

TOURISM & RECREATION

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Heritage tourism and Taijiquan. The case of Chenjiagou, Henan, RPC

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Abstract: At present tourism is considered a highly important component of the contemporary social system which has transformed and continues to transform ecosystems, settlements, landscapes and mentality. Globalization, which involves the circulation of mass tourism, consumer goods and related technology has thus helped to modify whole territories and the traditional customs of the native people, as other industrial sectors have. Travel has also become a kind of lifestyle for a growing number of people who have the desire to visit new places, meet people, experience unusual sensations. This is also true for the practitioners of Eastern martial arts who go near the places of origin of their discipline to deepen their learning by being in contact with the local customs, to learn from the renowned masters and the local community.

The study is an account of the visit to Chenjiagou village in Henan province of central China is the village of the Chen family whose ancestor Chen Wangting (1600-1680) created the oldest style of Taijiquan. This martial art was declared by the Chinese government in March 2006, to be part of the national heritage. The author stayed in Chenjiagou in the late summer of 2009 and in the spring of 2010, for a total of seven weeks, thus having the opportunity to collect a lot of direct testimonials, both visual and in conversation with residents and tourists. A special emphasis is devoted to the museum of Taijiquan. What seems to be most important is the inclusion in a network of really authentic relations, experienced by a person in search of himself through a discipline which guides him, in this location, to his other self. The author also expresses a concern that the village might be subject to transformations that would distort the alleged typicality.

Tourism, Modernity, Globalization

From the end of World War II the temporary movement from one's residence, be it for peace and quiet or for the search of something more exciting, has assumed such dimensions that social scientists are convinced that tourism is no longer a futile activity. No longer an accessory of the foundations

of modern times but a constitutive phenomenon of contemporary societies. Nowadays tourism is considered a highly important component of the contemporary social system which has transformed and continues to transform ecosystems, settlements, landscapes and mentality.

Meanwhile tourism has been the main industry of the world regarding employment and turnover

for about two decades. The circulation of mass tourism, consumer goods and related technology has thus helped to modify whole territories and the traditional customs of the native people, as other industrial sectors have. Importantly, more mature studies on the subject show the concept of an alleged “alternative tourism” to be rather unrealistic, considering that mass tourism as well as more selective ones both refuse standardization of Leisure [Smith, Eadington 1995; Viard 2003].

Travel has also become a habit for a growing number of people who have the desire to visit new places, meet people, experience unusual sensations to a point that for many this has become a lifestyle. The interruption of regular activities creates in fact a time and place contrasting with a day to day life. This, also, institutionalized makes it possible to act out various social experiments. From this perspective being a tourist gives one the feeling to be a part of the local population, while performing functional activities,

They serve as to follow a pleasing emotionalism, an independent constituent of the traits of modern societies and even more than those invested in recent decades by economic and cultural globalization [Campbell 1992].

If some decades ago it was believed that the most important aim of tourism was the search for authenticity [McCannell 1976], exactly this concept of authenticity is questioned today and replaced by a hedonistic search. In some cases - as in the tourism of martial arts, treated here - the opportunity to get access to the social environment of the back region [Goffman 1995] in which the daily life of the community is played out, sharing the habitual customs changes even more profoundly the meaning of tourist experiences. Indeed it searches for the cultural traditions but can not consider it immutable and fully developed - as it instead aspires a vague notion of authenticity - since it comes into contact with a culture that's alive - it thus changes it's nature adding cultural innovations.

The results of the contact between the local cultural elements and those introduced by tourism are not less authentic than they originally were.

Heritage Tourism and Martial Arts

Travellers are often motivated by a desire to “immerse in the natural history, human heritage, arts, philosophy and institutions of another region or country”, as it has been defined, almost twenty years ago, as *heritage tourism* by the highest authority in the world of tourism [World Tourism Organisation 1992]. The same source believes that this type of

reasoning concerns about 40% of international travel.

It is therefore, no coincidence that common goods and public assets like works of art, architecture, nature landscapes, historic city centres are subject to exploits by the tourist industry that tends to use these assets as private property rather than patrimony of humanity, causing damage stigmatised by many studies.¹¹

However, only in the last decade scholars have become interested in the “performing arts and intangible heritage” [Timothy, Boud 2003], exceeding the mere descriptive approach of monuments, sites and works of art, dominant until previously in literature on cultural tourism and heritage [Carter, Baxter, Hockins 2001]. Yet in 1990 it was obvious that: “Cultural tourism is experiential tourism based on being involved in and stimulated by the performing arts, visual arts, and festivals. Heritage tourism, whether in the form of visiting preferred landscapes, historic sites, buildings or monuments, is also experiential tourism in the sense of seeking an encounter with nature or feeling part of the history of a place” [Hall, Zeppel 1990].

It is therefore, even more important to document the experiences of those travellers who escape from the predatory logic of certain tourist industries and who make travel respectful of human and natural environments, often in a self-organized way reinforced by direct contact with members of the concerned communities. This is the case with the practitioners of Eastern martial arts who go near the places of origin of their discipline to deepen their learning by being in contact with the local customs. In fact the martial arts tourism is defined as: “A field related to sportive tourism in the meaning of trips made by sportsmen to tournaments, training camps, seminars and also for the sake of relaxation. However, martial arts practitioners more often travel for the purpose of learning and gaining competence” [Cynarski, Sieber 2007].

¹¹ In fact it's good to remember that the cultural heritage of a nation is an element of its essential identity, being thus inalienable as such. The term heritage evokes a complex of things that in the largest existing national legal systems of today are subjected - even if they are privately owned - to an effort regime dictated by a conservative interest believed to exceed the free availability of ownership. Moreover, the cultural heritage of a nation is always a complex mix, however unitarian, an aggregation strengthening with time which presents itself with a unique organic unity consistent in its belonging to the entire nation, therefore, as an extension to humanity. On this bases also the so called right of the uselessness of cultural goods has been stated, which has a value of its own, not as an object of trade or enjoyment.

The main object of interest of this particular form of tourism is therefore a unusual cultural one, it is not identified with an object, nor reducible to a physical place, a landscape, a panorama, but rather as a knowledge expressed by the performance and teachings of a master as well as from the community with its native students in the same housing, or in the vicinity, as the visiting martial arts practitioners. An immaterial asset thus consists of a set of psychophysical techniques supported by a complex theoretical system, handed down from generation to generation through a teacher who becomes himself a work of art, an object of admiration for all the practising tourists.

The research proposed here is a part of of this theoretical perspective, like other studies of the matter, from which however differs in geographical terms, since they mainly involved flows from Europe to the Far East, particularly to Japan [Obodynski, Cynarski, Litwiniuk 2005]. This action is instead focused on the specific case of a small Chinese village, met with increasing frequency of Taijiquan enthusiasts from around the world.

This is a first contribution that doesn't pretend to offer complete data but would like to suggest possible strategies for future research in a specific area rich in its universal appeal.

The Taijiquan, a humanitarian good

The Chinese government declared, in March 2006, The Taijiquan to be part of the national heritage. The following year the state body of the China Folk Culture and Arts Association certified the county of Wenxian as birthplace of Chinese taijiquan, while another public body, the Chinese Wushu Association, had it appointed as birthplace of Chinese Wushu Taijiquan. The county of Wenxian is located in Henan, the most populated province of the Chinese Republic, dotted with many sites which are documented in the earliest Chinese history (culture).

In 2008 the Chinese government, through the Jiaozuo Chenjiagou Taijiquan Research Institute has launched at UNESCO the procedure of recognition of Taijiquan as a humanitarian good. It's most probable approval would mean a very significant novelty, since the notion of cultural property is usually associated with items, not with an immaterial quality. In the case of Taijiquan this attribution not only refers to its prerogative to enrich the whole human race, but also to the fact that the masters of different ages represent an element which is indispensable for the maintenance and transmission of that knowledge, only by some masters, on an

extremely high level. In other words it would have been recognized as a knowledge reinforced by the experience of practitioners of all ages in all the parts of the world.

The recent action of the Chinese government, after the turbulent years between 1966-1975, during which every expression of traditional culture was attacked, reflects the new cultural politics. From the late seventies, cultural heritage has also been reaffirmed as an economic value, as a tourist attraction, which has resulted in the restoration of important monuments such as the Forbidden City and the Great Wall. Since 1982, with the publication of the Heritage Conservation Act, the conservation of cultural heritage has been strengthened through the promotion of scientific research, also on an increased local scale through patriotic educational initiatives aimed at defending the revolutionary gains, however based on the exploitation of the traditional, cultural identity [Sofield, Li 1998].

The museum of Taijiquan Chenjiagou

Public interventions realized in Chenjiagou - a village with a strong rural character in the Wenxian County surrounded by vast plantations of wheat, corn and peanuts, inhabited by about two thousand souls - are reflecting, on this place, as a connection between educational intentions and tourist promotion. The village is named after the family who were the custodians of the method of Taijiquan, encoded in the seventeenth century by Chen Wangting. He was a general of the Ming dynasty, who in 1641 commanded the garrison of the county. This has already been established since the thirties of the twentieth century by careful historical research [Chen Xiaowang 1990]. From Taijiquan, from the Chen family, derive other styles of this discipline practised today throughout the world by perhaps two billion people.

The author of this article has stayed in Chenjiagou in the late summer of 2009 and in the spring of 2010, for a total of seven weeks, thus having the opportunity to collect a lot of direct testimonials, both visual and in conversation with residents and tourists. Most of them being there for practising Taijiquan, but a group of tourists from Korea was just passing through as part of a heritage tour in the province of Henan. After about four years of work, funded directly from public administration, on 21 August 2009 - in the presence of high placed functionaries of the public cultural high office of tourism and sports - the first museum in the world dedicated to Taijiquan was opened [www.chnmus.net/html/20090824/255394.htmlwww.chnmus.net/

html/20090824/255394.html; www.cntjq.net/print.aspx?id=5200www.cntjq.net/print.aspx?id=5200]. The facility is the only one in China dedicated to a single martial art, although the government has invested heavily in the creation of a theme park dedicated to Bruce Lee, in Foshan city - in the district of Shunde – about 90 minutes driving from Guangzhou. Truth be told, apart from the highly popular “Small Dragon” the park is sparsely visited by tourists [Reuters 2010].

The building, housing the Taijiquan museum, constructed in a traditional architectural style, has three exhibition floors topped by an observation deck where about ten thousand handicrafts, weapons, books, calligraphy, old photographs, furniture and furnishings, plastics and reconstructed environments are collected.

These environments are monitored, spacious and well lit with the latest technology, to include interactive displays much appreciated by children. Captions, however are only written in Chinese, while the main panels with their explanations at the rooms entrances are both written in Chinese and English. Even instructional videos are transmitted with the alternating sound of two languages. Apart from that there is always a guide available, at the entrance of the park, who speaks English.

The museum is in fact constructed within a very monumental complex which holds sites of different interest. There are installations of other infrastructures planned by the government, as a more comprehensive plan for the redevelopment of the village, but already now the park has enough reasons to be attractive. Of a certain appeal is the restored residence of Chen Wangting, including a large courtyard dominated by a bronze statue of its founder, courtyards, walkways and gardens, corridors and pavilions painted with images and stories related to Taijiquan, but also furniture, statues and a collection of weapons. This site in particular is an object of devotion of the resident population. It can be attended for free during the celebrations of Chinese New Year's Eve in order to pay tribute to the ancestors. The restoration of this ancient monument was financed entirely by the Grand Master Chen Xiaowang – born in 1946, the main representative of the nineteenth generation of the Chen family, IX Duan, writer and calligrapher, certified by the Chinese Wushu Duan Association as a multiple winner of national and international competitions, thanks to the funds raised by his tireless work of relentlessly pursuing, for decades, to spread the knowledge of the discipline worldwide.

After the extensive area occupied by the historic residence of the founder, one crosses a door opening onto a path that crosses a large garden leading to

the museum. Here one arrives after a walk of about three hundred meters under five arches symbolizing the various stages of the discipline of learning. Before taking the monumental staircase to the museum, one passes by an enormous design of a Ba Gua, best to be admired from the top floor of the building. One also passes some large stone statues representing Taijiquan. From above there is a spectacular view over the entire complex and the surrounding fields.

The evidence collected by the staff of the museum will confirm their expected seasonable turnout – the winter is very harsh in the whole county – with significant contributions of hundreds of students who have already visited the facility. A ticket costs 40 yan (CNY) and grants also access to another suggestive site, the house of Yang Luchan – the founder of the Yang Taijiquan school, whose style is currently most widespread in the world – situated not far from the complex. The entrance fee is a lot of money for residents, but it certainly does not discourage the visit of strangers, especially those from foreign affluent countries.

Tourists of Taijiquan, research lines

Taijiquan enthusiasts from abroad have been reaching Chenjiagou already for some time – some Europeans and Americans from the 1990's – attracted, more than to the new museum, to the opportunity to study, near the hostels, with masters of world renown. But there is also the attraction to the atmosphere of sacredness that permeates this place, already in the imagination before the actual experience, as in all places where ancestors of a certain expression of civilization used to live. In this case – as well as in other martial arts – it is represented by a knowledge which is anything but extinct but alive and well in lessons from the masters of the Chen family, thanks to whom it is expanding throughout the world while maintaining the basic principles of one's own tradition.

The village is frequented by foreign practitioners especially during summer, for the same obvious reasons that the availability of free time in summer stimulates other tourist activities.

One can also visit during other periods of the year, with lower inflows during the winter because of the harshness of the climate that discourages travel. Moreover, the journey presents some difficulties. To get to the nearest airport (Zhengzhou, less than half an hour flight from Beijing) takes two to three hours, by car. Only if the conditions are acceptable to cross this long stretch of rough path, which includes the crossing of the Yellow River by a

bridge constructed out of boats. During the summer arrivals are distributed in various structures, some of which are open only during that period, while in other seasons the masters who manage them are teaching in urban localities in the same or even other provinces. Some schools however remain opened all year as happens with the most important in magnitude and age of construction, which is located in the centre of the village, adjacent to the house of the founder Chen Wangting. It's managed by G.M. Chen Xiaoxing (1951 -) a chairman of Chenjiagou Taijiquan School and younger brother of Chen Xiaowang G.M. This place however, is visited once a year by G.M. Chen Xiaowang to direct a seminar that draws at least hundreds of his students from all over the world. Another structure, always open, opened only two years ago. More or less like the ones managed by masters who live elsewhere, this one is led by master M. Chen Bing (1971 -), twice winning champion of the twentieth generation and a grandson of two famous grand masters of the nineteenth generation who has been already mentioned. For ten years now he has been regularly teaching in various centres in Asia, Europe and North America, he also continuous to deal with the daily affairs of the village as deputy and vice president of the Chenjiagou Taijiquan School. The increased influx of foreign and Chinese practitioners is clear to see from the ongoing work in this second structure as to provide it with a refectory and a more spacious gym.

In regard to the relationship between tourism and the martial arts, it is interesting to point out that Rome was the first European location where the young master went in 2006, to return four times ever since, visiting with a thirst for knowledge the most symbolic monuments. In fact he has repeatedly stated that the appreciation of the Chinese cultural heritage, embodied by the traditional Taijiquan, from those, like the Italian, which also has its own traditional heritage, give evidence of how cultural facilities serve as to create a bond and exchange between different societies.

During my recent stay in Chenjiagou I have been able to practise and communicate with a number of enthusiastic practitioners from Germany, Italy, Poland, United Kingdom, Russia, Spain, Switzerland and the USA. The analysis of the motivations and behaviour of this particular type of tourists requires a more complex preparation of the survey instruments than has hitherto been possible to prepare. The intensity of training, relocations differentiated from accommodations and training venues, the difficulty of the language, the coming and going of arrivals and departures made it impossible to systematize a survey

with questionnaires and interviews. Only seven practitioners, with whom I lived and practised for several days and even weeks, accepted and could respond, be it by writing down their reflections or by answering questions posed in the form of an interview. These contributions, although much reduced in number compared to the attendance of dozens of practitioners from Europe and America, is nevertheless useful as a start to prepare for a larger survey. They help to make the next questionnaires and interviews more clear due to the fact that the respondents, although from different cultural areas, are sufficiently homogeneous. Moreover, because they give a valuable guidance as to investigate the phenomenon in depth, due to the fact that they blend in with my direct participation. One method, undertaking social research, after the first seminal work, has a very well established tradition for the study of rural communities [For example: Pitt-Rivers 1954] which is giving amazing results about urban communities aggregated around a sporting passion, especially regarding the boxing scene at the urban fringe [Wacquant 2004], similar to the traditional martial arts, if not in its margin at least in its consequent choice of lifestyle.

The prospectus sets out the basic outline of the seven respondents:

Nation	Age	Gender	Profession	Years practicing Taijiquan
Germany	16	F	Student	9
Germany	30	M	School teacher	6
Germany	34	M	Sports teacher, therapist	10
Switzerland	38	F	P.E.teacher, body therapist	4
USA	44	M	Psychotherapist	1
USA	53	F	Taijiquan-Qigong teacher	22
USA	63	F	Retired teacher	15
Average	39,7	-	-	9,5

Because of the presence of a sixteen years old, the average age of the seven respondents is presumably lower than the actual one. Direct observation in fact suggests a more likely average of, only adult respondents, close to 43,6 years. In contrast, the average years of practice are probably overestimated, because it's quite common for a practitioner to feel a desire to go to Chenjiagou after four to five years, if not earlier. As to the duration of the stay, the three Americans – along with the largest group - left the village after three weeks, one of the Germans remained for a month, more or less the average period for visiting tourists.

The Swiss girl, the German teenager and his compatriot, in his thirties, moved to the village for about a year. The two adults thus had to leave their jobs as the adolescent had to leave school for



an unusually long time, making the choice of deep integration in the welcoming community. All three in fact also took regular lessons in Chinese language, as well as in Taijiquan. A choice consistent with the willingness to learn in detail the fundamentals of discipline, perhaps to become professional teachers themselves, but in the meantime to deepen their knowledge and their personal improvement. Particularly the case of the Swiss girl and even more that of the young German made a big impression because this can offer a fertile basis for a specific survey on female tourism with regards to the martial arts.

Conclusions (provisional)

Using the written answers, the dialogues and direct observations one can draw lines of research - not only applied to the specific case of Chenjiagou – (apart from those just mentioned on the length of staying), average age, professional occupations, the relation between martial arts and tourism and lifestyle choices on gender issues.

A crucial issue is that of the access to the back region offered to practitioners who visit Chenjiagou Taijiquan. The modern tourist is largely stimulated by the desire to get to know cultural habits and lifestyles different from their own, which means that a place or community becomes the object of a tourist attraction when

visitors can participate in things that make it different from their own habitat. In this regard one can assess: G.M. Chen Xiaoxing as well as M. Chen Bing are both residing in their schools with their families, therefore the practitioners have the opportunity to come in close contact with them, being often very near their agricultural activities, construction works, trading, in which tourists can participate, also just for fun; purchasing, storing and cooking foods that the tourists eat along with the residents and practitioners. Then there are the festivals, celebrations, ceremonies, demonstrations involving everybody, treating everyone equally, without distinction between a resident and a tourist. The same goes for the collective lessons, many students who went and still go to Chenjiagou were honoured as disciples within the family of his master, with several ceremonies over the years that have taken place mostly in Chenjiagou – only sometimes in other parts of the world – with the obvious outcome of a strengthening tie with the entire Chan family. However, this actual participation in the daily life of the community does not go without consequences.

From the interviews and informal conversations emerges a widespread concern that the village might be subject to transformations that would distort the alleged typicality. This disquiet is almost always in balance with the consideration that the modernized infrastructure improves the lives of the residents. These attitudes

are already widely reported in literature since the tourist usually leaves with a preconceived image that drives him to seek an exciting alternative from the alienation of the industrial society. In order to be able to accept this almost inevitable disappointment one criticizes the commodification of culture, or accepts it as a means for local economic development. One mentions – an inevitable disappointment – as a result of a naive desire, because, (again citing Goffman), also the reverse side is a part of reality and is therefore, authenticated, much as an unlikely background, but all cultures are the product of a continuous change, including state forces to market their resources, including strictly cultural ones. Believing in a supposed purity of the origins of the extra-Occidental Society – with a particular reference to the “magic” of the East – betrays a rather ethnocentric vision that denies their (hi)story and reflects just another character of modernity we would like to escape from. Attention should be drawn to the fact that all interviews are reflecting a degree of consciousness, writing about the fact that the development of tourism in the village can be an important factor of progress for the residents. It is also very significant that some of them highlighted the importance of the controlling of these activities which should remain in the hands of the local people.

Moreover, all the testimonies, although collected in various ways, maintain a high satisfaction with the experience. Practitioners of Taijiquan, who plan a return trip to Chenjiagou, always return home refreshed, both physically and mentally, having experienced all the facets for a satisfying holiday in terms of recreation, relaxation, energy recovery, cultural enrichment etc. These purely hedonistic facets are only a secondary aspect of the experienced satisfaction. What seems to be most important is the inclusion in a network of really authentic relations, experienced by a person in search of himself through a discipline which guides him, in this location, to his other self, with whom he has come in a relationship renouncing all his usual habits and thus putting to the test its consistency. More and more thorough research is certainly needed for more significant conclusions, but maybe it is already now possible to hypothesize that the tourist of the martial arts by finding his other self, creates himself.

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Turystyka dziedzictwa i taijiquan. Studium przypadku Chenjiagou, Henan, ChRL

Słowa kluczowe: turystyka globalizacja, dziedzictwo narodowe, muzeum

Streszczenie

W obecnych czasach turystyka jest uważana za wysoce ważny komponent we współczesnym systemie społecznym, który przekształca i dokonuje transformacji w ekosystemach, osadach ludzkich, krajobrazach i mentalności. Globalizacja, która wiąże się z masową turystyką, konsumeryzmem, technologią, która modyfikuje całe terytoria i tradycje krajowców, a nawet sektory przemysł. Podróże stały się stylem życia dla coraz większej liczby ludzi, którzy chcą odwiedzać nowe miejsca, spotykać ludzi, doświadczać niecodziennych doznań. Dotyczy to także adeptów wschodnich sztuk walki, którzy udają się w miejsca pochodzenia ćwiczonych dyscyplin by pogłębiać swoją wiedzę w kontaktach z lokalnymi zwyczajami oraz by uczyć się od mistrzów.

Praca jest relacją i przemyśleniami dotyczącym wizyty w miejscowości Chenjiagou, w prowincji Henan w środkowych

Chinach, miejsca zamieszkania rodziny Chen, której przodkiem był Chen Wangting (1600-1680) twórca starego stylu chińskiej sztuki walki Taijiquan (pięć wielkiej ostateczności). W marcu 2006 rząd chiński uznał Taijiquan za część dziedzictwa narodowego.

Autor przebywał w Chenjiagou w lecie 2009 i na wiosnę 2010 roku ogółem przez siedem tygodni by zebrać bezpośrednie relacje, zarówno wizualne jak i wnioski płynące z rozmów z rezydentami i turystami. Duży fragment tekstu poświęcony jest spostrzeżeniom dotyczącym muzeum Taijiquan i roli jaką ono pełni. Podkreślona została rola autentycznych relacji, których doświadcza osoba poszukująca własnego lub alternatywnego „ja” poprzez dyscyplinę kierującą nią.

Autor wyraża także obawy swoje, a także otoczenia dotyczące wpływów i transformacji, którym może podlegać wioska Chenjiagou ze strony licznych odwiedzających z innych kultur i stron świata. W podsumowaniu stwierdza też, że potrzebne są bardziej szczegółowe badania dotyczące większej liczby respondentów, które potwierdziłyby hipotezę, iż turysta praktykujący sztuki walki szukając innego „ja”, tworzy siebie.