

# A CONVERGENT ARENA OF NORTH AND SOUTH: THE PLATFORM FUNCTIONS OF THE GUANGDONG CHIN WOO ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION AND SOCIAL MOBILITY (1919–1938)

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**Abstract:** Drawing on approaches from social and cultural history and based on primary sources such as local gazetteers, newspapers, and Chin Woo Association periodicals, this article re-examines the historical positioning of the Guangdong Chin Woo Athletic Association. It first analyses the Association's emergence within its specific spatiotemporal context, and then investigates the organisational and cultural formation of Chin Woo as an open "arena" for competition. The study argues that Chin Woo's core significance lay in its successful construction of a modern public platform that aggregated martial-arts talent from both northern and southern traditions and facilitated individuals' upward social mobility. A set of representative biographical case studies further shows that this platform enabled three distinct developmental trajectories for participants from diverse social backgrounds. By comparing Guangdong Chin Woo with the contemporaneous state-sponsored "Liangguang Guoshu Institute," the article further demonstrates that Guangdong Chin Woo's model of civil-society autonomy afforded members a broader reflexive space for practice, thereby generating stronger organisational vitality and individual agency. These findings not only deepen our understanding of the Chin Woo movement but also provide new historical evidence for the distinctive role of modern Chinese voluntary associations in cultural integration, talent formation, and social transformation.

**Keywords:** Guangdong Chin Woo Athletic Association; Martial arts history; Social mobility; Bodily capital; Voluntary associations

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Against the backdrop of internal crises and external threats in modern China, national salvation and the strengthening of the nation and its people became dominant imperatives of the era. These calls directly propelled a nationwide discourse of "sporting the nation to strength," within which the Chin Woo Athletic Association emerged and rapidly developed into one of the most influential non-state martial arts organisations in modern China [1].

Scholarly research on the Chin Woo movement has produced a substantial body of work. Early studies primarily examined Chin Woo from macro-level perspectives such as organisational evolution and ideological culture [2], highlighting its contributions to promoting martial arts, incorporating elements of Western sport culture, and cultivating modern civic virtues [3,4]. Meanwhile, other scholars have begun to emphasise Chin Woo's broader social impact—particularly its educational function for women and its role in facilitating cross-regional cultural exchange [5,6].

Despite these advances, much of the existing literature continues to frame Chin Woo primarily as a top-down educational institution devoted to implementing bodily discipline. Less attention has been paid to its internal operating logic—especially to how, as an open platform, it dynamically integrated northern and southern martial arts resources, enabled cultural interaction, and created opportunities for social mobility among its members.

The Guangdong Chin Woo Athletic Association (hereafter "Guangdong Chin Woo") offers an exemplary case for addressing this question. Based in South China's commercial and cultural hub, it also served as a key conduit linking China's interior with overseas Chinese communities in Nanyang (Southeast Asia) [7]. Within a complex political and economic landscape, Guangdong Chin Woo cultivated a vibrant public space that not only showcased the practical effects of bodily discipline within voluntary associations but also revealed its distinctive capacity as a modern social platform. On the one hand, through its organizational design and cultural strategies, it constructed an "arena" for exchange and competition between northern and southern martial arts traditions; on the other, it provided individuals from diverse backgrounds—from traditional martial arts masters to modern-style athletes—with pathways through which bodily capital could be converted into social and cultural capital, thereby opening new routes of upward social mobility.

From this perspective, the article advances its argument on three levels. First, it analyses the distinctive spatiotemporal conditions that shaped the emergence of Guangdong Chin Woo. Second, it examines the openness and pluralism manifested in its organisational arrangements and cultural repertoire. Third, through biographical case studies of representative figures such as Lin Yintang, Huang Xiaoxia, and Chen Yan, it demonstrates Guangdong Chin Woo's role in talent formation and the production of social mobility. Finally, by juxtaposing Guangdong Chin Woo with the contemporaneous "Liangguang Guoshu Institute," the article further highlights the advantages of Guangdong Chin Woo's civil-society model in fostering members' reflexivity and practical autonomy. In so doing, this study seeks to

refine the historical positioning of the Chin Woo movement and to offer a new analytical lens for understanding the complex interrelations among voluntary associations, body culture, and social transformation in modern China.

## **2 A HISTORICAL CONVERGENCE: THE ERA OF NORTH–SOUTH MARTIAL ARTS INTEGRATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF GUANGDONG CHIN WOO**

### **2.1 Macro-Historical Context: The “Sport to Save the Nation” Discourse and the Symbolic Capital of Northern Martial Arts**

In the late Qing and Republican transition, the pervasive call to “strengthen the nation and strengthen the race” lent renewed legitimacy to traditional martial arts for modernisation and, in particular, for the southward diffusion of northern styles. In 1901, the Qing government abolished the wuju (military civil-service examination) system, depriving martial practitioners of a long-standing route into the state apparatus and plunging martial arts into a profound institutional crisis. After China’s defeat in the Sino–Japanese War, the humiliating label “the Sick Man of East Asia” circulated widely. Intellectuals such as Liang Qichao and Cai E actively promoted a “martial spirit” (*shangwu jingshen*) and “militarised citizenship education,” elevating physical strength to a political imperative tied to national survival [8]. Within this discursive field, martial arts were redefined as a critical means of cultivating national fitness and revitalising collective morale.

In his preface to *Chin Woo Benji* (*The Chin Woo Chronicle*), Sun Yat-sen criticised his compatriots for “abandoning the skills inherent to their own tradition,” and asserted that combat arts bore “immense significance for strengthening the race and safeguarding the nation.” This form of political endorsement elevated martial arts beyond mere technique, endowing them with strategic meaning in projects of national salvation. At the same time, northern martial arts—owing both to their geographical proximity to political centres and to their dissemination through the Beijing–Tianjin region since the late Qing—gradually acquired nationwide symbolic status as a putative “national art.” For a major southern metropolis such as Guangzhou, the introduction of northern boxing styles not only met the demand for modernised training systems but also carried symbolic weight as an active embrace of nationally recognised cultural signs and a concrete response to the call for “sport to save the nation.” It was precisely at this intersection of institutional crisis and ideological opportunity that the Chin Woo Athletic Association articulated its program of “promoting martial arts, researching physical education, and forging resolute citizens” [9], and rapidly grew into a key organisational vehicle through which the era’s imperatives were enacted.

### **2.2 Meso-Spatial Context: Guangzhou’s Nodal Position and the Internal Tensions of Lingnan Martial Arts**

As a major port city in South China, Guangzhou has historically been a convergence point for commerce and culture. In the modern period, it became a key site for the introduction of Western influences and the circulation of revolutionary ideas [10]. This open and plural cultural milieu provided a broad social space for the establishment of the Chin Woo Athletic Association.

Yet the Lingnan martial arts community had long been constrained by sectarian fragmentation and strong lineage-based gatekeeping. Contemporary observers noted that the martial world in Guangzhou was characterised by “separate factions” and suffered from “a major malady” in which “martial skills were treated primarily as a matter of fighting” [11]. This practical orientation privileged combat experience while neglecting systematic theory, thereby impeding the wider dissemination and rationalisation of martial arts. For some martial instructors and local elites, breaking through these entrenched barriers and introducing a new training system became an urgent agenda. The arrival of northern styles thus brought not only new techniques, but also standardised and pedagogized institutional forms and ideas. In this sense, Guangzhou’s distinctive nodal position— together with the internal contradictions of Lingnan martial culture — constituted a fertile ground for innovation.

### **2.3 Micro-Level Immediate Catalysts: Local Elite Interests and the Construction of an Institutionalised Platform**

The founding of the Guangdong Chin Woo Athletic Association was shaped not only by macro-level social imperatives and a conducive cultural milieu, but also by the concrete motivations of local military, political, and commercial elites. In 1918, Li Fulin, the commander responsible for the Guangzhou–Huizhou garrison, sought to “train troops through martial practice.” Through the mediation of Ma Xiang, a member of Sun Yat-sen’s security detail, Li invited Shanghai Chin Woo instructors Ye Fengqi and Yang Chenlun to travel south—an initiative that became the immediate catalyst for the southward transmission of northern boxing. Behind this decision lay the Guangdong army’s strategic need to consolidate its power within the local political configuration.

This move quickly garnered support from prominent figures, including Wei Bangping, head of the Guangdong Police Department, as well as militia-merchant leaders and social notables such as Chen Lianbo and Jian Zhaonan, who provided both financial backing and political protection [12]. On April 9, 1919, the Guangdong Chin Woo Athletic Association was formally established at the Haizhu Theatre. The inaugural meeting not only secured the teaching services of northern-style masters such as Zhao Liancheng and Ye Fengqi, but also received on-site support from leading southern-style practitioners, including Huang Feihong and Lin Shirong [13]. Thereafter, with a charter emphasising “no sectarian boundaries” and a systematised curriculum, Guangdong Chin Woo became a public platform for exchange and integration between northern and southern martial traditions [14].

In essence, the emergence of Guangdong Chin Woo was the product of converging forces at three levels: the macro-level discourse of “sport to save the nation,” the meso-level social environment of Guangzhou, and the micro-level interests of local elites. It not only responded to national imperatives to strengthen bodies and the nation, but also, at the local level, built an institutional bridge for north–south cultural interaction—thereby becoming a paradigmatic case of the institutionalisation of voluntary sports associations in modern China.

### **3 PLATFORM CONSTRUCTION: A MARTIAL ARTS PUBLIC SPHERE OF NORTH–SOUTH CONVERGENCE**

#### **3.1 The Founding Ceremony: Symbolic Construction of North–South Integration**

The founding assembly held at the Haizhu Theatre on April 9, 1919, was itself a highly symbolic cultural event, publicly announcing Guangdong Chin Woo’s historical positioning as a platform for the convergence of northern and southern martial arts. The gathering brought together key Chin Woo figures who travelled south from the Shanghai headquarters, represented by Chen Tiesheng and Chen Gongzhe. They introduced not only northern boxing repertoires—such as Tantui and Gongliquan—but also a modern associational vision and organisational ethos. Even more striking, according to contemporary accounts, renowned masters of southern boxing, including Huang Feihong and Lin Shirong, were also present and performed on stage in celebration. In the modern history of Chinese martial arts, this moment amounted to a historic “handshake.”

What it signified was that two major martial arts systems—long characterised by rigid boundaries and competing claims to orthodoxy—were, under the shared imperative of “strengthening the nation and strengthening the race,” brought into an open and egalitarian relationship of public dialogue and performance on a modern public platform. The event thus conveyed a clear message: Guangdong Chin Woo aimed to function as an open arena facilitating north–south circulation and exchange, rather than as a conventional lineage-based training hall. This inaugural choreography established an inclusive institutional tone while simultaneously enhancing Guangdong Chin Woo’s mobilising capacity and legitimacy within the Lingnan martial community.

#### **3.2 Organisational Openness: Building a Modern Voluntary Association**

Guangdong Chin Woo’s platform capacity was grounded in a modern organisational regime and an inclusive membership structure. Its charter explicitly articulated the core principle of “no sectarian boundaries”, a provision that directly challenged—and in effect overturned—the lineage-based organisational logic that had long structured the traditional martial arts world. By establishing a bureaucratic governance framework centred on a board of directors and functionally differentiated departments, Guangdong Chin Woo replaced the centralised, patriarchal model typical of conventional martial arts schools—encapsulated in the maxim “a teacher for a day, a father for life”—with a modern associational form that offered members a more egalitarian and rule-governed space of participation.

The diversity of its membership further exemplified this openness. Among its initiators were military and political elites such as Li Fulin and Wei Bangping, as well as leading commercial figures including Chen Lianbo and Jian Zhaonan. Early recruits, moreover, encompassed students, shop clerks, teachers, and other members of the broader public; within a single month, membership reportedly exceeded three hundred [15]. This cross-class and cross-occupational composition meant that Guangdong Chin Woo was not merely a martial arts group, but also a hub of social networking that concentrated heterogeneous forms of social capital and cultural resources, thereby substantially expanding its public reach. It was precisely this comprehensive openness—both institutional and demographic—that enabled Guangdong Chin Woo to transform from a site of martial transmission into a modern public association with wide-ranging capacities for social mobilisation.

#### **3.3 Curricular Integration: Cultivating Both Wen and Wu and Synthesising Chinese and Western Forms**

Guangdong Chin Woo’s integrative capacity as a cultural platform was ultimately embodied in its plural and inclusive curriculum. At the level of core martial arts instruction, it systematically taught northern boxing routines exemplified by the Shanghai headquarters’ “Chin Woo Ten Sets” (e.g., Tantui and Gongliquan). At the same time, it actively incorporated and consolidated high-quality techniques from the Pearl River region. For instance, Lin Yintang, director of the Xinhui branch, and Kong Chang, director of the Dashi Street branch, were both martial artists rooted in the Pearl River tradition. This arrangement facilitated the localisation and diversification of instructional content.

More importantly, Guangdong Chin Woo’s curriculum extended well beyond martial arts. Responding to the modern educational ideal of advancing the “three educations” in tandem, it offered a wide range of youyi (cultural and recreational) courses—music, dance, Cantonese opera, photography, and literature—designed to cultivate modern citizens competent in both wen (cultural refinement) and wu (martial discipline) [16]. In addition, Guangdong Chin Woo actively introduced Western-style sports such as swimming and ball games. In 1921, it established the Chin Woo swimming pool in Guangzhou’s Dongshan district, where it organised swimming competitions and aquatic recreation events, becoming a significant driver of water sports development in Guangzhou at the time.

By bringing together northern routines and southern techniques, traditional “national essence” practices and Western sports, and physical training and cultural cultivation within a single institutional repertoire, Guangdong Chin Woo’s

curriculum offers compelling evidence of its role as a cultural platform characterised by north–south convergence and Chinese–Western synthesis.

#### 4 A CRUCIBLE OF BODILY CAPITAL: TALENT FORMATION AND DIVERGENT TRAJECTORIES ON THE GUANGDONG CHIN WOO PLATFORM

##### 4.1 Trajectory I: The Modern Refashioning of Traditional Martial Masters—The Case of Lin Yintang

The first trajectory opened by the Guangdong Chin Woo platform provided traditionally trained martial masters—individuals already in possession of highly specialised skills—with an opportunity for modern refashioning. It enabled a decisive shift in status from “custodians of lineage-based technique” to “modern instructors of guoshu (national martial arts).” The career of the renowned boxer Lin Yintang (Figure 1) exemplifies this pathway.



**Figure 1** Portrait of Lin Yintang [17]

A native of Dongguan, Lin received his early training under Mo Liang and mastered the Mo Family Boxing (Mojiacquan), thereby establishing himself as a representative of southern-style martial masters within the conventional apprenticeship system. In the eighth year of the Republic (1919), Guangdong Chin Woo’s openly stated principle of “no sectarian boundaries” (*bu fen men li hu*) attracted Lin, who joined the Association’s first guoshu training cohort and embarked on six years of systematic study. During this period, he successively studied under prominent northern-style instructors such as Sun Yufeng and Luo Guangyu, acquiring a repertoire markedly different from his original knowledge system—*changquan* (Long Fist), Praying Mantis Boxing (*Tanglangquan*), *Baguazhang*, and *Taijiquan*, among others. He ultimately achieved a mature synthesis, fusing southern and northern traditions into a distinctive personal martial system [18]. In substantive terms, this was a key modern reconstruction of Lin’s pre-existing bodily capital, made possible by Guangdong Chin Woo’s injection of scarce knowledge resources—namely, northern martial curricula—into an otherwise locally bounded skill formation process.

The value of the Guangdong Chin Woo platform, however, extended beyond technical enhancement. Crucially, it endowed this newly acquired competence with modern forms of credentialing and embedded it within an expansive social network. On the strength of his outstanding performance as a Chin Woo graduate and his distinctive capacity to traverse north–south traditions, Lin’s social reputation and professional prospects expanded dramatically. His Chin Woo affiliation became a decisive credential enabling entry into state-linked institutions as a martial arts instructor. During the Republican period, he was successively appointed to teach at the Guangdong Gendarmerie Command, the Whampoa Military Academy, the Guards Brigade of the National Revolutionary Army, the Liangguang Guoshu Institute, and Sun Yat-sen University, serving as a *guoji* (national art) instructor.

This distinguished itinerary maps a clear upward trajectory of social mobility: a traditional martial master rooted in popular society, through the mediating platform of Chin Woo, successfully converted martial expertise into culturally and socially recognised capital across military, political, and academic fields. Lin Yintang’s case thus demonstrates the powerful enabling effect of the Guangdong Chin Woo platform in transforming and elevating martial talent with an established traditional foundation.

##### 4.2 Trajectory II: Professionalised Development Within a Modern Training Regime—The Case of Huang Xiaoxia

The second trajectory enabled by the Guangdong Chin Woo platform lay in its capacity to cultivate a new generation of practitioners through a standardised instructional system, producing professional martial arts figures whose growth unfolded entirely within a modernised regime. The formative pathway of Huang Xiaoxia (Figure 2)—celebrated alongside Lin Yintang as one of the “Five Southern Tiger Generals” (*Nanfeng Wuhujiang*)—is emblematic of this model [19]. Trained under Zhao Liancheng, a northern-style instructor at Guangdong Chin Woo, Huang’s martial foundation was built wholly within Chin Woo’s pedagogical framework of “integrating north and south” [20,21]. What he received was a form of modern martial arts education—systematised and standardised—that deliberately broke with the traditional master–disciple model of esoteric transmission and the barriers of lineage-based sectarianism. The advantage of this educational regime was that it allowed students like Huang to learn broadly and efficiently,

assembling a more comprehensive and modern knowledge structure of martial arts; his path of professionalised development was thus both legible and replicable.



**Figure 2** Huang Xiaoxia is Instructing Students in Martial Arts Training [22]

Huang Xiaoxia's rapid rise to prominence vividly illustrates the mutually reinforcing relationship between the Chin Woo brand and individual excellence. As an outstanding product of the Chin Woo system, he and his refined technical mastery ultimately attracted the attention of Chen Jitang, Guangdong's paramount political leader at the time. Chen not only recruited Huang as a martial arts coach for the National Sports Association (Guomin Tiyuhui), but also appointed him to teach martial arts to his personal bodyguards [23]. This episode carries multiple implications. First, it indicates that Chin Woo-trained personnel achieved official recognition—by the highest local military and political authority—for both practical combat competence and teaching ability. Second, the entry of Chin Woo members into the core of power in turn amplified Chin Woo's social standing and brand value, creating a virtuous cycle. Finally, Huang's success provided other Chin Woo members with a visible career horizon and an attainable model of aspiration.

Taken together, Huang Xiaoxia's case underscores Guangdong Chin Woo's distinctive capacity as a modern platform. Through standardised training, it systematically produced and supplied a new type of professional martial arts talent for modern Chinese society.

#### 4.3 Trajectory III: Cross-Field Elite Formation Through Sporting Capital—The Case of Chen Yan

The third trajectory enabled by the Guangdong Chin Woo platform reveals its most distinctive empowering dimension: how it helped individuals translate bodily capital accumulated through sporting practice into cross-field advantages, ultimately producing composite elites in modern society. Chen Yan's life course offers perhaps the clearest illustration of this pathway. While studying at the Nanwu Academy (Nanwu Xuetang), Chen had already become a celebrated track-and-field star in South China. In 1913, he won China's first international gold medal at the First Far Eastern Championship Games, a landmark achievement that endowed him with unparalleled bodily capital and public prestige (Figure 3 and 4). Following the establishment of the Guangdong Chin Woo Athletic Association, Chen's exceptional social influence and sporting expertise naturally positioned him at the organisational core: he served as Director of Physical Education (Sports Minister) and resident physician. He was later elected Chairman of the Board [24].



**Figure 3** Portrait of Chen Yan [25]



**Figure 4** Chen Yan Wins the First Gold Medal of Far East Games [26]

On the Guangdong Chin Woo platform, Chen Yan underwent a profound transformation in role. He was no longer merely an athlete; he became an effective social activist and an organiser of sport and physical culture. Drawing on his professional knowledge and on Chin Woo's institutional platform, he vigorously promoted both school-based physical education and mass sport initiatives, making substantial contributions to the development of modern sport in Guangzhou and, more broadly, in Guangdong. Even more importantly, the expansive social networks and public visibility provided by Chin Woo significantly facilitated his cross-field advancement. Having pursued studies in Japan and France, Chen returned to China as an accomplished physician. He subsequently served as Director of Guangdong Public Hospital and President of the Guangdong Provincial Medical Specialised School (Guangdong Shengli Yiayao Zhuanmen Xuexiao), attaining similarly high standing in medicine and education [27].

Chen Yan's career demonstrates that the value of the Guangdong Chin Woo platform far exceeded the transmission of martial arts or athletic skills. It functioned, rather, as a hub of elite aggregation and resource circulation—a social network centre in which bodily capital acquired through sport could be mutually reinforced and converted in tandem with professional expertise (cultural capital) and social relations (social capital). Chen Yan's trajectory thus exemplifies Guangdong Chin Woo's powerful capacity, as a modern platform, to promote comprehensive individual development and to facilitate processes of elite formation.

## **5 PLATFORM COMPARISON: GUANGDONG CHIN WOO AND THE REFLEXIVE EFFECTS OF THE LIANGGUANG GUOSHU INSTITUTE**

### **5.1 Antithetical Organisational Logics: Civil-Society Autonomy versus State Discipline**

The fundamental opposition in organisational logic between the Liangguang Guoshu Institute and the Guangdong Chin Woo Athletic Association constitutes the point of departure for their subsequent differences. The former was a paradigmatic top-down state disciplinary apparatus, whereas the latter operated as a bottom-up, civil-society voluntary association.

The Liangguang Guoshu Institute was a direct product of the Nanjing Nationalist Government's nationwide campaign to "nationalise" martial arts (*guoshu hua*). In 1929, the Institute was proposed by Li Jishen, then Chairman of the Guangdong Provincial Government. Its director was appointed directly by the Eighth Route Command Headquarters, while the government allocated its budget and premises—features that underscore its unmistakably official character [28]. Under this model, martial arts were incorporated into the framework of state will and reconfigured as an instrument for producing "robust citizens" in service of state objectives. Correspondingly, the Institute's organisational structure displayed pronounced bureaucratic and administrative features.

By contrast, Guangdong Chin Woo operated according to a markedly different logic. Guangdong merchants and prominent local notables founded it as a non-state organisation. Rather than relying on direct governmental appropriations, it financed its activities through membership dues and public donations. This fiscal autonomy underwrote a comparatively flatter and more participatory organisational form: a board of directors served as the institutional core; departmental officers (*ganshi*) handled day-to-day affairs; board members were largely drawn from socially respected donors; and routine operations relied heavily on the voluntary service and professional competence of these officers. Such an organisational arrangement ensured a relatively dispersed distribution of authority, minimised direct intervention through administrative command, and created a crucial institutional space for subsequent plural development and members' reflexive practices.

### **5.2 Divergent Disciplinary Pathways: Standardisation as an Instrument versus Pluralism as a Platform**

Rooted in their contrasting organisational logics, the Liangguang Guoshu Institute and Guangdong Chin Woo also differed markedly in their modes of bodily discipline and in the populations they targeted. Within the overarching framework of the *guoshu* nationalisation campaign, the Liangguang Guoshu Institute prioritised the standardisation and codification of martial arts, with the primary aim of disseminating a martial system aligned with state intentions. Its

Regulations for the Research and Training Class (Yanjiuban Jianzhang) explicitly specified that instruction was directed chiefly toward selected constituencies—military personnel, students, and civil servants—and was intended to “cultivate a sound personality, to serve in the future as the nation’s bulwark,” thereby revealing its pronounced character as an instrument of state discipline [29].

By contrast, Guangdong Chin Woo’s disciplinary regime was defined by pluralism and integration. It not only transmitted standardised northern and southern martial arts curricula systematised by the Shanghai headquarters, but also incorporated Western sporting ideas and practices (such as swimming). Moreover, its pedagogical repertoire extended beyond combat skills to include a wide range of cultural courses—calligraphy and painting, traditional music, Cantonese opera, and more—aimed at cultivating “civilised” citizens with comprehensive physical and mental development and a modern civic sensibility. Its target constituency was the broader public, transcending social class and gender, and thus exhibiting a markedly expansive social inclusiveness. This model of bodily discipline—characterised by the dual cultivation of wen and wu and by Chinese–Western synthesis—broke with the monolithic orientation of traditional martial instruction and exceeded the instrumental rationality of state discipline, placing greater emphasis on holistic individual development and differentiated personal needs.

### **5.3 Unequal Reflexive Effects: Constrained Space versus Expansive Horizons**

The differences between the Liangguang Guoshu Institute and Guangdong Chin Woo in organisational logic and disciplinary practice ultimately produced a striking gap in the scope and the effects of members’ reflexive spaces for practice. Backed by official authority, the Liangguang Guoshu Institute was able, in the short term, to assemble a cohort of prominent northern-style masters, including Wan Laisheng and Gu Ruzhang, thereby contributing to north–south martial exchange. Yet its top-down operating model and standardised disciplinary pathway substantially curtailed individual autonomy. Members functioned largely as passive recipients of state discipline; their bodily self-determination and room for reflexive action remained relatively narrow. Correspondingly, their routes of social mobility tended to be more singular, with advancement sought primarily within state-linked institutional channels (e.g., the military, police, and administrative sectors). Lacking sustained interaction with broader civil society, this model suffered from limited internal vitality. Once official support receded—such as after Li Jishen fell from power and Chen Jitang assumed political dominance—the Institute was quickly dissolved. Its institutional life proved extremely short-lived [30].

In sharp contrast, Guangdong Chin Woo’s civil-society character—marked by openness and pluralism—afforded members a far more expansive reflexive space for practice. Here, individuals were not merely objects of bodily discipline; they were active architects of their own developmental trajectories. Members could make flexible choices according to their interests—between wen and wu, among northern and southern styles, and across Chinese and Western sporting forms—and could realise forms of self-worth through participation in public service, organisational administration, and other associational activities. The experience of the renowned master Lin Yintang offers a compelling illustration: entering Chin Woo as a southern-style martial artist, he systematically studied northern martial curricula, ultimately achieving a north–south synthesis. On the strength of these credentials, he successfully entered state-linked institutions—such as the Whampoa Military Academy and the Liangguang Guoshu Institute—as an instructor, thereby accomplishing a leap in social mobility from popular society into official structures [31]. An even more distinctive case is Chen Yan, who rose to leadership in Guangdong Chin Woo based on his status as a champion in Western-style sport (track and field). Leveraging the social capital accumulated through the Chin Woo platform, he further advanced his career in medicine and education, becoming a multi-field social elite [32].

Taken together, these cases vividly demonstrate that the value of the Guangdong Chin Woo platform extended far beyond the transmission of skills. It activated members’ capacity to reflect and to act—enabling them to convert bodily capital into cultural and social capital in an agentic manner, and thereby opening up a broader horizon of life chances and social mobility.

## **6 CONCLUSION**

By examining the Guangdong Chin Woo Athletic Association, this study highlights its distinctive role during China’s modern period of social transformation. The significance of Guangdong Chin Woo lay not only in the effective implementation of bodily discipline but, more importantly, in its successful operation as a modern social platform. It functioned simultaneously as a public sphere for north–south martial exchange and as a key channel for aggregating talent and fostering social mobility. Its influence thus extended beyond the domain of sport, becoming deeply embedded in the social fabric of South China.

Grounded in the organisational principle of “no sectarian boundaries” (*bu fen men li hu*) and guided by a cultural strategy of cultivating both wen and wu while synthesising Chinese and Western forms, Guangdong Chin Woo broke through lineage-based barriers in traditional martial culture and mobilised social forces across regions and social strata. Within this platform, bodily capital was converted into cultural and social capital through training, credentialing, and social networking. The transformation of Lin Yintang from a traditional martial master into a *guoji* (national art) instructor, and Chen Yan’s cross-field ascent from sporting celebrity to social elite, provide compelling illustrations of this mechanism. Compared with the state-led Liangguang Guoshu Institute, Guangdong Chin Woo’s civil-society

character and openness afforded individuals greater scope for agency, thereby enabling a more enduring organisational vitality.

In the contemporary context of advancing the “Healthy China” initiative and strengthening cultural confidence, the Guangdong Chin Woo experience suggests that a vibrant sport-and-body-culture ecology depends not only on state promotion but also on socially rooted organisations that facilitate exchange and respond to individual development. Only when sporting practice becomes a genuine pathway for capital accumulation, value realisation, and social mobility can the ethos of self-strengthening through unceasing effort be transmitted in a more vivid and sustainable form in the new era.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

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