

Teaching Chinese martial arts to youngsters: Approaches and experiences of wushu coaches in Europe

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- B Data Collection
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Abstract

Background and Study Aim:

Wushu is the collective noun for Chinese martial arts. Extant research has demonstrated that the analytical and repetitive method commonly used in wushu is less appealing to modern youth than other Asian martial arts (such as judo, karate, and taekwondo). This study aims to gain a better understanding of wushu coaches' experience teaching youngsters in Europe.

Material and Methods:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 male wushu coaches teaching in Europe to investigate their purpose, teaching content, and approach. Eight of these coaches were Chinese immigrants to Europe, while the rest were European.

Results:

This study demonstrates the teaching experience of wushu coaches in Europe in terms of their teaching content, guidance (teaching approaches), and structure (main parts of a session such as warming up, core, and cooling down). The majority of coaches interviewed in this study use official content and mimic what they learnt from their coaches. Only a notable, small number of professional coaches broke down conventions and adapted their guidance and content. Professional coaches rely on student demands, drawing more students away from the stresses of their lives. Amateur coaches, however, have not changed much.

Conclusions:

The findings of this study emphasise the need for wushu coaches to adapt their traditional teaching approaches to youngsters practising wushu for recreational purposes. Future research could help to determine whether these adapted teaching approaches are effective in better engaging youngsters.

Keywords:

competition • coaching approach • coaching structure • motivation • routine

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Wushu – noun Chinese martial arts, considered collectively [42].

Routine – noun **1.** a regular pattern of activity
2. a rehearsed set of movements or actions that make up a performance, such as a gymnast's sequence of exercises [42].

INTRODUCTION

Wushu, the collective noun for Chinese martial arts, is one of China's most prominent traditional sports [1]. Outside of China, the term 'kung fu' is more pronounced and well-known than 'wushu' to describe Chinese martial arts. Although these two terms are generally interchangeable, there are some differences. For example, wushu literally means 'martial art', whereas 'kung fu' (or 'gong fu' in Mandarin) means 'skill'. Therefore, to avoid any potential ambiguity, we use the more general term 'wushu' throughout this paper [2].

Wushu is divided into two categories: traditional wushu and modern (or competitive) wushu. Yang concluded that traditional wushu is distinguished by characteristics of traditional Chinese culture, emphasising attack and defence as well as internal aspects such as 'yin and yang'. Competitive wushu, in contrast, has its roots in traditional wushu but also incorporates modern competitive sports theories and places more emphasis on external (visual) elements, such as performance of aesthetic and acrobatic movements [3]. In general, competitive wushu is divided into two parts: 'taolu' (barehanded and weapon routines) and 'sanda' (free fights) [4].

Although wushu appears to be a popular sport among youngsters worldwide, previous studies have demonstrated that international wushu is less favoured than other martial arts (such as judo, karate, and taekwondo) [5]. Wushu competitions are an important indicator that wushu is less attractive to European youth. According to extant research, the number of people competing in martial arts competitions is far lower than that of taekwondo and karate [6]. Some studies have discovered that a significant number of children and adolescents in several European countries, including the Netherlands, France, Germany, Slovenia, and Belgium [6-8, 1, 9], participate in martial arts clubs. These studies, however, have not included wushu in their analysis. Interestingly, wushu is not the most widely practised martial art style, even in China [10-12]. Wang et al. [11], for example, demonstrated that taekwondo (Korean) is more popular among youth than wushu as it uses various tools (such as kicking pads) and simple movements, and focuses on speed. Taekwondo's unique technical style and powerful visual impact, according to experts, are the keys to its appeal among adolescents. While most participants who begin to learn wushu are inspired by kung fu movies,

they quickly realise that its traditional teaching style requires rigorous approaches such as repetition, drilling, ritualization, and so on. As a result, some authors have indicated that this type of teaching approach makes it difficult to maintain participants' enthusiasm [11, 13]. Qiu and Yang [14] demonstrated that although children in China enjoy wushu, they dislike attending wushu classes. Among other things, the fact that most techniques are taught without reference to practical application is one of the reasons why many participants are uninterested in (continuing to learn) wushu. As this is not a new phenomenon, the General Sports Administration of China established a wushu ranking system called 'Duanwei' in the mid-1990s. The Chinese Martial Arts Research Institute developed 12 martial arts routines for the Duanwei system [15]. This system's content is based on over 100 routines, including practical applications, to make wushu more accessible and appealing to youngsters, progressing from basic (simple) routines to more complex combinations.

However, while some authors claim that the Duanwei system is effective for learning wushu [16], others question its validity [15]. For example, while it was expected that the Duanwei system would be used in schools, most schools have not implemented it [17, 18]. One reason is that teachers have insufficient knowledge of the Duanwei system [19]. Furthermore, some researchers have stated that the techniques and practical applications of the system are not integrated well and have expressed doubts regarding the system's relevance for self-defence [20, 18], which have resulted in the system failing to inspire students' interest in learning wushu and also failing to suit different level participants [21].

Several authors have emphasised the importance of enjoyment or fun in initiating and maintaining youth participation in sports [22, 23]. Enjoyment in sports is defined as 'a positive affective response to sports experience that reflects generalised feelings such as pleasure, liking and fun' [24, 25]. Some researchers have examined the various sources of enjoyment among young sportspersons, prioritising intrinsic factors (such as the excitement brought by the sport, personal accomplishments, and improving one's skills), social factors (such as affiliation with peers and being with friends), and extrinsic or outcome-related factors (such as winning a game and gaining recognition from others), in that order [26, 27,

23]. Theeboom et al [28] compared two youth wushu teaching methods using different motivational approaches (a performance-oriented or 'traditional' approach and a mastery-oriented approach) in a field-based intervention study. Their findings revealed that children who followed the mastery-oriented method enjoyed the sport better and had better motor skills than those who followed the performance-oriented approach. The authors suggested that the mastery method would be better for teaching basic techniques, while the traditional way would be more appropriate for teaching complex skills.

Only a few studies have examined the extent to which wushu teaching approaches are appropriate for today's youth. According to extant research, modern wushu derives not only its content but also its teaching methods from traditional wushu, which are very conventional and regarded as unsuitable for today's youngsters [29]. Vit and Reguli [30] state that the traditional martial arts teaching process includes the demonstration of the teacher's technique, participant observation, repetition, verbal extrinsic feedback from the teacher, and hard drilling. When it comes to teaching wushu to today's youth, Ding suggests that coaches develop appropriate and adaptive teaching programmes to attract and retain participants of different levels and ages [31]. Some authors have proposed new methods of teaching wushu with a focus on creating a cooperative and active learning environment [32]. Although Chen's research provides new principles for wushu teaching to be used in the curriculum, no empirical studies have been conducted to test the practicality of these methods [32]. In our previous research in China, we conducted interviews with professional wushu coaches who train children in two organisations (schools and clubs). In China, wushu is taught in specialised schools (wushu schools) that offer daily wushu training sessions geared towards professional wushu. In addition to these schools, wushu is taught in recreational sports clubs, as it is in many other countries worldwide. In this way, traditional wushu teaching programmes (including official content and teaching approach) are divided into two different organisational formats. Our findings revealed that although such an organisational format approach has resulted in some changes, such as changing the content of teaching by combining a modern approach with traditional Chinese culture to enrich the course in the club, the course still

lacks long-term systematic training for participants of various levels. Furthermore, although the teaching content was purpose-driven, Chinese wushu coaches retained their traditional teaching approaches [33].

However, preventing dropouts remains a significant challenge for coaches worldwide, and the reasons for quitting wushu may differ depending on cultural contexts. Focusing on children's attitudes towards wushu, we examined the current situation only in China, where wushu is a traditional sport that attracts youngsters to clubs and schools, and not in other countries. Therefore, this study focuses on wushu coaches' experiences in different countries and, when possible, examines differences between China and other countries to better understand the approaches used to teach youngsters and why they are unappealing. We include coaches from different cultural backgrounds (Chinese and European), having different sport-related objectives (professional versus amateur), and working in different European countries (Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom) to gain better insight into their teaching approach.

This study aims to gain a better understanding of wushu coaches' experience teaching youngsters in Europe.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

We collected data for the study by extensively interviewing our participants to understand their real-life experiences and 'encourage a range of responses which provide a greater understanding of the attitudes, behaviour, opinions and perceptions of participants on the research issues' [34]. This qualitative approach enabled us to better understand our respondents' feelings, thoughts, and experiences [35].

Participants

Twenty-one male wushu coaches working in different parts of Europe were interviewed to gain deeper insights into their teaching approaches, opinions, aspirations, and experiences. Table 1 presents a profile of our respondents.

All interviewees were recruited using a snowball sampling technique [36]. The majority of the interviewees (n = 14) were coaches referred by a wushu expert with extensive practise and

Table 1. Respondent profile (n = 21).

Background	Type of coach	N	Interviewee code
China	Professional coach	7	CPC1–CPC7
	Amateur coach	1	CAC1
Europe	Professional coach	9	EPC1–EPC9
	Amateur coach	4	EAC1–EAC4

Note: **CPC** Chinese professional coach; **CAC** Chinese amateur coach; **EPC** European professional coach; **EAC** European amateur coach

training experience in Europe and active involvement in martial arts research, specifically wushu research. Some of these coaches, in turn, suggested a few others as potential interviewees.

All our interviewees had prior experience coaching young people in wushu in Europe. An information letter explaining the study's purpose and how coaches could participate was sent to potential study participants as an invitation. The university's Ethics Committee for Human Sciences approved our study procedures. All interviewees taught modern wushu to youth aged 4–16 years in Europe, with relatively uniform content. Since traditional wushu content and approaches are diverse, we only invited coaches who teach modern wushu. As shown in Table 1, eight interviewees had a Chinese background (i.e. were born in China and migrated to Europe; coded as C), while 13 participants were born in Europe (coded as E). Although all Chinese coaches in this study were professional wushu athletes in China, none of them had a coaching degree. Among the coaches with a European background (i.e. born in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, France, or the United Kingdom), some of them had won medal(s) at international wushu competitions and one (French) coach had a wushu coaching certificate. The interviewees had diverse professional statuses, with 16 teaching wushu for a living (coded as P.C.) and five coaching on a volunteer basis (coded as A.C.). While professional coaches (P.C.) rely on wushu teaching for their income, amateur (volunteer) coaches (A.C.) have other jobs and, therefore, are not dependent on their wushu coaching to earn a living.

Data collection

The interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed for a previous study. The guide was divided into four sections and consisted primarily of open-ended questions [33]. The first section focused on items related to

the interviewees' personal background (such as professional experience). The second section focused on the characteristics (such as mission, vision, and coaching goals) of their wushu coaching practice. The third part focused on their coaching content (e.g. what content was used and why). The fourth section focused on the specifics of their coaching approach (e.g. organisation method and how to teach techniques). Due to the geographical location of the participants, 13 interviews were conducted online (through WeChat and Skype video calls with the camera turned on), and eight interviews were conducted in-person. All interviews were conducted in either Chinese or English and were audiotaped, with each interview lasting between 50 and 90 minutes (on average, 62 minutes).

Data analysis

We used thematic analysis to gain insights into wushu coaching approaches. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim, proofread [37], and then used for analysis. All interview transcripts were coded for concision. After analysing the coded transcripts, patterns among the codes were identified, and the data was grouped into four candidate themes, namely 'coaching aim', 'coaching content', 'coaching approach', and 'competition'. This analysis procedure helped us in addressing two research questions: 1) What aspects determine the coaching approach of Wushu coaches in Europe? And 2) Which coaching aspects have a negative impact on the level of enjoyment for European youth participating in wushu?

RESULTS

Teaching objectives

Several coaches in this study mentioned similar coaching goals and described how they focused on improving young people's discipline and respect

for one another while also encouraging them to enjoy the experience. According to coach EAC1, 'To stimulate participants to surpass themselves, I teach them as much knowledge as possible and provide them insight into the practical applications... And explaining how a technique can be applied is as important to me as understanding not using techniques outside the sport setting. I like wushu, therefore, I intend to teach wushu with a lot of content instead of just teaching techniques or watching them train on the training ground'.

Two coaches stated that their primary objective is competition, and thus they focus on developing their students' technical skills in the sport. According to coach EPC3, 'Wushu is a competitive sport. I am interested in finding talented students and helping them to participate in formal competitions. Another coach (CPC7) said, 'I was a professional athlete in China, and I hope my students have good skills and become excellent athletes'. However, the majority of our interviewees (13) set recreation as their wushu teaching goal. In the words of coach CPC3, 'Students in China learn wushu to participate in competitions, while in Western countries, most young people do it for leisure and entertainment. I could not teach them wushu the way I learned it from my coach. If so, most of them would drop out as they want to learn it for recreational purposes and not to become an elite athlete. But if there are talented people who want something more serious, I will encourage them to train harder and teach them more knowledge and skills'. Among our participants, only one coach stated that he focuses on both competition and recreation, depending on his students' needs. This coach also adapted his approach to the age of his students. He discovered that the needs of young people differ depending on their own sport-related ambitions (ranging from excelling in wushu to enjoying the sport with their peers) and that the needs are also partly influenced by students' age (or the developmental stages) (EPC9). According to this coach, 'I divide children into three age groups: 4–7 years, 8–10 years, and 11–16 years. This differentiation is important to prevent dropout. Students need to practice wushu with a team of friends. The social aspect is crucial for students, particularly for the oldest age category'.

The coaching content

A majority of the coaches in this study ($n = 20$) frequently use officially published Chinese guidebooks, which correspond to their own wushu

training. However, most of the European coaches stated that there is a lack of wushu teaching guidebooks in other languages, which is a major barrier for non-native Chinese coaches. One of the coaches (EPC3) stated, 'For my teaching content, I follow the guidelines of the International Wushu Federation (IWUF). Although I have all the manuals, I do not use them because all of them are in Chinese. Occasionally, I look at the pictures in these publications to remember specific techniques. Although these publications are not helpful for my coaching approach, I developed my training sessions based on my previous experiences'.

One coach (CPC1) explicitly stated that he creates teaching content in his club. According to him, 'My students learn the routines that I created. I do not follow regular routines because I believe those are developed for elite athletes. My students are not competing. I therefore adapt routines by shortening them and adding applied exercises that help students understand certain techniques' functions, and I also include defence content in my course. Of course, some traditional cultural aspects such as etiquette, the attack and defence implication of movements, and how to address these issues are crucial when learning wushu.'

Another respondent (EPC9) stated that his teaching priorities do not correspond to the traditional style in which wushu is taught. For instance, teaching students how to use weapons (such as swords) is typically the last thing that coaches teach, but he did so from the start. In his words, 'My teaching content is adapted, depending on students' ages and capacity levels. It usually consists of a selection of basic movements. At the same time, I teach them some of my own combined and practical routines, also some routines with weapons. Using a weapon is attractive and not difficult for the students, so why not just practice it from the very beginning?'

The coaching structure

The coaching structure denotes the coaching approach as well as the different parts of the sessions such as warming up, core, and cooling down. Most coaches interviewed in this study (20) are inspired by the traditional martial arts approach, which focuses on repetitions and is analytical in nature (regarding learning techniques or routines). Warm-up, demonstration of techniques or routines, and self-practice are the three phases of a traditional wushu approach. This traditional coaching approach is still widely

used to teach wushu in China. Although the majority of the coaches in this study use this traditional coaching approach, they have aligned the official standard movements, which have become increasingly difficult, with the Olympic motto 'faster, higher, and stronger'. Some coaches (5) also stated that they had to adapt their traditional coaching approach and structure to prevent dropouts.

According to coach CPC2, 'My coach was very serious and expected the same attitude from the students. I am not saying that students are not devoted in my training sessions, but I focus on creating a pleasant atmosphere where children are smiling. When I was a student, the training sessions were very long and serious, and repetitions of movements were core business. However, I do not ask my students to spend too much time repeating the same movements to avoid boredom and fatigue. After all, they are not elite athletes, which is not their ambition either.' Another coach (CPC3) stated, 'In general, my coach would first show us a new movement, that we then had to repeat three times ourselves under the coach's supervision, after which we practiced independently. During self-practice, my coach looked around to correct students or help those that forgot movements. If we made too many mistakes, our coach punished us physically by hitting our leg or hand with a stick. As a coach, I do not hit my students. Such physical punishments are forbidden by the law and not necessary. Especially when knowing that these young people come for health and leisure purposes.'

Although most coaches learned wushu through traditional coaching methods, some have consciously modified their own coaching approach. According to coach EPC9, 'I use four different approaches in my class. The first is a global approach or analytical approach. The second coaching approach is analytical and consists of step-by-step teaching routines or techniques. The third coaching approach is experiential in nature. Students are then given challenges that they must solve independently. The fourth type of coaching is a game-based approach where students learn through playing games. This is crucial because respecting the rules is as important as correctly demonstrating techniques.' This coach changed his coaching approach, which resulted in an increase in student enrolment. His

educational background as a university student studying physical education aided him in this transformation. He has integrated several pedagogical principles (such as experiential learning) and other sports coaching pedagogies (e.g. used in gymnastics) in the wushu course. According to him, 'I teach wushu for my life... in my city, I am the only one in this region that coaches modern wushu, so I do not have to compete with other clubs to attract potential members. But to attract more students, I have to compete with other martial arts and other types of sports. I felt that changing my coaching approach was necessary for being able to attract young people. I used to coach in a very traditional way, but I realised that many students dropped out because of boredom.' Although the structure of his coaching sessions is similar to the traditional wushu coaching approach (using three phases), there is a difference in the teaching and learning strategies and activities. He says, 'For children, the organisation could be varied, but the goal is nevertheless the same. For example, when I demonstrate basic skills, I do not use the same approach every time, although the technique is the same. The main goal is to learn a technique as planned and develop motor skills, and to improve physical fitness through games.'

Competition

Most coaches interviewed in this study encourage talented students to join competitive groups and, as a result, participate in wushu competitions. Our interviewees value competition in very different ways. One of the coaches (CPC1) discourages students from competing but agrees to organise friendly tournaments with other clubs to motivate the children and encourage them to improve their technical skills in the sport. Another coach (EPC9) combines participation in formal competitions and friendly tournaments. According to him, 'I focus on two types of competition. The first one is for fun... every child gets a medal after the competition. According to pedagogical and psychological books that I read, it is crucial for young people's motivation to experience success, including receiving a medal after participating in a competition. In formal martial arts competitions, there is only one winner that will get a golden medal, and consequently everyone else ends up being a "not first". This might lead to the perception of constantly losing, which is not constructive for young people.'

DISCUSSION

Coaches have different motivations depending on their coaching status

The results of this study demonstrate that coaches' personal goals for clubs are significantly influenced by their own status (i.e. employed as a professional coach versus being an amateur coach) in Europe. McLean and Mallett identified four distinct motivators for coaches, including coach and athlete development, as well as external and internal motivation [38]. Participants who are professional coaches repeatedly mentioned the importance of external motivators, such as the fact that they rely on membership fees for their income. Two interviewees modified their coaching guidance and structure to prevent dropouts and to be able to reach out to more children. Volunteer coaches, who teach wushu mainly out of interest, emphasised internal motivators (such as fun or passion for coaching) more. They were not concerned with dropout prevention, which may explain why they do not feel the pressure to reflect on and adapt their coaching approach, which is primarily traditional in terms of guidance and structure.

According to the findings of our previous study, pursuing a personal connection with athletes was prioritised by all types of coaches. Moreover, the majority of respondents in our previous study cited personal connections and athlete development as primary motivators for teaching. While club coaches in our previous study modified their coaching approach to preventing dropouts, the majority's primary goal remained the same, that is, developing elite athletes. One possible explanation for this is that while there are two different types of organisations in China where one can learn wushu (wushu schools and wushu clubs), coaches in both these organisations are all (employed) professionals [33], the concept of pursuing a high level appears to remain a guiding principle for them.

Comparison between Chinese and European coaches in Europe

According to the findings of this study, Chinese coaches who are former elite athletes have fewer students than their European counterparts. Furthermore, children drop out of wushu classes for three major reasons. First, the professional coaching approach is characterised by a high level of seriousness (such as severe repetitions of the same movements), despite the fact that most students in these clubs practise wushu for recreational purposes and do not aspire to be professional athletes. Second, the teaching programmes

of these coaches is consistent with the general teaching objective sequence. In general, this teaching sequence is similar to what the coaches learned in China, such as 'jibengong', which is learning basic wushu techniques, practising combinations (composed of several basic movements) and routines, and weapon practice. However, the coaches stated that the traditional approach is boring for their students and learning routines are complicated. According to Gould et al. [39], compared to older students, younger sports students (aged 8–19 years) are more likely to feel motivated when they can use equipment. The coaches interviewed in this study stated that most students told them that they wanted to use weapons after seeing older students practise with them. However, only two coaches interviewed in this study teach weapons when students begin learning wushu. Consequently, these two coaches have more students than other coaches interviewed in this study. Third, despite having taught in Europe for a long time, the Chinese coaches in this study have not changed their teaching programmes (including teaching guidance, structure, and content). Only one coach in this study had obtained a coaching certificate with the goal of improving his coaching methods, reaching out to more youngsters, and reducing dropouts. The remaining coaches reproduce what they learned without adapting it to the current context or the youth involved.

Furthermore, Chinese coaches teaching in European wushu clubs continue to hold the same ideas as wushu school coaches in China, as they all learned wushu at Chinese wushu schools. The findings of our previous study revealed that coaches working in Chinese clubs graduated in wushu from sports universities [33]. When they want to change the teaching programme at the club, they only change the content (type of learning strategies), leaving the coaching guidance (coaching approach) and structure (main parts of the sessions such as warm-up, core, and cool down) unchanged [33]. Liu also pointed out a flaw in the university educational system, namely, that professional training approaches are still used for students who will become coaches, despite the fact that this does not benefit their coaching careers [29], as professional training approaches would not suit general physical education courses in school contexts [14]. In contrast, one European coach interviewed in this study has a background in physical education and adapts his coaching approach based on his experience from other sports (e.g. taekwondo and gymnastics) and sports training approaches. Similar to

the majority of our interviewees, he experienced high dropout rates in his early teaching career and thus decided to diversify stereotyped martial arts teaching approaches by combining them with training approaches from other sports. It is noteworthy that wushu club coaches, as demonstrated by our previous study, have begun changing in China as well, by designing games, changing content, and adding more courses on traditional culture [33]. Considering their background, European coaches tend to have extensive knowledge of sports, while the sports knowledge of Chinese coaches is mostly focused on martial arts-related content. When comparing their approaches and content, we discover that European coaches combine professional martial arts approach with other sports, while Chinese wushu coaches tend to rely solely on their own traditional learning experiences to instruct students.

Although the IWUF is an important intermediary in promoting wushu internationally, its policies have been ineffective thus far as development has been limited to only professional wushu competitions, leaving unmet the needs for training and guiding youths in leisure groups [40]. Meanwhile, the majority of the clubs have leisure as well as competition groups, but while the leisure group does not want to train for competition, they are still being provided with the same material as the competition group. Consequently, youngsters can easily lose motivation. This has prompted coaches to respond to the needs of their students by adapting their content based on other types of martial arts and their coaching approaches. Furthermore, after reviewing guideline books, such as a series of officially published textbooks, and interviewing coaches, we discovered that the content has some disadvantages that may discourage children or novices from using them. First, the content is entirely in Chinese [41], which is a barrier for many students. Second, the majority of the content is formal competition routines [40], which are inappropriate for novices or amateurs in general as they have not mastered high-level movements. As a result, the repetitions bore the students, and they stop practising. This limitation was also mentioned by our interviewees, who stated that some

explanations in the guideline books are inappropriate for their students. The illustrations in the guideline books, such as the 'children Duanwei for fun' booklet, are still very serious and not adapted for young children. Furthermore, methodologies are lacking to demonstrate how children can learn and practise the content of these books.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study emphasise the need for wushu coaches to adapt their traditional teaching approaches to youngsters practising wushu for recreational purposes. It has also shown the importance of considering coaching status as a reason for introducing adapted approaches or not in youth wushu coaching.

This study has certain limitations that could be addressed by future research. First, although the experience of coaches who described their approaches and behaviours was examined, this study did not investigate the experience, attitude, and motivation of wushu students. Therefore, future research could examine what motivates students to continue participating in wushu and analyse the experiences of both European and Chinese youth.

HIGHLIGHTS

This study examines the teaching practices of wushu teachers in Europe. The teaching approaches of European and Chinese teachers are compared. The findings of this study emphasise the need for wushu coaches to adapt their traditional teaching approaches to youngsters practising wushu for recreational purposes.

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