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Gestures and their meanings of artistic movements in Chinese Kung Fu

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Abstract

Kung Fu is more than just a martial art; it is a form of cultural expression with deep symbolic meanings. This study analyzes the different types of gestures in Kung Fu to show their cultural and symbolic importance. Through qualitative descriptive analysis of 267 Kung Fu movements across a variety of styles, the study categorizes gestures into four types: Iconic (35.96%), Deictic (25.84%), Beat (25.84%), and Metaphoric (12.36%). The findings reveal that Iconic gestures are most prominent, emphasizing their role of visual representation of cultural symbols and philosophies. The article is concerned with the manner in which movements such as the Dragon and Leopard stances are not merely combat moves, but as manifestations of discipline, heritage, and philosophical thought in Chinese culture. Deictic gestures, like the Bow Stance and Front Heel Kick, direct attention and establish intention, while Metaphoric gestures like the Salutation Seal symbolize respect, wisdom, and self-control. Beat gestures, like Rhythmic Sweep the Foot, contribute to the dynamic rhythm of practice and performance. The findings underscore Kung Fu's status as a martial art and a cultural narrative, and they make the case for its endurance amidst contemporary combat sports. The research contributes to the body of knowledge on the non-verbal communication of Kung Fu, reinstating its status as a means of cultural expression and philosophical exchange.

Keywords: Gesture and Meanings, Artistic movement, Chinese and Kung Fu.

Introduction

Culture is a dynamic system that creates and is created by inseparable components such as people or communities, places, and practices. These components engage with each other where people create culture through shared practices in places, and culture shapes how people engage in practices and construct places (Overton, 2010). Culture gives birth to patterns of life, values, norms, beliefs, and social practices that are passed down from one generation to the next. But Culture is not only limited to material aspects, such as art and architecture, but also non-material aspects, such as language, customs and beliefs. Bronisław Malinowski (1922) stated that culture functions as a tool to fulfill

human needs, both biologically, socially, and psychologically. He suggested that each element of culture has a role in helping individuals and groups survive. For example, legal systems and customs serve to maintain social order, while language and art play a role in self-expression and communication.

Artistic movements are visual expressions that have a certain aesthetic and symbolism, as seen in dance, theater, and martial arts (Arnheim, 1954). Martial arts is one example of immaterial culture that is passed down from generation to generation within a community. Martial arts reflect the values, norms, and philosophies contained within them. Every technique and movement in martial arts often has a symbolic meaning and deep philosophy. The meanings and philosophies contained in each movement can vary with each culture from which the martial arts movement originates. For example, in Indonesian pencak silat, the stance symbolizes balance in life, both physically and mentally. The middle stance symbolizes readiness to face challenges while the low stance reflects humility and perseverance. Unlike karate from Japan, Kata (series of movements) in Karate symbolizes the journey of life and challenges that must be faced with wisdom. From this, it can be concluded that Gestures in the context of art do not only function as a form of expression, but also as a communication tool that describes emotions, philosophical meanings, and cultural identity.

According to Ray L. Birdwhistell (1970), an American anthropologist, only 30 to 35 percent of social meaning comes from words, while the rest is conveyed through body language and other nonverbal cues. In his book *Kinesics and Context: Essays on Body Motion Communication* (1970), Birdwhistell introduced the term "kinesics" to describe the study of body movements as a form of communication. He argued that human communication has been founded upon all the senses and that movement of the body does have orderly, culturally programmed patterns. However, psychologist David McNeill researched how gestures interlinked with thoughts much more vigorously. His book, *In Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal about Thought* (1992), McNeill argued that gesture and talk is a linked system. Gestures are more than additions to what is said, they are a natural component of the conveyance of ideas and are indicative of cognition. Given these expert conclusions, it would be evident that understanding gestures' meaning and intent is inherent. Gestures play vital roles in nonverbal communication, feelings, and even substituting words under certain circumstances.

Further, they are also representative of culture because different societies have their own gestures that reflect their beliefs and traditions. The interpretation of a gesture is reliant on social conventions, customs, and local tradition, thus better comprehensible within a shared culture. As components of nonverbal communication, gestures involve other physical movements like those of hands, shoulders, head, and feet. These movements can be coordinated with speech, yet they can also be spoken separately. One of the most famous Chinese martial arts is Kung Fu. Kung Fu is not only a combat system, but it is an artistic and philosophical one that joins movement, discipline, and cultural expression. According to ancient customs, Kung Fu puts great stress on the significance of movement and gesture, not only as functional fighting techniques but also as symbolic gestures deeply embedded in Chinese heritage.

According to Siu Leung Li (2001), Kung Fu evolved in a nationalist situation when China tried to modernize and yet still hold on to its culture. Previously, Kung Fu has been documented in books and integrated in numerous performing arts in Asia, such as dance, theatre, and especially Chinese opera. Nowadays, this fighting art has also influenced the world of cinema and thus resulted in the kung fu movie genre. Bruce Lee's movies, for example, were key in popularizing Chinese martial arts in the West during the 1970s. This study aims to discover the inherent meaning of Kung Fu movement and its connection to art. Kung Fu is not merely self-defense but a cultural expression with high philosophical, aesthetic, and symbolic content. It is also driven by evolving tastes of



Figure 1. Tiger claws of Kung Fu

young generations during this era of globalization. Traditional martial arts like Kung Fu are threatened by emerging combat sports and the growing influence of online entertainment. Many young people today are more drawn to contemporary fighting styles like Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) rather than cultural heritage disciplines such as Kung Fu. By examining the artistic and philosophical aspects of Kung Fu movements, this study contributes to a greater appreciation of traditional martial arts and encourages efforts to preserve this important part of Chinese cultural heritage. Here is the preliminary data from one of the kung Fu's movements:

Kung Fu borrows much from nature, and one of the most significant aspects of nature is animals. Most Kung Fu styles borrow their movements from animals, which are also symbolic in Chinese society. However, five animals are the foundation of Kung Fu movements: the Tiger, Dragon, Leopard, Snake, and Crane. The following illustration presents the "Tiger Claw" technique. The technique includes the use of all five fingers and the palm. All of the fingers come into play for striking some areas, so the technique is effective for attacking as well as for grabbing an opponent. The Tiger Claw is used typically for holding, pulling, or ripping and the aim is to weaken the structure of an opponent's body, such muscles, joints, and critical points. In practice, the Tiger Claw technique requires an integration of power, speed, and precision. It does not solely rely on raw power but also applies strategic thinking in both attack and defensive movements. According to gestural theory, the movement is an iconic gesture as it imitates the shape and motion of a real tiger claw exactly. The technique is a mimicry of the way a tiger ambushes and kills its prey by grasping and sweeping in powerful movement. Some relevant previous studies on this topic include:

1. Yifei He, Svenja Luell, R. Muralikrishnan, Benjamin Straube, & Arne Nagels (2020) "Gesture's body orientation modulates the N400 for visual sentences primed by

gestures". 2. Alessandro Jedlowski (2021), "The Ziguéhi Movement and the Afterlives of Kung Fu Films in Abidjan". 3. Izzo R, Febo M, Cruciani A, Cejudo A, Hosseini Varde'I C, & Crudelini E (2023), "Analysis of peak linear accelerations expressed in the technical gesture of gyakuzuki in Karate/Kumite, comparing dominant and non-dominant limbs, including a complete review of the subject". 4. Syamsul Bahri, Raja Sungai Simbolon, Angelica Laurina Silaban, & Fairuz Zahra Ramadhani (2024) "Gesture and their meaning of artistic movements in welcoming guests in Asian Countries". 5. Ambra Ferrari & Peter Hagoort (2025) "Beat gestures and prosodic prominence interactively influence language comprehension".

Unlike previous research, this particular study deals with gestures and the artistic meaning of movement in Chinese Kung Fu, highlighting the cultural, philosophical, and symbolic meaning that underlies each movement. As part of the global phenomenon of modern times, old martial arts like Kung Fu are no longer appealing to the younger generations. Often, participants and viewers are not well versed with the artistic elegance and deep symbolism behind these movements. With this in mind, this study aims to fill the gap by pointing out how Kung Fu gestures are not just self-defense techniques but rich manifestations of culture and philosophy. This study will attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of the artistry of Chinese Kung Fu, enlightening us regarding the often-unheard meanings of its movements and the symbolic components that form the identity and heritage of this fighting sport.

Method

This research uses the descriptive qualitative design, which attempts to look in-depth into Kung Fu interpretation and gesture in the context of the martial art. This research chose to use the qualitative descriptive design since the purpose of this study is to learn a given phenomenon, such Kung Fu techniques as not necessarily a fight mode but an emblem of what lies behind it philosophically and culturally. Qualitative descriptive research, according to Creswell (2014), is a method used in establishing the meaning that is attached to a social or cultural phenomenon by groups or individuals. This research is best suited for this study since it allows one to delve deeply into the symbolic meanings of Kung Fu movements that cannot be measured. In addition to that, Merriam & Tisdell (2015) explain that qualitative descriptive research aims to provide a clear description of a phenomenon without trying to make generalization or cause-and-effect. Hence, this research is more interested in how Kung Fu gestures convey cultural philosophies and values, rather than merely examining combat technique.

In this study, the process was viewing 7 videos of Kung Fu performances and training classes from various schools such as Shaolin, Wing Chun, Wudang, and Tai Chi. The videos were selected according to some requirements, which were good gesture coverage in combat scenes and artworks. The analysis of the movements in the videos was conducted with reference to the gesture categorization developed by McNeill & Levy (2005), which divides gestures into Iconic, Deictic, Metaphorical, and Beat. This categorization is used to understand how each Kung Fu gesture not only functions as a fighting technique but also has a deep symbolic communication value. This research is further supported by a literature review of various academic resources, including books, scientific papers, and previous research on gestures, martial art philosophy, and non-verbal communication.

Results and Discussion

Iconic

The Dragon



The "The Dragon" stance in Kung Fu is likely one of the most identifiable because it actually mimics the motion of a dragon, a legendary creature that symbolizes power, wisdom, and quickness in Chinese mythology. It includes smooth, wave-like strikes, full-body engagement, and signature strikes such as the "Dragon Claw," which is used for grabbing or striking an opponent's pressure points. Another feature is its spiraling motion, which follows the flight of a dragon through the air or a swim through water, creating the illusion that the martial artist moves with fluidity along with unpredictable power. This step is a classic move not only because of its unique and instantly recognizable shape but also because of its presence in the multitude of Kung Fu forms that descended from the five major animals of Chinese martial arts. Above all, Chinese legend dragons also describe themselves habitually as water and wind lords, and step-wise, such liberty and malleability is given to the dragon.

The Leopard



The "The Leopard" movement in Kung Fu is one of the most well-known moves as it mimics the characteristics of a leopard, which is renowned for its speed, agility, and precision when it strikes. Unlike the "Tiger" form, which relies on brute strength, the leopard form focuses on swift, explosive strikes with efficient energy conservation. Its characteristic method is the "Leopard Fist", a half-closed fist used to strike vulnerable points such as the throat, temples, or ribcage. In addition, this movement emphasizes

flexibility of the body, quick successive attacks, and quick changes in movement to avoid blows while looking for openings to strike. It is a legendary movement since it can be recognized immediately by its distinctive stance, powerful yet disciplined attack pattern, and its efficiency and strategy in fighting philosophy. The leopard as a symbol of swiftness and intelligence in Chinese society, not only is the style combat-efficient, but also symbolically potent. Speed, precision, and strong symbolism unified make "The Leopard" one of the most recognizable Kung Fu movements. The mastery of "The Leopard" movement requires a deep understanding of the underlying principles and philosophy of Kung Fu, as well as a high level of physical fitness and coordination. Practitioners of this movement must be able to combine speed, agility, and precision with a deep sense of discipline and control, making it a truly challenging and rewarding movement to master.

Deictic Bow Stance



Kung Fu's Bow Stance, also known as Gong Bu (弓步), is one of the fundamental stances commonly practiced in Chinese martial arts. It resembles the archer's position while drawing the bow, where a forward bent leg and a straight extended leg is extended backward to stabilize and balance the body. The Bow Stance is crucial to the creation of power for offense and to the building of a strong defensive stance in combat. It is also used as a transition movement from defense to offense so that Kung Fu practitioners can move effectively and efficiently. The Bow Stance is a deictic movement in the fact that it visibly and practically indicates a direction, either for attack, defense, or to draw the opponent's and audience's attention. The firm placement of the legs and the arm typically extended forward creates an impression of pointing or directing force at some target. Moreover, in demonstrations and performances, Bow Stance serves to attract the attention or lead to the succeeding movement, thus it is a basic stance and also a communication stance in Kung Fu. Mastering the Bow Stance requires a great deal of practice and patience, as it demands precise control over the body's balance, alignment, and movement. Kung Fu practitioners must develop the ability to maintain stability and generate power from this stance, while also being able to transition smoothly into other movements.

Front Heel kick



The Front Heel Kick in Kung Fu is a powerful and direct technique designed to maximize impact using the heel as the primary contact point. This kick follows a linear trajectory and is typically aimed at the opponent's midsection or upper body. Its execution relies on a stable stance, a strong push-off from the supporting leg, and precise targeting to ensure effective force delivery. The kick is not only a combat tool but also an essential element in training, helping practitioners develop strength, balance, and accuracy. By refining their execution of the Front Heel Kick, martial artists enhance both their offensive and defensive capabilities. Beyond its combat effectiveness, the Front Heel Kick serves as a deictic gesture, as it explicitly points towards a specific target. In martial arts, deictic gestures function as clear indicators of movement direction, intention, or emphasis, and this kick exemplifies these qualities. Whether employed in an actual fight or a training session, the motion of the kick naturally directs attention to its target. The extension of the leg, the alignment of the body, and the final impact with the heel collectively emphasize a particular point in space. This characteristic makes the Front Heel Kick not only a functional strike but also a communicative tool in Kung Fu.

Metaphoric Bowing Before a Fight



Bowing Before Fighting Kung Fu movement is a metaphorical movement of supreme significance and is symbolic in nature because it represents respect, discipline, and coordination of power and wisdom. Bowing prior to fighting in Chinese martial arts is not only ritualistic but also an expression of moral attributes such as respect for the enemy, masters, and the art itself. This is typically achieved by the right hand forming a fist, which is a symbol of strength, and the open left hand covering the fist, which is a symbol of control and peace showing the balance between aggression and honor.

Symbolically, this action signifies that combat is not merely violence but also self-control and morality. Furthermore, bowing prior to a fight signifies that one's body and mind are prepared, reminding practitioners that martial arts are not the fight or the victory alone but a journey of self-improvement and character development. With strong symbolism, profound philosophic meaning, and used for numerous various Kung Fu forms, Bowing Before a Fight is one of the most meaningful gestures in martial arts.

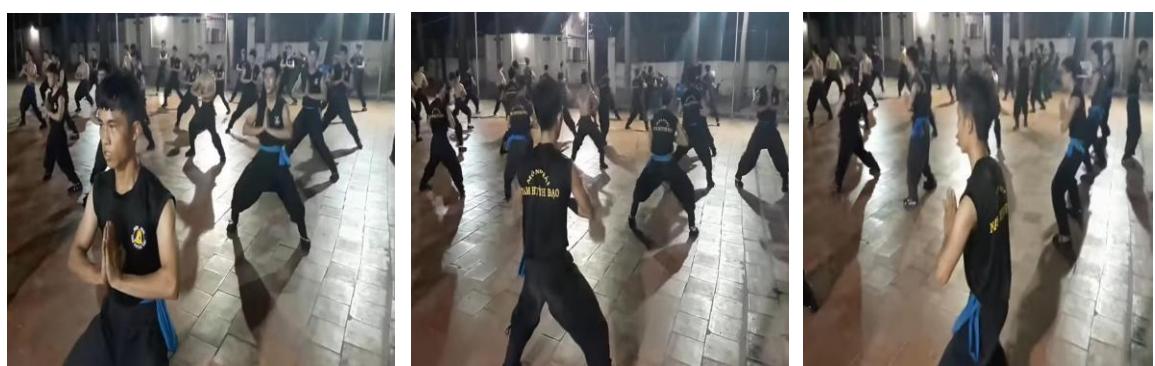
Salutation Seal



Salutation Seal in Kung Fu is a ritual movement, sometimes used as a sign of respect before and after training or combat. The movement is usually performed by holding the right fist and having the left hand open, enclosing the fist in front of the chest. The clenched right fist represents courage and strength, and the open left hand represents wisdom, self-discipline, and harmony. Their embrace is representative of the Kung Fu philosophy that power is always to be subservient to wisdom. This philosophy is deeply rooted in the principles of Kung Fu, emphasizing the importance of balance between strength and wisdom. It is representative because it is not just a physical action but represents a philosophical principle that lies beneath and signifies the coming together of power and justice. It is also a symbolic gesture of friendship and solidarity among rivals in a gesture of respect for tradition and teachers, as well as sportsmanship. As such, the Salutation Seal has become a powerful symbol of the values and principles that underlie Kung Fu. Rich in symbolism and common to many of the Chinese martial arts styles, the Salutation Seal is one of the most widely recognized symbols that strongly embodies the spirit of Kung Fu.

Beat

Turning the body to the right, left, back with a shout



Turning the body to the right, left, back with a shout technique in Kung Fu is a technique that combines body turning and shouting or voice to augment power and focus in combat. Turning the body to the right, left, or back makes avoiding attacks, rectifying stance, or establishing for a counterattack more effectively. Concurrently, the yell accompanying it not only helps in power generation through breath control (Qi) but also scares off enemies and makes one more aware of oneself during combat. It can be referred to as a beat gesture since it emphasizes rhythm and tempo in use, with direction changes and yelling serving as boundary markers for ordered movements that have a specific pattern. Additionally, in fighting sports, beat gestures are normally used to mark significant points of a technique both during training and real fighting. The combination of dynamic body rotation and vocal use makes this action not only physically effective but symbolically meaningful too in energy and emotional control in fighting. The strategic use of beat gestures, such as the "Turning the body to the right, left, back with a shout" technique, can also be seen in various Kung Fu forms and patterns. By incorporating these gestures, practitioners can enhance their overall performance, convey intensity and focus, and ultimately, achieve a higher level of mastery in their martial arts practice.

Rhythmic Sweep the Foot





Kung Fu movement "Rhythmic Sweep the Foot" is a foot sweep with a rhythmic and controlled pattern, usually utilized for unbalancing or knocking down an opponent. The movement relies on good body coordination, flexibility, and speed in performance, since the practitioner must coordinate his/her foot movement into the overall rhythm of his/her attack or defense. It is a beat gesture because it is within the rhythm pattern of fighting and helps to define the tempo or switching of attacks. In martial arts, a beat gesture would be movements that emphasize the rhythm of a fight or change attack patterns in relation to the body and the dynamics of the opponent. Sweep the Foot Rhythmically is not only effective in fighting but also aesthetically beautiful, which is often employed in Kung Fu demonstrations and displays due to its rhythmic and harmonious motion. Being the most efficient sweeping motion, controlling the rhythm, and serving as a marking of the tempo in fighting, the movement is a special instance of a beat gesture in Kung Fu. Ultimately, the Rhythmic Sweep the Foot movement embodies the perfect blend of martial arts technique and artistic expression.

Kesimpulan

In conclusion, the research explores the symbolic and aesthetic significance of gestures in Chinese Kung Fu, categorizing that the highest percentage is Iconic (35.96%) and the

lowest percentage is Metaphoric (12.36%) based on McNeill and Levy's model. Analysis of 267 gestures employed in various Kung Fu movements shows that the most frequent are Iconic gestures, demonstrating the effectiveness of Iconic gestures in explaining cultural symbols and philosophies as images. The study illustrates how Leopard and Dragon stances, and all others in Kung Fu movements, blend self-defense techniques with symbolic meanings to Chinese culture, discipline, and philosophy. From the analysis of such traditional stances as the Bow Stance and metaphorical movements like the Salutation Seal, the study illustrates Kung Fu as a cultural expression and a martial art. Besides, employing the use of beat gestures against the rhythm serves to illustrate the beautiful congruence between performance and technique. Findings tend toward greater appreciation for Kung Fu as a performing art and ensuring this within contemporary combat sports. Lastly, the research goes on to expand further our comprehension of how gestures of Kung Fu are a connecting bridge between movement and culture and philosophy that validates their place within both present-day and historical contexts. Ultimately, this study underscores the significance of preserving and promoting Kung Fu's rich cultural heritage, highlighting its value as a unique blend of physical discipline, artistic expression, and philosophical insight.

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