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Rural Community, Group Identity and Martial Arts: Social Foundation of Meihuaquan

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Abstract

Background. *Meihuaquan* has not only survived four successive dynasties as well as wars and other social upheavals, but it is, in fact, enjoying revitalization against the background of urbanization.

Aim. What is the social foundation of the revival of *Meihuaquan* in rural of north China? The focus of this paper is how this revival is supported by social institutions, especially the group identity of *Meihuaquan*.

Method. The methods of this article include participant-observation fieldwork, semi-structured interviews and questionnaire survey. Results. (1) *Meihuaquan* has survived four successive dynasties as well as wars and other social upheavals. (2) From 2006 the political environment has nurtured *Meihuaquan's* survival and development. Now, it is enjoying a revival. (3) It is a means to enrich personal, social and spiritual life of local people. (4) *Meihuaquan* serves as a means of identity formation not only for males but also for females. (5) Young adults have similar enthusiasm concerning *Meihuaquan* to their seniors. (6) Cultural awareness of educated young people is helpful for the development of *Meihuaquan*.

Conclusions. The fundamental reason for *Meihuaquan's* revival is that it cultivated the sense of group identity for local people in northern China. This kind of group identity is not only about social relationships, but also spiritual life; not only accepted by males, but also recognized by females; not only felt by older people, but also supported by the younger generation; not only favored by peasants, but also practiced by college students. In short, *Meihuaquan* established the identity of its members, local people and government by many strategies, and kept the balance between the three factions.

Introduction

The label *meihua* ("Plum Blossom" 梅花) has been widely applied to boxing systems in China.¹ According to traditional history, the form of *Meihuaquan* ("Plum Blossom Boxing" 梅花拳) on which the current paper focuses originated in the northeastern provinces near the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644)². This Chinese vernac-

ular martial art is well known by international scholars because of its connection with the Boxer Rebellion in the later Qing dynasty (1644-1912)³. Although various styles of *Meihuaquan* have been taught in formal settings and even distributed via dvd, we confine our remarks to the vernacular form as practiced in village settings in Henan, Hebei, and Shandong province [Zhang, Green

¹ *Tanglangquan* (*Praying Mantis Boxing*) and *Shaolinquan* (*Shaolin Boxing*) are related to the word "meihua". *Tanglangquan* has a branch called *Meihua Tanglangquan* (*Plum Blossom Praying Mantis Boxing*), and *Shaolin Boxing* has a branch called *Shaolin Meihuaquan*. But the relationship between them is still not clear.

² Lu Yao [1990], a historian writing about Boxer Uprising, and Zhou Weiliang [1992, 2009], a historian writing about

Chinese martial arts, he argued that *Meihuaquan* originated in the end of Ming dynasty.

³ There are some works mentioned the relationship of *Meihuaquan* and Boxers. For example, "*The Boxer Uprising: A Background of Study*"; "*The Origins of the Boxer Uprising; Rural Unrest in North China 1868-1900: With Particular Reference to South Shandong*"; "*History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Events, Experience, and Myth*".

2010], a form that like all vernacular martial arts: does not adhere to a structured curriculum, passes along techniques from experienced fighters to novices (often through observation), and emulates vernacular movement and musical forms. As in the case with folk arts in general, “knowledge is usually transmitted orally and in a casual fashion” [Green 2010: 17]. The art has survived the impact of social and political upheavals such as the change of dynasties from the Ming through the Qing, the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901), the Anti-Japanese War (1937-1945), the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and most recently the vast population relocation from rural to urban settings. Moreover, *Meihuaquan* not only has retained vitality, the art is undergoing revitalization. The focus of this paper is how this revival is supported by social institutions, especially the group identity of *Meihuaquan*. The examination is undertaken using Green’s [2012] notion of vernacular tradition and Tajfel [1974] and Turner’s [1975] theories of identity.

Vernacular Martial Arts, Rural Community, and Urbanization in China

Chinese martial arts as cultural practices and traditional sports have been documented to as early as the Song Dynasty (960-1279). In cities, such as Kaifeng, exhibitions were held as a form of muscular theatre to provide recreation for citizens [Lin 1996: 210; Lorge 2012: 131-135]. In the countryside, peasants practiced martial skills to develop fighting ability to protect their property. Especially the *Baojia System*⁴ promoted the spread of martial arts in rural areas. This system encouraged peasants to practice martial arts in daily life and helped reinforce the importance of martial arts culture. Historically, martial arts became integral to village daily life via both artistic and practical channels.

The term “vernacular” is borrowed from linguistics and architecture where it alludes to regional domestic forms. In the present context, then, vernacular martial arts are traditions that meet the need of local groups in which they are practiced and preserved, and typical characteristics of the region’s folk culture [Green 2012: 288]. Traditionally, the vernacular martial arts of China have been structured hierarchically based on a familial model that fostered mentoring relationships. Currently, large-scale and persistent urbanization threatens the stability of this traditional model. S.S. Zhang argues that many folk cultures became fragmented and ultimately vanished with the deconstruction and disappearance of villages in the process of urbanization, especially from the begin-

ning of 21st century [Zhang 2014: 5]. The preservation of Chinese vernacular martial arts during the process of urbanization has become problematic, and recent studies demonstrate that many of these arts are threatened with extinction [Gong 2011; Jiang 2011; Shan *et al.* 2011].

In fact, the survival of Chinese traditional culture, including vernacular martial arts, became increasingly imperiled when China began its modernization in 1949. Especially in the last 30 years, population demographics changed radically with an accelerating move from villages to cities as the progress of urbanization intensified. For a long time, the urbanization of China was based on the sacrifice of countryside not only on peasant’s basic rights, social status and resource allocation, but also on many core elements of Chinese traditional culture [Wang 2007]. Against the background of the shift from rural to urban lifestyles, the younger generation is less likely to live in a village that would preserve local tradition, and to compound the problem local traditions die along with older tradition bearers. This is the problem facing most Chinese vernacular martial arts at present.

Identity and Martial Arts

Apparently, the current urbanization has created some sense of identity crisis for peasants in China [Chen 2005; Wang, Ni 2005; Xiong 2008; Yang 2013]. “Who I am?” and “Where and to what group do I belong?” have become problems for rural populations. Members of a former peasant class, especially the young who shuttle back and forth between cities and their hometowns, are suffering a strong identity crisis never experienced in the past.

The term ‘identity’ is a key word in the area of humanistic and social science, because “a sense of belonging is basic to the human experience” [Villarreal 2009: V]. It derives from the Latin “idem” meaning “the same” [Gleason 1983: 930]. Normally identity is connected with different kinds of “folk groups” in the context of folklore [Bauman 1971: 32]. In the area of society, Tajfel [1974, 1982a] and Turner [1975, 1983] developed the theory of identity. Tajfel [1982b: 2] argues “group identification” has two necessary components, the sense of awareness of membership and the sense that this awareness is related to some value connotations.

The relevance between martial arts and identity has been argued not only in the West, but also in the East. Miller [2003] examined how the group identity was formed by *capoeira*, an Afro-Brazilian martial art. Frank [2006: 55] explored “the dynamic construction of identity that arose out of daily practice and forced practitioner to alternately embrace and question *taijiquan* as an ancient, Daoist art”. In moviedom, martial arts film helped to construct national identity among the Chinese [Lu, Zhang, Fan 2014: 320]. In China, there are also a few works analyzing the identity function of martial arts.

⁴ *Baojia System* is one of defense and social control systems of rural society in traditional China which was carried out in Song dynasty by Wang Anshi (1021-1086) and was widely used in Ming and Qing dynasties.

Regarding Chinese martial arts, Chen and Yao [2012: 52] argue that "martial arts could improve the national identity". In village contexts, "the development of traditional martial arts and the clan identity enhanced each other" [Wu, Liu, Guo 2011: 91].

But, as a whole, Chinese martial arts suffer from an identity crisis. The cultural aphasia of Chinese martial arts is that they "did not keep their cultural identity in the background of globalization" [Ye 2007: 13]. The reason for the identity crisis of Chinese martial art is that it "lost many of its traditional cultural traits during the long period of applying for being on the list of Olympic game" [Fang 2008: 5]. This is the situation that most Chinese vernacular martial arts are experiencing, as well.

Contrary to the general trend of deep crisis or even disappearance of Chinese vernacular traditions, *Meihuaquan* has retained vitality and even is undergoing revitalization. For this study, we hypothesized that there exists a subtle relationship between *Meihuaquan* and group identity, local community identity and national identity which reinforces the permanence of this vernacular martial art. So, the aim of this research is to find this subtle relationship and then to reveal the social foundation of *Meihuaquan*.

Methods

To test our hypothesis a two-stage, mixed (quantitative – qualitative) research was carried out. Next, the method of each stage and their outcomes are explained.

Method for the First Stage

The first stage of our research was based on the review of the literature on *Meihuaquan* (Chinese and English language sources) and on anthropological methodology: participant-observation fieldwork and semi-structured interviews. Zhang Guodong is a member of *Meihuaquan*, and he was in charge of the communication with local people and boxers. His hometown is Heze, a place nearby Henan and Jiangsu Province with strong martial arts tradition in Shandong Province, and he practiced martial arts in his village when he was a child. In 1998, he became a disciple of Sang Quanxi, a 15th generation boxer of *Meihuaquan* in Heze. From 2007, he began to research the tradition of *Meihuaquan*. So, his insider status made our fieldwork easier. We participated in their daily lives from martial arts practice to activities organization and participation in the staging of festivals such as summer holidays and spring festivals from 2010 to 2012.

We planned an outline of our interview procedures including questions about local traditions of *Meihuaquan*, personal experiences of practitioners, opinions on its function for individuals and their community, the current problems facing *Meihuaquan* and predictions concerning

the art's future. Our 78 interviewees included a spectrum of individuals from elementary school students to university professors, from villagers to government officials, and both males and females, residing in twelve villages in Shandong, Henan and Hebei Provinces. Most of our interviews were conducted individually at the interviewee's home. A few interviews were carried out in the form of panel discussions, however.

Overall, during the early stages of our fieldwork, our methodology remained "qualitative" [Geertz 1973]. We focused on the written history, oral history, transmission, current situation and social and cultural context of *Meihuaquan*.

Method for the Second Stage

The second stage of our fieldwork from September 2012 to February 2014 explored the mindset focused on the practice of *Meihuaquan* as a point of "folk identity" [Green 2006; El-Shamy 2011]. We added questionnaires to collect quantitative data both to supplement and test the previously collected qualitative data.

Sample. Ninety-eight residents in villages located in Henan, Hebei, and Shandong provinces volunteered to participate in this study. The sample was composed of 22 females and 76 males, ranging from 16 to 88 years-old ($M = 43.8$; $SD = 13.3$). According to their age, two groups were considered: Young adults (Y), under-35 years-old ($n = 24$), and Middle and Senior adults, 35 and above years-old ($n = 74$). On the basis of educational level, three groups were considered: Level 1 – Illiteracy & Elementary School ($n = 24$), Level 2 – Middle School ($n = 40$), Level 3 – High School and Higher ($n = 34$).

Questionnaire. A specific questionnaire designated *Meihuaquan Heritage Questionnaire* (MHQ) was developed for the purposes of this research. In its final version the MHQ contains forty-one items or statements which correspond to five key topics or dimensions: (1) Knowledge about *Meihuaquan* (KM, 12 questions), (2) Fondness for *Meihuaquan* (FM, 10 questions), (3) Needs of participation on *Meihuaquan* (NPM, 8 questions), (4) Social relationships established through *Meihuaquan* (SRM, 5 questions), and (5) Relationships between respondents' religion and *Meihuaquan* (RM, 6 questions) (see Appendix). Participants answer each item on a 5-point Likert scale indicating their agreement with the statement (1 = Disagree; 2 = Slightly disagree; 3 = Not sure; 4 = Relatively agree; 5 = Agree). Higher scores in each of the topics are indicative of greater knowledge and appreciation for *Meihuaquan*.

The validation process of the MHQ included two phases. During the primary phase the first author of the paper developed an initial set of statements which was next refined by all members of the research team. Also, statements were grouped in the above mentioned key topics. For the second phase, a pilot test was performed

on a sample of 32 local residents, including several local *Meihuaquan* masters and boxers, whose answers and comments about the questionnaire were used for the addition or deletion of statements, or reformulation of some of the statements to enhance clarity. For this segment of the research, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the whole questionnaire was 0.96 and for the five topics it ranged from 0.78 to 0.86.

Procedure. Two members of the research team participated in the Liangquan activity held in Houma village during the spring festival of 2013 in Pingxiang of Hebei province. More than 3,000 people from Shandong, Henan and Hebei provinces participated in this event. On that day, we randomly distributed a total of 110 questionnaires to visitors who agreed to participate in this study. The local, native Chinese speaker member of the research team was available when distributing the questionnaires and answered any queries regarding the questions or the procedure. Nevertheless, in order to avoid time pressure and lack of attention in answering the questionnaire, participants were allowed to fill it out alone and at their own pace. Finally, the recovery rate was 91.0% (100 of 110 questionnaires) but two of them were excluded from the analysis due to incomplete answers (effective rate = 89.1%).

Statistical analysis. We used the statistical program SPSS 20.0 (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA) for quantitative data analysis. Descriptive analyses included means and standard deviations, while Mann-Whitney or Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric tests were used for comparing gender, age and education level groups. The significance level was set at $p < .05$.

Result and Discussion

Next, we will focus on the history and functions of *Meihuaquan*, and its social foundation based on the influence of respondents' age, gender and education.

The Vitality of Meihuaquan

The history of *Meihuaquan* can be dated from the late Ming dynasty (1368-1664) according to "documents of *Meihuaquan* and some researches"⁵. It survived the various changes from the Ming to the Qing Dynasties, and from the Republic of China to the People's Republic of China. Peasant uprisings in late Ming and throughout the Qing provided the conditions for the development

of *Meihuaquan*. The most dramatic example of the social unrest of the period was the Boxer Uprising. Important wars such as the Northern Expedition, the Anti-Japanese War, and the Civil war between Kuomintang and Communist Party, promoted the spread of *Meihuaquan*. On the other hand, its development was hindered by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution and the rural social change in the 1980s and 1990s.

Meihuaquan originally was passed through the Zou family. Therefore, at this time, it was also called the *Boxing of Father and Son* (父子拳)⁶. But this situation was changed by the migration of *Zou Hongyi* (1624-1715) and his son from Jiangsu to Hebei province in the period of Emperors Yongzheng (1678-1735) and Qianlong (1711-1799). "Master Zou Hongyi began to teach his martial arts to other people during his travels and accepted many disciples in Henan and Hebei. Later, Zou Wenju, the son of Zou Hongyi, went to Hebei to find his father and lived in Houma village to teach *Meihuaquan* after his father died."⁷ *Meihuaquan* was soon accepted by rural communities at the boundary of Henan, Hebei, and Shandong province because of the "social instability" of the area [Esherick 1987: 13-28]. At the same time, *Meihuaquan* was influenced by some folk religions such as *Clear Water sects*, and *Eight Trigrams sects* [Cheng 1981; Esherick 1987; Lu 1990]. Until late in the Qing dynasty, *Meihuaquan* grew in popularity in rural northern China. "Each year in the second or third (lunar) month there are fairs, and the boxers use this opportunity to gather and compare their techniques. They called this *Liangquan* (showing off their boxing skills)⁸. Thus, in the countryside these fairs are regarded as *plum boxing meetings*."⁹ Mei Boxers were involved in the Boxer Rebellion as an important part of the *Boxers* in late Qing dynasty, during which time the art was preserved by *Zhao Sanduo*, a leader of the Boxers and a famous master of *Meihuaquan*. Zhao changed the name of his organization from *Meihuaquan* to the *Boxers* (or the righteous harmonious fists) [Lu 1986: 87].

In the Republican period, the government advocated practice of martial arts which were called *National Martial Arts* (*Guoshu*). This provided good conditions

⁶ The rules of *Meihuaquan* were very strict in its original time, and normally it just was taught to families not outsiders [Wang, Feng 2012: 178].

⁷ Interviewee: Tian Jianwen; Place: Office of *Meihuaquan Association* at Houma Village in Pingxiang of Hebei province; Time: February 6, 2012.

⁸ *Liangquan* is a series of activities of boxing show of Mei boxers during festivals, especially spring festival. The aim of it is to commemorate the ancestors of *Meihuaquan*. Now, it is also an important way to promote influence of *Meihuaquan* [Zhang & Li 2010: 245].

⁹ Hong Yongzhou report, cited in Zhang Rumei, GX 24/4/29 (17/6/1898), JWJAD, 6.1:236. Quoted in "*The Origins of the Boxer Uprising*" [Esherick 1987: 150].

⁵ "Lecture of *Meihuaquan's* Origin", an internal document of *Meihuaquan*, records that the second generation ancestor lived in late Ming dynasty and the third generation master *Zou Hongyi* lived in late Ming and early Qing dynasty. This statement gets the support of "folk stories" [Wang & Feng 2012] and some researches of scholars [Ma 2009; Zhou 2009].

for the development of *Meihuaquan*. At this time, there were some famous masters of *Meihuaquan*. For example, *Kou Yunxing* (1898-1982), a 14th generation Mei boxer, made his reputation at the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936 because of his Chinese martial arts demonstration with a team of other six other martial artists [Yang 2012]. During the wars, many Mei boxers served in China's army spreading the art throughout China and even to other nations. For example, *Wu Tipan* (1891-1964) took it to Taiwan in 1949¹⁰, and *Zhang Zuyao* (1917-1993) introduced it to Italy in 1975¹¹.

Later, *Meihuaquan* was profoundly affected by the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. As was the case with most traditional practices, it was prohibited and many masters were persecuted. "My father was forced to stop teaching (*Meihuaquan*) and stay at home on the charge of spreading the Four Olds¹²", *Han Jianzhong*, professor of *Meihuaquan* at the *Chinese People's Public Security University*, wrote in his blog (2008). *Wu Baihua* told us, "The government confiscated and then burnt all my documents of *Meihuaquan*. I was forbidden to practice and teach *Meihuaquan*. They put a gun to my head and told me they would kill me if I did it again."¹³ Fortunately, many of its traditions were preserved secretly. Survivors of this period reported the extreme measures they took to preserve Mei Boxing and related artifacts. "I concealed the tablet that recorded the history of *Meihuaquan* of my family under the ground of my house, and brought it out in the 1980s"¹⁴ "We practiced *Meihuaquan* secretly in thrashing ground for wheat that far away from village at night."¹⁵

Soon after this period, such repressive policies were repealed, *Meihuaquan* ushered in a decade of rapid expansion at the stimulated by the reform and opening-up policy. The National Conference on Martial Arts in 1982 liberated martial arts from the shadow of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution [Zhao 2003: 57]. Martial arts organizations and practitioners increased rapidly at the grass-roots level. The Kung Fu craze swept across the whole country after the showing of Kung Fu movies, such as "Shaolin Temple" [Yu 2001: 69]. In this

context, Nanpu, the president of the Hebei Wushu Association, came to Houma village to visit the burial place of *Meihuaquan* ancestor Zou Hongyi and highly praised the historical contribution of *Meihuaquan* in 1986 [Wang, Feng 2012: 207]. Acceptance by the government liberated the enthusiasm of Mei boxers. "Many boxing spots opened again and many traditions of *Meihuaquan* were recovered after the visit of Mr. Nanpu."¹⁶

But this situation was soon undermined by the wave of rural residents leaving the land for urban jobs in the 1990s and continuing into the beginning of 21st century, because as Zhu asserts, "the development of China was at the expense of the farmers' interest in the 30 years after reform and opening up. The farmers' income, social status, and work, suffered in different degrees due to social discrimination" [Zhu 2008]. The cultural expense was huge, too. Jia Pingwa, a famous Chinese author, describes the harsh reality of rural culture and the peasant life in southern Shanxi from the 1980s through the beginning of 21st century in his novel "Shanxi Opera" [2005].

As a result of these conditions, *Meihuaquan* took a battering again. As Ma Shujing recalls, "Most of the young and middle aged people worked in cities throughout the year. They just came back at the harvesting time and spring festival. Boxing spots disappeared one by one. Many old *Meihuaquan* master died with their arts."¹⁷

The Revival of *Meihuaquan*

Many commentators echo reporter Feng's sentiments: "Our traditional cultures are shrinking" [Feng 2005]. At the beginning of 21st century, the Chinese government realized the problem and initiated some protective measures. For example, the project of "Protecting Ethnic and Folk Culture" was activated in 2002, and China joined in the "Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage" of UNESCO (*United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*) in 2004. In this context, *Meihuaquan*, *Taijiqian* and *Shaolinquan* were on the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage items developed by the State Council of China [Notification of the State Council announced the first list of intangible cultural heritage 2006]. The acceptance of government ignited the passion of local people to recover their arts again. Our initial research confirms that *Meihuaquan* enjoys a revival following its inclusion on the list of Intangible Cultural Heritage items. The contemporary benign policies of the Chinese official agencies represent a marked contrast to earlier agendas. For example, our interviews showed that *Meihuaquan* persisted as a clandestine practice during the Cultural Revolution which branded vernacular martial arts, among other traditional cultural practices,

¹⁰ Interviewee: Wu Baihua, a grandson of Wu Tipan; Place: Wu's home at South Street in Heze of Shandong province; Time: February 18, 2010.

¹¹ See the relationship between Zhang Zuyao and *Meihuaquan* at: http://www.meihuaquan.it/mhz/genealog/zhang_zuyao.htm

¹² It is the general term of the old ideas, old culture, old customs and old habits. They were the aims to be broken in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

¹³ Interviewee: Wu Baihua; Place: Wu's home at South Street in Heze of Shandong province; Time: February 18, 2010.

¹⁴ Interviewee: Zheng Dani; Place: Zheng's home at Houma village in Pingxiang of Hebei province; Time: February 5 in 2012.

¹⁵ Interviewee: Zhang Fuyin; Zhang's home at Houma village in Pingxiang of Hebei province; Time: February 5 in 2012.

¹⁶ Same with note 14.

¹⁷ Interviewee: Ma Shujing; Place: Ma's home at Zhuzhai in Puyang of Henan province; Time: July 24, 2009.

Table 1. Results of the Meihuaquan Heritage Questionnaire (MHQ)

Dimensions of the MHQ	KM (max. = 60)	FM (max. = 50)	NPM (max. = 40)	SRM (max. = 25)	RM (max. = 30)	Total (max. = 205)
Global	56.5 ± 6.0	47.9 ± 4.0	38.3 ± 3.1	23.7 ± 2.7	28.8 ± 2.3	195.1 ± 16.9
Gender						
Males (n=76)	57.1 ± 4.6	48.3 ± 3.2	38.5 ± 2.4	24.0 ± 2.0	29.0 ± 2.0	196.9 ± 12.8
Females (n=22)	54.3 ± 9.2	46.7 ± 6.1	37.3 ± 4.6	22.7 ± 4.2	28.4 ± 3.1	189.3 ± 26.3
Age						
Under-35 (n=24)	55.7 ± 8.6	46.7 ± 6.0	38.1 ± 3.7	23.6 ± 3.1	28.7 ± 2.9	192.7 ± 23.6
35 and above (n=74)	56.7 ± 5.0	48.3 ± 3.1	38.3 ± 2.9	23.7 ± 2.5	28.9 ± 2.1	195.9 ± 14.2
Education						
Level 1 (n=24)	57.2 ± 3.8	48.8 ± 1.8	39.0 ± 1.8	24.2 ± 1.3	29.5 ± 0.9	198.9 ± 7.8
Level 2 (n=40)	55.7 ± 5.9	47.2 ± 4.4	37.5 ± 3.4	23.2 ± 3.2	28.3 ± 2.5	192.0 ± 17.9
Level 3 (n=34)	56.8 ± 7.3	48.1 ± 4.7	38.5 ± 3.3	23.8 ± 2.7	28.8 ± 2.7	196.1 ± 19.9

Note: Results are expressed as mean ± std. deviation. Level 1 – Illiteracy & Elementary School; Level 2 – Middle School; Level 3 – High School and Higher (n = 34). KM = Knowledge about *Meihuaquan*; FM = Fondness for *Meihuaquan*; NPM = Needs of participation in *Meihuaquan*; SRM = Social relationships established through *Meihuaquan*; RM = Relationships between respondents' religion and *Meihuaquan*.

as vestiges of feudalism and targeted them for extermination. Clearly, from 2006 the political environment has nurtured *Meihuaquan*'s survival and development.

Now, *Meihuaquan* is enjoying a revival. For example, the scale of *Liangquan* activities in Houma village in the past five years doubled the size of ten years ago. Many boxing spots for *Meihuaquan* are being rebuilt, and *Liangquan* activities are recovering in various regions as festival activities. *Meihuaquan* organizations and disciples in different places reinforced their communication by holding activities, interviews, SNS (Social Networking Services), and even academic salons. For example, Cao Guangchao, a young master in Dingtao of Heze, founded a website called “*Heze Meihuaquan*” [<http://www.hzmq.com/>] in 2009 in order to document the *Meihuaquan* style surviving in Heze and communicates with organizations of *Meihuaquan* in other regions. The hall of ancestor *Zou* in Houma that stands 32 meters high and 6563.75 meters square was funded by donations from Mei boxers in 2014. Furthermore, many places, such as Pingxiang and Guangzong in Hebei and Heze in Shandong, began programs to teach *Meihuaquan* in elementary schools in recent years in order to spread the art to the young generation.

In summary, our research showed that *Meihuaquan*'s history, although continuous, has had several crises as well as strong revival periods. Nowadays it is enjoying one of these revivals due to support from the government and local residents. For the next sections we will focus on the relationship between *Meihuaquan* and local people in order to find its social foundation.

Meihuaquan as a means to enrich personal, social and spiritual life

Global results (Table 1, first row) showed high scores in the MHQ and five related dimensions. They reflect the

identification of local people with *Meihuaquan* from the perspective of the five dimensions studied: knowledge, affection, participation, social relationships, and belief. It also illustrates that *Meihuaquan* plays an important role in their social and spiritual life, and could meet the need for identity of local rural populations in contemporary China.

After thirty years of reform and development, the concept of clan is vanishing, and the countryside community structure is being changed. Local people are suffering from the loss of identity, and are badly in need of something to regain it. As Shen observes, “The breakage and destruction of traditional rural culture resulted in the lost of cultural identity of peasants on the view of family, society, individual, value and culture.” [Shen 2009: 242]. The revival of *Meihuaquan* can be partly attributed to its ability to recreate the lost of identity of our subjects. Our research has led us to conclude that the primary function of *Meihuaquan* has shifted from the martial to the creation of group identity.

The primary function of *Meihuaquan* was established for self-protection not for self-cultivation or recreation reason. In its times of origin, the changing era of Ming and Qing dynasty, *Meihuaquan* was used by the Zhang family and local peasants in *Peixian* and *Tongshan* at the boundary of *Jiangsu*, *Shandong* and *Anhui* provinces, to fight with robbers and bandits to protect their property [Zhou 2009: 31-32]. This martial function persisted even through the early ages of new China.

With the increased social stability of China after 1949, the need for society to defend itself by means of traditional martial arts diminished. At the folk level of culture some traditions of martial arts endured, permitting the creation of a shared identity. In the present case this identity may be stated as “we are the same family of *Meihuaquan*”. In fact, the organization of *Meihuaquan* has changed into a primary social group.

We found that *Meihuaquan* is a way for members to expand their network of relationship and increase their social capital. Social capital comes about through changes in the relations among persons that facilitate action. Unlike other forms of capital, social capital "is less tangible and exists in the relations of persons" [Coleman 1988: S101]. By establishing a mentoring relationship with a master of *Meihuaquan*, one can share the personal relationship of his master and boxing brothers in relation to the boxing family comprised of all Mei Boxers. The whole *Meihuaquan* family is established according to the "100 Words Genealogy"¹⁸. Every Mei boxer has a generation word to determine his position and the relationship between him and other members in the overall family. All of them are connected by the generation words, which can create a fictive family.

Liangquan activity of *Meihuaquan* has integrated many genres of folk culture against the background of festival and as a result enriches participants' spiritual life. It is the most active element in *Meihuaquan* and attracts local people by various kinds of boxing shows with drama, dancing and bass drum. Normally, during festivals, *Liangquan* is held by *Meihuaquan* boxers both to venerate their ancestors and for recreation. The grand *Liangquan* activity is the one that is held during the Spring Festival (known in the West as Lunar New Year). Local people decorate the stage using paper-cuts¹⁹, provide tributes for ancestors by the art of dough modeling²⁰, and arrange a series of dramas to entertain the celebrating community. Furthermore, the making of weapons and producing of incense is boosted by *Liangquan*. In fact, *Liangquan* activity is more like a temple fair, a folk festival of Chinese traditional culture for libation, entertainment and shopping that contains various folk elements.

Regarding religious practices, *Meihuaquan* absorbed some ideas from Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and local religions based on ancestor worship in order to meet the spiritual needs of individual villages. Many ancestors of *Meihuaquan* have been deified. They have names, images, abilities and miracles attributed to them as would any other deity. For example, *Zou Hongyi*, the founder of *Meihuaquan*, and his family had become spiritual pillars of Mei boxers. Numerous boxers and local people come to their monument and worship them throughout

¹⁸ "100 Words Genealogy" is a genealogy poem perhaps "borrowed" from the *Dragon Gate branch* of Taoism and one word represents one generation. We are not sure of the details of the relationship between *Meihuaquan* and the *Dragon Gate branch* of Taoism.

¹⁹ It is a kind of folk art in China involving cutting paper into various patterns.

²⁰ It is a kind of folk art of Han people in China involving making dough into different kinds of shapes.

years. For many Mei boxers, ancestor-worship is a part of their spiritual life. This is not only an expression of family affection, but also the hope that they can get the blessing and protection of their ancestors. Some masters of *Meihuaquan* play the role of shaman, and they help local people to heal ailments and predict the future.

Participation of Females

In our study, both males and females achieved high scores in the MHQ. Although males achieved higher scores, no significant differences between the two groups were found ($p > 0.05$ for all dimensions and for the whole questionnaire). This indicates that *Meihuaquan* serves as a means of identity formation not only for males but also for females. Therefore, the role of females in *Meihuaquan* should be carefully examined.

Natives of Shandong, Henan and Hebei provinces are deeply influenced by the concept that man is more respectable than woman. But in that region, the philosophy of *Meihuaquan* is an exception. Our fieldwork indicates that the fictive Mei Boxing family never rejects but encourages females to join. There is no forbidden zone for females in *Meihuaquan*. They can become members, learn knowledge and skills, and participate in all activities.

Meihuaquan is not unique in the tradition of welcoming the participation of females. Women's practice of martial arts has a long history in China. "Martial art has always maintained a place for women, although it has always been gendered and strongly biased towards men in China" [Lorge 2012: 30]. From *Fu Hao*, a female militarist in the Shang dynasty, and *Yue Maiden*, a female sword master in the Spring and Autumn Period, to *Lady Gongsun* and her disciple *Lady Li* in Tang dynasty, then to *Lady Lin*, the leader of the *Red Lanterns*, a female martial arts organization in late the Qing dynasty, females have been connected with martial arts. As a part of the Boxer Rebellion, the *Red Lanterns* handed down the tradition of females practicing martial arts to *Meihuaquan* directly. During the Boxer Rebellion, *Lady Li* led the *Red Lanterns*, authored logistics works on logistics, and treated the wounded [Lu 2010: 68].

In fact, men really cannot do well without the support of women in *Meihuaquan*. First, women have the advantage of communication with the Goddess, the highest female deity. Folk religion was a way for females to express their self-awareness and spiritual salvation, especially in the traditional society of inequality between males and females. Many folk religions not only acknowledged the value of females but also placed them in a very high position during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. In the belief system of *Meihuaquan*, the highest female deity, Goddess, is the Savior. So, female participation in activities of *Meihuaquan* is very normal. Many females not only practiced martial arts, but also became famous

masters of *Wen*²¹. Second, the cooperation of males and females is very important in *Meihuaquan*. Normally one's wife is in charge of the work of serving the ancestors' shrine at home. Females use their specialty, such as paper-cuts and dancing, to participate during activities of *Meihuaquan*.

Intergenerational inheritance

Similarly, although middle and senior adults achieved slightly higher scores than the young adults in the MHQ, no significant differences were found between groups for the five dimensions and the global score of the questionnaire. This seems to illustrate that young adults have similar enthusiasm for *Meihuaquan* as their seniors.

There are some reasons for this situation. The first cause is the belief system of *Meihuaquan*. Mei boxers believe that their boxing ancestors are local deities and can bless them in daily life, so they can get their protection when they join a fictive family. The current urbanization increased the uncertainty about the future, although they had a better material life than 30 years ago. Young people of the countryside felt the unprecedented pressure that their elder generation never experienced. "The primary purpose of religion was at the beginning and has always remained salvation" [Ellood 1913: 295]; therefore, many young people joined *Meihuaquan* and participated in its activities for spiritual purposes. Thus, the tradition was inherited by the younger generation. Just like Ellwood said, that "moral and religious values come to individual through or are impressed upon the individual through various forms of social pressure" [Ellood 1913: 298].

Young people who joined *Meihuaquan* also had realistic concerns under the current social pressure. An important problem of China's urbanization is that the wealth of rural areas was plundered by cities during the past several decades. Young people in the countryside are a vulnerable group compared to those who live in cities. To protect themselves, they want to get more social capital from different relationships, including martial arts.

²¹ All members of *Meihuaquan* can be divided into two parts, *Wen* and *Wu*, according to their religion or marital art. Disciples of *Wen* are good at classical culture, prediction, and medical treatment by utilizing the way of Chinese Shamanism. They worship ancestors of *Meihuaquan*, learn and research the theories of martial arts, inherit and transmit classical documents which directly came from or were blended of Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and folk religions, and cultivate their body and spirit by practicing Qigong. Disciples of *Wu* are people who mainly learn and practice martial arts and just know a little about the knowledge of *Wen*. Their aim is to train body and Qi, and prepare to learn the knowledge of *Wen* and become a member of *Wen*. In *Meihuaquan*, *Wen* leads and guides *Wu* not only on knowledge but also on activity; but *Wu* is the foundation and the method of *Wen*.

Really, there is a huge social capital in *Meihuaquan* for young people who live in countryside. Members of *Meihuaquan* work in different industries, such as government departments, schools and so on, and they control many social resources. If you are a member, you can turn to members of your fictive family for help. In recent years, more and more young people became members of *Meihuaquan* in Heze. The number of disciples of Master Cao *Guangchao* has gone up every year for the past ten years.

Moreover, the brotherhood of *Meihuaquan* attracts young people, too. *Meihuaquan* requests its member to pay attention to the interests of others and lay emphasis on personal moral improvement.

"Xue Jike is one of my favorite disciples and he is upright and honest. He often helped my other disciples and managed business of our boxing family authentically. In the spring of 2002, his family came into conflict with a rich and great family because of dispute on housing ground in their village. This family bullied Xue family depending on overwhelming them with numbers. The village head did not dare to take charge of it. Xue had to seek help of his boxing brothers. Under the organization of several old brothers, dozens of them went to Xue's village and solved this dispute."²²

So, *Meihuaquan* is, in some sense, a kind of primitive community, and they maintain it by mutual respect and love, and this meets the needs of young people.

Cultural Awareness of Educated Young People

Finally, with regard to the educational level of our sample, no significant differences were found among the three levels considered, both for the five dimensions and the total questionnaire, although the Level 1 group (Illiteracy & Elementary School) got slightly higher scores than the other two groups. This illustrates that educational level is not the necessary condition for people having interest in *Meihuaquan*.

In the past ten years, the Chinese government has paid more attention to intangible culture through publicity, protection and legalization. This let local young people who have good education feel the importance of their tradition. Education helped them to understand the policy of government and imagine the future of their tradition. That *Meihuaquan* was listed on the directory of national intangible culture in 2006 gave some hope to young people. *Meihuaquan* has been taught in local elementary schools as a kind of school-based curriculum for about 10 years. These all aroused the interest of young people in *Meihuaquan*. They participated in application of *Meihuaquan* for getting the support of local government by doing some idea design or paper work, demonstrated at *Liangquan* during the Spring Festival.

²² Interviewee: Sang Quanxi; Place: Sang's home at Heze College in Shandong province; Time: February 20, 2010.

On the other hand, urbanization and the extinction of tradition gave young people some sense of local consciousness. They talk about *Meihuaquan* and show pictures of it on the internet, do some academic research about it in different areas, although they work and live in cities. For example, a *Meihuaquan* QQ chat group, set up by *Cao Guangchao* in 2011, has 240 members, and they share information and documents of *Meihuaquan* from different places with each other. Master *Cao* records, collects and researches the history of *Meihuaquan* in *Heze* according to information provided by members.

Furthermore, many professors teach *Meihuaquan* at universities and they combine the method of disciple relationship and modern school education, such as *Han Qichang* (1895-1988) in *Beijing University* and his son *Han Jianzhong* in *Chinese People's Public Security University*, *Yan Zijie* in *Shandong University*, *Ma Aimin* in *Anyang Normal College* and *Sang Quanxi* in *Heze College*. This is very helpful for students to learn and understand the tradition of *Meihuaquan*.

Conclusion

In the first stage of our research, we focused on the history and current situation of *Meihuaquan* and found that it survived four dynasties, war, and political upheaval to experiencing revival at the current background of urbanization. In addition to the support of government, we noted that the social foundation helping *Meihuaquan* to survive and develop during the second stage of our research. We found that effects on people's social and spiritual life by its function of group identity, female participation, shared enthusiasm by young the generation for *Meihuaquan* with that of older generation, and the cultural consciousness of young generation support the revival of this art from the aspect of social foundation.

The most important cause of culture extinction is whether the culture can help its holders to adapt to the change of society. The fundamental reason for *Meihuaquan's* revival is that it cultivates the sense of group identity for local people in northern China. This kind of group identity is not only about social relationships, but also spiritual life; not only accepted by males, but also recognized by females; not only felt by older people, but also supported by the younger generation; not only favored by peasants, but also practiced by college students.

In short, *Meihuaquan* established the identity of its members, local people and government by many strategies, and kept the balance between the three factions.

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Appendix

41 questions of *Meihuaquan Heritage Questionnaire* (MHQ)

Contents Disagree Not so much agree Not sure Relatively agree Agree 1. I know Meihuaquan is called Father and Son Boxing (父子拳) too, and it has special emphasize on religion. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)2. I know Meihuaquan has Wen and Wu and it has special emphasize on both of them. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)3. I think routines of Meihuaquan are great. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)4. I want to become a Meihuaquan master, too. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)5. We inherit Meihuaquan from generation to generation in our village. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)6. Activities of worshipping Meihuaquan ancestors can promote the communication of villagers. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)7. I heard some tales and stories about ancestors of Meihuaquan. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)8. I am proud of being a member of Meihuaquan. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)9. If it is needed, I will support building ancestral hall for Meihuaquan ancestors. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)10. Martial arts activities of Meihuaquan in leisure time can strengthen the feelings of villagers. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)11. I think Meihuaquan should be inherited from generation to generation. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)12. I know there are many monuments for Meihuaquan masters in my native place. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)13. In our village, villagers usually commemorate ancestors of Meihuaquan every year. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)14. I like to listen to tales and stories of Meihuaquan ancestors. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)15. I got some experiences of interpersonal communication and skills of fighting by participating in activities of Meihuaquan. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)16. Normally, I felt comfortable after I worshipped Meihuaquan ancestors. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)17. I always feel great when I take part in the ceremony of worshipping Meihuaquan ancestors. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)18. I know the general procedure of commemorating Meihuaquan ancestors. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)19. I can say names of several Meihuaquan ancestors. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)20. I enjoy watching the Liangquan shows of Meihuaquan. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)21. I hope my families and friends will join Meihuaquan. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)22. Prayers to Meihuaquan ancestors will take auspicious peace to your family. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)23. I practiced basic routines of Meihuaquan. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)24. I can say some names of Meihuaquan movements. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)25. I think the Plum blossom tag on costumes of Meihuaquan looks great. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)26. I would like to join in Meihuaquan activities. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)27. I will be honored if I can go to another village to take part in a communication activity of Meihuaquan. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)28. I will be surprised if a Meihuaquan boxer has never worshipped Meihuaquan ancestors. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)29. I will invite my friends and relatives if there is an activity of Meihuaquan in our village. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)30. The ancestor of Meihuaquan is the main deity of our village. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)31. I participated in activities of Meihuaquan

ancestors. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)32. I am glad to take part in activities of commemorating Meihuaquan ancestors. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)33. I will make time to worship Meihuaquan ancestors even though I am very busy. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)34. I usually meet my friends in activities of Meihuaquan. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)35. Prayers to Meihuaquan ancestors will bring good weather for the crops in the coming year. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)36. Many villagers enshrine the tablet of Meihuaquan ancestors in their home. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)37. I think the tablet of Meihuaquan ancestor is very efficacious. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)38. I gained more knowledge of local history and customs by participating in activities of Meihuaquan. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)39. I have got many friends by participating in activities of Meihuaquan. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)40. Worshipping Meihuaquan ancestors will keep you propitious and healthy in following year. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)41. Practicing Meihuaquan may let me become healthier. (1)(2)(3)(4)(5)

Spółeczność wiejska, tożsamość grupowa i sztuki walki: podstawy społeczne *Meihuaquan*

Słowa kluczowe: chińskie sztuki walki, *Plum Blossom* boks, bokser, tradycyjne sporty

Streszczenie

Tło. Pojęcie *meihua* ("kwiat śliwy") jest szeroko stosowane w odniesieniu do systemów bokserskich w Chinach. Forma *Meihuaquan*, na której koncentruje się artykuł, pochodzi z północno-wschodniej prowincji Chin, z końca panowania dynastii Ming (1368-1644). Ta chińska sztuka walki jest dobrze znana przez uczonych zagranicznych z powodu jej związku z Powstaniem Bokserów w późniejszej dynastii Qing (1644-1912). Chociaż różne style *Meihuaquan* nauczono w warunkach formalnych, rozpowszechniano ją też poprzez DVD. Autorzy ograniczają swoje badanie do sztuki walki praktykowanej na terenach wiejskich w okolicach Henan, Hebei i prowincji Shandong. Sztuka walki *Meihuaquan* przetrwała nie tylko cztery kolejne dynastie, ale także wojny i wiele innych wstrząsów społecznych między innymi: Powstanie Bokserów (1899-1901), wojnę z Japonią (1937-1945), wielką proletariacką rewolucję kulturalną (1966-1976). Obecnie doszło do rewitalizacji *Meihuaquan*. Cel pracy. Celem tego artykułu jest odpowiedź na pytanie: Co jest podstawą społecznego odrodzenia *Meihuaquan* na terenach wiejskich północnych Chin, a także jak to ożywienie jest wspierane przez instytucje społeczne, zwłaszcza w zakresie tożsamości grupowej *Meihuaquan*.

Metody. Metody zastosowane na potrzeby artykułu obejmują obserwację uczestniczącą w terenie, semistrukturalne wywiady i badania ankietowe. Pierwszy etap badań był oparty na przeglądzie literatury dotyczącej *Meihuaquan* i antropologicznej metodologii: autorzy brali udział w codziennym życiu miejscowej ludności, obserwowali praktyczne ćwiczenia, a także organizację inscenizacji *Meihuaquan* na imprezach zbiorowych organizowanych w latach 2010 do 2012. Autorzy

skupili się na historii pisanej, historii mówionej, obecnej sytuacji i kontekście społecznym oraz kulturowym *Meihuaquan*. W czasie drugiego etapu od września 2012 do lutego 2014 r. zbadano ideę *Meihuaquan*, jako punktu „tożsamości ludowej”. W stworzonych kwestionariuszach zebrano zarówno dane ilościowe, jak i jakościowe. W swojej ostatecznej wersji ankieta zawiera czterdzieści jeden stwierdzeń, które odpowiadają pięciu kluczowym tematom: (1) wiedza o *Meihuaquan*, (2) zamiłowanie do *Meihuaquan*, (3) potrzeba uczestnictwa w *Meihuaquan*, (4) relacje społeczne ustanowione przez *Meihuaquan*, oraz (5) relacje między religią respondentów a *Meihuaquan*. Wyniki. (1) Sztuka walki *Meihuaquan* przetrwała cztery kolejne dynastie, a także wojny i wiele innych wstrząsów społecznych. (2) Od 2006 roku sytuacja polityczna wpływa na przetrwanie i rozwój *Meihuaquan*. Obecnie następuje odrodzenie tego stylu walki. (3) Jest to sposób, aby wzbogacić prywatny, społeczny i duchowy rozwój życia ludności miejscowej. (4) *Meihuaquan*

służy jako sposób kreowania tożsamości nie tylko mężczyzn, lecz również kobiet. (5) Młodzi dorośli mają podobny entuzjazm względem *Meihuaquan*, jak ludzie starsi. (6) Świadomość kulturowa wykształconych młodych ludzi jest pomocna dla rozwoju *Meihuaquan*, ale formalna edukacja nie jest niezbędna, by kultywować tę sztukę walki.

Wnioski. Podstawowym powodem odrodzenia sztuki *Meihuaquan* jest wzmocnienie poczucia tożsamości grupowej miejscowej ludności w północnych Chinach. Ten rodzaj tożsamości grupowej nie dotyczy tylko relacji społecznych, ale także życia duchowego; nie jest akceptowany tylko przez mężczyzn, ale również przez kobiety; nie tylko wspierany przez starszych, ale również przez młode pokolenie; nie tylko preferowany przez mieszkańców wsi, ale również przez studentów. *Meihuaquan* kreuje tożsamość swoich członków, lokalnych mieszkańców i rządu używając wielu strategii oraz utrzymuje równowagę pomiędzy trzema frakcjami.