

Reconsidering the essence of Chinese wushu from ontological, epistemological and axiological perspectives

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Dictionary:

Chinese wushu – is a traditional sport based on Chinese culture as its theoretical foundation, using combat techniques as its basic content, and employing forms, sparring, and gongfa as its main forms of exercise [1].

Attack and defence – the core combative functions of Chinese wushu, referring to the integrated use of offensive and protective actions in combat. They form the basic practical structure that underpins wushu techniques, training methods and tactical applications [13].

Quan styles – are traditional Chinese wushu styles defined as systems of routines that share similar technical principles and movement flavour, and are transmitted in an orderly way. They are characterized by “clear lineage, explicit boxing theory, distinctive style and a relatively complete internal system” and function as the basic cultural and technical units of traditional wushu [29].

Ontology – is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of being and reality, asking what exists and what the basic structure of that existence is.

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Abstract:

Background and Study Aim: Chinese wushu, as a key component of traditional Chinese culture, combines embodied attack and defence techniques with cultural meanings. The question of its essence has long been central to martial arts studies, yet the lack of scholarly consensus continues to limit its theoretical clarification and contemporary development. This study reconsiders the essence of Chinese wushu from ontological, epistemological and axiological perspectives in order to clarify its structure and offer a basis for its development and international communication.

Material and Methods: This study adopts a theoretical desk research approach and conceptual analysis. It reviews key Chinese and international literature on Chinese wushu and related philosophical theories, and uses ontology, epistemology and axiology as an integrated framework to reinterpret the essence of Chinese wushu.

Results: Ontologically, Chinese wushu is identified as a mode of human practice that takes the body as its medium and embodied attack and defence as its core structure. Epistemologically, the study shows that bodily experience and practical cognition are gradually organised into mature martial forms and crystallised in distinct quan styles, which constitute the core epistemic system of Chinese wushu. Axiologically, the value of Chinese wushu cannot be reduced to combat effectiveness alone. Its attack and defence function remains the foundation, but has been transformed into broader educational, self-cultivational, cultural and social values. Contemporary transformations such as commercialisation, sportification and performative development should therefore be critically examined through the integrated perspectives of ontology, epistemology and axiology.

Conclusions: Chinese wushu can thus be understood as a distinctive mode of embodied attack and defence practice historically crystallised into a quan centred knowledge system within Chinese culture, condensing educational, ethical, health and identity values and providing a cultural resource for its future development and global dissemination.

Keywords: attack and defence; Chinese culture; combat effectiveness; kung fu, quan style; values

Epistemology – is the branch of philosophy that examines the nature, sources and justification of knowledge, asking how we come to know the world, what counts as valid knowledge, and on what grounds our beliefs can be regarded as warranted.

Axiology – is the branch of philosophy that studies value, clarifying what value is, what kinds of values there are, and how value judgements and value relations between subject and object are formed and justified in different fields of practice.

Zhouli – a classical Chinese text on institutions and ritual regulations traditionally attributed to the Western Zhou period. It includes detailed prescriptions for archery rites and chariot-driving rites that shaped early martial training in court and military contexts.

Jiaodi – was an ancient Chinese wrestling contest in which two competitors engaged in close-range grappling. It originated as a combat skill and method of training soldiers, and by the Qin and Han dynasties it had also become a popular public spectacle.

1. Introduction

Chinese wushu, as a quintessential expression of traditional Chinese culture, integrates offensive and defensive techniques, philosophical thought and spiritual cultivation [1]. It is not only a repertoire of physical skills but also a bodily expression of Chinese cultural knowledge and practical wisdom. However, under the influence of rapid modern social development and globalised sports concepts, Wushu has gradually shown a trend towards “technification” and “projectization” [2]. Its original combative orientation and deep cultural foundations have been progressively diluted, and the basic understanding of “what Chinese wushu is” is becoming increasingly blurred. Exploring the essence of martial arts is the theoretical basis for understanding “what Chinese wushu is”, and for addressing the current dilemmas in Chinese wushu development. I do not use the name 'hand to hand combat', which is adequate to the requirements of this scientific journal, due to the repeated appearance of the term 'martial arts' in references to the cited publications)

In existing research, scholars have proposed various views on the essence of Chinese wushu from different perspectives. For a long time, it was generally believed that Chinese wushu originated from practical combat and its essence was combat techniques [3-5]. Others have re-examined the complexity of the essence of Chinese wushu from the perspective of cultural generation and transformation, emphasising the historical process through which martial arts developed from combat techniques into cultural forms [6, 7]. Similarly, the “theory of life essence” focuses on individual life experiences and bodily existence, positing that Chinese wushu is a way to shape life and generate meaning through physical practice [8]. To overcome the limitations of singular essentialism, some scholars have attempted to synthesize Chinese wushu’s multiple attributes through a “hierarchical theory of martial arts essence”. This approach places combat effectiveness, cultural significance, and aesthetic value at distinct levels to more comprehensively explain the formation and transformation of various functions [9-11]. Based on these research theories, Dai G et al. [12] proposed understanding Chinese wushu as a “cultural system of physical practice”, emphasizing physical cultivation and the formation of cultural identity within the tradition of “seeking the Way” [12]. Meanwhile, Tian Z et al. [13] suggested “using attack and defence as the essential attributes of Chinese wushu to govern the differentiation and integration of martial arts” [13]. Some scholars further advocate that adopting quan styles as a methodological foundation is not only fundamental to constructing the discipline’s theoretical, academic, and discourse systems. It is also important for demonstrating the Chinese characteristics, style and identity of wushu in the contemporary context [14].

The current research on the essence of Chinese wushu provides a solid foundation for understanding the main characteristics of martial arts and clarifying the boundaries of related disciplines. It also offers an important theoretical basis for the public understanding and dissemination of Chinese wushu. However, these academic achievements have yet to form stable consensus across society, and a certain gap still persists between theoretical cognition and practical understanding. This gap is reflected in persistent ambiguity surrounding the value and cultural identity of Chinese wushu. In public discourse, Chinese wushu is sometimes framed mainly as a competitive sport centred on contest performance, and even reduced to a fitness activity, a tourism resource, or a popular cultural symbol such as “Chinese kung fu”.

Ultimately, the ambiguity surrounding the value and cultural identity of Chinese wushu highlights several basic questions that remain unresolved. First, views still differ on what should be regarded as its essence. Second, the historical shaping of its knowledge system and associated patterns of social perception has not been systematically clarified. Third, its functions and values at both the social and individual levels have often been discussed in a fragmented rather than comprehensive way. To address these issues, the present study attempts to reconsider the essence of Chinese wushu from ontological, epistemological and axiological perspectives. By clarifying “what it is”, “how it was formed” and “what its value is”, this study aims to provide theoretical support and academic reference for its sustainable development, cultural transmission and broader social recognition.

This study reconsiders the essence of Chinese wushu from ontological, epistemological and axiological perspectives in order to clarify its structure and offer a basis for its development and international communication.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a theoretical desk research approach and conceptual analysis based on key Chinese and international literature on Chinese wushu, ontology, epistemology and axiology. It uses these three philosophical perspectives as an integrated analytical framework to reinterpret the essence of Chinese wushu.

3. Results

Ontological perspective: what is the fundamental essence of Chinese wushu?

Ontology, as a branch of metaphysics, is concerned with the fundamental nature of being and with the basic determinations that make a phenomenon what it is [15, 16]. Grix [17] argues that ontological assumptions are articulated in our answer to the question: “What is the nature of the social and political reality to be investigated?” In the social sciences, ontological issues are thus translated into questions such as: “What is the true nature of social reality?” [17] Within this framework, when applied to Chinese wushu research, the same ontological concern can be further specified as the question: “What is the essence of Chinese wushu as a phenomenon?” In other words, we are asking whether Chinese wushu is merely a system of practices constructed through human experience and cultural interpretation, or whether it has a more fundamental structure that enables it to remain identifiable as wushu despite historical change. This line of inquiry involves not only the forms and historical transformations of Chinese wushu, but also the basic logic that supports its existence as a martial practice. In this sense, the basic ontological question is how we are to understand what Chinese wushu really is as a form of cultural existence. In what follows, we argue that its fundamental essence lies in a bodily attack and defence praxis that serves as a fundamental structure within human social practice.

To clarify how this ontological concern bears on essence, we use “essence” here to refer to the basic determination that makes a practice what it is and allows it to persist through historical change. In philosophical traditions, “ontology” and “essence” are closely intertwined: ontology concerns the reality of being, while essence refers to the intrinsic determinations that make something what it is. This understanding is

consistent with contemporary methodological discussions, in which ontology is treated as a theoretical perspective concerning existence, reality and their underlying nature [18]. From Plato's Theory of Forms and Aristotle's notion of formal cause to Hegel's dialectical account of essence, essence has long been regarded as a key pathway to understanding the truth of being. Philosophical reflection on essence thus serves both as the starting point for asking what Chinese wushu is and as the logical gateway for constructing systematic knowledge about them and clarifying its values.

Modern Western philosophers, especially Heidegger, placed the question of being at the centre of ontology. His claim that "All metaphysical thinking is ontology, or it is nothing at all" indicates that metaphysical inquiry should begin from the question of being itself [19]. This orientation aims to move beyond a merely compartmentalised view of metaphysical subfields and to reopen the fundamental inquiry into the meaning of being. Against this background, Marx's ontological thought shifts the question of being toward social and historical practice. In contemporary interpretations of Marxist philosophy, Marx's ontological thought is often understood as critically appropriating traditional ontological resources while, to a certain extent, transcending them. On this reading, it emphasises the primacy of practice, integrates the pursuit of rational justification into the exploration of ontological questions, and places social existence at the centre of ontological reflection. The focus is not only on matter in the abstract, but on how human societies concretely shape and transform the world through historically situated practice [20]. This shift gives Marxist ontology a distinctly practical orientation. It thereby confers on Marxist ontology a distinctly material and practical character, embodying Marx's concrete understanding of "existence".

In the present discussion, "essence" refers to the structural determination that enables a given form of existence to come into being and to keep its identity through historical change. Traditional metaphysical ontology often treats the essence of being as an *a priori* and relatively fixed structure. However, it often falls into abstract deduction and has difficulty explaining how such an essence gives rise to the concrete world or how it maintains its stability over time. It tends to treat essence as a logical starting point, but does not fully explain how concrete practices emerge and develop from it. This difficulty becomes especially visible when we try to understand complex practical forms such as Chinese wushu, which is deeply embedded in social structures and cultural contexts. In such cases, the static mode of thinking in traditional ontology is not sufficient. Marxist ontological thought, by contrast, is a materialist ontology whose basic feature is its emphasis on practice. The essence of existence is not an abstract "idea" or "substance", but a real structure that is formed in and through practice. In the Theses on Feuerbach, Marx states that "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations." Practice is therefore not an external activity added to human existence. It is the mode of human being itself and the basic force that drives historical development and changes in social structure. On this basis, the essence of Chinese wushu should not be reduced to a static technical system or a simple cultural symbol. Nor should it be understood only in terms of such surface functions as combat, fitness, or aesthetic display. Marxist practice theory offers a way to approach Chinese wushu from their practical root. Chinese wushu can therefore be understood first as a mode of human practice: an embodied practice of attack and defence in which human beings use the body as the medium, respond to survival and social needs, and act within a field of social relations.

Attack and defence in this sense are different from the attack or flight behaviour of animals driven only by instinct. What is decisive is that such actions are mediated by the human body, which carries both consciousness and social attributes. This mediation gives rise to a practice structure that belongs only to human beings and has existed since the earliest formation of human society. In early forms of social life, human beings faced threats from wild animals, harsh natural environments, and scarce resources. At the same time, they met conflict with others in struggles over living conditions and material interests. In these situations, they had to respond by using the body as a medium for attacking and defending. From the perspective of Marxist practice ontology, this pattern of bodily response centred on attack and defence is not a concept abstracted only afterwards from experience. It is a concrete structure of practice through which human social existence takes shape. From an ontological point of view, the “essence” of Chinese wushu refers to this practice structure centred on attack and defence. This structure makes Chinese wushu possible and allows it to maintain their identity through historical change. If attack and defence are completely removed, Chinese wushu loses their basic ground as this particular form of practical existence. In this sense, the fundamental essence of Chinese wushu can be summarised as a human practice structure that takes the body as its medium and attack and defence as its core.

At the level of concrete wushu practice, this structure is not an abstract philosophical category, but is expressed in the organisation of bodily actions such as advance and retreat, avoidance, control, counteraction and transformation. Whether in unarmed techniques, weapons practice, routines or paired training, the deeper structure of these forms is not merely technical display, but the embodied preservation, transformation and transmission of attack and defence experience. Therefore, attack and defence in this study do not refer only to fighting in a narrow sense, but to the basic practical structure that supports the formation and continuity of wushu as a martial art.

Epistemological perspective: what makes Chinese wushu distinctively Chinese?

Ontology asks what Chinese wushu is in itself, whereas epistemology asks how it becomes knowable as “Chinese wushu”. Here epistemology is used to explain a concrete issue: what makes Chinese wushu recognisable as a distinct tradition, rather than being repeatedly reduced to sport performance, fitness, tourism, or “kung fu” imagery. Human cognition is never completed in a single act. It arises out of practice and, through renewed practice, progressively deepens its grasp of the essence of things, marking a movement from sensuous awareness to rational comprehension and from the level of appearances to that of underlying essence. Ontologically, essence refers to the inner constitution of a thing, a relatively mind-independent structure that grounds its existence and provides the starting point for any possible understanding of it. Through the recurrent interplay of practice and reflection, our apprehension of this essence can be gradually clarified and enriched; yet this dynamic does not arbitrarily remake the essence itself. Put differently, as practice and history unfold, our knowledge of a thing’s essence may become more adequate, but its inner nature does not for that reason undergo a fundamental transformation. If the essence of Chinese wushu is to be approached from an epistemological standpoint, the task is therefore to follow the trajectory along which it has been understood, so that its essential meaning can come into clearer view. In this study, an epistemic system does not refer to an abstract set of concepts detached from practice. Rather, it refers to a historically formed structure through which martial knowledge is organised, embodied,

transmitted and recognised through bodily practice. In the context of Chinese wushu, quan styles function as such an epistemic system because they organise attack and defence experience, technical principles, training methods and cultural meanings into transmissible forms of bodily knowledge.

In the earliest stages of human society, the level of consciousness had not yet developed to the point where attack and defence behaviour could be abstracted as a distinct object of cognition. For this reason, such behaviour could not yet be called wushu. At this stage, attack and defence existed only as instinctive reactions in struggles against wild beasts and in life-and-death conflicts between groups. They had not yet been elevated to the level of conscious martial practice. This corresponds to the sensuous stage of cognition, in which the essence of wushu remains “unmanifest”, and it is latent within human practical activity in the form of bodily attack and defence. Precisely in such primordial struggles for survival, however, bodily attack and defence experience began to accumulate. Through repeated enactment in social practice, it gradually became stabilised and provided empirical material for subsequent rational understanding.

In primitive society, in order to cope with natural conditions and external threats, human beings, driven by the instinct for survival, developed combat practices centred on bodily attack and defence. Because this form of combat was rooted in basic survival needs, it bore a pronounced natural character. As a mode of action that takes the body as its vehicle and attack and defence as its core, it displayed a cross-regional and cross-cultural commonality in early human life, becoming the shared source of all later combat forms that involve “attack and defence”. In other words, although the martial skills of different peoples later diverged in style under diverse historical and cultural conditions, their underlying combative logic and the essential structure of bodily attack and defence exhibit a high degree of consistency. This movement from a common origin towards differentiation is not only a historical necessity. It also reflected an epistemological process in which practice gives rise to cognition, and cognition in turn guides further practice.

Building on this embryonic stage of bodily attack and defence, later social development gradually transformed such behaviour from an instinctive reaction for survival into a more autonomous practice. As clan communities evolved into early states, warfare became organised and the need for stable military training increased. Skills that had originally served only immediate survival began to be abstracted, selected and refined. On this basis, they started to take shape as specialised techniques of attack and defence. In the Western Zhou period, this transformation was already visible in the Zhouli. The “archery rites” and “chariot-driving rites” did more than regulate concrete methods of training with bow, crossbow and chariot. They also incorporated these martial skills into the formal order of court ceremony. Bodily attack and defence were no longer a purely natural reaction. This practice was codified, assessed and publicly displayed as a teachable and examinable competence [21]. From the Han dynasty onward, jiaodi contests became widespread. They still served clear military functions by strengthening practical fighting capacity. At the same time, they operated as civil events in which members of the elite demonstrated courage, honour and social status [22]. By the Tang dynasty, examinations in martial skills had been integrated into the imperial examination system. This marks a further step in the cognitive differentiation and institutional recognition of martial skills as a distinct domain with explicit criteria, contents and standards.

In parallel, martial practice entered into sustained interaction with Confucian, Buddhist and Daoist thought. Confucian ethics framed martial training in terms of loyalty, righteousness and disciplined self-cultivation. Daoist ideas informed breathing methods, internal regulation and the pursuit of harmony between body and cosmos. Buddhist teachings introduced themes of compassion, restraint and inward transformation. Through these layered integrations, martial practice was no longer understood only in utilitarian or military terms. It acquired moral, ritual and spiritual connotations that linked it closely to the broader development of Chinese civilisation. From an epistemological perspective, this historical process represents a movement from instinctive, survival-oriented bodily combat to a consciously organised, institutionally codified and culturally interpreted field of practice. It is a shift from a merely sensuous awareness of attack and defence to a more rational understanding of Chinese wushu as a structured field of functions, meanings and forms within Chinese society.

By the Ming and Qing dynasties, the widespread adoption of firearms had reduced the practical demand for cold weapons in actual combat, and the significance of Chinese wushu as a military skill declined [23]. Portions of martial practice that were no longer directly tied to warfare found new vitality in local society. In this context, bare-hand and weapons techniques were widely transmitted and practised among the population. Over time, these practices were continuously elaborated and, through wide transmission, crystallised into a variety of Chinese wushu styles (quan styles) and weapons systems. These styles have traceable lineages, explicit technical principles, distinctive characteristics and relatively coherent internal structures. At this stage, martial practice not only reached a high level of technical maturity, but also became increasingly integrated with traditional Chinese views of life, the body and ethical self-cultivation. In this way, it came to embody a rich layer of cultural and spiritual meaning. The differentiation between so-called internal and external styles, together with the gradual systematisation of notions such as the “eighteen martial skills”, signalled the emergence of a basic cultural framework for Chinese wushu. It was in this period that many of the styles now familiar to us, such as *Taijiquan*, *Baduanjin*, *Yijinjing* and *Xingyiquan*, took shape in the relatively stable forms by which they are known today. On this basis, Xu W [24] offers the view that Chinese wushu is a traditional Chinese martial practice that takes unarmed and weapons-based attack and defence movements as its basic content, is transmitted through distinct Chinese wushu styles, and emphasises the integrated cultivation of both internal and external aspects [24]. This definition clearly identifies the core status of quan styles in bearing both the technical content of attack and defence and the cultural content of moral and self-cultivational training. Wang G. [6] also emphasises that what distinguishes Chinese wushu from the martial skills of other people lies less in the combative techniques as such than in the repertoire of quan styles and routines as a distinctive bodily language. It is precisely the multiplicity of lineages and the rich array of quan styles that shape a mode of expression which sets Chinese wushu apart from other martial traditions [6]. Taken together, these views indicate that Chinese quan styles are not only technical forms of performance and training. They are historically formed systems of bodily cognition that concentrate practitioners’ understanding and expression of the attack and defence essence. This understanding is consistent with contemporary theories of embodied cognition, which argue that cognition is not a purely mental process separated from the body, but is shaped through bodily action, perception and interaction with the environment. From this perspective, quan styles

can be understood as embodied epistemic systems: they preserve martial knowledge not only in verbal explanation or written theory, but also in trained movement, bodily habit, tactical awareness and culturally organised practice.

From a philosophical standpoint, quan styles can therefore be seen as the pathway through which martial practice moves towards explicit knowledge. More precisely, they are the crystallised embodied epistemic system through which the essence of Chinese wushu is organised, named, taught and transmitted. This cognition always rests on an ontological basis of embodied attack and defence. Ontology and epistemology are mutually supporting at this point: the attack and defence orientation provides the basic being of martial arts, whereas Chinese wushu styles provide the historical and cultural form in which that essence is recognised, organised and transmitted. Despite many historical transformations, the existence of Chinese wushu has consistently revolved around this quan-centred core. These styles supply the basic logic for techniques and training systems and simultaneously carry distinctive cultural backgrounds and spiritual values. They therefore do not merely classify different technical schools; they provide the epistemological structure through which Chinese wushu knowledge is formed, stabilised and transmitted across generations. They constitute the common foundation of both traditional wushu and modern competitive wushu. Ultimately, it is impossible to discuss Chinese wushu in any meaningful way without reference to this configuration of quan styles, through which it becomes, in a substantive sense, distinctively “Chinese” martial arts.

Axiological perspective: what is the value of Chinese wushu for individuals and society?

The term “axiology” derives from the Greek words *axios* (value) and *logos* (science or theory). Axiology is therefore usually defined as the branch of philosophy that studies value. Its central concern is to clarify what “value” is, how human beings form value judgements in different domains of practice, and how, on this basis, they construct orders of meaning and systems of normative conduct [25]. At its core, the essence of value lies in the interaction between subject and object [26]. In the case of Chinese wushu, the objective pole consists in martial arts themselves, which possess properties that can satisfy human bodily and spiritual needs. The subjective pole is the martial arts practitioner. Through learning and practice, the practitioner transforms techniques, cultural meanings and spiritual ideals into experiences of value, thereby promoting bodily, psychological and spiritual development. The value of Chinese wushu therefore does not lie only in external techniques and formal structures. It is expressed above all in its capacity to meet multiple needs of individuals and society, including physical health, cultural identity and psychological growth.

The generation of value is a process constituted by the interaction among value object, value subject and social practice. Any value relation between subject and object is multidimensional and multi-directional, and its basic orientation is towards the comprehensive development of human beings [26]. External things become potential value objects because they possess properties that can meet human needs. For Chinese wushu, this was first manifested in striking, blocking and other attack and defence movements in real combat, which responded directly to the demands of survival and struggle. The actualisation of value depends on the subject, namely the wushu practitioner. Only when practitioners, on the basis of their own needs, come to know, reshape and employ the object do its value properties become apparent. In other words, only when people, in response to their own needs, learn, refine and apply attack and

defence movements are these skills activated and able to display their corresponding value properties. Moreover, value arises in practice. Through purposeful practical activity, human beings activate the relevant properties of objects in order to satisfy their needs. In this process, they also transform themselves and generate new forms of value.

Over a long period, the value of Chinese wushu has often been reduced to the question of whether it can “really fight” [27], reflecting a one-sided and strongly instrumental understanding of combat value. It is undeniable that in its early historical phases Chinese wushu primarily served concrete functions of survival, self-defence and military struggle. Combat effectiveness therefore constituted its earliest and most central value orientation. In this stage, the value of wushu was mainly expressed in practical needs such as individual protection and collective warfare, and the attack and defence character of techniques formed the original layer of its value system. Even today, when many people think of Chinese wushu, what comes first to mind is “fighting”, and “whether it can fight” is still used as a basic criterion for judging the authenticity of martial arts.

However, as social structures and practical contexts have changed, the combat function of Chinese wushu has gradually ceased to be its only or dominant meaning. In many contemporary settings the direct need to fight has receded, yet routines, training methods and ritualised practices continue to be widely used. From the perspective of value, this means that the original combat-oriented practical value of martial arts has been partly transformed and extended into other dimensions of value. The example of routines is especially revealing. On the surface, routines are still composed of attack and defence movements. In actual practice, however, these movements are reorganised into fixed sequences that can be systematically taught, repeated and displayed. In this process, combat techniques and combat logic are encoded into standardised postures, rhythms and spatial patterns, and are linked to aesthetic, educational and symbolic requirements. Routines thus convert knowledge of attack and defence into a visible and shareable cultural form. If they are judged only by the narrow criterion of “whether they work in real combat”, their value is reduced to a single dimension and their contemporary function is misunderstood. Today, routines operate as important carriers of cultural memory, as structured tools for bodily education, and as vehicles for moral cultivation and socialisation. The shift from a sole focus on “can it fight” to these broader value orientations does not deny the combative origin of routines. Rather, it shows how the original combat function has been transformed and layered into educational, aesthetic and cultural values under new historical conditions.

From a long-term historical perspective, the value of Chinese wushu has never been confined to practical functions such as physical conditioning, self-defence or combat display. Rather, it has been deeply embedded in China’s geographical configuration, political order, social structure and collective symbolism, and has gradually given rise to a value system that integrates individual self-cultivation, social edification, cultural identity and national symbolism. In this sense, the historical evolution of Chinese wushu is not merely a succession of changing technical forms, but also the outcome of sustained interactions among geography, society, culture and philosophy. Chinese wushu therefore embodies more than the essence of attack and defence skills. It concretely reflects a specifically Chinese logic of self-cultivation that organises relations between body and body, mind and mind, and body and mind. It expresses an awareness of ethical order in the relation between person and society, as well as an

ideal of harmonious coexistence between human beings and nature. In this way, Chinese wushu functions as both a bodily mode of expression and a form of practical wisdom shaped by a distinctively Chinese worldview. In axiological terms, its value resides in cultivating the bodily and moral formation of individuals while simultaneously sustaining social order and reinforcing a shared sense of national cultural identity.

From the perspective of cultural formation and social structure, China's geographical pattern of "high in the northwest and low in the southeast" exerted a profound influence on modes of subsistence and value orientations in ancient society. It also shaped, to a considerable extent, the development and positioning of martial arts culture. In the north-western border regions, rugged terrain and recurrent warfare fostered a tradition that prized martial strength and military preparedness, whereas in the south-eastern regions, with developed agriculture, economic prosperity and relatively stable social conditions, there emerged an atmosphere that privileged literary achievement and education. On this basis, a basic configuration of "taking civil as substance and martial as function" gradually took shape [28]. Civil assumed the core responsibility for governing social order, while martial was assigned the primary function of safeguarding national security and maintaining social stability. Within this structure, the spiritual value of Chinese wushu is expressed, on the one hand, through the practices of defending the country and protecting the body, where it underscores a sense of responsibility and commitment; on the other hand, through notions such as "subduing oneself and returning to ritual" and "the highest form of martial is to bring an end to the use of arms", it embodies a distinctively Chinese wisdom of restraining desire and curbing violence. In this way, techniques of attack and defence are elevated into a path of personal cultivation and social education. The practice of martial skills therefore points not only to fighting ability, but also to the value ideal of self-cultivation, responsibility towards others and the pursuit of social harmony.

In contemporary China, changing social structures, lifestyles and concepts of health have endowed Chinese wushu with additional layers of value. In contemporary public health and sport policy contexts, including initiatives such as "Healthy China" and "National Fitness", practices such as *Taijiquan*, *Baduanjin* and *Yijinjing* have been widely adopted in communities, parks and healthcare institutions as means of enhancing physical fitness, maintaining health and helping to prevent chronic disease. In many places, they are also incorporated into exercise-medicine and rehabilitation-oriented programmes. At the same time, martial arts communities, clubs and competitions provide platforms for inter-generational contact and social interaction, thereby strengthening community cohesion and fostering a shared sense of identity. Through performances, sport tourism and digital communication, Chinese wushu has further become an important resource for the cultural and sport industries and a distinctive "Chinese cultural symbol" that contributes to shaping national image and supporting cross-cultural communication.

Nevertheless, the contemporary expansion of wushu values should not be understood as a simple accumulation of positive functions. These values may also involve tensions and conflicts. Commercialisation can increase the visibility and social reach of Chinese wushu, but it may also reduce wushu to consumable cultural symbols and weaken its technical depth and cultural meaning. Sportification has helped wushu enter modern competition systems through rules, scoring criteria and standardised events, yet it may also emphasise difficulty, visual effect and measurable performance at the expense of quan-style traditions, attack and defence logic and embodied cultural

knowledge. Similarly, performative transformation can strengthen the aesthetic appeal and communicative power of wushu, but excessive performative orientation may detach bodily forms from their martial basis and turn wushu into spectacle. These tensions show that the multi-dimensional value of Chinese wushu is not automatically harmonious. Its contemporary development needs to balance health, education, performance, industry and cultural communication with the preservation of its attack and defence essence, quan-style knowledge system and ethical spirit. In this sense, the axiological significance of Chinese wushu lies not only in the diversity of its values, but also in the critical coordination of these values under changing social conditions.

4. Discussion

This study has proposed an ontological, an epistemological and an axiological perspective in order to reconsider the essence of Chinese wushu. On the ontological level, the analysis suggests that Chinese wushu should be understood as a specific structure of human practice. This structure takes the body as its medium and attack and defence as its core orientation. Attack and defence therefore constitute the most fundamental and indisputable essence of Chinese wushu. However, this definition should not be understood as reducing wushu to mere fighting ability. Its analytical boundary also needs to be clarified: it reveals the ontological root of wushu, but it cannot, by itself, explain all its historical forms, knowledge systems and value functions. In the context of contemporary development, this view has an important normative implication. It indicates that any attempt to modernise or reform Chinese wushu needs to preserve this embodied attack and defence structure as a basic criterion for what can still be called Chinese wushu. If this core is abandoned and Chinese wushu is turned only into performance, display or general exercise, it may retain certain cultural symbols but it will lose its essential ground as martial arts.

From an epistemological standpoint, the triadic framework also offers a way to reorganise the internal components of the Chinese wushu field. Traditional wushu, competitive wushu, sanda and related practices have often developed in a fragmented way. They sometimes compete for legitimacy and resources and are placed in separate institutional systems. By contrast, if we take embodied attack and defence as the ontological root and quan styles as the crystallised form of knowledge, these different components can be seen as sharing a common foundation. They express the same basic practice structure through different technical systems, institutional forms and cultural accents. This perspective does not erase their differences, but it encourages dialogue and complementarity among them. It also suggests that future reforms of rules, curricula and institutional frameworks should be guided by a clearer awareness of how each component relates back to the same ontological core and to the same historical process of cognitive formation.

On the axiological level, the discussion shows that the value of Chinese wushu goes far beyond the narrow question of whether it can really fight. Combat effectiveness remains a historical starting point and a necessary reference. At the same time, Chinese wushu has become a vehicle for bodily training and moral cultivation, a medium for social education and ethical regulation, and a carrier of cultural memory and identity. In the contemporary setting, it also contributes to public health, community cohesion and cultural diplomacy. These newer layers of value have not emerged out of nothing. They have grown out of the long historical process through which embodied attack and defence practice was integrated into Chinese views of self-

cultivation, social order and the relation between human beings and nature. In this sense, the multi-dimensional value of Chinese wushu depends on both sides of the triadic framework. It depends on a clear grasp of its ontological core and on an awareness of how this core has been interpreted, named and institutionalised in Chinese history. Recognizing this fact may help future research and policy to avoid a simple opposition between “combat value” and “non-combat value”. It may also support a more balanced development in which Chinese wushu can respond to new social needs without losing the essence that makes it distinctively Chinese. However, when these new needs are mediated by commercialisation, sportification or performative display, the value expansion of Chinese wushu may also generate internal tensions. While these processes can increase the visibility and social reach of wushu, they may also weaken its martial depth, quan-style traditions and attack and defence logic.

As social needs have become more diverse, the value forms of wushu have also expanded. Health preservation, performance, self-cultivation and cultural communication have become increasingly prominent. These functions are not new essences that replace attack and defence. Rather, they are functional extensions and value transformations based on the martial essence, the consciousness of attack and defence and the system of quan styles. Health oriented wushu is not ordinary fitness exercise. It achieves health preservation through wushu specific bodily structure, force control and attack and defence awareness. Performance oriented wushu is not ordinary dance or acrobatics. It presents and aesthetically transforms martial experience, technical logic and bodily style. Meditative or self-cultivation oriented wushu is not merely seated meditation or breathing training. It is a form of bodily and mental cultivation based on body control, mental regulation and the integration of movement and stillness. Therefore, whether a contemporary practice form still belongs to Chinese wushu does not depend only on whether it is directly used for fighting. The key is whether it still develops around the essence of attack and defence, the system of quan styles and the consciousness of attack and defence. Only by adhering to this ontological foundation and epistemic system can Chinese wushu respond to contemporary needs in health, aesthetics, education and cultural communication while maintaining its distinctive identity.

5. Conclusions

This article has addressed the core question of “what Chinese wushu is?” from three interrelated perspectives: ontology, epistemology and axiology. At the ontological level, we contend that the fundamental essence of Chinese wushu lies in a specific structure of human practice, which takes the body as its medium and attack and defence as its core. From an epistemological standpoint, this paper has traced how the essence of Chinese wushu has gradually been brought into consciousness and organised into a recognisable system. The trajectory runs from instinctive bodily struggle, through ritualised and institutionalised forms of practice, to the crystallisation of relatively distinct quan styles. On the basis of this ontological and epistemological grounding, the axiological discussion shows that the value of Chinese wushu cannot be assessed by the single criterion of “whether it can really fight”. Combat effectiveness undoubtedly represents its original and indispensable value orientation. Yet over the long course of history, Chinese wushu has acquired multiple layers of meaning. It has become a vehicle for bodily training and moral cultivation at the individual level, a medium for social education and ethical regulation, and a carrier of cultural memory

and identity. In contemporary contexts, it also functions as an important resource for public health, community cohesion and cultural diplomacy.

Taken together, this study roots the essence of Chinese wushu in embodied attack and defence practice. It locates its distinctiveness in the historical formation of a quantum-centred knowledge system and clarifies its multi-dimensional value for both individuals and society. In doing so, it reconsiders Chinese wushu from a new angle and offers a theoretical reference point for its future development, transmission and global dissemination.

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