

# BOOK REVIEW

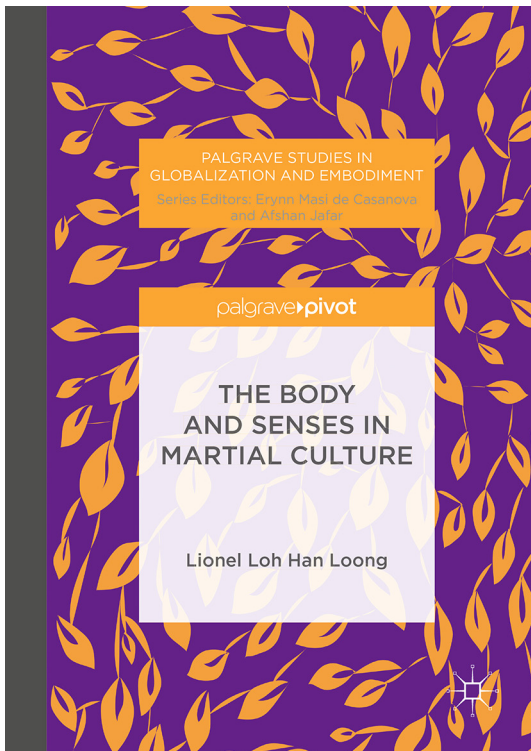
---

The Body and Senses in Martial Culture

Lionel Loh Han Loong

Palgrave Macmillan, 2016

137 pages



Lionel Loh Han Loong's ethnographic study of muay thai training explores the experiences of short-term migrant practitioners in Thailand, based at the Kwaan-saa-maat Gym in the rural province of Ubon Ratachathani, which Loong tells us lies in 'relative isolation' from the country's 'touristy locations' [18] regularly frequented by foreigners. In this sense, the gym holds a certain appeal as an authentic destination for practicing muay thai, epitomising the goal of many globetrotting martial arts consumers as they go about their search for 'traditional', fully immersive experiences of training in the geographically-bounded spaces out of which any given discipline is assumed to have originally emerged. Although such notions of authenticity, tourism and globalised consumerism are not the primary focus of Loong's analysis, the gym's geographic and symbolic location make this an exciting (even if not completely original) site for gathering ethnographic data on the lived experience of contemporary martial artists.

Organising his work primarily as a study of embodiment, Loong actually chooses to focus on a three-fold analysis of masculinity, liminality, and Norbert Elias' notion of the civilising process. There are two main arguments put forth in this short text which, as I read them, coalesce around the following points: firstly, the men who are training at Kwaan-saa-maat Gym undergo a liminal experience by putting aside 'their inhibitions of the civilising process' [10] for a fixed time while training in a thoroughly masculinised space. Secondly, understanding such lived experiences requires an embodied approach to research (and writing) which, Loong claims, has largely been missing from research on martial arts to date.

As these arguments were outlined within the first two chapters, I felt a sense of disappointment with what I had initially hoped would be an original addition to the fast-developing field of martial arts studies. Sadly, as I detail below, Loong's book does not offer anything particularly new, and is more noteworthy as an example of missed opportunities and analytical errors than the kind of agenda-setting text that one would expect of an ethnographic monograph. In particular, there are two main faults to call to light here, which I will address in turn.

Firstly, Loong begins the text with a short and far-from-comprehensive literature review. Leading with the claim that 'martial arts are often analysed in a discursive manner by researchers who are not themselves practitioners' [4] and developing an argument that suggests issues around bodies and embodiment have been ignored by scholars of martial arts, he overlooks a plethora of recent (and not-so-recent)

---

## REVIEWER

Alex Channon, University of Brighton

## DOI

10.18573/j. 2017.10102

ethnographic studies that in fact do exactly what he claims is missing.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps most notably, these include two recent, edited volumes on martial arts and embodiment [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011; Sánchez García and Spencer 2013], one of which was *exclusively* written by practitioner-researchers using ethnographic methods and both of which feature chapters on muay thai training in Thailand. Strangely, while not counting them in his initial analysis of the state of the field, Loong does go on to cite several other ethnographic studies later in the text, which begs the question as to why these – along with the preceding work that their authors would have built them on – weren't considered earlier in the piece.

By not having incorporated such work into his initial assessment, Loong's study unfortunately falls into the trap of assuming originality in a fairly saturated empirical space. Despite the (relative) uniqueness of the research setting, the study ends up being yet another discussion of (mostly) Western men's body projects, theorised largely around the apparent 'violence' and 'masculinity' of combat sports. Within both the sociology of sport and martial arts studies literature, this is now a very well-trodden path, meaning little of the data presented throughout the rest of the text did much to surprise or excite. By failing to engage properly with previous work, Loong has arrived rather late to a party that he claims to be throwing all by himself.

The second key issue relates to weaknesses within the book's core analytical themes. Here, the overstated, loosely theorised and under-evidenced discussion of 'masculinity' was particularly frustrating. In many sections of the book, 'masculine' almost becomes a synonym for 'fighter'. With one or two exceptions, Loong consistently used this term without justification vis-à-vis what the participants themselves actually thought about masculinity, let alone about gender more broadly. This is out of step with his claimed commitment to the ethnographic method: while 'fighting' might generally be coded 'masculine' in wider societal contexts, the social construction and negotiation of gender within specific martial arts subcultures and across the 'increasingly globalised martialscape' [102] needs to be considered before we can assign such meaning to any given community of practice.

This is especially the case in the 2010s, given the increasing prominence of women as regular practitioners but also elite fighters in many combat sport disciplines, and the development of competing discourses of femininity and masculinity that their visibility has inspired. Without clearly showing that it carries these meanings for participants, it makes little sense to assert 'masculinity' as a central, organising principle of gym life. At best, Loong is guilty here of not providing enough data to support his position on a contentious issue; at worst, he is complicit in essentialising the identity and behaviours associated with 'being a fighter' as masculine objects.

Meanwhile, the handling of Elias' notion of 'civilising processes' weakens Loong's argument around the 'liminal' quality of the gym as a social space. A simplistic (mis)reading of Elias' thesis is to argue that any form of interpersonal violence is illustrative of a departure from the project of advancing civilisation, and Loong consistently makes this mistake. In fact, it is central to his argument around training at the gym as a liminal experience, which is theorised here largely in terms of a temporary departure from normality (which is itself odd, given that the majority of his respondents are either professional fighters or long-term martial arts practitioners).

While Loong provides a decent discussion of Eliasian theory in abstract terms, his analytical application lacks

---

1 It is worth noting that Loong's claims about the lack of embodied sociological research on martial arts repeats a tendency among contemporary writers (most often, male writers) to completely ignore the vast body of feminist literature on women's self-defence training [see, for instance, McCaughey 1997; Thomson 2010; Hollander 2015]. Much of this is based on ethnographic research and is concerned centrally with the politics of the body, making it ideal theoretical, methodological and substantive material for informing current research trends in our field, especially those focusing on gender.

nuance, overlooking the key contribution that it might bring to martial arts studies. In essence, the notion that sparring 'goes against the civilising process' [55] misses the ways in which this practice of fighting is actually highly 'civilised' in the Eliasian sense. The equation of sparring and 'violence' is likely at fault here; Loong needed to consider the notion of mimesis in greater depth, and question the extent to which sparring involves a 'controlled de-controlling' of inhibitions [Elias and Dunning 1986] and can be interpreted as an ironic epitome, rather than obvious antithesis, of our everyday 'civilised' behaviour.<sup>2</sup> Without interrogating the deeper meaning of Elias' theory, the resulting analysis is left feeling fairly superficial.

Although I've found much to critique in this text, it would be inaccurate and unfair to suggest the book is without merit at all. Particularly, although the last substantive chapter was considerably shorter than the others, it was here that I felt Loong's discussion started to move onto stronger ground, and the conclusion was also neatly written. I was interested by his discussion of globalisation and its effects on the de-territorialisation of martial arts, while the paradox inherent in seeking 'authentic', traditional experiences whilst also adhering to a strict doctrine of efficacy regarding the value of any given technique or method represents an intriguing question of its own. I would have liked the discussion of these issues to have been more of a central focus for the text overall. While Loong isn't the first to write about them, it would seem that his fieldwork and research site would stand to make a more meaningful contribution to such debates than to those he eventually focused on here.

Ultimately, my feeling is that this study would probably have been better written up as a series of journal articles – something the author may yet pursue in future. This would've given him the benefit of a more robust, pre-publication peer review process, and it would've arguably made for a more fitting format within which to publish 'more of the same' data regarding now-familiar discussions of the embodied experiences of men training in combat sports. This text should remind us that the development of martial arts studies will depend upon our ability to shape future projects around, or in response to, the knowledge and arguments already forwarded by others, but also on carefully developed, academically sound theorising. Both of these elements seem to me to be missing here, unfortunately scuppering what might've been a highly informative report on a relatively under-researched and fascinating phenomenon in contemporary, commodified, globalised martial arts culture.

---

2 A recent study that represents a fantastic example of Eliasian analysis of mimetic violence and martial arts is Neil Gong's [2015] study of a no-rules fighting group in California.

## REFERENCES

Elias, Norbert and Eric Dunning [eds]. 1986. *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Farrer, Douglas S. and John Whalen-Bridge [eds]. 2011. *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Gong, Neil. 2015. 'How to Fight Without Rules: On Civilized Violence in "De-Civilized" Spaces', *Social Problems*, 1-18.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spv014>

Hollander, Jocelyn. 2015. 'Outlaw Emotions: Gender, Emotion and Transformation in Women's Self-Defence Training', in *Global Perspectives on Women in Combat Sports: Women Warriors around the World*, edited by Alex Channon and Christopher R. Matthews, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 187-203.

McCaughey, Martha. 1997. *Real Knockouts: The Physical Feminism of Women's Self-Defense*. New York: New York University Press.

Sánchez García, Raul and Dale C. Spencer [eds]. 2013. *Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports*. London: Anthem.

Thomson, Martha E. 2010. 'Empowering Self-Defense Training', *Violence Against Women* 20.3, 351-359.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801214526051PMid:24686126>

MARTIALARTSSTUDIES.ORG

TWITTER.COM/MASTUDIES

# MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

## EDITORS

Paul Bowman  
Benjamin N. Judkins

## EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Kyle Barrowman

To discuss publication or to submit  
a paper please contact:

[martial.arts.studies@gmail.com](mailto:martial.arts.studies@gmail.com)

## EDITORIAL ADVISORY PANEL

Oleg Benesch *University of York*  
Stephen Chan *SOAS*  
Greg Downey *Macquarie University*  
D.S. 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 London*  
Felipe P. Jocano Jr *University of the Philippines*  
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*  
Phillip Zarrilli *Exeter University, Emeritus*

## ABOUT THE JOURNAL

**Martial Arts Studies** is an open access journal, which means that all content is available without charge to the user or his/her institution. You are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles in this journal without asking prior permission from either the publisher or the author.



The journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Original copyright remains with the contributing author and a citation should be made when the article is quoted, used or referred to in another work.



Cardiff University Press  
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

**Martial Arts Studies** is an imprint of Cardiff University Press, an innovative open-access publisher of academic research, where 'open-access' means free for both readers and writers.  
[cardiffuniversitypress.org](http://cardiffuniversitypress.org)

### Journal DOI

10.18573/ISSN.2057-5696

### Issue DOI

10.18573/n.2017.10091

**Martial Arts Studies**

Journal design and production by Hugh Griffiths