

A Study on the Changes in Gender Perceptions and Influencing Factors in the Transmission of Traditional Martial Arts

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Abstract. Martial arts are an important component of China's excellent traditional culture. There exist certain gender debates surrounding the inheritance of martial arts. Some overseas studies have also paid attention to how historical traditions, social concepts, awareness of gender equality, and social changes affect the issue of gender differences in traditional martial arts inheritance. This paper takes the modern inheritance of Dongqing Quan in Huashan District, Anhui Province, as an example, preliminarily exploring the issue of gender differences in traditional martial arts inheritance. The study focuses on three dimensions: physical differences between men and women, family roles, and social roles, analyzing the participation, influence, and changes of gender in the inheritance of Dongqing Quan under the development of the times. Results show that as Dongqing Quan is listed as an intangible cultural heritage, its gender barriers have been weakened, breaking through stereotypes of "masculine temperament" and "female physical limitations." By combining diversified needs and expanding participation pathways, new vitality can be injected into the living inheritance of Dongqing Quan.

Keywords: gender concepts, traditional martial arts, dongqing quan

1. Introduction

Martial arts are an important component of China's excellent traditional culture and serve as a cultural ambassador for exchanges between China and foreign countries. Especially since modern times, martial arts have become a "window" through which the West views China. A series of martial arts-themed literary and influential works have been exported overseas, attracting enthusiastic attention both domestically and internationally [1,2]. There exist certain gender debates surrounding martial arts inheritance. Some viewpoints consider the transmission by both men and women as an inherent part of the martial arts' yin-yang concept. Traditional martial arts do not reject women. However, some opinions based on practical transmission and traditional concepts argue that women occupy a "voiceless" position in martial arts inheritance. The masculine spirit displayed by women practicing martial arts itself challenges the Confucian ethical order. Moreover, in the Chinese tradition of traditional martial arts inheritance, there indeed exist phenomena of "passing on to men but not to women," which further intensifies gender debates in martial arts transmission.

In recent years, some studies have found significant differences in gender roles concerning participation opportunities, types of activities, scheduling, and symbolic meanings. Chinese historical traditions, social changes, and awareness of gender equality influence these differences. In modern times, the inheritance of traditional martial arts has shifted from being limited to the master-apprentice form to a more popularized transmission. Historically, traditional martial arts skills were taught primarily for livelihood, and masters usually only taught specific local males or their relatives. The main purpose of learning traditional martial arts skills at the time was to perform high-intensity jobs such as bodyguard work. In modern times, traditional martial arts are no longer confined to skill transmission between masters and apprentices in martial arts schools but have evolved with social development into a method of physical fitness and a healthy exercise accessible to everyone [3]. Research shows that practicing martial arts improves and maintains balance ability, cognitive function, and mental health to a certain degree [4]. Therefore, an increasing number of women have joined the ranks of learning Dongqing Quan, and learners are no longer limited to males. The main influencing factors behind this change are social needs and transformations. In modern society, martial arts are no longer a mainstream livelihood skill, and correspondingly, the demand for such skills by the social mainstream has declined. Men no longer need to support their families by practicing martial arts; instead, they can obtain regular education and apply for various other jobs to support their families. Nowadays, people regard martial arts as a unique cultural dissemination and fitness method, and their demand for martial arts has shifted from livelihood to daily fitness.

Following changes in the modern social environment, China has gradually developed from an ancient male-dominant and female-inferior society into a gender-equal society. Consequently, martial arts have undergone significant changes; public demand has shifted from traditional skill learning to fitness and leisure. Women have actively participated in previously male-dominated occupations, including popularized martial arts. More and more people engage in martial arts, viewing it as a medium for strengthening the body. Traditional martial arts, but even modern sports, exhibit different attitudes toward the two genders, indicating that this is not merely a historical and traditional issue but also a theoretical issue that requires reflection and critique [5-8]. Based on this, this paper takes the modern inheritance of Dongqing Quan as an example to explore changes in gender concepts in traditional martial arts inheritance and their leading factors, aiming to provide some reflection and suggestions for the modern transmission of traditional martial arts.

2. Method

The research method of this paper is a case study, which is commonly used in qualitative sociology research. Case studies help focus on a specific example—in this case, Dongqing Quan—and allow for precise capture of specific changes and their causes during investigation and interviews. This paper takes the modern inheritance of Dongqing Quan, widely practiced in Huashan District, Ma'anshan City, Anhui Province, China, as a case. Dongqing Quan is a style of boxing that emphasizes exclusive and secret transmission, with very strict school rules, particularly placing martial ethics in the highest regard. Dongqing Quan is a traditional martial art that cultivates both internal and external aspects. Its physical discipline mainly involves a diverse series of boxing methods such as Dongqing First Route, Dongqing Second Route, Dongqing Third Route, Dongqing Sword, Dongqing Saber, Dongqing Spear, Dongqing Staff, Dongqing Double Weapons, Single Weapons, Soft Weapons, and paired practice. Additionally, it uses standing postures and impact exercises to strengthen the body while achieving internal health cultivation. The characteristics of Dongqing Quan's techniques include lightness, agility, flexibility, emphasis on waist and leg power,

rooting to the ground, and especially the coordination of hands, eyes, body, and footwork, requiring that the eyes guide the hands, and leg techniques to be full of force. Moreover, Dongqing Quan emphasizes concepts such as “disciples must be loyal to the school” and “once a teacher, lifelong father,” fully reflecting the Confucian thought of “filial piety above all virtues” within the school. Through in-depth interviews with Shi Weijiu, a representative inheritor of Dongqing Quan, this paper explores the issue of gender differences in the inheritance of Chinese traditional martial arts.

Shi Weijiu was born in 1951 and is currently 74 years old. He is the third-generation inheritor of Dongqing Quan. According to Shi Weijiu, Dongqing Quan originated in Cangzhou City, Hebei Province. Dong Baodian (1889–1963), a native of Cangzhou, Hebei, learned martial arts from his father from a young age. His family ran an escort agency. In 1909, Dong Baodian followed his father, escorting along the Grand Canal. By 1912, he arrived in Jiangsu, Shanghai, Anhui, and other places, making a living through martial arts practice and founding “Dongqing Quan,” recruiting many disciples. This boxing style is a family tradition and has developed for over 100 years. The second-generation inheritor of Dongqing Quan was Xing Xisen (born 1940), whose ancestral home is Hefei, Anhui, but was born in Shanghai. He learned martial arts from his father since childhood and became a disciple of Dong Baodian in 1950, studying Dongqing Quan techniques. Although Shi Weijiu had practiced martial arts since childhood, he formally began following Xing Xisen, the second-generation inheritor, to learn the techniques in 1968. Currently, Dongqing Quan has become an intangible cultural heritage project in Huashan District, Ma’anshan City. Shi Weijiu promotes and popularizes Dongqing Quan through recruiting apprentices and activities such as “Intangible Cultural Heritage into Campus.”

There are three main reasons why Shi Weijiu was selected as the interviewee in this study: first, he is most familiar with the history and contemporary inheritance situation of Dongqing Quan. Second, he has the most comprehensive understanding of the transmission methods and school rules of Dongqing Quan. Third, he has long-term teaching experience and a deep understanding of gender differences in the inheritance of Dongqing Quan. Therefore, this paper focuses on conducting in-depth interviews with Shi Weijiu, aiming to understand three main aspects: first, whether physical differences are the main reason affecting gender differences in Dongqing Quan transmission. Second, whether family roles influence gender differences in Dongqing Quan inheritance. Third, whether social roles affect the inheritance of Dongqing Quan.

3. Gender perception changes in the transmission of traditional martial arts

With profound changes in social structure and institutional environments, the marginalized position of Chinese women in traditional martial arts transmission has gradually been broken, and gender roles have shown trends toward greater equality and diversity. Before China’s reform and opening-up, women’s social roles were mainly confined to the household, undertaking domestic chores and agricultural production duties. This gender role positioning was deeply influenced by the traditional Confucian idea of “male superiority and female inferiority.” In the traditional social structure, men long held dominant positions, while women were disadvantaged in education, access to economic resources, and other aspects. This directly limited their participation in public life, especially in traditionally male-dominated cultural fields such as martial arts, where women’s presence was particularly scarce.

However, since the reform and opening-up in 1978, Chinese society has undergone profound changes. With the transition from a planned economy system to a socialist market economy system and the country’s full integration into the global economic system [9,10], traditional gender concepts have also been shaken and reconstructed. At the policy level, the government has successively

introduced a series of laws and regulations aimed at improving women's status and protecting their rights. For example, the "China Women's Development Outline" explicitly stipulates that village committees and resident committees must include a certain proportion of female members, enhancing women's voice in grassroots governance; the "Rural Land Contracting Law" emphasizes that men and women within the household have equal rights to land contracts, effectively safeguarding rural women's economic rights. At the same time, women's educational opportunities have significantly increased, their level of education has continuously improved, and social employment conditions have also improved, leading to enhanced economic independence for women. These changes have not only greatly increased women's participation in workplaces and politics but also provided the institutional and cultural foundation for their entry into traditionally male-dominated martial arts transmission fields. An increasing number of women have begun to learn, promote, and even teach traditional martial arts, which not only breaks the boundaries of traditional gender divisions of labor but also promotes the diversification and modernization of martial arts culture itself.

4. Influencing factors of gender perception changes in the transmission of traditional martial arts

4.1. Weakening impact of physical differences on Dongqing Quan transmission

In traditional society, Dongqing Quan had important social functions and was mostly used in high-intensity scenarios such as guarding homes and acting as bodyguards. Therefore, its basic skill requirements were very strict, and the training intensity was quite high, making it, to some extent, more suitable for strong men to practice. Under the male-dominated background at the time, men were the pillars of the family, and learning Dongqing Quan was a livelihood skill. Moreover, due to traditional views and gender roles, Dongqing Quan rarely recruited female apprentices in its early days. From this perspective, the physical differences in Dongqing Quan transmission in traditional society, superficially appearing as differences between male and female bodies, conceal deeper reasons, including social structure, social function, and traditional concepts.

Today, the social function of traditional Dongqing Quan has changed from high-intensity vigorous activity to daily fitness and health. Times have changed, and gender equality has been promoted, so more women are learning martial arts. Through practice, they train their bodies and strengthen their physical fitness. The martial arts of the new era are both aesthetically pleasing and skillful, possessing the grandeur of traditional martial arts along with agile moves, making them captivating. Thus, many women are attracted, and female participation has significantly increased. The physical demands in the Dongqing Quan transmission have changed. For ordinary men, the focus is more on overcoming physical endurance challenges and the demands of long-term training, while women need to break traditional stereotypes about physical fitness. Women practicing martial arts can improve their self-defense abilities and cultivate a tenacious will. As Shi Weijiu said, "Dongqing Quan requires extraordinary abilities and skills. Therefore, the influence of physical differences caused by biological sex on Dongqing Quan transmission is weakening."

4.2. Family roles as a major factor in Dongqing Quan transmission

Family roles refer to the roles and functions individuals play within family life and structure. Confucian thought emphasizes "male superiority and female inferiority," positioning men as family economic pillars and decision-makers, requiring women to obey male authority. This ideology is

reinforced by patriarchal systems, such as property inheritance rights being preferentially allocated to males and women taking their husband's surname after marriage, further consolidating male dominance. This has formed the basic division of labor of "men managing external affairs, women managing internal affairs." As a result, many men primarily work outside the home to earn a living, while women take on more responsibility for caring for the family. Family roles inevitably bring role expectations, deeply influencing men's and women's choices regarding livelihood methods.

As mentioned earlier, in traditional society, Dongqing Quan's social function was mainly "externally oriented," relying on frequent and extensive outside work to fulfill its purpose. This meant gender participation differences in Dongqing Quan were largely influenced and restricted by family roles. First, in terms of time cost, women after marriage need to take on responsibilities such as child-rearing and housework, limiting their practice time; men, as the traditional family pillars, are more likely to have continuous time and energy for training. Second, family support is also a crucial factor for successful learning, so family backing is essential for sustained training. Third, regarding age structure, Dongqing Quan traditionally required younger people, and family divisions of labor made men more energetic and able to participate than women.

With social structural changes, gender equality has brought changes in family role division. Along with changes in Dongqing Quan's social function, it is now more suitable for all age groups. Retired men and women have more free time and can devote significant time to learning and exercise, while young people, full of energy, are better at developing perseverance and basic skills. However, middle-aged women may stop learning due to adjustments in family priorities. Therefore, family roles still dominate Dongqing Quan transmission, and gender differences caused by family role differences still exist.

4.3. Diverse impacts of social roles on Dongqing Quan transmission

Changes in social roles are a core factor influencing Dongqing Quan, especially reflected in the traditional idea of "transmitting within the family, not outside." The idea of "transmitting within" affected transmission. In ancient China, learning Dongqing Quan was closely linked to livelihood. The motivation for learning was mainly guarding homes and working as bodyguards or similar jobs. These jobs were inherited within families or master-apprentice relationships and could not be spread externally. This conservative concept led to a narrow transmission scope, so under such strict transmission, men as family economic pillars were the main inheritors. With China's reform and opening up, the traditional idea of "transmitting within, not outside" was broken. Today, the boundary of "transmitting outside" has greatly loosened. In ancient times, learning Dongqing Quan was mainly for practical livelihood skills, while in modern times, learning and transmitting Dongqing Quan is primarily for physical fitness. Therefore, the transmission scope of traditional Dongqing Quan has shifted from relying on family and master-apprentice systems to popularized transmission. More and more women have participated, breaking the conservative idea of "transmitting within, not outside."

Specifically, first, there is a gender differentiation in learning objectives: previously, Dongqing Quan was mainly learned for guarding homes and bodyguard work, so men, as family economic pillars, had motivations directly linked to these reasons. Today, men still retain the need for fighting skills, while women focus more on health and self-defense. Second, the value of inheritance has changed. With Dongqing Quan listed as intangible cultural heritage, its inheritance value has changed from a practical livelihood skill to cultural heritage and fitness. This transformation weakens gender barriers. Modern women can practice Dongqing Quan for fitness and participate in traditional martial arts performances. Finally, challenges in inheritance are also affected by changes

in social roles and functions. In ancient times, traditional martial arts concepts were conservative (with a principle of “transmit within, not outside”), leading to narrow transmission scopes. Currently, the greatest challenge is the arduous nature of Dongqing Quan training, which tests learners’ perseverance. Most interviewees believe that participation of youth and women can be expanded through school promotion, social media publicity, and government support, highlighting their cultural value and functionality.

5. Conclusion

This paper, through interviews with Dongqing Quan and its representative inheritors, preliminarily explored the issue of gender differences in the transmission of traditional martial arts. The study focused on three dimensions—physical differences between men and women, family roles, and social roles—to analyze the participation, influence, and changes in gender in the inheritance of Dongqing Quan amid the development of the times. The research found that in traditional martial arts transmission, the role and status of Chinese women have gradually shifted from marginalization toward trends of equality and diversity. The specific reasons are as follows: First, physical differences between men and women are not the absolute factor in traditional martial arts transmission. The gender differences presented by physical differences are reflections of social concepts, social functions, and social roles projected onto the body. Women have more advantages in some flexible weapons and tactics, and the inheritance of Dongqing Quan places more emphasis on individual perseverance, which is more critical than physiological differences. Second, traditional gender divisions of labor in family and society largely influence gender differences in inheritance. This results from differences in family positioning and household responsibilities. Third, changes in social functions have weakened the gender barriers of Dongqing Quan. In modern times, Dongqing Quan’s primary purpose is no longer limited to participation in martial arts occupations such as bodyguard work, but more to physical health factors. Fourth, changes in gender perceptions have had a considerable impact on the inheritance of Dongqing Quan. With time, the ancient Chinese concept of “male superiority and female inferiority,” which centered transmission around males, has been broken. The popularization of the idea of “gender equality” has greatly weakened the traditional phenomenon of “transmitting to men but not to women,” shifting gender perceptions from traditional “gender segregation” to modern “diversity and inclusion.”

As Dongqing Quan has been listed as intangible cultural heritage, its gender threshold has been weakened, breaking through stereotypes of “masculine temperament” and “female physical limitations.” By combining diversified needs (such as self-defense, health, and cultural identity) and expanding participation pathways, new vitality can be injected into the living inheritance of Dongqing Quan. Dongqing Quan, as a branch of Chinese traditional martial arts, used to have characteristics of exclusive and secret transmission with very strict school rules, especially placing martial ethics in the highest position. Meanwhile, as an intangible cultural heritage, Dongqing Quan is mainly distributed across multiple morning exercise spots in Huashan District, Ma’anshan City, such as Binhu Morning Spot, Municipal Square Morning Spot, and Yushan South Gate Morning Spot. Due to its fitness and health-preserving functions, it attracts many middle-aged and elderly people to participate in learning, demonstrating its more practical health value and cultural heritage value in contemporary society. At the same time, this study has some limitations. Because this study focused only on Dongqing Quan as a case for interviews and research, without including multiple other martial arts forms, the sample scope is relatively narrow and cannot cover other martial arts styles. Future research can expand the case study range by incorporating different martial art types

and combining quantitative research methods to further verify general patterns in the inheritance of Chinese martial arts, making the research more comprehensive and persuasive.

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