

Taijiquan, *genius loci* and tourism: a participant observation about Chenjiagou

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Abstract

This essay analyses the key concepts enunciated by the international literature on martial arts tourism – and of the even broader category of cultural tourism. It combines notes produced by a participant observation and the images produced by the first author himself. The result is the illustration of a particular case of martial arts tourism included in the decade 2009-2018 and focused on Chenjiagou (Chen village), a village in inland China (Wen county, Henan province, People's Republic of China). Here tourists – attracted by the peculiar spirit of the place, *genius loci*, expressed in the landscape and in the local customs and reinforced by recurring or occasional celebrations – are contributing to the local economic development and urban improvement, by creating an informal planetary-scale network through the common interest in the martial art of taijiquan.

Keywords: Martial arts; tai chi; tourism; cultural tourism; UNESCO; intangible cultural heritage.

Taijiquan, *genius loci* y turismo: una observación participante sobre Chenjiagou

Resumen

Este ensayo analiza los conceptos clave estudiados por la literatura internacional sobre el turismo de artes marciales y por categoría, aún más amplia, de turismo cultural. Combina notas producidas a través de una observación participante y las imágenes producidas por el primer autor. El resultado es la ilustración de un caso particular de turismo de artes marciales realizado en la década 2009-2018 y centrado en Chenjiagou (pueblo de Chen), un pueblo del interior de China (condado de Wen, provincia de Henan, República Popular China). Allí los turistas – atraídos por el espíritu peculiar del lugar, *genius loci*, expresado en el paisaje y en las costumbres locales y reforzado por celebraciones periódicas u ocasionales – están contribuyendo al desarrollo económico local y al mejoramiento urbano, creando una red informal a escala planetaria unida por el interés común en el arte marcial del taijiquan.

Palabras clave: Artes marciales; tai chi; turismo; turismo cultural; UNESCO; herencia cultural intangible.

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Resumo

Este ensaio analisa os principais conceitos enunciadados pela literatura internacional sobre turismo de artes marciais e, pela categoria ainda mais ampla, de turismo cultural. Combina notas produzidas por uma observação participante e as imagens produzidas pelo próprio primeiro autor. O resultado é a ilustração de um caso particular de turismo de artes marciais inserido na década 2009-2018 e focado em Chenjiagou (aldeia de Chen), uma vila no interior da China (condado de Wen, província de Henan, República Popular da China). Aqui os turistas – atraídos pelo espírito peculiar do lugar, "genius loci", expresso na paisagem e nos costumes locais e reforçados por celebrações recorrentes ou pontuais – estão a contribuir para o desenvolvimento económico local e a melhoria urbana, criando um ambiente informal à escala planetária, através do interesse comum na arte marcial do taijiquan.

Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; tai chi; turismo; turismo cultural; UNESCO; herança cultural intangível.

1. Introduction

A tourist is certainly also a traveller, while the opposite is not true. The World Tourism Organization defines tourism more generally, in terms which go “beyond the common perception of tourism as being limited to holiday activity only”, as people “traveling to and staying in places

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outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure and not less than 24 hours, business and other purposes” (UNWTO, 1995). On the other hand, travellers can move freely between different geographic locations, for any duration and any purpose, including remunerated activities carried out in the countries or places visited. This article is therefore inscribed in the sphere of tourism because it traces several trips taken by the author over almost a decade, between August 2009 and October 2018, from Rome, Italy, his place of birth and residence, to the rural village of Chenjiagou, Wenxian county, Henan province, People's Republic of China. None of these trips lasted more than one month, as required by the visa granted to foreign visitors for tourism, nor did the protagonist ever carry out any paid activities.

The purpose of these trips lies in the passion for taijiquan, proclaimed Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO (decision [15.COM 8.b.21](#)) on the Fifteenth session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (held online, 14 to 18 December 2020). A remarkable result – which has already stimulated the development of specific and comparative studies related to martial arts tourism (e.g., Skowron-Markovska-Nowakowska, 2021) – expected since 2008 when Chinese government, through the Jiaozuo Chenjiagou Taijiquan Research Institute, applied to UNESCO for the recognition of taijiquan as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Taijiquan, an effective method of longevity and rehabilitation but also a refined combat system, its name can be translated as “punch” or “boxing” (*quan*) “of the supreme ultimate” (*taiji*) represented in the diagram handed down from the ancient Chinese cosmology (Figure 1) which expresses the universal efficiency of the rhythmic alternation between the complementary opposites *yin* and *yang* (Granet, 1934).

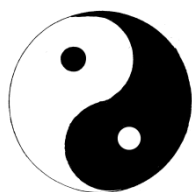


Figure 1. Popular representation of *taiji*, “great pole” or “supreme ultimate”

Among the institutional initiatives implemented to support UNESCO’s recognition, it should be noted that in January 2017, the Co-ordination Committee for the Safeguarding of Taijiquan was established. This institution, supported by the Culture and Tourism Department of the Henan province, gathered the main taijiquan schools rooted in various areas of the country. The goal was to establish a plan for the best dissemination of the traditional principles and practices of taijiquan in the near future, while preserving and ensuring its quality. Highlighting how taijiquan embodies the profound humanistic spirit of China, the Co-ordination Committee for the Safeguarding of Taijiquan emphasizes how its origins, deeply connected with the natural cycles of alternating opposites, proves a vivid witness of human creativity, as explained in a specific video recorded by Department of Culture and Tourism of Henan Province in March 2019 [[link](#)]. The common foundation of respect for diversity and easy access for all, makes the taijiquan philosophy compatible with the various forms of sustainable development, manifesting the value of traditional knowledge for health preservation even in the contemporary world. A total of seven styles, which are deeply rooted in several local communities (Table 1), are represented in the Co-ordination Committee for the Safeguarding of Taijiquan.

Table 1. Taijiquan styles represented in the Co-ordination Committee for the Safeguarding of Taijiquan.

Taijiquan style	Localization
Chen	Chenjiagou village, Wenxian county, Henan province
He	Zhabao village, Wenxian county, Henan province
Li	Dongjie village, Chengguan township, Wuqing district of Tianjin
Wang Qihe	Huanshui village, Xingjiawan township, Renxian county, Hebei province
Wu	Qingchengnanqu, Xingfeng subdistrict, Daxing district of Beijing
Wuu	Guangfu township, Yongnian district, Handan city, Hebei province
Yang	Nanjie Guangfu township, Yongnian district, Handan city, Hebei province



The proposal for taijiquan being recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity was also supported by a worldwide mobilization, as evidenced by the videos produced for this purpose by practitioners from all over the world. Some of these videos were collected in special compilations and included in the dossier submitted to UNESCO (see e.g., this [link](#), in which Chen Taijiquan practitioners all around the world congratulate the successful application of taijiquan to the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity List). This video documentation demonstrates the key role played by the Chen Clan from Chenjiagou behind the whole process started in 2008. This study focuses precisely on this special village in Wenxian (Wen County), in rural inland China, which has risen to worldwide fame in recent decades. Research conducted by Tang Hao (1969), Kang Gewu (1995) and Tommaso Gianni (2013) state that this is the place where taijiquan derives from.

Wenxian is located in Henan, the most populated province of the Chinese Republic, dotted with many sites which are documented in the earliest Chinese history. In 2005, the Chinese government declared taijiquan to be part of the national heritage, granting Chenjiagou the title of “Holy Land of Taijiquan” (Lu, 2018). Furthermore, in June 2007, the China Folk Culture and Arts Association certified Wenxian as the birthplace of Chinese taijiquan, accepting the conclusions of martial arts historian and anthropologist Kang Gewu, who also holds the position of Secretary-General of the Chinese Wushu Association. In the following August, a senior member of the Chinese National Sports Association unveiled a plaque in Chenjiagou declaring this village as the birthplace of taijiquan (Gaffney & Siaw-Voon Sim, 2009).

The knowledge of this remote location abroad has been promoted, at least since the nineties of the last century, by the masters of the Chen Clan. Especially by Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang, who, for over two decades, has been traveling twice a year around the world to direct week-long seminars organized by his students in several countries on America, Asia, Europe and Oceania, with the participation of thousands of enthusiasts. Since the end of the last century – with a notable increase in the last decade – many of these taijiquan enthusiasts, as well as the students of other masters from the Chen Clan, have travelled to this characteristic village, staying generally for a few weeks at the hostels built in the meantime, to deepen their skills in taijiquan.

2. Materials and methods

The lines above intend to reflect on some aspects of the recent changes experienced by the Chenjiagou community under the pressure of particularly accentuated tourist flows, attributable to some well-defined conceptual categories. First of all, it is necessary to clarify the concepts of “heritage tourism”, “sports tourism” and “martial arts tourism” as developed by the social sciences. Some critical ideas, emerged from the author’s participant observation, will be analysed both with the narration and through images almost all taken by himself directly on the visited places. As the author embodies a dual role of scholar of social sciences, and enthusiastic tourist attracted by a very personal experience, a short autobiographical illustration is therefore necessary to contextualize the motivations and lines of conduct which animated him in going to trace the roots of taijiquan.

Although the article considers a ten year-period (2009-2018), it avoids the chronological order of a diary to dwell instead on certain aspects of the lived experience. It is interesting to focus on the case of Chenjiagou because it is a site characterized by a very peculiar *genius loci* (i.e., the distinctive atmosphere or “spirit” of the place) perceptible in every moment of its quiet daily life. The whole context recalls the tradition of taijiquan and its relevance and modernity: buildings and scenarios, residents’ work activities and visitors’ behaviour, unusual events and habitual management of time and space, even sounds and smells. It can be considered a “place”, more than a “space”, if we want to follow the “Experiential Perspective” suggested by the famous geographer Yi Fu Tuan (Tuan, 1977). In a humanistic perspective, he considers the concept of site distinguishing the abstract space measurable with geometric data from the place pulsating of life and passion. A site, therefore, depositary of many meanings that during the centuries human beings have attributed to it, making it unique. Several studies focused on heritage and martial arts tourism, however, demonstrate how the analysis of particular cases is useful to address broader issues (Green, 2003; Tu et al., 2013, Nguyen, 2014, Zhang et al., 2016; Porchet, 2019; Skowron-Markovska, 2019]. In any case, in order to ascribe value to the forms assumed by the phenomena in question,

the author has remained adherent to the description of facts observed and experienced, rather than to pre-established theoretical schemes. The experiences lived through participant observation are therefore essential to understand the nature of the facts narrated and the images accompanying this essay serve the same purpose.

The expositive style chosen is therefore mainly narrative, although supported by theoretical references and quantitative data. We are convinced that this approach allows us to avoid enclosing the studies on martial arts tourism in a too narrow conceptual framework, limited by the scarce valorisation of the experiential meaning of the various declinations that animate the journeys made for this purpose. This risk has already been noted in the broader sector of sports tourism [Ramshaw & Gammon, 2005, 2017; Van Rheenen & Cernaianu-Sobry, 2017], and it is especially evident in studies pertaining to the young sector of martial arts tourism. Martial arts tourism is still in search of its epistemological status, as demonstrated on an international scale by the heterogeneity of the topics dealt with to date (see e.g., Raimondo, 2011; Cynarski, 2017; Porchet, 2019; Skowron-Markovska, 2019; Figueiredo, 2020; Pawelec et al., 2020; Johnson, 2021; Skowron-Markovska & Nowakowska, 2021). It is therefore essential to stimulate a reading capable of exalting the experiential dynamics as crucial characteristics of the whole tourist phenomenon, even more of the cultural, sporting (Standeven & De Knop, 1999) and martial arts phenomena. In this specific case, this expositive criterion allows both to underline the intensity of the experience over a decade and to highlight in vivid detail the role played by the spectacularisation of traditional festivities in a rapidly changing rural context.

The author's participant observation has paid much attention not only to the description of every kind of festivities and ceremonies – such as national celebrations, religious festivities or celebrations specifically related to taijiquan – but also to the progressive changes in the landscape and in the city structures during the decade under study. The participant observation was however enriched by an intense daily training activity for a total of fifteen weeks spread over six stays between 2009 and 2018. In detail, the stays in chronological order lasted three weeks in September 2009, a whole month in April and three weeks in September 2010, two weeks in April 2011 and March 2013, and one week in October 2018. It should be added also a brief visit to the village in January 2016, on the sidelines of another week of training carried out mainly in Zhengzhou, capital of Henan province. The training sessions have always followed the same schedule with a morning warm-up of about fifteen minutes before the lessons of four to five hours with morning and afternoon sessions directed by Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang (in 2011, 2013, 2016, 2018) or Master Chen Bing (in 2009, 2010, 2013). With these masters, the lessons attended were mainly individual or with a few other expert practitioners. The forms studied during these training sessions, at different levels of expertise, were: LaojiaYilu; LaojiaErlu; XinjiaYilu; XinjiaErlu; Fan, and Double Sword. They were accompanied by an in-depth study of *tuishou* (pushing hands) and the application of the forms in combat. It is worth mentioning that besides the daily training routine, the author had been practised taijiquan every day for over twenty years before going to China for the first time, and that he also knows the other forms of the Chen style of taijiquan – with bare hands and with weapons – studied following Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang in many workshops and individual lessons in Italy and in several other European countries from 1993 to 2013. He is still continuing his daily practice. The regular training sessions directed by the two masters in Chenjiagou were almost always followed by evening meetings with other Chinese or foreign students in order to repeat the programme studied during the day or to allow free experimentation, often related to combat. The author recurred to the daily recording, both in written and video-photographic forms during his participant observation of the atmosphere that animated the participants in the training classes, and of the technical details considering his interest in the specifics of the discipline.

The images used here, which were produced by the author without any aesthetic or ideological purpose, have a merely denotative purpose: to reveal reality in its immediate entirety, albeit filtered through the author's point of view, in which all the elements are contextual and connected. This procedure refers to a particular direction of visual sociology, not to be considered as a discipline in itself, but as a method that allows for a greater integration of social reality in its systemic dimension, otherwise too fragmented by the sole written description (Ciampi, 2007; Mattioli, 2007; Faccioli-Losacco, 2010).



The usefulness of the above-described approach emerges precisely in the analyses that concern semantic codes originating from social experiences, in which the bodily dimension acquires a central role: exactly the same can be observed in martial arts tourism and certainly in the case analysed here (Pauwels & Mannay, 2019).

3. Results

The participant observation of events for different purposes experienced in ten years of visits to Chenjiagou shows how the customs of this community knew and are still going through a progressive integration between social and anthropological factors. The celebratory events, expression of the symbolic ritual traditions typical of a rural society, adapt themselves to the modern forms of spectacularisation encouraging a particular example of soft power (Nye, 2004; Ohnesorge, 2020). Indeed, the local cultural tradition has formed the indispensable basis for an economic and civil development, supporting not only the improvement of the living conditions of the residents but also the meeting of thousands of people from all over the world, both with the local community and with each other. Even before the hard-to-find quantitative data, the economic increase induced by the tourist flow attracted by the ancestral seat of taijiquan was evident even just by observing the extension or the construction from scratch of gyms, hostels, hotels and stores, so much so as to make the village almost unrecognisable to the eyes of the writer between the first visit in 2009 and the last one in 2018 considered in this essay.

In the background, the action promoted by the government in favour of the recovery and promotion of the cultural heritage, is explicitly revealed by the raising of new buildings with two different purposes: on the one hand structures with an evident identity-giving function, such as museums and monuments, on the other hand, structures functional to the urban restructuring of crumbling edifices, such as sports facilities and various infrastructures. Furthermore, although electricity reached the village as early as 1964, the personal experience has shown that, in the summers of 2009-2010, there were frequent power cuts due to the overloading of the network related to the sharp increase in the number of tourists during the summer season. As far as the telephone and digital network is concerned, while the first private telephones were activated in 1995, the development of the Internet has been more rapid. In 2009, the year of the author's first visit to Chenjiagou, the Internet already had a very efficient wireless connection, albeit conditioned by repeated power cuts.

The various hostels attached to the schools run by the most important masters of the Chen family played a decisive role in the development of accommodation facilities. The first hotel, already in operation in 1982, offered very spartan services, as will be described in more detail later. Similar structures, started up later on, have certainly improved the services offered as well as the number of beds. The largest one has become the Academy of Master Chen Bing – where the author stayed on several occasions – which in 2009 already had a capacity of one hundred-people. The structure was expanded in the following years, doubling its accommodation capacity that will be further increased with the forthcoming inauguration of a new complex. Other accommodation facilities separated from the practice venues have also sprung up, such as the Wangting Hotel – named after the founder of taijiquan in the 17th century – built in 2014, when a modern and spacious sports hall, separated by it by a large square, was inaugurated. With an accommodation capacity of around 350 beds in double rooms, equipped with suitable areas for catering, ceremonies and conferences, the hotel offers a comfortable stay in the Holy Land of Taijiquan for the large numbers of Chinese and foreign tourists, used to comfortable services. According to the data provided by its management, recently contacted by telephone, the daily average of the structure amounted of 100 customers before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, for a total of 36,000 stays per year.

As already mentioned, it is still rather difficult to find comprehensive data about the influx of tourists to Chenjiagou, but Master Chen Bing, deputy mayor for many years, has directly provided the writer with reliable, albeit approximate, figures. These data allow a more concrete orientation on the extent of the changes derived from tourism. According to this information, almost 100,000 tourists reached Chenjiagou in each of the years immediately preceding the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of them stayed for about a week with an average expenditure budget of about

USD 300 to cover the costs of lessons, accommodation, purchase of clothing, footwear and weapons for practice, and various gadgets. Unfortunately, it is not possible to specify the country of origin of these tourists except by visual evidence on the spot or by repeated website consultation. Participant observation, both physical and virtual, shows that the majority are undoubtedly from China, but that the number of foreigners is still very substantial. More precise estimates of the economic impact of tourism in Chenjiagou can be derived from the number of visitors to the Chen Wangting Museum and Chen Wangting Complex, indicated by Master Chen Bing as just under 90,000 per year. Even considering the high percentage of non-paying visitors, mainly schoolchildren, even if only half of the visitors had paid the ticket price of CNY 40 (about USD 6/EUR 5), the annual revenues are supposed to be more than substantial. According to a rough estimate, it can be calculated an annual income of over two 200,000 USD or EUR. A figure that is very far from those reached by universally known historical sites – such as the Forbidden City in Beijing, where a limit of eighty thousand visitors a day has been imposed – but certainly considerable for such a decentralised community that, until a few decades ago, was very little known. To get an idea of their economic impact, we can compare the amount of ticket sales in Chenjiagou estimated on the basis of the official data published by the Italian Ministry of Culture for 2017 ([link](#)). It can be thus verified that several cities and provinces of the Italian peninsula, certainly not as remote as Chenjiagou and much more populated and extended, in the same year recorded significantly lower revenues from their museums, monuments and archaeological areas.

4. Discussion

4.1 Heritage tourism, sport tourism and martial arts tourism

As already highlighted by the author in a work published ten years ago, social science today no longer considers tourism an accessory of the foundations of modern times but a constitutive phenomenon of contemporary societies (Raimondo, 2011). Tourism flows, in fact, induce profound transformations both on environmental and housing structures and on customs and mentalities. The interruption of the usual activities configures a space and a time specifically conceived for tourism, which are in contrast with the daily but also institutionalized normality, in which acting different kinds of social experimentation, thus exercising an authentic right of citizenship, is allowed (Smith & Eadington, 1995; Viard, 2003; Campbell, 2005).

In the context of studies dedicated to heritage tourism, it has long been noted that it is achieved by admiring landscapes and visiting historical sites and monuments, but also, in a more active way, through experiences that allow people to feel part of the place history and atmosphere (Hall & Zeppel, 1990). It should be noted that heritage tourists are typically more educated, older, and often wealthier than other travellers, so they tend to stay longer in their destinations, to move from home more often, and to spend more money (Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, 2002; Gibson, 1998b). As a result, especially this type of tourists, with their consumption, build the social space of the place visited both at the level of economic benefits and at symbolic level with the meanings they attribute to it (Su & Teo, 2009).

This essay also takes inspiration from sport tourism studies, which refer to trips undertaken to attend or participate in a sporting event, remaining away from the tourists' usual environment (Gibson, 1998a; Gammon & Robinson, 2003; Sobry, 2004; Weed, 2005, 2009]. In particular, the participation in a sporting or recreational activity is an obvious product of the growing attention paid to physical activities. A phenomenon stimulated by the need to adopt healthy lifestyles, that can balance the stressful rhythms of urban life, now extended also to the most outlying and scattered areas, due to the pervasiveness of telematics, telephone and transport networks. Several studies emphasize how governments are inclined to organize sporting events as a tourism development strategy (Van den Berg et al., 2000], a useful theme for the present contribution.

Finally, the special category of martial arts tourism pertains precisely to similar circumstances. The growing number of contributions and the interest in the topics raised by specialized literature is bringing this analytical category out of genericity and taking on a more accomplished meaning, precisely in relation to studies on heritage tourism and sports tourism (Porchet, 2019; Cynarski, 2020; Pawelec et al., 2020; Figueiredo, 2020).



4.2 Autobiographical notes: on the “way of sharing”

The journeys mentioned in this essay, however, were motivated by the first author’s desire to refine a personal path of balance between mind, body and soul through the practice of taijiquan rather than to the intention of producing scientific research. This attitude usually belongs to martial arts enthusiasts and particularly to teachers of Chinese disciplines, as recent studies have shown (Partikova, 2019). Since the days of Luciano of Samosata (125-181 AD) (Lucianus, 1990), it has been clear that the journey constitutes a possible escape from the monotonous conformism of one’s time. The expert American writer Paul Theroux reiterates that the desire to travel seems to be a fundamental characteristic of the human being who, while traveling, wishes to satisfy curiosity, to appease fears, to escape boredom, to explore the unknown. Ambitions always animated by a blind faith in the importance of the elsewhere as a place where a renewal is possible (Theroux, 2011).

Therefore, an autobiographical digression is necessary, above all, to contextualize the conceptions and attitudes that accompanied the experiences lived in Chenjiagou. This autobiography is certainly interesting not as personal events but because it is emblematic of a value heritage to a large extent shared with the taijiquan and other martial arts enthusiasts met in ten years of travels to China. It furthermore allows us to stigmatize some asphyxiated western New Age far-fetched ideas which have often weighed down the relations with oriental cultures with presumptuous ideological filters.

The author, educated as historian and developing his main work as librarian of the State Library of Modern and Contemporary History (Rome, Italy) until his retirement in 2021, approached taijiquan in 1984 when Master Giovanna Sabatelli introduced him to the Yang style, which both abandoned in 1993 to follow the teachings of Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang, the main representative of the Chen style at the global level. They followed the grandmaster in different European countries and, from 1998 to 2013, invited him to Rome and other Italian locations every year, almost without interruption. In 1999 the author founded the sports association “Il campo del cinabro” (www.ilcampodelcinabro.it) directed by Master Sabatelli, and became its president. In 2011, Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang welcomed him into the Chen family lineage with the *baishi* ceremony held in Chenjiagou, as described below. From 2006 to 2018, Il campo del cinabro organised at least one annual seminar in Rome directed by Master Chen Bing, grandson of Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang. Within this association, the author combines his daily practice with teaching. Since 2002, he works as associate lecturer at the Sport Sciences Faculty of the University of Cassino and Southern Lazio.

When the author of these notes started practicing taijiquan in 1984, he had already turned twenty-five, he had been working in Italian cultural public administration for over five years and was about to complete his graduation thesis after completing a four-year cycle of university studies, followed by further five years of doctoral studies in economic history. The dreamy faith in a regenerating “elsewhere” had therefore been disproved for some time by a more realistic approach, not at all indulgent towards self-absolving escapes into unreality. The Californian anthropologist Jan English-Lueck at the end of the last century had already pointed out that the millennialism that has often accompanied – especially, but not only, in the Western countries – the practices of psychophysical integration of Asian origin is a phenomenon attributable to the anxieties of modern man rather than to the essence of traditional knowledge (English-Lueck, 1990).

A solid orientation was rather that of the research in the direction of the non-social principle that regulates human behaviour, which Alain Touraine (1993) indicated as a possible antidote to the increasing influence of the technical apparatus, of the market and of the State, on the individual. The attitude assumed has also certainly reverberated a culture opposed to that of a short-sighted Eurocentric perspective, expression of a classical cultural heritage which only a limited *élite* can manage to master. Until a few decades ago, the pompous and illusory belief in self-sufficiency typical of this narrow perspective – unfortunately still persistent in intolerant political forms – blocked the possibilities of intercultural communication on a mutual level, due to the foreclosure to understand and accept what appeared different and therefore considered inferior. The conduct followed in ten years of tourism in China was instead consistent with an attitude aimed at gathering shared values in both passionate and rational terms. A flexible attitude, two

decades ago invoked by Franco Ferrarotti (2000), as a necessary way out of the uncountable massacres that bloodied the Twentieth Century due to the rigidity of Eurocentric culture.

4.3 Chenjiagou

4.3.1 Economy and landscape in the early 2000s

Agricultural production has been the main source of the local economy until recent years, as confirmed by a survey conducted in 2006 by researchers of the Henan University (Gaffney et al., 2009), a fact immediately noticeable even with a short stay in the village. From what was observed and learnt during the visits in the decade 2009-2018, maize and peanuts can be considered as the main local products. Certainly, this was the immediate impression made on in two of the first three visits – of about a month each, in 2009 and twice in 2010 – due to the season in which they occurred, the late summer, when both the plants are harvested.

The custom of leaving the shelled maize kernels to dry on the paved roads (Picture 1) strikes the visitor who arrives in the village in this period with the fresco of yellow carpets tens of meters long, sometimes prayed on by hungry sparrows. This impressive sight is completed by the residents, including the elderly and the children, intent on shelling the corn kernels from the cobs or the precious peanuts from the uprooted plants collected in piles (Picture 2). Outside the village, the gaze is also lost on vast expanses of wheat cultivation, while no cotton and melon cultivations were identified, even though the author was informed about a good production. In the village, it was easy to run into flocks of sheep, housed in miserable shelters often adjacent to crumbling hovels still inhabited. According to the information gathered, corn and wheat are mainly used for self-consumption, while peanuts, cotton and melons find wider commercial outlets. The same research of 2006 attested the resident population to just under three thousand inhabitants for a total of six hundred families, almost all living in dwelling supplied with electricity and running water. Most of them had just received primary education; graduates were very rare.



Picture 1. Chenjiagou, September 2009. Maize kernels on the road.



Picture 2. Chenjiagou, September 2009. Shelling the corn kernels from the cobs.

Since 2003, movement within the village has been made easier by a twelve-meter-wide road that cuts vertically through the village. However, only a few years ago, this same road was effectively paved along with the secondary roads that were previously left in a state of almost total

abandonment after their installation in the early eighties of the last century; neglect that until a few years always turned a large part of the village into a mud puddle in case of rainfall.

Although agriculture still seemed to characterize the local economy in October 2018, the date of the author's last visit, since the early 2000s the government's commitment to transform Chenjiagou into a tourist attraction has become tangible. This strategic direction derives directly from the new cultural policy inaugurated by the Chinese government after the turbulent years between 1966-1975, during which every expression of traditional culture was attacked. From the late 1970s, cultural heritage has also been reaffirmed as an economic value, as a tourist attraction, which has resulted in the restoration of important monuments such as the Forbidden City and the Great Wall. Since 1982, with the publication of the *Heritage Conservation Act*, the conservation of cultural heritage has been strengthened through the promotion of scientific research, also on an increased local scale through patriotic educational initiatives aimed at defending the revolutionary gains. These initiatives are usually based on the exploitation of the traditional, cultural identity (Sofield, 1998; Su & Teo, 2009). Wushu (i.e., martial arts) is also an important element of this cultural heritage recovery (Lu, 2018). In the case of Chenjiagou and taijiquan, the first public intervention was implemented in 2004 with an initial investment by the local authorities of Wenxian of thirty-three million renminbi (CNY; \approx EUR 4.5 million), intended for the restoration of the historical residence of the Chen family's ancestors. This first allocation in 2014 was followed by another one of no less than two hundred million renminbi (\approx EUR 27.5 million), aimed at a radical urban restructuring of the village (Lu, 2018).

4.3.2 Genius loci

In Mediterranean antiquity, the spirit of a place, *genius loci* in Latin, was sacred by placing it under the protection of a divinity. The consecration of the spirit of Chenjiagou manifests itself in a tangible form in some specific areas of the village characterized by architectures, statues, frescoes, furnishing and commemorative stones that enhance the image of the ancestors and the liveliness of the local tradition. Besides its sacred essence, it is characterized by a ditch from which the country takes its name, since Chenjiagou exactly means "Chen Family Ditch". However, it is not a wild corner but rather a sort of garden where trees, bushes, stones, paths, pitches and a bridge merge together creating a harmonious and suggestive environment around the ditch, often invaded by rainwater, surmounted by two commemorative black stone stelae (Picture 3).



Picture 3. Chenjiagou, September 2009. Master Giovanna Sabatelli practicing on the bridges of Chen's Ditch.

Going up a few steps there is a massive stone arch centred on the top of both sides by *aedicules* with Chinese characters that delimits one side of the square, circumscribed on the other side by an arch which appears identical in the shape but with different writings.

Although with the recent urban restructuring other important aggregation centres have also arisen connected by new roads, this square constitutes the historic core of the village. Here we find taijiquan clothing and accessories shops, which also offer tailoring services, the entrance to a vast monumental complex and the academy directed by Grandmaster Chen Xiaoxing, which since 1980 has been hosting the Chenjiagou Taijiquan School, established by Henan Tourism Office, Wenxian Government and Chenjiagou Community ([link](#)). This is also the first centre to offer hospitality to foreign students throughout the year. The academy includes a large square where daily workout routine is held and a large hall, where the author of these notes has taken part in various types of activities described below. For many years, the structure has not offered high-comfort facilities, according to metropolitan standards, but it included a spacious refectory, large toilets and a very spartan dormitory. The restructuring that took place in recent years provided this historic structure with greater comfort in terms of hospitality services.

In the extensive monumental complex mentioned, which is considered an authentic temple, the evocation of the *genius loci* is really powerful. The visit requires the payment of an entrance ticket, but, on the occasion of the celebrations for the new year, access is free to allow the resident population to pay homage to their ancestors. The entrance fee for visiting the entire complex – including the visit to another suggestive monument which is the memorial home of Yang Luchan, founder of the Yang school of taijiquan – amounts to 40 CNY (\approx EUR 5.5). This is a burdensome cost for the resident peasants, but it certainly does not discourage the visit of foreigners, especially those from opulent countries. The entrance arch – preceded by a staircase and guarded, according to tradition, by the statues of two lions – leads to a square. Here we find the statue of Chen Wangting – the founder of taijiquan (ca. 1600-1680), a general of the Ming dynasty who in 1641 commanded the garrison of the county – erected in 2005, the same year in which the Sports Ministry announced the recognition of Chenjiagou as the “sacred land of taijiquan” (Picture 4).



Picture 4. Chenjiagou “temple”, September 2009. The statue of Chen Wangting, founder of taijiquan.



Picture 5. Chenjiagou, April 2010. Training in front of the museum.

The refurbished palace includes various pavilions, connected by paths decorated with flower beds, frescoed with images of stories regarding the history of taijiquan and containing other statues as well as collections of weapons, furniture, and ancient furnishings. After these buildings, we find a long avenue of approximately three hundred meters surrounded on both sides by flower beds and punctuated by five arches that symbolize the different stages of the discipline learning, as explained by the inscription on a plaque at the beginning of the avenue. On the right side we find the cemetery which houses the graves of ancestors or at least those which escaped the fury of the Cultural Revolution. At the end of the avenue the elegant building that houses the first museum in the world dedicated to taijiquan stands out. It is the only museum in China devoted to a single martial art (Picture 5).

The internal layout responds to avant-garde criteria with interactive devices, functional lighting, a wealth of information, educational panels, collections of images, furniture, weapons, furnishings, clothing, and books. There are over three thousand exhibits that occupy the three floors of the exhibition surmounted by another panoramic top floor. Inaugurated by Senior State Officials representative of Culture, Tourism and Sports in August 2009 – just a few days before the writer’s first visit to the village – the structure is another tangible result of the public interest in promoting local development through the recovery of cultural heritage, having been built in four years of works entirely financed by public funds. The museum staff, interviewed by the author in April 2010 – less than a year after its inauguration – underlined that the museum and the entire complex had already become the usual destination for educational visits targeted at students of all levels. In front of the museum there is a vast square, whose floor is decorated by the enormous design of a *bagua* (eight symbols or trigrams) which can be admired in all its scenic effect especially from the top floor of the building (Picture 6). From up there, in fact, the view embraces not only the whole complex, but also large portions of the village and the surrounding countryside. The evocative scenery of the square in front of the museum has been enriched, since 2009, by a total of thirteen massive stone figures representing specific taijiquan positions. Their number and arrangement correspond to the thirteen basic taijiquan techniques, eight forces or gates and five directions. In 2018, the author was able to see that alongside the design of *bagua*, a truly gigantic new statue of Chen Wangting was also erected, much taller than the already prominent sculpture that dominates his historical residence.



Picture 6. Chenjiagou 2010. View from top floor of the museum.

4.3.3 Tourism consumption and social space: Chenjiagou changes face

The concept of local can be defined both with the characteristics incorporated in a specific place and as a product of the characteristic culture of that area. It is therefore a rather flexible notion that helps us to understand how the specific context is permeable to influences generated in external social dynamics. The consumption places become the significant spaces for the social interaction processes and rituals, where new forms of subjectivity and protagonism emerge, induced by the overcoming of industrial society centred on the work rhythms. The dimension of spare time, of *loisir*, assumes an increasing importance as a laboratory of experience and identity building. In the framework of leisure, meant as a ludic moment, identity no longer constitutes a given datum but tends to be a process of construction and deconstruction of meanings, between sign encoding and decoding (Goffman, 1974). The opportunity to experience a freer than usual identity materializes by participating in social situations where it is possible to meet other people attracted by the same interests. Tourism, especially tourism based on heritage and martial arts – due to the essence of the union of body and mind that characterizes these disciplines – represents then an experimental territory of impulses and desires that remain hidden in everyday life routine.

From this point of view, it is easy to interpret martial arts tourism – which can be considered a fertile gemstone of the encounter between heritage tourism and sports tourism – as a powerful factor of integration. Specially if it takes the specific forms of the case examined here, where it was also the driving factor of the urban redevelopment of the taijiquan birthplace. This

objective is also held in high regard, for example, by European cities municipal administrations that nominate their city to be designated European Capital of Culture for a year, a success that guarantees them visibility, that represent a tourist attraction and a possibility to have access to funds to invest in urban redevelopment.

The renovation of the existing town and its functional expansion was the most striking aspect observed during the author's stays in Chenjiagou between 2009 and 2018. The restructuring was truly pervasive involving private and public spaces, road networks, collective services, accommodation, catering, sports facilities and urban furnishings. As mentioned before, at the time of the first visit, in late summer 2009, the monumental complex extension over a homogeneous area had already been completed, including the various installations of the restored Chen Wangting residence, the museum, the park and the graves of the ancestors, as well as the house of Yang Luchan not far away, restored with the same Government funds. From this first nucleus of territorial arrangement, essential for the economic and symbolic enhancement of the local cultural tradition, urban planning continued, creating more immediately functional structures for daily public life.

Starting with schools and kindergartens that take teenagers and children in large numbers from neighbouring countries. Distant from the central square of the village at the time of their construction, the school buildings are now part of a capillary road network that serves a new functional centre including a modern hotel, named after Chen Wangting and completed in 2015, located in front of a spacious Sports Palace from which it is separated by a bright square characterized by a large staircase. By 2018, toilets, a police station (Picture 7), a bank counter, and a cozy double-storey restaurant were also built along the main road or in its immediate proximity.



Picture 7. Chenjiagou police station, 2018.

After the repaving of the main road, new carefully set up shops, small taverns and a more modern pharmacy than the existing one have been established, and the sewers running parallel to the street centreline were covered. At the same time, just next to the old centre of the village, another more modern style arch, some naturalistic sculptures and a high luminous scaffolding, surmounted by a screen that continuously transmits news and images about taijiquan, were installed. Traffic was revolutionized with the opening of an overpass, under construction at the time of the first visit in 2009, conveying the main access to the town exactly on the opposite side to the one travelled until 2013.

The connection with the larger-scale road axes and with Zhengzhou – the capital city of Henan, an important airport and railway station – was finally greatly enhanced with the construction of a long masonry viaduct over the Yellow River. A result to be underlined if we consider that the first crossing of the river on the first visit to Chenjiagou in 2009 was possible



thanks to a footbridge supported by boats. Even if it must be added that this evident sign of infrastructural delay, as well as the absence in Chenjiagou of a functional sewage system and the poor condition of its streets, was somehow balanced in the first impressions by the widespread presence of Wi-Fi, active even on the above-mentioned boat bridge. Especially if you travel both in rural areas and in metropolitan areas, it is still easy to bring back from China the feeling that the future coexists with the pre-industrial age.

The innovations described have been developed in parallel with the increase in the didactic offer in the schools directed by the various teachers of the Chen family, as well as with a considerable expansion of accommodation capacities. The most consistent example is that of the academy inaugurated in 2007 by Master Chen Bing, a pupil of his illustrious uncles Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang and Chen Xiaoxing, expanded in the following years in the accommodation facilities, in the canteen and in the gyms and still under construction in 2018. Here the author has always resided, except in 2018, when he settled in the new hotel named after Chen Wangting, closer to the Sports Palace where a seminar was held directed by his teacher, Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang, protagonist of an important ceremony which we will focus on shortly.

4.3.4 Tradition and modernity: a productive combination

Four decades ago, Joffre Dumazedier wondered whether contemporary civilisation was changing from a work-centred society to a leisure-centred society (Dumazedier, 1962). This was a prophetic intuition in the light of the radical innovations brought about by technological development in the production organization, which freed up personal time and consequently modified individual and collective behaviour, now immersed in a perennial transition. Free time, from being a residual interval between work shifts, therefore subordinate to the rhythms of production, acquired the value of a resource, capable of attracting specific consumption of symbolic exchanges, leisure and self-care, becoming itself a productive factor of goods and services. Urban spaces were also affected by the new demands, linked to the increase in individual leisure time, for example with the proliferation of facilities for outdoor sports activities during the hours of darkness, which had previously been practised only or almost only during daylight hours, with obvious repercussions on employment and mobility.

However, the case of Chenjiagou shows that it is not only the city that is affected by the radical transformations induced by the new consumer cultures, stimulated in contemporary society by the contextual affirmation of leisure time and the increased possibilities offered by means of transport, especially air transport. A place can become the theatre of identity experimentation even if it is located in a remote rural area but is full of history and organic to a consolidated tradition, expressed by a psychophysical system effective for longevity, self-defence and symbolic exchanges. From what the author has personally experienced, this is what has happened in Chenjiagou in recent decades under the impetus of tourist flows interested in the traditional heritage of the place, well understood by the government's action as a strategic development factor. In addition to the undoubted and indispensable force of state intervention, the key to this result is the combination of traditional and modernising factors, a phenomenon that the author has had the opportunity to directly experience during the various ritual events he took part in.

Before illustrating the details and the relative reflections, it is therefore appropriate to dwell on the participant observation underlying this contribution on the organization of the daily training. Apart from the seminars directed by Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang, the writer has always trained at the academy of Master Chen Bing, attending his lessons over the years either alone or with Master Giovanna Sabatelli – who introduced him to taijiquan in 1984 and has been his partner ever since – or together with a few other students, including some of his own students in September 2010. At the time of the various stays considered here, guests staying at the academy had always a very similar timetable. In the morning around 7:00 a.m., warm-up exercises conducted by a qualified instructor; breakfast with rice and vegetables – the same food the other meals of the day –, with the addition of a hard-boiled egg; training session of about three hours until the lunch-break at 11:30 a.m. / 12:00 p.m.; a rest until 3:00 p.m.; more training sessions until 5:30 p.m. / 6:00 p.m.; dinner, free hours dedicated to sightseeing in the village, shopping or free training, until 10:30 p.m., when the gate of the academy closes.

Except for these evening hours, group training sessions are conducted by instructors taught by Master Chen Bing, who prepare students selected on the basis of their level of competence in taijiquan. In the case of the writer, however, it is repeated that the teachings were provided directly and only by Master Chen Bing, with obviously higher costs than the group courses held by the instructors. From what it was observed in other academies and from existing studies on the subject (Gaffney, 2006), the didactic offer maintains everywhere the same rigorous approach in the organisation of the day and in the methods, for which more complex exercises are not studied unless the fundamentals of the art have been meticulously honed. However, an important difference has been noticed in the accommodation provided in the Master Chen Bing Academy, since its inauguration, in reserved rooms with two beds and indoor toilets, rather than in dormitories with shared outdoor facilities, where, instead, many teenagers permanently reside, in this facility and in the central school. Only in this structure was it possible to meet, during the ten years considered in this essay, an adolescent girl from Germany (Raimondo, 2011), while all the other resident adolescents and children came from the vicinity of Chenjiagou and from other nearby areas. The housing conditions certainly don't stop them from training very hard – together with their peers who live with their families – during the hours free from their school commitments: very early in the morning, late in the afternoon, in the evening, all day on Sundays and holidays. The atmosphere of their training sessions is at the same time very relaxed and very serious, the intensity of the efforts and their tireless dedication never erase the high spirits.



Picture 8. Chenjiagou September 2009. Master Chen Bing's students fighting.



Picture 9. Chenjiagou September 2009. Punishment meted out to a student of Master Chen Bing Academy.

The team spirit is clearly visible in the mutual respect. Each meeting at various stages of the day ends with a ritual greeting spoken aloud with which the practitioners thank their teacher. Yet the discipline is very strict, slow students undergo harsh physical punishments. The punishment usually consists of leaving the transgressor with his hands and feet on the ground for a long time, keeping the arms outstretched, adding sometimes blows on the buttocks with the flat of a sabre in case of children, or with a stick in case of teenagers. As partial consolation for the disapproval of these methods, many decades away from modern Western pedagogy, the author can testify that on several occasions he saw children holding back tears during the punishment who, when everything was over, in few seconds returned cheerful and lively as before. They were children, but the impression got on all these occasions was that it was shame rather than physical pain that burned. The personal experience gained in ten years of travelling through many provinces of the populous country suggests that intransigence, in terms of social norms, is a custom shared in China from an early age. The rigorous apprenticeship also allows these country boys and girls to aspire to a chance of redemption from rather marginal social conditions, given the structural backwardness of the area. Many champions in the various competitions that take place on a different scale, including the national one, come precisely from their ranks, whereas a considerable number is also recruited in the cinematographic industry or in public and private security jobs.

As can be seen, the didactic transmission of taijiquan preserves the traditional principles of the art. The context analysed remains in fact that of a rural area of inland China, albeit undergoing evident modernization, as demonstrated by the indissoluble link to agricultural cycles and the



commemorations of the most important ceremonial events handed down over the centuries. (Granet, 1919; Green, 2015). In recent years, however, they may also coincide with institutional celebrations, in particular with the anniversary of the proclamation of the People's Republic of China, celebrated annually on October 1. The events attended by the author, which it is most interesting to dwell to, were experienced in April 2010 and 2011 and in October 2018. In all cases these were activities directly related to the practice of taijiquan – performances, seminars, examinations and acceptance of new disciples into the Chen Clan – always organized during festivities and anniversaries such as the Ancestors' Day and the National Day of the People's Republic of China. The Qingming Festival, or Ancestors' Day, part of the Taoist folk heritage, occurs one hundred and four days after the winter solstice – or the fifteenth day after the spring equinox – generally on April 4 and 5 according to the Gregorian Calendar. During the Festival, Chinese families visit the tombs of their ancestors and make ritual offerings to remind the bond of the living and the dead and express the commitment of each generation to pass on the ancestral traditions. In this way, symbolic powers that confer stability and continuity on social and institutional arrangements are evoked, exerting an intense psychological influence on the entire community.

On April 5, 2010 and 2011, it was possible to see that the masters of the Chen Clan have fully absorbed the importance of maintaining traditional rituals as an expression of the unique characteristics of the advanced art in the specific context of Chenjiagou. Regarding that Gaffney and Siaw-Voon Sim (2009, p. 55) insightfully note that

(...) the secrecy of the rural family clans is one important reason why many family martial systems were able to develop their own unique characteristics and flavour. The patriarchal clan system was an essential condition for the development of many distinctive local combat systems. The great importance traditionally placed in the family, its strict isolation from other clans and its autonomous way of life preserved many rural martial styles over generations. Outsiders were granted no access to this knowledge.

Through the ritual homage to ancestors, the continuity of the spirit of the place assumes crucial meanings for the real essence of taijiquan typical of the village.

In the days around 5 April 2010, the author joyfully took part in a seminar lasting several days led by Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang and attended an evening of brilliant taijiquan performances staged by local students. The active participation in the seminar was reserved only to Chinese practitioners, but thanks to the author's familiarity with the grandmaster it was possible for him to attend the event. The experience was coloured by the fact that he was the only Westerner in the midst of around hundred Chinese participants, but it was interesting for ethnographic purposes, above all because it made it possible to verify some obvious differences between the organisation of the grandmaster's seminars in Europe and those held in Chenjiagou. In fact, in all the grandmaster's seminars attended by the author for over twenty years, as an organizer or as a simple student in Italy and other European countries (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Germany, England, Poland, Slovenia, Switzerland), the class, even if crowded, was always arranged in orderly rows with the appropriate spacing, mobile phones were turned off, no one spoke during the exercise and often the students, at least those from the host country, wore a uniform. By contrast, in that seminar held on April 2010, the layout of the class was randomly arranged, everyone dressed as they saw fit, people spoke even though they were practising, on the floor it was possible to find the tea containers lying there to free the hands during the movements, the phones often rang and someone even answered the call without interrupting the exercise. It should be added, however, that in the subsequent seminars with a large majority of Chinese students, attended by the writer under the direction of the Grandmaster in Zhengzhou and Chenjiagou in January 2017 and October 2018, all participants were provided with uniforms, the rows were orderly even before the grandmaster's entrance into the hall, greeted by applause and the practice was carried out in silence. This is another sign of the process of institutionalisation of taijiquan promoted in its homeland through standards, in this case borrowed from imported customs.

During this same stay, except on the dates of the aforementioned seminar, personal training continued in Master Chen Bing's academy and under his guidance and, when the writer was there, expanded with additional works (Picture 10). Among other things, he was able to witness the marked differences between the local way of working in construction and what is normally



observed in Europe. He detected a considerable presence of female workers, who also seemed to carry out the heaviest and least qualified jobs such as transporting and lifting bricks, and the almost total lack of safety on the site and on the scaffolding itself. These aspects, however, should be dealt with separately, through a more exhaustive field research since they were noticed in every region of China visited, from north to south, in the countryside and in the big cities, in the capital itself, and they seem to be directly related to the tumultuous Chinese economic development of the last decades.



Picture 10. Chenjiagou September 2010. Master Chen Bing teaching double sword in front of his Academy. Note the cobs to be shelled near the wall of the building behind and, on the right, the new building under construction.

During this period, Master Chen Bing also offered a surprise gift to the author, organizing an official ceremony to mark the donation of a book about taijiquan written by himself together with Master Gianna Sabatelli. The ceremony took place at the museum in the presence of a representative of the governmental cultural authority and of the Henan television, which filmed the event, carried out an interview with the support of an interpreter and then broadcast an in-depth report of over six minutes in the news ([link](#)).

In addition to the above-mentioned seminar directed by Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang with the participation of mainly Western students, other special events were associated with Qingming Festival on 5 April 2011. Two of these can be considered exciting milestones in the author's biography. Especially the *baishi* (honouring the master) ceremony in which on 28 March of that year he received the coveted honour of being welcomed into the Chen Family lineage by paying *ketou* (prostrating oneself by knocking one's head on the ground) to the ancestors and to Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang. This ritual is an authentic initiation that reinforces the close relationship between master and student, and it is no exaggeration to compare it to an adoption, so much so that from that moment onwards the initiate calls his master *shifu* (Master Father). The ritual took place at the statue of the founder Chen Wangting in the temple dedicated to him, in the presence of excellent witnesses, such as Grandmaster Chen Xiaoxing, Master Chen Bing, the same representative of the state cultural authority met the year before, and other local representatives. A table with votive offerings – fruit, sweets, a pig's head – was placed at the foot of the statue. A chair reserved for the Grandmaster was placed beside it, facing the group of students ready to be welcomed into the lineage, while the witnesses sat at their side (Picture 11).



Picture 11. Chenjiagou April 2011. Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang and the author after the *baishi* ceremony.

A presenter with a microphone explained to the audience the meaning of the ceremony and its stages, and read out the names of all the aspirants for the requested honour. About forty students, mostly from China, but also including five Germans, three Brazilians, a Chilean, a Croatian, a Russian and an Italian, namely the author of this ethnographic essay. Then the ritual began with the dean of the community paying *ketou* to the statue of the founder, first bowing three times while standing, then genuflecting and touching his forehead to the ground three more times. He was followed by the grandmaster who, after sprinkling liquor as a further votive offering, on his turn, paid homage to the ancestor and lit three long incenses in a brazier in front of the monument to symbolically ask the founder to authorize the admission of the aspirants into the family lineage. Soon thereafter, all of them and the grandmaster – led by the Dean, who scanned each bow from the microphone – repeated the same homage to the monument. Then, one by one, they knelt down, touching their foreheads to the ground three times in front of the Grandmaster who had returned to his seat, after handing him a written commitment with the official request to be admitted into the lineage.

From his hands they then received an official certificate recognising them as internal disciples of the clan, included in the family tree as representatives of the 20th generation of the Chen Clan. The six-page document is bound in a booklet like a sort of passport. The second page features a personal photograph endorsed by an embossed stamp bearing the same star as the one on the flag of the People's Republic of China. Under the photograph appears the inscription 入室弟子 (*rushi dizi*) which literally means “disciple enters the room” to indicate the intimacy created between master and student. The same characters are affixed to the cover just below a *wuji* (diagram of the void), while at the top and bottom other Chinese characters attest that the file contains a certificate pertaining to taijiquan of the Chen Clan of Chenjiagou. When the last of the students had completed the individual rite, they all greeted the official witnesses standing in front of them in a single row in front of the statue of the founder, a gesture symbolizing an oath of loyalty to the commitment they had just made to maintain the honour and unity of the lineage. The whole event was filmed by Henan television, with the same interpreter met a year before interviewing the writer again.

The other event experienced in April 2011 that marked an important stage for the author on the taijiquan path was an examination for the awarding of the fifth *duan* by the Chinese Wushu Association, a non-governmental organization established in 1958, which is however the only one officially delegated to preside over the organization of wushu on a national scale. As is already the case in the system that has spread from Japanese martial arts to those of other Asian countries, the *duan* classification allows for the certification of the level of competence achieved in a given discipline. The director of the office of the Chinese Wushu Association responsible for the evaluation of *duans* was at the time – as well as later – the aforementioned Kang Gewu. He composed the examining commission, together with two other eminent institutional figures whose exact identity has not been ascertained, Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang and Chen Xiaoxing and the only western representative Master Jan Silberstorff, founder and director of the German and Brazilian sections of the Chen Xiaowang World Taijiquan Association. Although it is not a formally established international organization, in many countries outside China – including Italy – the disciples of Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang have created independent legal associations, although all with the same world logo, which operate in the transmission of taijiquan preserving the principles taught by the grandmaster. The commission assessed the correctness of the answers to questions on the theory of taijiquan formulated on a form written in English, given the international origin of many of the candidates, as well as the level of skill demonstrated with exercises appropriate to the different levels of gradation. In fact, the grades provided by the Chinese Wushu Association are

divided into three sections that divide them into triads in ascending order, from first to third, from fourth to sixth, and from seventh to ninth. The first triad is marked by the emblem of an eagle, the second by a tiger, the third by a dragon. For the grades marked by the tiger, including the fifth coveted by the author, the required tests were individual performances of the traditional taijiquan Chen sequence called *laojia* (ancient sequence) and a sword form. None of the candidates, however, aspired to a rank higher than the sixth, Master Silberstorff was the only European to be awarded the seventh *duan*, which he obtained in an examination held in December 2007 in a spa resort in the Czech Republic – in front of a commission that had come there on purpose, made up of Kang Gewu himself, Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang and a Chinese national Wushu champion – when also the author had obtained the fourth *duan*. It is impossible to dwell on this event here, but it is remembered as an example of international martial arts tourism, since the remote Czech town was reached for the occasion by dozens of examiners coming from non-European countries, despite the heavy snowfall that hit it in those days.

The events experienced in spring 2011 were completed by another ceremony following an initiative of Master Silberstorff and the German school, namely the donation to the central school of the village of a black stone memorial stele commemorating the long teaching period of Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang in Europe. The donation ceremony took place in his presence in the square inside the academy established in 1982 and the event was attended by an audience of international students and teachers (Picture 12).



Picture 12. Chenjiagou September 2009. Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang and Master Jan Silberstorff uncovering the memorial stele.

As stated before, for some years some important events closely related to taijiquan can be associated with the National Day of the People's Republic of China, a public holiday celebrated annually on 1 October since 1949 to commemorate the formal establishment of the People's Republic of China. Although it is observed on 1 October, another six days are added to the official holiday, during which an intense tourist traffic explodes within the country. The ethnography used here takes advantage of the participation in 2018 on two of these occasions, one which took place precisely on October 1 and the other the following day. In the first case it is the laying of the first stone of the school that Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang built in his hometown. The second event is another *baishi* ceremony attended this time not as an aspiring practitioner but as an observer. In both cases the spectacular dimension assumed by this kind of events, with abundant use of cutting-edge technologies, significantly emerged, without however deleting or hiding their traditional nature. The ceremony of laying the first stone took place on the morning of October 1, in the chosen place on the outskirts of the town. Hundreds of students wearing a light cotton uniform – black trousers and red tunic with frogs, black jacket and yellow silk scarf (provided by the organizers upon request) – awaited the arrival of Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang. The chosen area extended in front of an existing building, of which it was possible to visit the large courtyard facing the rooms. At the centre of it an excavation deep enough to accommodate a memorial stone engraved with

auspicious inscriptions surrounded by some shovels placed into the ground, ready to be used in turn by the attendants to throw earth on the stone. Preceded by a short procession carrying banners, at his entrance in this area, the grandmaster was greeted by the sound of large and small drums, accompanied by metal cymbals, played by forty-three musicians – seven men and thirty-six girls wearing a traditional dress – (Picture 13).



Picture 13. Chenjiagou October 1st, 2018. Musicians.

When the grandmaster arrived on the stage that had been erected for the occasion, once the percussion sound ceased, the national anthem was played at full volume with the bystanders all standing up. Then plaques were awarded for the recognition of the new sections of the school named after the grandmaster that have flourished in recent years also in China after that he came back. With some amusement of a dozen Europeans who attended the event, musical pieces unrelated to Chinese folklore – such as *Radetzky* (Johann Strauss, 1848), the soundtracks of the movies *The Magnificent Seven* (Elmer Bernstein, 1960) and *1492: Conquest of Paradise* (Vangelis, 1992) – were played also in the afternoon section. After that, with great profusion of fireworks, the grandmaster and his wife threw earth on the stone using the shovels prepared, the same evocative gesture was repeated in turn by all the participants with other tools ready for use (Picture 14). In addition to the eccentric music, the burst of modern spectacularism was well highlighted by the constant flight of a drone that captured the images of the whole event, even when all attendants followed the grandmaster at the colossal statue of Chen Wangting erected in front of the museum. There, the event of the morning ended with a collective performance of *laojia* which also involved students from other schools, in a very exciting moment for the participants.



Picture 14. Chenjiagou October 1, 2018. Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang and his wife at the ceremony of laying the first stone.

In the afternoon the event continued in the new Sports Palace – in front of the recently built Chen Wangting hotel, which offers all comforts of a modern hotel – where a large stage has been erected and then removed in the following days, in order to allow Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang to hold his usual seminar attended by the hundreds of students who wore the aforementioned uniform, showing a well-understood discipline. On October 1, in a venue totally packed with around a thousand people, the stage served to further enhance the spectacular content of the event. Different speakers took turns on the stage. They were set on one only row, with Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang placed in its centre. He was in front of a twenty-meter wide screen that uninterruptedly transmitted creative videos on topics related to taijiquan aesthetics. When all the speakers – about twenty –, placed their hands on the screen, they emanated some figurative rays that were concentrated in a single explosion with a strong scenic impact. Other smaller screens, but still quite large, punctuated the four corners of the large installation above the stands with the same images transmitted by the central device. Several performances then followed, the last of which, by the fourteen Westerners participants, including the author, was an *impromptu* performance. It must be underlined that the event and the seminar of the following days attracted a large number of practitioners from many areas of China, even from distant cities.

As mentioned before, the next day a new *baishi* ceremony took place with Master Chen Bing. It attracted a large number of practitioners – about one hundred and thirty – in the family lineage. Many of them were Chinese, but there were also participants from Poland, Greece, UK and Palestine. As a form of respect for his Muslim religion which reserves this gesture solely for prayer, he was allowed to obviate the ritual bow by remaining as long as necessary kneeling on both legs but without genuflecting with his forehead on the ground, therefore with its torso erect and its hands in the position of the typical wushu greeting, a very uncomfortable position. This day was a special day for the author, who this time took part in the event not as a beginner, like in 2011, or as spectator, like in 2007 in Italy, when the ceremony was celebrated by Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang in an almost private way to welcome nine students in the lineage, including Master Sabatelli. In this case the author was able to experience the thrill of appearing, as the only Westerner, among the official observers. This high honour was granted by Master Chen Bing in recognition for the support offered to a local young woman since 2009, when the sports association chaired in Italy by the author started supporting her to ensure her education and taijiquan training. This young woman was, this day, included among the new disciples welcomed.

Before the ceremony began, all practitioners put their signatures on a large red panel, a spectacular added element. The wife of Master Chen Bing was always close to him. She performed with him all the rituals addressed to the ancestors and sat by his side in the other moments, to testify how the rite really embodies the belonging of new disciples to the family (Picture 15).



Picture 15. Chenjiagou October 2nd, 2018. Master Chen Bing and his wife at the *baishi* ceremony.



Picture 16. Chenjiagou October 2, 2018. *Baishi* ceremony.

Practitioners wore an elegant uniform – black trousers and white tunic – made for the occasion and, upon receiving the official admission document from the hands of the master, they were dressed up by himself with a yellow silk scarf. The ritual bows took place in a slightly different way from what has already been described for the ceremonies previously attended by the author in 2007 and 2011 since, due to the considerable number of new disciples, *ketou* was performed not one at a time but keeping the order of their rows (Picture 16), then lighting each three incense sticks in the brazier at the feet of the founder. This was a clear proof of how the traditional ritual can take flexible forms without being distorted in substance, just as it is in the essence of taijiquan. At the end of the rite, the disciples performed a taijiquan sequence in the square, elaborated for the occasion by the master who had performed before them. Once the sequence was completed, everyone addressed loud cheers in favour of the future of taijiquan in the direction of a drone that filmed the entire event. A further confirmation of the spectacularization of traditional events, which was framed by the large audience intervened.

5. Conclusions

In the case of the planetary diffusion of taijiquan the prerequisite for aggregation can be identified in the search for well-being through the achievement of personal balance. A result made possible by an exercise that develops awareness of the plurality of senses that involves every personal experience and by the self-discipline with which consistent practitioners animate their training by putting their limits under control to cultivate their potential. An exercise that does not require words, but which, nevertheless, becomes a grammar capable of connecting otherwise completely distant cultures, just as it happens for music (Windress, 2016), dance, and artistic expressions in general. In this sense, these experiences seem to go towards the *network society* and the *network state* described by Manuel Castells (2000) as dynamic and self-expansive forms of the organization of human activities in contrast to the concerns of Anthony Giddens (1990) about the fading of the universalistic vocation of modernity. It could also be said that the attractiveness of taijiquan that prompts thousands of tourists to travel to Chenjiaogu and to other Chinese destinations from abroad and cover great distances for the same purpose also within China, can represent an example of *soft power* (Nye, 2004; Ohnesorge, 2020). It is no coincidence that Grandmaster Chen Xiaowang, other eminent taijiquan masters and the authorities of the Chinese Wushu Association were urged by the Chinese government to make an educational tour in Austria, Germany, Italy, and Hungary in the first months of 2018 as part of an initiative entitled *East meets West* – this event attended by the writer in the Italian stage – part of the diplomatic and commercial campaign in progress in the world known as *One Belt One Road*.

Economic globalization is often perceived as a destructive factor of local cultures. In the case considered here, we must certainly stigmatize some alienated actions of some visitors in blatant contrast with the ancestral spirit of the place. This can be found, for example, in some tourists' compulsiveness of filming with smartphone the masters' or other practitioners' performances, on official or daily occasions, to be published on social media as soon as possible. With much greater concern, one could also fear the environmental damage caused by the increase in tourist flows. However, since we do not have information on this subject, we can only hope that this phenomenon will be controlled by a constant monitoring that is essential both to quantify the amount of waste produced by planning its correct disposal and to prepare suitable solutions for reducing energy and water consumption.

In short, it seems that globalization so far has produced substantially positive effects in Chenjiagou. As evidenced by the numerous openings and expansions of accommodation facilities, shops and restaurants, the local community has certainly benefited from the increased tourist influx on a commercial level, especially through enrolment in taijiquan courses, food consumption and other kinds of consumption, as well as through the sale of clothing and accessories often produced by local artisans. All operations which also brought in considerable amounts of foreign currency. Moreover, it must be underlined the positive impact of the public infrastructure system that made it possible to remedy the deficiencies in the existing hygienic and housing conditions and to overcome the isolation previously suffered by the village due to the absence of efficient connections. Although, this is happening in a context that affects the whole of China, where cities

are becoming megalopolis and are devouring the countryside, probably provoking long-term effects that must arise serious concerns.

The respectful and careful attitude to perceive the *genius loci* of the great majority of tourists who travel to Chenjiagou animated by the passion for the taijiquan plays a decisive role in the dissemination of the traditional culture. The author has verified an almost total willingness to adapt to local uses and customs. Indeed, there has often been a conscious desire to put aside one's habits and lifestyles with the consequent triggering of a personal maturation brought back with them in their places of residence as a valuable acquired heritage. The local cultural tradition has therefore become an engine of economic and civil development, favouring not only the improvement of the living conditions of residents but also the meeting of thousands of people from all over the world, both with the local community and with each other. In a non-episodic and romantic dimension that finds solid possibilities of continuity and verification in the use of digital communication. The organic evolution of taijiquan seems to be still in progress, in fact an integration of the discipline in the programming of the Henan University located in Zhengzhou, on the model of what has recently been achieved for Shaolin Wushu has been envisaged [link].

The highlighted sensationalism elements show that the consumption associated with sporting events, in this specific case associated with traditional martial art in its own homeland, can be used, as indeed often happens, for the purpose of constructing symbolic meanings including those imported into the local context. It is important to reflect on the use of technology certainly unrelated to the rural history of the village and of musical pieces that are certainly engaging but rather jarring with the *genius loci*, as well as on the incorporation of costumes borrowed from experiences gained elsewhere by local masters, for example with the adoption of uniforms and proper attitudes during seminars.

Overall, we can see an extraordinary effectiveness in terms of heritage market strategies that promotes both economic and social innovation with the consolidation of identity belonging on multiple levels: local, national and group level, on an international scale. However, further studies are necessary both to clarify whether methodological cosmopolitanism is already underway in these experiences, as advocated by Manuel Castells, and to measure the extent of the changes in progress brought about by taijiquan tourism. What is certain is that, after decades of globalization largely dominated by the market appetites, the development of civilization today increasingly needs open ways towards a world society that instead heads towards the construction of a sense of belonging as broad and supportive as possible, particularly, to overcome the hard times of the COVID-19 pandemic: "We were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm... We have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this. No one is saved alone". These are the words of hope that Pope Francis addressed to the world on the evening of March 27, 2020 on the Easter vigil, in St. Peter's Square, deserted as never before.

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