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Article

2019

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How to cite

PORCHET, Pierrick. Process of Institutionalization in Chinese Martial Arts: The case of its ranking system. In: Religijski-filozofski raksti, 2019, vol. 2, p. 82–92.

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Religious–Philosophical Articles

Location: Latvia

Author(s): Pierrick Porchet

Title: PROCESS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS: THE CASE OF ITS RANKING SYSTEM
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Issue: 2/2019

Citation style: Pierrick Porchet. "PROCESS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS: THE CASE OF ITS RANKING SYSTEM". Religiski-filozofiski raksti 2:82-92.

<https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=804492>

PROCESS OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION IN CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS: THE CASE OF ITS RANKING SYSTEM

Introduction

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), authorities within their political project have elaborated a discourse on “popular culture” (民间风俗 *minjian fengsu*) that has led to their standardization into nationally shared and politically acceptable forms.¹ Elements labeled as ‘feudal’ (封建 *fengjian*) or ‘sectarian’ (宗派 *zongpai*) have been proscribed by state institutions, such as national sports associations.² These institutions are thus shaping the frame of an ‘orthodox’ practice showing “their will to keep control over the meaning” of these practices.³

¹ On this issue, see Bugnon, P. L'art d'accomoder les ancêtres de la nation: Analyse du patrimoine culturel musulman en Chine. *Tsantsa*, No. 23, 2018, pp. 99–10; Durand-Dastes, V. La Grande muraille des contes. *Carreau de la BULAC*, 2014, pp. 1–57; Graezer, F. Le Festival de Miaofeng shan: culture populaire et politique culturelle. *Etudes chinoises*, No. 22, 2003, pp. 283–95; Graezer Bideau, F. L'instrumentalisation de la culture populaire. Le cas de la danse du yangge en Chine. *Tsantsa*, No. 13, 2008, pp. 52–60; Micollier E. Qigong et ‘nouvelles religions’ en Chine et à Taiwan: instrumentalisation politique et processus de légitimation des pratiques. *Autrepart*. 2(42), 2007, pp. 129–146.

² Chinese Wushu Association. *The rules of martial ethics*. Available at http://zgwx.wushu.com.cn/w_wdsz.asp (retrieved 20.11.2017).

³ Graezer, F. Le Festival de Miaofeng shan, p. 291.

Since the foundation of the PRC in 1949, Chinese authorities have elaborated a discourse on Chinese Martial Arts in their cultural policy, in which appears the construction of a “patriotic body”⁴ embodying the nation. In 1958, the Chinese Wushu Association (CWA) was created under the supervision of the National Sport Bureau. Its mission is to “federate all the professionals and amateurs of the country” and “put in order” (整理 *zhengli*)⁵ the numerous systems of techniques that are then sorted together under the generic term of *wushu* (武术). The CWA starts to commission masters with the task of synthesizing the variations within a particular ‘style’⁶ (门派 *menpai*) of *wushu* into ‘simplified’ (简化 *jianhua*) sets of techniques ‘standardized’ (标准 *biaozhun*) on a national level.⁷ Authorities are thus reshaping *wushu* through a ‘modern’ perspective, formalizing the basis of a ‘physical education’⁸ by setting competition regulations and physical preparation (warm-up, gymnastic conception of movements, rationalized teaching method/pedagogy, etc) encouraging the youth to develop “a healthy spirit in a healthy body.”⁹ This political leadership over martial arts has led to the creation of a ‘*wushu* sport’ (武术运动 *wushu yundong*) – interspersed with the Olympic ideology – which has been the main discipline supported and promoted by state institutions until today.¹⁰

⁴ Thiesse, A. *La création des identités nationales: Europe XVIIIe-XXe siècle*. Paris: Seuil, 1999.

⁵ Chinese Wushu Association. *Constitution*. Available at <http://zgwx.wushu.com.cn/xhzc.asp> (retrieved 20.11.2017).

⁶ The concept of ‘style’ refers today to a “system of fighting technique [...] – bare hands or with weapons – [...] with its own theory of combat and its own personality” (王广西, *中国功夫*, 深圳: 海天出版社, 2006, pp. 205). Most often, styles are associated with a genealogy of masters from the founder to the present masters. For the socio-historic construction of *wushu* styles, see Judkins et al., 2015.

⁷ Lorge, P. *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 234–235.

⁸ 江百龙, *武术理论基础*, 北京: 人民体育出版社, 1995

⁹ Liu, B., Jiang, G. 2000. Le wushu, une fine fleur de la culture chinoise. *La Chine au présent*, No. 8, 2000, pp. 27–30.

¹⁰ Song, J., Yue, H. Considerations on Wushu’s National Culture Characteristics. *Asia Pacific Journal of Sport and Social Sciences*. No. 5, 2016, pp. 28–34.

These new representations of martial techniques – in which knowledge is legitimized by national standards and regulations – introduce a paradigm shift in regard to the “traditional transmission framework.”¹¹ *Wushu* is practiced within the population through local networks, consecrating “the elderly/cadet relationship especially the parent/child relationship, which express the relationship built between the master and his/her disciples.”¹² In this framework, the ‘master’ persona – and his belonging to the genealogy traced back to the founder of the style – legitimizes the knowledge that is transmitted. During the first two decades of the PRC, Chinese authorities strongly repressed this transmission framework labeled as “feudal”, in which some groups could effectively “resist the government at the local level.”¹³ However, in the past years, this traditional framework has recovered a new symbolic meaning in the shaping of Chinese identity, as it became a part of its National Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Thus, martial arts techniques – within traditional lineages registered as ICH on national lists – become cultural goods “reflecting the values and spirit of the Chinese nation.”¹⁴

The two frameworks – institutional and traditional – are intertwined. As a result, all the masters I could observe are all more or less engaged in institutional activities. Practitioners can assume different roles depending on the social context they operate in: within the local community, an individual assumes the role of master or disciple and becomes an athlete or a coach, when he participates in competitions. This development raises the question of the impact on practitioners’ habits and the way they articulate these new representations. How do they articulate the two frameworks

¹¹ De Grave, J-M. L’initiation rituelle javanaise et ses modes de transmission : Opposition entre javanisme et islam. *Techniques & Culture* [online], 2007, pp. 48–49. Available at <http://tc.revues.org/3032> (retrieved at 12.12.2017).

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹³ Lorge, P. *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 226.

¹⁴ Bodelec, C. Être une grande nation culturelle. Les enjeux du patrimoine culturel immatériel pour la Chine. *Tsantsa*, No. 19, 2014, pp. 19–30.

in their everyday practice? How do these frameworks influence the body techniques and their representations?

This paper will discuss the institutionalization process in Chinese Martial Arts by focusing on some aspects of its ‘ranking system’ (段位制 *duanwei zhi*). This program – launched in 1997 by the National Sport Committee – aims to “establish a normative training system as well as evaluation standards for technical level.”¹⁵ It introduces to the traditional framework new criteria of expertise under the supervision of state institutions. Practitioners – within the traditional framework – are thus no longer evaluated by their peers within the lineage but instead by outside experts. The system has become a well-established one – in the PRC and abroad – and all the masters I could meet within traditional lineages held a rank. However, oppositional views appear in masters’ discourses in regard to body techniques and their associated meanings. To illustrate the way state institutions are reclaiming meaning over the traditional framework, I will rely on institutional publications and especially the Textbook series of Chinese Wushu Duanwei system.¹⁶ These textbooks constitute the ‘examination criteria’ of the ranking system. They can also “be used as teaching material for *wushu* major in the higher education, for the training of *wushu* teacher in universities, middle and primary schools as well as *wushu* schools at all levels.” For this contribution, I will use the *bajiquan* textbook¹⁷ as the main example for my argument. I will focus the analysis on the description – in the textbook – of a specific technique of this style: the elbow strike. Through this example, I will highlight discursive and kinesic discontinuities between representations of movements in the textbook and in the traditional framework.

In order to understand how practitioners articulate the new representations of martial arts techniques embedded in this ranking system, I will rely on fieldwork observations gathered in two specific

¹⁵ Chinese Wushu Association. *Wushu Duanwei System*. Available at http://www.wushu.com.cn/wsdw_dwzxx_xq.asp?id=50 (retrieved 17.01.2011).

¹⁶ 国家体育总局武术研究院 (组编), 中国武术段位制系列教程.

¹⁷ 国家体育总局武术研究院 (组编), 中国武术段位制系列教程: 八极拳, 北京: 高等教育出版社, 2011.

sites between 2017 and 2018. During the summers of 2017 and 2018, I conducted ethnographical surveys in Cangzhou City and Yongnian district both located in Hebei province. In Cangzhou City, I followed practitioners affiliated with the Wu family *bajiquan* (八极拳) lineage. In Yongnian district, I observed both Yang and Wu families' *taijiquan* (太极拳). During the ethnography, I combine participant and outside observations. I also conducted formal and informal interviews. I concentrated the observations upon the interactions between individuals – especially those that involve body gestures – in order to describe ‘group life’ dynamics.¹⁸ Due to the controversial nature of the analysis, the informants cited in this paper remain anonymous.

By combining the analysis of institutional publications with on-site observation, this paper will highlight some of the ideological issues raised by the juxtaposition of the institutional ranking system with the traditional framework. I will show how different social actors compete over the meaning and values associated with Chinese Martial Arts and how this process is taking place in the materiality of body gestures performed in these arts.

This paper is a part of my doctoral research which focusses on the ‘circulation’¹⁹ of martial arts body gestures through traditional and institutional practices, as well as a collective imagery mobilized through visual arts. These body movements – when acting as interactions between individuals – are mobilizing a specific “kinesic intelligence [which is] our human capacity to discern and interpret body movements, body postures, gestures, and facial expressions.”²⁰ As we will see in the example of the ranking system, the values and meanings associated with martial arts movements are not fixed and can vary dramatically depending on the context. They are the result of an ongoing negotiation between

¹⁸ Fine, G. A. Towards a Peopled Ethnography: Developing Theory from Group Life. *Ethnography*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2003, pp. 41–60.

¹⁹ Zimmermann, B. *Waves and Forms: Electronic Music Devices and Computer Encodings in China*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015.

²⁰ Bolens, G. *The style of gestures: Embodiment and Cognition in Literary Narrative*. Lausanne: Editions BHMS, 2012, p. 1.

various actors. Therefore, this paper considers body movement in their “performative and generative dimension: they are themselves a means to generate, *construct something*.”²¹ Body movements are not only a way to express pre-fixed meanings, however, while being performed, they are rather actively producing new meanings and values. Considering the political development of institutionalized martial arts and its impact on individual practitioners, martial arts gestures act as an arena of political and ideological constructions that are continually under negotiation.

1. Textbook series of Chinese Wushu Duanwei system: bajiquan

The *wushu* ranking system is organized in 9 grades: 1–3 for regular practitioners, 4–6 for advanced ones, 6–9 for experts. Each grade is associated with a specific list of techniques and theoretical knowledge that the practitioners must grasp in order to take the examination and be granted the grade. The examination is held by the CWA with experts designated by them. To support this examination system, the CWA published the textbook series containing teaching material up to the 6th grade (grades 7 to 9 are no longer based on a technical examination but rather on the scope of the practitioner’s transmission). Up to today, two dozens of textbooks have been published covering a large range of *wushu* styles (*taijiquan*, *shaolinquan*, *changquan*, etc). Some instalments exclusively address the theoretical aspects, such as History or Ethics.

The textbooks are compiled by the Wushu Research Institute of the General Administration of Sport and approved by the CWA. The editing commission is supervised by high-ranking individuals within the Sport administration. Wu Bin or Xi Yuntai – both members of the approval commission – held top positions in the CWA. Yu Zaiqing – honorary head of the editing commission – is a former Vice-Minister in charge of the General Administration of Sport (1999–2011) and is currently acting as the Vice-President of the International Olympic Committee. Finally, Wu

²¹ Gibert, M-P. Façonner le corps, régénérer l’individu et danser la nation. *Parcours anthropologique*, No. 9, 2014, pp. 189–219, 211.

Lianzhi – who is both a well-respected master in the traditional framework and the national ICH transmitter for *bajiquan* – is the executive head of editing. Institutions rely on well-established Sport officials to supervise the process of textbook editing, hence keeping a close control on the content of these materials.

However, masters from traditional lineages also compose commissions. In the case of *bajiquan*, 34 individuals are listed in the editing commission. During an informal interview, a master shared his experience of the creation of the textbooks:

Representatives of all styles were gathered in a big hotel. There were hundreds of persons. I was with two other masters. From the morning to the evening, we were editing – movements by movements – the content for the first 6 grades. We were comparing our own way to perform each movement and decided together the text describing the movement. For each movement, they took pictures of us. We only had 10 days. It was very short! Afterward, they hired university students to take good looking pictures.

This testimony highlights the fragile balance of inclusivity in the institutional project. On the one hand, authorities rely on an expert from traditional lineages to create the materials – articulating continuity to the traditional framework by “referring to an authentic repertoire.”²² On the other hand, the process seems rushed as all the books were compiled at one time and with an insufficient amount of time. By comparison, I have observed several masters who have created their own system of techniques, which is transmitted through the initiation. In these cases, the creation process often lasts more than one decade and sometimes required long-lasting exchanges with other masters. In addition, the process can also lack in transparency: another master told me that he was not involved in the editing process but was asked to put his name as an editor nevertheless. Finally, the re-shooting of pictures with university students, which adds

²² Adell, N. Pourcher, Y. De quoi le patrimoine est-il le nom? *Transmettre, quel(s) patrimoine(s)? Autour du Patrimoine Culturel Immatériel*. Paris: Michel Houdiard Éditeur, 2011, p. 15.

aesthetical criteria over the technical requirement, will be problematic, as shown below.

2. Elbow strike and its kinesic principle

The technique called ‘pointing with the elbow in the horse stance’ (马步顶肘 *mabu dingzhou*) is one of the most representative technique of *bajiquan*. It consists of an elbow strike while standing with legs in the position called ‘horse stance’. This technique occurs regularly in all the basic and advanced routines. It is a central technique in this style. The textbook uses it as an example for principles in several parts, starting already in the second section: The basic techniques of *bajiquan*.²³ The picture illustrates the principle called: ‘shrink the ribcage and straighten the back’ (含胸拔背 *hanxiang babei*). This expression describes, on the one hand, the upper body structure where the ribcage is folded toward the inside making the shoulders naturally ‘sink’ (沉肩 *chenjian*) forward (*hanxiang*). Meanwhile, the lower back is straightened by stretching the upper abdomen backward and the lower abdomen forward, thus also pushing the pelvis forward (*babei*). This principle and the description above are shared by the traditional lineage and the textbook. However, the picture that illustrates this principle is problematic. When shown to *bajiquan* practitioners within traditional lineages, the upper body structure displayed by the young model is interpreted as wrongly performed – in regard to the *hanxiang babei* principle. Another picture shot in profile particularly reveals that the pelvis’ position is not entirely pushed forward. In this example, the text describing the technique is respectful of masters’ discourses, however, the body position featured in the picture is not. The question is why does this kinesic shift occur?

There are two features of the model body posture that are identified by *bajiquan* practitioner as wrong in regard to the principle. Firstly, the ribcage is more opened and stretched forward, making the shoulders pulled backward. According to practitioners, the model’s elbow and shoulders

²³ 国家体育总局武术研究院 (组编), 中国武术段位制系列教程 : 八极拳. p. 3.

are both lined up with the direction of the attack. If performed this way, the model's shoulders could suffer injuries when hitting the opponent. Secondly, the model's pelvis is slightly stretched backward, which curves forward his lower back. According to practitioners, straightening the lower back serves two purposes: 1. It creates a straight axis, around which limbs rotate to attack and defend. This straight axis improves mechanically the efficiency of the techniques. 2. It improves the *qi*'s circulation, which is central for the 'internal aspect' (内在 *neizai*) of the techniques. The two features displayed in the model's body structure are similar to those of gymnastics where movements are wide and the body structure opened – making movements more visible and thus more enjoyable for an audience. These features have been the esthetical standards – dominating the sport scene for decades – for the definition of what is a beautiful and thus correct movement. The young model – who is most certainly used to the *wushu* competition – performs the movement in a way that pleases his usual audience, that is, the judges. The latter have incorporated these esthetical standards.²⁴ As one master has told me: “judges mostly use aesthetical criteria and concentrate on the external appearance of the movement. We concentrate on the internal aspects of the techniques, the striking force.”

Conclusion

The example of the ranking system highlights how state institutions are framing martial arts through a new normative perspective. Evaluation of the practitioner – and the expertise required to evaluate – is not only related to the elderly within one's lineage, but also to institutional experts and national standards. Institutions rely on traditional masters' expertise to produce these new materials. According to my observations, masters also easily navigate within this system as they often hold an expert rank (7–9 rank).

²⁴ For a more detailed description of criteria used by judges during competition, see Porchet, P. *Processus d'adaptation des pratiques martiales chinoises au sport de compétition. L'exemple du style baji. Tsantsa*, No. 23, 2018.

However, masters are not actively engaged in the system. They rarely mention it and do not use the textbook materials in their regular practice. As a master states:

The popular custom doesn't need a ranking system, it needs to transmit traditional things. The ranking system requires you to perform standardized routines. These are not important for me. What is important is the original taste of the popular culture.

In the traditional transmission framework, the institutional materials do not hold the same legitimacy as the content passed through the previous masters. It neither fits with the ritual initiation of the disciple by the master, nor with the symbolic kinship, through which these networks reproduce themselves.

Finally, the introduction of normative evaluation criteria, of technical standards or teaching material is part of the state sponsored and dominant discourse on martial arts, which is intermingled with rational and objective features of the Sport ideology. As with any discourse, the ranking system “is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a center.”²⁵ Despite the institutions efforts to push forward its ideological agenda and to unify the heterogeneous representations of martial arts, the dominance of its discourse is challenged by masters within their personal networks. Institutions are imposing new meanings and values from above, but local actors re-interpret and re-articulate these categories. Some masters produce and promote competitive discourses by publishing textbooks, web content, or other materials.

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²⁵ Laclau, E., Mouffe, C. *Hegemony & Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso, 1985, p. 112.

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