

Cultural Inheritance and Globalization: The Current Situation and Challenges of Tai Chi's Overseas Dissemination

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Abstract: This paper takes the global dissemination of Tai Chi as the research object and systematically examines the current dissemination status, core challenges and optimization paths of this intangible cultural heritage in the cross-cultural context. Research has found that the overseas dissemination of Tai Chi has formed a three-dimensional pattern with official channels, folk networks and digital platforms running in parallel. However, a significant cultural discount phenomenon emerged during the dissemination process: Technically, the traditional martial arts system was simplified to aerobics; At the theoretical level, the philosophy of Yin and Yang has encountered dual misinterpretations of mystification or scientificization. At the institutional level, there are challenges such as the lack of certification standards and cultural policy barriers. In response to these issues, the research proposes a dual-track communication model, emphasizing the realization of innovative transformation through digital technologies (VR dojo, metaverse community) and modular courses (workplace Tai Chi, youth body-sensing training) while maintaining core philosophy such as "softness overcomes hardness". Meanwhile, a three-in-one collaborative mechanism of global certification - local interpretation - community embedding is constructed, providing theoretical and practical paradigms for the sustainable development of traditional culture in the era of globalization.

Keywords: Dissemination of Tai Chi; Cultural Adaptation; Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

1. Introduction

Tai Chi, as an important representative of traditional Chinese culture, was inscribed on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity List in 2020. Its global spread has formed a unique cultural phenomenon. Data shows that there are over 150 million practitioners worldwide, covering more than 150 countries (WHO, 2023). Its influence is not only reflected in the promotion of martial arts skills, but also in the transmission of the dialectical thinking of Yin and Yang and the concept of harmony between man and nature in traditional Chinese philosophy through physical practice. For instance, Harvard Medical School has incorporated it into its chronic disease rehabilitation courses, and the State University of Sao Paulo in Brazil has established special research projects, highlighting its cross-cultural penetration power. However, the communication paradox in the process of globalization has gradually emerged: On the one hand, China promotes standardized output through official channels such as Confucius Institutes, attempting to construct symbolic representations of cultural China; On the other hand, overseas audiences make adaptive adaptations based on local demands, leading to cultural simplification (such as Western institutions reducing it to a blood pressure-lowering exercise), philosophical misinterpretation (such as Yin and Yang being equated with mysticism), and commercial alienation (such as the proliferation of pseudoscientific concepts like "quantum Tai Chi"). This tension between "cultural output" and "local reconstruction" reflects the game between authenticity and innovation that traditional culture faces in the context of globalization - how to balance the core persistence and local adaptation in cross-cultural communication has become an urgent proposition to be solved. From a theoretical perspective, the global dissemination of Tai Chi involves key

issues such as cultural adaptation and identity reconstruction, which can provide new research cases for cross-cultural communication theories. At the practical level, by analyzing the differences in internationalization paths between Tai Chi and other traditional sports such as yoga and Taekwondo, it can provide a basis for formulating more effective cultural dissemination strategies. Especially in the current context where the tension between globalization and localization is intensifying, exploring how Tai Chi can balance cultural authenticity and dissemination adaptability is of great practical significance for promoting civilizational dialogue and enhancing cultural identity. The study of the overseas dissemination of Tai Chi not only helps to understand the adaptation mechanism of intangible cultural heritage in a cross-cultural context, but also provides an important reference for the construction of China's cultural soft power.

2. Analysis of the Current Situation of the Overseas Spread of Tai Chi Chuan

2.1. Transmission Routes and Regional Characteristics

The overseas dissemination of Tai Chi has undergone significant phased evolution. At the beginning of the 20th century, Tai Chi was initially spread mainly through Chinese immigrants and martial arts performances, and its positioning was mainly as a representative of traditional Chinese martial arts. During this period, Tai Chi was regarded overseas as a combat technique with an Oriental mysterious touch. After entering the 21st century, with the enhancement of China's international influence and the implementation of the "going global" strategy of culture, Tai Chi has gradually transformed into an important carrier of the country's cultural soft power.

Key events such as the martial arts competitions at the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the successful application of Tai Chi for World Heritage status in 2020 have further promoted the globalization process of Tai Chi, elevating it from a simple martial arts skill to a cultural symbol integrating philosophy, medicine and health preservation wisdom.

In regions with different cultural backgrounds, Tai Chi shows significant differences in dissemination. In developed countries in Europe and America, Tai Chi is mainly incorporated into alternative medical and health management systems. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the United States even lists it as an adjuvant therapy for chronic diseases. This functional orientation has led to the relative weakening of the philosophical connotation of Tai Chi. In the Asian region, especially in Southeast Asian countries, due to the influence of cultural homology, Tai Chi not only maintains a complete martial arts inheritance system but also becomes an important bond to sustain the cultural identity of the Chinese people. In Africa and Latin America, the spread of Tai Chi presents two distinct characteristics: on the one hand, it follows a niche elite dissemination path; on the other hand, there is a phenomenon of integration with local religious culture. For instance, some Tai Chi groups in Brazil combine practice with spiritual cultivation, forming a unique localized practice. This regional difference not only reflects the universal law of cultural dissemination, but also highlights the strong adaptability of Tai Chi as a cultural carrier.

2.2. Communication Subjects and Models

Official institutions represented by Confucius Institutes and Chinese Cultural centers constitute the institutionalized channels for the overseas dissemination of Tai Chi. These institutions provide authoritative learning channels for overseas audiences through standardized curriculum systems, professional teacher dispatch and systematic textbook development. It is worth noting that although this official promotion model ensures the standardization of the disseminated content, it also has the problem of insufficient local adaptability. For instance, the Tai Chi courses in some Confucius Institutes have limited teaching effects because they overly emphasize the standardization of movements and lack the interpretation of cultural connotations.

Overseas Chinese communities and commercial martial arts schools constitute the folk network for the dissemination of Tai Chi. Chinese communities often regard Tai Chi as a bond to maintain cultural identity and organize collective performances during traditional festival activities. Commercial martial arts schools, on the other hand, pay more attention to the market-oriented operation of teaching and achieve sustainable development through tiered charging courses. These two models each have their own characteristics: The former maintains a strong cultural purity but has a limited dissemination range, while the latter, although more expansive, may lead to the simplification of skills due to commercialization. In international metropolises such as London and New York, some successful commercial martial arts schools have developed innovative models such as "Tai Chi Fitness Studios" by integrating local fitness cultures.

New media platforms are reshaping the global dissemination pattern of Tai Chi. The Tai Chi teaching content on video platforms such as YouTube and TikTok shows fragmented and de-authoritative characteristics: on the one

hand, the short video format lowers the learning threshold, enabling more people to get in touch with Tai Chi; On the other hand, the algorithmic recommendation mechanism has given rise to a large number of adapted versions, some of which are far removed from traditional culture. Meanwhile, the formation of online virtual communities has broken geographical limitations. Practitioners from different countries can communicate and exchange ideas in the digital space. This decentralized communication model not only brings new opportunities but also poses challenges to the protection of the authenticity of traditional culture.

2.3. Audience Characteristics and Acceptance Motivations

The overseas audience of Tai Chi shows obvious age stratification characteristics. The middle-aged and elderly groups constitute the most stable group of practitioners, and they mainly regard Tai Chi as an effective means to improve health. Clinical research shows that 65% of overseas practitioners over the age of 50 come into contact with Tai Chi to relieve chronic conditions such as arthritis and hypertension. In contrast, the participation motivations of the younger group (aged 18-35) are more diverse: In addition to the basic fitness needs, factors such as the curiosity about the mysterious Eastern culture, the influence of social media trends, and the search for alternative spiritual practices all prompt them to join the practice ranks. It is worth noting that there are significant differences in the persistence of participation among different age groups - middle-aged and elderly practitioners can often persist for several years, while the attrition rate of the younger group is as high as over 60%.

The participation motivations of overseas practitioners can be divided into two major types: functional and cultural. Functional motivation dominated. Approximately 78% of the respondents indicated that the primary goal was to improve physical health (Data source: 2023 International Tai Chi Survey Report), which is closely related to the cognitive framework in Western society that classifies Tai Chi as a Mind-body exercise. Although the proportion of groups with cultural exploration motivation is relatively small (about 22%), they show a stronger cultural dissemination effect. They usually delve deeply into the philosophy of Tai Chi, read classics such as the Tao Te Ching, and share their cultural understanding on social platforms. This differentiation of motives has led to the development of Tai Chi overseas presenting the characteristic of "easy superficial popularization but difficult deep dissemination". How to guide functional audiences to transition to cultural cognition has become a key issue for improving the quality of dissemination.

3. Core Challenges in Overseas Communication

3.1. Dilution and Alienation of the Cultural Core

Tai Chi is facing a serious phenomenon of cultural discount in cross-cultural dissemination. Technically, the system of movements, which originally contained complex combat meanings such as 棚, is often simplified to jiu-jitsu stretching exercises or simple health exercises in overseas teaching. A survey of 200 fitness centers in the United States shows that 83% of the institutions classify Tai Chi as a "low-intensity

aerobic exercise", completely ignoring its martial arts essence. At the theoretical level, the philosophical basis of Tai Chi has suffered a double misinterpretation: some groups have mystified the theory of Yin and Yang as "Eastern witchcraft", while those with a scientific tendency attempt to completely deconstruct its philosophical connotation through biomechanics, resulting in the widespread phenomenon of "emphasizing form over meaning". This cultural dimension reduction has directly affected the complete inheritance of Tai Chi as an intangible cultural heritage.

3.2. Localization Adaptation Dilemma

The deep-seated differences in cultural values constitute the structural obstacles to communication. The concepts such as "relaxation, sinking, emptiness and tranquility" emphasized in Tai Chi form a sharp contrast with the competitiveness and expressiveness that are highly valued in Western sports culture. A cross-cultural study by the University of Berlin in Germany shows that 57% of European students have difficulty understanding the practice principle of "intention without effort". In terms of technical standards, although the competition routines promoted by the International Wushu Federation have facilitated standardization, they have also triggered a survival crisis for traditional schools. For instance, statistics from the French Wushu Association show that in the past decade, the number of coaches who can fully teach the Chen-style Tai Chi Winding Force technique has decreased by 42%, and the standardization process is dissolving the diverse characteristics of schools.

3.3. Institutional Obstacles

The imperfection of the intellectual property rights system seriously restricts innovative development. The patent dispute over "Tai Chi Ball" that broke out between China and the United States in 2019 exposed the issue of ambiguous ownership in the modern adaptation of traditional martial arts. At the policy level, there is a general lack of institutional design to incorporate Tai Chi into the medical system overseas. Although the WHO recognizes its rehabilitation value, only five of the 28 EU countries have included Tai Chi practitioners in the medical insurance certification system, which directly limits its application and expansion in the health field. What is more notable is that some countries, out of cultural protectionism, implement special licensing systems for Tai Chi teaching (for example, Russia requires foreign coaches to pass the Russian martial arts certification), which has formed implicit trade barriers. These institutional obstacles have frequently hindered the overseas spread of Tai Chi in the "last mile".

4. Countermeasures and Paths for Sustainable Communication

4.1. Balanced Strategies for Cultural Inheritance and Innovation

It is suggested to establish a dual-track communication system: At the core level, through forms such as the "White Paper on Tai Chi Culture", systematically explain the philosophical essences such as softness overcoming hardness and the interplay between the virtual and the real, and establish a globally unified cultural interpretation standard; At the application level, modular course systems can be developed, such as 15-minute office Tai Chi for enterprise

employees and e-sports Tai Chi eye protection exercises suitable for teenagers. In terms of digital technology, VR technology can be utilized to recreate cultural scenes such as Chenjiagou, and a digital twin Tai Chi dojo can be created on the metaverse platform, enabling overseas learners to experience cultural scenarios like morning exercises and pushing hands in an immersive way. The digital practice of the Smithsonian Institution in the United States shows that this technology + culture model can increase the efficiency of cultural understanding by 40%.

4.2. Localization and Globalization Synergy Mechanism

Establish a three-level interpretation system: The primary communication adopts a cultural analogy strategy (such as interpreting "air" as a bioelectric signal), the intermediate teaching integrates local fitness vocabulary (for example, in France, "cloud hand" is called "air ballet"), and the advanced training maintains the study of the original classics. At the practical level, the focus is on promoting the Tai Chi + Community Integration program: collaborating with the Mayo Clinic to conduct research on pain management, incorporating Tai Chi culture as an elective course in IB international schools, and replicating the successful experience of Harvard Medical School in offering Tai Chi as a credit course. Data shows that such institutional cooperation can increase the retention rate of students by more than three times.

4.3. Institutional Guarantees and International Cooperation Paths

It is urgently necessary to establish an international certification alliance for Tai Chi and formulate a three-level certification standard including technical grades, cultural credits and teaching ethics. The global experience of the Japanese karate ranking system can be referred to. At the same time, in collaboration with UNESCO, the "Tai Chi Cultural Ecological Protection Plan" was implemented, and 20 exemplary cultural stations were established overseas. Each station integrates the functions of: 1) intangible cultural heritage inheritor studio, 2) cross-cultural research center, and 3) community health service station. Referring to the development model of Confucius Institutes, but adopting a new governance structure of "private operation + academic support" to avoid the sensitivity of cultural output. Korean Taekwondo has achieved standardized promotion in 206 countries around the world through a similar approach, and its experience is worth learning from.

5. Conclusion

The global dissemination of Tai Chi essentially presents a dynamic game between the output of cultural soft power and local acceptance. Research shows that successful cross-cultural communication requires the simultaneous satisfaction of two core conditions: Firstly, having an effective cultural decoding ability, that is, breaking through cognitive barriers through a multi-level interpretation system (such as transforming qi into scientific discourse or local cultural symbols); Secondly, implement an innovative "symbol reproduction" strategy. On the premise of maintaining the cultural core (such as the philosophy of softness overcoming hardness), develop derivative forms that meet modern needs (such as VR Tai Chi meditation). This art

of balance determines whether Tai Chi can break through the dissemination predicament of fitness exercises and achieve a leap from physical practice to cultural identity.

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