

# A Brief History on International Promoters of Chinese Wushu

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**Abstract:** In order to learn from history, we need to identify Wushu international promoters' efforts and achievements.. In ancient times, the Tang Dynasty's Kibino Makibi, the Ming Dynasty's "Fujian Fishing People of Thirty-six Surnames", and Chen Yuanyun in the Ming and Qing Dynasties were the principal international promoters of Wushu in their eras. Later on, Zhang Zhijiang and the teachers group of the Central Guoshu Administrative, Huo Yuanjia, Chen Gongzhe, Lu Yichang and teachers of Chinwoo Athletic Association, Li Maochun, Zhao Futai, Ma Jinlin and other Chinese Wushu masters living abroad, were the most prominent international Wushu promoters. Modern international Wushu promoters such as Bruce Lee, achieved their prowess through promulgation of their movies. Other well-known actors include Jackie Chan and Jet Li. In addition Wushu Masters such as Shao Shankang, Wei Ming, and Xu Guo'an enhanced promotion of Wushu by doing performances outside of China. Shi Yongxin, who ran a Shaolin Temple, led a group of Shaolin monks to perform Wushu outside of China. Finally "The Four Chen style Tai Chi Masters" augmented international Wushu promotion by teaching and demonstraing Chen style Tai Chi.

**Keywords:** Wushu; International Promotion; Promoters; History

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## Introduction

In exploring the intricate phenomenon of human talents, Zhu Yaoting proposes an approach in his book "The Outline of Chinese Talents in History." To comprehend the law of human talents amid complex developments, he suggests extending the time frame and identifying common characteristics from the extended track of talents' activities. Before delving into the essential capabilities of international Wushu promoters, it is imperative to clarify and summarize the history of their endeavors in spreading Wushu, examining historical successes.

Wushu, synonymous with Chinese Martial Arts, traces its roots to ancient Chinese survival struggles, evolving from the necessity of daily existence<sup>[1]</sup>. The foundational skills of Wushu originated in defense against wild animals and wartime enemies. While some scholars attribute Wushu's origin to Martial Dance, fundamentally, it stems from humanity's need for combat techniques, shaping its existence based on these evolving needs. The progression of Wushu techniques and their transmission across generations laid the groundwork for Wushu's promotion.

In addressing Wushu's development and dissemination, Dr. Guo Yucheng, in "Theory of Wushu Communication, " underscores the inseparable connection between Wushu's development and spread. He posits that the history of Wushu's development is synonymous with its spread. Consequently, the history of Wushu's spread intertwines with the activities of Wushu practitioners and international promoters<sup>[2]</sup>. Evaluating the historical activities of Wushu's international promoters offers insights into identifying the requisite capabilities of the most successful promoters.

## 1. International Wushu promoters in ancient times

The internationalization of Wushu dates back to ancient times, with evidence pointing to its dissemination during the Zhou and Qin Dynasties in the third century BC. Notably, bronze weapons, integral to ancient Wushu, found their way to Japan during the Qin Dynasty, possibly introduced by Chinese immigrants. The historical accounts also suggest the transmission of Chinese Taoism and Wushu to Japan during the Qin Dynasty, particularly through figures like Xu Fu and the group accompanying him, although concrete proof is lacking, limiting our understanding to documented activities.

### 1.1 Kibino Makibi in the Tang Dynasty

In 777 AD, Japanese student Kibino Makibi brought bows and arrows from China to Japan, and the Japanese began to study and practice Chinese archery. The Japanese actively learned and absorbed the cultures of Tang. Later during the Yonghui years of the Tang Dynasty, the Japanese archers came to China with the envoy group and showed their superb archery skills. It was recorded in the history book *New Tang History-Japan* that ". They always hit their targets when asked to demonstrate." Although Kibino Makibi was not Chinese, his pioneering spirit and strong communication ability made him an important figure in the early dissemination of Chinese martial arts outside of China.

## 1.2 Thirty Six Ming Dynasty People with Different Family Names.

During the Ming Dynasty, cultural exchanges burgeoned between China and Japan. In the second year of the Hongwu Empire (AD 1396), the Ming government initiated the movement of "people of thirty-six family names" between China and Japan for tribute purposes. Eventually, these individuals settled in Ryukyu, Japan, becoming disseminators of Chinese culture, including Fujian Wushu. The introduction of Fujian Southern Fist significantly influenced Japanese martial arts, particularly the development of the local martial art "Naha Hand," a branch of Okinawa Karate, incorporating Ryukyu handwork martial art skills. Subsequent Ming Dynasty migrants to Japan, primarily in Naha and Shuri, further contributed to the spread of Chinese martial arts, as documented in Naito Busen's *"Karate Secrets"*.

Chinese martial arts' introduction during the Ming Dynasty played a pivotal role in catalyzing Karate's formation in Japan, a consensus among practitioners of both Chinese and Japanese martial arts. According to *"Karate Secrets"* Ryukyu Karate is believed to have originated and developed from Chinese martial arts during the Ming Dynasty when Ryukyu envoys received honor titles and Ming commissioners traveled to Japan from Chang'an. Chinese Wushu, along with other cultural elements, was brought to Japan during this period.

In conclusion, Ming Dynasty Chinese Wushu found its way to Japan through official and unofficial channels. The unintended influence of the "Thirty-Six Ming People" played a pivotal role in spreading Chinese martial arts. Their resilience in foreign environments demonstrated early characteristics of successful Wushu promoters, encapsulated in phrases like *"the spirit to penetrate stone with water"* and *"sawing through wood with rope"*

## 1.3 Chen Yuanyun of the late Ming and early Qing Dynasty

Amid the flourishing development of Wushu during the Ming and Qing dynasties, non-military applications of Chinese martial arts saw significant growth. Chen Yuanyun, a martial arts enthusiast from Yuhang, Zhejiang province, embarked on a transformative journey in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasty. Initiating his Wushu studies at a Shaolin Temple from a tender age, Chen's martial prowess and versatility became evident.

In the inaugural year of Tianqi (1621 AD), Chen ventured to Japan alongside Zhejiang officials. Initially hosted by Nakugawa Yoshino, lord of Owari, Nagoya, he later found himself at Kokuse Temple, imparting his Wushu knowledge. By 1625 AD, Chen had made his way to Edo (now Tokyo), subsequently relocating to Kokusho Temple in Nishikubo the following year. Here, he shared his martial arts expertise with monks like Kei Sike, Hi En, and practitioners San Ma and Tsiki Emo.

Chen Yuanyun's influence extended beyond his teachings, as his students fused his Wushu insights with Japanese Judo, enriching the content and technique system of the martial art. Revered as one of the co-founders of Judo, Chen was hailed for originating Japan's martial arts. Respected in Japan as the progenitor of Judo, his legacy endures due to his exceptional martial arts skills, expansive mindset, and adept teaching abilities.

Renowned for proficiency in language and writing, Chen's multifaceted talents facilitated effective teaching and Wushu promotion. His pioneering efforts marked a significant chapter in the early international propagation of Wushu, where his innovative spirit and unwavering persistence triumphed in disseminating Chinese martial arts beyond the borders of China.

## 2. Excellent Wushu international promoters in recent times

The international spread of Wushu has existed since ancient times, but accelerated in the late Qing Dynasty when foreign powers came to China and violently coerced the Qing government to open the door to them<sup>[3]</sup>. Wushu was highly valued by the government during the time of the First Republic of China, when it was referred to as a "national art". A great number of successful international promoters emerged during this time with the rapid development of Wushu.

### 2.1 Zhang Zhijiang and the teaching group of the Central National Art Administration

The Central National Art Administration, established during the First Republic of China by government officials and renowned Wushu masters, played a pivotal role in developing and transmitting Chinese Wushu to future generations. In 1927, Zhang Zhijiang established a Wushu training center at the former National Art Academy. By June 1928, it became "The Central National Art Administration," with Zhang Zhijiang as president and Li Jinglin as vice-president.

Beyond teaching Wushu, the Central National Art Administration engaged in Wushu research, published journals, and oversaw nationwide Wushu affairs<sup>[4]</sup>. It established subordinate organizations across cities, towns, districts, counties, and provinces, forming a comprehensive national management system. The system focused on popularizing Wushu and organizing national examinations and competitions. To achieve this, the administration and its subordinates conducted diverse Wushu classes to train teachers for provincial and national Wushu organizations.

As an official government department, the Central National Art Administration effectively spread Wushu through official channels and cultivated numerous Wushu teachers, significantly impacting Wushu's international promotion. The administration organized Wushu performances abroad, showcasing Chinese Wushu culture. In 1936, Zhang Zhijiang led the Nanyang Wushu Tour Group on a four-month performance tour to Singapore, The Philippines, Malaysia, and other countries, garnering enthusiastic support from local Chinese communities.

The administration's influence extended to the 1936 Berlin Olympics, where, at Zhang Zhijiang's suggestion, a Wushu team performed in various European cities. Despite financial constraints preventing additional performances, the tour demonstrated Western countries' deep appreciation for Chinese Wushu, marking a successful international promotion effort. Dr. Li Dehua, Olympic Games chairman, marveled at Wushu's excellence, and German and Hamburg newspapers praised Chinese Kung Fu's artistry.

Zhang Zhijiang, as the leader of the Central National Art Administration, spearheaded these efforts, supported by Wushu teachers and experts nationwide. Their outstanding skills, captivating performances, and progressive thinking collectively marked the first significant international promotion of Wushu in history.

## **2.2 Huo Yuanjia, Chen Gongzhe, Lu Weichang and Chin Woo Athletic Federation (CWF).**

The Shanghai Chin Woo Athletic Federation, founded by Chen Gongzhe, Lu Weichang, and others, emerged as a highly successful private organization in recent times, playing a pivotal role in the internationalization of Chinese Wushu<sup>[5]</sup>. Originating from the Chin Woo Gymnastic School established by Huo Yuanjia in 1909 in Shanghai, CWF prioritized Wushu values, producing proficient Wushu promoters with both martial arts skills and ethical principles, contributing to its stellar reputation and continued growth.

Driven by the goal of advancing Wushu techniques, studying Wushu education, and cultivating a strong-willed Chinese populace, CWF departed from traditional Wushu schools and parties' conservative ideas, introducing modern scientific concepts into Wushu. This approach presented Wushu as a more comprehensive discipline to the global audience. CWF's success stemmed from advanced educational theories and a robust organizational system, including a Technique & Skills Department focusing on global communication with overseas branches and other martial arts organizations.

To expand Wushu globally, CWF actively established branches abroad, receiving positive responses and support from overseas Chinese communities. By 1929, 42 CWF sub-branches worldwide boasted a total membership exceeding 400,000. Breaking tradition, CWF initiated branches for women in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur, marking a new era in the international spread of Wushu.

Huo Yuanjia and Chen Gongzhe made substantial personal contributions to CWF's success. Chen, an insightful Wushu master, introduced rural Wushu practices into urban settings and incorporated Western sports and training methods. He supported Wushu with theoretical and cultural backing, establishing martial arts journals like the Chin Woo Journal. Additionally, Chen promoted the international popularization of Wushu by organizing training classes, Wushu movie productions, and television shows, enhancing communication and exchange between Wushu and foreign martial arts.

## **2.3 Li Maochun, Zhao Futai and Ma Jinlin as prominent Wushu promoters travelling abroad**

Li Maochun, nicknamed "Bazhou Lee" was from Shandong province. After applying to teach Wushu in the most diverse places in China he was given another nickname - "Black Iron Li". With a high level of martial art skills, Li had no intention of becoming a bodyguard, so he devoted all his life to teaching Wushu to students all over the country. In 1912, Li was invited by an American named Piro to USA to give Wushu performances. He was later invited to other countries to perform Wushu. Li Maochun's students Zhang Futai, Ma Jinlin and others won titles in Wushu competitions in Shanghai, and later travelled to 24 European countries to spread Wushu, where they achieved many honors. They were early pioneers in the spread of Wushu in western countries. Their high level skills, driving spirit, strong willpower and adaptability made them models in the history of Wushu's international dissemination.

## **3. Current day international Wushu promoters**

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Wushu was mainly run as a representative traditional national sport. During this time, the government mainly promoted it internationally by giving performances, holding Wushu competitions, training Wushu teachers, and sending Wushu coaches abroad<sup>[6]</sup>. With the rapid growth of China's economy and the continuous ascent of its international status, Wushu has gradually stepped out of China onto the world stage. All kinds of literary and artistic works with Wushu content have gradually found their places throughout the world; Wushu films and TV programs have gradually gained global popularity. The abovementioned government sponsored and media related elements played a significant role in the worldwide promulgation of Wushu. Current research reveals that many foreigners gained familiarity with Wushu for the first time through Wushu movies and TV programs.

### **3.1 Bruce Lee's Contribution to the international promotion of "Chinese Kung Fu"**

Discussing the contemporary dissemination of Chinese martial arts necessitates recognizing Bruce Lee, a pivotal figure in the history of Chinese Wushu. In the 1960s and 70s, Bruce Lee gained global recognition through starring roles in films such as "The Big Boss," "Fists of Fury," "The Way of the Dragon" and "Game of Death." He astounded the world with his Wushu, which he referred to as "Chinese Kung Fu." His exceptional Kung Fu prowess, combined with his charismatic presence, quickly earned him worldwide popularity, propelling Wushu movies to international success and accelerating the global spread of Wushu<sup>[7]</sup>.

Bruce Lee's unparalleled performances and his contributions to Kung Fu cinema made him a universally acclaimed movie icon during that era. In November 1972, Bruce Lee was inducted into The Blackbelt Hall of Fame by the authoritative American martial arts magazine Blackbelt. By the end of 1974, he was once again honored as one of the top seven Wushu masters in the world. American media hailed him as the “King of Kung Fu” and the Japanese referred to him as the “Saint of Martial Arts”. The premiere of his movie “Game of Death” in 1979 was declared Bruce Lee Day. In 1980, he was named among the “Representatives of the 70s” by Asahi News, and in 1986, the University of Hamburg in Germany recognized him as “The Most Well Known Asian in Europe.” In 1993, Bruce Lee received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and in 1999, he became the first Chinese person selected by Time magazine as one of its “Heroes & Idols of the 20th Century”. In 2000, the American government issued postage stamps to commemorate his 60th birthday. These accolades highlight Bruce Lee’s international influence and his significant contribution to the global dissemination of Chinese Wushu. By bringing the rich history of Chinese Wushu to the international film industry, Bruce Lee not only elevated the cinema but also significantly contributed to promoting Chinese Wushu and culture. The first worldwide wave of martial art mania should be remembered as having been started by Bruce Lee.

### **3.2 Jackie Chan and Jet Li’s contributions to international Wushu promotion**

Jackie Chan and Jet Li became two of the most influential Kung Fu stars after Bruce Lee. With solid skills in drama and in martial arts, Jackie Chan rose rapidly on the international film stage. In his films, he touches and attracts audiences with thrilling, entertaining Wushu moves and fighting scenes. He and his films not only advanced worldwide audiences’ perceptions of Chinese martial arts, but also launched the development of Kung Fu movies into a new phase, thus beginning another wave of worldwide Kung Fu mania.

In the 1980s, Jet Li starred in the film *Shaolin Temple*, which became a hit all over the world. In the movie, Jet Li, through his solid Wushu skills, showcased the beauty and art of Wushu to the world. This generated yet another global wave of “Wushu Mania”. The success of *Shaolin Temple* further catalyzed the growth of Wushu across international boundaries, and promoted Chinese Wushu in other countries. In addition, as worldwide interest in Chinese Wushu was piqued, the film and television industries became more interested in Wushu film making, and in including Wushu elements in action movies.

### **3.3 Wushu visiting teams represented by Shao Shankang, Wei Ming and Xu Guoan.**

After the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the nation gradually evolved from its very closed, conservative, and exclusive former status. In order to meet its political needs, the new Chinese government regarded Wushu, which is a typical element of traditional Chinese culture, as a political tool to show the “new China” to the world. For example, in June 1960, at the invitation of the Republic of Czechoslovakia, China sent the first National Wushu team consisting of 22 performers including Shao Shankang, to give Wushu performances at the “Friendship Party” of the second Czech National Games. In June 1974, the Wushu delegation was invited by Mexico to perform for the first time, attracting more than 5, 000 Mexican spectators. In 1974, the first performance of the Chinese Youth Wushu delegation led by Wei Ming was warmly welcomed by more than 10, 000 people in Tokyo, Japan. The Wushu team led by Xu Guoan, on its world tour in 1975, had a larger number of players, and their Wushu performances attracted over 30, 000 attendees in the U.K, and more than 20, 000 in Mozambique. The performances they gave in other countries such as Egypt and Turkey also attracted a large audiences. Chinese martial arts performances have become an indispensable elements of China’s diplomatic activities. Every year Wushu delegations are invited to perform outside of China, and they are warmly welcomed wherever they go.

### **3.4 Shaolin Monk Wushu Regiment led by Shi Yongxin**

The Shaolin Temple, a significant cultural symbol of Chinese Wushu, made noteworthy contributions to martial arts development in China and played a crucial role in the global dissemination of Wushu. In the late 1980s, the Shaolin Monk Wushu Regiment (SMWR) was established to systematically promote Wushu. Over the past three decades, the regiment has been invited abroad over 40 times, delivering performances in more than 30 countries. Notably, in 1990, SMWR participated in the seventh international martial arts festival in Belgium, impressing the audience with their remarkable Wushu performances. The visit sparked a surge in local interest, with thousands expressing a desire to learn Shaolin Kung Fu.

Subsequent international tours in Italy, Korea, Austria, Japan, and the UK further fueled the global spread of Wushu. In Vienna, Austria, a performance by SMWR in 1995 triggered a Wushu craze among the local population. The regiment’s involvement in cultural exchange activities and collaborations extended to Japan, where they participated in martial arts communication, collaborations in medicine, and more. Notably, at the 71st British Royal Evening Show in 1999, Queen Elizabeth and her husband witnessed a captivating 15-minute Wushu performance by Shaolin monks, earning 16 rounds of applause. The queen’s enthusiastic response led to an invitation for SMWR to visit again the following year.

### **3.5 “Four Masters” of Chen Style Tai Chi and their devotion to the dissemination of Wushu.**

Tai Chi, a branch of Wushu, holds international influence comparable to Wushu itself, with Chen Style Tai Chi gaining popularity. The

Chinese Government actively played a role in spreading Chen Style Tai Chi through systematic and organized mechanisms, often inviting Chen Tai Chi masters for performances and cultural exchanges with overseas delegations. The “Four Masters” - Chen Xiaowang, Chen Zhenlei, Wang Xi’an, and Zhu Tiancai - were frequently chosen for international visits, representing the State Sports Committee, Ministry of Culture, and other government departments.

These Tai Chi masters not only engaged in short-term visits and performances but also dedicated substantial time to teaching. For instance, Zhu Tiancai was sent to Singapore by the state to teach Tai Chi, spending 7 months and training nearly 400 students. He became the first Tai Chi master sent abroad by the state. In the 1990s, private and commercial efforts played a pivotal role in Chen Style Tai Chi’s international promotion. Chen Xiaowang, for instance, moved to Australia in 1990, establishing the Worldwide Chen Xiaowang Tai Chi Association and actively promoting Tai Chi across continents. This initiative resulted in the establishment of more than 50 branches in over 40 countries, contributing significantly to Tai Chi’s global dissemination. Other Chen Style Tai Chi masters also joined international communication activities, serving as advisers or honorary presidents in Taiji organizations and founding their own schools and training centers worldwide. Many Tai Chi teachers and masters, inspired by this movement, established Tai Chi schools or training centers globally, impacting millions of practitioners.

#### 4. Conclusion

The analysis of Wushu's internationalization history and the roles of Wushu promoters reveals a nuanced journey characterized by shifts from unintentional dissemination to deliberate global representation. In ancient times, Wushu's international spread lacked intentionality, relying on the pioneering spirit and exceptional Wushu skills of its promoters. Conversely, recent times witnessed a purposeful and organized effort to showcase Wushu's beauty and charm globally, aiming to integrate it into the world stage and secure a place for Chinese culture.

Despite successful domestic promotion, international endeavors faced challenges. Chinese individuals abroad, exemplified by figures like Bruce Lee, played a crucial role in Wushu's promotion during these challenging times. The post-reform and opening-up era saw increased collaboration between Chinese Wushu promoters and local practitioners, further propelling Wushu's internationalization.

The historical review indicates a shift from passive to active transmission, from unconscious to conscious efforts, and from singular to diverse forms of promotion. Initially serving as a survival and self-defense technique passed down within master-disciple relationships, Wushu evolved into a representative facet of traditional Chinese culture. This evolution manifested through stage performances, teaching, cultural exchanges, and sports competitions, marking the multi-faceted international dissemination of Wushu. While not yet included in the Olympic Games, Chinese Wushu is globally recognized for its aesthetically appealing movements, profound philosophy, integration of internal and external elements, and diverse applications. These foundational aspects create a robust platform for newer Wushu promoters to further propel its international development.

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