

TAI CHI: AN ACT IN MAINTAINING BALANCE AND HARMONY

During the opening ceremony at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing, martial artists performed the 13 steps of tai chi in unison, emphasizing the tension of continual balance in nature and humanity.

For many westerners, the opening ceremony—and the Olympics in general—were an introduction to China and to this ancient practice.

Those coming to China as students will find how intertwined the practice of tai chi is with daily routine.

“I think tai chi helps students to learn more about Chinese culture,” said Heather Carleton, a graduate of Geneva College and the program assistant at the China Studies Program. “It doesn’t take much effort to find Chinese people practicing tai chi outside in the morning.”

Tai chi has been offered since the program’s beginning in 1999. As an elective course, students learn tai chi for the first half of the class and *wushu*, another martial art that developed from different tai chi forms, for the second half.

Tai chi originally developed in 12th century China as a practice of self-defense without the use of weapons. In Mandarin, *t'ai chi ch'uan* literally translates to “supreme ultimate fist” or “boundless fist.”

The ideology of the supreme ultimate is consistent with both Taoist and Confucian Chinese philosophies and represents the


fusion of two opposite forces to create one balanced movement. Accordingly, movement in tai chi relates to yin and yang, a philosophy that for every yielding motion there is a forceful motion that balances it. In tai chi, students move their bodies in slow, relaxed and graceful movements, either alone or with a group.

The movements are made up of routines, or forms, some of which are named for animals or birds. For example, “White Crane spreads its wings” is a movement where the student places both arms bent above his or her head. In its simplest forms, tai chi uses 13 standard movements. Students learn 24 forms, while an 81-form style is used in national competitions.

While tai chi appears to be a simple movement of the arms and legs while practicing different body postures, it can be difficult to do without accurate teaching and instruction. Carleton said the CSP course is always taught by knowledgeable Chinese tai chi instructors who have competed in national competitions.

“Tai chi is a way to mentally rest from the day’s distractions, just like playing the piano,” Carleton said. “It is also a good way to maintain flexibility and balance, but it is easier on your joints than many other ways of exercising, such as running. Tai chi is a way of life; a way to stay healthy physically and mentally.”

By Mimi Wiggins Perreault

 The China Studies Program is located in Xiamen, China. Learn more about the semester at www.BestSemester.com/csp.