

# Opportunities, challenges, and prospects for the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympic Games under the "Two Overall Situations"

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**Abstract:** Against the grand backdrop of the intertwined strategic overall situation of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the unprecedented global changes unseen in a century, martial arts, as an iconic symbol of excellent traditional Chinese culture, have evolved beyond mere sports competition aspirations, becoming a multidimensional strategic issue encompassing cultural dissemination, national image construction, and participation in global sports governance. This study aims to systematically explore the unique opportunities and core challenges created for the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympic Games (referred to as "martial arts entering the Olympics") during the historical convergence of the "two overall situations," and to anticipate its future path. The study finds that the opportunities for martial arts entering the Olympics primarily stem from the strategic support of national power, the transformation window of the global sports governance system (such as the Olympic Agenda 2020 granting host countries the right to set events), and the increasing appeal of Eastern culture in the process of globalization. The challenges are deeply rooted in the dilemma of martial arts' own standardization and international dissemination, the inherent competitive barriers and cultural prejudices within the Olympic system, and the complex international political environment. The study believes that the key to realizing the prospect of martial arts entering the Olympics lies in achieving dual progress in "competitive promotion" and "cultural interpretation," deepening competition reforms internally, innovating communication narratives externally, and fully utilizing the strategic opportunity of China hosting the Olympics again. The inclusion of martial arts in the Olympics is not only a milestone in achieving the rejuvenation of national sports but also a vivid manifestation of China's participation in global civilization dialogue through its own cultural practices and its promotion of building a more diverse and inclusive new Olympic order.

**Keywords:** Two Overall Situations; Martial Arts in the Olympics; Olympic Games; Cultural Soft Power; Sports Governance; Globalization; Mutual Learning among Civilizations

## 0. Introduction

The "overall strategic situation of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and the "unprecedented changes in the world in the past century" constitute the core framework for understanding the development orientation of contemporary China and its global interaction. The intertwining of these "two overall situations" implies that China's development is not only based on its own great rejuvenation, but also deeply integrated into and influencing the reshaping of the global order<sup>[1]</sup>. Against this vast backdrop, martial arts, an ancient skill that embodies the philosophical thinking, aesthetic taste, and physical wisdom of the Chinese nation, has been endowed with profound significance beyond the scope of sports in its century-long pursuit to become an official Olympic competition event (i.e., "martial arts entering the Olympics").

From its stunning performance at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, to its failure as a special event at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, and finally to its debut as an official event at the 2026 Dakar Youth

Olympics, the journey of martial arts in the Olympics has been full of ups and downs<sup>[2]</sup>. This is not only the "dream of several generations of martial artists", but has also become an "important task of the General Administration of Sport of China", and has been explicitly written into the implementation plan of the "Outline for Building a Strong Sports Country", setting the phased goal of "striving to enter the 2036 Olympics"<sup>[3]</sup>. Why has the long-cherished wish of martial arts to be included in the Olympics been elevated to such a strategic height today? How does it echo the national goals of "cultural confidence" and "building a strong sports country"? And how will it deal with the sports cultural barriers of Western centrism in the "centennial changes"?

This study posits that the "two overarching situations" provide an indispensable dual perspective for examining the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympic Games. From the "internal lens" of national rejuvenation, the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympics is a crucial path for quantitatively presenting cultural confidence and enhancing the country's cultural soft power. From the "wide-angle lens" of global transformation, it serves as a touchstone for Eastern civilization to participate in reshaping the global sports culture landscape and promoting the diversified development of the Olympic Movement. Therefore, this paper aims to systematically analyze: first, what unprecedented historical opportunities does the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympics face under the backdrop of the "two overarching situations"? Second, what deep-rooted challenges and structural contradictions does its process encounter? Third, based on a dialectical analysis of opportunities and challenges, what are the future prospects and feasible paths for the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympics? Through exploring these issues, this study hopes to provide a theoretical and practical analysis paradigm for understanding the modern transformation of traditional sports culture and its strategic value on the global stage.

## 1. Theoretical framework: The strategic interaction between "two overall situations" and sports culture

To deeply understand the contemporary significance of martial arts being included in the Olympics, it must be placed within the analytical framework constructed by the "two overall situations". This framework reveals the dynamic connections between national strategies, global systems, and cultural practices.

The core of the overall strategy for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation lies in the comprehensive revitalization of the nation, with cultural rejuvenation being its soul. Sports are regarded as a "symbolic undertaking for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," and martial arts, as a "cultural treasure of the Chinese nation," naturally become an important carrier for demonstrating cultural subjectivity and enhancing national pride through their internationalization and Olympicization process<sup>[4]</sup>. The proactive actions of national power are particularly prominent in this context. Historically, the successful inclusion of traditional sports from Japan (judo) and South Korea (taekwondo) in the Olympic Games has invariably demonstrated the comprehensive national strength of the "host country," especially the home field advantage provided by being the host country of the Olympic Games, which has played a decisive role. This provides China with a clear historical reference: strong national power is the cornerstone of dreams, and hosting the Olympic Games is the mainstream "regular path" to realizing these dreams. Therefore, the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympic Games is not simply a demand from the public for sports, but a strategic measure deeply integrated into national development goals and plans.

The unprecedented changes in the world over the past century point to profound adjustments in the international balance of power, reforms in the global governance system, and transformations in the modes of inter-civilization exchanges. In the field of sports, this "change" manifests as challenges faced by the Olympic Movement itself, such as sustainability, inclusivity, and attractiveness to youth. The "Olympic Agenda 2020" and subsequent reforms promoted by Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee, are precisely the product of responding to these changes. Among them, "maximizing cooperation with stakeholders of the Olympic

Games", especially granting the host country the right to add additional events to the Olympic Games it hosts, has opened a new policy window for the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympics<sup>[5]</sup>. This marks a slight adjustment in the logic of Olympic event design from a single "European-centered" or universal standard for events to one that respects more the cultural characteristics and promotion demands of the host country, providing institutional possibilities for multiculturalism to enter the Olympic hall.

The "two overall situations" are not separate but mutually reinforcing. National rejuvenation provides strength and confidence for participating in global changes, while actively participating in global changes and contributing Chinese wisdom and solutions (including cultural solutions) is an inevitable requirement and important symbol of national rejuvenation. The inclusion of martial arts in the Olympics is precisely at the intersection of these two overall situations: it is both inward-looking, concerning the self-confirmation and rejuvenation of national culture, and outward-looking, concerning how Chinese civilization can creatively express itself and engage in equal dialogue on the highest stage of world sports. This makes the study of the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympics a micro-case of observing how China coordinates internal and external factors, maintains cultural identity in the process of globalization, and contributes public goods.

## 2. Historic opportunity: The favorable conditions brought about by the convergence of the "two overall situations"

As can be seen from Table 1, martial arts are currently entering the most favorable strategic opportunity period in their long journey towards inclusion in the Olympics, which is mainly attributed to the strong driving force of national strategies, structural adjustments in international rules, and changes in the global cultural ecology.

Opportunity dimension	Specific manifestation	Strategic support and case
Driven by national strategy	Incorporated into the implementation plan of the "Outline for Building a Strong Sports Country" with a goal set for 2036.	The decisive role of national power as the host country of the project.
Olympic rule adjustments	The "Olympic Agenda 2020" grants the host country the right to add new events.	Leverage the "host advantage" path for China's future hosting of the Olympics.
Olympic Youth Strategy	The Youth Olympic Games has undergone reform and event setting, with martial arts becoming an official event at the 2026 Dakar Youth Olympic Games <sup>[10]</sup> .	Martial arts align with the concepts of youth development, gender equality, and sustainable development.
Global cultural demand	The interest in Eastern philosophy and the culture of physical and mental harmony is growing; Tai Chi has become a world intangible cultural heritage.	Enhance cultural attraction, transcend mere competition, and fulfill the cultural and educational functions of the Olympics.
International Foundation:	The International Wushu Federation has 152 member associations, with approximately 120 million practitioners worldwide.	This meets the potential requirements of the International Olympic Committee for the "universality" of the event and global participation.

### 2.1 Top-level design of national strategy and support from comprehensive national strength

The country has explicitly incorporated martial arts into the roadmap for building a strong sports nation. In March 2020, the Martial Arts Sports Management Center of the General Administration of Sport of China formulated an implementation plan, setting the specific goal of achieving a "major breakthrough in the application of martial arts for the Olympics and striving to enter the 2036 Olympics" between 2025 and 2035. The establishment of this official timetable marks the

elevation of martial arts' inclusion into the Olympics from an industry aspiration to a national will, which will surely bring together policy, resources, and intellectual support from both within and outside the system. Zhang Yuping, Secretary-General of the International Wushu Federation, also expressed confidence, saying, "I believe that one day martial arts will enter the Summer Olympics"<sup>[6]</sup>. Meanwhile, China's successful hosting of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics not only demonstrated its unparalleled event organization capabilities but also accumulated rich experience in utilizing the Olympic platform to showcase its national image. Strong economic strength, well-developed infrastructure, and efficient social mobilization capabilities make China fully "qualified and capable" of hosting the Summer Olympics again, thus providing the most solid premise for martial arts to enter the Olympics through the "regular path" of "adding events by the host country".

## 2.2 Reform window and demand changes of the International Olympic Movement

The reforms promoted by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to address contemporary challenges have created a crucial institutional opportunity for martial arts to be included in the Olympics. The Olympic Agenda 2020, which grants host countries the right to add new events, is one of the most direct benefits. This means that once China secures the right to host a future Summer Olympic Games, the possibility of martial arts becoming an official competition event will greatly increase. Furthermore, the Olympic Movement is increasingly emphasizing its influence among youth and sustainable development. The 2026 Dakar Youth Olympic Games boldly reformed the event setup rules, allowing events from 35 international federations to be showcased on the same stage. Against this backdrop, martial arts successfully became one of the 25 official competition events<sup>[7]</sup>. Zhang Qiuping, Secretary-General of the World Wushu Federation, pointed out that martial arts are "popular among young athletes, feature gender equality, require simple venues and equipment for competition, and are in line with sustainable development," which highly aligns with the philosophy of the Youth Olympic Games. This historic breakthrough is not only "taking the first step towards inclusion in the Olympics," but also marks martial arts' qualification as a "provisional member" within the Olympic system, accumulating valuable experience in organizing and operating Olympic events<sup>[8]</sup>.

## 2.3 Changes in the global cultural landscape and the rise of Eastern influence

In the "unprecedented changes in the world in the past century," a notable feature is the relative weakening of Western cultural hegemony and the rise in cultural consciousness and influence of non-Western civilizations. The global pursuit of multiculturalism, physical and mental harmony, and ecological philosophy has led to an unprecedented resonance for martial arts, including its representative branch, Tai Chi, which embodies the philosophies of "unity between heaven and man" and "combining hardness and softness." Tai Chi has been listed in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and the application for "International Tai Chi Day" is actively underway<sup>[9]</sup>. This cultural recognition has laid a solid cultural foundation for martial arts to enter the Olympics as a "deep sports event" rather than a mere combat technique. At the same time, martial arts have gained a broad mass base globally, with approximately 120 million people practicing martial arts worldwide and the International Wushu Federation boasting 152 member associations. This extensive international participation is an important foundation for meeting the "universality" requirement of Olympic events.

## 3. Realistic challenges: deep-seated contradictions and structural barriers

Despite unprecedented opportunities, the path for martial arts to enter the Olympics is still fraught with challenges. These challenges stem from both the complexity and historical baggage of the sport itself, as well as the inherent selection mechanism of the Olympic system and deeper cultural and political factors.

### **3.1 The dilemma of standardization and international dissemination of the project itself**

The martial arts system is vast and complex, with numerous schools, and its "competition format and content are more complicated, with a bloated and extensive event system." How to extract the essence from the vast tradition and create Olympic events that conform to the principles of "standardization, quantification, and evaluability" of modern competitive sports is a major challenge. Currently, competitive martial arts routines (such as Changquan and Tai Chi) and Sanda (free sparring) are the two major branches, but they have distinct styles. The Youth Olympic Games has chosen the routine formats of "Changquan All-around" and "Tai Chi All-around," and evaluated them with reference to scoring events such as rhythmic gymnastics. Although this is a pragmatic strategy, it has also sparked controversy over whether routine performances can represent the full scope of martial arts. Furthermore, martial arts terminology is deeply rooted in Chinese traditional culture, and its "literal expressions are relatively vague," posing serious language and cognitive barriers in cross-cultural communication. Wang Peng, an associate researcher at the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, pointed out that due to cultural differences, many foreigners simply equate martial arts with exaggerated fighting in films and television, and international promotion talents with both martial arts professional skills and cross-cultural communication abilities are extremely scarce. This makes it difficult for the cultural connotation and philosophical spirit ("martial arts ethics") of martial arts to be accurately understood by international audiences, affecting its image as a mature modern sports event.

### **3.2 Competitive barriers in the Olympic system and the "invisible cultural ceiling"**

The inclusion of events in the Olympic Games is subject to strict quotas and competitive procedures. Historically, the "Olympic Downsizing Plan" implemented by former International Olympic Committee President Rogge directly led to the failure of the 2008 Beijing Olympics in its attempt to include martial arts as an event, despite the host country's advantages. Although current policies have been relaxed, the number of new event slots for each Olympic Games remains limited. Martial arts must compete with emerging events that are more popular among global youth, such as skateboarding, rock climbing, surfing, and long-lobbied events like squash. Furthermore, the Olympic movement inherently carries the historical Western origins of modern Olympic sports, and its evaluation system, aesthetic standards, and organizational logic have inadvertently set a certain "cultural invisible ceiling." Non-Western traditional events must undergo a process of being "disciplined" and "reshaped" by Western sports logic (such as the color grading of judo uniforms and the protective gear rules for taekwondo). The process of including martial arts in the Olympics inevitably involves significant modifications to its rules, costumes, and scoring system, which inevitably leads to internal anxiety about how to maintain cultural authenticity. There have even been academic views that "martial arts do not need to be included in the Olympics."

### **3.3 Complexity of the international political environment and discourse power game**

Sports have never been able to fully separate from politics. Amidst the "centennial changes," competition among major powers has intensified, and China's rising influence in international affairs sometimes triggers unnecessary doubts and resistance. Martial arts, as a project explicitly identified as part of China's national cultural strategy, may be seen by some international sports and political forces as an attempt by China to expand its cultural influence, thus encountering non-technical resistance in voting, lobbying, and other aspects. This means that the inclusion of martial arts in the Olympics is not only a public relations campaign for sports competition rules, but also a complex game of international cultural and political discourse power. It requires China not only to promote it as the host country, but also to establish a broader alliance through long-term and meticulous work in daily international sports governance, telling a story that can be understood and accepted by the world about the integration of martial arts and the Olympic spirit.

## 4. Prospects and Path Selection: Strategic Vision towards 2036

Faced with the coexistence of opportunities and challenges, the prospect of martial arts being included in the Olympics hinges on the ability to adopt a systematic, precise, and resilient strategy. The core idea is that inclusion in the Olympics should not be seen as the sole end goal, but rather as a lever to drive the comprehensive modernization and internationalization of martial arts, achieving the dual objectives of "being included in the Olympics" and "cultivating people" (cultural infiltration).

### 4.1 Dual-track Advancement: Competitive Reform and Cultural Interpretation

At the competitive level, optimization and reform must be adhered to. The primary task is to further simplify and standardize the competition system. We can draw on the model of karate, which distinguishes between "kata" (routines) and "kumite" (contests), to clearly categorize competitive martial arts into two independent Olympic sports: "kata" and "sanshou" (or the more inclusive "martial arts combat"). Each category should have a small number of levels that are most ornamental and distinctive. The scoring system needs to continue to move towards transparency and technology, such as introducing electronic scoring assistance and real-time score display, to minimize disputes and align with international mainstream standards. At the same time, we should strengthen the branding of individual disciplines, "diluting the main name of martial arts and strengthening the symbolization and dissemination of the names of individual disciplines". For example, we should vigorously promote "Taijiquan" (Tai Chi Chuan) and "Changquan" (Changquan) as independent sports brands globally, lowering the cognitive threshold.

At the cultural level, it is imperative to undergo profound modern transformation and cross-cultural interpretation. We must not remain stuck in the mystified imagination of "gong fu", but systematically explain to the world the peaceful philosophy embodied in martial arts, which advocates "ceasing hostilities to practice martial arts", the cultivation concept of "cultivating both the inner and outer self", and the philosophical wisdom of "yin and yang balance". Si Hongyu, a professor at the School of Physical Education, Zhengzhou University, pointed out that it is necessary to "deeply explore the cultural connotation and philosophical ideas behind martial arts, providing more valuable content for international communication". This requires cultivating a large number of "martial arts cultural ambassadors" who possess an international perspective, are proficient in foreign languages, and are skilled in cross-cultural communication, rather than just technical coaches. In terms of communication channels, we should go beyond the competition field and allow martial arts to "enter and integrate" through multidimensional channels such as deep cooperation with Confucius Institutes, integration into international primary and secondary school physical education curricula, high-quality film and television documentaries, and digital media content.

### 4.2 Grasping the Key: The Strategic Opportunity of Hosting the Olympic Games

Historical patterns indicate that hosting the Olympic Games serves as a "golden window" for traditional sports to be included in the Olympics. Therefore, actively pursuing and successfully hosting the 2036 or subsequent Summer Olympic Games should be the top priority in the strategy to include martial arts in the Olympics. This requires the country to make forward-looking diplomatic arrangements and preparations for the bid. Once the hosting right is obtained, we can fully utilize the initiative granted by the Olympic Agenda 2020 to propose martial arts (taolu and/or sanshou) as a recommended event by the host country for submission to the International Olympic Committee for consideration. At that time, China's mature event organization capabilities, vast market appeal, and the successful "pre-performance" of martial arts at the Youth Olympic Games will all serve as powerful persuasive tools.

### 4.3 Stage planning: Progressive advancement from the Youth Olympic Games to the Olympic Games

The inclusion of martial arts in the Olympics should be designed with a clear phased roadmap. In the short term (2026–2030), the core task is to ensure the complete success of the martial arts competition at the 2026 Dakar Youth Olympic Games. Careful organization of participation is required to ensure that the competition is exciting and fair, fully demonstrating the appeal of martial arts to young people, and taking this opportunity to train international referees and technical officials, accumulating experience in operating the Olympic system. In the medium term (2030–2035), we should fully promote martial arts to become an "additional optional event" for the 2032 Brisbane Olympics or subsequent Olympic Games, and continue to expand the influence of martial arts in world championships, intercontinental games, and sports exchanges among "the Belt and Road" countries. In the long term (2035–), with the 2036 Olympics (if hosted by China) or the subsequent Olympic Games as the ultimate goal, we should initiate comprehensive diplomatic lobbying, public promotion, and final technical application work, striving for success in one go.

## 5. Conclusion

The grand narrative of the "two overall situations" has injected profound era connotations and strategic momentum into the specific and micro sports cultural project of martial arts entering the Olympics. It is no longer merely a long-cherished wish of the Chinese martial arts community, but also a symbolic pursuit of establishing cultural self-confidence and building a strong sports nation in the process of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. It is also a Chinese practice of promoting cultural exchanges and mutual learning, and participating in the reshaping of the global sports cultural ecology in response to the unprecedented changes in the world in the past century.

Opportunities and challenges coexist, and hopes and difficulties are intertwined. The support of national power, the window of Olympic reform, and the east wind of global culture constitute a once-in-a-century historic opportunity for martial arts to enter the Olympics. However, the pain of modernization transformation of the project itself, the competitive barriers and cultural barriers of the Olympic system, and the complexity of the international political environment also pose severe practical challenges. Looking ahead, the success of martial arts entering the Olympics depends on a set of intelligent strategies that balance "technique" and "philosophy": internally, it requires great courage to promote the standardization and modernization reform of the competitive system, and strengthen the construction of sub-event brands; externally, it requires a high degree of cultural consciousness to conduct modern interpretation and cross-cultural communication of philosophical connotations, and cultivate truly international talents. Grasping the strategic opportunity of hosting the Summer Olympics in the future is undoubtedly the most important path to achieve leapfrogging.

No matter how many challenges lie ahead, the significance of martial arts marching towards the Olympic hall of fame has long surpassed the mere gain or loss of a gold medal. It represents a dialogue between the ancient physical wisdom of Chinese civilization and the sports spirit of the modern world, and an active expression of Eastern philosophy in the era of globalization. This process itself is a vivid exercise of how China coordinates the "two overall situations" and contributes more inclusive civilization achievements to the world. As Zhang Yuping, Secretary-General of the International Wushu Federation, firmly believes, martial arts will eventually be included in the Olympics. This is not only an expectation for a goal, but also confidence in the historical law that civilization develops through exchanges and enriches itself through mutual learning.

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