

Opportunities, challenges, and prospects for the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympic Games under the “Two Overall Situations”

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Abstract: Against the historical backdrop of the interplay between the strategic overall situation of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the profound global changes unseen in a century, the inclusion of Wushu in the Olympic Games has evolved from a long-cherished aspiration of the industry into a national strategy, endowed with profound value in demonstrating cultural confidence and promoting the diversification of global sports culture. From the dual analytical perspective of the “Two Overall Situations”, this paper systematically explores the opportunities, challenges and prospects of Wushu’s Olympic inclusion. The study finds that the historical opportunities for Wushu to enter the Olympics are mainly reflected in the top-down driving force of national strategies and the support of comprehensive national strength, the institutional window brought by the reforms of the Olympic Agenda 2020, the practical foundation laid by Wushu’s inclusion in the Youth Olympic Games, as well as the dual empowerment from the rising influence of Eastern culture worldwide and its massive global mass base. At the same time, its advancement still faces three structural barriers: insufficient standardization of Wushu itself and dilemmas in cross-cultural communication; competition quota restrictions and the invisible cultural ceiling within the Olympic system; and the discourse power game triggered by the complexity of the international political environment. Targeting the goal of Olympic inclusion by 2036, it is necessary to realize the dual values of Wushu’s formal Olympic accession and cultural education by optimizing the standardized reform of the competitive system, deepening cross-cultural interpretation of its cultural connotations, seizing the strategic opportunity of hosting the Olympic Games, and constructing a stepwise advancement path from the Youth Olympic Games to the Olympic Games.

Keywords: Wushu’s Entry into the Olympic Games; Sports Power; Cultural Confidence; Olympic Reform

0. Introduction

The “overall strategic situation of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” and the “unprecedented changes in the world in the past century” constitute the core framework for understanding the development orientation of contemporary China and its global interaction. The intertwining of these “two overall situations” implies that China’s development is not only based on its own great rejuvenation, but also deeply integrated into and influencing the reshaping of the global order^[1]. Against this vast backdrop, martial arts, an ancient skill that embodies the philosophical thinking, aesthetic taste, and physical wisdom of the Chinese nation, has been endowed with profound significance beyond the scope of sports in its century-long pursuit to become an official Olympic competition event (i.e., “martial arts entering the Olympics”).

From its stunning performance at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, to its failure as a special event at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and finally to its debut as an official event at the 2026 Dakar Youth Olympics, the journey of martial arts in the Olympics has been full of ups and downs^[2]. This is not only the “dream of several generations of martial artists”, but has also become

an “important task of the General Administration of Sport of China”, and has been explicitly written into the implementation plan of the “Outline for Building a Strong Sports Country”, setting the phased goal of “striving to enter the 2036 Olympics”^[3]. Why has the long-standing aspiration of including Wushu in the Olympic Games now been elevated to a national strategic level? How does it respond to national development goals such as cultural confidence and the construction of a leading sports nation? Furthermore, how can we break through the sports and cultural barriers brought about by Western centrism amid the profound global changes unseen in a century? This paper argues that the “Two Overall Situations” provide an indispensable dual analytical perspective for examining Wushu’s Olympic inclusion. From the internal perspective of national rejuvenation, Wushu’s entry into the Olympics serves as a vital pathway to concretely demonstrate cultural confidence and enhance national cultural soft power. From the macro perspective of evolving global patterns, it acts as an important touchstone for Eastern civilization to participate in reshaping the global sports and cultural landscape and promote the diversified development of the Olympic Movement. On this basis, this paper systematically explores three core questions. First, what unprecedented historical opportunities does Wushu’s Olympic inclusion encounter under the context of the “Two Overall Situations”? Second, what deep-seated challenges and structural contradictions exist in the process of Wushu entering the Olympics? Third, following a dialectical analysis of opportunities and challenges, what are the future prospects and feasible paths for Wushu’s inclusion in the Olympic Games? By exploring these issues, this study aims to provide a theoretical paradigm and practical reference for research on the modern transformation of traditional sports culture and its global strategic value.

1. Strategic Coupling Between the “Two Overall Situations” and Sports Culture

To fully grasp the contemporary value of Wushu’s Olympic inclusion, it must be placed within the analytical framework constructed by the “Two Overall Situations”, so as to clarify the internal interactive logic among national strategy, global pattern, and cultural practice. The core of the strategic overall situation of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation lies in the comprehensive revitalization of the nation, with cultural rejuvenation as its spiritual essence. Sport is positioned as a symbolic undertaking for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. As a treasure of Chinese cultural heritage, Wushu, through its internationalization and Olympic development, naturally becomes an important carrier for highlighting cultural subjectivity and fostering national pride^[4]. The proactive actions of national power are particularly prominent in this context. Historically, the successful inclusion of traditional sports from Japan (judo) and South Korea (taekwondo) in the Olympic Games has invariably demonstrated the comprehensive national strength of the “host country,” especially the home field advantage provided by being the host country of the Olympic Games, which has played a decisive role. This provides China with a clear historical reference: strong national power is the cornerstone of dreams, and hosting the Olympic Games is the mainstream “regular path” to realizing these dreams. Therefore, the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympic Games is not simply a demand from the public for sports, but a strategic measure deeply integrated into national development goals and plans.

The unprecedented changes in the world over the past century point to profound adjustments in the international balance of power, reforms in the global governance system, and transformations in the modes of inter-civilization exchanges. In the field of sports, this “change” manifests as challenges faced by the Olympic Movement itself, such as sustainability, inclusivity, and attractiveness to youth. The “Olympic Agenda 2020” and subsequent reforms promoted by Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee, are precisely the product of responding to these changes. Among them, “maximizing cooperation with stakeholders of the Olympic Games”, especially granting the host country the right to add additional events to the Olympic Games it hosts, has opened a new policy window for the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympics^[5]. This marks a slight adjustment in the logic of Olympic event design from a single “European-centered” or universal standard for events to one that respects more the cultural

characteristics and promotion demands of the host country, providing institutional possibilities for multiculturalism to enter the Olympic hall.

The “two overall situations” are not separate but mutually reinforcing. National rejuvenation provides strength and confidence for participating in global changes, while actively participating in global changes and contributing Chinese wisdom and solutions (including cultural solutions) is an inevitable requirement and important symbol of national rejuvenation. The inclusion of martial arts in the Olympics is precisely at the intersection of these two overall situations: it is both inward-looking, concerning the self-confirmation and rejuvenation of national culture, and outward-looking, concerning how Chinese civilization can creatively express itself and engage in equal dialogue on the highest stage of world sports. This makes the study of the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympics a micro-case of observing how China coordinates internal and external factors, maintains cultural identity in the process of globalization, and contributes public goods.

2. The favorable conditions brought about by the convergence of the “two overall situations”

As can be seen from Table 1, martial arts are currently entering the most favorable strategic opportunity period in their long journey towards inclusion in the Olympics, which is mainly attributed to the strong driving force of national strategies, structural adjustments in international rules, and changes in the global cultural ecology.

Table 1. The main opportunities and strategic support for martial arts to be included in the Olympic Games

Opportunity dimension	Specific manifestation	Strategic support and case
Driven by national strategy	Incorporated into the implementation plan of the “Outline for Building a Strong Sports Country” with a goal set for 2036.	The decisive role of national power as the host country of the project.
Olympic rule adjustments	The “Olympic Agenda 2020” grants the host country the right to add new events.	Leverage the “host advantage” path for China’s future hosting of the Olympics.
Olympic Youth Strategy	The Youth Olympic Games has undergone reform and event setting, with martial arts becoming an official event at the 2026 Dakar Youth Olympic Games ^[10] .	Martial arts align with the concepts of youth development, gender equality, and sustainable development.
Global cultural demand	The interest in Eastern philosophy and the culture of physical and mental harmony is growing; Tai Chi has become a world intangible cultural heritage.	Enhance cultural attraction, transcend mere competition, and fulfill the cultural and educational functions of the Olympics.
International Foundation:	The International Wushu Federation has 152 member associations, with approximately 120 million practitioners world-wide.	This meets the potential requirements of the International Olympic Committee for the “universality” of the event and global participation.

2.1 Top-level design of national strategy and support from comprehensive national strength

The country has explicitly incorporated martial arts into the roadmap for building a strong sports nation. In March 2020, the Martial Arts Sports Management Center of the General Administration of Sport of China formulated an implementation plan, setting the specific goal of achieving a “major breakthrough in the application of martial arts for the Olympics and striving to enter the 2036 Olympics” between 2025 and 2035. The establishment of this official timetable marks the elevation of martial arts’ inclusion into the Olympics from an industry aspiration to a national will, which will surely bring together policy, resources, and intellectual support from both within

and outside the system. Zhang Yuping, Secretary-General of the International Wushu Federation, also expressed confidence, saying, “I believe that one day martial arts will enter the Summer Olympics”^[6]. Meanwhile, China’s successful hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics not only demonstrated its unparalleled event organization capabilities but also accumulated rich experience in utilizing the Olympic platform to showcase its national image. Strong economic strength, well-developed infrastructure, and efficient social mobilization capabilities make China fully “qualified and capable” of hosting the Summer Olympics again, thus providing the most solid premise for martial arts to enter the Olympics through the “regular path” of “adding events by the host country”.

2.2 Reform window and demand changes of the International Olympic Movement

The reforms promoted by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to address contemporary challenges have created a crucial institutional opportunity for martial arts to be included in the Olympics. The Olympic Agenda 2020, which grants host countries the right to add new events, is one of the most direct benefits. This means that once China secures the right to host a future Summer Olympic Games, the possibility of martial arts becoming an official competition event will greatly increase. Meanwhile, the Olympic Movement has attached growing importance to youth engagement and the concept of sustainable development. The 2026 Dakar Youth Olympic Games carried out major reforms to its event programme rules, allowing disciplines from 35 international sports federations to compete on the same stage. Wushu was successfully selected as one of the 25 official competition events^[7]. Zhang Qiuping, Secretary-General of the World Wushu Federation, pointed out that Wushu features a young participant base, balanced gender participation, simple requirements for venues and equipment, and alignment with sustainable development concepts, which are highly consistent with the mission of the Youth Olympic Games. This historic breakthrough not only marks the crucial first step for Wushu toward Olympic inclusion, but also grants Wushu associate membership status within the Olympic system, accumulating valuable experience for the operation, organization and management of future Olympic events^[8].

2.3 Restructuring of the Global Cultural Landscape and the Rise of Eastern Cultural Influence

A prominent feature of the profound global changes unseen in a century is the relative decline of Western cultural hegemony and the continuous growth of cultural self-awareness and international influence among non-Western civilizations. The global pursuit of multicultural coexistence, physical and mental harmony, and ecological philosophy resonates strongly with Eastern philosophies embodied in Wushu, such as the unity of humanity and nature and the integration of hardness and softness. Tai Chi has been inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and the application for establishing the International Tai Chi Day is steadily advancing^[9]. Such international recognition at the cultural level enables Wushu to go beyond being regarded merely as a combat technique and enter the Olympic arena as a culturally profound sport. In addition, Wushu boasts a solid global mass foundation, with approximately 120 million practitioners worldwide and 152 member associations of the International Wushu Federation. Its extensive global participation fully meets the universality admission criteria for Olympic sports.

3. Deep-seated Contradictions and Structural Barriers to Wushu’s Olympic Inclusion

Despite unprecedented historical opportunities, the path for Wushu to join the Olympic Games remains full of obstacles. The challenges stem not only from the inherent complexity and historical limitations of Wushu itself, but also from the established selection mechanism of the Olympic Movement as well as in-depth cultural and political games.

3.1 The Dilemma of Standardization and International Communication of Wushu Itself

The martial arts system is vast and complex, with numerous schools, and its “competition format

and content are more complicated, with a bloated and extensive event system.” How to extract the essence from the vast tradition and create Olympic events that conform to the principles of “standardization, quantification, and evaluability” of modern competitive sports is a major challenge. Currently, competitive martial arts routines (such as Changquan and Tai Chi) and Sanda (free sparring) are the two major branches, but they have distinct styles. The Youth Olympic Games has chosen the routine formats of “Changquan All-around” and “Tai Chi All-around,” and evaluated them with reference to scoring events such as rhythmic gymnastics. Although this is a pragmatic strategy, it has also sparked controversy over whether routine performances can represent the full scope of martial arts. Furthermore, martial arts terminology is deeply rooted in Chinese traditional culture, and its “literal expressions are relatively vague,” posing serious language and cognitive barriers in cross-cultural communication. Wang Peng, an associate researcher at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, pointed out that due to cultural differences, many foreigners simply equate martial arts with exaggerated fighting in films and television, and international promotion talents with both martial arts professional skills and cross-cultural communication abilities are extremely scarce. This makes it difficult for the cultural connotation and philosophical spirit (“martial arts ethics”) of martial arts to be accurately understood by international audiences, affecting its image as a mature modern sports event.

3.2 Competitive barriers in the Olympic system and the “invisible cultural ceiling”

The inclusion of events in the Olympic Games is subject to strict quotas and competitive procedures. Historically, the “Olympic Downsizing Plan” implemented by former International Olympic Committee President Rogge directly led to the failure of the 2008 Beijing Olympics in its attempt to include martial arts as an event, despite the host country’s advantages. Although current policies have been relaxed, the number of new event slots for each Olympic Games remains limited. Martial arts must compete with emerging events that are more popular among global youth, such as skateboarding, rock climbing, surfing, and long-lobbied events like squash. Furthermore, the Olympic movement inherently carries the historical Western origins of modern Olympic sports, and its evaluation system, aesthetic standards, and organizational logic have inadvertently set a certain “cultural invisible ceiling.” Non-Western traditional events must undergo a process of being “disciplined” and “reshaped” by Western sports logic (such as the color grading of judo uniforms and the protective gear rules for taekwondo). The process of including martial arts in the Olympics inevitably involves significant modifications to its rules, costumes, and scoring system, which inevitably leads to internal anxiety about how to maintain cultural authenticity. There have even been academic views that “martial arts do not need to be included in the Olympics.”

3.3 Complexity of the international political environment and discourse power game

Sports have never been able to fully separate from politics. Amidst the “centennial changes,” competition among major powers has intensified, and China’s rising influence in international affairs sometimes triggers unnecessary doubts and resistance. Martial arts, as a project explicitly identified as part of China’s national cultural strategy, may be seen by some international sports and political forces as an attempt by China to expand its cultural influence, thus encountering non-technical resistance in voting, lobbying, and other aspects. This means that Wushu’s entry into the Olympics is not merely public promotion at the level of competition rules, but also a complex game of international cultural and political discourse power. While leveraging its identity as an Olympic host country to take the initiative in promoting Wushu’s inclusion, China must also make steady and meticulous efforts in daily global sports governance, build extensive international alliances, and tell a compelling China story that highlights the integration between the spirit of Wushu and Olympic ideals, making it easy for the international community to understand and accept.

4. Strategic Planning toward 2036

Against the backdrop of coexisting opportunities and challenges, the prospect of Wushu entering the Olympics hinges on a systematic, targeted, and resilient strategic layout. The core philosophy is not to regard Olympic inclusion as the sole ultimate goal, but to take it as a leverage to drive the comprehensive modernization and internationalization of Wushu, and realize the dual values of Olympic event accession and cultural enlightenment.

4.1 Competitive System Reform and Cultural Connotation Interpretation

At the competitive level, continuous optimization and reform should be upheld. The primary task is to streamline and unify the competition system. Drawing on the classification model of Karate, which divides events into Kata (forms) and Kumite (sparring), competitive Wushu can be clearly categorized into two independent Olympic disciplines: Taolu (routine) and Sanshou (free combat), with only a small number of highly ornamental and distinctive event categories set for each. The scoring system should be upgraded toward greater transparency and technological application by introducing electronic scoring and real-time result announcement mechanisms to reduce judging disputes and align with mainstream international competition standards. Meanwhile, brand building for individual disciplines should be strengthened. The general term “Wushu” should be downplayed, while the symbolic dissemination of individual events such as Changquan and Tai Chi should be emphasized to create globally recognized independent sports IPs and lower the cognitive threshold for international audiences. At the cultural level, efforts should be made to advance modern transformation and cross-cultural interpretation. It is necessary to break away from the stereotyped fantasy impression of Kung Fu and systematically interpret to the world Wushu’s peaceful philosophy of ending warfare with martial arts, its self-cultivation idea of integrating internal refinement and external temperament, and its philosophical wisdom of Yin–Yang balance. Professor Si Hongyu from the School of Physical Education, Zhengzhou University, pointed out that it is essential to deeply explore the cultural implications and philosophical core behind Wushu so as to provide high-quality content support for international communication. In addition, a large number of Wushu cultural ambassadors with global vision, foreign language proficiency and cross-cultural communication competence should be cultivated, rather than merely training technical coaches. Communication channels should extend beyond competition venues. Through multi-dimensional approaches including in-depth cooperation with Confucius Institutes, integration into physical education curricula of international primary and secondary schools, high-quality films and documentaries, and digital new media matrices, Wushu can achieve in-depth global outreach and cultural integration.

4.2 Grasping the Strategic Dividend of Hosting the Olympic Games

Historical experience shows that hosting the Olympic Games serves as a golden opportunity window for traditional sports to gain Olympic inclusion. Taking the initiative to bid for and successfully host the 2036 Summer Olympics and subsequent editions is the top priority of the strategy for Wushu’s entry into the Olympics. This requires the country to make forward-looking diplomatic arrangements and preparations for the bid. Once the hosting right is obtained, we can fully utilize the initiative granted by the Olympic Agenda 2020 to propose martial arts (taolu and/or sanshou) as a recommended event by the host country for submission to the International Olympic Committee for consideration. At that time, China’s mature event organization capabilities, vast market appeal, and the successful “pre-performance” of martial arts at the Youth Olympic Games will all serve as powerful persuasive tools.

4.3 Stage planning: Progressive advancement from the Youth Olympic Games to the Olympic Games

The inclusion of martial arts in the Olympics should be designed with a clear phased roadmap. In the short term (2026–2030), the core task is to ensure the complete success of the martial

arts competition at the 2026 Dakar Youth Olympic Games. Careful organization of participation is required to ensure that the competition is exciting and fair, fully demonstrating the appeal of martial arts to young people, and taking this opportunity to train international referees and technical officials, accumulating experience in operating the Olympic system. In the medium term (2030–2035), we should fully promote martial arts to become an “additional optional event” for the 2032 Brisbane Olympics or subsequent Olympic Games, and continue to expand the influence of martial arts in world championships, intercontinental games, and sports exchanges among “the Belt and Road” countries. In the long term (2035–), with the 2036 Olympics (if hosted by China) or the subsequent Olympic Games as the ultimate goal, we should initiate comprehensive diplomatic lobbying, public promotion, and final technical application work, striving for success in one go.

5. Conclusion

The grand narrative of the “two overall situations” has injected profound era connotations and strategic momentum into the specific and micro sports cultural project of martial arts entering the Olympics. It is no longer merely a long-cherished wish of the Chinese martial arts community, but also a symbolic pursuit of establishing cultural self-confidence and building a strong sports nation in the process of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. It is also a Chinese practice of promoting cultural exchanges and mutual learning, and participating in the reshaping of the global sports cultural ecology in response to the unprecedented changes in the world in the past century.

Opportunities and challenges coexist, and hopes and difficulties are intertwined. The support of national power, the window of Olympic reform, and the east wind of global culture constitute a once-in-a-century historic opportunity for martial arts to enter the Olympics. However, the pain of modernization transformation of the project itself, the competitive barriers and cultural barriers of the Olympic system, and the complexity of the international political environment also pose severe practical challenges. Looking ahead, the success of martial arts entering the Olympics depends on a set of intelligent strategies that balance “technique” and “philosophy”: internally, it requires great courage to promote the standardization and modernization reform of the competitive system, and strengthen the construction of sub-event brands; externally, it requires a high degree of cultural consciousness to conduct modern interpretation and cross-cultural communication of philosophical connotations, and cultivate truly international talents. Grasping the strategic opportunity of hosting the Summer Olympics in the future is undoubtedly the most important path to achieve leapfrogging.

No matter how many challenges lie ahead, the significance of martial arts marching towards the Olympic hall of fame has long surpassed the mere gain or loss of a gold medal. It represents a dialogue between the ancient physical wisdom of Chinese civilization and the sports spirit of the modern world, and an active expression of Eastern philosophy in the era of globalization. This process itself is a vivid exercise of how China coordinates the “two overall situations” and contributes more inclusive civilization achievements to the world. As Zhang Yuping, Secretary-General of the International Wushu Federation, firmly believes, martial arts will eventually be included in the Olympics. This is not only an expectation for a goal, but also confidence in the historical law that civilization develops through exchanges and enriches itself through mutual learning.

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