

Traditional Asian martial arts and youth: Experiences of young Chinese wushu athletes

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Abstract

Background and Study Aim:

Traditional Asian martial arts have often been associated with positive outcomes in youth. But despite the absence of empirical evidence, especially countries with a long tradition in martial arts (such as China and Japan) have re-emphasised these proclaimed positive effects. A study was set up to investigate the way how contemporary Chinese youth experience distinct aspects of wushu, the collective noun for the Chinese martial arts.

Material/Methods:

Data were collected among 150 youngsters (7–16 years) regarding, among other things, their views on wushu, the training sessions and their teacher.

Results:

Data revealed that youth's experiences and views are not in line with the characteristics of wushu and its traditional teaching practice as described in the literature.

Conclusions:

In the present paper it is concluded that these youngsters seem to experience wushu as a modern sport, in which the focus is on learning technical skills rather than on ethical and spiritual cultivation.

Key words:

Asian martial arts • wushu • youngsters • Chinese youth • experiences • martial arts • China • teaching • martial arts teacher • self-reported effects

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BACKGROUND

Traditional Asian martial arts

There is a widespread belief that involvement in **traditional Asian martial arts** (e.g., judo, karate, taekwondo) can create positive educational opportunities for youth. Over the years, educators and youth workers in many western countries have increasingly made use of martial arts as an instrument to improve social and personal development of young people [1–5]. In recent years, there has also been an interest in introducing martial arts during physical education classes at school [6]. The proclaimed educational role of traditional Asian martial arts seems however even more apparent in the East. In recent years, high expectations have been raised in countries such as China and Japan with regard to the benefits of traditional Asian martial arts for

today's youth. For example, from 2012 onwards, martial arts will become a compulsory program at all junior-high schools in Japan in an attempt to re-educate youth and bring them closer to the Japanese culture [7]. In China, generally considered as the place of origin of most of the existing Asian martial arts styles [8], it has been indicated by several authors that the self-identity and behaviour of many of today's youth has been changed with a shift from oriental traditions towards (westernised) modernisation [9–11]. As the practice of traditional martial arts is strongly related to traditional Chinese culture [12,13], it is generally assumed by the Chinese that the involvement in traditional martial arts will help to improve the morality of contemporary youth.

To many foreigners the Chinese martial arts are better known by the term 'kungfu'. The first 'kungfu craze' dates

Traditional Asian martial arts – martial arts that found their origin in Asia and that are taught by using a traditional approach.

back to the early 1970's, introducing, among others, the legendary Chinese American action movie star and martial artist Bruce Lee to movie theatres around the world [14]. In later years, other Chinese actors followed Lee's footsteps, such as Jacky Chan and Jet Li. Today, worldwide exhibition tours of the famous 'Shaolin' monks and animated movies such as 'Kung-Fu Panda' 1 and 2 are examples of the internationalisation of the Chinese martial arts. However, in China and among insiders, the Chinese martial arts are known as 'wushu', which literally translates as 'war art', where kungfu (or 'gongfu' in pinyin Romanisation style) is best translated as 'skill' or 'expertise'.

Wushu

Wushu has a long history in China and is characterised by a wide variety of offensive and defensive fighting techniques that are divided in numerous styles and schools [15]. Over a long period of time, wushu was shaped through a constant struggle of man against his enemies on ancient battlefields. However, more than merely being a fighting system, since its inception, wushu has also been characterised by a strong relationship with traditional Chinese culture [16]. Wushu is regarded as an important part of China's cultural heritage and according to Chen [15], it has been influenced by various forms of Chinese culture, such as philosophy, art, literature, religion and ethics. For example in history, wushu masters used concepts from ancient Chinese philosophy, to expound their methods of training and to further develop their fighting art [16]. Also, wushu has been inseparably linked to Chinese traditional opera and Buddhism and Taoism have had a distinct influence in its development [16,17].

It is roughly estimated that well over a thousand variations (schools) of wushu exist among the various ethnic groups in China [18]. These schools are all characterised by the use of various attacking and defensive movements and can be classified by (a) geographical location, (b) place of origin, (c) basic characteristics and (d) technical forms [21].

Classification of martial arts

It is widely accepted that most traditional martial arts (e.g., judo, karate, taekwondo) originated from wushu [11]. As indicated by Mangan and Hong [19], the entire attacking and defensive repertoires of wushu have formed the basis of a martial arts system, that throughout the years became more complicated in terms of styles and methods. Several authors have therefore attempted to establish a classification system using a variety of criteria (e.g., physical, functional, cultural, historical, philosophical).

One of the most popular classification systems to divide martial arts is based on cultural differences, such as "Eastern (or Asian)" versus "Western" martial arts [20]. Some authors indicated that Eastern martial arts have a highly developed teaching tradition and philosophy [e.g., 21–23]. According to Back and Kim [24], the difference between Eastern and Western (e.g., boxing, wrestling, etc.) martial arts lies in the fact that the former are believed to provide an added value besides learning fighting skills, such as artistic enjoyment and a non-violent attitude. These authors also examined the philosophical claim that Eastern martial arts can lead to enlightenment, a state which is described as a complete concentration on the situation, with no dichotomy between you and the situation ("you in the situation"). In a broader view, Wertz [25] compared the value of Eastern martial arts with other (Western) sports. He indicated that participants of the latter can also reach a similar state, but that it is more systematically pursued in martial arts.

Another classification system in martial arts research is based on the basic philosophies, aims and methods used to teach martial arts, such as a traditional versus a modern approach. In the **traditional approach** participants are encouraged to strive for unity and coordination between internal (e.g., spiritual and mental) and external (e.g., physical) elements [1], while teachers using a modern approach emphasise more the sporting and competitive elements with a focus on physical aspects [23]. Both Canic [26] and Linden [27] indicated that a traditional approach is more process-oriented and strives for spiritual, educational, philosophical and esthetical gains, as opposed to a more outcome-related approach which values technical skill development, physical condition, self-defence proficiency and competition performance. The latter is compared with characteristics of a modern approach.

These both approaches are not necessarily linked to different martial arts, they can also be found within the same style. For example, as a result of cultural differences between Eastern and Western societies, as well as of modernisation and internationalisation trends, several Eastern martial arts have undergone distinct changes which have resulted in the occurrence of traditional and modern versions of the same martial art (e.g. judo: [28]; karate: [29]; wushu [17]).

And finally, some authors have also referred to a distinction between martial arts and combat sports [30]. Martial arts are then viewed as historical forms of (Far Eastern) physical culture which are at the same time processes of education and are considered to lead, through training, to psycho-physical perfection and

Wushu – a collective noun for Chinese martial arts [2]. Literally translated it means 'war art'.

Self-reported effects – effects that are measured by a self-reported questionnaire in which respondents are asked about their feelings, attitudes, beliefs, etc. [3].

Traditional approach – an approach in which participants are encouraged to strive for unity and coordination between internal (e.g., spiritual and mental) and external (e.g., physical) elements [1].

self-realization. Combat sports are defined as competitive sports where two adversaries are in direct combat [31].

Based on the different classification systems described above, the present paper will primarily focus on ‘traditional’ ‘eastern (or Asian)’ ‘martial arts’.

Traditional martial arts teaching

Looking more in-depth into the traditional approach, it is generally indicated that the purpose of traditional martial arts teaching is directed at spiritual cultivation (i.e., attainment of enlightenment). In a traditional approach of motor skill acquisition, the focus is more on the process of performing skills (or ‘how’ it is done), rather than on the outcome (or ‘what’ is done in terms of neuromuscular control) [29,30]. Förster [25] indicated that traditional martial artists perform their basic techniques with full mental concentration, no matter how often they are repeated. Technical skills and abilities are of secondary importance, because they are only the means to give stability on the path towards enlightenment.

The internal orientation of motor skill acquisition within traditional martial arts has resulted in a specific pedagogical approach, in which there is a distinct distance between teacher and student and where the former serves as a model for the latter with a constant repetition of the teacher’s example [32–34]. In their “Spectrum of Teaching Styles”, Mosston and Ashworth [35] have situated the traditional teaching concept of martial arts as the “command style”, which is characterised as a method in which students are expected to learn to do the task accurately and follow all decisions by the teacher. According to Homma [36], there is only limited positive encouragement and appreciation, as the aim is to strive for humility. Students are expected to focus on the things they still have to do, instead of on what has already been achieved. Homma indicated that this specific relationship between teacher and student is based on Buddhist Zen principles. Canic [29] described the role of the traditional martial arts teacher as pointing students in the way to reach “spiritual maturity”. This can only be achieved, according to Canic, by the use of demonstrations with limited verbal support, as too much talking would lead to confusion in finding a genuine experience of enlightenment. Back and Kim [27] stated that the traditional martial arts training process provides:

... a deliberative attitude towards combat in which fighting need not to be the goal of training. The deliberative attitude comes from teaching fighting techniques in a step-by-step manner. A beginning student spends many hours drilling in basic techniques. This drilling, and the later synthesis of the atomic

movements, make the student of a martial art more conscious of what he does in sparring. (p. 24)

Practice of wushu

It is interesting to note that the most important characteristics of traditional wushu practice is fundamental skill practice or “jibengong” [37]. In general, wushu teachers’ pay a lot of attention to jibengong, which consists of a series of hand, arm, leg, waist, balance and jumping exercises. Several authors have stressed the importance of these fundamental skills for the flexibility of joints, the strength of tendons, the control ability of the muscles and, consequently, for a decrease of injuries [38]. However, the importance of jibengong practice is not only emphasised from a physiological and motor learning perspective. Traditionally, jibengong and the practice of wushu in general have also been characterised by a specific moral code of behaviour. This code, which in most cases is passed verbally from teacher to student, consists of a number of guiding principles often inspired by Confucians thoughts [15]. According to Wang [39], teaching about morality comes first in wushu education. Liu [16] also mentioned the importance of teaching **youngsters** about traditional Chinese culture and national spirit.

In China, wushu is a popular leisure activity and is practised at various levels (from recreational activity to professional top level sport) [40]. It has been indicated that wushu is the second most popular physical exercise in China after aerobics [41]. According to Cai [42], there are well over 60 million Chinese that are involved in regular wushu practice. The Chinese Wushu Administration Centre has estimated that there are more than 12,000 wushu schools in China [43]. For example, privately owned schools range from 500 up to 3,000 students each [44]. Most Chinese youngsters start wushu practice from age 7 or 8. Professional teams often identify talented youngsters in kindergarten and through junior spare-time sports schools prepare them for later elite wushu competition.

Research regarding wushu

A literature study of China’s domestic research on wushu revealed that studies regarding the practice of wushu among youngsters have looked at a variety of topics, such as talent detection [46], competition performances of players and coaches [45], strategies to improve the development of wushu practice among youngsters [46,47] and teaching methods [42,48]. It is worthwhile to mention that many of the Chinese papers that deal with wushu teaching refer to the impact of wushu practice on moral and cognitive development of youngsters.

Youngsters – in this article youngsters are considered as 6 to 18 year olds.

In line with this, one of China's most well-known wushu coaches, Wu Bin of the prestigious Beijing wushu team, described in his work "Essentials of Chinese wushu" several functions of wushu: (a) moral cultivation, (b) self-defence, (c) curative and rehabilitative effect for various chronic diseases, (d) health improvement, (e) artistic effects, and (f) intellectual development [18].

As indicated earlier, many have advocated the use of wushu in attempting to improve the morality of contemporary Chinese youth [e.g., 42, 49] or as a way to introduce what is considered as 'quality education' in Chinese middle and primary schools [50]. Although the high expectations that have been raised regarding the effects of wushu practice for today's youth in China, there is, however, a lack of sound empirical evidence for these proclaimed effects. Only a number of authors have investigated the effects of wushu practice on youngsters [e.g., 51–54]. It is interesting to note however, that a considerable number of these papers can be regarded as very general and descriptive of nature. Their content is often merely based on document analysis and personal experiences of the authors. Also, the majority of the research on wushu is only published in Chinese. The limited number of international publications on wushu mostly refers to the investigation of health-related effects of taijiquan, an internal wushu style, better known in the West as 'taichi' [e.g., 55–57]. To date, there is a lack of international publications specifically focusing on the wushu practice of youngsters.

Consequently, evidence which supports the occurrence of the effects of wushu among youngsters remains scarce. Although it might be expected that empirical research can provide more insight into the proclaimed benefits of wushu practice, it also faces a number of problems. First, it will be difficult to establish a direct causal relationship between wushu involvement and the observed outcomes. As indicated in sports participation research in general, empirical evidence regarding a cause and effect relationship between sports involvement and developmental outcomes is sorely lacking [58]. Most studies cannot ascertain that if a particular behaviour or attitude is observed among participants, it is solely the result of their involvement of the activity. For example, it is also possible that a selection effect occurred, which means that if youngsters' characteristics are not in tune with those of a certain sport, they will not be attracted to it or will drop out. However, according to several authors, it might be inadequate or even unfeasible to determine a causal relationship, because certain kinds of sports in a specific context can lead to certain kinds of outcomes, while the same kinds of sports in a different context will not necessarily lead to the same outcomes [59–61].

Furthermore, it has been documented that, for example, the occurrence of socio-psychological effects of sports involvement is dependent on a number of contextual factors, such as type of guidance, social context, characteristics of participants and structural qualities of the sport [61, 62]. This has also been examined with regard to martial arts, in which it was concluded that these contextual factors are important to consider when examining the outcomes of youngsters' martial arts practice [63].

In conclusion, empirical research regarding the benefits of sports practice is very complex. Therefore, in order to gain a better understanding of the proclaimed effects of sports involvement, it is also possible to use another perspective, namely looking at participants' experiences and views. Papacharisis, Goudas, Danish and Theodorakis [64] even indicated that it is probably not the mere participation in sport that produces positive outcomes, but the individual's experience in sport that may be the critical factor. In the context of martial arts, Steenbergen [65] reported that the views of those directly involved (i.e., participants) are rarely heard. To date, only a limited number of studies have taken participants' experiences into account when examining outcomes of martial arts practice [e.g., 66–69].

As a number of authors have referred to the changed self-identity and behaviour of many of today's youth in China [12–14] and high expectations have been raised with regard to traditional martial arts practice, it is worthwhile to investigate how Chinese youngsters experience the practice of wushu and how they deal with the specific characteristics of traditional wushu and its teaching process.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present study was set up to analyse experiences of Chinese youngsters in wushu. The subjects of this study (N=150) came from 3 'spare-time' schools in the city of Chengdu, the capital of China's Sichuan Province. The group consisted of 109 boys and 41 girls, with ages ranging from 6 to 17 years ($M=11.9$ yrs., $SD=2.8$ yrs.). The average wushu training experience was 1.9 years ($SD=1.2$ yrs.). The subjects in this study practise wushu after school hours 2 or 3 times a week. Youngsters' experiences were registered through the use of an adapted and translated version of a written semi-structured questionnaire that was used in a previous study on youth's experiences in martial arts [70]. Other studies have used similar methodology to determine experiences and views of young martial artists [e.g., 7]. To eliminate social desirability in subjects' responses, questions were formulated in a very general way (e.g., by avoiding any direct reference to acclaimed positive outcomes of wushu

involvement). Questionnaires were handed out by their wushu teachers after a training session. Assistance was provided by the teachers for the younger youngsters. The main purpose of this questionnaire was to collect data with regard to youngsters' experiences and opinion of their own martial arts involvement (e.g. participation motives, training and competition experiences, and (perceived) effects on behaviour).

To examine age and gender differences, data were statistically analysed using non-parametric statistics (i.e., chi-square tests). If a p-value was minor than 0.05, the result was considered as significant. The effect sizes are also mentioned in order to provide more information regarding the size of the significant difference.

RESULTS

Views on wushu

As reported in the literature, wushu practice is regarded to serve a variety of functions, among other things, they include moral cultivation, self-defence, health improvement and intellectual development. Findings of this study however, showed that youngsters only reported a few functions. A majority of the youngsters (61.7%) in this study indicated that they practise wushu because of health reasons ("I want to stay in shape"). Also, more than half of all youngsters (52.6%) said that they practise Chinese martial arts because they want to defend themselves on the street. Interestingly, the majority of the youngsters (80.6%) indicated that they do not want to get involved in a fight. The most mentioned reasons were related to the fact that they believe fighting will not solve a thing (52.9%) and that they do not want to hurt another person (52.9%).

Nearly one fourth of the youngsters (24.0%) indicated they practise wushu to defend themselves at school. Further analyses revealed, among other things, a significant difference with the age of the participants. Older youngsters (12 to 17 yrs.) were more concerned with learning to defend themselves from bullying at school compared to the younger ones (6 to 11 yrs.) ($\chi^2=7.12$, $p=0.008$, $ES=0.45$). No gender differences were found regarding the motives that were mentioned.

As it was reported in the literature that traditional Asian martial arts are regarded to produce an added value compared to Western sports (such as enlightenment, artistic enjoyment and educational gains), the subjects of this study were asked if they see a difference between wushu and other sports. It is interesting to note that more than two thirds (68.9%) indicated to see a difference. This was even more apparent among the older youngsters ($\chi^2=6.13$, $p=0.013$, $ES=0.42$). However, instead

of primarily referring to some of the benefits that are described in the literature, by far the most mentioned difference according to the youngsters referred to the fact that wushu can be used as a means of self-defence.

Opinion on the training sessions

The overall opinion of the youngsters with regard to the training sessions is positive, as 39.3% rated training as 'good' and 15.9% as 'very good'. Again, results seem to suggest that youngsters in this study link wushu practice to a limited number of specific characteristics, which in general are mostly related to 'modern sport' characteristics.

The most mentioned reason for liking the training sessions was that they can improve on their technical level (51.0%). Older youngsters (both boys and girls) reported this significantly more than younger ones ($\chi^2=11.84$, $p=0.001$, $ES=0.59$). Also, one third of the youngsters (33.3%) reported that they like the sessions as they can help to improve their self-defence skills. No age or gender related differences were found here.

When asked what they consider as the most important aspect during a training session, more than half of the youngsters mentioned "working on physical condition" (54.5%). It is important to mention that for this aspect a significant difference was found between boys and girls ($\chi^2=5.85$, $p=0.016$, $ES=0.40$), with boys indicating this more than girls. The second most mentioned aspect was "repeating techniques" (51.0%), which was regarded by girls as the most important aspect. No significant differences were found here.

Opinions on the teacher

Results indicated that there is a positive attitude of the youngsters with regard to the general opinion they have of their teacher. In total, 83.4% of the youngsters described their teacher as "good" (48.1%) or "very good" (35.3%). Youngsters' opinions on their teacher also highlighted a more modern or outcome-related orientation of wushu practice as 63.4% of them said to have a positive attitude because of the teacher's knowledge of wushu (63.4%). Other frequently mentioned reasons are "he/she can do everything" (41.2%), "he/she can teach me the best techniques" (37.4%) and "he/she is funny and friendly" (22.9%). Regarding the latter, a significant difference was found with the age of the participants, with older youngsters indicating this more than the younger ones ($\chi^2=6.92$, $p=0.009$, $ES=0.44$).

On the other hand, youngsters that do not like their teacher indicated not to do so because he or she is very

strict (65.1%) or because they are not allowed to talk during training sessions (23.3%).

Competition

Although two thirds of the youngsters (66.9%) in this study indicated that they never or rarely take part in competition. The majority of the youngsters (83.3%) in this study consider taking part in competition as important. The most common reason that was mentioned (75.6%) related to the fact that through competition these youngsters can test the techniques they have learned.

The reasons that were mentioned when asked why the youngsters do not take part in competition are primarily related to “external” factors, such as the fact that they are not allowed by their teacher (56.6%) or by their parents (25.9%). Only less than one third of this group (29.6%) indicated not to take part because they do not like it.

Effects of wushu practice

Youngsters were also asked what they regarded as effects of their wushu practice. Again, it is interesting to note that although a number of positive effects were described, they all related to “extrinsic” elements. For example, more than half of the youngsters (47.8%) indicated that they feel physically stronger than before. Also, 41.6% of the youngsters of this study indicated that they are less afraid of being bullied at school than before. And more than one fourth (27.3%) said they want to fight less at school. Finally, almost one third (29.9%) also mentioned that they are less afraid because they know how to defend themselves. No significant age and gender differences were found here.

Discussion

The literature regarding traditional Asian martial arts practice reports on an emphasis on ethical and spiritual cultivation. While practice is also aimed at the improvement of technical skills and abilities, this is often regarded to be of secondary importance. Consequently, a number of authors have regarded traditional Asian martial arts practice as beneficial for the education of contemporary youth. In recent years, Chinese educators have increasingly promoted the use of wushu practice among youngsters in an attempt to bring them closer to traditional Chinese culture and to halt what they consider as a decline of morality among contemporary youth [52,53].

However, findings of this study do not appear to provide evidence for the proclaimed added value of traditional

martial arts. Instead, data seem to indicate that Chinese youngsters in wushu primarily focus on health improving aspects (“staying in shape”) and the acquisition of technical skills. The improvement of technical ability is often related to the acquisition of self-defence skills, which is regarded by the youngsters of this study as important to defend themselves on the street. Also, the subjects’ perception of the difference between wushu and other sports relates only to the self-defence component. These results are in line with Zhu and Wang’s findings [70] with regard to participation motives among young Chinese wushu players. Their study showed that youngster’s most important motives were “health improvement” (56%) and “enjoyment” (50%) and “self-defence” (25%). Zhu and Wang’s study also included parents’ opinions. It is interesting to see that, while the most important motives among parents was similar to those of their children (i.e., health improvement: 63.0%), next to “enjoyment”, “cultivation of willpower” came second (36%), which seem to suggest that parents represent a more traditional perspective on the value of wushu practice.

It is also interesting to note that while most youngsters reported various positive effects of their wushu involvement, again the effects that are described are mostly related to extrinsic aspects, such as having more self-defence skills and a higher self-confidence. As indicated earlier, these findings are not in line with what has been described in the literature as distinct effects of wushu practice. Nor does this appear to concur with the characteristics regarding Asian participants in martial arts that have been reported by others. For example, a number of authors have indicated that cultural differences exist between western and eastern participants in the way they perceive training in traditional Asian martial arts [see e.g., 71,72]. While it was indicated that Asians appear to focus more on the maturing process of the activity itself and consider the idea of winning and losing merely as a by-product, Westerners are believed to emphasise more the competitive side of martial arts and strive for proficiency and quick rank advancement. As a result, some authors suggested that the same activity can be differently perceived not only in meaning, but also in the nature of behaviour by different ethnic groups [73,74]. In this context, Clark [75] concluded in his study on American judo athletes, that the Americans viewed judo rather as a competitive sport than as a way of living in the same sense as the Japanese do. In an analysis of the situation of traditional martial arts in the United States, Back and Kim [74] indicated that Anglo students have different interests in the martial arts compared to Asian students:

... [Anglo] students are not especially interested in learning foreign terminology, in meditating, in doing lots of drills, in

concentrating on only a few techniques as beginners, in training diligently and repetitively in forms. Most students tend not to be committed to a martial art for years, and want proficiency and rank advancement quickly. They also want to learn advanced techniques and forms, and often are interested in free sparring and tournaments, to the exclusion of more restricted and less public activities. (p. 8)

Although no cross-cultural study was set up, the present findings show many similarities with a previous study regarding the experiences of young martial artists in the West [75]. Moreover, results of the present study seem to suggest that the Chinese respondents show more resemblance to the way Western participants of martial arts are portrayed in the literature than to Asian participants. It is unclear why Chinese youngsters in this study seem to experience wushu in a different way compared to what has been described in the literature. A number of explanations might be formulated. For example, as earlier mentioned, some authors have referred to a changed identity and behaviour among Chinese youth shifting from oriental traditions towards modernisation. As a result, youngster's experiences regarding martial arts might have become more "universal".

Furthermore, it is also not clear to what extent wushu teachers in China have started to use adapted teaching approaches to meet the changed needs of today's youth. It is interesting to note that a number of Chinese authors have indicated that wushu practice and its teaching methods are outdated and need to be modernised. For example, Qi and Gao [76] have indicated that the growing popularity of Korean taekwondo in China is due to the fact that this martial art has modernised and uses more adapted methods of practice and competition compared to Chinese wushu. Xue [77] described a number of modifications regarding the aims and concept of wushu training for youth that he regards as necessary in order to meet the needs of today's youth. These changes relate to focusing more on youngster's health (instead of skill development), enjoyment, motivation and active involvement. It is however noteworthy that no recommendations are made to take also more educational and spiritual aspects into consideration, which has seen earlier, are regarded as important characteristics of traditional martial arts practice. For example, Back and Kim [74] have indicated that in order to keep the status of a traditional Asian martial art through change, the following four criteria should continuously be satisfied: (a) recognition of the cultural origin, (b) reference to fighting, (c) presence of artistic aspects through formal training (i.e., forms or drills), and (d) working toward spiritual development. It is important here to mention that, while wushu can be regarded as the traditional Chinese martial arts, since the early 1950's it has undergone an

evolution in China in which it has been reformed from an ancient combative art into a modern sport with a focus on the perfection of technical skill performance [114]. It has been indicated by some that this change has ripped this 'new' style of wushu from some of the typical characteristics of traditional martial arts [78]. And while 'old style' wushu still exists in China, the new or 'modern' wushu is more practised to date. Interestingly, most authors in China still regard the new style as traditional. It might therefore be possible that contemporary wushu practice, while traditional in nature, has lost its potential to result in the expected benefits.

Still, other explanations might be taken into consideration for the fact that this study does not provide evidence for what has been described and claimed in the literature. One alternative explanation, for example, might be that the respondents' mean age was too low to expect them to be conscious about the educational value of their martial arts practice. Although the primary aim was to collect data on youngsters' view and experiences regarding their wushu practice, it can be questioned if the extent to which the set up and methodology used in the present study offers enough possibilities to provide evidence in this context. It might well be that the traditional (intrinsic) benefits of wushu practice simply remain "hidden" for participants, but still do occur. As it has been indicated that in a pedagogical context there is a teacher-student incompatibility in terms of personal motivation and motivational environment [79], it is possible that goals set forward by a teacher do not concur with these of pupils and it is even likely that they are not known to pupils nor experienced by them as such.

Furthermore, it is also possible that the expectations regarding the variety of functions of wushu in relation to Chinese youth are too high. After all, is it even realistic to believe that morality and spiritual education of youngsters can be improved through the practice of the Chinese martial arts? While similar claims have been made with regard to traditional martial arts in general, to date, empirical evidence regarding these expectations is also scarce [63]. One of the problems researchers are facing here, as earlier mentioned, is related to the measurement of the proclaimed effects. For example, it has been reported that several influencing contextual factors have to be taken into consideration when looking at possible socio-psychological effects of sports participation, such as type of guidance and characteristics of participants [62,63,65,80]. With regard to the type of guidance, it is interesting to mention that the way a martial arts teacher organises his or her class, is expected to have an impact on the outcome [81,82]. Another influencing factor indicated in the literature is described as the characteristics of the participants. Although age, gender

and training intensity were taken into account, in future research it might be relevant to investigate to what extent other characteristics, such as style of wushu (new or old) will have an influence. Also the level of wushu expertise might be relevant to consider. In the present study the variation with regard to the wushu training experience of the participants was considerable, going from several months to 6 years. Taking the age differences of the respondents into account, this difference can be regarded as reasonable. Future studies however might want to consider a comparison between similar age groups and various experience levels.

CONCLUSIONS

Distinct positive outcomes are attributed to the practice of traditional Asian martial arts. While this is not a recent phenomenon as they have been associated

since long with cultural, moral and spiritual benefits, it is until recent that an increasing number of physical educators in Japan and China have advocated the use of martial arts as an educational means for the moral decline of contemporary youth. The present study has looked at experiences of today's Chinese youth involved in wushu. Interestingly, its findings are not in line with the specific outcomes and characteristics of traditional wushu practice as described in the literature. For example, the youngsters in this study did not refer to any moral experiences with regard to their wushu involvement. As mentioned earlier, there are several possible explanations why their experiences differ from what is generally assumed. But until we are able to analyse the impact of most of these influencing factors which can lead to a better understanding of the true value of traditional Asian martial arts involvement for youth, more modest expectations might be advisable.

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