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► **To cite this version:**

Laurent Chircop-Reyes. Embarrassing Martial Arts: Masters Passing on the “Real Things” and Local Valuation in Shanxi. *China perspectives*, 2023, 132, pp. 19-28. hal-04051926

HAL Id: hal-04051926

<https://hal.science/hal-04051926>

Submitted on 26 Apr 2023

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Embarrassing Martial Arts: Masters Passing on the “Real Things” and Local Valuation in Shanxi

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ABSTRACT: Chinese martial arts are traditionally transmitted through the private master-disciple relationship. In recent years, some masters have been expressing their concern about the desuetude of their art, which calls into question the confidential modes of transmission and what is held to be orthodox in it. Concurrently, intangible cultural heritage (ICH) taken by a wide range of social actors, including the masters, attempts to value practices and perpetuate lineages. Fieldwork observations, however, enable the analysis of complex lineage functioning and a certain embarrassment linked to historicity and martiality when it comes to promoting traditional martial arts outside the private sphere. This article draws on masters’ narratives (oral testimonies and written sources), taking *xingyiquan* (“form and intention boxing”) as the main case study, conducted in Shanxi Province in 2017 and 2018. It aims at questioning the constraints balance arising from efforts to preserve cultural integrity, on the one hand, and engaging in valuation and standardisation processes, on the other.

KEYWORDS: martial arts, esoteric practices, lineages, transmission of knowledge, cultural valuation, ICH, *xingyiquan*, Shanxi.

Introduction

An old martial art master from Shanxi Province whom I have known since the 2000s is worried about the future of his art; as he says: “There are just a few left to pass on the real things; after [we] die, it’s over” (conversation with Master G, January 2017, Datong). Master G is a representative of intention boxing (*yiquan* 意拳 also known as *dachengquan* 大成拳, great accomplishment boxing), which is an evolutionary style elaborated on the basis of Shanxi’s and Hebei’s form and intention boxing (*xingyiquan* 形意拳, hereafter *xingyi*). During my fieldwork with three other *xingyi* masters presented below, I noticed different ways of expressing the same concern: “I’m afraid we’re the last ones” (conversation with Master Z, June 2018, Yuci). Oral narratives may also be corroborated by written sources. Probably one of the most detailed *xingyi* master’s narratives published to date is Li Zhongxuan’s 李仲軒 (1915-2004) testimony, which is part of the analysis in this work.¹ Concern over martial arts falling into disuse has led the masters studied here to become involved in Shanxi’s cultural valuation initiatives. Martial arts and cultural heritage issues have been well discussed in the scientific literature so far (Daly 2012; Kim, Whitford, and Arcodia 2019; Green 2020; Kozin 2020). Scholars have also conducted investigations on Shanxi’s *xingyi* cultural valuation or assimilated practices in

neighbouring provinces (Mu 2012; Zhang and Green 2018; Liu, Guo, and Li 2019; Chircop-Reyes 2020). Although relatively unknown outside East Asia (Lorge 2012: 234), *xingyi* is part of the three main forms of internal boxing (*neijiaquan* 內家拳), along with tai chi (*taijiquan* 太極拳) and eight trigrams palm [boxing] (*baguazhang* 八卦掌) (Zhou 2003: 86).

The present study applies an anthropological qualitative approach to *xingyi* in its historical depth. Building on previous work mentioned above and situated in the martial arts studies emerging field of research (Facal and Chircop-Reyes 2022: 2), this article presents data collected during fieldwork that covered Taiyuan, Taigu, Yuci, Qixian, and Pingyao in Shanxi Province. Anonymity was required, and the three main masters investigated, representative of Dai Kui’s 戴奎 (1874-1951) and Che Yizhai’s 車毅齋 (1833-1914) lineages, are therefore renamed as Master D, C, and Z. I first met them in January 2017² and continued the investigation until June 2018. My analysis is mainly the result of eight months of ethnography (2017-2018) drawn on nondirected conversations and participant observation conducted

1. Li Zhongxuan 李仲軒 and Xu Haofeng 徐浩峰, 逝去的武林 (*Shiqu de wulin*, The lost martial arts world), 2006, Beijing: Dangdai Zhongguo chubanshe.
2. Thanks to a recommendation from researchers at Shanxi University.

with them.³ The informants were recorded when their consent could be obtained (18 hours of recordings in total). Complementary data collected from Master G since 2005 in Datong are also included.⁴

The writing of this article was motivated by several situations observed in these regions, where a priori transmission and valuation of martial arts go hand in hand. But there may be discreet expressions of *embarrassment* when both cases come together. As shown by Hans Steinmüller in his study of esoteric practices in contemporary Confucianism, certain aspects of *xingyi* customs, in particular related to its historicity and its violence in society, could be a “potential source of embarrassment towards the outsiders” (2010: 90). Laura Silvestri also describes well the traditionalist discourse that confirms “the importance of protecting martial knowledge by divulging it only with the greatest prudence” (2016: 121). This prudence is observable in *xingyi* and may be a source of silent tension regarding “the reluctance of masters to transmit, their distrust of laypersons and the importance of loyalty to the chosen master” (ibid.). The *xingyi* masters of Shanxi do not close the door to valuation through transmission. Nevertheless, it is carried out on different criteria related to initiation rules that differentiate a student from a disciple.

Indeed, *xingyi* is traditionally transmitted through a hermetic and secret mode limited to disciples (Duan and Dai 2014: 26). Benjamin Judkins and Jon Nielson have described how the “traditional mode of transmission makes sense when it is remembered that martial arts were primarily a way of making a living. Given that these skills were valuable precisely because they were rare, one would not want to spread them” (2015: 88). I witnessed the symbolic importance of this during my personal initiation as a disciple with Master G: “Since you’re one of us, what is passed on to you is something precious” (conversation with Master G, July 2013, Datong).⁵ The distinction between students and disciples has continued even though rules have been slightly less strict in recent years: if some inner techniques (*neigong* 內功) are kept secret, forms (*taolu* 套路, set of routines) are taught openly in associative structures or parks. Still, *xingyi* seems to remain a practice of an esoteric nature, at least viewed from an etic perspective (Kennedy and Guo 2007: 18). By esoteric I mean not the arguable division between exoteric (*waijia* 外家) and esoteric (*neijia* 內家) categories (Henning 1999: 319-32), nor the fighting esoteric skills in religious mysticism (Farrer 2009: 41, 249-50), but more that receiving knowledge requires being initiated and ritually integrated into the lineage. *Xingyi* contains a spiritual and hygienic dimension derived from the practices of Daoism, and its initiation is to a certain degree in line with that of “Daoist circles” (Little et al. 2000: 37), as has also been noted in non-martial practices such as 氣功 (*qigong*, the “art of cultivating the energy”) (Palmer 2005; Micollier 2013: 137).

To my understanding, esotericism in *xingyi* is thus less related to what could be qualified as occult techniques than to a lineage organisation in which private initiation would guarantee knowledge singularity and perpetuation. But the strength of initiation is its *fragility*, to the extent that decisions can be made by knowledge holders to deal with modernisation efforts (Adell 2016: 26), and that secrecy may be seen among groups as an obstacle to modernity that would constitute one cause of desuetude (Homola 2013). Local valuing initiatives then try to prevent traditions from falling into disuse by preserving their cultural characteristics and lines of transmission, while also conforming them to standardised forms for wider teaching (Bodolec 2012).

Since the mid-2000s, a wide range of social actors in Shanxi, such as officials, transmitters, traditional practices enthusiasts, and tourism professionals, have been carrying out cultural valuation initiatives on a local scale.⁶ They participate to varying degrees in local decisions over what and who should be recognised as a cultural heritage value or holder. Considering that “heritage and tourism are often linked” (Lazzorotti 2000: 12), the prefectural-level city of Jinzhong’s ancient cities and surrounding counties form an attractive region to develop projects related to intangible cultural heritage (ICH) (*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物質文化遺產, thereafter abbreviated to *feiyi*). Jinzhong has effectively safeguarded ancient cities – Pingyao among the best known – but also several old ruins in Taigu, Qixian, and Yuci. As the native land of the Shanxi merchants, it was once a major trade hub shaped by intense human mobility towards the steppes in northern regions. The environment travelled by caravans was, however, hostile and at risk of brigandage. Merchants needed to ensure their personal safety and the protection of their goods from attacks by brigands along the routes, and also required the services of private domestic guards to prevent burglaries in their courtyards located outside walled cities. Jinzhong is therefore historically considered the cradle of local martial arts linked to the merchant world (Liu and Qiao 2014; Chircop-Reyes 2018, 2020). Some practices may have disappeared, but some still exist in forms that have been more or less modified over time.⁷ Masters D, C, and Z are the descendants of domestic guards by either direct kinship or classificatory kinship,⁸ and since 2008, their *xingyi* has been officially registered as an ICH of China, ranking as the 798th tradition on the national list of Chinese *feiyi* items.⁹

Thus, this research articulates historicity and current lineage functions. By highlighting *xingyi* masters’ views, it aims to question the balancing of constraints arising from efforts to preserve cultural integrity, on the one hand, and engaging in valuation and standardisation processes, on the other.

Method, research problem, and outline

Qualitative research and participant observation require personal engagement and that “the researcher assumes as far as possible the role of community members,” in which “group members assign identities to investigators” (Green 2019: 53). Role assignment in esoteric martial arts contexts “may range from the ‘intruder’

3. The participant observation was made possible thanks to a personal practicing experience in both styles (*xingyi* and *yiquan*) with Master G in Datong from 2005 onwards. I did not use any question forms during my fieldwork. The citations provided are therefore mostly extracted from nondirected conversations without any question-answer-type framework.

4. *Xingyi* and *yiquan* are closely connected historically and stylistically. Presenting data from both styles provides comparative insight for the analysis.

5. I have been studying *yiquan* with Master G since 2002. I was officially accepted into his lineage during a disciple acceptance ceremony in 2013. It should be noted that I have no master/disciple relationship with the other three masters involved in this investigation: they are my informants for the purposes of this research.

6. At prefecture-level or county-level divisions.

7. Such as the practice of 鞭杆 (*biangan*, whip stick), also called the “whip stick for camels and mules” (*luotuobian* 駱駝鞭) used during caravan expeditions. See Chircop-Reyes (2020), p. 104-5.

8. Classificatory kinship may be defined – among other definitions – as a system at work within a group that is not structured on biological kinship but considers itself as such. See White (1958). Here, group members refer to each other by a family classification (father, brother, uncle, etc.) and thus recognise themselves as belonging to the same lineage.

9. Data collected in February 2017 at the Shanxi Intangible Culture Protection Centre (*Shanxi feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu zhongxin* 山西非物質文化遺產保護中心) located in Taiyuan.

who disrupts ongoing events (e.g., outsiders may not see ‘secret techniques’) to one who is allowed insider access” (ibid.). Access to *xingyi* groups takes time, and what one is able to observe depends on the identity the group concerned has assigned to him or her. Aware of these difficulties, I nevertheless tried to highlight the different masters’ attitudes on how they wanted to promote and transmit their art. The masters investigated would shift in varying degrees from one attitude to another without publicly taking a definitive position; in private, they would rather remain conservative and cautious about projects that would standardise and broaden their teaching. Alternatively, they may be “a little bit more open,” as they said (here Master D is quoted, March 2017, Qixian), and accept – or act as if they accept – modifications of their practice in order to spread it more widely. The conservative attitude serves to avoid transmission that would not follow the clans’ rules, while the open one would conform to society’s expectations regarding martial arts, and at the same time help to prevent a possible break in the lineage’s continuity.

Following actors in the plurality of their interaction contexts provides a valuable perspective on two transmission dynamics at work side-by-side within the same groups. On the one hand, there is a transmission that respects historical logic through the private master-disciple relationship. On the other hand, there is a transmission that tries to be in line with standardised modes of teaching to ensure the perpetuation of a tradition. Martial arts have a potential for cultural valuation, and *xingyi* is now of interest, as I said above, to projects aimed at regional attractiveness driven by the *feiyi* phenomenon. The latter raises the question addressed by Patrick Daly: “It is important to ask to what extent efforts to record, protect and promote ICH facilitate transmission, while at the same time maintain the integrity of the cultural practice in question” (2012: 354).

The five sections suggest different degrees of embarrassment with a gradual fieldwork restitution in the following order: traditional practices valuation implies a reconstitution of their history and, in this case, questions how *xingyi*’s history is publicly narrated. The first two sections are therefore concerned with historical aspects related to social violence that are subject to friction with the current tendency toward tradition revival; secondly, the third and fourth sections bring into the analysis the importance of names, genealogies, and of keeping the “true heritage” private, questioning to what extent the valuation of *xingyi* implies a debate around the emic notion of orthodoxy (*zhengzong* 正宗, literally “orthodox ancestrality”);¹⁰ thirdly, the fifth section prepares for the conclusion by discussing how valuation may lead to the standardisation of traditional forms and transmission modes.

Local diffusion of a virtuous martiality

According to the masters investigated, the foundation of *xingyi* dates back to around the 1890s in Taigu (Wu 2002: 417-27). The merchant community provided a stepping-stone for social ascension and the very first transmission of *xingyi* outside a familial circle through the practice of employing escort companies (*biaoju* 鏢局), which included the profession of escort-masters (*biaoshi* 鏢師) and courtyard domestic guards (*baojia huyuan* 保家護院).¹¹ The escort companies’ milieu is known for its connections with Shanxi merchants and martial artists (Li, Guo, and Meng 2012), and

its history is promoted together with that of local martial traditions. Less well known to the public, however, is that some martial artists, including *xingyi* masters, were in league with social violence in the late imperial and republican eras: anti-Manchu circles, rebellion movements, and illegal trade (Esherik 1988; Chircop-Reyes 2023). Taking direct testimony from former escorts, the museums¹² of local escort companies expose the friendly relationship between martial artists and brigands (Chircop-Reyes 2022). These structures partially reflect the facts established by historians. There is a vocation to disseminate the history of the relationship between martial arts and the world of trade. However, this ambition seems to take a back seat to a discourse that consists of promoting the positive aspects of China’s martial arts culture.

Indeed, in the archival documents written by Qing officials, escorts in general are depicted negatively, and are typically presented as brutal, disrespectful, dishonest, and prone to theft (Chircop-Reyes 2022). Various archives of the eighteenth century indicate that escort companies engaged in illegal use of firearms, in particular muskets, while other official documents underline their illegal nature. The Qing government associated the escort-masters with brigands whose legal existence was denied, as suggested by the etymology of the Chinese term for brigand (*fei* 匪, literally “not,” “without”) (Chesnaux, Feiling, and Nguyen 1970: 14). At the turn of the twentieth century, Shanxi *xingyi* practitioners moved to big cities such as Beijing and Baoding (Hebei), where they diffused their art by training fighters and creating escort company businesses before becoming enmeshed in criminal activities such as those organised by the Boxers or the Red Spears sect.¹³ The archives studied to date remain incomplete,¹⁴ while current masters may be uncomfortable with talking about stories of historical violence transmitted within the groups. Although these facts may be embarrassing, I argue that they are important in legitimising the kinship and historical anchorage of lineages, as the current masters should respect the genealogy and names of past masters historically associated with dark activities – especially those closer to our own time.

Martial arts promotion in fact started during the troubled republican era, when nationalist motivations forged a national identity around arts, languages, medicine, and traditional dress (Makeham 2011: 17). Included in these categories, martial arts were at that time part of a project to inspire citizens to protect “national essence,” that is,

10. Not the conforming to a doctrine (religious context), but the conforming to a lineage system considered by the martial arts’ community as the only true ones.

11. *Xingyi* came from another style called intention boxing (*xinyiquan* 心意拳), transmitted mainly within a familial circle from at least the eighteenth to the end of the nineteenth century by the Dai family of Qixian. See Guo (2014) and Zhang Fang 張方, “心意拳十問(上)” (*Xinyiquan shiwen (shang)*, *Xinyiquan* in ten questions (Part One)), *Jing wu* (精武), No. 6, 2004, www.wfeng.net/gongfu/zhongguogongfu/neijiquan/201405/5827.html (accessed on 3 July 2022). Both styles were essentially employed in escort companies and in merchants’ courtyards. See Bu Bingquan 布秉全, “晉商, 鏢行, 形意拳” (*Jinshang, biaohehang, xingyiquan*, Shanxi merchants, armed escort, *xingyiquan*), *Shanxi ribao* (山西日報), 15 June 2009, <http://news.sohu.com/20090615/n264526907.shtml> (accessed on 20 February 2023).

12. Mainly located in Pingyao, these are small private structures called museums. I had access to three escort companies’ museums located in the ancient city and their collections (manuscripts, photographs, weapons, caravan items) thanks to the recommendations of the masters involved in this study, who were relatives of the people in charge of these structures.

13. Li Zhongxuan 李仲軒 and Xu Haofeng 徐浩峰, 逝去的武林 (*Shiqu de wulin (...)*), op. cit., p. 17.

14. Mainly Qing memorials, official letters, and local gazetteers. See Chircop-Reyes (2023).

to preserve Chinese cultural identity (Goossaert and Palmer 2011: 114-5; Makeham 2011). The current Chinese political model of promotion may be compared with that of the republican period, with the difference that the practices are now adapted to the social reference values of a different type of nationalism. If the republican regime encouraged citizens to learn martial arts and galvanised people's patriotism with slogans such as "venerate the martial spirit" (*shangwu jingshen* 尚武精神) (Morris 2004: 131-50; Lu 2018: 28), the communists, through the political orientation of "Chinese Dream" slogans, are more focused on making martial arts a nonviolent soft power and a "trademark of Chinese culture" (Wile 2020: 111).

In line with this, one witnesses in local private museums the prevalence of a concept of virtuous martiality, obscuring the dark periods that may be embarrassing for cultural valuation. Moreover, virtuous martiality also contributes to the development of the local tourist economy with the increasing creation of escort company museums as a tourist attraction in ancient cities or near some historical sites.¹⁵ Various events to promote the intangible heritage dimension of martial arts culture are organised in escort company museums, such as historical reconstructions of caravan expeditions or disciples' initiation rituals. Schoolchildren regularly attend these events as part of education programs aimed at discovering cultural heritage. Despite a pronounced historian's vocation, these structures, as observed by Agnew et al. (2004), seem to meet a tourism development strategy focused on commerce and entertainment rather than educational objectives.

The embarrassing question of combat

In the context of the cultural promotion initiatives developed above, *xingyi* is often presented through pre-codified routines, which are generally aesthetically pleasing, attractive for potential new students, and therefore appropriate for demonstration to the wider public. Except for some codified fighting applications in the routines, esoteric combat methods are rarely demonstrated. During training observations with Master G, he said: "All we train for are things to hit people (...) but we don't talk about it; we [show others that we] practise to play, to be healthy" (conversation with Master G, January 2017, Datong). Talking with noninitiates about traditions of combat is embarrassing. Current old masters indeed remain scarred by the Maoist iconoclast wave against any practices likely to bring people together, suspected of being hoodlum boxing (*liumangquan* 流氓拳),¹⁶ or even categorised as superstitious practices that the government strives to "rectify" (Palmer 2005). Wang Yufang 王玉芳 (1921-2012), daughter of *yiquan* founder Wang Xiangzhai 王薊齋 (1885/1886-1963), tells how during the Cultural Revolution:

people did not dare to act counter to the [Red] Guards (...) they came in looking for trouble, destroying my stuff (...) but I wasn't scared (...). Ten of them attacked me. I manage to knock down a good number of them.¹⁷

As Hans Steinmüller observed about ancestral shrines or geomantic practices, esoteric martial arts were considered old culture too, and the "intention had been to eradicate their bad aspects" (2010: 82); masters were badly injured during the 1970s, but as with geomantic practices, people now call it popular culture (*minjian wenhua*)

(*ibid.*),¹⁸ and the art of Master G has been officially recognised as Datong's city-rank ICH since 2020.

Before [the end of] the 1970s, martial arts were not looked upon favourably in China; I didn't dare to teach it, and I had then established a rule for those who wanted to train with me: firstly, not to teach it to others; secondly, not to charge; thirdly, not to brawl (...). (Speech given by Master G during a private ceremony in 2012, Datong)

While *xingyi* has the reputation of being aggressive,¹⁹ this by no means detracts from its reputation as being valuable in today's society. Historically, however, the art was born out of the military spear (Duan 2011; Ji 2011; Chi 2014). Warfare skills also include short or long weapons (stick, sword, and knife). Its barehand practice is composed of a set of boxing techniques applied mainly to close combat qualified as "art of fighting to kill" (Peng 2015). It is therefore renowned for its offensiveness and visualisation methods to galvanise the angry energies and relentlessness of the adept. The degree of intensity induced by visualising exercises produces an abundant secretion of adrenalin that puts the practitioner in a state of "madness."²⁰ These martial attitudes, not limited to the art of *xingyi* although fundamental to it (and especially taught in *yiquan*), were considered by the mid-twentieth century community of practitioners to be harmful to health because it can lead to symptoms described as psychastenia.²¹ Then, in the 1950s to 1970s, as "combat practices were no longer considered to be at the service of the people" (conversation with Master G in 2013, Datong), they were presented by the government as useless and even dangerous for living in society. Those who were caught even discussing combat would have been considered "criminals who seek to disrupt the order and security of society."²²

There was a return to combat teaching but in sporting forms (*sanda* 散打) in the early 1980s (Lorge 2012: 235), splitting martial arts, to put it simply, into two categories: modern and traditional. In the latter,

15. Besides Pingyao, one can also visit recently opened (2018) escort companies' museums in Qikou (Shanxi), near Lijiashan troglodyte village, or near the Shanhaiguan section of the Great Wall (Qinhuangdao, Hebei).
16. It describes *yiquan* practitioners in the 1960s and 1970s provoking brawls to establish dominance over other rival practitioners. This phenomenon is rarer today, even though I noticed this reputation during my long-term stay in Shanxi since 2005. The local government in Heilongjiang similarly described *xingyi* practitioners in the 1980s. See Feng Yunsheng 風雲生, "形意拳精華: 形意如龍" (*Xingyiquan jinghua: Xingyi ru long*, The essence of *xingyiquan: Xingyi* like a dragon), 360doc.com (360doc個人圖書館), 16 December 2019, www.360doc.com/content/19/12/06/14/52169558_877842192.shtml (accessed on 6 July 2022).
17. Extract from Eline Flipse's documentary *Eat your Enemy*, 2005.
18. 民間 (*minjian*) could be translated as the "space among the people."
19. Li Zhongxuan 李仲軒 and Xu Haofeng 徐浩峰, 逝去的武林 (*Shiqu de wulin* (...)), op. cit., p. 93.
20. Visualisation is practised through a position called "standing [like a] pole" (*zhanzhuang* 站樁). See Laurent Chircop-Reyes, "Du combat au *yangsheng*: Symbolique de la 'force' et réorientation des valeurs martiales" (From fighting to nourishing life: Symbolism of "force" and reorientation of martial values), Symposium *Culture martiale chinoise*, Paris, Musée du Quai Branly, 12 November 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1_r-1Pyo4 (accessed on 6 July 2022).
21. Li Zhongxuan 李仲軒 and Xu Haofeng 徐浩峰, 逝去的武林 (*Shiqu de wulin* (...)), op. cit., p. 93.
22. Testimony of Zhao Daoxin 趙道新 (1907-1990), see "關於兩大武術體系的對話: 把武術血淋淋地剖開" (*Guanyu liang da wushu tixi de duihua: Ba wushu xie linlin de poukai*, Dialogue on two great martial arts systems: A bloody martial arts' dissection). See a French translation from Chinese by Laurent Chircop-Reyes, "Une 'sanglante dissection' des arts martiaux chinois," *Les chroniques du wulin*, 8 November 2015, <https://wulin.hypotheses.org/106> (accessed on 6 July 2022).

combat remains an embarrassing aspect requiring the confidentiality of transmission to conform it to social values. Indeed, if secrecy may be seen as an obstacle to modernity as mentioned above, it can also be seen as a concern for conformity, at least in appearance, hence the fact that one should only talk about what one knows between initiated and trusted people (Steinmüller 2010: 89). The plural character of this context leads me to share the thinking that “the affirmation of a community’s [cultural] identity is played out and constructed between the things that are given to be seen and those that are embarrassing to communicate to others” (Moisa 2010: 455-6). Investigating the masters’ *cultural intimacy* scale (Herzfeld 2007) allows the perception of a social environment that follows on a complex historicity. This influences the functioning of current lineages and how they, each differently, promote what they consider to be socially coherent in respect to an orthodox lineage’s names and genealogies.

The recognition of orthodox lineages and genealogies

As in the Daoist lineages, ancestry in esoteric martial arts confers an orthodox dimension. Initiates in *xingyi* venerate not the master (*shifu* 師父), but the master’s master (*shiye* 師爺) and the founding ancestor (*shizu* 師祖). Transmission of the *shizu* school and the *shiye* style guarantees the lineage’s orthodoxy, that is, a direct line. In this sense, the *shifu* is an intermediary, and the age difference with the disciples ideally should not exceed fifteen years, to avoid causing confusion in the order of generations.²³ As Adeline Herrou points out for Daoist practices, with which *xingyi* shares hygienic practices and concepts derived from ancient cosmological thought (Wu 2002: 18-25), the names of the styles “must be transmitted identically” (Herrou 2014: 483). Master D, who is a descendant of the Dai family from Qixian by classificatory kinship, insists that to respect the name is to show adherence to the rules of the lineage concerned and recognition of the genealogy. As a descendant of the Che family from Taigu, likewise by classificatory kinship, Master C also maintains the idea that while the identical transmission of names ensures the continuity of tradition, the fact that “the content of the practice is likely to change significantly over time” does not seem to entirely alter lineage orthodoxy (ibid.). Maintaining a direct line of transmission by name helps to legitimise orthodoxy and in turn becomes a strong argument for some groups to present themselves as referent custodians when initiating a valuation process for their school, especially in terms of *feiyi*. However, I observed some situations in which valuation skews or makes an incomplete genealogy mainly because of the complexity of its reenactment resulting from confidentiality on the one hand, and the function of orality and writing in lineages on the other (Daly 2012: 324).

Transmission in *xingyi* is mainly based on an oral transmission.²⁴ Orality can act as an effective means of disseminating knowledge within lineages (Emler 2013), and the sense of belonging and continuity over time attests to the orthodoxy of the practice (Elias and Scotson 1985). It therefore represents necessary data in the valuation context, insofar as “orality puts the human relationship at the centre of a transmission process” (Homola 2013: 39), as well as being an “essential means in the construction and maintenance of a community identity” (van Krieken 1998: 44-5, 212). As in several

other martial arts, the sense of orthodoxy in *xingyi* is above all structured on the rite to formally become the disciple of the master (*baishi yishi* 拜師儀式). Alain Testart (1992) says that the rite of acceptance into a lineage implies the revelation of a secret teaching, which marks a social distinction between the novice and the initiate. This is particularly relevant with the distinction made in *xingyi* between the student and the disciple. The disciples’ names may be written for the building of the master’s stele (before or after his death) or during the rite, after which a lineage certificate is kept in two copies by the master and the disciple. But the rite can also be done in a strictly confidential way without producing any written materials. In both cases, the rite formalises the transmission that comes from one or more founding master ancestors, in accordance with the orthodox names, and is recognised by a nonformal *minjian* community called the circle of martial artists (*wulin* 武林). The *wulin* is composed of different schools and lineages. Those not recognised by the *wulin* are generally perceived as irregular or even as fake masters (Zhang 2020).

Thus, making the genealogies understandable for non-practitioners is a tricky task. Moreover, the purpose of recording implies making it accessible to the public, which could be sensitive: the complex lineage function described above may result in simplified genealogies accredited by structures in charge of cultural valuation. Some masters may then be designated as the successor or representative without being unanimously recognised by the *wulin*. Such initiatives can thus be a source of discord, or amplify existing tensions within groups that have their own private system of transmitter recognition. These tensions are almost imperceptible to laypersons, but may create social division between those who are selected by local institutions to represent their art as *feiyi*, and those who are not. Masters who are not in a legitimate position to take on the responsibility of representative may then have a privileged status to transmit, be financially supported (sports facilities, subventions), and have a certain social recognition.

“The main concern is [how] to pass on,” while keeping the “true heritage” private

In Jinzhong, the practice of *xingyi* is omnipresent in parks and public squares. Children, young adults, and elderly people practise *taolu* individually or in groups. One would think that *xingyi* is an art in full bloom. However, this craze for martial arts becomes a mere facade when the investigation goes deeper into private transmission circles. As a local master stated in the press: “Too few young people want to learn [traditional] boxing. Despite our efforts in promoting it in parks, except for helping kids to reinforce their bodies, the main concern is [how] to pass it on.”²⁵ The masters have difficulty finding

23. It may happen that an elderly master (not to be confused with a *shiye*) refuses a disciple who is too young. The latter is then entrusted to a master’s disciples, who have the ideal age gap for transmission. See Li Zhongxuan 李仲軒 and Xu Haofeng 徐浩峰, 逝去的武林 (*Shiqu de wulin* (...)), op. cit., p. 84.

24. Transmission can also take place in an embodied mode, involving haptic or mind-to-mind (*yi xin chuan xin* 以心傳心).

25. Song Lichao 宋立超, “中國傳統形意拳山西傳承新局: 走進中小學, 洋徒弟眾多” (*Zhongguo chuantong xingyiquan Shanxi chuancheng xinju: Zoujin zhongxiaoxue, yang tudi zhongduo*, New situation for Shanxi inherited tradition of Chinese *xingyiquan*: Entering primary and secondary schools, and appealing many foreign apprentices), *ChinaNews.com* (中國新聞網), 13 January 2017, <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/m/sh/2017/01-13/8123057.shtml> (accessed on 5 July 2022).

successors, and differences of opinion arise within the community of practitioners.

Master D agreed to receive me in his home. A little suspicious, he asked me what my interests are and why I came to investigate his practice. He also asked me not to record all the conversations. He allowed me to attend private teaching sessions at his home, where he demonstrated his strength on me by putting his hands on my chest and pushing to make me fall on the sofa behind – a classic method in internal martial arts to test a newcomer or to show one’s level without injury. Master D is a corn farmer. He is the representative of the seventh generation of his lineage, presented above. He does not make a living from his art, but teaches a few selected disciples based on social criteria or moral integrity:

I don’t easily accept a disciple (...). A dozen, maximum. Go pay a visit to other lineages (...). They have too many disciples! You can’t teach it to just anyone. You have to select. If you want [to be a disciple] you must have money, a job, or at least human qualities and good moral conduct. (Conversation with Master D, March 2017, Qixian)

Human qualities are among the most important criteria in the initiation phase: to train a disciple is to train a moral being, distinguishing education from simple instruction. The martial apprenticeship is indeed presented as an education marked by Confucian principles: filial piety, loyalty to the master, and subordination to elders shape the attitude of the disciple and his capacity to use violence with discernment according to the circumstances. A good moral conduct is also supposed to be developed through an education specific to martial learning. Combined with the training of the body and the mind, this education is part of a transmission system that does not oppose theory to practice and allows “the transmission of knowledge as a basis for learning to situate oneself and to live in society” (de Grave 2012: 28-9).

Master D’s narrative also expresses the difficulty of learning martial arts in this context, which reflects Patrick Daly’s observation that out of a hundred apprentices only a handful can understand it (2012: 351). D had four disciples at that time: a lawyer, a coalmine boss, a local government cadre (between 45 and 60 years old), and an assistant (about 30 years old). The amount of money he asks from his disciples is not fixed. The value of the teaching may be measured by the amount of money the apprentice is willing to put in, or by helping the master on a daily basis as an assistant for various tasks. D teaches exclusively at home and in private lessons. He is keen to pass on knowledge that is free from any alteration or interest. However, D is aware of social changes and is not entirely averse to valuing his practice, but insists that the rules of his lineage must be respected:

I am conservative. What my master passed on to me can’t be passed on outside; it has to be kept at home. This is the specificity of our lineage; [unlike the other styles] it has not undergone any modification (...). They [masters in favour of valuation] want me to participate in their meeting, but I don’t want to go. Why would I go? It’s all about interests, isn’t it? Still, I can’t disagree that things have to be adapted to our present time, and it will have to meet the needs of the new generations. (Conversation with Master D, March 2017, Qixian)

Master C has a view somewhat contrasting with D. Like D, C is one of the main representatives of *xingyi* in Jinzhong today. His father was close to the merchant families at the beginning of the twentieth century, and he defends a traditional way of teaching. Nevertheless, he insistently shared with me his concern over seeing his art progressively disappear. Therefore, he is actively contributing to the development of *xingyi* as a regional and national heritage in cooperation with the local government:

Xingyiquan is one of our important [regional] customs and it should be studied, protected, and used [by society]. It is part of our regional *feiyi*, and it should get the attention of regional Party committees and regional government leaders. It is a good thing that our martial art can become part of the county’s educational programme so that every child in the county knows two or three basics of boxing. But in comparison [to other valued practices], much remains to be done in terms of valuing martial arts (...). The good parts of traditions currently face the risk of transmission loss. (Conversation with Master C, April 2017, Taigu)²⁶

Master Z, a co-disciple and close friend of C, is a direct descendant of a local escort-master’s clan that was active dating back to the end of the nineteenth century. That makes him a respected *xingyi* master in his locality. Unlike C, however, he presents himself as a very demanding conservative regarding the historicity of his lineage and is an advocate of an orthodox transmission of his ancestors’ knowledge. When I was talking with Z, he was as reserved as he was elegant in his words about the public dissemination of *xingyi* outside of initiates’ circles:

Things [that come] out of the thatched cottages of the people have difficulty passing through the gates of the palace (...). The cultural value [of martial arts] is still poorly communicated, and in order for this tradition to be truly recognised, those who carry it on must become men of science, educated people. (Conversation with Master Z, June 2018, Yuci)

This situation once again echoes Hans Steinmüller’s observations. Master Z “would indeed avoid a decisive answer,” sometimes with “ironical or cynical shades,” because there are things to talk about “only in private and to others they trust” (2010: 89). The conversation above illustrates the caution with which Master Z expresses himself when it comes to discussing the valuation of his art. He believes that only a scientific approach is rigorous enough to make a serious valuation – he wanted to become a historian before the Cultural Revolution, but the government decided to make him work in a unit (*danwei* 單位). He was an informant during this survey, but when I asked whether the official communications about his art are faithful to the historical version that he transmits himself, he simply and cautiously answered with a laconic expression: “Roughly!” However, our conversations reveal that even if he had been a man of science, the weight of secrecy might not have allowed him to reveal everything.

The question of integrity’s preservation goes with that of the different social conditions and periods in which martial arts are

26. Master C has publicly stated his position in the local press. For reasons of consistent anonymity, the references are not indicated.

inscribed. Li Zhongxuan was the direct disciple of the *xingyi* masters Tang Weilu 唐維祿 (1868-1944), Shang Yunxiang 尚雲祥 (1864-1937), and Xue Dian 薛顛 (1887-1953). Due to the republican sociopolitical context that he describes quite accurately in his narratives and that have been incorporated into my analysis, Li vowed never to pass on the knowledge transmitted by his masters to anyone until, shortly before his death, he agreed to put his testimony on paper in the early 2000s. Li's direct testimony is all about how preserving the integrity of knowledge during the mid-twentieth century could even take priority over its continuation.²⁷ Today, integrity remains embarrassing, and it is interesting to analyse that while embarrassment may be experienced as a source of discomfort from the outside, it can actually serve to reinforce cultural identity within a group or community, forging among initiates an awareness of a common sociality (Herzfeld 2007). The masters in favour of modification put forward a standardised form for dissemination. With greater familiarity, each confesses in his own way that *xingyi* is something intimate, related to the history of their families and clans, and they would prefer to keep the true heritage within their private sphere, somehow away from the state's institutional influence. It was made clear to me that, historically, *xingyi* masters did not trust state officials. Even though there is a *de facto* exception to it today (see especially Master C's conversation), there was before 1949 a clannish rule that an official or a civil servant could not become an initiate or could never return to the *wulin* community again after becoming an official.²⁸ The respect of rules has nowadays more of a socio-ritual meaning than an effective application, but still has relatively the same importance in the lineages' functioning. The conservative attitude of the masters was often expressed to me metaphorically by a famous dialogue between the *xingyi* master Guo Yunshen 郭雲深 (1822-1902) and Prince Yixuan 奕譞 (1840-1891)²⁹: "I knelt down with my forehead on the ground to learn this art; I am not going to kneel with my forehead on the ground to teach it."³⁰

There is a tendency toward maintaining the secrecy of "something true" while at the same time also a tendency towards revising certain aspects of *xingyi* to make it a brand so that it is officially recognised as a *feiyi*. As these different tendencies rub up against each other, they again generate a sense of embarrassment.

Making a cultural trademark and a pedagogical instrument

The recognition of *feiyi* is mainly about granting cultural visibility, as well as social utility. Different uses and values can indeed be conferred to a practice after it has been put on the heritage list. Nationalistic uses have been studied (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 300-1), as well as economic and tourism uses (Bortolotto 2020). There are also social uses in the integration of rituals, songs, or dances in educational programmes (Létourneau 2009). In Shanxi, social application projects have been implemented for the past 20 years to *xingyi*. The government's objective was clearly to create a trademark, and to popularise the educational value of martial arts at the provincial level, and in sports at the national and international levels.³¹ This began with the decision made in 1997 by the General Administration of Sport of China (*guojia tiwei zongju* 國家體委總局) to award the county of Taigu with the title of "China's martial

arts land" (Cheng and Cheng 2005). This has led to the promotion of martial arts at various levels: sporting (national and international competitions), educational (cultural mediation, documentaries), and touristic (opening of local museums). These efforts have paid off: as mentioned in the introduction, in 2008 *xingyi* was officially registered as an intangible cultural heritage of China, and is the 798th tradition on the national list of Chinese *feiyi* items.

Perhaps the most concrete valuation was the decision by the Ministry of Education to integrate *xingyi* training into the physical education programme of 20 schools and colleges in the county, making it accessible to nearly 20,000 schoolchildren and college students.³² Local masters were hired to teach the training sessions. In 2010, *xingyi* was integrated into the programme for interclass gymnastics sessions. In 2011, it became part of the sports programme of the Institute of Computer Science of Shanxi Agricultural University as a required course.³³ In 2018, a Fujian high school website even stated, "at Shanxi Agricultural University, [students] cannot graduate if they have not mastered *xingyiquan*, the 'real kung fu'."³⁴

It is interesting to put this standardisation process within the perspective of other contexts in Asia and beyond. In the case of Japan, the government has made martial arts a pedagogical instrument of nationalist policy in schools (Kanô 2013). The Indonesian educational system has also been promoting its martial arts traditions (de Grave 2012: 183) – the *pencak silat* has been included in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity since 2019. The same phenomenon is observable with capoeira in Brazil, where confidential master-disciple intimacy is modified by moving it from "communal to societal (...) and a distance is created between the learner and the teacher who is assigned a position of otherness" (Gaudin 2009a, 2009b). My observation in Shanxi tends to reveal the same process. The integration of *xingyi* into educational programmes implies its standardisation, thus modifying the modes of intergenerational relations characteristic of the traditional master-disciple relationship. Indeed, the clan-based transmission system tends, under the effect of a standardised model, to gradually disappear in favour of public teaching in which the master becomes a trainer employed by the state.

27. See Li Zhongxuan 李仲軒 and Xu Haofeng 徐浩峰, 逝去的武林 (*Shiqu de wulin* (...)), op. cit.
28. Li Zhongxuan 李仲軒 and Xu Haofeng 徐浩峰, 逝去的武林 (*Shiqu de wulin* (...)), op. cit., p. 24-5.
29. Son of Emperor Daoguang 道光 (1782-1850).
30. See also Li Zhongxuan 李仲軒 and Xu Haofeng 徐浩峰, 逝去的武林 (*Shiqu de wulin* (...)), op. cit., p. 211-2.
31. Jiang Yaming 蔣亞明, "社會武術之窗: 山西太谷融入學校教育打造形意品牌" (*Shehui wushu zhi chuang: Shanxi Taigu rongru xuexiao jiaoyu dazao xingyi pinpai*, Window on social martial arts: Shanxi's Taigu, the making of *xingyiquan*'s trademark by its integration into the schools of education), *Boxing Fight* (拳擊航海), 26 May 2012, <https://www.qjhm.net/wulin/19898.html> (accessed on 20 February 2023).
32. "山西太谷: 讓非物質文化遺產'活'起來" (*Shanxi Taigu: Rang feiwuzhi wenhua yichan "huo" qilai*, Shanxi's Taigu: Let's make intangible cultural heritage "alive"), *Xinhua.net* (新華網), 4 October 2017, http://m.xinhuanet.com/sx/2017-10/05/c_1121763608.htm (accessed on 21 February 2023).
33. Jiang Yaming 蔣亞明, 社會武術之窗(...) (*Shehui wushu zhi chuang* (...)), op. cit.
34. "1.5萬學生習練形意拳, 沒有真'功夫'不能畢業" (*1.5 wan xuesheng xilian xingyiquan, meiyou zhen 'gongfu' bu neng biye*, 15,000 students have practiced *xingyiquan*, and they cannot graduate without real «kung fu»), *Jinzhong College of Information* (晉中信息學院), 14 June 2018, <https://www.jzci.edu.cn/html/32399/32399.html> (accessed on 28 February 2023).

Conclusion

Martial arts valuation contributes to encouraging regional attractiveness, and its promotion is therefore a lever for economic and sociocultural development in central Shanxi. However, this article has attempted to bring the focus down to a more intimate level of the *xingyi* masters, who consider their art to be in decline, calling into question an esoteric transmission system held to be orthodox within the groups. The masters investigated are to varying degrees split between defending a secular continuity of lineage functioning and being involved in valuation initiatives for modernisation. This research has thus pointed out the constraints balance between maintaining cultural integrity and being open to standardisation. It has used a case study to illustrate that the need to value a practice often arises after an event that is perceived “as the origin of a rupture in local time” (Cerlet 1998: 93). This rupture could be seen here as the loss of social coherence, which until the end of the republican era was sustained by a lineage function mostly related to arms occupations, combat practices, and social violence. Martial arts valuation today is cultural or sporting, but the ritual expression of these historical aspects through narratives and ceremonies are, to varying degrees, embarrassing given the reference values. In an effort to adapt, masters thus fluctuate between moving from the “personal and elective relationship between the master and his disciple, to a standardised, collective teaching open to all” (Homola 2013: 39). It would seem that these two attitudes coexist: while keeping “true heritage” private, masters are not averse to showcasing for valuation.

To open up avenues for reflection, if we accept that the ritual acts as a “revival of the society” (Iteanu 2010: 18), the respect for initiation ceremonies, names, and ancestral references would then provide a sense of closeness to the past, and therefore to a shared sense of orthodoxy among groups. Hence, social coherence would barely be affected as long as rituality in its broad social meaning, that is to say, the singular expression of cultural intimacy within groups, is preserved from any standardisation motives, including recognition in terms of *feiyi*. The remaining open question is whether the consequences of valuing will in return exert modifications on the groups, inducing, consciously or not, limitations on the margin of autonomy necessary to maintain a cultural integrity in private.

Acknowledgements

This research was made possible by the Fieldwork Scholarship Programme of the École française d'Extrême-Orient (EFEO) and the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac. I would like to express my gratitude to colleagues from Shanxi University in Taiyuan for their support, and to the masters for their hospitality. I am extremely grateful to Guillaume Dutournier and Florence Padovani for their inspiring advice, to Joan Listernick for her help in proofreading the draft, to the anonymous reviewers, and to the team of *China Perspectives* for their remarkable editorial work.

Manuscript received on 22 August 2022. Accepted on 11 February 2023.

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