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From resistance to embrace: Examining the trajectory of karate's expansion in contemporary China

Xie Jinwen [1A-E*]

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[1] Department of Physical Education, Xiamen University of Technology, Xiamen, China; m18707142718@163.com
* **Correspondence author:** Xie Jinwen, Department of Physical Education, Xiamen University of Technology, Xiamen, China, m18707142718@163.com.

Abstract:

Background and Study Aim: Despite karate's Japanese identity and global reach, little is known about how this martial art has been received, reinterpreted, and institutionalised in China. While Western studies have focused on karate's export and media-driven globalisation, the Chinese experience presents a contrasting narrative – one shaped by nationalism, reform-era openness, and Olympic ambitions. The aim of the research is to answer the question: why and how karate, once depicted as a 'foreign' and even 'inferior' art, has become one of China's most dynamic competitive sports.

Material and Methods: This study adopted a mixed-methods approach (in a sense complementary) combining documentary research and interviews. Documentary data were collected from national archives, mass media sources, and policy documents related to karate in China. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 22 participants using snowball sampling.

Results: Karate's early development in China faced limited acceptance due to the dominance of Chinese hand-to-hand combat systems (martial arts) and historical tensions with Japan. A turning point came with the thawing of Sino-Japanese relations in the late 1970s, which enabled its introduction through martial arts diplomacy and catalysed its later expansion. From an array of sources, karate's evolution is mapped across four pivotal stages, tracing the sport's evolution from a tool of hand-to-hand combat systems (martial arts) diplomacy to a strategic element within China's national sports agenda, propelled by the nation's aspirations for Olympic glory.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that China's case cannot be explained solely by global media diffusion but rather by internal political and cultural dynamics. The localisation of karate illustrates how foreign hand-to-hand combat systems can be reinterpreted within new cultural frameworks, offering broader insight into budo globalisation and cultural adaptation.

Keywords: diplomacy, hand-to-hand combat systems, martial art, sports history

Dictionary:

Karate – literally translated as "empty hand," is a traditional martial art that originated in the Ryukyu Kingdom (Okinawa) [3].

Hand-to-hand combat (fight) systems – a universal name for all systems traditionally associated with 'martial arts', however, when used in scientific publications it means that the author(s) does not promote the pathology of MMM, i.e. bloody neo-gladiatorship, camouflaged under the attractive name of mixed martial arts [48-51].

Budo (Budō) – originally a term denoting the "Way of the warrior", it is now used as a collective appellation for modern martial arts of *kendō, jūdō, kyūdo* and so on. The primary objective of these "martial ways" is self-perfection (*ningen-kesei*) [52].

Dōjō (dojo) – originally used in reference to places where Buddhism is studied , it is now also used to denote a training hall for the martial arts [52].

1. Introduction

Neo-gladiator – a person who trains mix martial arts (MMA) and similar forms of hand-to-hand fighting that do not meet the definition of sport according to the Olympic Charter [48].

Kung fu – originating from ancient hunting and war, traditional Chinese martial arts are known as 'kungfu' or 'wushu' [53, 54].

The ascent of Chinese karate on the international stage, particularly over the last decade, is an intriguing story of rapid development and achievement. In 2010, at the Guangzhou Asian Games, a defining moment unfolded as the Chinese karate team clinched two gold medals. This feat placed China on an equal footing with Japan in the sport – a nation long regarded as the heartland of modern karate and traditionally dominant in the discipline. This success was, however, a far cry from the 2006 Doha Asian Games scenario, where China had neither a standard karate dojo, a karate team, nor any athletes participating in the karate events. Nonetheless, this did not bring the narrative of Chinese karate to a halt. In 2011, the Chinese women's karate team achieved a landmark victory, defeating Japan at the Asian Championships for the first time and subsequently securing two gold medals in the world championships. Another high point in the trajectory was at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. The Chinese team excelled in the kumite events (literally 'grappling hands'), surpassing Japan with a haul of a silver and bronze medal. These dramatic transformations, once unimaginable, have sparked interest in delving deeper into the development of karate in China; in other words, this hand-to-hand combat system (a martial art) form closely associated with the Japanese samurai and militaristic traditions and popular in Western countries found a unique and flourishing path in China.

The narrative of Chinese karate begins in October 1949, with the founding of the People's Republic of China. The new nation aligned itself with the Soviet Union's socialist camp, drawing a stark 'Iron Curtain' between itself and the anti-communist bloc led by the USA and Japan. During this era, anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism became integral to the ideology and legitimacy of the new regime [1]. This led to a mass production of Chinese works in newspapers, movies, and TV dramas, wherein they beat karate masters. Most of these works are set in the backdrop of foreign occupation or aggression and the Second Sino-Japanese War (1931–1945), with anti-Japanese and anti-imperialist sentiments running through these works [2]. Chinese hand-to-hand combat systems (martial artists) were portrayed as national heroes who restored the confidence and dignity of the Chinese by defeating karate masters. Scenes of Chinese fighters defeating Japanese karate masters (e.g., Bruce Lee's 'Fist of Fury', and Donnie Yen's 'Ip Man') became stereotyped [3], helping to boost the country's image and find a cure for 'the sick man of East Asia'. However, karate was only one of the martial arts transplanted to China from the smaller neighbouring country of Japan, and it was always portrayed as a weak hand-to-hand combat form. Therefore, the motivation to accept, disseminate, and study it, should not be the most prominent.

However, karate is still highly popular in China. In 1978, China implemented its reform and opening-up policy, leading to increased exchanges with foreign countries in various sectors, including sports. Against this background, Japanese martial arts – including karate – were introduced to China. For instance, China's first martial arts magazine, *Wulin*, featured karate techniques in its second issue, which was published in 1981 by the Guangdong Provincial Sports Affairs Committee. Other publications like *Chinese Martial Arts* and *WuHun* followed suit, showcasing articles on karate. However, karate did not become widely known in China until later. In 2008, the Chinese Karate Association was established, and in 2016 it was recognised as an official sport for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. In 2017, it was promoted as an official sporting event for all sports competitions in China (including the National Sports

Meet of the People's Republic of China). Karate organisations (clubs, universities, and athletic teams) are established in all regions of China except Tibet [4], with more than 20,000 karate clubs spread across the country [5], and the number of karate practitioners being approximately 300,000 [6]. Today, more often than not, karate occupies high positions in various rankings of *Budo* available online, making it the most popular *Budo* in China (for example, a search through [7]).

The developments so far paint a rough sketch of karate's journey in China – a story intertwined with nationalism, economic reform, and Olympic strategies. However, these depictions offer only fragmented historical snapshots of the recent development of Chinese karate, insufficient to fully grasp why it has become so popular. To answer these questions – how and why did karate gain such prominence in China, and what drives its development – necessitates a more detailed historical analysis. However, first, it is crucial to revisit the existing literature on this subject to build a comprehensive narrative.

The aim of the research is to answer the question: why and how karate, once depicted as a 'foreign' and even 'inferior' art, has become one of China's most dynamic competitive sports.

Part I: literature review

A glance at the history of karate under globalisation

Karate is a traditional martial art that originated in the Ryukyu Kingdom (Okinawa). In 1922, Gichin Funakoshi and others brought karate from Okinawa to mainland Japan; they established schools, taught Japanese students, and promoted karate as a martial art (hand-to-hand combat system) with self-defence and character-building aspects [8]. Karate was developed in Japan by setting judo as a platform [9], where it became standardised and institutionalised to be later introduced to the West in its modern form. After Japan's defeat in the war, karate practice was not forbidden because the occupying American forces viewed it merely as a form of physical education, and thus deemed it 'harmless' [10]. Simultaneously, Japanese karate masters were actively engaged in international exchanges and demonstrations, introducing karate to practitioners in other countries in the post-war period. In 1970, the World Karate Federation was established, which now has 200 member countries or regions (as of 2022) [11], and its membership ranges from 100 million to 130 million people according to the estimated values.

Even though academic research has been conducted on various aspects and the implications of the global diffusion of karate, all studies have focused on the subject of its export to the West. The academic discourse on the global spread of karate attributes karate's global reach and influence to extensive media coverage. This perspective suggests that the proliferation of karate worldwide has been significantly propelled by its representation and popularisation through various forms of media. For example, Krug [12] claims that karate became popular in the West after it appeared in Western films during the 1930s to the 1970s. This offers valuable insights into the influence of media and popular culture.

Lachina (based on [13]) highlights the influential role of the 1970s' martial arts cinema in popularising Asian fighting styles, particularly Japanese martial arts (in fact hand-to-hand systems, because aikido is the art of self-defence), in the West.

Films like 'The Karate Kid' and 'American Ninja' significantly enhanced Western awareness and interest in these disciplines. This cinematic 'boom' not only entertained but also inspired many to learn Japanese martial arts, contributing greatly to the global dissemination of karate [13]. Bowman et al. [14] attributed the rising popularity of karate to the post–World War II military occupation of Japan by the United States, whereby he suggests that the cultural and martial experiences of US military servicemen influenced and reoriented the imagination of Hollywood. Additionally, Bowman [15] mentions that a key element responsible for the emergence of martial arts classes in the West was the prior circulation of images and ideas. Most non-military Westerners were first fascinated by the idea of doing karate or kung fu, an interest that arose from viewing images circulated by the image- media [15]. In conclusion, Bowman's study suggests that the widespread influence of media went beyond mere entertainment, contributing significantly to the cultural integration and global spread of karate. However, in China, a contrasting narrative can be observed in how the media often portrayed karate as a weaker martial art, using this depiction to bolster the spirit of nationalism among the Chinese. Despite this portrayal, karate became hugely popular in China, implying that the reasons for this are likely complex, multifaceted, and possibly contradictory to those in the West. The Chinese experience with karate is therefore intriguing as a case study for understanding the globalisation of this martial art (hand-to-hand combat system). It offers a perspective that diverges from the Western narrative, potentially enriching our understanding of karate's global journey and the diverse cultural contexts in which it has flourished.

Tracing karate's journey in Chinese academia

In Chinese academic circles, greater emphasis has been on the technical and training aspects of karate rather than its historical development within the country. A search for the keyword 'karate' on the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) revealed 316 research papers (217 submitted papers and 99 dissertations) by 2023 (retrieved on 28 August 2024). The earliest was published in 2001, and the number has been increasing every year since 2006, reaching a maximum of 48 papers in 2019. Among these paper, 285 papers were related mostly to training methods (techniques, tactics, rules, etc.) and the history of karate, while only 31 papers (10%) examined the popularisation of karate in China.

In these 31 articles, the focus has been on the feasibility of expanding karate within the country, its institutional development and evolution, including changes in the number of schools and clubs, practitioners, instructors, and judges, as well as school types and their characteristics. However, scholarly examination of the development of karate in China is limited. A common thread in these studies is the identification of significant gaps in the infrastructure and resources necessary for the development of karate in China. Thus, a prevalent conclusion among these researchers is the need for increased investment from the government in this martial art form for its overall development in China. A few scholars have briefly touched on the story of karate's introduction to China, providing valuable yet limited insights.

As Xingfu Chen [16], Qingzhen Zhang [17] have identified, in the 1970s–1980s, China implemented its reform and opening-up policy and resumed exchanges with foreign countries in various areas. This period, marked by renewed international exchanges, set the stage for karate's entry into China [18, 19]. Further contributing to this understanding, Junpeng Pang [20] and Hao Zhang and Chengjie Zhang [21] identified 2006 as the year when the Chinese government officially decided to introduce and

promote karate. This governmental decision is considered a pivotal moment in the widespread acceptance of karate in China. However, the specifics of the introduction of karate – the key individuals, organisations, and the exact processes involved – remain largely unexplored in the literature. Another gap in the existing research is the lack of clarity on why the Chinese government decided to introduce karate and how it facilitated its development and expansion within China. The motivations for this, as well as the strategies employed to integrate karate into China's sporting culture, are aspects that require further investigation.

Additionally, the existing body of literature on this subject reveals how authors tend to rely heavily on cross-referencing each other's works resulting in an echo-chamber effect, where new, diverse perspectives and in-depth analyses, particularly from primary sources, are lacking. Given this context, a re-examination of karate's spread in China and the reasons underlying its establishment would enrich the literature. Therefore, by exploring the development of karate in China, a significant depth can be added to the global narrative of karate's spread, particularly focusing on its unique trajectory in China.

Part II: Original research

2. Materials and Methods

Employing a mixed-methods research design, incorporating extensive documentary and oral sources, this study comprehensively investigates the development of karate in China. The documentary component is based on original data gathered from various databases and archives, encompassing material from the (1) National Library of China; (2) databases of China Digital Library; (3) China Local Gazetteers Database; (4) some mass media material not included in the above database [22]; and (5) karate-related policy and high-ranking karate leaders' personal accounts accessed from documents and articles [23].

Subsequently, oral data were collected through semi-structured interviews with witnesses and participants who have first-hand experience of the evolution of karate in China. Employing 'snowball sampling', aa diverse group of participants from Chinese karate clubs, schools, national and regional teams, including coaches, administrators, athletes, and referees, were interviewed, totalling 22 individuals. All interviews were with the consent of the respondents, ensuring anonymity to protect their privacy and confidentiality of data. Each participant was assigned an alphabet, and only a rough outline about their profession was provided to minimise any potential identification risks. Table 1 provides a general criteria of the interview method and the professional background of the participants.

Table 1. Participants' characteristics (ordinal variable: membership in a karate professional group/activity).

Code	Occupation	Ways of interview
C	karate club director	In-person, taking notes.
Z2	karate club director	In-person, taking notes
H3	karate club director	WeChat text message
L4	karate club director	In-person, taking notes
K	karate club director	WeChat text message

F	karate club director	WeChat text message
F2	karate club management	In-person, audio-recorded
L	national team coach	WeChat text message
L4	provincial karate team coach	In-person, audio-recorded
M	karate club coach	In-person, taking notes.
L3	karate club coach	In-person, audio-recorded
H2	karate club coach	In-person, audio-recorded
H4	university karate teacher	WeChat text message
C2	school karate teacher,	WeChat text message
P	school karate teacher	WeChat text message
Z	karate referee	In-person, taking notes
H	karate referee	WeChat text message
X2	karate referee	In-person, audio-recorded
L2	university student	WeChat text message
X	university student	In-person, audio-recorded.
Z3	university students	WeChat text message
Z4	university student	WeChat text message

3. Results

From all sources of data gathered, four key phases could be identified wherein particular events were prominent: (1) early phase (1980s–2005); (2) nascent phase (2006–2010); (3) expansion phase (2010–2015); and (4) peak phase (2016–2023). Each phase is characterised by specific events and historical narratives that shed light on the main features of karate's development in China. These insights contribute to advancing existing theories on the globalisation of karate, providing a unique perspective on how a traditional Japanese martial art found its place and grew in the culturally distinct and historically rich environment of China.

Early phase of karate in China: 1980s–2005

The ideological propaganda of new regime of the People's Republic of China established in 1949 emphasised anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism [24]. During this period, a clear aversion was noted towards Japanese hand-to-hand combat systems, often associated with Japanese militarism and imperialism, reflecting the tensions between China and Japan that stemmed from historical conflicts. However, the 1970s marked a significant shift in China's foreign policy and diplomatic stance, especially towards Japan. A pivotal moment was in 1972 when China and Japan normalised their diplomatic relations, and the significance of this diplomatic thaw was further cemented in 1978 with the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the two nations. The Treaty opened the door to a gradual increase in communication and cultural exchange between China and Japan, leading to a more open attitude towards Japanese culture and practices, including karate.

Chinese experts of hand-to-hand combat were among the first to take notice of karate, largely because of the frequent Sino-Japanese martial arts exchanges that began in the 1980s. One of the most noteworthy events during this time was the establishment of a sister-city relationship in 1981 between Fujian, a province in China, and Okinawa, Japan. This partnership was more than just a diplomatic gesture; it opened the doors for profound cultural exchanges, particularly in the realm of martial arts. A long-held

belief among Okinawan karate circles is about a deep-rooted connection between their martial arts culture and that of Fujian. This belief encouraged exchanges between Fujian experts of hand-to-hand combat and Okinawan karate practitioners, especially after the normalisation of Sino-Japanese relations.

During the 1980s, esteemed karate masters from Okinawa, such as Yuna Higa of *Shorin-ryu*, Shogun Nagahashi of *Matsubayashi-ryu*, Katsuya Miyahira of *Shaolinji-ryu*, and Kiyokichi Uehara of *Honbu-ryu,* made several trips to Fujian [25]. However, during this period, these karate practitioners who came to China were more inclined to explore the connections between karate and Chinese hand-to-hand combat systems, rather than actively promote karate in China. It was not until later, in the early 1990s, that karate was officially introduced and popularised in China.

China's first karate club was established in 1990 by Okinawan *Shorin-ryu* master Kenichi Mekaru in Shanghai, representing a landmark event in the history of karate in China [19]. Mekaru's karate club received considerable support from the Shanghai Martial Arts Association. Mekaru first visited China in 1988, performing a karate demonstration at the Shanghai Martial Arts Association [19]. Subsequently, in 1990, the association allocated space on the second floor of the Shanghai Sports Palace for Mekaru to establish his karate dojo. However, since membership was low, comprising ta mere handful of people, both Mekaru and the club struggled initially. The early spread of karate was hampered by the cost of training and equipment. Respondent "C", one of Mekaru's first Chinese students, recalls the financial challenges they encountered:

At that time, the cost of karate training was around 13 US dollars per month. Since karate uniforms were not available in China, our teacher imported them from Japan. However, a single karate uniform cost about 200 US dollars, a price that few could afford.

The financial barrier was particularly daunting when placed in the context of the average income in Shanghai during that period. According to a report by the *Xinmin Evening News*, the average monthly income in Shanghai was only about 168 yuan, equivalent to approximately 23 US dollars [26]. This stark disparity between the cost of karate training and equipment and the average income made it exceedingly difficult for the majority of the Chinese populace to participate in karate. However, in the mid-1990s, a strategic move by Mekaru to offer free karate courses at universities marked a pivotal shift in the spread of karate in Shanghai. This approach significantly reduced the financial barriers previously hindering the sport's growth. In 1994, Mekaru, together with his student Z, founded China's first university karate club at Fudan University. Respondent "Z" recalls the early days of the club:

We charged a membership fee of about 1.4 US dollars per semester. Additionally, I managed to find a supplier who could provide karate uniforms at an affordable price, approximately 13 US dollars each. Although in the first year we had only around 13 members, by the second year, the club had grown to over 130 members.

The drastic reduction in the cost of participation in karate made it more accessible to students. The minimal membership fee and affordable uniforms removed the previous constraints to the growth of the sport in China. Following this initiative, several of Mekaru's students, including Lei Zhang, Han Gong, and Zhijiong Cao, who trained in his karate club, were inspired to further propagate karate in Shanghai. They established university karate clubs in the Luwan, Hongqiao, and Yangpu districts of Shanghai [16]. By 1999, their efforts had culminated in an impressive increase in the number of university students practising karate in Shanghai, reaching approximately

6,000 practitioners [27]. The sustained growth and expansion of karate in Shanghai drew the attention of and garnered support from the Shanghai Wushu Association. The continued expansion of karate in Shanghai was noticed by the Shanghai Wushu administrators, and in 1999, the Karate Committee of the Shanghai Wushu Association was formed, with Mekaru as an advisor and head instructor [28]. This institutional recognition was a significant step towards integrating karate into the broader martial arts community in Shanghai. In May 2000, the International Karate Organization Kyokushinkaikan (IKO) opened its branch in China and worked with Mekaru and teach *Kyokushin-ryu* karate [29]. In 2002, Mekaru was recognised as the leading karate master in China by the Karate Committee of the Shanghai Martial Arts Association, underscoring his pivotal role in establishing karate in China. However, a point to note is that during this early phase, karate's spread in China was limited primarily to Shanghai. It was not yet part of traditional Chinese culture or recognised as an Olympic sport, which implied that it did not receive significant attention from the Chinese government.

The early development of karate in China was characterised by the unique interplay of Sino-Japanese martial arts diplomacy and the enthusiasm of the young people. During this period, karate made its entry into China not through widespread media exposure, but rather via the platform of Chinese martial arts, and it gained traction in specific regions through cost-effective promotional tactics. In stark contrast, the strong cultural traditions of Indigenous Chinese martial arts and the cinematic glorification of these forms overshadowed karate's visibility and appeal during this period. In fact, during the 1980s and 1990s, the allure of martial arts films, a key element of popular media, significantly overshadowed the appeal of karate in China. The immense popularity of films like 'Legend of Huo Yuanjia', featuring Liang Xiaolong (Bruce Lee), and 'Hero', starring Jet Li, is a testament to this phenomenon. These films captivated the Chinese audience, cementing the status of traditional Chinese hand-to-hand combat systems in popular culture. This divergence suggests that the role of popular media in promoting karate globally requires careful re-evaluation in the Chinese context.

Nascent phase of karate in China: 2006-2011

In 2006, the Chinese government decided to introduce karate from an official perspective and further promote its nationwide popularisation [19]. During this period, a confluence of factors, including China's aspiration for Olympic success and the strategic imperative to boost its medal tally, propelled the widespread promotion of karate across the nation. On the contrary, the *Shorin-ryu* and *Kyokushin-ryu* karate promoted by Mekaru in China did not receive recognition from the International Olympic Committee (IOC), leading to a decline in Mekaru's influence in the Chinese karate community. In contrast, China frequently invited IOC-recognised karate experts to conduct national karate instructor training, organise national karate competitions, and form a national karate team to participate in international competitions.

In 2006, during the Doha Asian Games, China was notably absent from the karate events, despite karate having been officially included in the Asian Games since 1994. This absence was particularly poignant because, in 2004, Guangzhou was announced as the host city for the 2010 Asian Games. As the host nation, China was obligated to participate in all the sporting events, making the development of the karate program an urgent priority. More importantly, from the beginning of the twentieth century,

promoters of the sport have been vying for karate's inclusion in the Olympics. In 2004, karate became the number one alternative event in the Olympic Games, drawing China's attention [30]. Thus, the potential inclusion of karate in the Olympics significantly galvanised China's determination to develop the sport. This was a strategic move aligned with China's aspiration to boost its Olympic medal tally. The past success of Chinese athletes at the 1984 Olympic Games raised hopes of China becoming a great country once again and increasing its medal tally as well. Attending the Olympics and other international competitions and performing well became the symbolic means of catching up with and even outracing the Western powers [31]. Thus, the Chinese government's interest in karate was fuelled by the potential inclusion of the game in the Olympics and the broader significance of accumulating gold medals at such prestigious events. This period marked a significant shift in China's approach to karate, positioning it not just as a martial art (a sporting form of hand-to-hand combat), but as a key component in the nation's pursuit of international sporting excellence and national pride.

On 29 May 2006, the General Administration of Sport of China (GASC) was tasked with establishing the Chinese Karate Association [19]. The GASC's role extended to planning, organising, and managing the development of karate nationwide [19]. This process was characterised by a top-down approach, leveraging existing infrastructure and expertise from related martial arts and sports. A former Chinese martial arts athlete, respondent "M", recalled his experiences from that period:

I was practising Chinese martial arts at a martial arts school in Guangdong Province. Around 2006, when China had just begun introducing karate, the GASC decided to hold the first karate training class in Foshan, Guangdong. Mr. Gao Linqing, an organiser from the Guangdong provincial sports institution, informed my school of this development. Then, my Chinese martial arts coach told me that I should attend this training class to learn karate.

M's account confirms the effective dissemination of the National Sports Administration's policy from the top down to various regions across the nation. His testimony illustrates how the government's promotion of karate was conveyed through multiple channels to the public, including local government sports management bodies, and through schools. This method of propagation ensured that the government's sports promotion policy steadily achieved positive outcomes. In October 2006, the Boxing and Taekwondo Sports Management Centre published recruitment notices and notified provincial, municipal, and autonomous sports organisations (e.g., sports associations and sports schools) in a top-down process, selecting more than 50 professional athletes from 10 cities across the country to train in Foshan for a month [32]. On 30 March 2007, China's first national karate team was established [33]. The national team athletes and coaches were from Guangdong, Beijing, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Zhejiang, Guangxi, Shandong, and Jiangsu. All these athletes were earlier part of taekwondo, boxing, wrestling, ball, or athletics teams; most were from the three sports of taekwondo, sanda, and boxing [33]. A former taekwondo athlete, who was recruited to become a member of the national karate team, respondent "L", reflected on this experience, noting as follows:

Whether it was taekwondo or any other sport, anyone with a bit of foundational skill could be brought in and utilised. However, the preference was often for professional athletes. Despite the early development of karate in Shanghai, most participants in it were from clubs, and these participants did not always meet the physical and professional standards required of athletes.

This strategy of leveraging existing skills and expertise from related sports disciplines facilitated the swift formation of a competent karate team, bypassing the lengthy process of training individuals from the ground up. It not only expedited the creation of a national team but also contributed to the proliferation of karate within various hand-to-hand combat systems and sports communities across China. This approach reflects a keen understanding of the inter-transferability of skills across different hand-to-hand combat systems and demonstrates a focused effort to enhance China's competitiveness in karate at the national and international levels. Importantly, this approach paid dividends at the 2010 Guangzhou Asian Games, where China, participating in karate for the first time, achieved remarkable success with two gold medals and one bronze medal, matching the performance of karate powerhouse Japan. This momentum continued into the following year when, at the 2011 Asian Karate Championships, the Chinese women's karate team triumphed over Japan for the first time, establishing the supremacy of the former in Asia. This achievement reflects the effective implementation of a strategic sports development plan, displaying China's ability to quickly rise to prominence in international competitions.

This nascent phase of karate in China, spanning from 2006 to 2011, represents a period of transformative growth and strategic manoeuvring. The establishment of the China Karate Association in 2008 marked a significant milestone, symbolising the formal integration of karate into China's sporting landscape. China's strategic adoption of karate in this period was a deliberate effort to elevate its international sports profile, a move that melded cultural adaptation with an ambitious sports strategy. Thus, despite karate's initially peripheral status in China, its Olympic aspirations resonated strongly with China's pursuit of global sports excellence, steering the country towards embracing and promoting karate.

Expansion phase of karate in China: 2012–2015

In response to the decision by the International Olympic Committee to not include karate in the 2012 London Olympics, and its subsequent exclusion from the 2016 Olympics weakened support for the game by the GASC. The Chinese Karate Association (CKA) then shifted its focus towards the masses, adopting a strategy to foster karate's popularity at the grassroots level.

After 2009, with reduced support from the GASC, the CKA faced challenges in terms of funding, resource allocation, and overall development opportunities. A senior executive from the CKA elucidated thus:

Being a non-Olympic event meant that issues like training facilities, accommodation, and funding for the national team posed significant challenges [34].

The reduction in state support and the lack of Olympic recognition posed considerable difficulties. This situation was acutely felt by members of the national karate team, as described by "L" (respondent):

After the 2010 Asian Games, many of us were considering retirement. There were several reasons: age, injuries, and the need to find work or complete our education. But the most crucial factor was karate's exclusion from the Olympics and the lack of opportunities to participate in major international competitions. There seemed no purpose in continuing training.

The experiences of athletes further highlight the challenges within a system where success and sustainability heavily depend on governmental support and Olympic inclusion. The withdrawal of seasoned practitioners from the sport not only depleted the talent pool but also impacted the motivation and aspirations of emerging athletes.

This shift led to a noticeable decline in China's competitiveness in karate at international levels, as evidenced by the country's performance in subsequent events like the 2014 Asian Games, where it failed to win any gold in karate events.

However, during this challenging period for karate in China, a glimmer of hope emerged at the grass root level. While elite-level karate experienced a decline and some regional sports management bodies lost interest, significant progress was observed in school karate programs and karate clubs. The CKA administrators stated:

It is a shame karate did not make it to the Olympics; the CKA will target students in the future [35]. The spread of karate among students can cultivate, in children, the qualities of tenacity and hard work, etiquette and manners of respect for their teachers [36].

The CKA's focus on students symbolised a broader vision of leveraging karate as an educational tool for cultivating resilience, respect, and discipline in students. However, historical perceptions posed challenges. Early associations of karate with Japanese culture and negative portrayals in widespread media, compounded by anti-Japanese sentiment, were barriers to its acceptance. To address this, a significant movement to "de-Japanise" karate began, rebranding it within the Chinese cultural context. This rebranding of karate in Chinese schools was spearheaded by educators like Professor Jiazong Wang, who strategically distanced karate from its Japanese origins and repositioned it within the framework of Chinese traditional culture. As Wang said:

Karate focuses on physical and mental training and is derived from Chinese martial arts, drawing on the best of Chinese martial arts techniques and rituals. It is safer than other combative sports and is suitable for being taught in the university. The spread of karate in university is a valuable complement to and innovation of Chinese martial arts, while deepening confidence in and love for our traditional culture [37].

Wang emphasised the historical connections between karate and traditional Chinese martial arts. Using this approach, educators shifted the focus from historical conflicts to karate's character-building, physical fitness, and cultural aspects. By presenting karate as a discipline that transcends geopolitical conflicts and emphasising its universal values, the educators fostered an environment that encouraged students to embrace karate as a valuable cultural practice. In other words, by placing karate within the context of Chinese martial traditions and emphasising its role in personal and character development, these educators transformed its perception from a foreign martial art to a valuable component of Chinese cultural education. Through strategic advocacy and curriculum integration by educators, karate has been formally recognised by China's Ministry of Education, leading to the establishment of karate majors in universities like Beijing Sport University, Wuhan Sports University and Shanghai University of Sport, in this phase [38]. This development provided an opportunity to scientifically and systematically study karate. Additionally, karate majors were later established in normal universities like Hunan Normal University and Anhui Normal University, focusing on karate teaching methods and theory [38]. This initiative helped future educators acquire the skills and qualifications needed to teach karate.

During this phase, the CKA also implemented another significant policy aimed at developing grassroots-level karate through organising competitions and events at various levels, from local to national. A manager from the CKA articulated this approach:

The CKA plans to increase the number of karate events for the general public to enhance competition networking and learning opportunities for karate practitioners. Aiming to promote karate through competitions, more tournaments will be held in different provinces and cities [36].

This strategy aimed to increase engagement and participation in karate across the country, recognising the power of competitions to stimulate interest and improve skills among practitioners. It is noteworthy that since 2011, the CKA has reformed the National Championships by abolishing the previous rule that non-professional athletes could not participate in the National Championships. This significantly increased the number of participants in the championships, which reached 611 that year [39]. This figure broke the usual number of 200 participants since the inception of the National Karate Championships [36]. In October 2012, the CKA organised China's first karate club championship in Hefei City, with 32 popular karate clubs from Jiangsu, Hubei, Anhui, Shenzhen, etc. and more than 400 participants [40]. This championship was open to all karate enthusiasts aged 6–45 years and was divided into junior and black belt categories [40]. The karate events for various age groups reflected the growing interest in the sport. Overall, between 2011 and 2015, the CKA held five national university karate championships, 5 national karate junior championships, 3 national karate club championships, 2 national karate *kyokushin* championships, and 1 China karate open championship, in addition to the regular National Karate Championships (10 times), for a total of 26 national karate events. During this period, the national karate participants came from 23 provinces, cities, and autonomous regions [40].

In summary, in this phase, despite facing challenges at the elite level, the resilience and adaptability shown by the CKA in the face of adversity played a pivotal role in sustaining karate's development and popularity. The strategic approach of 'de-Japanising' karate and promoting it at the grassroots level through enhanced championship participation contributed significantly to maintaining karate's momentum in China.

Peak phase of karate in China: 2016–2023

China's lackadaisical performance at the 2016 Olympics served as a wake-up call for the GASC. Gou Zhongwen, the GASC's top leader, expressed a clear target for the Tokyo Olympics, emphasising the need to reverse the trend of China's declining Olympic results and ensure a top position in the gold medal tally and overall medal count at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics [41]. Thus, the announcement of karate as a participating sport in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics in 2016 significantly reignited China's interest in elite karate, reflecting the politically charged atmosphere reminiscent of the 'nascent phase' era. The Olympic inclusion prompted the GASC to officially start supporting the development of elite karate. A reinvigorated national karate team was formed, quickly regaining its competitive edge. The team achieved remarkable success, not only securing 4 gold and 3 silver medals in the 2018 and 2022 Asian Games but also making a significant impact at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics with 1 silver and 1 bronze medal.

This heightened focus on karate was partly due to its comparative advantage over the other four newly added sports – surfing, skateboarding, sport climbing, and baseball/softball. Unlike these sports, China had already achieved commendable success in karate and had established a proven elite karate system. This existing foundation provided a strategic opportunity for China to capitalise on karate as a means to bolster its Olympic medal prospects. Thus, when karate was recognised in

2016 as an official sport for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the GASC officially announced the inclusion of karate in the 13th National Games of the People's Republic of China (NGC) the following year (2017), the country's highest-level and largest comprehensive sports event. A popular saying in China's elite sports circles, 'The country focus is on the Olympic, while that of the provinces is on the NGC', reflects the hierarchy of sports goals. The Olympics represent the pinnacle for national elite sports, while the National Games are the highest aspiration at the provincial and city level [42]. The achievements in key karate competitions in China are closely linked to the professional advancement of athletes, coaches, and related officials, such as their promotions and salary increases. This connection created a strong incentive for excellence in the sport. Consequently, the inclusion of karate in the NGC, a major sporting event in the country, significantly spurred interest in the sport across various regions.

The substantial increase in attention towards karate across various regions of China was mirrored by the remarkable growth in the number of karate associations within the country. Before 2016, only about 30 regions had established their karate associations. Yet, from 2016 to 2022, there was a significant expansion, with 139 additional regions forming their karate associations [43]. A significant instance of this growth was the establishment of the Hubei Province Karate Association in December 2016. The leadership of the provincial sports administration stated as follows：

We will support and assist the Hubei Province Karate Association in organising training for coaches and referees within the province. We will also guide the Association in organising the Karate Championships [44].

This example highlights the widespread appeal and accessibility of karate among regional sports institutions in China, following its inclusion in the Olympics and the NGC. One of the key factors contributing to the widespread popularity and development of karate across various regions in China, similar to the 'expansion phase' era, has been the rise of championships. However, a notable shift occurred post-2017, with karate championships focusing primarily on elite sports. A pivotal moment in this regard was the selection process during the NGC, which led to the formation of a new batch of international team members. This team included athletes who would go on to achieve notable success at the international level. Among them were Yi Xiaoyan, a former volleyball player who clinched a silver medal at the Tokyo Olympics, and Gong Li, a former taekwondo athlete who secured a bronze medal at the Tokyo Olympics.

In 2018, Guan Jianming, the chairperson of the CKA, introduced a crucial strategy for popularising and enhancing elite karate: the 'competition-as-training' policy [45]. This approach meant utilising a high volume of competitions as integral parts of training to boost the elite level of karate, particularly with an eye on enhancing performance at international platforms like the Tokyo Olympics Game. This strategy entailed a significant overhaul of the existing competition structure within China. By expanding the National Karate Championships to five times a year and the National Club Championships to six times a year, alongside introducing new events like the National under-18 Karate Championships and the National Secondary School Karate Championships, a robust competitive framework was established. Between 2018 and 2020, hosting a total of 59 national karate competitions was an unprecedented move.

The rise of karate championships also attracted athletes from other disciplines, who were drawn to the opportunities in this emerging sport. An athlete, respondent "X2",

who transitioned from taekwondo to karate and participated in competitions during this period mentions as follows:

I initially practiced taekwondo in my childhood because I wanted to obtain a grade certificate for university admission. However, achieving a taekwondo grade felt too challenging. Karate was just starting to develop in my province, and it seemed like this was a good chance to achieve excellent results and obtain a grade certificate. I believed that my taekwondo skills, especially my leg techniques, gave me an advantage over typical karate athletes.

Compared to the widely popular taekwondo, karate, being relatively new and with fewer participants, offered a higher likelihood of achieving success in major competitions. This aspect of karate ensured that practitioners could have an edge in higher education admissions and national professional league selections and explains why karate became an attractive option for athletes from other disciplines. The relatively lower competition level in karate, coupled with the potential for success and the benefits it offered in educational and professional opportunities, made it a viable and appealing alternative for athletes looking to leverage their existing martial arts skills in a new arena. The information released by the CKA in 2020 shows that the number of professional karate athletes in China in 2020 had reached 1,813 [4], a 36-fold increase from around 50 in 2006. By 2021, karate organisations (clubs, universities, and athletic teams) were spread across all regions of China, except Tibet. [4]. Since the first karate club was established in 1990 by Mekaru, 20,000 karate clubs have been established in China [5], and the number of karate practitioners has reached approximately 300,000 over the past 30 years [6], suggesting that karate has assuredly taken root in China.

However, in 2021, karate was excluded from the 2024 Olympics, and two years later, it was once again left out of the 2028 Olympic program. Currently, karate in China faces the risk of being excluded from the 2025 NGC, leading some individuals to believe that karate's prime time is gradually ending. A young athlete retired in 2022, respondent "L2", mentioned:

Not only for 2024, but I also feel it's difficult for karate to be included in the 2028 Olympics. Therefore, my provincial sports organisation does not provide much support for karate, and they are unwilling to continue supporting my participation in competitions.

L's statement reflects a concern about the future of karate in the Olympics. This uncertainty impacts athletes' motivation and the willingness of organisations to invest in the sport. An older athlete, respondent "C2", who retired in 2021, expressed concerns about financial security:

I have children now, and the provincial karate team cannot guarantee my livelihood. I am on a contract basis, earning only a salary without benefits like social insurance or bonuses, and no assurance for training, equipment, medical, or rehabilitation.

These voices reflect the reality underlying the glittering achievements of elite karate. Despite the exclusion of karate from the Olympics, the sport's popularity among grassroots enthusiasts seems largely unaffected in recent years. As karate club director, respondent "H3", pointed out:

The removal of karate from the Olympics might not have much impact on us. Most parents of the children training here do not really care about these competitions. They are more interested in their children's growth through karate, in terms of physical fitness and self-defence skills.

The overarching sentiment conveyed here highlights a significant trend in the perception and appreciation of karate in China. Despite facing hurdles at the elite

competitive level, particularly with its oscillating status in the Olympic Games, karate continues to find a strong foothold at the grassroots level. Parents and community members value karate for its ability to instil discipline, respect, and life skills in practitioners, especially in young learners. Karate, in this context, is deeply rooted in community values, personal development, and the cultural significance of martial arts (hand-to-hand combat systems as combat sports and as a healthy form of exercise). Thus, this sustained interest and participation at the grassroots level is an indication that the essence of karate's popularity in China is likely to transcend the pursuit of Olympic glory.

From 2016 to 2023, karate was at its peak in China, driven by its inclusion in the 2020 Olympics and the significant backing from the GASC. However, the sport faced challenges with its exclusion from future Olympics and potential removal from the 2025 NGA, leading to concerns about support and sustainability. Despite these hurdles, karate's widespread popularity and grassroots growth across China remain evident, showcasing its resilience and the potential for continued development in the face of shifting sports policies.

4. Discussion

Anthropologist Alfred L. Kroeber [46] noted that in the interplay of cultures, a new item or a trait often fulfils a need or presents an obvious advantage in a culture that previously lacked it, or at least faces no established competition for acceptance [46]. This suggests that one of the main forces of cultural transmission is the demand of the receiving side. However, karate, as a cultural element associated with imperialism and colonial violence, and stereotypically depicted as inferior in Chinese martial arts movies, raises questions about what might have created a national-level demand in China. In this study, in synthesising historical and interview data, four key phases were identified in the development of karate in China, which shed light on the significant factors that propelled this process.

The primary findings reveal that in the early and nascent phases, set against the backdrop of a thaw in Sino-Japanese relations in the 1980s, karate entered China through platforms of martial arts diplomacy and gained influence in specific regions. In the twenty-first century, as karate's international status rose, China's Olympic aspirations and pursuit of global sports excellence resonated strongly with this sport, leading the government to embrace and promote karate nationwide. In the expansion and peak phases, Chinese officials, coaches, and athletes saw karate as an emerging Olympic sport and an excellent opportunity to advance their careers. These varying yet aligned motivations collectively fostered a synergistic environment that propelled the rapid development of karate in China, culminating in its inclusion in the 2020 Olympics Game. Thus, based on Alfred L. Kroeber's theory on the interplay of cultures, in the interaction of Chinese and Japanese martial arts cultures, karate's foreign cultural trait – its potential for Olympic inclusion – aligned perfectly with China's strategic sporting needs. This potential stood out starkly against the backdrop of traditional Chinese martial arts, which lacked similar Olympic prospects. Thus, despite karate's initially peripheral status in China, its Olympic aspirations resonated strongly with China's pursuit of global sports excellence, steering the country towards embracing and promoting karate.

The adaptation of karate in China, similarly to wu shu in Japan [47], is an example of positively impacting the social health of the populations of two countries that were

previously in conflict with each other. Sporting rivalry is not the most important factor, although it provides simple qualitative indicators of the relationship between these forms of activity and peaceful competition with somatic and mental health, only for the leaders (medal winners). The most valuable indicators, in the context of estimating health effects in these three dimensions, are the numbers of practitioners—in this case, informing about the Chinese population.

5. Conclusions

The expansion of karate in China invites two theoretical reflections. First, academic discourse on the global spread of karate, often attributed to media influence, may be oversimplified as it fails to explain karate's rapid growth in China. Thus, when studying the globalisation of a sport, it is crucial to consider the specificity and individual differences of the receiving side and conduct more detailed research. Second, the Olympics played a key role in driving the rapid development of Chinese karate during the initial and peak phases. While the Chinese government's support for karate varied with its Olympic status, it did not limit the sport's development during the expansion phase and the post-Olympic era. Future research should involve in-depth interviews with grassroots enthusiasts to further validate and broaden the findings of this study.

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Jinwen Xie: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-8434-4338

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