Chinese martial arts in the dynastic era

Chinese martial arts, also known as guoshu, kung fu, wuyi or wushu, are considered by many to symbolise the strength of the Chinese and their pride in their history, and have long been regarded as an important element of Chinese culture. The history of Chinese martial arts can be traced back to the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BC). Together with the invention of bronze weapons, the practice of combat skills using archery, axe, halberd, sword and spear became an important part of military training. Over the course of time, archery demonstrations and martial dances (wu wu), which replicated the bodily movements of real combat, began to appear in rituals, ceremonies and celebrations.

By the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BC), archery demonstrations and martial dances had begun to appear in rituals, ceremonies and celebrations used to serve the construction of the feudal pyramid of power. Weapon and combat skills, notably archery, came to be highly regarded by the ruling regime and the feudal lords/kings, and became important parts of rituals, military training and education. Due to their important place in rituals and warfare, archery and charioteering training were incorporated into the education system for the children of the nobility, which was based on the Six Arts (Liu Yi): Rites (Li), Archery (She), Music (Yue), Charioteering (Yu), Calligraphy (Shu) and Mathematics (Shu). The sons of the nobility were also required to learn other weapon and combat skills. The Zhou dynasty saw the development of martial dances. Like the highly ritualised archery demonstrations and contests, these dances were loaded with political significance. The political and cultural values of martial dances were embraced by Zhou society and included in the curriculum for children and young people.

In the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BC) and the Warring States period (476–221 BC), facilitated by warfare, new technologies gave birth to steel and iron weapons such as the crossbow, halberd, sword, sabre and spear, which in turn fostered the further development of weapon skills and military tactics. Weapon performances and hand-to-hand combat contests emerged as a form of art and entertainment. An embryonic form of martial arts began to take shape.

After the Qin reunified China, in order to consolidate the power of the centralised government and prevent rebellion, Emperor Qin Shi Huang banned private ownership of weapons.
The rise of the standing army and the ban on weapons changed the direction of development of martial arts. Jiaodi contests, primarily based on wrestling but also involving striking techniques, and Shoubo (hand-to-hand combat) developed accordingly and became a popular entertainment form.6

After the collapse of the short-lived Qin dynasty (221–206 BC), the Han (206 BC–220 AD) rulers granted civilians the right to own weapons and all males were required to perform military service. This system facilitated the development of military tactics, weapon skills and combat techniques. Manuals on archery and fighting skills began to emerge. In the late Eastern Han period, wars between the three kingdoms resulted in the further development of martial arts. In a context of political chaos and social unrest, people learned weapon and combat skills to respond to unanticipated risks. This period also witnessed the rise of health-oriented physical training. Entering the Northern and Southern dynasties era, individual barehanded martial arts forms, Jiaodi and martial dances flourished.

During the Sui (581–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties, military reforms and the adoption of the Imperial Military Examination system encouraged more middle- and lower-class people to practise martial arts and led to the prevalence of militarism. A culture of gallantry was on the rise. The sword became a symbol of strength, courage, masculinity and righteousness, and carrying short weapons like knives, daggers and swords became fashionable. Social and economic prosperity also boosted the development of martial arts performances. Martial dances and Jiaodi contests were frequently held during courtly banquets, festivals and celebrations. Sword dances, wrestling, combat and other martial arts performances were gathered into the Baixi, a variety show that included acrobatics, animal shows, music, dancing and other art forms. Every year, on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, Baixi shows were held in major cities to celebrate the Lantern Festival. Historical records reveal that many Tang rulers were fond of swordplay and Jiaodi. Jiaodi was not only performed for entertainment; it also developed into a full-contact combat competition which featured a combination of striking and wrestling skills.

Moving on to the Song dynasty (960–1126), the Song rulers imposed civilian control over the military and used a voluntary recruitment system to build up a professional standing army. This led to the further development of weapon skills and training methods. An increasing number of military texts were produced by the Song government. At the same time, with the rise of urban centres and a booming entertainment industry, performing martial arts on the streets became a profession and martial arts emerged as a popular hobby among the urban population.

Entering the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), the Mongol rulers promoted archery, horse racing and wrestling among the Mongol population to maintain military power. After Kublai Khan (1215–1294) moved the capital of the Mongol Empire from Shangdu (Šandu) to Yanjing in 1267, Jiaodi flourished in the region. However, the court prohibited Han civilians from owning weapons and practising martial arts. Despite this, martial arts culture continued to develop via the newly emerging poetic dramas which combined various forms of performances including acrobatics, music, martial arts, dancing, pantomime and singing, with plots usually based on popular folk tales, love stories, major historical events and well-known political and religious figures. Some tell the stories of gallant warriors and military leaders and therefore involve martial arts movements and martial dances using bare hands or wooden weapons.7

In sum, by the Song and Yuan dynasties, a modern form of martial arts – a collection of weapon skills, combat techniques, wrestling, martial dances and performances – had taken shape. It was practised for various purposes, including military training, health promotion, self-defence, entertainment and sport-like competition.

The Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties marked a golden age of Chinese martial arts. In the 14th and 15th centuries, the Ming government’s supportive stance towards
military education and the restoration of the Imperial Military Examinations facilitated the development of martial arts at all levels. Wrestling, hand-to-hand combat and weapon contests remained popular forms of training and entertainment in the army. The ban on weapons and martial arts was lifted by the Ming court. Martial arts performances began to revive. Street martial arts shows were performed by civilians during market days and festivals. Wrestling and hand-to-hand combat remained popular forms of entertainment. In the meantime, the newly popular vernacular novels and Kun opera contributed to the building of a martial arts culture. Scenes of martial arts performances and contests were displayed in carved sculptures, murals and paintings, reflecting the popularity of martial arts among the general public and the ruling upper class.

In the late 15th and early 16th centuries, facilitated by warfare and benefiting from the voluntary recruitment military system, martial arts reached a new level of development. An increasing number of military texts and manuals were composed by military commanders and experts to standardise martial arts techniques and training. Soldiers were required to learn simple and effective fighting skills and avoid ‘colourful’ martial arts techniques meant for performance. In addition to military texts, descriptions of martial arts can be found in other literary genres such as poems, essays, local gazettes and historical writings. These texts reveal that various schools of martial arts had taken shape by the late Ming era, and they were practised by civilians for self-defence or as a hobby.

Following its Ming golden age, Chinese martial arts continued to flourish in the early Qing period. The Imperial Military Examinations and the relaxed control over weapons facilitated the development of martial arts. From the 17th century, people began to categorise different schools of martial arts into two families: external (Waijia) and internal (Neijia).

The external family was headed by the Shaolin school. Its defining characteristics included aggressive attacking techniques, fast movements and powerful strikes. Training focused on building up physical strength, agility and speed. It stressed the confrontation of force with force during combat. Most of the external styles centred around punching and kicking.

The internal family was headed by the Wudang school, which was believed to have been founded by Daoist priest Zhang Sanfeng from the Wudang Mountains in Hubei Province, central China. It emphasised the practise of internal power – qi – and the use of effective defence skills. It upheld the idea that qi could be cultivated and used to energise the physical body and help one to use physical power effectively and efficiently. It focused on throw and joint lock techniques. Movements were mostly soft, gentle and relaxed. During combat, the practitioner avoided direct clashes with the opponent. The strategy was to evade or redirect the opponent’s attack and ‘borrow’ his force to launch an attack.

In addition to the emergence of the concept of internal family and external family, the Qing dynasty saw the rise of various schools of martial arts, such as Baguazhang, Nanquan, Taijiquan and Xingyiquan. The older schools, such as Shaolin, Wudang and Emei, continued to evolve.

However, the rapid development of martial arts attracted the attention of the Qing court. Worrying that the growing population of martial arts practitioners could lead to a rise in gang culture and result in an increase in violence and crime, the Yongzheng Emperor (1678–1735) banned the teaching, studying and performing of martial arts in public places in 1727. Although the ban was not effectively implemented throughout the country, together with the introduction of modern firearms, it more or less discouraged the development of combat techniques and weapon skills. Many martial art practitioners turned their focus to hand-to-hand combat forms and qigong exercises that promoted good health.

Entering the nineteenth century, China was dragged into political unrest and economic hardship caused by domestic rebellions and Western incursion. Martial arts came to be associated with politics. Due to its renowned martial arts tradition and well-known loyalty to the Ming
regime, Shaolin was linked to the Heaven and Earth Society, an influential anti-Qing secret society. The Society employed Shaolin to build credibility and influence, turning Shaolin and Shaolin kung fu into a symbol of rebellion and a source of ethno-national identity. Historical evidence shows that members of the Heaven and Earth Society practised martial arts to improve their physical strength and fighting skills. Hongquan (Hong Fist), one of the most popular sub-branches of Nanquan, was the prime martial art they developed and practised. In addition to Hongquan, members of the society practised Wuzuquan (Five Ancestors Fist).

The five boxing forms are: Baihequan (White Crane Fist), Houquan (Monkey Fist), Luohanquan (Arhat Fist), Dazunquan (Bodhidharma Fist) and Taizuquan (Emperor Taizu Fist). In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Heaven and Earth Society expanded into the Leizhou peninsula, Hainan Island and the newly rising urban centres in coastal regions, such as Guangdong, Hong Kong, Xiamen and Shanghai. The society was also brought into foreign countries by Chinese migrants from Fujian and Guangdong provinces, and soon became one of the most popular mutual aid organisations among the Chinese diaspora in America, Australia, Europe and Southeast Asia. The martial arts tradition was carried on by its members both in China and abroad, which greatly facilitated the development of Nanquan in general, and Hongquan and Wuzuquan in particular.

Also in this period, a large number of farmers in northern China began to practise martial arts to defend their villages against bandits. Various schools of martial arts, including Meihuaquan (Plum Blossom Fist), Hongquan (Red Fist), Baguaquan, Erlangquan, Dadaohui (Big Sabre Society) and Shaolin kung fu circulated in rural areas in Shandong, Hebei and Henan provinces. By the 1880s, martial arts had become a popular form of physical exercise practised by farmers in northern China for self-defence. In the late 1880s and 1890s, in response to Western incursion and triggered by the expansion of Christian churches, farmers in Shandong Province, bonded together by martial arts societies and folk religion, launched anti-foreign campaigns by attacking churches, foreign missionaries and their Chinese converts. The movement later developed into the Boxer Rebellion of 1898–1901. During the Rebellion, martial arts functioned as a basis for social bonding and played an important role in the formation of a national consciousness among farmers and civilians.

After the Boxer Rebellion, a nationalism based on the consciousness of sovereignty prevailed and became a new intellectual source for resisting imperialist expansions. An anti-Manchu movement organised by Han nationalists plotted to overthrow the Qing government and establish a modern nation state. Sport clubs, gymnastics schools and martial arts societies functioned as footholds for nationalists and facilitated the communication, assembly and training of anti-Manchu revolutionary forces. The nationalists also allied with the Heaven and Earth Society due to its anti-Qing tradition and its influence in Chinese society and among overseas Chinese communities. Chinese martial arts were used to build up the strength of revolutionary forces, and directly contributed to the success of the 1911 Revolution.

The twentieth century

After the establishment of the ROC, fuelled by a modern Chinese nationalism that focused on anti-imperialism, national unity and national revival, practising Chinese martial arts became widely recognised as a basic approach to build up people’s physiques, strengthen the nation and achieve national salvation. In this context, the government officially promoted Chinese martial arts in the education sector. The 1910s, 1920s and 1930s became the golden age of Chinese martial arts, now called guoshu or wushu. Guoshu societies were set up in major cities across the country. Guoshu manuals, textbooks and monographs were published in great numbers to meet
the increasing demand from martial arts enthusiasts and practitioners. Supported by the government, educationalists and the general public, guoshu served the goals of promoting individual fitness and aiding national defence, and it contributed to the construction of national identity and national spirit among the Chinese people.

The revival of Chinese martial arts in the first half of the twentieth century was accompanied by the rise of wuxia novels and movies. Living in an era of rapid social transformation and influenced by the prevailing nationalism generated by revolutions, foreign aggressions, imperialist occupations and wars, Chinese novelists and movie producers consciously or unconsciously used Chinese martial arts to invent a cultural identity and aided the construction of a collective modern national identity among the Chinese during the infancy of the Republic. These wuxia novels and movies in turn helped Chinese martial arts lay a rhetorical claim to national identity.

Following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) initiated socialist reforms and extended state ownership to all sectors. In line with the economic and social policies, China’s sport policy was coloured by nationalism and self-strengthening objectives. The goal was to train strong, healthy bodies for national defence and the construction of the ‘New China.’ As an important cultural legacy and a popular traditional sport, Chinese martial arts received special attention from the government. A nationwide campaign was launched by the Sport Ministry to promote wushu and integrate it into the newly established state-run sport system and education system. Entering the 1960s, fuelled by a defensive nationalism that focused on national sovereignty and national security, sport became closely linked to militarism, and wushu was promoted among the militia in the interests of national defence.

Chinese martial arts suffered a major setback during the Cultural Revolution. At the height of the Revolution between 1966 and 1968, wushu competitions ceased to take place and wushu teams at all levels stopped training, as was the case with other sport. At the same time, wushu came to be regarded as representing elitism and feudal culture. Therefore, wushu competitions ceased to take place and members of wushu teams stopped training. Wushu manuals and weapons were confiscated and destroyed by rebels. Wushu societies were closed down and wushu practitioners had to either practise in secret or stop practising. However, not all wushu activities ceased. Various politicised wushu exercises were created to interpret and promote the Maoist road and cultivate revolutionary activism. It was not until the late 1960s that wushu started to recover. By the early 1970s, in a relatively relaxed political environment, wushu development was brought back to normal.

The 1950s, 1960s and 1970s also saw the rapid development of wuxia novels and films. In mainland China, due to the introduction of political censorship, wuxia novels and movies fell into the category of feudal superstition and therefore were banned by the government. Hong Kong thus became the place with the appropriate resources, talent and freedom to produce wuxia novels and movies. These novels and movies contributed to the construction of a wuxia culture and made wushu a unique representation of Chinese culture. They also unleashed the kung fu fever that later stormed the world.

Beginning in the late 1970s, China launched reforms in all areas to achieve the goal of modernisation. In line with this policy, the Sport Ministry launched a campaign to revive Chinese martial arts. The strategy was threefold: to transform wushu into a competitive sport composed of taolu and sanda; to promote wushu as a sport for all; and to develop wushu internationally. Guided by these policies, survey teams were set up to discover and archive traditional wushu forms. Private and public wushu academies, societies and schools were liberated and began to revive at all levels. Primary and secondary schools and universities started to offer wushu classes. Regional and national competitions and exhibitions were organised by the Sport Ministry and the Chinese Wushu Association (CWA) to promote wushu. By the early 1990s, wushu had
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experienced pronounced development and become a popular sport and pastime among the general public.

The revival of Chinese martial arts occurred together with the reintroduction of wuxia movies in mainland China. Many of the wuxia movies produced in the past three decades are set in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, with plots based around major historical events; they express a strong sense of anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism, nationalism and patriotism. The essential spirit of these films is that the core values of Chinese tradition should be inherited and preserved, and they stress a sense of national identity. Inspired by nationalism, wuxia movies have not only facilitated the revival of Chinese martial arts but also built it into a symbol of indigenous virtue and strength.

Together with the revival of wushu in China, and fanned by wuxia movies, the past decades have seen the spread of ‘kung fu fever’ around the world. An increasing number of Chinese martial arts societies and federations have been set up by wushu practitioners from across the five continents. The Sport Ministry and the CWA also launched initiatives to promote wushu internationally. Funded by the state, international conferences and invitation tournaments were held in major cities in China. Wushu coaches and wushu troupes were sent by the CWA to foreign countries to teach and perform wushu. In 1990, wushu was made a competition event at the Asian Games held in Beijing, and the IWUF was launched during the Games. During the past decades, various wushu competitions have been organised by the IWUF and its member federations in Asia, Africa, the Americas, Europe and Oceania, and sanda and taolu have been added to the official schedule of several continental and international sporting events. Today, with millions of people practising wushu and participating in wushu competitions, Chinese martial arts are attracting a worldwide audience. They have made, and will continue to make, important contributions to the promotion of cross-cultural exchanges and understanding between China and the world.

Modern vs. Tradition

In recent years, an increasing number of scholars, experts and fans have voiced concerns over the development of Chinese martial arts. Some criticise the Sport Ministry and the CWA’s policy of transforming wushu into a modern competitive sport and believe that the official promotion of the highly standardised taolu and sanda competitions has led to the decline of traditional wushu. Some believe that wushu is totally different from Western sport and therefore should keep its traditional form. Others assert that wushu has blindly followed Western sport and has therefore lost its national character.

These criticisms clearly demonstrate the problems caused by the reforms carried out during recent decades and the difficulties and challenges facing the wushu community. However, one has to understand that in this increasingly industrialised, urbanised and globalised world, the dual approach of reform and modernisation is probably the best way forward for Chinese martial arts. During recent decades, the reforms have made possible the rapid development of wushu both in China and internationally. The official promotion of taolu and sanda has resulted in the standardisation, professionalisation and commercialisation of wushu, successfully transforming wushu into a modern competitive sport and giving rise to a wushu education system that nourishes millions of wushu coaches, teachers, athletes, practitioners and movie stars like Jet Li, Donnie Yen and Wu Jing. Also, health-oriented simplified taolu and taijiquan routines have significantly lowered the threshold for wushu practitioners and helped introduce wushu to people from all walks of life and all age groups. There is no doubt that, like Korea’s taekwondo and Japan’s judo and karate, joining the international sport community and seeking to be included in the
Olympics is an effective way for wushu to boost its reputation, attract public interest and achieve sustainable development. As world-renowned wushu coach Wu Bin, the founder of the Beijing Wushu Team and the coach of Jet Li, argued: ‘The karate and taekwondo community were able to make these sports easy to learn, teach, and understand. Students nationwide also have a passion for it. Wushu must learn from these sports.’

To conclude, Chinese martial arts have always been evolving since their emergence in the Shang and Zhou dynasties. Their form, function, practice and theory have changed dramatically over the course of time. From the early twentieth century on, together with the rapid transformation of Chinese society and influenced by Western sport, wushu began to develop into a new form – a performing art, a competitive sport and a sport for all. It has been widely practiced for health and fitness, self-cultivation, self-defence and entertainment. After a century of development, it has grown into an important part of the international sport world and attracts a global audience.

**Acknowledgments**


**Notes**

1 Guoshu (国术), literally ‘national skills’, was used in China between the 1920s and 1940s when a nationwide campaign was launched by the nationalist government to promote Chinese martial arts in the education sector and in society. After the nationalist government retreated to Taiwan in 1949, they continued to promote guoshu there. The term was also used by martial arts practitioners in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia; kung fu (功夫), literally ‘effort’, ‘ability’ or ‘skills’, is used in both China and foreign countries, notably the United States; wuyi (武术), literally ‘martial arts’ or ‘feats’, first appeared in Han dynasty literature; wushu (武术), literally ‘martial skills’, first appeared in an essay collection edited by Prince Xiaotong (501–31) of the Southern Liang Dynasty (502–57). At first, the term referred to military affairs and operations. Its meaning changed over the course of time and became a collective term for military skills, combat skills, weapon techniques and martial arts performances. The term came into common use in the late nineteenth century. It has been used as the official term for Chinese martial arts in mainland China since the 1950s.


5 Ibid., 35–36.

6 Ibid., 60–62.

7 Beng Liao, *Song Yuan xiqiu wenwu yu minhu* [Song and Yuan Drama, Cultural Relics and Folk Customs] (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chuban she, 1989); Tonxu Tian, *Yuan zaju tonglun* [Study of Yuan Poetic Drama] (Taiyuan: Shanxi jiaoyu chuban she, 2007), 82–83, 188.


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