

Evolution and Prospect of Martial Arts International Dissemination Research: A Quantitative Analysis Based on CiteSpace

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How to cite this paper: Yu, J. N. (2024). Evolution and Prospect of Martial Arts International Dissemination Research: A Quantitative Analysis Based on CiteSpace. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 12, 452-466. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2024.129026>

Received: August 18, 2024

Accepted: September 21, 2024

Published: September 24, 2024

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Abstract

The spread of Chinese martial arts reached neighboring countries in ancient times, influencing the development of Asian martial arts like taekwondo and karate. Today, the dissemination of martial arts exhibits a trend of diversified development, encompassing technology, teaching, and terminology. Research in econometrics also highlights areas such as martial arts culture and intangible cultural heritage. Yet, most current studies primarily focus on China's domestic context. This article, drawing on foreign literature, explores the progression of research on the international spread of martial arts, offering insights for its future global dissemination. To achieve this, the study retrieved 1000 articles on the international dissemination of martial arts from the Web of Science Core Collection database over the past 30 years and employed CiteSpace software for quantitative analysis. The findings reveal that keywords such as "martial arts," "performance," and "combat" frequently appear in the literature, highlighting that research primarily focuses on the technical aspects of martial arts. The trajectory of research on the international dissemination of martial arts is gradually shifting from combat techniques to an analysis of martial arts techniques and movements, with future trends anticipated to emphasize health, sports medicine, and elite athletes, thereby promoting diversified development. Significant disparities exist in cooperation networks among countries, with countries having higher publication volumes demonstrating less collaboration. Despite this, stable cooperation networks have emerged in countries like Norway and Italy, while most countries' networks still require further strengthening. A relatively stable volume of publications and collaborative relationships have been established within the inter-institutional network. Overall, China's foreign language publications and international collaboration in the field of martial arts international dissemination require further enhancement. The research results offer a fresh perspective and direction for future studies on the

international dissemination of martial arts, underscoring the importance of diversified development and international cooperation.

Keywords

Martial Arts International Dissemination, Bibliometric Analysis, Research Progress, Collaboration Network, Diversified Development

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Martial arts originated in China and belong to the world. Martial arts, originating from China, are a traditional Chinese sport that embodies cultural values such as morality, righteousness, etiquette, courage, and trust. It is a form of physical fitness that has been passed down from generation to generation by the Chinese people and is a training method for the military to defend the country. In the 2018 “Research Report on the Overseas Recognition of Chinese Discourse” by the China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration, terms such as martial arts, Shaolin, Qigong, and Tai Chi have garnered significant attention (Rong, 2018). This underscores the pivotal role of martial arts as a means of disseminating Chinese culture, promoting national culture, narrating Chinese stories, and showcasing national confidence.

The spread of Chinese martial arts began to influence neighboring countries long before the Tang Dynasty. Through trade routes such as the Silk Road, Tang swords and hand weapons with Chinese culture were brought to neighboring countries, forming an early cultural transmission path (Guan, 1991). With the development of the times, the way of communication has been constantly iterated, and the spread of martial arts has shifted from the earliest oral transmission to various channels such as kung fu movies, martial arts books, martial arts performances, and teaching in Confucius Institutes, enabling people around the world to understand Chinese culture through more channels (Cui & Zhao, 2020; Jiao & Hu, 2019; Bowman et al., 2010). The spread of Chinese martial arts has unique advantages in building the national image, explaining Chinese etiquette culture, Chinese vigorous spirit, and harmonious concepts.

As the era progresses, the rise of digital media has transformed traditional communication models. The evolving global landscape and the rise of protectionism have introduced both challenges and opportunities for the international spread of martial arts. Particularly during the pandemic, Chinese healing practices like Baduanjin and Tai Chi have been instrumental in disease prevention and treatment, significantly boosting the international profile of martial arts. However, in the global promotion of martial arts, the amalgamation of terms such as Kung Fu, Chinese martial arts, Shaolin, and Tai Chi, while elevating the profile of martial arts, has hindered their standardized development and contributed to unclear definitions (Geng, 2023; Liu & Li, 2022). The book “Theoretical Basis of Martial

Arts,” published in 1997, describes martial arts as a traditional Chinese sport rooted in traditional culture, marked by the harmonious development of internal and external disciplines, and emphasizing both martial arts and Taoism. In July 2009, scholars convened by the Martial Arts Sports Management Center of the General Administration of Sport of China defined martial arts as a traditional sport grounded in Chinese culture, with combat techniques as its foundation and routines, combat, and practice methods as its primary forms of exercise. Following successive refinements, the definition of martial arts has become more precise, addressing earlier deficiencies in areas such as offensive and defensive combat and practice methods. Nonetheless, discussions among scholars regarding the categorization of sports persist (Xie, 2016; Li et al., 2008; Ma & Qiu, 2007). Therefore, given the new developmental circumstances, it is of great practical significance to summarize the current research status of the international dissemination of Chinese martial arts and provide suggestions and references for the international development of martial arts.

1.2. Research Purpose

The development of martial arts is inseparable from globalization, and its promotion relies heavily on international communication. By reviewing the current academic research on the international dissemination of Chinese martial arts, we can identify hotspots and trends, summarize research highlights across different periods, uncover patterns in international dissemination, and offer insights for future dissemination methods and pathways. This paper examines the progression of research on the international dissemination of martial arts by retrieving 1000 articles from the Web of Science Core Collection database covering the past 30 years and employing CiteSpace software for quantitative analysis, aiming to inform future international dissemination strategies.

1.3. Research Questions

With the advent of digitalization, international exchanges extend beyond real-life interactions to include virtual communication and learning, a shift that will inevitably influence all facets of society. The National Wushu Federation’s official website regularly posts martial arts teaching videos, offering high-quality learning resources to martial arts enthusiasts worldwide. Technological advancements will undoubtedly shape the modes of communication. This study gathers the top 1000 academic research papers from recent years in the WOS, exploring the following through visual analysis: 1) Which countries and regions have conducted extensive research on Chinese martial arts? 2) What are the primary research topics and domains? 3) What are the emerging trends and future directions in research?

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Historical Culture of Chinese

Martial Arts Martial arts, a traditional sport of the Chinese nation, encompassed

both barehanded combat techniques like boxing and horn-and-edge sports like fencing and long spears in ancient times (Huang & Hong, 2018; Shahar, 2008). As a national sport, martial arts blend deeply with Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, serving not only as a form of physical training but also as a reflection of the national spirit and culture. Over time, this has given rise to a distinctive martial arts culture, marked by virtues such as chivalry, morality, respect for etiquette, and self-cultivation (Ma, 2020; Fang et al., 2021; Wang, 2007). The martial arts system upholds principles like “the highest good is like water” and “the harmony between heaven and man”, aiming for a state of harmony with nature while cautioning against the pursuit of extremes, which could lead to their reversal (Li, 2006). Mr. Ruan Jizheng once proclaimed, “Without understanding martial arts, one cannot truly know China; without understanding the Chinese people, one cannot grasp the essence of martial arts.” Chinese martial arts epitomize the spirit of China, embody a way of life for the populace, and represent the essence of spiritual values (Liu, 2024).

2.2. International Dissemination of Chinese Martial Arts

The international dissemination of Chinese martial arts has a long history, beginning in ancient times when it started to spread to neighboring countries through overseas Chinese immigration and trade exchanges (Guan, 1991). The formal internationalization of martial arts was explicitly stated at the first National Martial Arts Work Conference in 1982: “We must actively and steadily promote martial arts to the world” (Yao & Li, 2021). Since then, research on the internationalization of martial arts has gradually increased, such as in terms of technology, creating regulated boxing styles to make martial arts techniques more standardized and facilitate unified standards; The study of standard terminology in language translation enables teachers to be more specific and prepared to express the meaning of martial arts techniques in their teaching; The filming of books and videos in the media of martial arts dissemination makes the presentation of martial arts more diversified, helping practitioners self-study and review; Promotion strategies and paths utilize platforms such as the Confucius Institute and International Martial Arts Federation competitions to expand teaching, competition, and exhibition opportunities (Theeboom, Zhu, & Vertonghen, 2017; Liu, 2015; Han et al., 2023; Wang, 2019).

2.3. Application of Quantitative Analysis in Chinese Martial Arts

Research As quantitative analysis is applied across various research fields, studies in martial arts research have also started to utilize software like CiteSpace to explore characteristics and trends. Chinese scholars have analyzed nearly three decades of traditional martial arts research, concluding that high-productivity authors tend to cluster, predominantly at universities. Martial arts culture, education, intangible cultural heritage, and traditional ethnic sports have consistently been focal points in research on traditional martial arts (Li, 2020; Sun & Li, 2024).

Regarding routine research, a consistent trend is observed in both authors and institutions, with universities being the primary institutions, and author collaboration networks becoming more centralized. Research interests predominantly revolve around foundational questions in martial arts, globalization, and dissemination (Xu & Guo, 2020). In the realm of martial arts dissemination, studies suggest that issues related to dissemination, competitions, and competitive martial arts are experiencing steady growth, with interdisciplinary integration manifesting in diverse research areas (Li et al., 2018, 2022). In translation studies, publications in sports translation research are on the rise, yet overall output remains low. Most scholars work independently without establishing consistent collaborative teams. Moving forward, sports translation is likely to evolve towards greater specificity, with martial arts as a primary focus (Liu, 2020).

3. Research Methods

3.1. Software Selection

The study employed CiteSpace, v.6.2.R7, an information visualization software primarily designed for the quantitative analysis of scientific literature data, developed by Dr. Chaomei Chen of Drexel University, USA (Chen & Song, 2017). The software is capable of displaying knowledge graphs related to authors, institutions, keywords, and countries, which, when combined with data, illustrate the thematic and temporal aspects of the international dissemination of Chinese martial arts, showcasing the evolutionary trajectory of research and emerging frontiers, and unveiling patterns in international dissemination to serve as a reference for future studies.

3.2. Data Collection

Firstly, for literature selection, the Web of Science core journal database was searched using the following five keywords: martial arts (Topic), kung fu (Topic), wushu (Topic), International (Topic), and popularize (Topic). The research areas were restricted to sports science, social sciences and other fields, educational studies, Asian studies, and cultural studies. The article type was set to “article” and the publication years were set to 1986-2024, resulting in 1207 results from All Databases. The results were sorted by relevance, and the top 1000 articles were selected and exported in Download_XX format, serving as the foundational data for CiteSpace 6.2.R7 analysis. We analyzed using CiteSpace 6.2.R7 software. Initially, we created four folders: input, output, date, and project. We placed the basic data in the input folder and exported related literature. During the analysis, we set the time span from January 1986 to December 2024, with yearly intervals. We analyzed vocabulary from titles, abstracts, and keywords.

3.3. Data Analysis

3.3.1. Keyword Co-Occurrence

Keywords represent the core of research content, and their analysis effectively

indicates the level of interest in the international dissemination of martial arts research. After inputting martial arts-related literature into the CiteSpace software to generate a keyword map, the node types are set to keywords within the interface, and the time range is set to 1986-2024. Upon execution, a co-occurrence map of keywords related to the international dissemination of martial arts is obtained.

Showing in **Figure 1** the color and thickness of the “annual rings” in the graph indicate the timing and frequency of keyword appearances. Each node represents a keyword, with its size indicating the frequency of occurrence. More frequent occurrences result in larger circles. Keyword centrality is marked with purple circles in this graph. Lines signify connections between keywords, with line color corresponding to the respective year. This illustrates that within the international dissemination of martial arts, keywords like martial arts, exercise, and performance are central to the focus of research. Research on martial arts, combat sports, and performance is notably frequent.

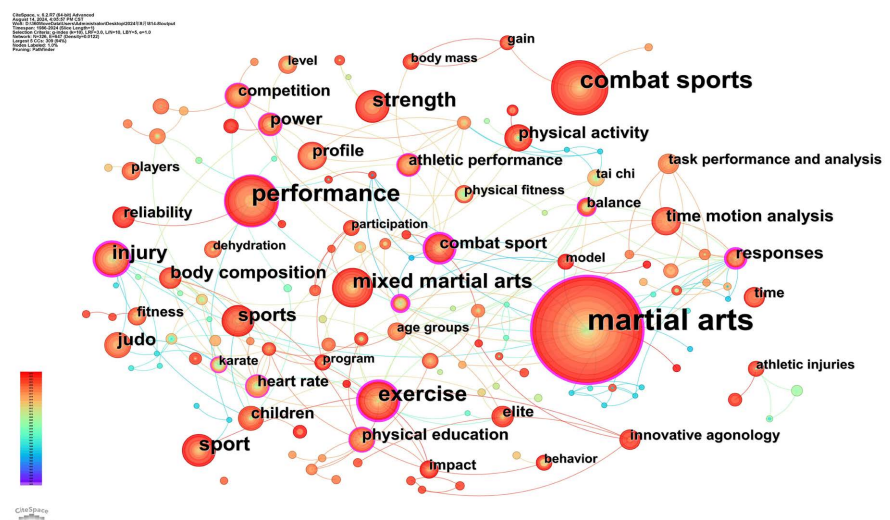


Figure 1. Co-occurrence of keywords in the international spread of martial arts.

3.3.2. Keyword Highlighting

To better understand the evolution of research hotspots in the international spread of martial arts and anticipate future research trends, we utilized the CiteSpace keyword highlighting algorithm, collecting the top 25 keywords as illustrated in the figure. As shown in **Figure 2**, the keyword with the strongest burst intensity is “task performance and analysis,” scoring 5.9. The second strongest is “time motion analysis,” with a burst intensity of 5.73. It is evident that research focused on martial arts techniques constitutes the primary direction in the international dissemination of martial arts. Tai Chi, a topic of significant interest, first appeared in research in 1998, reached its peak in 2008, and gradually faded by 2015. This trend is closely linked to the bid for the 2008 Beijing Olympics, when martial arts, as a featured competition event, garnered unprecedented attention, prompting scholarly research on its inclusion in the Olympics and global dissemination. In other aspects, research on karate as a martial art first emerged in 1996

and continued until 2010, making it the keyword with the longest duration in the research center. Additionally, research on judo began in 1996 and concluded only in 2021. Both sports are prominent internationally and their developmental strategies and approaches offer valuable insights for the standardization and normalization of Chinese martial arts. The keyword “sports” first appeared in 1997. Despite its relatively recent entry into research, the topic has sustained a lengthy span of study and continues to captivate scholarly attention.

Top 25 Keywords with the Strongest Citation Bursts

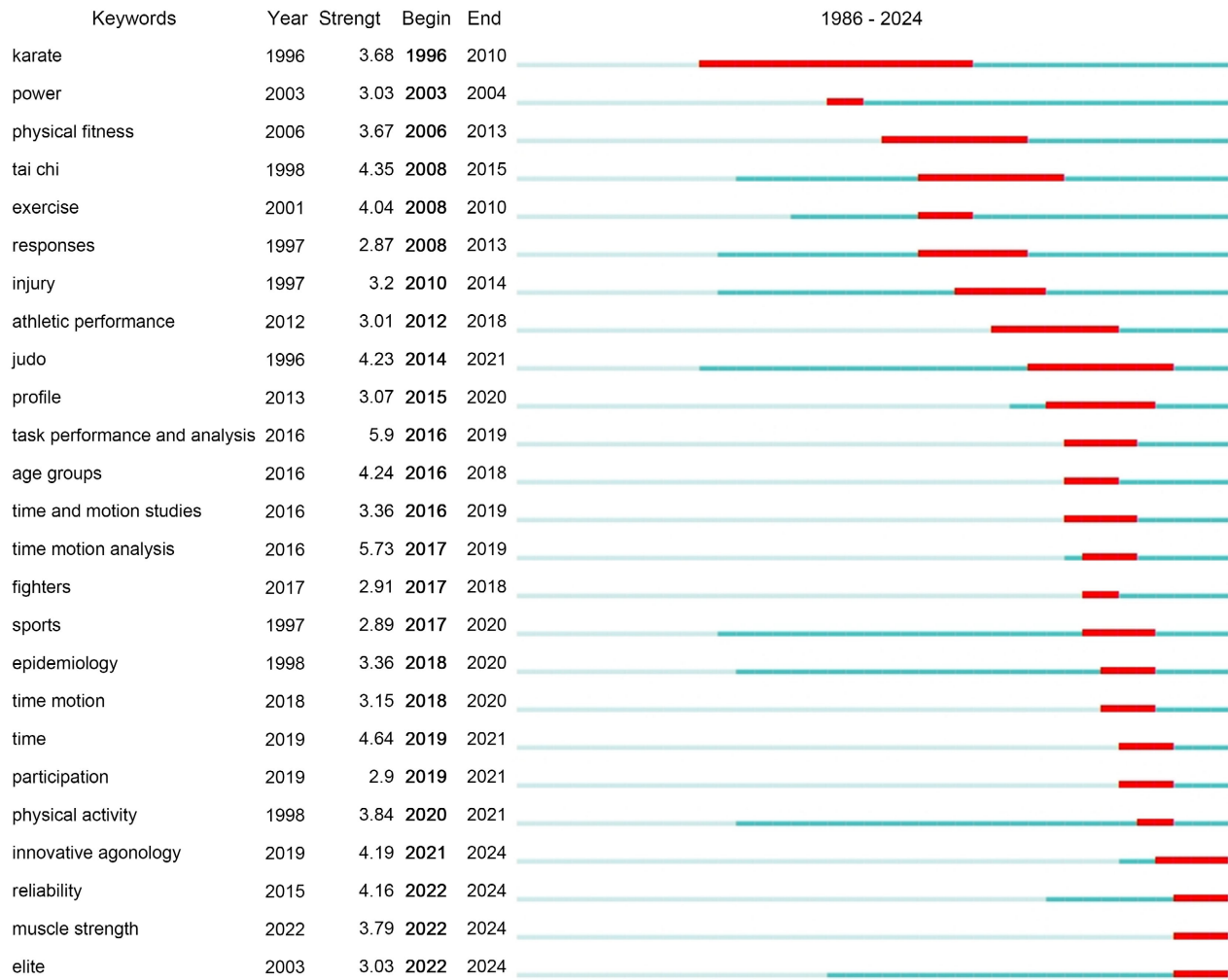


Figure 2. Highlighted keywords for international dissemination of martial arts.

3.3.3. National Co-Occurrence and Institutional Time Zone Analysis

To gain a deeper understanding of the research on the international dissemination of martial arts across various countries, a national cooperation network analysis is conducted to create a map of the cooperative relationships among nations. Employing annual rings as nodes, where nodes symbolize countries and connecting lines signify cooperative relationships, the size of nodes and the thickness of lines indicate the frequency and intensity of cooperation, respectively. Showing in

Figure 3 the graph reveals that countries like the USA, BRAZIL, POLAND, and CHINA are more engaged in martial arts research, with CHINA, CANADA, ITALY, and ENGLAND at the forefront of research. In terms of networking, researchers from high-publishing countries such as the USA, BRAZIL, POLAND, CHINA, and SPAIN demonstrate limited cooperation and have not established tight collaborative partnerships. Conversely, researchers from countries like LATVIA, IRELAND, CROATIA, and LITHUANIA, despite publishing infrequently, are at the center of research and maintain strong collaborations with other nations.

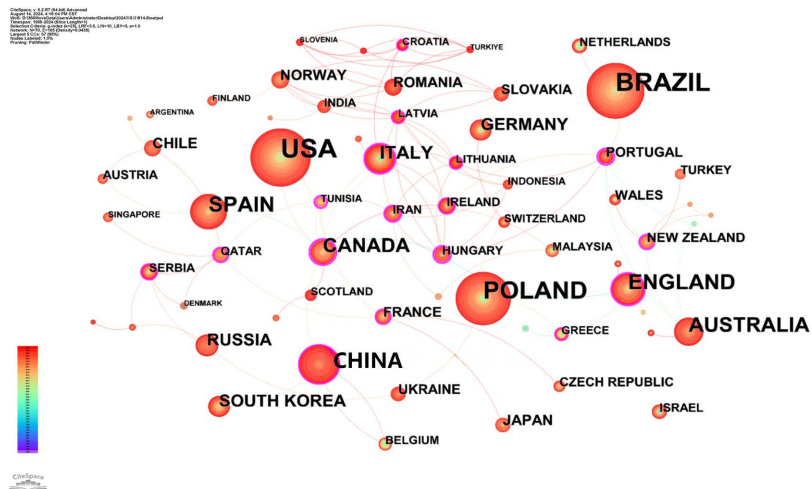


Figure 3. National co-occurrence in the international dissemination of martial arts.

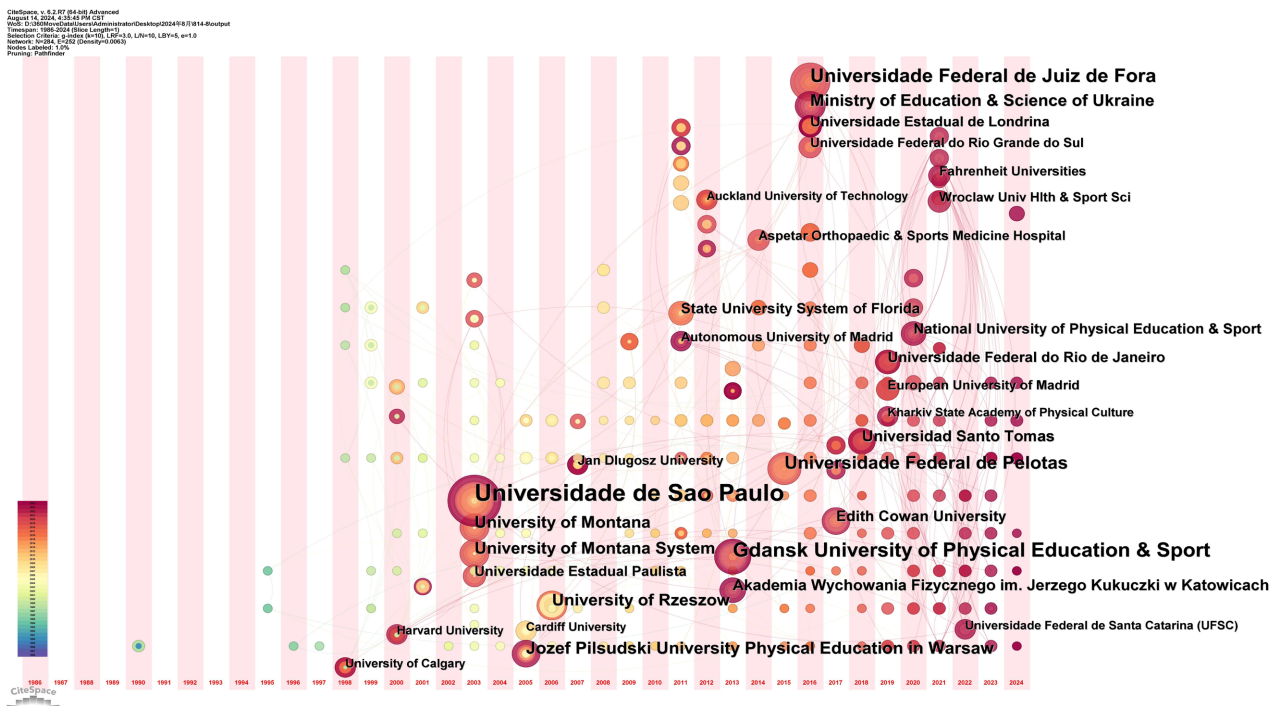


Figure 4. Time zone map of institutions involved in martial arts international communication research.

As illustrated in the institutional time zone chart, research into the international dissemination of martial arts is on the rise, transitioning from an ascending phase to a stable phase. Analytically shown in **Figure 4**, collaboration among research institutions began in its nascent stage from 1990 to 1997, and progressed through a growth phase from 1998 to 2010 with expanding cooperation and publications. During the boom years from 2011 to 2021, research on the international spread of martial arts surged. In the 2022 to 2024 stability phase, although there was a slight dip, it still maintained a high level of research interest. In terms of institutional connections, cooperation between institutions evolved from initially simpler relationships to closer collaborations, underscoring the trend of interdisciplinary integration in institutional research.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Bibliometric Characteristics

From the research results, they are primarily categorized into three parts: the first part focuses on the keyword “martial arts”, which significantly surpasses other research components; the second part involves studies using “combat” and “performance” as keywords to explore the two functional expressions of martial arts. Lastly, there is research into the functions of martial arts, such as “strength”, “sports”, and various sports events. From a specific analysis, research consistently centers on martial arts; however, within this, Chinese martial arts are contrasted with terms like karate, taekwondo, and Aikido, collectively known as Asian martial arts. This accounts for the prominence of judo and Aikido in martial arts-related studies. Primarily, studies emphasizing techniques are active, featuring keywords like performance, mixed martial arts, exercise, competition, body composition, and elite. This underscores the continued emphasis on martial arts technique application, spurring research on movement analysis and equipment, including time motion analysis. Additionally, research on martial arts in health is on the rise, exemplified by keywords such as physical activity, physical education, impact, behavior, balance, and heart rate, promoting martial arts practices for their benefits. Secondly, research into martial arts within the health domain is steadily increasing, highlighted by keywords like physical activity, physical education, impact, behavior, balance, and heart rate, which promote martial arts by highlighting their functional and therapeutic benefits. The benefits of martial arts practice are a focal point of international research, particularly in enhancing physical capabilities such as balance, coordination, and strength. Recent studies also indicate that Tai Chi, a component of Chinese martial arts, significantly influences chronic and psychological diseases. Chinese martial arts uniquely contribute to the education of young people’s willpower, etiquette, and morality (Li, 2006; Ma, 2020). Additionally, research is conducted on the confrontational aspects of martial arts, exemplified by keywords like combat sport and judo, showcasing their offensive and defensive functions. The mystique surrounding Chinese martial arts, enhanced by the promotion in films like “Shaolin Temple” and martial arts

novels, has sparked international interest in their combat applications.

The research hotspots identified in the literature analysis exhibit a distribution that diverges from studies conducted in China, encompassing the following aspects. Firstly, China emphasizes research in martial arts education, culture, and dissemination, primarily focusing on theoretical and applied studies to improve the dissemination effectiveness, practical approaches, and international influence of martial arts (Yu et al., 2011). Conversely, international research begins with the study of techniques, focusing on martial arts content, and conducts research in technical practice, sports benefits, and combat confrontation. Secondly, the research on the international dissemination of Chinese martial arts is comprehensive, covering aspects such as communication theory, pathways, terminology translation, and teaching competitions (Sun & Li, 2024; Li, 2020). In contrast, international research emphasizes form over culture, and values the concepts of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, bravery, and trustworthiness in martial arts theory as embodying the intrinsic essence and spirit of martial arts (Ma, 2020).

4.2. Research Context and Trends

From the analysis results, karate appeared earliest, sports, physical activity, and judo had the longest duration of appearance in the study, while karate, tai chi, and physical fitness had the longest occurrence time in the study center. From keyword highlighting data, it is evident that karate emerged early in the international spread of martial arts and was closely aligned with Chinese martial arts research for an extended period. The promotion methods and strategies of karate serve as valuable references for the international dissemination of Chinese martial arts. Similarly, China's research on the dissemination and promotion of martial arts draws parallels from successful sports like taekwondo and karate, aiding in comparative studies. Research on tai chi commenced in 1998. With its unique forms of expression, philosophical underpinnings, and health benefits, tai chi has captured the attention of international sports enthusiasts. Phenomena like "overcoming the hard with the soft" and "lifting a thousand pounds with four liang" vividly illustrate its distinct force application, encouraging public engagement in martial arts (Tang et al., 2022; You et al., 2021). Tai chi research became a focal point in 2008, further indicating that the inclusion of martial arts in the Beijing Olympics sparked a global research surge on martial arts (Li, 2022). Secondly, research on martial arts training, injuries, and analysis of technical movements parallels the general trajectory of technical training. Initially, there's a focus on technical training, which is followed by research on injury rehabilitation and treatment, leading to the deduction of technical details and mechanical movement trajectories. Additionally, research on sports, physical activity, muscle strength, and participation in sports demonstrates that martial arts training, more than its external forms, positively influences the practitioner's spirit and internal body structure. This effect is what attracts the public to participate, creating a health-promoting dissemination effect. Lastly, research topics in physiology and sports medicine, focusing

on innovative anthropology, reliability, and muscle strength, also reflect a deepening exploration into the intrinsic qualities of martial arts through technological advancements. Scientific technical assessments are performed employing techniques like electromyography, electroencephalography, and high-definition video to analyze both technical attributes and exercise styles (Huston & McFarlane, 2016).

The dissemination of martial arts primarily centers on technical aspects. Consider Elite, which began in 2003 and was incorporated into research centers by 2022. Its ongoing research demonstrates the importance of elite athletes and international events in the global spread of Chinese martial arts. This importance is underscored by the growing focus on events like the World Traditional Martial Arts Championships (WKFC), World Martial Arts Championships (WWC), World Junior Martial Arts Championships (WJWC), and World Tai Chi Championships (WTJQC), organized by the International Wushu Federation, which provide favorable conditions for the international promotion of martial arts. Additionally, research into martial arts sports medicine began in 2016. As global health concerns rise, martial arts have demonstrated utility in promoting muscle development, enhancing balance, and mitigating cardiovascular diseases (Hui et al., 2009; Huston & McFarlane, 2016). This has also prompted more researchers to use scientific instruments to analyze the impact of martial arts on human function and the contribution of martial arts to sports rehabilitation and medicine. Finally, in order to study the impact of digital technology on martial arts, research using innovative ethnology and reliability as keywords was conducted on testing, technology, etc. (Bodden et al., 2015), in order to improve the practical application of martial arts in different populations and enable technology to better serve project development. So from a trend perspective, elite athletes, martial arts physiology and sports medicine, as well as digital martial arts research, will become the development trend of international communication research in martial arts in the future.

4.3. Relationship Network of Major Countries and Research Institutions

In the study of international dissemination of martial arts, the number of publications reflects the attention of different countries to martial arts. Through national co-occurrence, it is reflected that countries mainly including USA, SPAIN, BRAZIL, CHINA, POLAND, ENGLAND, and AUSTRALIA rank high in the publication of martial arts international dissemination. However, the dissemination of martial arts is not solely carried out in various countries around the world, and is supported by the roles of overseas Chinese, Chinese cultural research centers, Confucius Institutes, etc. (Wang, 2019), which also indicates that the promotion of Chinese culture is well carried out in major publishing countries. Chinese martial arts have become a calling card for the world to understand China. Improving research on martial arts can make the international dissemination of martial arts

more deeply rooted in people's hearts, and enable them to understand the role and value of martial arts in various aspects. Compared to countries with higher publication volumes, countries with lower publication volumes but located in research centers such as IRAN, QATAR, LATVIA, and CROATIA have closer connections, indicating that they have formed a relatively fixed cooperative network to generate cross fusion synergies in martial arts research. Among them, there are also countries such as ENGLAND, CANADA, and ITALY, represented by CHINA, which have a high frequency of publication and maintain their research centers. Among them, CANADA and ITALY have a close cooperation network with other countries, and the international cooperation network of CHINA and ENGLAND still needs to be further improved.

Compared to national-level comparisons, the collaborative network of publishing institutions more clearly illustrates the connections among researchers. The data reveals a shift in martial arts research from a singular network to diverse and integrated collaborative relationships. After 2010, there was an explosive growth in institutional cooperation trends and paper publications, largely due to the implementation of China's national strategies such as "the Belt and Road", "cultural confidence", and opening-up policies (Jiao & Hu, 2019; Wang et al., 2018), which prompted more researchers to focus on the development of Chinese martial arts, engage in competitions and scientific research, leading to the emergence of prominent research institutions like Universidade de Sao Paulo, Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora, and Gdansk University of Physical Education & Sport. In terms of research institution types, universities and colleges predominate, mirroring domestic research trends in China, which drive the international dissemination of martial arts through academic research (Wang, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The international spread of Chinese martial arts is pivotal for advancing both the martial arts discipline and Chinese culture. It offers a robust guide for effectively reviewing research progress and anticipating emerging frontiers in the study of global martial arts dissemination. In terms of research hotspots, studies centered around martial arts, performance, and combat sport reveal that the technical aspects of martial arts predominantly influence their international spread. These aspects leave a profound impression on participants and audiences during performances and confrontations. This contributed to martial arts swiftly becoming a symbol for the world to perceive China following the popularity of kung fu films. Even today, martial arts techniques continue to be a focal point in the study of international martial arts dissemination. Secondly, in keyword-highlighted research, the study of international martial arts communication emphasizes the integration of technology and science, incorporating analyses from technological and sports medicine perspectives. This trend is expected to persist as a focal research area in the coming years. Research increasingly highlights the practical and athletic benefits of martial arts, aiming to foster their global dissemination and

wider recognition and participation. Notably, studies on sports engagement and health have also gained significant attention among researchers in recent years. Analyzing publication networks, countries with substantial publications have not developed extensive collaborative networks. Notably, China, as the cradle of martial arts, needs to enhance its publication and collaborative efforts in foreign journals. The time zone map of research institutions reveals an established and closely knit research collaboration network characterized by consistent partnerships.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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