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What is the meaning of ‘forms’ practice within the traditional Asian martial arts? Were Bruce Lee’s movies actually ‘kung fu’ films? Was the famous Ali vs. Inoki fight a step on the pathway to MMA or a paradoxical failure to communicate? What pitfalls await the unwary as we rush to define key terms in a newly emerging, but still understheorized, discipline? The rich and varied articles offered in Issue 3 of *Martial Arts Studies* pose these questions and many more. Taken as a set, they reflect the growing scholarly engagement between our field and a variety of theoretical and methodological traditions.

Many monographs, academic articles, book chapters, conference papers and proceedings that have appeared over the last year have been forced to address the question that Paul Bowman raised in the very first issue of this journal in 2015: Is martial arts studies an academic field?

Looking back on the rich achievements of the last year, the answer must certainly be ‘yes’. Yet, as Bowman reminds us in his contribution to the present issue [Bowman 2017], fields of study do not simply appear. They are not spontaneously called forth by the essential characteristics or importance of their subject matter. Rather, they are achievements of cooperative creativity and vision. Fields of study, like the martial arts themselves, are social constructions.

Over the next year, we hope, in a variety of settings, to stimulate even more systematic and engaged thinking about the various ways that one might approach the scholarly study of the martial arts. Given the diversity of our backgrounds and areas of focus, how can we best advance our efforts? What sort of work do we expect martial arts studies, as an interdisciplinary field, to do?

In this issue’s first article, Bowman turns his attention to the unfolding debate about the definition of martial arts [Channon and Jennings 2014; Wetzler 2015; Judkins 2016; Channon 2016]. This discussion is prefaced with a brief exploration of some of the failed precursors to martial arts studies, including hoplology. Bowman concludes that efforts to theorize the orientation of martial arts studies as a field are likely to put us on a better pathway for sustained development than arguments for or against any particular definition of the martial arts themselves. While Bowman does not suggest that any single methodological approach should dominate the emerging field, he offers a strong critique of ‘scientism’ in all its forms.

Alex Channon and Catherine Phipps, in an article titled ‘Pink Gloves Still Give Black Eyes’, ask what martial arts studies can tell us about the construction and performance of gender roles in modern society [Channon and Phipps 2017]. Their ethnographic study focuses on the ways that certain symbols and behaviors, when paired with achievements in the realm of fighting ability, are used to challenge and rewrite an orthodox understanding of gender. This leads the authors
to conclude that future scholars interested in the subversion of gender should carefully consider the possibility that appropriation and re-signification may be critical mechanisms in their own areas of study as well.

Daniel Mroz and Timothy Nulty draw heavily on their overlapping backgrounds in Chen style taijiquan with a pair of separate yet complimentary articles [Mroz 2017; Nulty 2017]. Both of these contributions ask us to consider how various theoretical approaches, drawn from a variety of fields, can help us to pragmatically understand basic elements of the embodied practice of the martial arts.

Mroz begins his article with a brief discussion of the practical, narrative, theatrical and religious explanations of prearranged movement patterns (taolu) within the Chinese martial arts. Noting the shortcomings of such interpretive efforts he employs the twin concepts of 'decipherability' and 'credibility', drawn from the Great Reform movement of 20th century theater training. He advances a framework that points out certain shortcomings in the ways that we typically think about the practice of taolu, and goes on to suggest a new perspective from which their practice might more fruitfully be understood.

Following this, Nulty draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ‘embodied intentionality’ to elucidate the distinction between gong (skill) and fa (technique) in martial arts training. After demonstrating the ways in which this approach facilitates the understanding of other concepts critical to taijiquan, Nulty argues that the gong/fa distinction outlined in his article is in fact widely applicable to the study of a variety of martial arts.

The articles that follow go on to examine the representation of the martial arts in various types of media, and their semiotic or discursive status. Jared Miracle draws on the realms of applied linguistics and performance theory in an attempt to reevaluate the famous, but ill-fated, 1976 bout which pitted the American boxer Muhammad Ali against the Japanese professional wrestler Antonio Inoki [Miracle 2017]. After reviewing a range of sources, including newspaper reports, eyewitness interviews and personal correspondence, Miracle concludes that the event should be understood as an example of robust, but failed, communication.

Wayne Wong turns his attention to new trends in Hong Kong martial arts cinema. After setting out a discussion of the action aesthetics developed in the films of such legendary performers as Kwan Tak-hing and Bruce Lee, Wong turns his attention to Donnie Yen’s immensely successful Ip Man franchise. In discussing the innovative fight choreography in these films, Wong notes a new set of possibilities for the positive portrayal of wu (martial) Chinese culture on screen. Wong argues that the innovative recombination of images and approaches in Yen’s films present students of martial arts studies with a new, and more comprehensive, understanding of the nature of the southern Chinese martial arts.

popular representations of violence and our historical understanding of martial culture [Hay 2017]. Specifically, he asks what reports in the press both reveal and conceal about the changing nature of violence in British society during the 1660s and 1670s, particularly with regards to duels. Despite pervasive censorship, a review of historical newspapers suggests insights into how these deadly encounters evolved as individual swordsmen gave way to both firearms and groups on horseback. The social upheaval that gripped British society during this period was reflected in parallel transformations both in how violence was carried out and in how it was publicly discussed.


Taken together, we believe that these articles and interventions illustrate how a wide spectrum of theoretical and methodological approaches make substantive contributions to our understanding of the martial arts. But, of course, the range of approaches present here is not in any way comprehensive. A considerable variety of tools and lenses remain to be explored and applied in martial arts studies. Yet, collectively, it is clear that these authors are advancing a compelling vision of the type of field that martial arts studies is in the process of becoming.

Our thanks go to all of our contributors, as well as to our editorial assistant Kyle Barrowman, our designer Hugh Griffiths, and all at Cardiff University Press, especially Alice Percival and Sonja Haerkonen.
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ABSTRACT

This article argues against all forms of scientism and the widespread perceived need to define martial arts in order to study martial arts or ‘do’ martial arts studies. It argues instead for the necessity of theory before definition, including theorisation of the orientation of the field of martial arts studies itself. Accordingly, the chapter criticises certain previous (and current) academic approaches to martial arts, particularly the failed project of hoplology. It then examines the much more promising approaches of current scholarship, such as that of Sixt Wetzler, before critiquing certain aspects of its orientation. Instead of accepting Wetzler’s ‘polysystem theory’ approach uncritically, the article argues instead for the value of a poststructuralist ‘discourse’ approach in martial arts studies.
DEALING WITH DISCIPLINARY DIFFERENCE

I was once invited to contribute a chapter to a collection being prepared on martial arts and embodied knowledge. When all the draft chapters were in and the editors were happy with the collection, the entire manuscript was then sent off to be assessed by two academic reviewers. Of my own contribution, one reviewer said: the chapter by Bowman is terrible; it is not publishable, and should be rejected. The other reviewer said: the chapter by Bowman is the best contribution to this volume, and greatly enhances and enriches it. Faced with two diametrically opposed views from two presumably equally reliable peer reviewers, the editors themselves held the casting vote. They decided that they liked the chapter overall, thought it had value, and wanted to include it. But they elected to share the reviews with me and invited me to make any changes I thought appropriate in light of them.

The experience of receiving such polarised views was educational. I share this anecdote here to introduce a cluster of interrelated issues. These start with the matter of how to establish value in an emergent academic discourse, the problematic of bias attendant to all acts and processes of evaluation and verification, and the fact that the shape, form, borderlines, organisation and orientation of academic fields are neither natural nor inevitable. Rather, these emerge in negotiation with decisions made by a host of agents and agencies, including academics, editors, reviewers, research councils, funding bodies, and publishers, all of whom make their evaluations with reference to established criteria and values. Accordingly, decisions as to what good or bad work looks like, and what ‘deserves’ to be published, are themselves reflective of values tied into interpretations of what good, correct or proper academic work in this field ‘should’ look like.

This does not mean that everything is already decided or overdetermined by pre-established ‘structures’ or ‘systems’. Rather, it means that senses of propriety, validity, appropriateness, fit, and so on, are always establishments or achievements that are ongoing, in negotiation, subject to dispute, up for question, challenge, revision and review. Such negotiation and renegotiation can be perceived in all academic disciplines, but it is inevitably more cacophonous in newly emerging fields, where senses of tradition and tacit agreements about convention have yet to be set.

This is the situation of martial arts studies today, in which huge disciplinary differences are palpable from one work to the next. Such vast differences are present because even though the emergence of the field is being driven by a sense of shared and communal investment in an object (‘martial arts’), this shared interest is not yet matched by anything like a shared approach. In other words, the shared academic interest in ‘martial arts’ is currently drawing together academics from many very different fields. Yet the deceptiveness of the term ‘martial arts’ combined with the diversity of this community, with its myriad premises, multiple perspectives, methods and orientations, seems to necessitate the creation of some kind of consensus around the object, field and approach to ‘martial arts’. Hence, understandably, people feel the need to establish a definition of martial arts [Jones 2002; Lorge 2012; Lorge 2016; but see also Judkins 2016b].

Because of this perceived necessity, at this point, many works would move directly into a discussion of definitions, attempting to settle the matter of which definition of martial arts should and should not be used, and where and when [Channon 2016; Lorge 2016]. However, rather than entering into the discussion about how best to define martial arts, in what follows I will instead argue that the question of the definition of martial arts is both a distraction and a red herring for the emerging field of martial arts studies. The more pressing task, I argue, is not the establishment of a consensus around the definition of our object. Rather, it is the establishment of a shared, circumspect, literate and analytical, theoretically informed critical discourse with rigorously formulated problematics that can contribute in diverse ways to both academic and public debates.

In short, I argue somewhat against the current of recent debates, and even against the grain of many academic approaches, that we do not need to define martial arts at all. Rather, I propose that we need to theorise the entire field or nexus of research, including the place, point and purpose of definition within it. Indeed, my contention is that if we allow ourselves to be animated by defining martial arts without both theorising and constructing the field, then martial arts studies may founder and fail, like so many past attempts to establish an academic field of study for martial arts.

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1 At the time, the emerging field that we now call martial arts studies was yet to be established, and the editors later commented that they had actually struggled to find suitable academics to act as peer reviewers who were not already contributors to the collection itself. Today there would be peer reviewers aplenty for such a collection.

2 For an important and valuable contrast to this argument, see Peter Lorge’s recent work [Lorge 2016], which argues against using theory – because it is difficult and off-putting – and instead for the virtues of deepening and refining historical knowledge. As Lorge sees it, deeper historical knowledge can both enrich martial artists’ practice and clearly illustrate to the academic community the value of martial arts as a valid topic of academic study. I believe it is possible to concede Lorge’s points and still argue for the value and necessity of theory ‘before’ or ‘beneath’ this.
APPRECIATING MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

Before following through on this, some further reflection on my opening anecdote seems called for. Ironically, even back at the time of this brush between my work and two border guards at the gates of a then unclear and embryonic field, I had already long accepted Roland Barthes’ argument that readers can and will have very different responses to the same text [Barthes 1977]. But I had never encountered such symmetrically opposed opinions from scholars I had presumed must work to some degree in the ‘same’ area – i.e., holding an academic interest in ‘martial arts’ refracted through one or another approach of the arts or humanities. The vastly differing verdicts surprised me even though I already believed I knew that academic disciplines are spaces of argumentation and disagreement rather than consensus. Today, I am no longer surprised by the appearance of such difference in what is still a very young and uncertain field. Indeed, as mentioned, encountering extreme disciplinary differences is currently our daily bread. The question is: is such diversity simply something to be either shrugged off or celebrated, or might it harbour a problem? What might it mean if the object and field of martial arts studies continues to be conceived of very differently by different people from different disciplinary backgrounds? In short, is it a problem that we are still frequently experiencing such widely differing approaches to the academic study martial arts?

On the one hand, no. There will always be disciplinary difference, and even vast differences in conceptuality and orientation within ‘the same’ discipline or field. Different academic origins and kinds of training bring with them differing questions, differing objects of attention, differing values, methods, and so on. And for the foreseeable future, martial arts studies will inevitably be built from work and approaches hailing from different disciplines. Moreover, no-one will ever be surprised, for instance, if a study of martial arts as they appear in one or more works of literature differs significantly from a study focused on questions of experiments in or around pedagogy [compare Liu 2011 with Lefebvre 2016 for instance]. So where might the problem come in?

Far be it from me to advocate any kind of unitary, univocal, mono-disciplinary or monoculturalist approach in martial arts studies. That would be neither desirable nor possible. Nonetheless, in order for a field or discipline to emerge and survive, there must be coherent and meaningful internal (community) and external (cross-disciplinary) discourses and exchanges. In order for this to happen, the matter of what we might call ‘the approach’ is important. There are stakes and consequences attached to the matter of the paradigms that organise our efforts.

To illustrate, one might briefly consider the possible reasons for the repeated failure of attempts to create a field of academic study of and for martial arts. Most famously, of course, Richard Burton in the 19th century and Donn Draeger later in the 20th century attempted to found and ground an academic discipline that they called ‘hopology’ [for an overview, see Spencer 2011]. However, this or these projects repeatedly foundered. The question is: why?

Even more pertinently, perhaps, is the related question of why a connected field of martial arts studies took until today to begin to emerge at all. Consider the fact that over the last two decades it became increasingly easy to carry out online academic searches and to discover that all sorts of different kinds of studies of all sorts of issues involving martial arts are being carried out across a surprising number of different disciplines. Yet there have been few sustained dialogues and fewer dedicated spaces for the academic study of martial arts.¹

My contention is that the matter of the approach or paradigm is central to both questions. It relates not only to all failed past attempts to establish any kind of martial arts studies but also to the stubborn non-appearance of martial arts studies today, despite scattered studies of martial arts in diverse disciplines.

To consider the recent situation first: there is a sense in which the very heterogeneity of the ways of approaching martial arts – the very richness of the potential field – may paradoxically have played a part in preventing the creation of a single interconnected, interacting field. The logic of this proposition is as follows: the creation of an academic discourse requires the emergence of shared problematics and discussions around – at the very least – matters of which questions are to be asked and which methodologies are best suited for their exploration. Yet, in recent decades, although there have been a great number of academic studies on all manner of things to do with martial arts, no single field or conversation has emerged, because of the very heterogeneity of approaches to radically heterogeneous questions.²

³ The long-running Electronic Journals of Martial Arts and Sciences is a noteworthy project that has attempted to construct such dialogues and spaces (http://ejmas.com/). I defer a discussion of this project here, however, in order to focus on more ‘stark’ examples, at this time, for clarity.

⁴ Moreover, far from informing, enlivening and expanding academic discourses on martial arts, the heterogeneity of approaches and diversity of kinds of work actually seems to have prevented many people from reading, engaging, or even being aware of the plethora of academic literature being produced on martial arts across the disciplines. Works continue to appear that present themselves as if they are the first to deal with the martial arts. Whether proceeding by making grand proclamations to this effect or by lacking a basic literature review, the net result is the same. (Thanks to Ben Judkins for making this point in personal email communication.)
What seems key to disciplinary emergence is a sense of a shared project. But, this does not mean that a field demands a unitary or univocal approach. Far from it. Taking too limited a conception of the object and of the field, particularly when this is combined with too limited or problematic an approach, can equally stymie growth. This might be illustrated by a consideration of perhaps the most well-known past attempt to establish a field for the academic study of martial arts – hoplology.

**HOPLOLOGICAL HOPES**

Hoplology is surely the most famous example of the failure of martial arts studies to attain a stable and sustainable academic presence. According to the website of the International Hopology Society, hoplology was founded by Sir Richard F. Burton in the 19th century. However, it then (says the website) ‘remained dormant’, until Donn Draeger picked up the baton at some unspecified point, after the 1960s, a baton he carried until his death [‘About the International Hopology Society’ 2016]. The International Hopology Society is now based in Hawaii, and presents itself as ‘an independent, not-for-profit organization’ which ‘offers its services to scholars, universities, museums, collectors, private and governmental organizations, writers and publishers around the world’ [‘About the International Hopology Society’ 2016].

Given this evidence of its continued and current existence, readers may be surprised by my claim that hoplology is a failed academic project. Hoplology still exists. The published work of Donn Draeger itself is of mythic status in most narratives of the history of Western attempts to establish serious and reliable scholarly knowledge of East Asian martial arts. Nonetheless, what provides the clearest evidence that the project failed is the lack of any significant academic presence for hoplology. It is neither a discipline, nor a discourse, nor an unfolding research programme, nor an interdisciplinary nexus of debate. The fact that hoplology continues to haunt us in the form of the hopes and aspirations of its proponents does not change the fact that as a field of study it never really made it to where any such field of study most wants to be – the university. The university was always where Draeger and other proponents wanted hoplology to be. But it never really made it.

It ‘never really made it’ for lots of different kinds of reasons. There were of course both personal and ‘political’ elements at work that arguably hampered Draeger’s attempts to get hoplology into a university [Miracle 2015]. But my contention is that, more significantly, there have always been fundamental obstacles to its academic survival, and that these have always boiled down its flawed conceptions of its object and its flawed theoretical orientations – in other words, its flawed paradigm and approach.

There are many possible ways to illustrate the conceptual and orientation problems at the heart of hoplology. But for the sake of brevity and clarity I will limit myself to one quick example. This is taken from the front page text of the International Hopology Society website, which proudly trumpets the ‘three axioms of hoplology’. These three axioms are:

1. The foundation of human combative behavior is rooted in our evolution. To gain a realistic understanding of human combative behavior, it is necessary to have a basic grasp of its evolutionary background.

2. The two basic forms of human combative behavior are predatory and affective. Predatory combative behavior is that combative/aggressive behavior rooted in our evolution as a hunting mammal. Affective combative behavior is that aggressive/combative behavior rooted in our evolution as a group-social animal.

3. The evolution of human combative behavior and performance is integral with the use of weapons. That is, behavior and performance is intrinsically linked to and reflects the use of weapons.

[‘About the International Hopology Society’ 2016]

From an academic point of view, the fundamental problem with these axioms is that they are not academic. Rather, they are tenets, beliefs, and assertions. They may appear scientific on first glance, but they are actually scientific. Specifically, they reflect an attempt to align hoplology with the controversial (and equally dubious) field of sociobiology [Wilson 1975], which itself has long been accused of scientism and biological determinism, among other things [Schreier et al. 2015]. Although focusing on such an example may be open to the criticism that it has not been taken from a properly academic context and so should not be subjected to academic critique, nonetheless this example has been selected because these are words that have been placed ‘front and centre’ and presented as expressing the heart of the hoplological academic project.
et al. 2016; Bethell 2016). The function of these scientific-sounding ‘axioms’ on the homepage is to gesture to the society’s declared commitment to scholarship and research. Unfortunately, this gesture actually demonstrates the opposite: it reveals its constitutively doctrinaire orientation. As such, the text commits quite a few academic crimes, which all effectively add up to a kind of unintentional (but certain) self-ostracising and auto-abdication from the world of serious academic debate and discussion.

Of course, neither Burton nor Draeger were the author of these words. But it is clear that the table was already set and the door opened to welcome them in advance by the kinds of approach common to hoplology since the beginning. This is such a limited raison d’être, articulated with reference to and in terms of a very limited and problematic deployment of an already problematic set of contentions. So it will always be highly unlikely to pass as academic in any field or context. Few, if any, 21st or even 20th century academic journals, for instance, would accept any allegedly academic article that proceeded according to such ‘axioms’ (as the case of Gottschall, discussed in the earlier footnote, illustrates [Gottschall 2015]).

Rather than this, in order to thrive within academia, what is required is something very different. Specifically, martial arts studies must emerge as a coherent communicative self-sustaining field of meaningful and productive exchanges and interactions that might be diversely relevant. To do so it will be necessary to undertake a sustained and explicit examination of and engagement with the stakes and consequences of the different conceptualisations, orientations and methods available to the field. This implies a sustained reflection on premises, remits, orientations and methods, along with ongoing dialogues with other disciplines and the principled awareness of other established and unfolding approaches across academia. Any conceptualisation of the field that starts out as an apologetic exercise for only a single set of assumptions or methods by definition cannot do this, and will be highly unlikely to attract wider academic interest.

This article seeks to contribute to such a reflection, by moving away from failed projects like hoplology and discussing instead some significant recent contributions to the crucial debate about what martial arts studies is and how it might elaborate itself and develop. Before engaging with these, however, it will be worthwhile to give some more attention to the matter of the significance for academic discourses of differing approaches and values.

### MOVING FROM ‘THING ITSELF’ TO ‘FIELD ITSELF’

One helpful way to understand why differences of opinion and orientation will always occur within academic disciplines and discourses is proposed by arch-poststructuralist Jacques Derrida [Derrida and Ferraris 2003]. Derrida proposes that academic fields are essentially always at war with themselves. The reason for this is that they essentially construct both their own objects and approaches and their own yardsticks for evaluating them. In this sense, a discipline essentially ‘constructs the object of argumentation and the field of argument itself’ [Arditi 2008: 115]. There is no immutable or incontestable fixed point outside of the discipline’s own discourse from which to adjudicate anything that takes place within it. But what takes place within it depends on a host of variables, including preferences in terms of premises, protocols, practices, procedures, and so on. Therefore, Derrida proposes that:

> 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; and this absence of overhang – in other words, the radical historicity of the field – makes the field necessarily subject to multiplicity and heterogeneity. As a result, those who are inscribed in this field are necessarily inscribed in a polemos, even if they have no special taste for war. There is a strategic destiny, destined to stratagem by the question raised over the truth of the field. [Derrida and Ferraris 2003: 13]

Any academic field is ‘a field of battle because there is no metalanguage, no locus of truth outside the field’. This ‘makes the field necessarily subject to multiplicity and heterogeneity’. Hence, when faced with divergent opinions or evaluations of any given approach, argument, assessment or experiment within a field, there can be no simple appeal to any higher authority outside the field. After all, how could anyone...
outside of a field be universally acknowledged as existing or operating in an informed, experienced or expert enough fashion to adjudicate on what takes place within the field? Do scientists ask philosophers to adjudicate on and decide the value of their methods and findings? Do lawyers? Kant thought that all fields could be interrogated and in a sense audited by philosophy. But do those working in fields other than philosophy agree? Indeed, do philosophers really (still) feel entitled, informed or expert enough to do so? 8

Of course, there are many crossovers and connections between certain fields. Work in one discipline often incorporates elements developed in other disciplines. Economics is often heavily involved in the use of mathematics, for instance. And the academic study of visual art regularly calls upon the approaches and insights of such fields as history, philosophy, cultural theory, sociology, and so on. But such crossovers, connections or collaborations are neither entirely free, nor inevitable, nor established without a battle or disagreement. Rather, such connections are contingent achievements, produced either through a sense of ‘obviousness’ (or appeals to norms – as in, ‘of course the study of art and the study of history overlap and interact’) or through the effort of making the case for the validity of their connection (as in, ‘perhaps recent advances in meteorology could be applied to help us learn more about cultural dynamics’).

Currently, art history rarely appeals to mathematics for justification or corroboration of the knowledge produced in its own disciplinary space. Although it is not impossible or inconceivable, any move to make the discourse or discipline of art history reliant upon mathematics – or subject to any kind of mathematical validation – would be met with considerable resistance within that field. To propose that the academic discourse around fine art, art history, and so on, should be subject to mathematical procedures would provoke a vehement battle. But the point to be made here is that this battle would merely be different in scale or intensity, not kind, from the ongoing day to day disagreements within the academic study of fine art and art history around such matters as whether, say, the psychoanalytic paradigm developed in the wake of the work of Jacques Lacan is of more use to art scholars than the sociological paradigm of Pierre Bourdieu, and so on.

Again, these are battles around the question of the paradigm (or paradigms) that structure a field. The choice of paradigm determines the kind of questions that can be asked, the type of work that will seem to ‘need’ to be done, and the ways in which such work will be approached.

Reflecting on the ways that academic disciplines and universities work, Derrida argued that what takes place within academic discourses involves ‘not an opposition between the legitimate and the illegitimate, but rather a very complicated distribution of the demands of legitimacy’ [Derrida 2003: 18]. At the very least, then, the determination of such matters as best versus worst is no simple matter. It does not easily come down to a clear question of whether something is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. For, if there is no fixed point outside of and transcending the field, then the source of the determination of such values can only come from within the field itself – from among the paradigms constructed within it.

The problem is that because there will always be more than one paradigm in play (and in process), there will be no sustained consensus arising within the field. In a sense, there are only ever shared, modified or replaced problematics, and rarely any widely held consensus about the formulation of the object, the parameters of the problem, or the framework for any exploration or method of approach.

The proposition that academic disciplines are battlegrounds may either disappoint or delight. It may disappoint those who cleave to the idea that academic disciplines principally trade in the establishment of truth about reality, and that they find out and know more and more about truth and reality as time goes on, as the discipline progresses. Conversely, the idea of disciplines as battlegrounds may appeal to others, and for any number of reasons. However, it is important to point out that the type of ‘war’ being formulated by Derrida here is not some Darwinian or neoliberal notion of ‘survival of the fittest’. Rather, Derrida is making a claim about the inevitable and inescapable emergence of pluralities of voices, positions and styles of attempting to establish or verify things within disciplines.

This depicts a condition of incessant and interminable disagreement, in which not only are there no absolute or eternal winners, there are not even agreed criteria for determining what notions like ‘survival’, ‘demise’ or indeed ‘fittest’ might possibly mean. (Has hoplology survived? In what way? Is it ‘the fittest’? For what?) In this kind of context, there will always be more to any disagreement than one matter or one issue. Indeed, ‘disagreement’, in this sense, can usefully be formulated as follows – as ‘less a confrontation between two established positions – as in the case of a debating society – than an engagement between ‘parties’ that do not antedate their confrontation. A disagreement constructs the object of argumentation and the field of argumentation itself’ [Arditi 2008: 115].
In academia, the mode and manner of our argumentation, as well as the very object of our attention itself, must all be understood to be essentially particular kinds of institutional construct. Our objects are ‘disciplinary objects’, essentially invented within, or at least ‘worked over’ by our own discourses [Mowitt 1992]. Our approaches to them are constructs too. This is so even though many people seem to believe that academic disciplines and fields just happen; that they are born spontaneously or emerge ineluctably in response to external realities of the world. However, this is not at all the case. Academic subjects are not born, they are made.9

THE PARADIGMS OF MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

In light of this, it is important to realise that an early and essential challenge for the nascent field of martial arts studies was always going to be the field itself. That is to say, at the same time as exploring and engaging with problematics within the field, it is also necessary to more clearly and indeed securely establish martial arts studies first as a field of study, and then as a legitimate field of study [Bowman 2015a; Wetzler 2015].

This matter may not seem to amount to too much of a serious problem, given the abundant empirical evidence that martial arts studies is a field that is mushrooming internationally. There are currently conferences and publications appearing in many languages in many countries. But the fact that this is happening without much in the way of a conversation about how to study martial arts is troubling [Bowman 2015a; Wetzler 2015; Judkins 2016a]. History is littered with failed attempts to establish any kind of coherent and sustainable academic discourse of martial arts studies. As I have been suggesting, perhaps this is in large part because of a lack of sustained communal effort to forge conceptual development via cross-disciplinary dialogues.

Moreover, in the present moment, we should not forget that until very recently, one of the most frequently posed questions in and around martial arts studies was: will martial arts ever be a valid topic of academic study? If today we are hearing a resounding ‘yes!’, there nonetheless remain not only ‘strictly academic’ but also ‘pressingly practical’ reasons for posing such questions as why and how. Different answers produce differing conceptualisations of the aim, object and field, and entail different approaches. So we need to ask: What are our aims? Which approaches best serve such aims?

In the terms of Thomas Kuhn’s now classic approach to understanding the ways that academic knowledge is produced, established and transformed, the emergent field of martial arts studies would currently be classified as ‘pre-paradigmatic’ [Kuhn 1962; Nicholls 2010]. This is because there is little to no consensus about its objects, orientations, methodologies or approaches. Some connections, crossovers and collaborations across disciplines are being formed, thanks to newly formed research networks, conferences and increasingly visible publications. But the wider field has long been confined to discrete islands of disparate disciplinary approaches in small enclaves. So, although some scholars are now producing works that engage with the question of the approaches and paradigms of martial arts studies, there remains much that still needs to be done to establish anything like a coherent topos.10

There is much to be said about this. But what I principally want to argue in what follows – in an argument that runs contrary or transverse to many discussions and impulses in and around the field – is that none of this entails a ‘need’ to define martial arts.

AGAINST DEFINITION

There is a widespread belief in and around the nascent discourses of martial arts studies that a primary and orientating task must be to define martial arts [Monahan 2007; Cynarski 2008; Lorge 2012; Channon and Jennings 2014; Cynarski, Sieber, and Szajna 2014; Lorge 2016]. The matter of defining martial arts has also prompted some valuable recent reflections on the many problems and issues that it raises [Wetzler 2015; Judkins 2016b; Channon 2016]. However, I want to intervene by arguing that this very belief and orientation harbours problems [Bowman 2015a; Bowman 2016b]. More precisely, my argument is that

9  There are many accounts of these processes. See, for example, Anderson on the formation of English Literature as a global discipline [Anderson 1991], Hall on the formation of cultural studies [Hall 1992], Fabian on how anthropology constructs its objects [Fabian 1983], Chow on the invention of film studies [Chow 2007] or, perhaps most famously, Foucault on the invention of psychiatry [Foucault 1989 (1963)]. Indeed, as one commentator put it to me: why should there be a field of martial arts studies, distinct from the wider study of movement, performance and embodied knowledge?

10  Hence the importance of the question of the paradigms of martial arts studies. From the outset, we must pluralise the question because it is evident from the range of scholarship and avenues of enquiry currently beginning to be explored across the disciplines that differing conceptualisations of both object and field emerge reciprocally with different approaches and orientations. To establish the paradigms of martial arts studies, one approach would be to map current approaches, analyse their orientations and interrogate their current and potential interconnections, in order to generate an overarching awareness of the field in its multiplicity and heterogeneity. Of course, the question that arises here is that of the map itself: what are the characteristics of the lens through which the cartographer is looking?
it is actually an error to think that forging definitions must be primary, or indeed even necessary, in academic work. Often, the belief in the necessity of definition is already an effect of a tacit acceptance that a certain manner, mode or register of academic discourse must be the proper, best or necessary method. Indeed, it arguably boils down to a belief that the only or best kind of academic work is scientific, and that science starts from definitions.

There are at least two problems with this. One problem lies with any attempt to make studies of human life, culture and society emulate ‘science’. In our case, this would take the form of trying to force the study of martial arts to conform to a certain (scientific) conception of science. For it is important to be aware that scientific approaches are neither the only nor necessarily the best, nor sometimes even viable approaches. (Must we use scientific methods to explore martial arts in and literature, film, music, gaming, philosophy, religion, gender, identity, or politics, and so on?) The second problem relates to the idea that science starts with definitions. This involves a misunderstanding of science. Science starts from theory. Scientific method always and only boils down to the attempt to test, verify or falsify a theory. Such work often seems to involve numbers, but science does not necessarily involve numbers. Some statements about science or elements of it involve numbers. But what is primary in science is theory.

On the other hand, or at the other end of the supposed spectrum of approaches, even putatively non-scientific approaches to any subject also involve theory – whether consciously acknowledged or not, and whether the theory is postulated explicitly (to orientate the work) or whether it emerges out of the work, through different kinds of encounter with ‘objects’, ‘things’, ‘processes’, ‘phenomena’ or ‘stuff’ – and regardless of whether we want to call such stuff ‘text’, ‘evidence’, ‘material’, ‘archive’, ‘fieldwork’, ‘results’ or ‘data’. The belief that such encounters, or any results or statements about any of this, necessarily or properly begins or ends with ‘definition’ is a misunderstanding. As such, any approach that positions the matter of how to define martial arts as if it is a primary or somehow fundamental question is misconceived or badly formed.

As Alex Channon has recently reminded us (although he argues for the utility of principled moments of definition), definitions quickly produce hierarchies, and help to erect values, borderlines, norms and exclusions [Channon 2016].

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11 One reviewer of this article challenged my use of the word ‘verify’ here, as it jars with scientific terminology. However, I have elected to keep the word, because my thinking is more influenced by Jacques Rancière than by scientific method per se. Rancière argues that attempts to establish, prove or argue for something – anything, anywhere – ultimately involve constructing ways of trying to verify (rather than falsify) the proposition, position or belief one is supporting [see for instance Rancière 1992].

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FOR THEORY

Fortunately, early work in the recently established journal Martial Arts Studies has, from the outset, attempted to move beyond the (dis)orientation caused by becoming trapped in the taxonomical labours associated with defining. Issue one of Martial Arts Studies, for instance, contained several different efforts to conceptualise the field and to work out ways that it could profitably and productively develop [Bowman 2015b; Wetzler 2015; Farrer 2015; Barrowman 2015]. Significant among these is Sixt Wetzler’s ‘Martial Arts Studies as Kulturwissenschaft: A Possible Theoretical Framework’ [Wetzler 2015]. This article is a particularly notable contribution to the field, so I would now like to turn to it.

In his article, Wetzler carries out a number of important tasks. He identifies the pitfalls that can arise when academics use the object-, folk-, or practitioner-language of the practices that they are taking as their objects of study. From here he broaches the problem of adequate academic terminology, asking: what terms should scholars use when talking about this or that aspect of martial arts in and as culture, politics, history or society? He argues that academic terms should surely not be the same as the terms and concepts used by practitioners themselves, either to characterise what they do or to carve up the conceptual spectrum of categories and hierarchies. This discussion moves Wetzler into a reflection on the well-worn problems of conceptualisation and – surprise, surprise – definition.

In an important move, however, rather than arguing for or against this or that definition of martial arts, Wetzler deconstructs and reveals the limits of a range of conventional and popular categories that circulate within martial arts discourses, and points to the essential impossibility of establishing fixed referential categories in these waters [28]. He proposes instead that martial arts studies analyses should be orientated by looking for and at the ‘dimensions of meaning’ attendant to any given construct of martial arts. To this end he proposes five plausible but always provisional dimensions of meaning: preparation for violent conflict, play and competitive sports, performance, transcendent goals, and health care. After making a case for these dimensions and inviting others to expand or refine his conceptualisation of them, Wetzler turns to the matter of how to conceive of, frame, and conceptually manage (in order to analyse and discuss) matters of martial arts studies without falling into what Derrida would call ‘metaphysical traps’, what cultural theorists would call ‘essentialism’, and what Wetzler calls the pitfalls of ‘lexical illusion’.

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12 My own contribution was entitled ‘Asking the Question: Is Martial Arts Studies an Academic Field?’ [Bowman 2015b]. In this article, I stopped short of explicitly addressing the question of which particular theories or approaches the field might involve (even though my preferences were surely readily inferable).
The way to avoid making conceptual mistakes, Wetzler argues, is to find an adequate theory. The one he proposes as valid and viable for martial arts studies is Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory. Wetzler quotes the following important passage from Even-Zohar:

Systems are not equal, but hierarchized within the polysystem. It is the permanent struggle between the various strata … which constitutes the (dynamic) synchronous state of the system. It is the victory of one stratum over another which constitutes the change on the diachronic axis. In this centrifugal vs. centripetal motion, phenomena are driven from the centre to the periphery while, conversely, phenomena may push their way into the centre and occupy it. However, with a polysystem one must not think in terms of one centre and one periphery, since several such positions are hypothesized. A move may take place, for instance, whereby a certain item (element, function) is transferred from the periphery of one system to the periphery of an adjacent system within the same polysystem, and then may or may not move on to the centre of the latter. [Even-Zohar 1990: 13-14, quoted in Wetzler 2015: 28-9]

Then Wetzler explains how this theoretical paradigm might be used in martial arts studies:

Transferred to the development of the Asian martial arts in Western culture within recent decades, this means: The total realm of the martial arts is the polysystem in question, which can itself be understood as a system within the ultimate polysystem ‘culture’. The cultural meaning of the polysystem ‘martial arts’ is not monolithic, but instead consists of several systems that each have their own relevance within the polysystem. Such systems might be ‘use for self-defence’ or ‘preferred way of combat for the silver screen’, while the ‘items’ that occupy these systems are the individual martial arts styles. [28]

Furthermore, the theory seems to offer ways to conceptually grasp change within and across systems. Wetzler continues:

To clarify with an example: Upon its arrival in the West, karate was perceived mostly for the Dimension 1: Preparation for Violent Conflict, and thus at the centre of the system ‘self-defence’. However, it has been driven to the periphery of ‘self-defence’ by other styles, especially by wing chun, which was then in turn driven from the centre by krav maga. Regarding the perception of Dimension 2: Play and Competitive Sports, karate was again driven from a centre, this time of the category ‘tough combat sport’, in this case by kickboxing, which was replaced by Muay Thai, which was replaced by MMA. However, not all is lost for karate. When the style held the centre of the self-defence system, it also had a connotation of being a pastime for bullies and hooligans. While losing the centres of those systems karate was able to gain ground in the systems including ‘martial arts for pedagogical purposes’ and ‘self-perfection by Eastern practices’ (both systems obviously representing Dimension 4: Transcendent Goals), whose centres it shares today with other Japanese budo styles, along with yoga, qigong, and various meditation practices in the second case. [Wetzler 2015: 28]

Wetzler’s ensuing discussion of the insights that such an approach opens up is extremely suggestive and rewarding – even though it does not broach the matter of how anyone might ever establish what is at the ‘centre’, ‘periphery’ or other ‘position’ of this or that ‘system’ – all of which will surely always be in question. Nonetheless, it has already generated (or at least enriched) some highly significant work, most notably in the form of Benjamin N. Judkins’ recent study of the Star Wars inspired phenomenon of Lightsaber combat [Judkins 2016a].

Using the ‘five dimensions of meaning’ that Wetzler proposes can be associated with martial arts practices in different configurations at different times and in different places, Judkins easily demonstrates that the perhaps unlikely pastime of Lightsaber combat training can in fact entirely reasonably be classed as a martial art. This is so even though such a conclusion might surprise or dismay certain scholars of martial arts and even if many of Lightsaber combat’s own practitioners would not feel entirely comfortable making such a claim.

Judkins’ approach to the quite possibly controversial example of Lightsaber combat, informed by Wetzler’s intentionally rigorous (looking) framework, has the benefit of challenging quite a few different positions – including, most importantly, any essentialist or ‘referentialist’ approach that proceeds on the assumption that something is a martial art if it is somehow ‘obviously’ a martial art. So, such works as these by Wetzler and Judkins – along with the arguably even more radical approach of recent work by Chris Goto-Jones, which argues that certain kinds of computer gaming can become martial arts practices [Goto-Jones 2016] – are all valuable, and not least because they foreground the limitations of any hasty attempt to define martial arts. Moreover, not only do such approaches all problematize the impulse to rush to definitions, they also do so without sidestepping or avoiding the issue of how to specify and handle martial arts as an object of academic attention.
For my purposes, a key value in this work is the demonstration of the primacy and productivity of theory before definition. Such frameworks clearly exceed the frames and orientations of hoplology, for instance, which is mired in inessential preconceptions and doxa. As such, it is in full support of Wetzler’s efforts and in broad agreement with the orientations of such scholars that my present contribution to this debate about definition and theory aspires be read. This is so even though my own contribution does involve criticisms of Wetzler’s proposed theoretical paradigm for martial arts studies. But these are less like fundamental disagreements and more like questions for further consideration. Importantly, any criticisms I have will neither be ‘anti-theory’ nor ‘pro-definition’. Rather, in what follows, I seek less to disagree with Wetzler and more to point out some potential pitfalls and problems attendant to any avoidance of theory or insistence on definition in martial arts studies.

DEFINING PROBLEMS: RELATIONALITY BEFORE DEFINITION

A well-known part of the problem that arises when trying to define the objects or foci of martial arts studies is semiotic openness, slippage, instability and the incessant ongoing changes that take place across cultures, communities, societies, technologies and practices. Wetzler tackles this by proposing a framework for structuring academic inquiry and proffering a set of theoretical terms for grasping what he represents as ‘systemic’ but what I would prefer to call discursive change. I prefer to approach the world in terms of the language of texts and discourses rather than elements, functions, systems and polysystems, and so on, for ontological reasons that boil down to the primacy (proposed by poststructuralist theory) of relationality, rather than the notion of ‘system’ or even ‘systematicity’. As Derrida writes of ‘system’:

If by ‘system’ is meant – and this is the minimal sense of the word – a sort of consequence, coherence and insistence – a certain gathering together – there is an injunction to the system that I have never renounced, and never wished to. This can be seen in the recurrence of motifs and references from one text to another in my work, despite the differing occasions and pretexts... ‘System’, however, in a philosophical sense that is more rigorous and perhaps more modern, can also be taken to mean a totalization in the configuration, a continuity of all statements, a form of coherence (not coherence itself), involving the syllogicity of logic, a certain syn which is no longer simply that of gathering in general, but rather of the assemblage of ontological propositions. In that case deconstruction, without being anti-systematic, is on the contrary, and nevertheless, not only a search for, but itself a consequence of, the fact that the system is impossible; it often consists, regularly or recurrently, in making appear – in each alleged system, in each self-interpretation of and by a system – a force of dislocation, a limit in the totalization, a limit in the movement of syllogistic synthesis. Deconstruction is not a method for discovering that which resists the system; it consists, rather, in remarking, in the reading and interpretation of texts, that what has made it possible for philosophers to effect a system is nothing other than a certain dysfunction or ‘disadjustment’, a certain incapacity to close the system. Wherever I have followed this investigative approach, it has been a question of showing that the system does not work, and that this dysfunction not only interrupts the system but itself accounts for the desire for system, which draws its élan from this very disadjointment, or disjunction. On each occasion, the disjunction has a privileged site in that which one calls a philosophical corpus. Basically, deconstruction as I see it is an attempt to train the beam of analysis onto this disjunctive link.

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[Derrida 2003: 3-4]

As an alternative to what Derrida would call ‘metaphysical’ thinking about systems, the poststructuralist notions of text and discourse provide alternative concepts, metaphors, vocabularies and paradigms [Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouwitt 1992; Bowman 2007]. Key here are the notions of relation or relationality, on the one hand, and force, on the other. It seems worthwhile to discuss these notions further, as they are important dimensions, but they are currently un- or at least underdeveloped in Wetzler’s proposed framework for analysis in martial arts studies.

To start with the matter of relation first. Can an identity ever be said to be anything other than relational? As Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argued in the 1980s, ‘identities are purely relational’ so ‘there is no identity which can be fully constituted’ [Laclau and Mouffe 1985: 111; Bowman 2007: 18-19]. Already this kind of perspective, with origins in Saussurean linguistics and semiotics, problematizes the notion of ‘elements’ within a ‘system’, and replaces the notion of ‘entities with identities’ with a much more fluid sense of their ongoing incompleteness and irreducible contextuality.
Almost two decades after his influential 1985 monograph with Chantal Mouffe, in a dispute with Slavoj Žižek about politics and society, Laclau was still making the same arguments. In response to Žižek’s now infamous (and what Laclau always regarded as ill-thought-through) adoption of a kind of crude Marxist and quick Leninist position on the question of how to make radical political change in the world, Laclau argued that:

We gain very little, once identities are conceived as complexly articulated collective wills, by referring to them through simple designations such as classes, ethnic groups and so on, which are at best names for transient points of stabilization. The really important task is to understand the logics of their constitution and dissolution, as well as the formal determinations of the spaces in which they interrelate. [Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000: 53]

Laclau pitched his argument about how to approach political entities, identities and processes in terms of the vocabulary and concerns of a poststructuralist and post-Marxist political theory, whose essential proposition runs like this: because everything – and by ‘everything’ what is meant is everything – can be seen to be contingent and hence conventional, then therefore everything is to be regarded as irreducibly political [Arditi and Valentine 1999; Marchart 2007].

There is much to be said about this argument [Bowman 2007; Bowman 2008]. I return to it here not just as a rejoinder to Wetzler’s advocation of an irreducibly metaphorical use of ‘system’ (even though he seems to present ‘system’ as if it is not metaphor but reality), but also because I believe it is vital (and vitalising) to try, as Laclau urges us, ‘to understand the logics of [the] constitution and dissolution [of entities and identities], as well as the formal [or informal] determinations of the spaces in which they interrelate’.

This is important not least because, if ‘identities’ can also be understood as ‘complexly articulated collective wills’, then to understand either ‘wills’ or ‘identities’ as arising ‘systematically’ could have a problematic impact on the way we understand such important matters as (for example) political struggle. Stated bluntly, to rely on polysystem theory might cause us to follow a line of thinking in which political struggles and political identities come to be conceived as somehow merely being the systematic unfolding of some kind of predetermined plan.

This is why the notion of force is also key. Entities and identities are not just matters of signification, or of systems, but also of force. Force is the other side of signification, a key part of the process of establishing meaning [Protevi 2001]. This is why Laclau believes we should not be content with the moment of referring to entities and identities ‘through simple designations such as classes, ethnic groups and so on’: because such terms ‘are at best names for transient points of stabilization’. In other words, signification should not be studied in isolation from considerations of force.13

So, Laclau’s broadly deconstructive perspective challenges us to think about the making or establishment of any identity in a way that exceeds the lexical illusion of systematicity and emphasizes instead the complexity of contingent processes of articulation [Laclau 1994]. This differentiated perspective – which replaces ideas of structures and systems with those of iteration, reiteration, dissemination, dislocation, and so on – forms the main part of my critique of the use of polysystem theory in martial arts studies, or at least my critique of Wetzler’s advocation of it. However, to reiterate, making such a critique is not my primary aim here. Wetzler is a sparring partner, not an opponent. Rather, the matters that I ultimately want to challenge are somewhat different.

**Changing Discourses**

Specifically, I want to point out that Laclau’s approach to discourse analysis involves rather different investments than thinking about the academic definition of any activity, entity or identity. Indeed, although Laclau’s argument here includes the injunction that academics be rigorous and forensic in their conceptual grasp of their key terms, it is not limited to this injunction. Moreover, the position Laclau advocates does not merely involve the endless or supposedly ‘useless’ problematizing of terms (something deconstruction was once regularly accused of), whether to try to reconfigure and refine the definitions and

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13 Laclau’s use of the word ‘stabilization’ here is significant. It seems to owe something to the fact that Derrida once emphasised the importance of the ideas of stabilisation and destabilisation in a published conversation with Laclau in the 1990s [Mouffe 1996]. In his response to Laclau and others, Derrida said: ‘All that a deconstructive point of view tries to show is that since convention, institutions and consensus are stabilizations (sometimes stabilizations of great duration, sometimes micro-stabilizations), this means that they are stabilizations of something essentially unstable and chaotic. Thus it becomes necessary to stabilize precisely because stability is not natural; it is because there is instability that stabilization becomes necessary; it is because there is chaos that there is a need for stability. Now, this chaos and instability, which is fundamental, founding and irreducible, is at once naturally the worst against which we struggle with laws, rules, conventions, politics and provisional hegemony, but at the same time it is a chance, a chance to change, to destabilize. If there were continual stability, there would be no need for politics, and it is to the extent that stability is not natural, essential or substantial, that politics exists and ethics is possible. Chaos is at once a risk and a chance, and it is here that the possible and the impossible cross each other’ [Derrida 1996: 84].
distinctions that academics use in their work or those that practitioners use in their practice, or to show them to be impossible.

Rather, for Laclau – and indeed for the overwhelming majority of works of cultural theory developed through and since the 1980s – the fundamental point to be taken on board is not that we should work out how best to define something; it is rather that we must face up to the fact that ‘things’ are neither simply nor necessarily ‘things’: that all identities are at root contingent discursive achievements, or establishments, or, to use Laclau’s words, ‘transient points of stabilization’.  

Moreover, our shared use of a term like ‘martial arts’ or ‘system’ stabilizes our discourse. But it can also impose and project a fixed view – our present view – of all sorts of dimensions of culture and society, both backwards in time and outwards across different linguistic, geographical, cultural, religious and social contexts. So, the establishment of a shared and stable term has its benefits (predication and communication being among them). But it inevitably also comes at a cost – which we might render in a number of ways, including projection, simplification, hypostatisation, generalisation, transformation, or even cultural, conceptual or linguistic imperialism. Wetzler calls this ‘lexical illusion’. As in: we say ‘martial arts’ in English here today, but did or do they say or mean anything like it there (elsewhere) or then (elsewhen), without difference or remainder? Or are we misrecognising the things ‘out there’ (and ‘then’) that we talk about in our terms, here and now? As an example, consider how frequently it is currently said that ‘mindfulness meditation’ has been practiced within Eastern movement traditions and martial arts for millennia. (Before we heard this said so much about mindfulness, we heard it said about qigong [Palmer 2007]. And before that, it was said about yoga [Spatz 2015]. And so on.) Such propositions are all based on acts of fantasy and projection, back into a fantasized notion of ‘long, long ago’ [Fabian 1983].

Such acts of projection are clearly faulty. They also have any number of potential ideological dimensions and material and discursive effects. Consider a second example. On a tour I was given during a visit to the new Mecca of Taekwondo in South Korea, the Taekwondowon, our guide pointed to a picture of an old statue and said, ‘look, this is a statue of someone doing taekwondo: that posture comes from taekwondo’. The fact that taekwondo was only invented in the 1950s [Gillis 2008; Moenig 2015] and that its patterns (or kata) were only subsequently changed from the Japanese martial arts from which it was derived, seems to problematize the idea that an ancient statue may depict a taekwondo posture. The possibility that the taekwondo posture might have been invented deliberately to depict the ancient statue in order to strengthen the ideological claim that taekwondo is ancient was not really encouraged or entertained at all.  

Entities and identities are discursive achievements, produced through efforts and institutions, arguments, demonstrations, articulations, demonstrations, and indeed processes and acts of institution (where ‘institution’ is to be read as both noun and verb). What something ‘is’ emerges through forceful – often enforced – processes of narration and representation. ‘Mindfulness’ is an entirely modern construct. ‘Taekwondo’ is no older than the 1950s. The resignification of such institutions as ancient is an effect of the contingent but motivated modes and manners of their discursive articulation and emergence.

The Definition of Martial Arts Studies
Paul Bowman

Theoretically, I have revisited some broadly poststructuralist points (all too) briefly here because I believe that remembering and taking into consideration these lessons in our various ongoing research projects into martial arts – and the international development of the field of martial arts studies – will allow us to move on, and specifically to move on from a certain kind of fixation on definition. (Neither Wetzler nor Judkins suffers from this fixation, however, and my comments about the problems with definition are not directed towards either of these scholars.) I am drawing attention back to poststructuralist theory because, rather than orientating and habituating us into an academic life of taxonomical labours centred on defining and demarcating, such approaches proceed from the proposition that identities are always irreducibly relational and incomplete, and hence contingent, open and ongoing. Identities are constituted by and within discourses, and they always emerge as points in clusters of moving constellations of related, contiguous, cognate, differentiated, associated, contrasting and oppositional terms, in all kinds of possible relations – linguistic, semiotic, lived, institutional, academic, legislative, and so on.

Accordingly, given that ‘martial arts studies’ takes its very name and focus (martial arts) from what Wetzler deems to be the dubious and problematic realm of ‘object language’, there can therefore be no ‘metalanguage’ that is not contaminated by this fact. As Laclau and Mouffe argued in the 1980s, because there is never anything like a fixed centre, stable system, or simple outside, there can be no metalanguage [1985].

After my visit, I blogged about this here: https://goo.gl/FXVF6T. I also went on to discuss it in ‘Making Martial Arts History Matter’ [Bowman 2016] and in Mythologies of Martial Arts [Bowman 2017].
One point to be emphasised again is the role not just of lexical illusion but also of force within the construction of entities and identities. Whether using what Wetzler terms object language or metalanguage, we always think through and with inherited terms, and hence conceptual differentials and differentiations – inheritances that we are more or less forced to work with and, to some degree, within [Derrida 1976 (1967)].

Now, although I am critical of the scramble for definitions, nonetheless, it strikes me that the growing prominence of the matter of definition does attest to a lot that is promising in the current stage of development of martial arts studies. It is evidently a reflection of the drive to found and ground and legitimate and build the field rigorously, and according to proper academic protocols. To this extent, despite the scientistic features of some forays into this new terrain, our current moment is of great significance. So we may be optimistic. However, in the current rush to try to define and establish ‘things’, there is always the risk that we labour under misapprehensions. My concern is that some of the misapprehensions we see arising today may come to constitute an obstacle or impediment in the development of the field tomorrow, pushing it towards becoming something dominated by what Žižek once termed ‘naïve empiricism’ or ‘naïve cognitivism’ [Žižek 2001]. Decades before Žižek, Derrida too had worried about something similar, that he called ‘incompetent’ and even ‘irresponsible’ empiricism [Derrida 2001 (1967)].

What such thinkers mean in making claims like ‘empiricism is naïve, incompetent, or even irresponsible’ – is that there is a kind of untenable idealism and simplicity at the heart of approaches that begin from the premise that to make sense of the world we should simply look around us, focus on things, classify them and count them; and that through a process of testing and disputing around categories, we might eventually get at the truth of reality and get it right.

Their more or less opposite opinion is that, on the contrary, what we all always need is an explicit theory. I say explicit theory, and not just ‘theory’, because, arguably, everyone always has a theory, even if they don’t consciously know what it is. By ‘explicit theory’, here, I am referring to anything from an overarching theory of ontology to an actively thought-through image or sense (to use Laclau’s terms again) of how discourses and identities are constituted, and the logics of their processes of establishment, stabilization, interaction, transformation, and dissolution.

It is in this sense that I am arguing for more theory, an injection of theory, and the permeation of theory, before definition. But I am not proposing a return to the intellectual battles of the 1980s and 1990s, in which the introduction of Continental Philosophy into the humanities led to a state of trench warfare between those who ‘did theory’ and those who ‘did empirical work’ [Hall 2002]. Furthermore, although I am arguing explicitly ‘for theory’, I want to be clear that I am certainly not therefore arguing ‘against empirical work’, or ‘history’, or ‘reality’, or anything like that. Moreover, I would follow neither Žižek nor Derrida nor anyone else who might ever position capital-T-Theory or capital-P-Philosophy as the necessary start or end point of ‘proper’ academic work on martial arts.

Rather, I want to insist that it will be vital and vitalising for work in martial arts studies to embrace certain aspects of cultural theory, especially when – as in the current moment – people seem to feel an apparent ‘need to do something properly academic’, a need that so many people seem to believe is to be interpreted as defining our object. For, faced with the (apparent) challenge of ‘needing’ to define, as we have already seen, with even the tiniest bit of theory, we are able to pause to reflect on the fact that before definition there is relation. Words and meanings and practices and values travel and twist and turn and change and move in relation to larger and other forces and processes. These may or may not be systemic, systemic (Wetzler, Even-Zohar), conjunctural (Hall), discursive processes of articulation (Laclau), or ‘dislocated’, ‘out of joint’ or even ‘hauntological’ [Derrida 1994 (1993)], and so on.

All such theories would concur that martial arts will always be relationally determined. Laclau and Mouffe theorised this in terms of ‘discourse’ and ‘articulation’ [Laclau and Mouffe 1985]. Stuart Hall insisted on the need to establish a sense of what he called the ‘conjuncture’. According to Hall, any analysis requires what he called ‘conjunctural analysis’ – that is, an analysis informed by an acute

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16 Nonetheless, as Saussure taught us, when we are thinking about our linguistically instituted categories, first and foremost we must remember that there are only ‘differences without positive terms’. Moreover, as Derrida went on to demonstrate, there are no easily specifiable or simply stable referents ‘behind’ these differences. The flipside of significations is force [Protevi 2001]. There is no stability in significations without force. Furthermore, as Gayatri Spivak added: the institution of any difference in the production of an identity in discourse, the drawing of any demarcation that distinguishes and hierarchizes entities and identities, is essentially and irredoubtably a political act, with more or less overtly political consequences [Spivak 1990; Spivak 1993]. Such poststructuralists sometimes even formulate dimensions of this in terms of violence [Bowman 2010]. This means that, if we were to follow this logic through to one of its conclusions, it would become possible to argue that more or less any identity is in some sense ‘martial’ (it has either been fought for or fought against), as well as stabilized but conflictual. Within martial arts studies, quite what these acts and their consequences may become remains to be seen. But hopefully such reflections as this may cause some hesitation, and possibly reorientation, before the battles continue over this or that ‘correct definition’.

17 I use the word ‘sense’ here, because I think that we can only ever get an image, sense or feeling for ontology anyway. I hesitate to say ‘structure of feeling’. This is because, as Derrida himself made clear, the very idea, term, notion or (possible) concept of ‘structure’ is rarely ever much more than a metaphor anyway.
awareness of the historical moment and context, and the forces and relations that produced it. Without this, we cannot really know or understand anything about any entity or identity, whether martial arts, class, ethnicity, or any other kind of identity or entity in process.

Of course, there may be many ways to characterise and analyse a conjuncture. As deconstruction sought to teach us, no context is ever fully closed [Derrida 1988]; so we might never know for sure whether we know for sure everything salient about a context or a conjuncture. Maybe we can’t really know for sure that we know anything at all for sure. Yet what we can do is attempt 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. This may not be too far from Wetzler’s proposed use of Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory – or it may be a world away.

**ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES**

In this article, I have proposed the necessity of theory for martial arts studies, and entered into a critique of one proposed branch of theory. I have done so because part of what needs to be theorised is the orientation of the discipline’s discourse, and I would prefer to steer that discourse as far away from anything approaching scientism as possible. My chief criticism of the tropes of ‘systems’ would be that this approach risks pointing the discourse of martial arts studies back towards a scientistic orientation.

Given this criticism, an obvious question is what, therefore, my proposed alternative approach would be. My answer relates to my ongoing arguments from poststructuralism about the need for attention not just to signification (‘dimensions of meaning’) but also to force, as in the forms of different relations to and entanglements within different kinds of social, cultural, economic and other forms of power.

In Britain, Raymond Williams long ago proposed that it is possible to formulate and look at entities, practices and identities and to assess them in terms of whether they are dominant, residual or emergent, and to ask whether they may be acting in ways that are either in line with a dominant or hegemonic ideology, or whether they may be alternative or even oppositional to it [Williams 1977]. This may seem like quite an old and crude paradigm. This kind of approach has certainly been hugely refined and developed over the decades [Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 1994; Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000]. But I draw attention to this seminal paradigm here because, even as simple as it is, it offers a viable and flexible framework through which many different kinds of studies of martial arts and society might be initiated. All of these are happily liberated from the stifling imperative to define and demarcate without any real sense or sensitivity to the complexities of matters of time, place and the interplay of forces that both produce and transform meanings, practices and contexts.

To illustrate the value of this framework, we might quickly consider one final example: the deliciously marginal or problematic case of taijiquan. Using Williams’ approach, we will be able to reconfigure discourse and debate about taijiquan, away from a sclerotic fixation on the question of whether it can even be ‘defined’ as a martial art or a combat sport, or self-defence, or a form of what we now insist on calling ‘mindfulness meditation’, etc., and into an understanding of what ‘taijiquan’ has been and has done and might be and might do in a given conjuncture.18

As Douglas Wile has argued, taijiquan emerged in a discursive foment in which China was threatened ideologically, economically and politically [Wile 1996]. Its 19th century proponents elaborated its philosophy along obscurely yet immanently nationalist lines, so that taijiquan came to stand in stark opposition to any and all things Western or European [see also Lorge 2016]. In this process, residual Taoist ideas and principles were mixed into a growing alternative worldview that was oppositional to everything supposedly non-Chinese. This is also precisely why Maoism tolerated taijiquan, of course, and why it ‘survived’ the Cultural Revolution: it amounted in its elaboration to a collective, combined, non-Western, non-competitive, non-individualistic calisthenics avowedly rooted in a non-religious worldview. But this was ‘survival’ via a formalisation that amounted therefore to a mutation on a genetic level. So, in a sense, post-Mao, the term taijiquan essentially had a transformed meaning referring to a transformed practice [Frank 2006].

In its journey to the West, as we know, in the Western imaginary, taijiquan was ostensibly deracinated from any nationalist inflection or valence, and became articulated to (connected with) a range of open-ended discursive configurations or conjunctures: from the counterculture to new age ideology and onwards into therapeutic and even medical culture [Frank 2006]. In all this, it becomes differently articulated or constructed at different times and places, often existing with utterly contradictory and heterogeneous (non-systemic, non-systematic) partial, immanent or potential meanings at the same time. Furthermore, any of those involved in taijiquan in any of its different

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18 Note again the way that we now ‘see’ mindfulness everywhere, from meditation in modern America to martial arts in ancient China, even though even a few years ago we wouldn’t have seen anything as mindfulness, anywhere, because no one other than a few specialists were using the term.
times and places will believe themselves to be either or both learning a
martial art, either or both for sport or for self-defence, and/or involved
in healthful calisthenics, and/or preserving or changing a culture, and/
or involved in a religious or mystical practice. And so on.

We can multiply our examples, and look at the ways in which certain
words and moves have drifted and disseminated and flipped and
mutated all over the place, around the world, through time and space,
and examine the processes of their emergence and development within
each new context; the ways they become mixed up and mixed in with
existing concerns and outlooks, and reciprocally modify and move
existing situations. This may or may not be systemic or systematic.

I have mainly referred to the theoretical models of people like
Laclau, Derrida, Hall and Williams here. And I have done so mainly
because I believe that there is – to a greater or lesser extent – a kind
of theoretical ontology that connects their outlooks, despite their
many other differences. This outlook is essentially poststructuralist or
postfoundationalist [Sedgwick 2003].19 And as much as many people
may still have a distaste for so-called ‘high theory’, I maintain that
martial arts studies will only benefit from a sustained engagement with
what there is to be learned from high theory – as much as there is to be
learned from engaging with the most intimate ethnography, the most
detailed historiography, the most multi-layered sociology, and so on.

Some of the first lessons relevant to us here would relate to an
awareness of the slippage and vicissitudes of signification that require
us to pay very close attention to the shifting and drifting apparent
referents of our focus, their different meanings in different times
and places, the genetic mutations and quantum leaps that occur in
‘cultural translation’ from one time to another, one place to another,
one language to another, even one utterance or instance to the next,
and the rather frustrating fact that, despite our eternal desire to see
unity and simplicity, cultures and practices are always ‘in bits’, always
in process, incompletion, dispute and contestation. There is no unity
to the lexical illusion that guides us, whether it be martial arts, combat
sports, self-defence, culture or society – apart from that which seems to
be conferred by the use of such terms themselves.

Discussing such entities often has much in common with discussing
unicorns, fairies, justice, Father Christmas, or how many angels might
fit on the head of a pin or through the eye of a needle. Discussing such
things can create a ‘reality effect’ that can lead people to believe these are
actually existing real and unitary things [Bowman 2012]. All meanings,
all practices, are stabilizations. The questions to be asked then surely
include explorations of why certain stabilizations take place at certain
times in certain ways, why some people often become so fixated on
fixation or stuck on stabilization, and what it is that both stabilization
and destabilization are ‘doing’ in any given context at any given time.

19 Interestingly, Sedgwick [2003] also sees an affinity between poststructuralist
and Buddhist ontologies, and she ponders whether she is drawn to the former because of
her interest in the latter or to the latter because of her agreement with the former.
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This article considers the gendered significance of women’s participation in combat sports, with a specific focus on the performances of femininity by female combat athletes. Against lines of argument which posit that women’s enactment of femininity is the result of restrictive, coercive, and ultimately conservative cultural pressures, respondents in two separate studies suggested that a purposeful, selective enactment of femininity, when understood in combination with their fighting ability, signified an important challenge to orthodox understandings of gender. As such, our data suggests that manoeuvring within normative cultural parameters of gender may, ironically, help to stimulate change in its structure of meanings, given that the feminine performances of these fighters ultimately posed symbolic challenges to cultural constructions of (‘normal’) women as inevitably weaker and inferior athletes compared to men. We therefore advocate that scholars with an interest in exploring the subversion of gender remain mindful of the possibility that such subversive impulses might occur via the appropriation, and re-signification, of some of its more orthodox norms.
INTRODUCTION

WOMEN, COMBAT SPORTS, AND GENDER

Much has been written over the past two decades about the experiences of women participating in martial arts and combat sports (MACS) of various kinds [e.g., Guthrie 1995; Halbert 1997; McCaughey 1997; Mennesson 2000; Hollander 2004; Sisjord and Kristiansen 2009; Lökman 2010; Paradis 2012; Mierzwiniski et al. 2014; Allen-Collinson and Owton 2015; Jennings 2015; Kavoura et al. 2015; Channon and Matthews 2015a; see also Follo 2012 and Channon and Jennings 2014 for wider reviews of this literature]. A significant amount of the scholarly work concerning these female martial artists, boxers, wrestlers, and self-defence practitioners has echoed themes prominent within the broader field of research on women’s sport, identifying in particular the ‘empowering’ experiences of female fighters and the broader, gender-subversive potential involved with these phenomena [e.g., Hargreaves 1997; McCaughey 1998; De Welde 2003; Noel 2009; McNaughton 2012; Velija et al. 2013].

This is unsurprising given the gendered character of combat-oriented activities in general and MACS in particular. Commonly viewed as ‘quintessentially masculine’ [see Mennesson 2000 and Gammel 2012], such activities often serve as cultural sites through which masculinity is symbolically articulated as the male embodiment of strength, toughness, and physical power [Matthews 2016]. Thus, women’s successful entry into these symbolically ‘masculine’ spaces has the potential to pose particularly dramatic challenges to wider social discourses of male superiority, owing to the way in which female fighting ability and the combat-ready female body destabilise patriarchal gender norms and women’s concurrent symbolic subordination to men [Hargreaves 1997; McCaughey 1997; Gammel 2012; Channon and Matthews 2015b]. In this respect, much research into women in MACS strikes an optimistic tone, with scholars frequently advocating women’s participation as a potential source of individual empowerment and also wider, progressive social change.

However, analyses of these phenomena have also drawn attention to the problematic nature of women’s engagement in MACS. Firstly, objections to women’s embodiment of the ‘violence’ implied by MACS involvement, with respect to its links to masculine domination and the destructive character of gender oppression, has been noted by some scholars [e.g., McCaughey 1997; Lafferty and McKay 2004]. However, this political critique is itself often problematized by pro-MACS feminist scholars (by way of, for instance, McCaughey’s [1997] conception of ‘physical feminism’) and has had little impact on the broader research base in this area. Secondly, and far more widely noted, has been the tendency for men (or women themselves) to resist or counteract the gender-subversive potential of women’s MACS practice in numerous ways. Such resistance can come in the form of passive or overt opposition to participation [e.g., Lafferty & McKay 2004; Hollander 2009] but more commonly involves modes of practice and/or representation which reify, rather than challenge, hierarchical gender relations [Hargreaves 1997; Paradis 2012; Channon and Jennings 2013; Weaving 2014]. In this latter respect, the ways in which practitioners ‘do’ gender is of particular importance in mediating the potentially transformative consequences of women’s integration into an otherwise ostensibly ‘masculine’ cultural sphere.

The performance of femininity by women within MACS has thus been the subject of scholarly discussion. Often, female fighters’ embodiment of femininity is considered somewhat oppositional to, or even incompatible with, their development of fighting skills [Halbert 1997; McCaughey 1998; Guérandel and Mennesson 2007; Kavoura et al. 2015]; it can also be framed as symbolic of the limited extent to which MACS practices can challenge wider social formations of (hierarchal) gender difference [Mennesson 2000; Velija et al. 2013; Paradis 2014; Weaving 2014]. In this sense, the extant feminist literature on women in MACS, with its overarching commitment to exploring how female practitioners can challenge or subvert women’s subordination, has often tended to reaffirm what Jayne Caudwell describes as the general tendency among wider feminist sport sociology to read sportswomen’s femininity as ‘duped’ [Caudwell 2006: 155]. That is to say, performances of femininity tend to be construed as blocking the gender-subversive potential of sport and as evidence of women’s passive or coerced conformity with male-centred, heteronormative culture. Such reasoning often supersedes attempts at interrogating how femininities might also be purposefully, reflexively, and perhaps even subversively performed by women in sport; indeed, there has been comparatively little attention paid within MACS research to the ways in which femininity might be actively reinvented or performed in potentially transformative ways [see De Welde 2003].

It is this particular aspect of women’s engagement in MACS which our current article seeks to explore; namely, the constructions of femininity among female combat sport athletes, as well as their attendant meanings relative to the central thematic concern of gender subversion through MACS participation. Before turning to this task, it is necessary to provide a fuller explanation of how we are conceptualising ‘femininity’ in this article.
Adopting a critical social constructionist position, we argue that femininity is best viewed as a culturally specific, dynamic, and internally diverse construct. Rather than a fixed set of characteristics arising from and residing within individuals, femininity is discursively constituted and performatively manifested – i.e., it is something which people socially learn and actively ‘do’ relative to institutionalised structures of meaning [West and Zimmerman 1987]. Typically associated with female bodies and the lives of women, femininity is most readily intelligible when it is considered as oppositional to corresponding constructions of masculinity. However, following Mimi Schippers, we argue against the analytical reduction of femininity to a descriptive label applied to the ‘behaviours of girls and women’ [Schippers 2007: 89]. Moreover, as Maddie Breeze notes, viewing femininity as ‘anything that women happen to do’ [Breeze 2010: 129] reduces the utility of the term, both as a way of understanding gender as conceptually separate from sex and as a means of grasping the power dynamics often embedded within men’s and women’s gender practices.

In this sense, naming something as ‘feminine’ must involve an evaluation of the sociological relevance of the word. What, exactly, does ‘femininity’ (or for that matter ‘masculinity’) help us to understand about people’s lives, and to what ends do we use this word to describe them or their behaviour? Our answers to these questions take inspiration from Candace West and Don Zimmerman’s [1987] influential ‘doing gender’ approach, which posits that feminine gender performance serves to socially mark people as ‘women’. In this model, men and women are recognised as such owing to the convincing presentation of a correspondingly gendered self, which is evaluated according to prevailing cultural norms. In lieu of their biological sex being known by others, if a person performs femininity to an appropriate extent then that person will be socially recognised as a woman.1 In the context of continual gender assessment (or ‘accountability’), femininity thus becomes an important way of achieving socially acceptable womanhood. Exactly what type of woman a person is socially recognised as being will be mediated by the specifics of that person’s gender performance and the interaction of femininity with other identity categories (such as ethnicity, age, social class, nationality and sexuality, to name a few), but the resulting multiplicity of femininities shares an orientation towards substantiating a public identity of ‘woman’.

Meanwhile, critical theorists such as Raewyn Connell [1987] understand constructions of femininity – particularly when such constructions are embodied by women – as lending themselves to the subordination of women. This is most often the case when femininity is constructed as oppositional to masculinity in hierarchal, complementary relationships [Connell 1987; Weedon 1999; Bourdieu 2001]. Typically, those things thought of as masculine (e.g., rationality, physical strength, etc.) are more culturally valued than those counterpoised qualities constructed as feminine (e.g., emotionality, physical weakness, etc.). Collectively, this value system makes ‘the relationship articulated through the quality content of femininity and masculinity’ the ‘central feature of gender hegemony’ [Schippers 2007: 94]. If ‘(real) men’ are socially recognised and valued for doing ‘powerful’ things – such as deliberately building their bodies’ strength or being decisive and influential leaders – and ‘(real) women are recognised and valued for doing the opposite – such as reducing the size of their bodies or remaining bound to the domestic sphere – then men’s superiority is rooted in the very acts which socially construct the sex categories of ‘men’ and ‘women’ to begin with. Thus, individuals’ performatively embodied gender constructs more than just social identities; it is also an integral component of the reproduction of sexual inequalities.

**Policing Feminine ‘Normality’ in Sport**

Such dynamics have particular relevance for participation in (combat) sports, long associated with both the embodiment and display of power and idealised notions of masculinity [Channon and Matthews 2015b; Mennesson 2000]. According to Judith Butler’s [1990] theory of the heterosexual matrix, female athletes practicing such sports, which most often require them to forgo socially normalised constructions of femininity, risk having their status as ‘real’ women (often conflated with, but not reducible to, being heterosexual) called into question [Tredway 2014]. This is particularly so for women of colour, given the

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1 To elaborate a little further, we recognise that men and/or people with male bodies can and do perform or embody ‘feminine’ behaviours and characteristics and that those things that are culturally considered to be feminine are certainly not the sole preserve of women or females. However, if ‘men’ are being socially recognised as such, it is because they continue to simultaneously deploy masculine signifiers to such an extent that their femininity is insufficient to mark them as ‘women’. Their status as men might be questioned – particularly given that male femininity is often considered indicative of homosexuality, traditionally viewed as anathema to ‘true’ masculinity [see for instance Kimmel 1994] – but they nevertheless continue to be socially categorised as men despite the mediating influence of an atypical gender performance. There is certainly more that could be said around the phenomenon of male femininity but, for lack of space, it is beyond the scope of this present article to do so.

2 At this point, we are cautious to emphasise the constructed nature of hierarchal gender binaries. While it is abundantly clear that gender does not objectively or statically exist in binary form, it is nevertheless often the case that it is socially constructed in this manner.
pervasive whiteness of Western femininity and its historical role in the colonialist project of ‘othering’ non-White people [see Pieper 2014], but so too has it been a particular problem for ‘out’ lesbian athletes, whose sexuality has historically been considered to confirm many of the more pernicious myths surrounding women’s athleticism as indicative of feminine deficiency. For such athletes, their non-conformity to orthodox visions of femininity may not preclude them from being socially recognised as women – often accomplished through a direct surveillance of their physical bodies [Jakubowska 2013; Pieper 2016] – but their discursive positioning as ‘aberrant’ or ‘deviant’ diminishes the symbolic value of their embodiment of apparently masculine qualities [Tredway 2014].

In this sense, because they are unable to count as ‘real’ or ‘normal’ women within this heterosexist (and ethnocentric) system of meaning, female athletes’ individual appropriation of power through sport avoids troubling the hierarchy maintained through normative gender performance [Griffin 2002]. In other words, what they are capable of is argued to not represent the capacities of other, ‘normal’ women; at best, they count as ‘honourary men’, and are thereby dismissed from troubling normative symbolic constructions of male superiority [Griffin 2002; Kavoura et al. 2015]. And thanks to the stigmatising, homophobic conflation of lesbianism with female masculinity often accompanying this process, as well as the historical marginalisation and denigration of homosexuals within sport,3 participating in ‘masculine’ sports can present a great deal of ‘gender trouble’ for women, regardless of their actual sexuality [Lindner 2012].

Those women who nevertheless do participate in culturally masculinised activities thus often find themselves pressured to maintain and display ‘enough’ femininity to preserve their social status as heterosexual women. Described as the ‘female apologetic’ [Felshin 1974], many female athletes attempt to ‘balance out’ the implied masculinity of athleticism with a correspondingly overt performance of femininity – which, historically speaking, is a well-evidenced phenomenon within the sociology of sport [see Hargreaves 1994; Heywood and Dworkin 2003]. On an individual level, this can prevent many women from reaching their athletic potential by limiting their body’s development of size or skill [see Dworkin 2001; Sisjord and Kristiansen 2009], while on a broader societal level it often serves to maintain assumptions about the inherent superiority of the male body and the status of sport as a male preserve [Krane 2001; Meân and Kassing 2008]. In addition, it also shores up the notion that women ought to be sexually desirable to men if they are to be socially valued [Engh 2011], a phenomenon LA Jennings [2015] recently referred to in her historical study of women’s combat sports as ‘the centrefold imperative’.

‘Alternative’ Sporting Femininities

As such, overt performances of femininity by sportswomen have tended to be broadly positioned as problematic, signifying either direct collusion with male power or an unwillingness to overtly challenge it – something seemingly possible only through women’s effectively ‘unapologetic’ engagement in behaviours thought to constitute masculinity. As noted above, this logic has tended to feature in many studies of women in MACS. However, while such theorising has been commonplace in the sociology of sport, it is also important to allow for the possibility that performances of femininity might, in some contexts, be understood or experienced as a source of resistance against the male-centred gender order rather than always imagined as implicitly supportive of it.

In this respect, the notion of ‘alternative femininities’ [Schippers 2002; Carlson 2010; Finley 2010] provides conceptual space for describing practices which are intelligible as feminine (i.e., they are socially understood as somehow signifying ‘woman’) but work against the maintenance of male hegemony. This is not to say that any recognisable expression of femininity which departs from orthodox or traditional feminine styles ought to be read as ‘alternative’, nor that women’s apparent embodiment of masculinity should in and of itself be considered ‘alternative’. Rather, it is those gendered practices which overtly signify both ‘woman’ and ‘power’ which – in our view – constitute a genuinely alternative form of femininity.

Research on women’s sport has begun to identify such alternative modes of femininity practiced by a range of female athletes [e.g., Thing 2001; Finley 2010; Hardy 2015], but perhaps the most recent and prolific site for discussion of this phenomenon has been within the scholarly work on women’s roller derby. This largely female, full-contact, combative team sport has provided scholars with ample opportunities to explore the construction of alternative femininities due to its woman-centred and woman-led ethos, its overtly feminised (and often sexualised) aesthetic, and the masculine connotations of its physicality. Roller derby thus serves as an interesting example of the potential for women athletes to deliberately adopt overtly feminised styles coupled with visible displays of strength and self-authorisation

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3 Although this is beyond the scope of the present article, recent research has suggested a much less hostile environment for gay and lesbian athletes in many sport settings in Western Europe and North America [see Anderson 2011; Dashper 2012; Cunningham 2012]. However, this does not necessarily mean that heterosexual female athletes are now completely unaffected by the suspicion of lesbianism often attached to female masculinity.
– qualities often assumed as masculine but here reconciled with local constructions of femininity. The extant research on this sport has highlighted the need to examine the degree of agency women claim when embodying (often overtly sexualised) femininities [Beaver 2014], the ways in which feminine signifiers are re-claimed to denote power rather than to balance out the power indicated by masculinity [Carlson 2010], and exactly what can be described as alternative femininity [Breeze 2010; Finley 2010] relative to the concerns about sexual signification, power, and conceptual integrity outlined above.

Similar to these scholars, we found instances in our own research into women’s MACS practice wherein women overtly and consciously performed femininity in specific ways, ways which were experienced as both indicative of womanhood and as a means of claiming power, and both for themselves and sometimes on behalf of other women, as well. In the sections that follow, we discuss how women involved in competitive martial arts articulated their understanding of femininity in these ways. Before explaining these findings, though, we offer a brief account of our research methodology.

**METHOD**

The data upon which this research is based were taken from two separate qualitative studies which followed similar methods and explored similar themes. The data from the first author’s study, which was part of a larger PhD project, are derived from semi-structured interviews with 13 women in the English East Midlands. These participants had at least three years of experience in a variety of different MACS, including kickboxing, muay thai, karate, taekwondo, and mixed martial arts (MMA), amongst others. These interviews took place between 2009 and 2011, lasting approximately one hour [see Channon 2012 for more details]. The data from the second author’s study were part of a Master’s thesis, which involved semi-structured interviews with 14 women who were professional muay thai fighters and based across the UK, of which five had retired from fighting in the past three years [see Phipps 2013]. All of these participants were classed as professionals, as they had received a purse from fight promoters; furthermore, two of the participants had achieved English titles, two had achieved British titles, and ten had achieved World titles as their highest competitive achievements to date. These interviews took place in mid-2013, lasting between 30 and 45 minutes.

In both studies, the researchers’ knowledge of and participation within MACS, along with information from contacts in their respective local gyms/clubs and the use of social networking websites, helped to source participants for the study, while further recruitment was made possible through the use of chain-referral sampling. While the interviewees in the first study were generally participating at lower competitive levels than those in the second study, this was the only notable variation in the characteristics of either sample with respect to their patterns of participation. Across the studies, participants were aged between 19–38 years old (mean ages of 25 and 29, respectively), all but one self-identified as heterosexual (with one lesbian participant), and most self-identified as White (with British Asian women comprising three participants in the first study and one participant in the second study). Across the combined sample, only two were not British nationals (one being Norwegian, the other Australian), although these participants had both been living, working, and training/competing in England for at least five years prior to interview.4

Similar themes were explored in both studies, including initial involvement in their respective disciplines, motivations for on-going participation, questioning the ‘masculine’ image of MACS, and women’s perspectives on expressing/negotiating femininity within their training and competition settings. Similar findings arose from both studies, which formed the basis of the collaboration represented by this article. After discussing phenomena surrounding martial artists’ expressions and articulations of femininity during a conference at which both authors were present, a joint analysis was later conducted whereby the authors shared datasets with each other, separately coding each other’s work using a deductive coding strategy built upon a synthesis of both authors’ separate (but broadly similar) earlier conclusions. Since this analytical framework had arisen from both datasets prior to the collaboration, the deductive coding approach enabled ‘working propositions’ to be jointly validated by ‘returning to the data’ [Jones et al. 2013: 92]. With both authors content that the foundations of each other’s conclusions were empirically sound and the datasets were suitably comparable, this article was written to represent the shared findings that emerged from these two separate studies.

**FINDINGS**

The data discussed in the following sections reveal the ways in which several women involved in competitive combat sports think about, construct, and perform femininity. Our findings reveal a problematisation of the assumed incompatibility of femininity and fighting, in spite of the normalised discursive positioning of combative activities as typically masculine; they suggest that women, as opposed to being/feeling socially compelled to do so, are active agents in choosing

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4 Readers should note that all interviewees are referred to by pseudonyms for the sake of anonymity throughout this article.
to embody, identify with, and enjoy being feminine. They also hint at the potential for such women’s performances of femininity to destabilise normative sexual hierarchies rather than to uncritically reproduce them.

Being a Fighter and Being Feminine

Many participants in our studies noted that the martial arts they participated in were considered by others to be ‘masculine’. This was particularly the case for the women who practiced full-contact kickboxing, muay thai, and MMA – so-called ‘hard’ martial arts jointly characterised by a comparatively higher risk of injury and an inclination towards competitive fighting rather than self-defence or any other training goals [see Mierzwinski and Phipps 2015]. This is perhaps unsurprising given that, among all MACS, these types of disciplines are highly ‘sportised’ and are considered to most closely approximate ‘real’ fighting, two things popularly imagined as the preserve of men [Matthews 2016]. When asked about what they thought of the ‘masculine’ image of these combat sports, some agreed that this label was fitting in certain respects and were happy to lay claim to having a ‘masculine side’ themselves. However, most were openly critical of such gendering, arguing that it implied that women did not belong in combat sports or were somehow masculinised or otherwise positioned as ‘abnormal’ for taking part. The following quotes illustrate these positions:

Within my group of friends, I am kind of like the tomboy one, always have been ... I have got my femininities about me as well, I like to go out and I like to dress up, but when it comes to training, I don’t mind being perceived as boyish when it comes to that. (Suzie)

I guess people might think that about me [being masculine] but I wouldn’t say so, because I feel like I’m girly and I just do martial arts ... There’s a lot of girls fighting [in my club], it just makes it less manly I think. Like, girls are doing it, too, so how can you still call it that? (Sara)

Sometimes you do get those comments – ‘Isn’t that a bit manly?’ – that kind of thing. I just find it’s easier to not bother talking about it, otherwise I’ll get angry at those people. (Kate)

These positions typified the range of responses given by the women in our studies, and while choosing to tackle the question of implied masculinity in different ways, they were not necessarily at odds with each other in that they all criticised the notion that women in combat sports were automatically masculinised by their participation. Indeed, all of those who claimed to have a ‘masculine side’ or to be a ‘tomboy’ also told of their corresponding ‘feminine side’, such that their involvement in an apparently masculine sport had not made them, in Suzie’s words, ‘abnormal, or butch, or anything like that’.

Thus, the implication of female masculinity was framed by our participants in ways which suggested that their self-perceived femininity was not correspondingly sacrificed or diminished by their engagement in competitive fighting. This contrasts somewhat with findings from other studies [see Mennesson 2000; Sisjord and Kristiansen 2009; Kavoura et al. 2015]. Nonetheless, that women enjoyed the sensations and significance of these so-called masculine fighting sports, and the changes they had wrought on their bodies, was clearly evidenced by many of our participants:

I’m more confident. I’m bigger, like, more muscly, and it’s not like I’m a bodybuilder, but it’s enough that I know I’m stronger, and I’m proud of that, definitely. (Jenny)

I am a bit crazy when it comes to fighting, it’s true ... I don’t know anything that’s as close to how much I love this, like, I just love it! I love being able to do this. (Sylvia)

The thing I liked about [muay thai], it were kind of full-on, which fit my personality really, I mean on my first session they let me hit pads and things like that and I thought this is fantastic, it’s definitely me. (Chloe)

These things considered then, it was evident that these women largely did not believe that their enjoyment of what are often considered quintessentially masculine activities made them any less able to claim or present a feminine identity. For some, this involved a rejection of the ‘masculine’ label; for others, it revealed the fluidity of gender. Either way, it was clear that even involvement in high-level competitive fighting did not preclude women from being, feeling, or identifying as ‘feminine’. As Beth neatly summarised, ‘I wouldn’t say to anyone that they have to give up being feminine in order to be a good fighter’.

5 ‘Full-contact’ fighting allows opponents to strike without withholding any degree of force, and is a type of competitive engagement which can often end in injuries or knockouts. It chiefly contrasts with ‘semi-contact’ sparring, where opponents hit less forcefully in order to score points rather than incapacitate one-another.
Choosing and Enjoying Femininity

When asked more specifically about their own sense of femininity, the interviewees’ responses revealed that being feminine was something they actively chose, enjoyed, and were proud of. Thus, when questioned about any perceived need to ‘stay feminine’ or ‘show their femininity’ to others, the interviewees’ responses complicated any straightforward suggestion of gender behaviour as a social imposition. While some indicated that their feminine performance was oriented towards others in order to claim the public identity of being a woman, this was articulated around a more fundamental project of constituting their own self-identity as women fighters. Illustrative of the deeply social nature of gender construction, the relationship between others’ perceptions and the integrity of the self were highlighted [West and Zimmerman 1987]. Thus, while gender was performed in order to be witnessed, the purpose of this performance remained tied to the women’s agency, as they aimed to be recognised in the ways that they themselves desired. For Helen and Sylvia:

The more I get into [kickboxing], the more I know myself, understand and appreciate myself, have more self-confidence that isn’t just external. It’s about finding out who I really am. And I think that I am a woman, and even though I am in a man’s world here, doing this so-called man’s sport, I don’t wanna lose my femininity… I think it’s important [for others] to recognise that I am a woman doing this sport, not to just think that I want to be a man doing it. (Helen)

As much as I love fighting, I still love the sense of being a girl. I’m not embarrassed about fighting but I still feel like if I do everything like a guy then it’s a bit, like, not right… I don’t want [men] to think, ‘you’re a girl so I’m not going to let you join in’, I want them to be as inclusive as possible but still treat me as a girl. (Sylvia)

In this project of constituting themselves as feminine women or girls, not all aspects of what they described as ‘traditional’ femininity were embraced by our interviewees. Returning to the question of compatibility between being feminine and being a fighter, they were generally critical of apparently feminine behaviours which were directly at odds with the (particularly embodied) characteristics required of fighters. Here, Emily told of her distaste for the ‘bitchy environment’ she’d encountered in some clubs, Sara bemoaned image-focused women who were ‘worried about getting bruises’ and so made poor training partners, and all interviewees argued that the stereotypically genteel, passive vision of femininity, summarised by Beth as embodied by ‘Disney movie girls’, wasn’t compatible with ‘serious’ involvement in MACS.

However, the strongest criticism in this regard was reserved for women whose performances of femininity involved overtly sexualising themselves, particularly within mixed-sex training environments [see Channon and Jennings 2013]. Beth complained of how one woman she trained with ‘held back more than she normally would’ when training with a man she was attracted to, ‘because [she didn’t] want to be aggressive in front of a potential boyfriend’ [see Guérandel and Mennesson 2007]. Elsewhere, Rachel criticised those she described as ‘groupies’ training at her club for giving a poor impression of other women to their male training partners:

Always with the low-cut tops, cleavage falling out, too much makeup on, stuff like that. It’s a bit gross … There are the serious women too and you just have to separate them out from the groupies, who are just there to get laid basically … What does it say to the guys? It might make them think we’re all just there to get laid.

Therefore, it was apparent that the means and methods of defining and presenting feminine selves needed to be matched with the requirements of being capable and legitimate fighters. For many women, this was articulated around feminine behaviours outside their MACS practice; for instance, Holly worked as a beauty therapist, Helen practiced and taught pole dancing, Andrea had competed in a beauty pageant, and nearly all of our interviewees mentioned ‘dressing up and going out’ as something they regularly enjoyed doing. However, within their training environments, adopting specifically feminine styles and aesthetics allowed the women to signify their femininity directly in conjunction with their identity as fighters. Here, wearing their long hair in ‘fighter-style’ cornrows or braids, adopting feminised but fearsome nicknames as fighters, or indeed, wearing pink fighting gear, illustrated the more overt manifestations of femininity within the combat sports milieu:

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6 It should be noted, of course, that such questions were not phrased using the academic language deployed in this article, and the issue of one’s own femininity often arose through discussion of the (gendered) image of martial arts, or following participants’ accounts of the ‘girly’ behaviours of other women, etc. Indirectly approaching this topic seemed to be the best way to avoid the issue being discussed in overtly analytical and abstract ways, focusing instead on participants’ actual behaviours and impressions of self.

7 Contextually speaking, this implied wearing women’s fashions and makeup, and drinking and dancing in pubs and nightclubs – presumably, given the largely heterosexual character of our sample, in the company of men.
In this sense, several women in our studies embraced feminine aesthetics as signifiers of their identities as women, and their example provides an interesting perspective from which to consider criticism of the ‘feminisation’ of combat sports implied by, for instance, pink boxing gloves [see Kalman-Lamb 2012] or, perhaps more controversially, the use of skirts for competitive boxers’ uniforms [van Ingen and Kovacs 2012; Paradis 2014]. Yet, the notion that stylistic adornments, along with other performative and embodied manifestations of femininity, could actually work for the betterment of women’s position in MACS represents the most compelling finding of our studies.

### Femininity as Useful

Rather than viewing their femininity as simply an enjoyable or otherwise positive aspect of their social identity, several of the interviewees in both studies highlighted ways in which being feminine whilst also being a fighter could be a useful way to advance women’s interests both within and outside of their sports. Similar to Christy Halbert’s [1997] observation that women boxers strategically used femininity to maintain the commercial viability of their sport [see also Trimbur 2013], some women argued that retaining an appearance of femininity helped to encourage female membership of their clubs, ensuring enough women were attracted to sustain their future development. Many interviewees suggested that their own feminine appearance and style helped avoid ‘putting off’ newer or younger women who might be joining their clubs by undermining intimidating stereotypes of MACS as activities purely for tough men or overtly masculine women. Furthermore, Emily argued that such a ‘softer’, feminised image could broaden the appeal of certain MACS disciplines to men as well as women:

> I think that girls in the UK have done a better job for [muay thai] than men have, and I think that’s because of that difference from what the general public think [muay thai] people should look like or be like, it’s not what the [muay thai] women are like at all. And I think that makes the sport [seem] softer, more accessible I guess for the general population.

Similarly, interviewees often noted that developing greater female participation in their sports could be achieved by including what were thought to be feminised practices, such as self-defence classes or ‘fitness-oriented’ sessions, in their clubs’ programs [Channon and Matthews 2015b]. It should be noted that many in our samples rejected the suggestion that training for fitness or self-defence were their own primary goals, preferring to identify as competitive athletes instead, while some were critical of ever advertising MACS to women by way of emphasising specifically ‘feminine’ practices [see Jennings 2015]. However, despite some disagreement, it was nevertheless accepted by the majority of our interviewees that this was an effective way to initiate women into wider MACS participation:

> I promote it as self-defence to women, because if you say ‘martial arts’ they just think of fighting, it’s perceived as violent, you know, punching someone and kicking someone, and they don’t like that. So if you say self-defence it sounds more like something they might want to do. (Evelyn)

However, several interviewees argued that presenting a feminine identity for MACS, or as individual fighters, was useful for more than just developing participation. Both within and outside of the context of their sports, the fact that they were high-level competitive fighters in addition to being recognisably feminine women carried something of a shock value that could at once challenge received wisdom about gender normality whilst also having positive consequences for their competitive performance:

> It’s quite a surprise to find a female who’s a professional fighter and everything else, I think people have images in their heads where you might not be feminine so they’re shocked but generally a lot of people are quite supportive. (Sophie)

In general life I can be quite shy and I don’t think I look the type to do the sport, I don’t really look very muscly or scary or anything like that. So I think I’m always underestimated a bit when I go in the ring and fight, and I think that’s an advantage really because I maybe shock people when I step through those ropes and do what I do! So, [femininity] tends to work in my favour. (Holly)

Of wider significance in this respect was the claim from some of our interviewees that the performance of femininity, with its social

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I just want to have a bit of girliness in [my fighting], so I have these hot pink gloves, they’re so cool! ... Yeah, I generally dress quite sporty but I always try to keep something, just a little something that makes it a bit feminine. (Sylvia)

Yeah, some people joke about it, these [pink] gloves I mean, but pink or black or whatever, it still hurts when they hit! (Suzie)

I wear, like, girls’ gym clothes and I have the pink gloves, lots of girls have that, it’s just a little thing you do to be like, I dunno, a bit less mannish … But it’s all good, isn’t it? Pink gloves still give black eyes, after all! (Keeley)
consequences of maintaining fighters’ public identities as – in many of their own words – ‘normal women’, could destabilise sexist ideals. Effectively symbolising a re-articulated vision of what constitutes such a woman, the feminine and powerful fighter became an important symbol for our interviewees. Here, Rachel’s view summarises this sentiment well in arguing that non-conformity to a model of becoming either overtly masculinised or avoiding MACS altogether for the sake of her femininity was effectively helping change attitudes about (all) other women’s capabilities:

In fact I think of myself as more of a woman because I see myself doing something for women, instead of just obeying a stereotype ... I think it's feminism, you know, pursuing something for ourselves and showing that normal everyday women are capable of doing something which a lot of people say we’re not. I think it’s a good thing what we’re doing.

Thus, doing femininity in specifically acceptable ways, which were understood as compatible with the embodiment of physical power through MACS training and simultaneously taken as a means of claiming a coherent identity as a woman and a fighter, became a means of illustrating, in Keeley’s words, that ‘girls can do this, too’. Such contextually legitimated versions of appropriate femininity were held up as evidence of a wider social value of women’s participation (‘it’s feminism’), lending added importance to the accomplishment of feminine signifiers among these competitive fighters.

Conclusion

Taken together, the findings of our studies reveal how specific articulations of femininity are purposefully chosen by women participating in MACS, and deliberately enacted/enjoyed in accordance with their own self-authorised sense of identity. Many of our interviewees used language that framed femininity as something desirable and intrinsically valuable; they didn’t want to have to ‘go without’, ‘lose’, or ‘sacrifice’ it to become a fighter. And, with this in mind, they articulated specific ways in which femininity could be happily accommodated with the demands of MACS participation. Critical of instances wherein certain aspects of femininity could obstruct training, or give a poor impression of women fighters to others, it was clear that feminine behaviours needed to be carefully negotiated in order to signify both ‘woman’ and ‘fighter’. Furthermore, it was broadly noted that such successful gender performances bore value – they could help develop wider (female) participation in MACS; they might confer some competitive advantages in the ring; most of all they carried the potential to challenge sexist beliefs about women’s capabilities and destabilise the hierarchal constructs through which sexual difference is commonly imagined.

To us, this illustrates a compelling example of a genuinely alternative iteration of femininity. The women we spoke to did not experience femininity as a means of correcting or apologising for their encroachment into ‘masculine’ terrain [e.g., Felshin 1974; Krane 2001], it was not a means of diluting the embodiment of physical power built through their training; rather, it served to signify to others that ‘normal, everyday women’ can be tough and powerful fighters. Echoing Kristine De Welde, we agree that – as an exercise in agency which defies the rigidity of gender binaries framed by the heterosexual matrix and the restrictive opportunities for identification which these provide – ‘it was imperative for these women to redefine womanhood and femininity on their own terms’ [De Welde 2003: 271]. Although laying claim to being ‘normal’ women carries heteronormative connotations with respect to the implicit stigmatisation of female masculinity, it nevertheless indicates a restructuring of the discursive possibilities enshrined by what ‘normal’ womanhood might otherwise involve. In other words, while moving within the parameters of normative gender construction, they began to undo its discursive relationship to women’s subordination.

In a context of increasing mainstream visibility for women in high-profile combat sports [e.g., Cain 2105; Hope 2015; Jakubowska et al. 2016], and amidst on-going public debate over the appropriateness of using normative feminine imagery to promote sport participation to women [e.g., Sanghani 2014; Fullagar and Francombe-Webb 2015], we argue that findings such as these stand to make an important
contribution to the way in which femininity is understood within martial arts studies. While we do not deny that pressure to conform to feminine norms is often exerted on athletic women, nor that such a process can be restrictive or harmful to the development of their abilities and thus damaging to the gender-subversive potential of MACS (among other, related activities), we nevertheless argue that, in other cases, the exact opposite may be true: women can choose to be feminine, doing so on their own terms and in ways which potentially work in subversive directions. Thus, we believe that scholarly work on women’s MACS and gender performance would do well to attend more closely to the manner in which the performance of alternative femininities by female fighters might work against the sexual hierarchies that their more orthodox counterparts are typically thought to preserve.

We conclude this article with a short comment on the limitations of the studies upon which it is based. As with all qualitative research, the subjective nature of the analysis we conducted must be considered, as it is entirely possible that other scholars might have understood and interpreted this data in different ways. Although our joint approach to re-analysing each other’s empirical findings provided the opportunity to cross-validate ideas, it is nevertheless important to acknowledge that the conclusions we have reached here are wrapped up in our own specific theoretical position and not, therefore, representative of all possible readings of these findings.

Also, our small overall sample size draws the generalizability of our findings into question, while the characteristics of this sample make for something of a partial view on contemporary gender construction given the heterosexuality and whiteness of the participants. With only four of our sample of 27 consisting of ethnic minority women, and only one identifying as openly lesbian, our studies are not well-placed to comment on the impact of sexual and cultural diversity on the construction of martial artists’ femininities. Indeed, while these particular minority group women did not offer any notably contrasting viewpoints within the interviews conducted, the overall body of findings here might be reconsidered in terms of its latent whiteness and straightness had a larger and more diverse sample been included in the research, and/or if we had directly sought to problematize these intersectional phenomena in our primary research questions. Therefore, the relationships between whiteness, straightness, and femininity in the MACS milieu is something that could warrant specific investigation in future research efforts of this kind, as we have not made these phenomena explicit objects of analysis in this article. Despite these limitations, we hope that our research can provide a useful contribution to colleagues wishing to expand the literature on women, gender, and martial arts.


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**TAOLU**

**CREDIBILITY AND DECIPHERABILITY IN THE PRACTICE OF CHINESE MARTIAL MOVEMENT**

**DANIEL MROZ**

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Martial arts studies, mixed martial arts, intersectionality, feminist theory, framing theory, gender, women’s sport, Ultimate Fighting Championship.

**ABSTRACT**

The practice of taolu (tao4lu4, 套路), the prearranged movement patterns of the Chinese martial arts, has been explained in fantastically diverse ways spanning a range of interpretations from the essential and functional to the narrative, theatrical and religious. Rather than trying to find a universal reason for the practice of taolu, this paper proposes to look at the idea of prearranged movement patterns through the lens of credibility and decipherability. These twin concepts, borrowed from the Great Reform movement in 20th century theatre practice, helpfully embrace both the criteria by which the performance of taolu is usually judged and also the deficiencies in our contemporary understanding of reasons behind this palimpsestic training method. As conceptual tools, credibility and decipherability also offer us insight into how the practice of prearranged martial movement patterns is presented and interpreted as a personal and phenomenological experience of embodied practice. This paper hopes to pragmatically present new perspectives from which the practice of taolu can be understood.
I would like to invite you to take part in a thought experiment with me. I would like to provisionally remove all but the most pragmatic definition of *taolu* (*tao4lu4, tào lù, 套路*). Yes, they are the prearranged movement patterns found in the Chinese martial arts; no, we’re not sure what they are for or how to look at them. I’d like to temporarily propose that *taolu* are *xuan* (*xuan2, 玄*), in the Orthodox Daoist sense, meaning ‘dark; profoundly mysterious’. This is not a prosaic mystery that will eventually be solved; it is an ultimate mystery, a feature of our experience that will remain impenetrable. I hope that if we consider *taolu* from this perspective it will relieve us of the preferences, habits and received wisdom with which we usually understand them. Likewise, should we seem to actually explain *taolu* in the course of our deliberations, their status as *xuan* will prevent us from succumbing to the temptation of merely explaining them away.

My reason for provisionally declaring the most visible and characteristic aspect of Chinese martial arts to be a mystery comes from my own experience. Since 1993 I’ve practiced several Chinese martial arts, principally Siu Lum Hung Sing Choy Li Fut kuen and the Practical Method (or Shiyong Quanfa) of the Chen style of taijiquan. Looking back over two decades of learning, I see that I take *taolu* for granted at every level of my engagement with *gongfu*. As a student, teacher and scholar I have unquestioningly behaved as though *taolu* are the alembic where the ideal ‘what and how’ of Chinese martial movement is synthesized, made manifest, refined, presented and refined again. Taking *taolu* for granted might be a perfectly adequate stance for practicing, teaching and theorizing, but realizing my habit, I ask myself: ‘What do I think about when I think about *taolu*?’

While the practice is ubiquitous there is amazing diversity in its manifestations and there is very little real consensus as to its purpose. British fighter Steve Morris expressed his frustration with Chinese martial arts training in a way that sums up the situation nicely:

> Attempting to clearly differentiate within the esoteric boxing forms of Fujian, let alone those of all of China, what is combative from that which has its origins in shaman, Taoist, Hindu/Buddhist magico-religious practices, mudra (i.e., the depicting of a story, emotion or action), secret society symbolism, zoomorphic display, Chi Kung gymnastics, the theatre, aesthetics or simply a fanciful display, would prove difficult enough for someone raised in the regional cultures in which these forms originated, let alone for a country boy from Penley 'Dingles', North Wales!

[Morris 2003]
While I think Morris is engaging in a little false modesty at the end there, given how intelligent and able he is, he has made a thorough if informal list of ingredients the imagined combination of which does indeed suggest baffling complexity. But, in spite of this, we practitioners continue to entertain opinions – nay wholehearted convictions – about taolu. How are we thinking about them?

To begin to answer I’d like to turn to an important branch of 20th century theatre practice called The Great Reform. The Great Reform, or Wielka Reforma, is a term invented by Leon Schiller, a Polish theatre director working between the two world wars. It refers to the early 20th century pioneers of theatre who developed modernism and the art of the director. Due to fascism, communism and the world wars, the continuity of this work was lost to Western Europe, the UK and North America but was preserved in Eastern Europe where it was developed by later generations of directors and creators [Schino 2009: 192, 261]. The most well-known artist associated with the Great Reform is Konstantin Stanislavsky (née Alexeyev), the Russian actor and theatre director who created numerous approaches to actor training during his lifetime and who left an indelible stamp on the aesthetics of both the Eastern European and the Anglo-American theatre traditions.

My engagement with the Great Reform, like my relationship with Chinese martial arts, came first as a practitioner. I learned to create theatre in one of the many branches of that lineage of artists: a Russian actor named Yuri Zavadsky was taught by Stanislavsky and worked with two of his principal students, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Evgeny Vakhtanghov. Zavadsky in turn taught a Polish director named Jerzy Grotowski, who taught an Italian director named Eugenio Barba. Canadian actor and director Richard Fowler studied under and then worked with both Grotowski and Barba before returning to Canada, where I became his student.

Like the Chinese martial arts, transmission in the Great Reform is based on personal apprenticeship and on sustained immersion in an ensemble or family-like group that practices a daily training. While the aesthetics of the Great Reform have diversified considerably over the course of the 20th century, they are principally characterized by the requirement that a theatrical performance be meaningful due to the credibility of the actions of the performers within a metaphorical staging designed by the director.

In his book, which has the ‘martial arts studies friendly’ title of Theatre and Boxing: The Actor Who Flies, Franco Ruffini sets up a pragmatic binary derived from the writings of Stanislavsky. We interpret theatrical performances along the two axes of credibility and decipherability. Decipherability asks: ‘What does it mean?’ Credibility asks: ‘Was it performed in a way I respond to?’ Ruffini’s thesis is that, under the aegis of the Great Reform, acting in the European art theatre of the 20th century switched from emphasizing decipherability to emphasizing credibility [Ruffini 2014].

I’ll return to the Great Reform later. Right now, I’d like to consider taolu from the pragmatic perspectives of credibility and decipherability.

If we’re not careful when we ask ‘What does it mean?’ and ‘Was it performed in a way I respond to?’ then we often wind up evaluating the authenticity of the material and the competence of the person performing it. Judgments of authenticity and competence are not my concern here. Our criteria for authenticity are most often derived from a jingoistic commitment to the style or styles we know personally and our evaluation of competence usually depends on the range of practitioners we’ve been able to observe first hand. My objective in introducing decipherability and credibility as tools is not to engage in criticism rendered parochial by the limits of our individual experiences. Rather, I hope to use these two ideas to examine how we identify and parse the component elements of taolu.

I propose that parsing taolu to differentiate their component parts and perceive the relationships between them can be done in two complementary ways, spatiotemporally and culturally. We can examine the actual movements as actions, vectors, trajectories and dynamics. And we can attempt to learn what cultural significance these movements have held.
There are numerous examples of spatiotemporal analysis of taolu in modern and contemporary Chinese sources provided by authors such as Wan Lai Sheng [1927] and Kang Ge Wu [1995]. The specific approach I’d like to focus on today is one that derives the actions of taolu from simple foundational movements.

The first exponent to propose an analysis in terms of foundational movements is Hong Junsheng [1907-1996], a student of Chen Fake [1887-1957] and himself a master of the Chen style of taijiquan. Following the ideas expressed in Chen Xin’s 1933 manual, *The Illustrated Explanations of Chen Family Taijiquan*, Hong analyzed the movements of the two principal taolu of the style and determined that every movement was composed of variations on one of two possible circular hand trajectories [see Hong 2006].

The ‘positive’ or *xun* circle (figure 4 below) when performed with the right hand moves in a clockwise direction. The ‘negative’ or *ni* circle (figure 5 overleaf) when performed with the right hand moves in a counterclockwise direction. While this particular movement is very specific to Hong’s Chen style, I feel the positive and negative trajectories he proposes can be used to describe a much wider swath of movements.

Hong is not alone in finding two actions at the centre of his martial movement training. Contemporary Taiwanese martial artist Zhou Baofu (b. 1951) suggests that all gongfu movements are derived from two hand trajectories, which he describes as ‘blocking hand’, which moves inward, and ‘sweeping hand’, which moves outward [Zhou 2014: 20:37]. While he expresses them using different words, he is describing the same basic trajectories as Hong.

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1 See also Timothy J. Nulty’s discussion of these circles in his article in this issue (pages 55-63).

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**Figure 4:** Chen Zhonghua demonstrating the positive circle. Photos courtesy of Chen Zhonghua.
Taiwanese choreographer Lin Huaimin is the founder of the renowned Cloud Gate Dance Theatre. He has created a cosmopolitan synthesis of North American modern dance that he learned at the Martha Graham school in the late 1960s with traditional Chinese movement forms. To this end, he has collaborated with gongfu teacher Adam Hsu and Chen taijiquan teacher Xiong Wei. Lin is even more ambitious than Hong and Zhou. He believes that the principal characteristic of all Chinese movement – dance, theatre and martial arts – is the sequential execution of the two circles described by Hong and Zhou in a pattern that is temporally desynchronized. I experienced Lin’s ideas and his fundamental movement training in person in October of 2007 when I took a master class with Ms. Lee Ching Chun, the co-artistic director of Cloudgate, at the National Arts Centre of Canada in Ottawa, Canada. This flower-shaped toroid movement (see video 1 opposite) is the basis for all of Lin’s work.

Finally, Lu Suosen, a master performer of the martial roles in Beijing Opera and a teacher at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in Beijing, believes that the movements of his art are derived from the rotation of two desynchronized circles, a movement known as yun shou or cloud Hands. Ms. Shijia Jiang, Lu’s apprentice, demonstrates an example (see 1:00 - 1:03, video 2 opposite) of yun shou found in the second Xiao Wu Tao, the short fighting set learned by novice Beijing Opera students.

Formally and pragmatically, the idea of deriving all Chinese martial movement from two circular trajectories executed simultaneously, sequentially or in syncopation is compelling. I have found it to be an effective shortcut for learning new taolu and for maintaining old ones.

But, helpful as this is, these are still a posteriori formal analyses. There remains a vast distance between relatively simple foundational moves and sophisticated choreographies. We can parse taolu into fundamental spatiotemporal units, but can we build them up from such simple beginnings? To accommodate the complexity of taolu I believe we need to turn to cultural forms. What did movements made up of fundamental spatiotemporal units mean to their creators?

Steve Morris’ exasperated list itemizes the cultural activities that I believe are present and represented in taolu: combative movement, theatrical presentation and religious en-action.
Taolu: Credibility and Decipherability
Daniel Mroz

Video 1: Flower Series

Click image to activate
(if viewing in latest Adobe Acrobat Reader)
or watch online at
https://vimeo.com/193558729

Video 2: Cloud Hands Series

Click image to activate
(if viewing in latest Adobe Acrobat Reader)
or watch online at
https://vimeo.com/195117574
[1:00-1:03]
Taolu have these characteristics for both intended and circumstantial reasons. They are first and foremost palimpsestic and speak in a mix of archaic and contemporary terms. A little familiarity with Daoist ritual and Chinese theatre, and with the three conflicts that led to the partial erasure of a culture that could recognize these elements – the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), the Opera Rebellion (1854-1855) and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) – allows us to imagine an earlier time when the performance of taolu functioned simultaneously as combative training, theatrical entertainment and religious acts of self-consecration and exorcism [Holcombe 1990]. Today, we often lack the interpretive tools to see the vestiges of these elements present in the taolu we train. While we’ll never know for sure how taolu were understood prior to the late 19th century, combative, theatrical and religious ideas are formalized in taolu in concrete ways that complement the spatiotemporal ideas we’ve just explored. Indeed, chances are if you have learned a taolu, then no matter the style, it has some of the following features:

*An opening*, which could be the up-out/up-in/down-out/down-in *kai zhang* or opening palms common to the Southern Shaolin styles, or the slow parallel rise of the arms in Yang or Wu style taijiquan.

*Themes and nodes*, or movements that are repeated along different trajectories, such as taijiquan’s yun shou or cloud hands or Choy Li Fut kuen’s *kwa/sao/chaap*. These punctuate the different sections or phases of the taolu.

*A diagrammatic stepping pattern* that creates a two-dimensional shape on the floor. These can be derived from religious practice, which was for example the original context of walking the nine points of the luoshu (figure 6), which is used as a training tool in the martial art of baguazhang.

Taolu may also contain *theatrical characters*. Here General Guan Yu enters, strokes his beard, rides his horse and sharpens his glaive in Choy Li Fut’s Guan Dao form. The sequence refers to Guan Yu’s journey of 1000 miles in the tale of the Three Kingdoms where he ‘passed 5 gates and killed 6 generals’ (*guò wǔ guān, zhān liù jiàng*). Presumably, after killing the six generals, he needed to sharpen his glaive! In another example, Daoist immortal Lu Dong Bin appears in the closing movements of the first section of the Wudang Dan Pai Liu Duan sword form.

As they are in fact deities, the appearances of these theatrical characters are also *religious references*. The evocation of deified figures such as Guan Yu and Lu Dong Bin is considered to have an exorcistic and purifying effect in Chinese normative religion [Riley 1997].
Further religious references can be found in the form of shou yin or mudras, such as the closing movement in the Wudang Dan Pai Xuan Men qigong t'aijiquan form, *Kan Li Ji Ji* or ‘Qi Above and Qi Below Mutually Reinforce Each Other’. Here the shou yin for the fiery heart, which resembles the head of a deer, is placed beneath the open hand that resembles the watery moon (figure 7 opposite).

These examples can easily be perceived ‘from the outside’. Some structures, however, are more conceptual. For example, the taolu of Hong Junsheng’s Chen style contain a literary-religious reference. The first set, or Yi Lu, has 81 movements and the second, or Er Lu, has 64, which corresponds to the 81 chapters of the Laozi and the 64 chapters of the Zhouyi, both classics of ancient Chinese literature.

I’m confident that this list can be developed substantially, not just by the addition of further elements, but also by the fact that some taolu seem to be defined by the absence of these elements. For example, while Choy Li Fut kuen is characterized by long and theatrical taolu, its contemporary, wing chun kuen, has equally structured and sophisticated taolu that appear to be devoid of religious and theatrical elements – or, at least, they are quite hard to spot in contemporary practice.

The selective presence and absence of all of these elements give taolu a rudimentary narrative form. They have clear markers indicating beginnings, endings, themes and variations. Concrete fighting techniques are introduced, repeated, developed and varied. Religious references appear and theatrical characters are evoked and dismissed. Conceptual meanings and imaginal actions only known to the performer may also be present.

To sum up, I am proposing two axes for considering decipherability in taolu: spatiotemporal form and cultural form. These axes are pragmatic. We cannot claim absolutely that taolu are composed of pure fighting movements that have been subsequently conditioned by cultural practice or that they are cultural practices that happen to also be useful for combat training. Exclusive emphasis on either stance jettisons valuable information and the lived experiences of practitioners and risks explaining away, rather than explaining, the complex phenomenon of taolu.

Now, on to credibility, which asks: ‘Was it performed in a way I respond to?’ Attempts to parse what makes a performance of any sort compelling can appear arbitrary, formalist or nebulous. And yet, we have all had the experience of finding a performance credible, even if

2 The word ‘imaginal’ is a neologism coined by scholar Henri Corbin to describe the visualized and visionary experiences of Islamic mysticism that exist between sensory experience and discursive thought [Corbin 1977: viii-ix].
we each find it credible for different reasons or come to find it credible in different ways.

In 2011, I performed a taolu at the First International Hong Junsheng Taijiquan Seminar and Competition on Daqingshan in Shandong, China. I was surprised and pleased to receive a score of 8.6/10 – a gold medal – for my efforts. My teacher Chen Zhonghua later explained to me that, although this was the highest score awarded to a foreigner in the entire competition, the parameters on which I had been evaluated were things like the depth of my horse-riding stance, my stability on one leg, my kick height, the clarity of the sound I made slapping my foot when kicking and the sharpness of my stops. The actual spatiotemporal parameters of taijiquan, he said, were unknown to the judges, so I hadn’t been graded on them. The judges found my performance credible; my teacher less so.

My personal parameters for credibility were further challenged when I watched the tui shou athletes preparing to compete. Martial arts competitors in China appear to focus either on the presentation of taolu or on various kinds of standing grappling and kickboxing. Competitive tui shou is a grappling sport derived from the partner balance training exercises of taijiquan. Speaking to a few of the competitors, I learned that professional push-hands players in China pick two or three principal throws that they train intensively. Tui shou players rarely practice taolu, but in order to qualify for competition, they have to demonstrate one. Imagine my surprise when I observed that they were not able to perform taolu credibly at all. They forgot movements, got stuck in repetitive loops and ignored postural requirements. Encased in the structural demands of taolu, they entirely lost their predatory menace and feline grace. They could not transfer the powerful credibility they demonstrated in their wrestling to their taolu.

A strong attempt to structurally identify what we are actually responding to when we attribute credibility to a performance has been proposed by theatre director Eugenio Barba. Theatre specialists will doubtless already be familiar with Barba’s ideas; as I mentioned earlier, Barba, emerging from the Great Reform, is the Italian born director of a Danish theatre company called Odin Teatret, an ensemble he founded in 1964 and with which he has directed 28 original performances. He’s also published prolifically on theatre. In 1980, inspired by the rigorous training of such traditional Asian dance-theatre forms as Indian Kathakali, Japanese Noh, Indonesian Topeng and Chinese Jingju, all of which he had seen while on tour around the world, Barba gathered a group of master performers from different traditions for a month-long workshop where he asked them to demonstrate and teach one another the exercises that they had learned as children on the first day of their apprenticeships.

Viewing these different exercises, Barba felt that, even though the results of training varied from style to style, the performers all sought a similar goal. They used their trained physicality to create a way of moving that captured their audience’s attention. Barba theorized that the principal goal of rigorous training was to cultivate the attribute of stage presence, or pre-sense, that which draws us to a performer’s actions before we can attribute meaning to them. In Ruffini’s terms, credibility is presence, which, according to Barba, precedes decipherability. Barba has named this level of the performer’s practice Pre-Expressive Behaviour, which he describes in terms of four principles [Barba 1995: 9]:

1. **Principle of Balance** – Performers use positions and ways of movement that are precarious and require greater effort to maintain than those used in daily life. Because they have control of their balance, they can move in unexpected directions without signaling their intent. And, as they can change at any time, we watch them.

2. **Principle of Opposition** – Opposition can be spatial or temporal. Spatially, lines of tension divide the body and create potential energy. For example, in ma bu, the body above the waist stretches up and below the waist sinks down. Temporally, I can signal left and then move right, catching the audiences’ attention with a trick – look over there / look over here!

3. **Principle of Consistent Inconsistency** – This refers to the internal coherence of the performer’s choices. In the case of a codified system like Chinese theatre, the idiosyncrasies of the form apply to all its practitioners and recur thematically throughout its repertoire. In less strictly codified genres, such as cinema acting, clowning, physical theatre or contemporary dance, the performer’s personal idiosyncrasies, contextualized for performance, become an expressive vocabulary.

4. **Principle of Equivalency** – Everyday actions are decomposed and restructured in order to make them more visible and visceral than they would be in daily life. To use a prosaic example: In everyday life, I’ll take a sip of water with as little effort as possible. To make the fact that I’m drinking water meaningful for an audience, I’ll decompose the action into discrete phases to make it more legible [Barba 1995: 34].

I have found these principles to be great pedagogical tools for actors, dancers and martial artists-in-training. Balance and opposition are as important to a beginning student assimilating postures and stepping patterns as they are to an intermediate student practicing fighting games with a partner. Personal and stylistic idiosyncrasies and the relationship between them, meanwhile, can be perceived quickly by examining consistent inconsistency; the principle of equivalence lets us
consider how everyday movement is transformed into martial prowess and vice versa. Despite their usefulness, however, in my experience, these principles don’t help in understanding why some performers are more interesting to watch than others; rather, they answer help in understanding how performers have trained in order to be credible to audiences.

The difference between ‘why’ and ‘how’ is a key one for me. As an artist, I’ve found asking ‘how’ to be more practical than asking ‘why’. How do I acquire a particular skill? How do I practice a particular method? How do I choose between different training methods? How do I express the fruition of my practice?

My ongoing question with respect to credibility has to do with causality: How is the immediately credible causality of two taijiquan players wrestling freely and spontaneously reflected in a set solo choreographic sequence? This transfer is germane to both the practice of taolu and to theatre practice, where actors and dancers need to repeat known sequences of movement and behaviour night after night all the while reliably retaining their credibility.

In a video clip available online, we see my taiji brothers Brennan Toh and John Dahms practicing competitive tui shou. Brennan is really trying to trip and throw John and John is really trying to stop him. As John falls, Brennan’s actions are credible in the most fundamental sense and the causality of the exchange is clear.

In the early 2000s, I began to develop exercises for actors and dancers using partner games from Choy Li Fut and taijiquan. My objective was to maintain the credible causality created by physical contact when not touching, going from the credibility of a concrete result on a partner to the more subjective credibility of indirect action across space via non-verbal and verbal communication.

Over time, I differentiated our games into two main categories: avoidance and entanglement. When players are touching, these are striking (where one avoids being hit) and grappling (where one welcomes becoming entangled), but as larger metaphors they embrace interpersonal actions both physical and social.

Figure 8: Author and actor Colleen Durham practicing an entanglement exercise. Photos by Laura Astwood.
In the spring of 2009, I was awarded a three-year Research/Creation Grant by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. This grant offered artists working in the university system funding for practical artistic research. I used this grant to found my studio *Les Ateliers du corps*, which for the first three years was a small group of emerging artists who met for nine hours a week to learn the curriculum of performer training I had assembled. Each year in the spring, we spent four weeks working full-time prior to presenting a professional dance theatre performance as the outcome of that year’s training and creation activities. The participants in *Les Ateliers du Corps* learned Chen style taijiquan, both from me and from Chen Zhonghua on his regular visits to Ottawa. I had a chance to see the effect of training in both orthodox Chen style and the kinds of games I’d been developing myself.

These games initially lent themselves to creating interesting staging and choreography. The next clip is a fragment from *Nor the Cavaliers Who Come with Us* – an original performance about the conquest of Mexico that I created and directed in residence at the National Theatre School of Canada. Here, improvised partner entanglement about a single wooden staff is used to dramatize the many battles led by Conquistador Hernan Cortez as he fought his way from the coast to the Mexico capital, Tenochtitlan. The text he is speaking is a translation of the Spanish Requirement of 1513, or *Requiremento*, a declaration by the Spanish monarchy of Spain’s divinely ordained right to take possession of the territories of the New World and to subjugate, exploit and, when necessary, to fight the native inhabitants. The *Requiremento* was read in Spanish to Native Americans to inform them of Spain’s right of conquest. Those who subsequently resisted conquest were considered to harbor evil intentions. We took the title of the performance itself from this text.

The effect I had hoped to create by not actually setting the individual movements of the fight over the staff was the kind of spontaneity and precision shown by the students at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (NACTA) in Beijing. They are using set fragments of precision shown by the students at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts. Each year in the spring, we spent four weeks working full-time prior to presenting a professional dance theatre performance as the outcome of that year’s training and creation activities. The participants in *Les Ateliers du Corps* learned Chen style taijiquan, both from me and from Chen Zhonghua on his regular visits to Ottawa. I had a chance to see the effect of training in both orthodox Chen style and the kinds of games I’d been developing myself.

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The effect I had hoped to create by not actually setting the individual movements of the fight over the staff was the kind of spontaneity and precision shown by the students at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (NACTA) in Beijing. They are using set fragments of known attacks and ripostes to improvise and mutually decide in the moment on the content and conclusion of their encounter.

This next fragment is from *Circe*, a performance I created at the 2010 Canada Dance Festival, which is a national festival that takes place in Ottawa every spring. In this example, two performers set the results of their improvised entanglement game in order to create a duet. The performance is named *Circe/Landfall* and it was based on the myth of Circe from Homer’s *Odyssey*. Instead of Odysseus’ men being transformed into pigs by Circe the witch, in our version, a single hallucinating, shipwrecked stranger is discovered washed up on the beach by a lonely woman. In this example, our Circe talks to herself and her conflicting inner voices played by two performers.

**CONCLUSION**

My combined experiences of training and teaching martial arts and theatre leads me to conclude provisionally that credibility in taolu is a function of interactivity. When we interact with a parameter, be it another person, a cultural enactment such as a theatrical figure or religious narrative or a series of impersonal movement variables, our focus is on something outside of ourselves. This gives us the space we need to interact with the multiple variables taolu conjure.

When we perform and watch taolu, we privilege different kinds of interactivity; we might expect taolu to be credible in terms of our existing repertoire of fighting techniques and power generation methods. But there are always techniques and methods of which we are ignorant. We can examine the credibility of taolu with respect to cultural information or with respect to our knowledge of fundamental human movement. But here, too, there will be gaps in our knowledge. Both taolu and the perceptual apparatus with which we receive them are palimpsestic. To the extent that we interact with different, tacit world-spaces, so the various world-spaces of the taolu become available to our perceptions.

Questions that might allow our attributions of credibility to become more conscious and nuanced would then include: What does the taolu suggest we should interact with? How does it accomplish this? How is the player interpreting those suggestions? We won’t necessarily get exhaustive answers, but we will come closer to understanding our own parameters and the gaps in our experience.

**Acknowledgement**

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REFERENCES


The distinction between gong (skill) and fa (technique) is ubiquitous in Chinese martial arts. Utilizing Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ‘embodied intentionality’, I examine this distinction. I draw specific examples of the kinds of skills under discussion from a particular style of taijiquan – Hong Chuan Chen Shi taijiquan (Master Hong Junsheng’s transmission of Chen taiji boxing) – and I argue that understanding taijiquan in terms of embodied intentionality allows us to understand important taijiquan concepts such as chansijin, yin, and yang. Although in this article I focus on one specific style of martial art, I argue that the general analysis of the gong-fa distinction based on embodied intentionality is widely applicable.
INTRODUCTION

In many traditional Chinese martial arts, gong (or skill training) was reserved for the master’s disciples. Discipleship in Chinese martial arts at times has the status of an adoption, where the disciple-master relationship is identical to that of father and son. This is certainly the case in Master Hong Junsheng’s lineage of Chen style taijiquan, in which gong training was traditionally reserved for the most loyal and trustworthy students. Today, however, it is taught more openly. Common sayings about gong and fa (technique movements) reflect the perceived value and importance of gong training. These include sayings such as, ‘If I don’t want to teach a person, then I will teach him fa but not gong; ‘If you are too busy to practice both, then practice gong instead of fa; ‘I’d rather teach ten fa than one gong; and ‘If you train your whole life, but don’t train gong, your efforts are wasted in old age.

Clearly, training that led to the development of gong was held in high regard. But what exactly is gong and why is it so important? Can the Western philosophical tradition tell us anything about the difference between gong and fa? Can it explain why gong training is viewed as superior to training only fa?

Utilizing Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ‘embodied intentionality’, I examine this distinction. I draw specific examples of the kinds of skills under discussion from a particular style of taijiquan – Hong Chuan Chen Shi taijiquan (Master Hong’s transmission of Chen taiji boxing). Additionally, applying Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied intentionality affords a clearer understanding of the role of yin and yang in taijiquan practice. The distinction between gong and fa is ubiquitous in Chinese martial arts. Although I focus on one specific style of martial art, I believe the general analysis of the gong/fa distinction based on embodied intentionality is widely applicable.

1 Master Liu Chengde is one of Master Hong’s senior disciples. The agreement of lineage presented to Master Liu’s students (and grand-students) during the discipleship ceremony reads in part: “This agreement has come to be due to the heartfelt relationship that is identical to father and son. Verbal teachings also stress that the relationship between shifu and disciple is identical to that of father and son.

2 Sayings such as these are common among noted Chen style masters such as Master Feng Zhiquiang [2000] and Master Chen Zhongua [2010] as well as Master Liu.

3 This way of representing the name of Hong’s lineage comes from one of his senior disciples, Master Liu.

WHAT ARE TECHNIQUES (FA) AND WHAT ARE SKILLS (GONG)?

Let’s think of techniques (fa) as meaningful bodily movements. The meaning of a movement is normally a combination of defensive and offensive maneuvers. Various techniques are usually given names that indicate the general intention behind the movement or that describe the shape of the movement (e.g., Chen style practitioners will be familiar with names such as ‘white crane spreads wings’, ‘Buddha’s warrior attendant pounds the mortar’, ‘single whip’, etc.). Let’s think of skills (gong) as bodily abilities which make techniques more effective. If one person’s use of a technique is more effective than another person’s use of that technique, other things being equal, we might say that the first person performed the technique more skillfully. Generally speaking, the difference in application efficacy is a difference in the level of gong. One martial art is distinguished from another not necessarily by the techniques but by the skills used to apply the techniques effectively.

For example, most martial arts, including Western boxing, have a straight punch. Often the straight punch of one style will appear very similar to the straight punch of another style. However, there can be great variations in the underlying body mechanics used to deliver the punch. Within a style, practitioners can differ in how well they execute those body mechanics. These differences both between and within styles are best thought of as differences in gong. Gong in this sense is often specific to particular martial arts. The skills that make the techniques of one style effective might be different from the skills that make the techniques of another style effective. Without the development of gong, techniques will either not work at all or will only work on inferior opponents. We need to know more about the difference between gong and fa in order to understand in detail why and how skill increases the efficacy of technique.

Of course, there are skills involved in the execution of any technique. These skills are usually a basic level or foundational level of skills sometimes called jibengong. These skills include balance, stamina, basic coordination, flexibility, etc. These basic skills are common in some form or other to almost all martial arts. While these types of foundational skills might be necessary to execute the technique effectively, they are rarely sufficient.

It might be helpful to distinguish two general kinds of skills: (1) athletic skills and (2) martial skills. Athletic skills are the attributes practitioners need to demonstrate their martial techniques in isolation, such as the choreographed training routines quan tao or taolu (‘kata’ in Japanese).

4 My discussion of taolu is focused exclusively on their value as self-defense movements. However, taolu have much greater significance in Chinese culture than being merely a set of self-defense movements. For a more extensive consideration of the significance of taolu, see the article in this issue by Daniel Mroz [2016].
These skills also contribute, no doubt, to combat effectiveness, but they are not sufficient by themselves to reach the higher combat levels of any art.

For example, contemporary Chinese wushu, with its standardized routines, is impressive to watch because of the speed, flexibility, and gymnastics incorporated into the routines, but it is sometimes criticized by traditional martial artists as lacking martial content (i.e., useful self-defense techniques). These routines are sometimes referred to as ‘hua quan, xiu tui’, or ‘flower fist, brocade leg’. The routines are beautiful to watch but, according to these critics, do not constitute legitimate combat training. I take no stance on the accuracy of that criticism in this article. My point is simply that there exists a conceptual distinction in martial arts discourse about types of skills that is relevant to the distinction between gong and fa.

Martial skills will be those attributes a practitioner must develop in order to attain a high level of combat effectiveness. These are the skills needed to know how to fight and to defend oneself against an attacker. A further distinction is needed at this point, however, insofar as there are different types of combat skills. As an initial attempt to elucidate this further distinction, let’s say there are both: (2a) brute skills and (2b) refined skills. Brute skills are easier to understand. If practitioner A can move his fist from point x to point y in less time than practitioner B, then we can say practitioner A has more speed-skill than practitioner B. Likewise, if practitioner C does lots of push-ups and therefore develops more upper-body strength than practitioner D, we can say practitioner C has more strength-skill than practitioner D. The same can be said for training which makes the body harder and more resistant to strikes. There is little doubt that strength, speed, and body conditioning are attributes and skills that enhance combat techniques.

It is the second sub-category of martial skill that is the focus of this article, and the one that I believe is referred to in the common sayings at the start of this article. It is sometimes said that true martial skill should allow the practitioner to defeat a stronger and faster opponent and it should allow the older practitioner to maintain his combat effectiveness against younger assailants. Indeed, it is claimed that this kind of skill or gong training is a necessary condition for martial ability in old age and is captured in the often cited taijiquan expression of ‘four ounces overcoming a thousand pounds’. When martial artists talk about avoiding localized strength when generating force (for example, using only the arm muscles to punch) and work to develop movements that coordinate the entire body, they are talking about more refined uses of strength as opposed to brute strength. Refinement is a matter of degree and different martial artists will manifest abilities with differing degrees of refinement. I will explore what such differences in refinement amount to later in this article.

I should add that the analysis of gong I am about to offer is incomplete, or will be viewed as incomplete from the perspective of some practitioners of taijiquan. I will avoid entirely, as did Master Hong in his discussion of taijiquan, any discussion of qi, jing, and shen, elements which are often regarded as essential to understanding gong in traditional Chinese martial arts. It is beyond the scope of this article to address adequately the Chinese metaphysics needed to explain these concepts. Most importantly, martial arts styles which include these elements tend to agree that correct physical training (including structural alignment, correct use of force, and proper breathing and relaxation) are necessary to develop these more esoteric aspects of the art. My discussion of martial gong will attempt to begin at the beginning.

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5 The separation between athletic skill and martial skill, according to some critics, can be seen in many martial arts schools. Critics claim that students perform the choreographed routines beautifully and with a high degree of skill, yet when the students spar, their techniques have no significant relation to the routines. If they have sparring skills at all, those skills are developed independently of the routines. For example, the sparring of kung fu practitioners might be indistinguishable from kickboxing. To my knowledge, no compelling data exist which would show the frequency or extent of this phenomenon among practitioners of Chinese martial arts. Finding good data is especially challenging since self-defense focused martial technique might be quite different than sport martial art technique common in mixed martial arts (MMA) competitions. Hence, an absence of traditional martial artists in MMA competitions would not be a sufficient indicator of a general lack of self-defense efficacy. The conceptual distinction between athletic skills and martial skills is nonetheless valuable as it affords practitioners a chance to examine the skills developed in their own practice in relation to martial efficacy.

6 Clearly brute skills and athletic skills often overlap. Speed and strength are useful in both solo performance and combat.

7 We can think of iron palm and iron body training here. The practitioners of these skills develop greater striking power because their fists or palms are harder, and their bodies are less likely to be affected by strikes because of their conditioning. Having a harder fist is not itself a technique but it will make fist techniques more effective.

8 This expression is mentioned by Master Feng [2000], Master Hong [2006], Master Chen [2010], and other notable Chen stylists in numerous publications and interviews.

9 It is sometimes said that training should convert jing into qi, and qi into shen, and ultimately shen or spirit merges into emptiness or what is sometimes referred to as wuji. Wuji is prior to taiji and is said to give birth to taiji and from taiji 10,000 things emerge. There is much to be said about how martial arts training is a form of spiritual development, but that would be a topic for another article.
THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF EMBODIED SKILL

Merleau-Ponty rejected both empiricist accounts of perception and intellectualist accounts. Taylor Carmen aptly describes these rejected positions: ‘The concept of sensations or qualia as primitive building blocks of perceptual experience on the one hand and [the] equally emphatic denial that perception is constituted by or reducible to thought or judgment on the other’ [Carmen 2005: 51]. Merleau-Ponty argues instead that the body has its own kind of intentionality, its own way of making sense of the environment, which cannot be accounted for by either empiricist or intellectualist theories.

A phenomenological analysis of perception and behavior reveals that the body does not respond to objective external stimuli via sensations which are isomorphic to those stimuli, nor does it wait to be animated by the mind, but actively enhances its perception of the environment leading to a greater refinement in skilled coping.

Hubert Dreyfus summarizes two of Merleau-Ponty’s concepts that are central to my analysis of gong and fa: the concepts of an ‘intentional arc’ and of ‘maximum grip’. The intentional arc names the tight connection between the agent and the world; as the agent acquires skills, these skills are ‘stored’, though not as representations in the mind but rather as more and more refined dispositions to respond to the solicitations of more and more refined perceptions of the current situation. Maximum grip, meanwhile, names the body’s tendency to respond to these solicitations in such a way as to bring the current situation closer to the agent’s sense of an optimal gestalt [Dreyfus 2008: 1].

Let’s begin with the intentional arc. It is easy enough to provide examples of this relationship between the embodied agent and his environment. Consider the toddler reaching for the shapes and colors dangling from her mobile, just out of reach. From a seated position, the toddler remains frustrated by her inability to reach the object. But if the toddler stands, then, with a bit more stretching, she will succeed in touching one of the colorful objects. In doing so, clearly the toddler’s behavior is intentional: it is about the object.

Crucially, this engagement does not leave the toddler’s world as it was prior to the grasping attempts. After enough successes and failures from different positions, objects now appear differently than before. Objects can now appear to be within reach or out of reach. The child’s environment has become enriched; formerly undifferentiated elements are now saliently discriminable. Notice too that the child becomes more efficient at reaching objects because now she can discern when she needs to move only her arm or whether she needs to move her entire body in order to be successful.

According to Merleau-Ponty, this discernment is not a matter of the child having an inner representation, or the result of some process of calculating distances; rather, this knowing is presented in how the world shows up.

The same kind of change in how the world appears to us occurs when we learn to parallel park. Through much trial and error, most city drivers learn to perceive when a parking space is large enough to accommodate their car. Country drivers less familiar with parallel parking often agonize over whether or not they can fit into the space. The two types of drivers differ not only in how the space appears to them, but also in terms of how the car feels backing into the parking space (i.e., in how well they can execute the task). The city driver feels when to cut the wheel to slip into the spot without clipping the other car, while the country driver starts and stops repeatedly while checking the mirrors or perhaps backing over the curb. We might say the city driver feels the parking space through his car, while the country driver suffers from a kind of perceptual deficiency since he is unable to feel the parking space adequately through his car.

It is important to note that, even when we are talking about the same parking spot, what solicits the city driver to attempt to park in the space and inhibits the country driver from an attempt is how the space appears to each driver. The objective features of the space, such as its dimensions, are insufficient by themselves to explain the behaviors of each driver. How the world appears to each driver solicits different courses of action, and those actions in turn affect how the world shows up to solicit them.

Merleau-Ponty uses the examples of a woman with a feather in her hat avoiding anything overhead that may break it off and a driver entering a narrow opening: The hat and the car have ceased to be objects with a size and volume which is established by comparison with other objects. They have become potentialities of volume, the demand for a certain amount of free space [Merleau-Ponty 1962: 143].

The lived world is not that of the physicist or the geometer; rather, it is a network of potentialities which encourages or inhibits certain courses of action. Objects have meaning or significance that emerge from our engagements with them.

If Merleau-Ponty is correct and the embodied agent is related to her environment through a network of intentional arcs, then understanding the agent’s environment necessarily requires an account of the agent’s behaviors; likewise, understanding what the agent is doing requires an account of how she experiences her environment – the network of
significance or solicitations she encounters. But what governs this ongoing interaction between the embodied agent and environment? What provides the general normative structure of the interaction such that it leads to improved coping and an enrichment of salient environment features?

Merleau-Ponty’s answer is that the embodied agent aims toward a kind of optimal gestalt: ‘Whether a system of motor or perceptual powers, our body is not an object for an “I think” [but] a grouping of lived-through meanings which moves towards its equilibrium’ [Merleau-Ponty 1962: 153]. This equilibrium is explained further by Merleau-Ponty in terms of perceptual clarity and richness, and in terms of our intentional behaviors functioning as expected.

For example, we naturally hold objects in our hands at the optimal distance for viewing, and we position our bodies in such a way as to get the best view of distal objects and events. When we reach for the objects that appear within reach while sitting at a table and writing, we do in fact succeed in grasping them. When going up the stairs in the dark, our feet find the stairs where the body expects them to be. Merleau-Ponty speaks of the body being ‘geared onto the world’:

My body is geared onto the world when my perception presents me with a spectacle as varied and as clearly articulated as possible, and when my motor intentions, as they unfold, receive the responses they expect from the world. This maximum sharpness of perception and action points clearly to a perceptual ground, a basis of my life, a general setting in which my body can co-exist with the world. [Merleau-Ponty 1962: 250]

And further:

The distance from me to the object is not a size which increases or decreases, but a tension which fluctuates around a norm. An oblique position of the object in relation to me is not measured by the angle which it forms with the plane of my face, but felt as a lack of balance, as an unequal distribution of its influence upon me.

[Merleau-Ponty 1962: 302]

Once again, we see that for Merleau-Ponty our encounter with the world is essentially normative. The normativity is grounded in the embodied agent’s continuous attempt to reach equilibrium in a given situation. The body is aware of deviations from what it finds optimal and seeks to relieve that tension. Dreyfus makes frequent use of Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the body responds to the solicitations of the environment without relying on mental representations of the goal. For Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus, motor intentionality is a form of non-representational intentionality. What the organism knows is not stored as representations but in how the world shows up and solicits that organism. As Merleau-Ponty explains, ‘it is to allow oneself to respond to their call, which is made upon it independently of any representation’ [Merleau-Ponty 1962: 139].

Merleau-Ponty uses the analogy of a soap bubble to illustrate how no representation of the end state or goal is needed to explain how the embodied agent moves toward an optimal gestalt. The final spherical result does not have a causal role to play in the bubble forming. Rather local forces acting on soap film result in the bubble’s production. Likewise, local solicitations on the embodied agent produce responses in the agent that result in movement toward the optimum gestalt. As Dreyfus notes, there is more involved than just a causal relation when the agent responds to a solicitation:

According to Merleau-Ponty, in absorbed coping the body of the performer is not just responding to causal forces like a soup bubble; it is solicited by the situation to perform a series of movements that feel appropriate without the agent needing in any way to present what would count as achieving the goal.

[Merleau-Ponty 1962: 302]

We could think of an infant learning to crawl or to reach for objects. The infant is not cognitively sophisticated enough to represent those goals to itself, but feedback from its interaction with the environment reinforces or inhibits some movements instead of others. And, importantly, that feedback has intentional content. Dreyfus offers the example of a player returning a tennis serve: ‘Indeed I cannot represent how I should turn my racket since I do not know what I do when I return the ball’ [Dreyfus 2008: 13]. The tennis player’s body automatically adjusts the racket to meet the oncoming ball at the optimum angle without the agent representing to herself what that angle is.

To summarize, there are three elements central to Merleau-Ponty’s account of the embodied agent’s relationship with the environment. First, the embodied agent has some sense of what is optimal in a given situation and the agent strives to reach and maintain that optimal

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10 A very similar point was made by James Gibson in The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception: ‘There are no atomic units of the world considered as an environment’ [Gibson 1979: 9]; ‘an affordance cuts across the dichotomy of subjective-objective and helps us to understand its inadequacy’ [Gibson 1979: 129]. Martin Heidegger’s notion of Das Eben (as ‘being-in-the-world’ is also meant to indicate that agent and environment cannot be understood in isolation from each other [Heidegger 1996 (1927)]].
relationship with the environment without making use of mental representations; the embodied agent also refines what counts as a good gestalt. Second, the agent becomes more skilled at coping with aspects of the environment through successful interactions. Third, this refinement in skill is concurrent with an enrichment of salient aspects of the environment, i.e., how that environment appears. I now want to employ these three elements to say something about the difference between gong and fa.

GONG, FA, AND EMBODIED SKILLS

The student is initially taught technique as a series of movements. The student might then be expected to increase the fluidity, speed, and power with which the movements are executed. Indeed, solo performances of martial techniques are often quite impressive in terms of their athleticism.

At this level of learning technique, gong training may or may not be introduced. It is important to realize that there is more than one way a person can move his body into a particular position, and more than one way a person can use his body to issue force. To the untrained eye, two people may appear to be performing the same movement since their torsos, limbs, and overall postures seem to be identical. However, which parts of the body initiate the movement, and how those parts perform the movement to generate force, can be radically different.

Someone could be taught choreographed routines in which one technique is followed by another, without being subject to the training necessary to develop the understanding of one’s body needed for higher-level skill training. In Master Hong’s transmission of Chen taijiquan, gong training initially consists of coordinated bodily movements called ‘positive and negative circles’.11 One of the most important parts of training the positive and negative circles is learning how to sense or feel what is known as the kua, or what we can think of as the hip joint. In taijiquan training, there is a requirement to ‘round the dang’ which refers to a kind of openness of the groin or crotch area, and which refers more to a quality of and receptivity to movement in that area rather than simply a physical structure. Rounding the dang or crotch involves the hip joints, the tailbone, the hip crease and kua, and also the perineum and buttocks area. There is a feeling of sitting down while the practitioner is standing. The hip joint feels as if it is floating in a contained space, free to rotate. We could imagine a ball floating inside a cube not touching any of the sides to get a sense of experiencing the kua and hip movement. In fact, taijiquan instructors in this lineage prioritize training the crotch area.12

Instruction regarding these two circles does not happen primarily in a verbal form, and as training progresses, the requirements for correct movement cannot be seen but only felt.13 The reason for the lack of verbal directions is quite simple: the novice practitioner lacks a sufficient understanding of the important areas of the body (such as the kua and dang) to correctly interpret verbal instructions. For example, the direction to ‘turn the waist’ typically results in incorrectly turning from the top (i.e., the shoulders or chest) or moving the hips in the same direction as the waist (i.e., not distinguishing the hips from the waist).

Part of the problem is that the novice practitioner is likely to have a very vague or limited conception of their waist. Additionally, because they have no sense or feel for their kua, the novice will misinterpret their visual perception of what the teacher is doing. In other words, the novice lacks the training to pick up salient features of their visual experience, much like the country driver who cannot determine whether the parking space is large enough for parallel parking. Thus, the student is in danger of copying the external movement of the teacher without grasping the subtle underlying mechanics – in other words, training fa without any gong.

The danger of failing to grasp the underlying mechanics by merely copying the external movement is mitigated by three instructional methods: (1) the teacher physically manipulates the student’s body in ways that more closely approximate correct movement; (2) the teacher allows the student to feel the teacher’s body as the teacher is moving; and (3) the teacher might prevent certain parts of the student’s body from moving thereby preventing the student from initiating the movement from the wrong part of the body. The teacher might have the student place their hands on the teacher’s kua as the teacher

11 It is important to note that in Hong’s system of Chen taijiquan all movements in the routines are variations of positive and negative circles. For further discussion of this, see Moz [2016].

12 Emphasis on the crotch region or dang can be found in Hong [2006]. Master Liu and Master Chen have also verbally emphasized correct use of the dang as essential to Hong’s transmission of taijiquan.

13 For example, Master Liu will often have the student stand behind him while he performs various movements, usually the positive and negative circles or movements from the form. The student’s hands are placed on the back of Master Liu’s hips or in the kua region so that the student can feel the correct movement. Master Feng states that one touch can penetrate, meaning that a simple touch from the teacher is sufficient to impart understanding in a student who has practiced sufficiently up to a certain point [Feng 2000]. Master Chen also frequently places students’ hands on his body in order to feel proper movement and alignment.
performs the positive and negative circles correctly. The teacher might also perform the movement incorrectly as the student would, in order to illustrate the difference. Thus, the teacher leads the student toward a better sense of what optimal movement and position feel like.

With correct training of the positive and negative circles, awareness and control of the kua develops. The kua movement becomes coordinated with the movement of other parts of the body. In Hong Chuan Chen Shi taijiquan, that coordination begins to produce a kind of force known as chansijin, or ‘spiral force’. The various movements of the routines are now expressions or manifestations of chansijin, and proper training of the routines becomes another way of training gong.

To get a better sense of the basic aspects of chansijin, hold your arm straight out in front of you. Notice that, by rotating the arm, you can turn your hand palm up or palm down. There are two directions of rotation. When the palm turns up, consider this a positive rotation; when the palm turns down, consider this a negative rotation. Now sit on the floor with your legs straight out in front of you. You can keep the entire leg rigid and you can rotate the leg from the hip joint inward, or you can rotate your legs outward. For most people, the hips naturally rotate outward and the feet point outward at 45 degrees when sitting in that position. Don’t turn from the ankles or knees; turn the leg as one unit from the hip joint. When the knee and foot turn out away from the other leg, consider that a positive rotation; when the knee and foot rotate in toward the other leg, consider that a negative rotation. Notice too that your torso can turn to the left or to the right. Consider the former a positive rotation and the latter a negative rotation.

We have three basic ‘units’ of the body which can rotate: the leg unit, the waist unit, and the arm unit. This is of course over-simplified but it should get the idea across. As you’re sitting on the floor you can coordinate rotations of these three units in different ways. You could have the right arm and right leg perform a positive rotation, or you might have the right arm and left leg both perform a positive rotation. The left leg could rotate negatively and so could the right arm. You could also turn the waist to the left or right while you perform these other rotations.

However, taijiquan is not practiced sitting down; it is practiced standing upright. The feet will now be planted on the floor and so cannot turn in or out as they can when seated. Rotating the legs while standing becomes more challenging because the ankles must allow the legs to rotate without the feet moving. The knees will appear to point upward slightly or downward slightly instead of simply pointing in or out. When the knee points upward it is a positive rotation of the leg, and when the knee points downward it is a negative rotation of the leg.

The knees cannot shift or collapse inward; they simply change their direction upward or downward as the leg rotates. When the right leg rotates negatively and the knee points down, the left leg will rotate positively and the left knee will point upward. This action of the legs will cause the waist to turn to the left. Likewise, the opposite action of the legs will cause the waist to turn right. By pushing into the ground with the feet while at the same time rotating the legs in coordination, the torso is made to rotate. The torso does not initiate its own movement or turning.

Westerners are often more familiar with punches thrown by boxers, even if only through televised bouts, and are sometimes also familiar with the admonition given to boxers to avoid throwing ‘arm punches’. Boxers are taught that the arm muscles are relatively weak, and a stronger force is delivered through the arm when the force is generated in the waist and legs. Westerners see boxers pivot on their toes while turning their waists. Western striking arts such as boxing advocate a more global approach which relies on the entire body when issuing force. Much like a boxer needs to turn his waist to issue a powerful punch, the taijiquan practitioner is training the coordination of his legs, waist, and arms to issue force more effectively. Recall our experiment of rotating your arms positively and negatively. In a similar fashion, though not identical, to how a boxer might rotate her arm while throwing a punch, the taijiquan practitioner rotates her arms while striking. The rotation of the arms must be coordinated with the rotation of the waist and the rotation of the legs. The speed and direction of the rotation must be coordinated from the feet through the hands.

Chansijin involves more than just coordinated rotation of the torso and limbs. The points of rotation, such as the hip, shoulders, and elbows must be in the proper position while rotating, and they must be relaxed. In other words, the proper bodily structure and alignment must be maintained while the rotations are occurring. As with the rotations, proper body structure and alignment are essential to the transmission of force.

As an experiment, stand in front of a wall with your right foot about two feet from the wall, and your left foot farther back in what is sometimes called a bow stance, forward stance, or hill climbing stance. Place your right hand on the wall about shoulder height and prepare to push into the wall with your right hand powered by your rear left foot. Before you start pushing, raise your right shoulder up close to your

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14 A boxer’s jab involves a negative rotation as the palm of her hand moves from a vertical position by her chin or in front of her face to a horizontal position facing downward at the point of impact.
earlobe. Now begin pushing, driving your hand into the wall by pushing hard with the rear left leg. Notice that your shoulder will start to fatigue quickly and much of the force from your rear foot is lost as you fight to keep your raised shoulder from moving backward. While pushing with constant force, let your shoulder drop as low as possible (no need to force it down). You will feel a greater pressure now in your rear left foot and the right hand. You have established a more direct line of force between your foot and your hand. You can also relax your body more with improved alignment.

Now notice the position of the tip of your elbow. Is it pointed directly down toward the floor or is it pointed sideways to some degree? If you relax the arm and let the tip of the elbow point down naturally, you will again find a greater connection to the rear foot than if the elbow is pointing sideways to any degree. When taijiquan practitioners practice ‘loosening the shoulder’ and ‘sinking the elbow’, this allows for greater relaxation and a more efficient transmission of force from the legs. In more advanced practitioners, the ability to relax and drop the shoulder is so refined that it appears as if there is one diagonal line from the neck to the elbow; the squared angle normally present due to the shoulder is almost eliminated. This more refined ability further enhances the transmission of force.

When the positive and negative rotations of the limbs and torso are properly coordinated, and the proper alignment and body structure is maintained, practitioners will begin to feel this connectivity as diagonal lines through the body while rotating. For example, one diagonal line will extend from the rear left foot to the front right hand while turning right in a right-sided positive circle. The force is transmitted from the foot to the hand through the body in a straight line, and the experience of this straight line of force also has a spiral quality to it; one feels the body rotating on the line.

Recall the experiment of pushing against the wall. With enough practice and awareness, you can feel when your force gets ‘caught’ in the shoulder, or elbow. Force can also get ‘caught’ in the back, the hips, and the knees.15 As you get better at finding the optimal alignment, you will find that the line of the force will become increasingly direct (i.e., straight from ground to hand). The goal of the basic training and routine training is to reduce the places in the body at which force is prevented from traveling directly from the ground to the point at which the force is issued. The body is learning to recognize and maintain an optimal body position. Chansijin is not a matter of imagining ‘energy’ moving through the body in some sort of spiral pattern. Chansijin is the result of proper coordination of the entire body.16

The solo practice of the routines helps the practitioner recognize optimal body positions in relation to their own movements. She can learn that she has to move her weight to one foot before stepping with the other, or to prevent her hips and knees from shifting instead of rotating. She can develop an isolated sense of optimal body position, but by itself this increased awareness cannot tell her how to find and maintain an optimal body position in relation to the opponent. The practitioner’s increase in skill is only focused on her own body. The practitioner learns to cope better with her own bodily movements, and, as a result, parts of her own body and their positions become more salient. Diligent practice produces in the student awareness of areas of the body, such as the kua, that were previously unrecognized and outside the realm of purposeful control.

If, as Merleau-Ponty argues, the body is a grouping of lived-through meanings, then the taijiquan practitioner’s body becomes something more because the body has become more meaningful. The body has become a locus for a whole new network of meanings. Correct taijiquan training radically transforms one’s sense of embodiment. One becomes aware of the hip joint, individual vertebrae, the tailbone, the shoulder joint, and other areas of the body. Awareness permeates the body in a new way, or perhaps we should say the body is aware in a new way.17

The gong training of the positive and negative circles is further refined and gains new significance as additional skills are developed. It is sometimes said in taijiquan practice: ‘Know yourself through practicing the routines, then know others through tui shou [push hands]’.18 Practice of the routines, which incorporates the gong of the positive and negative circles, leads to self-knowledge in the form of a radically enriched experience of embodiment. How does an enriched sense of embodiment relate to knowing others as one goal of push hands training?

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15 You can also experiment with the angle of the tailbone. Curl the tailbone under and push into the wall. Now point the tailbone back by making the buttocks protrude excessively. Now try varying the degree of the tailbone’s angle. You will notice that some positions are much better than others for transmitting force from the legs through the hand.

16 Chansijin actually involves more than I have just described. For example, the 45-degree angle plays a central role in this system of taijiquan. It is beyond the scope of this article to explain all the structural requirements of this type of taijiquan, but it is important to note that these are physical requirements, not metaphysical imaginings.

17 Think of writing with your dominant hand compared to your non-dominant hand. There is greater awareness and control with the dominant hand. Analogously, with correct taijiquan training, the entire body changes from functioning like the non-dominant hand to functioning like the dominant hand.

18 The author has heard both Master Liu and Master Chen explain push hands in this fashion during verbal explanations of stages of taijiquan practice.
Without training the circles and the forms correctly, correct push hands training is impossible and so *ting jin* is never cultivated. The proper movement patterns learned through solo training are necessary in order to avoid direct confrontations of force with one’s training partners while all the while remaining in continuous contact with them. Additionally, the sensitivity to the transmission of force through one’s own body cultivated through careful solo practice primes one to be better aware of the transmission of force through the partner’s body. *Ting jin*, or literally ‘listening energy’, is the ability to sense subtle changes in the opponent’s force.

*Tui shou* is the student’s first confrontation with an opponent, albeit a friendly and quite helpful opponent. *Pan shou* is taijiquan training with a partner. One partner applies force to the other person’s body. The force could be applied to any part of the practitioner’s body, though in practice force is typically applied to the arms and torso. The recipient of that force has to detect and respond to that force in an appropriate way. What does ‘appropriate’ mean in this context?

As an initial attempt at an answer, let’s say the recipient of the force neither fights the incoming force nor flees from it. The recipient of the force must neutralize the incoming force and issue force *at the same time*. In taijiquan terminology, *yin* and *yang* must happen concurrently, not sequentially. How does the practitioner neutralize force and issue force at the same time? The answer is by using the *chansijin* or spiral force developed in solo practice. Without the enriched sense of embodiment, particularly control of the kua, provided by correct solo training, the practitioner simply would not understand their own body well enough to practice push hands correctly.20 Practicing push hands allows the practitioner to learn how to sense the opponent’s incoming force and how to use the appropriate amount of spiraling in response. Some spirals might be tighter and faster, while other spirals might be larger and slower.

The practice of push hands further enriches the practitioner’s sense of embodiment. The movements of solo practice take on further meaning and become more precise because now they are performed with a sense of the opponent’s force and position. As awareness of one’s own body increases with the awareness of the opponent’s body, the practitioner reaches a stage at which they may even have greater awareness of the opponent’s body than of their own. Such a taijiquan practitioner can sense where their center of gravity is, where the opponent’s stance is weak or strong, and how exactly the opponent is applying force. By the same token, the advanced taijiquan practitioner is able to sense increasingly subtle variations in how force is applied to their own body.

Push hands allows the practitioner to test their body structure and the rotation of their limbs and torso to see whether they are able to receive and issue force properly (i.e., using *chansijin*). Recall again our wall pushing experiment. The wall is static; it does not change its direction of resistance. Push hands training allows the practitioner to cope with a wide range of changing forces being applied to their body. Push hands is an ongoing experiment that tests the habits that are being engrained during solo training. It can also become increasingly aggressive, with increases in both speed and force. Indeed, there are push hands competitions. However, if practitioners have not developed enough taijiquan skill, such encounters can easily come to resemble wrestling matches (albeit entirely upright, and often of apparently low or limited quality). Push hands is not the goal, but a means to develop free fighting or *san shou* (literally ‘free hand’ ability). As with other types of martial arts, some taijiquan practitioners in Master Hong’s lineage engage in free style sparring, attacking each other freely to test the efficacy of their techniques.20

Master Hong explains the essential characteristic of movement in this style: ‘We have established that Chen style taijiquan movements conform to the unity of opposites’ [Hong 2006: 12]. This ‘unity of opposites’ is manifested in multiple aspects of a movement. Using a positive circle exercise as an example, we can see the following pairs of opposites: empty/solid, open/close, positive/negative rotation, and withdraw/issue. The unity of opposites is achieved through the development of spiral force or *chansijin*.

Furthermore, Master Hong states: ‘The myriad of changes are rooted in one source. Only silk reeling is the foundation [silk reeling is a reference to *chansijin*]; each taiji movement is shaped in spirals that must be rounded and loose, like a towel repeatedly wrung’ [Hong 2006: 28]. Then, later in the same text, we find: ‘Open and close, hardness, softness; curvature and straight line are coordinated through spirals, that result in contradictory harmony’ [Hong 2006: 62]. And lastly: ‘The method is in the movement of the dang and the knees’ [Hong 2006: 65].

Thus, for Master Hong, the elements of *yin* and *yang* are incorporated into taijiquan training by the development of *chansijin*. According to Master Hong’s analysis, movements which do not involve *chansijin* are not taijiquan movements, regardless of external appearances.

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19 For practitioners with some basic understanding of kua usage, push hands can further that understanding. In most cases, however, the presence of a pushing partner takes the student’s awareness off their kua and other important elements of body and its mechanics and causes the student to focus too much on the point of contact with the opponent. Essentially, the expansion of bodily awareness happens in stages, not all at once.

20 Free fighting or free sparring is mentioned as the stage after push hands training by Master Feng, Master Chen, and Master Liu.
Individuals practice taijiquan routines for decades in some cases without ever having practiced taijiquan. These individuals practice the external shape of the routines, and might even be able to use the techniques somewhat effectively, but both practice and application will lack chansijin and will not qualify as taijiquan. The spiraling of limbs and torso produce the interplay of yin and yang, or what Master Hong calls ‘the harmony of opposites’.

The movements of the right arm while performing the positive circle exercise involves a variety of harmonious opposites. The right arm has both revolution, as the hand moves away from the body and returns to the body in a roughly circular shape, and rotation, either positive or negative. When the hand begins the positive circle, it moves upward and outward from the center of chest to eye level; this is the positive (yang) half of the revolution. During the positive half of the revolution, the arm performs a negative (yin) rotation as the palm rotates from facing 45 degrees upward at the chest to facing 45 degrees downward at eye-level with the arm extended (i.e., the palm rotated negatively a full 90 degrees). The negative (yin) half of the revolution which involves the hand returning to the body at elbow level is accompanied by a positive (yang) rotation of the arm which turns the palm from 45 degrees downward to its original position at the chest of 45 degrees upward.

The positive and negative rotations of the arm throughout the positive circle revolution also produce a harmonizing of yin and yang as expressed in the relationship between the hand and elbow. We find the elbow withdrawing and sinking (yin) which produces an issuing-rising (yang) effect of the hand. The opponent feels drawn in by the yielding yin aspects of the elbow and at the same time feels pushed out or repelled by the hand.

The positive and negative revolutions and rotations of the right arm are coordinated in pairings of opposites with each side of the lower body through the spiraling of the right and left leg. When the right arm opens outward from the body as the torso turns to the right, the arm performs a negative rotation. The right leg, being on the same side of the body, performs the opposite rotation and rotates positively. When the right arm closes toward the body and rotates positively, the right leg rotates negatively. Hence, the yin rotation of the right arm is coordinated with the yang rotation of the right leg, and the yang rotation of the arm is coordinated with the yin rotation of the leg.

The upper and lower body on opposite sides coordinate by performing the same rotations. The right arm coordinates with the leg left by performing the same rotations. As the right arm opens outward and rotates negatively, the left leg also rotates negatively. As the right arms closes and rotates positively, the left leg also rotates positively. Hence, we can see that in terms of the coordination of the upper and lower body same sides coordinate by doing the opposite, and opposite sides coordinate by doing the same.

Just as within a single arm there are additional pairings of yin and yang, there are multiple pairings of yin and yang within each leg and in the relation between the legs as they rotate. When either leg rotates negatively, the knee closes and the kua opens. If either leg rotates positively, the knee opens and the kua closes. Should one leg’s knee close and kua open, the opposite happens with the knee and kua of the other leg.

There are many other pairings of yin and yang. For example, there is the opposite side coordination between the left kua and right shoulder. When the left kua drops the right shoulder also sinks at the same time. Additionally, this sinking of the shoulder also sinks the elbow (yin) which raises the hand (yang).

Many years of practice are needed to understand and to manifest in one’s taijiquan the interplay of yin and yang. As practitioners advance, the meaning of these concepts becomes increasingly sophisticated because of changes in how they experience their own bodies. One understands the interplay of yin and yang not because one has a theory, but because one’s body is this dynamic relationship.
CONCLUSION

Training gong involves the establishment of a variety of intentional arcs designed to enhance combat effectiveness. Those intentional arcs are refined along with the agent's sense of optimal gestalt. Iterations of these intentional arcs during training exhibit the three components presented in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodied intentionality.

If the routines (quan tao or taolu) are thought of as catalogues of techniques, then a practitioner can have all of the information (i.e., all of the techniques) but not be able to see its relevance in a concrete situation.21 The practitioner can know many techniques but be unsure about when to use them or how to adjust them to variations in the attack. Relevance is not determined conceptually or even at the level of conscious awareness in Chen style taijiquan; relevance is determined by the listening skills of the practitioner’s body.

At closer fighting ranges, where the opponents are already close enough to strike or even grapple with each other, it is very difficult to perceive visually an oncoming attack. The hand is faster than the eye. The cultivation of ting jin allows the practitioner to sense directly subtle changes in the opponent’s movements through a highly refined tactile awareness. The sooner the defender can anticipate the opponent’s attack, the precise characteristics of the opponent’s force, and changes in the attack, the greater the defender’s advantage.

A skilled martial artist may perceive the opponent betray their intentions or telegraph their actions by changes in their body (for instance, where the opponent looks, how they shift their weight, the deep breath they may take before attacking, how force is applied to the defender’s body, etc.). The novice martial artist, however, is often blind to the available information. Gong training aims to actualize as much of that information as possible. The martial artist who knows the techniques but lacks gong is forced to make up for this lack of discrimination by compensating with speed or strength. For example, such a practitioner has to wait for the opponent’s attack to be fully underway and then must try to be faster to avoid the attack and then counter.

The development of chansijin allows the practitioner to receive the opponent’s force while maintaining an optimal body position. Optimal body position amounts to balancing the instances of yin and yang. The practitioner’s awareness of yin and yang becomes more refined through practice. Less experienced practitioners are often defeated in push hands because they cannot adequately perceive and maintain the balance of yin and yang. In taijiquan this lack of yin/yang balance is sometimes referred to as ‘double-heavy’.22 The practitioner not only harmonizes the yin and yang of her own movements (for example, in the positive circle exercise, or the movements of the routine), she harmonizes her movements with the yin and yang of the opponent’s movements. By not fighting the opponent’s force, the taijiquan practitioner is less vulnerable to a stronger opponent than a defender who confronts the attacker’s force head on. By not fleeing from the opponent’s force, the taijiquan practitioner remains in contact to sense the opponent’s intentions and remains in a position to issue force against the attacker.

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Uniting defending and attacking into one movement decreases the amount of time with which the opponent can respond to the counter-attack. It also makes it more likely the attacker will be caught by surprise. Moreover, the assailant’s own attack immediately puts her at a disadvantage since the neutralization of the attack is part of the counter-attack of the taijiquan practitioner. Accounts of the abilities of masters such as Master Chen and Master Hong speak of how opponents would seem to almost throw themselves to the ground. The master’s skill would not allow the opponent’s force to disturb or reach his center. The master neutralized the incoming force and, at the same time, the master (using chansijin) would direct the opponent’s force back into him. In such contexts, the attacker becomes the victim of the force of their own attack.

Because the perceived environment, in this case the combat situation, contains so much more information for the skilled martial artist, the practitioner can be solicited to a wider range of possible responses. The enriched sense of the practitioner’s own embodiment further increases the range of responses, since the body can do more, or in Merleau-Ponty’s terms, the body has a greater network of meaning. The skilled practitioner directly perceives a wider range of relevant techniques and is better able to change to a new technique in response to the perceived environment.

21 Gilbert Ryle [1946] made a similar claim in his analysis of the distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that. Ryle argues that understanding the relevance of a rule, or being able to apply a rule correctly in an appropriate situation, is not a matter of further rules or propositional knowledge but a matter of skill. Merleau-Ponty offers us one way of understanding what such a non-conceptual skill amounts to through his discussion of the intentional arc.

22 Earlier manuscripts on taijiquan were not clear about the nature of double-heavy or how it was to be avoided in practice and application. Master Hong explains in his book that Chen Xin first introduces the concept of double-heavy in his Taijiquan Treatise. See the forward by He Shugan in Hong [2006].
to the opponent’s counter measures. She *feels* the range of possibilities much as the city driver *feels* the parking spot is large enough for parallel parking. At higher levels, advanced practitioners are not limited to particular techniques, such as movements from the quan tao, because these individuals embody certain skills which can manifest themselves in novel ways. One is freed from thinking of a martial art as a set of specific techniques.

Differences in martial skill among taijiquan practitioners in Master Hong’s lineage depend on the degree to which each person manifests the chansijin in their movements. All members in a group of practitioners can know the entire eighty-one movement first routine (*yi lu*); they can also know how to apply the techniques. The difference in efficacy of those techniques resides in the level of refinement of the chansijin. A practitioner who relies on brute strength or speed to make the technique work is a lower level practitioner compared to the person who relies instead on chansijin.

Ultimately, then, martial ability resides not in how many techniques a person knows, but in how skillfully a single technique is performed. For practitioners of Master Hong’s transmission of Chen style, to a large extent this difference in martial ability amounts to how precisely the person rotates their joints in coordination, particularly the hip joint. Because the rotation of the joints is difficult to see, it often appears that high-level practitioners are not moving at all, yet the opponent is thrown or struck with great force. The force produced by the coordinated movements resulting in chansijin exceeds localized uses of force, and more grossly coordinated whole-body movements. Power is a matter of refinement.

High-level gong training allows the martial artist to compensate for an opponent who is stronger and faster. Gong training affords this ability by: (1) developing an enriched sense of optimal position to receive incoming force from the opponent and to issue force against the opponent; (2) increasing the number and richness of salient environmental factors relevant to anticipating and understanding the opponent’s attack; and (3) refining the practitioner’s ability to respond to an attack by increasing the range and effectiveness of possible responses. As the level of gong increases, these three attributes manifest with a diminishing amount of conscious involvement by the practitioner.

Although Chen style taijiquan was used to illustrate the distinction between gong and fa, my contention is that martial artists in general could be well served by examining which aspects of their training develop attributes (1)-(3) and to what degree those attributes are developed. Training which does not develop those attributes, or which does so only minimally, is much less likely to produce effective fighting and self-defense ability.23

With such an emphasis on Chen style taijiquan in this article, one might reasonably wonder about the general applicability of the analysis offered here to other martial arts. While it might be the case that many martial artists do not have the conceptual distinction between gong and fa, or concepts directly analogous to that distinction, in the repertoire of concepts used to think about their art or to describe their art, nonetheless normative judgments are crucial to all martial arts practices. There are ways one ought to practice and ways one ought not to practice, and the details of those prescriptive claims are specific to each martial art. In relation to combat or self-defense, these judgments are intended to make the practitioner’s style-specific techniques more effective. Normative claims are motivated by the fact that some ways of selecting techniques and performing techniques are better (i.e., effective against a wider range of opponents) than other ways of selecting and performing techniques.

Understanding how the gong/fa distinction can be generalized requires us to ask a set of related questions, such as: (1) Why, in relation to this particular martial art, are some ways of selecting and performing a technique better than others? (2) What skills must a practitioner have in order to actualize these better ways? And this second question can be further subdivided into: (a) What skills must the practitioner have to determine when to use this technique as opposed to other techniques (what I previously called ‘relevance’) and (b) What skills must the practitioner have in order to adapt the technique to the specific situation and effectively execute it? These latter two questions are general questions about gong.24

In most martial arts, anticipating and understanding the angle of attack is crucial information that can be used to avoid and to respond to an attack. A very fast defender can perhaps succeed despite being limited in her anticipatory abilities because her superior speed affords her a shorter response time. She can sometimes even have a delayed response

23 It is important to note that, although the cultivation of chansijin is the basis of martial ability in Hong’s system, it also has tremendous health benefits (e.g., keeping the joints loose and the body supple). It is also useful to consider how the three attributes are developed differently in different martial arts. For example, the gong essential to the development of these three attributes in jiu-jitsu practitioners or wrestlers will be different than the gong needed to develop these three attributes in kung fu practitioners.

24 Each practitioner can ask this simple question: Why is my teacher better at these techniques than I am? The teacher is not better simply because she has more techniques. Generally speaking, having more techniques isn’t what makes each particular practitioner effective. Is the teacher’s superiority a matter of size, speed, or strength, or is the superiority the result of something else?
to her opponent’s attack and still avoid being hit. Contrast such a case with the defender who has both a superior sense of position and a greater sensitivity to anticipating attacks. The superior sense of position might mean the defender has to cover less distance to avoid the attack or merely adjusts her angle to the attacker (e.g., the boxer who slips just under the punch or the taijiquan practitioner who slightly turns her waist) and the greater sensitivity (e.g., recognizing visual cues about the nature and direction of the attack or feeling the initiation of pressure applied to the body) affords her more time to make the adjustment, which is essential if the defender is slower than the attacker. Higher-level anticipatory skills also allow for greater energy conservation.

While anticipating the nature and direction of the attack is a general skill, it will be instantiated differently depending on the combat range in which the practitioner operates. In Merleau-Ponty’s terms, training at different ranges will reveal different types of solicitations in the combat environment. Mid- to far-range striking arts will rely heavily on visual solicitations to anticipate attacks. Closer range striking arts (such as wing chun or northern praying mantis) will likely rely on arm and hand sensitivity to feel the opponent’s movements. Grappling arts will rely on how the opponent’s weight feels against the entire body. Different types of weapons training may involve distinct skills related to anticipating attacks as well. The meaning of the combat environment as a network of solicitations will vary depending on the kind of art studied.

Positional awareness not only provides information about what the opponent can do; it also provides information about what the opponent cannot do. This means that positional awareness plays a role in anticipatory success. Of course, positional awareness also provides the practitioner with information about her movement or technique options. An attack, whether empty-handed or with a weapon, initiated from one location with a specific trajectory and terminus affords some follow-up movements and prevents others. A skilled martial artist might wisely move into the space least accessible to their opponent’s subsequent attack. Indeed, one can control an opponent not only by immobilizing them but also by only giving them certain movement options. By using positional awareness, the martial artist can be one step ahead of their opponents. The specific nature of positional awareness will depend on the type of martial art. Drills which develop a student’s ability to recognize likely movement trajectories from various points of initiation would be one way to begin to develop better positional awareness.

The degree to which purposive or intentional skill development is in contrast with technique acquisition seems to vary from art to art and from teacher to teacher. Often students acquire some of the relevant skills by trial and error and without much conscious awareness. Students repeatedly try to get techniques to work on each other and over time they start to be more successful without having a clear sense as to why. In other cases, students are given specific drills or exercises which are not techniques but which develop basic abilities needed to perform techniques more effectively. The teacher is fully aware that the purpose of the drills is the development of specific skills. In still other instances, techniques are taught and drilled in such a way that students are instructed to pay attention to certain salient features conducive to skill acquisition. Rather than a more haphazard acquisition of skill through trial and error, the student is guided to focus on certain elements to enhance the efficacy of training.

Master Hong provided a clear and thorough account of the fundamental skill of Chen style taijiquan in terms of chansijin. These kinds of conceptual resources are not necessarily available in all martial arts. My hope is that martial artists can enhance their own practice by researching the skills that underlie the effective use of their techniques. The very fact that martial artists make normative claims about practice and evaluative claims about the efficacy of different practitioners shows a basic grasp of the distinction between skill and technique. Once the underlying skills are identified, attempts can be made to improve the efficiency with which those skills are developed. From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodiment, skill development is a matter of continuously refining the ability to recognize the right sorts of solicitations and then responding appropriately to them. In turn, refinements in response will enrich the solicitations of the combat environment, affording yet a greater range of responses.

The analysis I’ve offered lets us say more precisely what constitutes bad or ineffective training. Ineffective training is training which fails to develop a proper relationship between solicitations and responses. For example, relying too heavily on choreographed routines might actually develop an insensitivity to certain solicitations because practitioners rely on their prior knowledge of what movement comes next rather than refining their anticipatory awareness. Training two-person routines with overly cooperative partners might inhibit both solicitation awareness and response refinement. If the cooperative partner always performs an attack in such a way as to make the partner’s response effective, the partner is never forced to adapt and to refine the response.

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25 Mroz (2016) provides an excellent example of positional awareness when he writes of the ways in which multiple movement types – both martial art and non-martial art – can be understood in terms of Master Hong’s positive and negative circles.

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One of the more colorful realizations of the age-old striking versus grappling rivalry came in 1976, in a fight billed as boxing versus professional wrestling. Unlike similar matches throughout history, however, this event featured the heavyweight world champion, Muhammad Ali, and the most popular Japanese professional wrestler of the day, Antonio Inoki. Investigating this event through the lens of applied linguistic anthropology reveals much about the contextual social dynamics at play. Sources including newspaper reports, interviews with witnesses and those involved, and private correspondence are considered as they unveil the complicated truth behind Ali vs. Inoki, the fight that marked a turning point in the career of history’s most celebrated boxing champion. Analysis reveals that the event was a public failure because of communication breakdown on myriad fronts. Consequently, I argue that the fight itself should be viewed as a robust form of communication in which the nuances of dialect are at play.

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Boxing and wrestling both fall under the category of ‘combative art’, displays of which are public affairs managed and frequented in the same manner as theater productions. They are therefore subject to the same social criteria as other, similar types of performance. This being the case, theoretical work in performance studies is crucial to the understanding of why some contests or performances succeed while others fail. To that end, I examine the case of Ali vs. Inoki, an unusual event in the history of both boxing and wrestling that exemplifies the ways in which such performances can fail as a result of lapses in communication and assumptions of responsibility. In the interest of organization, I have separated the key aspects of the combative performance into various sections which will complement one another and, together, will help in the attempt to understand this historic event.

ALI VS. INOKI

In 1976, Muhammad Ali still held the world heavyweight title, but he was approaching the end of his career. Due to the nature of boxing as a public spectacle, popularity with the audience is of key importance. Ali was known as a showman, gifted with a ‘mouth that could sell tickets faster than a computerized vending machine’ [Drake 1976a]. His skill with his words convinced promoters to bring him opponents; his skill with his hands ensured that said opponents returned home soundly beaten.

That same over-the-top, charming arrogance attracted the attention of Japanese fight fans. In March of 1975, a Japanese professional wrestling promoter met Ali at a party. Ali allegedly asked – off-the-cuff, it seems, as no reliable English-speaking witnesses have corroborated it – why there were no ‘Oriental fighters’ to challenge him [TV Asahi 2009]. The response from Japan came in the form of a challenge by wrestler Kanji ‘Antonio’ Inoki. Manager and fight promoter Bob Arum, who was involved with the overseas television distribution of the event, alleges that ‘the whole thing was supposed to be fixed’ [Hauser 1991: 336]. Reality, however, proved to be stranger than any fiction.

The contest was bizarre. The Japanese competitor spent much of the fifteen three-minute rounds on his back kicking the boxer’s legs. It is important to note that, while the event was billed as a match of styles, in fact ‘the rules [had] been so seriously modified that the contest [was] no longer boxing versus wrestling … Ali [could] grapple or punch the man down [but] Inoki [was] not allowed to leg-dive or tackle’ [Draeger 1976]. Here, then, was a pair of professional athletic performers operating outside their standard frames of reference and in accordance with rules that had been miscommunicated between the two camps. Ali was expecting a choreographed exhibition; Inoki was looking for a fight.

STYLE

The boxer versus wrestler premise is an interesting one as, cursorily, it’s a nonsense competition. To my knowledge, a football versus yoga premise has never been of interest to spectators. The draw of an inter-sport event seems irrational on its face. Yet, mixed-style fights have seen extraordinary popularity with audiences since at least the early 20th century and are now a mainstay of television in the form of mixed martial arts (MMA) organizations like the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). Still, this match was unusual given that it was billed not simply as boxing versus wrestling but, more specifically, professional wrestling. Professional wrestling differs from all other varieties of wrestling insofar as it is a form of theater rather than athletic competition. For the premise of Ali vs. Inoki to make sense as a performance, we must turn to the issue of ‘style’. Richard Schechner argues that ‘each human group – family, circle of friends, workgroup, ensemble – develops its own dialect of movement. Artists are particularly adept at constructing variations of basic codes. This is what “style” is all about’ [Schechner 1990: 32].

On a more minute level, these dialects of movement contain what Schechner calls ‘bits’ [Schechner 1990: 41]. A bit is one of the smaller parts of a given performance that, by itself, doesn’t necessarily convey meaning to an audience, but, when fitted together with other bits, contributes to the greater whole of the given performance. For an individual to converse within the context of a style, he must first undergo a process that Schechner refers to as ‘restored behavior’ [Schechner 1985: 35]. The notion here is to ‘get in touch with, recover, remember, or even invent these strips of behavior and then rebehave according to these strips’ [Schechner 1985: 36]. By unlearning previously held assumptions and integrating a style’s bits into their repertoire, the performer becomes conversant in that style.

Style is vital to understanding combative performance disciplines like boxing and wrestling. When two boxers compete, they have a mutual agreement. While each fighter is a unique human being, the overall aesthetic of a boxing match tends to involve predictable elements, primarily due to the rules in place. Likewise, professional wrestling performances are generally more alike in composition than they are different. Schechner’s ‘bits’, then, are the smaller pieces from which competitions are created. The jabs, crosses, and hooks that make up a boxing contest and the holds, pins, and locks of a wrestling display are bits – the smaller units that make up a combative style’s dialect of movement.
FRAME

Given that styles are, for our purposes, dialects, it is useful to examine what sort of communication is taking place by means of these dialects. In this case, 'communication' simply refers to the transfer of intended information from one party to another. With this in mind, communication can be said to be successful when the intended information is understood by all parties. Conversely, different perceptions result in a failure to communicate.

While prizefighting and grappling may appear brutal at times, the purpose of these endeavors has nothing to do with senseless violence. Indeed, if pointless, unadulterated violence were the only reason for purchasing an event ticket, it would be both easier and more cost-effective to simply watch the evening news. Even Ali, in the midst of disparaging his Japanese opponent, felt it necessary to correct one of his handlers, who told Ali to 'kill him': 'No, I don't believe in killing. I only want to annihilate him' [Drake 1976b].

What, then, is the purpose of such rough play? Gregory Bateson holds that actions themselves, in play, can stand for something altogether different from the more intense actions they might represent in other contexts. When, in his example, animals are playing and they nip one another, that nip is representative of a bite. An actual bite would cause a different and serious interaction, so the nip is used instead. Further, the nip doesn’t indicate that a fight is occurring, but rather that the situation at hand is play [Bateson 2000 (1955): 180].

When applying this logic to a prizefight, it is important to consider Ali’s insistence that he doesn’t believe in killing. Clearly, the idea of a fight, with rules and a referee, is not the same thing in his mind as uncontrolled violence between people, which I will refer to as a ‘brawl’. In the case of a brawl, play ceases to be a concern and one should most certainly fear for one’s life. So, one difference between a fight and a brawl rests in the ultimate likelihood of death. Bateson notes that a man watching a 3D movie in which a spear is thrown directly at him can be consciously aware that no physical harm will come to him, ‘but these images … really evoke that terror which would have been evoked by a real spear’ [Bateson 2000 (1955): 183].

Bateson suggests that psychological frames are exclusive, inclusive, have ‘premises’, and are metacommunicative [Bateson 2000 (1955): 187-188]. The frame, by its nature, excludes that which is not in the frame. Logically, then, the frame includes only that which is seen within the boundaries of the frame. The term ‘premise’ indicates that the frame ‘tells the viewer that he is not to use the same sort of thinking in interpreting the picture that he might use in interpreting the wallpaper outside the frame’ [Bateson 2000 (1955): 187-188]. Last, the frame is metacommunicative in that the frame itself is important when interpreting the image within the frame [Bateson 2000 (1955): 188].

While psychological framing happens in all contexts at all times, it is helpful to examine a few ways in which the concept operates with regards to combative performance. The athletes, as people, function via their ‘performer’ frames within the ring. This is the primary level on which Ali and Inoki differ. In a typical boxing contest, one attempts to strike the opponent more times, or at least with greater force, than one is struck. It is preferable for one, as both a performer and an athlete, to knock one’s opponent to the ground. Not only is the act of downing the other competitor exciting to an audience, in modern professional rules one need only floor one’s opponent three times in a single round to achieve victory by ‘technical knockout’. Professional wrestlers, however, are charged with working cooperatively to entertain fans. They aren’t permitted to strike with closed fists. Perhaps most pertinent to the current issue, their objective is not to batter the opponent as in boxing. Even within the same ring, the boxer and the wrestler experience different psychological frames.

We can think of a performance in terms of what Schechner calls the ‘whole performance sequence’ [Schechner 1990: 43]. This includes all the preparation beforehand, the performance proper, and the experience thereafter. This, he says, qualifies the performance as a kind of ritual identical to what Schechner calls ‘restored behavior’ [Schechner 1990: 43]. This process of restored behavior – unlearning and then putting the bits together – is composed of parallel but different frames by the boxer and the wrestler. The boxer spends his time training, watching videos of his opponent, and generating a strategy to defeat the

1 Gregory Bateson acknowledges that even animals communicate via play engaged in an interactive sequence of which the unit actions or signals were similar to but not the same as those of combat. It was evident ... that the sequence as a whole was not combat, and evident to the human observer that to the participant monkeys this was ‘not combat’ [Bateson 2000 (1955): 179].

While a fight is controlled with timed rounds, observed by a referee and a medical doctor, and stopped the moment a combatant appears to be in danger of permanent injury, the psychological experience of someone in the midst of a sanctioned fight may be no different from that of someone engaged in a brawl. However, his behavior remains in accordance with the rules of professional pugilism or wrestling, just as the man watching a 3D movie doesn’t run out of the theater. Here, it is important to apply another one of Bateson’s concepts: The psychological frame.
combatant across the ring. The wrestler also trains, but in coordination with his partner, who assumes the role of enemy combatant only for a brief time and in an explicitly performative context.

In Ali vs. Inoki, the roles were strangely reversed. The Ali team believed that the event was to be an exhibition in which the two men would not genuinely try to damage each other. The manager/promoter Bob Arum later testified that ‘what happened was, some Japanese guys came to Herbert [Ali’s business manager] with the deal … and the whole thing was supposed to be fixed’ [Hauser 1991: 336]. In an interview for a TV Asahi special about the fight, however, Inoki’s interpreter for the event, Ken Tajima, recalled that ‘Ali asked me when the rehearsal [would be]. Mr. Inoki and I had thought from the beginning that it was a real fight. [I thought] he knew that, too. I said, “There’s no rehearsal”. He asked, “Isn’t it an exhibition?” I think the Ali side was startled’ [TV Asahi 2009, my translation].

**GROUPS**

The exchange between Ali and Tajima is indicative of how far down miscommunication went before, during, and after this event and it is the key to understanding why the public reaction to the event was so negative. In particular, this verbal interaction represents what Dell Hymes – employing Bateson’s psychological frames – describes as ‘an expressive aspect to the cognitive style of an individual or group’ [Hymes 1962: 20]. Ali spoke as he thought, as did Tajima, but their modes of thinking were contradictory, so communication failed. This is one side of the problem that occurred inside the ring on the evening of the fight.

For the present purposes, we can consider a style (either boxing or wrestling) to be equivalent to a linguistic form. We have already established that styles are composed of bits which, put together, form the basis of a mode of communication. Like the monkeys that Bateson observed in play, the mode of communication need not be verbal to be understood. Hymes offers an elegant and succinct explanation:

The use of a linguistic form identifies a range of meanings. A context can support a range of meanings. When a form is used in a context, it eliminates the meaning possible to that context other than those that form can signal; the context eliminates from consideration the meanings possible to the form other than those that context can support. The effective meaning depends upon the interaction of the two. [Hymes 1962: 19]

When considering a style as a linguistic form, it becomes apparent that two people speaking languages as different as Japanese and English (or boxing and wrestling) will, inevitably, not understand each other. By altering the rules, as legendary martial arts studies pioneer Donn Draeger notes, the event ceases to be the sum of its components and, in fact, bears little resemblance to them. Added to which, there is another level of miscommunication. Not only were the two performers speaking different languages (both literally and figuratively), the rules employed on the evening of the fight eliminated large portions of their individual styles’ potential meanings.

The context provided to the participants in Ali vs. Inoki was one with which neither side was familiar. Consequently, the match was ‘insufferably boring. For fifteen rounds, Inoki crab-walked around the ring, horizontal to the canvas, kicking at Ali’s legs. That was the fight. Ali threw six punches’ [Hauser 1991: 337]. Even within the professional wrestling context, Inoki’s tactic was highly unusual. This occurred because the context provided (that is, the special rules of the match) precluded the possibility of traditional wrestling holds and takedowns.

Hymes goes on to say that ‘members of a group have conceptions and expectations as to the distribution of speech functions among situations, and insofar as several functions are co-present, it is a matter of expectations as to relative hierarchy’ [Hymes 1962: 38]. Because situations dictate both potential speech functions and potential meanings with a group, and because different groups may approach the same situation as part of unrelated frames, the expectations that the members of one group have of another when their frames overlap in the physical world may not match at all.

Ali vs. Inoki dealt with three groups, each of which perceived the situation as part of a different frame. The Ali team, specializing in boxing, didn’t treat the fight as being of any real danger. Inoki’s group, experienced in professional wrestling, prepared themselves for a legitimate match. The audience, too, must be considered as the primary reason for any professional athletic contest to take place. Without a paying audience, little cause exists to perform at all. Ali asserted on television in May of 1976 that ‘people expect these things of me … it’s interesting. People want to know what would a boxer do with a wrestler. What’s going to happen if Ali gets his arm twisted?’ [Hauser 1991: 336].

The title at stake was, of course, not Ali’s heavyweight belt, but rather one invented for the contest, the ‘World Martial Arts Championship’ [Nixon 1976]. While the frames in which the combatants functioned differentiated between boxing and wrestling, the target audience for the event understood both styles to fall under a single, larger frame called ‘martial arts’, thereby providing the chance to promote such an abnormal contest. It was the broadcast audience’s frame that must be taken into account in order to understand why Ali vs. Inoki took place at all.
PERFORMANCE

Despite the confusion across cultures, language barriers, and styles, everyone involved, including the audience, agreed that the match was less-than-ideal. Arum referred to it as 'the nightmare to end all nightmares, and the best thing would have been not to do it at all' [Hauser 1991: 337]. Stars and Stripes reporter Kent Nixon quipped that 'the worst thing that can be said about the Ali-Inoki event is that it started. The best thing that can be said about it is that it ended' [Nixon 1976]. And Draeger commented that 'the whole thing was disgusting' [Draeger 1976].

It seems eminently straightforward that the outcome of a fight, whether boxing or wrestling, is binary. That is, one participant will win and the other will lose. The possibility also exists, although much less common, that a fight may be called a draw (neither opponent wins) or a 'no contest' (some unforeseen factor delegitimizes a contest, such as a natural disaster or an accidental injury). In the case of Ali vs. Inoki, the fight was ruled a draw by referee Gene LeBell [Nixon 1976].

Not all fights that end in a draw are regarded so poorly by the public, nor are all fights in which one party wins considered a success. Two fights prior to Ali vs. Inoki, the champion faced a relatively unknown challenger named Jimmy Young. Ali didn't take the fight seriously and came to the ring out of shape and much heavier than he'd appeared in any other fight up to that point [Hauser 1991: 333]. Hauser’s description of the event is telling:

Young, who might have won with a more aggressive battle plan, was a largely passive figure. On six occasions when Ali had him cornered, the challenger literally stuck his head outside the ropes, forcing a halt in the action. The result, wrote Mark Kram, was 'some of the worst and most numbing rounds in heavyweight history'. Ali won a unanimous decision, but as a showman he'd failed. Even Angelo Dundee, who was legendary for looking at the bright side of things, acknowledged that Ali's performance had been 'the worst of his career'. [Hauser 1991: 333]

Richard Bauman’s ideas of performance and responsibility are helpful at this juncture. His concept of performance ‘calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of communication and gives license to the audience to regard it and the performer with special intensity. Performance makes one communicatively accountable’ [Bauman 1992: 44]. Because we have already established that a style of fighting is a means of communication, this description of performance holds important implications for the athletes performing a fight. Beyond simply brawling, a fighter must show his skill in communicating to the audience.

Bauman suggests that ‘the relative dominance of [a] performance … will depend on the degree to which the performer assumes responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill and effectiveness as against other communicative functions’ [Bauman 1992: 44]. That Ali neglected to ‘assume responsibility’ in his fight with Young explains why the champion received such negative criticism. We must note, too, that Young, with a more active strategy, might have made the display a success, but also slacked in his responsibility. It isn’t enough, then, to simply outdo one’s opponent; the combative performer must display communicative competence.

Competence is primarily displayed to the audience, but by what means does the audience validate the actions of the performers? Bauman says: ‘All performance, like all communication, is situated, enacted, and rendered meaningful within socially defined situational contexts’ [Bauman 1992: 46]. Society deems it acceptable that a performance is taking place, and so it does. Not only does it occur, but the parameters of the event are defined by the society – in effect, by the audience. By not having an established context for an event like Ali vs. Inoki, the audience was taking a greater risk than usual by allowing the performance to take place. The failure was chiefly the fault of the performers to successfully navigate the situation, but the audience, which actively took part in the event by patronizing it, also failed to some extent due to the fighters’ decisions.

SPECULATION

The ring is where the bulk of the failure happened. Alfred Schutz offers an explanation on the personal level as to the mechanics behind the two performers’ mutual failure. He describes a hypothetical scenario in which a musician is given a sonata to sight read [Schutz 1964: 167-168]. The musician, unfamiliar with the particulars of the piece at hand, must rely on previous experience to play the song, which ‘becomes the scheme of reference for his interpretation of its particularity. This scheme of reference determines, in a general way, the player’s anticipations of what he may or may not find in the composition before him’ [Schutz 1964: 168].

This example is especially pertinent to the subject at hand because Ali and Inoki, both the highest-level practitioners in their respective styles, had experiences from which to draw assumptions. These experiences, as with the musician, include similar-yet-different cases, such as an opponent of a similar body type or a referee with a similar disposition. More abstractly, though, each performer has an image of how the other does or might behave. This, it seems, is as much at the root of Ali and Inoki’s failed performance as anything.

Applied Linguistics, Performance Theory and Muhammad Ali’s Japanese Failure
Jared Miracle

MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

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Schutz’ pianist is preoccupied with the thinking of the piece’s composer, with the ‘grasping of the composer’s musical thought … which become[s] “thematic” for [the pianist’s] ongoing activity of re-creation [Schutz 1964: 169]. While the action in the fight ring, in both boxing and wrestling, is improvisational in nature and generally lacks an erstwhile absent choreographer, the notion of thematic activity, like a shadow cast over the performer’s efforts, is still highly applicable.

During the above-mentioned television interview, Ali speculated: ‘I’m betting I can hit him before he can grab me. With my dancing and moving, I can’t see him getting close enough to hit me without me hitting him. This man is a wrestler. He’s not used to taking hard shots to the head’ [Hauser 1991: 336]. Although his statements were intended to promote the fight (which, at that point, he still believed would be choreographed), they were also clearly intended to highlight how a fighter would actually approach such a situation.

The question of what the other performer would do also influenced the rules that were outlined for the fight. Draeger mentions that ‘the main concern was to not injure Ali, causing Inoki to complain that by the rules and this concern there was damn little that he could do to make it look good’ [Draeger 1976]. The rule prohibiting Inoki from performing any standard wrestling takedowns seems to have been thought up with the goal of displaying Ali’s skill while making Inoki appear inept. Seemingly, the grappler’s only option was to trade blows with the heavyweight boxing champion of the world – a notion that he likely found distasteful.

Prior to the fight, a public display of the participants’ skill took place in which Inoki and several other professional wrestlers demonstrated various types of kicks. It was clear that Inoki intended to neutralize his opponent’s advantage by targeting the only remaining exploitable area: leg strikes. Ali, upon seeing the tactic’s undoubted effectiveness, became outraged and called for further rules to be put in place which prohibited ‘kicks from a standing position’ [TV Asahi, 2009, my translation]. Staged or not, Ali did not want to risk serious injury from an unplanned hard strike. Inoki’s only recourse was the obscure attack of kicking from a prone position, which, in conjunction with Ali’s unwillingness to wrestle, caused the performance to fail.

**FAILURE**

Bauman states that performance ‘assigns to an audience the responsibility of evaluating the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer’s accomplishment’ [Bauman 1992: 44]. Based on reactions from *Stars and Stripes*, members of Ali’s entourage, and the claim by Draeger that the arena janitorial staff at the vaunted Budokan needed almost a full day to clean up the garbage that was hurled at the two “combatants” [for] their lousy performance’ [Draeger 1976], it can comfortably be said that, in the public eye, the performance did not go over well.

While several factors led to this failure, the core issues centered on the fighters’ contrasting approaches to the event and the audience’s perception. The audience and the performers represented three different psychological frames, all of which encompassed the same event. Based on statements by Ali, it seems that the public (at least, the public who patronized the event in question) included both boxing and wrestling in the same frame, which we can label ‘combat sports’. This enabled the promoters to market such an event of mixed disciplines.

Ali, an experienced competitor, perceived the frame of professional wrestling as ‘not real’ and appears to have planned accordingly. Inoki, a professional wrestler, also had a frame of understanding, but it focused on Ali and the notion that boxing is more ‘real’ than his own area of expertise. I propose that the framing tool serves to explain the confusion between the two performers when coupled with Schutz’ explanation of thematic activity. Because the two performers practiced different styles (composed of related though notably different bits) they had to rely on previous experience for an image of what to expect from the other competitor, and therefore how to respond.

Due to the obscure rules applied prior to the event, Inoki was incapable of behaving as a wrestler might be expected to behave. Rather, he circumvented the rules intended to make him trade blows with Ali by assuming a horizontal position and kicking the boxer’s legs. Because neither fighter had a reference of prior experience from which to draw, and because their respective styles lacked any modes of communication for such an arrangement, very little action took place.

Given that Inoki’s goal was to win the match and Ali’s was to avoid injury, neither performer took responsibility for the success of the performance. They also each failed in these respective aims, with Ali on the receiving end of lasting damage to his legs and Inoki falling short in his aim to defeat the heavyweight champion. In Bauman’s model success hinges on ‘a display of communicative skill and effectiveness’ [Bauman 1992: 44]. Because physical communication in a combative dialect (either boxing or wrestling) calls for competent technique, which was not displayed by either participant, the performance was a failure. Finally, although one may argue that this conflict eventually resulted in a positive outcome (i.e., the combatants becoming friends), the value of the performative event was in the moment immediately before, during, and after the fight. Far-flung outcomes notwithstanding, the present model considers the event to have been a failure.
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This article argues that Donnie Yen’s *Ip Man* series (2008-2015) synthesizes two predominant unarmed, hand-to-hand combat traditions of Hong Kong martial arts cinema – what I call *zhenshi* (真實; authenticity) and *shizhan* (實戰; combativity), represented by the series of kung fu films featuring Kwan Tak-hing as the legendary Wong Fei-hung and the martial arts action films of Bruce Lee respectively. Despite kung fu cinema’s claim to ‘realism’ since its conception in the 1949, there is a strong suppression of *wu* (武; the martial) in the genre’s action aesthetics due to the elevation of *wen* (文; the literary and the artistic) in traditional Chinese culture. By exposing the inherent contradictions within kung fu cinema and incorporating of combative action aesthetics derived from Bruce Lee’s martial arts philosophy and wing chun principles – what I call *kuai* (快; speed), *hen* (狠; brutality), and *zhun* (準; precision), the series presents new possibilities of *wu* and offers a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese kung fu.
Ip Man / 叶问 [2008-2015] is a series of films starring Donnie Yen based on the life of world famous wing chun grandmaster Ip Man [1893–1972]. Part of his fame comes from the fact that he is the celebrated shifu (師傅; master) of Bruce Lee. As Paul Bowman pointedly argues, 'both Ip Man and wing chun are now world famous solely because the most famous student was Bruce Lee' [Bowman 2013: 179]. Granted, Lee played a huge role in thrusting the style and its action aesthetics. Despite the terminological ambiguity and complexity, there are primarily two subgenres: wuxia, which refers to martial arts films that center on 'a cult of the sword', and kung fu, which refers to martial arts films that emphasize 'the art of fist-fighting' [Teo 2009: 4].

In this article, the intrinsic and complex linkage between kung fu and authenticity/realism/the 'real' will be examined in detail. Although the term kung fu has been used to encompass all kinds of unarmed combat [Sek 1980: 32; Bordwell 2011: 27; Desser 2000: 463; Hunt 2003: 21; Teo 2009: 81], this article will focus more specifically on Southern Chinese kung fu styles, Confucian humanism, and Cantonese culture. These are the three pillars constituting traditional kung fu cinema since Kwan Tak-hing’s Wong Fei-hung films (1949–1981). To designate martial arts films not sharing the above three characteristics, a third subgenre which I will refer to as martial arts action needs to be formulated. While ‘martial arts action’ is often used as a generic term indicating ‘any type of motion picture containing martial arts’ [Teo 2009: 2], in this article, it is used to indicate films in the shizhan tradition, a crucial concept that I will elaborate in detail.

Under this new classification, Bruce Lee’s films in the early 1970s should be placed outside the lineage of kung fu cinema proper. Although the early Wong Fei-hung films and Bruce Lee films are conspicuously at variance in terms of their themes and action aesthetics [Teo 2009: 75; Bordwell 2011: 32], a clear distinction between the two has never been made. It is not my intention to suggest that Kwan and Lee share nothing, as Kwan may be considered a ‘precursor’ to Lee’s emergence in the 1970s [Teo 2009: 75]. However, it is crucial to separate the two in order to address the often-ignored nuances/differences within the unarmed combat tradition of Hong Kong martial arts cinema.

Despite their common emphasis on ‘realism’, a convoluted term that I will elucidate later, there are key differences between zhenshi and shizhan. The shizhan tradition is derived from Bruce Lee’s martial arts philosophy. Jeet Kune Do (JKD), or the ‘Way of the Intercepting Fist’, privileges practicality over intricacy, efficiency over complexity, quick fights over extended dance-like performances [Li 2001: 527; Anderson 2009: 192]. As this relates to genre, the shizhan paradigm can often be

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1 Wing chun, as a part of the nanpai (南派; The Southern School) Chinese martial arts circulating in Southern China after the burning down of the Shaolin temple in the Qing Dynasty, is said to originate from Yim Wing Chun (葉妹春), a female student of Ng Mui (五娘), a Buddhist Nun.

2 In his theorization of Chinese film theory, Victor Fan uses the term bizhen (逼真) (approaching reality) to describe the notion that cinema, in its state of imperfection, is a potentiality that can approach reality but never fully actualize it [Fan 2015: 9]. While bizhen is insightful in the context of Shanghai cinema in the 1930s, zhenshi and shizhan are specifically developed for Hong Kong martial arts cinema, which addresses the divergent yet interconnected genres of kung fu and martial arts action.

3 Action aesthetics here refers to different representational strategies of choreographing/filming/editing martial arts performances, such as David Bordwell’s ideas of ‘expressive amplification’, the ‘pause-burst-pause pattern’, and the ‘glimpset’, etc. [Bordwell 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2011]. For a more elaborate discussion of action aesthetics, see Barrowman [2014].
The zhenshi tradition, as mentioned before, is archivally, philosophically, and regionally specific. Originating from the Wong Fei-hung films, it highlights unparalleled, authentic hand-to-hand combat and ‘realist’ representations of traditional Chinese martial arts [Chiao 1981: 33; Teo 2009: 71; Bordwell 2000a: 203]. The concept of ‘realism’, unfortunately, carries with it tremendous theoretical baggage linked to Western film theory, particularly the writings of André Bazin. It would require a different article to articulate its complex application to martial arts cinema [Barrowman 2014]. In the context of kung fu cinema, however, ‘realism’ can be understood as the genre’s need to differentiate itself from ‘the fantastic and stage-derived elements of earlier martial arts films’ [Sek 1980: 28] such as shenguai wuxia (神怪武俠; strange and bizarre wuxia films with gods and spirits) [Teo 2009: 71].

In the Chinese language, both zhenshi and shizhan highlight the concept of shi (實; combat/zhan (戰; war), hence prioritizing practicality and lethality in real combat. 7

In addition, given traditional kung fu cinema’s connection with Confucianism [Sek 1980: 29], zhenshi has a humanistic connotation. In the daxue (大學; The Great Learning) chapter of liji (禮記; The Classic of Rites), seeking what is truthful through gewu (格物; careful investigation of things) is a means to mingde (明德; illustration of virtue). Transcending the external forms of martial arts, the ultimate intent of pursuing zhenshi is to develop virtuosity. In other words, practicality has not been the primary concern of traditional kung fu cinema according to the Confucian code. Conversely, the emphasis on zhenshi in Lee’s films does not necessarily signify the truthful or the virtuous.

Rather than adopting existing terms such as authenticity and realism, zhenshi and shizhan can better address different dimensions of wu in the context of Hong Kong martial arts cinema. It should be noted that both paradigms, similar to Hunt’s notion of authenticity, are guiding principles delineating different components of ‘the real’ and should not be used interchangeably with kung fu and martial arts action genres (i.e., ‘zhenshi films’ or ‘shizhan films’) [Hunt 2003: 21].

By synthesizing the two traditions, the Ip Man series makes three contributions to the development of the kung fu genre. First, it challenges the enduring stereotype that Chinese kung fu is ‘chop-socky’ [Teo 1997: 110; Fore 1997: 241; Desser 2000: 40; Yau 2001: 11; Yu 2015: 21]. Based on the straight-line and center-line principles, wing chun is represented as a swift, robust, and practical martial art in the series. The series addresses the combative dimension of Chinese kung fu, which has long been suppressed by the zhongwen qingwu (重文輕武; place greater value on wen than wu) stigma in traditional Chinese culture [Louie and Edwards 1994: 145]. I will elaborate on this later in the first section.

Second, it problematizes conventional definitions of kung fu cinema exemplified by Bruce Lee.8 Followed by the ‘kung fu craze’ in the 1970s, it has been taken for granted that Bruce Lee is synonymous with the term ‘kung fu’ [Louie 2002: 146]. However, a closer examination of his films and his philosophy reveals incongruities between Lee and his predecessors.

Third, it elucidates the complexity of Leon Hunt’s tripartite framework of ‘authenticity’, which includes the archival (real technique), the cinematic (unmediated performance), and the corporeal (physical risk) [Hunt 2003: 29]. While Hunt’s framework has been frequently deployed in analyses of Hong Kong martial arts cinema, specific issues of kung fu cinema and martial arts action cinema have not been adequately addressed. The zhenshi and shizhan paradigms add specificity and clarity to the unarmed, hand-to-hand combat tradition for which the notion of authenticity fails to account.

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6 As a conglomeration of different martial arts styles, MMA incorporates virtually all forms of striking, wrestling, and submission grappling and allows practitioners to utilize almost every single part of their body to attack their opponent.

7 Kyle Barrowman developed the concept of ‘combative realism’ for the purpose of assessing the degree of realism... in a given cinematic fight scene. According to Barrowman, whether a fight scene appears ‘real’ depends on more than merely the presence of ‘really existing martial arts’ or ‘the bodily presence of actual combatants’; it also depends on, among other things, the particular historical context of the film/story, the skills of the particular characters, and the situational variables of the particular scene [Barrowman 2014].

8 In his pioneering study of Hong Kong martial arts films, Lau Shing-hon notes that the term ‘kung fu films’ came into general use in the 1970s, ‘with the appearance of Bruce Lee’s unarmed combat films, and it spread as the films themselves were distributed around the world’ [Lau 1980: 3].
Despite Lee’s incorporation of wing chun principles into his martial arts philosophy in JKD, his films seek to deviate from, rather than to reproduce, traditional kung fu cinema. Although the scope of this article does not allow me to examine the differences between Lee’s films and the earlier Wong Fei-hung films in detail, three major points deserve attention.

First, traditional Chinese martial arts are basically absent in Lee’s films. As Lee candidly expresses: ‘I’ve lost faith in the Chinese classical arts – though I still call mine Chinese – because, basically, all styles are a product of “land swimming”, even the wing chun school. So my line of training is more toward efficient street-fighting with everything goes’ [Lee quoted in Logan 1995: 11]. Although he learnt wing chun from Ip Man, Lee was highly critical of martial arts orthodoxy and his own art of JKD represented a radical challenge to it.

Second, although Lee’s films contain the ‘characteristics of loyalty, righteousness, and mateship’ [Louie 2002: 145], which bear some resemblance to traditional kung fu films, there are notable differences between them. As I will further elucidate in the discussion of the notion of hen, Lee’s aggressiveness, brutality, and sexuality differentiate him from the scholarly persona of traditional kung fu masters, such as Kwan’s (as well as Jet Li’s) Wong Fei-hung and Donnie Yen’s Ip Man, who are chiefly tranquil, tolerant, and pedagogical. Although Lee has been ‘recast as a philosopher and teacher’, his scholarly presence is less explicit when compared with Wong Fei-hung. In fact, his multiple ‘affairs’ in real life are plainly contradictory to Confucian values such as loyalty and righteousness [Louie 2002: 148].

Third, the distinctive Cantonese flavor of kung fu cinema is almost totally absent (e.g. lion-dancing, Chinese New Year customs, vernacular language). For instance, the setting of Fist of Fury is in the early republican period of Shanghai where the city was colonized by Western powers. The Big Boss / 唐山大兄 (1971) and The Way of the Dragon / 猛龍過江 (1972), meanwhile, deal with diasporic Chinese and their alienating experiences in foreign lands. Although Lee is mainly characterized as a martial artist from Hong Kong (with the exception of Fist of Fury), there is no explicit connection to Southern Chinese culture or customs in his films (except for a few shots showing Lee conversing with some Shaolin monks in the beginning of Enter the Dragon). Lee’s films are more international in scope and Guangdong culture does not receive the same attention as it does in the Wong Fei-hung films.

This differentiation is significant as kung fu cinema, insofar as the term ‘kung fu’ refers to unarmed combat, has been considered a unified genre. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that not all unarmed martial arts represented on the screen can be categorized as ‘kung fu’ if it is defined as a geographically, culturally, and philosophically specific style. Although the term kung fu (功夫) in the Cantonese vernacular can refer to the general accumulation of skill [Teo 2009: 4], which certainly includes different martial arts styles, a more specific definition is needed to make it academically useful.

Contrary to Bruce Lee’s subtle internationalization of kung fu in his films, Ip Man demonstrates a strong emphasis on combativey while maintaining a concrete link to the Chinese tradition. On the one hand, by featuring wing chun as an archival kung fu system in Foshan (a town in Guangdong province) and characterizing Ip Man as a scholarly and parental figure, the series preserves the zhenshi tradition. On the other hand, the practicality and efficiency of wing chun in the series is redolent of the shizhan tradition.

Although Jet Li’s Fearless / 霍元甲 [2006] largely incorporates the shizhan paradigm into its action aesthetics, it is less focused on the Southern tradition or nanpai (南派). As a Northern master, Huo Yuanjia (Jet Li) demonstrates extensive knowledge of weaponry and acrobatic movements, both of which are characteristic of beipai (北派; the Northern school) [Cao 1996: 271-273]. The difference between nanpai and beipai will be further examined in the section where I explicate the theatrical linkage of kung fu cinema. Despite the overall increase in combativity, the film’s accentuation of spectacular...
Addressing the Southern tradition, I have selected the Ip Man series rather than Fearless as the focus. The intention of this article is not to promote a conservative, orthodox concept of kung fu cinema. Rather, it is to posit that, by understanding the internal differences within the unarmed combat tradition between zhenshi and shizhan, one can better understand and analyze the latest development of kung fu cinema.

So far there have been six Ip Man biopics made. In addition to the Donnie Yen films, there have also been Herman Yau’s two films, The Legend is Born: Ip Man / 葉問前傳 [2010] and Ip Man: The Final Fight / 葉問:終極一戰 [2013], as well as Wong Kar-wai’s film, The Grandmaster / 一代宗師 [2012]. These films cover different periods of Ip’s life, which can basically be divided into three parts: luxurious days in Foshan before the Second World War, difficult times during the Japanese invasion in the 1940s, and relatively steady life as a wing chun master in Hong Kong after the 1950s.

Although there are other kung fu films featuring wing chun in the genre – most notably Shaolin Martial Arts / 洪拳與詠春 [1974], Warriors Two / 賢先生與找錢華 [1978], The Prodigal Son / 憶家仔 [1981], and Wing Chun / 詠春 [1994], which I will discuss later in this article – Ip as a key figure in the development of wing chun was not previously emphasized. Rather, the focus in these films was on Ip’s masters and grandmasters such as Chan Wah-shun, Ng Chung-so, Leung Chan, and Yim Wing-chun. Additionally, the wing chun in these earlier films is blended with other styles and ‘only survive[s] in fragments’ [Hunt 2003: 35]. As Hunt astutely points out, ‘Hung [in Warriors Two] never lets wing chun orthodoxy get in the way of his performers’ talents – Casanova Wong’s taekwondo kicking [or] his own flips and somersaults’ [Hunt 2003: 35]. Lastly, previous wing chun films highlighted the zhenshi tradition more than the shizhan tradition. Influenced by the popularity of kung fu comedy in the late 1970s [Sek 1980: 33-34], they feature slapstick fight scenes which counteract combative.

For as many interesting elements as there are to discuss in relation to the many Ip Man films that have been made to this point, this article focuses on the films starring Donnie Yen. When compared with, Dennis To (The Legend is Born: Ip Man), Anthony Wong (Ip Man: The Final Fight), and Tony Leung (The Grandmaster), Yen best encapsulates the idea of shizhan due to his diverse martial arts background. While traditional kung fu stars and authentic martial arts performances are present in other Ip Man films, such as Sammo Hung (as Chan Wah-shun, the first master of Ip Man) and Yuen Biao (as Ng Chung-so, the second master of Ip Man) in The Legend is Born, they bear closer resemblance to the zhenshi tradition.

As mentioned earlier, Yen’s early filmography in the late 1980s follows the shizhan tradition. He is known as ‘a favorite of genre purists for no-nonsense martial arts skills’ and a critic of ‘the “old school” of martial arts filmmaking that spends a lot of time and money on choreographing movements’ [Stokes and Hoover 1999: 134-135]. Despite his training in traditional Chinese kung fu, Yen is not keen on showcasing complex wushu forms and styles [Chan 2006: 157]. In terms of his filmography, Yen’s introduction of MMA into his choreography since the mid-2000s was a milestone in the industry. As demonstrated in films such as Killzone and Flash Point, Yen carries on Bruce Lee’s shizhan vision. Truly, these films have constructed Yen’s shizhan star persona, which in

14 There are other films that link kung fu with the shizhan tradition, such as Man of Tai Chi / 大極俠 [2013] and Kung Fu Killers / 一個人的武林 [2014]. These films deserve closer examination than can be provided in this article, but it is worth mentioning that both films feature traditional Chinese martial arts techniques while at the same time demonstrating a high degree of combative.

15 It is reported that a seventh Ip Man film (the fourth in Donnie Yen’s Ip Man series) is coming in 2017 with Yen reprising his role [Donnie Yen Official].
Synthesizing Zhenshi and Shizan

Wayne Wong

The multidisciplinary techniques of martial arts action films. Also, while the shizhan tradition can be identified in other martial arts action films in Hong Kong (as well as in Hollywood), the primary goal of this article is to explore how the Ip Man series merges the zhenshi and shizhan traditions, offering a new vision of wu in kung fu cinema.

The next section of this article will examine key frameworks of kung fu cinema and discuss how wu has been suppressed in the zhenshi tradition. Then the concepts of kuai, hen, and zhun will be introduced alongside Bruce Lee’s JKD philosophy and the principles of wing chun in order to address the shizhan dimension of kung fu cinema.

PROBLEMATIZING WU IN THE ZHENSHI TRADITION

WEN-WU, AUTHENTICITY, AND EXPRESSIVE AMPLIFICATION

Kung fu cinema is built on ‘the spirit of realism’ [Sek 1980: 28]. However, the connections between the concepts of the ‘real’ and the ‘martial’, or wu, deserve further scrutiny. First, the concept of wu is an ‘ambiguous’ concept. Kam Louie and Louise Edwards define it as a concept which embodies the power of military strength but also the wisdom to know when and when not to deploy this strength [Louie and Edwards 1994: 142]. The ideal figure of wu masculinity is Guang Yu, a major character in the Romance of the Three Kingdoms [1522]. Louie later applies the term to Bruce Lee and his films as a way to demonstrate how wu has been ’transformed’ by Western (Hollywood) constructions of masculinity [Louie 2002: 141]. Although wu can be applied to all kinds of martial arts films, it is crucial not to neglect the uniqueness of different subgenres. First, wu in Kwan Tak-hing’s kung fu cinema is more restrictive than that of Bruce Lee’s martial arts action films. Second, concerning action aesthetics, wu has disparate representational strategies in different subgenres, which I will explicate later in the essay.

With Hong Kong’s unique political situation after 1949, Sek Kei points out that Hong Kong filmmaking in the 1950s ‘retained close links with traditional Chinese culture’; in particular, kung fu cinema ‘promulgate[s] the traditional Chinese martial arts, together with a distinctively Chinese philosophy’ [Sek 1980: 28]. In other words, the virtuous dimensions of wu – the concept of wude (武德; martial virtue)23 – are transferred to the cinematic representation of kung fu.

Stokes and Hoover 1999: 134-138, imitation of Bruce Lee [Li 2001: 526], and transnational stardom in Hollywood [Hunt 2003: 179; Lo 2005: 132; Gateward 2009: 52]. In most cases, Yen’s name is only briefly mentioned as an additional example alongside stars like Jackie Chan and Jet Li, as he was not considered a prominent martial arts star before the Ip Man series. There has been increasing attention on Yen in recent studies of stardom. For examples, see [Hunt 2014] and [Funnell 2013].

In Ip Man 2, for example, when Ip is challenged by other masters in Hong Kong on a round table, he simply walks and jumps up there without any acrobatic movements. This creates a stark contrast with Northern masters who get on the table with specular somersaults.

In Ip Man, when Jin Shanzhao, the Northern master, announces that the Northern fist is defeated by the Southern one, Ip immediately replies: ‘It’s not the matter of the fist; it’s a matter of the person’. This statement has two levels of meaning. First, Ip wants Jin to humbly accept his defeat and not find a pretext for it. He understands that Jin is not a representative of the Northern Fist, nor does Ip represent the south. Second, the Southern-Northern division is not important to Ip. What he values is how a person practices his martial arts, be it Southern kung fu or Northern wushu.

It is worth noting that the selection of non-Chinese martial arts disciplines is pertinent to the level of combativity. The selected disciplines have often been portrayed in the martial arts genre as the opposite of kung fu in their forms and application. Western boxing is associated with physical prowess, masculinity, and efficiency, which is the opposite of the kung fu represented in cinema (e.g. weak, feminine, and ornamental). On the other hand, Muay Thai has a connotation of brutality due to its lethal knee and elbow techniques. This image has been reinforced by the rise of Southeast Asian martial arts action films such as the Ong Bak series [2003-2010] and The Raid series [2011-2014].

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With Hong Kong’s unique political situation after 1949, Sek Kei points out that Hong Kong filmmaking in the 1950s ‘retained close links with traditional Chinese culture’; in particular, kung fu cinema ‘promulgate[s] the traditional Chinese martial arts, together with a distinctively Chinese philosophy’ [Sek 1980: 28]. In other words, the virtuous dimensions of wu – the concept of wude (武德; martial virtue)23 – are transferred to the cinematic representation of kung fu.

21 In Ip Man, when Jin Shanzhao, the Northern master, announces that the Northern fist is defeated by the Southern one, Ip immediately replies: ‘It’s not the matter of the fist; it’s a matter of the person’. This statement has two levels of meaning. First, Ip wants Jin to humbly accept his defeat and not find a pretext for it. He understands that Jin is not a representative of the Northern Fist, nor does Ip represent the south. Second, the Southern-Northern division is not important to Ip. What he values is how a person practices his martial arts, be it Southern kung fu or Northern wushu.

22 It is worth noting that the selection of non-Chinese martial arts disciplines is pertinent to the level of combativity. The selected disciplines have often been portrayed in the martial arts genre as the opposite of kung fu in their forms and application. Western boxing is associated with physical prowess, masculinity, and efficiency, which is the opposite of the kung fu represented in cinema (e.g. weak, feminine, and ornamental). On the other hand, Muay Thai has a connotation of brutality due to its lethal knee and elbow techniques. This image has been reinforced by the rise of Southeast Asian martial arts action films such as the Ong Bak series [2003-2010] and The Raid series [2011-2014].

23 Specifically, it embodies the ‘seven virtues’, which are: ‘Suppressed violence, gathered in arms, protected what was great, established merit, gave peace to the people, harmonized the masses and propagated wealth’ [Louise and Edwards 1994: 142].

24 Wude epitomize[s]… the traditional Confucian virtues including li (禮; Propriety), yi (義; Righteousness), ren (仁; perseverance), shu (恕; forgiveness), renai (仁愛; charitable love), and heping (和平; peace) [Yu 1980: 83].
Although kung fu cinema is meant to be set apart from the fantastical wuxia and to emphasize instead ‘real’ fighting techniques, conflict is not resolved through the brutal killing or open humiliation of one’s opponent. It is not about martial prowess or winning street fights. At a deeper level, it accentuates philosophical and moral enlightenment through repetitive kung fu learning/practice [Sek 1980: 28].

As suggested by the Cantonese vernacular, the term ‘kung fu’ refers to an accumulation of skills through a long process [Teo 2009: 4]. It is not a shortcut that guarantees immediate results, but a persistent journey that a practitioner undertakes to expand their physical and mental limits while becoming a more ‘cultured’ person. In other words, kung fu not only inherently suppresses wu by highlighting the didactic dimension, it also features the promotion of wen as a strategy to further mitigate the emphasis of wu in kung fu cinema [Lau 1980: 3; Louie and Edwards 1994: 145].

Wen refers to ‘genteel, refined qualities that were associated with the literary and artistic pursuits of classical scholars’ [Louie and Edwards 1994: 141-142]. When translated to kung fu cinema, it constructs the literati persona of traditional kung fu masters. Contrary to Lee’s bold display of his kung fu body, a traditional kung fu master is more conservative in attire. These characters often wear plain changshan (長衫; long gown), covering the body, as a way to demonstrate modesty and humility (as opposed to Guang Yu’s wu warrior appearance).

The ideal wen role model is Confucius [Louie and Edwards 1994: 142]. Such a persona is literally transplanted into the original archetype of the kung fu master, from Wong Fei-hung and Huo Yuanjia to Ip Man. Along with poetry and calligraphy, the ‘literary pursuit’ of kung fu masters is reflected in their martial arts philosophy – the teaching of wude. As Louie states, ‘although manifestations of power such as physical size, martial skills and sheer brutality are indicators of wu masculinity, in themselves they are not sufficient to make the “real” yingxiong [Louie 2002: 29]. A ‘real’ kung fu yingxiong (英雄; hero) should be able to teach wude through his kung fu.

Although Confucian humanism is present in Louie’s original formulation of wu [Louie and Edwards 1994: 142], the fostering of wen constructs the scholarly presence of a kung fu master and further restricts the wu dimension of kung fu cinema. Undoubtedly, Wong Fei-hung is a pioneering kung fu hero that attempts to merge wu with wen,26 which is considered ‘the masculine ideal’ [Louie and Edwards 1994: 141-142]. However, the wu dimension in the Wong Fei-hung films has largely been restrained and displaced as zhongwen qingwu (‘place greater value on wen than wu’) is the prevalent ideology in Chinese culture [Louie and Edwards 1994: 145]. In other words, the concept of wu in Wong Fei-hung’s kung fu cinema (the zhenshi tradition) is different from that in Bruce Lee’s martial arts action cinema (the shizhan tradition) in which the former is more restrictive in demonstrating martial prowess and physical strength.

Apart from the traditional stigma, the shift from the martial to the metaphysical is also a result of the decreasing usefulness of kung fu in modernity. Viewing the ‘kung fu imaginary’ in Hong Kong cinemas as a ‘self-dismantling operation that denies its own effectiveness in modern life’ [Li 2001: 515], Siu-leung Li argues that kung fu shifts its focus from the martial to the art [Li 2001: 523]. This ‘artistic turn’ not only satisfies the demand of wen scholars and the suppression of wu, but it can also be considered as an approach to justify the teaching and learning of kung fu in the modern era where artillery predominantly replaces martial arts as the most effective way of killing.

Second, wu in the zhenshi tradition is problematized by the slippery notion of authenticity/realism, which has been the core of the study of kung fu cinema since the Wong Fei-hung series [Sek 1980: 28; Teo 2009: 70; Bordwell 2011: 129-130]. In this, a number of frameworks have been formulated in the past four decades. In 1980, for instance, Tony Rayns argued that ‘it is imperative to show protagonists full-length if their movements are to constitute the dynamics of the [martial arts performance]’ [Rayns 1980: 112]. Rayns’s idea of ‘full-length movements’ has become the basis for later scholars’ emphasis on the importance of long takes. Two decades later, Siu-leung Li proposed that authenticity is the central motif differentiating martial arts from other genres in Hong Kong cinema, which:

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26 It should also be noted that wu and wen are not mutually exclusive. As Louie astutely points out, Confucius was a proponent of archery and charioteering and encouraged the development of these wu arts in his students’ education’ [Louie and Edwards 1994: 143]. Thus, the issue is one of degree.

27 Apart from martial arts performance, the notion of ‘authenticity’ can also be approached from the perspective of identity [Hunt 2003: 22]. This reading focuses on the ideological and political connotations of kung fu cinema [Lo 2005: 81; Abbas 2006: 83]. The use of long takes and full-body framing in Bruce Lee’s films, for example, is read as a triumph of Western ‘realism’ over ‘Oriental fantasies’ [Chiao 1981: 33]. This kind of allegorical reading of kung fu cinema is particularly common in the late 1990s when Hong Kong was influenced by its reunification with China.
relies to a great extent on ‘accurate and faithful’ representations of the ‘authentic’ performance of kung fu itself on screen, and on the extent to which dangerous stunts in kung fu-action films are to be performed real with no cheating camera work.

[Li 2001: 522]

In addition, of course, there is also Hunt’s aforementioned tripartite scheme of authenticity. However, the notion of authenticity in kung fu cinema has been questioned by scholars. Stephen Teo questions the epistemological validity of the term. He asserts that the idea of ‘real kung fu’ is only a fantasy – a ‘representation [...] involving different forms of resemblance and performance and a high degree of choreography’ [Teo 2009: 70]. He also contends that the illusion is not solely created by filmmakers, as moviegoers are ‘complicit in their expectation that what they are seeing is real’ [Teo 2009: 70].

Gina Marchetti, on the other hand, questions the idea of ‘pure style’ in martial arts cinema [Marchetti 2014: 1]; she pointedly argues that the so-called ‘kung fu’ of Bruce Lee is a mixture of Japanese/Korean kicking techniques and Western boxing footwork rather than a faithful representation of wing chun or of any other Southern Chinese martial arts schools [Marchetti 2014: 2]. Her critique demands a clearer definition of different unarmed combat traditions – zhenshi and shizhan – within Hong Kong martial arts cinema. In short, the ambiguity and complexity of authenticity/realism have been the center of the debate for more than two decades.

Rather than rejecting ‘real kung fu’ as a cinematic illusion at the outset, it is more constructive to explore the relationship between authentic kung fu performance and its representations on screen.

As the latest reinvention of kung fu cinema, the Ip Man series problematizes existing frameworks insofar as the shizhan dimension of kung fu performance is not sufficiently addressed. First, while all real kung fu techniques are archivally authentic [Hunt 2003: 29], they are not equally efficient in demonstrating combativity. There is a martial hierarchy in kung fu cinema (and in martial arts cinema at large) structured by the practicality of the styles represented. Techniques with higher combative values often receive more attention in the genre.

In Lau Kar-leung (Liu Chia-Liang)’s works in the 1970s, for example, external hard styles (e.g. Shaolin) are more frequently and positively represented than internal soft styles (e.g. taijiquan). Moreover, priority is also given to Southern styles with clear, straightforward attacks rather than to Northern styles with symbolic and ornamental forms. This nanpai vs. beipai discourse is present in Ip Man 2, where it is arranged for Ip Man to fight with Northern masters from haguazhang (八卦; eight trigram palm) and tanglang quan (螳螂; praying mantis fist).

Furthermore, Hunt’s notion of archival authenticity is more applicable to kung fu cinema than to other subgenres, such as martial arts action. In Bruce Lee’s films and in Jackie Chan’s crime thrillers, such as the Police Story series / 警察故事 [1985-2013], the represented martial arts techniques are often multidisciplinary. Although there has been a revival of archival authenticity since the 2000s in martial arts action films such as Muay Thai in Ong Bak [2002] and MMA in Killzone [2005], the pursuit of archival authenticity has been kung fu cinema’s primary obsession for more than half a century. In other words, the idea of ‘authenticity’ is a relative concept that is historically, culturally and genre specific, which I will further elaborate along with the notion of hen.

Second, while traditional filmmaking methods that guarantee ‘cinematic authenticity’ in kung fu cinema such as the use of long takes are present in the Ip Man series [Hunt 2003: 35], it has a different emphasis. Rather than featuring extended and highly complex fight sequences, often combined with manipulation of surrounding objects in the mise-en-scène, fight sequences and action choreography in the Ip Man series are more direct and lethal in the context of kung fu cinema. In other words, the long take itself should not be the focus; rather, what is included in the long take is crucial in the formulation of the shizhan paradigm.

Third, the Ip Man series has a different approach towards ‘corporeal authenticity’ [Hunt 2003: 39–41]. It is worth noting that the examples Hunt uses in his formulation are not from the kung fu films of the 1950s (e.g. Kwan Tak-hing) or the 1970s (e.g. Lau Kar-leung and Yuen Woo-ping). They are mostly the martial arts action films of Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung in the 1980s. This begs the question of what corporeal authenticity means in kung fu cinema where there is less emphasis on dangerous action replays and outtakes, and more on hand-to-hand combat. It is crucial to clarify the specific ways that the kung fu genre constructs corporeal authenticity when compared with martial arts action films in general. As I will explain in the next section, corporeal authenticity is a specific concept depending on the needs of different martial arts styles and a new framework is required to account for the Ip Man series’ engagement with the shizhan paradigm.

The last aspect that problematizes wu in the zhenshi tradition is the idea of ‘expressive amplification’ in its cinematic representation of kung fu [Bordwell 2001: 75]. While the various notions of authenticity above

28 Although there are plenty of films featuring different non-Chinese martial arts styles in the 1970s, such as Muay Thai in Feng Huang’s The Tournament / 中泰拳擊生死戰 [1974] and Western boxing in Zhang Che’s Duel of Fist / 傳奇 [1971], the represented styles are a fusion of kung fu, boxing, karate, and taekwondo. Contrary to Lau Kar-leung’s kung fu films, archival authenticity in these works is questionable [Hunt 2003: 35].
advocate real-time performance with minimal technological mediation, David Bordwell takes a different approach and investigates how the cinematic apparatus plays a significant role in Hong Kong action cinema. Hunt’s idea of ‘transparent mediation’ [2003: 35], therefore, should not be understood in absolute terms, as martial arts cinema is never ‘transparent’ from the beginning and involves ‘re-presentation’ of real-time performance.

Hong Kong action cinema tends to ‘expressively amplify’ body movements with clarity and creates a strong sense of ‘visceral arousal’ among viewers [Bordwell 2001: 75, 90]. In other words, the authenticity in kung fu cinema is not merely an objective recording of real-time performance, but also involves a high degree of mediation or intervention. The key issue is how authenticity can be constructed through the cinematic apparatus.

Coining the term ‘expressive amplification’ as the underlying ‘energy’ of Hong Kong action cinema, Bordwell identifies several key film techniques that concretely amplify actions. These include the ‘pause-burst-pause’ pattern, rapid zoom, overlapping/repetitive editing, and the audio effects of fighting [2001: 80]. In brief, action aesthetics in the zhenshi paradigm are generally based on the interactive collaboration between Hunt’s formulation of authenticity and Bordwell’s notion of expressive amplification.

Although expressive amplification is useful in dissecting Hong Kong action aesthetics in general, it remains imperative that the specificity of different martial arts subgenres in Hong Kong cinema be addressed. Rather than a unified whole, wuxia in the 1960s (e.g. King Hu, Zheng Che), kung fu in the 1970s (e.g. Bruce Lee, Lau Kar-leung, and Yuen Woo-ping), and crime thrillers (e.g. Jackie Chan and John Woo) all have different conventions, developments, and aesthetic concerns. The notion of authenticity, as previously discussed, is especially crucial to kung fu cinema, in which unmediated performance of real kung fu technique is the top priority.

Wuxia cinema, by contrast, gives more room for imagination and highlights fantastical actions aided by somersaults and trampoline work [Teo 2009: 71]. For example, Bordwell argues that King Hu reconfigures wuxia actions in ‘imperfect’ ways that make them ‘partially indiscernible’. This includes changing ‘the opacity of the setting’, playing with ‘the bounding frame’, and incorporating ‘the over-informative long shots, the disorienting whip-pans, and the elliptical cutting’ [2000b: 119]. In other words, the ‘degree’ of expressive amplification varies in different martial arts genres. Using the monolithic idea of ‘expressive amplification’ to encompass all cases is over-generalizing and omits the specificity of different subgenres.

Furthermore, Bordwell’s framework is partly derived from the theatrical/operatic traditions, including Eisenstein’s theories on theatrical performance as well as elements from jingju (京劇; Peking Opera) [Bordwell 2001: 73]. He traces Hong Kong action cinema’s emphasis on the ‘graceful body’ to the soviet films of the 1920s, which were derived from the ‘gymnastics of popular theatre’, emphasizing the ‘recoil’ and ‘expressivity’ of acting [2000b: 78]. Similarly, the rhythmic ‘pause-burst-pause’ pattern is partly derived from the operatic ideas of chang zuo nian da (唱作念打; Singing, Acting, Recitation, and Acrobatics).

As I will elaborate further, two tendencies can be noticed in the zhenshi tradition – huge, fast movement such as continuous somersaults (later aided by undercranking in New Wave martial arts films) and clear, rhythmic movements (exemplified by Lau’s works in the 1970s). These are methods that aid the audience’s comprehension and apprehension of the performance in a theatre. The framework’s intrinsic and intimate connection to the notions and practices of Chinese opera, however, is inherently contradictory to the shizhan tradition. The use of acrobatic techniques and rhythmic movements is more performative than combative. Accordingly, Bordwell’s framework becomes inadequate for the Ip Man series, as it not only embodies the theatrical and operatic, but also the practical and the combative.

To further examine the relationship between theatricality and shizhan, it is crucial to consider the dialogical relationship of jingju and beipai. According to Lau Kar-leung, beipai is characterized by operatic elements, such as showcasing somersaults and leaps in ‘dramatic lion dancing, a staple of folk ritual used to celebrate the Lunar New Year, bless new enterprises, and keep martial arts students in top shape without engaging in actual combat’ [2009: 77-78]. Although this affiliation to operatic and performative arts can also be interpreted as the genre’s inherent pursuit of the wen ideals, which highlights both ‘literary achievement’ and ‘artistic grace’ [Louie 2002: 17], the use of expressive movements largely downplays the combative side of kung fu performance.

This is not to say that beipai has no place in the shizhan tradition. In fact, Northern masters are invaluable assets for spectacular movements such as ‘trampoline jumps and aerial somersaults’ [Sek 1980: 35], which are employed in Bruce lee’s films. Especially after the death of Bruce Lee, beipai started to gain prominence as kung fu cinema was seeking to reinvent itself by combining ‘Northern opera techniques and acrobatics’ with nanpai Southern kung fu styles [Sek 1980: 34]. This clarifies that the relationship between nanpai and beipai, zhenshi and shizhan, in martial arts cinema is not mutually exclusive, but a matter of degree.
The search for inspiration from within operatic traditions has had a huge impact to the development of the genre. Since the late 1970s, Yuen Woo-ping further reinvented the genre by experimenting with kung fu comedy, as exemplified by *Drunken Master* / 醉拳 [1978], which is characterized by ‘slapstick’ and ‘the amalgamation of flowery kung-fu tricks’ [Sek 1980: 35]. When compared with the early Wong Fei-hung series and Lau’s kung fu films featuring Shaolin styles, Yuen’s kung fu comedy has a higher degree of artificiality and theatricality, involving the complex use of props/weapons, acrobatic movements, dramatic facial expressions, etc.

Although Lau’s *nanpai* kung fu films are considered the opposite of *beipai* due to his emphasis on authentic representations of Southern kung fu styles, such as those derivative of Shaolin martial arts in *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* / 少林三十六房 [1978], he does not share the same *shizhan* ideals with martial arts stars such as Bruce Lee and Donnie Yen. First, despite his substantial knowledge of Hung Gar (a prominent Southern style), Lau was greatly influenced by the operatic tradition after his father’s chorographic work in Kwan Tak-hing’s *Wong Fei-hung* films [72]. This is not to disparage Hung Gar as an impractical style. Rather, it is to observe that operatic and performative contexts that gave birth to martial arts cinema have significantly influenced its cinematic representations.

Even though Lau’s films are known for their ‘authenticity’ (especially the archival aspect) [Hunt 2003: 29], they are theatrically expressive and highly rhythmic in terms of choreography (i.e. the pause-burst-pause pattern). Furthermore, Lau clearly aims to preserve the region’s martial arts heritage and traditions. Many of these traditions are performative in nature, such as lion-dancing. Another example is the five animal styles – dragon, snake, tiger, leopard and white crane – derived from Hung Gar, which are symbolically expressive. Therefore, despite the genre’s stress on authenticity in general, expressivity and theatricality play a central role in traditional kung fu cinema, from Kwan Tak-hing, Lau Kar-leung to Yuen Woo-ping.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the *shizhan* paradigm remained marginal due to the emergence of Hong Kong New Wave cinema and the increasing reliance on technological mediation, such as explicit uses of undercranking and wirework. Films reflecting the *shizhan* ideals such as Donnie Yen’s *Tiger Cage* / 特警屠龍 series [1988-1989], and *In the Line of Duty* / 皇家師姐 series [1989] were overshadowed by New Wave kung fu films such as *Iron Monkey* / 鐵馬驅 [1993] and

*Once Upon a Time in China* / 黃飛雄 [1991]. This is not to mention the incorporation and digitalization of kung fu by Hollywood from the late 1990s onward through blockbusters such as *The Matrix* [1999]. In brief, Hong Kong martial arts cinema’s emphasis on cinematic theatricality and technological mediation in the past few decades have limited the possibility of exploring the *shizhan* dimension of traditional Chinese kung fu [Hunt 2003: 24].

To address the combative dimension of kung fu cinema, the *Ip Man* series highlights three crucial dimensions of the *shizhan* tradition – *kuai*, *hen*, and *zhun*. As I will further unpack, these concepts can best elucidate the connection between the principles of wing chun and Bruce Lee’s martial arts philosophy, hence consolidating the synthesis between *zhenshi* and *shizhan* in the *Ip Man* series. Moreover, these three notions are key criteria in the Cantonese vernacular reflecting the idea of ‘pragmatism’.

Similar to the word ‘kung fu’, which refers to accumulation of skills in everyday language, *kuai*, *hen*, and *zhun* are a well-known tripartite scheme describing ‘practicality’ and ‘efficiency’ in Hong Kong. Commonly used in the Guangdong regions, these terms are evoked when one intends to highlight the execution of skills in a highly pragmatic manner. While they have been commonly used to describe the combative nature of martial arts techniques within Chinese-language journalism and publications [Mak 2015: 146; Chen and Mai 2010: 31], systematic analysis of each of these concepts in relation to Hong Kong martial arts cinema has not yet emerged. As I will demonstrate in the following paragraphs, wing chun is exemplary for manifesting the above concepts, due to its preference for simplicity and efficiency.

It is worth noting that the notions of *kuai*, *hen*, and *zhun* are not mutually exclusive. In fact, one element often plays a key role in the execution of the other(s). For example, *zhun* (precision) supplements *kuai* (speed) in the sense that the pure pursuit of speed is futile. In the words of Barry Allen, it is ‘mainly a matter of being able to perform complicated serial movements in one beat, one uninterrupted, interpenetrating measure, whose time is neither fast nor slow but right’ [Allen 2015: 100, emphasis in the original]. To take down an opponent efficiently, the strike needs to be brutal, but also swift and accurate. The notions of *kuai*, *hen*, and *zhun* supplement each other in practice.
KUAI 快
REDEFINING THE SPEED OF KUNG FU PERFORMANCE

The concept of kuai highlights the crucial role that speed plays in combat. As Bruce Lee writes in the Tao of Jeet Kune Do: ‘A good technique includes quick changes, great variety and speed’ [Lee 1975: 3]. This is emphasized in Ip Man 3 when Frank (Mike Tyson) alludes to a Chinese motto regarding real combat – ‘Wai Faai Bat Po’ (唯快不破; only speed is invincible). The fight between Ip and Frank is set up to discover ‘whose fists are the fastest’, those of wing chun or those of boxing.

This pursuit of speed is essential for real combat and has been exemplified by Bruce Lee himself. Lee’s punches were around 50 milliseconds, compared to the 0.15 seconds of an average martial arts practitioner [Glover 1976: 54]. His movements were so fast that they can only be seen by ‘viewing the film one frame at a time’ [92]. In fact, speed is not merely about increasing the difficulty of blocking. As power equals force times speed, the damage a punch or a kick inflicts also depends on its velocity [57]. ‘A powerful athlete is not a strong athlete,’ Lee argued, ‘but one who can exert his strength quickly’ [1975: 46].

What makes wing chun stand out in nanpui is its particular emphasis on speed. The technique highlights directness in punching and takes the shortest travelling distance in attack [Glover 1976: 53; Ip, Lu, and Pang 2009: 50-51]. When compared with conventional boxing techniques such as the hook, cross, and uppercut, wing chun’s straight punch from the central line of the body has a shorter travelling path, and hence a quicker delivery. In other words, the rapid hand movements on screen is not solely a result of cinematic effect, but reflective of the style’s principles. According to Stephen Teo, wing chun is so ‘short and abrupt’ that it ‘take[s] advantage of the tight, narrow streets and alleyways of Guangzhou where the martial art originated’ [2009: 79].

Moreover, speed in the martial arts genre is often mediated to enhance the impact of a performance. However, it is pivotal to preserve the real speed of martial arts performance in the zhenshi paradigm. While undercranking was commonly used in the 1980s and 1990s to increase the speed (hence apparent power) of body movements, it is not explicitly employed in the fight sequences of the Ip Man series.

Earlier kung fu films featuring the same style, such as The Prodigal Son and Wing Chun, replaced real-time fight scenes with undercranked motion at hyperspeed. By contrast, the Ip Man series aims to increase the real-time speed of the performance, so as to emphasize physical skill. For instance, at the start of Ip Man, Donnie Yen performs 13 moves in 3 seconds (in only two shots) during his fight with Jin Shanzhao.

Although conventional strategies of amplification such as constructive editing and slow motion have often been employed, there is little or no undercranking of action that makes Ip’s hand movements visually faster on screen. Admittedly, earlier wing chun films in the 1970s, such as Shaolin Martial Arts and Warriors Two, place less emphasis on undercranking. Influenced by the performative tradition, their movements are more rhythmic and clear-cut. This creates a stark contrast with the Ip Man series’ emphasis on real-time, high speed movements in fight sequences.

Additionally, the notion of kuai can also be complemented by wing chun’s continuous yet subtle movements. Rather than showing clear-cut, one-by-one movement, like Hung Gar, wing chun is flexible, variable, and highly complex in attack and defense [Chow and Spangler 1982: 59]. In addition to continuity, the action choreography also accentuates the style’s subtlety and refrains from showcasing spectacular movements, such as Jet Li’s ‘shadowless kick’ that appeared in Once Upon a Time in China. As Bruce Lee argued: ‘Except in rare cases, all movements should be made as small as possible, that is with the least deviation of the hand necessary to induce the opponent to react’ [Lee 1975: 196]. Huge and clear-cut movements are technically inefficient as they would easily expose one’s weakness in combat situations.

Furthermore, the series’ emphasis of kuai advocates a consistency between martial arts style and choreography, as well as between the principles of a style and its cinematic representation. The former is relatively easy to follow, albeit not all kung fu cinema would take it seriously. For example, Jet Li’s signature kung fu stance in Once Upon a Time in China bears greater resemblance to taijiquan than Hung Gar. In the case of wing chun, its representation relies on the intricacy of choreography and the performance of highly complex, continuous hand movements. In a sense, there is an argument here that martial arts styles should not merely serve as a signifier of difference in choreography (i.e. differentiating one style/film from another); instead, different styles require different representational strategies (e.g. fast and complex choreography for wing chun, birds-eye view for the circular movement of bagua). In this regard, the success of the Ip Man series is that it showcases a traditional style that is inherently connected to speed and hence to combativity.

In brief, speed is the key motif enhancing the combativity of the Ip Man series. This emphasis on speed is embodied in the dexterity and intricacy of wing chun forms and attack patterns.

30 Barrowman’s discussion of ‘martial suture’ with reference to the films of Steven Seagal is a relevant example here. He argues that the specificity of grappling techniques demands a new kind of action aesthetics [Barrowman 2014].
HEN 早
RENegotiating The MArtial LIMITS
OF Kung fu cinEMa

The concept of *hen* (brutality) refers to a fighter’s ability to ‘give all he has, all the time’ [Lee 1975: 69]. In real combat, *hen* can be understood as the use of the most brutal and lethal techniques, often combined with strong force/power to create ‘devastating attacks’ [Lee 1975: 69]. Cinematically, this idea is manifested through the lethality of wing chun in the series, where fight scenes are ‘gritty and brutal, keeping special effects to a minimum’ [Judkins and Nielson 2015: 4].

Before analyzing the series’ fight scenes, the concept of brutality requires further scrutiny. It is a relative concept that needs to be read in the right context. When Wu Pang made *The Story of Wong Fei-hung: Part I* / *黃飛鴻正傳上集之龍風鴻翼* [1949], it was considered to be the most ‘realistic’ and ‘authentic’ representation of martial arts to date, as the film was contrasted with the fantastical *shen guai wuxia* of the 1920s [Teo 2009: 72]. Similarly, the ‘new-style’ Mandarin *wuxia* in the 1960s and 1970s could be considered more ‘real’ and ‘brutal’ than its Cantonese counterpart in that specific context. Examples include Zhang Che’s *yanggang* (陽剛; staunch masculinity) and Mandarin *wuxia* films such as *The Assassin* / *大刺客* [1967] and *Vengeance* / *報仇* [1970], which are known for their ‘spectacles of bloodletting and physical mutilation’ [Yip 2014: 86].

Just as ‘realism’ is a relative concept [Barrowman 2014], there is no one single universal standard of ‘brutality’ applicable to all martial arts genres and contexts. *Wuxia*, kung fu, and martial arts action have different standards, understandings, and interpretations of violence. So the tension between theatricality and practicality, *zhenshi* and *shizhan*, authenticity and combative, needs to be carefully examined.

The brutality of the *Ip Man* series, therefore should be read against other kung fu films (rather than *wuxia* and martial arts action) featuring traditional masters and Southern styles, produced from 1949 to the 2000s. The closest point of comparison is *Wong Fei-hung* and Hung Gar, from Kwan Tak-hing (*The Story of Wong Fei-hung*), Jackie Chan (*Drunken Master*), to Jet Li (*Once Upon a Time in China*).

As explained earlier, while kung fu cinema has highlighted concrete hand-to-hand combat since its conception, its goal is not to illustrate the lethality of kung fu techniques. Rather, it seeks to promote moral enlightenment. In light of this, the *Ip Man* series also attempts to combine the combative dimension with the philosophical aspect of Chinese kung fu [Louie and Edwards 1994: 135]. While Wong Fei-hung has been considered an archetype of this ideal merger, there are certain limitations to his martial capabilities. An audience would never see Wong Fei-hung demonstrate brutal and lethal kung fu techniques, even in the name of the most just cause. *Ip Man*, by contrast, attempts to merge the seemingly irreconcilable.

Yet, at the same time, *Ip* is consistently portrayed as a traditional kung fu master, demonstrating wude. In *Ip Man*, when Master Liu, the Southern Chinese martial artist, comes to *Ip*’s mansion and demands *biwu* (比武; a kung fu duel), *Ip* invites him to have dinner with his family and then arranges a ‘closed-door match’ so that Master Liu’s reputation would not be tarnished by his defeat. This code continues to be featured in *Ip Man 3* when *Ip* teaches Bruce Lee (Chan Kwok-kwan) the importance of humility by opening the door as a gesture of acceptance (rather than rejection) or when he fights Cheung Tin-chi in his school without the presence of students and journalists. In the latter case, even *Ip*’s wife, Cheung Wing-sing, has to wait outside during the duel. The only two witnesses of the duel are *Ip* and Cheung’s sons, who are secretly watching from behind a staircase. They learn from their fathers the importance of wude in *biwu*, which is the core of the zhenshi tradition.

This is in sharp contrast with Jin Shanzhao in *Ip Man*, the Northern Chinese martial artist, who seeks to publicly humiliate other masters in front of their students. Violating the code of humility, he challenges kung fu masters in Foshan as a way to make a name for himself. He brutally smashes the forehead of a Dragon Fist master and uses the back of his sword to crush the head of a Choi Lee Fat master. In both cases, there is an explicit display of blood and injuries.

In traditional kung fu cinema, there is an implicit understanding that the martial dimension of kung fu needs to be suppressed and that the techniques used in combat should be not lethal. This is because the exhibition of violence contradicts the genre’s inherent connection to *wu de*, or Confucian humanism. This differentiates the genre from Bruce Lee’s martial arts action films and Zhang Che’s gory *wuxia* films. The purpose of *wu de* is not to physically harm other kung fu masters, but to compete based on the code of honor and respect. Jin’s violation of *wu de* vicariously enhances *Ip Man*’s persona as a respectful master following Confucian codes of conduct.

Against this backdrop, it is important to note that *Ip* is not reserved in using lethal techniques in combat situations. In *Ip Man*, he requests...
to challenge ten karate black belt masters in a dojo after witnessing the brutal murder of an honorable Chinese kung fu master. As a place containing Bruce Lee’s ‘spectre’ [Bowman 2013: 171], the dojo reminds viewers of Lee’s brutal battles with Japanese martial artists in Fist of Fury / 精式門 [1972]. Following Lee’s nationalistic legacy, Ip not only reproduces the classic scene, but he actually exacerbates Lee’s ferocity to another level. Instead of squawking in fury, the silent Ip unleashes his rage through brutal techniques: arm and hip dislocations, stamping on necks, breaking spines, punching throats, and smashing heads, etc. To amplify the impact of the strikes, the audience can clearly hear the sound of cracking bones and joints. The visual horror of a dislocated hip joint is shown in a frontally full-body medium shot.

In terms of action aesthetics, these ruthless representations offer a stark contrast to the harmonious tradition of the Wong Fei-hung films, where there was ‘a noticeable absence of physical violence on the narrative surface’ [Garcia 1980: 129]. Despite his demonstration of real techniques, Wong places more emphasis on Confucian humanism rather than on the effectiveness of his kung fu. But when Ip fights the last karateka in the dojo, he holds his head and keeps punching the forehead and nose until he dies. Even with the ‘just’ cause of avenging his comrade, this kind of brutality is rare in the history of kung fu cinema, in which the code of wude is the moral imperative. A traditional kung fu master should not be overwhelmed by rage and must always demonstrate restraint in combat.

Moreover, the notion of hen is not simply represented by visual gore, but also by aestheticized violence in the form of intellectual montage. In the last fight scene of Ip Man, Ip keeps punching Miura (Hiroyuki Ikeuchi) against a light post on stage and basically turns him into a wing chun wooden dummy. On the one hand, it is a violent scene because Miura at that point is already beyond his ability to fight back and his white uniform is increasingly soaked with his own blood. However, rather than showing mercy or ceasing the attack at the ‘right moment’, Ip keeps punching Miura until the back of his head smashes into the light post behind him and causes a concussion, which kills him on the spot.

At the same time, the screen is juxtaposed with flashbacks of Ip, in slow motion, practicing wing chun on a wooden dummy in an empty wing chun school. This montage is an aesthetic juxtaposition of violence and quotidian training. The tranquility and solitude of Ip in an empty school, as well as his elegant wing chun movements, are juxtaposed with Miura’s agonizing, bloody face. The seemingly basic, routine wing chun forms are now imbued with a sense of ferocity and cruelty. Transcending mechanical amplification (e.g. close-up) and gory visuals of the injuries, the Ip Man series also stresses conceptual and aestheticized violence through intellectual montage.

Granted, the narrative of Ip Man plays a key role in Ip’s expansion of wu or ‘violation’ of wude. Apart from demonstrating the practicality of wing chun technique through violence, Ip’s witnessing of a cold-blooded murder and the necessity of employing effective strikes in a ‘one vs. ten duel’ helps to justify the lethality of his attacks. While similar nationalistic narratives are not uncommon in previous kung fu films, such as Once Upon a Time in China, the deployment of wu is still very restricted. In that film, after Wong Fei-hung (Jet Li) witnesses the tragic death of Master Yim, who was shot down by American soldiers, he finishes off the captain, who ordered the killing, by ‘firing’ a bullet from his fingers (in a highly mythicized manner). In comparison, the amplification of violence associates Ip Man with the shizhan paradigm of Bruce Lee more than the zhenshi paradigm of Wong Fei-hung (both Kwan Tak-hing and Jet Li).

Although brutal scenes can be found in previous wing chun films, such as the endings of Warriors Two and The Prodigal Son, there are subtle differences. In these films, there is a deviation from the traditional master persona. Fei Chun (Sammo Hung) and The Cashier (Casanova Wong) in Warriors Two, as well as Leung Chang (Yuen Biao) in The Prodigal Son are portrayed as insurgent, impulsive, and immature adolescents, which in turn justify the films’ demonstration of graphic violence.

Commenting on Bruce Lee’s problematic and contradictory identity as a kung fu master, Cheng Yu points out that ‘physical strength and violence gave [Lee] a separate code ethics’ [Yu 1984: 25]. In other words, the protagonists in previous wing chun and martial arts action films require some distance from the traditional grandmaster persona. Ip Man is a rare case in that he is capable of demonstrating lethal combat techniques while maintaining the literati aura.

Simply put, the Ip Man series proposes that a traditional kung fu master, despite his scholarly presence, is also capable of brutal execution. As discussed in detail, this accentuation of hen needs to be read in the context of kung fu cinema where there is a denigration of wu (martial valour) and an accentuation of wen (cultural-attainment) [Louie 2002: 4]. Compared with Wong Fei-hung and Bruce Lee, Ip is a character presenting a well-balanced view of authenticity and combativevity, zhenshi and shizhan, wen and wu. Hence he is becoming a key figure in the development of Hong Kong martial arts cinema.
Although the literal translation of zhun is precision, its implication is to end a fight as quickly as possible by hitting the right targets at the right time. Bruce Lee stresses the importance of zhun in an interview:

‘It’s not like, “I want to kill you”. It’s an art’ [Chan 1998]. While Chan’s unique choreography style has aesthetic and artistic value due to his creative interaction with the environment (i.e. another instance that transfigures wu into wen), it inevitably undermines its perceived combativity. With Chan’s popularity in Euro-American markets, his complicated dance-like choreography and elaborate fight scenes reinforce the stereotype that Chinese kung fu is more performative than practical.

In kung fu, it always involves a very fast motion... It’s what we meant by simplicity, same thing in striking and everything. It has to be based on a very minimum motion, so that everything would be directly expressed. One motion, and he’s gone... [Hong Kong Film Archive 1999: 46]

In other words, every attack needs to be precise and effective. Rather than prolonging a fight, a better strategy is to create ‘devastating attacks’ through accurate movements and end the fight in a split second [Lee 1975: 69]. As mentioned before, the notions of kuai, hen, and zhun often combine to deliver the best result. Cinematically, the concept is translated as the deployment of brief and concise action choreography, manifesting the significance of efficiency in real combat.

Despite the popularity of Bruce Lee’s shizhan martial arts action films in the early 1970s, the kung fu genre soon turned to comedic kung fu action after Lee’s death. This was exemplified by the works of Yuen Woo-ping, Jackie Chan, and Sammo Hung. Imitating the movements of ‘animals, outlaws, heroes, assassins, immortals, and deities’, kung fu has been perceived as ‘ornamental’ and not ‘functional’ in real combat [Farrer 2011: 221]. Southern kung fu techniques such as the five animal styles of Hung Gar are highly stylized in form. Contrary to western martial arts, Chinese kung fu does not ‘solely function for combative training’ [2011: 221]. It is also part of the performative tradition in rituals and festive celebrations.

Aaron D. Anderson argues that Jackie Chan’s kung fu performances should not be considered ‘representations of actual physical violence, but rather as danced spectacles’ [2009: 192]. Drawing inspirations from Charlie Chaplin, Chan himself describes his fighting philosophy as dance-like. ‘I want to show audiences fighting is an art,’ he stresses, ‘it’s not like, “I want to kill you”. It’s an art’ [Chan 1998]. While Chan’s unique choreography style has aesthetic and artistic value due to his creative interaction with the environment (i.e. another instance that transfigures wu into wen), it inevitably undermines its perceived combativity. With Chan’s popularity in Euro-American markets, his complicated dance-like choreography and elaborate fight scenes reinforce the stereotype that Chinese kung fu is more performative than practical.

However, the Ip Man series turns this stereotype upside down and highlights the shizhan dimension of Chinese kung fu. Rather than showcasing fancy, ornamental techniques to extend the spectacle, Ip seeks to end every fight as soon as possible by deploying lethal techniques. Of the ten karateka Ip fights in Ip Man, he knocks out three in two seconds, one in three seconds, five in four seconds, and one in five seconds.

As argued, what differentiates the shizhan approach from the traditional zhenshi one is that fight choreography needs to be simple yet effective. One way to achieve this is to reduce the time spent on individual opponents in mass fight scenes. This can be achieved by the deployment of critical strikes combining kuai (speed), hen (brutality), and zhun (precision). Since wing chun does not involve large movement anyway, this increase in speed and repetition of punches is the style’s unique method of demonstrating impact and power.32

The idea of zhun can be understood at the micro as well as at the macro level. Not only does the series have more incisive fight choreography, the fight scenes are also significantly shorter than in previous wing chun films. Except for the boxing match in Ip Man 2, other featured fights in the series are all around two minutes, such as Ip Man versus the ten karate masters (one minute 28 seconds) Ip Man versus Miura (two minutes 17 seconds), Hung Chun-nam (Sammo Hung – two minutes 15 seconds), and versus the Muay Thai assassin (two minutes nine seconds). By comparison, the ending of Warriors Two is composed of a series of fights whose total time is approximately 25 minutes. Even in terms of single fight scenes, previous wing chun films are also longer in comparison. The final confrontations of The Prodigal Son and Wing Chun are five minutes five seconds and four minutes ten seconds respectively.

In Ip Man 3, the duel between Ip and Frank (Mike Tyson) has been promoted as the spotlight of the film, overshadowing the last fight scene with Cheung Tin-chi (Max Zhang). When Frank sets the time of his fight with Ip as three minutes, it highlights the notion of efficiency. The fight sequence arguably becomes a miniature of real combat. But it is worth noting that at exactly three minutes, the fight is the length of a standard round in boxing.

This synchronization of cinematic time and real time is unusual in the genre. Not only can the scene differentiate from the usual extensive fight scenes common in traditional kung fu cinema, but it can also reduce the discrepancy between the cinematic and the ‘real’. Surely,
In sum, *zhun* (precision) is a crucial dimension in *shizhan* aesthetics. Even for the film’s marque event, the guiding principle is to end the fight as soon as possible. Granted, the length of the fight scene is not the sole element demonstrating the notion of *zhun*. What makes the *Ip Man* series different from previous wing chun films is the brevity and effectiveness of fight sequences through precise action choreography.

This paradigmatic shift essentially echoes the idea of Bruce Lee’s *cun jin* (寸勁; one-inch punch) – short but incisive, brief but powerful, hence redefining the formulation and meaning of the kung fu spectacle. Known as *changqiao fali* (長橋發力; releasing power through an extended arm) in wing chun [*Ip, Lu, and Pang 2009: 50*], the technique is featured in the last fight of the whole series in *Ip Man 3*. It is a powerful summary of the series’ synthesis of the *zhenshi* and *shizhan* tradition.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are different degrees of *shizhan* among the three films. *Ip Man* places more emphasis on the *shizhan* tradition, while the *Ip Man 2* and *Ip Man 3* elevate the *zhenshi* tradition. One major difference between the three films is the degree of *hen* in the fight scene. The lethal techniques used in the dojo scene in *Ip Man* is not repeated in later films, in which the emphasis is placed on *Ip*’s grandmaster image, martial virtue, and concern for his family. Also, with the introduction of Sammo Hung as a key character in *Ip Man 2* and Yuen Woo-ping as the choreographer in *Ip Man 3*, there is an increasing reliance on the *zhenshi* tradition in the sense that theatricality and trickery play a more prominent role in the action choreography.

In a personal interview with a member of the production crew, I was told by one of the fight choreographers that different wing chun consultant teams are used in the series.33 In *Ip Man*, the team consisted of wing chun practitioners who have mixed martial arts (MMA) knowledge and are adept in merging *shizhan* techniques into wing chun. In *Ip Man 2* and *Ip Man 3* more traditional teams were used. While Sammo Hung is the named choreographer in *Ip Man*, his primary task was to communicate with the consultants and coordinate the cinematography according to their suggestions.

With the shift to more traditional consultation teams, there has been a decrease of combaticity in later films. I was also informed that another major reason for the difference in choreography styles was that they had more time to design the action in *Ip Man*, as Donnie Yen was still a lesser star in 2008 and not as pressed with the production of different films as he was between 2010 and 2015. Furthermore, with the rise of the series’ popularity in China, there may also be increasing difficulty in demonstrating *shizhan* due to tighter censorship.

Conversely, there is an increasing emphasis on trickery and mise-en-scène manipulation in the series (e.g. the table fight scene in *Ip Man 2* and the shipyard fight scene in *Ip Man 3*), bearing closer resemblance to kung fu films of the *zhenshi* tradition. Although there are individual fight scenes demonstrating the *shizhan* aesthetics (e.g. with Mike Tyson and the Thai assassin in *Ip Man 3*), the majority of fight scenes reflect a higher degree of staginess and theatricality.

Particularly in *Ip Man 3*, the final fight scene with Cheung Tin-chi is typical of Yuen’s choreographical work – sophisticated use of weapons (e.g. pole and swords), multiple shooting angles (e.g. birds-eye, 360 degrees revolving shot), and constant interaction with the environment (e.g. staircase, columns). In addition, the fight scene features a considerable number of close-ups (e.g. clashes of the swords, facial expressions), which also undermine its *shizhan* value. This is because while these close-ups enhance the expressivity of the action, they also increase the scene’s theatricality.

As the choreographer of Wong Kar-wai’s *The Grandmaster*, Yuen may have incorporated Wong’s aesthetics in *Ip Man 3*. However, this merge creates an uncanny outcome that fails to maintain the series’ uniqueness as a synthesis of the *zhenshi* and *shizhan* tradition. By the same token, it also fails to reproduce Wong’s art-house kung fu aesthetics.

Further examination of the films’ differences would require a separate discussion. But, in brief, the *Ip Man series’* synthesis of the *zhenshi* and *shizhan* traditions might be said to be achieved on a macro level more than a micro one.

Overall, the *Ip Man series* has incorporated action aesthetics highlighting the notions of *kwai*, *hen*, and *zhun*, which are characteristic of Bruce Lee’s *shizhan* ideals as well as wing chun’s principles and philosophy. First, the use of real speed (rather than undercranking) in martial arts performance is crucial in preserving the texture of actual combat. Importantly, this emphasis on speed is inherently associated with wing chun’s center-line principle and variability, thus reasserting the often-ignored link between martial arts style and the corresponding action aesthetics (i.e. that the latter should be an embodiment of the former). Second, the brutality of the series’ fight scenes (especially in *Ip Man*) addresses the suppression of *wu* (the martial) within kung fu cinema. Contrary to W’ong Fei-hung, *Ip Man* demonstrates the combative and lethality of wing chun while maintaining his status as a traditional kung fu master. Third, the precision and efficiency of fight choreography in the series shifts the genre’s focus from the elaboration of *kung fu* forms through extended fight scenes to their combative application in the blink of an eye.

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33 Interview with fight choreographer, December 2, 2016.
CONCLUSION

SYNthesizing ZHenshi and SHizhan / Wen-wu
IN Kung Fu CINema

Despite kung fu cinema’s attempt to merge wen-wu and create ‘the masculine ideal’, there has been a strong suppression of the martial dimension in the action aesthetics and an emphasis on theatricality and expressivity due to the elevation of wen (the literary and the artistic) and the denigration of wu (the martial) in Chinese culture. This is not to suggest that martial prowess should efface the virtuous or theatrical dimensions of the genre. Rather, the intention of this article is to expose the incongruity and complexity of wu as a key concept in Chinese masculinity as well as in kung fu cinema.

By synthesizing the zhenshi ( authenticity) tradition of the Wong Fei-hung series with the shizhan (combativity) tradition of Bruce Lee, which embodies the notions of kuai (speed), hen (brutality), and zhun (precision), the Ip Man series presents new possibilities of wu and offers a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese kung fu. This redefinition of wen-wu not only reinvents kung fu cinema, but it also renegotiates the status and meaning of traditional kung fu practice – where kung fu should no longer be chopsocky, fragile, and ornamental, but solemn, practical, and efficient.

Last but not least, the series problematizes the idea of Bruce Lee’s internationalization of the ‘traditional art’ and reinstates the specificity of Southern Chinese martial arts in kung fu cinema. Known as the master who inspired Bruce Lee, Ip Man is the perfect figure to rectify and reorient the development of kung fu cinema by synthesizing the two predominant modes of cinematic martial arts and the two paradigms of Chinese masculinities. After four decades of wandering following the death of Lee, kung fu cinema no longer needs to live under his shadow. Ip Man is the first, and probably the last, master that can embody Lee while upholding the value of traditional Chinese kung fu. The two seemingly irreconcilable masters, along with authenticity and combativity, wen and wu, the traditional and the modern, the inspirer and the inspired, have become one.

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The period between 1660 and 1670 was an eventful one for both Britain and its martial arts. 1660 saw the Restoration, where the Stuart dynasty was returned to power under Charles II and the post-Civil War Commonwealth swept away. For all the optimism at Charles' coronation, however, his kingdom was ill at ease. Such uneasy times were also significant for the press. It is what the press (and other sources from this period) reveal about duelling practice at the time, martial arts in general, and the changing nature of violence that is the focus of this article.

As the insurrections, riots and various acts of violence taking place both in Britain and abroad demonstrate, the 1660s were certainly a violent time. But, as the newspaper coverage also demonstrates, the nature of violence itself was changing. This continued a trend, dating back to the Civil War, where close quarter fighting skills had begun to give way to the relative ease and convenience of firearms. British violence found itself, ironically, in as much a state of flux as the rest of the country.

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**NEWS OF THE DUELS**
**RESTORATION DUELLING CULTURE AND THE EARLY MODERN PRESS**

**ALEXANDER HAY**

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Restoration, newsbooks, reporting, duels, violence, firearms

**ABSTRACT**

The period between 1660 and 1670 was an eventful one for both Britain and its martial arts. 1660 saw the Restoration, where the Stuart dynasty was returned to power under Charles II and the post-Civil War Commonwealth swept away. For all the optimism at Charles’ coronation, however, his kingdom was ill at ease. Such uneasy times were also significant for the press. It is what the press (and other sources from this period) reveal about duelling practice at the time, martial arts in general, and the changing nature of violence that is the focus of this article.

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**CITATION**

The period between 1660 and 1670 was an eventful one for both Britain and its martial arts. 1660 saw the Restoration, where the Stuart dynasty was returned to power under Charles II and the post-Civil War Commonwealth swept away. For all the optimism at Charles’ coronation, however, his kingdom was ill at ease. Dissent, and the further threat of yet more insurrection, was a reality both king and country had to face. In the next 10 years, war, plague, the Great Fire of London and ongoing conflicts over politics and religion all demonstrated the vulnerability of a society where the horrors of the English Civil War were still within living memory. Haunted by the 1649 Regicide of Charles I and the legacy of the Civil War and the Commonwealth, Charles II’s new kingdom faced anxieties that lingered long after his apparently triumphant return [Jenkinson 2010: 22-23]. One clear shift had certainly taken place: While the Royalists brought back their aristocracy, this old order now competed with a rising middle class and powerful men whose influence came from wealth rather than lineage. The birth of a society more like our own than what had come before had begun [Seidel 1972: 433].

Such uneasy times were also significant for the press, which, by the middle of the 1660s, had become to all intents and purposes a branch of the state. The news could certainly still inform and remained popular, but it served only to keep the public as informed as the government saw fit. This contradictory approach, as we shall see, led to an often strange way of reporting the news – to the extent that foreign newspapers often had more British coverage than the British papers themselves [Pettegree 2014: 239]. Yet they also had surprising levels of success and even engagement with readers. In terms of what they both reveal and conceal, these newspapers demonstrate a great deal about British society during the Restoration, its preconceptions and its place in the world.1

It is what they (and other sources from this period) reveal about duelling practice at the time, martial arts in general, and the changing nature of violence, that is the focus of this article. As the insurrections, riots and various acts of violence taking place both in Britain and abroad demonstrate, the 1660s were certainly a violent time. But, as the newspaper coverage also demonstrates, the nature of violence itself was changing. This continued a trend, dating back to the Civil War, where close quarter fighting skills had begun to give way to the relative ease and convenience of firearms. British violence found itself, ironically, in as much a state of flux as the rest of the country.

1 The research required for this article was made possible by the Burney Newspaper Collection and Early English Books Online.

2 It would reach 575,000 by 1700 [Schwarz 2003: 126].
roundhead sympathies remained, as did antipathy towards the restored aristocracy [Seidel 1972: 442]. A deep fear of the mob and its vulgar, revolutionary tendencies was also at the back of many well-to-do Londoners' minds. The masses were held in both fear and contempt [Seidel 1972: 430-431]. Civil unrest in the wake of the plague outbreak of 1665, the devastation of the Great Fire of London and the disastrous scuttling of the fleet at Medway in 1667 at the hands of the Dutch all showed a city in a fragile state and at odds with itself [De Krey 2005: 95]. Fear of French or Catholic plots as well as out-and-out race riots were common events during this time. The 1661 armed uprising by Venner and his fellow 'Fifth-Monarchist' compatriots also demonstrated that insurrection, of the kind many still remembered only too well during the 1640s, was still a possibility [Greeves 1986: 50-57]. Yet any threat it may have posed was minor compared to the harshness of the government's response or the weight of coverage the uprising received in the press, as will be discussed later.

Then there were the ever-present crowds of Londoners, who would gladly deal out rough justice towards suspected criminals as well as free others from prison or the stocks if they were deemed innocent or unjustly treated [Harris 1990: 24]. Indeed, a certain level of rowdiness was even celebrated, especially amongst young men, as it was seen to show a kind of manly virtue. This was openly tolerated during the yearly festivals of misrule, which had overtly violent and even misogynistic rituals [Turner 2002: 61]. Crowds could also often be summoned by the beating of a drum or similar instrument, hinting at an almost paramilitary flavour to their actions [Harris 1990: 25].

London's volatile, often poor and frustrated population of apprentices were another problem. Ranging from the sons of paupers to the surplus scions of the nobility, they were, needless to say, an ongoing source of unrest [Seidel 1972: 442]. A notorious example came in the form of the 1668 Messenger Riots, when a combined force of apprentices and sailors destroyed brothels, attacked prisons holding their compatriots and were finally quelled only through military intervention and subsequent trials for high treason [Harris 1990: 82]. Well organised along military lines, down to 'regiments' being lead by 'captains', these rioters demonstrated that London was a tinderbox where the traumas of the Civil Wars remained underneath the surface alongside old militarised habits passed on from father or grandfather to rowdy and pugnacious son or grandson.

The ability of the city to police itself was often called into question too. 'Constables' were members of the public pressed into service, often without pay, and open to varying levels of corruption or intimidation [Beattie 2001: 172], their effectiveness uneven and varying from ward to ward [Beattie 2001: 183]. The issue reached such a point that Charles himself denounced them as 'a few weak and feeble men' whose tendency to go home before dawn gave criminals ample time to wreak havoc in their absence [Beattie 2001: 174]. In their defence, constables often had to live amongst the people they sought to police and were often victims, sometimes fatally so, of angry crowds [Shoemaker 1991: 241].

As a result, London was also a place where crime was a common occurrence. Crime in the city naturally spread out into neighbouring areas, such as Surrey [Beattie 1974: 51], where highwaymen and robbers prospered [Picard 2004: 233]. What kept crime under control, ironically, was a divided criminal underworld and fierce competition for the proceeds of crime [McMullan 1981-1982: 320]. Meanwhile, at least until the Great Fire swept much of the old city away, its many rat runs, 'pennyrent' flophouses and alleys gave rise to a series of shanty towns and no-go areas where crime both prospered and radiated outwards [McMullan 1981-1982: 314]. Whether this translated into an epidemic of violent crime is, in a sense, irrelevant as it was the perception that it was endemic which loomed large in the public consciousness, and at all levels of society [Beattie 2001: 46].

Certainly, tolerance or even enjoyment of violence was considered perfectly acceptable. The gruesome public execution of regicide Hugh Peters in 1660 was a case in point, as was the gleeful press coverage thereof [Parliamentary Intelligencer, 15 October 1660-22 October 1660]. Death itself was dealt with in such a matter-of-fact way as to verge on the comical. For example, a 1663 advert in the Mercurius Publicus inquires about the identity of a skeletonised corpse, possibly murdered, and 'lately found buried in a Back-Yard' in Chelmsford, but with a certain lack of urgency [Mercurius Publicus, 2 April 1663-9 April 1663].

Plague, unrest and the Great Fire demonstrated London's capacity for chaos, but day-to-day life in the city was seldom easy either. Living standards had stagnated in London, despite its booming economic and population growth during this period [Boulton 2000: 475]. Inflation and a dependence on goods being imported into the city from the rest of the country left many Londoners poorer and at the mercy of rising rents and declining fortunes, especially in the wake of the Great Fire [De Krey 2005: 94]. That disaster, alongside plague, war and insurrection, took their toll. London itself remained riven with unease and mistrust, and by 1670 these divisions had still not resolved themselves. For many Londoners, newspapers and newsbooks, read in private or out aloud in coffee shops, were a welcome distraction from a turbulent decade.
THE PRESS

What sort of press emerged from this milieu? As it happens, the end result was a mix of official paranoia and anxiety, and yet a mixture of contrasts, much like London itself. News at this time came in four forms – newsbooks, newspapers, newsletters and informal gazettes [Sommerville 1996: 60; Atherton 1999: 40]. Newsbooks, which narrated the news in a fashion more akin to a prose-based narrative, were in any case in decline. What I term ‘informal gazettes’ were not newspapers in the strictest sense, but still a kind of periodical journalism in the way that they reported recent events, such as the Bills of Mortality [Sommerville 1996: 66]. Meanwhile, Philosophical Transactions, a regular summary of discussions between members of the recently formed (in 1662) Royal Society of London for the Promotion of Natural Knowledge, helped disseminate scientific debate and knowledge and was the predecessor of the modern academic journal [Sommerville 1996: 80].

However, the primary focus of this article will be newspapers, as these were the most common mass-marketed (by 17th century standards) news media of the period. From 1666 onwards, the only legal newspaper in the country was The London Gazette, published by the government. Yet press control had already been asserted in 1662 by the Licensing Act, which reduced the number of news outlets to two newsbooks – The Intelligencer and The Newes – published by Roger L’Estrange, a former pamphleteer turned government propagandist, official censor and press baron. L’Estrange echoed the alarm felt by his paymasters towards the masses, though he saw news media as both a threat to the social order but also as an ideal way to establish the government’s good name [Ward 2005: 126].

Thus, L’Estrange established the convention for the times, where foreign news took precedence over domestic events – so as not to encourage any local restiveness – and to defend to the hilt a Royalist worldview with perhaps more vigour than was required [Clark 1994: 24-25]. L’Estrange was not, however, a particularly good journalist; he failed to cover the plague outbreaks in London in much detail [Sutherland 1986: 45] and was generally inept [Sommerville 1996: 63] in terms of copy-editing and reporting [Pettegree 2014, 238]. His newsbooks were replaced by The Oxford Gazette, latterly the London Gazette,3 now run directly from the offices of the Secretaries of State under Joseph Williamson, from 1666 onwards.

The end result, while more competent and better written, was also as strictly controlled and faintly pessimistic of its readers as L’Estrange’s work ever was [Pettegree 2014: 239]. Indeed, as well as providing a sanitised and unthreatening product to sate the country’s insatiable appetite for news [Pettegree 2014: 239], it employed several spies on its staff and regularly smeared opponents with propaganda [Ward 2005: 239].

Yet despite its blandness and obvious side-stepping of domestic controversy, the Gazette was nonetheless immensely popular [Atherton 1999: 125], its editorial staff only too aware that an unpopular paper would not have sold so many copies. Within the very tight confines in which it operated, therefore, the Gazette had nonetheless very high standards of accuracy, information and fact-checking [Pettegree 2014: 239]. It was, when allowed to be, a very informative if very brief newspaper. Printed on both sides of a single broadsheet, in the Dutch fashion [Pettegree 2014: 238] the Gazette also broke away from the conventions of the newsbook in a direction far more recognisable by newspaper readers today.

It also had, perhaps despite the best efforts of its editors, a surprisingly close relationship with its readers. While it vowed not to take advertisements at its launch [Rosenfeld 1936: 124], the newspaper did nonetheless feature ‘Loyal Addresses’ from readers – in effect, an early form of the letters page – where personal views could be expressed, albeit with an inevitable degree of editorial oversight and, of course, a favourable view of the King [Sutherland 1986: 172]. As Sommerville has noted [1986: 73], there are interesting parallels between the London Gazette and ‘official’ Soviet news organs such as Pravda and Izvestia – all were closely controlled, censored and partial publications, yet readers still communicated with them through letters and feedback, using them as a means of getting the attention of the authorities as well as a source of news [Sutherland 1986: 74].

Perhaps no surer example of this can be seen than how the London Gazette responded to the Great Fire of 1666. As Wall has noted, its response to the disaster, while at first delivered with its usual reserve, quickly shifted to actively reporting reconstruction of the city and featuring advertisements – for the first time – that supported it [Wall 1998: 63-64]. In so doing, the paper began to reflect more than ever the views and experiences of its readers [Wall 1998: 66] and to provide a public voice hitherto considered unthinkable [Wall 1998: 10]. Similarly, the numerous stories, and later adverts [O’Malley 1986: 40], in the Gazette covering providential events and prodigies not only reflected the religious beliefs of its readers but also their need for confirmation in which it operated, therefore, the Gazette had nonetheless very high standards of accuracy, information and fact-checking [Pettegree 2014: 239]. It was, when allowed to be, a very informative if very brief newspaper. Printed on both sides of a single broadsheet, in the Dutch fashion [Pettegree 2014: 238] the Gazette also broke away from the conventions of the newsbook in a direction far more recognisable by newspaper readers today.

The Press

Alexander Hay

News of the Duels

ARTS STUDIES

Alexander Hay

News of the Duels

Fittingly, the answer is both contrary and yet curiously revealing.
Certainly, duelling did take place in London during the period. At this point, at least, the duel remained an urban phenomenon [Shoemaker 2002: 537]. They could nonetheless still be surprisingly violent, despite the start of a slow decline in duels overall. A 1668 duel, between the then Duke of Buckingham and Lord Shrewsbury also featured two other men per duellist, with the resulting melee resulting in injuries for all and two deaths [Shoemaker 2002: 537]. Duelling was also very much still a pastime of the wealthy, gentry and nobles [Shoemaker 2002: 544], and was often cause for pleas to the King for ‘special pardon’, as even the elite of Restoration London could be tried and found guilty of manslaughter and murder [Shoemaker 2002: 288]. Needless to say, the government took a very dim view of its would-be political leaders and military officers killing each other. While issuing insults in and of themselves were not crimes, if they were intended to commence a duel, this became an arrestable offence [Shoemaker 1991: 29]. Examples could be and were made, as was the case with Sir Thomas Coventry, who found himself imprisoned in the Tower of London [Picard 2004: 237].

Yet most significantly, the then still independent press itself reported the official government line. In 1660, the Mercurius Publicus published the following Royal Proclamation:

His Majesty ... having formerly in a Declaration published at Brussels November 23 1658, manifested his dislike of impious and unlawful Duels, strictly command all his subjects whatever, that they do not by themselves or any others, either by Message, Word, Writing, or other ways or means, challenge, or cause to be challenged, any person or persons to in Duel, nor to carry, accept, or conceal any challenge, nor actually to fight or be a second to any therein.

[Mercurius Publicus, 9 August 1660–16 August 1660]

The proclamation went on to add that any defiance of this would see the duellist barred from public office and the Court in general, in addition to legal prosecution in the usual sense. How serious was the Crown in this regard? Another report on the proclamation, this time in the Parliamentary Intelligencer, puts the interdict into context:

On Monday August 13, several Proclamations were given by his Majesty Against fighting of Duels: For calling in and suppressing Books of John Milton and John Goodwin, and for publishing a former Proclamation of the 30th of May, entitled A Proclamation against Vicious, Debauch’d; an

[Parliamentary Intelligencer, 13 August 1660-20 August 1660]

In other words, the State considered duelling to be as much of a threat to the stability of the regime as the writings of dissidents, all symptoms of a moral degeneracy it was determined to stamp out.

This did not stop duelling happening. Indeed, even the London Gazette could not resist reporting on the travails of the Duke of Buckingham and the aftermath of Lord Morley-and-Monteagle’s killing of Henry Hastings [Sommerville 1996: 68]. Similarly, popular culture still romanticised duelling, as one 1670 song’s lyrics demonstrate:

And I will place you on a Stage,
To fight a Duel you must ingage,
And from all Wounds you shall be clear,
You’ll gin the Prize you need not fear.

[Anon 1670]

Meanwhile, as Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, declared in a 1664 letter, ‘Gallant Valiant Gentlemen in the day of Battel or Duel’ were equally valid [Cavendish 1664: 143]. Yet there was also considerable opposition to the practice, and not just from the King. In 1660, the Royalist churchman Richard Allestree argued in his book The Gentleman’s Calling:

And upon this hostility and opposition against Heaven it is, that all the private Quarrels and Combats on Earth are (as on their foundation) superstructured; so that to initiate a Duelist, his first Challenge must be directed against God himself.

[Allestree 1660: 141]

Allestree then goes on to make his point even more explicit:

For to a Christian, ’tis certain the irreligion of Fighting a Duel would be the most infamous thing, and even to a sober Heathen the folly of it would be so too ... Yet this so pitiful despicable thing is it, which so terrifies and amazes them; And how shall we define Cowardise, if this be not it?

[Allestree 1660: 145]

Allestree’s writing reflects his times, where the fear of violence was all too evident. Secondly, the sheer vehemence of Allestree’s rhetoric and his couching it in theology suggests he was reflecting a widespread view, at least amongst his fellow churchmen. Allestree was certainly not alone in his criticism either. Religious and establishment criticism continued into the next century [Shoemaker 2002: 539]. Yet Allestree also demonstrates how the controversy had split the establishment. Allestree, loyal to the King during the Commonwealth and later Provost of Eton College, was certainly no fringe figure. Yet neither was...
Cavendish, nor many of the duellists themselves. This was just another of many conflicts and dilemmas faced by Restoration Britain at the time.

As for how the London Gazette reported duels: for the most part, it struck a precarious balance between an official disapproval of duelling and readers’ vicarious fascination with it. This is evident, as mentioned, in coverage of those rare domestic duels that made it into the paper. Yet the Gazette found an altogether more pragmatic and uncontroversial way of sating this appetite that played to its strengths in intelligence gathering; duels in the Gazette, as a rule, always took place abroad:

The Prince della Recca Filomarino having been lately killed in a Duel, the Dukes of Matalonii; Pipoli and St. Geogio, who were engaged therein having been committed to the Fort of Gaeta are since removed to Castel Nuova where they are using their endeavours an employing their Ingerget for their Liberties. [London Gazette, 21 October 1667-24 October 1667, Issue 202]

This has everything a good duel story needs – death, drama, celebrity/nobility and a hypocritical though no doubt well-received moral. Best of all, from the Gazette’s perspective, its foreignness not only means it can report the story in the first place but also that further moralising can take place. A reader perusing the Gazette in their local coffee shop could get their duelling fix whilst at the same time feeling superior to decadent foreigners. Another example of this demonstrates similar themes and undertones:

Naples, Novemb. 15. The Vice Roy has sent the Officer de la Vicaire into the Provinces of Leve and Barr, to guard the Duke of Martina, the Count de Connerfano, the Prince de Carfi, the Duke de Noja, and other Noble-Men, who were arrested upon the death of the Duke delle Noci, who as we hear, some time since was killed in a Duel by the said Duke de Martina. [Oxford Gazette, 21 December 1665-25 December 1665, Issue 12]

This approach also meant that the deaths of Britons abroad through duelling could be reported, any bad example set being remedied by the fact that this took place outside the country:

Three of our Men of War are come home to be repaired, and will suddenly be refitted and returned to the Armata; From Candia we are informed of the death of two of our ablest Ingineers, of whom one was killed in a Deull, the other by a Musquet shot, as he was observing the fortifications of Candia. [London Gazette, 6 December 1666-10 December 1666, Issue 111]

The death of the ‘ablest Ingineers’ is portrayed as a tragedy; the morality of the duel itself is avoided. Once again, the foreignness of the duel allows for an altogether more tolerant approach.

It is worth noting that something is missing here, however. That is, for the most part, the details of the duels are not discussed, and we are not given much information about how they were fought. This is unlikely to be down to censoriousness or squeamishness on the part of the Gazette. It was more than willing to discuss, for example, details of painful punishments, such as those visited upon four young Scottish criminals in 1665, publicly flogged, branded and deported for assaulting a clergyman [Intelligencer Published for the Satisfaction and Information of the People, 25 December 1665; Issue 8].

Instead, a more likely explanation is that readers did not as a rule need to be reminded what a duel was. It was an established if not acceptable facet of life, particularly in London, and readers would have needed no introduction to fencing or swords. Yet the reality of the duel could only be reported in the abstract. Readers knew what a duel involved, but the implied consensus seems to have been that the duels happening on British soil were not to be discussed, at least in official publications. Compare and contrast with Samuel Pepys’ diary entry in January 1668, where the injuries dealt by the duel he describes, between the Duke of Buckingham, a rival and their seconds are discussed with blunt openness [Peltonen 2003: 204]. As Pepys concludes, with some sarcasm:

This will make the world think that the King hath good counsellors about him, when the Duke of Buckingham, the greatest man about him, is a fellow of no more sobriety than to fight about a mistress. [Pepys 1668]

No such detail, or comment, could ever be countenanced by the Gazette. Pepys is unfair when he describes the newspaper and its editor as having ‘pleased me to have it demonstrated, that a purser without professed cheating is a professed loser, twice as much as he gets’. By definition, the Gazette was writing for a mass audience and with strict limits on how it could go about this, unlike Pepys and his private diary. Nonetheless, what is not said about duels is as revealing as what is. In addition, reporting foreign duels with such regularity suggests a clear audience for such content.

In that sense, therefore, newspaper coverage of duelling in this era is both revealing and yet ambiguous. Revealing, in that it demonstrates a clear interest in duels, at least amongst readers of the Gazette, and the elaborate ways in which the newspaper met those needs whilst staying within the boundaries of propriety. Yet, it is ambiguous in that the
duels themselves are left undeveloped. The reader is invited to provide the rest of the details with their Restoration-era imaginations and points of reference that are not so self-evident to a reader in the early 21st Century. From the perspective of martial arts history, these sources are useful in that they document incidences of duelling and how society responded to them, in conjunction with other primary evidence, such as letters, official documents and testimonies. Yet they are in and of themselves simple outlines where a more detailed picture is needed.

TWILIGHT OF THE SWORDS

There is, however, one exception to this pattern. Published in 1662, before the Gazette’s more censorious approach, a news story in the Mercurius Publicus covered a particularly fierce duel in Denmark:

Colonel Holly, Commander of Cronenburg a Dane, and Colonel Capel of the Province of Galderland came hither last week; they fell out with one another and came to blows but were hindered to go any further; but the case of their coming hither was to fight a duel. Yesterday they went out with their seconds two or three miles off from hence, a quarter of a mile beyond the Town of Daerdorp, belonging to the Prince of Saxen Lowenburg, having shaken hands with one another, and some words passing between them, they pulled off their Coats and Doublets taking a Pistol in one hand and the Sword in the other, they went on foot asunder about forty paces, and then approaching to one another six paces they gave fire upon one another; Colonel Capel received a shot under the arme in the side... The Commander... was dangerously wounded. The Corps of the Colonel was brother hither this morning, above two hundred persons went thither from hence to see the Duel.

[Mercurius Publicus, 12 June 1662-19 June 1662, issue 24]

What is significant is what they use to fight the duel with. In one hand, they wield a sword, as might be expected, but in the other, they carry a pistol, and it is the latter which is used to conduct the duel, both men being out of range to fight at close quarters, and the duel itself being decided with both men gravely wounded, perhaps fatally.

What this news story does demonstrate a turning point in the history of English and European martial arts. Firearms were increasingly overshadowing sword arts and this is the point where this becomes particularly evident. That is not to say that firearms were a new invention or unknown on the battlefield. Arguably, their first known deployment on British soil, albeit in a crude form, was at the 1461 Battle of Towton [BBC News Online 2010; Sutherland 2011: 13], while the English Civil War saw the ratio of musket first match and then exceed pikes [Atkin 2004: 15-16; Latzko 1993: 470-484]. By 1660, firearms were increasingly dominant weapons.

This is not to say that pikes or swords vanished into the aether there and then. In 1659, a Lieutenant Colonel of the London militia, William Kiffin, co-authored a letter complaining at the treatment meted out to both him and other officers after they were accused of being Anabaptists by a pamphlet. After the allegations were made, the houses of the accused officers were searched and, as Kiffin observes, alongside drums, firearms and swords, fifteen pikes are seized [Kiffin 1659].

What the content of Kiffin and his compatriots’ rather eclectic arsenals demonstrate, however, was that the progression from ‘pike and shotte’ to mainly ‘shotte’ was uneven; warfare was in flux, and pikes still lingered on in the British armoury until 1702 [Falkner 2014: 115-116], when the Duke of Marlborough did away with them, his battlefield tactics and the socket bayonet having finally rendered them obsolete [Black 1994: 111-113; Manning 2007: 691]. Even by 1670, according to The Cry of Innocent Blood... a polemic written by Robert Allen, appalling cruelty was dished out to Quakers by ‘red coats’ both with muskets and pikes, and on horseback, though a great deal of the violence involves either the butts of pistols and muskets, or the threat of shootings [Allen 1670].

This shift would nonetheless gather pace during the 1660-1670 period, as news coverage shows. Mostly, it was in the form of reported deaths by musketfire, such as the death of Admiral Van Hurst during a sea battle in 1666 [Current Intelligence, 18 June 1666-21 June 1666], or the death of a boatswain shot ‘through the neck, of which hurt he immediately died’ in another naval alteration [London Gazette, 18 July 1670-21 July 1670, Issue 488], or the injuring through shot visited upon the captain and ‘6 or 7’ of the crew of the Drake in 1665 [Intelligencer Published for the Satisfaction and Information of the People, 14 August 1665, Issue 63].

The situation ashore was no safer. A Visier was reported shot in the head during a siege in 1668, ‘but how dangerous we yet know not’ [London Gazette, 10 September 1668-14 September 1668, Issue 295]. Meanwhile a 1660 clash between the ‘Regimen of Artois’ and ‘a battalion landed from the Galleys of Malta’ put Ottoman forces to flight with ‘such a showre of bullets, that many fell upon the place’ [Parliamentary Intelligencer, 10 December 1660-17 December 17 1660, Issue 51].

Reports of injuries and deaths by gunfire are remarkably common in newspapers at this time – though usually from abroad. Interestingly,
however, volleys of shot had also become an accepted way of saluting a dignitary in Britain, as the newspapers would often report, such as that provided by the Edinburgh militia in 1666 for visiting and local dignitaries, ‘expressing an Infinite Zeal and Cheerfulness to serve his Majesty and their Country on any publick occasion’ [London Gazette, 13 September 1666-17 September 1666, Issue 87].

The rest of this news story is interesting in that it demonstrates how the use of guns was fast becoming standard practice; no mention of pikes or swords is given. Other examples of musket salutes demonstrate a similar pattern, such as that which received one Colonel Rossiter when he inspected his Lincolnshire troops in 1660, ‘who received him with many expressions of satisfaction and several volleys of Shot’ [Parliamentary Intelligencer, 2 April 1660-9 April 1660, Issue 15, 240].

When reports of battles are made, the only other force mentioned, time and again, are cavalry, which, as the English Civil War demonstrated, was the best way to counter musketeers at close quarters, though it often required combined arms to ensure this: ‘About this time Monsieur de Bauveze advanc’d with a Squadron of Horse beyond a Wood, to make a discovery of the Post, receiving many Shot, and having divers of his Cavaliers wounded in the Attempt’ [Intelligencer, 22 August 1664, Issue 67]. Newspaper coverage of Venner’s Uprising confirms this trend:

The Colonel (John Corbet) took onely twenty horse, and coming to Woodstreet found the Rebels in a very narrow place, where horse without much difficulty could not approach to do service. Howsoever with nine of his twenty he gallantly charged the Rebels (for the truth is, those that charged were no more) and broke those Rebellious Blunderbussers, so as the foot had little to do but to pursue the Rebels now they were broken. [Kingdomes Intelligencer, London, England, 7 January 1661-14 January 1661, Issue 2]

Cavalry tactics also had an effect on criminal activity in Britain and elsewhere. Highwaymen were a growing problem [Picard 2004: 233], but contrary to the modern public image, these robbers often hunted in packs, sometimes of very great size. In 1669, the London Gazette reported a series of robberies between Naples and Rome, carried out by ‘120 banditti’ on horseback [London Gazette, 29 April 1669-3 May 1669, Issue 361], but the press also reported similar cases in Britain, such as the nine ‘well hosted and armed’ highwaymen committed for trial in Ilchester after ‘confessing a Designe’ to rob the house of a wealthy woman [London Gazette, 28 February 1667-4 March 1667, Issue 135]. In 1660, Sir William Grove was robbed in his Berkshire home by seven men on horseback, all armed with pistols [Mercurius Publicus Comprising the Sum of Forraign Intelligence, 23 August 1660-30 August 1660, Issue 35], while in 1666, a merchant’s apprentice reported Carlisle had been attacked by up to 250 horsemen [London Gazette, November 22, 1666 – November 26, 1666; Issue 107]. A particularly dramatic case, meanwhile, unfolded in 1662:

The Prosecutors preferred two Bills of Indictment against them, one for the Robbery, another for the murder, and were very eager in the Prosecution... That these five Gentlemen going that day to Waltham to accompany one Mr Vaughn in his journey towards the North, in their return met with one [unintelligible] and one [unintelligible] [who] told them they were rob’d by four persons who had taken away ten pounds from them, and were before on the road, and desired those five Gentlemen to persue them, and they thereupon made hast, and in their pursuit towards London met one Goddard, who likewise told them that those four thieves had robbed him and were before upon the road... and riding still on in the pursuit of the Theeves with their swords drawn. [Kingdomes Intelligencer, 7 April 1662-14 April 1662, Issue 15]

Time and again, we see the same pattern – weight of numbers, firearms or horses, or a combination thereof. Such an approach to violence, while echoing the influence of military tactics of the time, also hinted at a certain de-skilling of the martial arts at this point. If you could ride a horse – as many could – aim a pistol and have enough of your friends at your side, the skill requirements would, of course, now be much lower. If duels and fencing masters ensured the art of swordfighting continued, it was increasingly overshadowed by the gun. Why learn to use a sword when it takes a much shorter time to load and fire a pistol?

Newspaper coverage of Venner’s Rising in 1661 confirms this trend:

After this, the Rebels were pursued to the end of Moor-lane, where seven of them unable to fly farther, betook themselves to an House, where though they were summoned they stood out, till Lieutenant Lambert [...] got some Musketeers of the Trained-Bands into the next room to the Rebels, who refusing to yield, the Trained-Bands fired, and the Rebels did the like, till four of them were kill’d, and the fifth lay for dead, and yet the other two refused to submit, until the Lieutenant untill’d [...] the room and got in amongst them, and then they cried Quarter for Jesus sake; but while he was dis-arming them, the fifth that lay for dead snapt a Pistol (loaden with a Slug) at the Lieutenant, who thereupon run him through, and brought forth the other two prisoners. [Kingdomes Intelligencer, 7 January 1661-14 January 1661, Issue 2, 24]
This is the only specific reference in the story to any sword fighting. Indeed, the story continually details the use of firearms on both sides, such as exchanges of fire and deaths and injuries caused by gunshot wounds. Lieutenant Lambert only got to use his sword when his opponents were unable to fire and on the brink of defeat. Guns, not swords, had brought an end to Venner’s Rising.

Firearms were also increasingly used by criminals on foot. In 1664, one of L’Estrange’s news books reported the murder of a Portuguese merchant at the pistol point of his manservant [Newes Published for Satisfaction and Information of the People, 24 March 1664, Issue 24]. Another story in the same year, also published in the Newes, told of the daughter of a Kentish noblewoman, shot en route to church by an assailant who fled the scene [Sutherland 1986: 97]. In a more benign fashion, guns had entered day-to-day parlance as metaphors. For example, Robert Hook’s 1665 study of nature through microscopes, Micrographia, described the bursting of a heated bladder as having ‘almost made me deaf for the present, and much surpassed the noise of a musket’ [Hooke 1665).

Another sign of the ascent of guns, however, was the cultural backlash against them. This was not due to them being used to kill people, however. Instead, as the woman of letters, Margaret Cavendish, argued, the problem with guns was a matter, quite literally, of class:

For Shooting is not a direct Fighting, because they must stand at some Distance to take Aim, which in my opinion appears Cowardly, to Pelt at each other, as if they were Afraid to come near each other; besides, a Child may have so much Skill and Courage as to shoot off a Pistol, and may chance to Kill a Man, but a Child cannot tell how to use a Sword, or manage a Horse; also a Peasant or such mean bred Persons, can shoot off Pistols, or Carabines, or Muskets, but they have no skill to use a Sword, nor know not how to manage an Horse, unless a Cart-Horse. [Cavendish 1664: 143-144]

In other words, Cavendish saw that guns, in effect, democratized violence and suggested a threat not only to the established order but its cultural expectations and traditions. While the blithe snobbery of Cavendish’s rhetoric is certainly evident, it is not without context. Written only four years after the Restoration, and three years after the Venner Uprising, and by someone with first hand experience of both the Civil War and exile to France, her contempt for the common man, or ‘clown’, with his ‘carbines or muskets’, is rooted in a genuine concern. The kingdom was insecure and instability an ongoing and very real threat, as the angry protests outside her husband’s London mansion after the 1667 Medway Raid made only too clear [Sutherland 1986: 98].

Instead, Cavendish argued not only for the cultural supremacy of the sword, and indeed the Swordsman, but also that it still retained its relevance and effectiveness as a weapon of war, primarily in close combat against unarmed infantry.

As for Foot Commanders, they must Chiefly, if not only, Practise the Use of the Sword, for it is the Sword that makes the greatest Execution; for though neither Horse nor Sword is either Defensive or Offensive against Canon Bullets, they are both Usefull against Bodies of men; for all sorts of Bullets, either from Canons, Muskets, or Pistols will Miss ten times for Hitting once, whereas an Army when Joyning so close as to Fight Hand to Hand, the Sword is the Chief and Prime Executor, insomuch, that a Sword Skilfully or Artificially Used, hat the Advantage over the Strength of Clowns or their Clubs, or the But-ends of their Muskets [...] for by the fore-mentioned arts [including ‘the management of his Horse’] you will make a great Slaughter, and a Quicker Dispatch to Victory, and Gain a great Renown or Game to each Particular Person, that are so well Bred or Taught to be Horse-men and Sword-men. [Cavendish 1662]

Cavendish was, of course, far too optimistic about the usefulness of the sword against massed musketry and weight of numbers, clowns notwithstanding. Tellingly, however, she does also argue for the supremacy of cavalry, and in that regard at least, Cavendish demonstrated some understanding of the new dynamics of war that would continue, to varying degrees, until World War One. It is also worth noting that Cavendish would later write a glowing account of her husband’s exploits in the English Civil War, alongside his great and effective reliance on muskets and cannons during that conflict, with nary a hint of irony [Cavendish 1667: 143]. In that sense, of course, Cavendish had no issue with firearms so long as the right sort were in control of them. Even an idealist like her could admit, albeit indirectly, that times have moved on.

A further confirmation of this change in the dynamics of British martial arts was written several decades after the era covered by this article. Swordmaster William Hope’s 1691 fencing treatise, The Sword Man’s Vade Mecum, both echoes Cavendish’s criticism and uses similar rhetoric:

But suppose they should openly reflect upon him, and undervalue his Art, by threatening him with that unanswerable defence, as they think of their Ignorance, and infallible Defeater of all Art (I mean by ingaging him to fight
with a Pistol, or other such like Fire weapons) and indeed to hear some People talk, one would think that by their gaining this one point, of engaging a Sword-man to fight with Firearms, they make no doubt, but all will go well with them, and that the day is certainly their own… Such discourse as this is but too common amongst Ignorants, and they think when they talk at this rate, they have found the Philosopher Stone, which in place of turning every thing into Gold, can turn all their Ignorance into the profoundest Art and Skill, and all skilful Persons, Art, and Judgement into the greatest Ignorance. [Hope 1691]

Hope does, nonetheless, make concessions to the point, noting that ‘no Man will be so foolish, as to pretend to parie the shot of a Pistol’, qualifying this with a claim that there are ways to ‘shun a shot’, but that he does not think it ‘fit at present to mention’. Unable to completely argue for the supremacy of the sword against the gun, therefore, Hope instead tries to equivocate that only expert shots can exceed the swordsman, and that since the weapons are so different, the point is essentially moot:

So that the only way to end this Debate, is, that they either fight with Weapons altogether unknown to both, or … propose a Barrel of Gun-power should be brought to each, in the middle of which, they were to place themselves, and then with fired Matches to try who could most Manfully, or I may rather say Madly blow up the other. [Hope 1691]

In Hope’s work, we see defiance but also a barely admitted resignation. The musket and the pistol, alongside the horse and the bayonet, were the future of warfare and the sword would be relegated to a sign of rank for military officers. Meanwhile, duellists from the 18th century onwards set aside the sword for the pistol [Shoemaker 2002: 528] before mounting criticism and social/cultural shifts ended duels altogether in the 19th century [Shoemaker 2002: 545]. As the newspapers of the 1660-1670 period amply demonstrate, journalism was not so much recording the nature of duelling at the time, but the beginning of its end, and an existential challenge to British martial arts themselves. The gun had prevailed over the sword.

CONCLUSION

As this article has shown, newspaper and media archives are effective sources of historical information in regards to the martial arts. What they reveal, however, is not always what we may expect. While the theme of the paper was ‘News of the Duels’, it is also, in hindsight, a demonstration that Restoration Britain’s martial arts were as subject to disruption as any other aspect of life at the time, including the press. Naturally, there is a need for caution in regards to these sources. As L’Estrange demonstrates, their bias was integral. We must also be aware of how terms of reference change over time – if newspapers and newsbooks of the time did not cover duels in great detail, this may be as much down to readers’ common knowledge as censoriousness on the part of the reporters. For example, for us, karate needs no introduction or description, though a 17th century reader would beg to differ.

The article’s focus on newspapers also means other media at the time, omitted for reasons of space, still await further investigation. While newsbook coverage of martial arts have been explored somewhat, a deeper study is needed. Handwritten newsletters, as produced on the side by newspaperman Henry Muddiman [Griffiths 2006: 13], when he wasn’t working for L’Estrange and, latterly, the London Gazette, would also be illuminating, not least because they were more detailed and far less censored. Meanwhile, the Bills of Mortality, while mentioned in passing, would be a valid area of research, if only to see how Londoners may have killed each other. The article has also referred to non-journalistic texts from the period; they are a rich source of further information, as the works of Lady Cavendish, Richard Allestree and Samuel Pepys are any yardstick.

While the press was limited in what it could report by the Licensing Act, there was a brief hiatus between 1679 and 1685, and the law itself was finally refused renewal by Parliament in 1695. How was violence of any stripe recorded during these times, and how much more revealing are they from a martial arts studies perspective? Foreign newspapers from the period, such as Dutch and German publications, could also provide an outsider’s perspective on British violence at the time, skilled or otherwise.

Finally, I hope this article will be of use to martial artists themselves. While fencing manuals from the period are standard texts, other sources offer further information. HEMA practitioners may wish to consider how cavalry tactics and blackpowder warfare, supported by swords and bayonets, can be recreated and taught (preferably without the live fire) from the material given here and in the archives themselves. The study of newspapers offers a new source of material as to how fighting not only took place but was perceived by those alive at the time. What is clear is that a great deal can be learned not just through the practice of the time but also by considering how the populace at large chose to read all about it afterwards.
MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

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A growing body of scholarship has examined the introduction, diffusion, and cultural domestication of Asian martial arts in the United States. Veteran martial arts researchers such as Joseph Svinth and Thomas Green have demonstrated the value of both archival and ethnographic approaches to the topic, and new publications – such as Charles Russo’s study of martial arts in the San Francisco Bay area during the 1950s and 1960s – are emerging to shed light on neglected topics. Whereas these studies have tended (judiciously?) to delimit their scope to a relatively narrow historical period, to a single martial art, or to a particular geographic region (or some combination thereof), Jared Miracle’s *Now with Kung Fu Grip!* spans more than a century, explores the history of various martial arts in both East Asia and the United States, and discusses pedagogical practices, professional competitions, and the impact and significance of media creations ranging from martial arts movies to the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* series. This book is, in other words, an ambitious undertaking.

Although the book’s main title might elude readers unfamiliar with American advertising slogans, the intriguing subtitle promises a lively and iconoclastic inquiry into how Asian martial arts in the United States became ‘Americanized’ over time. The five main chapter titles serve to further pique the reader’s curiosity: Chapter 1, ‘The YMCA, Christian Muscle and Breakfast Cereal’, examines the history of various fighting arts in the United States from the late 19th century through to the beginning of WWII, with a focus on the YMCA’s advocacy of what is now known as ‘muscular Christianity’; Chapter 2, ‘Karate, Boxing and Other Japanese Creations’, focuses on Japan during roughly the same time period; Chapter 3, ‘U.S. Occupation and a New Manly Art’, examines how the postwar American occupation of Japan and Okinawa shaped the way in which martial arts were later ‘translated’ for domestic consumption and also features a discussion of Kyokushin karate founder, Masutatsu Oyama; Chapter 4, ‘In Search of the Death Touch’, concentrates on Robert Smith, Donn F. Draeger, and John ‘Count Dante’ Keehan; and Chapter 5, ‘Bigger Muscles, Mutant Turtles and Cage-Fighting Philosophers’, is, in the author’s words, ‘concerned with the transformation of the martial artist identity as it has interacted with discursive masculinity from the 1970s to the present’ [12-13].

In the Preface, the author notes that his aim in the book is ‘to tease out trends in each generation’s approach to the martial arts, both East Asian and Western’ [2], and he describes the process as follows: ‘After sifting through historical material from the past century or so in three languages, interviewing famous – and not-so-famous – fighters, artists, and fans of the genre, and spending countless hours engaging in all elements of the martial arts industry on two continents, a few running themes emerged’ [2]. With all of this build-up, what reader would not be chomping at the bit to devour the main text?
The book does, in fact, contain much of interest, and its attention to the role of the YMCA in promoting athletics and to the shifting attitudes toward boxing in American society provides a fresh lens through which to view the reception of Asian martial arts in the United States. The author has gathered a diverse range of material from both primary sources and from interviews that he personally conducted, and readers unfamiliar with the colorful characters who fill the latter half of the book will find themselves entertained as well as informed. Those interested in shifting social constructions of masculinity will also find much that is worthwhile.

Notwithstanding its virtues, the book as a whole fails to live up to the high expectations fostered by the chapter titles and opening pages. Perhaps the most serious flaw, in view of the historical nature of the project, is the lax treatment of historical detail and context. This is particularly evident in the sections that dwell on Japanese history (why a book ostensibly about the 'reinvention of martial arts for America' should devote so much space to Japanese history and to the development of martial arts within Japan is already puzzling). For example, in his discussion of judo founder, Kano Jigoro, the author notes that, 'following Western pedagogical practices and almost certainly with the police and military in mind, Kano devised a system of ten grades to identify the level of a practitioner's ability and experience' [53]. In fact, the adoption of the 'dan' ranking system in judo was borrowed from the long-established systems used in Japanese chess (shogi) and Go to rank players; and Kano awarded a student the rank of 'first degree black belt' (shodan) as early as 1883, several years before his official contact with the Tokyo Metropolitan Police.

In the book's twenty-five-page 'Conclusion', which serves mainly to recapitulate points discussed at length in the preceding chapters, the author writes: 'From the turn of the century and into the 1910s and 1920s, a forward-thinking professor of education, Kano Jigoro, carried out an intensive study of the Japanese classical martial arts and formulated a system that he called "judo"' [152] – this after devoting many pages to a detailed discussion Kano and judo in Chapter 2, and after noting that Kano opened the Kodokan judo headquarters in 1882, which followed his intensive martial arts study referred to above.

In the next paragraph, the author mentions that Kano was responsible for introducing Okinawan karate master Funakoshi Gichin to Japanese educational authorities. He then adds, for the reader's edification, that, 'although it was later incorporated as a full prefecture of Japan, at the time Okinawa was still essentially a foreign culture' [152]. The remark about Okinawa's cultural difference from mainland Japan is accurate, but Okinawa was officially made a Japanese prefecture in 1879. Funakoshi would have been about eleven years old at the time.

One would have hoped that such historical inaccuracies were limited to the Meiji era (1868-1912), but the treatment of the postwar era is also problematic. In discussing this period, the author implies that Masutatsu Oyama was the son of Korean immigrants to Japan [76]; rather, he left his family's home in Korea for Japan by himself while still a teenager, and although decades later he became a naturalized citizen, for many years he concealed his Korean origins in an effort to 'pass' as Japanese. Much of the above information is available in Japanese (and probably in English as well), but while the author claims to have sifted 'through historical material from the past century or so in three languages', the book's bibliography only lists works written in English, and it is unclear what other two languages were employed in his research. Written Japanese would not appear to be among them.
The author further states that, 'although members of the occupying forces were probably familiar with judo to some extent prior to arriving in Japan, it was karate that came to be popularized by these men after returning to the U.S.' [82]. Yet during the occupation of Japan, judo was far more well-known and popular among the American troops than was karate (at least among those stationed in mainland Japan), and when fledgling American martial artists returned from their tour of duty and began teaching martial arts back home, judo classes far outnumbered karate classes throughout the 1950s.

At times, the author's treatment of American history is also perplexing. At one point, for example, he makes the following jaw-dropping claim: 'American women attained suffrage in 1920 after decades of public demonstrations and legal arguments. This is a clear indication of the degree to which women had the same autonomy as men' [36].

In terms of its theoretical framework, this book suffers from what appears to be a conflict between the author's acknowledgement of the multifaceted and constructed nature of identity ('masculinities are also fluid, varied, and sometimes contradictory' [34]) and his desire to indulge in essentialist claims relying on monolithic concepts. The following, rather awkwardly-worded, assertion is but one example: 'The attraction of the Asian martial arts for the American psyche would appear to be their advertised ability to grant individual power, ensuring the autonomy needed for enacting the lone warrior myth' [87, italics added]. One result of this monolithic approach to uncovering social and psychological motives behind Americans' interest in Asian martial arts is that the author ends up choosing a single social sector – namely, white, Christian, middle class men, typically in white collar jobs – then extends his argument to society in general. To give him credit, he does attempt to historicize, and he also points to instances where images (or fantasies) of working class masculinity are appropriated by the middle and upper classes.

More disturbing is this book's utter inattention to the critical role played by African American communities in the dissemination, popularization, and cultural domestication of Asian martial arts in the United States, particularly from the 1960s onward. Many, if not most, of this book's claims about the appeal of Asian martial arts to suburban, white, middle class American men are unlikely to apply to young, impoverished African American males, who were among the most avid consumers of martial arts movies and constituted an enthusiastic base of practitioners as well. Yet middle class white men are treated as normative throughout most of the book, and generalizations about this population are frequently conflated with those of American society writ large.

Finally, this book could have benefited from a hard-nosed editor to weed out the misspellings ('dissent' for 'descent' [35]; 'proselyting' for 'proselytizing' [150]), awkward phrasing and inane sentences ('Education is the key to preventing repeats of history' [165]), and, above all, the repetition of entire blocks of information throughout the book. This reviewer was left with the impression that the author must have rushed off his manuscript to the publisher, which in turn prematurely sent it to press. That is unfortunate, since the book contains the seeds for an immensely valuable project.
The Fighting Art of *Pencak Silat* and Its Music: From Southeast Asian Village to Global Movement

Uwe U. Paetzold and Paul H. Mason (editors)
Brill, 2016
376 pages £142

The word ‘interdisciplinary’ gets thrown around a lot in academia these days. Boundaries between fields of study are increasingly porous and it is not unusual for scholars to deploy theories or methods drawn from several different disciplines. In fact, Paul Bowman [2015] has suggested that the emerging field of martial arts studies is well positioned to further disrupt disciplinary boundaries thanks to the multiplicity of approaches being taken – or that could be taken – to its heterogeneous object of study. It is still somewhat rare, however, to find interdisciplinary work dealing closely with music while still remaining intelligible to scholars outside of (ethno)musicology. *The Fighting Art of Pencak Silat and Its Music* [2016] is a fine example of how martial arts studies can encompass musical (and choreographic) considerations alongside issues of culture, society, religion, ritual, media, politics, nationalism, identity, gender, and embodiment.

Uwe Paetzold and Paul Mason’s edited book arose out of productive interactions at the 2010 meeting of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) held in Singapore. During that conference, the inaugural symposium of the ICTM Study Group on The Performing Arts of Southeast Asia was held, and pencak silat received both ethnomusicological and ethnochoreological attention from the participants of several panels. Studies of martial arts have until recently been under-represented in music and dance scholarship, perhaps because violent behaviour appeared to fall outside the purview of research on practices that are more often concerned with aesthetics and social cohesion.

Pencak silat can be thought of as what Clifford Geertz famously referred to as a ‘blurred genre’ [Geertz 1983] and which the editors discuss briefly in the Introduction. Precedent for theorizing music and martial arts in this way was set with studies of the Afro-Brazilian dance-fight-game capoeira [Lewis 1992; Downey 2002, 2005], to which I would like to add my own research on percussion music and lion dance in Chinese kung fu [McGuire 2010, 2015]. Like these other types of musical martial arts, interdisciplinarity in pencak silat results in a field of practice where it is advisable not to separate the constituent parts, but rather to deal with them as a single whole. Music, dance, drama, costuming, performance, and ritual are not independent from the fighting skills of pencak silat – they form an integral part of it. Granted, pencak silat is a blanket term of relatively recent vintage that seeks to encompass a wide and idiosyncratic range of practices, so not all local versions and variants contain every possible aspect in equal concentration, but proceeding with the idea of a blurred genre in mind is still useful.

A basic premise of the book is that, ‘when distilled into performance arts, activities correlated with fighting, self-defence, and physical aggression are able to offer highly meaningful anthropological insights

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into cultural life’ that may not be available elsewhere [Paetzold and Mason 2016: 1]. This position ties into a key concept for research in the broad area of music and martial arts that Phillip Zarrilli might call *heroic display ethos*. He defines it as, ‘that collective set of behaviors, expected actions, and principles or codes of conduct that ideally guide and are displayed by a hero’ [Zarrilli 2010: 606]. Viewed from this perspective, a full range of martial art genres – broadly considered – from dance and dramatized combat to fighting sports and even organized warfare can be productively analyzed for their performative qualities.

This book is not self-identified as martial arts studies per se, but it does show an awareness of some of the relevant concerns. In the Introduction, Paetzold and Mason provide a definition of ‘martial arts’, which is considered alongside related terms like ‘fighting arts’ and ‘self-defence arts’. It should be noted, however, that the rest of the authors do not appear to be as invested in that discussion. It is unfortunate that the editors’ discussion does not engage with recent work on definitions from martial arts studies [e.g., Wetzler 2015]. Nonetheless, they make some useful contributions to martial arts studies discourse, particularly regarding aspects that are sometimes overlooked, like music:

As for music, when it comes to performing in public, it can be said to be one important aspect, or component, to differentiate a ‘self-defence related art’ – as manifested in some form of choreography, dance, or theatre – from a sheer self-defence art in the closer motoric functioning sense of a ‘Form-Follows-Function’ concept. Music is an important modality to bring pencak silat into the public arena, and to make it a movement art in everyday life. These are some of the assumptions from which this book starts.

[Paetzold and Mason 2016: 6]

Paetzold and Mason use David Jones’ [2002] list of possible characteristics for martial arts but further this schema by adding two characteristics of their own. They also provide an Index of Terms and Associative Expressions at the end of the book that helps to organize the chapters by providing page references under section headings according to Jones’ expanded model. The classification schema introduced in Jones’ *Combat, Ritual, and Performance: Anthropology of the Martial Arts* should be familiar to most readers of this journal, so I will simply list Jones’ categories for convenient reference along with his caveat that not all boxes need to be checked in order for a practice to be called a martial art: 1) Kata, 2) Emphasis on shock combat, 3) Ritual, 4) Techniques, repetition, and drill, 5) Sparring, 6) Entertainment, 7) Seeking internal power, 8) Ranking and indication of rank, 9) Connection with social elites. The editors’ additions to Jones’ schema are: 10) Medium for education and 11) Medium for movement therapy. The former educational aspect applies from large-scale government initiatives through to boots-on-the-ground work with street youth wherever martial arts are used as a means to inculcate social competence as well as control aggression. The latter movement therapy category refers to the holistic wellness benefits of some types of martial arts practice, which might be exemplified by taijiquan.

One of the greatest strengths of this book is its broad-yet-deep approach, which is unlikely to have been possible as a single, double, or even triple-author monograph. The twelve contributors combine approaches from ethnomusicology, ethnochoreology, anthropology, and performance studies. They cover nearly the whole ‘world of silat’, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, southern Thailand, and overseas transplants. In the root Indonesian-Malay culture areas, there are further differentiations by region belying the Java-centric nationalist discourses that threaten to construct pencak silat as a monolithic practice. The four parts of the book each contain several chapters. They cover 1) the general origins, history, development, and standardization of pencak silat; 2) specific case studies of local silat forms and their musics; 3) examinations of dances, rituals, and dramas that draw on or arise from pencak silat; 4) and considerations of
insider/outside experiences and approaches to silat’s embodied logic. The chapters in the third section cover movement arts like "luambek", "rudat", and "jaipongan", which stretches the blurred genre concept as they sometimes only reference fighting skills in very stylized ways. These studies of silat-esque dances and dramas demonstrate how the martial arts aspects can be foregrounded in work on practices that might seem to be one step removed from fighting arts.

A thread running through various chapters is the way that pencak silat and its music are imbricated with discourses of identity, gender, power, and society (among others) that can be analyzed through careful attention to the details of performance. All the authors touch on sound and movement in their texts, but the representational methods they use in relation to these discussions are divergent. Some use Western staff notation for music, which presents a barrier for readers not familiar with that system, but also allows a degree of precision that is difficult to match in regard to pitch, rhythm, and duration. Other authors use graphical representations of music that are more intuitive to the uninitiated. Similarly, several authors use (or adapt) the language of Laban Movement Analysis to precisely describe and interpret the physical action they discuss, without necessarily getting into the symbols of Labanotation. One of the most inclusive approaches was that of Zahara Kamal and Indija Mahjoeddin, who represent sound and movement in an integrated choreomusical analysis, which strikes me as important when dealing with a blurred genre. In an appendix to their chapter, they provide a text-based table with three columns (movement, time, and music) that helps to make explicit the structures of sound and physical action that they analyze in relation to social organization.

_The Fighting Art of Pencak Silat and Its Music_ would be a valuable resource for people with interests in martial arts as a blurred genre, as well as in the general topic area of Southeast Asian performing arts. It has been difficult to do this book justice in such a short review, particularly because I have dwelt on issues of theory and method rather than delving into the rich ethnographic, historical, cultural, social, musical, choreographic, and, of course, martial detail. In terms of critique, I am afraid that the steep price of the tome will scare some people away, although I hear that institutions who purchase the equally expensive access to an online e-book version will also be able to order much more affordable paperback ‘MyBook’ editions for their members. It is also unfortunate that the publisher could not (would not?) host a website for audiovisual supplements, and so the editors have taken on this task themselves. Their password-protected media site has its gate unlocked by a code available in the book. It is a work in progress, but the video is particularly helpful for those unfamiliar with silat and its music. Integration of audiovisual material with the text, however, is rather awkward. The authors were unable to refer to the supplementary website in their chapters because it was not available before publishing time, thus leaving readers to comb through the companion website to look for retrofitted examples. Minor faults aside, though, I heartily recommend this book.
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Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports
Raúl Sánchez García and Dale C. Spencer (editors)
Anthem Press, 2014
234 pages $40 /£25 (pb)

Fighting Scholars is an edited collection of ethnographic scholarship on martial arts and combat sports (hereafter referred to as MACS [Channon and Jennings 2014]). This volume is the first of its kind; it brings together a selection of empirical studies that demonstrates the fecundity of ethnographic research on the one hand and of Loïc Wacquant’s notion of ‘carnal sociology’ [Wacquant 2004, 2014] on the other. This volume is also quite timely when considered in relation to the wider context of the ‘bodily turn’ in the social scientific and anthropological study of sport and physical culture [Shilling 2007].

In the introductory chapter, editors Raúl Sánchez García and Dale C. Spencer outline their rationale for the volume, indicating in the process the considerable influence of Wacquant. In addition to contributing a chapter and an epilogue to the volume, Wacquant first introduced his ideas in his pioneering ethnography of boxing, Body and Soul [2004], in which he drew from and sought to develop the work of Pierre Bourdieu. The main idea put forth by Wacquant is to ‘use habitus as a methodological pathway, through the technique of apprenticeship, to pry into the forging and functioning of habitus as a spring of social action’ [Wacquant 2014: 211]. It is this idea and its implications for research in MACS with which the contributing authors all seek to engage.

Additionally, García and Spencer provide their explanation for what they see as the volume’s four-fold thematic division. Their method of division highlights four key areas – body techniques, race/ethnicity, gender and religion – which they believe can be fruitfully explored with a ‘carnal’ approach. However, this division does not shape the organisation of the ensuing chapters. Rather, it draws attention to some of the main, recurring points of focus across the various chapters. This thematic division could have been useful for readers in allowing them to navigate the volume, explore areas of particular interest and facilitate in highlighting the aspects of their contribution with regard to the frame of reference used by the editors.

Considering the importance of Wacquant’s oeuvre to this collection, it is appropriate that his chapter opens the proceedings. In his contribution, Wacquant reflects on his fieldwork in the Woodlawn boxing gym in Chicago, which was the subject of his most influential scholarship and which inspired many scholars (including myself) to take a carnal approach to the study of MACS. Following Wacquant, the rest of the chapters focus on a variety of topics and provide myriad insights across the wide range of MACS. Despite demonstrating a great deal of diversity in this respect, it is worth pointing out that the contributors to the volume all seem to approach their research from a decidedly Western/dominant point of view. This is something that future research could perhaps balance out by encouraging considerations of/ from alternative perspectives.

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Along with Wacquant’s carnal approach, the chapters in this volume are informed by the Bourdieusian notion of *habitus*. Regarding the latter, the chapter by David Brown and George Jennings offers interesting avenues for further research. Brown and Jennings aim to identify some core dispositions that make up a martial habitus in the context of wing chun and taijiquan. They also contemplate the possible identification of shared dispositions across MACS. Although they strongly emphasise that this is a preliminary enquiry, the idea of identifying shared dispositions that span different MACS in diverse ways and to different degrees could extend the study and use of habitus considerably.

Another highlight from this volume is Brian Hogeeven’s chapter on Brazilian jiu-jitsu. Hogeeven utilizes a phenomenological framework which relies on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In doing so, he draws attention to the intricate sensory and perceptual dimensions of phenomenological conceptualisations of *habitat* (rather than *habitus*) and thereby demonstrates the potential in developing an approach to the study of MACS that is truly derived ‘from the body’. The central role of the sensory and perceptual dimensions of habitus is a topic explored further in subsequent chapters, including Sara K. Schneider’s chapter on somatic learning in kalarippayattu and Sara Delamont and Neil Stephens’ chapter on mental agility and enculturation in capoeira. However, it bears mentioning that these authors’ analytical grasp of the implications of the sensory seems less systematic in comparison to Hogeeven’s.

Furthermore, Einat Bar-On Cohen introduces another possible avenue for further enquiry in her chapter on kuydo, the Japanese art of archery, in which she makes use of ideas advanced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Specifically, she suggests replacing the habitus/practice nexus with poststructuralist conceptualisations of actuality/virtuality. Doing so yields intricate insights into such matters as the intertwining of combat and religion (one of the key themes highlighted by the editors). Conversely, Spencer’s chapter on muay thai offers insights into the complexities of national identities through a consideration of attempts by Westerners to learn this art in Thailand. Lastly, Garcia employs Norbert Elias’ theory of the ‘civilizing process’ in his ethnographic study of aikido and boxing. The Eliasian framework has been examined extensively in social scientific studies of sport. However, these studies have taken a more macro, socio-historical approach, with the fleshy field of practice unfortunately suffering occlusion. Garcia’s timely effort to redress this imbalance thus serves as a useful contribution to further research in the ethnographic domain.

Overall, *Fighting Scholars* offers rich empirical and theoretical insights which are consistent with the stated goals of the editors. Although each individual chapter demonstrates in its own way, based on the perspectives of each individual scholar, the value of carnal sociology and ethnography applied to scholarly investigations of MACS, I do agree with the note Wacquant makes in the epilogue, viz. that the goals laid out by the editors remain to be achieved in future studies. One possible and as-yet-unexplored avenue would be to integrate literature not directly focused on MACS. For example, anthropological studies on *embodied ways of knowing* [Harris 2007] now encompass a wide range of corporeal and sensory bodies of knowledge. Such interdisciplinary efforts could help to make a stronger case for the relevance of martial/combat habitus to other connected fields of enquiry as well as enhance the developing field of martial arts studies.

Critical to this task is to highlight how the topics central to habitus in these contexts connect, intersect and interact with the societal contexts within which these gyms, dojos and MACS spaces are embedded. In particular, much remains to be explored vis-à-vis the dynamic structures and the everyday operation of inequality and resistance to reproduction of relations of oppression in connection with the themes of race, ethnicity, gender and religion. Moreover, I would also add to the list of themes put forth by Garcia and Spencer the theme of ‘class’, which is interestingly absent from the chapters in this volume. The chapter that best demonstrates the importance of this wider awareness is the chapter by Alex Channon in which...

Reviewed by
Anu Vaittinen

*Fighting Scholars*  
Garcia and Spencer  
Anthem Press
he examines the transformative potential of mixed-sex MACS training with respect to established gender relations and hierarchies.

In conclusion, Fighting Scholars takes a pioneering step forward towards a more systematic, critical and corporeally-grounded study of MACS. Continuing in the tradition of Wacquant’s early groundbreaking efforts, this volume aligns methodology and theory with corporeal insights. Fighting Scholars is therefore a valuable and essential resource for martial arts studies scholars and points the way towards a very bright future for the study of MACS and for martial arts studies more broadly.

REFERENCES


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

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

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

Firstly, Loong begins the text with a short and far-from-comprehensive literature review. Leading with the claim that ‘martial arts are often analysed in a discursive manner by researchers who are not themselves practitioners’ [4] and developing an argument that suggests issues around bodies and embodiment have been ignored by scholars of martial arts, he overlooks a plethora of recent (and not-so-recent)
ethnographic studies that in fact do exactly what he claims is missing. Perhaps most notably, these include two recent, edited volumes on martial arts and embodiment [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011; Sánchez García and Spencer 2013], one of which was exclusively written by practitioner-researchers using ethnographic methods and both of which feature chapters on muay thai training in Thailand. Strangely, while not counting them in his initial analysis of the state of the field, Loong does go on to cite several other ethnographic studies later in the text, which begs the question as to why these – along with the preceding work that their authors would have built them on – weren’t considered earlier in the piece.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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