

**AUGUSTUS JOHN ROE**

# **STRIKING A BALANCE: EXPLORING THE EVOLUTION AND INTERACTION OF MMA AND TRADITIONAL MARTIAL ARTS IN VIETNAM**

## **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the relationship between mixed martial arts (MMA) and traditional Vietnamese martial arts (TVMA) in Vietnam from 2018 to 2024, a period of significant regulatory and cultural transitions. Using globalisation and glocalisation frameworks, it investigates how martial arts interact and adapt. Drawing on six years of ethnographic fieldwork—including participant observation, expert interviews (n=8), and analysis of competition records and media—it identifies three integration phases. The pre-legalisation phase (2018–2020) was marked by informal uptake and adaptation. During the transition phase (2020–2022), TVMA participation in formal events declined. The post-legalisation phase (2022–2024) saw increasing hybridisation between TVMA and MMA. Analysis reveals how institutional and strategic adaptations fostered blended fighting approaches, catalysing innovation within TVMA rather than eroding local cultures. This research contributes to understanding how traditional martial arts sustain cultural relevance while adapting to global sporting trends, advancing perspectives on sporting globalisation and glocalisation in developing nations.

## **CONTRIBUTORS**

*Augustus John Roe is a British martial artist, linguist, and author. An instructor of traditional Vietnamese martial arts, he has also studied numerous other systems in depth. He is the author of several books on martial arts, including The Martial Arts of Vietnam: An Overview of History and Styles and Legendary Masters of the Martial Arts: Unraveling Fact from Fiction. He currently lives and works in Hanoi, Vietnam.*

## **KEYWORDS**

Mixed martial arts, Vietnam, traditional martial arts, globalisation, glocalisation, combat sports, cultural adaption, sport development, martial arts interaction.

*Accepted for publication on 21 February 2025*



## INTRODUCTION

Vietnam's martial arts landscape has undergone significant transformations throughout its modern history. In the early twentieth century, the country boasted a vibrant combat sports culture that incorporated elements of locally developed martial arts, styles from other nations throughout Asia, and Western combat sports. This culture was exemplified by many *Vô Tự Do* (free fighting) competitions held throughout the country, which shared notable similarities with contemporary mixed martial arts (MMA). However, successive political changes, first under French colonial rule and later during Communist governance, resulted in stringent regulations that prohibited prize fighting in all forms. As a result, the martial arts culture in Vietnam developed in relative isolation throughout much of the twenty-first century (Roe, 2020).

Following the country's unification under the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1976, government initiatives prioritised traditional Vietnamese martial arts (TVMA), including styles such as folk wrestling (*đấu vật*), Binh Dinh region martial arts (*võ cổ truyền*), and vovinam (*việt võ đạo*). These arts served dual purposes: promoting physical fitness among the populace and reinforcing nationalist ideals (Roe, 2020; Green, 2001). This development of TVMA aligns with broader patterns across Asia, where martial arts and their constructed histories have played crucial roles in the development of national identities and cultures (Moenig et al., 2023).

During the 1990s, Vietnamese state officials formed a governing body to unify various fighting styles under the umbrella term of "TVMA". These styles were defined as "traditional" by the use of criteria that include:

- A focus on developing Vietnamese culture and identity, often through the inclusion of historical/cultural practices (such as veneration rituals before fights)
- The practice of forms or "kata", either competitively or as training methods
- The practice of "cold weapons" such as pole arms, swords and staffs
- Consistent uniforms and hierarchical belt ranking systems
- Government-approved competition formats, typically emphasising striking and (except for folk wrestling) prohibiting most throws, while all disallowing striking or continued grappling on the ground (Roe, 2020)

Globally, throughout the 1990s, MMA was emerging as a major cultural and sporting phenomenon, marking a transformative shift in the way combat sports were both practiced and perceived (Downey, 2014). MMA initially began as "no holds barred"-style fights, facilitating unprecedented interactions between MMA and other styles of martial arts such as taekwondo, kung fu and karate. However, MMA contests soon evolved beyond a spectacle of violence, adapting to suit public interest, marketability and regulations, while allowing techniques that proved practical from

all styles to assimilate into MMA (Sánchez García & Malcolm, 2010).

By the 2000s, MMA was rapidly becoming a widespread cultural phenomenon, with millions of viewers and practitioners across the globe (Andreasson & Johansson, 2018). However, its growth in Vietnam was constrained by legal restrictions and limited international integration. Factors such as restricted social media access and low internet penetration initially hindered cultural exchange (Nguyen, 2023). However, this dynamic changed after 2015, as increasing access to the internet and exposure to international combat sports events transformed the landscape.

A significant turning point occurred in 2020 when Vietnam legalised MMA (VMMAF, 2020). While the official rationale for this decision has not been publicly disclosed, it can be understood as arising from a combination of: the risks linked to unregulated amateur MMA bouts occurring across the country; organisations, gyms, and experts advocating for a regulatory framework to support legalisation; and potential economic opportunities with strong public support. This trend is consistent with recent studies on the legalisation process of MMA in other nations, whereby, for both the state and the populace, the risks of legalisation outweigh the negatives of continued illegality (see Channon et al., 2020; Ramirez, 2023; Vertonghen et al. 2014).

Since 2020, MMA has developed a significant following in Vietnam, as evidenced by an abundance of new training facilities and widespread social acceptance as a spectator sport (Roe, 2024; Việt Nam News, 2020).

### Theoretical framework

This study employs theories of globalisation and glocalisation to examine the complex interaction between MMA and TVMA. Globalisation theories have traditionally viewed the spread of Western sports as a unidirectional process leading to cultural homogenisation (Horton, 2011). For example, Sánchez García and Malcolm (2010, p. 50) argue that the globalisation of combat sports has led to a "diminishing of contrasts in combat sport action" in nations such as Japan where local styles have been "synthesised and packaged in accordance with the commercial practices of Western professional boxing." While this may be true from a technical perspective, it is undeniable that the adoption of Western rule sets and methods has allowed Asian martial arts like karate, muay Thai, taekwondo, and sanda to develop into globally recognised combat sports (Vail, 2014; Moenig, 2015; Wang, 2022). Some scholars thus argue against a negative reading of the perceived homogenising impacts of globalisation, by contending that these processes serve as a valid means of preserving cultural identity and physical heritage (Chen, 2018).

Unlike globalisation, which Maguire refers to as "multi-directional movement of people, practices, customs and ideas that involve a series of power balances" (Maguire, 2012, p. 5.), a more nuanced framework for understanding how global sporting practices are transformed through local interpretation and adaptation may be Robertson's (1994) framework of "Glocalisation". Robertson conceptualises this not as a negotiation

of power or hegemony, but as a process where influence flows between global and local actors, affecting both the receiving culture and the practice itself. This theoretical perspective helps mitigate what Andrews and Ritzer (2007) consider to be a “false polarisation” of the global versus the local in many sports studies. This framework has also proven valuable for scholars studying Western sports in Asia, where glocalisation often emerges as social innovation to transform both local and global sporting practices (Horton, 2011; Cho, 2012; Li et al., 2025).

Therefore, this study draws on the framework of sporting glocalisation in Asia as described by Li et al. (2025), who identify three key factors that define the process: cultural inclusion, economic sustainability, and localised transformations. This framework allows examination of how TVMA practitioners and organisations navigate the tension between preserving what they consider to be “traditional” and adapting to global sporting trends, potentially transforming aspects of MMA practice within the Vietnamese context in ways that may enhance rather than diminish their cultural heritage. While studies into sporting globalisation and glocalisation have taken place primarily in industrialised countries, Vietnam offers a unique context for examination. Despite significant economic, cultural and social growth, Vietnam remains classified by the United Nations as a “developing nation” (Khalid, 2023), where martial arts remain strongly embedded in cultural identity. By focusing on Vietnam, this study broadens our understanding of combat sports’ evolution in modernising societies.

To guide this exploration, two central research questions have been formulated:

1. In what ways are TVMA and MMA practices interacting and adapting in modern-day Vietnam?
2. What are the implications of these changes for both technical practice and Vietnam’s martial culture?

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-method framework that includes ethnographic fieldwork, semi-structured interviews with experts and key stakeholders in the TVMA and MMA scenes, and data analysis of official documents related to past and present MMA contests and media surrounding their practices.

### Ethnographic fieldwork

Fieldwork spanned two distinct phases of MMA’s development: pre-legalisation (2018–2020) and post-legalisation (2021–2024). During the pre-legalisation phase, I competed as a participant-observer in five informal ‘*vô tỵ do*’ (free-fighting) events in Hanoi. I selected this location not only for its political significance but also its population size, and varied representation of MMA and TVMA styles practiced locally. Through the events I observed and participated in, a core of key stakeholders remained consistent, many of whom became board members, officials and ranked

fighters in the Vietnam Mixed Martial Arts Federation (VMMAF), established in 2020.

Pre-legalisation events combined TVMA with modern MMA practices, resembling the days of early UFC bouts that Downey (2014, p. 1) refers to as “deregulated confrontations [that] were supposed to establish which fighting style was the most effective.” To avoid legal restrictions, these events were presented as “exchange” sessions, which were all referred to as “draws”, unless one fighter was unable to make it to the centre of the ring at the end. During these events, bout lengths and fighting regulations varied and were often not strictly enforced. My immersion in these contests facilitated an embodied understanding of local technical practices and participant interactions, aligning with the principles of participant-observation as outlined by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), which involve active engagement in the field, sensitivity to participant perspectives, and a reflexive approach that recognises the researcher’s influence.

During the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown, which lasted from mid-2020–late 2021 in Vietnam, MMA was legalised and the VMMAF was formed, enabling government-sanctioned events to begin. At this juncture, my position shifted to that of a complete-observer, most notably in relation to five events held within a professional MMA promotion developed as a collaboration between private investors and the newly formed VMMAF. Although there were many smaller events held across Vietnam throughout that time period, I attended the largest and most significant (i.e. “Championship bouts” in which belts were exchanged). This evolution in my positionality from participant to observer enabled what Delamont (2016) terms “critical distance,” essential for reducing potential bias while maintaining deep engagement with the research context.

Throughout this six-year period, I collected data through reflexive journaling, photography, and videography, building on established ethnographic approaches in martial arts by Spencer (2013), Wacquant (2004), and Mariante Neto et al. (2021), which emphasise prolonged field engagement and embodied participation. Acknowledging critiques that “insider ethnographies” can be limited by the researcher’s embedded perspective (Naeke et al., 2010), I actively address such limitations through a commitment to cultural relativism. By combining participant observation with expert interviews and document analysis, I mitigate the risk of ethnocentrism, reducing the likelihood of interpreting cultural practices exclusively through my own cultural lens (LeVine & Campbell, 1972). However, as an interpretive rather than a positivistic method, some researcher influence on the findings is inevitable. Despite this, methodological triangulation ensures that local perspectives are authentically represented from a balanced positionality, while maintaining analytical rigor. This enhances both the cultural sensitivity and the validity of my findings.

### Expert interviews

Ethnographic research and results were supported through expert interviews with key stakeholders, most notably fighters, coaches,

promoters and officials within Vietnam's developing MMA scene. Following Given's (2008) guidelines for methodological rigour in purposive sampling, I approached expert participants representing key stakeholder groups within Vietnam's MMA and TVMA communities. Of those I approached, eight individuals consented to be interviewed, comprising fighters and coaches (n=4) and promoters, officials, and journalists (n=4). Of the eight participants, seven were male and one was female. Each participant held substantial involvement in these communities, often taking on multiple roles. This ensured depth in domain expertise for providing informed insights. I conducted all interviews in accordance with ethical research practices, following the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2014) as well as similar guidelines for social research (American Sociological Association, 2018). These standards emphasise informed consent, confidentiality, and the secure handling of data throughout the process.

I conducted semi-structured interviews from 2021 to 2024, both in person and via video conferencing, lasting 90 to 120 minutes each. These interviews explored themes including personal martial arts histories, perspectives on cultural preservation, impacts of MMA legalisation, and views on Vietnamese martial culture's evolution. While I primarily conducted interviews in English, Vietnamese language was employed when necessary, through immediate translation from a bilingual research assistant.

I analysed the interview transcripts using a constructivist grounded theory approach, specifically to acknowledge my role and positionality in constructing meaning from the interviews (Charmaz, 2006). I audio-recorded and transcribed each interview verbatim, and imported them into Taguette 1.4.1 qualitative analysis software (Rampin et al., 2018). I began the coding process with open coding, examining each transcript line by line to identify recurring actions, concepts, and participant perspectives relevant to my study's focus on the interplay between TVMA and MMA. This phase allowed me to develop forty preliminary codes directly from participants' experiences, without imposing preconceived categories. I then proceeded with focused coding, refining frequently occurring codes and grouping them into seven more specific categories that included: Personal involvement, the current TVMA/MMA landscape, the cultural impact of combat sports, globalisation, economic and financial development, the physical attributes of TVMA/MMA, social reception of martial arts, and the future of TVMA/MMA in Vietnam. Through analytical memos, I documented potential patterns, theoretical links, and evolving ideas on the interaction between TVMA and MMA in Vietnam. This iterative coding and memo-writing process was essential for my identification of central themes drawn from participants' narratives.

In the final stage, I employed theoretical coding to synthesise focused codes into four core themes, representing the key processes and interactions present in the data. I reviewed themes with participants and peer researchers to incorporate feedback, enhance validity, and clarify connections to my research questions. This grounded theory approach culminated in three

major themes that illustrate how TVMA and MMA in Vietnam are interacting and adapting—or, in some cases, failing to do so. These included: Participation of TVMA fighters in MMA events, development of hybrid fighting approaches, and negotiation of values between TVMA and MMA.

#### Documentary evidence

To further enhance analytical rigor, I employed data triangulation by comparing interview findings and field observations/notes with an analysis of documentary sources. I subjected this data to content analysis, which helped me identify points of convergence and divergence, ultimately providing a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon (Krippendorff, 2018).

The first component of this analysis comprised official regulatory documents that served as primary sources for verifying the institutional development of MMA in Vietnam. These included:

- Government decrees pertaining to MMA legalisation
- Vietnam VMMAF establishment rules and guidelines
- Official competition regulations/sanctions (from 2018-2024)
- Publicly available policy documents related to combat sports governance

I used these documents primarily for factual verification, corroborating specific dates, regulations, and institutional developments mentioned in interviews and field observations. This triangulation of sources helped me establish a reliable chronology of MMA's institutional development in Vietnam and verify the accuracy of participant accounts.

In the second component, I examined data from both pre- and post-legalisation phases, focusing on fighters' backgrounds as listed in VMMAF rankings and relevant competition records—categorising fighters as combat sport or TVMA practitioners—along with weight classes, gender, and performance in MMA. I then employed this quantitative data in a comparative analysis alongside regulatory changes over time, identifying trends and patterns that either supported or contradicted insights from my fieldwork and expert interviews.

For the third component, I conducted a systematic media analysis of 170 articles from January 2018 to November 2024 across three major Vietnamese news outlets: *Tuổi Trẻ News*, *Thể Thao & Văn Hóa*, and *Thanh Niên News*. I selected these sources for their national reach, focus on sports journalism, and balanced representation of mainstream and niche sports. My analysis covered three areas: local combat sports, international combat sports, and TVMA.

I followed a structured keyword search for data collection. For MMA, I included terms such as "MMA," "UFC," "ONE Championship," and keywords like "boxing," "kickboxing," "muay Thai," and "Brazilian jiu-jitsu," "traditional martial arts," "martial arts," and their first language translations ("*võ cổ truyền*" and "*võ thuật*"). I conducted the analysis bilingually, using Vietnamese and English language supported by a professional translator and



translation software to ensure accuracy in cultural and contextual nuances.

## RESULTS

### Participation of TVMA fighters in MMA events

Analysis of event records (2018–2024) revealed three distinct phases in TVMA practitioners' participation in Vietnam's evolving martial arts landscape: *pre-legalisation* (2018–2020) with TVMA representation at 12.2%; a decline to 3.3% during the *transition period* (2020–2022); and a resurgence to 25.3% *post-legalisation* (2022–2024). These figures are represented in Table 1, below.

Expert interviews revealed possible explanations for these differences, with TVMA fighters expressing apprehension about participating in the official MMA format bouts, stating: “We couldn't [fight] in a cage at first because that was too different,” and “It wasn't easy for us to take in all the changes, all the global trends in martial arts.” However, as one promoter noted, transitioning from unofficial competition to regulated MMA was “a huge learning opportunity for fighters of all backgrounds.”

Two key technical challenges emerged from the expert interviews that help explain these participation patterns:

1. Limited grappling experience: As one fight promoter explained: “The only wrestling concept we have is traditional wrestling back in the north. It is not popular for Vietnamese fighters, so they had a disadvantage against MMA fighters.”
2. Rule restrictions on traditional techniques: Another fighter and coach highlighted: “There is some grappling in our traditional martial arts, but not a lot. Because now in MMA, there are certain things you cannot do. But let's say that if you can grab here and pull [demonstrates pulling back a finger], the grappling would be very short.”

During my own observations, I noted various struggles with transitions from TVMA fighters to new rule sets throughout this period. Whilst many fighters demonstrated proficiency with long-range techniques like kicks and straight punches, they had frequent limitations in close-range striking (particularly in-fighting from “the pocket”) and struggles against experienced grapplers in both pre- and post-legalisation settings. This pattern mirrors historical precedent from early UFC events, where grappling-focused fighters, particularly the Gracie family, dominated stand-up fighters from traditional martial arts backgrounds who lacked ground-fighting experience (Downey, 2007). In Vietnam's context, these technical challenges appear to have contributed to the temporary decrease in TVMA representation during the transition period, as practitioners adapted to the demands of formalised MMA competition.

### Hybrid approaches of TVMA/MMA

The combination of my interviews, observation and statistical data revealed an increasing hybridisation of fighting styles among practitioners transitioning from TVMA to MMA. This trend is evidenced through both direct observation of competitors cross-training in TVMA, muay Thai, and Brazilian jiu-jitsu, and through VMAF official rankings data, where more fighters now openly identify as either TVMA or hybrid TVMA/MMA practitioners compared to earlier events.

Analysis of the 2024 VMAF rankings revealed that of 70 ranked fighters, 12 (17%) were listed as TVMA practitioners, compared to just 6 from 52 (12%) when the league began in 2020. Notably, the 2024 TVMA practitioners were predominantly concentrated in the male lightweight divisions (56–65kg), with virtually no representation in heavier weight classes. While these lightweight divisions are generally more populated, qualitative evidence suggests this concentration may reflect deeper cultural and technical-physiological factors. As one ranked fighter noted, this may be related to speed and mobility, stating that “(In the West) there are a lot of big guys, and big guys tend to use hands. Vietnamese fighters are fast and love to kick.”

This emphasis on kicking techniques appears to reflect the technical heritage of TVMA, particularly evident in styles like vovinam and *võ cổ truyền*. My fieldwork observations support this connection, suggesting the potential emergence of a distinct, localised striking style in Vietnamese MMA that places greater emphasis on kicking than is usually seen in MMA. The success of this approach in lighter weight classes, where agility and precision are paramount, may indicate that traditional striking techniques are particularly adaptable to these divisions. Conversely, the lower representation in heavier weight classes could suggest challenges in adapting traditional techniques to grappling-dominated competition, though more comprehensive fight analysis would be needed to confirm this hypothesis.

Notably, certain teams have successfully bridged the gap between TVMA and modern approaches. Gyms with strong wrestling and grappling programmes, such as *Liên Phong* MMA and Saigon Sports Club in Ho Chi Minh City, and Agoge or Vietnam Top Team in Hanoi, consistently produce ranked fighters from both pure MMA and TVMA/hybrid backgrounds. These teams have helped to facilitate transitions to international organisations like ONE Championship. Athletes like *Trần Quang Lộc* (*Liên Phong*) and *Phạm Văn Nam* (Agoge) exemplify this successful integration, coming from TVMA backgrounds while developing formidable grappling skills (Gia, 2022; Tường, 2024).

### Negotiation of values between TVMA/MMA

Through expert interviews and online media analysis, I uncovered ongoing value negotiations between TVMA and MMA approaches. One martial arts journalist highlighted a fundamental clash: “We (Vietnamese) respect the position in the fight. Traditionally, people believe that to keep fighting somebody grounded is dishonourable and ruthless.”

Table 1. TVMA Competitors in Observed Events

Event Type	Year	Total Competitors	TVMA Competitors	TVMA Percentage
Amateur, mixed exhibition	2018	40	6	15%
Amateur, mixed exhibition	2018	48	5	10.4%
Mixed competition with amateur MMA	2018	34	6	17.6%
Mixed competition with amateur MMA	2019	34	4	11.8%
MMA is legalised in Vietnam, February 2020				
Mixed competition with amateur MMA	2020	48	3	6.3%
Professional MMA	2022	30	1	3.3%
Professional MMA	2023	20	5	25%
Professional MMA	2023	20	5	25%
Professional MMA	2023	20	6	30%
Professional MMA	2024	14	3	21.4%

During field research, I observed the strategic efforts to broaden MMA's appeal by adapting local rules to accommodate TVMA values both prior and post legalisation. For example, during an amateur *võ thuật* event, I was reprimanded for using a neck throw/*kubi nage*—a technique legal in unified MMA rules and common in TVMA but prohibited under local rule sets as it may be considered “too dangerous” by any government or sporting officials that might see the bout in person or online. Ironically, I had successfully used this same technique for a TKO victory in a previous contest.

The VMMAF continued to make such adjustments once MMA was legalised. Examples of this include mandatory elbow protection in amateur bouts, restrictions on grounded elbows and certain throws, and early stoppages for bloody matches. These changes appear to align with local cultural expectations, as my observations revealed that audience enthusiasm noticeably dropped during fights that appeared particularly brutal.

The value conflicts extend beyond fighting philosophy into promotion. Several interview participants noted that Vietnamese fighters struggle to reconcile TVMA values of modesty with modern combat sports' promotional demands. One coach

explained that Vietnamese fighters prefer to “just be silent and then go out and fight and finish their job.” These promotional difficulties have inspired alternative competitive events nationwide, such as “Gods of Martial Arts”, a league that seeks to balance MMA competition with TVMA values by focusing their marketing on character aspects like resilience and spirit (Vietnam+, 2024). These values are further demonstrated through physical features of the contest, such as the hexagonal roped ring, to encourage stand-up fighting. Meanwhile, the events’ aesthetics pay tribute to Vietnam’s TVMA heritage by mirroring what one promoter considers “a golden age” in Vietnamese combat sports—the colonial period of *võ thuật* fights.

Promoters also emphasised that “martial arts are viewed differently in the East and in the West”, with one participant warning that “if somebody is taking the UFC strategy and uses it for Vietnam, they will fail completely.” This aligns with ONE Championship’s successes in Asia, where founder Chatri Sityodtong attributes his success to avoiding conflict-based promotion in favour of traditional values like “integrity, humility, honour, respect, courage, discipline, and compassion” (Mazique, 2019). Whilst “trash talk” still occurs between ONE Championship fighters, my observations reveal it to be less heavily emphasised in their promotional efforts.

Despite these conflicting values, both MMA and TVMA are growing in popularity. My analysis of media coverage from three major Vietnamese news outlets (*Tuổi Trẻ News*, *Thể Thao & Văn Hóa*, and *Thanh Niên News*) between 2018–2024 revealed an evolving relationship between TVMA and MMA. Coverage of domestic MMA events has shown consistent growth, increasing from 20 articles in 2018 to 38 in 2023, with only 4.7% of these (in total across the time period) expressing concerns about the sport—i.e., discussing the brutality of MMA and its assumed negative impact upon Vietnamese martial arts culture and society at large. This positive coverage trend suggests growing mainstream acceptance of MMA within Vietnam’s martial arts landscape and aligns with patterns in media research where emerging sports, particularly those with international competitive potential, often receive favourable coverage (Bernstein & Blain, 2002).

Notably, international MMA coverage increased dramatically in the years leading up to its legalisation, peaking in 2020 with 159 articles. Since then, coverage has hovered between 112 and 149 articles annually. Meanwhile, TVMA coverage has remained relatively stable, ranging from 48 to 63 articles per year, without a consistent upward or downward trend. This data indicates sustained interest in both forms. Similarly, their parallel representation suggests an ongoing negotiation between the two, potentially driving further hybridisation or greater differentiation between certain TVMA practices and MMA.

## DISCUSSION

The interaction between TVMA and MMA in Vietnam provides a compelling case study of glocalisation. This research

demonstrates that, rather than experiencing a unidirectional wave of globalisation that erases local traditions, the integration of MMA into Vietnam has resulted in unique adaptations, cultural expressions, and tensions. This aligns with assertions from scholars like Horton (2011), Cho et al. (2012) and Li et al. (2025) that global sports, particularly those with significant uptake in Asia, are frequently reshaped by local contexts rather than simply being adopted wholesale. Analysing the Vietnamese experience through Li et al.’s (2025) framework of glocalisation—which considers cultural inclusion, economic sustainability, and localised transformations as key factors—reveals several significant patterns.

### Cultural inclusion and adaptation

The shift in rule sets, approaches to promotion, and increasing incorporation of fighters from TVMA backgrounds demonstrates clear cultural inclusion and adaptation. However, this has not been a simple process and has generated tensions, particularly as TVMA practitioners and observers attempt to reconcile their preconceived notions of what is deemed to be honourable and respectful, within the type of ‘violent’ action commonplace in MMA.

The initial decline in TVMA fighters during the transition period (2020–2022) demonstrates a period of both technical challenges and cultural resistance. While viewing figures for MMA events in this period have not been publicly available, interviewees and my own experiences in Vietnam support the idea that there was initial cultural resistance to the sport, but that this has since relaxed over time as the populace became more used to the type of combat seen in MMA. Similarly, the subsequent resurgence of TVMA fighters taking part in MMA competitions suggests these cultural tensions acted not as fixed barriers but as catalysts for innovation and adaption, not only of martial arts but of their attendant social ideals, supporting Robertson’s (1994) concept of glocalisation as a transformative process.

### Economic sustainability

While public figures regarding the profitability of MMA in Vietnam are limited, the increasing popularity of the sport, both among practitioners and observers, indicates significant avenues for economic sustainability and growth. The positive perception of an evolving MMA scene from fighters, coaches, promoters and officials, along with my own observations, supports this. Similarly, the emergence of multiple MMA organisations and widespread governmental support provides further evidence of MMA’s economic potential, in which Vietnam may well aspire to become a regional leader, similar to Thailand or Singapore, currently home to the major MMA promotions active in Southeast Asia. Notably, however, organisations that preserve elements of TVMA culture while allowing for MMA integration benefit from increased marketability and social acceptance at a local level. They are therefore likely to receive greater governmental support, and as a result be made more accessible to both Vietnamese and international observers, fighters and investors.

### Technical and cultural transformation

Field observations revealed the success of hybrid fighters who combine TVMA striking methods with modern grappling systems. These results parallel broader patterns in Asian martial arts evolution, where traditional martial arts like karate and taekwondo are often successfully combined with grappling or wrestling systems in modern combat sport contexts, while preserving some of their distinctive cultural elements. This presents a possible path for TVMA to develop, by fragmenting into separate iterations and thus proliferate by filling certain niches (for example, by focusing on combat sport contests, self-defence practices or social/cultural practices). This is a process that Bowman (2010) refers to in relation to martial arts as “globalkanization”.

Media analysis supports this interpretation, demonstrating parallel growth in coverage of both TVMA and MMA, challenging assumptions about traditional practices declining in the face of globalisation. This suggests a more nuanced process of cultural development than the simple hegemony of “Western” combat sports like MMA. Instead, it represents an evolving process of social innovation in which TVMA and MMA simultaneously coexist, hybridise, and differentiate while exerting influence upon each other.

### Limitations and future research

While this study offers valuable insights into the interplay between TVMA and MMA in Vietnam, I must acknowledge several limitations. My research focused on particular themes and does not comprehensively address broader social factors, such as gender dynamics, social class, or regional diversity. My sampling strategy, composed primarily of expert interviews and personal experiences, limits the scope of public perceptions captured, which affects the generalisability of the findings. These also reflect predominantly male viewpoints on the phenomena in question, further underscoring such limits. Lastly, as I am involved in the Vietnamese MMA community myself, potential ‘insider’ biases in my interpretation must be considered. Given that this study examines a rapidly evolving context over a prolonged period, my findings may shift as new trends emerge.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating perspectives from a wider societal sample, including casual participants, fans, and observers, and/or utilising a more extensive and diverse sample base. Longitudinal studies would provide deeper insights into how technical adaptation patterns evolve, highlighting how traditional techniques are integrated into MMA training and competition. I believe comparative analyses with other Asian countries would also be beneficial to identify both consistent trends in martial arts modernisation and unique Vietnamese characteristics.

Furthermore, I propose that investigating the training methodologies of successful hybrid fighters could guide the development of more effective integration strategies for TVMA and MMA. The role of institutional frameworks in shaping

martial arts evolution, particularly how regulatory bodies balance preservation with modernisation, also warrants deeper exploration. Finally, I suggest that women's viewpoints, particularly used to examine gender dynamics within martial arts participation in this context, could reveal more about how traditional cultural values interact with modern sporting trends, shedding light on gender-specific experiences and contributions to martial arts development in contemporary Vietnam.

### CONCLUSION

Through my research into the interaction of TVMA/MMA in Vietnam's martial arts landscape, I have highlighted how martial arts deemed “traditional” can evolve and interact within established cultural frameworks. In addressing the first research question, my study highlights three phases of interaction between TVMA and MMA in Vietnam: initial decline in participation, transitional difficulties, and eventual resurgence. The rise of hybrid fighters, particularly in lightweight divisions, demonstrates how TVMA striking techniques can merge effectively with modern grappling, creating distinctive fighting styles suited to local contexts. For my second research question on technical practice and martial arts culture, I found that institutional adaptations by the VMMAF have supported the evolution of a dynamic and inclusive martial arts scene, showing that thoughtful regulation can promote both competitive growth and cultural continuity.

Looking ahead, I identified that TVMA, MMA and other martial arts/combat sports in Vietnam will simultaneously hybridise, differentiate, and co-exist while continuing to exert influence upon one another. My research suggests many practitioners will probably continue cross-training, blending MMA and TVMA while attempting to preserve a unique martial culture. While my study had limitations, it highlights sustainable pathways for combat sports development, illustrating how global sports can be adapted to broader audiences while integrating with local traditions. I have presented a possible framework that can be used to examine the interaction between ‘traditional’ martial arts and MMA in various other cultures and contexts.

### REFERENCES

- Andreasson, J., & Johansson, T. (2018). Negotiating violence: Mixed martial arts as a spectacle and sport. *Sport in Society*, 22(7), 1183–1197. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2018.1505868>
- Andrews, D. L., & Ritzer, G. (2007). The global in the sporting global. *Global Networks*, 7(2), 113–153. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0374.2007.00161.x>
- American Sociological Association. (2018). *Code of ethics and policies and procedures of the ASA committee on professional ethics*. [https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/asa\\_code\\_of\\_ethics-june2018.pdf](https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/asa_code_of_ethics-june2018.pdf)



- Bernstein, A., & Blain, N. (2002). *Sport, media, culture: Global and local dimensions*. Routledge.
- British Psychological Society. (2014). *Code of human research ethics*. <https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/BPS%20Code%20of%20Human%20Research%20Ethics.pdf>
- Bowman, P. (2010). The globalization of martial arts. In T. A. Green & J. Svinth (Eds.), *Martial arts of the world: An encyclopedia of history and innovation* (pp. 435–520). ABC-CLIO.
- Channon, A., Matthews, C. R., & Hillier, M. (2020). Medical care in unlicensed combat sports: A need for standardised regulatory frameworks. *Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, 23(3), 237–240. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsams.2019.10.014>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage Publications.
- Chen, X. (2018). A comparative study of Chinese Sanda and Western kickboxing from the perspective of sports culture. *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Culture, Education and Economic Development of Modern Society*. <https://doi.org/10.2991/iccse-18.2018.271>
- Cho, Y., Leary, C., & Jackson, S. J. (2012). Glocalization and sports in Asia. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 29(4), 421–430. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.29.4.421>
- Delamont, S. (2016). *Fieldwork in educational settings: Methods, pitfalls and perspectives*. Routledge.
- Downey, G. (2007). Producing pain: Techniques and technologies in no-holds-barred fighting. *Social Studies of Science*, 37(2), 201–226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312706072174>
- Downey, G. (2014). 'As real as it gets!' Producing hyperviolence in mixed martial arts. *JOMEC Journal*, 5, 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.18573/j.2014.10268>
- Gia, L. (2022, July 7). Trần Quang Lộc: 10 năm thăng trầm cùng MMA Việt Nam. Thể thao. <https://webthethao.vn/mma-boxing/tran-quang-loc-10-nam-thang-tram-cung-mma-viet-nam-y8flMh6ng.htm>
- Given, L. M. (2008). *The sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. Sage Publications.
- Green, A. T. (2001). *Martial arts of the world: An encyclopedia* (p. 135). ABC-CLIO.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2019). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. Routledge.
- Horton, P. (2011). Sport in Asia: Globalization, glocalization, Asianization. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *New knowledge in a new era of globalization* (pp. 177–193). IntechOpen. <https://doi.org/10.5772/21231>
- Khalid, R. (2023, December 6). Viet Nam, technology and the middle-income trap. UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/vietnam/blog/viet-nam-technology-and-middle-income-trap>
- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- LeVine, R. A., & Campbell, D. T. (1972). *Ethnocentrism: Theories of conflict, ethnic attitudes, and group behavior*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Li, Z., Waquet, A., & Campillo, P. (2025). The glocalization of sport: A research field for social innovation. *Social Sciences*, 14(1), 20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14010020>
- Maguire, J. (2012). Globalization and sport. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosg057.pub2>
- Mariante Neto, F. P., Vasques, D. G., & Stigger, M. P. (2021). "Se Perder e Der show, Vai Lutar de novo!" MMA E O conceito de esporte. *Movimento*, 27, Article e27030. <https://doi.org/10.22456/1982-8918.108259>
- Mazique, B. (2019, April 14). How ONE Championship has beaten the UFC in Asia. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brianmazique/2019/04/13/how-one-championship-has-beaten-the-ufc-in-asia/?sh=2206b1f41b4>
- Moenig, U., Kim, M., & Choi, H. M. (2023). Traditional martial arts versus martial sports: The philosophical and historical academic discourse. *Revista de Artes Marciales Asiáticas*, 18(1), 41–58. <https://doi.org/10.18002/rama.v18i1.7604>
- Moenig, U. (2015). *Taekwondo: From a martial art to a martial sport*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315733227>
- Naaeke, A., Kurylo, A., Grabowski, M., Linton, D., & Radford, M. L. (2011). Insider and outsider perspective in ethnographic research. *Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association*, 2010, Article 9. <http://docs.rwu.edu/nyscaproceedings/vol2010/iss1/9>
- Nguyen, M. N. (2023). Topic: Internet usage in Vietnam. *Statista*. <https://www.statista.com/topics/6231/internet-usage-in-vietnam>
- Ramirez, Y. (2023). The legalization process of mixed martial arts and its effects on both practice and practitioners: The case of France. *Loisir et Société / Society and Leisure*, 46(2), 278–295. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07053436.2023.2216582>
- Rampin, R., Rampin, V., & DeMott, S. (2018). Taguette: The free and open-source qualitative data analysis tool. *Taguette*. <https://www.taguette.org/>
- Roe, A. J. (2020). *The martial arts of Vietnam: An overview of history and styles*. YMAA Publication Center.
- Roe, A. J. (2024, May 12). The Rise of MMA in Vietnam: Insights from Movie Star and MMA Pioneer Johnny Tri Nguyen. *Augustus John Roe Blog Posts*. <https://www.augustusjohnroe.com/category/blog-posts/>

Robertson, R. (1994). Globalisation or glocalisation? *The Journal of International Communication*, 1(1), 33–52.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13216597.1994.9751780>

Sánchez García, R., & Malcolm, D. (2010). Decivilizing, civilizing or informalizing? The international development of mixed martial arts. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 45(1), 39–58.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690209352392>

Spencer, D. C. (2013). Sensing violence: An ethnography of mixed martial arts. *Ethnography*, 15(2), 232–254.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138112471108>

Tường, N. V. K. (2024, August 25). Võ sĩ Phạm Văn Nam: Từ tài xế xe công nghệ đến nhà vô địch MMA. *Sporting News - NFL*.

<https://www.sportingnews.com/vn/tsn/news/pham-van-nam-vo-si-nha-vo-dich-mma/vyelkadgtsljowlyah2ntbj1>

Vail, P. (2014). Muay Thai: Inventing tradition for a national symbol. *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 29(3), 509–553.

<https://doi.org/10.1355/sj29-3a>

Vertonghen, J., Theeboom, M., Dom, E., De Bosscher, V., & Haudenhuyse, R. (2014). The organization and regulation of full contact martial arts: A case study of Flanders. *Societies*, 4(4), 654–671. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc4040654>

Việt Nam News (2020, June 1). *MMA has bright future in Việt Nam*.

<https://vietnamnews.vn/sports/717552/mma-has-bright-future-in-viet-nam.html>

Vietnam+. (2024, July 15). *Gods of martial arts to hunt for Vietnam's finest MMA fighters*. <https://en.vietnamplus.vn/gods-of-martial-arts-to-hunt-for-vietnams-finest-mma-fighters-post290218.vnp>

VMMAF. (2020, May 30). General introduction.

<https://mmaf.org/gioi-thieu-chung-ce3.html>

Wacquant, L. J. D. (2004). *Body & soul: Notebooks of an apprentice boxer*. Oxford University Press.

Wang, F. (2022). The development path of traditional martial arts in China in the context of the development of globalization.

*Journal of Sociology and Ethnology*, 4(11), 85–90.

<https://doi.org/10.23977/jsoc.2022.041110>

## ABOUT THE JOURNAL

**Martial Arts Studies** is an open access journal, which means that all content is available without charge to the user or his/her institution. You are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles in this journal without asking prior permission from either the publisher or the author.

ISSN: 2057-5696



The journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Original copyright remains with the contributing author and a citation should be made when the article is quoted, used or referred to in another work.



**Martial Arts Studies** is an imprint of Cardiff University Press, an innovative open-access publisher of academic research, where 'open-access' means free for both readers and writers.  
[cardiffuniversitypress.org](http://cardiffuniversitypress.org)

## EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Alex Channon *University of Brighton*

## EDITORS

Peter Katz *California Northstate University*  
Lauren Miller *Texas Tech University*  
Wayne Wong *University of Sheffield*

## EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Jiongyan Huang *Cardiff University*

## FOUNDING EDITORS

Paul Bowman *Cardiff University*  
Benjamin N. Judkins *Cornell University*

## EDITORIAL ADVISORY PANEL

Oleg Benesch *University of York*  
Stephen Chan *SOAS University of London*  
Greg Downey *Macquarie University*  
D.S. Farrer *University of Guam*  
Adam Frank *University of Central Arkansas*  
Thomas A. Green *Texas A&M University*  
T. J. Hinrichs *Cornell University*  
Leon Hunt *Brunel University of London*  
Felipe P. Jocano Jr *University of the Philippines*  
Gina Marchetti *Hong Kong University*  
Meaghan Morris *The University of Sydney*  
Daniel Mroz *University of Ottawa*  
Meir Shahar *Tel Aviv University*  
Dale Spencer *Carleton University*  
Douglas Wile *Alverno College*