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Analyzing the Compilation of Ming Dynasty Wushu Texts: A Subjectivity Perspective

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Abstract

Ancient Chinese martial arts were primarily transmitted through oral instruction and mental comprehension (kouchuan xinshou), with limited textual documentation. However, the Ming Dynasty witnessed a significant surge in the textual recording of martial arts traditions. This study investigates the historical emergence of Ming martial arts texts from the perspective of their compilers, employing historical research and comparative analysis. The findings indicate that the majority of the compilers possessed backgrounds in the imperial examination system. Benefiting from the development of this system during the Ming, these compilers possessed strong educational backgrounds and literary proficiency. Furthermore, the specific content requirements of the examinations at certain stages directed the compilers' attention towards practical martial arts knowledge. Concurrently, the needs of practical governance motivated these compilers to systematically organize martial arts knowledge into written form. Consequently, martial arts entered a historical phase of theoretical systematization. In conclusion, the development of martial arts during this period was inextricably linked to the demands of practical governance and, crucially, depended on the contributions of educated individuals who advanced its textual tradition.

Keywords

Ming Dynasty; Martial Arts; Text; Subject.

1. Introduction

The surge in the quantity of Chinese martial arts texts during the Ming Dynasty was significantly facilitated by the emergence of multiple authors serving as compilers. These compilers enabled the documentation of martial arts—a traditionally tacit form of knowledge—across various genres of literature, thereby alleviating the long-standing dilemma wherein scholars did not write about martial arts and practitioners struggled to articulate their knowledge. This phenomenon inevitably raises several critical questions: Why did numerous compilers choose to record and author martial arts treatises during the mid-to-late Ming period? What were the driving forces behind their literary production? What were the defining characteristics of this community of martial arts writers that emerged, and what underlying factors shaped these characteristics?

While existing scholarship has conducted multifaceted analyses of the authors of Ming martial arts treatises, clarifying aspects such as their native places, social statuses, historical periods, and social networks [1], there remains a notable lack of in-depth exploration into their biographical experiences. Building upon prior research, this study delves deeper into the implicit dimensions of these authors' lives—particularly the profound historical connections

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embedded within experiences such as participation in the civil service examinations and engagement in military practice.

Employing historical research methods and comparative analysis, this paper systematically examines and analyzes the biographical trajectories of these authors. It aims to identify shared characteristics among the group, thereby elucidating the motivations underlying the textualization of martial arts knowledge in Ming China.

2. The Imperial Examination Backgrounds of Compilers in Ming Dynasty Chinese Martial Arts Texts

The scarcity of textual documentation concerning ancient Chinese martial arts presented a persistent challenge to its development. This issue was notably addressed during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), primarily through the efforts of literate individuals who served as the compilers of martial arts texts. These compilers lived during the mid-to-late Ming period. What were the commonalities in their life experiences, and how did these shared characteristics contribute to the advancement of martial arts? Utilizing historical sources, this study aims to elucidate the underlying factors behind these commonalities. This investigation seeks to understand the driving forces and historical processes involved in the generation of martial arts texts during the Ming era.

2.1. Strong Educational Backgrounds and the Development of the Imperial Examination System

The extant corpus of Ming Dynasty texts related to Chinese martial arts comprises 20 volumes authored by 17 individuals. Analysis of the biographical records of the 14 verifiable authors reveals a commonality: their primary experiences involved preparation for and participation in the imperial examination system (keju), alongside military practice and governance activities. All 14 verifiable authors possessed strong educational backgrounds. Their diverse acquired learning experiences fostered the accumulation of knowledge and the development of literacy and compositional skills, thereby establishing an essential foundation for martial arts textual production.

The sources of this education varied: some authors benefited from inherited family scholarly traditions (jiaxue), such as Mao Yuanyi and Xie Zhaozhe, granting them privileged learning conditions. Others stemmed from well-funded scholarly travels (youxue), exemplified by Cheng Zongyou's itinerant pursuit of masters and knowledge. However, the majority originated from the prolonged and systematic study specifically oriented towards the imperial examinations (keju zhi xue).

According to scholar Guo Peigui, the Ming Dynasty imperial examination system, building upon its Song and Yuan predecessors, evolved into a five-tiered structure: the Preliminary Examinations (Kekao), Provincial Examinations (Xiangshi), Metropolitan Examinations (Huishi), Palace Examinations (Dianshi), and the Hanlin Academy Admission Examinations (Shujishi kaoshi) [2]. With the exception of Cheng Zongyou (engaged in commerce) and Zhao Benxue (lived in seclusion), the remaining 12 authors were all connected to the imperial examinations to varying degrees. All 12 participated in the Preliminary Examinations (Kekao). Eight authors progressed to the Provincial (Xiangshi) and Metropolitan (Huishi) Examinations: among these, Wang Minghe, Yu Dayou, and Qi Jiguang took the military examinations (wuju), while Tang Shunzhi and four others took the civil examinations (wenju). Notably, the authors' participation in these examinations and attainment of degrees predominantly occurred during or after the Jiajing era (1522-1566).

The conspicuous historical pattern of Ming martial arts texts emerging concurrently suggests a significant correlation between the Ming imperial examination system and the development of

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martial arts. The imperial examination system functioned as a primary institutional mechanism for cultivating and selecting talent, representing a widely pursued path for social advancement. Even hereditary military officers like Qi Jiguang and Yu Dayou required examination credentials and experience for promotion or reassignment.

Pursuing an examination career necessitated systematic preparation tailored to each examination level, involving rigorous study of Confucian classics and the composition of examination essays. A comprehensive examination of the Ming imperial examination system, coupled with a correlational analysis utilizing mid-to-late Ming historical sources on the examinations and the widespread Provincial (Xiangshi) and Metropolitan (Huishi) examination experiences of martial arts treatise authors, holds significant potential. Such analysis could reveal valuable insights into the implicit connections embedded within the authors' keju backgrounds and their martial arts scholarship.

2.2. Policy Essays (Cèlùn): Shared Content in Imperial Examination Questions

Surviving primary sources documenting the Ming dynasty imperial examinations are predominantly found in Dengke Lu (Records of Successful Candidates). These records contain diverse information, including examination dates, locations, examination questions, and lists of successful candidates. While prior research has verified the examination degrees and official statuses of authors of Ming military treatises (wǔshù), there has yet to be a systematic collation and analysis of the specific examination questions these authors encountered, utilizing relevant historical materials on the Ming examinations. The content of the examination questions was crucial for candidates seeking advancement, prompting significant investment of time and effort in preparation.

By collecting primary sources from Ming examinations, it is possible to identify the content tested in provincial (乡试, xiāngshì), metropolitan (会试, huìshì), and palace (殿试, diànshì) examinations, particularly during the mid-to-late Ming period. Given the substantial similarity between provincial and metropolitan examinations, and the palace examination focusing solely on a single policy essay (策论, cèlùn), this section will briefly outline the content of the provincial examinations. This facilitates a better understanding of the examination experiences of authors associated with Ming military texts and helps identify factors within the examination content that may have influenced the generation of these military writings.

The Ming civil service provincial examination consisted of three sessions, each testing distinct content: “The first session primarily tested comprehension of the Four Books (Sishu) and the Classics (Jingyi); the second session focused on essays (Lun), legal judgments (Pan), imperial edicts (Zhao), proclamations (Gao), memorials (Zhang), and petitions (Biao); the third session centered on the Classics, History (Jingshi), and Policy Essays (Cèlùn)” [3].

The early Ming military provincial examination (武举乡试, wǔjǔ xiāngshì) primarily assessed proficiency in mounted and foot archery. However, by the later period, admission and ranking depended significantly on performance in the policy essay. For example, during the 1588 Shandong military provincial examination, an initial group was eliminated, followed by mounted archery tests; final admission was determined by the policy essay: “A large target was set up for archery comparison; nineteen hit the target mounted, sixteen on foot, yielding over three hundred candidates. Subsequently, [they] were re-evaluated on strategy (fānglüè) within the military examination hall, admitting fifty-seven individuals” [4].

Policy essay questions for the military provincial examination were primarily derived from military classics (wǔjīng). As civil officials were responsible for setting and grading these questions, military candidates needed not only to master military texts but also to be well-versed in Confucian classics. Yu Dayou’s policy essay question for the military examination was “The Way to Secure the State and Preserve the Army” (安国全军之道, Ān guó quán jūn zhī dào).

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His concluding argument stated: “Master Wu [Sun Tzu] spoke only from his own partial perspective and had not heard of the Great Way of the Mean (Zhōngyōng). Therefore, it is said: ‘One may tread upon the sharpest sword, but the Mean is impossible [to fully achieve]’” [5] (citing the Doctrine of the Mean).

Reviewing the content of both civil and military provincial examinations in the Ming reveals that policy essays constituted a shared component within the structured examination format. These essays required candidates to propose policy solutions (duìcè) to contemporary focal issues. Furthermore, policy essays held significant weight in the metropolitan examination and were the sole component of the palace examination. This raises a key research question: How did the specific content of policy essay questions used in mid-to-late Ming provincial and metropolitan examinations influence the way authors—many of whom possessed examination experience—integrated and synthesized content related to military techniques (wǔshù) within their written works?

2.3. The Imperative of Practical Governance in Ming Dynasty Policy Discourse Examination Questions

Among the authors of Ming Dynasty martial arts-related treatises, eight individuals participated in and passed the provincial-level examinations (xiangshi), and all participated in the metropolitan-level examinations (huishi). Policy discourse (celun) constituted the primary content of both the xiangshi and huishi examinations during the Ming Dynasty, categorized into two types: discourses on classical and historical knowledge (jingshi ce) and discourses on contemporary affairs (shiwu ce). The jingshi ce primarily tested fundamental knowledge of classics and history, generally lacking direct relevance to current governance. In contrast, the shiwu ce was intrinsically linked to practical state affairs. Its examination intent was explicit: to evaluate the candidates' grasp of "learning pertinent to the contemporary world" (dangshi zhi xue) and their "talent for statecraft and administration" (jingji zhi cai).

The third session of every Ming xiangshi and huishi examination tested both jingshi ce and shiwu ce. Five discourse questions were set in total, with the number of shiwu ce questions varying dynamically. "At least one shiwu ce question was set (the fifth question was typically shiwu ce), often two or three, and at times all five questions focused on contemporary affairs" [6].

These policy discourse examination questions encompassed several thematic classifications: Military, Frontier Defense, and Ethnic Relations; Ritual, Music, Education, and Scholar Customs; Civil Service Examinations and Personnel Selection; Financial Administration; Water Transport (Cao Yun) and Hydraulic Engineering; and Comprehensive Governance. These broad classifications essentially covered all critical aspects of social governance. The selection of problem content demonstrated a clear directive: to assess the candidates' abilities in practical statecraft (jingshi zhiyong) and social governance. Among these, questions classified under Military, Frontier Defense, and Ethnic Relations bore the closest connection to martial arts.

During the Jiajing reign (1522-1566) and subsequent periods, issues concerning military affairs, frontier defense, and ethnic relations proliferated in xiangshi and huishi policy questions. The recurring appearance of examination themes related to a specific topic indicated an urgent contemporary demand for talents capable of resolving military-related problems (wushi). This served as proactive guidance for examination candidates. Whether taking the civil (wenke) or military (wuke) streams of the xiangshi and huishi, candidates needed to prepare accordingly. They were required to closely monitor actual problems concerning the military, frontiers, and ethnic relations, conduct comprehensive analyses of relevant issues, and propose viable solutions. This process aimed to demonstrate their strategic acumen and capability in addressing focal governance challenges, thereby securing opportunities for official

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appointment. Most authors of Ming martial arts texts had undergone the rigors of the xiangshi and huishi examinations. Consequently, they were necessarily prepared for policy questions concerning military, frontier, and ethnic issues. They cultivated an acute awareness of current affairs, maintained sustained attention on the dynamics of the political situation, collected and collated information on crises and disorders, and practiced composing policy discourses on contemporary affairs. This process fostered both their consciousness of the current situation and their capacity for managing crises and turmoil. Upon assuming local office, officials were expected to engage in practical implementation (gongxing jianlü), applying their governance abilities to concrete problems to benefit their jurisdictions.

Martial arts, valued for their efficacy in physical strengthening (qiangshen jianti) and combat effectiveness (shizhan gesha), could yield practical utility in governing military operations, frontier crises, and social stability. For officials committed to pragmatic statecraft (jingshi zhiyong), martial arts knowledge could be directly applied to military operations, troop training, and strengthening armed forces (lianbing qiangbing). It could also be indirectly documented in various records for broader reference and application.

Therefore, against the backdrop of xiangshi and huishi examinations in the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty frequently addressing crises and disorder, martial arts emerged as a viable instrument for military governance (zhijun), frontier management (zhibian), and quelling unrest (zhiluan) within the practical administration of appointed officials. To facilitate the application of martial arts' value and efficacy within specific regions and groups, its transmission gradually shifted from embodied practice (shenti yanlian) to textual inscription (yueran zhishang). This transitioned martial arts knowledge from secretive oral transmission (kouchuan xinshou) to publicly accessible published texts (wenzi hua xianxian de gongkai chuban).

3. The Practical Transformation and Theoretical Synthesis of Governing Local Crises and Disorder

According to scholar He Huaihong, ancient Chinese governance primarily manifested through two modes: "recommendation" (举荐) and the "imperial examination system" (科举). From the Han-Wei to Sui-Tang periods, the pathway for the governed to enter the ruling class was via recommendation. From the Sui-Tang to the late Qing dynasty, this pathway evolved into the more institutionalized and rigorous imperial examination system [7]. As previously noted, most authors of Ming Dynasty martial arts (Wushu) texts entered the ruling class through the imperial examination system. Consequently, the recording of martial arts content in printed texts was predominantly an activity of the governing elite. Guided by imperial examination themes centered on governing crises and disorder, scholar-officials were prompted to analyze contemporary challenges and devise solutions to qualify for administrative roles. This raises the question: what specific motivations drove these elites to document martial arts content?

Scholar Feng Weijiang posits that the actions of the governing class were driven by their core objectives and executed through means aligned with achieving those goals. Analyzing Emperor Taizong of Tang's Admonitions for the Emperor (Di Fan), Feng identifies three primary governance objectives: fairness, efficiency, and security, with rulers placing paramount emphasis on security. Furthermore, computational text analysis of the Twenty-Four Histories and the Draft History of Qing (Qing Shi Gao) using the broad keyword "safety and peril" (安危) to represent the security domain revealed this term as the most frequent. Notably, its occurrence peaked during the Ming Dynasty [8]. This demonstrates that security was the preeminent governance concern prioritized by rulers across dynasties, and Ming rulers were no exception. It follows logically that numerous Ming governing elites documented martial arts content, as it directly served this core governance objective; recording martial arts constituted a practical means of achieving governance goals.

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Among Ming martial arts authors, nine possessed military experience, six of whom specifically participated in anti-Japanese pirate (wokou) campaigns. This indicates that the era and social environment these authors inhabited were characterized by significant disorder, necessitating a shift from merely proposing solutions to actively implementing them. This transition was crucial for effectively managing security threats, restoring stability, and protecting the populace. While Ming military practices undoubtedly influenced martial arts development, a precise analysis of these impacts requires correlating them with the authors' specific governance experiences.

Of the nine authors with military backgrounds, six (including Tang Shunzhi, Qi Jiguang, and Yu Dayou) engaged in anti-wokou campaigns in the southeast, while others like Cheng Zongyou assisted in troop training, Cheng Ziyi served in garrison forces, and Mao Yuanyi participated in frontier defense. On one hand, operating in the southeast region plagued by wokou raids, they witnessed firsthand the resulting economic devastation, threats to life and property, and severe social instability, which fundamentally undermined regional security and political harmony. On the other hand, shaped by the imperial examination system and the Confucian ideal of "bringing order to the world" (平天下), they felt a profound duty to fulfill their administrative roles and social responsibilities. Whether combating pirates, training troops, or managing frontier affairs, these concrete battlefield experiences provided an empirical foundation for their martial arts writings. As noted in Tang Shunzhi's Compendium of Military Arts (Wu Bian): "Master Jingchuan [Tang Shunzhi] mastered and adapted [martial arts], employing them effectively in seven or eight out of ten operations against southern pirates and northern barbarians." Direct involvement in warfare and local security governance enabled these authors to identify critical problems and devise precise, effective solutions. Their anti-piracy efforts, governance in the southeast, and subsequent martial arts treatises exemplify a commitment to practical governance (经世致用).

Therefore, the widespread presence and systematic documentation of martial arts across diverse texts cannot be divorced from the imperatives of practical governance. The utility of martial arts transcended traditional oral transmission, finding expansive application, development, and dissemination within the military, ethnic relations, and frontier governance. As the Weisuo (卫所) military garrison system encountered operational difficulties and overall military preparedness declined, the practical demands of quelling rebellions and restoring local order necessitated not only personnel skilled in training and organizing troops but also methods for rapidly enhancing combat effectiveness. To effectively arm soldiers for battlefield deployment, regionally distinct and combat-proven martial arts techniques needed to be systematically integrated and disseminated within the ranks. Printed media offered the most efficient means for this. Systematizing martial knowledge and techniques into written texts provided clarity, facilitated structured learning among soldiers, enhanced combat literacy, and laid a solid cognitive and psychological foundation for future combat engagements.

4. Conclusion

The proliferation of martial arts-related treatises and their widespread presence across diverse textual genres during the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty can be attributed to the authors who undertook the task of recording, compiling, and disseminating martial knowledge. Our analysis reveals that these compilers shared significant common experiences in their life trajectories. Within these shared experiences lie crucial factors worthy of deeper investigation: the thematic guidance provided by policy-discourse questions (celun) in the imperial civil examinations, and the practical governance imperative of pacifying rebellions and resolving conflicts (pingpan zhiluan).

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On one hand, candidates preparing for the examinations needed to strategically focus their studies on current affairs, particularly pressing issues of military strategy, ethnic relations, and governance—especially border conflicts and southeastern coastal piracy (wokou)—in order to devise policy proposals that might secure an official post. On the other hand, upon successfully entering officialdom through the civil examination system, appointees were required to engage in practical governance tailored to local conditions. This often involved either direct participation in military campaigns or the systematic compilation of knowledge, experience, and methodologies gained from suppressing unrest and resolving conflicts to benefit their jurisdictions. The recurring themes of military affairs, ethnic relations, and frontier management in examination questions, coupled with the practical challenges of pacification and conflict resolution faced in governance, necessitated considerations of martial applications (wuyong). This created fertile ground for the emergence and textual codification of martial arts knowledge.

In conclusion, the profound demand for practical martial applications arising from the governance needs of the mid-to-late Ming Dynasty provided sustained impetus for the textual generation, systematic organization, and widespread dissemination of martial arts knowledge and expertise. The thematic orientation of policy questions in the elite-selecting imperial examinations and the practical governance experiences of officials embodied the concrete societal demand for martial arts. The compilers' act of documenting martial content constituted, in itself, a vital process of summarizing and propagating governance experience. Therefore, the surge in martial arts texts during this period was fundamentally a product of the governance system's substantial demand for martial utility. This utility served the practical needs of governance actors—securing office through the examinations and maintaining order through pacification—which in turn catalyzed the compilation and transmission of martial arts content.

In essence, the development of martial arts has always been inextricably linked to the demands of practical governance. From the late Qing and early Republic period, to the founding era of the People's Republic, and into today's new journey of modernization, martial arts have manifested in distinct forms across different epochs, fundamentally responding to the practical needs of their times. Crucially, just as the textualization of Ming martial arts relied on dedicated compilers, the effective utilization of martial arts as a tool for governance and meeting societal needs relies on a talent pool capable of advancing its development. Consequently, in harnessing the utility of martial arts, it is imperative to fully leverage and capitalize on the advantages offered by skilled personnel.

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