

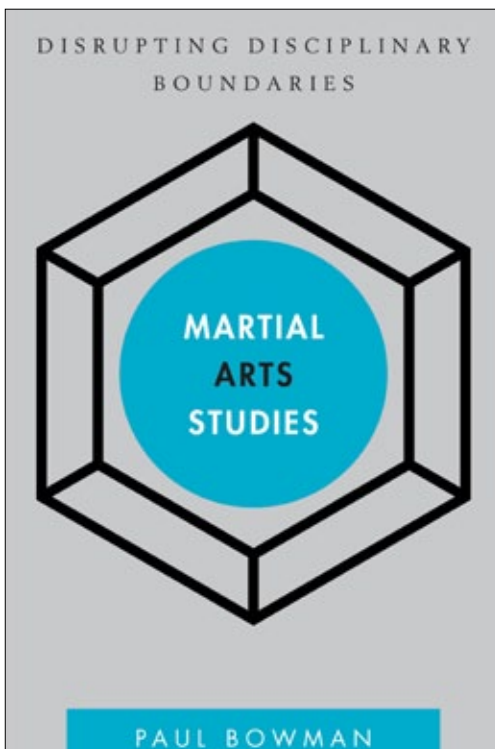
BOOK REVIEW

Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries

Paul Bowman

Rowman and Littlefield International, 2015

208 pages \$32.95 /£22.95



REVIEWER

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DOI

10.18573/j.2015.10024

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

(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 'allochroism' [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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cardiffuniversitypress.org

Journal DOI

10.18573/ISSN.2057-5696

Issue DOI

10.18573/n.2015.10013

Martial Arts Studies

Journal design by Hugh Griffiths