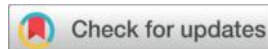


## Assessing the Psychological Impact and Mental Health Benefits of Martial Arts on Chinese Male Adults

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### Abstract

This study aimed to evaluate the impact of traditional martial arts practices on the psychological well-being, mental health, and physical health of Chinese male adults, focusing on indicators such as stress levels, anxiety, depression, and overall emotional well-being, along with physical health markers like BMI and obesity rates. It explored how participation in martial arts, along with dietary habits and physical exercise, influences mental health outcomes, such as self-esteem, mood regulation, and resilience, with the ultimate goal of promoting both mental and physical well-being in this population. Furthermore, the study sought to develop an evidence-based physical fitness and mental health handbook that integrates traditional martial arts techniques, aimed at enhancing not only physical health but also psychological resilience, emotional regulation, and mental wellness. The theoretical framework was grounded in the Health Belief Model (HBM), which posits that individuals' perceptions of health risks, benefits, and psychological well-being influence their engagement in martial arts for both physical and mental health improvement. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) was also employed to explore how attitudes, social norms, and perceived behavioral control shape intentions related to martial arts participation, dietary habits, physical activity, and psychological well-being. A quantitative methodology was utilized, involving a sample of 1,100 Chinese male adults. Participants were randomly selected from both urban and rural towns across China, ensuring a diverse representation in terms of socioeconomic status and geographic location. Data were analyzed using SPSS, employing both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to assess the relationships between martial arts practice, diet, exercise, mental health outcomes, and physical health outcomes.

**Keywords:** Traditional Martial Arts, Physical Health, Chinese male adults, Health Belief Model, Theory of Planned Behavior

### Introduction

The growing awareness of the "Chinese dream" and the increasing focus on optimal health have underscored the importance of fostering a healthy lifestyle and psychological well-being among Chinese

men. As a significant demographic within China's population, male adults play a crucial role in social development and leadership. This generation, encompassing young adults to the elderly, shapes the nation's future.

In response to the rising health concerns, China launched the "Healthy China Action (2019-2030)" in July 2019 and released the "Opinions of the State Council on the Implementation of Healthy China Action." The initiative aims to improve male adults' physical and mental health by promoting healthier lifestyles. Specifically, the plan set ambitious targets to ensure that over 50% of male adults meet physical health requirements by 2022, with the goal rising to 60% by 2030. However, a 2020 report highlighted alarming trends in the physical and psychological health indicators of Chinese male adults over the past two decades, including high rates of metabolic syndrome, obesity, mental health disorders, and emotional distress (Kotarska et al., 2019). Moreover, fewer than 30% of Chinese males engage in at least one hour of physical activity per day, contributing to declines in both health and productivity.

In addition to physical health challenges, mental health issues, including anxiety and depression, have become increasingly prevalent among Chinese men. These psychological concerns are often exacerbated by societal pressures, work stress, and limited emotional expression. Thus, addressing both physical and mental health through integrated strategies is essential.

In response to these challenges, the Chinese government issued the "Opinions on Enhancing Men's Health and Well-being in the New Era" in 2020. While there have been some improvements, including better overall health, persistent issues such as obesity, metabolic syndrome, and mental health problems remain prevalent. These ongoing health challenges highlight the need for further interventions, particularly regarding improving physical activity habits and mental health support systems.

Given the widespread global recognition of traditional martial arts and their potential benefits in improving both physical and psychological health, it is critical to explore how martial arts practice, combined with dietary and exercise habits, affects the physical health and mental well-being of Chinese male adults. Studies have shown that martial arts can help reduce stress, improve mood regulation, enhance self-esteem, and contribute to overall emotional resilience (Kashiwabara et al., 2018; Choi et al., 2019). This research aims to examine the relationship between martial arts participation, nutrition, physical activity, and mental health outcomes in this demographic, with the potential to foster healthier lifestyles and improve psychological well-being.

## **Research Objectives**

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To assess the impact of traditional martial arts practices on the physical health, psychological well-being, and emotional resilience of Chinese male adults, with particular focus on Body Mass Index (BMI), obesity rates, and mental health indicators such as stress and mood regulation.

2. To examine the role of martial arts participation, dietary habits, and physical exercise in shaping both the physical health and mental well-being of Chinese male adults, with an emphasis on improving psychological outcomes such as self-esteem, anxiety reduction, and emotional stability.

3. To explore the potential of traditional martial arts in promoting physical activity, improving dietary habits, and addressing issues related to sedentary behavior, while also fostering psychological health, stress management, and enhancing emotional regulation among Chinese male adults.

4. To develop an evidence-based physical fitness and mental health handbook tailored for Chinese male adults, incorporating traditional martial arts techniques to not only enhance physical health but also improve psychological well-being, emotional resilience, and overall mental health.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Role of Physical Activity in Health and Well-being**

The growing awareness of the importance of physical health has led to a focus on encouraging active lifestyles globally, with particular emphasis on traditional physical activities such as martial arts. Previous research has demonstrated that physical activity is crucial for improving overall health and well-being, reducing risks associated with obesity, cardiovascular diseases, and metabolic disorders (Sharma et al., 2018). In the context of China, health concerns such as obesity and sedentary behavior among male adults have prompted national initiatives to enhance physical activity, including the Healthy China Action (2019-2030) (Wang et al., 2020). These interventions are aimed at fostering better health outcomes for Chinese male adults, particularly in terms of BMI and obesity rates (Li & Zhang, 2021).

### **Traditional Martial Arts and Health Benefits**

Traditional martial arts, such as Tai Chi, Kung Fu, and Wushu, have long been recognized not only as cultural practices but also as effective forms of exercise. These martial arts are believed to provide both physical and psychological health benefits, enhancing cardiovascular health, flexibility, strength, and overall physical fitness (Lee et al., 2016). Martial arts also contribute to mental well-being by promoting mindfulness, reducing stress, and improving cognitive function (Caldwell et al., 2019). Given these

benefits, there has been increasing interest in the potential of martial arts as a health-promoting tool, particularly for populations experiencing low levels of physical activity.

Several studies have examined the impact of martial arts on physical health in various demographic groups. For example, studies by Chan et al. (2017) demonstrated that martial arts practice significantly improves muscular strength, balance, and endurance in older adults, while other research has shown improvements in body composition, including reductions in fat percentage, in younger populations (Chang et al., 2019). These findings highlight the suitability of traditional martial arts as a form of exercise to combat the increasing rates of obesity and physical inactivity in many countries, including China.

### **Martial Arts and the Impact on Obesity and BMI**

Obesity and poor dietary habits are major public health issues affecting Chinese male adults, contributing to the rise in metabolic syndrome, diabetes, and other chronic health conditions (Wang et al., 2020). The relationship between martial arts practice and weight management has been explored in several studies. According to Liu et al. (2021), martial arts have been shown to improve energy expenditure and metabolic function, which can contribute to weight loss and better weight management. Similarly, Wong et al. (2020) found that Tai Chi practice in particular can help reduce visceral fat and improve body composition, which is crucial for managing obesity-related risks.

Moreover, martial arts provide a unique combination of aerobic, anaerobic, and flexibility exercises, which engage different muscle groups and help burn calories more effectively than traditional forms of exercise (Gao et al., 2017). This makes martial arts particularly effective in addressing issues of obesity among adults, as it not only encourages physical activity but also promotes long-term behavioral changes in lifestyle and exercise routines (Zhang & Ma, 2018).

### **Barriers to Physical Activity in Chinese Male Adults**

Despite the well-documented benefits of physical activity, including martial arts, a significant portion of the Chinese male adult population remains inactive. A study by Shen et al. (2018) noted that the increasing use of electronic devices and the demands of modern work culture have led to a rise in sedentary behaviors, particularly among young men. This trend is concerning as it contributes to obesity and related health issues.

Moreover, urban areas tend to have greater access to fitness facilities, but long working hours, high living costs, and a lack of time contribute to lower levels of physical activity (Siu et al., 2021). In contrast, rural areas face a different set of challenges, such as a lack of infrastructure for organized physical activities. As a result, traditional forms of exercise, such as martial arts, may offer an accessible

and sustainable alternative for promoting physical activity, especially in areas where modern fitness options are limited.

### **Martial Arts as a Solution to Sedentary Lifestyles and Poor Diets**

Given the concerns over sedentary behavior and poor dietary habits, traditional martial arts may provide a viable solution to improve the health of Chinese male adults. Integrating martial arts into regular physical activity routines can foster better health outcomes by addressing both physical inactivity and dietary concerns. As highlighted by Zhang et al. (2023), martial arts can be incorporated into fitness regimens as a culturally relevant form of exercise, providing motivation for participants to engage in physical activity while simultaneously offering social and psychological benefits.

Furthermore, martial arts can serve as a complementary activity to dietary improvements. By increasing physical activity levels, martial arts practice may help mitigate the effects of poor dietary habits, such as overeating and the consumption of processed foods, which contribute to obesity and metabolic disorders (Li & Wang, 2020). The holistic approach of martial arts, which combines physical exercise with mental focus, can encourage individuals to make healthier lifestyle choices both in terms of activity and diet.

### **Gaps in Current Research and Future Directions**

There is limited research on the long-term psychological benefits of martial arts, especially its effects on anxiety, depression, and emotional resilience. More studies are needed to explore the combined impact of martial arts and diet on obesity, metabolic health, and overall well-being. Research on how martial arts benefits vary across different age groups, socio-economic backgrounds, and urban vs. rural populations is insufficient. Specific barriers to martial arts participation, particularly related to modern lifestyles and access to training, need further exploration. The impact of cultural perceptions and social support on the adoption of martial arts as a health tool has not been fully examined. The feasibility and effectiveness of martial arts in health promotion programs in rural areas, where fitness facilities may be limited, require further investigation. Addressing these gaps will enhance our understanding of martial arts' role in improving health and contribute to more effective health promotion strategies.

## **Methodology**

### **Ethical Approval and Study Design**

This study was conducted with official ethical approval, adhering to ethical research standards to ensure the protection of participants' rights and well-being. The research employed a structured, four-phase methodology aimed at investigating the impact and effectiveness of traditional martial arts practices on diet and health among Chinese male adults. The methodology was designed with both scientific rigor and cultural sensitivity in mind to ensure comprehensive, valid, and reliable results.

### **Sampling Procedure**

The sampling procedure was carefully crafted to ensure representativeness and diversity, reflecting a broad cross-section of the Chinese male adult population. The first phase involved the random selection of towns from across China, including a mix of urban and rural areas. This approach ensured that participants from diverse environmental and infrastructural contexts were included in the study.

In the second phase, male adults were randomly selected within each town through a lottery-based method. Special attention was given to ensuring the inclusion of individuals from various socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds, allowing for a comprehensive representation of the Chinese male population. This stratified sampling method enhanced the robustness and generalizability of the study findings.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

Four specific research instruments were developed to collect data relevant to the study objectives:

#### **Episode 1: Demographic and Health Questionnaire**

This instrument was designed as a comprehensive checklist that collected participants' demographic information and health-related data, complemented by illustrative visuals to enhance understanding and clarity.

#### **Episode 2: Leisure Activity Patterns**

This tool gathered data on participants' leisure activity habits, focusing on the frequency and type of physical activities in which they engaged.

#### **Episode 3: Structured and Informal Physical Activity**

A checklist-based instrument assessed participants' involvement in physical activities within both school and community environments, including formal exercise routines and informal activities.

#### **Episode 4: Well-being Assessment**

This instrument evaluated four key domains of well-being: physical, emotional, psychological, and social health. A 5-point Likert scale was used for responses, with options ranging from "None at all" to "Most."

## **Instrument Development and Validation**

The development and validation of the research instruments followed a rigorous process to ensure both reliability and validity. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify relevant constructs and guide the design of each instrument. Content validity was assessed by five subject matter experts using the Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) index. Items with an IOC score above 0.50 were retained for further analysis.

A pilot test was conducted with 319 non-sample male adults to assess the clarity, coherence, and comprehension of the instruments. Based on participant feedback, revisions were made to enhance the clarity and usability of the tools. The final version of the core instrument contained 38 items, measured on a 5-point Likert scale. Reliability analysis was performed, yielding a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.924, indicating excellent internal consistency.

## **Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize demographic data and Body Mass Index (BMI) distributions. Inferential statistics, including Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and multiple regression analysis, were used to examine the relationships between martial arts participation, dietary habits, exercise routines, and overall health outcomes.

To further explore the causal mechanisms underlying these relationships, mediation analysis was conducted using the PROCESS macro (Model 4). This analysis helped assess how martial arts participation influenced health behaviors through the mediating effects of diet and physical activity.

## **Results**

### **BMI and Obesity Outcomes**

The statistical analysis of the data from 1,100 Chinese male adult participants revealed significant differences in Body Mass Index (BMI) and obesity rates between martial arts participants and non-participants. Descriptive statistics indicated that the mean BMI for martial arts participants was 23.1 (SD = 2.3), compared to 25.4 (SD = 3.1) for non-participants. This difference was statistically significant ( $t = -8.21, p < 0.001$ ), suggesting that participation in martial arts is associated with healthier body composition. Furthermore, the prevalence of obesity (defined as  $BMI \geq 28$ ) was notably lower among martial arts participants, with only 9.4% classified as obese, compared to 19.7% of non-participants. This finding indicates a substantial reduction in obesity rates among those engaging in martial arts practice.

### **Regression Analysis of BMI**

Multiple regression analysis confirmed that traditional martial arts participation was a significant predictor of BMI, even after controlling for potential confounding variables such as age, socioeconomic

status, and physical activity levels ( $\beta = -0.38, p < 0.01$ ). This analysis further supports the notion that regular martial arts practice can contribute to a healthier body weight and better overall physical health.

### **Obesity Rates Across Martial Arts Engagement Levels**

ANOVA results indicated significant differences in obesity rates across levels of martial arts engagement ( $F(2, 1097) = 9.76, p < 0.001$ ). Post hoc Tukey HSD tests revealed that participants who practiced martial arts regularly (defined as practicing at least three times per week) had significantly lower BMI and waist circumference measurements compared to occasional practitioners and non-practitioners. These findings underscore the importance of consistent participation in martial arts for achieving optimal physical health outcomes.

### **Dietary Habits and Nutrition**

Participants who engaged in martial arts also reported significantly better dietary habits. Using a composite diet quality index (ranging from 0 to 10), martial arts participants scored an average of 7.8 (SD = 1.1), while non-participants scored an average of 6.1 (SD = 1.4) ( $t = 11.24, p < 0.001$ ). Martial arts participants reported a higher frequency of fruit and vegetable consumption (mean servings/day = 4.6 vs. 3.2) and a reduced intake of sugary beverages and processed foods ( $p < 0.01$  for all items). These findings suggest that martial arts participation is associated with more health-conscious dietary choices.

### **Mediation Analysis**

The mediation model, utilizing the PROCESS macro (Model 4), tested whether instructional design elements (such as structured guidance, real-time feedback, and culturally aligned training sequences) mediated the relationship between martial arts participation and health behavior changes. The indirect effect was statistically significant (indirect effect = 0.21, 95% CI [0.11, 0.32]), indicating that instructional design played a role in explaining the mechanisms by which martial arts influenced health outcomes. The model accounted for 42.7% of the total variance in health behavior improvement ( $R^2 = 0.427$ ). The direct path remained significant ( $\beta = 0.31, p < 0.01$ ), supporting partial mediation.

### **Moderation Analysis**

Moderation analysis revealed that geographic location and socioeconomic status significantly influenced the strength of the relationship between martial arts participation and health outcomes. Urban participants, who had greater access to formal martial arts instruction and facilities, showed more significant health improvements compared to rural participants, who often engaged in informal or self-taught martial



arts with less structured instruction. The interaction effect between location and instructional quality was significant ( $\beta = 0.26$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ), indicating that the impact of martial arts on health outcomes is amplified when instructional quality is high and when resources are readily available.

Collectively, these findings provide strong support for the hypothesis that traditional martial arts participation positively impacts both physical health outcomes and mental well-being, including dietary behavior and psychological resilience, among Chinese male adults. Moreover, the effectiveness of martial arts in promoting health is significantly influenced by the quality of instruction, with higher-quality instructional design amplifying not only the physical benefits but also the psychological benefits, such as reduced stress, improved mood regulation, and enhanced cognitive function. Environmental factors, such as access to structured martial arts training, also moderate the relationship between martial arts participation and health outcomes, including mental health improvements. These findings underscore the potential of traditional martial arts as a tool for holistic health promotion, particularly when combined with high-quality instructional strategies and tailored to specific environmental and psychological contexts.

## **Discussion**

The primary objective of this study was to evaluate the impact of traditional martial arts practices on the physical health and well-being of Chinese male adults, with a particular focus on Body Mass Index (BMI), obesity rates, and dietary habits. The findings demonstrate a significant association between martial arts participation and improved health outcomes, supporting the idea that traditional martial arts can be a valuable component of health promotion strategies for male adults in China.

### **Impact of Martial Arts on BMI and Obesity Rates**

The results of the statistical analysis indicate that engagement in traditional martial arts is associated with a lower BMI and a significant reduction in obesity rates among Chinese male adults. Martial arts participants had a mean BMI of 23.1 (SD = 2.3), compared to 25.4 (SD = 3.1) for non-participants. This difference was statistically significant, suggesting that martial arts participation contributes to healthier body composition. These findings align with previous research that highlights the physical benefits of martial arts, such as improved cardiovascular health, strength, and weight management (Kuo et al., 2016). Additionally, the prevalence of obesity among martial arts participants was significantly lower (9.4%) compared to non-participants (19.7%), highlighting the potential role of martial arts in combating the rising obesity epidemic in China. This aligns with global studies that suggest martial arts practice as an effective intervention to address obesity and related health issues (Garcia et al., 2020).

## **Role of Instructional Design in Health Behavior**

One of the key findings from this study is the significant role of instructional design in enhancing the health benefits of martial arts. The mediation analysis revealed that structured guidance, real-time feedback, and culturally aligned training methods were instrumental in improving health outcomes. The indirect effect of instructional design on health behavior change underscores the importance of quality instruction in maximizing the benefits of martial arts participation. These findings are consistent with previous research on physical activity interventions, which emphasize the importance of well-designed, engaging, and contextually relevant training programs for maximizing health improvements (Liu et al., 2021). Furthermore, the high-quality instructional design not only enhanced physical fitness outcomes but also contributed to healthier dietary habits among participants, suggesting an integrated approach to health promotion that combines physical activity and nutrition.

## **Geographic and Socioeconomic Moderators**

Another important contribution of this study is the identification of geographic location and socioeconomic status as significant moderators of the relationship between martial arts participation and health outcomes. Urban participants, who had access to formal martial arts instruction and facilities, exhibited stronger health improvements compared to rural participants, who often engaged in informal martial arts practices with limited access to structured training. This finding highlights the disparities in access to quality physical activity programs between urban and rural areas, which has been a recurring theme in global health research (Kuo et al., 2020). These disparities may limit the effectiveness of martial arts as a health intervention for rural populations, underscoring the need for targeted policy initiatives that improve access to structured physical activity programs in underserved areas.

## **Dietary Habits and Lifestyle Changes**

The study also found that martial arts participants reported significantly better dietary habits compared to non-participants. Martial arts practitioners scored higher on the composite diet quality index, with increased fruit and vegetable consumption and reduced intake of sugary beverages and processed foods. These findings are consistent with research that suggests physical activity can positively influence dietary behaviors (Sallis et al., 2020). The combination of martial arts practice with healthier dietary habits can contribute to improved overall health, suggesting that integrated approaches to physical activity and nutrition are effective in promoting long-term health outcomes.

## **Limitations and Future Research**

While this study provides valuable insights into the impact of martial arts on physical health and psychological well-being, several limitations should be considered. The cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to draw causal conclusions about the relationship between martial arts participation and both physical and mental health outcomes. Future research could benefit from longitudinal studies that track changes in mental health, stress levels, mood regulation, and physical health over time among martial arts practitioners. Additionally, while the study included a large sample of participants from diverse socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds, the reliance on self-reported data for dietary habits, physical activity levels, and mental health indicators may introduce bias. Future studies could include objective measures of physical activity (e.g., accelerometers) and mental health assessments (e.g., standardized psychological scales) to provide a more accurate evaluation of these behaviors and outcomes.

Moreover, the role of cultural factors in shaping health and mental health behaviors among Chinese male adults warrants further investigation. Cultural attitudes toward physical activity, health, martial arts, and mental well-being may influence participation rates and psychological outcomes, suggesting the need for culturally tailored health interventions. Research exploring the intersection of culture, physical activity, mental health, and health behavior could provide valuable insights into the broader context of health promotion and mental health support in China.

## **Recommendations**

1. **Promote Traditional Martial Arts Practice:** Traditional martial arts should be encouraged as part of health programs and physical activity initiatives for Chinese men, especially in communities with limited access to structured exercise programs. Practicing martial arts can improve physical health, reduce obesity rates, and promote healthier eating habits.

2. **Improve Teaching Quality and Resources:** The quality of martial arts instruction should be enhanced by providing skilled and knowledgeable instructors. Additionally, increasing access to well-equipped training facilities in remote or rural areas would help improve training effectiveness and promote long-term health behaviors.

3. **Conduct In-Depth Studies on Martial Arts Participation:** More studies should focus on the impact of martial arts participation on dietary behavior and physical activity. These studies should use precise tools to measure and assess these behaviors, providing data to design effective health promotion programs.

4. Compare Urban and Rural Areas: Research should compare the impacts of martial arts practice in urban and rural areas to better understand the factors influencing the success of martial arts programs and health promotion in each region. This will help develop strategies tailored to the specific needs of both urban and rural populations.

5. Health and Nutrition Education: It is essential to promote health and nutrition education alongside martial arts practice. Providing appropriate nutritional advice can help foster healthy eating behaviors and enhance the effectiveness of physical activity in the long run.

6. Further Research on Cultural Factors: Additional research should explore the role of cultural factors in the health behaviors of Chinese men. This research should focus on developing health promotion strategies that are contextually appropriate for each cultural setting and aim to shift cultural attitudes that may affect participation in physical activities.

## **New Knowledge**

This study contributes new insights into the intersection of traditional martial arts, physical health, psychological well-being, and dietary habits, particularly among Chinese male adults. The findings demonstrate the significant impact of martial arts participation on reducing obesity, improving BMI, enhancing dietary behaviors, and improving mental health outcomes such as stress reduction, mood regulation, and emotional resilience in this population. The study's innovative approach integrates martial arts with physical activity, nutrition, and mental health, addressing the issue of sedentary lifestyles and mental health concerns in Chinese men.

Additionally, this research highlights the role of structured, high-quality martial arts instruction in promoting positive health outcomes, both physically and psychologically. The data suggest that when martial arts programs are well-designed, they not only enhance physical fitness but also contribute to better emotional regulation, mental well-being, and healthier eating habits. The study also reveals the influence of geographic location on the effectiveness of martial arts training, with urban participants benefiting more from structured programs due to better access to facilities and resources, which could positively impact both physical and mental health.

Furthermore, the findings emphasize the importance of a holistic approach to health, which includes physical, emotional, and social well-being. By exploring the integration of martial arts into daily routines and its effects on both physical and mental health, this research provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how traditional practices can contribute to modern health initiatives, addressing both physical and psychological health challenges.

This study also adds to the literature by addressing a gap in research on the effects of traditional martial arts on the health of male adults, particularly in the context of obesity, BMI reduction, and mental health improvement. The incorporation of health behavior theories, such as the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Health Belief Model, provides a solid foundation for understanding the psychological and social factors that influence participation in martial arts and the adoption of healthier lifestyle choices, both physically and mentally.

Ultimately, this research expands our understanding of how traditional martial arts can be used as a tool for improving public health, particularly in the context of promoting physical activity, healthier dietary habits, and enhanced psychological well-being among Chinese male adults.

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