

# A Study of the Social Function of Chinese Wushu

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**Abstract:** *Nowadays, the development of Chinese Wushu is confined by some shackles, thus, this paper is aiming at analyzing the social function of wushu by using literature research and logical analysis. Later, it's possible to find the meaning and value of Chinese wushu. This paper reaches the following findings. Firstly, Wushu has the political function for stabilizing the country. Secondly, Wushu has a variety of economic functions. Thirdly, Wushu have multiple educational functions both for physical and moral development. Lastly, Wushu has the cultural function for enhancing cultural confidence.*

**Keywords:** *Wushu; Social function; Wushu economy; Martial morality education; Wushu culture*

## 1. Introduction

China, a country with rich history and culture, has always put great emphasis on cultural inheritance and regarded it as the foundation for a nation. After the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, “Excellent Traditional Chinese Culture Inheritance System” was proposed, which has been continuously improved with the development of the times. Later, in the report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the significance of traditional culture was emphasized again, and it clearly pointed out that we should “promote cultural self-confidence and self-improvement to create a new socialist cultural glory”.

Wushu is one of the typical representatives of the excellent Chinese traditional culture, an important carrier of the inheritance of Chinese history, and a splendid cultural treasure. At present, the competition between countries is not only limited to the armed struggle, but also pays more attention to the embodiment of soft power such as science and technology and culture, especially whether the cultural heritage is deep to a certain extent also determines the international status of a country, therefore, martial arts should become one of the most valued traditional Chinese culture in today's society. However, with the continued modernization and foreign cultures' influences, the development of Wushu has been affected to a large extent. Chinese people gradually forget the significance of Wushu and it begins to fade out our life.

In respect to this, this paper believes that the Chinese traditional culture connotation contained in Wushu is seriously out of step with the modern society, and the reduced public cultural identity also causes the tough development of Wushu nowadays. Therefore, this paper aims to draw Chinese attention to traditional Wushu and its culture by analyzing its functions and values, and also gives some corresponding suggestions, so as to effectively promote the high-quality and effective development of Chinese Wushu.

## 2. Introduction of Relevant Technical terms

### 2.1 Wushu

Many scholars in our country have defined the martial arts, which is a traditional national essence. These definitions have much in common. In the textbook *Wushu* (1961), it was clarified as a form of national sports composed of boxing, instrument sets and related exercises. Subsequently, this concept has been constantly refined. For example, it is proposed that Wushu is a traditional Chinese sport mainly involving fighting, routine and fighting, and both internal and external training (1991)<sup>[1]</sup>. However, *Chinese Martial Arts Course* (2004) and *Introduction to Chinese Martial Arts Culture*, textbooks for the construction of the national “12th Five-Year Plan”, put forward that Wushu is a traditional national sport with attack and defense skills as its main content, routine drills and fighting as its form of movement, and focuses on both internal and external training<sup>[2]</sup>.

Based on the definition of Wushu in Introduction to Chinese Wushu Culture, the author defines the concept of Wushu in this paper as a traditional national sport with attack and defense skills as the main technical content, routine drills and fighting as the form of sports, and emphasis on both internal and external training. Therefore, the main object of this paper is the traditional Chinese Wushu.

## ***2.2 Social function***

Social function was firstly put forward by French sociologist Emile Durkeim, which refers to the certain powers, effects and functions of various parts of the social system. This paper mainly focuses on these four aspects, including politics, economy, education and culture, and analyzes the effect and function of Wushu on them.

## **3. Research on the Social function of Chinese Wushu**

### ***3.1 The Ceaseless Evolution of Wushu's Political Function***

As a typical representative of Chinese traditional sports culture, Wushu has been used by the ruling class since ancient times due to their unique function of attack and defense. In the primitive society, in order to survive, human ancestors had to sum up fighting rules in the brutal struggle with nature, which forms the earliest prototype of Wushu. With the emergence of primitive tribes, tribes began to fight for their own survival, which further promoted the development of the embryonic form of Wushu.

After the transition from the slave society, China entered the feudal society lasting more than two thousand years. At this stage, the forms of Wushu also showed diversified features, which mainly shown in improving the national military strength by collective Wushu training, for the sake of achieving the political purpose of safeguarding national security and external stability. In the early Han Dynasty, in order to promote national unity and fight against the invasion of Xiongnu, the rulers encouraged people to practice Wushu for realizing the political function of it, and also promoted the development of folk Wushu<sup>[3]</sup>. Beside serving in military war, talent selection is also one of the essential political functions of Wushu. In addition to the imperial examination system, the martial arts system established in the Tang Dynasty uncovered a new channel for the poor class to rise. In the feudal society, the poorest people in the society were the people at the bottom, and the most unstable factors were often the people at the bottom. With their good physical quality, they could produce huge destructive power and destroy the stability and harmony of the whole society, and more opportunities to move up were brought by the martial arts system. Effectively curb the social deviance caused by people at the bottom of society because of the sense of social injustice, and even through this measure, the selection of the elite, to further enhance the country's military strength.

With the end of China's 2,000-year feudal society, the political function of Wushu in ancient times changed with the reformation of social structure as well. Therefore, in the new era, Wushu was given a new mission. For the government, martial arts training for police, soldiers and other public officials can effectively improve their physical fitness and realize their duty of protecting the country and people. For the masses, proper martial arts training is beneficial to safeguard their own interests in the face of robbery, theft and other social anomic behaviors, so that they can achieve a long-term peace and stability. In addition to public officials and individuals, martial arts can also achieve effective social integration through the coordination of social interests. This benefits from the versatility of martial arts, martial arts practice can simultaneously achieve fitness, learning, entertainment and social and other functions, condensed the centripetal force of people practicing martial arts. The broad adaptability of martial arts is also the reason why it can achieve social integration. Martial arts has characteristics that both Yangchun and Lower Liba can appreciate, so it connects the two ends of society, improves understanding between social groups, and thus maintains social stability. At the same time, as an outstanding representative of the traditional Chinese culture, Wushu has been mentioned on the international stage for many times since the foundation of the Republic of China period, establishing the platform to show the national features of our culture, so that more countries in the world can witness the charm of traditional Chinese culture. At the same time, the eyes of the world can take martial arts culture as an opportunity to further peep at Chinese history and Chinese legend, martial arts culture with its unique inside information provides a window for China to show the style of a big country, and helps China establish a prestige in the international community.

### ***3.2 The Diversified Development of Wushu's Economic Function***

The value of Wushu in economy is also diverse in the process of social change. In primitive society, strong military conditions are the foundation for competing for more social means of production.

Unlike primitive societies, with the improvement of social productivity and changes in social structure, the economic function of Wushu in feudal societies was no longer achieved through extortion, but took on a more diverse aspect. Firstly, Wushu brings its ornamental value into full play. In the street, restaurant, “Hangolan” and other places, Wushu artists gain rewards from the audience by performing Wushu skills, which realize the basic economic value of Wushu. Secondly, during the social turmoil of feudal society, people realized the necessity of protecting life and property, and the business model of Biaoju started to emerge in the Yuan Dynasty, as well as a new profession Biaoju. Biaoju accepts commissions to protect people or objects, providing justification to the existence of Wushu masters, which exists to this day in the form of bodyguards. The increased economic benefits of Wushu inspired more people to learn it. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the development of various Wushu schools tended to be mature, and martial arts schools emerged. The emergence of Wushu has brought certain economic benefits to the prosperity of the society, and the economic function of traditional martial arts has shown an upsurge during this period and has been further developed<sup>[4]</sup>. In addition to realizing the economic function of martial arts, the derived industries such as martial arts equipment, costumes and performances also contribute to economic development.

In modern society, the economic functions of Wushu have appeared in our lives in a richer form. For instance, modern Wushu movies demonstrate the economic functions of martial arts. Wushu movies have attracted audiences through the exciting scenes of real swords and fist fights, and movie stars like Bruce Lee became quite popular, who successfully triggered the global “martial arts fever” and led to larger Wushu consumption. Moreover, the modern form of Wushu has evolved in a more commercialized and industrialized way, which has also improved the effectiveness of its economic function through mass training of students in martial arts. Martial arts in different industries have played a role in promoting economic development, and martial arts itself also contains economic value. Since almost all of China's 56 ethnic groups have their own unique martial arts heritage, the participation of the whole people makes martial arts contain huge interest value behind the profound cultural heritage. In modern society, people are under pressure and have little spare time to take care of their bodies. Sub-health has become the norm. Martial arts can help people establish their own health management through lower economic costs. The “health economics” hidden in martial arts is being realized by helping people in modern society to improve the efficiency of work and production, and better adapt to the high-intensity and high-pressure rhythm of contemporary society.

The economic function of Wushu is also fully reflected in Wushu tourism projects. Many places of interest with a long history and martial arts culture are valuable tourist resources. Some scenic spots, such as Mount Wudang and Mount E-mei, promote local economy through regarding “Wushu as a platform and economic opera”. However, martial arts tourism projects in most areas of China are confronted with difficulties caused by the loss of cultural connotation, unclear brand image and others. The challenge for truly improving their economic benefits has become a dilemma for the current development of Wushu tourism projects.

### ***3.3 The Dual Embodiment of Wushu's Education Function***

The outstanding value of Wushu in education lies in the body education based on the improvement of Wushu skills and the demand of physical health, and the original aim of Wushu education is the improvement of personal ideology and morality.

Learning and improving Wushu is an important part of physical education. For example, the arrest and fighting skills practiced by police in daily training are derived from martial arts. While improving personal physical quality, they can also serve the society and realize their professional responsibility in a better way. The effect of Wushu on fitness has been passed down for thousands of years and is recognized worldwide. For example, Tai Chi is considered to be the most effective fitness exercise in the world, which has gentle and continuous movements. Long-term practice has good medical and health effects on the treatment of various chronic diseases and the adjustment of human internal environmental balance<sup>[5]</sup>. Therefore, in China's plan to build a healthy country, Wushu must be an indispensable part for improving the overall physical quality of the people.

Wushu is a part of physical education, but Wushu culture lies in higher than the connotation of sports, which makes the educational function of Wushu rise to the height of moral education. Chinese traditional Wushu culture advocates virtues like “loyalty, righteousness, benevolence, filial piety and faithfulness<sup>[6]</sup>. Wushu practitioners always confirm that “Wushu are practiced before virtue”. Practicing Wushu can enhance the courage and perseverance to confront setbacks, build up national self-confidence and take courage to go forward bravely, as mentioned, “To cultivate the ability to respond to crises without chaos, and the spiritual qualities of not being afraid of failure and being courageous<sup>[7]</sup>”. The educational function of Wushu has been endowed with an essential mission in the current of history. Integrating martial arts into youth education can form an effective ideological guide

to help young people establish good moral qualities, encourage them to promote traditional culture, enhance their sense of national identity and mission, and become the mainstay of national development and progress. In addition to student education, martial education is also an important spiritual source for building a strong military culture. The strong military culture has rich and colorful connotation, which is the common product of historical accumulation and the development of The Times. Our army has always attached great importance to the inheritance of national martial arts traditions and the construction of advanced martial arts culture, and is a people's army with a rich tradition of fine martial arts. Based on thousands of years of military practice in China, the spirit of martial morality condensed, is the essence of traditional military culture, is a summary of the rules of running the army to win, reflects the fundamental demands of a strong army, is to build a strong army culture, consolidate the ideological and cultural position of our army, firm the ideals and beliefs of officers and soldiers, sublimate the ideological realm of officers and soldiers, pure moral sentiments of officers and soldiers indispensable spiritual source<sup>[8]</sup>.

However, with the popularity of utilitarian social concept in modern times and the constant impact of overseas advocacy of competitive recreational programs, most families and schools generally believe that learning traditional Chinese martial arts is time-consuming, labor-intensive, and inapparent in effect, making it difficult to popularize the educational function of Wushu, so that it cannot be given full play in modern society.

### ***3.4 The Rich Connotation of Wushu Cultural Function***

As an outstanding representative of the excellent traditional culture of China, Wushu has extremely profound cultural deposits and spiritual extension. For example, Taijiquan contains Yin and Yang instruments, which fully reflects the Taoist thought of "braking by static". Baji boxing produces endless changes, but also hidden "appropriate" Confucian thought. The rich cultural connotation has become a solid foundation for Wushu to realize its cultural function in every historical period.

In modern times, when the Chinese were mistakenly considered as "sick man of East Asia", Chinese people gained prominence on the world stage through Wushu, which gives Wushu a unique international status and enables Chinese to form a strong cultural identity whenever and wherever they talk about it. Culture is the soul of a nation and indispensable vitality and creativity for the development and continuation of a nation. Therefore, the inheritance of Wushu culture inspires public confidence in the country and can achieve the social function of inspiring the people and enhancing national cohesion.

Since entering the new era, with the CPC Central Committee and The State Council attaching greater importance to traditional culture, China has put forward several propositions like "enhancing historical consciousness", "strengthening cultural confidence" and "carrying forward traditional Chinese culture". As an important carrier of traditional culture, Wushu matters a lot in undertaking the cultural Renaissance of China. Therefore, Chinese Wushu should adhere to the development path of nationalization and specialization, so that we can make Wushu become an important content in building a community with a shared future for mankind, and let the historical and cultural accumulation blossom with new life and vitality.

The development of traditional Wushu culture has gained greater space with the policy support of the new era. Moreover, as a traditional culture, in the case of social environment changes, some concepts of martial arts cannot adapt to the multi-complex social environment. With the entry of western culture, the concept of competitive sports also has an impact on China's cultural orientation to a certain extent, and has an impact on the development of traditional martial arts. The living space of traditional martial arts is compressed, and the transmission channels are limited to literary works and film and television works, which is easy to mislead and influence the audience, causing the mismatch between reality and falsehood. It is difficult for martial arts to show the real cultural charm, resulting in the basic cognition of traditional martial arts in modern society. In addition, martial arts requires hard training from a young age. From the very beginning, the high threshold excludes most people from martial arts. As an important part of Chinese cultural inheritance, martial arts has a situation in which the transmission of major martial arts types has declined, and martial arts is facing a special development dilemma.

## **4. Conclusion and suggestion**

### ***4.1 Conclusion***

Through the study of the social function of Wushu, this paper reaches the following conclusions:

Wushu shows certain functional value in politics, economy, education, culture and other aspects.

(1) The political function of Wushu in feudal society is manifested as the military function and talent selection function serving the ruling class, while in contemporary society, it is manifested as an important grip for leaders to maintain national stability, realizing the continuity of this function from ancient to modern times;

(2) In feudal society, the economic function of Wushu was manifested as the direct reward of Wushu performances and the development of economic entities such as the bodyguard and Wushu school. In modern society, it was diversified in many aspects, like Wushu film and TV works, Wushu training or even Wushu tourism.

(3) The educational function of Wushu is embodied in teaching some practical fighting skills and improving physical quality, while as for moral education, it appears in the form of martial education;

(4) Nowadays, the cultural function of Wushu is reflected in the motivation of national morale and the enhancement of national cohesion through cultural identity. After entering the new era, Wushu has taken up the responsibility of reviving the Chinese culture.

#### 4.2 Suggestion

As mentioned above, the author puts forward some possible suggestions for problems arising from the development of Wushu in the contemporary society.

(1) In response to the difficulty of advancing Wushu in the economic development of contemporary Wushu tourism, it is necessary to strengthen the overall design of tourism planning, integrate Wushu culture with tourism projects organically and use new media channels to publicize local Wushu culture, as well as build a large-scale and influential Wushu culture brand.

(2) For the general lack of attention to Wushu education, the current “double reduction policy” should be taken seriously to clarify the home-school cooperation system. Schools should take the lead in carrying out Wushu courses and Wushu culture courses, and parents should play their role in supervising their children’s practice, so as to popularize Wushu education both at school and home.

(3) In the face of the inheritance crisis and loss of Wushu culture, it is essential to improve it from various aspects, such as the government policy support, the awakening of public consciousness and the popularization of school and family Wushu education. As an important carrier of Chinese culture, Wushu must adhere to cultural confidence and keep pace with the times for innovative development in communication, so as to bring new vitality to traditional culture and Wushu<sup>[9]</sup>.

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