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The Old and the New: Chinese Boxing and the Integration of Traditional and Modern Chinese Identities.

Abstract:

Studies of Chinese modernisation have tended to make use of binary oppositions such as traditional versus modern. Although this paper recognises the relevance of such models, it seeks to take a more nuanced approach. This approach examines notions of identity, within the context of Imperialism and modernisation, which take into account the convergence and integration of traditional and modern Chinese identities during the period 1900 to 1935. Specifically, the paper demonstrates how the revival of traditional Chinese boxing at this time involved the construction and maintenance of both modern and traditional identities that utilised aspects of a traditional China from the past as well as elements derived from new cultural movements influenced by foreign imperialism. Rather than being in binary opposition these emerging identities represented hybrids of both old and new, traditional and modern, foreign and indigenous in an attempt to resist and negotiate with foreign imperial pressures at the time.

Conference presentation:

The 2006, Ronny Yu film *Huo Yuanjia*, English title *Fearless*, contains a number of scenes which depict the film's hero, the Chinese martial arts master, Huo Yuanjia, played by Jet Li, participating in various single combats with fighters representing foreign Imperial powers in China during the early part of the 20th century.

Huo Yuanjia is portrayed as defeating an American wrestler and a British bare-knuckle boxer in unarmed combat. Armed with a distinctly Chinese spear he outclasses what appears to be a Prussian military pikeman. In the following scene, he very skilfully disarms what I assume is an English opponent in a sword duel. There are also scenes in which he fights his Japanese protagonist unarmed, and armed with Chinese three sectioned staff against Japanese katana.

In each of these scenes a benevolent and small statured Huo Yuanjia defeats his angry well-muscled European opponents as well as the Japanese champion. He is able to achieve this through the use of his superior Chinese martial skills rather than brute force. Throughout these fights Huo Yuanjia and the Chinese martial arts represent a triumphant traditional Chinese masculine identity when this was under certain pressures from foreign imperialism and the stigma of the label 'sick man of Asia'.

Of course, these scenes are from a movie, which although it proclaims to be based on a true story is very loosely grounded in historical research and is based more on the myths that have been perpetuated around the legend of Huo Yuanjia rather than actual reality. As such, the scenes from the movie may be more useful in discussions of modern Chinese identities and perceptions of the past as remnants of imperialism than the focus of this paper, which is Chinese identities during the period 1900 – 1940. What the film, *Fearless* does highlight, although this may be depicted in a less than subtle or realistic way, is the relevance of martial arts in the formation of Chinese identity and as a symbol of resistance to foreign imperialism. This paper seeks to continue with this theme but to examine the question of Chinese identity and imperialism within the context of martial arts more broadly than the myths and historical record of a single man. This approach will focus mainly on accounts given in the English language press within China during this time.

Studies that have taken a broad approach in the examination of emerging Chinese identities and physical culture including sport and Chinese martial arts during China's modernisation include Fan Hong and Tan Hua's article, *Sport in China: Conflict between Tradition and Modernity, 1840s to 1930s*;¹ Tony Hwang and Grant Jarvie's, *Sport, Nationalism and the Early Chinese Republic 1912 - 1927*;² Lu Zhouxiang and Fan Hong's, *From Celestial Empire to Nation State: Sport and the Origins of Chinese Nationalism (1840 – 1927)*;³ Lu Zhouxiang's, *Sport, Nationalism and the Building of the Modern Chinese Nation State (1912-49)*⁴ and Andrew Morris' seminal work on the history of sport in China, *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China*.⁵ These studies have demonstrated the significant role sport and Chinese martial arts played in the modernisation of China and Chinese national identity as a reaction to Japanese and Western imperialism. They have tended though to focus on the debates between traditional or indigenous sport versus Western sport which has resulted in highlighting these two forms of sport as being in binary opposition. In a study of the modernisation which occurred within Shanghai during the 1930s, Lee has argued against such approaches and successfully demonstrates through a discussion of modern and traditional elements within calendars produced during the period that an approach which recognises "tradition within modernity" is much more useful.⁶

Although the debates concerning traditional and modern sport within China did take place and I recognise the usefulness of models which seek to divide concepts into opposing themes, what I discovered within the particular historical record under examination was that the actual realities of Chinese modernisation involved a much more complex and

¹ Fan Hong and Tan Hua, "Sport in China: Conflict between tradition and modernity, 1840s to 1930s," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 19, no. 2-3 (2002).

² Tony Hwang and Grant Jarvie, "Sport, nationalism and the early Chinese republic 1912–1927," *Sports Historian* 21, no. 2 (2001).

³ Lu Zhouxiang and Fan Hong, "From Celestial Empire to Nation State: Sport and the Origins of Chinese Nationalism (1840–1927)," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 27, no. 3 (2010).

⁴ Lu Zhouxiang, "Sport, nationalism and the building of the modern Chinese nation state (1912–49)," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 28, no. 7 (2011).

⁵ Andrew D Morris, *Marrow of the nation: A history of sport and physical culture in Republican China*, vol. 10 (Univ of California Press, 2004).

⁶ Wenhsin Yeh, "Introduction: Interpreting Chinese Modernity, 1900–1950," in *Becoming Chinese: Passages to modernity and beyond*, ed. Wenhsin Yeh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 6.

integrated set of circumstances. In covering the debate some of the authors already mentioned, most notably Hong and Hua, Andrew Morris and Hwang and Jarvie did recognise instances when there was convergence especially within the Chinese martial arts themselves. For example Hong and Hua discuss the views of Bi Bo, an educationist, who “argued that attitudes towards martial arts on both sides were wrong. Martial arts as a great cultural tradition of China should be inherited by the young generation. They could play an important role in modern times. However, martial arts should be reformed with modern sciences. Their contents and teaching methods should be changed”.⁷

This paper seeks to add to this body of knowledge by more fully investigating this convergence both within Chinese martial arts and also between Chinese martial arts and other forms of physical activity. It seeks to do this in the spirit of Lee by recognising that the traditional usually exists within the modern and that the modern can also exist within the traditional. In order to achieve this, an examination of notions of identity, which took into account the convergence and integration of traditional and modern during the period 1900 to 1940 is undertaken within the context of physical culture, modernisation, and Imperialism. Specifically the paper demonstrates how the revival of traditional Chinese boxing at this time involved the construction and maintenance of both modern and traditional identities that utilised aspects of a traditional China from the past as well as elements derived from new cultural movements influenced by foreign imperialism. Rather than being in binary opposition these emerging identities represented hybrids of both old and new, traditional and modern, foreign and indigenous in an attempt to resist and negotiate with the pressures created by foreign imperialism at the time.

The hybrid nature of the representations of Chinese identity within physical culture are evident in activities and events which involve both Western influenced activities as well as traditional Chinese martial arts. These western activities include sports and also scouting. Intersections of modern and traditional can also be found within the martial arts themselves where traditional martial arts were transformed and modernised through the application of western sports science. The final area in which Chinese identity can be seen to take on both modern and traditional aspects is the military – here there is evidence to suggest that both western methods as well as traditional Chinese martial arts were used in order to build a modern foreign influenced Chinese identity that still retained a Chinese flavour and tradition through the inclusion of Chinese traditional martial arts.

As part of China’s attempts to modernise during the period many events involving Western activities were held. What is interesting to note is that at many of these events demonstrations of Chinese martial arts were often also included. The North-China Herald and Supreme Court and Consular Gazette reported on 27 April, 1918 that the girls of the Normal School of Physical Education of the Chinese Young Women’s Christian Association in Shanghai gave a demonstration of gymnastics as well as Chinese boxing. On 7 June, 1928 the China Press announced that the First Soochow University Athletic Carnival to be held on 9 June would include gymnastics and Chinese boxing demonstrations. The same paper also reported in December 1932 on the inclusion of swimming and Chinese boxing into the 17th

⁷ Hong and Hua, "Sport in China: Conflict between tradition and modernity, 1840s to 1930s," 205.

annual North China Championships by the executive committee of the North China Athletic Federation. In 1933 there were also reports of an All Shanghai Labour track and field meet to include track, field, all games and Chinese boxing and in 1936 a large athletics meet was held which included track and field, tennis and volleyball and an opening ceremony demonstration by 3000 proponents of Chinese boxing. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the integrated nature of Chinese identity represented within physical culture was the inclusion of athletes to demonstrate Chinese boxing as part of the Chinese delegation sent to compete at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. A special ceremony was held to honour the athletes chosen to compete at the Olympics in boxing and weight lifting. At this ceremony four speeches were given. The Mayor of Greater Shanghai, General Wu te Chen and Mr H.V. Bernard, as representative of the foreign athletics community spoke about the ideals of western sportsmanship. The local German consul-general welcomed the Chinese athletes as well as bidding them farewell from Shanghai. The fourth speaker was Dr Chu Minyi who spoke on Chinese traditional boxing. Following this an extensive demonstration was given of Chinese boxing which was highly regarded given the loud applause received from the crowd. That both modern Olympic sports and traditional Chinese boxing were recognised in the delegation to be sent to the Berlin Olympics and the speeches given demonstrates the desire for the integration of both a modern Chinese identity able to compete on the world stage as well as a more traditional Chinese identity in the form of Chinese boxing.

A similar situation combining both modern with traditional identity was evident in the Chinese scouting movement. At an athletics event in 1915 which included the 100 metres and the 22 yard dash – Chinese scouts were recorded as participating in the usual scouting activities of fire making, tent building, first aid drills and flag signalling added to this though was Chinese boxing. The paper commented that the scouts' leader, "a Chinese is to be commended for his part in turning out a class of future men, who may later be well prepared to help make their country self-reliant and strong. This is giving an indication of the great possibilities resting on the shoulders of China's young men." On 4 May 1918, The North-China Herald and Supreme Court and Consular Gazette reported on an event at Tsinghua college which included Exhibits to be contributed by the departments of fine arts, manual arts, Chinese, English, geography, history, mathematics, and nature study. It also mentioned demonstrations of Chinese boxing to be given by the boy scouts. The article makes specific mention of the event as a demonstration of the striking contrasts between ancient and modern and the state of transition China was in at the time. There are similar examples of Chinese boxing occurring alongside scout manoeuvres and athletic meets in 1919, 1922 and 1924.

Within the martial arts there is evidence to support the integration of modern and traditional Chinese identities. One of the best examples of this is the Jingwu athletic association and this is where the story returns to the martial arts hero I mentioned at the beginning of my presentation - Huo yuanjia. The Jingwu athletic association was established in 1910 by a committee of members that included Huo. According to H.T. Wong in a contemporary newspaper article discussing the 10th anniversary of the association the aims of the Jingwu were "to make strong and healthy citizens of our youths and to keep them

from acquiring the bad habits of society by rousing their interest in athletics and training them to respect themselves.” It sought to do this by providing a modernised “scientific” Chinese martial arts and by including western activities and military drills into its offerings. The curriculum of the association included and I quote Wong again “Chinese boxing and fencing, which is regularly taught everyday to the members in the morning before they go to office and in the evening when they have leisure; military drill---Chinese and foreign-; Chinese and foreign music; drawing and painting; Photography, in which one of its members has made an invention and secured its patent in the United States; public speaking in mandarin; an evening school for the teaching of English and Chinese; and modern gymnastics and recreation. The daily practice of boxing has proved beyond the slightest doubt to be most beneficial to health.” In this way Jingwu sought the best of both worlds and represented a modern China whilst still portraying a traditional Chinese identity through the use of traditional Chinese pursuits including martial arts.

It is important to note that the most significant value of the Chinese martial arts was as a cultural symbol and not its practical application or use. All national martial arts can be useful on a practical level depending on the situation and variables involved and who is telling the story. This is very strongly reflected in the sources discussing the practical value of Chinese martial arts at this time. There are both negative and positive accounts of the arts displayed. For the most part both Chinese and foreign audiences’ reaction to displays of Chinese boxing were very positive and recognised the skill and athleticism of these performances.

For example, in the January 10, 1920 edition of the North-China Herald it was reported “that the athletic spirit of China being revived throughout China at the present *time* was never more fittingly demonstrated than at the meeting of the Shanghai Chinese Athletic Association at the West Gate recreation grounds. The events of which there were 14 on the programme ranged all the way from Chinese boxing to combats with sword, pike, lance and battle axes between pairs of Chinese, who were without armour or protection of any kind. They relied chiefly on their great skill and activity to preserve them from dangerous injuries. This style of play indulged in by Chinese athletes is truly a game for men. It is only by agility and quickness that you prevent losing a foot or a head. The boxing, side stepping, dodging and the use of the hands in blocking blows was nothing short of marvellous. It is safe to say that were these same men schooled in boxing as we know it, they would be a fair match for any foreign expert.”

At the same time though there are accounts of actual mixed martial art combats between proponents of boxing, judo and Chinese wrestling. In one particular account the author is impressed by all of the competitors except those demonstrating Chinese wrestling which when facing a Japanese proponent of jujutsu he describes as follows: “Japan showed just what she could do to China, and did it. The judo man, as was indeed a forgone conclusion, simply handled the Chinese wrestler almost as he pleased, and it was a relief when the three rounds came to an end”.

Alternatively, General Chang Tze-kiang while giving a speech in 1920 to encourage support for the building of a National Athletic College to restore Chinese boxing for the development of Chinese youth was reported as recounting a story of the effectiveness of Chinese martial

arts for self-defence. He told how 20 years ago in Mukden a Chinese soldier had used Chinese boxing to defeat several Japanese soldiers who because of a misunderstanding had attacked him with knives. In a similar fashion the National Gymnastic Institute issued a manifesto in 1933 urging that "a solid foundation for the nation be laid by the popular development of native boxing so that all may learn this method of self defence." And cited examples of the effective use of Chinese martial arts by Chinese troops wielding the Chinese dadao – or large sabre in confrontations with the Japanese during the Shanghai incident of 1932 (January 28 incident (1932)) and fighting at Hsifengkow in 1933. There was also the case of W.E. Fairbairn an accomplished martial artist and the superintendent of the Shanghai Municipal Police whose credentials in articles discussing his book *Scientific Self-defence* in 1932 include a second degree black-belt in jui-jitsu and training in Chinese boxing with the famed Tsai Ching Tung. Fairbairn's reputation as an experienced policeman and self-defence expert would seem to add credence to the credentials of Chinese boxing as a practical art. So it would seem that there is evidence for and against the practical effectiveness of Chinese martial arts.

The point though is that the real significance of Chinese martial arts was not their practical effectiveness but their ability to act as cultural signifiers of Chinese identity and strength. They enabled some sense of a traditional identity to still be retained and integrated with a modern Chinese identity that sought to incorporate the ideas and physical culture of the foreign Imperial powers which were exerting pressure on China at this time. The interaction of these two identities formed a hybrid identity during these times of change. It was an identity that offered the best of both worlds. The old and the new.

Conclusion

References

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