

Essentials of Chinese Wushu



Chinese Wushu Series

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Chapter One

General Description

1. Concept

Wushu (also known as kung-fu or martial arts) is one of the typical demonstrations of traditional Chinese culture. It is a sport which utilizes both brawn and brain.

The theory of Wushu is based upon classical Chinese philosophy, while the skills of Wushu consist of various forms of fighting: fist fights, weapon fights, and other fighting routines (including such offence and defence acts as kicking, hitting, throwing, holding, chopping and thrusting) and unarmed combats (Figs. 1, 2 and 3).

Wushu is not only a sporting exercise but also an artistic form. It is used to cure illness as well as for self-defence and is a comprehensive form of culture of the human body.

Wushu enjoys a long history and great popularity in China. Thanks to its uniqueness and charisma originating from traditional oriental culture, Wushu is captivating the attention of more and more people in other nations.

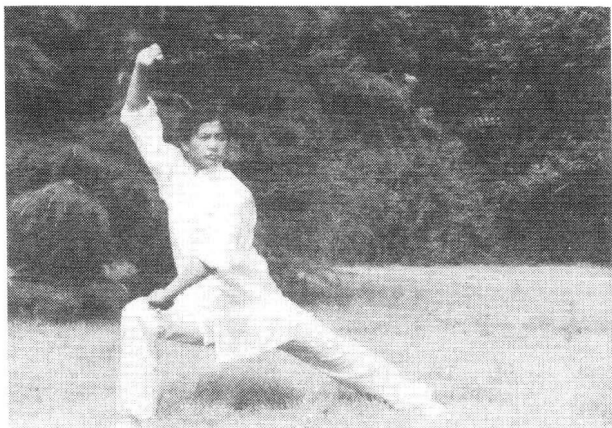


Fig. 1: Fist fights.

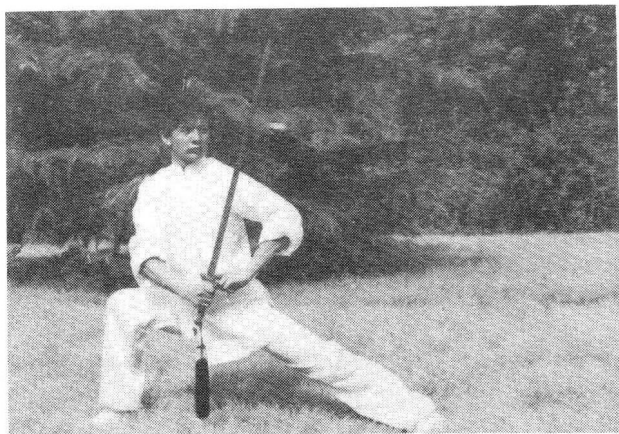


Fig. 2: The sword, a popular weapon in Wushu.

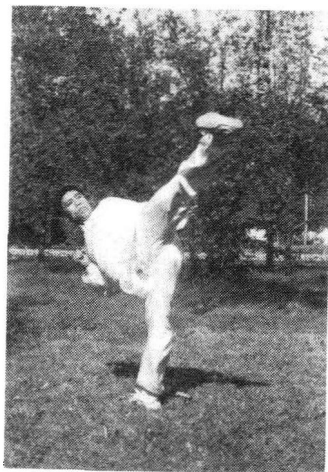


Fig. 3: Unarmed combat.

2. Characteristics

As one of the earliest and long-lasting sports, Wushu has developed its own characteristics over time. Major characteristics are listed below:

(1) Because of its long history incorporating differences in culture, ideology, region and usages, Wushu has developed into a great variety of schools and styles. While some schools emphasize the use of fists and hand technique, others emphasize leg technique and foot-work (Fig. 4). Some take interest in the variation of acts whereas others prefer simplicity. Some focus on keeping opponents at arm's and leg's length while others like to fight in close contact. The assortment of schools and styles displays the colorful features of Wushu and gratifies the various needs of people.

(2) Wushu includes the use of many weapons.

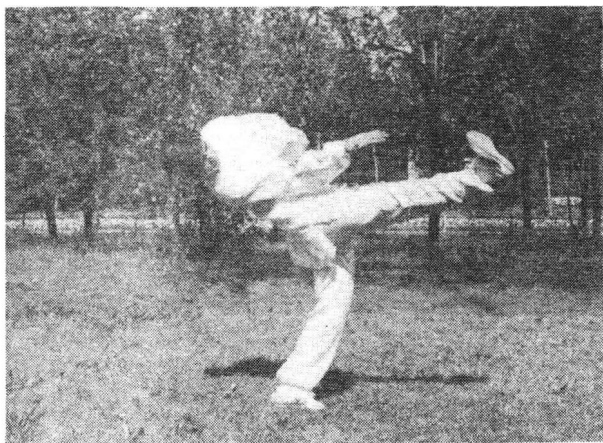


Fig. 4: A fight stressing the use of legs.

Chinese ancients named the Wushu arsenal the "Eighteen Arms," but there are many more in use. Almost all fights are accompanied by weapon usage of one kind or another. The combination of fist fights and weapon usage allows for a fuller and more efficient application of Wushu skills while sharpening the insight of combat and control and enriching the program of Wushu exercise.

(3) The combination of offence and defence is the essence of Wushu. Implications of offence and defence permeate the complete gamut of Wushu exercise. They are fully demonstrated in both practice and real combat. Even a solo practice implies the atmosphere of offence and defence against an imaginary opponent in time and space. Wushu masters have systematically summed up the contradictions of offence and defence and established a set of theories and techniques on combat.

(4) The movement of the human body is only the

external display of Wushu. Wushu is by no means limited to the external movement, but also emphasizes the full display of the internal temperament, mental attitude and potential of the human being. The practice of Wushu not only strengthens the bones and muscles but also the internal organs and intelligence. Coordination and cooperation are called for with each and every movement of the hand, eye, body, foot and form of movement. Wushu stresses that the mind directs the circulation of air flow within the body and that the inner circulation of air generates the external strength, so demonstrating the combination of external and internal forces. Cultivating air flows inside the body in order to improve the basic structures inside the body is an important purpose of Wushu exercises (Fig 5).

(5) Ingenious applications of substantial and insubstantial blows are incorporated in the movements and forces of Wushu. Motion and stillness alternate with

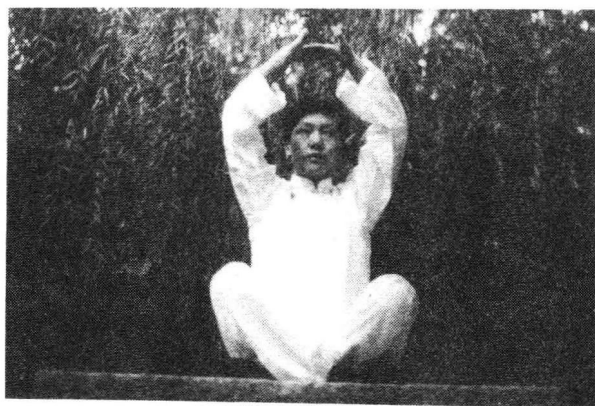


Fig. 5: An exercise of inner circulation of air flows.

each other, while hardness and softness supplement one another, greatly enhancing the artistic expression and the practicality of Wushu, and demonstrating its inclusive and equilibristic nature. Once in action, the movements can be as fast and forceful as a gust of wind, while being still, the body looks as steady as a mountain. Hard blows are like lightning and thunderclaps, whereas soft punches are like breezes delicately caressing willow twigs. Human feelings and abilities are clearly demonstrated through the rhythmic movements of opening and closing, and the emotions excited in doing exercises (Fig 6).

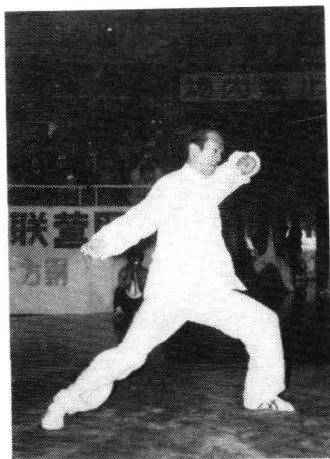


Fig. 6: A forceful exertion.

3. Functions

Wushu boasts versatile functions, of which the most outstanding are:

(1) Moral Cultivation

As a human practice which stresses cultivation of moral characters and demonstration of spirit and temperament, Wushu is conducive to developing good manners and conduct. It also helps adjust one's psychology. The moral characters and etiquette are held in esteem by all schools of Wushu masters.

(2) Offence and Defence

Wushu practitioners can master various offence and defence techniques of armed and unarmed combat for self defence through a great number of training exercises. Many of the Wushu techniques can also be utilized in military and police training programs.

(3) Curative Effect

Taiji Quan, one of the traditional schools of Chinese shadow boxing, and the various still standing exercises emphasize the adjustment of one's breathing, thinking and psychology. These exercises have been proven to have good curative and rehabilitative effects on sufferers of chronic diseases of many kinds. As these exercises help strengthen the coordination of the human body and its immunity, they are ideal for preventing and curing diseases.

(4) Health Improvement

The practice of the basic exercises and routines of

Wushu are effective methods for improving the pliability of the joints and the suppleness of the back and legs. The generation of energy, the jumping and leaping and the changes from one stance to another, all help enhance human strength and speed of movement. Wushu, therefore, can be taken as the basic exercise for other sporting activities.

(5) Artistic Effect

The graceful movement of the body, especially the typical oriental charm revealed during exercises and practice of Wushu, has an impressive artistic effect and provides visual delight. People can benefit mentally as well as physically from the display of the Wushu offence and defence skills and the exertion of forces through the display (Figs. 7 and 8).



Fig. 7: A graceful Wushu stance.



Fig. 8: A broadsword practising stance.

(6) Intelligence

While stressing the development of physical prowess, Wushu also emphasizes the exercise of thinking. By adjusting various human functions, Wushu also helps improve the nervous system and is therefore good for intellectual development.

4. A Brief Survey of Wushu Development

Wushu originated from the human activities of production and pursuit for survival, health and prosperity.

In primeval times, production tools were simple and crude while the level of productive forces was very low. Since wild animals presented a great menace to the human race, hunting in groups turned out to be a necessity for self-defence and food acquirement. The hunting activities not only helped sharpen human intelligence and physique, but also helped people develop some armed and unarmed grappling techniques, using simple weapons and devices such as hitting, dodging, jumping, chopping, axing, thrusting, stabbing and hurling. The most primitive and simplest weapon is the cudgel being the easiest to find, prepare and use. Along with improvements through actual usage and the advent of metallurgy, the materials for making weapons also changed from stone to metals. To the Wushu arsenal were added spears, swords and axes (Figs. 9 and 10).

Wushu, at its early stage of development was practised primarily for self-defence and for the acquirement of means of subsistence. At that stage, it was not an intentional, planned or organized sport. As human societies evolved and developed and as productive, cultur-

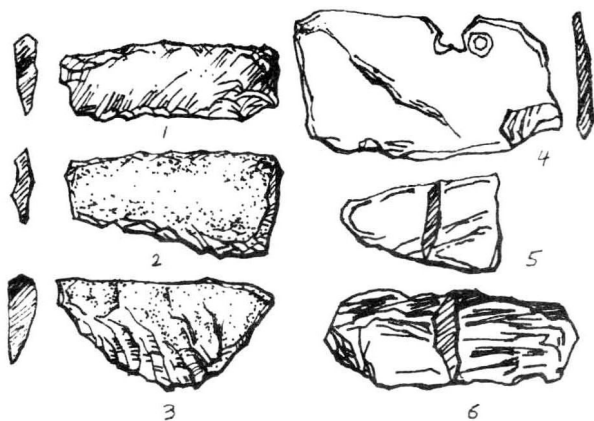


Fig. 9: Ancient stone weapons.

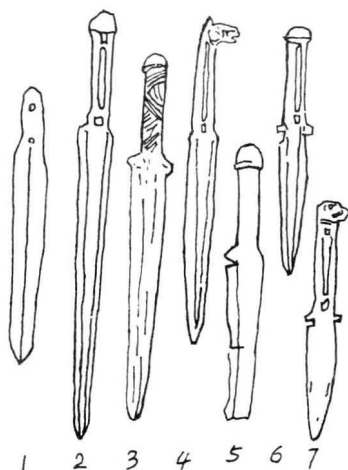


Fig. 10: Bronze swords of (11-17 B.C.)
Western Zhou Dynasty.

al and scientific activities became more and more prosperous, innumerable people tempered and processed Wushu routines in different ways. By the time of China's Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911), Wushu had formed its basic patterns (Figs. 11 and 12).



Fig. 11: Performing a sword-dance by a woman of Han Dynasty (206-220 B.C.)



Fig. 12: Practising Wushu in the third or fourth century.

(1) How Wars Promoted Wushu and Reinforced Its Applicability

State and regime appeared as the slave society replaced the primitive society. Consequently, armies also were formed. Intense military conflicts served as catalysts providing conditions for developing Wushu. During China's Xia, Shang and Zhou periods (21st century to 771 B.C.), Wushu, used for military purpose, matured and formed complete systems for offence and defence, with the emergence of various bronze weapons in quantity. During the period of the Warring States (B.C. 770 to B.C. 221), conflicts and disputes were aggravated and the dukes and marquises of different states advocated Wushu in their armies, and even the emperors and ministers kept Wushu masters for their own purposes.

Military Wushu developed more systematically during the Tang and Song dynasties (618-1279) and exhibitions of Wushu arts were held in the armies as morale boosters and military exercises. The Tai Zong Emperor of the Song Dynasty selected several hundreds of warriors for training in the display and use of swordmanship. Also at this time, some military generals introduced Wushu into military exercises and training in order to build a practical basis for military usage of Wushu. For example, Song Dynasty general Yue Fei taught his soldiers to use Wushu weapons so as to increase their combat effectiveness. His army was known at the time as the "Brave and Formidable Army of the Yue Family" (Fig. 13). In the Ming and Qing dynasties, the general development of Wushu was at its height. Military Wushu became more practical and meticulous and was systematically classified and summarized. General Qi Jiguang of the Ming Dynasty delved into Wushu study

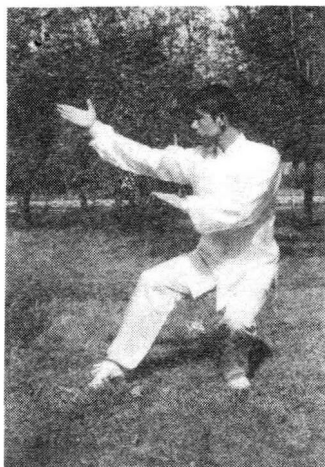


Fig. 14: An illustration from *A New Essay on Wushu Arts*.

Fig. 13: A stance of the Wushu style which is said to be created by General Yue Fei (1103-1142) of the Song Dynasty.

and wrote *A New Essay on Wushu Arts*. This essay collated many fist and weapon fighting skills (Fig. 14) and elaborated on each style and so became an important book in China's military literature.

The military demand for Wushu increased its applicability and caused the whole society to attach greater importance to it. As a result, Wushu obtained its legal position in the society and an official military examination on Wushu arts emerged.

(2) How Civil Wushu Developed Rapidly into a Multi-functional System as the Mainstay of Chinese Wushu

Because of its strict selectiveness, military Wushu did not develop into colorful schools or styles. By com-