



Teaching Chinese Martial Arts (Wushu) to Today's Youth: A Mixed-Method Study in China and Europe

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ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH

Chinese martial arts, commonly referred to as ‘wushu’ (武术), are also internationally better known as ‘kungfu’ (功夫). They represent a traditional and diverse form of combat practised in China, encompassing various fighting styles, techniques, and philosophies that have evolved and have been refined over centuries. Wushu underwent a significant transformation in the 1950s, marking its transition into a modern sport which is generally referred to as ‘modern’ wushu (or competition wushu). Compared to other Asian martial arts, such as taekwondo, karate, and judo, wushu has comparatively fewer youth participants. Various studies have referred to the negative impact of conventional training methods to explain the low youth participation rates in wushu. Youth training methods are often regarded as monotonous as they are perceived as repetitive and lacking variety. To date, there is limited understanding regarding the experiences of youth wushu coaches and the factors influencing their teaching to modern-day youth, both in China and other countries, as well as with regard to youth participation motivation in wushu. This PhD study has investigated the challenges confronted by coaches in instructing wushu to contemporary youth in China and in a number of European countries.

A mixed-method approach was used, encompassing both quantitative and qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews with coaches and questionnaires for young participants.

Findings identified a number of key challenges in wushu coaching programmes and approaches tailored to modern-day youth. One challenge relates to the fact that, despite the advocacy for modern coaching methods, many youth wushu coaches continued to rely on traditional approaches. Coaches’ cultural background, parental expectations, and professional status emerged as significant factors that appear to influence whether coaches in China and Europe maintain or update their teaching programmes and approaches. The coaches that were identified who made changes were only to a limited extent aligned with strategies that have been described in the literature on youth sports motivational theories. It is argued that this might be related to the absence of formal coaching education programmes tailored for coaching young practitioners. Also, although the International Wushu Federation attempts to turning wushu into an international (Olympic) sport, various Chinese scholars have criticised the ‘detraditionalisation’ process of modern wushu to comply with Olympic standards. However, as the sport remains rooted in Chinese tradition, the challenge persists in reconciling wushu's traditional roots with modernisation efforts, particularly in making techniques more accessible and appealing to young practitioners. Consequently, questions for future research arise, such as “Can traditional values coexist with competitive aspirations?”, or “Is there a need to differentiate between youth wushu geared towards competitive purposes and youth wushu intended for traditional education?”. These inquiries are integral to navigating the evolving landscape of wushu and ensuring its continued relevance and appeal to contemporary young practitioners.

CURRICULUM VITAE

JIA Yueyi began practicing Wushu at the age of 7, gaining extensive experience over the years. In 2011, she enrolled at the Shanghai University of Sport (SUS), where she pursued a Bachelor's degree in the Department of Traditional Chinese Sports (wushu). She later continued her studies at Xi'an Physical Education University, earning a Master's degree in the same field. In 2016, she began her PhD studies at Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) in the Faculty of Physical Education and Physiotherapy (LK), with a research focus on youth wushu training methods. During this period, she participated in several international academic meetings and published some academic papers related to youth wushu coaching.

