

A Primer of Chinese Boxing by Ma John: An Endeavor to Build a Self-Reliant Discourse System in Chinese Sports Scholarship

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Abstract: In the context of constructing an autonomous discourse system in Chinese sports scholarship, this study employs historical documentary research and cross-cultural comparative analysis to examine Ma John's 1926 master's minor thesis *A Primer of Chinese Boxing* as an early practice of discourse construction. The findings reveal that Ma John achieved the first systematic introduction of Chinese Wushu to Western academic contexts through three strategic approaches: a terminology strategy combining transliteration and free translation, a presentation mode emphasizing scientification and systematization, and the integration of nationality with historical continuity. However, his discursive autonomy was significantly constrained by the "untranslatability" of linguistic concepts, the restrictions of Western academic norms, the limitations of primer positioning, and asymmetric academic power relations. This study argues that Ma John's endeavor provides historical lessons for contemporary construction of an autonomous discourse system in Chinese sports scholarship: achieving strategic upgrading from "introduction" to "contribution," strengthening theoretical consciousness and methodological innovation, cultivating academic communities, and deeply excavating the "Chinese genes" embedded in traditional sports culture.

Keywords: Ma John; *A Primer of Chinese Boxing*; Autonomous Discourse System; Cross-cultural Communication.

1. Introduction

In recent years, against the backdrop of building a sports powerhouse[1] and constructing a philosophy and social science system with Chinese characteristics[2], the construction of an autonomous discourse system in Chinese sports scholarship has increasingly become a theoretical hotspot and practical proposition of academic concern.

With the comprehensive development of China's economy, society, and sports undertakings, international sports academic exchanges have become increasingly frequent. Scholars have devoted growing attention to the contestation of sports discourse power, making sports discourse research a cutting-edge academic frontier. Due to the long-standing dominance of Western sports science frameworks, the discursive power of Chinese sports culture on the international academic stage has gradually declined. This paper analyzes the overall situation and core dilemmas of discourse construction in Chinese sports scholarship, and through examining Ma John's 1926 *A Primer of Chinese Boxing* as an early discursive practice, provides historical reference and practical enlightenment for the current construction of an autonomous discourse system in Chinese sports scholarship.

General Secretary explicitly proposed the strategic goal of "accelerating the construction of a sports powerhouse" in the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, emphasizing the core role of sports in promoting comprehensive human development, enhancing national cultural soft power, and strengthening national confidence[1]. The promulgation of policy documents such as the 14th Five-Year Plan for Sports Development and the Outline for Building a Sports Powerhouse has further clarified the strategic direction for constructing an autonomous knowledge system in sports science with Chinese characteristics[3].

However, at the theoretical level of sports, particularly in international dialogue, Chinese sports scholarship still faces the predicament of "having reasons but unable to articulate them clearly, and unable to spread them even when articulated." Wushu, as a traditional Chinese sports culture, faces a crisis of "non-modernity" in the wave of globalized Western sports due to its unique dual characteristics of "technicality and philosophicity," resulting in severe loss of international discourse power[4].

Looking back at history, the Republic of China period was a crucial stage in the modernization of Chinese sports[5]. Faced with the strong influx of Western modern sports culture and national crises, Chinese intellectuals actively explored the modernization of local sports, demonstrating profound concern for local sports discourse power. Among them, Mr. Ma John, honored as "a banner of the Chinese sports community"[6], wrote his master's minor thesis *A Primer of Chinese Boxing* at Springfield College in the United States in 1926. In an academic environment dominated by Western sports theory, Ma John took Chinese Wushu as the entry point and systematically organized and transformed traditional Chinese Wushu knowledge in a manner comprehensible to Western academia, becoming the first English monograph in modern Chinese sports history to systematically introduce Chinese Wushu to the Western world[7].

This paper adopts historical documentary research, cross-cultural comparative analysis, and discourse analysis to interpret *A Primer of Chinese Boxing* within the grand context of current Chinese efforts to construct an autonomous discourse system in sports scholarship, excavating its potential contemporary relevance and enlightening significance, and injecting more historically profound and practically inspiring thinking into macro-level contemporary academic issues.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework and Expression

2.1. Three-Stage Evolution of Chinese Sports Discourse Research

Research on "discourse" in academia has undergone three stages. In the 1920s (first stage), facing the impact of Western culture, Chinese society had not yet developed a clear "discourse consciousness," but rather exhibited a state of "aphasia" toward Western culture—that is, a condition where a country or nation fails to construct its own discourse system for articulation and expression during a specific historical stage, and must borrow others' rules to analyze its own knowledge[8]. At that time, China extensively imported modern vocabulary from Japan and widely accepted the "military-civilian sports" of Germany and Japan as well as the "naturalistic sports" of Britain and America. However, this conceptual confusion brought numerous problems to subsequent sports theoretical research[9].

After the 1990s (second stage), under the long-term dominance of Western "functionalism-training theory" discourse, the sports discipline exposed problems of insufficient explanatory power and lack of local semantic meaning, triggering profound reflection in academia on "discourse dependency." Scholars recognized that it is imperative to establish one's own discourse system to achieve equal dialogue with the West[8].

After 2010 (third stage), China's sports undertakings entered a new stage of comprehensive deepening reform and transitioning from a major sports country to a powerful sports country. The implementation of major strategies such as "Healthy China" drove the upgrading of theoretical research, urgently requiring the formation of a discourse system capable of systematically guiding Chinese practice, explaining Chinese experience, and participating in international dialogue[10].

2.2. Core Dilemmas of Current Research

Despite fruitful research achievements, there remain areas urgently needing expansion:

First, insufficient theoretical construction capacity. Practical knowledge and local experience have not yet been systematically refined into theoretical categories with academic value. Most research remains at the level of empirical description, making it difficult to form a discourse system with equal competitiveness[4].

Second, lack of a "bilingual logical system." Some research one-sidedly emphasizes traditionalized expression, piling up local terminology while lacking universal academic conversion; other scholars excessively rely on Western theoretical templates, leading to serious phenomena of "academic importation" and falling into the dilemma of either "cultural self-talk" or "conceptual translation distortion"[4].

Third, lack of internationally adapted expressions for communication. Concepts rich in Chinese characteristics such as "the whole-nation system," "self-cultivation," "martial valor," and "martial ethics" cannot accurately convey their original meanings in English translation—either becoming over-"Westernized" and losing cultural depth, or being rigidly literal-translated and rendering international readers unable to comprehend[4].

Fourth, lack of strategic consciousness for "output-oriented discourse." Contemporary sports scholarship research mostly

remains at the stage of "introducing China" and "explaining experience," and has not yet formed an "academic output-oriented" discourse system with China as the knowledge source[4].

2.3. Academic Gap in Ma John Research

In the early 20th century, Ma John already provided important enlightenment for constructing a discourse system in Chinese sports scholarship through *A Primer of Chinese Boxing*. However, academic research on Ma John mostly evaluates his practical contributions as a "sports educator" and "moral model," and when addressing his academic achievements, places more emphasis on his article *The Transfer Value of Sports*, while specialized research on *A Primer of Chinese Boxing* as a concrete attempt to systematically interpret Chinese Wushu in a Western academic context appears particularly weak[7].

Through historical documentary analysis, this study connects Ma John's early discourse construction practice with contemporary theoretical needs, filling this academic gap and providing historical experience and directional guidance for solving current difficulties in discourse system construction.

3. Historical Context and Textual Analysis of a Primer of Chinese Boxing

3.1. Biographical Background and Thesis Production

Ma John was born in 1882 in Gulangyu, Xiamen, Fujian. He lost his mother at age 3 and his father at age 7, growing up with his elder brother, and developed a passion for sports from childhood. At age 22, he entered St. John's University, where he came into contact with the most advanced Western sports thoughts and theories, and profoundly felt the national cohesion of sports in international competitions—an experience that became the starting point for his abandonment of medicine for sports and the establishment of his "strengthening the nation and its people" sports philosophy [6].

In 1914, Ma John was employed by Tsinghua School as a chemistry teaching assistant, later transferring to the Physical Education Department to begin a 52-year career in physical education. He discovered that Chinese physical education lacked systematic theory and scientific methods, and that students' physical fitness was generally weak. In 1920, he went to Springfield College for further study, and after returning to China, served as director of the Physical Education Department at Tsinghua, bringing back the concept of "comprehensive development of spirit, thought, and body." In 1925, he again went to Springfield College to pursue a master's degree, completing *The Transfer Value of Sports* as his major thesis while simultaneously writing *A Primer of Chinese Boxing* as his minor thesis[7].

The production of this thesis had profound historical contexts. Domestically, in the early 20th century, China was beset by internal and external troubles, with "saving the nation from extinction" becoming the theme of the era. The New Culture Movement triggered intense debates between "Chinese learning as essence, Western learning for practical use" and "complete Westernization," and Wushu, as "national art," received widespread attention. Internationally, Springfield College was in a period of rapid development in

the scientification and professionalization of Western sports, where sports was regarded as an important tool for promoting health, cultivating morality, and enhancing efficiency [11]. However, Western society in the 1920s often viewed China with racial prejudice, perceiving Wushu with mystification and exoticism, and even generating negative impressions due to the Boxer Rebellion[12]. In this context, Ma John chose to systematically introduce Chinese Wushu through a master's minor thesis, employing scientific methods learned at Springfield—possibly inspired by the "national art saving the nation" trend, but also hoping to change Western society's one-sided perceptions and elevate Wushu's academic status and cultural image.

3.2. Thesis Structure and Content Analysis

A Primer of Chinese Boxing, as a "master's minor thesis" (M.P.E. Minor Thesis), has a clear structure and rigorous logic, aiming to systematically introduce Chinese Wushu to Western readers. The full text is divided into eight chapters:

Chapter 1 "Brief History" traces the origin of Chinese Wushu, its development in feudal times, and its position in modern civilization. Chapter 2 "Two Main Divisions" introduces the characteristics and differences between northern and southern Wushu schools. Chapter 3 "Classification of Forms" lists five main boxing forms: Xingyiquan, Baguazhang, Taijiquan, Tantai, and Shaolinquan. Chapter 4 "Xingyiquan" details the five basic movements and twelve combination routines. Chapter 5 "Technique of Postures and Movements" elaborates specific technical essentials. Chapter 6 "Twelve Principles in Practice" proposes practical combat principles including "three sections," "three fronts," "three steps," and "three controls." Chapter 7 "Five Fundamental Exercises" demonstrates practice methods through illustrations and text. Chapter 8 "Diagram of an Ordinary Double Bout" displays practical application[7].

From the above structure, it is evident that Ma John's research followed standardized academic organization while attempting to interpret and disseminate traditional Chinese cultural elements within a modern scientific framework. At the macro level, the thesis traces the origin and evolution of boxing arts, introduces differences between northern and southern schools, cites classics such as *Water Margin* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, emphasizes the combination of Wushu with the spirit of "chivalry and righteousness," and demonstrates its role as a cultural carrier bearing moral concepts and national spirit. At the micro level, Ma John selected Xingyiquan as the focus, explaining that "the reason for selection lies in the simplicity and typicality of movements, enormous physiological value, and high degree of muscle coordination participation," and corresponded it with the traditional Chinese Five Elements (metal, wood, water, fire, earth) and the five internal organs in modern Western science (lungs, liver, kidneys, heart, spleen) [7]. This correspondence not only endows movements with unique physiological exercise value but also embodies the traditional philosophical thoughts of "Yin-Yang Five Elements" and "harmony between heaven and human."

4. Discursive Construction Efforts and Limitations: A Cross-Cultural Analysis Based on Text

4.1. Attempts to Construct a Unique Discourse System

4.1.1. Terminology Strategy Combining Transliteration and Free Translation

Ma John employed a combination of transliteration and brief free translation to handle boxing form names. "Shien-I-Chuan" (Xingyiquan), "Peh-Kuai-chuan" (Baguazhang), "Tai-Chih-Chuan" (Taijiquan), and others retained approximate phonetic transcriptions of Chinese pronunciation, preserving the cultural recognizability of the terminology; simultaneously, they were paired with general English descriptions, such as "Natural form" for Xingyiquan, "The eight directions" for Baguazhang, "The Highest system" for Taijiquan, and "'Robin Hood' style" for Shaolinquan[7].

This strategy conveyed the "authentic flavor" of the terminology while also accommodating the comprehension needs of the target audience, constituting a unique academic posture and discursive practice. Ma John neither simply "Westernized" Wushu nor rigidly adhered to tradition, but sought creative integration between the two, embodying the "locality" and "integration" of discourse system construction—knowledge deeply rooted in Chinese realities while selectively absorbing beneficial achievements of human civilization[13].

4.1.2. Presentation Mode of Scientification and Systematization

Ma John employed a tone of modern Western science to discuss Xingyiquan, emphasizing its physiological benefits in developing large muscle groups and improving overall coordination. He utilized universally applicable Western scientific paradigms to interpret and promote Chinese Wushu, granting it modern legitimacy rather than adopting traditional mystical concepts such as "subtle body energy"[7]. The thesis extensively used practice photographs, with practitioners wearing Western-style trousers and shirts rather than traditional costumes, aiming to shape Chinese Wushu as a modernized sports practice and break Western stereotypes.

This effort demonstrates the "stability" and "openness" of discourse system construction—connecting Wushu movements with Chinese philosophy and Western physiology to establish a stable knowledge framework; while maintaining core identity, strategically absorbing external knowledge[14].

4.1.3. Unity of Nationality and Historical Continuity

Ma John incorporated historical narrative in the opening chapters, running through the origin of Chinese Wushu, its development in feudal times, and its "position in modern civilization," connecting it with the ancient and unified Chinese nation. This historical narrative strategy emphasized that Chinese Wushu still occupies a place in modern civilization, fighting for its modern legitimacy and practical significance, breaking Western stereotypes of Wushu as outdated "antiques," endowing it with vitality that keeps pace with the times, while simultaneously conveying an image of a unified and powerful China to Western audiences[14].

4.2. Limitations and Challenges in Constructing Fully Autonomous Discourse

Despite Ma John's pioneering efforts, under the historical conditions of the 1920s, constructing a fully "autonomous"

discourse system faced numerous insurmountable limitations:

Untranslatability of language and concepts. Wushu contains numerous concepts related to traditional philosophy and Chinese medicine, such as "qi," "internal power," and "intention," which possess polysemy, empirical nature, and non-verbal characteristics. In the early 20th-century English-speaking world, lacking directly corresponding vocabulary, accurate translation was extremely difficult[15].

Constraints of the academic environment. The thesis was completed within the framework of Springfield College in the United States, where topic selection, structure, argumentation methods, and linguistic style had to conform to Western academic norms to gain recognition. Springfield College was renowned for its scientific physical education philosophy, which may have prompted Ma John to focus more on physiological and technical dimensions while relatively downplaying metaphysical dimensions, limiting the space for freely constructing local discourse[16].

Limitations of "Primer" positioning. Facing Western audiences who knew little about Chinese Wushu and even harbored prejudices, the primary task was to popularize knowledge, clarify concepts, and break stereotypes, rather than construct profound theories. Expressions that were overly "autonomous" or "localized" might instead exacerbate cognitive barriers, leading to superficialization of information transmission [17].

Asymmetry of academic discourse power. Ma John's efforts were conducted within an asymmetric academic power relationship—"importing" local Chinese knowledge into the Western academic system that occupied a dominant position, rather than constructing and exporting Chinese discourse from a completely autonomous posture on an equal dialogue platform. This status difference meant that early "autonomy" was potentially constrained from the very beginning, only able to strive for maximum expression space within the existing Western scientific framework[14].

5. Historical Legacy and Contemporary Implications

5.1. Enduring Impact of Ma John's Early Work

Ma John's attempt to conduct historical, school classification, and technical summarization of Chinese Wushu in English writing was undoubtedly pioneering in the 1920s. This academic consciousness and cross-cultural communication effort provided an early exemplar for subsequent dissemination of traditional Chinese sports culture abroad. He introduced advanced Western sports concepts into China while actively promoting excellent traditional Chinese sports culture to the world. This two-way cultural exchange avoided one-sided output and promoted mutual understanding and integration between Chinese and Western sports[7].

More importantly, in that era when China was impoverished and weak, with national confidence severely damaged, Ma John's confident interpretation of his nation's cultural treasures in the Western academic hall as a Chinese scholar embodied the cultural consciousness and academic commitment of early intellectuals facing Western cultural impact, possessing historical inspirational value for today's emphasis on cultural confidence and promotion of Chinese culture to the world.

5.2. Implications for Constructing Contemporary Autonomous Discourse Systems

(1) From "Introduction" to "Contribution"—Strategic Upgrading of Discourse Role

Ma John's main goal was to "introduce" Chinese Wushu to Western academia to gain understanding and recognition, which was pioneering at that time. However, contemporary goals should be more ambitious: not only "explaining China" but also contributing "original theories" and "unique perspectives" originating from China to global sports science, shifting from "primer introduction" thinking to the ambition of "paradigm shaping." We should extract "identifiable concepts" and theoretical models with universal significance from Chinese sports practice to enrich and even challenge existing international sports science knowledge systems[4].

(2) Strengthening Theoretical Consciousness and Methodological Innovation—Deepening Academic Foundations

Ma John employed historical and classification description methods, which were important attempts at academic standardization at that time. Contemporary construction requires greater strides in theoretical depth and methodological innovation: profoundly reflecting on the advantages and limitations of existing sports discourse, clarifying the theoretical positioning of autonomous discourse systems; promoting diversification of research methods and localized innovation, combining traditional Chinese philosophical thought with modern scientific research methods, and developing qualitative research paradigms closer to Chinese social and cultural contexts[10].

(3) Cultivating Academic Communities—Consolidating Organizational Guarantees

Ma's explorations at that time were more individual efforts, while mature and powerful autonomous discourse systems cannot be separated from the support of active and healthy academic communities. We should encourage contention and dialogue among different academic viewpoints, strengthen the construction of high-level journals and conference platforms, reform academic evaluation systems to incentivize basic theoretical research, strengthen the cultivation of young scholars, and form academic communities full of vitality, courage in innovation, and solidarity[4].

(4) Taking Traditional Sports Culture as Fertile Soil—Excavating "Chinese Genes"

Ma's choice of Wushu as an entry point had strategic vision. Wushu contains unique philosophical thought, bodily wisdom, value concepts, and aesthetic tastes, serving as invaluable resources for constructing autonomous discourse systems. Contemporary scholars should transcend descriptive and classificatory levels, conducting higher-level theoretical abstraction from rich practical experience and cultural accumulation, to discover truly identifiable concepts and theoretical systems with "Chinese genes"—such as extracting sports game theory from the wisdom of "overcoming hardness with softness" in Taijiquan, or developing holistic sports health promotion models from the concept of "cultivating both internal and external"[4].

6. Conclusion

Nearly a century ago, with foresight and academic courage, Ma John opened the "first voice" of traditional Chinese sports culture entering the world academic hall through A Primer of

Chinese Boxing. Through historical documentary analysis and cross-cultural comparison, this study reveals the attempts and limitations of Ma John's discourse construction, providing a unique historical perspective for the current construction of an autonomous discourse system in Chinese sports scholarship.

Ma John's attempt was an early exemplar of Chinese scholars using modern academic methods to organize, interpret, and disseminate their nation's excellent traditional sports culture. Proceeding from the "standard" of a Chinese cultural messenger, he strove to break the barrier and prejudice of Western society toward Chinese Wushu culture through rigorous academic work. This spirit of promoting cross-cultural dialogue through academia remains practically significant today. Meanwhile, his demonstrated systematic thinking and standardized organization provided a historical starting point for constructing an autonomous discourse system in Chinese sports scholarship, sharing the same spirit with current emphases on "discourse originality" and the refinement of "identifiable concepts."

The unique value of this study lies in placing this relatively under-attended research project within the grand context of current construction of an autonomous discourse system in sports scholarship, not only as supplementary recognition of Ma John's academic heritage but also, through this specific historical case, providing a historical reference for reflection on how current Chinese sports scholarship can tell "Chinese stories" and contribute "Chinese wisdom" in a globalized context. Constructing an autonomous discourse system in Chinese sports scholarship is a long and arduous road, requiring generations of scholars to continuously explore and forge ahead with high cultural confidence and academic courage.

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