

From the Countryside to Overseas: The Inheritance and Development of Fujian and Guangdong Wushu in Singapore

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Abstract: As an important representative of southern Chinese wushu, Fujian and Guangdong wushu gradually spread to Singapore with the southward migration of Fujian and Guangdong immigrants since the 19th century, where they took root and evolved into a distinctive Singaporean wushu culture. This paper uses the study of Chinese and foreign literature and case analysis to collect and analyze relevant historical materials and documents at home and abroad. Focusing on the cross-cultural dissemination and localization development of Fujian and Guangdong martial arts in Singapore, this text elaborates on the dissemination process of Fujian and Guangdong martial arts in Singapore from an overall perspective. Specifically the growth and germination period (1840-1939), Fujian and Guangdong martial arts mainly spread in Singapore in the form of clan organizations, hometown associations and martial arts schools, martial arts were not only seen as a self-defense skill, but also regarded as an important bond for maintaining kinship and passing on culture; During the period of suspension and disappearance (1939-1945), due to the special historical background, the inheritance of wushu mainly relied on the secret transmission between master and apprentice, and its cultural significance shifted from the inheritance of skills to the symbol of the national spirit; The rise and flourishing period (1946-1965), after World War II, the wushu that had been privately taught gradually resumed their activity. Studying the development of Fujian and Cantonese wushu in Singapore is of great significance for understanding the spread and changes of Chinese culture overseas, as well as the formation and development of Singapore's diversity.

Keywords: Fujian and Cantonese Wushu, Singapore, Spread and Development

1. Preface

With the deepening of the Belt and Road Initiative and the strategic goal of "strengthening cultural confidence and promoting the flourishing of socialist culture" proposed by the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the international dissemination of Chinese culture and the exchange and mutual learning of civilizations have become important topics in the new era. The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China explicitly emphasizes the need to "adhere to the position of Chinese culture, tell China's stories well, spread China's voice well, deepen exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations, and promote Chinese culture to reach the world better", providing a clear direction and action program for the global dissemination of Chinese culture. Against this macro backdrop, the dialogue of civilizations between China and Southeast Asian countries has shown dual characteristics of strategic coordination and innovative practice. The strategic deployment of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on "deepening exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations" resonates with the "Five Connectivities" advocated by the Belt and Road Initiative. This is not only a theoretical expression of cultural confidence, but also a practical strategy for building a new type of international cultural relations. As a founding member of ASEAN and a key node of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, Singapore's special strategic position is particularly prominent in the cultural field. The Chinese community, which makes up 74 percent of the population, provides a natural cultural identity bond for the inheritance of Fujian and Guangdong wushu. Fujian and Guangdong wushu, as an important carrier of Lingnan culture, are evolving from folk cultural exchanges to institutional cooperation, demonstrating the depth and breadth^[1] of cultural exchanges between China and Singapore.

The Belt and Road Initiative aims to enhance China's level of opening up. Exploring the inheritance and development of Fujian and Guangdong wushu in Singapore will help enhance cultural exchanges

with Southeast Asian countries and is in line with the requirements of the Belt and Road Initiative to promote the "going global" of Chinese culture. As an important medium for the overseas dissemination of Chinese wushu, overseas Chinese wushu associations have played a key role in the inheritance and promotion of Fujian and Guangdong wushu. Reviewing the development of Fujian and Guangdong wushu in Singapore helps to explore the intangible cultural heritage of overseas Chinese wushu and promote the recognition of wushu culture among overseas Chinese. By innovating communication ideas and diversifying communication channels, the reach of Fujian and Guangdong wushu can be expanded in Singapore, its spread accelerated across Southeast Asia, and its international influence enhanced. The development of Min-Yue wushu in Singapore serves as an important bridge for cultural exchange between China and Southeast Asian countries along the Belt and Road Initiative, and also provides a practical example for the dissemination of Chinese wushu culture on the international stage.

From a historical perspective, early wushu in Singapore were mainly introduced by immigrants from the coastal areas of Fujian and Guangdong. The exchange of wushu between China and Singapore has a history of over a hundred years, but research on the regional spread of wushu is still insufficient. Therefore, an in-depth exploration of the inheritance and development of Fujian and Cantonese wushu in Singapore can improve areas that have not been fully discussed in academic research and provide new perspectives and practical paths for the international dissemination of Chinese wushu culture.

2. The Spread and Development of Fujian and Cantonese wushu in Singapore

2.1 Growth and Germination Period (1840 -1939)

The outbreak of the Opium War in 1840 forced China to open its doors wide, triggering the largest and most widespread wave of emigration in modern Chinese history. By 1860, the largest single group of immigrants to Singapore was almost all from Fujian and Guangdong^[2]. This migration laid the foundation for the wide spread of wushu from Fujian to Guangdong in Singapore. During the Opium War, Singapore was a hub for Chinese laborers known as "piglet". Among these laborers, many who knew kung fu used wushu as a means to resist the British colonizers, and the struggle forced the colonizers to change the "contract labor" system to the "free labor" system. From this, it can be seen that wushu, to some extent, constructed an alternative social order for the early Chinese society, which provided some security for the lives of immigrants. In the process, the practicality of Fujian and Guangdong wushu enabled it to spread rapidly among Chinese immigrants. Take CAI Li Fo Quan for example, a stool, a towel, a carrying pole... It's easy to start a fight with just one item. Laborers enhanced^[3] their ability to protect themselves by learning wushu, which provided a broader space for the development of wushu in Fujian and Guangdong.

The early Chinese laborers' dormitories or gathering places in Singapore - "Gulijian" - were another important platform for the spread of Fujian and Cantonese wushu, in addition to plantations and mines. In the Gouli, Chinese immigrants from different backgrounds who encountered similarities gathered together, and wushu performances and exchanges became the main means of their interaction. Most of the immigrants came from the coastal areas of Fujian and Guangdong, and the wushu they exchanged were mainly from Fujian and Guangdong. Through wushu, immigrants found common topics and interests, strengthened their connections with each other, and enhanced the cohesion of the Chinese community. It is worth emphasizing that the main subjects of dissemination were almost all from the lowest class of the working people. Because for Chinese immigrants, the lack of attention to sports is, in a sense, an "escape" in terms of intense physical exertion. These activities do not emphasize the effort or the sweat that comes with the intense physical exertion inherent in physical labor, which is a characteristic of the lowest strata of society. Therefore, it can be said that the early spread of wushu in Fujian and Guangdong was the embodiment of laborers in physical activities.

According to Peng Songtao's "Overview of National Societies in Singapore", the early Chinese organizational form "Gu Li Jian" can be traced back to Kinmen and Jinjiang immigrants, and after institutionalized transformation, it became a formally registered society or trade^[4] association. This laid the groundwork for the systematic spread of Fujian and Cantonese wushu in Singapore later on.

Chinese society has undergone many historical changes, such as the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom Movement, the Tiandi Uprising, the Xiaodao Uprising, and the Golao Uprising. After the failure of the uprising, many wushu enthusiasts fled to Southeast Asia, where they continued their gang activities. And mainly in the form of guild halls and guilds, they united the overseas Chinese and brought together the overseas Chinese wushu community. Although the "Gulijian" where laborers gathered became an

important place for the spread of Fujian and Guangdong wushu, and wushu performances and exchanges became the main means of interaction among immigrants, in fact, the inheritance still relied on guilds or guild halls. As the guilds' influence expanded, companies began to set up their own wushu schools. The term "company" was used by the Hongmen of Fujian and Guangdong provinces for the overseas Chinese community. In the middle of the 19th century, "Yixing Company" widely carried on the traditions of the Tiandihui in Southeast Asian overseas Chinese communities and was the most famous of all "companies". The Yixing Company also had its own independent wushu school - the Yixing School. The Yixing Gym is a place where members practice wushu and build up their strength, and it is the core that maintains the organization's cohesion. The wushu school plays the role of labor allocation and rights protection. In Singapore's Johor region, the Chaozhou-led Yixing Company wushu School even assisted the royal family in quelling the rebellion, and Fujian and Cantonese wushu began to be incorporated into more formal social structures^[5]. In addition, the Fujian Association also took on the role of mediating disputes and maintaining community order. Support networks, protection and assistance^[6] are provided for those who are excluded or alienated by their clans, especially the poor and vulnerable groups. This complements secret societies such as Yixing Company, which operate under the cover of wushu and play a significant role in safeguarding the interests of the Chinese community.

2.2 The Upgrowth period (1919 -1939)

In 1919, the Jingwu Society was officially introduced to the Fujian and Guangdong regions. The background of this spread was closely related to the social and political environment of China at that time: the north was controlled by the Beiyang warlords, the south was influenced by the Tongmenghui - the Kuomintang, and the development of the Jingwu Society was supported by the Tongmenghui. And because the Chinese along the coast of Fujian and Guangdong were an important mass base of the Tongmenghui, the Jingwu Society had natural soil^[7] for its spread in the Fujian and Guangdong regions. In 1920, five special envoys from Guangdong - Chen Gongzhe, Luo Xiaobao, Li Huiseng, Ye Shutian and Chen Shichao - went south to Southeast Asia, laying the foundation for the spread of Jingwu Society in Southeast Asia. The geographical advantage of the Fujian-Guangdong region served as an important springboard for the Jingwu Society's entry into Singapore.

In 1922, the Singapore Jingwu Branch was officially established, and Jingwu used Cantonese culture as the foundation for its overseas activities, a strategy that fully reflected the regional cultural characteristics. The main leaders were mostly from Guangdong, and Cantonese music, as an important cultural calling card, played a key role in the organization's development and external liaison work. Influenced by the "New Culture Movement" ideology, Chen Tiesheng and Chen Gongzhe led the Cantonese music department to develop Cantonese tune music to accompany the "national exercises" dance. The Cantonese cultural circle, with its large audience, provided strong support for the dissemination of the Jingwu Society. Cantonese music, as an art form that embodies the essence of Cantonese culture, resonates^[8] with the Chinese community in Singapore through embodied social memory and becomes an important tool^[9] for the dissemination of Jingwu culture.

The establishment of the Central Wushu Academy in 1928 opened a new chapter for the internationalization of wushu from Fujian and Guangdong. In 1936, the "Nanyang Tour Group", initiated and led by Zhang Zhijiang, came to Singapore for a demonstration performance of wushu. The main members of the "Nanyang Travel Group" were some technicians^[10] from the Central Wushu Institute and the National Institute of Physical Education. Unlike the strategy of Jingwu, the Central Wushu Institute adopted a combination of Chinese and Western performances, an innovative content that quickly attracted widespread attention from the Chinese community in Singapore and further expanded the reach of wushu. Tan Kah Kee, the patriotic leader of Singapore, said excitedly: "... This is a vanguard in spreading Chinese wushu, and it will spread Chinese wushu throughout Southeast Asia and the world^[11]."

The Jingwu Association and the Central Academy of Wushu, as the most representative cases of modern wushu dissemination, have respectively opened up different paths for the spread of Chinese wushu in Singapore and Southeast Asia through regional cultural characteristics and the combination of Chinese and Western elements. Based on the Cantonese cultural circle, the Jingwu Meeting showcases the unique charm of regional culture through the integration of Cantonese music and "national exercises"; The Central Wushu Academy, on the other hand, combines wushu with Western cultural elements through innovative performance forms, making it easier for more people to accept. The dissemination practices of the two complemented each other, jointly promoting the inheritance and development of Chinese wushu in Singapore and laying an important foundation for the global spread of wushu.

2.3 The Period of Pause and Disappearance (1939-1945)

During World War II, when the Japanese invaded southward in 1942, the focus of life shifted to survival and coping with the threats brought by the war. In the early days of the occupation, the Japanese carried out large-scale massacres through so-called "verification" methods, and used the Overseas Chinese Association as a tool to forcibly extort "tribute money" in order to consolidate their extreme colonial rule^[12]. Wushu, as a cultural and sports activity, naturally could not continue to develop in such an environment. The Japanese forces took a tough crackdown on the Chinese community in Singapore and carried out cultural invasions with a focus on newspaper publications, annotating Japanese words with the Fujian-Cantonese dialect to help with memory^[13]. During the Japanese colonial period in Singapore, the Guangwu Wushu Troupe went beyond the traditional wushu group and actively engaged in activities for national salvation and relief. However, with the Japanese occupation of Singapore and the implementation of the "Great Inspection of Overseas Chinese", wushu activities were forced to cease, and the activities of the Guangwu Wushu Group came to a standstill. The spread of wushu could only go underground and continue with difficulty through private teaching. Despite this, during the years of war, the Guangwu Wushu Group, along with Chinese organizations such as the Jingwu Sports Association and the Hongmen, made an indelible contribution^[15] to the salvation of the nation by uniting the Chinese through wushu.

2.4 Rise and Prosperity Period (1946-1965)

The overseas Chinese wushu associations in Fujian and Guangdong were often formed based on blood ties and geographical connections due to the influence of early "regional" immigrants. After World War II, the wushu associations of the overseas Chinese community in Singapore developed in a diversified and integrated form, including wushu schools, lion dance teams, and clan associations, and gradually formed Chinese clan associations based on blood ties, geographical ties, and professional ties^[14]. Moreover, a large amount of mass literature, art, sports and culture have impacted traditional wushu schools. Various associations have also accepted the innovation of wushu, begun to eliminate the traditional concept of association, and promoted the exchange of wushu among different schools in the process of seeking common ground while reserving differences. At this stage, Chinese wushu masters of Fujian and Guangdong origin played an important role in the inheritance of wushu in Singapore^[15].

2.5 Regulation-based Rejuvenation Period (1965 to Present)

Singapore officially became an independent republic in 1965. In the early days of independence, sects often had conflicts due to uneven distribution of resources. Against this backdrop, the development of wushu in Fujian and Guangdong witnessed multiple opportunities. In 1967, the National Wushu Association of Singapore was established (later renamed the Singapore Wushu Dragon and Lion Dance Association). This is not only a new and promising start for the wushu of Fujian and Guangdong in Singapore, but also a major turning point for Chinese wushu. In order to better unite the Singaporean consciousness, the National Wushu Research Group of the Singapore National Wushu Association has developed a set of Singaporean boxing with unique local characteristics. The Singaporean set of boxing not only incorporates wushu from Fujian and Guangdong but also draws inspiration from other schools of wushu. Through cross-factional dissemination, Fujian and Guangdong wushu in Singapore have broken through the traditional ways of spreading based on professional ties, geographical ties and blood ties. This not only avoids the traditional degeneration of close relatives but also endows them with a new space for survival.

In the early days of the founding of the country, Lee Kuan Yew, a patriotic overseas Chinese leader, constantly mentioned in his remarks about survival the necessity of sports and maintaining good health and a "strong body", and linked sports to the development of the nation. Meanwhile, with the development of the National Wushu Association of Singapore, the wushu of Fujian and Guangdong in Singapore have evolved from early self-defense to current self-cultivation and refinement. For instance, from "Hongshengguan National Wushu Lion Dance Research Society", "Minnan National Wushu Research Society" to "Lingnan National Wushu Fitness College" and "Jiangwutang Wushu Qigong Health College", it is not difficult to see from the naming of wushu clubs that the inheritance of Minnan and Cantonese wushu in Singapore has been constantly changing with the development of The Times.

In terms of the main body of the inheritance of Fujian and Cantonese wushu in Singapore, not only do traditional wushu associations continue to play an important role, but the national education system has also been deeply involved - from primary and secondary schools to colleges and universities, Fujian

and Cantonese wushu have been incorporated into the formal curriculum in the form of improved and integrated standard routines. Even to alleviate the aging population, great efforts have been made. For instance, after the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Singapore, Singapore hired "Southern Boxing King" Qiu Jianguo in 1987 to enhance the physical fitness of the middle-aged and elderly through individualized training^[16]. This multi-dimensional dissemination model not only ensures the systematic inheritance of skills but also endows traditional culture with modern vitality, forming a sustainable development ecosystem.

Relying on the framework of the "Belt and Road Initiative", in 2023, as a key project of the National Day celebration activities of the Chinese Embassy in Singapore, the performance of the original Shenzhen-based dance drama "Wing Chun" at the Esplanade demonstrated the dual value of modern translation of cultural symbols and cross-ethnic resonance. Wing Chun shone brightly on the stage of Singapore with its unique pantomime form and the ingenious integration of wushu and dance^[17]. This is like an emotional bond, connecting the common emotions and memories deep in the hearts of Chinese people and overseas Chinese. The play transforms every move into a unique language to tell the stories of the Fujian and Guangdong regions in China. This undoubtedly plays a positive role in promoting racial harmony and cultural exchange.

3. Research Conclusions

Through the study of the spread and development of Min-Yue wushu in Singapore, this study, based on Min-Yue wushu as a cultural carrier, reveals the unique role of Min-Yue Chinese in Singapore in the dissemination of Min-Yue wushu and its profound influence on Singapore's multicultural society. The study found that Fujian and Guangdong wushu have always carried the cultural memory and identity of the Chinese people, from the spontaneous inheritance of immigrants in the 19th century, to the vigorous development of organized societies in the 20th century, and to the innovative transformation in contemporary cultural integration. This process not only attests to the adaptability of Fujian and Guangdong wushu as a "cultural gene" in cross-regional dissemination, but also highlights its core value in maintaining cultural roots. From a historical perspective, the spread of Fujian and Guangdong wushu in Singapore has undergone an evolution from "instrumental means of survival" to "cultural identity symbols" and then to "components of multiculturalism". This process shows that its spread has always been closely intertwined with the survival strategies, cultural needs and social changes of immigrant groups. It fully attests to the reciprocity of cultural exchange under the Belt and Road Initiative. Fujian and Guangdong wushu have both "gone out" through the Chinese network and "settled down" through local integration, eventually forming a cultural practice with Singaporean characteristics.

The century-long history of Fujian and Guangdong wushu in Singapore is a vivid portrayal of the cultural resilience of overseas Chinese and a typical case of the creative integration of Chinese civilization and foreign cultures. The true vitality of cultural dissemination lies not in adhering to the purity of form, but in whether it can continuously respond to the emotional needs of people and the logic of social development in the midst of change. This conclusion not only enriches the theoretical discussion of cross-cultural communication of wushu, but also provides a concrete practical model for "telling the Chinese story well". This study is limited by the depth of historical materials and the breadth of field research. In the future, the research direction can be placed on comparative studies, broadening the breadth or delving into the micro level for more in-depth research.

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