

Limitations, difficulties, breakthrough—martial arts development situation of deep thinking

Lei Zhang

Bengbu Medical College, Sports and Art Department, Bengbu, 233000, China

Keywords: Martial Arts; Martial Arts Culture; Combat Culture; Traditional Chinese Sports
Modernity

Abstract: Martial arts has a long history in China, and its development has experienced a period of prosperity, which has gradually faded away today. However, the physical fitness benefits of martial arts remain unchanged and have great value for inheritance and development. Starting from the perspective of human martial arts culture, this article analyzes the internal and external factors that cause difficulties in the development of martial arts, and conducts an in-depth analysis of the inheritance and development mechanism of martial arts culture. It is believed that the joint action of internal and external factors has hindered the development of martial arts, requiring a reevaluation of the value and positioning of martial arts. It is necessary to firmly develop forward thinking based on grasping the essence of modernity. Deconstruction of martial arts culture is needed, and reconstruction is required on the basis of logic and the demands of the times. This allows martial arts to be reborn from its old shell.

1. Introduction

Martial arts is an important and precious cultural heritage in our country, incorporating elements of traditional medicine, aesthetics, ethics, philosophy, and more. With its unique combat attributes and profound cultural heritage, it has fascinated people worldwide. With the development of media technology, "kung fu" has also become a postcard showcasing the image of China. However, martial arts currently face unprecedented challenges: the invasion of foreign cultures; questioning from domestic people; the development of information dissemination; progress in science and technology; and lagging self-development, causing martial arts development to be passive. Similar to the ancient theology on the eve of the Renaissance, the cloak of mystery is gradually stripped away by science, facing constant questioning. In contemporary Chinese society, "the cultural mentality should be contemporary with the Enlightenment era in European society" [1]. The concept of "martial arts" that we have created has become blurred in self-awareness and understanding of the world as it evolves with the times. The fascination with Eastern mysticism and the disorderly modernization have caused martial arts to alienate into a cultural structure that is neither here nor there. Recent exposure of fraudulent incidents against traditional martial arts has left the martial arts community silent. Descartes once said, "For the pursuit of real truth, we must doubt everything at least once in our lifetime." Now, we have reached a historical moment where we need to reexamine the value and development of martial arts, a time that requires a "reevaluation of all values."

2. Analyzing the Main Causes of the Decline of Martial Arts

2.1. Analysis of Cultural Development Laws Leading to Natural Decline

Ultimately, nothing in the world is immortal, and humans cannot escape the fate of ultimate demise. Various cultures created by humanity face a similar fate, and museums worldwide serve as the graves of lost cultures. Schweitzer studied the reasons for the decline of culture: "If the failure of thought is the decisive root cause of cultural decline, a series of obstacles also damages the culture of our era. These obstacles exist in the spiritual and economic realms, especially due to the increasingly deteriorating interaction between these two domains" [2]. The vitality of culture lies in its relevance to the current needs of humanity. However, the development of the era continually influences the recipients of culture—human needs. Countless cultures emerge and then suddenly disappear. While efforts are made to preserve cultural diversity and rescue endangered cultures, these endeavors are akin to trying to stop a speeding train with bare hands. The essential purpose of human-created culture is to nourish the human spirit, relieving it from suffering, anxiety, and unrest. If a culture loses this function, it signals the beginning of its decay. The type of culture that humanity needs and what is discarded is determined by the era. As cultures evolve, they often face demise, only to regain life through improvement and development. Being conservative, isolated, and resistant to progress is perilous, and martial arts have gradually entered this path of obscurity.

For thousands of years, martial arts, as a carrier of traditional Chinese moral values, has transcended the realm of physical exercise and become a culture. However, with the development of the times, it has turned into an obstacle hindering the pursuit of truth, forcing us to contemplate the decline of martial arts. Martial arts once spread traditional Chinese values worldwide, influencing martial arts like sumo, judo, taekwondo, karate, and others, all seemingly connected to martial arts. At that time, martial arts appeared as messengers of enlightenment. But now, martial arts have lost their former glory. While lagging in its own development, martial arts resorts to confusing tactics to obstruct people from understanding other combat cultures. When we begin to view foreign combat cultures as ferocious floods, it indicates that martial arts has lost confidence, a significant sign of cultural aging. Protecting traditional culture cannot involve a wholesale copy because the audience, as the recipient of culture, has new perceptions and demands due to the development of the era. Demanding them to accept things from that time is akin to searching for a needle in the river. A reasonable approach is to discard the undesirable and retain the essence when inheriting traditional culture. To achieve this, it is necessary to deconstruct traditional culture, shatter its original framework, and reassemble fragments that align with the needs of the times, discarding those that cannot adapt to the development of the era into the river of history.

2.2. Humanity's Distortion and Vilification Leading to the Murder of Martial Arts

Burckhardt believed that the Renaissance brought about two important discoveries. First was the discovery of man. Human philosophy transitioned from "faith" to "reason," and "humanism" became the new social worldview. The second was the discovery of nature, initiating humanity's understanding of nature after the Renaissance. This shift from cultural to knowledge-based truth beliefs was a revolutionary event, praised by Kant as the "Copernican Revolution" [3]. If we use the term "Copernican anthropocentrism," it can be considered that after the Renaissance, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, Western "Copernican anthropocentrism" achieved considerable success [4]. Under the control of this thinking, humanity, for the sake of personal gain, did not hesitate to excessively exploit nature, also tampering with and trampling on culture. Similarly, under the impact of a market-driven economy and industrial civilization, the Chinese people have gradually deviated from traditional modesty and politeness, moving toward profit and self-centeredness. This is true in

the cultural field as well, where martial arts have become a tool for many to seek personal gain. Either intentionally or unintentionally, they have caused martial arts to deviate from its original appearance. For instance, traditional Tai Chi, originally a traditional sports activity with certain combat elements, has been labeled as an all-encompassing entity with super combat ability, excellent fitness effects, and supernatural abilities. Traditional Chinese medicine clinics, Shaolin martial arts schools, media, rugby fields, and entertainment shows all feature Tai Chi, as if everyone wants a piece of it. The excessively developed information dissemination channels and the development of scientific empiricism make it easy for people to eliminate the superficial charm of traditional culture. Excessive exaggeration and distortion will only make people hostile to Tai Chi.

Traditional martial arts generally thrived in past societies but would face significant problems if placed in the current society. So, what are the main means for us to understand martial arts today? Firstly, we can use modern science, such as physics, biomechanics, and physiology, to analyze martial arts at the technical level. Secondly, we can use rational thinking to discover the objective rules hidden behind martial arts phenomena. Thirdly, we can use inductive and deductive reasoning in logic to compare and analyze martial arts with other similar cultures. Finally, the rapid spread of various combat sports provides a platform for people to practically verify martial arts. Perhaps many people still believe that the depth of martial arts is difficult to explain with science or touch on with modern science, elements such as "qi," "jin," "spirit," and others. The significant reason for vehemently defending this is the fear that if the mystery and fantasy of martial arts are uncovered by science, it will immediately transform into something ordinary. However, the overall trend is irreversible. The development of information technology and communication studies has gradually clarified the true face of martial arts. People are now more dedicated and willing to discover the truth about everything in the world, never being as close to this goal as now.

3. Martial Arts Science Development Exploration

3.1. Accurate Positioning to Define Survival Space

In the natural ecological system, competition for ecological niches arises only when there is an overlap in ecological positions among living systems. Competition revolves around securing the most suitable ecological territory. It is essential to clarify the inherent development logic of martial arts and its position within the global "martial" cultural system. First, is martial arts a part of human "martial" culture? Given the continuous cultural exchanges among different human groups, finding purely isolated cultures has become challenging. Regarding martial arts, what cultural gaps exist between it and ancient disciplines like Muay Thai, Jujutsu, boxing, and Hwa Rang Do? Second, these human combat arts share similarities in their technical systems due to the common physiological structure of humans. Kicking, striking, throwing, and grappling form the primary technical framework of human martial culture. Third, there is a commonality at the spiritual level of culture. Whether Western combat sports or Eastern martial arts, they all emphasize the status of the strong, imbuing specific spiritual elements such as the Olympic spirit, Confucian culture, or Bushido philosophy. However, martial arts' spiritual dimension is more restrained, rich, and distinctive. Therefore, to facilitate the better development of martial arts, isolating it is not a correct mindset. Instead, it should be viewed within the broader human "martial arts" culture. Although this approach may pose some risks due to cultural competition, it is conducive to the spread of martial arts culture. In cultural dissemination, similar cultures have an advantage over divergent ones. Jigoro Kano expressed concerns during the sportsification of Judo, but he took the crucial step forward, making Judo popular worldwide. The same applies to Muay Thai, boxing, Taekwondo, and others. There is no need to claim that martial arts are a superior or privileged culture beyond combat and sports. Such unilateral assertions lack significant meaning.

If martial arts are to secure a place in human combat culture, they need to find distinct ecological resources and carve out their survival space. Uniqueness in rules, systems, techniques, spirit, attire, etc., is crucial to expanding their ecological territory. The extinction of culture can be seen as external cultures squeezing their survival space, similar to the appearance of wild dogs in Australia leading to the extinction of Tasmanian devils. The popularity of kickboxing and Muay Thai can also diminish the status of Sanda (Chinese kickboxing), as the same survival space is occupied, and the stronger will eliminate the weaker. Culture can also perish due to internal issues, as seen in animals facing extinction due to factors like environmental unsuitability and evolution. For example, pandas, despite sufficient food and a favorable environment, face extinction due to problems in reproduction. Martial arts currently find themselves in a situation akin to David standing before Goliath before slinging a stone – urgently needing to find weaknesses in the rules. As Indian-American entrepreneur Rana Dey suggests: one must understand the rules to use them effectively, even break them. Without adopting an inductive deductive reasoning to view martial arts macroscopically and systematically, it is challenging to find a foothold by solely scrutinizing one's own martial arts.

3.2. Scientifically Clarifying Inherent Development Logic

Aristotle said, "Definition is a phrase indicating the essence of a thing." Clear logic is a crucial condition for the development of martial arts, yet the internal development logic of martial arts remains chaotic in reality.[5] There is a suspicion of expanding the definition's scope when defining martial arts, with many studies defining martial arts as a culture transcending technique and rules or as a culture higher than or parallel to sports. Defining martial arts as "culture" commits a logical error of defining too broadly. We have overlooked that martial arts are a form of technology, a combat or striking art with distinctive features of traditional Chinese culture. Martial arts are part of the broader category of human martial arts (martial arts) and fall within the realm of sports. Denying our various physical movement cultures as part of education just because education is a foreign concept is a fallacy. This approach easily falls into the fallacy of "white horse is not a horse." Education is also a foreign concept, yet we acknowledge our ancient education systems. We do not deny that Han and Tang costumes or Ming and Qing costumes are part of costume culture, so why fixate on whether martial arts belong to sports and human combat culture? Isolating martial arts as unique, pure, and independent is not conducive to promotion and development. It should be viewed within the framework of the broader human martial arts culture, with foreign scholars consistently considering martial arts on par with boxing, wrestling, Taekwondo, etc.

The first step in scientifically clarifying the inherent logic of martial arts development is to define martial arts as traditional Chinese striking arts. Subsequently, it can be categorized and sub-divided. Following the principles of logic, it is easy to categorize martial arts into unarmed and weapon categories. However, the subsequent categorization process faces significant challenges, with many scholars diverging or making errors. Weapons have become less mainstream in combat culture with the advent of firearms. Unarmed combat, being safer, more humane, and emphasizing human instincts, has grown. For a more scientific approach, unarmed martial arts should be categorized based on the "primary technique": kicking, striking, throwing, and grappling. Only with this foundation can the development and survival space of martial arts be determined and planned.

3.3. Beneficial Integration of Tradition and Modernity

When discussing the development of traditional culture, the focus is often on preservation and inheritance, yet there is reluctance to embrace change and criticism. However, without undergoing scrutiny, criticism, and necessary changes, the protection and inheritance of traditional culture are impossible, leading it to be preserved only in museums. Respecting and protecting the unique

characteristics of national culture emphasize that traditional culture must maintain its uniqueness to garner respect. The global trend of modernization prompts traditional cultures to develop, as maintaining old traditions is incompatible with and cannot integrate into modern society. Why is the development of traditional martial arts and competitive martial arts limited domestically, while Taekwondo thrives? Why does Karate, similar to Taekwondo, and Judo face challenges? A brief analysis can be made from the perspectives of cultural evaluation and selection. First, cultural values formed over thousands of years lead Chinese people to prefer combat cultures that prioritize safety and civility. Second, deep-seated cultural genes cause a fuzzy and generalized fondness for similar Eastern cultures. Third, practicality and aesthetic preferences influence cultural choices. Therefore, Taekwondo, sharing cultural characteristics similar to martial arts, aligning with Chinese aesthetic preferences, and fitting traditional cultural values, is thriving. Confucian culture within Taekwondo, including etiquette norms, hierarchical order, attire, and techniques, can interfere with cultural choices, blurring cultural identity. Here, it is essential to avoid falling into the quagmire of "self-absolutization" when dealing with culture, assuming martial arts are profound and ancient, while Taekwondo is simplistic. Instead, cultural research should focus on the historical development, deep-seated spiritual ideas, deconstruction of tradition, and reconstruction of modernity.

The path of martial arts towards "modernity," or the process of "modernization," is diverse. For a long time, martial arts existing in closed spaces had minimal opportunities for cultural exchanges with similar foreign cultures, developing a robust and isolated cultural system. All cultural attributes of martial arts have been proliferating within this system, seemingly substantial but only "replicating the past," unable to break through the shell hindering its evolution. Qian Zhongshu once said, "Chinese poetry is just poetry; it should be poetry, which is more important than it being Chinese." Current martial arts studies still face similar issues, such as regarding martial arts as uniquely Chinese, deeming martial arts incomparable to other human combat cultures, or asserting that martial arts should be superior to sports culture. This isolated cultural perspective is undoubtedly disastrous for the development of martial arts.

4. Conclusion

After the outbreak of the Black Ship incident, the Tokugawa shogunate in Japan abandoned its traditional inflexible stance and started contemplating modernity, stating, "For us, adhering strictly to ancient methods seems to misunderstand the spirit of the times." This description is quite fitting when applied to the current state of martial arts. The mindset of isolating oneself and stubbornly trying to single-handedly take on the world has led martial arts into an awkward situation. Already in a disadvantaged position, martial arts persistently hopes to construct its own set of rules, expecting others to comply – a challenging endeavor. It is now time to reassess the value of martial arts. Doing so will not only prompt profound reflections on its development but also instill a reverence for martial arts itself and philosophical thinking. This reverence will empower scholars to break out of the "cave of darkness" and perceive the true prototype of a rational world. The ancient philosopher Socrates asserted that a life without frugality is valueless, and the Chinese nation is renowned for its "introspective psychology." However, when facing issues of traditional cultural development, there is a lack of the necessary rational introspection. Many martial arts scholars and enthusiasts seem oblivious to the fact that unwillingness to learn from advanced cultures and an overly protective attitude towards old traditions essentially embody "nostalgia." The present is not synonymous with modernity, and the past is not equivalent to tradition. Modernity and tradition are merely markers on the historical axis, running parallel and subject to replacement as time progresses.

Acknowledgement

Key Research Project of Humanities and Social Sciences in Anhui Universities (SK2021A0435)

References

- [1] Yu, Wujin. *The Lack and Reconstruction of Enlightenment: Reflections on the Development of Contemporary Chinese Culture*. *Journal of Shanghai Normal University (Philosophy & Social Sciences Edition)*, 2010(4): 5-13.
- [2] Schweizer, Francis. *Cultural Philosophy*. Translated by Chen Zehuan. Shanghai: People's Publishing House, 2008: 32.
- [3] Wan, Junren. *The "Modernity" Roots and Cultural Interpretation of the Crisis of Belief*. *Journal of Tsinghua University*, 2001(16): 22-29.
- [4] Luo, Jianjin. *Historical Reflection on "Man Conquers Heaven."* *Newsletter of Dialectics of Nature*, 2001(5): 68-73.
- [5] Cf. Nicola Hartman. *Ethics*. English translated by S. Colt. London: Unwin Brothers Publishing Ltd., 1932, Volume 2, 65.