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The Chinese Martial Arts Tradition

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Martial artists enjoy a unique form of respect in China. This respect, however, has little in common with the worship that our sports heroes enjoy in the West.

Where this Chinese attitude comes from is interesting and complex. Some of it has to do with the role that martial arts have played in China's cultural history. Some has to do with the Confucian tradition of respect for teaching and learning. Some, too, has to do with the ideal of martial virtue or *wude*. (Traditionally, a teacher will not accept a student for "indoor" teaching unless he or she demonstrates a strong work ethic *and* strong moral character. Both of these traits should grow over time.) And much has to do with the concept of *gongfu* (kung fu).

The term *gongfu* does not mean martial arts—at least not in China. There it refers to *any* skill acquired through persistent hard work and correct practice. *Gongfu*, in other words, is skill raised to the level of art. Martial arts (*wushu*), therefore, are just one potential *gongfu* among many.

Several sayings from the Chinese martial arts community emphasize the importance of a skilled, generous teacher and the centrality of sustained, hard work: "One word from a knowledgeable teacher," as one saying goes, "will save ten years of hard work." But there is a caution for the student, for there are teachers who will "teach you *quan* (form, external technique), but not *gong*." In other words, some will teach the externals of the art while withholding its inner core. A knowledgeable, willing teacher is necessary to develop *gongfu* but not sufficient: "The teacher will lead you to the door, but it is up to the student to enter." Entry, attaining real *gongfu*, involves more than learning many techniques; it also involves depth of study, as this last saying suggests: "I am not afraid of someone who knows a thousand forms (techniques); I am concerned with the person who does one form (technique) very well."

Admiration for martial artists, then, stems not only from what adepts they can do but, as importantly, from what they have done to attain their skill.