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Modern wushu: When Chinese martial arts meet Western sports

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Summary

Despite the fact that most Eastern martial arts originated in China and draw heavily upon Chinese philosophy, Chinese wushu (martial arts), as a comprehensive system of martial arts, has not been fully recognized or adequately explored within the international martial arts landscape. This paper defines what Chinese wushu is, introduces the history and evolution of Chinese martial arts, and discusses the dilemma of the modernization of Chinese martial arts in the context of East-West cultural conflict, negotiation, and compromise. In conclusion, it would seem that westernization or modernization has had both positive and negative influences on traditional Chinese wushu, and it is critical to the integrity of wushu that the traditional roots and true essences of these martial arts – health, self-development, and moral cultivation – are advocated in the process of modernizing them.

Key words: Chinese martial arts • sports • East-West

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WHAT ARE CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS?

Wushus (also called kung fu in English) are traditional Chinese martial arts that cultivate a practitioner's internal and external qualities and abilities. "Internal" refers to morals, mind, or spirit; "external" refers to physical strength or skills [1]. While hundreds of branches and styles exist, wushu can essentially be classified into two disciplines: formalized (taolu) and combat (bodou). Formalized wushu is usually a set of choreographed movements, whereas combat wushu is characterized by regulated one-on-one sparring. Formalized wushu encompasses sub-categories of fist arts (e.g., taijiquan, baguaquan, xinyiquan), weaponry (e.g., sword, knife, spear), one-on-one practice, and practice in groups; combat wushu (one-on-one) encompasses free combat (sanshou), long weaponry, and short weaponry [2,3]. Wushu, like most Eastern martial arts, originated in China [4] and draws heavily upon Chinese philosophy [5,6].

HISTORY OF CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS

Originating in China thousands of years ago, wushu has been used for survival, military combat, education, health, fitness, personal development, and as a leisure activity. During the prolonged cold weaponry age wushu was also employed by the military force to subdue their opponents. It was not until the mid-1800s, when China was defeated by Western imperial powers, that wushu fell out of favor with the military. In the early 1900s, however, the Chinese government – in an effort to enhance the health, fitness, and cultural identity of its citizens – introduced traditional wushu to the general public with very positive results and, in fact, it is a mandatory activity in schools today. Since the 1900s wushu, in response to the force of westernization, has evolved into three distinct styles. *Fitness* wushu is practiced by the public in general and taught in schools for health, moral education, rehabilitation, personal development, and recreation. *Combat* wushu is usually practiced among wushu masters or religious practitioners (e.g., Buddhists, Daoists); it derives from traditional wushu but focuses on internal development and actual combat. Finally, *athletic* wushu is practiced by dedicated athletes and consists of elements from both formalized and combat wushu. Of the three styles, athletic wushu has been the main vehicle to promote Chinese wushu culture worldwide (via the world wushu championship and the Olympics) because it has been precisely modeled along the lines of Western sports such as gymnastics [7].

THE DILEMMA OF THE MODERNIZATION OF CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS

Over the past century there has been an initiative to westernize or modernize traditional Chinese wushu – an initiative which was originally perceived as a means to revitalize China's image both nationally and internationally. Many experts and practitioners feel that wushu has great potential as a formal Olympic event, and wushu has been promoted as a sport (at the request of the Chinese government) by many agencies, particularly the International Wushu Federation (IWSF) [3]. The IWUF was officially recognized by the international Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2002. The IWUF and its 120-odd member federations are fully committed to comply with Olympic ideals and all IOC directives. There will

be a wushu competition during the 2008 Beijing Olympics; however, it is not one of the official 28 sports [8].

There are two conflicting camps with regard to whether the ancient martial art of wushu should be brought to the Olympics. The proponents believe that doing so is an opportunity to enhance, revitalize and revive Chinese confidence and pride of culture, and that it would create international awareness of China's significance as a large country with one of the longest civilized histories of any country in the world. In terms of bringing wushu into wider acceptance and practice, potentially this could parallel what Japan did with judo in the 1964 Tokyo Olympiad and what South Korea did with taekwondo in the 1988 Seoul Olympiad.

Those who disagree with including wushu in the Olympics argue that there are essential differences between Chinese culture and Western culture that cannot and should not be compromised in the context of these disciplines. For example, the purposes of learning wushu are to pursue self-enlightenment (e.g., to pursue Dao) and self-cultivation (e.g., achieving Ren), and to develop one's morals, health, and self-defense abilities. Wushu was never intended to be practiced as entertainment for an audience, or to satisfy referees or to conquer a competitor [9]. Numerous wushu masters in Buddhist or Daoist temples, or even in secular society, would never consider competing for the title of the Olympic champion, simply because they practice wushu only for self-cultivation, health, and self-defense. Also, from a safety perspective traditional wushu can be dangerous in competition, and could easily result in severe injuries – or even death – for an opponent. While the Olympic requirements do state certain rules for athletes' safety, (not allowing the use of elbow or knee in combat, and requiring opponents to wear protective equipment), these rules significantly restrain technique and fundamentally distort traditional wushu. Another argument is that the extensive media coverage (e.g., TV, movies) would disseminate wushu at the unfortunate expense of sacrificing its philosophical essence; this recalls how Japanese judo and Korean taekwondo were accepted by the Olympics by changing themselves significantly, thereby losing their philosophical essences of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism [10].

The proponents appear to have won this round, although pushing wushu into the mainstream of the Olympics is merely a continuum of the ongoing westernization of Chinese traditional sports. As noted earlier, since the mid-1800s China has been reacting to the fact that many of its people felt inferior and inadequate in their traditional culture. Westernization has been regarded by many as the only way to rejuvenate China, and to give it a dominant international voice. Numerous Chinese have tried diligently to help the nation gain back self-confidence, self-respect, and prestige, and to create a strongly united country. When Western sports such as track and field, gymnastics, and ball sports (e.g., basketball, volleyball, soccer) became dominant in China and especially in its schools, a trend also began to westernize or reform wushu [4]. The methods to revamp wushu along western lines included: switching from the master-disciple family apprenticeship style (e.g., individualized teaching, oral instruction) to a public education format (e.g., group teaching, reading materials); modifying the practice of wushu using Western gymnastic formats; and study-



ing wushu in tandem with Western theories (such as anatomy, physiology, biomechanics) and Western sports (such as track and field, gymnastics, and ball games). A final significant change was the development of a wushu competition system involving westernized rules and a ranking system for referees and athletes [7].

Beginning in the mid-1950s, the athletic training and competition systems in China were adapted from the former Soviet Union and East Germany, where sports were primarily used to demonstrate communist superiority to their Western counterparts. The government selected and modified the most popular branches of wushu using the “gymnastics mentality” of aesthetics and performance art. While the westernization of wushu has been reasonably successful in terms of achieving the proponent camp’s goals of unity and confidence for China, negative effects are also evident. Seeking champions and winning medals becomes the primary goal of learning/practicing in athletic wushu, pursuing Olympic ideals such as *higher, faster, and stronger*. This style of wushu is detached from its traditional roots – the cultivation of fitness, self-development, and self-defense – and propagates a misunderstanding of traditional wushu [7]. As a result, many of today’s martial artists are similar to gymnasts, searching for an aesthetic in public exhibition and hunting for medals. Ironically, these athletic wushu performers nowadays would not be able to use wushu – one of the most powerful self-defense arts – to defend themselves in real fight situations as they have not learned the proper techniques. In sanshou, another westernized wushu (a freestyle grappling), athletes focus on some techniques of wushu but are taught little about self-cultivation and personal health development as addressed in traditional wushu learning. These modifications raise serious concerns and require scholars’ and practitioners’ careful examination [11].

CONCLUSIONS

Westernization or modernization has both positive and negative influences on traditional Chinese wushu. It would be beneficial to introduce wushu to Western mainstream sports venues, especially the Olympics, as an influential means to promote Chinese culture; however, it is critical to the integrity of wushu that the traditional roots and true essences of these martial arts – health, self-development, and moral cultivation – are advocated in the process.

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