

Taoist Tai-Chi: An Intersection of Western Spiritual Culture and Chinese Religion

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Abstract

This research paper explores and analyzes the relationship the Taoist Tai-Chi Society and the Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism shares with contemporary spirituality in the Western context. Academic typologies regarding contemporary spiritualities from notable authors Jeremy Carrette, Richard King, Paul Heelas, and Linda Woodhead are utilized as evaluative frameworks for addressing the TTCS and Fung Loy Kok. This reveals while these theories are adequate for understanding the organization's relationship with the economy and spiritual marketplace of the West, they do not fully account for the importance of the organizations' as a medium of cultural exchange with Chinese spirituality and religion. As an alternative, this paper concludes that Taoist Tai-Chi and Fung Loy Kok and the relationship it shares with Western contemporary spirituality can be understood as a post-Oriental dialogue between cultures, characterized by the creation of a hybrid religious practice.

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Introduction

New Age religion, private spirituality, and holistic practices have become commonplace within the spiritual ethos of the West, leading scholarship to question and explain the underlying reasons for the growth in spiritual culture.¹ This trend is indicative of a greater cultural shift towards “self-realization, persona

religious connections for its primarily Western practitioners through the use of Chinese philosophy and practices. Specifically, the Taoist Tai-Chi Society (TTCS) and the more religiously-rooted wing of the organization, the Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism (FLK), are an international organization active in 26 countries. It offers a unique brand of *taijiquan* called Taoist Tai-Chi Moving Meditation®, which was created by their founder Moy Lin Shin who is credited with popularizing tai-chi within the West. FLK was originally founded in Hong Kong in 1968 and began to spread in the West during the 70s through the private teachings of Moy. The organization was not officially institutionalized until 1981 with the opening of their first temple in Toronto, Ontario. Subsequently, temples have been opened internationally including the Orangeville International Centre, which acts as the headquarters and training retreat for the organization. The Orangeville International Center will be an integral part of this observational research.³

This institute is particularly relevant in understanding the relationship Chinese spirituality shares with the West as it is open to any individuals interested in attempting Taoist Tai-Chi but also has roots and foundations in traditional Daoist teachings and internal alchemy as well, offering religious components that “

coupled with the availability of research material, the organization can be an opportunity for analyzing a potential methodology in which Chinese spirituality is navigated and promulgated within the context of Western society.

Thus, this study intends to understand the importance of contemporary Chinese spirituality in the West through the case study of TTCS/FLK. It does so first by outlining key scholarly theories regarding the relationship between contemporary spirituality within the Western context, focusing onundersta

and individualism has transformed contemporary spiritual practices to be marketed and sold as a product within a wider consumer culture which has become concerned with crafting individual identities through the individual's participation in said spiritual marketplace. These theories will be contrasted with the writings of Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (*Spiritualities of Life, The Spiritual Revolution*), who conceptualize contemporary spirituality as contributing to a cultural holistic milieu wherein individuals who seek subjective wellness participate within spiritual communities that create a humanistic ethic. These theories will be the focus of study as they offer different lenses regarding the cultural importance of contemporary spirituality which will then be utilized as effective frameworks for understanding TTCS/FLK.

The second section of this study will consequently analyze the advertisement model, organization, and role of TTCS/FLK as a contemporary spiritual organization with the objective of evaluating the relevancy of the above theories when applied to this specific context. It will be argued that FLK in particular is a unique and pragmatic organization that, while utilizing the language of capitalism and popular health culture to mau Ý h ' a M

and that of the West within chapter three. This argument relies on understanding Taoist Tai-Chi as a “point of contact” between Western ideals of health and fitness and a deeper history of Chinese self-cultivation, internal alchemy, and Daoist philosophy. Furthermore, it will be evidenced that FLK represents a hybrid organization of Western and Chinese culture as it offers participants the chance to identify with a form of Daoist identity rooted in Chinese spirituality, but it also operates within the language and cultural norms of the West, including an ethos of individuality, capitalism, and globalization.

Thus, it will be concluded that FLK is an

Chapter One

Understanding Western Contemporary Spirituality

Introduction

Modern academic writing positions the study of contemporary spirituality as the result of the late 1980s rise of seminar spirituality and subjective-wellness following a longer evolution of individualism. This framework situates new-age spirituality as inherently related to business and economics as opposed to the spirituality of the 1960's which was counter-cultural and an expression of freedom. Paul Heelas refers to this paradigm shift in contemporary spirituality as *seminar spirituality*, characterised by spirituality being shifted away from “truths of subjective experience as their primary source of positive experience,” to an internalized spirituality that is characterized as the conflict between one's ego and ‘higher self’ rather than paying attention to socioeconomic roles that was characteristic of the previous decades.⁵ Essentially, this form of spirituality is better understood as being rooted in modern psychology wherein spiritual practices, rather than being perceived as transcendent in an ethereal or reality challenging sense, are a method towards the “deconditioning” of the mind and body which individuals accomplished through professional seminars. Heelas describes this trend as being a result of “ex-counter-culturists who have entered the mainstream as young professionals...[thus] it can hardly be doubted that numbers of the more individualistic, the more self-centered came to appreciate

relation to identity.”⁹ This theory of spirituality places individual choice as an ultimate illusion, wherein subjective individualism is crafted and molded by elites within the business and marketing sphere, taking advantage of a cultural niche that has grown in popularity since the 1980s. Leading economic analysis points to “post-Fordism,” referring to the post-war explosion of branding and mass consumption, as the historical link between consumer culture and society, claiming with the dematerialization of goods (referring to “concepts” such as religion, spirituality, and wellness are being presented as a commodity), communication networks begin to arbitrate social power, highlighting the ideological nature of neoliberalism as opposed to typical market capitalism.¹⁰ Essentially, the move towards neoliberalism from traditional market

Business-Ethics/Reformist Spiritualities: Characterized as movements that lend primacy to the pursuit of profit as a life-affirming goal but do so as constrained by ethical principles derived from religious or spiritual conceptions.

Individualistic/Consumerist Spiritualities: Also known as “prosperity religion,” which are religious movements that embrace capitalism and individuality and transfer these values into their spirituality.

Capitalist Spirituality: The use of spiritual and religious symbols to facilitate profit and corporate endeavours.

The above typology of contemporary spirituality assumes an observable level of neoliberal/capitalist ideology,¹³ ultimately informing how North American and capitalist society integrates inner-spirituality into its cultural framework. This notion is based on the concept of neoliberalism as a Western ideology wherein consumption and consumerism has influence on all aspects of social and cultural life (in this case spirituality) to the point where dominant values (including wellbeing, hedonism, happiness, personal satisfaction, choice, sovereignty, etc.) are actualised through material circumstances which individuals use to form their identity.¹⁴ Within this ideology, spirituality functions as a brand that individuals use to present certain aspects and values of their persona to society. Mike Featherstone succinctly describes this relationship as “transvaluation” between activity and marketing forces wherein activities are sold as the “embodiment” of values where running and yoga are no longer simply activities but a medium that creates a personal identity representing (in the case of inner-spirituality practices such as yoga and Tai-Chi) harmony, sensuous experience, naturalness, etc.¹⁵ Thus, brands such as Lululemon are not simply sellers of yoga-accessories but provides a means through which individuals create their self-identity through the association of these brands with spiritual-wellness, naturalness, and health. Heelas and Woodhead define this as “subjective wellbeing

¹³ While the *Revolutionary/Anti-Capitalist Spiritualities* reject this ideology, this typology is still based on the acceptance of the primacy of said ideology. Thus, capitalism/neoliberal ideology ultimately informs how these spiritualities present themselves and operate relative to capitalism.

¹⁴ *Religion in consumer society*, 3.

¹⁵ Featherstone, Mike. “The body in consumer culture”, in M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth, and B.S. Turner (eds), *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, London: Sage. 1991. 185.

culture” wherein consumer culture and branding emphasises not the utility of a product but rather the experiential benefits, focusing on the value of personal uniqueness and “feeling good about oneself.”¹⁶

“engaged spirituality grounded in an awareness of our mutual interdependence, the need for social justice and economically sustainable lifestyles,” which, according to Carrette and King, may dismantle and resist the pervasive nature of neoliberalism.¹⁹ While the above notion of contemporary spirituality calls for almost a form of spiritual activism, other contemporary scholars, while accepting the notion that the economy and market are central to understanding contemporary spirituality, argue that spirituality is already contributing to a form of subjective and cultural wellness through the cultivation of humanistic ethics.

Subjective Wellness and Ethics

Paul Heelas in *Spiritualities of Life* challenges the notion of contemporary spirituality being primarily concerned with consumption by noting that characterizing spirituality with the language of consumption does not necessarily strip value away from the act. Rather, the focus on consumptive language only serves to guide scholarship away from other aspects of spirituality.²⁰ Instead, this school of literature focuses on the subjective nature of contemporary spirituality in order to discern if and how spirituality promotes inward growth that is then reflected by the practitioner outwardly into wider society and culture, potentially encouraging social and cultural transformation *away* from what can be described as over-consumption and capitalism.

At the heart of this argument is the idea that contemporary spirituality is largely defined and interpreted by the practitioners themselves regardless of the profit motive pursued by outside marketing and consumer forces. Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas succinctly describe this occurrence through the “subjectivization thesis.” Building upon the modern notion of individualization, the subjectivization thesis is a Taylorian notion of culture that Heelas and

¹⁹ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*. 182.

²⁰ Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*. 110.

Woodhead conceptualize as shift from individuals characterizing their life in relation to “object” obligations and life (such as monetary gain) towards “life lived by reference to one’s own subjective experiences,” experiences which are both relational and individualistic in nature.²¹ Within this cultural shift, people define themselves not in terms of an outside established order but rather through an understanding of their “inner self” which is pursued through action (and thought) that encourages a notion of personal/inner transcendence. The above scholars subsequently characterize the culture of subjective-ness as being concerned with “states of consciousness, states of mind, memories, emotions, passions, sensations, bodily experiences, dreams, feelings, inner conscience, and sentiments.”²² This body of literature contrasts with the writings of authors such as Carrette and King who are primarily concerned with the interaction between authoritative institutions (marketing, branding, and consumption) and the ethos of contemporary spirituality. Rather than claiming that participants in contemporary spirituality are simply being “thought controlled” (using the language of Carrette and King)²³, Heelas and Woodhead view forms of contemporary spirituality as a means of moving beyond transvaluation and the subjective wellbeing culture discussed in the subsequent section into the “holistic milieu,” which is characterized as individuals seeking to better their subjective wellness not by engaging with consumption and products but rather by engaging in a larger community of like-minded individuals.²⁴ The notion of holistic milieu being transformative lies in an understanding of how spiritual activities generally take place. Specifically, relationality is key in contemporary spirituality. This includes the relation that the parti

which literally nothing was important but self-fulfilment.”²⁶ Heelas contends that while in some cases (perhaps the more “consumer-

humanistic ethic, regardless of the consumer-driven nature of contemporary capitalism. This notion may appear overly idealistic to those that argue for the authoritative ideology of neoliberal capitalism on the realm of religion/spirituality. However, Heelas argues that the individualistic

conception of a spiritual ethic and holistic milieu. The importance of this

Introduction

As the frameworks of Carrette and King, and Heelas and Woodhead have been outlined, this section intends to apply their writing and theories to the organization and management of Fung Loy Kok. The objective is to evaluate these theories in regards to creating a thorough understanding of Fung Loy Kok in the context of contemporary spirituality and the culture they operate within. Specifically, Carrette and King's notions of consumerism will be applied to the marketing and "brand core concept" of FLK to potentially discern the interaction between the organization and consumer culture. Subsequently, Fung Loy Kok will be approached as existing within a holistic milieu as argued by Woodhead and Heelas, focusing on how the practice of Moy Lin Shin's tai-chi relates to the understanding of spirituality as a route to social transformation. The limits of the above theories will also be explored, prompting the need for Fung Loy Kok to not be analyzed solely as an institution of contemporary spirituality but rather one that is rooted in Chinese culture and history which is operating within the wider culture of Western modernity.

The Western Appropriation of Daoism

According to Carrette and King in *Selling Spirituality*, modern new-age and spiritual movements are marked and characterized as borrowing or appropriating motifs and ideas from Asian traditions, privatizing them to cater to notions of individuality and Western modernity. Specifically, the authors suggest that the appropriation of Asian traditions by Western culture leads to a "flattening out" of those traditions, and to "the ultimate in the commodification of other people's cultures available for selective appropriation, repackaging and selling." In the case of Stephen Russell, author of multiple holistic self-help books and owner/operator of *Barefoot Doctor*, a UK based health therapy shop Russell "even justifies such cultural appropriation on

the grounds that he has paid good money to ‘purchase’ such cultural rights by studying them.”³¹ Thus the question arises, is Fung Loy Kok/TTCS part of this pick and choose notion of spirituality? Arguably, based on the unique history of the organization coupled with the Chinese religious dimension of the organization, this theory is inadequate for understanding Fung Loy Kok/TTCS.

Fung Loy Kok/TTCS notably occupies a space within Western culture not only as an institution of tai-chi and spirituality but of a cultural exchange between China and the West. Specifically, Moy Lin Shin founded the TTCS and specifically Fung Loy Kok as an extension of Hong Kong Quanzhen Daoism which can be considered “ethnic” Chinese Daoism.³² Moy Lin Shin believed in propagating and spreading this form of Daoism (alongside elements of Confucianism and Buddhism) through his brand and practice of tai chi which he claims draws upon influences from Zhang Sanfeng, a mythical Daoist monk, and the Yijing, a philosophical text part of the Confucian canon.³³ On an ethical level, the TTCS and Fung Loy Kok adhere to and teach the *Eight Virtues* sourced from Sage Emperor Guan’s *Book of Enlightenment*. The virtues of filial piety, sibling harmony, dedication, trustworthiness, propriety, sacrifice, and sense of shame are the foundation of their volunteerism model.³⁴ This model is referred to by Moy as “Cultivating Health Through Virtue,” channeling traditional Chinese thought on the link between virtues and internal organs/health, stating how “improving your Tai Chi and improving your health doesn’t just involve doing Don-yus and Tor-yus. You have to cultivate your virtue in your everyday life before you can really be considered to be cultivating your internals.”³⁵ This

³¹ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*. 89-90.

³² Siegler, Elijah. *The Dao of America: The History and Practice of American Daoism*. University of California

traditionally Chinese form of tai-chi and self-cultivation points away from Carrette/King's notion of a "flattening out" of Eastern philosophy and instead suggests that Fung Loy Kok/TTCL is propagating traditional notions of Chinese philosophy/culture.

Furthermore, these values and ideals are reflected in the construction and the physical space of the Orangeville International Centre. The centre, in addition to space dedicated to tai-chi and various other Taoist activities, contains numerous buildings and shrines dedicated to Chinese religious functions, such as weddings and funerals. The Fung Loy Kok Three Religions Temple honour the deities Wong Tai Sin, Lü Dongbin, Confucius, Laozi, Avalokite vara, and Lin Moniang, with publications of the *Goon Yam Gau Foo Ging*, *Daai Bei Jau*, *The Great Learning*, *The Heart Sutra of the Perfection of Wisdom*, and *The Scripture of Clarity and Wisdom* available to visitors. Alongside the Three Religions Temple the Orangeville grounds include a Hall of Original Constellations, Columbarium and cemetery, and the original temple (The Early Temple) which now acts as both a temple and a memorial to Moy Lin Shin.³⁶ Regular rituals take place within these installations, typically led by a visiting Daoist monk. Furthermore, the Chinese cultural elements and religious aspects of Fung Loy Kok are a direct result of the history and beliefs of Moy Lin Shin who is (according to members of the organization) an ordained Daoist monk, who likely made the transition to becoming a monk during his education in Hong Kong.³⁷ Specifically, Moy is referred to as a "Taoist missionary" by members of Fung Loy Kok.³⁸

Thus, it is apparent that Fung Loy Kok and TTCS as a "flattened" out adaption of Asian spirituality/culture is a superficial analysis given the Chinese roots of the organization coupled with the multi-faceted elements of the Orangeville International Centre, which includes both the physical and fitness aspects of tai-chi as well as the religious functionality of the institution

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Sieglar, *The Dao of America*. 203.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

which offers traditional Chinese rites that deal with the marking of all phases of life. These observations therefore demonstrate the limits of Carrette and King's theories regarding Chinese spirituality being appropriated by Western market forces.

Limits of the Language of Consumption

Additionally, the economic-centric models of contemporary spirituality forwarded by Carrette and King are inapplicable to the organization of TTCS and Fung Loy Kok. Specifically, while Fung Loy Kok/TTCS is a non-profit organization and donation-based, they still have a notably active advertising and web presence in order to facilitate public knowledge regarding their organization. Their website also allows the centre to present their aims and objectives to the general populace. Given the nature of contemporary spirituality as being, according to the prominent theories explored in the previous chapter, directly related to varying degrees of consumer culture, analyzing how Fung Loy Kok brands and advertises their unique form of Daoism and tai-chi ("Taoist Tai-Chi") assists in understanding how their organizations propagates their values in a Western context. This analysis hinges on the assumption that on different levels, modern contemporary spirituality operates as a brand or business in the sense that it presents itself to the mainstream public through mediatisation (such as websites, print advertisements, etc.) and seeks to garner followers/believers (capital) in order to continue functioning within society.

Arguably, a salient method of understanding Fung Loy Kok in relation to contemporary spirituality or other tai-

for-profit studios regardless of the fact, the organization is rooted in historically Chinese Taoist/religious practices propagated by the teachings of Moy Lin Shin, lies in the concept of “healthism,” which is defined as “the pursuit of being healthy, [and illustrating] the impact of health promotion in the defining of moral values. Health promotion strategies provide social agents with information regarding what constitutes healthy behaviour.”⁴⁴ Healthism is a core component of modern consumer culture and is one of the contributing factors in the growth of new-age religion and contemporary spirituality, evidenced by the popularity of practices such as yoga, meditation, tai-chi, and other activities that Heelas and Woodhead refer to as being part of subjective wellbeing culture.⁴⁵ The important observation to be made in relation to understanding Fung Loy Kok and the Taoist Tai Chi Society is how the prevalence of consumer culture and branding trends influence how new age religions/spirituality present themselves to the public, regardless of the historical and cultural roots of the practice, thus fitting into the mold of the overall culture of healthism and fitness.

In addition to considering the focus placed on “healthism,” a potential explanation for appealing to a “brand core concept” of fitness and physicality may lie in a general hesitancy in the Western context to regard all things labelled or presented as religious with an eye of scrutiny. Heelas and Woodhead also explore this notion, arguing that through their study of Kendal “religious capital,” both in terms of membership and cultural importance, there is a favour towards “cultural renderings of holistic themes” and the emergence of “spiritual capital,” including language/imagery associated with nature, inwards-looking thought, and holistic terminology.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Shaw, Ian, and Alan Aldridge. "Consumerism, Health and Social Order." *Social Policy & Society* 2, no. 1 (2003).41.

⁴⁵ Heelas, Paul, and Linda Woodhead. *The Spiritual Revolution*. 83.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 134.

This is certainly observable in the advertising methods of Fung Loy Kok, who regularly utilize holistic language that emphasises the importance of the mind/body rather than other

wellbeing, Fung Loy Kok and the TTCS occupy a place within society in which they provide a method of cultivating “inner life,” assisting in explaining the success and spread of these two organizations in the last three decades. Furthermore, one of the characteristics of the holistic milieu, a subsection of subjective wellbeing culture which focuses on spirituality, is the inclination to favour person-to-person relational teaching and sharing of experiences of spirituality.⁵¹ Considering this characterization, Fung Loy Kok could be regarded as being part of the Western holistic milieu given the community-based nature of Fung Loy Kok/TTCS which emphasises the teacher-student relation which was fundamental to the form of tai-chi taught by Moy Lin Shin. This is further reflected in how Fung Loy Kok organizes their institution which is primarily through offering “healing retreats” to their Orangeville Quiet Cultivation Centre and organizing public demonstrations of the practice of tai-chi in locations like Dundas Square, Toronto.

Accepting that Fung Loy Kok to a certain degree occupies a position within the holistic milieu of Western society, the theories of Woodhead and Heelas assist in explaining the advertising and branding methods of the organization discussed in the previous section.

Specifically, surveys done for The Kendal Project suggest that the two most common reasons that individuals enter organizations within the holistic milieu is firstly due to previous contact with the activities which were originally undertaken to improve health and fitness (23.3%) and secondly due to individuals looking for spiritual growth (19.4%).⁵² Essentially, The Kendal

Project suggests that the overall subjective culture of Western society facilitates individuals eventually improve health and fitness (23.3%) and secondly due to individuals looking for spiritual growth (19.4%).⁵² Essentially, The Kendal

components, creating a more thorough and complete experience of self-cultivation that leaves the individual practitioner with ideally a greater sense of fulfilment in both physical and emotional aspects. This analysis of branding and advertising sugg

One of the primary assertions argued by Heelas is that subjective wellness and contemporary spiritual practices have the potential to be inherently transformative in nature rather than purely consumptive.⁵⁴ By moving away from the language of consumption and towards that of transformation in the study of Fung Loy Kok provides evidence for this paradigm

objectives of Fung Loy Kok, this element of ecological and social responsibility points to the notion of “horizons” discussed previous in Chapter One. According to the theory of Heelas, the significance of Taylorian “horizons” is the idea of participants of spiritual activities, through an internalization of said practices, and discipline to the activity, leave the realm of objective pleasures (consumption of purchasable goods, for example) to that of the subjective pleasure gained from the relationship the practioner shares with the outside world.⁵⁷ This conception seems relevant in the analysis of Fung Loy Kok given how numerous volunteers dedicate their time beyond the performance of tai-chi and engage in activities aimed at improving the organization by engaging in the social and ecological pursuits listed above rather than doing so through the typical for-profit model of expansion through generated wealth.

At the core of this idea is, in an addition to the downplaying of “consumptive language,” the “authority of practices” that Heelas adapts from Alasdair MacIntyre, which essentially outlines that activity, in this case tai-chi:

Are MacIntyrian ‘practices.’ Internal *goods* are in evidence, for example, spiritually informed health. Internal goods are *realized* by way of appropriate activity which in turn develops virtues. And human conceptions of ends and goods are systemically extended – for example by being inspired by new horizons of experiential-cum-existential significance to come to experience what it is to be ‘truly’ wise in one’s relationship.⁵⁸

The growth of these virtues stems from the cooperative nature of holistic spirituality and the ability for these practices, when engaged within a community setting, to foster a level of identity revolved around self-betterment.⁵⁹ In regard to the TTCS and Fung Loy Kok, this likely occurs due to the community-based perspective of Moy Lin Shin who focused on propriety or “public relations” as an element of his tai-chi, claiming it is possible to train “all the five viscera

⁵⁷ Heelas, Paul, *Spiritualities of Life*. 121.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 124.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 124-125.

in [the] body” by talking to people.⁶⁰ While this analysis does not extend the scope of these “virtues” outside of the operation and management of Fung Loy Kok, as such a study which require research regarding the activity of Fung Loy Kok members outside of the organization itself, the above endeavours of Fung Loy Kok on ecological and social grounds does lend credit to the framework set forth by Heelas. Furthermore, given the nature of organizations such as *QiBelly* which, do not appear to be actively engaged in such social and ecological pursuits, suggests that this characterization does not extend to tai-chi organizations in general but rather ones that could be described as being part of the holistic milieu.

Thus, the frameworks and theories authored by Woodhead and Heelas, when applied to the organization and philosophy of TTCS/FLK, suggests that it is possible to understand the organization not simply as a physical activity grounded in religious/spiritual history but rather one that operates within the cultural holistic milieu of the West. The nature of organizations which are part of said holistic milieu, according to Woodhead and Heelas, engage in culturally transformative endeavours through adherence to spiritual conceptions, which, in the case of Fung Loy Kok, is the form of Daoism propagated by Moy.

Conclusion

In summation, how are we to understand this pragmatic institution which is grounded in Chinese heritage and culture, while advertising and operating within the framework of Western capitalism/consumer culture? According to an evaluation of the above theories, Fung Loy Kok could be potentially characterized as an organization that operates within a society and culture marked by language and consumption while simultaneously being part of a cultural holistic

⁶⁰ Fung Loy Kok Taoism. *10th Anniversary of the Health Recovery Program Pamphlet*. 2007.

milieu which seeks to challenge the nature of consumptive practices by transforming individuals engaged in Taoist Tai-Chi to be aware of the relationship they share with their broader environment. However, the above theories, while useful for conceptualizing Fung Loy Kok in

Chapter Three

Towards a Post-Orientalist and Hybrid Understanding of Taoist Tai-Chi

Introduction

Understanding Fung Loy Kok through the framework of the holistic milieu theorized by

holistic milieu in the sense that it is advertised as a place that offers health exercise with the possibility for religious development. On the surface, they offer a health and longevity practice that conforms to said holistic milieu, but it also offers members a deeper religious and spiritual connection with Daoism and Chinese religion, ultimately leading to the assertion that tai-

committed, and thus was an essential step towards producing a confession that would recover health.”⁶⁶ It is also important to note that these *qi* practices were not simply for the overall goal of health but were also intended to outline key social parameters of the time period through the self-cultivation of “virtues” through aspirations towards and eventual adherence to the qualities of “flexibility, softness, mobility as well as pervasiveness and penetrability.”⁶⁷ Thus, within this text, the clear historical and philosophical connections between the virtue-based moving meditation of tai-chi and Chinese spiritual and social history can be drawn wherein Daoist cultivation techniques served both spiritual and social purposes.

The origins of what is now called tai-chi is related to the legendary mythology of Zhang Sanfeng (approximately mid-13th century CE). Zhang is said to have been a master of sexual self-cultivation, meditation, wealth, and to have created *taijiquan* (“boxing of the supreme ultimate”) within the Wudang Mountains (now a UNESCO Heritage Site). His collection of texts found in the *Daozang jiyao* deals with numerous topics including martial arts and cultivation. Mythological tales depict his life as a traveling teacher; and following his transcendence into immortality, he was adopted into the *Quanzhen* pantheon of gods and is worshiped in the Baiyun guan Temple in Beijing.⁶⁸ This martial art form was also defensive in nature due to the fact that health and defense of the body, both from toxins and other human beings, were viewed as important steps in pursuing the path to harmony and inner meditation, which was part of the Daoist and Chinese culture of internal alchemy.⁶⁹ Zhang Sanfeng also serves a spiritual purpose at Fung Loy Kok’s Orangeville Centre, commemorated and honoured in their older temple facility alongside Moy Lin Shin.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 151.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 149.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 119.

⁶⁹ Clarke, J.J.. *The Tao of the West*. New York: Routledge, 2000. 137.

However, given that Zhang Sanfeng's history is one of mythology, a complete and more historical understanding of *taijiquan* understands the practice as being rooted in Daoist philosophy combined with healing gymnastics and martial arts that gained traction in the 17th century.⁷⁰ Specifically, the gymnastic elements of the practice combined managing *qi* flow in a similar manner to *qigong* with a philosophical understanding of the Great Ultimate (*taiji*), “a name for the universe at the time of creation, when yin and yang are present but not yet differentiated into the five phases. Its symbol is the commonly known yin-yang diagram.”⁷¹ This philosophy is rooted in understanding one's relationship with the primordial essence of the world. As Livia Kohn explains:

In concrete practice, this means that adepts identify the flow of the five phases in their bodies, then sublimate them into yin and yang and from there unify all into a flow of pure primordial *qi*. The philosophy of the Great Ultimate provides the rationale for Taiji quan as a moving meditation, whose ultimate goal is a return to the origins, accompanied by the creation of inner, cosmic harmony.⁷²

Thus, this philosophy combined with the martial element which arose from self-defence training of Chinese communities as well as a long history of lineage-based evolutions of the practice⁷³ presents *taijiquan* as a practice that originated fairly recently (17th century) but has rich philosophical roots found in Chinese spirituality and history

The form of tai-chi practices (“Taoist Tai Chi”) taught by TTCS/Fung Loy Kok and created by Moy is separate from the martial arts-based *taijiquan*, and instead strictly adheres to the notion that “The *Taoist Tai Chi*® arts are not to be practiced as a martial art technique or in a

competitive spirit, but rather as a means to cultivate every aspect of health.”⁷⁴ Moy’s school of tai-chi appears to be based on the Wu-Style of *taijiquan* and shares the same number of moves and certain characteristics. The absence of the martial arts element of Moy’s Taoist Tai Chi has led to individuals, such as the notable martial artist Ian Sinclair, criticising his set and claiming he appears to have no actual relation or lineage to the Wu-school. Specific complaints have been based around the stretching and twisting-based routines that can lead to potential physical issues, partially caused by the notably short period of time it takes one to be certified as an instructor in Moy’s move-set.⁷⁵ Perhaps the non-martial arts characteristics of Moy’s style, as well as the stretch-based approach, is the reason his organization is popular among seniors, giving them a health practice that is not as intense and likely to result in injury while still allowing them the opportunity for exercise and a spiritual experience. Thus, on the surface, Taoist Tai Chi can be characterized as being fairly meditative in nature, focusing on the inward components of the practice rather than the combative external elements, possibly suggesting that this practice shares more in common with textual Daoist philosophy rather than any lineage of *taijiquan*. However, information regarding the specific lineage of Moy is unclear but he claims to be a Daoist monk who was taught by “respected teachers” in China and Hong Kong about the non-violent aspects of tai-chi.⁷⁶

Here it can be seen that on the surface, there appears to be a tension between Taoist Tai-Chi, which is presented as being primarily health and fitness-based, and the more religious and spiritual components of the organization. The concept of the holistic milieu potentially explains this tension as being rooted in the idea of “horizons” discussed in the second chapter of this

⁷⁴ Fung Loy Kok Taoism. Our *Unique approach to tai chi*, <http://www.taoist.org/about-us/a>

study in which participants' interest in subjective wellbeing eventually evolves into an emergence into the holistic and spiritual area.

It is my assertion that this notion of a holistic milieu, while serving to describe the environment within which Fung Loy Kok and similar organizations are propagated, does not account for the fact that Chinese traditions, particularly Daoism, have a long-standing history of subjective wellness and inward practices which are rooted in spiritual ideas of internal alchemy. Based on this historical approach, tai-chi in the Western context is not adapted in such a way as to appear more secular in order to gain followers, but rather, the rise of the holistic milieu has allowed a practice, which has always been health-

contact in which they integrate members into the broader scope of the organization through initial contact with tai-chi, likening the tactic to that of the Scientologists who offer free personality tests.⁷⁸ Siegler essentially claims that Daoism within America is characterized by different organizations claiming some sort of “authenticity” in regard to what it means to be Daoist. The difficulty, of course, is deciding what constitutes spiritual authority. Siegler argues that there has been little momentum in understanding what exactly Daoist identity within America actually implies as many academics have the tendency to frame arguments regarding Daoism through a perspective of “authentic Daoism” versus “false Daoism,” a perspective that offers little regarding the nuances related to individuals who identify as Daoist within America.⁷⁹ There are certain individuals (such as Michael Saso, one of the few non-Chinese individuals to be formally ordained as a Daoist priest) who studies orthodox Daoism, that claims within orthodox Daoist sects the title “Daoist” is reserved for organizations that use registers (*lu*), including US organizations such as Da Yuen Circle (formerly Orthodox Daoism in America) and the Daoist Restoration Society.⁸⁰

Understanding the role of Fung Loy Kok in relation to other Daoist organizations is difficult. However, it is clear that the organization as well as members to a certain degree follow and adhere to Daoist teachings, making them at some level “Daoist.” While members of the above organizations would likely be in conflict with the idea, as Siegler’s work demonstrates, attempting to understand American Western Daoist identity is one of frustration and controversy but important as Daoist identity and the maintaining of such an identity is tied closely with a

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 207.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 256.

⁸⁰ Komjathy, Louis. "Tracing the Contours of Daoism in North America." *The Journal of Alternate and Emerging Religions* 8, no. 2 (2004).18 – 19

sense of legitimization.⁸¹ Therefore, I intend to focus the scope of this section on how participants of Taoist Tai-Chi within the framework of Fung Loy Kok encounter and interact with notions of Chinese spirituality, drawing observations regarding the legitimization of Daoist identity rather than focusing on any form of authenticity claim regarding the religious nature of FLK.

of body and mind.”⁸⁴ The organization claims that Moy Lin Shin had an active role in popularizing Daoism in the West by leading a delegation to attend the 1993 Parliament of World Religions conference in Chicago.⁸⁵ Given the international spread of the organization as well as the general popularity of tai-chi lends credit to this assertion as well as the existence of a Daoist identity shared by members of FLK.

Therefore, Fung Loy Kok represents what could be considered a hybrid organization of Western and Chinese traditions that are propagated through the spread of Taoist Tai-Chi and the formulation of a Daoist identity through adherence to some form of Daoist spirituality /religiosity. The unique brand of Daoism offered by the organization does seemingly share historic characteristics with the general spread of Daoism into North America, spread by a charismatic missionary figure or teachers who placed an emphasis on lineage. Furthermore, the organization shares characteristics with what Livia Kohn describes as the self-cultivation school of Daoism in the United States, characterised by “groups that place much less emphasis on ritual practice and do not serve as community centres. Their main focus is the practice of longevity

the West and at FLK specifically. This mixed exchange of culture may be the reason that scholars such as Elijah Siegler claim that while TTCS/Fung Loy Kok is not consumerist in its objectives like the schools run by other notable tai-chi masters Hua Ching Ni and Mantak Chia, they still do away with an observable level of tradition and community in their method of organization.⁸⁸

It is also important to note that the notion of Fung Loy Kok as being a cultural hybrid model of contemporary spiritual practices assists in explaining the marketing and advertising tactics of the organization discussed in previous chapters. Therefore, merging this idea with the concept of the holistic milieu, Fung Loy Kok seemingly exemplifies an interesting relationship to the broader Western culture. Specifically, they exist within the wider marketplace of neoliberal capitalism but also simultaneously within the growing holistic milieu, characterized by individuals seeking refuge from an objective identity and instead turning to ideas of subjective wellness and healing. If anything, this points to a contemporary spiritual marketplace marked by pragmatic identities in a constant flux.

the style of a Chinese temple, but also features allusions to their multicultural scope, including the explicit inclusion of numerous international flags outside of their head office, as well as through décor choices observed around the compound including hanging sombreros or other cultural artifacts next to framed lines from the *Daedejing*. Essentially, there is an observable mixture between Eastern and Western culture in the context of Fung Loy Kok and the TTCS. Therefore, while individuals who participate in Taoist Tai-Chi likely do not self-identify as Daoist, they are engaging to a certain degree with Chinese philosophy, imagery and motifs in a context which blends said motifs with Western language. The Orangeville centre has proved to be a particularly interesting cas-

of adapted Chinese spirituality.

Clarke also attempts to predict the relationship Daoism will share with Western culture in the not-so-distant future by claiming that Daoism:

Is likely to take a different, albeit related, path from that of Buddhism. It is likely that the direction of this pathway will lie in its potential as an attitude of mind, rather than as a complete philosophy. It will probably appeal as a set of loosely related insights and practices which will be subject to considerable variation and transformation as they become absorbed into Western ways of thinking and global preoccupations.⁹⁵

Given that Fung Loy Kok is based on the completely volunteer and non-profit involvement of members, and furthermore, given their tendency to avoid any form of written or commercialized products, the organization now active in 26 countries arguably embodies the above conception of modern Daoism in the West. While, given the controversial heritage and lineage of Moy Lin Shin and the fact that the exact form and history of their conception of Daoist philosophy is difficult to ascertain, there is an obvious merger of Eastern philosophy embodied in the globalized culture of the West. Specifically, the objectives of Fung Loy Kok, including healing, ecological accountability, and community, suggest a type of philosophy that is “a spirituality which reconnects us with the need, expressed in many quarters, for a spirituality which reconnects us with the earth and with the living world.”⁹⁶ Given the wide variation of Daoist organizations in the West, ranging from the more consumerist *Qibelly* to more orthodox sects, Fung Loy Kok appears to operate within a hybrid model which mirrors the writings of J.J. Clarke who imagines Daoism in the West as being a philosophy adapted through an exchange of cultures rather than of traditional ideas of orientalism or cultural transplantation.

Conclusioophy i

This section has challenged understanding Fung Loy Kok entirely within the framework of Western spiritual culture/the holistic milieu, demonstrating that there is key historic agency which has influenced understanding Taoist Tai-Chi in the context of the West. In the above chapter, it has become evident that Fung Loy Kok and tai-chi in the West did not necessarily originate out of the conception of a holistic milieu, but rather, the holistic milieu has acted as an environment in which Daoism could reframe and adapt philosophical teachings in an interaction with wider intellectual shifts of Western modernity, as manifested in post-orientalism. These teachings themselves were demonstrated to have a longstanding historical and intellectual grounding in self-cultivation and healing, suggesting that Daoism, while adapted and transformed within the context of the West, still retains elements of what can be considered Chinese religious and cultural heritage. This can be seen in the observation that the Western culture of healthism and fitness allowed for physical self-cultivation such as *taijiquan* and more recently Taoist-Tai Chi's practices to become the "point of contact" between these cultures. From a historical perspective, an analysis of Fung Loy Kok/TTCS lends credit to J.J. Clarke's conception of modern Daoism in *The Tao of the West* as being part of a larger post-oriental and pluralistic dialogue, characterized as a spirituality which has been amalgamated into Western culture in a symbiotic relationship of cultural exchange.

Conclusions

This study has aimed to demonstrate the ways in which Western spiritual practices and Chinese Daoist religion has intersected in the modern world, utilizing the Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism as a case study. Understanding Fung Loy Kok through existing academic typologies regarding Western contemporary spirituality is limiting as they do not account for or assist in

understanding the unique position organizations such as FLK occupy within the Western spiritual ethos, which is that of a post-Oriental dialogue between Western culture and Chinese spirituality and philosophy. Specifically, the economically-grounded theories of Carrette and King assist in understanding the marketing paradigms and methods of organizations such as FLK. They also aid in showing their relationship with wider capitalist systems, including the relationship between spirituality and identity formation within consumer culture. These theories are limited, however, as they do not account for the transformative relationship spiritual organizations share within their spiritual commun

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