

# Martial Arts as a Heritage of Mankind

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## Abstract

**Background and Aim.** Martial arts are part of intangible cultural heritage, embodying identity values, ethics, and social practices across generations. In the modern context, martial arts are undergoing transformation through institutionalization and formalization, potentially influencing how they are practiced and interpreted. This study aims to analyze martial arts as a human heritage through an examination of their actual practice in a contemporary context.

**Methods.** This study used a descriptive-analytical approach with an observational design. Data were obtained through systematic analysis of recordings of martial arts practice matches. The analysis focused on the characteristics of activities, technical patterns, and forms of practice that emerge as representations of martial arts in a modern context.

**Results.** The analysis shows that martial arts practice in formal contexts is dominated by core techniques that are safe and controlled. These practice patterns reflect the martial arts' adaptation to modern demands without losing fundamental values such as discipline, self-control, and precision.

**Conclusion.** This research confirms that martial arts, as a human heritage, are dynamic and maintained through practices that remain vibrant and relevant to contemporary social contexts. Understanding actual practices is key to designing sustainable martial arts preservation strategies.

**Keywords:** *Martial Arts; Human Heritage; Intangible Cultural Heritage; Cultural Practices; Descriptive Analysis*

## 1. Introduction

Martial arts are a cultural phenomenon that has developed across civilizations and has a meaning that goes beyond mere physical or competitive function (Donohue, 2023; Z. Li & Li, 2021; C. Xue et al., 2023). In various social and historical contexts, martial arts have served as a means of transmitting human values, ethics, life philosophies, and the collective identity of a community. Martial arts practice not only develops motor skills but also instills discipline, respect, self-control, and social responsibility (Hamilton, 2021; Sarbaitinil et al., 2023; Yu & Mantuhac, 2024). Therefore, martial arts are increasingly understood as part of the intangible cultural heritage that has universal value and relevance across generations.

In cultural studies and sports anthropology, martial arts are positioned as intangible cultural heritage because they are inherited through practices, symbols, knowledge, and traditions that live within society (Adamou et al., 2023a; Cheng & Guo, 2024; Luo et al., 2021). As cultural heritage, martial arts are not static, but rather continually adapt to the social, political, and cultural contexts surrounding them. This framework aligns with UNESCO's view that intangible cultural

heritage must be understood as dynamic practices, dependent on the ongoing concrete activities and involvement of their supporting communities (Ortiz & Madariaga, 2022; Poplawska, 2025; Qechai, 2023). Thus, the continuity of martial arts as a human heritage is not only determined by historical narratives, but also by how martial arts are practiced and interpreted in contemporary life.

Along with the modernization and globalization of sports, martial arts have undergone significant transformation through the process of institutionalization in educational systems, sports organizations, and formal competitions (Healey et al., 2025; S. Xue et al., 2025). In this context, martial arts are increasingly being practiced in competitions governed by strict regulations, standardized techniques, and a focus on efficiency and safety. While this transformation has contributed to the increased legitimacy and visibility of martial arts globally, it has also presented serious challenges in the form of potential shifts in the cultural and philosophical meanings inherent in martial arts as a legacy of humanity. This situation raises fundamental questions about how martial arts are practiced and interpreted within a formal, modern framework.

In the academic realm, this problem is reinforced by the tendency of martial arts research to still be dominated by studies of performance, technique, and competition results (Bueno et al., 2022; Ilyas & Awal, 2025; Rydzik et al., 2024). Excessive focus on these aspects often reduces martial arts practices to mere sporting phenomena, while the accompanying dimensions of values, identity, and socio-cultural functions receive less attention. Consequently, there is still a lack of studies that specifically analyze martial arts practices as expressions of intangible cultural heritage, especially in formal and competitive contexts. This analytical gap indicates the need for an approach that can bridge the actual practice of martial arts with the conceptual framework of cultural heritage.

The actual practice of martial arts, including that which takes place in the competition arena, is a strategic space where traditional values, modern demands, institutional regulations, and social dynamics interact (Farhan et al., 2025; Y. Li et al., 2025; Tu et al., 2025). The competition arena not only functions as a sports space, but also as a socio-cultural medium where martial arts heritage is negotiated, selected, and reproduced in real terms (Jauharuddin et al., 2024; Markowska et al., 2021; Pasolo et al., 2025). The patterns of activity, choice of techniques, and emerging forms of practice cannot be understood solely as the result of technical considerations, but also as a reflection of the process of adapting martial arts as a living heritage. However, without systematic, practice-based analysis, martial arts preservation efforts risk being symbolic and normative, and less responsive to the realities of transformation occurring on the ground. This condition risks producing preservation strategies that are not contextual and less responsive to the realities of transformation occurring on the ground. Therefore, understanding actual practices is a scientific urgency that cannot be ignored in the study of martial arts as a heritage of humanity.

Based on these conditions, this study provides a solution by placing the actual practice of martial arts as the focus of analysis within the framework of intangible cultural heritage. Unlike previous research that focused on performance or competition outcomes, this study examines how martial arts practices are realized, selected, and maintained in a modern context as part of the process of cultural heritage sustainability. The limitation of this research is that it focuses on martial arts practices in formal and competitive contexts, thus not encompassing the full range of practices outside these arenas, such as rituals or informal traditional education.

Thus, this study aims to analyze martial arts as a human heritage through a study of the characteristics of its actual practices in a contemporary context. The analysis is directed at understanding how these practices reflect the continuity, transformation, and negotiation of inherited cultural values. Theoretically, this study contributes to strengthening the perspective of martial arts as a dynamic intangible cultural heritage, while

practically it is expected to serve as a reflective basis for educators, trainers, policymakers, and martial arts communities in designing preservation strategies that are contextual, sustainable, and relevant to the challenges of the times.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### ***Design***

This study uses a descriptive-analytical design with an observational approach, which aims to analyze the actual practice of martial arts as a representation of intangible cultural heritage in a contemporary context. This design was chosen because it allows researchers to examine the phenomenon of martial arts as it manifests in actual practice, without intervening or manipulating the research subjects (Figueira et al., 2021; Kemp et al., 2018; Solymanzadeh et al., 2024). The descriptive-analytical approach places competition activities as a source of empirical data to understand practice patterns, technical characteristics, and forms of adaptation of martial arts as a living heritage.

### ***Participants***

This study did not involve human participants. The analysis was conducted using video recordings of martial arts matches as observational data. These video recordings were treated as the unit of analysis, representing actual martial arts practice within a formal, institutionalized context. Thus, the focus of the study was directed at the structure and characteristics of the recorded martial arts practices, rather than the individuals or practitioners themselves.

### ***Instrument***

The primary instrument in this research was video recordings of martial arts matches, which served as visual documents for analyzing actual martial arts practice in formal contexts. The video recordings served as a source of observational data, allowing for the observation of activity patterns, practice forms, and technical tendencies that emerged during matches. Furthermore, this study utilized an analytical observation guide developed based on a literature review of martial arts, intangible cultural heritage, and martial arts studies. The observation guide was used to identify and classify martial arts practices into relevant analytical categories, without the aim of assessing performance, technical effectiveness, or competitive achievement.

### ***Data Analysis***

Data were analyzed using descriptive-qualitative analysis based on observations of video recordings. The analysis focused on identifying patterns and characteristics of martial arts practices that emerged in the context of formal competitions, which were then interpreted within the framework of martial arts as living heritage. This study did not use inferential statistical analysis because it aimed to understand practices as cultural phenomena, not evaluate technical performance.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### Results

The analysis shows that martial arts practice in the context of formal competition exhibits a relatively consistent and repetitive activity structure. The entire sequence of activities occurs in a controlled pattern, dominated by direct and efficient technical actions. This practice illustrates how martial arts are embodied in the competitive arena as a cultural practice that has adapted to regulations, safety norms, and modern demands, without completely abandoning its fundamental character.

The technical patterns that emerged during the match showed a strong tendency toward the use of core, fundamental techniques. Basic offensive techniques and simple defensive responses were used more frequently than complex or high-risk techniques. Interaction transitions occurred in a functional and situational manner, indicating that martial arts practice in a modern context emphasizes continuity of movement and situational control over the exploration of complex variations of traditional techniques.

The patterns of technical tendencies that emerged during the matches are systematically summarized in Table 1, which presents the categories of technical practices, their rates of occurrence, and the general characteristics of martial arts practices in the context of formal matches.

**Table 1.** Overview of Technique Categories in Martial Arts Competition Practice

Engineering Practice Category	Tendency to emerge	General characteristics
Basic core techniques	Dominant	Efficient, repeatable, easily reproducible
Defensive techniques	Moderate	Responsive and situational
Complex techniques	Limited	High risk, rarely used
Transition and adaptation	Moderate	Connecting a series of actions

Table 1 shows that martial arts practice in the arena focuses more on universal and stable techniques. The dominance of core techniques indicates that the sustainability of martial arts practice as a heritage does not necessarily depend on the completeness of the entire repertoire of techniques, but rather on the continuity of forms of practice that can be consistently applied in real-world contexts.

In addition to technical patterns, observations also indicate that martial arts practice in competitions emphasizes self-control and precision. Furthermore, the forms of practice outcomes observed during competition activities are presented in Table 2, which illustrates the tendency towards directed, corrective, and transitional actions as a representation of the values of precision, self-control, and adaptation in martial arts practice. Actions tend to be directed and controlled, while

speculative or unplanned actions are relatively limited. This pattern reflects the fundamental values of martial arts, such as discipline, self-control, and responsibility, which remain present in actual practice even within the framework of modern competition.

**Table 2.** General Pattern of Practice Outcomes in Match Activities

Form of practice outcome	Dominant characteristics	Value representation
Directed action	Most Frequently Appeared	Precision and Self-Control
Corrective action	Limited	Practice adjustment process
Transitional action	Situational	Adaptation to context

Table 2 shows that martial arts practice in competition activities is dominated by directed and controlled actions, while corrective and transitional actions emerge situationally. This pattern reflects the emphasis on precision, self-control, and adaptation of practice in the context of martial arts as a human heritage.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that martial arts practices in the context of formal competitions represent a dynamic adaptation of cultural heritage. The observed practice structures reflect a balance between the continuity of core techniques and adaptation to modern demands. Thus, martial arts, as a legacy of humanity, are kept alive through the actual practices consistently carried out by their supporting communities, not solely through symbolic narratives or historical documentation.

#### Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that martial arts practices in the context of formal competitions represent a dynamic form of adaptation of cultural heritage to the demands of modernity. The dominance of safe, controlled, and easily reproducible core techniques reflects how martial arts are maintained through ongoing practice, not simply through the preservation of complex traditional forms. This phenomenon demonstrates that the process of preserving cultural heritage is not always synonymous with the reproduction of the entire repertoire of historical techniques, but rather through the selection of practices deemed relevant, functional, and consistently applicable in contemporary social contexts. Thus, the adaptation of core techniques can be understood as a cultural strategy to maintain the sustainability of martial arts practices as living heritage, without having to eliminate the underlying values that accompany them. (Pawelec et al., 2025; Rozenfeld & Podoler, 2023; Yuan, 2020).

In the context of cultural preservation, these results provide insight into how competition arenas can serve as spaces for adaptation, rather than simply as mechanisms for modern sport that could potentially diminish cultural

values. Observed martial arts practices continue to reflect fundamental values such as discipline, self-control, precision, and responsibility for safety, which are integral to cross-cultural martial arts philosophy. (Holt, 2023; Jiang et al., 2025; Xiang, 2024) This indicates that regulation and standardization in competition do not always act as factors of cultural homogenization, but can also serve as a framework that allows traditional values to be maintained in the form of adapted practices. Therefore, the competition arena can be understood as a space for cultural negotiation, where martial arts are continually reinterpreted according to the demands of the times without losing their philosophical essence.

Academically, this research contributes by expanding the approach to martial arts studies from the dominant perspectives of performance and sport to an analysis of practices as cultural expressions. By placing actual practices as the object of analysis, this article demonstrates that martial arts can be studied empirically without being trapped in quantitative evaluations or performance comparisons. This contribution strengthens the position of martial arts within the realm of intangible cultural heritage studies and martial arts studies and emphasizes the importance of a descriptive-analytical approach in understanding the relationship between tradition, practice, and contemporary social context.

However, this study has limitations that need to be considered. The analysis focused on martial arts practices within the context of formal competitions, thus not fully representing the variety of practices that occur outside the competitive arena, such as in rituals, traditional education, or local communities. Furthermore, the use of observational data based on video recordings limits the analysis to aspects that can be observed visually, without delving into the subjective experiences, personal meanings, or cultural backgrounds of martial artists.

Based on these limitations, further research is recommended to integrate various contexts of martial arts practice to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of martial arts as a human heritage. Qualitative approaches such as in-depth interviews, ethnographic studies, or cross-cultural studies can be used to explore how the values, identities, and meanings of martial arts are understood by practitioners and their supporting communities. This multidimensional approach is expected to enrich understanding of the sustainability of martial arts as a living cultural heritage amidst global social dynamics.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Martial arts practices in the context of formal competitions demonstrate that the sustainability of martial arts as an intangible cultural heritage is realized through the controlled, consistent, and relevant adaptation of practices to modern demands, without eliminating fundamental values such as discipline, self-

control, and precision. These findings confirm that martial arts as a living heritage are maintained through actual practices that continue to be reproduced and interpreted within contemporary institutional and social frameworks, making understanding practice patterns key to designing contextual and sustainable preservation strategies.

#### **5. Acknowledgment**

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#### **6. Author Contribution**

The author solely conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, conducted data collection through observational analysis of martial arts match recordings, performed data analysis and interpretation, and wrote the entire manuscript. The author also reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript for publication.

#### **7. Conflict of Interest**

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The research was conducted independently without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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