

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Foshan Martial Arts Culture: Research on the dynamic balance between historical authenticity and modern adaptability in the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the historical evolution of Foshan martial arts culture and its contemporary multifaceted significance, analyzing its social status and challenges in cultural transmission. By examining the formation of community identity within Foshan martial arts communities, the research reveals the developmental trajectory of their collective consciousness. The study innovatively links Foshan martial arts' cultural development with psychological identity, providing both theoretical insights and applied strategies for safeguarding and promoting intangible cultural heritage within the changing context of modern cultural adaptation.

**Keywords:** Foshan martial arts; group psychology; cultural identity

## 1. Introduction

The unique status of Foshan martial arts in Chinese martial culture is primarily reflected in its historical contributions and cultural influence<sup>[1-4]</sup>. Historically, Foshan has been recognized as one of the birthplaces of renowned martial artists and martial arts schools, with world-famous masters like Wong Fei-hung and Bruce Lee sharing deep connections with the city. Not only does Foshan martial arts hold significant importance in traditional Chinese martial arts, but it also exerts broad influence in global martial arts communities. Particularly among overseas Chinese populations, this martial art has increasingly gained attention and preservation as a symbol of cultural identity<sup>[5,6]</sup>.

This study systematically analyzes the historical evolution of Foshan martial arts culture, explores its multiple meanings in modern society, and investigates its influence on group psychology, aiming to fill the research gap regarding how psychological identity shapes the sustainability of intangible heritage, while providing theoretical and empirical foundations for the protection, transmission, and global communication of Foshan martial arts culture.

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## 2. Influence of psychological identity on residents of Foshan martial arts culture

Ideological shifts demonstrate changes in collective consciousness, evolving from Republican-era nationalism toward today's fusion of tradition and globalization. Martial arts have become a powerful symbol of resilience and soft power, profoundly influencing public perception. As cultural emblems, lion dance and wooden dummy practices have transitioned from regional markers to global icons, shaped by cinematic influences and diaspora communities. While commercialization risks threaten their cultural ecosystems—Now integrated into health initiatives, education programs, and entertainment industries—Their survival remains secured. To examine psychological identification with martial arts culture, this study employs descriptive statistics based on survey data from 228 participants.

**Table 1.** Analysis values.

	mean	standard deviation
Cultural awareness	4.36	0.823
Emotional experience	4.23	0.966
Behavioral congruence	3.89	1.039
Sense of belonging	3.66	1.145
Group psychology changes	4.03	1.003

The overall mean value of group psychological changes in Foshan's martial arts culture is 4.03, with a standard deviation of 1.003. Overall, Foshan residents demonstrate strong collective consciousness towards their martial arts culture, with cultural awareness and emotional engagement scoring 4.36 and 4.23 respectively—Both exceeding the 4-point threshold. This indicates that residents' identification with martial arts culture primarily manifests through cognitive evaluation and emotional engagement. The average scores for behavioral recognition (3.89) and sense of belonging (3.66) were found to be relatively low. Further analysis shows that 124 participants (54% of the total sample) practiced martial arts regularly, which may explain the slightly lower averages for behavioral performance and identity recognition, suggesting that regular practitioners may engage differently with cultural identity compared to casual participants.

According to the above data, Foshan martial arts culture is a "cultural circle" and a symbiotic body with common values and development goals. With the change of times, the people of Foshan are psychologically affected by the "Foshan Martial Arts Culture Group" and have a strong sense of identity and belonging.

## 3. The process of group psychological identity change

### 3.1. Complicating "Authenticity" and cultural identity

The theory of group psychological identity explains how individuals navigate between identity hierarchies across contexts. However, modern adaptive strategies—Particularly government-led branding initiatives like the "World Capital of Kung Fu" —Tend to emphasize the highest and most generalized identity levels. This approach aligns with external promotion and market logic, which may cause a “top-down erosion of identity,” where global branding dilutes national symbolism and national frameworks overshadow distinctive regional cultural expressions. Ultimately, the rich diversity of cultural schools and heritage lineages that give culture vitality and depth gets gradually erased in the pursuit of market

differentiation. This provides a powerful theoretical framework for critically examining state-driven branding strategies in cultural heritage preservation.

### **3.2. The process from individual identity to group psychological identity**

#### **3.2.1. Individual identity**

In terms of individual identity, philosophical identity exists in the form of "identity," which is based on an innate and consistently consistent object. At this stable "core" lies a static structure unaffected by time and space. Subsequently, psychology enriched and developed the philosophical perspective. Psychology abstracted from the elusive concept of "identity," explaining the formation and development of individual personality through a "self-centered" lens. A vibrant person can endure various internal and external contradictions, re-emerge after each crisis, and repeatedly strengthen unity. It is evident that martial arts culture maintains an inherent continuity in identity recognition and follows the principle of gradual personality formation. Therefore, psychological identity as a structure not only represents a framework but also a process of self-planning. Thus, the "self-identity" in martial arts culture unifies "object self." This is a process of defining boundaries through meaning construction: during this process, it continuously separates from the external world, evolving from initial "self-integration" to triggering "qualitative changes," ultimately achieving rebalancing to form an "individual self," thereby creating a unique identity. Essentially, it builds upon the foundation of "ordinary individuals" while placing the broader context of "history" and "society" upon them. "Personal psychological identity" represents an individual's conscious awareness of self-identity, where the significance of "identity" gradually gives way to its replacement.

#### **3.2.2. Formation and development of group psychological identity**

"Group psychology" is fundamentally an internal study of individuals, offering clear explanations for the formation of group consciousness and collective behavior. However, it demonstrates insufficient interaction with macro social variables. The classification of martial arts culture serves as a crucial tool for shaping symbolic boundaries between internal and external groups. Due to rigid cognitive patterns, individuals develop a shared "self-group" concept that drives their identification with it. Positive differentiation operates on the principle of positive distinction, aiming to fulfill individuals' need for positive self-esteem while significantly enhancing group specificity. Social categorization and comparison generally work in tandem, enabling members to better identify with group identity. The processes of "seeking common ground" and "preserving differences" proceed simultaneously.

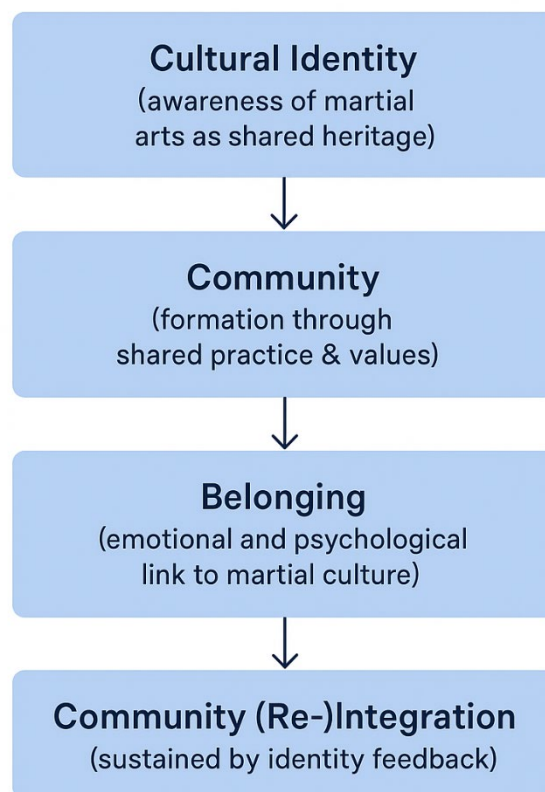
Secondly, the construction of group psychological identity theory is also reflected in the interpretation of identity reconstruction. Vulnerable groups that feel "downgraded" adopt a series of strategic actions to regain new group qualifications, thereby triggering structural changes in society. Social mobility develops as a personal cultural belief through "marginal infiltration." Conversely, when ethnic members perceive "unsurmountable ethnic boundaries," the group may resort to collective actions to elevate its status. "Group psychological identity" emphasizes conformity within a group, where its acquisition is determined by "individual consciousness' alignment with cultural identity."

### **3.3. Group psychological identity**

#### **3.3.1. Culture to psychology**

The public perception of Foshan's martial arts community follows a "knowledge-awareness-emotion-identity" progression. Establishing this cultural group requires first building community identity among Foshan residents. Therefore, cultivating local identity and belongingness holds crucial practical significance for developing the martial arts community. This process begins with understanding the martial arts

community as its foundation, elevates through collective recognition, and ultimately drives internal growth through shared identity. Specifically, it involves comprehending Foshan's social ecosystem: First, accurately recognizing martial arts community consciousness is essential for building a harmonious society. Knowledge acquisition—Whether actively or passively absorbing external information and processing it into personal systems—Serves as humanity's cognitive starting point and emotional foundation. For Foshan residents, this includes historical-cultural identification and reverence for martial arts legends. Second, the core lies in community identity. Recognizing martial arts culture forms the essence of this community, while cultural acceptance builds on this foundation. Notably, the cultural space and cinematic symbols constructed through martial arts play vital roles in fostering collective identity. Thirdly, the cultural identity and practical engagement within Foshan's martial arts community have deepened collective understanding. This cultural entity is a cohesive organism formed through shared traditional values, historical psychological connections, and common mental frameworks. As a naturally evolving entity with dynamic influence on both internal and external environments, it represents an organic synthesis of traditional customs and collective consciousness. Shared interests and beliefs serve as the spiritual bond that unites members of this martial arts community – which constitutes the core value driving its development. Through psychological identification with martial arts culture, Foshan residents actively practice their martial arts traditions while integrating into the cultural community. The positive impact of cultural identity on group belongingness highlights how enhancing martial arts cultural recognition strengthens this sense of community. This process forms a logical framework—“cultural identity → community → belonging → community”—illustrated conceptually in **Figure 1** below.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of group psychological identity.

### **3.3.2. Group psychological identity of martial arts culture**

"Collective psychological identity serves as a vital source of cultural development, forming the foundation for internal cultural cohesion and external social isolation." Shared psychological identity constitutes both the practical basis for shaping martial arts communities in Foshan and a key element in shaping local social identity. In essence, Foshan's martial arts represent a collective psychological identity shaped by external cultural attributes, as evidenced by its numerous martial arts cultural landscapes and spaces. The shared heroic narratives within traditional martial arts further reinforce this identity. As the cradle of Foshan martial arts and a shared memory for its people, the city has produced iconic figures like Wong Fei-hung, Yip Man, and Bruce Lee—These martial heroes embody Foshan's legacy. The city's emergence as a world-class martial arts hub marks a significant step toward becoming a global martial arts capital. To achieve this vision, the Foshan government and martial arts associations must collaborate with local residents, inheritors of various martial arts styles, and community organizations. When Foshan was designated as a "World Martial Arts Capital" in 2004, it left a profound impression on its citizens. The city's reputation as a "Martial Arts City," "Martial Arts Homeland," and "Kung Fu Capital" has solidified its status as a cultural beacon for Foshan residents. Promoting Foshan's martial arts culture remains a shared aspiration that deepens the community's psychological identity.

## **4. Conclusion**

The future of Foshan martial arts as a living heritage depends on maintaining a dynamic balance between preserving historical authenticity and meeting modern adaptive needs. Findings show that challenges extend beyond funding and recruitment, encompassing deeper issues of cultural identity and social recognition, as reflected in survey data indicating high cultural awareness but moderate behavioral and belonging scores among Foshan martial arts participants.

## **Conflicts of interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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