

# BOOK REVIEW

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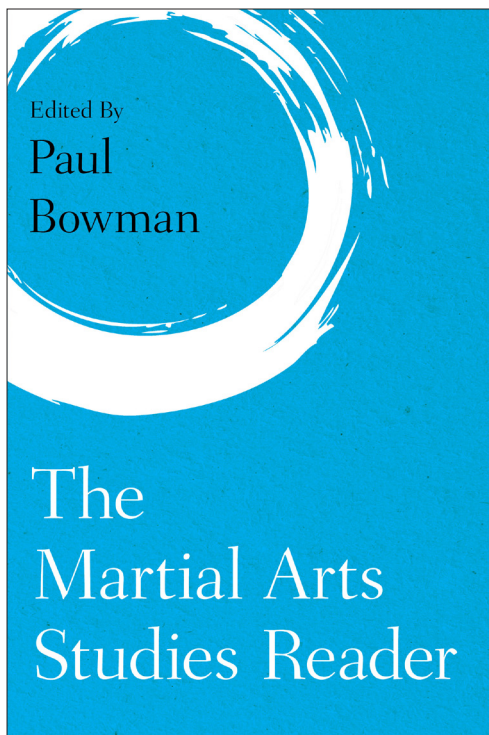
## The Martial Arts Studies Reader

Paul Bowman (ed.)

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## REVIEWER

*Qays Stetkevych is a doctoral student whose current research examines unarmed combat and grappling in the Norse Sagas.*

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In order to review something of the scope of and breadth of this multidisciplinary collection of essays, it may be practical to address *The Martial Arts Studies Reader* first on the macro-level, and then on the micro. With that in mind, this collection does a good job of covering the field in terms of topic matter and approaches to all things martial arts. As a result of the varying backgrounds, interests, and arguments put forth by the contributors to this collection, the question of 'what is martial arts (studies)?' is answered (both directly and indirectly) from an array of angles. Thanks to the clever and intentional ordering of the essays, what may have come across as a disjointed collection of vaguely martial-arts-related essays instead reads in a somewhat linear fashion, with several topic-specific threads weaving between and interconnecting otherwise disparate articles. *The Martial Arts Studies Reader* succeeds in its goal of trying to 'capture and convey something of the emerging constellation of martial arts studies'. With few exceptions, this collection poses an array of interesting and thought-provoking questions and central issues about the budding field of martial arts studies, and does so in a way that is generally accessible to martial artist, scholar, and layman alike. I will now go on to review the *Reader* on the micro-level, briefly moving through the essays in the order in which they are presented, as a way to structure this review.

Though in many ways reflecting my previous thoughts on the collection as a whole, the introductory chapter 'What, Where, and Why is Martial Arts Studies?', written by Paul Bowman (the editor of this collection), gives an ordered and general overview of the essays that are to follow, and how they fall in-line with the greater overarching aims of the *Reader*. Intentionally posing more questions than answers, this introduction serves to outline the objectives of the collection; namely, to showcase the potential range of scope of the field, as well as to 'ground, orientate, acclimatize and stimulate' ongoing and new research on martial arts studies.

Chapter 2, Peter Lorge's 'Early Chinese Works on Martial Arts' starts the collection off by giving the reader a brief history of 16<sup>th</sup> century (and earlier) China's rich tradition of martial arts: concentrating in particular on China's recorded and extant collection of martial arts histories. Through the surveying of imperial book collections, Lorge takes us from the earliest-known Chinese texts on martial arts from the Han Dynasty through to the imperial collections of the Ming Dynasty. Through this survey we can see the long-term popularity that martial arts manuals and studies shared in China, though it is of interest that the extant works are virtually exclusively about archery, almost to the exclusion of all other martial arts. I found of interest the section on *The Wrestling Record*, listed in *The Song Dynasty History* under the 'Essays and Minor Works' category of works – a seeming outlier in contrast to the dominance of archery. I also found of particular interest Lorge's postulation that the archery-centric nature of these collections stemmed from their being 'an appropriate topic' for properly

'Confucianized intellectuals'. Despite being far-removed from my area of expertise, I found this chapter to be quite consumable. A final, and clear, takeaway from this essay is also that earlier Chinese writers clearly had a different interest in martial arts than modern martial artists and scholars, and that this difference is reflected in what was written and collected, and by whom.

Douglas Wile's 'The Battlefield and the Bedroom: Chinese Martial Arts and Art of the Bedchamber' takes two activities that are clearly linked, yet rarely compared, and analyses and contrasts them at depth. This chapter draws numerous parallels between martial acts on the battlefield and carnal acts in the bedroom, the majority of which are quite compelling, if not immediately apparent. This chapter also touches on a cultural facet that I found interesting, comparing both 'Eastern' and 'Western' martial and sexual ideologies. In this regard I found the article to be quite fascinating, as, for example, the bedchamber concept of 'essence theft' can come off as quite foreign to Westerners, and yet when compared to more universal concepts on the battlefield, 'essence theft' becomes a more relatable concept. Wile's section on 'Martial Arts Fantasy Fiction: Essence Dueling and Sadomasochism' was also quite fascinating, as was his astute analysis of the political, social, and historical reasonings for the genre's re-emergence. Fascination aside, my objections to this chapter is twofold: First, many of the 'traditional' techniques and concepts come off as dripping with misogyny (and indeed, they are). This is not to in any way say that this is a reflection of the author's personal views, but rather that I am of the mind that the modern academic scene should aim to clarify and 'straighten out' such 'backward' ideologies when we see them, rather than to 'let them slide' under the guise of 'culture'. Secondly, although I did indeed find the comments interesting, some of the quotes (particularly a blogger called Sugar Britches musing about the sexual prowess of fellow aikidoka) came off as simply in poor taste. Again, anecdotal musings about training partners' level of sexual prowess are just that: anecdotal. I do not see the inherent academic merit in such musings (however intriguing they may be) and would prefer a more factually-grounded means of approaching the nonetheless interesting question.

Daniel Jaquet does a great job addressing the current academic state of affairs regarding European primary sources ('fight books') in his chapter 'Martial Arts by the Book: Late Medieval and Early Modern European Martial Arts'. In contrast to the Chinese imperial collections in Lorge's previous chapter, the 'fight books' referred to in this chapter were often pointedly created for the purpose of passing on specific techniques and fighting styles. As this is an area I am quite familiar with (as well as much of Jaquet's other work), I found little that was novel on the personal level, but thoroughly enjoyed what to me was a 'refresher course'. Perhaps the most profound concept to take away from this chapter is Jaquet's mantra 'inscription, description, codification': where inscription refers to the documenting of practice without didactic intent; description refers to the documenting of practice with evidence of didactic intent; and codification refers to the documenting of practice with encryption (where a technique is described in detail, yet in such a way as only those who can 'decipher' the terminology/are already 'in the know' are able to understand it). Furthermore, of particular note, Jaquet does a very good job in presenting this topic, and his approach to it, in a very 'user-friendly' manner: although the topic matter is very much specialist, it is intentionally described and explained in a manner that allows outsiders and the uninitiated to fully understand the rationale and concepts. This level of discourse is precisely what I feel martial arts studies needs to be aiming for.

Michael Molasky's 'The Phone Book Project: Tracing the Diffusion of Asian Martial Arts in America Through the Yellow Pages' is a straightforward project executed masterfully. Clear in intent and parameter, as well as realistic in its objectives, this piece was both interesting and entertaining. As the title would suggest, this chapter goes to great lengths in its dissection and analysis of the spread of Asian martial arts as evidenced through the Yellow Pages (US phone books) over time. Although not an immediately exhilarating title, the insights that Molasky gleans from this project are both revealing and convincing. He traces the roots

and dissemination of Asiatic martial arts in the US starting from the mid-1940s until 2000, complete with numerous ads for reference, and leaves little room for doubt in his conclusions. While following the general change in ads from 'Gymnasium' and 'Martial Arts Instruction' to 'karate', 'judo' and 'Kungfu' adverts, Molasky also takes into account cultural, geographical, and demographic information. Watching the once 'Asian' adverts (complete with 'chopstick writing') become more and more 'Americanized' ('Christian owned and operated'), through the sole use of phone directories, was an interesting experience, and serves as positive affirmation that the realm of martial arts studies can be approached from many versatile angles.

Chapter 6, Esther Berg-Chan's 'Martial Arts, Media, and (Material) Religion' left me scratching my head a bit – not in a 'lost in contemplation' sort of way, but rather in a 'who is the intended audience for this?' sort of way. That is not to say that the case studies and arguments within this chapter are without merit. Much could be said about them in a martial arts context (and indeed Berg-Chan approaches them in some interesting ways). Rather, the issue I take with this article is in its writing and argument style. The twelve pages of this chapter are so injected with elitist post-structuralist terminologies and phrases (with little in the way of explanation/definition) that I imagine them to be extremely difficult for the non-post-structuralist to grasp. After reading the article twice myself, I also find that, after a laborious amount of deciphering, I still cannot 'connect the dots' as to how certain parts of the argument relate to other parts, leaving me with the sense that some key points of logic/reason lie either hidden beneath layers of esoteric language or are simply missing altogether. On another, though not totally unrelated, note, I find the concept of conflating (to any degree) religion and martial arts problematic. Although Berg-Chan gives an ample clarification as to her intentions and the intended scope of the paper, I feel that as an academic field we should not dismiss the importance and veracity of 'truth claims'. Doing so, in conjunction with melding religion and martial arts, seems to at very least buttress the notion that one, and therefore the other, are beyond reproach. There are certainly plentiful interrelations (particularly in the cultural and social realms) between martial arts and religion, but discussing these relations in a setting that intentionally ignores their potential veracity goes against the very precepts of academic rigour. I don't say this to be dismissive or harsh towards the author, as this chapter would fit very well into other fields and contexts; but if the aim of this collection is to 'ground, orientate, acclimatize and stimulate' both ongoing and new research on martial arts in culture and society, then I feel that the inclusion of this arcane essay misses the mark.

For those of you already familiar with Benjamin Judkins or his work, 'Liminoid Longings and Liminal Belonging: Hyper-reality, History and the Search for Meaning in the Modern Martial Arts', comes as 'par for the course'. This chapter delivers high-level and thought-provoking insight on topics ranging from martial arts studies and contemporary social structures to ethnographic accounts of rites of passage in modern Western society: all under the guise of studying lightsabre combat. What really makes this chapter stand out, however, is the apparent ease in which Judkins explains, expands upon, and critiques a topic, before seamlessly connecting it to his next profound (yet often mundane) topic. This, in conjunction with his clear and layman-oriented way of writing, results in a refreshing and highly interesting, yet highly accessible, chapter. In answering the apparently simple questions of 'what sort of martial art is lightsabre combat?' and 'why would someone choose to practice it, given the many other, better established, combat systems that already exist?', Judkins takes the reader on an exploration of the complexities between liminoid and liminal martial arts practices, and examines all the baggage that unpacking these two through such a lens reveals. Lastly, in response to Judkins' pondering about why his instructor keeps reiterating that 'remember, this is all just for fun', I would posit that this kind of 'fun' is very akin to the kind of 'fun' one has in a haunted house, on a rollercoaster, or, in my own case, a grappling tournament or MMA sparring session. This sort of 'thrill-seeking' fun is, by its very nature, very much *not* fun for the vast majority of the population, yet the select few enjoy it immensely.

Janet O'Shea's "He's an Animal": Naturalizing the Hyper-real in Modern Combat Sport' is a fun and pleasant read from beginning to end, especially if you are a mixed martial arts fan. Spring-boarding off a discussion of MMA 'cage names' (nicknames) and their revealing nature about both the fighters' and fans' psyches, O'Shea moves on to the core of her argument, equating combat sports to 'high risk-play' as opposed to simply an extension of violence: a proposal that I wholeheartedly agree with. Although I enjoyed this chapter, there were some areas and claims that I felt could use some more explanation, or were convenient 'low hanging fruit' and not fully fleshed-out. For example, the statement 'Cage names that associate men with nature and women with technology or irony suggest that combat play is natural for men and constructed for women' refers in part to one of the most dominant female mixed martial artists in history, Cristiane Justino Venâncio, known better by her cage name, Cris Cyborg. The claim that this (type of) nickname implies that combat play is 'constructed in women' is unsubstantiated not only in that it (as with several other similar claims made in this essay) is based upon conjecture, but more conclusively so because it is relatively common knowledge that 'Cris Cyborg' got her nickname from her long-time husband, and also professional mixed martial artist, Evangelista 'Cyborg' Santos. This shows that not only did such a cage name *not* come from a sense that combat must be 'constructed in woman', but also sabotages the idea that this kind of technological name applies primarily to women. Regardless of such instances, I found many of the discussion points brought up in this essay to be quite (potentially) fruitful, especially towards the end. In particular, I found the argument that (high-risk) play allows its players to experience mastery as well as to negotiate failure to be particularly compelling, as well as the notion that a wide range of biological evidence suggests a predilection in nature 'not towards the competitive, lone, aggressive organism enacting dominance but towards a biological advantage conferred by sociality and shared labour'. I can easily foresee subjects such as these leading to important future discourse in martial arts studies.

Sixt Wetzler begins his chapter by briefly mapping (through the use of two German newspaper articles featuring kickboxers) society's general change in attitude to combat sport over the last three decades. Interestingly, he uses these examples to then show how polysystem theory can be used as a lens through which to view martial arts. The example here is that whereas kickboxing once held the position of scapegoat in the public's equation of martial arts to violence, MMA has now taken over that same position within the polysystem. Stemming from such examples, Wetzler goes on rather convincingly to argue how one of martial arts' primary purposes is in fact to function as a psychological coping strategy. This strategy, Wetzler argues, could prove more practical in one's everyday life than the actual physical knowledge of how to perform 'X' technique, as he goes on to question the possibility of whether or not someone can ever 'really' be prepared for the intense physical and psychological trauma that is violence. Once again, this chapter highlights several potential approaches to martial arts studies that could have resounding effects in future scholarship.

DS Farrer's chapter, 'Performance Ethnography', sets out to define its title, as well as several other interrelated key terms in his research, such as 'performance' and 'participant observation'. More than anything else, however, this chapter serves as a 'mini-handbook' for the aspiring ethnographer. Through detailed personal accounts, Farrer both cautions the reader about potential pitfalls in the ever-changing world of ethnography, and also gives some refreshing tips and tricks regarding 'best practice' advice on topics ranging from informed consent to how best to avoid ethical biases – and all delivered in his signature, relaxed tone. The chapter is rife with interesting advice, and gives a compelling argument as to why fields such as martial arts studies have until now been relegated 'to a sideline', and why they shouldn't be.

Alex Channon's chapter, 'Martial Arts Studies and the Sociology of Gender: Theory, Research and Pedagogical Application', aims to outline the various interrelations between martial arts studies and gender studies. He goes on to argue that gender studies could learn much by paying close attention to martial arts and combat

sports (MACS), primarily because of MACS' inherent embodiment, its symbolic proximity to matters of violence, and its frequent attempts to de-emphasize gender difference. Conversely, he also argues that martial arts studies would do well to not lose sight of the importance of gender in analyses. Although I agree with Cannon on virtually all such points as made in this chapter, I found some of the evidence used (the three examples on pages 161-2) to be problematic, in that it was both anecdotal and perhaps not reflective of prevalent issues within martial arts training. A participant's 'feeling' that a punch was 'fuelled with sexism and misogyny' has no bearing on the intent behind the punch, nor any business being used as an academic example to support the claim that it relates to. Furthermore, the recommendations (not by Cannon but by cited authors) on page 164 seem counterproductive in their insistence upon gender-specific training techniques within the martial arts. For some reason, these completely omit any mention of age-and-weight classes in training and competition: two almost universally-used 'equalizing' strategies. It seems somewhat schizophrenic to praise MACS' ability to 'de-gender' on the one hand, while simultaneously appearing to fixate on very gender-specific ways to implement training with MACS. Still, I strongly agree with Cannon on his closing statement that the use of such knowledge in applied interventions deserves to become a key focus as martial arts studies (and gender studies) research moves forward.

Dale C. Spencer's chapter, 'Masculinities, Bodies, and Martial Arts', draws extensively on the concept of corporeal realism in order to examine potential correctives to certain contemporary approaches to martial arts studies, and the understanding of men, masculinities and martial arts. Unfortunately, this chapter once again suffers from muddling esoteric language, and indeed, as a result the very definition of corporeal realism, and its potential impact upon martial arts studies, is lost upon the reader. Again, that is not to say that this article is without merit, or that the author did not achieve his desired result, but that in its current form it is mostly indecipherable to those not deeply initiated within post-structuralism. Although there are several interesting and engaging points, such as friendship's seemingly paradoxical role in martial arts training, the greater context and intertextuality of these points is made opaque by postmodern-esque word play. It seems an unrealistic ideal to suppose that language such as this will ever increase the allure or accessibility of martial arts studies moving forward.

In the chapter 'Martial Arts as Embodied, Discursive and Aesthetic Practice', Tim Trausch does an admirable job in analysing the divide between practice and discourse within martial arts studies through the lens of martial arts video games and media. In doing so he touches upon the paradox of using media as a departure point in discussing martial arts studies, asserting that at the crux of the issue may be the idea of 'representation' and its implied divide from, yet subordination to, 'the actual thing'. His at first seemingly far-fetched argument that martial arts video games (MAVs), and their mastery, is akin on many levels to actual martial arts and their respective mastery only gets more convincing as the chapter goes on. Indeed, he goes on to competently argue, through the support of examples from the neurosciences, that watching or playing martial arts-related media activates one's motor system in much the same way as physically performing the action would. To conclude his argument, Trausch states that, through martial arts media such as film and video games, we are presented with a 'dynamic network of associations' that move across and assemble references to martial arts as embodied, aesthetic, and discursive practice. This article seemingly leaves open a portal of near-endless possibilities for future multi-media research directions within the budding field of martial arts studies.

Luke White addresses the cultural and social underpinnings to the success of the kung fu comedies of the mid-to-late 1970's in his article, 'Carnival of the Drunken Master: The Politics of the Kung Fu Comedic Body'. In doing so, White maps the socio-political happenings in Hong Kong in conjunction with the rise and fall of Bruce Lee's box-office supremacy (in Hong Kong). Intersecting with these occurrences, White further outlines the cultural backdrop that he argues led to the success of the carnivalesque kung fu comedies at the



box-office at the expense of the more nationalist, anti-colonial Bruce Lee films. My only contention with White's argument is that the movie-going experience of watching the carnivalesque kung fu comedies, to my mind, does not empower the audience and reinforce their identity, but rather further engrains them in the subordinate position of 'consumer' within the capitalist machine. Rather refreshingly, White discusses this very objection within the essay, further lending it a well-rounded and thought-out appeal. Over all, White has done an excellent job in using the comparison of two Hong Kong movie genres to highlight the contemporary post-colonial aesthetics, one that sheds a light on a conducive way forward for martial arts studies to interact with popular culture and media.

Lastly, *The Martial Arts Studies Reader* wraps-up with a conversation between two icons in the field: the editor of the collection, Paul Bowman, and Meaghan Morris, in a chapter entitled 'Learning from Martial Arts'. In this interesting back-and-forth conversation, ranging from topics as disparate as Derrida and Pilates to the general appeal of martial arts, both scholars expand upon what got them interested in martial arts in the first place, and what direction they think (or wish) martial arts studies is heading. I found particularly interesting the conversation that revolved around the aspect of stretching and practice, and how these otherwise mundane techniques, when executed under different conditions can become sublime in an almost religious sense. Overall, it is both a pleasant read and experience to get a little 'behind-the-scenes' look into the minds of two such scholars in the field, and this chapter serves as a nice 'capping-off' of the otherwise academically intense reading preceding it.

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