

Martial Arts (Wushu)

Wūshù 武术

Movements originating in fighting systems developed throughout China's history have been stylized into routines touted for individual physical fitness and psychological well-being as well as contact sports and competitive exhibitions. China's martial arts influenced those of other countries and have inspired literature and movies.

Wushu is a Chinese term usually translated as martial arts. *Wu* is associated with military and warfare; *shu* with the skill, way, or methods of doing an activity. Wushu describes Chinese martial traditions from their origins in early stone-age cultures to a wide variety of martially-inspired practices seen today. (The term *gongfu*, or *kung-fu*, often used in the West to refer to Chinese martial arts, is composed of two Chinese characters referring to the time and effort required to accomplish a task. The term can be applied to any human activity and is applied to martial arts only because of the time and effort required to become skilled in these arts.) Wushu, although primarily focused on fighting arts, has also long been associated with physical conditioning, dance, drama, meditative exercise, and competitive exhibition. The sophisticated repertoire of techniques coupled with philosophies of self-cultivation make wushu a vital aspect of China's culture. Wushu has influenced the martial traditions of neighboring countries and eventually the rest of the world.

Origins and Development

The technological and social changes that have occurred during China's long history are mirrored by the evolution of Chinese martial traditions. Fighting arts required a variety of defensive and offensive specializations, from basic hand-to-hand combat to complex techniques of large-scale warfare. An overview of the development of Chinese wushu helps clarify the significance of today's martial arts.

Originating in the need for protection against other people and dangerous animals, Chinese martial systems naturally grew more complex as Chinese society grew more complex. The first fighting methods were designed for hand-to-hand combat: techniques were developed that used the hands, feet, elbows, knees, and head. These early skills were refined and supplemented by the use of hunting and farming tools made of wood and stone, including the club, spear, and knife. As metals came into use and basic technology developed, a variety of weaponry became available. Chinese society came to place more and more emphasis on warfare, and the martial arts became a specialized profession for many. With the advent of modern firearms in China, traditional martial arts were more commonly practiced as forms of exercise and sport.

Rudimentary forms of Chinese martial arts developed in the early Neolithic period. Basic fighting methods served to protect individuals, families, and clans. They also provided entertainment, as in games of "head butting" in which contestants donned animal horns. By the Zhou dynasty (1045–256 BCE), wushu had already reached



A man practices martial arts in the morning on the grounds of the Temple of Heaven in Beijing. PHOTO BY TOM CHRISTENSEN.

a highly advanced level. Excavations of the period have uncovered an array of arms and armor, including spears, halberds, chariots, bows, arrows, helmets, swords, and knives. Other artifacts depict not only sophisticated military organization, but a culture in which martial arts were greatly valued for their eminent role in securing or maintaining political stability. In the fifth century BCE, the crossbow and iron weapons came into use, ushering in new modes of fighting arts. Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, a military treatise from this period, detailed military tactics and maneuvers that are still studied today for their insights and practicality.

In the following centuries, neighboring countries were inspired by China's culture and knowledge. But with China's cultural and economic greatness came threats of

foreign invasion by those seeking her riches. Social inequities among economic groups spawned internal conflicts. Long years of turmoil between imperial armies and invaders and/or native rebel groups have taught the Chinese to rely on martial arts as a security measure. Those who possessed the most advanced systems felt that they had an advantage in protecting their empire, clan, or family. The fighting systems that evolved were therefore highly secretive and taught only to selected individuals or groups.

Tactical and weapons systems reflect the concerns and social positions of their creators. For example, the imperial army developed arts geared for large-scale military engagements and often focused on long-range weapons, such as the crossbow and archery. Their maneuvers usually required a fast cavalry to carry out their objectives.

But all too often the imperial political–military structure crumbled, leaving the commoners to fend for themselves. Other groups developed their own highly effective fighting systems. These groups often organized themselves around a common social bond, be it linguistic, social, or philosophic.

Because specially gifted individuals are credited with the creation of specific martial systems, their own families often retained hold of the tradition by passing on their knowledge from generation to generation. Their concerns were primarily for the security of family and clan. Their limited resources kept their focus on developing skills an individual fighter could employ, including weapons such as sword, spear, or knife. The conflicts they encountered were often with individuals or with small groups, so open-hand boxing skills were also of great importance.

Martial art styles were usually named for the people, places, or philosophic ideas associated with them. There are a few hundred known Chinese styles, but many more styles and substyles remain to be categorized. For simplicity, martial art styles are sometimes placed into general categories, such as Northern/Southern, Internal/External, or Daoist/Buddhist, and sometimes they are categorized according to their place of origin. The modern *nanquan* style of martial arts is derived from techniques developed in southern China.

Some Chinese martial arts developed in association with religious centers. Temples were often places of refuge during times of turmoil. They attracted a variety of people from all segments of Chinese society, including martial experts who came from near and far to live together, often discussing and comparing their knowledge. Some temples, such as the Buddhist temple of Shaolin in Henan Province, became universities where leading experts contributed to the preservation and evolution of the martial arts. The modern *changquan* style of martial arts is derived from techniques developed at Shaolin Temple.

China exemplified refined culture to surrounding Asian countries for many centuries. This holds true for Chinese martial traditions as well. The martial arts in Japan, Korea, and Indonesia, for example, were influenced by encounters with Chinese people, such as those occurring during trade, immigration, or war. Okinawan karate derived from China's Fujian Province; the founder of Korean tae kwon do studied wushu while serving in the military in Manchuria.

Some martial traditions have become extinct due to the rise of modern weaponry. Nonetheless, in China many martial arts remain intact. The continued popularity of these arts is due, in part, to their pervasive presence in Chinese culture. Their historical importance has been the subject of many literary endeavors, including a separate martial arts genre. As moving art forms, the martial arts are valued living expressions of their developers' creativity and genius. Martial art forms are also cherished for their therapeutic benefits, and in China the majority of people practicing a martial art do so primarily for this reason. However, the martial arts can be found in theatrical productions, self-defense classes, military training programs, entertainment industries, meditative practices, and sporting events. Knowledge of Asian martial arts likewise spread to the rest of the world, the movie industry being the most significant popularizer.

Modern Competitive Sport

Martial art exhibitions are a long-standing tradition in China. Competitions were held regularly in provinces, and now national and international competitions are held. Routines standardized by government regulations are taught in specialized martial art schools and in colleges having departments dedicated to wushu. Martial arts training is still held at Shaolin Temple.

Competitive martial art exhibitions have transformed traditional solo routines by selectively adapting elements from traditional systems and by incorporating gymnastic elements for greater visual effects. Matches between individuals, usually judged on a point system, place limitations on the type of techniques used. *Taolu* (forms) comprise basic movements (stances, kicks, punches, balances, jumps, sweeps, and throws). Competitions often highlight two major categories: *changquan* (long fist) and *nanquan* (southern fist). *Changquan*, the style associated with Shaolin monks, involves whirling, running, leaping, and acrobatics. *Nanquan* style, based on styles developed in southern China, is typically less acrobatic than *changquan* and features low stances and intricate hand movements. *Taijiquan* style is famous for its slow movements. Routines of any style may include stylized use of a “weapon.” For example, *qiangshu* is a *changquan* style using the *qiang*, or spear.

Sanchu (sparring) is another wushu event. This sport was influenced by Chinese boxing and Chinese wrestling. Both men and women compete.

The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games Wushu Tournament, although not an official Olympic event, was sanctioned by the International Olympic Committee. Wang Xiaolin, secretary general of the International Wushu Federation and president of Chinese Wushu Association, described this tournament not only as a showcase but as a way to promote world understanding of Chinese culture. *Taolu* events for men and women (ten gold medals) included all three categories of forms. There were *Sanchu* events in three weight classes for men and in two weight classes for women, awarding a total of five gold medals. China led all countries in the number of medals won at this tournament, with eight of the fifteen gold medals. (Russia was second in medal count with two gold and three silver medals.)

Outlook

The martial arts are practiced for a variety of reasons in all parts of the world today. Some are either attracted to wushu or seek to suppress its practice because of its perceived violence. Martial sports competitions draw enthusiastic crowds. Such sporting events range from full-contact bouts with no rules, to no-contact tournaments with rules to prevent injuries and to ensure fairness in judging. The Beijing Olympic Games Wushu Tournament drew contestants from forty-three countries, a testimony to wushu's international popularity; there is a need, however, for a single internationally recognized system for teaching, ranking, and judging. Still others desire to learn martial arts for the many potential physical and psychological benefits offered. *Taijiquan*, with its slow movements, is especially suited for the elderly. Martial arts studios for children promote the confidence-building aspects of the discipline. More than ever, individuals are attracted to the study of wushu not simply as a physical activity, but as a way of self-discovery.

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Further Reading

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