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## The Martial Art Librarian: Tai Chi as a Metaphor for Librarianship

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### Abstract

Tai Chi Chuan is an ancient Chinese martial art that follows a philosophy of Ying and Yang and is attuned to the flow, focus, and harmony of opposing principles pictorially represented by the black and white Tai Chi symbol. The state of mind and physical principles of this ancient martial art can also serve as a metaphor for how to become and remain a successful library professional.

### The Martial Art Librarian: Tai Chi as a Metaphor for Librarianship

The basic principles of Tai Chi Chuan (commonly referred to as Tai Chi) teach us that all things must maintain a balance, an important lesson for professionals in a chaotic world. Tai Chi, the Supreme Ultimate Fist or martial art, is derived from the concept of a Supreme Ultimate “Force” associated with the dynamic duality of Yin and Yang, which represents two opposing yet harmonizing forces that often appear as male and female, light and dark, active and passive, forcing and yielding, and Heaven and Earth. While Yang is Yin in motion, Yin is Yang at rest. The term “fist” translates literally as “empty hand form” or “martial art system.” It represents inner strength, not brute strength. Intended to harmonize and balance the life force known as Chi (also spelled “Qi” as in Qigong), the physical exercises have been described as swimming through air, as swimming without water, and as a set of progressive movements.

Tai chi has already found its way into libraries as cultural events, artistic performances, or lunch break classes much like yoga or Weight Watchers. It is often viewed as an exercise regimen, a dance, a mental challenge, a stress reliever, and a journey of self-discovery. Yet the martial art can mean much more to library professionals than mere entertainment, exercise, and calorie reduction. The authors offer the novel idea that Tai Chi Chuan may serve as a powerful metaphor for the library community and intend to reveal that the librarian is a form of martial artist.

A metaphor is a literary device used to describe the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar. It embellishes, exaggerates, or emphasizes key salient features. If the authors say we are feeling very “up” about writing this article or if Prince Charles says that Princess Diana was his English rose, then we are speaking in metaphors. If Tai Chi is a metaphor, then how does it relate to libraries and librarians?

Tai Chi offers a metaphor for career development. A career develops by action and movement: chaotic and controlled. Professional growth, duties, and responsibilities flow within a continuum of shifting events. Tai Chi Chuan involves a similar dynamic and continuous flow. You cannot watch yourself perform Tai Chi just as you cannot become a successful professional by watching yourself or by mimicking someone else. In neither arena is there any place for vanity or showing off. Hide your strength in gentle moves. Learn

when to be still. Maintain focus as thoughts, senses, and training engage.

Tai Chi also provides metaphor for career movement. Our performance in life and on the job is what we bring to and take from our actions. During Tai Chi, the human body naturally moves in five core directions: front, back, right, left, and back to center. Yet, despite this flexibility, we constantly pass through and use the center as a point of stability. We need our center. Diverge too far from the center, and the Tai Chi form collapses. This is similar to our movement as professionals; we can move forward (progress), backward (regress), to the right (to one side), to the left (to the other extreme), or remain centered (equilibrium). And, as with Tai Chi, if professional movements or actions wander too far from the center (common values, consensus, norm, balance, stability), then a library career can crumple as well.

Tai Chi presents a metaphor for career alignment. To move properly requires alignment, and professionals must align themselves properly with library colleagues, policies, patrons, family, and friends. In Tai Chi Chuan, if you break alignment then you lose connection and, consequently, power. Being out of alignment with one's personal interactions invariably leads to the same result.

Several movements can cause a librarian to become out of alignment. The aggressive personality usually encounters resistance. Similarly, show antagonism toward a library patron (or library management) and negative repercussions will surely follow. In contrast, progress comes from coordinated movements in harmony toward a common goal. Interact with patrons smoothly and their information need flows naturally from them to you. Being a successful librarian involves the smooth communication of information.

Much like librarianship, Tai Chi relies upon smooth, coordinated stylistic movements, which include but are not limited to:

(Example: 13 Yang-style **Tai Chi form** )

- Posture 1. Opening Move (arise from stillness).
- Posture 2. Wave Hands Like Clouds.
- Posture 3. Single Whip.
- Posture 4. Fist Under Elbow.
- Posture 5. White Crane Spreads Wings.
- Posture 6. Brush Knee and Push.
- Posture 7. Strum the Lute (or Play the Pipa).
- Posture 8. Pat Horse on High with Thrusting Palm.
- Posture 9. Turn Body and Chop.
- Posture 10. Deflect, Parry, Block, and Punch.
- Posture 11. Grasp The Bird's Tail.
- Posture 12. Cross Hands.
- Posture 13. Closing Move (return to stillness).

Lean too far, move too fast, remain too rigid, or cross a line, and the body breaks alignment. Natural forces become skewed and lose their power. Personal actions become less effective. The metaphors to the librarian professional are clear.

In addition to alignment, Tai Chi offers a metaphor for career positioning. Both Tai Chi and librarianship require a framework on which to build. (Before a person can move, they must learn how to stand.) How we stand determines how we move. What you see depends upon where you stand. If a Tai Chi form is to be productive then it must be solidly anchored using the following set of unified principles:

1. Lift the head.
2. Sink the chest and raise the back.
3. Sink the shoulders and drop the elbows down.
4. Waist leads the movements.
5. Use intent not force.
6. Coordinate upper and lower body.
7. Practice continuously without interruption.

8. Define empty and full.
9. Show your spirit.
10. Seek quiescence in movement.

These principles hardly seem the basis for librarianship as a martial art. Nevertheless, they are arguably the basis for all martial arts. A library career must be anchored in solid guiding principles: integrity, ethics, maturity, social responsibility, literacy, public service, equal access, diversity, community involvement, etc. Without a solid framework, a librarian's career, like a Tai Chi posture, may collapse.

The librarian as martial artist flows smoothly through his or her workload, bombarded by the duties of the day while being challenged with timing, space, and speed determined by the external environment. Some professionals take control managing and directing the flow while others dissipate their energy ineffectively by pushing and pulling, imposing and asserting, and resisting challenges rather than flowing with them. Wasting energy drives one off-balance. Loss of balance leads to loss of control.

Tai Chi Chuan is a very old mental and physical art form. Its core philosophies and associated movements serve as symbolic metaphors for the modern librarian. Librarianship can be viewed in terms of this martial art.

With a final metaphor of the open soft palm embracing and stopping the closed hard fist, the authors salute the readers, respectfully bow and thank you.

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