

Enhancing health, harmony and cultural traditions: Contextualizing the development of Tai Chi associations in Ottawa

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Author contributions

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Competing interests

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Abbreviations

OTCA, Ottawa Tai Chi Chuan Association; TTCS, Taoist Tai Chi Society; TCM, Traditional Chinese Medicine; PRC, People's Republic of China; CCAO, Chinese Community Association of Ottawa; OCCSC, Ottawa Chinese Community Service Centre; OCLS, Ottawa Chinese Language School; NAM, New Age Movement.

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Abstract

Background: This study examined the development of Tai Chi in Ottawa, Canada, focusing on: (1) traditions and modernization of Tai Chi in mainland China; (2) the evolution of Ottawa's Chinese community; and (3) the role of Ottawa Tai Chi Chuan Association (OTCA) and Taoist Tai Chi Society (TTCS)-in promoting Tai Chi and traditional health practices rooted in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in Ottawa. **Methods:** Archive research was used to investigate origins, organizational structures, and programs of the associations. Documents were obtained from the personal collections, websites, and Ottawa Archives. Secondary literature on Tai Chi's history in China and Chinese immigration to Ottawa provided contextual insights. **Results:** In the twentieth century, Tai Chi in mainland China underwent significant transformations, aligning with nation-building, social reform, public health promotion, and cultural influence. Since the 1970s, the demographic composition of Canada's Chinese community has become diversified. Some community members played a critical role in transmitting Tai Chi to Canada by establishing OTCA and TTCS. Through a variety of Tai Chi programs, workshops, and community engagement, OTCA and TTCS promoted Tai Chi as a holistic health practice rooted in TCM and traditional cultural principles in different approaches. OTCA primarily served the Chinese community, focusing on diverse forms, techniques, and theories. In contrast, Ottawa's TTCS, as a satellite association, emphasized Taoist-inspired Tai Chi and cultivation passed down by the founder, Moy Linshin, to accommodate members from diverse cultural backgrounds. OTCA and TTCS created inclusive mind-body communities for individuals to engage in Tai Chi as a culturally meaningful practice and a means of fostering social connection and holistic wellness. **Conclusion:** OTCA and TTCS significantly revitalized while adapted Tai Chi and TCM practices to Western contexts, integrating its historical roots with western health ideas to establish it as a widely recognized mind-body discipline and alternative therapy.

Keywords: Tai Chi; health; Canada

Background

Tai Chi is a complete mind-body exercise system rooted in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), Chinese martial arts, and ancient Chinese philosophical theories, combining flow-motion movements, breath control, Qi cultivation, and mental regulation to promote holistic health and well-being. While Tai Chi has been practiced in mainland China for over 300 hundred years, it was in the mid-twentieth century that Tai Chi gained increasing popularity in the Western world [1]. Chinese immigrants played a significant role in the transmission of Tai Chi and traditional health practices to the West. As a result of their commitment to establishing Tai Chi groups, Tai Chi became accessible in their communities, which is particularly important considering the transmission of this traditional practice relies heavily on physical interactions and person-to-person contact.

Over the past few decades, researchers in Western biophysical sciences have extensively studied the health benefits of Tai Chi, demonstrating its effectiveness in enhancing balance, improving cardiovascular health, alleviating chronic pain, and reducing the risk of falls [2, 3]. These benefits make Tai Chi particularly well-suited for older adults and individuals undergoing therapeutic rehabilitation. Tai Chi's meditative qualities can also help reduce stress, strengthen mental resilience, and promote overall mind-body harmony [4]. Furthermore, Canadian scholars have examined the cultural and social significance of Tai Chi within the Chinese community and the Canada's multicultural landscape. One exploratory study found that for first-generation Chinese Canadians, preserving TCM principles, health beliefs, and daily fitness practices was central to maintaining their cultural identity and enhancing their holistic health and wellbeing, even as they gradually integrated some Western fitness practices [5]. Another study revealed that for non-Chinese Canadian practitioners, Tai Chi not only supported healthy aging by reducing the risk of geriatric diseases but also fostered social interactions and deepened their understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture [6]. However, there is limited historical knowledge regarding the Chinese diaspora as a distinct group in transmitting Tai Chi and TCM's practices in the West, and particularly the role of Tai Chi organizations in creating the community of health practice in Canada.

This paper examines the development of two key Tai Chi associations in Ottawa, Canada's Capital City: the Ottawa Tai Chi Chuan Association (OTCA) and the Taoist Tai Chi Society (TTCS). Our research reveals that both Tai Chi associations were founded by immigrants from Hong Kong who wanted to create a community of Tai Chi practice as well as a space for health knowledge exchange within Ottawa's Chinese community. In this paper, we argue that while both associations share foundational principles rooted in TCM and traditional culture such as the concepts of balance, harmony, and the interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit, the OTCA and TTCS also displayed notable differences. Each association adopted different objectives, Tai Chi approaches and organizational structures during their development phases. As the largest Tai Chi associations in the Chinese diaspora in Canada's Capital City, the OTCA and TTCS played critical roles in transmitting the principles of TCM to vibrant communities of practices, hence strengthening the therapeutic potential of Tai Chi in fostering health, well-being, mental tranquility and resilience, while also contributing to cultural continuity and social cohesion in a multicultural context.

Methods

This study employed archive research to examine the development and significance of two Tai Chi associations-OTCA and TTCS-in promoting Tai Chi and other traditional health practices in Ottawa. Archival research focused on documents related to the associations' origins, key figures, programs, and community engagement, included association websites, private collections, Chinese community newspapers, and Ottawa archives.

Moreover, secondary sources, such as books, articles, and theses, provided historical context for the adaptation of Tai Chi in Canada

and offered valuable insights into how TCM and cultural principles were inherited and manifested by the practices and programs of these associations.

Tai Chi traditions: Taoist Internal Alchemy and Chinese Martial Arts

The English term "Tai Chi," when used in the context of the Chinese centered pinyin system, is spelled "Taijiquan," which carries two connotations absent in the English version. First, the word "Tai" literally means "Supreme," "Ji" means "Ultimate," and "Quan" means "Fist," linking it firmly to martial arts. Second, the pronunciation of "Quan" makes a different word: Taiji is a term used in traditional Chinese philosophy. Considering the widespread acceptance of "Tai Chi" in Western contexts, this study uses "Tai Chi" to refer to the physical movement of Taiji while recognizing its cultural and philosophical significance.

Traditionally, Tai Chi has been classified with Xingyiquan and Baguazhang as internal martial arts. Unlike external martial arts, which emphasize physical strength and outward form, Tai Chi focuses on cultivating internal energy, breath control, and mental awareness. Its practice aligns closely with the Daoist Daoyin and Tuna principles, emphasizing the seamless integration of outward form and spirit, the conscious guidance of Qi, and the cultivation of internal balance and vitality [7]. Its foundational stances, breathing rhythms, and mental focus reflect the influence of Daoist internal alchemy, integrating Zhan Zhuang to develop stability, deep abdominal breathing to regulate Qi flow, and Yi to unify mind and body.

The tradition of Tai Chi lies not only in its physical movements that have been practiced over several hundred years but also in its cultural underpinnings that embody "the way of life that has been practiced by the Chinese for thousands of years" [8]. The philosophical essence of Tai Chi is deeply intertwined with Yin-Yang theory, a foundational principle of both traditional Chinese philosophy and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Yin and Yang represent the interconnected and interdependent nature of opposing forces-movement and stillness, hardness and softness, advance and retreat-which are embodied in Tai Chi's fluid yet structured techniques [9]. As a form of physical movement that has been invented and continuously developed within the cultural soil of China, Tai Chi is profoundly informed by three main components of Chinese culture: principles of TCM, such as the flow of Qi, disease prevention, and interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit; external formats of Chinese martial arts; and traditional philosophical foundations.

There are various accounts for the chronological origins of Tai Chi as a physical exercise. The most common but contested claim found in extensive historical records and folk anecdotes indicates that Tai Chi was created by a Taoist priest, Zhang Sanfeng, in the Wudang Mountain during the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties [10]. Zhang Sanfeng is respected as a sage by the various Taoist sects and was skilled at Fengshui and fortune telling in some official accounts. Regardless of numerous tales of how Zhang Sanfeng merge Taoist cultivation and Yangshen (life cultivation) to create Tai Chi, this widely accepted account of the Tai Chi origin from Taoism reflects that the practice has been popularly perceived as part of Taoist internal alchemy to pursue self-cultivation, self-defence, and longevity in the traditional folk culture.

Another common academic perspective on the history of Tai Chi linking it with martial arts is that the origin of the practice is in Chenjia Valley, where the two most significant Tai Chi lineages, the Chen and Yang styles, emerged in the 17th and 19th centuries, respectively. Regarding continuous transmissions by teachers, Tai Chi can be directly traced without any breaks to Chen Changxing, the fourteenth generation of Chen Clan. He is credited with significantly developing Chen-style Tai Chi as a martial art, particularly for breaking his family's admonitions to keep the art within the family by teaching Tai Chi to Yang Luchan (1799–1872) [11]. Yang Luchan (1799–1872) is the figurehead of Yang-style Tai Chi. After training Tai Chi from Chen Changxing, Yang Luchan began teaching Tai Chi to imperial guards and the royal family of the Qing court and the general

public in the capital Beijing, gradually developing what has been known as the Yang style Tai Chi [12]. Under his instruction to a vast population, Tai Chi as a branch of martial arts became known to the public for the first time. Subsequently, Tai Chi evolved into diverse styles named by family surnames partly through his students' transmissions.

While its origins cannot be definitively traced, it is certain that Tai Chi has experienced continuous evolution and is still developing. National and personal imagination continually reinvented the external forms and spiritual-cultural connotations of Tai Chi in response to novel situations [13]. However, three traditional axes constituting Tai Chi are distilled through centuries to modern days, encompassing Taoist philosophy, prevention and health cultivation, and martial techniques. Moreover, over time, a tradition of Tai Chi transmission was established based on master-disciple relationships, with different styles being named by surnames. In the 20th century, Tai Chi underwent significant institutionalization and modernization in mainland China, with the Chinese governments playing a pivotal role in this process.

The institutionalization and modernization of Tai Chi in mainland China since the twentieth century

The development of Tai Chi in the twentieth century has been significantly affected by the national political and cultural environment. During the Republic of China era, in a climate of political turmoil and foreign invasions, Tai Chi was actively promoted as part of national martial arts by the nationalist government and various private associations to meet the needs of a surge in patriotic sentiments and the public's strong interest in martial arts. Simultaneously, the adoption of Western sport cultures not only introduced new sports to China but also stimulated the development of national martial arts and affected the traditional practices towards scientificization, exemplified by the "Tu Yang Ti Yu Zhi Zheng" movement (debate on native and foreign sports) centered on advocating scientific approaches to practice traditional martial arts during the 1920s and 1930s.

The Shanghai Chin Woo Athletic Federation (SCWAF) and the Central Guoshu (National Arts) Academy (CGA) were the important pillars for the institutionalization of Tai Chi among others. The Chinese Gymnastics School, established in 1909 and renamed the SCWAF in 1919, was one of the earliest state-supported sports organizations with the aim to promote national salvation and develop national spirit through educating both Western sports and Indigenous martial arts [14]. In 1929, the SCWAF had 42 branches in other Chinese major cities and in Southeast Asian with over 400,000 members [15]. The CGA was founded in 1928 by the Nanjing Nationalist Government to systematically promote Chinese martial arts and enhance public health through four major initiatives: conducting research on martial arts, teaching martial arts, compiling and publishing martial arts books, and managing martial arts events [9].

As martial arts and Tai Chi schools developed, the adaption and diversification of the Tai Chi forms occurred through four basic processes: variation-inventing new forms and styles; combination-integrating other martial elements; simplification-streamlining lengthy movements; and extension-creating new training methods. Another important feature of the institutionalization of Tai Chi in the Republican era was the rapid growth in publications and instruction manuals. These printed forms had not only increased the popularity of Tai Chi but also helped construct a public image for the practice, further promoting the theoretical and historical research on Tai Chi.

At the beginning of the People's Republic of China (PRC), national martial arts were promoted in the competitive sports arena and were given a government-managed label. The new governmental leaders initially emphasized the cultural and health values of Tai Chi and advocated for its promotion as a national exhibition and competitive sport. As a result, the modernization of Tai Chi accelerated in the first decade and a half of the PRC. Under the guidance of sports

departments, national and international demonstrations and competitions were rapidly held along the lines of Western sports systems with fixed standards, regulations, and professional teams. In 1956, the General Administration of Sport of China (GASC) convened a group of Tai Chi experts to create the first standardized and simplified Tai Chi form based on Yang style Tai Chi, named "Simplified 24-step Tai Chi" [16]. In 1959, the GASC announced the first official set of competition rules for martial arts under the new government, which standardized the content, format, timing, and categories of Tai Chi competitions [9].

At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, the public practice of Tai Chi was suppressed by the authorities due to perceived "leftist thinking" of critiquing feudalism and Confucianism found in martial arts. As a result, Tai Chi was practiced in private, clandestinely and some techniques and methods of Tai Chi were lost. During this period, several Tai Chi masters migrated to Hong Kong and other countries where they enjoyed more freedom to practice alternate styles.

Following China's economic reform, Tai Chi experienced a significant revival and was promoted as a competitive sport and traditional martial art with the rise of popular nationalism. With the endorsement of the government, Tai Chi was characterized and practiced in several forms, including through formal competitions, education programs, mass participation events, and as a symbol of cultural heritage [17]. In 1982, the GASC set an ambitious goal to "bring Wushu to the world" [9]. Subsequently, the Chinese government made conscious efforts to include Tai Chi as a unique contribution of Chinese culture on the list of recognised Olympic sports. In 1984, the inaugural international Tai Chi Championship took place in Wuhan, Hubei Province, attracting 70 Tai Chi practitioners from 18 countries, including Canada [6]. In 1989, the GASC developed the "42-Step Tai Chi Competition Routine," which was included at the 11th Asian Games in 1990 and later became the standard global competition hand form.

Compared to the lengthy process of gaining international recognition as a competitive sport, the dissemination of Tai Chi as a significant symbol of Chinese heritage was immediate and was frequently performed at numerous cultural and political events. During the 2008 Beijing Olympics, Tai Chi was showcased as a symbol of Chinese culture to the world. Not only did the opening ceremony feature a Tai Chi performance by 2008 practitioners, but the emblem of the Games was a pictogram of a Tai Chi practitioner moving in the shape of a Chinese character. In 2020, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization inscribed Tai Chi on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity [18].

In addition to official channels, Chinese immigrants played a crucial role in introducing and adapting Tai Chi to the Western world from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Just as the histories of Tai Chi's dissemination into the United States and Britain are embedded in the history of Chinese immigration, the development of Tai Chi in Ottawa is associated with the history of the local and broader Chinese communities.

Chinese immigration to Ottawa

In 2021, the city of Ottawa was home to Canada's sixth-largest Chinese population, with approximately 46,170 individuals, comprising 4.60% of the region's total population [19]. Figure 1 illustrates the growth of Ottawa's Chinese population from 1951 to 2021, highlighting the steady increase and significant demographic shifts over time. Although Ottawa has never grown to be a major city for Chinese immigrants in Canada, the Chinese community has a long-standing presence that dates back to the 1880s [20]. Ottawa is also one of the eight cities in Canada with a designated Chinatown that still exists today. The evolution of the Chinese community in Ottawa largely parallels the historical trajectory of the country's Chinese population as a whole, such as the shift from early physical labor-based individuals to the arrival of skilled migrants in recent decades.

The first wave of ethnic Chinese migrants to Ottawa came primarily from Taishan and Kaiping of Guangdong Province at the end of the nineteenth century during the construction and expansion of the national railway across Canada. Before 1947, Chinese residents in Canada were typically characterized as rural-born, male and uneducated, whose social life was confined to specific enclaves [21]. Shortly after the repeal of the *Chinese Exclusion Act* in 1947, there was a steady increase in Chinese immigration to Ottawa. During the 1950s and 1960s, the migration flow was mainly comprised of wives and children as family members of Chinese men already in Canada. In particular, Cantonese-speaking families from British Hong Kong and Portuguese Macau, a small Mandarin-speaking group from Taiwan began arriving in Ottawa [15].

From the 1970s onwards, economic and political conditions in different places of origin, as well as the emphasis on economics and evolving immigration policies, profoundly influenced patterns of Chinese immigration to Canada. These shifts led to the reconfiguration and sociocultural diversity of Ottawa's Chinese communities in terms of the population composition and subcultural identities. Many Chinese immigrants who were skilled at Tai Chi-related practices started to resettle in Canada beginning in the 1970s. From the end of the Second World War to the middle of the 1990s, Hong Kong was the primary source of ethnic Chinese emigration to Canada, and many of these individuals had professional backgrounds and elevated socio-economic status [22].

The constant influx of immigrants from Hong Kong resulted in the replacement of Taishanese with Cantonese as the dominant language within the Ottawa Chinese community in the early 1980s [23]. Simultaneously, a sequence of political and economic events associated with mainland China and Canada contributed to the annual increase in the number of mainland urban-based immigrants, including the normalization of diplomatic relations between Canada and China in 1971, China's "opening-up policy and economic reform" since 1978, the 1989 Tiananmen Square Protests, the rapid economic development of mainland China since the end of 1990s, among others [17]. Since 1998, Mainland China has surpassed Hong Kong as the

primary source of ethnic Chinese immigrants to Canada. As a result, Mandarin gradually became the dominant language within the Chinese community in Ottawa.

Notably, the rapidly expanding high-tech industry and higher education institutions in Ottawa attracted significant Chinese professionals and international students since the 1980s. Compared to other major cities, the Chinese community in Ottawa experienced a higher growth rate and a larger proportion of well-educated and younger immigrants from the 1991 to 2006 [24]. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Ottawa's reputation as the "Silicon Valley North" and the capital city remained important factors in attracting a large number of Chinese immigrants who were well-educated and keen to work in the high-tech, medical and governmental sectors [25].

Under Canadian policies to encourage multiculturalism, various new Chinese cultural associations were created including community service agencies, political organizations, recreation clubs, and religious groups, partly due to socio-cultural diversity among new Chinese immigrants with regard to linguistic abilities, demographics, social status, and leisure interests. Traditional Chinatown organizations such as clan associations gradually lost influence with new Chinese professionals, who instead organized various voluntary organizations for their interests and needs.

The Chinese Community Association of Ottawa (CCAO) [26] and Ottawa Chinese Community Service Centre (OCCSC) [27] are two prominent volunteer-based community service agencies. These two formal ethnic organizations preserved Chinese cultural heritages and promoted interactions between the Chinese community and the host society through various services, including language instruction, social support, and cultural initiatives. In 1972, with support from the CCAO, a small group of community-minded local Chinese Canadians established the Ottawa Chinese Language School (OCLS), which was the first and most influential Chinese language school in Ottawa. The school offered various cultural activities, including Chinese languages, traditional dance, calligraphy, and Tai Chi. This Tai Chi class in the OCLS was a precursor to the OTCA.

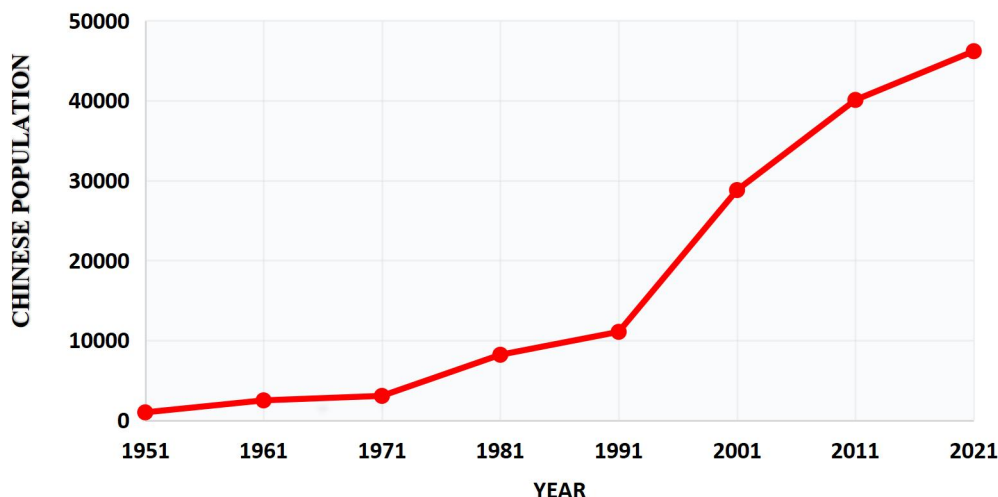


Figure 1 Growth of the Chinese population in Ottawa, Canada (1951–2021). Note: The population figures are based on census data released by Statistics Canada.

The Ottawa Tai Chi Chuan Association (OTCA)

The sisterhood: the close relationship between the OTCA and the OCLS before 2013

The main founder of the OTCA metaphorically described the relationship between the OTCA and the OCLS as "sisters" before their

partnership ended in 2013, underscoring their historical connection. Throughout the OTCA's development, many loyal members were former teachers or parents from the OCLS. The long-standing sisterhood between the OTCA and OCLS has resulted in the OTCA being predominantly comprised of members of Chinese origin, thus maintaining strong ties to the Chinese community. Furthermore, the

OCLS provided extensive support for the OTCA such as member recruitment and securing rental spaces, which solidified their close relationship prior to 2013.

The OCLS was created in 1972 by a group of Chinese parents with the goal of passing Chinese culture to the next generation. This Chinese language school was enthusiastically embraced within the Chinese community and received financial support from the community and later the municipal government. In 1976, as the number of students at the OCLS grew dramatically, some parents advocated practicing traditional activities to improve health while waiting for their children. Correspondingly, the OCLS began providing Tai Chi classes specifically for parents on weekends. Li, a parent of an OCLS teacher, learned Tai Chi in Hong Kong under the tutelage of a descendant of the Yang-style lineage before migrating to Canada. She was invited to teach this Tai Chi class and later continued teaching at the OTCA until 1994. From 1976 to the early 1980s, the Tai Chi classes organized by the OCLS were characterized by spontaneity and a less structured format.

In the early 1980s, the student body of the OCLS continued to grow as well as the Tai Chi class for parents. Tai Chi classes have always been the main focus of the association, and its emblem incorporates the Tai Chi diagram, the colour of vermilion sand (the color symbolizes auspiciousness, joy, and strength in ancient culture), with traditional calligraphy, emphasizing Tai Chi and Chinese culture. During the 1980s, the OCLS became more prominent and served as a community centre providing Chinese education and cultural services. In 1986, more than 900 Chinese immigrants were involved in its programs, representing approximately one-tenth of the total population of Chinese of ethnic origin in Ottawa that year [28, 29]. The relationship between the OTCA and the powerful OCLS laid a foundation for the OTCA's growth.

From 1985 to the early 1990s, the OTCA was primarily comprised of established residents from Taishan and recently-arrived immigrants from Hong Kong. During this period, Li was the sole Tai Chi instructor

for the OTCA. The 1990s saw significant diversification within the OTCA's membership, particularly with an increasing number of members coming from mainland China. In 1996, Yuan, a student's parent from the OCLS, became the first instructor from mainland China to join the association. Yuan was a renowned Tai Chi master in mainland China and bought extensive expertise in various Tai Chi styles to the association. She taught both traditional, simplified, and competitive Tai Chi forms that were previously unfamiliar to the members.

The OTCA set itself apart from private Tai Chi clubs, in which authority is typically centralized in a single master. In his address to the association's 30th anniversary, the main founder who was initially a Tai Chi student highlighted the association's commitment to an open teaching approach to promote an inclusive and collaborative learning environment where instructors and members can share and learn diverse Tai Chi theories and skills with each other. However, from the perspective of teaching system, the OTCA's loose structure often required volunteers to proactively recruit potential instructors, especially following the departure of previous ones. During the first decade of the new century, the OTCA benefited from the network of the OCLS and the expansion of the Chinese community, which brought in several experienced instructors from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macao. As a result, the association could sustain and diversify its range of Tai Chi styles within its curriculum.

In 2013, the OCLS encountered financial difficulties and underwent reconfiguration, which ended its long-term partnership with the OTCA. The OCLS officially closed in 2023. This development had an immediate effect on the OTCA as it had to independently rent the gym space and lost access to the strong network previously supported with the OCLS. Consequently, the association experienced a decline in new student enrollments and public performances in the subsequent years. The OTCA is currently managed by a board of executives consisting of 6–8 volunteers with approximately 70–80 active members, most of whom are still parents of former students from the OCLS (Table 1).

Table 1 Ottawa Tai Chi Chuan Association

Name	Location	Date Established	Type of Tai Chi practiced	Membership
Ottawa Tai Chi Chuan Association (OTCA)	Ottawa, Canada	June 1, 1985	Practices traditional Tai Chi styles, such as Yang-style and Chen-style, as well as modern simplified forms like the 24-form, 48-form, and Tai Chi Fan.	70–80 members, most of whom were of Chinese backgrounds.

Note: The numbers presented represent the average membership for the OTCA from 2015 to 2024.

Enhancing cultural traditions and community engagement through Tai Chi

As an association predominantly composed of Chinese practitioners, the OTCA not only practiced Tai Chi but also played a role in maintaining health and cultural traditions, strengthening the local Chinese community and promoting their broader social integration. In a comment posted on the Ottawa Chinese website, the main founder reflected on the purposes of creating the association: "In 1985, a group of Tai Chi amateurs from the Chinese language school formed the Ottawa Tai Chi Association under the encouragement of Master Li. As the name suggests, it emphasizes using Tai Chi to Qiang Shen Jian Ti (make the body strong and healthy) and Yi Wu Hui You (make friends through martial arts). We hope that the essence of Chinese culture can take root and flourish in Ottawa. So that, our friends can enjoy a harmonious and healthy life within Canada's multicultural environment" [30].

The emphasis on "martial arts" and the "essence of Chinese culture" indicates that the OTCA continued the official Chinese construction of Tai Chi as a martial art and as a national cultural heritage. Although the main founder acknowledged Tai Chi as a martial art, the low intensity and flexible content of the classes suggest a strong focus

on presenting Tai Chi to most members in terms of holistic health and leisure rather than a form of self-defence martial arts.

The disease prevention and healthcare focus are particularly evident in the workshops the association held, which often centered on themes related to TCM. For instance, in 2013, the OTCA held a public Tai Chi and Qigong workshop at the University of Ottawa Theatre, given by a renowned Tai Chi master who had emigrated from China. The Tai Chi master elaborated on the holistic health efficacy of these practices from TCM perspective, highlighting key concepts such as the flow of Qi, internal vitality, meridians, and Yin-Yang balance.

The OTCS maintained the ties between its Tai Chi programs and traditional cultural values and the TCM principles through three main aspects: upholding Tai Chi lineages, providing Tai Chi resources in Chinese languages, and participating in Chinese community activities. The OTCA recruited instructors based on whether they had training histories with masters from widely acknowledged traditional styles. In the Tai Chi community, the lineage rather than Duanwei system is the primary means of establishing credential for instructors, since the tradition of master-disciple relationship is still integral to the transmission of Tai Chi techniques and culture. Therefore, the OTCA located itself within an "authentic" tradition by way of emphasizing

on its visible lineages. All the main instructors gained their “qualification” from Chinese masters, which were advertised through a lineage chart circulated within members.

Since the 1980s, the growing popularity of Tai Chi in mainland China and Hong Kong led to the domestic production of numerous books and videos on the subject. The OTCA amassed a significant collection of these works and made them available in its online library for members to study. These digital resources not only enriched the content of OTCA’s programs but also strengthened its ties to the evolving practices of traditional health activities in China.

Benefiting from the intimate relationship with the OCLS, the OTCS had opportunities to promote Tai Chi and traditional health practices Tai Chi at various cultural events within the Chinese community. These public performances not only enhanced the association’s profile but also served as a means to integrate TCM theories with broader community engagement. For example, in 1992, the OTCA represented the students’ parents with a Tai Chi performance at the OCLS’s 20th Anniversary and graduation ceremony and continued to perform at similar events in subsequent years. In the early 2000s, the OTCA expanded its performances to various cultural events, such as the Ottawa Dragon Boat Festival and Asian Heritage Month [23].

In 2004, the OTCA launched the official English website, which provided an important window for non-Chinese individuals to learn about the association. As a result, the OTCA has attracted a diverse group of non-Chinese students, instructors, thus bridging ethnic and non-Chinese individuals with similar health interests. As a concrete example, a Canadian learner was drawn to Tai Chi at OTCA through a strong interest in Chinese internal martial arts [31]. His long-term training in OTCA had refined his martial skills and expanded his engagement with Tai Chi communities locally and globally. Through Tai Chi experience, he came to perceive Tai Chi as not only an internal martial art and a practice of mind-body cultivation but also a medium for cultural transmission and understanding, and appreciated the role of OTCA in connecting Chinese heritage with Ottawa’s multicultural landscape [32].

In 2018, the OTCA made an effort to establish its role as an arbiter within the local Tai Chi community by launching the Instructor Development Program to provide training and qualifications to members interested in serving as voluntary instructors for the association and the general public. This program comprised two key components: technical judgement by veteran instructors and the completion of a certain time of practicing Tai Chi. Through this program, a few senior students became instructors teaching in the association and some community seniors’ and rehabilitation centres. The OTCA’s dedication to public health and well-being and its efforts in promoting social integration have been acknowledged by the wider community. This recognition is exemplified by the Ontario Volunteer Service Awards received by some volunteers over the years.

From the perspective of the association alone, its long-term success and inclusive vision are primarily attributed its members and their volunteer efforts in promoting Tai Chi. Most of the association’s volunteers are well-educated, long-term residents who have established stable social networks in Ottawa. As an association with a relatively loose structure based on a common interest in traditional health and bodily practices, it heavily relied on voluntary work. Between 1985 and 2015, over 120 members volunteered to manage the operations of the OTCA. They made significant collective efforts to coordinate and consolidate the community’s Tai Chi instruction resources, such as inviting Tai Chi instructors to lead classes, and to develop the association’s multifaceted roles in promoting Tai Chi and TCM theories, building healthier community, and promoting social cohesion and integration.

The Taoist Tai Chi Society (TTCS): bringing Tai Chi and Taoist traditions to Canada

Many Tai Chi groups in Western countries were founded by renowned Tai Chi masters who acted as role models for students both in techniques and ethical standards. A prime example is Moy Lin Shin,

the founder of the TTCS. His teachings of Tai Chi and Taoist arts significantly influenced the TTCS’s development in the western countries. Moy is revered as a spiritual leader within the organization, as evidenced by the numerous accounts of his Taoist teachings and compassionate acts featured on the official website.

Moy was born in 1931 in Taishan County, Guangdong Province. Due to frail health in childhood, he went to the Hua Shan School of Taoism to seek traditional healing practices. There, Moy learned a wide range of internal martial arts and Taoist religion [32]. Ahead of the Communist Revolution of 1949, he moved to Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, Moy continued his learning in internal martial arts from different masters, including Tai Chi, Qi Gong, Lok Hup Ba Fa, Pa Kua, Xingyiquan. During this period, Moy was ordained as a Taoist monk in the Yuen Yuen Institute, which was built to practice the synthesis of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. In 1968, he co-founded the Fung Loy Kok (FLK) Taoist temple with Mui Ming-to on the grounds of the Yuen Yuen Institute.

In 1970, Moy Lin Shin emigrated to Canada and soon after established the TTCA to teach Tai Chi and other internal martial arts in Toronto and Montreal. His teaching was initially focused on martial techniques but shifted to health aspects after he discovered that most students were more drawn to traditional Chinese approaches to health and wellness than to martial skills. Subsequently, Moy developed a 108-movement set of Tai Chi based on Yang-style Tai Chi, designed to enhance practitioners’ health and simplify the learning process for broader accessibility. He named this form as Taoist Tai Chi to emphasize its roots to Taoist traditions while removing the word “Chuan” (fist) to de-emphasize its combativeness. Moy explained to his followers that Taoist Tai Chi not only incorporated elements of internal martial arts but also drew inspiration from the ancient “Five Animal Frolics”, which is an integral part of Chinese bodily techniques and can enhance joint flexibility and the flow of Qi, strengthen tendons and bones, and support the function of the muscular, skeletal, circulatory and internal organ systems [28].

Moy’s teaching on Taoist Tai Chi and other internal arts garnered significant interest and acceptance among individuals who were interested in the Asian holistic health practice. Although Moy could only speak Cantonese fluently, he attracted students with diverse cultural backgrounds, including Chinese immigrants and other cultural groups interested in TCM and philosophy wisdom. As Moy’s original students dispersed from Toronto, the TTCS’s branches began to spring up across Canada. In 1982, Moy renamed his Tai Chi club “the Taoist Tai Chi Society of Canada” [33].

While teaching Taoist Tai Chi and other internal arts, as a Taoist missionary, Moy was committed to spreading Taoist religion and philosophy in the West. In 1981, Moy and his lay students established the FLK in Toronto to formally preach Taoist arts, including studying relevant scripts, chanting, and holding rituals and ceremonies. This institute became the significant religious arm of the TTCS. Three years later, Moy opened another Taoist temple and shrine near Orangeville of Canada and made it the headquarters of the organization.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Moy frequently delivered lectures on and demonstrations of his Taoist Tai Chi and arts in different cities across Canada and internationally. He also supported his students in establishing branches in their local areas. In 1997, Moy and his followers established the Taoist Health Recovery Centre at the Orangeville headquarters. This centre provided holistic alternative treatments and therapies for people who suffered from physical or mental issues, helping them pursue Tao through various health and ethic practices such as Taoist Tai Chi and relevant meditation, chanting, and voluntary services [34]. In 1998, the year of Moy’s passing, the TTCS had expanded to over 400 teaching locations in more than 20 countries [35]. His passing marked the end of an era for the TTCS, yet his legacy continued to influence the practice of Tai Chi and Taoism in the TTCS and the Western countries. After his passing, Moy has been enshrined in the Orangeville center of the TTCS.

Moy’s success in linking and disseminating Tai Chi and Taoist arts in Canada can be attributed to various factors. The growing Western interest in Asian health practices and philosophy that were

particularly spurred by the New Age Movement (NAM) in the 1960s created a fertile ground for Moy's Taoist teachings. For the majority of members who were only interested in alternative health medicine, Moy emphasized the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of Taoist Tai Chi over the mysticism and religious aspects of Taoism. His pragmatic approach integrated common NAM metaphors and narratives such as subjective well-being and the interconnectedness of mind and body. In 1990, with the translation help of his non-Chinese followers, Moy published an English and French book introducing Taoist Tai Chi to the West. In his book, Moy deliberately downplayed the esoteric connections of Taoist Tai Chi to religious concepts, instead presenting it as a mind-body health cultivation originating from the East [28]. Despite some simplification, the book also emphasized Tai Chi's roots in Taoist philosophy and elucidated how Taoist Tai Chi can merge with modern Western medicine discourse, offering a pathway for individuals to counteract the stress and imbalances of fast-paced modern life by reconnecting with their natural state and embracing equilibrium with their environment.

Moy's monastic background and his separation from the political climate of the PRC government allowed his Tai Chi to remain uninfluenced by the official suppression and intervention of traditional Tai Chi and culture in the modernization of China. This separation and personal monastic experience enabled Moy to unrestrictedly use Taoist spirituality and philosophy as a theoretical base for the construction of his Tai Chi and other internal arts. Consequently, Moy established the legitimacy of traditions of Taoist Tai Chi in the Western world in a separate path from the Tai Chi modernization in China over the last century. As early as 1978, the TTCA was registered as a charitable organization and formalized its aims and objectives to promote Taoist health arts through a lay approach to improve mind-body health, cultural exchange, and help others [36]. After Moy's passing, the TTCS continued to expand its teaching locations, Taoist temples, and health recovery centers both in Canada and internationally. By 2016, the TTCS had more than 40,000 participants across 26 countries, including 12,000 in Canada [37]. A survey conducted that year revealed that 97% of the members in Canada were aged 40 or above, and 76% were female. The top five reasons for practicing Taoist Tai Chi were exercise (72%), alleviation of health issues (42%), improvement of mental health (24%), social or community interactions (22%), and spiritual interests (11%) [33].

Due to Ottawa being the capital city and its proximity to the Orangeville headquarters, the Ottawa branch was one of the first to be established and has maintained a close relationship with the headquarters. In 1977, Moy and twelve students performed Tai Chi publicly in Ottawa and subsequently established the Ottawa branch with 20 members at the first class [38]. During the 1980s, the Ottawa branch continued cooperation with the municipal government by providing Tai Chi classes in senior centers while developing its own programs. In the early 1990s, the branch applied for a grant from the municipal government to support Moy's initiative for a Golden Age program, which aimed at helping seniors by offering free Taoist Tai

Chi classes and other voluntary services. In 2012, the branch had grown to 600 members in 10 locations across Ottawa and near cities including Gatineau, Kemptville, and Cornwall (Table 2) [34].

In accordance with the curriculum set by the headquarters, the Ottawa branch offers introductory and continuing classes as well as workshops in Taoist Tai Chi, with an emphasis on health and non-competitive nature. Beginners are provided with a bilingual pamphlet (in Chinese and English) that explains the Taoist health philosophy and each movement. After completing the four-month introductory course, participants can continue practicing in the beginner class or improving their movements in the continuing class.

In addition to holding regular Tai Chi classes and workshops, the Ottawa branch frequently organized public Tai Chi demonstrations and performances to align with the founder's mission of making 'Taoist arts available to all' and promoting cultural exchange [28]. Some of these activities were conducted in cooperation with the municipal government and local churches. Ottawa was also an important venue for the entire TTCS to hold various health-related events, enhancing its profile nationwide. In 2008, the TTCS celebrated the International Awareness Day (initiated by Moy) in Ottawa. Hundreds of members from Ontario, Quebec, and the northeastern United States and delegates from other countries gathered on Parliament Hill to demonstrate Taoist arts and propagate the founder's Taoist visions of health and social well-being [39]. Following the performance, the TTCS members marched in a Chinese dragon dance parade through downtown. In a series of public events in 2017, the Ottawa branch held Taoist Tai Chi demonstrations and free classes weekly in July and August in front of City Hall as part of the city's summer programming.

TTCS is deeply embedded in the local community with a predominantly non-Chinese membership (including the governing body) and English as the primary language. While the TTCS has few organizational links to China, it emphasizes the spectacle of Chinese culture and heritage through Tai Chi. This dialogic theme is evident throughout the TTCS's activities and marketing materials, which synthesized Taoist mind-body cultivation with Western health ideals and reinvented Taoist arts as an attitude of mind rather than a strict religious system. Thus, it created an inclusive space for individuals from different cultural backgrounds to learn about and practice Tai Chi while being exposed to teachings about traditional Chinese health and medicine, thus allowing space for multicultural exchanges and interactions between Chinese and non-Chinese practitioners in Canada.

While the TTCS and its Ottawa branch made an impact on the promotion of Taoist Tai Chi culture, Moy's construction of Tai Chi did not go unchallenged. In particular, debates center on Moy's lineage and the non-martial nature of Taoist Tai Chi taught through accelerated training sessions. However, the meditative-based and gentle movements of Taoist Tai Chi may be one of the reasons that the Ottawa branch and the entire organization is primarily comprised of older members who prioritize holistic health and low-impact exercise.

Table 2 Taoist Tai Chi Society of Ottawa

Name	Location	Date Established	Type of Tai Chi practiced	Membership
Taoist Tai Chi Society (TTCS)–Ottawa Branch	Ottawa, Canada (Headquarters: Toronto, Ontario)	Found in 1970, with the Ottawa branch established in 1977	Specializes in Taoist Tai Chi, a health-focused practice founded by Moy Lin-Shin, integrating Taoist internal alchemy, Chinese internal martial arts, and Traditional Chinese Medicine principles.	Over 600 members in Ottawa, with over 30,000 globally in 26 countries, including a significant proportion of non-Chinese members.

Note: The numbers presented represent the membership for TTCS in 2020.

Conclusion

Tai Chi is a comprehensive practice that integrates traditional philosophy, health cultivation, and martial arts. In the 20th century,

Tai Chi underwent a significant process of modernization, standardization, and mass adoption, evolving from a traditional martial art into a practice that increasingly emphasized health, wellness, and cultural significance. This transformation was driven by

government initiatives, rising nationalist sentiments, scientific research into its health benefits, and increasing cultural exchanges between China and the West.

The global spread of Tai Chi has been closely linked to Chinese migration. Since the 1970s, the steady migration of Chinese immigrants to Canada has facilitated the development and practice of Tai Chi in Ottawa. Some of these immigrants took organizational initiatives to formalize Tai Chi instruction and TCM-inspired activities. The OTCA and TTCS were established by Hong Kong immigrants during the 1970s and 1980s. Through their distinct missions and approaches, these associations played distinct roles in adapting and promoting Tai Chi as both a holistic health practice and a form of cultural expression within the Canadian context. The development of the OTCA was closely linked to the local Chinese diasporic community, particularly the Ottawa Chinese Language School, whose expansion provided necessary Tai Chi resources (e.g., Tai Chi instructors and members). These resources and the international promotion of Tai Chi by the Chinese government directly or indirectly facilitated OTCA to offer sustainable and diverse Tai Chi and health activities grounded in TCM concepts, establishing a connection to the notion of Tai Chi as a Chinese cultural treasure, martial art, health and prevention practices. In contrast, the TTCS's founder bypassed China's official nation building through Tai Chi, instead infusing Tai Chi with Taoist traditions and successfully integrating it into New Age wellness and alternative health initiatives. The TTCS had attracted a wide audience from diverse cultural backgrounds and evolved into a network of spiritual-health satellite branches with a Sino-Western hybrid identity that have extended across Canada and other Western countries. The TTCS had centred its practices around non-martial Taoist arts and holistic health cultivation, rooted in the teachings introduced by its founder, and continuously upheld by its practitioners from various cultural backgrounds to fit social and psychological situations embedded in the western context. In this way, the TTCS had established a cross-cultural community that transcends the Chinese diaspora where diverse groups connect through common values centered on Taoist health and spirituality and developed a broadened sense of cultural belonging and appreciation among the multicultural groups of practitioners.

As transnational migration evolves and different cultural groups engage in cultural exchange and integration, these associations will continue to play an important role in bridging traditional Chinese health practices with their modern applications and adaptations in the Western world. Through structured programs, community health initiatives, and research collaborations, they will further cultivate mind-body communities in multicultural societies, contribute to the integration of Tai Chi with TCM in global health and wellness systems, and advance the contemporary evolution of Tai Chi philosophy.

As this is an exploratory study on two influential Tai Chi organizations in Ottawa, it has notable limitations, including potential sample biases, such as the exclusion of other Tai Chi groups and non-affiliated renewed practitioners. Nevertheless, this study provides a foundation for future research with larger, more representative samples to gain a deeper understanding of the development of Tai Chi and TCM in Canada. Furthermore, future research on the health practices of Chinese Canadians could adopt either a cross-sectional or longitudinal approach to investigate how TCM practices, such as Tai Chi, evolve within the Canadian context, as well as their impact on the public health and well-being of local multicultural communities [5].

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