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Eyebrows raise. Sometimes there are sniggers. Glances are exchanged. Some people look confused. Some say ‘what?’ People seem surprised. ‘Martial arts?’, they ask, incredulously. ‘Why?’ Or even, ‘Martial arts studies? What is that?’ These kinds of reactions come from all sorts of people – whether academics or not. No one ever just nods and says, ‘Oh, ok’, the way they would if you’d just said Romantic poetry or urban planning or philosophy or music or fluid dynamics, or the way they might even if you’d just said that you ‘do’ one of the many obscure and often peculiarly named branches of modern science (whether neuroparasitology, nutrigenomics, clidynamics, or something even more unexpected).

Sometimes there is surprise and delight. Sometimes there are other sentiments (to be confirmed). A lot of it – whether shock, delight, dismay, concern, or confusion – should be unsurprising, really. On the one hand, people are used to hearing about the familiar subjects of the arts, humanities, and social sciences – the old, traditional fields. On the other hand, when it comes to the sciences, people almost expect to hear of new and unintelligible fields with exotic Latinate names, involving odd prefixes combined with all kinds of ‘ologies’, ‘ographies’, ‘omatics’, ‘otics’, ‘amics’, and ‘omics’. We measure our social progress through this ever-rising spiral of technical specialization.

But martial arts as a field of academic study? Martial arts studies? This kind of thing sounds highly dubious to most ears. It doesn’t seem to need explanation as much as it needs justification. What reason could there be for the existence of something so … so what? Words come out of the woodwork: iffy, dodgy, nerdy, niche, weird, boyish, hobbyist, or – of course – trivial.

What triviality is martial arts studies? What indulgence? What narcissism, navel gazing, nothingness, even naughtiness is this?

Our questions may seem hyperbolical. But we recall a rhetorical question posed by Stuart Hall about cultural studies in the very early 1990s, in an essay written at the height of the era of the full horror of the AIDS epidemic. Hall asks: ‘Against the urgency of people dying in
the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies?' [Hall 1992: 285]. Hall posed this question to illustrate the marginality and ineffectuality of academics who saw themselves as working in a field that sought to make a real difference to the world, a real difference in the world – because, as another famous thinker famously put it, surely the point is not merely to interpret or understand the world, ‘the point is to change it’.

Is martial arts studies ‘mere’ interpretation? Is it only empirical observation? Or might it be something more?

There are other interpretations of our academic obligations than this, of course [Wetzler 2015]. One does not have to struggle to change the world to work in academia. Indeed, one caricature of the academic figure is he or she who retreats from the world, who hides in books, who is indeed incompetent in the ‘real world’. Nonetheless, whether our understanding of our academic activities boils down either to trying to interpret the world or to trying to change the world, what in God’s name is the point of martial arts studies?

Shortly after publishing my first book on Bruce Lee in 2010 [Bowman 2010], I was discussing my future research plans with a senior colleague. I stated my interest in developing further some of the lines of enquiry opened up by my work on Bruce Lee. (No one was talking about ‘martial arts studies’ then. It wasn’t yet a ‘thing’ [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011].) In response, my colleague said, with a kind of paternal or avuncular concern (that suggested he thought I might be making a big mistake), ‘Yeah, but that’s just a bit…’ and with a wince and a shrug and an expression that said, ‘You know what I mean, don’t you? Don’t make me say it’, his sentence tailed off, inviting me, obliging me, to finish it in my head myself. One word leapt up for the job: Trivial. ‘That sort of thing is just a bit [trivial’.

Of course, we know where he was coming from. Two places. A nexus, or chiasmus. Two forces converged, driving his opinion. Two fields of legitimation. The first work is the general force that has been exerting itself on the arts, humanities, and social sciences since at least the 1960s. This might be called the force of the political. Specifically, it is the force of the increasing consensus that grew to a crescendo by the final decades of the twentieth century, which held that the way to study something, the way to justify giving attention to something, the way to redeem something and to elevate it to legitimacy in the university, was to show that it was political [Young 1992; Readings 1996].

The second force in play in my colleague’s words was the age-old sense that, to borrow a phrase, ‘that just ain’t how we do things around here’. In many departments, the obligation to work within the paradigm of the political has been interpreted and assumed in a very particular (literal and direct) way, and Bruce Lee and martial arts don’t obviously, or self-evidently, fit within that space.

This is not to say that Bruce Lee or martial arts were necessarily anathema to that space. But such objects of attention were always likely to be filed as ‘niche’. In a heavily journalism-focused school of ‘Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies’, Bruce Lee and martial arts could be made to ‘fit in’ – as part of the general non-journalism background of media studies and cultural studies. But not as a
particular central part even of them. Bruce Lee or other things related to martial arts would always fall into the subcategories of 'film', on the one hand, and 'popular culture' (or, worse, fan/subculture), on the other. Indeed, such foci would arguably fall further, into such unspoken or unspeakable sub-subcategories as non-serious film, and playful – or trivial – popular culture.1 Even the historical study of these subjects tends to focus on questions of the 'social' and 'local', rather than the more prestigious (and properly political) categories of military, diplomatic, or national history.

The problem is that the kinds of things that the subject of martial arts seems to open out onto are exactly the kinds of things that a few decades ago caused problems for the image and reputation of the fledgling fields of media studies and cultural studies. They are the kinds of things that once caused people to regard media studies and cultural studies as 'Mickey Mouse subjects' – i.e., non-serious, non-central, non-important: trivial [Young 1999]. Likewise, the sociology of sport and other recreational pursuits never seem to carry the same prestige as core topics like economic class or religion.

The salvation or salvaging of the reputations of media studies and cultural studies came in the form of the quiet victory within the university of the idea that more or less everything is contingent and hence more or less political [Mowitt 2003]. Politics – or, more precisely, 'the political' – became the sign under which certain previously excluded, overlooked, ignored, or disparaged things could justifiably and hence legitimately be studied [Marchart 2007]. Women's things, ethnic minorities' things, postcolonial things, working class things, local things, new things, controversial things, and so on.

Unfortunately, it takes about three stages of argument to persuade the uninitiated that things to do with martial arts, like, say, Bruce Lee, are in some sense political and hence in some sense important and hence worthy of at least some kind of academic time and attention [Bowman 2010; Judkins and Nielson 2015]. This means that, even if everything is equal in the eyes of the paradigm of the political (because everything is in some sense political), it is still a hell of a lot easier to show that some parts of media, culture, and society are 'self-evidently' political and hence important. These include such 'obviously political' parts of media, culture, and society as, say, serious news journalism, serious policy debates, protest, and so on.

So, things like journalism, news media, and protest, along with matters of gender and race and disability in representation, and so on, are easy to perceive as proper objects or fields to be privileged. This is because they are easy to regard as being somehow closer to politics or the political – or 'more political' – than certain other kinds of media and other kinds of cultural practice – like, for example, martial arts.

The fact that all things are potentially equal within the paradigm of the political does not mitigate the fact that it will always take about three argumentative steps to prove or persuade someone that martial

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1 People who are into things from popular culture – and even people who study such things – are regularly regarded as 'fans'; but people who are heavily into, say, broadsheet journalism or politics or news media are never called 'fans.' You never have a 'fan' of The Times or of the labour movement.
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Our anecdotes involve senior colleagues conveying a judgement that may be regarded as intentionally or unintentionally subtly seeking to discourage a junior colleague from pursuing a certain style or orientation of work. Norms and values are being implied here: good things to do and less good things to do.

Of course, this anecdote is just an anecdote. But we could follow it up with quite a few others. In fact, our opening words were a distillation of many possible anecdotes. But, what is the status of such anecdotes? And what of the innumerable possible counter-balancing anecdotes that could be considered?

In a rightly renowned essay called ‘Banality in Cultural Studies’, Meaghan Morris says that anecdotes ‘are not expressions of personal experience, but allegorical expositions of a model of the way the world can be said to be working. So anecdotes need not be true stories, but they must be functional in a given exchange’ [Morris 1988: 7].

Our anecdotes seek to say something about the way at least some parts of the world can be said to be working, at least in relation to the academic study of martial arts. Of course, the world of human interactions and conversational exchanges can be seen as an almost infinite ocean of potential anecdotes, so are we merely singling out only the reactions that suit our purpose? Indeed, are we maybe being a bit too sensitive to any perceived criticism of our shared field of work, whether real or imagined, no matter how slight the sleight may be, when evaluated according to more objective yardsticks? Do we protest too much?

Maybe so, but even if we are being hyperbolic, or making a mountain out of a molehill, we believe that there will nonetheless be some value in the exercise of reflecting on the problem posed. Indeed, it is arguably the case that any and all serious, rigorous, and sustained academic treatment of anything must necessarily magnify and intensify the object of attention’s status – and, in other words, make a mountain out of it, even when we know it is not a mountain, even if it really is a molehill. To someone seriously studying molehills, a molehill is a mountain, at least, if not bigger and more significant. In fact, to someone studying molehills, a mountain may be entirely insignificant.

To put all of this in slightly different terms: is there an issue here that is larger, more far reaching or significant than these anecdotes themselves and their local interpretation? How do they connect with ways that the world might be working, and what might be the significance, importance, or consequences of that?

Elsewhere in ‘Banality in Cultural Studies’, Morris discusses the dynamics of the then relatively new (and still very Japanese) term ‘boom’ – as in, ‘economic boom’. As Morris notes via a variety of
examples, in a period of boom, a certain kind of explosion in activity often goes hand in hand with another kind of limitation or prohibition. In her words, a boom involves not only ‘passion and activity’ but also ‘a pre-emptive prohibition and limitation of activity’ [1988: 5]. As such, in a boom, there are ample opportunities for the exploration and expansion of activities that are popular (or booming). But, by the same token, any attempts to engage in non-boom activities are likely to be met with blank stares, closed doors, and dead ends.

In thinking about the features of a boom, Morris argues that there is a significant ‘difference between the Japanese concept of cultural boom, and the older European notion of “fashion”’ [1988: 4]. Relating it to academia, she observes:

The notion of ‘intellectual fashion’ ... is usually used to denigrate passion and enthusiasm as ‘fickle’ – in order to imply that real, solid scholarship is going on somewhere in spite of the market, within which it will nonetheless find its true place of recognition once the fuss of fashion subsides. A boom, however, overtly defines and directs what can be done at a given moment. [Indeed] booms positively shape the possible, by stabilising a temporary horizon in relation to which one cannot claim a position of definite exteriority, [meaning that] it also becomes possible to think more carefully the politics of one’s own participation and complicity. [Morris 1988: 5]

So, if and where there is a boom, there is possibility, facility, propensity, energy, ability. If and where there is not, there is resistance, apathy, confusion, skepticism, and so on. Indeed, as well as the lack of interest that may face any non-boom activity, there may actually be a lack of ability to imagine why anyone could be interested in it.

What, then, is the situation vis-à-vis martial arts studies? Is martial arts studies facing a boom, or facing its opposite – which is not a ‘bust’, as it hasn’t yet had its day in the sun; so some kind of ‘pre-emptive prohibition and limitation of activity’? What would be the larger, only dimly perceived, intellectual trends which define this gravitational horizon?

Our sense is that martial arts studies is currently emerging thanks to the ground opened up by the victories won by subjects like cultural studies, part of whose success was the demonstration of the political dimensions of culture and the contingency of norms, hegemonic values, and institutional investments. While not compiling a comprehensive list here and now, we might say that the movements of which cultural studies was a part revealed the extent to which our educations and our institutions were white, Western, male, heterosexual, Eurocentric, and upper class [Storey 2000]. All of these things were deemed to require redress on ethical and political grounds. And a windfall gain of the general deconstruction of elitist tastes, values, formations, and practices in so many of their incarnations was the attendant ability to revalue hitherto devalued things – not only non-white and non-male things, but also things that had been regarded as supposedly lowbrow, popular, low-class, and – hence – trivial. Things like martial arts in their many incarnations, as well as the media, history, and training methods that accompany them.
So, in one sense, the emergence of martial arts studies owes a lot to the intentional or unintentional redemption or salvaging and revaluation of the supposedly secondary, inferior, inauthentic, non-serious, and trivial that took place in and around cultural studies. But on the flipside, perhaps this is also a source of problems for martial arts studies. For, thanks to it, martial arts studies becomes an heir to the most problematic inheritance of the deconstruction and reconstruction of academia – namely, the trivial. This is why we suggest that martial arts studies should expect to attract as much perplexity and even vitriol and vituperation as subjects like media studies, audience studies, fan studies, game studies, fashion studies, and so on – all of which have for a long time easily drawn flak for sounding like so many different names for something that should really just be called Triviality Studies.

As many people intuitively know, these kinds of problems might always be circumvented or deferred by sheltering or smuggling martial arts studies under more established umbrellas, as in such formulations as: I’m an anthropologist, and I research...; I’m a historian, and I research...; I’m an ethnographer, and I research...; I’m a sociologist, and I research...; and so on. In this way, the ground is prepared for the introduction of martial arts as a more obviously legitimate object of studies by framing it as merely one of the many possible objects of an already valid and valued field. Or, alternatively, the martial arts might be transformed from a dependent variable (the thing examined) to an independent variable (an explanatory factor) within a better-established research program.

Such an approach has its virtues. Indeed, how many of us could actually say that we work in schools or departments of martial arts studies, or that we principally teach modules, courses, or degrees in martial arts studies? And for those handful of people in the world who could say something like this, what exactly is it that they are working in or teaching?

Both of these questions point to a problematic that I tried to think through in my 2015 book, *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* [Bowman 2015]. This problematic boils down to the question of whether martial arts studies could be said to exist as an academic field, and what it means to say that it does, or to operate as if it does. Phrased differently: we already know that martial arts studies can emerge parasitically, and exist as a kind of supplement, sub-field, or focus within other umbrella disciplines and departments. That has never really been in doubt. Many scholars have touched on the martial arts over the decades. Yet, might martial arts studies exist somehow independently? Is it possible to invent martial arts studies as an independent or discrete entity, and what would it look like if we were to try?

It soon becomes apparent that posing such questions very quickly opens out onto a whole range of questions about academic subjects, a questioning that could – perhaps should – ultimately open out into a far reaching reflection on what a university subject (or discipline or field) is, what university disciplinary and managerial divisions and subdivisions are, why they exist, what they do, whether we ‘need’ them, what sort of interests and outcomes they serve, and whether we might dispense with them, or at least move them into different relations and dynamics.
I spent quite a long time on this (which I think is a fascinating and important) subject in that 2015 book, so we will not tarry too long in the same terrain again here. Instead, we will try to move things along by maintaining a focus on the question of triviality, and specifically the triviality of martial arts studies, before coming back to these questions about the possible forms of existence of martial arts studies.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* says a lot of things about the words trivia, trivial, and the word trivium, from which they all substantially derive. For, as the *OED* tells us, trivial once referred to belonging to the trivium of medieval university studies, or ‘the lower division of the seven liberal arts, comprising grammar, rhetoric, and logic’. We could make a lot of this, but to do so would involve sophistry. This is because when people say trivial today they do not intend to mean anything related to this, unless they are having a specialist discussion on the subject of the medieval university. Nor do people mean triple or threefold. Nor do they mean ‘placed where three roads meet’. But they may mean ‘Such as may be met with anywhere; common, commonplace, ordinary, everyday, familiar, trite’, or – more likely – ‘Of small account, little esteemed, paltry, poor; trifling, inconsiderable, unimportant, slight’.

There are other technical meanings for trivial that are used in fields like zoology and a range of sciences, but none of these relate to what is most commonly meant by trivial. However, one meaning of trivial that comes from mathematics is suggestive to the point of being poetic. In it, trivial means: ‘Of no consequence or interest, e.g. because equal to zero’. So, we might say, trivial most often evokes something that is so ordinary, commonplace, familiar, or inconsequential that it is effectively deemed equal to zero. Or, if not nothing, then at least very little, almost nothing.

Again, we could make much of this and use all of the kinds of arguments made in cultural studies and gender studies and postcolonial studies and so on to argue for the revaluation, redemption, or reclamation of martial arts. But we will not do this here, because we should all already know how to do this. I’m sure I am not the only one who has, on many occasions – as I did in response to my anecdotal colleague – persuaded others of the value of martial arts studies by playing the political card. In *Theorizing Bruce Lee*, I actually ran through a check list of many of the key organising themes and problematics that organise not only cultural studies but also many other fields – such as ethnicity, postcoloniality, polyvocality, polysemy, multimediability, cultural translation, intertextuality, *sex/gender* identity performativity, postmodernity, enculturation, hegemony, commodification, resistance and subversion, and so on – and showed the extent to which Bruce Lee ticked all of such fields’ boxes. In their study *The Creation of Wing Chun*, Judkins and Nielsen engaged in a similar exercise tackling themes such as imperialism, resistance, modernization, marginality, nationalism, and social violence.

There are other ways to argue for the legitimacy of studies of martial arts, of course: legitimation by numbers (just look at how many people in the world do martial arts), legitimation by money (just look at how big a range of businesses martial arts are), legitimation by area (just look at how central martial arts are to nationalism and national identity building projects, particularly across Asia), legitimation by UNESCO (if it’s good enough for UNESCO to call it ‘intangible cultural heritage’,
it’s good enough for a study, right?), legitimation by demographics, pedagogics, identity politics, ideological orientation, discursive status, and so on and so forth.

But we know all of this. If Judkins’ wide-ranging and field-defining blog *Kung Fu Tea* has taught us one single thing, it is this: that, nationally and internationally, martial arts are *massive*.

But lots of things are massive. Narcissism, nose-picking, and trainspotting, for instance, might all be said to be massive. The question is whether such things might warrant an academic field and/or whether such a field might be deemed trivial.

To move things forward, perhaps what is needed here is to note that one vital thing the *OED* does not tell us about the notion of the trivial is that it is radically relational and that reflection on what a given perspective, person, or situation deems to be trivial constitutes something of a royal road to the unconscious biases or unthought regions of that perspective, person, or situation itself.

So, if we are in a conversation with our critic, we can deconstruct any criticism of our position that proceeds according to the argument about something’s triviality. Or, better, we can engage in discussion and win the argument and persuade our interlocutor of the validity or non-triviality of martial arts and martial arts studies. And so on. In fact, as I have just suggested, there are a range of options.

But whatever we decide to do, it strikes us as both theoretically and practically useful always to proceed in full awareness of the fact that all of us are very often going to regard certain other things as trivial. Moreover, some people, hostile to this or that academic focus or approach, are often likely to be inclined to wield whatever they think is properly important like a kind of sledgehammer to try to smash whatever it is they think is trivial. At cultural studies conferences it is a common (perhaps therefore apparently trivial – certainly frequent) occurrence for any session of presentations on more or less any subject – anything at all – you name it – to provoke a member of the audience to cry out, in exasperation, something along the lines of, ‘Why are you all wasting your time with this? *What about the war?!’

Wars are serious. When measured against the seriousness of an ongoing war, and people dying in the streets, academic studies of more or less anything, in any discipline, will almost always seem somewhat trivial.

Of course, the irony is that some people working in martial arts studies may well have compelling, informed, intelligent, specialist, rare, or valuable insights into questions of war and violence. But a further and more pertinent irony is that experts and specialists on modern war or social violence are actually likely to be in the minority in martial arts studies. This is so even though ‘martial’ has to do with war. Nonetheless, the peculiarity is that – for a whole host of linguistic, cultural, and historical reasons – many of us mostly seem to forget the most literal meaning of the word ‘martial’ as soon as it is combined with the word ‘art’. Something happens that is not entirely unlike the way the most obvious meaning of the word ‘pretty’ is evacuated and utterly transformed when it is connected with the word ‘ugly’.
This is why the very term ‘martial arts studies’ is rarely-to-never decoded, translated, defined, or interpreted as meaning anything like ‘studies of the art of war’ – even and perhaps especially within martial arts studies itself. Indeed, the tendency of the field today exhibits a definite bias towards studying armed and unarmed embodied fighting, which is the very thing that Peter Lorge has suggested Chinese military experts throughout history have long regarded as being ‘a developmental rather than a functional skill in the army’ [Lorge 2012: Loc 3506]. The myriad other realms and components of the arts of war (or rebellion or riot) are rarely centralised or foregrounded in martial arts studies. Indeed, if the term ‘martial arts studies’ really meant ‘studies of the arts of war’ to us, this would make the field into a very different kind of thing – something that arguably already exists, under a range of different names: war studies, conflict studies, peace studies, security studies, and so on and so forth. But do war studies, conflict studies, or peace studies really capture or cover what we tend to think martial arts studies is or should be? And if so, why the new name, the new demarcation, if martial arts studies is just another version of something or some things that already exist? What the hell is martial arts studies supposed to be anyway?

I have argued elsewhere against the drive to define martial arts and hence thereby to demarcate martial arts studies [Bowman 2017b]. As I have suggested on several occasions, such an orientation is naïve in a number of ways. And we will add here and now, in this context, that succumbing to such an orientation (the drive to define, or the ‘definition drive’, if you will) would achieve the opposite of what most pro-definition academics hope for: rather than conferring scientific seriousness onto the field, it would most likely tend to work to guarantee the marginality and triviality of any martial arts studies generated or facilitated by imposing a strict definition of martial arts. Or, to put it slightly differently, such a move would tend to isolate martial arts studies from the critical questions of the day, rather than asking what our hard won understanding might contribute.

This has been addressed before [Bowman 2017a, 2017b]. To avoid being repetitive, let us say something slightly different this time. This time, we will borrow an argument made by Mark Singleton about the word ‘yoga’ [Singleton 2010]. Specifically, in a fascinating study of yoga, Singleton notes that, over the centuries, and in different contexts and different minds, the word ‘yoga’ has long existed; but it has always referred to ever-changing and very different things – ideas, practices, ideologies, orthodoxies, orthopraxies, and so on. In the face of such polysemy, rather than adopting a position that would force him into feeling the need to specify anything like ‘this is real yoga but that is not real yoga’, Singleton instead proposes that we always treat the word yoga as a homonym.

Homonyms are words that are both spelled the same and pronounced the same but mean different things. When I say ‘martial arts’ and you say ‘martial arts’, we may well be thinking of very different things, with different forms, contents, places, roles, functions, associations, implications, and so on. But we will undoubtedly be able to talk about this difference because an interesting thing about these homonyms is that the meanings tend to cluster together, overlap each other, interact together, reflect (and reflect on) each other, and so on.
This is why not only ‘we specialists’ but also all practitioners and, most importantly perhaps, myriad non-practitioners and people who simply know as close to nothing as is imaginable about ‘martial arts’ will all have an immediate pre-critical inkling of what the ‘martial arts’ of ‘martial arts studies’ is most likely referring to. This is because the term ‘martial arts’ is a discursive achievement – a construct, not a trans-historical datum. It is a type of popular conversation (rather than a singular thing) that is already familiar to all.

Despite having a long history, ‘martial arts’ is nonetheless a comparatively recent term within English language popular usage. That is to say, it is a current term. Yes, it also has a long history. But to claim that the English language term ‘martial arts’, in the ways we use it today, is much older than the late 1960s is much the same as claiming that when people say ‘trivial’ they are referring to the disciplinary demarcations of the mediaeval university or that they are referring to ‘where three roads meet’. That is to say, it is a claim that overlooks the words’ currency, or current-ness. Martial arts has a certain currency now, in Anglophone cultures and societies. Again, it points to trends and conversations much more than things.

Perhaps this widespread current currency is why studies of martial arts have so definitively broken free from anthropological or area studies paradigms, in which many research programmes are organised by notions of the rituals of groups. As popular as such approaches continue to be, postcolonialist deconstruction has taught us that, while subjects such as anthropology and area studies continue to invent their objects in terms of ideas about rituals and groups, white Western thinkers tend not to be quite as keen on the idea that white Western cultures and societies are themselves organised by groups and rituals. That kind of thing is easier to see in and as the societies of the others, not us and ours [Fabian 1983; Spivak 1993]. So, if it’s something ‘we’re into’, something that’s happening here, it surely can’t be the traditional indigenous ritual practice of natives, now can it?

Nowadays, the flipside of this situation is never too far away. This is the belated realisation that the apparently ancient traditional ritual practices of the natives over there always turn out to be complex discursive formations and constructions, or, as we now so easily say, a heady mix of ‘orientalisms’ and ‘invented traditions’. There is a lot to say about this kind of thing. But, in terms of thinking about ‘currencies’ and ‘booms’, one thing that leaps out at us as truly remarkable, and surely significant, is the enduring currency of terms like ‘orientalism’ and ‘invented tradition’ in the generation and organisation of so much research. How great are we at finding ‘our’ orientalism and ‘their’ invented traditions? Surely, we should be great at it: we’ve been doing this kind of thing over and over again since the 1970s!

Discussion of all of this could take us far afield. But the point we wish to make here is that, as much as so many of us are so ready, willing, and able to carry out discursive or conjunctural analyses of our objects of study these days (as long as our objects of study are others: the practices of natives, the practices of tribes, or subcultures, or working classes, or bourgeoisies, and so on), surely we have an attending obligation to consider the question of how and why we ourselves are doing what we do in the ways that we do it.
The question is one of what the discursive conditions of possibility for today's emergence of an academic thing called martial arts studies are or have been. We have suggested that part of our enabling conditions relate to the revaluation of erstwhile trivia by former trailblazing projects like cultural studies. Might another key component relate to the enormous productivity of notions like orientalism and invented tradition? These terms have been available since the late seventies and early eighties, yet they show no signs of fatigue, which suggests that their work is not yet done (unlike countless other once fashionable or once booming theoretical terms that seem to have evaporated today but are presumably still skulking in the shadows or waiting in the wings — like the Baudrillardian ideas of 'banal strategies' and 'fatal strategies' that Morris's essay notes were dominating cultural studies in the 1980s. Are we still thinking about banal strategies and fatal strategies? Is that problematic even remembered today?).

But, wait. Do reflections like this, on our enabling and organising terms, take the entire field of martial arts studies too far afield? Is such a kind of self-reflection narcissistic or trivial? It is easy to disagree with such an idea. There is immense value and opportunity for mastering and improving our practices if we learn more about the forces that mould and shape our activities. (We may not want to apply the notion of 'invented tradition' to our own activities, for instance; but we ought to think about why that is and why we are happy to apply it elsewhere.)

In fact, as much as I am often fascinated by the kinds of objects of attention that are emerging in martial arts studies, I am possibly even more animated by the challenge of thinking about where we are now. This is not simply to do with the 'newness' of the field, but rather with what can be seen to be happening right now in terms of discursive creation, writing, construction, invention, and the articulation and stabilisation of martial arts studies as a 'thing'.

We are still close enough to 'the start' that the publication of a new book generates widespread excitement and gets everyone talking, and for the announcement of a conference in the near future to get everyone looking at their diaries and hoping that they might be able to afford to go. New scholarly English language books on martial arts are not yet merely felt as a drop in the ocean. Their status as 'a contribution' is still easily palpable.

Obviously, as this process continues and grows, the status of each new conference, paper, article, chapter, journal issue, book collection, and monograph will undoubtedly change, and maybe ultimately seem to diminish. The field will be elaborated and proliferate and in time it will surely mutate and reposition. But our hope (and our sense) is that this will not be until after something has happened.

Something is happening. Something has already started to happen. We have, at the very least, already resoundingly answered at least one question that haunted so many of us for so long: Will martial arts ever be a valid object of academic study? Remember how often and how pessimistically this question was posed? But now the answer is: Yes, look, it can be, it is, and look how diversely and dynamically connected with so many other things martial arts always turn out to be!
So, to use a well-worn question form: If martial arts studies is a thing, what kind of a thing is it? What is this a case of? And, again: If something is happening, what kind of a something is it – and what kind of a happening?

To take any or all of these questions, in isolation or at the same time, any answer would always involve asserting that martial arts studies is emerging to answer a demand – not just an academic demand, whether by ‘academic demand’ we mean in the sense of ‘knowledge for knowledge’s sake’ (i.e., a demand to fill a perceived hole in the field of knowledge, simply because we have perceived that a hole is there) or in the pejorative sense of being a ‘merely academic’ matter. Rather, martial arts studies is emerging because an untold number of conditions have been met that now allow into the university the kind of ongoing and widespread intellectualisation of martial arts that has been taking place for many years outside of the university [Bowman 2015, 2017a, 2017b].

It is critical not to forget that intellectual discourse and scholarship on martial arts has long taken place, but mainly outside of standard university channels, and outside of the West. So, in this sense, Anglophone martial arts studies is belated. But nonetheless, finally, today – and helped in large part by having organised itself around and in terms of the questions, concerns, languages, vocabularies, and purviews of established fields like cultural studies, anthropology, history, and sociology – academic scholars have begun to find a way to legitimise martial arts as an academic field.

This kind of legitimisation is principally at the research level. Wherever martial arts studies has so far been instituted at the pedagogical level – that is, as a unique or discrete degree level subject taught to undergraduates – this has principally taken the form of practical and vocational orientations, i.e., as degrees involving learning martial arts and learning about them in terms physical education delivery and self-defence pedagogy or industry [but see also Wile 2014].

So, there is a difference between the research field and the pedagogical field. Of course, that’s not to say there are not connections and crossovers. But the point is that there have so far been different orientations and modes of legitimation in which the research field has been legitimating itself via questions and concerns of critical, social scientific, and historical theory, while pedagogical instantiations of the field have proceeded according to a range of vocational, physical education, and industry questions and concerns.

The relations between these two levels are always going to be complex, and often fraught. But the homonym ‘martial arts’ that organises all levels and orientations can and will facilitate many leaps and links and crossovers and connections, and could indeed coalesce at times and in places into enormously exciting and genuinely multiple and heterogeneous experimental interdisciplinarities.

From any academic perspective, there is very little to no triviality in this. Similarly, if money talks, there is no triviality in securing research grants, establishing research centres, setting up modules and courses and degrees. There is no triviality in cross-disciplinary discourses that have the capacity not merely to enrich but to alter the disciplines from which they began. Nor is there triviality in transforming the wider cultural discourses on martial arts – in, say, demonstrating orientalism,
or debunking myths, or revealing the inventedness of traditions. Orientalism and myths and invented traditions are big business. The stakes are high. So, this kind of work has the capacity – perhaps the obligation – to change things.

By the same token, there is therefore a strong corresponding undercurrent of force or even a kind of ‘violence’ here (whether acknowledged or unacknowledged). This arises because, with the emergence of academic martial arts studies, what happens is the pitting of one kind of orientation against another, one kind of livelihood against another, one kind of tradition against another, one kind of myth against another. This takes place both at and across internal university borders, as well as at the borders and across the realms straddling the inside of the university and the outside [Bowman 2015, 2017a]. It is wise to remember that one never explores an ‘invented tradition’ in a vacuum. Such a conversation is bound to have an effect on individuals and institutions that have looked to such stories as a source of legitimacy and an assurance of authenticity in a shifting world.

These are just some of the levels, some of the contexts, some of the scenes and sites of struggle and activity of the emergence of martial arts studies. All in all, when thinking about martial arts studies, we should perhaps take the famous phrase of Pierre Bourdieu that ‘sociology is a martial art’ and intensify it, by accepting that, in so many ways, martial arts studies is a martial art. The challenge is to understand both putative entities here (‘martial arts’ and ‘martial arts studies’) at the same time and in ways that are adequate to the complexity, forces, violences, vicissitudes, promises, possibilities, and potentials of their ‘passion and activity’ without any ‘pre-emptive prohibition and limitation of activity’, by reducing, simplifying, defining, or consigning either element to triviality.

This struggle, both challenging and fruitful, is evident in the entries that follow. Douglas Wile begins the conversation with a detailed investigation of four recent document finds related to the history and development of taijiquan. Far from setting anything to rest, Wile explores the ways in which these documents have reignited long simmering arguments about the origins of the art while forcing martial arts studies scholars in China to rethink not just their theories but also the relationship between historical research, questions of Chinese identity, and the limits of academic freedom. This article was originally conceived as a short review of Lars Bo Christensen’s latest book, Tai Chi: The True History and Principles [2016]. Yet it soon became apparent that a far wider treatment of the subject was required to set the stage for any Western scholarly examination of the documents that have reanimated the academic debates within China on Taijiquan’s origins. Only in this way can the significance and scope of these developments be appreciated.

From there, our attention shifts to the Brazilian art of capoeira. Lauren Miller Griffith begins her study by noting that instruction in capoeira is a highly embodied practice. Yet, the art generates an immense number of virtual tutorials on social media platforms such as YouTube. Turning her attention to the comments sections found beneath such videos, Griffith investigates the various ways in which these conversations both spread the specific training ethos of the art as well as function as an invitation to certain students to seek out the embodied training community.
In the following article, Gabriel Facal draws on his extensive background and anthropological fieldwork in an exploration of the fundamental factors that unite the diverse world of the Malay fighting systems. Moving away from the term ‘martial art’, he argues that to understand these combative practices within their own cultural context they are better viewed as a progressive series of ‘martial initiation rituals’. He then explores the ways in which key political and social markers of ‘Malayness’ are consolidated through these practices.

Mario Staller, Benjamin Zaiser, and Swen Körner also focus on questions of pedagogy and training. Their study focuses on modes of instruction in combative practices seen in the Western world, including those employed within the realm of civilian self-defence. After critiquing concepts such as ‘realism’ and ‘reality based training’, they propose their own ‘Trade-Off Model of Simulation Design’ to help diverse types of instructors make better choices when designing testing or training regimes.

The last six months have been an exciting time as several important books and collections have been released. Three of these are discussed below. Sixt Wetzler begins by offering an assessment of Paul Bowman’s latest work, *Mythologies of Martial Arts* [2017a]. Incidentally, this volume is the second to be released by Rowman & Littlefield International’s newly launched martial arts studies book series.

Lauren Miller Griffith’s *In Search of Legitimacy: How Outsiders Become Part of the Afro-Brazilian Capoeira Tradition* [Griffith 2016] is then discussed by Kyle Green. This volume is based on her extensive ethnographic research in Brazil, and hence explores a different aspect of Griffith’s research than the previously mentioned article. Finally, in keeping with the topic of South American martial arts, Benjamin Judkins reviews Michael J. Ryan’s exploration of *Venezuelan Stick Fighting* [Ryan 2017]. In this ethnographic study Ryan addresses themes and topics relevant to a wide range of martial arts studies scholars interested in the ways that local fighting systems are subjected to modernizing and civilizing processes.

Taken together these articles and reviews offer a cross-section of some of the very best work being produced in martial arts studies today. Drawing on a wide variety of disciplinary skills, and addressing fighting practices in many areas around the globe, each of these authors makes a notable contribution to our understanding of both their subject and the disciplinary specific questions that surround it. Taken as a set they illustrate the progress that can be made when a deep exploration of the martial arts informs our evolving understanding of martial arts studies as a distinct field of study. It is the strength of such work, more than our own pondering of the problems of triviality, which establishes the substance of martial arts studies.
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FIGHTING WORDS
FOUR NEW DOCUMENT FINDS REIGNITE OLD DEBATES IN TAIJIQUAN HISTORIOGRAPHY
DOUGLAS WILE

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Martial arts historiography has been at the center of China’s culture wars and a cause célèbre between traditionalists and modernizers for the better part of a century. Nowhere are the stakes higher than with the iconic art of taijiquan, where, based on a handful of documents in the Chen, Wu, and Yang lineages, traditionalists have mythologized the origins of taijiquan, claiming the Daoist immortal Zhang Sanfeng as progenitor, while modernizers won official government approval by tracing the origins to historical figures in the Chen family. Four new document finds, consisting of manuals, genealogies, and stele rubbings, have recently emerged that disrupt the narratives of both camps, and, if authentic, would be the urtexts of the taijiquan ‘classics’, and force radical revision of our understanding of the art. This article introduces the new documents, the circumstances of their discovery, their contents, and the controversies surrounding their authenticity and significance, as well as implications for understanding broader trends in Chinese culture and politics.

Douglas Wile is professor emeritus of Chinese Language and Literature from Brooklyn College-City University of New York. He holds a PhD in East Asian Languages from the University of Wisconsin, with additional training at Stanford University. He has numerous publications in the field of Chinese intellectual history, with specializations in martial arts studies and sexology. He was the first to publish a scholarly monograph on Asian martial arts with a university press and the first to offer credit-bearing college courses on taijiquan and Asian movement arts. Professor Wile has trained in various styles of five martial arts, as well as yoga and qigong, and has maintained a fifty-year practice of Yang style taijiquan.
On August 21, 2007, the General Administration of Sport of China awarded Chen Village, Henan, a commemorative plaque acknowledging its status as ‘the birthplace of taijiquan’, and Yuan Fuquan of the Wen County Sports Academy proclaimed, ‘Dust finally settles on century-old controversies’ [Yuan 2011]. However, what was ‘dust’ to Yuan proved to be fuel to the opposition, and just two months later, a firestorm of protest forced the removal of the plaque. The awarding of the plaque seemed to be the culmination of half a century of official recognition for the Chen Wangting (1597-1664) taijiquan creation thesis and was tantamount to granting a patent or certificate of authenticity. Why, then, was the case officially closed and then reopened? Perhaps not coincidentally, just as Chen Village was celebrating its victory, long hidden evidence was emerging in neighboring villages that would disrupt official orthodoxy and could not be dismissed as mere mythology. Actually, these old genealogies, manuals, gazetteers, and stele inscriptions give ammunition to both sides in a protracted culture war between traditionalists and modernizers. Over time, the controversy has become bigger than taijiquan, bigger than martial arts, bigger even than traditionalists versus modernizers, and has emerged today as a site of resistance to Party control of culture and academic freedom. The use of colorful expletives, such as ‘liar’, ‘criminal’, ‘con artist’, ‘counterfeiter’, ‘party hack’, and ‘sycophant’, hardly characteristic of a ‘nation of decorum’ (liyi zhi bang), testifies to the intensity of emotions on all sides of this battle over ownership of China’s ‘intangible cultural heritage’.

This article introduces the provenance, contents, authenticity, and significance of four new document finds in China. Geographically, three of them cluster in the sliver of Henan Province just north of the Yellow River, traditionally regarded as the cradle of Chinese civilization and a hotbed of martial arts activity. Specifically, these new finds include the ‘Li Family Genealogy’, ‘Martial Arts Manual’ and ‘Li Daozi Stele’ of the Li family and Thousand Year Temple (Qianzaisi) of Tang Village in Boai County; the ‘Wang Family Spear Manual’ of the Wang family of Wangbao Village in Boai; ‘The Secret Art of Taijiquan’ of the Wang family of Zhaobao Town in Wen County; and the ‘Wang Family Genealogy’ of Xinjiang County, Shanxi Province. These are the most significant new document releases since the 1970s Yang family material published by Li Yingang, Chang Hongkui, Wu Mengxia, and Shen Jiazhen and the manuscripts of Wu Chengqing and Wu Ruqing [Wile 1983,1996]. Together, these latest finds, if authentic, are the Dead Sea Scrolls of taijiquan studies, containing the oldest versions of what have come to be regarded as the core ‘classics’, but potentially more far-reaching in significance, as they challenge prevailing origin narratives.

There are a number of reasons that document finds are so important in taijiquan historiography. First, perhaps more than any other Asian martial art, the slim body of theoretical works defining the art, since Guan Baiyi’s 1912 Taijiquan jing (Taijiquan classics), have acquired the status of ‘classics’ (jing) and are accepted as normative in all styles. Second, they not only describe movement principles and self-defense techniques, but are widely regarded as expressing the very ethos of Chinese culture. Taijiquan practitioners may fairly be called ‘a people of the book’.

Nowhere is the saying ‘history is told by the conquerors’ truer than in China, where official dynastic histories legitimized the founding myth of the imperial family and articulated a normative political ideology for intellectual discourse. At various times, Legalism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism have all enjoyed state patronage. In the twentieth century, Chinese Marxist historians overturned the traditional focus on emperors, generals, and Confucian statesmen and celebrated peasant ingenuity and resistance to ruling class exploitation. In today’s martial arts marketplace, the various schools and styles vie to become commercial conquerors by inventing their histories. ‘Inventing tradition’ in contemporary Chinese martial arts culture takes the form of seeking new documents, revealing new lineages, new ‘birthplaces’, and ultimately connecting these to old ‘Daoist transmissions’. In a mutually beneficial alliance between conservative scholars and local lineages, the former gains ammunition to challenge the Party, and the latter gains intellectual capital to invest in kai fa (development). Our twin task, then, is to evaluate the substance of the various revisionist claims and to understand the debate itself as exposing deep ideological fissures in Chinese martial arts historiography and in the wider culture.
EMBEDDEDNESS PRECEDES EMBODIMENT

What is the relationship between the practice of taijiquan today and interpretations of its ancient origins? From Marcel Mauss’s *technique du corps* to current interest in ritual, performance, and embodiment, we know that physical activities always carry culturally constructed meanings. They are never simply instrumental or practical. Sometimes, the meanings are unconscious, as with washing the dishes; other times, the meanings are explicit, as with the Eucharist or tea ceremony. Culturally constructed meanings are highly mutable, often contested, and subject to historical contingency. Thus, historical and cultural embeddedness always precedes individual embodiment.

The hermeneutics of taijiquan have focused on the proper purpose of the art, and especially on its origins. This is why the stakes are so high in taijiquan historiography. Do Czech basketball players care about the 1891 Massachusetts YMCA origins of their sport? Do Brazilian cricketers care about evidence of cricket in 1550 Guilford, England? Nations have their *de jure* and *de facto* national sports. Field hockey may be the *de facto* national sport of India, but yoga has had far more international impact; capoeira may be the official national sport of Brazil, but soccer excites far more popular passion; and table tennis may be the national sport of China, but martial arts are more iconic. Martial arts are as contested a discursive space for national identity as sports are for race relations in the United States. In postmodern China, cultural compartmentalization defies incommensurability and allows sportification and spiritualization to coexist, and thus, even as spectator competitions proliferate, the wrapping of martial arts in religious robes also intensifies. We can only scratch the surface here of the historical and sociological dimensions of what conditions the experience of the individual practitioner, leaving the psychology to the better qualified.

Most of our new documents emerge from a period known by Western historians as the Ming-Qing transition (1570-1670), the decline and fall of the Ming dynasty and rise and consolidation of the Qing. The Manchu conquerors’ expansionist policies enlarged the empire, but their two and a half century rule was wracked by a series of rebellions (the Three Feudatories, White Lotus, Taiping, Nian, Muslim, Boxer, and, eventually, Republican) and repeated foreign invasions (two Opium Wars, Eight-Nation Alliance, and two Sino-Japanese Wars). Although the Qing forbade the practice of martial arts and private possession of weapons, this was also the period when history records a flowering of specific styles of martial arts. Many of these rebellions were centered in the northeastern provinces, and it was not unusual for temples and monasteries to serve as refugee camps and safe houses for rebels and bandits. The development of martial arts during this period must be seen, then, in the context of defending hearth and home against bandits, resisting foreign aggression, and overthrowing a foreign dynasty.

Having failed to resist an enemy they knew, and one willing to rule them in the Chinese style, China was suddenly faced in the nineteenth century with an enemy they did not know and a new political paradigm. Declining dynasties risk the wrath of their gods, manifested in omens, natural disasters, and the loss of the ‘Mandate of Heaven’. The Manchu dynasty’s double dilemma was how to rally resistance to foreign aggression when they themselves were foreign and whether to be first class citizens in a second-class civilization or second-class citizens in a first-class civilization. As Emerson quipped, ‘all she can say at the convocation of nations must be – “I made the tea”’ [Emerson 1990 [1824]: 127]. Manchu rule produced a kind of cultural hybridity, and contact with the West would produce another, but unlike the Mongol and Manchu conquests, Western aggression did not aim to found a new dynasty. The closest thing to colonialism that China knew was the tributary system, but China had always been the sun in the solar system of tributaries. They did not want to become a gigantic colony of a Western power as India did, or a ‘liberated’ protectorate of the upstart Japanese empire.

After acknowledging the failure of pulling up the drawbridge, the first active response to Western imperialism was the Self-Strengthening Movement of the mid-nineteenth century, under the slogan ‘Chinese cultural essence and Western technology’. With the West on the march and the dynasty tottering, the Reform Movement and coup d’état of 1898 sought to challenge Manchu rule and recast Confucianism and Buddhism as dynamic and reformist religions capable of standing up to evangelical Christianity. The anti-foreign Boxer Uprising of 1900 was one of the last manifestations of magical cult reaction to Western military and missionary incursions, bearing many of the same features as the Native American Ghost Dance Movement. After the overthrow of the dynasty and founding of the Republic in 1911, a period plagued by warlordism and Western ‘spheres of influence’, the 1919 May Fourth Movement aimed to smash everything Confucian and abolish the ‘unequal treaties’ signed with Japan and the West. All of the traditional arts were called to contribute to the task of national revival, but traditionalists and modernizers had different visions. How could traditional medicine survive the challenge of Western biomedicine; how could monarchy survive the challenge of democracy; how could agrarianism survive the challenge of industrialism; how could logographic calligraphy survive the challenge of alphabetic script; how could the literary language survive the challenge of vernacular literature; and how could traditional martial arts survive the challenge of Western firearms and calisthenics? Inspired by the Japanese model
of wedding the samurai spirit with modern technology, Republican era patriots established the National Martial Arts Institute and the Jingwu Academy, both dedicated to overcoming the Chinese ‘sick man of Asia’ stereotype. During the early Communist period, the government appropriated the martial arts, creating standardized forms, promoting them for health and competition, and endorsing official histories. In the post-Mao era of ‘reform and openness’, martial arts have become a marketable commodity, attracting martial arts tourism and serving as a public relations weapon in the ‘soft power’ campaign to win friends around the world.

The nativist impulses of the National Martial Arts Movement (guoshu) did not go unopposed. In Chinese sources, the physical culture debate was expressed as xinjia tiyu (new and old physical culture) or tuyang tiyu (native and foreign physical culture). Critics of Western calisthenics, like Wu Tunan and Chen Lifu, emphasized their incompatibility with ‘national conditions’. Western sports (ball games, swimming, track and field) were limited to school campuses and upper class social clubs. In Wu Tunan’s somewhat hyperbolic view, the promotion of taijiquan, ‘will allow the Chinese people to compete on an equal footing with the Western powers and cause the imperialists to withdraw in defeat; all unequal treaties will naturally disappear without repeal. Isn’t this tantamount to achieving freedom and equality?’ [Wu 1983: 6]. The current globalization of Chinese martial arts and the Olympic success of Chinese athletes make it difficult to imagine a time when this was framed as an either/or debate. Thus, beginning with Huang Zongxi’s seventeenth-century account of the Internal School, through twentieth-century ‘self-strengthening’, to the current promotion of taijiquan as ‘Daoist self-cultivation’, its practice has often been played out in the context of national identity and even foreign relations. In this way, an invisible thread of cultural continuity connects the Internal School’s ‘softness overcoming hardness’ with today’s ‘soft power’.

Meanwhile, in 2002, a document find in nearby Tang Village, Henan, was about to blow the origins controversy wide open. The discovery was presented at a 2004 conference on refugee culture in Hongdong County, Shanxi Province and electrified the participants. It was made public in 2005, and dissident scholars swarmed the surrounding villages, seeking fresh evidence of pre-Chen taijiquan roots in hidden genealogies, manuals, and local gazetteers that survived the anti-feudal book burnings of the Cultural Revolution. Paralleling these document finds are individuals coming forward and claiming to be living successors to long lost lineages, such as Ansheng Yuandao of the White Cloud Temple, who in 1990 demonstrated ‘Original Taiji’, maintaining that it was the ancient Wudang Daoist form and crediting the Yellow Emperor as its creator [Zhang 2014]. These developments are reminiscent of recent archeological finds in the Yangzi River basin challenging the Yellow River cradle of Chinese civilization orthodoxy.

For General Qi Jiguang in the Ming, the basic binary in martial arts was ‘flowery’ versus ‘practical’; for Huang Zongxi in the Ming-Qing Transition, it was ‘internal’ versus ‘external’; in the Republican Period,
it was Shaolin versus Wudang; and today, it is 'traditional' versus 'modern'. Who are the traditionalists, and who are the modernizers?
The traditionalists could also be called conservatives, idealists, fundamentalists, cultural nationalists, preservationists, creationists, or even self-orientalizers. They are animated by a fundamental belief in the identity of myths and ethos and an acceptance of the compatibility of technology and mythology. Militant Christian evangelism was obviously a key factor in the dynamism of Western imperialism; likewise, Shinto provided Japan with the spiritual adrenalin for empire building. In both cases, they were able to preserve traditional elements, seemingly at odds with modernity, and undertake great missions with religious fervor: civilizing the backward, saving heathen souls, or driving Western imperialism from Asia. Marxism offered science and nationalism, and a kind of dialectical teleology, but banished the supernatural. The May Fourth Movement's attack on Confucianism and the Cultural Revolution's attack on every last vestige of traditional religion created a cultural identity crisis. Traditionalists, who witnessed the replacement of Confucianism with communism and empire with nation state, were convinced that China could have its myths and modernity, too. In the martial arts, this manifested as an obsession with establishing the Daoist origins of taijiquan.

What is accomplished by labeling the art 'Daoist'? First, it raises the practice from mere self-defense to high culture art; second, it makes it uniquely a product of Chinese culture. The Daoist origins thesis focuses on a singular act of creation by an enlightened individual; the evolutionary thesis is a collective project, historically and culturally contingent. Once taijiquan has been sacralized as a Daoist creation, it is just a short step to frame it as a religion. In the religious reading of taijiquan, the 'classics' become scripture, masters become apostles, and the practice becomes a prayer [Wile 2007]. Identifying a creator is about creating an identity. China has alternately seen itself as a Confucian civilization, a model for Third World revolution, a Confucianism with religious fervor: civilizing the backward, saving heathen souls, and nationalism, and a kind of dialectical teleology, but banished the supernatural. The May Fourth Movement's attack on Confucianism and the Cultural Revolution's attack on every last vestige of traditional religion created a cultural identity crisis. Traditionalists, who witnessed the replacement of Confucianism with communism and empire with nation state, were convinced that China could have its myths and modernity, too. In the martial arts, this manifested as an obsession with establishing the Daoist origins of taijiquan.

Although Nathan Sivin has so problematized the term 'Daoist' that one uses it today with the greatest trepidation, he raises some questions about conventional assumptions that are relevant to our present discussion of taijiquan historiography: 'The notion that everything began as a grant to the commons from a legendary founder is so entrenched in traditional culture that this form of it lingers on despite the historical evidence accumulated against it' [Sivin 1995: 16]. Anna Seidel adds: Zhang Sanfeng 'biographies and legends lack even the faintest allusion to his being a boxing master' [Seidel 1970: 484].

Kristofer Schipper agrees with Sivin, and what he says about Laozi is equally applicable to Zhang Sanfeng:

> Although what has been transmitted through the ages about Laozi is of a purely legendary nature, these legends are not without historical interest. In fact, they are often more significant than 'historical facts', because they show how Taoism and Laozi were already thought of in ancient times. [Schipper 2000: 33]

Various accounts of Zhang place him in the Song, Yuan, or Ming dynasties; there are three ways of writing the name and claims of three different figures; and there are 81 different traditions attributed to his creation. Of the 'three old manuscripts' copied by Li Yiyu from his uncle Wu Yuxiang, the preface to the 1867 copy in the possession of Ma Yinshu says: 'Taijiquan began with Zhang Sanfeng of the Song dynasty'. However, Hao He's 1881 copy is more cautious, saying, 'I do not know the origin of taijiquan, but its subtleties and marvels are exhaustively described by Wang Zongyue' [Tang 1963:153]. This inconsistency has contributed to the general lack of consensus. Nevertheless, for traditionalists, attacking the Zhang Sanfeng creation theory is tantamount to committing cultural treason.

Among the taijiquan lineages that emerged during the early twentieth century, the Yang family style enjoyed the greatest popularity. This is due to three factors: four generations of outstanding exponents, literati participation and promotion, and nationwide geographic reach. Well-placed students of Yang Chengfu, like Chen Weiming, Zheng Manqing, and Dong Yingjie, were able to publish books introducing his teachings in a style that accomplished the twin goals of 'popularization and elevation', consciously positioning the art to reach the greatest numbers and giving it high culture credentials. The latter meant supplying mythological origins, philosophical foundations, and self-cultivation cachet. Most of these works included fabricated biographies of Zhang Sanfeng, parallels with Daoist classics, and principles from inner alchemy. The following passage from Yang Chengfu's 1931 Taijiquan shiyongfa (Self-defense applications of taijiquan) illustrates the hagiographic tone of much of the first generation of modern taijiquan literature:

> One day the immortal Zhang Sanfeng saw a burst of golden light where the clouds meet the mist shrouded peaks. A thousand rays of marvelous qi spun and danced in the Great Void. The Immortal hurried to the spot but found nothing. He searched where the golden light had touched down and found a mountain stream and cave. Approaching the mouth of the cave, two golden snakes with flashing eyes emerged. The...
Immortal swished his duster, and the golden light descended. He gazed upon it and realized that it was two long spears about seven feet five inches. They seemed to be made of rattan but were not rattan; seemed of wood but were not of wood. Their quality was such that swords could not damage them, and they could be soft or hard at will. A rare glow emanated from within, and looking deeper, he found a book. Its title was *Taiji Sticking and Adhering Spear*, and it was destined to be revealed to the world.

[Wile 1983: 138]

If this passage reads like fantasy fiction, there were also forays into sociological theorizing. The somatization of China’s social ills seems to be epitomized in the following excerpt from Yang Chengfu’s 1934 *Taijiquan tiyong quanshu* (*The complete theory and applications of taijiquan*):

The gentlemen of today know only of the poverty of the nation but not of its weakness … We are poor because we are weak; truly weakness is the cause of poverty. If we examine the rise of nations, we find that they all begin by strengthening the people. The virility and vigor of the Europeans and Americans go without saying, but the dwarf-like Japanese, while short in stature, are disciplined and determined. When the gaunt and emaciated members of our race face them, one need not resort to divination to predict the outcome.

[Wile 1983: 153]

There are many levels of complexity in this short passage. First, Yang Chengfu was illiterate, and the book is widely believed to have been ghost written by Zheng Manqing. Second, the words are excerpted from a purported dialogue between Yang Chengfu and his grandfather Yang Luchan, who inconveniently died eleven years before Chengfu’s birth. Third, one could cogently argue that it was imperialism, landlordism, corruption, and class contradictions that were the causes of poverty, and that ‘weakness’ was the result rather than the cause. However, Zheng was very suspicious of the motives of those who analyzed China’s ills in terms of class because they seemed also to be enemies of traditional culture in general. He says in the forward to his 1947 *Zhengzi taijiquan xiziu xinfu* (*Master Zheng’s new method for self-study in taijiquan*): ‘Some people have indulged in wild slander, claiming that taijiquan was not created by the immortal Zhang Sanfeng. I do not know what their motives are’ [Wile 1985: 11]. The ‘some people’ referred to here, of course, are Tang Hao, Xu Zhen, and the other historicizers, who believed that China’s weakness was precisely the result of superstition and magical thinking, and that clinging to old myths should not be the test of patriotism. They felt this was part of satirist Lu Xun’s ‘Ah Q syndrome’, delusional compensation for a national inferiority complex, manifesting in a tendency to declare ‘spiritual victory’ in the face of humiliating military defeats at the hands of Japan and the West.

Who were the modernizers? The Self-Strengtheners of the mid-nineteenth century believed that Chinese institutions and traditional culture could be left substantially intact, while adopting Western science and technology for practical purposes, especially military. The reformers of the late nineteenth century believed traditional culture should be sifted and winnowed for what was positive and universal, a kind of religious reformation, combined with anti-Manchu, anti-imperialist, and anti-feudal nationalism. The Communists held that national survival depended on rapid and radical transformation, requiring the total transvaluation of all beliefs, institutions, economics, and even the family. Mao believed China did not have the luxury of gradually developing capitalism and a conscious proletariat but must proceed directly to socialism, with an agrarian peasantry as its base. During this period, martial arts historiography, as all scholarly discourse, was heavily laced with Marxist rhetoric. However, today’s modernizers have largely abandoned this vocabulary and conduct their research using the kind of evidence-based standards familiar to Western scholars. This is not to say that they have achieved some perfect ‘objectivity’, or do not have their own set of motives, but just that China has seemingly entered a new era in scholarly style.

In the arena of martial arts scholarship, Tang Hao (1887-1959) emerged as the leader of the modernizers, and his 1931 *Study of Shaolin and Wudang* (*Shaolin Wudang kao*) sent reverberations through the conservative martial arts world, reverberations that are still felt today. For some, he is the founder of modern martial arts scholarship; for others, he is the anti-Christ of traditional Chinese culture. He was for modern martial arts scholarship what Lu Xun was for modern Chinese literature, a left-wing intellectual who carried the May Fourth Movement torch for reform. His attempts to apply modern research methods to martial arts history won him admirers but also made him a lightning rod for conservative attacks. The first generation of martial arts literature, while patriotic in tone, indulged in what Tang called ‘inventing mythical origins and romanticizing the biographies of historical masters’ [Deng 1980: 69]. In 1928, Tang was arrested for ‘inciting peasant violence’ in Jiangsu, and after his release the following year, fled to Japan, where he studied Japanese language, law, and bayonet. It was during this time, according to conservative scholars, that he fell under the spell of Japanese anti-Chinese propaganda and became the archenemy of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism.

Returning to China in 1930, he joined the Central Martial Arts Institute in Nanjing, and in his capacity as head of the editorial department, visited Chen Village in Henan, where, based on certain knowledge of
Yang Luchan’s study with Chen Changxing (1771-1853) and references in family documents to Chen Wangting (1597-1664) as creating martial arts forms’ and keeping the Yellow Court Classic by his side’, declared Chen Wangting the creator of taijiquan. Tang presented his findings in A Study of Shaolin and Wudang, seeking to disprove Bodhidharma and Zhang Sanfeng’s roles in the development of Shaolin gongfu and taijiquan: ‘Chinese martial arts were already highly developed in ancient times, and there is no reason to fabricate myths about Bodhidharma and Zhang Sanfeng’ [Tang 1931: 7]. Since the Central Institute’s official classification of the martial arts into Shaolin and Wudang, pitched battles between the two ensued, and Tang Hao’s studies managed to anger both camps. In 1931, he resigned from the Central Institute amidst increasing controversy, admitting, ‘I realize I may have offended some people’ [Tang 1931: 8], and returned to Shanghai, where he practiced law and wrote for the Guoshu tongyi yuekan she (National martial arts unification journal). For Tang, scientific scholarship was a prerequisite for modernization and self-strengthening; for conservatives, this struck at the heart of China’s cultural self-confidence, precisely as Japan was invading Manchuria. He was arrested by the Japanese occupiers in 1941, and after his release moved to Anhui, and then, in 1945, following Liberation, to Shanghai, where he joined the Commission of Sports and continued his groundbreaking work in martial arts studies until his death in 1959 [Judkins 2014].

Attacks on Tang Hao typically take three forms: he is a culture traitor; his theories are contrary to popular belief; and he had his facts wrong. Li Bin, Society for the Promotion of Traditional Chinese Culture 2014 award winner, brands Tang Hao as an ‘outsider’, declaring: ‘Research in taijiquan history is the business of taijiquan practitioners’ [Li 2012]. Even more damning, Li accuses him of collaborating with Japan’s Manchuria policies by ‘obliterating Yao, Shun, and Yu’ (denigrating traditional culture), ‘supporting agricultural pioneers’ (armed Japanese immigration), and ‘legitimating Manchukuo’ (supporting the puppet government of Henry Puyi), adding that his ‘light beating and speedy release from prison’ was due not to a lack of evidence of his communist affiliations, but because his ‘cultural destruction’ played into the hands of the Japanese policy of demoralizing the Chinese. Further attempting to cast shade on his character and contribution, Li Bin points out that Tang’s wife committed suicide, and his gravestone inscription makes no mention whatever of his pioneering work in martial arts studies. However, Li makes a telling distinction between Xu Zhen and Gu Jiegang, whom he considers legitimate critics of antiquarianism, and Tang Hao, whom he considers a Japanese sympathizer and traitor (Li, 2012). Yu Zhijun delivers the coup de grace, saying that ‘the basic error is that Tang and Gu are taken as genuine historians … instead of being judged historiographic criminals’ [Yu 2007]. After 1949, when Tang’s version of taijiquan’s origins became party line, attacks were silenced but have resurfaced today as code for protest against official orthodoxy. If Tang Hao, Xu Zhen, Shen Shou, and Gu Liuxin represent the first generation of martial arts history modernizers, Kang Gewu, Yuan Fuquan, and Zhou Weiliang represent the second generation, with Cheng Feng, Li Libing, Wei Meizhi, Yan Ziyuan, Qi Jianhai, Li Bin, Li Shirong, and Yu Zhijun leading the neo-traditionalists.

Once taijiquan came to be seen as not merely a physical technique but the vessel for everything fine in Chinese culture – its philosophy, medicine, and aesthetics – Tang Hao’s bombshell research highlighted the contradictions between left and right, traditionalists and modernizers, mythologizers and historicizers, materialists and idealists, preservationists and iconoclasts, purists and hybridizers, creationists and evolutionists. In the traditionalist camp, there were those who wanted to reject everything foreign, and in the modernizing camp, there were those who advocated wholesale Westernization. Both camps had their compromisers, and both agreed that martial arts could play a role in reviving the nation. Formerly, lineage was the mechanism for the transfer of cultural capital and the basis for legitimacy, but after the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, and the adoption of ‘the theory of Marx and the thought of Mao Zedong’, official epistemology upheld the materialist view that knowledge is produced in the struggle for survival, i.e., doing; and demonized the idealist view that knowledge is produced by deduction, i.e., thinking. Materialists are the champions of the masses; idealists represent the ruling class and are the enemy. This paradigm dominated all historiography in China for nearly half a century, including martial arts history, but today one may read whole articles without ever encountering the names Marx or Mao. The new documents complicate the old myth versus history binary, both of which had to overcome three gaps in the record: 1) how to bridge the gap from the Internal School of the Wudang mountains in Hubei to taijiquan in Chen Village in Henan, 2) how to trace the transition from hard Chen style to soft Yang style, and 3) how to account for the paucity of written theory in the Chen family and its richness in Wu and Yang. The new evidence, if authentic, can indeed help to connect the dots, and in ways that give comfort to both traditionalists and modernizers.
HISTORY OR HOAX
A TALE OF FOUR VILLAGES

Looking at the provenance of the four documents and the circumstance surrounding their discovery, there seems to have been a nexus of interrelations between Chen Village, Tang Village, Wangbao Village, and Zhaobao Town, involving intermarriage, shared interest in martial arts, and study at the Thousand Year Temple, as well as some participation in subversive activities. This is a very different backdrop for an origin narrative than an immortal’s dream, observation of a snake and stork, or the discovery of a secret manual in a cave, complete with fog machines and psychedelic light shows. It ties together the Chen, Li, and Wang families of Henan with the Wang family of Shanxi, and even Chang Naizhou and the Wu family.

1 THE LI FAMILY OF TANG VILLAGE

Our story begins with a tiny clan village called Tangcun in Boai County, Henan, a village of some 1300 souls, the vast majority of whom share the surname Li. The Li family has revealed three documents: a genealogy, a martial arts manual, and a stele rubbing. The age-old custom of compiling family genealogies was suspended in 1949 and specifically targeted in the 1962 ‘Four Purifications Movement’ (siqing yundong) as ‘a feudal remnant’. However, in 2002, in the more ‘open’ post-Mao era, Li family clansman Li Libing was tasked with bringing the genealogy up to date, the third revision since the family’s move to Tang Village from Shanxi in 1371. His methodology included collecting written records, conducting interviews, inspecting gravestone inscriptions, and convening meetings of clansmen. The last version, written in 1716 by tenth generation Li Yuanshan, was discovered in the possession of villager Li Chenghai, who had moved to Xi’an and was initially reluctant to expose the genealogy because of frank references to martial arts. The ‘Genealogy’ a handwritten manuscript of twenty-five pages, extends from first generation Li Qingjiang to 12th generation Li Helin. Compiler Li Yuanshan was a martial arts teacher, while the other two are missing [Li 2010].

Li Helin’s grandson, Li Jiazhen, operated a salt shop in Wuyang County, where Wu Yuxiang’s older brother Wu Chengqing was magistrate. A branch of the Li family had settled in Liu Village, Boai County, and Li Xinghao was granted a post overseeing salt transport by the Qianlong Emperor. This enabled the Li family to enter the salt business, including production and retail sales at a location called Beiwu Duzhen. Based on fieldwork, Yan Bin believes that Wang Zongyue was not the author of the classic text that bears his name, but copied it from a Li family manuscript while a student of Li Helin. Pursuing this reconstruction of events, Yan believes that Jiazhen subsequently shared a copy with Wu Yuxiang, who in turn shared it with his younger brother Wu Yuxiang. Yan concludes that the reason Wu Yuxiang subsequently sought out Chen Qingping of Zhaobao is that Qingping’s approach was more compatible with the soft style described in the salt shop classics that Wu copied in Wuyang [Yan 2012].

Of the ‘Genealogy’s nine sections, the preface and seventh section are most relevant to martial arts history. The preface tells us that eighth generation Li Chunmao (1568-1666) studied martial arts with Daoist priest Bogong Wudao in the Thousand Year Temple, wrote the ‘Wuji yangshenggong shisanshi quan’ (Infinity health cultivation thirteen postures boxing), and taught martial arts across several provinces. The ‘Genealogy’ also relates the story of ninth generation Li Xin (Yan), Li Zhong (1598-1689), and cousin Chen Wangting (1597-1664) of Chen Village, all studying in the Taijimen (Taiji Gate) of the Thousand Year Temple, and collaboratively creating taiji yangshenggong shianshi (taiji health cultivation thirteen postures) and tongbeigong (back-through art). Later, the two cousins accompanied Chen Wangting, when he competed in the provincial military examinations in Kaifeng. Incensed by an unfair judge’s scoring in the archery contest, the three participated in the fatal beating of the man. For this, Li Xin was stripped of his gongsheng degree and fled to Qicheng, where he worked in his uncle’s granary until it went bankrupt. Returning to his hometown Tang Village, he resumed his martial arts study in the Thousand Year Temple but was ‘enticed’ to join the rebel army of Li Zicheng, which sought to overthrow the Ming dynasty. He rapidly rose to the rank of general but was assassinated in 1644 on the eve of the collapse of the rebellion and Manchu takeover. The seventh section of the ‘Genealogy’ contains the titles of three texts related to martial self-cultivation, but only half of the ‘Shianshi gong ge’ (Song of the thirteen postures routine) has survived, while the other two are missing [Li 2010].

Pursuing his research further, in 2004, Li Libing was introduced to Li Lichao, who produced another manuscript that had been hidden in a space above a door lintel in his house. This document is a bona fide martial arts manual, consisting of 14 texts in three parts, the earliest of which is dated 1591 and attributed to Li Chunmao (1568-1666). The
titles, texts, and postures are nearly identical to the corpus in the Wu and Yang lineages. If authentic, these manuscripts would be the urtexts of the ‘taijiquan classics’. All the hallmarks of taijiquan as we know it today are there: moving from center, distinguishing full and empty, erect posture, opening the qi channels, softness overcoming hardness, stillness overcoming speed, and four ounces deflecting a thousand pounds.

Examining the various texts in the Li family manual, eighth generation Li Chunmao’s 1591 ‘Wuji yangsheng quanlun’, (Treatise on infinity health cultivation boxing), although containing no martial applications, shows the mature fusion of inner alchemy with qigong and qigong with movement, together with the Confucian dedication to family health and long life. Chunmao’s 1591 ‘Shiianshi lun’ (Treatise on the thirteen postures) downplays inner alchemy, instead emphasizing the movement principles of root in the feet, whole-body integration, and global full and empty potential. Ninth generation Li Zhong’s (1598-1689) ‘Shiianshi shiming’ (Defining the thirteen postures) uses the trigrams and five phases to analyze the eight hand techniques and five kinds of footwork. Li Zhong’s ‘Shiianshi xinggong xinjie’ (Elucidation of the practice of the thirteen postures) explains the roles of mind, qi, and spirit, using a series of vivid images to illustrate movement qualities: nine bends pearl, tempered steel, silk reeling, folding, mountains and rivers, bows and arrows, wheels and axels, birds and cats. Twelfth generation Li Helin’s ‘Dashou ge’ (Song of sparing) applies soft style movement principles to self-defense techniques, with such familiar concepts as: following, sticking, neutralizing, emptying, yielding, and four ounces deflecting a thousand pounds. Li Helin is also credited with authoring the ‘Taijiquan lun’, (Treatise on taijiquan), which elaborates the self-defense principles of interpreting energy, sinking the qi, emptying, sensitivity, and avoidance of double-weightedness.

The third document in the Li family corpus is a rubbing of the ‘Shili zhanuanbei’ (Biographical stele of the monk Shili), formerly housed in the Thousand Year Temple and commemorating the life of a monk named Li Daoci. The Thousand Year Temple thus forms a trio in Chinese martial arts history and legend, along with the Shaolin and Wudang Temples, as cradles of martial arts. In fact, the Li family documents should be read alongside Cheng Zongyou’s (1561-?) accounts of gentry participation in the activities of the Shaolin Temple. If Shaolin is Buddhist and Wudang is Daoist, the Thousand Year Temple represents the Unity of the Three Teachings (sanjiao heyi), an ecumenical movement prominent during the Ming and Qing periods, that gathered Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism under one roof without dissolving their distinctive features. The stele inscription, dated 1716 and attributed to Puguan, recounts the life of Li Daoci, born in 614 of the Sui dynasty and active during the Zhenguan period (627-649) of the Tang. The biography reveals that he was the offspring of a divine dragon and wedelia herb, a precocious youth, and a student of the Daoist classics and qigong. He is credited with writing the ‘Wuji yangsheng wugong’ (Infinity health-cultivating martial practice), which contains passages on martial ethics in the xia (righteous knight-errant) tradition, as well as such movement principles as softness overcoming hardness and defense over offense. He was granted the surname ‘Li’ by the emperor, and as an itinerant monk he was known as Shili (Ten Powers), because of his polymath talents. The ‘Biographical Stele of the Monk Shili’ shares a number of features with biographies of the immortal Zhang Sanfeng: supernatural birth, revelatory dream, extraordinary physical powers, and exceptional longevity [Long 2008: 159-163].

Before turning to the significance of the Li family documents, it cannot be assumed that their authenticity has gone unchallenged. The argument for the authenticity of the documents begins with two early adopters: Cheng Feng, professor of local history at nearby Jiaozuo Normal School, and Wei Meizhi, director of the Boai County Office of Geographic Names. They point out that the genealogy was in the hands of sixteenth generation Li Taicun’s wife Wang Guiying, who was illiterate and had neither the means nor the motivation to produce a forgery. Moreover, interviews with villagers confirm details of the genealogy and the tradition of martial arts practice in the region. Information in the genealogy is attested in local gazetteers and gravestone inscriptions, and the location of gravestones corresponds to descriptions in the genealogy. Moreover, the veracity of the genealogy is confirmed by Li Yanshan’s admission of father Li Zhong and uncle Li Yan’s rebel backgrounds, embarrassing details he had every reason to conceal. Wang Xuhao, who is not sympathetic with claims of Daoist connections, nevertheless points out that the current holder of the manuscript Wang Guiying had three family members killed by the Li family during the Cultural Revolution and lacked any inclination to produce a forgery. Moreover, interviews with villagers confirm details of the genealogy and the tradition of martial arts practice in the region. Information in the genealogy is attested in local gazetteers and gravestone inscriptions, and the location of gravestones corresponds to descriptions in the genealogy. Moreover, the veracity of the genealogy is confirmed by Li Yanshan’s admission of father Li Zhong and uncle Li Yan’s rebel backgrounds, embarrassing details he had every reason to conceal. Wang Xuhao, who is not sympathetic with claims of Daoist connections, nevertheless points out that the current holder of the manuscript Wang Guiying had three family members killed by the Li family during the Cultural Revolution and lacked any inclination to credit them with past glories. Cheng and Wei rest their case by pointing out that family genealogies were an integral part of ancestor worship, and any falsifications would be sacrilegious [Cheng et al 2015]. Yan Ziyuan reinforces this by pointing out that the texts observe all the name taboos of emperors and reign years of the Ming and Qing periods, a nicety that would not have been necessary during the Republican or later periods [Yan 2016].

Li Bin believes that the ‘Genealogy’ resolves all of the former mysteries in the genesis and transmission of taijiquan. It confirms that the Wu family found the ‘classics’ in a salt shop, and not from Yang Luchan; it attests that Li Yan, Li Zhong, and Chen Wangting are the creators of taijiquan; it demonstrates that the Unity of the Three Teachings is the
Denying the authenticity is Xicheng Wuseng, an evolutionist, who focuses on anachronisms in the ‘Biographical Stele of the Monk Shili’ text that undermine its credibility. He argues that the Yijinjing (Sinew changing classic), referenced in the text, did not exist during the Tang, and that the word quan was not used as a generic term for martial arts during the Tang. These suspicions (and oddly similar language) are shared in articles by Long Weidong, Chen Yaqun, and Lin Zhangqiao. Liu Honggang, Wu Hua, and Dong Lei dismiss the documents as plagiarized, simply passages lifted from the Wu and Yang ‘classics’. While some support the authenticity of the documents on the basis of embarrassing disclosures of criminal and subversive activity, others see this as so atypical of genealogy protocol as to be proof of forgery. Zhou Weiliang points out that contemporary Chen family standard-bearers, Chen Zhaopi, Chen Xiaowang, and Chen Zhenlei all relate the story of Wangting killing the examination judge, but omit any reference to Li family involvement, as do local gazetteers. He also points out that the genealogies of other families with martial arts backgrounds, such as the Chen family and that of Chang Naizhou, are not nearly so overpopulated with references to martial arts study and masters, giving the impression of ‘protesting too much’. Based on the mysterious disappearance of the stele itself, anachronistic word usage and references (e.g., Shaolinquan and xinyiquan), and suspiciously modern looking calligraphy, Zhou agrees with Zhang Quanhai’s assessment that the stele rubbings are ‘computer masterpieces’. Zhou Weiliang further points out that passages in Li Chunmao’s ‘Wuji yangsheng quanlun’ are identical with those in Sun Lutang’s Xingyiquan lun (Treatise on xinyiquan), suggesting plagiarism of the Sun text by the Li family. An unlikely denier is Li Shirong, tireless champion of Daoist causes, who, nevertheless, rejects any identification of Li family taiji yangshenggong with taijiquan, any ties between the Li and Chen families, or assertions that Wang Zongyu was a Qing figure. In Li’s hands, the two-edged sword cuts exclusively in the direction of denying contamination by Chen involvement and upholding pure Zhang Sanfeng genesis [Li n.d.].

Soft deniers accept that the manuscripts in their current forms are forgeries but say that they ‘reflect’ an earlier, undiscovered version. Even Yan Ziyuan, one of the most prolific proponents of the Daoist thesis, concedes that the manuscripts contain some forgeries and interpolations for the sake of commercial exploitation but are genuine in the main. Wang Xuhao is another compromiser, who accepts the authenticity of the Li family manuscripts, interprets them to reveal Li Zhong, Li Yan, and Chen Wangting as the creators of taijiquan and Li Helin as author of the classics and teacher of Wang Zongyu, but dismisses Xu Xuanping, Li Daozi, and Zhang Sanfeng as fabrications of late Qing literati [Wang 2015].

Apart from questions surrounding its authenticity, this document discovery has given rise to two highly divergent hermeneutic positions: 1) confirmation of the Daoist genesis theory and 2) proof of the Chen Wangting creation theory. Let us examine each of these positions. Proponents of the Daoist genesis theory are buoyed by the idea that Chen Wangting studied in the Thousand Year Temple. The Li Daozi stele links the temple with martial arts and Daoist qigong practices. Li Chunmao’s teacher Bogong Wudao was a Daoist priest, and the similarity between the Li and Yang family texts of the ‘Shisanshi xingjingtai’ (Song of the practice of the Thirteen Postures) shows that the Yang family preserved this soft style Daoist tradition, eventually lost in the Chen family and suspended in the Li family. This also rehabilitates the Song Shuming, Wu Tunan, and Xiao Tianshi assertions of Daoist origins [Li 2007]. Li Bin speculates that the Li family kept Sanfeng soft style taijiquan secret and taught a hard style to Chen Wangting. In another version, Wangting was taught hard style as a beginner, with soft style reserved for a more advanced stage. A further variation is that the Li family taught Wangting soft style, which was eventually diluted by Chen family paochui, a hard style derived from Hongdong tongbeiquan.

In any case, this removes Chen Wangting from any creative role, or, as Li states, ‘Wangting lacked the depth in Daoist teachings to create such a profound art’ [Li, 2005]. Lin Junan, who accepts Fu Xi, Huang Di (Yellow Emperor), Laozi, and Zhang Sanfeng as historical figures and
criticizes Tang Hao as ‘making a mess of Chinese martial arts history’ and an example of ‘left-wing extremism’, credits Zhang Sanfeng with infusing taijiquan with Daoist philosophy and inner alchemy, and accepts the Thousand Year Temple as nurturing the art [Lin 2009]. Yan Ziyuan reasons that if Changxing had told Yang Luchan that Wangting was the creator of taijiquan, Yang would have honored him and not Zhang Sanfeng, but, in fact, Wangting learned from Daoist priest Dong Bingqian in the Thousand Year Temple, which is where he heard about Zhang Sanfeng [Yan 2016]. Yuan Fuquan is keen to credit Dong Bingqian of the Thousand Year Temple with teaching the Thirteen Postures, which he considers synonymous with taijiquan, to Chen Wangting. For Yuan, this removes Wang Zongyue from the line of transmission because Wang was 153 years younger than Wangting, and even younger still than Jiang Fa. Yuan concludes that originally the Chen family acknowledged Zhang Sanfeng as progenitor because Yang Luchan would have no other source for this notion. Wu Yuxiang must have heard the same story from Chen Qingping, and thus everyone shared the same tradition [Yuan 2007]. Conservative scholars ask, if Li Yan, Li Zhong and Chen Wangting are given credit for creating taijiquan, then why did they return to the Thousand Year Temple and continue their study with Bogong Wudao? This demonstrates that they are transmitters of an art with a long history, not inventors.

A soft pro-Daoist position is articulated by Li Bin, when he acknowledges a reflexive tendency to attribute the origins of Chinese arts to legendary culture heroes, but insists that this is a patriotic gesture of respect for the collective creativity of the Chinese ‘laboring masses’ [Li 2007]. Yan Ziyuan, who is sympathetic to Li family claims, also acknowledges that Tang Village has produced a flood of forged stele rubbings and exaggerations, including that the Li family were descendants of a Tang empress, that Li Daozi was a clan member, that Wu Chengqing was a Li family disciple, and that the Li family spawned a host of martial arts styles [Yan 2016]. Summing up the pro-Daoist connection, Cheng Feng calls Li Daozi the ‘progenitor’, the Thousand Year Temple the ‘cradle’, and Wangting the ‘transmitter of taijiquan’ and the ‘creator’ of Chen style [Cheng 2007].

Deniers of the Li family documents and opponents of historical revisionism short-circuit the debate by declaring the new manuscripts forgeries and thus not a serious challenge to the official Chen Wangting creation theory. Liu Honggang, Wu Hua, and Dong Lei join Zhou Weiliang, the author of History of Chinese Martial Arts, in concluding that the Li family documents are no more than a patchwork of passages lifted from early Republican Wu, Yang, Chen, and Sun published material. Again, they are led to this conclusion by anachronisms in the text, obvious interpolations, and lack of concrete evidence of ties between Tang Village and Chenjiagou. At issue are Wang Zongyue’s dates and whether Chen Wangting learned taijiquan in the Thousand Year Temple or from a family transmission. In the eyes of traditionalists, if Wang Zongyue is Ming and Wangting learned in the Thousand Year Temple, then it undermines the official version and opens the door for Zhang Sanfeng. Of course, it doesn’t establish Zhang’s historicity or involvement with martial arts, only that the legend may be older than we thought.

The attempted recentering of the cradle of taijiquan in the Thousand Year Temple reopens the issue of the ‘softening’ of taijiquan. Behind all of this speculation is the implicit assumption that evolution inevitably proceeds in the direction of hard to soft, almost, one might say, from primitive to civilized. There are many theories seeking to explain the ‘softening’ of taijiquan. Was it an act of inspiration, as with the Huang’s stories of Zhang Sanfeng’s dream or observation of nature? Did it happen as a result of Yang Luchan and sons’ modifications for the pampered Manchu princes, or Chengfu’s accommodations for modern intellectuals, or national martial arts academies’ adaptations for mass consumption? This evolutionary theory was strengthened by the appearance of Chen Fake, whose style was considered something of a prehistoric relic and was visibly ‘harder’ than the popular image of taijiquan, prompting some to say that it was not taijiquan at all. Some recent interpretations that have emerged from debates around the four new documents have proposed a ‘same source, different streams’ theory, suggesting that the Thousand Year Temple is the common source, but what Zhaobao took away was the soft style, and what the Chen family received was the hard style.

Finally, it is seldom noted that four of the most important figures in the history of taijiquan all had rebel backgrounds. Huang Zongxi, late Ming philosopher and anti-Manchu resistance fighter, articulated the first soft style theory in his ‘Wang Zhengnan muzhi ming’ (Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan), based on the teachings of knight-errant Wang Zhengnan. Li Yan killed an examination judge and went into hiding, eventually joining the Li Zicheng rebellion against the Ming dynasty and ultimately being assassinated. Chen Wangting and Jiang Fa joined the grain tax resistance movement of Li Jiyu, and Wangting eventually died in their liberated zone in Dengfeng County, Mt. Daiyu, Henan.
2 THE WANG FAMILY OF WANGBAO VILLAGE

In 2006, the Jiaozuo City Radio and Television News published two articles on the ‘The Wangbao Spear Manual’ (Wangbao qiangpu). According to Wang Anmin’s 1787 ‘Wangbao qiangpu yuanliu xu’ [Preface on the origins of the Wangbao spear manual], the Wang family, like the Li family cited above, moved from Hongdong County in Shanxi to Boai County in Henan, where they established Wangbao Village as part of a resettlement program mandated by the Ming emperor in 1372. During the Jiaqing period (1522-1567), fourth generation Wang Zhongjin studied liuhe shenqiang (Six unities spirit spear), staff, and hand forms with Daoist Priest Dong Bingqian (1580-1679) of the Taiji Temple (Taijigong) in the Thousand Year Temple, which provided the foundation for the Wangbao Spear Form. (Note: Wei Meizhi and Zhang Dewen dispute the preface’s dating and reckon eighth or ninth generation). The hand form that Dong taught was the Shisianshi ruanshou (Thirteen postures soft hands). Wang Zhongjin also studied with Bogong Wudao and Li Chunmao in the Thousand Year Temple, and there were bonds of consanguinity with the Li family of Tang Village.

A century later, Wang Anmin (b. 1731), younger brother Lincang (b. 1758), and Chang Naizhou studied with Li Helin in the Thousand Year Temple. In 1787, Wang Anmin wrote the ‘Wangbao Spear Manual’, based on Wang Zhongjin’s (b. 1610) transmission of the Six Unities Spirit Spear. The form continued to evolve, and Wang Lincang was invited to the capital as tutor to the Manchu princes, which helped spread its fame. It circulated within the family down to nineteenth generation Wang Jinglue (b. 1935). In an addendum to the ‘Spear Manual’, we find six hand forms, with titles very close to the Li family corpus. Another version of the ‘Spear Manual’, attributed to Wang Zheyu of the Daoguang period, says that Dong Bingqian taught spear to the Wang family and taijiquan to the Chen family. In Wang Zheyu’s version (1846), it says that Dong’s transmission was from Zhang Sanfeng, and thus the Chen form originated with Zhang Sanfeng. The Li family of Tangcun had relations with the Chen family and Thousand Year Temple, and the Wang family of Wangbao also had relations with the Thousand Year Temple and Daoist priests Bogong Wudao and Dong Bingqian. Zhongjin studied with Chunmao, and Anmin studied with Li Helin, indicating close ties between the Li and Wang families. At least one Wang family member, Wang Qingyan, was a student with Li Helin, indicating close ties between the Li and Wang families.

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The pro-Daoist view is that, if the genealogy is authentic, then we can conclude that shishanshiqian and taijiyangshenggong existed before Chen Wangting. Moreover, the Yang and Wu (Jianquan) lineages never gave up acknowledging Zhang Sanfeng as their founder. He adds that, in Chen Village, Zhaobao, and Wangbao, it is ‘common knowledge’ that the immortal Zhang is the founder. He also points to similar language and principles in tongbeiquan manuals and other manuals that predate Yang. Asking rhetorically why the Li family’s ‘Shisanshi lun’ (Treatise on the Thirteen Postures) is not attributed to a specific author like the other pieces, his answer is that it was not written by a family member but borrowed from the Thousand Year Temple, again reinforcing the notion of a pre-Chen genesis of taijiquan.

The pro-Daoist view is that, if the genealogy is authentic, then we can conclude that shishanshiqian and taijiyangshenggong existed before Li Yan and Li Zhong, and certainly before Chen Wangting. The form described by Song Shuming and Xiao Tianshi corresponds to that in the ‘Li Family Manual’. Du Yuanhua, who studied in Zhaobao, says in his 1935 Taijiquan zhengzong (Authentic taijiquan) that the art was created by Laozi and transmitted by his disciple Mi Xi, and after five generations reached Zhang Sanfeng. Attempting to have their myth and Marxism, too, some pro-Daoist scholars take a benign view of attributing the origins to legendary figures like Laozi, the Yellow Emperor, or Zhang Sanfeng, considering it a patriotic gesture of respect to the collective wisdom of the Chinese people. They remind us that all of the arts have legendary patron saints (Lu Ban for architectural
Taken together, then, the Li family and Wang family documents reveal a complex web of relationships, both of kinship and martial arts study, much of which centers on the Thousand Year Temple. If the documents are authentic, and the facts therein are true, and we accept that ‘taijiquan’ by any other name would smell as sweet, then it poses a real challenge to the Chen Wangting creation thesis, as Chen Wangting becomes a student of a precursor of taijiquan, and the ‘classics’ predate the Wu family corpus by several centuries.

The earliest publication representing the Zhaobao style was Du Yuanhua’s 1935 Taijiquan zhengzong. Elements of Du’s claim were supported by Wu Tunan and Song Shuming. In the 1990s, Wang Zhencuan of Zhaobao Town discovered a manuscript in the medical documents of a certain Liu family. According to the 1917 preface by Liu Fengwu, Liu found a manuscript stuck in the pages of his father’s copy of Ming dynasty physician Zhang Jingyue’s Complete Works of Zhang Jingyue (Zhang Jingyue quanshu). The preface tells us that, in 1861, his father, a physician, encountered a nameless sick man from Zhaobao, who crossed the Yellow River to visit a friend in Sishui and suddenly fell ill. The man could not be saved and on his deathbed vouchsafed the physician a martial arts manual, entreating him to preserve it. The manual bears a preface dated 1728 by Wang Boqing. The preface states that Wang learned taijiquan in Wen County from Zhang Chuchen and that the art had ‘Daoist origins’.

The twelve texts in the corpus, now called Taiji mishu (Secrets of taiji), include some that are essentially identical with the previously received ‘classics’ and some additional texts in the same vein. The works are variously attributed to Zhang Sanfeng, Wang Zongyue, Jiang Fa, Xing Xihuai, Zhang Chuchen, and Wang Boqing. The first eight, attributed to Zhang, Wang, and Jiang, share the same language as the received ‘classics’, and the last four, attributed to Xing, Zhang, and Wang, while not the same, share similar movement and self-cultivation principles. The 1728 date of the preface places them somewhere between the Tang Village Li family manuscripts and the Wu family ‘salt shop’ texts. Contemporary exponents of Zhaobao style have now appended the prefix ‘Wudang’ to the name of their style, signaling their identification with the Zhang Sanfeng Daoist lineage and distancing themselves from their neighbors in Chen Village. Not to be outdone by Chen Village’s heroic statue of lineage patriarch Chen Wangting, Zhaobao has now erected no fewer than ten sculptures of figures in its lineage, beginning with Jiang Fa.

Qi Jianhai sees these texts as ‘definitive proof that Zhang Sanfeng created taijiquan’ [Qi 2003]. In this, he agrees with Li Bin and Li Shirong, who also hail this as evidence against the official Chen Wangting creation thesis. By hitching their wagon to Zhang Sanfeng’s transmission through Jiang Fa, the Zhaobao camp has been able to reverse the direction of transmission and reduce Chen Village to junior partners, a role they vehemently reject. It is not lost on villagers aspiring to the middle class that what once was ‘feudal dregs’ is now an industry, especially when role models are just up the road.

Reaction has been swift from Chen family stalwarts, and in what has now become an arch rivalry, the number of articles flying pro and con could easily overwhelm any bibliography. As usual, opposition begins with accusations of inauthenticity, and the 1728 preface’s error of writing ‘Wenzhou’ for Wenxian is seen as proof of an amateurish forgery. The stakeholders in denying the Zhaobao claims are both Chen family members and scholars who uphold the official view. A Tianya shequ poster who uses the handle ‘chlsj’ argues that ‘Zhaobao’ is not a legitimate, distinctive style because it designates a geographic region and not a family lineage, like all other recognized taijiquan styles. Skeptics also insist that Zhaobao has received no official recognition, precisely because it lacks a traceable lineage of innovators, and, in fact, the county registration of the Zhaobao Taijiquan Association has been revoked, and the Association has been labeled ‘an illegal organization’. Moreover, in 2005, on account of its denial of the Chen Wangting creation thesis and claim to be the heirs to Zhang Sanfeng, Zhaobao was forbidden to send a delegation to participate in a competition in the Wudang Mountains.
4 THE WANG FAMILY OF XINJIANG COUNTY

In 2010, Taiji magazine published Li Wanbin’s ‘Taijiquan shi yanjiu de zuixin tupo’ (The latest breakthrough in research on taijiquan history) heralding the discovery of Wang Zongyue’s family genealogy in Xinjiang County, Shanxi Province. Wang Zongyue is a very contested figure in taijiquan historiography. It is critical to the Daoist case that he be considered a Ming figure and equally critical to the Chen Village and Tangcun cases that he is dated Qing. On August 18, 2016, a conference of local elders was held in Xinjiang County to discuss the implications of this discovery, and they decided that Wang was a native of Wangzhuang Village in Jiang Prefecture and that his dates were 1525-1606.

Li Wanbin uses the genealogy to flesh out the details of Wang Zhongyue’s life and draw direct connections to Zhaobao. According to Li’s reconstruction of events, Wang learned the art from Yunyou Daoren, a peripatetic disciple of Zhang Sanfeng, who passed through Xinjiang and was impressed by Wang. Li calculates that Jiang Fa studied with Wang in 1596 and returned to Zhaobao in 1603. At the age of 72, Jiang taught taijiquan to Chen Wangting. He says that this explains why Chen style First Route (small frame) is the same as Zhaobao style, but over the years it was influenced by Chen family paochui and gradually got harder. He says that Chen Changxing was the only Chen master who taught pure taijiquan, and that is what he taught Yang Luchan. Li elaborates a long list of descendants and disciples, ending with Wang Wuchen (b. 1939), who claims to be a direct descendant of Wang Zongyue [Li 2010]. Quan Jiamei posits a virtually identical account [Quan 2016] and Zhang Sengsheng stresses that this drops the taijiquan transmission directly on the doorstep of Zhaobao Town [Zhang 2011]. Yan Ziyuan is especially impressed with correspondences between the genealogy and Chen Xin’s ‘Examining the Martial Arts’ (Bianquanlun).

According to Yan’s reconstruction, in contrast to Li Wanbin’s, during the Ming dynasty, an unnamed father and daughter moved from Yunnan to Shanxi and settled in Little Wang Farm along the Fen River in Fuzhou Prefecture, where the father taught hand and staff forms to the Wang family. Thus, Yan asserts that Little Wang Farm must be the native place of Wang Zongyue, and in moving about the county, Wang would have naturally passed by the Thousand Year Temple, where he transmitted Thirteen Postures Soft Hand to Bogong Wudao and Dong Bingqian. Later, Wang discovered Jiang Fa in Zhaobao and brought him back to Little Wang Farm, where he taught him for seven years. Yan further concludes that Jiang Fa is from Liu village in eastern Wen County, and Chen style could not have derived from Jiang because it already existed in the Chen family when they moved to Wen County. In the local Shanxi dialect, seventh generation Wang Gongyue sounds exactly like Wang Zongyue, and Jiang Fa made a mistake in transcribing the name. Returning to Zhaobao, Jiang Fa taught Xing Xihuaui. Meanwhile, ninth generation Chen Wangling brought the Thirteen Postures to Chen Village from the Thousand Year Temple, where, by the fourteenth generation, Chen Changxing preserved the Soft Hands style and taught it to Yang Luchan. Chen Youben taught a mixture of the Thirteen Postures with tongbeiquan that became the signature Chen family paochui, which belongs to the taijiquan family but is not the Daoist Soft Hands style. According to Yan, Tang Village people today confuse Wang Anmin with Wang Zongyue and misplace him in the Qianlong period [Yan 2016].

Wang Zongyue has been a shadowy but pivotal figure in the taijiquan creation story ever since Huang Zongxi’s Internal Boxing lineage mentions ‘Wang Zong’ as a disciple of Zhang Sanfeng. If the genealogy is genuine, and the entry on ‘Wang Zongyue’ is believable, this is indeed a sensation and makes the official version untenable. Needless to say, reaction has been swift and dismissive. Among the many skeptics is Yan Ziyuan, who questions the paper and calligraphy as looking too contemporary and the writing style as violating the conventions of the Ming period. Traditional genealogies were padded front and back with hundreds of blank pages to accommodate future supplements and for protection, so even if the paper is authentically pre-modern, it is no guarantee against forgery. Moreover, the character used for ‘yue’ in ‘Wang Zongyue’ is a homophone but not the correct character: it is a place name rather than a tribute to Song dynasty hero Yue Fei. It should be remembered that Yan is a committed traditionalist and does not want the case for Zhang Sanfeng embarrassed by a crude forgery [Yan 2012].

The small amount of primary source material available to historians before these recent discoveries was sufficient to fuel debates for nearly a century. The work of authentication and interpretation, reconciliation and integration, of the new documents promises to be a cause célèbre for at least another century.

It is in this context that new works in English such as Lars Bo Christensen’s recent book Tai Chi: The True History and Principles [2016] should be read. Christensen has done us a great service by bringing the Tang Village Li family documents to the attention of practitioners and martial arts scholars in the English-speaking world [Christensen 2016]. The book provides original Chinese texts together with the author’s translations and his conclusions regarding their impact on our understanding of taijiquan’s origins. First impressions (of unidiomatic English, non-standard orthography, and an apparent lack of either peer review process or competent editing together with
a large number of factual and translation errors) should not deter the reader from recognizing the importance of the subject. Yes, it deserved a more serious scholarly treatment, especially in regard to the utter lack of historical and cultural context and the absence of a survey of the voluminous secondary literature in Chinese. An easily avoidable sin of omission at the very outset is that the author neglects to inform his readers that the 'Li family' of Tangcun is not the same as the Li family of Yongnian. Students of taijiquan history will immediately assume that 'Li family' refers to Wu Yuxiang's nephew Li Yiyu, preserver of the 'salt shop' classics and teacher of Hao Weizhen, whose son Yuewu went on to popularize the Wu family style in the 1920s. Moreover, the odor of orientalism hangs over every page and will be particularly offensive to scholars in the humanities and social sciences who have striven to elevate martial arts studies to a respectable place in the contemporary academic landscape.

Rather than an exhaustive catalogue of the factual and translation errors, a few examples might serve as a heuristic. Christensen states that 'Gu Liuxin … was a student of Yang Chengfu', contrary to all biographies of Gu, and that 'the texts are dated between 1590 and 1787 in the Ming dynasty' when the Ming dynasty ended in 1644 [Christensen 2016: 5]. His rendering of the Li Daozi stele is an example of translation error: 'He became a disciple in Three Teachings Gate of the Henan Wuji Temple, in the era of Shen Long, Xiang Fan, Ma Lan Cao, and Mother Dan' [Christensen 2016: 17]. The correct translation reads: 'He was born of the union of a divine dragon who came to earth and a wedelia herb'. This is corroborated by the many Chinese commentators, who interpret this supernatural birth as an allegory for an illegitimate child abandoned in the wilds. Another example is Christensen's rendering of the 'Wuji yangshen quanlun', where he translates:

Before people start practicing the wuji yangshen gong they have no thought and no intention, no form or shape, no sense of self or other. The mind is utter confusion, all is but muddled ideas and the mind has no direction.

[Christensen 2016: 27]

The fatal error here is literalness and failure to recognize a standard rhetorical formula used in countless inner alchemy texts to describe the proper attitude to begin a meditation session. It is not a condition of ignorance that precedes enlightenment, and should be interpreted: 'Before beginning the infinity health-cultivating practice, one should enter a mental state free of thoughts or intentions, without awareness of form or shape, without distraction of self and other, and with an attitude of innocence and undifferentiated unity'.

Methodologically, Christensen is unaware of, or feels no obligation to share with his readers, any sense of the voluminous secondary literature on the Li family manuscripts that has exploded over the past decade and a half. This in turn has led to two gross distortions: First, he fails to encompass the wide spectrum of opinion on the authenticity and significance of the texts; second, he misses the other three recent primary document finds that have received equal attention by Chinese martial arts scholars. The result of this tunnel vision has been the uncritical acceptance of the views of one camp and representing this to the reader as settled truth. If authentic, the four documents will, indeed, require revision of our writing of taijiquan’s history, but the bigger story may be the reigniting of the century-old culture war between traditionalists and modernizers, the commercial competition between villages claiming to be the birthplace of taijiquan, and the political struggle between official and dissident scholars, all of which go completely ignored.

Happily, the author betrays a number of underlying philosophical fallacies early on, so there is no delayed disappointment for the reader. In the preface, he declares:

We have to acknowledge, though, that what made Tai Chi famous was the old masters all of whom had wonderful skills based on philosophical principles. There are still masters who possess genuine knowledge but they are, unfortunately, far outnumbered by the sport-like approach that Tai Chi has turned into in many places around the world. This is why the discovery of the Li Family Manual is so very important because the written material from the old masters is really the only source that can truly define the nature of Tai Chi [Christensen 2016: 3].

Elsewhere, Christensen says that ‘Tai Chi has been taught publicly for about 100 years’ [Christensen 2016: 3], a statement difficult to reconcile with the assertion that it was ‘old masters’ who made Tai Chi ‘famous’. Moreover, the tautological notion that ‘old masters’ possessed ‘wonderful skills’ is unverifiable, untestable, and instantiates the nostalgia that Rey Chow refers to as 'Orientalist melancholia', a condition characterized by mourning the loss of an idealized, ancient China [Chow 1993]. Underlying this attitude are three foundational assumptions: that there was a golden age in the past, that taijiquan is a stable entity, and that deduction precedes induction. Furthermore, Christensen’s golden age thinking confounds the very notion of progress. Is the Ptolemaic system superior to the Copernican, is monarchy superior to democracy, feudalism to capitalism, candles to electric lights, smoke signals to cell phones, the naked eye to electron microscopes, the humoral theory to the germ theory? Are monarchy,
patriarchy, slavery, and polygamy superior because they were practiced in the Bible? Would you rather have your appendicitis treated by Hippocrates or your local general surgeon?

In the realm of human kinetics, today’s women sprinters would have been in a photo finish with Jesse Owens at the Berlin Olympics, and today’s women marathoners would crush the men’s winner by a full quarter of an hour. Radical changes in body mechanics have revolutionized the high jump, broad jump, and shot put. The movement principles expounded in the classics may be philosophically and aesthetically pleasing, and may even, in fact, correspond to today’s most advanced kinesiology, but they are not superior simply because they are old. Martial arts styles are inherently unstable and subject to a sort of Heisenberg ‘uncertainty principle’: if we focus on the name, the principles can blur, and if we focus on the principles, the names can shift. The basic fallacy is that antiquity equals authenticity. To use the language of Catholic theologians, Christensen is guilty of ‘archeologism and antiquarianism’, the assumption that the practices of the Apostolic and Early Church were intrinsically superior to present practices simply because they were chronologically earlier.

The question of whether taijiquan is the product of Daoism creating a martial art or a martial art absorbing Daoism is a critical issue in Chinese martial arts historiography. If anything, Daoism is an even more slippery term than taijiquan itself, but the issue has become highly politicized, which is understandable in the context of Chinese history and culture. However, for a Western scholar to stumble into this minefield bespeaks a certain naiveté. The assertion of Daoist origins has become associated with cultural nationalism and the search for Chinese identity, often called ‘Chineseness’. Chinese scholars have built entire careers out of championing either Zhang Sanfeng or Chen Wangting, but it is very unseemly for Western scholars to insert themselves in this politicized process of roots-seeking and competing attempts to identify origin, creator, or birthplace as ‘transient points of stabilization’ [Laclau 2000: 53]. These debates exist because, as Derrida says, ‘there is polemos when a field is determined as a field of battle because there is no metalanguage, no locus of truth outside the field, no absolute and ahistorical overhang’ [Derrida and Ferraris 2001: 13]. In the case of taijiquan’s origins, the state chose one side in the ‘field of battle’, wielding Marxism/Maoism as its metalanguage, but is it appropriate for Western scholars to take sides in this battle, and while shielding readers from the reality of the ongoing war? Is this a case of Western orientalizing and Chinese self-orientalizing? Finally, the author not only ignores the reams of secondary and even primary literature on the subject, but seems completely innocent of the wealth of theory that has flowed into the humanities and social sciences from such movements as postmodernism, post-colonialism, critical theory, and feminism, and that has nurtured the burgeoning new field of martial arts studies.

**CONCLUSION**

No, the dust has not yet settled on the taijiquan origins debate, and the new documents may have raised the particulate level to new highs. It is perhaps premature to say for sure whether there are grains of truth among that dust, much less to expect consensus around a new paradigm. Two things are certain at this stage, however: That no history of taijiquan can be written today without taking the new documents into account and that the debate itself has thrown fault lines in China’s intellectual landscape into sharp focus.
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Laura Miller Griffith is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Texas Tech University. Dr Griffith received her PhD in anthropology from Indiana University. She studies performance and tourism in Latin America and the U.S. Specifically, she focuses on the Afro-Brazilian martial art of capoeira and how non-Brazilian practitioners use travel to Brazil to increase their legitimacy within this genre. Her work on capoeira has been published in Annals of Tourism Research, the Journal of Sport and Tourism, and Theatre Annual, and she is the author of In Search of Legitimacy: How Outsiders Become Part of the Afro-Brazilian Capoeira Tradition [2016]. She is currently working on a new book titled Apprenticeship Pilgrimage [under contract with Lexington Books].

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Previous research on capoeira suggests that face-to-face training is the ideal mode of learning this art. However, there is a robust corpus of capoeira tutorials available on YouTube. This paper asks what the function of these videos is. I analyze six comment threads taken from YouTube that exhibit a common pattern, concluding that beyond the video’s utility as a source of information, the comments shared by community insiders serve as an invitation for aspiring students to join the embodied capoeira community, paving the way for their adoption of the underlying ethos of capoeira by socializing them into the ‘anyone can do it if they work hard enough’ discourse that is common in capoeira academies. And while this discourse itself is somewhat deceptive insofar as not everyone can do all of the moves of capoeira – even if they work hard – it is actually the mediating link between technical mastery, which could theoretically be achieved from watching videos, and embodiment of capoeira’s generative grammar, which must be learned in an embodied community setting.
INTRODUCTION

I am envious of those people – you know who you are – that can so confidently march into a new class without any background whatsoever and jump in alongside more experienced students. You aren’t embarrassed by your white belts. You aren’t bothered when you trip over your own feet. That is most certainly not me. Perhaps it is the academic in me, but before trying something new, I like to read about it and gather as much information as possible. I study videos. I try things out in the privacy of my own home. It turns out, I am not alone.

In 2008, I joined a capoeira group in Brazil as part of my research on how non-Brazilians acquire legitimacy within a social field associated with a foreign culture. Although capoeira classes have become quite common in many parts of the world [see Downey 2005; Joseph 2008; deCampos Rosario, Stephens and Delamont 2010], there are still significantly fewer training opportunities outside of Brazil than in a Brazilian city like Salvador, popularly considered the ‘cradle’ or even the ‘Mecca’ of capoeira. Within this context, many aspiring capoeiristas – including those who are actively taking face-to-face classes – turn to supplementary resources like the Internet, instructional books, videos, etc., to enrich their learning experience. My mestre (master) in Brazil, however, frequently denigrated such sources, claiming that they would result in someone playing ‘robot’ capoeira (i.e., stiff and lacking fluidity). In other words, learning from a standardized source like a book or video results in a standardized style, something that is antithetical to the very essence of capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art that originated with slaves resisting and reclaiming agency in the face of their dehumanizing circumstances. My mestre also liked to talk about sentimento – feeling – which he said you cannot learn from a book.

In the course of conducting my fieldwork in Brazil, I concluded that travel to the source of an art or sport – something I call an apprenticeship pilgrimage – is one way for individuals to claim legitimacy within a foreign cultural art [Griffith 2013]. The implications of this conclusion are far reaching, and can be seen not only in visits to the source of an art, but also at local and regional levels [Griffith and Marion forthcoming]. In addition to physical pilgrimages, it is also worth considering whether or not it is possible to make virtual pilgrimages, using Internet-based resources to approximate the learning experiences one might have if one could travel for more advanced or specialized training opportunities. Based on my Brazilian fieldwork, I was skeptical that the Internet would be a viable source of legitimation for capoeiristas. I turned to YouTube in order to understand the discourse surrounding the legitimacy of online tutorials as a tool for learning capoeira. I expected to find repeated disavowals of the legitimacy of online tutorials or exhortations to find a ‘real’ teacher.

Although there were a few comments of this nature, by and large I found there to be a supportive community of viewers that repeatedly expressed gratitude for the material that was being posted, encouraged novices to keep training (without specifying the ways in which that training needed to be conducted), and tended to shut down ‘trolling’ (unprompted or excessive negativity or hostility) relatively quickly.

Typically, when viewers search for capoeira tutorials online, they are looking for information about how to do a particular movement or for general training routines that they can practice on their own or with a partner or small group. Some viewers do ‘stumble upon’ the videos after following a series of links from other videos or sites, or out of general curiosity as to what capoeira is after encountering it in another arena like a video game (e.g. Tekken) or television program (e.g. Bob’s Burgers). However, of the users who intentionally seek out the tutorials, they are most likely in pursuit of knowledge about the form of capoeira. For example, I found comments left by several individuals who seemed to feel inhibited by their lack of knowledge and wanted to learn at least a few moves before taking face-to-face classes. Yet, there is something more than just information exchange at work within the comment sections of the capoeira tutorial videos available on YouTube.

Following Geertz [1972], it has become commonplace to discuss a multitude of cultural expressions as texts that can be read and interpreted. And while there is merit in this perspective, especially in its validation of interpretive anthropology and attention to the construction and circulation of symbols, its overuse – especially in discussing the moving body – has some troubling implications [Marion 2007, 2013]. These critiques notwithstanding, the circulation of moving images on YouTube is accompanied by the circulation of literal texts, creating an interesting opportunity to explore the creation of intertextual links in a multimedia environment. Within the disembodied context of YouTube, intertextuality represents a different kind of emplacement, one that does not rely on physical location or even on the simulation of place as we see in virtual worlds like Second Life [see Boellstorff 2008]. Rather, capoeiristas’ experiences – translated into texts – become part of the web of meaning that supports their engagement with the physical art. Their comments often cross-reference other videos, well-known capoeiristas, and other comment threads. For example, in response to a query about two moves – which were spelled phonetically, suggesting the poster’s lack of knowledge about the Portuguese language (which incidentally marks him/her as an outsider or novice) – another individual provided the proper spelling of the movements, the English translation of the movements, and included a link to another YouTube video in which those movements were demonstrated. This media itself provides ample opportunities for individuals to create intertextuality by linking to other multimedia.
content both on YouTube and hosted on other websites. Within this context, most individuals – even those who live in areas where no face-to-face capoeira classes are offered – can access information about capoeira provided they have an Internet connection. What is less clear, however, is how access to this information factors into an individual’s trajectory as a capoeirista, which has implications for the study of enskillment and belonging within many different martial styles.

In the remainder of this article, I argue that, beyond its utility as a source of knowledge about the form or even the history of capoeira, the comment sections provide a space for capoeiristas – or aspiring capoeiristas – to express vulnerability regarding their practice and receive support from fellow capoeiristas who perpetuate the idea that anyone can learn capoeira provided he or she works hard enough. It is this discourse, as well as other conversational moves, that identify individuals as insiders within the capoeira community, giving their words of encouragement more weight to the struggling students than those of the ‘trolls’ who prey upon their vulnerability or other outsiders whose lack of genre-specific knowledge render their comments largely irrelevant. So, while the YouTube comment section is in some ways a free-flowing communication space in which anyone can say just about anything, there is a subtle metacommunicative process of identification and legitimation happening in conjunction with the information exchange facilitated by the video and question/answer format of the comments. This suggests that there is a virtual capoeira community visible within the disorderly assemblage of commentary associated with YouTube videos if one just knows how to find it. Furthermore, the particular piece of capoeira discourse that is being shared online (i.e., anyone can do it if they train hard enough) is actually the mediating link between technical mastery, which could theoretically be achieved from watching videos, and embodiment of capoeira’s generative grammar, which must be learned in an embodied community setting.

**METHODS**

To build a sampling frame for this project, I ran six searches within YouTube using the following phrases: (1) capoeira instructional video, (2) capoeira instruction, (3) how to play capoeira, (4) capoeira tutorial, (5) capoeira basics, and (6) learn capoeira. These search terms yielded an extraordinary number of results, so to narrow the idea of results, I only considered the first five pages of results for each search. Then, I selected the individual videos that had at least 150,000 views, but excluded those that were specifically geared towards children as well as capoeira channels that compile multiple videos because (a) there was no data available regarding the number of times channels had been viewed and (b) these same videos also tended to appear in the main listing of search results. I also excluded video clips like a mestre performing on Conan O’Brien’s television show or an individual’s highlight reel because they are not actual ‘how to’ videos despite appearing in the search results. Duplicates were also eliminated from the sample, as were videos for which the owner had disabled the comment function.

For each video that was included in my study, I analyzed the first 10 threads that appeared when comments were sorted by ‘top comments’ rather than ‘newest first.’ I omitted comment threads that were in a language other than English (though the vast majority of comment threads were indeed in English and only one video in the sample contained a significant number of comment threads in Portuguese). When Portuguese comments were mixed into an English-language thread, those comments were included in the analysis. I omitted comments that advertised businesses other than capoeira classes or instructional materials like DVDs or capoeira books (e.g., ‘Hello! I’m Nicole. I did -40 lbs in 2 month. Visit hawght.so#YAHp’). Given the length of some comment threads, I only analyzed the first 10 exchanges in each thread (meaning a single video could, but in actuality did not, yield a maximum of 100 different entries).

There are some obvious disadvantages to this approach. Namely, given my strict parameters, I did not have the freedom to chase some interesting comment threads to see how they developed. I also lost some context that could have been useful for understanding certain comments, especially in cases where a newer comment referenced an older one that had – in the interim – been buried by other comments. However, I implemented this strict protocol to systematize my data collection, and anyone who has spent much time on YouTube can appreciate how easy it is to become sidetracked by following interesting comments and links to other material. This also helped me avoid ‘cherry picking’ interesting videos or comments that were already in keeping with my hypothesis.

A few additional caveats warrant mentioning here. Not all capoeiristas visit YouTube and the majority of viewers do not leave comments. Therefore, although my selection protocol was robust, I can only comment on the subpopulation of capoeiristas who both reference YouTube and participate in online dialogs about capoeira. This may help explain why I did not find more disparaging remarks directed towards the very notion of learning an embodied art online. The people who search for YouTube capoeira tutorials have likely already bought instructional materials like DVDs or capoeira books (e.g., ‘Hello! I’m Nicole. I did -40 lbs in 2 month. Visit hawght.so#YAHp’). Given the length of some comment threads, I only analyzed the first 10 exchanges in each thread (meaning a single video could, but in actuality did not, yield a maximum of 100 different entries).

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Another limitation of these data is that there are no capoeira Angola videos included in the sample. If one searches specifically for capoeira Angola, there are some videos available; however, they typically have less than 10,000 views, far under the inclusion threshold I established for this study. There are likely multiple reasons for the relative paucity of videos (and viewership) for capoeira Angola tutorials. Globally, capoeira Angola has far fewer practitioners than its rival style, capoeira regional, or the modern, hybrid style known as capoeira contemporânia. It is also possible – though this is conjecture based on my participant observation experiences with capoeira Angola rather than any objective data – that teachers of capoeira Angola more vocally denigrate learning from videos. This was certainly true of my experiences training with an international capoeira group headquartered in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil.

My final corpus of material to be analyzed included 29 videos. Despite one video – posted by the world-renowned Mestre Barrão – lasting nearly 35 minutes, the vast majority were less than five minutes in length. Although the full search results included videos from a very diverse set of presenters, the majority of the videos in the corpus that was analyzed were posted by the same three teachers, suggesting that they have somehow tapped into the 'magic formula' that yields a high number of views (most likely by keeping their videos short and by using frequently searched key words in their video descriptions). Using MaxQDA to assist in managing these data, I created a codebook that reflects an inductive analysis of the prevalent themes in these particular videos. My codebook had 30 categories, but in this paper, I focus specifically on the themes of doubts, encouragement, and identification of background. I have used pseudonyms throughout this paper despite the fact that these comments are all visible to the public. When known, pseudonyms and pronouns reflect the commenters' genders; in all other cases, pseudonyms and pronouns are gender neutral and reflect the spirit of the commenters; online identities as expressed by their usernames.

**EXEMPLARY CASES**

As is the case with many communities of practice, the online and actual sites of capoeira practice interact in interesting ways. While some capoeiristas only engage with the art and other practitioners in embodied, face-to-face venues (e.g., academies, street rodas, social gatherings, etc.) and others only engage with capoeira online (e.g., watching YouTube videos, discussing the art in chatrooms, reading blogs, etc.), many people engage in both ways. Given the deterritorialized nature of the Internet, the virtual capoeira community is multinational, multilingual, and multiracial, encompassing more diversity than one commonly finds in any single place-based capoeira group. Yet, while it is easy to connect with capoeiristas online that one will likely never meet face-to-face, it is also quite possible to – either intentionally or unintentionally – engage with individuals that one knows and sees regularly in the ‘actual’ world. In such cases, an individual’s online and offline self are situated in a dialogic relationship with one another [Jordan 2009; Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2012].

Although it is certainly possible to create an alternate version of oneself online, qualitative studies of the virtual reality environment Second Life as well as interviews with bloggers suggest that it is more typical that people present a version of themselves online that is relatively close to the persona they project in real life, even if they do emphasize certain traits over others or showcase just one facet of their identity in the online environment [Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2012]. When one’s offline social network is aware of his or her online activities and has access to those virtual spaces, the individual is even more likely to construct an online persona that closely matches ‘reality’ [Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2012], keeping in mind, of course, that what we experience as reality is always culturally mediated [see Golub 2010].

While there is always some degree of artifice in anyone’s presentation of one’s self outside the most private of back spaces [see Goffman 1959], there are ways for capoeiristas to get a feel for one another’s degree of belonging in the capoeira community even when they lack visual cues about the individual’s identity or mastery of the formal requirements of the genre. Take, for instance, the following exchange between Gatinho and Pham Binh:

**Gatinho:** does someone know how that music track is called?

**Pham Binh:** Capoeira’s Traditional Music, just Google it like that and search, man :)

**Gatinho:** Hi Pham Binh! Thanks, but of course I know that it is traditional capoeira music (I’m portuguese) and I also know what Google is ;-). But I was searching for especially this track. Finally Shazam made it and I found this track :-)  

**Pham Binh:** is it? Sorry if my idea was wrong man

In the initial comment, Gatinho asks if anyone can identify the song being played in the video. Pham Binh responds, telling Gatinho that it is traditional capoeira music. In the next comment, Gatinho identifies as a Portuguese capoeirista who, therefore, is familiar with traditional capoeira music and then clarifies that he or she was looking for more specific information about the particular song used in the video, not the genre of capoeira music in general. Gatinho appears to take
issue with Pham Binh’s recommendation to ‘just Google it’, pointing out that he/she knows what Google is and therefore such simplistic instructions are a bit insulting. The winking face adds some levity to what could otherwise be a terse exchange. Pham Binh adds the final comment to this exchange, posting a seemingly genuine apology for misunderstanding the initial query or perhaps misidentifying Gatinho as a novice/outside when that was not the case.

In the next example, the commenter’s identification of his/her standing within the embodied community is less subtle. This comment is in response to a thread in which some ‘trolling’ (e.g., ‘I am sorry for saying this but 99% of the views are boys waiting for a hot brazilian girl’) is interspersed with comments expressing genuine gratitude for the video as well as one individual’s doubts about his/her overweight body being able to do capoeira. This individual is explicit about his/her qualifications for making authoritative comments about the diverse body types that can succeed in capoeira.

ImaLibra: Jesus, what is up with all the hate spewed here? Seriously, a few of you guys need to learn some respect. I’ve been doing Capoeira for 2 years now learning under a pupil of mestre Santiago from Seattle, let me tell you some of my experiences. There’s a guy in my class who’s about 5’6’ and weighs almost 300 lbs. He knocked my ass out with a beija flor to the temple. My instructor has been all over the world, found rodas from many different cultures. Many street rodas, he has related, are a lot more lenient in their code of conduct. If you think Capoeira isn’t a viable martial art, find a street roda. They most assuredly aren’t dancing. Lastly, this guy is obviously just doing videos for the basic moves. I can tell simply by the fluidity of his movements and his flexibility that he is definitely capable of much more. For those of you chastising him for not incorporating an attack into his au, ask yourself: how did I learn Au? I bet anyone who actually practiced this art didn’t even lift their feet off the ground while learning the hand positioning for the flips. Hell, even after two years I still get nervous when trying Au sem mao. This art is all about being deceiving, there’s even a term for it, ‘malandragem’ which alludes to trickery.

After admonishing people for trolling, ImaLibra indicates his geographic location, the length of time he has been training, and the name of his mestre. Although he does not indicate that his group practices the capoeira regional style, those who are knowledgeable in the art can infer this from the comment about being kicked in the head (the regional style is more upright, making kicks to the temple more likely than in the lower, more strategy-based capoeira Angola style) as well as the mention of flips, which are discouraged in the Angola style. While not defending his mestre’s legitimacy per se, ImaLibra nonetheless highlights it by referencing his mestre’s international travel. Having participated in rodas ‘all over the world’ suggests that the mestre is in high demand as an instructor who gets invited to give workshops around the world and/or the mestre has taken it upon himself to increase his knowledge by seeking out training opportunities around the world. Either activity contributes to the mestre’s legitimacy within the social field [see Griffith and Marion, forthcoming].

By establishing his own legitimacy as an experienced student of a known mestre with international experience, this individual is then in a position to – or perhaps is allowed to do so – comment on (a) the efficacy of capoeira, (b) the progression of students within capoeira, and (c) the essential habitus required in capoeira (i.e. malangradem, which is discussed below as part of the underlying ethos of capoeira). ImaLibra does not use pedagogical terminology to describe this, but when he explained how a novice could build up to doing the movement by keeping his or her feet on the ground while learning the hand placement, he was essentially talking about the discipline-specific scaffolding that supports a learner’s execution of advanced skills [see Downey 2008]. In saying, ‘even after two years I still get nervous when trying to Au sem mao’, which is a hands-free cartwheel, this individual uses the weight of his self-assessed legitimacy in the field to encourage novices to keep trying the moves, to use scaffolding as needed, and to not feel bad about incremental progression.

The next exchange between Ariel, Frank and Pericles429 is interesting because of the way in which Frank, the instructor from the video, draws out specific information about Ariel’s degree of experience, allowing him to position her within his understanding of the physical capoeira world and give feedback that is appropriate to her level of development. Note that all of this diagnostic work is happening without him being able to watch her perform the movements, which is such an important source of information for teachers in face-to-face environments. In response to Frank’s demonstration of the au (cartwheel), which is one of the longer tutorials in the sample (four minutes and 24 seconds) and has the word ‘beginner’ in the title, Ariel asks, ‘This is for beginners?’ It is not clear whether her statement is an indication of disbelief, frustration, or genuine curiosity. The teacher from the video then responds to her query.

Ariel: This is for beginners?

Frank: Yep. Are u a pro?

With his comment, Frank – who posted the video – is asking Ariel to identify her degree of experience with capoeira. He may be doing this to figure out whether or not he is communicating with a beginner.
who is looking for basic information or a seasoned veteran who is critiquing his selection of material for beginners. Ariel then identifies her experience level.

Ariel: No I have no training, this looks hard. I was interested in this as a new workout.

Frank: well, you will be awesome if you be patience and take it step by step. i’m sure u will pick up very fast and easy. keep trying.

Having received the information he needs to situate Ariel within the community of practice, Frank is able to give her advice that is appropriate for her stage of development. Although I have found that many people within the capoeira community are dismissive of people who start training solely because they want a ‘new’ or ‘different’ workout, subordinating this motivation to the more highly esteemed quest for cultural enrichment, the teacher does not express any of these qualms and indicates his belief – based on nothing more than her disembodied comment – that she will be ‘awesome’ if she has ‘patience’ and keeps working. After Ariel expresses her gratitude to Frank for his encouragement, a third individual – Pericles429 – enters the conversation, giving Ariel additional encouragement.

Ariel: Thank you for the encouragement,

Pericles429: This isn’t as difficult as it may seem, you just have to repeat each and every movement many times and master it, and it will be like a reflex.

At no point in this exchange do any of the commenters address the issue of body-type, the physical fitness of Ariel’s body, or the question of innate skill. Instead, hard work and dedication are the only things that seem to matter. Although this optimism may seem like an artifact of the disembodied environment in which Frank and Pericles429 are unable to evaluate Ariel’s potential for advancement, this discourse matches well with what I have encountered in the face-to-face capoeira community in which students are told that everybody and every body is unique and can progress along any given path provided that the student is willing to work hard [see Griffith 2016].

Despite the prominent discourse in capoeira that anyone can play as long as he or she is willing to work hard, many practitioners – especially novices – do have concerns about not or their bodies can perform the amazing feats they see being done by experts, whose virtuosity makes the movements look easy [see Royce 2004]. In the next two exchanges, the body is the specific focus of the discussion. The two exchanges should look similar, because they were both started by the same individual who – presumably – copied and pasted his/her comment from one thread to the other. In the first exchange, Ad Astra starts the thread by mentioning a specific difficulty he/she is encountering, links it to an immutable characteristic of his/her body (having long legs), and then asks whether or not it is likely that he/she will be able to learn capoeira. This is within the context of a video that includes ‘advanced moves’ in the title, suggesting that Ad Astra is viewing videos that are above his/her current level of achievement, which may contribute to the anxiety expressed in the following comment.

Ad Astra: I can’t do a simple cartwheel, maybe because of my long legs. My cousins can do it naturally. Is there a chance I will learn capoeira?

The next two conversational moves involve inflammatory language that reinforce the virtual capoeira community as being a straight, male space. It is not entirely clear why Hiphop or Die is making fun of Ad Astra – perhaps for showing vulnerability, for being unable to do a cartwheel, or maybe even for wanting to do a cartwheel if he/she is not familiar with the use of the cartwheel in capoeira. Vadik comes to Ad Astra’s defense, but does so in a manner that denigrates women. Whether intending to do so or not, this conversational move marginalizes female capoeiristas, who still struggle for equal treatment in the roda and in capoeira academies [see Griffith 2016]. Regardless of the vulgar language used, Ad Astra expresses gratitude for Vadik’s defense of him/her.

Hiphop or Die: Ha!! Gayyyyy!

Vadik to Hiphop or Die: stfu cunt

Ad Astra to Vadik: Thanks.

At this point, a fourth individual enters the conversation.

Mista Marx to Ad Astra: hey im fatter than your average guy but i can do a cartwheel so keep it up man

Ad Astra: Thanks for the encouragement man. Someday I will be the very best cartwheeler like no one ever was.

Mista Marx also references one of his physical characteristics – his weight – which he implies could be a limitation to doing capoeira, but argues that, even being ‘fatter than your average guy’, he can nevertheless do a cartwheel. Seeming to take solace in Mista Marx’s words, Ad Astra again expresses gratitude and makes public the intent to overcome the obstacle he/she identified in the initial comment.
The second video in which Ad Astra inquires about whether or not his/her long legs and inability to ‘do a simple cartwheel’ will be a serious impediment to his/her ability to do capoeira shows an even more advanced sequence – though it is not labeled as advanced – in which the instructor has his assistant perform a macaco (an off-kilter, one-handed back-handspring).

Ad Astra: I can’t do a simple cartwheel, maybe because of my long legs. My cousins can do it naturally. Is there a chance I will learn capoeira?

Small Knight: training

Ad Astra: Wow things just got dumb by that reply...

Marcos Santos to Ad Astra: Well hes just seems like a dick dont worry about it bro anyone can learn

Ad Astra to Marcos Santos: Thanks bro!

The comment by Small Knight could be taken in one of two ways: either it is a sarcastic response that implies the original commenter should stop worrying and just start training or it could be taken as a genuine, albeit terse, suggestion that training will help the commenter succeed. Ad Astra seems to have interpreted it in the first manner, as does Marcos Santos, who dismisses the seemingly rude comment by Small Knight and deploys the by-now familiar trope that anyone can learn if they work hard. Just as he/she did in the previous video, Ad Astra concludes the exchange by expressing gratitude for a third-party’s encouragement.

Beyond the fact that both comments start with the same opening line, there is another similarity. In both threads, an opening query that exposes the commenter’s vulnerability is met with a dismissive retort followed by a third party intervening to first undercut the sting of the unkind remark and then reinforce the idea that anyone can do capoeira if he or she works hard. By trolling, Hiphop or Die (in the first example) and Small Knight (in the second) have broken an interactional norm within the capoeira community, even if it is common practice in social media and on YouTube. Conspicuously absent in their short and rude comments is any mention of how they articulate with the capoeira community. Viewers of the thread have no basis for judging whether or not they are members of the community at all. However, Mista Marx (in the first example) and Marcos Santos (in the second) both provide some clues as to their positions as insiders by explicitly or implicitly referencing the ‘anyone can learn’ discourse.

Lest one think that I am presenting an overly tidy argument that the virtual capoeira community is perfectly harmonious, I conclude by presenting this potential counter-example. The video in question is significantly longer than most of the tutorials considered here (seven minutes and 12 seconds). It has two instructors whereas most only have one instructor. Both of the instructors are male, which is typical for this corpus of material. What is unusual, however, is that both are Afro-Brazilian, a point that does come out in the comment thread.

Johnny Dunn: some seriously ugly capoeira, modern capoeira looks much nicer than this

Bonnie Rose: this is a training for beginners. fast forward to more advanced techniques and videos if this is too slow or ‘ugly’ for you.

Johnny Dunn: This is terrible training for beginners. I would NEVER recommend this to ANYONE because its so bad. If you go to any capoeira group you’ll quickly see that no one plays like this

Bonnie Rose: Oh ok. It’s all new to me and i was able to follow these movement. Im still searching the tube, looking for beginner classes. But thanks.

Johnny Dunn: If you look at some stuff by group cordao de ouro (the style I do) its contemporary capoeira that is really nice to watch, or if you’re up for something more aggressive and fast (personal taste) then Group Capoeira Senzala or Muzenza are pretty good. There are lots of different styles out there, guess you gotta find the right one for you (and hope they have a group in your town)

EternalQuest: Do you have to go and leave the same comment on all of the videos?

Sawyer Hunt: This is real Capoeria. The Muzenza and ‘modern’ stuff is NOT better. I watched the videos you recommended and they are alot sloppier, slow, and mostly uncoordinated Euro kids.

Given the argument that I have presented thus far – that insider status can be gauged in part by the degree of supportiveness a commenter expresses towards novices – it bears asking whether or not Johnny Dunn is an insider. His first comment does not make this clear. In his third comment, however, he explicitly identifies himself as being part of the Cordao de Ouro group, which is an internationally known...
organization with a distinctive aesthetic. He also identifies two other groups as being 'pretty good'. Although he does not indicate where he lives, who his specific instructor is, or how long he has been practicing capoeira, he presents himself as someone who is in a position to advise a beginner and also subtly suggests that he has enough experience visiting capoeira groups other than his own to know that ‘no one plays like this’. Although he does not provide much specific information, it is enough to position himself as an insider – a claim that Bonnie Rose seems to accept.

Bonnie Rose’s first conversational move here is to defend the instructor’s presentation. She reminds Johnny Dunn – in much the same way that ImaLibra did in an earlier example – that beginners are not ready to perform the fast movements that would be more appropriate for an advanced student. When Johnny Dunn establishes himself as an expert, whether or not he really is, Bonnie Rose immediately backs down and identifies herself as a beginner by saying, ‘it’s all new to me.’ She essentially ratifies his claim to expertise, after which he provides additional information that he thinks will help her development as a capoeirista.

When EternalQuest and Sawyer Hunt enter the conversation, EternalQuest chastises Sawyer Hunt for his comment. Though not referencing any physical experience with capoeira, EternalQuest indicates his or her familiarity with other capoeira videos by signaling awareness of Johnny Dunn’s pattern of behavior. Similarly, while Sawyer Hunt does not indicate whether or not he himself is a capoeirista, he does establish himself as someone who is aware of the intertextual network of capoeira tutorials and provides his evaluation. Most provocatively, he criticizes these other videos because they feature ‘uncoordinated Euro kids’. With this comment, it can be inferred that Sawyer Hunt is at least familiar enough with the art of capoeira to know that it is an Afro-Brazilian art (or at the very least that ‘Euro kids’ do not represent its traditional demographic); however, this in and of itself is not indicate insider status, and it is often outsiders who know a bit about an art but are not themselves involved in its production that are most likely to operate on essentialist stereotypes [see Grazian 2004].

This example is messy in the sense that it is not entirely clear whether or not what Johnny Dunn is doing should be considered ‘trolling’. In some respects, he is merely using his position in the social field to help a novice evaluate the quality of the model proffered online. Yet, as EternalQuest points out, he seems to post the same or similar comments on many different videos, which could be considered trolling. If this is an example of trolling, then this exchange runs counter to my claim about trolling being done by outsiders, as Johnny Dunn certainly does appear to be an insider. At the same time, however, it follows my argument in so far as Johnny Dunn does encourage Bonnie Rose’s training, albeit by redirecting her towards online resources more closely associated with his preferred style. Even within ambiguous cases such as this one, it is possible to see how commenters signal their standing in the field – which is at least partially based on embodied experience/ expertise in capoeira – as a way of legitimizing their advice to novices. Even though Johnny Dunn does not explicitly tell Bonnie Rose that she will be successful if she just trains, by telling her to find a style she likes and then ‘hope they have a group in your town’, he implicitly invites her to join the embodied capoeira community and suggests that Internet-based resources alone are not sufficient for her to become a capoeirista.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Pasty, beady-eyed from the strain of viewing a flickering screen in a dimly lit room, chatting online with strangers because he or she lacks the social skills to engage in ‘the real world’. If this was once the stereotype of the hard-core gamer or chat-room user, it is making way for a new understanding of how online forums and participatory media like YouTube represent just one node in complex networks of social interaction. Recent scholarship in media studies as well as anthropology and related disciplines has revealed that there is an active social dimension of Internet usage, especially in the way that individuals produce and circulate discourse [see Boelstorff 2008; Haridakis and Hanson 2009; Coleman 2010]. New media, like YouTube in particular, has been celebrated for its participatory potential, enabling individuals to become active content generators rather than passive recipients of pre-packaged content created, vetted, and circulated by others [Spencer 2014; Scott 2016]. At the same time, however, its detractors argue that it can be a distraction ‘from democratic processes’ and accelerates the spread of the surveillance state [Scott 2016]. According to the ‘uses and gratifications’ theory of media viewership, individuals choose to engage with media based on a host of factors including their idiosyncratic goals and needs [Haridakis and Hanson 2009]. YouTube is ideal for this because viewers can search for specific content that meets their needs, view it on demand, spread it by sharing it with others, and participate in the discourse surrounding specific content by contributing to the comments.

Even when watching YouTube videos is a solitary activity, viewers often engage in follow-up behaviors – like sharing links to favorite videos or discussing videos with others – that are quite social [Spencer 2014]. Although Haridakis and Hanson [2009: 330] focus more on the ‘post-viewing social activities’ associated with YouTube videos, their observations about it being ‘a unique social resource’ nonetheless...
Brazilian men are often granted the most legitimacy [see Griffith 2016] however, interactions in the roda and in class sessions perpetuate a hierarchy in which Afro-blind discourse of equality in which anyone can get ahead through hard work. In actuality, 1 At the level of discourse, capoeiristas tend to promote a ‘color blind’ and ‘gender blind’ discourse of equality in which anyone can get ahead through hard work. In actuality, however, interactions in the roda and in class sessions perpetuate a hierarchy in which Afro-Brazilian men are often granted the most legitimacy [see Griffith 2016].

Spencer [2014] argues that YouTube operates, in part, as a forum for people to share their narratives about how they became BJJ practitioners. Spencer’s work on BJJ practitioners’ usage of YouTube suggests interesting parallels for how capoeiristas engage with this medium. In neither case is there a formal kata to learn – thus no set sequences that one trains and performs individually. Rather, each movement is meant to be trained with a partner. In this context, there is little point to even learning the art unless one has face-to-face opportunities to practice/play with others. Yet, both arts have a large corpus of tutorial videos available online. While some people may be using these to guide their training with other practitioners (e.g. small study groups that do not have a local master), others are viewing them in isolation. What, then, is the point?

Spencer [2014] argues that YouTube is not a replacement for face-to-face BJJ training, but is a complement to one’s progression from novice to expert. I concur, and as the data show, many of the people who comment on capoeira tutorial videos are trying to build up their confidence before taking a face-to-face class [see Griffith and Marion, forthcoming]. Indeed, Downey has captured the frustration of many novices who ask their capoeira mestre for clarification only to be told to watch and mimic [Downey 2010], making it understandable why some might turn to the Internet or other sources to augment their teacher’s instructions. However, there is also an important social function of these YouTube videos.

According to Spencer, BJJ has a ‘douchebag filter’, meaning that the way one is manhandled as a beginner serves to separate those who can be humble and learn from the experience of being dominated by another competitor from those whose egos cannot suffer this reflection of their own fragility [Spencer 2014]. It is the on-the-mat experience that accomplishes this work, but it is the online environment in which the discourse is nurtured, circulated, and appropriated by individuals in the larger community of practice. A similar phenomenon is at play when comparing the embodied and virtual spaces of capoeira. To be recognized by the community at large as a legitimate capoeirista, an individual has to master the form. This involves not only the proper execution of specific movements but also an embodied understanding of the underlying value system of capoeira (e.g. being tricky and playful, adopting a rogue’s swagger to channel the original founders of the art, breaking the rules when doing so will either make the other players/spectators laugh or highlight your knowledge of the art’s history, etc.).

While movements can be learned in isolation from other practitioners provided one has the right resources (e.g., videos, books, etc.), this latter element is almost impossible to learn without the support of others in a face-to-face training environment.

The virtual words of encouragement offered by individuals who either subtly or overtly identify themselves as capoeiristas online bridge the divide between just mastering the mechanics and embodying the true essence of this art. 2 By shutting down the ‘trolls’ and encouraging novices, they implicitly extend to these novices an invitation to join the capoeira community. Yet, there is something else at work here too. These comments are priming the recipients and any other potential capoeira students who may be ‘lurking’ (reading posts without commenting) for a lesson that they will not learn until later, and even then, they may only know it at a subconscious level.

It is simply not true that anyone can become a technical master of capoeira – which seems to be implied in many of these comments. But the malandragem and malica (terms used to describe the sneaky, win-at-all costs ethos that informs the habitus of capoeira) that one comes to embody after years of practicing capoeira enables one to cleverly and beautifully navigate the roda even if he or she is unable to perform the full range of movements in a master’s repertoire. I have seen a man in his 70s outwit a much younger and stronger opponent and a young man whose physical disabilities made walking difficult foil the full range of movements in a master’s repertoire. I have seen a man in his 70s outwit a much younger and stronger opponent and a young man whose physical disabilities made walking difficult foil the full range of movements in a master’s repertoire.

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2 See Royce [2004] for more on the distinction between virtuosity – mastery of form – and artistry, a level of accomplishment that includes technical mastery but also transcends it, making each performance seem like an inevitable interpretation of the source material.
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After obtaining a Master of Social Anthropology at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris (2009), Gabriel Facal completed his doctoral thesis (2012) at Aix-Marseille University as a member of the Institut de recherches Asiatiques (IrAsia, Marseille) under the supervision of Professor Jean-Marc de Grave. He carried out a dozen fieldwork expeditions for a total duration of thirty-seven months in Southeast Asia. His research initially focused on ritual initiation groups and their links with religious organizations and political institutions in the West of Java and the South of Sumatra (Indonesia). Since 2013, he has completed several additional trips in different regions of Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam to establish a comparative perspective.


This article explores continuities in fighting techniques of martial ritual initiations found across the Malay world (*Dunia Melayu*). Comparison with other neighboring Asian and Southeast Asian regions shows that these techniques follow patterns and principles that can be considered as ‘properly Malay’. I argue that ‘Malayness’ is socially and politically consolidated through these initiations, not least because the techniques mobilize local cosmologies and notions of the ‘person’. These cosmologies and notions are mainly articulated through conceptions of space and time, an aspect that is underlined by the transmission processes themselves. Transmission steps show parallels with life processes such as maturation, growing and purification. The correspondences between these processes are also expressed through a specific material culture. The structures of the technical fighting systems are oriented towards principles based on religion and morality, cosmology and philosophy. All of this suggests that the efficacy of techniques should be analyzed in conjunction with larger questions of the efficacy of rituals.
INTRODUCTION

The martial practices of Southeast Asia feature a rich diversity of both techniques and frames of transmission. Several studies provide insights on the streams (locally called aliran) found in the mainland area of the region and in some parts of the insular zones, particularly in the Philippines. However, these streams are still understudied. With few exceptions, research generally focuses on the origins, diffusion, social rooting, and organization process of the martial practice groups. Little has been written about the technical aspects of the fighting systems.

Moreover, in this area almost no research into techniques has been undertaken from a systematic or comparative perspective.

Recent developments regarding the Malay martial systems (e.g., pencak silat's approval by the UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) program), their vast heterogeneity, and the strengthening of related research may cause one to question both the relevance of the so-called 'Malay martial arts' as a specific set of practices and the ability of the concept of 'martial arts' to define these highly composite practices.

I argue that, for many of the most rooted practices – defined by the number of practitioners and the practices' inclusion into local social activities and systems of representations – the notion of 'martial ritual initiation' would be a better fit. Finally, if contextualization and comparison suggests that a family of 'Malay martial practices' exists, it stands to reason that we should examine what specifically unites these practices.

This theoretical and conceptual project is based on data I collected in over a dozen expeditions (with a total of thirty-seven months spent in the field) that began in 2004. Ethnographic studies were conducted through immersion in the martial schools of Banten and West Java. My research also employed several types of 'participant observation' and a large number of interviews with practitioners, masters, and officials in Jakarta, the Central part of Java, the Southern area of Sumatra (Lampung), Brunei Darussalam, Sarawak, and Kuala Lumpur.

The comparative aspect of this study was also shaped by the extensive specialized literature on Malay martial practices (Maryono 1998; de Grave 2001; Farrer 2009; Wilson 2015; Wilson 2016; Paetzold and Mason 2016; Natawijaya 2016; Facal 2016).

This essay does not claim to provide a comprehensive overview of Malay martial arts. Due to the immensity of the field (several hundred streams and thousands of schools), I will discuss only a limited number of groups most relevant to the present study. Moreover, one of the characteristics of Malay martial practices is the importance of the informal dimension. The capacity of practitioners to interpret, combine, hybridize, create, and transmit leads to a ‘rhizomic’ model of expansion, where orality is still the predominant vector of knowledge's diffusion. Therefore, comparative results will be limited to general observations to better picture the complex pattern of these regional practices in their changing social contexts. One must also remember that the different streams are marked by strong heterogeneity in terms of practices and representations. Indeed, these martial practices are cross-cut by social tensions and are the site of divergent cultural discourses.

HOLISTIC DIMENSIONS OF MALAY MARTIAL PRACTICES

Anthropologists have emphasized that the techniques of Malay martial practices form part of a system that includes gesture, material culture, and cosmological knowledge (de Grave 2001; Farrer 2009; Facal 2016; Paetzold and Mason 2016). Furthermore, the data collected indicates several interactions between different technical systems in the given area [Gille 1978]. This paper presents several martial practices from the Malay world which exhibit this double aspect: a systemic dimension of the technical sets, and interactions between these sets with other emergent social and martial systems.

Since the pioneering works on cultural technology initiated by André Leroi-Gourhan, it has largely been shown that techniques are embedded in the extended social frame [Digard 1979: 74] and that there is a 'human' dimension to techniques, as when activities are defined and finalized through effects that are socially recognized [Haudricourt 1964]. Moreover, specialists stress that there is a reciprocal determination of the technical systems with other areas, such as social and economic systems [Digard 1979: 83], and that techniques are ways...
of acting upon materials that are culturally defined [Lemonnier 1994: 255]. Therefore, I will consider techniques in their socio-cosmological frames as a way to specify their interactions with other social systems (including religion, ritual and daily activities like agriculture).

Analysis of the set of correspondences between the components of these fighting techniques shows that they provide a pivotal basis for the functioning of larger practice systems. Within various streams fighting techniques are (to different extents) prevalent among the practices that comprise ‘martial systems’. These include disciplines like dance and medicine. Indeed, they are designed to provide general protection: which encompasses defense and attack as well as the capacity to heal, kill, or even provide invulnerability. Therefore, fighting techniques constitute the main point by which to position the specificities of the streams in comparison with each other. The centrality of the fighting techniques, underlined by both the practitioners’ discourses and analytical, and anthropological examination, indicates that they can provide insights into interregional continuities that exist between the martial practices found across the Malay world.

The integration of the techniques into wider cosmological frames and sets of social values leads us to consider their connection with related aspects, such as initiation, ritual, authority, apprenticeship, and transmission. However, I will mainly approach the martial practices through technical forms and the structures of the fighting systems they encompass. This approach will allow comparison and reveal the points of convergence and distinction that occur between the different regional streams. Due to the complexity of these combat systems, the other related cultural aspects (initiation, ritual, authority, apprenticeship, and transmission) evoked above remain the concern of specific works to be developed in the future. Nevertheless, as we cannot separate the ‘style’ and the ‘function’ of the techniques [Latour and Lemonnier 1994: 13], their origins, interactions, systematizations, and evolutions reveal both the representations of action upon material and the ideological dynamics of their societies of development.

THE CONCEPT OF MARTIAL RITUAL INITIATION

The fighting systems discussed here are embedded into a set of practices usually classified as ‘martial arts’, whether by practitioners, researchers or the public. Nevertheless, previous debates, particularly in this journal, have underlined the challenges of defining ‘martial arts’. Sixt Wetzler, for example, has stressed the multidimensional aspects of the meanings of martial arts discourses (with ‘meaning’ ranging from ‘preparation for violent conflict’ to ‘play and competitive sports’, ‘performance’, ‘transcendent goals’, and ‘health care’) [Wetzler 2015: 28]. Paul Bowman, meanwhile, has convincingly argued for the necessity of placing theoretical concerns before definition by attempting ‘to assess a context in terms of forces and relations, relative weights and gravities, and the ways in which forces and fields constitute, colour, and condition entities, identities, and practices’ [Bowman 2016: 19].

Following these paradigmatic lines, and in accordance with the anthropological method, this study conceptualizes Malay martial practices on the basis of two operations. The first will be contextualization, which means that martial practices are considered in their society of inclusion and in relation to its social history and dynamics. Following Wetzler, the second operation will be comparison; specifically comparisons that will enable us to specify the characteristics of these practices among the various kinds of martial categories, including ‘martial arts’, ‘self-defense systems’, ‘combat sports’, ‘performance arts’, and ‘healing systems’. On the basis of these two operations, the current study concludes that, considering the particular importance of rituality and the predominance of the initiation aspect over martial formation, we must mobilize another category: martial ritual initiation. The development of this concept is not based on an assumption that initiation is alien to other aspects of martial practice, such as performance, healing, and sport. Rather, it suggests that initiation is hierarchically predominant over these other dimensions. Although some cases suggest that Malay martial arts schools have already shifted away from an initiation-based model of organization, I observed in my research a countervailing trend towards an increased use of an initiation model. Of course, by its very nature the initiation model is highly heterogeneous and ceaselessly shifting, as the following discussion will suggest.

During his study of Central Java’s kanuragan initiation, Jean-Marc de Grave [2001] was the first scholar to suggest that to understand the most fundamental Malay martial practices we must consider the analytical notion of ‘ritual initiation’. Such initiations sometimes begin even before the practitioner’s birth, when rituals are performed to protect the future newborn. De Grave stresses that the entire life of initiates is sequenced by personal and collective martial rituals. The most widespread rituals concern introduction into the practice group, access to new knowledge that will enable the practitioners to transform their bodies (by strengthening and purification actions), and access to higher levels in the group’s social hierarchy that enables initiates to open a new branch of the school.

All such rituals contribute to the transmission of cosmological and religious knowledge, healthcare techniques, martial dances and performances, meditation, concentration and breathing techniques,
and invulnerability magic. These are all seen as complementary to fighting rituals and techniques. The practices are transmitted through spiritual chains of descent (silsilah), and individuals who enter a practice group must often take an oath that refers to these ancestral chains. Even when they have contributed to the transformation of a school’s practices and values (sometimes significantly), practitioners who have successfully followed the rules of the school and have come to be considered as embodying its values enter this same ancestral chain. In some cases, these ancestors are thought to possess the practitioners who best embody and enact the group’s values. Ultimately, these initiations conclude with death, although even the status of the dead is thought to continue its transformation through the larger cycle of ancestry.

All the rituals discussed here follow the three stages discussed by Arnold van Gennep in his work on rites of passage. These are, the setting of the ritual context, marked by the initiated group’s separation from the community of the non-initiates; a transition, illustrated by the details of the ceremony; and finally, the reincorporation of ritual acts into daily life. According to van Gennep, these can be qualified as pre-liminary, liminary and post-liminary rites [van Gennep 1909]. Victor Turner later underlined the importance of liminal periods that position the initiates at the margin of an institutional political order and then favor a mode of social participation that is indispensable for the coexistence of the members of the inclusion group (which he calls communitas [Turner 1969]).

In addition to this ritual aspect, several initiation groups consider their martial practice as ultimately oriented towards religion. The historian and Islamologist Martin van Bruinessen [1999] illustrated this phenomenon in the socio-religious contexts marked by Sufism by showing that invulnerability practices (locally called debus in the West of Java and dabuih in the South of Sumatra) are central in regional religious practice. Locally, initiates believed that these practices contributed to the first diffusion of Islam in the Archipelago. Moreover, as noted by de Grave [2003: 16], the holistic aspects of these initiations enable the maintenance of activities that are exterior to orthodox Islam, like the cult of high-ranking persons (kings, saints, or local authority figures) or the cult of local ancestors. Locally, Muslim conceptions are not exclusive to other practices of a more animistic orientation. In these practices, some animal and mythical figures are mobilized and natural elements are referred to (for instance the bamboo and its flexibility; water and its fluidity) as a way for the practitioners to obtain their qualities as combatants. These points are further developed below.

For the reasons given above, and given the holistic nature of Malay martial practices, the notion of martial ritual initiation is a useful analytical tool. It enables us to grasp the predominance of initiation and religious dimensions over martial training as well as the preeminence of collective action upon the socio-cosmic system over the supposed ‘artistic performance’ of the practitioners. This perspective supports the notion of the transmission of diverse practices and knowledge that surrounds the fighting techniques. They are ritually transmitted through the initiation of the persons over the course of their lives and across generations. We can then theorize why this model predominates in the Malay world and through what modalities it operates.

**The Consolidation of ‘Malayness’ Through Martial Ritual Initiations**

Even if it is well established that Malays constitute an ethnic group [Coedes 1964; Lombard 1990: vol. 1-2; Tuan Soh 1991: 3], the notions of Malay identity and ‘Malayness’ still inspires debate among specialists. Territorially, the Malay world includes, according to these authors, the Isthmus of Kra, Singapore, the Riau Archipelago, Sumatra (including Aceh), the coastal regions of Borneo, the Sulu Archipelago, and the island of Java [Benjamin 1993; Farrer 2009]. More generally, de Grave [2013] suggests the inclusion of Indonesia (without Irian Jaya), Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, and Timor Leste. We could probably also consider the linguistic and socio-cultural continuities that exist in the Malay parts of southern Thailand and the southern Philippines.

Given the difficulties of territorial demarcation, the nature of the ‘Malay world’ as a socio-cultural entity requires reflection. Anthony Reid [2000] reviewed the historical evolution of the terms ‘Melayu’ and ‘Malayness’ in this context. He found that these terms were used initially as referential categories among people of the Archipelago and later were adopted as social labels by outsiders. Among specialists, some support arguments for the pre-colonial origins of the notions of Malay and Malayness, while others contest them [Barnard 2004]. However, most scholars agree that, while in everyday usage the term Melayu is readily understood, in truth its meaning is fluid and elusive [Yaapar 2004].

Similar conclusions can be reached regarding the fighting systems included within the ritual initiations. These systems resulted from the combination of multiple foreign and interregional influences and this aspect poses difficulties when trying to trace the borders of the areas of these practices and their development. Exogenous influences that can also be noted include Indian or Middle Eastern breathing practices: several Bantenese schools refer to the local Islamic mystic, elmukhikmat, as a source of power and invulnerability [Facal 2016]. There are also...
healing techniques, which were conveyed through various forms of Hinduism and Islam, introduced by merchant networks and religious preachers. The practices linked to Indian *kalaripayat* (itself bound to *pranayama*, the practice of controlling breath and vital energy, *prana*) can lead to comparisons of the regions that were influenced by Hinduism. The numerous schools of *kanuragan* and *kebatinan* from Central Java indicate such an influence [see de Grave 2001].

Chinese influences deeply influenced these streams, an aspect of which is stressed by the extension of the term *kuntao*. This designates systems including Chinese elements at varying degrees [Davies 2000]. Kuntao is spread in peninsular and insular Malaysia [Davies 2010: 312-317], in the South of the Philippines [Jocano Jr. 2010: 335], and Indonesia [Wiley 1997], particularly in the Betawi streams from the extended Jakarta region [Natawijaya 2016]. More recently, the sportive and self-defense techniques integrated from Japan and western countries also impacted the fighting systems [de Grave 2013].

Interregional influences within Southeast Asia are apparent according to the geographical proximity of these areas. Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Taiwan, and China have in common a link between their fighting systems and dance (sometimes of royal origin), theatre, healing, spiritual protection, and invulnerability practices, as well as the use of protection amulets and weapons, like the dagger *keris*, the knife *kujang*, and the spear *tombak* [Wiley 1997]. Some streams encompass different regional influences, like *tomoi* and *silat spelek*, which are practiced in the Malaysian northern states of Kedah, Perlis, Terengganu, and Kelantan. They are closely related to other Indo-Chinese boxing styles such as *muay thai* from Thailand, *pradal serey* from Cambodia, *vo thuat* from Vietnam, *muay lai lao* from Laos, and *bama lethwei* from Myanmar. Finally, influences also radiate from Malay areas to neighboring regions, as is the case for *silat* in the southern Philippines [de Grave 2003; for Filipino martial arts, see Wiley 1997].

These influences between Malay and other areas have an impact on how Malay systems distinguish themselves from other regional forms. Neighboring systems (especially *arnis* and *muay thai*) have been well documented, and they can serve as solid points of comparison to determine what constitutes Malayness in the field of martial ritual initiations. As we can define what links different systems and in what ways they differ from other regional streams, it can also be stressed that they build Malay identity and Malayness both at the internal level by distinguishing areas' cultural specificities as well as on an international scale by forging interregional cohesion. Thus, through both contextualization and comparison, it can be established that there is a Malay ‘family’ of fighting systems which transcends the varieties of local culture and significantly shapes bodily practice.

Observations made during previous research on Malay martial initiations suggests that the area has long been the scene of exchanges, particularly in the field of martial systems and ritual initiations [cf. Draeger and Smith 1980: 179; Notosoemijoto 1984: 9; Mitchell 1989: 183; Maryono 1998; de Grave 2013]. Douglas Farrer and Jean-Marc de Grave note that most Indonesian and Malaysian specialists assert a Sumatran origin for Malay martial arts [Farrer and de Grave 2010: 363]. Even if there are insufficient written sources to confirm the Sumatran origin hypothesis, studies of the social anchorage of the art, including its ties to ritual activity, theater, performance, and regional linguistic media, all point toward Sumatran origin.

The number of schools and practice groups that have developed in the Malay world is impossible to calculate, as these fighting systems are often integrated into wider structures of transmission. Moreover, it is very difficult to distinguish between a school (*perguruan*) and a branch (*cabang*), or an extension, as these structures are created through diverse processes according to descent and kinship networks, as well as reflecting divisions or alliances between persons and groups. On the other hand, it seems more established that a limited number of regional families (about ten, according to de Grave [2013]) – identified through specific streams (*aliran*) (around 600-800 only for Indonesia, according to Natawijaya [2016: 7]) – form the basis of these structures. The streams are regionally designated through different vernacular names. Jean-Marc de Grave [2001] deals with pencak in Central Java; O’ong Maryono [2002] describes pencak and *silat* in Indonesia; Douglas Farrer [2012] considers *silat* in Malaysia; Lee Wilson [2015] and Ian Wilson [2016] analyze *penca* in West Java; and Gabriel Facal [2016] focuses on pencé in Banten. Other families are *silék* in West Sumatra; *manca* in Bawean; *bemancak* in East Borneo; *akmencak* in South Sulawesi; *enak* in Bali; *bukuntu* in Banjarmasin; *elaj, djalat*, or *ilat* in Madura; *gayong* in some parts of Malaysia; *silat* in Aceh, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei Darussalam; and *pasilat, akmencak*, or *basilat* in Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago (South Philippines) [Gong 2007]. Other ritual war practices whose techniques do not necessarily form systems can be found across the Indonesian archipelago, as is the case for *carok* in Madura or *sirri* in Sulawesi.

Correspondences between regional streams appear at diverse levels. They are marked in accompaniment by musical orchestras, dance gestures, and valorization of movement aesthetics, which Douglas Farrer has characterized as ‘a performance of enchantment and an enchantment of performance’ [2012]. The recent edited volume by Uwe Paetzold and Paul Mason [2016] stresses these correspondences, from southern Thailand to Bali, passing by Kelantan, Sabah, West Sumatra, Riau islands, and West and Central Java. An observation that can be raised concerning the link between aesthetics and efficiency in combat...
is the function sometimes played by aesthetics. In many schools where I conducted research, aesthetical gestures were believed to attract or to capture protective invisible entities. These entities would possess the practitioners and provide them with force and knowledge about martial applications. As such, the performances and their aesthetic characteristics are not only oriented towards the public, but also concern the domain of such invisible entities. Using this example, we can add to the analysis of Farrer [2015: 43], for whom entertainment and efficacy (similar to my notion of ‘combat efficiency’ below) permeate porous definitional boundaries.

Correspondences also vary according to the proximity of local forms of theatre, for example randai in West Sumatra, wayang golek in West Java, and wayang kult in Central Java, East Java, and Bali. Theatrical forms are particularly elevated and enhanced during the martial displays of the wedding ritual in Banten (buka tolak panto) and Jakarta (palang pintu). Mimicry, imitation, and exaggeration are also constitutive of the Madurese performances of silat and rattan stick fighting ohjung, described by Hélène Bouvier [1994: 146-157, 182-183]. In every case, it seems that the link between theatrical forms and possession remains an aspect warranting further research [Farrer 2015: 36].

General parallels between streams can be identified around the important status of women in the foundation stories of schools, the social organization of the practice group, and links with tutelary spirits (for instance, the possession latah in Malaysia and the possession by ancestors who took the form of female tiger–ancestors in many parts of West Java). Female warriors are certainly an important subject of research, even in the contemporary period, as illustrated by the head of the West Javanese panglipur school, Enny Rukmini Sekarningrat (1915-2011). Because she was the daughter of the school’s founder, Abah Aleh, she exerted influence upon every other panglipur master, and her charisma was reinforced by her military experience during the Indonesian Revolution (1945-1949).

Other parallels between the Malay streams concern the role of the masters as physical, spiritual, or mystic healers and intermediaries with tutelary entities, often considered as spirits of ancestors. The interrelations between martial practice and healthcare is illustrated by the fact that moderate aggression is considered a way to strengthen both the body and the whole person. This principle appears not only in physical training but also in several privations (fasting, sexual abstinence, wakefulness), particularly in the streams influenced by kebatinan or the Sufi brotherhoods (among others, Naqsbandiyah in Malaysia, Shatariyah in West Sumatra, and Qadiriyah wa Naqsbandiyah in Banten and West Java). Moderate and controlled aggression is also enacted through the strengthening massages (urut) of the body, that consist of specific strikes and techniques of ‘bruise crushing’, or the more prosaic ingestion of chili which is thought to strengthen the inner organs [personal investigations on the Bantenese school of Mande Macan Guling and Terumbu stream].

Correspondences also touch on the link to local animals, as expressed in the stories of foundation (among many others, see Cimande and Syahbandar from West Java and Haji Salam from Banten), the identity of the tutelary spirits of the schools, the correspondences between animals (particularly tigers, but see also the surprising reference to turtles in silat penyu from Terengganu as well as the other animal forms described below) and ancestry, ritual sacrifices, and the attributes (blood, hair, teeth, nails) sought after by the practitioners through practice to strengthen their own body, to forge weapons, to make amulets, or to compose ritual offerings. In several streams, such as Cimande, links with agricultural production are visible in the field of the fighting techniques, ritual offerings, and parallels concerning the life cycle of plants and the process of apprenticeship. This is illustrated in many regions by the widespread conception of aesthetic movements, which are considered as flowers, and martial applications, which are referred to as fruits.

Another set of correspondences encompasses the relation to ecological elements like water (the Java Sea for Bandrong stream from Banten, the seven sources of Gombel Bunga Lari stream from Jakarta, the Cimande river and the basin of Terumbu Bantenese stream) and earth (comprising natural elements like mountains, but also cultivated spaces, such as the rice field invoked in Jakartanese Beksi and the lime garden of Bantenese Tjimande Tarikolot), as they are invoked in many myths of foundation. These elements are also extensively used for ritual offerings. Earth from ancestors’ graves and other products of the earth are used; many offerings are made from rice (like the cake kue onde of the tutelary spirits of the schools, the correspondences between). Water from sacred sources is also used for ritual offerings; many kinds of beverages (tea and coffee) and juices (lime or coconut) are also found in the majority of martial initiation rituals of Java and Sumatra [Farrer and De Grave 2010].

When exploring the relationship between streams, we can also cite the structure of the rituals related to apprenticeship and to the cohesion of the practice group, oral traditions of transmission, the linguistic regional supports, and some more central notions, such as rasa [Stange 1984]. Rasa includes sensations, emotions, and feelings, as well as a faculty of empathy with a set of mundane and invisible forces. The strong valorization of this feeling is present in the whole Malay world under various regional modalities. It is influenced by cosmological and religious concepts, whether they derive from local forms of animism
or different tendencies of Islam, Catholicism, Javanism, Confucianism, or Hindu-Buddhism. Some streams develop specifically the capacity of rasa, like West Javanese Cikalong, Gerak Rasa, and Gerak Gulung. Other practitioners give an extended definition to this notion, as illustrated by several schools from the Syahbandar stream, that conceive of rasa as a way to communicate with invisible impersonal forces and, in some cases, to be possessed by them. Finally, correspondences between the streams are also obvious regarding the local principle of authority (discussed below) [Facal 2012]. Interesting parallels have been noted regarding the recent phenomena of sportive state federations and local informal political networks [Sidel 2004; Wilson 2016].

Such correspondences between regional streams show that it is essential to consider their social inclusion. It leads researchers to consider disruption and ruptures in the systems as well as the ways that practitioners reassemble the systems' elements to maintain their coherence or to provide new forms of meaning.

**Figure 1: First movement of golempangan dance, inspired by the first prostration (rokaat) of the Muslim prayer (TTKKDH stream, Serang, keceran ritual 2).**

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**Trans-regional Continuities of Fighting Techniques**

**Gabriel Facal**

**Understanding Fighting Techniques in their Original Social Context**

Continuities and distinctions between the techniques of the regional streams remain an open field of study. However, it is well established that there is an interaction between the techniques and their frame of inclusion [Leroi-Gourhan 1945]. This fact is significant as martial techniques influence numerous other practices. For example, Minangkabau theatre (randai) uses speech, music, and dance training, which are all derived from silek. This section examines several specific factors explaining these regional continuities, such as physical environment, social structure, political frame, and religious context. Moreover, André Leroi-Gourhan has shown that to be accepted in a specific socio-cultural frame, a technique needs a ‘favorable milieu’ which encompasses the actors’ representations [Leroi-Gourhan 1973: 374]. To grasp these representations I will consider both cosmology and other central notions, such as that of the ‘person’.

The physical environment in some ways orientates the conditions of practice (see below for a discussion of the social factors that prevent a geographically determinist argument). Through the analysis of the practitioners’ discourses and practices, I have observed that urban or rural landscapes, hills, mountains and plains play a role in the daily movements and gestures that people choose to develop. This environmental influence is expressed in the numerous analogies made by the practitioners themselves linking techniques and environmental references like waves, mountains, earth, and sky [Facal 2016; Natawijaya 2016]. These elements are also central in martial rituals, which employ water, earth, fire, and breathing techniques (the breathing methods are sometimes understood as a way of mastering the air element).

Some activities, such as agriculture, cattle farming, steel forging, maritime work, and trade influence both techniques and the shaping of the bodies. For example, practitioners of the Cimande stream (West Java) suggest that the shaping of their bodies by the demands of rice agriculture facilitates the fighting techniques they practice. In West Java, the Syahbandar stream’s founder, Mohammad Kosim Ama Syahbandar, was known as a blacksmith farrier. It is said that he developed his strength, as well as the grappling and locking techniques of his style, based on this work. Bandrong stream practitioners from West Banten inherited techniques designed for fighting aboard ships against pirate attacks. In the urban areas of Jakarta, several groups claim to have developed systems adapted to close combat in narrow and crowded urban spaces. In the harbor area of Tanjung Priok (North Jakarta), the martial streams stress technical specificities that differentiate one from another. On the other hand, in Bandung’s city, considered to be West Java’s cultural center, one observes robust sharing and exchange. This
hybridity gives birth to an immense variety of syncretistic forms that exist among the local streams.

These examples suggest that techniques are designed by practitioners to match their ecological specificities, physical environments, and daily activities. It also shows how the link between society and the environment is culturally constructed [Sahlin 1976]. In this respect, it squares with the observations of Maurice Godelier [1984], who concluded that reality is both ideal and material and that we cannot disconnect human action from the environment or the representations that underlie these actions. Of course, the use of the physical environment may vary according to the strategies and the cultural and technical specificities of the practice groups. The environment’s use may also depend on political context (as described below). Another point linked to the environment is technique circulation and the types of exchanges favored, which is an important aspect of social organization.

Social structure and organization impacts the technical aspects of fighting systems. Regionally, combat methods demarcate social hierarchy. For instance, in West Sumatra, initiation of the Minangkabau’s local rulers (datuk) still requires their ritual performance of silēk combat dances. In the whole Malay area, for centuries, several systems were the monopoly of the rulers and the court [Bertrand 2011: 31]. During colonization, or periods of political reforms, these streams spread to popular classes, sometimes through religious networks (as part of the teaching curriculum in Islamic boarding schools, pesantren and surau) or specialized groups, including army officers, defense supervisors in the harbors, or security experts in mining areas [Maryono 1998]. Class stratification has always been linked to technical differentiation.

This was evident in the foundation of the Cikalong stream in the Cianjur region (West Java) by members of the noble class (menak) during the 19th century. That stream limited high kicks and the use of strength to differentiate itself from the Cimande peasants’ (semah) stream from Bogor [Sastrahadiprawira 1978]. Cikalong practitioners therefore stressed a refined (lemes) ethos and technical training that emphasized sensitivity and feeling (ngarsa), whereas Cimande focused on force and resistance; a characteristic that was frequently noted by the practitioners with whom I conversed.

In both rural and urban areas the social contexts that influence the martial practices can be very diverse, according to the relations between local streams, migration tradition, geographical mobility, pilgrimage and peregrination, and uxorilocal marriage, viri- or neo-local modes of residence. In the matrilineal Minangkabau society of West Sumatra, the migration called menantau that is done during men’s initiation contributed to intensive exchanges. Over the course of fieldwork in Lampung in South Sumatra in 2011, I observed that work migration permitted complex combinations of the systems. De Grave [2001] studied how pilgrimages practiced in Central Java favored and extended combinations between different systems. Likewise, I found that the uxorilocal marriage practices in West Java had the same consequence. In turn, in mid-20th century Brunei Darussalam society, the technical systems were increasingly formalized and homogeneous [Facal 2014]. These different cases lead us to consider political dynamics which may have an impact on both the circulation of the fighting techniques and their meaning.

Concerning the link between political frames and the development of fighting methods, the provinces of Banten and Lampung show that external political pressures can favor the development of local streams and push these to assert their specificities. For example, combat dances (ibing penceu) have been encouraged by the West Javanese federation and the Indonesian pencak silat union (Persatuan Pencak Silat Indonesia, PPSI) as a way to oppose the national spread of more sportive forms of the art such as those promoted by the national federation and the Union of pencak silat (Ikatan Pencak Seluruh Indonesia, IPSI) [de Grave 2013]. In Banten, the invulnerability practices (called debus) have played the same role by differentiating regional penceu from the process of national homogenization. However, these local characteristics were also used by entrepreneurs and local government officials for commercial and political goals, in turn pushing some masters to develop hybrid forms. PPSI’s combat dances have been formalized so their local characteristics can be easily identified during national pencak silat events and meetings. I have shown in previous work that the Bantenese have also created contemporary forms of debus, designed to spread the invulnerability image of its strongmen, the jawara [Facal 2016].

National unification and local marginalization have also operated for the Malays of Singapore, for whom the silat ritual practiced during wedding ceremonies is a method of socio-cultural identity affirmation in a disintegrating urban context [Farrell 2012]. Unified territorial areas, as is the case in Malaysia, exhibit a strong differentiation between the regional streams; each one linked to the larger cultural system of its home State (negeri). In contrast, the centralizing policies of the Indonesian State since independence led to the simplification of the martial initiation techniques, as well as their modification for military or sportive purposes [de Grave 2011]. Also, in Brunei Darussalam sultanate, silat groups have been almost entirely eradicated, expelled from the country or marginalized during the political conflicts of the 1960s. Now, every school must register under the supervision of the national federation and practice one of the two national streams: Silat Cakak Asli or Silat Kuntu. As any form of violence and political contestation is banished, the schools are tightly supervised. Several
masters transmit their ultimate and axial techniques only to close initiates [Facal 2014].

Religious context determines the transmission of martial methods and their content, as religion and rituality are the main markers of hierarchical authority structure and social organization. Cosmological depictions (which can be captured through the analysis of the discourses and practices) stress that the fighting techniques are embedded in a coherent system that combines methods for representing values with practices designed to reach material objectives. This double articulation is underlined by the several parallels seen between the fighting techniques and the daily techniques of work on material (agriculture, horse taming, steel forging) and nonmaterial (prayer and devotion) objects. Thus, we must consider both cosmological systems and notions of personhood when seeking to understand the evolution of specific fighting techniques.

**COSMOLOGIES AND NOTIONS OF PERSONHOOD IN THE MALAY WORLD**

Even if we sometimes observe deep influences from the past Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms [Lombard 1990], the Malays themselves link their practices to Islamic and Chinese religious doctrines or, in the case of some minorities, Christianity [de Grave 1996]. According to Islam, which is the reference religion for most of the streams, the world is divided in two realities that coexist and interact: the world of human beings (alam manusia) and the invisible world (alam ghaib). Those coextensive universes hold six classes of beings created by God. The world apprehended by humans encompasses beings and inanimate objects. The invisible world is populated by subtle creatures (makhluk halus) like malevolent entities (jin) and angels.

As animals, human beings have two dimensions, the terms for which are Arabic in origin: one realm is exoteric/physical (lahir or zahir) and the other is esoteric/spiritual (batin). The exoteric dimension of humanity concerns the physical body (badan), whereas the esoteric aspect is composed of different elements. Esoteric components include intelligence (akal), soul (jiwa), and a centre of emotions (ati). They are associated with the liver or heart, which relate to the sense of ‘feeling’ (rasa).

However, the local discourses on the Islamic notions of lahir and batin do not totally encompass and represent the actual martial practices and their representations, as categories like physical and spiritual, inner and external, are not straightforward and easily separated. Indeed, one can exert an influence over the upper world through mundane and physical acts, and can experience physical modifications by spiritual practice, as is the case with breathing exercises or the recitation of sacred words. As a result, there is no strict duality between body and spirit; there are different degrees of interiority and exteriority, with a possible reversal of the relations between elements considered internal and external.

Here, and as Meyer Fortes [1987] has shown concerning the Tallensi from Ghana, the conception of ‘the person’ cannot be dissociated from the status of a person. Personhood is progressively constructed throughout a life by social moments (circumcision, marriage, childbirth) and ritual actions, as is the case for martial initiation. This conception is fully realized when the person reaches the ancestors’ community although transformations can still occur while a person’s spirit continues to be honored and called upon.

We can note the cosmological influence of Sufi brotherhoods, such as the Qadiriyah and Naqsabandiyah, in several areas. According to their initiates there is an isomorphism between body and universe, in which both are led by the same rules. They are constituted by the five elements: earth (from which the human body was created and where it is buried after death), water (which irrigates human flesh), fire (often compared to blood), air (perceived in breathing), and ether (considered as a fluid and pure element in which evolve superior entities). These five elements are put in correspondence with the five cardinal directions and together construct a classification system.4 The body is also considered to be constituted according to Islamic categories, particularly numerical ones.

These Sufi conceptions are embedded together with Malay notions. Other points of convergence appear in the mystical practice kebatinan, which is composed of elements from local religions, Hindu-Buddhism and Islam. Kebatinan includes possession practices by the spirits of ancestors, legendary figures and animals (tiger, cat, monkey, turtle, bat, goat, pig, and snake), and ulin handap gesture techniques, (used by the initiates to initiate possession by tiger-ancestors). These two categories are sometimes combined: ancestor spirits can manifest themselves in the form of animal spirits, and humans can be possessed by animal spirits.

The Sufi doctrine of the Unity of God (tauhid) suggests certain pantheist notions and admits the possibility of sacral forces (kesaktian). These concepts form the basis for a set of practices that enables the initiate to perform effective actions in different fields of reality. Kebatinan

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4 Concerning these correspondences between cardinal directions and elements in Central Java, cf. de Grave [2001: 131-135]; concerning these correspondences in Malaysia, cf.Farrer [2009: 261-264].
encompasses breathing and concentration exercises [Farrer 2009: 145, 148], ritual purification, religious devotion, fasting and retreat, relation to spirits, and peregrinations at cult places (kramat). In these practices of protection and the obtaining of sacral force, combat practices are central. The techniques they embed are therefore the key to activating relationships between persons, between persons and spirits, and indirectly with God [de Grave 2001].

The many parallels between Malay fighting systems are linked through at least three larger fields of social life and cosmology. These are time (both in linear form, as in generational descent, and a cycle process, seen in rituality), space (with the dimensions of close/far; up/down; inside/outside), and perceived ontology (including aspects of visible-heard/hidden-silent). These three fields form a system and are linked by many correspondences, expressed by numerical classifications. Since the time and space dimensions cannot be separated, I will try to underline the inter-relations between them.

**SPATIAL DIMENSION AND FIGHTING TECHNIQUES**

The fighting systems spread throughout the Malay world emphasize different distances between opponents. Each distance favors a type of strength and a category of techniques. There are basically three types of distances and categories of techniques: long distance and percussion techniques (for example in Silat Kuntau or in the Sundanese stream Kari), middle distance and trapping (or ‘sticky hands’) techniques (for example Silat Cekak or Sundanese stream Cikalong), and short distance with several styles of wrestling and grappling (like Silat Jatuh in Kelantan [Malaysia], Gedou-gedou in Tapanuli [Aceh], Marsurangut in North Sumatra, Atol in Rembang [Central Java], Patol in East Java, Bahempas in Banjarmasin, Benjang in Sunda [West Java] and Sirroto in South Sulawesi). Many streams combine these fighting strategies with inner techniques derived from practices such as mystic kebatinan and the local Muslim mystic hikmat. They sometimes constitute proper fields of practice, as is the case with ilmu contact (‘knowledge of the contact’) and silat jarak jauh (‘silat of long distance’). In both ilmu contact and silat jarak jauh, the opponents are hit without any physical contact and these practices are often conceptualized as designed to cause internal injuries to the opponent from a long distance [Farrer [ed.] 2016].

These different ranges lead the systems to emphasize specific postural techniques. For example, the streams Madi, Syahbandar, and Cimande, which develop close and middle-distance fighting techniques as well as using full power during the attacks, require a very strong posture and a block-shaped stance. When hitting, the extension of body parts is not maximal and the stance remains deeply anchored. In contrast, a stream like Kari that is centered on speediness and multiple attacks develops mobility and the capacity to change postures quickly. Other streams, such as Sera, combine these different characteristics. The mixing of different postural types in Sera enables practitioners to develop a progressive approach to the opponent where one can alternate between hitting, trapping, and locking.

Besides the distance between opponents, during combat the practitioners must take into account two dimensions of spatiality to create effective combinations. In this case, spatiality encompasses various parts of the practitioner’s body as well as its location in space. The main dimensions mobilized are right/left, up/down,
inside/outside. During my investigations, I have observed that the combination of these different dimensions leads to a multiplicity of possible techniques and the mobilization of various parts of the body. Upper parts of the body used may include palms, fingers, the backs of hands, fists, forearms, elbows, shoulders, and heads. Lower parts of the body employed may be feet, calves, shinbones, thighs, and knees. These areas can be used to hit, block, grab, or lock. Such actions can be combined into a single movement in a variety of ways that differ from one style to the next.

In all the streams that I have observed, the salutation stance is the base of the fighting movements. Through the centered position of the arms and the balanced position of the body, salutation can easily become a guard or a blocking/attacking technique, and it facilitates footwork in any direction. The salutation stance is then a way of centering oneself, both spatially and in terms of one’s state of mind. As a result, it is often considered as a prayer in movement (lailah sembah) which aims to make a bond between earth and upper world forces, between tutelary ancestors (whose graves are underground and spirits are in the upper world) and God or divine forces. Thus, many fighting techniques and postures (sikap) are directly inspired by the prayer movements. On the horizontal plain, during a performance, salutation is directed to the assembly, beginning on the right, with the representatives of the various authorities including the initiation master, political guests, musicians, and spectators. It may also happen that it is designed to ward off approaching evil [Binson 2016: 134], as in the wai kru ceremony (also present in muay thai) found in Southern Thailand. It features a movement sequence that is repeated while facing each of the four cardinal directions (North, South, East, West).

Various streams treat these spatial dimensions differently in their creation of fighting techniques. Some systems (for instance Bandrong from Banten, Beksi from Jakarta) prefer to begin from long distance move to close combat and other systems (particularly in the Minangkabau region of West Sumatra) seek to move in the opposite direction. In some schools, such as Tjimande Tarikolot from Banten, close combat is not taught before the highest levels of apprenticeship. There, close distance is conceived as a type of abolition of social distances and is reserved for initiates who are deeply involved in the practice group. That is to say, it is only taught to those who are rooted in the locality and have endured the initiation rituals that previously enabled them to receive the genealogy of the past masters. Progressive physical proximity between the practitioners and between them and the elders is expressed through the progressive steps of physical approach. Long distance movements follow aesthetic gestures that combine large and soft movements of the arms with wide steps. The movements and steps then tighten while the distance is abolished and physical contact occurs. This progression is obvious in the choreographed fights called ganda (literally ‘duo’ or ‘double’) used in the majority of the pencak silat performances.

Footwork (balabeh in West Sumatra, langkah in Central Java, lengkah in West Java, pacah in Malaysia) is an essential part of this process and it is often strongly systematized according to physical fighting techniques. The main patterns are the line, diagonal, square, triangle, and circular displacement. The displacement can refer to numbers: triangle would be called the ‘step of three’ (langkah tiga) and the square the ‘step of four’ (langkah empat). It can also lead to strategies, like with the ‘robber step’ (langkah curi) and the ‘liar step’ (langkah bohong). Each pattern can be employed in diverse ways if they are used against one or several opponents, with empty hands or with weapons.

Footwork also varies according to techniques employed in the so-called ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ spheres of the opponent’s guard. This is defined as the area located between their arms or outside their arms. For example, some streams emphasize that the foot and arm must be opposite while inside the opponent’s guard, as to enable quick retreat from grappling. This combination has specific names. In West Java, standing with the opposite leg and arm is called suliwa, whereas a same leg and arm stance is called ngarodon.

Finally, movement does not always require steps, as it is shown by the techniques geser or seser found in West Java. The Geser technique enables the practitioners to shift progressively from their position by displacing their heel. Geser is even more progressive and consists of a closing and opening of the toes, as a means to create a slight traction of the whole body. These moves are useful to the practitioner when he is already in contact with the opponent and must change his guard’s angle without modifying his/her body balance.
STEP PATTERNS COMMONLY PRACTICED

When practiced as approach movements, footwork begins from long distance between the partners. In the Tjimande Tarikolot stream, the partners face opposite directions, then both turn right at the same moment so they still are in opposite directions, then they both turn left, and finally they turn face to face. This progressive orientation to face the adversary is accompanied by a movement towards the inside and center point. At the same time, the partners progressively get away from their own center to be in contact with each other. Thus, confrontation is a movement towards the interpersonal contact, a displacement from the spatial center of the person to the spatial center of the relationship.

Identically, the process of apprenticeship in the West Javanese Cimande stream begins with low stances and finishes with high ones, whereas it is the opposite in the Bantenese version of Cimande. The body’s going down is done progressively to control the different phases of the fight. Stances include squatting, kneeling, and sitting positions. A large variety of sitting postures can be found in the streams, including crossed legs position (sila), sitting with one leg under the back (sempok), and sitting on the knees (simpuh). This progressive apprenticeship for ground fighting techniques stresses that it is related to the proximity between the initiates and the practice group (considering their level of advancement).

We can also notice the link between the ground fighting techniques, generally taught to the highest-level initiates, and the invocation of tutelary spirits of the soil, which are often considered by the practitioners as their ancestors. The fact that some techniques, particularly ground ones, enable one to obtain – at least for a while – invulnerability shows that there is a link between the control of the up/down dimensions and the internal/external ones. This is expressed in the widespread Muslim concepts of *lahir* and *batin*, described previously, which are integrated into the conception of the body in the Malay world. *Lahir* is the physical part of the body and is mainly built through horizontal and mundane relationships, whereas *batin* is considered to be its spiritual component and nurtures itself through relation with divine and invisible forces.

These conceptions of spatiality emphasize the role of penetration and expulsion in the practices of fighting, invulnerability, and therapeutics. Some techniques enable the practitioners to abolish the space limitations and to harm an adversary at a distance through internal injuries. Invulnerability practices mainly consist of control of the body’s penetration by picks, daggers, and glass. Therapeutic practices, such as energetic massages, herbal medicine, magnetism, and healing prayers,
are designed to expel the wind/air that penetrated and misbalanced the physical condition of the person: in particular the balance between cold and warm. They embrace an ensemble of factors, ranging from physical trauma and biology (parasites, germs, and microbes), humeral elements (the role of climate and nutrition), ‘wind’ (angin), and magic (sorcery, spirit attacks).

Other kinds of therapy stem from the invisible order and are designed to exercise a harmful spirit or force. ‘Inner power’ (tenaga dalam) practice also includes healing practices and emphasizes therapeutic breathing exercises and meditation [Farrer and de Grave 2010: 367]. There is a link between tenaga dalam and ilmu batin; terms that are roughly translated as ‘inner knowledge’. They refer to ritual techniques including breathing exercises, meditation, mantras, fasting, retreats, the use of religious talismans, magical amulets, and methods to summon spirits. Again, practices vary regionally and from one stream to another.

The spatial dimensions of the person find correspondence with the sites of social life: the village and the house. Jean-Marc de Grave underlines that, ‘if we admit that the human body and the house are basic elements of the socially marked locality, it then appears that the orientations horizontal and vertical and the relation interior-exterior that accompany them are structurally representative of the place’ [de Grave 2001: 135]. He also provides a parallel with the Javanese royal palace (kraton). The house is also a place for alliance, for example through weddings. In West Java’s and Batavia’s (Jakarta area) societies weddings are often the place of marriage martial rituals (respectively buka tolak panto and palang pintu). During the wedding ceremonies, ritual fighting aims to demonstrate the practitioner’s internal values. Afterwards, when the fiancé enters the spouse’s house, it enables alliances. Sometimes, these alliances correspond to a closer relation between two villages and therefore carry a political dimension.

Inside the house, particularly the home of the master, different spaces mark ritual localities. The center is a locality of ritual initiation and unification, for instance unification between offerings. This aspect is also indicated by the importance of foreign elements, which are often integrated and even looked after to nurture the socio-political system of the community. This is also indicated by the propensity of the schools to develop branches and initiate people considered foreigners. There is a link between penetration-initiation and alliance-development as these acts enable unifications and also lead to the processes of maturation (described below).

Meanwhile, we can note a link between internal/external dimensions and hidden/visible ones. This is clear in breathing techniques, like those which are practiced for religious Islamic word recitation (zikir). There, breathing and words are combined to increase the person’s vitality. The spelling of sacred words is also practiced facilitating divine illumination. These words are used as signs for revelation in a therapeutic setting. In the urut janur massage that I observed in a Haji Salam stream’s family (Banten), the healers analyze the formation of leaves given to them as an offering to interpret the symptoms of disease and illness. Finally, words can be pronounced to invoke protective spirits or to harm an opponent. Other protective spells can be used to fill an object or a person with a force or a spirit through ‘adorcism’ (intentional possession) [Rouch 1953].

During initiation rituals, the master places initiates under the tutelary of the ancestors and, if they follow the rules of the school and practice with faith and devotion (iman dan taqwa), schools can reveal to them the secrets of the techniques. During the ritual performances messages can also be revealed from the ancestors through the mediation of the practitioner. Some initiation rituals enable the master to predict the success of transmission as a new initiate develops over the years. These are designed to expose the internal aspects of the person and indicate a strong relationship between elements linked to space and time.

**THE TIME DIMENSION AND FIGHTING TECHNIQUES**

One of the main factors differentiating streams are the lists of descent (silsilah) that their masters transmit. These lists describe a spiritual chain going back to the founder of the stream and link them to the current masters, whose advanced age is valorized as proof of their mastery of protection and preservation techniques. The method of descent can be either genealogical or by initiation. This link determines the transmission of techniques: some faculties can be transmitted hereditarily while initiates can learn and receive knowledge from past masters through ritual possession or invocation. Techniques also evolve according to the initiate’s dedication to practice, as they reveal their secret aspects through time. This temporal element is linked to rituals that mark the steps of apprenticeship.

A central aspect of the initiation rituals is the interpretation of signs by the masters. These signs are perceived through various kinds of ritual. In the Malaysian stream Silat Sprint 12, the cutting of a chicken by the master and the random selection of pieces by initiates give information on their future apprenticeship and behavior according to the oath rules. In West Java, the movements of the sacrificed chicken after beheading and the way in which the blood spreads are read as oracles. In Minangkabau, interpretation can relate to the directions taken by two needles placed in a cup of water; the needles symbolize
the initiate and the master and the directions taken represent their future relationship. In the Malaysian stream Silat Lian, also called Buah Pukul Lian, the initiate brings limes and the master interprets the form and configuration of limes on the ground after cutting. During the entire process of apprenticeship, other interpretations can be made; for example by observing the state and form of degradation of a piece of fabric given by the initiate to the master, or through the evolution of ritual oil carried by the initiate to the master and filled with the master’s ritual blessings.

Apart from these rituals of enthronization, several other rituals provide for the purification of the initiates and determine their capacity to integrate the fighting techniques. Among these rituals are the urut strengthening massage of the forearms’ bones that is found in the West Javanese stream Cimande – and other streams across the Malay world – and the shinbone strengthening massage found in the Bantenese stream, Terumbu. Other purification rituals concern the flower bath of ritual soul purification (mandi bunga/kembang), or the keceran ritual, designed to purify the eyes and the heart (hati or ati). The flower bath and keceran are spread through various forms in Malaysia (both continental and insular), Brunei Darussalam, Sumatra and Java. The flower bath can be partial or concern the whole body. The purification of the eyes is done by either having water dispensed with a knife enrolled in betel leaf or through pressing lime on the eyes. This ritual is sometimes, as is the case in West Java, called the ‘time of pain’ (waktos peureuh), where the initiates seek to strengthen themselves and overcome their physical resistance limitations. The ritual leads to more confidence in the master and faith in the efficacy of the transmission’s content. Therefore, waktos peureuh relates to a main aspect of the transmission process, which is the necessity for the initiate to be opened to receiving the transmission’s content. These different rituals enable the initiates to begin the apprenticeship of upper level techniques. They also enhance their mastery of techniques by modifying their being and by reflecting their relationship with the ancestors of the streams, which ancestors are said to possess the techniques and to supervise the apprenticeship process.

Besides the rituals that link techniques to time, the principles of fighting methods also refer to time. Some principles are moral, like the obligation of respect to elders and those who are younger, which is stated in almost every stream’s oath. Patience is also a moral value promoted by the streams and it is complementary to efficiency in fighting as it encompasses the ability to hit at the right moment. Managing the tempo of a fight is a central ability that practitioners develop, particularly through the correlation of movements with breathing and the accompaniment of gestures to music. Several kinds of musical accompaniment are found in the Malay world, such as kendang penca in West Java [Facal 2016], kecapi in Bandung (for maenpo styles) [personal observations], rampak bedug in Central Banten (recently integrated in Ulin Makao school) [personal observations], gendang silat in Malaysia [Farrer 2009], pee silat in South Thailand [Binson 2016], or gulingtangan in Brunei Darussalam [personal observations]. The musical rhythms underline the precision seen in a series of fighting techniques. Some rhythms emphasize the footwork of approach and entry, others penetrating movements, softness and absorption of the rival’s movements or, on the contrary, explosiveness in aggressive phases of attack.

The practice of musical instruments is complementary to the formation to fighting techniques: drumming develops short distance hitting strength as well as synchronicity between feet and hands from the sitting stance. This stance is linked to ground fighting. The quadruple-reed shawm (tarompet/tarumpet) is an instrument that develops disciplined breathing and the control of blood flowing to the brain; these abilities are essential in combat situations. For example, guard (jaga, pasang, nanti) stances must emphasize the capacity of the practitioner to react to an attack with rapidity and full power. Finally, gong playing teaches students to strike at the right moment, in this case it marks the end of a combat movement phase. In each phase, the practitioner must find the correct tempo.

Time is linked to fighting techniques through the concept of process. For example, performances, which sometimes involve the calling upon of ancestor spirits, are structured in three sequences: opening, intermediation and closure. Apprenticeship itself is conceived as a process involving several phases. The ‘process aspect’ of a fighting method can be observed in the spatial dimension through progressive approaches with the opponent, while in the temporal dimension it is marked by the different phases of the fight. Movements accelerate or slow down according to these phases. Finally, this process-based aspect is verbally expressed through several analogies concerning life cycles.
The stages of martial apprenticeship are often seen as corresponding with the life cycle of plants. Prior to the social and agricultural changes of the late 19th century (including the development of extensive plantations, seasonal agriculture and work migration), the communitarian ceremonies of martial initiation happened during the rice harvest. Some researchers also argue that local martial practices, like West Javanese *penca* descend from animistic fertility rituals, rooted in belief systems that valued the power of gender differences [Spiller 2010]. Agricultural techniques (including digging, raking, lifting, carrying, cutting, harvesting) have clearly been influential in the development of some regional fighting methods. Livestock herding (shoeing horses, leading and manipulating cattle) is also important. They shape the body of the practitioner and are complementary with techniques found in peasant streams such as Cimande. Similar relationships have also been observed in very different geographical contexts, including the development of African stick and machete fighting systems that were influenced by local cattle herding practices [see Obi 2008: 30-36].

Generally, the aesthetic movements of approach between two partners during a performance are referred to through an analogy with ‘flowers’ (*bunga* in Java, *kembang* in Malaysia). Their application in fighting techniques is referred to as the ‘fruit’ (*buah*). The process of apprenticeship itself is associated with the vegetative cycle. As the knowledge is transmitted to the initiate he is called a ‘fruit child’ (*anak buah*) in hopes that it will fructify. Moreover, this process aims at the development of the feeling sense *rasa*. In old Javanese, this Sanskrit origin term designates ‘plant sap’, or ‘the juice contained in the fruits’ [Zoetmulder 1982, II: 926]. In this process, maturation is an essential step that leads to the ancestors’ revelation of the techniques and their comprehension by the initiate.

The life cycle of the plants, like that of the martial ritual initiation, is composed of distinct phases: there is germination, growing/maturation, decreasing/rotting, and regeneration/transmission. Firstly, the initiation is seen as the transmission of ‘content’ (*isi*). This content is linked to the list of past masters, the pronunciation of an oath and the transmission of a sacred force to the initiate under the supervision of the ancestors. The link to the ancestors itself is sometimes considered to be the object of transmission. Like seeds, which must be put under the soil to germinate, the initiates should be sheltered from direct external influences in the first stages of apprenticeship. Hence some masters do not allow them to learn with other teachers before they reach a certain level of skill. It is also why initiation rituals take the form of a face-to-face meeting between the master and the initiate. These are often held at night and in an enclosed space, hidden from view.

All of the conditions that enable preservation can also be related to some techniques’ secrecy. Exposure presents a risk of vulnerability and that is why several taboos (both oral and practical) surround the techniques. It is also why direct transmission is valorized. Transmission is essentially oral and there is little writing.

One advantage of orality is that it avoids the exposure of knowledge to non-initiates. The mastering of secrecy is also linked to efficiency in the practice of the fighting techniques. It is particularly relevant to techniques which refer to cheating (*jurus bohong*), tricking (*pancingan*), disappearance and invisibility (*ghaib*). This emphasis on invisibility also provides a link with inner energy and powers provided through connections with tutelary spirits who inhabit the invisible world (*alam ghaib*).

After initiation complementary actions enable the practitioner’s knowledge to mature. These actions follow the cycle of days and nights, alternating periods of strong activity with deep rest. The processes of maturation must take place in isolated and dark places, as is demonstrated by practitioner’s retreats and meditations in caves. Dark places, silence and immobility enable the maturation of the initiates’ inner qualities. In the same way, some rituals aim for the maturation of ritual oils. These can be found in many streams of Sundanese *penca*, including Cimande. The phials of oil are placed under the earth or in dark places, where they are protected from alteration by air and light.

Exposure plays a complementary role by favoring nurturing and growing actions. Initiates who reach a sufficient level of mastery take part in public performances. They might open branches outside the village in which they were initiated or participate in public or political activities to develop the school. During communitarian rituals, the masters can publicly expose their knowledge, mainly by designating, showing, and spelling the names of evil spirits in the aim of exorcising them. They can also invoke protective spirits by spelling their names and by reciting sacred formulas. In some streams, the masters enrich the ‘internal energy’ (*tenaga dalam*) of the initiates, provide divine protection (*berkah*) and guide their followers towards spiritual illumination. According to the practitioners of several streams, such as Tjimande Tarikolot, this mastering of visible and invisible dimensions enables some masters to disappear or appear with ubiquity.

Following the vegetative metaphor, rotting can occur if the initiation process of maturation is not carried out effectively. This rotting

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5 I am grateful to Benjamin Judkins for directing me to this reference.
can lead to disease and possession, misfortune and curse. The rotting can be revealed by the physical decline of the initiates and their relatives, the fading away of the ritual oils, and the wearing-down of ritual fabric. Several acts and rituals of regeneration can be invoked to sort out these deteriorations. Some are done through a visit to the ancestors’ graves. This enhances the importance of cosmological elements in these processes of apprenticeship.

Earth appears as a main element, considering that the basic techniques are practiced in a sitting position and the ultimate ones are designed for ground fighting. Earth enables generation and regeneration, and it appears at the beginning and at the end of the apprenticeship process. It is also present in different ritual solutions strengthening the link between the initiates and protective spirits.

Water enables fertility and purification. It is stressed by religious Muslim in the ablutions (wuduk) which some martial streams recommend before practicing, the ritual showers held during the initiation and the distribution of ritual oils to initiated individuals. Periodic sexual abstinence – that is to say, control of the seminal liquid’s expulsion – is one of the requirements for invulnerability, together with fasting, breathing and spelling practices. The capacity of controlling the actions of physical and spiritual penetration and expulsion enables the non-penetration by glass, needle, dagger, pick and fire.

This last element is a central aspect of initiation rituals. For example, incense is burnt to call protective spirits, and sacrificed chickens are cooked for edibility. There is a conjunction between fire and breath. Like fire, which is used to forge the weapon, the control of breathing – and thus inner energy – enables practitioners to build physical resistance and to forge their bodies as organic weapons. As such, fire enables transformation and fixation through sublimation. These analogies also show that, to a certain extent, there is identification between the practitioners and their weapon, as is indicated by the importance given to sacred weapons, called pusaka (on pusaka, cf. Rassers 1940; Karita 1992; Guerreiro 2011]. These objects can constitute valuable heirlooms or regalia and they signal social status and hierarchy. As such they can be put in parallel with ritual liquids.

These aspects of material culture – weapons and ritual liquids – require the use of all the elements provided by the cosmos: air, water, earth, fire, and ether. They also mobilize different actions during both daily activities and rituals events. As such they are positioned at a crossroads between the structural dimensions of the cosmos (horizontal and vertical dimensions of space; linear-cumulative and cyclic-non-cumulative dimensions of time) and the initiates’ necessities for preservation, survival, regeneration and transmission.

MATERIALIZING OPPOSITE DIMENSIONS
WEAPONS TECHNIQUES AND THE USE OF RITUAL LIQUIDS

The transmission’s linked processes of maturation, growing and purification require complementarity between opposite dimensions, particularly those of space and time. This is mediated by the initiates themselves through the relationship between elder/younger and male/female. Material culture holds a central position bridging these fundamental concepts. This mainly concerns weapons, as they accompany the initiates both during daily activities and ritual events. The form and the aesthetic of the weapons materialize this continuity between various levels of temporality. This expression of temporal continuity through weapons corresponds to the observation of researchers such as Pierre Lemonnier [1991], for whom the material is a field of ‘social production’. In this sense, people give meaning to their relations with other persons, with the visible and invisible worlds; and people in society give meaning to their material productions.

The object is then a privileged witness of exchanges, borrowings, and innovations concerning both artifacts and social practices to which they are associated [Appadurai 1985].

Concerning weapons techniques, even if they are related to empty hand methods, their mastery requires the acquisition of specific principles. In most of the Malay streams, apprenticeship begins with empty hands while the use of weapons is taught at the final levels; whereas the Philippines’ arnis streams generally propose an opposite progression. It is also interesting to note that in the silat and kunta streams of the Muslim areas of the Southern Philippines (mostly in Mindanao), methods for empty-hands combat are the foundation of skill while weapons techniques are taught at a later stage [Jocano Jr. 2010: 335]. Progression in the use of weapons (like rattan stick, dagger and knife, and flexible weapons like sarung) is also distinct. Dozens of different weapons are used, often with local variations. The most distinctive is the wavy-blade dagger (keris), but others include machetes (parang and golok), swords (pedang), knives (pisau), bill hooks (celurit), curving knives (karambit), pruning knives (sahit), spears (tombak), tridents (cang or trisula), staffs (tongkat or taya), and a tightly rolled sarung (cindai).

As objects weapons are understood as non-human agents [Warnier 1999]; but in the Malay context they are often anthropomorphized. Their features invite analogies with human character and their use inflects the technical style of the practitioner. Mastering the dagger requires sharpness, quick and compact movements; the sarung needs softness and absorption to be effective; the whip requires elasticity; and the stick needs power, a strong stance and a firm anchorage of the legs. Moreover, both humans and weapons are protected by a sheath
(sarung), and they can shelter ‘content’ (isi), as is the case with the pusaka weapons. Indeed, these objects are ‘filled’, which is to say, they contain a force. This non-physical element stems from their natural origin or is provided through rituals.

It is also believed that pusaka can hold an ancestor spirit or ancestral properties. These weapons are often transmitted through descent, mark the status of the practitioner and can provide extraordinary capacities. They possess their own character and must be nurtured ritually as living entities, mainly with incense and oils [Farrer 2009: 89]. In the Malay tradition, a dagger keris pusaka can only be taken out from its sheath if to kill, and it is said that once it has tasted blood, it will be eager for more. This anthropomorphic logic is accompanied by a parallel with gender representations. When a couple of machetes are held, the machete in the right hand is ‘male’ whereas the left-hand machete is ‘female’. In Ciomas (Banten), a regional center of pusaka machetes fabrication, the forging hammer is considered female.

Besides pusaka weapons, various liquids play the role of union between opposite elements of the cosmos that are mobilized by the practitioners. I have described in the sections dedicated to the dimensions of space and time the role of rituals, like urut strengthening massage of the forearms’ bones, the flower bath (mandi bunga) purification ritual, and the keceran eyes purification ritual. These rituals are all centered around several kinds of sacred, or force filled, waters and oils.

To illustrate the centrality of these oils in initiation rituals we can mention the case of minyak biang (‘maternal oil’ or ‘essential oil’). During the collective ritual keceran of the Cimande Pusaka Medal school in Rancalame (Banten, West Java), each initiate brings to the master a small phial of perfume. During the ritual the master and his sons fill the phial with a solution – the biang, which gives its name to the oil – designed to enable the call of the tiger-ancestors. The phials are then distributed to the initiates so they can bring it back to their homes. Each year, the initiates may bring back the phials to the master so he can add to the solution. This process strengthens the relationship between the master’s school and the branches. On the other hand, the transformation of the oil’s color through the years signals the evolution of the initiate’s apprenticeship and link to the tiger-ancestors. As the reconfiguration of the relations in space enables the renewal of the substances in temporality, fixation of the substances in time enables the perpetuation of relations in space [Facal 2012].

Eventually, there is complementarity between sacred/ritual weapons and ritual oils. Sacred weapons are nourished with ritual oils and these liquids, as is the case for the keceran ritual, are applied into the eyes of the initiates with a ceremonial knife (the oil flows along the edge of...
the knife and falls into the eyes). Other kinds of complementarity exist based on the dual relationship male/female mobilized through these materials.

The process of martial apprenticeship corresponds to life stages and is punctuated by several steps: generation/seeding; growing/flowering; maturation/fructification; decrease/rotting; regeneration/childbirth. Martial initiation rituals follow similar steps, which is obvious in long-term process rituals transcending many phases. Before the rituals, abstinence and fasting are used to concentrate people’s ‘forces’. The rituals are opened by community prayers and the pronunciation of words designed to invoke ancestral and divine forces (vertical relations) as well as consumption/distribution of goods (horizontal relations). Finally, after the rituals the proceedings are interpreted by the elders. These processes are then marked by different steps which alternate between phases of growing and decreasing, production and consumption, and secrecy and exposure. The alternating phases are enacted through the relationship between male and female principles and elements.

A discussion of all these aspects would exceed the limits of this study; but, as an example, we can note that the male-female dyad impacts the techniques and their process of transmission in many respects. For example, it is central to social status structures (the authority of women, political power of men in West Java), territoriarity and relation to locality (matrilocality and initiation peregrinations of men, as in Minangkabau society) and the links of the initiates to superior forces (apical spirits are female, tutelary spirits are male, both in Sundanese and Minangkabau societies). At the level of the techniques, it is often accepted that blocks constitute feminine principles and strikes are masculine. Likewise, some weapons, including fans (kipas), are used exclusively by women. This duality is also present with ritual oils, which are composed of elements combining male and female components. Lastly, invulnerability is gained mainly by sexual abstinence. This duality is also present with ritual oils, which are composed of elements combining male and female components.

These fighting systems and the transmission frames are structured according to several principles to assure the realization of the apprenticeship process. They follow lines found in religion, morality, cosmology and philosophy.

**PRINCIPLES OF THE TECHNIQUES
RELIGIOUS, MORAL, COSMOLOGICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL**

The continuity that characterizes all Malay martial techniques derives from the cultural principles that have been the basis of this analysis. Indeed, techniques are valorized as they contain principles, and these principles refer to social values. There is hierarchy between values, principles and techniques. This organization implies that one value gives birth to different principles, and that a principle can be expressed through a multiplicity of techniques. This hierarchy is critical because it suggests that when comparing martial techniques, we must reference the wider context of practices and representations. Thus, techniques cannot only be compared ‘movement by movement’, but only as parts of a wider ensemble of actions and ideas. These principles refer to the relationships between the practitioner and himself, with other humans, the material world, invisible entities and God.

In the streams influenced by Islam, techniques often correspond with the movements of Muslim prayer and the religious and relational principles of Islam. For example, in Cimande Pusaka Medal School of Banten, the five daily prayers correspond to five martial principles, the 17 prostrations of the prayer correspond to 17 series of martial movements and the 244 gestures of the prayer correspond with 244 secret martial applications which must be discovered by practicing penca with faith and devotion. Horizontal relations between the initiates and the other persons are also a source of inspiration for the martial principles. They mainly encompass relations between the initiates and the master, younger students and elders, and men and women.

Most of the schools stipulate that it is forbidden to criticize the members of one’s own practice group or of other practice groups. Some rules appear as morals, but they are also oriented towards efficiency. For example, one rule states that the practitioner may ‘not hit first but neither be touched first’ (‘Miheulaan ulah, kapheulaan ulah’). It emphasizes the necessity to be patient and peaceful while at the same time stressing speediness and aggression in attack. In the West Javanese TTKKDH school it is recommended to ‘give first before receiving’ (‘mere heula karek narima’). This means that one must first block his/her opponent and give him/her the opportunity to not hit before being hit.

Another rule in the same spirit is that the practitioner must know the pain provoked by a technique before using it. This rule is designed to develop empathy in the initiates, but also to provide them the capacity to hit on specific points with the right strength for maximum efficiency. It strengthens the characteristic of specific points on the body as transitional between the person’s internal and external dimensions. As such, these points assume a critical function in the representations...
linked to interiority and exteriority and, like the corporal orifices, they are connected with penetration and thus purity ([akin to the analysis of Douglas 1966]).

The parallels between the control of diverse kinds of circulations and purification processes appear in the rituals surrounding weddings in the villages as well as alliances between martial ritual practice groups. Purity can be observed by the masters through signs and marks. For example, in many streams the initiate brings to the master a piece of fabric during the ritual of enthronization. During the ritual, the master touches different points on the initiate’s body with hands and pronounces sacred formulas that combine Islamic and vernacular language (for example old Sundanese in West Java or old Javanese in Central Java). The initiates consider that these actions open these specific points, namely in the center of the palms, the wrists, the crooks of the elbows, and the point between the two eyebrows, to enable further contact between the initiate and protective spirits. Through the years, the alteration of the piece of fabric reveals to the master the evolution of the initiate. Finally, when the initiate passes away he is wrapped in this fabric to be buried.

Aside from the religious and ritual dimensions in the structuring of the technical principles, relations with the physical environment play a strong role. I commented earlier the influence of daily work techniques such as fishing, livestock hearing and agriculture, which often influence the naming of fighting techniques. Some activities of this nature contribute to martial training, and the technical capacities acquired are correlated to behavior rules: diligence in work, humility, and control of the emotions. They imply the mastery of movement, balance, precision, management of interpersonal distances and one’s relation to the physical environment. The main philosophical and moral value promoted is that of the ‘rice sprout knowledge’ (ilmu padi). It stipulates that the practitioners must humbly bend under their knowledge as the rice sprout does under the weight of its seeds. It then designates a practical and esoteric body of knowledge as well as an ethical behavior. Another analogy – seen in the Cimande stream for instance – is that of the bamboo, which must be flexible to not break in the wind. Yet flexibility also enables bamboo to hit even harder when it is subjected to pressure.

A final source of principles is found in the personal faculties that practitioners develop and in their capacity for social interaction. The importance of these competencies is underlined when the fighting techniques training phase is envisioned as a game (maenan in Jakarta, uliinan and amengan in West Java) and the practitioners as players. The qualities valorized include intelligence. Some masters suggest that the words pandekar or pendekar, which are used to designate experts of martial arts, may come from ‘pandai akar’, which means ‘smart’.

Martial games also require dexterity (with a notable use of the notion of silat being for oratory joust (silat lidah) and craftiness (tipuhan). Craftiness is also one of the goals of the eyes purification ritual keceran, as keceran aims at reinforcing the eyes: organs used to mislead the opponent. Different strategies are used that emphasize the use of craftiness, including the ‘fishing principle’ (pancingan) and the ‘cheating principle’ (jurus bohong). They consist of the ‘fisher’ giving false offensive signals to the opponents to create openings in their guard or to force them to respond to attacks signaled by the ‘fisher’. These principles can be expressed through several techniques.

In a limited number of cases, the words associated with principles maintain their consistency across longer time processes rather than varying with technical terms, which fluctuate according to time and regions. That distinction is linked to the previously described characteristics of the principles, which crystallize the relationship between techniques and values. This correlation between techniques and values leads to social efficacy in the widest sense of the term. Efficacy here surpasses the mere combat effectiveness.
We must also remember that efficacy is not always visible and immediate. A technique can be thought to harm an opponent in the long-term and at distance, as is the case with those linked to extraordinary skills. Fighting efficiency alone is not always proof of other types of efficacy. In schools where Muslim war (jihad) is promoted, death in combat, if it follows sociocultural and religious values, is more enviable than success in a war that is linked to a sinful life. The former opens the gates of paradise, but the later does not. This perspective implies that God and invisible forces govern the cosmos according to rules that are not always understandable for humans. Some fighting techniques can have an invisible impact yet act efficiently in fields which remain unknown to humans. As such, in many systems the mastering of both secrecy and exposure is a key for the development of efficacy in the practice of the fighting techniques.

The mastery of secrecy and exposure is firstly linked to values, such as force. Force is not only physical, but also moral and mental. It is mainly acquired through fasting and abstinence. It is a quality usually shaped by experience and expressed in the community through social status and holding positions of authority. This status is linked to the capacity to embody social values, like fidelity and trust. These values are expressed through the initiation oath as well as different ritual controls of the initiate’s behavior enacted by the master. There is a link between self-confidence and courage acquired through the gaining of technical mastery, trust in social relations induced by the transmission system, and faith supported by religious practice. All these aspects contribute to an individual’s martial efficacy understood in terms of protection. Force, courage and devotion are tempered by opposite behavioral values such as humbleness and empathy. I have explored this aspect through the philosophy of the rice sprout (ilmu padi).

In the Cimande stream of West Java, mastery of opposite values and their control enables the capacity of protection, which implies faculties of both destroying and healing. Therefore, martial efficacy is fundamentally linked to the regulation of relationships. Ritual words and acts are effective because through enunciation and hearing, as well as through performance and seeing, the practitioner creates relationships: with the audience and assistants during ritual performances, with tutelary spirits through possession and exorcism, and with God through prayer. Fighting efficiency is subordinated to this set of more fundamental relationships.

Winning at war and combat in the margins of this integrative social system would mean a loss of efficacy, even though this loss may express itself in more or less visible ways. In other words, the system is effective because the techniques are structured according to the dynamics of a preexisting set of social relationships. If these relations are damaged or subordinated to the formalization of the system, there is a loss of efficacy. Even if a phase of formalization seems necessary so the practices can be maintained [de Grave 2012: 8], representation and practice of the techniques still take on meaning because of their integration into a cultural system. Thus, researchers can speculate as to what degree of continued formalization might inhibit these practices from forming a holistic system.
CONCLUSION
DEGREES OF MAINTENANCE AND CHANGE OF THE TECHNIQUES

In this article, I have argued that there are trans-regional continuities in the martial initiation rituals and fighting techniques found in the Malay world. We can identify regional continuities and specificities in comparison with the other practices found elsewhere in Asia and in peninsular Southeast Asia. These aspects are shown through the techniques, terminology, training methods, combat tactics, and in associated practices, like therapeutics, theater and dance. I have also emphasized the degree to which these fighting techniques derive not just from a physical, but also an invisible, order. As such, they form part of a larger cosmology which mobilizes spatial and temporal dimensions according to sets of systematic correspondences. In linking martial practices to this cosmology, several values from religious, philosophical and moral sources were seen to form the basis of various technical principles. As I have argued, these principles are transversal to diverse fields of social life, including: agriculture, interpersonal relations and religion. They are all oriented toward purity as an ultimate value.

This article concludes that drawing an analytical distinction between ritual activity and developments in the technical sphere is not legitimate for every society [Bonte 1986: 47; Warnier 1999: 28-30]. This is particularly the case in Malay martial initiations. In the Malay world, ritual principles generally determine fighting techniques. The valorization of principles over pure utility enables the technical system to have great flexibility when it comes to the integration of exogenous techniques. This capacity for integration makes resonance with a wider realm of socio-cosmic and religious systems possible. Throughout history, the latter contributed much to these practices and their conceptualized efficacy, instead of simply emphasizing abstract doctrines.

Nevertheless, even if flexibility within the technical systems enables diachronic adaptation to socio-political variation, the contemporary era is marked by a tendency towards the formalization of these practices. It is a fact that since the launch of the various national independence movements, federations aiming to unify the different transmission structures and homogenize practices have flourished. By employing discourses based on ‘reinvented traditions’, national understandings of the practices’ local diversity and trans-regional continuities were marginalized. Moreover, the process of ‘euphemization of violence’ that accompanied the formation of these nations [Elias and Dunning 1994] deeply impacted the fighting techniques and their modes of transmission.

The pressures exerted during both national identity construction exercises and the spread to global audiences can lead to very quick changes in practices. For examples, Filipino arnis and Malay pencak silat benefit from abundant media coverage and a prominent Internet following. Many masters have adapted their techniques to the demands of the public and gained increased combat efficiency by being positioned against exogenous systems. These tendencies provide dynamism to the practices, but also risk a collapse in cultural diversity as homogeneity spreads across the different streams. Monetary and political factors can contribute to the maintenance of the vitality of traditional practices, but they can also bring economic interests that weaken the concern of the masters for local practitioners who can no longer afford their teachings. I frequently observed this phenomenon when visiting schools (of both silek from Minangkabau and penca from West Java) that spread to Europe and the United States. I have also noticed this bias from the perspective of a practitioner as the Mande Macan Guling school and Tjimande Tarikolot stream from Banten diffused to France.

Despite these schools’ diffusion processes, the transformation of the techniques should not be overestimated. They are a single aspect of a wider cultural transmission, and that also evolves through long-term processes. As a result, studying this course of transmission, understood as the interface between physical techniques and cultural values, could enable scholars to better grasp what these broader social changes are [de Grave 2008: 16]. For example, I have discussed how the linked processes of maturation, growing and purification are mediated by the initiates via the relationship between elder/younger and male/female dyads. Finally, it should be stressed that the practices found in the Malay world (as well as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Africa, India, the Caucasus and the Middle East) have endured very long-term codification [Gaudin 2009]. While changes might occur according to various temporalities and geographic factors, a socio-historical approach may yet reveal the degree to which these martial ritual initiations have been both transformed and maintained.

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**ABSTRACT**

Physical assaults are an inherent problem of modern society. One strategy available to try to prevent violence is to strengthen one’s personal capacities to defend oneself. This is the scope of various self-defence programs and systems within the civil domain. While training in self-defence facilitates the use of self-protective strategies in real life situations, it is important to ascertain whether individuals learn the skills taught in self-defence classes and whether they are able to perform the skills when these are required. In order to test the effectiveness of self-defence skills in an ethically acceptable way, instructors and scholars have to design environments in which valid and practically relevant results about the performance of the learner can be obtained. The imprecise nature and the multidimensional use of terms like ‘realism’ and ‘reality-based’ leads to difficulties in designing such environments. In this article, we argue for the need to shift the emphasis from ‘realistic’ to ‘representative’ design in testing and learning environments, with the aim of developing transferable self-defence skills within the civil domain. The Trade-Off Model of Simulation Design that we propose is intended to help instructors and scholars to make more informed decisions when designing tasks for testing or training.
Physical assaults are an inherent problem of modern society [e.g. Kajs, Schumacher, and Vital 2014; Tiesman et al. 2014]. One approach to trying to prevent violence is to strengthen personal capacities to defend oneself [Koss 1990]. This is the realm of various self-defence programs and systems within the civil domain. While training in self-defence facilitates the use of self-protective strategies in real life situations, it is important to assess whether individuals learn the skills taught in self-defence classes and whether they are able to perform the skills when these are required [Gidycz and Dardis 2014]. In order to test the effectiveness of self-defence skills in an ethically acceptable way, instructors and scholars need to design environments in which valid and practically relevant results about the performance of the learner can be obtained. In this paper, we argue for abandoning the term ‘realistic’ when it comes to testing and learning self-defence skills. Instead, we suggest focusing on representative designs of such tasks. The Trade-Off Model of Simulation Design that we propose is offered to help instructors and scholars make more informed decisions in designing tasks for self-defence skill testing or training.

THE TRANSFERABILITY OF SELF-DEFENCE SKILLS

A central goal of self-defence training is to increase participants’ self-defence skills [Brecklin 2008]. Yet, the majority of studies in that context focus on the application of such skills in simulated assaults [Ozer and Bandura 1990], the demonstration of learned techniques [Pava et al. 1991; Henderson 1997], or the self-perception of learned skills [Hollander 2004, 2014; Boe 2015]. Only a few studies in the law enforcement domain have tried to investigate participants’ actual competence to deal with intense violent encounters [Jager, Klatt, and Bliesener 2013; Renden et al. 2015].

Renden and colleagues investigated the ability to manage violence on-duty of Dutch police officers via an online questionnaire (n = 922). The results showed that, even though officers performed well enough to manage violent situations, they seemed neither clearly positive nor negative about the usefulness of the learned skills. Furthermore, the officers indicated a wish for more realistic training. Hence, Renden and colleagues recommend (a) providing more training, (b) delivering training that is ‘more comparable to the high-pressure situations that officers face in the line of duty’ [Renden et al. 2015: 17], and (c) considering teaching more reflex-like skills that are easier to learn and execute. In another study, Jager and colleagues [2013] conducted an online questionnaire with German police officers from North Rhine-Westfalia (n = 18,356) in order to map the victimization of police officers to violence while on duty. Subsequent interviews (n = 36) with participants of that study, who experienced physical violence on the streets, revealed that the attacks on the street differed substantially from the ones they were confronted with in the training environment. One officer described the difference between the incident and the training experience as follows: ‘The attackers don’t stand around and attack you stupidly; they charge at you. It’s chaos. It looks different’ [Jager et al. 2013: 346, translated from German]. Additionally, attacked officers perceived the surprising character and the aggressiveness of the situations as very demanding. Based on these results and the participants’ notion that training should be designed more realistically, Jager and colleagues [2013] recommend practicing self-defence skills in training situations that resemble real incidents.

Both studies reveal that the performance of self-defence skills is different in training (the learning environment) as compared to a real incident (the criterion environment). This difference between the learning environment and the criterion environment is fundamental to the understanding of the acquisition of self-defence skills. The development of skills that transfer into the real world is the underlying goal of self-defence training. In the context of perceptual motor skills, including self-defence skills, transfer involves the ability to use prior experiences from perceptual motor skill performance and learning trials in self-defence situations (training sessions or real incidents) and then to adapt these experiences to similar or dissimilar contexts [Collard, Oboeuf, and Ahmaidi 2007]. Therefore, the effectiveness of training programs refers to the transferability of self-defence skills from the learning environment to the criterion environment, where optimal performance is needed (see Figure 1 overleaf).

Transferability of skills to real incidents can only be measured through the analysis of performance in the criterion environment, whether in the civil or law enforcement domain. Corresponding studies focus only on self-reports of participants in the field of law enforcement [Jager et al. 2013; Renden et al. 2015]. What is missing and what future studies should address are analyses of performance in real incidents based on objective data like video footage (for example, from CCTV or bodycams). A major drawback of analysing performance in the criterion environment is the delayed feedback, since it is ethically impermissible to actively seek violent confrontations in order to capture performance after new skills have been taught. Therefore, the performance of self-defence skills has to be tested in a testing environment that simulates the criterion environment. Valid results about the transferability of self-defence skills can only be obtained if the testing environment is representative to the criterion environment (red arrow). The same is true for the learning environment: the more representative the learning environment, the better the transfer of skills from that environment to performance situations [Broadbent et al. 2015].
From Realism to Representativeness
Staller, Zaiser & Körner

Figure 1: Representativeness in Self-Defence

Figure 2: The Testing of Generated Solutions for Self-Defence Problems
THE SIMULATION OF REALITY OF SELF-DEFENCE TASKS

Practitioners and scholars in the self-defence domain regularly refer to ‘realistic’ or ‘reality-based’ training with regards to the design of corresponding learning or testing environments [Murray 2004; Wagner 2005; Oudejans 2008; Dzida, Hartunian, and Santiago 2010; Wollert, Driskell, and Quali 2011; Hoff 2012; Armstrong, Clare, and Plecas 2014]. Yet, there are various definitions and explanations of what the term ‘realism’ exactly refers to in the context of learning environments. For example, Armstrong and colleagues define a realistic environment as an environment that ‘replicates what an officer would expect to encounter in a real-life situation’ [Armstrong et al. 2014: 52], whereas Hoff states that the ‘more realistic the environment, the greater the benefit’ [Hoff 2012: 21] without giving further explanations of what ‘realistic’ refers to. In the context of scenario-based training, Wollert and colleagues point out that a scenario is a simulation of reality and that in order ‘to be realistic it must “feel right” to the user’ [Wollert et al. 2011: 47]. Furthermore, they use the term ‘scenario fidelity’ in order to describe ‘how accurately the scenario reflects realistic conditions’ [Wollert et al. 2011: 47]. To accommodate for the evasive nature of the term, they introduced three dimensions: equipment, sensory and psychological fidelity. Yet, these dimensions do not emphasize the functional properties of the simulation that align with learning or testing objectives. Scholars in the medical domain also suggest abandoning the mere term of ‘fidelity’ in simulation design, due to its imprecise nature and its lack of emphasis regarding functional task alignment [Hamstra et al. 2014].

At this point it is worth noting that skill transfer can be fostered in many activities during a training session and not necessarily through the means of scenario-based training [Staller 2015; Staller and Zaiser 2015]. Nevertheless, a simulation of reality (via scenario-based training) is the only viable way to test the effectiveness of technical and tactical solutions to problems encountered in the field (see Figure 2). Deliberate testing of learned self-defence skills in the field is ethically impermissible, whereas the testing in ideal conditions leads to the erroneous assumption that generated (technical and tactical) solutions work in the field. Therefore, the simulation of reality has to include conditions that are prevalent in violent encounters, such as surprise attacks, aggressiveness, and high amounts of pressure [Miller 2008; Jager et al. 2013; Jensen and Wrisberg 2014].

At the same time the scenario designer has to ensure the safety of the participants by omitting the real-world features that bear the risk of injuring participants [Murray 2004; Wollert et al. 2011]. For example, practicing self-defence techniques in highly dynamic and surprising situations using real guns or knives bears the risk of serious injury if the learner makes a mistake. Another option would be to work with real guns or real knives, but to drastically reduce the speed, the dynamics and the surprising character of the situation [Staller 2015].

THE CONCEPT OF REALISTIC TRAINING IS FLAWED

This example illustrates the imprecise nature of the term ‘realistic’ in training or testing environments. Both situations can be described as realistic in reference to one aspect (Situation a: dynamic, surprising attack; Situation b: use of real weapon) but unrealistic in reference to another (Situation a: use of mock weapon; Situation b: slow, unsurprising attack). It seems that in most cases practitioners refer to the physical resemblance of the training setting as resembling reality or not. Yet, from a learning perspective, the ‘functional alignment with the learning task, the instructional design, and the instructor likely have far greater impact on immediate learning, retention and transfer to new settings’ [Hamstra et al. 2014: 389].

Based on these observations, we argue for abandoning the term ‘realistic’ (and related terms like ‘reality-based’) and for shifting the emphasis onto *representativeness* in learning and testing environments. In the sport research domain, representative tasks allow the performer to search the environment for reliable information, integrate this information with existing knowledge, and complete an appropriate action [Broadbent et al. 2015]. The representativeness of a given task consists of two critical components: functionality of the task and action fidelity [Pinder et al. 2011; Broadbent et al. 2015]. The former refers to whether the constraints a performer is exposed to and must act upon in the task are the same as in the performance environment. The latter requires that the performer be allowed to complete a response that is the same as in the performance environment. Central to these ideas is the relationship between perceptual-cognitive and motor processes as well as emotional responses associated with the task [Pinder et al. 2011; Broadbent et al. 2015; Headrick et al. 2015]. As such, representative task design emphasizes the need to ensure that the task constraints of the practice activity represent (i.e., simulate) the particular task constraints of the criterion environment [Pinder et al. 2014].

Self-defence environmental constraints that the performer must act upon can involve (a) physical, (b) perceptual-cognitive, and (c) affective elements. The physical design refers to elements that mainly influence the intensity of attacks and attacker behaviour, which the defender has to cope with (functionality), such as the speed or level of force [Staller 2015], the spatial structure [Staller 2015], or the level of contact of the attack [Staller and Abraham 2016]. This is connected to the intensity of the executed motor skills of the defender (action fidelity), like the speed [Staller 2015], the spatial structure [Staller 2015], and the contact-level of the defence [Pfeiffer 2014]. Perceptual-cognitive elements impact decision-making, in terms of choosing which skill to perform and how to perform it (functionality), in relation to the presentation of valid cues [Staller and Abraham 2016] or situational constraints, and when the attack is surprise [Jensen and Wrisberg 2014]. Therefore, such constraints mainly put load on the information-processing and problem-solving abilities of the performer (action fidelity) [Staller and
Health and Safety in Testing and Learning Environments

The designer of the learning or testing environment has to ensure the safety of participants as well as the safety of training partners or role players. Since performance mistakes are going to happen, the instructor has to make sure that, when they happen, they have no serious consequences (e.g. injury/death). This can be achieved by (a) a reduction of intensity, (b) a reduction of task complexity, or (c) environmental changes. Changes in intensity refer to measures that focus on making self-defence and combat techniques less dangerous in testing or training settings. Possible options include the reduction of permissible contact (as defender or as attacker), the exclusion of target areas, or the reduction in speed and applied force. The reduction of task complexity aims at lowering the load of the perceptual-cognitive processes of the performer. By reducing surprises, ambiguity, and available options, the probability of mistakes in the decision-making component in self-defence performance decreases, leaving the performer more attentional resources for the associated motor processes. Finally, environmental changes refer to measures by the task designer, which reduce the risk of injury by altering the physical structure of the training or testing environment. This can be achieved, for example, by using different forms of safety gear, using replica...

Figure 23 The Trade-Off Model of Simulation Design
The different components of representativeness and the different components of health and safety in self-defence learning and testing environments enable the designer to make informed and precise decisions about the ‘trade-off’ between the two competing concepts. Since a 100% level of overall representativeness cannot be achieved (this would be the criterion environment, in which it is ethically impermissible to perform), the instructor may design a task in order to ensure the health and safety of the participants in which a higher level of representativeness can be achieved in one component while representativeness would be reduced in another component. For example, if the attacker attacks with a real knife, which reflects a high level of representativeness regarding the affective constraints under which the individual performs, the designer may consider reducing speed, which reduces the intensity of the attack, in order to ensure health and safety.

**Conclusion**

The effective design of testing environments in self-defence simulations is paramount to the testing of effectiveness of self-defence skills. The imprecise nature and the multidimensional use of terms like ‘realism’ and ‘reality-based’ leads to difficulties in designing such environments. Therefore, we argue to shift the emphasis from a realistic to a representative design of testing environments. This provides the instructor with a more precise tool to make informed decisions about the trade-off between representativeness and health and safety when he or she designs tasks for the testing of self-defence skills. It has to be reiterated that a full level of representativeness cannot be achieved without posing at least some risk to the health and safety of the participants. The proposed TOMSD can be applied to the design of any learning environment that aims at the development of transferable skills.

**The Trade-Off Model of Simulation Design**

The analysis of representativeness and health and safety in the context of self-defence simulation design leads to the conclusion that these two concepts are of a competitive nature. The more health and safety features are implemented in a certain learning or testing environment, the more the level of overall representativeness will decline and vice versa. Miller describes these alterations in the simulation (compared to a real incident) as ‘deliberate flaws’ in the design of training activities. Without referring to the two components of representativeness, he describes ‘unrealistic’ performance of what an attack will be like (functionality) and the restriction of being allowed to perform injuring techniques (action fidelity) as two major flaws in simulations. According to Miller, the most prominent flaw is ‘when the solution to the drill is based on the flaw [such as] using medium speed defences to defeat slow-motion attacks’ [Miller 2008: 107]. However, beyond this excellent analysis of the associated problems with poor representativeness in simulations, a systematic way of designing representative, yet safe, simulations is still missing.

The Trade-Off Model of Simulation Design (TOMSD; see Figure 3 opposite) provides a possibility for the self-defence coach to systematically manipulate simulations in training settings. The TOMSD illustrates the relationship between representativeness and health and safety together with the skill level of the participants and conveys its implications for the design of effective self-defence learning and testing environments.
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From Realism to Representativeness
Staller, Zaiser & Körner

MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

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In 1926, the famous ethnologist Bronislaw Malinowski stated that ‘the study of myth has become a point of contact for various branches of academia’ [Malinowski 1986 [1926]: 141]. Had he known that, almost one hundred years later, a branch of academia would develop that calls itself ‘martial arts studies’, he probably would not have been surprised to hear that it, too, has its own take on mythology. This comes in the form of a short monograph entitled Mythologies of Martial Arts, the second title in the new Martial Arts Studies book series published by Rowman & Littlefield. It is authored by Paul Bowman, the editor of that book series, one of the editors of this journal, organizer of the annual Martial Arts Studies conference, and professor of cultural studies at Cardiff University.

Mythologies of Martial Arts takes up several of the strands Bowman laid out in his previous book, Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries [Bowman 2015]. As the title of his latest effort implies, his focus is on the ideological narratives that surround, permeate, and define martial arts, as well as on the ways martial arts are practiced, perceived, and culturally understood (or misunderstood). While Bowman’s theoretical approach is deeply rooted in (mostly French) postmodernism, and indebted to Hegelian and Marxist thought, his ideological impetus is that of Anglo-American cultural studies. To fully appreciate Bowman’s work here, it will be important to clarify the methodological differences between Anglo-American cultural studies and their German and French counterparts. As it is known in German, Kulturwissenschaften (and, similarly, disciplines like medieval and early modern history, social anthropology, economics, etc.) explicitly avoid making normative judgements about the subjects they research and attempt instead to analyze, understand, and describe from a neutral perspective (although whether neutrality is truly possible is itself a subject of debate). Cultural studies, on the other hand, were from their outset designed as political projects; they do not simply want to understand the world, they want to change the world.1

Bowman is an exponent of the latter branch, and he will not shy away from coming to explicit conclusions and judgements that, for example, a Swiss researcher might leave implicit or simply keep to himself/herself. To Bowman, moreover, all mythology is on the verge of creating hierarchies of power, power that can and often will be abused and result in injustice. Consequently, he perceives the eradication of mythology as an act of liberation [Bowman 2017: 94], especially when it comes to myths of authenticity, origin, and lineage.2

1 For a more elaborate discussion of these differences, see Lutz Musner [2001]. For a more elaborate discussion of these differences specifically in relation to martial arts studies, see Wetzler [2015].

2 This claim may be confirmed or denied with reference to Bowman’s discussions of these issues in chapters 5 and 6 in Mythologies of Martial Arts.
(in themselves ideological) might be for readers from a different academic tradition, they do not diminish the accuracy or worth of the book’s observations and interpretations. On the contrary, these observations and interpretations contribute to the book’s importance.

As he has himself pointed out continuously throughout his writings and lectures, Bowman is mortified by anything fixed, of the process of petrification inherent in crafting definitions, even of the idea of (static and unchanging) ‘truth’ as such. He perceives culture(s), the martial arts therein, and its/their martial narratives as networks of meanings, attributions, and ‘supplements’, none of which exist in isolation but rather are constituted by and through the other cultural condensations in this network. Following Stuart Hall, Bowman thus calls for ‘conjunctural analysis’, which he argues enables scholars to understand a given phenomenon within its contextual dependencies and temporal fluidity – a perspective that, even if the jargon might be different, will likely come natural to many of us. He applies the method of conjunctural analysis with great success to his subject, the popular martial arts discourses of the 20th and 21st centuries. His approach is never straightforward, but (possibly because of that) his results are convincing.

The predominant questions in many martial arts discussions, be they among practitioners or academics, are ‘What is...?’ and ‘What was...?’ The questions raised (and often quite satisfyingly answered) in the book, however, are more along the lines of ‘How do/did they imagine it to be?’, ‘How do/did they tell others and are/were themselves told to imagine it to be?’, and, most importantly, ‘Why do/did they want to imagine it to be that way?’ Guided by these questions, Bowman discusses the status of Asian martial arts in the West. He focuses on matters of cultural exchange and assumption, and particularly on ethnicity and orientalism; on the notion of *qi* in Western and Eastern discourses; on authenticity and lineage; on the vicissitudes of aesthetics in action cinema; on gender discourses; on the ping-pong of ‘mythological’ narratives between East and West; and on the ‘mythological’ undercurrents in martial arts studies itself.

However, Bowman’s ‘addiction’ to the notion of instability and fluidity might also underlay what I perceive to be the main weak point of the book. Despite its title, it lacks a theoretical discussion of the terms ‘myth’ and ‘mythology’ (often used interchangeably). This is problematic insofar as both terms have been inflated to such a degree and used in so many different contexts that it is impossible to know what someone means when they use either term. Malinowski described the chaos aptly and, if anything, the situation has gotten worse in the last hundred years. Bowman starts his text with a reference to Roland Barthes (not surprising given his affinity for 20th century French thought, not to mention the title of the book itself). Barthes’ understanding of myth as condensed ideology fits neatly into Bowman’s discourse analysis and Bowman utilizes it well. Yet, in other sections the book, he shifts to much more traditional notions of myth as the opposite of logos, and usually without calling attention to (without noticing?) the shifts. In line with Stanley Henning’s work [1981], which often aims to ‘debunk’ popular Chinese martial arts histories, myth is for Bowman a synonym for ‘historical lie’. The book would have benefited from a short introductory discussion of the possible meanings of myth, as well as a clearer awareness of which of these meanings is being deployed at which points. Such a categorization – explicitly not a closed definition, and thus fitting nicely within Bowman’s larger approach – has been given by Jan and Aleida Assmann [1998] and offered to martial arts studies scholars in an article edited by Bowman himself [Wetzler 2014].

The second point of critique is that this volume displays a certain degree of ‘Asiacentrism’. Though Bowman often speaks of ‘martial arts’, in 95% of cases, he is really only referring to Asian martial arts. He often lists ‘wrestling, boxing, and martial arts’ one after the other, thereby juxtaposing Western and Eastern traditions.

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3 Of course, ‘they’ can become ‘we’ at any point.
In this respect, his unwillingness to define what martial arts are (though theoretically well grounded) may pose a problem. Intuitively, Bowman has already decided that martial arts are ‘from the East’. This notion is historically inaccurate, as martial arts can be found almost anywhere at almost any time. This, I am sure, is not news to anyone, Bowman included. But it is high time for martial arts studies scholars to actually acknowledge this fact. Even within popular culture (which, for a long time, did separate European fencing, boxing, and wrestling from ‘proper’, Asian martial arts), it is no longer a truism in the 21st century that martial arts are from the East. In fact, in this day and age, after the MMA revolution, it may even be doubted that martial arts are primarily associated with Asia or serve primarily as a ‘marker of Asian-ness’.

Today, MMA reigns supreme, and it is significantly regarded as a Western or global phenomenon. It is as much boxing as it is muay thai, as much wrestling as it is jiu jitsu, as much sambo as it is judo (speaking, absolutely in line with Bowman, not about sambo’s history as a direct offspring of judo, but about its perceived ‘Russian-ness’). MMA is as much North American, Brazilian, and Russian as it is Japanese or Thai (and remarkably non-Chinese). The iconic symbol of MMA is not the Japanese samurai or the Shaolin monk, but rather the Roman gladiator (or even, thanks to the movie *300*, [2006]) the Spartan warrior. And the MMA movie *Warrior* [2011] significantly had no need for any Asian characters or references [Barrowman 2015: 82].

Thirdly, Bowman seems less interested in the transmission and execution of martial arts techniques themselves than in the narratives being told about them. In itself, this is not a shortcoming. Yet, at several points in the book (see, for example, his discussion of taiji principles [Bowman 2017: 165]), one gets the impression that the author himself is at risk of falling into the ‘mythological trap’, rephrasing common ideas on what martial arts will do with a body.

Nevertheless, *Mythologies of Martial Arts* is a treasure trove of stimulating thoughts and new ideas, as well as an ammunition belt to arm scholars entering into discussions about the self-stylization of the martial arts. The book thus comes highly recommended. The term ‘inspiring’ is often used too hastily, but here, I use it deliberately. While reading the book, at least once every third page there was a moment when I would have liked to call the author (or any of my martial arts studies colleagues) to discuss what I had just read. This does not mean that I agree with everything on those pages. For example, I wanted to ask if the rather negative view on myth should not be balanced with the productive capacity of myths, what Hans Blumenberg called ‘Arbeit am Mythos’ (work on myth) [1985]. Also, scholars of the historical European martial arts will likely feel compelled to point out how well known Asian styles already were in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the West, and that kicking techniques (described, by Bowman, as purely Asian) were beautifully illustrated in a German ‘kickboxing manual’ from 1863 [Happel 1863]. But even at the points where readers may disagree, engagement with the book never comes to a standstill; Bowman’s very personal, often humorous, and always enjoyable style of writing positively engages and all but invites disagreement, and there is the distinct sense that he is looking forward to the discussions the book may catalyze.

Finally, the goals of Anglo-American cultural studies (as discussed above) suggest that this book may have an impact that transcends purely academic reflection. *Mythologies of Martial Arts* calls on martial artists to reconceptualize and possibly even challenge their own mythologies. On this front, Bowman’s insights offer a healthy antidote to a scene where people so enthusiastically divide themselves along the lines of invented images and narratives.
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In Search of Legitimacy: How Outsiders Become Part of the Afro-Brazilian Capoeira Tradition

Lauren Miller Griffith

Berghahn Books, 2016

248 pages

Lauren Miller Griffith's *In Search of Legitimacy: How Outsiders Become Part of the Afro-Brazilian Capoeira Tradition* is an ambitious ethnographic study of tourists and pilgrims journeying to Bahia, Brazil, the sacred birthplace of capoeira. In each chapter, Griffith employs a methodological and analytical approach that celebrates the complexity of capoeira rather than seeking to reduce it through a single theoretical framework. It is this ability to provide insight while avoiding simplification combined with an insistence on raising difficult questions that could serve as a model for scholars of martial arts, physical practice, identity, cultural flows, and appropriation.

In following the comparatively affluent men and women from Western nations who seek cultural authenticity and martial art expertise through their capoeira pilgrimages and apprenticeships, Griffith takes us into a site of tension and constantly shifting meanings. Capoeira is presented as existing in a space of in-betweens – simultaneously a martial art, a dance, a game, and a sport. To be a capoeirista is to be confined by a structured set of moves, but it is also to celebrate and master an art of improvisation and trickery. The practice is at times a painful, and even violent, exchange, but the goal is also to share a performance with a partner. Yet, capoeira is also an exoticized performance for tourists, an increasingly accepted source of cultural pride for the nation, and a site of resistance and celebration of black identity. Perhaps most challenging, the practitioner traveling to Brazil to train is both tourist and pilgrim, both insider and outsider, both accepted and shunned, both a necessary source of economic revenue and implicated in the essentialization and commodification of culture.

To complicate matters even further, Griffith seeks to answer two related but difficult classic anthropological questions – why and how – each implied in the title of the book. First, *why* would someone invest significant amounts of money, time, and energy into a practice that will not provide monetary reward or lead to future success? Second, *how* does one become a member of the capoeira community? Here attention is shifted to the negotiation that takes place as someone seeks an identity that is not their cultural heritage in a land in which they were not born. Together, these two questions do much to highlight the ambitious nature of the work. To even partially answer these two questions is a considerable accomplishment.

Griffith’s decision to train alongside the participants seems to place her, on the surface, as one of a growing number of sociologists and anthropologists studying martial arts and physical culture through use of the body as a methodological tool [see Channon and Jennings 2014]. As the book concretely demonstrates, her participation provides her access and entry into sites and activities that would simply not have otherwise been possible. In doing so, she gains a fuller appreciation of both the

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appeal and the complexities, as people from an array of social and geographic groups come together to share a physical and cultural practice.

Perhaps it is pertinent to note that Griffith’s book appears in an edited series on ‘Dance and Performance’. With this in mind, it is less surprising that she does not couch her contributions or methodological approach in terms of the currently burgeoning scholarship on martial arts per se. Indeed, her work differs from the numerous scholars who have followed in the footsteps of Loïc Wacquant [2004] and his seminal ‘enactive ethnography’ of boxing. While Griffith shares a commitment to full participation as part of the research process, her analysis cannot be said to be centered on the sensual or on embodiment. For instance, while Griffith provides insight into the process through which participants improve their skills, the focus is not on the ‘scaffolding’ process (to use a term from Greg Downey’s [2008] work on learning capoeira), in which the body is shaped and conditioned through repeated training to become capoeirista.

The moments in which Griffith does employ vivid descriptions of her training are enlightening, insightful, and left me wanting more. The discussion of gender in the book was particularly compelling and serves as example. Griffith makes the topic come alive with stories of interactions that take place both inside and outside of training situations. Excerpts from her field notes are rich with both descriptive and analytic value, since much of the knowledge in the site operates at a felt-level; whether it is an incorrect movement subtly being corrected within the flow of performance or the experience of having a training partner forced to kiss the author’s hand as a ‘sign of respect’ for capoeira.

This type of writing and analysis is important when studying any physical culture. However, it would be safe to say that the importance is magnified when studying martial arts. Capoeira, as Griffith illustrates, offers a particular challenge for it demands an appreciation of one of the most difficult to textually capture qualities – movement. It is its unique movement that distinguishes capoeira from all other martial arts. And it is movement that distinguishes the expert from the novice (rather than simply the pragmatic ability to win or score points under a combat sport rule system).

For Griffith, not being completely seduced by the corporeal trend is also a strength, as she takes advantage of the additional space and time to explore the social and historical context of capoeira, and how these play parts in the constant identity work being performed by visitors seeking to belong. In looking at the ways that particular stories and pasts are invoked, the reader is given insight into the process of interpretation that ensures that capoeira is never simply a physical contest. Following Griffith, we see how performing traditional songs is never just learning the lyrics and melody but also determining what it means for a white woman from the United States to loudly sing words written by black slaves. Similarly, getting dinner after practice is never just finding a satisfying meal but also a negotiation of who eats with whom (or who gets to eat with the locals) and how cultural pilgrims differentiate themselves from cultural tourists.

For scholars of martial arts and combat sports, Griffith offers two particularly valuable lessons. First, she confirms the importance of martial arts as an object of study. In particular, martial arts offer rich examples for understanding debates over cultural authenticity and the role of the pilgrim in seeking, and even demanding, the ‘authentic’. For, as scholars of martial arts are well-aware, capoeira is not the only fighting style to have a Mecca. Griffith raises important questions about the role of the outsider in policing the boundaries of the practice in which they seek meaning and the complex process through which legitimacy and cultural capital are established and negotiated.
Second, Griffith convincingly demonstrates that to understand integration into a cultural practice a researcher should take seriously both the physical integration and the meaning-making that occurs during and surrounding training. Much effort has been made to understand the conditioning and training of the habitus, focusing on the physical lessons that occur in a site. However, less work has simultaneously taken into account agents’ self-definitions and identity construction. In asking both why and how, Griffith demands that the pilgrim’s sense of self (and how this sense of self orients actions) must be part of the story.

Taking up these challenges is rather daunting. Even as Griffith makes it clear that martial arts offer a particularly rich site for better understanding the transmission of culture and the relationship between action and talk, she demonstrates how difficult it is to take seriously multiple questions, methodologies, and research strategies. It is easy to get stuck somewhere in the middle – neither quite capturing the corporeal nor the hermeneutic. But, as Griffith shows, such complexity and interplay is an essential part of the story. To really understand a fundamental capoeira movement like the gëngë, the researcher must appreciate not just the feel of performing the movement with fluidity and style, but also how the performance is always already tied into larger understandings of race, ethnicity, gender, authenticity, and belonging.

In the end, Griffith’s In Search of Legitimacy: How Outsiders Become Part of the Afro-Brazilian Capoeira Tradition is a book of negotiations and questions. And, I would say, this is a good thing. Those seeking clear and final answers should look elsewhere.

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BOOK REVIEW

Venezuelan Stick Fighting: The Civilizing Process in Martial Arts
Michael J. Ryan
Lexington Books, 2016
186 pages

It is surprising to open an academic study and find, within the first few pages, a clear-eyed review of the volume that one is set to embark upon. The Foreword contributed by Professor Thomas A. Green to Michael J. Ryan’s *Venezuelan Stick Fighting: The Civilizing Process in Martial Arts* provides readers with exactly that. While taking some of the surprise out of the coming exercise, Green lays out both Ryan’s contributions and his place in a rapidly growing field. After considering this book, I am inclined to agree with Green’s assessment that it:

warrants a close reading as a first-rate example of the work produced by the current generation of martial arts scholars and of the preoccupations and methods of the discipline of martial arts studies as it develops in the early decades of the twenty-first century. [xi]

*Venezuelan Stick Fighting* is first and foremost an impressive contribution to the growing body of ethnographic studies on regional martial arts. As Ryan correctly notes, the close links between patterns of community violence and the development of fighting systems (whether formalized or vernacular in nature) can be seen in many locations around the globe. Yet, this diversity of human experience is not always reflected in literature that tends to focus on traditional Asian and European fighting systems on the one hand and modern Western combat sports on the other.

Recent publications suggest that a potential rebalancing of emphasis may be underway. The release of multiple books on topics like capoeira [Griffith 2016; Delamont, Stephens and Campos 2016], the South Asian martial arts [Sieler 2015], and even hyper-real modes of violence [Goto-Jones 2015] suggest that the horizons of martial arts studies continue to broaden in both geographical and theoretical terms. Ryan’s detailed ethnographic analysis of a South American stick and machete fighting community is a welcome contribution to the literature on the martial arts of the Western Hemisphere.

Even those who are new to the academic study of the martial arts will find Ryan’s writing compelling and his arguments easy to follow. This short work (only 143 pages of actual text) is divided into eight brief chapters (not counting the Introduction), each of which tackles a single subject. Most of these discussions were previously published as articles in a variety of journals, which helps the author to move through a wide range of topics with relative ease.

Each of these chapters grounds Ryan’s arguments within the ethnographic method. The author freely shares descriptions, interviews and excerpts of his fieldnotes in such a way that one develops a sense of empathy both for the region’s aging stick fighting masters and the intruding anthropologist seeking to study their (often secretive) art. The rich descriptions of both the technical instruction that Ryan received and the rapidly evolving social environment which structured it is one of this work’s strongest features.
While not as rich, Ryan’s work also tackles an ambitious number of theoretical topics. As Green suggests in the Foreword, these reflect many of the current trends seen in the field. Indeed, Ryan quite consciously situates his book within the evolving martial arts studies literature.

The author’s overarching theoretical concerns grow out of what sociologists term the ‘modernization hypothesis’. In Ryan’s work, this takes the form of an assertion that, as societies around the globe become more democratic, economically successful, rational and secular, we should expect to see a decrease in violent behavior and the sorts of social institutions (vernacular and formal fighting systems) that support it. Yet, here, as in so many other areas, the seemingly intuitive expectations of the modernization hypothesis are not playing out as planned.

While it is true that stick fighting has retreated from the space it once occupied (both figuratively and literally) in rural Venezuela’s public squares, it has not vanished. Rather, Ryan suggests that, while the sticks which were once carried openly are now concealed in a car’s trunk, or strapped to a moped, they are still an important aspect of local life. In a few areas – such as festivals popular with tourists as well as efforts to create a unifying Venezuelan martial art – the cultural prominence of the garrote (a hardwood walking stick also used for fighting) has increased.

This puzzle is then explored through several linked discussions, each focusing on different topics and theoretical approaches. Norbert Elias’ ‘civilizing process’ is invoked, as well as the contributions of such familiar names as Bourdieu, Foucault, Wacquant and Downey. For the most part, now-standard theoretical concepts are used to illuminate trends in the underlying ethnographic data and to draw connections between ongoing debates in the literature. However, Ryan is less interested in using his data to challenge these approaches or to craft a truly unique theoretical contribution of his own. One exception to this trend is his use of the concept of the ‘warrior habitus’ to explore the understudied question of how traditional fighting systems assist in the social reintegration of individuals who have been exposed to significant acts of violence.

Unfortunately, certain aspects of the production of the volume distract from Ryan’s efforts. This book would have benefited from more attention to detail in the proofreading and copyediting process. Issues like missing punctuation, spacing errors and even misspelled names became a distraction as the volume progressed. And while the physical construction of the book is good, the quality of some of the photos is so poor (see Figure 5.2) that one is left to wonder if perhaps this was an attempt to make an aesthetic statement about the difficult to resolve, nature of traditional garrote. Readers attempting to visualize the scenes described in the book will be better served by locating the author’s Facebook page and watching the many interesting training clips that he recorded throughout the course of his fieldwork. On the other hand, the glossary found at the end of the text is invaluable.

The overall length of the manuscript also creates its own set of challenges. Ryan does an admirable job of painting a detailed picture of the environment and habitus that shaped an aging generation of garroteros (individuals who have mastered stick fighting). At its best, the text can invoke a genuine sense of empathy for a set of figures that are culturally remote from most modern readers. Yet, due to the nature of both the research questions asked and the constraints of space, other figures remain less well understood.

Readers may find these omissions to be a challenge precisely because these other, opaquer individuals might constitute the future of stick fighting in the area. While Ryan delves into the life and times of an aging generation of experts (many in their 70s and 80s), by the end of the volume, we still know very little about their younger students.
At multiple points in the text, we are assured that garrote is not on the verge of extinction. Ryan notes that, while it may have receded from the public into the private sphere as the region’s strong ‘culture of honor’ gave way to different social systems, certain young men (and a few women) still take an interest in the art. While we are informed that such individuals may carry a fighting stick on their moped, or apprentice with an older relative, they make surprisingly few appearances in the author’s narrative and are inevitably invoked as supporting characters when they do emerge. What sorts of work do these individuals do? What is their educational background and worldview? How do they negotiate the realities of rapidly changing social and economic environments? Why do certain individuals take up the garrote when so many of their siblings and cousins walk away?

I found myself coming back to these questions more frequently while reading Chapter Seven, ‘The Creation of a National Patrimony’. This is among the most interesting sections of the volume because it speaks directly to the author’s central questions about modernization and the civilizing process which has structured the development of these fighting systems. Ryan concludes that these arts survived because they were useful to, and helped to shape, patterns of local resistance to exploitation by an ever-shifting array of elites coming out of the national (and global) center.

Given this context, recent attempts to recast local forms of stick fighting as a ‘national martial art’ have been met with suspicion by local garroteros seeking to resist the erosion of their unique regional identity. They understand these efforts (possibly with good reason) as an attempted act of cultural appropriation or theft wrapped in nationalism. Their response has been to retreat from the public display of their art; this in contrast to the younger generation of teachers and their creation of programs designed to extract payments from the national government while at the same time stripping the resulting classes of any cultural or combative value. These individuals hope to build a reputation as shrewd leaders of the local resistance by selling a fraudulent version of the art to urban elites while protecting its secrets.

It may be easy for these younger teachers to protect such secrets since, as Ryan suggests, they never possessed this knowledge in the first place. These individuals, by and large, were always excluded from the small circle (defined mostly by kinship ties) in which ‘real’ combative stick fighting was jealously guarded. Still, I am not sure that this sort of strict division between ‘authentic/combative’ and ‘fraudulent/public’ can capture the full totality of the shift in social systems that the author seems to hint at throughout the volume.

Ryan describes a situation in which the older social group takes on ever fewer new students while mass classes are being organized to spread a new ‘national art’ in both schools and police academies. While the move away from an honor-based social discourse places the older version of stick fighting in an ever more marginal position, parents and various institutions are eager to have their children involved in a ‘character building’ activity not premised on the valorization of drunken brawling and knife fighting. This seems to be exactly the sort of civilizing process that the work of Norbert Elias can speak to, and which the author indicated was central to his research. Yet, only half the story is explored.

Little attention is given to the actual statements and understanding of this new generation of ‘fraudulent’ teachers, and none whatsoever to the beliefs and motivations of either their numerous students or the agents of the state that are paying for and subsidizing all of this. It is important to remember that they too have had a lifetime to become acquainted with patterns of mistrust and secrecy in rural areas. If we have learned nothing else in martial arts studies, it is the ease with which the ‘invented traditions’ and ‘simplified systems’ of one generation become the ‘ancient and authentic’ cultural touchstones of the next. The very nature of vernacular fighting systems makes their history easily rewritten and forgotten. Looking at the question from a wider variety of perspectives, one is forced to wonder: Who is really exploiting whom?
Professor Green began his Foreword to this volume by noting that, ‘in *Venezuelan Stick Fighting*, Michael Ryan does not break new ground. He does, however, sow seeds whose plants yield a rich harvest’ [ix]. Ryan’s book represents an ambitious marriage of detailed ethnography with the theoretical questions that unite and motivate the current generation of martial arts studies scholars. His book is sure to find a place on many syllabi and reading lists as it makes the rich traditions of South American stick fighting immediately accessible and relevant to many of the core discussions in the field. His interest in the process of modernization, as well as the psychological aspects of traditional combat training, are particularly stimulating. In short, Ryan has written a book that is sure to be read, and enjoyed, by a wide cross-section of martial arts studies researchers.

**REFERENCES**


