

From Martial Arts to Self-Cultivation: The Integration of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism and Karate Etiquette and Ethics

Jiayin Liu

*The Experimental High School Attach to Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China
ljyyyyyy000@qq.com*

Abstract. Research on karate's cultural background often mentions Confucianism, but the specific route from late imperial Chinese thought to modern Japanese practice is not always spelled out. This study traces that route. It starts from Song–Ming developments—both the Cheng–Zhu synthesis and Wang Yangming's stress on the mind—which framed ethics, family life, and education across East Asia. In the same period, Chinese martial arts were circulating among lay groups and borrowing Confucian language to talk about discipline and harmony. Parts of this martial culture later entered Japan and, after adaptation to local settings, fed into what became karate. What is striking in today's dojos is that etiquette—bows, address forms, order of practice—still carries recognizably Confucian themes such as ritual self-restraint and reverence for the teacher. Drawing on textual sources and interviews with instructors and long-term practitioners, the article shows how these themes are performed in training and what they contribute to contemporary efforts at cultural inheritance. It suggests that karate's moral pedagogy is not incidental but shaped by a Confucian logic linking bodily practice to ethical cultivation and to wider social harmony.

Keywords: Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism, Confucian ethics, karate culture, dojo etiquette, moral training

1. Introduction

Discussions of karate's intellectual background often point to Confucianism, but the historical link is not as straightforward as it is sometimes described. In late imperial China, two currents—Cheng–Zhu Neo-Confucianism and Wang Yangming's School of Mind—reworked earlier Confucian ideas in different ways. The former grounded moral order in the investigation of principle, while the latter insisted that moral knowledge must be activated through personal practice. What matters for our topic is that these debates did not stay inside philosophy; they filtered into schooling, family rules, and everyday etiquette across East Asia and created a language for speaking about discipline and hierarchy.

During the same period, Chinese martial arts were no longer confined to court or military settings. They spread among civilian groups, guilds, and local associations, and in that milieu it became useful to explain martial training not only as learning to fight but also as learning to behave. Confucian terms—self-cultivation, harmony, respect—were ready-made resources for doing so.

When parts of this martial culture moved to Japan—through contacts with China and the Ryukyu Kingdom, and later through Japanese re-interpretation—what emerged as karate kept the technical content but also absorbed the Confucian way of organizing relations in the training hall. A modern dojo is therefore not just a place for kata and kumite; it is also a place where status is marked, where speech forms are regulated, and where ritual bows punctuate interaction.

The entrance bow is a good example. Instructors often tell beginners that bowing on entry is not “mere form” but a way of putting oneself in the right state, which mirrors Confucian views on ritual as a vehicle for inner discipline. The bow exchanged between teacher and student at the opening and close of class recalls classical expressions about honoring those who teach. Even the small act of receiving a weapon or a pad with both hands reflects the idea that courtesy is shown through embodied gestures.

In contemporary Japan, these practices have not disappeared with modernization. On the contrary, school education and family training have kept parts of the Confucian vocabulary alive, which in turn makes it easier for karate to present itself as a moral as well as a physical art.

This article, then, asks a simple question: through which concrete practices does Confucianism speak in karate today? To answer it, I look at historical materials and at present-day dojo routines, and I use them to discuss what this connection means for the wider project of cultural inheritance.

2. Neo-Confucian philosophy and the spirit of East Asian ritual studies

When we speak of Neo-Confucianism in East Asia, we are not talking about a brand-new doctrine that replaced classical Confucianism, but about a long process of re-reading, defending, and re-adapting Confucian ideas to changing social conditions from the Song onwards. What emerged from this process influenced far more than China's own tribute or bureaucratic systems; it travelled, in different degrees, into the political culture, educational ideals, and family ethics of the wider East Asian world. A key feature of this intellectual current is that it tried to hold two things together: an ordered universe and regulated human conduct. Core notions such as “Heavenly Principle” (天理), “Human Desire” (人欲), and “Principle and Qi” (理气) were used to describe this linkage. “Heavenly Principle” was understood as the objective, overarching law that structures both the cosmos and human society; it tells people what a properly ordered life should look like. “Human Desire,” by contrast, referred to the impulses and needs that all people naturally have and that, if left unchecked, can disrupt that order. Much of Cheng–Zhu Neo-Confucianism can be read as an attempt to let desire exist but to make it answerable to principle. Once this hierarchy is accepted, ritual becomes more than a social convention: it becomes the everyday mechanism through which people keep desire within the bounds of principle. That is why, in the Song–Ming tradition, ritual appears in so many spheres at once—family hierarchy, village compacts, official conduct, even professional life. What is important for our later discussion of karate is that this way of thinking never treats ritual as “empty form.” It assumes that properly designed rituals help an individual stay morally clear in complicated situations and, at the same time, keep society running without friction. In other words, the personal and the social are tied together through ritual.

2.1. The concept and evolution of “Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism”

The expression “Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism” usually refers to the dominant Confucian discourse that took shape from the Northern Song and reached maturity in the Ming. Yet the story is not as closed as that label suggests. In practice, the line continues into the Yuan and even the Qing, so some scholars prefer to speak of “Song–Yuan–Ming–Qing Neo-Confucianism” to highlight the continuity. The Song period is where the main framework was laid down. The Yuan largely kept to the Song model, which makes sense given that the Yuan rulers, though non-Han, still needed a stable

ideological tool to govern a multiethnic empire. The Ming is where we see strong differentiation—especially with the rise of the School of Mind. The Qing, in turn, did two things at once: it inherited what was useful from earlier Neo-Confucianism, but it also subjected late-Ming moralism to philological and practical criticism. After the mid-Qing, the rise of "Plain Learning" (朴学) weakened the authority of speculative Neo-Confucian discourse, but it did not erase the methods, categories, or concerns that had been formed since the Song.

So even under non-Han regimes like the Yuan and Qing, Confucian concepts, ritual systems, and ways of reasoning were not abandoned; they were re-used, trimmed, or localized to fit new political circumstances. This is important because it shows that Neo-Confucianism was not a frozen Song-dynasty philosophy but a flexible East Asian resource that could be inherited and revised.

2.2. Major Neo-Confucian theories and ideas

If we look at the Northern Song first, a small circle of thinkers—Zhou Dunyi, Zhang Zai, Cheng Hao, Cheng Yi, and Shao Yong—more or less set the agenda for what later became Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism. They tried to explain the world with a limited set of concepts—Principle (理), Qi (气), Tai Chi (太极)—and then asked how these cosmic structures are reflected in human nature and in the mind. Different figures emphasized different links, but the shared move was to say: the way the universe is built and the way humans ought to live are not two unrelated questions. In the Southern Song, Zhu Xi gathered, systematized, and ranked these earlier insights. By putting Principle at the top, he offered a very powerful scheme: human relations, ethical norms, and even daily discipline could all be justified by referring them back to an ultimate, ordered principle. That is why later generations felt that with Zhu Xi the system became "complete." Not everyone agreed with this strongly objective, principle-first approach. Lu Jiuyuan put forward the idea that "the mind is Principle," stressing that morality is not only something to be discovered outside of us but something to be realized within. Wang Yangming in the Ming took this route further. His School of Mind argued for the unity of knowledge and action (知行合一)—a very practical claim aimed at officials and literati who tended to separate "knowing the good" from "actually doing the good."

Within this whole tradition, "Principle" (理) is a dense word. Sometimes it clearly means universal law—what Zhu Xi would call Heavenly Principle. Sometimes it points to the inner norm of human nature. At other times it is used for moral rules, or for the pattern in things that investigation is supposed to uncover. Neo-Confucian writers often shift among these meanings without spelling them out every time, trusting that the reader moves within the same conceptual world [1].

2.3. The position of Neo-Confucianism in history and society

The concepts of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism contributed to the transformation of the clan-based estate system of the Tang dynasty into a system of civilian landownership, driving social change. This process is often referred to as China's "modernization" or "quasi-modernization." The emergence of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism allowed China's "quasi-modern" era to transcend the medieval mindset, gradually evolving toward a more theoretical framework. As a rational and philosophical approach, Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism provided a metaphysical foundation for the Confucian value system. It not only coexisted alongside Buddhism and Taoism but also absorbed beneficial elements from both, representing the ideas of the later stages of feudal society and promoting China's quasi-modernization process.

2.4. The spread and influence of Confucianism in East Asia

When East Asian Confucianism is discussed today, a number of scholars have cautioned against taking the Chinese experience as the only legitimate template. Huang Junjie has stressed more than once that what we should look at is a field made up of several interacting Confucian traditions, each developing within its own historical agenda, rather than a single center radiating to a passive periphery. In his view, "East Asian Confucianism" works better as a shared framework that allows China, Korea, Japan, and later Vietnam to talk to one another, borrow from one another, and still keep their cultural subjectivity. On this point, Wu Zhen is close to Huang: research, he argues, ought to be conducted as a cross-cultural dialogue, not as an attempt to read others only through one's own categories. In other words, studying Korean or Japanese Confucianism is not a footnote to Chinese Confucianism; it is part of reconstructing the web of East Asian intellectual history as a whole [2].

From the late 19th century onward, as each country began to emphasize its cultural distinctiveness, separate disciplines such as the history of Japanese thought or Japanese literary history took shape. Yet this differentiation did not mean that Confucianism in these countries stopped influencing one another. On the contrary, the traffic often went both ways. Japan, for example, absorbed Chinese Confucianism early on—sometimes via Korea—and still managed to produce an Edo-period reading of Zhu Xi that responded to local social needs. Korean Neo-Confucianism, especially the current associated with Yi T'oebye (李退溪), in turn became an important reference for Japanese scholars of the Tokugawa era. This kind of cross-border circulation and local reworking is precisely what shows that East Asian Confucianism is not a static "Chinese original + surrounding copies," but a dynamic system in which influence, appropriation, and critique happen in multiple directions.

Within this broader system, Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism provided much of the conceptual language. By framing ethics around "Heavenly Principle" and "Human Desire," it offered East Asian elites a ready-made tool to speak about political legitimacy, educational goals, and everyday behavioral norms. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the sphere of ritual practice: the Song–Ming model treated ritual as the practical device through which principle could govern desire, not only for individuals but for whole communities. Once this way of thinking travelled—through the tribute system, scholarly missions, Buddhist and Confucian exchanges—to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, it did not remain unchanged. Each region localized it, sometimes tightening Zhu Xi's orthodoxy, sometimes softening it, sometimes combining it with indigenous institutions. Even so, it continued to function as a linking discourse that made East Asian political orders, village ethics, and educational programs look structurally similar.

Seen from this angle, Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism was not just China's dominant scholarly language between the 11th and 18th centuries; it was also one of the key media through which an East Asian cultural sphere was imagined and maintained. It helped different countries justify hierarchical family relations, ritualized schooling, and morally inflected governance, while still leaving room for local modifications. That is the background against which we can later understand why a Japanese martial art such as karate could so naturally pick up Confucian-style etiquette and present it as part of its own cultural logic.

3. The influence of Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism on Chinese martial arts

When we look at Chinese martial arts from the Song–Ming intellectual horizon, it becomes clear that they were never understood simply as techniques for defeating an opponent. Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism, with its insistence on linking knowledge, self-cultivation, and social harmony, offered martial artists a language in which boxing, weapon work, and even training etiquette could be framed as part of moral learning. The Neo-Confucian program of "investigating things to extend knowledge" (格物致知) was especially useful here: it encouraged practitioners to look closely at concrete

movements and training devices, but also to let that concrete work point upward to principles and to character. In this way, martial arts were gradually described not only as a "skill" but as a comprehensive practice of body, mind, and virtue.

3.1. "Virtue above all" and Cheng-Zhu Neo-Confucianism

The familiar maxim in traditional schools that "morality comes before techniques" (德先于技) is very close to the Cheng-Zhu idea of "preserve Heavenly Principle and restrain human desires" (存天理, 灭人欲). In practical terms, martial artists have always known that a powerful fighter without restraint is a social danger. So "virtue" in this context does at least three things: it rules out unprovoked aggression, it forbids using force to bully weaker people, and it requires the practitioner to align his skill with public order. This is exactly how Cheng-Zhu thinkers imagined the relation between Heavenly Principle and human desires—desire is not annihilated, but it is made to answer to something higher. What martial arts added was a technical route to this goal: by studying the "fist" (拳) in detail—its structure, timing, angles, and breathing—the practitioner is also studying himself. The "investigation" in martial arts therefore is not abstract speculation; it is an embodied inquiry. Through that inquiry, temper is moderated, intention is clarified, and the person slowly becomes fit to live in an ordered community. In that sense, martial training can be seen as one concrete way of doing what Neo-Confucianism called 格物致知.

3.2. Master-disciple transmission and ritual norms

One place where Neo-Confucian values are especially visible is the 师徒关系 itself. Traditional martial arts do not spread mainly through anonymous manuals; they spread through people. Entering a school usually involves bowing, acknowledging the lineage, and accepting the school's rules. These gestures are not decorative. They rehearse the Neo-Confucian hierarchy of respecting the teacher and valuing the Way and, at the same time, cultivate the moral quartet of propriety, righteousness, integrity, and a sense of shame (礼义廉耻). Because of this, transmission in martial arts is always double transmission: techniques plus moral style. A disciple learns how to punch or to hold a spear, but he also learns how to address the master, how to behave toward senior brothers, and how to control pride when he defeats someone. That is why many schools pair training with regular reminders of 仁爱—caring for those inside the group and not humiliating those outside it. Put differently, the master-disciple system is an institutional way of keeping martial arts inside the Neo-Confucian project of self-cultivation + social harmony; it makes the practice a living form of 格物致知 rather than only a set of fighting tricks.

3.3. "Mind moves, form follows" and the unity of knowledge and action

The formula often heard in internal schools—"the mind moves, the body follows" (心动形随)—is, in spirit, very close to Wang Yangming's idea of "the unity of knowledge and action" (知行合一). If the hand moves before the mind is settled, the movement is empty; if the mind "knows" but the body never performs, the knowledge is hollow. Martial training tries to avoid both extremes. So, in a good routine, intention (意), qi, and the visible body are trained to arrive at the same time. Intention corresponds to "knowledge," the strike or step corresponds to "action." Only when both are present can the practitioner claim to have understood the technique. This is why advanced training is often described as outer form and inner spirit becoming one. At that stage, martial arts are no longer just ethics wrapped in movement; they become a methodology for testing ethics—does my body actually

do what I say I believe? That is a very Wang Yangming–like question, and martial arts answer it daily on the training floor.

3.4. Concrete uses of "investigating things to extend knowledge" in martial arts

Neo-Confucianism often speaks at a high level, but in martial arts we can watch 格物致知 happen step by step.

(1) From one fist to many parts.

Many schools divide the "fist" into several bodily segments—head, shoulders, hands, waist, knees, feet—so that the learner can see what must be corrected. This kind of disassembly is a form of “investigating things”: starting from a whole, we observe each part. Tai Chi’s instructions—“head suspended, shoulders sunk, elbows dropped, chest relaxed, back rounded, waist loose and hips tucked”—and Xingyi’s requirements—“lift the crown, sink the shoulders, drop the elbows, wrap the waist, lift the knees”—are classic examples: each clause targets one error, and only when every part is correct does the whole form become natural.

(2) From external technique to "mental fist."

After the body is trained, attention shifts inward—to intention, will, and qi. Exercises such as "intention leads, movement follows" or "one intent throughout" teach the practitioner to let the mind set the pattern for the body. This is the stage where martial arts almost overlaps with Wang Yangming: the inner decision and the outer act must appear together, otherwise the technique loses power and the person loses focus.

(3) From empty hand to weapons.

Weapons—sabre, sword, spear, staff—are not only tools for fighting. They function as extensions of the body that expose weaknesses in posture, distance, and timing. In Hebei Xingyi lore, the saying "turn the spear into the fist" means exactly this: by studying how the spear works, you understand your own fist better. So even weapon work can be read as "investigating things to know": you analyze a concrete object, then you return that knowledge to the body.

(4) Self-checking and eliminating "fist diseases."

A very Neo-Confucian feature of martial practice is constant inner observation. Practitioners use mirrors, rulers, partner feedback, and set routines (like Tai Chi push-hands, with its "follow, adhere, connect, stick") to find small deviations—what masters call "fist diseases". Correcting "lowered head, bent neck, exposed shoulder, raised elbow," or applying fixes such as "tighten the waist as if bound" and "look to the armpit," is not only about better combat efficiency; it is a moral exercise in patience, humility, and precision. Normative lists such as the "Eight Reversals of the Fist" (拳家八反) were created to help beginners name and correct the most common faults, and in doing so they pushed martial arts toward systematization and shared standards [3].

(5) Following heaven–earth rhythms.

Some lineages even connect training content to seasons—liver in spring, heart in summer, lungs in autumn, kidneys in winter. This may sound medical, but the logic behind it is Neo-Confucian: practice should respect the larger order of time and space. When routines and actual combat draw on timing and spatial arrangement to achieve tight coordination, they are enacting the unity of humans with the patterns of heaven and earth [4].

3.5. The goal of cultivating both virtue and talent

If we follow the Neo-Confucian reading of martial arts to the end, the point of "investigating fist to extend knowledge" (格拳致知) is never just "to fight better." The real target is to produce a person whose technique and character rise together — what later writers liked to call "virtue and talent in

one" (德艺兼修). Under the Song–Ming influence, this ideal was unpacked into a few very recognizable dimensions.

First, the "fragrance of virtue."

Traditional masters often say that martial morality shows itself in two places: on the training ground and in society. On the training ground, it appears as civilized control — striking but pulling back at the moment of contact, not humiliating a weaker partner, not using a winning technique to show off. In society, it appears as acting when injustice happens, helping the vulnerable, or supporting one's community. Both are ways of letting others "smell" the virtue of the practitioner. This is straight out of the Song–Ming view that martial skill must be answerable to Heavenly Principle; otherwise, it is just another form of human desire.

Second, refined technique as proof of inner work.

"Exquisite skills and outstanding talent" in martial arts are not only about power. They come from long, disciplined correction — especially from naming and fixing the so-called "fist diseases." When posture, breathing, timing, and intention have all been polished, the body moves naturally, and the principle of the fist "shows itself" without being forced. At that point, form and meaning coincide: the movement is correct and, at the same time, reveals the understanding behind it. This is the technical side of 格物致知 — you pushed hard on the concrete "thing," and knowledge emerged.

Third, inheritance that allows innovation.

Because martial arts live in master–disciple lines, every generation receives a package: routines, stories, prohibitions, etiquette. But good lineages do not ask students to repeat mechanically. They ask them to grasp the core and then make it flourish — which is exactly the Song–Ming idea of "mastery and broadening" (精通与光大). So a practitioner who truly combines virtue and talent will keep the old flavor of the school, yet adjust footwork, application, or even weapon methods to new circumstances. Continuity plus creativity is what keeps martial arts from becoming a museum piece.

Fourth, alignment with heaven–earth rhythms.

Neo-Confucianism takes seriously the unity of heaven and humanity; martial arts, being both bodily and mental, are an easy place to practice it. Some methods divide training by seasons — liver in spring, heart in summer, lungs in autumn, kidneys in winter — in order to stay close to natural cycles. Others stress timing and spatial layout in two-person work so that attacks and defenses "fit" the situation with no waste. In both cases, the point is the same: a well-cultivated fighter should move in step with the larger order, not against it [4].

To sum up, by using the Neo-Confucian method of "investigating things to extend knowledge," Chinese martial arts gained more than a philosophical slogan. They gained a way to tie moral restraint to technical excellence, to make lineage a channel of culture, and to present themselves — even in today's global environment — as a practice with clear cultural self-awareness and long-term vitality.

4. The historical development of Karate and the influence of Neo-Confucianism

4.1. The origin of Karate in Japan and its connection to Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism

There are several theories regarding the origin of Karate, with the most widely accepted one being that it originated from the martial arts of Fujian province. It later spread to Okinawa through diplomatic missions, the thirty-six surnames of Fujian people, and Okinawan students studying in China, where it blended with local martial arts to form the art known as "Tang hand" (唐手). Tang hand was primarily used for self-defense, focusing on practicality and defense. During the Ming Dynasty, with the introduction of Fujian martial arts, Confucian ideas, especially those from Song–Ming Neo-Confucianism, also spread to Okinawa. At this time, the Okinawan Kingdom adopted Confucianism as the core of its educational system, and the central concepts of Song–Ming Neo-

Confucianism, such as "investigating things to extend knowledge" (格物致知) and "self-restraint and returning to propriety" (克己复礼), gradually became integrated into the local social and cultural fabric. These Confucian ideas subtly influenced the technical development of Tang hand and the cultivation of martial ethics, so that Tang hand not only emphasized combat techniques but also stressed moral cultivation.

In 1922, Gichin Funakoshi demonstrated Tang hand at the first Japanese National Sports Exhibition in Tokyo, and subsequently left it there to spread. Later, figures such as Mo Bunji Ken, Miyagi Choshun, and Otsuka Hiroki came to Tokyo, further developing and integrating Tang hand to form what we know today as Karate. They established various schools such as the Shotokan, Goju-Ryu, Shito-Ryu, and Wado-Ryu. Throughout the formation of Karate, Confucian values such as "respect for teachers and reverence for the way" (尊师重道) were widely absorbed and practiced, becoming an important foundation for the Karate etiquette system. By the 1950s, with Japan's economic and social development, the Karate system gradually matured, forming a comprehensive etiquette system, competition rules, and kata patterns, which quickly spread from Tokyo to the rest of the world [5].

4.2. The spread and localization of Karate in East Asia

After the 1950s, driven by modernization efforts, Karate spread widely across East Asia. During World War II, Japan introduced Karate to Korea, which had a significant impact on the formation of Taekwondo. While Taekwondo inherited the basic hand techniques of Karate, it amplified the use of leg techniques, focusing on kicking attacks. Moreover, the etiquette and cultural values of Taekwondo were greatly influenced by the spirit of Karate, with its etiquette system closely resembling that of Karate, emphasizing "respect for teachers and reverence for the way" and "humility and self-restraint."

Furthermore, when Karate spread to China and Southeast Asia, it merged with local martial arts, promoting the localization of Karate's spirit and techniques. For example, in China, Karate combined with traditional Chinese martial arts, resulting in Chinese-style Karate schools, while in Southeast Asia, Karate fused with local martial arts cultures, enriching both the techniques and cultural connotations of Karate. This cross-cultural transmission and fusion not only facilitated Karate's global development but also allowed it to adapt uniquely to different cultural contexts, showing its remarkable resilience and vitality.

4.3. The influence of confucian ethics on the Karate etiquette system

Even in its modern, sport-oriented form, karate still looks very Confucian once you pay attention to the small rituals around training. The bow to the dojo at the beginning and end of class is not simply a Japanese courtesy; it functions very much like a Confucian acknowledgment of the place where the Way is practiced. The bow to the instructor makes the logic even clearer: it reproduces the Confucian idea of "respecting the teacher and revering the Way" (尊师崇道) and reminds students that technique is transmitted through a hierarchy, not downloaded from nowhere. Bows exchanged between training partners or between opponents before a match likewise echo the Confucian demand to "treat others with courtesy" (以礼待人) — we start from respect even if we are about to strike each other.

What all these gestures do is to normalize behavior inside the dojo. They tell practitioners: karate is not only about power or victory; it is also about presenting oneself properly, controlling emotion, and recognizing the other person's dignity. In this sense, etiquette becomes a tool of moral socialization. It keeps competition from sliding into hostility and daily training from sliding into carelessness. That is exactly the Confucian ambition: to let ritual forms build character and, through character, build harmonious relations.

4.4. The integration of moral cultivation and Neo-Confucian ethics in Karate training

Karate practice, especially when kata is taken seriously, is a good example of how a bodily art can carry Neo-Confucian content. Repeating a kata is not just "doing the moves again"; it is revisiting the same form with closer attention — to timing, to breathing, to intention. This is very close to the Neo-Confucian method of "investigating things to extend knowledge" (格物致知): start from something concrete, observe it carefully, correct what is off, and let understanding deepen through practice.

While working on precision and standardization, instructors also ask for inner focus and self-restraint — no drifting mind, no flashy extra movements, no impatience. That is already the Confucian program of "cultivating the self" (修身): making the body an entry point for moral discipline. In more advanced stages, students are encouraged to look at their own practice from within, to notice when they chase speed and power at the expense of attitude. This reflective loop is very close to the Neo-Confucian idea of "self-cultivation and nourishing one's nature" (修身养性): technique improves, but the person also becomes calmer, more respectful, and more responsible.

So, in a well-run dojo, the line between "technical training" and "moral education" is deliberately blurred. Bowing, controlled contact, attention to posture, keeping the dojo tidy — all of these are treated as part of karate, not as add-ons. That blended approach is what allows karate, a Japanese martial art, to carry and re-express Confucian and even Song–Ming Neo-Confucian ethics.

5. The body as the subject: Confucian thought in Karate etiquette and moral cultivation

Karate, as it is practiced in many dojos today, does not treat the body as a neutral instrument. The body is the carrier of ritual and therefore the carrier of ethics. This is where Confucian and especially Song–Ming Neo-Confucian ideas become visible. The entrance bow, the bow to the shomen, the bow to the instructor, and the bow before techniques are performed are not there only to make practice look solemn. They are ways of making the practitioner express respect from the body outward, which is exactly how Confucian ritual cosmology imagines moral order — the right gesture, at the right moment, toward the right person, so that the inner intention is stabilized. In that sense, karate etiquette is already a moral framework, not a layer added after technique.

The work on kata (型) shows this even more clearly. Repeating the same sequence, controlling breath, and returning to correct form every time is a very concrete version of "cultivate the self, order the family, govern the state, pacify the world" (修身、齐家、治国、平天下): you start from the smallest unit you can actually control — your posture, your distance, your timing — and you make that orderly. Only then can you speak of wider order. Practitioners are constantly asked to restrain themselves and return to propriety (克己复礼), especially when the movement is difficult or when fatigue sets in. So the goal is not just a clean kata, but a person who can keep inner calm and self-governance under pressure. That is very much the Song–Ming understanding of self-cultivation.

Confucian core virtues — benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness (仁、义、礼、智、信) — are also threaded through competitive practice. A kumite match does not begin with aggression; it begins with bows to the opponent and to the referee. After a point is scored, the bow returns. Technically, these moves "bookend" the exchange, but ethically they say: even in contest we recognize the other as a person. This is a Confucian way of doing competition — conflict without enmity, victory without humiliation — and it keeps dojo relations harmonious.

The match between Neo-Confucian cosmology and karate technique is not accidental either. Neo-Confucianism speaks of a dynamic balance between humans and the natural order, of acting with the flow, of overcoming hardness with what seems soft. Karate has its own language for this: breathing synchronized with movement in kata; issuing power through relaxed structure; in kumite, reading the

opponent's timing rather than forcing one's own. To respond rather than blindly attack, to "ride" an incoming force, is to act in accordance with circumstance (顺势而为) and to let softness temper hardness (以柔克刚) — exactly the sort of moralized naturalism Neo-Confucianism likes.

It is also useful here to look briefly beyond East Asia. Aristotelian virtue ethics tells us that virtues are formed through repeated, embodied practice; karate does something very similar. By repeating ritualized bows, by insisting on respectful language, by performing techniques under rules, the practitioner slowly internalizes 仁、义、礼、智、信 — first as dojo requirements, later as habits that travel into daily life. On the other hand, deontological ethics cares about the rightness of the act itself. Karate has a parallel in its principle of "zun-zhi" (存止) — the demand to stop, to pull strikes, to refuse excess violence even when one is able to deliver it. Here karate and Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism meet again: both say that action must show moral responsibility, not only pursue outcomes.

Put together, this means that in karate the body is the place where Confucianism is rehearsed. Etiquette gives the body a script; repetitive training fixes that script; moral reflection turns the script into character. That is why karate can claim, credibly, to be more than self-defense — it is a training in how to act toward others.

In conclusion, Karate constructs a dynamic moral system through physical training, with its virtue ethics guiding practitioners via daily rituals and competitive rules. As an Asian martial art, Karate integrates the core ideas of Song-Ming Neo-Confucianism, establishing a moral practice system that combines the cultivation of inner virtues with external norms, blending body and mind in a harmonious way.

6. “Emotional connection”: the interaction and etiquette practices between athletes and the Karate discipline

To explore the practical application of Confucian thought in the etiquette and moral cultivation within Karate, and its influence on athletes, this paper collects the practical experiences and insights of several Karate athletes through interviews. The following table provides the basic information of the interviewees to better understand their backgrounds and perspectives.

Table 1. Basic information of interviewees

No.	Age	Training Duration	Occupation	Other Relevant Background
1	30	20 years (2004-2024)	PhD, Waseda University	Trained in Karate as a teenager in a club, later entered university as a Karate-specialist student, and pursued academic and competitive research in Karate.
2	27	6 years (2018-2024)	Club Coach	Transitioned from Taekwondo to Karate in youth, trained in a professional sports school and entered university as a sports-specialist student, now a club coach.
3	17	10 years (2014-2024)	National Karate Athlete, Level 2	

Table 1. (continued)

4	24	10 years (2014-2024)	Club Karate Coach	Trained in Karate at a club during youth, later switched to a sports school, became a national athlete, and joined the national team; now a club Karate coach.
5	26	16 years (2008-2024)	Club Karate Coach	Started Karate training early in 2008 at a sports school, now a club Karate coach.

6.1. Voluntary choice: driven/created by etiquette, constructing and maintaining “close relationships”

6.1.1. "Serendipitous" encounter and initial recognition based on competitive needs

The interviewee initially practiced a different sport, but due to competitive needs, switched from Taekwondo to Karate. During the interview, the respondent mentioned, "Because of the provincial team's requirements, I switched from Taekwondo to Karate. Actually, at first, it was for career development..." (No. 2). Due to professional development needs, the respondent quickly developed an initial competitive recognition of the Karate kumite (sparring) discipline and became familiar with its basic etiquette norms and rules.

6.1.2. From “competitive tool” to “spiritual anchor”

After many years of training in Karate, it became more than just a competitive vehicle for the respondent; it also became a spiritual anchor. In training, the guidance from coaches and the requirements of etiquette helped the respondent develop a strong sense of respect and etiquette, learning to respect both coaches and seniors. On the competition floor, while giving their all in Karate, the off-stage camaraderie also taught the respondent humility through learning from the strong. The respondent stated: “Practicing Karate taught me to respect my teachers and elders, and to be humble. At that moment, I realized this is not just a simple technical competition; it's something that helps me grow” (No. 2). This shows that practicing Karate not only sharpens technical skills but also helps individuals form moral concepts and cultivate good qualities.

6.2. Negotiated adjustment: the interaction between rationality and emotion in martial arts etiquette

6.2.1. "Harmonizing" within rules and cultural differences

Compared to Taekwondo, Karate has more stringent etiquette norms. Karate coaches emphasize not only achieving results but also the importance of proper etiquette and norms during training. One respondent mentioned, "In the past, professional teams only focused on results and neglected many of the etiquette details; whereas this coach requires us to ensure that even the smallest movements follow the correct norms, which made me realize the need to respect the discipline itself." The coach required athletes to neatly organize their protective gear after training, salute each other during practice, and avoid talking while running. These strict demands led the respondent to gain more spiritual growth. This aligns with Confucian "self-cultivation" philosophy, enhancing the respondent's personal development while fostering a sense of reverence for the discipline itself. Such a training atmosphere defines Karate not merely as a competitive sport, but as a serious discipline requiring "self-restraint and return to propriety," respecting opponents and improving oneself.

6.2.2. The dynamic balance between competition and emotion

In Karate's competitive training, the respondent encountered emotional fluctuations. Initially, transitioning from Taekwondo to Karate presented significant differences in rules and tactics, which created a large gap in competition. Furthermore, Karate's traditional Japanese roots led to some bias from the respondent's family. Coupled with the pressure from the demanding sports school training system, the respondent experienced some resistance to the sport for a period of time. However, through the coach's guidance and self-adjustment, the respondent was able to find a balance between competition and emotion, continuing on the path of Karate.

6.2.3. Continuous rational self-reflection: from emotional breakdown to "practice virtue before technique"

Faced with highly skilled opponents in competition, the respondent encountered adversaries whose abilities were far superior. Naturally, fear arose when facing such formidable opponents. However, Karate requires giving one's best effort on the competition floor, respecting the match, and showcasing one's true abilities. The competitive atmosphere instilled confidence in the respondent. During the interview, the respondent also mentioned, "When I wanted to give up, my coach would tell me that results are not everything; we must respect our opponents, respect the competition, and also respect ourselves. That atmosphere of respecting our teachers and elders helped me endure through the pain." This demonstrates that Karate's competitive philosophy of "practice virtue before technique" helps practitioners bravely face challenges and respect the sport.

Karate is not only a technical martial art but also a system of moral cultivation deeply rooted in Confucian ethics. Through an in-depth analysis of Karate's historical background, etiquette norms, and training process, it is clear that the etiquette system, teacher-student relationships, internal cultivation, and moral development in Karate are profoundly influenced by Confucian thought. The concepts of "investigating things to understand," "self-restraint and returning to propriety," and "cultivating oneself and nurturing one's nature" in the Song-Ming School of Thought are fully embodied in Karate, helping practitioners cultivate moral character and seek harmony between body and mind during their technical training.

The process of practicing Karate is not merely about improving technical skills; it also involves the cultivation of personal moral qualities and spiritual growth, reflecting Confucian ideals of "cultivating oneself, managing the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world." Through an analysis of Karate's etiquette, techniques, and inner cultivation, we also observe Karate's cultural inheritance and innovation within the context of globalization. The modernization of Confucian thought and the global spread of Karate form a profound interaction, with each influencing the other, thereby promoting the widespread dissemination of East Asian culture.

7. Conclusion

Through this study, we have gained a deeper understanding of Karate as a comprehensive system of practice with profound cultural significance, as well as a better recognition of the positive impact of Confucian thought on modern society. Karate, as a traditional martial art that integrates ethics, etiquette, and technique, continues to offer important cultural insights for contemporary society. It plays an indispensable role, particularly in promoting social harmony, individual self-cultivation, and global cultural exchange. Therefore, future research can further explore the manifestation of Confucian thought in other East Asian martial arts and their cultural practices, and how these cultural forms can contribute to the moral development and cultural identity of modern society.

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