

'Tai Chi Language'

by Sam Masich

What's in a Name?

Chinese language is based largely on monosyllabic written characters which give no phonetic clues as to their pronunciation. Though bound by a common system of written characters, Chinese possesses seven or so main dialects with dozens of regional variations. 'Romanization' is the transliteration of non-Latin tongues into the alphabet employed by Latin languages such as English, French and Spanish. Three main romanization systems have been used to transliterate Chinese characters into pronounceable, phonetic words for Latin language speakers. They are *Wade-Giles*, *Yale* and most recently *Hanyu Pinyin*, known better simply as *Pinyin*.

The originators of Taijiquan were from the northern parts of China and therefore spoke *Beifanghua* (北方话 - lit. 'Northern Speech'), more commonly known as *Mandarin* or *Putonghua* (普通话 - lit. 'Northern Speech'). The Wade-Giles romanization system for Mandarin Chinese (*Cantonese* or *Japanese* speakers pronounce these characters completely differently and other transliteration methods apply) is the product of two British scholars, *Sir Thomas Wade* (1818-1895) and *Herbert A. Giles* (1845-1935). In 1859 Wade, who was a professor of Chinese at Cambridge University, adapted an even earlier transliteration system. Later Giles, who succeeded Wade at Cambridge, served as a British consular official in China from 1867-92, and in 1912 revised Wade's system. Wade-Giles was the standard for the romanization of Mandarin Chinese for the majority of the twentieth century.

Somewhat ineffective in popular spoken use, the Wade-Giles system has largely been replaced by *Hanyu Pinyin* (lit. 'Chinese Alphabet') which was officially adopted by the Chinese government in 1979. Pinyin is now widely used in China on street signs, maps and as an aid in learning Chinese characters. Several minority languages also use variations of Pinyin and the system is now generally used by the international community. Wade-Giles remains the de facto system in Taiwan.

The *Yale* system of romanization was created during World War II by the United States military for its soldiers and was also used in the US for teaching Asian languages to civilian students. Although the Yale system is probably the most intuitive for English speakers, it has all but vanished from contemporary use.

Taiji or not Tai Chi?

Depending on the publication, one may see many romanized spellings for the same Chinese word. Indeed the variations *Tai Chi*, *T'ai Chi*, *T'ai-chi*, *Tai-chi*, *Taiji*, *Tai Chi Chuan*, *T'ai Chi Chuan*, *T'ai-chi Ch'uan*, *Tai Ji Chywan*, *Taijiquan*, *Tai Ji Quan* and *Taiji Quan* have all been used to romanize the same characters which refer to the same art. While some of these variations are due to the transliteration system being employed, others are either simplifications or commonly repeated errors.

The term 'Tai Chi' (太极), is actually an abridgment of 'T'ai-chi Ch'uan' (太极拳; Taijiquan) which, while it reflects popular usage, contains both conceptual and linguistic errors. But even use of the full, correct terms tends to lead to mispronunciation due to inherently confusing features within unique to each transliteration method. For example *Taijiquan*, which should be pronounced approximately "Tai Jee *Chwen*", is often mistakenly said "Tai Jee *Kwan*", since 'qu' is always 'kw' in English.

This makes teaching and promoting the art extra difficult. Students, when first introduced to Taijiquan, often find these language considerations frustrating and difficult. Imagine trying to explain these issues quickly and clearly to a local news reporter who has come to do a brief article on your club's annual Canada Day demonstration. Rarely are Chinese language terms ever published correctly in these kind of situations. An art like *Yoga* by contrast, is always spelled and pronounced "*Yoga*" even though it possesses at least as much stylistic and historical diversity as Taijiquan and comes from equally challenging language origins. Much of *Yoga*'s popularity I'm certain, is do to the fact that people are conditioned to respond to and remember repeatedly presented 'name-brands'.

So what to do? Some contemporary 'reformers' struggle against the current, endeavoring always to present Taijiquan terminology accurately, often to find that their readers don't want to make the effort to sort it all out, even when issues are clarified. Personally, I think simple is better, at least when it comes to promotion. You can't educate anyone if they haven't walked through the door. When referring to the art while addressing the larger, less educated public, I generally use the term *Tai Chi*, which has more or less made its way into the pop lexicon, however, I encourage my students early on to understand the full and correct terminology including the difference between *Wade-Giles* and *Pinyin* systems of transliteration.

Is it English or Chinese?

Many of the terms associated with Chinese martial arts and Neigong are not used in the same way in general conversation by ordinary Chinese speakers. Like any technical language, Tai Chi language possesses its own vernacular, an amalgamation of terms referenced to the art's practices, history and pedagogical requirements. Take as an example, *Dantian* (丹田; lit. 'Elixir Field'; Tan T'ien in Wade-Giles) an ancient term drawn from Daoist metaphysical practices which refers to the energetic centre of the body. If you ask a young Chinese person about this word they will likely have no idea what you are referring to. While the characters 丹田 would certainly be recognized, their meaning in this context would not.

While teaching a class an English speaking Tai Chi instructor may sometimes use terms such as *Dantian*, *Qi* (vital energy) or *Song* (a specific way to relax) as these words convey something which is not easy to say simply in English. Other times

these terms may be translated into an English equivalent depending on what the instructor is trying to imply. For example, a teacher might say something like, “When practicing Peng, sink your qi to the dantian. Feel the energy moving in the centre. Relax deeply. You must ‘song’ the waist. This is important in *Grasp Bird’s Tail*.” Without knowledge of the linguistic and technical meanings of these statements it would be to grasp the intent and impossible follow the instructions though much can be conveyed in an instructor’s tone of voice. On the surface the usage seems inconsistent but in fact this way of using language reflects a great deal of experience and consideration.

It is easy to let formal pronunciation and usage details slip and, depending on an teacher’s knowledge of Chinese terminology, the language can get pretty loose. Strongly Anglified pronunciations of Chinese words may render them unintelligible to native Chinese speakers and be peevish to the ear of more studied individuals. Inevitably however, a somewhat common understanding of the lexicon is arrived at in every in every group by informal consensus. This is an important thing to note in discussing what might be termed *Tai Chi Language*, as it is actual usage in common situations by ordinary speakers that ultimately defines what any language is and what it becomes. Indeed, speakers who try to use Chinese terms with completely correct tonal pronunciation in the midst of English sentences can sound pedantic and somewhat bookish.

Tai Chi Language like Tai Chi culture is a melange of influences. While language is ultimately a side issue when it comes to mastering the Internal Arts, many years of erroneous practice may be averted by a basic understanding and comfort of the art’s native and evolved terminology.

©Sam Masich 2004