

Projecting “Chineseness”: Nationalism, Identity, and Chinese Martial Arts Films

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Abstract

Wushu, also known as Kung Fu, is a traditional Chinese martial art. It also symbolizes the strength of the Chinese and their pride in their history. Wushu came to be associated with Chinese nationalism after China's various defeats at the hands of foreign imperialist powers at the turn of the 20th century. This relationship has been further strengthened through martial arts films. In the first half of the 20th century, martial arts films helped to construct national identity among the Chinese. They also facilitated the development of Wushu, making it a symbol of indigenous virtue and strength. From the late 1960s, influenced by a defensive strain of nationalism, Chinese filmmakers began to adopt a new approach to the portrayal of Wushu. Martial arts films were endowed with political and cultural significance, and evolved as a unique representation of Chinese nationalism. Several decades later, martial arts films still retain at their core a sense of "Chineseness". From Bruce Lee's *Fist of Fury* to Donnie Yen's *IP Man*, Chinese martial arts films have demonstrated not only the important place of Wushu in Chinese nationalism, but also the influence of nationalism on Chinese cinema.

Keywords: Wushu; Chinese martial arts film; identity; nationalism; cinema

Renan argued that "a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle".¹ This soul or principle is constituted by two elements: a legacy of remembrances and the will to continue to value such heritage. Wushu has long been regarded as one of the most important elements of Chinese culture. From its very beginning, Chinese nationalism was tightly bound to Wushu. In the 1890s, the rapidly developing network of Wushu clubs united

Chinese people against the foreign aggressors and gave birth to the Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901). After the 1911 nationalist revolution, Wushu was recognized by most of the Chinese as a basic means to “preserve the nation” and “preserve the race”. The government, educationalists, and the general public supported the widespread promotion of Wushu as a means to encourage individual fitness and aid national defence.² The nationwide development of Wushu in the Republic of China era (1912–1949) revealed the extent to which the nation’s soul and spiritual principle were valued and preserved by its people. In the following decades, Wushu successfully reinforced its place as one of the most important cultural images of the Chinese nation. Its relationship with Chinese nationalism has been fortified over the course of time.

Benedict Anderson has argued that the print media facilitated the construction of nationalism and national consciousness.³ Cinema has also functioned as an important vehicle for the “maintenance and reinvention of nationhood”.⁴ From the beginning of the 20th century, the relationship between Wushu and nationalism was consolidated by martial arts films. Influenced by nationalism, these films have relied upon “large bodies of Chinese tradition including Wuxia literature, Chinese opera, and Chinese martial arts themselves”.⁵ They have built Wushu into a symbol of indigenous virtue and strength. This article will discuss the relationships between nationalism, Wushu, and Chinese martial arts films. It will explain how Wushu became linked to national identity and nationalism through film, and how these films have helped Wushu lay a rhetorical claim to Chinese purity and identity.

The Beginning (1920s–1930s)

Descriptions of Wushu can be traced to the Xia Dynasty (2100 BC–1600 BC).⁶ At that time, Wushu was a part of military training.⁷ With the development of technology