

# A HISTORY OF CHINESE WRESTLING IN PICTURES

*by BIAN JI*



Artistic disciplines are an indispensable complement to self-expression through sport ; they provide a reflection of its development through the ages and through the world's civilisations. To paint sporting scenes on stone or canvas, depending on the medium most readily available, is to participate, through the artistic representation of a sport, in the very history of that sport. Taking as evidence five ancient illustrations, Bian Ji establishes the long-standing popularity of wrestling in China.

From many paintings, murals and objects of art that have come to light, we have learned that wrestling was very popular in ancient China. Shown here are five pictures in connection with this sport. Figure 1 is found on a double-edged fine-toothed comb in a tomb of the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BC), excavated on the Phoenix Hill in Hubei Province in 1975. Judging from the wrestlers' costume and postures, the game resembles Japan's *sumo* of today. Figure 2 shows a bout engraved on a bronze plaque in the Period of Warring States (475-221 BC), unearthed near the ancient city of Xi'an. Wearing long hair, the contestants are in short shirts and loose-fitting pants that remind us of the present-day Mongolian-style wrestling. No. 3, part of a mural in a tomb of the Eastern Han Dynasty (AD 25-220) near the Hunt Tiger Pavilion in Henan Province, portrays two strongmen — barefooted, stripped to the waist and stretching out their arms in a "bow step". There is no telling which kind of wrestling they are engaged in. Figure 4, discovered on a mural in another Han tomb in Jilin Province, is evidently a wrestling bout of the Korean style. No. 5 is a colour painting of a much later period now kept in the Palace Museum in Beijing — about a

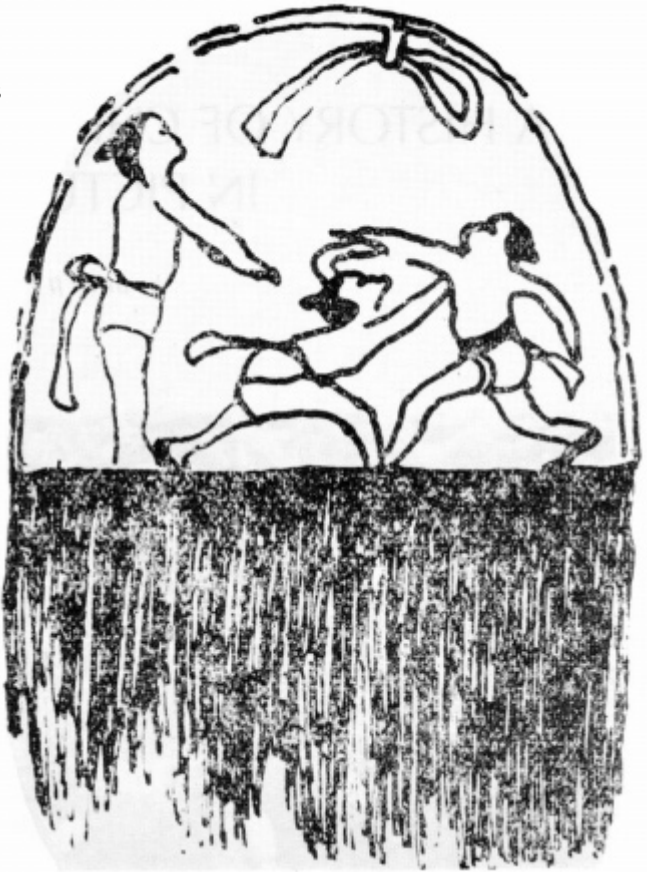


Figure 1

wrestling demonstration in front of an emperor and his officials in the 18th century. At that time, professional wrestlers were trained in special camps called *buku*, their costume consisting of a white shirt, a belt and long trousers tucked in boots. According to historical records, the front and sleeves of a wrestling shirt were strengthened with seven or eight layers of cloth sewn together, as is that used for wrestlers today.

Wrestling in China dates back to 3000 BC, when the warriors of a tribal chieftain named Chi You fought with sharp horns fastened on their heads. Hence the name '*Jiaoli*', which literally means "horn resistance". Later on, wrestling was called by many other different names, such as *jiaoli*, *shijiao*, *zhengjiao* and *xiangpu*. It was included in military training in the Qin Dynasty and later developed into a competitive and spectator sport that allowed the use of the head,

Figure 2





Figure 3

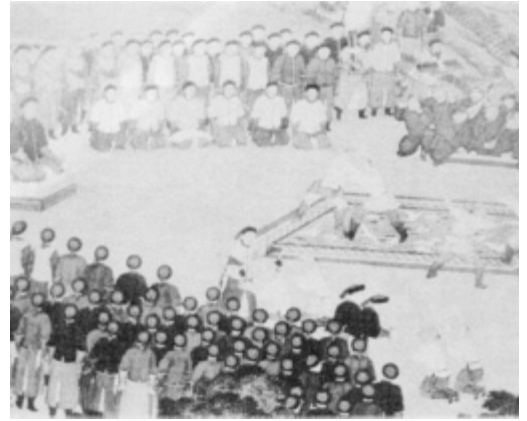
hands and feet and might be compared in many respects to sumo. As a matter of fact, “xiangpu” and “sumo” are written in the same characters, though read with different sounds. Wrestling con-

Figure 4



tests and demonstrations were held at both imperial courts and among the common folk at festive occasions. The Song Dynasty (960-1279) saw the appearance of female wrestlers.

Figure 5



Today, apart from the free-style and Greco-Roman wrestling and judo, the Chinese-style wrestling is enlisted as an official sporting event with unified regulations. Besides, many of China's fifty-five minority nationalities, such as Mongolian, Korean and Uygur, have their own traditional forms of wrestling, each with its own distinctive features.

B.J.

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