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CONFERENCE

SPEAKER: TSAI WEN-HSUAN (蔡文轩)

DISCUSSANT: PROF. AURÉLIEN BOUCHER

JUNE 18 , 2024

10AM-11:30AM (GMT+1)

BCMACS (CEO&GS)

Dancing or Fighting? The Governance of Kungfu in Modern China

Abstract

Often regarded as an embodiment of national pride and patriotism, traditional martial arts have fulfilled an important political function in modern China. In this presentation, Wen-Hsuan Tsai explores the relationship between sport and the state in China over the period 1912-2023, especially the management and governance of martial arts (Kungfu) in the Republic of China (1912-1949) and the People's Republic of China (1950-present).

Tsai argues that in modern China, martial arts have been placed in the field of the state, and they have over time occupied different positions on a spectrum between dance and fighting. These two characteristics of Kungfu reflect how Chinese people think about the connection between traditional martial arts and Western civilization, especially modern sports, and how Kungfu has been reshaped through China's contact with modernity.

The Chinese government has tried to dominate traditional martial arts by using them as part of its strategy of cultural position. Martial arts have performed four functions in modern China. During the Republican period, they were geared toward nation-building, as they were seen as a way of enhancing the Chinese people's sense of national identity and a means of resisting foreign aggression. There was a shift in focus after the founding of the People's Republic of China. During the Mao period, martial arts were the target of "socialist transformation." They became a form of "political dance" in the service of Mao Zedong's cult of personality and their combat function was almost totally eclipsed. Since the 1980s, the Chinese government has undertaken the "rationalization" of martial arts and established standardized rules, thereby facilitating their commercialization. The government now aspires to promote martial arts globally as a soft power resource.

Short Bios

Prof. Wen-Hsuan Tsai is Research Fellow at the Institute of Political Science in Academia Sinica (Taiwan) and a Jointly Appointed Professor at Graduate Institute of East Asian Studies in National Chengchi University. His main research is on Chinese political development, Chinese governance and innovation, comparative politics, and comparative authoritarian regimes.

Prof. Aurélien Boucher works at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen. His recent research deal with Social Stratification in China, through the lens of consumption and lifestyle and the sociology of sport labor in China. At the same time, he is continuing his research on the epistemology of social science. He is also currently a member of the International Chinese Sociological Association and a board member of the Asian Journal of Sport History&Culture