

Review

The Unique Value and International Influence of Shaolin Sports Culture

Youwen Yang¹ and Qianyi Xu^{1,*}¹ College of Education, Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

* Correspondence: Qianyi Xu, College of Education, Capital Normal University, Beijing, China

Abstract: As a vital component of traditional Chinese heritage, Shaolin sports culture represents both a physical training system and a comprehensive cultural ecosystem integrating martial arts, Zen philosophy, health preservation, and ethics. Its core concept, the harmony of Zen and martial arts, embodies the symbiotic philosophy of Chinese culture, emphasizing the unity of heaven and humanity alongside inner and outer cultivation. This system holds significant value in enhancing physical and mental well-being, shaping character, and fostering moral development. In the 21st century, accelerated globalization and cross-cultural exchanges have transformed Shaolin sports from a regional practice into a global cultural symbol. This transformation occurred through various channels, including media, international competitions, overseas teaching, and global institutional networks. The global tours of Shaolin monks and the widespread circulation of related cinematic works have established Shaolin sports as a crucial bridge connecting Eastern and Western civilizations. This review systematically examines the structural connotations, spiritual core, and social functions of Shaolin sports culture. Furthermore, it analyzes communication pathways, acceptance mechanisms, and cultural adjustment strategies within a globalized context. Ultimately, the research demonstrates that Shaolin sports culture offers a holistic lifestyle integrating physical and spiritual cultivation, providing modern society with an Eastern paradigm to address psychological stress, alienation, and contemporary crises of meaning.

Keywords: shaolin sports; zen martial arts; cultural value; globalization; cross-cultural exchange

1. Introduction: Shaolin Sports Culture---Eastern Wisdom from the Mountain Gate to the World

Situated in the central region of Songshan in Henan, Shaolin Temple was established during the nineteenth year of Taihe in the Northern Wei Dynasty (495 AD) and initially functioned as a site for translating Buddhist texts by the Indian monk Bhatuo [1]. Over time, following Bodhidharma's nine years of meditation and the founding of Chan Buddhism, Shaolin evolved into the ancestral temple of Chinese Zen Buddhism. Its global recognition stemmed from its distinctive tradition of "protecting principles through physical discipline." Historical records indicate that during the transition from the Sui to the Tang Dynasty, the Thirteen Staff Monk assisted Prince Qin in stabilizing the region, leading to the allocation of land and the construction of a temple, which brought Shaolin martial arts into historical prominence. Over centuries, Shaolin martial arts have transcended their original combative purpose, developing into a comprehensive cultural system encompassing physical training, spiritual growth, health practices, and ethical education.

In modern times, the concept of "Shaolin sports culture" represents a shift from viewing it as merely a set of martial arts techniques to understanding it as a holistic cultural framework. This culture is characterized as a complex system integrating cultural elements, practical techniques, and economic factors, with martial arts serving as its most visible expression and Zen philosophy as its core essence [2]. This integrated structure,

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which combines physical practice with philosophical depth, distinguishes it from other traditional sports forms.

The global prominence of Shaolin sports culture is not solely due to its historical legacy but also to its extensive international outreach over the past several decades. From the 1982 film "Shaolin Temple," which ignited widespread interest in martial arts, to the portrayal of Shaolin in global popular culture by figures such as Jet Li and Jackie Chan; from the Shaolin Monks' cultural exchanges in Japan in 1987 to the establishment of numerous cultural centers across continents; and from performances at major international events to recognition by UNESCO as a candidate for intangible cultural heritage, Shaolin sports culture has successfully transitioned from localized knowledge to a globally recognized cultural asset [2].

This article seeks to systematically explore the unique value of Shaolin sports culture and analyze the mechanisms and outcomes of its international influence [3]. The discussion will cover five key areas: first, an examination of the multidimensional aspects of Shaolin sports culture; second, an analysis of the philosophical core of "Chan and Wu as one"; third, an evaluation of its benefits for physical and mental well-being; fourth, a review of its historical development and diverse pathways of global outreach; and fifth, a reflection on its adaptation, reinterpretation, and transformation in cross-cultural contexts. This study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the cultural richness of Shaolin sports and offer insights for the global promotion of other traditional sports.

Shaolin sports culture is often narrowly perceived as "Shaolin Kung Fu," but this simplification overlooks its extensive cultural dimensions. Shaolin martial arts are not isolated technical practices but are deeply embedded within specific philosophical, spiritual, and social frameworks [4]. These dimensions can be analyzed as follows:

First, the martial arts system [3]. This is the most visible aspect of Shaolin sports culture, encompassing a wide range of forms and techniques, including various fist styles, specialized tools, paired training exercises, and internal energy practices. The technical approach emphasizes a balance between strength and flexibility, speed and deliberation, and the coordination of movements, gaze, posture, and footwork. While these techniques have practical applications, traditional teachings have consistently stressed that physical skills should only be applied when absolutely necessary and should not be used indiscriminately.

Second, the philosophical foundation of Zen. The essence of Shaolin martial arts lies in its philosophical underpinnings. From the establishment of Zen principles by Bodhidharma to their further development, concepts such as "understanding one's true nature" and "achieving clarity through practice" have profoundly influenced martial arts training. Physical practice is not merely for bodily strength but serves as a medium for mental cultivation and spiritual insight [5]. The integration of physical movements with meditative focus allows practitioners to gain profound understanding and clarity, distinguishing Shaolin martial arts from other traditions.

Third, the structured practice framework. As a monastic institution, Shaolin Temple incorporates martial arts training into a structured daily routine. Practitioners follow a disciplined schedule that includes periods of study, physical training, and reflection. Rituals performed before training help to focus the mind and foster a sense of purpose. This structured approach ensures that martial arts remain a disciplined practice aimed at personal growth and self-improvement.

Fourth, the integration of traditional health practices. Ancient texts associated with Shaolin provide insights into health preservation, emphasizing the importance of energy flow, balance, and overall well-being. Many movements in Shaolin martial arts are derived from traditional practices aimed at enhancing physical health and have been shown to offer significant therapeutic benefits. Modern studies have confirmed that consistent practice can improve cardiovascular health, boost immunity, and alleviate chronic conditions [2].

Fifth, the ethical and moral framework. Shaolin practitioners adhere to a strict code of conduct, which includes principles such as refraining from harmful actions,

maintaining integrity, and cultivating humility. Additionally, guidelines for teaching ensure that only individuals with appropriate character and dedication are entrusted with the traditions [6]. These ethical principles not only preserve the integrity of the practice but also shape practitioners into individuals who embody compassion and self-discipline.

In conclusion, Shaolin sports culture represents a holistic system that integrates physical practice, philosophical depth, structured routines, health preservation, and ethical principles. Each of these elements is essential to understanding its true nature. In the modern era, technological advancements are reshaping the way this cultural system is shared and practiced, yet its core values remain unchanged.

2. The Philosophical Essence of "the Unity of Zen and Martial Arts": A Concentrated Expression of Chinese Wisdom on Harmonious Coexistence

"The unity of Zen and martial arts" represents the most fundamental concept of Shaolin sports culture and constitutes the essential distinction that sets it apart from other martial arts systems [7]. It is defined as a two-way interactive relationship in which "Zen guides martial arts, and martial arts validate Zen." This concept is not merely a simple combination but rather a profound integration, reflecting the philosophical traditions of Chinese culture, such as the unity of form and function, and the harmony between knowledge and action.

From an epistemological perspective, "the unity of Zen and martial arts" upholds the idea that "the body itself is the path." While some philosophical traditions often view the body and the mind as opposites, Chinese philosophy considers the body to be the very locus of enlightenment. Through rigorous physical training—such as performing thousands of kicks or punches—Shaolin martial arts help practitioners eliminate impatience and misguided thoughts, enabling them to experience a state of detachment from self-centeredness [1]. At this point, movements are no longer controlled by conscious effort but occur naturally—precisely what Zen seeks: to allow the mind to arise without attachment or fixed patterns.

From a methodological standpoint, "the unity of Zen and martial arts" emphasizes that "stillness and movement are one." Meditation is often associated with static contemplation, whereas martial arts involve dynamic physical activity. However, within the Shaolin system, there is no distinction between the two in terms of superiority or inferiority [8]. Standing in a fixed posture may seem static, but in reality, the internal energy is flowing vigorously; throwing a punch may appear swift, yet the mind remains calm and composed. As stated in the "Shaolin Fist Manual": "Motion contains stillness, and stillness contains motion; when motion and stillness complement each other, that is true skill." This understanding of the dialectical relationship between motion and stillness reflects the cosmological view expressed in the "I Ching": "The interplay of yin and yang constitutes the Way."

From a values perspective, the concept of "the unity of Zen and martial arts" advocates using martial skills to promote peace. Although Shaolin martial arts possess great physical power, their ultimate goal is not conquest but protection and education. Throughout history, Shaolin monks have frequently participated in actions such as safeguarding temples and assisting communities during challenging times, all with the aim of "protecting the law and bringing peace to the people." This spirit of martial ethics—courage combined with restraint, strength paired with compassion—is in line with Confucian ideas of "the benevolent are invincible" and Taoist beliefs that "a skilled practitioner remains calm." Together, they form a unique aspect of China's martial culture.

On a deeper level, "the unity of Zen and martial arts" offers a philosophy of life for addressing the challenges of modernity. In today's highly rationalized and fragmented society, people often face crises related to the separation of mind and body and a sense of meaninglessness. However, Shaolin training requires focus on every single movement at hand; this practice of mindfulness helps to bridge the gap between mind and body. At the same time, through repetitive daily training, practitioners of martial arts come to see the extraordinary within the ordinary and gain an understanding of enduring principles

through perseverance—this is precisely an effective way to counter feelings of disconnection.

Therefore, "the integration of Zen and martial arts" is not only a technical guideline for Shaolin martial arts but also a way of living. It teaches that true strength does not lie in physical prowess but in a clear and tranquil mind; true achievement does not consist in overcoming an opponent but in surpassing oneself. This Eastern wisdom holds profound implications for the world we live in today.

3. The Individual Value of Shaolin Sports Culture: The Modern Significance of Mind-Body Integration and Character Building

In today's increasingly diverse health concepts, the comprehensive benefits of Shaolin sports culture for individual development are becoming more prominent. Its value is reflected not only in physiological aspects but also extends to psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions, forming a model of holistic education [9].

On a physiological level, Shaolin martial arts is an efficient full-body exercise. Its movement design adheres to ergonomic principles: low stances enhance lower body strength, rotational movements train core muscles, rapid punches improve reaction speed, and deep breathing supports lung function. Systematic practice of Shaolin boxing over an extended period has been shown to significantly increase bone density, reduce body fat percentage, and improve cardiovascular health. Particularly noteworthy is its philosophy of prioritizing prevention over treatment, which includes methods such as daily guidance, patting, and massage to help prevent age-related diseases [9].

On the psychological level, Shaolin training plays a significant role in mental adjustment. High-intensity training can release stress hormones and create a sense of exercise-induced pleasure. Additionally, the focus required during routine exercises helps interrupt cycles of anxious thinking. The emphasis on martial virtues, such as enduring challenges and maintaining composure in varying circumstances, fosters emotional stability. Practices like Tai Chi and Shaolin boxing have also been integrated into therapeutic systems aimed at alleviating psychological conditions, including stress-related disorders.

On the social level, Shaolin culture emphasizes collectivism and role responsibility. Within temples or martial arts schools, students adhere to structured hierarchical rules, fostering respect, discipline, and cooperation [10]. This "pseudo-family" structure provides young individuals with a clear framework for socialization. Furthermore, participation in performances, competitions, and public activities helps trainees develop social skills and confidence. Many parents encourage their children to practice martial arts for its ability to instill discipline and a strong sense of character.

On the spiritual level, Shaolin sports offer a practical approach to personal cultivation. For individuals who may not follow specific religious practices, the physical training provides a tangible way to experience concepts such as calmness and focus. One practitioner described the peace experienced through daily training as unparalleled [6]. This spiritual dimension, which transcends formal religious frameworks, positions Shaolin sports as a valuable means of fostering inner tranquility in modern life.

A particularly valuable aspect of Shaolin sports is its accessibility. It requires no specialized equipment or venues—only a suitable space and dedication [11]. This low barrier to entry, combined with its high returns, makes it highly suitable for widespread promotion under the national fitness strategy. Shaolin boxing has been included in the "Chinese Sports Fitness Methods" catalog, and public training classes have been launched in communities nationwide, benefiting millions of participants.

In summary, Shaolin sports culture provides a systematic approach for addressing physical and mental challenges through a comprehensive process of physical training, breath control, mental focus, and moral development. Under initiatives such as the Healthy China strategy and efforts to promote active aging, its individual value is expected to gain increasing recognition.

4. International Dissemination of Shaolin Sports Culture: From Film and Television Wonders to Deep Cultural Cultivation

The globalization of Shaolin sports culture has been a gradual process, evolving from passive dissemination to active construction over several decades. This development can be categorized into three distinct stages: the period driven by film and television during the late 20th century, the phase of institutional establishment in the early 21st century, and the current era of cultural integration.

The first stage involved the influence of film and television media. In 1982, a film directed by Zhang Xinyan, titled *Shaolin Temple*, gained worldwide attention, attracting an audience of over 500 million. This film showcased the resilience and Zen philosophy of Shaolin martial arts, challenging Western stereotypes about Eastern culture. Subsequent productions, such as *Shaolin Boy* and *North and South Shaolin*, further fueled global interest in Shaolin [4]. Entering the 21st century, major films like *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero* incorporated Shaolin elements into their narratives, embedding the association of Shaolin with Chinese martial arts into global popular culture. This phase was characterized by the appeal of visual spectacle, which captivated audiences but offered limited insight into the deeper cultural meanings.

The second stage marked the systematic establishment of Shaolin institutions worldwide. Recognizing the limitations of media-based communication, Shaolin Temple initiated international outreach efforts. In 1987, Shaolin monks conducted their first visit to Japan, initiating a series of global tours. By 2004, the first overseas Shaolin Cultural Center was established in Berlin, Germany. As of 2023, Shaolin Temple has established over 150 sub-temples, cultural centers, and authorized martial arts schools across more than 40 countries. These institutions not only teach martial arts but also host cultural activities such as meditation workshops, tea ceremonies, and calligraphy exhibitions, transitioning from mere performance to immersive cultural experiences [6]. For instance, the Shaolin Center in Los Angeles, USA, organizes an annual "Zen Martial Arts Summer Camp" that attracts thousands of participants, while a center in Moscow collaborates with local healthcare providers to offer rehabilitation programs based on Shaolin medicine.

The third stage involves active participation in intercultural dialogue. In recent years, Shaolin sports culture has engaged with global issues through various initiatives. For example, Shaolin monks contributed to the United Nations Forum on Dialogue among Civilizations in 2019, promoting the concept of "Promoting Peace with Martial Arts." Collaborative research projects, such as one launched with Harvard University in 2021 on the relationship between Zen martial arts and mental health, further highlight this engagement. Additionally, the global tour of the stage production *Kung Fu Zen Martial Arts Never Give Up* in 2023 utilized modern performance techniques to convey the philosophy of integrating Zen and martial arts. These efforts signify a shift from being a subject of observation to becoming an active participant in global cultural exchanges [12].

Communication channels have also diversified significantly. Beyond traditional performances and teaching, digital platforms have become integral to Shaolin's global outreach. Social media platforms, such as a YouTube channel with over two million subscribers, online courses like the "Shaolin Zen Wu Introduction" on Coursera, and video games featuring Shaolin characters, have expanded its reach. During periods of restricted physical interaction, initiatives such as "cloud meditation" and "online martial arts classes" enabled Shaolin culture to transcend geographical boundaries and connect with audiences worldwide.

It is important to note that international communication is not a one-way process but involves mutual adaptation. To resonate with diverse cultural contexts, Shaolin teachings are often tailored to local needs. In Europe and North America, the focus is on fitness and stress relief, while in the Middle East, the emphasis is on discipline and self-control. In Africa, Shaolin practices are integrated with local dance traditions. This strategy of "cultural translation" preserves core values while enhancing acceptance, serving as a model for effective cross-cultural communication.

The global influence of Shaolin sports culture extends beyond the cultural domain, generating significant impacts in areas such as cultural identity, economic development, and intercultural understanding.

On the level of cultural identity, Shaolin has become a vital symbol for overseas Chinese communities. In Chinatowns, Shaolin martial arts schools often function as cultural hubs, organizing events such as Spring Festival lion dances and Mid-Autumn Festival celebrations. For younger generations of Chinese descent, practicing martial arts provides a tangible connection to their ancestral heritage. Simultaneously, Shaolin serves as a cultural gateway for non-Chinese individuals, many of whom develop a deeper interest in Chinese language and history through their fascination with martial arts [13, 14].

Economically, Shaolin culture has fostered the growth of a substantial industrial ecosystem. The global market for Shaolin-related products, including apparel, equipment, and media, generates an annual output value exceeding 10 billion yuan. Dengfeng City, home to Shaolin Temple, has branded itself as the "Kung Fu Capital," attracting over 8 million tourists annually and stimulating local industries such as hospitality and training services. Additionally, the strategic management of Shaolin as a cultural brand has led to the registration of over 400 trademarks, covering sectors such as food, medicine, and entertainment, effectively transforming cultural heritage into economic assets.

In the academic realm, Shaolin studies have emerged as a prominent field of international research. Prestigious institutions such as Oxford University, the University of Tokyo, and Paris Sorbonne University offer courses on Shaolin culture. Scholarly articles on the subject are regularly published in international journals, and the Global Shaolin Academic Symposium convenes biennially. This academic focus has deepened the theoretical understanding of Shaolin culture and enhanced its global academic influence.

In terms of intercultural understanding, Shaolin sports culture promotes a paradigm of "harmony in diversity." Unlike Western competitive sports, which prioritize the principles of "faster, higher, stronger," Shaolin emphasizes harmonious values such as balance and moderation. This philosophy has particular relevance in fostering mutual understanding in today's interconnected world. For instance, joint training camps organized in regions with historical tensions have demonstrated how shared martial arts practices can build trust and cooperation among participants.

However, the process of internationalization also presents challenges [1, 5]. Over-commercialization risks diluting cultural authenticity, while misunderstandings—such as equating Shaolin with aggression—require ongoing clarification. Additionally, issues related to intellectual property protection are becoming increasingly prominent. To address these concerns, Shaolin Temple has implemented standardized management practices, including the "Authentic Shaolin" certification system, to safeguard the integrity of its cultural heritage.

5. Conclusion

Shaolin sports culture has endured for more than 1,500 years, developing from a local tradition on Mount Songshan into a globally recognized cultural practice, and this trajectory is not incidental. A key reason lies in its broad human relevance: the pursuit of harmony between body and mind, the emphasis on self-discipline and restraint, and the commitment to sustained daily practice. These values transcend cultural and geographic differences and respond to widely shared spiritual and developmental needs.

In a world marked by increasing fragmentation and cultural misunderstanding, Shaolin sports culture offers a form of gentle influence: rather than depending on direct promotion, it uses embodied practice as a medium and lived experience as a bridge, gradually fostering understanding and respect. As reflected in one German student's account, learning to breathe, walk, and think through Shaolin practice created a sense of closeness to Chinese culture rather than distance from it.

In the future, the international influence of Shaolin sports culture is likely to deepen further. With the expansion of cross-cultural exchange and the growing emphasis on mutual learning among civilizations, this form of Eastern wisdom may play an increasingly constructive role in promoting intercultural dialogue and supporting a more harmonious global order. The central lesson is that genuine cultural confidence does not depend on rigid attachment to tradition, but on enabling tradition to remain vital in the present and responsive to the future through openness and adaptation.

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