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# AN INVESTIGATION INTO LOCAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EFFECTIVENESS AND RELEVANCE OF TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE MARTIAL ARTS

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Traditional Vietnamese Martial Arts, effectiveness, relevance, modern martial arts, vovinam.

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## ABSTRACT

Traditional Vietnamese Martial Arts (TVMA) are practices that have not been widely studied in relation to their functions. As a result, the effectiveness and relevance of these systems in a rapidly developing nation are widely debated. This study identified local attitudes towards TVMA forms, in a bid to better understand the practices, their backgrounds, their relevance in a contemporary climate and implications for their future. Attitudes were assessed through the use of a seven-point semantic differential scale questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to one hundred participants in the Vietnamese capital city of Hanoi, all of whom had some understanding or experience of martial arts. Results were compared in relation to demographic data such as gender, age differences and martial arts backgrounds. Statistical significance was then analyzed through two-tailed T-tests. Results demonstrated conclusively that TVMA are seen as important historical, cultural, and social practices; however, the effectiveness of such systems as practical fighting arts as well as their relevance economically, is a highly divisive topic among the local population. Outcomes of the research suggest that further refinement and development of these systems are required to ensure they are not superseded by combat sports.

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional martial arts can be defined by their 'emphasis on the elements of philosophy, restraint, control, and especially the kata' [Nosanchuk and MacNeil 1989: 154]. In contrast, the objectives of combat sports are 'to show one's superiority over the rivals directly on the rivals' bodies (by employing different sets of techniques, such as throws, strangles, joint-locks, holds, punches, kicks, etc.)' [Vertonghan et al. 2014: 656].

Through personal observation and my own experiences of Traditional Vietnamese Martial Arts (TVMA), it appears that a dichotomy has developed within the nation of Vietnam. On one side, traditional styles are viewed as skilled fighting systems, sources of patriotism and national pride, while the opposing viewpoint considers them to be less effective in terms of self-defence and less relevant in contemporary times than combat sports such as kickboxing, boxing and Brazilian jiu jitsu (BJJ).

This study utilized quantitative data collected through questionnaires to investigate attitudes of the martial-arts-literate section of Vietnamese society (i.e., those that have some level of first-hand experience of martial arts practices). The results were then analyzed to examine the attitudes towards TVMA that pervade in the current climate and discussed in terms of potential implications for the future of these styles and systems.

Within this paper, 'effectiveness' is defined as the application of martial arts to a self-defence scenario. It is widely considered to be a blend of speed, strength, accuracy, awareness, decisiveness and the ability to improvise [Angleman et al. 2009: 91; Indio 2012: 7]. 'Relevance' can be determined in relation to the outcomes of martial arts practices in the everyday lives of participants. For example: improved mental well-being as discussed by Nosanchuk and MacNeil [1989]; sense of self and national identity as discussed by Salomon & Vu [2007]; or economic/financial development as discussed by Bowman [2010: 436] can all be considered as relevant factors.

## TRADITIONAL VIETNAMESE MARTIAL ARTS (TVMA)

TVMA can typically be considered within one of four distinct geographical/ethnic categories: Northern styles; Central styles; Southern styles; and Sino-Vietnamese styles [Borton & Ngoc 2003; Tran 2004; Roe 2016].

Borton and Ngoc [2003: 9] consider the Northern Vietnamese styles to have developed in response to 'fight[ing] against invasions, especially from the armies of various Chinese dynasties'. These practices were first formalized in 1253 when 'the Trần Dynasty established the Giảng Võ Đường, a martial arts training school for royal relatives serving as military officers' [2003: 19]. In recent years, these styles have seen continued development for both practical and political functions. As Green and Svinth state in regards to the modern Northern Vietnamese system of Vovinam: it 'was developed with both the practical intent of providing, after a short period of study, an efficient means of self-defence, and establishing a focus for national identity of the Vietnamese people' [2003: 439].

Roe [2016] considers the Central Vietnamese systems of TVMA as having developed as a culmination of the Chinese-influenced ancient Vietnamese (Đại Việt) culture and other Southeast Asian practices. The central region of Vietnam has historically been home to the Siamese, Champa and Khmer civilizations, acting as 'a melting pot for culture and customs' [Roe 2016: 10]. An amalgamated system of armed and unarmed martial arts (referred to interchangeably as Võ Cổ Truyền/Võ Tây Sơn/Võ Bình Định) was developed in this region during the seventeenth century under the rule of the future Emperor, Nguyen Hue. This system incorporated and adapted a blend of northern and local ethnic fighting practices to create a uniform and effective military training program. Significantly, this assisted in Nguyen Hue's campaign to unify the nation into modern-day Vietnam and found the Tay Son Dynasty (1778-1802) [Goscha 2017: 88]. Roe states these styles of TVMA 'considered to be of Vietnamese origin still hold a strong connection with the Vietnamese people' [2016: 136].

Tran [2004] details the Southern Vietnamese styles of TVMA stemming from the Seven Mountains (Thất Sơn) region. He states that equivalent Chinese systems, differ in 'historical origin, religious background and societal function of the art and its practitioners'. Furthermore, Tran [2004: 66] considers the spiritual elements of the art to be primary functions, stating that the 'Northern (Chinese) imitation forms were created for self-cultivation and defence', whereas the southern TVMA styles were often 'born out of superstition and a perceived need to combat the strange and mysterious' [67].

Finally, due to widespread trade and migration between China and the Southern Vietnamese provinces during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a number of Sino-Vietnamese systems developed. These practices were then adapted by the local populace over time to better suit their locations and practitioners' physiques [Roe 2016: 129]. Common Sino-Vietnamese martial arts include Vịnh Xuân Quyền (Wing Chun), Hồng Gia Quyền (Hung Gar) and Bạch Mi Quyền (Bak Mei Pei) [Green & Svinth 2003: 458; Roe 2016: 129].

From the above, two key points can be drawn. Firstly, despite shared influences and concurrent development, modern TVMA practices can be considered as distinctly different from their Chinese and other Southeast Asian counterparts. Secondly, TVMA have served a number of important functions, including self-defence and physical fitness, as well as historical, cultural, social, economic, spiritual and political purposes.

In modern society, many traditional martial arts systems are often considered ineffective for practical purposes as a result of being 'choreographed' or having 'too many rules and regulations' [Angleman et al. 2008: 90]. Although there has been a great deal of scholarly discussion on attitudes towards Chinese traditional martial arts and their role in modern society, similar studies have not yet examined those in a Vietnamese context. As such, at this juncture, it was timely to investigate the attitudes towards traditional martial arts in the Vietnamese context.

## DATA & METHODS / APPROACH

This study utilized a two-part semantic differential scale questionnaire, issued to a sample group of one hundred volunteer participants. The group included both Vietnamese nationals and long-term residents of Vietnam, all of whom had experience of traditional martial arts, combat sports or both. By selecting martial artists as participants, motivation for participation in the study was ensured, whilst the group had the ability to give realistic and knowledgeable insight into the practices. This contrasts with the general population, who typically hold significant misinterpretations about the physical practices and philosophies of traditional martial arts [Angleman et al. 2008: 90].

All volunteers were recruited in the capital city of Hanoi, therefore, the study provided only a cross-section of the city's population rather than a national view. This is an important differentiation to make due to societal differences throughout the country, for example, in the southern city of Ho Chi Minh, the populace is widely recognized to be less patriotic and possibly resentful of the Communist-style ideals of The North [Maresca 2015]. These differences may hold relevance within martial arts contexts as various TVMA systems are funded and promoted by the government [Roe 2016: 35].

The questionnaire was administered to a mixed-gender, adult group considered to be within the typical age range for martial arts practitioners (18-65 years old) [Gaille 2018: para. 13]. Ages and genders of respondents were collected during Section A of the questionnaire

to ensure test-retest reliability of the study. The sample group were recruited via word of mouth (specifically discussions with martial arts groups, instructors and school members); via the internet (targeted advertising and posts to various platforms and martial arts forums and through flyers posted in locations around the city (community notice boards, university campuses and bookstores). Each volunteer could then visit an online portal which provided them access to the questionnaire.

## DATA & METHODS / INSTRUMENT DESIGN

Section A collected demographic and behavioural data, specifically participants' ages, gender, and martial arts backgrounds and current practices. The selection mirrors the studies conducted by Rogowska and Kuśnierz [2013] and Zeng, Hipscher and Leung [2011], both of which found age and gender to be significant factors in participant attitudes towards sports.

Questions 1 – 4 served to examine any potential correlations between age, gender, level of education and participant attitudes. Question 5 allowed us to identify any cultural bias among respondents; whilst Questions 6 – 9 assessed behavioural aspects of the participants' attitudes. The following questions were used:

1. Name (not required)
2. Age (tick boxes in ten-year increments from '18-24' to '50+')
3. Gender ('Male', 'Female', 'Prefer not to say')
4. Level of education ('Secondary school' - 'Postgraduate')
5. Nationality (drop-down list)
6. Have you ever studied any traditional Vietnamese styles of martial arts?
7. If so, which schools or styles?
8. Have you ever studied any other combat sports or martial arts?
9. If so, which schools or styles?
10. How many months/years have you trained in total? (Tick boxes from 0-10+ years)
11. If you currently train in martial arts, how many sessions per week? (Tick boxes from 0 - 5+)

Section B provided a bilingual definition of TVMA alongside a video which demonstrated sections of 'kata' from 'Võ Cổ Truyền', one of the most popular styles of TVMA [Roe 2016: 68]. It then provided eight semantic differential scale questions in which participants rated their understanding and feelings towards TVMA practices on a scale from 1 (Very Bad) to 7 (Very Good).

Question 1 – 2 assessed the cognitive component of participants' knowledge and assisted in potentially revealing further biases among the participants. Questions 3 – 8 then further assessed participants cognitive and affective understanding of TVMA.

The following questions were used:

1. Your understanding/knowledge of the physical practices that take place within Traditional Vietnamese martial arts training.
2. Your understanding/knowledge of the mental/philosophical practices that take place Traditional Vietnamese martial arts training.
3. Traditional Vietnamese martial arts effectiveness for self-defence.
4. Traditional Vietnamese martial arts effectiveness for fitness training.
5. Traditional Vietnamese martial arts effectiveness for developing positive behavior (e.g. discipline, self-control, integrity).
6. Traditional Vietnamese martial arts relevance as cultural / historical practices.
7. Traditional Vietnamese martial arts relevance for social aspects (e.g. meeting people, making friends, social events, etc.)
8. Traditional Vietnamese Martial Arts relevance for economic and financial development (e.g. for tourism, the film industry, international training programs etc.).

## RESULTS / DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Out of the sample group (n=100) there was an 88% response rate. 54.5% fell into the 25-34 age bracket; approximately 20% were aged 18-24 and 35-50 respectively, while just over 5% were aged 50+. As a result, age groups were considered further in the analysis of data, focusing on the attitude differences between the main (>35) age group and the remaining (35-50 & 50+) groups of respondents.

Respondents were mostly male, 84.1% versus 15.9% female, this does not coincide with the suggestion that martial artists are likely to be of relatively equal genders [Gaille 2018: para. 12], however there may be societal reasons that account for the lack of female participation and response rate in Vietnam when compared to the figures of martial arts practitioners in the United States or Europe.

Over half of the respondents had experience of TVMA (53.4%) versus (46.6%) that did not. 88.6% of respondents also had prior experience in other traditional martial arts or combat sports, many of which currently trained in several styles. 38 of the 48 participants who were experienced in TVMA also cross-trained in other styles, while just 10 (20.8%) of TVMA practitioners studied exclusively.

The types of TVMA practiced included the Northern Vietnamese styles (11 participants), Central Vietnamese styles (9 participants), Southern Vietnamese styles (7 participants), and Sino-Vietnamese styles (14 participants); while 7 participants responded with other minor/family lineages or left the question blank. In response to other martial arts practiced, the most popular styles were boxing, kickboxing, karate, taekwondo, jiu jitsu, judo, wushu, Filipino martial arts, and Mixed Martial Arts (MMA).

## RESULTS / SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL SCALE RESPONSES

As displayed in Table 1, the sample group perceived themselves to have a reasonable understanding of both the physical and mental practices of TVMA (M=4.11 and M=4.23 respectively). This is of particular relevance as Rogowska & Kuśnierz's [2013: 189] study found a direct correlation between how knowledgeable participants perceived themselves to be and how favourably they thought of martial arts practices.

The aspects identified as most important by participants were 'Cultural/historical relevance' (M=5.75) and 'Effectiveness for health/fitness training' (M=5.42). 'Effectiveness for self-defence' (M=4.28) was the second-lowest rated aspect and the most divisive (standard deviation of 1.84), and 'Economic/financial relevance' (M=4.14) was the lowest-rated factor overall.

Each of these areas were then considered in relation to participants' martial arts backgrounds; age range; and genders. They were then analyzed using a two-tailed T-test to confirm statistical significance among responses ( $p \Rightarrow 0.05$ ). These areas were identified for further investigation due to the notable division in responses of the sample group and results from previous studies that found marked differences in attitudes when using similar criteria [Rogowska & Kuśnierz 2013: 189; Zeng,

Table 1: Section B Responses

Attitude Item	Low Responses (1-3)	Neutral Responses (4)	High Responses (5-7)	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q1. Physical Aspect Knowledge	35 (39.8%)	12 (13.6%)	41 (46.6%)	4.11	1.82
Q2. Mental Aspect Knowledge	33 (37.5%)	11 (12.5%)	44 (49.9%)	4.23	1.94
Q3. Self-Defence Effectiveness	28 (31.8%)	19 (21.6%)	43 (46.6%)	4.28	1.84
Q4. Health/Fitness Effectiveness	10 (11.4%)	9 (10.2%)	69 (78.4%)	5.42	1.48
Q5. Behavioural Effectiveness	10 (11.4%)	16 (18.2%)	52 (70.5%)	5.40	1.58
Q6. Social Relevance	6 (6.8%)	16 (18.2%)	66 (74.9%)	5.37	1.38
Q7. Cultural/Historical Relevance	4 (4.6%)	10 (11.4%)	74 (87.1%)	5.75	1.24
Q8. Economic Relevance	27 (30.6%)	32 (36.42%)	29 (32.9%)	4.14	1.54

Table 2: Variations by Gender

Attitude Item	Male Responses Mean (n=75)	Female Responses Mean (n=13)	Standard Deviation	p-value
Q1. Physical Aspect Knowledge	4.24	3.61	0.44	0.2562
Q2. Mental Aspect Knowledge	4.26	4.23	0.02	0.9596
Q3. Self-Defence Effectiveness	4.14	5.30	0.82	0.0367
Q4. Health/Fitness Effectiveness	5.42	5.53	0.07	0.7805
Q5. Behavioural Effectiveness	5.34	5.84	0.35	0.2928
Q6. Social Relevance	5.50	4.76	0.52	0.0736
Q7. Cultural/Historical Relevance	5.81	5.53	0.19	0.4566

Table 3: Variations by Age Range

Attitude Item	18-34 Responses Mean (n=69)	35-49 / 50+ Responses Mean (n=19)	Standard Deviation	p-value
Q1. Physical Aspect Knowledge	4.05	4.31	0.26	0.5762
Q2. Mental Aspect Knowledge	4.13	4.57	0.44	0.3762
Q3. Self-Defence Effectiveness	3.95	5.47	1.52	0.0009
Q4. Health/Fitness Effectiveness	5.22	6.15	0.93	0.0124
Q5. Behavioural Effectiveness	5.26	5.89	0.63	0.1162
Q6. Social Relevance	5.29	5.68	0.88	0.2677
Q7. Cultural/Historical Relevance	5.66	6.10	0.44	0.1649
Q8. Economic Relevance	3.95	4.84	0.89	0.0257

Table 4: Variations by Martial Arts  
Background

Attitude Item	TVMA Responses Mean (n=47)	Non-TVMA Responses Mean (n=41)	Standard Deviation	p-value
Q1. Physical Aspect Knowledge	4.97	3.10	1.87	>0.0001
Q2. Mental Aspect Knowledge	5.36	2.90	2.46	>0.0001
Q3. Self-Defence Effectiveness	4.89	4.00	0.89	0.0177
Q4. Health/Fitness Effectiveness	5.80	4.97	1.03	0.0078
Q5. Behavioural Effectiveness	5.78	4.95	0.83	0.0130
Q6. Social Relevance	5.78	4.90	0.88	0.0086
Q7. Cultural/Historical relevance	5.91	5.57	0.34	0.2020
Q8. Economic Relevance	4.44	3.80	0.64	0.0384

## DISCUSSION

### Attitudes in relation to gender

Table 2 displays that the female group identified effectiveness of TVMA for self-defence purposes to be considerably higher than the male group. This coupled with the lower-rated knowledge of female participants opposes the idea that perceived knowledge of martial arts correlates to favourable opinions as hypothesized by Rogowska and Kuśnierz's [2013: 189] study. In contrast, this data suggests that:

- A lack of martial arts knowledge may lead to a more favourable view of martial effectiveness.
- Female and male martial artists may have different perceptions of what constitutes effectiveness and may have different needs in terms of self-defence. This data is supported by studies that have shown women are more likely to face both sexual and physical violence than men ['Fundamental Rights Report' 2019: 29]. Of these, many are perpetrated by known attackers and family members [Leach & Charlotte 2017: para. 7], whereas men 'are more likely to be victims of violent crime where the perpetrator was a stranger' [2017: para. 7].

### Attitudes in relation to age range

Table 3 demonstrates that the lower-age bracket identified themselves as weaker in both physical and mental understanding of TVMA. Although effectiveness for health and fitness purposes, economic and social relevance of the TVMA practices were all notably lower within responses from the younger age group, the most divisive factor by a remarkable amount, was how TVMA is considered in terms of effectiveness for self-defence. These results suggest:

- Different age groups have different perspectives of self-defence. This is particularly relevant as younger participants are 'more likely to be victims of violent crimes than those in older age groups' [Leach & Charlotte 2017: para. 6].
- Senior-grade (and therefore older) traditional martial arts practitioners have frequently been identified as being less aggressive than junior students [Nosanchuk & MacNeil 1989: 158]; as a result, they are more likely to utilize verbal and non-physical techniques in self-defence situations.
- The younger group may be less aware of the training practices within TVMA. The lower-rated knowledge of the younger participants, coupled with the fact that just 50% of the younger group had experienced TVMA (versus 68.4% of the older group), supports this conclusion.

### Attitudes in relation to martial arts background

Combat sport practitioners marked all attitude points lower than the group with TVMA experience, highlighting that they view the practices overall less favourably than other types of martial arts. However, both groups, considered TVMA to hold significant 'cultural/historical relevance' (M=5.74), whilst being reasonably effective for self-defence (M=4.45). In terms of 'health/fitness effectiveness', the non-experienced group rated TVMA considerably lower. Possible reasons for this may include:

- Familiarity with more-progressive training and fitness methods which may oppose traditional training methods (e.g., the use of dynamic stretching rather than static stretching, despite the fact that it has been identified that 'acute static stretching may induce performance decrements' [Costa et al. 2011: 75].
- Misconceptions of the physical training exercises of TVMA. From a logistical standpoint, it was not possible to detail these practices at length during the descriptions of TVMA in the questionnaire.

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

As Kraus states: there is little doubt 'that attitudes significantly and substantially predict future behavior' [Kraus 1995: 7]. Although there are many other variables among social behaviours, this study indicates there are two main groups of thought among the local populace (although further research is needed to confirm this and thus establish a model): (a) those that consider TVMA primarily as historical and cultural practices rather than functional combative systems and (b) those that identify TVMA as effective combative systems of martial arts.

With respect to (a), the implications of such attitudes may lead to attempts to further nationalize TVMA as cultural, spiritual, or sporting practices, similar to Japan (karate, judo), Korea (taekwondo) and China (wushu). Although this has happened to some extent already with the development of martial arts-centred tourist areas and festivals around the nation [Roe 2016: 71], schemes will need to be developed to increase the financial relevance of TVMA through tourism and training programs.

In relation to (b), the teaching of TVMA as a functional combative system will require further development and refinement of the self-defence aspects, as even many practitioners of TVMA do not view these arts as being particularly effective for self-defence purposes. However, it is arguable that this is not the primary purpose of such training, especially in Vietnam where martial arts have a long history of spiritual, nationalistic, and mental development purposes as argued by Tran [2004], Green and Svinth [2003: 439], and Roe [2016].

## CONCLUSION

The results from this study have demonstrated conclusively that TVMA are identified as important practices among the local populace for social, physical, cultural, and spiritual reasons. This study has further hypothesized that TVMA are considered to be fairly effective self-defence practices, however, the extent of this is an extremely divisive point among the local populace, particularly among those of different genders, ages and martial arts backgrounds. Thus, better definitions for effectiveness need to be developed.

In response to these findings, it is suggested that a set of criteria are established which can be utilized alongside a ranked scale and applied to a particular technique (or the core techniques of a system) to determine an idea of effectiveness. Provided analysis is undertaken by suitably qualified individuals, a scale may be used in relation to footage of self-defence scenarios to develop quantitative data or as a critical training-experiment which allows martial artists to examine their own practices.

As the aspects widely considered to define effective self-defence include awareness, decisiveness, improvisation, accuracy, efficiency, strength, speed and physical fitness [Indio 2012: 7; Angleman et al. 2009: 91; Keren 2014: 9], suggested criteria to be used in a technical effectiveness scale include:

1. **Speed**  
Can the technique be applied rapidly from a neutral position? Does it have sufficient speed to meet its intended purpose?
2. **Strength**  
Does the technique have sufficient force to disable/deter an imminent threat?
3. **Accuracy**  
Can the technique meet its intended target with ease? Is the target viable?
4. **Tactical use**  
Can the technique be delivered at such a speed/from a position to surprise an opponent or gain a tactical advantage?
5. **Adaptability**  
Can the technique be adapted across ranges and/or to utilize tools, weapons or the environment to provide a tactical advantage?
6. **Protection**  
Does the technique leave the deliverer exposed/in a position to receive further damage during or after application?



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