

Review of *Poematica del Principio Tai Chi*, by Massimo Mori

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REVIEW

Abstract

This review covers the book *Poematica del Principio Tai Chi* (Firenze, Italy, 2020) by Massimo Mori, that gather a lifetime multicultural researches converging on the Tai Chi, Supreme Principle coming from the unknowable *Dao*. When applied to the martial art, tai chi becomes *taijiquan*, "Punch of the Supreme Principle". The first chapters provide the coordinates to deepen a holistic paradigm through different trajectories ranging from the classical cultures of the East and the West to the globalized contemporaneity. Complex and fascinating themes are creatively addressed in the subsequent chapters. The book ranges from theology to theoretical philosophy, from physics to literature and art, even to cinema. The chapters on *I Qing* and *Daodejing* indicate how the holistic vision of a conscious wisdom can be defined as systemic and essential in the relationship between culture and nature. If the *Dao* is the *Way*, this has to be followed in the name of a natural ethic that the *Daodejing* shows with an enlightening wisdom. Thus, the practice of Taijiquan becomes the "martial art of peace" and the Taiji Supreme Principle, practicable in every activity, is the paradigm of a renewed humanism. Massimo Mori is considered among the masters who have dedicated their existence to the wisdom vision of a New Horizon – as he called his school - and his book is a premise to imagine peace between East and West, between all the people of the globe living under the same sky.

Keywords: Martial arts; Chinese martial arts; tai chi; taijiquan; holistic paradigm; multidisciplinary approach.

Revisión de *Poematica del Principio Tai Chi*, por Massimo Mori

Resumen

Esta reseña cubre el libro *Poematica del Principio Tai Chi* (Firenze, Italia, 2020) de Massimo Mori, que reúne investigaciones multiculturales de toda una vida que convergen en el Tai Chi, Principio Supremo proveniente del incognoscible Dao. Cuando se aplica al arte marcial, el tai chi se convierte en taijiquan, "Puñetazo del Principio Supremo". Los primeros capítulos proporcionan las coordenadas para profundizar en un paradigma holístico a través de diferentes trayectorias que van desde las culturas clásicas de Oriente y Occidente hasta la contemporaneidad globalizada. Temas complejos y fascinantes se abordan de manera creativa en los capítulos siguientes. El libro abarca desde la teología hasta la filosofía teórica, desde la física hasta la literatura y el arte, incluso hasta el cine. Los capítulos sobre *I Qing* y *Daodejing* indican cómo la visión holística de una sabiduría consciente puede definirse como sistémica y esencial en la relación entre cultura y naturaleza. Si el Dao es el Camino, esto debe seguirse en nombre de una ética natural que el *Daodejing* muestra con una sabiduría iluminadora. Así, la práctica del Taijiquan se convierte en el "arte marcial de la paz" y el Principio Supremo del Taiji, practicable en todas las actividades, es el paradigma de un humanismo renovado. Massimo Mori está considerado entre los maestros que han dedicado su existencia a la visión sabia de un Nuevo Horizonte - como llamó a su escuela - y su libro es una premisa para imaginar la paz entre Oriente y Occidente, entre todas las personas del mundo que viven bajo el mismo cielo.

Palabras clave: Artes marciales; artes marciales chinas; tai chi; taijiquan; paradigma holístico; enfoque multidisciplinar.

Resenha de *Poematica del Principio Tai Chi*, de Massimo Mori

Resumo

Este resumo aborda o livro *Poemática do Princípio Tai Chi* (Firenze, Itália, 2020) de Massimo Mori, que reúne pesquisas multiculturais de uma vida inteira, convergindo para o Tai Chi, Princípio Supremo proveniente do Tao desconhecido. Quando aplicado à arte marcial, o Tai Chi se torna Tai Chi Chuan, "Golpe do Princípio Supremo". Os primeiros capítulos fornecem as informações para aprofundar um paradigma holístico por meio de diferentes trajetórias, que vão desde as culturas clássicas do Oriente e do Ocidente à contemporaneidade globalizada. Temas complexos e fascinantes são tratados de forma criativa nos capítulos subsequentes. O livro vai da teologia à filosofia teórica, da física à literatura e arte, até mesmo ao cinema. Os capítulos sobre *I Qing* e *Daodejing* indicam como a visão holística de uma sabedoria consciente pode ser definida como sistémica e essencial na relação entre cultura e natureza. Se o *Dao* é o Caminho, isso deve ser seguido em nome de uma ética natural que o *Daodejing* mostra com uma sabedoria esclarecedora. Assim, a prática do Tai Chi Chuan se torna a "arte marcial da paz" e o Princípio Supremo do Tai Chi, praticável em todas as atividades, é o paradigma de um humanismo renovado. Massimo Mori é considerado um dos mestres que dedicou a sua existência à visão da sabedoria de um "Novo Horizonte" - como ele chamou sua escola - e seu livro é uma premissa para imaginar a paz entre o Oriente e o Ocidente, entre todos os povos do globo que vivem sob o mesmo céu.

Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; artes marciais chinesas; tai chi; tai chi chuan; paradigma holístico; abordagem multidisciplinar.



P*oematica del Principio Tai Chi*, published in January 2020 by Clichy, Florence, is a dense volume, in Italian language, a rare example of genuinely interdisciplinary skill, which is the result of the multi-faceted experiences of its author.

Massimo is a doctor who has practiced medicine for decades; author of numerous technical articles in his field; a multi-media poet who has received several acknowledgments; a tireless host for many of Florence's rich cultural organizations. As early as 1964, Mori travelled to Hong Kong where he became acquainted with the Yang style of *taijiquan* (in *hànyǔ pīnyīn* transliteration, but *tai chi chuan* in the Wade-Giles transliteration used in the book, which literally means "fist of the supreme principle"). After becoming an expert in the discipline through many years, he added the study of traditional Chinese medicine, as well as *qigong* techniques of energy well-being and *tuina* energy manipulation. In 1996, he founded his own school (the amateur sports association Nuovo Orizzonte ["New Horizon"], (www.nuovorizzonte.it) in the heart of Florence, which places great importance to the quality of exercise as well as to the detailed study of the theoretical, philosophical and artistic aspects of *taijiquan*. In the discipline's most authentic spirit, the welcoming spirit of Nuovo Orizzonte, called the "N.O. Nature-Culture Zone", has become a true cultural association over the years, one that invites the participation of scholars and experts of other schools, which is one more sign of the multidisciplinary approach that characterizes the author's whole life.

The impressive edition numbers 371 pages that include two important introductions by Amina Crisma and Ernestina Pellegrini, Bologna and Florence University respectively, in addition to several useful critical apparatuses, marking an improvement over the previous edition published by Caliel, Castel Maggiore, Bologna, which appeared barely two years ago, in October 2018 (Mori, 2018). Even the title of the essay indicates its essentially non-didactic stance. From the first to the eighth (and final) chapter, the reader actually finds themselves immersed in a flood of learning that requires considerable lexical mastery. But the book itself is enjoyable to read precisely because it is free from academic constraints and pedagogical responsibilities, easily leading to the continuous discovery of potential associations among concepts, sensations, philosophies, suggestions and even visions, in the literal sense. Indeed, the printed book is accompanied by two films that one can watch on a smart phone simply by scanning two QR codes provided in the back of the book. In this way, the reading experience can continue beyond the apparent closure of the book, concretizing the experience of the end producing a new beginning, just as in the rhythmic oscillation between *yin* and *yang* in *tai chi*, the supreme principle, which is at the heart of the entire work.

Right from the first chapter, which lays out the necessary keys to gaining deeper knowledge, the author states his intention to develop a holistic paradigm that can be found in various traditions and can be experienced in the present, while leaving fashionable orientalism behind. This is nothing new, especially ever since Edward Said (1978) – who curiously is never mentioned in the book – cogently warned critical minds about the risks of referring to eastern cultures superficially while forgetting that they have largely been, and continue to be, represented rather than understood in the western intellectual tradition. All the same, Mori proceeds in his intent with surprising creativity as well as consistency. He uses learned classical references that are never trite, but popular references as well, for example to musical journeys as different as those of Lou Reed, Demetrio Stratos and Bob Dylan. He manages to bring them all together through the force of his mind; with methodological scrupulousness, moreover, the eclectic teacher, doctor and poet proposes explanations for the language he uses availing himself of universal literary references that range from theology to theoretical philosophy, from physics to literature and even film.

A useful procedural guide can be found at the end of the third chapter which outlines a clear alternative stating that the hoped-for holistic paradigm must derive firmly from the combined action of philosophy, science and art. Mori thus avoids the philosophical dead-end that an overall, inert vision inevitably goes down when faced with the human need for choice, the only discriminating factor among the many variables that can turn us onto the path of the knowledge of virtue. Here intellect and emotions, instinct and rationality, body and mind, sense and non-sense, all separated by

reductive Newtonian-Cartesianism, are immediately recomposed in the universal efficiency of rhythm, as Marcel Granet (1934) would say, generated by the complementary alternation between *yin* and *yang*. Chapter six then focuses on a reading of the *I Qing* (or *I Ching* in Wade-Giles), itself preceded by two other chapters that analyze complex topics such as non-verbal perception, time and meditation which themselves merit a deeper consideration than is impossible in this space. A previously mentioned topic is also dealt with more firmly, namely the importance that man follow the path of nature. The same is taken up again in the next chapter devoted to the *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*, also known as *Laozi*) but it also true that this theme traverses the entire work. Most opportunely, in several passages the author underlines how nature, which is able to unify body, mind and spirit, does not manifest itself for it is a redeeming, divine emanation that welcomes whoever believes in a metaphysical entity, nor those who strictly observe moral precepts that are considered absolute precisely because they are an expression of transcendence.

Here the parallel between Mori's approach and new scientific paradigms is clear. Mori looks closer at the above-mentioned convergence especially with respect to Ilya Prigogine's and Isabelle Stengers's (1979) theories of time, chaos and predictability. Winner of the Nobel Prize for chemistry in 1977, Prigogine expounded a theory of dissipative structures that showed how the order of nature is not immutable, much less divinely inspired, but rather the result of continual fluctuations. But it is easy to see how the Daoist philosophy that the author presents also shares with molecular biology, particle physics and environmental sciences the same, what we might call systemic, vision of life. This means that reality is not seen as an unchanging fact, something given once and for all, which, when we begin to examine it only requires us to understand objective laws already transcribed somewhere, and isolate the various components of the natural world in order better to delineate them. Reality however is observed – and experienced by the same observer who thereby examines himself – as a totality that is not only inseparable but is also undergoing continual change. Ecology long ago showed that balancing ecosystems – and living organisms in general – is not a condition that is given once and for all, nor is it given in the absence of disruptive human influences. Living organisms, natural structures, are in fact complex systems characterized by numerous interactions among internal and external factors, but the most important aspect of their spontaneous development lies in their ability to expel disorder as a way to regain their own equilibrium. And that comes about by taking advantage of the incoming energy flow – from sunlight, for example – which creates a more stable new order. This necessary ability to self-organize is characteristic of both the reproductive spontaneity of ecosystems and living organisms on the one hand, and, on the other, the effort to follow the Path, the Dao. One could say that both nature and the good practitioner maintain a direction without having an end, where the direction is to maximize the available free energy while the path remains undetermined. Each environment, like each person, has its own genetic code from which it derives its ability to organize itself and maximize the available free energy.

After these lengthy disquisitions, amply bolstered by literary references of the highest order, the final chapters focus on the liberating, regenerative characteristics of *taijiquan*, an exercise that requires commitment and perseverance but that reaps its benefits, which are now recognized even by allopathic medicine, precisely because it eschews coercion. The steadfast practitioner of *taijiquan* reestablishes the rhythmic alternation of opposites through the non-action characteristic of the oldest Daoism, which however does not mean that they are inactive or passive, quite the contrary. They are in fact aware that the order of rhythmic alternation is the result of a continuous dynamism, characterized by numerous ceaseless and interdependent fluctuations – order through fluctuation, to use Prigogine's language. In order to achieve such a result, every living organism – a wood, a lake or a person performing an exercise – must maintain their own flexibility in order to be ready to seize as many choices as possible in interacting with their environment. One might even say that a system's flexibility, as well as its resulting stability, depend upon the number of available variables, fluctuating within a limit of tolerance. Ultimately, the more dynamic the organism's state, the greater the flexibility that influences its capacity for equilibrium. Losing flexibility means losing the ability to self-organize, which leads to disequilibrium, illness, loss of control. In this sense, the individual's wellbeing is the result of a dynamic equilibrium that involves the physical, psychic and emotional spheres in continual interaction with their natural and social environment. In sum, the ability to adapt to a changing environment is a necessary characteristic of both living organisms and social systems; losing this ability results in a stiffening that leads to unpleasant difficulties.

Before bidding farewell to his, necessarily attentive, readers, Mori mentions his connection to the current historical reality of the practice of *taijiquan*. At the same time, he reminds us that an effective teacher, a genuine mentor, can only be someone who offers his students the possibility of using their qualities in the best way, of optimizing available energy, not someone who is skilled at deceiving their disciples into believing that anyone can become a great artist.

More important still are his final thoughts on the attitude of a martial art such as *taijiquan* to establish conditions of peace. Those thoughts are quite well summarized in the exhortation to go *Beyond the naturalness of instinct*, the title of one of the paragraphs in the final chapter. If, in fact, the self-discipline that makes it possible to maintain physical and moral integrity through the practice of *taijiquan* is also a way of reaching the great order of universal nature, learning is not a solitary act, nor does it contribute to boosting self-centeredness. It is noteworthy that the diligent practitioner pays single-minded attention to respecting the spontaneous rhythms of the natural world because they are held up by a view of life that does not see the needs of man and nature as incompatible, but rather appreciates their collaboration. Similarly, the consistent practitioner will take great pains to keep an attitude of respect and collaboration alive even in the realm of social relations. Made more secure in their own means because conscious that the only source of anxiety and fear lies within their own person, the dedicated practitioner will be able to set aside their pride and free themselves from the chains of self-absorption. So, the process of self-education points toward consistently taking responsibility for the same methods that make it come about. By becoming aware of the interdependence of opposites and their continual alternation, we learn to recognize our own responsibilities with respect to changing circumstances and to be sympathetic to the search for equilibrium. Evoking and continuing consistency does not mean referring to categorical imperatives established by a metaphysical author. It means experiencing the harmony of the universe expressed in the alternation of the *yin-yang* opposites which are nevertheless equally complementary, just as night does not exist without day and vice versa. Mori's theory does not devise antithetical abstractions as a way metaphysically to resolve the question of opposites, which has visibly preoccupied philosophers of the past and present in every corner of the world, as Mori shows through continuous references to their works. Good-evil, true-false, beauty-ugliness, one-many, always-never, absolute-relative are balanced pairs rather than rival expressions; the opposites complement rather than exclude each other. Let us be clear that living the resonance of complementary opposites is a process that takes place in the visible world, where passions and conflicts are not repelled or negated, but instead experienced with enough strength to take on the responsibility of their own choices.

So, we can state that if choosing means excluding one possibility in favor of another, consistent practice can help us to identify the best solutions for the development of ourselves but also for civilization, for the growth of sharable and shared values in every corner of the planet, beginning with the respect for differences. From this perspective, it can actually be easier to imagine forms of organization derived from informed adhesion to harmony, which mirror the density of honest people because it is easy to bring about social cohesion through them. Any organization constitutes both a unity and a multiplicity. In other words, the various components express their own potentialities in a specific value context, which is limiting on the one hand, but on the other allows qualities to emerge that can exist only in the presence of such a context. We need only think of social rituals – personal hygiene, greetings – learned from birth within the family, or of a hologram or of biological organisms: every single part or cell already contains all information about the whole. Coherently acting out the resonance of opposites makes it possible to formulate grammars that are intelligible to different aspirations, drawn to a common goal. We should be thankful to Mori and to other teachers who, like him, have devoted their own lives to building a holistic paradigm based on the combined action of philosophy, science and art. A path that is all the more current for experiencing an ethical space imbued with a secularism that is careful to understand and respect the other, to listen to the voices of others as the basis for imagining peace.

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