



## From Kung Fu to Silk Road: The unspoken language of martial arts in China-Africa cultural diplomacy

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### Abstract

This research posits that martial arts have emerged as a remarkably effective, though under-researched, avenue for interaction between China and Africa. Serving as a gesture of goodwill, they foster mutual trust and deepen cross-cultural understanding beyond verbal communication. Using qualitative case study methodology from cultural studies and political science perspectives—including the Shaolin Temple’s African apprenticeship programs, Chinese Wushu’s integration into Confucius Institutes, and Beijing’s support for Senegalese wrestling infrastructure—this paper analyzes how combat traditions function as soft power. Findings reveal a two-pronged martial arts diplomacy model: top-down state-led initiatives under FOCAC and BRI initiatives, and bottom-up grassroots enthusiasm driven by Kung Fu films’ global popularity. Furthermore, China’s investment in Africa’s indigenous sporting heritage reflects a nuanced diplomacy that respects local culture. The research recommends strengthening this connection through institutional integration, reciprocal media collaborations, competition circuits, and leveraging diaspora networks to foster balanced cultural enrichment between China and Africa.

**Keywords:** New Silk Road, martial arts diplomacy, soft-power, China-Africa cultural exchanges, African martial arts

### Introduction

In the evolving landscape of global South cooperation, the relationship between China and African nations has transcended purely economic and infrastructural partnerships. Under the ambitious aegis of the “New Silk Road”, officially the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a more nuanced and holistic engagement has emerged, emphasizing “people-to-people bonds” as a cornerstone of sustainable diplomacy<sup>[1]</sup>. Within this framework, a powerful, unspoken language has gained prominence: the shared grammar of physical culture, expressed through the dynamic interchange of martial arts. This phenomenon represents neither accidental cultural diffusion nor merely instrumental soft-power projection, but rather a deliberate diplomatic strategy wherein martial arts serve as embodied communication transcending verbal language. Martial arts represent a unique category of cultural resource insofar as they communicate through bodily practice, physical discipline, philosophical principles, and ritualized performance, creating spaces for mutual recognition that precede or bypass linguistic interpretation.

While scholarly attention has extensively covered the economic and infrastructural dimensions of China’s engagement in Africa (Marcus Vinicius, 2023)<sup>[2]</sup>, such subtler and more embodied aspect of its “soft-power” strategy remain underexplored. In fact, when considering the traditional obstacles in China-Africa relations, the significance of martial arts diplomacy becomes apparent. Despite the deepening of economic ties, substantial cultural disparities still persist, which are influenced by different historical backgrounds, religious traditions, philosophical frameworks, and physical practices. Martial arts offer a distinctive means to bridge these gaps as they operate at multiple communicative levels simultaneously: the physical demonstration of skills requires no translation; the philosophical underpinnings based on concepts of discipline, respect, and self-improvement resonate in diverse cultural contexts; and the ceremonial elements of

martial arts training generate shared experiences that facilitate genuine personal interaction (Wenger, 1998)<sup>[3]</sup>. Therefore, martial arts diplomacy is not merely state-supported soft power or spontaneous cultural exchange, but a hybrid form in which government agencies, cultural organizations, individual martial artists, and recipient communities collaborate to create what can be termed “Embodied Diplomacy.” The following lines investigate the phenomenon of “Martial Arts Diplomacy”, analyzing how combat traditions—from Chinese Wushu (formal Chinese expression for Martial arts) to indigenous African martial arts traditions—function as potent instruments of cultural statecraft, fostering mutual trust and intercultural dialogue where words alone may fall short.

### Theoretical Framework of Martial Arts Diplomacy

#### 1. Foundational Concepts and Definitions

##### ▪ Soft Power

Understanding martial arts diplomacy requires engagement with theoretical frameworks developed in international relations and cultural studies. Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power provides essential groundwork, defining it as “the ability to attract rather than coerce, to set the agenda rather than react to it.” (Nye, 2008)<sup>[4]</sup> Soft power resources include culture, political ideology, and diplomatic institutions that project an attractive image of a nation-state, thereby influencing international actors to align their preferences with those of the power-projecting state. Hunter distinguishes soft power from hard power (military force and coercive economic measures), arguing that in contemporary international relations, soft power has become increasingly consequential for achieving strategic objectives (Hunter, 2009)<sup>[5]</sup>.

##### ▪ Cultural Diplomacy

Cultural diplomacy, defined as the strategic use of cultural exchange, artistic expression, and educational programs to advance foreign policy objectives, constitutes a primary

mechanism through which states exercise soft power. (Grincheva, 2024) [6] However, cultural diplomacy encompasses a broader terrain than conventional public diplomacy, which focuses on government-to-public communication. Cultural diplomacy can involve non-state actors (artists, intellectuals, spiritual leaders, athletes, and cultural practitioners) who operate autonomously from state direction while simultaneously advancing state interests through their cultural activities. This distinction becomes particularly significant in analyzing Sino-African martial arts diplomacy, wherein Shaolin monks, wushu instructors, and African martial artists function both as cultural ambassadors and as authentic practitioners of embodied traditions that transcend instrumental political purposes.

▪ **Embodied Communication**

A critical dimension of martial arts diplomacy lies in what might be termed “embodied communication” or “non-verbal communication.” Recent research in sports studies demonstrates

that approximately 70% of human communication occurs through non-verbal channels including body language, facial expressions, gesture, spatial positioning, and physical rhythm (Lekakis, 2019) [7]. In athletic and martial arts contexts, this proportion increases dramatically. Martial arts practitioners communicate meaning through the precise execution of techniques, the flow of movement, the relationship between instructor and student, and the physical sensations of impact and balance. This embodied communication operates independently of linguistic frameworks, enabling practitioners from different linguistic backgrounds to exchange knowledge, develop mutual understanding, and build interpersonal trust through shared physical experience (Taling T. *et al.*, 2019) [8].

**2. Specialized Frameworks for Martial Arts Diplomacy**

Within a broader context, several specialized theories illuminate the unique mechanics of martial arts as a diplomatic medium.

Theoretical Framework	Definition & Relevance in China-Africa Context	Key Scholars
Heritage Diplomacy	The use of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) to reinforce national identity and gain international prestige. China’s efforts to promote <i>Wushu</i> as a global cultural symbol and potential Olympic sport is a clear example of leveraging heritage for diplomatic gain, mirroring Korea’s use of Taekwondo.	Eugenia Rozenfeld (Lachina) & Guy Podoler (2022) [9]
Conflict Resolution Theory (CRT)	Johan Galtung’s framework emphasizes empathy, non-violence, and equity as foundations for peacebuilding. The philosophical tenets of many martial arts, such as discipline and respect, align with CRT, suggesting that joint practice can serve as a peacebuilding activity that prioritizes cooperation over competition.	Johan Galtung (2007) [10]
Contact Hypothesis (CH)	Allport’s theory suggests that interpersonal contact under shared rules and common goals can reduce prejudice and foster trust. Martial arts dojos and training halls provide a structured environment for precisely this kind of contact, creating people-to-people bonds that transcend national and cultural divides.	Johnson, J.A. (2024) [11]
Martial Arts Washing Theory (MWT)	A critical theory that examines how martial arts can be “hijacked” by powerful actors to project an image of strength, discipline, and honor, thereby legitimizing authoritarian or nationalist agendas. This provides a crucial counter-perspective for analyzing whether China’s martial arts diplomacy is perceived as genuine cultural exchange or a form of strategic image management.	M.J. Meyer (2024) [12]

These theoretical layers provide a robust framework for understanding the complex and unspoken language of martial arts diplomacy.

**The Relevance of Martial Arts in Modern Diplomacy**

**1. National Identity Construction and Civilizational Values**

Martial arts are powerful vehicles for national identity because they operate on corporeal, philosophical, and symbolic levels. The body itself becomes a medium for expressing national identity, which is especially significant in postcolonial African nations seeking to establish identities distinct from colonial impositions. Such process occurs through three primary mechanisms. First, martial arts embed philosophical principles into practitioners. Chinese arts incorporate concepts of harmony and balance from Taoist and Buddhist traditions, while African martial arts (AMAs) often embody warrior virtues and communal solidarity. Through disciplined training, these values become an embodied part of a practitioner’s identity (Zhouxiang, 2014) [13]. Second, each tradition has unique aesthetic and movement sensibilities—a specific rhythm, spacing, and posture—that reflect deep cultural norms. Practitioners internalize these movements, training their bodies in culturally specific ways (Taling, 2021) [14]. This

allows for cross-cultural engagement, such as an African practitioner of Chinese wushu who simultaneously retains the distinct sensibilities of their own martial heritage. Third, at a symbolic level, martial arts signify national pride and resistance to cultural domination. The global visibility of Chinese martial arts (CMAA) through films and their recent inclusion in the Olympics generates pride and strengthens national identity (Lin, 2022) [15]. Similarly, the international promotion of African combat forms like Senegalese Laamb wrestling and Nigerian Dambe boxing helps construct positive identities rooted in civilizational pride rather than postcolonial subordination.

This mutual acknowledgment of martial arts traditions as bearers of civilizational value creates a foundation for respectful intercultural engagement. When practitioners recognize the legitimacy and philosophical depth of each other’s traditions, they engage in a form of “Kinesthetic Diplomacy”—a diplomacy conducted through shared physical experience and mutual respect for embodied cultural practices (Felix Rösch, 2024) [16].

**2. Trust-Building and Intercultural Understanding Mechanisms**

Martial arts diplomacy fosters mutual trust and intercultural understanding through distinctive mechanisms that create a

holistic transformation in practitioners, exceeding typical diplomatic objectives. First, the shared physical experience of training builds profound emotional bonds. The inherent vulnerability and physical contact create “embodied trust,” a deep confidence between partners developed through repeated interaction rather than abstract discussion. This authentic connection forms a strong foundation for broader relationship-building. Second, martial arts practice prompts personal transformation, which practitioners often describe in spiritual or philosophical terms (Taling, *et. Al*, 2019) <sup>[17]</sup>. This journey of self-cultivation—leading to increased confidence, emotional regulation, and mental clarity—creates a “subjective attachment” to the art’s cultural origins. For example, African practitioners training in wushu develop positive associations with Chinese culture, while Chinese instructors develop deep respect for their students’ dedication, challenging stereotypes and fostering mutual admiration. Third, martial arts training establishes respect-based hierarchies. An instructor’s authority comes from demonstrated mastery of technique and philosophy, not external status. This invites voluntary submission from students who recognize their teacher’s superior knowledge, creating a model of authority built on competence and genuine respect rather than coercion (Jennings, 2023) <sup>[18]</sup>. Finally, martial arts practice generates what anthropologists describe as “communities of practice”—social formations united by shared commitment to a particular activity, shared standards for evaluating performance, and shared meanings regarding the activity’s significance (Wenger, 1998) <sup>[19]</sup>. Within martial arts communities of practice, participants from diverse national, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds develop shared understanding of what constitutes good practice, what values martial arts embodies, and what it means to be a competent practitioner. This shared understanding, developed through bodily practice and repeated social interaction, creates foundation for intercultural community transcending national and ethnic boundaries.

### 3. Constructing Meaning: Symbolic Interactionism and Relationality

Beyond the state-centric view of soft power, a social constructivist lens reveals how martial arts diplomacy shapes identities and norms through shared interaction (Villanueva R., 2018) <sup>[20]</sup>. This perspective, informed by symbolic interactionism, posits that international relations are not just about material power but are constructed through shared meanings, symbols, and discursive practices. The physical exchange in martial arts (its rituals, gestures, and shared discipline) becomes a site where mutual understanding and new identities are co-created. This is particularly relevant in the China-Africa context through the Chinese concept of “*guanxi* (relation, filiation)”. Rooted in Confucian ethics, *guanxi* emphasizes relational obligation, long-term trust, and moral reciprocity over transactional agreements. Some scholars have theorized this as a relational paradigm that shapes China’s diplomatic engagement, offering an alternative to Western models (Eisenman, 2023.) <sup>[21]</sup>. Martial arts exchanges, which rely on building personal relationships between masters and students, co-disciples etc., can be seen as a physical manifestation of *guanxi*-based diplomacy.

## Sino-African Martial Arts Diplomacy and Cultural Statecraft

### 1. A Historical Trajectory of Sino-African Martial Arts Exchanges

Sino-African martial arts interactions date to ancient times. As early as the 2nd century BCE, African acrobats performed in China, showcasing physical arts that prefigured martial exchanges (Taling, 2018) <sup>[22]</sup>. The Ming Dynasty voyages of Zheng He to Africa included cultural gifts, embedding martial elements like silk-wrapped weapons as symbols of peace.

The 20th century witnessed a surge through media. Bruce Lee’s films in the 1970s introduced Kung Fu to Africa, creating “visual memories” that shaped African perceptions of China (Taling T. *et al.*, 2019). This was followed by Jackie Chan and Jet Li’s movies, which amplified Wushu’s appeal. African audiences, lacking verbal context, decoded these films through body language, admiring the discipline and moral codes depicted.

Formal diplomacy accelerated post-1949. With China-Africa diplomatic ties established in the 1950s, martial arts became a staple of cultural delegations. The 2013 “Shaolin Kung Fu Training Class for African Disciples” marked a milestone, blending Wushu with Zen philosophy. African participants, like those from Cameroon, reported deepened appreciation for Chinese culture, illustrating how body techniques bridge historical divides.

On the African side, martial arts have long been intertwined with resistance and identity. For example, Senegalese wrestling (Laamb) combines sport with ritual, echoing communal values. Its inclusion in Sino-African events, such as the China-Africa Cultural Exchange Week, demonstrates reciprocity—China acknowledges African traditions as equally valid cultural capital.

### 2. The Soft power of Chinese Martial Arts and its Diplomatic Impact

#### 2.1. China’s Soft Power Strategy

China’s contemporary soft power strategy, as articulated through official policy documents and implemented through government institutions, assigns significant importance to martial arts. The “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” established in 1954 and serving as the philosophical foundation of China’s foreign policy, emphasize “mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity,” “mutual non-aggression,” “mutual non-interference in internal affairs,” “equality and mutual benefit,” and “peaceful coexistence.” (Coslovi, 2018) <sup>[23]</sup> Martial arts philosophy, emphasizing self-defense over aggression, respect for opponents, and the cultivation of inner harmony, aligns with these principles, providing cultural embodiments of China’s stated commitment to peaceful international relations.

The Chinese government’s development plan for wushu from 2016-2020 explicitly identified the sport as a vehicle for “increasing national confidence and boosting national cultural influence.” (Ministry of Culture PRC. 2016) <sup>[24]</sup> This governmental prioritization reflects recognition that martial arts constitute a globally recognizable form of Chinese cultural expression, with significant appeal in non-Western contexts particularly, given wushu’s prominence in popular culture through cinema and martial arts films. Notably, the plan emphasizes internationalization of wushu not merely as a competitive sport but as a vehicle for transmitting Chinese philosophical and cultural values,

suggesting that the Chinese state views martial arts as repositories of civilizational wisdom transcending their function as physical techniques.

## 2.2. The New Silk Road and the Institutionalization of Martial Arts Diplomacy

The BRI and its explicit emphasis on “Cultural Silk Road” development creates a macro-institutional context within which martial arts diplomacy operates and through which dispersed local initiatives achieve coordination and legitimacy. The 2024 FOCAC Summit in Beijing explicitly prioritized cultural exchanges, with the conference theme incorporating discourses about advancing a China-Africa “Cultural Silk Road” and implementing “Ten people-to-people exchange projects.” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2024) <sup>[25]</sup> Within this framework, martial arts initiatives acquire recognition as significant vehicles for advancing the BRI’s objectives of fostering people-to-people connectivity, mutual understanding, and long-term partnership.

The institutionalization of martial arts within the New Silk Road framework occurs through multiple mechanisms

- **First, through the establishment of formal training programs and cultural institutions:** The Shaolin Temple’s expansion into Africa, the establishment of Confucius Institutes promoting wushu alongside language education, and the organization of international martial arts competitions and festivals all represent institutionalization of martial arts as recognized components of China-Africa cultural exchange. These institutions provide infrastructure through which dispersed individual practitioners connect to broader diplomatic and cultural objectives.
- **Second, through the integration of martial arts into educational and cultural exchange programs:** The Confucius Institutes, which have proliferated throughout Africa with 61 institutes established in 46 African countries as of recent counts, increasingly include wushu and martial arts training within their programming, alongside language education and cultural performance. (Smith, 2018) <sup>[26]</sup> This integration positions martial arts not as exotic entertainment but as central components of Chinese cultural heritage worthy of serious study and practice.
- **Third, Martial arts diplomacy is advanced through the creation of new physical spaces:** such as Shaolin Temple branches in Africa. These centers, like those in Zambia and South Africa <sup>[27]</sup>, are strategic investments serving as training facilities, cultural hubs, and diplomatic spaces. They integrate martial arts with cultural exchange, business networking, and community outreach, symbolizing Sino-African cooperation and providing opportunities for local youth.

These strategies are reinforced by the “New Silk Road” framework, which emphasizes historical continuity with the ancient Silk Road’s legacy of cultural diffusion. By positioning martial arts as ancient traditions representing civilizational wisdom, this narrative lends historical legitimacy and profound weight to contemporary diplomatic initiatives. It frames modern exchanges as a continuation of

a centuries-old dialogue, strengthening the foundation of these cross-cultural relationships.

## 2.3. Case Studies and Empirical Analysis

The most visible manifestation of China’s martial arts diplomacy is the state-supported promotion of Chinese Wushu across the African continent. This effort is systematic, well-funded, and integrated into broader diplomatic initiatives like the FOCAC. The following case studies illustrate how physical culture is operationalized as a tool for soft power and identity expression, revealing a dynamic and often asymmetrical field of exchange.

### Case1: The Shaolin Temple’s African Training Programs and Intercultural Pedagogy

The “Shaolin Kung Fu Training Class for African Disciples,” launched in 2013, brings martial artists from nations like Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Tanzania to the famed Shaolin Temple for intensive training. Managed by China’s Ministry of Culture, these programs are designed to cultivate “envoys of Chinese-African friendship” who return home with a deep appreciation for Chinese culture <sup>[27]</sup>. The pedagogical methods employed by Shaolin instructors teaching African students illustrate the significance of embodied communication in martial arts diplomacy. Research examining intercultural pedagogies at the Shaolin Temple reveals that Shaolin masters employ teaching methods that privilege physical demonstration and imitation over verbal explanation, enabling students from diverse linguistic backgrounds to acquire martial arts knowledge despite language barriers. (Marta, 2019) <sup>[29]</sup> This pedagogical approach, which might appear primitive compared to verbal explanation, actually reflects sophisticated understanding of embodied learning and the cognitive processes through which practitioners acquire complex motor skills. By minimizing reliance on verbal language, Shaolin pedagogies create learning spaces wherein African students experience themselves as participants in shared human endeavor transcending linguistic and national difference.

Furthermore, the Shaolin Temple’s engagement with vulnerable African youth—particularly its programs at the Cultural Center of Shaolin Temple in Lusaka, Zambia, serving impoverished youth from surrounding communities—demonstrates how martial arts diplomacy extends beyond elite cultural exchange to create material benefits for economically marginalized populations. In fact, the Cultural Center of Shaolin Temple in Lusaka, Zambia, founded in 2021, teaches Shaolin Kung Fu and promotes Chinese culture, symbolizing Sino-Zambian cooperation. Since its opening, it has given young Zambians opportunities in martial arts, character development, and career training. Students also take part in music, traditional drumming, and sports like football. The center spreads Shaolin philosophy and Chinese traditions and offers social support to underprivileged youth. Another notable example is the Shaolin Temple of South Africa, described by some as “the only true repository of Shaolin Gong-Fu in Africa,” suggesting its prominent and possibly official role in promoting Shaolin culture. The temple and its affiliated centers provide martial arts training, Buddhist teachings, cultural activities, and community outreach. South Africa regularly hosts Shaolin Kung Fu demonstrations, exchange programs, and performances, reflecting strong ties with the

original Shaolin monasteries in China. In addition to Shaolin institutions, the country has Buddhist temples such as Nan Hua Temple near Pretoria, which, though not affiliated with Shaolin, frequently host Chinese cultural programs and share similar functions.

These engagements, while ostensibly focused on charitable provision of educational and material resources, simultaneously functions as profound cultural diplomacy, enabling participants to internalize positive associations with Chinese culture and with Shaolin traditions specifically. Participants in such programs become cultural ambassadors returning to their communities with embodied understanding of Chinese philosophy, discipline, and values, transmitted not through abstract cultural education but through lived experience and personal transformation.

### **Case2: Confucius Institutes (CIs): key nodes for disseminating CMAs alongside language instruction**

The expansion of CIs throughout Africa has been substantial, with 61 institutes established across 46 African countries as of recent counts, providing comprehensive programming that integrates language education with cultural activities including martial arts instruction, traditional Chinese medicine seminars, calligraphy workshops, and cultural performances. South Africa leads with six Confucius Institutes—more than any other African nation—while countries including Kenya (four institutes), Egypt, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Cameroon host multiple CIs that collectively reach hundreds of thousands of African learners annually. These institutions benefit from substantial Chinese governmental investment, receiving funding, teaching materials, Chinese instructors support, and infrastructural assistance that enable them to offer subsidized or free programming to African students. The Chinese Ministry of Education coordinates CI operations globally through Hanban (the Office of Chinese Language Council International), establishing standardized curricula while permitting local adaptation to host country contexts and priorities. This model enables CIs to integrate martial arts training as core rather than supplementary programming, reflecting recognition that Chinese wushu constitutes a “main cultural symbol of China” with unique capacity to attract international audiences and transmit Chinese civilizational values through non-verbal embodied practice (Taling. *Et al.*, 2023) <sup>[30]</sup>. CIs serve as crucial institutional vectors for martial arts dissemination across Africa, functioning simultaneously as language education centers and cultural diplomacy platforms that transmit embodied Chinese cultural knowledge through wushu training programs. These institutions represent a distinctive model wherein linguistic and physical cultural transmission converge, enabling African learners to experience Chinese civilization through both verbal instruction and corporeal practice. The CI at the University of Liberia launched its “Liberia-China Wushu School” in 2018, establishing systematic training programs that prepare local instructors who subsequently propagate martial arts knowledge throughout their own communities, thereby creating multiplier effects that extend Chinese cultural influence far beyond the initial institutional contact points.

The proliferation of martial arts clubs across the African continent demonstrates the remarkable reach and influence of Chinese cultural diplomacy facilitated through CIs and related institutional mechanisms. In Kenya, more than a

dozen primary and secondary schools in Kiambu County offer courses in CMAs, and the Confucius Institutes at Kenya’s premier universities—the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University—provide year-round martial arts classes, supporting more than 10 martial arts clubs and thousands of enthusiasts nationwide. Tanzania has witnessed similar enthusiasm, with the Tanzanian government providing substantial support to CMAs programs that now attract tens of thousands of Tanzanians, particularly school-age youth who find wushu training beneficial for physical fitness, self-defense capabilities, and self-control development <sup>[31]</sup>. This “kung fu frenzy” reflects deeper dynamics of cultural transmission wherein CMAs function as accessible entry points for broader engagement with Chinese language, philosophy, and civilizational values. Research demonstrates that African students initially attracted to wushu training through visual exposure via kung fu films subsequently develop interest in Chinese language study, traditional Chinese medicine, and philosophical systems including Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. The embodied nature of martial arts practice—requiring sustained physical discipline, master-student hierarchical relationships, and internalization of philosophical principles through repeated movement patterns—creates profound affective attachments that verbal language instruction alone might not achieve (Taling. *Et al.*, 2023).

### **Case3: Stadium Diplomacy and Cultural Festivals The Dakar National Wrestling Arena: A Model of Cultural Sensitivity**

China’s martial arts diplomacy is supported by significant investment in physical infrastructure, most notably via its “stadium diplomacy.” These large-scale projects serve as powerful symbols of partnership and provide the venues for future cultural and sporting exchanges. China has financed and built over 100 major sports stadiums across Africa, which act as highly visible diplomatic gifts (Charlie Q.L. *et al.*, 2019) <sup>[32]</sup>. A key example is the National Wrestling Arena in Senegal, a modern venue for the traditional sport of Laamb <sup>[55]</sup> <sup>[59]</sup>. Funded and built by China, this state-of-the-art facility was inaugurated in 2018 with President Xi Jinping in attendance, underscoring its diplomatic significance. Rather than imposing a generic stadium model, the arena was specifically designed to accommodate the unique cultural and ritualistic requirements of Laamb. Its architecture blends traditional Senegalese aesthetics with international standards, demonstrating a nuanced approach to infrastructure development that respects and validates local cultural heritage. These projects generate local economic activity and employment, serve as landmarks symbolizing China-Africa friendship, and provide platforms for cultural events, enhancing China’s soft power and diplomatic leverage (Dubinsky, 2025) <sup>[33]</sup>. This project serves as a powerful symbol of China’s willingness to “support rather than supplant”, indigenous African traditions, thereby building significant goodwill.

### **Martial Arts Festivals**

FOCAC action plans explicitly include the organization of joint cultural events. The planned “China-Africa Wushu Conference” and other festivals aim to institutionalize martial arts as a pillar of people-to-people exchange under the New Silk Road initiative (Ministry of Foreign Affairs PRC, 2025) <sup>[34]</sup>. These events move beyond grassroots

enthusiasm to create official, state-sanctioned platforms for martial arts diplomacy, ensuring continued engagement and visibility. The first African Shaolin Kung Fu Games held in Lusaka, Zambia in 2023 represented a significant milestone in this engagement, attracting African participants from multiple countries and drawing international attention to the presence of Shaolin Temple institutions throughout Africa. These games, and the training programs that preceded them, reveal important dimensions of how martial arts diplomacy functions in practice.

### 3. African Martial Arts: Charting the Path from Cultural Legacy to Contemporary Soft Power

#### 3.1. African Martial Arts Traditions: Embodied Heritage with Contemporary Resonance

To understand China-Africa martial arts diplomacy, one must recognize the equal importance of AMAs. Far from being primitive, these are sophisticated cultural systems that survived colonial suppression and embody millennia of philosophical and adaptive evolution. AMAs represent comprehensive knowledge systems integrating physical, spiritual, and aesthetic dimensions, often distinguished by a trinitarian structure of “Combat-Spirituality-Dance” (Taling, 2018) <sup>[35]</sup>.

These traditions are built on profound ethical frameworks. For instance, Senegalese wrestling (Laamb) is a multisensory experience of combat, song, and ritual guided by the Njom principle (“honor”), a comprehensive code governing conduct. Similarly, Zulu stick fighting and the Batho Pele (“Humanity First”) philosophy of Lesotho’s King Moshoeshoe I exemplify core African martial values of restraint, restorative justice, and treating adversaries with dignity. These traditions included sophisticated humanitarian rules, such as protecting non-combatants and cultural property, that parallel modern international laws.

AMAs share significant characteristics with CMAs, creating a foundation for meaningful, peer-level exchange. Both systems emphasize discipline, respect, and the integration of physical technique with philosophical principles. Both serve as powerful vehicles for constructing national identity and expressing cultural pride, combining combat functionality with aesthetic and ritualistic dimensions. This allows African practitioners to engage with CMAs not from a position of cultural inferiority, but of equivalence. Key Chinese concepts like balance (yin-yang) and flow (wu wei) resonate with similar African philosophies emphasizing communal harmony and spiritual-physical integration (Parle, 2007) <sup>[36]</sup>. This philosophical commensurability enables a genuine intercultural dialogue, where martial arts act as embodiments of profound civilizational values that can be appreciated across cultural boundaries.

#### 3.2. The Effectiveness of African Martial Arts as Diplomatic Tools for Global Engagement

While CMAs like Wushu are officially used as diplomatic tools to boost national influence, AMAs remain vastly underutilized despite possessing equivalent potential. This asymmetry stems from historical colonial suppression and post-colonial marginalization. However, African nations are increasingly recognizing this potential. Senegalese wrestling (Laamb), now a multi-billion-dollar industry and a “national treasure,” is a prime example. China’s aid in building Dakar’s National Wrestling Arena, personally inaugurated by both presidents, exemplifies culturally sensitive

diplomacy, demonstrating support for indigenous traditions rather than imposing external ones. This positioned China as a partner in African cultural self-determination.

AMAs are rich soft power resources, embodying culture and philosophical values with global appeal. The transformation of Angolan Engolo into the internationally recognized Brazilian art of Capoeira demonstrates this adaptability (Taling, 2016) <sup>[37]</sup>. This growing influence is also seen in recent blockbuster films like <Black Panther> and <The Woman King>, which have showcased African combat traditions with unprecedented authenticity, resonating with global audiences and fostering widespread appreciation.

The soft power of AMAs operates through several key mechanisms. First, embodied communication transcends language barriers, building trust through shared physical experience. Second, their philosophical resonance—principles of warrior virtue, communal solidarity, and spiritual connection—creates a foundation for intercultural dialogue. Third, they are crucial for national identity construction, acting as symbols of civilizational pride and resistance to cultural domination. Finally, international promotion facilitates cultural recognition, challenging historical hierarchies and establishing African combat forms as sophisticated traditions deserving equal respect alongside their Asian and Western counterparts. Strategic promotion through festivals, media, and educational initiatives could significantly enhance Africa’s cultural diplomacy portfolio.

### Challenges and Limitations of Martial Arts Diplomacy

Despite the significant potential of martial arts as diplomatic instruments, this form of engagement faces substantial challenges and limitations requiring careful analysis.

#### 1. Cultural imperialism risks

Martial arts diplomacy carries the risk of cultural imperialism, where globally dominant traditions displace local practices. The hegemony of Asian martial arts—like Chinese wushu, Japanese karate, and Korean taekwondo—has already marginalized many African martial arts traditions, restricting their visibility and institutional support (Meyer J., 2025) <sup>[38]</sup>. This imbalance is clear in Sino-African exchanges. CMAs benefit from decades of cinematic promotion, Olympic inclusion, and strong governmental backing. In contrast, African systems are often perceived as local curiosities or historical relics rather than sophisticated, living traditions worthy of equal recognition. This reinforces a cultural hierarchy. To counter this, deliberate efforts and equivalent institutional investment are required to promote and document AMAs on a global stage, ensuring they achieve the same level of respect and recognition.

#### 2. Trojan soft power diplomacy

Trojan soft power denotes the strategic arrangement of subtle and appealing cultural or technological undertakings by a nation or an entity to attain diplomatic goals while embedding more profound, and at times, concealed interests or influences. In actuality, martial arts diplomacy can operate as a means to promote national interests while obscuring the asymmetrical power relations inherent in cultural exchanges. The emphasis on “soft power” can veil the ways in which cultural diplomacy serves the strategic objectives of the government, leveraging cultural allure to advance political or economic interests. A critical analysis should probe into whose interests martial arts diplomacy serves, how power asymmetries mold cultural exchange,

and whether genuine inter-cultural understanding can emerge from contexts where one party (usually the state) retains control over the institutions and resources that shape the exchange. The “unspoken language” may foster connection, but it is also deeply embedded in the broader political and economic realities of China-Africa relations.

### 3. Philosophical misalignment

AMAs emphasis on spirituality, supernatural dimensions, and integration with religious practices may face incomprehension or skepticism from audiences conditioned by materialist or rationalist worldviews. Chinese wushu’s philosophical principles rooted in Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism—emphasizing harmony, balance, “defeating opponents without fighting”—differ markedly from African combat philosophies emphasizing warrior aggression, spiritual empowerment, and practical effectiveness. Successful cultural exchange requires mutual recognition that different philosophical orientations reflect legitimate civilizational diversity rather than hierarchical sophistication levels. Some African martial practitioners as well might reject philosophical elements they perceive as alien to African worldviews. For example, they might practice Chinese wushu while emphasize martial arts’ resistance dimensions rather than its harmony-emphasizing philosophical aspects. These embodied and experiential dimensions of martial arts practice create spaces wherein practitioners exercise agency and construct meanings not entirely determined by diplomatic frameworks. (Solmoe, 2024) <sup>[39]</sup> Such critical viewpoints underscore that while martial arts diplomacy opens new channels for communication, it operates within a complex and asymmetrical power dynamic that cannot be ignored.

### 4. Unidirectional communication patterns

Existing exchanges of martial arts between China and Africa are predominantly unidirectional, with a flow from China to Africa. This is manifested in African students receiving training at the Shaolin Temple, Chinese instructors teaching in African schools, and the promotion of Chinese wushu through Confucius Institutes. To avoid unbalanced cultural exchanges, it is imperative to establish a reciprocal mechanism.

Furthermore, there is a dearth of infrastructure development and sufficient funding for the support and promotion of AMAs. For instance, the African film industry lacks the substantial funding, advanced technology, and extensive distribution networks required to produce high-quality martial arts films that can compete on the international stage. In comparison to their Chinese counterparts, the training facilities, competition venues, certification systems, and institutional frameworks supporting AMAs are underdeveloped.

Unless African governments and international partners make substantial investments in martial arts infrastructure, media production capabilities, and promotional platforms, the reciprocity in martial arts exchanges will continue to be asymmetrical.

### Strategic Recommendations for Reciprocal Engagement

To realize martial arts’ full potential as vehicles for authentic mutual understanding and reciprocal cultural enrichment, both Chinese and African stakeholders must implement several strategic shifts

### 1. Prioritize reciprocity over unidirectional transmission

Although the promotion of Chinese wushu in Africa has attained remarkable success, a true partnership necessitates an equivalent endeavor in promoting African martial arts in China. Chinese governmental, cultural, and educational institutions ought to allocate comparable resources, media attention, and institutional support to African combat traditions, just as African institutions do for Chinese wushu in Africa. The principle of “mutual learning among civilizations” expounded in the FOCAC frameworks mandates bidirectional knowledge dissemination. The Confucius Institutes throughout Africa are increasingly integrating wushu training with language education. African cultural institutes in China (patterned after the Confucius Institutes) should likewise incorporate AMAs into their programming. Beyond independent institutes, AMAs should be integrated into the physical education curricula of Chinese schools and sports programs at universities.

### 2. Recognize civilizational equivalence

Both Chinese and AMAs are sophisticated knowledge systems representing millennia of cultural achievement. African traditions must be promoted as equally valid civilizational accomplishments, not primitive novelties—a parity that Chinese official discourse should reflect. However, a great disparity exists in their documentation. Chinese arts benefit from continuous written records from an uninterrupted civilization. In contrast, AMAs, despite more than 5,100-year history of practice proven by archeological evidences (Taling, 2021), lack written materials due to disruptions from colonialism, slavery, and imperialism. This documentation gap complicates their scholarly validation and international promotion, reinforcing a cultural hierarchy that must be challenged.

### 3. Invest in infrastructure and capacity building

The asymmetrical infrastructure supporting Chinese versus AMAs perpetuates unequal exchange. Substantial investment in AMAs facilities, training programs, documentation projects, media production capabilities, and institutional frameworks is essential. The Belt and Road Initiative’s emphasis on infrastructure development provides mechanisms for such investment. Chinese aid supporting projects like Dakar’s National Wrestling Arena exemplifies appropriate approaches; scaling this model across multiple African countries and martial arts traditions would demonstrate genuine commitment.

### 4. Academic Research and Knowledge Production

Establish an interdisciplinary research network that integrates anthropologists, historians, sports scientists, scholars in cultural studies, philosophers, and practitioners from Chinese and African institutions to carry out collaborative research. This consortium is expected to fulfill the following tasks

1. Archive endangered African martial arts traditions;
2. Conduct a comparative analysis of philosophy and techniques;
3. Examine the socio - cultural impacts and diplomatic potential;
4. Construct pedagogical frameworks for cross - cultural martial arts education;
5. Publish scholarly journals, books, and conference proceedings to promote the development of the field.

The 14th Meeting of the China - Africa Think Tanks Forum, successfully held in 2024, offers an institutional model.

6. Support doctoral and postdoctoral research on AMAs at Chinese universities, including fieldwork in Africa and training under African masters.

Equally, sponsor African scholars to conduct research on the role of Chinese wushu in Africa and comparative martial arts studies. Expanding such research with substantial financial support, institutional backing, and publication channels will generate an authoritative knowledge base that can legitimize AMAs on the international stage.

## 5. Competition Circuits and Festival Platforms

**Sino-African Martial Arts Festivals:** Organize annual or biennial festivals that alternate between Chinese and African host cities. These festivals shall feature both competitive and demonstration segments, showcasing Chinese wushu and a variety of African martial - arts traditions. The festivals would encompass the following aspects

1. Technical workshops that facilitate practitioners in learning each other's techniques;
2. Philosophical symposia that deliberate on ethical frameworks, training methodologies, and cultural connotations;
3. Artistic performances that integrate martial arts with music, dance, and theater;
4. Scholarly conferences that promote academic research;
5. Public exhibitions that educate a wider audience.

The African Regional Martial Arts Congress, which has been held annually since 2018, first in Kenya (2018) and then in Ghana (2019), has attracted participants from over 12 African countries. It has discussed the roles of martial arts in youth development and women's empowerment, thus providing a template. Expanding these activities to include Chinese participation and reciprocal hosting in China would enhance bilateral cooperation.

**Integrated Competition Formats:** Rather than imposing winner/loser dynamics potentially increasing hostilities (as cautioned in Taekwondo diplomacy research), design collaborative competition formats emphasizing mutual learning, cultural exchange, and shared excellence. These could include

1. team performances combining Chinese and African martial artists;
2. cultural demonstrations judged on authenticity and educational value rather than competitive dominance;
3. mixed-style exhibitions showcasing complementarity between traditions;
4. collaborative choreography workshops co-creating new forms blending elements.

Such formats would avoid transforming peaceful cultural diplomacy into competitive sports diplomacy risking unintended consequences.

## 6. Media Collaborations and Digital Platforms

**Sino-African Kung Fu Films:** Co-produce martial arts films that integrate both Chinese wushu and African combat traditions, with storylines mirroring shared historical connections (such as ancient Silk Road linkages, anti-

colonial struggles, and contemporary partnerships), and involve collaborations among Chinese and African filmmakers, actors, choreographers, and production teams. These film productions are required to meet the following criteria

1. Present visually captivating fighting scenes that authentically depict both traditions;
2. Adopt progressive narratives of China-Africa relations instead of relying on stereotypical clichés;
3. Guarantee genuine collaboration and grant African creative control over African representation;
4. Obtain governmental support in the form of favorable policies, funding, infrastructure provisions, and distribution assistance.

Such films have the potential to attract a vast global audience while reshaping perceptions of both Chinese and African martial traditions.

**Documentary Series:** Produce comprehensive documentary series exploring AMAs history, philosophy, contemporary practice, and cultural significance—distributed widely through Chinese television, streaming platforms, and educational networks. These would parallel existing CMAs documentation while elevating African combat traditions to equivalent visibility. Chinese state media (CCTV, China Radio International, Xinhua) should feature regular programming on AMAs, educating Chinese audiences and demonstrating respect for African civilizational contributions.

**Digital Exchange Platforms:** Establish online platforms enabling virtual martial arts instruction, cross-cultural discussion forums, video exchange of techniques and training methods, and collaborative research. During COVID-19, UNESCO ICM held AMAs webinars discussing roles in addressing youth and women's issues, with 191 concurrent viewers and more than 3,000 YouTube views over two days. Scaling such digital initiatives with enhanced production quality, translation services, and institutional backing would dramatically expand reach.

## 7. Institutional Integration and Policy Frameworks

**Educational and Cultural Heritage Cooperation:** The 2024 China-Africa-UNESCO High-Level Dialogue on Cooperation in Education and Cultural Heritage Protection, held during Beijing Summit, established frameworks for "Jointly promoting educational development and cultural heritage protection in Africa". AMAs should be explicitly recognized as intangible cultural heritage requiring protection, documentation, and promotion.

**Martial Arts within FOCAC Action Plans:** The 2024 Beijing Summit explicitly prioritized cultural exchanges, with themes advancing "China-Africa Cultural Silk Road" and implementing "Ten people-to-people exchange projects". The 2026 China-Africa Year of People-to-People Exchanges under theme "Consolidate All-Weather Friendship, Pursue Shared Dream of Modernization" provides ideal framework for systematic martial arts initiatives. Specific FOCAC mechanisms should include

1. dedicated martial arts working groups within FOCAC follow-up mechanisms meeting regularly to coordinate initiatives;

2. explicit martial arts components in Beijing Action Plans establishing measurable targets (number of exchange programs, participants, facilities constructed, films produced);
3. financial commitments supporting infrastructure development, training programs, and promotional activities.

### 8. Leverage African diaspora networks

African martial artists who have received training at Shaolin or in Chinese wushu, along with Chinese instructors imparting knowledge in Africa, serve as valuable cultural envoys. It is imperative to engage these practitioners systematically as conduits to foster more profound exchanges. This can be achieved by supporting their establishment of educational institutions that teach both traditional martial arts heritages, documenting their experiences and perspectives, and enhancing their influence in policy-related deliberations. Testimonials from African practitioners, such as the description of how “Chinese martial arts communicate with me on a level that surpasses verbal expression,” unveil the profound emotional and philosophical aspects of such exchanges.

### Conclusion: Martial Arts as Diplomatic Nexus in China-Africa Relations

Martial arts embody a substantial yet under-exploited aspect of China-Africa cultural diplomacy. They serve as communicative means that can surmount linguistic obstacles and promote mutual recognition and inter-cultural comprehension. By theoretically engaging with the concepts of soft power and embodied communication, and complemented by an empirical exploration of the initiatives of the Shaolin Temple, AMAs traditions, and the institutionalization of the New Silk Road, this analysis reveals how martial arts function as an “unspoken language” that is uniquely qualified to tackle contemporary diplomatic imperatives. The effectiveness of martial arts diplomacy stems from its ability to operate across multiple communicative levels concurrently. This includes physical demonstration that does not necessitate linguistic mediation, philosophical tenets that resonate across different civilizational settings, ritualized social interactions that generate shared significance, and embodied practices that transform practitioners’ outlooks and emotional bonds. These aspects facilitate authentic inter-cultural dialogue, thereby enhancing conventional diplomatic channels.

In the context of China-Africa relations, martial arts diplomacy assumes particular significance in light of postcolonial historical legacies and enduring hierarchical development frameworks. By according epistemological parity to African martial traditions in relation to Chinese traditions, framing training as a process of mutual transformation rather than unidirectional dissemination, and establishing peer-to-peer engagement platforms, martial arts diplomacy facilitates the establishment of relationships that transcend postcolonial subordination models. The New Silk Road Initiative offers institutional support, enabling scattered exchanges to achieve coordination, legitimacy, and alignment with overarching diplomatic goals.

Finally, the strategic promotion of martial arts diplomacy necessitates four crucial measures: expanding institutional resources dedicated to AMAs traditions; promoting equitable access through initiatives targeting economically

disadvantaged populations; integrating martial arts into national educational and cultural policy frameworks; and fostering critical contemplation on power imbalances and instrumental appropriation. Future research should focus on AMAs as a form of outward-oriented cultural diplomacy to complete this intercultural exchange cycle.

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