

Université de Montréal

**Game of Thrones, Game of Body Practices: A CCO Study of Authority in a Traditional
Chinese Martial Arts Organization**

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Martial Arts Organization

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Résumé

En tant que type particulier d'organisation religieuse séculaire, les organisations traditionnelles d'arts martiaux chinois (TCMAO) sont peu étudiées en ce qui concerne la manière dont l'autorité est accomplie de manière communicationnelle et le rôle des pratiques corporelles. Fondée sur une vision performative de l'autorité relationnelle dans la perspective de la constitution communicationnelle des organisations (CCO), cette thèse propose de répondre à cette omission dans la littérature actuelle. Convaincue de la valeur de l'utilisation de théories indigènes pour étudier les pratiques locales, cette thèse s'appuie sur le concept de *chaxugeju* (ou *mode d'association différentiel*) du sociologue chinois Xiaotong Fei et développe l'idée d'autorité différentielle, qui décrit le phénomène par lequel l'autorité d'une personne peut être étendue à d'autres territoires et d'autres acteurs par le biais d'associations. Ensemble, les pratiques corporelles et l'autorité différentielle constituent le cadre conceptuel de cette thèse.

Cette thèse adopte une approche ethnographique en mobilisant des méthodes qualitatives. En analysant les données ethnographiques recueillies auprès d'une TCMAO située à Zhengzhou (Chine), j'identifie cinq pratiques corporelles principales dans une TCMAO: l'instruction incarnée, la pose de photos, le rituel corporel, la performance mise en scène et le concours situé. Chaque type de pratique corporelle joue un rôle unique dans l'établissement d'associations significatives qui aident les individus et les organisations à revendiquer une autorité différentielle. L'instruction incarnée présente d'une manière très efficace les artistes martiaux comme les vecteurs légitimes d'un art martial particulier, prouvant ainsi l'association authentique entre l'héritier et l'art qu'ils représentent. Ces personnes utilisent également le photo-posing pour développer leurs associations positives avec des figures d'autorité (humaines ou non) afin de revendiquer l'autorité différentielle des individus et des organisations. Parallèlement, ils évitent

toute forme d'association négative qui pourrait nuire à leur autorité. Grâce au mécanisme mutuellement bénéfique de l'emprunt de lumière et de l'ajout de gloire, le maître et ses disciples utilisent ces photos comme dispositifs d'auctorialité différentielle de leur association pour établir leur autorité respective par le biais de l'association maître-disciple.

De même, les rituels corporels établissent et réaffirment les associations des disciples avec leurs ancêtres, leurs maîtres et les lignées célèbres. Ces rituels sont essentiels pour accomplir l'autorité différentielle de ces disciples et de l'organisation qu'ils représentent. Les performances mises en scène contribuent ainsi à établir leur autorité en associant les artistes martiaux à des étapes importantes investies de prestige et d'influence. Quant aux performances mises en scène au niveau intra-organisationnel, elles permettent de différencier certains membres de l'organisation des autres en affichant publiquement leur statut au sein de l'organisation, ce qui aide ainsi les membres favorisés à accomplir les bases de leur autorité.

Enfin, les concours situés établissent l'autorité des artistes martiaux en les différenciant et en les plaçant dans différentes positions dans la hiérarchie de la communauté des arts martiaux. Ces cinq pratiques corporelles se mêlent les unes aux autres et contribuent à l'accomplissement communicatif de l'autorité dans une TCMAO. Cette thèse apporte des contributions significatives à la littérature sur l'intersection entre religion et organisation. Elle étend la recherche en cours sur la dimension matérielle de la communication. Elle fait progresser la discussion sur l'autorité relationnelle dans une perspective communicationnelle, en particulier la discussion du corps et du rôle de la pratique corporelle dans l'accomplissement de l'autorité.

Mots clés: autorité, pratiques corporelles, *chaxugeju* (mode d'association différentiel), communication constitutive des organisations (CCO), communication organisationnelle, organisation d'arts martiaux traditionnels chinois

Abstract

This dissertation aims to address two omissions in current literature. First, current literature has not examined how authority is communicatively accomplished in traditional Chinese martial arts organizations (TCMAOs), which are one special kind of secular religious organization. Second, in the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) literature, it is unclear what is the role of body practices in the communicative accomplishment of authority. Grounded in the CCO tradition, this dissertation seeks inspirations from Xiaotong Fei's *chaxugeju* (or *differential mode of association*) theory and develops the concept of *differential authority*, which refers to the phenomenon that authority can be shared and extended to other actors and territories through meaningful associations established in and through communication. Together, body practices and differential authority constitute this dissertation's conceptual framework to investigate how body practices contribute to the communicative accomplishment of authority in a TCMAO.

To answer my research question, this dissertation takes an at-home ethnographic approach to study a TCMAO located in Zhengzhou (China). I developed an *organic iterative approach* to analyze data collected through participant observation, conducting interviews, and writing a reflective journal. My analysis summarizes five body practices in a TCMAO: *embodied instruction*, *photo-posing*, *body ritual*, *staged performance*, and *contesting*. Each body practice plays unique roles in helping individuals and organizations establish meaningful associations with authoritative figures, and thus claim differential authority. They also intermingle and co-act with one another in the communicative accomplishment of authority in a TCMAO.

Through *embodied instruction*, martial artists show themselves as the legitimate *vectors* of a particular martial art, thus proving their authentic associations between the inheritors and the art. People use *photo-posing* to develop their positive associations with authoritative figures

(human or non-human) to claim the differential authority *of* individuals and organizations; and they avoid any form of negative associations that might hurt their authority. Through the mutually beneficial mechanism of *borrowing light* and *adding glory*, the master and disciples use photos as differential authoring devices of their associations to establish their authority respectively through the master-disciple association.

Body rituals establish and reaffirm disciples' associations with ancestors, masters, and famous lineages. They are critical for accomplishing the differential authority of these disciples and the organizations they represent. *Staged performance* establishes authority by associating martial artists with important stages invested with prestige and influence. *Intraorganizational staged performance* differentiates certain organizational members from others by publicly displaying their status within the organization, thus helping the favored members to accomplish authority. *Contesting* establishes martial artists' authority by differentiating them and placing them in different positions in the martial arts community hierarchy.

This dissertation contributes to the CCO literature by advancing research on the role of body practices in accomplishing authority from a communicative point of view. Besides forwarding ongoing research on the material dimension of communication, it also extends our understanding of relational authority by integrating an indigenous theory of association from China. Furthermore, it expands our understanding of TCMAOs and secular religious organizations at unfamiliar settings.

Keywords: authority, body practice, *chaxugeju* (differential mode of association), communication constitutes organization (CCO), organizational communication, traditional Chinese martial arts organization (TCMAO)

Dedication

To my mother, Shoulan Yang

For raising me up with unconditional endless love and support

To my husband, Chris

For loving me for who I am, being my best friend, and having faith in me

To my son to-be-born, Calvin

You are the best gift from life

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A poem from You Lu (1125–1209), who was a famous Chinese historian and poet of the Southern Song Dynasty, vividly summarized the spirit of doing a Ph.D.: “After endless mountains and rivers that leave doubt whether there is a path out, suddenly one encounters the shade of a willow, bright flowers and a lovely village” (Z. Li, 2013, p. 234). To get to the village with beautiful willows and bright followers, we need to be strong in our body, mind, and heart. We also need to get over self-doubts and stick to the passion that landed us on this journey in the first place... This Ph.D. journey is impossible without our dedication, resilience, and hardworking. However, it is also impossible without all the valuable support. Behind every heroic adventure, there is a strong team of supporters. Here I want to acknowledge all the great souls who supported me during this journey. Please forgive me if there is any omission.

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Preclude

I was born in the 1980s to a family in Henan province of China, the birthplace of Shaolin kungfu and tai chi. Many of my young peers had kungfu dreams. The *kungfu craze* in the 1970s and 1980s that later populated the Western world (Bowman, 2017a) certainly has a stronger influence on kungfu's hometown than in other parts of the world. When I was a child, I witnessed half of the village gathered in one family home to watch the TV show *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, which was adapted from legendary author Louis Cha's martial arts fiction. The love of martial arts was in the air. During summer break, I went to practice the Shaolin five-step boxing following a relative who attended a martial arts school next to the Shaolin temple. I was determined to attend college and leave my little farming town, and I never thought about making practicing martial arts my profession. However, there was always a special place in my heart for traditional Chinese martial arts.

In the fall of 2002, I went to Beijing to visit Beijing Broadcasting Institute (renamed Communication University of China in 2004) where I intended to pursue my first master's degree. On the train back from Beijing to Zhengzhou, I had a long conversation with a gentleman who sat across from me about our interests in tai chi and the difference in tai chi styles. I also mentioned that my sister was practicing Chen-style tai chi. Suddenly, the young lady sitting next to me asked me: "Have you heard about Master Shangchun (alias)¹?" I answered: "Of course, I heard about him! He is the current leader of Chen-style tai chi, and he is very famous!" Then she smiled and told me: "He is my father." We kept chatting for the rest of the trip and kept in touch afterward. She told me that she could help me plan my training at her father's studio. Next year, with her help, I dedicated my summertime to studying tai chi full-time at Master Shangchun's

¹ In this dissertation, I choose aliases for all the figures and research participants.

studio. When I was there, my first thought was that I wanted to practice hard and someday become Master Shangchun's disciple. After all, Master Shangchun was the ultimate authority figure of Chen-style tai chi in my mind. Personally knowing his daughter, it seemed natural for me to want to follow Master Shangchun. However, I rarely saw him at the studio. When he showed up, he was often there to greet guests, and interact with VIP guests or senior partitioners, but he never taught me in person.

I benefited greatly from my coach Master Duke (alias). His teaching style impressed me. Before coming to Master Shangchun's studio, I had never heard about Master Duke's name. He was very low-key and unknown. But as time went by, I realized that Master Duke was my ideal master. Between a famous master who never taught me and a coach whose instruction impressed me, I chose the latter. Somehow, I felt Master Shangchun's authority was flying in the air (someone I only knew from stories), while Master Duke's authority was there right in front of my face and emerging in my actual daily experience; I could *see* and *feel* it.

My story reflects the experiences of many martial arts practitioners. How do we figure out who is the authority in martial arts? And how do we decide whom to follow? People may have different answers to these questions, but one thing is clear: Choosing the right master will directly shape the trajectory of our practices and greatly contribute to our status and professional prospects in the community of traditional Chinese martial arts. Authority in this community is thus a critical question that needs to be well understood. Practically speaking, following the right master helps practitioners progress properly and help professionals develop better careers. Academically, it is a chance for us to understand how authority is accomplished in organizations that have an intangible cultural heritage as their core asset. How to recognize and find the right master (the right authority) to follow was a curious question that planted itself in my mind as a

rookie practitioner nineteen years ago. My aim was to explore this question in this dissertation.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Rationale

Authority has been a vantage point to understand society and human relations, and there have been plenty of discussions from varied views. However, it was not until recently that organization communication scholars started to explore how authority is communicatively accomplished within organizations. This question has been investigated by a group of scholars united in the theoretical tradition called the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) (for recent overviews, see Ashcraft et al., 2009; Brummans et al., 2014; Cooren et al., 2011). Scholars in this tradition, especially those in the Montreal School, gradually developed the perspective of the communicative accomplishment of authority (Bencherki et al., 2020; Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009; Bourgoin et al., 2020; Brummans et al., 2013). This approach adopts a bottom-up approach that focuses explicitly on *how* authority is communicatively accomplished within organizations through textual or verbal practices, such as presentification, invocation, and ventriloquism (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009; Brummans et al., 2013; Costantini & Wolfe, 2021).

However, this perspective has not explored the role of body practices in accomplishing authority. We need to acknowledge that the CCO tradition has made great efforts to recognize the body's agency in organizational life (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Kuhn et al., 2017). Bencherki et al. (2020) also propose different venues and methodologies to study the role of bodily and material elements in authority and power. Here the body is treated like unique texts or material objects: It is one type of critical element of interaction that can move around. In the literature that discusses body and authority from a communicative perspective, the body under examination is

mainly an individual's physical body, the human flesh. They pay attention to the authoritative figure's body (one's arm (Hawkins, 2015) or one's body as a whole (Brummans et al., 2013; Sørensen & Villadsen, 2014)). They all focus on the individual untamed body's natural performance during interactions and ignore body practices shared by members of certain communities.

Different types of communities or organizations have body practices unique to those communities or organizations. In other words, they have their routinized ways of moving the body (Reckwitz, 2002). This body practice perspective invites a shift in focus by concentrating on the collective handling of the body. It leads us to focus on the body's *ways of doing* that are shared by and in a social collective. It also encourages the researcher to observe the pattern and commonality of the body's performance and pay attention to certain practices that center around the body. These practices are shared by organizational members and are vital to the organization's enactment. The literature on the communicative accomplishment of authority can be enriched by investigating the role of body practices in accomplishing authority.

The literature on the communicative accomplishment of authority in the CCO tradition has stepped out of the comfort zone of only focusing on Western mainstream organizations. It has started to pay attention to authority-related phenomena in religious organizations in Eastern settings. For instance, Brummans et al. (2013) reveal how people invoke an authoritative figure's narratives, voice, and body postures to establish their authority in a Taiwanese Buddhist humanitarian organization. This line of research could be further strengthened by studying secular religious organizations in the Eastern world. In this regard, studying traditional Chinese martial arts organizations is a great option. Since "TCMA" is already a widely used abbreviation of "traditional Chinese martial arts" (Jennings, 2012; Partikova & Jennings, 2018), this

dissertation uses “TCMAOs” as the abbreviation of “traditional Chinese martial arts organizations” afterward. Below I will explain why it is a great fit to advance research on the communicative accomplishment of authority.

First, due to the nature of martial arts, body practices are central to practicing martial arts and the existence of martial arts organizations (McDonald, 2007). Body practices refer to *practices that center around the body*. They include training and performing all sorts of routines and techniques, which constitute the most significant activities of TCMAOs. Particularly, rigorous body training is at the heart of TCMAOs. Body practices also include rituals or collective habits that highly involve the specific shared ways of moving the body, which are also crucial for TCMAOs. These organizational characteristics make TCMAOs great sites to investigate how body practices participate in accomplishing authority.

Second, with spirituality at the soul of martial arts practices (Lowry, 1995), TCMAOs, as one type of Asian martial arts organization, can be seen as secular religious organizations (Brown et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2010). Studying TCMAOs is a response to the calling of advancing studies at the intersection of organizational studies and religious studies (Brummans, 2017; Brummans et al., 2019; Tracey, 2012; Tracey et al., 2014) from a CCO perspective. In the CCO tradition, academic interest in Asian religious organizations is rising. Some research focuses on the communicative dynamics of organizing (Brummans, 2012, 2014, 2017; Brummans et al., 2013, 2019; Brummans & Hwang, 2010; Cheong et al., 2014). These studies show that Asian religious organizations are rich sites for organization studies. They can offer new concepts and theories to enrich current Western thinking on organizations, such as mindful organizing (Brummans, 2012, 2014, 2017; Brummans et al., 2013). Including TCMAOs in this line of research is a promising path for extending our understanding of Asian (secular) religious

organizations. Studying TCMAOs has similar potential “to gain fresh perspectives on the study of organizations in general” (Tracey, 2012, p. 108). Insights gained from studies about martial arts organizations can help Western managers to better manage “the talents of Eastern and Western employees alike” (Cole, 2015, p. 586).

For the two reasons mentioned above, this dissertation chooses to study how body practices contribute to the communicative accomplishment of authority in TCMAOs. On one hand, it can advance research on the role of body practices in accomplishing authority; on the other hand, it responds to the call of advancing studies at the intersection of organizational studies and religious studies from a CCO perspective.

Besides, authority is a critical issue to pursue since it is vital for TCMAOs’ survival and better development of their arts. Progress in this line can help us, especially Western medical institutions, better collaborate with TCMAOs to make the best use of martial arts’ healing and spiritual functions (F. Wang et al., 2014).

To fulfill the mission of my study, I consider the specific social and cultural contexts where TCMAOs are located. When studying Chinese organizations, we need to acknowledge that China has distinctive cultural traditions that are different from Western societies. We, therefore, need to recognize local mode of organizing and reflect on how it influences the accomplishment of authority. As Hamilton & Zhang (2011) point out, many theorists overlook that social concepts should be generated from first-hand knowledge of the society in question. In this regard, this dissertation looks at local understanding of authority and seeks inspiration from homegrown theories and philosophies that understand Chinese society “to the bone.” On this subject, Chinese sociologist Xiaotong Fei’s indigenous concept of *chaxugeju* (Fei, 1947; Fei et al., 1992a) is extremely valuable. Inspired by his theories, I coin the term *differential authority* to

describe how authority can be shared and extended to other actors and territories through meaningful associations established in and through communication. It reveals how different ways of social organizing yield different ways of establishing authority.

Body practices are performative and communicative. I see body practices as the *means* of communication and differential authority as the *mechanism* of accomplishing authority. This dissertation puts body practices and differential authority together to form the theoretical framework to investigate my research question: How do body practices contribute to the communicative accomplishment of differential authority in a traditional Chinese martial arts organization?

Contributions to the Extant Literature

This dissertation makes multiple contributions to existing CCO scholarship. First, it identifies how body practices are communicative and performative in establishing meaningful associations. Therefore, it extends ongoing research on the material dimension of communication (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Brummans et al., 2019; Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007; Fuchs, 2017) and performativity (Bourgoin et al., 2020; Brummans et al., 2019; Diedrich et al., 2013; Gond et al., 2016, etc.). This dissertation examines different body practices in accomplishing authority in a TCMAO. It aspires to shed new light on the role of body practices, and the body in general, in accomplishing authority (Bencherki et al., 2020; Brummans et al., 2013).

Second, differential authority emphasizes the significance of associations between people and authoritative figures in accomplishing authority. By empirically examining this concept, this dissertation advances research on relational authority from a communicative perspective (Bencherki et al., 2020; Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009; Bourgoin et al., 2019; Brummans et al., 2013).

Third, each type of body practice identified in this dissertation has the potential to enrich thoughts on other topics in organizational communication studies. This contribution is not the original intention of this dissertation but a delightful surprise. For instance, recognizing the role of *photo-posing* in accomplishing authority responds to the visual turn of organization studies that calls for studying the visuals' roles in the power relations (Boxenbaum et al., 2018). It also enriches our understanding of how visual practices participate in accomplishing authority. This dissertation also identifies body rituals as one form of body practices and recognizes their roles in accomplishing authority. It contributes to the research on organizational rituals from a CCO perspective (Koschmann & McDonald, 2015).

Moreover, by studying TCMAOs, one type of secular religious organization, this dissertation contributes to research on studies at the intersection of religion and organization from a CCO perspective (Brummans, 2017; Brummans et al., 2019; Tracey, 2012; Tracey et al., 2014). It also contributes to the burgeoning discipline of martial arts studies (Bowman, 2015, 2017b) by examining authority in TCMAOs, which is an understudied topic in this field. Furthermore, by integrating the CCO tradition with an indigenous theory from China in its framework, this dissertation makes a meaningful contribution to organization communication studies by extending understanding of differences in organizational reality and practices between the “West” and the “rest” (S. Hall, 2018) from a CCO perspective.

Finally, this empirical investigation offers practical insights for traditional Chinese martial arts practitioners by revealing both advantages and disadvantages of certain body practices in accomplishing authority, which is crucial for TCMAOs' survival and better development of their arts. It also helps us, especially Western medical institutions, better collaborate with TCMAOs to make the best use of martial arts' healing and spiritual functions

(F. Wang et al., 2014).

Overview of Chapters

Chapter II aims to help us understand TCMAOs and clarify why it is important that we study authority in TCMAOs. It first presents a literature review of TCMAOs as secular religious organizations and briefly describes their history and status in China. Based on literature from different disciplines, mainly historical and anthropological studies, this chapter outlines a general picture of authority-related phenomena in TCMAOs. Subsequently, it shows that the current literature lacks empirical research that focuses on how authority is communicatively accomplished through various forms of communication in TCMAOs. Consequently, many critical questions remain unanswered.

Chapter III outlines the theoretical framework of this investigation. It first introduces the CCO literature on authority in organizations. Then I bring up Xiaotong Fei's work on *chaxugeju* and discuss its value for studying authority in China. After presenting the concept of differential authority, I introduce several indigenous concepts that can help people better understand differential authority from the Chinese point of view. Subsequently, I introduce the body's constitutive roles in authority and why it is meaningful to pay attention to body practices. Seeing body practices as the *means* of communication and differential authority as the *mechanism* of authority, I put body practices and differential authority together to form the framework to investigate my research question: How do body practices contribute to the communicative accomplishment of differential authority in a TCMAO?

Chapter IV describes the data collection and analysis methods that I used to investigate my research question. In this at-home ethnographic project at Duke Tai Chi Research and Training Institute (DTC), I collected a rich data set through participant observation, conducting

interviews, and writing in a reflexive journal. Drawing on Tracy's *iterative approach* (Tracy, 2019; Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017), I developed what I call an *organic iterative approach*. This approach enabled me to use my 19 years of expertise in tai chi and intuition in the coding process; it also allowed me to embrace my experience-driven assumptions about what might be the most important body practices in a TCMAO. Then I carefully read the data to *verify, modify, and extend* my assumptions. In other words, I went back and forth between *expertise, emic data, and etic theories*. In this long-term project, I was able to go back to adjust the data collection strategy to collect data that can better answer the research question. My data analysis yielded fruitful results. I identified five body practices in a TCMAO: *embodied instruction, photo-posing, body ritual, staged performance, and contesting*.

Chapter V presents my analysis of how each type of body practice contributes to the communicative accomplishment of authority in a TCMAO. Hence, this chapter reveals how embodied instruction shows martial artists as the legitimate vectors of a particular martial art, thus proving the authentic association between the inheritor and the art. It also shows how people use photo-posing and body rituals to develop positive associations with authoritative figures (human or non-human), ancestors, masters, and famous lineages to claim the differential authority of individuals and organizations. Furthermore, this chapter shows how staged performance establishes authority by associating martial artists with important stages invested with prestige and influence. Intraorganizational staged performance differentiates certain organizational members from others by publicly displaying their status within the organization, thus helping the favored members to accomplish authority. Last, this chapter reveals that contesting establishes martial artists' authority by differentiating them and placing them in different positions in the martial arts community hierarchy.

Chapter VI concludes this dissertation. Based on insights gained from Chapter V, I present my study's implications for studying authority from a CCO perspective. I propose that more attention be paid to the specific organizational contexts we face. It is necessary to further explore the relationship between individual authority, organizational authority, and professional authority. It is also helpful to systematically investigate the role of body and body practices in constituting authority and turn attention to other body practices in varied organizational settings. Furthermore, it is meaningful to understand how body practices work together with other practices, such as discursive practices and visual practices, to accomplish authority communicatively. Next, I discuss the limitations of this study and present several avenues for future research. I suggest exploring the relationship between authority and sanctions towards self-claimed associations, testing the concept of differential authority in different organizations, and identifying other practices that contribute to the communicative accomplishment of authority in various organizational settings.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

This chapter briefly introduces the development of traditional Chinese martial arts in China and studies about TCMAOs in contemporary China. It also explains why we should see TCMAOs as one special type of secular religious organization. Since few studies have looked at authority in TCMAOs in the fields of organizational communication and organization studies, this chapter draws findings from research in other disciplines, such as history and anthropology, to paint a picture of existing critical knowledge about authority in TCMAOs. Also, this chapter identifies research gaps about authority in TCMAOs. The literature often focuses on the historical, cultural, and social aspects of TCMAOs (e.g., Judkins & Nielson, 2015; Shahar, 2008). Empirical studies of authority-related issues in TCMAOs in contemporary China are far from becoming the focus of attention. There are many questions about authority in TCMAOs remain unanswered.

TCMAOs and Secular Religious Organizations

Asian martial arts have reached sophistication, complexity, and effectiveness that appear seldom matched by martial arts in other parts of the world (Maliszewski, 1996). China's key position in the development of Asian martial arts is well recognized, and most Asian martial arts started in China (Theeboom & De Knop, 1997). Chinese martial arts originated from ancestors' tactical fighting arts for survival in primitive societies and can be traced back to China's Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BC) (Fan & Huang, 2019). They have developed into more than 1,000 variations of schools and styles, which roughly includes two categories: unarmed fighting skills and the use of traditional weaponry (Z. Wang, 1990). The most famous Chinese martial arts include Shaolin quan, tai chi, wing chun, and Wudang quan, etc.

Chinese martial arts are “embedded with the development of Chinese philosophy, military science, education, medicine, aesthetics, and other health sciences, and have a long history and profound connotations” (F. Huang & Hong, 2018, p. xi). They have been termed differently throughout history, such as *wuyi* (武艺) and *quanfa* (拳法) in ancient China (C. Xu, 1996), as *guoshu* (国术), *wushu* (武术), and *sanshou* (散手) in the era of the Republic of China (1912-1949) (Draeger & Smith, 1969; Yi, 1995). *Wushu* is the most popular term to describe Chinese martial arts in the People’s Republic of China (China afterward) (Theeboom & De Knop, 1997).

Over the years, Chinese martial arts have undergone significant changes regarding their content, appearance, functions, and training paradigm (Theeboom et al., 2015). Currently, people divide martial arts in China into two categories: the *competitive style*, also called *modern martial arts* or *institutions style*; and the *traditional style*, also called the *folk martial arts* or *park style* (Amos, 1995). Traditional Chinese martial arts are a quintessential example of traditional Chinese physical culture that serves multiple purposes, such as self-defense, health promotion, self-cultivation, and martial artistry aesthetics (Brownell, 2008; Pérez-Gutiérrez et al., 2015). They try to follow historical traditions that were jeopardized or eradicated during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), such as rituals, beliefs, and lineage. The competitive style results from institutional efforts to operate under the communist regime, which tries to revolutionize traditional customs and put new norms in place. In this sense, martial arts are derived from their historical and cultural roots and have been reprogrammed to meet the regime’s agenda and narrative.

Although competitive martial arts are based on traditional Chinese martial arts, in their earlier stage, they were marked by all sorts of ideological meanings illustrated by numerous

moral maxims in their practice (Theeboom & De Knop, 1997). They were standardized in the 1950s and became part of the state-supported elite sports system that focused on improving the overall technical performance of athletes (Chinese Wushu Research Institute, 1997). Competitive martial artists mainly compete in two distinguished disciplines: routines (套路, *taolu*) and free sparring (散打, *sanda*). Each routine consists of sets of armed or unarmed choreographed forms with connected stylized movements that emphasize its aesthetics and artistic merit in performance. Routines “appear to be hybrids between ballet, gymnastics, and martial arts, which makes this ‘visual art’ exciting to watch” (Martinez, 2009, p. 307). Free sparring is a combat sport that involves striking actions, such as punching, kicking, grappling, and throwing (Y. Zeng et al., 2009).

This distinction between the competitive and traditional martial arts constitutes an essential background for developing traditional Chinese martial arts organizations. As people transform martial arts into a cultural industry, all kinds of martial arts organizations in China thrive, varying from modern mixed martial arts studios to traditional family-based schools.

In this dissertation, *martial arts organization* refers to *an organization where practicing martial arts is the central concern*. This definition excludes governing sectors that manage or supervise martial arts practices. The term *traditional Chinese martial arts organization (TCMAO)* signifies *an organization whose existence centers on traditional Chinese martial arts practices*. These practices include, but are not limited to, *traditional martial arts forms, postures, rituals, and codes of conduct*. More specifically, a TCMAO can be recognized based on specific characteristics: First, its practices must be centered on specific traditional Chinese martial arts, which generally have their complete systems of philosophy, postures, forms, and training methods.; second, it is an *inheritance lineage organization*, where “the rights and responsibilities

of each member of the lineage are determined by inheritance relations” (Zheng, 2001, p. 71); third, it is *an aggregated lineage organization*, since they accumulate members through recruitment and behave as agnatic lineages (Takacs, 2001); last, it follows specific *codes of conduct* inherited from ancestors, with or without modernization. This definition separates TCMAOs from gyms, clubs, and martial arts training schools embedded in modern sports systems. Marked by these key characteristics, some TCMAOs also adopt competitive martial arts routines and the modern *duanwei* ranking system in their practice and management. Some traditional martial arts practitioners also actively attend competitions to strengthen their profiles.

Some practitioners might appropriate traditional Chinese martial arts and only practice for “athletic prowess or street-smart fighting” (McFarlane, 1990, p. 397), shorn of their spiritual and humanistic values. However, both academics and practitioners have emphasized the relationship between traditional Chinese martial arts and religion-spirituality. In fact, “themes of personal change plus spiritual and religious sensitization often appear in biographical accounts by martial arts practitioners” (Jennings et al., 2010, p. 534). TCMAO, as one type of Asian martial arts organization, is well regarded as a type of secular religious organization (Brown et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2010 et al.).

James E. Dittes’ concept of *secular religion* suggests that the secular and the sacred are not independent and mutually exclusive but instead can be similar and interpenetrated through the process of *sacralization* (Dittes, 1969). In a martial arts organization, sacralization happens when skills embedded in a martial arts master’s body are given a sacred value by others (Jennings et al., 2010). When martial arts are the *means*, they can be seen as a gateway to established religions; when martial arts are a form of religion, they can be seen as a spiritual exercise and a secular religion (Brown et al., 2009). This positioning was empirically validated

in Jennings, Brown, and Spark's (2010) research, which reveals how a group of dedicated *wing chun* practitioners practice martial arts as a secular religion: At first, the traditional Chinese martial art *wing chun* was just secular practice for them. Then, gradually, this art took on sacred meanings for practitioners, and a *wing chun habitus* was developed over time.

A TCMAO could be a traditional religious organization, such as the famous Shaolin temple. Yet, most belong to folk martial arts established outside of religious temples. In China, all three teachings (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism) contribute to shaping people's spiritual pursuit and negotiation of meanings of practicing traditional Chinese martial arts. Daoism and Buddhism have been the primary sources for providing techniques, theories, and philosophies that sustain traditional Chinese martial arts, such as tai chi and various schools in Wudang martial arts (Z. Chen, 1999; Long, 2011). Besides, religious stories, discourses, mantras, and teachings are encapsulated in martial arts' postures, routines, and names. For instance, the *great mercy quan* is the bodily encapsulation of the *great mercy mantra* (Y. Liu, 2010). The connection between martial arts and spiritual enlightenment is materialized in this fashion.

In China, religions have always been secondary to politics. The Confucian view of spirituality presumes that enlightenment and salvation lie in practicing *inner sagehood* (morality, spiritual and intellectual cultivation) and *outer kingliness* (benevolent engagement with society) while dealing with earthly matters and mundane life. Spiritual sanctuary and salvation are not considered to be "at the other shore," so to speak, but here and now (W. Tu, 2012). This view takes on new meanings in the modern era by emphasizing collective cultivation and developing national spirit (Zhuo, 2012), which may end in "narrow-minded nationalism in the guise of patriotism" (W. Tu, 2012, p. 96). Daoist spirituality still focuses on undoing social harnesses, returning to a natural way of being, and connecting to what is considered the ultimate force, the

dao (Schipper, 1993). Buddhist spirituality encourages the idea of not clinging to the body or anything in this life — and the next. At the same time, it also emphasizes making the best of this earthly body through practicing meditation and martial arts to achieve non-attachment and to end suffering (Tomio, 1994).

These three teachings interact with each other and collectively shape the spiritual pursuit of contemporary Chinese martial arts practitioners: On the one hand, practitioners want to achieve personal spiritual enlightenment and well-being in general; on the other hand, they want to nurture collective *Chineseness* through practicing traditional Chinese martial arts (e.g., Jin et al., 2018). These spiritual pursuits that underlie people’s practices make TCMAOs secular religious organizations in nature.

Unfortunately, as Bowman (2017a) suggests, despite their ubiquitous presence in popular culture and public consciousness, martial arts and related studies still hold a marginal position, since they are positioned to be “away from the center, divergent from the norm” (p. 12). Often, martial arts and martial arts organizations are assumed to be interesting but peripheral, exotic, unrelatable, and unimportant. This is obvious in organizational communication studies and organization studies, where there is a minimal study of TCMAOs and Asian martial arts organizations. A rare exception is Cole’s (2015) study of a martial arts dojo in Japan that shows how high-context communicators change the implicitness of message to manage content. They also alter shared understanding by reprogramming the content. However, as one special kind of religious/spiritual organization, a martial arts organization has similar potential “to gain fresh perspectives on the study of organizations in general” (Tracey, 2012, p. 108). Insights gained from studies about martial arts organizations can help Western managers manage “the talents of Eastern and Western employees alike” (Cole, 2015, p. 586).

It is fair to say that existing knowledge about TCMAOs is scattered among traditional Chinese martial arts studies. Most current literature related to TCMAOs focuses on their historical, cultural, and social aspects (e.g., Judkins & Nielson, 2015; Shahar, 2008). Empirical studies of the operations and management of TCMAOs are far from becoming the focus of attention, and there are many unanswered questions. For scholars interested in moving forward with this line of inquiry, an excellent starting point is studying phenomena related to authority. There are plenty of reasons for studying TCMAOs through the lens of authority.

Authority in TCMAOs is a critical issue that needs to be better understood. For practical reasons, we should consider the current situation and realize that it is a real challenge for TCMAOs and traditional martial arts professionals to establish their authority. Many recent scandals have exposed fake martial arts masters in China, primarily initiated by mix martial arts fighter Xiaotong Xu. Although the Chinese government suppressed this campaign through censorship of Xu's speech and limitations on his participation in combat and contests, it still gained tremendous support and attention from the Chinese public (Atkin, 2019; Campbell, 2018). Waking up from their "kungfu dreams," somehow, the general public began to see traditional Chinese martial arts as "some kind of joke." A infamous fake master's image was developed into emojis that populated the internet (Y. Xu, 2020). This campaign has challenged all traditional Chinese martial arts community members since their authority, legitimacy, and integrity are in doubt.

Moreover, the martial arts ranking system (also called the duanwei ranking system or China wushu system) helped ignite practitioners' enthusiasm (Cai et al., 2002). It was developed by the National Sports Commission to rank practitioners into nine levels, and level nine is the most honorable one. However, its credibility is in doubt because this standardized exam does not

test people's combat skills and reduces martial arts practices to gymnastic movements. Overall, there is a lack of reliable quantitative measures to decide who is an authoritative martial artist (Hou, 2017). It has been a challenge for many laypersons to figure out who is a real authority in the field and whom they should learn from, especially when "fake masters" bring more confusion and doubt to the public (G. Gao & Wu, 2019).

These factors present both challenges and opportunities for martial artists to establish their authority in this territory. Thus, research on authority may help professionals (instructors), as well as practitioners (students) and the public, develop better insight into TCMAOs. In addition, TCMAOs need practical insights that can guide them to establish their organizations' authority in society better. Authority is also a critical issue directly related to whether a TCMAO can attract enough paying students to sustain its existence.

Academically, in the fields of organizational communication and organization studies, the question of authority has been mainly studied in the context of western organizations. Our understanding of authority in organizations in the Chinese context is comparatively limited (J. T. Li et al., 2000). How authority work in a society is extensively formed by its cultural roots (Farh & Cheng, 2000). As Hong and Engeström (2004) put it: "The authority issue has deep and unique roots in Chinese culture." (p. 553) It is important for scholars to better unpack indigenous cultures' influence on authority-related practices because they influence how people define the sources of authority and how to work with authority. For instance, traditional Chinese political authorities "had to have earned to right to rule by deeds deserving the support of the ruled" (K. Chang, 1983, p. 33). Besides, in different Chinese organizations, authority also function differently. For example, the master's authority over disciples in a TCMAO is undoubtedly distinct from a mentor's authority over trainees in a private company. It is useful to identify

phenomena that have not been yet highlighted by the current literature and examine how they can inform our conceptions of authority.

As we make efforts to understand authority in different organizations in unfamiliar cultural settings, and start taking TCMAOs more seriously, we need to be aware that TCMAOs, are not just any secular religious organizations (Brown et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2010); they are also responsible for the transmission and preservation of the valuable intangible cultural heritage, particularly the martial arts (Daly, 2012). The safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage and traditional knowledge requires a better understanding of how their transmission is conducted in and out of organizational settings. A proper understanding of authority in the TCMAOs is critical for recognizing the legitimate “bearers” of a specific martial art and choosing the appropriate candidates to pass this art on.

Hence, organizational (communication) research needs to explore in greater depth how authority is accomplished in different types of organizations in various cultural settings, thus enriching our theoretical understanding of authority in organizations. TCMAOs is a great starting point in this regard. There is a lack of empirical studies of authority in TCMAOs in contemporary China. We can paint a rather abstract picture about what authority might be like in TCMAOs by drawing findings in other disciplines where research is based mainly on historical materials or theoretical discussion. In studies that involve fieldwork, they often focus on topics other than authority. The following section helps us have some glimpses of authority-related phenomena and certain organizing principles in TCMAOs.

Understanding Authority in TCMAOs

Authority is one of the most complicated and elusive concepts in the history of human thought (Brummans et al., 2013). It is “a fundamental feature of our human capacity to act in

concert, whether with regard to the basis of government, the establishment of social bonds, the process of organizing, or the sustenance of communal life through rhetoric” (Benoit-Barné & Fox, 2017, p. 6). In the East, especially in China, authority has been at the center of thinking for thousands of years, especially in Confucian theories that have significantly shaped the modes of being of the Chinese people (Hershock & Aimes, 2012). In an organizational context, authority can be broadly seen as “a legitimate form of power able to foster a sense of integration, predictability, and order” (Benoit-Barné & Fox, 2017, p. 1). The perceived legitimacy distinguishes authority from other acts of influence, such as power, coercion, domination, control, and persuasion.

The next chapter of the theoretical frame will present a more detailed review of various conceptions of authority. Here I want to point out that authority in different professions and contexts entails different meanings. In other words, it is essential to recognize the *specificity* of authority in various professions and contexts. In studies of traditional Chinese martial arts, although the term authority and its corresponding Chinese word “权威” (*quanwei*) are widely used, there is a lack of definition of what exactly “an authoritative person” or “a person with authority” means. Here I want to point out three essential perspectives to understand this question. First, A person of authority in traditional Chinese martial arts has access to specific valuable exclusive knowledge about a particular martial art. Second, the mind and body can never be artificially separated in martial arts. Simply knowing martial arts knowledge theoretically is not enough. A person of authority must be able to embody the knowledge. As Farrer and Whalen-Bridge (2011) point out: “Many martial artists may dismiss ‘theorists’ who do not have the embodied authority of a martial arts master who has put in thousands of hours of practice” (p.7). Third, the perception and acceptance of the public matters greatly in making an

authority. The state and media can significantly influence public opinion. Being good at embodying martial arts is necessary but not an adequate condition for becoming an authority. Also, the organizing of traditional Chinese martial arts is rooted in specific historical and cultural settings that are under the influence of Confucianism (I will explain more in the next chapter). When we review literature that helps us understand authority in TCMAOs, we need to pay attention to the specificity of authority in TCMAOs, and be aware of some general principles of the Chinese view of authority rooted in Chinese culture. In the following section, I will unpack different critical factors influencing how authority works in TCMAOs.

The Influence of the *Menhu* System and Confucian Values

The structure of TCMAOs is primarily based on the Confucian clan system, which is also called the *menhu* system (Freedman, 1966). The word *menhu* is constituted by two words, *men* (门) and *hu* (户). Both words are architectural concepts that express different layers of rooms and space in traditional Chinese buildings. *Men* literally means a door, and it often represents a household. In this household, there might be different generations living together in one set of dwellings. In comparison, *hu* is a small family that lives within the bigger family represented by *men*. In a major lineage, there can be multiple *hus* under the same *men*. A *hu* can become dependent, develop into a new *men*, and has new *hus* under it. This developmental process is vividly described as a process like a cell division (Fei, 1947).

In the traditional Chinese martial arts community, the *menhu* system refers to different segments and divisions within the same martial arts school. It is the basic social unit in this community (Dai, 2015). Take tai chi as an example: When it was created, it was mainly taught and shared within the Chen family in the Chen village. Its name was “Chen village quan,” instead of “tai chi.” After it was taught to the first outsider, Luchan Yang (1771-1853), and

transmitted to other parts of China, different styles of tai chi emerged, such as Yang style tai chi and Wu style tai chi. These new styles were named after the family names of their representative founding figures. Tai chi gradually became one type of martial arts with different styles. In each style, there are different *menhus*. *Menhu* refers to “a specific martial arts community of a certain school of tai chi in a certain generation” (Dai, 2008, p. 68, translated by the author). Take Chen-style tai chi as an example: Although both Master Shangchun and Master Xun belong to the Chen village lineage, they have developed their *menhus* through creating their sub-linages. Like grown-ups can start their own families, successful martial artists can start their *menhus* as the division of the lineage they are in.

The *menhu* system offers a clear structure that defines the authoritative relationship between members according to their positions in this basic unit. Once a *menhu* is formed, its members tend to believe that “we are right, and others are wrong; we are better, and others are worse” (我是他非, 我优人劣, *woshi tafei, woyou renlie*). This attitude is often criticized as “*menhu* bias”(门户之见, *menhu zhi jian*). There is some truth to this critique, but it should not be simply interpreted as being shallow and arrogant. Instead, it is necessary for both the master and disciples to develop solidarity and maintain confidence and pride in their art. Without this faith, the authority of the *menhu* and master will be in doubt. Without believing in their masters’ authority, it is difficult for the disciples to engage in long-term tedious and painstaking martial arts practice (Dai, 2008). Ideally, the transmission of specific martial art is often strictly limited within the same *menhu* to ensure this art’s smooth transition to a competent inheritor, and this process might take decades. If a disciple wants to learn tai chi today, then wants to try boxing tomorrow, s/he achieves nothing eventually without focus and dedication.

But the *menhu* system is a double-edged sword. People often criticize it for lacking

lateral communication and knowledge exchange with peers in other martial arts schools, resulting in isolation, secrecy, and lack of innovation (Hou & Zhou, 2016). For example, if tai chi practitioners want to keep their combat skills alive and vital, they must engage in actual combats with fighters from different martial arts schools and face challenges from modern combat arts, such as mixed martial arts and free sparring. Otherwise, those combat skills of tai chi will die eventually. The challenge lies in knowing when to be open to knowledge exchange and when to stay focused on practicing one's arts. It is a question of artful balance.

Each TCMAO is also a martial arts clan sharing a value system based on Confucian concepts such as *li* (rites, rituals of propriety) and *ren* (humaneness, human excellence). Practitioners use the family metaphor to form a sense of belonging and solidarity within a diverse community in terms of age and social class (Partikova & Jennings, 2018). The esoteric knowledge of certain martial art can be regarded as part of the master's estate, which only legitimate disciples can claim (Naquin, 1986). In this regard, authority, like skills, is also inheritable. Hierarchy exists between disciples enlisted in the ancestry of certain martial arts schools and regular students (Zhou, 2004). Furthermore, honoring the teacher and respecting his teaching is highly emphasized. Traditions, codes of conduct, and rituals are critical for putting together organizations, even entire martial arts schools (G. Xu, 2007). Rituals and ceremonies play essential roles in establishing disciples' status and legitimacy (Takacs, 2003). Being a member of the sub-lineage of a famous master can "bring an inherited estate of status and prestige to any counterparty instructor" (Takacs, 2003, p. 915). Ancestral power, the legitimacy and power associated with ancestors, is important in Chinese society. In some cases, people even make up fictitious lineages to attain them (Z. Liu, 1992).

This section outlines the influence of the *menhu* system on authority in TCMAOs. There

are other studies that shed light on this topic. The next section introduces some literature that discuss authority issues in TCMAOs from different perspectives.

Reflections on Authority in TCMAOs from Different Perspectives

Some studies see martial arts as embodied knowledge (D. S. Farrer, 2009; D. S. Farrer & Whalen-Bridge, 2011) and intangible cultural heritage (Daly, 2012), and they focus on studying the trans-generational transmission questions. Particularly, these studies focus on the “safeguarding and transmitting of intangible cultural heritage” (Daly, 2012, p. 353). Thus, a proper understanding of authority is critical in transmitting martial arts skills by providing a reliable order. In this regard, Hou’s (2017) oral history study of Xiangdian quan reveals that this form of martial art is struggling with finding the ideal inheritors, which is a shared concern for many other traditional Chinese martial arts. This situation means these arts lack candidates of next generation that could become the authoritative figures and speak on behalf of their arts.

While facing the challenges of finding qualified inheritors, martial artists also face the challenge of outdated ideas of authority. In his analysis of the training process of traditional Chinese martial arts in Malaysia, Daly (2012) notices that highly prescribed notions of authority are essential to the transmission and preservation of the skills. However, they also need to be balanced by critiquing the implicit power relations in play. In other words, the absolute authority given to the master can also become an obstacle to traditional Chinese martial arts’ transition into the contemporary era. Masters’ emphasis on the necessity of adherence to conventional roles to preserve the skills is also part of broader self-construction of authority and social positioning.

When it comes to adapting to modern management and organizing practices, traditional Chinese martial arts fall behind karate and taekwondo, which have a high level of formal “scientific” training and standards regarding advancement and progress. These insights resonate

with many conceptual studies about the standardization of traditional Chinese martial arts among Chinese scholars (e.g., S. Li & Guo, 2015). Indeed, standardization involves a battle between the ruling of the law and the ruling of person, the latter representing a more traditional form of authority in this community.

The authority of a master toward disciples is often far-reaching and long-lasting. TCMAOs mainly adopt the lineage system that tends towards stability and instability simultaneously. Existing teachings and rules are binding on disciples. However, disciples have a “natural” tendency to innovate and surpass their masters. The tension between stability and instability is key to understanding the enactment/constitution of TCMAOs since new sub-lineages are constantly emerging in the field (Hou, 2017). When a disciple starts his/her studio, this studio could still be regarded as a sub-organization of his/her master’s organization. The disciple might be at the master’s disposal to do certain work for the master’s studio. As to how intense a disciple’s involvement in his/her master’s studio might be, it is up to the quality of the master-disciple association. A master’s authority can be far-reaching, even when a disciple tries to step out of the shadow of his/her master.

Above we have discussed how ideas of authority should be often renewed to adapt to new situations. For masters, it is also challenging to maintain authority over accomplished disciples. However, there are some classical practices that can help martial artists attain authority and keep authority in place. For example, folk narratives play a role in establishing the authority of martial artists and certain martial arts schools. Green (2003) noticed that in folk narratives of martial arts, many fictional accounts of events make little sense at face value. Still, there is a “sense in nonsense” (p.1) since these stories and narratives work like “invented traditions” that can establish social cohesion and legitimize institutions or relations of authority (Hobsbawm &

Ranger, 2012). Accuracy of those stories is not an issue to students of the martial systems in which these stories circulate since “questioning too rigorously can (and often does) lead to expulsion or resignation from the system” (Green, 2003, p. 9). Hence, these folk stories are treated as sacred stories that are taken for granted and unquestionable. Nowadays, social media offers new platforms for creating and sharing folk narratives, it is up to the martial artists to use this opportunity constructively to build authority.

Moreover, the organizing of TCMAOs and the accomplishment of authority are deeply influenced by China’s political system and social climate. China is a totalitarian Communist Party-state (Garside, 2021). Everything is under the control of the central government. Besides lineage, several other factors can be considered as sources of authority in the community of traditional Chinese martial arts. First, all kinds of TCMAOs are under the multilayered management of the China Wushu Association, which is not a peer industrial association, but rather a governing body of the Chinese government. For example, from 1998 to 2006, This association awarded about 60 martial artists the “Grade nine” title, which is the highest honor a martial artist can receive in China and a symbol of authority and social status (Y. Shi, 2018). With the popularization of the duanwei ranking system, it is easy to reach a relatively high grade, such as grade seven, but grade nine is still hard to obtain since there is a very strict quota limit. In addition to endorsement by the central government, recognition from lower-level government agencies can also greatly contribute to the authority of martial artists and their organizations.

In addition, Chinese media outlets play unique roles in establishing martial artists’ authority. In China, the media, whether new or traditional, serve as the propagandistic machine of the China Communist Party (CCP) (I. Huang, 2018). Chinese traditional media are placed in different hierarchical levels: state media, provincial media, city media, and county/town media.

Media at each level corresponds with the government at the same level and serves to disseminate messages for the latter. Furthermore, there are also specific media in place for different governmental sectors, such as the military and agricultural ministry. It is a tremendous honor for martial artists to be covered by state media since they are regarded as the government's mouthpiece and represent authority in Chinese society overall. For instance, appearing on China Central Television (CCTV) carries excellent weight for martial artists and the organizations they represent. Beyond the effect of publicity, it also signifies official recognition at the state level (for example, see Lu, 2011).

Moreover, endorsement from social elites, celebrities, political officials, and the rich can improve martial artists' authority since these people's opinions carry a lot of weight in Chinese society (Jia, 2006). Such endorsements help shape public opinions towards some martial artists. Having known ties with famous students, such as movie stars or famous entrepreneurs, can boost one's authority and influence in the field (Wen & Lu, 2016). For instance, tai chi martial artist Zhanhai Wang became famous for teaching tai chi to the Chinese business magnate Jack Ma. Wang is also the co-founder of the company of Tai Chi Zen, along with Jack Ma and Jet li, the kungfu movie star. By associating himself with these two influential figures, Wang boosted his authority, his studio's authority, and tai chi's authority compared to other martial arts (for example, see Cao, 2013).

Last, practitioners' fluid identities also play their roles in authority accomplishment. Members of a TCMAO may come from different backgrounds and professions, they become the connecting knots that facilitate resource exchange between the organizations and other social entities to which practitioners may also belong. Organizational members wear multiple "faces" and have multiple identities that can be invoked to accomplish authority. In his insightful blog

article, Judkins (2021) observes that in the community of traditional martial arts, besides professionals whose credentials are more esoteric, some draw upon their careers in the military or law enforcement to establish authority. Also, an outstanding record on the tournament circuit is usually taken as a sign of expertise.

Based on literature from different disciplines, this section and the section above have outlined a general picture of how authority in TCMAOs has been studied from different perspectives. The next section intends to show what is missing from the extant literature.

Unanswered Questions about Authority in TCMAOs

The extant literature lacks empirical investigation that focuses on how authority is communicatively established through various forms of communication in TCMAOs.

Consequently, many critical questions remain unanswered. First, insights from historical or anthropological studies indicate that elements like kinship, martial arts routines, postures, codes of conduct, and rituals matter, but how they matter is still an open question. It is not clear how people enact these elements in TCMAOs' daily practices. In this regard, studying these elements from a communicative perspective can show us how people mobilize these elements to form relations and order, shape their ways of doing, and thus constitutes authority within a TCMAO.

Second, social change, technology, and commercialization of martial arts have changed how people teach, practice, and share martial arts. These factors disturbed traditional orders in TCMAOs. They are also reshaping certain cornerstone practices of TCMAOs. For example, video-sharing sites such as TikTok and Kuanshou offer new platforms for practitioners to become social influencers. But it is unclear how this ongoing change influences traditional authority in the martial arts community. Also, some masters are designing simpler and shorter martial arts routines, such as Chen-style 18 Short Form (Z. Chen & Yue, 2007), to make it easier

for the general public to learn Chen-style tai chi. Nevertheless, we still lack proper understanding and empirical investigation of regarding how such innovations influence authority in the communicative dynamics of TCMAOs. Advances in this area could help us better understand how these secular religious organizations cope with social and technological changes; they could also shed light on TCMAOs' development as active players in Chinese society.

Finally, one key element that distinguishes TCMAOs from other secular religious organizations, and organizations in general, is the importance of all sorts of practices that centers around the body. Rigorous body training is at the heart of how TCMAOs work. Systematical engagement in bodily training and practices is the soul of TCMAOs. However, there is a lack of research about the role of body or body-related practices in constituting authority in TCMAOs. It is meaningful to bridge this gap. Advances in this line of research could show us that body is not just there to be shaped, modified, and manipulated like a piece of passive plasticine. Instead, body and body-related practices are performative and can actively contribute to establishing order and accomplishing authority in TCMAOs. Thus, we can achieve a fuller understanding of authority in TCMAOs.

Conclusion

This chapter presents a brief history of traditional Chinese martial arts and relevant studies. It also explains why TCMAOs are one special type of secular religious organization. By drawing findings from research in other disciplines, such as history and anthropology, this chapter paints a panoramic picture of existing knowledge about authority in TCMAOs. The *menhu* system in traditional Chinese martial arts has significantly shaped some fundamental principles of how authority works in TCMAOs. Martial artists also use other means, such as folk narratives, to establish their authority. However, TCMAOs need to get over outdated ideas of

authority to adapt to this first-changing world.

Also, this chapter identifies several gaps in the extant literature, especially the lack of insights into the role of the body and body-related practices in accomplishing authority in TCMAOs. In contemporary China, innovations in technology are reshaping the landscape of TCMAOs. They present new challenges and opportunities for martial artists to accomplish their authority. More empirical studies of authority-related issues in TCMAOs are warranted. The next chapter will present the theoretical framework of my investigation.

CHAPTER III

Theoretical Framework

This chapter introduces the cornerstone concepts that constitute the theoretical framework of my investigation. I first present the view of the communicative constitution of authority anchored in the CCO tradition. Then I introduce the concept of *differential authority*, developed from Chinese anthropologist and sociologist Xiaotong Fei's *chaxugeju* theory. Afterward, I explain several indigenous concepts pertaining to differential authority that can promote the understanding of authority from a Chinese point of view. Last, the idea of *body practices* is introduced. Together, the concepts of body practices and differential authority constitute the theoretical framework of this dissertation.

The Communicative Constitution of Authority

Authority is a universal phenomenon but lacks unified definitions. Herbert A. Simon's (1957) take on this question is still sound and clear today: "there is no consensus today in the management literature as to how the term 'authority' should be used" (Simon, 1957, pp. xxxiv–xxxv). In an organizational context, authority can be broadly seen as "a legitimate form of power able to foster a sense of integration, predictability, and order" (Benoit-Barné & Fox, 2017, p. 1). The perceived legitimacy distinguishes authority from other acts of influence, such as power, coercion, domination, control, and persuasion. Also, to some extent, the critical issue of how authority derives its perceived legitimacy structures the field of inquiry (Benoit-Barné & Fox, 2017). This section mainly introduces the view of the communicative constitution of authority anchored in the CCO tradition.

This view is mainly associated with studies that identify with or share the same theoretical lens as the CCO tradition, especially the Montreal School tradition of CCO

(Brummans, 2006; Brummans et al., 2014; Cooren, 2004, 2006; Schoeneborn et al., 2014; J. R. Taylor, 2000; J. R. Taylor et al., 1996; J. R. Taylor & Van Every, 2000, 2015 etc.). Even if the CCO tradition is an amorphous territory (Brummans et al., 2014), the same ontological premise tends to unify studies in this tradition: organizations can only exist and be maintained in and through communication (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Cooren et al., 2011; Brummans et al., 2014; Schoeneborn et al., 2014; Putman & McPhee, 2009; Putnam & Nicotera, 2008).

Cooren et al. (2011) emphasize that this approach not only pays attention to language and discourse but also to the interactional events that constitute the building blocks of organizational reality. They point out that “any turn of talk, discourse, artifact, metaphor, architectural element, body, text, or narrative should at least be considered in its performance or transactional dimension” (p. 1152). An event is not an isolated episode of action but rather the segment of an ongoing and situated stream of communicative practices (Cooren et al., 2011; Schatzki, 2001, 2006). CCO’s central contribution lies in enabling “a rethinking of ontological and epistemological positions on organization that can open up avenues for novel theoretical and empirical research” (Cooren et al., 2011, p. 1150), which includes a new way to see authority.

Within the CCO tradition, the Montreal School approach especially presents its own unique and valuable insights about authority. Scholars and advocates of this tradition position communication as what allows people to express various forms of authority. In other words, authority has to materialize *in* communication in order to make a difference in a given situation; it has to be performed in communicating. Authority can only be concretely achieved in interaction and it is through interaction that people can work out a sense of “negotiated order” (Strauss, 1978). This view typically operates under two theoretical premises. First, an organization is a “plenum of agencies” (Cooren, 2006, p. 84), that is, populated by figures with

different ontologies, varying from people to all kinds of things and beings, such as documents, charts, buildings, and slogans (Cooren, 2006, 2010). These figures can therefore be mobilized to author certain situations. Thus, the Montreal School tradition acknowledges the agencies of both humans and other-than-humans, such as texts, bodies, and objects, in the accomplishment of authority. Second, communication is performative and can continuously create, establish, and negotiate precedence, hierarchy, and order (Cooren, 2006; Cooren et al., 2011).

Advocates of the Montreal School tradition also take a close look at the etymological root of the notion of *authority*. They note that the words “author” and “authority” both share the same Latin root, *auctor*, which means the source or originator. The focus on *authority* should therefore consist of observing and identifying who and what is *authoring something at a specific moment* in the course of interaction (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009; Brummans et al., 2013; J. R. Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Furthermore, since the Latin word “auctor” comes itself from “augere,” which means “to augment,” we understand that multiplying its authors amounts to augmenting the authority of what is being said, or more generally communicated (Cooren, 2010).

The Montreal School tradition identifies three key features of the communicative accomplishment of authority: presentification, thirdness, and ventriloquism. First, the enactment of authority can be seen as an effect of presence (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009; Koschmann & Burk, 2016; Cooren et al., 2008). Echoing Derrida’s (1974, 1982) reflection on “presencing” and “hauntology,” the Montreal School tradition indeed sees interactions as spectral “in the sense that they implicate a host of agents whose presence and absence are performed and create certain effects” (Benoit-Barné & Fox, 2017, p. 9). Through acts of presentification (Cooren, 2006), different sources of authority (policies, rules, documents, people) can thus be *made present* in the interaction. Furthermore, authority can sustain and endure through their spectral presence prior to

and after interactions (Benoit-Barné and Cooren, 2009). Authority can therefore be seen as a phenomenon of plural and hybridized effects of presences(s) and absence(s) (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009).

By mobilizing all kinds of authoritative figures, such as policies, procedures, documents, and leaders, people thus *lend weight* to their positions and actions. Benoit-Barné and Fox (2017) conclude that several practices of presentification can be documented. First, authority is linked to an agent's capacity to speak for or in the name of someone or something; second, the inscription of artifacts or texts can make the organization present in a given interaction; third, invoking revered figures through speech and text during interactions provides members with a legitimate basis for action. For instance, people in a Taiwanese Buddhist humanitarian organization establish their authority by invoking their spiritual leader's discourse, intonation, and rhythm in their daily interaction (Brummans et al., 2013).

Second, building on Peirce's (1955) phaneroscopy, J. R. Taylor and Van Every (2014) identify thirdness as what governs the connection between a sign-vehicle (a first) and an object (a second), a category that they identify with sensemaking (Weick, 1979). They point out that "it specifies the duties, responsibilities, and rights of those whose roles are thereby defined by their relationship" (p. 198). According to them, thirdness thus offers the basis of authority. It is the law that serves as the basis of human collaboration. Authority is therefore not something that someone can exclusively own. Instead, it is what governs a relationship and unites both parties in a transaction. When both parties interpret their actions as being authorized by a third, authority is deemed to be "enshrined" by this law. In other words, "if the interpretation of the 'law' is shared, then authority is enshrined in the law" (J. R. Taylor & Van Every, 2015, p. 198).

When a shared interpretation is absent, however, parties engage themselves in "playing a

frame game” (J. R. Taylor & Van Every, 2011, p. 52), where each party tries to invoke a frame – a law – that justifies an interpretation as a new norm to gain acceptance by others. Using this idea to investigate how authority failed in the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in the 1960s and a more contemporary IT project of the New Zealand police force, these two authors found that authority fails when conflicting perspectives of what is supposed to govern people’s actions cannot be resolved and unified. Authority unavoidably fails when the pragmatic negotiations of relationships cannot reach a shared understanding of what governs them.

Third, the ventriloquial view of authority pays attention to how people ventriloquize certain figures to author a situation (Cooren, 2010, 2012, 2015b). Interlocutors can animate and be deemed as animated by various sources of authority, such as a policy, a value, and a protocol. But who or what exactly can become a figure is an open question (Cooren, 2008) that can only be answered on the “*terra firma* of interaction” (Cooren, 2012, p. 9). Therefore, this view of authority proceeds without a prior assigning authority to certain positions or expertise. During interaction, an individual’s authority can be strengthened by ventriloquizing other forms of agency, which are then speaking through that person. People can then mobilize multiple sources of authority to build up their own (Cooren, 2018).

Thus, a ventriloquial perspective views authority as something that people can “have” but also as a situational and interactional accomplishment (Bencherki et al., 2020). As such, authority can be observed in processes of presentification, whereby sources of authority materialize or are made present in interactions (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009). People can ventriloquize various figures, such as facts, statuses, preoccupations, artifacts, and rules, to lend weight to their respective positions (Bergeron & Cooren, 2012), navigate authority (Caronia & Cooren, 2014; Jahn, 2016), and accomplish leadership (Clifton et al., 2021).

As we see, the ideas of presentification, thirdness, and ventriloquism lead us to observe that specific figures can be mobilized as authoritative sources to enable or constrain people's action. They also tend to ground the communicative constitution of authority in interaction (Hollis, 2018). Fundamentally, all three notions are interrelated. When person A ventriloquizes an organizational policy in a conversation with person B, person A is also being ventriloquized by this policy in that the latter is implicitly presented as leading her to "speak and act in certain ways" (Brummans et al., 2014, p. 181). He or she is also evoking this policy as an authoritative third party, a law that is supposed to govern the interaction. Also, through the person who talks about it, this policy is presentified in the discussion. It would be practically impossible to accomplish authority without this policy, which functions as a third and therefore as a common ground. However, any figure that is presentified or ventriloquized can also be denounced, rejected, or unrecognized by other parties.

In organization studies, the rising relational perspective on authority (Huisling, 2014, 2015; Kellogg, 2009) shifts attention toward authority "as it is exercised in relation to those who are not necessarily subordinates, such as clients, experts, or even hierarchical superiors" (Bourgoin et al., 2020, p. 1137). However, this program tends to be limited as it especially focuses on human actants and emphasizes authority as compliance with command (Huisling, 2014). The communicative constitution of authority view advances this program by emphasizing the importance of objects and abstract elements (principles, values, norms) as well as their roles in the performance of authority (Bourgoin et al., 2020).

Interpretations of authority and its ways of *coming into being* vary significantly in different cultures and industries. When it comes to studying authority in TCMAOs, the idea of the communicative accomplishment of authority is exceptionally appealing for several reasons.

First, by acknowledging the agencies of both humans and other-than-humans and the critical roles of communication, this view provides a fertile ground for investigating the role of objects, space, and bodies in accomplishing authority. Second, this view offers an adaptable framework that nurtures innovative theorizing. The CCO tradition is well known for its ability to transcend the micro-macro divide (Kuhn, 2012). It is also very versatile in inspiring scholars to build their own theories of authority (Bourgoin & Bencherki, 2013, 2018; Bourgoin et al., 2020), which are built on a profoundly relational ontology.

Third, this view has the potential to open new space to study authority in an unfamiliar setting. For example, theoretical variants used to theorize cultural difference, such as collectivism vs. individualism (e.g., Hofstede, 1984), tend to neglect that these constructs and variants themselves are problematic when applied to a different cultural setting (Y.-H. Yu, 1996). Many Western constructs used to measure phenomena taking place in Western societies tend to lose their validity when used to measure what happens in Chinese society, which is formed from different traditions, histories, philosophies, and ideologies (Fei et al., 1992a; Y.-H. Yu, 1996). The CCO view offers a chance to focus on the bottom-up formation of authority by observing how various figures are mobilized to develop authority through specific practices.

Cultural differences do not rest on abstract concepts. They lie in the ways certain figures appear to matter more in a given situation and the difference in weight that they carry (Cooren, 2010). In this sense, cultural differences originate from the types of figures explicitly or implicitly presented, referred to, and mobilized in certain circumstances. They also arise from how much weight these figures might carry (Cooren, 2010). To understand authority in another culture means observing what kinds of figures, such as relationships, laws, and rituals, matter more in authoring a situation. Namely, by observing figures mobilized to establish or dissolve

authority, this approach enables the researcher to see authority itself as the *explanans* of cultural difference, not as the result (*explanandum*). In sum, it is a “down-to-earth” approach that encourages indigenous theorizing based on local practices.

I think the idea of relational authority is a great fit for studying authority-related issues in Chinese society. It is well recognized that China is fundamentally a relational society (G. Xu & Dellaportas, 2021). The inter-disciplinary research program called Chinese Relationalism conceptualizes Chinese people’s social existence and connectivity as relational beings instead of independent individuals rooted in individualism (Y.-H. Huang, 2003; Fei, 1947; Fei et al., 1992a; Ho, 1998; K.-K. Hwang, 2000, 2006). Chinese thinking is therefore fundamentally relational (K.-K. Hwang, 2000; Nordin & Smith, 2018; Yeh, 2010). By using the CCO perspective to study Chinese organizations that are deeply embedded in local culture, this dissertation certainly has the potential of advancing a relational perspective on authority in Chinese organizations.

While adopting this perspective, there are several aspects that we need to pay attention to. First, the current CCO literature, or even organizational studies in general, leaves a lot of space for further clarifying the differences and connections between individual authority (the authority of an individual in an organization), organizational authority (the authority of an organization), and professional authority (the authority of a profession). Individual authority *in* an organization receives the most attention compared with the other two types of authority. While searching the keyword “organizational authority” on Google Scholar, most literature that comes up talks about *an individual’s authority within an organization*, not about the authority *of* organizations, which certainly matters a lot in our society. For example, the authority of the World Health Organization has been clouded during the COVID-19 pandemic due to its unresponsiveness and perception of becoming “China’s coronavirus accomplice” (Feldwisch-Drentrup, 2020).

In the CCO literature, attention is also mainly given to authority *in* an organization (for example, see Bourgoin et al., 2020; Brummans et al., 2013; J. R. Taylor & Van Every, 2015) or in a specific situation (Bencherki et al., 2020). Often, however, when someone or something is acting, she/he/it is also acting on behalf of specific organization(s) and profession(s) she/he/it represents (Benoit-Barné & Fox, 2017), which also means that an individual's actions can be *possessed* by organization(s) and profession(s) (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011). Therefore, it is unlikely that we can separate individual authority from organizational authority and professional authority. This forces us to rethink the boundary between them. It would be interesting to extend the inquiry of authority from a CCO perspective and further think about how the authority *of* individuals, organizations, and professions are interconnected and can be communicatively accomplished in a simultaneously integrated way.

Although the CCO literature acknowledges that authority can be attributed to other-than-humans, this dissertation proposes to focus on investigating the communicative accomplishment of human authority. It also proposes that we recognize the *specificities* of authority in different professions or industries. For example, the Alpha's authority in a Navy SEAL team is certainly different from a store manager's authority in Starbucks: Their ways of operation, seriousness, and meanings certainly vary. Thus, I propose to build this dissertation around two fundamental ideas of the CCO tradition: First, authority means *authoring certain situations* (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009; Brummans et al., 2013; J. R. Taylor & Van Every, 2000); second, property is communicatively accomplished through possessive relations that establish constitutive links between beings (Bencherki & Bourgoin, 2017; Bencherki & Cooren, 2011). This dissertation thus pays attention to the specificities of martial arts practices and conceptualizes authority in TCMAOs as *one type of desirable property that is communicatively accomplished and assigned*

to a specific subject, whether this subject is an individual, an organization, a martial arts school, or a profession.

Therefore, authority is one type of property that entails or results from perceived potency to author certain situations and interpret certain knowledge. It creates effects such as gaining trust, respect, voluntary obedience, and admiration from relevant parties. To be more specific, authority in martial arts means that someone's knowledge and practice of martial arts is seen as legitimate, authentic, and reliable by interested parties; people admire, trust, and believe in this person and are willing to learn from him/her. When confronted with different sources of influence, his/her voice carries more weight and can ultimately author the situation. The specificities of authority demand understanding of the specificities of means of accomplishing authority in communication.

This view of authority in TCMAOs is close to the local understanding of authority in real life. The Chinese term closest to the word *authority* is “权威” (*quanwei*). Looking at its etymological roots, we observe that “权威” comprises two independent words. The first word “权” (*quan*) means a) kind of tree; b) scale and sliding weight of a steelyard; c) weighing, comparing, and measuring; d) reins of power, influence, and authority; e) agent, hold an additional post; f) adaptation to circumstances, flexibility; g) for the moment, tentatively; h) plan; i) officials; as well as j) rights and claim (“权,” n.d.). As for the second word “威” (*wei*), it means: a) being mighty; power; b) dignity; c) terrifying things; d) penalty; e) a hundred families as an organizing unit; f) fear; and g) shock (“威,” n.d.).

As you can see, both words have an incredibly wide range of meanings. When these two words are put together to form the term “权威” (*quanwei*) in contemporary Chinese, it suggests a wide range of meanings too: authority and being authoritative; power and influence; the prestige

and reputation that make people believe and follow; important things and people that have high status in certain territories (“权威,” n.d.). Overall, the Chinese understanding of authority already includes several meanings: Something that can be attributed to specific people or objects, and the effect of authority, which includes being believed and followed by others.

To study authority in Chinese organizations, we also need to consider the *local mode of organizing*. For this dissertation, it is crucial to understand how social organizing in China is done. As Hamilton & Zhang (2011) point out, many theorists overlook that social concepts should be generated from first-hand knowledge of the society in question. As they say, “many studies of contemporary China...have ignored the theoretical contributions of Chinese scholars such as Xiaotong Fei, and few seem to get to grips with vernacular Chinese theories about Chinese society” (p. 20). The work of Fei (Fei, 1947; Fei et al., 1992a) is extremely valuable in guiding us to understand how Chinese and Western societies are organized and institutionalized differently. While anchoring my investigation in the CCO tradition, this dissertation is aware of the necessity of diving into indigenous concepts to understand social phenomena. The next section will introduce Fei’s work, the concept of differential authority, and several indigenous concepts that can boost our understanding of differential authority.

Introducing Differential Authority

Xiaotong Fei and *Chaxugeju*

Xiaotong Fei obtained his Ph.D. under Bronislaw Malinowski’s supervision at the London School of Economics in 1938. As the “finest social scientist to emerge from China in the twentieth century” (Fei et al., 1992b, p. 1), he is usually regarded as “China’s most important anthropologist and sociologist” (Arkush, 2006, p. 452) and the founder of Chinese sociology. He analyzes rural China society at a civilizational level through empirical fieldwork and “shows a

penetrating understanding of Chinese society as a whole” (Hamilton & Chang, 2011, p. 23). His insights “remain as fresh and as intellectually gripping today” (Fei et al., 1992a, p. vii). His classic book 乡土中国 (*Xiangtu Zhongguo*, From the soil: The foundations of Chinese society) was first published in a serialized fashion in the journal 世纪评论 (*Shiji Pinglun*) and later collected and revised into a book form in 1947. This book is regarded as Fei’s “first and only effort to create a non-Western theoretical foundation for a sociology of Chinese society” (Fei et al., 1992a, p. 4). It was not introduced to the English world until 1992.

Fei (1947) argues that there are two modes of association prescribed for Western and Chinese societies: *tuantigeju* (or *organizational mode of association*) and *chaxugeju* (or *differential mode of association*) respectively, which are vividly visualized by the rock-in-the-pond and haystack analogies that “refer to a fundamental ordering of, respectively, Chinese and Western societies” (Hamilton, 2015, p. 113). For *tuantigeju*, the Western mode of association, the individual is like a rice straw, distinct but equivalent. Gathered straws form bundles, bundles form larger bundles, and all the bundles form a haystack. The key idea is that distinct and equal individuals form organizations and groups that have clear boundaries. People’s rights and duties are clearly defined. Organizations and groups fit in large organizations, such as a city, which fit into larger units, such as states. At each level, individuals act in a certain way that fits their rights and duties, otherwise, they are free to act the way they want as long as they respect others’ rights and duties. In this mode, one’s bond to any organization or collective is based on an individual’s will, and principles and norms are not pre-designed or pre-decided.

Regarding *chaxugeju*, the Chinese way of social organizing, Fei et al. (1992) mention:

Our pattern...is like the circles that appear on the surface of a lake when a rock is thrown into it. Everyone stands at the center of the circles produced by his/her own social

influence. Everyone's circles are interrelated. One touches different circles at different times and places. (pp. 62–63)

In this mode of association, one's social relationships spread out gradually, from individual to individual, resulting in an accumulation of personal connections. What Fei is trying to say is that the primary mode of social organizing is not the bounded, hierarchically organized social group, but rather "there are person-centered networks based on a multiplicity of individual distinctions of rank and distance. It is these ranks and distances (差序, *chaxu*) that shape the network of every Chinese individual" (Harrell, 2011, p. 84).

In this association mode, everyone is at the center of an elastic network, a discrete circle. People are never equal, and personal rights are not an issue. One's status is always determined by one's distance to a reference point of social relationships. Here the reference point can be understood as a specific figure that matters in a particular social network. For example, take the grandpa figure in a traditional family (let us say his name is Kai) as the point of reference, the grandson born to Kai's son is more important and closer to him than the grandson born to Kai's daughter. This differentiation results from the traditional belief that the daughter is ultimately a member of another family since she is due to marry into another family. Hence, her son is a member of another family.

Also, one's duties are defined by Confucian rituals according to one's status. Individuals must master rituals and exercise self-restraint, and thus cultivate their morals. Networks are elastic and situation-specific, as the obligations and responsibilities outlined by rituals are the only fixed elements of Chinese society. Confucian rituals prescribe specific ways of being and interacting between people in different relationships and fulfilling corresponding duties. By following these rituals, one can go beyond oneself and reach out to the world; in other words,

one can “extend oneself circle by circle” (Fei et al., 1992a, p. 67). The boundaries between public and private spheres are therefore always relative and ambiguous.

Fei’s concepts indicate that in China, the patterns of social interactions and principles of domination are fundamentally different from the West. Different principles of domination produce distinctive institutions. Western institutions of domination have a “jurisdictional quality” (Hamilton & Chang, 2011, p. 22), meaning that legitimate authority can only be exercised within prescribed organizational boundaries (what Weber would typically call rational-legal boundaries). However, Chinese institutions work according to a logic of relationships that are controlled at a basic level through Confucian rituals, which signify the studied obedience to one’s roles in society. People not only conform to their respective roles, but also monitor others’ conformity to theirs. The way that Chinese institutions work is fundamentally the rule of rituals, instead of the rule of law. People conform not to the superior’s commands but to their roles as subordinates (Hamilton, 2010; Hamilton & Chang, 2011).

How can Fei’s thoughts help us understand authority in China? First, we should put relationships at the center of our thinking of authority. Social organizing in Chinese society is significantly shaped by Confucianism, which suggests that the self is fundamentally relational. Confucianism provides a stable political and social order to Chinese society (Y.-H. Yu, 1996). A self in Confucianism is never a distinct, independent existence; rather, it is defined based on social relationships one is embedded in. One can be born into a social relationship that is rather stable. For instance, a prince born to the royal family has a stable status unless he is repealed due to a serious offense; one’s status and social relationships can also be negotiated by climbing up (or falling from) the social ladder. For instance, a poor male intellectual can marry himself into a rich family with high status or become more powerful through the imperial competitive

examination.

The definition of who can author what is thus prescribed according to one's status in relationships. One's status in a relationship can be stable. If you are the son of someone, you are the son of someone forever; it is also open to negotiations through various means. If an official's maid becomes his wife, her status is fundamentally transformed. One should act according to one's positions (位, *wei*) in the world. Confucius teaches people that "everyone should stay in his place" (不失其伦, *bushi qilun*) and respect the authority associated with one's authoritative positions, such as the authority of a father to his son and the authority of a teacher to his/her students. Thus, positions and titles indeed can be seen as sources of authority. An example in this regard is that in TCMAOs, a master is prescribed certain authority over his/her disciples.

Second, one's authority in organizations and society has a lot to do with the size, quality, and strength of one's social ties in one's discrete circle. The social tie is referred to as *guanxi* by the Chinese. Now, *guanxi* has already become a well-accepted concept in the organization studies (for a review, see C. C. Chen et al., 2013). "Everyone's circles are interrelated. One touches different circles at different times and spaces" (Fei et al., 1992a, p. 63). The stronger one's *guanxi* is, the better one can get his wishes fulfilled, missions accomplished, and voices respected.

Another critical aspect that Fei points out is that the boundaries between private and public, family and state, are never clear in China. Even in contemporary China, laws, contracts, or professional guidelines might mediate but not trump the importance of personal relationships in social organizing and decision making. In the relationship-based society of China, individuals' actions often privilege *guanxi* and *renqing* (explained later) over abstract principles, such as equality and fairness, which are now accepted as the minimum standards throughout mainstream

Western culture (C. Li, 2012; G. Xu & Dellaportas, 2021). Confucianism does not endorse the idea of political equality. Additionally, the idea is that “no matter how a society is organized, it always has people in different social stations, doing varied tasks, and engaging in uneven participation in political processes. Confucians are realistic and honest about this.” (C. Li, 2012, p. 306).

Different from the Western rule of law, Chinese legalism sees fidelity to law as the fidelity to the monarch (He, 2011). Being loyal to ethics defined by relationships thus tends to be more important than being faithful to the law. In this sense, as one kind of resource that could be relocated in one’s *guanxi* networks, one’s authority can be extended to others who are close to us or associated with us through the mechanism of the reciprocity of favor-giving and face-giving (K. Hwang, 1987).

Defining Differential Authority

Inspired by the concept of differential organizing, I propose the concept of *differential authority* to describe the phenomenon that authority can be shared and extended to other actors and territories through meaningful associations established in and through communication, almost by contamination. Through reciprocal favors and face-giving, one’s authority can have effects beyond one’s immediate sphere of activities and infiltrate other territories. Through *guanxi*, one’s authority can also be shared with and extended to other actors to varying degrees depending on the strength and quality of their *guanxi*. This concept is consistent with the idea of the *relational being*, which indicates “multiple relationships constitute who we are” (Jian & Fairhurst, 2017, p. 15). Differential authority is “a way of being-in-relation-to-others” (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011, p. 1430) embedded in everyday experience.

This phenomenon appears different from presentification and ventriloquization. The latter

two phenomena both emphasize that sources of authority lie in specific human and other-than-human figures that are mobilized in interactions, regardless of whether it is a policy or the CEO's note. These figures become authoring forces by being presentified or ventriloquized into specific situations. People who presentify or ventriloquize them serve as the media or the vectors that make those figures talk (Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009; Brummans, 2011; Cooren, 2010). In contrast, differential authority emphasizes how an actor attains authority by *associating* oneself with authoritative figures because these associations *matter* in local contexts and signify specific resources and potentiality. By this means, the actor's status changes accordingly. Here the actor is not just a medium or a vector of other figures. S/he is the center of attention and can gain authority by being associated with authoritative figures.

Differential authority does not deny the existence of other types of authority; instead, I contend that it is a specific aspect of authority accomplished through communicative acts that create meaningful relations and associations that matter in a situation or society in general. At first sight, it may seem like the ventriloquial approach, but they are different. Ventriloquizing someone or something is more about inviting that figure to author a particular situation. For example, a disciple might ventriloquize his renowned master's teaching while conversing with his student to impress the latter. Here, this disciple makes himself the vector of the master's voice; what is authoritative is still the master.

Ventriloquizing one's master indeed indicates the existence of the master-disciple association, but this act does not reveal too much about how *close* the master and the disciple are, and what is the *strength* of their association. A famous master can have hundreds of disciples, and the difference in status and skills between disciples can be huge. Ventriloquizing the master does not guarantee the disciple's authority. In comparison, differential authority

emphasizes creating and showing one's meaningful associations that matter to members of certain communities and a particular society. People who want to claim differential authority underline the existence of certain associations and tend to show off the *quality* and *strength* of these associations.

Since differential authority runs through relationships, accomplishing authority means continuous efforts to establish delicate relationships with *authoritative figures* and make these connections *visible* to relevant parties, which is a communicative accomplishment. How one relates to another must be materialized through language, images, witnesses, or other communicative acts. Here communication refers to any means that relate one element to another (Cooren, 2018).

One's relationship with authoritative figures must therefore be *seen* by others. Thus, the value of these associations comes from the fact that they are perceived, respected, and even admired. These associations might also have different shapes and titles. Some may carry more meanings and weight than others. For example, in the martial arts community, being a blood-related heir is always perceived to be more valuable than being an in-house disciple, while the latter is more meaningful than being a student (Zhou, 2004). Each association puts one individual in a specific position in another's social network and offers a frame of understanding of the nature of these associations. In Chinese society, people tend to be mindful of others' social status and connections and carefully weigh others regarding all the potential authoritative human figures that others may be associated with. One's societal influence is the sum of all the influences one can put together. Of course, any self-acclaimed associations with authoritative figures might also be sanctioned and dissolved.

Fei's concepts are human-centered, and the sources of influence are limited to human

figures. Therefore, it is helpful to extend Fei's approach by combining it with current CCO thinking, especially the Montreal School's thoughts on agency: All kinds of things/beings/elements can make a difference, not just human beings (Cooren, 2010). Once we acknowledge the agency of other beings, we can immediately recognize the critical roles of sacred texts, ancestors, locations, documents, authenticating objects, and tales in establishing people's authority in TCMAOs. Thus, accomplishing authority means continuous efforts to develop solid relationships with *authoritative figures*, which include anything or any being that matters and carries weight in certain situations, such as ancestral halls, pedigree of a clan, statues of ancestors, or birthplaces of certain martial arts (Kang, 2008; Z. Liu, 1992). Figuratively speaking, the idea of differential authority results from Xiaotong Fei's theory meeting CCO thinking halfway: While insisting on the principle of differential organizing, it adopts CCO thinking by acknowledging the agency of both humans and other-than-humans.

Lastly, since in a society organized through *chexugeju*, the boundaries between private and public, family and state are never clear (Fei, 1947; Fei et al., 1992a), the boundaries between one's personal circle, organizational circle, and professional circle are also hard to separate. Consequentially, boundaries between individual authority, organizational authority, and professional authority are also hard to identify, mark, or maintain. Another implication of differential authority is that we should not assume that there are rigid boundaries between individual authority, organizational authority, and professional authority. Instead, it is better to observe how they interact with and empower each other in flux.

Some may argue that Fei's theory is outdated or limited because Fei mainly focuses on family and lineage and seems to neglect non-kin relations (Barbalet, 2020). However, there are good reasons why it is meaningful and valuable to introduce Fei's theory to organizational

studies and use this idea of differential authority to study TCMAOs. First, compared to Western understanding of social organizing, Fei's approach is rooted in indigenous Chinese practices and closer to the Chinese minds, hearts, and behaviors. Modernization and communization have altered but not fundamentally changed how Chinese society is organized. Barbalet (2020) points out that "Fei's characterization of lineage is an idealization in conformity with Confucian ideology" (p. 3). Compared to other Chinese organizations, as mentioned before, TCMAOs are more traditional and historically driven by Confucian ideology. After all, Confucian lineage is still regarded as the most critical source of legitimacy and authority for traditional Chinese martial arts practitioners (Takacs, 2003).

The concept of differential authority emphasizes the importance of associating oneself with influential figures in a relational society. To understand how differential authority works, it is therefore helpful to introduce several indigenous concepts that can help us analyze differential authority's operating mechanism: *ming* (the naming), *wei* (positions), *mianzi/lian* (the Chinese face), *guanxi* (social ties), and *renqing* (reciprocal favors). These concepts are critical to the Chinese Relationalism program and have been widely discussed in different disciplines that study Chinese society. They can be found frequently in Chinese conversations, and they comprise the inner logic of Chinese thinking. I believe that they can prepare us to properly understand certain terms that are frequently invoked by participants. They can also deliver a more realistic and accurate understanding of relational authority in China.

To clarify, although this dissertation brings out the distinction between *chaxugeju* and *tuantigeju*, it aims to show an indigenous approach to understanding social organizing in China and a different way of understanding authority. Strictly speaking, pointing out cultural differences does not mean that this dissertation aims to conduct a cross-cultural organizational

study. This kind of effort certainly can be made in future projects. Instead, this dissertation focuses on finding a domestic lens to investigate local authority-related practices. The comparison between *chaxugeju* and *tuantigeju*, between differential authority and other forms of authority, is not the focus of the endeavor.

Indigenous Concepts Pertaining to Differential Authority

Ming (Naming)

Ming's corresponding English translation is "naming", and it is "the Chinese word for language/rhetoric/communication" (Jia, 2006, p. 52). People assigns meanings to all kinds of beings through this naming process. Through *ming*, things and beings with different statuses are differentiated and become recognizable. Although *ming* is always associated with words used to describe one being, it also means a unit of meaningful sound (Geaney, 2010). It is helpful for us to visualize *ming* as recognizable properties assigned to certain beings through communication. "Proper naming is expected to bring about the very birth of proper *wei* and the accurate representation of *wei*" (Jia, 2006, p. 52). *Wei* can therefore be understood as the positioning of beings in this universe, which we will illustrate later.

Ming can be understood from several perspectives. First, it is an identity marker in a hierarchical society. For example, in traditional China, a man's principal wife is called "qi (妻)," while concubines can only be referred to as "qie (妾)." These *mings* are used to dictate status differences (Sommer, 2015). Second, *ming* creates space for moral judgment, and one can have good *ming* or bad *ming*. Good *ming* can be gained through means such as righteous acts, honors, fame, and pleasing personality. Bad *ming* is associated with indecent and dishonorable behaviors. Bad *ming* is very humiliating and unharmonious, not only for the individuals but also their families, and the organization(s) they are affiliated with. In the martial arts community,

one's *ming* can be constituted by the awards one received, the people one is associated with, or the reputation gained from good sportsmanship. In this sense, *ming* signifies one's reputation, honor, and personal branding. It also has a social status dimension. It can be sacred and worth dying for. One's *ming* has a more extended existence than the human body (Pines, 2019).

Suppositionally, we can also see *ming* as fame.

Overall, *ming* holds a very important position in Chinese society. Boosting one's *ming* often involves using titles, honors, or other instruments that contribute to shaping one's *wei* in society. One's *ming* is often directly related to one's worth and status. *Ming* and *wei* are often intertwined and positively interrelated. Metaphorically speaking, they walk hand in hand. The better *ming* one has, the easier it is for him/her to gain acceptance and build meaningful associations with authoritative figures.

Wei (Positioning)

Wei is critical for understanding Chinese cosmology and views about order in society.

As summarized by Cheng (1996):

It refers to a positioning in the primary onto-cosmology which should underlie any other constructed or developed system, for it is most fundamental and has everything to do with the very existence of a thing and its worth. In this sense *wei* can be said to define the worth and "raison d'être" of anything, particularly those of the human person. (p. 149, italic original)

Every being holds his/her/its *wei* in society; thus, *wei* must be considered and defined based on one's relations with others. From the Confucian view, *wei* indicates "a relation of ranking high or low in government, society and even in morality" (Cheng, 1996, p. 170). While the universe and society are in fluid change, one's *wei* is continuously changing too. One must act appropriately

according to one's *wei*.

As noticed by Fei and other distinguished scholars who deeply understand Chinese society (Fei, 1947; Fei et al., 1992a; Y.-H. Yu, 1996), in modern Western culture, it is a popular shared understanding that, in general, all human beings are free and equal. In contrast, there is no such thing as equality in Chinese society, at least in a Western sense (C. Li, 2012). The Confucian view sees people as unavoidably placed in different positions of moral and social hierarchies. Instead of “being born equal,” Confucianism believes that human beings are born unequal. What defines oneself and one's identity is the social relations one is born into or developed into. Metaphorically speaking, it is as natural as all five fingers not having the same length (Jia, 2006).

But one's *wei* is changeable and can be moved upward or downward by many means, such as marriage, association with prominent figures, promotion, gaining *ming*, and professional success. There is a famous Chinese saying that describes one's transformation through changing one's *wei*: “the sparrow turns into a phoenix”. Another classic Chinese saying is “when a man attains enlightenment, even his pets ascend to heaven”. This phrase is widely used to describe how the whole family, including pets, benefits from one person's rising social status due to their associations.

Our *weis* influence how people interact with us since there are different standards of behaviors towards people in different positions (Fei, 1947; Nakamura, 1964). This status-consciousness has understandably become a prominent part of the Chinese cultural psyche. It suggests that one's worth, dignity, power, influence, and access to resources should vary according to his/her *wei* (Jia, 2006).

Because *wei* is always embedded in relations, different *weis* correspond with different

authoritative relations (W. Tu, 1998). Take the Confucian three bonds and five relationships as examples: The three bonds refer to the authority of the ruler over the minister, the father over the son, and the husband over the wife. As for the five relationships, they refer to the following relationships: ruler-subject (the relation of righteousness), father-son (the relation of love), husband-wife (the relation of chaste conduct (for the women only)), older-younger (the relation of order), and friend-friend (the relation of faithfulness) (H. Chang & Holt, 1991). These relationships are assumed to be unequal and complementary. They provide the protocols for various relationships in organizations in Asian societies (G.-M. Chen & Chung, 1994). For example, the employer/leader and employee/subordinate relationship can be seen as a variant that combines the father-son relationship and the ruler-minister relationship.

Also, *wei*, as a differential tool, refers not only to a person's position but also to a collective, an organization, and a profession's position and status in society. If we consider the whole society as a human body, we can take different sectors of society and different professions as different parts of the societal body that contribute to the harmonious operation of the whole society (Schipper, 1993). For quite a long period of time in traditional China, intellectuals, as a profession and a social class, were regarded as having a higher *wei* in society than farmers, skilled workers, and businessmen (Y.-H. Yu, 1987). When we consider the authority of individuals, we must also consider the *weis* of their professions and organizations to which they belong.

This view is different from a general systematic view of society that sees organizations as part of an extensive dynamic social system (Von Bertalanffy, 1973). Instead, the Chinese thinking of *wei* emphasizes the artificial order and hierarchy between different organizations and professions. Of course, the status of various professions has changed dramatically in China. For

example, during the Ming and Qing dynasties (A.D.1368-1912), martial arts practitioners who took on professions such as military martial artists, caravan guards, and boxers had low social class (M. Tang & Cai, 2014). However, nowadays, accomplished martial artists are well respected as representatives of traditional Chinese cultural heritage (People's Daily, 2017).

The concept of *wei* informs three specific means of accomplishing differential authority. First, it entails continuously improving one's *wei* in society: the higher one's *wei*, the easier it is to build relationships with another individual with who has high *wei*. Second, it means trying to position oneself at the authoritative end of any given relationship. For example, disciples might fight over the *wei* of being the "senior" disciples and claim authority ascribed to senior positions in a given lineage. Third, it suggests that accomplishing authority is a process that consists of continually upgrading one's *wei* in the cobweb-like net of positions which are not limited to an organization, but in the scope of professions and society overall. When a martial artist becomes the leader of a martial arts school, it not only marks his/her authority in this organization but also boosts his/her social status.

Guanxi (Social Tie)

Guanxi lays the path for favor exchanges and is critical for extending authority to various parties in different territories. What connects people with different *weis* within society is *guanxi*. As Lee & Dawes (2005) pointed out, this term consists of two characters: "guan" means a gate or a hurdle; "xi" refers to a tie, a relationship, or a connection. So *guanxi* literally means "pass the gate and get connected" (p. 29). It refers to interpersonal relationships or connections and can be applied to kinship and friendship relationships and social connections, such as dyadic relationships (K. Hwang, 1987; J. B. Jacobs, 1979; Lee & Dawes, 2005). Others think *guanxi* refers to "the state of being related between two or more entities, be they animate or inanimate,

concrete or abstract (e.g., between two concepts), and human or non-human” (C. C. Chen et al., 2013, p. 170). To some extent, *guanxi* means meaningful associations among humans and other-than-humans.

To be more specific, Hwang (1987) identified three types of *guanxi*: first, the expressive tie, which is based on *qingqing* (affection between blood relatives), which exists within one’s immediate or extended family. These ties are personal and stable; second, the instrumental tie, which exists mainly in transactional relationships and serves a specific goal, such as the relations between a salesman and a customer. These are temporary, impersonal, and utilitarian-oriented; third, the mixed tie, which is driven by both affection and utilitarianism and has a particularistic and personal essence. Building mixed ties is most relevant and popular in modern society. Once a mixed tie is in place, under the mechanism of *renqing* (a concept that I will introduce shortly), the resource allocator cannot help following the rule of *renqing* and giving the petitioner special consideration, especially when this person is in a position of power (K. Hwang, 1987). Thus, in Chinese society, “many people like to make the best of the special qualities of the mixed tie by cutting a figure of power to impress others. This, they hope, will place them in a favorable position for any future allocation of some others’ resources” (K. Hwang, 1987, p. 953). Having access to more resources means having more authority in allocating resources and reaching desired goals.

Guanxi projects a collective awareness of the audience of any action and others’ associations and networks. It is fair to say that a relational view of authority is naturally embedded in the Chinese way of thinking (Jia, 2006). We can put *guanxi* and *wei* together to understand them better. As one’s positioning in society, *wei* differentiates people from each other and sets up barriers. We also need to realize that *wei* can only exist by occupying a position

embedded in the complex social hierarchy, which has so many different *weis*. Just image a star in the galaxy; if there are no other stars in the galaxy, there is no *wei* for this star. Through *guanxi*, communication and the exchange of resources between different *weis* becomes possible. Of course, *guanxi*, especially those in Chinese business settings, must be materialized through all sorts of communicative practices, such as informal discussions (M. Hardy & Jian, 2010). *Guanxi* is not only the specific means that makes the existence of *weis* possible but also key to make the realization of authority possible (K. Hwang, 1987; J. B. Jacobs, 1979).

The importance of *guanxi* has several implications for conceiving relational authority. First, connecting with people at higher *weis* offers the potential of improving one's authority in society. From a ventriloquial view, building *guanxi* with people at higher positions means setting up the channel of invoking the authority invested in the latter to add weight to one's own *wei*. Also, it means multiplying the means of accessing certain resources. Other than some rare exceptions (for example, see C. C. Chen et al., 2013), most discussions of *guanxi* development have focused on relationships between humans. When we combine *guanxi* with CCO thinking, we can expand the landscape of *guanxi*: It can also include relations with other-than-human figures, such as objects, sites, or respected moral principles.

The act of building *guanxi* is fundamentally a communicative act that holds people or things at different *weis* together and creates a channel for the flow of resources and information. The Chinese use the term *panfu* (攀附) to describe the act of attaching oneself to the powerful and influential by all means to climb the social ladder. The same word describes how a plant such as a Boston ivy climbs up a wall. This practice can also be seen in other parts of the world, but it has been intensely discussed in China. At its core, *panfu* is a communicative act that aims to build meaningful and valuable associations to elevate one's *wei*.

One thing that needs clarification is that *guanxi* cannot be seen as the same as the prescribed relationships within an organization invested by law or policy in the modern sense. The latter is one type of instrumental tie, but it is less effective if it cannot be developed into a mixed tie. There are many incidents in Chinese politics about how new leaders' legitimate orders could not go through due to interference from old *guanxi* between subordinates and old leaders (Lin & Zhou, 2008). Indeed, when *guanxi* is not solid and supportive, hidden resistance to legitimate orders is expected in Chinese organizations. China fundamentally is a *renqing* society, that is, a society based on reciprocal favors, where *guanxi* often tends to be more important than law, ethical concerns, professionalism, and rules of exchange. Basically, "social interactions based on Confucianism elicit a duty of care and concern towards significant others in important relationships" (G. Xu & Dellaportas, 2021, p. 215). The significance of *guanxi* in Chinese social life thus gives differential authority a space to thrive.

Renqing (Reciprocal Favor)

Another key concept that is part of the underlying mechanism of differential authority is *renqing*. As a multi-faceted concept, the broader definition of *renqing* consists of three interwoven elements (K. Hwang, 1987). First, it indicates the emotional response of an individual confronting various daily life situations, such as happiness and anxiety. Second, it includes a resource element and is a form of social capital or social indebtedness bonded in reciprocity. Every time one gives others gifts, treats others, or performs favors for others, one earns oneself *renqing*, which can be "cashed in" in the future. Of course, one's efforts to earn *renqing* can also be rejected when others refuse to accept what is offered. Thus, accepting others' *renqing* is regarded as a positive sign of willingness to maintain certain relationships. Simply speaking, *renqing* "is a resource that an individual can present to another person as a gift in the

course of social exchange” (K. Hwang, 1987, p. 954). This leads to the third element of *renqing*: It connotes social norms that maintain harmony between people; and it includes means to deepen *renqing* and *guanxi*, such as mutual gifting and doing favors on demand. A narrower definition of *renqing* mainly refers to the second element mentioned above: the reciprocal favor (Lee & Dawes, 2005).

Renqing is a bonding force for Chinese people. Violating the rule of *renqing* makes one look rude and unreliable, indicating “one has ‘no credibility,’ to have ‘no conscience,’ and to be ‘mean,’ and they lose face, reputation, and ultimately personal relationships and their peers’ trust” (Lee & Dawes, 2005, p. 35). Otherwise stated, the principle of *renqing* implies a normative standard for regulating social exchange and a social mechanism that an individual can use to strive for desirable resources within a stable and structured social fabric (K. Hwang, 1987, p. 946). *Renqing* is most relevant for the *guanxi* of mixed ties, where both parties are not bonded by blood and not reduced to pure transactions (K. Hwang, 1987).

Renqing plays a critical part in differential authority because it provides the norms and motivations for people at different *weis*, especially those holding powerful positions, to offer favors and share resources with others. It is “the underlying mechanism that explains the cultivation and maintenance of *guanxi*” (G. Shi et al., 2011, p. 496). Whether one offers *renqing* is greatly influenced by the *wei* of the favor-receiver. The principle of giving *renqing* is based upon the receiver’s power or authority (K. Hwang, 1987). People with superior positions and more significant resources may receive more *renqing*, while those without resources are often denied *renqing*. The more exchanges of *renqing* happen, the stronger the *guanxi* between the favor-giver and receiver, and the more *mianzi* (explained later) both parties have. For any act of *panfu*, associating oneself with prominent figures can be entirely successful only when the latter

acknowledges this association, which can also be considered a type of *renqing*. Somehow, this *renqing* system is like the social credit system portrayed in the episode of Nosedive from the sci-fi drama Black Mirror, where one can accumulate one's scores in *renqing* by offering others *renqing*. Gradually one can ask others to pay back the *renqing* by doing certain favors.

Mianzi and Lian (Chinese Face)

Mianzi has been pinpointed as the most complex and potent key to understanding Chinese national character and spirit (Hinze, 2012; Zhai, 1994). Together, the indigenous concepts *mianzi* and *lian* are called the “Chinese face” (Z. Shi et al., 2010). There are a complex array of words and expressions in the Chinese language to talk about *mianzi* and *lian*. They refer to something far more multifarious than simply the false social appearance referred to by many early Western writers as “face” (Pan, 1995). A study of its etymological journey has revealed that the figurative use of “face” in English has a Chinese origin and was adopted into English from Chinese during the late 19th century by Western missionaries and diplomats who tried to portray the “Chinese national character” (Hinze, 2012, p. 15). These early works inspired Goffman's (1955, 1959, 1967) influential theories on face and facework. However, “none of these early works on ‘face’ in English specified which Chinese word (or words) they were actually discussing” (Hinze, 2012, p. 15). To understand local practices, we must go back to the indigenous concepts to understand their specific meanings and avoid distortions from translation or time (Kipnis, 1995).

In Hu's (1944) seminal work on face, she points out that *mianzi* and *lian* are two critical concepts that reveal how “prestige is gained and status secured or improved” (H. C. Hu, 1944, p. 45). *Mianzi* refers to one kind of prestige that is emphasized in China. It is reputation and status achieved by getting on in life, success, and ostentation. “It is built up through initial high

position, wealth, power, ability, through cleverly establishing social ties to a number of prominent people, as well as through avoidance of acts that would cause unfavorable comment” (H. C. Hu, 1944, p. 61). *Mianzi* can be borrowed, struggled for, added to, and padded. Overall, the volume of one’s face can increase or decrease, suggesting the realizable influence one has in the world while mobilizing resources through *guanxi*. The more *mianzi* one has, the more differential authority one has the potential to achieve.

Mianzi certainly makes a difference in social interaction and decisions about what is doable and what is not. For instance, when Chinese people consider taking specific actions, they tend to consider the *mianzi* of various parties involved. When one thinks about giving favors or refusing to do so, one needs to consider the *mianzi* of both the petitioner and those this petitioner is associated with. This awareness is vividly summarized in the Chinese saying that indicates socially intelligent people know to “have a look at the Buddha’s *mianzi* before turning the monk’s plea down” (K. Hwang, 1987, p. 963). Here “the Buddha” represents certain authoritative figure. The monk is under the Buddha’s protection as his followers. Rejecting the monk’s plea equals declining the Buddha’s *mianzi* and may lead to unwanted consequences.

As to *lian*, Hu (1944) defines it as the respect of a group for a person with an excellent moral reputation for fulfilling his/her obligations and displaying great decency. *Lian* presents people’s confidence in the integrity of one’s moral character. It is almost impossible for a person who has lost his/her *lian* to function appropriately within the community. Losing *lian* often causes social sanctions that enforce moral standards. Those sanctions are often internalized since losing *lian* is often associated with shame and guilt. The amount of *lian*, just like *mianzi*, can be lost or reduced; it can also be gained and increased. The better one’s behaviors fit moral expectations, the more significant the amount of one’s *lian* is. Like the saying about the

Buddha's *mianzi* mentioned in the last paragraph, when one commits immoral actions, it is not only this individual who loses *lian* but also all people associated with him or her. *Lian*-adding acts include activities that can bring glory and honor to one and one's associations. In contrast, *lian*-losing acts include activities that can bring shame, humiliation, and other adverse effects.

Lian and *mianzi* can also be used to form the concept of *lianmian*, which refers to a practical social-moral construct of the Confucian personhood that stands for the very worth defined by one's *wei*. This concept includes the moral, prestige, and status elements in understanding one's face in Chinese society (Jia, 2000, 2006). When it comes to translating these terms into English, the delicate and subtle differences between them tend to disappear. Each term's corresponding English word is the same: face. So, I propose to use "Chinese face" as their shared English translation.

The concepts introduced above are crucial to understanding how differential authority works. Jia (2006) gives his understanding of these essential concepts and introduces how they work together as a *wei-ming-lianmian-guanxi-renqing* complex to perform the relational authority in Chinese society:

...*lianmin* is generated by *wei* via *ming*, while *wei* is the hub, *lianmian* functions as a team of spikes with *ming* as the spin, *renqing* as the lubrication oil, and *guanxi* as the joints. *Guanxi* is not only part of the absolute reality to the Chinese, which the love of *lianmian* makes possible, but also it can be pulled to elevate one's *wei*. Each *wei* is always relative and in relationship to all other *weis*. As a result, a culture is structured hierarchically with different members of a society voluntarily or involuntarily occupying different positions, and the culture is maintained as a culture of authority. (Jia, 2006, pp. 49–50, italics original)

In this complex, *ming* is the vehicle to attach value to a thing, particularly a person. The bigger one's *ming* is, the more power, influence, access to truth, and the right to rule one has, including the right to think, speak, reward, and punish, and access wealth and privilege. Also, as the articulation and symbolic construction of hierarchy, *ming* certainly improves one's *wei* in Chinese society. As *renqing* is about the giveaway of social capitals and other resources to do favors for others, the higher one's *wei* is, the more *renqing* and *lianmian* one accumulates, and the more differential authority one can possess. These concepts constitute the grammar for understanding Chinese politics, communication, sociology, and psychology (Jia, 2006). They offer a system of indigenous ideas to help us analyze local practices that help to accomplish differential authority.

Above I have introduced Fei's concept of *chaxugeju* and reflected on how this model of social organizing leads to the phenomena of differential authority. This concept emphasizes that one new way to study authority accomplishment is examining how people continuously establish relationships with authoritative figures that occupy certain valuable *weis* in and through communication. These authoritative figures include humans and other beings that carry weight in Chinese contexts and make sense to traditional Chinese martial arts practitioners. I have also introduced several indigenous concepts that can decipher how differential authority works. In the next section, I will draw attention to TCMAOs, and introduce another critical element of this framework, namely, the body practices.

Introducing Body Practices

Considering the importance of lineages and ancestor power (Z. Liu, 1992; Takacs, 2003, 2001), traditional Chinese martial arts practitioners use varied communicative acts to establish their authority by associating themselves with authoritative figures, including grandmasters,

ancestors, VIP students holding high social status, or famous persona. Discourse practices that produce these relations include verbal claims, publicly enlisting one's name on the lineage tree (for example, see Zheng Zhenglei Tai Chi, 2017), praising their masters, and avoiding public confrontation or argument against their masters. Those arguments will "undermine one's authority. In as much as your teacher is the source of your information and prestige and in addition, sanctions your right to teach" (Takacs, 2003, p. 912).

Although martial arts are highly body-centered and often conceptualized as bodily practice (McDonald, 2007), it is noteworthy that the current literature has not examined the body's role in constituting authority in martial arts organizations. Similarly, as to the authority issue in TCMAOs, what is not clear is how different forms of body practices participate in establishing relationships and thus contribute to the accomplishment of differential authority. Occasionally, some martial artists and journalists mentioned the importance of taking photos in their narratives. However, they did not investigate into how photo-related practices contribute to accomplishing authority (N. Chen, 2020; Y. Yang, 2016). Overall, body practices' roles in accomplishing authority are still beyond the scope of organizational communication studies and martial arts studies. Yet, there are reasons to believe that body practices' role is neither mundane nor marginal. Instead, they are, as we will see, critical in producing orders and accomplishing authority in TCMAOs. The nature of martial arts is one type of practice that centers on the body. Besides, we also need to consider the body's agency in constituting authority and organizations.

The CCO tradition has made great efforts in recognizing the body's agency in organizational life. For instance, Ashcraft et al. (2009) position it as one type of material element, along with sites and objects, that constitutes organization. In different organizational settings, some studies explore the body's roles in accomplishing authority or its related

phenomena, such as materializing leadership or shaping organizational ethics, to various degrees. For instance, through the study of Peter Aalbæk, the eccentric managing director of the Danish film company Zentropa, Sørensen & Villadsen (2014) also show how the managerial body of the authority figure of an organization materializes this organization's ethics in its own right. By analyzing the sheer force of Aalbæk's dramatic bodily performance, such as displaying his naked paunch and even private body parts, the manager's body becomes the enforcer of social meanings and helps him oscillate between different values.

Hawkins (2015) suggests that body parts constitute assemblages at a Royal Navy shore establishment that accomplish leadership. As she points out, "command presence places demands on the body to accomplish a constellation of aesthetic performances by eyes ('look you in the eye'), hands ('the firm handshake'), legs ('walk in'), and backs ('straight-backed')" (p. 963). Finally, in the religious domain, Brummans et al. (2013) show that mindful organizing materializes not only through organizational leaders' verbal and bodily incarnation of spiritual leaders' stories, sayings, and expressions but also postures, voices, walking paces, and demeanors.

By paying attention to the authoritative figure's body (one's arm (Hawkins, 2015) or one's body overall (Brummans et al., 2013; Sørensen & Villadsen, 2014)), these studies are similar in treating the body of the authoritative figure as a performative element in materializing one's leadership, authority, or what the organization is supposed to stand for. This focus on bodies and body parts is valuable in showing us how the body in action can be performative. Meantime, Bencherki et al. (2020) further propose new perspectives to explore the body's roles in accomplishing authority in interaction: an experimental research approach, a transductive approach, and a ventriloquial approach. These approaches tend to decenter the analysis towards

the “things” that are active in the situation, whether physical objects or seemingly abstract entities. Here the body is treated like unique texts or material objects: It is one type of critical element of interaction that can move around. These approaches open new spaces for understanding the body’s roles in accomplishing authority. Still, they all focus on the individual untamed body’s natural performance during interactions and ignore body practices shared by members of communities.

Thus, it is a valuable path to extend our attention from understanding an individual body to body practices at a collective level from a practice lens. Advancement in this regard will expand the current understanding of the authority’s communicative constitution. This body practice angle presents a shift in focus by concentrating on the collective handling of the body. In other words, it leads us to focus on the body’s ways of doing that are shared by the collective. This view encourages the researcher to observe the pattern and commonality of the body’s performance and pays attention to certain practices that center around the body. These practices are shared by organizational members and are vital to the organization’s being.

According to Corradi et al. (2010), the concept of *practice* has three dimensions: a set of interconnected activities that stabilize collective action and common orientation; the sensemaking process that supports the accountability of a shared way of doing things; and the social effects generated by a practice in connection with other social practices. This dissertation research aligns with the first dimension. In this way, we can see practice as “a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described, and the world is understood” (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 250). Viewing the body differently is at the core of practice theory. A practice can be understood as the human body’s regular and skillful performance, whether it is about modes of handling particular objects or about intellectual

activities such as talking, reading, and writing (Reckwitz, 2002).

Since a practice always involves the body, it is fair to say that almost all practices are *bodily* practices (“*bodily*” as an adjective). We can use this versatile term to describe professors’ habits of standing in front of the class instead of from the back of the room; it can also refer to the work of a skilled masseuse. In the case of TCMAOs, one would not be mistaken to see martial arts as bodily practices, as proposed by McDonald (2007). But to emphasize the body as the center of concern of this type of organization, I suggest connecting the *body* with *practice(s)* by coining the term *body practices*. This concept does not refer to any physical part of a body or the body as a physical existence limited by the human skin. It is instead a theoretical assemblage that describes *practices that center around the body*. In TCMAOs, body practices include, but are not limited to, ritualized body practices, routinized body training, body rituals, public performance, and combat.

In a TCAMO, martial arts must materialize through certain kinds of body practices, which are always subject to the others’ gazes. Through body practices, the order in a TCMAO is worked out. So, body practices can be defined as *a form of communication*. From a CCO point of view, communication consists of acts of relating/linking/connecting that forge connections and establish relations (Cooren, 2018). In other words, communication materializes relations (Kuhn et al., 2017, p. 72). In TCMAOs, body practices produce links between different beings, just like linguistic or discursive practices.

For example, the master’s body practices become the object of trainees’ imitation and others’ observation. In contrast, disciples’ body practices become objects of sanction from coaches and masters that further help them materialize martial arts properly. In this process, the order between different organizational members emerges, and body practices become where

authority emerges, comes into being, and plays out.

Some insights about practices can help us envision body practices as a performative force in a martial arts organization. It is a well-established idea that practices, discursive or physical, are performative in nature (Gond et al., 2016). Suppose that practices can be seen as “the outcome of institutionalization and stabilization of a certain ordering of heterogeneous elements” (Corradi et al., 2008, p. 26); an underlying implication is that body practices, or practices in general, can also be seen as stabilizing, materializing, and reaffirming how an organization comes to be and act, that is, how it is constituted. Within limited studies of authority from a practice point of view (Stevanovic & Peräkylä, 2012), practice is mainly seen as the site to work out, negotiate or refine pre-existing authority that one already possessed (for example, see Glenn & LeBaron, 2011). What is neglected is that body practices, or practices in general, have the potential to be seen as not just the “conditioner” of authority. Instead, they can also be the exact site and means to accomplish authority.

Another critical characteristic of practices is that they correspond with regularities and commonalities (Rouse, 2001) as they constitute “models, bonds, or bundles of activities” (Corradi et al., 2008, p. 18). Suppose body practices correspond with the patterned regularities and commonalities of a body’s ways of doing, such as the feminist organization FEMEN’s iconic topless protesting. In that case, they become the recognizable representatives of an organization by making it presented to others in a specific way. Therefore, we should acknowledge their agency in bringing the organization into being (Schoeneborn et al., 2014). Suppose certain body practices become the signature of certain TCMAOs, such as performing in a unique or excellent manner with consistency that others cannot compete with. In that case, they certainly add *mianzi* to this organization and relevant individuals and improve their *weis* in the martial arts

community and Chinese society, thus certainly having the potential to establish this organization's authority.

Also, we need to recognize that the role of body practices in producing hierarchy and other authority-related phenomena have long been recognized by local practitioners and thinkers interested in these practices. Implications for regional traditions and cultures should therefore be considered. "In East Asia, bodily practices, some codified in ritual manuals, others in customary activities of politeness and deference, established hierarchical relations and marked out social space. Hierarchy was understood to be the normal order of things" (Hevia, 2009, p. 214). What is lacking is a detailed examination of how body practices play their roles in authority accomplishment in organizations, including TCMAOs.

To gain empirical insights into how differential authority is taking place in TCMAOs' organizational life and to understand how body practices play their roles in accomplishing differential authority, the following research question is formulated:

RQ: How do body practices contribute to the communicative accomplishment of differential authority in a traditional Chinese martial arts organization?

Conclusion

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework of this investigation. It first reviews the perspective of communicative constitution of authority in the CCO literature. This perspective pays attention to the specific ways of becoming of authority. By acknowledging the agencies of both humans and other-than-humans and the critical roles of communication, this perspective provides a fertile ground for investigating the role of objects, space, and the body in accomplishing authority. It is very suitable for studying how authority is accomplished communicatively in TCMAOs.

Thenceforth, this chapter presents Xiaotong Fei's work on *chaxugeju* and discusses its value for studying authority in China. Then it introduces the concept of differential authority, which describes the phenomenon that authority can be shared and extended to other actors and territories through meaningful associations established in and through communication. To help understand the mechanism of how differential authority work, this chapter introduces several indigenous concepts rooted in Chinese culture: *ming*, *wei*, *guanxi*, *renqing*, *mianzi*, and *lian*.

This chapter is concluded by introducing the body's constitutive roles in authority and organization and why it is meaningful to pay attention to the role of body practices in accomplishing authority. Body practices refer to *practices that center around the body*. Seeing body practices as the *means* of communication and differential authority as the *mechanism* of authority, I put body practices and differential authority together to form the framework to investigate my research question: How do body practices contribute to the communicative accomplishment of differential authority in a TCMAO?

The next chapter will introduce the methodology of my research. I will explain the research site I chose for this at-home ethnographic project. Then I will illustrate how I collected research data and analyzed my data through an *organic iterative approach*.

CHAPTER IV

Methods

To explore the role of body practices in accomplishing authority in a TCMAO, I adopted an ethnographic approach. In organizational communication studies, ethnography is highly valued due to “its unique ability to generate nuanced findings that vividly explain *how* communication is meaningful and consequential for organizational actors” (B. C. Taylor et al., 2021, p. 624). Researchers use it to conduct studies in cross-cultural settings and investigate varied body-related phenomena, such as performance and ritual, in the workplace (B. C. Taylor, 2017). It helps document, interpret, and explain human communication in the context of participants’ activities and their subjective meanings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Organizational communication ethnography is “a distinctive tradition of qualitative research” (B. C. Taylor et al., 2021, p. 623).

This approach has proven to be effective for investigating the communicative constitution of authority (Brummans et al., 2013; Costantini & Wolfe, 2021; J. R. Taylor & Van Every, 2015). In martial arts studies, ethnography is also widely used to investigate the legitimacy of martial artists, lineage, relations within the community, organizational dynamics, and communication styles (Cohen, 2009; García et al., 2013; Jennings et al., 2010; Partikova & Jennings, 2018; Takacs, 2003). The popularity of ethnography has epistemological reasons. In this regard, García & Spencer (2013) point out that “the Archimedean point that is proffered through quantitative approaches fails to afford the flesh-and-blood experience of martial arts and combat sports that is allowed through qualitative research (specifically through ethnography)” (p.185). In fact, many researchers interested in martial arts studies are “fighting scholars” who are dedicated and enthusiastic practitioners of the martial arts under investigation (García et al.,

2013).

In line with my research question, I not only observed practices in the field carefully but also listened to how people described and interpreted their practices. Hence, I collected data through participant observation, interviews, and writing in an ethnographic journal. I observed actions and performances in the field, especially those on the *terra firma* of interaction. Through interviews and observations of how people told their stories through multiple media platforms, I gained insights into how people interpret the meanings of their actions. After mapping out central body practices in the field, I further analyzed and organized body practices into different categories. Then I analyzed how they played their roles in the communicative constitution of authority.

In what follows, I first overview my research site DTC, a TCMAO located in Zhengzhou, where I am a member. Then I explain how my data was collected through various means, including participant observation, interviews, and writing in an ethnographic journal. I also introduce my key informants' roles in this research. After that, my data analysis strategy is presented. I use the *organic iterative approach*, which is based on Tracy (2019)'s *iterative approach*, to analyze my data, which ends in identifying five primary body practices in a TCMAO.

Research Site

The TCMAO studied in this dissertation is “Duke Tai Chi Research and Training Institute” (DTC hereafter), located in Zhengzhou, Henan Province, China. It was founded in 2009 by the famous Master Duke and his wife, Master Qing. Although Master Qing is an accomplished martial artist, she does not take in any disciples. All disciples at DTC are registered as Master Duke's disciples. In daily life, disciples call Master Duke “shifu” and refer

to Master Qing as “shimu”. Only disciples have the privilege to call them this way; regular trainees can only refer to them as teachers. Master Duke came from Wen County of Henan province, the hometown of tai chi. He is one of the most renowned disciples of Master Shangchun (alias), who is one of the “Four Grandmasters” (四大金刚, *si da jingang*) of Chen-style tai chi of the 11th generation. Master Shangchun is also the current leader of Chen-style tai chi endorsed by the Chinese government. Before Master Shangchun allowed Master Duke to open his studio and start his sub-lineage in 2009, Master Duke worked as a coach at Master Shangchun’s studio in Zhengzhou for many years. I met him for the first time at Master Shangchun’s studio in 2003.

Master Duke had already accumulated many fans and followers while working for Master Shangchun’s studio. Once he started DTC, it developed quickly. DTC is headquartered in Zhengzhou. At the time of my research, its federation had 20 branches in Mainland China, five branches in France, two branches in Hong Kong, one in Australia, and one in Japan. There were also dozens of coaching and promotion centers in Mainland China operating under DTC’s name. Master Duke had more than 200 disciples and tens of thousands of students worldwide. Master Duke defined his “students” as anyone who learned from him by various means, whether in person or through DVDs and online videos (fieldnotes, October 3, 2018). Students often got to know Master Duke through peer recommendations, traditional media, and online materials. Some students decided to apply for discipleship after learning from Master Duke for a while. Sometimes, disciples of other masters also came to learn from Master Duke. However, they often avoided showing up in collective photos and asked DTC to remove their names from the roster to avoid upsetting their masters. About 70% of Master Duke’s disciples engaged in teaching tai chi.

My observation is that DTC followed two traditional family and gender value systems:

Between generations, filial piety was valued; in conjugal (husband-wife) relations, the husband was the dominant figure (L. Schein, 1997; Yeh et al., 2013). Master Qing avoided taking any disciples to make sure her husband was the central figure of DTC. Following the norm of patrilineality, the inheritance line was male-centered (Dahengson, 2009). Our masters prepared their son, not their daughter, to be the inheritor of DTC. There were different expectations regarding males and females within DTC.

When Wenrou, a single female in her early 30s, came to study tai chi full time at DTC, our masters were touched by her dedication and waived some of her tuition. At the same time, there was continuous gossip from those who wondered why she did not find a job and get married first. Many people at DTC genuinely thought it was weird for a female like her to study tai chi full time at this age (fieldnotes, September 21, 2018). About 20% percent of Master Duke's disciples were females. Although some female disciples were outstanding coaches, no female coaches worked full-time at the headquarters. There were also no females in the team of reserve coaches that were regarded as the next generation of coaches trained by DTC. However, there were almost equal numbers of both genders among regular trainees.

On a typical day, DTC offered four training sessions: early morning sessions (7-9 am), morning sessions (9-11 am), afternoon sessions (3-5 pm), and evening sessions (7-9 pm). Despite Master Duke's rising influence, the number of regular attendees was low. The early morning and evening sessions had about ten attendees each; the afternoon sessions often attracted about 5-7 trainees. The morning sessions that ran for a decade were canceled in 2020 due to low attendance. The "golden era" of DTC was in 2015, when DTC had more attendees for regular daily sessions. The past couple of years have been rough for TCMAOs. I often heard complaints from Master Qing and coaches about how bad economics make people have less money and

desire to learn tai chi. In 2021, the average monthly income in Zhengzhou was about 3,864 Chinese Yuan (approximately US \$590) (Jiuchentanfang, 2021). DTC's annual membership fee for unlimited access to daily sessions was about 7,980 Chinese Yuan (approximately US \$1,220), which was not cheap for a regular middle-class worker. When the economy had a downturn, DTC lost some trainees who once could afford it.

Each session began with 40 minutes of warm-up exercises, followed by practicing the old form routine one for two rounds, which lasted about 30 minutes. After the break, the coach spent 30 minutes teaching new moves of different routines or reviewing moves trainees may have struggled with. Occasionally, Master Duke and Master Qing showed up and taught something to trainees. Most of the time, the coach on shift was responsible for managing each session. DTC also offered monthly training seminars with different themes. Each seminar lasted three to five days and charged separately. One of DTC's significant sources of income were the yearly training camps offered during the New Year's holidays, National Day holidays, and Labor Day holidays. Each training camp often lasted five or six days. Most of the attendees were Master Duke's disciples. Beginning in 2019, DTC also profited from training tai chi performers from H Group, a famous company that DTC partnered with.

I chose this site because it was a typical TCMAO with moderate size and influence. DTC also represented its peers regarding how they work and handle everyday challenges. DTC was a typical knowledge-based organization. One critical factor distinguishing knowledge-based organizations from other industrial age organizations is that they rely principally on members' intangible intellectual capital, not on the manual efforts of semi-skilled workers (Read, 1996). DTC's core asset was the master's and coaches' embodied knowledge of tai chi. Master Duke's personal embodied skills were vital to the existence of DTC since DTC members depended on

him to develop their embodied knowledge. Tai chi is what Hobsbawm and Ranger have referred to as *invented traditions*, which can be defined as “cultural practices, framed by implicit and explicit sets of rules that are enacted symbolically or by ritual to socialize particular values, norms, and dispositions through repeated behaviors” (Brown et al., 2009, p. 47). Tai chi is also one type of *intangible cultural heritage* that can be preserved by preserving individuals who can embody them (Daly, 2012). In this sense, *the living body* is the most crucial asset of a TCMAO like DTC. Like any other school, DTC also has “a curriculum of the body” (Lesko, 1988, p. 123). These characteristics demand that I pay more attention to how actions are developed around the body.

DTC was a family business where employment relationships are formed through the kinship and master-disciple relationship; it was also a franchised business, but the ties between the headquarters and branches were fluid; the master-disciple relationships rather than contracts bonded them. Having Master Duke as its central figure, DTC had a strong sense of secular religion characterized by regular martial arts practices that are deeply spiritual (Brown et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2010).

I first knew Master Duke in 2003 when I spent one month to receive full-time tai chi training at Master Shangchun’ studio, where Master Duke worked as a coach. I was deeply impressed by Master Duke’s mastery of this art, effective teaching methods, and personal charisma. Driven by my admiration, I asked him to take me in as his disciple. At first, he hesitated because I was female, and my skills were at a fundamental level. But he was moved by my dedication eventually. Plus, one of Master Shangchun’s senior disciples became my referrer and arranged a dinner with Master Duke, where he drank the tea offered by me and verbally agreed to take me in as his disciple.

Between 2003 and 2006, I studied in Beijing. From 2006 to 2010, I worked in Nanjing, where Master Duke asked his fellow tai chi brothers to teach me tai chi. Between 2011 and 2015, I immigrated to Canada and then moved to the U.S. I gradually drifted away in these years and grew distant from DTC. Since 2015, I have visited Zhengzhou more often and become more active in attending DTC's events. In 2017, I performed the official disciple ceremony, which Master Duke was not allowed to perform back in 2003, and officially obtained my disciple identity at DTC. Until this point, among about 200 disciples, I ranked 4th based on my initial time of joining Master Duke's lineage in 2003.

This affiliation qualified this study as an at-home ethnography project. As Alvesson (2009) notes:

At-home ethnography is a study and a text in which the researcher-author describes a cultural setting to which s/he has a "natural access" and in which s/he is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants. The researcher works and/or lives in the setting and uses the experiences and knowledge of and access to empirical material for research purposes. (p.159)

What distinguishes at-home ethnography from more conventional ethnography is the setting under study. It draws attention to own's cultural contexts and organizational settings and allows people to "micro-anchor" the specific acts, events, and situations that could be lost in abstractions (Alvesson, 2009). We need to note that the territory of an (organizational) home is constantly shifting, never in one place, and processual, and it should not be defined based on geographic location or territory. It is more advantageous to see home metaphorically in terms of hybridity instead of spatiality. Thus, it may be more appropriate to speak of "hybrid home ethnography." This new perspective acknowledges the hybrid nature of home. It "captures the

idea that studying one's organization entails investigating a web of relationships between other organizational members, nonmembers, and oneself (the ethnographer) that are blends of diverse cultures and traditions enacted or constituted in communication" (Brummans & Hwang, 2018, p. 166). DTC's members and branches were widely distributed around the world. This hybrid view of home means that I am not limited by the specific location of DTC's headquarters in Zhengzhou. Instead, it is more appropriate to consider all sorts of relations established through communication that constitutes the very existence of DTC.

At-home ethnography was appropriate for exploring my research question for several reasons. First, I could rely on my familiarity with DTC as an empirical starting point and do more "realistic" writing, including rich descriptions of events, talk, and actions. I had access to a large number of events, which made it possible for me to "spot, document and interpret some sufficiently interesting and revealing examples" (Alvesson, 2009, p. 163) without inventing fiction to make my research more "readable." In other words, this approach helped me stay faithful to what I had seen, heard, and felt in the context of a TCMAO.

Furthermore, to answer my research question, the researcher needs more than theoretical knowledge about body practices in a TCMAO. It is critical to have embodied knowledge of this martial art and know how to observe and appreciate body practices. On this subject, my expertise in tai chi equipped me with the educated attention to study this unique community of practice of tai chi practitioners (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Here, educated attention means the ability to attending matters and details that matter to tai chi practices. For example, at DTC, we paid special attention to how people moved their knees, hips, and waist. In my tai chi practice, training my perception was intrinsic to cultivating my skills, and it was achieved by attuning my body and mind to the rhythms and sensitivities of this art taught at DTC. Through practicing tai

chi, I went through a sensory apprenticeship to understand and appreciate the specific “ways of seeing” (Berger, 1972) among my fellow organizational members. This kind of competency gained through training is a type of “skilled vision” that signifies that one knows the specific way of seeing things in a community of practice (Grasseni, 2004).

It takes time and dedicated practice to develop the ability of evaluating tai chi performances and telling the difference between excellence and mediocrity. The educated and skilled vision of tai chi practices was vital for this study. It guided me to notice details and aspects of events that matter to this community from the practitioners’ indigenous points of view. Thanks to this, I could observe and analyze the practitioner’s body (skills, postures, feelings, movement of *qi*, aesthetic appeal, etc.) in ways unavailable to non-practitioners. Also, it is essential to recognize that even in the same martial art, each master has his/her distinctive performing and training style. Master Duke’s unique style has become his recognizable embodied signature in the community (this topic will be discussed more in the analysis section). His style certainly shaped how his disciples *see* and *do* tai chi. Compared with studying a different TCMAO with another style, it made sense to study my home organization where I was familiar with its people, style, and culture. All my knowledge of tai chi had been gained here and could be best utilized in my research.

As “organizational barriers to the successful conduct of ethnography appear to be growing” (B. C. Taylor et al., 2021, p. 625), being able to do an auto-home ethnography in an unfamiliar setting from mainstream organizations was an extra blessing. Without *guanxi* (connections), it would be challenging to do an in-depth study of a TCMAO. I have actively participated in many DTC’s events to maintain my natural access (Alvesson, 2009; Cnossen, 2018), which opened many doors that I could not imagine if I were not a member.

At-home ethnography comes with challenges. Alvesson (2009) mentions that one might be less able to liberate oneself from some taken-for-granted ideas and socially shared framework to view things open-mindedly. The researcher needs to “engage in an ambitious struggle with her/his personal and cultural framework” (Alvesson, 2009, p. 171); s/he also needs to be careful about maintaining ethnographic strangeness and avoid taking the participants’ views for granted (Neyland, 2008).

To overcome these challenges, I was aware of potential blind spots and intellectual closures and actively brought mindfulness to the field during my fieldwork. Brummans (2014) reminds us that we need to go beyond ego-clinging and accept that we are “inter-beings” that emerge and subside in interactions with numerous others. Being mindful in the field allowed me to be surprised, enlightened, and *see* new relations and reality. During my fieldwork, I tried to maintain the delicate balance between staying familiar and being *naïve* to my field. I switched back-and-forth between the insider’s passionate perspective and the outsider’s dispassionate perspective (Van Maanen, 1988).

Suarez Delucchi (2018) reminds us, “the researcher, whether an insider or an outsider, needs to go beyond the local setting to look at how the institution is organized” (199). Although I actively engaged in DTC’s activities online and offline, I have mainly lived in America and studied at a Canadian university for the past decade. Being familiar with Chinese and Western cultures, I stayed alert and observed DTC from perspectives that were different from my fellow practitioners who only live in China. I did not experience too much difficulty in “breaking out” the constraining taken-for-granted frameworks and often actively sought different interpretations of my observations in DTC.

Last, the division between “insider” and “outsider,” between “at-home” and “abroad,”

assumes that “we experience fixed or static positions rather than fluid social locations” (Suarez Delucchi, 2018, p. 199). One’s home organization is both hybrid and fluid, and we need to consider the researcher’s fluid positionality (Brummans & Hwang, 2018; Suarez Delucchi, 2018). As Cnossen (2018) notes, there are different selves performed at a home organization, and an “insider” position is not something that one naturally owns through affiliations. Instead, it is a position that must be earned. Below I will discuss how I gained entry and established trust for my fieldwork.

Gaining Access and Establishing Trust

Being Master Duke’s disciple opened DTC’s door for me, but it also took a lot of work to establish trust and collaborate with my peers for my study. Below I will introduce the importance of being a good disciple and the critical role of my key informant in my research. I will also present how the ethnographer’s body serves as a crucial research tool in a project like this.

Be a Good Disciple

Most disciples in DTC had careers in different industries, and some of us were quite successful according to local standards. For instance, some were rich, and some were politically powerful. One was expected to take the mission of transmitting tai chi seriously to perform the role of a good disciple. Ideally, each disciple should make contributions to DTC in his/her own way. My part in DTC was less about becoming a competent coach and more about being a good writer. I was expected to promote knowledge exchange on DTC’s behalf. Back in 2004, I helped Master Duke start his blog. Years later, on multiple occasions, he still referred to me as “the one who helped me set up my blog” while introducing me to others. He emphasized how this endeavor established him as one of the pioneers in using internet for personal branding in the martial arts community (fieldnotes, June 18, 2016). As Yaoshi commented, “each disciple has

his/her strengths and weaknesses...how can you compare with us on tai chi skills? We are professionals and make a living by teaching tai chi. Your strength is more about transmitting tai chi culture. That is what our masters want you to do more” (fieldnotes, September 29, 2018).

Over the past six years, whether I was in Zhengzhou or not, I volunteered more than 300 hours. I worked as an interpreter to facilitate communication between DTC and international students. I also helped to translate documents such as Master Duke’s resume. I wrote several long blog articles about DTC on their official WeChat account. My sister Linglong and I referred a significant member of paying trainees to DTC. I also worked with Yaoshi to develop posture names for his newly invented twelve postures tai chi stick routine that soon became popular. I often told people, “I am Master Duke’s disciple, a Ph.D. student studying TCMAOs.” Articles I wrote for DTC’s official WeChat account helped members learn more about my background and research. I often heard compliments about my Chinese writings. Since intellectuals with good writing skills are highly appreciated in Chinese society, my articles certainly helped me build trust and earn favor with my peers in DTC.

The benefits of these activities are threefold: First, as a disciple, it was my honor to make significant contributions to my master’s organization. In other words, I was performing the role of being a good disciple. My efforts earned me some *mianzi* and made it easier to ask for DTC’s support for this study. Second, my deep involvement with DTC through volunteering helped me see more backstage work in DTC, which was not available to a regular disciple. I witnessed a range of frontstage and backstage activities at the center. Third, some of my fellow disciples got to know me through my articles published with DTC’s official WeChat account. People were often delighted when I told them that I would use DTC as my research site to study TCMAO. They frequently interpreted my project as aiming to promote tai chi culture. One disciple I

encountered told me, “I read your articles. What you are doing is great! You can do many things to promote tai chi” (fieldnotes, August 7, 2018).

As I have been living in the U.S. for the past decade, my face-to-face interactions with many DTC members were limited. When I was in the field, I tried to get to know my fellow disciples by conversing with them as much as I can. Even when I was not in the field, I interacted with them through WeChat. My way of building trust was being sincere, respectful, humble, and helpful while interacting with DTC members.

Key Informant

During my fieldwork, Yaoshi was initially just my fellow tai chi brother who taught me tai chi. Gradually, we developed friendship. He became one of my go-to people in tai chi training and agreed to become the key informant for my study in 2017. As the former head coach of DTC and content creator of DTC’s WeChat account, he was very knowledgeable about DTC’s operation. He taught daily morning sessions, evening sessions, and private one-on-one sessions on demand. Occasionally, he was sent to teach at other organizations as part of DTC’s outreach program. He was always happy to share his observations in our conversations.

Our trust increased after Yaoshi started dating, and subsequently married, my sister Linglong, and became my brother-in-law in 2018. I am confident in the accuracy and sincerity of the information provided by Yaoshi. Our closeness and trust enabled us to share our true feelings and insights, the credibility of his insights was high, and he didn’t need to hide or “mask” his observations and opinions, which is quite common in Chinese society. For example, during interviews, I always reassured people about the confidentiality of this research. I asked all interviewees what they thought DTC could do better, and none of them said anything negative

about Master Duke and DTC. Only one interviewee offered a carefully worded suggestion, saying it would be nice to provide more private training to disciples. Under these circumstances, Yaoshi's honesty and openness were precious.

At the same time, I remained mindful not to lose my objectivity when listening to his narratives and interpretations of events. I saw myself as a critical thinker and conversationist when I interacted with Yaoshi. Our relationship did not cloud my independent thinking and observation. I often challenged him and verified what he said.

As a regular disciple, what I saw and felt was often from the perspective of a disciple who was at the "customer" end of DTC's operations. Disciples' investment in training and commodities was DTC's critical source of income. As someone who worked with Master Duke and Master Qing on a daily basis, Yaoshi was more knowledgeable than I about the backstage management of DTC. He had first-hand experience with events that were not accessible by regular disciples. In this regard, he was able to educate me about stories behind the scenes and helped me peek into the "deep inner cycle" of DTC.

I tried to downplay our association as in-law siblings, so until 2021, some interview participants had no knowledge of our relationship and could share their honest opinions of Yaoshi. Yaoshi left his job as head coach of DTC headquarters at the end of 2020 and became a prominent influencer in the virtual teaching of tai chi through various video-sharing sites. He is currently creating his independent studio, but he is still a member of DTC as a disciple.

The Ethnographer's Body

In this dissertation, my body was the critical research tool. Drawing on his practice of crane qigong and insights from other martial arts practitioners, Ots (1994) argued for the value of

experiencing the *Leib* (the living body):

It is time to reconsider our epistemological tools: the *Leib* cannot be thought of, it must first be experienced. This calls for an approach in *Leib* research where one goes beyond participant observation – ‘experiencing participation’ would be more to the point. (p.134)

Indeed, experience is the key. “Experiential data” is valued by other scholars such as Nancy Chen, who studies qigong practice in the urban China (see N. N. Chen, 1995). In my fieldwork, I practiced tai chi and experienced many bodily actions of DTC. My body experienced and recorded activities by embedding them into my existence and memory. My body became a living *recorder* that could be used for future “data-retrieving.” Also, it is worth noting that for an ethnographer to study TCMAOs, having a body that can experience and mobilize *qi* and force (*劲力, jinli*) is essential. Both terms guide the direction of practices and are hard to explain verbally to outsiders. They are something you can only *feel* and *manage* when they come to you through training.

Practicing tai chi involves many reconfigurations of postures and tedious repetitions and adjustments until the body internalizes these postures. Using Master Duke’s term, one must practice postures repeatedly until “they are finally in your body.” The history of tai chi, this unique cultural heritage, is passed on through habitual body memory:

Habitual body memory involves “an active immanence of the past in the body.” In such memory the past is embodied in actions. Rather than being contained separately somewhere in mind or brain, it is actively an ingredient in the very bodily movements that accomplish a particular action. (Casey, 2000, p. 149)

Developing this habitual body memory is at the center of tai chi practice. It is where both history and skills reside. My body supports my observations and makes sense of my

surroundings in my fieldwork. It is also the only way, the embodied way, to know things that only practitioners could understand. For example, it is argued that during these interactions, people “constantly construct and negotiate spaces and times that end up structuring their activities and even their identities” (Cooren et al., 2005, p. 273). By practicing with other disciples, I noticed that history, just like time and space, is also embodied performance that is continuously negotiated. People use body performance to negotiate activities and identities, and body performance is often intertwined with the question of “when” and “where” one begins his practice. As Sergi and Hallin (2011) remind us, “doing research is performing it, and performing it cannot happen without feeling a wide range of emotions, without appealing to who we are or without questioning what we are doing” (p.191). They see research as the performance, and researcher is the performer. My body performance in the field was critical for my performance in the field.

My body was the sensemaking body and the experiencing body in the field. It is also the performing body that participates in the constitution of this organization. In this sense, my performance is also my data. On January 4, 2017, Master Duke taught another disciple, Li, and I a technique. When Master Duke tried it with me, I got the point without feeling too much pain, while when Li tested it with me, he almost broke my finger. Master Duke criticized Li: “You must always be aware of the limit. Tai chi is not about winning. If you hurt others in practice, no one wants to practice with you anymore, how can you improve yourself?” (fieldnotes, January 4, 2017) Testing techniques with Master Duke was always safe because his skills were so good that he was always in complete control of his strength. Authority, reliability, and personal charisma emerged through this embodied performance.

A master is not to be *seen*; he’s there to be *felt*. Comparing my training with Master Duke

with my training with Li, the difference in the level of pain and the accuracy of techniques reminded me of Master Duke's skills and wisdom: He always did things *to the point* and always left space for others. I could never really *feel* such wisdom by reading or discussing *Doctrine of the Mean* (Legge, 1971) or *Dao De Jing* (Laozi & Roberts, 2019). Compared to merely observing Master Duke's bodily demonstrations as shown to his students, embodied interaction with him advanced my knowledge of skills and "ways of being." Embodied action like this produces relationship, status, and organizational expertise. Its value should never be underestimated.

Indeed, it is ironic that, to a certain point, a project such as this that aims at exploring body practices still relies on language and discourse to reach its objectives. It is a challenge to integrate the embodied methodologies (Chadwick, 2016) that stops treating the body as *a thing* to discuss in qualitative studies, as Frank (1990) pointed out decades ago. Although there are many studies about embodiment, how to study the embodied experience remains a challenge. Chadwick (2016) suggests, "we need to find ways of listening to and analyzing the bodies and fleshy articulations already present in our qualitative 'data,' and move embodied methodologies into the realm of qualitative data analysis" (p.71). She proposed three strategies: finding a theory of the embodied subject, problematizing transcription, and using poetic analytic devices inspired by the listening guide. I kept her suggestions in mind while embracing my bodily experience in my data collection.

Data Collection

Participant Observation

To conduct participant observation at one's home organization, the researcher "takes part

in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events” (Musante & DeWalt, 2010, p. 1) of this organization as a member. S/he also learns different aspects of this organization, explicit and tacit, that can help answer the research question(s). Between 2016 and 2019, I visited Zhengzhou three times and spent 97 days, or more than 400 hours, at DTC’s headquarters to conduct participant observation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2014). While I was there, I attended training and collected data with DTC’s permission. I mainly assumed two different roles and selves in the field (Cnossen, 2018): being a disciple and a researcher. From the beginning, I told Master Duke and Master Qing about my Ph.D. study, my research interests in TCMAO, and my intention to do fieldwork at DTC. They agreed to support my data collection and were happy that my research had the potential to promote understandings of TCMAOs and tai chi culture.

Thanks to my knowledge of DTC as a long-term member, I could switch smoothly between the researcher self and the disciple self or make both selves present at the scene. I performed both non-virtual and virtual observations and took fieldnotes for both. As a result of my non-virtual participant observation, I produced two forms of data: fieldnotes and video recordings. As a result of my virtual participant observation, I gained fieldnotes and public online data.

Non-virtual Observation

My activity in the field involved different kinds of activities. First, I actively participated in the early morning, late morning, and evening sessions as a trainee. I received private tutoring from Yaoshi and other coaches when they were available. Each day, I spent an average of five hours at the headquarters. During training, I often chatted with coaches and trainees to listen to their voices and stories. I also actively attended week-long seminar-style intensive training camps, such as the yearly Chinese Labor Day week training camp in 2017 and the Chinese

National Day week training camps in 2018 and 2019. These camps welcomed trainees from all over the country. During my stays in the field, I witnessed many significant events hosted by the organization, such as the New Year's Eve Gala, etc. I made every possible effort to be a good helper. For example, I helped Master Duke organize and edit his response to media; I helped to greet and host visitors; finally, I also translated materials for DTC whenever they needed me.

While performing my role as a good disciple, I maintained my awareness as a researcher all the time and stayed sharp at observing events and writing my fieldnotes between training sessions. Besides jotting down my notes, I actively conversed with people I encountered and documented things that struck me as interesting or strange. I also used my iPhone and a handycam in my data collection. They helped mark the material context and capture specific moments of people's body practices with their oral permissions. Taking photos of different spaces significantly improved my special memories, and restored my memories, even feelings, after the event was over. I agree with Gorman (2017) that researchers need to be aware that the very medium and devices of notetaking can influence the field and the relationship between researchers and participants. These vivid images can inspire reflections and are easier to display and access than video recordings. I focused on the most significant moments or events to write substantive fieldnotes (Emerson et al., 2011) that could offer a vivid description (Geertz, 1973) of "a slice of life" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 126). My notes documented my observations of how organizational members used social media. These data helped me observe and reflect on how body practices in the field were organized and unfolded. They also sparked reflections and thoughts on how authority was performed in these scenes.

As my fieldnotes documented my observations from a subjective standpoint, video recordings offered more objective and comprehensive documentation. Depending on the

Figure 1: Collecting Video Data through Stationary Camcorder



circumstances, I collected video data through stationary videotaping and video shadowing (Vásquez & Cooren, 2013). As shown in figure 1, the stationary handycam in the corner of the room documented a complete picture of ongoing events without disturbing people or activating practitioners' *staging mode*, that is, DTC practitioners' tendency to pose for the camera.

I also collected some video shadowing data while I was in the field. Shadowing is generally believed to be a technique that can “grasp the complexity and perplexity of organizational actions” (Meunier & Vásquez, 2008, p. 169). It allows the researcher to “access as faithfully as possible what happens on the *terra firma* of interaction” (Schoeneborn et al., 2014, p. 301). The recording style of the mobile action could be described as “guerrilla-style filming,” which means following participants as they engage in mobile activities (Shrum et al., 2005). I adopted Carole Groleau's practice of inviting *verbalization* from participants during the shadowing process (see Vásquez et al., 2012). Following the Montreal School tradition, my

shadowing focused on actions or events and was not necessarily centered on humans (Cooren et al., 2007). With these ideas in mind, the “researching self” that I brought to the field was a mindful one who could embrace openness and flexibility. I allowed myself to be surprised and let my attention follow the flow of action to investigate places, members of the organization, aesthetical aspects, technologies, rituals, and simple events (Bruni, 2005). Events I shadowed included regular daily training and special events such as discipleship ceremonies or performances on HNTV, a provincial TV station. Video shadowing focused on activities in a closer range and centered around certain people or events. What I shadowed greatly depended on what was available during my fieldwork in China.

I stopped recording when video data of specific arrays of activities reached the saturation point (Fusch & Ness, 2015). For example, I stopped recording evening sessions after attending three of them. At DTC, trainees and visitors often took photos and videos with their phones. It appeared to be a norm for people to take pictures and videos and share them on the Chinese social media platforms WeChat and TikTok. It is fair to say that people were quite used to cameras and video-taking devices.

While the intrusion of video recording devices has been a concern for many researchers, the field that I worked in might have been less sensitive to it. To some extent, active recording and sharing by smartphones were even encouraged. For example, at the end of many sessions, Yaoshi told trainees: “OK, let us do some good postures. I will take some pictures and post them on WeChat Moments” (fieldnotes, September 21, 2018). Thus, my passion for taking visual materials with my iPhone did not appear strange. When I asked people’s consent to be photographed, I did not experience rejection. However, even when people gave me oral permission, they became more curious and alert once I brought out my Sony handycam and the

tripod to take fixed-perspective videos. Then I explained why I was doing it and how the data would be used. The handycam and tripod brought the “seriousness” of documenting to another level.

I noticed that Master Duke was highly aware of what bad images or videos could do to his and DTC’s reputation. Thus, although he gave me consent to do some video-shadowing, he was very cautious about what I could film and what I could not. He once asked me to leave the VIP room when he gave private lessons to a group of four influential figures from television stations and the government. Besides respecting my university’s ethical principles of data collection, it was also essential to consider local norms and expectations about data-collection behaviors.

Fieldnotes and video recordings complemented each other in varied ways. For instance, fieldnotes offered background information, stories, and reflective thoughts about people’s body practices. At the same time, video recordings captured the minutiae of body practices, presented layered actions and chronological activities, and allowed me to revisit them again and again (Smets et al., 2014; Vásquez & Cooren, 2013). In addition, fieldnotes reported my subjective observations. Video recordings, especially stationary recordings, showed me perspectives that I was unaware of when I participated in the action. They also allowed me to revisit them and find new interpretations missed in my fieldnotes.

Virtual Observation

There is a tendency to distinguish fieldwork from virtual ethnography since many believe virtual ethnography is not as *real* as being physically in the field. However, in my case, social media played a great deal in organizing activities in DTC. China’s social-media users are typically more active than in any other country (Chiu et al., 2012). WeChat, the most popular

social media platform in China, has been integrated into almost every aspect of civil life (F. Tu, 2016). Also, DTC is a “cluster of affiliation” that was retribalized by social media. Here traditional geographic boundaries were dissembled, and people were drawn together through shared interests in tai chi. As most of Master Duke’s disciples lived in different parts of China, even across the world, WeChat was the only virtual space that connected all members. Even when we were physically in the headquarters, we still counted on WeChat to communicate and make sense of what was going on in DTC. Virtual space was already part of the reality we were living in. Whether in the physical field or back at home in the U.S., I used social media to communicate with DTC members and engage in organizational events. Master Duke highly emphasized the importance of social media and said: “It connects us. If you don’t show up in our group, you might be forgotten” (fieldnotes, January 23, 2017). In DTC, I noticed that online participation was a critical part of organizational life, and the digital mediated body played an essential role in it. Online and offline activities were intertwined together and hard to separate.

I integrated the virtual ethnography (see also Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2015) into my participant observation. As Master Duke’s disciple, I kept in touch with my tai chi family members and remain an active member of two online tai chi groups on WeChat hosted by DTC. The “Disciple Group” is limited to 231 existing members, while the “DTC Friends Group” has 387 members who were invited to join. Every day, I spent about 10-15 minutes reviewing the latest group conversations and keeping track of trends and news with both groups. I also contributed to important matters. My fieldnotes documented my virtual observations as well. Virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000) was an excellent means to collect data complementary to my interviews. Although based on digital data, netnography’s focus is still on examining individual interactions (Kozinets, 2010). My virtual data collection included three parts:

First, I participated in online group activities and paid close attention to DTC members' postings on social media platforms, such as TikTok, Quishou, Tencent Video, and WeChat Moments. When something interesting came up, I documented my observations and thoughts. WeChat Moments is only open to friends, but posts and comments on TikTok, Quishou, and Tencent videos are open to the public. In the case of using WeChat Moments' posts in my writing, I obtained people's oral permissions first. For example, as shown in Figure 2, Yaoshi shared a photo of being trained by Master Duke hand-to-hand on April 25, 2015. This photo could *say* many things to other organizational members about his status and skill level. It is a photo that *reaffirmed* his position within this organization.

These online communications revealed how DTC and its members interacted with the public and how body practices were interpreted and presented. As Jones (1999) notes, online communication is an ideal setting, "practically irresistible in its availability" (p.13).

Figure 2: Master Duke Training Yaoshi Hand-to-Hand



Second, I conducted *digital shadowing*. I coined this term to describe the technique of following online activities of participants that were publicly displayed. There were two kinds of digital shadowing for my dissertation: First, I followed the event. I closely followed how an event was presented online, such as following the live streaming of a training session. I collected the textual discussion and video streaming simultaneously. Second, I followed the people. I followed Master Duke, Master Qing, Yaoshi, and some active representative figures of DTC to observe their online engagements with organizational members and the public. I also paid particular attention to their activities related to the body.

Third, I used online data, including publications, TV shows, documentaries (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012; Zundel et al., 2013) involving DTC and critical members, and posts on video-sharing sites, etc. (Hine, 2000). I collected three types of public online data. First, DTC's official WeChat account's publications. Second, reports, TV shows, and documentaries from various media platforms. Last, publicly published photos and videos relevant to DTC. Some images used in this dissertation came from publicly posted materials. I obscured faces, slogans, signs, and other symbols that might reveal participants' identities. I also chose not to disclose links to these online materials to protect participants' identities.

These online data were helpful in many ways. First, they showed how body practices were presented and discussed beyond personal interpretations and interactions. Second, they helped me understand how the mediated body contributed to organizational sensemaking and presentification. Third, they indicated how body practices were presented to a broader audience and helped me see DTC from the public's perspectives. For instance, the website Taiji Net's coverage of the 10th-anniversary celebration of DTC's branches in France demonstrated that body practices could be used as public performance to materialize DTC's international presence

and increase Master Duke's authority in the tai chi community. Besides, timely updated online data helped me see the overall trends and background of ongoing events. They also provided me with materials to form relevant interview questions.

My participative observation that integrated virtual ethnography left me with 266 pages of (single-spaced) fieldnotes (Emerson et al., 2011) written in Chinese (about 700 pages if translated into English), over 60 hours of video recordings, and countless photos. I also collected 38 documents that were widely shared among DTC members. Furthermore, I have documented more than 30 hours of media coverage, 127 articles published by DTC's official WeChat account, 63 reports about DTC from various media platforms, and more than 300 posts posted by DTC and its members on all sorts of social media platforms.

Semi-structured Interviews

Information collected through semi-structured interviews focused on two areas: First, it helped me understand the background and contexts of different activities in DTC; second, it helped me explore how people understand and interpret the role of body and body practices in organizations.

Yaoshi was my key informant. He was guaranteed to be one of my interviewees. Between May 6, 2020, and November 13, 2021, I reached out to 34 potential participants through WeChat. I looked for people with different tai chi skill levels in various professions and age ranges. Master Duke was the core figure of DTC; he was on the top of my list. I looked for disciples who worked at DTC and those who worked at other places. I tried to differentiate between disciples who taught tai and those who did not. Finally, I recruited regular trainees since they were also an essential part of DTC.

More than 90% of Master Duke's disciples were in my WeChat contact lists, and I also

knew some trainees in person. I found potential participants in my WeChat contacts or the disciple and trainee groups. Occasionally, I asked Yaoshi to recommend participants and help me vet them first to see whether they were interested in participating in my study. It was also a strategic move to avoid hurting my face and maintain harmony since we were all in the same organization.

I sent each potential participant a recruitment message and the consent form through WeChat. Twenty-eight of them agreed to participate in my interviews; six of them rejected my proposals. Instead of directly saying no, five potential participants agreed to participate and said they would find a time for me. Then they ignored my follow-up messages about making appointments for an interview. In the high-context Chinese culture, people tend to be indirect in refusal and use nonverbal cues to avoid confrontation and maintain face harmony (G. Gao, 1998). Their initial agreement was a consideration of the researcher's face, but they used deferment to express their genuine attitude. One potential participant directly said no after reading my recruitment letter, indicating her work at a state institute prohibited her from being interviewed by any member of a foreign organization. People willing to participate in my study usually quickly found a time for me. The typical waiting time between first contact and conducting the interview was two days. My impression was that if Chinese people want to do something, it will happen quickly. But things could be indefinitely postponed if they didn't want to do it. Indeed, "deferment is a subtle form of rejection in Chinese culture" (K. Hwang, 1987, p. 959).

Altogether, I had 29 participants for my interviews. I conducted synchronous mediated interviews (Janghorban et al., 2014) with them through WeChat. For key informant Yaoshi, I had 38 interviews with him from March 13, 2019 to March 11, 2022. The average interview time was

53 minutes. I also randomly interviewed him online, using the voice chat and text chat functions of WeChat. These interviews helped me keep track of DTC's activities for an extended period. Each interview lasted between 40 and 168 minutes for other participants, and the average interview time was 118 minutes.

Nine participants were females, and 20 participants were males. This gender ratio reflected the gender ratio in DTC overall, where most disciples were male. The age of participants ranged from 25 to 65, with the average age being 43.6 years old. Four interviewees lived abroad in France, Japan, and Australia, and others were from Zhengzhou and other Chinese cities. Eight participants were regular trainees. They had different careers, such as small business owner, tea science educator, life coach, sales manager, and professor. Twenty participants were Master Duke's disciples.

Master Duke, Yaoshi, Zuoshi, and Luohan worked at DTC's headquarters; some disciples, such as Kuiyong and Feng, had their own studios and were full-time coaches. Other disciples worked in different industries, such as marketing, medicine, education, and public service. They often had experience at varying levels and taught tai chi part-time. For instance, Xinxu was a physical education teacher in a middle school, and he also taught tai chi at his own studio. Among all participants, three graduated from middle school, six graduated from high school, 11 had associate degrees, six had bachelor's degrees, one had a master's degree, and two had Ph.D. degrees. Overall, coaches had lower educational attainment than others. This situation was expected within the martial arts community (F. Zeng, 2006), and it has many things to do with the career path of becoming a coach, which requires some of them to engage in intense full-time training at an early age. Appendix 1 lists more detailed information about my interview participants.

Consent was documented in our online chat record, audio recording, or my notes. Before each interview, I went through a familiarization process that strengthened my knowledge and understanding of the participant. This process improved my awareness of their experience, expertise, achievements, and professions. To be more specific, I spent some time reviewing public information available online to learn more about each participant. Sometimes, I talked with Yaoshi to gain more knowledge about certain participant. I also paid attention to participants' online discussions in our disciple group and their posts on WeChat Moments. This process was helpful in distancing me from people I already knew. I intentionally observed my participants from the eyes of a stranger and paid attention to aspects of the participants I was unaware of before.

I designed an interview guide organized through themes, such as participants' engagement with DTC, views on taking photos, and experiences with contests. Although this research focused on body practices, I avoided directly using this term during interviews. Instead, I asked questions that were more relatable to them. The content and sequence of interview questions were modified based on each participant's background and particularity of situations. For instance, during the recruitment process on October 12, 2021, my interviewee Qiyun mentioned that he was preparing for a competition, so I brought a question about competitions to the beginning of my list of questions and used it as an icebreaker for the interview. For coaches working in overseas settings and going through significant events, I would question how they established their authority in different cultural contexts. These interviews provided different opinions, experiences, and accounts of practices from the founder, coaches, and trainees of DTC (Tracy, 2019).

As the interviews went on, I was able to see what kinds of questions produced the most

relevant insights about body practices and updated my interview questions accordingly. More than being a tool for getting at members' views, interviews were a procedure to observe and record naturally occurring talk and interaction (Emerson et al., 2011). They provided a chance to invite multiple voices to reduce the risk of having a single voice of the author (Hess, 1989). They allowed others to express their opinions, motivations, experiences, and accounts of events (Tracy, 2019). As Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori (2011) indicate, "the interview is... a very convenient way of overcoming distances both in space and in time; past events or faraway experiences can be studied by interviewing people who took part in them" (p. 529). Interview data helped me understand how DTC members define body practices' roles in DTC's organizational life and see how they associate body practices with membership, organizational image, authority, and other issues. They also shed light on the connections between body practices, people's understanding of authority, and their enrollment with DTC, etc.

Reflective Journal

Since I started my participant observation, I wrote a reflective journal to document my reflections. After ending my participant observation in December 2019, I continued to write my journal since I regularly engaged with DTC as a member in the virtual space (Alvesson, 2009). I continued to write my reflective journal until I finished collecting the interview data. The usefulness of this reflective journal is twofold: First, it enabled critical self-reflections of my roles in the field. To ensure the credibility and reliability of an at-home ethnographic study, the researcher must stay mindful of shifting between being familiar and being strange to the fieldwork (Alvesson, 2009). It is crucial for me to continuously reflect on my standpoints and perspectives in examining events happening at my home organization.

Second, it allowed me to document my thoughts, impressions, reflections, and even

struggles regarding body practices. For example, after working with different practice partners, I felt strongly that one thing that made Master Duke a great master is that his mastery of tai chi was materialized through demonstrating techniques in a highly proper and productive manner. When I practiced with other partners, I had to stay alert to the possibility of being hurt. However, if I was practicing with Master Duke, I could be relaxed because I knew, literally, that I was “in good hands.” From my own experience, I realized that Master Duke’s body practices were among the most powerful recruiting/communicating devices that established his and DTC’s authority and attracted new members. In other words, his body practices “spoke for themselves.”

I verified my observations with interviewees who had similar insights. In brief, my reflective journal directly contributed materials and ideas for further analysis. It made it easier for me to understand others and stay sensitive to stories told by body practices, not just by words. Between 2016 and 2021, I produced 238 single-spaced pages of a reflective journal written in Chinese (about 625 pages if translated into English).

Data Analysis

All forms of data were chronologically categorized into visual and textual data for convenience. When it came to data analysis, based on Tracy (2019)’s iterative approach, I developed a method that I call an *organic iterative approach* to analyze the data. The iterative approach:

...alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories. Rather than grounding the meaning solely in the emergent data, an iterative approach also encourages reflection upon the active interests, current literature, granted priorities, and various theories the researcher brings to the data. (Tracy, 2019, p. 184)

This dynamic approach enables the researcher to go back and forth between data and emerging insights to reach a refined focus and understanding (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009).

Like other well-established approaches, the template of making an iterative approach “provides a means to derive theoretical claims from qualitative data that are — based on codified standards — warranted and grounded in defensible epistemic virtues” (Harley & Cornelissen, 2020, p. 2). But when researchers try to force their data through specific templates, they risk substituting their reasoning with a procedural template application as a proxy for rigor in their analysis (Cornelissen, 2017). Thus, any existing data analysis template should be a valuable tool to be harnessed to suit the specificity of a research project, rather than as a suppressing force that limits flexibility and modification. Harley and Cornelissen (2020) argued that the rigor of data analysis does not lie in implementing protocolized techniques or methods. Instead, it lies in the outcome of processes of inferential reasoning, where researchers reason about their use of particular techniques or methods and report such reflections in their texts.

When I applied this iterative approach in my dissertation, despite its usefulness as a template for data analysis, I found that something critical for my data analysis process might be missing from the standard iterative approach. First, the value of my expertise, intuition, and experience should not be neglected. Being immersed in this community for almost two decades, I already had some rough ideas of what types of body practices might exist in a TCMAO and how important they were. It is hard to say these findings only emerged through analyzing the data. While the standard iterative approach emphasizes frequent reflections between emerging data and existing theories, etc., before coming to new insights, the organic iterative approach I developed acknowledges the researcher’s expertise, experience, and intuition as a critical part of the data analysis process. The researcher’s “gut” can quickly pick up relevant raw data and

categorize them according to specific standards closer to practitioners' experience in certain knowledge communities. For an at-home ethnographic project that studies an organization that belongs to a community of practice, the researcher's insights would undoubtedly be different from doing an ethnography project at an organization that the researcher was strange to. Under those circumstances, most insights would emerge from the researcher's close reading of collected data. Thus, instead of mainly focusing on reading the emerging data, I brought my intuition and knowledge into the data analysis process in the organic iterative approach. I allowed myself to make some assumptions about what the most popular body practices in DTC might be. Then I carefully read the data to *verify*, *modify*, and *extend* the premises. In other words, I allowed the continuous interactions between three elements: *expertise*, *emic data*, and *etic theories*. This process is closer to the actual organic experience of doing research as an organizational member.

The researcher's expertise should also include his/her knowledge of the specific cultural context in which one is native. In my case, being native to Chinese culture also played a role in making sense of my data and the social environment I was in. China is a highly hierarchized society, and one's *mianzi*, a kind of prestige emphasized in China (H. C. Hu, 1944), is directly related to one's status in society and richness in material possession. Being aware of this phenomenon, some inspirations that helped frame my analysis theme did not necessarily come from the field data; they could also come from other circumstances. For instance, during my fieldwork in 2019, I once had a tea date with a high school classmate who was also a trainee at DTC. Amidst the pleasure of the reunion, I also felt something very odd. As I wrote in my fieldnotes:

OK, I am happy to see her. However, it was bizarre that she could not wait to show me

some photos of her and another woman and ask me whether I knew that lady. After I said no, she said this woman was very successful and then talked about how their meeting went... What was she trying to say? it seems that she wanted to impress me by associating herself with someone wealthy and successful. (fieldnotes, September 22, 2019)

When we parted, despite that I told her repeatedly I was uncomfortable with taking any photos that day, she insisted on having a picture with me. “I had a gut feeling that she will show others our photo too” (fieldnotes, September.22, 2019). In Chinese society, as mentioned before, one’s social status is indicated by whom one is associated with. I sensed there was an identity-building motivation behind this kind of act. My reunion with her reminded me of how people use photos in interactions as devices that carry meanings and achieve specific effects. With this emerging awareness of this practice of taking and sharing pictures, I began to pay more attention to photo-related practices at DTC. I not only documented what people were doing about taking photos in the field but also prepared photo-related questions for the interview. It is fair to say that during my fieldwork, photo-posing already started emerging as one type of noticeable body practice in DTC.

Since I finished my fieldwork at the end of 2019, I gave myself enough time and mental space for data immersion and engaged myself in reading, looking, listening, and thinking about the data (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). During data immersion, I recorded my hunches and continuously revisited existing data. I found revisiting existing data extremely helpful for reflecting on how to improve my later data collection practices and detecting the gaps in existing data. Revisiting existing data also inspired me to design a data collection strategy that focused on answering my refined research question and pushed me to collect more data to verify and support

specific analytical themes that had emerged from existing data.

Reflecting on existing data is an ongoing process, and several types of body practices were already roughly identified and written in my notes. After I decided to focus on investigating how body practices contributed to accomplishing authority, I began to ask questions that specifically addressed the relationship between certain body practices and authority during my interviews. My point is that the organic iterative approach allowed me to modify my methodology design to accommodate emerging insights that required verification from more empirical data.

As I mentioned earlier, my knowledge about tai chi and this community laid a strong foundation for my investigation. I had well-developed intuition about *what to look for* and what might matter in the field. For example, whether a master has mastered the “real stuff” was critical for me to recognize his/her authority. The master’s mastership could only be established when his/her routine performance and pushing hands skills were solid. His/her expertise must be embodied. Thus, I naturally paid special attention to how embodied instruction was done. After all, even when an instructor is good with skills, if he or she cannot teach these skills to me, there is no point for me to follow him or her. Metaphorically speaking, taking the data as the *ocean*, my knowledge provided me with a lighthouse to navigate the data during the data coding process. I paid close attention to the sea of data and closely observed what was in the “water.” This was a journey of watching the water and recognizing data's emerging waves (themes).

In what Tracy calls the primary-cycle coding, I used the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006) to produce descriptive first-level codes, which focus on “what” is present in the data (Tracy, 2019). Since all forms of data serve the same purpose for identifying body practices and exploring their roles in materializing organization, I treated them the same way. Still, I

started with the visual data first. Body practices in visual materials are more vivid and straightforward than textual accounts, so they are more intuitive to work with. I went over all the visual materials, read notes, interview transcripts, social media posts, and other textual data, and scrutinized the photographs and the videos, which allowed me to identify recurring meaningful practices (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). At the same time, I wrote down all ideas about possible themes and analysis strategies. Hence, I tried to identify what kinds of body practices were going on, analyze the contexts, consequences, and interpretations associated with these body practices, and reflect on what types of actions these body practices had accomplished and what might be their roles in accomplishing authority.

Still taking the body practice of photo-posing as an example, in my primary-cycle coding, I paid specific attention to circumstances in which people posed for photos and reflected on literature about how pictures and proxemic behaviors participated in accomplishing membership and authority, etc. After going through visual materials, a careful reading of textual data helped me enrich, extend, and revise codes developed from visual data. At the end of this primary-cycle coding, I created a codebook, including a list of regulations, brief definitions, and representative examples. These codes summarized essential body practices that contributed to the communicative accomplishment of authority in DTC. Some sample codes can be found in Table 1.

In the secondary-cycle coding, I used the technique of *hierarchical coding*, which consists of “systematically assembling codes into hierarchical or umbrella categories that make conceptual sense” (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 6). These analytic and interpretative second-level codes must answer the research question (Tracy, 2019). This process helped me systematically reveal patterns in participants’ experiences, including the researcher’s (see Lindlof & Taylor,

2011; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). It was coupled with interpretative creativity and theoretical knowledge to ensure the second-level codes could explain, theorize, and connect the data. I was able to juxtapose various literature and synthesize theories, concepts, and assumptions from different fields (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017). At the end of the secondary coding cycle, I was able to see whether existing data was sufficient to address my research question and whether it was necessary to collect more data before I started synthesizing my analysis.

Since I had already immersed myself in data collected from my participant observation, I kept an “idea book” to document my interpretative thoughts and ideas. Although my coding process could be roughly divided into first level and second level coding, it was not strictly linear. For example, thanks to my 19 years of tai chi practice, I have recognized the importance of contests in authority accomplishment. This awareness naturally influenced how I collect related data, organize descriptive codes, and summarize analytical themes. It is a back-and-forth organic “swing” process between experience, data, theories, and research question.

I have been using the mind-mapping software “iThoughtsX” to organize my analytical thoughts systematically. Using this software, I firstly wrote down my ideas in detail, then I connected the dots and organized them under different themes. Mostly importantly, by moving my notes around and reflecting on relations between different thoughts, a road map for my analysis gradually emerged. In the coding process, I documented the accomplishments and timeline of my analysis in memos. After data coding, I revised the focus of my analysis and theoretical framework to fit the emerging data. I also created a loose analysis outline that pinpointed the research question and sub-questions that I wanted to address and noted potential ways the emerging codes were attending to or not attending to them (Tracy, 2019). This outline guided me to go back to the data and use the resulting code “in a more etic, top-down, deductive

Table 1: Sample Descriptive Codes, Data Exemplars, and Emerging Themes

Descriptive Codes	Data Examples	Emerging Analytical Themes
Masters, coaches, or selected disciples stand in front of the studio to teach and lead all forms of tai chi practices	Every morning or evening session follows the same routine: warming up, silking, playing two rounds of old form one, and teaching new moves	
Coaches or masters demonstrate the combat use of tai chi postures	Disciples asked Master Duke how to use the <i>Draping Body Fist</i> posture in combat. Master Duke showed how to use it on the asking disciple	
Masters, coaches, and disciples practice pushing hands with each other	During the Chinese National Day week training camp (2018), trainees got super excited about practicing pushing hands with each other	
Masters and coaches test specific skills on others, especially those newcomers, visitors, or people who misunderstand tai chi	When Lilly visited DTC, she had a lot of tests with Master Duke and had a lot of fun	#1: Through embodied instruction and skill testing, organization members and the organization they represent show their associations with specific martial arts by doing it in “the right way” and establishing their authority as the legitimate authority in this art
Masters, coaches, and disciples teach others randomly without planning or structured procedure	Master Duke corrected Wenrou’s posture of <i>Turn Around, Lotus Kick</i> and showed her how to do it correctly after watching her quietly for a while	
Peer-mentoring between disciples and trainees	During training breaks, trainees practiced what they have learned with their peers and helped each other during this learning process	
DTC peers challenge each other in public or private settings to negotiate status within the same organization	A fellow disciple publicly challenged Yaoshi. He took down the challenging peer to maintain his face and authority in DTC	
Challenger initiated challenge towards established practitioner and his/her organization	A hostile visitor challenged coaches at DTC by initiating fights with them	

Descriptive Codes	Data Examples	Emerging Analytical Themes
Disciples and trainees try to take photos with Master Duke and Master Qing. Several tai chi postures are often posed to show that Master Duke or Master Qing is teaching them	At the training camp, trainees waited in line to take pictures with Master Duke and Master Qing	
DTC members often took collective photos when there were organizational events	People who attended the yearly Chinese Labor Day week training camp (2017) gathered in front of the local landmark, the Zhongyuan tower, to take group photos	#2: Through photo-posing, organization members materialized their associations with authoritative figures and made their associations visible to relevant parties. People invoked these associations as sources of authority
DTC members frequently took photos of their daily practices DTC members who teach tai chi took photos with students	On WeChat, many DTC members often share their pictures of practicing tai chi After his first training camp hosted in Xinyang, Yaoshi took some pictures with his students and used these photos in his studio's admission announcement	
DTC members took photos with authoritative individuals, landmarks, organizations, etc.	Master Duke took photos with a powerful billionaire. Master Duke and DTC used these photos in promotional materials	
Daily ritualized body practices	At the end of each session, DTC members performed the session closing ceremony	#3: Through performing body rituals, one's associations with authority figures are continuously reproduced, materialized, and stabilized
Disciples performed the discipleship ceremony to become Master Duke's disciples officially	Since 2010, DTC has performed at least 11 large-scale discipleship ceremonies that enrolled multiple disciples	
DTC members performed other types of body rituals	Master Duke and Master Qing performed the graveside worship at one of their discipleship ceremonies	
DTC members performed the fist and palm salute	When new visitors came to DTC headquarters, they often performed the <i>palm and fist ritual</i> toward Master Duke	

Descriptive Codes	Data Examples	Emerging Analytical Themes
DTC members participated in public performance on different platforms	Master Qing appeared on a TV show on HNTV; Tai Chi Bear performed at all kinds of TV shows; Yaoshi and Ben performed pushing hands in a TV show of HNTV	#4: Through staged performance, the authoritative relationships between organizational members are materialized and made visible; also, by performing on stages of various influence and status, organization members and the organization accomplish authority through their association with these stages
Trainees did debrief performance at the end of annual training sessions	In the Chinese National Day week training camp (2018), trainees were organized into different groups to perform in front of Master Duke, Master Qing, and guests of honors	
DTC members used social media to show off their tai chi performance	Wangzi's performance of the competition routine of Chen-style tai chi was streamed online	
DTC members performed tai chi at social events	At Yaoshi's wedding, the "tiger team" of DTC performed tai chi and livened up the atmosphere	
DTC members attend all kinds of competitions	Xuming attended a contest in Hongkong. After winning a contest, she began to call herself a "world champion"	#5: Martial arts are competitive. Through participating in contests that vary in forms and scales, organizational members negotiate and accomplish the authority of individuals and the organizations they represent

manner" (Tracy & Hinrichs, 2017, p. 7). Table 1 summarizes sample descriptive codes, emerging themes, and data examples.

As I mentioned, I allowed my knowledge about tai chi and TCMAO to play its role in the coding process and used it to draw my attention to body practices related to authority accomplishment. The table did not include all body practices I identified from the data. For

example, the body practice of *dining and drinking* plays a significant role in relationship building in DTC. I reflected back-and-forth between my experience, data, emerging themes, and relevant theories and concepts and narrowed my focus to the five most prominent and regular themes. I put descriptive codes that were not relevant to these five themes to rest for now.

Conclusion

This chapter describes and explains my data collection and analysis methods. I collected a rich data set through participant observation, interviews, and reflective journaling in an unfamiliar setting for many Western audiences. My data analysis strategy enabled me to develop well-informed answers to my research question. During my participant observation, I had already started to think about what kinds of body practices exist in a TCMAO and their roles in accomplishing authority. My expertise in tai chi certainly contributed valuable intuitions in outlining initial thoughts and analytical themes, which further influenced my later data collection. During the coding process, identifying descriptive codes and refining emerging analytical themes were organically intertwined. That is also why I refer to this process as an organic iterative process. The researcher can not only go back and forth between the data, emerging findings, and relevant theories, s/he can also go back to adjust the data collection strategy to collect data that can better answer the research question. My coding process yielded first level descriptive codes about popular body practices in DTC. In the second level coding, I categorized them under several salient themes of body practices: embodied instruction, photo-posing, body rituals, staged performance, and contesting. In the next chapter, I will present my analysis of how each type of body practice contributes to the communicative accomplishment of authority in the TCMAO I studied.

CHAPTER V

Analysis

The core idea of differential authority is that one's authority, the ability to author certain situations, can be extended to other territories or fields and shared with other actors through associations. The existence of differential authority is clearly illustrated in the following public speech made by Xinggu at the Zhengzhou Friends Association of DTC on June 28, 2014. Xinggu was a project manager in the construction industry:

The previous year at Luohe city, my project could not move forward for over a month. The villagers who lost their land threw their grievances and waves of anger towards our construction site. Two big fights broke out, and the conflict intensified. In desperation, I picked up the roster of DTC's first training camp and got in touch with Lee from the Luohe Municipal Political and Legal Committee. He promised to help. Then Master Duke told Lee: "You and Xinggu are tai chi brothers. When Xinggu is at Luohe, you must treat his matters as your own!" The next day, Lee went to the town hall and invited the mayor and the Secretary of the Party Committee to visit our construction site. Lee told them seriously: "You have to come here every morning, and you can stop coming only when everything with this site is going well!" Afterward, the local police taught the outlaws a lesson, and soon no one dared to make trouble at our construction site. (Xinggu, public speech, June 28, 2014)

For law-abiding citizens in democratic societies, they might be confused about why Xinggu didn't call the police first? That kind of thinking does not work so well in China, especially in underdeveloped areas. Had Xinggu called the police, a possible scenario is that they would have shown up, completed an official "procedure," and you wouldn't have found procedural or legal problems with how local police handled the situation. But problems would still be there unless someone from above, in this case, Master Duke's disciple Lee, was dedicated to solving this problem for real. Law enforcement involvement became effective only after Lee stepped in. In this case, the police's authority was in service of problem-solving only when Lee exerted his authority over local officials, who were not directly under Lee's chain of command. Local officials were wary of Lee because they feared all the differential authority that Lee could

mobilize.

Events that reveal the existence of differential authority in DTC could be found everywhere: Using the stadium of a state-owned company for DTC's training (fieldnotes, October 02, 2019); installing protective foam floor mats retired from a provincial sports center (fieldnotes, September 23, 2019); dismissing criminal charges towards a disciple in trouble (fieldnotes, September 02, 2018). This list could keep going. The focus of this dissertation is not on corruption but instead on *how authority works in real situations in China*. These events show how authority can be extended to other territories, such as the legal system, through associations with authoritative personnel who can mobilize relevant resources.

Some disciples chose Master Duke as their master not only because they admired Master Duke's skills and personality, but they also took Master Duke's circles of powerful *guanxi* (connections) in consideration. It's fair to say that owning strong connections is part of a master's charm. Xiyi was one of Master Duke's favorite students, they had known each other for decades. Almost everyone at DTC assumed that Xiyi would become Master Duke's disciple. However, Xiyi secretly attended seminars of another master who was hostile towards Master Duke and took that master as his shifu. Master Duke and Master Qing were emotionally shocked and felt hurt about this incident. They had a meeting with the coaching team, discussed Xiyi's actions and reflected on why Xiyi left them. One possible reason they agreed on was that in general Xiyi was very utilitarian, and the master he chose had more connections with CCTV at that moment (fieldnotes, October 14, 2019). Master Duke's authority as a landmark martial artist had a lot to do with his expertise and his identity as the legitimate successor of Master Shangchun. But being Master Shangchun's disciple was not enough. After all, Master Shangchun had hundreds of disciples, and many did not make a name for themselves. As I often

heard, many martial artists with outstanding skills and legitimacy remained unrecognized.

Establishing authority in a TCMAO takes many factors, such as political trends, mass media, and a powerful persona's endorsement. All these elements have roles to play. Even for Master Duke, it is critical for him to associate himself with other authoritative figures or entities. The closer one is associated with authoritative figures, the more one can benefit from differential authority. Making others aware of one's association with authoritative figures is thus an essential, even profitable practice for DTC members.

In this chapter, I will take a close look at five types of body practices: *embodied instruction*, *photo-posing*, *body rituals*, *staged performance*, and *contesting*, and show how these body practices help people establish their associations with *authoritative figures* recognized by relevant parties, such as organizational members, trainees, media, and the public. I will also discuss how these recognized associations help the organization and its members accomplish authority through the mechanism of differential authority.

Embodied Instruction: Sacred Knowledge, Vectors, and Differential Authority

Defining Embodied Instruction

In different industries and contexts, authority accomplishment entails different approaches and qualifications; it also has different requirements of the bodies. Take Stephen Hawking as an example: For this English theoretical physicist and cosmologist, the world recognizes his authority in physics despite his confinement to a wheelchair. However, martial arts can never be reduced to abstract formulae and theoretical concepts. Its transmission must be done through the instructor's embodied teaching, where skills must be shown through the body to be fully appreciated. Thus, no one can become an authority in martial arts without a capable body that can embody the form and spirit of a particular art.

In this dissertation, *embodied instruction* refers to the body practice that *people use their*

bodies to demonstrate, share, and teach martial arts to others under varied circumstances. In martial arts training, it refers to how a person claims rights and knowledge of instructing how others' bodies function, move, and feel (Reed, 2021). While Dewey recognizes that learning is an embodied process (Shilling, 2017), the importance of the body in martial arts is more prominent. The body is people's "first and most natural instrument" (Mauss, 2005, p. 75) in the efficient deployment of martial arts, which is one type of cultural practice.

The key to this body practice is that the instructor must embody specific martial arts. Martial arts entail cultural, philosophical, and even medical knowledge. Most importantly, they always consist of systems of training approaches to help practitioners develop specific skills and abilities. Also, what distinguishes traditional martial arts from other combat sports is their varied forms, also variously known as *patterns, kata, forms, or taolu* (套路) (Jennings et al., 2020). As a side note, there is a risk of oversimplifying potentially deeper meanings when translating these East Asian terms. Still, for clarity, the generic English word '*form*' is used as "an umbrella term to focus on the shared body pedagogic strategy" (Jennings et al., 2020, p. 63) in traditional martial arts. Teaching these *forms* constitutes a particular and vital type of pedagogy common among the traditional Asian martial arts and their global derivatives (Jennings et al., 2020).

In DTC, people learned basic warm-up skills, pushing hands, and all sorts of tai chi forms through embodied instruction. As mentioned by Shilling (2017), "the challenges involved in high-level skill acquisition may restrict success to those with the means to undergo prolonged apprenticeships" (p.1217). In a TCMAO, long apprenticeships supervised by the master are always seen as key to one's success in mastering the art since it means more opportunity to receive face-to-face embodied instructions from the master. As mentioned by a participant named Meigui, "[Compared with disciples who live close to our master], if we had that amount

of time to be around shifu, our skill level would be much better” (Meigui, interview, September 22, 2020).

People use embodied instruction to transmit martial arts and establish authority.

Through embodied instruction, organizational members and the organization they represent show their associations with specific martial art by doing it in “the right way” and establishing their authority as legitimate heirs of this art. Here, one’s authority depends not only on one’s position within the lineage but also on the status of this martial art in society. If a particular type of martial art is despised, the authority of its practitioner can be minimal. For example, during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the government defined tai chi as something wrong and evil. They persecuted tai chi inheritors and coaches and attacked the legitimacy of their professions as martial artists and martial arts educators. There was no space for tai chi martial artists to develop their authority and their profession’s authority (Z. Chen, 1999). Below, without diving into the complicated history of TCMAOs, I will give a brief introduction to the status of TCMAOs in Chinese society and reflect on how it influences the accomplishment of authority.

Martial Arts: The Sacred Knowledge

Traditional Chinese martial arts have played an essential role in Chinese society for a long time. They were weaved into China’s military philosophy, health preservation culture, and aesthetic spirit. They became sacred knowledge in contemporary China for several reasons. First, they have tremendous spiritual and health value without publicly challenging the state’s atheist ideology. Practicing traditional Chinese martial arts offers a spiritual path towards enlightenment and awakening without invoking a specific sacred figure. Through practicing traditional Chinese martial arts, practitioners’ biographical accounts often report experiences of personal change plus spiritual and religious sensitization (Jennings et al., 2010). The spiritual dimension of traditional

Chinese martial arts is materialized through three means: personal accounts of spiritual experiences; participation in religious activities and events; and postures and routines that are inspired by or named after spiritual elements, such as the Buddhist mantras or spiritual principles. The spiritual dimension is the soul of the martial arts (Lowry, 1995). Some martial arts, such as tai chi (Brown, 2016), have been perceived as beneficial body-mind practices worldwide. For many practitioners, including Westerners, what drives them to persist in their martial arts studies with tenacity and enthusiasm is the martial arts' ritual process and the emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual pull that martial arts can exert on students (Donohue, 1994; Kong, 2012).

Second, traditional Chinese martial arts are being integrated into China's National Intangible Cultural Heritage system and becoming desirable cultural goods. The fate of traditional Chinese martial arts is directly influenced by political trends and state ideology. "Traditional Chinese culture in the modern day is shaped by a complex negotiation between the State – which keeps close control over the meaning of practices – and grassroots practitioners who actively articulate this ideological framework in their everyday practice" (Porchet, 2020, p. 47). The transmission framework of traditional Chinese martial arts is embedded in the traditional lineage system and mainly practiced within the population through local networks. In this framework, the "master" persona and his belonging to the genealogy traced back to the founder of a particular martial art or its variants legitimize the transmitted knowledge (Porchet, 2019). For more than two decades, especially during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), this framework was labeled "feudal," outdated, dangerous, and needed to be eradicated. For example, the discipleship ceremony and tai chi were forbidden as "cultural trash of feudalism" (Z. Chen, 1999).

However, people began to see this framework as a cultural treasure in the recent past. It is gaining popularity as an important way to reinstate China's traditional values and cultural confidence. This traditional framework gains its new symbolic meaning in shaping Chinese identity. Traditional Chinese martial arts have become an essential part of China's Intangible Cultural Heritage program, along with many traditional cultural systems such as tea art or traditional craft. In this regard, martial arts have become desirable cultural goods that reflect the values, spirit, and "great creativity, and wisdom of the Chinese nation" (translated from Chinese) (Wu & Wang, 2007, p. 73).

Third, it is often considered key to the construction of the martial spirit of China. One popular discourse on China's modern history describes China as a purely bullied and victimized nation suffering from Western and Japanese cultural and military invasions. The martial spirit emerged decisively as a discursive trope during the late nineteenth century as China faced the existential threat of internal rebellion, Western and Japanese imperialism, and a moribund Manchu dynasty (Wile, 2020). In regaining national pride and independence, people turned to martial arts to find the path toward national salvation. In 1920, the first president of the Republic of China, Zhongshan Sun, presented the Jingwu Athletic Association with a calligraphic inscription, declaring: "Revere the martial spirit" (Wile, 2020, p.94), recognizing the role of traditional Chinese martial arts in reviving the nation. The development of traditional Chinese martial arts in the Republic era is characterized by a roaring passion for saving the nation and strengthening people's bodies by practicing martial arts.

Beginning in 1949, the newly founded People's Republic of China (PRC) elaborated a discourse on Chinese Martial Arts in its culture and sports policy. This discourse emphasizes constructing a "patriotic body" that is supposed to embody the nation (Porchet, 2019). Chairman

Zedong Mao specifically stressed the importance of physical education. He saw martial arts and physical education as linked in that they were both compatible and complementary to moral and intellectual training (Uberoi, 1995). Mao's logic was that if individual Chinese was physically weak, then the whole Chinese people were physically weak, which meant that the nation-state was weak in face of its enemies. Suppose youth could be self-conscious of this causal connection and practice physical culture with discipline and perseverance. In that case, they would individually become strong, which meant that the people would become strong, and the nation would prosper (Uberoi, 1995). Thus, martial arts training was considered the path to a strong country.

Despite China's more recent and unprecedented economic and military expansion, policymakers' craving for martial spirits and patriotism is rising instead of declining. Financial success has further fueled the rising martial spirit of China. As China remains steadily guided by the "one hundred years national policy" of replacing the U.S. to become the No.1 superpower on earth (Pillsbury, 2016), martial arts is critical to promoting martial spirits and Chinese collectiveness. Martial arts are at the frontier of cultural controversy between China and the West and have become the new vehicle for promoting China's soft power. China's latest development plan for the martial arts industry (2019-2025) is to weave martial arts into the curriculum of the Confucius Institute (The Department of Sports Economics of China, 2019), which is regarded by some as "the Chinese Trojan Horse" (e. g. Mosher, 2012; Peterson, 2017). Martial arts are integrated into the grand strategy to "tell China's story well" and infiltrate and promote Chinese culture and narratives globally (Fang et al., 2011).

Traditional Chinese martial arts have thus become sacred knowledge within Chinese society (and beyond) due to its attractiveness as a form of intangible culture, the practitioner's

spiritual and health needs, and the state's ideology and political needs. It is considered key to the Chinese identity and a robust national image. Understanding this context is helpful for us to understand narratives and practices within the martial arts community.

Knowledge Acquisition as Association

In the martial arts community, the most straightforward means to verify one's association with specific martial arts is mastering the art and embodying it. As vividly described by Brown and Jennings (2011), the martial arts transmission framework is fundamentally a "body lineage" where the intergenerational connections between the master and his/her successors could only be materialized through the successful inheritance of the master's teaching. When a master dies, so does the specific embodied knowledge that s/he accumulated through life-long practice, which includes but is not limited to:

...use of energy, sensitivity, touch, "feel," specific solutions to the problem of body combat, idiosyncratic body ritual, and martial choreographies, and the mythologized notions of "secret" techniques, contained within the myriad martial arts, as movement culture...(Brown & Jennings, 2011, p. 64)

Still, a question remains regarding whose "transmission" can be said to be "authentic"? It is hard to set a single measure. Instead, many factors can play a role, such as the master's fame. It is generally believed that the "embodied martial knowledge is taken to be incorporated by those martial artists who have trained with the most culturally esteemed master practitioners of the previous generation" (Brown & Jennings, 2011, p. 65). Training with a famous master provides the next generation with a form of embodied legitimacy to help them inherit the authority of the former master. At the same time, how long one has been trained by a master also matters, the longer, the better. But time here can be further understood on two levels: the length

of actual training time and how long one has joined a particular lineage.

Although training time is a reference measure, the hard-core standard is whether one has his/her master's skills "on his/her own body" (练到身上, *liandao shenshang*). The level of knowledge acquisition is the ultimate indicator of the strength of association between disciple and master. In this case, the master-disciple association is also a matter of degree between "name" (名, *ming*) and "substance" (实, *shi*). Suppose a disciple follows all the procedures of discipleship but does not do well in skill acquisition. In that case, s/he may be perceived in the end as having only the name of the association, which can be described in Chinese as "having the name, but not the substance" (有名无实, *youming wushi*) or "in name only" (徒有其名, *tuyou qiming*).

The idea is that the name and substance matching are joined (有名有实, *youming youshi*). Namely, one's association with his/her master and their lineage is not only procedurally legitimate but also substantiated by high-level skill acquisition that corresponds with one's seniority. Thus, the authority that one can claim by being associated with a particular master also depends on the strength of their association. This is a judgment call made by relevant parties, and it is always under peer review. A seasoned practitioner can immediately tell one's skill level by simply looking at any posture one performs. In even the seemingly most mundane posture, a good eye can tell whether a practitioner meets the critical requirements of tai chi: Is the hipbone open? Are the shoulders relaxed? Does his eyesight land in the right place? One can verbally claim associations with famous masters, but his/her body performance cannot lie. The body immediately tells one's actual place in the community.

The body that indicates strong associations between the disciple, his/her master, and their lineage has specific characteristics. First, the practitioner's body masters the techniques and style

of a particular master, in native words, the master's *quanjia* (拳架). Like other Asian martial arts such as Aikido, tai chi also includes "a system of identifiable units of movement, the so-called techniques, executed for utilitarian results. Techniques are labeled, catalogued, and portrayed as a chain of mechanical actions that obviate attacks" (Kong, 2012, p. 93). The Chinese word "quan" (拳) often refers to various forms of unarmed martial arts (zdic.net, n.d.-a), while "jia" (架) has meanings such as "rack, stand, prop; prop up" (zdic.net, n.d.-b). The English word "frame" might be the closest term to express the original meaning of *quanjia*. *Frame* (拳架, *quanjia*) refers to the embodied postural patterns in martial arts postures and routines. Sometimes it is also used to describe martial arts routines.

In this dissertation, I mainly use *frame* to describe the embodied postural patterns while practicing martial arts routines and postures. It is not just the routines and postures shared by all practitioners in the same martial arts. Instead, it is the unique, recognizable style of embodied performance of martial arts routines and postures. Even for the same posture, different masters present it differently and develop their unique styles. A strong disciple can embody his/her master's style by adopting the master's training methods and theories in their practice and being physically present to attend the master's training camps frequently. In DTC, as summarized by Master Duke, "well, they [disciples] should come here to attend our training camps frequently. Otherwise, their practices will deviate from our teaching and end up losing the shape and spirit of our tai chi" (fieldnotes, October 23, 2018). In a word, the strength of the master-disciple association is indicated by how well one can embody the master's teaching and unique frame (and even transcending one's master, if possible).

Legitimate Vectors in Action: Accomplishing Authority through Embodied Instruction

The previous section outlined why traditional Chinese martial arts are regarded as sacred

knowledge in today's China. I also introduced the idea that the strength of one's association with his/her master and their lineage depends more on the body than on verbal claims. When this insight is translated into organizational practices regarding accomplishing authority, it appears to be a salient practice for martial artists to present themselves as legitimate vectors of the arts taught by their masters through three types of embodied instructions: master demo, testing touch, and embodied social insertion. I will explain them later.

The etymological root of the word *vectors* is the Latin *vehere*, which means “to carry, convey” (Brummans et al., 2021, p. 3). In the CCO literature that recognizes communication's critical role in composing relations, namely communicative relationality (Cooren, 2015a, 2017, 2018; Cooren et al., 2017; Cooren & Sandler, 2014; Jahn, 2018; Kuhn, 2021; Kuhn et al., 2017), vectors have carrying or conveying abilities to reform a wider web of relations, which can be seen as “trajectories of practice” (Kuhn et al., 2017, p. 32) or realization of possibilities out of numerous potential courses of actions. They can be stable or habitual, but they can also always be accomplished otherwise and veer off course. Thus, through vectors of ordinary practices, explanations of relations in which we find ourselves become possible (Kuhn et al., 2017).

Both texts and humans can act as vectors. Brummans et al. (2021) develop a vectorial perspective on mediation that investigate “how actors make differences in situations (their agency) by carrying or conveying what other actors are saying, doing, thinking, or feeling, and this is what defines the effects of their contributions to composing the nature of relations — their vector effects, so to speak” (p. 4, emphasis original). Here I focus on another layer of meaning of vector effects, namely, how humans use communicative practices (to be more specific, body practices) to portray themselves as vectors of the martial art they are practicing. Through these effects, they can speak on behalf of the art and carry or convey what this art authentically entails.

The martial arts world is full of controversies regarding the legitimacy and authenticity of certain martial arts lineages (Takacs, 2003). Take tai chi as an example, despite historical evidence, people are still fighting for the title of “birthplace of tai chi”. Some twist narratives to fit their interests. Historical studies have reached a well-accepted conclusion that tai chi was created by Wangting Chen (1600-1680) from the Chen village in Wen County, Henan Province (DeMarco, 2015). However, due to influential stories written by fictionists and popular movies such as *The Tai-Chi Master*, many people, including authors such as Payne (1981), believe that the Wudang mountain in Hubei Province was the birthplace of tai chi. Answers to historical questions like this directly influence how practitioners accomplish authority in real life: Who are the authentic vectors of this art? Accomplishing authority always involves defending the lineage one is in, claiming oneself as the legitimate vector of this art, and emphasizing one’s legitimate association with his/her master. Below, I will show how three different types of embodied instructions help practitioners accomplish authority.

Master Demo: Showing, Besides Telling

In the context of a TCMAO, the term *master demo* refers to how people, such as the master or coach, demonstrate the proper techniques for specific postures, routines, or combat skills. It includes demonstrating the technique or routine without interacting with learners so the latter can observe and imitate the demonstrator’s way of doing it. It also involves embodied interaction where the demonstrator can touch, adjust, and even fight with the practitioners’ body to help them master specific techniques. Through effective master demo, a master can correct others’ wrongful practices. Teaching martial arts always involves verbal elements, but it is master demo that makes a fundamental difference. Otherwise, everyone could become a kungfu master by just reading books! Effective teaching always involves theoretical explanation and an

impressive master demo that shows how to do it.

As summarized by Kuiyong:

When I teach kungfu, I explain the usage of each movement and *show* them how to do it. For instance, when I teach the move of the Single Whip, I explain clearly why the posture is this way and demonstrate the attack and defense usage of each movement. In this way, whether the student can understand it right away or not, he at least understands the context of the movement and be mentally wired to practice correctly: He shifts his weight first, then turns his waist, he knows (in the future) he will not just turn around randomly, you know, we saw that a lot among people who are not well trained, so their moves are always off. I also work with a higher-level practitioner to dismantle the moves and show them how to apply them in combat. This helps students understand. There is no need to worry about whether the students can do it perfectly now. It is all about cultivating their impressions. After practicing it thousands of times, someday they will get it! (Kuiyong, interview, October 23, 2021)

Kuiyong emphasized the importance of both theoretical illustration and master demo. His idea resonated with what my key informant Yaoshi and other senior coaches were saying. DTC's teaching philosophy emphasized "knowing why" and "knowing how." Only when one knows the logic behind every move can one know how to do it correctly, but "knowing how" is the ultimate standard for proving that their knowledge acquisition is legitimate and authentic.

In the martial arts community, practitioners emphasize their associations with their masters and lineages for many reasons, such as accumulating differential authority and being seen as loyal and filial, which is stressed by Confucianism. Despite being an established master, Master Duke still frequently mentioned his association with his master to portray his image of being a good disciple. For example, below is part of the transcript of Master Duke being interviewed by a French martial arts magazine. I was responsible for writing down his answers and sending them to the magazine:

Interviewer: You studied under the Grand Master Master Shangchun; can you tell us more about him? How did he influence your style and way of perceiving Chinese Martial Arts?

Master Duke: Master Shangchun is the representative figure of Chen-style tai chi and has made significant historical contributions to the development and promotion of this art. I

have been under the tutelage of Master Shangchun for more than twenty years and have entirely inherited his teachings. (fieldnotes, January 9, 2019)

Master Duke's answer was respectful and appropriate and met the expectation of how an ideal disciple should behave. He was well regarded as one of the most representative personages of the 12th generation of Chen-style tai chi in the community. Among his disciples, similar insights about him being the next leader of Chen-style tai chi were often expressed. Compared with Master Shangchun's children, Master Duke did not have the valuable bloodline that could make someone a blood heir. Instead, it was his achievements that made him stand out. Master Duke's disciples favored his style more than others. Take Kuiyong as an example:

The famous "Four Grandmasters" (四大金刚, *si da jingang*) of Chen-style tai chi are perfect in their skills, and their kungfu is very mature. But maybe because their kungfu is too deep and sophisticated, we sometimes cannot understand it... We know they are good, but we cannot tell what is wonderful and good about their practices. You just do not know what is going on. This makes me very confused; I still do not know how to practice tai chi in the right way. But after I watched shifu's practice, I felt that his frame was very clear. All the movements and their transitions were very clear. When you look at his practice or his video, you understand where the movements should be, and which movement is considered to be excellent or terrible. People often compare shifu's frame to the regular script in calligraphy, where the strength and ingenuity of each stroke are apparent and in place... Follow shifu's teachings, you can quickly feel the meanings of tai chi and understand how to do it. (Kuiyong, interview, October 23, 2021)

Other disciples, such as Wenbin, also frequently mentioned the "standard script" metaphor:

I particularly like shifu's style. This is like calligraphy; it is the regular script with neat strokes. While other masters' movements are more flowing, like the cursive script or the running script, which are not very suitable for beginners. If you have the foundation of writing regular script, it will be easier for you to practice the cursive script, even the running script later. But you must master the regular script first. How can you learn to run before you can walk? So, I chose Master Duke as my master. One thing is that I like his frame; also, I have made my investigation. In the Chen village, or the country in general, there are many teachers with good kungfu, but there are not so many with both good kungfu and good characters. Some teachers in the village are loan sharks and wife beaters, and their reputations are terrible. But Master Duke's reputation is intact; people say he has three good qualities: good character, good kungfu, and good teaching. It is so challenging to be good at all three. I like to follow him. (Wenbin, interview, November 13, 2021)

Both accounts above pinpoint that Master Duke inherited the tai chi art well and developed his unique style of practicing his art. His style satisfies all the classic standards of Chen-style tai chi while raising it to a high level of clarity and elegance.

It is noteworthy that the governmental sector has recognized the excellence of Master Duke's style of performing Chen-style tai chi. He was chosen to work with another 11th generation master, Weiwu, to co-design the "ranking system" (段位制, *duanwei zhi*) of Chen-style tai chi. As commented by Wenbin:

I asked shifu about the story of the ranking system over dinner. He mentioned that the Chinese Wushu Association approached him... Think about it: There are so many Chen-style tai chi practitioners out there, why did shifu's frame become the national standard? Shifu's style was excellent, and the state chose it. If you want to take the Chen-style tai chi ranking exam, you must learn this style. How cool is that? (Wenbin, interview, November 13, 2021)

Master Duke's signature "national standard" style is materialized and expressed through his frame and other pushing hands techniques. A good frame is essential for master demo since it can reveal one's skill level. With all the technologies available, master demo can be face to face, or it can be documented through videos and photos and circulated widely through the internet and other media platforms.

Although tai chi has been reduced to a mind-body meditation-like regular exercise in many Western well-being organizations, authentic tai chi is a complicated knowledge system that is hard to master, even with years of dedicated practice. In a TCMAO like DTC, profound teachings continuously show learners the proper techniques to improve themselves endlessly. I noticed that a successful master demo has several essential qualities: First, it must be an impressive performance that embodies skills that others cannot do or cannot perform as well as the demonstrator. Here what counts as impressive is context-based. For senior disciples, the wonderfulness of Master Duke's skills can be adequately appreciated. However, for a tai chi

newcomer, almost any qualified demonstrator's performance can be impressive. Overall, people in the tai chi community have basic common sense about what counts as a good performance, and when they see it, they know it.

Master Duke, Yaoshi, or other senior disciples all had their ways of attracting fans through their master demo. Below is the recounting of two incidents where practitioners were drawn to DTC because they found Master Duke's master demo in the virtual space.

I used to practice the 24-move national routine, 48-move tai chi, and tai chi sword, etc. One day, I saw shifu's video online. Ouch! When I saw it ((laughing in surprise)), I thought: Chen-style tai chi is fantastic! I told myself: "Hey, it is powerful and beautiful, so good!" At that time, the image I saw was about the master playing tai chi at a riverside, accompanied by were wind, water, and waves. When everything was combined with the master's powerful movements of the new form routine one, oh my god, he was so handsome! I was immediately attracted to the master and his tai chi. It was so good! I said I must go to learn this tai chi from him! At that time, I did not know who the person in the video was, so I searched online and finally found out that man in the video was shifu. He was young, chubby, and had a very innocent look ((laugh)). I watched more videos of him, following his demonstrations of holding the hands correctly and doing the hook hand, palm, and silk reeling...The more I watched, the more interested I was, and I decided to go to him to learn. (Mumian, interview, October 19, 2021)

Today, I met a trainee, Zhuyu, at the training camp and asked her what brought her to this camp. She said she had been practicing tai chi for many years, but she could not get the hook hand posture right. That was very frustrating. No matter how hard she tried, it just did not feel right. Then, she happened to see a picture of shifu on a friend's cell phone. She pointed out that this photo was the background picture of the large banner at our training site. This photo was also widely circulating online. The moment she saw the picture, she thought, wow, this posture feels so right! So handsome! She had not seen anyone who could practice this posture so beautifully. At that time, she did not know who the master in the photo was, so she did some investigation. People told her this man was Master Duke. Then she searched online and found out about this training camp. That is why she is here. (fieldnotes, October 07, 2019)

As we can see, both Mumian and Zhuyu were experienced practitioners when they saw Master Duke's mediated performance for the first time. However, they did not know who he was. They were attracted by his postures and demonstrations first and went to find out who did them.

Master Duke's master demo spoke for itself and revealed a new level of excellence that they

could not find elsewhere, indicating that he has mastered this art as a legitimate heir.

Second, a good master demo must vividly show a clear path/example that other learners can follow and imitate. It wouldn't be helpful if the instructor showed off his skills but did not offer decomposition moves that enabled others to comprehend them. While explaining why his short tutorial videos were popular on Chinese video-sharing platforms such as TikTok and Kuaishou, Yaoshi mentioned a big difference between him and others:

Many other martial artists focus more on showing off what they can do, but I focus on showing people how to do it step by step. Showing off oneself is not helpful for learners. I focus on providing things that are useful to them. In other words, I aim to serve others, not show off my capability (Yaoshi, interview, February 8, 2021).

It is not surprising that Yaoshi had become a significant influencer in the world of tele-martial arts in China. Although his fame was not as strong as Master Duke's, his online courses attracted more students due to his effective teaching methods. In other words, using master demo, he established his authority that attracted followers and paying students.

Third, an effective master demo often addresses a specific challenge or technological difficulty that is hard to explain without demonstration. Many came to DTC to solve problems they could not solve elsewhere. One of the most representative challenges for practitioners, especially seniors, was knee injuries caused by incorrect tai chi footing practices (Pu, 2019), which directly relates to not knowing how to correctly relax and open up the hips and control the angle of the knees. Unfortunately, many so-called tai chi instructors in both Eastern and Western regions did not know the proper techniques. Whether an instructor can help practitioners avoid this problem is a quality mark indicating this instructor's skill level and authenticity of his/her teachings.

In this regard, Master Duke and his disciples tended to excel. DTC's training system had fixed this problem for many practitioners. From a practitioner's point of view, anyone who could

help them with this challenge would be considered as a validated vector of this art. Many people had experiences that were similar to Luliu's:

I had bleeding during childbirth and have been in poor health. I was almost unable to take care of myself and had difficulty getting in and out of bed. Late in 2007, I accidentally encountered Yang-style tai chi and practiced with a teacher in a park. But the movements I learned were not authentic and standard. I hurt both knees and developed arthritis. Later, I went to DTC and changed my movements systematically. Now I am feeling fantastic. I think my body is better than a decade ago. (Luliu, interview, September 8, 2020)

At DTC, Luliu worked with coaches who taught her how to practice tai chi effectively and healthily. After her techniques were corrected, Luliu had been one of the most dedicated trainees at DTC. Interestingly, she was associated with teachers who taught her Yang-style tai chi and managed a training station that was part of a Yang-style tai chi network. However, she has been spending a lot of time training with DTC, teaching Chen-style tai chi, and competing on DTC's behalf. In other words, while keeping her social ties with the Yang-style tai chi network, she recognized DTC's authority in tai chi and practiced teachings from DTC.

At DTC, many disciples and trainees had experience in different martial arts, such as Shaolin kungfu, bagua quan, sanda (Chinese kickboxing), and tai chi of other styles, etc. However, once they joined DTC's training program or Master Duke's lineage, they officially recognized and acknowledged Master Duke and DTC's authority in Chen-style tai chi. A practitioner could maintain a fluid and multifaceted identity that suits his/her circumstances. For example, when Luliu taught Chen-style tai chi, she often invoked her association with DTC.

In Wenbin's case, he went through a painful knee injury before being corrected by Master Duke and one of his disciples, Xiong:

If you do not practice tai chi in the right way, the more you practice, the faster you destroy yourself. I was fixed on lowering my stance when I started practicing, and it was the wrong way of thinking. I injured my fascia, and my knee hurt a lot. Later I changed my technique and got better. My experience is that tai chi practice is a matter of "a small

discrepancy leads to a great error.” Once my tai chi brother Xiong, a higher-level practitioner, came, he looked at me and immediately recognized that problems with my practice were everywhere. He was good, very good! But once we went to see our master, the master took a quick look and immediately told us problems that Xiong did not know. My practice just has not been there yet. Again, I need our master to rectify my practice and show me how to do it correctly. It always opens my eyes to see how our master practices tai chi. (Wenbin, interview, November 13, 2021)

Correct teaching is key to avoiding injuries. Wenbin emphasized how helpful it was when Xiong showed him the proper techniques and continuously corrected him. During the interview, he spoke highly of Xiong, one of Master Duke’s strongest disciples. Despite knowing Yaoshi’s relationship with me, he insisted that Xiong’s skills of playing the tai chi big knife were better than Yaoshi’s. This attitude showed me that he trusted Xiong and recognized his authority to teach him the correct skills. Wenbin also pointed out that Xiong’s authority dimmed when he was compared with Master Duke, who could see problems that Xiong missed and showed them another level of practice that Xiong had not reached yet.

From a coach’s point of view, being able to fix problems that could not be fixed elsewhere is important for establishing one’s authority since his association with the authentic art is materialized and substantialized through mastering this art to a high level. As summarized by Feng:

Many people have studied elsewhere before finding me. Although each of them has different problems, there are common challenges. When they come to you, they expect you to hit the nail on the head and help them correct it. It is effortless to point out someone’s problems verbally. Everyone knows in theory that over-kneeling or buttock-uptilting are problems, but the hard part is how to help them change them. When a student comes to see me, I make some simple but critical adjustments to his body, and help him adjust his cross joints, knees, and stance. Once he feels the difference, he will be surprised: Why was it so hard to change before, and how can you fix it quickly? Well, it takes years of accumulation of teaching experience. I can do this by finding the root of the problem to help him make fundamental changes. It is useless to tell people not to kneel too much and not to uplift their hips. You must show them how to do it and help them fix their stances. When I help people solve problems, they will be very down-to-earth and loyal to follow me to learn. They have spent a lot of money to learn tai chi somewhere else. When things do not work, they will get a sense of stagnation and want to

give up. When you help him solve the problem, you also help him achieve a breakthrough. His determination to practice tai chi will be stronger. When he meets the next bottleneck, you will help him create another breakthrough and move up gradually and progressively. (Feng, interview, October 25, 2021)

All three cases above talked about how both showing and teaching the proper techniques helped DTC and its coaches establish their authority by proving, not merely claiming, that they were the legitimate vectors of this art. Indeed, a martial artist distinguishes himself or herself from competitors by offering concrete values others cannot provide. In Feng's case, like other outstanding disciples in DTC, he had mastered Master Duke's systematic and scientific training approach and techniques, and he was able to help many practitioners fix common problems regarding their knees and buttocks.

As seen in Figure 3, Master Duke was often engaged in correcting trainees' techniques by physically touching their bodies instead of just talking. As experienced practitioners, we can

Figure 3: *Master Duke Adjusting a Trainee's Body to Help Him Correct His Techniques*



Figure 4: Master Duke Demonstrating One of the Tackling Skills



immediately tell the skill level of practitioners by simply looking at their knees and buttocks in any posture they can perform. Without going too deep into technical terms, a simple way to say it is that without relaxed hips and appropriate positioning of knees, there is no way to develop the real spiral force that comes from one's footing.

We can find master demo in various situations: First, it can be found at collective events and group training, as shown in Figure 4, where Master Duke was demonstrating one of the tackling skills with Yaoshi to his trainees. Master demo can be about the overall basic requirements of practicing tai chi. For example, a report on the Group Taiji Sword Training seminar summarized what happened as follows:

After a brief warm-up activity, Master Duke reviewed and demonstrated the requirements of Chen-style tai chi practice and the fundamental laws of movement. He gave a vivid lesson on the basics of tai chi by analyzing mistakes that beginners are prone to make. After that, Master Qing, who was the head coach of this seminar, started teaching tai chi sword. (news report, Taiji.net, May 15, 2020)

Master demo can also be about the specific techniques the coach/master wants the trainee to master. For example, during the 2019 National Day training camp, I witnessed an exciting master demo that Master Duke did on a new trainee:

To illustrate what “strength comes from the soles of the feet” means and what is the spiral force, Master Duke called on a young man to stand on the stage. Master Duke instructed him to form the basic posture to start doing cloud hands. After this young man finished two rounds of them, Master Duke lowered this man’s body and used both hands to hold his ankles tight. Then he asked this young man to do cloud hands again. Interestingly, no matter how hard this young man tried, he could not move his legs, let alone practicing cloud hands. Amidst kind laughter from the crowd, Master Duke stood up and explained why mastering the appropriate use of the feet and ankles is critical for developing the spiral force of tai chi. Once one’s feet are locked in, the body is trapped too. I knew the importance of making my feet the source of strength before, but this demonstration brought my understanding of this matter to another level. (fieldnotes, October 5, 2019)

What is interesting about Master Duke’s demo is that he vividly demonstrated the most critical techniques that people intellectually knew but were unable to perform correctly. Almost everyone has heard about the sentence “strength comes from the soles of the feet” (力从脚底出, *li cong jiaodi chu*) in this community, but what exactly this sentence entails is not clear to many. Master Duke used an engaging way to demonstrate how this technique was materialized in a moving body. Through this seemingly mundane master demo, Master Duke showed that he indeed knew the key to mastering the art of tai chi and he was capable of helping others improve their skills. His status of being the legitimate vector of this art was substantiated by master demo like this.

We can also find master demo at private tutoring. There are many factors that can distinguish a great master from a mediocre instructor. A great master can quickly identify problems with trainees’ practices. S/he uses master demo to show them how to fix the root causes of problems. For students, a good master demo always invites Eureka moments in their hearts that helps them achieve breakthroughs. The master’s ability of making sharp diagnosis and

performing effective master demos prove him/her is indeed a legitimate vector of this art. The effect of master demo was quite obvious with those who could afford approximately US \$120 per hour to train with Master Duke:

Take our tai chi brother Yong as an example. 80% of his stomach was removed due to cancer. After his surgery, he practiced tai chi especially hard. He paid Master Duke for private sessions. After two years, he practiced better than those who had practiced for ten years. How come? Xiong told me that even Master Duke's favorite disciples, such as Feng or Zhishen, were not allowed to be in the room during a private session. Master Duke only teaches one or a limited number of students in private sessions. He teaches very carefully according to students' skill levels and shows them the most critical lessons that help them grow. The effect is quite obvious. Especially for experienced students, you might feel you are so close to breakthroughs. However, you cannot reach real breakthroughs if you only rely on your practices. It is just hard. In a private session, what Master Duke teaches is about the methodology that can help you see through problems and help you reach another level. Your progress will be sure to be faster than others. Even if you are a beginner, as the saying goes, it is easy to learn new kungfu, but it is hard to correct what you have learned. If you let shifu teach you initially, you are super lucky. You will have fewer detours than others. So, during our training camps, I was particularly attentive when Master Duke taught his son; I observed how Master Duke did it and talked about it. You know he never hold back when teaching his son." (Wenbin, interview, November 13, 2021)

Here Wenbin talked about what was usually considered common sense in the community: having someone with "real stuff" to teach you in person is critical for your progress. Those interactive, timely, and goal-oriented master demos help trainees avoid detours and make progress on the right path. Through quality master demo, authority emerges. The authority of Master Duke seemed to be self-evident, but other coaches established their authority through compelling master demos too. Take Yaoshi as an example, owning the title of head coach did not naturally guarantee him authority over trainees or fellow disciples. He had to earn respect and followship through his impressive master demo. A good master demo can empower trainees with specific physical sensations (体感, *tigan*) that can never be transmitted through logical thinking or analysis. My participant Jingang identified nurturing trainees' physical feelings as key to establishing his and his organization's credibility and authority:

The development of your organization depends on your ability to make your students feel the physical sensations and the substantial physical changes that occur from practicing tai chi with you. Only when they feel that they can be convinced and attracted to you. (Jingang, interview, September 29, 2020)

Our fellow disciple Dasheng also saw nurturing physical sensation as the foundation of long-term engagement of this art; it is also critical for establishing the authority of the instructor:

Tai chi is a complicated and profound knowledge system and has many specific requirements for the body. If you cannot master the critical knowledge, your body won't feel it, the real kungfu. But if you have a qualified instructor with you, he can adjust your movements for you, and then your body's feeling will be enhanced, and you will be able to experience the overall strength, force points, and your qi. The difference is noticeable. In other words, as instructors, we must teach students hand to hand, and help them know what the standard movements are and how to feel them. This is very important. For example, if a student can relax his pelvis, he does not need to squat particularly low. You can just press his pelvis joint and instruct him to relax. You can hardly see the difference in appearance, but once the student can relax, he will immediately feel the change in his body strength. Once he can feel it, he will be more convinced about your ability to teach him the authentic art. He will understand that what he is practicing is not the empty superfluous "tai chi gymnastics." He will appreciate that you are teaching them the real tai chi kungfu. (Dasheng, interview, October 16, 2021)

So far, I have introduced how master demo speaks loudly about the instructors' level of knowledge acquisition and the authenticity of their inheritance. Through master demo, one's association with this art can be confirmed and validated. Although tai chi has many variations and modified versions to suit the needs of the public, the bottom line is that authentic tai chi techniques won't cause problems such as knee injuries. Also, genuine tai chi has certain critical principles of positioning the body, which are the cornerstone of this art. Only when people can embody those key principles in their practices can their associations with this art be recognized by peers and the public. Although verbal narratives are essential in communicating one's association with this art, as the old Chinese saying says: "those who bark and don't bite are counterfeit; those who bite and don't bark are stupid; those who bark, and bite are the real stuff". Here "those who bark" refers to those who talk about martial arts theoretically, while "bite"

refers to actions that embody the art. The next section will talk about testing touch, which can be seen as another version of master demo. Instead of focusing on setting up an imitable model for others to follow, testing touch has more daring spirit in it.

Testing Touch: Try Me If You Dare

For some practitioners, witnessing a master's incredible master demo is the defining moment for recognizing a master's authority. Out of curiosity or other reasons, practitioners with varying skills levels are often eager to feel the combat power of tai chi, which is mentally exciting and compelling for skill development. Besides strength training, pushing hands practices and sanshou (散手) are necessary for developing combat skills. In sanshou practice, people break up the connected moves in a routine and apply the critical offensive and defensive techniques of crucial moves. Practitioners exchange blows to experience these techniques and develop combat skills. Sanshou mainly happens between master and disciples, or between peers with friendly, supportive, and collaborative spirits. Typically, it includes one person who plays the attacking role while the other plays the defensive position. Its goal is not about winning but rather about experimenting with different techniques (Y. Zeng et al., 2009).

Pushing hands is often misunderstood as “slow, steady, and rounded movements” (Cheung, 2012, p. 161) that are non-violent, but this type of characterization only reveals a small part of the truth of pushing hands. As one type of combat exercise, pushing hands allows a pair of practitioners to make physical contact and sense each other's strength and power through a series of routines. This process is called “listening to the energy” (听劲, *tingjin*) and “understanding the energy” (懂劲, *dongjin*). The listening is “not done by the sensuous ear but by hands that are free to follow, respond, with an undulating rhythm that, as in molding, can take

hold of the whole body” (Robinson, 2016, p. 64). Understanding the other party’s energy allows the practitioner to find appropriate timing and techniques to take the opponent down by utilizing the opponent’s power. It is used to practice the application of the eight forces in tai chi: pushing (棚, *peng*), stroking (捋, *lu*), squeezing (挤, *ji*), pressing (按, *an*), picking (采, *cai*), twisting (捩, *lie*), elbowing (肘, *zhou*), and leaning (靠, *kao*).

In this dissertation, *testing touch* is defined as any bodily effort that aims at experiencing and developing specific combat skills in martial arts. It includes pushing hands, sanshou, and any other forms of experimental combats between practitioners. My analysis revealed three types of testing touch in DTC according to the interaction climate and intensity of actions: curious exploration, power play, and rivalrous touch. Below I will give them a more detailed illustration.

Curious Exploration. *Curious exploration* refers to *testing touch that happens between rookies or less experienced practitioners and accomplished instructors*. The learners tend to be motivated but have limited knowledge about tai chi. They want to explore tai chi by experiencing the compelling tai chi force and its technical application in combat. This process is often the defining moment for instructors to show learners their skills and establish their authority as legitimate heirs of this art. The learners may know the instructor and his/her organization’s fame. However, they harbor suspicions about how effective and powerful this art is, and the best way to find it out is to experience it.

On June 29, 2016, Linglong, as a beginner, visited DTC. Master Duke happened to be available and was willing to satisfy her curiosity:

Linglong was not shy. She asked Master Duke: “Can I try?” Master Duke laughed, saying, “Do whatever you can. See whether you can make me move even an inch.” In the coming three minutes, other trainees and I witnessed that Linglong tried everything she had to push or pull Master Duke, but her efforts were easily defeated by Master Duke, who used only his right hand. While Master Duke’s body was like a solid

untouchable mountain, Linglong’s body was like a weeping willow that fell over all sides under Master Duke’s “direction” ...Linglong’s efforts were fruitless. The scenario became more and more hilarious. I felt like I was watching a lion playing with an innocent little panda without any intent to hurt its prey. Linglong fell again and again, but she quickly got back on her feet and back to the game. Well, I must give credit to her resilience. This play between the “lion” and “panda” lasted about three minutes till Master Duke asked with a smile: “Had enough?” Linglong laughed and nodded: “Yes, yes. I had enough, thank you!” Master Duke smiled and commented: “You have excellent intuition and flexibility. Keep practicing, and you can do well in tai chi” ... Afterward, I asked Linglong how she felt, did it hurt when she fell? She said: “Well, impressive! OMG, Master Duke is so good. He had total control over me, and all my power was dissolved. I know he is famous, but I had no idea how good he is. Now I *felt* it! I am speechless. Oh, it did not hurt, by the way. He controlled his force so well. (fieldnotes, June 29, 2016)

As seen in Figure 5, Master Duke’s body posture was relaxed and solid, while Linglong (the girl on the left) was losing her footing towards the left (as her left foot had already lost contact with the floor and her right foot was ready to be forced to leave the floor too). Both Master Duke and Linglong’s faces were blurred, but they were smiling. Falling on the hard

Figure 5: *Linglong Losing Her Balance*



floor could be very painful, but Linglong was unharmed. As noticed by my fellow disciples and me, one great thing about Master Duke is that he has complete control of his force and can ensure his opponent is unharmed while exerting his power. As Linglong said: “I know he is famous, but I had no idea how good he is. Now I felt it! I am speechless.” This process gave Linglong an embodied experience of Master Duke’s skill, which spoke louder than any words and dispelled any suspicions and doubts she might had. After her curious exploration, Linglong recognized Master Duke’s authority at a higher level and showed him respect from the bottom of her heart.

Curious exploration provides an excellent opportunity for instructors to show off their skills and establish their credibility. In the following excerpt, Xinggu told one of his stories where he ended up recruiting loyal students afterward:

People knew that I practice tai chi, and some people who were very athletic and fit came to me and asked me to try tai chi with them. For example, one of them was my boss’s friend. I used the move of the One-handed Wrap, and suddenly, I threw him far away. He smashed a couch about three meters away. Ha-ha. The couch was smashed. Both my boss and his friend were convinced. (Xinggu, interview, September 24, 2022)

For learners, curious exploration is not only an opportunity to experience the instructor’s martial skills but also a critical moment to make sense of the instructor’s morality, elegance, and personality. After all, an authority in martial arts is supposed to be excellent and competent in both knowledge and martial virtues, which indicate successful inheritance of the spiritual martial arts. “Wu” (武) is the Chinese word corresponding to “martial.” It is a military concept that “expresses virtuousness and morality in dealing with adversaries” (Rodrigue, 2018, p. 15).

Zhou (1998) summarizes that traditional martial virtues can be understood from three perspectives. First, they refer to ethics and morality in daily life. For example, in the Qing dynasty (1636–1912), it was proposed that martial arts should never be taught to persons who

have sinister intentions, are overly aggressive, alcoholic, frivolous, or showy, and those whose bones are soft and blunt. Second, they refer to ethics and morality in practicing martial arts. This includes both volitional qualities and ethical norms. They are materialized in persistence and resistance in practicing the art and being humble and harmonious in relationships. Third, they include the Chinese chivalrous spirit. This spirit emphasizes maintaining justice, eliminating violence, making peace, and devotion to helping others. Traditional Chinese culture sees martial virtues as the spiritual foundations of skill acquisition. In other words, one's achievement in martial arts is limited by one's martial virtues. As the old Chinese saying goes: "It is hard for people with poor martial virtues to reach a high level of skill."

One's martial virtues can be directly embodied in testing touches, where one's characters regarding coping with adversaries and treating others can be naturally revealed. Below is the interview transcript between Jingang and I that investigated the appropriate way to deal with curious exploration.

CC: When I started practicing tai chi in 2003, I was still very young and curious. I visited one coach in Beijing that Master Duke recommended to me, asking him, "I am curious about what the tai chi force feels like, can I try it with you?" I told him that I had three months' experience of practicing routines, but I had no combat training. He said, "Are you sure you want to try?" I said I could give it a try. He asked me to stand in position, and I did, then he pulled me towards him, my natural response was pulling back, then he suddenly pushed towards me, the next thing I knew was that my back hit the ground very hard, I heard a cracking sound and felt that something happened to my spine. I could not move for a while but finally got up. I did not overthink it and did not go to the hospital, and as a result, the injury on my back never healed properly. I would be in pain after sitting for a long time. My lesson was that it is crucial to work with the right coach.

JINGANG: Yes, he was probably trying to establish his authority. He was probably thinking, "Well, don't you trust me? You want to challenge me?" He might have felt that you tried to provoke him, so he wanted you to suffer. His method of establishing personal authority made others try to stay away from him. People will think he is too heavy-handed. The sense of trust and closeness will be reduced. Things like this tell a lot about an instructor: Whether he can control his power freely and know the limits. That is the actual display of one's skills. As an instructor, if you make people fall hard and get hurt, you may look powerful and cool at first, but you lose people's hearts. (Jingang, interview,

September 29, 2020)

Even though Master Duke appointed that coach as my go-to person in Beijing, I stayed away from him after that incident. As Jingang commented: When a coach hurts a trainee, they may look powerful, but they will lose people's hearts. In the past 19 years, whenever my spine hurt, I was reminded to be careful to choose the right person to trust my body with. In this incident, this coach showed me his mastery of tai chi knowledge, revealing that he was not equipped with the proper martial virtues. Thus, despite Master Duke's recommendation, I renounced his authority over me and stopped learning from him. Jingang's comment, "never hurt your curious trainee," reflects the common sense in this community. In front of accomplished instructors, trainees are in a vulnerable position. How to deal with curious exploration is a challenge for instructors. When they do it well, they establish themselves as authority in this art by showing their excellent in skills and morality. When they fail learners by hurting them, their weakness with martial virtues will be exposed.

Power Play. *Power play* refers to *testing touch between people already positioned in a specific hierarchy and power relationships*. This type of testing touch often reaffirms the existing authoritative relationships between people. When it is time to perform testing touch in front of others, the instructors carefully select their partners. Power play exists for many reasons. One of them is that an instructor needs (a) partner(s) to demonstrate specific martial arts techniques for educational purposes. Power play can often be found at training sessions or video shoots.

For a couple of years, I noticed that Master Duke often chose Luohan as his partner while doing training camps. Compared with Yaoshi, who was in his 40s, Luohan was in his 20s and had intensive pushing hands training before being recommended to Master Duke by the head of the martial arts school he attended. He was energetic, young, and well trained. These qualities

made him a great candidate to play the supporting role in a demonstration. If he was less experienced, Master Duke would have to be very careful to avoid hurting him, which would reduce the effect of the demonstration. In a power play, a good supporter makes the lead practitioner shine. The supporter should be good enough to help the lead demonstrate his skills, but he should also be weak enough not to threaten the lead. In other words, the supporter's role is to help the lead establish and strengthen his/her authority in front of others.

In the case of playing with Master Duke, being qualified to participate in power play is also suitable for establishing the supporter (Luohan)'s authority as an established heir. For Luohan, being chosen to play with Master Duke proved that he was good enough, and Master Duke trusted him. Anyone in DTC with a decent sense of common sense could tell Luohan's importance in DTC. In a TCMAO like DTC, where Master Duke was the crucial figure, people's authoritative status was directly influenced by how he thought of them. Master Duke manifested his attitude towards certain disciples through different communicative acts, such as liking one's WeChat posts (which could be seen by other disciples who were connected on WeChat), bringing someone to significant events, public endorsement, and selecting someone for specific performances. Master Duke rarely publicly denounces anyone, but organizational members always understood the indirect expression of his attitude. For instance, Feng emerged as one of his favorite disciples in DTC since he appeared in Master Duke's pushing hands demonstrations, and he became more and more active in DTC's official events.

In contrast, there were stories regarding why another strong disciple, Zhishen, was gradually being marginalized. The story that traveled around DTC was that Master Duke was invited to record a teaching video years ago. On the day of the shooting, other disciples showed up early or on time. Zhishen, on the contrary, was not only late but also commented that "if it

were not me, he (Master Duke) would have no qualified disciple to use” (Yaoshi, interview, March 11, 2021). Back then, he played the supporting role in many of Master Duke’s pushing hands videos. After this alleged event, other disciples were chosen over Zhishen to fill the supporting role. Zhishen was marginalized because his attitude appeared to be arrogant. Suggesting that his master had no better choice than working with him was offensive. For the master, involving a disciple in video shooting was a sign of valuing this disciple and giving him *mianzi*. The disciple was supposed to be appreciative. Zhishen’s alleged speech certainly violated Master Duke’s trust.

Power play happens every time an instructor uses another person for skill demonstration. While it might also have complications, the typical logic is that an instructor establishes his/her authority as the legitimate vector of their art through power play. Still, in real life, this exercise is not without any risk. Take the following incident as an example:

Today, Master Qing demonstrated pushing hands in front of a group of trainees. I volunteered to be the pair, the object for demonstration. Master Qing was excellent, but her efforts to take me down didn’t work initially. I was a little bit surprised, too. I was expecting to be thrown away in a second. Then I realized that she could easily take me down with other techniques, but the frame of her movement was limited to the specific pushing hands skill that she planned to demonstrate. I didn’t fall immediately because of my physicality. I am much heavier than her, and I am 15 cm taller than her. Besides, I was relaxed and didn’t intend to attack her, so I did not offer any force she could use and reverse back to me. I acted like a heavy stone with soft surfaces and firmly stuck to the ground. After several attempts, Master Qing seemed to have felt a little bit of embarrassment in front of other disciples. She smiled and looked around, saying “Aha, she is relaxed.” My skill is at junior level, but taking me down is not just about skills. It is about the physicality of my body, and there is a reason why boxing pair contestants according to their weight. We continued to play. At that moment, I just knew that I had to fall soon, to fake the fall without being noticed. Then I pretended to fight very hard to keep my balance, and I fell to the ground dramatically and awkwardly. My back hit the ground, and my legs went in the air. One fellow disciple videotaped this demonstration and shared the video with me. When I checked the video later, I smiled: “It is very nice, my fall was compelling.” (fieldnotes, May 9, 2018)

Under those circumstances, as shown in Figure 6, I, whether as a researcher or a disciple,

realized I needed to fall to play my role as the ideal supporter of the lead of this show. Confucian etiquette forbids the student to contradict the teacher and publicly challenge the teacher's face and authority. There are always untold codes of conduct in situations like this in martial arts, and we should be sensitive to them. I considered all the watching eyes around us and the demonstration's purpose. It was never about me, and it was all about Master Qing's teaching; it was never about me losing face, and it was about the appropriateness of conducts in that situation. It is reasonable to lose to one's master as a disciple, and I have nothing to be embarrassed about. Master Qing's authority would be threatened if she could not take me down in this exercise. Falling onto the ground was the right thing for me to do as a disciple.

In another incident, I suspect that Feng did the same thing. But this time, this power play backfired and jeopardized Master Qing and DTC's authority somehow. During the 2021 New Year's Training Camp, Master Qing and Feng practiced pushing hands together. Another disciple

Figure 6: *Master Qing and the Author (in Blue Pants) Practice Pushing Hands*



videotaped their practices and shared a video clip online. In this video clip, after some back-and-forth moves, Feng fell dramatically: He rolled over on the floor before standing up. When I looked at this video, my first impression was that Feng might have faked his fall. There was no doubt that Master Qing was good, but Feng was a young muscular guy in his 30s, a well-trained fighter who outweighed Master Qing. I think Master Qing is better in terms of the elegance and aesthetics of routine performance. However, if it were actual combat, I think Feng might have been the winner.

As shown in Figure 7, Master Qing was wearing approximately 2-inch-high heel shoes. From my point of view, that was not the right gear for pushing hands since it could interfere with the force rising from the bottom of the feet. But as a disciple, I understand why Feng needed to lose in this practice, and it was appropriate for him to perform this role in this type of power play. If he dared to throw Master Qing down, it would signify that there was nothing more that Master Qing, even Master Duke, could teach him. A decent disciple is never supposed to show his/her strength before the master. Even though he might be stronger, he should never forget where he

Figure 7: Screenshots of Master Qing and Feng's Viral Video



came from. Without the master's training, he would not be in this place. Losing to his own master showed that he remembered where his skills came from and remained appreciative of it. It is not ethical or proper to defeat one's master, especially in front of others. It is fair to say that this power play reaffirmed Master Qing's authority over Feng.

The importance of "tucking one's tail" in front of one's master is also evidenced by Yaoshi's experience. After inventing his tai chi stick routine that gained a lot of popularity, he was passionate about sharing it with his fellow practitioners back in his hometown in Northeast China. So, in 2019, when he went back home to visit his former master, he taught his tai chi stick routine and other skills to tai chi lovers and his former fellow disciples for free. He thought it was a kind gesture to repay the friendships and share the pleasure of tai chi. His former master was a man with a big heart. Otherwise, he would not recommend Yaoshi to Master Duke when he realized Yaoshi's talents demanded a better master to help him reach a higher level. He was also kind enough to give consent to Yaoshi when Master Duke showed intent to take in Yaoshi as his disciple. Without his permission, Yaoshi could have been labeled as a betrayer. However, when Yaoshi tried to do another training event in his hometown in 2021, his former master told him not to do it anymore. There was no need to explain more. Yaoshi immediately realized that his teaching in his former master's geographic territory and sphere of influence challenged his former master's authority among the locals. As Yaoshi summarized: "Reading between the lines, what my master wanted to say is: 'Young man, what are you trying to show off here?'" (Yaoshi, interview, November 24, 2021)

"Tucking one's tail" before one's masters was reasonable and legitimate within an organization. However, once these videos were shared online, the public's response ignored the ethical principles that shaped Feng's behaviors and focused more on the fakeness of Feng's and

Master Qing's actions. Most of the comments were mean, cynical, and sarcastic. For instance,

Comment #1: This is the so-called "shimu taught me kungfu." (This comment received two comments of its own: "now we saw evidence!" and "I agree 🤔👍.")

Comment #2: What are they doing? If it is for exercise, it is better to do a set of radio calisthenics.

Comment #3: Tai Chi is about you and me pushing around, and when you fall asleep, (I do) a fierce push to take you down!

Comment #4: No wonder martial artists increasingly look down on tai chi. I see why! 🤔🤔

Comment #5: Not as good as Master Yan 😊

Comment #6: This shimu pushed and pushed and lost it 😊

Comment #7: The highest level of kungfu is that they lie to themselves, and then they believe those lies are true!

Comment #8: This social dance is charming 👍

Comment #9: It is a romantic love push 🤔🤔🤔🤔 (TikTok anonymous comments, January 20, 2021)

Comment #1 was mocking that the master's wife, not the master, taught the disciple kungfu. It suggested the disciple's kungfu was a joke. It also meant there might be an erotic relationship between the master's wife and disciple. Comment #2 reduced tai chi to a simple exercise that was not as good as calisthenics. Comment #3 was mocking that pushing hands was nothing more than a simple game of pushing around. Comment #4 suggested that tai chi martial artists' fake play caused tai chi to be despised by society. "Master Yan," mentioned in Comment #5, is a famous female figure who made videos depicting that she was pushing people away without touching them. Her videos were ridiculously exaggerating, and she was regarded as one of the most shameless fake tai chi masters in contemporary China. This comment compared Master Qing to Master Yan, which was insulting and degrading. Comment #6 disrespectfully

described the scene. Comment #7 suggested Master Qing and Feng were pathetic liars who believed their own lies. Comment #8 mocked tai chi as a form of social dance. Comment #9 ridiculed tai chi as embodied flirting between practitioners.

We need to understand that one's authority must speak to specific audience. For the public who was not bounded by organizational ethics or martial virtues in a master-disciple relationship, their attentions were given to the sincerity and authenticity of the power play: Whether these two players showed real kungfu? From their perspectives, the footings and movements may have been beautiful, but when Feng's fall appeared to be fake, the integrity of both players and even their organizations were questioned.

The public is tired of phony depictions created by fake masters such as Master Yan and Baoguo Ma. They began to see tai chi as "laughable matters." This video of Feng and Master Qing offered them new material to laugh at. Sanctions from the public could be straightforward, brutal, and judgmental. Within the organization, this power play reaffirmed Master Qing's authority as the master and Feng's authority as an important heir of Master Duke and Master Qing. Overall, DTC members often ignored these negative comments and stayed quiet about controversial issues. However, the public raised more questions about Master Qing and DTC's authority. They also called the legitimacy of tai chi as a martial art into suspect.

Baiying, a martial artist who had no relation with DTC, commented on this video and offered refreshing insights:

This type of video is not suitable for online sharing, especially for those who have established themselves and accumulated some fame in martial arts circles. Combat is not the training focus for many practitioners anymore. What is the point of showing off pushing hands techniques? Without systematic training, tai chi practitioners cannot compete with those practicing Thai boxing or sanda. When you show off pushing hands, people doubt that you are combat-focused. When there is a fake element in the play, things can go bad very soon. Thus, you are adding oil to the fire that might burn you. (Baiying, personal conversation, January 20, 2021)

As we see, Baiying pointed out the importance of being careful about what to show to the public. Legitimate power play within an organization might be perceived as being appropriate and fun and confirming the existing authority within the organization. But when they are exposed to the public, the same actions can be seen as hypocritical, deceptive, and disgraceful. Consequentially, they can damage the authority of the figures involved and the organization they represent.

Rivalrous touch. The last type of testing touch is *rivalrous touch*, which refers to *people engaging in testing touch with rivalrous intentions, such as challenging the other party's authority or humiliating the other party for one's gain*. A quick way to establish one's fame in the field is taking down some famous figures or opponents. Master Duke's story manifests this principle. After his victory of taking down two significant challengers in Taiwan in 1994, Master Duke's authority started to rise. Below is a report on his story:

At the Cross-strait Tai Chi Observation Conference, a heavyweight champion of Taiwan's "Zhongzheng Cup" Pushing Hands Competition offered to spar with Master Duke. This person was 1.8 meters tall and weighed 90 kg. He looked like a pagoda while standing next to the medium-sized Master Duke. At the beginning of the fight, the opponent frequently attacked, while Master Duke walked around and cleverly turned away the opponent's fierce strength. After finding the opponent's soft spot, Master Duke's hands shook and quickly darted down to close, and the opponent fell to the ground with a heavy thud. Immediately after that, Master Duke used Chen-style tai chi's unique shocking bouncing power to throw the opponent out of the air by ten feet. Afterward, a tai chi master studying mechanics was not convinced and came forward to "teach Master Duke a lesson," only to see himself knocked down more than ten times in a row with lightning speed by Master Duke. The whole process was broadcast live by the Taiwan TV station and immediately became a sensation in Taiwan." (news report by <http://www.cvntvuk.com/>, date unknown)

As part of their self-protection efforts, accomplished martial artists are generally cautious about protecting their hard-earned fame. They are reluctant to fight with others, especially those less famous, since they have everything to lose, while the fameless challengers have nothing to lose. Sometimes, as their agents, their disciples might fight on their behalf. For an extended period, Master Duke played the role of a defender when people came to challenge his master,

Master Shangchun. After becoming famous, besides being physically challenged, accomplished martial artists are meticulous not to create opportunities for others to twist their words, actions, and stories. In other words, they must be careful not to become steppingstones for others. As

Master Duke revealed in his interview:

Over the years, we have met many people who come to kick the door (踢馆, *tiguan*). It is normal. If he just wants to try and experience my skills, it is ok to satisfy him if he is not malicious. However, some come here to fool you and damage your reputation. For example, when you randomly test pushing hands with him, he might arrange people to make videos of it. Sometimes you might go gentle with him or be modest to give in one or two moves to avoid hurting him. But he might pick the moves that you withdraw and make it into a short video to post online, claiming that he beats you. While dealing with these kinds of people, you cannot win them and cannot lose to them. If you take them down, they will blame you for having no martial virtues. If you lose to them, they will say you don't have real kungfu. It is better to ignore them. Otherwise, you will degrade yourself. Sometimes, you threw him out a dozen of times, and he kept quiet about this part. But if he made your feet move for an inch, he began to brag about it everywhere, saying he is better than you. What can you do with these kinds of shameless people? You cannot explain every time. (Master Duke, interview, September 22, 2020)

It can be tricky when someone comes to challenge an accomplished martial artist. If the master loses, his/her authority suffers. If one refuses to engage, one might be labeled a coward or being hypocritical. At DTC, instructors at different skill levels swing between two extremes: They either refuse to engage or beat the challenger soundly. Their responses vary according to the specific situations they are in. Some instructors refuse to engage in any form of testing touch with challengers:

He wanted to do a virtual battle with me, but I refused. He tried to use this to attract traffic to his TikTok account. I am not interested, and I told him I don't do any form of PK or combat. My goal is to teach people tai chi for health benefits, and combat is not what I am interested in. (Yaoshi, interview, December 17, 2021)

We do not accept combat requests from people who come to kick the door to avoid complications. For instance, if you take down someone, he might say he got hurt and begin to blackmail you. So even if you win the battle, there is no gain for you. It is better to avoid such situations, not bring trouble to us. Besides, this kind of action will disrupt the regular operation at the studio (Dasheng, interview October 26, 2021).

For famous masters, a typical practice is sending their disciples to fight on their behalf, in other words, as their vectors. If the disciples lose, people can explain the situation by saying these disciples have not mastered the art well enough. If the disciples win, the status of the master is naturally confirmed. It is a middle way to navigate through face-threatening situations.

As Wenbin explained in his interview:

Once they become masters, there is less and less chance that they will combat each other. The losing party will lose face and status. For example, when Master Duke fought with others, even if he knocked his opponent over but had a small scratch on his hand caused by the opponent's long fingernails, Master Duke loses face. The story told by the opponent will be that "I hurt Master Duke's face!" And that doesn't sound good. See, that is why the master should stay out of the battle. But it is a different story for disciples. They have no burdens. For them, even if they lose, it is just a valuable experience to learn from others. There is no shame. Do you know why Master Duke likes to take Xiong with him to attend social events? Because Xiong can fight! There was a time when shifu took him out to dinner, and there were people at the same table who practiced sanda, mixed martial arts, and wrestling. They wanted to challenge tai chi. Shifu did not have to fight; he sent Xiong to play with them. Xiong knocked over all six of them! Xiong's performance made shifu's face look good! ah! (Wenbin, interview, November 13, 2021)

Xiong's win established the legitimacy of tai chi and showed that Master Duke was a legitimate heir of tai chi and a successful master who trained great disciples. Due to their association, both Xiong and Master Duke both won in this incident. As Master Duke's vector, if a disciple knocked out other masters' disciples, it could be perceived as face-threatening behavior towards other masters. Actions like this hurt other masters' mianzi and authority and might damage the relationships between Master Duke and other masters. As Master Duke's proxy, Xiong can defend Master Duke's authority; however, his strength may also be problematic:

Shortly after arriving in Beijing, Xiong was distributing enrollment ads at the park, and he was not aware that that area was the territory of a disciple of Master Xun. That guy was not happy about Xiong's behavior, so they figured things out via battle. Once they started, Xiong threw that guy into the garden! That was rough! Later this incident was known by Master Duke, and I heard Master Duke scolding him on the phone: "You little F***...you just got to Beijing, and you are causing me trouble!" Xiong kept arguing: "I

didn't even make any real effort..." (Wenbin, interview, November 13, 2021)

Interestingly, Wenbin recalled that Master Duke used the "F" word, which indicated the closeness between Master Duke and Xiong. Master Duke was morally bounded to criticize Xiong in this seemingly angry phone call, but I suspect that he secretly felt proud of Xiong. Master Duke personally won't make any public comments on Master Xun's skills, but masters can make sense of each other's strengths through testing touches between their disciples. Wenbin heard Master Duke yell at Xiong on the phone but did not know how Master Duke knew about this incident. It is also unclear whether Master Xun's disciple reported this incident to Master Xun. There was a chance that people in Master Xun's lineage interpreted Xiong's action as if Master Duke and members of his lineage were disrespectful and offensive toward Master Xun. This was why Master Duke was yelling at Xiong that "you are causing me trouble!" Years later, Master Xun took in a woman named Nan, Master Duke's disciple, as his new disciple without Master Duke's consent. It was not clear whether Nan reported her relationship with Master Duke to Master Xun. The common sense in the community is that one master should not "steal" another master's disciple unless this disciple is officially expelled or has his/her master's consent. If a disciple initiates rivalrous touch, his actions can be attributed to his master and lineage. Sometimes, bad blood can be created between masters due to their disciples' actions. It is understandable why many martial artists warn their disciples not to engage in rivalrous touch easily.

As mentioned earlier, Master Duke saw "not hurting others" as an essential part of his professional life. But for those who overstepped or displayed overtly disrespectful actions, he had no problem teaching them a lesson with his or his disciples' hands. Sometimes, he gave silent permission to his disciples to take down aggressive challengers:

Feng: At that time, shifu and I went out to perform at an event. The next day when we returned, some trainees told us what had happened the day before. A foreigner from Uzbekistan had come to our studio. He had practiced tai chi for over ten years in Chen village, and then he had suddenly shown up here, asking for pushing hands with our coaches. Since shifu and I were out, two young coaches stepped up. They were still apprentices under training, and they lost. Surprisingly, this guy showed up again. He probably thought that since yesterday no one in the studio could beat him, he could use our space for free. Then he just started to practice like we did not exist. So, I went straight up and pushed hands with him. I knocked him out, and he was very defiant and had a bad attitude. When I went to pull him up, he pushed my hand away arrogantly. Then he got up and fought me again. I was young and had my temper at that moment, so I upgraded my game. Soon, he was flying out...he tried to hold on with his hands before landing on his back, resulting in crushed fractures.

CC: It seems that he made a mistake with the landing. He would not have been injured if he simply rolled over and did not resist with his hands. What did shifu think of this?

Feng: I clearly remember that shifu was sitting in the reception area, pretending to read a newspaper. But he turned his face to observe what was happening secretly. When I knocked the man out, he heard the “Gang” ((onomatopoeia, the sound of falling to the ground)), but his face had a little bit...you know, like his face was saying: “He brought this to himself.” Then he turned his face away as if he did not see anything. Afterward, we did not talk about this incident at all. That guy left quietly and never returned. (Feng, interview, October 25, 2021)

Master Duke’s silence suggested his approval of Feng’s actions in this episode. It would be inappropriate for him to take on this challenger by himself, but Feng’s act defended DTC’s face in front of the trainees. For trainees, witnessing their young coaches beaten by a challenger certainly had damaged the authority of these coaches and DTC in their minds, regardless of whether they spoke out or not. Feng’s actions restored their faith in DTC. For professionals in martial arts education, many factors contribute to how they respond to rivalrous challengers. Many of them tend to act differently, depending on the situation. Some of Master Duke’s disciples are not afraid to confront challengers:

If someone comes to kick the door, I fight back. Normally pushing hands takes two hands. I am prepared to use only one hand. Generally, people play three circles before attacking, and I do only one circle before attacking the opponent’s temple acupoint. The first strike must be strong. I am friendly to people who visit me out of curiosity and simply want to experience tai chi. In contrast, I do not have too much mercy for those

who intentionally come to kick the door. After attacking the temple acupoint, my next step is to close my hand, make a fist with my right hand, and drop it. Then, I can use my five fingers to pull it upwards towards his face and knock him out. It always works. (Xinxi, interview, September 20, 2020).

Most disciples I met at DTC shared the same attitude with Xinxi: If I must fight with you, I beat you hard. Once things start, it becomes a matter of defending one's authority and status in the field, and they tend to try their best. Some tend to be more aggressive than others. As for masters like Master Duke, their standards are higher: not only to win but also to win elegantly and beautifully. He applied this standard to himself and his senior disciples. On October 1, 2018, my note documented Yaoshi's account of why Master Duke criticized him:

For shifu, taking down your opponent is not enough; you must strike like lightning, show him your power, but avoid hurting your opponent. Shifu said I acted harshly towards that guy who challenged me in public because I had problems with my confidence. If I were 100% confident, I would not be so harsh to him. (fieldnotes, October 1, 2018)

Overall, how to deal with rivalrous touch is an ongoing challenge for many professionals in martial arts education. Losing a battle will hurt one's authority, one's master, and even his/her lineage to different degrees. Since taking down famous figures in the field is a quick way to establish one's authority, there are always challengers standing up. Professionals respond to rivalrous touch with different attitudes. Some hold the policy of non-engagement, while others play by ear and act according to the specific context. Their approaches might vary, but their overall goal is how to protect their authority by avoiding or engaging in rivalrous touch.

This section has introduced three types of testing touch: curious explorations, power play, and rivalrous touch. Curious exploration is a golden opportunity to help professionals establish their authority by assisting learners to gain embodied experience of legitimate skills. Compared to verbal explanations and claims, embodied experiences tend to be more effective in proving that people are the legitimate heir of this art. Professionals might also reveal information about

their personality and martial virtues in this process. As legitimate heirs of this art, they need to be competent in skills and martial virtues. Power play reinforces and confirms existing authoritative relationships since Confucian morality that dominates martial virtues tends to defend authority based on moral principles between teacher and student.

When a discrepancy between status and skills occurs, people might fake their performance to conform to authority. When the public sees fake performance like this, these martial artists could experience an increase of distrust towards them and a loss of their authority. Since tai chi has already suffered from scandals caused by fake masters, the adverse effects can be severe. Therefore, managing and presenting power play is a practical challenge that professionals in this line of work need to be cautious of. Compared with curious exploration and power play, rivalrous touch is the most hard-core and provoking form of testing touch. It aims at challenging others' authority and building one's own authority. Thus, practitioners either ignore these requests or act according to specific situations. It is a tricky and intricate issue that needs to be handled delicately.

Embodied Social Insertion: Students as Stepstones to Uplift Instructors' Authority

As we saw, master demo is about bodily showing that one is the legitimate heir of specific martial arts. Its effect greatly depends on the viewers' knowledge to make a fair judgment. As for testing touch, it is about bodily experience of the impact of mastering particular martial arts. The body in action often speaks louder than words in testing touch. Both master demo and testing touch require a specific understanding of tai chi. Many rookies and beginners might not have had a chance to do testing touch, and they may have difficulty appreciating and analyzing what constitutes a good master demo.

Taking CNN's report on tai chi medicine (LaMotte, 2019) as an example, a female tai chi

instructor was portrayed in this report as a legitimate vector of tai chi. But for experienced practitioners, we can immediately tell that her shoulders were not relaxed, and the angle between her arms and upper body was wrong...in other words, she did not even meet the most basic technical requirements of tai chi. But she was teaching CNN's on-camera doctor a tai chi lesson. From this doctor's viewpoint, this lady was an authority on tai chi in this session. And for those CNN viewers who did not understand tai chi, they might had similar feelings. For this lady, she could use this report to attest that she was an authority in tai chi since even a doctor from CNN came to study with her. A significant part of the authority in martial arts is about perceptions: Not all people are equipped with adequate technical knowledge to make professional judgments. Thus, they often count on other measures to determine who is an authority in tai chi. One of them is through knowing who the instructor is teaching.

One of the crucial elements of differential authority is that one's authoritative status depends on who one is associated with. When an instructor teaches someone who are famous, influential, or essential, the students' status were extended to the instructor. The status of students contributes to the development of the instructor's authority. This section uses *embodied social insertion* to refer to the phenomena by which *professionals in martial arts education try to build their authority through teaching people with status and influence*. In contemporary China, the famous, the rich, and the powerful naturally gain more respect. Beyond that, people who excel in their professions may also be seen as important and deserving of respect. For example, Chinese society highly values education, and intellectuals have had higher social status than other professions, such as farmers or skilled workers (Y.-H. Yu, 1987). When people with status learn from an instructor, it is considered a silent endorsement toward the instructor. This section will highlight two types of embodied social insertion that DTC members frequently perform by

advertising their teaching towards students with status and foreigners.

Teaching Students with Status. Who has status in society depends on the specific cultural and social context. Instead of making theoretical assumptions about what status is important, it is better to observe “from the soil” to see what types of students’ identities were often highlighted in DTC’s operations. Here, several status types were noticed: The first type of people with status are leaders of important organizations with size and influence. Leaders who work for the government were exceptionally valued. Many DTC coaches saw teaching “leaders” (领导们, *lingdao men*) as an important task that needs to be taken seriously. Xinggu’s account of his experience is very representative:

The word “tai chi” is beautiful. It sounds very intellectual. When people hear it, they feel a sense of flexibility and rigidity, and these leaders from the courts and big companies are very receptive to it. If I teach them Shaolin kungfu and take a brick to hit their head, they will not dare to learn from me. When you talk with those great leaders about tai chi, they listen and learn from you. They especially like the joint exercises routine, where the third and fourth movements benefit cervical spondylosis. When these leaders learn from me and call me shifu or teacher, they are below me, right? The point is, after teaching them, my status is different. I am the teacher of these leaders, right? (Xinggu, interview, September 24, 2020)

For Xinggu, by teaching leaders, his status was uplifted since the Chinese teacher-student ethnic principle offered him a rung to step up on a social hierarchy that was hard to climb through other means. As a teacher of those leaders, Xinggu had a higher status than them to a certain extent. Over the past three years, the biggest event of DTC was collaborating with Daheng and his billion-dollar company. Daheng was also a deputy to the National People’s Congress (NPC), making him financially affluent and positionally influential. With his resources, Daheng could easily find any martial artist in China to teach him tai chi to improve his general health. But he chose Master Duke. Any junior coach at DTC would be good enough to teach a beginner like Daheng, but Master Duke taught him in person. Due to Daheng’s high status

according to Chinese standards, Master Duke rarely publicly announced that Daheng was his student. Instead, since Daheng was including tai chi as part of his business plan of developing cultural tourism, DTC and Daheng's company became strategic partners. DTC was responsible for providing technical support in tai chi training. When Master Duke and Daheng appeared in public, they appeared to be equal partners. Given Daheng's position and financial resources, he could easily get whatever training he wanted, and there was no need for him to become anyone's disciple to access suitable training. Even though the teacher-student relationship between Master Duke and Daheng was omitted from public discourse, for Master Duke, partnering with Daheng was already a significant steppingstone that uplifted Master Duke and DTC's authority in the community.

From Yaoshi's standpoint, "collaborating with Daheng and his company was probably the summit of Master Duke's career" (Yaoshi, interview, December 30, 2021). The value Master Duke placed in this partnership could be shown in posts from Master Duke and DTC's WeChat accounts. At one point, Master Duke even retweeted articles about Daheng's company and its new line of clothes to show his association with this company. Master Duke also praised Daheng's painting publicly. Before mentioning Daheng's name, Master Duke systematically mentioned Daheng's three titles. One was the founder of the billion-dollar company, one was the president of a martial arts association of a province in China, and the last title was the chief consultant of DTC. All these titles emphasized Daheng's status. From my point of view, the more DTC highlighted the strength and power of Daheng's company, the more DTC and Master Duke promoted their statuses.

The second type of people with status at DTC are media practitioners . In China, despite having other functions such as generating profits and providing entertainment, media are still

fundamentally the CCP's mouthpiece. It contributes to the CCP's legitimacy and effective rule by propagandizing citizens' experiences in China's legal system (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). Chinese media is generally divided at the state, provincial, and city levels. It is of great importance for martial arts professionals what media they have appearances on, which signifies the level of recognition from "the officials" they can get. The public still sees being covered by media, especially by provincial or state TV stations, as being recognized by the state and as an official sign of climbing the social ladder. Every time a disciple was featured in the media, especially by state media, Master Duke and Master Qing tried hard to promote their disciples and express their appreciations to the media who covered their disciple's story. For example, when their disciples' stories of promoting tai chi in France were featured by CCTV, both Master Duke and Master Qing made significant efforts to ensure that people knew about that. In Kiddo's case, after a famous TV hostess, Na Xie, called him "little master," the story of "Kiddo being Na Xie's little master" was often invoked in stories told about him (DTC WeChat official account, July 8, 2019).

In this case, people always try to build good relationships with media practitioners, hoping that someday they can receive reciprocal favors to be featured in media in a positive light. Master Duke's private hour-long session costs at least US \$120, but when media practitioners who hold important positions showed up, Master Duke taught them for free as part of relationship building. For instance, when a group of media practitioners arrived the VIP room at DTC, after a short introduction, Master Duke asked me to leave the floor to make space for his private training of these VIPs (fieldnotes, July 06, 2016). Master Duke also established himself as their teacher by teaching these people. The moral implication of this type of relationship is that students need to try their best to help their teachers, especially when they received special

treatments.

When a famous state TV station director was looking for a tai chi instructor for his son, Kiddo's father asked around diligently to make it happen (reflective journal, June 1, 2021). The enthusiasm behind his action is that Kiddo's fame could be significantly attributed to TV stations' support. By helping this director, Kiddo's father tried to strengthen their relationship.

As summarized by Yaoshi:

One reason that Kiddo's story went viral is his age. He is so young and can practice tai chi so well. Another reason is that Shimu intentionally tried to promote him by posting Kiddo's videos on our official WeChat account, there were videos such as playing tai chi in the bed, etc. He got a lot of viewers. Because his story was newsworthy, other news platforms began to forward or republish more reports of Kiddo. Then his stories attracted the attention of some TV stations, and he appeared on HNTV, then Beijing TV and Hunan TV, etc. He became famous step by step, then all kinds of honors and opportunities began to come to him, he became a little celebrity. (Yaoshi, interview, October 29, 2020)

As social media has risen in China, influencers have also gained importance as a special type of media practitioner. For instance, when an influencer with millions of followers and his wealthy friend, portrayed as a philanthropist, visited DTC on November 29, 2016, DTC stopped its regular training sessions to host them as VIP guests. The whole process of this visit was broadcasted online. Master Qing performed tai chi sword to entertain the visitors; both guests performed curious exploration with Yaoshi to have a sense of pushing hands. After a hard fall, the influencer added dramatic elements to the scene by lying down on the floor like a paralyzed zombie. He was expressing the effect of tai chi amusingly and entertainingly. The studio was full of laughter due to his sense of humor. Master Duke personally taught both guests how to do tai chi footing, the most fundamental skill (fieldnotes, November 29, 2016). By learning the footing technique from Master Duke, this influencer personally approved Master Duke's authority. His credibility among his fans was also partially transferred to Master Duke.

Being interviewed or portrayed by famous media is an event that is reportable and worth celebrating. For example, Master Qing posted videos about Master Duke being featured by French media in her WeChat post, saying: “The French media is here at our institute to introduce Chen-style tai chi, the representative of traditional Chinese culture, to the French people!” (Master Qing’s social media post, September 3, 2017). Here tai chi was described as representative of traditional Chinese culture, and of course, DTC was the spokesperson for tai chi.

The third type of people with status are those who have established fame in various fields. DTC always gave special attention to people who had fame or had achieved recognized excellence in certain territories. For example, when an actress came for training, DTC’s WeChat account posted a feature article about her activities at DTC. When a kind-of-famous actor came to train at DTC, Master Qing recorded how she guided this actor to do an old routine and posted this recording on her social media (reflective journal, July 12, 2020). When a famous geomancer and his family visited DTC to learn tai chi in November 2021, Master Duke showed off photos taken with this geomancer. To make sure his audience understood the significance of this guest, he also presented an introduction of this geomancer (reflective journal, November 6, 2021). When a trainee’s son became a local hero by saving seven people during the 2021 flooding in Zhengzhou, this trainee’s association with DTC was also emphasized by Master Qing on her social media. Although this trainee’s son never had any training at DTC, this trainee called his son “the pride of DTC” on her WeChat video sharing platform (reflective journal, July 26, 2021). The mother’s association with DTC was naturally extended to her son and vice versa.

Besides, DTC associates also like to share stories about conducting training at organizations regarded as rich, powerful, or influential. In their online posts, organizations that

DTC has highlighted include the Zhengzhou People's Congress, China CITIC Bank, and a big insurance company's Henan branch (reflective journal, June 25, 2015). Universities are significantly valued compared to private or commercial organizations since they represent intelligence, social status, and official status in the Chinese hierarchy. For a martial artist from a private institution, it is an honor to be able to teach at a university, even if it is not part of the official curriculum. When Master Duke was hired as an adjunct professor at a university, it became big news at DTC (reflective journal, September 28, 2020). Similar behavior patterns were found in Master Duke's disciples' online activities. They also tended to report events related to working with organizations that signify wealth, status, and power.

Having people with status as students is a natural and helpful approach to boost tai chi professionals' authority, as it naturally extends these students' credibility to their teachers. For the general public and practitioners with limited knowledge, they count on people they deem to be respectable and successful in validating who is an authority in tai chi. It is the halo effect (Nicolau et al., 2020) in martial arts, where people form an opinion about an instructor's authority status based on their attitudes towards his/her students. Besides, martial artists naturally uplift their social status and authority by putting themselves at the authoritative end of the relationship with these figures. These figures' choices also reassure the public that the instructors they choose are legitimate vectors of their arts.

Teaching Foreigners: Conquering, Nationalistic Pride, and Authority. Traditional Chinese martial arts are fueled by nationalism. This situation has a lot to do with Chinese cosmology, which sees China as the center of the world, and what happened to China at the end of the Qing dynasty (Y. Hu, 2013). "Historically, the Chinese have, like all monarchies, assumed that they would be ruled by someone, not of their choosing, and they do not assume that a benign

foreign conqueror is inherently less desirable than a domestic despot” (Wile, 2020, p. 94). Caused primarily by the settlement of foreign powers, political turmoil in the 19th century inspired secret societies to use martial arts for fighting purposes, although its military value had diminished. According to Draeger & Smith (1975), Chinese people organized well-publicized challenge matches against foreign fighters in the 1920s to display China’s strength. In the late Qing dynasty and the Republican period of China, there were many fictitious stories about Chinese martial artists defeating arrogant foreigners who looked down on Chinese martial arts and saw Chinese people as “the sick man of East Asia.” This term was a characteristic expression of prejudice, contempt, and even insult towards Chinese people that appeared between 1895 and 1903 (Y. Hu, 2013).

An excellent example is stories told in the movie *Fearless* starring Jet li (R. Yu, 2006). In this movie, the Chinese martial artist Yuanjia Huo (1868 –1910) fights against four fighters, each representing the major foreign powers in China. Huo defeated a British boxer, a Spanish swordsman, a Belgian soldier, and a Japanese martial artist before he died due to being poisoned. Thanks to many stories like this, an idea gradually became well-developed in the Chinese mind: The martial spirit is the nation’s backbone and the perpetual motion machine of its strength and prosperity. Once a nation has lost its martial spirit, it will be defeated (Wile, 2020). As Wang (2014) points out: “China’s new accomplishments and growing confidence often serve to strengthen this historical consciousness by activating, not assuaging, people’s memory of the past humiliation” (p.4). In the meantime, a clear division had emerged: “us vs. them” and “Chinese vs. foreigners.” This division is still deeply rooted in the mindset of many Chinese martial arts practitioners. Winning over foreigners is good, but even better is having foreigners voluntarily come to learn from Chinese martial artists. Formerly, for some martial lineages,

“transmission of secrets to foreigners was viewed as the ultimate post-modernist sin, and teachers engaged in such behavior at their own risk” (A. D. Frank, 2014, p. 1). But now, for martial arts like tai chi, instructors usually desire to teach international students.

There are several reasons behind this new trend: First, the Chinese government considers martial arts valuable cultural resources in conducting soft power diplomacy and promoting the national image (e. g., Y. Guo & Liu, 2012; Wu & Wang, 2010). Martial arts play a critical role in the “cultural export strategy”(H. Gao & Kang, 2010). Also, the naturalized version of tai chi is “often peculiarly, fetishistically attractive to foreign learners”(A. D. Frank, 2014, p. 7). Teaching tai chi to foreigners is now viewed as politically correct and supported by the government. Stories of teaching tai chi to foreigners are often highly praised by the state and all kinds of media since these acts are labeled as “promoting Chinese culture to the world” and are supposed to embody the superiority of Chinese culture.

In the Chinese context, teaching something to others implies the teacher’s superiority over the learner. It is one type of mental conquering. Part of the Chinese ideal discourse developed during Jingpin Xi’s ruling is the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, including rejuvenating traditional Chinese culture (Z. Wang, 2014). It implies that China is no longer the student of the West and is becoming the teacher of the World, especially the West, and is rewriting the world order. By becoming the teacher of international students, especially Caucasians, martial arts instructors become the vectors of the Chinese dream. Also, they receive more attention and praise than peers who only have domestic students. Approximately 80% of Master Duke’s disciples engage in teaching activities. Still, other than Master Duke, Master Qing, and the child star Kiddo, disciples who receive the most media attention are not those with the most experience or the best skills. Instead, they are disciples who have been teaching tai chi

in France and Australia.

Their stories are covered by state media, such as CCTV or People.net. In this regard,

Yaoshi shared his honest observation:

Domestic people are now pandering to foreigners. People talk about how China is rising, and America is in chaos. However, deep in their hearts, they are just not confident. They are still worshipping foreign things and fawning over foreign countries. In Meigui's case, the total number of her students is minimal, less than one hundred. Then CCTV flew to France to cover her stories. In China, teaching this number of students is nothing special. As to Xuming, she only practiced tai chi for a few years, and she needs other accomplished disciples to make teaching videos for her. She did some online broadcasting and was good at marketing and self-promotion, and she suddenly became a big deal. Even the former president of the Chinese Wushu Association sent her a congratulatory message and inscription. Don't you see the irony here? There is something not right. When instructors teach foreigners, suddenly they appear to be more important than those who teach domestic students. If you teach tai chi in America and write a book, you can soon become a celebrity. (Yaoshi, interview, May 29, 2020)

Like it or not, having international students can quickly boost an instructor's fame and authority. When foreign faces show up at the headquarters of DTC or its training camp, it becomes a newsworthy event. For example, about 30 members of the "Chinese Bridge" Summer Camp for Youths of the Belt and Road Initiative Partner Countries Program visited DTC in 2019. This visit made the news of many Chinese portal websites, mentioning that Master Qing taught a tai chi class to these visitors from 19 countries (Sohu.com news report, August 07, 2019). For Master Duke, taking down curious explorers through pushing hands was a regular practice. If the explorers were Chinese, it is nothing newsworthy. However, when a Danish male student showed up and tried pushing hands with Master Duke, Master Qing recorded a video and posted it on her social media (see Figure 8), emphasizing that this was a Danish student (fieldnotes, May 11, 2017). While telling its stories, DTC's official WeChat account often invoked its history of teaching foreigners to emphasize DTC's status. For example:

Since the opening of DTC in 2009, many foreign students have traveled across the ocean to learn authentic tai chi from us. So far, we have received students from the USA, UK,

France, Canada, Greece, Sweden, and other places. (DTC WeChat official account, July 23, 2019)

Master Duke had several disciples who were foreign citizens, but those who had non-Chinese ethnicity got more attention than foreign disciples of Chinese origin. Race is still the most salient factor that defines one's foreignness in China. Having foreign disciple(s), especially Caucasians, boosts the master's face and status. Usually, students have to beg the master to take them in as disciples. However, since foreign disciples are so desirable, masters sometimes even take the initiative in recruiting them to become disciples (A. D. Frank, 2006). Foreign students, whether they like it or not, whether they are aware of it or not, are often viewed as representing their respective countries. The same principle was also true of Master Duke. This means that when Master Duke taught foreigners tai chi, it was also China that taught these countries something, which positioned China in an authoritative position. Teaching foreign students certainly improves the master's visibility and internationality; it also enhances one's authority within the community since he or she also becomes a vector of the Chinese dream.

Figure 8: *Master Duke Teaching a Danish Male Student Pushing Hands Techniques*



Having overseas teaching experience is gradually becoming an underlying standard of measuring one's mastery. When Master Duke's disciples taught foreign students, they liked to document and share their experiences online. They often received comments such as "adding glory to DTC" and "raising our country's prestige." For instance, Xuming's online discourse frequently equated teaching tai chi with teaching Chinese language and culture. This attitude was reflected in the titles of her self-promoting articles, such as "Chinese tai chi teaches Westerners to learn to speak Chinese" (reflective journal, May 19, 2020). She related teaching tai chi to promoting Chinese nationalism. Although she was an Australian citizen, she appeared to "have a Chinese heart."

In short, by teaching foreigners, especially people with foreign ethnicity that signifies and represents "Westernness," martial arts instructors become the vectors of specific martial arts, Chinese martial spirits, and national culture. Their authority is validated by foreigners who recognize them and come to learn from them. Interestingly, foreign recognition often matters more than Chinese fellow's recognition for many Chinese minds.

Summary

This section discusses three forms of embodied instructions: master demo, testing touch, and embodied social insertion. Master demo refers to how people, such as the master or coach, demonstrate the proper techniques for specific postures, routines, or combat skills. The beauty of master demo is "*showing, not telling*." For knowledgeable audience, a master demo speaks louder than thousands of words. By executing techniques and routines in convincing manners, instructors can *show* and *prove* that they are the legitimate heir of specific martial arts and establish their authority accordingly.

Testing touch can be examined from three perspectives: curious explorations, power play,

and rivalrous touch. Curious explorations offer a chance for instructors to establish their authority by helping learners gain embodied experience of legitimate skills. Power play reinforces existing authoritative relationships since Confucian morality that dominates martial virtues tends to defend the authoritative domination of the teacher over the students. When discrepancies between status and skills occur, people might fake their performance to meet the moral code. Still, when the public sees this type of fake performance, they may raise questions and distrust about the competence of the instructor and his/her lineage. It can also increase distrust towards relevant figures and lead to falling authority. Scandals caused by fake masters have already plagued tai chi, and the negative consequences can be severe. Thus, how to manage and present power play is a practical challenge that professionals in this line of work need to be conscious of.

Rivalrous touch is the most hard-core and provoking form of testing touch. It aims to challenge others' authority and build the challenger's authority. To protect their authority from challengers, practitioners develop different coping strategies, from ignoring to making situational decisions, including fighting back hard. Power play and rivalrous touch are tricky issues that must be handled carefully. Also, they can reveal the personality, character, and martial spirits of the instructors and test the martial artists' martial morality, which is deemed extremely important in the martial arts community. To be a legitimate vector of specific martial arts, one needs to have both skills and martial morality.

Embodied social insertion is an effective way to insert oneself into a social network where one probably cannot gain entry through other means. By becoming the teacher of people with status, an instructor positions himself or herself at the authoritative end of their relationship. These students with status also reinforce their approval of the instructor's status as a legitimate

vector of their art and create a halo effect that attracts people who have limited knowledge about this community. Another group of students that can quickly bolster the authority of instructors is, as we saw, foreigners, especially Caucasians, who are seen by the Chinese as representatives of Western developed countries. By teaching foreigners, instructors position themselves as not only vectors of specific martial arts but also as vectors of the Chinese dream of strengthening cultural confidence and overpowering Western cultures, which can bring them more recognition and praises.

Photo-posing: The Art of Posing for Authority

Defining Photo-Posing

Photo-posing refers to one kind of body practice performed explicitly for the camera and is always subject to others' gazes. It includes two layers of actions: First, people intentionally manipulate their bodies to form specific postures to take pictures. Second, people intentionally share those photos by various means. Of course, the difference between cameras, phones, and video recorders is blurry nowadays, as even a simple photo on an iPhone can be a "live photo". Photos can be easily extracted from a video. Thus, *photo* refers to *static visual materials taken by various image acquisition devices*. Simply speaking, photo-posing involves the production of photos and their dissemination.

Local Understanding of the Relations between Photo-posing and Authority

While reviewing the latest material and visual turns in organization studies, Bexen. et al. (2018) remind us:

The visual offers a means of generating multi-sensory impact through communicating in a way that is more immediate and emotionally powerful than that enabled by words. The visual can enable understanding of social action in cultural contexts and embodied

experience of actions as they unfold in space and over time. (p. 6)

Indeed, as the influential visual theorist John Berger told us almost half a century ago: “Seeing comes before words” (Berger, 1972, p. 7). There is no doubt that people make sense of organizations and get things done through talk and text, but we should not ignore the visual strategies that are central to organizations’ existence (Boden, 1994).

The relationship between power, authority, and visuals is not a new topic for discussion. In the eye of the Roman natural philosopher Pliny, the political authority of painting, a classical form of visual representation, can go beyond propagating the noble genealogy of state propaganda. It is “a restraint and discipline of power as well as an instrument of it, a way of *introjecting the master-servant relationship* into the sovereign” (Mitchell, 1995, p. 338, italic added). It is reasonable to argue that today, photos take on paintings’ function of introjecting power relations in TCMAOs and other types of organizations or entities as well. Below, I draw inspiration from studies in varied disciplines that shed light on relevant issues in local context.

First, *photo-posing* always involves spatial relationships among people and things. In China, spatial relations are always mirroring and creating power relations. As indicated in the Chinese classic text *the Book of Rituals*, traditional Confucian rituals detailed specific rules regarding physical positions, body postures, and pace of movement according to one’s gender, social status, rank, and kinships. Ritual-conforming behaviors are also performative in producing the mind, manner, and sense of self appropriate to one’s status. For example, people of lower status are always required to take contractive postures that make people appear humble (X. Li & Ye, 2016). When people come together, seating arrangements (排座次, *pai zuoci*) have always been critical for social rituals. They must follow specific rules that arrange spatial relationships between people (W. Wang, 1982). However, these rules can be flexible since people might use

different standards in different situations to identify who should take the central authoritative position. Factors that take the lead can be seniority, richness, ability, prestige, and age (Bai, 2008). What society values more under certain circumstances also makes a difference.

The *distance* to the central figure in a photo can be understood as the distance to the center of power and influence. Metaphorically speaking, it is like the distance from the ripple to the center of the web in the *chaxugeju*. Typically, the closer one is to the center of influence, the more positively aligned with it, and the more authority and legitimacy one is perceived to have. The famous Chinese political slogan of “keeping in alignment with the core” (向核心看齐, *xiang hexin kanqi*) is also an organizing principle where people carefully align themselves with specific authoritative figures by positioning themselves in the right place with the proper postures. On many occasions in China, photo-posing materializes authoritative relationships between people. Compared with their Western peers, the Chinese display higher sensitivity and seriousness regarding photo-posing.

While taking individual photos, Chinese people tend to exemplify and emphasize the background and environment. However, Westerners tend to put individual(s) as the central focus of an image (Jeong-Ook & Jeong-Ook, 2009). When it comes to taking collective photos, Geng and Song (2006) highlight that the Chinese tend to follow the principle of “authority figures stand in the middle” (p.185). Namely, people of high status are placed in the center, usually in the middle of the front row, while the rest are placed on the sides. Sometimes, people consider factors such as age and gender. Also, Chinese people like to use a posture rarely used by Westerners, the stance of “standing by the chair,” in which the authority figure is seated in the middle of the front row, with the rest of the group sitting on either side of him/her or standing in separate rows behind him/her.

Confucian traditions still govern Chinese people's behavior in photo shoots. Numerous unwritten rules about photo-posing are deeply embedded in Chinese consciousness. If they are broken, suspicions and questions are generated. For example, when the Secretary of the Henan Provincial Communist Party Committee stood *behind* a group of entrepreneurs, it immediately became breaking news around the country since it is usually the officials who take the front and center position (Z. Wang & Du, 2010). From a performative point of view, taking group photos mirrors pre-existing power relations and materializes them. Through photographs, authoritative relations between different figures are made visible and observable. A study of taking group photos in China reveals that the country's post-90s generation tends to carefully choose group selfies with teachers and leaders to share online, preferably with authoritative figures in the center. In this way, they can show a positive image and position of authority among students and reinforce existing relationships with teachers or leaders (Luo, 2019). However, how photos are produced and used in TCMAOs is still largely an uncharted territory. Below I will introduce how photo-posing serves as an evidencing device to build and maintain authority within a TCMAO.

Photos as a Differential Authoring Device

Be Careful About Whom You Stand by in Photos

The core idea of differential *authority* is that one's authority, and the ability to author certain situations, can be extended to other territories or fields and shared with other actors through close association. The closer one is to authority figures; the more one can benefit from differential authority. Making others aware of one's association with specific figures is thus a critical, even profitable practice for DTC members. Photo-posing has become a vital and widespread body practice in DTC.

As discussed earlier, when disciples choose someone as their master, they also consider

whether the master has strong *guanxi* (connections). If a martial artist is believed to have powerful connections, s/he is more attractive in recruiting disciples, and photo-posing certainly plays a role in this process. Photo-posing helps to show others whom one is associated with. However, it must be handled carefully since it may also reflect images that one tries to avoid.

Master Duke was very conscious of what kinds of images were appropriate to share publicly:

So, you must be very cautious about the [photo] thing. For example, if you ask to take pictures with leaders while they eat dinner, they resent it. Why? Sometimes there may be a bottle of Maotai next to them. If you take pictures and carelessly share them everywhere, you may harm a leader's image. When you eat fancy food in a high-end restaurant, taking pictures can be used as evidence of corruption and put someone under investigation. (Master Duke, interview, September 20, 2020)

As a footnote to the context, Maotai is a distilled Chinese liquor that is popular and expensive. Following the 18th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2012, a far-reaching anti-corruption campaign began in China. Local political leaders did not want any photos of them drinking Maotai in regular social settings to avoid being suspected of corruption. Master Duke also mentioned:

There are always things that are inappropriate to reveal to the public. For example, I recently demonstrated some postures to teach you, and I was wearing plain clothes... leather shoes with a watch. You took a photo of me. If others do not know the context, they have no idea that you were wearing that to get ready for an official event. They may question why a tai chi master dressed like that and think you are too casual and disrespectful to tai chi. This will have a negative impact. No matter what you do, you must behave accordingly and give your best, including being mindful of your image. When I am leading the practice, performing in front of the public, or teaching in public, it is totally fine to videotape or take my photos. For example, everyone is filming when I do public performances, right? (Master Duke, interview, September 20, 2020)

These two excerpts show that Master Duke was very mindful of the circumstances of taking and sharing photos. During my fieldwork, he also asked me to stop my video recording when VIP trainees showed up or when he was switching from “public mode” to “private mode”

to teach disciples. During my discipleship ceremony in 2017, the long yellow ribbon around my neck was asymmetrical. Being aware that this ceremony would be photographed, Master Duke quietly and gently helped me make this ribbon even on both sides. It was a touching detail that stood out in my mind (fieldnotes, January 17, 2017).

Being aware of the power of visual materials in projecting one's public image, Master Duke was cautious with who or what he wanted to be associated with and was mindful of how he presented himself. As a promising martial artist, he established himself early on and was invited to Taiwan and France starting in his early 20s. In his journey of rising as an authority of Chen-style tai chi, he encountered many people who wanted to challenge and embarrass him to establish their own authority: The quickest way to gain fame is to take down a famous master. An accomplished martial artist protects his name like a precious and fragile vase. During the interview, when we talked about how to respond to challengers and their cameras, he commented:

You have been living in America for too long. You are too simple, too pure to understand how calculating people can be. Some people have evil intentions toward you. (Master Duke, interview, September 20, 2020)

As a seasoned martial artist who has deep insight into the culture and climate of the martial arts community, Master Duke saw me as a straightforward and non-utilitarian person who might underestimate the complexities of people's agendas while interacting with him. I think he was aware that being associated with him was a profitable business for some people and his authoritative status was a valuable resource for others. There are indeed some people who have tried to take advantage of him. For example, some tai chi instructors visited DTC and took photos with Master Duke, then they left and never contacted him again. How they used these photos was totally out of Master Duke's control, they may even claim that they learned tai

chi from Master Duke, and there was no way that Master Duke could track and expose every false claim. Instead of focusing on things he cannot control, Master Duke had enough worldly wisdom to associate himself with authoritative figures who could raise him on the social ladder and build his authority. In his public appearances, whether in-person or online, he used *positive associations* to enhance his authority while avoiding *negative associations* that might damage his reputation.

Positive association refers to associating oneself with *positive authoritative figures* to share the latter’s differential authority, which typically is also an upward association: One tries to associate with positive figures above, or equal to, one’s social class in the very hierarchical Chinese society. Through photos, Master Duke’s online presence showed how one could intentionally showcase his positive association with authoritative figures in China.

Figure 9: Screenshot of Master Duke's Weibo Post



In Figure 9, before “@” several famous state officials and martial artists, Master Duke wrote:

Suggesting including tai chi in the Olympics # Daheng, member of the CPPCC National Committee, chairman of the board of directors of the H Group, and general consultant of the DTC, practiced Chen-style tai chi in front of the Great Hall of the People while attending the “Two Sessions”². 🎉🎉🎉[strong][strong][strong] He submitted a proposal about using national power to get tai chi into the Olympics. (Master Duke’s Weibo post, May 26, 2020)

Below the text, there are nine well-selected photos. Three of them show Daheng depicting tai chi postures in front of the Great Hall of the People, the building signifying power and authority in China. During the “Two Sessions” meeting, this area was closed to the public. Only the most powerful elite in China can enter this space. People in these group photos are powerful figures in Chinese society. Daheng’s *photo-posing* was rather well-calculated since his pictures were soon republished on many media platforms. He offered two proposals for this meeting: One was promoting the inclusion of tai chi in the Olympics, and another was about requesting the General Administration of Sport and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism to jointly build a model national base for integrating culture, sports, and tourism. This proposal aligned well with his business plan since his company, worth billions of dollars, was working on cultural tourism. As part of his business development, he partnered with DTC and became the latter’s honorary advisor.

When Master Duke reposted Daheng’s photos, he included a double photo of him and Daheng (the middle one of the third row), showing them standing side-by-side with relaxed and delighted facial expressions. Daheng’s pictures of tai chi postures were circulating on the

² The term “Two Sessions” refers to the annual meeting of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

internet, but his skill level was the least relevant. His status, not his skill level, made his poorly performed postures (from a pure technique perspective) hit the news and social media.

Master Duke showed others how *close* he and Daheng were by reposting these photos. In an image like this, physical closeness always signifies that they belong to the same social cluster and are relationally close. This photo inserted him into a powerful circle without verbally saying it. Daheng's photos connected tai chi with the powerful *landmark* that symbolizes the highest political authority in China. Master Duke's photos connected DTC with the H Group and the mission to bring tai chi to the Olympics. These photos were supposed to impress the audience in specific ways and have a message to deliver. They boosted Master Duke's authority, but they also grew DTC's authority since DTC was the partner of H group. Finally, they promoted teaching Tai Chi as a prestigious profession, compared with other martial arts not seen at this decisive stage.

But authority must speak to its audience. It depends on how others perceive those associations. For instance, a photo showed Daheng standing side by side with Master Duke and leading the group practice of senior disciples whose skills were hundreds of times better than Daheng. Master Duke proudly shared this photo online. When I saw it, I turned my nose up and bluntly wrote down my honest feelings in my reflective journal:

Seriously? [this photo] makes me feel humiliated and disgusted. He cannot relax his shoulder, straighten his spine, and open his legs correctly, and now he is "leading" senior disciples to play tai chi? Seriously? I refused to recognize his [Daheng's] "authority" in DTC. For me, he is nothing but a calculating rich man. At the "Two Sessions" meeting, he was supposed to propose something on the people's behalf, but he proposed how to use governmental force to strengthen his business: The cultural tourism that he invested in. His power and money are irrelevant to the spirit of martial arts. We are supposed to follow people with outstanding skills, virtues, or spiritual enlightenment, not who are RICH and politically POWERFUL! For me, this is a shame of the spiritual martial arts. Where is the good pride of martial artist? But I must understand that in contemporary Chinese society, money and power matter greatly and can indeed decide who has more authority in society. They *matter* to others, and money always talks. I respect Master

Duke's choice, but I will never be kowtowing this association like others. So, I better keep my mouth shut." (Reflective journal, May 30, 2020).

I documented my visceral reaction, which might have aligned with a tiny fraction of DTC members who cared more about spiritual growth than earthly achievement. As Master Duke and Master Qing publicly displayed their associations with the wealthy and powerful figures, such as Daheng, and showed great excitement in these types of associations, some DTC trainees and disciples noticed the change in the student body and organizational climate of DTC.

I feel the studio is becoming less and less adorable than before...three years ago, I had fellow trainees who were young, inspiring, and explorative. We wanted something more than physical change; we desired experiencing tai chi culture and gaining spiritual enlightenment. But overall, despite the coaching team's good skills, they were not equipped with the ideal level of cultural attainment and intellectual wisdom to help us get there. What is more depressing is that lately more governmental officers and businessmen are showing up. Many of them are arrogant, rude, and self-centered. Some of them smoke cigarettes in the studio while others are exercising, that is terrible! I also feel some young, educated, and thoughtful people are leaving the studio. Overall, the climate in the studio is changing, and it is becoming more official, like a boring governmental office...I just don't like it! I don't want to go there anymore". (Linglong, interview, August 17, 2020)

While actively associating themselves with figures such as Daheng, Master Duke and DTC naturally distanced themselves from certain groups of people, such as intellectuals and those who favored the purity of practicing martial arts and didn't like seeing a tai chi studio become a vanity project. Master Duke's association with Daheng could have been politically and financially motivated. Daheng opened new opportunities for Master Duke; training performers from Daheng's company also brought DTC significant financial returns. Master Duke ran the risk of spoiling his image and identity by associating himself with figures like Daheng. He also ran the risk of diverging from what he was supposed to be: an honest and upright martial artist with a chivalrous spirit. Any association was potentially a risk of corruption and spoliation, especially with politicians and businesspeople. Master Duke's authority, for the purists, came from his tai chi skills and his capacity to embody the spirit of this martial art. He was considered

the vector of tai chi, and that is where his authority came from (tai chi expressed itself through him). When he associated himself with politicians and businesspeople, this vectorization was spoiled by others as he also became the vector of less noble forces. Thus, to a certain extent, it is fair to say that Master Duke and DTC gained more authority in society by being associated with powerful and wealthy figures. However, they also become less authoritative in the eyes of certain people.

The traditional classical image of grandmasters in martial arts is of those who cannot be tempted by money or power. However, as Yaoshi mentioned, “Nowadays, it is hard to do things without connections and support from the rich and powerful” (Yaoshi, interview, October 13, 2021). For instance, Master Qing once mentioned that to get specific assignments from the state, Master Duke must stay humble and drink, with a high-level female government official just to please her: “There is no way out, that woman has a terrible temper, you have to treat her like a goddess since she is the decision-maker” (fieldnotes, August 07, 2018).

Photos with similar themes of being associated with people who were perceived to be powerful and authoritative were often posted on Master Duke’s WeChat Moments and Weibo. For instance, on September 24, 2020, when a renowned university hired Master Duke as an adjunct professor and invited him to give a speech, he posted group photos with the department chair and other officials (reflective journal, September 24, 2020). Through these photos, the associations between Master Duke and authoritative figures such as architects, officials, celebrities, and influential entrepreneurs, were materialized and shown to his disciples, his students, and the public. In this sense, one’s authority is constituted by all established, materialized, and visible links between oneself and authoritative figures/organizations that are considered to be meaningful and relevant.

Some of Master Duke's achievements distinguished him from others and contributed to his authority. For example, he was recognized by the mayor of Soursac, France, as an Honorary Resident. He became the first Chinese martial artist awarded the "Red Wine Knight" title by the "Knights of Cahors, France" on March 18, 2017 (online report from KKnews, March 20, 2017). When people of lower social status were shown in photos shared by Master Duke, they were always used as background or actants to express Master Duke's superior position. As the old Chinese saying says: "It takes a green leafy backdrop to emphasize the flower." Taking photos with political figures, especially the popular ones, can be exciting for citizens of different cultures. However, I think there is a difference in degree regarding its significance. Suppose you take a picture with a member of Congress in the U.S., which might only suggest that you are a supporter or a donor. If you take a picture with a deputy to the National People's Congress of China, people may think you are a big deal and wait in line to do business with you. My point is, we must consider local perspectives when discussing the matter of photo-posing.

In contrast with the *positive association*, *negative association* refers to associating oneself with *negative figures* that might damage one's authority and influence. Whether a given figure is considered negative or positive is, of course, relative, and contextually determined, as it highly depends on how the relevant parties, such as the public/audience/customer, see it. For example, nationalism could be seen everywhere in DTC's activities and online discussions, and some DTC disciples were outspoken about their hate towards Japan and the Japanese people. Participants Yaoshi and Chun both mentioned that they think Master Duke intentionally downplayed his associations with his Japanese disciple and students. Master Duke's choice is easy to understand: These negative associations might damage his authority in the eyes of some of his disciples and the public under current political climate.

Furthermore, there is a distinction between the existence of an association and whether they want this association to be *seen* by others. For example, when Master Duke and Master Qing taught classes in France and Australia, news and images were released and circulated online to boost DTC's influence, fame, and status as an authoritative organization with global impact. But when they taught in Japan, nothing about their trip was mentioned in DTC or on Master Duke and Master Qing's social media accounts. Photos of Master Duke with his Australian and French disciples are widely shared online and readily available on Google. Still, I could not find any online group photos that put Master Duke and his Japanese disciple Chun in the same frame, even though Chun's achievements in promoting tai chi in Tokyo were equally impressive. Yaoshi, as DTC's social media manager, once was told never mention anything about Master Duke and Master Qing's trip to Japan online (Yaoshi, interview, May 06, 2020). Chun recalled several times he was verbally assaulted by fellow disciples because of his nationality, despite having half Chinese heritage, growing up in China, and speaking perfect Chinese. He understood why Master Duke remained silent about his teaching in Japan due to the soaring nationalist sentiment against Japan in China (Chun, interview, September 20, 2020).

To make those *positive associations* well known, the disciples were expected to spread information about them, such as forwarding or reposting Master Duke, Master Qing, and DTC's social media posts where photos were presented. In the following two excerpts, Master Duke emphasized that this behavior shows that one is acting as a good disciple. At the same time, participant Jingang not only agreed, but also emphasized how beneficial it is for the disciples:

Being a disciple, you should always keep in contact with the headquarters, take the initiative to communicate with us, show up in the [WeChat] group, and participate in discussions. When the headquarters has big events, [you] should actively send messages and photos about them or forward our official accounts' articles on your Moments, and help to improve our publicity, right? (Master Duke's speech, fieldnotes, October 23, 2018).

You should share important things, also frequently forward or repost shifu's posts about his articles, photos, updates on ongoing events, even his "chicken soup for the soul (refers to all sorts of inspirational stories, and famous quotes and warnings)," right? By sharing shifu's activities online, you prove to others that you are indeed the disciple of your masters, right? So, this is already a promotion of yourself. (Jingang, interview, September 29, 2020)

So far, I have shown how photo-posing is used in accomplishing differential authority in DTC and Chinese society. Martial artists such as Master Duke used photos and textual materials to establish positive associations with powerful figures in China and establish their authority by sharing the differential authority of these figures, whether they were institutions, events, people, and honors. At the same time, *negative associations* that might hurt one's authority were avoided or hidden from relevant parties. Disciples were expected to help make positive associations well-known while helping to hide negative associations. While they were encouraged to forward or repost Master Duke, Master Qing, and DTC's social media posts where positive photos were presented, they were also expected to be silent on things that Master Duke and Master Qing were quiet about. It is noteworthy that DTC had three generations of disciples: Master Duke, his disciples, and his disciple's disciples. His disciples also replicated Master Duke's practices: Using photos to establish positive associations and demanding that their students widely share related images. What was passed on was not just skills but also practices as well. In the next section, I will show how the production of photos themselves was one kind of communicative act that produced authority at varied levels.

Borrowing Light from Authoritative figures

As the "soul" of DTC, Master Duke's authority was key to the authority of DTC, since DTC's authority greatly originates from Master Duke's authority in the field. It also decided how much differential authority his disciples could share. Master Duke's increased fame and

influence benefited his disciples' careers greatly. Master Duke's high authority in society made him a valuable source for disciples to "borrow light" from. During interviews, the terms "借光" (*jieguang*) and its synonyms, such as "占光" (*zhanguang*) and "粘光" (*zhanguang*), were frequently mentioned by interviewees. They all mean *borrowing light* in the Chinese context. Master Duke's accumulation of authority made him a valuable source for disciples to borrow light from. It is fair to say that disciples and masters were all aware of the mechanism that consisted of *borrowing light* in DTC's organizational life. There were various ways a disciple could borrow light from Master Duke. They could repost Master Duke, Master Qing, or other influential members' posts. They could also repost Master Duke's public teaching videos on their personal TikTok or Kuaishou accounts. When asked about his thoughts about these acts, Master Duke said: "Some people are uploading my videos to increase their influence and publicity" (Master Duke, interview, September 20, 2020).

Without using the word "借光" (*jieguang*), Master Duke clearly defined what *borrowing light* means: *disciples appropriate Master Duke's authority and influence to increase their own influence and publicity*. There were many means to do so, and one common body practice was *photo-posing*. DTC members widely used photos as differential authoring devices to prove their association with Master Duke. Thus, they can borrow light and draw differential authority from him. The importance of *borrowing light* from Master Duke and using photos in this process can be seen in the following excerpts:

Shifu is getting more and more famous. That is a good thing; we all can borrow light from him! (Xinxi, interview, September 20, 2020)

Many people like to have their pictures taken with shifu. These people may do it out of personal admiration. If you have a picture with the master, it is kind of a memorial. The other thing is that it is something to show to others: Who I have been with and what we have done, and there is proof here! Right? There is evidence. Yeah, many people have this mentality. (Zhengyi, interview, September 9, 2020)

He [takes pictures] to show that he has a famous master, or that he learned from a master who is excellent and famous or something like that. When we were promoting ourselves in France at that time, we also put up some photos showing shifu was teaching us tai chi. (Meigui, interview, September 22, 2020)

Everyone may be different. For example, those who run a studio must have a lineage and be recognized as the successor of a good master. You must have photos; otherwise, how can people recognize you? For them, [group photos] are part of the appearance. From my point of view, I think they must have that. Every time I come to train at the headquarters, I must take a photo with shifu and shimu. It feels like a family photo for me. It feels very intimate (Taohong, interview, September 7, 2020).

Because this is proof that your studio has a legitimate inheritance and provenance, and you belong to a legitimate lineage. People will see that you are not someone who is trying to fool them casually. You still must prove yourself, and it is necessary to hang a picture in the studio (Jingang, September 29, 2020).

It is fair to say it is almost “industry standard” practice to use photos as an evidencing device to associate oneself with the master and claim his legitimacy and differential authority. As

Figure 10: Master Duke and Wusi Posing for the Camera



Zhengyi said, once you have the photo, “there is evidence.” Photos are supposed to provide evidence of the associations one is trying to claim. It is like saying, “it is not me who says that I am famous or important. It is the photo I’m showing you.” This is also a form of ventriloquation (Cooren, 2010; Nathues et al., 2020). One type of popular photo was those that showed how Master Duke taught people specific tai chi postures. As shown in Figure 10, Master Duke and his disciple Wusi were posing for a photo that showed him teaching Wusi a stance in the tai chi knife, and Yaoshi was taking the photo for them. People have developed different strategies to

Table 2: *Different Ways of Using Photos to Borrow Light from Master Duke*

Type	Description	Empirical data
Online avatars	Using double photos with Master Duke or triple photos with him and Master Qing as avatars of the online profile. These photos often show them instructing people on specific postures	As of October 25, 2020, out of 202 disciples, nine disciples used a double photo with Master Duke or triple photo with him and Master Qing as avatars of their WeChat profiles; eight disciples used single quan photos with DTC’s signboard and signature landmark in the background as their avatars; more than 100 disciples used individual quan photos or group photos as their avatars
Online postings	Sharing double photos and group photos on online social media platforms, such as WeChat and WeiBo	The double photo of Master Duke and his disciple Feng in a public performance has been widely used by both parties in online materials
Visual materials used in media products	Embedding double photos and group photos in media products and marketing materials, such as documentaries, TV shows, and media articles	Double photos of Meigui and Master Duke and triple photos of Meigui, Peijian, and Master Duke were used in the “Bond with China” TV show on China Central Television (CCTV)
Visual objects	Developing photos in various sizes and displaying them accordingly in specific physical environments	Luliu placed a lot of group photos in her house. Sometimes people visited her home just to look at those photos; Peijian, Peter, and Xinxi hung Master Duke’s quan photos or their double photos with him on the walls of their studios

Figure 11: *Master Duke and Feng Performing Pushing Hands on the Stage*



use photos to “borrow light” from Master Duke. Photos can be organized, repurposed, and transformed to be used in various circumstances, such as avatars of online profiles, televised documentaries, decorative arts on the walls, and digital albums. Table 2 lists several ways photos can be used as evidencing devices in online and offline spaces.

As indicated in Table 2, one way of using posed photos is to appropriate them as part of marketing materials to be circulated online and combined with various textual materials. Some good photos, especially those double photos that can reveal a lot of information about ones’ skill level, become the circulating “online currency” that displays the desired images. For example, Master Duke and Feng’s photo in Figure 11 was widely shared in online group chats, social media posts, and online publishing materials. It was a photograph of Master Duke and his disciple Feng during a public performance of pushing hands before many cameras and live audiences in May 2020.

Who is Master Duke in this photo? If your first thought is the person standing on the right

side, this photo indeed will *inform* your perception of who is the authoritative figure in this relationship. Like the seating arrangements during public performances and power plays, it is always the one with lower status who falls. Here, it was not necessarily prearranged. Instead, the difference in skills made Master Duke dominate the game. He had complete control of when and how to take down Feng without hurting him. Feng's face showed pain and shock in the original photo, and Master Duke's face was calm and peaceful. Master Duke had a principle of taking down opponents with elegance and avoiding hurting others (fieldnotes, January 04, 2017).

What can this photo do? For Master Duke, it vividly shows his strength, technique, and power and materializes his authority as one of the greatest masters in TCMA; for Feng, it is a photo that he can proudly show to others to establish his own authority. How so? This photo visually associates him with Master Duke. There is no shame in a disciple being beaten by his own master; instead, it is an honor: Only competent disciples favored by Master Duke would be chosen to *share the stage* with him. Thus, for Feng, circulating this photo online could establish his authority among peers and impress his audience (students, business partners, etc.). A robust visual association is more powerful than thousands of words. Also, compared with textual materials, it is easier for photos to resonate with people from different cultures speaking different languages.

Indeed, people have various ways of using photos to prove their association with Master Duke. Two interesting patterns were revealed: First, the significance of pictures as the evidencing device varies from disciples to disciples. It is mainly influenced by how well the association between a disciple and Master Duke was already known. In the early stages of their careers, coaches were more eager to use photos to showcase their association with Master Duke, such as Luliu and Taohong. In contrast, established coaches who already had some authority in

the tai chi community, such as Denzel, Wuzhe, and Xinxi, focused more on the affective side of taking photos with Master Duke and Master Qing. They agreed that they must put Master Duke's image or double photos with him on the walls of their studios, which was almost a standard practice among peers. But it is unnecessary to share pictures with Shifu online. As Wuzhe explained:

Hong Kong is small. I've been in Hong Kong for many years, so many people know me already. Sometimes when people come to me, when they introduce me, they will say: Master Duke's first Hong Kong disciple is this one. (Wuzhe, interview, September 22, 2020)

Second, as differential authoring devices, photos' functions vary by context. For example, Meigui indicated it matters more when you are teaching overseas:

People value your lineage very much, especially when you teach in foreign countries. If you pose with shifu and shimu and take some photos when they teach you, these photos can be useful promotional materials. Especially photos of you learning kungfu in China, when you show foreigners your photos, they will think, "oops, he went to China specifically to learn kungfu!" and they will think that you are more credible and that your kungfu is not something you invented yourself, ha-ha ((laughter)). So, you should always intentionally create and preserve these precious materials. The master-disciple relationship cannot be proved through empty words. When you have these [photos], the teacher-disciple relationship is visualized and becomes more reliable. (Meigui, interview, September 22, 2020)

Tai chi is a field where the consumer/audience generally has little knowledge about it, and mass media and movies have spread a lot of myths and misconceptions about this martial art. To impress beginners, especially foreign beginners lacking knowledge of tai chi, instructors often invoked their lineage and associations with renowned masters to establish their authority.

This section shows that it is a regular practice for people to intentionally take posed photos with Master Duke and Master Qing and use them as differential authoring devices to prove their associations and access their differential authority. Showing these photos is also beneficial in presenting themselves as grateful disciples who always respect their masters. Being

loyal and grateful is an essential virtue of a good disciple. By showing others that s/he is a good disciple, s/he also earns status by merit (K. Chang, 1983) and establishes moral legitimacy.

These factors all contribute to the establishment of authority. The master also sets up role model for his/her disciples. While disciples are not just “suckers” or “light borrowers,” in the following section, I will show how they can contribute to Master Duke and DTC’s authority by also *adding glory* (增光, *Zengguang*) to them.

Adding Glory Back to Associated Authoritative Figures

Differential authority is not a one-way path; instead, it is a two-way street. In a society organized by *chaxugeju*, everyone is at the center of his/her network. Our changes in status and influence will influence those associated with us (Fei et al., 1992a). This process can be done both ways since each end of a relationship can be a source of influence. Master Duke’s authority benefited from his associations with famous *authoritative figures*, such as governing sectors, universities, and notable events. His authority was also continually established through his disciples’ achievements and influence in the field. In the master-disciple relationship, a good disciple always attributes his success to his master. Since one’s master is deemed the primary source of one’s legitimacy (Takacs, 2003), it is expected that credit is given to the master.

Jingang articulated this point in the following excerpt:

At the very beginning, it is a given that you are going to take advantage of your master’s reputation, power, and influence and use his banner to recruit students and open things up. Because people recognize shifu as a big guy in our field, they are interested in visiting your studio to check out how his disciple is doing. First, you need shifu’s reputation to attract people, right? After years of teaching, the number of people who recognize you increases. You will build up your own reputation, and people will say you are excellent. Thus, they recognize that the disciple is also good since shifu is good! This is a win-win situation. Now is the time for you to return the favor and add glory to shifu. Why am I so good? Because my master taught me well, I followed a good master! Simply speaking, in

the beginning when you are nobody, you need to borrow light from shifu. Later, you can add glory back to shifu. This is a mutually beneficial process. Now you walk your path with two legs: shifu's reputation and your own abilities. (Jingang, interview, September 29, 2020)

For disciples, showing association with Master Duke was an excellent starting point to build their careers. Once they reached a certain point where they could “self-sustain” in setting up their circle and territory of influence, they started adding glory back to Master Duke and DTC through the same channel: the master-disciple association. In the past couple of years, Master Duke's authority was rising at an accelerated rate for several reasons, such as working with state authorities and partnering with the H group. Having famous disciples was also an essential factor. One good example in this regard was Kiddo, Master Duke's youngest disciple I mentioned earlier.

Born in 2011, Kiddo was Master Duke's youngest disciple. On October 25, 2020, I Googled the names of Kiddo and the kungfu movie star Jet Li and found that the number of Kiddo's results (29,000,000) was more than twice that of Jet Li (12,300,000). Kiddo's story of practicing tai chi since he was 20 months old fascinated Chinese media. He soon became a young celebrity. Media coverage of Kiddo always integrated photos of him doing postures with Master Duke and/or Master Qing.

The sentence “DTC's tai chi Kiddo, the Red Boy besides the throne of Arya Avalokiteshvara” was widely quoted (online data, kknews.com, November 29, 2016). This slogan equated Kiddo to the Red Boy, one of the most well-known magical figures in China's mythology. Kiddo's accumulated fame made him a young authoritative figure in his own way. He was invited to teach tai chi to older kids in elementary school. He was awarded the “Good Boy for a New Era” title in his province and became a tai chi ambassador of a city famous for tourism. He was treated with respect in many situations with all these titles and honors, and his

influence made him at least a young authoritative figure in tai chi. In this sense, being associated with him was beneficial. For example, his authority was extended to his father's studio and city. His city used him as an example to promote his city's image.

Since Kiddo's influence came from his tai chi skills, his success was naturally attributed back to Master Duke and DTC, thus significantly increased the publicity and authority of the latter. Master Duke showed up in almost all TV shows that featured Kiddo, such as *Amazing Kids* on Hunan TV in 2017. The association between Kiddo and DTC was materialized in their co-presence on the stage and in double photos of Kiddo and Master Duke (or Master Qing). Figure 11 shows the most circulated image of Kiddo in media coverage. It is a posed double photo of Kiddo and Master Duke in front of the ancestor wall in the headquarters with DTC's name visible on it. This photo is a differential authoring device to materialize the association

Figure 12: *The Widely Circulated Double Photo of Master Duke and Kiddo*



between Kiddo and Master Duke. This association was enhanced every time this photo was circulated and seen by someone new. For the public, all the attention paid to Kiddo naturally extended back to Master Duke and DTC and improved their authority.

In our online disciple group, every time a disciple shared his/her achievements in promoting tai chi, one of the most common comments was: “Congrats, you are adding glory to DTC!” (fieldnotes, October 18, 2019). Master Duke usually only posted photos that associated him with figures with equal or higher status, the exception were disciples who made a mark in the field. Master Duke didn’t hesitate to show his double photos with Kiddo on his WeChat and Weibo accounts multiple times. For Master Duke, Kiddo was not just some disciple who borrowed light from him. This little celebrity was a figure who could add glory back to him and DTC. It was the same case with Feng, Xuming, and Meigui: They were figures that made Master Duke proud and added glory to him and DTC.

Disciples could add glory to Master Duke and DTC; they could also add glory to fellow disciples. For instance, when CCTV covered Meigui’s story of teaching Tai Chi in France, many disciples shared this news and used sentences such as “my tai chi sister Meigui” to associate themselves with her. In the traditional Chinese martial arts community, being associated with CCTV is a big deal. It *matters* in the local context. Meigui’s appearance on CCTV added glory to Master Duke, DTC, and fellow disciples. DTC members generally liked to share photos of influential disciples’ notable and cheerful events, such as taking in their disciples, receiving prizes, and opening new studios. Usually, disciples interpreted these events as the success of DTC and attributed them back to Master Duke’s teaching and support.

Summary

This section shows that TCMAO members used the body practice of photo-posing to

establish their associations with authoritative figures (human or other-than-human), thus claiming differential authority. This process focuses on building positive associations and avoiding negative associations that might hurt their authority. What constitutes positive or negative associations depends on how the locals and community members perceive the nature of specific figures.

Through the mutually beneficial mechanism of *borrowing light* and *adding glory*, masters and disciples used photos as differential authoring devices of their associations to establish their authority respectively through the same association: the master-disciple relationship. Also, fellow disciples could benefit from each other's authority by associating with each other through the fictive sibling relationships. In other words, disciples could also borrow light and add glory to each other. These mutually beneficial two-way processes (borrowing light \rightleftharpoons adding glory) can benefit each end of the relationship. Together they could grow DTC's organizational authority since all disciples associated with DTC were *members* of it. DTC was their *home*; their authority in the field boosted their home organization's authority, and vice versa. During this process, photo-posing was always at work as the differential authoring device of association. This practice materialized the link between individuals and became the bridge that allowed the authority to extend from one end to another.

Body rituals: Want authority? Kneel first

This section will focus on the role of body rituals, a typical type of body practice in TCMAO, in accomplishing authority within a TCMAO. Body rituals refer to a series of rituals that center around the body in a TCMAO, such as discipleship ceremonies and session closing ceremonies.

Defining Body Rituals

In organizational settings, rituals can be seen as a form of social enactment and symbolic expression that portray cultural values and beliefs within events or occasions, and they usually have an opening and an ending (Islam & Zyphur, 2009; Plester, 2015; Trice & Beyer, 1984). Rituals rely on shared assumptions that define their meanings to a particular group (E. H. Schein, 2010). Although they are subject to change and modification, sometimes individuals' interpretations of rituals might differ (Smircich, 1983). Overall, rituals are comparatively stable as they can be repeatedly planned, enacted, and organized, and they are attention-getting and always aimed at collective consumption (Islam & Zyphur, 2009; Morgan et al., 1983). Rituals vary greatly, from informal rituals in the most mundane activities, such as food rituals and joking (Dandridge, 1986; Plester, 2015), to formal rituals such as passage rituals. (Zahniser, 1991). In other words, based on the fullness and degree of their expression, organizational rituals can be described on a spectrum where complete or "full" organizational rituals possess a more significant number and intensity of ritual features than "ritual-like" activities (Smith & Stewart, 2011).

Undoubtedly, most rituals involve the body. Being "embodied" is a prominent feature of rituals, and doing rituals is often a bodily act. Rituals involve gestures, postures, dances, and patterns of movement (Crossley, 2004). However, the role of the body in a ritual can also be described on a spectrum: From servicing as the fundamental element of human action (the weak end) to occupying the center stage of ritual (the strong end). For instance, we need the human body to blow out candles in a typical Western birthday party ritual. However, the body's role is more central and critical for some rituals, such as the Pravrajya ceremony in Chinese Buddhism, where one's hair is removed (Naquin & Yü, 2020). It is impossible to separate body rituals from other rituals; instead, we should see them as a cluster of rituals where the body matters more and

carries more weight.

This dissertation conceptualizes *body ritual* as a *ritual that has the body at the center of attention*. Body ritual has different implications in different contexts and disciplines. In Miner (1956)'s famous anthropology study of body rituals among the Nacirema, the term *body ritual* is used to describe practices such as mouth-rite that consists of inserting a small bundle of hog hairs into the mouth, along with certain magical powders, and then moving the bundle in a highly formalized series of gestures. Among varied rituals popular within TMCAOs, some rituals are gradually diminishing, such as the graveside worship (Takacs, 2003) due to changes in funeral policies in China; some are unique to specific organizations, for instance, TCMAOs such as the Yellow Crane, the Big Sword Group, and the Flower Basket Society all had their versions of the invulnerability rituals, which were supposed to protect them from being harmed (Jiao, 2020). There are some body rituals are popular among most TCMAOs, such as discipleship ceremonies (also called rituals of initiation) that take in new disciples (D. Farrer, 2018; Takacs, 2003) and session ceremonies that happen at the beginning and end of a session. Here I conceptualize them as body rituals because there are specific requirements of how the body should be managed, positioned, and presented during these rituals. The body performance is critical for completing these rituals. The bodies of participants are at the center of these ceremonies.

In English, *rites*, *rituals*, and *ceremonies* entail different meanings, but they can all be expressed with the same character: *li* (礼) in Chinese. *Li* represents rituals, but it is somewhat broader than the English term “ritual” since it includes actions and attitudes that we would be more likely to categorize as propriety, decorum, or etiquette. Another difference between *li* and the modern concept of ritual is that it has an almost magical power to induce harmony in society and the natural world (G. Hardy, 1993). When a description is attached to *Li*, such as Baishi *Li*

(discipleship ceremony) or Biyie Li (graduation ceremony), it represents a specific ceremony. In this dissertation, I have used these terms in a way close to the indigenous understanding of the relationship between rituals and ceremony: Ceremony is regarded as one type of ritual. The *discipleship ceremony* and *session ceremony* are all defined as body rituals.

Like other rituals, body rituals in TCMAOs are supposed to provide its members with confidence, courage, a sense of belonging, and identity. They are also supposed to improve the cohesion and solidity (Boretz, 2011; Jiao, 2020). They also provide a sense of meaning and security by feeling that “a chaotic and strange world is meaningful, recognizable and structured” (Bonde, 2009, p. 1350). Primarily, they provide a particular order and materialize the relationship between members. For instance, through ritualized combat practice, the drill and the master’s ability to perform it became sacralized over time by producing a collective effervescence (Jennings et al., 2010). In other Asian martial arts organizations, it has been pointed out that through rituals, a practitioner is continuously reminded of his/her positions “in terms of where [s/]he stands in the hierarchy” (Becker, 1982, p. 23). Indeed, body rituals are structured and structuring (Bourdieu, 1977). It is reasonable to propose those body rituals, as one type of meaningful body practice that is communicative and performative, have their roles in accomplishing differential authority by forging meaningful relationships. The question is *how* it is done from a communicative point of view.

Kneel Before Me: The Discipleship Ceremony and the Officialization of Association

The importance of discipleship ceremonies in TCMAOs is well documented. Many TCMAOs share “a performative tradition of cult-like rituals to enter discipleship to specific masters, pledging oaths of lifelong, exclusive allegiance” (D. Farrer, 2018, p. 38). Since 2010, DTC had performed at least 11 large-scale discipleship ceremonies that enrolled multiple

disciples. This body ritual varied in size, location, and processual and decorative details. However, it was stable in crucial elements and processes. Table 3 is the moderator's script for the discipleship ceremony held at DTC in 2015. It offered a general description of what people *did* in this body ritual, which could be divided into four sections: Section one was the staging and introduction; section two was the master's first round of ancestor worship; section three was the master worship, and section four was the final ancestor worship. My analysis focuses on how associations with authoritative figures were formed through body performance in this body ritual.

In this body ritual, many figures were made present (presentified) to the scene: The human figures, including the founding ancestor Wangting Chen, Master Shangchun, Master Duke, Master Qing, the moderator, witnesses, disciples, and incoming disciples. The other-than-human figures included the tea, ancestors' portraits, images of statues of the founding ancestor(s), the ancestor temple at Chen village, incense, letters of discipleship applications, the auspicious time, the universal dress, the disciple ribbons, and the photos that were taken. The prescribed body performance included the parading of guardian disciples, taking seats (according to one's status), bowing, and kowtowing towards ancestors and masters, offering incense and wine to ancestors (by Master Duke and Master Qing), offering tea (or other token objects) by disciples-to-be, drinking the tea (Master Duke and Master Qing), giving an admonitory talk, and photo-posing at the end of the ceremony.

Associating with the Walking Dead: Ancestors as Authoritative Figures

Chinese folk tradition sees ancestors as *living agents* who influence their descendants' lives through *fengshui*, where the dead are the vehicles of geomantic fortune (Freedman, 1966). Martial arts' founding ancestors are the ultimate sources of authority since they are the

Table 3: Moderator's Script for the 2015 Discipleship Ceremony

Section	Moderator's Script
#1: Staging and introduction	<p><u>(Please take your seats)</u> Dear guests and friends, how are you all? Welcome to the famous Tai chi master Master Duke's disciples-taking ceremony in the year of Yiwei. I am deeply honored to be entrusted by Master Duke, our famous tai chi master, to be the moderator of this discipleship ceremony. I hereby declare that the ceremony in the year of Yiwei will now begin. Play the music! Please enter the guardian disciples' parade. Please invite the guests of honor to enter. Please invite Master Duke, the famous tai chi master, and his wife Master Qing to enter. He has been practicing martial arts for decades since he was a child. He is a well-known prominent in-house disciple of Master Shangchun, the 19th generation of the Chen family, and the 11th generation of Chen-style tai chi. According to the Chinese <i>duanwei</i> ranking system, he is a grade-seven martial artist, a level one martial artist recognized by the state. He is a senior master teaching Chen-style tai chi, one of the “ten outstanding tai chi talents” recognized by the committee of the “international tai chi annual meeting,” an ambassador of transmitting tai chi globally, and an outstanding inheritor of Chinese tai chi. The guests of honor who are witnesses of this ceremony are... (names of all the guests listed based on social status). In this world, there are hundreds of lines of work. None of them is possible without the founding ancestor(s). This divine tai chi kungfu was created by the great grandmaster Wangting Chen. It has been handed down for hundreds of years and spread to five continents. Chen-style tai chi is the first authentic tradition of tai chi. The disciples of Master Duke are in this honorable lineage.</p>
#2: Master Duke and Master Qing worship ancestors	<p>Please invite Master Duke, the 12th generation inheritor of Chen-style tai chi, and his wife, Master Qing, to pay respect to the ancestor. <u>Now offer incense!</u> Please perform the ancestor worship rites! <u>Bow! kneel! One koutou, another koutou, three koutou! Rise!</u> <u>Bow Again! Kneel! One koutou, another koutou, three koutou! Rise!</u> <u>Three bows! Kneel! One koutou, another koutou, three koutou! Rise!</u> <u>Please take your seats.</u></p>

Section	Moderator's Scripts
#3: Incoming disciples worship Master Duke and Master Qing	<p>Today the students who have applied to become disciples of Master Duke are ... (read all the names)</p> <p>Please <u>read out the application letter of discipleship as a group, led by Master Duke's disciple ... ((when it comes to an end, <u>all new incoming disciples declare their names in turn</u>))</u></p> <p>The auspicious time has arrived. It is time to perform the ritual of master worship!</p> <p>Please, all incoming disciples, perform the ritual of master worship!</p> <p><u>Bow! kneel! One koutou, another koutou, three koutou! Rise!</u></p> <p><u>Bow again! Kneel! One koutou, another koutou, three koutou! Rise!</u></p> <p><u>Three bows! Kneel! One koutou, another koutou, three koutou! Rise!</u></p> <p>Incoming disciples <u>present the application letter of discipleship to shifu (shifu awards each incoming disciple his/her inheritor ribbon).</u></p> <p>(Repeat until all incoming disciples have finished their parts)</p> <p>Ask the representative of all new disciples to <u>offer tea</u> to shifu!</p> <p>(The representative disciple <u>kneels on one knee, raises his cup over his eyebrows to offer tea, and changes the way of addressing the master, saying: “Shifu, please have tea!”</u> (others <u>echo</u>)</p> <p><u>“Offer tea to shimu!”</u></p> <p>(The representative disciple <u>kneels on one knee, raises his cup over his eyebrows to offer tea, and changes the way of addressing the master's wife, saying: “Shimu, please have tea!”</u> (others <u>echo</u>)</p> <p>Now, please invite the representative of senior disciples ... (pronounce his/her name) to <u>speak on behalf of senior disciples.</u></p> <p>Please ask the representative of the new disciples ... (pronounce his/her name) to <u>speak on behalf of all new disciples.</u></p> <p>Please invite the witnesses of honor... (pronounce his/her name) to <u>speak on behalf of all the honorable witnesses.</u></p> <p>Please invite Master Duke to <u>give an admonitory talk</u> to all disciples.</p>
#4: Master Duke, Master Qing, and new disciples worship ancestors	<p>Please shifu and shimu, lead all the disciples to worship ancestors.</p> <p><u>Bow! kneel! One koutou, another koutou, three koutou! Rise!</u></p> <p><u>Bow again! Kneel! One koutou, another koutou, three koutou! Rise!</u></p> <p><u>Three bows! Kneel! One koutou, another koutou, three koutou! Rise!</u></p> <p>Ceremony completed! The ceremony of the famous master Master Duke's disciples-taking ceremony in the year of Yiwei is finished.</p> <p>Please <u>take a group photo</u> for a souvenir.</p>

Note. Figures mentioned in this ceremony are written in bold font; bodily actions are underlined.

originators and holders of this valuable asset that inheritors try to claim (Takacs, 2003). This phenomenon is consistent with the notion of authority. The words “author” and “authority” both share the same Latin root, *auctor*, which means the source or originator (Cooren, 2010).

It is common practice for martial artists to glorify their ancestors by sharing anecdotes, legends, and other traditional narratives praising the virtues of their predecessors. In doing so, they establish the value of their arts. These practices work as “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012), serving the respective functions of establishing social cohesion, legitimizing institutions, relations of authority, and socialization (Green, 2003). In DTC, ancestors, and their materialization in all forms, were at the center of all activities. Establishing their relationship with their ancestors was the essential practice to accomplish differential authority. This section will show how this was done through body performance.

In these body rituals, the most critical authoritative figures were the ancestors, especially the founding grandmaster of tai chi: Wangting Chen. During the discipleship ceremony, ancestors were often materialized and presentified in different ways: images of the Tai Chi Five (Wangting Chen and other ancestors who made significant contributions to tai chi), statues of the founding grandmaster, or images of this statue on a printed poster or digital projections on a big screen. Technologies that materialize the ancestors had been evolving, while the ancestor(s) were always presented as the “walking dead.” I borrow this term from the American post-apocalyptic horror television series *The Walking Dead*, where dead figures still rule the world in their ways and have complicated relationships with the living. People see the founding grandmaster as the representative token of ancestors.

If we look at Figure 13, it is noticeable that Master Duke and Master Qing always sat or stood in front of the ancestor(s), no matter how they were materialized. Between the masters and

Figure 13: *The Materialization of Ancestors During the Discipleship Ceremony*



the ancestors, there were altars on which incense burners and other sacrificial offerings were placed. These objects were believed to be able to “reach their destination in the other world” (Scott, 2007, p. 2) where ancestors reside, as living beings usually cannot cross to the other side. In this sense, these objects are the mediators between the living and the dead: They tie the living masters with the ancestors. However, this mediating mechanism must be *activated* through body performances while asking permission to enroll new disciples: lighting incense, bowing, kneeling, and toasting to ancestors in front of their images.

As shown in Figure 14, body performance was the site where the “contagious magic” (Takacs, 2003) happens. Through physical “contact” mediated by these objects, people associated themselves with ancestors and appropriate the ancestors’ legitimacy as their own. By doing this body ritual, again and again, the master was continuously establishing his authority as

Figure 14: *Saluting, Offering Incense, and Toasting to Ancestors*



the legitimate inheritor of this art. Figuratively speaking, the ancestors were *standing behind him* and *backing him up*.

Notably, although Master Duke was one of the most renowned disciples of Master Shangchun, Master Qing had never performed the discipleship ceremony with Master Shangchun and was not an official disciple of this lineage. According to Yaoshi, there were two reasons for Master Qing not to do this ceremony:

First, she is already quite famous as the daughter of a famous Shaolin master, she already has a very renowned lineage, so there is no need for her to become the disciple of Master Shangchun. Also, it is helpful for DTC to keep its independence while dealing with Master Shangchun's studio. For example, when it comes to Chinese New Year, one set of gifts from Master Duke is enough. If Master Qing is also a disciple, they have to offer two sets of gifts to Master Shangchun. There are other things like that. It means fewer troubles in some way. It is good that one of them is “off the leash” of the “master-disciple bond.” (Yaoshi's comment, fieldnotes, August 05, 2018)

Yaoshi's interpretation might not be completely accurate, but it offered some insights regarding from *where* Master Qing might claim her differential authority. Besides her famous father in the Shaolin Temple lineage, her authority could also be drawn from the husband-wife relationship. She learned tai chi from her husband, and established herself as a tai chi master by mastering the tai chi sword and inventing the famous tai chi fan routine. In other words, her authority was based on her relationships with her father and her husband and her impressive performances.

When she showed up in these body rituals, her primary identity was being Master Duke's wife. We often call the male master shifu and call shifu's wife shimu. As shimu, even if Master Qing didn't know tai chi, she would still naturally be an authority for Master Duke's disciples. The husband-wife relationship directly entails this type of authority. Although she was an accomplished martial artist in both Shaolin quan and tai chi, Master Qing did not take in any disciples. One explanation presented by Yaoshi, who knew the backstory very well, was that "she did not want to dilute any attention from Master Duke, and she wanted to make her husband the sole master and key authoritative figure in DTC" (fieldnotes, August 05, 2018).

However, having Master Qing in important body rituals was vital for Master Duke's authority. According to the traditional Chinese view, an accomplished man must be a family man who already knows how to take responsibility by taking care of his family first. This idea is well-reflected in the Chinese idiom: "To make one's own home and establish oneself in business" (T. Liu, 2015). Establishing a family is supposed to be done before building one's career. A wife with high social status, or other valuable characteristics, such as being beautiful, rich, and honorable, can improve a man's face and boost his social status.

Section two of the script shows that Master Duke and Master Qing worshipped the ancestors first before interacting with incoming disciples. They performed the classic full *koutou*, including three kneelings and nine prostrations. As the ultimate way of showing respect in the Chinese context, *koutou* "has been a staple act in religious practices in China for a very, very long time" (Hevia, 2009, p. 214). Through *koutou*, people establish and maintain relationships with the deities, ancestors, and other authoritative figures. For Master Duke and Master Qing, besides reaffirming their association with the ancestors, *koutou* was also an act of informing the ancestors and setting up role models for disciples. An empirical study of Chinese rituals' effects

indicates that when people take contractive positions, such as kneeling, they see others' social status as higher (X. Li et al., 2016). A full *koutou* is a communicative act that suggests surrendering toward specific figures and produces submissive subject(s). This section also presents the history to the audience and lays out the historical background for the incoming procedures.

As shown in section four of the script, after the master-disciple association was formed, Master Duke led all his new disciples to kneel to the ancestors to “inform the ancestors about the new members of this lineage and signify that tai chi is handed down from generation to generation” (online data, May 8, 2017). As shown in Figure 15, this body performance, again, improved his authority by portraying him as a competent inheritor since he could fulfill the duty of passing this art on to so many disciples. It also reaffirmed the associations between three parties: Master Duke, his disciples, and ancestors of Chen-style tai chi. Through media reports and social media posts, these associations were also shown to the public. After this ritual, all

Figure 15: Master Duke and Master Qing Leading New Disciples to Kneel Ancestors



disciples were qualified to invoke their associations with Master Duke hereafter. I have shown how Master Duke continuously used body performances to show his associations with ancestors. Below, I will take a close look at how the master-disciple tie is formed.

Kneeling to Enter a Powerhouse

In the traditional Chinese martial arts community, one's position in a lineage is the place that defines one's martial artist identity. Each disciple's actions can add glory or bring shame to one's master and the whole lineage. Consider the gravity of this association, it is normal for martial artists to be extra cautious about taking in disciples. A master might take years of observation to know students well before accepting them into the lineage (Brown & Jennings, 2011; D. Farrer, 2018). A disciple also has opportunities to do some "master shopping" before engaging in such a serious relationship. There is a process of negotiating this commitment for both parties. Once the mutual intention is confirmed, the official association can only be tied through body rituals. Most bodily performance is about forging a kinship relationship, not "consanguinity in the literal sense" (Freedman, 1966, p. 140).

As shown in section three of the script, there were three noticeable body performances (see Figure 15): First, incoming disciples performed the full *koutou* towards Master Duke and Master Qing, which officialized the disciples' inferior position. The old Chinese idiom says: "No man gets down on his knees, not even if there's gold at his feet!" This proverb is quite sexist (T. K. Li, 2016). It indicates the importance of only kneeling before legitimate authority figures, such as deities, ancestors, rulers, fathers, masters, etc., not material temptations. Among Master Duke's disciples, while some were very rich and powerful, they all must accept their inferior positions in the master-disciple relationship.

While kneeling, incoming disciples then presented Master Duke with their application

letters of discipleship, which indicated their qualifications, dedication, and allegiance toward joining his lineage. Usually, it requires a reply letter from the master to confirm that s/he accepts this application. This reply letter will serve as the official certificate of the disciple's lineage membership (Zhao, 2019). But some masters adopted another way to reply to this application: Offering a discipleship ribbon and placing it directly around the disciple's neck. For example, the ribbon given to Master Duke's new disciple signified "the inheritor of Chinese Chen-style tai chi." As a communicative object, this ribbon was more symbolic and attention-grabbing than a

Figure 16: *Koutouing, Letter Offering, Ribbon Awarding, and Tea Offering During the Discipleship Ceremony*



letter enclosed in a sealed envelope or cover when it came to showing the identity of its wearer to viewers and cameras. Besides, in China, ribbons have a long history of establishing a hierarchy of power, as early as the Han dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.), where specific standards for who could wear what kinds of ribbons were specified (X. Yang, 2019). As shown in Figure 16, the master indicated his consent to accept an application and award discipleship to the applicant by putting a ribbon around the incoming disciple's neck. But this just the first step toward officializing their association.

The next critical body performance was offering tea to Master Duke and Master Qing while still on one's knees. In East Asia, a tea offering certainly has religious elements since it can be used to worship deities and other sacred figures (Rüsch, 2021). Even in the West, a cup of tea can be more than a small act of caring. It is a fundamental instrument for engagement and relationship building and a tool for power and struggles (Lavelle, 2015; Schoneboom & Slade, 2020). Unlike a Western tea offering, tea offerings in China are more often used in rituals and ceremonies, such as weddings and discipleship ceremonies where new members seek acceptance from others (Boretz, 2011; D. Farrer, 2018; Monger, 2004; Zhou, 2004). Most times, offering tea is always initiated by people of lower status who are new to specific collectives, such as a new bride offering tea to her parents-in-law or new organizational members offering tea to senior members. Offering tea to Master Duke and Master Qing while kneeling was a bodily materialization of one's pledged loyalty, compliance, and respect as a disciple. By drinking the offered tea, the master showed his acceptance of the offering and started to take on responsibility and authority as the master.

As a practical consideration, Master Duke and Master Qing could not drink cups after cups of tea when there were more than 20 new disciples. So, a representative of incoming

disciples was chosen to offer tea that the masters would drink, while others made the offering gesture along with the representative. The offering and drinking of tea signified the freshly formed association between them. At that moment, new disciples were now officially *in* the powerhouse.

Afterwards, celebrating speeches were made by three representatives who represented senior disciples, new disciples, and honorable witnesses respectively. Master Duke also gave a speech. These four speakers spoke on behalf of four forces in DTC. Three speeches were made from the insider's point of view. The representative of senior disciples expressed gratitude towards Master Duke, Master Qing, and DTC. Then they welcomed the new disciples. Last, the new disciples' representative expressed gratitude towards Master Duke, Master Qing, and DTC. He also talked about his excitement and dedication to inheriting and transmitting tai chi. His pre-written speech verbalized the meaning of this body ritual and his declaration of joining DTC and Master Duke's lineage.

For example, in the first discipleship ceremony held by Master Duke in 2010, a disciple said, "We will live up to the expectations, respect the master, abide by the rules of our martial arts school and contribute to the promotion of tai chi culture" (Student Tina's blog, April 17, 2011). Master Duke's talk was indeed admonitory, along with a welcoming message. He often expressed his expectations and guidance for his disciples: "I urge you to cultivate both inside and outside (of your bodies), to carry forward Chen-style tai chi for the benefit of mankind" (Student Tina's blog, April 17, 2011).

The representative guest often offered the one and only outsider point of view that spoke highly of Master Duke, Master Qing, and DTC and congratulated them on the success of this ceremony. It is interesting to consider what their very presence and voices could accomplish.

First, witnesses presented the public and outsiders in this situation and made this body ritual legitimate by witnessing the transition of incoming disciples' identities. Honorable guests were the connecting force that anchored this organizational act in society. Their presence materialized the most valuable *guanxi* that Master Duke and Master Qing could mobilize, which signified their social status in Chinese society and their authority in the community.

In 2010, there were four honorable guests, including the Deputy Secretary-General of the Henan Chen-style Tai Chi Association, a general manager of a cultural communication company, the general manager of a famous tai chi website, and the Vice Chairman of the China Railway Bureau Labor Union. In 2021, there were nine honorable guests, two of them were famous entrepreneurs, and three were high-level government officials from provincial or city level Wushu sports associations. Five guests were associated with H group that DTC partnered with. In other words, as time passing by, the social status of the honorable guests had risen higher and higher, which corresponded with Master Duke's growing authority and social status.

Esteemed guests' presence was a communicative act that added face and glory to Master Duke, Master Qing, and DTC. Their presence signified that Master Duke had incredible *lianmian*, which refers to the practical social-moral construct of the Confucian personhood that stands for the worth defined by one's positions in society (Jia, 2006). The amount of *lianmian* that Master Duke had also signified his authority. His connections with esteemed guests often brought tangible benefits. For example, with the help of one of his honorable guests, Master Duke gained access to use the stadium of a state-owned company for DTC's training (fieldnotes, October 2, 2019). A more robust profile of honorable guests also signified the authority of DTC as an influential tai chi training institute. Indeed, this ceremony reinvented and reconfirmed Master Duke's relationships with these authoritative human figures. Since DTC's first

discipleship ceremony in 2010, people always brought vidicons, cameras, and smartphones with camera functions to the scene. Participants of this ceremony knew that this event was meant to be seen by others to validate and showcase those newly formed master-disciple associations.

But this ceremony was not done yet: They must then move to section four of the ceremony to perform another round of full koutou towards ancestors led by Master Duke and Master Qing. This round of body performance of *koutou* reported the official admission of new disciples to ancestors. Now associations between three parties, new disciples, masters, and ancestors, were officially finalized. The ceremony was then finished, and new disciples were now officially Master Duke's disciples, the legitimate heirs of Chen-style tai chi. This association would be critical for accessing critical training and establishing their authority in their careers as tai chi instructors.

From Master Duke's viewpoint, forming the association with a new disciple meant passing on a certain sense of responsibility and mission to him or her, along with skills:

Once you become a disciple, you feel different. Your sense of belonging is much more robust, and now you are officially an inheritor of this art...your sense of responsibility and mission must rise to another level: You... must better improve your skills and then promote tai chi...being my disciple entails my support, but it also comes with responsibility. (Master Duke, interview, September 22, 2020)

In other words, this body ritual forged a closer relationship between the master and the disciple and increased the disciples' sense of responsibility of being an inheritor. Many disciples confirmed this point. Take Yaoshi and Zhengyi's reflections for example:

After the ceremony, you become a real insider (自己人, *ziji ren*); otherwise, you will always be an outsider (外人, *wairen*). (Yaoshi, fieldnotes, October 8, 2019)

There is a fundamental difference between being a disciple and being a student... I always felt that after (this body ritual), my relationship with my master became much closer, not only for affection but also for kungfu teaching. When it comes to teaching something, the master will treat you differently, depending on whether you are his disciple or just a regular student. If you are his disciple, he will take you more seriously. Because the

master-disciple relationship is a kind of mutual recognition, he will pay more attention to his disciples. His disciples will also be more serious about practicing our art. (Zhengyi, interview, September 06, 2020)

For Zhengyi, the master-disciple tie meant mutual recognition and responsibility between the master and the disciple; and Master Duke would teach him differently than regular students. Once one became a member of a unique martial arts family through this ritual, “similar to how parents may discipline their children, masters often enforce strictness and severity in their martial arts teachings and life’s lessons.” (N. C. Yang, 2011, p. 57). Disciples also needed to take this art and its transmission more seriously. Zhengyi’s attitude was also echoed by Xinxi, who took in his own disciples after receiving Master Duke’s approval. He pointed out how he, as a master of his own, treated disciples differently from regular students:

Once one becomes my disciple, I must be responsible for him. You see, I will teach him more stuff compared to others. At the same time, I must teach my disciples according to their talents. For those who are young, I teach them to spar, fall, push hands, and combat in pairs; for those who are older, especially those who are twice my age, I guide them to focus on fitness. I train them to attend routine competitions and public performances. Their training is all about postures. There is no actual combat for them. Indeed, there must be the factor of affection when it comes to teaching your disciples. You don’t push your students too hard, and if their legs are shaking, you give them a break and offer them more encouragement; While for disciples, I push them to work hard and challenge themselves. I also give them honest criticism and critical advice. Do you remember that when Master Duke taught us, if we disciples did not do well, he would scold: “xinqiu!” (a curse word). Between the master and disciple, “beating is caring, and scolding is loving!” ((Laughter from both Xinxi and the author)) Being strict with you is about helping you practice well. But when our master teach regular students, he never curse, and he is always polite. This is the difference between being close and distant, between being an insider and an outsider. (Xinxi, interview, September 20, 2020)

Zhengyi and Xinxi’s feelings resonated with the widespread *belief* that the “real stuff” was taught exclusively to in-house disciples in traditional arts. This belief worked towards disciples’ benefit since their associations with the master was believed to qualify them to access skills unavailable to outsiders. This belief strengthened the value of the identity of being an inheritor of a famous lineage. Indeed, this body ritual offered the most critical credential to

Master Duke's disciples and grand disciples (disciple's disciples). When someone is looking for a career in teaching traditional Chinese martial arts, finding oneself an official master by performing this body ritual is often at the top of the to-do list. In this case, Xinxu mentioned the story behind his acceptance of a female disciple. To move forward with her tai chi teaching career in Australia, a woman begged Xinxu to take her as a disciple so she could have the identity of being an official inheritor of Master Duke's lineage:

In 2018, I had a female student who was moving to Australia. She said she wanted to teach tai chi there. She asked me to accept her as my disciple, I said no, I would wait until I am 50 [years old]. That was my real thought at that time. But she kept begging, she said she practiced tai chi for three years, and now she wants to go to Australia, and he desperately needs this *name* (refers to the identity as an official inheritor). Once she had a *name*, it would be easier for her to teach tai chi there... For this purpose, at the time, I asked shifu if I could accept a disciple. Shifu said: "well, your techniques cannot be said to be too perfect." ((laughter from both Xinxu and the author)) then he gave me a few words of praise and said I could take on this disciple. Once shifu gave me his approval, I told this female student. She immediately wrote a discipleship application letter and sent it to my online group. Then a few people followed her and sent in their applications too. Later I did an official discipleship ceremony and accepted all of them as my disciples. (Xinxu, interview, September 20, 2020)

Indeed, forging ties with a famous master and gaining a position in a respected lineage is a big step in establishing the personal authority of disciples who aspire to a career in teaching tai chi. Performing this body ritual also gives one an honorable place to belong to and a community to count on. Luohan, who worked closely with Master Duke, gave a vivid description of why the discipleship ceremony was important and why it was meaningful to join a powerhouse of traditional Chinese martial arts officially:

The original Chinese culture is very traditional. This (ceremony) is significant. You must have a lineage to rely on. Suppose you do not have this traditional ritual of a discipleship ceremony. In that case, you may still be good at what you are practicing, but without a master in your life, you will always be a wild card (野路子, *ye luzi*) without inheritance, (you will be) an orphan without a family. Once you are in our lineage, it is easier to trace down where you got your skills from, and there is a system there! You have a family to belong to. For example, if you go to teach people, people may ask, since you practice so well, who taught you all these skills? Which school and what lineage do you belong to? If

you have performed this traditional ritual, you can proudly say that I am a disciple of Master Duke. I practice Chen-style tai chi, right? So, this ritual is vital. My belonging to a lineage is very clear. If everyone recognizes your master, you will also be recognized accordingly. You might be a person capable of excellence by counting on yourself, which is good, but the team is much more potent with this united force. That is not the same thing. For instance, if someone dares to bully you or start a fight, you have a whole group of people to count on, right? Our lineage is like a traditional family tree. It is a way for a martial artist to have a family to fall back on. (Luohan, interview, January 28, 2021)

Without this body ritual, can master-disciple ties still be formed? There is room for flexibility and negotiation, but the final answer is “NO!” If the body ritual is absent, this association, if there is any, will always be considered incomplete and unfinalized, and the vague tie formed by discursive practices can never reach the same level of legitimacy gained through performing the body ritual. For instance, while working at his master’s studio, Master Duke gradually established his authority as an outstanding martial artist with remarkable character and skills, so some students at Master Shangchun’s studio, including the author, admired him and wanted to become his disciple. However, officially he could not take in his disciples since he was still working for his master. Thus, a backstage silent master-disciple relationship was formed through a verbal agreement. It was not until 2010 that Master Duke took in his first group of official disciples through the complete body ritual. Since the timing of starting discipleship was directly related to one’s position in Master Duke’s lineage, which timing he acknowledged (the moment of reaching oral agreement or the moment of performing the ceremony) was an essential question for many of us. Master Duke handled this with wisdom and flexibility: All disciples who were taken in by oral agreements were treated as exceptional cases. He recognized the time of reaching agreements as our official time of entry, but we all had to perform the make-up discipleship ceremony to formalize our associations.

In my case, I had one of Master Shangchun’ most senior disciples as the referrer to arrange a small three-person dinner party with Master Duke. In August 2003, I was still a shy

young woman, clumsy and nervous in front of my favorite martial artist. I remember how excited I was when he agreed that I could call him shifu afterward. Because of this early agreement, I reserved a spot and ranked relatively high in his lineage as the 4th disciple among more than 200 disciples. But it was not until 2018, when I performed the discipleship ceremony, that I formalized my position in this lineage. I received my martial arts name, which has Chen as the last name, and I became an official 13th generation inheritor of the Chen-style tai chi. The necessity of doing this ceremony was mentioned twice by Master Duke and Master Qing's chief assistant, who delivered messages on Master Duke's behalf. As I wrote after my ceremony: "It feels like after a long engagement, now we are finally legally 'married'!" (fieldnotes, January 18, 2017). The same situation also happened to two disciples living in France. They performed their official discipleship ceremonies in 2018.

In Xinxi's case, a struggle regarding the status of fellow disciples about the timing of their entry into the lineage was more obvious:

I can't remember if I asked him in 2003 or 2004, [I said] "I will call you shifu," and he said, "No, I can't be your shifu now. It is not time yet." Later we had another dinner together. I said, "Now I don't want to call you teacher anymore. I will call you shifu when there are no other people present. And you must approve!" He laughed and said, "I approve." That was it, it was a verbal recognition, and I did not *kowtow* back to then. The real *kowtow* happened in 2015; that was quite late...I helped shifu out with his first training camp held in Wugang city in 2014. I found the venue and figured out many other things. During our dinner meeting, Longtou sat on the right hand of the master, and others were sitting on the left-hand side. While pouring whiskey for us, Longtou asked me: "Which year did you become shifu's disciple?" I could not answer this question at that time. How could I? At that time, I had not performed the ceremony yet, but I was already included in the discipleship. So, when Longtou asked me that, I asked the master in return, I said, "Shifu, what year did I become your disciple?" I asked shifu rhetorically. He was very dignified and wise and said: "You became my disciple in about 2003 or 2004." Longtou went silent since shifu's answer suggested I became a disciple earlier than Longtou. Then people sitting around the table started to call me "senior brother." But I told Longtou: "You are always the big senior brother," You know, he is close to shifu and cares about his ranking a lot. Then, I performed the discipleship ceremony next year and finally settled everything. (Xinxi, interview, September 20, 2020)

This incident was fascinating since it showed that there was indeed a power struggle around the timing of initiating discipleship. Although Longtou was not necessarily the earliest disciple, he was called the “big senior brother” because he was Master Duke’s most trusted, closest, and most potent disciple regarding fortune and political influence. Longtou’s friend-like closeness to Master Duke and his social status put him in this authoritative position among disciples. Some associations indeed matter more than others. This example above shows us that verbal agreement without a body ritual is never sufficient in establishing the master-disciple relationship.

Performing this body ritual is critical for disciples to establish their differential authority. It also boosts Master Duke’s authority. Master Duke’s associations with so many disciples enhanced his fame, social status, and consequentially his authority in the field. Also, it meant that the disciples’ authority in various territories could be extended to Master Duke under the appropriate circumstances. Each disciple opened a unique door that helped the master access new *guanxi* networks and new resources. For example, thanks to his disciples in different provinces, even countries, Master Duke ended up teaching, by proxy, worldwide, which further enhanced his authority in the field. Overall, this master-disciple association was mutually beneficial, but it could break down as well. Below, I will present a case that shows how the master-disciple association can be dissolved through the very body ritual that established it, failing the authority of the master and his organization in some ways.

When Authority Fails: The Dissolution of Associations through Body Rituals

As reflected in the Chinese idiom: “One day master, life-long father”. Ideally, once formed, a master-disciple association should be long-lasting and permanent. “Once committed, there is no way out except expulsion or death” (D. Farrer, 2018, p. 38). This morality is shaped

by Confucian thoughts of filial piety and loyalty and the unique requirements of martial arts: It takes years to train a disciple. Skills taught to disciples are deemed a gift or asset that can be given and taken back. As reflected in the famous movie *The Grandmasters*, Miss Gong had to kill the man who betrayed his father to take back what his father had taught him: The skills that were already “on” the traitor’s body (Q. Wang, 2013). Fundamentally, the master-disciple relationship is preclusive since loyalty and dedication are expected. These attributes are also essential to ensure that specific martial arts can be successfully passed along.

Betraying one’s own master and lineage is the most severe and condemned offense in the traditional Chinese martial arts community (B. Chen et al., 2020). An analysis of folk narratives of Chinese martial arts recognizes several forms of performance that constitute betrayal. These performances include insincerity, unreliability, difficulty in keeping one's integrity, lack of patience, abandonment of righteousness, and violation of the ways of being a teacher. Such negative examples generally have an eventual end — their demise (Song et al., 2019). In DTC, several disciples were expelled due to disloyal and dishonorable behaviors.

Nonetheless, the ultimate form of betrayal was performing the discipleship ceremony with other tai chi master(s) without Master Duke’s consent. It happened once in DTC in August 2018. As written in my fieldnotes:

Today, there was a heated discussion in the WeChat online disciple group. The link to a KKnews report was shared in our group. This report showed that Nan, shifu’s disciple, just performed a discipleship ceremony with Master Xun on July 18, 2018. This news was indeed a bombshell... The feeling of anger and betrayal could be seen in the group discussion... Yaoshi mentioned how Nan begged Master Duke to give her some opportunities to teach overseas. He commented that Nan went too far for someone who had pledged loyalty and begged for opportunities... According to the family tree of Chen-style tai chi, Master Xun is Master Duke’s “uncle” since he has the same seniority as Master Shangchun. Now Nan had suddenly become a fellow “sister” of Master Duke. Besides directly betraying him as her master, it was also trespassing of seniority. (fieldnotes, July 20, 2018)

Figure 17: Master Duke's Disciple Nan Performing the Discipleship Ceremony with Master Xun



What matters here is not *why* she did it but *how* she did it. She must have reached out to Master Xun and discussed all the details, but everything was not confirmed, officialized, and made known to the community until she performed this body ritual. As shown in Figure 17, Nan offered her application letter and knelt ancestors after Master Xun.

It is not clear whether she hid her relationship with Master Duke from Master Xun. Reports of KKnews and cttjq.net described her as a “tai chi enthusiast.” The common sense in the martial arts community is that seeking a second master requires approval from one’s prior master(s), but Master Duke only learned of this incident afterward. Between masters in the same martial arts school, it is disgraceful to take another master’s disciple without his/her consent. It is one kind of “stealing” behavior that directly offends the other master’s face. Xinxin’s story illustrates this commonsensical viewpoint very well:

I just like learning; I did not mention this to our shifu, but I think it is ok for me to learn skills from different masters. I learned a lot pushing hands skills from Master Daliang. Then In 2014, he suddenly asked me to take him as my master. Wow, I could not do that. I told him I was already Master Duke’s disciple since 2003. After that, he never mentioned the discipleship thing again. But his attitude towards me never changed. He treated me as well as ever. (Xinxin, interview, September 20, 2020).

As we see, Xinxin felt that it was acceptable to practice pushing hands skills with another tai chi

master, but he could never betray Master Duke by taking a new master without his consent. Master Daliang did not change his attitude towards Xinxi after learning that he was already “taken” by another master. This was an honorable response to what happened.

For Master Duke, there were some actions he could do to denounce Nan’s new association with Master Xun. After all, as Yaoshi noticed:

Shifu and Master Xun know each other very well. They are from the same village, and Master Duke might have learned some kungfu from Master Xun before becoming Master Shangchun’s disciple. If shifu wanted to punish Nan, he could inform Master Xun that she had already performed this ceremony with him. Then Master Xun would probably kick her out of his lineage because he must consider shifu’s *lianmian*. (fieldnotes, July 21, 2018)

But Master Duke did not do that. Instead, he let this whole scandal rest in peace. Through his niece Zuoshi’s mouth, a message was sent to all disciples in the online group: “People have their own free will, there is no need to force anything, let us stop talking about it.” (fieldnotes, July 21, 2018). Soon, Nan’s name was officially deleted from the register of Master Duke’s disciples and related websites.

Three months later, during a private conversation, I asked him what he thought about Nan’s case:

Shifu said: “This is a matter of *yuanfen* (缘份, it means “fateful coincidence,” describing good and bad chances and potential relationships). There is no need to force it. Let her be whatever she wants to be.” Such an optimistic view reminded me of shifu’s article about always leaving space for others and not pushing people into corners (留余, *liuyu*). Leaving room for others has become shifu’s consistent philosophy in practicing tai chi and treating people. Nothing is forced; just let nature take its course. It’s important to always leave room for others. This is true even for those who offended him. I was impressed by his big heart and forgiveness. (fieldnotes, October 23, 2018)

A series of steps materialized the dissolution of the association between Master Duke and Nan: Nan first thought about leaving DTC, then she contacted Master Xun and performed the discipleship ceremony with him, and subsequently, knowledge of this ceremony was made

known to DTC members. The most critical step was undoubtedly performing the discipleship ceremony with Master Xun. Whatever she said or thought before that was just theoretical discussion. The ceremony was the actual closure signifying the disassociation. This ceremony dissolved Master Duke's authority over Nan and her authority attained from being associated with Master Duke as his disciple. Her new association with Master Xun became her new path to establishing authority as a tai chi instructor.

Establishing a master-disciple association takes at least two parties' agreement, while dissolution takes only one. A master can denounce someone's discipleship, while a disciple can also do it if he or she is willing to pay the moral costs. In ancient China, Nan's behavior could have been punished to a very severe extent. But nowadays, what she received was just several shrugged shoulders and a bad reputation. Again, today, voluntary subscription is the key to maintaining this master-disciple relationship.

So far, I have shown how body rituals are critical for officializing the master-disciple association and dissociation. Below, I want to show that to establish authority, association with authority figures must also be continuously reproduced, materialized, and stabilized in daily body rituals and other practices.

Routinized Body Rituals to Reproduce Meaningful Associations

For many Asian martial arts, two sets of rituals co-exist. One of them is the body rituals that mark significant events and transformation of peoples' identities; another is the daily body rituals that continuously shape and nurture practitioners' spirit and body (Zarrilli, 2013). Certain rituals are often performed at the beginning and end of each training session (D. E. Jones, 2002; Labbate, 2011; Menheere, 2011). At DTC, each session lasted almost 2 hours, they often began with warm-up exercises, and some trainees arrived in the middle. The course design intentionally

Figure 18: Screenshot from a Video Recording of the Session Closing Ceremony



made it easy for people to join at their convenience by not having a strict opening ceremony. But the session’s closing ceremony was strictly held every time.

This body ritual happened before the “ancestry worship wall,” an essential part of DTC’s headquarters’ physical space. There were five black and white photographs of the Great Five and a color photo of the Master Shangchun on this wall. Master Shangchun’s picture was also bigger than the images of other ancestors. Color photos differentiated the living from the dead, and a larger frame of Master Shangchun indicates Master Duke is his disciple and is directly associated with him. As shown in Figure 18, when a session ended, the coach guided trainees to perform the “fist and palm salute” towards ancestors and Master Shangchun while reciting a slogan that could be roughly translated as “passing on the national essence, sharing health, studying tai chi, cultivating body and mind.” Then the coach turned back towards the students, both parties performed the “fist and palm salute” to each other, and then the students said, “Thank you,

coach!” while bowing to him. The class was then dismissed.

Interestingly, through this seemingly mundane body ritual, the associations between DTC, coaches, and the great ancestors were reenacted repeatedly. First, the visual materials such as photos of ancestors on the wall were already used to highlight the school’s lineage. Similar walls could be found at almost every DTC-affiliated location. The wall, which included a hierarchy of photographs, goes upstream toward ancestors and downstream to inheritors. These visual statements of the association were further reinforced by the body performance of the fist and palm salute, accompanied by reciting the organizational slogan. This slogan emphasized the connection between the trainees’ (and the studio’s) indebtedness to their ancestors and the benefits they gained from tai chi training. By loudly reciting this slogan while saluting the ancestors, they conversed and made promises to those ancestors. In China, talking to photos of the dead is positively viewed as an effective way to form and continue a bond between the living and the dead (Chan et al., 2005). The fist and palm salute towards Chen family ancestors also clearly positioned DTC and its trainees in the Chen family’s lineage. This daily body ritual repeatedly confirmed and presented the association between DTC and ancestors.

DTC’s authority as a legitimate organizational heir of a martial arts school and the coach’s authority as the legitimate heir and vector who could speak on behalf of ancestors to students was established through this body ritual. For students, performing this body ritual with body postures that were rigid, respectful, and self-contained showed that they were willingly obedient to the authority of DTC and its coaches. Finally, daily body ritual like this was also subject to the gaze of those present at the scene and those who saw it through social media posts. By performing this body ritual, DTC and its coaches showed to the world that they were loyal and respectful inheritors of their great ancestors.

Summary

This section takes a close look at the discipleship ceremony and the session closing ceremony at DTC and examines the *communicative* function of body rituals. It concludes that through body performances embedded in various body rituals, such as saluting, kneeling, and tea offering, the disciples' associations with ancestors, masters, and specific famous lineages were established, which was critical for accomplishing these disciples' differential authority. Since martial artists also represent their organizations, their organization's authority was also achieved through being associated with authoritative figures that matter to this community.

Ideally, the master-disciple association is supposed to be stable and last forever to ensure the smooth transmission of martial arts. It is up to the master, not the disciple, to decide what to do with a dysfunctional master-disciple relationship. Nowadays, the disciplinary power of the master-disciple system is weakening, and the consequences of breaking it are not as severe as before. Some disciples dare to do things unimaginable to ancestors, such as dissolving these associations under unpleasant circumstances. For example, if a disciple performs the discipleship ceremony with other masters without consent from the former master, the association with the former master is naturally dissolved. This act also dissolves the former master's authority over this disciple and the association that enables the disciple to claim differential authority from the former master. This section also shows that people must continuously reproduce, materialize, and stabilize associations with authority figures in daily body rituals and other practices to keep authority in place.

Staged Performance: The Art of Staging Authority

Defining Staged Performance

Traditional Chinese martial arts are multifaceted. Over thousands of years of evolution, combat and self-defense function has been fundamental to traditional Chinese martial arts. Many

martial arts are used for military training and are naturally competitive. Meanwhile, they often took on another essential function: a form of art performance that served religious and recreational purposes. For instance, the sword-throwing contest in the Pre-Qin period (221 BC) was intended to manifest deities and could be the infancy of martial arts contests (Fan & Huang, 2019). In the Warring States Period (475–221 BC), sword-fighting was used for entertainment and even to meet rulers' desire to watch sword-fighting contests (Fan & Huang, 2019). Martial arts “entailed competition, performance, and recreation” (Fan & Huang, 2019, p. 23). As for performance, they appeared in many religious rites and ceremonial events of the state and individuals, such as sacrifices to gods or ancestors, weddings, and birthday celebrations.

Compared with their Western peers, such as boxing and wrestling, which appear to be raw, unrefined, or even rough, traditional Chinese martial arts have “aesthetic components related to the delivery and overall visual impression” (Filipović & Jovanović, 2018, p. 111). These components make them an excellent fit for performance. For centuries, the development of traditional Chinese martial arts has been inseparable from a form of dancing. Take the martial dance *jiaodi* as an example. Originated in the Warring States period (475-221 BC), *jiaodi* evolved into a war game held annually during the Lantern Festival in the Sui (581-618 AD) and Tang (618-907 AD) dynasties. Motion techniques used in *jiaodi*, such as jumping, spinning, rolling, falling, and hitting, were all adopted by combat systems referred to today as *Wushu* (warrior skills) (Filipović & Jovanović, 2018).

Metaphorically speaking, martial dance was pregnant with the embryonic forms of martial arts routines (Z. Guo, 1992). Martial arts dance also added audience awareness as a new dimension of martial arts expression and virtuosity. Besides deadly motion techniques, they also combine skills and methods that attract spectators (Filipović & Jovanović, 2018). As martial arts’

health and entertaining functions keep growing in the contemporary era, martial arts performances often appear at various stages and occasions. For instance, for years, the CCTV Spring Festival Gala, the most attention-grabbing gala in China, often presented highly rated martial arts performances (Ming et al., 2014). Martial arts performance has become an essential part of this gala in the past couple of years.

This dissertation defines *staged performance* as *martial arts performance performed at various stages for skill demonstrations and entertainment. It can be armed or unarmed; it can be achieved by an individual, a pair, or a group; it can be preprogrammed to create specific effects and presented to a broader audience through mediated communication.* Martial arts' staged performance has been combined with music, dance, drama, and stage design to form a unique performing art. The Chinese word corresponding to the word "stage" is "舞台"(wutai); its classic definition in the authoritative dictionary Chinese *Cihai* is "one of the main components of the theater building, refers to the performance venue connected with the audience" (Meng, 2014, p. 311). But stage also generally refers to any space where a performance takes place. With the development of technology and new media, "stage" now includes both physical space and virtual spaces since more martial artists are using new media platforms as their new stages to present all sorts of performances.

Staged performance has different functions across history. First, people use it to enroll new members. For instance, Chinese secret societies once used martial arts performances to attract people to join them (Filipiak, 2010). Second, it provides new sources of livelihood for martial arts practitioners. By the Song dynasty (960-1276), martial arts performance had already become a new profession. Third, people use martial arts performance to promote cultural exchange and express Chinese culture and experiences (Huynh, 2012). An excellent example in

this regard is Shaolin temple's performances overseas. Here I mainly pay attention to how staged performance participates in the accomplishment of authority.

Standing on Big Stage: The Bigger, the Merrier

As well-known martial artists, both Master Duke and Master Qing are celebrities in the community of traditional Chinese martial arts. On many occasions, I witnessed how people were eager to lick their shoes, and sometimes I even felt sad for those who were keen to please them. For instance, while we were drinking tea in the VIP room at DTC's headquarters, a woman in her 50s walked in, smiling flattering expressions. She kept saying good things about Master Duke and expressing her admiration. Master Duke politely smiled and ignored her eventually (fieldnotes, October 23, 2018). One of the reasons behind all the flattery was that people were often eager to learn from the best, and they wanted Master Duke or Master Qing to like them so they might get some instructions from them.

Chinese people admire authoritative people even when that admiration does not bring them any instant benefits (Pye & Pye, 2009). On August 7, 2018, I shadowed Master Qing, Yaoshi, and Ben to perform on a TV show on HNTV, which was Henan province's public TV station. In the waiting area, other performers came to fawn upon Master Qing. Maybe Master Qing was too familiar with this kind of situation, she played with her cell phone and avoid looking at those people in the eyes (fieldnotes, August 07, 2018). These verbal and non-verbal asymmetries in the communication field (P. Yang, 2013) reflected the status difference between Master Qing and other performers. With her status, it is understandable for her to have this queen-like persona. So, it was a shock to me to see how much pain she was willing to endure to be cooperative in doing her part in this TV show.

In the morning, Master Qing received a call from HNTV, inviting her to perform on this

Figure 19: *Master Qing Warming Up for Her Performance*



show that afternoon. She immediately agreed and decided to take Yaoshi and Ben with her. He also approved my request to shadow this trip. HNTV had told her to arrive in the early afternoon, so we left at around 2 pm and reached the filming site within half an hour. The staff had set the stage in the playground on a school campus. There was no designated area for performers to rest; there was no drinking water available for us. Before Master Qing started her tai chi sword performance, we waited for almost 6 hours. It was noisy and hot at the site, the logistics were disorganized, it was nearly the most painful summer afternoon and evening I have endured in the

past six years. But Master Qing seemed to be used to waiting for so long; before the audience took their seats, she had already dressed up for the show and started to warm up.

As shown in Figure 19, Master Qing was warming up for her performance, which happened about three hours later. By the time the shooting was over, at around 10 pm, we were starving and exhausted. While driving back home, she complained that the floor was too soft, causing her to make a slight stumble. Yaoshi and I emphasized that the stumble was so minimal that the audience would not have noticed it. I commented that this show was not well organized and asked her how she thought about it. She replied:

Well, they are not the most efficient team. However, when the producer contacts us, we must do it. If we don't do it, they will contact another person and may never contact us again. We must keep this collaboration going. After all, there are so many practitioners in Zhengzhou who are fighting for opportunities like this. (fieldnotes, August 7, 2018)

Master Qing was willing to endure a painful process to participate in this show because she considered it rewarding in the end. Before entering the stage, she asked us to videotape her performance. Soon after, we shared our recording with her. She picked the best one and posted it on her social media, mentioning that she was attending this talent show's nationwide Audition Launching Ceremony. Soon this video was shared widely by Master Duke's disciples on WeChat. Later, people began to share a high-quality clip of Master Qing's performance recorded from the broadcasted show. Her performance here was not just about her presence on a provincial media; it was also about showing the world she was there.

Being associated with authoritative media in China is a big deal for martial arts professionals. Experiences like this gave Master Duke, Master Qing, and their disciples stories to tell. These staged performances provide them a silent and powerful means to demonstrate their associations with authoritative media and the level of recognition they received. Many factors decide whether a stage is authoritative, and the most crucial factor is the influence and status of

the organizing party. There are some hidden assumptions about what types of stages matter more. For instance, well-known international stages are considered better than domestic stages; stages organized by the government are better than those managed by the private sector. The significance of a stage also depends on who is the audience: The more influential the audience is, the more important the stage is.

For stages presented by media, there is a pyramid structure of ranking: CCTV ranks as the top media in China, then there are provincial media, city media, and county media; also, TV is regarded more important than magazines, which is more important than newspapers. Martial artists at Master Duke's and Master Qing's level care about media at the state and provincial levels and don't take city-level media as seriously as others. To promote DTC in Zhengzhou, I introduced my good friend, a chief editor of a city newspaper under the leadership of the city government, to cover community service training offered by DTC. Still, DTC showed little enthusiasm in working with him. From their point of view, a city-level newspaper was not that important, thus neglectable. For the time being, I knew how hard DTC worked to maintain a good relationship with people from the provincial TV stations and some leading Chinese martial arts magazines.

To make sense of what mattered in DTC, an essential approach was paying close attention to the content shared by Master Duke and Master Qing on their social media. Their voices created and reflected DTC's agenda and priorities. It was also a great way to make sense of what was going on with DTC since they were the "core" of this organization. Taking their social media posts as examples, several types of staged performances were often mentioned and widely talked about in DTC. Below, I will introduce different types of staged performances.

Eventful Staged Performance

The first type of staged performance consists of performing at important events domestically or overseas, such as ceremonies, conferences, social gatherings, cultural events, etc.

Here are some staged performances that took place between 2018-2021:

- Master Qing performed the tai chi sword at the H Group Tai Chi Competition Award Party (June 2021)
- DTC's team performed at the Second Traditional Wushu Competition in Jiangsu Province (May 2021)
- As VIP guests and award presenters, Master Duke and Master Qing performed at the 6th tai chi video contest hosted by taiji.net at the Yutai Mountain (October 2020)
- Master Duke, Master Qing, and DTC's tiger team performed at the opening and closing ceremonies of the Australia International Martial arts festival (September 2019)
- Master Duke and his disciple performed in front of representatives of 22 provinces at the closing ceremonies of the national social sports instructor training camp (August 2019)
- Master Duke and Master Qing performed at the opening ceremony of China (Rizhao) Daqingshan International Tai Chi Competition (May 2019)
- Master Duke, Master Qing, and their trainees from China and France performed at the China-France martial arts exchange gala at the Jiande Culture Center hosted by the Jiande city government (April 2019)
- Master Qing and the tiger team performed at the premiere of *tai chi China* that was broadcast on CCTV (March 2018)

The significance of these invited performances lies in how they *indicate* Master Duke,

Master Qing, and DTC's status in the tai chi community. To increase the publicity and significance of their events, the organizing party would invite famous authoritative figures that could add glory to their events. Their invitation further confirmed these performers' authority in the field and gave them a chance to validate their influence. It is thus a win-win situation for both parties. Through these staged performances, people could claim certain statuses without using words. For example, at the 2017 National Advanced Wushu Township Award Ceremony, the government recognized ten townships, and three of them were from Henan province: Wen county, Dengfeng county, and Yima county. Wen county is where Chen village is located. The organizing committee chose Master Duke and another master to perform as the representative of outstanding inheritors of Chen-style tai chi at this award ceremony. Through this performance, both Master Duke and the other master could be naturally recognized as the *vector*, spokesperson, and representative of this art. Their authority in tai chi was further confirmed through these performances.

Similarly, as shown in Figure 20, Master Duke, Master Qing, along with their son Wangzi and their daughter Yilai, performed as a "tai chi family" at the event of "Tai Chi Masters Enter Chen Village and Unveiling of Wangting Chen Bronze Statue" (September 17, 2017). There were only two recognized "tai chi families" in this event: one was Master Duke's family, and another was Master Duke's master Master Shangchun's family. Although Master Shangchun has his son as the first heir of his lineage, people often see Master Duke as the most vigorous heir of Master Shangchun's lineage in the community. For instance, the moderator of the opening ceremony of the China (Rizhao) Daqingshan International Taijiquan Competition (May 2019) directly introduced Master Duke as "the leader of the new generation of Chen-style tai chi" (Online data, May 18, 2019). If Master Duke made a claim like this, it would be arrogant and

Figure 20: *Master Duke, Master Qing, Wangzi, and Yilai Performing as a "Family of Tai Chi"*



inappropriate. However, if others initiated this title, it was then considered to be fine. In that case, Master Duke's authority would rise through these titles, along with staged performances that put him parallel or close to his master Master Shangchun's position.

For disciples, watching Master Duke and Master Qing's staged performances often brought us special joy and pride as we could notice how amazing they were on stage. Master Duke had a medium build, and his appearance was also not the typical handsome look (at least from my point of view). However, when he played tai chi on stage, there was something special about his postures and movements that was so fluent, beautiful, and elegant. This type of performance grabbed my eyes and my heart immediately. I wrote about how "handsome" and charismatic his tai chi was in my social media posts several times. When his performance was

compared with others who performed on the same stage, Master Duke's charisma became more evident. Although they might all performed the same routines, their difference in technicality, strength, and aesthetics was immediately revealed.

Master Duke's excellence was vividly proven before our eyes through its contrast with other masters. Of course, there is a chance that we were biased, but overall, we had commonsense and well-developed insights to make fair judgments. For instance, when he was performing with another master simultaneously on the same stage at the 2017 National Advanced Wushu Township Award Ceremony, Master Duke's demonstration of the tai chi forces was far more appealing than his peer. Indeed, performance always speaks louder than words, and it can be considered a silent declaration of one's status in this community.

Mediated Staged Performance

This type of staged performance is a general description of performance presented by the media. In this case, martial artists' participation is often on the media's demand, and they often craft their performances to meet the media's needs and requests. It is therefore a collaborative production between the media and the martial artists. Sometimes, these performances are also intertwined with interviews or other entertainment elements. In China, traditional media, especially TV, holds the unique position of "being authoritative" in the Chinese context. Journalists are also endowed with status that their Western peers often do not enjoy. Their socio-economic status are also often higher than judicial workers, police, doctors, and managers of state-owned enterprises (C. Li, 2005). Media's influence is a valuable resource that martial artists value greatly. Media thus plays the role of "giver" while interacting with martial artists, and martial artists are often thankful for every opportunity presented to them by the media. Below are some mediated staged performances that DTC has engaged in in the past couple of years:

- Kiddo participated in multiple TV shows in China, such as a *little master* of Dragon TV, etc. (2016-2020)
- Master Duke's tai chi fan performance was broadcast on the *World of Kungfu* channel of HNTV (October 2016)
- Parker, Meigui, and Peijian were featured in the show *Bond with China*, produced by China Media Group China Central Television International Channel (May 2021)
- Henan Radio and Television News Channel broadcast a special program titled "Master Duke teaches Chen-style Tai Chi Old Frame All the Way" to fight against COVID-19 in their "Daily Health" show (March 2020)
- The "Daily Health" show broadcast the classic series of "Chen-style tai chi taught by Master Duke" (July 2019)
- Master Duke and his French disciple's teaching was featured by a French TV station (March 03, 2017)
- Master Duke and Master Qing participated in the shooting of the documentary *Tai Chi China* (April 22, 2018)
- Master Duke, Yaoshi, and Ben performed at a martial arts talent show on HNTV (August 2017)
- Master Qing performed at the *Martial Arts Legend* TV show (January 2018)
- Master Qing performed in the documentary *Life-long dream of tai chi* (August 2017)

Being featured on high-level media is regarded as an indicator of the martial artists' status and thus authority in the community. The most authoritative traditional media in China is CCTV, the most significant propaganda platform in China. CCTV's news program aims to

“publicize the voices of the CCP and the government and spread the world’s events.” It is seen as the “the vane of Chinese politics” (新闻联播 [News Broadcast], n.d.). Participant Wenbin’s view reflected shared ideas among peers:

CCTV is equal to the authority; it is certainly more influential than HNTV. Why do people recognize brands advertised on CCTV? Because brands on CCTV are called “international Chinese brands.” If your commercials are played on HNTV, it is called “local brands,” it is not the same. If you can make it to CCTV, it proves that you have already reached to a certain level. Of course, there is space for commercial operation, but there is still a selection process based on quality and contents. CCTV is the traditional media, it is the authority! (Wenbin, interview, November 13, 2021)

Thus, when CCTV decided to make two television documentaries about Parker, Meigui, and Peijian, Master Duke and Master Qing flew to France to support the shooting. Meigui was Master Duke’s disciple. She immigrated to France as a tai chi specialist and helped her husband Peijian immigrated to France. Peijian later also became Master Duke’s disciple and a tai chi instructor. Parker was Master Duke’s first foreign disciple from France. Later, when these programs were released, announcements about them were repeatedly mentioned by Master Duke, Master Qing, and other DTC members on social media. During interviews, Meigui said that these two programs did not influence their student recruitment in France, but it certainly was a big deal for DTC back in China as an authority booster for Master Duke, Master Qing, and DTC. In Kiddo’s case, he appeared on the most influential TV shows in China, ranging from *Extradentary 6+1* on CCTV to *Amazing kids* on Hunan TV. All these mediated staged performances greatly improved the fame of DTC and Master Duke. Both Kiddo and Master Duke were becoming well-known celebrities that *matter* significantly in the tai chi community.

To some extent, good fame *equals* authority. Many martial artists frequently invoke their stories of being feathered by CCTV to prove their status. Interestingly, the YouTube channel *Finding Chinese Kungfu* revealed that for some programs, a martial artist could pay ¥100 000

(about US \$15,843) to get covered by certain shows on CCTV (Finding Chinese Kungfu, 2020). This YouTuber did not provide hard-core proof for this kind of under-the-table transaction (Online date, December 30, 2020). However, this kind of story itself indicates that being covered by CCTV certainly means something to the community. As a former ghostwriter who wrote for a CCTV program, I think there is some fact to this YouTuber's claim. In my work, I heard many stories about paying directors to get covered by media or get a chance to perform on certain stages. At least from my experience, I believe those under-the-table transactions could be what actually happened. There are some popular "shady" practices in Chinese media industry. I once was told by my director that it was ok to "creatively modify" details of stories to create dramatic effects. When the television documentaries produced by CCTV were released, Peijian's former job in China was changed from translator to doctor (Peijian, interview, September 29, 2020). This change aimed to make his image more convincing and establish his authority as an ambassador of health and well-being. Both the producing team and Peijian didn't think it was a big deal to fake certain details.

Being aware of the importance of media and mediated staged performance, Master Duke and Master Qing took opportunities like this seriously. While shooting for a show that had both interview and performance elements, Master Qing shared a comment from the director about how hard Master Duke worked for this shooting on her social media:

Here is the director's comment: "During the shooting process, for visual impact, I suggest Master Duke shoot by multiple cameras and then do fast-paced editing, but he politely refused. He suggested that we use a fixed camera to do a long take of the whole process of taking down the opponent so that the audience can see the whole process. Everything is raw, and there is no faking, no edited reality!" I hope the final film can have the effect that Master Duke desired and worked hard for. By the way, the weather here is scorching, the sand on the land is burning hot. Master Duke fought with ten people and sweated a lot. He had to change clothes continuously to keep the shooting going. He is a true professional. (Master Qing's social media post, July 15, 2017)

To understand Master Duke's decision, we need to understand the role of long take in filmmaking. A long take is a shot with a duration much longer than the conventional editing pace either of the film itself or films in general ("Long Take," 2022). When filming fight scenes, they are usually tracked in long takes, and the action is shot consistently. Unlike other films, scenes that are a little more thrilling are often shown by special techniques or by using a body double to replace the actor's performance when shooting difficult actions. Quick editing and multiple shots can cover up actors' incompetence in martial arts. In good kungfu films, this was generally impossible, since they required the actors to have the skills and techniques of kungfu, which could not be faked. Representative kungfu films in this regard are *Fist of Fury*, *Dragon Crossing*, and *Drunken Fist* (N. Tang, 1980). In Jackie Chan's early movies, we also see many long takes that show the whole fighting scene, which proves that Jackie Chan was, in many respects, a genuine martial artist. Like those kungfu movie stars, Master Duke intended to show his real kungfu in front of the camera by doing a single long take of his fighting scene.

Master Duke was highly aware of the possible reaction of the future audience while shooting for this program and was willing to work hard to achieve the best raw, while powerful, effect. As shown in Figure 21, he often brings out his best game in front of the camera. Unlike *eventful staged performance*, once a mediated staged performance is produced, it is out there and will be subject to viewers and critiques forever. Martial artists like Master Duke must be cautious about how they were presented. As discussed earlier, after performing on a TV show of HNTV, Master Qing was concerned that the floor was too soft and there was not enough space for her to perform the tai chi sword routine (fieldnotes, August 7, 2018). Master Duke was also concerned that his performance could have been highly edited like a Hollywood action movie that could make anyone look like a kungfu master. Had this happened, his credibility and ability could have

Figure 21: *Master Duke Performing for the Camera in July 2017*



been in doubt.

Compared with eventful staged performances that mainly target the martial arts community, mediated staged performance, especially those performed in collaboration with famous entertainment shows, can bring exposure to the public that eventful staged performance typically can't reach. The media platform also provides professional stage design, lighting, and editing that amplify the effect of performances on stage.

Virtually Staged Performance

With the development of mobile technology and social media, eventful staged performances and mediated staged performances are often shared in virtual space. Here *virtually*

staged performance emphasizes that martial artists make the best use of available public platforms, such as TikTok and Kuaishou, to design and program their performances and establish their fame and influence and consequently their authority in the community. Virtually staged performances can be easily found on platforms such as TikTok and YouTube.

In this regard, martial artists can actively participate in virtual events organized by third parties. They are often responsible for their performances without support from the third party. Martial artists may or may not have their team to design, shoot, and edit videos or another forms of materialization of their performance. They are responsible for creating their performance-based content, and video-sharing applications make things comparatively easy for them. Applications like TikTok or Kuaishou do not rely on traditional professional cameras and complicated editing afterward. Videos can be produced through mobile phones and tablets. These applications can even directly match the sound effect of the video with special effects, allowing rookie users to create high-quality videos comparable to movies. In some applications, even illiterate senior martial artists can create their own videos (W. Li, 2018).

For traditional martial arts like Master Duke and Master Qing, it took them decades to rise to their current status. However, with the help of new media, a well-prepared girl can claim her fame and authority within two years and become a phenomenal figure. It is a fast track to success on the condition that one's martial arts skills are, of course, ready. Video-sharing platforms and social media offer new paths and spaces for young martial artists to rise and build careers that were unimaginable before. One example in this regard is Lingyun, an heir of Ermei martial arts who majored in choreography in college. She produced many short videos of her martial arts performance that amazed the Chinese audience and gained 20 million followers on TikTok. After earning her fame, she was designated as the official Publicity Ambassador of

Ermei martial arts, which allowed her to establish her fame and authority as a young female martial artist (Qing, 2021).

For eventful and mediated staged performance, it is essential to be associated with events and media that are deemed to be authoritative and critical. However, almost anyone can participate in virtually staged performances by using public platforms. Here one's influence is signified by the number of followers. Once someone's fame is growing, his/her status is also rising; soon, he or she can get more opportunities to participate in eventful staged performances and mediated staged performances. Take Lingyun as an example: her rising fame brought her to the stage of the 2021 Zhejiang TV New Year's Eve Gala and the 2021 Sichuan TV Spring Festival Gala. She also had opportunities to participate in several TV shows.

DTC members were increasingly engaged in virtually staged performances. Many practitioners were eager to build their online presence. In this regard, Yaoshi was an outstanding example. When the COVID-19 epidemic hit, DTC's headquarters was closed for six months. DTC did not pay Yaoshi any salary during that period. He was forced to explore new ways of generating income. He devoted his energy to live streaming and publish tai chi tutorial videos on TikTok and Kuaishou. Within two years, he attracted 250,000 followers and started his innovative online teaching programs. As his fame and number of followers kept growing, his authority grew too. As shown in Figure 22, he was performing *Single Whip* with his assistant Bulang in their virtually staged performance. These performances showed the world that he was a legitimate heir of tai chi, which allowed him to attract more and more followers. Indeed, it is up to the martial artists to create dazzling performances that attract audience and tell the world who they are. Rising fame thus suggests rising authority in the community.

When Yaoshi first suggested that Master Duke and Master Qing do online teaching at

Figure 22: *Yaoshi and Bulang Performing Single Whip in Their Virtual Performance*



the beginning of this COVID-19 pandemic, his proposal was bluntly rejected (Yaoshi, interview, May 21, 2020). As Yaoshi's success in the virtual world became more and more impressive, more and more DTC members started to engage in virtually staged performances, including Master Duke and Master Qing. Since the middle of 2021, a significant portion of Master Qing's social media posts have been about online courses or streaming announcements of her family. Feng was another figure who actively explored opportunities presented by new media. He once proposed to Yaoshi to do an online battle to draw more attention to their accounts, but Yaoshi refused this request. He explained that he focused on using tai chi to promote well-being and health, and he was not interested in participating in competitive events (Yaoshi, interview, October 13, 2021). Yaoshi's success also triggered plagiarism in content creation. One fellow disciple even duplicated Yaoshi's movements and scripts in his own videos.

A virtually staged performance is a chance for martial artists from any background and

seniority to stand on the same starting line to show off their skills. Once their popularity and influence reaches a certain level, their virtual power will be translated into opportunities to participate in eventual staged performance and mediated staged performance, which often signify the official recognition of one's status in society. Recognition from the virtual world is considered grassroots, civilian, and nongovernmental. In contrast, recognition from public events in real life and state media are regarded as official, governmental, and authoritative. In China, the authority of media is inextricably linked to its official background as the mouthpiece of governmental sectors. Even after they become commercialized, they are still one of the most critical factors in constructing popular culture. Media authority is often used to recreate a broad social authority by recognizing specific figures and making them celebrities well accepted by the public (Dong, 2011). Media authority has helped many martial artists establish their authority by offering them a well-recognized stage and allowing them to shine.

So far, I have discussed how martial artists establish their authority in society through staged performance. In the next part, I will explore how authority is enacted and presented *within* the organization through staged performance.

Authority in Negotiation: Materialize Authority on Stage

Local Perspectives on Presence and Sequence during Staged Performance

As previously mentioned, spatial relationships often materialize power relationships. Chinese rituals dominate everyday life and define the principles of spatial arrangements and sequences of actions on many occasions. One sign that signifies a collective is formally transforming into an organization is that people start paying close attention to the seating arrangements of key figures of this collective (J. Chen, 1994). During organizational gatherings, the organizing of all sorts of affairs, from seating arranging to the sequence of actions, all must

meet the requirements of Chinese rituals and be consistent with the extant power relationships. This principle is often translated into performances presented on stages. Take the Peking opera as an example; it uses staging to show the intricate power relationship of the characters (Peng & Liu, 2014). Studies have not explicitly investigated how power relationships and authority are represented in the staged performance of martial arts. Still, we can get some insights from studies about other forms of performances.

First, as the center of attention, the stage often signifies specific values and significance that matter to members in the community. For example, in the *Nuo dance*, the figure of *the duke guan* (关公, *guangong*) is the embodiment of loyalty and benevolence and is seen as a symbol of divine authority, so people would fight for the right to play this role to claim the symbolic authority embedded in this role (M. Liu, 2019). Being associated with this figure helps the role-players establish their dominance in real life. Thus, people fight for opportunities to play roles like this in staged performance. Playing essential roles on certain stages signifies a form of recognition from other organizational members, earning honors and face, and reflecting one's authority. Being deprived of opportunities to perform roles suitable for one's position signifies one's marginalization in his/her organization.

Second, staged performance is a dynamic, linear process that can be understood from two perspectives: a temporal process and a spatial approach. The time process involves the sequences of performance on the stages, and it involves who appears first and what kind of performance appears first. Usually, for a gala, the most important figures and performances show up later in the event. They are often the climax of the gala. To note, we can see this phenomenon in the Western world too. As a spatial process, in a specific performance, the lead figures usually take the center position, while other supportive figures are placed in surrounding positions. The less

important a figure is, the more peripheral its position might be. This “center-marginal” spacing practice mirrors the differential relations among people within an organization.

Third, the *size* of the performance also matters. From a collective perspective, if they can come up with a performance that mobilizes a significant number of performers, it could be one way to shout out its strength and influence. However, at the individual level, participating in a group or pair performance is deemed to be less important compared with a solo performance.

Based on the insights mentioned above, I mainly focus on the eventful staged performance within the organization and explore how it contributes to the accomplishment of authority within the organization.

Accomplish Individual’s Authority within a TCMAO

At DTC, there are roughly three types of staged performances: the training camp graduation performance, the new year party, and the welcome show. They can all be categorized as eventful staged performances. Below I will illustrate how DTC’s intra-organizational staged performance contributes to accomplishing individual authority within DTC.

First, one’s presence in critical performance becomes an indicator of one’s position within DTC and his/her authority. Within DTC, one’s status greatly depends on one’s relations with Master Duke and Master Qing, who decide one’s presence or non-presence in certain events. DTC’s first performance at H group in 2020 was the most significant large-scale performance in its history. Many famous disciples were summoned to participate in this event, but I noticed that Zhishen was not invited. Yaoshi mentioned that he heard at the headquarters that Zhishen tried to recruit DTC’s trainees to join his studio in a neighboring city of Zhengzhou, which was perceived as undermining the foundation of DTC. As a response to Zhishen’s alleged transgression, DTC did not invite him to participate in the most important event in DTC’s history

(Yaoshi, interview, October 29, 2020). Master Duke's silent punishment towards Zhishen was also a peaceful means to tell all disciples that Zhishen was no longer favored. Zhishen's status within DTC unavoidably declined after this event, and so did his authority within DTC.

In contrast, during the 2019 National Day training camp, Laili, a disciple who was a professor at a university in East China, suddenly showed up on the name list of "assistant coaches." His skills were not at the same level as other professional coaches, but he showed up in the group performance of coaches at the graduation report performance. At the post-training meeting of disciples, Master Duke praised this professor's advancement in promoting tai chi at the university he was working for. Laili was put into the performing squad pack of coaches due to his achievement in promoting tai chi. His performance on the stage symbolized Master Duke's recognition and materialized his rising status among disciples.

Second, one's authority status emerges through performing a particular type of performance. As a TCMAO, DTC was a typical family business. Master Duke's niece Zuoshi called DTC "a family workshop in nature" (Zuoshi, interview, January 5, 2021). DTC operated on two parallel logics that were conflicting in nature. On the one hand, it operated like a modern for-profit company, where coaches (who are also Master Duke's disciples) had job titles and ranks based on seniority and ability. On the other hand, it was also a family business that favored kinship more than fairness and justice. At the training camp graduation ceremonies, almost all trainees were mobilized to participate in staged performance. The design of these staged performance, like material arrangements in the space, often mirrored people's status in DTC.

In their interviews, both Zuoshi and Yaoshi said they saw teaching tai chi as an educational service. The customers are therefore considered clients and not inferior to them. But in DTC, the traditional idea that "teachers are superior to students" still dominated daily

interactions. As Jacobs et al. (1995) reminds us, “strong feelings of a social hierarchy are still present in China” (p. 29). The hierarchy was obvious and stiff in DTC. Trainees were often seen as having the lowest status. For example, for the six-day National Day training camp in 2019, there were more than 100 trainees, but there were only about 15 chairs available; some were reserved for Master Duke, Master Qing, and VIP guests, the rest had signs indicating “coaches only.” There was no chair arranged for trainees who must stand for an extended period during the day. I had an ankle injury by then and could not stand for long hours. As the pain in my left ankle aggravated, and all chairs reserved for coaches were empty, I took a seat and rested for two minutes; then Master Duke saw me and began to yell at me in front of others: “Are you blind? Could not you read the sign? These seats are coaches only!” I stuck out my tongue and smiled awkwardly, then walked away, feeling humiliated (fieldnotes, October 3, 2019). This incident shows how much DTC valued hierarchy.

With hierarchy materialized in almost every aspect of organizational life, so was the staged performance. During the graduation performance, trainees often did the performance based on what they were taught. The format and procedure were like a Chinese military drill. The trainees walked into the stage like soldiers, saluted Master Duke and other VIP guests, and performed. After that, “the coaching team, logistics team, and Master Qing did their performance” (DTC official WeChat account, October 7, 2019). Here the coaching team was the working front; the “logistics team” was the management team with two members: One was Master Duke and Master Qing’s daughter Yilai; another was a disciple who worked as “office director” at DTC. The coaches (titled “coach” or “assistant coach”) first performed as a group, then it was the turn for the logistic team’s performance. After that, surprisingly, there was a solo performance of Wangzi before Master Qing’s performance of tai chi sword, as shown in Figure 23.

Before 2019, we knew that Master Duke and Master Qing had two children, Yilai and Wangzi. Subconsciously, we also know that they would pass DTC to Wangzi, their only son. After all, influenced by the Confucian tradition, if a family has only one son, he will be the primary candidate to inherit the family property and legacy (L. Jacobs et al., 1995; Yan & Sorenson, 2006). We treated Wangzi nicely because we respected Master Duke's face. Wangzi was born to a legendary father, and this kinship was helpful for his status in the martial arts community. However, "the kinship system by itself could not maintain the status hierarchy indefinitely. Other factors had to enter the balance sheet" (K. Chang, 1983, p. 33). Wangzi needed to do systematic work to prove he was qualified to inherit authority from his parents. Since 2019, Wangzi showed up more and more in Master Duke and Master Qing's online narratives, and we all got a feeling that the process of making Wangzi an important figure had already started.

Under these circumstances, I felt both "normal" and "weird" about Wangzi's solo performance. It is normal because we knew that as Master Duke's only son, he would be the inheritor of DTC and Master Duke's legacy, and he would be favored and have special

Figure 23: *Wangzi's Solo Performance and Enthusiastic Audience*



treatment. It felt weird, however, because this collective event centering on training paying students was turned into a private stage for Master Duke and Master Qing to promote their son. Because of Master Duke's absolute authority, people paid extra attention to his son's performance and were eager to record his performance (see figure 23). Even the applause was extra loud. I brought my feelings to Yaoshi and asked him his opinion; he said:

Well, do you remember how many coaches we have? Many of us on the coaching team have years of coaching experience, like Feng, me, and Zhishen. We are all veteran coaches already; we have worked with Master Duke for around a decade; Even Luohan also had much experience. Our title in this training camp is "coach." Wangzi's title here is "assistant coach," and he rarely has coaching experience at DTC. All coaches here perform as a group, but an assistant coach has his solo performance. It is right if you feel weird. But there is no meaning to discuss fairness here; he is shifu's son; this is their family's business; they can do whatever they want. (fieldnotes, October 6, 2019)

In a highly hierarchized environment where even stage performance was organized according to one's status, Wangzi's solo performance disrupted the order we were familiar with. But it also gave us a clear message: the tie between Master Duke and Wangzi, that once was just something lingering at the back of people's minds, had come to the front stage. It was Master Duke and Master Qing's intention to make Wangzi a new authority within DTC. As an assistant coach, he could have a spot that veteran coaches could not have; this kind of trespassing was only possible for Master Duke's kids or someone Master Duke adored very much. By giving someone a particular position on the stage or frequently endorsing or ignoring someone in their narratives and activities, Master Duke, and Master Qing continuously reshaped the authoritative relationships within DTC.

Master Duke's authority was extended to his son. As long as Master Duke was alive, his disciples would treat Wangzi carefully and applaud anyone Master Duke wanted us to. With his father's support, Wangzi would probably become someone significant in the field and have his sincere supporters. But before that moment, his authority within DTC was still greatly dependent

on his associations with Master Duke and Master Qing. If he was just a regular disciple who was trying to become a coach, like other young student coaches, people would not care about him.

When it comes to intraorganizational stage performance, one's very presence on the stage and the sequence and form of his/her performance directly *reflect* and *show* the quality and nature of the his/her associations with Master Duke and Master Qing. In a TCMAO like DTC, Master Duke and Master Qing were the absolute authoritative figures; one's fate in DTC depended on their attitudes, and staged performance was one of the most effective approaches for them to publicly display their attitudes towards someone. Staged performance helped others make sense of organizational dynamic and changing landscape of authoritative relationships within DTC. As my fellow disciple Wuzhe pointed out:

Who is the authority among disciples depends on what shifu thinks. Those people valued by shifu are the authoritative ones. I mainly figure that out by two means: first, I observe who are chosen to teach and perform at the training seminars; second, I observe other disciples' practice to know their skill levels. (Wuzhe, interview, September 22, 2020)

Indeed, for disciples to make sense of who were the authoritative figures within the organization, we not only counted on Master Duke's and Master Qing's discourse, we also greatly counted on body practices such as staged performances. Wu et al. (2011)'s study of village martial arts indicates that practicing martial arts provides a practical approach to realize hierarchical differentiation in the village; it brings the hidden power structure in the town to the surface. By engaging in practicing martial arts and joining in prestigious lineage, one's source of legitimacy of status can be updated and justified. Participating in staged performance is a way of publicly informing others about one's position in the village. This mechanism also works for TCMAOs, where authoritative relationships between members need to be produced by all kinds of means, including staged performance.

Summary

In this section, I see staged performance as performing martial arts for the purposes of skill demonstration and entertaining in various situations. There are mainly three categories of staged performance: eventful staged performance, mediated staged performance and virtually staged performance. Eventful staged performance signifies one's status in the community through performing at prestigious stages. In contrast, the audience of mediated staged performance mostly are the public. This type of staged performance provides an excellent opportunity for martial artists to accumulate fame and authority in society by working with traditional media. The importance and influence of the events and media certainly matter; the more significant the stages are, the merrier! Martial artists can claim authority invested in these stages by performing on these stages.

We should also be aware that these events and media also profit from the authority and fame of martial artists to improve their own authority and popularity. Thus, these staged performances are often mutually beneficial. Compared with eventful staged performance and mediated staged performance, virtually staged performance is an opportunity for martial artists to become "self-made" influencers and thus accumulate enough fame and status to be invited to attend eventful staged performance and mediated produced performance; the latter two often signifies the officialization of recognizing those self-made martial artists as authority in the field.

Moreover, intraorganizational *eventful staged performance* plays essential roles in establishing an individual's authority *within* the organization. In a TCMAO like DTC, the master was often the most authoritative figure. He was the center of this tiny universe, and disciples' status often depends on the quality and nature of their associations with the master. Although all disciples were associated with Master Duke as his disciples, they were continuously differentiated through seniority, skill levels, social backgrounds, accomplishments, and Master

Duke's appreciations. An intraorganizational eventful staged performance was one of the most effective ways to display one's status within the organization publicly; it also helped organizational members to make sense of Master Duke's intention, which was also DTC's intention. By deciding who could or could not perform on the stage and what kinds of performance could be presented, Master Duke and Master Qing, as DTC's leaders, continuously shaped the authoritative relationships of DTC. Those favored by them naturally were deemed to have more authority than others within the organization.

Contesting: Winning Authority Over

Defining Contesting

There is an old Chinese proverb: "There is no first in writing and no second in martial arts" (文无第一，武无第二; *wen wu diyi, wu wu di'er*). It is hard to tell who writes the best article, but when martial artists confront each other, it is easy to tell who is the better one: The standing one wins. One dimension of the meaning of "contest" is "amicable conflict, as between competitors for a prize or distinction"; it is synonymous with "competition" ("Contest, n.2," n.d.). In China, as early as the Spring, Autumn, and Warring States Period (771-476 BC), there were already martial arts contests such as *jiaodi*, sword-throwing contests, sword fighting, etc. They are seen as the infancy of martial arts contests and a form of entertainment (Du & Hong, 2004). With uniforms, recruitment systems, rules, and awards in place, martial arts contests in this period were also institutionalized to a great extent. Afterward, contests with different forms and focuses were developed throughout Chinese history. For instance, strength contests of bar-lifting games were popular in the Han dynasty, and the unarmed matches that center on strength and tumbling techniques have been popular for thousands of years (Fan & Huang, 2019).

Nowadays, martial arts have welcomed its "flowering period" of time since China

entered the post-reform period in 1976 (Chinese Wushu Research Institute, 1997; Fan & Huang, 2019). Elite martial arts teams at different levels thrived, and there were all sorts of martial arts contests at the state, provincial, and county levels. Games organized by private sectors also began to thrive. Some comprehensive tournaments emphasized showcasing the country's competitive strength, soft power, and national culture through martial arts (Zhang & Dai, 2016).

In the case of tai chi, its popularity laid a strong foundation for developing all sorts of tai chi contests. In 1984, the Wuhan International Tai Chi Quan and Sword Invitational Tournament were held. More than 100 athletes from 18 countries and regions attended this contest. The National Tai Chi Quan and Sword Invitation were held in Harbin in the same year. Afterward, the Ministry of Sport of China formally approved tai chi quan and sword as individual annual national competitions. After 1987, the Martial Arts Association and the Research Institute of Martial Arts had regular meetings with veteran tai chi masters and practitioners to establish competition rules and organize training camps for instructors. In 1991, the competition rules of tai chi quan, tai chi sword, and pushing hands were released by the Ministry of Sport of China and were subjected to modifications later. Nowadays, there are all sorts of tai chi contests at different levels from different social sectors. Some games are tai chi only, such as the China Jiaozuo (Wen County) International Tai Chi Annual Convention. At the same time, some include tai chi as part of their program, such as the World Traditional Wushu Championships.

For many practitioners, especially those who want to make a career in teaching tai chi, participating in contents is often an essential part of their tai chi journeys. Attending contests can be beneficial. It motivates people to continuously craft their skills; it also promotes knowledge exchange in the community. This dissertation defines the body practice of *contesting* as *participating in competitions under the guidance of written or hidden rules*. Competitions

include tournaments and games organized by public or private organizers at various scales. Below I will analyze contesting' roles in the communicative accomplishment of authority.

Winning Authority Over: Qualifications, Fame, and Authority

Contesting to be Seen: Fame and Authority

Unlike political authority that can be endowed by laws or tradition, the authority of martial artists can be accomplished through being associated with people or things that are perceived to be authoritative and trustworthy, such as lineage, official recognition, and media endorsement, etc. In this matrix of beneficial associations, contesting is another practical approach for martial artists to accumulate authority by associating themselves with honors and titles. Honors and titles can be transferred into fame through publicity and self-advocacy. Fame leads to rising position in the community; it also signifies authority.

For this reason, many martial arts schools make attending contests part of the training model. Attending competitions can help people grow their skills and nurture their martial spirits. Responding to questions from the French martial arts magazine *Karaté Bushido*, Master Duke offered his insights about contests, and I helped him write down his response:

It is a misconception to think that tai chi is not competitive. Martial arts need communication and knowledge exchange. A contest is an effective platform for communication and complementing each other's strengths and weaknesses. The results of competitions are not the most important thing. It is all about meeting friends and verifying what they have learned so practitioners can have an objective and comprehensive understanding of their ability, skill level, and the state of the martial arts world. At the same time, participating in competitions is a significant incentive for young martial artists. Medals and awards motivate young people. After all, learning martial arts is hard work; it is lovely and inspiring to have some rewards. However, an essential aspect of martial arts is cultivating practitioners' minds. If one cares too much about the competition results, one may be too eager to win and become hungry for quick success, which should be avoided. (fieldnotes, January 9, 2019)

Here Master Duke mentioned an essential function of martial arts contest: an incentive

system that offers a sense of accomplishment. It is a chance to “have an objective and comprehensive understanding of their ability, skill level, and the state of the martial arts world.” Through contests, one can step out of the crowd and be placed in a position in the world of martial arts, like the small ripple in the chain of waves. Thus, contesting can be seen as a *positioning* and *differentiating* process, where the difference in status is created. The higher the level of the games is, and the shinier the medal is, the higher one’s position will be. Performing well in contesting is career-making in this regard. As Jingang and Feng, two senior coaches, mentioned in their interviews:

At that time, after I became a coach, I won three consecutive national championships and five consecutive Henan provincial championships. Then, I played in many domestic and international tournaments, such as the Tai Chi Annual Invitational Tournament and other invitational tournaments. For eight years, I was very active in attending tournaments; I worked very hard and got all the medals and awards I could get, which proved my ability and achievements. At a certain point, I felt that I already had enough honors and could take a break from those intense contests...attending contests made me more confident and a better coach since I could better explain the principles and combat applications of each move. (Jingang, interview, September 29, 2020)

I grew up practicing martial arts. When I was a child, I practiced hard to get the ideal results from competitions. Once you have results, you have an advantage over others; one benefit is that the coach likes you better. When you are a moldable talent, that kind of care can help you learn better and get better results, and then you can better establish your position. So, when I was young, I was always the best in my class, no matter I practiced tai chi or Shaolin kungfu...Also, being good at the competition is a way to create a future for yourself. If you do not have these competition results, especially when you are still young, you cannot go out and convince people. When you go out to teach, why can you charge a higher price and others cannot? After all, competition tests your kungfu, whether it is pushing hands or routines, and by winning competitions, you tell everyone that you can get first place and you are better than others. Winning competitions is a positive confirmation of your ability. If you claim that you practice well, but you never participated in a competition, never won a medal, who will believe you? So, if you are a professional, you must rely on these competitions to build your foundation of success. (Feng, interview, October 25, 2021)

For both Jingang and Feng, contesting served as a differentiating device that separated them from their peers. Each medal they won served as a stepstone for them to climb up the social

ladder of tai chi instructors. Correspondingly, they could gain more trust and charge a higher price for their work. In competitions, each medal is endowed with influence and recognition from two sources: (1) the level of award. The weight a gold medal can carry differs significantly in different events, for instance, an Olympic gold medal means a lot more than a gold medal in a provincial contest. However, the word “gold medal” itself often invites imagination and perception of excellence and sportsmanship; (2) the influence of the event. The more authoritative the event is, the more weight its medal can carry, and the more authority one can accumulate from winning the medal.

Jingang and Feng were good at both routines and pushing hands. For them, being able to take down their opponents spoke even louder than excelling in routine performance. However, even for an instructor who was not interested in combat activities and only focused on nurturing health, it was also helpful for him/her to get some recognition through contesting. For instance:


One of our female instructors cannot fight in real life. She did not have a lot of confrontational contact practice. She focuses on teaching routines and basic skills, mainly to help people maintain health. She was trained in Chen village, but before she started teaching tai chi here, she participated in routines competitions and won awards. This helped her gain trust from trainees. (Dasheng, interview, October 26, 2021)

For instructors in different phases of their careers, the significance of contesting varied greatly. In their profiles, instructors often showcased the medals or honors they had won in the past, especially those who were in their early careers. Established martial artists like Master Duke and Master Qing took on more roles as judges, award presenters, or guest performers. They rarely participated in contests unless the government ordered them to do so. For instance, in July 2018, Master Qing was ordered by the Sports Bureau of Wen County to represent Wen County to attend the National Martial Arts Hometown Competition. She won the gold medal in tai chi sword. Master Duke commented on Master Qing’s social media post, saying that his wife’s

performance “added glory to our hometown” (fieldnotes, July 28, 2018).

Famous martial artists usually didn’t attend contests in person. Instead, their glory came from their disciples’ performances in competitions. Influenced by the Confucian understanding of generations and ranks, there was a strong sense of what people should do or should not do according to their age and status. It would be downgrading for Master Duke to attend some contests where his disciples were also competing since it could be seen as “the big bullying the

Figure 24: Master Qing’s Social Media Post about Wangzi’s Online Course



(Translation)
Details

Master Qing: “Good news! Wangzi’s course of *Chen-style Tai Chi 56 Moves National Competition Routine* is open for registrations; dear tai chi brothers and sisters, please join us!”
(Link to the online course)

Location: Zhengzhou
August 1, 2021

((Commenting area))
Master Qing:
In March 2016, ((Wangzi)) won four gold medals in Hong Kong International Wushu Festival for tai chi quan, tai chi big knife, tai chi sparring and group competition.

In June 2016, ((Wangzi)) won the championship of Chen-style tai chi quan in men’s group B in Henan Province Traditional Wushu Competition on behalf of Zhengzhou City.

In November 2016, ((Wangzi)) won the gold medal of Chen-style tai chi quan and silver medal of tai chi sword in Men’s Group B and C in the International Wushu Competition of “Huangshan forum on martial arts” on behalf of the Chinese Wushu Association team.

In September 2017, ((Wangzi)) won the first place of Chen-style tai chi quan in the men's group in the “Ticai Cup” Henan Province Traditional Wushu Championship on behalf of Zhengzhou City, and was awarded the title of "National Grade 2 Athlete"...

small” (以大欺小, *Yi da qi xiao*). For Master Duke and Master Qing, serving as judges and award presenters was considered more appropriate for their status. For early-career instructors, such as Wangzi, the meaning of medals and honors could be more significant. As Figure 24 shows, on August 1, 2021, Master Qing posted that “Good news! Wangzi’s course of *Chen-style Tai Chi 56 Moves National Competition Routine* is open for registrations; dear tai chi brothers and sisters, please join us!” Below this post was a link to a more detailed description of this online course. After that, there were seven likes. Compared with her other posts, the number of likes was comparatively low. Then below this post, there was one comment came from Master Qing that listed nine awards that Wangzi won in contests, one honorable title from the Wushu Sports Management Center of the State General Administration of Sports, and the event about him being admitted to a sports university through the “special track for sports major” admission process.

Why did Master Qing invoke those medals right after the course announcement? The most reasonable explanation is that she intended to boost Wangzi’s authority as a competent instructor, and these medals were considered proof of his qualifications. Being Master Duke and Master Qing’s only son gave Wangzi unique privilege in learning tai chi. His parents taught him whole-heartedly without any reservation, which was a privilege other disciples could never imagine. It is fair to say that his blood lineage offered him an extremely significant advantage in boosting his authority. Still, as a young man, as a “2nd generation of famous masters” (拳二代, *quan erdai*) who benefitted from his parents’ fame, he needed *more* to prove himself, and attending contests was a good option.

With his status and influence in the community, especially as a high-level official of the Chinese Wushu Association, Master Duke has been paving the road for Wangzi’s rising status by

getting him selected to attend certain important contests or perform on important stages. Without Master Duke's backstage support, it would not be easy for Wangzi to develop his fame so quickly. There were rumors in DTC that Master Duke pulled some strings to make sure Wangzi got a decent place in a significant competition (fieldnotes, October 14, 2019). I had no means to verify whether it was true or not without upsetting my master. However, I could say that I would not be surprised if it was true. Overall, medals gained from contests, and staged performances with his parents at important events all were used to boost Wangzi's authority.

As we can see, no matter for regular disciples such as Jingang or Feng, or a blood-disciple like Wangzi, in their early careers, contesting was a valuable and necessary approach for them to make their names and establish their status in the community. Once practitioners established themselves, their need for contesting started reducing. Their glory could come from their disciple's performance in contests by then. Besides being in different career phrases, their engagement in contesting was also influenced by *financial resources* and *age*. For instance, Jingang stopped attending competitions for two reasons: first, he had accumulated enough honors; second, he wanted to ease the financial burden related to attending competitions.

The financial burden was heavy because many tournaments did not offer prize money, I must be responsible for all the traveling costs, etc. My family is from a rural area. That was quite an expense! I attended five or six games each year for eight years, which cost a lot of money. My parents were under much pressure... at a certain point, our financial situation did not allow me to play more games... fortunately, I already had enough honors to prove my ability and achievements. (Jingang, interview, September 29, 2020)

Age was another critical factor that forced people to distance themselves from contesting. Once their careers were on the right track and they had accumulated enough authority to recruit enough trainees, some felt that they don't need the glammers of honors anymore; instead, they started focusing on the practical side of their profession: offering high-quality training. Take Wuzhe and Yaoshi for example:

When I was young, one of the reasons I chose to practice Chen-style tai chi was that I thought that Chen-style tai chi was wonderful, it was very cool to play. It could help me get good results in competitions. But after that, when I got to this age, I would not participate in competitions anymore. My focus now is delivering good tai chi teaching; that is my focus. (Wuzhe, interview, September 22, 2020)

The combat aspect is not my future direction; I focus on the health track and aim at improving people's well-being through teaching tai chi. I am in my middle 40s; at my age, I cannot jump around like teenagers or guys in their early 20s. My body is different; my focus is also different. When I was younger, I got some awards; that was enough. Now it is my teaching that attracts trainees, not medals. (Yaoshi, interview, April 27, 2021)

Just like it is beneficial to be associated with a famous lineage and renowned master, it is also helpful to climb up the social ladder by winning honors and medals through contesting.

Contesting provides valuable qualifications for instructors to certain degrees. However, whether one can have a smooth career still depends on other factors, such as the master's connections. In Jingang's case, he was trained at another famous master's martial arts school; he also had a beautiful contests record, but his master was based in the Chen village and did not have as many connections as Master Shangchun. In the very end, it was Master Shangchun's son who offered Jingang a job to teach at Master Shangchun's studio in Zhengzhou, which was the beginning of his relatively solid career.

Each DTC's branch was quite flexible in deciding its strategy and ways of being, and the owner's personal preference was critical for decision making. It was quite normal for DTC to organize teams participating in contests at different levels. News of victories were often shared online. Besides promoting engagement, one significant benefit of contesting was helping members find appreciations towards DTC, thus further recognizing DTC's authority in the field. Through contesting, many members realized how DTC's unique and solid style differentiated them from peer organizations and, like this, excelled in all sorts of competitions. As coaches Luliu and Luye noted:

We did not participate in any contests recently due to the epidemic. But we did so in 2017, 2018, and 2019. Our team went to Jiaozuo to compete, and they all won awards. Some took the first prize, some took the second prize, and some took the third prize. Then we went to Chen village, the sacred place where tai chi originated, for tourism. They were all in a perfect mood... Whenever there is a contest, such as this one in Jiaozuo, I advise them to go, and they are very proactive... I am the coach and team leader; they respect me a lot! The better they do in contests, the more they respect me. (Mumian, interview, October 19, 2021)

If you want to open a tai chi studio, I believe it is good to go out to compete; we do that a lot! And we display our medals and certificates so others can see them. After all, sports are competitive in nature, right? How can people know that you are doing well? Through referees and the verification of contests! If you keep bluffing that you are a great player, but you never got a gold medal, and you can only get some bronze medals... how can people trust you? When people notice that you only have bronze medals, their impressions of your studio will be discounted. (Luye, interview, October 13, 2021)

We often go to the annual tai chi convention in Jiaozuo and attend competitions. We represent DTC. We encourage our trainees to participate in contests to see where they stand in the field and use this opportunity to improve their love for tai chi. Their confidence in our school is also boosted because when we go out to compete, people always look up to us because of the neatness of our tai chi frame. We always get a lot of praise and appreciation; this greatly improves my students' love for our frame and helps them be sure that we are indeed an authoritative tai chi institution! This makes them more confident and more able to persevere. (Luye, interview, October 13, 2021)

Mumian pointed out that performing well in contests improved people's faith in themselves, their coaches, and their organizations. As for Luye, he mentioned that instructors must gain their authority through winning contests to show that they were the real deal. Also, the master needed to win, but the trainees also needed to win to demonstrate the effectiveness of the training. Their glory was then naturally extended to their organizations. Below is a report from DTC's official WeChat account:

On September 19, 2019, the 10th China Jiaozuo International Tai Chi Exchange Competition ended. After fierce competition, 77 athletes from 4 domestic teams and three overseas teams of DTC emerged from more than 4,000 participants, taking 67 gold medals, 52 silver medals, 24 bronze medals, and nine individual first places in the individual events. DTC had the most shining teams in the whole field. (DTC's official WeChat account, September 21, 2019)

Participating in competitions like this is about both *doing* and *showing*. It is important to

advertise the results of contesting. If one engages in competitions for self-perfection and self-challenge, there is no point in showing off. But *showing* is precisely the point of contesting. It is about showing DTC's status in the community through excelling in a well-known game.

Tournaments offer a rare opportunity to allow practitioners from different organizations to be compared according to the same rules and thus create *differentiating effects* to place individuals and their organizations into various hierarchy positions in the community. The higher their status is, the more authority they can claim.

Above I have shown that both individuals and organizations use contesting to win awards, gain fame, and establish their authority by differentiating themselves from others. After reading and hearing many stories about winning medals at DTC, I noticed one interesting detail about their narratives: Although occasionally the total number of contestants was mentioned, people rarely said how many medals were awarded in total in a contest or how many categories and events there were. Mentioning these factors risked lowering people's expectations about the quality of these contests, which could increase doubts about these medals' worthiness. Below, I will discuss the tricky and deceptive part of using contesting in establishing authority.

The Grand Deception: Tricks of "Gaming the Game"

Contesting is not necessarily sufficient for establishing one's authority for serious martial artists whose lives depend on teaching martial arts. However, it is necessary. To make every contest count, one must carefully choose the right contests to win awards, the qualifications that are essential for career development. As Wenbin sharply pointed out:

You must get some honors through competitions; it is something you must have; you cannot do without (them). But your status in the world of martial arts is not dependent on these honors or certificates. I heard that Master Xun did not participate in the Chinese martial arts ranking system exams, but he was finally given a certificate of eight or nine stage because his influence had reached a certain point; you must give this honor to him; this is something that you can't get by winning a few games. Now many tournaments are

all about commercial operations; people pay 5,000 yuan to participate, then one-third of them get gold medals, and there are more silver or bronze medals. You must look at the competitions and evaluate the value of their medals. Not every gold medal is a real gold medal; you know what I mean? Take my brother's story as an example, he said back a dozen years ago that if you want to participate in contests and get to the top three or win the provincial championship, you must work very hard! Every contestant was all beaten up and swollen because all of them were quite strong contestants, and many of them came from Chen village! It is not easy for anyone to win! As to the honor thing, people say that each family in Chen village is filled with baskets of certificates and medals. Although this expression sounds slightly exaggerated, each family's wall is indeed full of certificates since they participated in too many contests. Everyone is a champion here and there because there are so many categories to compete in: the weight classes are different, the routines are different, the competition styles are different. So, the result is that they are all champions. If you visit a park there, you can easily meet a dozen "world champions." (Wenbin, interview, November 13, 2021)

Wenbin's comment outlined some agreeable points to many community members:

contesting is essential but there is an overflow of matches and medals. Take the formerly mentioned 10th China Jiaozuo International Tai Chi Exchange Competition as an example:

This tournament belongs to the "folk tournament." In this type of contest, men and women separate, and are divided into the junior group, youth group, middle age group, and senior group. Usually, twenty percent of contestants of each group get the gold medals, thirty percent of them get silver medals, thirty percent of them get the bronze medals. The so-called elite competition is to gather the first place of each group and compete again. (Yaoshi, interview, January 11, 2021)

Demands create the market. The popularity of this type of folk tournament meets practitioners' desires for fame, which is essential not only for their pride but also for their professional needs: they need this qualification. Gradually, holding competition becomes a profitable business that is often combined with local economic and cultural development strategy (J. Wang, 2016). And it is usually a win-win situation for both the contestants and the organizing party: one uses the money to get medals, another party use medals to get money.

It is common sense for people, athlete or not, to understand the weight an Olympic medal can carry, but for the public and those new to the community, there is a lack of ability to tell the quality of contests, especially when any folk tournaments can randomly use big terms like

“international” or “global.” The glory embedded in the word “gold medal” was quickly appropriated by any piece of metal that claims to be a gold medal. In this case, the example of Xuming is fascinating.

Xuming was new to DTC around 2018; she had strong social and organizing skills. Before meeting Master Duke and Master Qing, she found Master Qing’s bank account online and deposited money to it to show her good intention. During her first visit to DTC, she gave a red envelope (monetary gift) to every coach at DTC (Yaoshi, interview, June 1, 2020). Her tai chi skills were fundamental; problems with her routines and postures were pronounced from the eye of any veteran player in DTC. But her foreign identity as a Chinese Australian and generosity helped her gain Master Duke’s and Master Qing’s support. In 2018, Master Qing flew to Hong Kong with her and tutored her for about a week to prepare her for the 16th Hong Kong Wushu International Championship hosted by the Hong Kong International Martial Arts Festival. In her profile on taijigen.com, it is said that she won the all-around championship gold medal (including five gold medals in five different events).

Although the official website of this championship had already removed materials about how many awards were awarded and the lists of attendees, it gave explicit instructions about how the all-around title would be awarded in the 18th Hong Kong Wushu International Championship: “the athletes will be accepted and divided based on male and female, in a total of 34 groups, in each group the first three places will be selected, for a total of 102 athletes” (Hong Kong International Martial Arts Festival, 2020). This website also mentioned that this championship tried to limit the number of participants to less than 2,000, and the “all-around championship” was one of eight events.

It is therefore reasonable to guess that there were few attendants for each game category,

which meant that a very high portion of contestants would walk away with a medal. Does winning six gold medals in this contest make Xuming an authoritative instructor? It depends on who you are asking. These medals did not prove anything for senior coaches such as Zuoshi and Yaoshi. Xuming's tai chi skill was even not good enough to teach any tai chi routine, as she was only able to teach the health qigong *Eight Pieces of Brocade* and *tai chi warm-up exercise*, which did not require too much real kungfu to do. When it came to teach tai chi routines, she had been asking Master Qing, Zuoshi, Yaoshi, and other established martial artists to record online courses for her for free. Then she sold those courses on her website.

On her website, Xuming introduced herself as “a world martial arts all-around champion” (世界武术全能冠军, *shejie wushu quanneng guanjun*). This title removed all the critical contextual information that could help people to identify the quality of this contest and was an excellent example of ambiguity and exaggeration: It could be used to describe a champion from the World Wushu Championships hosted by the International Wushu Federation. It could also be used to publicize a gold medal easily won from a commercial folk championship. But how many people would seriously investigate the backstory of this title and the quality of this contest? Without enough knowledge about the industry, the public lacks professional judgments of the quality of certain “gold medal”. This gives instructors like Xuming space to manipulate the public perception.

The title of “world martial arts all-around champion” *elicits* awe and respect, and it often works. As Wenbin commented:

For insiders, titles such as “international champion” may not mean a lot; we know how to differentiate the real champions from the fake ones. But for people who do not know our industry, especially foreigners, these titles might mean a lot. For example, when Chinese officials say, “I'm the mayor of somewhere” or “I'm the governor of somewhere,” they feel awesome because many people will immediately try to lick their boots. However, if they visit a foreign country, people there do not care whether you are a mayor or

governor. But if you say, “I am the Jiaozuo City Academy of Fine Arts director,” people will think: Oh, an artist! The feeling is different; foreigners do not care how politically powerful you are, but they respect art, culture, and sports stars. They also take scientists and thinkers seriously. When you bring up your “world champion” title, people will think you are a professional, (they) respect you and take you seriously. (Wenbin, interview, November 13, 2021)

Wenbin’s comment reflects his understanding of the cultural differences between foreigners and Chinese; it may not be accurate. However, it shows that professionals like him were aware that people from different cultures have different perceptions of awards and titles. As “golden medals” have populated the streets, people have become more suspicious about contests’ quality. Some studio owners hold comparatively negative views towards contesting, for instance:

My boss Xinggu is particularly averse to competitions, and he does not participate in any of them. In 2019, shimu called me and said that Longtou would lead a group of our disciple brothers from Zhejiang to participate in a pushing hands competition there, and shimu wanted me to go. I spoke to Xinggu about it; he asked me not to do it, saying there is no point in doing so. But he also said that the decision was still in my hands. Then I went as usual and won first place in the contest of pushing hands. He was pleased when I came back, which was interesting to think about. (Dasheng, interview, November 13, 2021)

I rarely participate in competitions. Nowadays, competition is more formalistic and does not show the contestants’ real skill level. We have a senior tai chi brother who is very good at kungfu. He took a disciple who had only practiced for three months to attend the same competition, and the disciple scored higher than him. Ironic, right? So, there is no need to attend this kind of commercial competition. Many events hang on using names such as “international” or “national” tournaments; the title is huge. But in fact, there is no credibility there. I do not go; I also do not let my students or disciples participate in such competitions. Of course, if shifu and shimu ask me to do it, I will do it. My job now is to help people get healthy by practicing tai chi; getting healthy is more important than any medal. (Kuiyong, interview, Oct 23, 2021)

Both Dasheng and Kuiyong already had stable careers. Dasheng’s boss, who discouraged him from attending any contest, was already a wealthy businessman. As a Shaolin disciple, he was already a tough fighter. It is reasonable that those commercial contests meant nothing to him. It is true that people, especially insiders, begin to raise questions about the quality of these

competitions. Thus, it is not surprising that when people try to impress those who are knowledgeable about the community, they try to offer information that make the contests sound more authoritative and legitimate. For instance, after Wangzi got 5th place in the Chen-style tai chi category in the 2019 X Championship (pseudonym) on behalf of Z University Sports College and was awarded the title of “National Sportsman” by the National Martial Arts Sports Management Center, Master Qing not only shared this news on her social media, but also made a special note to explain how important this championship was. As noted in my reflective journal:

Today, Master Qing shared the good news about Wangzi’s newly winning in the X Championship; I understand both Master Qing and Master Duke are very proud of their son and are trying every means to pave a road towards success for their blood inheritor. Master Qing mentioned that “the X Championship is a competition in which only professional athletes from provincial sports teams and very few sports academies can participate! Each province can only send a maximum of two people per event. It is tough to be chosen to participate in this championship because there are world champions and national champions among participants. So, Wangzi’s achievement has a lot to do with his efforts. For professional martial arts athletes, it is hard to win the ‘national sportsman’ titles. Good job, Wangzi!” Master Qing also displayed Wangzi’s certificate of “National Sportsman” and a screenshot of the official announcement from the National Martial Arts Sports Management Center, which showed the finalists of 10 athletes who got this title this year. Master Qing invoked voices of the authoritative organization to back herself up. I was curious about how the two representatives of each province were chosen; after all, there are so many good players out there; how did Wangzi get this special place to participate in the first place? Was there an open screening process? I asked Yaoshi whether he knew more about the story, and he laughed, saying: “What do you think? With shifu and shimu’s connections and influence, what do you think happened?” I asked him whether he was sure about that? He said: “I am not sure, but I think that was probably the case. Of course, Wangzi worked very hard to improve his skills too.” Wow, a typical “we know that we know, but I don’t have evidence to prove what I know” situation. I guess it is a judgmental call, believe it or not. But with the commonsense about how Chinese society works, I think it was possible that Master Duke and Master Qing helped Wangzi get into the competition and get the certificate eventually. (Reflective journal, February 24, 2020)

For Master Qing, emphasizing how hard it was to get a good place in specific contests was an effort to clear doubts about this contest and prove Wangzi’s ability, thus further helping him establish his emerging authority in the field. Master Qing’s move might be hard to swallow

in the Western world, but it was quite normal and understandable in local context. Master Duke's and Master Qing's authority certainly could mobilize some disciples to support Wangzi with all their hearts. For instance, Longtou not only showed Wangzi's photos related to this contest on his WeChat Moment, but also wrote "Congratulations to my tai chi brother Wangzi! He just got the 'National Sportsman' title awarded by the National Martial Arts Sports Management Center, now DTC has a successor!" (reflective journal, February 21, 2020). Wangzi needed to convince both the public and his fellow disciples. The public was easily impressed, but he still had a long way to go to convince peer disciples and other established martial artists. In this regard, Yaoshi's comments were relatively straightforward. I felt that others might have similar thoughts, but unless they were very close to me, no one would dare to spit it out so frankly. Yaoshi may be a little bit arrogant, but there is some truth to his observation:

The most prestigious domestic tournaments are real tournaments with only one first place for each category. Wangzi can only be considered a third-grade player in professional games. He is only good at performing routines; his skill in pushing hands is even lower. So far, he has not inherited what his father can offer. But if we look at it from another perspective, what he represents is also the mainstream of contemporary tai chi: performance and fitness. (Yaoshi, interview, January. 11, 2021)

In contemporary sports cultures, medals and ranks are often treated as status symbols within a sports community. People have certain stereotypes about what a medal signifies and often *relate* medals to one's excellence and achievements in a particular sport. It is almost habitual thinking to associate a gold medal with the mental image of "being the best." It is fair to say that medals and honor certificates have become one particular type of authoritative figure in their own ways. They have become part of the qualification for teaching martial arts. There is a high demand for medals among martial arts practitioners, especially instructors whose livelihood counts on trainee's faith in them.

Where there are demands, there is a market for that. It has become a profitable business

to organize tournaments and offer plenty of medals to contestants at a surprisingly high award rate. A knowledge gap in evaluating the quality of contests exists between the public and the martial arts industry. This gap allows martial artists to toy with public perception, appropriate the meanings of medals and claim fame, status, and eventually authority in the community. This is tricky since what they have been doing is not necessarily *lying*, but the whole picture of “medals and honors” is only partially presented. This type of selective tactical *showing* might be legal but not necessarily ethical. In this regard, the public needs to be more knowledgeable about the nature of different contests and make sound and solid judgments about the quality of awards and medals used by martial artists to establish their authority. Also, the state authorities should take more responsibility for regulating these competitions.

Summary

Seeing the body practice of contesting as participating in competitions under the guidance of written or hidden rules, this section discusses how it is used to differentiate practitioners and place them in different positions in the hierarchy of the martial arts community. Obtained through contesting, medals, awards, or other honorable certificates are authoritative figures that serve as symbols of excellence. Practitioners try to associate themselves with these authoritative figures and claim authority through these associations. Compared with martial arts instructors who already have solid careers, instructors in their early careers benefit most from honors gained through contesting. They can serve as professional qualifications that help them establish authority in front of the public and potential trainees. For accomplished martial artists, their need to participate in contesting in person is significantly reduced. Instead, they and their organizations can benefit from the performance of their trainees and disciples, which add glory to their master’s organizations.

Since performing well in contesting is a practical approach for practitioners to gain authority, more and more games are created to meet the needs of martial arts practitioners. There seems to be no regulation regarding how a game should name itself correctly. Significant terms such as “international” are often randomly taken by many regional, small-scale competitions that try to improve the influence of their commercial contests. Between the public and professionals, there is a knowledge gap about understanding the quality and scales of different games. Sometimes instructors make use of it to exaggerate their accomplishments by intentionally leaving out critical information that can help the public to make sense of the quality of different honors. To reasonably interpret practitioners’ self-promotion, it would be helpful for the public to be more knowledgeable about evaluating the quality of contests and martial arts performance in general. The state authorities should also take more responsibility for regulating these competitions.

Chapter VI

Conclusion

This dissertation has examined body practices' roles in the communicative accomplishment of authority in a TCMAO based on ethnographic data collected from an at-home organization. In this chapter, I will first respond to the research question by summarizing how five different body practices contribute to the communicative accomplishment of differential authority in a TCMAO. After that, I will discuss the implications of this dissertation research for studying authority from a CCO perspective and for the studies of TCMAOs. Finally, I will describe the limitations of this dissertation and propose directions for future research.

Summary Responses to the Research Question

To explore the role of body practices in the accomplishment of authority in a TCMAO, I first looked at the ethnographic data collected through participant observation, interviews, and reflective journaling. Through an organic iterative analysis process, I first summarized five popular and influential body practices within this type of organization: embodied instruction, photo-posing, body rituals, staged performances, and contesting. Then I looked at each of them closely to see how these practices helped people establish their associations with recognized authoritative figures and thus claim authority.

In this dissertation, embodied instruction refers to situations where people use their bodies to demonstrate, share, and teach martial arts to others under various circumstances. It can be categorized into master demo, testing touch, and embodied social insertion. Master demo refers to how people, such as the master or coach, demonstrate the proper techniques for specific postures, routines, or combat skills. As I have shown, master demo speak louder than words. Through master demo, instructors could *show* and *prove* that they were the legitimate vectors

and heirs of certain martial arts and establish their authority accordingly.

As for testing touch, it can be understood from three perspectives: curious explorations, power play, and rivalrous touch. Curious exploration offered a chance for instructors to establish their authority by helping learners gain embodied experience of legitimate skills. Power play reinforced and confirmed the existing authoritative relationship. Still, it may also have invited doubts and suspicions about the authority figure when people faked their performance to reinforce the current authoritative relationship. Rivalrous touch is the most hard-core and provocative form of testing touch. It aims at challenging others' authority to build the challenger's own. Practitioners adopted various coping strategies to protect their authority from challengers, ranging from ignoring to fighting back hard. Martial artists often revealed their characters and morality in this process. Since it takes both skills and marital morality to be a legitimate vector of specific martial arts, lousy morality revealed through rivalrous touch could also undermine the instructor's authority.

Embodied social insertion is about carefully choosing students to boost the authority of instructors and their organizations. By becoming the teacher of people with status and foreigners, instructors positioned themselves at the authoritative end of their relationships and thus inserted themselves into a social network they probably could not rise to through other means. Approvals from students with status and foreigners were extremely valuable. They validated the instructor's status as a legitimate vector of their arts and thus created a halo effect that could attract more disciples, which increased the instructor's authority. When it came to teaching foreigners, instructors not only positioned themselves as vectors of specific martial arts but also as vectors of the Chinese dream of strengthening cultural confidence and overpowering Western cultures, which could bring them more authority within the martial arts community roared with

nationalism.

Photo-posing is always staged for the camera and subjected to the gaze of others. It includes two layers of actions: Firstly, people manipulate their bodies to form specific postures to take pictures; secondly, people share those photos through various means. Practitioners used this approach to establish their associations with authoritative figures (human or other-than-human), thus, claiming differential authority and establishing their individual and organizational authority. This process focuses on building positive associations and avoiding negative associations that might hurt their authority. Also, through the mutual beneficial mechanism of *borrowing light* and *adding glory*, the masters and their disciples used photos as differential authoring devices of their associations to establish their respective authority through the same association: the master-disciple relationship. Fellow disciples could benefit from each other's authority through sibling relationships in the same tai chi family. These mutually benefiting two-way processes (borrowing light \rightleftharpoons adding glory) could benefit each end of the relationship. Together, they were beneficial to the authority of DTC since all disciples were its members.

Body ritual is a ritual that has the body at the center of attention. This dissertation examines what could be called the *communicative* function of body rituals. My study shows that through body performances embedded in various body rituals, such as saluting, kneeling, and tea offering, the disciples' associations with their ancestors, masters, and lineage were established, which was critical for accomplishing their differential authority. Since martial artists also represent their organizations, the latter's authority was also accomplished through being associated with authoritative figures that matter to this community.

Body rituals can establish the master-disciple association, which is supposed to be permanent. However, they can also dissolve this association. By performing the same body ritual

with another master, one can put an end to the former master's authority over this disciple and the association that enables this disciple to claim differential authority. This dissertation also shows that practitioners must continuously reproduce, materialize, and stabilize their associations with authority figures in daily body rituals and other practices to keep their authority in place.

Staged performances refer to martial arts performance performed at various stages for skill demonstrations and entertainment. Three interrelated types of staged performance were identified: eventful staged performance, mediated staged performance, and virtually staged performance. Staged performances often speak to a broader audience beyond the organization. The importance and influence of these events and media certainly matter; the more significant the stages are, the merrier! By performing on these stages, martial artists can claim authority by being associated with the prestige and influence endowed in these stages. Virtually staged performance is an opportunity for martial artists to become "self-made" influencers, which allows them to accumulate enough fame and status to be invited to attend eventful staged performance and mediated staged performance. The latter two often signify the official recognition of the self-made martial artists as an authority in the field. Three types of staged performance are often closely interrelated. One form of staged performance often leads to other forms of staged performance. Recordings of eventful and mediated staged performances are often reappropriated into materials to be shared in the virtual space.

Furthermore, an intraorganizational eventful staged performance is an opportunity to differentiate certain organization members from others by publicly displaying one's status within the organization, thus helping favored members to get more authority. The underlying premise is that the master, the central authoritative figures of a TCMAO, often allocate opportunities for staged performance according to their disciples' seniorities, skill levels, social backgrounds, and

most importantly, their appreciations. Performing on the stage showcases the scale and quality of one's association with the master, the most authoritative figure in the TCMAO.

Contesting refers to people participating in competitions under the guidance of written or hidden rules. People obtain medals, awards, or other honorable certificates from competitions. These token of honors are authoritative figures that serve as symbols of excellence. Practitioners claim differential authority through associating themselves with these figures. Contesting is an effective body practice that differentiates practitioners and places them in different positions in the hierarchy of the martial arts community.

For people in their different stages of careers, the importance of contesting vary significantly. Instructors in their early careers benefit most from it. For them, honors gained from contesting are critical authoritative figures that prove their qualification in teaching martial arts. For accomplished martial artists, it's less important to participate in contesting in person. Instead, they and their organizations could benefit from their trainees' and disciples' performances in contests, which add glory back to the organizations where they belong.

Due to the popularity of contesting, holding contests has become a very profitable business. More and more contests have been created to meet martial arts practitioners' needs. The value of medals, awards, and certificates varies significantly depending on the games. However, there is a knowledge gap between practitioners and the public in evaluating the quality and scale of these competitions. Some instructors exaggerate their accomplishments and claim authority that they do not necessarily deserve. In this sense, it would be helpful for the public to be more knowledgeable of the quality of different competitions and martial arts performances in general. The state authorities should also take more responsibility for regulating these competitions.

These five types of body practices interrelate with each other in many ways. Embodied instruction, especially master demo and testing touch, is the fundamental element that constitutes the daily activities of a TCMAO and serves the purpose of transmitting martial arts through generations (Brown & Jennings, 2011). An instructor can establish his/her authority through embodied instruction, which is also critical for the smooth implementation of effective training. Body rituals lay down the foundations for master-disciple relationships, which allow certain types of embodied instructions to be happening. For example, given the authority embedded in his/her identity, a master can be more rigid and harsh in training his/her disciples than training regular trainees.

Effective embodied instruction is key to people's satisfying performance in contesting and staged performance, which further strengthens the instructor's authority and the organization s/he represents. Photo-posing happens during all four other types of body practices and showcases the different layers of meaningful associations that practitioners value. For instance, by posing photos that show the master is teaching a posture to a disciple, the latter can show the world where s/he got her kungfu from. Photos of martial arts professionals holding medals or posing in fancy postures at various stages certainly help them showcase *when*, *where*, and *how* they are associated with those honors and stages, thus claiming recognition and status.

These five body practices focus on different ways of materializing associations with authoritative figures in various contexts. Both embodied instructions and body rituals focus on establishing one's association with the master and his/her legitimate lineage. They use people with status as stepstones to increase the legitimacy of these associations. However, body rituals often invoke dead ancestors in their associations, compared with embodied instructions. In the eventful and mediated staged performance, the reputation of the stages certainly matter greatly.

As pointed out previously, “the bigger the stage is, the merrier!” The same logic applies to contesting. However, many amateurs have no idea of the actual value of medals, awards, and certificates gained through contesting. Through photo-posing, people sometimes display incredible creativity and flexibility in selectively associating themselves with authoritative figures that can benefit them. These body practices offer different paths and techniques to help instructors and their organizations associate themselves with authoritative figures that can boost their status and authority.

This dissertation focuses on body practices’ critical roles in accomplishing authority. This inquiry is also closely related to another crucial question about how body practices contribute to the communicative constitution of a martial arts organization. Dobusch and Schoeneborn (2015) note that a social collective becomes “organizational” when decision-making instances become interconnected and are attributed to a collective actor. This is made possible through demarcation and negotiation of organizational identity. Body practices certainly play critical roles in this process.

As mentioned earlier, Master Duke’s unique frame spoke for itself and attracted people to learn from him. People in the community began to call his unique frame the “Duke style.” When Duke style became recognizable, although it was not the typical format of “symbols” such as logo and texts that we were familiar with, it was undoubtedly one unique form of *embodied symbol* that constituted DTC as a martial arts organization. Through embodied instruction, the “Duke style” was duplicated by Master Duke’s disciples and trainees. This type of embodied duplication could not be as accurate as making a copy of a document on paper by a photocopier, and there were variations and deviations. But overall, When DTC members practiced tai chi, people in the community were able to identify that they were practicing Master Duke’s frame

and thus recognized these practitioners' membership at DTC. In this regard, this frame, as a distinctive style, was the unique "uniform" worn by the *bodies* of DTC's members. It was not made by fabric but by its unique ways of handling the body.

When one's practices deviated from the "Duke style," one's membership and identity could be in doubt. For example, when I studied in Beijing between 2003 and 2006, I hung out with friends who learned Chen-style tai chi from another master. They did the posture *Buddhas Warrior Attendant Pounds Mortar* differently from Master Duke, and they influenced my ways of practicing it. Later, during my visit to DTC, Yaoshi immediately recognized this deviation in my practice and told me: "This is not us!" He did not spell it out, but he was suspicious about whether I was still a DTC member, wondering whether I had started to learn from other masters. My loyalty to Master Duke and DTC was questioned. I felt my *degree* of membership was reduced. I was still a disciple, but something was missing.

To reclaim my partially lost membership, I changed my posture back to how Master Duke does it. Organizational identity does not necessarily have to be claimed by discursive practices, and it could be done through body practices. By embodying the master's teaching, people can make a silent claim about their membership and identity. One's belongingness to a TCMAO is not always guaranteed. One must continuously produce one's membership by both language-based practices and body practices, such as daily body rituals. In other words, one must "practice" into a member. If I lose my "Duke style" frame again, I can still be *partially* deported from DTC.

During staged performances and contesting, when others recognize practitioners' frames as the "Duke style," both the practitioners and the third party attribute their performance and actions back to DTC. DTC thus becomes an actor that can "own" these performances and has its

glory (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011; Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015). Photo-posing and body rituals create meaningful associations between people and authoritative figures, and they develop associations that render people membership and identity. They also put people into different positions in relationships through body performances, such as kneeling or standing behind the master in a photoshoot. Differentiation of status further forms the chain of command and sequences of actions within a TCMAO: The master gives orders, and the disciples follow.

Overall, there is a lot to be discussed regarding how body practices constitute a TCMAO and organizations in general. I am looking forward to unpacking this topic further in future projects.

Implications

Implications for Studying Authority from a CCO Perspective

This study was meant to advance the research on relational authority from a communicative perspective (Bencherki et al., 2020; Benoit-Barné & Cooren, 2009; Brummans et al., 2013), especially research on the role of the body and body practice in the accomplishment of authority (Bencherki et al., 2020). It also extends ongoing research on the material dimension of communication (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Brummans et al., 2019; Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007; Fuchs, 2017) and advances the study of rituals in the CCO literature (Koschmann & McDonald, 2015) by revealing the communicative functions of body rituals.

Currently, Western thought dominates the mainstream academic world. People often use Western theories or concepts to explain local practices in different cultures and forget that these social concepts should be generated from first-hand knowledge of the society in question (Hamilton & Chang, 2011). This dissertation reminds us of the importance of considering the specific contexts of our investigation of authority: cultural contexts, professional contexts, and

organizational contexts. When we study authority, it is helpful to consider the particular cultural and social contexts of the organization we are studying.

In the case of studying China or other Eastern countries, it is essential to acknowledge that these societies have distinctive cultural traditions that are different from Western societies. We, therefore, need to recognize the local mode of organizing and reflect on how it influences the accomplishment of authority. Drawing on Chinese sociologist Xiaotong Fei's *chaxugeju* theory, this dissertation developed the concept of differential authority to describe how authority is extended and shared with others through association. It suggests that accomplishing authority means continuous efforts to establish solid relationships with authoritative figures and make these associations visible to relevant parties through communication, which refers to any means mobilized to relate one being to another (Cooren, 2018).

This dissertation makes, I think, a reasonable attempt to embrace indigenous theories and thoughts while studying authority from a CCO perspective. It might be time for the CCO community to consider other cultures as something more than exotic *research sites* for different projects. Instead, they can also be *inspirational hubs* that provide perspectives, concepts, and theories to enrich current CCO thinking. Fundamentally, indigenous concepts and theories tell us that there are different ways of *being* and *doing* that can enhance our ways of studying and conceiving reality. To better utilize these contributions from other cultures, scholars may want to master other languages, visit other countries, and collaborate with scholars native to these cultures. In other words, it is time to expand the boundaries of thinking and collaboration.

Also, I think we need to recognize the *specificities* of authority in various professions and industries. Take authority in TCMAOs as an example: This dissertation recognizes how a series of body practices contribute to the communicative accomplishment of authority. It also shows

that practitioners must handle *testing touch* carefully if they do not want their actions to backfire and compromise their authority. Testing touch is unique to the martial arts community as one type of embodied instruction. Professionals in other industries might have different body practices and discursive practices that can challenge or strengthen their authority. For example, an easy way to tell whether a traditional Chinese medicine practitioner is competent is by letting him or her touch the patient's pulse and see whether the practitioner can accurately describe the problems with this patient. Also, a football coach in the NFL certainly does not need to invoke dead ancestors in his discourse to claim his authority. However, we saw that traditional Chinese martial arts instructors often do so. Paying attention to the specific professional contexts means the scholars need to observe and study practices that are unique to this community and reveal these particular ways of doing and being. This line of investigation may help us gain knowledge and insights into authority-related practices in organizations in different contexts.

Also, to study authority, I think we also need to pay attention to the specific organizational contexts we are facing. Authority is not context-free. It does not occur in a vacuum and always occurs in specific organizational contexts. These contexts take on different meanings; it often includes, among others, particular forms of motivation, communication, teams, and leadership (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006); it can also refer to “a frame that surrounds the event and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation” (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992, p. 3). Here the context I want to emphasize is the unique traditions, norms, histories, and ideologies that prevail in a specific type of organization. Being aware of these factors increases our appreciation of the uniqueness of different organizations and thus helps us investigate critical elements that make a particular type of organization the way it is. It certainly helps us see how authority is nurtured and established through approaches unique to certain type of organizations.

Moreover, it is time to push forward studies about the relationship between individual authority, organizational authority, and professional authority. Current CCO literature has paid attention to authority *in* organizational settings (for example, see Bourgoin et al., 2020; Brummans et al., 2013; J. R. Taylor & Van Every, 2015) or in a specific situation where a country clerk processes a gay couple's marriage license application (Bencherki et al., 2020). Often, however, someone or something acts on behalf of the specific organization and profession she/he/it represents (Benoit-Barné & Fox, 2017), which also means that an individual's actions can also be *possessed* by the represented organization and profession (Bencherki & Cooren, 2011). Empirical evidence in this dissertation shows how individual authority is possessed and extended to the organization they belong to through the master-disciple associations, thus improving the organization's authority. Vice versa, disciples also appropriate the organization's authority to improve their own authority through the same association.

As the authority of individuals and organizations thrives, the profession they represent also benefits from it. Thus, when we put the words "organization" and "authority" together, it might be time to avoid only focusing on *authority in organizations*. Instead, it would be helpful to think about how the authority of individuals, organizations, and professions interact with each other and examine them in a more holistic approach.

Furthermore, given that CCO studies have already recognized the body's roles in constituting organization (e.g., Ashcraft et al., 2009), it might be meaningful to more systematically investigate the role of the body and body practices in constituting authority. Centering around the idea that body practice is *a form of communication* that forges connections and establishes relations (Cooren, 2018), this dissertation reveals how authority materializes through these practices since they produce meaningful associations between humans and other

beings (Kuhn et al., 2017). It also shows that body practices often *work along* with linguistic or discursive practices to produce associations. For instance, body rituals often involve slogans, remarks, and verbal explanations to make their meanings more sensible and resonatory for organizational members and audience of these rituals. Thus, it would be meaningful to think about how body practices work together with other practices to accomplish authority. We may also ask: What practices do people use to accomplish (organizational) authority?

While studying organizational rituals from the CCO perspective, Koschmann and McDonald (2015) recognize that organizational rituals possess agency and can participate in accomplishing organizational action. In other words, they can act and make a difference. My dissertation extends this line of investigation in at least two aspects. First, this dissertation distinguishes body rituals from other forms of rituals and recognizes body rituals' roles in creating meaningful associations; second, it advances research on the relationship between rituals and authority. We acknowledge that ritual can presentify authoritative texts; ritual can also be the active carrier and media to ventriloquize other actors. However, body ritual's agency has another layer of meanings. It can associate two or more actors together, allow them to "borrow light" from and "add glory" to each other, and thus accumulate each party's differential authority. Figuratively speaking, organizational ritual is not just the magnifying lens that transforms the trajectory of the light that travels through it; it is also the liquid glue that brings actors together and allows them to have a "chemical reaction."

Finally, I think we should take the role of visual practices in the communicative accomplishment of authority more seriously. Although visual practices are not the central focus of this dissertation, my investigation of photo-posing reveals the power of photos in materializing associations that help people claim differential authority. The findings advance the

literature on the role of the visual in power relations (Boxenbaum et al., 2018). Indeed, photos can shape people's perceptions of reality and "invite novel connections to be made" (Lehmuskallio & Cruz, 2016, p. 7). The latest material and visual turns in organization studies have recognized visuals' impact on generating a more immediate and powerful multi-sensory impact.

Also, visuals can help us better understand social actions in various cultural contexts and the embodied experience of actions as they unfold in space and over time (Boxenbaum et al., 2018). This turn should further include investigating the role of visual practices in the accomplishment of authority as one of its key venues. After all, visual strategies are central to the existence of an organization (Boden, 1994). Last but not least, it would be equally important to acknowledge that visual practices might vary significantly in different cultures and people often entangle them with other practices, such as spatial practices (W. Wang, 1982).

Implications for Studying TCMAOs

By combining the Western CCO traditions with a concept that emerged from an indigenous Chinese theory to study TCMAOs, this dissertation extends studies at the intersection of religious studies and organizational studies from a CCO perspective. It also contributes to the rising interdisciplinary field of martial arts studies (Bowman, 2015). This dissertation shows that studying TCMAO, a special kind of secular religious organization, contributes "fresh perspectives on the study of organizations in general" (Tracey, 2012, p. 108). When it comes to doing research at the intersection of organization studies and religious studies, it has been proven beneficial to adopt an Eastern perspective (Brummans et al., 2013, 2019) to examine organizations in an Eastern context. Findings from this type of investigations have indeed the potential to be used in exploring different kinds of religious organizations or even secular

organizations. Compared with secular organizations, secular-religious organizations might be unique in certain aspects of their operations, such as invoking dead ancestors or sacred figures (Takacs, 2001, 2003). However, since they all operate within the same social and cultural environments, they may share similar practices. We can thus use insights gained from investigating religious organizations to probe secular organizations. For instance, this dissertation only examined differential authority empirically in a TCMAO. However, it is reasonable to assume that this concept applies to other Chinese organizations since differential organizing is still prevalent in China.

The study of TCMAOs has been primarily focused on the historical, cultural, and social aspects of this type of organizations (Judkins & Nielson, 2015; Shahar, 2008, etc.). According to Confucianism and community traditions, a master's authority in TCMAOs is always taken for granted and assumed factual. From a performative point of view, this dissertation shows that the master and his/her organization must continuously produce and accomplish authority through various body practices that associate themselves with certain authoritative figures. Therefore, it is a new lens to explore authority in TCMAOs, and it invites us to bring divergent theoretical approaches to probe phenomena that were initially taken for granted. It is equally essential to scrutinize specific practices in TCMAOs. The CCO perspective has been proven to be very useful in studying authority. It can be more widely applied in studying different topics related to TCMAOs, such as relationship management and organizational branding.

Moreover, studying TCMAOs often involves cross-disciplinary efforts. As Bowman (2014) reminds us, "studies of many aspects of martial arts have been appearing within and around a surprising number of disciplines for a considerable number of years" (p. 1). Interdisciplinarity is often a critical characteristic of works in the burgeoning field of martial arts

studies. It might be a promising avenue to integrate the CCO tradition or communication studies in general into the study of TCMAOs.

Scholars with different theoretical backgrounds and interests can collaborate to produce innovative and inspiring studies. Together, they can help TCMAOs better survive and thrive in the contemporary world. For instance, one major challenge faced by DTC and other TCMAOs is how to better engage with modern management and organizing practices while still greatly relying on the traditional kinships between the master and his/her disciples. In this dissertation, DTC's development greatly counted on Master Duke's and Master Qing's authority, which was critical for accomplishing DTC's organizational authority. However, the hidden challenge of this situation is that if anything happens to them, the falling of DTC is predictable. In that sense, insights from the family business and management studies might help enact a sustainable development strategy that separates the organization's fate from the master's lifespan.

To conclude, TCMAOs are one type of secular-religious organization. My discussion has mainly focused on the secular aspects, which means that the spiritual factors are not the central focus of this analysis. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the spiritual elements of TCMAOs are not important. It is part of the iceberg waiting to be dug into from different perspectives. For instance, one of the underexplored questions is how martial arts' spiritual benefits are invoked in practitioners' discourse to establish the legitimacy of TCMAOs.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

I encountered several challenges in data collection and analysis. First, it would have been nice if the fieldwork in Zhengzhou in 2020 had not been interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It would have been easier for me to conduct face-to-face interviews with participants living in Zhengzhou, which would have allowed me to better observe subtle expressions that I

might have missed during synchronous mediated interviews (Janghorban et al., 2014) conducted through the social app WeChat. Also, Witnessing the participants' actual performances could have helped me better verify their stories. Fortunately, I was very familiar with DTC's operation and had collected plenty of fieldnotes and visual data during my earlier participant observation. Besides, I have kept a close eye on DTC through social media and group discussions. When I went over my data through the authority lens, I realized that my data was already incredibly rich even without my field trip in 2020.

What is noteworthy is that Fei's *chaxugeju* theory recognizes the extreme importance of relations and associations in Chinese society. Still, it does not deny that connections and associations also matter in a society organized through *tuantigeju*. There is no absolute difference between *tuantigeju* and *chaxugeju* regarding whether associations matter, but more a *difference in the degree* of mattering. China is a relational society, which means that relationships tend to matter more in many situations overall (Y.-H. Huang, 2003; Fei, 1947; Fei et al., 1992a; Ho, 1998; K.-K. Hwang, 2000, 2006), and they certainly matter more in some industries than in others. The value of differential authority depends on whether its audience *buys* the importance of meaningful associations with authoritative figures, sustained by a widespread belief in society. In TCMAOs, differential authority certainly matters greatly.

However, this does not mean that differential authority is the *only* form of authority that matters in TCMAOs. No matter how much differential authority a disciple can accomplish from being associated with a famous master, his authority might still be questionable if the disciple's skills are mediocre. Thus, to advance research on authority in TCMAOs, it is helpful to investigate how other forms of authority *coexist* and *co-act* with differential authority. After all, authority can also be seen as a phenomenon of plural and hybridized effects of presences(s) and

absence(s) of different forms of authorities.

Besides, although rooted in a indigenous Chinese theory, differential authority might also be found in other so-called high-context cultures (E. T. Hall, 1989) or even Western societies since the power of associations exist everywhere (Latour, 1986). The question is less about whether relations/associations matter but how they matter *to different degrees in different contexts*. The concept of differential authority should be further explored in more empirical studies to determine its applicability and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Studies that apply this differential authority lens to different types of organizations in different contexts and cultures are warranted.

This dissertation points out that the authority of individuals, organizations, and professions are interconnected and can be communicatively accomplished in a simultaneously integrated way. The analysis indeed reveals how the master and disciples' authority synchronously contributes to the authority of their organization. The old Chinese saying says, "when the water rises, the boat rises." Organizational authority certainly benefits its members' authority. This two-way pathway works well through the master-disciple associations. However, in this triangle, where three different types of authorities interact, the connections between professional authority and the other two types of authorities were only briefly analyzed. It is essential to continue to explore this topic more thoroughly.

Moreover, this dissertation summarizes five primary body practices that are important to TCMAOs. Future research can further probe these body practices or recognize other forms of body practices. Besides exploring body practices' role in accomplishing authority, it is promising to explore how body practices constitute organization and participate in organizational branding. This dissertation focuses on observing and categorizing body practices and counts on online

discourse and interview data to illustrate body practices' meanings. Future studies may further examine body practices on the *terra firma* of interactions and analyze how authority emerges through interaction. For example, how is authority embodied and materialized during an instruction episode?

Furthermore, this dissertation recognizes the role of local social media in organizing a TCMAO. Major popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Line are banned in China. In DTC, WeChat is the only virtual social space connecting members scattered around the world. Other Chinese social platforms, such as Weibo or Xiaohongshu, do not have the same popularity as WeChat. This dissertation acknowledges that members of DTC mainly use social media to showcase their associations with authoritative figures. People often exhibit these associations through statements evidenced by photos. Social media serves as the shopping window that display associations that matter to the community. To some extent, people's authority depends on continuously presenting their associations with authoritative figures. Future studies could further examine how social media, and media in general, participate in the communicative accomplishment of authority in TCMAOs. In China, media contributes to the CCP's legitimacy and effective rule by propagandizing citizens' experiences in China's legal system (Stockmann & Gallagher, 2011). Research in this direction could shed light on the communicative accomplishment of authority in a totalitarian society where media plays different roles from their Western peers.

To conclude, this dissertation empathizes how people use all sorts of body practices to claim meaningful and positive associations with authoritative figures, thus claiming differential authority. Besides body practices, discursive practices also play important roles in claiming associations. It is noteworthy mentioning that differential authority has its dark side. Since

associations with famous authoritative figures matter greatly in TCMAOs, it is not rare that people make false claims and counterfeit associations for their gain. One widespread practice consists of fabricating glorious stories about ancestors that boost the authority of specific lineages (Green, 2003). Even the famous Shaolin Temple's credibility can be in doubt regarding whether the famous *yijinjing qigong* was invented there (Gong, 2001). In contemporary China, we often see false self-acclaimed associations. For example, the notorious tai chi martial artist Baoguo Ma announced online that he defeated Peter Itaipava Bjj Irving, the former champion of European mix martial arts. The latter made a statement on his Facebook revealing how Ma's win was staged:

I did an acting job a year or two ago as the uke in a vanity project for this old kungfu guy Ma Baoguo, which I understood to be just a tribute to him that was not for general release anyway. Recently...he decided to edit the footage and claim he'd beaten me in a real fight... (Irving, 2017)

Here Peter sanctioned the false associations claimed by Ma. *Uke* originates from the verb *ukeru*, "to receive." In martial arts that involve throwing or grappling, the uke refers to the person thrown or successfully immobilized (Lowry, 2006). Here Peter used it to describe the party that takes attacks from another party in this staged combat. Peter's sanction was successful since many people heard about his side of the story.

However, it is hard to sanction every deceiving false association for practical reasons. This type of fraudulent behavior negatively influences the reputation of traditional Chinese martial artists and harms the authority of the profession of traditional Chinese martial arts instructors. Thus, how to sanction self-acclaimed fake associations and manage the dark side of the communicative accomplishment of authority in TCMAOs remains an ongoing challenge. It is theoretically and practically essential to investigate how destructive false claims might be sanctioned and promote a healthy and constructive environment for the traditional Chinese

martial arts industry. Further examination is warranted of the relationship between authority and sanction. Research on this question could further advance current discussion on authority from a CCO perspective.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Demographic Characteristics and Relevant Information of Participants

#	Alias	Sex	Age	Relationship with DTC	Residence	Education	Occupation
1	Duke	M	49	Founder	Zhengzhou	Associate degree	Tai chi master
2	Zhengyi	M	38	Disciple	Zhengzhou	Associate degree	Armed police
3	Taohong	F	54	Disciple	Taiyuan	High school	Coach
4	Chun	M	65	Disciple	Tokyo, Japan	Bachelor's degree	Coach
5	Xinggu	M	56	Partner	Hefei	High school	Project manager
6	Meigui	F	37	Disciple	Limoges, France	Ph.D. degree	Studio owner & coach
7	Wuzhe	M	45	Disciple	Australia	Master's degree	Studio owner & coach
8	Peijian	M	43	Disciple	Limoges, France	Bachelor's degree	Studio owner & coach
9	Jingang	M	40	Disciple	Zhengzhou	High school	Coach
10	Yaoshi	M	44	Disciple	Zhengzhou	Middle school	Coach
11	Xinxi	M	49	Disciple	Wugang	Associate degree	Teacher & coach
12	Linglong	F	34	Trainee	Zhengzhou	Associate degree	Small business owner
13	Chizi	M	32	Trainee	Zhengzhou	Associate degree	Tea science educator
14	Lang	M	47	Trainee	Zhengzhou	Ph.D. degree	Professor
15	Fang	F	40	Trainee	Zhengzhou	Bachelor's degree	Sales manager
16	Zhiyin	F	51	Trainee	Beijing	Bachelor's degree	Life coach
17	Luliu	F	55	Trainee	Zhengzhou	High school	Coach
18	Lehuo	F	38	Trainee	Zhengzhou	Associate degree	Small business owner
19	Zhihe	F	48	Trainee	Zhengzhou	High school	Small business owner

#	Alias	Sex	Age	Relationship with DTC	Residence	Education	Occupation
20	Zuoshi	M	35	Coach	Zhengzhou	Associate degree	Coach
21	Luohan	M	28	Coach	Zhengzhou	Middle school	Coach
22	Qiyun	M	47	Disciple	Qingyang	Bachelor's degree	Manager & coach
23	Wudao	M	40	Disciple	Penglai	Associate degree	Doctor, studio owner & coach
24	Luye	M	46	Disciple	Xuchang	Associate degree	Manager & coach
25	Mumian	F	56	Disciple	Xinyang	High school	Coach
26	Kuiyong	M	49	Disciple	Longyan	Associate degree	Studio owner & coach
27	Feng	M	33	Disciple	Nanjing	Middle school	Studio owner & coach
28	Dasheng	M	25	Disciple	Nanjing	Associate degree	Coach Marketing manager & part time Coach
29	Wenbin	M	38	Disciple	Beijing	Bachelor's degree	Coach

Note: unless noted otherwise, “coach” here refers to “tai chi coach,” and the city mentioned in the “residence” column is a Chinese city. All coaches worked at DTC were Master Duke’s disciples.

Appendix 2: Selected Interview Questions³

1. Why did you choose to practice Tai Chi in the first place?
2. How brought you to DTC? How did you get to know Master Duke?
3. What is the most prominent difference between DTC and other studios?
4. What do you think is the core strength of DTC?
5. Master Duke often says the word “our stuff,” what do you think “our stuff” refers to?
6. Do you feel any changes after practicing tai chi? If so, what are these changes?
7. What made you decide to become a life member of DTC?
8. What do you think about traditional rituals and ceremonies, such as the ancestor worship ceremony and the discipleship ceremony?
9. What factors would influence your decision to become Master Duke’s disciple or student?
10. How did you feel before and after the discipleship ceremony?
11. What do you think you should do as a disciple? How should you maintain a good relationship with your master and DTC?
12. What do you think are the things to avoid and not to do as a disciple?
13. In DTC, after each session, people performs a session closing ceremony. What do you think about such a ritual?
14. Do you often participate in any other rituals besides the ritual of ancestor worship and the session closing ceremony?
15. What are the rituals in your studio? Do you have your slogan?
16. What do you think about the pictures of ancestors and Master Shangchun hanging on the walls of DTC?

³ These questions were translated from Chinese.

17. What do you think of those posters about ancestors' teachings and codes of conduct in our lineage?
18. People like to take pictures with Master Duke and Master Qing. Why do you think people do this?
19. Do you share photos of you practicing and learning tai chi on WeChat?
20. I saw that you shared photos of you practicing tai chi at DTC online (showing the interviewees their posts). Can you tell me why you shared these photos?
21. Many disciples and students post photos they took with Master Duke and Master Qing on WeChat Moments. Why do people do this?
22. In one of the videos you posted, you showed people a skeleton during your teaching. What you did was very interesting. Can you explain why you did this?
23. How do you define your work and your identity?
24. What do you enjoy most about being a coach?
25. How do you define authority? What kind of person do you think can be called an authority in martial arts?
26. At DTC, the authority of the master is unquestionable. However, how do you tell who is the authority among 200 fellow disciples?
27. How do you establish your authority when you teach tai chi?
28. What is the authority of an instructor over his students?
29. What instructors and their studios can do to increase their authority? Is there anything they need to pay attention to?
30. How do you deal with people who challenge you in front of others? Can you share some of your experiences or stories you have witnessed or heard?

31. What do you think about communicating and combating with practitioners from other lineages or other martial arts?
32. Do you learn from other masters other than Master Duke?
33. What do you enjoy most about being an instructor?
34. How do you attract and retain students?
35. What is the hardest part of running a tai chi studio?
36. What do you think of people like Ma Baoguo and Lei Lei? What impact have they had on traditional Chinese martial arts?
37. As a student, what things the instructors do are most helpful to you?
38. How do you think about the role of media in the development of traditional martial arts like tai chi?
39. Master Duke and Master Qing often participate in performing for TV programs and events. What's the significance of that?
40. What do you think of the media coverage of Master Duke, Master Qing, and other disciples? How would media influence the development of our masters and DTC?
41. How do you feel about attending performances at various stages? What is the meaning of doing so?
42. Do you and your students often participate in performances?
43. How will attending performances influence the authority of the instructor and his/her studio?
44. What do you think of the value of attending competitions?
45. How does participating in competitions affect you, your students, and your studio?
46. How do you choose which contests to attend?
47. There are a lot of online competitions in China. What do you think of them?

48. What are the advantages and disadvantages of online competitions compared to live competitions?
49. What kind of new opportunities social media and video-sharing platforms, such as TikTok and Kuanshou, have provided to you? How might they change your ways of practicing and teaching tai chi?
50. As a trainee, how might social media and video-sharing platforms, such as WeChat and TikTok, influence your learning and practice of tai chi?
51. What do you think about the role of short videos in tai chi practice?
52. As a trainee, how do you feel about masters and coaches doing live streaming? Would you watch them?
53. What are the roles of WeChat in running your studio?
54. What are the roles of WeChat in DTC?
55. Many of our coaches and disciples repost Master Duke's posts in their WeChat Moments. Why do you think people do this?
56. What channels do you usually use to get the latest news and information about DTC?
57. I saw you share this video in the group (showing the interviewee his/her post). What made you interested in this video and want to share it?
58. Do you often follow the social media posts of Master Duke, Master Qing, and other coaches?
59. You have taught an online tai chi course; how did you feel about it? What do you think about online classes overall?
60. As a trainee, would you join an online tai chi course? Why?
61. As a coach of DTC, do you think it conflicts with your job to have your personal TikTok

account and your followers?

62. Do you watch Master Duke's videos online? How about other masters' videos?

63. What is the difference between watching Master Duke's videos and watching him teach his students in person?