

## ISSUE

Autumn 2015  
ISSN 2057-5696

## EDITORS

Paul Bowman  
Benjamin N. Judkins



# MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

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### Journal DOI

10.18573/ISSN.2057-5696

### Issue DOI

10.18573/n.2015.10013

**Martial Arts Studies**

Journal design by Hugh Griffiths

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# EDITORIAL

Paul Bowman and Benjamin N. Judkins

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Four decades after the tipping point of the 'kung fu craze' of the early 1970s that caused their explosion and proliferation, participation in martial arts in the Western world now rivals (and often exceeds) participation in traditional physical cultural practices connected with sport, health and exercise. Taekwondo and taiji are as common in schools, college campuses and community centres around the world as football and tennis; and mixed martial arts (MMA) are now globally bigger business than boxing and wrestling combined. The worldwide explosion in both 'traditional' and new martial arts has been enormous.

Yet, in the world of English language academic publication, the academic study of martial arts has until now remained in the shadows. This is so even though scholars from a range of disciplines have been contributing to diverse international scholarly fields via explorations of the many questions attached to martial arts, culture and society, for some time. Indeed, martial arts studies is indisputably developing in diverse academic fields and across many geographical regions. Clusters of overlapping problematics are emerging within disciplines such as anthropology, cultural studies, ethnography, film studies, history, medicine, psychology, religious studies, political science, sociology, and sports studies.

These studies have developed within discrete disciplines, however, and researchers have rarely engaged in cross-disciplinary dialogue. Yet, there is ample evidence of an international appetite for a publication that could foster cross-disciplinary communication in the interlocking and overlapping realms of martial arts studies. As well as increasing publications, there are growing numbers of conferences and events, around the world.

There are regular academic conferences on martial arts in Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic and in many countries in Asia. Around the world, a growing number of degree programmes involve elements of martial arts studies, including some in the UK and USA. In June 2015, the UK saw the first international interdisciplinary Martial Arts Studies Conference, at Cardiff University. It was so successful that it is now established as an annual event. Participants came from the UK, Australia, Guam, North America, China, Korea, Hong Kong, Japan, South America, Germany, Finland, and France, and represented fields as diverse as anthropology, cultural studies, ethnography, film studies, history, medicine, philosophy, psychology, religious studies, sociology, and sports studies.

This wide national and disciplinary sweep was matched in a broad spectrum of work, spanning from theoretical to practical orientations. As well as pure academic work, there were talks by surgeons, security experts, diplomats, and clinicians involved in research into ways of incorporating elements of martial arts as therapy into treatment for issues such as post-stroke rehabilitation and depression.

In the UK, a martial arts studies research network ([mastudiesrn.org](http://mastudiesrn.org)) has recently been awarded funding by the UK's prestigious Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The network is now the principal UK institution for bringing researchers together in face to face events to advance the study of martial arts and to explore what studying martial arts can contribute to knowledge more widely. Each research network event engages with a cluster of questions around a specific theme, and

involves the participation of academics, researchers, practitioners, and professionals, in order to explore core social and cultural questions. In this way the research network seeks to contribute to the stimulation of multi-disciplinary conversations that advance our understanding of martial arts in broader cultural contexts.

This journal, *Martial Arts Studies*, both feeds from and back into these exciting new spaces. It aspires to stimulate and enrich the development of research and scholarship in martial arts studies by publishing the highest quality interdisciplinary work in the emergent field. For while there are many growing areas of publication on many aspects of martial arts, there has until now been very little in the way of a coherent academic discourse, and certainly very little in the way of scholarly journal presence. Even within academic book publication – which ranges from the most light and popular to the most serious and scholarly – texts often feel like they are isolated islands. *Martial Arts Studies* aims to connect some otherwise isolated disciplinary discourses by fostering cross-disciplinary dialogue in a rigorous, peer reviewed academic context.

To ensure the highest academic standards, we first assembled a prestigious editorial advisory panel, made up of many of the key and most esteemed academics from multiple disciplines from across the university and around the world. These are Oleg Benesch (University of York), Stephen Chan (SOAS, University of London), Greg Downey (Macquarie University), Douglas Farrer (University of Guam), Adam Frank (University of Central Arkansas), Thomas A. Green (Texas A&M University), T. J. Hinrichs (Cornell University), Leon Hunt (Brunel University), Felipe P. Jocano Jr (University of the Philippines, Diliman), Gina Marchetti (Hong Kong University), Meaghan Morris (The University of Sydney), Daniel Mroz (University of Ottawa), Meir Shahar (Tel Aviv University), Dale Spencer (Carleton University), Douglas Wile (Alverno College), and Phillip Zarrilli (Exeter University, Emeritus). We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all of our editorial advisory panel, for having both confidence in and enthusiasm for this project.

After establishing our editorial advisory panel, we were delighted to become an imprint of Cardiff University Press. Cardiff University is one of the UK's elite research universities, and Cardiff University Press is blazing a trail by pioneering a radically ethical open access publishing model. For, whereas many 'open access' publications actually involve hidden charges (such as charges to authors, who have to pay to publish their work), Cardiff University Press insists that open access should mean genuinely free – or, in their words, 'free in and free out': free for authors to publish, and free for anyone to read.

Consequently, we believe that *Martial Arts Studies* has started as it means to go on: with both intellectual and ethical integrity, and in the spirit of genuine open-ended interdisciplinary inquiry, open to the unexpected and as yet unknown, whilst insisting on the highest academic standards.

We could not have got this far without the invaluable assistance of several individuals and institutions. Our editorial assistant and book reviews editor, Kyle Barrowman, has been tireless in his enthusiasm and contributions to all aspects of the journal. Alice Percival at Cardiff University Press has been extremely helpful to us on some key technical matters. And Hugh Griffiths, a PhD student and colleague at Cardiff University, has been exceptionally generous and helpful in providing both a great deal of time and a high level of professional expertise in advising, devising, designing, and producing the journal. We offer our sincere thanks to all of them, and to the fellow travellers who have encouraged us to see this project through to the present exciting moment – the beginning.

## CONTRIBUTOR

Paul Bowman (Cardiff University) is author of nine books, including *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* (2015). He is founder and director of the AHRC-funded *Martial Arts Studies Research Network* and co-editor of the journal *Martial Arts Studies*. He is currently working on a book called *Mythologies of Martial Arts*.

## ASKING THE QUESTION

# IS MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES AN ACADEMIC FIELD?

## PAUL BOWMAN

## DOI

10.18573/J.2015.10015

## KEYWORDS

martial arts studies  
disciplinarity  
interdisciplinarity  
cultural studies

## CITATION

Bowman, Paul. 2015. 'Asking the Question: Is Martial Arts Studies an Academic Field?', *Martial Arts Studies* 1, 3-19.

## ABSTRACT

This article proposes that the emerging field of martial arts studies will benefit by engaging as thoroughly with questions of disciplinarity as with questions of martial arts. It argues that thorough and self-reflexive attention to the problems and possibilities associated with academic work as such will greatly enrich martial arts studies and enable it to develop into as vital and dynamic a field as possible. The article explores martial arts studies in terms of the recent history of disciplinary transformation in the university via the case of cultural studies, and then goes on to explore two different kinds of approach to the academic study of martial arts (first, the work of Farrer and Whalen-Bridge, and then that of Stanley Henning).

The article is an extract from Chapter One of *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* (Bowman 2015). It is reproduced here with kind permission of the publisher, Rowman & Littlefield International.

## INTRODUCTION

### MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES - DISRUPTING DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES

The subtitle of this book is as important as the main title, if not more so. This is because the book is as much invested in *Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* as it is in *Martial Arts Studies*. What this means is that the book not only offers arguments about martial arts studies in terms of academic disciplines and their boundaries; it also seeks to enact at least some of the disruption to disciplinary boundaries that it proposes. This gives the book a unique – some may say peculiar – character. It is both *about* martial arts studies *in terms of* disciplinary boundaries, and it also disrupts certain disciplinary boundaries as a result of the ways it studies martial arts.

All of this may strike some people as odd, eccentric or excessive. On the one hand, readers interested primarily in martial arts may wonder what kind of a book this is, that looks on first glance to be about *martial arts*, but that on second glance is actually about something called martial arts *studies*, and that for some reason feels the need to connect this with a project of disrupting disciplinary boundaries. On the other hand, readers who may already be familiar with some of my other works – whether on matters of cultural studies, deconstruction and theories of intervention and agency [Bowman 2007a, 2008, 2012, 2013b], or on the impact of Bruce Lee on global popular culture [Bowman 2010b, 2013a], for example – may have different kinds of question. For instance, such readers may notice that the title and subtitle appear to be at war with each other. First, the main title, *Martial Arts Studies*, seems to propose a (new) discipline or field. But upon the announcement of this, the subtitle immediately stipulates some kind of correlated disrupting of the very thing just proposed, namely disciplinary boundaries. On such a reading, the question would become one of whether the aim is about the establishment of a new discipline or the disruption of the very possibility of stable disciplinary boundaries. These are very different kinds of objectives – unless the disruption to disciplinary boundaries is one caused simply by the emergence of another discipline within an already overcrowded academic space. In other words, the questions may be posed like this: is this about jostling for space, subverting the established allocation of space, or deconstructing the very idea of space?

Although this work does make certain claims and arguments about an emerging academic movement or discourse that has been called martial arts studies [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a; Liu 2011] both as it is currently emerging and as it might develop, my agenda is not to stake out, map out and measure a territory (a ‘field’), or to presume to make decisions about what is inside and what is outside or what is good and what is bad ‘martial arts studies’. Rather, my agenda

is to argue that the self-conscious elaboration of such a field that is currently taking place should proceed in full awareness of the stakes and critical potentials of such elaboration and construction. Martial arts studies need neither rely on nor ‘be like’ the disciplines and fields from which it is currently emerging. Its objects, topics, foci, and problematics, its approaches, methodologies, and ways of writing and discoursing, need neither mimic nor be beholden to the practices and protocols of other disciplines and fields. Rather, the objects of martial arts studies, the foci, the questions and relations into which its studies engage may be constructed in ways that disrupt and reconfigure the fields from which martial arts studies emerged. As such, martial arts studies could constitute an intervention into more than its own space, an intervention that challenges established norms and proprieties in a range of fields. This may seem inconsequential, but in the pages and chapters that follow, I hope to demonstrate some of the ways in which academic discourses are political and consequential in some perhaps surprising ways.

The underpinnings or ingredients of this argument will not be obvious to all readers. Indeed, these few prefatory paragraphs may already have signalled to some that this is not likely to be a book for them. Nevertheless, to clarify this matter, in the following pages, I will introduce many of the main concerns that will be developed and explored more fully in the subsequent chapters.

Readers who have managed to stomach these opening paragraphs may be inclined to read on. Other readers may put the book back on the shelf or leave the preview pages of the website on which they found it. This is undoubtedly not a book for everyone interested in martial arts. It is a book for those concerned with questions of the academic study of martial arts, and it seeks to persuade such a readership of the sometimes subtle but always present and active place and work of *disciplinarity*, and of the value and virtue of disrupting disciplinary boundaries. Of this, much more will be said. But first we should turn to the object evoked in the main title: martial arts studies.



## MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES VERSUS STUDIES OF MARTIAL ARTS

In diverse geographical and disciplinary spaces, the phrase ‘martial arts studies’ is increasingly circulating as a term to describe a growing field of scholarly interest and academic activity. Indeed, many academic fields already engage with martial arts in their particular ways. But, half way through the second decade of the 21st century, the term ‘martial arts studies’ is increasingly being used not only as a designation to refer to and connect work that is already being done in different disciplines, but also as a question. The question might be phrased like this: although there are various sorts of studies of martial arts, is there, or might there be, such a thing as a unique field of martial arts studies? [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011b; Judkins 2012-; García and Spencer 2013]

Studies of martial arts exist, in a wide variety of disciplines: in history, anthropology, psychology, area studies, sports studies, sociology, literary studies, peace studies, religious and philosophical studies, media studies and film studies; even political economy and branches of medicine could be said to have a range of versions of martial arts studies. These fields are certainly hospitable to studies of martial arts, at least provided such studies are carried out in terms of relevant disciplinary concerns and methods. But the book you are currently reading is perhaps the first to engage directly and in a sustained manner with the discourse of ‘martial arts studies’ as such. This is so even though it may often seem to fly in the face of respectable disciplinary concerns and methods. But this is because respectable disciplinary concerns and methods are part of its focus. So, rather than following any one disciplinary approach, this book exists and operates in terms of a cultivated critical awareness of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of actual and possible approaches to martial arts studies. It is concerned with the consequences of the often tacit decisions which police disciplinary borders, norms, proprieties and conventions. So it explicitly and implicitly explores the orientations and limitations of existing approaches, in order to clarify the stakes and to make a case for the future directions in which martial arts studies might be elaborated, in order perhaps to grow into a unique field; perhaps a field disruptive of the idea of unique fields.

It does so because at its current stage of emergence and development, martial arts studies requires some work. If martial arts studies is to blossom into a field – a discrete field of academic study – this will not just happen, as if naturally. Rather, martial arts studies must be *created*. Establishing what it is requires something rather more than simply surveying all of the academic work done on martial arts in the different disciplines, and stringing it all together, so as to produce some kind of archive or encyclopaedia of shared knowledge. As illuminating as such a work might be, academic disciplines, en masse, don’t work like that.

Different disciplines have very different approaches, even when they are approaching the ‘same’ thing. Each discipline is a foreign country to the others: they do things differently. This is so much so that it is not only their ‘approaches’ to martial arts that are different, but also their very conceptualisations of ‘martial arts’, as well as their guiding questions and the sorts of concerns and values that animate them. Accordingly, this study begins from the proposition that any effort to combine, organise and synthesize the insights of all of the current scholarship on martial arts would not in itself produce evidence of a coherent field of martial arts studies. It may even be *unhelpful*, at this stage, in this study, to proceed in the manner of the textbook, the survey or the literature review, by constructing a narrative or encyclopaedic account of something called martial arts studies scholarship – an account of all of the work on martial arts carried out all over the sciences, arts, humanities and social sciences, all over the world. Such projects will always be interesting and stimulating in many ways. But for present purposes it is not the best approach. This is because, for all of their many merits and values as introductions and overviews, textbooks, surveys and literature reviews are arguably obliged to overlook, ignore or downplay considerations of the implications and consequences of the inevitable deep disagreements and incompatibilities between the paradigms of disciplinary approaches. They are limited in their ability to explore or reflect upon the reasons for disciplinary differences, as well as the significance and implications of such differences.

Engaging with questions of the field requires a different sort of focus: a kind of double-focus [Bowman 2008a]. Indeed, my argument is that the development of martial arts studies requires a focus not just on ‘martial arts’ but also on the question of ‘studies’. One requirement of this is to engage with the problems that spring up because of the differences between disciplinary paradigms, or disciplinary worlds [Lyotard 1984], and to entertain the possibility that looking squarely at these issues could – but need not – lead to two equally unsatisfactory alternatives.

*Alternative one.* When different disciplines come face to face with each other, sometimes the encounter yields only mutual distaste. Think of the ‘culture wars’, the ‘Sokal affair’, or the tendency of academics in one field to joke about other disciplines being ‘Mickey Mouse subjects’, for instance. So the first possible outcome of any kind of engagement with disciplinary difference involves *fragmentation*, or the moving of approaches away from each other. This is underpinned by a sense that, when it comes to differences between two disciplines, ‘never the twain shall meet’. This kind of splitting apart is based on disagreements about premises and methodologies, epistemologies, values, investments and orientations, and a closure to what might be called ‘the otherness of the other’ or ‘the difference of the different’ [Lyotard 1988]. In fact, this type of splitting amounts to little more than a demonstration and a consolidating reproduction of disciplinary demarcations.

*Alternative two.* The exposure of two different approaches to each other can culminate in the more or less explicit take-over or 'hegemonization' of one by the other. In this situation, the terms and concepts of both fields may appear to be preserved, but one paradigm will quietly rewrite and reconfigure the meanings and statuses of the terms appropriated or 'incorporated' from the other. This will involve subtle processes of translation and displacements of meaning, but it still amounts to a demonstration of the way disciplines work to preserve and strengthen themselves.

However, if martial arts studies is to amount to any kind of distinct field or a unique development, then it should remain vigilant to the possible consequences of following either of these common trajectories. The former would prevent martial arts studies from coalescing at all; the latter would ensure that martial arts studies always remained an expression or subsection of an existing discipline; and both of these options would amount to the same thing: that martial arts studies as such would not exist.

In order to work towards a new, unique or discrete mode of existence and operation, then, it is important to be sensitive to the slippery logic of disciplinarity [Mowitt 1992; Bowman 2007]. Of course, some academics, researchers and students interested in the questions of how and why to study martial arts may regard such a double focus as pointlessly or uselessly 'theoretical' and 'merely academic' in the most pejorative and dismissive of senses. However, as I hope will become apparent, my argument throughout *Martial Arts Studies* will be that a focus on the logic of disciplinarity is actually doubly relevant for any study of martial arts. This is because martial arts are themselves scenes in which logics of disciplinarity, or disciplinary logics, are always in play. Martial arts are disciplines and contested scenes of disciplinarity. Questions of discipline and disciplinarity are either manifestly present and hotly contested, in all kinds of ways, in martial arts, or they are just a scratch below the surface away from flaring up.

Like martial arts themselves, then, martial arts studies must be at once theoretical and practical. All approaches to martial arts rely on a theory – of what to do, and how to do it, and why. Similarly, martial arts studies cannot but be fundamentally theoretical, even if avowedly interested in matters deemed to be practical. Equally, just as all martial arts – no matter how avowedly 'pure' or 'unique' they may be – are always surely hybrid, so martial arts studies must navigate the fact of its own unique kind of impurity. As I have already suggested, if it ever wants to be more than the sum of the bits and pieces of different disciplines that go into work on martial arts, then it needs to take seriously the question of how its many and varied 'ingredients' could genuinely produce something new and distinct.

Martial arts discourses of all kinds are arguably preoccupied with matters of purity, impurity, continuity and change. They have a fraught relationship with ideas such as authenticity, tradition and essence, on the one hand, and invention, innovation, revolution and mixing, on the other. Many arts make sometimes incredible claims about improbably long unbroken histories, and have incredible origin myths. They make such claims in order to claim that from the outset the art was pure and complete. However, history invariably reveals complexity, chiasmus, divergence, hybridity and even dislocation and discontinuity between now and then, here and there. Similarly, martial arts studies must be sensitive and attentive to its complex origins and contingent development. It can never pretend to have been born in the blink of an eye, out of nothing. It will always owe a debt to other disciplines and discourses from which it emerged. Moreover, it will always remain in complex and ongoing relationships with these discourses. However, my hope is that martial arts studies might come to be not only different to the disciplines and discourses that predated and in some sense produced it; hopefully, it will be able to produce new insights and approaches that will then feed back into and modify the disciplines from which it as a field is currently emerging.

## THE DOUBLE FOCUS OF MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

Accordingly, this book approaches the study of martial arts in terms of a double focus. It all hinges on the theme of *institution*. Two of its basic premises are (1) that martial arts are best understood as institutions and (2) that the ways martial arts are thought about, known, discussed and studied are also institutional – whether connected to institutions or productive of institutions. For these reasons, the book proposes that the concept of 'institution' is fundamental to martial arts studies, and that by approaching both martial arts 'themselves' and martial arts studies 'itself' in terms of a focus on 'institution' (understood as both noun and verb) we will be able to unlock unique insights into martial arts. But not only martial arts: also scholarship, pedagogy, history, subjectivity, ideology, knowledge-production, embodiment, and many other aspects of culture.

Another key proposition of this book is that media representations have long been a powerful force in martial arts discourse, at least (or most clearly) for the last half century. I mention this here because an acknowledgement that film and media are often *constitutive forces* in martial arts theory and practice is something that is very often downplayed or even written out of studies of martial arts in culture and society. This book, however, seeks to redress the balance to some extent by frequently foregrounding the ways in which film, television, documentary, gaming and other forms of representation/construction

have an impact on martial arts discourses and practices. The fact that many academic approaches to martial arts either subordinate, fail to recognise, or appear unable to deal with 'media supplements' to 'real life' is regarded as something of a royal road to the conscious and unconscious orientations of many studies.

An exhaustive study of this relation would require a volume or more in itself. However, rather than ignoring it, *Martial Arts Studies* argues that representation, mediation and mediatization are not mere secondary or supplementary add-ons, to be ignored or discounted. Rather, it regards them as matters that fundamentally complicate and muddy the waters of martial arts culture and discourse, so much that the field cannot simply be organised by binaries and value systems organised by matters of truth, falsity, fact and fiction [Chan 2000; Bowman 2010b, 2013a]. Rather, such myth and media-related dimensions demand that martial arts studies be organised by paradigms, theories, methodologies and orientations that engage with epistemological and ontological complexity, and specifically by paradigms that do not dismiss, subordinate or remain blind to the problems and problematics involved in mediatization, representation, discourse and ideology.

In setting out the stakes and putting forward a case for some of the kinds of orientations and approaches that the emerging field could encompass, *Martial Arts Studies* draws heavily on developments in the theoretical fields of poststructuralism, cultural studies, media studies and postcolonial studies. It argues that martial arts studies cannot but be an *interdisciplinary* field, but more significantly that this means it may well have an *antidisciplinary* effect. This is an argument that may take quite some elaboration. Its starting points are studies that have rigorously and critically engaged with the topics of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity. Stated baldly, *Martial Arts Studies* argues that 'true' interdisciplinarity is never a simple pick-n-mix process. It is rather a minefield, and a battlefield.

This may seem to be an excessively theoretical and academic argument. However, it relates to matters that are not confined to academia. As I have already proposed, interdisciplinarity in academia is not dissimilar to interdisciplinarity in martial arts: in both realms, one cannot merely add to or subtract from an institution without the institution changing as a result. As a consequence, there will always be deep-seated resistances to interdisciplinarity *qua* change. Adding, altering or subtracting always threatens to transform the institution, so all manner of resistances spring up in response to interdisciplinary work [Barthes 1977; Weber 1987; Mowitt 2003]. Put differently: any study, any approach, always involves stakes, allegiances, values and consequences. Wherever there are significant processes of adding, subtracting, combining or recombining in interdisciplinary ways, there will always be disciplinary resistances, hurdles and obstacles to tackle.

In awareness of these issues, and engaging with them in terms of the problems of academic interdisciplinarity and in terms of related matters in martial arts 'innovations', *Martial Arts Studies* makes a case for constructing the field of martial arts studies according to the terms of problematics drawn from poststructuralism, cultural studies, media studies and postcolonial studies. My argument is that these coordinates can be regarded as key because of the lessons that each of these approaches incorporated into their own emergence. In a sense, I treat these 'approaches' as complex *responses* to perceived problems of institutions, hierarchies, and status quos [Chow 1993; Morris and Hjort 2012]. In other words, I regard them as non-standard disciplines, at least to the extent that they involve explicit critiques of disciplinarity. As such, these fields involve perspectives on and critiques of institutions, critiques that have gone on to institute viewpoints that I argue are highly relevant for martial arts studies.

As non-standard or even 'antidisciplinary' approaches, these coordinates are also to be understood as both disruptive of approaches in other disciplines, and productive of a potentially unique landscape of martial arts studies. In this way, *Martial Arts Studies* proposes a field that both emerges out of and yet differs from many disciplinary locations, and which has the critical potential to feed back into and transform those disciplines.

From one perspective, this may seem to be very little, almost nothing – at best a shadow of the kinds of claims made for certain disciplinary innovations in the past – of the order: '*We are currently witnessing the emergence of a new field of study, one that will challenge established knowledge, transform the academic disciplines, and reconfigure conventional modes of knowledge production*'. How many times have academics read statements like this? Such sentences may strike some readers as exciting and engaging. But to others they will sound formulaic and familiar, possibly to the point of being tedious. This is because nowadays the declaration that a new subject is going to be 'radical' and 'transformative' is very passé. This situation has come about because we are now arguably at the tail end of at least half a century of precisely this sort of 'revolutionary' transformation of the university disciplines – a transformation carried out in large part through the emergence of ever more new disciplines, new fields and new interdisciplinary explorations.

In the UK, for instance – but in a way that moved far beyond the shores of the UK – the main cycle of the 'revolutionary transformation' of the arts, humanities and social sciences was arguably kicked off by the foundation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in 1964 [Hall 1992; Bowman 2007, 2008, 2013c]. The ensuing period of transformation has been characterised by the institution of more and more new subject areas, defined through

use of the suffix 'studies'. Cultural studies, media studies, women's studies, queer studies, disability studies, television studies, peace studies, migration studies – even business studies, sports studies, science studies, tourism and management studies – you name it – all of these and more can be said to have blazed the trail and paved the way for the emergence of as many 'studies'-suffix subjects as can be conceived and as can produce articles, books, journals and degree courses [During 2011]. Certainly, many of the 'new' subjects and fields have indeed radically challenged and transformed established knowledge, established academic disciplines and conventional modes of knowledge production [Bowman 2008a]. But inevitably, over time, claims about the radical potential of this or that new 'studies'-suffix subject' have come to seem narcissistic and overblown.

In this context, a pertinent question about something called 'martial arts studies' might be: whereabouts in this continuum of possibilities – stretching from radical transformation to business as usual – might such a subject, field or discipline be situated? Could we make grand claims for it, as something truly new and transformative (and if so, 'transformative' of what)? And why? Such questions deserve to be addressed to martial arts studies – if it can even be said to exist. And does martial arts studies really exist? Is it one thing? Or is such a proposition really just fanciful thinking? Are we rather merely talking about a miscellaneous smattering of disparate books and articles, produced here and there by unconnected thinkers working on diverse topics with diverse orientations and conceptualisations? If it does not yet exist fully or properly, should it be invented, and if so, as what sort of a field or discipline? Tackling such questions requires some sense of what it means for anything to be regarded as a discipline, subject area or field. Only in light of establishing a sense of this will it be time to ask about what sort of a discipline, subject area or field martial arts studies might be or become – whether somehow radical and transformative, or whether merely novel or niche. The form of the answers to all of this will depend upon what aims, objects and methods such a new field might involve, and to what ends.

As for the question of whether martial arts studies already exists: in the institutional world of university degree courses, martial arts studies definitely does exist. There are university institutions with established degrees named 'martial arts studies', and others where students can major or minor in martial arts studies [Wile 2014: 8]. In other words, under this and other names, the academic, physical, cultural, philosophical and vocational study of martial arts exists in different sorts of degree programmes all over the world. In this literal though limited empirical institutional sense, martial arts studies clearly exists. However, on closer inspection, the martial arts studies degree programmes and the treatment of martial arts within

subject areas related to sports studies, health and fitness and so on overwhelmingly tend to approach the object according to the concerns either of established disciplinary concerns (such as those of history, anthropology, area studies, psychology, physical education, sports science, management, business, etc.) or according to a vocational agenda: the advertising for martial arts studies degrees typically suggests that they are orientated towards producing graduates qualified for jobs such as teacher of physical education, health and fitness consultant, sport and leisure manager, or even bodyguard or government security operative. The website of the University of Bridgeport degree in martial arts studies, for instance, suggests that:

**Students may choose one of several career tracks in criminal justice, health sciences, or business and may go on to pursue careers in the medical sciences, business, psychology, human services, or media. Students may also choose to pursue graduate study in areas such as global development or international law.**  
[Bridgeport n.d.-a]

The same page then lists the following 'career tracks': martial arts instructor, business owner, sports psychologist, therapist, journalist, media teacher or college professor, criminologist, DEA agent, FBI agent, INS agent, probation officer, secret service, nutritionist, recreation therapist. The major syllabus itself is made up of modules covering the History of Martial Arts, Martial Arts and East Asian Thought, Psychosocial Aspects of Martial Arts, Martial Arts School Development, The Dao of Business, Martial Arts and Research Methods, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, Survey of the Martial Arts, Communication and the Martial Arts, Image and Reality in the Martial Arts, Internship, and Senior Thesis/Presentation. Then there is a Taekwondo Track, involving Issues in Taekwondo, Self-Defence, Taekwondo I, II and III; a Japanese Martial Arts Track, involving Issues in Japanese Martial Arts, Judo, Karate, Kobudo Practica, Kata/Kumite Conditioning; and a Taiji Track, involving Issues in Chinese Martial Arts, Taiji Practice, and Qigong Training [Bridgeport n.d.-b]. Thus, one might propose: although one cannot entirely gauge the full nature of the content of each module within the degree course, although one cannot presume to know in advance exactly what the 'issues' in taekwondo, taiji, etc. may be deemed to be, and just as that content can and most likely will vary and change over time, this looks to be a distinctly practical course, in two senses: first in the sense of being focused on practical dimensions of martial arts, and second in the sense of being vocational.

Now, to the extent that any instituted version of martial arts studies marches to the beat of a pre-established agenda (such as being consigned to being 'case studies' in sports science or psychology, or knowledge of native cultures in anthropology or area studies, or 'how

to get a job' in one or more branches of the 'martial arts industries'), one might question whether we are dealing with anything truly new or distinct at all. For, to be truly 'new', one might expect a subject area or discipline logically to involve a fairly large dose of *difference* – specifically difference from what is done in existing disciplines.

What this means can be illustrated by a quick (but crucial) consideration of one interesting case of academic 'newness' to be found in the history of the evolution of the university: namely, the case of cultural studies, as it blossomed during the 1980s and 1990s. Born in the 1960s, cultural studies was institutionalised as a 'subject area' or 'field' within universities. Its key mouthpieces have always steadfastly refused the designation of cultural studies as a 'discipline'. So it was overwhelmingly thought of by cultural studies theorists themselves as being characterised by or establishing a kind of shared identity more by way of its *shared problematics*, or sets of gnawing problems, themes and issues, than by a shared 'object' [Hall 1992]. Thus, the term 'cultural studies' specified first and foremost a *problematic* or *set of problematics*. This was (or these were) inextricably related to agency, power and (in)equality; and such problematics were initially explored and elaborated under the headings of gender, race and class questions [McRobbie 1992]. Soon, evermore areas, such as those related to place, identity, technology and other types of symbolic structure and forms of power entered into its purview [Birchall and Hall 2006]. At the same time, cultural studies was characterised by an openness to the other, to the different, the un- or under-examined [Hall 2002]. It was hospitable to experimental approaches [and] to unexpected objects of study. In this regard, at least, the very possibility of the easy emergence of martial arts studies today cannot be dissociated from a certain indebtedness to the trailblazing work of cultural studies, as a field which forged ahead in the study of new objects and practices in new ways, and thereby attracted the flak of academic disapproval and even occasional media scandal [Hall 1992]. The loosening of disciplinarity forged by 'scandalous' innovations in cultural studies in some sense blazed the trail that enables martial arts studies and other new fields to emerge.

During the first major period of taking stock of what cultural studies was, had become and might go on to become, John Storey noted that a 'proper' academic discipline might be defined by a collective sharing of 'the object of study[,] the basic assumptions which underpin the method(s) of approach to the object of study (and) the history of the discipline itself' [Storey 1996: 1]. Of course, the vast – potentially infinite – field of 'culture' always meant that cultural studies could not have *one* shared object of study. And therefore there might never be a shared 'method' or 'approach' to anything. But, to cut a long (and multiple) story short, one might propose that cultural studies was organised into a kind of identity with a kind of shared disciplinary

history to the extent that it involved a shared commitment to what might be called cultural politics [Bowman 2013b].

Arguably, cultural studies was a unique and challenging field, one that did substantially transform the academy [Mowitt 2003]. Yet, clearly, a lot of the 'ingredients' that went into cultural studies had neither been born in cultural studies nor would they stay in cultural studies. No one can claim a monopoly on attention to issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, marginalisation, exclusion, etc. Accordingly, the development of 'cultural studies' went hand in hand with events that might be regarded either as the disciplinary fragmentations and divisions of cultural studies or as the increased generation and institutionalisation of ever more subjects *like* cultural studies. In either interpretation, what is clear is that all such 'studies' subjects were elaborated under the sign of the political: their paradigms were organised by questions of the political dimensions and ramifications of x, y, or z [Young 1992; Bowman 2008a]. On the other hand, at the same time as this was taking place, numerous other 'studies' subjects emerged that were clearly not organised by anything like a 'new' paradigm. Business studies would exemplify this equivalent (even if apparently politically or ideologically opposite)<sup>1</sup> countertendency.

In the context of this discussion: where might 'martial arts studies' come to be placed? Will it involve a disciplinary agreement about the *object* of study ('martial arts')? Will enquirers share 'basic assumptions', that will come to 'underpin' the method(s) of approach to the object of study? Will it come to have an agreed shared history? Will it matter? After all, academic fields are not renowned for being sites of agreement. Nevertheless, an important question is this: even if martial arts studies is elaborated as a field of *disagreement* vis-à-vis *all* of these things, will it be organised by something like a shared problematic or paradigm? Will this problematic be unique to martial arts studies, or borrowed from and shared with other academic disciplines and fields? If so, which ones, and why? This is an open matter, a matter to be decided, and determined by the orientation of *research* into martial arts.

Research into martial arts is primary because any possible degree courses in martial arts studies will ultimately come to be organised by research publications on the range of topics regarded as defining the field. However, because the object 'martial arts' will be conceptualised and approached very differently depending on the context and

1 The self-styled radicalism of some cultural studies would tend to place business or management studies in opposition to the ethical and political concerns of cultural studies. However, many have argued that any interest or investment in culture and/or society cannot be divorced from an interest or investment in the questions of its **management**.



orientation of the formulation of the term, therefore the publications selected to organise the field will be determined more by implicit or explicit disciplinary affiliation than by anything necessary or inherent in the term 'martial arts'. It is clear, for example, that the definitions constructed, the sets of questions asked, and the methodologies used to explore them will be more than likely to differ fundamentally between sciences, arts, sociology, theology and philosophy. The philosophical questions posed by some Western approaches to taijiquan, for instance, which relate to cosmology and ideology, etc. [Raposa 2003], could hardly be said to be pertinent to the various kinds of Western studies of taijiquan in relation to matters such as knee function, ageing, injury or post-operative convalescence in and around the field of medicine [Zetaruk et al. 2005]. But equally, more subtle but no less significant differences arise because of the different sorts of focus that are possible within even related fields: Assunção's historical treatment of the Brazilian martial art of capoeira, for instance [Assunção 2005], is notably different to Downey's anthropological treatment of the 'same' topic [Downey 2005], which focuses very much on questions of the body and pedagogy, rather than history. Then, Downey's treatment of the body differs again from Adam Frank's focus on it in his study of taijiquan [Frank 2006]. The implications of the potential consequences of the orientation of individual research become clear when we consider the fact that García and Spencer went as far as to organise a collection on martial arts in which all of the contributions were required to be organised by Loïc Wacquant's [re]formulation of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of 'habitus' [García and Spencer 2013]. Such a project has been clearly designed to push the approach of Wacquant's 'carnal sociology', and with it, therefore, a certain kind of sociological materialist phenomenology. This is not necessarily a 'bad thing'. But it is crucially important to be alert to the stakes and consequences of methodological or disciplinary choices, and the effects they have on determining what may become regarded as proper and good, and reciprocally improper and bad.

Other than in the terms of work in extant disciplines, the birth of martial arts studies as a subject area or field was perhaps announced most clearly in the editors' introduction to a 2011 collection, *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World*. In their editorial introduction, Douglas Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge put it like this: 'The outlines of a newly emerging field – martial arts studies – appear in the essays collected here' [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 1]. Thereupon, they offer a reflection on the problems and possibilities of one possible type of martial arts studies – namely, that which would be organised by a focus on *embodiment* (hence the book's title). As they propose, at the outset, some scholars may eye such a project with suspicion: 'the subject of martial arts studies may cause some readers to pause' [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 2]. To their

mind this is because the very proposition of studying martial arts within and even as a field 'invokes a series of disturbing dialectical linkages', or associations, 'between philosophy, religion and violence, self-defense and aggression, Buddhism and brutality' [2]. In other words, many academics, inculcated with certain sorts of cultural value combined with what one can only assume to be media stereotypes about martial arts philosophy and violence, such as those furnished by many films and television programmes since the 1970s, will be ill-inclined to take seriously the proposition that martial arts could be a serious field of study.

To this we might add that, along with the likelihood of a suspicion about the validity of 'martial arts studies' arising because of the effect and influence of mediated 'kung fu connotations', suspicion and resistance is likely to be compounded by a rather older 'Western' prejudice: namely, a tradition of prejudice against *the body itself* in Western theology and philosophy [Gilbert and Pearson 1999]. A Western prejudice against the body has often been discussed and diagnosed in academic circles at least since Max Weber in the 1930s [Weber 2002]. It arises arguably as a consequence of Christianity's fear of sins of the flesh. This yielded a general distrust of the body per se [Gilbert and Pearson 1999; Wile 2014]. Moreover, Jacques Derrida's influential approach to questions of the values and orientations of 'the West' strongly suggest that the exclusion or subordination of 'the body' in Western scholarship is the flipside of the overwhelming Western philosophical and theological tendency to privilege matters of the mind and the word – what Derrida called the West's 'logocentricity' [Derrida 1976].

Thus, Farrer and Whalen-Bridge propose: 'In Western academe, precisely because martial arts seem like an awkward pretender to "knowledge", the problems associated with embodied knowledge and scholarly resistance to it are apparent'. Chief among these, they suggest, is that 'the growth of martial arts studies has almost certainly been stunted by one of the paradoxes of postcolonialism'. This 'paradox' involves the problem of difference and legitimation – a problem that may be explained as follows: established approaches to knowledge are sceptical of and resistant to *different* approaches to knowledge [Lyotard 1984, 1988]. Accordingly, established forms of knowledge cannot easily countenance 'different knowledges', and cannot easily deal with propositions relating to different scholarly knowledges of knowledge, different academic discourses about it, different academic understandings of understanding, and so on [Bowman 2007]. *Established* approaches and *established* bodies of knowledge are what they are because they conform to more or less agreed processes of verification, validation and legitimation. Anything that falls outside of established processes of verification and legitimation cannot but be regarded

as invalid and illegitimate. Thus, ‘different knowledges’, ‘alternative knowledges’, etc., in all realms, are always and already suspect. Such are the problems of difference.

However, rather than championing *difference* and *different approaches* as being necessarily virtuous, Farrer and Whalen-Bridge propose that what might be regarded as yet another version of the ‘legitimation crisis in knowledge’ [Lyotard 1984] is not helped when ‘the conceptual apparatus of embodied thinking, in its reflexive effort to liberate the body from its role as mind’s subordinate other, too often goes too far in the direction of what Spivak has called “strategic essentialism”’ [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 2]. With this, what is introduced is the idea that there is – paradoxically, and ironically – a risk of *essentialism* entering into studies that seek to champion the complexity of ‘the body’. Essentialism here can take the form of hypostatizing and reifying ‘the body’ – as if ‘the body’ were one fixed and unified knowable thing.

Of course, studies of the body take many forms and have a range of traditions, including studies of body technologies [Foucault 1977], techniques of the body [Mauss 1992], bodies’ propensities and capacities, and so on. Thinkers like Foucault [1977], Bourdieu [1977], Mauss [1992] and Csordas [1994], as well as Butler [1990], have inspired a great deal of scholarship in their wake. Nevertheless, it is important to heed Farrer and Whalen-Bridge’s warning that essentialism might even enter into fields as complex and nuanced as studies of body-knowledge. But, it is clearly important to be aware that essentialism is something that is constantly threatening to return, to plague thinking, and to skew and bias it in what Derrida would call ‘metaphysical’ (uncritical, unthinking, habitual or reflex) ways.

Essentialism has been the primary target in many ethically and politically inflected kinds of cultural and postcolonial studies, for several decades. Such studies have long singled out and attacked the circulation of essentialisms (generalisations, stereotypes, etc.) about race, gender, class, and so on [Hall et al. 1980; Laclau and Mouffe 1985]. The problematics and vicissitudes of essentialism are particularly keenly felt in postcolonial contexts, in which – for example – the establishment of postcolonial national identities does often seem to require at best ‘strategic’, at worst ‘reflex’ essentialism about ‘us’ versus ‘them’ [Fanon 1968]. This is why Farrer and Whalen-Bridge seek to alert any nascent martial arts studies to beware of essentialist thinking in developing its concepts, orientations and elaborations.

One problem, however, is that *essentialism may already have entered – in the form of any attempt to specify the object of study itself*. For instance, just think of terms – or potential topics, objects and foci – such as *karate*, *kung fu*, *capoeira*, *escrima*, *silat*, and so on. Once we so name

them, arguably the door has already been opened, and essentialism has already been invited in. This is because the types of formulation that naming invites tend all too easily to imply a fixed and frozen object of study, one fixed in time, place, and often nation and ethnicity. The invitation to essentialism is made as soon as one constructs any statement of the form ‘x is (essentially) y’ – such as, say, ‘*karate* is...’, ‘*kung fu* is...’, ‘*silat* is...’. In other words, ‘essentialisms’ can and do enter and abound, through conceptual conflation and displacements that can emerge simply by attempting to specify and define an object. *Karate* is essentialized as Japanese, *kung fu* as Chinese, *silat* as Indonesian, and so on. Geographical/nationalistic associations threaten to overwhelm or overpower our thinking. We may very easily and acceptingly think of this or that style of martial art according to simplifications about place, nation, and ethnicity. As Farrer and Whalen-Bridge note:

**Martial arts, meaning the things done to make the study of fighting appear refined enough to survive elite social prohibitions, has never been exclusively an Asian matter, but martial arts discourse, meaning the expectations that help order the texts and images of martial bodily training and its entourage of cultural side effects, remains predominantly projected onto the Asian body. In Western representation martial arts are powerfully associated with specifically Asian traditions and practices. The association of particular physical skills with particular kinds of socialization gathers even more complexity when we figure in the role of Orientalist fantasy.** [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 2]

These are some of what Farrer and Whalen-Bridge call the ‘built-in conceptual problems’ of martial arts studies [3]. Accordingly, they contend, whichever way it is approached, the object ‘martial arts’ constitutes ‘a rapidly changing, ambiguous, contradictory, and paradoxical quarry’ [3]. It will be defined, related to, and treated in contingent and conventional ways, all of which will reciprocally help to determine what is ‘discovered’ or ‘learned’. For instance, Farrer and Whalen-Bridge suggest that some studies have used arguments about Asian martial arts to try to show that there are discourses other than orientalism available to Westerners when thinking about Asia. However, although such arguments may be motivated by admirable desires to reduce generalisations, simplifications and stereotypes about Asia, they may still unwittingly feed into them. As they observe:

**The term ‘martial arts’ signifies ‘Eastern’ and can be accessed to champion, as a counterdiscourse to effeminizing Orientalist clichés, the contemporary paradigmatic image of the Asian-yet-masculine martial arts icon (think of Bruce Lee). To the**

degree that this reactionary response is highly predictable, so does the cumulative effect of Asian martial arts discourse serve, in spite of its advocates' best intentions, to reify and falsely unify the notion of a centered, stable, objective Asian culture.

[Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 2]

With such arguments, Farrer and Whalen-Bridge begin to set out some of the problematics that the emergent field of martial arts studies must inevitably encounter, navigate and negotiate: entrenched prejudices against different registers of 'knowledge' (or, as I will argue, 'orders of discourse'), the status of the practices involved, problems of conceptualising, articulating and expressing non-verbal and non-logocentric knowledges, the problems of condensation, conflation, and displacement around even such foundational and definitional a term as 'martial arts' itself, and so on. Any serious approach to martial arts as a complex processual field requires that such matters be noticed and tackled. This is why Farrer and Whalen-Bridge argue that martial arts studies must be organised by a sensitive, self-reflexive ethos and be both theoretically and methodologically literate:

the concept of martial arts studies that we propose de-essentializes the 'how to' approach in favor of a more theoretically informed strategy grounded in serious contemporary scholarship that questions the practice of martial arts in their social, cultural, aesthetic, ideological, and transnational embodiment.

[Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 8]

They go on to give a list of (so to speak) 'approved' approaches to martial arts studies, as they envisage it – namely, a selection of works organised by challenging questions and problematics:

cutting-edge work in what we are calling martial arts studies investigates discourses of power, body, self, and identity [Zarrilli 1998]; gender, sexuality, health, colonialism, and nationalism [Alter 1992, 2000; Schmieg 2005]; combat, ritual, and performance [Jones 2002]; violence and the emotions [Rashid 1990]; cults, war magic, and warrior religion [Elliot 1998; Farrer 2009; Shahar 2008].

[Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 9]

However, to some, this explicit advocacy of what are arguably ultimately 'theoretical' approaches to martial arts studies may be received as disappointing, or even disturbing. This is because one typical complaint against 'theoretical' studies is that the object of study *itself* is somehow lost or transgressed and replaced with a soup of impenetrable jargon. It is often said that in 'cultural theory' type

approaches to any topic, any real concern with the real object of study is subordinated to concerns that are 'merely academic'. However, as will be discussed further in due course, it is possible to argue and to show (via a range of different sorts of evidence) *that this always happens anyway – that no matter what style of scholarship one adopts, the object of study is transformed into something else.*

Still, one might ask, are there certain sorts of approach to martial arts studies that might not transform 'martial arts' into something other than what they 'really' are? I will argue that the answer to this question is no, and that no matter how 'true' one strives to be to 'the thing itself', any study always involves in a sense transgressing it and reconfiguring it. After making this argument I will explore the reciprocal obverse question: if transformation is inevitable, even in the most basic and 'no frills' approaches to the subject(s), then what sorts of approach might martial arts studies embrace in order to 'reveal' martial arts 'otherwise'?

## LOST IN TRANSLATION? THE SUBJECT AND OBJECT OF STUDY

To assess the originality, significance, difference, uniqueness, specific attributes and potential impact of a new field called martial arts studies, it is important to bear in mind two fundamental but easily overlooked dimensions to *any* study of *any* thing; namely, the complex but fundamental relationship between subjects and objects. Here, the term 'subject' refers to the 'academic subject', the 'academic field', and its associated conceptual, terminological and methodological approaches to 'objects'. Accordingly, 'object' refers simply to 'the thing studied'. Academic subjects study objects. This is the first point to note. However, the second point to note is this: different academic subjects conceive of, construe and *construct* objects *differently*. Even objects that have the same name will be understood differently – and will therefore effectively *be* different things – within the conceptual universes of different subjects. To illustrate, just imagine the different conceptualisations and treatments of something like 'love' within different subjects, from literature to psychology to history to sociology, chemistry, biology, theology, anthropology, business studies, philosophy, and so on. Any of these subjects could take love as an object of study, but the conceptualisation and construction of the object (what each thinks the object 'is' and 'does', plus how it is thought to appear, exist, operate, function, with what significance, consequences, relations, and so on) will be very different in each disciplinary context.

The key point to note is that a strange alchemy occurs in the combining of any object (any thing or practice that exists or seems to exist in the world) with any *way* of studying it (any style of approach). By 'alchemy'



I mean this: that in the meeting of an object and a subject, *the object always becomes something else*. In other words, the object always becomes what John Mowitt has termed a ‘disciplinary object’ [Mowitt 1992]. A disciplinary object is an object *produced* by a discipline. It is ‘produced’ by being conceptualised, looked at, discussed and written about in certain ways (and not others); by being defined, delimited and demarcated in certain ways (and not others); by being analysed in certain ways (and not others); by being *thought through*, associated with or placed in relation to certain ideas (and not others); and by being associated with certain contexts, institutions, locations, traditions, and groups (and not others).

When it comes to approaching martial arts, Stanley Henning’s ground-breaking essay ‘Academia Encounters the Chinese Martial Arts’ [Henning 1999a] offers example after example that can ultimately be taken to illustrate the significance and effects of this alchemy – or, that is, ‘what happens’ when a subject ‘takes’ an object. This reading of his essay is possible even though Henning himself is motivated merely by the desire to establish *truth* in the realm of historical knowledge about Chinese martial arts. He is not at all invested in ‘theory’. Rather, he wants both to deepen and to foreground the importance of Chinese martial arts, not least because he contends that all the evidence suggests that martial arts are as ancient as – and coeval with – Chinese culture and civilisation itself, having been intertwined with its development for millennia. Accordingly, for scholars to ignore, overlook, marginalise or misconstrue Chinese martial arts will *matter* and will *have consequences* for the establishment of any historical knowledge of China. In other words, in Henning’s view, misunderstanding the place of martial arts within Chinese history is not merely to misunderstand Chinese martial arts; it will also help to (dis)orientate (mis)understandings of Chinese history *per se*.

This is why Henning himself is chiefly concerned to set the historical record straight. He does so primarily by seeking to point out and correct certain literal and metaphorical mistranslations, because he believes these to have led scholars to make incorrect arguments and to draw incorrect conclusions on a wide range of matters. Thus, Henning’s essay (like many of his writings) is full of discussions carried out according to the following basic structure: first he points to a modern (usually western) scholar’s argument about Chinese martial arts – or even to something that the scholar does not recognise as being a matter of martial arts. Then he turns both to original Chinese texts and to the relevant translation (or the other sorts of source that the scholar is either directly or indirectly drawing on). Most commonly, Henning traces arguments about Chinese martial arts back to one of the editions of Joseph Needham’s multi-volume study *Science and Civilisation in China* [Needham and Wang 1954, 1956, 1959; Needham, Wang,

and Lu 1971; Needham and Tsien; Needham, Sivin, and Lu 2000; Needham, Harbsmeier, and Robinson 1998; Needham, Robinson, and Huang 2004]. Thereupon, he isolates a mistranslation or historical misunderstanding (or both), one that has skewed subsequent thinking. Then, he proposes a different translation, one that would lead to a very different interpretation, not just of the martial arts themselves, but also of the surrounding cultural, social, ideological and political contexts that they both inform and are informed by.

This form of ‘correction’ is Henning’s primary work. It is self-evidently a very important endeavour. However, I am focusing on it here not because I want to engage with the matter of what is right and what is wrong on this or that point of interpretation, but rather for two different sorts of reason. The first is to point out that Henning’s acts of correction (and also what he elsewhere calls ‘demystification’ [Henning 1995, 1999a, 1999b]) clearly illustrate some of the ways in which academic disciplinary objects and ‘knowledge’ can differ from the real object in the real world. Henning shows time and again how scholars have misread, misinterpreted, misconstrued and misrepresented things – and moreover that they have done so because their reading position or their viewpoint is such that they are led to interpret things in one sort of a way (and not another). As he contends repeatedly, some scholars have failed even to recognise the presence of discussions of martial arts in Chinese texts and contexts, while still others have been led to ignore or downplay salient details in their discussion, and hence to misconstrue not only martial arts but (therefore) also the wider social and cultural context. Consider the following passage, for example:

had Joseph Needham and his associates heeded Jin Bang’s advice and carefully read Ge Hong’s autobiographical sketch (wherein he admits that he studied several martial arts, including boxing, but does not count them among his Taoist pursuits), rather than depend so heavily on a single secondary source, a 1906 *Adversaria Sinica* article by Herbert A. Giles titled ‘The Home of Jiu-jitsu’, one cannot help but feel that they would not have arrived at the conclusion in *Science and Civilisation in China* that Chinese boxing ‘probably originated as a department of Taoist physical exercises’. On the other hand, it appears that Needham may have been attempting to force Chinese boxing into a preconceived notion of the role of Taoism in Chinese culture... [Henning 1999a: 320]

With this and many other equivalent examples, Henning illustrates what we might regard as some of the micrological workings of what Edward Said calls orientalism [Said 1995]. For, as we see in this example, Henning proposes an ‘and/or’ situation in which scholars have either blindly followed an already ‘biased’ or skewed

text (so as to interpret *all* Chinese martial arts as being associated with Taoism) and/or operated according to their own conscious or unconscious convictions or assumptions that all Chinese martial arts must be in some sense associated with Taoism. This can be called orientalism insofar as it conforms to Said's contention that Western scholars have long been influenced by often tacit preconceptions, stereotypes, simplifications and generalisations about immensely – almost unimaginably – complex geopolitical assemblages (such as the infinitely complex multiplicity that is reduced to the word 'China'). Such influences overwhelmingly lead them to read and interpret things not on the basis of material evidence but rather according to the lenses and optics provided by a limited and limiting set of preconceptions, stereotypes, simplifications and generalisations (about, say, 'China').

Of course, Henning also knows that even so-called orientalism can be a two-way street. For instance, elsewhere he considers the fact that even Chinese martial artists in China will often hold beliefs about martial arts histories, lineages and doctrines that would be scoffed at and denounced as orientalist were they uttered by a Westerner. (We may think of beliefs in myths about unbroken martial lineages stretching back to Bodhidharma or Zhang Sanfeng, for instance.) Indeed, *self-orientalisation* might be regarded as something close to a quasi-official policy of Chinese state bureaux of film and tourism, focusing as they do on permeating what has been called the 'soft power' of constructing and exporting an exotic and appealing 'public image' of China around the world [Eperjesi 2004], one which also and at the same time is used to construct and reinforce a sense of national identity and collective belonging within China itself [Anderson 1991]. Consequently Henning is vociferously against any kind of 'politically correct' or 'culturally sensitive' treatment of subject matter by academics. As he writes:

**There is a rising trend in the 'Occidental' world of 'Oriental' martial arts – the number of 'scholars' who, in spite of making pretences to upholding 'academic standards', are displaying no small amount of intellectual compromise by acting as apologists for the myths surrounding the Chinese martial arts. They do this in a manner which gives one the impression that they somehow feel that to expose these myths is an irreverent act, harming the sensitivities of the Chinese people and insulting to pseudo-intellectual Occidentals seeking a New Age refuge in Oriental mysticism or, worse yet, causing them to lose interest in a subject about which these 'scholars' delight in composing involved, ambiguous treatises.**

[Henning 1995]

Henning's strident and principled insistence on the need for intimate and intricate analysis and academic rigour is admirable. However, the

second main reason for focusing on Henning's work here is to draw another, more slippery set of problems into focus. The first of these problems is this: where Henning might see a spectrum of interpretation ranging from totally correct to totally false, a poststructuralist position would propose that this 'traditional' perspective (which sees truth on the one hand and error on the other, 'and ne'er the train shall meet') ought to be replaced by a perspective which sees instead a discursive continuum of interpretation [Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Weber 1987]. In other words, not a perspective which sees truth versus falsity or error, but which sees interpretation versus interpretation, in a sea of interpretation, on the basis of the observation that all 'knowledge' is conditional and provisional and ultimately based on a limited, contingent, positioned viewpoint informed by partial (limited and incomplete) information. This might be supplemented further, with the premise that no 'information' is neutral or simply 'discovered'; rather information is something that is always and already 'produced' by both theory and interpretation, and according to a method [Barry 2001]. In other words, much, if not all of the 'information' and 'evidence' upon which any interpretation is to be based must also be regarded as related to, produced by, and illustrative of yet another interpretation.

This kind of argument has often been called 'relativist' and 'postmodernist', and has been caricatured as being one in which there is a spurious belief that 'nothing is true', or that 'everything is relative', or that 'there is no reality', and so on. However, whilst there may well have been theorists, artists, philosophers, writers and academics to have apparently made such contentions, the caricature is really only that – a caricature. For in fact poststructuralist epistemologies and ontologies tend primarily to be organised by an attentive awareness of the inescapable facts and acts of processes of reading and interpretation in order to construct arguments and to make claims about reality. In other words, it is not that there is no reality; it is rather that knowledge of reality is endlessly contestable and contested – up for grabs, open to interpretation, indeed endlessly *calling for* interpretation. There is no single uncontested *way* to interpret. There is no one single repository of evidence. All sorts of evidence can be used to support all sorts of processes of interpretation, argumentation, and verification. And each can be contested or put into question by others.

Put differently, Henning's 'corrections' should rather be viewed as reinterpretations of interpretations. And although Henning firmly believes that his works' interventions are purely and simply organised by the aim of correcting errors, it seems more circumspect to regard his intervention as illustrating something very important about the significance and effects of any and all interpretation. Namely: academic interpretations feed both from and back into wider cultural discourses [Gramsci 1971; Althusser 1977; Bowman 2008a].

## THE TRUTH OF DISCOURSE

According to Henning, in the passage quoted above, academic interpretations should not be based on cultural discourses, whether ‘common knowledge’, ‘common sense’ or ‘reasonable assumptions’. Nor should scholarship pander to other types of cultural discourse, such as ‘politically correct’ ideas of ‘heritage’ or ‘tradition’, and so on. Rather, scholarly work on martial arts should be based on an intimate knowledge, made up of both close textual familiarity and broad and deep historical knowledge, plus, where necessary (as Henning’s work demonstrates amply) advanced linguistic and translation skills. As we have already seen, Henning’s linguistic and historical knowledge constitutes his primary toolkit. He retranslates mistranslations according to his particularly lucid awareness of martial arts in Chinese culture and society, in order to reconfigure our understanding. In other words, precision and correctness in translation is one of his primary ‘tools’ or ‘weapons’.

Even so, there is no escaping the fact that, in Farrer and Whalen-Bridge’s words, ‘martial arts historiography poses formidable challenges’ [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 8]. Problems in understanding and in establishing ‘legitimate’ interpretations cannot simply be resolved by throwing ever more linguistic and historical knowledge at the situation. Adding evermore ‘knowledge’ of a ‘context’ can in many situations work to exacerbate the possibility of coming up with a univocal or unequivocal interpretation. To start and end from such a viewpoint, without tackling epistemological problems head on, is to hold not only a very traditional but also an unnecessarily limited and unnecessarily limiting view both of academic practice and of what ‘knowledge’ and ‘scholarship’ are. This is not to say that scholarship cannot be concerned with the establishment of facts and figures, names and dates, valid and invalid claims about connections and causalities, etc., in the quest for more robust interpretations. It is rather to suggest that, as important as such projects are, if they proceed in ignorance of or indifference to the hermeneutic and epistemological problems raised in such realms as literary theory, cultural theory, translation theory, and so on, then they are in more than one sense ‘living in the past’. Stated differently, one might say that the sort of orientation to martial arts studies that Henning’s project exemplifies is a very traditional orientation, in its adherence not only to clear dichotomies and absolute value differences between truth and falsity but also – more radically put – to the very idea that there is one single truth.

The proposition that there is one single truth implies a belief in a social whole that is unified in its viewpoint and in its relations to, within, across and throughout itself. However, wherever there is difference (of position, perspective, viewpoint, status, background, education, and

so on), there will already be a conflict of interpretations. This means that even within a given historical moment – even ‘at the time’ – there will be dispute and dissensus about what the situation is and what its meaning may be [Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Bowman 2007]. Needless to say, the problems of establishing ‘the’ reality and ‘the’ interpretation cannot but be compounded or even constitutively impossible when it comes to historical and cross-cultural interpretations. For, these change: the meaning and status of events changes, depending more on the context of its assessment than on ‘new facts’ about it.

Some thinkers have made large epistemological claims about the ‘untranslatability’ of one epoch to another, and one culture to another [Heidegger 1971]. In a subtle engagement with this problematic, Walter Benjamin proposed that one always translates historical texts in terms of current concerns, the outlooks of the current time and place, and current ways of thinking [Benjamin 1999]. This implies that our interpretive ‘access’ to other times and places is in a sense cut off, simply because we are from here and not there. Michel Foucault more than once strongly suggested that different historical epochs were, equally, cut off from each other by their very difference from [or alien-ness to] each other [Foucault 1970]. And Martin Heidegger contended that Eastern and Western worldviews were ‘essentially’ alien and untranslatable to each other – although he worried that the spread of ‘Western’ technologies like film and media was reducing the difference, albeit not by allowing cross-cultural communication, but rather by eradicating the true ‘East Asian lifeworld’ altogether and replacing it with a technologized ‘Western’ lifeworld [Heidegger 1971; Sandford 2003]. However hyperbolic and problematic such positions may seem when stated so starkly, some evidence for the validity of their essential thrust may be proposed when one considers the regular ‘need’ for new translations of historical texts, whether that be *The Bible*, the *Tao Te Ching*, *The I-Ching*, or whatever. Such works are retranslated for any number of reasons, but most reasons given will refer to the fact that as time marches on, translations of such texts come to seem dated, distant and increasingly impenetrable.

To bring this back to martial arts studies: there are lessons to be drawn from the inevitability of difference, change and transformation. One is that martial arts studies has no absolutely clear referent and no necessary preprogrammed or preordained direction or mode of elaboration. What it will become will be determined by the way it is invented. It will always be a kind of academic writing, first of all, and as such will always differ from and be likely to disappoint or attract the disapproval of practitioners and fans of this or that martial art. Indeed, it is just as likely to elicit the same reactions from people involved in more traditional academic disciplines. It will never simply be the ‘direct’ study of this or that martial art. Every study will be guided and

structured by a supplementary set of concerns. This is because every study of every subject is always initiated, orientated and organised by a particular set of questions.

Farrer and Whalen-Bridge point to existing works of martial arts studies and characterise them in terms of their guiding questions and organising problematics – problematics of ‘power, body, self, and identity’; those of ‘gender, sexuality, health, colonialism, and nationalism’; ‘combat, ritual, and performance’; ‘violence and the emotions’; and those of ‘cults, war magic, and warrior religion’ [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 9]. To this list we might want to add studies of martial arts and/as experience [Spencer 2011; Downey 2005], as ethnic political cultural dynamic [Kato 2007; Brown 1997], as cinematically disseminated engine of cultural transformation [Bowman 2010b, 2013a], as forces and loci of cultural translation [Bowman 2010a], and so on and so forth. None of these studies and none of their significance rely on proving or disproving truth and falsity. All are constituted by the posing of different questions, the shining of different lights and looking through different lenses at what these different acts of enquiry and exploration themselves produce as the object of martial arts studies. There are many ways to do this, then, and each way of proceeding is likely to have disciplinary consequences. In the following, we will discuss just some of these...

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# MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES AS KULTURWISSENSCHAFT

## A POSSIBLE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

## SIXT WETZLER

## DOI

10.18573/j.2016.10016

## KEYWORDS

martial arts studies, martial arts definition, cultural studies, multidisciplinary, Kulturwissenschaft, polysystem theory, comparative method

## CITATION

Wetzler, Sixt. 2015.  
'Martial Arts Studies as  
Kulturwissenschaft: A Possible  
Theoretical Framework',  
*Martial Arts Studies* 1, 20-33.

## ABSTRACT

This essay deals with some of the key theoretical issues of martial arts studies: the definition of martial arts, the possible objects of research, adequate methods, and the search for an applicable theoretical framework. After a very short introduction to the German-speaking martial arts studies (from whence the following ideas derive), the differences between Anglophone cultural studies and German Kulturwissenschaften will be briefly shown. The text will then discuss the problem of normative/object-language arguments in martial arts studies, and follow with a critical assessment of terminological distinctions between terms like 'martial arts', 'combat sports', etc. As an alternative, a very wide working definition of martial arts will be proposed, as well as five dimensions of meaning ascribed to martial arts practice, which can help analyzing any given martial arts style. In a next step, the various actualizations of martial arts, from body images to cultural contexts, will be grouped into classes of phenomena. Then, Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory (devised for the study of literature) will be introduced and its applicability to martial arts studies demonstrated. Finally, a short discussion will highlight the method of scientific comparison.



## INTRODUCTION

In this article, some of the theoretical, terminological, and methodological issues of martial arts studies shall be discussed and a possible theoretical framework presented. These basic approaches were derived from discussions within the German-speaking martial arts studies (or *Kampfkunstwissenschaft*) community.<sup>1</sup>

A German-speaking network of researchers in the field of martial arts and combat sports has developed in parallel to the emergence of the English language martial arts studies literature.<sup>2</sup> The turning point in this development was the 2011 founding conference of the *Kommission Kampfkunst und Kampfsport* (Commission for Martial Arts and Combat Sports) within the *Deutsche Vereinigung für Sportwissenschaft* (German Association for Sports Science). An interdisciplinary endeavour from the beginning, the *Kommission* has worked in the last four years to collect the various, often very heterogeneous academic approaches towards the subject that have been made in Germany, Switzerland, and Austria since the late 19th century. Annual conferences have been held since 2011, and four conference volumes have been published so far.<sup>3</sup>

Martial arts studies research within the *Kommission Kampfkunst und Kampfsport* can mainly be divided into three branches: first, educational/ pedagogical perspectives and health care, both physical and mental; second, historical, anthropological, and sociological perspectives; and third, movement sciences and training theory. This article is geared towards the second branch, the cultural studies perspective (or, more

precisely, the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektive*). The questions this perspective engages are those of the forms in which martial arts exist, their development, the meanings practitioners ascribe to them, how they are embedded in their cultural contexts, and so on. The ideas presented here derive from the author's experiences at the German conferences.

On the one hand, the *Kommission Kampfkunst und Kampfsport* has been successful in uniting a significant number of the German-speaking researchers active in the field. On the other hand, it became apparent that we are in need of a theoretical framework to guarantee the quality of future work.<sup>4</sup> So my aim here is to examine how to integrate the different approaches into a coherent, meaningful field of research, instead of a loosely connected collection of individual projects. My proposal is that three basic questions have to be considered: First, what are the objects that martial arts studies can or has to deal with? Second, what are the sources that martial arts studies needs to take into consideration? Third, what methods could be used by martial arts studies researchers to approach these objects and sources?

This article suggests answers to these questions. More specifically, it will address two of the main problems encountered in the discussions of recent years. The first of these relates to the clarity of object-language versus metalanguage and the problem of terminological pitfalls (whether we use terms like 'martial arts', 'combat sports', 'self-defence', etc.). I will then argue for an open description of the concept of 'martial arts'. This concept will be described as a network of *different dimensions of meaning ascribed to martial arts practices*. These are actualized in various *classes of phenomena* that, at the same time, are the objects to be analysed and the sources from which to draw our information. Finally, a theory will be proposed that may help us to understand and explain the concept of martial arts in its complexity, and a method briefly described by which its unique *dimensions of meaning* and *classes of phenomena* can be approached.

<sup>1</sup> Theoretical and methodological issues were first presented in English as a 'key questions' lecture at the Martial Arts Studies Conference held 10-12 June 2015 at Cardiff University. This lecture, in turn, was based on the article 'Vergleichende Kampfkunstwissenschaft als historisch-kulturwissenschaftliche Disziplin. Mögliche Gegenstände, nötige Quellen, anzuwendende Methoden' [Wetzler 2014a]. The English article at hand is a revised and expanded version of this earlier German text.

<sup>2</sup> For the most recent and detailed discussion of if and how martial arts studies can be understood as a 'field', see Bowman [2015: 1-54]. Herein, Paul Bowman writes: 'If martial arts studies is to blossom into a field – a discrete field of academic study – this will not just happen, as if naturally. Rather, martial arts studies must be created'. [Bowman 2015: 4] And he argues that 'the self-conscious elaboration of such a field that is currently taking place should proceed in full awareness of the stakes and critical potentials of such elaboration and construction' [Bowman 2015: 2]. I hope that this article can be a small step in both directions: in further creating martial arts studies as an academic field and in critically reflecting on our own constructions.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed description of the current state of martial arts studies in Germany, see the *Kommission's* website (<http://www.sportwissenschaft.de>), especially the article 'The Development and Current State of Martial Arts Studies in Germany' [Wetzler 2015] which first appeared on Benjamin Judkin's blog *Kung Fu Tea* (<http://chinesemartialstudies.com/>).

<sup>4</sup> The 2015 conference, held from September 30th through October 2nd at the University of Mainz, dealt with theoretical and methodological questions, especially with the difficulties of defining 'subject' and 'field'. The results will be published in 2016. The conference title 'Martial Arts Studies in Germany – Defining and Crossing Disciplinary Boundaries' was decided on in 2014, before Paul Bowman announced the title of his book *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* [2015]. However, the similarity is no coincidence, but instead reflects the very nature of our field. A fruitful, monodisciplinary approach towards martial arts is hardly conceivable much less desirable.

## CULTURAL STUDIES AND KULTURWISSENSCHAFTEN

Before explaining theory and methodology, a few words on the similarities and dissimilarities of the concepts behind Anglophone cultural studies and German *Kulturwissenschaften* are needed. I myself was not aware of these differences when I travelled to the first Martial Arts Studies Conference in Cardiff in June 2015, and some of the descriptions and methods of my English-speaking colleagues were at first difficult for me to follow. It was only after the conference that I was made aware of a lucid article that Lutz Musner had written on the problem [Musner 2001], and I believe that a short summary of his observations may foster a better understanding between Anglophone and German martial arts studies.<sup>5</sup>

Even though *Kulturwissenschaften* may best be translated into English as ‘cultural studies’, Musner makes clear that the two approaches are not the same. Instead, he calls the two disciplines *ungleiche Geschwister*, or ‘uneven sisters’ [Musner 2001: 261], and he writes:

**Cultural studies developed in post-war England as a socio-political project, while German *Kulturwissenschaften* were motivated by academic politics. The first are [or try to be] a political project sui generis, while the second are a process of innovation, which refers to academic subjects and originated from undeniable symptoms of a crisis of the humanities.<sup>6</sup>**  
[Musner 2001: 262]

Musner then points out that the ‘social and cultural marginalisation experienced by minorities, immigrants, women, and sexually discriminated [communities] played a central role in the formulation of theories’ in English-speaking cultural studies, and that the ‘critical approach towards marginality, discrimination, and the corresponding self-images is a key topos of cultural studies and essentially defines

<sup>5</sup> The direct relevance of the discussion for our work is demonstrated by the fact that Musner explicitly mentions Meaghan Morris as a leading cultural studies scholar and quotes her book *Too Soon, Too Late: History and Cultural Studies* [1998]. Morris in fact gave one of the keynote lectures at the 2015 Cardiff Martial Arts Studies conference. Thanks to Eric Burkart for pointing out Musner’s text to me.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Die Cultural Studies entstanden im England der Nachkriegszeit als ein gesellschaftspolitisches Projekt, die Kulturwissenschaften hingegen in Deutschland und aus einer wissenschaftspolitischen Motivationslage heraus. Die einen sind oder versuchen zumindest ein politisches Projekt sui generis zu sein, während die anderen ein fächerbezogenes Innovationsverfahren sind, das aus unübersehbaren Krisensymptomen der Geisteswissenschaften heraus entstanden ist.’ All translations from German to English by the author.

their political credo’<sup>7</sup> [Musner 2001: 263]. The key subjects of *Kulturwissenschaften*, on the other hand, are “memory”, “symbol”, “system”, or “mediality”. Their central methods are philology, hermeneutics, and historiography, while cultural studies are more concerned with discourses and cultural practices and less with their historical meaning’ [Musner 2001: 266].

However, both approaches seem to be connected by a *Band der Komplementarität*, a ‘bond of complementarity’. This means that, while *Kulturwissenschaften* provide a deeper understanding of history, memory, and tradition, cultural studies focuses more on the experiences of social marginalisation and friction [Musner 2001: 269]. These things are not mutually exclusive, of course. On the contrary, once the methodological differences are understood as mostly a language barrier, this barrier can be overcome, and the results of one approach can fertilize the other. This is equally true for the sub-disciplines of English-speaking martial arts studies and German *Kampfkunstwissenschaft*.

My own scientific take on martial arts is firmly rooted in German *Kulturwissenschaften* or, more precisely, in *Religionswissenschaften* (religious studies) as coined by authors like Burkhard Gladigow, Jan and Aleida Assmann, or Hubert Cancik. These academics developed their theories in the study of pre-Christian Mediterranean culture and religion, and they fit Musner’s analysis very neatly.

In light of this, we shall now turn to the aforementioned problems: ‘object-language versus metalanguage’ and ‘terminological pitfalls’.

## OBJECT-LANGUAGE VERSUS METALANGUAGE

This is a problem that should be self-evident, but my experience suggests that it has yet to be addressed. Some of the contributions to martial arts scholarship in recent years reveal the extent to which many authors feel obligated not only to their own academic discipline but also to the respective styles of martial arts that they study. In some cases, this has led to misunderstandings within the community. We were encountering, so to speak, a twofold interdisciplinary language barrier, caused by the fact that researchers approach the scientific object

<sup>7</sup> ‘So spielten im weiteren Verlauf die gesellschaftlichen und kulturellen Marginalisierungserfahrungen von Minderheiten und MigrantInnen, von Frauen und sexuell Diskriminierten eine wesentliche Rolle in der Theoriebildung. Die kritische Auseinandersetzung mit Marginalität, Diskriminierung und damit korrespondierenden Selbst-Bildern ist ein wesentlicher Topos der Cultural Studies und bestimmt ihr eigentliches, ihr politisches Credo.’

‘martial arts’ from the implicit perspectives of their own academic and martial arts backgrounds. This problem became most evident when contributions worked with the terms and concepts of the object-language and tried to elevate them to appropriate descriptive tools of a metalanguage [as in the case of *qi*].

Such problems, however, are not new to the discourses of the humanities. A look at religious studies can serve as an example. This discipline had to struggle for decades (and, in some parts of the academic community, is still struggling) to eliminate normative assumption from its methodology [Gladigow 2005: 41-42]. The strict distinction between religious studies and theology can serve as a model for martial arts studies. In other words, our task is not to describe, for example, ‘how the *qi* flows’, but rather, ‘how certain practitioners of internal Chinese martial arts *believe* the *qi* flows’.

## TERMINOLOGICAL PITFALLS: MARTIAL ARTS, COMBAT SPORTS, AND SELF-DEFENCE

Those who argue within the frame of their own style’s object-language are often the same people who have no difficulty in deciding which movement traditions qualify as ‘proper’ martial arts and which do not. However, this issue too is not at all easy to adjudicate. The criteria that define one movement system as a martial art and disqualify another are hard to establish – and even more so in an intercultural context. Since the term ‘martial arts’ is widely used in colloquial language, everyone brings along an intuitive understanding of what it denotes. As with all general terms, at the core of this intuitive semantic field lies a group of phenomena that most people would agree to call ‘martial arts’ without giving it much thought. But the field becomes less and less clear towards its edges, where we find phenomena whose classification as a martial art can be disputed.

The common assumption (also among scholars) of what the term includes often seems also to subsume the field of combat sports. Note that so far no one seems to have felt the need to call for an individual discipline of ‘combat sports studies’.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, our intuitive

understanding of the term ‘martial art’ is why most readers would expect to find articles on topics like aikido or Ronda Rousey in this journal, but not articles on ballet or Lance Armstrong. In this respect, it is the pre-scientific bias that first enables us to create and develop martial arts studies. Readers may wish to check their own understanding: Is Shotokan karate a martial art? Is judo a martial art? What about taijiquan and Olympic fencing? Or possibly MMA and krav maga? How about the ritualized fencing of German student fraternities, arranged hooligan brawls, and combat shooting with handguns? Even if classifying some of these things as martial arts may seem counter-intuitive, all of them include aspects that could be analysed as topics of martial arts studies.

As we take the step from colloquial language to scientific discourse, the question arises: How can we define martial arts? The problems involved in defining one’s own subject are well known in the humanities, and they certainly apply to martial arts studies. Religious studies have never reached a generally accepted definition of religion, political sciences struggle to define politics, and so on. Nevertheless, these and other sciences are able to work on their respective fields and produce results. The same is true for martial arts studies. On the one hand, the search for the ‘perfect’, unifying definition can inspire understanding and self-reflection. Yet it must be acknowledged that such a search hardly ever reaches its goal. It therefore makes more sense, and is much more practical for the ‘daily work’ of the martial arts studies scholar, to assume a minimal definition of the field. Such a definition has to be wide enough to encompass a heterogeneous multiplicity of phenomena without becoming so general as to include each and every possible thing. On the basis of such a minimal definition, the phenomena identified as relevant to the topic can then be analysed individually and according to their form, content, and meaning, rather than by checking whether and how well they fit into predefined, superimposed moulds.

One possible minimal definition that might serve this purpose is that proposed by Peter Lorge in his book *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* [2012]. Confronted with the historical, geographical, and phenotypical vastness of his topic, he writes:

I define ‘martial arts’ as the various skills or practices that originated as methods of combat. This definition therefore includes many performance, religious, or health-promoting activities that no longer have any direct combat applications but clearly originated in combat, while possibly excluding references to these techniques in dance, for example. Admittedly, the distinctions can be muddled as one activity shades into another. In addition, what makes something a martial art rather than an action done by someone who is

<sup>8</sup> However, sometimes both terms are used to denote the field, as in the case for example of the International Martial Arts and Combat Sports Scientific Society that has held several international conferences on the topic over the last few years ([www.imacsss.com](http://www.imacsss.com)), or by the aforementioned **German Kommission Kampfkunst und Kampfsport**. While in German **Kampfsport** is the more widely used term, both words stand in singular, in contrast to their English correspondents. This is noteworthy insofar as the singular implies even more so a sense of homogeneity between the different styles.

naturally good at fighting is that the techniques are taught. Without the transmission of these skills through teaching, they do not constitute an 'art' in the sense of being a body of information or techniques that aim to reproduce certain knowledge or effects.<sup>9</sup>  
[Lorge 2012: 3-4]

Three addenda have to be made: First, 'methods of combat' should be understood as all methods for the wide continuum of physical struggle, from convivial wrestling and controlled force application in retention scenarios to fighting with lethal intent. We may assume that 'methods of combat' on all levels of force and violent intent have always existed alongside each other. (Also, the historical primacy of combat over dance movements might be often difficult to prove.) Second, Lorge's emphasis on transmission fits the historical report, but it should maybe be softened to the concepts of 'reproducibility' and 'systematization'. Though it may have been the historical exception (if it ever happened at all), the martial arts hermit training his fighting skills in solitude atop the mountain is at least imaginable. His systematized skills could also be counted as martial arts. Third, 'transmission' and 'teaching' are in themselves terms whose scope has to be discussed. If, for instance, visual learning counts as transmission, that would classify the fighting movements copied by school kids from computer games also as martial arts skills – even more, since modern games use motion capturing of professional martial artists for their programming. Taken to the extreme, this leads to the question of whether completely ineffective movements, copied without proper tuition but wrapped in martial arts imagery, have to be counted as martial arts. Is everything a martial art as long as the protagonist understands it as such?<sup>10</sup>

If we accept the proposed minimal definition and the addenda, we can re-assess the terminological and methodological problems that accompany any attempted distinction between 'martial arts', 'combat sports', and 'self-defence'.

A popular distinction heard among both outsiders and martial artists alike defines the martial arts as oriented either towards tradition/philosophy or self-defence. This separates them from competitive

combat sports. Within the martial arts community additional terms are in use, often by practitioners of self-defence systems. With them, they intend to emphasize their 'purely realistic' approach: terms like 'practical self-defence', 'hybrid systems', 'combatives', and 'CQC [close quarter combat] systems' can be found. The tripartite distinction 'martial arts – combat sports – self-defence', employed by practitioners, is mirrored in the triadic model which Alex Channon and George Jennings have used in their article 'Exploring Embodiment through Martial Arts and Combat Sports: A Review of Empirical Research':

Thus, we have adopted the aforementioned term 'martial arts and combat sports' [MACS], which we propose be used as an inclusive, triadic model encompassing competition-oriented combat sports, military/civilian self-defence systems, and traditionalist or non-competitive martial arts, as well as activities straddling these boundaries.  
[Channon and Jennings 2014: 4]

All these distinctions are as helpful as they are deceiving. For although, on a first glance, many of the better known 'standard' martial arts can be classified into one of the three categories, a closer look reveals how poorly the categories depict reality. If we take, for example, Shotokan karate, as one of the most widespread styles of martial arts, we can see that the very same style can either be trained as traditional art, as competition sport, or as 'street' self-defence, depending on teacher and school. In most schools, it will encompass all three categories. Furthermore, the category 'traditionalist or non-competitive martial arts' is explained by Channon and Jennings as 'traditionalist, mind-body disciplines, or "Eastern movement forms", such as kung fu and taijiquan' [Channon and Jennings 2014: 3].<sup>11</sup> This definition quickly unravels and proves to be more of a hindrance than a help. Movement forms from the acrobatic performances of the Beijing opera to martial arts-inspired folk dances in pencak silat and even meditative practices like kyudo would have to be included, and this without even addressing the problem of 'invented traditions'. In a global perspective, the 'Eastern' component should be dropped altogether, as martial arts exist and have existed in all corners of the earth.

Finally [at least in the German-speaking martial arts studies], the constructed dichotomy *Kampfkunst* versus *Kampfsport* has helped to institute imagined differences in the social value of respective styles [see Leffler 2010]. Brought forth mostly by protagonists of Japanese budo disciplines – sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly – 'true' martial

<sup>9</sup> Compare another recent definition proposed by Alex Channon and George Jennings: 'Thus, our fundamental criteria for inclusion within the MACS [Martial Arts and Combat Sports] model here involves the requirement of some form of orientation towards improving/measuring "martial" or "combative" abilities – regardless of how this is lived out in actual practice' [Channon and Jennings 2014: 4].

<sup>10</sup> Martin Meyer has raised this question in his lecture on the 'kamehameha-problem' at the *Kommission Kampfkunst und Kampfsport*'s conference 2015; see the forthcoming conference volume for a written version (<http://goo.gl/cd12j3>).

<sup>11</sup> Channon and Jennings, in turn, borrowed the term from David Brown and Aspasia Leledaki's article 'Eastern Movement Forms as Body-Self Transforming Cultural Practices in the West: Towards a Sociological Perspective' [2010].

arts allegedly aim for the perfection of one's self and are of greater value than 'primitive' agonistic combat sports. Whereas there might indeed be differences in the applicability of martial arts for pedagogical or health care reasons, such normative judgements are wholly unacceptable from the perspective of *Kulturwissenschaften*.

The insufficient descriptive value of a terminological distinction between 'martial arts', 'combat sports', and 'self-defence', and the normative undertones this distinction often carries, are strong indicators that it is not in fact useful for the pursuit of martial arts studies. Thus, an alternative shall be proposed: Instead of trying to establish discernible sub-categories, all phenomena that fit the above minimal definition should be subsumed under the term martial arts. This would reflect both the aforementioned intuitive understanding of the term martial arts as well as actual academic reality; combat sports studies or self-defence studies are safely embedded within martial arts studies. In other words, 'martial arts' is chosen to denote the field of study as it is most widely used. However, convenience is not the only reason for this decision. Another is the term's long history. It stands in line with similar expressions, from the European Middle Ages onwards, when close combat practices were called *ars*, e.g., *ars dimicatoria*, and counted among the court arts. Art, in this context, does not bear the meaning of 'creative expression of the human mind' but of 'skilful execution of a difficult action'. As such, it spilled over into several European vernaculars during the Middle Ages. The proposed use of the term 'martial arts', then, is neither new nor arbitrary. It has its roots in a centuries-old convention.

'Martial arts' shall thus be used here as an umbrella term, allowing us to speak about the totality of our topic. In contrast to this general expression, we can use the word 'style' to denote an individual tradition, imagined as a coherent entity from the inside, and more or less clearly distinguishable from the outside. Examples may include wing chun, Turkish oil wrestling, or the medieval Liechtenauer school of fencing. While other terms, like 'system' or 'tradition', could also be used, 'style' is preferred here for being less prone to misunderstandings in the ongoing discussion. This, however, provokes the next problem: Where exactly are the borders between one style and the next? How big can [or must] a style be? What are the parameters to define a style?

To take a look at a prominent example, should we subsume all incarnations of karate as one style? Or is Shotokan one style, and kyokushin the next? Or are the various sub-divisions of Shotokan and kyokushin our units of analysis? Or is a style any individual interpretation of one school, one teacher, or even one student?

When Mas Oyama, the founder of kyokushin karate, raised the question *What is Karate?* with the title of his book in 1966, and faithfully answered it himself in his 1972 book *This is Karate*, he could only do so as a practitioner. In other words, in object-language. In metalanguage, martial arts studies should classify all those styles as karate that call themselves karate. Their dividing lines are where their practitioners perceive them to be. For many devoted practitioners, this approach might seem too generous towards invented styles and traditions. But it can represent the various modes of tradition, transmission, and copying that exist in the martial arts more faithfully than any superimposed list of criteria for an individual style's 'authenticity'. Furthermore, it can easily cope with the fact that a large part of the existing styles derive not from a single origin but are syncretistic by nature.

Making ourselves aware of such definition problems is fundamental for martial arts studies. They do not come as a surprise. The humanities face similar difficulties in all fields. The question presently under consideration – 'What is martial arts?' – is of the same quality as, for example, the questions, 'What is folk music? What is mannerism? What is magic?' Such difficulties are not flaws that need to be repaired, but a result of the complexity of our topic, where all clear cut distinctions must remain lexical illusions.

## DIMENSIONS OF MEANING

Instead of creating boxes to put the existing styles in, we could rather search for common, recurring qualities in the martial arts. A discussion of a given style can then analyse how these qualities are fulfilled, and to what degree. Five common qualities of the martial arts shall be proposed here, which will be called *dimensions of meaning ascribed to martial arts practices*, or – for short – *five dimensions*. When presented to other scholars, the five dimensions of meaning have sometimes been misunderstood as a solid structure into which specific martial arts can be forced.

This is the opposite of what I want to achieve. For, firstly, I would not claim that the list is definite. Other dimensions may be devised. Secondly, it is not a collection of necessary or sufficient conditions that define a movement system as a martial arts style. And not every style must actualize all five dimensions. The list is nothing more than a tool that could help us to take recurring patterns of martial arts into perspective, and to describe a given style more adequately. The five dimensions that I propose are the following:



#### *Dimension 1: Preparation for Violent Conflict*

The preparation for hostile physical conflict, in civilian and military contexts, with the aim of protecting one's own physical integrity, destroying the opponent's capacity to do harm, and compelling him to one's own will. As important as the actual increase in physical capacities is the function as a psychological coping strategy, to deal with the fear of possible or imagined violence.

#### *Dimension 2: Play and Competitive Sports*

The convivial practice of physical struggle, within set rules and frames, but usually without the intent to physically destroy; such practice can be done 'for fun', or for the prize of winning a competition.

#### *Dimension 3: Performance*

The display of martial techniques and combat skills before an audience; for example as part of a ritual, for entertainment purposes, or as self-allocation within certain social contexts. Of course, the audience can also be the practitioner him- or herself. The dimension of performance is often perceived as a symptom of corruption of 'true' martial arts, where efficient technique is blurred by movements only performed to please the audience. This is another notion of object-language that should not spill over into our work. The dimension of performance is actually the rule rather than an exception in the history of martial arts.

#### *Dimension 4: Transcendent Goals*

This wide area comprises the connections martial arts have to spiritual and philosophical practices. Also included are their intended pedagogical uses to educate or form the character of the practitioners, and their function as connection to (imagined) otherwise unreachable entities of (martial) culture (e.g. 'our medieval forefathers/the samurai/the special forces'). Transcendent goals can be openly stated trademarks or implicit agendas.

#### *Dimension 5: Health Care*

This is the use of martial arts for prophylactic and/or therapeutic purposes, mostly in physical but also psychological contexts.

For martial arts studies, these five dimensions should stand equally beside one another. From a perspective of cultural studies/*Kulturwissenschaften*, Mexican show wrestling – something like the quintessence of *Dimension 3: Performance* – can be just as valuable a topic as Chen-style taijiquan, or World War II CQC training. This will also help to denounce any notion of 'original', 'pure', or 'more true' martial arts. These categories may be important within the mythic thinking of object-language, but on the meta level, they have to be discarded

as illusions, just like any evolutionism that proclaims a teleological development of the martial arts towards ever more effective fighting systems [Amberger 1999: 2].

Of course, there are no solid boundaries between these five dimensions: they will overlap in several places. Nevertheless, they may help to sharpen our view of the martial arts. Any given style can be analysed according to these five dimensions, and their functions within cultural contexts can be described. Only then does it become possible to discuss various styles at the same time, and compare them side by side.<sup>12</sup>

## CLASSES OF PHENOMENA

The forms and degrees to which a given style fulfils one or more of the five dimensions are not self-evident. They have to be deduced from the actual phenomena that construct the style's existence. For the researcher's convenience, these phenomena can be arranged into classes. The classes display varying degrees of abstraction and will be presented here in order, from most tangible to abstract. Since many of the phenomena are not exclusive to a single style, they can be put into context both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, they represent part or all of the actualizations and the repertoire of a single style. Horizontally, they represent features of martial arts which are shared by several styles. They can be the object of comparative analysis (I will say more on this below). In a third dimension, depth, the historicity of all these phenomena has to be taken into account.

Some *classes of phenomena* are as follows. Again, this list is not definite:

**The Body:** As obvious as it may sound, martial arts are physical activities. The human body is the foremost tool with which they are expressed, and also the canvas on which practitioners paint their martial self-image. Often, a style implies a certain 'ideal' body type, both for athletic and aesthetic reasons. Attitudes towards the body can thus be discussed on practitioner and style levels.

<sup>12</sup> A question often raised here is, 'Why did the martial arts lose most of their significance in the West while they thrived in the East?' Apart from the ignorance vis-à-vis historical developments in both East and West betrayed by this question, a possible explanation for the strong position of the Asian martial arts might be that they were more successful in fulfilling the five dimensions of meaning, thus solidly integrating martial arts into contexts that, in the West, have become dominated by other cultural systems, like medicine, theatre, firearms, esotericism, the gymnastic movement, etc.

**Movement/Techniques:** The most obvious yet also the most difficult class to understand and describe. As Eric Burkart has recently pointed out, martial arts skills, 'being body techniques and tacit knowing, can only be communicated interpersonally to a certain degree. For a complete understanding, the re-enacting, or re-living with one's own body is inevitable' [Burkart 2014: 259-260].<sup>13</sup>

The methodological problems are obvious: How can I be sure that my tacit knowing is congruent with that of another person? How much training is necessary to understand a technique? Can movements be understood from the outside, and does it make sense at all to extract them from their style's context? Researchers cannot perform movements that the practitioners of a style train for years and hope for the same bodily sensation. And since many researchers are trained martial artists themselves, there is the imminent danger of interpreting new movements through the lens of one's own style. However, these problems do not prohibit the study of this class of phenomena, nor are they an excuse to avoid it. If anything, they encourage an even greater degree of self-reflection.

**Tactics/Concepts:** Tactics and concepts are the premises that guide the selection of techniques on a functional level, and their application. A single technique, like a wrist lock, may be found in dozens of martial arts all over the world. However, when and how to apply it might be judged very differently. Tactics and concepts reflect the area in which a given style is used, and its risk assessment. What would make sense in one combative environment, and would therefore be highlighted in one style, might be dysfunctional in another one.

**Weapons/Materiality:** The material perspective is of the greatest importance in martial arts studies. The widespread assumption that martial arts have always and everywhere been mainly empty hands combat systems does not fit the historical evidence. At least where *Dimension 1: Preparation for Violent Conflict* is a prime motive, the use of weapons is the rule, not the exception. Understanding a style's movements and concepts cannot be achieved without understanding of the physical properties of its weapons. Furthermore, the weapons' symbolic value is often a defining part of the practitioners' self-image. The sword as a paramount symbol in human culture has to be pointed out especially. Beyond weaponry, we must consider the information that other objects carry, both on practical and symbolic levels: clothing, training equipment, the training area, etc.

<sup>13</sup> '...als Körpertechniken [...] und als implizites Wissen (tacit knowings) jedoch nur bedingt intersubjektiv kommunizierbar. Zum vollständigen Verständnis ist für Dritte immer der Nachvollzug, das Nacherleben mit dem eigenen Körper notwendig.'

**Media Representation:** Many styles possess written accounts of their teaching. At the intersection of material culture and teaching methodology, such writings can be approached from the perspectives of, among others, linguistics, literature, history, art history, or training sciences. On the other hand, the absence of written accounts can attest to a secretive tradition of techniques, or a certain dynamic approach to teaching. In modern times, written accounts stand alongside photographic and cinematographic depictions of martial arts. Their use as teaching material is not necessarily the dominant purpose. Often, self-promotion seems just as important (see YouTube). In a further step, the use of martial arts in other genres of media is to be taken into account, most notably for entertainment – from Chinese *Wuxia* literature to martial arts cinema or beat-'em-up computer games.

**Teaching Methodology/Learning Process:** 'The secret is not the technique, but how the technique is given to the student', a martial arts saying goes. Even though various styles may share identical applications of certain martial arts techniques, the same styles can vary dramatically in their methods of anchoring these techniques as tacit knowing in their students. Often, didactic theory and its practical implementation can be described precisely.

**Myths/Philosophy:** Myths are understood here as the explicit narratives that create the world that their narrators perceive, lay the foundations for their interaction with the world, and legitimize this interaction. Thus, they 'authoritatively regulate the manifold arrays of social life' [Assmann and Assmann 1998: 180].<sup>14</sup> Especially important are the founding myths told in many styles [Wetzler 2014b]. Related to the myths, but not the same, are explicit and implicit philosophies. As ideological frameworks, they answer questions on the necessity and meaning of training, the importance of martial arts in the practitioners' lives, and also attitude towards violence and the value of physical and psychological integrity. While mythic narrations are presented in word, picture, and movement, philosophies sometimes have to be deduced from the internal discourse and external presentation of a style.

**Social Structures:** The quality of martial arts as knowledge imparted from one person to another leads to their shape as networks of interpersonal relations and dependencies. The dichotomy teacher-student generates hierarchies that are fundamental for the organisation of many styles. Such bilateral relationships are accompanied by complex relations between more or less experienced co-students, grandmasters, and other teachers of the same style. The analogy to a family tree, as used in Chinese martial arts, can be useful as a conceptual parallel even if coined by the object-language. The individual's privileges and duties within

<sup>14</sup> 'Die vielfältigen Ordnungen des sozialen Lebens verbindlich zu regeln.'

such structures, and the ensuing social dynamics within a style, are two of the eminent subjects for research.

**Wider Cultural Context:** Any style is a product of the culture surrounding it, and both stand in reciprocal relation. Martial arts can be perceived as a system promoting stabilization or even dangerous divergence. They can be used as vehicles to convey desired social values. They can be of central or peripheral interest to a culture. Especially were martial skills are an integral part of the self-fashioning of social elites, this cultural context has to be taken into account for an adequate description of a style. Also, the connections between several styles that exist within one cultural system have to be considered.

All these phenomena serve both as objects and sources for martial arts studies. In the study of historical European martial arts, for example, considerable linguistic, codicological, and art historical work has been undertaken on the medieval and early modern fight books. In these cases, they were the object of study. However, when the movements and techniques of medieval European fighting are analysed, the same books become the main sources for research.

## POLYSYSTEM THEORY AND COMPARATIVE APPROACH

It is apparent that the common denominator of the issues touched upon so far is their fluid aggregate state – the impossibility of drawing clear-cut boundaries and finding solid definitions. We have noted so far: the lexical illusion of ‘martial arts’ vs. ‘combat sport’ vs. ‘self-defence’; the problem of defining a martial arts style as an individual entity; the problem of most styles’ syncretistic nature; the overlaps between the five dimensions of meaning ascribed to martial arts; and the shifting of the classes of phenomena between being objects and sources of study. Consequently, we need a theoretical framework that is properly able to deal with the slippery nature of martial arts as a scientific topic. As pointed out earlier, martial arts studies is not the first scientific endeavour to encounter this kind of problem. It is worth taking a look at the theoretical work that has been done in other academic fields and the results they provide.

One theory that seems extraordinarily well-suited to martial arts studies is the ‘polysystem theory’ coined by Itamar Even-Zohar [Even-Zohar 1990]. On the basis of Russian formalism of the early 20th century, Even-Zohar devised a theory for the study of literature that conceived of literature and literary texts ‘not as an isolated activity in society, regulated by laws exclusively [and inherently] different from all the rest of the human activities, but as an integral – often central and very

powerful – factor among the latter’ [Even-Zohar 1990: 4]. To Even-Zohar, literature as well as other cultural systems have to be perceived and described as ‘polysystems’:

**A semiotic system can be conceived of as a heterogeneous, open structure. It is, therefore, very rarely a uni-system but is, necessarily, a polysystem – a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent. [Even-Zohar 1990: 11]**

In this respect,

**the term ‘polysystem’ is more than just a terminological convention. Its purpose is to make explicit the conception of a system as dynamic and heterogeneous in opposition to the synchronistic approach. It thus emphasizes the multiplicity of intersections and hence the greater complexity of structuredness involved. [Even-Zohar 1990: 12]**

Even-Zohar’s theory has been adopted – and fruitfully so – by literary studies, especially concerning questions of translated literatures, in language studies, and other disciplines. Mutatis mutandis, it can also be applied to martial arts studies.

Polysystem theory is complex, and can hardly be summarized in a few words. However, some examples may demonstrate how aptly it can describe martial arts as dynamic, ever-changing entities, dependent contingent upon their cultural context.

In many countries of the world in the 21st century, several martial arts exist side by side. With clubs and schools of different styles in every big city, they compete for practitioners, reputation, and resources. How do these systems stand in relation to each other, and to the surrounding cultural systems? Even-Zohar writes that:

**Systems are not equal, but hierarchized within the polysystem. It is the permanent struggle between the various strata ... which constitutes the (dynamic) synchronic state of the system. It is the victory of one stratum over another which constitutes the change on the diachronic axis. In this centrifugal vs. centripetal motion, phenomena are driven from the centre to the periphery while, conversely, phenomena may push their way into the centre and occupy it. However, with a polysystem one must not think in terms of one centre and one periphery,**



since several such positions are hypothesized. A move may take place, for instance, whereby a certain item (element, function) is transferred from the periphery of one system to the periphery of an adjacent system within the same polysystem, and then may or may not move on to the centre of the latter. [Even-Zohar 1990: 13-14]

Transferred to the development of the Asian martial arts in Western culture within recent decades, this means: The total realm of the martial arts is the polysystem in question, which can itself be understood as a system within the ultimate polysystem 'culture'. The cultural meaning of the polysystem 'martial arts' is not monolithic, but instead consists of several systems that each have their own relevance within the polysystem. Such systems might be 'use for self-defence' or 'preferred way of combat for the silver screen', while the 'items' that occupy these systems are the individual martial arts styles.

To clarify with an example: Upon its arrival in the West, karate was perceived mostly for the *Dimension 1: Preparation for Violent Conflict*, and thus at the centre of the system 'self-defence'. However, it has been driven to the periphery of 'self-defence' by other styles, especially by wing chun, which was then in turn driven from the centre by krav maga. Regarding the perception of *Dimension 2: Play and Competitive Sports*, karate was again driven from a centre, this time of the category 'tough combat sport', in this case by kickboxing, which was replaced by Muay Thai, which was replaced by MMA. However, not all is lost for karate. When the style held the centre of the self-defence system, it also had a connotation of being a pastime for bullies and hooligans. While losing the centres of those systems karate was able to gain ground in the systems including 'martial arts for pedagogical purposes' and 'self-perfection by Eastern practices' (both systems obviously representing *Dimension 4: Transcendent Goals*), whose centres it shares today with other Japanese budo styles, along with yoga, qigong, and various meditation practices in the second case.

On the other hand, this model also makes us aware that martial arts may have to compete with other items of the surrounding culture for the centre of one or the other system – for example, regarding *Dimension 2: Play and Competitive Sports* and *Dimension 3: Performance*, Brazilian capoeira competes against parcour which competes against breakdancing in the system 'hip athletic underground youth movement culture'.

How and if a style can possess the centre of a system or polysystem depends on the way it is perceived by the surrounding culture:

As a rule, the centre of the whole polysystem is identical with the most prestigious canonized repertoire. Thus, it is the group which governs the polysystem that ultimately determines the canonicity of a certain repertoire. Once canonicity has been determined, such a group either adheres to the properties canonized by it (which subsequently gives them control of the polysystem) or, if necessary, alters the repertoire of canonized properties in order to maintain control. On the other hand, if unsuccessful in either the first or the second procedure, both the group and its canonized repertoire are pushed aside by some other group, which makes its way to the centre by canonizing a different repertoire. Those who still try to adhere to that displaced canonized repertoire can only seldom gain control of the centre of the polysystem; as a rule, one finds them on the periphery of the canonized, referred to (by the carriers of official culture) pejoratively as 'epigones'. [Even-Zohar 1990: 17]

To set this in context with the example above: the 'group which governs' the polysystem 'martial arts' in the West may be identified as modern media culture, with the currently undisputed dominance of MMA. Today, MMA is the point of reference against which pop culture reads most other martial arts. Traditional techniques 'would never work in the cage', one often hears, and even Bruce Lee's skill has to be re-assessed when internet boards discuss whether he would have been a successful UFC fighter. 'Pejoratively referred to as epigones', on the other hand, describes well the MMA world's view of the attempts of traditional karate practitioners who suddenly interpret the movement of their forms as blueprints for ground fighting.

Even-Zohar's polysystem theory provides an excellent foundation for an approach that aims to understand the martial arts' dynamic complexity. Applying the theory to the field can be a remedy for the essentialist pitfalls or oversimplifications that sometimes emerge. Glancing through the theory with both the history of martial arts and current martial arts studies in mind will lead to several striking insights. Some quotes from Even-Zohar's text may serve as further examples:

Thus, not only does [the polysystem theory] make possible the integration into semiotic research of objects (properties, phenomena) previously unnoticed or bluntly rejected; rather, such an integration now becomes a precondition, a sine qua non, for an adequate understanding of any semiotic field. This means that standard language cannot be accounted for without putting it into the context of the non-standard varieties ... the polysystem hypothesis involves a rejection of value judgments as criteria for an a priori selection of the objects of study ... No

field of study, whether mildly or more rigorously 'scientific', can select its objects according to norms of taste.

[Even-Zohar 1990: 13]

This quote corresponds to the call for the abandonment of normative assumptions and object-language earlier in this article. The researcher has to refrain from being simultaneously a critic. And it demands that we also take into consideration the smaller, non-mainstream styles of martial arts.

Even-Zohar calls the totality of actualizations of a given system its 'repertoire'. Concerning the production of repertoire, he writes that:

**the relations which obtain within the polysystem do not account only for polysystem processes, but also for procedures at the level of repertoire. That is to say, the polysystem constraints turn out to be relevant for the procedures of selection, manipulation, amplification, deletion, etc., taking place in actual products (verbal as well as non-verbal) pertaining to the polysystem.**

[Even-Zohar 1990: 15]

Another strength of polysystem theory when applied to martial arts studies is that it not only provides a terminology to describe the relations of styles between each other and to the surrounding culture, but also considers the conditions under which they produce the items listed above under the classes of phenomena. This provides a background to many observations made by martial arts studies scholars. Consider, for example, the following quote from Lorge:

**Because almost all martial arts in China and outside share a mostly identical palette of individual strikes, stances, and other techniques, what distinguishes one style from another is which techniques are not used, how techniques are combined, what forms [designated patterns of techniques] one performs, and the emphasis given to certain techniques over others.**

[Lorge 2012: 207]

The selections of techniques noted by Lorge are not simply based on functionality, as many practitioners themselves believe, but result from internal processes which are typical, according to Even-Zohar:

**It is this local and temporal sector of the repertoire which is the issue of struggle in the literary (or any other semiotic) system. But there is nothing in the repertoire itself that is capable of determining which section of it can be (or become) canonized or not, just as the distinctions between 'standard',**

**'high', 'vulgar', or 'slang' in language are not determined by the language repertoire itself, but by the language system – i.e., the aggregate of factors operating in society involved with the production and consumption of lingual utterances. It is thus these systemic relations that determine the status of certain items (properties, features) in a certain 'language'.**

[Even-Zohar 1990: 18]

The polysystem theory's model of 'canonicity' can help to analyse how techniques or concepts from one style are integrated into another one. This can happen either as 'static canonicity', where 'a certain text is accepted as a finalized product and inserted into a set of sanctified texts literature (culture) wants to preserve' [Even-Zohar 1990: 19; substitute 'text' with 'technique' and 'literature' with 'style']. Or it happens as 'dynamic canonicity', where

**a certain literary model manages to establish itself as a productive principle in the system through the latter's repertoire. It is this latter kind of canonization which is the most crucial for the system's dynamics. Moreover, it is this kind of canonization that actually generates the canon, which may thus be viewed as the group of survivors of canonization struggles.**

[Even-Zohar 1990: 19]

An example for such a dynamic canonization might be the dissemination of the technique known as the 'double-leg takedown' in the wake of the UFC, influencing many self-defence styles. Prior to that they had before often neglected ground fighting to a large degree.

These examples shall suffice for now. Hopefully, they demonstrate the value of polysystem theory as an approach to martial arts studies. However, no theory can do more than prepare the ground for research, and all need fitting methods to bear fruit. One method that can easily be applied to our field, and that fits organically with Even-Zohar's models, is that of scientific comparison (as used, for example, in religious studies). It lends itself well to analysing the adjacent and competing styles within a martial arts polysystem, and can also provide understanding of martial arts as a general part of human culture. This is especially promising when dealing with similarities between martial arts phenomena that never stood in direct contact with each other (e.g. martial arts instructional manuals in medieval Europe and China).

Comparison is a standard, intuitive way of dealing with seemingly similar phenomena. However, it is advisable to sharpen the tools of comparison, as Oliver Freiburger did in his article on 'comparison as method and constitutive approach in religious studies' [2012]. To

Freiberger, the aim of a comparative study is not to 'show the identity of different phenomena – thus defining their postulated "true core" – but instead ... to analyse similarities and analogies regarding a certain aspect. In regards to a different aspect, the phenomena may well be different' [Freiberger 2012: 210].<sup>15</sup> He emphasizes the epistemological problem of how one can know before one compares things 'that they belong to the same category at all' [Freiberger 2012: 206].<sup>16</sup> While he admits that pre-categories are inevitable, Freiberger urges us to be extremely cautious with them (in the following quotes from his text, please substitute 'martial arts' for 'religion'):

Asking where such pre-knowledge comes from, we will get back to associative and subjective constructions ... In most cases, the religious tradition that a researcher knows best will give the frame of reference ... The danger is to look for something in another religion that, even if it exists there, has a completely different meaning, position, or relevance.<sup>17</sup>  
[Freiberger 2012: 206]

His solution to this problem is constant oscillation between definition of terms and comparison. In the field of tension between these two poles, knowledge will be gained:

The starting point for a comparative study can be a definition of terms (as wide and open as possible) to isolate the topics of the study; and a result of the comparison will be a modification and precision of the terms. These more precise terms can then be the basis for a further comparative study [which] will prevent the essentialisation of terms.<sup>18</sup>  
[Freiberger 2012: 207-208]

<sup>15</sup> 'Identität von Phänomenen festzustellen – womit ihr postuliertes "Wesen" bestimmt würde – sondern vielmehr ... Ähnlichkeiten und Analogien von Erscheinungen im Hinblick auf einen bestimmten Aspekt zu untersuchen; im Hinblick auf andere Aspekte mögen sich die Erscheinungen durchaus unterscheiden'.

<sup>16</sup> 'Woher man vor dem Vergleich weiß, dass die Gegenstände, die man vergleichen wird, überhaupt in dieselbe Kategorie gehören'.

<sup>17</sup> 'Geht man nun der Frage nach, woher dieses Vorwissen eigentlich stammt, landet man letztlich wieder bei assoziativ-subjektiven Konstruktionen ... Meist bildet diejenige religiöse Tradition, die den Forschern am besten vertraut ist, den Bezugsrahmen ... Es besteht die Gefahr, dass man in anderen Religionen nach etwas sucht, das dort – selbst wenn man es findet – eine ganz andere Bedeutung, Stellung oder Relevanz besitzt'.

<sup>18</sup> 'Der Ausgangspunkt einer Vergleichsstudie kann also eine (möglichst weite und offene) Definition der Begriffe sein, die den Gegenstandsbereich der Studie eingrenzen; und als Ergebnis des Vergleichs kann die Begrifflichkeit modifiziert und präzisiert werden. Die so präzisierten Begriffe können wiederum der Ausgangspunkt für eine weitere Vergleichsstudie sein, aufgrund derer die Definitionen wiederum modifiziert werden. Eine solche kontinuierliche gegenseitige Befruchtung von Begriffsbestimmung und Vergleich verhindert eine Essentialisierung von Begriffen und Vorstellungen'.

Freiberger demands a study of '*quantitative criteria*, which measure an item by its position and effect within a tradition' [208], while at the same time admitting that such positions and effects can be contested over time within a given tradition.<sup>19</sup> This is, obviously, a variation of Even-Zohar's model with other terms. Contrary to *quantitative criteria*, Freiberger rejects *qualitative criteria* – that is, those criteria which want to establish the 'true' features or position of a given tradition. Such criteria are normative, and aim to establish the results of a comparison before the comparison has been made. Of course, it is only suitable to compare those phenomena whose position and function in their respective system is properly analyzed. This demands familiarity with the cultural context of a martial arts style, and the necessary scientific methods to approach the phenomena that shall be compared.

Though not the only applicable method, the critically reflected comparison, as described by Freiberger, yields very good results when applied to martial arts, and answers to the heterogeneity of the field.

## CONCLUSION

One aim of martial arts studies is to observe, understand, and interpret martial arts in their various representations, their development, form, and cultural meaning. To achieve this, martial arts studies has to find ways to deal with the multifaceted and highly dynamic nature of martial arts on horizontal and vertical axes. They have to widen their perspective to a degree where the totality of the martial arts is no longer perceived through the lenses of normative or oversimplified assumptions, which were derived from a single style, or a single family of styles. This defines the horizontal axis. Instead of assuming clear cut categories of martial arts [e.g., martial arts vs. combat sports], the field should be approached without predetermined conclusions. The various classes of phenomena through which a given style is actualized, from dominant body images to its interaction with the surrounding culture, have to be analysed with the methods of the relevant academic disciplines. This describes the vertical axis. The historicity of any given style or phenomenon introduces a third dimension to the coordinate system.

Once styles and/or phenomena have been arranged on the horizontal axis, the method of scientific comparison can help in understanding them. However, the difficulties of integrating the diversity of martial arts into a coherent, comprehensible total have to be faced via a fitting

<sup>19</sup> '*Quantitative* Kriterien, die einen Gegenstand nach seiner Stellung und Wirkung innerhalb der Tradition bemessen'.

theoretical framework. The polysystem theory of Itama Even-Zohar has been proposed in this article for its ability to deal with the dynamics of martial arts especially in the modern world, and for its capacity to include results from a wide range of academic disciplines. Also, it can easily integrate the different degrees to which a given style fulfils the proposed dimensions of meaning ascribed to martial arts practices.

Martial arts have fascinated mankind for thousands of years, and have been a part of human culture ever since. They have been able to change their forms constantly and to adjust to new historical situations and cultural challenges. Only an open, truly multidisciplinary approach can hope to adequately describe a subject as complex as this. Aspiring to be more than a mere collection of results from unconnected disciplines, martial arts studies has to meet this challenge.

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# EFFICACY AND ENTERTAINMENT IN MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

## ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

## D.S. FARRER

## DOI

10.18573/j.2015.10017

## KEYWORDS

Efficacy, entertainment, nomadology, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, seni silat, Chinese martial arts, performance

## CITATION

Farrer, D.S. 2015. 'Efficacy and Entertainment in Martial Arts Studies: Anthropological Perspectives', *Martial Arts Studies* 1, 46-59.

## ABSTRACT

Martial anthropology offers a nomadological approach to Martial Arts Studies featuring Southern Praying Mantis, Hung Sing Choy Li Fut, Yapeese stick dance, Chin Woo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, and *seni silat* to address the infinity loop model in the anthropology of performance/performance studies which binds together efficacy and entertainment, ritual and theatre, social and aesthetic drama, concealment and revelation. The infinity loop model assumes a positive feedback loop where efficacy flows into entertainment and vice versa. The problem addressed here is what occurs when efficacy and entertainment collide? Misframing, captivation, occulturation, and false connections are related as they emerged in anthropological fieldwork settings from research into martial arts conducted since 2001, where confounded variables may result in new beliefs in the restoration of behaviour.



This article<sup>1</sup> outlines the particulars of an ethnographic journey into martial arts to indicate certain implications for the fledgling discipline of martial arts studies regarding efficacy and entertainment in the anthropology of performance.<sup>2</sup> The notions of efficacy and entertainment, and their correspondence to social to aesthetic drama were conjoined in the 'infinity loop model' in performance studies [Schechner 2002: 68; Turner 1985: 300-1]. My topic is the question: what happens when efficacy and entertainment are confounded in martial arts? I consider various theoretical outcomes including misframing, captivation, occulturation, and false connections, and in the process consider why some martial arts practice seems more like entertainment than actual combat training.

Since 2001 I have researched martial arts in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Guam, Yap, Hong Kong and China. Anthropological fieldwork provides a tool to develop concepts from the ground up [Agar 1996; Davis and Konner 2011; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Robben and Sluka 2007]. My anthropological trajectory, delving into various martial arts in different field sites, is that of a 'nomadologist'. Primary research findings from Southern Praying Mantis, Hung Sing Choy Li Fut, Yapese stick dance, Chin Woo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, and *seni silat* are collected together here to consider problems in the anthropology of performance relating to efficacy and entertainment [Schechner 1994; Turner 1985; 1988]. A frequent question that arises for researchers into martial arts is that of which style is 'the best'. The answer to the question of 'the best' martial art depends on whether the training is for efficacy or entertainment.

The 'nomadological approach', configured here, intersects with ontology, epistemology and methodology [Deleuze and Guattari 2002]. Ontologically, nomadology means not being tied down to style, it concerns *what* is being studied, whether silat, *baguazhang*, capoeira, dance, performance art, martial art, warzone combatives, etc. [see also Downey 2005].<sup>3</sup> Epistemologically, nomadology means there is no one particular way to examine a style, whether phenomenological,

Marxist, realist, feminist, or anarchist. In addition to primary fieldwork investigating martial arts, studies of representations in literature, film, and theatre may be included in a nomadological approach to martial arts studies. Martial arts studies' ontology and epistemology is 'nomadic', to experientially 'absorb what is useful', in Bruce's Lee's appropriation of Mao Zedong's precept [Bowman 2013: 18]. Furthermore, the nomadic approach fits methodology, where martial arts studies researchers utilize participant observation, interviews, case studies, life histories, and many other methods drawn from the arts, sciences, or humanities. Nomadology brings martial arts studies together, not so much into a unified perspective, but to provide a conceptual tool for questioning, comparing, and examining what may otherwise appear to be endless disparate materials, styles, aims and objectives.

## SETTING THE SCENE

With a lifelong interest in martial arts, my initial impetus towards martial anthropology came from Phillip B. Zarrilli, the external examiner of my doctoral degree, pursued at the National University of Singapore from 2001-2007, on silat and Malay mysticism. I chose Singapore because I wanted to live in Southeast Asia to learn silat, and the Malay language. I ended up living in Singapore for nine years. This provided opportunities for frequent and extended visits to Malaysia and Thailand.

My research was spurred on by the notion of 'performance ethnography', where the researcher joins in and learns a martial art from the ground up as a basis for writing and research [Zarrilli 1998].<sup>4</sup> The study of *silat Melayu* that became *Shadows of the Prophet* [Farrer 2009] was complicated because the martial art, as I encountered it, was subsumed under the Haqqani, an Islamic religious order of Sufis. I had trained with the silat group in North London from 1996-98, before relocating to Singapore where I caught up with them again in Malaysia in 1999. The Haqqani were part of the Naqshbandi Sufi *tarekat*, a Sufi order of mystics serving powerful Islamic royal families across Southeast Asia. I first learned silat in England from a bodyguard (*hulubalang*) of H.R.H. Raja Ashman [1958-2012].<sup>5</sup> Granting me permission (*ijazah*) to carry out research on silat, Shaykh Raja Ashman said, 'the most important thing is respect' [Farrer 2009: 18].

<sup>1</sup> This article is based upon my keynote address at the inaugural Martial Arts Studies Conference, Cardiff, UK. References and footnotes have been added and the text has been revised.

<sup>2</sup> John Whalen-Bridge takes the credit for coining the term 'martial arts studies' in our co-edited volume *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge* [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011]. Whilst Whalen-Bridge pressed for 'martial arts studies', I was occupied with 'performance ethnography', now 'martial anthropology' ranged alongside carnal ethnography and carnal sociology as possible routes into martial arts studies [Wacquant 2004; García and Spencer 2013].

<sup>3</sup> Preliminary findings were presented at the ASA15 Conference, 15/04/2015. See <https://goo.gl/rYLR8C> last accessed 12/10/2015.

<sup>4</sup> This was before Wacquant [2004] published his book on the 'carnal' sociology of boxing.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://goo.gl/69hZEP> last accessed 09/10/2015.

In the West, however, the Haqqani might be considered as a New Age cult. Perhaps they would have been regarded as a 'deviationist cult' in Malaysia, too, had they not been the *tarekat* of the royal family of Perak. Hence the research became a double study, a study of the martial art, but also a study of the Haqqani. At the end of the silat project, although not exactly a 'casualty', I did get fed up [Buehler 2011]. There were too many bitter arguments between the group and the *guru silat*, and there was too much suspicion of black magic, which gave me the creeps.<sup>6</sup>

Early one morning in Singapore I watched a man perform sophisticated martial arts in a local park. Ng *sifu*, in his late sixties, was remarkably agile. This encounter led me to embark on a second ethnographic study of martial arts, commencing in 2005.<sup>7</sup> Gaining entry, I trained with Ng sifu and his group everyday for 30-months, for two or three hours a day. During the last nine months I trained for an additional two or three hours a day in baguazhang and Hung Sing Choy Li Fut. I trained about 35 hours a week, and wrote field notes for two or more hours per day. Plus I spent many hours socializing with martial artists, so the research was full on, full-time [Farrer 2011].

Prior to research in Southeast Asia I had learned Southern Praying Mantis Kung Fu in London.<sup>8</sup> In other words, I was a martial artist who became an anthropologist, not an anthropologist who became a martial artist. In 1996 I earned a black belt in Southern Praying Mantis, for which I trained for up to five hours a day, for eight years. Following silat, and Chin Woo, I wrote about Southern Praying Mantis, as I retrained Southern Praying Mantis in Hong Kong. For five years I travelled to Hong Kong to visit Li Tin Loi sifu, staying for a few weeks at a time to polish my skills (*chup*, Cantonese slang for 'to tidy up') [Farrer 2013: 148].

Committed to community based collaborative research, I've worked with many generous martial arts practitioners who have acted as interlocutors. Joining the Chin Woo Athletic Association boosted my research because Chin Woo masters and long-term practitioners are research active, and some excellent academic accounts have emerged regarding Chin Woo [Frank 2006; Morris 2000; 2004]. The Chinese language in Singapore has many dialects, including Hakka, Hokkien,

<sup>6</sup> Additionally, I disliked the knee hyperextension in Seni Silat Haqq Melayu (SSHM) basic stances.

<sup>7</sup> Besides opportunity and time, I felt that I had written adequately about Malay martial arts, but the majority of the people in Singapore are Chinese, and I wanted to balance out my research with a study of Chinese martial arts in Southeast Asia.

<sup>8</sup> Sifu Paul Whitrod, U.K. representative of Southern Praying Mantis, generously took me on as a full-time student (disciple) with no charge or ritual. See <http://www.chowgarsouthernmantis.com/instructuk.php> last accessed 10/12/2015.

Teochew, Cantonese and Mandarin. By the time I left Singapore I spoke Chinese and Malay well enough for general interaction, but specialist definitions of deep concepts required more thorough investigation.<sup>9</sup> Yong Feng was my long-term research assistant in Singapore, Hong Kong, China, Malaysia, and Thailand, alongside Ah Kin, from Southern Praying Mantis in Hong Kong.

Having set the scene, I present the initial conceptual frame via the infinity loop model from the anthropology of performance/ performance studies to introduce efficacy and entertainment, ritual and theatre, social and aesthetic drama, concealment and revelation.

## THE INFINITY LOOP MODEL

The Infinity Loop Model developed from collaborative work between theatre director Richard Schechner, and social anthropologist Victor Turner, to combine insights from the *Anthropology of Performance* with acting and theatre resulting in a new academic discipline called performance studies [Schechner 1988; 2002; Turner 1985; 1988]. Schechner theorised how social drama has a positive feedback loop into theatre, and how theatre (aesthetic drama) feeds back into real life (social drama) [Schechner 2002: 66-71]. There are many ways to explain the infinity loop model, and below I'm going to employ an example from silat. First, some basic definitions: 'efficacy' is to achieve results, effect change, possibly via ritual; 'entertainment' is to have fun, give pleasure to an audience, possibly via performance art [Schechner 2002: 71]. Every performance has aspects of both efficacy and entertainment. But what happens if entertainment and efficacy become confused?

Confounding efficacy and entertainment, frame confusion (misframing), results in false connections [Etchegoyen 2005: 78-82; Breuer and Freud 2000: 67-70; Goffman 1974]. To explain 'false connections' an example is helpful. Imagine a table in the middle of an empty room, where a subject is woken out of hypnosis having been told not to cross the room as a post-hypnotic suggestion.<sup>10</sup> Asked to collect something from the table the post-hypnotic subject edges around room, retrieves the object, and returns. The hypnotizer asks, 'Why did you walk around the edge of the room and not across it?' The subject replies, 'It's cold, I wanted to stay near the radiator to keep warm'; or something to that effect. To risk an electrical analogy, error under hypnosis is something like 'crossed wires', where the subject unconsciously offers

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Margaret Chan has generously shared many insights regarding Chinese ritual and performance in Singapore.

<sup>10</sup> For Freud on hypnosis see Córdón [2012: 211-217].



a false reason for their action. So, if 'efficacy' and 'entertainment' are confounded, this may result in a false connection or cognitive error.<sup>11</sup>

Another way to address frame confusion and false connections, in anthropology, is with the concept of 'captivation', drawn from Alfred Gell's book *Art and Agency* [1998: 68-72], discussing how an object or an artwork exerts 'agency' to ensnare the viewer in a cognitive trap. 'Healing Arts of the Malay Mystic' illustrated this phenomenon where the paintings of Mohammad Din Mohammad spring alive to help people under spiritual attack [Farrer 2008]. Such notions of 'agency' and 'embodiment' smack of Hegel's [1807] *Phenomenology of Spirit*. The problem with 'embodiment' is what is being embodied? Mystical energy, soul or spirit? Embodiment may cause more problems than it solves in martial arts studies.

Embodiment and agency are *emic* attributions, 'notions from the field', that entered anthropology to become *etic* 'matters of theory', in Gell [1988; 1999 [1996]], and many other writers. That agency is embodied in things is an academic false connection. It is not just indigenous people who experience false connections; academics suffer from false connections too. For Ingold [2011: 28] agency is 'magical mind-dust' and we should forget about it, especially the idea that 'second class agency' could be embodied in things. For Ingold [2011], we don't need a theory of agency in things; we need a theory of life. And the same goes for embodiment. The notion that something is spiritually encapsulated within the person is nonsensical, because we are active beings in the world, creating the world with our every move, word, and line [Ingold 2011, 2007, 2000].

<sup>11</sup> This correlation could equally operate in reverse where false connections result in misframing.

Ingold's dismissal of agency and embodiment is fascinating, and in a way I agree with him. However, those who most doubt the existence of agency have probably never had their agency stripped from them. Locked in a 'total institution', a prison or mental hospital, the prisoner/patient regards agency as lost, where structure is bureaucracy encased in concrete and steel [Goffman 1961]. Agency then, is the power to act upon the world, and this sociological meaning needs to be retained in martial arts studies, despite battles in anthropology.

## ATHLETICS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Training Chin Woo in Singapore and Malaysia with Ng Gim Han sifu I came to enjoy martial arts practice as a pastime, for theatre training, Chinese opera, health and fitness, acrobatics, and staged community centre performances of Chinese identity [Chan 2006; Lee 2009]. In terms of efficacy, as a practical fighting art, the training was problematic. As mentioned previously, I earned a black belt in Southern Praying Mantis in London's East End, and if nothing else they taught how to fight. One night in Singapore, a senior student of Ng sifu challenged me to spar outside Kampung Glam Community Club. He punched me in the mouth and split my lip. I wasn't going to put up with it, so I flattened him with a ferocious Southern Praying Mantis palm technique known as 'the face'. Yong Feng ran up to me and said:

YF: Oh, no, no, no, you can't do that, you can't do that!

Me: Why not? He attacked me.

YF: No, no, no, you'll make him lose face.

Me: What?

YF: Yeah, you made him lose face.

Ng sifu teaching Howie Fong  
in Hat Yai, Thailand



Chin Woo training, as I experienced it, was mostly for theatre, memory work, actor training, entertainment, fitness and athletics. Of course, the training exhibits a marked degree of physical efficacy, yet this is difficult to translate into fighting prowess given the absence of sparring and physical confrontation. At Kampung Glam, Chin Woo practitioners balanced, walked, and ran upon the dancing lion's ball, a sphere of woven rattan about three feet across, a feat of balance at least as difficult as riding a unicycle.

Ng sifu said, 'This [training] is not about fighting, this is about staying fit', about ageing gracefully, and developing and maintaining enhanced physical abilities. Of course, being in peak physical fitness enhances fighting ability, and there are many excellent fighting skills preserved in the Chin Woo sets. Nevertheless, an extreme emphasis on solo set training distracts from the combat skills better learned through drilling movements, sparring and competition.



*Li Tin Loi sifu, grinding arm, Southern Praying Mantis*

## POWER AND EFFICACY

Li Tin Loi sifu is a retired Hong Kong policeman. For Li sifu, martial arts training concerns efficacy, done to develop shock power capabilities to paralyse or kill an opponent. Training in East River Chow Gar Southern Praying Mantis Kung Fu emphasises partner exercises to develop strength, power, speed, accuracy and timing. The body is held rigid during forms practice to harden muscle and sinew. Li sifu is incredibly strong and powerful for a small person, for any sized person, and has developed some strange abilities through his training. Li sifu's teacher, Ip Kai Shui [1913–2004], also had some peculiar attributes. After decades of throat strengthening exercises, Grandmaster Ip Shui's throat came down from his chin at a 45-degree angle. He would invite people to knock on his throat, which made a sound like hard plastic. I couldn't pinch any skin on his arms or back. Profound bodily transformations occur through Southern Praying Mantis training methods that may be referred to as becoming-animal, becoming-insect [Farrer 2013]. Southern Praying Mantis practitioners would say that there is very little theatre in their practice, that it is totally practical, and would be upset with any talk saying their martial art had much to do with entertainment.

## ENTERTAINMENT MASKING EFFICACY? YAPESE STICK DANCE

In 2013 I spent a week on Yap, Micronesia, to observe stick dance. Literature regarding the Carolinian martial art, *bwang*, claims that it had virtually disappeared by the 1940s [Lessa and Velez-Ibanez 2002]. Apparently there is no *bwang*, it cannot be seen or found. Fed up with inescapable bed bugs in the hotel, I stayed in a *faluw* [men's house] for three nights, bringing a few bottles of Scotch. An elderly man came and sat in the *faluw*, saying he could not drink very much because he'd had a stroke, but he polished off an entire bottle of Glenmorangie as we sat there talking late into the night. He knew I was an anthropologist, and asked me what I was interested in. I said I was interested in *bwang*. 'Really? Well it doesn't exist, it's gone, everybody who knew it died', he said. I replied, 'Well I don't believe you'. He said, 'Why don't you believe me?' I said, 'Because I saw the Yapese stick dance and to me it's [...] obvious it's right there'.

The muscular definition on the stick dancer's back is pronounced. The poles are long and heavy. Stick dance is serious training for men and women, where a slip of the stick could result in broken fingers. No doubt stick dance is entertaining for the audience and participants. But here the efficacy of a martial art has been disguised in entertainment. So, I'm sitting in this men's house with the elder, and he's drinking whisky, and I'm having a couple of beers, and I said, 'I know you have some of the movements, because I'm a martial artist, and, for example, I know you can do this (showing a Southern Mantis technique)'. He laughed and said, 'Yes, but can you this? (rolling hands)'. I said, 'Yes, I can do this (following the move)'. That evening the Yapese elder



Yapese stick dance

and I went through a hundred different patterned movements, one after another. The Yapese martial art probably does exist, it's just well hidden, because the community is reluctant to discuss it or reveal it to outsiders.

All martial arts evidence the dualism of efficacy and entertainment, where one facet may be seen to predominate over the other, but to develop this further along the lines of the infinity loop model I shall return to *seni silat*.

## SOCIAL AND AESTHETIC DRAMA IN SENI SILAT

In *silat*, ritual ordeals (efficacy, social drama) and theatre training (entertainment, aesthetic drama) are combined in a martial art. *Seni Silat Haqq Melayu* (SSHM) had a practice of 'breaking the ego' that exemplifies social drama. The idea is to 'break the ego', to conquer 'the animal within', during a 40-day (or longer) seclusion. In Sufism, the *khalwa* (retreat) is done alone in seclusion, locked up in a room alone, but the millenarian camp in 1999 took a group of Malay and mixed British people out into the Malaysian rainforest to wait for Doomsday (*Qiyamat*) as predicted by Shaykh Nazim [Farrer 2009: 203-204; Özelsel 1996]. The group was isolated for 40-days during Ramadan, to live according to the rules of the camp.

'Verbal mortification' was used to break the ego. *Silat* retreats are brutal, like Bolshoi ballet training. 'Misdirection' played a part, where breaking

the ego is a form of psychological callusing [Spencer 2009]. One evening during the retreat the guru *silat* ordered Siddique to eat lamb soup for supper, because it was a favourite of the Prophet Mohammed. Having fasted all day, the *murid* ['disciple'] tucked in hungrily, but the *guru silat* said:

'Eat slowly'. (Said loudly)

'Eat slowly!' (Shouting)

'Chew your food!' (Angry, repeated once more)

'There: why did you drop it down yourself?' (Gentle; condescending)

'Don't touch the food until you have swallowed what is in your mouth' (Irritated).

[Farrer 2009: 209]

Breaking the ego occurs via the public shaming of verbal mortification. Every little thing, down to the last minutiae of their behaviour is mortified [Goffman 1961]. Given 'misdirection', however, the question is, was the guru *silat* criticizing Siddique, or was the guru *silat* criticizing somebody else through him? The explanation provided was that 'because their ego is not big enough to take it', one person is criticized on behalf of another, where those strong enough to take it bear the brunt of the vituperation for others.<sup>12</sup> But, given such misdirection, nobody in the camp seemed to know who was actually being criticized. Nobody knew to whom the guru *silat* was referring. They wondered: 'Is he telling me off? Of course he's not telling me off, because he is telling off somebody else through me'. This frustrating experience was a hall of mirrors that paralysed the group.

SSHM ended up running a theatre show in England in 2002. The guru *silat* declared that only students from Malaysia, and no British (UK) students would be cast. Again, he travelled to Malaysia, this time for a theatre camp, and brought Malay performers to England to present *Silat: Dance of the Warriors*.<sup>13</sup> During the one-hour show, performers clashed with machetes in a constant martial arts battle to display the arsenal of *silat* techniques. For the finale the guru *silat* played a prince, and the two warring factions sniffed the royal hand, submitting to his pious authority to heal the rift. Having experienced both camps, and the show, I interpreted this scene using the infinity loop model as kind of wish fulfilment. The social drama of breaking all these egos, of breaking all his students, and of having all his students leave him, only to be replaced by new students to be broken in their turn was symbolized by

<sup>12</sup> One person suffering the blame for another may be a transformation set of Jesus sacrificed for our sins; a notion rejected in Islam where Isa (Jesus) did not die on the cross.

<sup>13</sup> See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIWkgY53WXM>> last accessed 16/10/2015.



the constant battle. Submission to royal authority was a fantasy wish fulfilment played out through aesthetic performance.

During the silat camps I placed my hands into boiling oil four times to experience the *mandi minyak* ritual. For my first attempt [2001] dull coals heated an oily sheen floating atop glutinous coconut fibre and pulp, yet another time [2007] the flames blazed under the cauldron of sieved oil. Experiencing the *mandi minyak* four times (and only being slightly burned on one occasion), led me to propose the notion of 'occulturation'. I define occulturation as the attribution of occult power to esoteric skills [Farrer 2009: 41, 249-250]. Occulturation pertains to the infinity loop model with the occult on one side, and esoteric skills on the other. Understanding martial arts as simultaneously efficacy and entertainment, social and aesthetic drama, ritual and performance, concealing and revealing is integral to martial arts studies.

## SINGAPORE KOONTOW

The next example is from research I conducted in Singapore from 2006-2007. *Koontow* (*kuntao*; Hokkien 'head/fist') refers to Chinese (and Malay) mixed martial arts [see also Davies 2010: 312-317]. The Hung Sheng (Sing) Chinese Koontow and Lion Dance Society is located in Geylang, Singapore's red light district comprised of fourteen streets speckled with lion dance associations, clan headquarters, coffee-shops, legal brothels, illegal streetwalking sex-workers, pimps, massage parlours, guest houses and seedy hotels [Ng 2011; Warren 2003]. Hung Sing fuses Choy Li Fut with Jow Gar, using arm-swinging training methods with the arm extended straight, punctuated with snappy leopard (fore knuckle) fist strikes to the throat and solar plexus. The uniform consists of black and yellow leopard-spotted trousers, topped by leopard-head insignia T-Shirts. Hung Sing is a 'closed-door' martial arts group accessed by invitation only; in other words, they are a 'secret society', what the British colonial officials would have called a 'triad', albeit this group are not to my knowledge involved in criminal activity [see also Boretz 2011]. One of the disciples said this is the best style to learn prior to imprisonment, because the essential self-defence attributes of the art may be picked up in three months - to kill with one blow of the fist. Of course, for the purposes of actual combat, the long arm-swinging method prominent in the forms (entertainment) is rejected for lightening fast leopard fist strikes (efficacy).

During the past few decades Hung Sing has changed, with tough 'traditional' training methods abandoned. Chia Yim Soon sifu, the chief instructor, trained great strength in his fingertips by setting two Chinese stools apart at arms length to do finger press-ups between the

stools with his legs propped up behind on a bar. According to Chia sifu, 'nobody does [raised finger press-ups] anymore' because 'it's too much like hard work'. Chia sifu teaches very precise, nimble footwork. During one class he asked me: 'Do you know how to dance? Do you know how to do the cha, cha, cha?' Usually stern, an amused Chia sifu demonstrated the cha, cha, cha, a sideways turning step, striking out left and right with lethal punches to an imaginary enemy's windpipe.

Studying with Chia sifu brought the withholding and revealing of knowledge into stark relief. Chia sifu would teach the next step only when the student had attained the desired level of ability. Simultaneously, certain applications to the moves were revealed whilst others were withheld until the disciple (*yup moon diji*, lit. 'enter the door disciples') exhibited satisfactory progress. Continuous turning and twisting with precise footwork added to the complexity and sophistication of the moves. Turning the waist doubles the manoeuvres - elbow, palm, palm, elbow - where four blows emerge from one simple turn. Chia sifu went beyond the slavish reproduction of forms to create his own style from fundamental principles in the production of Hung Sing Choy Li Fut.

One evening Chia sifu demonstrated a back fist, knee raise, double seize, and step with downward palm strike. Against this combination, performed by one of the practitioners, he used swatting hand blocks, and two circling kicks, one to the side, and one behind the opponent. The blocks and kicks shadowed the form taught, with the shadowing manoeuvres presented instead of the application. Chia sifu often invited me to show applications. So I demonstrated on a volunteer how to distract the opponent with the back fist to the face (to make them look up and raise their hands), followed by a knee into the abdomen, seizing the head as it drops down, and turning sideways to smash the face into the floor. His eyes widened, and somehow he looked furious, yet amused. This was an obvious, if brutal application to the techniques. With decades of cross training in twenty-one martial arts I saw the application instantly. Despite Chia sifu's creative fusion, in Hung Sing 'traitors' are outcast, and no deviation from the correct form is tolerated. So I wondered why he emphasized the shadow set over the actual application? Why did he teach fancy shadow moves, when the actual techniques are so devastating? Had the correct application been hidden so well that even the masters had forgotten it? Was the avoidance of teaching applications an example of 'false connections' held in the 'captivation' of the slavish reproduction of sets? For Occam's Razor the simplest explanation is the right one, located here in terms of martial efficacy.

## BRAZILIAN JIU-JITSU ON GUAM

My latest project concerns Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) taught by chief instructor Sensei Dan O'Connor at Spike 22 Gym, on Guam, and here I can only comment briefly. BJJ is a rough sport, derived originally from Japanese *judo* and *jujutsu*, the later meaning the 'technique or art' (*jutsu*) of suppleness, flexibility, pliancy, gentleness' [Ratti and Westbrook 1973: 347; Green and Svinth 2010: 31-36; Hogeveen 2013]. Rather than kick, punch, or strike, the practitioner will seize, push/pull, and drag the opponent to the floor, pass the guard, and attain a dominant position from which to control and submit the opponent

Positions include the full mount, side control, the turtle, North-South, and the T-bag. Most of the submissions are done from arm bars and from chokeholds although there are a wide array of other submissions including leg locks and wristlocks.<sup>14</sup> Although techniques and drills are sometimes taught at the beginning of the class, most of the ninety-minute session is spent in 'rolling' (sparring), where the practitioners fight each other on the mats.

A United States Territory, Guam is part of the U.S., albeit not recognised as a state and thousands of miles away from continental America. Guam is the largest American military base in the Pacific. Spike 22 is named after the owner's dead pit-bull, and is well known in MMA circles. Policemen train at Spike, including SWAT, Guam Police Department (GPD), immigration, customs, alongside the security services, and the U.S. military, including the National Guard,

Navy, Coast Guard and Air Force. Participants are mostly indigenous Chamorro, Filipino, American, Korean, Japanese and other diasporic people living on Guam. Professional and amateur, foreign and local MMA fighters, wrestlers, jiu-jitsu competitors, and Thai boxers visit from time to time. There is a constant flow of bodies, knowledge and perspectives through the gym. Every day at six or seven in the morning the 'Grey Beard' or 'Old Man' jiu-jitsu class starts.

Cauliflower Culture is one of the brands promoted at the gym, an MMA fighter's brand appealing to wrestlers, boxers, rugby players and others for whom cauliflower ear is one of the 'perils of proximity'.<sup>15</sup> Big, lumpy, cauliflower ears are common injuries in BJJ, and it's said, 'If you're not injured after a year of Brazilian jiu-jitsu, you're dead'. On Guam several fighter brands have emerged including Fökai, Purebred, and Cauliflower Culture in a celebration of controlled violence with the built-in logic of submission for the subjugated to 'tap out' and signal defeat. If someone applies a lock or choke, the opponent can tap out, and the victor must let go (or possibly face assault charges). According to Sensei Bob Sales, 'PCS', position, control, submission is what jiu-jitsu is about: first attain position, then control, and finally submit the opponent. Gaining position, control, and submission takes effort, and more advanced practitioners take their time, unlike the rough white belts who tend to rush.

Mixed martial arts are hugely popular on Guam with Pacific Xtreme Combat (PXC) MMA bouts regularly held at the University of Guam Fieldhouse.<sup>16</sup> Local denizens, Guamanians, are highly literate in MMA

<sup>14</sup> Unless specifically requested to demonstrate a skill or application, I endeavour to 'bracket off' techniques from other martial arts when conducting fieldwork. I joined Spike 22 Gym on Guam in October 2014.

<sup>15</sup> ASA2015 <http://goo.gl/rYLR8C> last accessed 12/10/2015.

<sup>16</sup> See <http://pacificxtremecombat.com/newpxc/> last accessed 14/10/2015.

Brazilian jiu-jitsu, Spike 22, Guam



and BJJ techniques. Baby Joe Taimanglo, a Chamorro professional fighter has achieved something like pop star status. Vicious Guam school fights viewed on YouTube demonstrate that Guam children have learned MMA and BJJ manoeuvres. Even skills learned by novice and intermediate practitioners may prove lethal in real confrontations. A Guam Police Detective said: 'I don't see arm bars or ankle locks as that dangerous: it's going to be choke holds'. Carl Gargarita was accused of killing Anthony Guiralau on June 14, 2013, using a rear naked choke. During a fight outside a Guam nightclub, over a love-triangle, the victim tapped out, but Gargarita didn't stop applying pressure, possibly because he feared it was not safe to let go.<sup>17</sup> Eric Garner was killed on July 17, 2014, by the NYPD using a rear naked choke, leading to the 'We can't breathe' street protests in New York.<sup>18</sup> So BJJ has proven efficacy on the street and not just in competitive events or the brutal MMA cage or Octagon. An advanced 'grey beard' practitioner, however, a medical doctor, told me that he trains BJJ so that he can eat steak and eggs followed by ice cream, and drink beer without worrying about weight gain. Advanced practitioners take their time, so ultimately even this highly effective street fighting art is conducive to entertainment. As Judkins points out

**MMA was the ultimately the product of, and feeds back into a massive entertainment industry. Indeed, most fans' only contact with the art is through its entertainment function as the number of people who actually train in it are relatively small compared to the number of people who watch the competitions and buy the brands, thereby participating in an MMA 'lifestyle' without actually becoming martial artists [Benjamin Judkins, personal communication, 19/10/2015]**

## CONCLUSION

My research trajectory in martial anthropology includes a decade learning several styles of silat, three decades in Southern Praying Mantis, nine months in Hung Sing Choy Li Fut, thirty months learning Eagle Claw, Northern Praying Mantis, and Shaolin sets from the Chin Woo Athletic Association, a glimpse of Yapese stick dance, and some intense training in Brazilian jiu-jitsu, baguazhang, and xingyiquan. I have continued to practise the martial arts that I have learned while pursuing a career in social anthropology, arising after graduate studies in sociology, psychoanalysis and social psychology. Martial arts research in anthropology has taken me through London, Yap, Guam, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Thailand, China and Singapore. Although my professional writing predominantly addresses contemporary issues in social theory from fine-grained often long-term participant observation in particular field sites, this article, based upon a keynote address at the inaugural Martial Arts Studies Conference, provides an overview of martial anthropology, as I have pursued it, to advocate a 'nomadological approach' in martial arts studies. Nomadology is not a quick and easy solution to the lengthy process of ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation and depth interviews, where each study takes nine months of complete immersion just to get started. Nomadology does offer a means to connect martial arts cross-training to fieldwork in multiple sites, to begin asking comparative ethnological questions and to seek similarities and differences in global and regional martial arts practice. Nomadology permits the flow of information, theory, and concepts to emerge directly from the field site where questions arise from the ground of martial arts practice rather than being imposed via external perspectives at the outset of the research.

Efficacy and entertainment, ritual and theatre, social and aesthetic drama, concealment and revelation, work and play are bound together in the 'infinity loop model' developed in the anthropology of performance and performance studies. Performance theorists assumed a positive feedback loop where efficacy flows into entertainment and vice versa. The infinity loop model proved useful for my research in silat, where the social difficulties involved in the religious practice of 'breaking the ego' in silat camps using methods based in humiliation, mortification, and vituperation, led the students to abandon the guru silat, if not Islam and the art of silat. This social drama was symbolically enacted onstage in a theatre production of continuous martial arts machete action between warring factions who reconciled under the Sultan's authority. The reactionary wish fulfilment of submission to divine royal authority is for an end to ruptured interpersonal relationships, but also for a return to the overarching rule of the Sultanate, the Islamic Caliphate, to heal the capitalist class divisions in Malaysia brought about by colonialism, modernity, and globalisation,

<sup>17</sup> The Supreme Court of Guam overturned Gargarita's manslaughter conviction. Retrial is set for January 2016. See <http://goo.gl/VvNQ2m> last accessed 14/10/2015.

<sup>18</sup> See <http://goo.gl/lBhfn4> last accessed 14/10/2015.



and further as a proposed solution to end economic and religious violence in Islam worldwide. Hence the social and aesthetic model, albeit drawn from outside the fieldwork, proved useful to organize disparate happenings, to provide an explanatory framework for what otherwise would be descriptive data or ethnographic narrative. The research in silat inevitably led me to the study of Malay magic, to propose the theory of *occulturation*, meaning ‘occult attribution’ - esoteric skills are framed as magic. Therefore, theatre for some may be framed as ritual for others and vice versa, where one woman’s black magic might be another’s religiosity.

The problem addressed here is what occurs when efficacy and entertainment collide? Misframing, captivation, occulturation, and false connections occur where confounded variables may result in new beliefs in the ‘restoration of behaviour’, where the martial art develops and changes, with strips of martial techniques reconfigured and rearranged, simultaneously referring to tradition in the struggle to control resources [Schechner 1985; Judkins and Nielson 2015]. For Schechner ‘restored behaviour’ is the main characteristic of performance, where restored behaviour is living behaviour that is re-patterned, or rearranged, and reconstructed like a film director would reconstruct strips of film, possibly involving an entire theatre drama, or a single movement, in ritual, shamanism, exorcism or trance [Schechner 1985: 35-36]. Entertainment and efficacy are not polar opposites – the categories seep into one other and permeate porous definitional boundaries. Extended arm-swinging training, for example, is a method of staging fights where the audience needs to see the action from afar, yet this same action over long-term training toughens and lengthens the sinews of the shoulder, enhances the power of the spine and waist, and swells the arms with blood to increase density and the flow of energy.

Martial arts studies must consider the emergence of cultural practice, praxis, via fine-grained ethnographic attention with community participation. Rather than to say ‘enough particular studies’, we should conduct them with renewed vigour. The environment keeps changing, people keep changing, and to have a lens on social change we must continue fine-grained participant observation. Furthermore, our research should have an applied dimension; for example, we may gain access to the police to help to solve cold cases, and/or to help solve injustice perpetrated by the police. That some martial arts practice seems more like entertainment than actual combat training depends upon context and participation. As Shaykh Raja Ashman said, ‘the most important thing is respect’, because all martial arts have an element of efficacy no matter how much they may look like dance or entertainment. Yet we all come across practitioners who consider the martial art they practice as ‘the best for fighting’. This is a false belief, a false connection that results from mistaking the frame for the individual, and mistakes the individual street-fight for the battle to live a long and healthy productive life.

#### Acknowledgements

*I am grateful to Paul Bowman for inviting me to present at the 2015 inaugural Martial Arts Studies Conference. Benjamin Judkins, Paul Bowman, Tarah Farrer, and Geraldine Datuin read the draft manuscript and provided useful suggestions. Margaret Chan hunted down the lion’s ball. The University of Guam and the National University of Singapore provided grant funds towards various stages of the research. Most of all I owe a debt of gratitude to all the martial artists who have taught me over the years, and to my fellow practitioners who shared this journey, some of whom appear within this article.*

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# IMPOSING THE TERMS OF THE BATTLE

## DONN F. DRAEGER, COUNT DANTE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR AMERICAN MARTIAL ARTS IDENTITY

# JARED MIRACLE

## DOI

10.18573/j.2015.10018

## KEYWORDS

Donn F. Draeger, Robert W. Smith, Jon Bluming, Count Dante, taiji, judo, karate, Japan

## CITATION

Miracle, Jared. 2015. 'Imposing the Terms of the Battle: Donn Draeger, Count Dante and the Struggle for American Martial Arts Identity', *Martial Arts Studies* 1, 46-59.

## ABSTRACT

The trifecta of Robert W. Smith, Donn F. Draeger, and Jon Bluming formed, for a time, the core of what became the most influential group of Western practitioners of Asian martial arts in the English-speaking world. Their collective work from the 1950s through to the 1980s was central to the basis of Western martial arts folk culture, in particular with regards to the lexicon utilized even today, the nature of how performances are understood and evaluated by the group in terms of effectiveness, the availability and interpretation of the group's repertoires, and, perhaps most important, by establishing different modes of cultural preservation that resulted in radically different approaches to the subject matter by practitioners worldwide. These men can be juxtaposed against others selling their wares in the American domestic market at the same time, but lacking the scholarly rigor of Draeger and Smith. Such capitalistic figures include one of the most colorful figures in the history of American martial arts culture, John 'Count Dante' Keehan. The struggle between these two groups for control of the market illustrates how textures of knowledge and objects of knowledge were often confused in the postwar period of American martial arts development.

Three central figures to the adoption of Asian martial arts in the West were Robert W. Smith, Jon Bluming, and Donn F. Draeger. Over the course of their research and training, each developed a different means of preserving martial arts and culture. For Smith, this can be seen as a holistic effort to include not only physical skills, but also a system's inherited wisdom, related arts like poetry, and overall social structure unique to a given lineage. Bluming amassed his extensive personal combative experience to create a hybrid system of striking and grappling that incorporates all of the many styles in which he was trained. Draeger's primary interest was combative effectiveness and he formulated a research system called hopology to that end.

While the majority of Asian martial arts practitioners in the United States were for a long time almost exclusively Japanese- and Chinese-Americans living on the West Coast, there were occasions on which people of other ethnic backgrounds ventured into their clubs and training halls. Robert W. Smith and Donn F. Draeger were two of the first Anglo-Americans to undertake the practice of judo. Their meeting at the Chicago Judo Club via an introduction by the legendary champion and instructor, Johnny Osako, in 1948 or 1949 proved to be the start of a long and prolific partnership, one that resulted in some of the first English language treatments of the Asian martial arts as a field of study. Unlike their counterparts, for whom Japanese and Chinese language and culture were still very much a part of daily life, it was incumbent upon the pair to introduce – sometimes explicitly, sometimes through happenstance – an entire new lexicon, set of practices, and publication genre through which Western martial artists could express their thoughts on subjects for which there were few established concepts in English.

The lack of terms and phrases to express Asian martial arts concepts is a matter of 'textures' and 'objects'. Cetina's [1997] idea of intangible cultural assets classifies them as 'objects of knowledge' that can be transferred, reinterpreted, and generally modified in ways that suit a given social agenda – just like physical objects – to show that traditions are invented and repurposed in different ways depending on time and location as much as cultural background knowledge. Such knowledge is what Krug [2001], in an expansion of Cetina's work, calls a 'texture of knowledge'. As an example, the standard uniform associated with karate practice came about in Japan during the 1920s, the manner of wearing it was adopted by American servicemen after World War II as an object of knowledge, but without the texture of knowledge [that is, the cultural background that brought about the uniform's implementation], it took on new meaning and was subject to invented traditions as the Americans returned home and founded their own communities of practice, where the traditions were integrated based on a different set of social needs.

More pragmatically, Toelken notes that, in many cases, a group's folk speech is the only way to appreciate and express a style of performance [1996: 234]. One issue during the creation of a folk group, then, is establishing a new form or mode of speech for the purposes of transmitting knowledge and communicating aesthetic values where no concept of such values previously existed. The new folk speech had to be constructed and molded and over time this took place through a bricolage of translations, transliterations, and neologisms. One relevant example is their editorial debate over the term 'Chinese boxing'. Smith had long used the term to reference Chinese unarmed martial arts in general, however Draeger was vehemently opposed.

During their conversation over articles in Draeger's ill-fated magazine project, *Martial Arts International*, the subject of editorial changes came up, to which Smith was apparently less than amenable, and Draeger responded: 'As for leaving your work stand as is ... of course... But we do have some house rules' [letter to Smith, 7 October 1974]. Draeger's group, operating primarily in Tokyo, had intentionally chosen to 'not normally use the expression "Chinese boxing" as they considered it to be 'an old, misused, wornout [sic], and improper term for something that already has its own proper name'. Legitimacy, in Draeger's view, was in hewing as closely as possible to the culture from which a martial art originated. 'No self-respecting Chinese ever refers to wu shu as "Chinese boxing"', he argued, 'which is a British phrase' [letter, 7 October 1974].

A decade prior, in his seminal *Secrets of Shaolin Temple Boxing*, Smith had already established his desire to use the term 'boxing' in English language discourse about *ch'uan fa* given that *ch'uan* (拳) is the Chinese character for fist [1964: 15]. Despite having been a boxer in his youth and later a boxing trainer, Smith does not appear to have felt that the word carried any special weight or implication aside from fighting in general and so the use of it to connote any other style within the confines of the English language was acceptable. Draeger disagreed, continuing the argument in a follow-up letter, this time suggesting that legitimacy relies not only on remaining as close to the mother tongue's usage of a term, but to professional practitioners' official usage of said term:

**The term 'boxing' is simply not used by pros. We will follow the pro view. The ideograms for ch'uan-fa in Chinese mean the same when read in Japanese, and do not include the word or idea of 'boxing!' We prefer 'sparring arts' to 'boxing', tho [sic] no ch'uan-fa, in its fullest sense, is entirely made up of sparring techniques. Likewise we decry use of 'fencing' for Japanese swordsmanship, 'school' for ryu, etc. We will go pro route and try to educate some, re-educate others. (by way ... Peking lays**





*Draeger Posing [Smith]*

use of 'boxing' term to British use during rebellion era ... lay opinion of what they saw in terms of what they thought it was).

[Letter to Smith, 27 December 1974]

'Boxing' clearly held different connotations for Draeger than it did for Smith, as did the cultural clash between the British and Chinese, referenced as sufficient enough cause to avoid the term in publication.

At the root of this issue, however, was an even more complex negotiation between two different approaches to interpreting Asian martial arts for Western audiences. Draeger, a former career Marine, was primarily interested in issues of efficacy in the fighting arts and had little patience for those styles and exponents that failed to meet his expectations. He saw the Chinese art of energy cultivation, *chi gong* (*qigong*) for instance, as nothing more than stage magic: 'These Chinese are fantastic with their ch'i kung garbage.... I've yet to see one demo that isn't involved with circus tricks... all crap' [letter to Smith, 20 November 1973]. For Draeger the use of theatricality in martial arts demonstrations was both unnecessary and undesirable. He was searching for the most effective means of meeting particular combative requirements in all different social and cultural situations, as indicated

by a somewhat oblique reference in a letter from his 1968 trip to Java: 'Among mainland Chinese here, kungtao places t'aichi lower on the combative scale than what you have focused on in your work. I'll elaborate on this later' [letter to Smith, 12 July 1968]. With such specific emphasis on systematic fighting rather than generally performing, he praised only one demonstration during his 1973 trip to Malaysia, noting that they were 'indifferent to what audience likes or wants, and goes about business of training' [letter, 20 November 1973].

Smith's views of legitimacy and successful performance within the martial arts were somewhat more complex. Although he sometimes referred to sheer fighting prowess as being desirable, he also clearly supported other goals of less combat-oriented styles as acceptable, which drew a strong contrast between himself and Draeger. Smith's willingness to explore and embrace the alternative roles of the martial arts has at least some origin in the end of his period as an amateur boxer and trainer. Despite having been an avid fan of prizefights in his youth, Smith's later education on its long-term health effects led him to not only give up the sport entirely in the 1950s, but to actively work toward having it banned. In his memoirs he bemoans that 'all boxing should be banned ... too brutal for civilized societies ... This sterile intentionality is what stamps this remnant of primitive savagery as unfit for human beings' [Smith 1999: 21].

By Smith's own admission, there was an element of bias on each side of the debate over Chinese martial arts, and the use of 'boxing' was simply an indicator of a greater rift between the two. Smith suggests: 'I believed that the men and systems he showcased were inferior to those I studied under in Taiwan. I had visited the other areas [that is, mainland China] and met their leading teachers and found them lacking' [Smith 1999: 98]. For Draeger's part, it was more a matter of falsifiability, even where Smith's primary teacher, Zheng Manqing, was concerned. By July of 1974 the two were in the heat of their differences, with Smith advocating for the Taiwanese martial artists and Draeger losing interest in investigating them, especially taiji, which Draeger saw as lacking any real-world application. Draeger wrote: 'You seem to have lost your position of objectivity Bob ... and with is your sense of realism. Cheng Man ching a fighter???? [sic] A scuffler, no doubt, who isn't, but a real fighter ... hardly ... more literati' [letter to Smith, 9 July 1974].

Draeger later offers, at least somewhat tongue-in-cheek, to introduce Zheng to a lucrative business opportunity training professional sumo wrestlers: 'Pro sumo assn. [sic] tells me that they would pay all expenses, etc. to have man like Cheng show them how to remove opponent from ring' [letter, 9 July 1974]. Smith continued to counter that Draeger simply didn't understand Chinese street culture well enough to locate the most skilled martial artists as he had in Japan. In addition, he claims

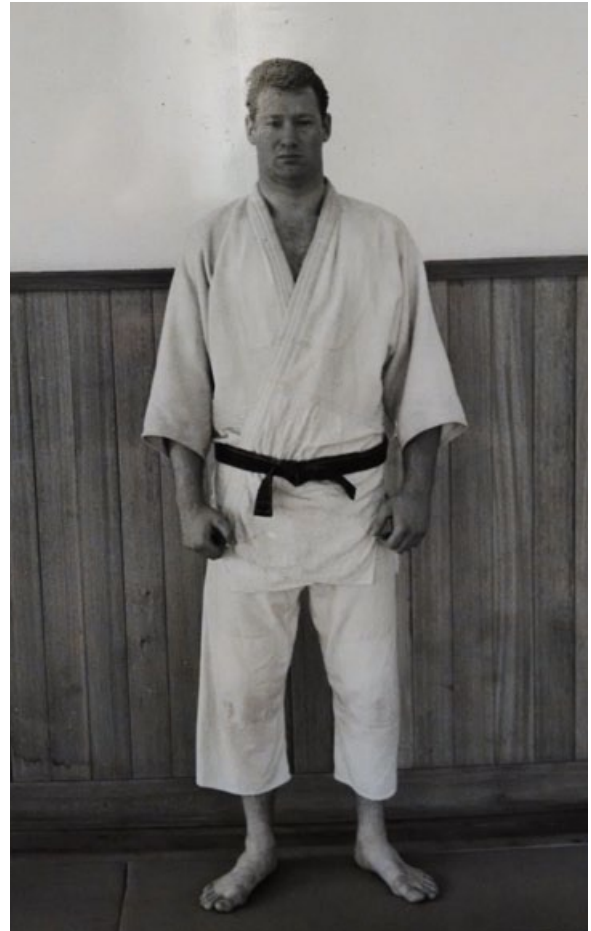


in his memoirs that Draeger had developed a prejudice against the Chinese due to his service in the Korean War which was exacerbated by spending so much time with the Japanese [Smith 1999: 99]. At the same time, the Chinese fighters with whom Draeger was in regular contact were unimpressed with Zheng himself or taiji in general, 'Nobody here [in Malaysia] has illusions about tai-chi being useful as a sole system in combat of any kind... this confers [sic] what Wang [Shujin, a mutual friend and teacher of Chinese martial arts] always said and taught... nobody thinks [Zheng] is all that good come a good punch up' [letter, 8 September 1974].

The reference to Wang Shujin is significant. Wang spent much of his adult life in Tokyo, where he became a regular figure at the house in which Draeger and a coterie of rotating foreign martial artists lived, as it was walking distance from the Kodokan Institute and several other training centers. Draeger, ever on the lookout for unique opportunities, was intrigued by Wang's ability to accept blows to the stomach seemingly without injury. In a letter to Smith, Ellis Amdur explains that 'Wang set out to teach him Pa Kua [sic], but for two years simply had him walking around a tree in Meiji shrine, and he would come by, look at the trench being scuffed in the dirt and say 'not deep enough' [10 February 1998]. This may have been frustrating enough for a talented athlete and fighter like Draeger, however the final straw with his training was likely 'at Donn's house one day, Wang said, "The trouble with you is you have no control over your body" and he picked up an iron meteorite Donn was using for a paperweight, and ... held it out at arms [sic] length, immovable' [10 February 1998].

Draeger's interactions with Wang colored his vision of the Chinese 'soft' or 'internal' arts as consisting of time-intensive, non-combative practices that ultimately yielded few meaningful results. He also respected Wang's abilities, however was clearly not in awe of them or the Chinese arts in general. Defensive of his teacher and confident in what he'd experienced of the internal martial arts, Smith eventually proposed a solution to the rift; Draeger, in his frequent travels, was welcome to visit Taiwan and 'test' Zheng's abilities for himself. Draeger was not amenable, insisting that "testing" and fighting are completely different.... It's not for me, though Jon Bluming, the Dutch animal might consider it now as he has in the past. Short of a fight to do somebody, or myself in, I am not equipped to test anybody' [letter to Smith, 7 November 1974].

It remains unclear what, precisely, Draeger meant by the final portion of this comment – given that he was fifty-six years old at that point and two years prior had admitted to Smith that 'as I look on my multitude of injuries, I see them all stemming from my association with judo. I don't want to batter myself anymore ... I have better things to do now' [letter, 4 November 1972]. This seems rather sudden since, as recently



*Jon Bluming at the Kodokan, 1960 [Smith 1960]*

as 1967, he had still been ‘testing’ others. On his trip to Singapore that year Draeger recounts investigating the world of silat via ‘my method – combat vs. one of their experts. To shorten the story – I flattened him with osoto-gake makikomi; only I got up!’ [letter, 4 August 1967]. He had also, however, given up on competition entirely roughly around the time of his 1974 trip to Malaysia. In a letter to Smith some years later, Pat Harrington, another foreign judo luminary in Tokyo in the storied days of Draeger’s Ichigaya house, comments that ‘nobody tried harder than Donn, but they still would not accept the advice of a foreigner. Yes, it broke his heart, and he then put all of his energy into other martial arts ... and most of his time into researching and writing books’ [letter to Smith, 2 June 1997].

Thus the seemingly innocuous statement that he wasn’t ‘equipped’ to test others could be a reference to the unpleasantness of political entanglements that he preferred to avoid, being an avid researcher and not a politician. Draeger had another means by which to test his ideas, however, one that also provided a buffer between himself and organizational fallouts: Jon Bluming. Bluming, from Holland, was younger than Smith and Draeger during their years of active training and research in Asia and possessed certain physical attributes that allowed him a degree of leniency in questioning the efficacy of another’s fighting method. Specifically, Bluming claims that at the time he stood at an intimidating 102 kilograms (224.9 pounds) and regularly trounced the finest judo experts at the Kodokan Judo Institute, including several world champions [interview transcript, 20-21 February 1998].

In personal communication, Bluming confirmed that he had met Smith and Draeger at a time when both were most active in judo practice at Kano’s reopened Kodokan, but that Smith was, even at that time, much more interested in Chinese martial arts than his judo studies. He further characterized Draeger’s thoughts on the matter as, at best, begrudgingly accepting of the state into which he felt Chinese martial arts had fallen in recent decades, apparently having believed that there was a time when styles such as taiji and Shaolin were truly effective combat methods against resisting opponents, but that this was no longer the case. In keeping with his tendency to illustrate points with blunt and evocative language, Bluming informed me that he and Draeger shared the same sentiments, but only Bluming ‘told Bob [Smith] that I never met a Taichi [sic] champ who could beat my Granny when she had an umbrella in her hands’ [personal communication].

While Smith and Draeger were committed to maintaining mostly congenial relations with other martial artists and researchers, Bluming was committed to personally verifying the effectiveness of any given method, theory, and individual, and did so seemingly without regard to political (or sometimes legal) consequences. Smith shares the story of

the ever-upfront Bluming and himself being approached by a ‘strapping 200-pound Korean carrying an umbrella’ who attempted to sell them pornographic magazines. He recalls that Bluming ‘seized the man’s umbrella and chased him down the street beating him about the head. I didn’t see him again until later in the day. His first words: ‘Bob, do you want an umbrella?’ [Smith 1999: 108].

Draeger, beleaguered with cross-cultural issues as both an expert and a foreigner in a Japanese institution, saw in Bluming the opportunity to prove at least some of his more contested points. During the early days of the Ichigaya house (around 1958), Bluming traveled from Holland to Japan to practice judo at the Kodokan and soon began working with Draeger and company: ‘Draeger said “Look, I am trying to prove a point that weight training and judo, if you do that, you become a better judoka. So I want you in the team to prove that point”’ [interview, 20-21 February 1998]. The experiment was successful and the already impressive Bluming claimed to have put on twenty kilograms of muscle within the same year.

Draeger’s triumph in the weight training experiment led him to consider Bluming as a litmus test against which to compare anyone laying claim to superhuman abilities or unverified levels of achievement in the fighting arts. In particular, the matter of Wang Shujin remained suspect in Draeger’s mind. Indeed, it wasn’t until the mid-1970s that his opinion on the matter of Chinese internal martial arts like *taiji* came to rest squarely in the critical camp. In a letter to Smith he references his time in the Marine Corps during the Korean War:

**Chinese in general lack guts such as compared to Thai or Japanese fighters. The history books are filled with evidence of the general lack of Chinese fighting ability when they are faced with real fighting men ... I know from Korea when my company knocked hell out of 4 Chinese divisions.... Milling mobs and masses, yes, but fighters ... I have not seen any.**  
[9 July 1974]

Confirming Smith’s suspicions, Draeger’s wartime experience certainly did give him a distinct prejudice against the Chinese, which, as a passionate expert on East Asian martial arts and prolific writer on the topic, was an issue that continued to trouble him throughout his career. It may explain why, despite insisting that he personally make all contributions to the field regarding Japan and myriad Southeast Asian culture groups (which caused him to be constantly traveling and drained what little funds he had), he was quite comfortable asking Smith to handle Chinese martial arts in their joint publications. It was this personal struggle that seems to have fueled his interest in Wang, eventually leading him to bring the Chinese man together with Bluming for a ‘test’.

Wang was known for his apparently indestructible belly. Possessed of a prodigious waistline, he would assume a *taiji* posture and invite anyone to strike at his abdomen, simply absorbing the blow no matter how large or powerful the aggressor. Draeger saw that this was a parlor trick of one sort or another and resolved to determine just how durable the man's gut might be. Bluming recalls that he was invited to meet Wang at a private training hall where few could be witness to the spectacle. Because of the somewhat secretive nature of this meeting, a number of rumors have been generated over the years with all manner of variations on the basic idea that Wang and Bluming had an all-out fight. Bluming insists that this was not the case, explaining that, at first, Wang took his usual stance and allowed Bluming to punch him in the stomach. The Dutchman did so, with the usual results. At that time Bluming was focused much more on judo than karate, however, and they agreed that testing the European's grip would be a better means of judging Wang's powers. Gripping Wang's shoulders (he was not wearing a judo uniform), Bluming was surprised when the *taiji* expert shot his belly forward, checking Bluming so hard that he was thrown 'meters away'. There ended the meeting, with Bluming and Draeger walking away unconvinced that Wang would be of much use in a street altercation. 'I did not at the time and still don't [sic] think much of their style', comments Bluming, 'he died Young of FAT [sic]' [personal communication].

The Chinese were not the only group with whom Draeger and other Westerners in Asia at that time encountered racial tensions, however. Bluming also knew of the political issues at work during Draeger's time with the Kodokan as he insisted that 'they did very dirty things to foreigners... Draeger was a better teacher than anybody else there. He was a better kata man than anybody else' [interview, 20-21 February 1998]. In spite of these issues with the Japanese and others within the foreign martial arts community, Bluming remained anything but timid in his career of challenging and testing others. This did not escape the observant Smith, who acknowledges that 'over the years, there have been rumors and gossip about Bluming's so-called misconduct on and off the mat. He was a fierce competitor... giving no quarter to anyone' [Smith 1999: 111]. Despite any number of personal misgivings, it was more-or-less universally understood at the time that Bluming was nearly unbeatable in a fair match of any kind. He was also not afraid to issue personal challenges to others. Another successful Dutch judo competitor of the 1960s, Anton Geesink, quickly rose through international competition toward the end of Bluming's main activity in judo and the two were often made out to be rivals by the press, although the narrative concocted by journalists was, according to Bluming, not entirely accurate given that he issued seven requests for a private match with Geesink via registered letters (that is, said Bluming, 'He has to sign for it. So his signature is on the paper, he can never say he didn't get the

letter') with the sole intention of proving who was the stronger judo player [interview, 20-21 February 1998].

Bluming's interests were primarily vested in fighting itself. As time went on – and especially after Draeger's passing – he spent more time focusing on Mas Oyama's kyokushin karate and a system of Bluming's own invention that he calls simply 'free fighting' – something akin to contemporary mixed martial arts, in which both percussive and wrestling techniques are permitted. Such disinterest in the narrative surrounding an event and the greater spectacle of the performance may serve to explain at least some of Bluming's and, to a lesser extent, Draeger's political quandaries.

Regarding further cross-cultural frustrations, Bluming complained that 'the Japanese are great at manufacturing legends. When I hear the stories they tell about me from the old days I'm really amazed that they are so naïve to believe it' [interview, 20-21 February 1998]. Here 'legend' is indeed the correct term for such tales. His karate instructor, Oyama, became the embodiment of the very manufactured narratives that Bluming despised. There are several stories surrounding Oyama, but one example serves to prove Bluming's point. As an internet site dedicated to kyokushin karate explains:

**In 1950, Sosai [the founder] Mas Oyama started testing [and demonstrating] his power by fighting bulls. In all, he fought 52 bulls, three of which were killed instantly, and 49 had their horns taken off with knife hand blows. That it is not to say that it was all that easy for him.... In 1957, at the age of 34, he was nearly killed in Mexico when a bull got some of his own back and gored him. Oyama somehow managed to pull the bull off and break off his horn.**  
[Masutatsuoyama.com 2013]

Oyama's bull stories are common fair in karate circles. However Bluming's frustration with them stemmed from having been so close to the source that his information, if not more accurate, was certainly more believable. 'It wasn't a bull, it was an ox', he insists: 'Kurosaki [another of Oyama's students] comes along beforehand and hits him on the horn so the horn is loose, and then Oyama comes in there and makes a lot of noise ... and the horn comes off. The rest of the Dutchman's version follows a similarly unimpressive vein as he reveals that Oyama 'never killed a bull. That's absolute nonsense' [interview, 20-21 February 1998].

As with all communities, legend narratives tend to propagate among martial artists. They form a substantial portion of most every training group's social identity and invented history; however Bluming, in his

Promotional article about Draeger for You Only Live Twice [Godfrey, n.d.]

# **DONN DRAEGER** **MAN WITH THE DEADLIEST HANDS IN THE WORLD**



The first non-Japanese ever asked to fight at the famed Kodokan combat academy, Draeger upset hosts, received 1. million as No. 1 and stayed to teach.

by JOHN GODFREY

WOULD YOU believe that if a professional boxer hits you with his fists during an argument he can be charged by the police for the criminal act of "assault with a deadly weapon?"

Would you further believe that if a Karate or Judo instructor gets it into his head to tangle with you — even if he only means to "mess you up a little" — he will be guilty in the eyes of the law of "aggravated assault with intent to kill?"

And lastly, would you believe that if a guy's been trained to kill in 36 different ways — *all of them with just his hands* — he's a good type to steer clear of?

Well, if you believe those three things you've got a

pretty good idea of what it's like to be Donn Draeger, the man who is widely reputed to have the world's most deadly hands.

Forty years old and an ex-Marine, Milwaukee-born Draeger has devoted his life to learning (and teaching) the 2,000-year-old fighting arts of Karate, Judo, Jiu Jitsu, Kung Fu, Savate, Yawara, Kendo, Aikido and Ate-Waza to name just a few. All of them involve killing with hands. And Donn Draeger is an expert in every one.

"That means Donn has to 'walk softly' because he sure as hell carries one big stick," a friend of the former Marine Corps major (Continued on page 68)



ceaseless search for the strongest fighters, not only failed to recognize this element of the culture with which he had surrounded himself in the 1960s, but from the beginning seems to have despised that it makes up such a meaningful part of the social milieu. A trope of Japanese fiction that especially bothered Bluming is the protagonist who takes to solitary ascetic practice in the mountains in a sort of Taoist-style search for greater power, enlightenment, or some other missing portion of the success formula before returning to society with revealed knowledge or ability. Oyama utilized this trope to great effect: the stories of his solitary training in the wilderness claim anywhere from eighteen months to three years of daily feats that would hospitalize a lesser man, including toughening his knuckles with rocks and punching trees until they died [Masutatsuoyama.com 2013].

In his 1998 interview Bluming insisted on telling a more believable account of Oyama's asceticism. 'When I came to his dojo the first time the old man told me that before some fight or some tournament in Kyoto he went to the mountain and stayed there six weeks for training, hitting a tree so many hundred times a day, training hard and doing Zen meditation' [interview, 20-21 February 1998]. He went on to note that, by the time he returned to the Netherlands, Oyama's followers were claiming much more extraordinary occurrences, even resulting in the publication of graphic novels, films, and a cartoon series based on the legendary version of the man's life. Bluming wasn't able to escape the rumor mill that turned out these narratives, either. Finding himself playing a supporting role (branded 'the Dutch Animal'), he and his teacher were said to have 'really went to the yakuza ... and knocked them all out and so on. Unbelievable!'

Bluming argues that the fantastic stories of the martial arts that came to be commonplace among later generations of Westerners have their roots in the Asian cultures from which the arts themselves originate, stating, in his singular way, that 'Chinese and Japanese are great storie [sic] tellers and legends builders and when you check tham [sic] you will find mostly BULL shit'. Oyama was perhaps more prolific at commercializing the fantastic stories than anyone, a matter at which Bluming continues to balk even decades after their parting:

**Oyama was a great teacher and used the stories about him with a smile but never denied them. He was a perfect example well build and used the stories for his advantage. But in the seventies he really overdid it by not letting people stand on his shaduw [sic] and things like that thats whan [sic] I stopped... BUT I am sure when he had to fight he was a terrific fighter and not much people could beat him.**  
[personal communication]

Bluming was once offended by the tales spread about him and his teacher, but has come to accept the transmission of myths and legends

as a necessary – if inexplicable – part of the fighting arts, regardless of location. 'I thought it was very funny and hearing all the stories thrue [sic] many years its like part of Budo and Wushu they cannot apparently [sic] get without it', he notes – with a more congenial frame of mind than the Bluming of fifty years prior may have had. Just the same, 'many idiots still believe it' [personal communication].

The most confrontational member of Smith and Draeger's circle was judgmental of more than just the Japanese public's aggrandizement. His general policy toward other martial artists was that 'I respect anybody, as long as he doesn't say, when I see that it is bullshit, he says it is terrific. Because then I challenge him' [interview, 20-21 February 1998]. His judgments – as well as his willingness to express them – were clear and simple, as when asked his thoughts on being in Tokyo during the final active years of aikido founder Morihei Ueshiba: 'aikido is a kind of phony dance for girls and queers. It's nothing to do with fighting. But – some of the techniques in aikido are good, you should learn some of them'.

Although Bluming faulted the Japanese for their tendency to stretch the fabric of history, the 1960s and '70s were a time of similar tale-spinning in the West. Following the 1967 release of the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice*, a media blitz surrounding the Japanese fighting arts included interviews with Draeger, who did some choreography and stunt work during the Japan unit's production. These often sensationalized his life in much the same way that the Japanese public morphed the exploits of Bluming and Oyama. One piece, *Donn Draeger: Man with the Deadliest Hands in the World*, refers to his ability to 'take the loudmouth and bend him into a pretzel, break every bone in his body or reduce him to a lump of lifeless flesh with a single sweep of his hand'. It also claims that his hands are 'so lethal they are outlawed by the courts', and ironically recognizes that 'a lot of poppycock has found its way onto the printed page' [Godfrey 29].

In such surroundings, with Draeger (and Oyama, as well) hoping to prove his value to the Japanese through the vessel of the physically-gifted Bluming, while also vigorously studying and documenting the martial culture around them and, at the same time, realizing that Western popular culture and magazines had embraced unrealistic notions of their activities, the trifecta came to a decision that, if one couldn't correct the situation through upfront presentation and frank discussion, it would at least be possible to enjoy some mockery of the newly popular Asian martial arts community in the West as it emerged. With Bluming's power, Draeger's experience, and Smith's keen wit, they created a fictional representation of their real-life conglomerate: the Bruce Wayne-esque John F. Gilbey.

'Gilbey was a joke, an exaggeration, a fantasy' admits Smith in his memoir. 'He had money, time, and amazing skill in everything. We

were sure that readers would be smart enough to realize this. We were wrong' [1999: 113]. The original intention was to lampoon the legends of super-powered fighting men by having Gilbey's adventures be so over-the-top that those with some sense of reality would understand the joke. A great deal of these fictions are based on actual events that were made legendary, such as Bluming's meeting with Wang. In *The Way of a Warrior*, for instance, 'Gilbey' recounts his efforts to learn the secret Kurdish art of *Fiz-les-loo* by traveling throughout the Middle East, eventually meeting a master of the system, testing his abilities, and, in what was clearly intended as a punch-line, 'after a week's hiatus I had walked away from hitting myself in someone else's groin' [1982: 29].

Despite such a concerted effort to point out the absurdities of some modern legends of the fighting arts, many readers simply accepted that men such as Gilbey existed. This unintentionally served as an experiment in the spread of information among a community and was perhaps the turning point in each of the three's approaches to studying and preserving different aspects of the fighting arts and their attendant cultures. Draeger all but gave up on the modern Japanese arts, dedicating more time to classical systems and his forays into Southeast Asia while Bluming returned to the Netherlands and set about establishing both an international branch of Oyama's Kyokushin organization while also teaching his own 'free-fight' or 'all-in' method. Smith became a family man, earned a graduate degree in Asian studies, and took a job with the Central Intelligence Agency in Taiwan, after which he eschewed all other martial arts and taught a repertoire of three Chinese styles to a small group of followers.

Upon his return to the Netherlands, Bluming, as the head of his own judo and karate organization, eventually ran into myriad political roadblocks:

**When I came back to Holland ... I was supposed to participate in the world champ [sic] judo in Paris. But because of hate and bickering ... they really [sic] screwed me and in the end I was put on a side track and I stopped competing and instead became a teacher... [I]n 1990 I made the Kyokushin Budokai [his group] All around fighting.  
[letter to Smith, 5 December 1997]**

As Bluming made the transition back to his homeland during the 1960s and '70s he ceased frequent contact with Smith and Draeger, even stating in his first letter to Smith in over two decades that 'I heard years ago that you passed away, so you old rascal welcome back' [letter to Smith, 5 December 1997]. Bluming was soon preoccupied with his own dealings in Europe, spending less and less time in Japan and eventually losing nearly all contact even with his teacher, Oyama.

Meanwhile, Smith and Draeger continued their cooperative efforts, publishing the first edition of *Asian Fighting Arts* in 1969. This was an achievement for the pair as writing had begun at least six years prior – a 1963 letter has Draeger complaining about the Charles Tuttle Company, the intended publisher, mistreating its authors and 'fudging my royalty statement'. Moreover, writing was arranged primarily through the mail while the two were mobile, Smith moving to Washington, Taiwan, and Maryland and Draeger frequently conducting fieldwork in Malaysia and elsewhere [letter to Smith, 10 March 1963]. By 1972 Draeger was planning a magazine of his own with heavy contributions and editorial support from Smith. This seems to have been inspired by Draeger's contacts at the University of Hawaii's East West Center, and he even had the support of the director 'for academic study of world martial culture' [letter, 2 June 1972].

The initial foray into the world of institutional academics set off a spark that laid Draeger's later plans, which grew more ambitious in both the publishing and scholarly realms. Smith's involvement with the projects lessened as Draeger put a new team together. Although his June 1972 news of the magazine plans included the use of Smith's 'name on masthead, and [I'll] give you what scope you feel is necessary or can do', by November of that year Draeger's expectations of his friend's assistance had fallen to 'any good article, that is thought provoking will be gladly accepted' [letter, 4 November 1972].

Draeger's efforts to document the fighting arts in an organized and at least quasi-official fashion became a career goal, but so did a much more pragmatic realization that his aging body could not continue in the lifestyle he had chosen for the past several years. A trip to Hawaii to give guest lectures on his experiences with martial culture solidified this reality and he became determined to settle in Kona. 'I've ambled around this ... earth, and insofar as the U.S. is concerned, if one must live somewhere, for me it is Kona'. His plan was relatively simple, if not easily accomplished: 'to build international martial culture research center, and to tie close to U of H on such study. We will be teaching local police and civilian units on various arts' [letter to Smith, 1 July 1973]. His intention was to continue living in Asia for half the year and Hawaii the other. For Draeger, the plan to preserve and spread the fighting arts (as well as to live comfortably) necessitated institutionalization and organized study.

His focus on institutionalization was no more clear than in his [re] invention of hoplology, the study of the science and mechanics of human combative behavior and a term lifted from Sir Richard F. Burton's writings in the nineteenth century. This study would be the basis of Draeger's dream to build a martial culture center and, as the 1980s began, the plans seemed to be coming together. Draeger wrote



to one of his primary supporters in the endeavor: 'While I am here [Hawaii] I will attend to the legal matters which will make the Center a tax-exempt non-profit corporation, an educational institution' [letter to Geoff Wilcher, 3 December 1981].

Draeger passed away in 1982 after several months of hospitalization due to cancer. By the time of his passing the magazine project he had initially planned with Smith was transformed into *Hoplos*, the newsletter of his International Hopology Research Center, the term that he planned to apply to the martial culture establishment at the University of Hawaii. Unfortunately for those vested in the development of the Center, only a small cadre of Draeger's associates would carry on his hopology, continuing to publish *Hoplos* at irregular intervals, but abandoning the Hawaii connection entirely. Despite his best efforts to avoid the kind of political intrigue with which he and Bluming wrestled on a daily basis in their training and competition lives, the hopology group fell to the same sorts of squabbles following Draeger's death. Regarding the scholarly work of Geoff Wilcher, Chris Bates [a member of Draeger's circle and one of Wilcher's martial arts students] explained that Draeger 'decided when near death that he wanted Geoff to take over as research director for the IHRC. This was not to be. Phil [Relnick] killed it as soon as Donn died and when the dust settled it was 'Geoff who?' [letter to Smith, 8 November 1996]. The IHRC became the International Hopology Society under the direction of Hunter Armstrong. Now based out of Sedona, Arizona, the IHS continues to produce and republish material, primarily through *Hoplos*, however with a more evolutionary/biological component than much of Draeger's own work.

Robert W. Smith, meanwhile, embraced the Chinese 'internal' martial arts that he studied in Taiwan during a three-year period from 1959 to 1962. His approach to these arts seems somewhat contradictory. In *Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts* Smith suggests that 'solo form work is a useful exercise... But the solo exercise is not fighting' and therefore 'in the end in fighting we must come to scratch with an actual antagonist... It little behooves ... never to try conclusions with a living man' [Draeger and Smith 1980: 22]. In *Martial Musings*, however, he is very clear that 'the main thing I wanted to elicit from him [Zheng Manqing] was simply: what can taiji do for character?' [Smith 1999: 195].

Smith's claim to focus on the reality of combative engagements in the earlier work may be an accurate reflection of his experience at the time, given a strong background in amateur boxing and judo and having first encountered such training while serving in the military. During his time in Japan he spent a great deal of time with Draeger and Bluming, whose single-minded concern for effective violence is apparent. Smith's time in Taiwan – and especially with Zheng Manqing – then, seems the

likely catalyst for his shift toward the artistic and sentimental aspects of martial study.

His efforts to preserve the art of Zheng through both documentation and teaching would have been hampered by an empirical, perhaps hopological, method as Zheng was, at least in Smith's eyes, 'the multifaceted savant, the "Master of Five Excellences", famed as a painter, calligrapher, poet, medical doctor, and taiji genius' [Smith 1999: 201]. Here it is plainly visible why Smith and Draeger disagreed over Zheng. Smith had found a teacher who had captured his attention and, possibly, imagination while his friends from the old Ichigaya house were traveling the world, 'testing' fighters and systems. Draeger spoke broadly with exponents of many systems, some of whom were unimpressed with Zheng, while Smith undertook deep study with a small group of Zheng's acquaintances who held the teacher in high regard. For Draeger, preservation of the fighting arts was systematic and essentially scientific; for Smith it was more artistic, conceptual, and emotionally experiential.

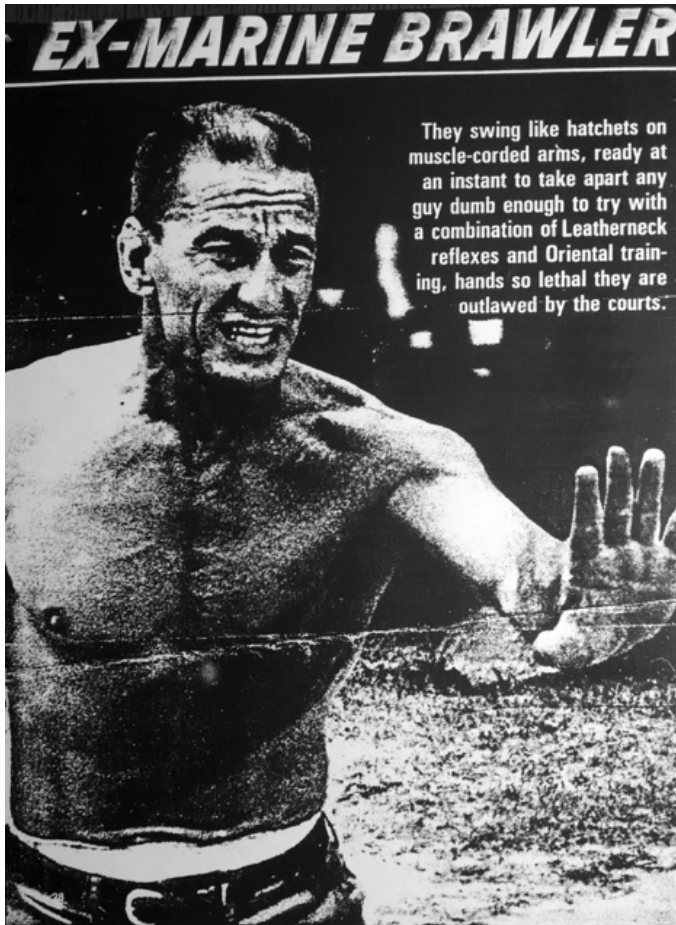
Another taiji pupil, John Lad, illustrated the sort of mindset necessary to learn their style:

**In a sense, it does not really matter what he [Zheng] knew or didn't know about science. His conviction that T'ai Chi Ch'uan could and should survive in the modern world, and even be communicated to and developed by people who are relatively innocent of traditional Chinese concepts and values was evident in his teaching efforts. It was obviously the result not of a scientific analysis, but of his own understanding of the depth of the practice itself.**

[letter to Smith, 25 January 1983]

Smith had joined what may be considered a more traditional model of pedagogy and preservation within the Chinese martial arts than Draeger and Bluming found in their experiences (with the possible exception of Draeger's dedication to his classical *bujutsu* teacher and mentor, Otake Risuke). The result was a non-institutional, highly personalized method of instruction that Smith passed on to his own students, only granting teaching permission to those who mastered the full repertoire of the genre. This contrasts strongly with Draeger's notion that the fighting arts can be dissected, analyzed, and passed on through institutional orchestration. John Lad concludes in his letter: '[use of] scientific terms and formulas only serves to obscure the teaching concerning T'ai Chi Ch'uan that Prof. Cheng was no doubt trying to communicate'.

The trifecta, especially in their respective later years (Bluming, the



*Even Draeger could not escape the media's sensationalism [Godfrey]*

youngest, is still active at the time of writing) grew more interested in the preservation of the various arts with which they had experience. Bluming formed his own organization. Draeger planned to open a research center in Hawaii and already had a team of researchers prepared to staff it. Smith, a dedicated family man, taught local students taiji, bagua, and xing-i, fostering personal relationships with each individual while working full time for the Central Intelligence Agency [Smith 1999:233].

It could be argued that Smith's approach to continuing the line of his adopted community (that is, the collective of students following the lineage of Zheng) was not only more traditional, but more effective in the long-term than institutionalization. Toelken notes that repertoires of performance are rarely confined to a single genre and, indeed, tend to integrate several at once, particularly where preservation of the performance style is concerned [1996: 209-210]. Smith's repertoire included not only the three physical arts he studied in Taiwan, but also a litany of jokes, anecdotes, riddles, and, printed material. What might be termed his 'legitimate' information was passed to others through these media, particularly among his private students. But so was another, 'illegitimate' lineage, through the person of John F. Gilbey, the unreliable narrator who perpetuates unbelievable tales amalgamated from Smith, Draeger, and Bluming's accumulated knowledge of legends and humor.

Gilbey, the unreliable narrator and obvious joke that proved not-so-obvious to English-speakers in the Western world may have been unintentionally convincing because the character so accurately portrayed the fantastical figures he was intended to lampoon, thereby blurring the line between real people with extraordinary stories and the purely fictional. Although the individuals willing to undergo the rigors of training and living abroad for years at a time formed a basically cohesive community with an understood camaraderie, the domestic community of Asian martial arts practitioners in the United States during the 1960s and 1970s was of a much more questionable nature as far as historical legitimacy and commercialism are concerned.

Almost certainly the most colorful figure in the world of American martial arts during this time was a man name John Keehan. Keehan's background is uncertain at best, however his role in the popular mythos of the time is unrivaled. He is most well-known for a series of advertisements that appeared in graphic novels and magazines aimed at young men, much like the muscle-building advertisements that began to crop up in such publications during the early part of the twentieth century. Keehan, though, was not selling a system of weight gain, but rather promised to impart 'secret fighting arts' as won through hard training in death matches around the world by the 'Deadliest Man

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(Illinois residents please enclose \$5g for Illinois Sales Tax (Total \$6.75))

Advertisement for Count Dante  
[Black Dragon Fighting Society 1968]

Alive’. The product was a short pamphlet containing photographs of Keehan and students executing eye gouges and groin strikes, stressing the danger of unleashing these ‘dim mak’ or ‘death touch’ techniques on live subjects [Dante 2014: 11].

Draeger, especially, hated these publications. *Black Belt* magazine, which once contracted him to pen a series of articles about competitive judo, was especially offensive in his eyes for printing articles without fact-checking or even considering the qualifications of the authors:

Black Belt gets nothing from me ... only criticism. I’m on them now for series planned on Japanese Budo which includes article on Jodo which some Kendo teacher is writing. Jodo federation here tells me that this man is not qualified in Jodo and has no knowledge of what he writes. Hope to get BB [Black Belt] to realize that this type of crap always hurts them and to go directly to source for info.  
[Letter to Smith, 21 June 1965]

Despite obvious problems with the quality of information presented in these popular publications, they continued to sell well thanks, in part, to the fodder they presented for self-mythologizing among young men seeking personal power by making public experts available and thereby normalizing the practice of Asian martial arts in America.

Keehan was Draeger’s and Smith’s polar opposite in most ways, so it is interesting to note how they came from similar backgrounds. Notably, Keehan’s first personal exposure to Asian fighting arts was probably his time spent at the Chicago Judo Club with Johnny Osako during the late 1950s or early 1960s, the same club at which Smith and Draeger met. Another of Keehan’s instructors during the 1960s was Robert Trias, the promotional rival of Mas Oyama and founder of the first national karate organization in the United States. Like Smith and Draeger, Keehan was also a Marine and later joined the United States army during the Korean War, although his deployment overseas is disputed [Roy 2010: 19].

There the similarities end, however, as Keehan was much more interested in making money by furthering his spurious claims than spreading the most accurate and reliable information possible in order to educate the public, a matter over which Smith, Draeger, and Bluming all took great pains. Rather, Keehan enjoyed building his own legend, even changing his name in 1967 to render his public persona more amenable to aggrandizement. From that year until his death, John Keehan became Count Juan Raphael Dante. Interestingly, he claimed that the royal title was legitimate and, according to those who knew him, this is almost certainly the case, although not, as he declared, by inheritance from his mother’s Spanish ancestors, but rather through a

significant check written to an office of the Spanish government [Roy 2010: 27].

According to his claims, Count Dante was a globe-hopping playboy who spent his time ferreting out martial arts masters in the exotic 'Far East', learning their secrets and winning personal glory and inner peace by engaging in death matches. The character sounds suspiciously like Gilbey, and it is quite likely that some portion of Smith's creation was aimed straight at mocking the absurdity of Dante's masquerade. In reality, Dante's qualifications in judo, karate, and some systems of his own design appear to be legitimate, if substantially inflated. However, his alleged personal tutelage from aikido founder Morihei Ueshiba in 1964, mastery of *taiji* and other Chinese martial arts, and participation in underground no-holds-barred fights in Thailand are all unsupported by any evidence whatsoever. What is certain is that Count Dante owned a chain of karate schools, sold used cars, was a licensed hairdresser who worked for *Playboy*, operated pornography stores in Chicago, and unsuccessfully attempted to launch his own brand of Count Dante cigarettes [Roy 2010: 57-58]. If not a master of martial arts, Dante was at least a master of business promotion.

Dante famously claimed membership in something called the Black Dragon Fighting Society. The name is evidently taken from one of the militant nationalist organizations operating in Japan before and during World War II with the stated goal of ousting foreign powers from Japan and Manchuria. According to Dante, the occult group was an invitation-only, anonymous [except for himself, apparently] society for the preservation and dissemination of Asian martial arts. In order to accomplish this, the Society was supposed to have held tournaments around the world in which exponents of the different styles would face each other in one-on-one combat without rules. It was in these tournaments that Dante is alleged to have killed two men with his bare hands. In reality, the Japanese Kokuryukai [literally, 'Black Dragon Society'] was named for the Amur ['Black Dragon' in Japanese] River that marked the boundary between Japanese-controlled and independent areas of China, campaigned for Japanese political and military sovereignty over East Asia, and, as far as any inquiry has revealed, had no involvement with secret death matches [Time magazine, 5 October 1942].

Count Dante, with his flamboyant, provocative personality and memorable public image, was fertile ground for creating myths and legends about an imagined Asia, home to elusive masters of esoteric fighting arts. The narratives that grew over time formed the basis for popular culture of the 1970s through the 1990s as films and television, especially, latched onto the desires and whims of a generation of young men in search of a new means to express masculinity in a nation where

their notions of hegemonic traditionalism were no longer suitable to the social climate conceived in the wake of the civil rights movement, the Cold War, and the rise of feminism. While both women and ethnic minorities made their own use of Asian martial culture, such groups cannot, by their very nature, have contributed to book sales and magazine circulation, and thus did not form the target audience for such mainstream advertising as that used by Count Dante. Minority uses for martial arts warrant their own studies and are far beyond the scope of this simple analysis. With that in mind, it can be seen that fantasies of the hyper-masculine became fundamental to the new masculinity and the exotic East proved a useful imaginary space in which to enact it. Men like Draeger, Bluming, Smith, and Keehan served a vital role in helping to bring mainstream attention to the Asian martial arts in American culture during this period, as well as making the practice and depiction of these arts a part of the 'normal' texture of knowledge in the process.



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# THE ART AND POLITICS OF FENCE

## SUBTEXTS AND IDEOLOGIES OF LATE SIXTEENTH CENTURY FENCING MANUALS

# ALEXANDER HAY

## DOI

10.18573/j.2015.10019

## KEYWORDS

Historical European Martial Arts, HEMA, Martial Arts History, Early Modern London

## CITATION

Hay, Alexander. 2015. 'The Art and Politics of Fence: Subtexts and Ideologies of Late 16th Century Fencing Manuals', *Martial Arts Studies* 1, 60-71.

## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to demonstrate that historical fencing manuals and treatises are worthy of study not merely as historical documents but as works of both philosophy and literary merit, demonstrating, as they do, a clear ideological viewpoint as well as an engagement with the ideological and intellectual shifts of their time. The two texts chosen for this initial study, namely, George Silver's *Paradoxes of Defence* (1599) and Vincentino Saviolo's *His Practise* (1595), not only contrast with one another, which was Silver's intention, but also demonstrate an engagement with humanistic and social concerns. We cannot detach these works from the literary and socio-political contexts in which they were written, nor would the authors have intended them to be.



## INTRODUCTION

Historical fencing and martial arts manuals have undergone a resurgence of interest in recent decades thanks to the efforts of hobbyists and researchers who have sought to recreate these fighting arts in a living context. Texts as varied as Talhoffer's *Fechtbuch* [1467] to Sir William Hope's *Advice to his Scholar from the Fencing Master* [1692] to early forms of syncretic martial arts like E.W. Barton-Wright's *The New Art of Self-defence: How a Man May Defend Himself against Every Form of Attack* [1899] have been resurrected and in some cases successfully taught and systematised, but with the obvious caveat of them being modern interpretations of hitherto dead arts. Naturally, this can only be a hypothetical exercise as, in many cases, and unlike some Asian martial arts, much or all of these Western styles' lineage is extinct and so the recreationists must start from scratch.<sup>1</sup>

Yet beyond the sphere of recreation and what is, in effect, a very physical form of experimental archaeology, this article seeks to demonstrate that these manuals and treatises are worthy of study not merely as historical documents but as works of both philosophy and literary merit, demonstrating, as they do, a clear ideological viewpoint as well as an engagement with the ideological and intellectual shifts of the Early Modern period.

This, then, is also a study of a conflict between two very different approaches to controlled and systemic violence, as well as issues of culture and context and a growing sense of what in the long term would become nascent modern nationhood. As the article will demonstrate, the technical instruction of these manuals, while consisting of the bulk of their content, were not their sole primary purpose. Rather, they were used also as a means of articulating ideas about the notion of violence and the role it serves in a social structure favoured by the authors. The intellectual underpinnings of these texts demonstrate instead two competing ethical models and an attempt in both cases to integrate them into the context of Early Modern England, itself facing religious and political tumult as the Tudors gave way to the Stuarts and the complexities of a society in transition continued to engender both conflict and debate.

As this is an initial study and introduction to the subject, I have selected two authors and their texts to begin with. Firstly, this allows a sufficiently in-depth reading within the confines of a journal article. Secondly, it allows us to focus on two key figures and argue for their consideration not merely as fencing masters but as contributors to

Early Modern discourse and humanism. The two texts chosen for this initial study, namely, George Silver's *Paradoxes of Defence* [1599] and Vincentino Saviolo's *His Practise* [1595], not only deliberately contrast with one another, which was Silver's intention, but also demonstrate an engagement with political and social issues of the day; we cannot detach these works from the contexts in which they were written, nor would the authors have intended them to be.

## THE LONDON CONTEXT

Before discussion of these manuals begin, however, the context in which they were written must be established. Both Saviolo and Silver were based in London – the former's salle located in the Blackfriars district, while Silver resided in the city as, in his own words, 'a gentleman'. London itself was now a huge city by the standards of the time with a population of 60,000 by 1520, which had rapidly expanded to 120,000 in 1582 and, by 1605, it was 200,000 [Briggs et al 2001: 21] – making it by far the largest urban settlement in England.

In part, this was due to low grain prices and so a relative absence of famine, the ongoing upheaval of the post-reformation era where government and authority became centralised in London [O'Connell 2000: 92], a general boom in England's population and the aggravating factor of enclosure, which led to both civil strife up to and including riots and civil disobedience in the English countryside [McDonagh 2013: 58] and the active eviction of tenant farmers by landlords, sometimes leading to the depopulation of entire villages [Everitt 1990: 171].

This rapid growth, then, represented both a surge in immigration from the rest of the country and precisely the transient and atomised environment where crime could flourish in a fashion not seen in the rest of England at the time [Briggs et al: 22]. One Italian visitor went so far as to say that England had more robbers and thieves than anywhere else [Cockburn 1977: 49], while social anxiety at the resulting increase in vagabondage and beggars [Carroll 1996: 21-22] and the ever lingering spectre of social disorder [Carroll: 34] that these marginalised men and women represented led to ever harsher attempts to regulate them. These measures included licensed beggary [Carroll: 42] and proscriptive approaches such as bridewells and limits on building, lest the increased accommodation encourage yet more people to move to the burgeoning city [Carroll: 21].

The transitory nature of this growing, chaotic population also made law enforcement a difficult matter. While the city lacked anything

<sup>1</sup> The use of a phrase culled from 18th Century bareknuckle boxing terminology at this point is quite deliberate on my part.

comparable to a police force [Briggs et al: 22], the comparatively well organised nature of criminal activity was certainly evident in the form of efficient fencing (of goods rather than of swords) and training of thieves' apprentices, as well as a disciplined approach to matters of turf and which network controlled which areas [Salgado 1995: 33]. By contrast, what passed for London's law officers may have had strict and even onerous laws to enforce, particularly those which targeted vagabonds and other undesirables, but the day-to-day enforcement of these strictures, both in the city and throughout the land was often uneven and even negligent. This was well known and even accepted, albeit grudgingly, at the time – the ineptitude of law enforcement being widely documented and commented upon, not least upon the stage [Salgado: 166].

Two aggravating factors here were both in the form, or rather, the source of physical violence. The first of these came in the form of discharged soldiers, a common problem at the time, as they found themselves unemployed and yet both inured to and trained in violence. As Gamini Salgado noted:

Although the discharged soldier was a common enough figure on the medieval roads, his activities appear to have been more widespread and better organised in Tudor times. In 1589 for instance, soldiers returning from Drake's unsuccessful expedition against Portugal arrived in London just in time to create alarm and confusion during the festivities of Bartholomew Fair. Some of the city streets had to be closed off with iron railings and peace and order were not restored for six months. When we recall that soldiers on active service were badly paid [if they were paid at all] and discharged with only their weapons and their uniforms, we are unlikely to be surprised that so many of them turned to vagabondage or robbery with violence. They had the training, resources and opportunity to do little else. [Salgado: 111]

The other aggravating factor came in the form of duelling, often to the death, not only among the nobility and gentlemen, but also among the population as a whole, due to the affordability of swords and what could best be termed as a duelling culture. The last example of Trial by Combat in England had only just taken place in 1571 [Morsberger 1974: 34] while duels over insults and, particularly, 'giving the lie' or accusing another of lying were commonplace [Peltonen 2003: 60]. The latter obliged the insulted to offer a challenge, which provided the more rash and bloodthirsty swordsmen with a ready supply of rivals to cross swords with [Morsberger: 53]. The causes of duels could verge on the comical – the author and parliamentarian Robert Ashley went so far as to say that turning down a duel on the grounds of mere illegality 'or the

rule of Conscience' was shameful [Peltonen: 77]. This frankly unhinged approach to resolving disputes even affected the authors and thespians of the day:

The martial dance [as a means of maintaining order between Reason and Passion] was a particularly fascinating notion to most of the great Elizabethan minds. Jonson, Raleigh, Sidney, Porter, and Wyatt were all at least as concerned with their status within the fighting community as within the literary community. Ben Jonson killed one of his actors in a rapier-and-dagger duel in 1593, Henry Porter was killed in a rapier fight in 1599. Christopher Marlowe was a notorious duellist, and died in 1593 in a Deptford tavern fight. [Turner and Soper 1990: 53]

While common, this was not tolerated by the authorities. Marlowe was arrested for one fatal duel and only released after successfully arguing that the death resulted from self-defence [Morsberger: 68]. Jonson was branded for his slaying of Gabriel Spencer [Donaldson 2011: 232]. Complicating matters were the fencing manuals themselves: Saviolo assumed carrying a sword was an essential feature of rank and the display thereof [Peltonen: 62]. Silver, for his part, believed he was defending an English tradition of single combat as a means of obtaining knightly glory [Peltonen: 96]. Conversely, this violence predated them and not all fencing masters had the same attitude. In Giacomo Di Grassi's case, *His True Arte of Defence* instructed the reader to swear off violence (at least away from the battlefield) altogether:

Moreover, because this art is a principal member of the Militarie profession, which altogether [with learning] is the ornament of all the World, Therefore it ought not to be exercised in Braules and Fraies, as men commonlie practise in everie shire, but as honorable Knights, ought to reserve themselves, & exercise it for the advantage of their Cuntry, the honour of weomen, and conqueringe of Hostes and armies. [Di Grassi 1994]

Nor was popular culture entirely enamoured of the duellists. Shakespeare's plays often satirised the practice and the practitioners, as demonstrated in blood-soaked tragedies such as *Romeo and Juliet*, which not coincidentally alluded to fencing techniques very similar if not identical to those of Saviolo [Holmer 1994: 164-165], as well as comedies such as *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where the duelling Dr. Caius and Parson Evans are both the butt of the joke and the means whereby duelling is portrayed as a social evil – a doctor and a priest ready to kill each other over farcical matters of pride [Morsberger: 48-49]. For his part, the Maldon preacher George Gifford and his 1594

*Treatise on True Fortitude*, which condemned duellists in spiritual terms, a rejection both of God's authority and that of one's divinely ordained monarch, was not unusual amongst religious figures who spoke out against the practice during and after this period [Clarke 1995: 289-290]. As Gifford says:

We are also as sure on the contrary part, that thys kinde of man-hoode, [if I may so call it] which uttereth it selfe in private quarrell, and bloody revenge, springeth from the lusts of man, as frō wrath, vaine-glory, and disdainefull pride... It plucketh the sworde out of the hande of the Prince, who is the minister of GOD to take vengeaunce uppon the evill doers... The fruites which it bringeth foorth, are quarrelling, rayling, horrible swearing, and cruell murders. This is the glory of their man-hoode.  
[Gifford 1594]

We should not assume, either, that London was simply a series of street battles around which a city coincidentally coalesced. While the crime rate in London was high compared to nearby rural Essex where murder seldom occurred at all, alongside other violent offences only accounting for one in ten recorded crimes [Samaha 1974: 21], the vast majority of recorded offences in London pertained to crimes against property. In total, 93% pertained to this category, with violent crimes – while common – being dwarfed in comparison. Even if the means of recording crime were unreliable at the time, this gulf is still remarkable.

Meanwhile, if duels were an ongoing issue they had neither reached the relatively high levels as those that took place during James I's reign [Peltonen: 82], nor did they ever match the dreadful levels of death and maiming typified by the French experience at the time, where up to 8,000 men died at the point of a sword between 1598 and 1608 [van Orden 2005: 122]. This was not perhaps helped by French fencing instructors insisting on teaching their students with sharpened blades from the start, which reflected an even more violent aristocratic culture than that of late Elizabethan England [van Orden: 105].

Nor did the fear of crime itself particularly trouble Elizabethan Londoners, who seemed mostly inured to it by being in close proximity on a daily basis. It was taken as a given that some fairs were simply fronts for the sale of stolen goods [Salgado: 58] and many had experienced a stint in prison [Salgado: 165], regardless of their social status, with assault and debt as the usual causes for their imprisonment. Indeed, the duel simply fed into an existing context of homicide at the time. Murder or manslaughter had a particularly domestic tone to it, being often the result of impulsive acts of violence between family members, friends, employers and employees or acquaintances [Cockburn: 57].

Yet if violence did not frighten Elizabethan Londoners, it certainly fascinated them. Ballads and pamphlets dwelt ghoulishly on violent deaths and grotesque details, eclipsed in popularity only by a more literal folk devil in the form of witchcraft. The chap-books, in particular, were an early form of sensation journalism, often promptly written and published in the wake of notorious criminal cases [Langbein 2005: 46], and as we shall discuss later, the rhetoric of the pamphlets had another role to play in the development of fencing manuals. They also demonstrated a growing level of mass literacy and demand for reading matter amongst a burgeoning middle class of tradesmen, merchants and bankers that meant both Saviolo and Silver had an audience for their writing [Stevenson 2002: 55-56], which we will discuss in detail later on.

Blackfriars had its theatres and fencing schools, of course, but it also had bloodsports in the form of cockfighting and bear-baiting, with some bearpits converting easily into venues for drama and, indeed, being licensed for both [Ford 2006: 180]. Theatre, of course, was full of [staged] violence and sword-fighting, the latter carefully choreographed not only to demonstrate the actual skills of the actors but to appear as convincing as possible as the audience both knew what the reality looked like and could be expected to have an understanding of the techniques and terminology employed [Borden 2006: 137]. While staged duels, or rather, the plays they were part of, were popular, so too were prize fights, where swordsmen duelled before audiences in the form of sporting competition, which both influenced and often took place in the Early Modern London theatre.

It can be inferred then that there was an appetite for violence and so a corresponding demand for martial arts training. Elizabethan London had complex and even dysfunctional social dynamics which fed the readership for fencing manuals. This, in addition to London's being the focus of English literary and printing activity at the time [Sheavyn 1967: 127] ensured that *His Practise and Paradoxes of Defense* would not only be printed in London but would be written for and consumed by an audience based in that city and the surrounding counties of South East England. They are books written for a geographically specific readership in mind and, in part, this must be borne in mind when we consider not just their purpose but how their authors went about realising this. The first step, then, in contextualising these fencing manuals is to acknowledge they were products of a particular era in London's history; the next lies in the intentions of the authors themselves. In both cases, their aims were not simple instruction in swordplay, but rather, the articulation of a particular worldview.

*'For whosoever will followe this profession must flie  
from rashnes, pride, and injurie'*

## SAVIOLO AND THE MELANCHOLY OF VIOLENCE

This is certainly the case with Saviolo. *His Practise* is, of course, primarily a means of instruction as demonstrated by its methodological structure and use of a dialogue between a student and a fencing master. The subtext, however, moves this beyond the prosaic as there is a strange melancholic quality to Saviolo's writing, as this example demonstrates:

Let us omit therefore as a speciall and extraordinairie cause, that sometimes God suffereth and permitteth the contrarie: and take this for an infallible rule and ground, that everie one renounceth and fosaketh that helpe which God hath appointed, as often as hee despiseth and contemneth this Arte, and that God hath given us wit and understanding to discerne and know the good and the badde: which beeing so, it must needes followe, that if a man wilt not defend himselfe nor doo his best to obtaine victorie, he must be overcome although his quarrell and cause were most just and reasonable, because he will not use the meanes which God hath appointed, and therefore must blame himselfe only for his ill hap and succeſſe.  
[Saviolo 1595]

For Saviolo, personal virtue alone is not enough to ensure success in this life; one must be willing and able to use violence in order to ensure one's survival and that of one's cause and values. In this sense, Saviolo betrays his Italian origins; contemporary thought there had long acknowledged a sort of pessimism where the best laid plans could be rent asunder by fate, and where violence could neither be prevented nor avoided. As Saviolo notes at one point, 'all things fall to decaye'.

We are reminded of Machiavelli's Fortuna metaphor, and his admonition to seize her roughly, but also his admission that no one can entirely escape the confines of their own natures [Roe 2002: 180]. The civic schools of Italian humanism, keen as they were to espouse a communal response to the vagaries of an uncertain world, also demonstrated a deep pessimism in regards to individual endeavour; as Felice Figliucci argued, man without society is reduced to a wild animal [Brann 2001: 222]. Saviolo's response to this is that the study of violence is therefore necessary, for where collective endeavour fails, individual violence prevails, but only as a last resort:

Therefore to conclude this matter, I woulde counsell and advise everie one, to give as small occasion of offence anie waie unto

anie as may be, and especially unto his friend, to whom hee is in anie sorte beholding: but when that hee is forced to laie hande on his weapon, to doe the best he can, as well in respect of his credite, as for to save his owne lyfe.

[Saviolo]

Here, violence is portrayed as a necessary evil, one where the student must learn sound principles but where the act of swordplay brings with it a deep lingering sadness. If unarmed combat at least allows the possibility of survival, if not avoiding injury, the very nature of a bladed weapon is to kill. While many duels were, at least in principle, based on the drawing of first blood, Saviolo does not spare his student or the reader the more likely reality of swordfighting. Indeed, it is interesting to note that Saviolo himself notes the absurdity behind some duels:

Whereof I hvae my selfe seene a notable example, passing through the Citie of Trieste, in the uttermost part of the territories of Friule in Italy, where I sawe two brethren, one a most honorable Captaine, and the other a brave and worthie souldier, who walking together in the streetes, were verie stedfastly eied of certaine young Gentlemen of the Citie, who stared the Captaine and his brother in the face something unseemely, and [as they tooke it] discourteouslie: wherupon they asked the Gentlement in verie curteous manner, whether they had seened them in anie place before, or whether they knew them. They answered no. Then replied the Captaine and his brother, Why then doo you looke so much upon us? They aunswered, because they had eies. That [sayd the other] is the crowes fault, in that they have not picked them out. To be short, in the end one word added on the other, and one speech following the other, the matter came from saying to doing: and what the tung had uttered the hand would maintaine...  
[Saviolo]

Violence ensued, the Captain was wounded, his brother slain and the ringleader, 'misled by evill company', captured and beheaded, 'despite being very well beloved in the Cittie', the rest of his gang exiled. Saviolo uses this as a cautionary tale – all could have been avoided if the parties involved offered 'no occasion or opportunity for the effecting thereof'.

Nonetheless, he does not doubt the inevitability of such violence, regardless of the cause. Saviolo advises the reader to avoid provoking violence, but he provides no guarantee that it can be avoided altogether. One can't, after all, assume others adhere to the same standards of behaviour:

**But if the injurie be such, that either murder be committed by trecherie, or rape, or such like villanies, then is it necessarye to procedde in revenging it...**  
[Saviolo]

In that sense, the main accusation levelled at Saviolo by his critics was true – he certainly advocated violence as a means of settling scores. Conversely, he also advises his readers to avoid all provocation, gives them grounds whereby a challenge can be refused and uses Christian imagery and theological arguments to support this argument. For Saviolo, violence was nuanced, and there was a clear demarcation between murder and justified violence, yet the latter considered revenge as valid a reason as self-defence to take up arms.

Again, this reflects a stoic fatalism underpinning *His Practise*; the reader is assumed to have a need to learn fencing method and the book certainly celebrates the technique and ensuing accomplishment that results from the mastery of such skills. Yet even during these moments of muted celebration, Saviolo reminds the reader of the seriousness of this study and its implications for life, limb and personal responsibility:

**And therefore weighing and considering the greate daunger those men incurr that commit these things to the proove of the sword, Gentlemen ought to bee more slowe in fighting, except great occasion urge them, and unlesse they bee certaine to fight upon justice, so as they have great hope to obtaine Gods favour in it.**  
[Saviolo]

Given the mania for Italian influences (and swordfighting techniques) amongst English aristocrats [Kirby 2013: 15], alongside a less flattering view of them from the rest of the English and in popular culture [Kirby: 32-33], Saviolo's worldview must have seemed like an alien imposition for some. 'The Italianised Englishman is a devil incarnate' may have come from Italy itself, but it found currency amongst many Englishmen too, though they were more inclined to see a depraved nation collapsing in on itself through its foreign degeneracy than the sophisticated ideal some aristocrats saw [Clark 1983: 187-188]. Certainly, a vogue for the rapier and the Italians who taught it, including Saviolo himself, explains why he was able to publish *His Practise*, as one required a firm reputation as a teacher to do this in the first place [Turner and Soper 1990: 52]. Yet while his book was published in English, with possible assistance in its composition by his friend, the influential and well-connected translator and lexicographer John Florio [Yates 2010: 133-134], it still seems to be a foreign mindset expressed in English rather than a text written with the English in mind. In part, this is to be expected from an author who had probably only been in London for around eight years before he

wrote the book [Jared 2013: 16], and – as mentioned – the international and ever-shifting nature of London's population would certainly have made such texts inevitable [Briggs 2001 et al: 21]. Yet its very nature – the introduction and discussion of a particularly Italian worldview as well as Italian fencing methods – betrays its context. Saviolo's anecdotes are mainly Italian in nature; its culture and attitudes towards society and violence being very different from that of England.

What do we know of the author, however? Florio reveals he was ambidextrous and a surprisingly patient and forgiving character [Yates 2010: 133-134], useful traits for a teacher but also someone who had probably lived so long precisely because he knew when not to draw a sword. He was also a dancer, which presumably assisted his footwork, reflexes and coordination as a fencer. Also, given that it was as much a component of combat training amongst nobles as an essential courtly skill at the time [van Orden 2005: 92], this in turn suggests Saviolo's family was of high rank.

Florio also reveals that Saviolo was originally from Padua, itself significant as the city's university was an extremely popular destination for English scholars [Woolfson 1998: 46-48] – it may well have been a case of Saviolo recognising where a market for his skills existed. The fence instructor Rocco Bonetti had already succeeded in wooing English nobles with Italian fencing, and had opened a successful Blackfriars salle prior to his death in 1587 at the hands of the English fencer Austen Bagger [Turner and Soper 1990: 14-17], the same year Saviolo may have arrived in London.

Given his skills, Saviolo seems well-travelled and it is certainly possible that he took part in the 1570 war between the Republic of Venice, rulers of Padua, and the Ottoman Empire, as suggested by anecdotes featured in *His Practise*. This was a man who may well have witnessed violence both on and off the battlefield, and had an awareness of the cost to its participants.

It may also have been that he tired of his life in Italy – or at least life under the Venetians. The regular organised gang brawls for control over bridges in Venice, which were actively encouraged and participated in by the Republic's rulers [Davis 1994: 89], would see a ready stream of grave injuries, permanent maiming and deaths. In addition to sometimes involving tens of thousands of willing, violent participants, these *battaglie sui ponti* would involve weapons up to and including swords and pikes, as well as whatever implements tradesmen fighting squads would bring along. The bridge brawls would inspire similar side brawls between children or women (again, with similar festive glee and internal feuds within the two main Castellani and Nicolloti factions added even more violence to the situation. As a



Paduan, rather than a Venetian, Saviolo may simply have had his fill of such violence, and being ruled by such a republic may have been less desirable than England, with its Italophile nobles and scholars.

To Saviolo's eyes, London may well have seemed relatively sedate in comparison to life in Italy, still scarred by the Italian Wars and street violence of the kind he himself mentions. This too often reached absurd levels, up to and including duels over games of tennis and the works of Dante and Ariosto [Holland 2004: 61]. Certainly we can detect a sadness as well as resignation towards violence in *His Practise*, which contrasts with the delight Venice seemed to take in its institutionalised gang wars. The great irony here is that Saviolo may have been trying to leave behind the Italian violence he was accused of bringing with him to England.

With this in mind, what are we to make of *His Practise*? There is fatalism, vengefulness and tribalism here, but also moderation, kindness and compassion. Damning him with faint praise, Silver summarised Saviolo like so: 'For he professed arms, but in his life a better Christian' [Silver 1599]. In that sense, *His Practise*, while contradictory and perverse to modern eyes, nonetheless displays an earnest attempt to reconcile a need for violence with a sense of moral purpose and social responsibility.

*'An Admonition To the Noble, Ancient, Victorious, Valiant  
and Most Brave Nation of Englishmen'*

## GEORGE SILVER AND EARLY MODERN POPULAR PATRIOTISM

George Silver had much to feel aggrieved at. As an exponent of the traditional backsword fighting of the English, he had seen his art and its practitioners slowly but relentlessly marginalised by their own nation.

The champions of this tradition had certainly hit upon hard times. From being instituted as *The Company of Maisters of the Science of Defence* by Henry VIII in 1540 to the time Silver wrote his treatise on these techniques, *Paradoxes on Defense*, instruction in English swordsmanship have been directly challenged and out-competed by Italian instructors. These newcomers had not only attracted the most prestigious students but charged far more in terms of tuition fees – Saviolo charged up to £100 a lesson [McElroy 1986: 197] – which deftly characterised their training as somehow more exotic and so more valid than the mundanities of the English methods.

This continues to the present time – many martial arts and weapons

have been sold to new audiences on a mix of the exotic and the potent, be it the Japanese *katana* or the ground fighting methods of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. This tendency to imbue the new with special powers or a certain mystique is not new – certainly it was something Silver and the Companie of Maisters knew only too well in 1599. By 1580, most of the youths apprenticed to the Corporation were of a lower class background, while gentlemen and aristocrats increasingly favoured foreign masters or even studied abroad [Anglin 1984: 407]. The Company's monopoly had long since faded.

Worse indignities were to come. The 1572 Vagrancy Act listed unlicensed fencers as being on par with beggars, street performers, cony-catchers and other undesirables, risking imprisonment, fines and even flogging if they did not move on [Aydelotte 1967: 68]. For Silver, whose work certainly demonstrates a pride in the heritage of the art he loved, this must have seemed beyond the pale, and he placed the blame squarely on the 'Italian teachers of defence, by their false monstrations' [Silver] who had taken English swordfighting away from its rightful place in English society and left it, often quite literally, in the gutter.

To say that the English masters were in a difficult situation is an understatement. For them the only way they could demonstrate their superiority to the 'inferior' Italian methods lay in pressure tested duels. Silver and his peers reasoned that if they were to defeat an Italian fencing master, they could prove the validity of their skills and so justify their supremacy. This was a reasonable idea – credibility is key in all martial arts where the unskilled 'master' or out-and-out charlatan can be demonstrated, beyond reasonable doubt, to be inferior. Frustratingly, however, the Italian masters were having none of it. As Silver complains:

We caused to that effect, five or six score bills of challenge to be printed, and set up from Southwarke to the Tower, and from thence throughout London unto Westminster, we were at the place with all these weapons at the time appointed, within a bow shot of their fence school. Many gentlemen of good account, carried many of the bills of challenge unto them, telling them that now the Silvers were at the place appointed, with all their weapons, looking for them, and a multitude of people there to behold the fight, saying unto them, now come and go with us [you shall take no wrong] or else you are shamed for ever. Do the gentlemen what they could, these gallants would not come to the place of trial. [Silver]

Were Saviolo and his fellow Italians ducking a fight, however? It was certainly true that Saviolo refused to take up the English fencers on their challenges, not helped by him alternately describing them as

lacking ‘cunning’ or the inflammatory language he is said to have used during his argument with Bartholomew Bramble. Yet if we take into account Saviolo’s own views on violence as well as his own gracious behaviour to opponents such as Bramble, we can see a consistency in his approach. The Maisters didn’t want a violent street battle, despite one drunken altercation outside Saviolo’s school that could have escalated to bloodshed. They saw themselves as scholars and not brigands, after all, and any violence of this sort would have discredited them and their cause, and so they would not – *could not* – draw their swords in any other context. Bramble’s confrontation with Saviolo, for example, was primarily due to Bramble trying to persuade him to ‘play’ at his school. Saviolo, for his part, and as mentioned earlier, only advocated violence in cases of self-defence or the most extreme of provocations. His refusal to draw his sword in that sense was admirable, and betrayed a great deal of patience, but also little understanding for what the Maisters really wanted and needed – validation and treatment as peers. The tragedy for the Maisters was that their chances of proving their worth were latterly scuppered by a kind of pacifism. For other Italian masters, similar rules applied. Violence was something they wished to avoid for many reasons, and they had nothing to gain by crossing swords with those whose prestige depended on it. Once again, the English fencers found themselves at a disadvantage they could not surmount.

It is for this reason that the angry, resentful tone in *Paradoxes* cannot simply be dismissed as a bitter diatribe by one of history’s losers. Silver was unusual in that he felt a genuine sympathy towards other maisters, despite their low class origins, and also considered their marginalisation to be a disgrace. ‘I speak not against masters of defence indeed, they are to be honored, nor against the science, it is noble, and in my opinion to be preferred next to divinity’, as he says at one point. Silver the Gentleman had picked a side, and it was not the same as that of the aristocrats who had abandoned the backsword and the maxim that ‘English masters of defence, are profitable members in the commonwealth, if they teach with ancient English weapons of true defence’, as he put it.

With that in mind, *Paradoxes of Defense* should not be read simply as an instruction manual nor a diatribe, though certainly it has those features, but as a method for Silver to conduct his feud with the Italian masters through other means. Silver’s approach was threefold. Firstly, he had rank – as a gentleman, he could not be so easily dismissed as the lower class English swordsmen, and this also granted his writing authority. Secondly, Silver identified an existing civic patriotism in English national identity at the time and sought to ally his method of swordfighting with it. And thirdly, Silver’s style has strong parallels with the tone and preoccupations of a new form of popular writing, that of the pamphleteers.

In regards to Silver’s status, it is telling that there is little reference to his own training in his work. Descended from a Hertfordshire knight called Sir Bartholomew Silver in the reign of Edward II [Burke 1884: 927], Silver was prosperous enough to be involved in logging [Turner & Soper 1990: 79] and both George and his brother Toby took an active role in defending the old traditions of English swordsmanship by confronting Italian swordmasters, including Saviolo. Silver himself described his background like so: ‘having the perfect knowledge of all manner of weapons’ [Silver], but he provides no further details. This is not to say that Silver was illegitimate, any more than Saviolo, whose own swordfighting lineage remains unknown. Yet the important factor, as made clear on the frontispiece of *Paradoxes* is Silver’s rank of gentleman, as opposed to his status as a swordsman. This immediately contextualises the work; Silver’s social status is part of the treatise’s identity – one not only reads about English swordfighting here, but via a literate and well-educated English gentleman, key in situations where other maisters, and their students, were illiterate or too low down the social strata to make their voices heard.

Silver’s use of nationalism, meanwhile, tapped into an existing impulse that verged on the jingoistic:

**And for as much as this noble and most mighty nation of Englishmen, of their good natures, are always most loving, very credulous, & ready to cherish & protect strangers, yet that through their good natures they never more by strangers or false teachers may be deceived, once again I most humbly to admonish them... [Silver]**

Here Silver deftly invokes national pride while only criticising his intended audience in as gentle a fashion as possible. Notably, he cites English openness as the reason why ‘false teachers’ are able to enter society and spread their flawed methods. Such nimble flattery continues throughout the treatise. Austen Bagger is described as ‘carrying the valiant heart of an Englishman’ while, Silver argues, ‘there is no manner of teaching comparable to the old ancient teaching’ – and by ‘ancient’, one should read English, as is the case when he states that ‘truth is ancient though it seems an upstart’. Silver makes great use of this word – derived from the Latin word ‘ante’, or ‘before’. Silver’s association of it with Englishness serves two purposes. It seeks to demonstrate that Englishness itself is long established and so valid in and of itself [his references to Achilles, the Spartans and Ajax in the same breath are not coincidences], but that the swordfighting techniques he is defending are part of this heritage and so superior to the upstart methods of the Italians. Tellingly, while Silver alludes to classical mythology, he avoids allusions to Roman history because, of course, that would confer similar status upon his Italian rivals.

Silver was, of course, not alone in promoting Englishness at this point. Drama at the time was full of an English nationalism that was both protestant (but not excessively so) and legitimised by the weight of history [Ostovich, Syme and Griffin 2009: 15]. Writing only 11 years after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, Silver would surely have been aware of a prevailing fear of invasion, echoed again in theatre and popular culture as a whole, where fear of invasion is countered by a sense of national purpose and triumph [Munro 2009: 121]. This creation of a literary and dramatic Englishness, which took place on the later Elizabethan stage, came with what might be termed as a necessary xenophobia [Degenhardt and Abingdon 2011: 190]. It is no coincidence that this upsurge in national identity was particularly pronounced amongst Englishmen born in the 1550s and 1560s – including Silver himself [Cavanagh 2004: 72].

In this sense, it is not too much of a leap to read Silver's work in a similar light. Here, England, or rather its foolhardy 'gallants' led astray by fanciful notions of foreign swordfighting, are in peril. Yet the very traditions of Englishness can both withstand this and provide salvation. There was also an existing cultural uneasiness towards Italians alongside a passion for their culture in other quarters. From the great ambivalent Marlowe and his portrayal of Rome as a decadent maze of intrigue [Stapleton 2011: 40] to the often tart caricatures of decadent Italians, such as that of Robert Greene's Velvetbreeches, where even apparel becomes ensnared in this rigorous cultural brawl [Hentschell 2008: 120-125], Silver was simply echoing an already established view amongst many English.

This is not to say that everyone in England was a rampant xenophobe, especially in London. The disquiet towards foreign influences often co-existed (and indeed still does) with a pragmatic open-mindedness and, if not an absolute mania for the foreign, certainly a curiosity and willingness to engage [Howard 2009: 9-10]. As with all the other polemicists, Silver's real issue was Englishness itself and how it could be influenced, protected or, indeed, threatened.

Yet who was it that Silver was addressing in *Paradoxes*? Beyond the dedication to the Earl of Essex, Silver must have had a particular audience in mind. While the challenges Silver and his brother, Toby, issued to the Italians – up to and including a fight on top of a scaffold – were rebuffed [Stern 2009: 49], Silver still felt he could win the argument through his writing. Who he was attempting to influence, however, is key to understanding the real purpose of the text. One clue lies in a comparison between the following passages:

Alas, our Englishmen are the plainest dealing soules that ever God put life in: they are greedie of newes, and love to be fed in their humors and heare themselves flattered the best that may be.

[Nash 1594]

Remember Gentlemen, your lives are like so many lighted Tapers, that are with care delivered to all of you to maintain: these with wind-puffed wrath may be extinguished, which drunkenness put out, which negligence let fall: for man's time is not of itself to short, but it is more shortened by sin.

[Greene 1592]

Yea, who neglecting the holy and sure wisdom of God in his word, wherein are the onely honorable enstructions for polytyques, and honestest rules of governing our houses and owne person, do beate their braines in other bookes of wicked vile Atheistes and sette before them the example of Turkish and Italian practises, wherby the Lorde many times thrustes theyr hands into the neste of waspes and hornets while they seek the hony of the swete bee.

[Stubbs 1579]

These passages, by Elizabethan pamphleteers Thomas Nash, Robert Greene and John Stubbs respectively, all follow the same tone and rhetoric, as well as moralising and sense of a vulnerable yet pronounced Englishness that both needed to be celebrated and defended. (Not coincidentally, Greene's cautionary tale is set in the decadent environs of Italy.) If we refer back to Silver, we can see these similarities for ourselves:

To prove this, I have set forth these my Paradoxes, different I confesse from the maine current of our outlandish teachers, but agreeing I am well assured to the truth, and tending as I hope to the honor of our English nation. The reason which moved me to adventure so great a taske, is the desire I have to bring the truth to light, which hath long time lyen hidden in the cave of contempt, while we like degenerate sonnes, have forsaken our forefathers vertues with their weapons, and have lusted like men sicke of a strange ague, after the strange vices and devises of Italian, French and Spanish Fencers, litle remembring, that these Apish toyes could not free Rome from Brennius sacke, nor Fraunce from King Henrie the fifth his conquest.

[Silver]

If we assume that Silver's *Paradoxes of Defence* is a polemic, it certainly takes after the predominant polemic format of its time, the Elizabethan pamphlet. Silver's work matches the overwrought, dramatic and indeed sensationalist tone of the pamphlets, providing an uncanny preview of the lurid, alarmist and swaggeringly vulgar nationalism of the modern British press.

Yet why would Silver elect to make his arguments via the pamphleteers' style? As mentioned earlier the period saw the rise of a relatively literate middle class, and much printed material of this time was published with that audience in mind. While this meant content such as religious material or romances were popular, so too were moral tracts and instructional works [Clark 1983: 23].

While pamphleteering was popular, it was also poorly esteemed and even hazardous – as Greene and Stubbs each found out to their cost – but such considerations would have meant little to Silver, whose beloved English fencing had already hit rock bottom. Instead, a pamphleteer's tone offered access to a new audience who were more xenophobic and conservative than the upper classes, and so, it was reasonable to assume, more open to Silver's impassioned defence of fence. The Elizabethan pamphlet's puritanical tendencies went well with Silver's sermonising tone, and its satirical elements meant that Silver could also vent his frustrations at the Italians and their followers. The genre's general tone of threatened ruin and admonitions to an unwary England also sat well with Silver's agenda. His objective, then, was simple and direct. Having been denied the favour of high society, and limited to an audience on the edge of the underclass, his objective was the new English middle class itself. *Paradoxes of Defence* was his attempt to colonise the imagination of yeoman and craftsman alike.

Was it successful? In many ways, Silver had already lost. The reign of James I saw the importation of French fencing masters to instruct the Stuart princes [Turner & Soper 1990: 19], a state of affairs that would ironically have provoked both a proud Italian like Saviolo and a stalwart Englishman like Silver in equal measure. A brief reinstatement of the Company's official status in 1605 was precisely that [Shephard 2015: 426]. The sword-fighting techniques of the early Stuart period and so the 17th Century saw the continuing popularity of the rapier amongst civilians, now competing alongside the English broadsword, mortuary sword and other cut and thrust blades on the battlefield [Clements 2015].

Silver did outlive Saviolo, who had died sometime before *Paradoxes* was published, but this was his only victory. Part of his dilemma lay in the fact that he wrote and published his book in London; precisely the place

where new ideas would arrive and take root and new arrivals could easily become part of its fabric. Silver's passionate conservatism was railing against the very nature of the city itself – Saviolo was neither the first nor the last foreigner to die a Londoner. Silver, for his part, took up his sword and pen to preserve a still-extant tradition that was under threat not merely from foreign influences but the relentless progress of history itself.

## CONCLUSIONS

It must not be forgotten at this point that the primary goals of these manuals was to provide instruction in swordfighting. For Saviolo, this was through the conceit of the classical dialogue; for Silver it was primarily in the form of critique and a defence of tradition. Nonetheless, we cannot disregard the fact that both texts were also part of an overall worldview their authors had attempted to articulate. This has implications for further research into the field. In this article, I have examined the two manuals chosen through a multi-contextual prism, in so doing, bringing these texts to a deeper level of study and critique. Similar studies for other manuals from this time, as well as before and after it, may yield similar insights. Such a process has not been exhaustive, nor should it be. How might a Marxist reading of His Practise or *Paradoxes of Defence* unfold? The near absence of women in Silver's work – apart from 'a pretty wench' who 'ran with outcry into the street: "Help! Help! The Italians are like to be slain"' [Silver] – may well be of interest to feminist historians, just as Saviolo's depiction of 'the valour and vertue of women' is also worthy of debate.

For re-enactors and contemporary students of Historical European Martial Arts this study also raises questions. How does a broader understanding of the context of these manuals affect how they are interpreted? Does such a study enable practitioners to delve deeper, or is contemporary practise unaffected? Greater collaborations between practitioners and academics may allow deeper insights for all concerned, as demonstrated by the recent Bronze Age Combat: An experimental approach project hosted by Newcastle University [Dolfini 2013]. In any case, as historical martial arts increase in popularity, so further study of it across the disciplines should be encouraged.

Finally, we have Silver and Saviolo themselves – here we have fully realised ideologies and an overlooked debate on ethics and values in the early modern period. Surely then an argument should be made for their texts to be seen not merely as instruction, but as rich and intriguing humanist works in their own right.

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# HISTORY IN THE MAKING

## MARTIAL ARTS BETWEEN PLANET HOLLYWOOD AND PLANET HONG KONG

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## DOI

10.18573/j.2015.10020

## KEYWORDS

Film Studies, Cultural Studies,  
Interdisciplinarity, Criticism

## CITATION

Barrowman, Kyle. 2015.  
'History in the Making:  
Martial Arts Between Planet  
Hollywood and Planet Hong  
Kong', *Martial Arts Studies* 1,  
72-82.

## ABSTRACT

In virtually all existing scholarship on martial arts cinema, what is indicated in the invocation of such an ostensibly vast cinematic realm (temporally and culturally) is the specific and narrow martial arts cinema of Hong Kong from the 1960s to the 1980s. Scholarship has ignored, dismissed or written off many of the threads which have come together to form the unique cinematic patchwork known as martial arts cinema; even more problematically, they have all-too-easily dismissed the American thread as quasi-racist orientalist opportunism on the part of Hollywood filmmakers. Against this deeply problematic view, this essay reviews two important recent contributions to American martial arts cinema scholarship in order to highlight problems in previous work and to create space for a new position from which to better understand and appreciate the American inheritance of the martial arts.

## INTRODUCTION PASTS AND FUTURES

The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be the same as a discovery that I am dogmatic or egomaniacal. The wish and search for community is the wish and search for reason.

– Stanley Cavell [1979: 20]

The renowned film historian Tom Gunning once remarked that ‘history is never simply the surviving records of the past, but always a creative and imaginative act of trying to understand the past, a belief that it says something to us’ [Gunning 1991: 2]. As it relates to martial arts studies and the efforts of scholars to bring to light historical and theoretical issues on the basis of cinematic representations of the martial arts, this sentiment is important to keep in mind. This is so not only as one pours over various films, but also, in the metatheoretical spirit espoused by D.N. Rodowick [1988; 1991; 2014; 2015], as one pours over various scholarly accounts of films. Operating according to the belief that previous scholarship on martial arts in the cinema has something to say to us, I plan to explore the American legacy of martial arts cinema through an interrogation of two important investigations into this largely neglected – and unfairly castigated – area of film history.

This inquiry will proceed according to the ‘key methodological questions’ in historical research signaled by David Bordwell: first, ‘what phenomenon is the [scholar] trying to explain’; second, ‘what are candidates for an approximately adequate proximate explanation’; third, ‘what rival answers to the questions are on the table’; and fourth, ‘from a comparative perspective, what explanations are most plausible?’ Bordwell acknowledges that it would be naïve to assume that scholars across the broad range of academic disciplines could easily come up with single answers for any and every historical question, but at the same time, he is quick to point out that scholars’ efforts should nevertheless be ‘to weigh the pluses and minuses of each alternative’ without shrinking from interdisciplinary conversations and debates [Bordwell 2005].

In the interest of stimulating scholarly exchanges, I wish to emphasize the need for martial arts studies to tackle head-on its ‘dialectical responsibilities’ so as to prevent the ‘ever-present danger’ averred by Noël Carroll of ‘theoretical premises [being] taken as given – as effectively inoculated from criticism’ [Carroll 1996: 57]. As Carroll makes clear:

Present theories are formulated in the context of past theories. Apprised of the shortcomings in past theories, through processes of continued scrutiny and criticism, present theories try to find more satisfactory answers to the questions that drive theoretical activity. Sometimes advances involve incremental improvements within existing paradigms; sometimes new paradigms are required to accommodate the lacunae made evident by the anomalies that beset previous theorizing. Sometimes the driving theoretical questions need to be redefined; sometimes they need to be broken down into more manageable questions; sometimes these questions need to be recast radically. And all this requires a free and open discursive context, one in which criticism is not the exception, but the rule.  
[Carroll 1996: 57-58]

Conceding the point sagaciously observed by Stanley Cavell that ‘criticism is always an affront’ [Cavell 2002 (1969): 46], I nevertheless wish to encourage scholars inspired by the possibilities of martial arts studies to embrace the ‘value of being disagreeable’ with the goal of transforming through dialectical argumentation the epistemological and axiological commitments that have been entered into either tacitly or explicitly by scholars interested in cinematic representations of the martial arts [Rodowick 2015: 79].

For the sake of time and space, I will not discuss each and every extant account of martial arts in the cinema. Instead, I will focus on two recent accounts, each of which, for the sake of clarity and rigor, I will discuss at some length. My hope is that this might serve as a way, first, to highlight problems in previous scholarship on the American legacy of martial arts cinema, and second, to create space for a new position from which we can begin to better understand and appreciate this dynamic cinematic realm in the hopes of achieving a more comprehensive understanding of the American inheritance of the martial arts.

## GARY J. KRUG AT THE FEET OF THE MASTER

The first piece of scholarship from the 'prehistory' of martial arts studies that I would like to examine is Gary J. Krug's essay, 'At the Feet of the Master: Three Stages in the Appropriation of Okinawan Karate into Anglo-American Culture' [2001]. Benjamin Judkins considers Krug's essay to be 'mandatory reading' for martial arts studies scholars due to its unique historical placement as one of the first attempts to 'seriously investigate the spread of the martial arts from a cultural studies perspective' [Judkins 2014]. Given the emphasis Krug places on American movies in particular over the course of his generally insightful and inspiring exploration of the ways the martial arts have tended to travel across countries and time periods, his essay is especially worth exploring in an effort to flush out the assumptions subtexting his engagement with the cinema and the implications of the historical claims he makes on its behalf.

The main idea promulgated by Krug is that 'karate is not a thing' [Krug 2001: 395]. Those familiar with the unwieldy histories of the various martial arts practices that have proliferated around the world will be aware of the difficulties of corraling difference for the sake of an easy definition of, and lineage for, any individual style. For his part, Krug endeavors to reorient the scholarly understanding of martial arts styles as historically-specific and mutable practices which exist within various and varying frameworks of ideas, knowledge, and beliefs. Armed with this understanding of martial arts styles, he undertakes an exploration of the ways karate in particular was introduced into American culture at different periods throughout the 20th Century [Krug 2001: 395-396].

Following his introduction, Krug spends the first portion of his essay detailing the fractured 'origin story' of karate, which he describes as 'a creole of practices that were combined together on the island of Okinawa' [Krug 2001: 396]. On the basis of the events in Japanese history which occurred over the course of the next several centuries – including the unification of the three kingdoms of Okinawa under King Sho Hanshi in 1492 and the banning of weapons stockpiling, which stimulated interest in unarmed combat techniques; the invasion of Okinawa by the Satsuma Clan in 1609, which intensified the cross-fertilization between Japanese and Chinese martial practices; and then, in later centuries, the constant turbulence of Japan being occupied by and then occupying other countries, which ultimately led to the Sino-Japanese wars and, of course, to World War II – Krug argues that, 'from its inception, karate was never a single thing but an evolving set of practices linked to local knowledge as well as prevailing cultural beliefs. It was, as well, actively evolving in many directions and idiolects or styles' [Krug 2001: 396].

It is clear that, based on the way Krug frames his anthropological/archeological exploration, *history* is a signal concept. Over and above everything else, Krug's is a historical study which seeks to trace across various regions [another key term for Krug] the multifarious 'transmissions' of karate, and only after identifying key moments in the American appropriation of karate does Krug attempt to theorize the significance of these moments. What is worrisome about Krug's analysis is the uneasy marriage between history and theory which is awkwardly mediated by his understanding of orientalism, which both skews the timeline of American cinema that he proffers and which calls into question a number of the theoretical assertions he makes on the basis of that skewed timeline.

Krug's discussion of the 'cultural blending' of karate from an Okinawan context into an American context proceeds according to three stages. The first stage is said to run from 1920-1970 and to be characterized by 'discovery and mythologizing' through media representations, most notably film and television [398-401]; the second stage is said to run from 1946-1980 and to be characterized by an increased presence of karate in the actual personal histories and lived experiences of Americans [401-403]; and the third stage is said to run from 1980 to the present and to be characterized by 'appropriation and demythologizing' by virtue of the shifting signs of authenticity and legitimacy in the teaching and the practice of karate [403-405].

Readily apparent is the lack of a rigorous historical account of transmissions of karate in America during the first half of the 20th Century, particularly in American film and television. Krug is scrupulous with his historical research of karate as it moved through its various Okinawan incarnations, yet he is less so when it comes to the history of martial arts in the context of American film and television. Consider the 'historical record' he provides for pre-1960s cinematic representations of the martial arts:

The early, simplistic view of martial arts in general ensured that their appearance as cultural markers in Anglo-American cinema would perpetuate commonly held beliefs. Few Westerners had direct experience of martial arts, and the common knowledge of it derived from mass media representations in film and books and later in television. The martial arts that first appeared in American cinema were in films of the 1930s, although they became much more common after the 1960s. *The Hatchet Man* (1932) depicted parts of Chinese Tong wars in San Francisco, whereas other films might occasionally show judo techniques. In general, martial arts in mainstream American, English, and Australian cinema showed only parodies of the practices, lifted out of all cultural

and historical contexts. Throws from judo appeared now and then, but wushu, jujitsu (unarmed combat techniques from the samurai tradition), karate, and other traditional martial arts were largely unknown as coherent sets of practices outside of their geographical areas and cultural traditions.  
[Krug 2001: 399]

This sketch illuminates by virtue of its paltriness an area in need of attention from martial arts studies scholars. An initial problem with this historical account is the confusing circularity in Krug's attempt to argue that early American cinematic representations *perpetuated* commonly held beliefs about the martial arts while at the same time claiming that the beliefs about the martial arts commonly held by Americans at the time were *derived* from those same cinematic representations.<sup>1</sup> More troubling than this problem of the chicken or the egg, however, is Krug's claim that all American representations of the martial arts before the 1960s showed 'only parodies' of the martial arts depicted. Sacrificing historical accuracy for theoretical convenience (and in the process offering a negative value judgment under the guise of theoretical objectivity), Krug hurtles past several decades worth of 'simple' (read *bad*) American representations of the martial arts in order to discuss the 1960s spy vogue.

Despite the significant passage of time and the substantial cultural shifts in America (to say nothing of the rest of the 'Western' world) between the 1930s and the 1960s, it would seem that little had changed in American representations of the martial arts inasmuch as even the spy films and television shows Krug discusses are deemed 'politically and morally suspect' due to the alleged opportunistic orientalism of their utilization of the martial arts as mere 'window dressing' to highlight the 'exotic' elements of the stories. Even where actual martial arts techniques were used, they were allegedly 'caricatured' as a result of

their being 'nearly always in the hands of Anglo-Americans' [399].<sup>2</sup>

For the sake of the development of martial arts studies, it is worth pausing here in order to consider the implications of such irresponsible, ostensibly historically-informed scholarship on the cinema. Even though Krug does not position himself within film or media studies, he is nevertheless positing an authoritative and comprehensive account of a historical period in American film and television, and the fact that his account is neither authoritative nor comprehensive combined with the fact that he did not consult any historical scholarship conducted by any film or media scholars should be cause for alarm. In lieu of an actual argument supported by scholarship from relevant disciplines regarding the awfulness of American representations of the martial arts, martial arts studies scholars should studiously avoid equating Krug's slipshod historicizing and flippant dismissals with rigorous argumentation. Simply referencing with no argumentative support the alleged 'simplicity' of arbitrarily chosen films [evident in which films, compared to which other films, on the basis of what criteria?] is an all-too-familiar tactic whereby scholars claiming to be unconcerned with value judgments nevertheless enable themselves to denigrate large swaths of film history on the strength of *idées reçues* which are mistakenly believed to be universal and incontestable.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, given Krug's characterization of American film history, there would appear to be nothing left to say for present-day martial arts studies scholars interested in the history of American representations of the martial arts. Against this position, I believe that the history of American cinema has far more to say to us than Krug's perfunctory, gap-filled timeline would have us believe. For example, is there anything to be said [and, if so, what is there to be said] about the appearance of jujitsu and judo in the respective James Cagney films *'G' Men* (1935) and *Blood on the Sun* (1945), or about the fight scene between

<sup>1</sup> As Judkins astutely observes, 'change is a critical element to consider in Krug's paper [seeing as] he basically attempts to provide us with a theory about how certain types of cultural change happen ... yet at the end of the day we are left with no explanation for why [changes in the knowledge about and the practices of the martial arts occurred] the way[s] that they did. ... His theory does not attempt to predict or explain [any changes]. They are taken as given ... [they are] assumed rather than clarified' [Judkins 2014].

<sup>2</sup> I would also like to point out the tactical shift discernible in this portion of Krug's essay upon his arrival at Bruce Lee's celebrated role as Kato in the American television show *The Green Hornet* (1966-1967). After excoriating all of the other American film and television products he has occasion to mention, Krug merely catalogs Lee's appearance in *The Green Hornet* without the expected follow-up denunciation. Perhaps Krug considers *The Green Hornet* a rare 'authentic' representation from the era, given that the featured martial arts expert was (part) Asian. This kind of theoretical tap dancing foregrounds the relevance of Bowman's critique of the conceptualization of culture 'as the **particular property of a particular group**', an especially problematic position with respect to martial arts practice which begs the question that Bowman pragmatically and pointedly asks: 'Which is the more problematic position: the one that shows **anyone mastering anything** or the one that implies that only ethnic and national specimens can master ethnic and national practices?' [Bowman 2015: 141].

<sup>3</sup> For more elaborate critiques of this tactic in scholarship on action and martial arts movies, see Barrowman [2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2014a].



the American boxer and the Japanese judoka in *Behind the Rising Sun* (1943), or about the sparring session between Humphrey Bogart and Teru Shimada in *Tokyo Joe* (1949), or about Katharine Hepburn's self-defense showcase in *Pat and Mike* (1952).<sup>4</sup> While I grant, of course, that Krug could just claim that these films are exceptions that prove the/his rule, the problem is that this is exactly the kind of argument missing at this crucial point in his discussion, an absence all the more disheartening considering what a laudable achievement this essay is in virtually all other respects.

Krug (or someone sympathetic with Krug's position) may wish to point out that film history was not the primary concern in his essay and that, by pedantically pointing out the existence of films which he failed to include in his timeline, I am missing the point of his argument. Yet, in the interest of productive interdisciplinary scholarship, is this really a valid defense? My suspicion is that such a wet noodle argument – which attempts to rely on disciplinary shielding as soon as criticisms are leveled at such self-proclaimed 'interdisciplinary' arguments – accomplishes nothing other than reducing the notion of interdisciplinarity to a superficial rhetorical gesture. After all, just as approaching the question of how to determine, for example, the sources of the differences between the teaching and practice of Eddie Bravo's 10th Planet Jiu-Jitsu system compared to Gracie Jiu-Jitsu may, depending on the perspective from which the scholar is operating, require a consultation with sociological and cultural studies scholarship in the interest of gleaning salient connections between the different cultural contexts in which each style of jiu-jitsu emerged and is currently taught and practiced,<sup>5</sup> so approaching the question of how to assess the appearances of the martial arts throughout the history of American cinema may require a consultation with film studies scholarship in the interest of gleaning salient connections between representations of the martial arts and different filmmakers and/or filmmaking practices.

In short, if martial arts studies is to rely on interdisciplinary scholarship, then scholars must show respect for and engage substantially with work from relevant disciplines in the interest of producing the most pertinent, accurate, and productive scholarship available on the martial arts. Krug's essay is an important landmark on the path that has led to the present moment in which martial arts studies is poised to open myriad new pathways for scholarship on the martial arts, but just as

important as recognizing the virtues of such pioneering scholarship is recognizing the limitations in order that we may improve upon such heraldic and salutary scholarship.

## SEAN M. TIERNEY THEMES OF WHITENESS

While the problems identified in Krug's essay focused on his treatment of American films from what is known as classical Hollywood cinema, problems with interdisciplinary research on the martial arts in American cinema sadly do not cease with the dissolution of the Hollywood studio system.<sup>6</sup> In a discussion of 'the speed and narrative [re]orientation with which white western martial arts stars emerged' in American cinema following the 'kung fu craze' of the 1970s [Bowman 2010: 24], Bowman offers a consideration of the argument made by Sean M. Tierney in his essay, 'Themes of Whiteness in *Bulletproof Monk*, *Kill Bill*, and *The Last Samurai*' [2006]. While Bowman believes Tierney poses valid questions for future research, he judiciously calls attention to a number of problems in Tierney's analysis which are endemic of additional problems in scholarship on martial arts in American cinema [Bowman 2010: 28-32; 2015: 141].

Tierney begins his essay in a way that recalls Krug's reliance on a simplistic notion of orientalism for the sake of calling into question the validity of American martial arts movies before the discussion has even started. Indeed, the very first line of Tierney's essay states in no uncertain terms that 'the martial arts film originated in Asia' [Tierney 2006: 607]. In a fashion similar to the consideration of the uneasy marriage between history and theory in Krug's essay, I would like to consider the uneasy marriage between criticism and theory in Tierney's essay as a way to highlight another problematic aspect of prior engagements with American cinematic representations of the martial arts.

Following his proclamation about the origins of martial arts cinema, Tierney launches a full-scale assault on the 'strategic rhetoric of whiteness' according to which the 'supraethnic viability of whiteness',

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these films and the implications they present for studies of martial arts cinema, see Barrowman [2015]. I have also attempted to elaborate a principle of aesthetic construction which I have termed **martial suture** on the basis of the action aesthetics in *'G' Men* and *Blood on the Sun* [see Barrowman 2014b].

<sup>5</sup> I am relying for this hypothetical investigation on the exemplary work of Adam D. Frank [2006; 2014], D.S. Farrer [2009; 2011], and Dale C. Spencer [2011; 2013; 2014].

<sup>6</sup> In film studies, classical Hollywood cinema refers to the period of time from the late-1920s/early-1930s (when synchronized sound replaced the practices of silent filmmaking) to the late-1950s (when the fallout from the infamous 1948 Supreme Court case known as the 'Paramount Decree' led to changes in the way films were produced, distributed, and exhibited) when the major Hollywood studios controlled all aspects of the filmmaking process and filmmaking efforts were conducted in accordance with a standardized 'mode of production'. The canonical text on this period in the film studies literature remains *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* [1985] by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, although scholars such as Andrew Britton [1984; 2009 (1989); 2009 (1992)] and Thomas Schatz [1981; 2010 (1988)] among innumerable others have also conducted important investigations into this foundational period.

the 'necessary defeat of Asians', the 'disallowance of anti-White sentiment', and the 'presence of at least one helpful and/or generous Asian cohort' led to the standardization of a distinctly American [a label which is, for Tierney, interchangeable with 'racist'] brand of martial arts cinema in violation of [Tierney's vague conception of] *the* martial arts film [Tierney 2006: 607, my emphases]. Tierney's language throughout his essay indicates a hostile and adversarial position taken up against American martial arts films, as evidenced by his choice of words in such claims as how he is using his chosen theoretical framework to *expose* the *strategic* rhetoric of whiteness in American martial arts films and how his framework allows for the *deconstruction* of that rhetoric [Tierney 2006: 608]. He even goes so far as to place quotation marks around 'martial arts' when he describes Chuck Norris, Jean-Claude Van Damme, and Steven Seagal as "martial arts" stars' [Tierney 2006: 607]. And the conclusion to his broadside features the expected, inevitable anti-orientalist condemnation about how 'it is especially troubling, in light of the original, indigenous function of the martial arts film as an outlet for nationalistic expression ... that the ascension of the White martial artist to mastery is so deeply resonant with a colonialist framework' [Tierney 2006: 622].

It bears mentioning that none of the themes adduced by Tierney as damning evidence of the 'inherent arrogance' [618] of American martial arts films, neither individually nor taken together, are capable of guaranteeing a priori a racist film. As Yvonne Tasker perspicaciously observed, if all action and martial arts movies look the same to scholars, then they 'may well be viewing them through an inappropriate framework' [Tasker 1993: 60]. In Tierney's case, his framework entraps him within a 'finalistic vortex' where, as described by Tzvetan Todorov, 'it is foreknowledge of the meaning to be discovered that guides the interpretation' [Todorov 1982: 254]. Indeed, railing against American cinema with an essentialist axe to grind, what Tierney misses in his crusade is what Cavell, with his characteristic equipoise, registered as the impossibility of such essentialist denunciations inasmuch as the 'possibilities of variation and inflection' in the 'automatisms' of American cinema can either be 'its stupidities or its glories' depending on the specific film at hand [Cavell 1979 (1971): 186].<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Space does not permit a full exegesis of Cavell's rather unwieldy notion of 'automatism', but for a brief explication, Cavell uses this term to describe anything in our experience of watching films that seems to be happening of/by itself; as he explains, 'in calling [aspects of films] automatisms, I do not mean that they automatically ensure [either an artistic success or failure] but that in mastering a tradition one masters a range of automatisms upon which the tradition maintains itself, and in deploying them, one's work is assured of a place in that tradition' [Cavell 1979 (1971): 104]. The most important insight of Cavell's with respect to automatisms is that, while automatisms contribute to how we understand and the way we experience films, they are not inviolable. Indeed, the magic of the cinema for Cavell is the ability of filmmakers to innovate within traditions, to give 'new wrinkles to old formats' [Cavell 1979 (1971): 69]; as he postulates, 'one might say that the [filmmaker's] task is ... the task of establishing a new automatism ... it follows that, in such a predicament, [automatisms] are not given a priori' [Cavell 1979 (1971): 103-104]. For more thorough articulations of the concept of automatism, see Stanley Cavell [1979 (1971)], William Rothman and Marian Keane [2000], D.N. Rodowick [2007; 2015], Lisa Trahair [2015], and Daniel Morgan [2015].

In the interest of applying pressure to Tierney's claims regarding American martial arts films, I would like to work through the four themes identified by Tierney and the claims he makes regarding the way they allegedly function. The first theme Tierney discusses is the supraethnic viability of whiteness. He begins his examination of this theme's presence in American martial arts films by stating that, 'for white martial artists in American film, ethnicity is not preventative of mastery; there is nothing ethnically salient or even incongruous about a White person learning and mastering Asian martial arts, often with great speed' [Tierney 2006: 610].

It does not take very much effort to detect Tierney's incredulity and disapproval, yet I am hard-pressed to understand why this is so unfathomable for him (especially if one takes to heart Bruce Lee's emphatic assertion that 'a martial artist is a human being first [and] just as nationalities have nothing to do with one's humanity, so they have nothing to do with martial arts' [Lee 2011 {1971}]). After all, to not only expect but demand that every person with white skin necessarily stink at martial arts goes beyond being merely illogical to being racist, while evidence beyond the fictional worlds of the films under consideration – such as Chuck Norris' documented track record in martial arts competition, the fact that the first champion of the famed Japanese Mixed Martial Arts [MMA] organization Pancrase was the white American wrestler Ken Shamrock, or the fact that Matt Damon went into the *Bourne* trilogy not knowing martial arts yet was able to pick up the necessary skills he was taught by Jeff Imada with great speed and efficiency – should have been able to assuage his fears of imperialist intentions.

Moreover, Tierney's belief that American martial arts films put forth 'specific ideological constructs of whiteness' [Tierney 2006: 607, my emphasis] would seem to require careful criticism of films according to the terms of the specific narratives. Yet his operating procedure indicates instead a preference for what Robin Wood once referred to as 'plausible falsification' [Wood 2006 (1976): 238-245], a critical shortcut characterized by Andrew Britton [following Wood] as betraying 'a tension between what [a film] is saying and what, from a certain perspective, [it] can be *maneuvered into saying*' [Britton 2009 (1979): 418, my emphasis]. We can take, as an initial example of plausible falsification, Tierney's discussion of *The Matrix* (1999). Tierney is aghast at the 'speed, efficacy, and unorthodox yet highly efficient means' [Tierney 2006: 611] by which white protagonists become proficient in the martial arts. However, I find it strange that he does not find it pertinent – neither in his discussion of *The Matrix* nor in his supplementary discussion of *The Fifth Element* (1997) – to point out that there is a significant difference between average white spectators of such films (allegedly being brainwashed with regards to their inalienable

omnipotence) and the very special (technologically special in the case of *The Matrix* and biologically special in the case of *The Fifth Element*) white protagonists of the films in question.

In *The Matrix*, the fact that Neo (Keanu Reeves) is able to become such an exceptional martial artist so quickly is precisely what is being highlighted in the narrative as explicitly unbelievable, as indisputable proof of Neo's exceptional status as 'the one'. If Neo's ability to so quickly become so proficient was as insidiously normal(ized) as Tierney's thesis needs it to be, then the sequence where all of the other characters excitedly huddle around the computer screen to see if Neo can beat Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) – who, it bears mentioning, Tierney for some reason (because he is black?) has no problem with despite his non-Asian and technologically-enhanced proficiency in the martial arts – in the training simulation would not have had the dramaturgical weight it so memorably possesses. The same is true for *The Fifth Element*. The fact that Leeloo (Milla Jovovich), referred to in the film as the 'supreme being', is able to become an unbeatable fighting machine 'in the time it takes her to do a comical imitation of Bruce Lee' [Tierney 2006: 611] is an indication not of how normal this phenomenon is but exactly that it and she are exemplary.

Believing he has sufficiently explicated the pertinence of the first theme of whiteness, Tierney moves on to the second theme and claims that, along with the first theme of whiteness/non-Asianness *not* being an obstacle to martial arts proficiency for the protagonist, the Asianness/non-whiteness of the antagonist is 'a salient and *necessary* element in establishing White mastery' [Tierney 2006: 613, my emphasis]. While there are a number of films which indulge the orientalist idea that Asians have a claim to martial arts mastery and therefore an Asian antagonist must be defeated to secure expert status for the white protagonist, Tierney's interrogation is problematic on two fronts. First, Tierney tries to both have his cake and eat it. On the one hand, his explication of the first theme of whiteness denounces the very idea of a white person being able to become proficient in the martial arts with any kind of speed or efficiency – and certainly not with greater speed or efficiency than an Asian character. Yet his explication of the second theme of whiteness includes a chastisement of American filmmakers for pandering to the orientalist fantasy of Asian mastery on which the first theme relies for whatever perceived sting Tierney believes it possesses.

Second, even if Tierney still wanted to persevere with such a flimsy argument, he should have been dissuaded by the enormous amount of American martial arts films that would have to be excluded. A short list of American films requiring exclusion for not featuring a white protagonist's 'necessary' defeat of an Asian antagonist would include the early Chuck Norris films *Breaker! Breaker!* (1977), *A Force of One*

(1979), and *Lone Wolf McQuade* (1983), the three of which are merely choice examples; nearly every Steven Seagal movie, from *Above the Law* (1988) and *Marked for Death* (1990) through *The Glimmer Man* (1996) and *Fire Down Below* (1997) up to *Born to Raise Hell* (2010) and *Maximum Conviction* (2012) among many others; lesser-known and lower-budget films such as *Bloodmoon* (1997) and *Champions* (1998); and the many recent MMA movies including but not limited to *Never Back Down* (2008), *Fighting* (2009), *Warrior* (2011), and *Here Comes the Boom* (2012).

Finally, the third and fourth themes deal with the frequency with which Asians in American martial arts movies either resent white martial artists or help them. Beyond the banality of this binary, the implications of these positions for Asian characters are not as convincing as Tierney seems to believe [and, as one may begin to be expecting, they often contradict other claims made by Tierney earlier in his argument]. For example, Tierney is annoyed by how often Asian characters are shown to be hostile to The Bride (Uma Thurman) in Quentin Tarantino's epic revenge saga, *Kill Bill* (2003/2004), yet their annoyance is the exact same annoyance with which Tierney tries to bolster his first theme of the supraethnic viability of whiteness. How can his position against the arrogance of white people being depicted as better martial artists than their Asian counterparts be noble in the first theme but an indication of pernicious racism in the third theme?

In opposition to the critical relationship with American martial arts films preferred by Tierney – viz. presuming to know beforehand what the films will reveal (that all American martial arts films are racist, orientalist garbage) and then proceeding to force the films to show exactly what had been presumed through plausible falsification – a film, as Britton has strenuously and convincingly argued, 'is not something simply available to be constituted at will by the discourse of criticism but a historical object to which criticism aspires to be adequate' [Britton 2009 (1989): 435]. Speaking in a similar register of critical adequacy, Gunning has mandated that scholars interested in film history must not only watch and document the existence of films but 'must also *respond* to them, uncovering the questions they address [Gunning 1991: 289, my emphasis]. My emphasis on Gunning's sense of *responding* to films rather than *deconstructing* them is an effort not to repudiate poststructuralism *tout court* but rather to apply pressure to some of the typical overextensions of the positions on textuality espoused by the likes of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida of which Tierney may be considered representative. Contrary to Tierney's mode of (pseudo-)deconstruction, I would like to underline the commonsensical contention that, inasmuch as 'the desire to avoid (quite rightly) any simple subject/object relation (the myth of "presence") is perpetually in danger of denying the object altogether', then, 'unless we prefer doodling to reading ... we must be concerned with "the integrity of the

text” since, ‘Barthes to the contrary ... *the text always precedes the reader*’ [Britton 2009 [1979]: 425, my emphasis].

For his part, Derrida stated in no uncertain terms that, ‘in asking if [an] interpretation [of a text, filmic or otherwise] is justifiable, [we are] therefore asking about two things’:

(A) Have we fully understood the sign itself, in itself? In other words, has what [the author of the text] said and meant been clearly perceived? This comprehension of the sign in and of itself, in its immediate materiality as a sign ... is only the first moment *but also the indispensable condition of all hermeneutics* ... when one attempts, in a general way, to pass from an obvious to a latent language, *one must first be rigorously sure of the obvious meaning*. The analyst, for example, must first speak the same language as the patient. (B) Second implication of the first question: once understood as a sign, does [the author’s intention] have with the total historical structure to which it is to be related the relationship assigned to it? [Derrida 1978 (1964): 32-33, my emphases].

Here, the distance between what Tierney is doing in the name of deconstruction and what Derrida actually advocates could not be greater. In a spirit decidedly more Derridean than Tierney’s self-proclaimed deconstruction, Britton emphasizes the importance in analyzing films of posing such critical questions as, ‘What do its makers think of [the film] as being? What do they want [the film] to do? What is the significance of their wanting [the film] to do this?’ He goes on to say that, in the interest of producing an adequate critical account of a film, one must then proceed to an account of what that film *does*, ‘which may well be very different from anything grasped by its project’. Most interesting in Britton’s discussion of critical method is the claim, all-too-frequently disavowed by scholars, that *all* discussions of films are ‘already implicitly evaluative’ insofar as every scholar ‘writes from a point of view, one which ought to be as conscious and as explicit as possible’ [Britton 2009 (1989): 435].

The Derridean position from which Britton argues a critical account of a film must take place – one which considers each individual film ‘an intervention in a culture’ the nature of which it is one of criticism’s aims to understand and explicate and the value and significance of which it is another one of criticism’s aims to determine [Britton 2009 (1989): 435] – is, as posited by Derrida, merely the first step on the road to providing a critical account of that film. What makes the scholarship on the American legacy in martial arts cinema so remarkable, however, is the inability of most scholars to take even this first preliminary step, preferring instead to deny *by definition* the possibility of positive,

productive, and progressive representations of the martial arts (and, by extension, non-American cultural identities/practices) in American cinema. Such posturing is both anathema to rigorous historical scholarship and stifling to progressive political theory, and an important step for martial arts studies on this front will be to develop from these earlier efforts to find a way to produce responsible interdisciplinary scholarship on the martial arts between and beyond American cinema and culture.

## POSTSCRIPT ARTFUL CONVERSATION AND THE VALUE OF CRITICISM

Having discussed the work of Krug and Tierney at length, I would like to pick up the discussion of critical method with which I ended the previous section. In particular, I would like to consider in greater detail the centrality of film criticism in academic scholarship on the cinema. Criticism is an unavoidable aspect of writing about film in any academic context, yet most scholars proceed as if what they are doing has nothing whatsoever to do with criticism, as if their assertions are value-free and as if establishing and expounding on their relationships with film(s) is irrelevant to ‘proper’ scholarship. In response to this rather strange view of academic film writing, William Rothman once decried:

**Too many academic film critics today deny their experience ... [of films and] refuse to allow themselves to take instruction from them. Predictably, the resulting criticism reaffirms an attitude of superiority to the films ... such criticism furthers rather than undoes the repression of these films and the ideas they represent ... we [as scholars] cannot play our part in reviving the spirit of the films we love without testifying, in our criticism, to the truth of our experience of those films.** [Rothman 1986: 46]

The scholars discussed in this review essay foregrounded some of the problems stemming from this mode of ‘criticism-free’ scholarship, and the point of putting pressure on scholars’ readings of films is to consider the modes of ‘artful conversation’ [Rodowick 2015] most conducive to insightful criticism. Inspired by Cavell’s long engagement with philosophy and film, the seed for what Rodowick has termed artful conversation was planted in one of Cavell’s most lucid and spirited arguments on critical method:

**The philosopher appealing to [artful conversation] turns to [his interlocutor] not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something against himself.**

He is saying: Look and find out whether you can see what I see, wish to say what I wish to say ... [the] implication is that [artful conversation], like art, is, and should be, powerless to *prove* its relevance; and that says something about the kind of relevance it wishes to have. All the philosopher, this kind of philosopher, can do is to express, as fully as he can, his world, and attract our undivided attention to our own.  
[Cavell 2002 [1965]: 95-96]

Taking the baton from Cavell on the honest expression of one's relationship to films, Rodowick argues that 'the pursuit of knowledge, in whatever context or through whichever method, unavoidably involves interpretive activities', and he therefore endeavors to 'restore the maligned concept of interpretation as a central aspect of human and intentional activity', included among which, of course, is scholarly activity [Rodowick 2015: 77]. Far too many scholars disavow criticism as unmitigated subjectivism, if not complete irrationality, with no place in 'proper' academic discourse. Rodowick, however, frames artful conversation as our wanting to ask for universal assent in expressing our opinions while being willing to settle for 'arriving at and better understanding mutually held contexts' [Rodowick 2015: 194] and he postulates that, rather than demonstrating a *lack* of rationality, artful conversation more radically provides a different picture of rationality [Rodowick 2015: 192]. In effect, the inherent paradoxicality of artful conversation showcases a capacity for disagreement which 'is also the capacity for conversation and sociability', indeed, for community [Rodowick 2015: 193].

By embracing artful conversation and the value of being disagreeable, martial arts studies can create a community of scholars *working with* films as opposed to *making use of* films, a change in register which has the potential to allow the *art* of film to be acknowledged rather than sacrificed in the interest of 'deconstructing' evil imperialist American movies. As well, the emphasis on criticism is not a surreptitious effort to arrive at a 'scientific' model of interpretation where competing interpretations are stamped out for all-time and the 'one true meaning' of a film is discovered. Instead, following Cavell, we must avoid allowing the realization of the constitutive dissonance of critical discourse to lead to extremes of relativistic dilettantism on the one hand or the anarchy of infinite polysemy on the other, and proceed instead towards the completion of our own unique interpretations of the films that mean the most to us, the films that have the most to say to us and that we believe have important things to say to others. As Cavell explains, the completion of an interpretation 'is not a matter of providing *all* interpretations but a matter of seeing one of them *through*' [Cavell 1981: 37]. The benefit of this is the way it 'leaves open to investigation what the relations are' between a film, an interpretation of a film, and competing interpretations of a film [Cavell 1981: 38].

I will end on this optimistic note of imagining scholarship on the cinema becoming 'a diagnosis of values' [Rodowick 2015: 95] where 'learning to value is a question of adding to one's cognitive stock, amplifying one's perceptual sensitivity and openness to new experience, acquiring new frameworks or contexts for judgment, and developing the potential for imaginatively applying or creating concepts' [Rodowick 2015: 103]. In response to her fear of the 'academic idea' that 'every film can be usefully "read" for its performance of social issues', Meaghan Morris sought to call attention to the double-edged sword of interdisciplinary cultural studies of the cinema with their potential to be 'creative' but also 'blinkered and narrow' [Morris 2001: 184]. Rather than reducing films to cultural commodities emptied of the human inspiration that elevates them to the status of art and resorting to an 'armchair way of seeing or not-seeing films which first views them as evidence of some social or political mess [and] then treats them as guilty stand-ins for that mess – and wages a war of attitude on other viewers' [Morris 2001: 171], artful conversation entails a constant process of critique of the various concepts one uses as well as the various perspectives from which one seeks to use those concepts in the hopes of cultivating an imaginative capacity to see in different cinematic practices [such as the history of American cinema] not a single [orientalist] essence but multiple, fractured histories all of which have myriad insights to offer those capable of hearing and willing to listen to what they have to say.

Following Krug, I am inspired to say that American cinema is not a thing. Like karate, American cinema has always been 'an evolving set of practices'. Moreover, it has always been 'actively evolving in many directions and idiolects or styles' [Krug 2001: 396]. Upon realizing that the 'history' of 'martial arts cinema' with which martial arts studies has been saddled is merely one exceedingly problematic and largely uninformed timeline, claims like Krug's about the 'politically and morally suspect' American cinema or Tierney's regarding *the* 'origins' of *the* martial arts film will become what, in all honesty, they have always been – wrong – and martial arts studies will find itself in a position to do something quite extraordinary: make history.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For providing good-humored encouragement and diligent feedback throughout the writing process, I would like to thank Paul Bowman, Benjamin Judkins, and Hiu M. Chan.



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# BOOK REVIEW

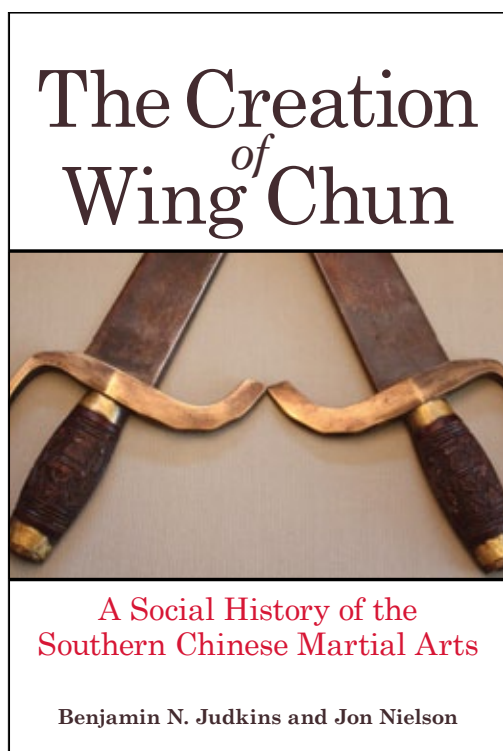
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## The Creation of Wing Chun: A Social History of the Southern Chinese Martial Arts

Benjamin N. Judkins and Jon Nielson

State University of New York Press, 2015

364 pages      \$90 /£59.29



Written under imperial sponsorship, traditional Chinese historiography was propagandistic and didactic: the relationship between knowledge and power was not ambiguous, and historians sought to establish dynastic legitimacy and judge the past as a 'mirror' for posterity, as in the saying: 'The overturned cart ahead of us should serve as a warning'. Benjamin Judkins and Jon Nielson, too, are concerned with the question of legitimacy, but in this case, it is the legitimacy of martial arts studies. Martial arts was scorned by traditional Chinese literati, ignored by Western historians, and predicted to go extinct by Western and Chinese modernizers. However, as this book brilliantly demonstrates, late imperial and twentieth century Chinese history cannot be properly understood without it. So if it is true that the world needs a book like this, it is equally true that the author needed to write it. Books happen because of perceived gaps or falsehoods in the historical record: sins of omission and sins of commission. Most exercises in historical deconstruction, however, target hostile ideologies – sexism, racism, homophobia – but Judkins' deconstruction of wing chun is an act of love, as he simultaneously deconstructs myth and reconstructs history. To a hammer, everything looks like a nail, and to a historian everything looks like a product of the past. However, going beyond the 'great man' theory of history, the social scientist in him weaves a tight fabric of the cultural, economic, political and social strands that go into the creation of wing chun.

As a student of the martial arts in both the practical and academic sense, it appears that Judkins and Nielson have turned a personal obsession into a professional specialization, doing for martial arts what women have done for women's studies, Blacks for African-American studies, or gays for queer studies. Martial arts scholars have been given permission by social scientists and arts critics to take popular culture seriously and emboldened by anthropologists and cultural theorists to come out of the closet as observer-participants and revel in embodied knowledge. Since martial arts schools often become a home-away-from-home and intentional family, we might see this as a work of genealogy – the adopted child seeking its biological parents. Thus, we can say that the writer is in the mold of participant-observer, not, however, in the anthropological sense of immersing himself in the lives of his informants, but rather relying on the written and visual record. He approaches his task loaded for bear, with the ultimate collection of primary and secondary sources and an unprecedented set of scholarly skills in both research methods and theory.

So now that you know this book is a labor of love, the next question becomes what is it about? Judkins and Nielson are equal parts sleuth and storyteller: the sleuth collects evidence and separates fact from fiction, and the storyteller assembles the facts in a cogent and compelling account of what really happened. Starting with the assumption that all human creations are culturally constructed, they say 'Wing Chun is a "social

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## REVIEWER

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## DOI

10.18573/j.2015.10021

construction” just as much as it is a compilation of forms and techniques’, adding that he sees it in the context of ‘globalization, economic development, and identity construction’. This may be but the latest stage in the demystification process that started with the May Fourth New Culture Movement, peaked with Mao’s Cultural Revolution, and now in the hands of skeptical Western scholars, is subjected to postmodern, postcolonial, and poststructuralist analysis. For early Chinese scholars, historicizing the martial arts was a struggle for the soul of China and for its survival in the modern world, a way of preserving Chinese ‘essence’ while strengthening the nation. May Fourth reformers saw myth and superstition through the binary of feudal and modern, Marxists saw it as ruling class and proletariat, and postmodern historians see myth as a kind of ideology, or ‘knowledge’, that reinforces power.

Judkins and Nielson attack myth on a least three levels. First, they explode myths of creation, then the notion that styles are fixed and stable entities, and finally the idea that there is a ‘unified field’, or meta-narrative of Chinese martial arts that has always existed and is teleologically destined to evolve into the current state-sponsored, standardized forms. Judkins and Nielson view myth with a combination of clinical detachment and fascination. Their discovery of identical creation stories in many martial arts is more proof of plagiarism than confirmation of Jungian ‘collective unconscious’. Perhaps, too, their sympathies allow them to ‘explode’ myth gently and with a Jamesian recognition of its pragmatic psychological value. In the authors’ hands, then, myth making becomes a part of history.

Now that Judkins and Nielson have historicized the origins of wing chun, does that mean that imagination plays no role in martial arts? Has science eliminated religion; have documentaries eliminated Hollywood? Martial arts and myth are inextricably entwined in the psyche of the practitioner – warrior dreams and the hero archetype will survive. Judkins and Nielson are passionate about the power of the social sciences to unpack what really happened, and they deliver the most holographic account of the rise of any martial art to date. In the process he clinches the argument that fact really is more fascinating than fiction. The world is not more boring because of Copernicus and Darwin.

Actually, deconstructing the myth of wing chun’s creation is child’s play: the burning of the Southern Shaolin Temple did not happen, and the characters in the story did not exist. Media, of course, is the new mythopoetic machine, and he acknowledges the role of Bruce Lee and Ip Man films in burnishing the wing chun brand for today. If the myth of misty mountains, monks and nuns must go, so too the apocrypha of righteous rebels and Red Boat opera singers. What’s left are real world influences, such as Choy Li Fut for its popularization and institutionalization of a southern martial art, the Jingwu Association and Guoshu Academies for adopting Western scientific terminology and promotional paradigms, and craft guilds for providing the model of organizational structure. Tracing the chameleon we know as wing chun, he shows how it adapted to different environments: Foshan, Hong Kong, and the global marketplace; different eras: empire, Republic, People’s Republic, and colony; and different classes: gentry, bourgeoisie, working class, doctors, militia, bodyguards, police, delinquents, gangsters, and ultimately non-Chinese.

The book’s language and underlying logic derive from contradictions inherent in twentieth-century China: traditional and modern, central and local, northern and southern, private and public, urban and rural, revolutionary and conservative, Chinese and foreign, working class and literati, Communist and Nationalist. The author uses traditional structuring devices, chronology and geography, as reflected in the book’s two parts, ‘Hand Combat, Identity, and Civil Society in Guangdong, 1800-1949’ and ‘Conflict, Imperialism, and Modernization: The Evolution of Wing Chun Kung Fu, 1900-1972’. These are the Genesis and Exodus of wing chun.

To whom will this book appeal? Martial arts scholarship always aspires to satisfy two readerships: scholars and practitioners. Among practitioners, there are monostylists and polystylists; among scholars, there are martial

arts studies specialists, social scientists and historians. Fellow scholars are soft targets. The subject matter may be unfamiliar, but the scholarly methods will be instantly recognizable and highly impressive; practitioners are another matter. Certainly they will be disappointed if they were expecting a how-to book, but will they appreciate learning the 'truth' about the background of their art? All of this deconstruction, demythologizing, and destabilizing may be unsettling to the neophyte practitioner, for whom wing chun is that thing s/he associates with one teacher, one class, one set of routines, and one version of origins. If we use the analogy of a chess game, the Sinologist will know the board, the pieces, and the rules of the game. For the lay practitioner, everything that the Sinologist takes for granted will be new, making for a very steep learning curve. Having said this, however, Judkins accomplishes his scholarly tasks in an engaging and accessible style, without a hint of what Chomsky calls the 'polysyllabic truisms', 'gibberish', and 'pretentious rhetoric' that plague so much of contemporary scholarship. Judkins' scholarly tools are razor sharp, but he has no axes to grind, and he shares his discoveries with an enthusiasm matched only by his erudition. He is not a 'preservationist' and does not romanticize or essentialize his Chinese subjects. The central question may come down to whether historians are more open-minded about learning history through martial arts, or whether martial artists are more open-minded about using history to gain insight into their art? In truth, scholars will see a masterful treatment of a colorful historical phenomenon, and unsuspecting practitioners will find themselves breathlessly swept up into the rarified atmosphere of social science theory.

What is the book's contribution? Paul Bowman's *Martial Arts Studies* laid to rest any doubts about the legitimacy of martial arts studies as a discipline, and Judkins and Nielson's *The Creation of Wing Chun* is the first major monograph to exploit that opening and resoundingly demonstrate that first-rate scholars need have no fear of putting their reputations at risk. Second, this work is the last nail in the coffin of formulaic accounts of martial arts lineages that splice a string of fictional and historical figures onto a mythic progenitor. In sum, wing chun students will see the most definitive exposition of the roots of their art, historians will see twentieth-century China through a new lens, and martial arts studies scholars will see a high water mark and model in their field.

Every good book attempts to answer some old questions and provoke some new ones. Social construction approaches to history always beg the question of cultural comparison. Judkins has skillfully unpacked the role of the mythic imagination in the construction of wing chun through fiction, folklore, and film. Asian myths of origin have often enjoyed a second life in their adopted Western homes, but they play differently to different audiences: to Chinese they speak to national essence; to Westerners they evoke exoticism. This is what the Chinese call, 'same bed; different dreams'. The themes of national salvation and regional identity may not be relevant to Western audiences, but somatic spirituality and self-defense survival skills have had universal appeal. As for identity formation, and particularly the role of martial arts in the construction of masculinity, these are features shared by both Chinese and Western practitioners of wing chun and other martial arts; however, wing chun's role in the construction of Cantonese identity cannot be nationalized, let alone globalized. Or can it? Can Marcel Mauss' 'techniques of the body', a theory developed from his observation that French youth had adopted a manner of walking from watching American films, help us explain the acquisition of foreign body language? Is wing chun then a kind of embodied *chinoiserie*? The multivalence of the martial arts as they evolved in China – preservationist and progressive, fundamentalist and reformist – ultimately allowed them to shape shift in adapting to the global environment. Another question is the assumption that in the process of globalization, it is the body mechanics that remain stable, while the mythology and social meaning are more malleable. Can we also assume variability in the mind's eye of the practitioner as they conjure different culturally specific adversaries during training? Did past Chinese practitioners conjure bandits, clan rivals, and colonialists, while their contemporary Western counterparts imagine schoolyard bullies, barroom brawlers, muggers, and rapists? Have Asian martial arts become so naturalized, like tea or ballet, that we forget their foreign origins? Are non-Asians participating in Asian martial arts perceived by Asians as global consumers or perpetrators of yellowface? These are all questions that Judkins and Nielson's provocative work raises and which clearly warrant further study.



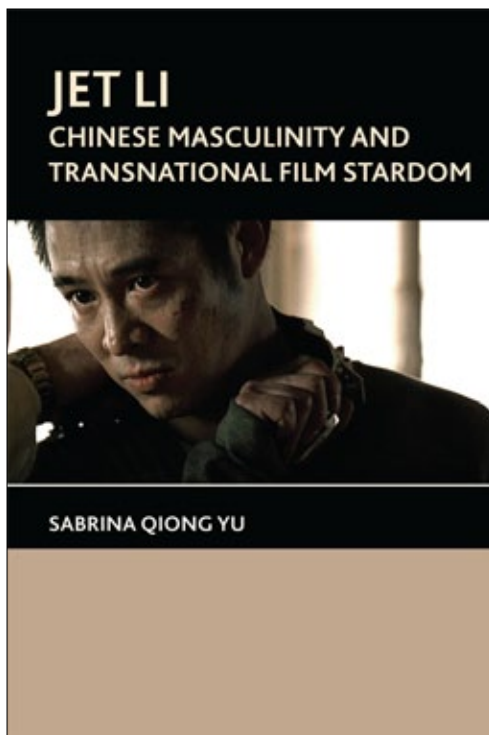
# BOOK REVIEW

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## Jet Li: Chinese Masculinity and Transnational Film Stardom

Sabrina Yu

Edinburgh University Press, 2015  
224 pages      \$34.95 /£19.99



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## REVIEWER

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## DOI

10.18573/j.2015.10022

Chinese audiences may find it difficult to accept Jet Li's latest characterisation in Sylvester Stallone's *The Expendables 3* (2014). At the end of the film, Arnold Schwarzenegger cuddles up to Li, and the final glimpse of these two characters is of them nuzzling into each other. This scene strongly suggests (as has been confirmed by the director) a homosexual relationship – something rarely portrayed by such protagonists in the hardcore action genre. Embodying his name in the film (*Yin Yang*), Li's diverse, often conflicting transnational star image – involving a constant oscillation between masculinity and femininity, hero and villain, and even national and transnational – is a central motif of Sabrina Yu's multifaceted examination of Li's complicated star text, *Jet Li: Chinese Masculinity and Transnational Film Stardom*. Yu argues that Li's gender transgressive screen persona started two decades earlier, in *Swordsman II* (1992), a film in which he allows himself to be emotionally attached to Asia the Invincible, a transsexual man. The transnational career of Asian stars (especially male stars) can be encapsulated in a famous line uttered by the transsexual character – 'mutilate your genitals before learning the invincible martial arts'. This is a line that reveals the politics and dynamics of transnational kung fu stardom. It is no coincidence that the ascending path to transnational success resembles the painful process of acquiring the invincibility via kung fu, which requires sacrifice and denial not only in terms of personal star image but also of national pride and cultural specificity.

Of course, Li is not the first transnational star to play out such a dramatic narrative, and Yu is not the first to explore such issues. Stephen Teo [1997, 2009] found traces of similar culture-crossing characterizations in his pioneering bicultural readings of the films of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. David Bordwell [2000], meanwhile, goes beyond individual characterizations and offers a formalist analysis of the traditions of martial arts aesthetics that foregrounds East Asian theatre traditions as well as American and Soviet filmmaking traditions. Finally, Leon Hunt [2003] crosses myriad boundaries from (among others) Asia to America, literature to theatre, theatre to film, film to gaming, and analogue to digital.

Yu's book continues the legacy of ambitious contemporary martial arts cinema scholarship by focusing on the increasing transnational presence of Chinese kung fu stars and their shifting meanings in various cultural contexts. In retrospect, Gina Marchetti [1993] provided a solid framework for studies of Asian stars in Hollywood. In the late 1990s, Stephen Teo [1997], Mark Gallagher [1997], and Yvonne Tasker [1997] scrutinized the context of transnational kung fu stardom and interrogated the crossover images of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan in their Hollywood adventures. Since the handover, film scholars such as David Desser [2005] and Kenneth Chan [2009] have noticed the gradual exportation of Hong Kong film talents and have explored the increased

Chinese presence in Hollywood. Through the cultivation of a ‘cosmopolitical awareness’, Hong Kong martial arts stars and filmmakers have transcended boundaries demarcated by disparate film industries and achieved transnational success [Szeto 2011: 18].

There have been ample studies of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan’s representations of masculinity, which focus on the hyper-masculine kung fu body, physical risk, etc. [Witterstaetter 1997; Hunt 1999, 2004; Yau 2001; Louie 2002; Morris, Lu, and Chan 2005; Gallagher 2006; West 2006; Donovan 2008; Farquhar and Zhang 2010]. Yet, despite his transnational success and global fandom, Jet Li rarely receives such scrutiny – perhaps due to his ambiguous negotiation of Chinese masculinity on Western screens.

The martial arts bodies of Lee and Chan respectively embody the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ ends of the masculine spectrum [Tasker 1997; Shu 2003; Lo 2004]. Li, however, seems less keen on either showcasing his body or on allowing comedic elements to dominate his action. Yu attempts to account for Li’s unique negotiation of masculinity by introducing a Chinese paradigm according to which theatrical and literary traditions play an indispensable part in the interpretation of Chinese masculinity and the *wuxia* ethos (*xia*). She argues that one of the most interesting aspects of Li’s persona is his flexibility, not only in terms of physical mobility across film industries but also his versatility in performing diverse, often conflicting roles, along with his willingness to engage with special effects and his emphasis on maintaining an ordinary and low-key off-screen persona.

While current studies of martial arts cinema primarily revolve around key questions such as action aesthetics and genre conventions [Bordwell 2000; Barrowman 2014], links with philosophy and cultural theory [Bowman 2010, 2013], and ideological or allegorical readings [Teo 1997; Sek 1997; Stokes and Hoover 1999; Sarkar 2001], Yu takes a detour and explores the transnational or transcultural meanings of some of the most important motifs in the martial arts genre – such as authenticity, masculinity, and the *wuxia* ethos. From her meticulous empirical studies of audience reception across races, social classes, and platforms, she contends that discrepancy (and similarity) in judgment may exist between critical discourses and ‘real’ audiences.

Given the inspiring quotes drawn from personal interviews and online fan sites such as *The Internet Movie Database* (IMDb), readers may be surprised to discover that fandom consists of much more than a homogenized mass of somnambulistic viewers incapable of individualized and culture-specific thinking. While acknowledging different critical perspectives, fans also adopt a ‘holistic’ perspective, showing more sympathy and sometimes even offering insightful ideas with the potential to reinvent the genre. In other words, Yu carries on the legacy of empirical research in the studies of stardom and fandom, and asserts that the ‘assumed spectator’ favoured by Western scholars may not be the best critical perspective. This is especially so considering the fact that academic discourses on stardom are gradually being ‘decentred’ (from Hollywood), disrupted by peripheral stars (Asian) and genres (martial arts), and metamorphosed by the Internet [Yu 2012: 182–183].

The first four chapters of Yu’s text focus on the solid construction of Li’s star persona as a *wuxia* hero by Chinese and Hong Kong critics and viewers, while the last four explore Li’s diverse crossover images and transcultural receptions by global audiences. It is worth noting that Yu’s reading of Li’s films is highly selective, as she chooses to analyse films that best exemplify the conflicting views characterised by transcultural readings of kung fu film stardom. For example, *Once Upon a Time in China* [1991], *Swordsman II*, and *Fong Sai-yuk* [1993] embody what she calls the ‘new *wuxia* cinema’ [Yu 2012: 33], in which traditional kung fu heroes are reinvented and deconstructed by rapid technological advancement, proliferating views on gender transgression, and the diminishment of patriarchy in specific social, historical, and filmic contexts.

Meanwhile, *Lethal Weapon 4* [1998], *Romeo Must Die* [2000], *Kiss of the Dragon* [2001], *The One* [2001], *Cradle 2 The Grave* [2003], and *Unleashed* [2005] delineate orientalist constructions of Li as killer/villain/child, the asexualisation of Asian men in Hollywood, and a desinicisation of national sentiments. To highlight the similarity and difference between critical discourses and fandom, Yu incorporates in each chapter insightful comments from a variety of platforms and offers a more accurate, comprehensive picture of transnational stardom.

Hong Kong Cinema in the 1990s is probably one of the most frustrating yet intriguing eras in the industry's history. Overshadowed by the Tiananmen incident in 1989 and the imminent handover in 1997, critics tend to engage in ideological readings of film texts produced in that period [Yu 2012: 36]. Thankfully, in Chapter 1, Yu takes a different route and explores two equally important issues in the same period – the declining popularity of martial arts cinema and its possible reinvention through the new wuxia cycle. Focusing on three distinct portrayals of the wuxia heroes in that period – the parodied, the technologized, and the castrated – she contends that the new wuxia film cycle in the 1990s provides the foundation for Li's later transnational career.

The first thing that drew my attention was Yu's definition of key terms. Wuxia is used to encompass both kung fu and Chinese martial arts films. Categorisation has always been a huge issue in studies of martial arts cinema, as different terms signify the specificity and diversity of martial arts traditions. While the majority of scholars (e.g. Teo, Bordwell, and Hunt) consider wuxia, alongside kung fu, to be a sub-genre of Chinese martial arts films, Yu uses it to represent the whole genre. This is probably because her argument prioritises performativity over authenticity – hence her stress on the amplification of the wuxia imagination through acting performances and technological mediation in martial arts cinema [Yu 2012: 53].

Despite the issues around definitions, Yu successfully links Stephen Chow's ambivalence and instability, the increasing exhaustion with traditional heroic images in the genre, and the popularity and reinvention of wuxia films in the 1990s [Yu 2012: 38]. Together with a higher tolerance for gender transgression demonstrated in filmic and social contexts, not only could Chow's schizophrenic pastiche subvert the heterosexual, sometimes misogynistic genre, it also paved the way for Li's diverse interpretations of wuxia heroes and prepared him for more radical transformations in his later transnational career.

In what follows, I will focus on three key issues that Yu discusses in relation to current scholarship in martial arts cinema: performance versus authenticity, Chinese masculinity, and the wuxia ethos.

## MORE THAN A FIGHTING MACHINE: MARTIAL ARTS [AS] PERFORMANCE

A recurring question is whether kung fu stars can act. Considering kung fu performance to be a body genre and visual spectacle, English-language critical discourses have tended to put martial arts fighting and acting into an antagonistic relationship. In addition, instead of an acknowledgment of a kung fu star's acting skills, emphasis tends to have been put on the matter of authenticity. To address this complex issue, Yu formulates her argument on two levels: first, martial arts is part of acting/performance; and second, the acting/performance of martial arts can be enhanced by technological mediation.

Martial arts in cinematic representation have always been treated as (choreographed) 'performance' (or a bodily spectacle, in Western critical perspectives). It is not 'real' fighting in any sense, despite the requirement of some real skills. Therefore, Yu uses the term 'performance' primarily in the context of acting, rather than to remind readers of the plain fact that cinematic martial arts are not 'real'. It is also worth noting that, whenever the term 'martial arts' is used, she accentuates what Hunt calls the *archival* qualities (authentic punches and kicks) rather

than the *cinematic* (authentic camerawork) or *corporeal* (authentic body/risk) qualities [Hunt 2003: 29-41], so as to advance the second level of her argument about enhancing martial arts performance through technological mediation.

Instead of linking the notion of authenticity with André Bazin's realism [Bazin 1997, 2005] or contemplating its philosophical implications, Yu is more concerned with the transcultural readings arising from paradigmatic difference. To shed light on the escalating conflict between digital technologies and traditional representations of martial arts, Yu traces the debate on technological mediation back to the early 1990s, when special effects and wire-stunts were extensively utilised in new wuxia films. As argued by Hunt [2003] and Yau [1997], the increasing technological mediation in cinematic representation of martial arts [or 'technologised masculinity'] is connected with matters such as the depreciation of masculinity, the absence of martial arts training, and even the superfluity of human participation. Accordingly, Yu declares that expressive performativity and technological enhancement of the wuxia imagination is an exit strategy for an increasingly 'disconnected' martial arts cinema that over-emphasises the unrealistic and irrelevant question of authenticity [Yu 2012: 48, 52-53].

This also foregrounds the acrimonious debate surrounding Li's transnational star persona in Hollywood where his performances are often criticised as wooden and inauthentic. Yu attempts to tackle these two issues by proposing a two-pronged reconciliation of physical capabilities and acting skills, on the one hand, and authenticity and technology, on the other [Yu 2012: 47]. Focusing on *Once Upon a Time in China* in Chapter 2, Yu expands on Bordwell's ideas and asserts that fighting is part of acting, tracing a lineage back to Chinese theatrical traditions such as Peking opera. To Yu's mind, martial arts should be considered a language, resembling those of facial and linguistic expressions, and hence something crucial to characterization and performance. Fusing martial arts with theatrical traditions of 'pause' and 'pose' through cinematic enhancements such as close-ups or slow motion, Li's Wong Fei-hung demonstrates in an elegant, calm, even scholarly manner that martial arts fighting and acting are not mutually exclusive [Yu 2012: 61]. To demonstrate the disjuncture in transcultural readings of martial arts films, Yu scrutinizes reviews written by Hong Kong critics and argues that Chinese viewers tend to adopt a holistic approach in their critical judgments and are generally unconcerned with the authenticity of martial arts on the screen. Contrary to the mode of appreciation adopted by Western spectators, martial arts are considered only part of the performance.

Similarly, Yu attempts to tackle the cross-cultural mistranslation of 'authenticity', by proposing that it is a Western paradigm incompatible with the embodiment of wuxia, which dwells in transcendental visions of 'rivers and lakes' (*jianghu*). This is largely due to the genre's intertextual affiliation with literary conventions such as Louis Cha's (*Jin Yong*) novels. Applying Bordwell's [2000] ideas of expressive amplification to Li's performance in *Once Upon a Time in China*, she claims that fusing wuxia with technology can better clarify the ethos of the genre than merely showcasing authentic/realistic punches and kicks with no expressive mediation [Yu 2012: 60]. In addition, using the concepts of 'impersonation' (developing different personas in different roles) and 'personification' (maintaining the same persona in different roles), she contends that Li successfully 'impersonifies' various roles and is a more flexible kung fu star in martial arts performance than his predecessors such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. Without the 'burden' of authenticity, Li develops a more comfortable relationship with cinematic technology, one which allows him to reinvent dozens of wuxia heroes and transform himself into a transnational kung fu star.

Granted, the wuxia imagination can be enhanced by visual effects (VFX) and computer-generated imagery (CGI). Considering martial arts fighting as part of acting could help to avoid some of the pitfalls of authenticity in addition to providing a new vantage point from which to consider the merits of kung fu stars' performances beyond the visual spectacle provided by the martial arts action.

However, Yu's proposition may not be applicable to all 'sub-genres' of wuxia (such as kung fu, in her categorisation). For example, Western critics would not raise the issue of authenticity in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [2000] or *Hero* [2002], as these films are inherently fantastical, according to the genre's conventions. Conversely, if wirework and special effects were extensively used in *Enter the Dragon* [1973] or *Shaolin Temple* [1976], authenticity would immediately become an issue. Just as imagination and expressivity are the motifs of the wuxia genre, authenticity and realism are equally crucial to the production and appreciation of more realistic sub-genres of martial arts films. To encompass the diversity and complexity of martial arts cinema, it is essential to consider other 'types' of wuxia films as well.

The key questions, then, would seem to be: In terms of performance or representation, why is 'graceful' wuxia superior to 'straightforward' kung fu? Why is technologised 'wire-fu' better than solid, authentic kung fu? Can authenticity also be part of martial arts performance? It appears to me that the negotiation between the real and the fictional is constitutive of the genre as such. Furthermore, while it is true that theatrical elements add expressivity to cinematic representations of martial arts, it is authentic martial arts that provides the raw material for further amplification. It is not difficult for kung fu practitioners to notice that 'pause' and 'pose' are inherent in real martial arts forms and routines, such as taijiquan and wing chun. In other words, they are amplified but not invented by theatrical traditions. Prioritising performativity and mediation over authenticity can, to a large extent, be self-defeating.

The key is not the enhancement of wuxia imagination and performing martial arts through technology at all levels, but rather using it in the right context. I agree with Yu that *Once Upon a Time in China* demonstrates the marriage of authenticity and technology. However, I remain sceptical as to whether the mastery of this art can be generalised to the genre. There are dozens of films in Hong Kong, such as Andrew Lau's *The Avenging Fist* [2001], trying to mimic the success of *The Matrix* [1999] and enhance martial arts performance and imagination by VFX and CGI. The result, however, falls short of filmmakers' expectations owing to its indiscriminate, excessive adoption of visual enhancement. Sometimes even the right context of mediation leads to poor outcomes. Tsui Hark's *Zu Warriors* [2001], despite its wuxia context, was severely criticised for its abusive use of special effects. The real issue is when and how to use technological mediation. While the digital effects of bullet-time (*The Matrix*) and X-ray moves (*Romeo Must Die*) have been internationally celebrated, a systematic theoretical framework has yet to emerge and the mechanisms behind such visual amplifications require careful scrutiny.

Furthermore, it is essential to take into consideration the unique spectatorship shaped by the conventions of martial arts action cinema in the early 1990s. Li's martial arts background gives him a huge advantage over the new wave of action stars of his generation, such as Leslie Cheung and Brigitte Lin. Despite his highly mediated actions in *Once Upon a Time in China*, Li was largely considered an authentic kung fu star when compared with his contemporaries. The authenticity debate instead mainly focuses on Li's films with contemporary settings in his Hollywood ventures such as *Lethal Weapon 4*, *Romeo Must Die*, and *The One*. In other words, the idea of authenticity is genre - as well as context - specific vis-à-vis the geographic site of production.

In brief, Yu's emphasis on performativity over the authenticity of martial arts on the screen has greater compatibility with the fantastical wuxia genre, which has a higher tolerance for phantasmagoric actions, or with New Wave kung fu films, which allow for more acrobatic movements. To better accommodate the specificity and diversity of the martial arts genre, more flexibility can be given to the idea of martial arts fighting as acting if it divides into, for example, fantastical performance (of wuxia) and authentic performance (of kung fu). It should also be made clear that, first, acting and performance are not synonymous, especially when the latter encompasses martial arts, acting, and technological mediations, and second, that authenticity is not only about the archival but the cinematic and corporeal, as well.



It is problematic for English-language critical discourses to privilege authenticity over acting/performance. However, subordinating authenticity under the guise of expanding the wuxia imagination through technological mediation fails to alter the binary structure. Despite Li's fantastical actions, *Once Upon a Time in China* is cinematically and corporeally authentic. For example, the 'lion dance' scene in the beginning of the film, which is shot mostly in long takes and full-body framing, adequately demonstrates Li's incomparable physical capabilities and his concrete martial arts trainings over the years. Could the wuxia imagination in *Once Upon a Time in China* be successful if the actor lacked substantial martial training? Is Jet Li then just a biased subject to argue against authenticity in the first place?

The mesmerizing power of martial arts cinema lies in the constant interplay between the real and the fictional, the violent and the elegant, moments of belief and of disbelief. In spite of the stereotyping of kung fu heroes in English-language scholarly writings, it is crucial not to simply reverse the binary structure. Privileging one side over the other would potentially undermine the genre's power of imagination rather than enhance it.

That said, Yu's emphasis on performativity does provide an exit strategy for the overall decline of martial arts cinema nowadays. As she points out, when cinematic and digital mediations are slowly replacing martial arts action, kung fu stars can no longer rely solely on their 'fists and kicks' and must instead embrace, as Li has, diverse roles and state-of-the-art technology.

## AN ALTERNATIVE TO HOLLYWOOD: CHINESE MASCULINITIES

Another key discussion in Yu's book is the transcultural understanding of masculinity. Especially in the action genre, the definition of masculinity has been monopolised by Hollywood – white, heterosexual, aggressive heroes who rescue and develop sexual intimacy with heroines. In view of this monolithic paradigm, transnational kung fu stars on Western screens have been considered either supermen or effeminate, usually in sharp contrast to the heroic images constructed before their venture to Hollywood. Indeed, Li has a more feminine screen persona when compared to Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan due to concealing his body and minimising physical risk. Together with linear characterisation [villain, killer, child] and abandonment of the wuxia spirit, there is a total effacement of Li's masculinity [Yu 2012: 124]. Nevertheless, Yu proposes that such a view is only valid within the Hollywood paradigm of masculinity. By incorporating Chinese masculinity into her analysis, Yu demonstrates that not only could Li reveal to Western audiences a decent 'ideal' form of intimacy, commonly found in the Chinese literary writings, he could also potentially deconstruct the centrality of Hollywood masculinity by stressing gender and interracial equality [Yu 2012: 143].

As a prominent kung fu star, Li is unique in the sense that he seeks not to reproduce traditional heroic images and formulae for guaranteed box office success. His exploration of alternative masculinities began in the 1990s when he engaged in the reinventions of well-known wuxia heroes in the genre, such as Hong Hei-gun, Fong Sai-yuk, and Ling Hu-chong. Going back to Li's earlier work in *Swordsman II*, Yu notes Li's propensity for flexibility and subversion which comes up again in his Hollywood career [Chapter 3]. Despite the wuxia genre's innate rejection of homosexual themes, in the film Li takes up a role that potentially develops a romantic relationship with a transsexual man. Not only did Li achieve international success through his versatility in acting and his diverse wuxia image, he also ventured into areas inaccessible to traditional kung fu stars and opened up a new avenue where gender and sexuality could be explored further within a highly patriarchal and masculine genre.

Apart from challenging the hegemony of heterosexuality, the genre's innate connection with patriarchy is undermined by *Fong Sai-yuk*. Yu demonstrates that the film subverts traditional understandings of masculinity by highlighting the maternal relationship (Chapter 4). This emphasis on the maternal and familial is a vision carried on in the popular *Ip Man* series, wherein Ip is portrayed not as a patriarchal master but a family man possessing modern family values. Unlike the traditional *daxia* (adult hero) who usually traverses the *jianghu* (wuxia world) in a solitary and solemn manner, Li/Fong is more humanised and family-oriented. While this might be seen as adolescent or even childish, it prioritises Chinese fidelity and respect in a fashion often missing in the Western/Oedipal paradigm. In other words, Li demonstrates a concerted effort to explore various paradigms of masculinity and to subvert the heterosexual and patriarchal norms of the wuxia genre even before his Hollywood excursion.

Nevertheless, when Li reached the other side of the Pacific in the late 1990s, he was unwillingly sutured into a whole repertoire of stereotypical representations (Chapter 5). Yu investigates how Li's masculinity is exploited in Hollywood through various stereotyping strategies, including the 'charismatic villain, passionate killer, and childlike Chinese men' [Yu 2012: 124]. She declares that if a transnational kung fu star intends to survive in Hollywood, he needs to forsake his masculinity, heroism, and any nationalist sentiments acquired in his previous career. Despite the fact that there is an effacement of Li's Chinese masculinity as well as the wuxia ethos and that he may be complicit in reproducing or reinforcing racial stereotypes, his bold venture to the 'dark side' earned respect from fans across the globe and opened the door to his transnational stardom.

Indeed, Yu proves that it is more constructive to explore alternative paradigms of masculinity rather than simply denounce the stereotypes in Li's English-language films. In particular, the 'asexual' portrayal of Li should be understood within the paradigm of Chinese masculinity (Chapter 6). It serves as an alternative model to Hollywood's monolithic understanding of the notion. Alluding to the well-known *wen-wu* paradigm proposed by Kam Louie [2002], which refers to the scholarly-martial binary within Chinese masculinity, Yu disagrees with Louie's argument that the heterosexual desire of the *wu* masculinity was 'invented' by Hollywood as seen in the films of transnational stars such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Chow Yun-fat (assuming that they are representative of the Chinese *wu* masculinity). She asserts that heterosexual desire is always subtly present in the *wu* paradigm, though it is not explicitly expressed in terms of physical intimacy and sexual intercourse as dictated by Hollywood. By situating Li's 'asexual' screen persona in a Chinese paradigm, Yu postulates that Li's treatment of the character is actually an ideal form of maleness in the Chinese context characterised by abstinence from sexual indulgence and subtlety of romantic expression. In other words, Yu demonstrates the necessity of acknowledging different cultural paradigms in the transcultural reading of kung fu stardom.

Furthermore, it is intriguing for Yu to propose that Li's platonic relationship with the heroines in his crossover images could offer an alternative model for male sexuality on screen, hence potentially 'deconstructing stereotyping representations of race, gender and sexuality in action cinema' [Yu 2012: 142]. This is especially valid if one considers the monolithic view in Hollywood that male sexuality onscreen equals physical intimacy. As a sceptic, I am glad that Yu reminds her readers of the fact that this potentially subversive treatment of the male hero could be read as a strategy to make Li less threatening and hence more acceptable to Western audiences, conforming to and reproducing the stereotype of Asian men as children. Yu invokes 'double castration' to describe the dilemma Li faces: the conservative plot prevents him from developing interracial romance on the one hand and his subtle, decent expression of love is not appreciated by Western audiences on the other [Yu 2012: 138].

## BEYOND VISUAL PLEASURES: THE WUXIA ETHOS

The third discrepancy in the transcultural reading of martial arts cinema is the significance of the wuxia ethos – or, in her word, the *wuxia* ‘spirit’ (Chapter 7). In spite of the genre’s transnational development over more than four decades, a majority of Western critics and viewers adhere to the tangible, visible side of martial arts cinema in which martial arts and their performers exist merely for the sake of spectacle. However, as Li’s off-screen persona emphasises, learning the philosophy of *wushu* (viz. non-violence) is more valuable than two hours of sensual excitement.

What makes Yu’s work important is that she reminds viewers and scholars that there is an intangible, invisible side to the popular, secularised genre. Fully aware of the trap of essentialism, Yu carefully explains with a concrete example (her choice is *Hero*) that Chinese critics’ and viewers’ appreciation of a martial arts film usually transcends the sensual pleasure of visual beauty and incorporates the film’s interpretation of the wuxia ethos, which captures the capacity and audacity of challenging hegemonic discourses and overthrowing authoritarian regimes. However, with Li’s submission to the king of Qin, the reception of Zhang Yimou’s ‘marital art-house’ blockbuster among Chinese critics shares the fate of Li’s character, Nameless, in the final scene wherein he is pierced by hundreds of arrows. Putting the nationalist sentiments and orthodoxy aside, the awareness of cultural specificity and martial arts literacy are key issues disrupting the landscape of transnational martial arts cinema, stardom, and even the discipline of film studies. Perhaps facilitated by the popularity and pervasiveness of *Jin Yong* novels in Chinese communities worldwide for more than half a century, this discrepancy in literacy and spectatorship is an often-neglected yet extremely crucial point in studies of transnational film stardom. To further elaborate Yu’s idea, the hierarchy of martial arts cinema appreciation can be described as follows: visual performance, narrative, and wuxia ethos. Not being mutually exclusive, these three elements overlap with varying significance in a martial arts film.

This is perhaps why Yu disagrees with David Desser’s [2005] claim that there is an ‘Asianisation of Hollywood’, a conclusion that he derives from an increasing presence of masculinised Chinese men on Western screens. She points out that transnational kung fu stars have to be ‘desinicised’ in order to be accepted by Western critics and audiences. Desincisation means that transnational kung fu stars such as Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and Jet Li are required to forsake their wuxia ethos and focus on reproducing Hollywood’s preoccupation with repeating visual spectacles.

To conclude the chapter, Yu points out that the difference in receptions across the Pacific signifies the constant negotiation between Li’s national and transnational identities. On the one hand, Li’s status as a Chinese, national kung fu hero helped him make his debut in Hollywood. On the other hand, his physical capabilities make him a flexible transnational star attracting audiences beyond borders. In spite of severe criticisms from Chinese intellectuals, Yu argues that *Hero* elevates Li to a new level of transnational stardom that further enhances the Chinese presence in the U.S. and even global market.

## CONCLUSION

Sabrina Yu's work on Jet Li highlights the transcultural receptions of Li's films and star persona vis-à-vis discourses on, among other things, 'gender, sexuality, genre, race, nation, and cultural identity' [Yu 2012: 185]. Despite the diverse and at times even conflicting images of Li perceived by audiences across different social and cultural contexts, they are crucial to the construction of Li's transnational screen persona. Without these incoherent, often fragmented personae, Li would not have developed the flexibility that mesmerizes audiences around the globe. By incorporating martial arts into acting and performing antagonistic roles in Hollywood, Li demonstrates that Asian kung fu heroes are not merely fighting machines but real actors with acting skills. Furthermore, his transnational success has paved the way for the rise of 'martial-art house' blockbusters and the transnationalisation of Chinese stars as well as cinema.

Finally, I am glad that Yu spent the last chapter discussing Li's low-key, even humble offscreen persona as an ordinary man. Compared with Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and even Donnie Yen, Li's subtle strategy of not stressing the continuation of onscreen performance in his off-screen life gives him a greater flexibility in experimenting with new roles and incorporating different technological mediations, which may also lengthen his film career in an age of digital reproduction. This motif resonates with Yu's empirical endeavor whereby she brings the often-neglected discourse of fandom to academic studies of transnational kung fu stardom by reading innumerable fan letters, forum replies, and blog entries. Amidst the everyday, down-to-earth comments written by fans across the spectrum of race, class and gender, Yu uncovers that the engaged commentary produced by ordinary fans does in fact yield valuable insights shared by (if not more interesting than) scholars who treat Li merely as a text rather than as a real person devoted to philanthropy, wushu promotion, and Buddhist philosophy. Perhaps Li's transnational career can best be summarized with the following formula: to become a *lethal weapon* in transnational stardom, Li has to forget about *kissing* women and metaphorically *die*; only then will he have the chance to become *the one* who may finally unleash his star power and become a *fearless* transnational kung fu *hero*.

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# BOOK REVIEW

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## Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks and the History of a Ming Novel

Mark R.E. Meulenbeld

University of Hawaii Press, 2015

288 pages      \$57 /£36.43



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## REVIEWER

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## DOI

10.18573/j.2015.10023

Martial Arts Studies is such a new field that many of the most important recent works have been written for other fields: Avron Boretz's *Gods, Ghosts, and Gangsters* [2011] is anthropology, Meir Shahrar's *Shaolin Monastery* [2008] is religion, Andrew Morris's *Marrow of the Nation* [2004] is history of physical education. As we define the boundaries of this new field, we must draw on a broad range of existing disciplines, and the lack of common ground will require introductions to and bridges between different disciplines.

*Demonic Warfare* by Mark R. E. Meulenbeld [2015] is an important book for the field of Martial Arts Studies – even though it does not address martial arts directly. Rather, Meulenbeld skips fifteen hundred years of Daoist history to get to the meat of his subject: Daoist thunder ritual. For readers new to the subject, this is like trying to understand what an iPhone is without having seen a regular phone or a computer. New works in Daoist studies are built on a specific background of ethnology, language, history, and religion. By way of this review, I will attempt to introduce the book to the field of Martial Arts Studies.<sup>1</sup>

Meulenbeld's introduction has two main purposes: first, to explain to Chinese literary experts how China's epic novels were cut off from their religious roots in the early twentieth century, and second, to explain the importance of these novels to Daoist ritual studies. The book is organized to be accessible to readers with background experience in one or both of these areas. It must be noted that Meulenbeld explores the relationship between martial arts and militias without ever discussing martial arts directly. He investigates how religious cosmologies and institutions integrated militias into multipurpose rituals of canonization. The only other book I am aware of that delves into the function and organization of Ming dynasty militias is David Robinson's *Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven* [2001]. Robinson examines the ways in which constantly shifting alliances between men of prowess held the empire together in circles of patronage. Anyone interested in the relationship between martial arts and militias will find them both essential reading with little overlap in content.

*Demonic Warfare* analyzes the historic relationship between Chinese militia organizations, Daoist thunder rituals, and a text called *Canonization of the Gods* (*Fengshen yanyi*). Before the twentieth century, *Canonization* was ubiquitous, but for the last hundred years, it has been largely ignored. In effect, it was intentionally put into the dustbin of history even though *Canonization* is in the same category as the Ming dynasty works which were put forward as the primary representatives of Chinese theatrical

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<sup>1</sup> I apologize to Meulenbeld and to readers for not immediately dealing with the content of this work, but without a specialized introduction it will remain largely inaccessible despite being beautifully written.

literature and became a major source of inspiration for Hong Kong Cinema such as *Three Kingdoms (San Guo)*, *Journey to the West (Xi Youji)*, and *Outlaws of the Marsh (Shuihu Zhuan)*.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth movement were desperate to position China as a contributor to modernity. They wanted to cast off the 'sick man of Asia' label and banish any content which mixed theater, martial skills, and religious ritual, for this particular combination was associated with the humiliating defeat of the Boxer Rebellion. This entailed a sorting and re-framing of prominent elements in Chinese culture into two categories, 'treasures' and 'trash'. This process successfully sidelined the religious warfare context of Chinese theatrical literature.

Meulenbeld shows how *Three Kingdoms*, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, and *Journey to the West* were selected by May Fourth activists because they fit the model of modern fiction better than other works in the same category. By presenting their narratives as transcendent universals, they were able to obscure the religious warfare origins of these works. But *Canonization of the Gods* gave away its purpose in the title and the text's religious content was too overt so it was sidelined. These Ming dynasty 'novels' were sacred collections of theatrical rituals of canonization, each containing a hundred or more chapters - standalone rituals each of which was referred to as an opera [*xiju* 戏剧] and strung together by an overarching plot.<sup>2</sup> Once the historical context was obscured, May Fourth activists like Lu Xun, literature experts in China and the West, and nearly everyone who has tried to read these three works as 'novels' has found them repetitive, with too many characters, and containing side stories that distract from their tenuous plots. And that is because they were not written as novels.

This is important for the field of Martial Arts Studies because the same political movement which 'invented the novel' created the notion of *jingwu*, or 'pure martial' arts. In the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion (1898-1900), the intense ridicule, heaped upon any combination of martial skills and ritual-theater, created 'martial arts' as a distinct category. Like the designation 'novel', pure martial arts are the result of the forced creation of separate categories demanded by twentieth century intellectuals and politicians.<sup>3</sup>

On a personal note, my martial arts teachers often promulgated the notion that martial arts were pure, or should be pure; that is, all combat, with no theater or religion. This explanation did not fit my empirical experience. As a professional dancer with a background in ethnology and years of training in Congolese and north Indian dance, I knew that martial skills could be fully integrated into theatrical religious arts. Like these other arts, it was self-evident that Chinese martial arts forms (*taolu*) were embedded with performing skills and theatrical design. My own research has focused on linking this embodied theatricality in the martial arts to religious Daoism.<sup>4</sup> The greatest contribution of *Demonic Warfare* to the field of Martial Arts Studies is that it describes a ubiquitous historic milieu in China in which combat skills, theatricality, and religion were fully integrated. This historic milieu is called a canonization ritual.

Anyone who has delved into Chinese history has come across the notion of ritual. Confucius framed ritual

<sup>2</sup> Meulenbeld notes, as does Johnson [2009], that there are examples of local operas, which are composed around the same characters and scenes, and yet are not included in the finished novels. The sources of authority for literary invention were thus, local, and of the same creative milieu that nurtured martial movement.

<sup>3</sup> Two excellent primers on this subject are Cohen [1997] and Morris [2004]. Also, see Liu [2009] for a look at how Daoism adapted to this movement and Goossaert and Palmer [2011] for a look at religion generally.

<sup>4</sup> See Phillips (2008), 'Daoyin Re-Imagined', forthcoming in *Journal of Daoist Studies*, vol. 8; and 'Taijiquan as Enlightenment Theater', in *Daoism and the Military*, forthcoming 2016, Three Pines Press.

propriety and reciprocity as the seeds of all relationships.<sup>5</sup> Modeling appropriate behavior was understood as a tool for making the world better. In the West, this idea is odd but comprehensible because we have institutions like the Boy Scouts, which seek to foster and mold upright human beings. However, ritual in China goes way beyond the Confucian tradition: ritual was the central organizing mechanism of village life. This is hard to see at first, precisely because modern scholarship is so deeply informed by a Protestant worldview which posits that ritual is vacuous and archaic and that the central organizing principle of social institutions is belief.<sup>6</sup> In Chinese culture, rituals are more important than beliefs. The question, then, is not 'who do you worship?' Rather, the question is 'how do you make your offerings?'

*Demonic Warfare* is a powerful interpretive text which contributes to an ongoing academic conversation about the nature of Daoist ritual, which has accumulated a great deal of data over the last thirty years. The common question ('What is the purpose of this martial art?') is similar to another question ('What is the purpose of this ritual?') in that it can obscure a prominent characteristic of ritual practice – namely, that rituals can accumulate and shed purposes quite easily.<sup>7</sup>

With regard to canonization-ritual operas (*xiju* 戏剧), Meulenbeld has identified several major categories of purpose: they functioned as entertainment; as a way for villagers to learn history and mythology; as part of regular festivals which brought communities together to have fun, trade, problem-solve, allocate resources, designate leadership roles, and organize militias; and as performances before battles intended to invoke the gods to fight either up in the air, running alongside the troops, or as possessing deities controlling individual combatants. The gods in these rituals were ferocious in battle, and in fact, demonic in nature. Canonization rituals told their stories and transformed these demonic warriors into gods while simultaneously enlisting them in the service of righteousness.

The English term canonization comes from Catholicism. The key term *feng* (封) in the title of *Canonization of the Gods* (*Fengshen yanyi*) literally means to contain or enclose. It implies a container of ritually-correct behavior used for taming or pacifying unruly demons and baleful spirits. In Catholicism, canonization is the process of promoting a martyr to sainthood so that he or she can become a source of solace or power. A martyr is a person who has died prematurely and is credited with transcendent values or a noble purpose. Chinese gods of the theater are often like martyrs. The Catholic hierarchy used canonization extensively to bring peoples on the fringes under its control. For instance, the gods of Haitian Vodou and Cuban Santaria were made into Catholic saints.<sup>8</sup> A parallel process happened in China.

In every Chinese family, when someone dies of old age, they get a place on the family altar where they are symbolically fed and incorporated into family rituals. In a nutshell, these family rituals resolve lingering and conflicting emotions by acknowledging and carrying forward the positive models and contributions of one's ancestors. But, a premature and violent death bars a person from inclusion on the family altar. In such an

<sup>5</sup> Contemporary scholars often use the term **Ru**, or **Ruist**, rather than Confucian. Regardless of the term used, we refer here to the many traditions of scholarship and ritual in historic China which are self-consciously associated with Warring States era literature which developed into theories and practices of statecraft

<sup>6</sup> One does not have to 'believe' to perform a ritual. The vacuity of a ritual may in fact be one of its selling points [Puett 2013].

<sup>7</sup> As shown by Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1982 (1975)]), the same ritual can even take on opposite meanings from one community to the next. Additionally, Daoist priest and scholar John Lagerwey [2010] recently published an introductory text which surveys the diversity of Daoist ritual which I highly recommend.

<sup>8</sup> See Deren [1953] and Pinn [1998].

event, the dead become a kind of homeless ghost. Shrines are built to house these spirits, to create a location of forgiveness, and to otherwise resolve old conflicts and commitments. Over time, some of these ghost-spirits (*guishen*) accumulate power (*ling*), can grant wishes, and gradually become more god-like.

When large numbers of people were killed in battle, they left behind a lot of ghosts made from the energy of unresolved conflicting emotions like vengeance, sorrow, and regret. In Chinese religious cosmology, if these baleful spirits are not appeased, they linger in wild animals, trees, grass, and rocks, and become the causes of all future violence. Canonization rituals were performed before battles to clarify the intentions of the combatants and to infuse them with demonic powers by enlisting reformed resident demons and baleful spirits of past conflicts. This fact is indispensable for understanding the historical origins of Chinese martial arts. Canonization rituals after battles attempted to enlist all the dead, especially the leaders of the losing side, into the service of a new order. In a very simple and direct way, honoring the enemy's dead created a basis for the survivors to save face, go on with their lives, and eventually forgive. Conquered peoples, along with their local spirits and heroes, were transitioned to righteous demon warriors and incorporated into a heavenly hierarchy. These cosmic orders became the organizational frameworks for the creation of militias and a form of literature.

*Demonic Warfare* looks specifically at the role Daoist thunder rituals play in the process of canonization. *Canonization of the Gods* tells the story of the child-god Li Nezha who commits suicide, kills dragons, and becomes the leader of the thunder gods. These gods ride around on fire wheels and use magical thunder and lightning weapons to catch baleful spirits. The predecessor of the thunder gods is the Indo-Tibetan bird-god Garuda who catches snakes and fights dragons; in China, it was a half-human, half-bird god with a hammer and a spike; and in Japan, it was the Tengu, the original sword masters of the samurai.<sup>9</sup>

In the capital city of Beijing there is a sort of national shrine to war dead called The Temple of the Eastern Peak. It was the central temple of all militia organizations in which Li Nezha was enshrined. The overarching narrative of *Canonization of the Gods* pivots around this temple where baleful spirits are maintained as a source of power for creating militias under the command of the thunder gods. Rituals invoking Li Nezha, as the head of the thunder gods, were done outside the front gates of a city or temple. Canonization tells the story of how they were ritually incorporated into a national network.

Li Nezha is a badly behaved son transformed into a powerful protector deity. The same pattern, in which the unruly become protectors, is visible with the *jaijiang* demon troops described by Boretz and in the story of the once-wild Monkey King who finds both immortality and enlightenment. In fact, it is a common narrative of martial theater in general. The very meaning of the martial arts term *gongfu* implies this transformation from unruly to disciplined, from dangerous to meritorious.

Meulenbeld shows how Chinese literature grew out of the ritual theatricality of temple culture, which was a complex organizational network used to organize militias and other forms of sanctioned violence.

In case it is still not obvious, what is called Chinese opera comes from a martial ritual of canonization which also became a form of literature. These martial operas were scalable for both small- and large-group warfare. When local militias banded together under a military command structure, they performed these plays and staged narratives in which local gods and demons worked together toward a common goal.

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9 This was the subject of Meulenbeld's dissertation.



One of the reasons Chinese theatrical literature is difficult to read is that the magical abilities of these ghost-god (*guishen*) characters contain layers of metaphor and presumptions of cosmological knowledge that are not explicated in the individual stories. In other words, they are rituals of social organization first and stories of cosmological pedagogy second. The substantial entertainment value they once had was built around their value as cultural pivots of meaning. Martial arts cinema ('electric shadows' [電影] in Chinese) is a reminder of this once-unified realm of theater, religion, and violence.

*Demonic Warfare* gives us a context for martial arts to exist as theater with martial skill embedded in a religious framework. For Martial Arts Studies, it triggers questions: Should we look at martial arts forms as rituals of canonization? Does the modern dojo transform conflicting emotions into righteous causes, viz., demons into gods? If martial arts forms (*taolu*) tell stories, what kind of stories do they tell? Are they fragments of canonization rituals or are they intact rituals obscured by time and distance? Are forms ritual movements abstracted from a narrative? Martial rituals functioned by infusing would-be combatants with an active cosmology of ritual actions, thereby giving meaning to violence in historic time, mythic time, and regional locale. Can martial arts still perform that function? Meulenbeld focuses on the role of Daoist priests in performing and codifying these rituals, citing evidence that, during the Yuan dynasty, generals performed plays on the stage (which means that professional, low-caste actors must have been part of this process, too). These ritual plays were performed by professional actors, by militia participants, and by Daoist priests. Because this ritual culture appears to have been extremely diverse, the significance of all of this is going to take time to sort out.

This book is another nail in the coffin of the early twentieth century idea that at some time in the past there was a pure form of martial arts devoid of religion and theatricality. It is *Demonic Warfare* all the way down.

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# BOOK REVIEW

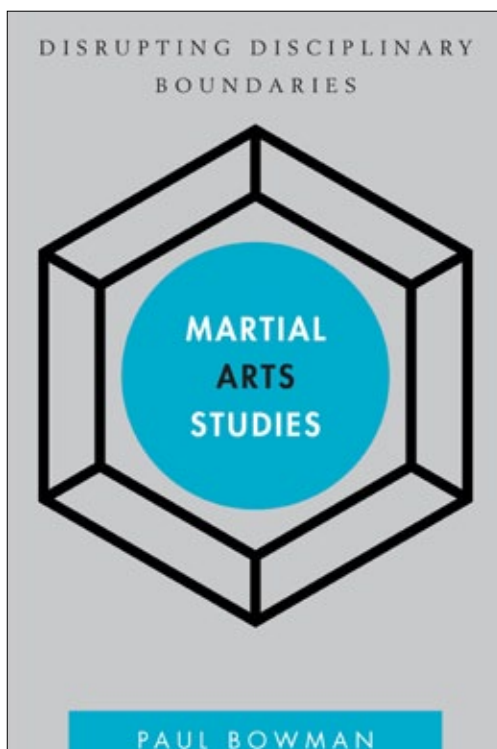
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## Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries

Paul Bowman

Rowman and Littlefield International, 2015

208 pages      \$32.95 /£22.95



I teach in the U.S. at the Schedler Honors College of the University of Central Arkansas, a small undergraduate program serving about 350 students within a larger public university of 11,500. Students who complete our program (seven courses and an Honors thesis project over four years) receive a minor in Interdisciplinary Studies to go along with their major fields. Not only do our students come from all disciplines on our campus, our core faculty members in the Schedler Honors College also come from a wide variety of disciplines: religious studies, sociology, philosophy, law, geography, literature, and anthropology. In the ten years that I have taught at my institution, the legitimacy of our interdisciplinary approach has been questioned frequently by well-meaning colleagues in other, discipline-focused departments who are convinced we are merely further muddying the already muddy waters of young minds.

Yet, from my perspective, it is this very muddying of boundaries that allows everyday conversations with my Honors colleagues and students to constantly challenge me to re-think my own discipline. I am no less an anthropologist because of these conversations; rather, they make me a more disciplined anthropologist. Likewise, our students, especially those who come to our liberal arts-centered program from 'hard' sciences like chemistry and biology or from mathematics or physics, often report that the interdisciplinary methodology they practice in their Honors College courses imbues their disciplinary studies with a creative edge – and also makes them more tolerant, well-rounded people.

I start this review of Paul Bowman's excellent *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* [Bowman 2015] with my personal experience of interdisciplinarity not to brag about my college's successes but to underscore that disciplines, as Bowman emphasizes throughout his book, are 'invented traditions'. As such, even for the hardcore disciplinarians, disciplinary boundaries undergo constant reinvention.

*Martial Arts Studies* offers a fruitful approach to questions of disciplinary boundaries. Occasionally, a book is published that makes the 'expert' reviewer wish that he or she might have had the chance to read it before ever publishing anything on the topic at hand. *Martial Arts Studies* is just such a book. Bowman, a scholar in the School of Journalism, Media, and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University (and co-editor of this journal), has written a gallant first attempt at laying a theoretical and methodological foundation for the emergence of martial arts studies. Bowman is serious about drawing upon both martial arts practice and the geography of extant martial arts scholarship to disrupt convenient notions of 'discipline' and 'field'. Indeed, it is in this process of fighting his way through the complexities of interdisciplinary/intradisciplinary discourses on martial arts, in carving out a place for martial arts studies as worthy of legitimate scholarly attention, that the book is at its best. Because Bowman is essentially inventing a new scholarly world here

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## DOI

10.18573/j.2015.10024

(though he is careful to deny this several times throughout the book), the road is at times bumpy. The author's goal is sometimes foggy as we move between the two poles that delimit the book's structure: on the one hand are the principles of martial arts themselves that we can apply to a variety of scholarly questions in order to better understand distinct disciplinary perspectives; on the other hand are the well-defined, sometimes even rigid disciplinary perspectives that help us understand the complex cultural, social, and historical ramifications of martial arts.

The book's structure reflects this project. In the first paragraph of chapter one, 'Martial Arts Studies as an Academic Field', Bowman clearly states his objectives:

The subtitle of the book is as important as the main title, if not more so. This is because the book is as much invested in *Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* as it is in *Martial Arts Studies*. What this means is that the book not only offers arguments about martial arts studies in terms of academic disciplines and their boundaries, but it also seeks to enact at least some of the disruption to disciplinary boundaries that it proposes. [1]

Stated another way, 'this book exists and operates in terms of a cultivated critical awareness of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of actual and possible approaches to martial arts studies' [3]. Bowman's main task in chapter one is to review the geography of martial arts studies as an 'academic field' and he cites the 2011 Douglas Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge-edited volume *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World* [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011] as the starting point for martial arts studies as such. Farrer and Whalen-Bridge, Bowman points out, attempt to battle 'essentialism' in this volume by delineating a number of "approved" approaches to martial arts studies, as they envisage it – namely a selection of works organized by challenging questions and problematics' [18].

Bowman spends substantial time in the chapter on the groundbreaking martial arts scholarship of Stanley Henning, noting Henning's call for historical treatments of martial arts to pay close attention to 'intimate' analysis and academic rigor. Yet, Bowman is not content with 'rigor' from a purely disciplinary perspective (in Henning's case, historiography). He urges us instead to attend to 'theory' or 'Theory' (depending on one's context) as an essential tool for martial arts studies. But Bowman is not interested in theory for theory's sake. Rather, he challenges us to draw upon poststructuralism – Derridean deconstruction in particular – to equip martial arts studies with a useful set of explanatory tools. Indeed, Bowman's brief historical summary of poststructuralism is one of the clearest I have encountered, an excellent sidebar on the topic for undergraduates and graduate students new to these often challenging concepts. Here, Bowman is laying the groundwork for later links he will make between the Derridean notion that 'truth' is ever evasive and Bruce Lee's abandonment of 'style' in his creation of *jeet kune do*. Useful, too, is Bowman's extended discussion of Loïc Wacquant's 'Bourdieuian ethnographic sociology' of Western style boxing that uses Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* to counter poststructuralist antinomies (Wacquant 2004).

In chapter two, 'Writing Martial Arts Studies: Body, History, (Trans)Nation, and Narration', Bowman focuses on the discursive tension between academic and practitioner discourses. Addressing recent scholarly studies on martial arts that have usefully taken into account deconstructive notions like Fabian's 'allochronism' [1983] and Said's 'orientalism' [1995], his project in the chapter is to think about 'how to proceed to work on constructing different knowledge(s) of martial arts in light of such insights into the complexities and intertwining of history and ideology' [63]. It is important to note that, for Bowman (and for Sylvia Chong, who he cites extensively in this chapter), 'writing' extends to 'the language of film'. Looking at Chong's [2012] treatment of Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo* films, as well as her discussion of the movement away from a Bruce Lee-centered language

of martial arts films that began with the popularity of Chuck Norris's work in the 1980s, Bowman makes a compelling case that martial arts cinema provides an important vehicle for 'tracing the contours of different cultural-historical conjunctures' [71].

To bolster this argument, Bowman enters into an extended discussion of Petrus Liu's 2011 study of martial arts literature, *Stateless Subjects: Chinese Martial Arts Literature and Postcolonial History* [Liu 2011]. Liu argues that, while attaching martial arts literature to the Chinese nationalist project has become something of a paradigm within scholarship on martial arts novels and films, to do so is a fundamental misreading of the place martial arts literature historically holds as a literature of the elite. Referring to the contemporary example of Jin Yong's extremely popular fiction, Liu points out that the most revered martial arts literature references religious and philosophical concepts accessible only by the literate and well-educated. Further, Liu notes that, in the post-Revolution discarding of classical Chinese in favor of vernacular writing, martial arts novelists continued to use classical Chinese for many years. They were, in other words, catering to the elite, not to the masses. Bowman is not entirely convinced that Liu is not himself making a case for an important nationalist flavor in martial arts literature, albeit of a different sort.

I find Bowman's treatment in this chapter of the reviewer's own discussion of nationalism and *taijiquan* particularly informative – another instance of wishing I had been able to read this book before writing my own. Bowman notes that both Douglas Wile's historical work and the historical treatments of *taijiquan* in the reviewer's work might be seen as 'projecting modern discursive formations (whether nationalism or Chineseness) back in time' (again, Fabian's allochronism), but he asks us to focus instead on the very notion of 'back in time' in terms of 'modern discursive formations and socio-political configurations' [90].

For the remainder of the chapter, Bowman makes the interesting, though perhaps not entirely successful, move of attempting to exclude the martial artist from the discussion of martial arts studies. He acknowledges this move as an essentially Derridean way of saying 'that discourses on a certain subject cannot but drift, diverge, double, and disseminate away from the subject' [95]. This approach works best in his discussion of the way certain martial approaches explicitly reject 'form' and 'style', for example, Bruce Lee's jeet kune do, which emerged from Lee's famous fight against Wong Jack Man in San Francisco Chinatown, a fight Lee allegedly felt went on much too long and that he won with way too much difficulty. Likewise, Bowman notes the emergence of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA), a 'style' that was never meant to be a style. Indeed, it was intended originally to be a showcase for pitting distinct styles against one another but has evolved into a style of its own with specific techniques and, for many MMA fighters, no link whatsoever to 'traditional' martial arts. Again, this is an interesting move because it does reflect a certain tendency for some martial artists to look for the ideal form of the art in their own practice rather than for the ideal exemplar of the art. For some practitioners, in other words, martial arts are less about 'looking for the little old man' and more about direct experience of the art. One might argue that this was Bruce Lee's explicit project in creating jeet kune do. The difficulty lies in the human tendency to seek the phenomenal rather than be content with the noumenal. Thus, as Bowman notes, two certified jeet kune do instructors create the more 'real' Keysi Fighting Method, which then itself evolves into a series of specific techniques that allow it to be marketed as the Keysi Fighting Method.

Bowman concludes chapter two with an extended discussion of Rey Chow's notion of 'primitive passions', placing it at the end of the chapter in the context of a Keanu Reeves martial arts film, *Man of Tai Chi* [2013], a film that explicitly requires the audience to view the main character, Tiger Chen, in terms of his mounting primitivity, a primitivity antithetical to the principles of taiji, which have been imparted to him by his teacher.



While the many threads Bowman follows in chapter two at times give his discussion an unfocused feel, he does, I think, achieve his goal. The many discursive strategies we find here in the academic writing on the literature of martial arts begin to lay out a geography of scholarship that is better 'performed' than merely described. Bowman successfully employs a performative style of writing here, particularly when he interweaves his own work on Bruce Lee and MMA to concretize the more Derridean turn he employs throughout the chapter.

Chapter three, 'The Reality of Martial Arts', is perhaps the most satisfying in the book. Here, Bowman is at his best as he delves in detail into the search for the 'real' in non-style styles like jeet kune do and its offshoot, the Keysi Fighting Method (or KFM). What he refers to as the '*Fight-Club-ization*' of the martial arts becomes a key moment in not only understanding martial arts history and contemporary conditions in the martial arts but also for understanding Bowman's interest in 'disrupting disciplinary boundaries' throughout the book. In this chapter, disciplines are first and foremost specific martial arts schools or styles, which is why disrupting those boundaries is fraught with martial arts politics. So, for example, KFM founders Justo Dieguez and Andy Norman, students of one of Bruce Lee's best-known students (Dan Inosanto), were both estranged from Inosanto (if I read Bowman correctly here) when they 'invented' their own non-system system, then split as business partners over differences about systematization/mediatization (DVDs, packaged courses, etc.).

Bowman makes a particularly important point about martial arts practice in this chapter, that is worth emphasizing here: '*One is not doing KFM if one is flailing wildly*'. To unpack that sentence, Bowman is noting that, while KFM and other arts that claim to have emerged from 'real' street fighting eschew set rules and styles per se, they also have identifiable kinesthetic principles that distinguish them from one another. But he is also making a key point about disciplinary boundaries, as well, perhaps even making a case for *not* disrupting disciplinary boundaries (though I do not think this is his intent). Sticking with the martial arts context for a moment, one *is* doing KFM – or *may* be doing KFM – if one adopts the 'pensador' stance (the 'thinking man' stance with chin tucked, elbows and hands close into the body, hands covering the face and head in a 'natural' protective stance). Bowman draws a distinction here between martial principles that are 'realized' versus those that are merely mimetic [116]. The same logic and principles apply to the inventedness of disciplines, Bowman argues. Like martial arts, 'all have their "reality tests" and modes and manner of verification' [135].

Bowman re-configures his fundamental question in chapter four, 'Martial Arts and Cultural Politics Mediated', where he writes:

**What happens when we think about universalism and particularism, not in terms of 'political processes proper', but by way of things that traverse the putatively distinct – but entangled (realms of media, culture, body, *psyche*) and which maybe even supplement politics – such as mediatized martial arts? [139]**

This question is answered most cogently in his discussion of the unmarked appearance of the Filipino martial art of *escrima*, or *Kali*, in the *Bourne* trilogy. Bowman notes that a quick Google search will reveal numerous websites that reference this fact, yet it is nowhere mentioned in the films themselves. Rather, Jason Bourne is seen as the ultimate *American* killing machine. The Filipino origin of the art is notably invisible, and thus the cultural politics that emerge through mediatization are equally invisible, the opposite of Rey Chow's notion of 'coercive mimeticism' that Bowman introduces earlier in the book.

In the concluding chapter, Bowman engages in an extended discussion of the reviewer's work [Frank 2006], particularly in regards to layered discourses in Chinese academic writing on martial arts, the mediatization of martial arts in particular historical contexts, and 'the condensation and displacement of qi' [162] – terms he

draws from Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* [Freud 1976]. As flattering as it is to have one's work discussed at length, Bowman might have been better served by a more traditional conclusion that explicitly revisited prominent themes. He does return to issues of boundaries (or lack thereof) in his final paragraph, remarking 'martial arts studies must explore the entanglements of its own objects with the cultural, media, academic, political, interpersonal, and sensual realms and registers that flow into and out of what any kind of study of martial arts enables and disrupts' [167].

It is not a bad thing that this statement leaves us wanting more. With *Martial Arts Studies*, Paul Bowman has done a wonderful job of both delightfully entangling us in the object of study and disrupting perhaps too comfortable relationships with the boundaries of our respective disciplines.

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