

Research Article

The Development Process of Wushu Under the Influence of Wuju Selection System

Li Jun Hua* 

Physical Education Department, China Women's University, Beijing, China

Abstract

Wuju, historically known as Wuke, was began in Tang Dynasty, the second year when Wu Zetian became empress. It was developed in successive dynasties. However, with the invasions of Western colonists in 19th century, the traditional martial arts were clearly no longer suitable for the needs of modern warfare, finally, it was abolished in the 27th year of Guangxu in Qing Dynasty. The abolition of Wuju system caused a fierce debate in the imperial court. Although there is still little research on the influence of Wuju to the development of martial arts in various dynasties, as the earliest main way to select martial arts talents, it has existed for more than 1,200 years in Chinese history and has improved the selection criteria for talents that are adept with both the pen and the sword. Wuju in Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, military martial arts and folk martial arts are the earliest martial arts system in China. The rise and fall, as well as combination of Wuju and martial arts have a profound impact on the history of martial arts. Therefore, the paper tries to explore to the development process of martial arts by explaining the five stages of Wuju: rise, development, imprisonment, prosperity and defeat, then provides a theoretical basis for future scientific research on martial arts.

Keywords

Wuju, Martial Art, Development, Process

1. Introduction

Prior to the establishment of the Wuju system in the Tang Dynasty, the Qin Dynasty unified the six states and confiscated weapons throughout the realm. This practice, known as "Jiao Di", was considered a form of entertainment by the pre-Qin vassals and gained widespread popularity as a recreational and performance activity, becoming a major feature in the development of martial arts during the Qin Dynasty. The rulers of the two Han Dynasties, in response to the northern invasions by the Xiongnu, fostered a martial atmosphere throughout society, with iron weapons extensively employed on the battlefield. During the Three Kingdoms era,

martial arts routines with martial dance as the main characteristic gained current development. The Wei, Jin, Northern and Southern Dynasties marked a period of extensive integration in martial arts. The Wuju system was initiated during the Sui Dynasty, introducing an informal system for selecting and cultivating martial talents. Its zenith occurred during the Tang Dynasty, followed by reform in the Song Dynasty, development in the Ming Dynasty, and decline in the Qing Dynasty. The Wuju system, as a path alongside the civil examination system, did not wield as much influence and significance in Chinese history as the civil examination sys-

*Corresponding author: ljh0876@163.com (Li Jun Hua)

Received: 6 March 2024; **Accepted:** 29 March 2024; **Published:** 10 May 2024



Copyright: © The Author(s), 2024. Published by Science Publishing Group. This is an **Open Access** article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

tem did. However, it served as a necessary complement to the civil examination system. Without the Wuju system, the completeness of the examination system would not be manifested. Therefore, the Wuju system not only holds a place in the history of examinations but also plays a crucial role in the development of military history, martial arts history, and educational history. Simultaneously, it has a positive impact on the historical stage, being irreplaceable in the training and selection of military talents and the promotion of martial arts development. In each dynasty's Wuju system, it undoubtedly played a positive and developmental role in promoting martial arts, contributing to the development and influence of martial arts in each era.

2. Overview of the Wuju System

Before the Tang Dynasty, the Wuju system primarily employed the method of "selecting talents through martial skills." In the late stages of primitive society, there was no strict distinction between production tools and weapons, with items such as bows, arrows, and clubs serving both as production tools and weapons. The degree of mastery and application of these weapons became a crucial measure of an individual's abilities and prestige. During the Xia, Shang, and Zhou periods, changes in the scale and methods of warfare prompted improvements in the selection methods for martial talents by slaveholders. For instance, during the Shang and Zhou periods, infantry and chariot troops needed to skillfully master the arts of archery and charioteering, making proficiency in these skills an essential criterion for national selection. The Zhou Dynasty further refined the archery system, and by the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, the competition among vassal states led to a heightened emphasis on the cultivation and selection of martial talents. During this period, various vassal states primarily used methods such as "selecting talents through archery" and "selecting talents through strength" in the cultivation and selection of martial talents. From the Qin and Han Dynasties to the Sui Dynasty, the selection of martial artists was mainly carried out through recommendations by court officials, without the need for a standardized examination. However, as society progressed, this unorganized mechanism for selecting martial talents gradually changed, and the Wuju system emerged during this period.

The establishment and consolidation of the Wuju system from the Sui Dynasty to the Tang Dynasty were closely related to the well-developed political system, prosperous economy, and flourishing culture of the time. Learning from the lessons of the Sui Dynasty's downfall, the Tang Dynasty implemented a series of measures to strengthen its political stability, including the inheritance and refinement of the Sui political system. These measures greatly improved the political system of the Tang Dynasty, effectively promoting economic development and securing the leading position of the Tang Dynasty in politics, economy, and culture within the

contemporary world [1]. Due to social stability, economic prosperity, and cultural flourishing, the material and cultural foundation for the subsequent consolidation and development of the Wuju system was established, ensuring the fulfillment of military needs and national security.

3. Formal Establishment of the Wuju System

The Wuju system originated during the reign of Empress Wu Zetian in the year 702 AD, officially adopting the name "Wuju" at that time [2]. The formal establishment of the Wuju system is closely tied to the governance of Empress Wu Zetian. During her reign, opposition forces within the court were rampant, with the rebellion led by the Li Tang royal family and the Yangzhou uprising being notable instances. To strengthen central authority, enhance military capabilities, and diminish the influence of the "elderly faction," Empress Wu Zetian broke away from hereditary systems and introduced the Wuju system. This system included examinations covering various military skills such as archery, crossbow shooting, spear throwing, climbing obstacles, carrying heavy loads, equestrian archery, lance riding, oratory skills, and physical appearance. The Wuju system implemented during the Tang Dynasty, to a certain extent, pioneered the practice of selecting individuals for official positions based on martial skills. A prevailing martial spirit, characterized by vigor and courage, became prominent, establishing the significance of being proficient in both literary and martial arts as a crucial criterion for assessing talents. Through the Wuju system, the Tang Dynasty successfully identified a considerable number of military talents, injecting new vigor into its military development.

3.1. The Impact of the Tang Dynasty Wuju System on the Emergence of Martial Arts

"Wuju" is a subject specifically designed within China's imperial examination system to select individuals with martial skills. During the Tang and Song Dynasties, the Wuju system developed into a relatively sophisticated institutional framework, persisting through the Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods, following the model established during the Tang Dynasty. The Wuju system thrived during the Tang Dynasty but was abolished in the 27th year of the Guangxu era in the Qing Dynasty (1903). Spanning over 1200 years, it was second only to the imperial examination system in terms of duration. This not only played a crucial role in the development of ancient Chinese society but also had a profound impact on the genesis and evolution of martial arts. The establishment of the Wuju system incorporated the selection of martial talents into the imperial examination system, formalizing and standardizing the recruitment and appointment of military talents. The notion of "governing the country with

both culture and military strength" has been a consistent approach for rulers throughout history. The Han Feizi, for example, states, "A country must have both culture and military strength," while the Records of the Grand Historian in the Confucius Family Records asserts, "Those engaged in cultural affairs must also have military preparedness, and those with military preparedness must also engage in cultural affairs." This positive ideological stance recorded in historical texts significantly influenced the development of martial arts. The establishment of the Wujū system opened a gateway for individuals practicing martial arts, contributing significantly to the elevation of the social status of martial practitioners and the formation of a martial ethos within society. Under the continued influence of the Wujū system after the Tang Dynasty, martial arts for physical fitness and entertainment gradually entered the public consciousness, experiencing development and popularity. This had a positive impact on fostering a martial spirit within society, emphasizing the value of traditional martial arts, physical fitness through martial arts, and the entertainment value of martial arts practice. Therefore, the establishment of the "Wujū subject" during the Tang Dynasty played a constructive role in the formation and development of traditional Chinese martial arts, underscoring its crucial role in guiding and promoting the development of martial arts.

3.2. Development Phase of Martial Arts Influenced by the Song Dynasty Wujū System

During the Northern Song period, due to frequent military conflicts, the Wujū system was not implemented, resulting in a brief period of vacancy in the system. However, upon entering the Song Dynasty, the Wujū system gradually resumed. During the reign of Emperor Renzong of Song, the Wujū system was formally implemented. Building upon the development model of balancing literary and martial arts from the Tang Dynasty and the criteria for talent selection, the Song Dynasty required candidates to excel in both martial and literary arts. This served as a valuable reference for the development of the Wujū system. Additionally, the Song Dynasty further categorized the Wujū system into two major types: archery and equestrian skills, and literary arts and strategic questioning, building upon the four-tier examination structure established during the Tang Dynasty. Furthermore, the Song Dynasty effectively elevated the overall cultural and martial quality of individuals achieving the titles of "Wu Jinshi" (martial scholar) and "Wu Zhuangyuan" (martial top scholar). The Song Dynasty can be considered a period of rapid development for the Wujū system, playing a positive role in promoting the selection of outstanding talents in ancient times. Although the Song Dynasty Wujū system inherited elements from the Tang Dynasty, it was not a mere imitation; instead, it introduced its own innovations and developments. In an environment that prioritized literary

achievements over martial prowess, a shift occurred towards valuing literary accomplishments more than martial skills, in contrast to the Tang Dynasty's emphasis on martial prowess [3]. The Song Dynasty advocated and implemented a model that emphasized both literary and martial arts, setting standards for candidates to excel in both domains. This served as a valuable reference for future Wujū selection systems. Furthermore, the Song Dynasty was the earliest to establish specialized schools dedicated to Wujū—known as Wuxue. This initiative contributed to the development of theoretical aspects of martial arts culture, enhancing the overall cultural and martial quality of individuals achieving titles such as "Wu Jinshi" and "Wu Zhuangyuan" to a significant extent. This marked a substantial change in selection compared to the Tang Dynasty and laid a solid foundation for the subsequent inheritance of martial arts knowledge.

3.3. Restrictive Phase of Martial Arts Development Influenced by the Yuan Dynasty Wujū System

The Mongolian ethnic group established the powerful Yuan Dynasty. The Yuan Dynasty did not specifically institute a Wujū system, but in the selection of military talents, it actively emulated the Wujū system of the Song Dynasty. Minister Ma Zu Chang of the Yuan Dynasty once submitted a memorial to the court, proposing the establishment of a "Wuxue" (martial studies) and a "Wujū" system, emphasizing the accumulation of talent for emergencies. Although the Yuan Dynasty had a keen interest in selecting military talents to meet its military needs, it prohibited civilians from practicing martial arts to consolidate its ruling position. Under the governance of the "prohibition on martial activities," the Yuan Dynasty implemented strict control over the management of military weapons. Specifically, this involved prohibiting civilians from collecting and privately manufacturing weapons. While this martial prohibition system to some extent stabilized the rulers' position, it simultaneously heightened ethnic tensions.

Although the Yuan Dynasty did not have a formal Wujū system, it placed significant emphasis on selecting military talents, albeit with certain relaxations in this regard. This stark contrast between the emphasis on selecting military talents and the prohibition of civilian martial arts practice is noteworthy. Given the majority Han population and the presence of other ethnic minorities under Yuan rule, the Yuan Dynasty implemented restrictions on the management of military weapons and civilian martial arts practice after its founding [4]. Additionally, the Yuan Dynasty not only established prohibitions on private collections of military weapons but also formulated detailed penalty clauses. This indicates that the Yuan Dynasty's control over weapons extended beyond the collections and private manufacturing of both civilians and certain official institutions to include intervention in some cultural activities. The increased restrictions on civilian

martial arts practice and the collection and private manufacturing of weapons resulted in a lack of communication and inheritance among martial scholars and practitioners. During this period, the stringent martial prohibitions had an unprecedented restraining effect on the development of martial arts.

3.4. Flourishing Phase of Martial Arts Development Influenced by the Ming Dynasty Wuju System

The Wuju system experienced rapid development during the Ming Dynasty, reaching a flourishing phase. In the twentieth year of Hongwu (1387) in the seventh month, the establishment of Wuxue (martial studies) and the utilization of the Wuju system were enacted. Scholars who excelled in both literary and martial arts were sought after, distinguishing the Ming Dynasty's emphasis on cultivating individuals with a well-rounded education in both fields compared to the Tang, Song, and Yuan Dynasties. The Ming Dynasty's Wuju examinations inclined towards martial skills, significantly elevating the importance placed on military talents and greatly promoting the development of martial sports. The Ming Dynasty Wuju system consisted of three levels: local examinations, provincial examinations, and palace examinations. The content of the Wuju system was divided into two major categories: "strategic" and "technical valor." Notably, Ming Dynasty military figures such as Qi Jiguang and Yu Dayou, representing military talent, combined the technical characteristics of "technical valor" with the military studies found in "strategic" to articulate martial principles. This gradually led to the formation of tactical thoughts and principles within martial arts, further advancing the Wuju system.

Due to ongoing military threats from the north and the persistent issue of repelling Japanese pirates, the Ming Dynasty faced significant challenges [5]. Simultaneously, the renowned Shaolin martial arts began to flourish, playing an irreplaceable role in the establishment of Japanese Judo and Karate during this period. Martial arts no longer remained confined to specific types of weaponry but evolved into distinct schools of thought. The establishment of martial arts routines prompted the formation of China's martial arts system, marking a new stage in martial arts development [6]. During the reign of Zhu Yuanzhang in the Ming Dynasty, the Wuju system was formalized, advocating the parallel development of literary and martial arts. This led to alterations in examination methods, with an increased focus on martial skills. In the context of external threats and internal challenges posed by the Wokou pirates, the rulers significantly heightened their regard for martial arts. Military martial arts, crucial for the battlefield, played a vital role during this period [7]. The Ming Dynasty's emphasis on martial studies within the Wuju system greatly promoted the development of military and martial arts. It also stimulated the collection, organization, and research of martial skills and knowledge at that time. Figures such as Qi Jiguang and Yu Dayou, inte-

grating various technical aspects of martial arts, ingeniously incorporated military studies into technical principles, fostering the study of martial tactics, the establishment of martial arts disciplines, the refinement of martial arts theory, and the augmentation of both academic and practical value.

3.5. Integration Phase of Martial Arts Development Influenced by the Qing Dynasty Wuju System

During the early to mid-Qing Dynasty, there was a prevailing trend of martial valor in society, and this cultural atmosphere was significantly influenced by the development of the Qing Dynasty Wuju system [8]. The Qing Dynasty placed a strong emphasis on the Wuju system, categorizing it into four levels: juvenile examinations, local examinations, provincial examinations, and palace examinations. The testing content included walking and shooting, horseback archery, martial arts skills, and military cultivation, contributing to the further refinement of the Wuju system during the mid-Qing period. Simultaneously, there was a requirement that Manchu individuals had to demonstrate proficiency in horseback riding, walking, and archery to be eligible for examinations. However, as Western invaders encroached in the later Qing period and traditional Wuju no longer met the demands of modern warfare, the Wuju system gradually declined. Despite its demise, the Qing Dynasty Wuju system's development provided valuable lessons [9]. During the "Kangxi and Qianlong era," marked by political, economic, and cultural prosperity, the Wuju system experienced further development. While the later Qing Dynasty witnessed the invasion of Western aggressors and the demise of the traditional Wuju system, the earlier period contributed to the separation of civilian martial arts from military martial skills. Under the influence of the Wuju system, martial arts integrated and exchanged ideas with culture, religion, etiquette, and health practices, significantly enriching the content of martial arts. Therefore, the influence on the development of sports during the Qing Dynasty was substantial. The ultimate abolition of the Qing Wuju system led to the gradual decline of military martial arts within the Qing military, while civilian martial arts experienced flourishing growth. This marked an expansion of martial arts content, with various martial arts schools emerging. The establishment of martial arts schools and the open exchange of skills among practitioners broke down traditional barriers and conservatism. This period became a conducive environment for the systematic classification and reintegration of martial arts content after the dispersion of martial arts culture. Thus, from its decline to abolition, the Wuju system facilitated the rapid development of martial arts and contributed to the process of martial arts becoming more sports-oriented.

4. Conclusion

1) The Wuju system represents the ancient Chinese system

for selecting and nurturing martial arts talents, leading it towards standardization [10]. Throughout its developmental history, the Wujia system has played a crucial role in promoting the expansion and development of martial arts, leaving a profound impact on the history of martial arts development.

- 2) The continuous development of the Wujia system across dynasties can be attributed to its role in refining the ancient imperial examination system to some extent. This refinement effectively propelled the growth and empowerment of civilian martial arts, enhancing the theoretical knowledge and proficiency of martial arts practitioners. Additionally, in historical contexts where there was a prevailing bias towards literary pursuits over martial arts, the Wujia system helped overcome obstacles that hindered the development of martial arts [11].
- 3) While the functional relevance of the Wujia system has diminished over time, it still holds valuable lessons for martial arts development [12]. The Wujia system played a critical role in the rapid growth of civilian martial arts and the process of martial arts becoming more sports-oriented. It contributed significantly to the efficient and stable transmission of martial arts and the enhancement of skills and knowledge among martial arts practitioners.
- 4) The limitations and class-based nature of the Wujia system became apparent in the later stages of feudal dynasties, contributing to its eventual decline due to backwardness and conservatism [13]. Therefore, the Wujia system had both positive and negative aspects. A comprehensive understanding of the historical context of the Wujia system is essential for forming effective perspectives in various fields, including selection and recruitment.

Author Contributions

Li Jun Hua is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Wang, Y. (2016). The Impact of the Wujia System on the Development of Chinese Martial Arts from the Perspective of Communication Studies: A Case Study of the Sui and Tang Dynasties. *Chinese Martial Arts (Research)*, 5(01), 20-23.
- [2] Guo, Y. (2015). Analysis of the Establishment of the Wujia System in the Tang Dynasty. *Journal of Shaanxi Socialist College*, 2015(03), 56-58.
- [3] Xiong, B. (2020). The Wujia System in the Song Dynasty under the Context of Valuing Literature over Martial Arts. *Journal of Kaifeng Culture and Art Vocational College*, 40(07), 15-16.
- [4] Song, L., et al. (1976). *Yuan Shi - Xing Fa Zhi [Yuan Dynasty - Penal Code]*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- [5] Guo, P. (2017). The Formation and Establishment of the Wujia System in the Ming Dynasty. *Ming History Research*, 2017(00), 78-92.
- [6] Huang, Q. (2016). On the Origins of the Wujia Township Examination System in the Ming Dynasty. *Journal of Chengdu Normal University*, 32(10), 84-88.
- [7] Jiang, J. (2008). On the Social Basis of the Prosperity of Martial Arts in the Ming Dynasty. Shandong Normal University, China. (Doctoral dissertation).
- [8] Li, J. (2011). The Impact of the End of the Wujia System in the Qing Dynasty on the Development of Chinese Martial Arts. *Sports and Science*, 32(03), 110-111+120.
- [9] Li, N. (2012). The Influence of the Qing Dynasty Wujia System on Chinese Martial Arts. Shanxi University, China. (Master's thesis).
- [10] Zhou, W. (2015). The Fourteen Stories of Ancient Chinese Martial Arts History: The Wujia System in Ancient China. *Chinese Martial Arts*, 0(2), 30.
- [11] Peng, X., & Cui, H. (2021). Research on the Era Background and Social Value of the Establishment of the Wujia System. *Chinese Martial Arts Research*, 6(08), 6-8+19.
- [12] Chen, K., Li, Y., Yang, A., et al. (2005). Ethnic Traditional Sports and Primitive Religion in the Three Gorges Reservoir Area. *Journal of Beijing Sport University*, 28(12), 1627-1629. <https://doi.org/10.19582/j.cnki.11-3785/g8.2005.12.017>
- [13] Yang, A. (2006). Discussion on the "Military Examination Equipment" of the Martial Science. *Journal of Military Sports College*, 25(3), 42-46.