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Chinese Wushu Transmission among International Students in China: A Qualitative Analysis of Cultural Heritage Processes*

*Çin'deki Uluslararası Öğrenciler Arasında Çin Wushu Aktarımı: Kültürel Miras
Süreçlerinin Nitel Analizi*

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Abstract

Chinese Wushu represents a significant component of traditional Chinese culture with considerable potential for international cultural transmission, yet the lived experiences of international students—who occupy a unique position as both cultural learners and potential transmitters—remain insufficiently understood. This qualitative study explored how international students in China experience and make meaning of Chinese Wushu, identified factors that facilitate or hinder their cultural engagement, and examined the processes through which they develop intentions to transmit Wushu culture. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 32 international students from diverse cultural backgrounds at universities in Chongqing, China, supplemented by participant observation in Wushu classes and cultural events; data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Analysis yielded four interconnected themes: "From Spectacle to Substance," "Body as Bridge," "Negotiating Meanings," and "Becoming Ambassadors." The findings indicate that international students' engagement with Chinese Wushu follows a complex, non-linear trajectory shaped by embodied experience, interpretive negotiation, and relational contexts, and that effective cultural transmission requires attention to the experiential, cognitive, and relational dimensions of learning, with implications for curriculum design and cultural exchange programming.

Keywords: Chinese Wushu, International Students, Cultural Inheritance, Cross-Cultural Communication, Qualitative Analysis

Öz

Çin Wushu'su, geleneksel Çin kültürünün önemli bir bileşenini temsil etmekte olup uluslararası kültürel aktarım açısından kayda değer bir potansiyele sahiptir. Çin'deki uluslararası öğrenciler, hem kültürel öğrenciler hem de potansiyel kültür aktarıcıları olarak benzersiz bir konumda bulunmaktadır. Ancak bu öğrencilerin Wushu kültürüyle karşılaşma, yorumlama ve etkileşim deneyimleri hâlâ yeterince anlaşılamamıştır. Bu nitel çalışma, Çin'deki uluslararası öğrencilerin Çin Wushu'sunu nasıl deneyimlediklerini ve anlamlandırdıklarını araştırmıştır. Kültürel katılımlarını kolaylaştıran veya engelleyen faktörleri belirlemiş ve Wushu kültürünü aktarma niyetlerinin gelişim süreçlerini incelemiştir. Nitel fenomenolojik bir yaklaşım benimsenerek, Chongqing'deki üniversitelerde farklı kültürel geçmişlere sahip 32 uluslararası öğrenciyle derinlemesine yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler yapılmıştır. Bu görüşmeler, Wushu dersleri ve kültürel etkinliklerdeki katılımcı gözlemiyle desteklenmiştir. Veriler, Braun ve Clarke'ın altı aşamalı çerçevesine göre refleksif tematik analiz yöntemiyle çözümlenmiştir. Analiz sonucunda birbirine bağlı dört tema ortaya çıkmıştır: "Gösteriden Öze", "Köprü Olarak Beden", "Anlamların Müzakeresi" ve "Elçi Olmak". Bulgular, uluslararası öğrencilerin Çin Wushu'suyla etkileşiminin bedensel deneyim, yorumlayıcı müzakere ve ilişkisel bağlamlar tarafından şekillendirilen karmaşık ve doğrusal olmayan bir yol izlediğini göstermektedir. Etkili kültürel aktarım, öğrenmenin deneyimsel, bilişsel ve ilişkisel boyutlarına dikkat edilmesini gerektirmekte olup müfredat tasarımı ve kültürel değişim programları için önemli çıkarımlar sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çin Wushu'su, Uluslararası Öğrenciler, Kültürel Miras, Kültürlerarası İletişim, Nitel Analiz

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INTRODUCTION

Chinese Wushu, known variously as Wushu, Gongfu, or Kung Fu (Dai & Lu, 2019: 321), constitutes one of China's most globally recognized cultural exports (Li & Dai, 2021: 769). Beyond their technical dimensions, Chinese Wushu embodies a comprehensive cultural system integrating physical practice, philosophical principles, ethical codes, and aesthetic traditions that have developed over millennia (Bowman, 2019: 5; Chen & Morazuki, 2025: e43769). As China increasingly emphasizes cultural soft power development and international exchange, understanding how this rich cultural heritage is received and interpreted by international audiences has become both practically and theoretically significant.

Philosophical and Cultural Foundations of Chinese Wushu

Chinese Wushu is rooted in a synthesis of China's three major philosophical traditions—Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism—each of which has contributed distinctive elements to martial arts theory and practice (Zhou, 1990: 20). Confucianism provided the ethical framework of *wude* (martial virtue), which encompasses virtues such as benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), propriety (*li*), loyalty (*zhong*), and filial piety (*xiao*), establishing moral cultivation as inseparable from technical training (Wang, 2007: 99). Daoism contributed foundational cosmological concepts, most notably *qi* (vital energy), *yin-yang* (complementary duality), and the principle of *wu wei* (non-forceful action), which inform both the internal dynamics of movement and the practitioner's relationship with nature (Wen, 2008: 7). Buddhist influences introduced meditative discipline, breath regulation practices, and an emphasis on mental stillness that shaped the contemplative dimensions of many Wushu styles (Zhou, 1990: 20).

Cross-cultural philosophical scholarship has increasingly recognized the global significance of these Chinese philosophical traditions. Scholars working across diverse intellectual contexts have made notable contributions to understanding Confucian and Daoist thought in comparative philosophical frameworks. Tan (2017) has examined Confucianism and education, demonstrating how the Confucian pedagogical model—grounded in concepts of *ren* (benevolence) and *li* (propriety) and enacted through the hierarchical yet caring master–student relationship—offers distinctive resources for understanding culturally embedded teaching and moral cultivation. This pedagogical framework, in which learning is inseparable from ethical formation and the teacher serves as moral exemplar, directly illuminates the traditional Wushu *shifu–tudi* (master–disciple) relationship through which technical skill and moral character are transmitted holistically.

Xiaoli (2013) has further demonstrated through philosophical translation work that Confucian ethical concepts resist straightforward linguistic transfer and demand contextualized interpretation to become meaningful across cultural boundaries. This challenge is particularly salient for the *wude* (martial virtue) framework in Wushu, which integrates Confucian ethical concepts—*ren*, *yi* (righteousness), *li*—with martial practice. International students encountering *wude* must navigate not merely unfamiliar vocabulary but an entire ethical system in which virtues are understood relationally and cultivated through embodied practice.

Similarly, Moeller's (2006) systematic philosophical analysis of the *Daodejing* represents a significant cross-cultural engagement with Daoist thought, making foundational concepts—

including wu wei (non-forceful action) and the dialectics of yin-yang—accessible while demonstrating their philosophical complexity. His interpretive work illuminates how these concepts require careful hermeneutic engagement when encountered outside their originating traditions, operating through philosophical logics that emphasize spontaneity, receptivity, and naturalistic harmony in ways that differ from dominant Western frameworks—a dynamic directly relevant to how international students encounter and interpret the Daoist dimensions of Wushu philosophy.

These cross-cultural philosophical engagements underscore that Chinese martial arts philosophy is increasingly subject to global scholarly interpretation, raising important questions about how philosophical concepts embedded in embodied practices like Wushu are understood by learners from diverse cultural and intellectual traditions.

These philosophical streams converge in the traditional pedagogical model of the master–disciple (shifu–tudi) relationship, through which cultural knowledge is transmitted not merely as technical instruction but as holistic formation of the practitioner's character, worldview, and bodily habits (Meng & Cai, 2013: 16; Zhou, 1990: 21). Dai (2012: 11) has described this process as one in which the practitioner's body serves simultaneously as instrument, medium, and repository of cultural knowledge. The concept of shenti wenhua (body culture), frequently invoked in Chinese-language Wushu scholarship, captures this understanding of Wushu as a practice system in which philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic meanings are encoded in and transmitted through physical technique (Dai & Lu, 2019: 322; Qiu & Wang, 2018: 57).

Understanding these philosophical and cultural foundations is essential for examining how international students—who may lack familiarity with these traditions—encounter, interpret, and ultimately transmit Wushu culture. The degree to which these deep cultural dimensions are accessible to learners from diverse backgrounds constitutes a central concern of this study.

International students studying in China represent a particularly important population for examining cultural transmission dynamics. Numbering over 490,000 in 2018 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019), these students experience intensive, sustained exposure to Chinese culture during their educational sojourn. Unlike tourists or casual observers, they engage with Chinese society as participants rather than mere spectators, developing relationships, acquiring language skills, and navigating daily life within Chinese cultural contexts. Upon returning to their home countries, many become informal cultural ambassadors, sharing their experiences and perspectives with family, friends, and broader social networks (Sivaperumal, 2024: 10).

Within Chinese-language scholarship, Wushu cultural transmission (wushu wenhua chuancheng) has been explored from multiple perspectives, including international dissemination strategies (Guo & Fan, 2013: 84) and cultural identity formation among practitioners (Yang, 2022: 85). These Chinese-language contributions provide essential cultural and theoretical grounding that complements the Western theoretical frameworks employed in this study.

Previous research on Chinese Wushu international dissemination has predominantly employed quantitative approaches, focusing on measuring knowledge levels, attitude changes, and behavioral outcomes (Hartig, 2015: 250). Such quantitative approaches, though valuable for

mapping broad patterns, cannot capture the texture of individual experience—the moments of confusion, breakthrough, or unexpected connection that shape how students actually engage with Wushu. Survey responses indicating 'positive attitudes' tell us little about what those attitudes mean to participants or how they developed.

Qualitative inquiry offers a complementary lens. Rather than measuring outcomes against predetermined categories, qualitative approaches enable researchers to explore how participants themselves understand their experiences, what meanings they construct, and how context shapes their engagement (Creswell & Poth, 2016: 77). For a cultural phenomenon as multifaceted as Wushu—simultaneously physical practice, philosophical system, aesthetic form, and identity resource—such exploratory, participant-centered inquiry is particularly appropriate.

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do international students in China experience and make meaning of their encounters with Chinese Wushu?
2. What factors facilitate or hinder their engagement with Wushu culture across cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions?
3. How do international students develop intentions and capacities to transmit Wushu culture to others?

These questions resist quantification. What does it mean to 'understand' a practice rooted in concepts—qi, wude, yin-yang—that may have no equivalents in one's native language? How do students navigate the gap between cinematic fantasy and training-hall reality? Qualitative inquiry, with its tolerance for complexity and contradiction, offers tools suited to these interpretive challenges. Our aim is not to measure cultural transmission but to understand its texture—the confusions, negotiations, and occasional transformations that occur when bodies and ideas cross cultural boundaries.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, specifically drawing on interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) traditions that emphasize understanding lived experience while acknowledging the interpretive role of the researcher (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021: 150). Phenomenology was selected for its focus on how individuals experience and make meaning of particular phenomena—in this case, encounters with Chinese Wushu. The study combined in-depth individual interviews as the primary data source with participant observation as a supplementary method. This methodological triangulation enhanced the richness and trustworthiness of the data.

Study Group

The research was conducted in Chongqing, a major municipality in southwestern China with a substantial international student population and rich Wushu cultural resources (Huang et al., 2025: 235). Data collection occurred between September 2024 and February 2025, spanning

one academic semester. This timing allowed the research team to capture experiences across different stages of students' engagement with Wushu.

Participant recruitment employed a combined strategy of purposeful and snowball sampling. Primary recruitment involved distributing study flyers through international student offices at four Chongqing-based universities: Southwest University, Chongqing Medical University, Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications, and Chongqing Second Normal University. Inclusion criteria were: (1) international student status at a Chongqing university; (2) minimum six months of residence in China; (3) some experience with Chinese Wushu (through formal courses, informal learning, or observation); and (4) willingness to conduct interviews in English or Chinese. Maximum variation was sought in participant characteristics including nationality, gender, educational level, Chinese language proficiency, and extent of Wushu experience. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved—the point at which new interviews yielded no substantially new themes or insights (Guest et al., 2006: 65).

The final sample comprised 32 international students from 18 countries across five continents. Participant characteristics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics (N=32)

Characteristic Category	Specific Classification	n	%
Gender	Male	19	59.4
	Female	13	40.6
Age range	20-24 years	14	43.8
	25-29 years	12	37.5
	≥30 years	6	18.8
Region of origin	Asia	14	43.8
	Africa	7	21.9
	Europe	6	18.8
	Americas	4	12.5
	Oceania	1	3.1
Educational level	Undergraduate	11	34.4
	Master's	15	46.9
	Doctoral	6	18.8
Chinese proficiency	Basic/None	9	28.1
	Intermediate	14	43.8
	Advanced	9	28.1
Wushu experience type	Formal course only	18	56.3
	Course + additional training	8	25.0
	Informal learning/observation	6	18.8

Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Country-specific identifiers are provided in the findings to contextualize responses while maintaining anonymity.

Data Collection Instruments

Two primary instruments were employed in this study: a semi-structured interview guide and a structured observation protocol.

The semi-structured interview guide was developed based on the research questions and refined through pilot interviews with two international students (not included in the final sample). The guide covered six domains: (1) prior knowledge and expectations regarding Chinese Wushu; (2) experiences of learning or encountering Wushu in China; (3) perceptions of Wushu techniques, philosophy, and cultural significance; (4) facilitators and barriers to engagement; (5) personal meaning and significance of Wushu experiences; and (6) intentions and experiences of sharing Wushu with others. Questions were open-ended to elicit rich, detailed responses. Follow-up probes were used flexibly to explore emergent topics.

The observation protocol was designed to systematically document pedagogical practices, student engagement patterns, informal interactions, and the spatial and social organization of Wushu learning contexts. The protocol included structured fields for recording descriptive observations, researcher reflections, and contextual notes.

Data Collection

In-depth interviews. Semi-structured individual interviews constituted the primary data collection method. Interviews were conducted at locations chosen by participants (typically on-campus offices, cafés, or communal areas in dormitories), with each session lasting 60–90 minutes. Twenty-five interviews were conducted in English, while seven were conducted in Mandarin Chinese—a language option selected by participants with advanced proficiency. All interviews were audio-recorded following informed consent. Upon study completion, participants received a gift of ¥35 RMB (approximately US\$5).

The second author, a Master's candidate in Sports Science with advanced English oral proficiency, received intensive training in qualitative interviewing methods and conducted all interviews. As an insider to Chinese physical culture yet an outsider to the participants' own cultural milieus, this positioning fostered reflexive, cross-cultural dialogue. All participant quotations are presented verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participants' voices, including colloquial expressions characteristic of spoken English.

Participant observation. Supplementary data were gathered through participant observation in three contexts: (1) Wushu Physical Education Courses for International Students at Chongqing Medical University and Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications (6-session program); (2) a weekend Wushu workshop for international students (2 days); and (3) a cultural performance event featuring Wushu demonstrations (1 event). Field notes were recorded during and immediately after observation sessions using the structured observation protocol described above.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. Chinese-language interviews were transcribed in Chinese and subsequently translated into English by the first author; translations were verified by the second author.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006: 86) six-phase reflexive thematic analysis framework:

1. Familiarization: Repeated reading of transcripts and field notes, noting initial impressions and ideas.
2. Coding: Systematic generation of codes capturing meaningful features of the data.
3. Theme development: Collating codes into initial themes representing patterns across the dataset.
4. Theme review: Checking themes against coded extracts and the full dataset; refining theme boundaries.
5. Theme definition: Developing clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Writing: Producing the analytical narrative integrating themes with data extracts.

Analysis was conducted primarily by the first author using NVivo 12 software. Regular discussions with co-authors provided analytical triangulation. An audit trail documented analytical decisions throughout the process.

Validity and Reliability

Several strategies were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of this qualitative study. First, methodological triangulation was achieved by combining interview data with participant observation, enabling cross-verification of findings across data sources. Second, the first author maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process, documenting assumptions, reactions, and interpretive choices. As a Chinese Wushu practitioner, the first author possessed insider knowledge of Wushu culture but risked overlooking aspects that seemed "obvious" or imposing Wushu-centric interpretations on participants' experiences; the reflexive journal served to mitigate these risks by making researcher positionality explicit and subject to ongoing scrutiny. Third, member checking was conducted with a subset of participants ($n = 8$), who reviewed preliminary findings and provided feedback on the accuracy and resonance of interpretations. Fourth, analytical triangulation was achieved through regular discussions among co-authors during the coding and theme development process. Fifth, a detailed audit trail documented all analytical decisions, from initial coding through final theme definitions, ensuring the transparency and reproducibility of the analytical process. Finally, thick description—the provision of detailed contextual information and extensive participant quotations—enables readers to assess the transferability of findings to other contexts.

Ethics Committee Declaration

This study involved human participants and required ethics committee approval.

Board Name: Ethics Committee of the School of Physical Education, Southwest University

Decision Date: April 5, 2024

Document Number: SWUPE-2024-045

RESULTS

Analysis revealed four interconnected themes that illuminate the experience of international students encountering Chinese Wushu: (1) "From Spectacle to Substance"; (2) "Body as Bridge"; (3) "Negotiating Meanings"; and (4) "Becoming Ambassadors." These themes are presented sequentially, though in practice they overlap and interact dynamically in participants' experiences.

Theme 1: From Spectacle to Substance

Nearly all participants described prior exposure to Chinese Wushu through media—primarily action films, but also video games, documentaries, and social media content. This mediated familiarity shaped expectations that in-China experiences subsequently challenged, refined, or transformed.

Media-Derived Expectations

Film stars Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Bruce Lee were referenced by 28 of 32 participants as primary sources of pre-arrival Wushu knowledge. For many, cinematic representations constituted virtually the entirety of their understanding. As David (24, American, master's student) noted, "my whole idea of Kung Fu was basically Jackie Chan movies. I knew it was not realistic, but that is what I pictured." Similarly, Kwame (26, Ghanaian, doctoral student) described growing up on martial arts films and feeling that he "already knew Wushu, even though I had never actually tried it myself."

This media-derived knowledge generated interest that drew students toward Wushu engagement. As Yuki (22, Japanese, undergraduate) stated, "the movies made me curious. That is why I signed up for the Wushu class here." However, it also established expectations that actual practice frequently contradicted.

Encountering the "Real"

Several participants described initial disillusionment when practice diverged from cinematic expectations:

"The first class was actually boring to me. Just basic stances, very slow movements. I thought, where is the fighting? It took time to understand this is a different thing from what I imagined." (Samuel, 23, Nigerian, undergraduate)

Over time, many came to view this divergence positively, perceiving deeper authenticity in practice:

"The real practice is much more simple, more focused on basics, on details. But this simplicity is actually more profound. There is a saying our teacher uses—'practice one move ten thousand times rather than ten thousand moves once.'" (Maria, 29, Brazilian, master's student)

For participants from Asian countries with martial arts traditions, the encounter with Chinese Wushu prompted comparative reflection. Kenji (27, Japanese, doctoral student) observed: "Chinese Wushu feel different—more flowing, more internal somehow. It made me think about why martial arts developed differently in different places."

Importantly, the shift from spectacle to substance was not a single revelation but a continuous process. Participants described holding multiple, sometimes conflicting, images of Wushu simultaneously. As Chen Wei (24, Malaysian, undergraduate) explained, "I have two pictures in my mind now: the movie picture and the practice picture. Sometimes they talk to each other." This multiplicity suggests that media representations and experiential knowledge coexist rather than one replacing the other, and that cultural transmission involves adding new dimensions to existing understandings rather than erasing them.

Theme 2: Body as Bridge

The embodied nature of Wushu practice emerged as central to participants' experiences. Physical engagement served not merely as a vehicle for cultural content but as a distinctive mode of cultural understanding.

Learning Through Movement

Participants consistently described how physical practice produced understanding that surpassed verbal explanation:

"Qi—I still don't fully understand it, honestly. But there was this one class where something shifted. My teacher hadn't said anything different, but suddenly I noticed this... warmth? In my hands. Maybe it's just blood circulation, I don't know. But after that, when he talked about qi, I had something to connect it to." (Isabella, 30, Italian, doctoral student)

"The yin-yang thing confused me at first because I'd read about it as this abstract philosophy. Then we practiced push hands, and my partner kept defeating me because I was too hard, too resistant. My teacher said 'be water.' Sounds cliché, right? But when I finally softened and he couldn't push me anymore—that's when yin-yang stopped being just words." (Amara, 26, Kenyan, master's student)

This pattern—embodied experience making abstract concepts tangible—appeared across Wushu styles and participant backgrounds. The body became a site of knowledge production rather than merely a recipient of instruction.

Observation data supported these accounts. During a Taiji push-hands exercise, students initially approached with visible tension and resistance. Over the session, some visibly relaxed and began to "listen" to their partners' movements. Rahul (25, Indian, master's student) later described: "When I stopped trying to push and started feeling what my partner was doing, something clicked. The teacher had said 'follow, do not fight,' but I did not understand until my body found it."

The Body as Common Language

Several participants highlighted how embodied practice transcended linguistic barriers. As Pierre (23, French, undergraduate) explained, "My Chinese is not good. In regular class, I miss a lot. But in Wushu, even when I do not understand the teacher's words, I can follow his body. Watch, imitate, feel. The body communicates." This bodily communication also facilitated intercultural exchange; participants described sharing movement practices from their own backgrounds—yoga, capoeira, traditional dance—creating informal spaces of mutual embodied learning that bypassed linguistic constraints.

Physical Challenges and Breakthroughs

Participants' narratives frequently emphasized physical difficulty as a meaningful component of their experience:

"The horse stance—I hated it at first. My legs burning, shaking. But the teacher said, 'Training the body trains the mind.' After many weeks, when I could hold it longer, I felt accomplishment, but also something changed in my attitude. More patience, maybe." (Ahmed, 27, Egyptian, master's student)

These accounts suggest that physical challenges served as sites of personal transformation, not merely skill development.

Limitations of Embodied Learning

While participants generally valued embodied learning, some articulated its limitations. James (29, British, doctoral student) asked, "Am I really learning Chinese culture, or just learning some exercises? The forms do not explain themselves." Elena (26, Spanish, master's student) similarly noted that her teacher focused on technique correction with little cultural explanation. This observation points to an important finding: embodied learning, while powerful, requires complementary verbal explanation and cultural contextualization to realize its full potential as a mode of cultural transmission.

Theme 3: Negotiating Meanings

Participants engaged in active interpretive work as they encountered Wushu concepts and values. This process of meaning negotiation involved relating new cultural content to existing frameworks—sometimes finding resonance, sometimes experiencing tension, and often arriving at novel syntheses.

Finding Unexpected Resonances

Many participants discovered connections between Wushu concepts and elements of their own cultural backgrounds. Min-jun (24, Korean, master's student) found that the emphasis on respecting teachers and hierarchical etiquette felt familiar through Korean cultural values. Fatima (25, Moroccan, master's student) connected wude (martial virtue) to Quranic teachings on inner purification. Rahul (25, Indian, master's student) linked qi to the concept of prana in yoga, recognizing that "different word, maybe different concept exactly, but close enough that I had a starting point."

However, participants also recognized that such connections could be misleading. Isabella (30, Italian, doctoral student) initially approached Taiji like yoga but came to recognize its distinct martial dimension: "I had to unlearn my yoga assumptions."

Experiencing Cultural Dissonance

Not all cross-cultural comparisons yielded easy resonance. Lars (27, Danish, master's student) found the hierarchical etiquette "uncomfortable at first" given Danish egalitarian norms. Maria (29, Brazilian, master's student) challenged traditional gender assumptions in Wushu practice. James (29, British, doctoral student) struggled with spiritual concepts, ultimately reframing them "more as metaphors than literal facts." These moments of cultural friction, while

challenging, often prompted deeper reflection and more nuanced understanding than easy resonance alone.

Constructing Personal Syntheses

Through negotiation, participants developed personalized understandings. Amara (26, Kenyan, master's student) connected wude to the African philosophy of Ubuntu: "the sense that we become persons through our relationships and responsibilities to others. I do not know if this is exactly what Chinese people mean, but it is how I understand it now." James reframed Wushu philosophy in psychological terms: "Yin-yang as balance between different parts of yourself. Qi as embodied awareness." These personal syntheses represent not distortion of Wushu culture but creative cultural work through which participants made meaning.

This process of cross-cultural philosophical negotiation resonates with scholarly work examining how Chinese philosophical concepts operate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Sertdemir Özdemir's (2020: 115) analysis of how the Confucian concept of *li* (ritual propriety)—central to the wude framework in Wushu—requires contextualized interpretation in non-Chinese cultural contexts illuminates the hermeneutic challenges international students face. Similarly, Ünal Chiang's (2018: 104) examination of *wu wei* demonstrates that even seemingly straightforward concepts like "non-action" or "effortless action" carry philosophical complexities that demand interpretive work when encountered outside their originating traditions.

These philosophical analyses suggest that the meaning-negotiation processes participants described are not merely individual psychological processes but reflect deeper hermeneutic dynamics inherent in cross-cultural philosophical engagement. When Amara connected wude to Ubuntu, or when James reframed yin-yang in psychological terms, they were engaging in the kind of interpretive bridging-work that cross-cultural philosophy requires.

The Role of Explanation and Discussion

Participants emphasized that their meaning-making was facilitated or hindered by opportunities for explanation and discussion. Kwame (26, Ghanaian, doctoral student) valued when "the teacher stops and explains why we do things a certain way, what is the meaning behind the movement." Observation data revealed significant variation in pedagogical approaches, with students in classes featuring cultural contextualization developing more elaborate cultural understandings.

Theme 4: Becoming Ambassadors

Participants reflected on their potential and actual roles as cultural transmitters.

Transmission Intentions

Nearly all participants expressed some intention to share Wushu experiences, though the scope varied considerably—from casual family demonstrations (Samuel), to informal health-practice sharing (Fatima), to pursuing formal teaching certification (Isabella). Students with more extensive training expressed more ambitious transmission goals.

Already Transmitting

Several participants had already engaged in informal transmission through digital and interpersonal channels. Sofia (24, Russian, undergraduate) posted short practice videos on Instagram, generating curiosity and questions: "It has become like a little way I represent Chinese culture." Chen Wei (24, Malaysian, undergraduate) demonstrated movements during family video calls, observing that his nephew's imitation attempts felt like "planting seeds." These informal activities, often spontaneous and unplanned, represented early manifestations of the cultural ambassador role.

Challenges and Hesitations

Despite positive intentions, participants articulated concerns about authenticity and readiness. Yuki worried about spreading misinformation. Lars noted that "many terms do not translate well." Kwame anticipated skepticism: "People might think it is weird—why are you, an African, teaching Chinese Wushu?" Maria expressed concern about "turning it into some mystical Oriental thing." These concerns reflected thoughtful awareness of the responsibilities of cross-cultural mediation.

Enhancing Transmission Capacity

Participants suggested interventions including multilingual instructional materials (Samuel), certification programs providing credibility (Fatima), practitioner networks for ongoing support (Isabella), and training in cross-cultural explanation methods (James). These suggestions point toward programmatic interventions with significant implications for cultural dissemination strategy.

Cross-Cutting Dynamics

Three factors modulated the themes described above. First, cultural distance shaped engagement: participants from Asian backgrounds reported greater ease, as shared philosophical heritage created what Min-jun described as not needing explanation for values such as respect and patience. However, participants from more distant backgrounds sometimes valued the challenge, as Lars noted: "Everything was new to me... it was harder, but maybe I also paid more attention because nothing was familiar."

Second, Chinese language proficiency significantly moderated depth of engagement. Maria observed that when she could understand her teacher's Chinese explanations, "whole new levels opened up." Conversely, David, with limited Chinese, estimated he caught "maybe 60%" of class content.

Third, pedagogical approach varied significantly across instructors, with participants most positively evaluating teachers who combined rigorous physical training with culturally sensitive explanation adapted to international students' frameworks.

CONCLUSION, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary and Integration of Findings

This qualitative exploration illuminates the complex, multidimensional processes through which international students encounter, engage with, and make meaning of Chinese Wushu. The

four themes identified—from spectacle to substance, body as bridge, negotiating meanings, and becoming ambassadors—together reveal cultural transmission as an active, interpretive, embodied process that unfolds over time and varies significantly across individuals and contexts.

The findings challenge simplistic transmission models that conceptualize cultural spread as message transfer from sender to receiver. Instead, they support constructivist perspectives emphasizing the active role of audiences in co-producing cultural meaning (Hall et al., 2003: 120). International students did not passively receive Wushu culture; they actively interpreted, questioned, connected, and synthesized new cultural elements with existing frameworks to construct personalized understandings. Amara's connection of wude to Ubuntu and James's reframing of yin-yang in psychological terms exemplify this active co-construction.

Embodiment as Central Dimension

A recurring theme across interviews and participant observation was the centrality of embodied experience in processes of cultural transmission. Participants emphasized that certain forms of understanding could only be accessed through sustained physical engagement, rather than through verbal instruction or discursive explanation alone. This insistence on the corporeal dimensions of learning resonates strongly with phenomenological accounts of skill acquisition that foreground the role of bodily habituation and perceptual attunement (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986: 30; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2013: 250). It also echoes ethnographic work that takes seriously the non-verbal, sensorial, and kinesthetic registers through which cultural knowledge is conveyed and constituted (Downey et al., 2015: 190; Wacquant, 2006: 75).

Crucially, this finding aligns with Dai's (2012: 11) analysis of traditional Wushu as a holistic practice system in which the practitioner's body serves simultaneously as instrument, medium, and repository of cultural knowledge. As Isabella's account of feeling warmth in her hands during Taiji practice illustrates, certain dimensions of cultural knowledge become accessible only through sustained bodily engagement. Similarly, Amara's experience of comprehending yin-yang philosophy through the physical dynamics of push-hands practice exemplifies how embodied encounters can render abstract concepts tangible in ways that verbal explanation alone cannot achieve.

For Wushu cultural transmission, this finding has significant implications. Programs that emphasize discursive cultural education—lectures, readings, discussions—may fail to leverage the powerful learning channel that embodied practice provides. Conversely, purely physical training without cultural contextualization may produce skilled movement but limited cultural understanding. James's question—"Am I really learning Chinese culture, or just learning some exercises?"—captures this tension precisely. Meng and Cai (2013: 17) have argued that effective Wushu pedagogy integrates technical training with cultural education, a recommendation strongly supported by participants' experiences. The most effective approaches, participants suggested, integrate embodied practice with reflective dialogue.

The Role of Prior Knowledge and Expectations

The ubiquity of media-derived prior knowledge shaped participants' engagement trajectories. Nearly all entered with expectations formed by film representations—expectations that practice subsequently complicated. This finding resonates with research on media influence

on cultural perceptions (Bowman, 2010: 450) and highlights both opportunities and challenges for Wushu promotion.

Media representations generate interest and motivation that can draw audiences toward deeper engagement; Yuki's decision to enroll in a Wushu class specifically because of film-inspired curiosity illustrates this dynamic. However, when experiential reality diverges significantly from mediated expectation—as Samuel discovered when his first class featured "just basic stances, very slow movements"—disappointment or confusion may result. Effective cultural transmission may require explicit attention to bridging media images and practice realities, helping learners understand the relationship between spectacular representation and authentic tradition.

Cultural Distance and Accessibility

The finding that cultural background significantly shaped engagement patterns resonates with theoretical frameworks emphasizing cultural distance (Hofstede, 2001: 45) and acculturation dynamics (Berry, 1997: 15). Students from Asian backgrounds often found familiar cultural touchstones that facilitated engagement, while students from more distant backgrounds faced greater interpretive challenges.

Importantly, however, cultural distance did not determine engagement quality in a straightforward way. Lars explicitly noted that "everything was new to me... it was harder, but maybe I also paid more attention because nothing was familiar." This observation suggests that greater cultural distance, while increasing interpretive demands, may simultaneously heighten reflexive engagement and produce more deliberate, articulated forms of cultural understanding. Yang (2022: 85) has similarly argued that cultural identity formation in Wushu involves not merely proximity to tradition but active interpretive engagement, regardless of the practitioner's cultural origin.

Language emerged as a particularly significant accessibility factor. Students with limited Chinese proficiency often felt excluded from the richer dimensions of Wushu instruction, as David's estimation of catching "maybe 60%" illustrates. This finding suggests a need for multilingual resources and culturally sensitive teaching approaches.

This process of cross-cultural philosophical negotiation resonates with scholarly work examining how Chinese philosophical concepts operate across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Tan's (2015: 433) analysis demonstrates that Confucian educational values—including the emphasis on hierarchical respect and moral cultivation through ritualized practice—embody pedagogical assumptions that require careful contextualization when encountered by learners from different educational traditions. The Confucian concept of *li* (ritual propriety), central to the wude framework in Wushu, exemplifies this challenge: what appears as hierarchical formality to some international students reflects a deeper philosophical commitment to cultivating virtue through structured social practice—a logic that may be unfamiliar to those from more individualistic educational traditions.

Lu (2009: 129) has further illuminated how Confucian relational ethics, including concepts foundational to wude such as *xiao* (filial piety) and role-based moral responsibility, resist direct translation and demand engagement with the philosophical system that gives them

meaning. For Wushu learners, this implies that wude cannot be grasped as a simple list of virtues but requires understanding how these ethical concepts operate within webs of relationships and are cultivated through embodied practice rather than abstract contemplation.

Similarly, Slingerland's (2017: 431) examination of conceptual metaphor in Chinese philosophy demonstrates that Daoist concepts like *wu wei* carry philosophical complexities rooted in culturally specific metaphorical systems. Terms like "non-action" or "effortless action" translate poorly because they evoke metaphors (water's flow, infant's spontaneity) grounded in particular ways of understanding the relationship between agency and naturalness—metaphors that demand interpretive work when encountered outside their originating traditions.

These philosophical analyses suggest that the meaning-negotiation processes participants described are not merely individual psychological processes but reflect deeper hermeneutic dynamics inherent in cross-cultural philosophical engagement. When Amara connected wude to Ubuntu, she was drawing on her own tradition's relational ethics to construct a bridge toward Confucian virtue ethics—precisely the kind of creative interpretive work that cross-cultural philosophical understanding requires (Lu, 2009: 130). When James reframed yin-yang in psychological terms, he was engaging in the metaphorical reasoning that Slingerland (2017: 431) identifies as essential when philosophical concepts rooted in one cultural-linguistic system travel to another.

From Recipients to Transmitters

The theme of becoming ambassadors reveals international students' potential as active agents of cultural dissemination. Participants not only developed intentions to share Wushu experiences but in many cases were already doing so through informal digital and interpersonal channels. Sofia's Instagram posts and Chen Wei's family video-call demonstrations illustrate the organic, grassroots nature of this transmission.

However, participants also expressed significant concerns about their readiness and capacity for authentic cultural transmission. Kwame's worry that "people might think it is weird—why are you, an African, teaching Chinese Wushu?" and Maria's concern about "turning it into some mystical Oriental thing" reveal that aspiring cultural transmitters grapple not only with knowledge sufficiency but also with questions of legitimacy, authenticity, and the ethics of cross-cultural representation.

The transition from cultural recipient to potential transmitter mirrors processes described in Chinese-language scholarship on Wushu dissemination. Guo and Fan (2013: 85) have argued that effective international Wushu transmission requires not merely technical competence but cultivated capacity for cross-cultural interpretation—a point strongly supported by participants' accounts. Similarly, Wang (2007: 99) has emphasized that cultural inheritance depends on practitioners' ability to internalize and subsequently articulate the philosophical and ethical dimensions of Wushu, not merely its physical forms.

Implications for Theory

The findings extend cultural transmission theory in several ways. First, they validate the applicability of constructivist reception theory (Hall et al., 2003: 120) to embodied cultural practices, demonstrating that even physical skills are interpreted through cultural frameworks

rather than simply absorbed. Second, they highlight the distinctive role of embodiment in cultural learning, suggesting that embodied and discursive modes of cultural transmission operate through different but complementary mechanisms—a point illustrated by the contrast between Isabella's embodied grasp of qi and James's continued uncertainty despite cognitive engagement.

Third, the findings support conceptualizing cultural transmission as a two-stage process: reception and retransmission. The distinction between these stages was vividly illustrated in the data: participants such as James, who could execute Wushu movements proficiently, nonetheless questioned whether technical competence constituted genuine cultural understanding—a concern directly relevant to the quality of subsequent retransmission.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should inform interpretation and suggest future research directions. First, the sample was geographically limited to Chongqing, which, while culturally rich in Wushu resources, may not represent all Chinese regions or Wushu traditions. Research in other locations could reveal how regional variation shapes international students' experiences. Second, while maximum variation sampling was employed, the sample may overrepresent students with sufficient interest and engagement to participate in Wushu-related research. Students with minimal engagement or negative experiences may be underrepresented. Third, as a cross-sectional study, the research captured experiences at a single time point. Longitudinal research tracking students' Wushu engagement over extended periods—including after leaving China—would provide richer understanding of transmission trajectories. Fourth, researcher positionality as a Chinese Wushu practitioner may have influenced data collection and interpretation. While reflexive practices and member checking mitigated this risk, the possibility of biased interpretation cannot be entirely eliminated.

Conclusion

This qualitative study illuminates the lived experiences of international students in China encountering Chinese Wushu, revealing a complex process of cultural engagement that unfolds through embodied learning, interpretive negotiation, and gradual transformation from cultural recipients toward potential cultural transmitters. Four interconnected themes capture this process: the evolution from media-shaped expectations to experiential understanding; the role of the body as a privileged site of cultural learning; the active interpretive work through which participants reconcile new cultural content with prior frameworks; and the development of intentions and capacities to share Wushu culture with others. Cultural background, language proficiency, and pedagogical approach emerged as significant factors shaping engagement trajectories. The findings contribute to cultural transmission theory by highlighting the active, constructive nature of cross-cultural reception and the distinctive role of embodiment in learning.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are offered for enhancing Chinese Wushu cultural transmission among international students:

1. Integrate embodied practice with cultural explanation. Physical training should be accompanied by accessible discussion of cultural meaning, adapted to participants' linguistic

abilities and cultural frameworks. Instructors should move beyond technique-focused pedagogy to incorporate historical, philosophical, and ethical contextualization within practice sessions.

2. Address media-shaped expectations explicitly. Programs should acknowledge and discuss the relationship between film representations and actual practice, helping participants navigate the transition from spectacle to substance. Orientation sessions or introductory materials that bridge cinematic imagery and authentic tradition could reduce initial disillusionment and facilitate deeper engagement.

3. Provide multilingual resources. Given language barriers' significant impact on depth of engagement, developing quality English-language and other-language instructional materials—including video tutorials, illustrated guides, and glossaries of key terms—could substantially enhance accessibility for students with limited Chinese proficiency.

4. Develop transmission capacity intentionally. If international students are valued as cultural transmitters, programs should include training on how to explain and share Wushu culture effectively across cultural contexts—not merely how to practice. Workshops on cross-cultural communication, simplified teaching methods, and digital content creation would equip students for their informal ambassador roles.

5. Create ongoing connections. Networks linking international Wushu learners can provide support, resources, and community that facilitate continued engagement and transmission after students leave China. Online platforms, alumni associations, and international practice groups could sustain engagement beyond the sojourn period.

6. Acknowledge and leverage diversity. Rather than one-size-fits-all approaches, programming should recognize how cultural background shapes engagement and offer differentiated pathways. Students from culturally proximate backgrounds may benefit from advanced philosophical discussions, while those from more distant backgrounds may require additional scaffolding for unfamiliar concepts.

Several avenues for future research also emerge from these findings: (1) longitudinal tracking of how Wushu engagement evolves during students' stay in China and after returning home; (2) comparative studies examining how experiences differ across Wushu styles, pedagogical approaches, and geographical regions; (3) investigation of what occurs when international students share Wushu culture with home-country audiences; (4) development and testing of programs designed to enhance international students' cultural transmission capacity; and (5) exploration of the role of social media and digital platforms in Wushu engagement and transmission activities. As China continues to promote international cultural exchange, understanding international students' experiences more deeply—not merely measuring outcomes but comprehending processes—can inform more effective, nuanced approaches to sharing China's rich Wushu heritage with the world.

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Authorship Contribution

This study was conducted as a multi-authored collaborative work. The first author (40%) was responsible for conceptualization, research design, data analysis as the primary coder, Chinese-English translation, theme development, manuscript drafting, and manuscript revision. The second author (30%) was responsible for data collection, including conducting all 32 interviews and participant observation, as well as translation verification, pilot interview refinement, and critical review of findings. The third author (30%) provided supervision, methodological guidance, and analytical triangulation, and contributed to the critical review and editing of the manuscript and funding acquisition. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Ethics Committee Declaration

This study involved human participants and required ethics committee approval.

Board Name: Ethics Committee of the School of Physical Education, Southwest University

Decision Date: April 5, 2024

Document Number: SWUPE-2024-045

All participants provided written informed consent after receiving detailed information about the study purpose, procedures, data handling, and their rights. Participants were assured of confidentiality and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely on password-protected devices, with access limited to the research team. All participant quotations are presented using pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

Consent for Publication

All participants have provided written consent for the publication of anonymized quotations and findings.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data generated and analyzed in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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