Contemporary Chinese martial arts and the manipulation of cultural positioning

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ABSTRACT

Traditional Chinese martial arts have a long history. In terms of cultural positioning, traditional martial arts have two main functions, namely, to promote patriotism and to provide opportunities for commercial exploitation. These are primarily reflected in the combat style and the expressive nature of traditional martial arts. In addition, martial arts can be useful in the governance of contemporary Chinese society, as they have the potential to boost morale and patriotic sentiment among the public. However, there is evidence that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) manages traditional martial arts in a closed and independent way which obstructs the internationalization and scientific development of traditional martial arts.

KEYWORDS

Traditional martial arts; cultural positioning; Chinese Wushu Association; patriotism; commercial exploitation

1 Introduction

How does the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) strengthen patriotism through sports activities? In particular, how can sports activities be used in conjunction with the features of Chinese history and traditions to accomplish cultural governance? Sport and national pride are often closely associated with each other. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, China was the victim of Western oppression. Since the latter part of the Qing Dynasty, China has been striving to boost its national status by competing in international sporting events, and its sportsmen and women train their bodies in the hope of winning competitions and further enhancing national self-confidence. Since the establishment of the CCP regime, international sporting events have been closely linked to national honor; the Party and government have deployed various strategies in a holistic manner to preserve that honor. Furthermore, Chinese leaders often like to proclaim their love of sport as a way of encouraging the population to exercise. General Secretary Xi Jinping, for example, has expressed his fondness for sports such as soccer, volleyball, basketball, tennis, ice hockey, and martial arts. Xi is particularly fond of ice hockey, which he has described as a great sport that requires not only individual strength and skill but also teamwork and collaboration.
Among these various sporting activities, traditional Chinese martial arts (传统武术, chuantong wushu) are particularly worthy of further examination. Martial arts have a long history in China, and their moves and techniques are closely related to Chinese culture, including elements of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, which are represented in the concepts of harmony, the doctrine of the mean, and the harmonization of yin 阴 and yang 阳. When modern China was being oppressed by the foreign powers, some Chinese people had high expectations of Chinese martial arts, believing that they could be used to defeat the Western invaders. This aspiration was encouraged, in many Chinese people’s imaginations, by the exploits of such masters of traditional Chinese martial arts such as Huo Yuanjia 霍元甲, Ip Man 叶问, Wong Fei-hung 黄飞鸿, and Chen Zhen 陈真, who won popularity among Chinese people for their “achievements” in defeating Western boxers in the ring.

However, in some cases their exploits were unverified or the individuals themselves never existed at all. In more objective discussions, many experts in the field have pointed out that traditional martial arts are characterized by high levels of expressiveness, the presence of spectators, and a fitness orientation, but that they lack genuine combativeness. In other words, the moves of traditional martial arts are too elaborate to be used in actual one-on-one combat. The gradually evolving modern fighting system has emphasized the scientific training of players since the 19th century to enhance their fighting skills, amplify their strengths, and increase their protection. Additionally, modern fighting uses the ring as an arena and appoints referees to reduce injury to fighters. Thus, modern fighting can accommodate increasingly frequent practice times to boost practicality. However, traditional Chinese martial arts practitioners rarely take the relevant norms seriously; they often deliberately ignore the rules. The absence of protective criteria generally renders it impossible for traditional martial fighters to compete very often, which then reduces their actual combat abilities.

A martial artist who practices traditional martial arts (e.g., tai chi 太极, weng chun 永春, baguazhang 八卦掌, or xing yi quan 形意拳) is unlikely to win against a practitioner of a modern fighting system shaped by modern scientific training (e.g., mixed martial arts, Russian sambo, boxing, taekwondo, karate, or jujitsu).

Although the development of traditional martial arts has been associated with patriotism or nationalism in contemporary times, its practitioners have no real ability to defeat Western-style fighters in a sports arena. The current literature on traditional Chinese martial arts is predominantly inclined toward discussions of how martial arts have functioned to formulate a collective Chinese identity in modern times. This article will reference these extant studies to further discuss how the CCP uses martial arts to accomplish cultural propaganda and manipulation. As a tool for propaganda and a subject of political manipulation, traditional martial arts are indeed meaningful. Since its establishment, the CCP has appealed to patriotic sentiment, believing in its mission to save the Chinese nation from Western imperialism. The ideology of the CCP can easily be integrated with traditional martial arts. Even in contemporary times, martial arts remain a useful symbolic tool to be used by the CCP in its governance of Chinese society.

In particular, since coming to power, Xi Jinping has repeatedly stressed the importance of “cultural confidence” (文化自信, wenhua zixin). For example, in 2019, he stated that “a flourishing nation lies in a flourishing culture, and a strong
nation lies in its strong culture. Without a high level of cultural confidence and cultural prosperity, there will be no great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”7 In January 2017, the CCP issued a document entitled “Suggestions on the Implementation of Projects to Promote and Develop Excellence in Traditional Chinese Culture” (关于实施中华优秀传统文化传承发展工程的意见, Guanyu shishi zhonghua youxiuchuantong wenhua chuancheng fazhan gongcheng de yijian), the intention of which was to revive all aspects of traditional Chinese culture8. Driven by the demand for cultural confidence and official acquiescence, many masters of traditional martial arts started to exaggerate the powers of their disciplines, claiming that their moves could be used in real combat and advertising classes based on these claims. Previously, the Chinese government and the martial arts governing body – the Chinese Wushu Association (CWA, 中国武术协会, zhong guo wushu xiehui) – had strictly prohibited self-proclaimed “martial arts masters” from overstating the practical effectiveness of their training. However, given the policy of boosting cultural confidence, it is no wonder that some of these masters have been engaging in exaggerated and untrue propaganda activities.

For the Chinese government, traditional martial arts are proving to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, allowing martial arts masters a degree of freedom to operate helps enhance national self-respect and patriotism among the public. However, on the other hand, traditional martial arts are not as effective as modern combat sports. Hence, if masters overstate the effectiveness of their disciplines, this may have the unintended consequence of damaging the reputation of traditional martial arts and of traditional Chinese culture in general. This is what the CCP officially refers to as “vulgarization” (庸俗化, yongsuhua)9. Vulgarization may compromise the reputation of traditional martial arts and reduce the profitability of this cultural industry. This is because traditional martial arts fulfill two functions: to promote patriotism and to provide opportunities for commercial exploitation. Here, we use the concept of cultural positioning to interpret and discuss the CCP’s governance of traditional martial arts.

2 Cultural positioning and the traditional martial arts management system in contemporary China

In China, traditional martial arts are governed through the regime’s culture and sports system, within which the CCP Publicity Department (宣传部, xuanhua bu) is the most important organization. The mission of the Publicity Department and other agencies within the system is to boost patriotism and nationalistic sentiment among the people10. Elizabeth J. Perry has observed that the CCP is adept at adopting and applying historical symbols in contemporary Chinese governance, something which she calls cultural positioning11. This refers to a symbolic concept or thing in history, defined by the state and applied to contemporary social governance. For example, the giant panda is an excellent example of cultural positioning. Due to their scarcity, pleasing appearance, and gentle temperament, pandas convey an image of peace and friendship in the West12. For this reason, the CCP regime has frequently offered pandas to foreign governments as a sign of goodwill and friendship. The use of pandas as diplomatic gifts is a form of cultural manipulation by the CCP.
Cultural positioning can also be observed through the CCP’s governance of traditional martial arts. As these disciplines have no real combat effectiveness, despite being used to inspire patriotism among the public, some manipulation is necessary to protect them from competition from modern combat sports and to restrain traditional martial arts masters from exaggerating their own abilities.

The CCP’s system for managing traditional martial arts is depicted in Figure 1. At the top, is the CCP Publicity Department. This is the lead body for propaganda and ideological work in China, and its responsibility for policy decisions on culture and sport demonstrates that, in the CCP’s eyes, these activities come within the ambit of propaganda. Under the Publicity Department is the General Administration of Sport of China, which is in charge of the Wushu Administrative Center (武术运动管理中心, wushuyundong guanli zhongxin), the office dealing with the administration of traditional martial arts. The center is responsible for managing the Chinese Wushu Association, which is classed as a social organization. In reality, the Chinese Wushu Association is directly led (领导, lingdao) by the Wushu Administrative Center and receives operational guidance (指导, zhidao) from the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Chen Entang, the current director of the Wushu Administrative Center holds the concurrent post of vice-chairman of the Chinese Wushu Association. All martial arts practitioners must register with the Chinese Wushu Association in order to engage in commercial activities connected with the sport.

China’s propaganda machinery aims to introduce and promote traditional martial arts at global sports competitions. China took advantage of being the host country to list a special performance event of traditional martial arts as early as the 2008 Beijing Olympics. China Central Television (CCTV)’s Spring Festival Gala (春晚, chunwan) aired programs about martial arts, such as Tai Chi, before the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics to connect traditional martial arts to the context of world sports. The Hebei Provincial Sports Bureau, guided by the Publicity Department of the Chinese Communist Party, invited ten martial arts masters to the Winter Olympics inaugural event on February 4 to produce a program titled “Traditional Martial Arts Helps the Host

![Figure 1. CCP’s management system for traditional martial arts.](image-url)
of Winter Olympics: Strengthen Your Body”  (传统武术助冬奥: 强身健体练起来, chuantong wushu zhu dongao: qiangshen jianti lian qilai)\textsuperscript{15}. Such official operations demonstrate China’s efforts in the Xi Jinping era to combine its traditional combat techniques with contemporary sports and other projects to project China’s voice to the world through its martial arts.

3 Traditional martial arts as a symbol of CCP’s patriotism

From the perspective of cultural positioning, traditional martial arts have two main functions in contemporary Chinese governance: to promote patriotism and provide opportunities for commercial exploitation. Concerning patriotism, the CCP has a very high opinion of the competitive effectiveness of traditional martial arts as reflected in its official publications. The utilization of traditional martial arts to defeat foreign invaders or challengers is often associated with patriotism and is consistent with the ideology of the CCP.

In the CCP’s publications, we often find descriptions of how masters of traditional martial arts instructed the Chinese armed forces in their disciplines, helping them defeat the invading Japanese during World War II. For example, the Cantonese martial artist Huang Xiaoxia 黄啸侠 taught knife fighting techniques, which originated in Shaolin Wushu, to troops of the Chinese army\textsuperscript{16}. Another master, Zhang Zhijiang 张之江, was a model figure used in CCP propaganda at the beginning of the Civil War. He taught boxing, saber fighting, bayonetting, and gymnastics to the Chinese armed forces. Zhang refused to flee to Taiwan with the retreating Nationalists and this earned him the respect of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, who invited him to serve as a member of the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC)\textsuperscript{17}.

Ever since its foundation in 1921, the CCP has portrayed itself as having led a patriotic Chinese population in the struggle against Western imperialism, something which the weak government of the Republic of China was incapable of doing. Traditional martial arts fit quite well into this narrative. Nowadays, many official publications associate leading members of the CCP during the Yan’an period with traditional martial arts. General Xu Shiyou 许世友, for example, is said to have spent his youth working as a handyman and practicing martial arts at the Shaolin Temple 少林寺\textsuperscript{18}. Another example is that of Lieutenant General Qian Jun 钱钧, who spent five years at the Shaolin Temple working as a cook. He is said to have developed “iron hands” by chopping wood for the fire. During the war, Qian Jun led a death squad against the Japanese army and is reputed to have killed many Japanese soldiers using the martial arts skills he learned at the Shaolin Temple\textsuperscript{19}.

Premier Zhou Enlai’s relationship with traditional martial arts is even more interesting. In an article published in 2015 in Dangshi zongheng (党史纵横, The Length and Breadth of Party History), a periodical published by the Party History Research Office of the Liaoning Provincial Party Committee, it was claimed that while he was studying at Nankai University, Zhou studied xing yi baguazhang 形意八卦掌 with martial arts master Han Muxia 韩慕侠\textsuperscript{20}. Han also taught martial arts to the Chinese army and set
up a “knife troop” to defend against the Japanese. However, the reliability of this source is questionable and the story can largely be dismissed as no more than CCP propaganda.

Even Mao Zedong was obsessed with traditional martial arts, especially as depicted in the movies of Bruce Lee. In 1974, he instructed Politburo Standing Committee member Hua Guofeng to find some Bruce Lee films for him. At that time, such films were not easy to obtain in China. Hua ordered the vice minister of culture, Liu Qingtang, who was in charge of the movie industry, to handle the matter. Liu then instructed the president of the Hong Kong branch of Xinhua News Agency, Liang Weilin, to undertake the task, and Liang turned to Run Run Shaw, owner of Shaw Brothers Studio, for help. The studio was able to provide master tapes of Fist of Fury (精武门, jingwumen), The Big Boss (唐山大兄, tangshan daxiong), and The Way of the Dragon (猛龙过江, menglong guojiang). According to the recollections of Mao’s secretary, Zhang Yufeng, Mao often applauded when watching Bruce Lee fighting with foreigners and shouted “Good kung fu! Good fight!” Since Mao had enjoyed these three films, the Chinese authorities passed them for public screening that year.

China achieved intensive development of its traditional martial arts during the Mao Zedong period; unfortunately, the practice of martial arts and their competitive events stopped once the Cultural Revolution occurred. The teaching and training of traditional martial arts and competition events featuring them were quite popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Practitioners of traditional martial arts even traveled to Japan to imbibe specialized fighting skills. The advancement of Chinese martial arts stagnated after 1966. Martial artists were not allowed to teach their inherited military art forms. Chinese Wushu Associations were overthrown, and martial arts-related organizations almost stopped functioning in varied places. These entities could only resume operations after 1978.

Officials also recorded films to reinforce the patronage of the traditional martial arts. In 1978, when Deng Xiaoping was a vice premier, he mentioned Chinese martial arts during a reception for Japanese guests and wrote the inscription “tai chi is good” (太极拳好, taijiquan hao). In 1980, the official movie studio, Chung Yuen Motion Pictures (中原电影制片公司, zhongyuan dianying zhipiangongsi), collaborated with the Hong Kong film industry to produce the film Shaolin Temple, which was released in 1982 and depicted Shaolin martial arts masters battling foreign invaders with their skillful kung fu.

“Qigong fever” (气功热, qigongre) represented a critical phenomenon for the progression of traditional martial arts in the 1980s and 1990s. The traditional martial arts emphasize neijia (internal) kung fu, and use the so-called “qi” (气) to generate physical strength for fitness. Practitioners believe that they can inflict physical injury through the so-called qigong on their opponents in combat situations. The popular practice of qigong in China at that time made it a principal means for people to express their social and spiritual needs. However, “qigong fever” was later developed and absorbed by Li Hongzhi, who used it to further establish Falun Gong, which was suppressed by the CCP after 1998. Since that time, traditional martial arts resumed their function of stirring mainstream patriotism for China and thus continued to advance.
Even under Xi Jinping, the CCP has leveraged the patriotic symbolism of traditional martial arts to serve the cause of contemporary governance. During China Central Television’s (CCTV) Spring Festival Gala on New Year’s Eve 2020, Hong Kong movie star Jackie Chan performed the theme song of the 1983 classic Hong Kong drama The Legendary Fok (大侠霍元甲, daxia Huo Yuanjia) – “The Great Wall of China Will Never Fall” (万里长城永不倒, wanli changcheng yongbudao). The lyrics, which emphasize the health and strength of the Chinese people, seem to have had an inspiring effect during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the official website of the Tianjin Central Commission for Discipline Inspection even chose Huo Yuanjia as a “vanguard individual” (先锋人物, xianfeng renwu), referring to him as a “patriotic martial artist,” in an effort to stimulate patriotism among the public.

As we can see from the above, traditional martial arts are often associated with patriotism in the minds of the Chinese people, in particular the struggle against imperialist invaders. When watching films featuring traditional martial artists, audiences feel uplifted and proud of the masters who are purported to have defeated Western fighters in the ring during the late Qing Dynasty and the early years of the Republic of China, despite the fact that there is hardly any historical evidence for such exploits, and that traditional disciplines lack the combat effectiveness needed to defeat practitioners of modern martial arts in the ring.

The CCP is aware of this problem. The practical utility of traditional martial arts and their positioning was discussed for the first time in April 1980 at the National Symposium on Martial Arts Work (全国武术工作座谈会, quanguo wushu gongzuo zuotanhui). The participants, who included martial arts experts and scholars, conducted an exhaustive debate on the myths and controversies that had surrounded traditional martial arts for decades. Most of them concluded that, compared to modern fighting techniques, traditional martial arts were not really combat-oriented. Some wondered whether traditional martial arts should be positioned as “martial arts performance” (武术, wushu), emphasizing their spectator-based, cultural and fitness-oriented nature, while others thought they should be transformed into a genuinely combative “martial art” (武术, wushu) by incorporating modern fighting techniques. These contrasting opinions sparked an intense debate. The participants also discussed an experiment with “sanshou” (散手). Sanshou is a set of fighting techniques developed by traditional martial artists from a combination of Manchu wrestling, judo, and Western boxing. It was decided during the symposium that sanshou should be promoted. However, the training methods and techniques of sanshou are much more like modern fighting techniques than traditional martial arts, so they are beyond the scope of this article.

The CCP officials are well aware of the limitations of traditional martial arts. However, they do not want to see any public discussion concerning whether these disciplines are genuinely suited to use in combat and competition. Their objective is to reinforce the performative nature of traditional martial arts and to encourage as many people as possible to learn them or to engage in cultural activities related to them, in such a way as to promote their commercialization.
4 Everyone learning Kung Fu: the commercialization of traditional martial arts

In addition to patriotism, the second “cultural positioning” function of traditional martial arts concerns the pursuit of profit. During its 18th National Congress, the CCP proposed a strategy for “building a culturally strong country” (文化强国, wenhua qiangguo), emphasizing the need to develop China into a “strong nation in culture” by 2035. Given the development of the market economy and other factors, there is now more scope for local governments and enterprises to make money out of cultural or creative industries.

The CCP is concerned about the commercialization of traditional martial arts. The Guiding Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Expediting the Development of the Sports Competition and Performance Industry (国务院关于加快体育产业促进体育消费的若干意见, Guowuyuan guanyu jiakuai fuzhan tiyu-chanye cujin tiyuxiaofei de ruoganyijian), released in 2014, states that the sports competition and performance industry system should be significantly strengthened by 2025, when the total value of the industry will have reached five trillion yuan and it will have become an important force in promoting the sustainable development of the economy and society. Traditional martial arts are being actively promoted by the Chinese government due to their historical and cultural relevance. In July 2019, the General Administration of Sport and fourteen other government agencies jointly issued the Martial Arts Industry Development Plan (2019–2025) (武术产业发展规划, wushu chanye fajianguihu). The plan stated that “new technologies should be fully utilized to build a ‘smart wushu’ service network and platform” and that the martial arts industry should be substantially enhanced by 2025.

The CCP has gone even further in its effort to combine patriotism with commerce. Incentivized by central regulations, many local governments in China have been trying to make use of martial arts to boost local economic development. “Red” politics are easily combined with traditional martial arts. For example, Guangdong has always been an important region for traditional Chinese martial arts. The Cantonese opera, Hong Sheng Pavilion 鸿胜馆, tells the story of martial arts practitioners from the famous Hong Sheng Pavilion under the leadership of the CCP and how the masters of the pavilion helped the oppressed class introduce social reforms. Lee Wai-fung 李伟峰, the secretary-general of the Foshan Wushu Association in Guangdong Province and a disciple of the Hong Sheng Pavilion, has described how, during the War of Resistance against Japan, CCP members Qian Weifang 钱维方 and Wu Qin 吴勤 started a martial arts class at the Hong Sheng Pavilion and traveled around the city teaching people techniques for hacking and killing Japanese soldiers. This shows how traditional martial arts can be manipulated in such a way as to combine the “red” revolutionary spirit and patriotism.

Many people believe that in order to gain a full understanding of traditional martial arts, it is necessary to make a pilgrimage to Foshan 佛山 – birthplace of the legendary master Wong Fei-hung – and the city has been quick to take advantage of this. As early as 2016, during the 12th Foshan People’s Congress, it was recommended that Foshan be turned into the “World City of Kung Fu.” This project was also mentioned in the Three-Year Action Plan for “Cultural Foshan” released in
2017. During the annual meetings of the Guangdong Provincial People’s Congress and the Provincial CPPCC in 2019, Sun Xiaohua 孙小华, a member of the provincial CPPCC, also submitted a “World City of Kung Fu” proposal. The project was aimed at increasing the value of the martial arts industry by thirty billion yuan by 2024. According to this proposal, the city would host more than ten thousand martial arts practitioners and be developed into a domestically and internationally famous center for traditional martial arts\(^{35}\).

Another source of traditional martial arts legends is modern martial arts fiction, which has become a huge commercial success in recent years. One extremely popular wuxia 武侠 novelist is the late Jin Yong 金庸 (the pen name of Cha Leung-yung 查良镛, 1924–2018). The death from illness of Jin Yong was widely covered in the CCP’s official media and he was praised for his strong patriotic sentiments\(^ {36}\). Some localities have jumped on the Jin Yong bandwagon. Because of the similarity between the name of the county and the title of one of Jin Yong’s novels (Lian Cheng Jue 连成诀, A Deadly Secret), the publicity department of the Lian Cheng County Party Committee planned to stage a Lian Cheng Jue martial arts event in 2016\(^ {37}\).

Zhengzhou, where the Shaolin Temple is located, also sees the temple as an important economic asset. As Shaolin kung fu grew in popularity in the 1980s, the temple attracted a continuous stream of domestic and international enthusiasts seeking to study martial arts. More than fifty martial arts schools sprang up in the vicinity of the Shaolin Temple. In 1988, the China National Tourism Administration spent a large amount of money building Asia’s largest martial arts training center next to the Shaolin Temple – Song Shan Shaolin Temple Wushu Training Center. These martial arts industry projects have earned the local government a considerable amount of revenue. In 2020, on the fortieth anniversary of the release of the famous film, Shaolin Temple, Huang Qingzhi, Zhengzhou’s director of publicity, recommended that the history of the Shaolin Temple should become part of the plan to “tell the Zhengzhou story” (讲好郑州故事, jianghao zhengzhou gushi)\(^ {38}\).

5 The statecraft of traditional martial arts

As mentioned above, traditional martial arts have two functions: to reinforce patriotism and to provide opportunities for commercial exploitation, both of which are based on the two main characteristics of the activity, i.e., the combative and the performative. In reality, traditional martial arts are highly performative and spectator-oriented but have little combative value. For these reasons, the way traditional martial arts are managed by the CCP is quite interesting. On the one hand, the CCP tacitly allows masters of traditional martial arts to boast of their combat ability as that inspires patriotism among the public. On the other hand, the CCP is aware that traditional martial arts are mainly performance-based and lack real combat potential. When these masters go too far with their exaggeration, the authorities expose their lies to a certain extent, to prevent them from damaging the reputation of traditional martial arts and affecting their profitability. This cycle of exaggeration and exposure continues (see Figure 2).
5.1 Tacit approval of exaggeration

Contests in which masters of traditional martial arts take on Western fighters are popular in China. One master has recalled how, in the summer of 1986, he defeated a 38-year-old Swiss judo expert, using the traditional Chinese technique of “leg kicking” (弹腿门, tantuimen)\(^{39}\). This story is an affirmation of Xi Jinping’s concept of “cultural confidence” and has been widely read and shared on the Internet.

Fueled by patriotism, many martial arts masters claim that traditional martial arts are extremely powerful in combat, and the authorities seem to have given some degree of tacit approval to their boasting. For example, Wei Lei魏雷, the “Tai Chi Master” (太极拳大师, taiji dashi), Chen Xiaowang陈小旺, a master of chenjiagou 陈家沟 tai chi from Henan Province, and Shi Yanjue释延觉, the martial monk who is known as the Dharma Protector of Shaolin Temple, have all claimed that traditional martial arts are highly practical and competitive, highlighting their own particular disciplines and skills.

It is surprising that such claims are tacitly approved or even openly supported by the official media, including CCTV and provincial TV stations. These outlets often broadcast propaganda about the amazing combative powers of traditional martial arts. CCTV even produced a program about Tai Chi Master Wei Lei. In Experience the Real Kung Fu (体验真功夫, tiyan zhengong), Wei Lei demonstrated his powers by striking a watermelon with his palm. While the exterior of the fruit seemed to remain intact, the pulp inside was blackened. In another trick entitled “The Bird Doesn’t Fly Away” (雀不飞, quebufei), Wei demonstrated that he was able to prevent a pigeon from flying away from his hands. The CCTV reporter explained that the trick was an advanced use of Chinese neijia (“internal” boxing), in which Wei used his powers to prevent the bird from kicking and therefore being able to take off. Wei was later unmasked as a fraud; he had actually tied the bird’s feet to his fingers with a thin thread.

There are many other similar examples. For instance, Han Feilong, known as the “No. 1 Tai Chi Fighter” (太极实战第一人, taijishizhan diyi ren), defeated a Ukrainian kickboxing champion using tai chi at the official Emei Legend (峨眉传奇, emei chuanqi) event on March 312,017, at Mount Emei\(^{40}\). It was Han who defeated a series of foreign Muay Thai fighters with his flashy air kicks on the CCTV show Martial Arts Competition (武林大会, wulin dahui). Han was lauded as the “Tai Chi Kid” by the martial monk, Shi Yanjue. Shi said, “Our country is helping masters who practice Chinese style kung fu to...
gain international recognition, so they can show the world the unique style of Eastern culture.”

However, Han Feilong used Western boxing skills rather than tai chi against the Ukrainian fighter. The exaggerated claims of traditional martial arts masters have led many genuine boxers, who have been trained in modern fighting techniques, to challenge this activity and to unmask their lies (打假, dajia). The Chinese mixed martial arts practitioner and instructor Xu Xiaodong 徐晓冬 once knocked Tai Chi Master Wei Lei to the ground in a mere 20 seconds. The feud between Xu and Wei had lasted for a long time, and they finally agreed to meet each other in Chengdu on April 27, 2017. Xinhua News Agency reported a statement issued by the Chinese Wushu Association saying that the fight (约架, yuejia) between Xu and Wei was suspected to be “unauthorized.” Zhou Jinbiao 周金彪, an official of the Wushu Administrative Center under the General Administration of Sport of China, told the media that the fight was not registered with the Chinese Wushu Association and thus constituted a disciplinary offense. Xu succeeded in exposing Wei’s lack of skill, but he was prevented by the official publicity department from publicizing his victory, and his personal social media accounts were shut down.

Many traditional martial arts “masters,” such as Ma Baoguo 马保国, Tian Ye 田野, and Yan Fang 闫芳, have bluff and deceived the public, making their fortunes on the pretext of promoting Chinese kung fu. For example, Yan Fang, who refers to herself as the “Strongest Tai Chi Player” (最强太极推手, zuiqiang taiji tuishou), claims that whenever an opponent approaches her, she uses her tai chi moves to push them several feet away. In reality, many of her sparring partners were actually her own disciples. Ma Baoguo, the self-proclaimed “Master of the Hunyuanxingyi Tai Chi School” (浑元形意太极掌门人, hunyuanxingyi taijimen zhangmenren), has always boasted of his powers and how he can beat Western fighters in no time at all. Nevertheless, in a fight in Shandong in 2020, he was knocked to the ground by an amateur fighter in less than 30 seconds. This later became a standing joke in the martial arts and sports world.

5.2 The establishment of match rules: avoiding competition between traditional martial arts and other combat disciplines

The CCP has introduced several measures designed to prevent masters of traditional martial arts from being defeated by practitioners of other combat disciplines, something which would damage the reputation of traditional martial arts. The People’s Daily and other Party media outlets have criticized Ma Baoguo for exaggerating his abilities. A People’s Daily article entitled “Ma Baoguo’s Farce: It’s Time to End It Now” stated, “Some of Ma Baoguo’s words and actions are actually a farce. He tries to grab public attention with grandstanding and deceit.” The article also noted that some other traditional martial arts masters have been known to be deceitful, and their exaggeration of the combative nature of traditional martial arts was damaging the social climate.

In addition, the CCP has introduced some new regulations, the most important one being the Proposal on Strengthening Industry Self-Discipline to Promote Wushu Culture (关于加强行业自律弘扬武术文化的倡议书, guanyu jiaqiang hangye zilu hongyang wushu wenhua de changyishu) (hereinafter referred to as the Proposal), issued by the Chinese Wushu Association in 2020. Article 4 of the Proposal is the most notable, as it stipulates that,
... the practitioners of martial arts shall be supported to participate in competitive martial arts competitions and exchanges but shall not participate in combat events such as mixed martial arts and kickboxing using the styles and schools of martial arts.

Mixed martial arts and kickboxing are both modern Western fighting systems, so masters of traditional martial arts are not permitted to pit their traditional skills against athletes who practice Western fighting arts.

Article 3 of the Proposal is also interesting. It states:

We shall support martial arts practitioners in evaluating the level of martial arts through the Chinese Martial Arts Ranking System (中国武术段位制, zhongguo wushu duanweizhi) and award honorary ranks to those who have made outstanding contributions to the development of martial arts. Martial artists are forbidden from calling themselves "Master" (大师, dashi), "Leader" (掌门, zhangmen), "Orthodox Practitioner" (正宗, zhengzong), or "Direct Disciple" (嫡传, dichuan).

The Wushu Association has made reference to the rules of taekwondo and other traditional martial arts and has developed a “martial arts parity system” to define the skills of traditional martial arts practitioners. The policy separates traditional martial arts competitions from other styles of combat and manages them through a ranking system determined by members of the Association themselves. Forbidding them from awarding themselves titles such as “master” or “leader” reduces the personal influence of individual practitioners. Since these rules came into force, traditional martial arts have been subject to a modern style of management; there are more rigorous rules governing grading and individual personalities are no longer allowed to dominate the activity.

After the publication of the Proposal, the Chinese Wushu Association also issued a statement. In the future, it said, the Chinese martial arts community must follow standardized procedures when planning martial arts events; applications to hold such events will be submitted to relevant departments for processing, and in an effort to “crack down on lies,” no “fight challenges” are permitted. The Chinese Wushu Association has said that it intends to further strengthen the management of the activity, take effective measures to end the chaos that prevails in the martial arts “industry,” increase publicity and guidance, regulate martial arts events, and promote the orderly development of martial arts. The Association also issued the Guide to Holding Wushu Combat Events (武术搏击类赛事活动办赛指南, wushuboji leisaishi huodong bansai zhinan) and the Guidelines for Participating in Wushu Combat Events (武术搏击类赛事活动参赛指引, wushu boji leisaishi huodong cansai zhiyin), which emphasize the need to ensure safety at such events, so as to avoid controversies caused by injuries to the participants. Although these rules are nominally designed to end the practice of unregulated “fight challenges,” a more important purpose is to protect traditional martial arts, as practitioners will no longer face the embarrassment of defeat by fighters from other disciplines.

6 Conclusion

Traditional martial arts have a long history. When China was suffering oppression by the Western powers, the sight of traditional martial arts masters defeating foreign boxers in the ring provided a much-needed boost to national pride. The CCP prides itself on being a champion of patriotism, and its ideology can easily be combined with traditional
martial arts. In the process of cultural positioning, traditional martial arts perform two important functions, namely reinforcing patriotism and providing opportunities for commercial exploitation. The former is reflected in the combative nature of traditional martial arts and the latter is reflected in their performative nature. Nevertheless, traditional martial arts cannot compete against fighters who have received modern scientific training. This is why the authorities in China have to conceal this lack of combat effectiveness, or at least prevent it from becoming a public issue.

Following Xi Jinping’s emphasis on cultural confidence, and with the tacit approval of the authorities, many traditional martial arts masters began to exaggerate their skills. In order to prevent traditional martial artists from being defeated by practitioners of modern fighting systems – something which would undermine the prestige of traditional martial arts – the CCP has imposed new regulations on traditional martial arts that prohibit public contests between Chinese martial arts practitioners and fighters who use other styles. Traditional martial arts are indeed a useful governance tool, as they can enhance public morale and reinforce patriotism. However, we can also see that in order to protect this useful tool, the CCP has turned traditional martial arts into a closed and independent system. This approach will obstruct the internationalization and scientific development of traditional martial arts. They will probably end up as a mere tool of the CCP, used to promote “cultural confidence.”

Endnotes

1. Brownell, *Training the Body for China;* Morris, *Marrow of the Nation.*
2. Xu, *Olympic Dreams: China and Sports.*
3. “Wo geren de shijian duqu ne ar liao” Section A4.
4. DeMarco, *Asian Martial Arts, Monks, and Ways of Thought.*
5. Li, “Ni youji rou wo you shengong: waiguo dalishi beiou shi.”
6. Lu, *Politics and Identity in Chinese Martial Arts;* Lu, *A History of Shaolin: Buddhism, Kung Fu and Identity.*
7. Xi, “Jianding wenhua xizin, jianshe shehuizhuyi wenhua qiangguo.”
8. “Guanyu shishi zhonghua youxiuchuantong wenhua chuanzheng fazhan gongcheng de yijian.”
9. “Ezhi liuxing wenhua disuhua qushi, saochu disuwenhua.”
10. Perry, “Cultural Governance in Contemporary China,” 29–55.
11. Perry, *Anyuan: Mining China’s Revolutionary.*
12. Nicholls, *The Way of the Panda: The Curious History of China’s Political Animal.*
13. Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship.*
14. “Jigou shezhi.”
15. Xiao, “Chuantong wushu zhu dongao: qiangshen jianti lian qilai.”
16. “Huanyuan kangri zhong de wushu zhenmianmu,” Section B9.
17. Zheng, “Taier zhuang zhanyi zhong de wushujia Zhang Zhijiang.”
18. Xu, “Xu Shiyou huiyilu,” 637.
19. Wu, “Shaolinsi sanshinian zaihuishou,” 109.
20. For a related discussion, see Palmer, *Qigong Fever.*
26. “Chenglong Chunwan Xianchang, Yiju Geci Rang Zhongguo Wangyou Gantan: Fengci Juewing.”
27. “Huo Yuanjia: Jingwu Bizu, Minzu Yinxiong, Aiguo Wushujia.”
28. Han, Wuhun: Ji Zhongguo Sanda Chuangshiren Zhiyi Mei Huizhi Xiansheng de Fengyu Rensheng, 91–99.
29. Yang and Yang, Zhonghua Renmin Gongheguo Wushushi, 74–82.
30. Qin, “Dang Zhongyang Shouci Mingque Jiancheng Wenhuaqiangguo Shijianbiao.”
31. Keane, China’s New Creative Clusters, 4–5.
32. “Guowuyuan Guanyu Jiakuai Fazhan Tiyuchanye Cujin Tiyaofei de Ruogan Yijian.”
33. “Hongse Gonghu Yueji Hongshengguan Qidon, Gjiangyu Qiyue Xiaxun Shouyan.”
34. “Dadao Shadishu Li Qishizai Fengyu Zaixian Fengcai” [“Broad Sword Killing the Enemy,” Section FA 14.
35. “Shijie Gongfu Zhicheng, Zhege Zhaopai Foshan Zenme Caliang?” Section AI04.
36. “Guowang Xianxi Lueguo Buti: Zhongguo Guanmei Zan Jinyong Daxia,” Section A 14.
37. “Gongfu Zhengba Lianchengjue.”
38. Qin and Yang, “Richu Songshanao, Chongju Shaolinsi Xilie, Qunzhong Wenhua Huodong Zai Zhenghqidong.”
39. “Cong Wenhua Zixin de Gaodu Chuancheng Zhongguo Chuantong Wushu.”
40. “Han Feilong Wansheng Dongou Quanwang, Shizhan Taiji Xianshenwei.”
41. “Yan Bicheng UFC de Chongyang Guanxian Bixu Juizheng, Han Feilong Daibiaoliao Zhongguo Wushu de Wenhua Zixin.”
42. “MMA Xuanshou Ersihmiaonei Dadao Taiji Quanshi.”
43. “Zhongguo Wuxia: Yuejia Xingwei Youwei Wude Shexian Weifa.”
44. Jie Mian, “Ma Baoguo Xianxiang Shi Wushu Wenhua Chanve de Weiji Xinhao.”
45. “Renmin Ribao Pinglun: Ma Baoguo Naoji, Gai Li Shouchanglia.”
46. “Zhongguo Wushuxiehui Guanyu Jiaqiang Hangye Zilu Hongyang Wushu Wenhua de Changyishu.”

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9C%8B%E6%AD%A6%E6%8A%A1%93-427%E5%B7%94%E5%B3%B0%E5%B0%8D%E6%B1%BA-%E5%BE%90%E6%99%B9%E5%86%AC-%E9%AD%8F%E9%9B%B7-%E6%89%93%E5%81%87-%E6%90%8F%E6%93%8A-mma/.

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