



## **Unstructuring Structure and Communicating Secrets inside/outside a Chinese Martial Arts Association**

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## Abstract

In 2007, Zhang, a teacher of the health-promoting exercise of taijiquan, traveled from Shanghai to the United States and Europe to conduct a short series of workshops and demonstrations of his art. Zhang soon came under fire from the prominent Shanghai martial arts family that led his martial arts association for teaching 'family secrets' to foreigners. In this paper, I attempt to open a window into understanding how definitions of social structures can take place when symbolic conjunctions, histories of colonization, and individual needs come together to create the kind of rupture that Zhang and the association experienced in Shanghai. How does an exercise like taijiquan, billed as promoting both individual physical health and social stability, become subjected to surprisingly destructive forces as the art and its teachers move across geographical, generational, racial, political, and temporal borders? How do members of a taijiquan association reconcile long and painful memories of the ever-colonizing foreigner with a publicly stated mission to promote health internationally through their art? How do teachers like Zhang negotiate their own openness about certain elements of the art with their desire to remain well-respected members of formal social structures like the martial arts association? And, perhaps most significantly, what role do foreign 'consumers' of taijiquan play in changing the rules of how and to whom teachers communicate the secrets of taijiquan? I attempt to answer these questions by framing them within the context of an old scholarly debate between Marshall Sahlins and Gananth Obeyesekere regarding the circumstances of Captain Cook's death in Hawaii.

## Contributor Note

Adam D. Frank is Associate Professor of Asian Studies and Anthropology in the Norbert O Schedler Honors College, University of Central Arkansas. His book *Taijiquan and the Search for the Little Old Chinese Man: Understanding Identity through Martial Arts* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2006. He is currently engaged in an ethnographic study of the Hollywood film industry.

## Introduction

For practitioners of Chinese martial arts, secrets have a special place. It is an oft-told tale within these arts that the revelation of secret techniques will bring one to new levels of skill and understanding, and much of the power that teachers hold emanates from the perception that they are guardians of such secrets. If a teacher is able to demonstrate martial skill, it is assumed that he or she was privy to secrets, and students tend to compete in terms of how many and how extensively secrets have been revealed to them. Rifts and jealousies may arise when one student receives or claims to have received a transmission from the teacher while another, perhaps more experienced but less favored student, has not.

For teachers, caretaking secrets is fraught with its own dangers, as permission to transmit secrets is usually less clear than permission to receive them. When socio-historical factors are thrown into the mix, complications intensify. For some martial lineages, transmission of secrets to foreigners is the ultimate post-modernist sin, and teachers engage in such behavior at their own risk. Conflicts rooted both in historical-cultural conjunctures and the contemporary globalization of cultural forms, give rise to disagreements among individual actors regarding the nature of social structures – or even whether such structures exist at all. Thus, real-life conflicts in Chinese martial arts circles take on, dare I say, an almost anthropological tone.

This essay focuses on one such conflict that arose in a Chinese taijiquan association when a teacher I will call Zhang revealed martial secrets to a group of European practitioners who had invited him to teach an extended

workshop.<sup>1</sup> Through Zhang's story, I will argue that in the emergence of martial arts studies we are best served by dialectical, interdisciplinary approaches, approaches that seldom fit neatly under any single theoretical rubric. The present article might thus be seen as a kind of case study to underscore that point. In my attempt to understand the complexities of Zhang's situation, I situate the conflict within three discursive contexts. First, I am interested in the historical paths and accompanying political economies that the art of taijiquan has taken over the last hundred and fifty years and how these paths ultimately lead for one teacher to a fracturing of a lifelong, highly valued relationship. Second, through a brief discussion of martial arts film and television, I address the intersection of practice, racialization, and aesthetics that set the stage for this fracturing. Third, I am interested in how specific notions of social structure – what they are, whether they exist, whether they exist in a state of malleability – served as technologies of communication for Zhang to try to understand what happened to him. To inform this third context, I resurrect an old scholarly debate about the circumstances surrounding the death of Captain Cook in Hawaii that pitted the interpretive turn in anthropology (represented by Marshall Sahlins) against a post-colonial perspective (represented by Gananth Obeyesekere).<sup>2</sup> Teacher Zhang's contentious relationship with his

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<sup>1</sup> The essay is based on fieldwork conducted during Zhang's visits to the U.S. in 2008 and 2011.

<sup>2</sup> The parameters of the debate are framed by two works published ten years apart: Sahlins, 1981 and Obeyesekere, 1992. In a 2001 collection of essays, Geertz makes an in-depth case for Sahlins's approach, and Dennis Tedlock (2000) comes to Obeyesekere's defense in a review essay of Geertz's book appearing in *Times Higher Education*.

martial arts association, the conflicting views of what did or did not constitute 'rupturing' of structures, are, I believe, reflected in this debate.

### Teacher Zhang's Tale

In the spring of 2008, Teacher Zhang<sup>3</sup> and I find ourselves heading down a highway somewhere south of Fayetteville, Arkansas. Zhang has been my martial arts mentor ever since I met him in a Southern Chinese park twenty years before. Somewhere around 2000, the informal mentorship transformed into a more formal teacher-student relationship. In the U.S. at the invitation of my university, Zhang is on a short tour of the more scenic areas of the state. Almost out of petrol and clearly lost, I finally pull over to a station on the side of the road where we fill up, reorient ourselves (so to speak), and finish up the last of the cold food we had saved from our lunch at Shanghai Restaurant in Fayetteville.

The conversation drifts back to a topic that we had already discussed several times since Zhang arrived: His ostracism from a taijiquan<sup>4</sup> association of which he had been a member since around 1980. Zhang's crime? Revealing the ostensibly

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<sup>3</sup> Given the contentious issues dealt with in this paper, I use pseudonyms throughout. I have also modified the name of the taijiquan styles described in the paper and have changed some details regarding locations and recent martial arts history relevant to the association under study. Since my topic focuses on the nature of secrecy, I felt it necessary to change the name of the set of exercises that Zhang taught to his European students. Conversations with Zhang were conducted in Mandarin Chinese and translated by the author.

<sup>4</sup> I use the pinyin system to romanize 'taijiquan' and other Chinese terms throughout the essay. 'Taijiquan' is commonly romanized as 'tai chi' in Euro-American popular culture contexts. On occasion, I also shorten the term to simply 'taiji'.

'secret' Golden Temple techniques to a group of European taiji practitioners who had invited him to teach the previous year.

Zhang describes how he had received a late night, angry phone call from Bing Jianwu, the association's current president, a grandson of the now-deceased founder:

There was a call and my wife told me it was Bing Jianwu. I was happy to get a call from Bing Jianwu, but when I got on the phone, he was really angry. He said that I didn't have the family's permission to teach the Golden Temple techniques. He said that foreigners were not allowed to learn them. I told him I had no idea that permission was required, since I'd seen others publicly performing the Golden Temple techniques at the association's monthly meeting in the park, but Bing Jianwu was very angry and told me that I had to cease teaching the Golden Temple immediately.

By Zhang's 2008 visit, it was common knowledge among his few students that he had already taught the techniques to at least one foreigner. This was something of a sensitive topic between Zhang and me because I had learned the techniques from another teacher in the association. That teacher, fearing the sort of reception Zhang received, had sworn me to secrecy, but Zhang knew that I knew that he knew who had taught me the techniques.

'I don't understand their attitude', I said to Zhang: 'I also saw a teacher showing some of the Golden Temple techniques to a group of elderly students in the park. If Bing Jianwu really wants to spread taijiquan and keep the level of skill high,

then anyone who works hard should be allowed to learn the family secrets. It's not a question of skin color'. Zhang nodded in agreement. Zhang was himself one of the teachers who had vigorously preserved what Bing family's martial arts secrets he had acquired, and he strove to embody the transmission and preservation of the art. Besides, the former 'friends' from the association who were now calling Zhang at home and berating him for his perceived violations were themselves traveling to the States. In fact, by the early 2000s, teachers traveling overseas to train foreigners often found themselves forced to make snap decisions about what to teach and to whom. Perhaps most significantly, association head Bing Jianwu's younger brother, who had made a name for himself as a taiji teacher in Europe some years before, almost certainly had taught the Golden Temple techniques to his top students, most of whom were non-Chinese – at least that was the rumor among association members, and secrets were particularly subject to rumor.

As we polished off the last of our spicy but now barely edible eggplant, Zhang appeared circumspect about his years of loyalty and toil aimed at becoming an accomplished and respected taijiquan teacher, his years of careful attention to not stepping on the wrong toes. Despite his care and diplomacy, here he found himself on the outside looking in. 'Still', Zhang said, 'I got to come to America'.

'Yes', I replied. 'They're probably angry because some of them never had the opportunity to come to America'.

In response, Zhang once again nodded and said nothing. Of course, Zhang and I both knew that many association members had already traveled to the U.S. and Europe and many more would

likely follow as visa restrictions for Chinese travelers eased and urban Chinese continued to build savings and disposable income. This, we agreed, was inevitable.

### Taijiquan Histories<sup>5</sup>

In an earlier work (Frank 2006), I described 'taijiquan' (popularly transliterated as simply 'tai chi') as the general term for a family of martial arts that includes slow and fast solo sequences of postures; a self-defense training exercise called 'push hands' (*tui shou*); solo and two-person weapons forms; yoga-like meditation, stretching, and strengthening exercises; and sparring. Reflecting aspects of Chinese cosmology and adopting a Daoist sensibility,<sup>6</sup> the term itself couples *taiji*, commonly translated as 'supreme ultimate', with *quan* ('fist' or 'boxing'). Taijiquan is one of many Asian martial arts that emphasize the development of *qi*, or 'vital energy', in the body in order to attain both longevity and martial skill. The art also privileges *yi* ('mind' or 'mind-intent') over *li* ('strength').

Practitioners and martial arts historians alike make the claim that taijiquan and its underlying moral and cosmological frameworks find their origins in esoteric Daoist practices dating back several thousand years (Zhang 1996; Liu 1997; Li 1998; Xu 2000; Zheng 2000). Historical evidence of the art, or a similar art, places its probable origin in Chenjiagou, Henan Province, in the seventeenth century, though written evidence of an

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<sup>5</sup> Elements of the following section are revisions of historical background originally included in Frank 2006.

<sup>6</sup> See Frank 2013 for the author's extended discussion of the role of the Daoist aesthetic in martial arts training.

art called 'taijiquan' does not appear until the nineteenth century (Wile 1996, 1999). Still a rather secretive, family-centered practice, it appears to have moved through itinerant teachers to Beijing and other cities across China. By the early twentieth century, famous taijiquan teachers had moved in large numbers to China's new economic centers, especially Nanjing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Beijing. With the fall of the last emperor in 1911, the establishment of the Republic of China, and the advent of a national physical fitness movement, teachers began to teach publicly, linking together and slowing down postures (Morris 1998). Various families, including Chens, Wus, Suns, and Yangs, established their own distinctive forms. After the Communist victory in 1949, many taijiquan teachers fled to Taiwan with the Nationalist Army, and, over the next twenty years, an increasing number of American military personnel learned the art there, eventually inviting several renowned teachers to the United States. By the early 1970s, the art had begun to gain real popularity in the U.S., primarily as an exercise and meditation form, but, for those who were interested in pursuing such skills, also as a martial art (Frank 2006).

Following the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (*wenhua da geming*, c. 1966-1976), China increasingly opened its doors to the West. By the early 2000s, hundreds of taijiquan teachers had emigrated to the United States, and thousands of Americans, with varying degrees of seriousness, had traveled to China to study taijiquan from 'real' teachers. Today, one can find a taijiquan class in virtually every mid-size town in the United States.

In China, taijiquan's development was similarly linked to internal economic conditions and external geopolitical influences. Association head Bing Jianwu's grandfather, Bing Tiancai, for example, established the Tiancai Martial Arts Association in the 1930s and taught classes at a local YMCA to a clientele that was as likely to take classes in tennis and swimming as martial arts. This new, physical culture-oriented brand of taijiquan was only one part of a gymnasium movement borrowed more or less intact from the colonial powers that continued to control parts of China (Brownell 1995; Morris 1998; Frank 2006). At the same time, Bing Tiancai and other teachers continued to teach the martial elements, as well as methods said to train internal energy (*qi*), to a select group of disciples both in and outside the family. For outsiders, access to those family secrets had to be earned. In the Tiancai school, as was the case with most martial arts associations, full disciple status (*tudi*) was notoriously difficult to attain, yet it was only through discipleship that secret practices integral to the family system could be transmitted.

After Bing's death in the early 1940s, his children and their spouses took over leadership of the association and its various branches. During the anti-Japanese War (c. 1937-45), the Japanese military government banned the practice of martial arts in occupied China, and the association's activities went underground. After the war, they continued to train students until the mid-1960s when the Cultural Revolution made esoteric, 'feudalistic' arts like taijiquan dangerous to practice. However, as the Cultural Revolution came to an end, the association officially re-constituted itself. It has been active ever

since. Over the last twenty years, the Tiancai Martial Arts Association (including its loosely linked affiliates in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, and Canada) has increased its active membership from a handful of elderly practitioners to several thousand members of all ages.<sup>7</sup>

Teacher Zhang's personal history with the Tiancai Martial Arts Association closely parallels the dramatic historical, political, and economic changes that China has undergone over the last thirty years. When I first encountered Zhang in an urban Chinese park in 1988, he had been practicing taijiquan with the association for eight years, coming out of a background in Chinese wrestling and one or two other martial arts that he had begun studying as a child. By 1988, Zhang had become a disciple of Jian Kaodun, one of the oldest members of the association and one of the teachers generally considered to have mastered the self defense aspects of the art, which he regularly demonstrated through the two-person training technique of push hands (*tui shou*). Zhang's skill in push hands reflected his training with Master Jian, but he also demonstrated a unique understanding of taijiquan self-defense applications and principles that arose out of his previous background in martial arts.

Zhang developed a close relationship with Master Jian and with the Bing family. He usually visited the Bing family for additional training once or twice a week, and, along with a small inner circle of serious young practitioners in the association, he was widely perceived as one of the best of the new generation of practitioners that emerged in the 'golden

age' of urban martial arts training of the 1980s – a generation that benefited from minimal work responsibilities, a rejection of the anti-feudalism policies of the Cultural Revolution, a gradual replenishment of urban green spaces, and plenty of time to actually practice the art. In this atmosphere of genuine enthusiasm for taijiquan, the Tiancai Martial Arts Association welcomed foreign martial artists, readily shared training skills, and asked for very little financial compensation in return.

As more foreigners entered the arena of martial arts training in China, however, the intricate dance between economic opportunity and personal obligation gradually began to change the relationships between teachers and students. In the nascent global integration of the late 1980s, payment of fees from foreign student to teacher happened quietly, if not clandestinely, and came in the form of U.S. or Hong Kong dollars. Even for private lessons from advanced teachers like Zhang's instructor Master Jian, fees were low. By 1995, however, free market economic reforms in China had kicked into high gear. Though there was no standard rate, teachers could – and did – openly accept tuition from both foreign and local Chinese students with the clear expectation that the foreign student would be able to pay a minimum monthly tuition, often the US\$50 or so per month that American students would pay in the United States at that time. Teachers were as likely as not to suggest figures wildly out of range for the typical foreign student. For example, my arrangement with Master Jian, my main teacher in 1995, included both private lessons and public practice in the park, depending upon our mutual schedules. At the same time, my relationship with Teacher Zhang became one of informal,

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<sup>7</sup> Under the rubric of 'membership', I include both dues-paying members and regular, non-dues-paying participants in association activities.

martial arts 'big brother-little brother' (*sige-sidi*) rather than master-student (*shifu-xuesheng*), and tuition fees went directly to Master Jian. As long as the relationship remained clear and stable for all parties, it seemed, no conflict would arise, nor would any jealousies fester. Under this arrangement, I remained Master Jian's student for seven months before returning to the U.S.

### Global Soul, Practice, and Aesthetics

Teacher Zhang's eventual estrangement from the Tiancai Martial Arts Association might best be seen as the detritus of a gradually emergent, dizzyingly complex network of global flows between people, money, epistemologies, imaginaries, and changing notions of tradition.<sup>8</sup> Zhang was one of many martial artists who followed a desire to travel great distances to either learn or teach martial arts. Such desires, I will argue here, are historically situated, dialogic, and evocative of what Pico Iyer (2000) refers to as 'the global soul', a never-ending stream of interconnections between people, products, places, clothing, tastes, and thought processes. I will make the case here that film and television in particular have driven the globalization of Chinese martial arts by fueling the desire of individuals to cross geographical and cultural borders, often at great cost, in order to explore the martial path. Capturing the spirit of the martial sojourner, the notion of *jianghu* (literally, 'rivers and lakes') that appears in early

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<sup>8</sup> A review of ongoing debates about the value of 'diaspora' and 'Chineseness' as analytical categories is outside the purview of this essay. Particularly relevant to the present discussion, however, are Chiu's critique of the notion of an historicized 'Chinese diasporic imagination' (2008) and the related critiques of 'Chineseness' in Ang 1998; Chow 1998; and Chun 1996.

martial arts novels like *The Water Margin* lives on through film and television. Indeed, the author's motivation for focusing ethnographic fieldwork on martial arts is deeply rooted in his early viewings of David Carradine's television series *Kung Fu*, Sunday afternoons watching *Black Belt Theatre*, and early exposure to the visually transformative martial arts films of Taiwanese director King Hu (Frank 2006).

Cinematic vernaculars eventually permeate temporal, ethnic, and political boundaries.<sup>9</sup> The vernacular of martial arts films, as several scholars have pointed out, is not a new invention.<sup>10</sup> Rather, it is part of a long oral tradition of martial arts storytelling that, as Cai Rong notes in her discussion of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, often focuses on the knight errant's (*wuxia*) journeys and adventures in *jianghu*,

A fantasized space with multiple layers and dimensions in *wuxia* literature – an imaginary world within an imaginary world. A symbolic territory with no physical, professional, or class boundaries, [*jianghu* is] ruled and sustained by certain ethical principles and behavioral codes by which the knights-errant recognize and judge one another, making friends or foes. (Cai 2005: 445).

While I am not arguing that Teacher Zhang sees himself as a 'knight-errant', his foreign students may reproduce the image in their Orientalist gaze. The cinematic images color the students' view of the teacher, create a peculiar aesthetic of practice, and perhaps

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<sup>9</sup> My use of 'vernacular' is a variation on Benedict Anderson's notion of textual vernaculars in what he calls 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1993).

<sup>10</sup> See Farquhar and Berry 2005; Curtin 2007.



contribute to a certain, bidirectional level of trust that might open a space for secrets to be revealed where they otherwise might not have been. Ultimately, as I have argued in detail elsewhere (Frank 2006), images and stereotypes may melt away in the face of intense practice and its accompanying bodily experience, a space where a shared aesthetic arises, where cultural improvisation occurs in negotiation with pre-conceived notions of what Others think, need, and desire (see also Zito 1994; Brownell 1995; Chen 2002 and 2003; Harstup 2007; Ingold and Hallum 2007; Ingold 2000).

For many taijiquan players, the aesthetic is a Daoist one (Frank 2013), and 'Daoism' takes on varying, culturally specific definitions. In discussing the aesthetics of Daoism, Philosopher Li Zehou defines aesthetics in terms of 'the sedimentation of social entities (concepts, ideals, attitudes, and meanings) onto psychological functions, particularly the emotions and sensory cognition' (Li 2009: 7). For Li, there are transformative moments between animalistic, totemic dance (pure passion) and cultural-psychological formations (rituals) that lead to sociality, and these transformative moments constitute the 'sedimentation' of aesthetics. The Daoist aesthetic, he argues, is rooted in animality and, ultimately, in nature. It is this naturalized version of taijiquan that is often peculiarly, fetishistically attractive to foreign learners.

Though he certainly recognized the needs of many of his foreign students for taijiquan to be Daoist, Teacher Zhang's concerns were primarily practical, martial concerns. The students assumed Zhang had secrets, and he did, but for Zhang the Golden Temple techniques were a pathway to *gongfu* (practical skill

acquired through hard work), whereas many of his students associated the exercises with a set of 'Daoist' cosmological concepts they had gleaned from cinematic depictions of internal Chinese martial arts, *Crouching Tiger* being the best-known example. Thus, the transnational aesthetic space, one can argue, opened up a concurrent space for Zhang to reveal secrets that would be far more clearly restricted in China. At the very least, the transnational aesthetic space made him more lax in his assessment of whether or not he should or should not teach certain things to foreign students.

But this process – and the germ of the Golden Temple conflict – had actually begun several years before Zhang first travelled outside of China, a direct result of the newly forming political economy of martial arts tourism in China.

### **Conflict and the Commodification of the Foreign Student**

By 1997 dramatic changes had occurred in Teacher Zhang's relationship with Master Jian. The previous year, a foreign student who had heard of the association's special emphasis on push hands began studying regularly in the park with Jian. As had happened in my case, a mentorship developed between this student and Teacher Zhang. Unlike my pre-1997 experience, however, the two of them sometimes met separately for additional practice outside Master Jian's park classes. Depending on whom one asked, Teacher Zhang was trying to 'steal' Master Jian's student or a horrible misunderstanding arose due to differing perceptions of Zhang's relationship with the American student. Zhang contended that he and the American students were friends and, like any other enthusiastic

members of the association, were only interested in practicing as much as possible in order to improve their skills. When some time later Master Jian banished Zhang from the park group (not the association per se, since this would have fallen within the purview of the Bing family), Zhang was hurt and perplexed. He felt he had behaved honorably and that other disciples of Master Jian's had besmirched his name. Zhang, however, was not the embittered sort and had no interest in exacting revenge, proving his honesty, or challenging his 'gongfu brother'. Since it was also made clear to the American student that he was no longer welcome, Zhang and the student found themselves steered toward a natural teacher-student relationship, which they formalized several years later through the discipleship ceremony (*baishi*).

In 1998, Master Jian died. His death shifted the dynamics of Teacher Zhang's relationships within the association. Other members in other sub-lineages (i.e., not through Master Jian, but still within the Bing style taijiquan) remained close to Zhang and made sure to invite him to the association's monthly public performances, which rotated between different parks in the city. Zhang and his American student sometimes performed taijiquan together in these demonstrations, and, as was the case with other members of the association who came from all parts of the city to these gatherings, engaged in push hands on the sidelines while others performed. It remained a collegial atmosphere, and senior members of the association, including Bing Jianwu, seemed quite comfortable with Zhang's participation.

By 2001, Zhang's position appeared to have solidified even further. His American students were asked to demonstrate at

the monthly association park performances, and they were introduced as his students. One of Zhang's foreign students had also helped him obtain a job as a crew leader in the student's company. The job often took Zhang on business trips around China. And though he had not been successful in his visa applications, Zhang had been invited to the United States to teach taijiquan more than once, a sign of both his desire to teach outside China and the spread of his reputation as a skilled teacher and martial artist. While some animosity still existed between Zhang and Master Jian's other senior students, Zhang simply stayed clear of them at monthly meetings, and, since he did not himself establish a pool of Chinese students and did not teach in parks where other association members taught, his relationships with the association higher ups appeared intact.

In 2003, the chain of events began that ultimately led to Zhang's estrangement from the group. The foreign student who had secured him the job had a falling out with his employer, though Zhang was never sure if the reasons were economic or personal. He soon found himself in the position that many men of his generation dreaded: laid off (*xiagang*), minimally educated, and lacking skills that could translate to success in the capital-driven economy of the new China. Up to this point, Zhang had always refused to accept fees from any of his three or four foreign students. At their urging and after some initial resistance, he now began to accept monthly tuition. To some degree, accepting tuition may have constituted a loss of face for Zhang (*diu lian*). Perhaps he considered it something of a handout from students who he had always characterized as 'friends'. His students pointed out, however, Zhang's goal had always been

to teach martial arts professionally. Now he could focus all of his energy on teaching and begin to build the contacts he would need to travel overseas.

By 2005, this is exactly what happened. Several European students had gotten word of Zhang through a European student in Nanjing. The European student eventually helped Zhang arrange a short-term workshop in Europe, Zhang's first overseas trip. This trip resulted in repeated invitations, and, eventually, an opportunity to teach a short-term workshop in America. With the patronage of a wealthy European student, Zhang has been living and teaching full-time in Europe for the last several years, annually returning to China for short periods of time. His schedule includes annual workshops, usually several weeks in length, in several different European countries.

Fulfilling his dream, however, has come at a great price for Zhang, for it was his early relationship with the European students, many of whom were diligent practitioners of the lessons Zhang taught, that ultimately led to his estrangement from the association. Seeing progress and dedication in his European students – and perhaps also a need to give them a taste of the 'real stuff' in order to maintain their interest – Zhang made the decision to teach the Golden Temple techniques. How word traveled back to China about this is unclear, but certainly Zhang made no attempt to hide the fact that he was teaching the techniques, and, by his own account, felt justified in passing them on, even without the structure of the disciple-master relationship. The Golden Temple methods were not, after all, martial techniques in and of themselves, he reasoned. As a gate-keeper of the technique whose *shifu* had died, Zhang felt he had leave to teach

the technique to anyone of sound character.

The Bing family disagreed. For them, the Golden Temple, while not the only secret techniques the family included in their martial system, lay on the other side of the gateway between several dichotomous states of being, the most important of which was 'foreigner-Chinese' (*waiguoren-zhongguoren*). While discipleship was important to the association higher ups as well, the specific charges against Zhang emphasized ethnicity: Foreigners simply were not allowed to learn the Golden Temple techniques. (One Bing family member emphasized to the author that the Opium War had never really ended for many Chinese.) From the Bing family's perspective, Zhang had ruptured a key structure in the fragile web of relationships that held the association together after the death of Bing Tiancai's father.

### **The Structure of the Conjuncture and the Rupture of Structure**

The notion of social structure is long out of fashion in anthropology. I resurrect it here because it is more or less how the situation was conveyed to me by the various parties involved during the field-work. In other words, I am trying to understand why Zhang and others involved with the Tiancai Martial Arts Association seem to view the association in terms of structure, what they consider to be the structuring principles, and how they feel that structure was or was not violated or damaged in some way. In order to excavate this very specific structural vision, it would be useful to revisit the scholarly debate I mentioned at the beginning of the essay.

In *Historical Metaphors and Mythical Realities: Structure in the Early History of the Sandwich Islands Kingdom* (1981), anthropologist Marshall Sahlins is fundamentally concerned with how 'the reproduction of a structure becomes its transformation' (Sahlins 1981: 8). His application of this notion of structure and history to the story of Captain Cook's death in Hawaii helps us, in turn, to understand some of the tensions and conflicts that people like Teacher Zhang actually experience in the process of becoming a transnational person and engaging in cultural translations of bodily practices like taijiquan and its related technologies.

To summarize the argument, Sahlins describes the annual ritual alteration of the gods Lono and Ku, during the transition from mackerel to bonito fishing (10). The transition marks the end of the four-month sojourn of Lono, who is peaceable and loving (the Makahiki). At the end, Lono returns to the invisible land 'whence he had come' (kahiki, or to the sky):

Ku, together with his earthly chief, now gains the ascendancy. The historic significance of all this is that Captain Cook was by Hawaiian conceptions a form of Lono; whereas the chief with whom he dealt and who could ritually claim his death, Kalaniopuu – he was Ku.... The incidents of Cook's death in Hawaii were in many respects historical metaphors of a mythical reality. (Sahlins 1981: 10)

In other words, the crux of Sahlins' argument is that the Hawaiians who met Cook upon his first arrival took him to be the *actual* Lono. Because their *mythical* world was, in Sahlins' view, their *real* world, it made perfect sense for Cook to

be Lono. It is the unexpected return of Cook after damage to his ship, *Discovery*, that violates ritual expectations and causes friction between Cook's crew and the same Hawaiians who hosted him so graciously (apparently) only a few weeks earlier. When *Discovery's* cutter is stolen, Cook attempts to take King Kalaniopuu hostage and is ultimately killed by the King's defenders (Sahlins 1981: 23-24). While Sahlins does not dispute the facts of Cook's death, he claims that Lono returning violated the annual ritual, and the people have to kill him to return to a state of balance.

It is on this point that Obeyesekere accuses Sahlins of making a primitivist, colonialist argument. So beholden to a structural analysis is Sahlins, Obeyesekere asserts, that he cannot see the complexities and very practical motives associated with Cook's death. In his 1992 book-length response to Sahlins, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific*,<sup>11</sup> Obeyesekere questions the 'fact' that the Hawaiians ever believed Cook to be Lono at all:

I question this 'fact', which I show was created in the European imagination of the eighteenth century and after and was based on antecedent 'myth models' pertaining to the redoubtable explorer cum civilizer who is a god to the 'natives'. To put it bluntly, I doubt that the natives created their European god; the Europeans created him for them. This 'European god' is a myth of conquest, imperialism, and civilization – a triad that cannot be

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<sup>11</sup> See Obeyesekere 2003 for an interview that deals more generally with his interest in Captain Cook.

easily separated. (Obeyesekere 1992: 3)

Obeyesekere makes it clear at the outset he considers Sahlins one of anthropology's most 'creative' thinkers and that he is not 'unsympathetic' to the 'structural theory of history' that is Sahlins' project, but he does take umbrage at the 'illustrative example' Sahlins draws upon (8). Obeyesekere then argues against the notion that people are structurally confined to any particular set of beliefs (19), then argues for the notion of 'practical rationality' (23) – people making rational decisions based on all the evidence that is in front of them (including history, tradition, etc.). While there is a great deal more to Obeyesekere's refutation of Sahlins and to *Apotheosis of Captain Cook* than I am able to cover here, it is clear that he is essentially making an argument that is both *psychological* (i.e., based in individual experience) and *postcolonial* – an argument that happens to resonate well with the circumstances that befell Zhang when he transmitted the secrets of the Golden Temple practice.

Perhaps then the value of addressing structure in postcolonial/transglobal contexts lies in the fact that perceptions of structure are far from shared, and that conflicts arise when individual actors find themselves no longer confined to certain structures geographically, legally, or culturally – indeed, no longer necessarily perceive things structurally at all – while others in their circles continue to do so. From our conversations over the course of the fieldwork, it was clear that Zhang perceived his difficulties as arising from violations of or confusions about structure. He raised questions, for example, about whether he had violated specific traditions, about increasing greed and jealousy among association

members post-contact with foreigners (c.1980), and about what life without his association ties might be like. He even went so far as to say, half-jokingly, that he could begin teaching 'Zhang style' taijiquan, since he was now ostracized as a lineage holder. The significance of the latter comment should not be underestimated. For Zhang to even consider that he was no longer a lineage holder constituted a major shift in identity.<sup>12</sup> He was certainly not the first martial artist to become estranged from a teacher or a school, but such a possibility had previously been unimaginable for him. In his own mind, he was a traditionalist who had never left the fold.

It is apparent from conversations with Zhang and other members of the association that both decisions to reveal secrets and decisions to punish those who reveal them, as Obeyesekere might argue, are as much practical responses to changing conditions as they are examples of entrenchment in worldviews. In other words, perhaps the association exiled Zhang not only because he ignored a deeply entrenched and rather specifically historically rooted practice of not sharing certain secrets with foreigners, but also because the rules of transglobal Chinese martial arts tourism were still being written – and were, therefore, malleable.

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<sup>12</sup> To clarify, Zhang was concerned that he could no longer claim his status as Jian's *tudi*, as the rightful heir to the lineage. In an objective sense, of course, nothing had changed, but being ostracized from the association came with a whole set of unknowns about what exactly he could claim in terms of lineage.

## Adrift in a Structureless Sea

2011. Zhang and I are hurtling down the highway, somewhere south of Fayetteville, Arkansas. This is Zhang's second visit to the U.S., and, after living and teaching in Europe for almost five years now, he finds himself at a crossroads. While he has developed several groups of loyal students around Europe, he has failed to establish an actual school. He therefore has no reliable source of income.

'When I left China', he confides, 'I told my wife I could bring in about US\$5000 per month in Germany, and I could send a lot of that home. I've probably sent home \$5000 total since I moved there. She's not happy'. During our drive from Fayetteville to my home in Conway, Zhang and I spend two hours developing an informal business plan for him to establish a school in the Conway-Little Rock area. We plan down to the smallest details: How much will rent cost? How about advertising, office supplies, insurance, alarm systems for the school, safety equipment, etc.? How much will he need to rent a home and to pay for food? Will he need to learn to drive? We even concoct a plan for his son to join us and help manage the school. Finally, we determine that in order to make ends meet, Zhang would need a minimum of 40 students, paying US\$50 each per month – not a fortune but certainly enough to get started.

As we approach Conway, Zhang looks exhausted by the conversation. After a long pause, he says, 'I don't want a lot of students. I just want a few who will work hard'. Clearly, Zhang still felt part of the Tiancai Martial Arts Association. He still felt protective of a lineage he no longer technically belonged to. It was part of his personal history, part of how he structured a sense of self. Now it was

unclear whether such a structure even existed and, if it did, where he stood in relation to it. Zhang continued to maintain his right to pass on secrets to students who demonstrated diligence and strong character. He rejected a race-based system of distributing secrets. And, since he knew that I had learned the Golden Temple techniques from another teacher in the group, he was well aware that other teachers felt the same way. Our workshop host had demonstrated just the sort of misunderstanding of lineage that made Zhang reluctant to take on large numbers of ill-informed students.

As I noted at the beginning of this essay, the revelation of secrets plays an important role for the student wishing to advance in a martial art, as well as for the teacher wishing to establish his or her credentials. The circumstances under which secrets are revealed and passed on form a central topic in the martial arts imaginary, particularly in cinema (e.g., as a central plot point in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*); they also play an important role in the everyday relationships between martial arts students and their instructors. The globalization of taijiquan – the actual movement of people and practices across geographic and ethnic-racial borders – creates a unique set of stresses on existing cultural forms to the point that those forms may collapse, or may be revealed as ephemeral in the first place, fracturing long-standing relationships along the way.

While we may never know precisely why the Bing family reacted the way it did when Zhang revealed the Golden Temple forms to his European students, looking at the event in terms of multiple discursive spaces does, I believe, help us make broader generalizations about the

role of secrets in martial arts and, indeed, can help us develop an interdisciplinary methodology that is well-suited to the scholarly study of martial arts. In drawing upon such a methodology, I have hopefully shed some light on how the 'death' of one

sojourning taijiquan teacher's relationship with his martial arts association both reflects an old scholarly debate about the perception of structure, and, in an odd way, parallels the death of Captain Cook himself.

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