

Taiji practice in Switzerland: a short report

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KEYWORDS: Taiji; Switzerland; practice settings; course characteristics; health promotion

Over the past two decades the demand for traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) in the general population has continuously increased in Switzerland^[1-3] and is frequently implemented in medical teaching^[4,5]. Together with Qigong, Taiji is commonly regarded as a mind-body practice integrating TCM principles of health and longevity^[6-8]. This form of slow intentional body movements is rooted in ancient Chinese martial arts and aims to strengthen and relax the physical body and mind, enhance the natural flow of qi, and improve health, personal development, and self-defense^[8]. In the West, as the preventive and therapeutic benefits of Taiji practice are gaining empirical support^[9-12], the popularity of this form of low impact mind-body practice is increasing^[7,8,13]. The present article aims to provide a brief overview of the development and current status of Taiji practice in Switzerland with an outlook on future perspectives.

1 A brief historical review

The first Taiji schools in Switzerland were established at the end of the 1970s. At the beginning of the 1980s, Taiji was included into the elective sports program of some Swiss universities. Today, seven of eleven universities in Switzerland offer

Taiji courses on a regular basis as part of their sports program. In 2000, the Swiss Society for Qigong and Taijiquan (Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Qigong und Taijiquan, SGQT) was established. It is a national professional association of Taiji teachers of various styles and is in charge of certifying qualified Taiji and Qigong teachers. The main objective of SGQT is the promotion and maintenance of high quality and ethical standards in the teaching practice of Taiji and Qigong in Switzerland. Besides the national SGQT association, there are international Taiji associations represented in Switzerland that are related to a specific Taiji style or lineage (e. g. the International Tai Chi Chuan Association and the Chen Xiaowang World Taijiquan Association). Since 2001, every two years the international Taiji meeting “Tai Chi Tcho” is taking place in La Chaux de Fonds, Switzerland where the exchange among Taiji practitioners of various styles from different countries is cultivated. Furthermore, various national and international style-specific and style-independent workshops are regularly organized mainly by the leading Taiji associations in Switzerland. It is only in recent years that Taiji-related presentations are included

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in the ASA TCM Congress, namely, the Swiss congress for health care professionals engaged in TCM hosted by the Association of Swiss Medical Societies for Acupuncture and Chinese Medicine (Assoziation Schweizer Ärztgesellschaften für Akupunktur und Chinesische Medizin, ASA).

2 Practitioner characteristics and current setting of Taiji practice

Even though in 2008 only about 3.8% of the Swiss population was engaged in regular mind-body practice such as Taiji, Qigong and Yoga, the tendency is increasing. About 84% of these practitioners were women with an average age of 49 years^[13]. To date, representative data characterizing Swiss Taiji practitioners in particular is not available. Besides the provision of Taiji courses in Taiji schools and through the elective sports program at the universities, Taiji courses are also offered by some healthcare institutions like nursing homes, hospitals, rehabilitation and wellness centers, TCM clinics and some patient associations such as the Swiss Rheumatism League (Rheumaliga Schweiz).

3 Characteristics of Taiji courses

To assess characteristics of beginners and advanced

courses, we conducted a survey among 292 active Taiji teachers in Switzerland. The response rate was 47% ($n = 136$). The participants were asked to declare which Taiji style(s) they are teaching and to characterize their Taiji courses by rating the degree of relevance of various course contents on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (= not relevant at all) to 4 (= highly relevant). The list of potential course contents is based on characteristics of Taiji courses described in previous publications^[6-8]. To compare characteristics of Taiji beginners and advanced courses, two-sided Mann-Whitney U-tests were conducted. The level of significance was set at $P \leq 0.05$.

The Taiji style most frequently taught in Switzerland is the Yang style (see Figure 1). As shown in Figure 2, in most of the Taiji beginner courses a strong focus is laid on increasing practitioners' body awareness (70.4%), teaching the motion sequences (64.3%), and health promotion (59.1%). In fact, health promotion is the only aspect that is equally emphasized in all Taiji courses independent of the course level ($P = 0.58$), while the relevance of all other investigated course contents is perceived to be significantly higher in courses for advanced Taiji practitioners ($P < 0.05$).

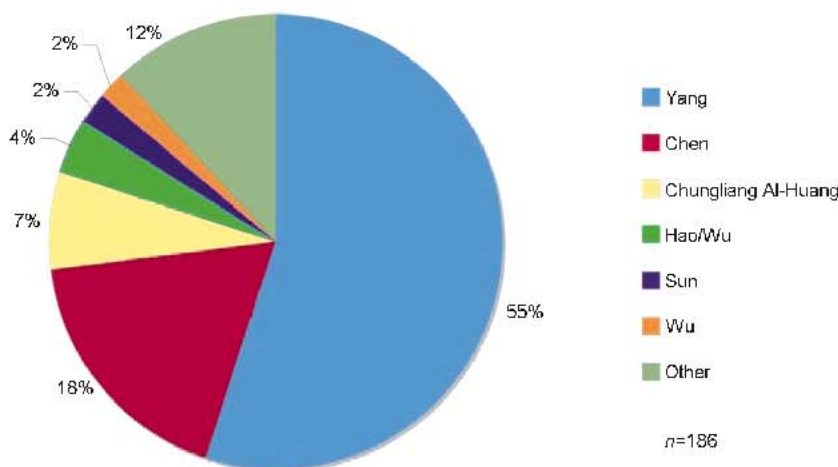


Figure 1 Frequency of Taiji styles taught in Switzerland



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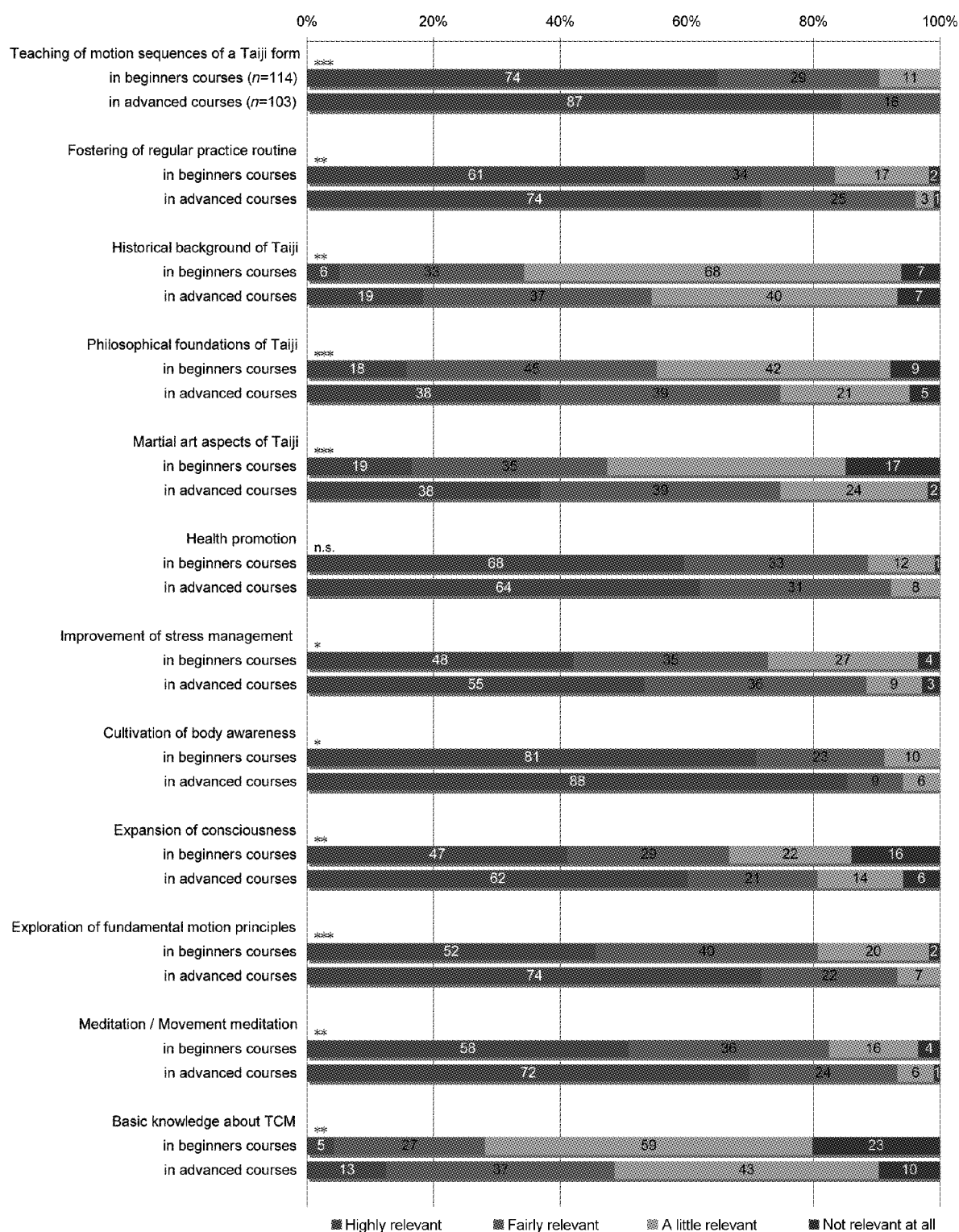


Figure 2 Description and comparison of relevance of various course contents in Taiji beginners and advanced courses
n.s.: not significant; * $P < 0.05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $P < 0.001$, vs in advanced courses. TCM: traditional Chinese medicine.

4 Discussion

Bearing in mind that the first Taiji schools were established in Switzerland less than 40 years ago, we realize that since then, Taiji practice has developed remarkably. Today, Taiji courses are offered in various practice contexts and a formal quality control of Taiji teachers is warranted by the implementation of accreditation guidelines of the

SGQT. National and international networking among Taiji teachers and practitioners is promoted by various workshops and meetings. Findings from our online survey among active Taiji teachers in Switzerland revealed a wide range of Taiji styles being taught, with different focuses also varying between Taiji courses for beginners and advanced practitioners. Taking into account that the majority of the respondents emphasized “health promotion”

as a core component in both beginners and advanced courses, and that this aspect is increasingly supported by an emerging scientific evidence base also including domestic Taiji studies^[11,14,15], we see strong potential for Taiji practice in public and private health promotion. The growing integration of this safe mind-body practice in interdisciplinary therapeutic settings in healthcare institutions and in health-promoting programs at various work places is likely to be further encouraged by an increasing level of public awareness about the health benefits inherent to regular Taiji practice. To achieve this, the further promotion of Taiji-related research, as well as expedient public relations work by the leading national Taiji associations are required.

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6 Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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