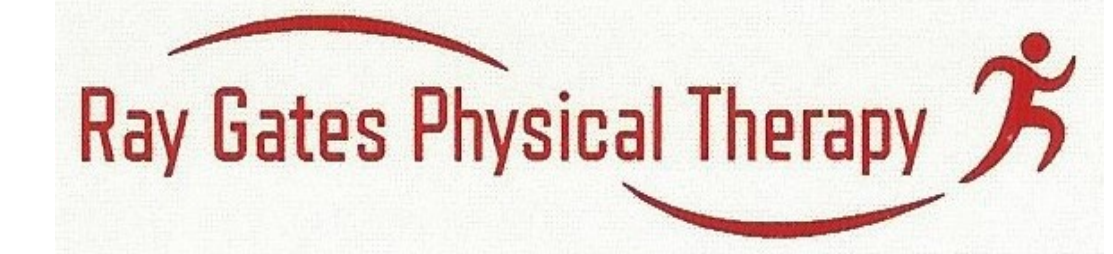




# What are Tai Chi and Qigong? The Need to Define our Arts for the Health Industry and General Public



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## Why do we need a definition?

“Tai Chi” is the modern, English and more publicly recognized name used for the Chinese martial art, *taijiquan*. In the United States approximately 3.76 million people stated they practiced Tai Chi in 2018<sup>1</sup>. However, the general public’s perception and understanding of Tai Chi is limited by its exposure. Many perceive Tai Chi as “slow, gentle exercise for old people” with images of elderly people in parks gently waving their arms through the air. This perception also permeates much of the health industry, as depicted in media campaigns and educational materials.

Coupled with this is the increasing number of programs and organizations claiming that “traditional” Tai Chi is “too complicated” for most people to learn. They offer heavily modified programs which imitate the movements in Tai Chi forms yet lack any of the underlying theory or philosophy. Some argue that what they offer is “Tai Chi” without the “martial art” because what they offer only focuses on the health benefits. Some go further and qualify people as “Tai Chi Instructors” through short online or in-person courses, effectively giving these people the equivalent status as that which has been earned by others through years of dedicated study and practice.

Qigong faces similar issues, with an increasing number of “instructors” separating the movements and the breathing from the internal energy work and the accompanying theory and philosophy that underlies its practice. This results in Tai Chi and Qigong being reduced to little more than choreographed light exercise programs, often being taught by people with minimal training, and sometimes combined with other forms of exercise, such as yoga, aerobics, or Pilates, to the point where it is no longer recognizable as Tai Chi or Qigong.

That is not to say these programs are without merit. The argument, however, is that these things should not be called Tai Chi or Qigong because they have deviated so far from what their namesakes are. A comparative example would be the differentiation between (traditional Chinese) acupuncture and dry needling<sup>2</sup>.

The health industry and general public know, through an ever-increasing body of evidence-based research, that Tai Chi and Qigong have many health benefits. As this awareness continues to grow, so will the demand for quality instruction. Instructors and health providers may one day be in a position to lobby for health insurers to cover Tai Chi and Qigong classes both as a complementary treatment option and as a means of preventative care. It is therefore imperative that we protect the integrity of Tai Chi and Qigong – including its schools and Instructors – whilst ensuring that the public is accessing quality, legitimate instruction to gain the maximum benefits. Determining appropriate definitions for Tai Chi and Qigong will educate the health industry and the general public on what Tai Chi is, and of equal importance, what it is not, and ensure that only those programs that meet this definition have the right to call what they do Tai Chi or Qigong.

## What would a definition look like?

Achieving a definition that all relevant stakeholders can agree upon will be a challenge. With the expansion and ‘Westernization’ of Tai Chi there are numerous interpretations of both Tai Chi and Qigong

that are different enough to cause debate as to which is the “true” Tai Chi or Qigong. Ideally, an appropriate body of Tai Chi and Qigong experts will determine and administer a working definition of Tai Chi and Qigong so that all key stakeholders understand what Tai Chi and Qigong are, and what they are not (see next section).

**“With increasing interest in Tai Chi and Qigong as a complementary form of health care and increasing numbers of programs rushing to meet this need, working definitions of our arts are needed now more than ever.”**

It is not this writer’s place to propose a definition for either Tai Chi or Qigong, however for the purposes of ongoing discussion the following concepts are suggested as a potential basis of – but not a limitation to – a definition for Tai Chi:

- it is derived from and adheres to the traditional teachings and philosophies associated with Tai Chi (including, but not limited to, the Tai Chi Classics, principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), and Taoist philosophy);
- it encompasses the integration of mind, qi, and body, thus demonstrating both internal and external application;
- it demonstrates application as a martial art (whether or not martial application is taught to students);
- it is an intangible cultural treasure of China, as inscribed by UNESCO<sup>3</sup>.

## Who would be responsible for the definition?

At this time there is no formally recognized national (USA) or international authority which represents Tai Chi and/or Qigong. In the United States there are several bodies that claim representation of Tai Chi and/or Qigong, including the American Tai Chi and Qigong Association (ATCQA), and the International Medical Tai Chi Qigong Association (IMTQA). The United States of America Wushu-Kungfu Federation (USAWKF), and the International Wushu Federation (IWUF) also represent Tai Chi nationally and internationally, respectively, though primarily in a sporting/competitive capacity. A number of other countries have similar equivalent bodies, for example, in Australia Tai Chi is represented nationally by the Tai Chi Association of Australia (TCAA) and Tai Chi Instructors can be nationally accredited by Kung Fu Wushu Australia (KFWA), which is linked to the Australian Sports Commission (ASC).

However, it remains unclear whether any of these organizations are sufficiently and legitimately representative of the greater Tai Chi and Qigong community, and whether any definition any of these organizations cared to propose could be upheld in a meaningful way.

Issues for consideration in determining an appropriate authority to define Tai Chi and Qigong include, but are not limited to:

- are any existing bodies adequate/appropriate to take on this role, or does a new body need to be formed?
- should it be determined at the National (USA) or International level?
- how to ensure that any expert body is sufficiently representative of all key stakeholders, especially existing Tai Chi and Qigong Instructors?

## What are the next steps?

With increasing interest in Tai Chi and Qigong as a complementary form of health care and increasing numbers of programs rushing to meet this need, working definitions of our arts are needed now more than ever. This presentation was originally proposed as a discussion panel with the aim of developing and coordinating a plan of action. In lieu of this, this writer proposes that a working group needs to be established to develop a plan of action, and see that plan executed. This writer therefore calls on all interested parties willing to form such a group, with the intent that upon its formation the group will determine its own leadership and course of action amongst its members, to register your intent to be part of this group at the following email address:

[rayg@wisconsintaichiacademy.com](mailto:rayg@wisconsintaichiacademy.com).

## References

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