

# EDITORIAL

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## INTRODUCTION

At the time of writing, as we make the final preparations to publish issue 9 of *Martial Arts Studies* in Spring 2020, the world's media, health organisations and governments are telling us that we are standing on the brink of a global pandemic of the coronavirus, COVID-19. We do not yet know how this will play out. Yet we can learn a lot from the media messages we have been given, that are ostensibly about this new virus, but that are also about many other things. These narratives centre on far older concerns, and they have consequences.

One narrative has a very familiar shape. The origin of this new enemy was in the East, in China. From there it began to spread, like a new 'yellow peril' – marching, moving, contaminating, growing in force inexorably and yet invisibly – like the sinister, Chinese-led, anti-Western crime network depicted in Sax Rohmer's imperialistic British *Fu-Manchu* novels of the early twentieth century. Certain individuals, including the United States Senator Tom Cotton, have even wondered whether we are witnessing the escape of a Chinese biological weapon. Luckily such openly conspiratorial accusations have, so far, been rare.

Uncannily like *Fu Manchu's* evil network, the destructive force of the coronavirus is actually enabled by the global system it threatens, as it is unwittingly smuggled along with and profits from the hypermobility of business travellers, tourists and other cosmopolitan citizens. In being spread by the globalised network of advanced capitalism, the invisible yet still somehow 'yellow' peril strikes at world markets, causing not only illness and increased mortality, but also economic crisis and potential state lockdowns of unknown duration.

In response, we have seen many disturbing things. Firstly, a rise in racism. China itself has been blamed. The Chinese treatment of animals has resurfaced as a familiar theme. 'Hence', there has been a rise in anti-Chinese and anti-Asian abuse, with increased racist physical attacks reported in many cities in diverse countries.

At the same time, subtle kinds of nationalist reinvention are capitalizing on the situation. In the face of fears of hand-to-hand transmission, different countries have proposed alternative forms of greeting to the (Western) handshake. China has urged its citizens to use the fist-in-

palm *gong shou* gesture long associated with traditional Chinese martial arts. Many countries – including South Korea, the home of taekkyeon and taekwondo – are encouraging people to tap feet together.

All of which raises important questions for those interested in the globalization and social function of the East Asian (and particularly Chinese) martial arts, not least because an examination of media stories suggests that the actual practice of these systems has been drawn into all of this. Quarantines, public space/event closures and travel restrictions have taken a toll on all sorts of organizations and classes. At the same time, global citizens have been treated to the sight of gowned and masked nurses leading isolated hospital patients through taijiquan training sessions in an attempt to maintain a healthy level of activity and boost immune systems.

Other news outlets have broadcast features across China suggesting that martial arts practice is an ideal form of exercise for small indoor spaces. The unspoken implications of this lie heavy in the air. Not only can the martial arts be pressed into service as a type of national health regime in times of crises, but they can also serve as a means to deal with the anxieties that COVID-19 – and the media messages about it – spread. Managing a society-wide sense of uncertainty transmitted by so many means is, on some level, a critical aspect of managing the disease itself. Perhaps it is understandable that in times of globalized risks we see a social and political pressure for closures of all kinds: of borders, movement, public spaces, and forms of sociality. Yet a knee-jerk response like this is surely an incorrect one. Turning inward deprives us of the insights, cooperation and resources needed to tackle a global crisis.

As China strives to deal with the continuing social fallout of the crisis, we will almost certainly see more government sponsored features on martial arts, food and other aspects of traditional culture that are generally popular with global audiences. Rather than dismissing such efforts as 'mere propaganda', we ought to remember that the martial arts have often functioned as a pathway for the establishment of communities of common interest between East and West. While it is easy to pick apart the sorts of cultural or historical myths that have gone along with this, the relationships of trust and reciprocity that they have created, both within states and between them, are very real. It might be too much to suggest that these sorts of practices function as a vaccine against the fears and biases that emerge in the wake of a crisis, but such institutions are nevertheless central to the recovery that inevitably comes. This was true in the 1950s, it was true in the 1970s, and it will likely also be true today.

But even within global processes, we each retain agency in the face of events and discourses, in terms of our choices. A racist will always find grounds to be racist, just as a nationalist will always find grounds to be nationalist. Choosing to bow, bump elbows or tap shoes together may mean little other than the compulsion to ritualise social interactions by any means available. But while the meanings of some conventions may be empty, open or variable, certain others may be almost impossible to dissociate from established ideological connotations – just think of the connotations attached to snapping to attention and clicking the heels together, for instance.

What all of this throws into relief in so many ways is the complex global interconnectedness of our lives – of the major in the minor and the minor in the major, the trivial in the serious and the serious in the trivial, and one part of the world in all of the others. Just as martial arts are always imbricated within complex discourses and formations, martial arts studies is nothing if not a laboratory for exploring what our practices reveal about the interconnectedness of global society.

## COVERAGE

Issue 9 of *Martial Art Studies* demonstrates the disciplinary breadth and heterogeneity of the field itself, in the form a range of articles employing diverse methodological and theoretical approaches. Alex Channon (University of Brighton) opens the issue by asking why people engage in seemingly violent activities such as modern combat sports with those whom they simultaneously claim to respect and admire. To address these issues, he turns to Stephen Lyng's concept of 'edgework' and seeks to interrogate and problematize the concept of violence within sports like the mixed martial arts. In addition to addressing core issues regarding an important phenomenon in popular culture, the theoretical concepts raised in this article will be interesting to researchers in many areas of martial arts studies.

In 'The 52 Hand Blocks, Sexual Dominance, and Mother Dear as Archetype' Thomas A. Green (Texas A&M University) stages an investigation of folklore in a predominantly African American martial art which arose within the US prison system during the second half of the twentieth century. His exploration of various origin stories (often focusing on motifs of sexual violence and dominance) opens the way for an exploration of the psychological and social function of the anti-hero in broader African American oral traditions.

Continuing the theme of New World martial arts, José Cairus (University of Santa Catarina) presents a detailed study of the role of nationalism, class-conflict and immigration in the Gracies' creation of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu (BJJ). This study follows the fortunes of three brothers from the middle years of the 1930s–1940s. Cairus argues that Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu is the direct outcome of clashes pitting the Gracies against Japanese immigrants, all of which occurred against a background of the radical nationalism, violence and ideological polarization accompanying the rise of the Estado Novo dictatorship.

Karl Bennett and William W. Dressler (both of the University of Alabama) continue the discussion of BJJ with a paper titled 'Variation in Cultural Consensus Between Expert and Novice in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu Athletes'. By employing diverse methodological tools, they conclude that the performance and strategic choices of novice athletes on the mat is guided by shared understandings of positional dominance, which are then drilled to the point of embodied reflexivity. High belt-ranked expert athletes, on the other hand, find that relying exclusively on this cultural model of strategy impedes their performance in competition. These individuals are forced to develop personal strategies and fluidity within the context of a cultural model that can be adapted to specific opponents and circumstances.

Pedagogical and technical issues are also central to the article presented by E. H. Hofmeister (Auburn University), B. A. McCullick, P. D. Tomporowski, and P. G. Schempp (all of the University of Georgia). They begin by noting that within the traditional martial arts instructors typically acquire their teaching skills through an informal apprenticeship process. Contending that this leads to poor pedagogical techniques, they then attempt to measure improvements in teaching outcomes as instructors advance through the ranks from first to fifth degree black belts. In general, they find that there is a positive correlation between instructors' rank and their teaching ability.

In 'Navigating the Rocky Road: Elite Female Boxers' Perceptions of Their Boxing Journey', Shakiba Oftadeh-Moghadam (University of Portsmouth), Catherine Phipps (Solent University), Richard Thelwell and Neil Weston (both of the University of Portsmouth) provide the field with a much needed bottom-up examination of the life experiences of female boxers. They also provide specific policy recommendations to facilitate greater developmental opportunities. These include the provision of a women's boxing programme at the elite level and an increase in media promotion of women's boxing, which may help governing bodies nurture their female amateur boxers. However, they caution that more research is needed examining those who support these athletes (e.g. coaches, parents and sport science/medicine practitioners) to provide a truly holistic evaluation of female boxers' lived experiences and to understand how best to support them throughout their careers.

All who are interested in the development of Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) will be pleased to note that the next paper, authored by Daniel Jaquet (University of Bern), provides a comparative exploration of the important texts produced by the Early Modern German fencing enthusiast Paulus Hector Mair. Jaquet's essential project is to sweep away the notion of Japan and China as the exclusive cradle of globalized martial culture through a review of the interest in European fight books in Asia. His article echoes the recent interest in comparative studies on fight books stemming from Asia, Europe and the Americas, but also points out potential sources of bias.

Douglas Wile (City University of New York) concludes this issue with a thought-provoking and wide-ranging essay titled 'The Martial Spirit: Ethos, Ideology, and Identity in the Chinese Martial Arts'. Although written before the emergence of COVID-19, some of the points raised in Wile's important article bear upon the issues that opened our editorial. For instance, Wile notes that our current notions of 'Martial spirit' (*shangwu jingshen*) first emerged as a discursive trope during the late nineteenth century, as China faced the existential threat of internal rebellion, Western and Japanese imperialism and a moribund Manchu dynasty, during which time China's self-image as the 'Central Kingdom' gave way to the international reputation as the 'Sick Man of Asia'.

Wile sets out the terms of an ever-evolving cultural debate which has been reconstructed and re-imagined over time, until the present conjuncture in which we see expansionist policies on the one hand and separatist movements on the other, and a former ideological belligerence replaced by trade wars and arms races. He argues that, seeing the West as a declining civilization, China flexes its muscle, even amidst persistent fears about going soft. The martial arts themselves have been deeply implicated in each stage of this process.

## **CONCLUSION**

The contents of this issue make it clear that the ebbs and flows of globalization have had a profound impact on the martial arts. Moreover, these exchanges have never been simple and unidirectional. Coming to terms with the social implications of this requires a commitment to interdisciplinary research that fully embraces the values of methodological and conceptual diversity. Indeed, the strength of this issue reminds us that openness and free exchange continues to be our best strategy for facing the threats that challenge our deeply interconnected world.

## **CODA**

*Martial Arts Studies*, issue 7 (Winter 2018), published the article, 'The Creation of Wing Tsun: A German Case Study', by S. Körner, M.S Staller, and B. N. Judkins. On 16 July 2019, the editors received the following note from Master Kernspecht with regard to that article. He wrote:

While I enjoyed the recent case study of the development of Wing Chun and the EWTO in Germany by Körner, Staller and Judkins (published in Issue 7 of *Martial Arts Studies*), I feel strongly compelled to offer my own clarification on one critical point. It is not true that I switched loyalty from Sifu Joseph Cheng to Sifu Leung Ting in 1976 as reported by the authors. Rather, it was Sifu Cheng who approached me and said:

'I cannot teach you anymore. I would like you to continue your studies with the best student of Yip Man in Hong Kong, with Leung Ting Sifu!'

This was exactly what our Chinese translator said. Of course, it was a kind of polite excuse as perhaps Sifu Cheng believed he should no longer teach a non-Chinese student. I was always the only Caucasian in class. Indeed, I had to persuade him every day anew by bringing him a big bottle of Johnny Walker Whisky. To which he always said: 'Ok, but only today!'

The authors and editors thank Master Kernspecht for this clarification.

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