

摔跤

shuaijiao — the Throw

Traditional Chinese Wrestling

The art of grappling (*shuaijiao* 摔跤, anciently *jiaodi* 角抵) as the oldest layer of the *wu*
武

A deepening volume to Volume I of a series on the martial,
the civil, and the cultivated person

A source-based scholarly investigation of its legend, its long indigenous history
before the age of the horsemen, its later transformation, and its practice today

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A scholarly work for practitioners, teachers, and masters

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This volume deepens the grappling art (shuaijiao 摔跤) of the wu, first sketched in Volume I. Wrestling is the oldest documented martial practice of the Chinese record, older than the boxing manuals and older by far than the steppe influence with which it is so often confused. This volume follows it from its indigenous roots to the modern sport. The guiding ideal of the whole series remains
wen wu shuang quan 文武雙全, completeness in both the civil and the martial.

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Summary

The present work traces Chinese wrestling (*shuaijiao* 摔跤, in its older names *jiaodi* 角抵 and *jiaoli* 角力) as legend, as documented practice, as a court and popular institution, and as a living sport with a modern evidence base. It is a deepening volume within a larger series on the education of the person in the Chinese tradition, organized around the classical pair *wen* 文, the civil and cultural, and *wu* 武, the martial, whose union, *wen wu shuang quan* 文武雙全, was the true measure of the complete person. Volume I reconstructed the *wu* as a whole and treated wrestling there as part of the body-and-weapons foundation; the present volume takes up the grappling art alone and follows it to a depth the general volume could not afford, while deliberately building on, rather than repeating, what Volume I established.¹

Wrestling holds a singular place in this scheme, and it is a place defined above all by *age*. Of all the practices this series treats, wrestling is the one with the deepest documented roots in Chinese soil. It appears, under the name *jiaodi*, in the earliest strata of the record; it was performed at the Han court; it flowered into a professional entertainment and a graded skill in the Tang and the Song, complete with paid champions, a raised stage, women competitors, and, in the tenth or eleventh century, the earliest book devoted to the subject that any civilization has left. All of this happened *before* the Mongol conquest, and it is the central concern of this volume to recover that indigenous history, because it is so persistently obscured. In the popular imagination Chinese wrestling is a Mongolian import, a thing of the steppe and the felt tent, borrowed by China from its northern conquerors. This volume shows, from the sources, that the opposite is nearer the truth: China possessed a rich, documented, and continuous wrestling tradition of its own for at least a millennium before the Mongols arrived, and that the steppe traditions, real and important as they later became, were grafted onto a living Chinese stock, not planted in empty ground.

The work pursues six aims. First, it distinguishes the founding legend of wrestling, the horn-butting of Chi You, from the documented history, and reports the legend as legend. Second, and at greatest length, it reconstructs the indigenous Chinese wrestling tradition before the Mongol period: its military use in the Zhou, its proscription and revival in the Qin and Han, its golden age as *xiangpu* 相撲 in the Tang and Song, and its first literature. Third, it gives an honest account of the later steppe infusion, the Mongol *böke* and the Manchu *buku* 布庫, and of the Qing imperial wrestlers, without either erasing that influence or letting it swallow the older tradition. Fourth, it follows the art into the modern nation, through the Guoshu reform and the standardization of the name *shuaijiao*, to the regional styles and the modern sport. Fifth, it weighs, in descending strength of evidence, what modern research on grappling can and cannot show, giving full weight both to the one genuinely strong applied finding, the value of trained falling, and to the real costs of a contact art. Sixth, it closes practically, with design principles for taking up wrestling as formation rather than as mere competition, held within the ethics of *wude* 武德.

One clarification governs the whole. The lasting value of wrestling does not lie in any claim to national priority or ancient magic, but in a pedagogy: the training of the whole body, of balance, sensitivity, and composure, against the honest and immediate resistance of another person, and within an ethical frame. That pedagogy is the same whether the throw is called *jiaodi* or *shuaijiao*, and it needs no exaggeration to be worth preserving. The tradition gains when one looks at it closely. And wrestling, let it be said in advance, forms only the one half of the complete person;

¹ Volume I: Opfermann, Eike Andreas, *Traditional Chinese Martial Arts Education. The Wu* (Version 4, English), 2026, esp. the chapters on the body strand, on the founding legends, and on the honest limits of the evidence. The present volume presupposes that account and refers to it rather than restating it.

its discipline of the body points beyond itself, to the *wen* whose own volume completes the pair.

A Note on the Sources

This volume follows the source-critical method of the series without alteration, and the reader is asked to keep its threefold distinction in view throughout. Every statement in what follows belongs to one of three kinds, and the text marks which. The first kind is *founding legend*: a narrative written down long after the events it describes, prone to idealization, and reported here as legend, never as fact. The second is the *datable institution, text, or find*: a court performance recorded in a dynastic history, a ritual or military notice, a surviving book, an archaeological object, each given with a concrete source in the footnote. The third is the *modern empirical finding*: peer-reviewed clinical or epidemiological research, weighted by strength of evidence and named with its limits. This stance is not imported from outside but has its own Chinese ancestry, in the critical historiography founded by Tang Hao 唐豪 (1897–1959), who first tested the founding legends of the martial arts against the sources and largely rejected them.² The same demand of honesty governs the modern sections: every empirical claim has been verified against its primary publication, with exact authors, title, journal, year, and locus, and no figure is reported that could not be so verified.

For wrestling this discipline is doubly necessary, because the subject is entangled in two opposite distortions that the method is designed to resist. The first is the nationalist temptation to make Chinese wrestling the oldest and the parent of all others, the ancestor of Japanese *sumo* and of judo; the second, and more common in the West, is the reverse error that treats Chinese wrestling as a mere borrowing from the Mongols, without a serious history of its own. Both are refuted in the same way, by the documents. The Chinese record establishes a deep and continuous indigenous tradition, which disposes of the second error; it establishes no priority over other peoples' wrestling, which are as old as humanity everywhere, and so gives no support to the first. This volume therefore neither claims that China invented wrestling, an absurdity, since wrestling is universal, nor concedes that China imported it, a falsehood, since the Chinese practice is documented for a thousand years before the Mongols. It reports what the sources report, and no more.

The account draws on four groups of sources. First, on the classical and historical primary record as transmitted and interpreted by modern scholarship: the notices of *jiaodi* and *jiaoli* in the early texts and dynastic histories, the descriptions of the Song capital's entertainments, and the surviving *Jiaoli ji* 角力記, the earliest Chinese book on wrestling.³ Second, on the scholarly historiography of the Chinese martial arts, above all on Peter Lorge's standard history, supplemented for institutional and textual detail by the reference apparatus of ChinaKnowledge.de and by the essays of Stanley Henning.⁴ Third, for the twentieth-century transformation, on Andrew Morris's history of Republican physical culture and on the standard accounts of the Guoshu

² On Tang Hao as founder of critical martial arts historiography cf. Kennedy, Brian / Guo, Elizabeth, *Chinese Martial Arts Training Manuals. A Historical Survey*, Berkeley 2005, chapter on Tang Hao; Henning, Stanley E., *Ignorance, Legend and Taijiquan*, in: *Journal of the Chen Style Taijiquan Research Association of Hawaii* 2/3 (1994), pp. 1–7.

³ On the *Jiaoli ji* 角力記 of the Song-period master Diaoluzi 調露子, its five chapters, and its unique place as the only work treating the martial arts as a historical subject in the Song imperial bibliography, see Theobald, Ulrich, *Jiaoliji* 角力記, in: *ChinaKnowledge.de – An Encyclopaedia on Chinese History and Literature*; it is treated in Chapter 3.5 below.

⁴ Lorge, Peter A., *Chinese Martial Arts. From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge 2012; Theobald, Ulrich, *ChinaKnowledge.de*; Henning, Stanley E., various essays on the history of the Chinese martial arts.

movement.⁵ Fourth, for the modern sections, on peer-reviewed research in sports medicine and the sport sciences, in particular on the epidemiology of grappling injuries and on the benefits and risks of judo-type training, held to the same standard of verification as the historiography. Where a claim rests only on the specialist wrestling literature of the modern revival, which is often produced by practitioners and federations rather than by independent scholars, it is marked as such.

1. Introduction: Why Wrestling Deserves a Volume of Its Own

Among the practices that the Chinese tradition counted as martial, none is older in the documented record than wrestling. Before there were boxing manuals, before there were named styles or lineages or temples, there were two people who took hold of each other and tried, by strength and skill and balance, to put the other on the ground. Volume I of this series traced the martial half of the person, the *wu* 武, and placed the empty-handed skills at the foundation of its architecture; but a survey could give the grappling art only the space that a survey allows.⁶ Yet wrestling rewards, more than almost any other strand, a closer look, for a reason that is at once historical and, in an age of confused popular belief, corrective: it is the deepest indigenous root of the Chinese martial tradition, and it has been more thoroughly misunderstood than any other part of it.

The misunderstanding can be stated plainly, because dispelling it is one of the purposes of this volume. Ask an educated Westerner, or indeed many a martial artist, where Chinese wrestling comes from, and the answer will very likely be: from the Mongols. The image is of Genghis Khan's warriors grappling on the steppe, of the felt boots and the eagle-dance of Mongolian *böke*, and of a Chinese art that took its shape from these northern conquerors. That image is not wholly false, for the steppe traditions did leave a deep mark on the wrestling of the late empire, as Chapter 4 will show in fair detail. But as an account of the *origin* of Chinese wrestling it is simply wrong, and wrong by more than a thousand years. The Chinese were wrestling, at court and in the market, writing about it and grading it and paying champions to do it, for a full millennium before the Mongol conquest of the thirteenth century. To begin the story with the Mongols is to begin it in its next-to-last chapter.

This is why the volume gives the weight of its central chapter to the indigenous tradition *before* the age of the horsemen. It is a deliberate correction of proportion. A reader who has met Chinese wrestling only as a cousin of Mongolian *böke* will find here, from the documents, the Han emperors who staged *jiaodi* 角抵 as the climax of their grand entertainments; the Tang and Song cities in which professional wrestlers performed on a raised stage for prize money; the women who wrestled before an emperor until a Confucian official protested; and the tenth- or eleventh-century writer who composed the first treatise on the art. Only after that indigenous history has been given its due does the volume turn to the steppe infusion and to the modern sport, so that the later influence is understood, correctly, as a graft upon a living and ancient stock rather than as the root of the whole.

The volume proceeds in five movements. It first situates wrestling within the *wen* / *wu* scheme and the series, and clarifies its tangled vocabulary (Chapter 2). It then unfolds, at length, the indigenous Chinese tradition from the legendary Chi You to the eve of the Mongol conquest, the

⁵ Morris, Andrew D., *Marrow of the Nation. A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China*, Berkeley 2004; cf. Volume I, on the Republican reorganization of the martial arts.

⁶ Volume I treats the empty-handed body work as the first of the four strands of the *wu* and the foundation of the rest; wrestling is there one component of that foundation. The present volume takes it out of the survey and follows it alone.

true center of gravity of this volume (Chapter 3). Third, it gives an honest account of the steppe infusion and the Qing imperial wrestlers (Chapter 4), and follows the art into the modern nation and the standardized sport (Chapter 5). Fourth, it sets wrestling back among the strands of the *wu* (Chapter 6) and weighs the modern evidence in descending order of strength (Chapter 7). Fifth, it names the honest limits, including the twin distortions of nationalism and dismissal (Chapter 8), and closes with design principles for a modern practice held within the ethics of *wude* (Chapters 9 and 10). Figure 1 previews the historical arc that Chapters 3 to 5 unfold.

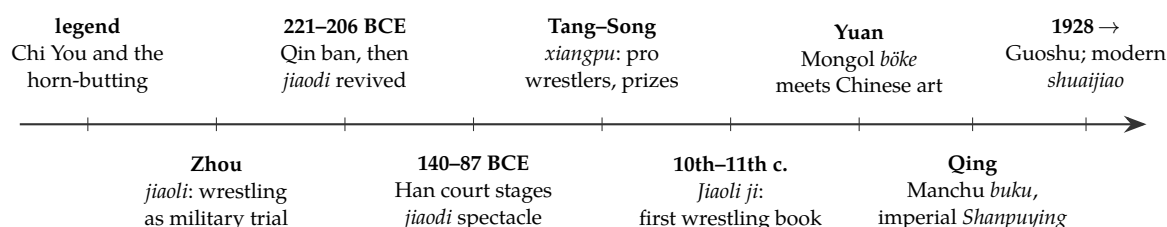


Figure 1: The historical arc of Chinese wrestling (timeline not to scale; the leftmost event is legend, not history; the earliest datings are approximate)

A word on tone belongs here, as it did in Volume I. Wrestling trains the self by the plainest of means, the honest resistance of another body, and the tradition that grew around this plainness needs no mystification, and no nationalist inflation, to command respect. This volume tries to earn that respect by accuracy.

2. Wrestling in the Scheme of the Series

2.1 The place of grappling as the root of the body strand

The series to which this volume belongs is built on a single conceptual pair. Classical Chinese culture measured human accomplishment by *wen* 文, the civil, literary, and cultural, and *wu* 武, the martial, and held the complete person to be the one accomplished in both, *wen wu shuang quan* 文武雙全.⁷ Volume I unfolded the *wu* as four interlocking strands, the body-and-weapons work of Kung Fu, the mobility of the horse and chariot (*yu*), the precision of the bow (*she*), and the judgment of the art of war (*bingfa*); a companion volume treats the *wen*; a short third volume treats the inner cultivation (*xiulian* 修煉, with qigong) that lies beneath both as their common root. Within this architecture wrestling occupies a particular and revealing position, and naming it exactly is the first task of a deepening volume.

Wrestling belongs, without question, to the *wu*, and specifically to its first and foundational strand, the empty-handed work of the body. But its position there is distinctive, because it is not merely one technique among the body's skills but, historically, their deepest documented root. The unarmed combat of the Chinese record does not begin with the elaborate boxing styles of the Ming and Qing, which are comparatively late; it begins, so far as the documents reach, with grappling, with *jiaodi* and *jiaoli*, the taking-hold and throwing-down of one person by another.⁸ If the body strand is the foundation of the *wu*, wrestling is the foundation of that foundation, the archaic bedrock beneath the later architecture of styles. This is the sense in which a volume

⁷ On the conceptual pair and its cultural history cf. Louie, Kam, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity. Society and Gender in China*, Cambridge 2002; and Volume I, on the *wen* / *wu* scheme.

⁸ On grappling as the oldest documented layer of Chinese unarmed combat, older than the systematized boxing styles, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*, on the early history of wrestling; and Chapter 3 below. The systematized empty-hand styles are treated as a later development in Volume I.

on wrestling reaches farther back than any other in the series: it touches the oldest stratum of the whole martial tradition.

This position determines what the present volume does and does not do. It does not restate the general history of the *wu*, nor the derivation of the four strands, nor the account of the later boxing styles, all of which Volume I carries.⁹ It takes wrestling out of the survey and follows it alone, into its legend, its long indigenous history, its transformation, and its modern practice, returning at the end to place it back among the strands (Chapter 6) and to draw the practical consequences (Chapters 9 and 10). Throughout, it keeps visible the fact it is built upon: that in wrestling the tradition preserved its most ancient and most honest martial exercise, the direct contest of two bodies, which needs no weapon and admits no pretence. Figure 2 shows this placement.

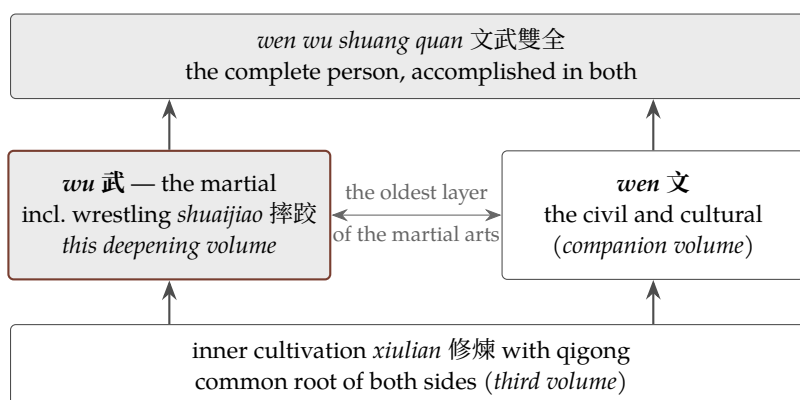


Figure 2: The place of wrestling: the deepest indigenous root of the *wu* and of its body strand (the present volume accentuated)

2.2 What “Chinese wrestling” means here, and a tangle of names

A subject as old as this one accumulates names, and the names are themselves a piece of the history, so a brief clarification of terms is not pedantry but orientation. The oldest term is *jiaodi* 角抵, literally “horn-butting,” bound up with the legend of Chi You treated in Chapter 3.1 and used, in the Qin and Han, both for a specific grappling contest and, more loosely, for a whole class of court spectacles.¹⁰ A near-synonym, *jiaoli* 角力, “matching of strength,” names the contest as a trial of power and gives the earliest wrestling book its title. In the Tang and Song the dominant word became *xiangpu* 相撲, “mutual striking” or “grappling together,” the term for the professional and popular wrestling of the great cities; the same characters, read in Japanese, give *sumo*, a shared inheritance to which Chapter 5.3 returns.¹¹ The modern standard term, *shuaijiao* 摔跤 (older written form *shuaijiao* 摔角), “throwing by the leg” or “throwing down,” is a compara-

⁹ For the four strands and the later empty-hand styles see Volume I; here they are presupposed. The inner cultivation of breath, which recurs in the wrestler’s rooted composure, belongs to the third volume and is used here only as far as understanding the art requires.

¹⁰ On *jiaodi* 角抵 as “horn-butting” and its double use, for a wrestling contest and for the broad category of court entertainments (*baixi* 百戲), cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; Theobald, *ChinaKnowledge.de*. The term’s own history is treated in Chapter 3.

¹¹ On *xiangpu* 相撲 as the Tang and Song term, and on its identity with the characters of Japanese *sumo*, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; Theobald, *ChinaKnowledge.de*. The shared writing does not by itself establish the direction of any influence, a caution developed in Chapter 5.3.

tively recent coinage that became official only in the twentieth century.¹² The evolution of the word, from *jiaodi* through *jiaoli* and *xiangpu* to *shuaijiao*, tracks the evolution of the thing, from an archaic horn-game through a court and popular sport to a standardized modern discipline, and Table 1 sets it out.

Table 1: The principal names of Chinese wrestling and their periods

Term	Chief period	Literal sense and note
<i>jiaodi</i> 角抵	Qin, Han	“Horn-butting”; a wrestling contest, and loosely the whole class of court spectacles (<i>baixi</i>).
<i>jiaoli</i> 角力	Zhou onward	“Matching of strength”; the trial-of-power sense; title of the first wrestling book.
<i>xiangpu</i> 相撲	Tang, Song	“Grappling together”; the professional and popular sport; same characters as Japanese <i>sumo</i> .
<i>buku</i> 布庫	Qing	The Manchu term for the wrestling of the imperial corps (<i>Shan-puying</i>).
<i>shuaijiao</i> 摔跤 (摔角)	20th c. onward	“Throwing down”; the modern standardized name of the art and sport.

The through-line, beneath all these names, is a single thing: the Chinese tradition of jacketed wrestling in which one contestant seeks to throw the other to the ground, and this is the subject of the volume. It is not modern international freestyle or Greco-Roman wrestling, though Chapter 5.3 compares them; it is not Japanese *sumo* or judo, though it shares deep roots and characters with the one and instructive contrasts with the other; and it is not the invented pseudo-history that would make it either the mother of all wrestling or a mere Mongol loan. It is a specific, documented Chinese practice, and its own long record is the thread this volume follows.

3. Before the Horsemen: The Indigenous Chinese Wrestling Tradition

This is the central chapter of the volume, and its length is deliberate. Its purpose is to recover, from the documents, the long and continuous history of Chinese wrestling in the millennium and more *before* the Mongol conquest, the history that the popular image of a “Mongolian” art has all but effaced. The chapter moves from legend, carefully labeled, through the earliest documented military use of wrestling, to its life as court spectacle under the Han, to its golden age as a professional and popular sport under the Tang and Song, and finally to the remarkable fact that the Chinese produced, in this period, the first book on wrestling known to any civilization. Taken together, these strata establish a claim that the rest of the volume rests upon: that Chinese wrestling is a deeply rooted indigenous tradition with its own thousand-year record, onto which the later steppe influence was grafted, and not the other way about.

3.1 The horn-butting legend: Chi You and the origins of *jiaodi*

The tradition traced its own wrestling to the beginning of things, and the story it told is worth relating precisely because it must be labeled for what it is. According to the legend, the wrestling contest *jiaodi* 角抵 originated in the primordial battle between the Yellow Emperor and the rebel Chi You 蚩尤, whose warriors, or Chi You himself, were said to have worn horns upon their

¹² On *shuaijiao* 摔跤 (also written 摔角) as the modern standard name, standardized in the twentieth century, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; and Chapter 5 below. The change of name is itself part of the modern reorganization of the art.

heads and to have gored their enemies with them; the “horn-butting” of the name is the memory of this bovine combat.¹³ A later source, the sixth-century collection of marvels *Shuyi ji* 述異記 attributed to Ren Fang 任昉 (460–508), records that in the region of Ji 冀 the people preserved a folk game called the “play of Chi You” (*Chiyou xi* 蚩尤戲), in which men wearing ox-horns butted one another, and states that this was the ancient *jiaodi* of the Han.¹⁴

The source-critical points are three, and they matter for the whole volume. First, the Yellow Emperor and Chi You are figures of myth, and no date, person, or event underlies the story of the horns; it is reported here as legend and no historical claim is attached to it. Second, the *Shuyi ji* notice is itself a text of the sixth century CE describing a contemporary folk game and projecting its origin onto the mythical past; it is good evidence that a horn-wearing wrestling game existed in the early medieval north, but not evidence that wrestling “began” with Chi You. Third, and most important, the legend, though it is only legend, encodes a genuine cultural memory worth noticing: that the Chinese themselves regarded wrestling as primordial, as belonging to the very origins of their martial life. When a tradition tells its own oldest story about combat as a story of grappling rather than of striking or of weapons, it registers how deep the grappling art lay in its sense of itself. The legend is not history, but it is a true index of how old the Chinese felt their wrestling to be, and, as the documented record will show, they were not wrong to feel it ancient.

3.2 Jiaoli in the Zhou: wrestling as a military trial of strength

The documented history begins, as so much of the martial tradition does, in the military training of the Zhou. Here wrestling appears not as spectacle but as a serious exercise of soldiers, a trial of strength folded into the seasonal rhythm of military instruction. The ritual compilation known as the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), in its calendar of monthly observances, prescribes that in the winter the commanders instruct the troops in the arts of war, and that the men practice archery, charioteering, and the matching of strength (*jiaoli* 角力).¹⁵ That wrestling should stand in this list beside archery and charioteering, the two unambiguously martial of the classical Six Arts (Volume I), is itself significant: the same culture that made archery a school of the self counted the matching of strength among the exercises by which soldiers were made, and did so in its ritual calendar, the most conservative and formal of its records.

The point to be drawn from the Zhou stratum is one of standing rather than of detail, for the early notices are brief. Wrestling, under the name *jiaoli*, was from the earliest documented period a recognized component of military preparation, on a level with shooting and driving; it was not a marginal amusement but part of the serious equipment of the warrior. This is the first and firmest layer of the indigenous tradition, and it is already, be it noted, entirely Chinese and entirely pre-imperial, set down long before any contact with the mounted peoples of the

¹³ On the legend deriving *jiaodi* 角抵 (“horn-butting”) from the horned Chi You 蚩尤 and his battle with the Yellow Emperor, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; Theobald, *ChinaKnowledge.de*. The Yellow Emperor and Chi You belong to the legendary, not the historical, record, and the story is reported here as legend, in the manner this series reserves for founding myths (cf. Volume I, on the legend of the Yellow Emperor).

¹⁴ On the *Shuyi ji* 述異記, attributed to Ren Fang 任昉 (460–508), and its notice of the “play of Chi You” (*Chiyou xi* 蚩尤戲), a horn-wearing butting game of the Ji region identified with the ancient *jiaodi*, cf. Theobald, *China-Knowledge.de*, on the *Shuyi ji*; Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*. The collection is a Six Dynasties record of the strange, not a historical source for the age it claims to describe, and its attribution to Chi You is legendary.

¹⁵ On the winter military training of the *Liji* 禮記 *Yueling* 月令 (Monthly Ordinances), which pairs archery and charioteering with *jiaoli* 角力 (the matching of strength) as seasonal military exercises, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*, on wrestling in early military training; Theobald, *ChinaKnowledge.de*. The *Yueling* is a ritual-calendrical text of the late Zhou or early Han, and its notice attests the standing of wrestling among the recognized military skills.

far north shaped the wrestling of the later empire. The root is native, and it is old.

3.3 The Qin proscription and the Han court spectacle

With the unification of the empire under the Qin in 221 BCE, wrestling passed through a transformation that the sources record with unusual clarity, and that transformation gave it, for the first time, the name by which the classical period would know it. The First Emperor, having conquered the warring states, sought to disarm the population and to suppress the private military culture of the old aristocracy; in the course of this the open military exercises of the Zhou were curtailed. But the physical contest did not vanish; it was retained and renamed, and the standard accounts report that it was under the Qin that the old military “demonstration of arms” was reconstituted as *jiaodi* 角抵, the horn-butting game, now less an exercise of massed soldiers than a contest of individual strength and skill.¹⁶ There is a *spiegelung* here with a theme this series has traced elsewhere: as the empire gathered up the weapons of the people, it did not extinguish the martial impulse but channeled it, and wrestling, precisely because it needs no weapon, survived the disarming intact and emerged as a permitted contest of the body alone.

Under the Han (206 BCE–220 CE) this *jiaodi* rose to the center of imperial spectacle, and here the documentation becomes rich and specific. *Jiaodi* became the name not only of the wrestling match but of a whole class of grand entertainments, the “hundred games” (*baixi* 百戲), in which wrestling stood beside acrobatics, music, and mime; and the greatest of the Han emperors staged these entertainments on a lavish scale.¹⁷ The *History of the Han* (*Han shu* 漢書) records that Emperor Wu 武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) held a great *jiaodi* spectacle in the third year of the *yuanfeng* era, 108 BCE, and that the people came from the districts around the capital, a radius the source measures in hundreds of *li*, to watch.¹⁸ This is documented history, not legend: by the second century BCE, more than a thousand years before the Mongol conquest, wrestling was an established institution of the imperial court, staged as mass entertainment and drawing crowds from across the metropolitan region. The Han tomb reliefs and figurines that depict wrestlers, stripped to the waist and locked in the grapple, put the matter beyond doubt, giving us the image as well as the word.¹⁹

The Han stratum, then, gives us wrestling as a fully documented and central institution: named, staged by emperors, watched by crowds, and depicted by artists. It is worth pausing on how thoroughly this refutes the notion of a Mongol origin. Twelve centuries before the Mongols, the Chinese had a court wrestling institution rich enough to draw named imperial patronage and to leave its image in stone. Whatever the steppe would later add, it added to a tradition

¹⁶ On the Qin suppression of open military exercises and the renaming of the wrestling contest as *jiaodi* 角抵, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*, on the early imperial history of wrestling; Theobald, *ChinaKnowledge.de*. The received tradition, transmitted in the *Han shu*, associates the name *jiaodi* with this Qin reconstitution of the older military games. The parallel with Volume I’s theme of the disarming of the population (the “weapons-gathering”) is deliberate: as with edged weapons, the state did not abolish the martial skill but redirected and re-formed it.

¹⁷ On *jiaodi* 角抵 as both the wrestling contest and the name of the broad category of Han court spectacle (*baixi* 百戲, the “hundred games”), cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; Theobald, *ChinaKnowledge.de*. The breadth of the term in the Han is the reason later usage sometimes blurs wrestling proper with the wider category of entertainments.

¹⁸ On the great *jiaodi* performance of Emperor Wu of the Han in 108 BCE (*yuanfeng* 3), recorded in the *Han shu* 漢書, drawing spectators from a wide radius around the capital, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; Theobald, *ChinaKnowledge.de*. The notice is a datable documentary record, not a legend, and fixes wrestling as an established court institution by the second century BCE.

¹⁹ On Han-period pictorial and sculptural depictions of wrestlers (tomb reliefs, tomb figurines, and related images) as material confirmation of the textual record, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; and the surveys in the specialist wrestling literature (marked as such, cf. the Note on the Sources). The material evidence corroborates the documentary notices independently.

already ancient and already Chinese.

3.4 Tang and Song xiangpu: the golden age before the Mongols

If the Han gave wrestling its imperial stage, the Tang (618–907) and above all the Song (960–1279) gave it a fully developed civilian and professional life, and this period, immediately preceding the Mongol conquest, is the true golden age of indigenous Chinese wrestling. Under the new name *xiangpu* 相撲, wrestling became at once a court spectacle, a recruiting test for the army, and, most strikingly, a professional entertainment of the great commercial cities, performed for prize money by paid champions before a paying public. The richness of the Song record on this point is one of the best-kept secrets of martial-arts history, and it deserves to be spread out in some detail, because it is precisely what the “Mongol origin” myth conceals.

The setting was the entertainment quarter of the Song metropolis. The two great capitals, Kaifeng in the Northern Song and Hangzhou in the Southern, possessed pleasure districts, the *wazi* 瓦子, filled with roofed performance galleries, the *goulan* 勾欄, in which professional entertainers of every kind, singers, storytellers, acrobats, and wrestlers, plied their trades for the urban crowds.²⁰ Our knowledge of this world comes from a precious genre of nostalgic memoir, written after the fall of each capital by men who remembered its glories. Meng Yuanlao’s *Dreams of Splendour of the Eastern Capital* (*Dongjing meng Hua lu* 東京夢華錄), recalling Kaifeng before its loss in 1127, and Zhou Mi’s *Old Affairs of Wulin* (*Wulin jiushi* 武林舊事), recalling Hangzhou, both describe wrestling among the entertainments of the city, and the latter goes so far as to list professional wrestlers by name.²¹ That a thirteenth-century source can name the star wrestlers of the capital, as a modern writer might name famous athletes, tells us how thoroughly professionalized and how public the sport had become.

The competitive form is documented with equal concreteness. The Southern Song sources describe great wrestling tournaments held on a raised stage, the *leitai* 擂台, at which wrestlers from across the empire competed before officials and crowds for substantial prizes, silver cups and vessels, lengths of coloured silk and brocade, saddled horses, and official recognition.²² The famous “challenge platform” (*leitai*) of later martial legend and fiction has one of its real historical homes here, in the Song wrestling ring. Wrestling also retained its military use: the Song army recruited strong men through wrestling trials, and maintained wrestlers among the imperial guards, so that the same skill served the emperor’s spectacle, the city’s entertainment, and the army’s recruiting officer at once.²³

One episode, better documented than any other, throws a sudden light on the whole scene and deserves to be told in full, because it proves how public and how popular Song wrestling was, and it reveals a startling fact besides: that women wrestled, and wrestled before emperors.

²⁰ On the Song entertainment quarters (*wazi* 瓦子) and their performance galleries (*goulan* 勾欄), and the professional entertainers, wrestlers among them, who worked in them, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*, on wrestling in Song urban culture; and the memoir literature cited next. The commercialized urban entertainment of the Song is the setting for professional wrestling.

²¹ On the descriptions of *xiangpu* wrestling in Meng Yuanlao’s *Dongjing meng Hua lu* 東京夢華錄 (a memoir of Kaifeng, compiled c. 1147) and Zhou Mi’s *Wulin jiushi* 武林舊事 (a memoir of Southern Song Hangzhou), including the naming of individual professional wrestlers, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; Theobald, *ChinaKnowledge.de*, on these memoir sources. That named champions could be recorded attests a developed professional scene.

²² On the Song wrestling tournaments held on a raised stage (*leitai* 擂台) for named prizes, silver, silk, horses, and official notice, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; Theobald, *ChinaKnowledge.de*. The *leitai* of the later martial imagination, the challenge platform, has one of its documented origins in these Song wrestling contests.

²³ On wrestling as a means of military recruitment and on wrestlers attached to the Song imperial guard, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*. The triple life of Song wrestling, as court spectacle, popular sport, and military test, marks its full institutional development.

During the Lantern Festival of 1062, in the seventh year of the *Jiayou* era, Emperor Renzong 仁宗 watched a programme of entertainments before the Xuande Gate that included women wrestlers (*nü xiangpu* 女相撲), and afterwards rewarded them.²⁴ This so scandalized the great historian and statesman Sima Guang 司馬光 that he submitted a formal memorial to the throne protesting it, objecting that women should be made to wrestle, and in scanty dress, in so solemn a public place and before the emperor's own eyes, and urging that the practice be stopped and those responsible punished.²⁵ The memorial is a priceless document. Written to *suppress* women's wrestling, it proves beyond doubt that women's professional wrestling *existed*, publicly and at the highest level, in eleventh-century China; and it shows, in the very scandal it records, how thoroughly wrestling had saturated the popular and even the court culture of the Song. Here, four centuries before the Ming and six before the Qing imperial wrestlers, is a Chinese wrestling world so developed that it had professional women champions and a Confucian backlash against them, and all of it, once more, before the Mongols came.

A word of source-criticism guards the boundary between this documented history and the fiction it later inspired. The most famous "Song" wrestling story of all, the victory of the dashing Yan Qing 燕青 over the giant Ren Yuan on the challenge platform at Mount Tai, belongs not to the Song record but to the Ming novel *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳), and is fiction, however vividly it reflects the real *leitai* culture that the historical sources attest.²⁶ It is reported here only as evidence of how deeply the real Song wrestling culture had impressed itself on the Chinese imagination, so deeply that it furnished one of the classic scenes of the national literature. The history is documented; the novel is its echo; and the series' method requires that the two be kept apart.

3.5 The *Jiaoli ji* of Diaoluzi: China's first book on wrestling

The indigenous tradition produced, in this same pre-Mongol period, a monument that by itself would settle the question of its depth and self-consciousness: the earliest book devoted to wrestling that any civilization has left. The *Jiaoli ji* 角力記, "Notes on Wrestling," was composed by a master known only as Diaoluzi 調露子, of whom nothing else survives, in the Song period and by some datings as early as the tenth century.²⁷ It is a short work, but a serious one, divided into five chapters: a statement of aims (*shuzhi* 述旨), a treatment of terms and designations (*mingmu* 名目), a research into antique texts (*kaogu* 考古), a gathering of proofs from ancient literature (*chuchu* 出處), and miscellaneous explanations (*zazhuo* 雜說).²⁸

²⁴ On Emperor Renzong's watching of women wrestlers at the Xuande Gate during the Lantern Festival of 1062 (*Jiayou* 7), and his rewarding of them, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; and the memorial of Sima Guang cited next, which is the primary source for the episode.

²⁵ Sima Guang 司馬光, memorial against the performance of women wrestlers before the emperor (submitted 1062, some ten days after the festival); on the memorial and its argument cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*. The memorial is the primary documentary source both for the episode and, ironically, for the very existence of women's professional wrestling in the Northern Song. The subsequent decline of recorded women's wrestling is generally associated with the tightening of Neo-Confucian norms.

²⁶ On the wrestling of Yan Qing 燕青 in the *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (*Water Margin*), a Ming novel set in the late Northern Song, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*. The episode is literary invention and is reported here only as a cultural reflection of the documented *leitai* tradition, not as a historical event, in keeping with the series' care to separate fiction from record.

²⁷ On the *Jiaoli ji* 角力記 of Diaoluzi 調露子, a Song-period (and by some datings tenth-century) work of which the author is otherwise unknown, cf. Theobald, Ulrich, *Jiaoliji* 角力記, in: *ChinaKnowledge.de*, the principal source for the following account; and the specialist studies cited there (e.g. Weng Shixun 1988; Zhou Weiliang 2020, marked as specialist literature per the Note on the Sources).

²⁸ The five chapters of the *Jiaoli ji*, *shuzhi* 述旨 (aims), *mingmu* 名目 (terms), *kaogu* 考古 (research into antiquity), *chuchu* 出處 (textual proofs), and *zazhuo* 雜說 (miscellany), follow Theobald, *Jiaoliji*. The structure shows a

The structure repays a moment's attention, because it reveals something remarkable about the maturity of the tradition. This is not a bare technical manual but a *historical and philological* treatment of wrestling: it inquires into the antiquity of the art, researches its terms, and gathers its textual attestations. In other words, a thousand years ago a Chinese writer already regarded wrestling as a subject with a history worth researching and a literature worth citing, and set out to write that history. The book's standing is confirmed by its transmission: it is recorded in the bibliographical chapter of the official dynastic history *Songshi* 宋史 and in the great encyclopaedia *Tongzhi* 通志 of Zheng Qiao 鄭樵 (1104–1162), and it is, so far as the record shows, the only work treating the martial arts as a historical subject to appear in the Song imperial bibliography.²⁹ That the learned bibliographers of imperial China found a place for a book on wrestling among the recognized categories of knowledge is a fact of the first importance for this volume. It means that wrestling was not merely practiced but *studied*, that it had entered the world of letters, and that the *wen* and the *wu* met over it, exactly as this series everywhere argues they should. The very existence of the *Jiaoli ji*, six centuries before the Qing and long before the Mongol conquest, is the single most economical refutation of the idea that Chinese wrestling was a late or a borrowed thing.

3.6 What the pre-Mongol record establishes

It is worth drawing the threads of this long chapter together, because their sum is the central historical claim of the volume. The documented record, set out above and resting throughout on datable texts and finds rather than on legend, establishes four things. First, *antiquity*: wrestling appears in the Chinese military record from the Zhou, under the name *jiaoli*, beside archery and charioteering. Second, *institutional depth*: it was a central court spectacle under the Han, named *jiaodi*, staged by Emperor Wu in 108 BCE and depicted in Han tomb art. Third, *full development*: under the Tang and Song it became a professional and popular sport with named champions, prize tournaments on the *leitai*, women competitors, and a military recruiting function, documented in the memoir literature of the great cities and in Sima Guang's memorial. Fourth, *self-consciousness*: the tradition produced, by the tenth or eleventh century, the first known book on wrestling, a historical and philological study recognized in the imperial bibliography. All four are in place *before* the Mongol conquest of the thirteenth century.

The corrective this establishes must be stated as carefully as the series' method demands, neither more nor less than the evidence allows. It does *not* establish that China invented wrestling, which would be an absurdity: wrestling is a human universal, found in every part of the world and as old as humanity, and the ancient Egyptians, the Greeks, the peoples of the steppe, and countless others wrestled as anciently as the Chinese. This volume claims no priority for China over any other people, and the nationalist use of this history, to make Chinese wrestling the parent of *sumo* or of all Asian grappling, receives no support from these facts and is explicitly rejected. What the record *does* establish is the narrower and firmer point that concerns us: that China possessed a rich, continuous, documented, and self-conscious wrestling tradition of its own for well over a thousand years before the Mongols, and that this tradition owed nothing to the steppe for its existence, its institutions, or its literature. The steppe would later contribute much, as the next chapter fairly records. But it contributed to something already ancient and already great. The horsemen did not bring wrestling to China; they rode into a country that

self-consciously historical and philological treatment of the subject.

²⁹ On the recording of the *Jiaoli ji* in the bibliographical treatise of the *Songshi* 宋史 and in Zheng Qiao's 鄭樵 (1104–1162) encyclopaedia *Tongzhi* 通志, and its status as the only work treating the martial arts as a historical subject in the Song imperial bibliography, cf. Theobald, *Jiaoliji*. Its inclusion in the official bibliography marks its recognition by the learned tradition.

had been wrestling, and writing about it, since before their own peoples entered the historical record.

4. The Steppe Infusion: Mongol, Manchu, and the Late-Imperial Art

Having given the indigenous tradition its due, this volume can now do full justice to the steppe influence, which was real, deep, and formative for the wrestling of the late empire and for the modern sport, without any longer being in danger of mistaking it for the origin. The relation is one of confluence: from the thirteenth century, two great wrestling worlds, the ancient Chinese *xiangpu* and the wrestling of the Mongols and later the Manchus, met, mingled, and, under the patronage of conquest dynasties, produced the characteristic jacketed standing wrestling from which modern *shuaijiao* most directly descends. To describe this fairly is to describe neither a borrowing nor a displacement but a grafting, in which an old stock received a vigorous new scion.

4.1 Two wrestling worlds meet: böke under the Yuan

The Mongols who conquered China and ruled it as the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) brought with them a wrestling of their own, ancient, prestigious, and central to their culture in a way that has few parallels. Mongolian wrestling (*böke*) was, and remains, one of the “three manly games” of the steppe, alongside horse-racing and archery, contested at the great festal gatherings later formalized as the *Naadam*; it was a marker of martial worth and of manhood itself.³⁰ It is essential to the honesty of this volume to affirm that the Mongol tradition is genuinely ancient and genuinely its own; the argument here is not that the steppe wrestling was derivative of the Chinese, any more than the reverse. These were two independently deep traditions, and their meeting under the Yuan was the meeting of equals in age.

Under Mongol rule wrestling enjoyed vigorous imperial patronage, and grand wrestling contests were held at the Yuan court, where champions of the steppe performed and were rewarded. For the first time the Chinese *xiangpu* tradition, with its urban professionals and its *leitai* prizes, stood alongside the steppe *böke*, with its festival contests and its distinctive standing, jacketed form. The characteristic features of the steppe wrestling, an upright grappling in a stout jacket, decided by throwing the opponent so that he touches the ground with a knee or the body rather than by pinning him, would in time reshape the competitive form of Chinese wrestling itself. But this reshaping was gradual, and it was under the second and greater of the conquest dynasties, the Manchu Qing, that it reached its institutional height.

4.2 The Manchu buku and the Qing imperial wrestlers

The Manchus, who conquered China and founded the Qing dynasty in 1644, prized wrestling as intensely as the Mongols, and it is from the Qing period that the modern Chinese art most directly inherits. Manchu wrestling was known by the Manchu word *buku* 布庫, and the dynasty made it an emblem of the martial vigour it feared to lose as its bannermen settled into the comforts of empire. The institutional expression of this was a dedicated imperial wrestling corps, the *Shanpuying* 善撲營, the “Battalion of the Skilled in Wrestling,” established under the Kangxi Emperor and quartered in Beijing; its wrestlers, graded by skill and salaried by the state,

³⁰ On Mongolian wrestling (*böke*) as one of the “three manly games” of the steppe, alongside horse-racing and archery, and its centrality to Mongol martial culture, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*, on the wrestling of the conquest dynasties; and the general literature on the *Naadam*. Mongolian wrestling is a distinct and ancient tradition in its own right, not a branch of the Chinese.

performed at court, entertained foreign envoys, and formed a living reserve of the martial arts under direct imperial patronage.³¹

The founding of this corps is bound up with one of the most famous episodes of the early Qing, and it is worth telling both because it is well attested and because it shows how far wrestling stood from being a mere amusement. When the young Kangxi Emperor came to resent the domination of his over-mighty regent Oboi (Aobai 鳌拜), he is reported to have gathered about himself a band of sturdy youths and to have kept them busy, ostensibly at play, with wrestling in the *buku* manner; and when the moment came, in 1669, it was this band of young wrestlers who, at the emperor's signal, seized and overpowered the astonished regent in the audience hall, breaking his power at a stroke.³² Whatever the embellishments the story later acquired, its core is historical, and its meaning for the standing of wrestling is plain: at the very summit of the state, wrestling was regarded as a real and decisive skill, potent enough to overthrow a regent, and the imperial corps that institutionalized it enjoyed a prestige accordingly. Under Qing patronage the Beijing wrestling of the *buku* reached a high polish, and when the dynasty fell in 1912 and the *Shanpuying* was disbanded, its trained wrestlers passed into civilian life as teachers, carrying the imperial art directly into the modern styles, and above all into the Beijing *shuaijiao* that is its most immediate heir.³³

4.3 What the steppe added, and what it did not

An honest reckoning of the steppe infusion must state precisely what it contributed and precisely what it did not, and the distinction is important enough to be drawn explicitly, since it is exactly the point on which the popular account errs. What the steppe traditions added was real and lasting. They gave the late-imperial and modern art much of its *competitive form*: the upright, jacketed wrestling decided by a throw to the ground rather than by a pin or submission, which is the signature of modern *shuaijiao*, owes far more to the Mongol and Manchu manner than to the older Chinese forms. They gave it, through the Qing, a powerful institution, the *Shanpuying*, and a period of intense imperial patronage that carried the art in a high state directly into the twentieth century. And they gave the Beijing style in particular its most immediate ancestry, in the disbanded imperial wrestlers who became its first modern teachers. None of this is to be minimized, and this volume does not minimize it.

What the steppe did *not* do is equally clear. It did not originate Chinese wrestling, which, as the whole of Chapter 3 has shown, was ancient, documented, institutionally rich, and self-conscious for more than a thousand years before the Mongols. It did not displace the indigenous tradition, which persisted alongside and beneath the steppe-inflected court art, especially in the south and in civilian practice, and which supplied the deep substratum onto which the steppe form was grafted. And it did not make Chinese wrestling “Mongolian,” any more than the Manchu conquest made Chinese cuisine or Chinese medicine Manchu; a conquest dynasty's

³¹ On the Qing imperial wrestling corps, the *Shanpuying* 善撲營 (established under the Kangxi Emperor, quartered in Beijing, its *buku* 布庫 wrestlers graded and salaried), cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; and the specialist wrestling literature (marked as such per the Note on the Sources), which reports the corps at roughly three hundred men. The corps gave Chinese wrestling, for the first time since the Song, a permanent state institution.

³² On the seizure of the regent Oboi (Aobai 鳌拜) in 1669 by a band of young wrestlers trained by the Kangxi Emperor, and the association of this episode with the prestige of *buku* wrestling and the *Shanpuying*, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; the episode is recorded in the standard histories of the Kangxi reign. It is reported here as documented history, and it illustrates the seriousness with which the dynasty regarded wrestling skill.

³³ On the disbanding of the *Shanpuying* at the fall of the Qing and the passage of its wrestlers into civilian teaching, feeding directly into modern Beijing *shuaijiao*, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; and the modern-style histories in the specialist literature (marked as such). This is the direct line of descent from the Qing imperial corps to the twentieth-century art.

patronage of an art it favoured is not the same as that art's origin. The accurate summary is the one this chapter opened with: modern Chinese wrestling is a confluence, in which an ancient indigenous tradition received, under two conquest dynasties, a strong steppe contribution to its competitive form and its institutions, and emerged as the jacketed throwing art we now call *shuaijiao*. Table 2 sets out the two contributions side by side, that neither may be forgotten and neither exaggerated.

Table 2: The two roots of modern Chinese wrestling

Aspect	Indigenous Chinese tradition	Steppe (Mongol / Manchu) contribution
Antiquity in China	Documented from the Zhou; central by the Han	Ancient in its own right; enters China with the Yuan and Qing
Institutions	Han court <i>jiaodi</i> ; Song professionals, <i>leitai</i> , guilds	Qing imperial corps (<i>Shanpuying</i>); court patronage
Literature	<i>Jiaoli ji</i> (10th–11th c.), the first wrestling book	Oral and practical; less textualized
Competitive form	Varied; grappling to the ground, court and stage	Upright jacketed throw to the ground; shaped modern rules
Line to modern art	Deep substratum; southern and civilian continuity	Direct: disbanded <i>Shanpuying</i> wrestlers taught modern Beijing style

5. From Empire to Nation: Guoshu, Standardization, and the Name Shuaijiao

The fall of the Qing in 1912 removed the imperial patronage that had sustained the wrestling of the *Shanpuying*, and, as with archery, the turbulent Republican century might have scattered the art. Instead wrestling was caught up in the great project of the age, the remaking of the traditional martial arts into a modern, national physical culture, and it emerged from that project with a new name, a new institutional home, and eventually the standardized competitive form it has today. This last chapter of the history follows that transformation and then, in fairness to a subject beset by comparison, sets Chinese wrestling honestly beside its foreign relatives.

5.1 The Republican reorganization: Jingwu, Guoshu, and a new name

The Republican refoundation of the martial arts, which Volume I treated in general, gathered the scattered fighting traditions of the late empire into national organizations that sought to modernize, standardize, and dignify them as a “national art” (*guoshu* 國術). The Jingwu Athletic Association, founded in Shanghai in 1910, and above all the Central Guoshu Institute (*Zhongyang Guoshu Guan* 中央國術館), founded in Nanjing in 1928, organized the martial arts into recognized categories, trained instructors, and held national examinations; and wrestling was among the disciplines they embraced and codified.³⁴ It was in this period of national systematization that the modern standard name of the art, *shuaijiao* 摔跤, displaced the older *xiangpu* and *jiaodi* and became official; the change of name marks the passage of the art from an imperial and pop-

³⁴ On the Central Guoshu Institute (*Zhongyang Guoshu Guan* 中央國術館, founded 1928) and the Jingwu Association (1910), and their reorganization of the martial arts into modern national categories, cf. Morris, Andrew D., *Marrow of the Nation*, Berkeley 2004; and Volume I, on the Republican reorganization. Wrestling was included among the disciplines organized and examined by the Guoshu movement.

ular tradition into a modern, codified national sport.³⁵ This is the terminological endpoint of the long evolution set out in Chapter 2.2: a single practice that had been *jiaoli*, then *jiaodi*, then *xiangpu*, now received the name under which it is known today.

5.2 The regional styles and the modern sport

The wrestling that entered the modern era was not a single uniform art but a family of regional styles, each with its own flavour, and the modern sport was built by drawing them together. The most prestigious was the Beijing style, the direct heir of the disbanded imperial *Shanpuying*, polished and fast; Tianjin had its own robust tradition; and the city of Baoding in Hebei gave its name to a celebrated “fast wrestling” (*kuaijiao* 快跤), prized for the speed and directness of its throws.³⁶ Alongside these Han-Chinese styles the distinct Mongolian wrestling continued and continues to be practiced, especially in Inner Mongolia, as a living tradition in its own right. Under the People’s Republic, *shuaijiao* was organized as a modern competitive sport, with weight categories, a standardized heavy cotton jacket (the *shuaijiao* jacket, gripped by both wrestlers), a defined mat, and a scoring system that rewards clean throws to the ground, the contestant who is thrown so that a part of the body above the knee touches down losing the exchange.³⁷ This throw-decided, jacketed, upright form, it will be recognized, is precisely the competitive logic that the steppe traditions contributed (Chapter 4.3), now fixed as the rule-set of a national sport and grafted onto the deep indigenous stock.

5.3 Shuaijiao and its neighbours: sumo, judo, and international wrestling

Because Chinese wrestling is so often introduced to Western readers only through comparison with better-known grappling arts, and because those comparisons breed exactly the nationalist and dismissive errors this volume resists, a plain statement of the relationships is in order. Three comparisons recur, and each must be made carefully.

The first is with Japanese *sumo*. The temptation to derive *sumo* from Chinese wrestling is strong, and it rests on a real fact: the characters that write *sumo* are the very characters that write the Tang and Song *xiangpu* 相撲, and there was undoubtedly cultural transmission between Tang China and early Japan.³⁸ But the shared graph does not settle the direction or the depth of any borrowing. Japanese *sumo* has its own ancient ritual and religious roots, and the honest position, the only one the evidence supports, is that the two are related East Asian wrestling traditions sharing a term and some early contact, not that one is simply the parent of the other. To claim *sumo* as a Chinese invention is the nationalist error in its commonest form, and this

³⁵ On the standardization of the name *shuaijiao* 摔跤 (earlier also written 摔角) in the Republican and early PRC reorganization of the martial arts, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; the modern-sport histories in the specialist literature (marked as such). The displacement of *xiangpu* by *shuaijiao* accompanies the modern codification of the art.

³⁶ On the principal regional styles of modern Chinese wrestling, the Beijing style (heir of the *Shanpuying*), the Tianjin tradition, the Baoding “fast wrestling” (*kuaijiao* 快跤) of Hebei, and the distinct Mongolian style, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; and the specialist wrestling histories (marked as such). The regional styles share a common competitive logic while differing in emphasis and repertoire.

³⁷ On the modern codification of *shuaijiao* as a competitive sport, with weight classes, the standardized gripping jacket, and throw-based scoring in which a fall to the ground decides the exchange, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; and the modern-sport literature (marked as such). The jacketed, upright, throw-decided form reflects the steppe contribution described in Chapter 4.3.

³⁸ On the shared characters of *xiangpu* 相撲 and Japanese *sumo*, and the cultural contact between Tang China and early Japan, cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*. The shared writing is a real datum; the inference of a one-way “Chinese origin” of *sumo* goes well beyond what it can bear, since Japanese wrestling has its own ancient ritual roots.

volume declines it.

The second comparison is with judo, and here the relationship is one of instructive resemblance rather than descent. Judo was created in Japan by Kano Jigoro in 1882 out of the older Japanese *jujutsu*, and it owes nothing directly to Chinese wrestling; yet it resembles *shuaijiao* strikingly, for both are jacketed arts in which throwing the opponent is central.³⁹ The differences are as revealing as the likeness: judo carries the contest to the ground, with pins, chokes, and joint-locks, whereas *shuaijiao* is decided by the throw itself and does not pursue the fight to the ground. This resemblance is not a matter of borrowing but of convergence, two peoples arriving at similar solutions to the same problem, and it has a practical use for this volume, since the far larger modern medical literature on judo is the closest available analogue for understanding the risks and benefits of *shuaijiao*, as Chapter 7 will exploit.

The third comparison is with international wrestling, the Olympic freestyle and Greco-Roman disciplines. These differ from *shuaijiao* more sharply, for they use no jacket and are decided largely by pinning the opponent's shoulders to the mat, a groundwork logic foreign to the Chinese standing throw.⁴⁰ Setting the three neighbours side by side clarifies what *shuaijiao* distinctively is: a jacketed, upright, throw-decided wrestling, sharing the jacket-and-throw logic of judo, the standing emphasis of Mongolian *böke*, and the antiquity of no one but itself, since, as this volume has laboured to show, its Chinese roots are its own and older than any borrowing. The comparisons illuminate; they do not diminish. Chinese wrestling need not be the parent of the others to be worth studying, and it need not be their child.

6. Wrestling Among the Strands of the Wu

Having followed wrestling through its legend, its long indigenous history, its steppe infusion, and its modern codification, it is time to set it back into the whole from which this volume drew it. Volume I presented the *wu* as four interlocking strands, a cumulative curriculum bound by the ethics of *wude* and connected by trained breath: body-and-weapons work (Kung Fu), which establishes the body as foundation; mobility (*yu*), which sets the steadied body into motion; archery (*she*), which refines the resulting calm into precise attention; and the art of war (*bingfa*), which directs that attention outward upon real situations.⁴¹ Wrestling belongs to the first of these, the body strand, and within it to the deepest layer: it is not one technique among the body's skills but, as Chapter 2.1 argued and Chapter 3 documented, the archaic root of the whole unarmed tradition, the oldest documented martial exercise of the Chinese record. Where archery is the strand that reaches farthest *forward* into the *wen*, wrestling is the strand that reaches farthest *back* into the origins of the *wu*. Figure 3 shows the four strands with the body strand, and wrestling as its root, accentuated.

Within this architecture wrestling has a distinctive role that this volume is now in a position to state precisely, and it turns on the figure this series has made its own: the incorruptible mirror. Volume I found in the target of the archer, and the companion volume in the unresisting brush

³⁹ On judo as Kano Jigoro's 1882 development from Japanese *jujutsu*, independent of Chinese wrestling, cf. the standard histories of judo; the resemblance to *shuaijiao* is typological (both jacketed throwing arts), not genealogical. The comparison is used in Chapter 7 because the modern medical literature on judo is the nearest well-studied analogue to *shuaijiao*.

⁴⁰ On the difference between jacketed, throw-decided *shuaijiao* and the jacketless, pin-decided international styles (freestyle and Greco-Roman), cf. Lorge, *Chinese Martial Arts*; and the general sport literature. The distinction of jacket and of winning condition is the principal technical divide among the world's wrestling styles.

⁴¹ Volume I, on the four strands and their cumulative order; the body strand is the first and the foundation of the rest. The archery deepening volume treats the third strand; the present volume reaches into the deepest root of the first.

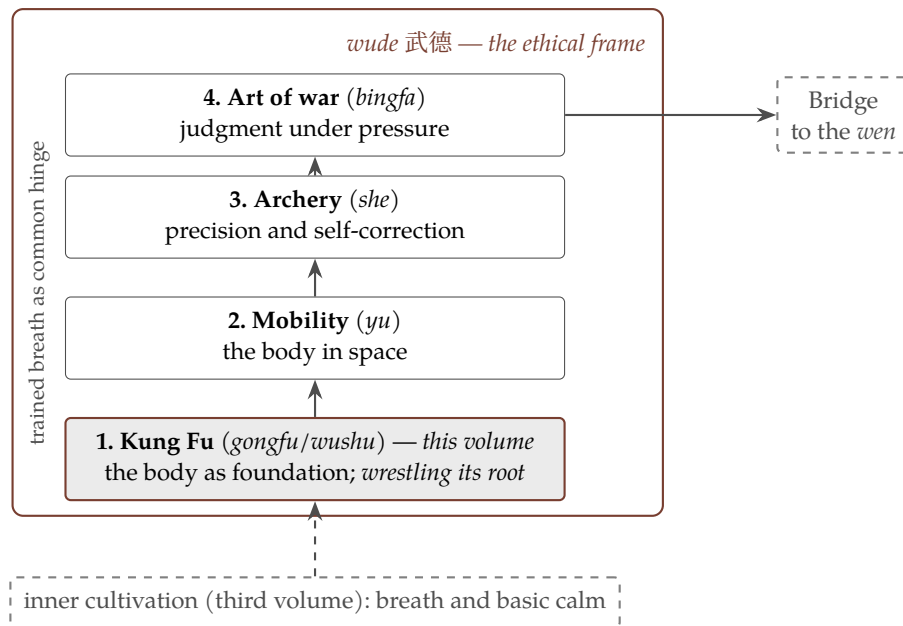


Figure 3: Wrestling as the deepest root of the first strand (the body) of the *wu*, bound by *wude* and connected by trained breath (the present volume accentuated; cf. Volume I)

and the board of the strategic games, a surface that returns the practitioner's actual state rather than his intention. Wrestling offers the most immediate and least deceivable mirror of all, and it is a living one: the resisting body of another person. The opponent cannot be flattered; he returns one's actual balance, timing, and structure with instant and physical honesty, rewarding a real advantage with a throw and punishing a false one with a fall.⁴² Where the archer's target reports his state after the arrow has flown, the wrestler's partner reports it continuously and at once, in the very moment of contact. If archery is self-examination in the mode of precision, wrestling is self-examination in the mode of resistance, and the lesson the *Shenyi* drew for the bow, to seek the cause of the failure in oneself, the mat teaches with even less mercy: the wrestler who is thrown has, almost always, been thrown by his own error, and the partner is merely the instrument that reveals it.

There is, finally, a sharp and instructive contrast between wrestling and its sister strand of the bow, and naming it guards against a false symmetry. The archery volume had to concede, and honestly did, that the war-bow is obsolete, superseded by firearms, so that archery survives only as a formation and never as a practical skill of arms. Wrestling is under no such shadow. The unarmed control of another body at close quarters is not obsolete and cannot become so; it remains a living skill, the foundation of every grappling art, of practical self-defence, and of much of modern combat sport.⁴³ This does not make wrestling superior to archery, for the value of both, in the terms of this series, lies in their pedagogy and not in their utility as arms; but it does mean that wrestling carries its formation without the melancholy of a dead function. It trains the person and remains, into the bargain, a real and useful skill, and the modern evidence

⁴² On the recurring figure of the incorruptible mirror across the strands and volumes, the target, the horse, the brush, the board, cf. Volume I; and the archery deepening volume, on the target as the sharpest external mirror. Wrestling's mirror is the resisting partner, the most immediate of all because it answers in real time and cannot be deceived.

⁴³ The contrast with archery (cf. the archery deepening volume, on the obsolescence of the war-bow) is deliberate: unlike the bow, unarmed grappling retains a genuine practical function, which is why the modern evidence in Chapter 7 can weigh applied benefits, such as trained falling, that have no archery equivalent.

of the next chapter can therefore weigh practical benefits, above all the trained capacity to fall safely, that archery could not offer. The bow teaches by a target that has outlived its war; the mat teaches by a contest that has not.

7. The Modern Evidence: What Wrestling Can and Cannot Be Shown to Do

The historical case for wrestling is strong and well documented; the modern empirical case must be made with more caution, and this chapter makes it in the series' manner, in descending order of evidential strength and with the limits named at every step. Wrestling is a contact sport, and honesty requires that its benefits and its costs be weighed together on the same scale. The picture that emerges is neither the wellness advertisement that a promoter might wish nor the catalogue of dangers that a critic might compile, but something more useful than either: a sober account of one genuinely valuable applied benefit, a set of general benefits shared with any vigorous exercise, and a real and quantified debit of injury that a prudent practitioner must respect.

7.1 The starting point: inactivity and the value of any sustained practice

Before turning to what is specific to wrestling, the general backdrop established in Volume I should be recalled, because it frames the whole question. A large and rising share of the world's adults do not meet the minimum recommendations for physical activity. A pooled analysis of 507 population-based surveys with 5.7 million participants found that the global age-standardized prevalence of insufficient physical activity rose from 23.4 % in 2000 to 26.4 % in 2010 and to 31.3 % in 2022, and that on current trends the international target of a 15 % relative reduction by 2030 will not be met.⁴⁴ Against this background, any regularly practiced activity that reaches the recommended threshold already makes a substantial contribution to health, and wrestling, practiced seriously, is a vigorous whole-body activity of exactly this kind. Figure 4 shows the rising prevalence of insufficient activity, with a dashed extrapolation that is emphatically not a study estimate but a simple continuation of the trend, included only to make the direction vivid.

This is the weakest and most general benefit, shared with any exercise, and it is stated first precisely because it is the surest. Wrestling trains strength, power, balance, and whole-body coordination as thoroughly as any activity one could name, and for a person who will actually stick with it, the health value of that vigorous engagement is real. But this benefit is generic, and the volume does not rest wrestling's case on it. Two more specific questions must be asked: whether wrestling trains anything of distinctive and transferable value, and what it costs in injury.

7.2 Learning to fall: the one genuinely strong applied finding

The most valuable specific benefit that a grappling art can offer is also the one with the best evidence behind it, and it is worth stating clearly because it is so often overlooked: wrestling teaches a person how to fall without being hurt. The trained break-fall, the reflexive skill of meeting the ground with a distributed impact and a protected head rather than with an outstretched arm or an unguarded skull, is the first thing any grappling art teaches, because a beginner who can-

⁴⁴ Strain, Tessa et al., *National, Regional, and Global Trends in Insufficient Physical Activity among Adults from 2000 to 2022. A Pooled Analysis of 507 Population-based Surveys with 5.7 Million Participants*, in: *The Lancet Global Health* 12/8 (2024), pp. e1232–e1243. Global age-standardized prevalence of insufficient physical activity: 23.4 % (2000), 26.4 % (2010), 31.3 % (2022); the 2030 target will not be met on current trends. This is the same backdrop used across the series (cf. Volume I; the archery deepening volume).

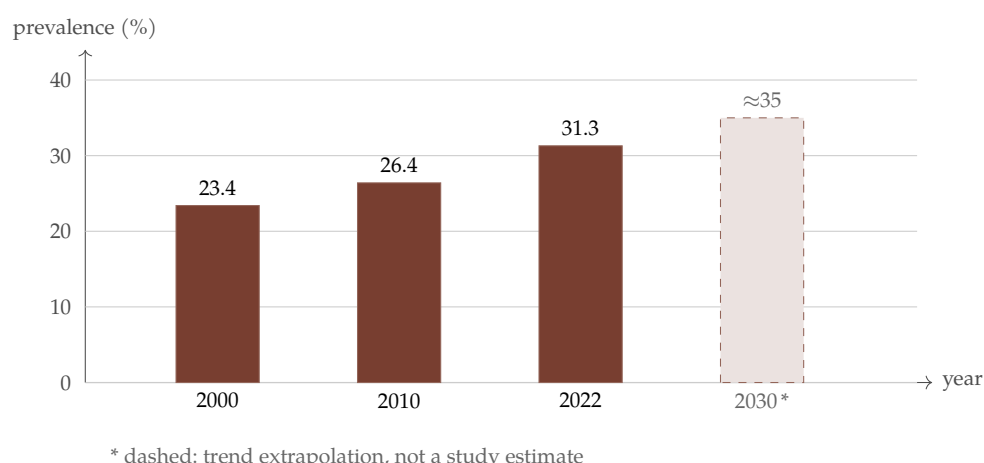


Figure 4: Global age-standardized prevalence of insufficient physical activity among adults, 2000–2022, with a trend extrapolation (Strain et al. 2024; the 2030 bar is dashed and is not a study projection)

not fall safely cannot practice at all; and this skill, unlike almost anything else in the martial repertoire, has a directly demonstrated real-world value. The evidence comes chiefly from the closely related art of judo, whose break-falls (*ukemi*) are essentially those of *shuaijiao*. A systematic review of judo training for middle-aged and older people, covering 23 studies and nearly 1,400 participants, found that judo-based programmes improved balance, strength, gait, and, specifically, safe-falling technique, and concluded that teaching such falling skills is a promising strategy for reducing the injuries that falls cause in older adults.⁴⁵ This matters greatly, because falls are among the leading causes of injury and of death from injury in older people, and a trainable skill that reduces their harm is a public-health asset of the first order.

The honest statement of this benefit is nonetheless careful. The strong evidence concerns judo, not *shuaijiao* directly; the inference to *shuaijiao* rests on the near-identity of their falling techniques, which is sound but is an inference. The reviewed programmes were, moreover, generally adapted for older beginners, avoiding the dangerous joint-locks and strangles and emphasizing the safe elements, exactly as a prudent adaptation of wrestling would. With those qualifications, this is the firmest applied finding in the chapter, and it is one that archery, the sister strand, could not offer at all: a grappling art teaches, as its very first lesson, a skill that measurably protects people from one of the commonest and most serious injuries of ordinary life. For this benefit alone, taught safely, wrestling would earn its place.

7.3 Injury: the honest debit side

No account of a contact sport is honest that does not weigh its injuries, and wrestling's are considerable. The point must be faced squarely: wrestling, as a competitive sport, carries one of the highest injury rates in organized athletics. The long-running injury surveillance of collegiate men's wrestling in the United States found match injury rates on the order of twenty-six

⁴⁵ Palumbo, Federico / Ciacconi, Simone / Guidotti, Flavia / Forte, Roberta / Sacripanti, Attilio / Capranica, Laura / Tessitore, Antonio, *Risks and Benefits of Judo Training for Middle-Aged and Older People. A Systematic Review*, in: *Sports* 11/3 (2023), article 68 (23 studies, 1,392 participants, mean age 63). Judo-based interventions improved physical performance, balance, strength, gait, and safe-falling technique; the review identifies the teaching of break-falls (*ukemi*) as a favourable strategy for reducing fall-related injuries in adults without prior judo experience.

per thousand athlete-exposures, among the very highest of any studied sport, with the musculoskeletal system and the head the most vulnerable, and skin infections a persistent hazard of the close-contact practice environment.⁴⁶ The related evidence from judo tells a similar story with useful detail: a systematic review of judo injuries found an injury risk of roughly eleven to twelve per cent at the 2008 and 2012 Olympic Games, with sprains, strains, and contusions of the knee, shoulder, and fingers the most common injuries, and being thrown the most common mechanism.⁴⁷ To these acute risks two chronic ones peculiar to the sport must be added: the dangerous practice of rapid weight-cutting before competition, and the transmissible skin infections bred by close skin contact. Table 3 summarizes the injury picture from the two best-studied analogues.

Table 3: The injury profile of grappling sports (from the two best-studied analogues)

Source	Headline figure	Character of injuries
Collegiate wrestling (Agel et al. 2007)	≈26 injuries per 1,000 match exposures; among the highest of NCAA sports	Musculoskeletal and head injuries; skin infections in practice
Olympic judo (Pocecco et al. 2013)	≈11–12 % injury risk at the 2008/2012 Games	Sprains, strains, contusions (knee, shoulder, fingers); mechanism: being thrown; severe injury rare

The lesson of these figures is not that wrestling should be avoided but that it must be practiced wisely, and it bears directly on the design principles of Chapter 9. The high injury rates belong above all to *competitive* wrestling at its most intense, where maximal effort meets maximal resistance; recreational and formative practice, conducted at moderate intensity with good falling technique and sane weight management, occupies a far gentler part of the spectrum. The single most important protective skill is the very one the previous subsection praised, the trained fall, since being thrown is the commonest mechanism of injury and the trained wrestler is precisely the one who has learned to be thrown safely. Honesty about the debit and confidence in the benefit are therefore not in tension: the same skill that makes wrestling valuable, knowing how to fall, is what makes it survivable.

7.4 Character, aggression, and the young: the genuinely mixed evidence

A further claim often made for wrestling, as for the martial arts generally, is that it builds character and channels aggression, and here the evidence must be reported as what it is: genuinely mixed and methodologically weak. A systematic review of the social-psychological outcomes of martial-arts practice among youth, drawing on twenty-seven studies, found a contrasting picture in which some studies reported enhanced personal and social functioning while others warned of increased aggression, and concluded that the outcome depends heavily on mediating factors, the type of art, the social context, the structural qualities of the activity, and above all

⁴⁶ Agel, Julie / Ransone, Jack / Dick, Randall / Oppliger, Robert / Marshall, Stephen W., *Descriptive Epidemiology of Collegiate Men's Wrestling Injuries. National Collegiate Athletic Association Injury Surveillance System, 1988–1989 Through 2003–2004*, in: *Journal of Athletic Training* 42/2 (2007), pp. 303–310. Match injury rates of approximately 25.7–27.4 per 1,000 athlete-exposures, among the highest of NCAA sports; injuries concentrated in the musculoskeletal system and head, with skin infections a continuing concern in practice.

⁴⁷ Pocecco, Elena et al., *Injuries in Judo. A Systematic Literature Review Including Suggestions for Prevention*, in: *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 47/18 (2013), pp. 1139–1143. An injury risk of about 11–12 % was observed at the 2008 and 2012 Olympic Games; sprains, strains, and contusions (knee, shoulder, fingers) were most frequent, being thrown the most common mechanism; severe injuries were rare but, when they occurred, affected chiefly the brain and spine.

the character of the instruction and guidance.⁴⁸ The honest reading is that martial-arts practice does not, in itself and regardless of how it is taught, reliably improve or worsen a young person's conduct; what determines the outcome is the framing, the teacher, and the ethical culture of the school. This is not a disappointing result but an illuminating one, and it converges exactly with the argument of this whole series: the value of a martial practice is not automatic or magical but depends on the pedagogy and the ethical frame (*wude*) within which it is conducted. The mat can make a bully or a gentleman; which it makes depends on the master, not on the throws.

7.5 The honest gradient of evidence

Taken together, the wrestling evidence forms a gradient that the series' method requires be stated exactly. Firmest is the applied benefit of trained falling, supported by a systematic review of the closely related judo and directly relevant to a real and serious problem of ordinary life. Solid and general is the value of wrestling as vigorous whole-body exercise against the background of widespread inactivity, though this it shares with any sport. Well quantified, and pointing the other way, is the substantial injury cost of competitive wrestling, which no honest account may omit. Genuinely uncertain, and dependent wholly on how the art is taught, is the effect on character and aggression. What the evidence does *not* support is any claim that wrestling possesses a special power to transform the mind or the character that ordinary disciplined activity lacks; it is a valuable physical education with one outstanding applied benefit and one serious cost, not a magic. As with the bow, so with the mat: the tradition needs no exaggeration to be worth preserving, and it is honoured best by an exact account of what it can and cannot do.

8. Challenges and Honest Limits

A defensible account of wrestling must state plainly what the practice cannot do and where its study and revival can go wrong. Four limits deserve emphasis, and the first two are peculiar to this subject.

8.1 The twin distortions: nationalism and dismissal

The first limit is not a limit of the practice but of the discourse around it, and this volume has been shaped throughout by the effort to avoid it. Chinese wrestling is caught between two opposite falsifications. On one side stands the nationalist temptation, strong in some popular and federation literature, to make Chinese wrestling the oldest wrestling in the world and the parent of *sumo*, judo, and every Asian grappling art, a claim the evidence does not support and that this volume has explicitly rejected, since wrestling is a human universal and no people can claim to have invented it.⁴⁹ On the other side stands the more common Western dismissal, which knows Chinese wrestling only as a footnote to the Mongols and denies it a serious history of its own, an error that the whole of Chapter 3 was written to correct. The two errors are mirror images,

⁴⁸ Vertonghen, Jikkemien / Theeboom, Marc, *The Social-Psychological Outcomes of Martial Arts Practise Among Youth. A Review*, in: *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine* 9/4 (2010), pp. 528–537 (27 studies). The findings are contrasting: martial-arts practice is associated with both prosocial and antisocial outcomes, and the effect depends on partakers' characteristics, social context, the type of art, and the type of guidance; the authors stress the methodological limitations of the existing research.

⁴⁹ On the rejection of nationalist priority-claims and the treatment of dubious lineage and origin stories, cf. the method of this series (Note on the Sources) and Volume I, on the exposure of founding legends. The claim that Chinese wrestling is the ancestor of other peoples' wrestling is unsupported and is not made here.

and the same discipline refutes both: attention to the actual documents, which establish a deep indigenous tradition without establishing any priority over others. The honest position is narrow and firm, and it is the harder to hold precisely because both distortions are so tempting. This volume has tried to hold it, and the reader is asked to resist, in equal measure, the flattery of the one error and the condescension of the other.

8.2 Injury, weight-cutting, and the ethics of a contact art

The second limit is the real physical cost documented in Chapter 7.3, and it imposes an ethical obligation on anyone who teaches or practices the art. Wrestling is among the higher-injury sports, and two of its characteristic harms are, unlike the accidents of contact, entirely self-inflicted and entirely preventable: the dangerous rapid weight-cutting by which competitors dehydrate themselves to make a lower weight class, and the transmissible skin infections that flourish in unhygienic training.⁵⁰ A tradition that claims to form character cannot be indifferent to the health of the bodies in its charge, and the ethics of *wude* (Chapter 9) must therefore extend, in the modern gymnasium, to sane weight management, strict hygiene, graduated intensity, and the protection of beginners and children from the competitive extremes that produce the worst of the injury statistics. The honest limit here is not an argument against wrestling but a condition upon it: the art is worth practicing only if practiced with active care for the body, and a school that drives its members to injure themselves for a medal has betrayed the very formation it claims to offer.

8.3 The invention of lineage and the romance of the ancient

The third limit is the one this series meets in every field: the temptation to dress a practice in a fictitious antiquity or an invented lineage. Wrestling is less prone to the mystical romanticism that afflicts the “internal” arts, being too plainly physical to mystify easily, but it is not immune to the manufacture of unbroken master-to-disciple genealogies and secret ancestral techniques, the same fictions that Volume I exposed in the boxing traditions.⁵¹ The remedy is the one applied throughout: distinguish the documented from the reconstructed, name the gaps in transmission honestly, and prefer the verifiable to the evocative. A style whose teacher can trace his wrestling to a named lineage of the *Shanpuying* has a real and valuable descent; a style that claims descent from Chi You has a myth, and should say so. The dignity of the tradition, as this volume has argued from its first page, lies in its genuine and documented depth, which is great enough that no invention is needed to adorn it.

8.4 Evidence and time

The fourth set of limits is quickly stated. The modern evidence, as Chapter 7 set out, is uneven: strong for trained falling, general for fitness, well quantified for injury, and genuinely uncertain for character. No claim beyond what that gradient supports should be made, and in particular the pleasant belief that wrestling reliably makes the young less aggressive is not established and depends wholly on how the art is taught. And the last limit is the one no method removes:

⁵⁰ On rapid weight-cutting and its dangers in wrestling, and on the transmission of skin infections in the grappling environment, cf. Agel et al., *Descriptive Epidemiology of Collegiate Men's Wrestling Injuries*; and the general sports-medicine literature. Both are recognized, preventable hazards of the sport, and their prevention is an ethical duty of coaches and practitioners.

⁵¹ On the manufacture of lineages and the projection of spurious antiquity, and the duty of source-critical scrutiny, cf. Volume I, on founding legends and the honesty of transmission; and the Note on the Sources above. The remedy is to name what is documented as documented and what is reconstructed as reconstructed.

embodied skill takes time, and wrestling in particular cannot be learned from books or alone, but only slowly, with a partner and ideally a teacher, over years. Any program or teacher that promises quick mastery, or that treats the winning of matches as the measure of the art, should be distrusted on principle. What a sound practice offers is not speed but durability: a way of taking up the mat that keeps the practitioner improving slowly, protected by good technique, and held within an ethical frame that makes the practice a formation rather than a scramble for medals.

9. Taking Up Wrestling: Design Principles for a Modern Practice

This series ends its volumes with practice, and this one does so in a lighter form than Volume I, because wrestling is a deepening of one root of one strand rather than a whole curriculum, and because the general training architecture, the tiered plans and the weekly rhythm, is already set out there and need not be rebuilt.⁵² What follows is not a training plan but a set of principles for taking up the art honestly, each drawn from the history and evidence of the preceding chapters. They are offered as design constraints within which a practitioner, who in this art *must* have partners and should have a teacher, can build a practice suited to his own circumstances.

The first principle is *learn to fall before you learn to throw*. This is the first lesson of every grappling art for the soundest of reasons, confirmed by the modern evidence: being thrown is the commonest mechanism of injury, and the trained break-fall is both the precondition of all safe practice and, as Chapter 7.2 showed, the single most valuable transferable skill wrestling has to give.⁵³ The beginner who masters falling first buys safety and a lifelong asset in a single lesson; the one who rushes to throw before he can fall buys injury.

The second principle is *the partner is the teacher, and the mirror*. Wrestling cannot be learned alone or from a text; it requires a resisting partner, and the quality of one's practice is bound up with the quality and the safety of one's partnership.⁵⁴ This has both a practical and an ethical face. Practically, one needs partners of varied size and skill, and a teacher to correct what the partner reveals. Ethically, the partner is not an enemy but the instrument of one's own formation, the incorruptible mirror of Chapter 6, and is to be treated with the care one owes a person who makes one's own progress possible: controlling one's throws, protecting the partner's safety, and matching intensity to his level. The wrestler who injures his partners has destroyed the very means of his own art.

The third principle is *daily ritual and patient increment*. The cultivation model (*xiulian*) that governs the series applies to wrestling as to every strand: short, regular, attentive practice, of falling, of footwork, of a few throws drilled with a compliant partner, builds the skill more surely than occasional exhausting sessions or the pursuit of competitive peaks.⁵⁵ A few minutes of correct daily practice over years teaches more, and injures less, than the intermittent intensity that produces the worst of the injury figures.

⁵² For the full training architecture, tiered plans for different time budgets and a staged progression, see Volume I. The principles below adapt that architecture to wrestling rather than duplicating it.

⁵³ On the primacy of the break-fall, both as safety precondition and as the best-evidenced transferable benefit, see Chapter 7.2 (Palumbo et al. 2023) and Chapter 7.3 (Agel et al. 2007, being thrown as the commonest injury mechanism). Falling well is the foundation of both safety and value in wrestling.

⁵⁴ On the necessity of the resisting partner and the impossibility of solitary or textual mastery in wrestling, and on the partner as the "incorruptible mirror" of Chapter 6, cf. Chapter 6 above. The cooperative-yet-honest partnership is the specific ethical and pedagogical structure of the grappling arts.

⁵⁵ On the cultivation model of small, daily, patient practice cf. Volume I; and the archery deepening volume, on the same principle applied to a single strand. Wrestling's fundamentals, falling and footwork, are especially amenable to short, frequent, attentive drilling.

The fourth principle is *the ethical frame (wude)*, which in a contact art acquires a concrete and medical content. To practice wrestling within *wude* is, in the modern gymnasium, to manage weight sanely rather than by dangerous dehydration, to keep the training environment clean against infection, to graduate intensity and protect beginners and the young from competitive extremes, and to treat every partner's body as being in one's care.⁵⁶ Here the ethical frame is not decoration upon a sport but the very condition of its being a formation rather than a harm, and it is the point at which wrestling, like every strand of the *wu*, calls for the moral seriousness that the *wen* cultivates.

These principles translate into a modest and realistic shape for beginning, offered not as a prescriptive plan, the full architecture belongs to Volume I, but as an illustration of how they cohere. A beginner does well to spend his first weeks almost entirely on falling and on basic footwork and balance, with a compliant partner and under a teacher's eye, before contesting a throw at all; to add resistance only gradually, as safe falling becomes reflexive; to drill a small number of fundamental throws to real fluency rather than collecting many; and to keep sessions short, frequent, and attentive, measured by the quality of the practice rather than by the punishment endured. Competition, if it is sought at all, comes late and is held in its place as a test of the practice and not its purpose; weight is managed by sane training and diet, never by dehydration; and hygiene is treated as a duty to one's partners. Where a competent teacher and a stable group of partners can be found, this is a practice that can be sustained and enjoyed for decades and that gives, along the way, the one applied gift wrestling uniquely offers, the trained and lifelong capacity to fall without harm. None of this is fast, and the volume has promised throughout that it would not pretend otherwise. What it offers is a way of beginning that can be sustained for years, which is the only timescale on which the mat gives up what it has to teach.

10. Conclusion: The Honest Partner

Of all the practices this series treats, wrestling is the oldest in the Chinese record and the most misunderstood, and this volume has tried to set both matters right at once. It began, in legend, with the horned Chi You, and the tradition's choice to make its oldest combat-myth a myth of grappling is itself a measure of how deep the art lay in the culture's sense of its own beginnings. It was, in documented history, a military exercise of the Zhou, a court spectacle of the Han staged by Emperor Wu and carved into the walls of tombs, and, in the Tang and Song, a fully professional sport with named champions, prize tournaments on the raised stage, women competitors, and, by the tenth or eleventh century, the first book on wrestling that any civilization produced. All of this stood in place, ancient and Chinese and richly documented, before a single Mongol horseman rode south. The steppe would later add much, the jacketed throwing form, the imperial corps of the Qing, the direct ancestry of the modern Beijing style, and this volume has given that infusion its full and fair due. But the horsemen did not bring wrestling to China; they came to a land that had been wrestling, and writing about its wrestling, for more than a thousand years.

The honest conclusion is therefore neither the nationalist's nor the sceptic's. Chinese wrestling is not the mother of all grappling, for wrestling is a human universal and belongs to every people; and it is not a Mongol loan, for its indigenous roots are documented for a millennium before the Mongols. It is something better than either fantasy: a genuine, ancient, continuous, and self-conscious tradition of its own, which received a steppe graft and grew into

⁵⁶ On *wude* as the ethical frame of the martial strands cf. Volume I; on its concrete medical content in a contact sport, weight management, hygiene, graduated intensity, protection of the vulnerable, see Chapter 8.2 above. In wrestling the ethical frame is inseparable from the duty of care for bodies.

the modern art of *shuaijiao*. Its modern evidence, weighed honestly, gives it one outstanding applied gift, the trained capacity to fall without harm, alongside the general benefits of vigorous exercise and a real and quantified cost in injury that a wise practice manages rather than denies. It needs no exaggeration, and no myth of priority, to be worth preserving; it gains, as this whole series holds, when one looks at it closely.

And it remains, as everything in this series remains, one half of a whole. The wrestler learns, from the most honest of teachers, the resisting body of another person, what the *Sheyi* demanded of the archer and the classics demanded of every cultivated man: to seek the cause of the fall within himself, to treat his partner with the care he owes the instrument of his own formation, and to hold his strength within an ethical frame. These are lessons of the *wen* as much as of the *wu*, learned through the body but pointing beyond it. The mat, drawn to its full meaning, points to the book. This is why the volume closes, as its companions do, by naming what it cannot complete: the *wu* of the grapple finds its wholeness only in the *wen*, and the complete person of the tradition, *wen wu shuang quan*, is the one in whom the strength that can throw a man and the cultivation that would rather raise him are at last joined in a single character.

Glossary

Term	Meaning
<i>baixi</i> 百戲	The “hundred games,” the broad category of Han court entertainment within which <i>jiaodi</i> wrestling was staged.
<i>böke</i>	Mongolian wrestling; one of the “three manly games” of the steppe, an ancient tradition in its own right.
<i>buku</i> 布庫	The Manchu term for wrestling; the art of the Qing imperial corps.
Chi You 蚩尤	The horned rebel of legend whose battle with the Yellow Emperor was said to originate <i>jiaodi</i> ; mythical, not historical.
<i>Chiyou xi</i> 蚩尤戲	The “play of Chi You,” a horn-wearing folk wrestling game recorded in the sixth-century <i>Shuyi ji</i> .
Diaoluzi 調露子	The otherwise unknown Song-period author of the <i>Jiaoli ji</i> , the first book on wrestling.
<i>Dongjing meng</i> 東京夢華錄	Meng Yuanlao’s memoir of Northern Song Kaifeng, a source for its professional wrestling.
<i>goulán</i> 勾欄	The roofed performance galleries of the Song entertainment quarter.
<i>Guoshu</i> 國術	“National art”; the Republican designation under which the martial arts, wrestling included, were reorganized.
<i>jiaodi</i> 角抵	“Horn-butting”; the oldest term for the wrestling contest, and loosely the Han court spectacles.
<i>jiaoli</i> 角力	“Matching of strength”; the trial-of-power sense of wrestling; title-word of the first wrestling book.
<i>Jiaoli ji</i> 角力記	“Notes on Wrestling”; the earliest known book on wrestling, by Diaoluzi, tenth or eleventh century.
<i>kuaijiao</i> 快跤	The “fast wrestling” style associated with Baoding in Hebei.
<i>leitai</i> 擂臺	The raised stage of the Song wrestling tournaments; later the “challenge platform” of martial legend.

<i>Shanpuying</i> 善撲營	The Qing imperial wrestling corps, founded under the Kangxi Emperor and quartered in Beijing.
<i>shuaijiao</i> 摔跤 (摔角)	“Throwing down”; the modern standardized name of Chinese wrestling.
<i>Shuyi ji</i> 述異記	A sixth-century collection of marvels attributed to Ren Fang, source of the <i>Chiyou xi</i> notice.
<i>ukemi</i>	The trained break-fall (Japanese term); the safe-landing skill shared by judo and <i>shuaijiao</i> .
<i>wen</i> 文	The civil, literary, and cultural pole of Chinese education.
<i>wu</i> 武	The martial pole; wrestling is the deepest root of its body strand.
<i>wude</i> 武德	“Martial virtue”; the ethical frame of the martial strands, extending in wrestling to a duty of care for bodies.
<i>wen wu shuang quan</i> 文武雙全	“Complete in both the civil and the martial”; the guiding ideal of the series.
<i>Wulin jiushi</i> 武林舊事	Zhou Mi’s memoir of Southern Song Hangzhou, which names professional wrestlers.
<i>xiangpu</i> 相撲	The Tang and Song term for wrestling; the same characters as Japanese <i>sumo</i> .
<i>xiulian</i> 修煉	“Cultivation and refinement”; the model of patient, incremental, transforming practice.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary sources and early texts

Han shu 漢書 (History of the Han), by Ban Gu and others, 1st c. CE. Records the great *jiaodi* spectacle of Emperor Wu in 108 BCE and the early imperial history of the wrestling contest.

Jiaoli ji 角力記 (Notes on Wrestling), by Diaoluzi 調露子, Song period (tenth or eleventh century). The earliest known book devoted to wrestling; a historical and philological treatment in five chapters, recorded in the *Songshi* bibliography and Zheng Qiao’s *Tongzhi*. Cited here after Theobald (below).

Liji 禮記 (Book of Rites), chap. *Yueling* 月令 (Monthly Ordinances). Pairs the matching of strength (*jiaoli*) with archery and charioteering among the winter military exercises.

Shuyi ji 述異記 (Notes Relating the Extraordinary), attributed to Ren Fang 任昉 (460–508). A Six Dynasties collection of marvels; records the “play of Chi You” (*Chiyou xi*), a horn-wearing folk wrestling game, and identifies it with the ancient *jiaodi*.

Dongjing meng Hua lu 東京夢華錄 (Dreams of Splendour of the Eastern Capital), by Meng Yuanlao 孟元老, c. 1147. Memoir of Northern Song Kaifeng; a source for its professional wrestling and urban entertainments.

Wulin jiushi 武林舊事 (Old Affairs of Wulin), by Zhou Mi 周密. Memoir of Southern Song Hangzhou; describes wrestling tournaments and names individual professional wrestlers.

Sima Guang 司馬光, memorial against the performance of women wrestlers before Emperor Renzong (1062). The primary source for the episode of the women wrestlers at the Xuande Gate, and, ironically, the best evidence for the existence of women’s professional wrestling in the Northern Song.

Shuihu zhuan 水滸傳 (Water Margin), Ming novel. Cited only for its wrestling episode (Yan Qing), a literary reflection of the documented *leitai* tradition, not a historical source.

Scholarly historiography of the Chinese martial arts

Henning, Stanley E.: essays on the history of the Chinese martial arts, including *Ignorance, Legend and Taijiquan*, in: *Journal of the Chen Style Taijiquan Research Association of Hawaii* 2/3 (1994), pp. 1–7. On the source-critical method and the exposure of martial-arts legends.

Kennedy, Brian / Guo, Elizabeth: *Chinese Martial Arts Training Manuals. A Historical Survey*, Berkeley 2005. On the manual tradition and the foundational appreciation of Tang Hao.

Lorge, Peter A.: *Chinese Martial Arts. From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge 2012. The standard scholarly history; the backbone of the historical account of wrestling here, from *jiaodi* through *xiangpu* to the modern art.

Louie, Kam: *Theorising Chinese Masculinity. Society and Gender in China*, Cambridge 2002. Authoritative on the conceptual pair *wen* and *wu*.

Morris, Andrew D.: *Marrow of the Nation. A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China*, Berkeley 2004. On the Republican reorganization of the martial arts and the Guoshu movement.

Theobald, Ulrich: *ChinaKnowledge.de – An Encyclopaedia on Chinese History and Literature*, arts. *Jiaoliji* 角力記, *Shuyi ji* 述異記, and related entries. The scholarly reference apparatus for the early texts, the terminology, and the institutions.

Modern empirical research (verified)

Agel, Julie / Ransone, Jack / Dick, Randall / Oppliger, Robert / Marshall, Stephen W.: *Descriptive Epidemiology of Collegiate Men's Wrestling Injuries. NCAA Injury Surveillance System, 1988–1989 Through 2003–2004*, in: *Journal of Athletic Training* 42/2 (2007), pp. 303–310. Match injury rates ≈26 per 1,000 exposures, among the highest of NCAA sports.

Palumbo, Federico / Ciaccioni, Simone / Guidotti, Flavia / Forte, Roberta / Sacripanti, Attilio / Capranica, Laura / Tessitore, Antonio: *Risks and Benefits of Judo Training for Middle-Aged and Older People. A Systematic Review*, in: *Sports* 11/3 (2023), article 68. Judo-based training improves balance, strength, gait, and safe falling; *ukemi* as a fall-injury prevention strategy.

Pocecco, Elena et al.: *Injuries in Judo. A Systematic Literature Review Including Suggestions for Prevention*, in: *British Journal of Sports Medicine* 47/18 (2013), pp. 1139–1143. ≈11–12 % injury risk at the 2008/2012 Olympics; being thrown the commonest mechanism; severe injury rare.

Strain, Tessa et al.: *National, Regional, and Global Trends in Insufficient Physical Activity among Adults from 2000 to 2022*, in: *The Lancet Global Health* 12/8 (2024), pp. e1232–e1243. The global inactivity data used in Chapter 7.1.

Vertonghen, Jikkemien / Theeboom, Marc: *The Social-Psychological Outcomes of Martial Arts Practise Among Youth. A Review*, in: *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine* 9/4 (2010), pp. 528–537. Twenty-seven studies; contrasting outcomes dependent on context, type, and guidance.

Specialist wrestling literature (grey, used with caution)

Modern histories of *shuaijiao* produced by practitioners, federations, and physical-culture institutes (e.g. overviews issued through the international wrestling and *shuaijiao* bodies). These are used only where the scholarly literature is silent, chiefly for details of the modern regional styles and the size of the *Shanpuying*, and are marked as specialist literature in the notes, in keeping with the series' treatment of grey sources.

A Methodological Closing Note

This volume has held throughout to the method of the series. Founding legend, datable institution, and modern empirical finding have been kept apart and labeled: the horn-butting of Chi You was told as legend, the Han spectacle and the Song professionals and the *Jiaoli ji* as documented history, and the injury and falling data as verified modern research stated with its limits. The central historical claim, the depth and continuity of the indigenous Chinese tradition before the Mongols, was built from datable texts and finds and defended against the two opposite distortions that beset the subject, the nationalist inflation and the “Mongol origin” dismissal, by the same discipline of attending to what the sources actually say. Every modern empirical claim has been verified against its primary publication, with exact authors, title, journal, year, and locus, and no figure has been reported that could not be so verified; where a claim rested only on federation or practitioner literature, it was marked as such. Where the tradition’s own confidence outran the evidence, as in the claim that wrestling reliably forms character, the gap was named rather than papered over. Wrestling, more than most of the subjects of this series, is surrounded by claims of priority and of borrowing that the documents do not support; the answer offered here is the one the tradition’s own first author, Diaoluzi, already modeled a thousand years ago when he set out to research the antiquity of his art from the texts rather than to invent it: to prefer the documented to the wished-for, and to let a tradition this genuinely old and this genuinely rich stand on what can be shown. The tradition needs no exaggeration to be worth preserving; it gains when one looks at it closely, and the honest partner on the mat, who returns exactly what one brings to him, is a fitting emblem of that method.