

Chinese WuShu along the Silk Roads

The Silk Roads provided considerable opportunities to enrich exchanges regarding traditional sports such as wrestling, Polo, Cuju (an ancient Chinese game similar to football/soccer), Go (an abstract strategy board game), Touhu (an ancient banquet game involving throwing arrows into a pot) and Chinese 'Wushu' (an umbrella term for various martial arts styles). In Xi'an, a vibrant city visited by ambassadors and merchants that marked "mile zero" of the Silk Roads, numerous artefacts relating to traditional sports have been preserved in the city's History and Sports Museums. Similarly, in the Maijishan Grottoes, a series of rock cut caves in Tianshui in Gansu province, numerous wall paintings and sculptures containing valuable information relating to traditional sports have been uncovered including reliefs depicting martial arts equipment.

In terms of the development of traditional sports, the Silk Roads provided an opportunity for nomadic skills such as archery and horse riding to hybridise with farming culture to form a number of martial arts styles. As well as goods for trade, sacred arts like calligraphy, tile making, painting and martial arts traversed the Silk Roads along with travelers and merchants.¹ Over time, trading activities enabled martial arts, and their practitioners, from various regions to encounter each other. Martial arts in particular were transferred along the overland Silk Roads as those skilled in these art forms often accompanied merchants and their caravans to safeguard both those travelling, and the goods they were travelling with, from attack and theft by bandits.

Various nomadic and farming skills formed the basis of the different styles of WuShu, which was known by various names during different historical periods. It was known as "Chinese boxing" during the Shang Dynasty (16th Century BCE – 1046 BCE), "technical strike" in the Spring and Autumn Period (722 ~ 479 BCE), and "martial arts" during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). In the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, Chinese WuShu became more developed and well defined as numerous different styles emerged. As WuShu was invented during the farming era, it has at its core a consideration of the harmony between humans and nature. Chinese WuShu's "Wu 武" is a character made with two sub-characters "Zhi Ge 止戈" which literally translates as "no war" and is representative of the harmony its practitioners seek. This Harmony is emphasized throughout mind and body, and WuShu practitioners focus on both external and internal techniques to bring about strong feelings of calm.

¹ Ricbard Kurin. AnthroNotes Volume 23No.1 Winter/Spring 2002

Moreover, interactions between the various regions of China, as well as regions to the west and south, formed unique styles of martial arts. These different styles of WuShu can be classified according to geography. For example, the 'Southern Fist' style from Fujian Province emphasizes foot moves and arm strokes, the 'Northern Kick' style focusses on legwork, kicking and acrobatics, whereas in the Northwest of China WuShu styles typically incorporate long and short staffs. As they were transmitted across the Silk Roads, forms of these martial arts were taken up in regions of Southeast Asia. In Malaysia for example, Kung Fu is well preserved and popular. It is said that during the Tang Dynasty, Kung Fu, and specifically external styles such as ChangQuan(长拳), HongQuan(洪拳), NanQuan(南拳) and YongChun(咏春), were brought to Malaysia from the Guangdong and Fujian Provinces.²

Additionally, a number of hybrid martial arts were formed through the organic combination of elements from different Silk Roads regions. For example, in modern day Iran, the historical mid-point of the over land Silk Roads connecting Quanzhou in Fujian to Rome, Italy,³ a martial art known as Kung Fu Toa was established in the 20th century. This is a hybrid of a number of traditional martial arts including Shaolin Kungfu, Karate, Taekwondo and Yoga.⁴ Today, Tai Chi, one of the most popular styles of WuShu has millions of practitioners worldwide and WuShu in general remains a popular sport that promotes good physical and mental health, as well as the common heritage of the Silk Roads.

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² <https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/424311964672458692.html>

³ Iran has a unique position on the silk road, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2014/0605/c1002-25107873.html>

⁴ Kung Fu To'a history, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kung_Fu_To'a