

A Study on the Transformation of Cross-Medial Performance Paradigms of Chinese Wushu

Guo Cheng

School of Physical Education, Nanjing Xiaozhuang University, Nanjing, China
Email: chengguo@njxzc.edu.cn

How to cite this paper: Cheng, G. (2025). A study on the transformation of cross-medial performance paradigms of Chinese Wushu. *Social Sciences and Humanities*, 2(1), 124-128. ISSN Print: 3104-4328; ISSN Online: 3104-4336. <https://doi.org/10.63313/SSH.9042>
Published: 2025-10-31

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Abstract

This study takes the cross-media performance of Chinese Wushu as the research object, and explores its paradigm transformation in multiple fields such as film and television, dance, drama, digital interaction, and cultural tourism practice. The research holds that in addition to its core nature of “combat skills”, Wushu is also an aesthetic entity with highly malleable symbolic narrative functions. The translation mechanism of Wushu in different media is influenced by the characteristics of the media; at the same time, it also reshapes the aesthetic system of Wushu itself and its cultural connotations. Based on this, a three-dimensional interactive model of “Body-Media-Aesthetics” is proposed to explain the internal logic of Wushu’s cross-media performance.

Keywords

Wushu; Cross-Media Performance; Body Narrative; Technical Translation; Aesthetic Reconstruction; Paradigm Transformation

1. Introduction

“All folk customs through which a nation recognizes itself and maintains its cohesion are inherited and realized via body culture[1].” As one of the outstanding representatives of traditional Chinese culture, Chinese Wushu’s “body culture” goes far beyond combat skills and physical fitness. Against the backdrop of contemporary visual culture and media convergence, Wushu is undergoing a profound “performative turn”—a transformation from a practical technical system to a performing art system with rich aesthetic connotations and narrative functions. This turn involves a multi-dimensional reconstruction process of body concepts, media language, and cultural identity.

2. Traditional Paradigms of Wushu Body Narrative and Its Contemporary Transformation

2.1. Rituality and Stylization of Traditional Body Narrative

Throughout the long history of the Chinese nation, Wushu has continuously drawn nourishment from the fertile soil of traditional Chinese culture. Looking at its historical context, Wushu is deeply embedded in rituals of religious activities, performances on opera stages, and spaces for street performances (by martial artists). Although these traditional paradigms vary in form, they share a core common feature: Wushu movements themselves carry specific cultural narratives and emotional expressions. Whether it is the value identification in religious rituals, the survival wisdom in market economic activities, or the character portrayal in operas, Wushu serves as one of the core elements in both the generation of meaning and the transmission of value.

2.2. Contemporary Transformation: From “Practicality” to “Signification”

With the development of society, the media environment has undergone tremendous changes, and the functions and forms of Wushu body narrative have accordingly undergone a fundamental transformation. One of the important manifestations of this is the shift from focusing on “combat” - oriented “practicality” to “signification” that serves artistic expression and emotional release. Firstly, Wushu has been deeply integrated into the narrative structures of Chinese artistic forms such as opera and dance, becoming a key element in advancing plots and creating artistic conceptions. This can be said to have expanded the narrative function of Wushu. Secondly, from the perspective of martial arts films, the narrative style of Wushu exhibits differences due to the varying creative intentions and directorial styles of works—whether it is the masculine pathos in Chang Cheh’s films or the cold realism in Xu Haofeng’s films. Furthermore, Wushu is one of the visual carriers of Chinese national culture and philosophical concepts. For example, the flexible and integrated rhythm of Tai Chi is regarded as an embodiment of the “harmony between man and nature” philosophy, while the power and ferocity of Shaolin Kung Fu metaphorize collectivism and national spirit. This has deepened the cultural connotations of Wushu to a large extent. Admittedly, the above transformation is not a departure from Wushu traditions. “Practicality” and “signification” are not contradictory; in a certain sense, “signification” is the value extension of “practicality”. The transformation from “practicality” to “signification” is precisely the rediscovery and re-creation of the physical potential of Wushu in the context of new culture.

3. Cross-Media Translation

Media is not a transparent communication channel; its unique material properties, symbol systems, and reception methods profoundly influence the presentation form of Wushu’s physical expression. In a certain sense, the essence of Wushu’s cross-media practice lies in the process of “adaptive translation” of its physical lan-

guage in accordance with the logic of different media.

3.1. Wushu in Film and Television Media

In film and television, close-up shots transform subtle eye expressions, muscle tremors, and the trajectory of weapons into highly expressive visual symbols. Editing, through the assembly of shots, creates a brand-new action rhythm and temporal-spatial logic, allowing the audience to synthesize a coherent and intense fighting impression from fragmented images. This process not only relies on the actors' real martial arts skills but also heavily depends on the choreography of action directors and the synthesis of post-production technology. For instance, the action design by Yuen Woo-ping for the film *The Matrix* is rooted in traditional Chinese Wushu, yet its final effect is a fully cinematic product tailored to camera shots and editing.

3.2. Wushu in Stage Media

The charm of Wushu in stage media lies in the “liveness” of the shared physical space-time between performers and the audience. Wushu performances here emphasize the integrity of the body, the fullness of postures, and the tight coordination with music and gongs. The performer's body in stage Wushu serves as a medium for direct emission and reception of energy: the physical energy emitted by the performer directly affects the on-site audience, while the performer immediately receives feedback from the audience, forming an instant emotional resonance. This direct interaction of energy fields is precisely the core charm of stage art.

3.3. Wushu in Digital Interactive Media

In digital interactive media such as online martial arts games, technologies like motion capture convert the real physical movements of Wushu athletes into digital data, which in turn drives the actions of virtual characters. Users are no longer passive “viewers” but directly control the Wushu behaviors of virtual characters. Here, the Wushu body becomes a “data body” co-generated by code, algorithms, and user input. Its significance lies not only in being watched but more importantly in being used and experienced—allowing players to personally “comprehend” the philosophical codes of Wushu practice through interaction (Table 1).

Table 1. Transfer Characteristics of Wushu in Different Media

Media Type	Core Translation Mechanism	Main Aesthetic Pursuit
Film and Television	Camera, Editing, Special Effects, etc.	Visual Spectacle
Stage	Stylization and Energy Interaction	Collective Resonance
Digital Interaction	User Manipulation	Immersive Experience

4. Reshaping of Wushu's Aesthetic System

In cross-media practice, Wushu not only changes the way of its body narrative but also profoundly reshapes its aesthetic system, and is endowed with new connotations and values in the context of performing arts.

4.1. Performative Transformation of Wushu

In performing arts, Wushu has undergone the following transformations: From the “form of actual combat” that optimizes offensive and defensive structures to the “visual form” that pursues the beauty of lines and imagery; From the alert focus when facing an opponent to the expression of a character’s inner emotional world and spiritual temperament; From the pursuit of “strength for striking” to the “rhetorical strength” that conveys emotional tension and rhythmic changes; From the tactical and unpredictable rhythm to the “rhythmic structure” that governs artistic expression. The above transformations are most thoroughly reflected in the “body charm” system of Chinese classical dance, which further verifies the idea that “dance and Wushu share the same origin[2]”. The “body charm” system extracts rhythmic elements from Wushu and traditional opera, transforming the movement logic of Wushu into something dance-like and lyrical, thus forming a body expression system with unique Oriental aesthetic characteristics.

4.2. Dialectical Unity of Wushu

“Xu (void) and Shi (solid)” is a crucial category in Chinese classical aesthetic theory[3]. The principle of “interdependence of Xu and Shi” in Chinese classical aesthetics is embodied in Wushu performance as the dialectical unity of “realistic combat” and “expressive lyricism”. Different media and styles find their respective positions on this spectrum. For example: The alley fight in Xu Haofeng’s film *The Master* emphasizes the narrowness of space and the presentation of physical reactions, pursuing a kind of “artistic realism”; The bamboo forest chase in Ang Lee’s film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* features movements that blend with the natural environment, aiming to express the characters’ mental states and philosophical artistic conceptions; In addition, most martial arts films move freely between the two extremes: they not only require the sense of strength in moves and the logic of offense and defense but also integrate fantasy elements such as wall-climbing and sword energy crisscrossing. This dynamic balance between “Xu” and “Shi” constitutes the unique charm of Chinese Wushu performing art, enabling it to not only provide sensory stimulation but also lead the audience into a poetic aesthetic realm.

5. Future Outlook of Technology-Enabled Wushu Performance

Digital technology has transformed the definition and mode of performance[4]. Against the backdrop of new technological waves such as virtual production, artificial intelligence (AI), and extended reality (XR), the future development of Chinese Wushu’s cross-media performance faces new opportunities and challenges. Based on

virtual production and pre-visualization, action directors can accurately preview the entire action sequence in a virtual environment before filming, greatly improving creative efficiency and visual quality. Meanwhile, VR/AR/MR and immersive experiences break the physical limitations of the stage, creating an immersive feeling for users of being in a martial arts world—allowing Wushu performance to shift from “viewing” to “experiencing,” and from “narrative” to “situation.” In addition, AI and motion generation can be used to analyze massive amounts of Wushu movement data, generate new action combinations, or assist in completing high-difficulty special-effect movements that exceed human physical limits. It is believed that with the continuous development of technology in the future, the international communication channels of Chinese Wushu empowered by artificial intelligence will be further expanded[5].

6. Conclusion

The cross-media performance of Chinese Wushu is a three-dimensional interaction of “Body-Media-Aesthetics”. During its cross-media journey, Wushu constantly breaks its own boundaries, which can be described as a profound cultural creation and meaning regeneration. It not only activates the aesthetic genes of traditional Wushu but also responds to the visual consumption and emotional needs of contemporary society. Looking ahead, with the iterative development of science and technology, the cross-media performance of Chinese Wushu will surely present a more diverse form. It is necessary for us to continuously promote the development of this vibrant field with a more open perspective, so that the physical wisdom of Chinese Wushu can shine more brilliantly in the context of the new era.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by the Jiangsu Province “14th Five-Year Plan” Education Planning Project Fund. The project is titled “Research on the Excavation and Practice Path of Ideological Elements in College Martial Arts Courses,” Project Number: T-c/2021/72.

References

- [1] Liu, J. X. (2017). *Oriental Body Culture*. Beijing: Beijing Time-China Press.
- [2] Zhang, Y. Y., & Yang, Z. P. (2000). On the homology, integration, and influence between Wushu and dance [J]. *Journal of Shanghai University of Sport*, (03), 25-28.
- [3] Li, X. (2023). A study on the development and evolution of the concept of “Xu and Shi” in the discourse system of Chinese art theory [J]. *Art & Design Research*, (01), 116-122.
- [4] Lu, Z. H. (2024). Digital performance and new interaction: Internet art, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence [J]. *Theatre Arts*, (05), 11-19+6.
- [5] Liu, W., & Peng, J. (2024). Research on the path of artificial intelligence empowering the international communication of Chinese Wushu [J]. *Journal of Shenyang Sport University*, 43(04), 124-130.