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Comparison of Steps in Bulgarian Folk Dances and Chinese Martial Arts[1]

ABSTRACT. Chinese martial arts (Wushu) enjoy great international popularity. An important stylistic aspect are the steps used. Bulgarian folk dances are gaining more popularity as a mass activity of a sport and folkloric nature, or a stage art. Their steps are a main element of the choreography. The biomechanics of the human body allow it to perform only certain types of movements. Purpose: Comparison of steps in Bulgarian folk dances and Chinese martial arts. The comparative analysis is carried out on visual material from official sources, such as the public records of leading martial arts masters, and on material from public performances with Bulgarian folk dances choreography. The results show similarities in the steps of choreographies with Bulgarian folk dances and the steps in Wushu (Wing Chun, Chinese: 詠春 and Tai Chi Chuan, Chinese: 太极拳). The steps in Bulgarian folk and Chinese martial arts have common characteristics. Drawings of the sequence of the steps, photos and videos of the movement should be used simultaneously as a tool for better understanding of the biomechanics. Bulgarian folk dances have movements in them that can be used for self-defense. Self-defense application coded in the dances are symbolic but can be developed for real situation.

KEYWORDS: Wushu, Wing Chun, Horo, martial art, Bulgarian dance, Spiral theory of the human body

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[1] Scientific project, Medical Faculty, Trakia University 16/2022, Description of the formal complexes in Wushu through graphic figures of their steps.

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Сравнение шагов в болгарских народных танцах и китайских боевых искусствах

А Н Н О Т А Ц И Я. Китайские боевые искусства (ушу) пользуются большой международной популярностью. Важным стилистическим аспектом в них являются шаги. Болгарские народные танцы сегодня приобретают все большую популярность как массовое занятие спортивного и фольклорного характера или сценическое искусство. Шаги в них являются основным элементом хореографии. Биомеханика человеческого тела позволяет выполнять только определенные виды движений. В статье сравниваются шаги в болгарских народных танцах и китайских боевых искусствах. Сравнительный анализ проведен на визуальном материале из официальных источников, таких как видеозаписи выступлений ведущих мастеров боевых искусств, а также на материале публичных выступлений, представляющих хореографию болгарских народных танцев. Результаты исследования показывают сходство шагов в болгарских народных танцах и китайских боевых искусствах (вин-чун (кит. 詠春) и тайцзицюань (кит. 太极拳) — они имеют общие характеристики. Рисунки последовательности шагов, представленных на фотографиях и видео, должны анализироваться одновременно для лучшего понимания биомеханики. В болгарских народных танцах есть движения, которые можно использовать для самообороны. Элементы самообороны, запрограммированные в танцах, носят символический характер, но могут быть применены в реальной ситуации.

К Л Ю Ч Е В Ы Е С Л О В А: ушу, вин-чун, хоро, боевое искусство, болгарский танец, спиральная теория человеческого тела

Д Л Я Ц И Т И Р О В А Н И Я: Bagalev S. P., Dimitrov N. D., Pirovski N. L. Comparison of Steps in Bulgarian Folk Dances and Chinese Martial Arts. *Этнография*. 2025. 2 (28): 208–221. DOI: 10.31250/2618-8600-2025-2(28)-208-221

INTRODUCTION

Martial arts masters have always impressed everyone with their skills, ability to move their body in space in various and complex movements such as punches, kicks, jumps and evasions. The footwork, the steps, the movements and the ways of surprisingly shifting the weight is impressive, surprise for opponent and often the means to achieve victory. Even more complicated, exceeding all expectations, is the model when there is a fight against more than one opponent.

Bulgarian folk dances have an equally diverse and complex pattern of steps in different "Horo" dances, which impress with their dynamics, beauty, and the different change of rhythm and tempo, with the alternation of short quick steps with wide steps, high lifts, hops and jump moves (Malcheva 2019).

"Horo" is a collective dance with a social meaning, and the habits of the population are well reflected in it. They can be played individually, in pairs, in small groups of 12, or in large groups in a row or circle. The "Taratantsi" Foundation digitizes a choreographer's steps and places them in a circle, a very close characteristic to the movements in "Ba Gua" Wushu style (Baguazhang (Chinese: 八卦掌; pinyin: bāguàzhǎng), which are also performed in a circle. The visual approach of teaching Bulgarian "Horo" dances through drawings of the steps and games, based on these drawings, is innovative and developed in different versions by "Taratantsi", in their training books and post cards. Thus, the beginner has a clear method to visualize where the footsteps on the ground are. This gives a very clear direction and possibility both for independent training and for visually teaching in group training in martial arts and Bulgarian dances.

In martial arts, the method of visualizing the forms by drawing the steps (steps or Bu Fa 步法) was accepted a long time ago, published in the first martial arts books printed in China, and it is still used today (fig. 1).

This graphic contains 8 different movements, called forms. The whole sequence is also called form, which leads to some misunderstanding. To avoid that we use movement/single form or technique for one movement, and complex or sequence of forms for the whole set. The form could also be used for the health or the skills condition of the demonstrator, but we do not use it in this context in our article.

Taratacni foundation is mapping the steps in the Bulgarian Folk Dances (BFD). Separated by the main step elements, the BFD could be visualized this way (fig. 2).

In the long history of mankind, dances have mostly been taught personally by the way of a perception. Even when, as a result of many centuries of development, a relatively suitable musical script had already been created, attempts to find special choreographic signs are still unknown. Today for the current analysis and comparison, a textbook for recording Bulgarian folk dance is available (Jenev, Haralampiev 1971).

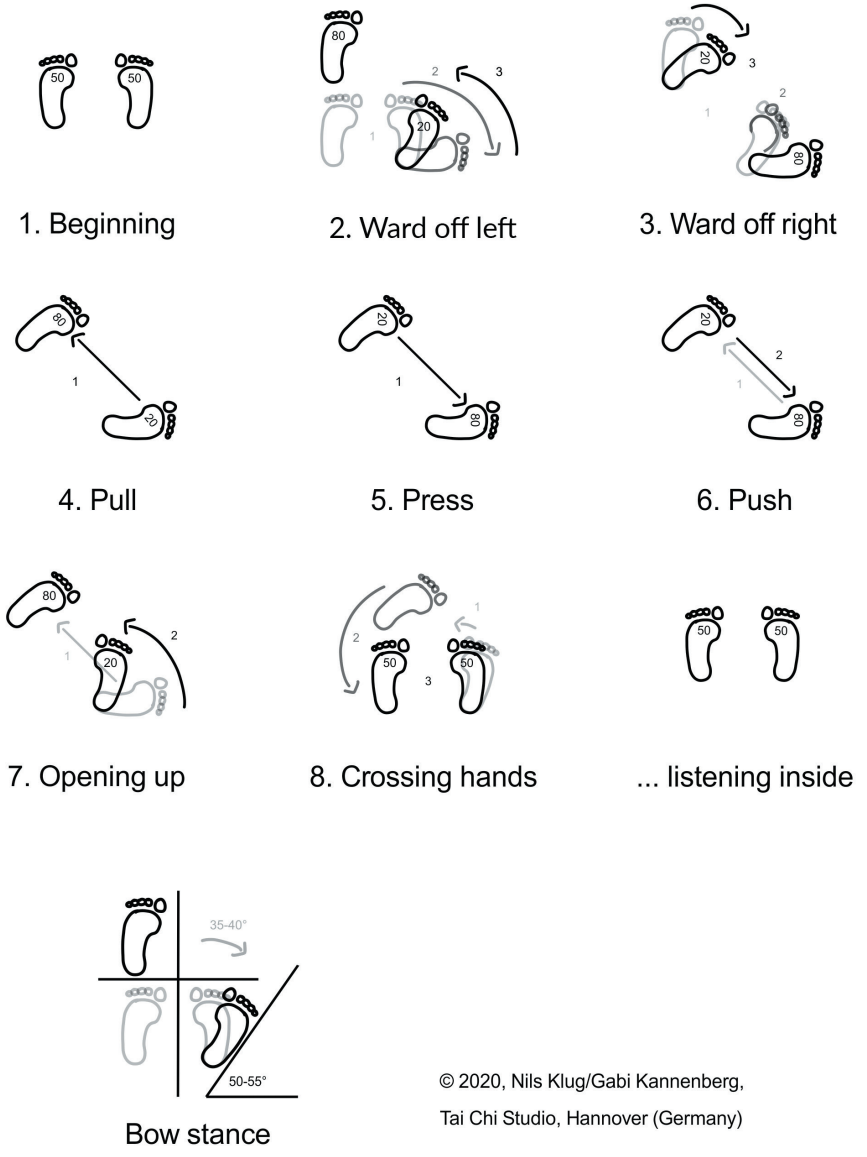

Fig. 1. Present day visualization of the steps in martial art course (Free Tai Chi online course complete! / Taiji Forum Compilation // Taiji Forum. 2020, May 20. Available at: https://taiji-forum.com/free-tai-chi-online-course-complete/ (Accessed: 06.06.2025)

Our study focuses on a comparative analysis of the movements in Bulgarian folk dances and those in Wushu styles of: "Wing Tsun Kuen" (as practiced in the European WingTsun Organization (EWTO) and "Yang Tai Chi Chuan" of the International Yang Family Taichichuan Association. Wing Chun (Wing Tsun) is a traditional Chinese martial art that was created in ancient China

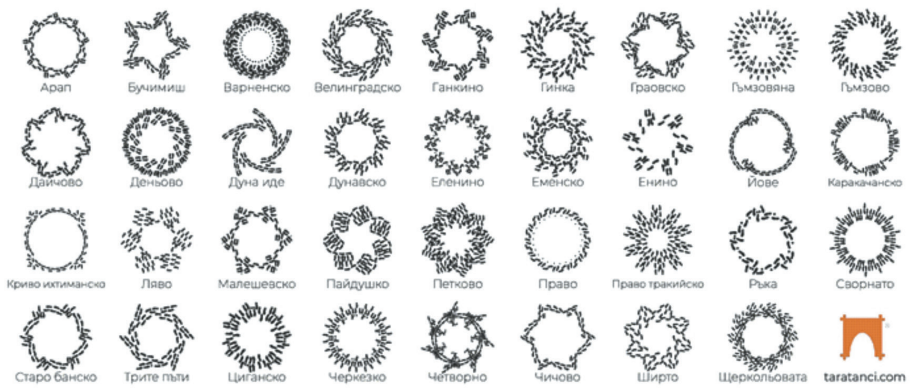

Fig. 2. Final appearance of the steps in “Horo” dances by Taratanci

and is included in the encyclopedia of martial arts (Green 2001). In Europe, it is practiced by the largest number of people in the European Wing Tsun Organization (over 1 500 schools), which also has a representation in Bulgaria (EWTO-Bulgaria). The movements in these arts are complex, acyclic and synchronize all parts of the body. When considered separately they are called a form, and their sequence — a complex of forms.

This article is on the very broad subjects of martial arts and folk dance and the relationship between them.

OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

Comparison of steps in Bulgarian folk dances with those in Chinese martial arts.

Null hypothesis (X0): Steps in BFD and CMA have no similarities.

The alternative hypothesis (Xa): The steps in BFD and CMA have similarities.

TASKS

To study and analyze the literature on the problem.

To separate, analyze and photograph the steps by elements.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND ORGANIZATION

The comparative analysis is performed on visual material from official sources, such as the public records of leading martial arts masters, and on material from public performances whose choreography includes Bulgarian folk dances. In addition, author’s photographs of positions of the compared movements were taken.

RESULTS

Analysis of the relationship between the "Horo" dance and martial arts could be done in many categories. Overview of some of the important similarities and differences could be seen on fig. 3, 4.

Similarities between Bulgarian Folk Dances (BFD) and Chinese Martial Arts (CMAs)		
Characteristic	**BFD**	**CMAs**
choreography	yes, beats and steps	yes, a complex of forms
rhythm	yes	yes
alternating fast and slow movements	yes	yes
musical accompaniment	yes, whenever available	yes, mandatory for some sports disciplines (Yan style Tai'Chi and preferably during training)
uniform	yes, costume, theater costume	yes, sport or demonstration suits
reflects part of life	yes	yes
reflects a duel	yes, there are verbal, danceable competitions	yes, there are staged fights, Dui Liang, ect.
altered state of consciousness	yes, inner focus and balance	yes, focus, energy, balance
sole performance	yes	yes
group performance	yes	yes
the movements are complex, acyclic and synchronize all parts of the body	yes	yes
improvisation and adaptation	many types, countless choreographies	many styles, countless fighting techniques
competitions	pageants and festivals	sports competitions and festivals
a long tradition	recorded testimonies of Bulgarian folk dances	martial arts texts, pictures and videos
use of dance equipment	stick, shepard staff, knife, cloth	sword, saber, spear, the cloth is hung on them

Fig. 3. Similarities between Bulgarian Folk Dances and Chinese Martial Arts. Compiled by N. Pirovski and S. Bagalev

Differences between Bulgarian Folk Dances (BFD) and Chinese Martial Arts (CMAs)		
Characteristic	**BFD**	**CMAs**
musical accompaniment	Bulgarian folk music	Traditional Chinese music
reflects part of life	yes, a variety of activities	a duel
uniform	Bulgarian national costume	Chinese national costume
independent performance	less often	more often
group performance	more often	less often
competitions	competitions and festivals, without single combats, they are separated into a separate cartegory of events (fights)	Contact matches are not separate from formal complexes
distance	The distance for each movement is relative to the choreography, not the distance between the participants	The use of distance- long, medium and close to position attacks and defenses
breathing	as in hard physical work, exclamations, chants	Using the breath as a model for concentration, recovery, entry into a altered state of consciesness
contact and timing	according to the music and according to the movements of the cooperative partner	according to the movements of the partner for supremacy, using the timing to be before, with, or after the attack of the opponent
weapons	rarely used	often present

Fig. 4. Differences between Bulgarian folk dances and Chinese martial arts. Compiled by N. Pirovski and S. Bagalev

The similarity and difference tables could be made much more detailed in terms of categories and explanations.

Graphs of the entire sequences of formal complexes can be confusing and difficult to remember like the one on fig. 5.

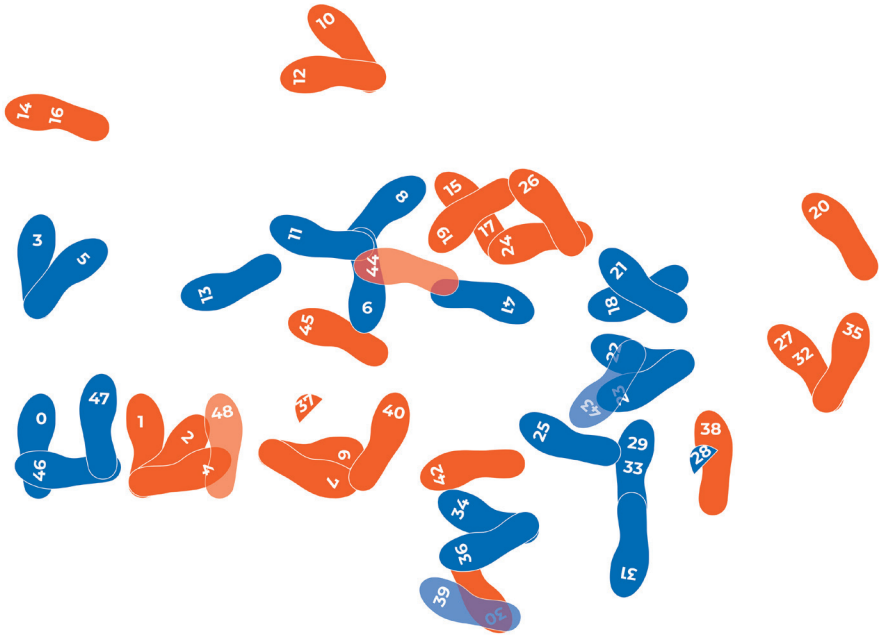

Fig. 5. First attempt to illustrate the steps form Standard 24 Form Tai Chi Chuan (Yang Style) by Taratanci Demonstrator N. Pirovski (Blue for the left foot, and red for the right foot. The numbers indicate the sequence of movement)

By separating the single forms form the complex of all the movements in the sequences, more artistic, logical and useful drawings could be made. We did that for Master Yang Jun/Senior Form Demonstration movement/form number 13, Cloud hands[2]. This could be seen on fig. 6.

The numbers indicate the sequence of movement. Part A demonstrates the sequence of the steps, direction of rotation and proportion. Section B is only for the position of the legs one to each other, during the different of stances. The beginning and ending stances are the same, as well as stances 2 and 4, and 1 and 3.

Similar basic step type like 2 and 4 could be recognized in “Kulsko horo”, North Ethnographic Region, size 2/4, during the stepping backwards[3].

Photography and video comparing is also very demonstrative, because it demonstrates not only the steps, but also the position of arms, body and head. Wing Chun (Wing Tsun) steps were segmented and photographed for real-time descriptive analysis (fig. 7).

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[2] Yang Family Tai Chi Essential Form Performed by Master Yang Jun, 30.11.2018 // YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESmo4-vKPsg&t=129s (Accessed: 31.10.2023).

[3] Kulsko horo, North Ethnographic Region, 2022 / Zornitsa Venkova // YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QfKEBY2qxw (Accessed: 31.10.2023).

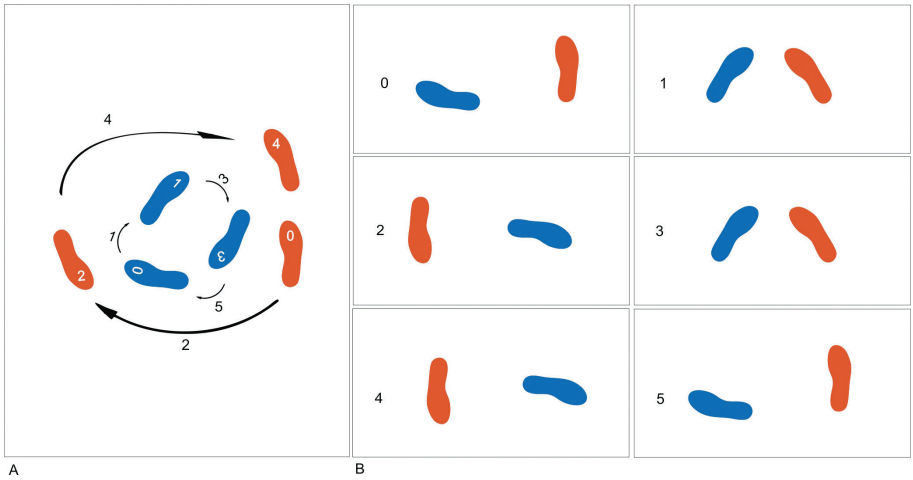

Fig. 6. Graphic of the steps of the movement number 13 (Yang Family Tai Chi Essential Form Performed by Master Yang Jun, 30.11.2018 // YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESmo4-vKPsg&t=129s (Accessed: 31.10.2023). Drawing by N. Pirovski (Blue for the left foot, and red for the right foot)

Similarities in the leg kicks are listed under numbers 1, 2 and 3. The left side is the appearance of the Wing Chun (Wing Tsun) form, and the right the choreography of the BFD. These movements can be used to attack as well as defend against attacks.

Short rotation steps are very distinctive for Wing Chun and could be seen at the beginning of the first sequence, in the middle of the second, and all through the third. Identical movement is used in the dance "Melnishko Horo"[4].

DISCUSSION

Bulgarian folk songs and dances are one of the most ancient, traditional means of physical education. On the other hand, their appearance and development is considered in unity with the life and livelihood of the Bulgarian people. Our folk dances and people are characterized by their expressiveness, emotionality and grace. In most of the movements of the body, hands and feet, labor elements are recreated and important aspects of the life of a Bulgarian are revealed. In other cases, they are a stylization or imitation of phenomena or movements from the environment.

Dances appear as a way of human communication with nature and the surrounding environment, through movements, poses and gestures. In many cases, they are a generalized reflection of the surrounding reality with their

[4] Melnisko horo — Southwest Bulgaria, 2022 / Bulg Folk // YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=niSsE3VbPzk (Accessed: 01.11.2023).

Fig. 7. Comparison of steps from WingTsun, Wing Chun — Chum Kiu Form Complex (Three Forms of Wing-Tsun / Kung Fu Fit — Wing Chun Bath, 2011 // YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wf11ynP4qJk (Accessed: 31.10.2023) and Bulgarian "Horo" dance (Ensemble Chinary, "Male Dance", choreography by Asen Pavlov, 2016 // YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGDwk97TkHw (Accessed: 31.10.2023). Photo by S. Bagalev and M. Iliev. 8 August, 2023. Plovdiv

emotionally colored artistic images. Stylized movements have an emotional impact and influence people's thoughts, feelings and will. With its specific impact on individual parts of the body, it stimulates physical development and

performance. The combination of dance and music further stimulates motor activity, which supports solving the main tasks of physical education. The basis of the education in the Bulgarian folklore is the mastery of a wide range of motor skills, habits and knowledge. Educational tasks are solved through the development of moral-volitional and aesthetic qualities. The regular and systematic practice of dancing helps to strengthen the health of the participants and improves the body's resistance. Folk dances affect a person in several ways. They have a positive effect on most organs and systems of the human body. The cardiovascular and respiratory systems are most affected. The precise performance of the individual dance movements associated with a characteristic rhythm, durability, tempo and amplitude make significant demands on the joints and the locomotion apparatus. The strength, elasticity and mobility of the joints and joint surfaces are improved. The great diversity of Bulgarian folklore offers movements of a very different nature. Mastering them is one of the easiest ways to improve the coordination abilities and the general motor culture of the players. These abilities are characterized by easy application in other motor activities, which favors solving educational tasks in various sports activities.

Bulgarian folk dances are established as cultural national wealth of Bulgaria (Videnova, Vankova 2019), and play an important role in Bulgarian traditions, both in the country and for Bulgarians abroad (Ivanova-Nyberg 2014). Bulgarian folk dances are actively studied scientifically, both by Bulgarian researchers (Malcheva 2019) and by foreign ones (McDermott 1998; Jordanoff 1979) and are part of the encyclopedia of folk dances (Snodgrass 2016). Martial arts are also seen as a scientific field (Wetzler 2015).

Each "Horo" has a style and character according to the six ethnographic regions in Bulgaria. That is similarity with the Chinese martial arts (CMAs), which are also subdivided into styles and each formal complex within the style has a different character. An example of this are the Yang Style weapon forms of Tai Chi Chuan, where the character of sword execution is light and precise, while the execution of complex saber movements is heavy and sharp. The weapon has been preserved in the BFD mainly in the "Kukeri" games. Shouts and songs often accompany the movements. In the Rhodope ethnographic region, people are slower and more often divided into male and female groups with low jumps. Folk dances are well preserved in Bulgarian folklore, as well as martial arts in the Wushu schools. To search for similarities in their unifying biomechanics and their ancient roots and to discern their dual use for both celebration and warfare is logical (Vaglarov 1976). The group dancing in a circle is a level of performance which is not common for CMAs.

The biomechanics of the human body only allow certain movements when a high level of efficiency, speed and coordination is required. Because of this, many moves in different martial arts styles are similar. The number of the basic dance step form in the analyzed folk dances varies from three to even sixteen, i. e. the number of bars in the dance forms of Balkan folk dances is very diverse

(Stanimirović, Mutavdžić 2012; 2014). The basic structure present, apart from three and four parts, can also be an eight, nine, ten and sixteen part structure. There are examples of the reformation of martial arts into dances, most often when the social situation changes (Cynarski 2013) or the prohibition of their practice. There are also examples of dances that draw inspiration from martial arts (McGuire 2015; Hoefnagels et al. 2019), most often for promotion and acquisition of national identity (Kaeppler 2000; Zhouxiang 2018). Often these activities are performed at communal festivals (Sharma 1989). Both dance and martial arts training can be used to address aggression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Siapno 2012). Such rituals are present both in Bulgaria (Kukeri) and China (Lion dance) (McGuire 2015).

Other authors have also explored the relationship between folklore and martial arts (Green, Svinth 2003; 2010), and have looked for ancient national systems of self-defense in India (Tokarski 2007) and Japan (Redmond 2006). Some national ballets have predominantly military appearance[5]. There is a need to rediscover the traditions embedded in folk dances (Ivanova-Nyberg 2015). Both martial arts and dance can have health effects (Videnova 2020), and can be used for health promotion (Videnova et al. 2019). Virtual reality could be used to study these movements as well as for training (Uzunova et al. 2016) and developing motor skills in children (Ignatova 2017). The use of kinesiology sensors remains an interesting idea for a future study (Uzunova 2018; Uzunova et al. 2017). Folk dances also have the capacity to be an alternative to sports activities for high school students (Bazelkov, Ignatova 2012).

Bulgarian "Horo" dances are a model for preserving the cultural layer, as well as an example for natural movement and feeling of the body under the accompaniment of music, a means of unification, but also an ancient method of martial-applied practice, preserved and coded to this day. Many more examples could be made for similarities between the steps in the BFD and CMAs. The origin of Bulgarian folk dances may be related to a Bulgarian martial art that existed in the past. The highly variable social environment of the Balkans during antiquity and the Middle Ages could have transformed martial practices into folk dances. There are prerequisites for studying the applicability of forms from other Bulgarian folk dances for self-defense, including with weapons, such as the shepherd's gag. Bulgarian folk dances and Chinese martial arts are compatible despite their differences and can enrich each other.

CONCLUSIONS

The steps in Bulgarian folk and Chinese martial arts have common characteristics. Drawings of the sequence of the steps, photos and videos of the

[5] Tsinandali Festival, 2019 | Georgian National Ballet Sukhishvili // YouTube. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7a1jcQxJpU (Accessed: 31.10.2023).

movement should be used simultaneously as a tool for better understanding of the biomechanics. Bulgarian folk dances have movements in them that can be used for self-defense. Self-defense application coded in the dances are symbolic but can be developed for real situation.

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