

From Martial Arts to Self-Cultivation: The Integration of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism and Karate Etiquette and Ethics

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Abstract: During the Song and Ming periods, the development of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism and Wang Yangming's School of Mind further refined Confucian thought, profoundly influencing East Asian politics, education, family ethics, and daily life. Meanwhile, Chinese martial arts during this period gradually shifted from military use to civilian practice, absorbing the essence of Confucian philosophy and becoming a comprehensive system for cultivating personal character and social harmony. After martial arts were introduced to Japan, they evolved into karate, which, through integration with local culture, developed into a Japanese form of martial art. The etiquette system of karate deeply incorporated Confucian principles, reflecting core values such as "self-discipline through ritual" and "respect for teachers and the Way." The interaction between modern Japanese society and Confucian thought further promoted the integration of the Confucian worldview into karate, endowing it with unique cultural awareness and enduring vitality in the context of globalization. This study uses historical analysis and interviews with karate practitioners to explore the specific manifestations of Confucian thought in karate culture, revealing how Confucian rituals play a role in karate practice and discussing the implications of contemporary karate education for cultural inheritance. The study demonstrates that Confucianism profoundly influences karate's moral development system through various aspects such as etiquette norms, teacher-student transmission, and self-cultivation, fostering the physical and moral unity of martial arts, and providing important cultural support for the harmonious development of modern society.

Keywords: Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, Confucian Thought, Karate, Etiquette, Moral Cultivation

1. Introduction

During the Song and Ming periods, the development of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism and Wang Yangming's School of Mind marked a deepening and refinement of Confucian thought. Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism emphasized the importance of moral cultivation and social order by exploring the essence of the universe and human life. In contrast, Wang Yangming's School of Mind advocated for personal practice as a means to awaken inner moral consciousness. These two major schools of thought not only had a profound impact on politics and education but also permeated the family ethics

and daily life of East Asian societies, laying a solid cultural foundation for Confucianism. At the same time, martial arts in China underwent a transformation during the Song and Ming periods, shifting from military applications to civilian practice. This development retained the essence of combat techniques while absorbing the core tenets of Confucian thought, making martial arts an ideal means of cultivating personal virtue and promoting social harmony.

In this historical process, Chinese martial arts were introduced to Japan, where they gradually evolved into karate, a distinctly Japanese form of martial art. As a branch of Chinese martial arts, karate was deeply influenced by Confucian culture in terms of its spiritual content. Karate not only values the transmission of techniques but also places a strong emphasis on the importance of etiquette norms. Confucian principles of ritual and propriety are reflected in various karate ceremonies, such as the entrance bow, teacher-student bow, and receiving equipment etiquette.

The entrance bow requires practitioners to bow when entering the dojo, embodying the Confucian concept of “self-discipline through ritual” and guiding practitioners to approach their training with a proper attitude through strict etiquette. The teacher-student bow is performed at the beginning and end of training, originating from the teachings in the Book of Documents (“The Heavenly Sovereign aids the people, making the ruler, making the teacher”), emphasizing the teacher’s elevated position and the student’s respect for the teacher. This reflects Confucian values of respecting teachers and the Way. Receiving equipment etiquette requires practitioners to receive training tools with both hands, embodying the Confucian principle of “etiquette is respect,” showing respect and politeness to others through the use of both hands.

The ongoing interaction between modern Japanese society and Confucian thought has deepened, promoting the integration of the Confucian worldview into karate culture. As this modernization process progresses, Confucian thought continues to play an important role in Japanese family life and education, while also revitalizing karate’s inheritance and development. As a comprehensive martial art system, karate, through Confucian etiquette norms and moral education, inherits and promotes core Confucian values, providing strong cultural support for the harmonious development of modern society.

This study aims to explore the specific manifestation of Confucian thought in karate culture. Through in-depth analysis of historical background, ritual practices, and cultural connotations, it reveals how Confucian rituals play a role in karate practice and discusses the implications and value of contemporary karate education in cultural inheritance.

2. Neo-Confucian Philosophy and the Spirit of East Asian Ritual Studies

Neo-Confucian philosophy reinterprets and develops traditional Confucianism, continuously adapting to social changes during its evolution. It has had a profound impact not only on China's tribute system but also on the political, educational, and ethical systems of the entire East Asian region. The worldview of Neo-Confucianism centers on the basic concepts of "Heavenly Principle" (天理), "Human Desire" (人欲), and "Principle and Qi" (理气), emphasizing the orderliness of the universe and the normative nature of human behavior. Among these, "Heavenly Principle" serves as the fundamental law of the universe, guiding human moral practice and helping individuals maintain moral purity and normative behavior in a complex social environment. "Human Desire" refers to the natural desires inherent in all humans, which serve as the internal driving force behind human actions. Therefore, regulating "Human Desire" in accordance with the "Heavenly Principle" is the core of Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. The mutual dependence of "Heavenly Principle" and "Human Desire" creates an intrinsic logic in which rituals not only reflect personal cultivation but also ensure the harmonious operation of society, making rituals central in the Song-Ming Neo-Confucian system.

Such rituals are not only present in family ethics but are also widely applied in public life and professional behavior.

2.1. The Concept and Evolution of "Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism"

"Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism" refers primarily to the dominant ideological system in Confucianism from the Northern Song to the Ming dynasty. However, in terms of historical continuity, it also underwent significant transitions and developments during the Yuan and Qing dynasties, thus sometimes being referred to as the Neo-Confucianism of the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing periods. Neo-Confucianism began to emerge during the Song dynasty and underwent differentiation and further development during the Ming dynasty. The Yuan dynasty generally extended the mainstream system of Song Neo-Confucianism, while the Qing dynasty provided a deep reflection and criticism of Ming Neo-Confucianism. After the mid-Qing period, the rise of "Plain Learning" (朴学) weakened the significance of Neo-Confucianism. Nevertheless, whether in the Yuan dynasty's inheritance or the Qing dynasty's reflections and critiques, the ideas and methodologies of Neo-Confucianism have been preserved and have given rise to new forms. Additionally, the Yuan and Qing dynasties, both ruled by non-Han peoples, also inherited and revised Confucian concepts and systems.

2.2. Major Neo-Confucian Theories and Ideas

During the Northern Song period, the Five Masters of the Northern Song, namely Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, Cheng Yi, Cheng Hao, and Shao Yong, were the founders and pioneers of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism. They collectively established a cosmology centered around "Principle" (理), "Qi" (气), and "Tai Chi" (太极), and explored the relationship between "human nature" (性), "mind" (心), and "principle" (理) from different perspectives, thus creating a system of human nature theory. By focusing on "Principle," they ultimately built a philosophical system integrating cosmology, theories of the mind and human nature, and ethics, laying the foundation for the development of Confucianism during the Southern Song period. During the Southern Song, Zhu Xi systematized and integrated the teachings of the Cheng brothers, elevating "Principle" to the highest status, thus bringing the Neo-Confucian system to maturity. Propositions such as "Heavenly Principle" and "the Highest Ontology" linked the traditional Confucian norms of human relations to the origins of the universe, thereby bridging the metaphysical framework of Neo-Confucianism. Meanwhile, Lu Jiuyuan proposed that "the mind is Principle," emphasizing subjective moral self-awareness. During the Ming dynasty, Neo-Confucianism underwent differentiation, with Wang Yangming further developing Lu Jiuyuan's ideas, and the School of Mind gradually took shape, with its core principle emphasizing the "unity of knowledge and action" (知行合一).

In Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, "Principle" has a rich connotation. It typically refers to the universal law of the universe (Heavenly Principle), the essence and internal norms of human nature (human nature principle), ethical norms (ethics), the essence and rules of things (physics), and the realm of rational speculation (reason). Although these different meanings can be unified to some extent within the framework of Neo-Confucianism, Neo-Confucian scholars do not always predefine the specific meaning of "Principle" when using the term. [1]

2.3. The Position of Neo-Confucianism in History and Society

The concepts of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism contributed to the transformation of the clan-based estate system of the Tang dynasty into a system of civilian landownership, driving social change. This process is often referred to as China's "modernization" or "quasi-modernization." The emergence of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism allowed China's "quasi-modern" era to transcend the medieval

mindset, gradually evolving toward a more theoretical framework. As a rational and philosophical approach, Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism provided a metaphysical foundation for the Confucian value system. It not only coexisted alongside Buddhism and Taoism but also absorbed beneficial elements from both, representing the ideas of the later stages of feudal society and promoting China's quasi-modernization process.

2.4. The Spread and Influence of Confucianism in East Asia

Professor Junjie Huang has consistently emphasized that in the study of East Asian Confucianism, Chinese Confucianism should not be viewed as the sole standard model. Instead, the interaction and development of Chinese Confucianism with Confucian traditions in other East Asian countries should be analyzed, focusing on the unfolding and construction of each country's cultural subjectivity. He pointed out that East Asian Confucianism should be regarded as a common framework, facilitating cultural exchange and development in each region. Therefore, the study of Confucianism in different regions should be treated equally. Professor Zhen Wu shares a similar view, arguing that the study of East Asian Confucianism should be a cross-cultural dialogue, aimed at fostering mutual understanding between different cultures, rather than imposing one's perspective on others. This suggests that the study of East Asian Confucianism is not only an independent examination of Confucianism in each country but also a deep analysis of its developmental trajectory and internal connections from an East Asian perspective. [2]

Since the modern era, as countries have increasingly focused on their cultural characteristics, research in areas such as the history of Japanese thought and Japanese literature has gradually emerged. However, despite the obvious regional characteristics of each country's culture, Confucianism in East Asian countries still exhibits mutual infiltration and influence. Therefore, when studying East Asian Confucianism, one should not focus solely on the development of Confucianism in a single country but rather consider the overall East Asian perspective, integrating the Confucian traditions of different regions and their interconnections. For example, Japan, despite being deeply influenced by Chinese Confucianism, especially in the process of the introduction of Korean Confucianism, developed a unique form of Zhu Xi's teachings that combined with local needs. The teachings of Yi Tui-hee (李退溪) had a profound impact on the Zhu Xi school in Edo-period Japan. This cross-national diffusion and localization of Confucianism highlights the importance of East Asian Confucianism as a dynamically developing system.

Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, as a typical form of Neo-Confucianism, provided continuous ethical, political, and educational guidance to the entire East Asian region through systematic arguments concerning the concepts of "Heavenly Principle" and "Human Desire." Especially in the domain of ritual practice, Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism laid a highly unified foundation for social norms, enabling the effective regulation of "Heavenly Principle" and "Human Desire" on a societal level and fostering the formation of social order and harmony. Through the tribute system and cultural exchanges, Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism was widely disseminated to regions such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, where it was localized and innovatively developed, forming Confucian schools of thought with regional characteristics. It can be said that Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism not only represented the mainstream form of Confucianism in China's academic history from the 11th to 18th centuries but also played a key role as an important link in cross-regional intellectual connections within the East Asian cultural sphere. It shaped the common political and cultural structures and social ethics of the region.

3. The Influence of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism on Chinese Martial Arts

Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism had a profound impact on East Asian ethical culture and various practical activities. Among them, martial arts, as a traditional Chinese martial discipline, significantly reflects the influence of Neo-Confucianism. This influence not only transformed martial arts into a skill but also developed it into a comprehensive system encompassing physical fitness and moral cultivation. Through the philosophical proposition of "investigating things to extend knowledge" (格物致知), Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism provided a solid intellectual foundation for the theoretical construction, practical methods, and cultural inheritance of martial arts.

3.1. "Virtue Above All" in Martial Arts and Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism

The core idea of martial arts practice, "virtue above all," directly reflects the concept of "preserve Heavenly Principle, extinguish human desires" (存天理,灭人欲) in Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism. In martial arts, "virtue" is not only a key way to regulate personal behavior, opposing aggression, bullying the weak, and seeking unnecessary violence, but also requires practitioners to improve their moral cultivation through self-cultivation and adherence to social order. This aligns with the Neo-Confucian principle of restraining "human desires" and practicing "Heavenly Principle," demonstrating martial arts as part of the practice of "investigating things to extend knowledge." By exploring the essence of "fist" (拳), martial artists aim to enhance their moral character.

3.2. Master-Disciple Transmission and Ritual Norms

In the inheritance of martial arts, the master-disciple relationship and ritual norms play a key role. Martial arts emphasize the passing down of knowledge through the master-disciple tradition, which includes rituals such as bowing to the master, receiving the teachings of the ancestors, and following the discipline and rules of the school. These practices not only reflect the respect for teachers and the social norms of propriety, righteousness, integrity, and shame (礼义廉耻) in Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism but also foster a cooperative and mutually respectful atmosphere within the martial arts community. This promotes the concept of "benevolence and love" (仁爱) in Neo-Confucianism. This method of transmission is not only the passing of skills but also the transmission of morality and culture, making martial arts a means of self-cultivation, further deepening the application of "investigating things to extend knowledge" in martial arts.

3.3. "Mind Moves, Form Follows" and the Unity of Knowledge and Action

The practice of martial arts emphasizes the concept of "mind moves, form follows" (心动形随), and the unity of internal and external, both form and spirit. Practitioners are required to unify their thoughts and movements, aligning their form and spirit. This idea closely aligns with Wang Yangming's concept of the "unity of knowledge and action" (知行合一). The mind and spirit are akin to "knowledge," while the actions and form correspond to "action." The two complement each other, and only by cultivating both the internal and external can one reach a higher level of mastery. This process is not only physical training but also the cultivation of the mind and character, embodying the transformation from passive reception to active exploration in "investigating things to extend knowledge," as well as the shift from pure ethics to epistemology and methodology.

3.4. The Specific Application of "Investigation of Things to Extend Knowledge" in Martial Arts

The application of "investigation of things to extend knowledge" (格物致知) in martial arts is specifically reflected in the multi-level exploration of "fist" (拳). First, martial arts divides "fist" into three levels: "physical fist," "mental fist," and "weapon fist."

In the realm of "physical fist," martial arts divides the "fist" into seven parts: "head, shoulder, hand, waist, knee, and foot," providing a comprehensive and systematic approach to physical training. This method, which starts with one and expands to seven, not only enhances physical coordination and strength but also promotes unity and harmony of various body parts through integrated training. For example, Tai Chi's "empty head to top force, sinking shoulders and dropping elbows, chest concaving and back pulling, waist relaxing and hips contracting," and Xing Yi's "top of the head, sinking shoulders, dropping elbows, embracing the waist, raising the knees," all reflect specialized training for each body part and the pursuit of overall coordination.

In the exploration of "mental fist," martial arts emphasizes the connection between the heart, will, and qi, cultivating the practitioner's inner spirit and control over intentions. Through exercises like "mind moves, form follows" and "unified intention," martial arts not only improves the precision and force of technical movements but also enhances focus and mental realm. This idea is highly consistent with Wang Yangming's "unity of knowledge and action" (知行合一), emphasizing the guiding role of inner spirit in external movements, thus achieving the harmonious unity of body and mind.

Regarding "weapon fist," the use of weapons in martial arts, such as the knife, sword, spear, and staff, serves not only as tools for combat but also as extensions and enhancements of the body's functions. Through the use of weapons, martial artists can further explore the essence of "fist," enhancing their combat abilities, while promoting the coordinated development of body parts through weapon training. For instance, in the legend of Xing Yi, "transforming the spear into a fist" reflects the important role of weapon training in martial arts.

In the exploration of the method "investigating fist to extend knowledge," martial artists emphasize self-reflection through inner observation. By refining movements and eliminating "fist diseases," they achieve harmony between body and mind. This process is not only an improvement in combat abilities but also a manifestation of moral cultivation. Through introspection, martial artists can check the correctness of their movements, adjust combat strategies, and enhance self-control, ultimately achieving the goal of both virtue and skill. For example, the self-checking method in Tai Chi, such as "using a ruler to test whether the posture is correct," and the "following the extension and bending" in push hands, both demonstrate the importance of introspection in martial arts training. [3]

Furthermore, in the long-term practice of martial arts, practitioners have developed normative standards to correct incorrect movements, such as the "Eight Reversals of the Fist" (拳家八反), which highlight common mistakes made by beginners. These norms not only help martial artists correct errors in their movements but also promote the standardization and systematization of martial arts techniques. For example, in Tai Chi, problems such as "lowered head, bent neck, exposed shoulder, and raised elbow" are corrected with specific measures like "tightening the waist as if bound" and "looking toward the armpits" to help practitioners standardize their movements and achieve the unity of body and mind.

3.5. The Goal of Cultivating Both Virtue and Talent

The ultimate goal of "investigating fist to extend knowledge" is not only to enhance combat ability but also to cultivate well-rounded qualities that combine both virtue and talent. Under the influence of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, this goal is embodied in several aspects. First, "virtue's fragrance" emphasizes the moral character of martial artists, which is not only demonstrated through "civilized"

performance in martial arts contests, such as stopping at the point of contact, but also in societal actions like "acting courageously when faced with injustice," giving back to society and showcasing the fragrance of martial morality. The cultivation of virtue enhances the personal qualities of martial artists and increases the moral influence of martial arts in society. Second, "exquisite skills and outstanding talent" is reflected in rigorous combat training and the standardization of "fist diseases." Martial artists continuously improve their skills, achieving "natural body movements" and "fist principles naturally manifesting." This improvement in skills is reflected not only in the coordination and power of movements but also in a profound understanding and embodiment of the principles of "fist." Additionally, "inheritance and innovation" is achieved through master-disciple transmission, ensuring the intergenerational passing of cultural heritage while encouraging martial artists to form their own distinctive styles, advancing the development of martial arts. This process preserves traditional essence while maintaining martial arts' vitality through innovation, reflecting the Song-Ming Neo-Confucian idea of "mastery and flourishing" (精通与光大). In terms of martial arts' perspective on time and space, Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism emphasizes the unity of heaven and humanity, and martial arts, as a system that integrates both physical and mental training, naturally aligns with this idea. Through the process of "investigating fist to extend knowledge," martial arts reflect the philosophical thought of the unity of heaven and humanity through the handling of time and spatial relationships. For example, martial arts adjust their training methods and content according to the seasons and times, such as practicing the liver in spring, the heart in summer, the lungs in autumn, and the kidneys in winter. This reflects an adherence to the laws of nature and the embodiment of life vitality. Furthermore, in the practice of routines and combat techniques, martial artists use the timing and spatial arrangement of movements to achieve tight coordination and unity, demonstrating the intrinsic connection between martial arts movements and the rhythms of heaven and earth. [4]

In conclusion, through the philosophical method of "investigating things to extend knowledge," Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism not only provided a theoretical foundation and practical guidance for Chinese martial arts but also deepened the cultural connotations and moral values of martial arts. Under the influence of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, martial arts became a system integrating both physical training and moral cultivation. Through master-disciple transmission, introspection, standardized combat techniques, and the cultivation of both virtue and talent, martial arts achieved unity of body and mind, as well as a combination of virtue and skill. This not only enriched the content of "investigating things to extend knowledge" but also provided valuable intellectual resources for the inheritance and development of martial arts, enabling them to demonstrate unique cultural self-awareness and enduring vitality in a globalized context.

4. The Historical Development of Karate and the Influence of Neo-Confucianism

4.1. The Origin of Karate in Japan and Its Connection to Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism

There are several theories regarding the origin of Karate, with the most widely accepted one being that it originated from the martial arts of Fujian province. It later spread to Okinawa through diplomatic missions, the thirty-six surnames of Fujian people, and Okinawan students studying in China, where it blended with local martial arts to form the art known as "Tang hand" (唐手). Tang hand was primarily used for self-defense, focusing on practicality and defense. During the Ming Dynasty, with the introduction of Fujian martial arts, Confucian ideas, especially those from Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, also spread to Okinawa. At this time, the Okinawan Kingdom adopted Confucianism as the core of its educational system, and the central concepts of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, such as "investigating things to extend knowledge" (格物致知) and "self-restraint and returning to propriety" (克己复礼), gradually became integrated into the local social and cultural

fabric. These Confucian ideas subtly influenced the technical development of Tang hand and the cultivation of martial ethics, so that Tang hand not only emphasized combat techniques but also stressed moral cultivation.

In 1922, Gichin Funakoshi demonstrated Tang hand at the first Japanese National Sports Exhibition in Tokyo, and subsequently left it there to spread. Later, figures such as Mo Bunji Ken, Miyagi Choshun, and Otsuka Hiroki came to Tokyo, further developing and integrating Tang hand to form what we know today as Karate. They established various schools such as the Shotokan, Goju-Ryu, Shito-Ryu, and Wado-Ryu. Throughout the formation of Karate, Confucian values such as "respect for teachers and reverence for the way" (尊师重道) were widely absorbed and practiced, becoming an important foundation for the Karate etiquette system. By the 1950s, with Japan's economic and social development, the Karate system gradually matured, forming a comprehensive etiquette system, competition rules, and kata patterns, which quickly spread from Tokyo to the rest of the world. [5]

4.2. The Spread and Localization of Karate in East Asia

After the 1950s, driven by modernization efforts, Karate spread widely across East Asia. During World War II, Japan introduced Karate to Korea, which had a significant impact on the formation of Taekwondo. While Taekwondo inherited the basic hand techniques of Karate, it amplified the use of leg techniques, focusing on kicking attacks. Moreover, the etiquette and cultural values of Taekwondo were greatly influenced by the spirit of Karate, with its etiquette system closely resembling that of Karate, emphasizing "respect for teachers and reverence for the way" and "humility and self-restraint."

Furthermore, when Karate spread to China and Southeast Asia, it merged with local martial arts, promoting the localization of Karate's spirit and techniques. For example, in China, Karate combined with traditional Chinese martial arts, resulting in Chinese-style Karate schools, while in Southeast Asia, Karate fused with local martial arts cultures, enriching both the techniques and cultural connotations of Karate. This cross-cultural transmission and fusion not only facilitated Karate's global development but also allowed it to adapt uniquely to different cultural contexts, showing its remarkable resilience and vitality.

4.3. The Influence of Confucian Ethics on the Karate Etiquette System

The etiquette system of Karate, even after modernization, retains deep traces of Confucian ethics. For instance, before and after training, practitioners bow to the dojo to show respect, and bowing to the instructor reflects the Confucian value of "respect for teachers and reverence for the way." Additionally, before beginning a set of movements, practitioners bow to their partners, and before competitive matches, they bow to their opponents. These forms of etiquette are not merely formalities; they are concrete manifestations of the Confucian core idea of "treating others with courtesy" (以礼待人).

These forms of etiquette regulate behavior and aim to cultivate practitioners' personal development and sense of social responsibility, making Karate not just a technical skill but a moral practice. The penetration of Confucian etiquette ensures that Karate maintains respect and humility in both competitive and daily training contexts, fostering harmonious relationships among people.

4.4. The Integration of Moral Cultivation and Neo-Confucian Ethics in Karate Training

Karate training is not only a refinement of techniques and strength but also an enhancement of personal moral cultivation. During kata practice, practitioners repeat movements, internalizing the rhythm and deeper meaning of each motion. This process reflects the concept of "investigating things

to extend knowledge" from Neo-Confucian ethics. While pursuing precision and standardization in movements, practitioners also focus on inner concentration and self-restraint, embodying the Confucian concept of "cultivating oneself" (修身).

Moreover, the Karate training process emphasizes self-reflection and inner tranquility. Practitioners must constantly reflect and adjust during training, avoiding the tendency to focus solely on external movements while neglecting the improvement of inner spirit. This aligns closely with Neo-Confucian ideas of "self-cultivation and nurturing the nature" (修身养性), helping practitioners cultivate good moral character and a noble spiritual realm while simultaneously improving their technical skills.

5. The Body as the Subject: The Integration of Confucian Thought in the Etiquette and Moral Cultivation of Karate

The etiquette system of Karate deeply integrates Neo-Confucian thought, establishing a systematic moral framework. During training, the rich rituals, including the entrance ceremony, the bow at the beginning of training, and the bow before performing techniques, not only reflect formal etiquette but also serve as genuine expressions of respect from the heart, embodying the core cosmology of Confucian ritual. These rituals regulate behavior and aim to cultivate personal refinement and social responsibility.

The practice of kata (型拳) requires the repetitive execution of movements, which is highly consistent with the Confucian concept of "cultivating oneself, managing the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world" (修身、齐家、治国、平天下). In this process, practitioners must practice self-restraint and return to propriety (克己复礼), maintaining inner tranquility and self-governance when facing challenges. This approach not only seeks the perfection of movements but also emphasizes the refinement of morality and the integrity of character, reflecting the "self-cultivation" process advocated by Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism.

The core Confucian values of "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness" (仁、义、礼、智、信) are woven throughout the competitive aspects of Karate. For example, before a kumite (组手) match begins, competitors must bow to each other and to the referee; after scoring, they must bow again to the referee as a gesture of respect. These rituals not only reflect the spirit of competition but also highlight the Confucian value of "benevolence" (仁爱), symbolizing harmonious relationships between individuals.

The Neo-Confucian cosmology emphasizes the dynamic balance between humanity and nature, advocating for the use of gentleness to overcome rigidity and to act in harmony with the flow of circumstances. This aligns with Karate's respect for natural laws and the principle of adapting to the way of martial arts. In kata practice, practitioners must align their breathing with their movements, using their breath to generate power, aiming for the unity of humanity and nature (天人合一). In kumite, competitors must sense their opponent's movements and respond flexibly, rather than relying solely on aggressive attacks, embodying the principle of "gentleness overcoming hardness" (以柔克刚) and "acting in accordance with the flow" (顺势而为).

Western moral philosophy, such as Aristotle's virtue ethics, argues that virtues are cultivated through practice and habit. Karate, too, fosters moral cultivation in practitioners through repeated training and practice. For example, the Confucian core values of "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness" (仁、义、礼、智、信) are cultivated during Karate training. Through rigorous practice and a ritualized understanding of these values, practitioners internalize moral etiquette in their behaviors and ways of thinking. These virtues are not only manifested on the

competition floor and during training but also carry over into daily life, aligning with the "self-cultivation" (修身) philosophy of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism.

Deontological ethics emphasizes focusing on the morality of actions themselves, rather than their outcomes. The "non-violence" principle of "zun-zhī" (存止) in Karate also reflects deontological thought, which requires practitioners to refrain from excessive violence under any circumstance and to act with restraint during competitions. Therefore, Karate is not only a self-defense technique but also emphasizes the practitioner's ability to control desires in various conflict situations, choosing non-violent solutions. Similarly, Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism requires individuals to demonstrate moral responsibility in their actions, which complements the sense of duty found in Karate.

In conclusion, Karate constructs a dynamic moral system through physical training, with its virtue ethics guiding practitioners via daily rituals and competitive rules. As an Asian martial art, Karate integrates the core ideas of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, establishing a moral practice system that combines the cultivation of inner virtues with external norms, blending body and mind in a harmonious way.

6. “Emotional Connection”: The Interaction and Etiquette Practices Between Athletes and the Karate Discipline

To explore the practical application of Confucian thought in the etiquette and moral cultivation within Karate, and its influence on athletes, this paper collects the practical experiences and insights of several Karate athletes through interviews. The following table provides the basic information of the interviewees to better understand their backgrounds and perspectives.

Table 1: Basic Information of Interviewees

No.	Age	Training Duration	Occupation	Other Relevant Background
1	30	20 years (2004-2024)	PhD, Waseda University	Trained in Karate as a teenager in a club, later entered university as a Karate-specialist student, and pursued academic and competitive research in Karate.
2	27	6 years (2018-2024)	Club Coach	Transitioned from Taekwondo to Karate in youth, trained in a professional sports school and entered university as a sports-specialist student, now a club coach.
3	17	10 years (2014-2024)	National Karate Athlete, Level 2	
4	24	10 years (2014-2024)	Club Karate Coach	Trained in Karate at a club during youth, later switched to a sports school, became a national athlete, and joined the national team; now a club Karate coach.
5	26	16 years (2008-2024)	Club Karate Coach	Started Karate training early in 2008 at a sports school, now a club Karate coach.

6.1. Voluntary Choice: Driven/Created by Etiquette, Constructing and Maintaining “Close Relationships”

6.1.1. "Serendipitous" Encounter and Initial Recognition Based on Competitive Needs

The interviewee initially practiced a different sport, but due to competitive needs, switched from Taekwondo to Karate. During the interview, the respondent mentioned, "Because of the provincial team's requirements, I switched from Taekwondo to Karate. Actually, at first, it was for career development..." (No. 2). Due to professional development needs, the respondent quickly developed an initial competitive recognition of the Karate kumite (sparring) discipline and became familiar with its basic etiquette norms and rules.

6.1.2. From “Competitive Tool” to “Spiritual Anchor”

After many years of training in Karate, it became more than just a competitive vehicle for the respondent; it also became a spiritual anchor. In training, the guidance from coaches and the requirements of etiquette helped the respondent develop a strong sense of respect and etiquette, learning to respect both coaches and seniors. On the competition floor, while giving their all in Karate, the off-stage camaraderie also taught the respondent humility through learning from the strong. The respondent stated: “Practicing Karate taught me to respect my teachers and elders, and to be humble. At that moment, I realized this is not just a simple technical competition; it's something that helps me grow” (No. 2). This shows that practicing Karate not only sharpens technical skills but also helps individuals form moral concepts and cultivate good qualities.

6.2. Negotiated Adjustment: The Interaction Between Rationality and Emotion in Martial Arts Etiquette

6.2.1. "Harmonizing" Within Rules and Cultural Differences

Compared to Taekwondo, Karate has more stringent etiquette norms. Karate coaches emphasize not only achieving results but also the importance of proper etiquette and norms during training. One respondent mentioned, "In the past, professional teams only focused on results and neglected many of the etiquette details; whereas this coach requires us to ensure that even the smallest movements follow the correct norms, which made me realize the need to respect the discipline itself." The coach required athletes to neatly organize their protective gear after training, salute each other during practice, and avoid talking while running. These strict demands led the respondent to gain more spiritual growth. This aligns with Confucian "self-cultivation" philosophy, enhancing the respondent's personal development while fostering a sense of reverence for the discipline itself. Such a training atmosphere defines Karate not merely as a competitive sport, but as a serious discipline requiring "self-restraint and return to propriety," respecting opponents and improving oneself.

6.2.2. The Dynamic Balance Between Competition and Emotion

In Karate's competitive training, the respondent encountered emotional fluctuations. Initially, transitioning from Taekwondo to Karate presented significant differences in rules and tactics, which created a large gap in competition. Furthermore, Karate's traditional Japanese roots led to some bias from the respondent's family. Coupled with the pressure from the demanding sports school training system, the respondent experienced some resistance to the sport for a period of time. However, through the coach's guidance and self-adjustment, the respondent was able to find a balance between competition and emotion, continuing on the path of Karate.

6.2.3. Continuous Rational Self-Reflection: From Emotional Breakdown to “Practice Virtue Before Technique”

Faced with highly skilled opponents in competition, the respondent encountered adversaries whose abilities were far superior. Naturally, fear arose when facing such formidable opponents. However, Karate requires giving one's best effort on the competition floor, respecting the match, and showcasing one's true abilities. The competitive atmosphere instilled confidence in the respondent. During the interview, the respondent also mentioned, "When I wanted to give up, my coach would tell me that results are not everything; we must respect our opponents, respect the competition, and also respect ourselves. That atmosphere of respecting our teachers and elders helped me endure through the pain." This demonstrates that Karate's competitive philosophy of "practice virtue before technique" helps practitioners bravely face challenges and respect the sport.

Karate is not only a technical martial art but also a system of moral cultivation deeply rooted in Confucian ethics. Through an in-depth analysis of Karate's historical background, etiquette norms, and training process, it is clear that the etiquette system, teacher-student relationships, internal cultivation, and moral development in Karate are profoundly influenced by Confucian thought. The concepts of "investigating things to understand," "self-restraint and returning to propriety," and "cultivating oneself and nurturing one's nature" in the Song-Ming School of Thought are fully embodied in Karate, helping practitioners cultivate moral character and seek harmony between body and mind during their technical training.

The process of practicing Karate is not merely about improving technical skills; it also involves the cultivation of personal moral qualities and spiritual growth, reflecting Confucian ideals of "cultivating oneself, managing the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world." Through an analysis of Karate's etiquette, techniques, and inner cultivation, we also observe Karate's cultural inheritance and innovation within the context of globalization. The modernization of Confucian thought and the global spread of Karate form a profound interaction, with each influencing the other, thereby promoting the widespread dissemination of East Asian culture.

7. Conclusion

Through this study, we have gained a deeper understanding of Karate as a comprehensive system of practice with profound cultural significance, as well as a better recognition of the positive impact of Confucian thought on modern society. Karate, as a traditional martial art that integrates ethics, etiquette, and technique, continues to offer important cultural insights for contemporary society. It plays an indispensable role, particularly in promoting social harmony, individual self-cultivation, and global cultural exchange. Therefore, future research can further explore the manifestation of Confucian thought in other East Asian martial arts and their cultural practices, and how these cultural forms can contribute to the moral development and cultural identity of modern society.

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