

Embodied spirituality: Shaolin martial arts as a Chan Buddhist practice



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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of spirituality and martial arts through an in-depth examination of Shaolin Kung Fu as practiced within the Shaolin Monastery in Henan Province, China. Conducting fieldwork from April 2018 to August 2020, the study employs theories of practice and embodiment to understand how religious teachings are interwoven into physical movements and martial practices. This phenomenological analysis of bodily movement integrates the physical body with the sense of self, highlighting the relationship between individual habitus and the agency of the moving body, referred to as the “lived body.” It argues that Shaolin martial artists engage in a form of dynamic embodiment, where Chan Buddhist doctrines are embedded within the “lived body,” influencing both movement and perception. This process allows practitioners to interpret and interact with their socio-cultural environment through a religious lens, highlighting the deep connection between spiritual beliefs and bodily actions.

The paper presents a comprehensive approach, combining intensive participant observation, historical analysis, and a close look at both the communal and individual aspects of monastic life and learning. By examining narratives, daily routines, and pedagogical methods, the study reveals how the socio-cultural setting of the monastery fosters collective habitus and transforms the individual habitus of practitioners. It shows how this transformation contributes to the development of a spiritual dimension in their martial performance. By highlighting the link between the habitus, the lived body, and the dynamic embodiment, the paper extends the current

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discourse on embodiment, offering a novel perspective on the relationship between spirituality, culture, and physical practice in the context of Shaolin Kung Fu.

Keywords Contemporary Buddhism · Shaolin monastery · Martial arts · Embodiment · Habitus

1 Introduction

Martial art novels and 1980s Hong Kong movies have shrouded the bodily skills, cultivated over centuries in the secluded communities of Chinese monasteries, with an air of mystique. The proliferation of retreats and training programs led by Buddhist and Daoist masters, along with various online platforms presenting physical exercises as spiritual cultivation techniques, underscore the widening accessibility of previously secluded communities harboring specialized esoteric knowledge. Nonetheless, certain monastic communities still uphold traditional transmission methods for their esoteric knowledge, while also adapting to contemporary trends.

This case study focuses on the Shaolin Monastery in China, recognized as the cradle of Chan Buddhism and Shaolin martial arts, known as Shaolin Kung Fu. The cultural evolution of contemporary Shaolin Kung Fu arises from two concurrent processes. The Shaolin monastic community perpetuates the tradition of martial arts as a form of religious self-cultivation. This personal endeavor, manifesting through sitting meditation, chanting, martial arts, and calligraphy, is steered towards spiritual ascent. The intent is to align the quality of an individual's subjective and objective existence in the world more closely with the concept of Buddha-nature. Concurrently, the community develops martial arts as a secularized cultural practice adapted for a broader circle of international practitioners. By scrutinizing the knowledge acquisition and skill-crafting processes, this research reveals ways in which martial arts training remains intertwined with spiritual practice within the contemporary social milieu.

Chan Buddhism distinguishes itself as a unique branch of Buddhism by rejecting the authority of written words and positing that authentic Buddhist wisdom cannot be acquired indirectly through studying texts or reciting scriptures by heart. Instead, it requires a direct experiential encounter facilitated by unmediated interactions between Buddhist teachers and their disciples. The insufficiency of words as a sole means of knowledge acquisition does not negate their utility as supplementary tools. Shaolin Chan Buddhists also study ancient scriptures and recite memorized sutras daily. The Lankavatara Sutra (楞伽经 *Léngqié Jīng*) is revered as the foundational sutra of Chan Buddhism, to which Bodhidharma attributed particular significance.

In order to frame the theoretical approach, this study draws upon elements of the theory of practice (Bourdieu 1977), theories of embodiment (Csordas 1990, 1993; Jackson 1994), and dynamic embodiment (Varela and Harré 1996; Varela 2003; Farnell 1999, 2018). It relies on the concepts of *habitus* and *lived body* to explicate the integration of religious meaning into bodily movement. Initially, this research highlights the importance of distinguishing between individual and group habitus and

their interrelation. Based on data analysis, it contends that the socio-cultural context of monastic life transforms the individual habitus of the Kung Fu practitioner and fosters a group habitus that underpins the infusion of a spiritual quality into bodily performance. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the concept of *lived body* is essential in analyzing bodily movement from a phenomenological perspective as it integrates body and self, thus permitting the identification of the agency of the moving body. More importantly, by establishing the interrelation between these concepts, the study expands the embodiment paradigm and builds upon the existing theory of dynamic embodiment.

In an endeavor to bridge the theoretical and practical divide, that is, to conceptualize the body that is both transforming and being transformed by the physical and socio-cultural milieu in which it is nested, the study adopts two complementary approaches. The first approach concentrates on the discourse about the body as a vessel for cultural knowledge and symbols. The second approach focuses on the concept of “talk from the body” (Farnell 1999), highlighting the unique ways in which individuals express the embodied aspects of collective cultural concepts. This perspective emphasizes the subjective interpretation and manifestation of these concepts.

The paper theoretically postulates that dynamic embodiment stands for the continuous transformation of individual habitus through correspondence with elements of the socio-cultural environment. It hypothesizes that the competent practice of Shaolin Kung Fu develops through a process of dynamic embodiment, incited by the agency of the moving body, through which objective structures imbued with religious meaning are concurrently inscribed, activated, and reproduced within given cultural circumstances. This study defines the knowledge-making and skill-crafting process of spiritually imbued Shaolin martial arts (Shaolin *Wushu Chan*) within the contemporary monastic community as the dynamic embodiment of Chan Buddhism through the practice of Shaolin martial arts. By employing the concept of *lived body*, this paper puts forth a theoretical explanation of what Shaolin warrior monks term *the mind of the body* (身体的意念 *shēntǐ de yìniàn*).

The root challenge in analyzing spiritually imbued martial arts practice lies in ascertaining whether and how religious doctrines become integrated into body movement. The primary question guiding the research is how the corpus of traditional and contemporary worldviews intrinsic to this community — its cosmological ideas, religious doctrines, and socio-cultural practices — facilitates the religious role of Shaolin Kung Fu. The theoretical framework empowers the author to articulate the core of the investigation as the process through which Chan Buddhist teaching is dynamically embodied in the practice of Shaolin Kung Fu within the contemporary monastic community. This research examines this process through the understanding of the socio-cultural circumstances of daily life at Shaolin Monastery, which facilitate the transformation of an individual martial arts practitioner’s habitus into that of an exemplary Chan Buddhist monk.

The paper argues that the intertwining of experiences in the realms of martial arts training, religious practices, and ritual routines, and the informal aspects of daily life interactions within the monastic community results in the establishment of a group warrior monk habitus. The individual habitus thereby evolves through the dynamic

embodiment of the shared meaning structures amongst the monastic martial artists. This process paves the way for the emergence of a spiritual quality in bodily performance. The religious potential of Shaolin Kung Fu is thus realized, not through its constituent elements of body movements and techniques, but through the Chan Buddhist structures of meaning that the practitioners embody. Finally, the theoretically informed investigation of the fieldwork data allows the author to argue that this potentially transformative process of dynamic embodiment may result in conditioned perceptions of reality, which the monastic community interprets as spiritual ascent.

The analytical framework for this study is centered on an array of meaning structures that are embedded within the practice and performance of Shaolin Kung Fu in the monastic community. These structures are not only reflective of elements of Chan Buddhist teachings but also form a crucial basis for understanding the integration of martial arts with Chan practice. To comprehensively identify and interpret these cultural meanings, which are both manifested in and shaped by daily monastic practices and attitudes towards Shaolin Kung Fu, a detailed investigation into the everyday life of the monastic community was imperative. This approach enabled a nuanced exploration of how these meaning structures are embodied and their influence on the community's engagement with Shaolin Kung Fu.

Over two and a half years of fieldwork (April 2018 to August 2020), this study explored the knowledge-making and skill-crafting process within the Shaolin monastic martial arts community. This research relies on the history of the Shaolin community, the structure of daily monastic life, the community's cultural specificity, individual and collective narratives of their members, as well as through the analyzes of formal and informal educational processes. The interlocutors were members of two Shaolin community groups: warrior monks and ordained monks. Warrior monks (武僧 *wǔsēng*) are committed to preserving, developing, and showcasing Shaolin martial arts, both domestically and internationally. This group comprises lay Buddhists and fully ordained monks. Ordained monks (和尚 *héshàng*), on the other hand, are fully ordained members of the monastic community tasked with specific duties within the monastery, which pertain to religious affairs and the organization of daily monastic life. Some ordained monks have previously been part of the warrior monk group, and currently practice martial arts in their leisure time (Nešković 2020).

2 Theoretical framework

Bourdieu defines embodiment as a process through which objective structures of the socio-cultural conditions are internalized as human dispositions. These dispositions are patterns of perception and appreciation that produce experiences of meaning and incite engagement with the world. Habitus, as a “system of durable, transposable dispositions” (Bourdieu 1977/2013), engenders practices that reciprocally reproduce the same objective structures. This study defines objective structures as ascertainable units of socio-cultural meaning and takes Bourdieu's stances further by arguing that habitus, by its very nature, possesses a certain plasticity, allowing its continual

fine-tuning to the evolution of socio-cultural conditions. These adjustments are made through a dialectical relationship between enduring structured dispositions and novel objective structures arising from changing conditions. Over time, these initially alien structures become integrated into the local community's practices and narratives. In this process, they undergo reinterpretation, gradually finding acceptance and being woven into the fabric of traditional understanding.

While the author agrees with Akrivou and Di San Giorgio's (Akrivou and Giorgio 2014) critique of Bourdieu's habitus as primarily reproductive and insufficiently engaged with the role of critical cognition in societal transformation, their dialogical reinterpretation does not fully align with the perspective presented in this paper. Akrivou and Di San Giorgio envision a "new habitus" emerging from an old, whereas this study conceptualizes habitus as continually evolving, more akin to a system never reaching equilibrium, rather than transitioning between discrete, stable states. This perspective mirrors the endless flux of reality, emphasizing a state of continuous transformation over a progression through fixed states. Moreover, rather than focusing on dialogue as a catalyst for habitus transformation, the author advocates for the concept of active engagement, which involves a dynamic correspondence with each element of the socio-cultural environment. This approach models the process as complex and interdependent, where each element evolves through its interactions with all others, emphasizing a continual, multifaceted exchange within the social fabric.

In the context of specific, culturally conditioned bodily practices, the relationship between objective structures, dispositions, and embodiment becomes explicit. Martial arts have been analyzed with these concepts in works by Wacquant (2004, 2015), Delmont and Stephens (2008), and Jennings et al. (2010). For this research, Bourdieu's conception of individual habitus, as a structural variant of group habitus (Bourdieu 1977/2013), needs expansion. Theories of practice have evolved significantly through contemporary anthropology's use of ethnography. Delmont and Stephens, whose research focuses on the globalized practice of capoeira in the diaspora, rely on Wainwright et al. to identify individual, institutional, and choreographed habitus (Wainwright et al. 2006; Delmont and Stephens 2008). They conceptualize habitus as static, "both a state of mind and a bodily state of being," but this paper argues for its dynamic nature. It leans towards Smith's definition of habitus as "a collection of resources and dispositions which we carry with ourselves, in our minds and bodies and which we can apply to different social circumstances" (Smith 2001; Erdei 2008). Individual habitus, though originating from one's biology and biography, is concurrently shaped by the "collective history of any group(s) to which he or she belongs." Thus, education and socialization are defining factors of individual habitus (Delmont and Stephens 2008; Reed-Danahay 2005). Csordas asserts that religious practice "exploits the habitus to transform the very dispositions of which it is constituted" (Csordas 1990). This paper argues that the individual habitus of the Shaolin community members is cultivated through formal and informal religious education and practice, and correspondence with the social and natural environment. Ingold suggests that we live in the world through correspondence, rather than interaction with our surroundings, emphasizing the shift from ontological to ontogenetic explorations (Ingold 2022). While group habitus does presuppose broadly shared

dispositions within a given community, it doesn't imply uniformity among its members. Individuals, with their unique biographies and experiences, inevitably introduce variation into the common habitus. These personal histories contribute to a spectrum of nuanced interpretations and enactments of the group habitus. Therefore, even within a relatively homogenous community, diversity and individual distinctiveness persist, adding richness to the shared cultural and social landscape.

Bourdieu's theory of practice provides a valuable framework for understanding how socio-cultural practices are perpetuated within the Shaolin Monastery. However, considering the monastery's relative insular community, characterized by a high degree of daily interaction, a more nuanced theoretical apparatus is required to articulate the dynamics of this intricate system. In this network, the significance of each element is profoundly influenced by its relationship with others. Drawing on Capra's concept of the *Web of Life* (1996), it becomes clear that individuals, through their interconnected relationships, collaboratively construct their social reality. Interactions between members of the community play a crucial role in molding and activating their dispositions. Nonetheless, it is important to note that not all dispositions are concurrently operative. A central question then arises: what serves as the driving force that mobilizes these dispositions, and by what hierarchy of precedence?

To uncover an appropriate theoretical framework for this driving force, it is essential for the author to contextualize the issue and revert to the specificities of the case study. Therefore, the task at hand is to delineate a force that stimulates religious dispositions through martial arts practice, thereby enabling individuals to concurrently experience and reproduce religious meanings. Despite the shared religious dispositions, they do not prescribe a uniform bodily experience. Rather, they create space for spiritual experiences that, while diverse, share underlying congruence. The diversity in the experiences of the individual lived body can be attributed to various factors, namely: each person's unique perceptions, their personal histories, and their subjective interpretations of the religious principles within the martial arts practice. Despite these differences, the experiences are congruent in that they share an alignment with the broader religious and spiritual values of the community.

The internalization and external articulation of knowledge and skills by the lived body, through its ongoing interactions with the socio-cultural environment, is a continual process. This process is underpinned by the individual habitus of each practitioner, serving as the operational guide within the body-mind system. As this navigational framework for the lived body, the habitus informs environmental interactions, thereby catalyzing its own evolution and transformation. Within this framework, the structural nature of the habitus necessitates agency-driven evolution, whereby the habitus directs the agency towards behaviors and processes required for its transformation, thus elucidating a unique interplay between structure and agency within the context of cultural and bodily practices.

Theories of embodiment and dynamic embodiment allow the author to argue that structured dispositions become inscribed in the *lived body* (Farnell and Varela 2008). This inscription is conditioned by the martial artists' prolonged engagement within the monastic community. The causal power emerging from the *lived body*, informed by these embodied dispositions, propels martial arts practice. This active agency of the moving body mobilizes structured dispositions and steers bodily movement,

bridging the gap between the body as a subjective participant and as an objective cultural construct, both perceptive and representational (Csordas 1990). Competent martial artists partake in “dynamically embodied discursive practice” (Varela 2003), which permits them to perceive and experience the socio-cultural milieu through the lens of religious doctrines.

Within the bounds of competent practice, socio-cultural conditions imbue bodily movement with meaning. These meanings arise not only from the body as we perceive it through our senses but also from its participation in the extensive intersubjective network of the relevant socio-cultural context. They are not always externalized and accessible for semiotic analysis; instead, they assign values and establish qualitative criteria for bodily performance. The categories of external/internal meaning in bodily performance distinguish the body as an expressive entity and the body as experiencing, learning, or teaching. In the context of Shaolin Kung Fu, the artistic performance garners value for its appeal to spectators, while the religious practice is valued for the degree of activation of internal structures laden with religious content.

This case study provides insight into the dual subject-object nature of the body and illustrates how cultural continuity rests on bodily transformation through movement. Through the process of embodiment, the body both internalizes and reproduces culture. The body transforms into a medium through which structures of meaning are reintroduced into socio-cultural reality. Rather than adopting an ontological perspective, which regards habitus as a state of being, this study leans on Ingold’s (2013; 2022) ontogenetic perspective, which facilitates a focus on the continuous generation of habitus through correspondence with the world.¹

3 Methodology

The research method encompassed diverse forms of observation, interviews, conversations, and small-group discussions. Participating in the Kung Fu program for international students allowed the author to apply the method of full participation (Vučinić Nešković 2013) in both the activities that were central to this research and the everyday life of the monastic community. From April 2018 to September 2019, the initial period of the fieldwork, the author was part of the Kung Fu program for foreign students administered by the monastery’s Office for Foreign Affairs. Although the students resided outside of the Temple gates, martial arts classes were held within the Temple complex. During the second period, from October 2019 to August 2020, the author was granted special permission from the monastic leadership to stay within the guest area (鍾普堂 *Chuípūtáng*).

The research plan involved gathering primary fieldwork material through conducting various types of interviews, including formal (pre-scheduled, recorded, questionnaire-based interviews) and informal (conducted on ad hoc initiated topics). This material incorporated diverse information like facts, opinions, attitudes,

¹ Ingold applies Simondon’s (1993) idea of ontogenesis or the “becoming of being” to theorize living beings as co-evolving.

descriptions of practices, and recollections of experiences. As a temporary female member of the community, the author's presence in Shaolin Monastery was restricted by the rules of monastic discipline common to all Buddhist temples. The Baizhang Rules of Purity date from the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), and are currently formulated and regulated by the Buddhist Association of China (Yifa 2002). The interviews took place in monastery courtyards, common areas where monks often congregated, and various offices. The author conducted these interviews with the monastic community members in Chinese, requiring her proficiency in spoken Putonghua. Serbian sinologists verified the transcripts of the interviews. Alongside the ethnographic material as the primary source, the author used other resources like monastic academic publications, texts, and visual materials from the official Shaolin Monastery website, as well as video material showcasing various formal and informal events.

The fieldwork data suggests that the religious meanings of monastic martial arts practice are not outwardly expressed through bodily techniques and symbols. Rather, they condition the experiences and attitudes of individuals and groups involved in the modern development of Shaolin Kung Fu within the monastery, namely, the warrior monks, ordained monks, and foreign students. To analyze the embodied cultural content, the author applied the methodological concept of “thick participation,” signifying that the anthropologists primarily need to “record” cultural knowledge within their body before it can be externalized as visual and textual data for analytical purposes (Samudra 2008). Buddhist doctrines, akin to traditional medical concepts, cannot be captured solely through analyzing movement observation and training methods. Therefore, the research approach also considers the structure, dynamics, and overall atmosphere of the community that shapes the warrior monk habitus and provides conditions for the dynamic embodiment of Chan Buddhism in the monastic martial art practice.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Shaolin Kung Fu in diverse social contexts through history

Before framing the religious domain of Shaolin Kung Fu, it is imperative to comprehend its historical context, and the multifarious cultural, religious, socio-economic and political influences that shaped it in its contemporary form. The fieldwork demonstrates that the monastic Shaolin Kung Fu is continually adapting to modern man and society.

Studies based on Shaolin Temple archives reveal varied roles of martial arts within Chinese society throughout history. Shahar points out that “Chinese martial art is a multifaceted system of physical and mental self-cultivation that has diverse applications, from health and well-being to theatrical performance, from competitive sport to religious self-cultivation, from self-defense to armed rebellion” (Shahar 2008). The present-day monastic narrative portrays Shaolin Kung Fu as fulfilling multiple historical roles: therapeutic practice, a means of self-cultivation through Chan practice, and a method of self-defense. Moreover, it accentuates that

in contemporary times, Shaolin Kung Fu has acquired another role, which consists of promoting Shaolin culture nationally and internationally. Internationally, Shaolin Kung Fu symbolizes Chinese martial arts tradition, Chan Buddhist teachings, and spectacular performative bodily skills. Consequently, the practice now boasts significant artistic value. Shahar reminds us that this versatility has allowed it to survive during severe political and social shifts throughout Chinese history. The unique fusion of military, therapeutic, and religious objectives that spurred the development of Shaolin Kung Fu across centuries made it highly adaptable to varied cultural traditions, facilitating its broad international acceptance.

The rich, multi-layered meaning of Shaolin Kung Fu has emerged from the varied roles it played in diverse social circumstances. It is essential to first delve into the meanings of Shaolin Kung Fu from the lens of the monastic community, then from the standpoint of the Chinese state, which officially recognizes it as a national intangible cultural heritage. Ultimately, we need to consider the international perspectives, where this practice has been gaining momentum as a martial art since the closing decades of the previous century.

4.2 Definitions of Kung Fu

As historical studies suggest, the evolution of Shaolin Kung Fu involved an eclectic blend of various Chinese cultural elements, from indigenous calisthenics, therapeutic exercises based on traditional medicine later adopted by Daoists, military combat techniques and Buddhist doctrines, to the artistic elements of Shaolin Kung Fu bodily movements showcasing the aesthetic value of traditional Chinese culture (Shahar 2008).

For a majority of foreign students, Kung Fu is primarily a martial art. Those familiar with the Chinese characters 功夫 (*gōngfū*) know it denotes skill in a broader sense. Warrior monks emphasize that acquiring Kung Fu implies “time and sweat” (时间和汗水 *shíjiān hé hànshuǐ*), symbolizing years of relentless effort and commitment to training, and a life of rigid discipline. They consider that the Shaolin Kung Fu movements were initially not developed for aesthetic performances but for their application in combat. Warrior monks contend that the features of Shaolin Kung Fu (six harmonies, breathing, explosiveness) promote exceptional martial efficacy while concurrently strengthening the body and health.

Senior warrior monks, especially those who transitioned to become ordained monks, perceive the concept of gongfu (功夫 *gōngfū*) as not being exclusive to martial arts. They view it as a devoted approach to any action, leading to personal betterment. They also often remark that gongfu is not merely about physical exercise, but about transforming the mind-heart,² or “polishing” (打磨 *dǎmó*) *the mind of*

² Within the scope of relevant contemporary academic literature, the translation of the concept 心 (*xīn*) varies, often rendered as “mind/heart” in different contexts, and occasionally differentiated into the separate notions of “mind” or “heart.” The author opted to retain this dual translation in the form of “mind-heart” to consistently convey to the reader that 心 represents a nuanced concept not entirely translatable into foreign languages. An approximate definition, fitting for the purposes of this research, is that 心 signifies a locus that simultaneously embodies thoughts and emotions, as well as the individual’s capacity to regulate and manage these aspects (Tiwald 2020).

the body (身体的意念 *shēntǐ de yìniàn*). The ordained monks, who may have never undertaken physically strenuous martial arts exercises but have undergone mental and physical complexities of meditation, often refer to gongfu in predominantly conceptual terms. They lean on the official monastic narrative, and the content of the old scriptures found in the library and the scripture hall. The monastic community as a whole underscores that in the Shaolin Monastery, martial arts are perfected in conjunction with Chan Buddhism.

4.3 Monastic narratives about Chan Buddhism and Shaolin Kung Fu

Shaolin Kung Fu, once safeguarding dharma and now facilitating its dissemination, is considered a highly esteemed spiritual legacy within the monastic community. Legends of the second patriarch of Shaolin Kung Fu and the monastery's dharma protector, King Kimnara — revered as an avatar of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara possessing superhuman strength and combat skills — play a pivotal role in shaping the monastic comprehension of the relationship between Shaolin martial arts and Chan Buddhism. Abbot Shi Yongxin emphasizes that the evolution of Shaolin Kung Fu into a form of Buddhist cultural expression has been catalysed by faith in King Kimnara's "supernatural power" (Shi 2013).

This portrayal of King Kimnara as the forefather of present-day warrior monks and the incarnation of Buddhist power allows Shaolin Kung Fu to be perceived as a mechanism bridging the gap between an ordinary individual and the transcendental ideal of the Buddha. The monastic narrative interprets Shaolin martial arts as a Darma gate (法門 *fāmén*), a pathway leading to Buddha Nature. This narrative not only influences individual experiences of religious practices (Corwin 2012)³ but also informs practitioners' perceptions of their bodies as mediums transitioning between the worldly and spiritual realms, thereby imbuing them with supernatural powers. As demonstrated in the *Mind and Spirit* project by Luhrmann et al., "cultural invitations may kindle spiritual experiences" (Luhrmann 2020). The enduring belief within the monastic community in the religious and supernatural potential of Shaolin Kung Fu preserves its Buddhist nature. Consequently, whether Shaolin Kung Fu embodies Chan Buddhist teaching hinges on the degree of religious devotion of its practitioners.

The monastic narrative emphasizes the significance of time and experience in developing a more profound understanding of Shaolin Kung Fu. Masters often cite that the experience of executing the same movements now compared to a few years of diligent practice will vary considerably; long-term practice allows the uncovering of the profound meanings inherent in each move. The Abbot explains: "The life of the elderly and that of the young differ not much in their routine but rather in their insight into life."⁴ To truly understand the connotation of life can make a total

³ Corwin writes about how linguistic religious practices can transform the embodied experience of the divine and of illness and pain (Corwin 2012).

⁴ Similarly, Ingold (2010) explains that the growth of one's knowledge continues throughout life and is "equivalent to the maturation of his/her own person." He accentuates that such maturation refers to the increase in not the quantity of knowledge, but its quality.

difference in one's life. The same is true for Wushu Chan." He further elaborates that upon grasping the connotative meaning of *wushu* movements and practice routines (套路 *tàolù*), they become "stepping stones for self-realization ... a pathway leading towards the perfection of the human mind" (Shi 2014).

The Abbot goes on to elucidate that practitioners of Chinese martial arts progress through three main spiritual states that correspond to the three levels of martial (武 *wǔ*) practice: the martial art (武艺 *wǔyì*), the martial study (武学 *wǔxué*) and the martial way (武道 *wúdào*, in the sense of a spiritual way as a way of life) (Shi 2014).⁵ As stated in the Secret Formula of Shaolin Fist Art (少林拳术秘诀 *Shàolín quánshù mìjué*), "a higher level of martial technique in general is imbued with the spirit of Chan, so as to demonstrate agility and equanimity" (Shi 2014). Thus, *Wushu Chan*, the spiritually imbued martial arts, is considered to be one of Chan insights (禅机 *Chánjī*), i.e., the methods of the Chan school for demonstration of the verbally indescribable state of enlightenment.

4.4 The meanings of Shaolin Kung Fu

This study elucidates the multifaceted nature of Shaolin Kung Fu, encompassing its cultural, personal, and spiritual dimensions. It emphasizes that the meaning of Shaolin Kung Fu is not static but rather dynamic, influenced by diverse factors, including contextual variables, individual expression, and the practitioner's internal states and intentions. This analysis is grounded in fieldwork data and contextualized within contemporary martial arts literature, with a primary focus on the meaning of Shaolin Kung Fu routines (套路 *tàolù*). The initial question addresses what gives meaning to a movement, and how it carries or produces specific cultural content. As demonstrated in this research, martial arts body movements are not inherently defined by the intrinsic content; they possess the capacity to convey this content, just as the *lived body* can produce cultural meanings. Moreover, the content of a martial movement depends on the context of its performance and the movements preceding and following it. The same movement can serve as an attack or a defense during combat, be part of a sequence of movements aimed at spiritual cultivation or health promotion, or a movement whose aesthetics enhance the warrior monks' artistic performance.

This view echoes the stance of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (Culler 1976), who postulated that linguistic elements gain meaning as part of the overall structure they constitute. This idea can be extended to body language. The interrelatedness of movements performed in a sequence (i.e., in a form 套路 *tàolù*) primarily

⁵ Johnson (2017), in a somewhat similar way, gives useful insights into the possibility of hierarchical categorization of the pedagogical process of martial arts, starting from "musul" (武艺 *wǔyì*, martial technique) to "muye" (武学 *wǔxué*, martial artistry), and finally to "mudo" (武道 *wúdào*, martial way). Exploring the practice of taekwondo, the author gives an example of how this kind of stratified pedagogy can tell us the ways to acquire martial art skills and knowledge, and more importantly, the ways to adapt and accept them in everyday life. Thus, "mudo" is set as the high point of the taekwondo practice, which can be achieved only after decades of learning and going through the previous two phases. This comes about when the student is able to bring in personal understanding to his or her practice of this martial art.

determines the meaning of each individual Shaolin Kung Fu movement. For example, the Baduanjin (八段锦 *Bāduànjīn*) movement, “propping up the sky to regulate internal organs,” does not inherently carry health-promoting content. It only has the potential to produce a health-promoting effect if made part of the complete structure of Baduanjin. This movement only carries health-related meaning if performed in a context where particular content can be realized, i.e., if executed by someone with the necessary knowledge and skill.

The same bodily techniques can serve different functions for different people, and even carry different meanings for the same individuals at different times, depending on the situational context. Shaolin Kung Fu techniques can be viewed as shaped by the demands of the warrior monk profession, a form of relaxation and leisure, or a means of maintaining body vitality and overall health. The same techniques can also facilitate religious self-cultivation. Senior monks experienced in both martial arts and Chan practice emphasize the unique evolution of Shaolin Kung Fu as a comprehensive cultural entity, or as Shahar would phrase it, referring to the evolution of Chinese martial arts from the 17th century onwards, a “self-conscious system of thought” (Shahar 2008). Master YK explains that Shaolin Kung Fu transcends mere combat techniques, representing a fusion of practice, philosophy, and symbolic meanings. He expounded:

Shaolin Kung Fu is distinct from other schools because it integrates Chan philosophy, focusing on cultivating inner wisdom alongside physical training. In ancient times, our martial arts were guided by the “fist manual” (拳谱 *quánpǔ*), which encompassed traditional Chinese cultural thoughts, ways of life, and artistic expressions. Take, for instance, our routines like Xiǎohóngquán, which include movements like “Embracing the Moon” and “White Clouds Overhead.” These names are not arbitrary; they embody deep Shaolin cultural and Chan philosophical concepts. “Embracing the Moon” refers to a state of enlightenment achieved through prolonged meditation and practice, symbolizing inner wisdom... The moon, pure and unblemished, especially at night, symbolizes a state of mind achieved through Chan meditation and martial arts practice — as unblemished and pure as the moon itself. The state of “Embracing the Moon” represents an advanced level achieved through Chan practice, such as sitting meditation, and Shaolin Kung Fu. It’s a state of inner peace and elevated inner wisdom, free from impurities. What affects our body and mind? The Five Poisons and Six Dusts. The Five Poisons are attachment, anger, ignorance, pride, and doubt; the Six Dusts are form, sound, scent, taste, touch, and dharmas (external views and opinions). “White Clouds Overhead” represents these external factors that can adversely impact our physical and mental state. However, through inner cultivation, we can mitigate these influences on our bodies. Thus, through internal practice, we can resolve the external impacts on our physical being. Each movement in our routines is imbued with Shaolin cultural elements and Chan philosophy. Understanding and internalizing these concepts are essential to mastering Shaolin Kung Fu. By practicing the routines and grasping the underlying Shaolin cultural ideas, one can truly excel in Shaolin martial arts.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to assume that each Shaolin Kung Fu technique or each physical attribute or behavior of a monastic community member carries a particular symbolic content. It is essential to keep in mind that “bodily

techniques do not necessarily say anything special about the symbolic, social or cultural order, just as they can be part of a wider cultural system” (Žikić 2018). Furthermore, while the nomenclature and cultural meanings embedded in the martial arts forms do not explicitly reveal their origins, they have emerged from the community’s dual efforts: on the one side, transforming combative skills into practices of self-cultivation, and on the other, shaping them into a vehicle to carry forward the monastery’s cultural heritage in the modern context.

Master LL, a 22-year-old martial arts teacher and an experienced performer, explains that it is thanks to the enduring pedagogical tradition within the Shaolin community that we still have access to the cultural heritage of the monastery. He asserts that the inherent value of contemporary Shaolin Kung Fu lies not in the exquisite martial prowess of the warrior monks, but in the wealth of knowledge the practitioners embody, a legacy transmitted unbroken through the ages. He humbly suggests that the duty of present-day warrior monks is merely to “promote Shaolin Kung Fu” by participating in various national and international events. However, the true merit and distinctive character of Shaolin Kung Fu practice, he claims, are defined by the heritage steadfastly handed down the lineage from master to disciple over centuries.

Body movements, while seemingly straightforward, can embody complex meanings that go beyond societal norms and cultural interpretations. These meanings are also shaped by individual intentions, which emanate from the unique lived perspectives and sensibilities of the person. This personal element, ingrained within the context of the “lived body,” is a testament to how personal experiences and internal states are expressed through bodily movements. The “lived body” here refers to the idea that through prolonged engagement in specific practices, like martial arts in a monastic community, certain dispositions become inscribed in the body, which in turn guides its movements. The active agency of the moving body mobilizes these inscribed dispositions, effectively bridging the gap between the body as a subjective participant and as an objective cultural construct. In this process, the body is both perceptive, engaged in experience, and representational, symbolizing broader cultural meanings (Csordas 1990). Jackson (2014) cautions that we must interpret these body movements with care, as their meanings can often be less straightforward and more prone to multiple interpretations than verbal communication. He cites the example of ritual activities, a form of collective action wherein, despite a shared consensus regarding the ritual’s necessity and structure, the content of the ritual is experienced individually and uniquely by each participant. The subjective nature of this religious or ritual activity feeds into the broader socio-cultural experience of the spiritual domain and consequently prompts unique bodily responses. Seligman (2010; 2018) delves into the relationship between these socio-cultural experiences and bodily responses in the realm of religious devotion, utilizing “bio-looping” as a conceptual tool that captures the “circular and reinforcing processes through which religious meanings and practices shape bodily experience and functioning” (Seligman 2010; 2018).

Upon analysing the interviews conducted during the fieldwork, it became evident that the meaning of Shaolin Kung Fu is not confined to a singular interpretation. Instead, it unfolds as a complex interplay of its various dimensions, each providing

unique insights into the essence of this ancient martial art. These various dimensions coalesce into two principal categories: internal and external. The interviewees discussed the symbolism and aesthetics of bodily movement, and the way in which martial arts techniques and routines, as repositories of traditional intangible heritage, inform their present-day meanings. For ordained monks, the meaning of Shaolin Kung Fu is determined by a subjective, personal element that is introduced into the practice by the practitioners themselves. This view aligns with that of Ophir (2016), who posits that each skilful body in motion carries its own distinct signature. Furthermore, senior monks value commitment to martial arts practice on the grounds of Buddhist virtues. For them, Shaolin Kung Fu is an extension of Chan. Hence, the bodily movements themselves, when separated from Chan, do not have a meaning or purpose that can represent the Shaolin tradition. When ordained monks discuss progression in Shaolin Kung Fu, they emphasize the cultivation of Buddhist virtues that emerge through the practice of specific martial arts techniques and skills. They do not focus on the number of routines they have learned or the duration of their training, but on how their self-perception and world experience have been transformed through the practice of Shaolin Kung Fu.

Master YX elucidates that the practice of Shaolin Kung Fu trains not only the body but also the mind-heart (心 心). Consequently, the ultimate goal of persistent training transcends mere physical skill; it also shapes the mind-heart and character, which influence every aspect of life. He contends that the Shaolin approach to martial arts distinguishes itself from other schools, attributing a deeper meaning to monastic Kung Fu. He asserts: “The tradition is here, the ideology is here, Chan is here, the influence of Buddhism is here.”

Master YX holds the conviction that although the martial art forms and techniques practiced within and outside the monastery can be identical, their inner essence is disparate (“what is inside is not the same”). The purpose, motivation, intention, and thereby the state of consciousness and internal sentiment, differ between someone who practices martial arts purely for combat and someone who employs them for Buddhist self-cultivation. “If one has faith, the purpose of all actions, including Kung Fu, is different. Life in the monastery is very free — we can train Kung Fu, drink tea, and recite sutras in the morning. It is all very pleasant.”

Practitioners who have an interest in the internal aspects of Shaolin Kung Fu often analyze the quality of performance through their experience of the personal component introduced by the practitioner into the form. Even when they discuss the external aspects of practice, such as the aesthetics, they talk about the experience of the movement — its fluidity, speed, power — rather than quantitative aspects, like the number of routines learned and the rate at which they were learned. Hence, the body is portrayed as an expressive medium, which aligns with Mullis’s discourse on the performing body in martial arts, games, and acting. Mullis introduces two concepts in his exploration of the internal and external aspects of body performance. He terms the internal aspect as the “body schema,” defining it as the preconscious system that is not culture-bound and is situated below the level of self-referential intentionality, thereby enabling individuals to experience their bodies in motion. On the other hand, he labels the external aspect of body performance as the “body image,” which is shaped by culture, that is, by intentional content (Mullis 2008).

All qualitative differences between various routines of martial arts are produced based on the performer and the given context. Masters often find themselves perplexed by foreign students' questions, such as, "Which martial arts form is better, Xiaohongquan or Dahongquan?" In response to this question, Master YZh said:

It is not a matter of the best thing, but about how you do it. Whether something is good or not is your personal issue. Things are the same. If you will do something well or not, that is a personal matter. Do you think *Xiǎohóngquán* (小洪拳) is better or *Dàhóngquán* (大洪拳)? Only when you perform them well can you say whether or not they're good. We cannot say that something is good, or something is the same, because the level of performance of every person is different. Kung Fu cannot be exceptional. The essence is in perseverance, if you persevere then that is gongfu, if you do not persevere then it is nothing. Kung Fu is a matter of time and personal involvement.

The performer's responsibility extends beyond the execution of the form, embracing the context of its application — how it's wielded in specific situations. An oversight of Shaolin Kung Fu's intrinsic values results in a reductive transmutation — quality into quantity, depth to superficiality, leading to Weber's "disenchantment of the world" (*Entzauberung*). As a result, the practice risks becoming a sequence of generic combat techniques, lacking defined meaning or quality, abandoned to "blind chance or systems necessity" — rather than guided by spirit or consciousness (Weber 1946/1958; Wilber 1998).

McDonald described a similar transition in his examination of the modernization of the traditional Indian martial art of *kalarippayattu*. Once an intricate, unified practice, its contemporary form diversified into three dimensions: a physical exercise, a performance art, and a competitive sport. McDonald, invoking Merleau-Ponty and Benjamin, argues that the commodification and objectification of *kalarippayattu* as a competitive sport and performing art has left it "without an aura." However, he asserts that *kalarippayattu*'s embodiment as physical practice retains its "aura," preserving its traditional form (McDonald 2003).

In discussing the competent practice of Shaolin Kung Fu, Master YF said:

If you wish to be like a Shaolin monk, first you must train Kung Fu and perform well, then you must have faith, and be driven by positive thoughts. It is this that will make you exceptional. If you are excellent at Kung Fu, but do not have faith, then it won't work. If you are good at Kung Fu, and your bodily expression is good, but you lack spirit, then there can be nothing of it. A monk must study Buddhist scripture. If you do not study these things, how can you connect Chan with health and martial arts?

He proposes that what shapes the distinctive development of warrior monks' skills is the environment within which they live — the monastic community and the principles they adhere to, but most importantly, the faith they nurture and the ideals they relentlessly pursue. He emphasizes that all residents of the monastery are required to adhere to its rules, and notes that this lifestyle, encompassing the integration of warrior monks into the core community, is a long-standing tradition.

Master YZh further elucidated that the members of the Shaolin monastic community must strive to understand and adhere to Buddhist precepts. He emphasized:

The rules of practicing martial arts must be in agreement with Buddhist rules, because we are in that environment. There are two types of rules. Within the framework of Buddhism, we do not have the practice of martial arts; that is specific to the Shaolin Monastery. The Shaolin Monastery is a specific community. We cannot say that these are the rules of the Buddhist world. The Shaolin Monastery has its own specific rules that differ from other places. Other places do not have a warrior monk community.

Warrior monks open their performances by saluting the spectators with a bow with hands closed on the chest (双手合十 *Shuāngshǒu héshí* 𞄂; like during a prayer), an act serving dual purposes. This gesture imbues the performance with religious symbolism while offering the performer a moment of calm, a grounding of the heart and breath, and a focus of the mind to attain the optimal state for the performance. This seemingly simple movement conceals profound practical wisdom. As Žikić suggests, body techniques can represent a cultural response to a certain necessity, dictated by human biophysical reality, while simultaneously transmitting a particular symbolic message (Žikić 2018). The example above shows how the wisdom and experience held in monastic tradition can be embodied in martial arts practice, paired with symbolic physical expressions.

In analyzing the outward characteristics of the Shaolin warrior monks' performance, we note the gripping of the floor with the feet, the tensing of the jaw and tongue against the palate, and the intensity in the eyes. The forceful vocal expressions and intimidating gaze of the performers are striking. Yet, the internal journey these young men undertake is hidden. The internal state that underpins such a performance is developed through years of devoted self-cultivation and disciplined training. The mind strives for tranquility and clarity to apply the theory of internal harmonies, while the body seeks a relaxed state essential for synchronizing movements and achieving speed, fluidity, and explosiveness. The theory of internal harmonies, which is part of the written tradition of Shaolin Kung Fu, indicates the presence of the ontological assumption that body and mind-heart are interrelated.⁶ Mullis, using martial art styles inspired by animal movements like the tiger or mantis style as examples, elucidates the different energetic properties of Kung Fu. Drawing upon the principles of traditional Chinese medicine, the refinement of techniques inspired by unique animal movements allows practitioners to transmute their somatic energy (气 *qi*) into a more refined form of energy, known as *jin* (劲) (Mullis 2013).

Samudra argues that somatic knowledge, being distinct from semiotic knowledge, is not necessarily subject to symbolic interpretation. Cultural knowledge acquired through specialized body practices, such as martial arts, becomes deeply embodied and often defies translation into a semiotic code (Samudra 2008). In essence, the Chan practice's conscious discarding of all cultural content — stemming from the

⁶ For more on non-Western ontological traditions, see De Castro 1998, Descola 2005 and Ingold 2006.

Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of “emptiness” and the method of “silent illumination” from the Chan Caodong School (Lu 2019) — leaves us with no material for semi-otic content analyzes. Imposing hidden meanings in Shaolin Kung Fu movements, or seeking symbolic representations in meditative and health-oriented postures, may inadvertently overcomplicate our interpretation of these practices by introducing cultural nuances that were not originally present. In this regard, this paper aligns with Jackson’s perspective, advocating that the value of bodily practices transcends cognitive or semantic functions. Hence, interpreting embodied experiences should not be confined to realms of cognitive and linguistic theories alone. Echoing Best’s assertion, body movement is not merely a representation of reality — it is reality itself (Best 1978). To perceive bodily practice purely as a semiotic product, risks undermining its true importance and the inherent potential of the body (Jackson 2014). A comprehensive exploration of bodily practices requires acknowledging the practitioner’s internal world — all the elements that contribute to their embodied experience of movement (Mullis 2008; 2013).

As Ingold (2010) explains, “conscious awareness does not retreat with practice, ..., but rather increases in concentration and intensity with the fluency of action.” In distinguishing the expert from the novice, he proposes that the mind of an expert is not “more richly furnished with content” but possesses heightened sensitivity to “cues in the environment” and the aptitude to respond to these cues with discernment and precision. The spiritual insights of Chan masters emerge when they free themselves from the cultural constructs that prevent humans from fully experiencing their existence in the world. Focusing on anything other than self-experience disrupts its flow. As such, focusing on bodily processes or actively seeking spiritual content — striving to objectify and rationalize it — restricts awareness and, thus, is not conducive to Chan practice. Seligman, referencing Hallowell (1955), remarks that “the reflexive mode of awareness is a self-objectifying mode and self-objectification separates individuals from their subjective experience” (Seligman 2010). This spiritual practice does not require extensive intellectual prowess, scientific analysis, or interpretation but rather calls for a state of contemplation. Therefore, the core skill of Chan practice entails liberating the mind-heart from socio-cultural constraints.

Mastering Shaolin Kung Fu implies understanding and embodying various levels of meaning — from the internal (pre-objectified and objectified) to the external, symbolic representation. This means that the *lived body* both conveys and is shaped by these meanings.

4.5 Unveiling the practices and mechanisms of dynamic embodiment

In this anthropological examination of dynamic embodiment within the Shaolin monastic community, we understand engagement with the world as intrinsic to the human condition. This engagement signifies the habitus as emerging from and co-evolving with the socio-cultural milieu. Dynamic embodiment, thus, is enacted through intra-community interactions that facilitate assimilation and manifestation of the objective structures of the socio-cultural landscape. In the subsequent paragraph,

we will highlight the specific mechanisms and practices that underpin the process of dynamic embodiment within the Shaolin Monastery community, comprising some 400 members. Ordained monks (和尚 *héshàng*), novices (沙弥 *shāmī*), and warrior monks (武僧 *wǔsēng*) reside within a structured environment of the monastery that operates under a patriarchal clan system. The community's daily schedule is meticulously structured: the day starts with morning prayer (早课 *zǎokè*) at dawn, followed by breakfast at 6:00 am and lunch at 11:30 am, each commencing with ritual chanting. The dinner, which follows the dusk chanting, although not an official ritual activity, remains communal. This rhythm is fundamental to the daily routine, instilling structure and nurturing a sense of belonging within the Shaolin collective. Monks underscore that the well-organized work distribution and the guiding rules of daily life are essential in maintaining the monastery as a cohesive and functional unit. The administrative and religious affairs of the monastery are distributed across departments, each functioning under the Baizhang Rules of Purity and adjusted to contemporary times by the Buddhist Association of China. The halls, including the Abbot's Office, Chan Hall, Guest Hall, Sutra Hall, Dining Hall, Shaolin Pharmacy Bureau, Shaolin Incense Hall, and the Warrior Monk Group, each uphold their internal hierarchy and cater to various aspects of monastic life.

Within the Shaolin community, the process of dynamic embodiment is facilitated through a synergy of structured and spontaneous practices, tailored to the distinct roles of warrior monks and ordained monks. For warrior monks, the embodiment of Chan Buddhism is mediated primarily through rigorous martial arts training complemented by communal obligations such as serving meals and providing assistance for physically demanding tasks like unloading supplies in the kitchen, setting up the Shaolin Kung Fu performance area, or similar activities where strength is required, with the youngest team being the first to be called. Warrior monks are trained to absorb and convey the essence of Shaolin culture, equipping them to effectively represent and sustain the monastery's martial arts heritage, adapting it to contemporary times through cultural engagements. In contrast, ordained monks dedicate themselves to the preservation of the Chan Buddhist tradition through their monastic routines. Their emphasis is on absorbing the fundamental principles of Chan Buddhism and enhancing their skills in its practices, thereby safeguarding the perpetuation of its spiritual legacy. Thus, ordained monks engage in a parallel, yet distinct process of embodiment. For them, the internalization of Chan principles is structured around monastic precepts and ritualized daily tasks. The disciplined repetition of these tasks, coupled with sitting meditation practice, ritual ceremonies, dedicated scriptural study and participation in doctrinal discussions, anchors their engagement with Chan Buddhism. This disciplined engagement ensures a continuous interaction with the tenets of Chan, fostering a lived experience that progressively embeds these principles within their habitus. Both warrior and ordained monks are immersed in an environment that is sustained through its pedagogical framework. To effectively internalize the complex structure of Chan Buddhism, which demands both theoretical understanding and practical proficiency, one's habitus must undergo significant recalibration. This recalibration guarantees that the frameworks of Chan Buddhism govern their engagement with the world, influencing both their perception and interactions. Consequently, other structures recede into dormancy through sustained

non-engagement. The pedagogical methodologies intrinsic to Shaolin, deeply embedded within the quotidian, facilitate this embodiment.

Shaolin pedagogical methodologies bifurcate into formal and informal streams, permeating all facets of monastic life to inculcate a distinct way of correspondence with the social and natural environment. With regard to their learning objectives, the primary obligation of the warrior monks is martial arts training, complemented by their secondary responsibility of engaging in collective cultural classes where they learn about the history and cultural heritage of the monastery. By honing physical skills and mental discipline this specific pedagogy provides a platform and method for entering Chan practice. Nevertheless, the warrior monks gravitating towards religious life must also develop specific mental skills required for Chan Buddhist self-cultivation. This aspect of pedagogy involves training in meditation, chanting, engaging in ritual routines, and doctrinal study. Formal pedagogies for ordained monks are focused on learning community narratives, through the study of precepts, classical scriptures, and other Buddhist literature, and fostering master-disciple individual tutorship. When it comes to practical skill development the pedagogies include religious ritual practices, with an accent on ceremonial proceedings with chanting and sitting meditation. Some of the monks take on efforts to hone additional skillsets through the practice of Chan medicine, archery, Game of Go, calligraphy, cultivating flowers, etc. Informal pedagogy permeates monastic routines, informal interactions, and self-cultivation endeavors, also often guided by the traditional master-disciple relationship. The collective discipline of the warrior monks, defined by physical rigor and communal responsibilities, contrasts with the ordained monks' adherence to monastic precepts and devotion to Chan self-cultivation, with a number of them, nevertheless, engaging in daily monastery management responsibilities. When asked about the specific pedagogical methods that lead to competent Wushu Chan practice, Master YK cited an ancient verse he learned in the Shaolin Monastery, explaining the significance of training both body and mind for Chan self-cultivation: "The spirit seeks stillness to awaken; the body seeks health to be unobstructed." He then explained that "a calm heart and spirit are essential for realizing inner wisdom, while a healthy body ensures unobstructed circulation of blood and Qi." He also accentuated that bodily strength supports the realization of ideas in concrete terms of daily life. In his view, a pedagogical approach that fosters the unity of mind and body is crucial for Chan practice. As the practitioners gain competence in both realms, a convergence occurs, where physical abilities and mental discipline are augmented by profound concentration, enhanced perceptivity, and emotional stability. We can conclude that within the Shaolin warrior monk tradition, knowledge and skills are developed through bodily movement (martial arts practice) combined with mental work (polishing the mind-heart), within the conditions of monastic discipline. Moreover, the Shaolin environment fosters individual motivation for progress within the community, creating an axiological framework that dictates the community-specific embodied capital. The long-term immersion in this socio-cultural environment cultivates their will and intention, leading the monks' realities to mirror the objective structures of the monastery.

In this setting, the dynamic embodiment of Chan Buddhism emerges as a rich tapestry woven from disciplined routine, cultural education, and individual spiritual

practice, finely tuned by a blend of ancient traditions and contemporary regulations. In this sense, the Shaolin Monastery stands as a living testament to the resilience of Chan Buddhism in the modern era. To summarize, the monastic setting itself is intrinsically defined by mechanisms and practices catalyzing the process of dynamic embodiment of Chan Buddhism through daily life. It provides a consistent routine that reinforces the community's axiological structure and, by extension, what is valued as embodied capital within this setting. The environment not only prescribes the discipline but also engenders the impetus for individual transformation.

4.6 Advancing theory of spiritually imbued body movement

This research contributes to the anthropological understanding of knowledge formation and skill acquisition within the realm of religious martial arts. It proposes a conceptual framework regarding the nature of habitus and the process of dynamic embodiment, wherein the latter is defined as the ongoing transformation of individual habitus through engagement with socio-cultural influences.

This study reveals that Shaolin Monastery's senior monks distinguish between martial arts as physical exercise (*wushu*) and martial arts as a religious practice (*Wushu Chan*). They perceive Shaolin Kung Fu as a Chan Buddhist practice that enhances health and facilitates spiritual experience. It serves as a means to uncover the spiritual essence inherent within oneself, referred to as the Buddha-nature and the spiritual reality of the world. Through the integration of physical conditioning and the cultivation of the mind-heart (心 *xīn*), it facilitates a life of compassion, wherein practitioners tirelessly strive towards the spiritual emancipation of all sentient beings.

The theoretically grounded analysis of fieldwork data argues that the process of dynamic embodiment of Chan Buddhism within the Shaolin martial arts community results in the emergence of novel objective structures within the practitioners' habitus. These structures are activated through the competent practice of Shaolin martial arts, developed within the monastic community under the conditions of knowledge-making specific to this tradition. This transformed habitus subsequently conditions the perception of reality. Conversely, an incompetent practice would merely comprise imitation of bodily postures and movements, devoid of the embodiment of objective structures infused with religious significance.

The lived body mobilizes different structures constituting the individual habitus in response to varying socio-cultural circumstances. Through rigorous training and discipline, Shaolin martial artists learn to prioritize structures specific to Chan practice, while simultaneously de-prioritizing constraining structures prevalent in secular practices. Most individuals residing in the monastery for extended periods undergo this partially conscious, partially unconscious internal transformation. Thus, Shaolin's esoteric heritage is perpetually reproduced by successive generations within the monastic community.

The analysis of individual and collective responses to the socio-cultural milieu of the monastery has enabled a differentiation between individual, group, and institutional habitus. Group habitus corresponds to micro-collectives within the

larger monastic community, sharing living spaces and responsibilities such as work in the Chan Hall, Guest Reception Hall, Office for Foreign Affairs, Pharmaceutical Bureau, and Dining Hall. The institutional and group habitus modulate individual habitus, initially molded by “one’s biology and biography” (Delamont and Stephens 2008). Different collectives within the monastic community possess varying sets of generative dispositions (Wainwright et al. 2006) and embodied capital (Bourdieu 1986), shaping distinctive socialized subjectivities (Shevtsova 2002). For instance, the habitus of warrior monks requires a specific bodily capital distinct from that of other community members. Dispositions shared across all Shaolin groups correspond to the Shaolin institutional habitus, which is more enduring and stable than individual habitus, given that it embodies the collective’s socio-cultural history. The structured dispositions of both individual and group habitus are “the basis of perception and appreciation of all subsequent experience” (Bourdieu 1977/2013).

Applying the theory of dynamic embodiment aids in understanding the concept of *the mind of the body* (身体的意念 *shēntǐ de yìniàn*) as referred to by Shaolin warrior monks, and in explicating how the body is “moved” by religious teachings. The dynamic embodiment of Chan Buddhism through sustained martial arts practice within the monastic community engenders a habitus that transforms the trained *lived body* into “the locus of the sacred” (Csordas 1990, 1994). The paper argues that this *lived body*, both perceptive and representational, is the agent producing bodily movement informed by embodied religious doctrines. Thus, martial arts practice is conditioned by the practitioners’ religious experience of reality.

Monastic martial artists endeavor to assimilate the intricate structure of Buddhist teachings, a process that can occur systematically or spontaneously. As such, it is inadequate to delineate clear boundaries between pre-objectified and objectified embodied content. Numerous elements participating in the embodiment process create a web of complex, non-linear interrelationships and, therefore, cannot be extrapolated or defined individually. Instead, they must be understood about each other and the overall process. Embodied content extends beyond the semantic forms of body language to manifest in one’s relationship with oneself and others — in other words, in all the nuanced facets of simply existing in the world. Putting into practice the embodied cultural content allows the practitioners to self-objectify their internal dispositions. The study posits that Shaolin Kung Fu practitioners enhance the quality of their martial arts performance by self-objectifying the dispositions acquired through the transformation of their habitus, which is, in turn, shaped by the group warrior monk habitus.

The question of significant interest to the psychological aspect of embodiment is whether the durable and transposable dispositions that define meditative mental states, developed during intensive meditative practice, can also be evoked during martial arts training and under what conditions. In other words, are the cognitive dispositions developed during the transformation of habitus transferable through mere objectivation to practices other than those that originally incited this transformation? The author argues that objectivization of the “embodied cultural capital”

disintegrates the mutually constitutive cognitive and bodily dispositions, reducing them to inert, disembodied mental or physical action.⁷

5 Conclusion: from embodied meaning to performative value

The primary objective of this research was to unravel the knowledge-making and skill-crafting processes whereby Shaolin Kung Fu training transforms into a Chan Buddhist self-cultivation practice. The paper explored the multi-layered meanings of body movements within the context of Shaolin Kung Fu demonstrating that these movements serve not merely as physical expressions but also as embodiments of complex cultural, individual, and spiritual elements. The dual role of the *lived body*, both a subjective participant and an objective cultural construct, reinforces the intricate relationship between bodily practices and cultural meanings. This relationship, embodied in the practice of Shaolin Kung Fu, extends beyond the aesthetic to incorporate personal and spiritual transformations, ultimately shaping an individual's lived experiences and worldviews.

This research contributes to dynamic embodiment theory by explicating how Chan Buddhist doctrines become active constituents of competent Shaolin Kung Fu practice, transforming martial artists' habitus by instigating novel religious dispositions. These dispositions, mobilized by the agency of the moving body (*lived body*), generate competent practices, allowing embodied content to re-enter social reality as values, knowledge, and skills. Chan Buddhist dispositions become active in Shaolin Kung Fu practice only once the practitioner achieves a certain level of competence in both physical and religious practice. Moreover, objective structures with religious elements must supersede other prevailing dispositions in secular practices. Alongside other Shaolin religious practices, the spiritually-infused martial arts — referred to as *Wushu Chan* by the community — recreate conditions of monastic daily life. Thus, Shaolin martial arts practice is not a pre-fabricated product or a mere aggregation of bodily techniques; it is a method for reiterating conditions for shared religious life.

This study delineates two ways in which Chan Buddhist religious practice and martial arts become mutually constitutive within Shaolin Kung Fu. The first pertains to the warrior monks' *Wushu Chan* practice, where Chan Buddhist objective structures, embodied through sustained monastic life, become incorporated into individual habitus. Here, martial arts constitute the primary, and Chan the secondary practice. The second corresponds to ordained monks' integration of martial arts into their pre-established spiritual life. In this instance, Chan is primary and martial arts secondary. Senior monks, proficient in Chan practice, profess

⁷ “The dialectical relationship between objectified cultural capital — of which the form par excellence is writing — and embodied cultural capital has generally been reduced to an exalted description of the degradation of the spirit by the letter, the living by the inert, creation by routine, grace by heaviness.” (Bourdieu 1986).

that for them, “life is Chan.” They strive to continuously activate their religious dispositions, irrespective of daily activities.

The analyzes further demonstrate that Shaolin community members embody Buddhism at two levels — group and individual. At the group level, they draw upon the monastery’s history and traditional knowledge transmission, internalizing institutional and group narratives where Chan Buddhism is depicted as the essence of Shaolin culture. At the individual level, Chan Buddhism is embodied through religious self-cultivation and the monks’ daily activities, including martial arts. Therefore, whether Shaolin Kung Fu embodies Chan depends on the practitioner’s internal domain. Apart from living in the monastery and being devoted to martial arts, competent practitioners aspire to live by Chan Buddhist ethical values. By aspiration, the author refers not merely to a strong desire but to a driving force, or as Callard defines it, “the agency of becoming” (Callard 2018).

Further, this study contributes to the existing anthropological theories on culturally embedded bodily practice and sheds light on esoteric knowledge and skill transmission processes within a relatively insular religious community. It probes the human capacity to embody religious dispositions defined by the monastic community’s overarching narrative and prioritize these dispositions in engagements beyond religious ritual practice. It explicates how habitus, inserted into the agency of the moving body, informs competent martial arts practice. Consequently, martial artists engage in *dynamically embodied discursive practices* that, in turn, allow them to perceive and experience their socio-cultural environment through a religious doctrines’ prism.

In conclusion, the embodiment of meaning in the practice of Shaolin Kung Fu reveals the interconnectedness of personal experiences, cultural contexts, and spiritual aspirations. It illustrates how body movements become potent sites for the exploration of human existence, character development, and spiritual growth. This study, therefore, underscores the profound depth and breadth of meanings that body movements can hold and convey, contributing to a richer understanding of the human condition.

Further research into the conditions necessary for an objective structure to be embodied as a disposition of habitus would significantly contribute to the anthropology of education. It would yield a more precise understanding of how to generate structures adequate for efficient embodiment, and also how to motivate individuals to embody them. This investigation would also help discern general competence criteria in established socio-cultural practices necessary to activate embodied structures.

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