

A Case Study of Family Trans-Generational Transmission of Chinese Wingchun Wushu: Confucian Ethics, Family Education and Cultural Inheritance

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Abstract

This paper adopts case study, semi-structured interview and participatory field observation to conduct empirical research on a certified Wing Chun heritage clan in Foshan, Guangdong. Information about the first generation is mainly collected from oral narratives and archival video materials provided by the second-generation inheritor, while first-hand interview data from 11 participants and long-term field records document inheritance practices of the second, third and fourth generations. Thematic analysis is used to organize all data and compare intergenerational inheritance practices across four generations. Martial arts inheritance in the first generation was exclusively open to male descendants without any plan to involve women. The second generation represented a transitional phase that largely adhered to traditional norms, only permitting the granddaughter's amateur training in the inheritor's later years. The third generation thoroughly broke the male-only succession barrier and built an interest-centered flexible inheritance model. Restrictions on female succession originated from local Lingnan clan customs rather than original Confucian ethics. This study verifies that Confucian culture does not fade amid modernization; instead, it achieves dynamic adaptation by retaining core values while revising superficial institutional rules. This paper fills the gap of micro empirical research on Confucian governance within martial clans, and provides localized practical references for sustainable living heritage of Wing Chun and other similar traditional martial arts.

Keywords

Wing Chun, Wushu Intangible Cultural Heritage, Family Intergenerational

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1. Introduction

As a core medium carrying China's embodied crafts, moral codes and humanistic heritage, traditional Wushu constitutes a vital component of intangible cultural heritage, with consanguine clans functioning as its most stable pathway for living transmission (Yan & Ma, 2018). Driven by globalization, urbanization and the shift toward smaller household sizes, traditional martial arts face tangible predicaments, such as broken technical lineages and a dearth of young successors. Most established protective frameworks center on external interventions including school-based outreach, commercial martial gym management and government policy subsidies. Few academic inquiries delve into micro clan spheres to unpack the foundational logics of clan ethics and domestic education that govern cross-generational technical inheritance.

A review of existing domestic literature reveals two clear research voids. First, publications investigating intergenerational Wushu transmission independently analyze technical evolution and master-disciple hierarchies, artificially severing the intrinsic links between inheritance practice and Confucian domestic and patriarchal institutions; such work lacks first-hand field evidence from multi-generational martial clans (Hou, 2022). Second, cross-disciplinary research integrating Confucian thought and Wushu is limited to macro theoretical deliberation. These studies fail to contrast the elastic adjustments of Confucian regulations across agrarian traditional and modern urban societies, and cannot account for intergenerational divisions observed in modern martial clans that retain core cultural spirits while revising surface inheritance protocols (Xiang et al., 2023).

In response to these gaps, this paper poses two core research questions. First, how do traditional Confucian ideologies continuously shape the full spectrum of intergenerational practices within martial clans—covering skill delivery, talent screening and identity formation—in contemporary social contexts? Second, how may Confucian ethical systems achieve flexible reform to match modern family education values? This paper carries out empirical research focused on a provincial certified Wing Chun intangible cultural heritage clan based in Foshan, Guangdong. Theoretically, this study fills the gap of micro case research regarding Confucian domestic governance within martial arts academia. Practically, it supplies implementable references for long-term living inheritance of Wing Chun and analogous traditional Wushu, alongside the modern transformation of clan cultural traditions.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. Review of Domestic and International Literature

2.1.1. Research on Intergenerational Transmission of Wushu

Domestic research on familial Wushu transmission has formed a complete ana-

lytical framework. Consensus across relevant studies holds that consanguinity, geography and occupational ties constitute three core bonds of clan inheritance. As the smallest cultural unit, households reproduce embodied crafts, clan norms and spiritual values across generations via Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital. Urbanization, shrinking family scales and diverse career choices among youth jointly erode traditional patrilineal succession, triggering technical loss and weakened willingness to practice martial arts (Hou, 2022). Supplementary research focused on rural folk Wushu further argues that traditional clan communities serve as the foundational carrier of martial arts continuity (Fang, Gao, & Wang, 2007). Nevertheless, continuous rural-to-urban migration disintegrates village-based martial training circles; standalone external policy support cannot activate endogenous inheritance momentum within families (Yan & Ma, 2018).

2.1.2. Cross-Disciplinary Research on Confucian Domestic Ethics and Martial Arts Inheritance

Interdisciplinary scholarship unanimously recognizes that Confucian value systems form the fundamental ethical foundation of both master-disciple and clan-based martial inheritance. Synthesizing the five-relations framework and inheritor life-history research, scholars have proven that core Confucian ideals including self-cultivation, hierarchical etiquette and clan continuity are deeply integrated into ancient martial education. It is critical to draw a clear distinction: the norm of male-only succession is not an inherent mandate of original Confucian ethics. Instead, it represents a local clan custom shaped by Lingnan agrarian production demands during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Original Confucian thought advocates self-improvement and equal treatment of all people, containing no intrinsic gender exclusion (Wang, Zhao, & Huang, 2010). Furthermore, whether a single clan adheres to this custom is also shaped by the personal value judgments of successive senior family members. While Confucian blood ties facilitate the intergenerational transmission of homeland sentiment in regional martial cultures such as Lingnan boxing styles, gendered succession rules emerge from the combined effects of local customs and individual preferences, rather than stemming purely from core Confucian values (Zhang, 2018; Wang, 2018).

2.2. Core Theoretical Foundations

2.2.1. Theory of Cultural Intergenerational Transmission

The theory of cultural intergenerational transmission posits that households function as the primary arena for cross-generational reproduction of values and identities (Wang, 2008). Through explicit instruction and implicit immersive socialization, elder kin transmit clan and regional culture to realize cultural iteration (Kolb, 1984; Fang, Gao, & Wang, 2007). Taking consanguinity as its core carrier, the Guo Wing Chun clan combines Lingnan geographic ties and master-disciple occupational bonds to achieve multi-layer cultural circulation, which forms the foundational analytical framework of this paper.

2.2.2. Theory of Embodied Practice Inheritance

Wushu inheritance constitutes immersive reproduction of embodied cultural capital, distinct from text-based knowledge transfer (Bourdieu, 1986). Long-term daily training shapes unique embodied habitus among elder practitioners, passed down through demonstration and imitation. Beyond technical skills, physical training conveys martial morality and Confucian rituals, acting as the central medium of domestic martial education (Xiang et al., 2023).

2.2.3. Four Concept Definitions

1) Core Confucian Values

Stable, timeless spiritual tenets of Confucianism that remain unaffected by social shifts across millennia. These tenets include respecting mentors, self-cultivation and moral integrity, cultural inheritance, and devotion to the nation and community, with no inherent gender or hierarchical exclusivity.

2) Superficial Institutional Rules

Practical auxiliary norms derived from Confucian thought within agrarian clan societies to facilitate clan governance. Such rules carry distinct temporal limitations. Typical examples include male-only succession, absolute authority of senior kin, and priority given to direct male line descendants.

3) Rigid Inheritance

An inheritance model that fully adheres to traditional superficial institutional rules. Martial arts practice and lineage succession are coercively regulated by clan obligations and the authoritative power of elder family members.

4) Flexible Inheritance

An inheritance framework that fully retains core Confucian values while discarding outdated superficial institutional rules. Individual interest and egalitarian inclusiveness serve as the primary driving forces of martial arts transmission.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Methods

This empirical investigation deploys three complementary methodologies: case study research, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and participatory field observation. The case study method enables rigorous, systematic dissection of intergenerational transmission mechanisms within Wushu households by centering on the single illustrative case of the Guo Wingchun clan. Semi-structured interviews were administered to three generations of core clan inheritors to capture primary oral data regarding inheritance trajectories, ideological shifts, and domestic educational practices. Long-term participatory field observation entailed engagement in routine clan training, instructional sessions, and cultural exchange events to document authentic inheritance contexts and behavioral patterns, safeguarding the authenticity and completeness of study data.

All audio recordings and field notes were transcribed verbatim and cleared of irrelevant content to build a raw text database. This study adopted thematic analysis: basic themes including training motivation and gender views were first ex-

tracted, then grouped into four core themes (rigid/flexible inheritance, core/superficial Confucian norms), forming the analytical framework of dynamic adaptation of Confucianism. Draft analysis was sent to Guo Wei and Guo Jie for member checking to revise subjective inferences.

3.2. Case Selection Criteria and Rationale

Two screening benchmarks were established to guarantee case representativeness and analytical validity. First, eligible clans must maintain an unbroken Wushu inheritance lineage spanning three or more generations, with priority assigned to households officially certified as custodians of Wushu ICH to secure professional, sustained inheritance practice. Second, core household members across three generations must hold long-term residency within Chinese Mainland, enabling direct observation of how shifts in indigenous Confucian culture and societal modernization reshape inheritance practices. Drawing from the official registry of Wushu ICH inheritors in Guangdong Province, the Guo Wingchun clan—characterized by a complete inheritance lineage and distinct intergenerational disparities—was selected and contacted as the focal case for this research.

3.3. Profile of the Research Case

The Guo Wingchun clan, a certified ICH Wingchun household based in Foshan City, Guangdong Province, boasts a largely intact four-generation inheritance lineage. The founding first-generation inheritor Guo Fu (pseudonym), a direct disciple of Ip Man, formalized the Guo lineage's Wingchun technical repertoire and familial inheritance protocols. The second-generation successor Guo Wei (pseudonym) inherited his father's mantle, dedicating decades to advancing Wingchun transmission and attaining prominent standing within national Wingchun communities. The third-generation custodian Guo Jie (pseudonym) assumed stewardship of the clan's inheritance enterprise while revising traditional transmission philosophies. The fourth generation, represented by the clan's young granddaughter, is gradually pioneering a new paradigm of female Wingchun inheritance. Presently, the clan navigates a transitional phase of handover from the third to fourth generation, having fully experienced two distinct eras: societal governance dominated by traditional Confucian norms and contemporary modern social transformation. Pronounced intergenerational divergences render this case highly representative for analytical inquiry.

3.4. Fieldwork Procedures and Ethical Protocols

Data collection integrated on-site in-person visits, participatory training observations, and remote in-depth interviews with core inheritors spanning three generations and multiple formal disciples, yielding tens of thousands of words of transcribed interview data and field observation notes. All clan members and research participants are assigned pseudonyms to protect individual privacy. All field data is utilized exclusively for academic research without any commercial application,

in full compliance with standardized research ethical guidelines.

A total of 11 interviewees were recruited for this field research. The first-generation inheritor Guo Fu was deceased and thus unavailable for in-person interviews. This study draws on early historical materials archived by local intangible cultural heritage institutions as well as oral historical accounts provided by the second-generation inheritor to reconstruct relevant information. The remaining participants include the second-generation inheritor Guo Wei, the third-generation inheritor Guo Jie, five senior disciples who received systematic training under both generations of clan masters, and witnesses from other local Wing Chun lineages in Foshan.

Purposive sampling was adopted to select interview participants. We contacted inheritors listed on the official intangible cultural heritage rosters of Guangdong Province and Foshan City, and only recruited those who met the preset criteria to ensure all samples aligned with the analytical goals of this research.

Two sets of screening benchmarks were established for participants. Core clan inheritors must have long-term responsibility for internal martial arts teaching, take charge of external cultural exchange events, and keep complete written archives recording the clan's inheritance lineage. Formal disciples refer to practitioners who have received systematic Wing Chun training within this clan for at least ten years and experienced two distinct teaching systems, enabling them to offer first-hand comparative observations regarding generational disparities in inheritance practices.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Traditional Cultivation: Forward Intergenerational Transmission Governed by Rigid Confucian Discipline across the First Two Generations

Wingchun transmission among the Guo clan's first and second generations was entirely anchored in traditional Confucian patriarchal ethics and clan hierarchies, generating a rigid, stable, fixed model of forward intergenerational transfer that facilitated comprehensive cross-generational delivery of technical skills, personal discipline, cultural knowledge, and heir cultivation systems.

4.1.1. Transmission of Conduct and Discipline: Modeled Transfer through Sustained Embodied Practice

Traditional Wushu training demands long-term, self-regulating immersive practice, with consistent daily physical engagement serving as the core carrier for transmitting skill and self-discipline (Kolb, 1984). Guo Fu, the first-generation inheritor, adhered to Confucian self-cultivation principles and maintained a lifelong daily training routine, setting an exemplary standard for his descendants. The second-generation inheritor Guo Wei began training with his father in childhood and fully adopted his father's training schedule and self-disciplinary mindset, replicating the full embodied practice paradigm across generations. This transmission model—founded on elder demonstration and long-term immersive influence—integrates Confucian ideals of self-improvement and moral integrity into daily martial practice, enabling cross-generational transfer of Wing Chun tech-

niques, self-restraint and consistent training habits.

4.1.2. Transmission of Culture and Identity: Constructing Clan, Regional, and National Cultural Belonging

Confucian consanguineous clan structures build multi-layered senses of belonging centered on family, locality and nation (Zhang, 2018). When imparting techniques, Guo Fu prioritized passing down Lingnan martial morality: refusing to bully the weak and never yielding to hostile forces, framing Wing Chun as indigenous living regional culture. In 2000, Guo Wei participated in overseas cultural exchange events in Denmark, engaging with Chinese Wing Chun practitioners from multiple nations. This experience made him fully aware that clan martial practice extended beyond private family affairs to serve as a medium for disseminating Lingnan culture abroad. Under sustained Confucian cultural influence, martial training evolves into a formative process wherein individuals construct multi-layered cultural identities. Interview data further reveals that Guo Fu did not hastily designate a successor. Instead, he long observed each child's dedication to training, technical aptitude and clan accountability, ultimately selecting Guo Wei as the second-generation inheritor for his lifelong commitment to Wing Chun. Guo Fu also adopted a developmental training framework requiring Guo Wei to independently recruit and teach disciples, leveraging instructional pressures to drive technical refinement and capacity building. This cultivation system was fully perpetuated by the second generation, establishing standardized hierarchical successor selection under Confucian patriarchal governance and consolidating the clan's competitive advantages within provincial intangible cultural heritage Wing Chun communities.

Oral evidence was collected from the second-generation inheritor Guo Wei during the interview: "Back in my father Guo's time, none of the clan's daughters learned Wing Chun. They only did housework and cooking at home; martial training had nothing to do with women. The older generation all believed boxing was solely men's business." In addition, none of the clan's early inheritance rosters contain records of female practitioners or successors. The interview excerpt and archived lineage documents jointly verify that the first two generations enforced male-exclusive inheritance restrictions.

Therefore, the first generation led by Guo Fu strictly implemented the rule of refusing to teach boxing to female kin. As for the second-generation inheritor Guo Wei, he fully abided by the clan's traditional norms in his youth. Along with the shift of social values in his middle age, his attitude toward female descendants practicing martial arts gradually softened. Nevertheless, he would not take the initiative to pass down the clan's core techniques to women and merely tolerated his granddaughter's amateur training. It was the third-generation inheritor Guo Jie who thoroughly dismantled the full barriers against female succession.

4.2. Modern Adaptation: Reformed Inheritance Modes amid Social Changes of the Third and Fourth Generations

Contemporary gender equality and updated family education philosophies have

profoundly reshaped the clan's inheritance logic. The second-generation inheritor Guo Wei only held a passive tolerant stance: he merely allowed his granddaughter to practice Wing Chun for leisure, and would never take the initiative to pass down the clan's core boxing skills to female kin. Fundamental changes took place under the third-generation inheritor Guo Jie. Adhering to egalitarian educational values, he voluntarily taught his daughter the full set of core techniques and formally recognized women as legitimate full inheritors of the clan lineage. This completely broke the old patriarchal barrier of male-exclusive succession and established a flexible inheritance model centered on individual interest and gender equality.

Traditional master-apprentice systems relied on absolute senior authority and mandatory clan obligations to compel martial training. Modern family education prioritizes individuals' voluntary choices and inner passion. Abandoning the coercive training rules of the old days, Guo Jie no longer regards Wing Chun as an exclusive familial duty for male descendants. Instead, he frames martial practice as a voluntary path for personal self-cultivation and regional cultural continuity, realizing deep integration between traditional master-disciple structures and modern egalitarian family education.

4.3. Comparative Analysis of Intergenerational Inheritance: Rigid Traditional vs. Flexible Modern Modes

The four generations demonstrate gradual evolutionary differences in inheritance. During the era led by Guo Fu, martial arts training and lineage succession were only open to male clan members, and there was no prevailing idea of involving women in heritage practice. Clan obligations and guidance from senior kin served as the primary drivers of Wushu learning. The second generation under Guo Wei acted as a transitional phase. While the overall traditional training framework was maintained, he would not proactively pass down core Wing Chun techniques to female descendants and merely allowed his granddaughter to practice for leisure. Restrictions on inheritance were slightly relaxed, yet an equal succession mechanism for men and women had not been established. A mature flexible inheritance model took shape from the third generation onward, where all gender barriers were removed and every younger family member could train based on personal interest (Yang, Xiang, & Xu, 2015). This modern approach retains core Confucian spirits such as self-cultivation and moral integrity while abandoning outdated superficial clan regulations from the old times.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Contemporary Persistence of Confucianism: Dynamic Transformation from Rigid Institutional Discipline to Flexible Cultural Empowerment

This study revises the one-sided claim that modernization eliminates Confucian culture, verifying that Confucianism undergoes a dynamic shift from explicit institutional control to implicit cultural empowerment, consistent with the adaptive evolution of traditional inheritance summarized by Xiang et al. (2023). In agrarian

clan societies, superficial clan regulations restricting female participation in inheritance grew out of local rural customs and one-sided interpretations of patriarchy; such rigid gender constraints stand distinctly disconnected from Confucian core values of equality and self-cultivation. In modern urban contexts, these gender barriers and rigid hierarchical limits rooted in ancient folk customs have gradually faded (Zhang & Dai, 2018). Nevertheless, original core Confucian virtues including reverence for mentors, moral self-cultivation and cultural continuity remain intact as the steady spiritual foundation of martial clans.

5.2. Household Embodied Technical Education: The Core Mechanism through Which Confucian Family Education Empowers ICH Inheritance

Intergenerational transmission within martial clans fundamentally represents a whole-person educational process guided by Confucian values, distinct from school physical education and commercial martial gym training. By integrating Confucian ethics and clan traditions with long-term embodied practice, domestic martial education builds a three-dimensional cultivation system focused on technical mastery, moral formation and cultural stewardship. Regular embodied modeling enables cross-generational transfer of skill and discipline; clan cultural immersion fosters layered identity formation; hierarchical cultivation establishes a pipeline of future inheritors. Confucian domestic education provides a stable venue, sustained motivational force and profound cultural core for Wushu intangible cultural heritage, functioning as an irreplaceable medium for living heritage transmission.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Core Research Conclusions

First, Wing Chun inheritance across the clan's first two generations emerges as a product of rigid Confucian patriarchal ethics. Regular embodied practice, clan identity construction and tiered male successor screening facilitate holistic cross-generational transfer of technical skill, self-discipline, cultural heritage and moral norms, establishing a stable traditional inheritance system.

Second, shifts in modern society drive flexible reform of martial inheritance. Gender equality philosophies and contemporary family education dismantle patriarchal gender barriers and rigid succession rules, generating an inclusive, egalitarian, interest-centered model of intergenerational transmission and cultural reverse nurturing (Zhou, 2011; Zhou, 2014).

Third, Confucianism exhibits dynamic sustainability in contemporary contexts. While superficial institutional norms undergo continuous optimization, core ethical values endure across generations, guiding domestic education and intangible heritage practice within martial clans through adaptive cultural empowerment.

6.2. Practical Implications

First, inheritance of martial intangible cultural heritage requires differentiated in-

terpretation of Confucian culture. Practitioners should uphold core Confucian virtues of self-cultivation and respect for mentors while abandoning regressive superficial norms including gender discrimination and rigid hierarchy, realizing creative transformation of traditional ethics.

Second, optimizing domestic educational frameworks for martial clans. Integrating the strengths of traditional experiential teaching with modern egalitarian educational philosophies to build a unified household cultivation system combining technical training, moral instruction and cultural heritage stewardship, unlocking the core value of consanguinity-based inheritance.

Third, pursuing modernized innovation for intangible heritage transmission. Breaking closed clan succession barriers, centering cultural identification and prioritizing individual empowerment to align with contemporary social demands and achieving long-term living continuity of traditional Wushu intangible cultural heritage.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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