

# A Guide to Chinese Martial Arts



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## 中国武术指南

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*Chang Quan* (Extended Boxing)  
by Li Lianjie.



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(Eagle's Talons Boxing)  
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Spring and Autumn Halberd.



Double-Bladed Dagger.



Twin Hooks.



Three-Sectioned Flail.



Sword and a Multi-Sectioned Whip.



Sky-Measuring Combs.



Monk's Spade.



Crescent-shaped spade.

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## *Chapter One*

# **The Origins and Historical Development of Chinese *Wushu***

*Wushu*, or martial arts, is a sport for health and self-defence, with a history of several thousand years and part of China's valuable cultural heritage.

### **I. The Roots of Chinese *Wushu***

Chinese *wushu* was developed through the centuries by the Chinese people in their struggle for survival. Its roots lie in primitive society, though, at that time, it was a far cry from the artistic sport that it is today.

In antiquity, man used clubs and sticks in his struggle against wild animals and in his search for food. A rudimentary skill in weaponry was developed and then the need for skill in arms was further stimulated by inter-tribal warfare. These conditions led to the gradual development of sophisticated weapons whose use required more skill, although hand-to-hand fighting was still basic to combat.

As man became more skillful in hunting and warfare, he also gradually developed dance for entertainment and relaxation. Ancient records suggest that dance was often the imitation of various animal movements, hence



Ill. 1. Butting with Horns

demonstrates the early relationship between dance and fighting skills. Butting with Horns was competitive wrestling practised by the soldiers. This sport was said to have been a training method before battle by the armies of the legendary Chiyou tribe of eastern China. The soldiers wore horns on their heads as a sign of courage, then butted each other during the contest (Ill. 1). These exercises were early forms of *wushu*.

## II. *Wushu* Before the Qin and Han Dynasties

As society developed, so did *wushu*. The Shang period between the 16th and 11th centuries B.C. saw the flourishing of the Bronze Age in China, giving rise to an array

the Monkey Dance, the Bear Dance, the Bird Dance, and so on. The *Book of History*, refers to them as "the dances of the hundred animals."

In addition, rudimentary sports appeared, such as Dance with Shield and Battle-Axe and Butting with Horns (Ill. 1), both military training exercises. The Dance with Shield and Axe, which was a martial dance depicting battle and training troops,

of bronze weapons, such as the wave-bladed spear, dagger-axe, halberd, axe, battle-axe, broad-sword and rapier. These weapons required a corresponding development in skill wielding them.

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period between 770 and 221 B.C., cavalry replaced chariot-based warfare. To suit combat on horseback, modifications on weapons were made such as the shape of the blade or the length of the handle. New weapons were also invented.

According to the *Book of Zhuang Zi*, unarmed combat was a highly developed skill by the end of this period, with many methods of attack, defence, counter-attack and feints.

Fencing was also fairly common at that time. It was discussed in another section of the *Book of Zhuang Zi*. According to *The Sayings of the Confucian Family*, "Zi Lu went to see Confucius in battle-dress and, wielding his sword, began to dance."

Fencing was especially popular among the people of the states of Wu, Yue and Zhao. Competitions were frequent, but because contestants wore inadequate protection, injuries were common during the bouts. In one fencing competition in the state of Zhao, more than sixty people were killed or wounded over a period of seven days. In the state of Wu, scars on the body or face were a common sight among the people. Nevertheless, the love of fencing went unabated among women as well as men. *The Spring and Autumn Chronicles of Wu and Yue* tells the story of Chu Nü, who was given the honorary title "Daughter of Yue" by Yue's King, Gou Jian, who lived around 465 B.C., for her outstanding skill in martial arts. The story is that King Gou Jian was

discussing plans to strengthen his country with his Prime Minister Fan Li, who advised him, "When leading the army into battle, victory or defeat is usually decided by the soldiers' skill in arms. I hear that in the Southern Forest lives a woman named Chu Nü, whose skill in martial arts far surpasses the ordinary. Might I suggest that Your Majesty summon her to instruct our troops." The King promptly agreed and sent a general to fetch her. When the general got to the Southern Forest, he found her picking leaves in a mulberry tree, seemingly unaware of his arrival. The general tried to test her ability by aiming a fierce blow at the branch on which she was standing. Before the blow had even struck, however, Chu Nü somersaulted off the tree and landed in front of his horse. She met the King, who was impressed not only by her thorough knowledge of fencing, but also her superb sword dance (Ill. 2).

By the Qin Dynasty (221-207 B.C.), competitions had developed stricter rules with referees, arenas and protective clothing. Among the articles unearthed in 1975 from a tomb of the Qin Dynasty in Jiangling County, Hubei Province, was a wooden comb (Ill. 3), on the back of which was painted in colour a scene depicting a wrestling competition. A streamer hangs from a stage where two men wrestle, their torsos bare, wearing breeches, belts around the waist, and shoes with up-turned toes. A third man acts as a referee.

During the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220) *wushu* was developed further, the element of sport and dance now becoming more apparent. Many martial dances appeared, such as the Rapier Dance, the Broad-Sword Dance, the Twin-Halberd Dance and the Battle-Axe Dance. While these dances contained elements of attack





III. 2. The Daughter of Yue Leaves the Southern Forest, a stone carving of the Han Dynasty showing a figure wielding a sword.



III. 3. A wooden comb unearthed from a Qin Dynasty tomb and decorated with a picture of wrestling.

and defence, other postures and techniques evolved which were designed clearly for calisthenic purposes. An historical record in 108 B.C. tells how people came from as far as 300 *li* (150 km.) around the capital to see a contest.

It was tradition that every feast should have a dance performance which, by the Han time, would often take the form of a sword dance. The most famous one was the sword dance performed at the feast at the Swan-Goose Gate. The feast took place after the collapse of the Qin Dynasty, during the struggle for supremacy between the forces of Chu, led by Xiang Yu (232-202 B.C.) and the forces of Han, led by Liu Bang (247-195 B.C.). The story says that Liu Bang was invited to a feast at the Swan-Goose Gate by Xiang Yu. Xiang Yu's supporter, Xiang Zhuang, performed a sword dance with the intent of accidentally killing Liu during his performance. But, a man named Fan Kuai joined the dance to protect Liu.

Unarmed combat contests were also popular during the Han Dynasty. The rapid developments in cavalry warfare of this period led to further improvements in skill using bladed weapons. *History of the Han Dynasty* records chapters on fencing, unarmed combat and archery. Unfortunately, however, these have all been lost.

### **III. The Sui-Tang Period and Afterwards**

Fencing Dance became increasingly popular during the Sui and Tang dynasties (518-907). Among the well-known masters were the Tang poet Li Bai, General Pei Min and two women, Gongsun and Li Shi'er.

During the Tang Dynasty (618-907) a system was

inaugurated for selecting military officers by examination. Those highly skilled in *wushu* were given honorary titles such as "Fierce and Eager Knight," and "Fleet-Footed Knight." This system for selecting martial talent stimulated the practice of *wushu* all through society. As a result, *wushu* routines developed rapidly. New forms of single and group dance exercises were designed, involving swords, spears, broad-swords, halberds, cudgels and staffs. Boxing also appeared.

During the Song Dynasty (960-1279) *wushu* associations were organized among the people. There are records of archery, cross-bow, staff and wrestling societies. In the cities, every street and alley became a practice ground, with performances of horn-butting, boxing, kicking, staff and cudgel play, dances with broad-swords, spears, and archery. Traditional tales such as *Outlaws of the Marsh*, about the rebellion of peasant heroes against the corrupt Song government officials give a vivid picture of *wushu* in that period.

By the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), *wushu* had gradually crystallized into many different schools. Theoretical works were written summarizing the development of the many styles; works such as *A New Work on the Effect of Martial Arts* (Ill. 4), *Martial Writings and Skills Additional to Tilling*. These works recorded the different schools of armed and unarmed combat, their development, technique, fighting methods, and the names of the movements. The author of *A New Work on the Effect of Martial Arts*, Qi Jiguang (1528-1587), was a renowned general under Emperor Jiajing (reigned 1522-1566) of the Ming Dynasty, and was highly skilled in nearly all kinds of weapons. He regarded unarmed combat as the most important aspect of *wushu*, as the foundation of all



III. 4. *A New Work on the Effect of Martial Arts*,  
written by Qi Jiguang, a renowned general  
of the sixteenth century.

fighting skills and the beginners' door to all other skills. Qi's soldiers became renowned throughout China for their bravery and skill in battle.

This period abounds in famous figures such as Ou Qianjin, famous for his outstanding fighting ability and *wushu* skill, and Zhang Songxi for his internal school of boxing. Zhang Songxi was still a formidable opponent and capable of breaking a stone slab with his bare hand at the age of seventy.

In the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), secret *wushu* societies were common. This period saw the rapid development of many styles of *wushu*, as well as the appearance of such styles as *Taiji Quan* (Great-Ultimate Boxing), *Bagua Quan* (Eight-Trigram Boxing), *Xingyi Quan* (Imitation Boxing), *Baji Quan* (Eight-Ultimate Boxing) and *Tongbi Quan* (Full-Arm Boxing).

After the Revolution of 1911 which overthrew the Qing Dynasty, Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866-1925), leader of the revolution, greatly encouraged the practice of *wushu* as a means to strengthen the body. *Wushu* was advocat-