

武术

wǔ shù

(Martial) (Art)

(From the Teaching of Sifu Ven. Lama Dondrup Dorje Rinpoche)

Wushu means “martial art”; the word “martial” normally takes us back to Mars. In the Olympus of ancient Rome, Mars was the God of fertility and agriculture and spring, protector and thus warrior; only later (1st century B.C.) he was associated with Ares, the god of war in Hellenistic culture, therefore linking the meaning of the term “martial” to the idea of conflict between men, the way it has always been interpreted since.

The same happened for the word *Wushu*.

The word *Wushu* appears for the first time in the text “*Zhaoming taizi wenxuan* - collected writings of the illustrious legitimate heir”, compiled by Xiao Tong (501-531), man of letters, eldest son of Emperor *Wudi* of the south *Liang* dynasty.

In modern times (1926) it was rediscovered and adopted in Popular China as a unique term to define Chinese martial arts as a whole, unlike previous definitions, such as *Gōng Fū* 功夫, which anyway means literally “hard work” and therefore is not strictly related to martial arts or fighting.

The word *Wushu* gathers then all sorts of Chinese martial or combat arts, who were later differentiated in external and internal. This division, slightly arbitrary, is clearly related to historical and cultural upheavals that occurred in China, especially with the advent of firearms. Most of these arts were later downgraded: the most dynamic of them have been relegated in the field of sports, while the ones characterized by slow and soft movements, as was the case with *Taijiquan*, have been “promoted” to therapeutic aids, and imitation styles became merely demonstrative. With the opening of China to the West, particularly in the 80s, there was a significant influx of students, which led to the rediscovery of these disciplines, focusing on their link with tradition and its deep cultural backgrounds, rather than on their choreographic or competitive aspects.

As a consequence, the arts were separated not only in internal and external, but also in classical and modern styles.

Modern times inevitably brought a mechanistic view of art (the same applies for traditional Chinese medicine) and a mechanistic text interpretation as well.

Let’s consider the word 太极拳 *Tài Jí Quán*. If we read it in the western way, left to right, its literal translation is “the fist”, namely *Tài Jí* boxing, which reads also “boxing of the supreme center”.

The meaning of “fighting”, “conflict”, is found to be prevailing, much like in the word “martial”. Now, if we arrange the ideograms vertically, as used to be in China when these arts were propagated, the semantics change considerably

太 极 拳

From a mechanistic standpoint, the interpretation remains “boxing of the supreme center”; however, taking into account the energetic aspect, namely that of movement, of the growth one can achieve by practicing a discipline, we can discover an amazing intrinsic meaning, as noted by Claudio Mallegni in his physiotherapy master degree thesis at the University of Siena. (see “www.lairone-crtd.it/tesimallegni1.pdf”, pg. 30)

“TAI JI QUAN

Let’s explore in detail the ideograms we identify TJQ with.

Tai: It means maximum, supreme, the highest.

Ji o Chi: polarity, aspect, level.

This ideogram embodies the concept of “spontaneously becoming”, and can be likened to the occurrence of natural events, which are characterized by a rhythm, a flow; as an example, some authors express it with the idea of tidal waves: we can observe that it is a dynamic and harmonic concept. It represents the way in which two opposites can get in touch. In this respect, it’s interesting to note that this ideogram was used, in the popular Chinese tradition, to point at the North Star, which represents the pivot the sky revolves around.

Quan: it depicts a moving fist seen from the front, conveying also the idea of dynamicity, movement, intention, will, ability, assessment, measurement, action, achievement, practice, modulation; concepts that recall not only the practical function of the hand, but also its metaphysical meaning, the human ability to build relationships. This ideogram represents then man’s ability to interact and create, so it specifies the way of knowledge.

Clearly it’s quite hard to find an unique meaning, a straight translation; certainly we must factor the possibility of incorrect interpretations, but probably what comes closest to the concept expressed in TJQ might be:

“Supreme way to connect the opposites by means of movement” or “Supreme way of movement”.

Given this already comprehensive interpretation, we could add, looking at the **Qi** ideogram, that the refinement of vital energy is a movement from the bottom to the top, as shown by the relevant Chinese ideogram 气, which in the modern form represents steam coming out from a pot, and was in the past

integrated with the ideogram of “rice”, *mǐ*



which certainly brings added value to the meaning of the composite ideogram: in the pot full of boiling water which produces steam, there are rice grains, an essential nutrient for man.

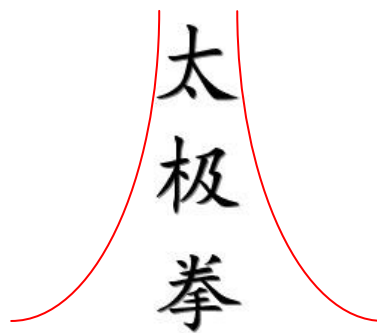
So, through water in a closed container, and fire, not directly shown but alluded to by the steam it causes, rice can be cooked then transmuted in energy to feed the body, to maintain and nurture it. Steam is the representation of the energetic movement going to the top, which can lift the pot's lid. In internal alchemy this process is called refining *Jīng* 精 to *Qì*: the abdomen is the container, where the bottom fire is found, in 神 which *Jīng*, refined, becomes *Qì*; then it rises through the central channel to morph into 神 *Shén*.

Water and fire, crucial elements for organic life, are used by skillful human activities which, by cooking the product of land, produce nourishing meals: it's this capability that distinguishes our species from the rest of the animal world.

Hence we can hold that, when talking about *Qì* in its energetic aspect, we do not refer merely to steam escaping from a pot with boiling water inside, as well as when talking about *Quán*, in the *Tài Jí Quán* expression, we should not read merely the idea of boxing, of conflict (even if supported by *Tài Jí*), as unfortunately have suggested many widespread ideologies, where speculative interpretations twisted a message of peace in an excuse to endorse "holy wars".

If we understand the expression *Tài Jí Quán*, taking into account the considerations about the energetic movement which points out to growth from earth to heaven, we can try this interpretation:

The ability of man to interact with others and create "*Quán*", is the way of knowledge, which can make him stand above the rest of living beings, combining "*Jí*", its earthly and animal origin, to its spiritual essence, represented by the supreme center "*Tài*".

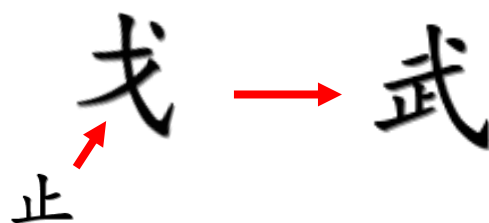


Let's go back to the term *Wushu*, and analyze the ideograms it is comprised of

the composite ideogram *Wǔ* 武 contains two ideograms: *gē*, 止 meaning "to hamper, to stop",

and *zhǐ*, 戈 meaning "halberd", a war instrument.

put together this way:



so, the ideogram *Wǔ* takes the meaning of "stopping the halberd".

As we can see, it is a very different meaning from the idea of war, conflict and competition; it does not evoke the art of warring, but the art of avoiding war, of overcoming conflict. The conclusion we can pull out from the classical Chinese text "The Art of War" by Sun Tzu is: the best warrior is he who wins without fighting.

Now, this reminds us of our Christian culture, based upon the New Testament, where the ancient biblical saying “eye for eye, tooth for tooth”, is replaced by the teaching “to present the other cheek”, as striking with sword leads to dying by sword. These words are very beautiful and full of meaning, but still just words, that few people have been able to understand and put into practice.

Classical internal Chinese martial arts, as the expression *Wǔ Shù* shows, are not very distant from the principle of being able to present the other cheek instead of striking by the sword; moreover, they can offer tools so that this precept does not remain only an ideal but can become life practice.

This tool is the *Tuī Shǒu* 推手; it has a fundamental importance in the practice of *Tai Ji Quán*, but also in other disciplines, such as *Bā Guà Zhǎng* 八卦掌, *Xíng Yì Quán* 形意拳, *Yì Quán* 意拳, all of them internal arts par excellence, and it can be identified also in the *Chǐ Shǒu* 黏手 of *Yǒng Chūn Quán* 永春拳 (Wing Tsun), a key practice known in English as “sticking hands” (in Italian it can be translated as “mani appiccicose, incollate”).

The *Yǒng Chūn Quán*, best known as *Wing Tsun*, is the style practiced by Bruce Lee, who deserves credit for spreading Chinese *Gong Fu* in the west.

Unfortunately what took root in the west is only the most primitive facet of *Gong Fu*, that of competition and physical violence; the spiritual aspects of this discipline have always been neglected or ignored, resulting in the reprehensible boosting of arrogance and ambition through the willingness to excel in fighting.

The classical tradition of these disciplines had a wholly different aspiration. The practice of *Tuī Shǒu* or *Chǐ Shǒu* itself, was not conceived as an occasion of competition, but as a means for listening: listening to the movements and the nature, listening to the other; much in the same way, in the solo practice the exercise is to listen and discover our own body, his structure, his capability of movement and above all his limits, to learn how not to injure oneself while moving.

In *Tuī Shǒu* and *Chǐ Shǒu* the principle is exactly the same: to see the other not as an enemy or opponent, but as a part of oneself, an essential element for survival, much like any other limb of the body.

Classics say: *feel, join, follow*; this advice holds both in solo and twin practice.

These are the same principles which made possible the evolution of communication and relationship science.

This is the essence of Chinese martial arts, of *Wǔ Shù* and *Gōng Fū*: to learn the art of winning without fighting.

To do so, it is not enough to learn movements and special techniques, but it is crucial to work deeply on oneself, on our emotions, our fears, our desire to revenge, our anger. Otherwise, it all comes down to wanting to vault over a pole, placed higher and higher, until we fall. Only when, defeated by the limits in which the world of form and matter relegates us, we are forced to seek different means than muscular force and competition, have we the possibility to access new dimensions of knowledge; only by accepting the defeat of what belongs to matter, to ambition, to the ego, can we turn this defeat in a great and eternal victory.

The body, being material, has boundaries. Mind and spirit have none.

Maurizio Gandini

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