, as Wile does (2007, 57) that Cheng tended to 'Confucianize' Laozi (老子 Lao-tzu). So, in addition to his commentaries on Confucian classics, he proffered his own rendition of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (*The Classic of the Way and Virtue*), claiming that all twenty English translations contained in the Columbia University Library were 'completely wrong' (Cheng 1995, 155). Cheng's aim in interpreting the *Daodejing* was to introduce people to Laozi and then lead them to Confucius. 'You will never understand Confucius' principles without first understanding Lao-tzu' (Cheng 1995, 156). Cheng explains the relationship between the two in terms of the symbol of *Taiji*. For Cheng, the white area (*yin*陰) is *qi* or heaven, while the dark area (*yang* 陽) is its image, earth, and 'the dividing line is the Law, or principle' (Cheng 1995, 158). As Cheng sees it, Laozi speaks of the *dao* of heaven and earth while Confucius speaks of the *dao* of man. Yet, Cheng emphasizes the key Neo-Confucian idea of principle or *li* as that which bridges the two senses of *dao*, and he uses it to interpret Confucius's claim in *Analects* 4:15 that 'I have but one thing, and upon it I string everything else.' He writes, 'With it, we can follow the ebb and flow of the yin/yang and entwine heaven with earth. Every single thing in the universe follows this principle' (Cheng 1997, 38). While privileging Confucius over Laozi, Cheng notes that 'despite their vast differences, these two men still strive toward the same goal' (Cheng 1995, 158), namely, moral self-cultivation.

Taijiquan and Moral Self-Cultivation

Cheng understood the shared goal of Confucian and Daoist thought to be moral self-cultivation—the moral development of the self which has as its crowning achievement the selflessness of *ren*—and he believed the practice of *taijiquan* to be very much a part of this effort. In his *T'ai Chi Ch'uan: A Simplified Method of Calisthenics for Health & Self Defense* (Cheng 1981a), in the chapter entitled, 'My Hope,' Cheng explains that the essence of *taijiquan* is to learn what he calls 'investment in loss,' a phrase he takes to mean the same as what Confucius meant by subduing the self (Cheng 1981a, 24).

The basic commandment of the Confucian doctrine is for one to subdue the self and to seek *jen*—i.e., to develop in one the virtues of love, creativity, and harmony; and then to extend one's self to others, i.e., to enlarge one's sphere of goodness by helping other people to do good. Although I have not risen to the height of Confucius's teaching, I try to learn and to venerate its meaning and spirit. (Cheng 1981a, 24–25)

But before one can fully achieve the subduing of the self characteristic of the virtue of *ren*, one must correct and strengthen the self. And this includes bodily training, specifically, training in *qi* cultivation. So, in the preface to his most famous work on the philosophy of *taijiquan*, *Master Cheng's Thirteen Chapters on Tai Chi Chuan* (1982), Cheng writes that his hope is to share *taijiquan* with 'the world's true seekers' and 'to demonstrate that the cultivation of *ch'i* is the basis of individual and national self-strengthening' (Cheng 1982: xiv). It would seem that 'self-strengthening,' including internal bodily strengthening, must

be seen as a component of the ultimate aim of moral self-cultivation, perhaps as its foundational basis. For Cheng, bodily development and moral development share the same continuum of self-development. The practice of *taijiquan* provides a bodily foundation, therefore, for moral and spiritual growth.

How so? It must first be noted that, contrary to the typical Western dualistic conception of the human being as a mind that *has* a body or *shen* 身, for traditional Chinese thought, the person is more an embodied mind, or better yet, a body-mind unity. As Robin Wang explains, 'One's mind is intimately bound up with one's body. Together this bond forms a complex whole,' (Wang 2010, 340), so much so that '*shen*, body, is often directly translated as "self" or "person"' (342). Given this body-mind unity, it is natural to see how the qualities of one's physical movements would have a direct effect on one's overall way of being, including one's moral character. For example, studies of embodied cognition indicate a kind of 'bodily relativity' such that the way one experiences or uses one's body in relation to the world influences the way one thinks about the world, including one's cognitive and moral judgements (Casasanto 2014). The suggestion here is that repeated, ritualized bodily movements such as that of *taijiquan* would influence moral dispositions as well. As a solo physical exercise, *taijiquan* focuses primarily on relaxation and balance while cultivating gentle and flowing ease of movement. The relaxed, balanced, gentle, flowing bodily movements should then result in a calm, balanced, gentle, fluid or resilient moral disposition. Such a moral disposition should then be especially evident in *taijiquan* practice with a partner. In this sense, as a martial art, *taijiquan* would promote a kind of peaceful, non-violent resistance.

This is part of the general idea that in *taijiquan* one aims to embody *Taiji*, the Supreme Ultimate, the principle of the balance of *yin* and *yang*, of emptiness and fullness, within oneself and in relation to others. Following the *Yijing*, Cheng notes that *Taiji* is the mother of both *yin* and *yang*, yet he is fond of referring to the claim of the *Daodejing* that 'softness and weakness overcome hardness and strength,' and so *yang* is always defeated by *yin*. He writes, 'The soft and weak are the followers of life; the hard and strong are the followers of death' (Cheng 1982, 9). This is essentially what Cheng means by 'investment in loss,' the subduing of the self. To invest in loss with *taijiquan* as a martial art is to allow others to attack with force, while one yields and refrains from using force to repel the attack. Instead, by remaining soft, one is capable of interpreting the energy of another, and then one simply deflects the incoming force, thereby neutralizing the oncoming aggression. If one learns to live this way in all of one's actions with others—returning force or aggression with gentle deflection—or as it is said, 'using four ounces of pressure to repel a thousand pounds,' Cheng believes that one's moral disposition will be transformed. One learns to neutralize force, to turn violence into peace, in one's daily life. This is one way that the Daoist virtues of gentleness and humility—to be like water or 'as selfless as melting ice' (*Daodejing* 15)—subsumed by Cheng under the Confucian notion of subduing the self, is embodied within *taijiquan*. Yet, with regard to the ability of *taijiquan* to transform his own moral disposition, Cheng was demure, claiming 'I do not know if my disposition has been transformedWhen it comes to achieving perfect peace and gentleness, I dare not make such claims'(Cheng 1982, 13). 'Nevertheless,' he continued, 'my former recklessness and belligerence have been all but eliminated' (14).

In placing bodily training within the sphere of moral development, Cheng is following in the long tradition within Confucianism of *xiushen* 修身, the cultivation of the body, as fundamental to moral self-cultivation. As Wang points out, the importance of ritualized activity for Confucius requires an emphasis on bodily control: 'The eyes, ears, mouth, and bodily movements must be aligned with well-defined social rituals' (Wang 2010, 341). Wang also notes that, for Confucius, the virtue of *ren* is not possible without the self-discipline that accompanies proper bodily ritualized performance, and the virtue of *xiao* or filial piety requires that one take care of one's own body since parents give birth to it, nourish it, and protect it. As in Cheng's perspective, *xiushen* is often regarded by the Confucian tradition as foundational to the development of character. 'Taking care of one's own body in certain ways is a necessary first step in moral self-cultivation and a practical path to acquiring moral and civic virtue' (Wang 2010, 341–342). The Confucian classic, *the Great Learning*, for example, includes *xiushen* among the eight steps of moral self-cultivation such that 'From emperor to gentlemen, all have *xiushen* as the fundamental foundation' (quoted in Wang 2010, 342).

As already noted, the practice of *taijiquan* also involves the practice of *qigong* or *qi* cultivation, which, for Cheng, and much of the Chinese philosophical tradition (Wang 2010, 343–351), is essential to the process of moral self-cultivation. In his commentary on the *Daodejing*, chapter 6, for example, Cheng notes that the reference to the 'spirit of the valley' and the 'Mysterious Female,' 'has to do with the application of breathing techniques and the cultivation of breath (ch'i)' (Cheng 1981b, 39). Similarly, in his own translation (with Tam Gibbs) of *Daodejing*, Cheng renders the key line of chapter 10 to read: 'In concentrating the ch'i to attain resiliency, can one be like a baby' (46), a statement Cheng regards as fundamental to the proper understanding of *taijiquan* (Wile 2007, 111). And the middle section of the third chapter of the *Daodejing* is rendered as follows: 'The sage governs himself by relaxing the mind, reinforcing the abdomen, gentling the will, strengthening the bones' (28). This, too, is achieved through the kind of deep, meditative breathing and *qi* cultivation that one practices in *taijiquan* as, throughout the form, one sinks the *qi* to the lower belly or *dantian* 丹田. According to Cheng, this is the true meaning of 'properly nourishing and not damaging the ch'i,' a phrase he based on the words of Mengzi who spoke of 'nourishing his flood-like *qi*' (Mencius 1970, 2A2). As Cheng writes,

Today, if we wish to emulate Mencius, but are unaware of practicing T'ai-chi ch'uan for the purpose of cultivating ch'i, then we must certainly fall short of him. At the same time, to study T'ai chi ch'uan without understanding what Mencius meant by stilling the mind and eliminating attachment, I fear will only lead to wearing out one's ch'i without benefit. (Cheng 1982, 36)

For Cheng, therefore, *taijiquan* and moral development clearly have a reciprocal relationship. In order to progress in *taijiquan*, we must learn the moral principles of stilling the mind and eliminating attachment. In turn, the practice of *taijiquan* aids in our moral development by providing us with daily practice in stilling the mind so that we may nourish our flood-like *qi*, the very energy needed to make progress in self-cultivation. For Cheng, we still the mind by keeping it focused, with the *qi*, in the *dantian* or lower belly, from which we breathe deeply and slowly, as if following Chuang-tzu (*Zhuangzi* 莊子), who noted in the *Inner Chapters* (Book 6, part 2) that 'the True man breathes from his

heels' (Chuang-tzu 2001). As Cheng notes, 'If one can do this, then establishing the "three imperishables" [achievements, virtue, and teachings] will be assured of success' (Cheng 1982, 36). He continues, 'If we are able to do this, then there is no time during the day when we are not practicing T'ai-chi Ch'uan.' (37). And, consequently, we may add, there is no time when we are not engaged in moral self-cultivation.

Cheng particularly commends Mengzi for coordinating *qi* cultivation with moral growth and for 'upholding the mainstream Confucian interpretation of ch'i as the assistant of Tao and duty' (Cheng 1995, 49). For Cheng, 'Mencius's interpretation of ch'i qualifies him as a true disciple' (49). It is worth noting that Mengzi's reference to his 'flood-like *qi*' (Mencius, 2A2; see also 6A8 and 7A36) takes place within his account of how he attained his unmovable heart-mind (*xin*). His initial examples of those who exemplify this moral quality are warriors whose courage springs from their self-control, their ability to remain steadfast and unmoved in the face of either victory or defeat. Mencius also notes that 'it is generated through the long accumulation of acts of righteousness' (2A2). In this regard, as Lee Yearley has noted, Mencius 'moralizes' *qi* (Yearley 1990, 153), a view with which Cheng would seem to agree. Philip Ivanhoe has further suggested that Mencius's 'floodlike *qi*' is a special kind of energy which connotes 'moral strength' or 'moral courage' (Ivanhoe 2002, 91), and that it 'grows naturally in the properly cultivated individual, just as the "energy" of any creature increases as it matures' (200, fn.14). Given the heart-mind-body continuum within traditional Chinese thought, it would seem natural that the development of the strength and purity of one's ordinary *qi* would thereby enhance one's moral strength, one's moral *qi*, if you will. Cheng maintained that this is precisely what the practice of *taijiquan* does. The gradual development of *qi* in the practice of *taijiquan* (or *qigong*), then, goes hand in hand with the gradual development and refinement of one's moral energy.

Taiji Sagehood

For a Neo-Confucian like Cheng, beyond even the achievement of becoming a *junzi*, the ultimate end of moral self-cultivation is becoming a *sheng* 聖 or 'sage'. As Stephen C. Angle points out in his account of the relevance of Neo-Confucian thought to today's world, Neo-Confucians speak of stages of development toward sagehood. An initial stage requires commitment and effort or *gongfu* 功夫 (Angle 2009, 141). The discipline of *taijiquan* helps one to establish the ability to form commitment and exercise effort. It therefore constitutes a spiritual exercise, in addition to a bodily exercise, that aids in moral development, conforming to what Angle calls 'practices of self-improvement' (146). The daily practice of *taijiquan* is also an expression of the kind of commitment one finds associated with the Confucian notion of *jing* 敬, typically translated as 'reverence' or 'respect' but also 'seriousness' or 'attention,' which is needed for moral self-cultivation (150). And, again in sympathy with the Confucian sense of the significance of ritual, the daily practice of *taijiquan* constitutes a kind of ritual in that it is a set sequence of movements, done first thing in morning, last thing before sleep.⁵ Consistent with Ivanhoe's observation that 'ritual practice [Ivanhoe's emphasis] often precedes proper feeling or understanding in the process of cultivating ethical dispositions' (Ivanhoe 2013, 37), *taijiquan* may be seen as precisely the kind of physical ritual that conditions us to feel in proper ways. The practitioner of *taijiquan* imagines feeling the feet rooted in the earth

and head connected to heaven, a physical posture that reminds one of the words of Wang Yangming: 'Standing between Heaven-and-earth, what dignity this body of mine possesses' (quoted in de Bary 1970, 15). Ideally, this dignity is in turn transferred to one's entire self and to others, for, as Cheng writes in his commentary on the *Analects*, 'The complete man bestows his virtue lovingly upon all men, shares his goodness, and finds pride in others' success as if it were his own—there is no greater virtue than this' (Cheng 1995, 15). The ritual practice of *taijiquan*, habituating one to feel in certain ways, may then be seen to aid in the development of the loving-kindness or *ren* of the fully developed sage.

For the Neo-Confucian tradition, the sage, above all, is characterized by both wisdom (*zhi* 智) and perceptiveness, that is, a kind of sensitivity to others and one's surroundings (Angle 2009, 113–121). As such, the sage exhibits the kind of spontaneity and ease of right action that Confucius attributed to himself at age 70 (*Analects* 2.4). Of course, the qualities of spontaneity (*ziran* 自然) and ease of action (*wuwei* 無為) are also principal teachings of Daoism. For the Neo-Confucian, these qualities receive an enhanced moral emphasis, characterizing the exceptional virtue (*de* 德) of the sage. We may say that, in the sage, virtue is fully present, and its embodiment is expressed in what Angle describes as 'a cultivated, consistent ability to respond correctly' (56). Such virtue is attained by a mind attuned to principle, to the way of things, with the ultimate goal the achievement of harmony with all things and oneness with the *dao*. For Cheng, this is what the daily practice of *taijiquan* has as *its* aim, the age-old Neo-Confucian moral goal of 'sageliness within and kingliness without.' The sage is always centered, able to interpret the surrounding energy, and ready to respond to any situation with a calm, relaxed alertness that is both spontaneous, effortless and morally appropriate. In his or her ability to respond to each situation with moral appropriateness, the effortless right action of the sage exhibits something like Confucian versions of *ziran* and *wuwei*.

The kind of moral sensitivity exhibited by the sage is aided by *taijiquan's* emphasis on being present in one's body. This is again consistent with the traditional Chinese understanding of the person as an embodied being rather than a disembodied mind as in Platonic or Cartesian thought. When in *taijiquan* one feels one's legs rooted in the earth and one's head connected to the heavens by a string, one seemingly embodies the cosmic principle that binds together all things. This bodily feeling of balance and inner straightness cultivated by the practice of *taijiquan* has an impact on the heart-mind and aids in the development of our moral sense. *Taijiquan's* emphasis on bodily straightness as a principle therefore echoes Cheng Yi's moral exhortation that we must engage in 'straightening ourselves within,' as Zhu Xi reminds us (quoted in Angle 2009, 152). In the same vein, Zhu Xi says, morally speaking, 'One does not lean forward or backward' (quoted in Angle 2009, 154). The desired moral disposition mirrors the physical posture and is supported by it.⁶

Another way to think of internal straightness is as a metaphor for the moral quality of adhering to the mean or centrality (*zhongyong* 中庸). Centrality is the quality of being centered and balanced amidst the cyclical pattern of energy that is the manifestation or *qi* of the universal principle, *li*. Without it, one loses the awareness of *li* both internally and externally, whether in nature, as in the changes of the seasons, or within society. According to Cheng, 'the word *chung yung* [*zhongyong*] itself concerns man's centrality, *chung*, between heaven and earth and his appropriate reaction to the constancy, *yung*, of

their forces' (Cheng 1997, 33). For Cheng, the person in possession of the quality of centrality (*zhongyong*) 'attains a state of non-inclination and changelessness' (32). Centrality enables the human being to be centered both vertically between heaven and earth but also centered horizontally with relation to the world by remaining balanced in response to the moving forces that surround one. Cheng explains, 'Mencius later extended this idea of centrality to include the movement required to maintain a central focus, saying, "To hold to the center without gauging movement leaves you holding on to only one end"' (57). And further, 'Properly gauging an object's movement lets you hold its center and maintain balance while moving with the object as it rises and falls, advances or retreats' (57). Adhering to the center of one's opponent while maintaining one's balance is exactly what one aims to achieve in *taijiquan* push hands. For Cheng, the physical ability to achieve centrality through the practice of *taijiquan* mirrors the moral quality of centrality whereby one is able to respond in a balanced and appropriate way in the ethical realm.

In making possible the proper responsiveness in any given situation, centrality includes knowing not only how to respond but when to respond. Following the *Zhongyong*, Cheng notes that 'The noble man is timely centered' (57), which suggests, as in Aristotle, the importance of proper timing as a component of right action in the *phronimos* or wise person (*Nicomachean Ethics* 2009, VI.5). Practical wisdom or 'know-how,' the ability to properly measure what is required in any given situation, requires knowing when to act, and knowing when to act requires the inner balance not to be forced into acting too soon or too late. *Taijiquan* teaches this kind of timing—when to retreat, when to parry, etc.—as well as the balance to act on that knowledge, thereby reinforcing these qualities in one's moral life. These are the moral qualities of the sage who, like Confucius, acts in a measured way, according to the mean, in all circumstances. And, so, as Cheng writes, 'With his sage's centrality, Confucius could properly gauge all things' (Cheng 1995, 57).

Conclusion

Given the growing popularity of *taijiquan* in the West, the proper understanding of the higher purposes of this art renders it an ideal vehicle, as Cheng Man-ch'ing had hoped, for the transmission of the values of the Neo-Confucian moral tradition. As a 'moving meditation,' *taijiquan* is potentially more effective for practical affairs than even yoga or 'quiet sitting' in that it teaches us to carry our relaxed attentiveness into all we do. While yoga and seated meditation practices also emphasize the need to maintain relaxed attentiveness at all times, in the case of *taijiquan*, this attentiveness is nurtured through an active movement that is itself relaxed and flowing.⁷ As such, we become disposed to maintain it while walking or eating, etc., but especially while interacting with others. As Wolfe Lowenthal notes, 'Of all the Five Excellences, Professor said that if he had to choose one, it would be Tai Chi Chuan, "because of the way Tai Chi allows you to interact with people"' (Lowenthal 1991, 43). So, if we can maintain our *dantian* awareness, then in each action we perform we are practicing *taijiquan*; and in doing so, ideally, we become quietly present to all that surrounds us, establishing in us the disposition to respond appropriately to the situation at hand. In his discussion on the Confucian care for the everyday, Ivanhoe reminds us that Wang Yangming taught that 'one must, at all times, be like a cat

catching mice—with eyes intently watching and ears intently listening’ (Ivanhoe 2013, 77). The *Tai Chi Classics* exhorts us to ‘walk like a cat’ (Davis 2004, 139) thereby reinforcing this point.

In the preface to his *Thirteen Chapters on T'ai Chi Chuan*, Cheng gives expression to his hope that through his teaching of *taijiquan* he will be able ‘to express Confucius’s capacity for empathy in order for brotherhood to fill the entire world’ (Cheng 1982: preface). Indeed, it was Cheng Man-ch’ing’s view that the relaxed attentiveness that comes from the practice of *taijiquan* not only brings about peace and unity within oneself but enhances one’s ability to be morally attentive to others, and, consequently, to help bring about peace and unity in the world. It is worth noting that the final move of Cheng’s version of the *taijiquan* form is called ‘entering the *dao*,’ a fitting description of that ultimate peace that Neo-Confucians believe is achieved through oneness with all things. In true Neo-Confucian fashion, *taijiquan* aims to fulfill Wang Yangming’s teaching that, ‘The humane person forms one body with Heaven-and-earth and all things’ (quoted in De Bary 1970, 14). There should be no doubt that this was Cheng Man-ch’ing’s ardent hope for the art he helped transmit to the world.⁸

Notes

1. I have decided to use the Wade-Giles version of transliteration of Chinese characters rather than pinyin for Cheng Man-ch’ing’s name since this is the way his name was transliterated during his lifetime, the way his name appears on the many books he authored, and the way he was known, and is still known, by students of *taijiquan* in the West. I have also retained the Wade-Giles transliteration of Confucius and Mencius since this how the names appear in the many references to them in translations of Cheng’s writings.
2. Much of what follows is based on the memorial book for Cheng written by his longtime assistant and translator, Gibbs (1978) as well as the ‘Biographical Notes’ in Wile (2007).
3. See Davis (2004, 2–23) for a more likely account of the origins of *taijiquan*.
4. For a helpful introduction to the different schools of Neo-Confucianism, see Angle and Tiwald (2017).
5. One reason for morning and evening practice no doubt has to do with the importance of morning *qi* and evening *qi* for its purity and calming effects, as Mencius noted in the Ox Mountain parable (6A8).
6. It should be noted here that it is not the external straightness of the physical posture that supports the moral disposition, and so persons with disabilities who are unable to stand straight are not morally disadvantaged. Rather, it is the performative aspect or internal sense of straightness within the body that manifests the embodiment of the moral quality of straightness. In fact, one finds in Zhuangzi’s many accounts of persons with disabilities as moral exemplars a good counterpoint within the Chinese philosophical tradition to the kind of ‘ableism’ that might otherwise arise. See, especially, the *Inner Chapters*, chapter 5. (I owe this point to an anonymous reviewer of this journal).
7. I also owe this point to an anonymous reviewer.
8. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 23rd Annual ASIANetwork Conference, ‘Asia: Body and Spirit,’ Saint Louis, MO, 11 April 2015. I would like to express my thanks to an anonymous reviewer of this version of the paper for the very helpful comments.

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