

A Brief History of Ancient Chinese Wrestling

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Wrestling, one of the oldest forms of sports in human history, has witnessed the evolution of human civilization and profoundly influenced social life across various eras. Chinese wrestling stands out among them, evolving continuously over thousands of years and becoming a valuable cultural heritage of the Chinese nation. The accumulation of wrestling techniques not only embodies the combination of strength and beauty but also symbolizes the fusion of multiple ethnic cultures. Different regions, influenced by diverse production methods, living habits, and folk customs, have shaped the unique styles and charms of Chinese wrestling.

Clan Society and Early Records

During the clan society period, clans used one-on-one combat to vie for leadership, toppling the opponent to win, which was the prototype of wrestling. With repeated practice, wrestling techniques continuously developed and spread. According to research, wrestling existed in China as early as the time of the Yellow Emperor. The "Shu Yi Ji" written by Ren Fang of the Southern Dynasties mentions that the Chi You tribe was skilled in wrestling, using horned helmets for combat. The "Book of Rites · Monthly Ordinances" also explicitly records wrestling activities in the Western Zhou Dynasty: "In the first month of winter... the emperor orders generals to practice martial arts, archery, and wrestling."

Shang Dynasty

Wrestling existed as early as the Shang Dynasty, where it was commonly known as "dou," meaning two people fighting bare-handed, reflecting combat and confrontation. Oracle bone inscriptions reveal that "dou" activities among Shang kings and nobles are some of the earliest recorded military activities, marking the earliest historical records of wrestling in China.

Western Zhou Dynasty

In the Western Zhou Dynasty, wrestling was referred to as "jiao" and became an important part of official military training, conducted regularly according to a monthly schedule.

Qin Dynasty

After unifying the six states and centralizing China, Qin Shi Huang designated wrestling as a key component of military parades. At that time, the northern Xiongnu excelled in archery and horseback riding, while the southern "Baiyue" focused on naval warfare. In contrast, the vast central plains were ideal for infantry, leading the Qin Dynasty to emphasize hand-to-hand combat training. During the Qin period, wrestling was officially renamed "jueli" and became popular in the court. The "Records of the Grand Historian · Biography of Li Si" notes, "At that time, the Second Emperor was at Ganquan, engaging in jueli and watching performances."

Han Dynasty

During the Han Dynasty, wrestling performances like "Donghai Huang Gong" were popular both in the court and among the common people. These performances were distinct from competitive wrestling. "Donghai Huang Gong" was both a court and folk entertainment, indicating that earlier performances such as Chiyou and jueli were more theatrical than competitive.

Northern and Southern Dynasties

From 420 AD, after the fall of the Eastern Jin Dynasty, to 589 AD, when the Sui Dynasty unified China, the country experienced a period of division known as the Northern and Southern Dynasties. This era marked significant ethnic integration. As minority groups entered central China, cultural and artistic exchanges flourished, enhancing and refining sports, with wrestling being a highly popular event. The "Taiping Yulan" cites Wang Yin's "Book of Jin," noting that wrestling competitions were held during welcoming ceremonies in the regions of Xiangcheng and Yingchuan, showcasing the widespread popularity of wrestling among the people.

Sui and Tang Dynasties

Wrestling thrived during the Sui and Tang Dynasties. The "Book of Sui · Emperor Yang's Annals" records, "Grand wrestling performances took place on Rui Men Street, with extraordinary talents from across the world gathering for a month." The "Book of Sui · Biography of Liu Yu" states, "In recent times, city dwellers have competed in wrestling games every fifteenth day of the first lunar month, spending lavishly." Wrestling competitions were held on the fifteenth day of the first and seventh lunar months during the Tang Dynasty. The "Miscellaneous Records of Wu Xing" notes that Tang emperors enjoyed wrestling, and the court established "wrestling troupes," known as "xiangpu peng," for military training and entertainment.

Song Dynasty

During the Song Dynasty, wrestling, known as "xiangpu" or "jueli," became widespread among the people, leading to the establishment of organizations like "Jueli Society" and "Xiangpu Society," primarily composed of professional wrestlers. Competitions were divided into wrestling matches, emphasizing skill and technique, and court entertainment performances. Wrestling matches had "society rules" ensuring fair competition, with referees known as "bushu" who explained the rules before the matches. Song Dynasty wrestlers wore minimal attire, with their upper bodies bare and only short pants around their waists, forming a comprehensive system.

Yuan Dynasty

In the Yuan Dynasty, wrestling, known as "jueli," was managed by professional wrestlers called "jueli zhe," overseen by the "Yongxiao Office." The Mongolian ethnic group, known for their martial prowess, considered wrestling, archery, and horseback riding as the "three manly skills." The "History of Yuan · Emperor Yingzong's Annals"

records, "Rewarded 120 jueji warriors with a thousand strings of cash each." In the late Yuan Dynasty, to maintain stability and control, the rulers prohibited other ethnic groups from practicing wrestling.

Ming Dynasty

Wrestling continued to thrive in the Ming Dynasty, with specialized institutions for wrestling techniques. During the Wanli period, the "Wanfa Baoquan" was published, featuring wrestling illustrations and techniques. The rulers incorporated wrestling into the "Six Arts," using it as an essential component of military training. The "History of Ming · Biography of Jiang Bin" records, "Regularly trained wrestling in the palace, with the emperor often donning armor to participate," demonstrating the high regard of the rulers for wrestling.

Qing Dynasty

In the Qing Dynasty, wrestling, often called "buku," saw significant integration between the wrestling practices of the Manchu and the traditional wrestling of central China. Official wrestlers were known as "buku," managed by the "Shanpuying" and received salaries based on their skill levels. After Emperor Kangxi used "buku" techniques to eliminate the Aobai faction, wrestling became even more popular, reaching a new peak. Amateur wrestling among the people, called "private wrestling," was for entertainment. The Palace Museum in Beijing houses the "Four Events of the Hunt" painting, depicting grand scenes of wrestling and archery during Emperor Qianlong's reign.

In summary, wrestling in ancient China was not just a sport but an essential part of military training and cultural heritage. The continuous development and evolution of wrestling techniques enriched traditional Chinese sports culture and provided valuable historical and cultural resources for future generations.

《塞宴四事图》(局部)

Four Amusements at the Border (Partial)



"Four Amusements at the Border" is a painting created by Giuseppe Castiglione (Lang Shining), a court painter during the Qing Dynasty. This artwork meticulously depicts various traditional Mongolian festivities during the reign of Emperor Qianlong, including a wrestling match, known as "buku." Below is a detailed description and historical context of this painting.

Description of the Image

At the center of the image is a wrestling match, where two pairs of wrestlers are engaged in fierce competition on a carpet. They wear traditional clothing, showcasing a combination of strength and skill. The movements and expressions of the wrestlers are vividly portrayed, highlighting their focus and power in the match.

In the upper right corner, a group of musicians dressed in blue floral robes is seen kneeling on the ground, playing traditional instruments to accompany the wrestling match and dance performances. The detailed depiction of the instruments, such as flutes, clappers, pipa, ruan, and others, vividly showcases the musical culture of the time.

The audience around the wrestling area includes the emperor, officials, guards, and various ethnic dignitaries. They sit around the wrestling mat, enthusiastically watching the match and cheering for the wrestlers. Each figure's facial expressions and clothing are meticulously rendered using traditional Chinese fine brushwork, adding a lively and realistic touch to the scene.

Historical Context

Wrestling (buku) was a significant sport and entertainment activity in the Qing Dynasty, especially in the court. The Qing emperors often ordered the Eight Banners soldiers to hold wrestling competitions to train their strength and combat skills while demonstrating the emperor's martial prowess. Wrestling was not just an entertainment program but also a means to showcase military strength and foster ethnic unity.

In "Four Amusements at the Border," Castiglione vividly recreates the festive scenes of Mongolian celebrations through the depiction of wrestling matches. This painting not only highlights the importance of wrestling in the Qing court but also reflects the cultural integration among various ethnic groups.

Through this painting, we see that wrestling in ancient China was not merely a sport but a crucial medium for cultural exchange and ethnic integration. Wrestling matches displayed the strength and skills of the participants and served as an essential activity for fostering friendship and interaction among different ethnic groups. This artwork preserves valuable historical scenes, providing us with precious visual materials to understand the wrestling culture of the Qing Dynasty.

"Four Amusements at the Border" is not only an artistic masterpiece but also a valuable historical record. It vividly portrays the wrestling matches and the cultural fusion in the Qing court, emphasizing the historical significance of wrestling in China. Through this painting, we can appreciate the techniques and charm of ancient wrestling and gain a deeper understanding of the unique position of this traditional sport in history and culture.

《敦煌壁画·摔跤组图》

Introduction to the Dunhuang Mural Series on Wrestling

The Dunhuang murals preserve a wealth of historical data related to sports. In these ancient sports scenes, we find the origins and shadows of many modern Olympic events. According to the preserved materials, although there are significant differences in rules and scale compared to modern sports, at least 20 sports, including archery, wrestling (jué lì), sumo, gymnastics, weightlifting (lifting bells), swimming, rowing, horseback riding, martial arts, mountaineering, sand sliding, jumping, and throwing, had become regular competitive activities for Chinese people before the Song and Yuan dynasties.

Below are the introductions to two Dunhuang wrestling murals:

Wrestling Mural from the Northern Zhou Period



The wrestling mural from the Northern Zhou period depicts a fierce wrestling match. The dynamic actions of the wrestlers are vividly portrayed, showcasing the combination of strength and technique. The background characters and decorations are simple, mainly highlighting the movements of the wrestlers. This style of wrestling mural presents an authentic scene of wrestling as a popular competitive activity, with a strong sense of motion and visual impact.

Wrestling Mural from the Late Tang Period



Compared to the Northern Zhou period, the wrestling mural from the late Tang period presents a serene and mysterious atmosphere. The wrestlers' postures are elegant, the background design is more complex and detailed, and the overall color tone is softer, reflecting the delicacy and beauty of Tang dynasty art. This wrestling mural not only illustrates the competitive nature of the sport but also integrates artistic aesthetics, showcasing the unique charm of Tang dynasty wrestling culture.

Wrestling in ancient China was not just a sport but also an important medium for cultural exchange and ethnic integration. The Dunhuang murals vividly record wrestling as a competitive activity, reflecting its significant role in ancient society. Through these murals, we can understand the development and changes in wrestling over different historical periods and appreciate the richness of ancient Chinese sports culture.

The Dunhuang murals provide us with valuable visual materials, helping us better understand and study ancient Chinese wrestling culture. These murals not only display the skills and charm of wrestling but also reveal the sports life and cultural atmosphere of ancient society. By appreciating and studying these murals, we can gain deeper insights into and preserve this ancient and precious cultural heritage.

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