



The Internationalisation of the Chinese Martial Arts: An Analysis of the Policy of the International Wushu Federation

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ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH

Wushu, the collective noun for Chinese martial arts, is one of China's most prominent traditional sports and a significant part of its cultural heritage. Since the mid-1980s, China has made considerable efforts to internationalise the practice of wushu, facilitating the establishment of the International Wushu Federation (IWUF) in 1990. Over the past three decades, the membership of IWUF has expanded from 38 members in 1990 to 160 in 2024, which seems to indicate that wushu has entered the global sports arena. Following the success of other Asian martial arts (judo and taekwondo) in gaining inclusion in the Olympics, both the Chinese government and IWUF have made efforts to include wushu in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and the 2020 Tokyo Games. Despite several attempts, wushu has not yet achieved its Olympic ambition. Scholars often attribute these failures to cultural differences between East and West, Eurocentrism within the Olympic Movement, and the detraditionalisation of the sport. However, these studies often overlook the critical role of IWUF's policy in influencing wushu's international development and Olympic status.

This research investigated how IWUF's policy choices (e.g. terminology decisions, underlying policy assumptions, and strategic responses to the IOC Olympic programme reforms) have influenced the international development and Olympic status of wushu. Adopting a qualitative approach, this study integrates in-depth interviews and document analysis.

The findings indicate significant implications stemming from the choice of terminology: the popular term 'Kung Fu' is associated with traditional Chinese martial arts and cultural imagination shaped by Kung Fu cinema and linked to fighting practicability and Chineseness. In contrast, the official term 'wushu' is perceived as modern, detraditionalised Chinese martial arts, shaped significantly by IWUF's Olympic policies to align with its Olympic ambition. Evident policy failures identified include both implementation and theory failures within IWUF's policy. Implementation failures include an imbalanced representation of continents on the IWUF board, China's dominant position within the federation and the use of mostly Chinese social media. While theory failures reflected tensions between promoting wushu as a traditional Chinese sport to enrich the Olympic Movement and detraditionalising this sport to align with the IOC's criteria. In response to the IOC Olympic programme reforms, IWUF has employed both 'substantive' strategies (e.g., technical evolution and strengthening international communication) and 'symbolic' strategies (e.g., promoting youth participation, emphasising traditional wushu and collaborating with the traditional wushu community). However, these efforts failed to convince the IOC that adding wushu would enhance the appeal of the Olympic programme.

This thesis identified two critical challenges to IWUF's Olympic ambition. The first involves the issue of how to keep cultural integrity in the pursuit of wushu's Olympic inclusion in regard to Olympic homogenisation and prolympism. The IOC's governance model empowers it to reshape the identities of sports while resulting in the imbalance between cultural globalisation and cultural diversity within the Olympic programme. Secondly, while China's dominance in wushu has significantly promoted the development of IWUF, it has also hindered IWUF's ability to function as a truly international federation. The IOC's discourse power over Olympic inclusion has influenced the sportisation of wushu to align with Olympic expectations. The power dynamics among IWUF, the IOC, and China have shaped the unique policy discourse surrounding IWUF's efforts. Future research could consider applying the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to explore the diverse perceptions of stakeholders surrounding IWUF's policies or investigate the long-term impact of Olympic inclusion on the development of other martial arts, action sports or non-Olympic sports.

CURRICULUM VITAE

HAN Qingsong began practising wushu at the age of 5, gaining extensive experience over the years. In 2013, he enrolled at Henan University of Urban Construction, where he pursued a Bachelor's degree in the Faculty of Environmental and Municipal Engineering. He later continued his studies at Henan University, earning a Master's degree in Wushu and Traditional National Sports. In 2016, he began his PhD studies at the Shanghai University of Sport (SUS) in the School of Martial Arts. Two years later, in 2018, he started a joint PhD programme between SUS and Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) in the Faculty of Physical Education and Physiotherapy (LK). During this period, he participated in several international academic meetings and published a number of academic papers related to wushu internationalisation.

