

PIC+1,000

A picture and a thousand words

Is it exercise? Medicine? Religion? Philosophy? A scholar and enthusiast contemplates the ancient art of tai chi, whose Toronto connection gave it a global following

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

For Danny Simmons, a Toronto musician and sound designer, Taoist tai chi has been a life-saver. Faced with the prospect of a double hip replacement, he took up this increasingly popular practice, and gradually regained strength and flexibility in his joints.

"Taoist tai chi allowed me to take my health into my own hands," he said. "In the end I didn't need the surgery."

This week, along with thousands across the world, Danny celebrated the 40th anniversary of the International Taoist tai chi Society. Founded by the late Moy Lin Shin in 1970, the society has its global headquarters in Toronto's Dundas-Spadina Chinatown. Today, Taoist tai chi is a respected brand with 40,000 members in 25 countries. It is arguably one of our city's best examples of cultural and spiritual entrepreneurship, bringing its unique style of health practices to thousands around the world.

On Thursday morning, the loud glitz and commercial bustle of Dundas Square offered an incongruous backdrop to the hundreds in red T-shirts who were performing the slow, gentle arcs of the 108-step routine. As onlookers clutched their caffeine and fiddled with their iPhones, people performed moves with fanciful Chinese names such as "stork spreads the wings" and "carry tiger into the mountains."

In the corner by the Eaton Centre, an animated conversation was taking place. Ziyun Weng, a recent immigrant from Chengdu, was taking in the sights with her Chinese friend. "Wo feichang kaixin — I'm so happy," she exclaimed, "to see so many foreigners who appreciate Chinese culture." As we chatted in Chinese, other bystanders drew near and listened in. I realized that we, too, had become part of the spectacle, Chinese and Westerners joining together in a piece of cross-cultural performance art.

My first encounter with tai chi took place far away from Dundas Square. I was a student in China in 1987, long before Beijing became a maze of hypermodern skyscrapers



RICK EGLINTON/TORONTO STAR

shrouded in smog. One morning I visited the Purple Bamboo Park not far from the People's University where I studied. In the dawn hours it was thronged with people of all ages practising this simple and elegant physical art. To a 19-year-old Westerner, it was exotic and mesmerizing. Tai chi has since become a global phenomenon, and here I am discussing its finer points with a group of Chinese women in Dundas Square.

Although tai chi began in China as martial art, it has always maintained strong connections to Taoism, China's indigenous religion, which emphasizes balance, health and long life. Moy Lin Shin, the Society's founder, described tai chi as a kind of moving meditation. According to Chinese understanding, the physical movements of tai chi channel vital energy, known as Qi, and bring about a deeper spiritual awareness of the body and its con-

nection to the world around. The effects are not just physical but also mental and even spiritual.

"The practice gave me a healthier, more flexible body but it also reset the way I look at the world and my place in it," said Chris Farano, manager of the Society's Toronto office. Taoism is a kind of physical spirituality that fuses body, mind and spirit together in a dynamic interplay. Practitioners do not sit on rigid wooden pews, but move and chant in temples and in open spaces.

On D'Arcy St., not far from Dundas Square, lies the headquarters of the Taoist tai chi Society's separate religious arm, known as the Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism. If you climb up to the third floor, you will discover a Taoist temple, complete with statues and incense, which serves as a sacred space for chanting, veneration of the gods, and rituals for the departed. Although the chanting is in Cantonese, the words

are written out in the Roman alphabet so that anyone can participate. You can get a sense of what Chinese religious life is all about.

It's hard to underestimate the importance of this outreach. Since its founding nearly 2,000 years ago, Taoist religion has maintained an aura of esoteric mystery that has caused it to be described as the world's least understood religion.

The suppression of religious life in communist China during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) nearly caused Taoism to become extinct. In 2010, Beijing still struggles to control the place of religion in society; Taoism is being reinvented in Toronto.

Though it's not always remarked upon, Toronto has cultural advantages that surpass the new Asian financial capitals and the old European ones. We are a global city where cultures and religions are free to open their doors and invite

the city inside, and where the city invites the world onto its public squares to demonstrate their practices for all to see. Some encounters are grand spectacles inviting gawking tourists and flashing cameras. Others are more ordinary encounters woven into the fabric of daily life so that we hardly notice them. Out of these interactions, Toronto creates itself day by day as a space for global cultural dialogue, and model for the rest of the world.

Probably the best-known saying from Taoist scripture is, "The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step." For many Chinese immigrants, Toronto is the end point of a journey. But for Moy Lin Shin, who sent out this Chinese art from Toronto to the world, it was just the beginning.

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