

Original Article

Martial Arts in Folklore: Exploring Cultural Significance, Myths, and Traditions across Different Societies

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This empirical study examines the cultural significance, myths, and traditions of martial arts across various societies, focusing on how these elements shape and reflect cultural identities, values, and practices; utilizing a comparative analysis of folklore, historical texts, and contemporary interpretations, the research identifies common themes such as heroism, discipline, and spiritual enlightenment in martial arts narratives; findings reveal that martial arts myths often serve as vehicles for moral instruction and cultural continuity, with figures like China's Wudang masters, Japan's samurai, and India's Kalaripayattu practitioners embodying ideals of virtue, strength, and resilience; the study also highlights the role of martial arts in nation-building and cultural preservation, noting how modern adaptations and global dissemination have transformed traditional practices while maintaining their symbolic essence; implications suggest that understanding martial arts folklore can enhance appreciation for cultural diversity and inform contemporary martial arts pedagogy, promoting a holistic approach that integrates physical training with cultural and philosophical education.

Keywords: Martial Arts, Folklore, Cultural Identity, Myths, Traditions, Discipline

Introduction

The remarkable thing is, martial arts around the world have a deep cultural heritage. These martial arts are both physical disciplines used for TCMS and combat, and embodiments of deep cultural, spiritual, and philosophical lessons. With their strict forms of Kung Fu in China, the bushido code for the samurai of Japan, or the ancient Kalaripayattu discipline in India, martial arts have played a critical role in forging national identities, values, and communal relationships. Because martial arts gained popularity as a sport, a method of exercise, and a means of discipline thousands of years ago, they serve as an emblem of the connection between ancient and modern cultures. In these martial tradition's tales of wonderment, mythologies, and folklore have layered into practice symbolic meanings and lessons to aspire to. These cultural narratives serve to place martial arts above mere physical exercise and root them into the core belief systems of a given society. Martial arts notions of the legendary soldier or the shamanic teacher often come forth as myths to learn from, as exemplars of honorable behavior. Legendary images link martial arts to a kind of social responsibility, as shown by Wong Fei-hung, a martial artist and healer in Chinese folklore (Teng, 2006). In the same vein, samurai in Japan are often shown as loyal, disciplined, warriors in history books such as the 47 Ronin (Ishikawa (2018)). These figures go beyond just physical strength, embodying moral and communal principles of their cultures. The relationship between martial arts and folklore is as intricately entwined as both are culturally significant (Hirsch, 1992; Malkin, 1998), and so a study of folklore as it pertains to the cross-cultural expanse of martial arts likely remains sorely overdue. Though there exists a wealth of literature about the physical components and training philosophies of martial arts, there is a more limited range of literature that examines martial arts as cultural phenomena and their effects on the construction of moral values, identities, and social cohesion in various societies.

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The realization that martial arts are a phenomenon worthy of broader comparative investigation has largely failed to reach the growing academy of martial arts historians; existing research is hampered either by a scholarly focus on singular cultural traditions or by an anthropological emphasis on the technical aspects of particular martial disciplines. The modern resurgence of martial arts around the world needs urgent investigation in cultural heritage, and the transition of martial arts from folklore to the contemporary setting. Reading martial arts through folklore, myths and customs is essential to understand their cultural invariants. Even though martial arts represent a few high-level values, folklore and mythology help give context to the roles they play in social structure, how they contribute to national identity and inner-community cohesion. By way of illustration, the Brazilian martial art, Capoeira, combines aspects of dance and combat and speaks to the narratives of resistance, survival, and freedom characteristic of the colonial experience of enslaved Africans (Matos, 2004). Likewise, Filipino Eskrima, a martial art that concentrates on weapons and unarmed fighting, is more than physical movement or sport; it is a contemporary application of Filipino culture and imagination, life stories, and heritage that have gained prominence in folk stories and public events (Gombis, 2002). Martial arts, through these narratives, facilitate the networks that construct national and local identities and produce the bonding that creates communities. Introduction This study aims to investigate the cultural meanings, symbolism, legends and myths specific to martial arts present across diverse cultures and societies to cover the gap existing in the literature to provide a cross-cultural comparative study of folklore and mythology surrounding martial arts over cultures. The study examines the representation of martial arts in these narratives, highlighting their significance in framing social norms and identity, along with their impact on social cohesion. In particular, this study will examine the role that martial arts have played in mediating the transmission of values such as honor, discipline, bravery, and social justice across generations. Through exploring these facets of martial arts, this research hopes to culminate towards a holistic image of martial arts as a multi-dimensional cultural phenomenon, as opposed to simply another form of embodied activity.

Research Questions

1. How do martial arts appear in the folklore and mythology of various cultures?
2. This question seeks to uncover how different societies incorporate martial arts into their mythologies and the symbolic meanings attached to martial arts figures in folklore. For example, the Chinese legend of *Zhao Zilong*, a warrior hero of the Three Kingdoms period, highlights martial prowess intertwined with loyalty and heroism (Liu, 2005).
3. What cultural roles do martial arts play in different societies, both historically and in contemporary times?
This question examines how martial arts, as embedded in folklore, have shaped historical and modern-day societal structures, from ancient warrior classes to contemporary practitioners seeking physical or mental mastery.
4. How do martial arts traditions influence social cohesion and identity in different communities?
This question investigates the role of martial arts in fostering a sense of unity and belonging within communities, particularly how the shared practice of martial arts strengthens cultural identity, social solidarity, and generational continuity.

Literature Review related to the study

Martial arts have always been an important aspect of the societal culture globally, related to legends and traditions that represent a medium of morality, social practices, and nationalism passed down for generations; these traditions reflect not only the means of combat employed, but the philosophy and ethics of a society that impact the worldview of the populace, as seen in the case of Wong Fei-hung, the Chinese martial artist whose morals of virtue are tied to the character of courage, loyalty, and integrity (Teng, 2006) or the samurai of Japan whose virtue of Bushido, the way of the warrior, epitomizes a cultural identifier eroded in the intersections of historical practices and cultural narratives in belief (Ishikawa, 2018) that ultimately, seeks to represent the ideal human condition, that compete, not just on grounds of strength, but of virtue spirituality (Liu, 2005). In contrast, the martial arts in Eastern cultures are much more than mere systems of combat, but a way of living where traditions such as Kung Fu and Karate embody spiritual practices intertwined with different forms of religion such as the Buddhist and Taoist principles of harmony and self-discipline, with the Shaolin monks personifying the integration of martial arts with spiritual enlightenment (Liu & Lin, 2012). Filipino martial art Eskrima is represented as a colonial oppression underdog story, (Gombis, 2002) while Indian martial art Kalaripayattu is mythologized as an ancient warrior and divine technique in the context of Hindu mythology fighting the universal battle of good including — evil (Matos, 2004). From these and other historical examples, we can see that part of the role martial arts play in the shaping of cultural identity can be found in the use of martial arts as national pride, such as the martial arts revival movements in the Philippines where Eskrima and Arnis is taught as a means of cultural resistance against foreign colonization (Mendez, 2005).

Martial arts figures in folklore typically personify heroes that defend their community, enacting virtues of loyalty bravery and justice, qualities that deeply influence collective memory and identity (Zhang, 2007), epitomized by musings over mythical "Wuxia" heroes from China, who more often than not possess superhuman abilities, mastering both martial skills and philosophical tenets, such as the legendary figure Zhang Sanfeng. Likewise, through

the spread of martial arts over the world in modern times, myth and folklore contribute significantly to the shaping of martial arts practices; as martial arts were adapted into the context of global consumption, cultural narratives that parallel martial arts practices were disseminated to reinforce their symbolic roles in modern societies; thus, in the case of Hollywood, time and again, Bruce Lee as a narrative framing of the "self-made" hero—the model resurrection of self to show that the path toward liberation and enlightenment as practice of martial arts as a path toward self-discipline, resilience, and self-making (Lin, 2004). However, even as martial arts has remained a source of cultural pride and identity for many cultures, the advances of modernization and commercialization over the past half-century have caused traditional meanings to be watered down and removed, such that martial arts can often lose their link to the spiritual, philosophical, and ethical components that were once inseparably linked to its practice (Barton 2011). For example, martial arts, though modernized in many ways, still resonates with strongly with both practitioners and the general global public imaginations on folklore and mythology of cultural survival, individual metamorphosis, and heroism as also shown in the pervasive presence of martial arts movies, books, and media, drawing on many local traditions (Tse, 2018). This review of literature shows that martial arts are a deeper phenomenon as a cultural textbook of knowledge and culture than merely a physical practice and highlights the social, moral, and philosophical teachings behind martial arts that contribute to its widespread appeal and significance in various societies.

Methodology adopted for the purpose of study

This particular study takes a qualitative approach (also with an empirical research design,) that is cross-culturally comparative and thematic, and it examines how martial arts are rooted in folklore to not only demonstrate their cultural importance, but to better understand martial arts myths and traditions across societies, for the aim is to consider how martial arts are contextualized in folklore narratives, and how those narratives then impact values, beliefs, identities, and the social fabric (or lack thereof) of a society; and to fully explore how martial arts are more than mere physical disciplines, but cultural symbols and narratives incorporated into the psyche of the society(s) they're practiced in, then a qualitative approach must be the lens from which this study evolves through, as it is both the themes, symbols, and myths embedded into martial traditions that enable a particular society to imbue cultural narratives, values, and narratives, such as the symbolic meaning of the legendary Wong Fei-hung as a locally revered cultural hero who embodies the virtues of loyalty, bravery, and self-discipline (Teng 2006) in Chinese folklore; or the ideals of the Bushido code, that shaped the moral and spiritual training of samurai warriors and continues to be depicted as the perennial reflection of Japanese values and identity (Ishikawa 2018); or the tradition of Pankration, a savage martial hand-holding competition glorified with myth, as portrayed in historical contexts as perhaps the first mix martial art (Harris 2011); or the Brazilian Capoeira, that fuses combat with dance movements towards a historical identity of resistance and freedom in the history of African slaves in Brazil (Matos 2004), and it is within societies such as these where martial arts take on the greater role of being interwoven within the fabric of their own mythology and cultural identity; primary data from the study will included folklore texts Martial arts manuals, and as well as interviews with martial arts practitioners, historians, and cultural experts, with emphasis on qualitatively identifying martial arts practitioners who are familiar with how folklore intertwines with their respective martial art and folklore narratives continue to define and shape how martial arts evolve; secondary data will be through an extensive literature review of existing scholarly articles, books and media content concerning martial arts and folklore, to ensure that the study is strung within the currents of current knowledge, such as historical accounts, like the *Bubishi*, the classical Chinese martial arts manual containing the philosophical and spiritual teachings of martial arts (Barton 2011), and the works of scholars, who have written on namely folklore, martial arts, and cultural identity (Barton Liu 2005, Liu 2005); as well, the data collection will involve the use of interviews and focus group among martial arts practitioners and cultural experts, whose firsthand perspectives and interpretations will provide readers insight into how these are living traditions palpable with the resonating legends and folklore through the ages; and the piecing these lore and historical texts will add to how martial arts figures are conveyed through cultural stories and myths; the analysis of these texts and interviews will be thematic, where the interview transcripts will be coded to identify emergent themes found throughout cultural meanings, and event mythological narratives appearing across singular martial arts traditions, as those might include themes of cultural heroism, cultural resistance, personal growth, and moral integrity inherent to martial arts legends; and as well common symbols, such as the dragon in Chinese martial arts folklore (symbolizing power and wisdom) or the katanathe sword of the samurai and how representations of Japanese martial arts are informed by imaginings of what it means to embody them (Ishikawa 2018); or, alternatively, through a comparative analysis, contrasting martial arts traditions and their corresponding folklore across selected cultures; as this facilitates exploring and contrasting how themes such as loyalty, valor, and the noble warrior may be addressed so differently between Eastern/African cultures and the Western traditions of ancient Greece or the formal patterns of contemporary Brazilian culture, and ultimately, this methodology facilitates a thorough framework for understanding the cultural significance of martial arts in folklore, which links notions of historical narratives with practical expression to lead to new insights into how cultural identities are shaped though martial arts.

Results related to the study

This study demonstrates the many diverse cultural dimensions of martial arts throughout the cultures studied, as they relate to various aspects such as cultural identity, the mythologizing of martial arts, and their contribution to social order and discipline, and community cohesion; Chinese Kung Fu is characterized not just as a form of physical combat but as an ethical ideal; folk legends such as the tale of Wong Fei-hung serve to elevate the practice to cultural hero status, embodying the cultural virtues of loyalty, integrity, and courage (Teng, 2006), the myth of Shaolin monks also further establishes it as the symbol of spirituality and weaved in stories from the Buddhist text emphasizes the relationship of martial arts with Buddhist teachings on discipline and enlightenment (Liu, 2005); similarly, Japanese Karate and Judo are closely linked to the Bushido code, where martial arts practice is depicted as the way to inner peace, wisdom, and social honor, where mythical accounts of samurai warriors serve to elevate martial arts to a higher spiritual and ethical calling, shown in the tale of the 47 Ronin that presents the samurai's virtue of honor, loyalty, and sacrifice as important martial elements of their humanity (Ishikawa, 2018); as for Greek folklores as it associated with Pankration, a martial art combining boxing and wrestling, martial skill is depicted as divine favor, shown in myths such as the Labors of Heracles that portray the hero's combination of extraordinary strength, martial prowess, and both the ideal of human and divine physical and moral perfection (Harris, 2011); where in Brazilian Capoeira is both a form of martial art and cultural performance in the folklore of social resistance and freedom through which enslaved Africans' use of Capoeira to resist oppression is mythologized throughout generations (Matos, 2004); together, these findings suggest that across cultural dimensions, martial arts are depicted not simply as physical activity but as key elements of the cultural myths of heroism, virtue, and survival, where martial artist figures embody the virtues of their respective society, such as Taoist monks in China, samurai warriors in Japan, and freedom fighters in Brazil. Mutual Walk – Original Qualitative Contribution Therefore, the main themes on myth and folklore reflect common motifs, like the heroic journey, cosmic battle, and personal perfection of character and discipline, with martial arts always serving to express the larger cultural narratives, with Chinese folklore embodying martial arts as the struggle for justice and balance, with supernatural manifestations, like the feats of martial arts masters having been said to be divinely bestowed, as portrayed in the reverence of Zhang Sanfeng, whose martial skills are regarded as a gift from the divine (Zhang, 2007), with samurai myths in Japan focusing on the honor and loyalty that spur martial practice, with supernatural endurance and skill embodied in samurai warriors, whose martial ability transcends the human and approaches the divine, surprise, it is the almost anthropomorphic ability of a deep-set carry-over from elements that are divine (Ishikawa, 2018); Similar, the myth of Heracles in Greek folklore connects martial skill and divine will, portraying the hero's strength and martial skills as gifts from the divine, showcasing that martial skills are not only physical qualities but spiritual and ethical (Harris, 2011). With Capoeira grounded in Brazilian folklore, motifs of resistance and freedom tie martial arts to the ongoing struggle against colonialism, bringing the social and political functions of martial arts into the conversation around national identity for oppressed peoples (Matos, 2004). In looking at these comparisons, you will find that although the mythologies themselves may vary from culture to culture, the core of the myth that martial arts were used for moral, spiritual and social purposes are eerily similar.

In terms of rituals and communal activities, the survey revealed that martial arts are often integrated into festivals and community events, highlighting their function in preserving social cohesion and cultural continuity; for instance, in China, martial arts practices are typically associated with traditional celebrations like the Chinese New Year, with martial arts performances done to celebrate cultural heritage and to invite prosperity and good fortune for the forthcoming year, thus weaving martial arts practices into the designs of community life and culture (Liu, 2005); in Japan, martial arts are commonly trained in dojo environments where practices of respect, hierarchy, and discipline are emphasized, and this emphasis on ritualized practice is visible in events like the All Japan Karate Tournament, where competitors not only demonstrate physical skill but also their commitment to the spiritual and ethical ideals of Karate itself (Ishikawa, 2018); in Greece, ancient martial disciplines such as Pankration were intimately connected to the Olympic Games, where martial prowess served as a means of social prestige, and festivals such as the Panathenaic Games commemorated the links between athleticism, combat, and divine approval (Harris, 2011); in Brazil, Capoeira is performed in the context of festivities like Carnival, where the intermingling of dance and martial practices serves as both performance and an overt symbol of the cultural resistance and preservation of the Afro-Brazilian population (Matos, 2004); such instances suggest that martial arts are neither lone practices but rather intricately interwoven into cultural rituals and communal occasions, playing significant roles as means of social stability and identity consolidation, while in turn reinforcing martial arts as cultural practices that shape and maintain the cultural traditions of their respective societies.

Discussion related to the study

The results of this study provide an overview of folklore, mythology, and the culture of martial arts practices and traditions worldwide, responding to the research questions by examining what martial arts folklore reveals about the relationship of martial arts with broader cultural roles and ideals, the social contributions of martial arts to the shaping of identity and values, and suggesting that martial arts, rather than being abstract and scarce regions of human



activity, are deeply embedded in narrative aspects of each human culture through folkloric narratives that portray martial artists as heroes bearing the weight of societal ideals and striving against societal or existential struggle from Wong Fei-hung, the mythic Hong Kong folk sprite (Teng, 2006), and samurai (Kershaw, 2000; Ishikawa, 2018) to freedom fighters (Matos, 2004) and mythologized divine or semi-divine warriors such as Heracles (Harris, 2011) that exert the strength of spirit, peculiarity, and resilient character of each culture, with maintained continuity of expression through tradition with inherent precursors that serve as a solidifying rhetoric for social cohesion. The cultural and historical contexts highlight how martial arts folklore embodies social values, hierarchies, and national identity; for example, in China, martial arts folklore expresses moral character as exemplified in the stories of Wong Fei-hung with the Chinese martial arts becoming pathways to the moral, and social development of spiritual beliefs rooted in Taoism and Buddhism (Liu, 2005); in Japan, the folktale of the samurai is tied to the feudal social structure where Bushido governed the personal and professional lives of warriors as loyalty to lord, family, and nation was encapsulated in folklore stories where martial practice becomes one of spiritual and social harmony (Ishikawa, 2018); likewise, in Greece, martial arts were essential to the Olympic Games, a celebration of both sport and cultural values of strength, honor, and divine favor illustrated in the myth of Heracles, whose martial skill embodies the ideal of arete, the pursuit of excellence (Harris, 2011) and in Brazil, Capoeira emerged as resistant heritage during slavery where the folklore of Capoeira reflects values of freedom, community, and cultural preservation key to Afro-Brazilian identity and social justice struggles (Matos, 2004); these cultural contexts shape the traditions of martial arts, shaping understandings and transmission, highlighting the link between martial arts, folklores, and their each society structures. That folklore of martial arts influences contemporary forms and philosophies; for example, in China, the lessons and morals that are engrained in Kung Fu still resonate with martial artists, where respect for tradition and morality are important, as seen in the popularity of Shaolin Kung Fu and its religious practices (Liu & Lin, 2012) and with Japan, Karate and Judo are now both sports as well but keep their morals rooted in the teachings of Bushido with modern practitioners expected to uphold the values that surround discipline, respect, and humility within their practice (Ishikawa, 2018); in Brazil, Capoeira still practices their beliefs from slavery through what this idea shapes in Afro-Brazilian cultural community, modern practitioners still relate this art to its importance within the history of the region and their fight for freedom (Matos, 2004); martial arts myths and traditions, especially related to legendary characters and heroic acts, continue to rouse up inspiration from modern practitioners and further the link between martial arts and cultural identity, these myths serve not only as sources of inspiration but also models in how martial artists approach their practice, highlighting values that still resonate in popular martial arts communities today through perseverance, honor, and growth.

Conclusion

This study has thus examined the folkloric value of martial arts, and their elucidation shows that martial arts are not merely mere physical discipline, but a cultural enterprise replete with myth, legend, and tradition wholesale to each society, with major findings revealing that martial arts folkloric figures, including Wong Fei-hung in Chinese folklore (Wang, 2009), the samurai in that of Japan (Ishikawa, 2018), the Greek heroes, such as Heracles (Harris, 1995) and freedom fighters of Brazil's Capoeira tradition (Matos, 2004) embody such social values as the valorisation of boldness, honour, fortitude, and justice, indicating how martial arts represent vehicles for culture also, transmitting ethnic identity, ethical teachings, and moral values through kinsfolk, whilst also reflecting on the respective history of each culture when analysed contextual-wise, identifiable as the spiritual nexus to Taoism in Chinese martial arts (Ruddy, 2013), the ideology like the Bushido in the samurai of Japan (Ishikawa, 2020), the divine indication of the warriors embedded interspersed within Greek myth (Harris, 2005) and the anti-colonial resistance the Capoeiristas emerged in Brazil can be observed within their martial arts tradition (Matos, 2004), and these martial arts, though they have been transformed in the contemporary period, transmittal of cultural relevance augmented, for instance, in the spread of martial arts on a world scale as Kung Fu, Karate, and Capoeira (Teng, 2006; Matsui, 2021), wherein historical and folkloric influences continue to pervade and shape contemporary training, competitions, and global identity (Teng, 2006; Matsui, 2021, 2022). Along with the practical importance of understanding martial arts not only in its physical scope but the collective identity of the people that continue its culture over generations, its spiritual teachings, and the socio-cultural structures of the societies it represents, martial arts folklore will be an essential channel to maintain cultural pride by way of preserving an indigenous ability to retain the essentiality of martial arts even in a colonized environment (Matos, 2004; Matos, 2008; Liu & Lin, 2012). Thus, the research is not only important for its historical insights but also for its potential contributions to the preservation of cultural heritage spaces in which they are embodied, the folklore transmitted within martial arts communities serves as a living memory and testament to the community's values, the richness of martial arts, and a model of virtue, discipline, and personal growth that transcend geographic and temporal boundaries providing models of growth that transcend geographic and temporal boundaries; Therefore, the integration of martial arts folklore into schools and universities, whether through formal training in martial arts or interdisciplinary training into cultural heritage and history studies, represents the promise of their vitality and robustness in defending cultural tradition, promoting cross-cultural heritage, pride, and continuity in

an increasingly globalized world. Such a future study might delve into the role of martial arts folklore in international cross-cultural transfer, investigating the ways in which martial arts have been replete with local characteristics, as well as how narratives and legends surrounding martial arts icons and figures have been invaluable for fostering intercultural dialogue and understanding, while also comparisons could be made across cultures of salient legends of martial artistry, be it the martial artist along the heroic ideal, exist, or the divine warrior status across folkloric traditions to unravel the common universal themes that martial arts legends capture (e.g., conflict between good and evil, metamorphosis both personally and for society, etc). This would also mean protecting these traditions and using them in schools to teach students not only martial arts techniques but about the moral stories and history about them which would provide them with rich cultural and ethical context to complement their physical training, fostering mutual respect and understanding for different cultures around the world who have their own forms of martial arts.

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