

# Martial Arts Studies

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# Martial Arts Studies

## Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries

Paul Bowman

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*philosophise with the hammer*  
—Nietzsche

*the twain shall meet*  
—Kipling



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## Preface and Note on the Text

The title *Martial Arts Studies* may imply comprehensive or encyclopaedic coverage. However, for reasons that will soon become clear, this work could never hope to be either encyclopaedic or comprehensive. Indeed, there has only been space to discuss *some* select moments in *some* scholarship on *some* aspects of *some* martial arts related to *some* wider issues in culture. In terms of ‘coverage’, then, only a few martial arts are even discussed in this book. Moreover, their treatment is always subordinated to other concerns—academic, theoretical, cultural, political. Many martial arts receive no mention at all. Similarly, in terms of the themes that often organize scholarship on martial arts: some problematics are treated at length, while others receive barely a mention. Doubtless this reflects a definite bias—a bias that receives attention in the following pages. But at this stage it suffices to say that this work does not claim to be the first word on martial arts studies and it certainly does not seek to be the last. Its focus is on select questions and problematics of (and for) an emergent field, rather than focusing ‘directly’ on specific martial arts or specific common academic themes. As readers who move further into the main body of the book will quickly become aware, the focus of this work is on subterranean matters, matters that subtend ‘case studies’, ‘themes’, or ‘examples’, in the usual sense. Nonetheless, case studies, themes, and examples abound. The point is, I have not organized the book schematically, whether in terms of styles, schools, historical periods, geographical regions, or anything else.

The book progresses organically via the developing explorations of emerging problematics.

That being said, readers may notice a greater attention to nominally Chinese martial arts than others. However, the book is not a study of Chinese martial arts. Rather, the specific studies within it—whether ‘Chinese’ or otherwise—have been selected because their analysis relates to and can cast light upon wider issues, fields, contexts, and practices of martial arts and martial arts studies. Other texts and examples could have been selected—some will say ‘should have been’. It is my hope that they will be, and that the theoretical and analytical thrust that animates my analyses and discussions here will come to contribute to a diverse range of contributions to martial arts studies.

As for the Romanization of Chinese terms: some of the authors I quote from use the Wade-Giles system (so they write *t'ai-chi ch'üan* and *chi*) while others use pinyin (so they write *taijiquan* and *qi*). If someone has used Wade-Giles, I have not altered this, but other than in quotations I have used pinyin. As for the spellings of Asian terms, concepts, and martial arts names, I have either selected one conventional variant as opposed to another (so, *escrima*, even though it is equally common to read *eskrima*) or used the spelling related to the conventions of the context of its usage (so, for instance, ‘Japanese’ *jujitsu* or ‘Brazilian’ *jiujitsu*—although there are other variants, and spellings vary so much from context to context that it seems to matter little even to people who have clear accounts of why the variations occur).

I have italicized the first occurrence of words that may—according to certain conventional assumptions—be assumed to be unusual to Western readers, including all ‘Asian’ martial arts (even the American-born *jeet kune do*). However, I have elected never to interrupt the flow and development of any discussion, analysis, or argument by attempting to insert a pithy definition of any martial art or related term, preferring instead to assume that any reader willing to soldier through this book will either already know or have the wherewithal to find out quickly and sufficiently about any martial art or term mentioned. This is not a book of definitions. If anything, it is about their disruption.



# Martial Arts Studies as an Academic Field

## **INTRODUCTION: MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES: DISRUPTING DISCIPLINARY BOUNDARIES**

The subtitle of this book is as important as the main title, if not more so. This is because the book is as much invested in *Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* as it is in *Martial Arts Studies*. What this means is that the book not only offers arguments about martial arts studies in terms of academic disciplines and their boundaries, but it also seeks to enact at least some of the disruption to disciplinary boundaries that it proposes. This gives the book a unique—some may say peculiar—character. It is *about* martial arts studies *in terms of* disciplinary boundaries, and it also disrupts certain disciplinary boundaries as a result of the ways it studies martial arts.

All of this may strike some people as odd, eccentric, or excessive. On the one hand, readers interested primarily in martial arts may wonder what kind of a book this is that appears, on first glance, to be about *martial arts* but that, on second glance, is actually about something called martial arts *studies*, and that for some reason feels the need to connect this with a project of disrupting disciplinary boundaries. On the other hand, readers who may already be familiar with some of my other works—whether on matters of cultural studies, deconstruction, and theories of intervention and agency (Bowman 2007a, 2008a, 2008b, 2012, 2013b) or on the impact of Bruce Lee on global popular culture (Bowman 2010b, 2013a), for example—may

have different kinds of questions. For instance, such readers may notice that the title and subtitle appear to be at war with each other. First, the main title, *Martial Arts Studies*, seems to propose a (new) discipline or field. But upon the announcement of this, the subtitle immediately stipulates some kind of correlated disrupting of the very thing just proposed, namely disciplinary boundaries. On such a reading, the question would become one of whether the book is about the establishment of a new discipline or the disruption of the very possibility of stable disciplinary boundaries. These are very different kinds of objectives—unless the disruption to disciplinary boundaries is one caused simply by the emergence of another discipline within an already overcrowded academic space. In other words, the questions may be posed like this: Is this about jostling for space, subverting the established allocation of space, or deconstructing the very idea of space?

Although this work does make certain claims and arguments about an emerging academic movement or discourse that has been called ‘martial arts studies’ (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a; Liu 2011), both as it is currently emerging and as it might develop, my agenda is not to stake out, map out, and measure a territory (a ‘field’), or to presume to make decisions about what is inside and what is outside or what is good and what is bad ‘martial arts studies’. Rather, my agenda is to argue that the self-conscious elaboration of such a field that is currently taking place should proceed in full awareness of the stakes and critical potentials of such elaboration and construction. Martial arts studies need neither rely on nor ‘be like’ the disciplines and fields from which it is currently emerging. Its objects, topics, foci, and problematics, its approaches, methodologies, and ways of writing and discoursing, need neither mimic nor be beholden to the practices and protocols of other disciplines and fields. Rather, the objects of martial arts studies, the foci, the questions, and relations into which its studies engage may be constructed in ways that disrupt and reconfigure the fields from which martial arts studies emerged. As such, martial arts studies could constitute an intervention into more than its own space, an intervention that challenges established norms and proprieties in a range of fields. This may seem inconsequential, but in the pages and chapters that follow, I hope to demonstrate some of the ways in which academic discourses are political and consequential in some perhaps surprising ways.

The underpinnings or ingredients of this argument will not be obvious to all readers. Indeed, these few prefatory paragraphs may already have signalled to some that this is not likely to be a book for them. Nevertheless, to clarify this matter, in the following pages, I will introduce many of the main concerns that will be developed and explored more fully in the subsequent chapters.

Readers who have managed to stomach these opening paragraphs may be inclined to read on. Other readers may put the book back on the shelf or leave the preview pages of the website on which they found them. This is undoubtedly not a book for everyone interested in martial arts. It is a book for those concerned with questions of the academic study of martial arts, and it seeks to persuade such a readership of the sometimes subtle but always present and active place and work of *disciplinarity*, and of the value and virtue of disrupting disciplinary boundaries. Of this, much more will be said. But first we should turn to the object evoked in the main title: martial arts studies.

### **MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES VERSUS STUDIES OF MARTIAL ARTS**

In diverse geographical and disciplinary spaces, the phrase ‘martial arts studies’ is increasingly circulating as a term to describe a growing field of scholarly interest and academic activity. Indeed, many academic fields already engage with martial arts in their particular ways. But, halfway through the second decade of the twenty-first century, the term ‘martial arts studies’ is increasingly being used not only as a designation to refer to and connect work that is already being done in different disciplines but also as a question. The question might be phrased like this: Although there are various sorts of studies of martial arts, is there, or might there be, such a thing as a unique field of martial arts studies (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011b; Judkins 2012–; García and Spencer 2013)?

Studies of martial arts exist, in a wide variety of disciplines: in history, anthropology, psychology, area studies, sports studies, sociology, literary studies, peace studies, religious and philosophical studies, media studies, and film studies; even political economy and branches of medicine could be said to have a range of versions of martial arts studies. These fields are certainly hospitable to studies of martial arts, at least provided such studies are carried out in terms of relevant disciplinary concerns and methods. But the book you are currently reading is perhaps the first to engage directly and in a sustained manner with the discourse of ‘martial arts studies’ as such. This is so even though it may often seem to fly in the face of respectable disciplinary concerns and methods. But this is because respectable disciplinary concerns and methods are part of its focus. So, rather than following any one disciplinary approach, this book exists and operates in terms of a cultivated critical awareness of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of actual and possible approaches to martial arts studies. It is concerned

with the consequences of the often tacit decisions which police disciplinary borders, norms, proprieties, and conventions. So it explicitly and implicitly explores the orientations and limitations of existing approaches, in order to clarify the stakes and to make a case for the future directions in which martial arts studies might be elaborated, in order perhaps to grow into a unique field—perhaps a field disruptive of the idea of unique fields.

It does so because at its current stage of emergence and development, martial arts studies requires some work. If martial arts studies is to blossom into a field—a discrete field of academic study—this will not just happen, as if naturally. Rather, martial arts studies must be *created*. Establishing what it is requires something rather more than simply surveying all of the academic work done on martial arts in the different disciplines, and stringing it all together, so as to produce some kind of archive or encyclopaedia of shared knowledge. As illuminating as such a work might be, academic disciplines, *en masse*, don't work like that. Different disciplines have very different approaches, even when they are approaching the 'same' thing. Each discipline is a foreign country to the others: they do things differently. This is so much so that it is not only their 'approaches' to martial arts that are different but also their very conceptualizations of 'martial arts', as well as their guiding questions and the sorts of concerns and values that animate them.

Accordingly, this study begins from the proposition that any effort to combine, organize, and synthesize the insights of all of the current scholarship on martial arts would not in itself produce evidence of a coherent field of martial arts studies. It may even be *unhelpful*, at this stage, in this study, to proceed in the manner of the textbook, the survey, or the literature review, by constructing a narrative or encyclopaedic account of something called 'martial arts studies scholarship'—an account of all of the work on martial arts carried out all over the sciences, arts, humanities, and social sciences, all over the world. Such projects will always be interesting and stimulating in many ways. But for present purposes it is not the best approach. This is because, for all of their many merits and values as introductions and overviews, textbooks, surveys, and literature reviews are arguably obliged to overlook, ignore, or downplay considerations of the implications and consequences of the inevitable deep disagreements and incompatibilities between the paradigms of disciplinary approaches. They are limited in their ability to explore or reflect upon the *reasons* for disciplinary differences, as well as the significance and implications of such differences.

Engaging with questions of the field requires a different sort of focus: a kind of double-focus (Bowman 2008a). Indeed, my argument is that the development of martial arts studies requires a focus not just on 'martial arts' but also on the question of 'studies'. One requirement of this is to



engage with the problems that spring up because of the differences between disciplinary paradigms, or disciplinary worlds (Lyotard 1984), and to entertain the possibility that looking squarely at these issues could—but need not—lead to two equally unsatisfactory alternatives.

*Alternative one.* When different disciplines come face to face with each other, sometimes the encounter yields only mutual distaste. Think of the ‘culture wars’, the ‘Sokal affair’, or the tendency of academics in one field to joke about other disciplines being ‘Mickey Mouse subjects’, for instance. So the first possible outcome of any kind of engagement with disciplinary difference involves *fragmentation*, or the moving of approaches away from each other. This is underpinned by a sense that, when it comes to differences between two disciplines, ‘never the twain shall meet’. This kind of splitting apart is based on disagreements about premises and methodologies, epistemologies, values, investments, and orientations, and a closure to what might be called ‘the otherness of the other’ or ‘the difference of the different’ (Lyotard 1988). In fact, this type of splitting amounts to little more than a demonstration and a consolidating reproduction of disciplinary demarcations.

*Alternative two.* The exposure of two different approaches to each other can culminate in the more or less explicit takeover or ‘hegemonization’ of one by the other. In this situation, the terms and concepts of both fields may appear to be preserved, but one paradigm will quietly rewrite and reconfigure the meanings and statuses of the terms appropriated or ‘incorporated’ from the other. This will involve subtle processes of translation and displacements of meaning, but it still amounts to a demonstration of the way disciplines work to preserve and strengthen themselves.

However, if martial arts studies is to amount to any kind of distinct field or a unique development, then it should remain vigilant to the possible consequences of following either of these common trajectories. The former would prevent martial arts studies from coalescing at all; the latter would ensure that martial arts studies always remained an expression or subsection of an existing discipline; and both of these options would amount to the same thing: that martial arts studies as such would not exist.

In order to work towards a new, unique or discrete mode of existence and operation, then, it is important to be sensitive to the slippery logic of disciplinarity (Mowitt 1992; Bowman 2007a). Of course, some academics, researchers, and students interested in the questions of how and why to study martial arts may regard such a double focus as pointlessly or uselessly ‘theoretical’ and ‘merely academic’ in the most pejorative and dismissive of senses. However, as I hope will become apparent, my argument throughout *Martial Arts Studies* will be that a focus on the logic of disciplinarity is actually doubly relevant for any study of martial arts. This is because

martial arts are themselves scenes in which logics of disciplinarity, or disciplinary logics, are always in play. Martial arts are disciplines and contested scenes of disciplinarity. Questions of discipline and disciplinarity are either manifestly present and hotly contested, in all kinds of ways, in martial arts, or they are just a scratch below the surface away from flaring up.

Like martial arts themselves, then, martial arts studies must be at once theoretical and practical. All approaches to martial arts rely on a theory—of what to do, and how to do it, and why. Similarly, martial arts studies cannot but be fundamentally theoretical, even if avowedly interested in matters deemed to be practical. Equally, just as all martial arts—no matter how avowedly ‘pure’ or ‘unique’ they may be—are always surely hybrid, so martial arts studies must navigate the fact of its own unique kind of impurity. As I have already suggested, if it ever wants to be more than the sum of the bits and pieces of the different disciplines that go into work on martial arts, then it needs to take seriously the question of how its many and varied ‘ingredients’ could genuinely produce something new and distinct.

Martial arts discourses of all kinds are arguably preoccupied with matters of purity, impurity, continuity, and change. They have a fraught relationship with ideas such as authenticity, tradition, and essence, on the one hand, and invention, innovation, revolution, and mixing, on the other. Many arts make sometimes incredible claims about improbably long unbroken histories and have incredible origin myths. They make such claims in order to claim that from the outset the art was pure and complete. However, history invariably reveals complexity, chiasmus, divergence, hybridity, and even dislocation and discontinuity between now and then, here and there. Similarly, martial arts studies must be sensitive and attentive to its complex origins and contingent development. It can never pretend to have been born in the blink of an eye, out of nothing. It will always owe a debt to the other disciplines and discourses from which it emerged. Moreover, it will always remain in complex and ongoing relationships with these discourses. However, my hope is that martial arts studies might come to be not only different to the disciplines and discourses that predated and in some sense produced it, but hopefully, it will be able to produce new insights and approaches that will then feed back into and modify the disciplines from which it as a field is currently emerging.

## THE DOUBLE FOCUS OF MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

Accordingly, this book approaches the study of martial arts in terms of a double focus. It all hinges on the theme of *institutions*. Two of its basic

premises are (1) that martial arts are best understood as institutions and (2) that the ways martial arts are thought about, known, discussed, and studied are also institutional—whether connected to institutions or productive of institutions. For these reasons, the book proposes that the concept of ‘institution’ is fundamental to martial arts studies and that by approaching both martial arts ‘themselves’ and martial arts studies ‘itself’ in terms of a focus on ‘institution’ (understood as both noun and verb) we will be able to unlock unique insights into martial arts. But not only martial arts: also scholarship, pedagogy, history, subjectivity, ideology, knowledge production, embodiment, and many other aspects of culture.

Another key proposition of this book is that media representations have long been a powerful force in martial arts discourse, at least (or most clearly) for the last half century. I mention this here because an acknowledgement that film and media are often *constitutive forces* in martial arts theory and practice is something that is very often downplayed or even written out of studies of martial arts in culture and society. This book, however, seeks to redress the balance to some extent by frequently foregrounding the ways in which film, television, documentary, gaming, and other forms of representation/construction have an impact on martial arts discourses and practices. The fact that many academic approaches to martial arts either subordinate, fail to recognize, or appear unable to deal with ‘media supplements’ to ‘real life’ is regarded as something of a royal road to the conscious and unconscious orientations of many studies.

An exhaustive study of this relation would require a volume or more in itself. However, rather than ignoring it, *Martial Arts Studies* argues that representation, mediation, and mediatization are not mere secondary or supplementary add-ons, to be ignored or discounted. Rather, it regards them as matters that fundamentally complicate and muddy the waters of martial arts culture and discourse, so much that the field cannot simply be organized by binaries and value systems organized by matters of truth, falsity, fact, and fiction (Chan 2000; Bowman 2010b, 2013a). Rather, such myth and media-related dimensions demand that martial arts studies be organized by paradigms, theories, methodologies, and orientations that engage with epistemological and ontological complexity, and specifically by paradigms that do not dismiss, subordinate, or remain blind to the problems and problematics involved in mediatization, representation, discourse, and ideology.

In setting out the stakes and putting forward a case for some of the kinds of orientations and approaches that the emerging field could encompass, *Martial Arts Studies* draws heavily on developments in the theoretical fields of poststructuralism, cultural studies, media studies, and postcolonial studies. It argues that martial arts studies cannot but be an *interdisciplinary*

field but argues more significantly that this means it may well have an *antidisciplinary* effect. This is an argument that may take quite some elaboration. Its starting points are studies that have rigorously and critically engaged with the topics of disciplinarity and interdisciplinarity. Stated baldly, *Martial Arts Studies* argues that ‘true’ interdisciplinarity is never a simple pick-n-mix process. It is rather a minefield, and a battlefield.

This may seem to be an excessively theoretical and academic argument. However, it relates to matters that are not confined to academia. As I have already proposed, interdisciplinarity in academia is not dissimilar to interdisciplinarity in martial arts: in both realms, one cannot merely add to or subtract from an institution without the institution changing as a result. As a consequence, there will always be deep-seated resistances to interdisciplinarity *qua* change. Adding, altering, or subtracting always threatens to transform the institution, so all manner of resistances spring up in response to interdisciplinary work (Barthes 1977; Weber 1987; Mowitt 2003). Put differently: any study, any approach, always involves stakes, allegiances, values, and consequences. Wherever there are significant processes of adding, subtracting, combining, or recombining in interdisciplinary ways, there will always be disciplinary resistances, hurdles, and obstacles to tackle.

In awareness of these issues, and engaging with them in terms of the problems of academic interdisciplinarity and in terms of related matters in martial arts ‘innovations’), *Martial Arts Studies* makes a case for constructing the field of martial arts studies according to the terms of problematics drawn from poststructuralism, cultural studies, media studies, and postcolonial studies. My argument is that these coordinates can be regarded as key because of the lessons that each of these approaches incorporated into its own emergence. In a sense, I treat these ‘approaches’ as complex *responses* to perceived problems of institutions, hierarchies, and status quos (Chow 1993; Morris and Hjort 2012). In other words, I regard them as nonstandard disciplines, at least to the extent that they involve explicit critiques of disciplinarity. As such, these fields involve perspectives on and critiques of institutions, critiques that have gone on to institute viewpoints that I argue are highly relevant for martial arts studies.

As nonstandard or even ‘antidisciplinary’ approaches, these coordinates are also to be understood as both *disruptive* of approaches in other disciplines and *productive* of a potentially unique landscape of martial arts studies. In this way, *Martial Arts Studies* proposes a field that both emerges out of and yet differs from many disciplinary locations, and which has the critical potential to feed back into and transform those disciplines.

From one perspective, this may seem to be very little, almost nothing—at best a shadow of the kinds of claims made for certain disciplinary

innovations in the past—of the order: *‘We are currently witnessing the emergence of a new field of study, one that will challenge established knowledge, transform the academic disciplines, and reconfigure conventional modes of knowledge production’*. How many times have academics read statements like this? Such sentences may strike some readers as exciting and engaging. But to others they will sound formulaic and familiar, possibly to the point of being tedious. This is because nowadays the declaration that a new subject is going to be ‘radical’ and ‘transformative’ is very passé. This situation has come about because we are now arguably at the tail end of at least half a century of precisely this sort of ‘revolutionary’ transformation of the university disciplines—a transformation carried out in large part through the emergence of ever more new disciplines, new fields, and new interdisciplinary explorations.

In the UK, for instance—but in a way that moved far beyond the shores of the UK—the main cycle of the ‘revolutionary transformation’ of the arts, humanities, and social sciences was arguably kicked off by the foundation of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University in 1964 (Hall 1992; Bowman 2007a, 2008b, 2013c). The ensuing period of transformation has been characterized by the institution of more and more new subject areas, defined through use of the suffix ‘studies’. Cultural studies, media studies, women’s studies, queer studies, disability studies, television studies, peace studies, migration studies—even business studies, sports studies, science studies, tourism and management studies; you name it—all of these and more can be said to have blazed the trail and paved the way for the emergence of as many ‘studies’-suffix subjects as can be conceived and as can produce articles, books, journals, and degree courses (During 2011). Certainly, many of the ‘new’ subjects and fields have indeed radically challenged and transformed established knowledge, established academic disciplines, and conventional modes of knowledge production (Bowman 2008a). But inevitably, over time, claims about the radical potential of this or that new ‘studies-suffix subject’ have come to seem narcissistic and overblown.

In this context, a pertinent question about something called ‘martial arts studies’ might be: Whereabouts in this continuum of possibilities—stretching from radical transformation to business as usual—might such a subject, field, or discipline be situated? Could we make grand claims for it, as something truly new and transformative (and if so, ‘transformative’ of what)? And why? Such questions deserve to be addressed to martial arts studies—if it can even be said to exist. And does martial arts studies really exist? Is it one thing? Or is such a proposition really just fanciful thinking? Are we, rather, merely talking about a miscellaneous smattering

of disparate books and articles, produced here and there by unconnected thinkers working on diverse topics with diverse orientations and conceptualizations? If it does not yet exist fully or properly, should it be invented, and if so, as what sort of a field or discipline? Tackling such questions requires some sense of what it means for *anything* to be regarded as a discipline, subject area, or field. Only in light of establishing a sense of this will it be time to ask about what *sort* of a discipline, subject area, or field martial arts studies might be or become—whether somehow radical and transformative or whether merely novel or niche. The form of the answers to all of this will depend upon what aims, objects, and methods such a new field might involve, and to what ends.

As for the question of whether martial arts studies already exists: In the institutional world of university degree courses, martial arts studies definitely does exist. There are university institutions with established degrees named ‘martial arts studies’, and others where students can major or minor in martial arts studies (Wile 2014: 8). In other words, under this and other names, the academic, physical, cultural, philosophical, and vocational study of martial arts exists in different sorts of degree programmes all over the world. In this literal though limited empirical institutional sense, martial arts studies clearly exists. However, on closer inspection, the martial arts studies degree programmes and the treatment of martial arts within subject areas related to sports studies, health and fitness, and so on overwhelmingly tend to approach the object according to the concerns either of established disciplinary concerns (such as those of history, anthropology, area studies, psychology, physical education, sports science, management, business, etc.) or according to a vocational agenda: The advertising for martial arts studies degrees typically suggests that they are orientated towards producing graduates qualified for jobs such as teacher of physical education, health and fitness consultant, sport and leisure manager, or even bodyguard or government security operative. The website of the University of Bridgeport degree program in martial arts studies, for instance, suggests:

Students may choose one of several career tracks in criminal justice, health sciences, or business and may go on to pursue careers in the medical sciences, business, psychology, human services, or media. Students may also choose to pursue graduate study in areas such as global development or international law. (Bridgeport n.d.-a)

The same page then lists the following ‘career tracks’: martial arts instructor, business owner, sports psychologist, therapist, journalist, media teacher or college professor, criminologist, DEA agent, FBI agent, INS

agent, probation officer, secret service agent, nutritionist, recreation therapist. The major syllabus itself is made up of modules titled The History of Martial Arts, Martial Arts and East Asian Thought, Psychosocial Aspects of Martial Arts, Martial Arts School Development, The Dao of Business, Martial Arts and Research Methods, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, Survey of the Martial Arts, Communication and the Martial Arts, Image and Reality in the Martial Arts, Internship, and Senior Thesis/Presentation. Then there is a Taekwondo Track, involving Issues in Taekwondo, Self-Defence, Taekwondo I, II, and III; a Japanese Martial Arts Track, involving Issues in Japanese Martial Arts, Judo, Karate, Kobudo Practica, Kata/Kumite Conditioning; and a Taiji Track, involving Issues in Chinese Martial Arts, Taiji Practice, and Qigong Training (Bridgeport n.d.-b). Thus, one might propose that, although one cannot entirely gauge the full nature of the content of each module within the degree course and although one cannot presume to know in advance exactly what the ‘issues’ in taekwondo, taiji, and so on may be deemed to be, and just as that content can and most likely will vary and change over time, this looks to be a distinctly *practical* course, in two senses: first in the sense of being focused on practical dimensions of martial arts, and second in the sense of being vocational.

Now, to the extent that any instituted version of martial arts studies marches to the beat of a pre-established agenda (such as being consigned to being ‘case studies’ in sports science or psychology, or knowledge of native cultures in anthropology or area studies, or ‘how to get a job’ in one or more branch of the ‘martial arts industries’), one might question whether we are dealing with anything truly new or distinct at all. For, to be truly ‘new’, one might expect a subject area or discipline logically to involve a fairly large dose of *difference*—specifically, difference from what is done in existing disciplines.

What this means can be illustrated by a quick (but crucial) consideration of one interesting case of academic ‘newness’ to be found in the history of the evolution of the university: namely, the case of cultural studies, as it blossomed during the 1980s and 1990s. Born in the 1960s, cultural studies was institutionalized as a ‘subject area’ or ‘field’ within universities. Its key mouthpieces have always steadfastly refused the designation of cultural studies as a ‘discipline’. So it was overwhelmingly thought of by cultural studies theorists themselves as being characterized by or establishing a kind of shared identity more by way of its *shared problematics*, or sets of gnawing problems, themes, and issues, than by a shared ‘object’ (Hall 1992). Thus, the term ‘cultural studies’ specified first and foremost a *problematic* or *set of problematics*. This was (or these were) inextricably related to agency, power, and (in)equality; and such problematics were

initially explored and elaborated under the headings of gender, race, and class questions (McRobbie 1992). Soon, ever more areas, such as those related to place, identity, technology, and other types of symbolic structure and forms of power, entered into its purview (Birchall and Hall 2006). At the same time, cultural studies was characterized by an openness to the other, to the different, the un- or under-examined (Hall 2002). It was hospitable to experimental approaches and to unexpected objects of study. In this regard, at least, the very possibility of the easy emergence of martial arts studies today cannot be dissociated from a certain indebtedness to the trail-blazing work of cultural studies as a field which forged ahead in the study of new objects and practices in new ways and thereby attracted the flak of academic disapproval and even occasional media scandal (Hall 1992). The loosening of disciplinarity forged by ‘scandalous’ innovations in cultural studies in some sense blazed the trail that enables martial arts studies and other new fields to emerge.

During the first major period of taking stock of what cultural studies was, had become, and might go on to become, John Storey noted that a ‘proper’ academic discipline might be defined by a collective sharing of ‘the object of study[,] the basic assumptions which underpin the method(s) of approach to the object of study [and] the history of the discipline itself’ (Storey 1996: 1). Of course, the vast—potentially infinite—field of ‘culture’ always meant that cultural studies could not have *one* shared object of study. And therefore there might never be a shared ‘method’ or ‘approach’ to anything. But, to cut a long (and multiple) story short, one might propose that cultural studies was organized into a kind of identity with a kind of shared disciplinary history to the extent that it involved a shared commitment to what might be called *cultural politics* (Bowman 2013b).

Arguably, cultural studies was a unique and challenging field, one that did substantially transform the academy (Mowitt 2003). Yet, clearly, a lot of the ‘ingredients’ that went into cultural studies had neither been born in cultural studies, nor would they stay in cultural studies. No one can claim a monopoly on attention to issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, marginalization, exclusion, and so on. Accordingly, the development of ‘cultural studies’ went hand in hand with events that might be regarded either as the disciplinary fragmentations and divisions *of* cultural studies or as the increased generation and institutionalization of ever more subjects *like* cultural studies. In either interpretation, what is clear is that all such ‘studies’ subjects were elaborated under the sign of the political: their paradigms were organized by questions of the political dimensions and ramifications of *x*, *y*, or *z* (Young 1992; Bowman 2008a). On the other hand, at the same time as this was taking place, numerous other ‘studies’ subjects emerged



that were clearly not organized by anything like a ‘new’ paradigm. Business studies would exemplify this equivalent (even if apparently politically or ideologically opposite)<sup>1</sup> countertendency.

In the context of this discussion: Where might ‘martial arts studies’ come to be placed? Will it involve a disciplinary agreement about the *object* of study (‘martial arts’)? Will enquirers share ‘basic assumptions’, that will come to ‘underpin’ the method(s) of approach to the object of study? Will it come to have an agreed, shared history? Will it matter? After all, academic fields are not renowned for being sites of agreement. Nevertheless, an important question is this: Even if martial arts studies is elaborated as a field of *disagreement* vis-à-vis *all* of these things, will it be organized by something like a shared problematic or paradigm? Will this problematic be unique to martial arts studies or borrowed from and shared with other academic disciplines and fields? If so, which ones, and why? This is an open matter, a matter to be decided and determined by the orientation of *research* into martial arts.

Research into martial arts is primary because any possible degree courses in martial arts studies will ultimately come to be organized by research publications on the range of topics regarded as defining the field. However, because the object ‘martial arts’ will be conceptualized and approached very differently depending on the context and orientation of the formulation of the term, the publications selected to organize the field will be determined more by implicit or explicit disciplinary affiliation than by anything necessary or inherent in the term ‘martial arts’. It is clear, for example, that the definitions constructed, the sets of questions asked, and the methodologies used to explore them will be more than likely to differ fundamentally between sciences, arts, sociology, theology, and philosophy. The philosophical questions posed by some Western approaches to *taijiquan*, for instance, which relate to cosmology and ideology, and so on (Raposa 2003), could hardly be said to be pertinent to the various kinds of Western studies of *taijiquan* in relation to matters such as knee function, ageing, injury, or postoperative convalescence in and around the field of medicine (Zetaruk et al. 2005). But equally, more subtle but no less significant differences arise because of the different sorts of *focus* that are possible within even related fields: Assunção’s historical treatment of the Brazilian martial art of capoeira, for instance (Assunção 2005), is notably different to Downey’s anthropological treatment of the ‘same’ topic (Downey 2005), which focuses very much on questions of the body and pedagogy, rather than history. Then, Downey’s treatment of the body differs again from Adam Frank’s focus on it in his study of *taijiquan* (Frank 2006). The implications of the potential consequences of the orientation

of individual research become clear when we consider the fact that García and Spencer went as far as to organize a collection on martial arts in which all of the contributions were *required* to be organized by Loïc Wacquant's (re)formulation of Bourdieu's conceptualization of 'habitus' (García and Spencer 2013). Such a project has been clearly designed to push the approach of Wacquant's 'carnal sociology', and with it, therefore, a certain kind of sociological materialist phenomenology. This is not necessarily a 'bad thing'. But it is crucially important to be alert to the stakes and consequences of methodological or disciplinary choices, and the effects they have on determining what may become regarded as proper and good and, reciprocally, improper and bad.

Other than in the terms of work in extant disciplines, the birth of martial arts studies as a subject area or field was perhaps announced most clearly in the editors' introduction to a 2011 collection, *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World*. In their editorial introduction, Douglas Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge put it like this: 'The outlines of a newly emerging field—martial arts studies—appear in the essays collected here' (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 1). Thereupon, they offer a reflection on the problems and possibilities of one possible type of martial arts studies—namely, that which would be organized by a focus on *embodiment* (hence the book's title). As they propose, at the outset, some scholars may eye such a project with suspicion: 'the subject of martial arts studies may cause some readers to pause' (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 2). To their mind this is because the very proposition of studying martial arts within and even as a field 'invokes a series of disturbing dialectical linkages', or associations, 'between philosophy, religion and violence, self-defense and aggression, Buddhism and brutality' (2). In other words, many academics, inculcated with certain sorts of cultural value combined with what one can only assume to be media stereotypes about martial arts philosophy and violence, such as those furnished by many films and television programmes since the 1970s, will be ill inclined to take seriously the proposition that martial arts could be a serious field of study.

To this we might add that, along with the likelihood of a suspicion about the validity of 'martial arts studies' arising because of the effect and influence of mediated 'kung fu connotations', suspicion and resistance is likely to be compounded by a rather older 'Western' prejudice: namely, a tradition of prejudice against *the body itself* in Western theology and philosophy (Gilbert and Pearson 1999). A Western prejudice against the body has often been discussed and diagnosed in academic circles, at least since Max Weber in the 1930s (Weber 2002). It arises arguably as a consequence of Christianity's fear of sins of the flesh. This yielded a general distrust of

the body per se (Gilbert and Pearson 1999; Wile 2014). Moreover, Jacques Derrida's influential approach to questions of the values and orientations of 'the West' strongly suggests that the exclusion or subordination of 'the body' in Western scholarship is the flipside of the overwhelming Western philosophical and theological tendency to privilege matters of the mind and the word—what Derrida called the West's 'logocentricity' (Derrida 1976).

Thus, Farrer and Whalen-Bridge propose: 'In Western academe, precisely because martial arts seem like an awkward pretender to "knowledge", the problems associated with embodied knowledge and scholarly resistance to it are apparent'. Chief among these, they suggest, is that 'the growth of martial arts studies has almost certainly been stunted by one of the paradoxes of postcolonialism'. This 'paradox' involves the problem of difference and legitimation—a problem that may be explained as follows: established approaches to knowledge are sceptical of and resistant to *different* approaches to knowledge (Lyotard 1984, 1988). Accordingly, established forms of knowledge cannot easily countenance 'different knowledges', and cannot easily deal with propositions relating to different scholarly knowledges of knowledge, different academic discourses about it, different academic understandings of understanding, and so on (Bowman 2007a). *Established* approaches and *established* bodies of knowledge are what they are because they conform to more or less agreed processes of verification, validation, and legitimation. Anything that falls outside of established processes of verification and legitimation cannot but be regarded as invalid and illegitimate. Thus, 'different knowledges', 'alternative knowledges', and so forth, in all realms, are always and already suspect. Such are the problems of difference.

However, rather than championing *difference* and *different approaches* as being necessarily virtuous, Farrer and Whalen-Bridge propose that what might be regarded as yet another version of the 'legitimation crisis in knowledge' (Lyotard 1984) is not helped when 'the conceptual apparatus of embodied thinking, in its reflexive effort to liberate the body from its role as mind's subordinate other, too often goes too far in the direction of what Spivak has called "strategic essentialism"' (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 2). With this, what is introduced is the idea that there is—paradoxically, and ironically—a risk of *essentialism* entering into studies that seek to champion the complexity of 'the body'. Essentialism here can take the form of hypostatizing and reifying 'the body'—as if '*the body*' were one fixed and unified knowable thing.

Of course, studies of the body take many forms and have a range of traditions, including studies of body technologies (Foucault 1977), techniques of the body (Mauss 1992), bodies' propensities and capacities, and

so on. Thinkers like Foucault (1977), Bourdieu (1977), Mauss (1992), and Csordas (1994), as well as Butler (1990), have inspired a great deal of scholarship in their wake. Nevertheless, it is important to heed Farrer and Whalen-Bridge's warning that essentialism might even enter into fields as complex and nuanced as studies of body-knowledge. But, it is clearly important to be aware that essentialism is something that is constantly threatening to return, to plague thinking and skew and bias it in what Derrida would call 'metaphysical' (uncritical, unthinking, habitual, or reflex) ways.

Essentialism has been the primary target in many ethically and politically inflected kinds of cultural and postcolonial studies for several decades. Such studies have long singled out and attacked the circulation of essentialisms (generalizations, stereotypes, etc.) about race, gender, class, and so on (Hall et al. 1980; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The problematics and vicissitudes of essentialism are particularly keenly felt in postcolonial contexts, in which—for example—the establishment of postcolonial national identities does often seem to require at best 'strategic', at worst 'reflex', essentialism about 'us' versus 'them' (Fanon 1968). This is why Farrer and Whalen-Bridge seek to alert any nascent martial arts studies to beware of essentialist thinking in developing its concepts, orientations, and elaborations.

One problem, however, is that *essentialism may already have entered—in the form of any attempt to specify the object of study itself*. For instance, just think of terms—or potential topics, objects, and foci—such as *karate*, *kung fu*, *capoeira*, *escrima*, *silat*, and so on. Once we so name them, arguably the door has already been opened, and essentialism has already been invited in. This is because the types of formulation that naming invites tend all too easily to imply a fixed and frozen object of study, one fixed in time, place, and often nation and ethnicity. The invitation to essentialism is made as soon as one constructs any statement of the form 'x is (essentially) y'—such as, say, 'karate is . . .', 'kung fu is . . .', 'silat is . . .'. In other words, 'essentialisms' can and do enter and abound, through conceptual confluences and displacements that can emerge simply by attempting to specify and define an object. *Karate* is essentialized as Japanese, *kung fu* as Chinese, *silat* as Indonesian, and so on. Geographical/nationalistic associations threaten to overwhelm or overpower our thinking. We may very easily and acceptingly think of this or that style of martial art according to simplifications about place, nation, and ethnicity. As Farrer and Whalen-Bridge note,

Martial arts, meaning the things done to make the study of fighting appear refined enough to survive elite social prohibitions, has never been exclusively an Asian matter, but martial arts discourse, meaning the expectations that

help order the texts and images of martial bodily training and its entourage of cultural side effects, remains predominantly projected onto the Asian body. In Western representation martial arts are powerfully associated with specifically Asian traditions and practices. The association of particular physical skills with particular kinds of socialization gathers even more complexity when we figure in the role of Orientalist fantasy. (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 2)

These are some of what Farrer and Whalen-Bridge call the ‘built-in conceptual problems’ of martial arts studies (3). Accordingly, they contend, whichever way it is approached, the object ‘martial arts’ constitutes ‘a rapidly changing, ambiguous, contradictory, and paradoxical quarry’ (3). It will be defined, related to, and treated in contingent and conventional ways, all of which will reciprocally help to determine what is ‘discovered’ or ‘learned’. For instance, Farrer and Whalen-Bridge suggest that some studies have used arguments about Asian martial arts to try to show that there are discourses other than orientalism available to Westerners when thinking about Asia. However, although such arguments may be motivated by admirable desires to reduce generalizations, simplifications, and stereotypes about Asia, they may still unwittingly feed into them. They observe:

The term ‘martial arts’ signifies ‘Eastern’ and can be accessed to champion, as a counterdiscourse to effeminizing Orientalist clichés, the contemporary paradigmatic image of the Asian-yet-masculine martial arts icon (think of Bruce Lee). To the degree that this reactionary response is highly predictable, so does the cumulative effect of Asian martial arts discourse serve, in spite of its advocates’ best intentions, to reify and falsely unify the notion of a centered, stable, objective Asian culture. (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 2)

With such arguments, Farrer and Whalen-Bridge begin to set out some of the problematics that the emergent field of martial arts studies must inevitably encounter, navigate, and negotiate: entrenched prejudices against different registers of ‘knowledge’ (or, as I will argue, ‘orders of discourse’); the status of the practices involved; problems of conceptualizing, articulating, and expressing nonverbal and nonlogocentric knowledges; the problems of condensation, conflation, and displacement around even such foundational and definitional a term as ‘martial arts’ itself; and so on. Any serious approach to martial arts as a complex processual field requires that such matters be noticed and tackled. This is why Farrer and Whalen-Bridge argue that martial arts studies must be organized by a sensitive, self-reflexive ethos and be both theoretically and methodologically literate:

The concept of martial arts studies that we propose de-essentializes the ‘how to’ approach in favor of a more theoretically informed strategy grounded in

serious contemporary scholarship that questions the practice of martial arts in their social, cultural, aesthetic, ideological, and transnational embodiment. (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 8)

They go on to give a list of (so to speak) ‘approved’ approaches to martial arts studies, as they envisage it—namely, a selection of works organized by challenging questions and problematics:

Cutting-edge work in what we are calling martial arts studies investigates discourses of power, body, self, and identity (Zarrilli 1998); gender, sexuality, health, colonialism, and nationalism (Alter 1992, 2000; Schmiege 2005); combat, ritual, and performance (Jones 2002); violence and the emotions (Rashid 1990); cults, war magic, and warrior religion (Elliot 1998; Farrer 2009; Shahar 2008). (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 9)

However, to some, this explicit advocacy of what are arguably ultimately ‘theoretical’ approaches to martial arts studies may be received as disappointing, or even disturbing. This is because one typical complaint against ‘theoretical’ studies is that the object of study *itself* is somehow lost or transgressed and replaced with a soup of impenetrable jargon. It is often said that in ‘cultural theory’-type approaches to any topic, any real concern with the real object of study is subordinated to concerns that are ‘merely academic’. However, as will be discussed further in due course, it is possible to argue and to show (via a range of different sorts of evidence) *that this always happens anyway—that no matter what style of scholarship one adopts, the object of study is transformed into something else.*

Still, one might ask, are there certain sorts of approaches to martial arts studies that might not transform ‘martial arts’ into something other than what they ‘really’ are? I will argue that the answer to this question is no, and that no matter how ‘true’ one strives to be to ‘the thing itself’, any study always involves, in a sense, transgressing it and reconfiguring it. After making this argument, I will explore the reciprocal obverse question: If transformation is inevitable, even in the most basic and ‘no frills’ approaches to the subject(s), then what sorts of approaches might martial arts studies embrace in order to ‘reveal’ martial arts ‘otherwise’?

### **LOST IN TRANSLATION? THE SUBJECT AND OBJECT OF STUDY**

To assess the originality, significance, difference, uniqueness, specific attributes, and potential impact of a new field called ‘martial arts studies’,

it is important to bear in mind two fundamental but easily overlooked dimensions to *any* study of *any* thing; namely, the complex but fundamental relationship between subjects and objects. Here, the term ‘subject’ refers to the ‘academic subject’, the ‘academic field’, and its associated conceptual, terminological, and methodological approaches to ‘objects’. Accordingly, ‘object’ refers simply to ‘the thing studied’. Academic subjects study objects. This is the first point to note. However, the second point to note is this: different academic subjects conceive of, construe, and *construct* objects *differently*. Even objects that have the same name will be understood differently—and will therefore effectively *be* different things—within the conceptual universes of different subjects. To illustrate, just imagine the different conceptualizations and treatments of something like ‘love’ within different subjects, from literature to psychology to history to sociology, chemistry, biology, theology, anthropology, business studies, philosophy, and so on. Any of these subjects could take love as an object of study, but the conceptualization and construction of the object (what each thinks the object ‘is’ and ‘does’, plus how it is thought to appear, exist, operate, function, with what significance, consequences, relations, and so on) will be very different in each disciplinary context. The key point to note is that a strange alchemy occurs in the combining of any object (any thing or practice that exists or seems to exist in the world) with *any way* of studying it (any style of approach). By ‘alchemy’ I mean this: that in the meeting of an object and a subject, *the object always becomes something else*. In other words, the object always becomes what John Mowitt has termed a ‘disciplinary object’ (Mowitt 1992). A disciplinary object is an object *produced by* a discipline. It is ‘produced’ by being conceptualized, looked at, discussed, and written about in certain ways (and not others); by being defined, delimited, and demarcated in certain ways (and not others); by being analysed in certain ways (and not others); by being *thought through*, associated with, or placed in relation to certain ideas (and not others); and by being associated with certain contexts, institutions, locations, traditions, and groups (and not others).

When it comes to approaching martial arts, Stanley Henning’s groundbreaking essay ‘Academia Encounters the Chinese Martial Arts’ (Henning 1999a) offers example after example that can ultimately be taken to illustrate the significance and effects of this alchemy—or, that is, ‘what happens’ when a subject ‘takes’ an object. This reading of his essay is possible even though Henning himself is motivated merely by the desire to establish *truth* in the realm of historical knowledge about Chinese martial arts. He is not at all invested in ‘theory’. Rather, he wants both to deepen and to foreground the importance of Chinese martial arts, not least because

he contends that all the evidence suggests that martial arts are as ancient as—and coeval with—Chinese culture and civilization itself, having been intertwined with its development for millennia. Accordingly, for scholars to ignore, overlook, marginalize, or misconstrue Chinese martial arts will *matter* and will *have consequences* for the establishment of any historical knowledge of China. In other words, in Henning's view, misunderstanding the place of martial arts within Chinese history is not merely to misunderstand Chinese martial arts; it will also help to (dis)orientate (mis)understandings of Chinese history per se.

This is why Henning himself is chiefly concerned to set the historical record straight. He does so primarily by seeking to point out and correct certain literal and metaphorical mistranslations because he believes these to have led scholars to make incorrect arguments and to draw incorrect conclusions on a wide range of matters. Thus, Henning's essay (like many of his writings) is full of discussions carried out according to the following basic structure: First he points to a modern (usually Western) scholar's argument about Chinese martial arts—or even to something that the scholar does not recognize as being a matter of martial arts. Then he turns both to original Chinese texts and to the relevant translation (or the other sorts of source that the scholar is either directly or indirectly drawing on). Most commonly, Henning traces arguments about Chinese martial arts back to one of the editions of Joseph Needham's multivolume study *Science and Civilisation in China* (Needham and Wang 1954, 1956, 1959; Needham, Wang, and Lu 1971; Needham and Tsien 1985; Needham, Sivin, and Lu 2000; Needham, Harbsmeier, and Robinson 1998; Needham, Robinson, and Huang 2004). Thereupon, he isolates a mistranslation or historical misunderstanding (or both), one that has skewed subsequent thinking. Then he proposes a different translation, one that would lead to a very different interpretation, not just of the martial arts themselves, but also of the surrounding cultural, social, ideological, and political contexts that they both inform and are informed by.

This form of 'correction' is Henning's primary work. It is self-evidently a very important endeavour. However, I am focusing on it here not because I want to engage with the matter of what is right and what is wrong on this or that point of interpretation, but rather for two different sorts of reason. The first is to point out that Henning's acts of correction (and also what he elsewhere calls 'demystification' (Henning 1995, 1999a, 1999b)) clearly illustrate some of the ways in which academic disciplinary objects and 'knowledge' can differ from the real object in the real world. Henning shows time and again how scholars have misread, misinterpreted, misconstrued, and misrepresented things—and moreover that they have



done so because their reading position or their viewpoint is such that they are *led* to interpret things in one sort of a way (and not another). As he contends repeatedly, some scholars have failed even to recognize the presence of discussions of martial arts in Chinese texts and contexts, while still others have been led to ignore or downplay salient details in their discussion and hence to misconstrue not only martial arts but (therefore) also the wider social and cultural context. Consider the following passage, for example:

Had Joseph Needham and his associates heeded Jin Bang's advice and carefully read Ge Hong's autobiographical sketch (wherein he admits that he studied several martial arts, including boxing, but does not count them among his Taoist pursuits), rather than depend so heavily on a single secondary source, a 1906 *Adversaria Sinica* article by Herbert A. Giles titled 'The Home of Jujitsu', one cannot help but feel that they would not have arrived at the conclusion in *Science and Civilisation in China* that Chinese boxing 'probably originated as a department of Taoist physical exercises'. On the other hand, it appears that Needham may have been attempting to force Chinese boxing into a preconceived notion of the role of Taoism in Chinese culture. (Henning 1999a: 320)

With this and many other equivalent examples, Henning illustrates what we might regard as some of the micrological workings of what Edward Said calls 'orientalism' (Said 1995). For, as we see in this example, Henning proposes an 'and/or' situation in which scholars have either blindly followed an already 'biased' or skewed text (so as to interpret *all* Chinese martial arts as being associated with Taoism) and/or operated according to their own conscious or unconscious convictions or assumptions that all Chinese martial arts must be in some sense associated with Taoism. This can be called 'orientalism' insofar as it conforms to Said's contention that Western scholars have long been influenced by often tacit preconceptions, stereotypes, simplifications, and generalizations about immensely—almost unimaginably—complex geopolitical assemblages (such as the infinitely complex multiplicity that is reduced to the word 'China'). Such influences overwhelmingly lead them to read and interpret things not on the basis of material evidence but rather according to the lenses and optics provided by a limited and limiting set of preconceptions, stereotypes, simplifications, and generalizations (about, say, 'China').

Of course, Henning also knows that even so-called orientalism can be a two-way street. For instance, elsewhere he considers the fact that even Chinese martial artists in China will often hold beliefs about martial arts histories, lineages, and doctrines that would be scoffed at and denounced

as orientalist were they uttered by a Westerner. (We may think of beliefs in myths about unbroken martial lineages stretching back to Bodhidharma or Zhang Sanfeng, for instance.) Indeed, *self-orientalization* might be regarded as something close to a quasi-official policy of Chinese state bureaux of film and tourism, focusing as they do on permeating what has been called the ‘soft power’ of constructing and exporting an exotic and appealing ‘public image’ of China around the world (Eperjesi 2004), one which also and at the same time is used to construct and reinforce a sense of national identity and collective belonging within China itself (Anderson 1991). Consequently, Henning is vociferously against any kind of ‘politically correct’ or ‘culturally sensitive’ treatment of subject matter by academics. He writes:

There is a rising trend in the ‘Occidental’ world of ‘Oriental’ martial arts—the number of ‘scholars’ who, in spite of making pretences to upholding ‘academic standards’, are displaying no small amount of intellectual compromise by acting as apologists for the myths surrounding the Chinese martial arts. They do this in a manner which gives one the impression that they somehow feel that to expose these myths is an irreverent act, harming the sensitivities of the Chinese people and insulting to pseudo-intellectual Occidentals seeking a New Age refuge in Oriental mysticism or, worse yet, causing them to lose interest in a subject about which these ‘scholars’ delight in composing involved, ambiguous treatises. (Henning 1995)

Henning’s strident and principled insistence of the need for intimate and intricate analysis and academic rigour is admirable. However, the second main reason for focusing on Henning’s work here is to draw another, more slippery set of problems into focus. The first of these problems is this: where Henning might see a spectrum of interpretation ranging from totally correct to totally false, a poststructuralist position would propose that this ‘traditional’ perspective (which sees truth on the one hand and error on the other, ‘and never the twain shall meet’) ought to be replaced by a perspective which sees instead a discursive continuum of interpretation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Weber 1987). In other words, not a perspective which sees truth versus falsity or error, but which sees interpretation versus interpretation, in a sea of interpretation, on the basis of the observation that all ‘knowledge’ is conditional and provisional and ultimately based on a limited, contingent, positioned viewpoint informed by partial (limited and incomplete) information. This might be supplemented further, with the premise that no ‘information’ is neutral or simply ‘discovered’; rather information is something that is always and already ‘produced’ by both theory and interpretation and according to a

method (Barry 2001). In other words, much, if not all of the ‘information’ and ‘evidence’ upon which any interpretation is to be based must also be regarded as related to, produced by, and illustrative of yet another interpretation.

This kind of argument has often been called ‘relativist’ and ‘postmodernist’ and has been caricatured as being one in which there is a spurious belief that ‘nothing is true’, or that ‘everything is relative’, or that ‘there is no reality’, and so on. However, while there may well have been theorists, artists, philosophers, writers, and academics to have apparently made such contentions, the caricature is really only that—a caricature. For, in fact, poststructuralist epistemologies and ontologies tend primarily to be organized by an attentive awareness of the inescapable facts and acts of processes of reading and interpretation in order to construct arguments and to make claims about reality. In other words, it is not that there is no reality; it is rather that knowledge of reality is endlessly contestable and contested—up for grabs, open to interpretation, indeed endlessly *calling for* interpretation. There is no single uncontested *way* to interpret. There is no one single repository of evidence. All sorts of evidence can be used to support all sorts of processes of interpretation, argumentation, and verification. And each can be contested or put into question by others.

Put differently, Henning’s ‘corrections’ should rather be viewed as reinterpretations of interpretations. And although Henning firmly believes that his works’ interventions are purely and simply organized by the aim of correcting errors, it seems more circumspect to regard his intervention as illustrating something very important about the significance and effects of any and all interpretation. Namely: academic interpretations feed both from and back into wider cultural discourses (Gramsci 1971; Althusser 1977; Bowman 2008a).

## THE TRUTH OF DISCOURSE

According to Henning, in the passage quoted above, academic interpretations should not be *based on* cultural discourses, whether ‘common knowledge’, ‘common sense’, or ‘reasonable assumptions’. Nor should scholarship pander to other types of cultural discourse, such as ‘politically correct’ ideas of ‘heritage’ or ‘tradition’, and so on. Rather, scholarly work on martial arts should be based on an intimate knowledge, made up of both close textual familiarity and broad and deep historical knowledge, plus, where necessary (as Henning’s work demonstrates amply), advanced linguistic and translation skills. As we have already seen, Henning’s linguistic

and historical knowledge constitutes his primary toolkit. He retranslates mistranslations according to his particularly lucid awareness of martial arts in Chinese culture and society, in order to reconfigure our understanding. In other words, precision and correctness in translation is one of his primary ‘tools’ or ‘weapons’.

Even so, there is no escaping the fact that, in Farrer and Whalen-Bridge’s words, ‘martial arts historiography poses formidable challenges’ (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 8). Problems in understanding and in establishing ‘legitimate’ interpretations cannot simply be resolved by throwing ever more linguistic and historical knowledge at the situation. Adding ever more ‘knowledge’ of a ‘context’ can in many situations work to *exacerbate* the possibility of coming up with a univocal or unequivocal interpretation. To start and end from such a viewpoint, without tackling epistemological problems head on is to hold not only a very traditional, but also an unnecessarily limited and unnecessarily limiting, view both of academic practice and of what ‘knowledge’ and ‘scholarship’ are. This is not to say that scholarship cannot be concerned with the establishment of facts and figures, names and dates, valid and invalid claims about connections and causalities, and so forth, in the quest for more robust interpretations. It is rather to suggest that, as important as such projects are, if they proceed in ignorance of or indifference to the hermeneutic and epistemological problems raised in such realms as literary theory, cultural theory, translation theory, and so on, then they are in more than one sense ‘living in the past’. Stated differently, one might say that the sort of orientation to martial arts studies that Henning’s project exemplifies is a very traditional orientation, in its adherence not only to clear dichotomies and absolute value differences between truth and falsity but also—more radically put—to the very idea that *there is one single truth*.

The proposition that there is one single truth implies a belief in a social whole that is unified in its viewpoint and in its relations to, within, across, and throughout itself. However, wherever there is difference (of position, perspective, viewpoint, status, background, education, and so on), there will already be a conflict of interpretations. This means that even within a given historical moment—even ‘at the time’—there will be dispute and dissensus about what the situation is and what its meaning may be (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Bowman 2007a). Needless to say, the problems of establishing ‘*the*’ reality and ‘*the*’ interpretation cannot but be compounded or may even be constitutively impossible when it comes to historical and cross-cultural interpretations. For these change: the meaning and status of events changes, depending more on the context of each one’s assessment than on ‘new facts’ about it.

Some thinkers have made large epistemological claims about the ‘untranslatability’ of one epoch to another, and one culture to another (Heidegger 1971). In a subtle engagement with this problematic, Walter Benjamin proposed that one always translates historical texts in terms of current concerns, the outlooks of the current time and place, and current ways of thinking (Benjamin 1999). This implies that our interpretive ‘access’ to other times and places is in a sense cut off, simply because we are from here and not there. Michel Foucault more than once strongly suggested that different historical epochs were, equally, cut off from each other by their very difference from (or alien-ness to) each other (Foucault 1970). And Martin Heidegger contended that Eastern and Western world-views were ‘essentially’ alien and untranslatable to each other—although he worried that the spread of ‘Western’ technologies like film and media was reducing the difference, albeit not by allowing cross-cultural communication but rather by eradicating the true ‘East Asian lifeworld’ altogether and replacing it with a technologized ‘Western’ lifeworld (Heidegger 1971; Sandford 2003).

However hyperbolic and problematic such positions may seem when stated so starkly, some evidence for the validity of their essential thrust may be proposed when one considers the regular ‘need’ for new translations of historical texts, whether they be the *Bible*, the *Tao Te Ching* (*Dao dejing*), the *I-Ching* (*Yijing*), or whatever. Such works are retranslated for any number of reasons, but most reasons given will refer to the fact that as time marches on, translations of such texts come to seem dated, distant, and increasingly impenetrable.

To bring this back to martial arts studies: there are lessons to be drawn from the inevitability of difference, change, and transformation. One is that martial arts studies has no absolutely clear referent and no necessary preprogrammed or preordained direction or mode of elaboration. What it will become will be determined by the way it is invented. It will always be a kind of academic writing first of all and, as such, will always differ from and be likely to disappoint or attract the disapproval of practitioners and fans of this or that martial art. Indeed, it is just as likely to elicit the same reactions from people involved in more traditional academic disciplines. It will never simply be the ‘direct’ study of this or that martial art. Every study will be guided and structured by a supplementary set of concerns. This is because *every* study of every subject is always initiated, orientated, and organized by a particular set of questions.

Farrer and Whalen-Bridge point to existing works of martial arts studies and characterize them in terms of their guiding questions and organizing problematics—problematics of ‘power, body, self, and identity’; those of

‘gender, sexuality, health, colonialism, and nationalism’; ‘combat, ritual, and performance’; ‘violence and the emotions’; and those of ‘cults, war magic, and warrior religion’ (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011a: 9). To this list we might want to add studies of martial arts and/as experience (Spencer 2011; Downey 2005), as ethnic political cultural dynamic (Kato 2007; Brown 1997), as cinematically disseminated engine of cultural transformation (Bowman 2010b, 2013a), as forces and loci of cultural translation (Bowman 2010a), and so on and so forth. None of these studies and none of their significance rely on proving or disproving truth and falsity. All are constituted by the posing of different questions, the shining of different lights and looking through different lenses at what these different acts of enquiry and exploration themselves produce as the object of martial arts studies. There are many ways to do this, then, and each way of proceeding is likely to have disciplinary consequences. In the following, we will discuss just some of these.

## DISCIPLINARY DEMARCATIONS AND DECISIONS

A recent review article, ‘Exploring Embodiment through Martial Arts and Combat Sports: A Review of Empirical Research’ (Channon and Jennings 2014), gives an overview of work published in the field of what the authors configure as ‘martial arts and combat sports’ (MACS). The article purports to give a review of the breadth of research in the field(s), but it also claims that the authors cannot—and do not intend to—attempt to review everything published in the realms of academic work on martial arts in English. As they note, there is no distinct database for logging or retrieving research in martial arts and combat sports research, and works in the field of martial arts and combat studies are not necessarily telegraphically signposted as being such, so they had to rely on a range of search methods, which essentially boil down to a double-pronged methodology of doing their best and asking around.

At the same time as embracing incompleteness by acknowledging that they cannot be expected to find *everything* relevant, the authors also make two further gestures. These are represented as attempts to delineate and demarcate the field, but they also amount to what I will characterize as *exclusionary gestures*. The first gesture acknowledges their deliberate decision regarding what to exclude, and why. Thus, they mention a range of fields they have not ventured into at all. The second gesture is hierarchizing: they say they focus only on texts that they deem to be most important or significant. In their words:

Our framework is not without limitations; the boundaries between these topical themes are in fact blurred in the reality of the social practice of MACS, while several other categories might have been instructive and may have seen the inclusion of other notable studies. Nevertheless, we focused on works which we felt were the most significant and instructive to issues pertaining to practitioners' embodiment, a key topic within the sociology of sport and cognate disciplines. For example, we omitted a large body of writing on MACS films, typically composed by media scholars (with the majority of studies analysing the representation rather than the action and experience of the body), and did not account for a large number of psychological studies of MACS. Finally, we have focused on works available in English, which limits the scope of our analysis, thereby inviting future contributions of this type from multi-lingual researchers around the world. (Channon and Jennings 2014: 15)

They also draw some inclusionary/exclusionary lines that appear to be somewhat less immediately intelligible. That is to say, they go on to draw distinctions that are not obvious distinctions between disciplines. For instance, on the one hand, it may be reasonable to note that empirical sociological work on embodiment might clearly and uncontroversially be differentiated from film studies work on embodiment. On the other hand, however, the authors also make certain far less clear distinctions between different kinds of sociological/empirical work:

From the outset, it must be clearly stated that this review is concerned with work on *embodiment*, which we define as research centred on the living, moving and feeling social experiences of human beings. This approach is different to the *sociology of the body*, for instance, which primarily sets out to explore and test social theory as applied to the body. (Channon and Jennings 2014: 3)

Now, to be clear: such directness about selection criteria is all part of good academic form, and it registers an important awareness of disciplinary orientation as being constitutive of what is seen and done. However, there are nonetheless some significant problems involved in such taxonomical labours as these. These problems include, but are not limited to, those caused by the authors' decision effectively to elevate a kind of disciplinary myopia to the status of a disciplinary virtue. The term 'disciplinary myopia' may seem harsh and excessive—and I am deliberately being provocative or hyperbolic here. But I am putting it in stark terms for important reasons. What I mean by this is clarified by Ben Judkins, who also zoned in on what I am characterizing as the principled disciplinary myopia at work in Channon and Jennings's article. Judkins writes, in response to the authors' list of supposedly under-researched areas that are supposedly lacking and calling out for further work,

My first reaction was to note that many of the items that the authors wished to see discussed had been addressed (sometimes quite well) in the various chapters of Farrer and Whalen-Bridge's 2011 volume *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge* (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011b). Given that this is a recent university press volume dedicated exclusively to [the] authors' topic of interest, one would have expected it to play an important role in this review. It did not. Aside from a single cursory mention in their introduction, neither this volume nor the studies offered by its authors are ever mentioned.

Channon and Jennings are admirably up front about what they are excluding and why. This is actually somewhat refreshing as not all literature reviews are. Specifically, they state that they have sought to restrict their work to empirical studies of the actual embodied experiences of martial artists and as a result they decided to exclude the more 'interpretive' and 'critical' contributions of cultural theorists and media scholars.

The crux of the issue is that Farrer and Whalen-Bridge (who have done as much old-school ethnographic research as anyone else in field) argue that this division is artificial and hard to maintain. In fact, their work was a conscious attempt to bridge this divide. So in excluding these arguments Channon and Jennings were not simply following the obvious and unquestioned contours of the field. They were in effect advancing their own argument about the proper shape of the literature and what constitutes research 'worthy' of engagement.

In some ways the picture of martial studies that Channon and Jennings paint is remarkably interdisciplinary. Ethnographic and sociological studies sit comfortably next to discussions of what role martial arts instruction should play in the development of grade school physical education curriculum. [But] while they have shown themselves willing to reach across disciplinary lines, their approach to theory seems a bit more conservative. (Judkins 2014)

To Judkins's astute assessment, it is important to add some further points related to disciplinarity. Channon and Jennings's approach is, in a sense, not *simply* their own—even if it is indeed 'not simply following the obvious and unquestioned contours of the field'. Rather, their article is their own performative interpretation of how to carry out a proper review of proper empirical work. (For a discussion of 'performative elaboration', see Derrida 1994.) Their approach ultimately reflects what might be called their *disciplinary decision*. The relative success or failure of their attempt to live up to the disciplinary protocols that they are valuing here is of less interest to me than a reflection on those implicit protocols themselves. On this showing, it seems that the disciplinary protocols being valued involve what I would propose to call a constitutive drive towards taxonomies. That is, they construe 'the field' as if it is a physical space, which they want to map, so as to put everything in its proper place, ordered, labelled and maybe even hierarchized. Reciprocally, they want to exclude anything from one area



from intruding into other areas. According to some thinkers, such is the orientation of a great deal of social science (Rancière 2004).

Nevertheless, what is evinced in various ways is that the drive to establish clear distinctions that I am (provocatively and again deliberately hyperbolically) representing as a drive to taxonomical mapping is met by a kind of impossibility. The categories can never be pure and truly separate because construing approaches as (if) singular, self-contained, and self-identical is an *ex post facto* attribution. The categories cannot contain the categorized. In this article, then, much of what they seek and claim to exclude—because that's not what they are looking at or looking for—is *included anyway*. This actual inclusion of the avowed exclusion occurs for lots of reasons. One reason is that the empirical is always both theoretically and rhetorically defined. Empirical work is carried out according to theorized parameters (exclusions), and methodologies are the performative elaboration of theoretical frameworks. Moreover, even empirical work always seeks to be 'interpretive' or 'critical'.<sup>2</sup> Passages such as the following are populated with works that are not only supplemented by theoretical conceptions but that are far from simply empirical in any understanding of the term:

While other research has explored various phenomena linked to the effects of culture on the body, such as Kohn's studies of identity formation and corporeal discipline in *Aikido* practice, perhaps the most prevalent themes in this area have concerned the transmission and transformation of the 'original' cultural meanings of today's 'globalized' MACS, which forms the second principal research area on body cultures. Beginning with Back and Kim's largely theoretical discussion of the changing nature of Eastern martial arts in the Western (and particularly North American) world during the late 20th century, several authors have investigated how such arts, when disembedded from their 'home' settings, have been appropriated and altered by practitioners in different nations. For example, Krug considered the changes in Okinawan *Karate* following its integration into American body culture; Assunção explored the development of *Capoeira* from African tribal arts to today's global, cosmopolitan, Brazilian phenomenon; and Ryan explored the hybridization of *Taijiquan* upon its introduction to Britain. (Channon and Jennings 2014: 6)

The key point I want to draw out of all of this here relates to the performance of disciplinarity. As Judkins puts it, 'the basic issue comes down to how the authors have defined the scope of the relevant literature, and in a more subtle way, what they have implied about the boundaries of the field'. Even something as apparently innocuous as a literature review involves 'an either implicit or explicit assessment of what "good work" looks like and where exactly the boundaries of the disciplinary conversation [lie]'. This is why 'it is just as important to consider what has been excluded from the

conversation as what has been included' (Judkins 2014). Judkins goes on to refute the necessity or even validity of many of the operative distinctions that Channon and Jennings use—or claim to use—to structure their review. On the one hand, he deconstructs their taxonomies (revealing their reasonable-sounding distinctions to have a strangely impossible status), and on the other hand, he points to the significant omissions that their disciplinary gaze produces:

After all, there already seem to be a number of interesting studies on the role of the mass media in promoting certain views of gender, violence and ethnicity in the martial arts. And it is not hard to point to studies on the experience of the martial arts in multicultural societies. I have reviewed a number of them here at *Kung Fu Tea*. So what exactly is going on here? (Judkins 2014)

There are two main books that Judkins cannot believe Channon and Jennings could have omitted. One is Farrer and Whalen-Bridge's *Martial Arts As Embodied Knowledge* (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011b). The other is Adam Frank's *Taijiquan and the Search for the Little Old Chinese Man: Understanding Identity through Martial Arts* (Frank 2006).<sup>3</sup> Turning our attention to the orientation of these books may help us to answer Judkins's question.

### DISCIPLINARY MOVES

If Channon and Jennings could be said to have made a move that has larger ramifications than having merely omitted work worthy of inclusion within their literature review, I think that it boils down to a 'mistake' of the order of a disciplinary decision. To reiterate, in order to be fair to them, they make only modest claims for their ambitions, and they acknowledge that they could have made different decisions. But it should be clear by now that both Judkins and I, at least, believe that they should have moved beyond making acknowledgements about limitations and made a move into the realm of overcoming some of them by making different disciplinary decisions and taking different steps.

Indeed, it is ironic, from this sense, that Channon and Jennings omit Adam Frank's book *Taijiquan and the Search for the Little Old Chinese Man: Understanding Identity through Martial Arts* (Frank 2006). This is not least because Frank *begins* the book with a reflection on theoretical, methodological, and disciplinary choices, one that Channon and Jennings could have done worse than to heed, and that are of importance to our discussion of martial arts studies. Frank writes:

This book attempts to contribute to the development of phenomenological ethnography by focusing on the twilight zone where theory meets methodology, taking a kind of quantum approach to culture that considers the contributions that Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, critical race theory, and poststructuralism have made to our attempt to understand who we are as individuals versus who we are in social context. At the same time, I make a modest effort to move beyond ideology-centered frameworks. The postmodernist moment in anthropology began quasi-officially in 1986 with the publication of *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), a book that had the positive effect of demanding that anthropologists reflect upon their positionality in the writing of ethnography—in effect, that they treat ethnography as literature. This book opened a space for subaltern perspectives to move from the fringes to the center and, as Katz and Csordas (2003) note, created room for phenomenological ethnography. After *Writing Culture*, ‘culture’ as a given, useful concept for anthropologists ceased to exist for a time, and dire predictions arose as to the imminent demise of the discipline. Well into the 1990s and early 2000s, this situation had the effect of creating a contentious atmosphere in which the various isms competed with one another in journals and within departments. It was not merely a fight between the old and the new, but also a fight between contending pictures of the new. One largely unsatisfactory response to this state of affairs has been to pretend that those irritating isms never happened at all and return instead to a kind of modified, anachronistic empiricism. (Frank 2006: 14–15)

This reflection on the history of a key disciplinary antagonism indicates the kinds of convulsions, reactions, and reformations that can take place in disciplinary contexts when paradigm revolutions erupt. Frank continues:

The book is partly an outgrowth of my dissatisfaction with both the narrowness of the isms and the wholesale rejection of them that seems more attached to conservative victories in the culture wars than to the search for understanding that is still anthropology’s disciplinary hallmark. Nor was I satisfied with unqualified deconstruction, the ‘I have no position’ position, which, I believe, has grown out of narrow interpretations of French poststructuralists such as Derrida, Deleuze, and Lacan. (15)

Uncritical, absolute, or knee-jerk reflex extremes of position are equally to be avoided in the ‘search for understanding’, of whatever kind, suggests Frank. Ultimately then, his

response is a modest proposal for *reconstitution*, an approach that asks us not just to acknowledge multiple perspectives but also to apply these perspectives at appropriate moments to appropriate situations, then *reconstitute* them into an interpretation of sorts. My hope is that the method of understanding a particular

practice in terms of constant shifts between multiple levels of analysis—in this case, in terms of the intersubjectivity of body, city, nation-state, imagination, and transnation—is applicable beyond the current work. (15)

In this way, Frank proposes methodological sophistication, responsiveness, and even a kind of dilatoriness—with focus expanding and contracting, going forward, backward, in and out, depending on the nature of the particular question and phenomenon under consideration. Indeed, Frank’s methodological frames mirror, mimic, derive from, and replay aspects of his object of study itself, *taijiquan*. Accordingly, Frank deliberately chooses to construct a theoretical, analytical, methodological, and conceptual framework out of a ‘thinking through’ of the ‘logic’ of the taiji symbol—the yin/yang or *taiji tu*. As he states, his ‘fundamental proposition can be expressed in two words: identity moves’ (Frank 2006: 4). This is because, in his view, ‘the interaction of the self with the world might be modeled as an ever-changing, yet changeless, process’ (18)—exactly like the logic of the *taiji tu* or yin/yang.

From this subtle *taiji*-like paradigm, Frank is able to develop a work in which ‘martial arts, as conduits for the mutually constitutive construction and experience of identity’, are shown to ‘move transnationally through people, media, kung fu movies, novels, and martial arts tournaments’, and he is able to explore ‘how they function both personally and socially in the very different contexts of urban China and the global diaspora of Chinese people and public culture’ (Frank 2006: 4).

There is an awful lot more to be said about Frank’s work, and its significance for the development of martial arts studies. I return to it repeatedly throughout this book. But, at this stage, what I want to emphasize are the differences between the approaches of Channon and Jennings, on the one hand, and Adam Frank, on the other. These can be taken to illustrate the extent to which a disciplinary approach is both a decision *and* an imposition, a reflection of a prior order *and* the constitution of a new one. In what follows we will pick up, amplify, and explore the potential ramifications of this for martial arts studies as a field.

### THEORETICAL NECESSITY

In light of the foregoing, it seems reasonable to propose that, in order to elaborate martial arts studies, theory is necessary. As will be apparent by now, the necessity of theory is a central component of my arguments about martial arts studies. However, although my argument is that theory is

‘necessary’, I want to insist that it is not necessary *just for its own sake*. In fact, like many, I have little patience with theory for theory’s sake. I need to know why I am reading it, what work it is doing, and to what ends.

What we call ‘theory’ is itself a movement that arose for a variety of reasons. When it is given a capital *t*, and called ‘Theory’, this term designates the outcome of a moment in the encounter between the discourses of Continental Philosophy and Anglophone Literary Theory (Hall 2002). This encounter was ‘useful’, in ways to which I will return below. But my contention at this point is merely that theory is necessary for trying to flesh out whether, to what extent, how, and why there might be a discrete or unique field that might be called ‘martial arts studies’, a field that would be different from, for example, the many examples of, say, martial history that abound. I hasten to add that I have no problem with the discipline of history, as such. But, the point is that martial arts studies—if it is anything—is not simply the discipline of history. There can be historical studies of many things related to martial arts. But are these works martial arts studies? Do historical studies define or demarcate the field? To attempt any answer to this requires and relies on some kind of reflection on what it is to be an academic study. And if we think that to be an academic study of something means to be a historical study, then that means that we equate ‘proper’ academic work with the discipline of history.

Put differently, although a formulation like ‘what it is to be an academic study’ implies that ‘academic study’ is singular, it is not. Academia is plural. Academic disciplines and fields are different to each other. Disciplines are often fundamentally at odds with each other. They each have different and discrete systems of values. For instance, history does not *necessarily* speak to or with or cross-fertilize anthropology or psychology or philosophy—and vice versa. *Sometimes* there are cross-fertilizations, and these are to be admired. But to believe that disciplines *necessarily* speak to each other is to idealize. Disciplines are apparatuses or assemblages that are actually surprisingly good at ignoring each other and belittling each other’s values and efforts. Given the forces of internal cross-referencing, stabilizing, and self-legitimation, it is very easy for scholars who see themselves as working in one field to remain blind to, and to ignore, anyone working in what they regard as a different field.

As already mentioned, the production of a new academic discursive field will necessarily disappoint stalwarts or zealots of other forms of disciplinary propriety. They are likely to be inclined to view any new interdisciplinary effort as ‘improper’ or as a ‘failure’—much as the merging and intermingling of martial arts styles offends purists within this or that ‘proper’ lineage. Reciprocally, disciplinary disappointment can arise from

the other direction: for instance, when I read many styles of scholarship, I can find them interesting, but I also often feel that they've *missed* something. For example, when reading history or sociology, I often feel that they are missing something that either film, media studies, visual studies, or cultural studies might be able to offer. But, by the same token, when I read film studies of martial arts films, I often feel that they too are simply not moving into the really interesting terrain—which would encompass that of the impact of film and media on martial arts practices themselves. At such moments, I want film studies to become ethnography or sociology . . . which, of course, it won't. Film scholars are film scholars. Historians are historians. Ethnographers are ethnographers. All of these constituencies tend to disappoint each other, in a disciplinary sense—just as academic work *tout court* might be expected to tend to disappoint the nonacademic practitioner reader.

Martial arts studies, in performatively elaborating itself, has an obligation to engage with these disciplinary questions. This is not just because we are dealing with the emergence of something like a new discipline or interdiscipline but also because problems of disciplinarity and institution, what is proper and what is improper, are so central to so much martial arts discourse itself. The academic, disciplinary concern refers directly back, or is mirrored in the practical, disciplinary realm. Look at any example from any area of martial arts practice and consider what people discuss there: What is the *best* approach, what is the *proper* approach, what is the best way; are hybrids and cross-training styles 'proper'; are they improvements on or regressions away from the proper?

Peter Lorge's history of Chinese martial arts confirms this double-pronged 'theoretical' point. Lorge notes that *the very first discourse* about martial 'styles' in China was a discourse organized by the question of which is best—which is the best approach—and why. Of the very first lists and taxonomies of martial styles, Lorge writes:

Qi Jiguang and other authors were not just assembling these lists of styles out of mere curiosity; they were attempting to find the most functional skills available. Qi complained about the incompleteness of many styles, that they were only good in parts and lacked a comprehensive set of techniques. Most of the authors were also concerned with what they called 'Flowery Boxing 花拳', ineffective and overly elaborate styles that only looked nice. Indeed, one of the central issues of the discussion of boxing styles was effectiveness. There was a constant comparison between styles, or anecdotes recounting how someone practiced an ineffective or flawed style. These flowery styles had lost the foundation of boxing and strayed very far from some presumably simple and effective original form. Although boxing styles varied widely across

China, and indeed the terminology for boxing was similarly varied, there was perceived to be a core of effective techniques. Unarmed fighting was not as effective in combat as armed fighting, and that is perhaps why boxing was listed last on the reformulated Ming period list of 'Eighteen Martial Arts'. From the military standpoint, boxing was not a real battlefield skill. For Qi Jiguang and Mao Yuanyi, boxing was the beginning skill for martial arts training before one took up weapons. It was also useful for developing overall agility with the hands and feet. Anyone expecting to fight on the battlefield would have to be better trained and properly armed. Boxing was recognized as a developmental rather than a functional skill in the army, and Qi dropped it from the later edition of his manual. To practice boxing was therefore more about training the body and mind, despite the quest for practical boxing skills. The practical skills were the genuine or true roots of the art, and thus by definition, more effective in developing the body and mind. (Lorge 2012: loc 3506)

This kind of historical point suggests fascinating parallels with the present. It suggests equivalences between discourses on ancient Chinese martial arts and contemporary discourses about effectiveness and ineffectiveness in martial arts. Furthermore it suggests that contemporary concerns with the question of the best approach may actually be regarded as originary. Moreover, as demonstrated by my use of Lorge here, I hope it is clear that I am not saying martial arts studies cannot be historical. What I would prefer to say (again) is that it should not simply be hegemonized by any discipline, at least without first theorizing the consequences of this for the kind of work that will be produced, and the effects it will have on the orientation. As Timothy Bahti once put it:

For all the activity devoted to historical knowledge—by which I mean the courses, the examinations, the papers and dissertations and submitted manuscripts—there would be the repeated occasion, on each such occasion, for these small and simple questions: How? Why? So what? That is, the present distribution which, for some century and a half, has favored historical knowledge over its philosophic judgement, need not be revamped or done away with (which is hardly realistic anyway), so much as used as the fulcrum for the corresponding questions of how and why one knows such knowledge, questions weakened to muteness but thereby given voice by virtue of their very other. My sense of injury within the 'humanities' leads me to insist, quietly but firmly, that all historical knowledge without an accompanying rationale for its constitution and existence is counterintellectual, and ultimately counterrational. My sense of a possible therapy suggests that each bit of historical knowledge, each occasion for its articulation and transmission, should become the occasion for inquiry into its methodology and teleology. Even to acknowledge, and to insist upon the acknowledgement, that history has a history, and that the history 'known' is not a substantial object but a

subjectively constructed cognition, can be critical in this context. Put more polemically: no history of literature, no history of art, no history of society, without a philosophy of history, a method of historiography, an internal and external accounting. (Bahti 1992: 72–73)

There are many possible answers to the question of what our orientations should be, and why. This is something that those involved in martial arts studies must keep talking about. But, again, let me be clear that I am not insisting on univocality or consensus. The terrain is multiple, diverse, rich, and ripe. But it is crucial to reflect on *why* academic orientations in a sense speak *past* each other, in order to be able to establish a kind of disciplinary self-awareness that might enable exchanges and communications. Indeed, this is another way in which ‘Theory’ is helpful. The lingua franca of ‘Theory’ which could be said to hegemonize a lot of disciplinary spaces is valuable if only for this reason: that it enables people working in different worlds to articulate their connections and their differences. And this is the first stage of any ‘communication’, crucial to any collective effort to produce a new space of and for critical, self-reflexive, intellectual martial arts discourse.

### WHAT KIND OF THEORY?

There is a very great range of things that can be grouped into the general designation ‘theory’. What kinds of approach seem pertinent—or maybe even central—to martial arts studies? The term ‘theory’ is often used as a synonym of ‘poststructuralism’, which was one of the main branches of theory and philosophy that came to dominate arts, humanities, and social sciences approaches to most—if not all—subjects increasingly from the 1970s to the 1990s, and still makes its presence felt today. In its most literal sense ‘post-structuralism’ means ‘after structuralism’. However, the term also strongly implies some kind of connection with or debt to structuralism. Accordingly, some scholars draw a distinction between ‘post-structuralism’ (with a hyphen) and ‘poststructuralism’ (with no hyphen). The former can be taken to mean anything ‘after’ or ‘in the wake of structuralism’. On the other hand, the unhyphenated term ‘poststructuralism’ is often used to refer to a distinct body of work with distinct sorts of shared premises, hypotheses, arguments, procedures, and even writing styles.

A similar use has been made of the hyphen to distinguish between certain other terms too: for instance, ‘post-colonialism’ (historical-geographical situations after colonialism) and ‘postcolonialism’ (the body of scholarship



that sprung up to theorize and study such historical situations); as well as ‘post-modernity’ (a historical period and its associated ‘cultural condition’), ‘post-modernism’ (after modernism) and ‘postmodernism’ (a style of artistic, cultural, and academic practice). In fact, these examples are all slightly related, and it has not been uncommon for people to confuse and conflate them. However, they are distinct.

Poststructuralism is perhaps the most controversial of these three terms. It has certainly been received with the most perplexity—and hostility. In terms of a possible connection with martial arts studies, there will already be readers wondering why I am focusing on poststructuralism when there would seem to be much more apt theoretical fields and problematics to explore first. Poststructuralism is notoriously ‘textual’ and ‘wordy’. Its concerns do not seem directly connected with matters of physical activity and the body. Indeed, most famously, or infamously, the arch-poststructuralist Jacques Derrida once argued that ‘there is nothing outside the text’ (Derrida 1976: 163). This argument seemed to some to be a denial of ‘reality’ or physicality, or a strange contention that only books or written words exist. However, in actual fact, Derrida’s arguments were the expression of an eminently reasonable series of arguments about how perception, knowledge, and understandings of reality are established. But in any case, I choose to begin this reflection on ‘which theory’ with an engagement with poststructuralism because, although it may not at first seem like an obvious place to begin, I believe it will prove fertile and productive for martial arts studies theory.

Derrida’s deconstruction of terms such as ‘reality’ and ‘experience’ amounts to the proposition that we relate to all aspects of the world (including ourselves) in a way that is ultimately little different from the way that we relate to any written text (Derrida 1982: 307–30). In other words, anything and everything calls out for interpretation, and hence we ‘read’ the world. Some readings are given to us, or insisted upon, and reinforced by social institutions. Think, for example, of the ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ ways to read (interpret) religious texts, such as the Bible. Different religious communities will have different readings of their key sacred texts, and any deviation from these readings will be regarded as heretical.

Indeed, the consideration of different ‘readings’ of religious texts can be used to show us a number of things relevant to understanding Derridean deconstruction—perhaps the exemplary example of poststructuralism. The first point is that ‘meaning’ is neither natural nor fixed forever. The ‘same’ text will be read in different ways by different communities, and even by ‘the same’ community at different times. A poststructuralist way of saying this is that there is ‘no final signified’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). There

is no permanently fixed meaning for anything. Meanings that seem to be ‘natural’ or ‘permanent’ can be said to be deeply conventional (Hall 1980). But they will change.

A second point to be taken from the example of the different ways that different people read the ‘same’ text is that, as deconstruction holds, there is no single meaning ‘in’ texts. The meaning of a text is always something to be produced in the encounter between the reader and the text (Derrida 1992: 21–23). This is quite a controversial proposition because it reverses and displaces the normal view of the relationship between readers and texts, in which readers go to a text and look for its meaning, which they ‘get out’ of it. Poststructuralism argues that readers bring a lot to texts and that what they ‘get out’ of texts is in many ways determined or influenced by what they ‘bring to’ them. And we must remember that, although the poststructuralists often or primarily discussed written texts, they did not limit what they meant by the word ‘text’ to written text. Anything and *everything* is a text—even a punch, kick, lock, throw, or hold. What a punch ‘means’ to you will change.

Roland Barthes took delight in the realization that the meaning of texts was not set, and he argued that readers should become ‘active’ and not ‘passive’: readers should actively produce interpretations, rather than look for some fixed, final, or single meaning. He argued that we have been taught to believe a few things about reading that are both unnecessary and actually culturally/politically disabling: The first is that an ‘author’ is a creative genius who knows all of the possible meanings of his or her text because he or she ‘put them there’. The second is that we need experts, like university professors and school teachers, to teach these meanings to us. However, Barthes contended that rather than this, an author’s work is inevitably full of ingredients and possible meanings that they could not possibly be, or have been, completely aware of because what ‘goes into’ the writing or production of any text is never anything other than already culturally circulating material—words, phrases, techniques, styles, and conventions—none of which are unique to an individual and in fact only exist and ‘work’ because they are part of the fabric of communication, community, and discourse. Barthes calls this ‘textuality’. Communication of all kind works on the basis of what Julia Kristeva went on to call ‘intertextuality’. Works are *stitched* together from existing cultural material (words, signs). New works are produced from the recombination of existing matter. They are not born from nothing or out of the mind of an individual creative genius. They are always, as both Derrida and Barthes variously argued, essentially forms of *citation, allusion, reiteration, and quotation*. Although these terms sound very literary, they will prove to be enormously helpful when we come to

think about the ‘creation’ or ‘invention’ of martial arts styles. This is because the poststructuralist deconstruction of the terms used for discussing literature can be transposed or translated into the ways we think about any kind of cultural creation, including that of martial arts.

Barthes deconstructs the idea of ‘author’ (as individual genius) and also the idea that there is a realm of ‘great art’ on the one hand that is clearly and necessarily separated from ‘non-art’ on the other. To Barthes, there are language and sign systems and the infinite potential for their combination and recombination into new texts. We might say the same about the potentials for martial arts creation. However, in his own work, Barthes was in a sense elaborating a poststructuralist theory of communication. His argument about textuality was immensely popular with the artists and architects of postmodernist thought—because, in a sense, it provided the theoretical justification for what they were already doing anyway (Jameson 1991). Postmodernists argued that since the 1950s, consumer societies have been in a period of post-modernity, in which cultures are increasingly ‘fragmented’ because of the proliferation of choice, increasingly commodified, exposed to globalization, and, if not ‘homogenized’ by all of this, then at least increasingly technologically mediated.

However, Barthes (and Derrida) were never simply writing about textuality for textuality’s sake, or advocating the ‘free play’ of signifiers purely for the sake of emphasizing the possibilities of their artistic or interpretative recombination. In fact, the basic target of Barthesian and Derridean post-structuralism is the social and political power of institutions (Weber 1987). In his essays ‘From Work to Text’ and ‘The Death of The Author’ (Barthes 1977), Barthes’s primary target is clearly the power held by the institutions that people so often (needlessly) believe in and turn to: the professors and teachers who ‘tell’ or ‘teach’ us how to read ‘properly’. For Barthes, if we subordinate ourselves to the authority of these ‘experts’ we are maintaining the status quo in many ways. (The implicit ethical and political argument about the equality of all readers that underpins Barthes’s argument here anticipates the one developed by Jacques Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière 1991), to which I will be turning in due course. There are also strong resonances with the sentiments expressed in Bruce Lee’s influential essay ‘Liberate Yourself From Classical Karate’ (Lee 1971), as I have argued elsewhere (Bowman 2010b, 2013a).)

Both Barthesian textuality and Derrida’s deconstruction involve a post-structuralist engagement with the (largely invisible institutional) processes by which meanings are established, set, reiterated, modified, and controlled. In his early work, Derrida read the work of influential philosophers and followed doggedly the connections, associations, and logical steps they

took in their argumentations. His first intervention would be to ask *why* a philosopher would make a certain connection, association, or declaration. Then he would show the ways in which the steps that philosophers often took in constructing arguments were not quite as ‘logical’ or ‘necessary’ as they would seem (or want) to think. Upon demonstrating this, he would go on to consider the cultural preconceptions and biases that were operating on and orientating their reading, thinking, arguments, values, and judgments. Because of this, during the 1960s and 1970s, Derridean deconstruction was tremendously exciting to certain readers because they could see the profound political implications that it seemed to hold (Mowitt 1992). However, these implications were far from obvious to many other sorts of reader, and Derrida’s work—along with that of other (in)famous poststructuralists writing at the time, such as Barthes and Kristeva—was greeted with confusion and hostility. This was not least because Anglophone scholars working outside of fields like comparative literature and Continental Philosophy could not understand what some literary scholars and philosophers found so fascinating with all of this difficult and apparently gratuitously ‘wordy’ new ‘French theory’.

Overwhelmingly, poststructuralism became associated with words and wordiness. Its relevance for the study of something so bodily as martial arts may then seem dubious. But of course, ‘poststructuralism’ is not one thing. It has many variants and dimensions. For instance, people have often lumped together ‘Foucault and Derrida’ as if they wrote about the same sorts of things or made the same sorts of arguments. However, although Michel Foucault was one of Jacques Derrida’s teachers, the two had some serious disagreements about many issues (such as the reading of Descartes and the understanding of ‘madness’). Yet, as far as most readers will be concerned, the fundamental difference between Derrida and Foucault is that where Derrida focuses on words and institutions, Foucault focuses on bodies and institutions. Indeed, despite its many internal differences, a first tenet of poststructuralism is arguably this: *institutions form subjects*. Michel Foucault picked up the baton of his colleague Louis Althusser, who argued in the influential essay ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ (Althusser 1977) that social institutions ‘call’, mould, and make individuals into ‘subjects’. Foucault deepened and developed this argument in a series of book-long studies of the ways institutions produce ‘knowledge’ (about ‘subjects’) and then accrue a kind of ‘power’ over them. His primary example would be psychiatrists, who on the one hand merely ‘study’ and try to ‘help’ or ‘cure’ patients but who on the other hand *examine* people and can incarcerate them or release them, can deem people to be fit or unfit, and who are nowadays often utilized as expert witnesses, integral to

making judgments about whether someone is ‘criminal’ or ‘insane’ (Foucault 1973).

In other words, Foucault shows time and again how the establishment of knowledge is *institutional*, how that institutional knowledge becomes institutional power, and how that complex of power/knowledge acts on people’s minds and bodies (Foucault 1977, 1978, 1980). Foucault’s method is primarily historical. He explores the emergence of new institutions and their new vocabularies and fields of knowledge, and in this way, shows how many of the terms we feel are natural or inevitable are in fact not necessary but rather historical. For instance, consider the key categories that we associate with sexuality—heterosexual, bisexual, homosexual, and so forth. Nowadays we believe that these are essential descriptions of pre-existing categories. But Foucault’s work shows that they were terms that were born in academic and medical discourse that were then applied to people who became ‘subject types’ and who over time came to be treated accordingly and who acted accordingly (Foucault 1978).

Foucault’s work has many dimensions and ramifications. Like all post-structuralist scholarship, it is subtle, wide-ranging, and complex. However, one of the most prominent and enduringly influential uses of Foucault’s approach to ‘discourse’ and ‘power/knowledge’ took the form of Edward Said’s 1978 book *Orientalism* (Said 1995), which many regard as a founding text of postcolonialism. The subtitle of Said’s book is *Western Conceptions of the Orient*, and its primary argument is that Western ‘discourse’ about Asia has long been organized by a small set of stereotypical ideas—myths and fantasies about what ‘the Orient’ is like—but which bear no necessary relation to reality. Thus, there is a European intellectual and artistic discourse about ‘the Orient’, one that is produced and reproduced in scholarship, art, and high and low culture. It is based on simplistic stereotypes about ‘what the East is like’ and ‘what Orientals are like’. And it comes to pass for ‘knowledge’, even though it is of a highly dubious (both formulaic and even sometimes crypto-racist) status: Scholars in many fields (media, communication, cultural studies, and so on) have shown that ‘orientalist’ ideas about ‘Asians’ (or ‘Blacks’, and so on) continue to have effects in all sorts of areas of Western culture and society. Stereotypes circulate, and people are judged and treated accordingly. Thus, ideas circulated in ‘discourse’ can impose themselves as ‘knowledge’ and can exert ‘power’ in diverse ways in dispersed contexts.

The many matters of the power of institutions and their conventions and the power effects they generate and sustain is a primary focus of both poststructuralism and postcolonialism (as distinct from postmodernism), and these intellectual approaches have fed into an enormous range of

academic disciplines: literary studies, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, history, media and communications, architecture, and beyond. The impulses associated with poststructuralism had an immense impact on late twentieth-century thought in all sorts of areas of the university, to the extent that even though in the twenty-first-century poststructuralism seems to have receded from the forefront of attention and controversy, one can easily feel its effects on all sorts of academic theory and methodology. Of course, poststructuralism has diverse continuing legacies, traditions, and many other dimensions, key figures, and key terms not discussed here, but the ripples, waves, and transformations produced by the work of the figures introduced here are perhaps the most dispersed and sustained.

Other key points on the academic constellation include phenomenological and ethnographical approaches, which explore experience via different routes. Some of these approaches involve strong implicit and explicit critiques of poststructuralism—normally taking issue with its overly textualist orientation. Against this backdrop, Loïc Wacquant's recent reflections on his own use of Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' to structure his ethnographic study of boxing in the Chicago ghetto (Wacquant 2004) are interesting in many ways. First, this is because of his robust defence of the Bourdieuan notion of *habitus* in the face of its critics. Secondly, because of his critique of poststructuralist and postmodern approaches to sociology, anthropology, and ethnography ('auto-ethnography')—which relate to deconstruction and also to Derrida's critique of Bourdieuan sociology. And thirdly, because Wacquant makes some comments that might recast certain disagreements that circulate between ethnography and poststructuralism, such as those voiced by Rancière about Bourdieu's orientations and investments.

This is pertinent here because of the growing centrality of Bourdieu-inspired approaches to the study of martial arts. In this field, Bourdieu-inspired approaches are often adopted, sometimes apparently uncritically, by scholars keen to get down and dirty with their object of study—the everyday practices of martial arts, their rituals, belief systems and ideologies, and so on. However, both Derrida and Rancière historically offered critiques of Bourdieuan sociology. Rancière's is perhaps currently the most well known in poststructuralist circles, if not beyond (Rancière 1991); but Derrida's critique of Bourdieu certainly deserves recapitulating (Derrida 2002). Derrida basically takes issue with the philosophical or theoretical stance of Bourdieu, which purports to be anti-philosophical—and which, in disidentifying with philosophy, identifies instead with 'objectivity'. Specifically, Derrida challenges what he calls the Bourdieuan 'interpretation of truth as "objectivity"' (Derrida 2002: 63), taking issue with the idea

that ‘the value of scientific statement, its truth, is in effect determined by its “objectivity”’ (64).

It is important to note that Derrida’s critique of Bourdieuan sociology begins with a very direct challenge to the kind of work that Wacquant would go on to develop in his studies of boxing—an approach that is proving to be increasingly influential (García and Spencer 2013). For, in a sense, what Wacquant wants to do is to get access to the truth of a particular nexus, chiasmus, or conjuncture, organized by working class and sub-working class (‘proletarian’) male, black boxing life in the Chicago ghetto. Put polemically, Wacquant could be said to want to get to ‘things themselves’ by virtue of an immersion course that removes the distance between the ivory tower and the object of its knowledge. Now, although I have planted the words ‘things themselves’ on Wacquant without his permission in order perhaps to entrap him unfairly, I think that the contrast between the type of ‘Bourdieuian’ knowledge that Wacquant seeks to construct and the problematics that Derrida could be said to anticipate here deserves attention.

In the essay in which he takes issue with Bourdieu’s approach, Derrida writes:

Certain people are always impatient to *access-the-things-themselves-directly-and-reach-right-away-without-waiting-the-true-content-of-the-urgent-and-serious-problems-that-face-us-all-etc.* Thus, they will no doubt judge an analysis that deploys this range of meanings and possible sentences playful, precious, and formal, indeed futile: ‘Why be so slow and self-indulgent? Why these linguistic stages? Why not go right to the things themselves?’ Of course, one can share this impatience and nonetheless think, as I do, that not only do we gain nothing by immediately giving in to it, but that this lure has a history, interest, and a sort of *hypocritical* structure, and that one would always be better off to begin by acknowledging it by giving oneself the time for a detour and analysis. (Derrida 2002: 3–4)

There are two salient issues in this Derridean argument: the first is the problem of ‘access to things themselves’; the second is what Derrida calls the ‘hypocritical structure’ of academic work that does not stop to think about the (linguistic and/or aesthetic, etc.) forms and structures of our way of ‘accessing’ (or constructing in discourse) ‘things themselves’. In other words, for Derrida, the subject is always a barred subject because of the unavoidable intrusion of language in between and in the way of everything. Thus, to think that you have got at the ‘truth’ is always going to be a problem for Derrida because what you have got at is a linguistic discursive construct, one that is being engaged in and through one or another style of language.

Derrida's questions and critiques were formulated at a relatively early stage of the elaboration of Bourdieu's approach to sociology—around the time that those approaches could be said to have been gaining a kind of hegemony in France, in terms of growing connections between Bourdieu and French educational and sociological policy makers. And it is not unusual for critical thinkers to worry about *everything* that is gaining power. (As Derrida once put it, the future should be regarded as a kind of monstrosity.) But if we regard Wacquant as the current heir to the Bourdieuan approach to a sociology that seeks to bypass or beat the 'problem of writing', we can ask: Were Derrida's worries founded? How does Wacquant's work fare in relation to the Derridean critique of its Bourdieuan orientation? And what does it say in response? We will turn to these matters soon. But first, we should also set out Rancière's critique of Bourdieu, as these debates are intertwined.

The Rancièrian critique of Bourdieu is slightly different. It is organized not so much by questions and problems of language—at least, not directly—as by those of the presumption of inequality. To introduce it quickly, Rancière argues that Bourdieuan sociology's stated aim of reducing or even eradicating class-based inequality in French society via interventions into the educational system is not only doomed to fail but is doomed to fail because it, at best, reproduces and, at worst, intensifies the inequality it seeks to redress. This is because it is based on what Rancière calls a 'presumption of inequality'.

Through a series of direct and indirect readings of Bourdieu's work, such as in *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Rancière 2004) as well as the earlier oblique work *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière 1991), and indeed throughout his entire critical corpus, Rancière takes issue with what he construes as the presumption of inequality wherever he discerns it. And he discerns it everywhere: in the political presumption that 'the people' need 'leaders' or 'educators', in the aristocratic presumption that some people deserve to be socially superior to others, and in the pedagogical presumption that children need teachers, and so on. There are different versions of this that Rancière regularly returns to; most famously his preferred story of the proletarian workers who are often treated by academics 'as workers'—that is, as *definitely not writers, intellectuals, artists or, scholars*. However, archival research reveals that 'the workers' very often had all sorts of philosophical and aesthetic aspirations and engaged in practices that most scholars could not accept. Accordingly, scholars and activists have tried to 'police' such 'aberrations' back into their proper place: workers who indulged in art and literature have been regarded, even by Marxist and communist intellectuals, as 'class traitors'.



Rancière's work often identifies these moments where writers and thinkers betray their prejudices—their belief in the superiority of some groups over others—such as whenever they cannot accept that workers might be philosophers or artists or where they cannot accept that children might not need teachers. All of this is also present in Rancière's book on politics, *Disagreement* (Rancière 1999), in which he reveals the extent to which political thinkers use what he calls a 'geometrical phantasy' or model of society: each 'class' is presumed to have their proper place, and anyone who moves out of place should be policed back into it. Which is where Bourdieu and 'habitus' comes in. Rancière argues that Bourdieu repeats the aristocratic perspective of presuming that the superior class (the sociologists) will always know more and know better than their object (the people). The people will never understand themselves fully, properly, or even adequately because, for them to be able to do so, they would have to go through the universities and learn from the sociologists themselves. Thus, argues Rancière, Bourdieu works for the maintenance of the class hierarchies he claims to want to remove.

Now, there does seem to be a certain amount of post-Bourdieuian sociological work which seems to confirm the Rancièrian critique perfectly, in reproducing the inegalitarian view that any kind of 'emancipation' from this or that habitus (construed as a kind of force of 'determination') means, in a sense, struggling to *move upward* (Hilgers 2009). In such work, the lower classes—say, Wacquant's ghetto boxers—are (or should be) aspiring to 'escape' from the subjugation/determination of their place in the social order. The implication here is that those who are most free are those who are higher up. But does Wacquant's recent work accord with this?

Wacquant gives two contributions to the collection *Fighting Scholars* (García and Spencer 2013). The first is positioned as the first chapter of the book (Wacquant 2013a). The second is the epilogue to the book (Wacquant 2013b). As such, by bookending the collection, Wacquant's work is clearly marked as central. At the very end of his epilogue, Wacquant provides a brief account of what drove him 'to study boxers in the first place':

I was not motivated to spend three years in a boxing gym just to plumb the idiosyncratic features of the Manly Art. Aside from the sheer pleasure of being enwrapped in a gripping sensual and moral universe, I ploughed ahead in my journey among pugs because I held—and I still hold—that the ring offers an especially propitious experimental setting to show how social competency is fabricated and membership bestowed (Wacquant 2005a). I am keenly aware of the objection that practices vary in their 'physicality', or in their reliance on discursive reason, such that a prizefighter would seem to differ radically

on that count from, say, a philosophy professor. For this objection was raised forcefully and rather intimidatingly by none other than John Searle after I presented the theoretical implications of *Body and Soul* to his Workshop on Social Ontology at Berkeley in April of 2010. While Searle agrees that some notion much like habitus, which he calls ‘the Background’, is needed to account for social action, he considers that there is a ‘dramatic difference’ (his words) between an athletic and an intellectual craft, one that renders transferring knowledge gained about the one to the other too risky if not invalid. He would advise to study ‘intermediate cases’, such as that of the soldier (in his response to my argument, he drew on the experiences of his son as a tank officer in a US Army battalion stationed in Germany). (Wacquant 2013b: 198)

It is interesting that the staunch critic of Wacquant’s argument (that what he learned about identity, membership, and ghetto life might be translated into all sorts of realms) is none other than John Searle—who is most famously known in the fields of poststructuralism as the staunch critic of Derrida’s essay ‘Signature, Event, Context’ (Derrida 1982). Searle’s reply to Derrida prompted Derrida to write the long rejoinder that became *Limited Inc.* (Derrida 1988). And one way of characterizing the disagreement between them boiled down to Derrida’s desire to radicalize and expand some aspects of the theory of speech acts as developed by Searle’s mentor, Austin. However, Searle disagreed with Derrida’s reading, which ‘radicalized’ Austin’s theory, and Searle argued that one should focus on, so to speak, ‘intermediate cases’ and move far away from the grey areas of borderline and extreme cases—which is precisely where Derrida wanted most to push and explore. Like Derrida, Wacquant too is not prepared to stay away from the supposedly clear borders and boundaries between supposed realms. He continues immediately:

I am not convinced. I take the difference between pugilists and philosophers to be one of *degree and not one of kind*. The existential situation of the generic, run-of-the-mill agent is not ontologically different from that of the fighter and of the fighting scholar: like them, she is a sentient being of flesh and blood, bound to a particular point in physical space and tied to a given moment in time by virtue of her incarnation in a fragile organism. This porous, mortal organism exposes her to the world and thus to the risk of pain (emotional as well as physical) and injury (symbolic as well as material); but it also propels her onto the stage of social life, where she evolves in practice the visceral know-how and prediscursive skills that form the bedrock of social competency. Though carnal sociology is particularly apt for studying social extremes, its principles and techniques apply across all social institutions, for carnality is not a specific domain of practices but a fundamental constituent of the human condition and thus a necessary ingredient of all action. For this reason, and

until this methodological strategy is practically invalidated, I would urge social analysts to start from the assumption that, *pace* Searle, we are all martial artists of one sort or another. (198)

In a sense, then, Wacquant's thinking of 'habitus' might be related to Derrida's thinking of Austin's 'performatives'. In Derrida what becomes undecidable is the line between what is constative (or fixed and stable) and what is performative. He finds performativity active in even the most basic constative statement. Similarly, Wacquant is adamant that the habitus is not a field of determination, but a signifier of the logics of agency: 'habitus alone never spawns a definite practice', writes Wacquant, 'it takes the *conjunction of disposition and position*, subjective capacity and objective possibility, habitus and social space (or field) to produce a given conduct or expression' (194). Thus, it is not a kind of determinism. Rather, habitus always involves a 'meeting between skilled agent and pregnant world', and the nature of such an encounter or process 'spans the gamut from felicitous to strained, smooth to rough, fertile to futile' (194). The key point of Wacquant's approach is that habitus 'must be studied in its actual formation and extant manifestations, and not stipulated by analytic fiat' (194). Accordingly,

far from being [as certain critics deemed 'habitus' to be] a 'theoretical *deus ex machina*' . . . that keeps us locked in conceptual obscurity, habitus is a standing invitation to investigate the social *constitution of the agent*. It is not an answer to the conundrum of action—lately rephrased by invoking the equally enigmatic category of 'agency'—but a question or, better yet, an *empirical prompt*: an arrow pointing to the need to methodically *historicize the concrete agent* embedded in a concrete situation by reconstituting the set of durable and transposable dispositions that sculpt and steer her thoughts, feelings and conduct. (194)

So far so good. Wacquant's work does not seem to elaborate itself according to Rancière's prophesies about Bourdieuan inequality inscribing itself everywhere. This is perhaps because Rancière's critique of Bourdieu in this sense may only be germane to Bourdieu's work on class and education. Indeed, Wacquant, as we have seen, although faithful to Bourdieu, actually goes on to regard the lessons he learned about habitus in the boxing club as generalizable *everywhere*—including to the figure of the philosophy professor. (Of course, given the long-running historical disputes between sociology and philosophy, there is a certain predictability to the example of 'an academic' given by a sociologist being the figure of the philosopher. This is because, as the battles between Derrida, Rancière, and

Bourdieu suggest, the ultimate target of the sociologist is often the philosopher, and vice versa.)

But what of the problem of language? Readers of Derrida will know that for Derrida there's really no getting past it. (Rancière, however, has never had much patience for the Derridean/deconstructive multiplication of words and wordiness—what Rey Chow calls the 'primary strategy of deconstruction': to make things more complicated.) In his contributions to *Fighting Scholars*, Wacquant seems more than a little surly in the face of anything that might relate to the deconstructive turn in sociology, anthropology, and ethnography. Indeed, according to him, 'the notion [of habitus was] intended to overcome the antinomy between an objectivism that reduces practice to the mechanical precipitate of structural necessities and a subjectivism that confuses the personal will and intentions of the agent with the spring of her action' (24). Wacquant states that he decided upon his own research methodology in the following way:

The idea that guided me here was to push the logic of participant observation to the point where it becomes inverted and turns into *observant participation*. In the Anglo-American tradition, when anthropology students first go into the field, they are cautioned, 'Don't go native!' In the French tradition, radical immersion is admissible—think of Jeanne Favret-Saada's ([1978] 1980) *Deadly Words*—but only on condition that it is coupled with a subjectivist epistemology that gets us lost in the inner depths of the anthropologist-subject. My position, on the contrary, is to say, 'go native' but *go native armed*, that is, equipped with your theoretical and methodological tools, with the full store of problematics inherited from your discipline, with your capacity for reflexivity and analysis, and guided by a constant effort, once you have passed the ordeal of initiation, *to objectivize this experience and construct the object*, instead of allowing yourself to be naively embraced and constructed by it. (27–28)

Thus, 'theory and method are joined to the point of fusion in the very empirical object whose elaboration they make possible' (28). But, here's the sting:

*Body and Soul* is not an exercise in reflexive anthropology in the sense intended by what is called 'poststructuralist' or 'postmodern' anthropology, for which the return of the analytic gaze is directed either onto the knowing subject in her personal intimacy or onto the text that she delivers to her peers and the circuits of power-knowledge in which it travels, in a contradictory and self-destructive embrace of relativism (Hastrup 1995; Marcus 1998). Those forms of reflexivity, narcissistic and discursive, are rather superficial; they certainly constitute a useful moment in a research undertaking by helping to curb the play of the crudest biases (rooted in one's identity and trajec-

tory, affects, rhetorical effects, etc.). But they stop the movement of critique at the very point where it should start, through the constant questioning of the categories and techniques of sociological analysis and of the relationship to the world these presuppose. It is this return onto the instruments of construction of the object, as opposed to the subject of objectivation, which is the hallmark of what one may call epistemic reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 36–46; Bourdieu 2002a). And here is another difference with the ‘egological’ or textual reflexivity of the subjectivist anthropologists: epistemic reflexivity is deployed not at the end of the project, *ex post*, when it comes to drafting the final research report, but *durante*, at every stage in the investigation. It targets the totality of the most routine research operations, from the selection of the site and the recruitment of informants to the choice of questions to pose or to avoid, as well as the engagement of theoretic schema, methodological tools and display techniques, at the moment when they are implemented. (30)

Wacquant’s ‘target’ here is perhaps wider and more far-reaching than his own account suggests. Its object is not a few postmodernists or poststructuralists. Rather, it relates to a rift in the fields of sociology and anthropology caused by the eruption of the poststructuralist textual paradigm—as we heard earlier from Adam Frank, in his discussion of the textualizing effects of Clifford’s 1986 work, *Writing Culture* (Frank 2006: 14–15).

Wacquant’s picture of ‘the new’ is clearly one in which the body and agency are to be brought into visibility by way of a paradigm to be created by thinking and looking for habitus in embodied research. As such, it seems likely that, on this account, Rancièrian readers may, after all, have some problems identifying ‘a problem’ with Wacquant’s orientation. It does not appear to proceed according to the terms of Rancière’s critique of Bourdieu. But what of Derridean or deconstructive readers? It seems likely that Derridean poststructuralists could still have a field day, pulling to pieces Wacquant’s ‘position’. This is because there do seem to be loose threads, to be picked up and pulled out—and doing precisely this is the bread and butter of deconstructive readings. For instance, as Wacquant says, immediately after attacking so-called narcissistic postmodern approaches to sociology, ‘*Body and Soul* is written against subjectivism, against the narcissism and irrationalism that undergird so-called “post-modern” literary theory, but that does not mean that we should for that deprive ourselves of the literary techniques and instruments of dramatic exposition that this tradition gives us’ (31). In other words, as a Derridean reading might point out, not unlike Searle, Wacquant too would seem to prefer to keep things in their safe and proper place. For him, language is something to be ‘used’. It is a helpful ‘tool’. Accordingly, he approves of

the use of language in two ways: first, we can use the insights of ‘literary theory’ to become ‘reflexive’, all the way through—but *not too much*. Second, even the ‘objective’ sociologist must find ways to write their objectivity. *Body and Soul* (Wacquant 2004) has three distinct voices, for three distinct sections, Wacquant informs us. In other words, language is not a problem *as long as it is properly constrained*. Accordingly, language is indeed what Derrida once called ‘that dangerous supplement’. And, to supplement Derrida with Rancière, writing is something that must be *policed*. Otherwise, ‘habitus’, just like ‘the constative’, cannot become anything other than absolutely opaque and undecidable.

To such a challenge, the carnal sociologist would most likely merely reiterate that Wacquant spent three years training in a boxing gym on Chicago’s South Side. This immersion is the guarantee of his ability to describe and discuss its habitus. Indeed, as Wacquant notes elsewhere, initially he regarded the gym merely as a way ‘in’ to the local community: an entry point, viewing station, or vantage point from which to stage a different research project. However, he quickly became sucked wholeheartedly into the lifestyle, the pleasures, the pains, the aims, aspirations, and everything to do with the life of boxing that he was involved in. Accordingly, habitus became his central concept and tool.

However, there are at least two senses in which his deployment of habitus differs from the negative sense of habitus as invoked by the Rancièrean critique of Bourdieu. Wacquant explains in an interview published in 2009:

The question of whether or not to do fieldwork never presented itself to me in terms of a methodological avocation. Rather, it is the method that came to me as the best suited for resolving the concrete research problem I confronted which, in Chicago, was not just to ‘get closer’ to the ghetto to acquire a practical and lived knowledge of it from within, but also to gain an *instrument for the deconstruction of the categories* through which America’s Black Belt was then perceived and portrayed in the scholarly and policy debate. My initial intention was to rely on an ethnography of the urban scene of the South Side to pierce through the double screen formed, first, by the prefabricated discourse on the ghetto as a site of *social disorganization*—a space of violence, deviance, and void, characterized by absence and lack—flowing from the externalist and exoticizing point of view adopted by conventional sociology, and, second, by the academic tale of the ‘underclass’, that fearsome and loathsome category that crystallized in the 1980s in the social and scientific imaginary of America to explain in perfectly tautological fashion the breakdown of the black ghetto by the ‘anti-social behavior’ of its residents. (Wacquant 2009: 115–16)

In other words, Wacquant's project was organized in part by the aim of piercing the key terms of journalistic, media, political, and 'folk' discourse about 'the ghetto'. It was, in other words, orientated in such a way as to deconstruct and complicate received categories of discourse in order to challenge the problematic media and political analyses and diagnoses based on stereotypes and wrong assumptions about 'the ghetto' and its 'types', or stereotypes:

I wanted to quickly find a direct observation post inside the ghetto because the existing literature on the topic was the product of a 'gaze from afar' that seemed to me fundamentally biased if not blind. That literature was dominated by the statistical approach, deployed from on high, by researchers who most often had no first-hand or even second-hand knowledge of what makes the ordinary reality of the dispossessed neighborhoods of the Black Belt, and who fill this gap with stereotypes drawn from common sense, journalistic or academic. I wanted to reconstruct the question of the ghetto from the ground up, based on a precise observation of the everyday activities and relations of the residents of that *terra non grata* and for this very reason *incognita*. (Wacquant 2009: 107)

In the terms of Rancière's critique, it seems that at most Wacquant's conceptualization of 'the poor' might be regarded as double. For he is explicit that his aim was to deconstruct the falsities and hence put pressure on the moralistic or panic discourse constructed around folk devils by offering a counterdiscourse about the ghetto. So, he wants to explode the myth of 'the poor'—the poor of the media, of moral entrepreneurs and of the political/interventionist discourse of the time:

I deemed it epistemologically and morally impossible to do research on the ghetto without gaining serious first-hand knowledge of it, because it was right there, literally at my doorstep (in the summertime, you could hear gunfire going off at night on the other side of the street) and because the established works seemed to me to be full of implausible or pernicious academic notions, such as the scholarly myth of the 'underclass' which was a veritable intellectual cottage industry in those years. (Wacquant 2009: 107)

The potential double status of this myth-busting project derives from the possibility that although Wacquant may be deconstructing the dominant figures of the poor, he may be doing so in the name of his own figure of the poor. This would be a slippery accusation to make, and one which boils down to the necessity for some kind of predicative or signifying stability (the specification of an object), even while seeking to put that object into question. In other words, it is perhaps an accusation that could be levelled

at anyone who is required to structure their discourse by way of a term that they may ultimately seek to complicate or even reject—just think of the problematic status of ‘woman’ in poststructuralist feminism, for instance, ‘the text’ in deconstruction, ‘the native’ or ‘the nation’ in postcolonial theory, and so on.

According to the logic of Rancière’s critique, one might expect the status of ‘the poor’ in Wacquant’s Bourdieuan ethnographic sociology to be established in and through the discussion of ‘their habitus’—with ‘habitus’ constructed and depicted via the sociologist’s ‘tautology’, mentioned earlier. However, a slightly complicating factor in this regard is the way in which the focus of *Body and Soul*, while diverse and shared out across many figures—the boxers, the trainers, and also, crucially, Wacquant himself, as the ‘apprentice boxer’ undergoing a transformative process—is not simply a person or a group of people; rather, the focus of *Body and Soul* is the gym itself, as a material institution—as a ‘machine’, which produces boxers. Thus, says Wacquant:

In fact, theory and method are joined to the point of fusion in the very empirical object whose elaboration they make possible. *Body and Soul* is an *experimental ethnography* in the originary meaning of the term, in that the researcher is one of the socialized bodies thrown into the sociomoral and sensuous alembic of the boxing gym, one of bodies-in-action whose transmutation will be traced to penetrate the alchemy by which boxers are fabricated. Apprenticeship is here the means of acquiring a practical mastery, a visceral knowledge of the universe under scrutiny, a way of elucidating the praxeology of the agents under examination—and not the means of entering into the subjectivity of the researcher. It is absolutely not a fall into the bottomless well of subjectivism into which ‘autoethnography’ joyfully throws itself, quite the opposite: it relies on the most intimate experience, that of the desiring and suffering body, to grasp *in vivo* the collective manufacturing of the schemata of pugilistic perception, appreciation, and action that are shared, to varying degrees, by all boxers, whatever their origins, their trajectory, and their standing in the sporting hierarchy. The central character of the story is neither ‘Busy’ Louie, nor this or that boxer, and not even DeeDee the old coach, in spite of his position as conductor: it is the gym as a social and moral forge. The intellectual model here is not Carlos Castañeda and his Yaquí sorcerers but the Gaston Bachelard of *Applied Rationalism* and of the materialist poetics of space, time, and fire. (120)

This orientation and approach clearly differs from the statistical and questionnaire-based approach of Bourdieu about which Rancière complains in *The Philosopher and His Poor*. Indeed, as we have already seen, Wacquant himself is highly critical of precisely such approaches, as they involve



a gaze from outside and ‘from afar’. Moreover, it can even be said to be a clear advance on the ‘go-and-play-them-some-classical-music-on-a-piano-and-see-if-they-like-it’ approach that Rancière proposes as an alternative to the Bourdieuan distribution of questionnaires about musical taste.

Wacquant’s methodological approach inverts and displaces many features of the oft-stereotyped sociological or anthropological orientation. The object is not ‘othered’, is not hypostatized, is not fixed in time or place (Fabian 1983). The sociologist is not ‘supposed to know’, does not pretend to ‘know’, and in fact has his ‘ignorance’ impressed upon him during every workout. Rather than in terms of fixities, habitus is approached as a material process of becoming (as it is now so easy to say, in the wake of ‘Hurricane’ Deleuze). The material conditions of production, development, and maintenance of the boxing habitus include factors such as relatively stable domestic situations and certain moral and ethical dispositions deriving from this, and then, once within the boxing gym itself, the pulls, pushes, pleasures, and pains of the internal workings of its own technical, aesthetic, ideological, and ethical rhythms and processes. In other words, habitus is construed as material and relational, rather than relating to ‘identity’ construed as some kind of fixed, essential, or produced property.

Indeed, the discourse of ‘identity’ is studiously avoided by Wacquant. As he writes elsewhere:

*Body and Soul* is moreover written against the grain of postmodernism and at crosscurrent with the narcissistic irrationalism that has informed auto-ethnographic efforts of the past decade. It firmly grounds its subjects in an objective social structure of material forces and symbolic relations. It studiously shuns the hoary notion of identity and sidesteps the issues of ‘voice and authenticity, and of cultural displacement’ and ‘resistance’ that have preoccupied contributors to that current to the point of obsession. (Wacquant 2005: 470)

The ethnographic method that emerged not only from his immersion in a context and a lifeworld but also from his status as novice and apprentice led him, writes Wacquant, ‘to effect a *double rupture*, with the dominant journalistic-cum-political representation as well as with the current scholarly common sense, itself heavily contaminated by the national doxa’ (Wacquant 2009: 116). Ethnography, then, becomes an ‘instrument of rupture with the political and intellectual doxa . . . and as *tool for theoretical construction*’ (116). Thus, the focus is not simply on ‘the others’—the sociologist’s ‘poor’—but rather on a surprising range of problematics. These problematics stem from those of constructing the object of enquiry or knowledge itself to that of writing about bodily knowledge, and out to problematics of macro-scale governmentality.

Wacquant indicates much of this range and scope in the interview from which I have already been quoting, ‘The Body, The Ghetto, and The Penal State’. In it, the problematic becomes that of engaging with, thinking about, and conveying—*in language*—*bodily* knowledge and skill:

How to go from the guts to the intellect, from the comprehension of the flesh to the knowledge of the text? Here is a real problem of concrete epistemology about which we have not sufficiently reflected, and which for a long time seemed to me irresolvable. To reconstitute the carnal dimension of ordinary existence and the bodily anchoring of the practical knowledge constitutive of pugilism—but also of every practice, even the least ‘bodily’ in appearance—requires indeed a complete overhaul of our way of writing social science. (Wacquant 2009: 122)

It is to these questions that we shall turn in the next chapter.

## 2



# Writing Martial Arts Studies

## *Body, History, (Trans)Nation, and Narration*

### WRITING THE BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

Loïc Wacquant proposes that to ‘restitute the carnal dimension of ordinary existence and the bodily anchoring of the practical knowledge constitutive of pugilism—but also of every practice, even the least “bodily” in appearance—requires . . . a complete overhaul of our way of writing’ (Wacquant 2009: 122). The objects and topics of martial arts studies will certainly partake of many dimensions of the problematics that Wacquant evokes in his discussion of boxing; but it will also encounter others unique to it.

Certainly, Wacquant identifies a widely generalizable problematic, central to many fields, when he asks: ‘How to go from the guts to the intellect, from the comprehension of the flesh to the knowledge of the text?’ This is a problematic immanent to many fields; yet it is, in his words, ‘a real problem of concrete epistemology about which we have not sufficiently reflected’ (122). The problem, thus formulated, is one of how to enact the translation from lived sensuous experience to intellection and analysis or even discussion in scholarly contexts. This is a problematic that is—or should be—shared by any academic study of the carnal, the sensual, the experiential, and the embodied. Put like this, it becomes a challenge of and for *writing*: how we as academics move from ‘the guts to the intellect’ relies entirely on metaphors, analogies, styles of discourse, and translations in building concepts and categories of predication, signification, and communication.

There are already concepts and conventions for discoursing on the body. Practices themselves have their language games and what Spivak would call their 'concept-metaphors'. The teaching and learning of many skilled and embodied practices involves styles of discourse replete with their own tropes, images, and terminologies. Taijiquan, for instance, which is a practice based on ever more nuanced refinements of sensitivity to one's own and others' body positions, movements, and interactions, is saturated with analogies that try to capture and communicate the feelings one is looking for. (It 'should feel as if the top of your head is hanging from a thread'; doing the form 'should be like swimming on dry land'; push-hands 'should be like pedalling a bicycle or using a two-man saw', and so on.)

Within academic discourses, the analogies and metaphors used in practitioner language games are often quoted, but the practices themselves are discussed in other terms. Academic discourse does not operate within the same language game as practitioner discourse. It is not a natural extension of the practitioner discourse. Rather, academic discourse typically holds up practitioner discourse to analysis and explores it, but in different terms and according to different considerations, questions, values, and investments. The matter for martial arts studies to consider is what these questions, values, and investments should be. As introduced in the previous chapter, different disciplines have different foci and conventions. They construct and handle objects, 'information', 'material', 'data', 'evidence', and so on, very differently. So, one question for martial arts studies would be, how should the field be written? As an art, literature, humanities, social science, or hard science? What are the stakes? To broach these questions, we will begin from a consideration of discourse on and knowledge of (or about) taijiquan.

## HISTORY AND IDEOLOGY

Johannes Fabian offers the term 'allochroism' to describe one tendency involved in certain manners of thinking about other cultures (Fabian 1983). Allochroism involves projecting a fantasy about the unchanging character of the other culture back and forward through time. What this means is illustrated by an example given by Jean Baudrillard: Baudrillard draws attention to the fantasies that it is still easy for Westerners to hold about Amazonian tribes. These fantasies take the form of an image of such natives as primitives. They are based on photographs taken at the moment of first contact between Westerners and tribespeople (Krug 2001). Of course, after the moment of first contact, a great deal will have changed. The photographs that capture the moment of contact are in a strong sense capturing

the moment of the demise of a former state. However, such images produce and circulate allochronic fantasies to the extent that people continue to project fantasies about primitivism onto such peoples, regardless of the fact that they have had increasing contact and interaction with the modern world for decades or even centuries since then.

In other words, allochronism is a kind of essentialism—a belief in the unchanging essence of an ethnic group. This is not divorced from Saidian orientalism (Said 1995). Both allochronism and orientalism produce nostalgia for fantasies such as ‘a more innocent time’, or a time before the ‘corruption’ of a more ‘pure’ culture; before its ‘contamination’ by contact with the West. As Rey Chow demonstrates, one predictable practical consequence of this is that any natives who do *not* live up to this fantasy structure—any ‘natives’ who are ‘contaminated’ by Westernization or modernization—are all too often regarded as impure, inferior, corrupt, or inauthentic—by both Westerners/others and by guardians of ‘their own’ ethnic/native culture (Chow 1995, 2002).

Chow focuses on the effects of ethnic allochronism in academic contexts and its effects on academic subjects—that is, on actual people—actual ethnic academics. Her focus is on the ways such subjects are prodded and poked, cajoled and coerced to behave in a ‘proper’ manner—that is, an expected manner, in accordance with this or that stereotype of what *this sort* of ethnic subject should be ‘into’ and how they should act. This leads her to propose the existence and operation of what she calls ‘coercive mimeticism’. Coercive mimeticism refers to all of the micro and macro forces that act on an ethnic or gendered subject and which give guidance or coercion about how, where, and why to be, act, think, and discourse (like). An awareness of the risks of falling into allochronic thinking and contributing to either orientalism or coercive mimeticism is extremely pertinent to martial arts studies. Its relevance extends beyond providing insights into the effects of such structures on *individuals*, and into the matter of the circulation of discourses (Frank 2006; Iwamura 2005).

A consideration of the martial art of taijiquan will prove illustrative. Douglas Wile points to Wu Wen-han’s observation that ‘in the past, students of the development of t’ai-chi ch’üan have ignored historical, economic, and political conditions and have focused narrowly on the art itself and a small number of masters’ (quoted by Wile 1996: 3). Taijiquan is indeed all too frequently *denied* a history. Instead of a more sophisticated sense of the historical development of taijiquan, all we are often given is a simplistic mythology. Within this mythology, multiple levels of allochronism, orientalism, and even self-orientalization are at work. This includes Western ahistorical or allochronic conceptions of ‘ancient

China', conceptions complicated by the tendency within Chinese martial arts *themselves* to claim an often preposterously ancient lineage, in order to confer legitimacy, authenticity, and superiority on a currently existing martial art. However, Wile notes that many of the 'classic' texts of taijiquan can only actually be traced back to the nineteenth century, and specifically to the writers Yang Lu-ch'an and the Wu and Li brothers. The 'internal' mythologizing of taijiquan by its own practitioners (the claim that it is ancient to the extent of being virtually timeless) is compounded by the fact that, for Westerners:

Anything earlier than the Republican period (1911–49) tends to slip into the mist of 'ancient China', and we often overlook the fact that Yang Lu-ch'an and the Wu brothers were of the same generation as Darwin and Marx, and that the Li brothers were contemporaries of Einstein, Freud, and Gandhi. Railroads, telegraph, and missionary schools were already part of the Chinese landscape, and Chinese armies (and rebels) sometimes carried modern Western rifles. How often have we stopped to reflect that Yang Lu-ch'an was probably in Beijing in 1860 when British and French troops stormed the capital and the Manchu Emperor took flight. (Wile 1996: 3)

With this evocation of the historical and political context of the times and places of the figures who were key in the articulation and constitution of taijiquan as a certain kind of Chinese martial art, Wile sets the scene for a non-allochronic and more complex understanding of the cultural, ideological, and political context of the emergence and development of taijiquan. Indeed, Wile's explicit proposition is that this 'watershed period in the evolution of the art and theory of t'ai-chi ch'üan did not take place in spite of larger social and historical events but somehow in response to them'. He continues by noting that even though the classic texts of taijiquan 'have a timeless, art-for-art's-sake tone, this should not prevent us from asking who were the Ch'ens, Yangs, Wus, and Lis, why did they involve themselves in the martial arts, and why did they create this kind of martial art?' (Wile 1996: 3–4)

Wile's work is 'archaeological', in the sense that he studies the classics of taijiquan in relation to a reconstruction of what we currently know of their origin and composition. This contextual or conjunctural approach leads him to argue that the textual formalization of the theory and philosophy of taijiquan that took place during the nineteenth century was something quite context specific and far from ideologically neutral. In fact, argues Wile, during the nineteenth century, Chinese intellectuals and thinkers felt increasingly besieged by foreign forces. These were not just the military challenges of former times, but also intellectual, scientific,

religious, and cultural onslaughts. Thus, China saw many ‘anti-foreign’ uprisings, culminating in the Boxer Uprising of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Esherick 1987). The intellectual elaboration, codification, and popularization of a self-consciously and deliberately *Chinese* practice of taijiquan, with explicitly Taoist principles, can be regarded as a very particular kind of ‘response’ to the Western invasion.

Elsewhere, Wile has undertaken a genealogical study that looked for the ‘ancestors’ of modern taijiquan (Wile 1999). Like others who have undertaken such studies (Kennedy and Guo 2005), Wile’s studies suggest that the principles central to internal martial arts like taijiquan are eminently discoverable: anyone in any time or place could ‘discover’ or activate the training principles characteristic of taijiquan—principles such as slowness (mental or psychological slowness, rather than simply physical slowness), sensitivity, yielding, redirection, ‘roundness’, and so on. However, the reasons these caught on and developed in China were historical in a very precise causal sense. As indicated above, on Wile’s reading, the first modality of the emergence and growth of taijiquan was as a kind of symptomatic ideological response to Western cultural, ideological, and intellectual forces. Taijiquan was in a sense a defensive retreat—a search for something ‘essentially Chinese’. Taoism was one cultural resource, being as it was a set of ideas and practices alien to the West. The intellectual elaboration of certain ‘internal’ martial arts practices became another. In other words, although some thing(s) related to taijiquan had existed in different forms and under different names in China for quite some time, it emerged in its modern form because of a series of significant cultural, political, and economic processes. In Wile’s words:

The shapers of modern t’ai-chi ch’üan thus witnessed repeated military defeat and reduction of the empire to semicolonial status. T’ai-chi ch’üan as we know it today rose from the ashes of a collapsing empire. With roots that clearly reach back farther than the nineteenth century, t’ai-chi’s association with national revival did not become explicit until the twentieth. China’s anti-imperialist struggles began in the nineteenth century, yet t’ai-chi writings from this period do not yet show self-conscious patriotic sentiments. Succeeding sections of this chapter will explore t’ai-chi ch’üan as a cultural response to China’s political predicament. (Wile 1996: 5)

Wile proposes that taijiquan in the nineteenth century ‘may be seen as a psychological defence against Western cultural imperialism, a clinging to chivalry in the face of modernity’ (26). At the same time, it was not just ‘modernity’ that was causing cultural identity crises. It was specifically a Western or *Westernizing* modernity. Thus, Wile proposes, against this backdrop,

the development of taijiquan as a practice underpinned by a strong ideology or philosophy suggests it can be understood as an ‘attempt to create a space where purely Chinese values and worldview could survive’ (27):

Thus, as China’s political body was losing control (sovereignty), t’ai-chi ch’üan became a way to maintain a measure of autonomy in the practitioner’s body. It must have been clear to China’s elites in the second half of the nineteenth century that the West could not be beaten at their own game. They were thus thrown back on their own bodies, the microcosm where traditional Taoist self-cultivation sought to discover and become attuned to the *tao*. This was to pursue a Chinese brand of strength. (Wile 1996: 27)

Wile proposes that the semiotic structure of Western domination imposed an immanent femininity upon any discourse of essential Chineseness (27). Thus, it was not simply or solely that *Western* orientalism constructed Chineseness as the feminine to the West’s masculine, as a Saidian approach might have it. It is also that, in the face of the ‘rational’, ‘intellectual’, ‘reasonable’, ‘powerful’ imperial, and economic encroachments, there was, in a sense, very little semiotic room for manoeuvre. Accordingly, rather than championing progress and technology, a defensive and nostalgic response to forces of change would champion *nature*. Indeed, Wile notes, ‘Late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century European romanticism suggests some interesting parallels with the t’ai-chi movement in nineteenth century China’ (27). For European Romanticism ‘advocates returning the body to nature’, and ‘t’ai-chi advocates returning to nature in the body’ (27–28):

Nature is the setting in which man is beautiful and powerful, the stage on which Greek mythology is acted out. The Chinese literati in the nineteenth century faced an external but similar culture shock, and the effect, of course, was even more alienating. Disaffected young European aristocrats created a romantic subculture and took refuge in the arts as a realm of personal perfectability. The shapers of t’ai-chi ch’üan also project a vision of personal perfectability, or mastery, through the martial arts. As opposed to all other pursuits in their lives, which were overtly familial or political, t’ai-chi was an individual and interior quest. The almost religious solace that men like Goethe, Byron, Swinburne, Flaubert, Valery, Poe, and Brooke found in swimming, a subset of Chinese intellectuals found in t’ai-chi ch’üan. It may be no coincidence that Cheng Man-ch’ing called t’ai-chi ch’üan ‘swimming on dry land’. Both feature physical effort against a mythological backdrop: for one it was Greek mythology and for the other Taoist hagiography. (28)

Wile goes on to argue that while ‘rejecting Westernization and withdrawing into nativist roots might appear to be merely a reactionary reflex’,



in a sense it can be argued that such types of ‘nativism’ may be regarded, in retrospect, as ‘the healing that prepares the way for modern nation building in the twentieth century’ (29). This is because, as a process which articulates a strong sense of *Chineseness*—both in the present (in the body, in the mind, in the physical and mental dispositions acquired through training) and in terms of a notion of an elongated mythological history—the discourse of taijiquan is part of larger nationalist and nationalizing processes, such as the ‘invention of tradition’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and indeed the very invention of the sense of a nation (Anderson 1991). Wile observes: ‘Selective celebration of tradition thus helps to consolidate Chinese identity, and in this sense it is “complicit” with the task of modern nation building rather than antagonistic to it’ (Wile 1996: 29). Of course, it would be wrong to conclude from this that the emergence and elaboration of taijiquan in any context is *simply* nationalist, or, similarly, orientalist. Wile proposes:

Only a secure sense of national self could permit China to change and adapt to a new international environment. By consolidating and retaining firm control over the spiritual sphere, it becomes easier to compromise with modernity. If t’ai-chi ch’üan in the West today represents a reaching out from within modernity to embrace a foreign and traditional practice, in nineteenth-century China it may have been a recoiling from modernity and withdrawing into native roots, but in both cases an attempt to make modernity tolerable. (29)

This idea of taijiquan as a cultural and physical activity emerging and functioning so as to ‘make modernity tolerable’ for both Easterners and Westerners chimes with Slavoj Žižek’s argument that ‘Western Buddhism’ and ‘Western Taoism’ eventually came to be what he regards as the exemplary forms of ideology in contemporary global capitalism (Žižek 2001; Bowman 2007b). On Žižek’s account, all such practices are therefore implicitly politically negative because they do not ‘combat’ or militate against modern and postmodern capitalism—they do not politicize or antagonize; rather they depoliticize and actually enable the spread of the ideology and of the political system that they would seem to be opposed to (Bowman 2007b, 2010b). However, Wile’s focus on the nation and its attendant ideologies is probably more pertinent than Žižek’s focus on ‘global ideology’, at least here. This is because taijiquan certainly functioned throughout the latter half of the twentieth century as part of the project of achieving China through the development of *Chineseness* (see also Frank 2006).

Taijiquan, as most people think of it now—with reference to images of large groups of Chinese people performing forms in Chinese city parks—came into its present form in Mainland China, first thanks to early

twentieth-century modernizing movements, and also thanks to certain aspects of Maoism. Maoism championed taijiquan because it was collective, communal, synchronized, coordinated, non-Western, physical, non-sporting, and non-individualistic. It became a part of the material ideology of state communism. It could be regarded as forward looking and nation building much more easily than certain meditative practices, such as *qi-gong*, which had unclear connections with religion and mysticism. Nevertheless, even qigong—a heterogeneous realm of meditative practices—has at various times been recruited for ideological purposes (Palmer 2007). Qigong, like taijiquan, is another Chinese tradition that is often regarded as being timeless and unchanging—an enduring tradition, stretching back in an unbroken lineage through the mists of time to the most ancient prehistories of China. However, as David Palmer’s study of the history of qigong makes plain, although many physical practices that we may today class as qigong may well have existed here and there throughout history, it was actually in 1949 that Chinese officials settled on the name for the practices and set about ‘nationalising’ them (Palmer 2007). Palmer writes:

Many of the gymnastic, breathing and meditation techniques defined as qigong were widely practised in Chinese society before 1949, but were not known under that name, nor grouped under a single category. They were practised in a diversity of contexts, and embedded in a variety of systems of representations and social organisations: monastic institutions, sectarian groups, martial arts networks, literati circles and medical lineages. It was only in 1949 that qigong became a global category which aimed to include all Chinese breathing, meditation and gymnastic techniques. (Palmer 2007: loc 136)

According to Palmer: ‘The choice of the term ‘qigong’ by Party cadres in 1949 reflected an ideological project’. This was ‘to extract Chinese body cultivation techniques from their “feudal” and religious setting, to standardise them, and to put them to the service of the construction of a secular, modern state. As such’, he states baldly, ‘qigong is an invented tradition’ (Palmer 2007: loc 98).

Inevitably, part of the invention of tradition is the simultaneous obfuscation of the act of invention and the attempt to cover one’s tracks. Thus, both taijiquan and qigong (along with styles of kung fu, such as Shaolin), have overwhelmingly been constructed and represented as ancient, unchanging, and timeless, despite the fact that their histories and genealogies were often invented during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Historical studies, such as those of Wile (1996, 1999), Lorge (2012), Kennedy and Guo (2005), Shahar (2008), Palmer (2007), Henning (1995), Frank (2006), and the ongoing work of Judkins (2012–), have done much to counteract

allochroism in the academic discourse of Chinese martial arts. But rather than being content with ‘knowing’ such complexity, the question for martial arts studies becomes one of how to proceed to work on constructing different knowledge(s) of martial arts in light of such insights into the complexities and intertwining of history and ideology.

One interesting attempt to engage with the matter of how best to write an ethnographic study of a martial art can be found in the work of Adam Frank. Frank constructs a theoretical relation between poststructuralism and taijiquan, in his 2006 ethnographic study, *Taijiquan and the Search for the Little Old Chinese Man* (Frank 2006). In this book, Frank draws multiple relations between poststructuralism/deconstruction and taijiquan. But what is perhaps most unique is the way that he uses the *taiji tu* or yin/yang symbol—which is used so often to explain the logic of taijiquan (as well as philosophical Daoism)—as an organizing structure both for the conceptual organization and movement of his book and for the argument he constructs within it.

The argument itself can be characterized in many ways. The book purports to focus on ‘identity’ (the book’s subtitle is *Understanding Identity through Martial Arts*), but Frank shows the necessity of regularly shifting focus from the personal to the cultural or social, and from the singular present to its multiple histories. In other words, through its shifting focus, the book *performs* the fact that one needs to shift focus if one wants to understand matters of private or personal identity, or indeed of the singular present moment: one must inevitably refer to moments outside of the self and outside of the present. In Daoist or taijiquan terms, this is understood as the grain of yin in the heart of yang and the grain of yang in the heart of yin. In the terms of deconstruction, any ‘one’ entity or identity is essentially the *différance* of the other.

Of course, this conceptual matrix is not new in itself. In fact, studies of identity almost necessarily have to refer to wider causes and correlations. Similarly, many people have drawn Daoism and deconstruction into various kinds of relations, with varying degrees of success (see for example Hall 1991; Clarke 1997; Sedgwick 2003). However, few have done so with the success and subtlety of Frank. This is doubtless because of his equally theoretical and practical investment not only in taijiquan but also in cultural theory and methodological issues in ethnography. This allows him to move from what he calls ‘sensual social’ matters—say, of interacting with oneself and one’s partner in push-hands practice or other elements of a taijiquan class or postclass conversation—to the most intimate matters of what psychoanalysis calls ‘phantasy’ (say, orientalist ideas about essential cultural difference, for example), and outwards, into fields of media, politics,

history, language, culture, and economics—and back again. Indeed, Frank often ponders the question of exactly *where* the problem of cultural difference resides. When it seems to him that an idea of cultural difference is present in some way (in the form of presumptions about the other, whether orientalist or racist, etc.), he immediately wonders whether it is only present in his head, or whether it popped into his head because it seemed to be affecting others around him. This question ('Am I just imagining this or is it real?') raises problems of verification: How does one establish *where* ideas of cultural difference are working? How does one establish what they are doing?

Frank's solution is to *maintain the problem as a problem*. Hence, he always tries to read out of, off, and from the evidence of any situation. This requires contextual analysis of what people said and did at the time, and also auto-analysis of his own thoughts, hopes, fears, actions, and reactions. But he does not try to *resolve* or *dissolve* the problem, in the sense of dispensing with it and categorizing it as something that has been resolved. Instead, he treats it as something that long has and long will continue to emerge and have effects. Thus, he accepts, for instance, that he has certainly more than once harboured various phantasies about cultural difference, and he tries repeatedly to engage with them—with what they have made him think, feel, and do and what it would mean if and when they change. Then, he maintains a nonjudgemental position vis-à-vis the likelihood that his Chinese friends and colleagues may well harbour certain cultural assumptions about him, as a white Westerner/American. In other words, rather than trying to treat cultural difference as a necessarily bad problem to be solved, he treats it as an inevitable occurrence with a very wide-ranging and dynamic constellation of consequences, from fear or hatred at one extreme, to fetishization, love, or desire at other points. And he treats all of these possibilities as moveable. This is because social and cultural relations are formed from contingent histories and ongoing events. As he repeats, 'identity moves'.

Frank's use of the taiji symbol (*taiji tu*) as a matrix suggestive of a paradigm for exploring and writing the ways in which the most intimate and personal is always also political, historical, sociological, and so on, is an important example of the way in which an object of study can in itself propose a mode and manner apt for engaging with it. He writes:

I have tried to capture the play of multiple discourses within the unity of a particular embodied practice. To what end? All this talk of racisms, power, hegemony, deception, and capitalism run amok is not meant to give the impression that taijiquan is a painfully negative experience that one should avoid at

all costs. My goal has been the opposite: to highlight the obstacles to practice and understanding that teachers and fellow practitioners shared with me during the course of my fieldwork. Ultimately, all these negatives are meant to yield a positive. By understanding the tendency to conceive taijiquan in terms of race, those who practice the art might more easily cut through the obstacle of preconception to experience it in a new light. Those who do not practice, but who see people practicing taijiquan in a park or read a book or rent a videotape, might approach the art, as well as their conception of China and Chinese people, in a more sophisticated way. Perhaps transnational practices like taijiquan allow us to engage in an act of reduction about identity, where comparison is no longer ‘cultural’, but internal. Practice can lead us to a moment when we are neither a particular self nor not that self—in other words, a moment when socially structured identities are negated through direct experience. (Frank 2006: 241)

This passage illustrates both the strengths and also perhaps some of the limitations of Frank’s approach. We can see the complexities of identity and its vicissitudes. Yet, ultimately perhaps, this work might still be said to be organized by focusing on a mirage or red herring: *identity*. A thoroughgoing deconstruction, on the other hand, might engage in processes of *inverting and displacing* such a focus. At times, Frank certainly inverts: he shows how individual or group consciousness is produced by all sorts of ‘unreal’ or inhuman supplements—media representations, literary figures, political interventions, and so on. But he does not displace the discussion away from the human to the inhuman dimensions of the interhuman and, instead, effectively maintains a belief in—to borrow a phrase from Laclau and Mouffe (1985)—the individual as the origin and basis of human relations. There is more to identity construction than humans and other humans. And, as Laclau once argued in a discussion of political identities, 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’ (Laclau 2000: 53).

The logics and spaces of identity construction in and around martial arts doubtless cannot be ascertained via a one-size-fits-all approach. So while Wacquant’s use of the conceptual field of *habitus* may prove efficient and insightful in the context of an intensely competition-focused boxing gym in the United States, the same concept (*habitus*) may not prove entirely useful when considering, for example, taijiquan learning in Shanghai (as was the focus of Frank’s work). In fact, in relation to martial arts and identity—or indeed, the identity of martial arts—there are many ways to enquire into the ‘logics of their constitution and dissolution’.

As distinct from the interpersonal foci of studies like that of Frank and Wacquant, we might enquire into other theoretical and interpretive

possibilities. One notable approach is offered by Sylvia Huey Chong in her study of the ‘place’ of Asia in twentieth-century American culture (Chong 2012). This work offers an enormous array of insights into questions central to martial arts studies, via considerations of media, culture, and history. It is, in a way, an example of what Stuart Hall would call a ‘conjunctural analysis’. In what follows, I will focus on the question of history (or, rather, *discourse*) in Chong’s contributions to our ways of understanding the identity of martial arts and martial artists.

### RE: WRITING HISTORY IN MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

It is common (indeed, ‘common sense’) to regard history as the ultimate referent: the name for the repository of every process and event and thing that happens. In this view, things happen, and they are either noticed or unnoticed, either recorded somewhere or somehow, or unrecorded, as the known or unknown contents of history; and history moves forward. However, arguably, history is quite different to this. It is something other, something more, *and* something less than this idealized process. Certainly, history is never a simple neutral referent. Nor is it always on a simple forward trajectory. Nor is it ever simply one thing. When we say ‘history’ we may *seem* to be evoking one thing. But we are not. We are referring to something that is written, recorded, experienced, fantasized about, engaged with, hidden from, denied, manipulated, invented, played and replayed, worked over, worked through, worked with. There is no sense in which ‘history’ is ever a complete, comprehensive, self-present, self-identical entity, identity, or process. As with so many things, language tells us that it is a singular noun; but a moment’s reflection suggests it is a complex, incomplete, slipping, sliding, spiralling, vertiginous array of processes, moving at different speeds and in different directions. Moreover, historical processes are themselves part of other processes. They are always connected with operations that might be called, for simplicity, *ideology*. I use the word ‘ideology’ here deliberately: in everyday usage ‘ideology’ tends to be used to mean ‘false belief’. It can also be used to evoke motivations, belief systems, visions, and ideals (as in, ‘the ideology of the Conservative Party’ and ‘the ideology of the Labour Party’). In some of the most ‘radical’ cultural theory, the word can be used to refer to something from which there is no escape, no outside, and no getting away from—that is, something fundamental and constitutive of culture and society (Žižek 1989). So the term can be used to evoke anything from the ‘most false’ to ‘most basic’ element of humanity. It is relevant here because bringing

the notion of ideology to bear on a consideration of history is pertinent to martial arts studies.

This can be illustrated through discussion of the figure of Sylvester Stallone's character John Rambo in *First Blood* (1982) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). *First Blood* is one of a range of 1980s films which on first glance purport to display the power and combat supremacy of U.S. special forces. However, as Sylvia Chong points out, these films exist in a complex relationship with what has to be understood as the *trauma* of the Vietnam War (Chong 2012). Thus, *First Blood* is to be regarded as a reworking of historical issues from the 1960s and early 1970s in 1980s visual culture. Moreover, it becomes clearly ideological in a number of ways in the sequel, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. This was the film about which President Ronald Reagan would comment, on one occasion, that it helped Americans to find a way to be proud of their involvement in Vietnam. On another occasion, Reagan quoted Stallone's character, John Rambo, in a motivational speech, saying, 'In the spirit of *Rambo*: we're gonna win this time'. In other words, the film functioned as a kind of fantasy replay of the war in which America gets to 'win this time'. It is also the film that most showcases Stallone's muscularity—something that film theorists and scholars of identity have remarked upon in terms of its relevance for signalling discursive changes in styles of masculinity. It certainly signals a kind of discursive change in the visual aesthetics of martial arts masculinity. In other words, in all of these registers and more, *ideology* is an apt term for thinking about what is happening with *history* in and through this film.

Chong's overarching argument starts from the proposition that America was traumatized in the Vietnam War. But, she asks: 'What might it mean to traumatize a nation? To borrow this diagnosis from psychology might seem to impose an unnatural unity upon the unruly collective known as the U.S. nation' (Chong 2012: loc 223). However, she argues, 'to analogize the nation as subject is not necessarily to adopt the organic unities of the body politic or the universalities of the Jungian collective unconscious or the "myth and symbol" school of American studies' (226). Rather, 'if the personification of the nation as a patient on the cultural critic's couch is to be more than mere poetic analogy, it must take into account the way post-structuralist psychoanalysis has fundamentally challenged the coherence of the subject' (226). Accordingly, she continues:

The modern nation, like the modern subject, must be understood as fundamentally split, historically and socially contingent, and incapable of complete self-presence or self-awareness. The nation becomes a 'subject' in my analysis only insofar as it is a fictive field within which the scenarios of the oriental obscene circulate and take on meaning. (231)

For Chong, the ‘oriental’ was ‘obscene’ in the Vietnam era because of the power of the visual signs of carnage, violence, destruction, abjection, and otherness associated with it and articulated through it. The impact of such visual images of the Vietnam War on America was traumatic, Chong argues. As such, the emergence of Asian martial arts into the visual cultural realm during this time and against this backdrop of trauma should mean that we be resolutely ‘wary of celebrations of martial arts as an essentially Third World cultural form that is inherently resistant to dominant formations of state and economic power’ (2730).

One of the aesthetic productions of the overlapping emergence of Asian martial arts into U.S. consciousness at the time of the Vietnam was Stallone’s Rambo—along with, of course, Ralph Macchio’s ‘karate kid’, and (earlier) Chuck Norris’s various special forces characters. Thus, in addition to the ‘mystical lore combining Buddhism and other Asian religions with the American counterculture’ (2743), what is also to be acknowledged as present is ‘the violence which such Asian bodies taught to Americans, a gestural vocabulary that retains an Asian cultural residue through periphery symbols: the use of Asian terminology, such as sensei or sifu for teacher, even when applied to non-Asians; costumes of white karate gi robes and kung fu outfits with Mandarin collars’ (2741). But, with Stallone, Norris, Macchio, Seagal, and Van Damme, ‘what seems to disappear once the martial arts leave the screen is the specificity of the Asian body’ (2741).

Of course, coming before all of these figures was Bruce Lee, as well as other notable figures, such as the Japanese actor Sonny Chiba. However, Chong argues that Asian figures like Chiba ‘do not serve as direct points of identification’ but rather as ‘conduits for this style of violence that flows through them and into the audience as kinetic energy’ (2748). Significantly, though, she proposes that ‘the one exception to this exclusion is the figure of Bruce Lee, whose persona offers further insight into just how this orientalized violence makes its way into American bodies without those bodies becoming overtly racialized as Asian’ (2748). ‘The object of assimilation is not simply the static image of Lee, frozen in time on a movie poster, but rather a style of movement: the combination of choreography and cinematography that produced the dynamic images of bodily movements identifiable as Bruce Lee’ (2768).

Film theorists may be interested in Chong’s argument that ‘Lee seems to provide an exemplary instance of the Deleuzian movement-image, since his star persona appears to be completely enmeshed with the mapping of his body moving through space onto the temporal medium of the cinema’ (2770). But for our present purposes, what is more important is the idea that ‘the Vietnam War shadows the movement-images of Bruce Lee as well, appearing on the edges of films like *Enter the Dragon* through Vietnam



veteran characters such as Williams (Jim Kelly) and Roper (John Saxon), and emerging in the colonial settings and battles of his other films' (2774).

Chong undertakes chapters-long analyses of the racial and ethnic significance of the U.S. love of Bruce Lee, but does so in order to think more fully about the logic and dynamics of what arose after him, in the form of the characters played by Norris and Stallone in the 1980s. Crucial at the Lee-stage of the discursive movement is that Lee managed to 'serve both as a metonym for the Chinese as a racialized group and also as an honorary white, a figure of masculine power who transcends his racialized status and is assimilated into existing structures of power' (3136). Interestingly, she notes that, in many of the popular narratives about Lee's status vis-à-vis 'race' in the United States, the stories always seem to involve *Chinese racism*—namely, the presumed insularity of the Chinese kung fu community, the supposed scandal within the Chinese community of Lee teaching kung fu to non-Chinese, and so on. Chong points out that these stories 'locate racism in Chinese rather than in American culture and depict Lee as overcoming his own culture's xenophobia and thus becoming "American" in the process' (3178). Moreover, something significant happens with the tendency of post-Bruce Lee American films to displace matters of race and ethnicity into the realm of either individualism or class. Assessing Davis Miller's (Miller 2000) account of Bruce Lee's place and function in his own life, Chong argues that

Miller's move from mourning the death of the 'bad old white boy' to being reborn through an identification with Bruce Lee is not simply about racial transcendence, but represents a reconfiguration of orientalism as a form of honorary whiteness, cleansed of its more troubling connotations. (3188)

Similarly, in the working-class drama of *No Retreat, No Surrender*, 'the spirit of Lee is resurrected to restore the privileges of whiteness that Jason temporarily lost with the emasculation of his father' (3200). Interestingly, however,

the production history and subplots of *No Retreat* complicate the erasure of racial specificity that the film's narrative tries to perform. The film was directed by Corey Yuen and produced by Ng See-Yuen, two Hong Kong martial arts film luminaries and members of the Seven Little Fortunes, a Hong Kong performance troupe trained in Chinese opera acrobatics whose other illustrious members included Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung. As a result it is difficult to dismiss *No Retreat* as simply an appropriation and whitening of Bruce Lee's legacy, when in fact the film serves as an early bridge for Chinese directors and actors to enter Hollywood. (3202)

Thus, Chong proposes that we can extend Meaghan Morris's argument that 'instead of seeing *No Retreat, No Surrender* as a Hong Kong rip-off passing as American, we can just as well say that it remade *The Karate Kid* for people who like Hong Kong films'. So, 'rather than viewing the film as simply Americanizing Bruce Lee as an honorary white *pater familias*, it might also orientalize Jason through his imagined relationship with Lee, whom he addresses as "Lee da ge" (big brother Lee)' (3206).

Chong discusses a range of films in which cross-ethnic identification is unstable. But, most pertinent for our consideration of history and ideology, she argues that a crucial change occurs around Chuck Norris in the 1980s:

By 1986, when Norris is promoting his tenth film after *Good Guys, Invasion U.S.A.* (1985), Bruce Lee is no longer the main point of reference for his career. Instead, as another *Los Angeles Times* profile reveals, Norris is now the reincarnation of John Wayne, whose name is evoked four times on the first page alone, and Norris's films in the mold of 'modern-day Westerns'. (3293)

This is a significant transformation because, as Chong argues, it constitutes a kind of strong disavowal and distancing of identities: before this moment it was, in a sense, 'clear' that the special forces characters played by the likes of Norris and Stallone were presented as not only having been produced *in* Vietnam, but also *by* Vietnam, as well as owing a strong aesthetic debt to Bruce Lee films. As she notes, Stallone's striated martial muscularity refers more to Bruce Lee's body than Arnold Schwarzenegger's Mr Olympia mass. Similarly, Norris's martial moves always signalled the cross-fertilization or even contamination of bodily capacities by East-West encounters. But the semiotic switch from referring to Bruce Lee to referring to John Wayne signals a kind of backward-moving pre-oriental reference:

From Bruce Lee to John Wayne—this reverse genealogy of the Hollywood action hero seems to undo the orientalization of the Vietnam veteran, replacing both the body incontinent of the traumatized soldier and the body mastered of the Asian martial artist with an earlier warrior figure more often associated with the violent oppression of racial difference on the edges of the U.S. nation-state. (3295)

Put differently, 'the soldier-heroes played by Chuck Norris, and later by Sylvester Stallone, represent a differently orientalized body, one neither fully traumatized nor invincible, but rather the condensation of both fantasies simultaneously' (3298). Both have an 'ostensibly white body whose origins are thoroughly oriental' (3299). Indeed, Chong asserts:

Norris's and Stallone's Vietnam heroes are white Orientals, performing a yellowface minstrelsy sans yellowface, in order to reinvigorate a whiteness that has lost both its hegemonic wholeness from the protests of the 1970s and its masculine vigor from the Vietnam War. But since the oriental source of this minstrelsy is phantasmatic to begin with, such a masquerade is ultimately less a theft of authentic Asian culture than a reflection of the original fantasy of the oriental obscene that produced such scenarios. (3309)

In such characters, Chong contends, their 'whiteness is shot through with otherness'. This comes both 'in the form of its bodily comportment'—that is, in terms of the 'fighting techniques borrowed straight from the mysterious *ars violentiae* of Asian martial arts'—and also in 'its specular form', a form that had 'descended from the bloody naked torso of Bruce Lee, revealing its vulnerable embodiment as Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and Charles Bronson never did' (3299).

This kind of analysis of the semiotic genealogy of what went on to be a supposedly thoroughly Americanized martial arts aesthetic reveals the ways in which history and ideology are ineradicably intertwined and produce aesthetics as much as conscious discourses. Although I have in no way done justice to the complexity and subtlety of Chong's historical, ideological, and cultural analyses here, I hope that what I have focused on in her work suggests some of the ways in which historical analysis can be recruited to draw into focus the tectonic movements and interplays of forces that go into tracing the contours of different cultural-historical conjunctures. Incorporating this type of analysis into the purview of martial arts studies both continues the important tradition of what Stuart Hall called 'conjunctural analysis' and moves the paradigm on from any naïve understanding of carnal sociology's habitus, without throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

### **MARTIAL ARTS, NATIONALISM, AND TRANSNATIONALISM**

As we have already seen, as well as history, ideology, and identity, *the nation* has played a significant role in the previous discussions. Because of its centrality, it warrants further attention, but the question remains one of how best to approach it. The themes of the nation are familiar and common to many disciplines. To disrupt the smooth treatment of this theme, it makes sense to engage with it somewhat differently.

Petrus Liu discusses 'the rise of martial arts studies' in the field of Chinese literature and culture (Liu 2011: 14). His novel study of martial arts

literature, *Stateless Subjects: Chinese martial arts literature and postcolonial history* (Liu 2011), is an important study that is highly relevant to martial arts studies because it engages in several kinds of pertinent discourses. Among these are the following: First, Liu's study recasts our understanding of the status of martial arts literature in modern China. Second, it clarifies certain obscured relations between literature and film. Third, it argues that martial arts literature long had a serious cultural-intellectual status in China but that twentieth-century events precipitated a project to erase its erstwhile status from the historical record. And fourth, it picks up on this literary form's role as a site of critical engagement with wider social and historical forces. Consequently, martial arts literature is represented as having a largely neglected capacity to inform a critical engagement with a number of aspects directly and indirectly related to all things 'China'—including, of course, many aspects of martial arts discourse. Liu writes at the opening of *Stateless Subjects*:

The past decades have seen a broad transformation of China studies into the new Sovietology. In the international sphere, this change has involved, in equal measure, frenzied media denunciations of China's human rights violations, pollution, and military build-up—and at the same time, popular, sensationalist images of mummies, angels, and kung fu-fighting pandas. A culture of martial arts has come to play a surprisingly important role in shaping China's global identity, delineating the contours of its cultural influence, helping to predict its political transformations, and suggesting ways to interpret its historical formation as a nation-state. Far from being a trivial matter of popular culture, Chinese martial arts are persistently linked—in the imagination of academic critics, political gurus, business entrepreneurs and social activists—to the master narratives of the twentieth century: capitalism, colonialism, and globalization. (Liu 2011: 1)

From here Liu immediately announces that his study will constitute a rejoinder to the dominant ways of approaching martial arts in film and literature. He observes, 'Nationalism has emerged as the most common explanatory paradigm for the study of Chinese martial arts film and literature'. This is so much the case, he proposes, that 'virtually every currently available scholarly work on martial arts fiction connects the genre's historical rise, aesthetic conventions, and popular appeal to the emotional freight of representing the Chinese nation' (Liu 2011: 1). Pointing to one exemplary and influential study, Chris Hamm's *Paper Swordsmen: Jin Yong and the Modern Chinese Martial Arts Novel* (2005), Liu argues that this study

uses the status of Hong Kong as a British colony to explain the author's popular appeal to the masses, characterizing his martial arts novels as the

embodiment of ‘a heroic and erotic nationalism’. According to Hamm, Jin Yong’s writings signify the increasing dominance of ‘an essentialized and celebratory Chinese cultural identity’ over a ‘consciousness of loss and displacement’, which serves as ‘a point of reference and token of continuity amidst the uncertainties of existence’ for the citizens of Hong Kong. Hamm points out that all of Jin Yong’s novels were originally serialized in Hong Kong’s newspapers before appearing in book form, and he argues on this basis that Jin Yong’s martial arts fiction exemplifies Benedict Anderson’s theory of ‘print-capitalism’—the ability of serialized fiction to create sentiments of diasporic nationalism by allowing readers who have never met each other to imagine themselves as members of a coherent national community: cultural China. In the final analysis, Hamm’s explanation is a psychologizing one. His argument suggests that martial arts literature is a result of the colonial inferiority complex of the citizens of the British Crown Colony. The popularity of the genre is explained by its ideological persuasiveness rather than its intellectual depth. (2)

Liu’s argument about Chinese martial arts literature will come to invert and displace these terms. However, he does not claim that twentieth-century martial arts literature is intellectual by way of reading it in such a way as to find new ‘hidden depths’. Rather, he points to its long-standing status as recognizably central to Chinese literary culture. His argument is that the status of martial arts literature was eroded first during Chinese modernization movements and then decisively transformed by a range of twentieth-century acts of censorship.

Of the contemporary consensus that martial arts literature always has something to do with nationalism, however, Liu notes that this apparent consensus nevertheless involves a certain cacophony of discord and dissensus:

This common explanation of martial arts fiction as the ideological instrument of Chinese nationalism . . . has generated a bewildering array of contradictory conclusions. Recent martial arts films such as *Hero* (2002), *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) have led critics to characterize the genre as a paean to Chinese authoritarianism, a representation of diasporic consciousness, an apologia for Chinese unification, cultural resistance to Sinocentrism from the margins, an instrument of China’s ‘kung fu diplomacy’, an index of the exploitation of third-world labor by a Hollywood-centered, capitalist regime of ‘flexible production’, or the reverse—cultural colonization of America by Asia—an ‘Asian invasion of Hollywood’. (2)

Phrased in reverse, Liu explains: ‘While these interpretations contradict one another in their assessment of particular texts’ relation to Chinese nationalism, they share one thing in common?—namely:

the assumption that martial arts fiction is a by-product of China's colonial and postcolonial histories, and that therefore the economic and political organizations of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (semicolonial, postcolonial, capitalist, socialist, or postsocialist) should serve as the prevailing analytical framework for our interpretation of this literature. (2–3)

Of course, this would seem to make sense, given the importance placed on historicizing cultural phenomena and cultural values in contemporary scholarship. And Liu has no problems with this *per se*. However, as he puts it, ‘Traditional “state-centered” interpretations emphasize the problem of Chinese identity and the role of the nation-state in the production of the martial arts text’ (3), whereas ‘martial arts literature has demonstrated a remarkable ability to unify ideological opposites, an ability that is compounded with the genre’s antisystemic, rhizomatous dispersion across many registers of social discourse’ (3). Indeed, after going through a list of different, mutually contradicting takes on martial arts literature, Liu points out that the ‘malleable nature of martial arts fiction allows it to be assimilated to political claims about the “Sick Man of Asia” and “China rising” with equal ease’ (3).

However, such state-centred or macropolitics-focused understandings of martial arts literature miss simultaneously the ‘forgotten history’ and the aesthetics as well as the ‘vital contributions to the development of modern Chinese culture’ made by martial arts literature, Liu contends (3). Indeed, the presentation of ‘mutually contradictory views about China’s relation to the world is one of the most curious features of martial arts aesthetics’ (5). This is because, Liu argues, the institution of the ‘Chinese martial arts novel represents a radically different political philosophy of the state’ to those commonly dealt with by philosophers and political theorists. In martial arts literature, ‘the state is neither the arbiter of justice nor the sphere of moral constraints that prevents civil society from destroying itself through its own rapacity. On the contrary, the martial arts novel invents scenes of stateless subjects to explain the constitutive sociality of the self’ (5–6).

If some may regard this sort of argument as the eccentric interpretation of a lone critic, it must nevertheless still be acknowledged that the contrary impulse, the widespread and ‘persistent desire to read martial arts narratives as national allegories’ certainly seems to be something that has ‘prevented us from developing a historical account of precisely what is interesting and complex about these works’ (5). In fact, Liu notes, and perhaps as a consequence of this dominant tendency, ‘no sustained account of twentieth-century martial arts literature as literature—that is, as a historically determinate discourse with a unique set of aesthetic conventions,

philosophical basis, institutional history, and thematic coherence—has been forthcoming’ (5). Liu proposes that the ‘lack of critical attention to the aesthetics of martial arts narratives stems, no doubt, from a widespread perception of martial arts fiction as potboilers for mass culture consumption that have little to say about serious politics’ (5). As indicated above, such a perception ‘itself rests on the even more fundamental assumption that politics is always state politics, which is precisely what, I will argue, the martial arts novel as a modern literary movement sets out to challenge’ (5).

This is why Liu has two connected aims: on the one hand, ‘one aim of the present book is to produce a descriptive account of the distinctive aesthetic properties of the genre’; on the other hand, it also aims to ‘resituate this genre as an interventionist and progressive cultural movement in twentieth-century Chinese intellectual history that invented the most important model of nonstatist political responsibility’ (5). If this latter claim may still seem hard to swallow for some, Liu quickly points out that in the martial arts literature ‘discourse of *jianghu* (rivers and lakes) defines a public sphere unconnected to the sovereign power of the state, a sphere that is historically related to the idea of *minjian* (between the people) as opposed to the concept of *tianxia* (all under heaven) in Chinese philosophy’ (6). Thus, he suggests that martial arts novels present ‘the human subject as an ethical alterity, constituted by and dependent on its responsibilities to other human beings’:

It is through the recognition of this mutual interdependence, rather than the formal and positive laws of the state, that humanity manages to preserve itself despite rampant inequalities in privilege, rank, and status. As recounted by martial arts novels, the human subject is made and remade by forces that cannot be defined by positive laws of the state—rage, love, gender, morality, life and death. The formation of this stateless subject is incompatible with the liberal conception of an autonomous rights-bearing citizen. (6)

This is why Liu wishes to redress ‘the widely accepted thesis that China’s response to foreign imperialism has always been the establishment of a strong modern nation-state’ (6). Rather than this, he proposes that modern Chinese martial arts literature might actually be better approached ‘as a thought experiment on this question: If we lived in a world where the meaning of politics were not reduced to the ballot-box, revolutions, fiscal crises, wars, and other trappings of governmentality, what would it mean to be a person of public responsibility?’ (6)

This is a long way from most treatments of martial arts fiction—for which we normally mean ‘film’. Indeed, this distance is something Liu actively seeks to draw attention to:

Despite the global hypervisibility of martial arts cinema, no systematic study of this visual culture's literary basis in Chinese fiction is available in English. *Wuxia xiaoshuo*, the literary tradition that gave rise to these cultural images and political paradoxes of martial arts, is a novelistic genre unique to Chinese literature that has no satisfactory translation in English. (7)

Moreover, just because 'the global hypervisibility of martial arts cinema' means that we all tend to know about martial arts drama and fictions in terms of a history of Hong Kong cinema, and just because academics tend to diagnose many aspects of Chinese culture as connected to a certain kind of cultural pathology, this does not necessarily mean that any of this is right. And it is around these areas that Liu packs the biggest punches:

Known in the West primarily through poorly subtitled films, Chinese martial arts fiction is one of the most iconic and yet the most understudied forms of modern sinophone creativity. Current scholarship on the subject is characterized by three central assumptions that I argue against in this book: first, that martial arts fiction is the representation of a bodily spectacle that historically originated in Hong Kong cinema; second, that the genre came into being as an escapist fantasy that provided psychological comfort to the Chinese people during the height of imperialism; and third, that martial arts fiction reflects a patriotic attitude that celebrates the greatness of Chinese culture, which in turn is variously described as the China-complex, colonial modernity, essentialized identity, diasporic consciousness, anxieties about globalization, or other psychological difficulties experienced by the Chinese people during modernization. (7)

Against all of this, Liu 'reinterprets martial arts literature as a progressive intellectual critique of modernization theory' (7). Moreover, he insists on the argument that 'martial arts culture was first invented as a poetic relation between words rather than a visual relation between bodies' (7–8). Thus, Liu asserts, 'not only did the historical rise of martial arts literature predate the rise of martial arts cinema but the culture of martial arts, even in its cinematic incarnations and adaptations, is explicitly concerned with literariness' (8). In addition, 'against commonly accepted interpretations of martial arts fiction as an apolitical form of escapist fantasy, this book presents it as a mode of intellectual intervention that has shaped the course of modern Chinese history' (8). The real twist to Liu's reading comes with his claim that the 'historical reason for the genre's exclusion from the Chinese canon' boils down to 'its distance from and *incompatibility with* Chinese nationalism, which since the Qing dynasty has been a campaign to reform literature with criteria derived from European experiences of modernity' (8, emphasis added). In other words, martial arts literature was, in a sense, a victim of nationalist modernizing discourses rather than a positive part of them:



The expansion of modernization discourse into the sphere of literary production in the May Fourth period had rendered alternative (non-modernization-based) philosophical and literary discourses illegitimate, and martial arts fiction, which has resisted Western models of instrumental reason and rational bureaucracy, was quickly branded as the feudal ideology of ‘Old China’, an obstacle that must be eradicated from the field of cultural production. (8)

This twist is also part of a double whammy. Not only was martial arts literature regarded as anathema to nationalist modernization, but it should also be understood as initially among the highest and most elite and educated of literary genres:

While May Fourth intellectuals advocated Western thought as the basis for rapid modernization, martial arts novelists continued to draw upon China’s indigenous intellectual sources—Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and pre-modern literary models such as linked-chapter fiction. The martial arts novel in Chinese is renowned for the density of its classical poetic devices, historical allusions, philosophical precepts, and sophisticated plots. Indeed, the martial arts novel is the only genre in modern Chinese literature to be written in a semiclassical language after the early twentieth century, when the spoken vernacular Chinese (*baihua*) replaced Classical Chinese (*wenyan*) as the official language of literary communication. Unlike the ‘universal language’ of cinema, the semiclassical language of the martial arts novel is in fact inaccessible to the masses—a fact that bedeviled early twentieth-century Chinese revolutionaries’ attempts to frame the genre as merely ‘popular fiction’. (8)

Consequently, because of the macropolitical and ideological twists and turns in the first half of the twentieth century, far from helping with any kind of nationalist project, ‘martial arts novelists were quickly demonized as “traditionalists” who were holding China back from economic and military modernization’ (9). The irony is that, before the 1920s and 1930s, martial arts literature in China had held a long-standing position as being both central and canonical in the world of Chinese ‘high’ literary culture:

As indicated by James Liu’s important and massive 1967 study, *The Chinese Knight-Errant*, the philosophy of martial arts has permeated and dominated virtually every form of premodern Chinese literature for over two thousand years: philosophical treatises, *shi* and *ci* poetry, dynastic histories, *zawen* (‘miscellaneous writings’), songs, Tang *chuanqi* (legends), Ming drama, and prose fiction. Indeed, two of the so-called Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese Literature (*sida qishu*) are explicit representations of the culture of martial arts: *Water Margin* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and despite being proto-martial arts novels, the two fourteenth-century classics have never been relegated to the status of popular fiction. (9)

However, from the 1920s onwards, Chinese martial arts literature was attacked and disparaged by various parties, and, according to Liu, this was *because* it occupied a problematic position *vis-à-vis* nation building and modernization. It was denounced as lowbrow popular fiction, despite being written in a classical Chinese language unintelligible to all but the most highly educated. Thus, Liu argues that the label ‘popular fiction was . . . strictly a May Fourth construction’ and that before the ‘rise of modernization discourse and developmental thinking in China, martial arts narratives were not seen as popular or even middle-brow fiction, but part of China’s high literary canon’. Indeed, he continues: ‘The culture of martial arts has always been a normative and privileged theme in Chinese literature’ (9). Nonetheless, during ‘the May Fourth crusade against martial arts fiction’, the genre was conflated ‘with “mandarin ducks and butterflies” (*yuanyang hudie pai*) fiction, stories about love published in Saturday and other less respected venues’ (9).

The reasons for the May Fourth reformers’ crusade against martial arts literature was not its existence *per se*, but its *continued* existence in a time when the agenda was being driven by the desire to reform, modernize, and nationalize:

We can see that what May Fourth reformers objected to was not martial arts narratives as such, but the existence of such narratives in the twentieth century. Both Mao Zedong and Lu Xun wrote approvingly of premodern narratives of outlaws and martial valor, which they considered to be an expression of the people’s heroic struggles against feudal values, while accusing the modern descendants of the same works of corrupting the minds of the Chinese masses and blocking their revolutionary consciousness. (10)

Thus, martial arts literature and culture was represented and reconstituted as something lowbrow, anti-modern, anachronistic and politically regressive. In 1932 martial arts films were banned in China, and martial arts fiction *tout court* ‘was banned by both the Communist Party in China and the Nationalist government in Taiwan after 1949’ (10). Subsequently:

In post-1949 mainland China, members of the League of Leftist Writers assumed leading positions in the PRC’s cultural bureaucracy and published literary histories that canonized (socialist) realism as ‘modern Chinese literature’. Nonrealist trends in early twentieth-century China, such as martial arts fiction, were removed from literary history. The story of modern Chinese literature and Chinese modernity was subsequently told as a unilinear movement toward realism and Europeanized syntax, a feat accomplished through the translations, introductions, and appropriations of Western thought. (10)

With these clampdowns in both Mainland China and Taiwan, Hong Kong ‘became the new center for martial arts film and literature after 1949, although Taiwan also produced a significant number of talented and prolific authors despite censorship’. Indeed, Liu notes, ‘literary historian Lin Bao-chun actually considers the early period under martial law (1961–1970) to be Taiwan’s “golden age of martial arts literature”’ (10).

This is an interesting history. It is not as widely known in the West (and maybe also in the East) as it could be. However, this could be changing. Liu devotes a lot of space to the consideration of the ‘Jin Yong phenomenon’—namely, the recent explosion of interest in, and accolades showered upon, the contemporary martial arts novelist, whose work has led to something of a renaissance or discursive reevaluation of the status of martial arts literature. But, for Liu, the implications of the reevaluation of Chinese literary history provoked by interest in Jin Yong are more far-reaching than mere canon revision:

The ‘Jin Yong phenomenon’, as critics are now calling it, signifies more than an emerging literary canon or merely changing conditions of literary evaluation. Comprehended historically, the rise of martial arts studies has profound implications for postcolonial studies and our understanding of what constitutes a colonial situation. While a previous generation of scholars tended to understand colonialism in a more literal sense as territorial occupation, we are now much more aware of colonialism’s discursive workings in the production of identities and subject positions. Newer postcolonial theory has taught us to recognize the ways in which colonialism reproduces itself as the anticolonial nationalist elite’s attitude toward their own past. As the subaltern studies scholar Partha Chatterjee argues, the dominant West not only colonizes non-Western peoples and territories, but their imagination as well. Martial arts literature provides an opportunity for us to re-evaluate the assumption, promulgated since the May Fourth period, that Chinese modernity could only be attained through the negation and destruction of its own traditions. Martial arts literature challenges our conventional sense that literary modernity belonged to those ‘iconoclasts’ who promoted the Europeanization of the Chinese language. The submerged political history of martial arts literature reveals one of the modes in which a desire for the West and its rationalism colonized Chinese intellectuals’ consciousness in their self-appointed roles as saviors of the nation. For Liu Zaifu, Jin Yong’s achievements and the reasons for his newfound canonicity reside precisely in his ability to develop an ‘anti-Europeanized Chinese writing’ against the May Fourth enlightenment ideology and Europeanized sentence structures, and Jin Yong’s writing has succeeded in preserving China’s ‘accumulated cultural treasures’. (14–15)

This is an expansive and effusive passage. However, it strikes me that this representation of the matter actually circles back around behind Liu’s

argument and allows the thing he is arguing against to reenter through the back door. For Liu is hostile to the reading of Chinese literature in terms of nationalism, but yet here it is, coming to the forefront of attention, in the form of a rethinking of the postcolonial as what thinkers like Fredric Jameson, Haile Gerima, Vijay Prashad, and others have constructed as a decolonizing of colonized consciousness (Prashad 2001). At this point, one wonders about the status of Liu's earlier polemical distancing and differencing from critics who read martial arts culture under the sign of nationalism.

Of course, to adhere to Liu's own contentions about the complexity and subtlety of martial arts literature, it would therefore seem to be very wrong to approach this in an all or nothing manner. Liu himself is concerned with the internal textual, narrative, and generic features of martial arts literature and is dead against the ignoring of these elements in the name of grouping it all together as pro- or anti-nationalist or pro- or anti-capitalist, and so on. Rather, Liu insists upon two important things. The first is the *literariness* of martial arts literature. The second is the range of possible relations, groupings, identifications, and practices that it can precipitate. Of the first, he writes:

Martial arts texts' concern with literariness is foregrounded by the recurring motif of the 'Secret Scripture' (*miji*). A standard formula in wuxia films and novels, the Secret Scripture is a lost or carefully guarded ancient text that endows its owner with superhuman combat abilities; the competition or quest for this book forms the main plot of many wuxia stories. Significantly, the Secret Scripture is not a training manual with pictorial illustrations of martial moves, but a verbal text written in Classical Chinese (or sometimes in Sanskrit). The Secret Scripture contains instructions that guide the protagonist through a series of inner or spiritual transformations, which is, however, possible only if the protagonist is literate—that is, if the character has access to what in the real world would be termed the educational capital of the dominant class. (11)

Liu emphasizes 'the genre's advocacy of book learning as the source of martial power' (12) in order to impress upon us the fact that the genre was not merely read by the educated classes but also that it has long been self-reflexive about its literariness. It is a literary genre that values literature. Its stock figures with the highest skills have an ineradicable relationship to literature. In his words: 'Wuxia is a self-consciously literary discourse that draws attention to the aesthetic properties of language'. Moreover, one of its effects was 'to translate classical Chinese literary and cosmological concepts into a large corpus of easily quotable, memorable phrases'. So influential has been this movement from the literary into the popular

cultural realm of everyday discourse that many 'wuxia phrases have by now become endemic in speech situations unrelated to martial arts' (12). Over two pages, Liu lists some of the most common everyday expressions that are used frequently in contexts of conversation, advertising, politics, and journalism in China, expressions that derive directly from martial arts literature (12–13).

If the seeping into Chinese language, in all sorts of context, of terms and expressions from martial arts literature provides evidence of the strange unacknowledged or disavowed centrality of martial arts literature to contemporary Chinese culture, Liu hammers this point home by noting that even contemporary martial arts film comedies are structured by ideas that are only funny to the extent that the literariness of martial arts literature is known. Thus, he writes:

The narrative tradition of the Secret Scripture is the subject of Stephen Chow's critically acclaimed 2004 parody of the genre, *Kung Fu Hustle*, in which Yuen Wooping (Yuan Heping), the legendary action cinema choreographer behind *Matrix* and *Kill Bill*, plays the character of a beggar who sells 'fake' manuals that turn out to be real Secret Scriptures for the protagonist, played by Stephen Chow himself. The inside joke for those who recognize Yuen is that the action choreographer is the creator of fantastic martial arts, while the wirework, trampolines, and computer-generated images are the real Secret Scriptures. The joke draws its comedic power from a local knowledge of the genre's tendency to reference textual artifacts. (11)

The secret scripture is a theme that will be most well known to non-specialists in the Western(ized) world as it appears in the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. And it was of course around, through, and because of this film and subsequent 'similar' arty martial arts films that the genre started to attain or regain a kind of artistic/intellectual 'capital' in these contexts. Wong Kar-wai's recent film *The Grandmaster* is perhaps at the pinnacle of this 'reclaiming' of the martial arts for 'high culture'. During this same time period, martial arts literature has been reappraised in China, too:

Since the 1990s, the martial arts novel has undergone a significant reversal of fortune in the opinion of Chinese critics and cultural authorities. Doctoral dissertations on the topic mushroomed across Chinese universities; research centers, archives, and international conferences have come into being. The study of the best-selling martial arts novelist, Jin Yong, is now a newly baptized sub-branch of academic studies—'Jin-ology' (*jinxue*)—in a manner analogous to *hongxue*, the dedicated specialization in the study of Hong lou meng (*Dream of the Red Chamber*), or to Shakespeare Studies in the West. (13)

All of this recasts the question of writing in (the writing of) martial arts studies. However, there are also some problematic steps in Liu's writing. I have already indicated that one is the problematic status of the relations between martial arts literature and the nation. There is at least one more.

Paying close attention to the way that Liu sets up his argument in *Stateless Subjects* (Liu 2011) reaps rewards. As we have seen, the work stridently opposes and seeks to redress the tendency to read Chinese and Hong Kong martial arts literature (and film) as being ultimately somehow basically just about nationalism. The force and clarity through which he argues this is admirable and highly thought provoking. However, I am not entirely convinced that he successfully manages to reconfigure our understanding of this area. This is because, when reading his work, the now-clichéd line from Hamlet kept popping into my head—'the lady doth protest too much, methinks'.

By this I mean that although Liu is a sophisticated writer, and although his major claims and contentions involve an attention to the complexity and historical imbrication of Chinese martial arts literature and the twists and turns of history, I still feel that he overplays his enabling observation about the injustice of reducing martial arts literature to what Jameson called 'national allegory' readings. Liu seeks to extricate the texts from their consignment to more or less nationalist productions and to demonstrate that, in actual fact, the textual features of the genre relate to the condition of protagonists being 'stateless subjects'. It is in the study of these textual features that Liu's work is most successful and in resituating the texts in terms of a kind of aesthetic continuity that persevered at the same time and despite the modernizing and nationalizing tendencies of the May Fourth movement that would have preferred to see the back of such a genre. The differentiating of his perspective from any of the 'national allegory' positions strikes me as necessary, but overplayed. This is so even though, rather than 'opposing', Liu seems more interested in exposing subterranean forces and movements, tangential to or under, through, and between, the dominant currents.

One of the benefits of Liu's approach is that the modernizing and nationalizing forces of the twentieth century in China come to be recast in such a way that *they* are shown to be more reactionary and Westernized in and through the desire to modernize and 'nationalize' than the writers of traditional genres of martial arts literature. To reiterate what Liu writes in relation to the 'Jin Yong phenomenon':

Martial arts literature provides an opportunity for us to reevaluate the assumption, promulgated since the May Fourth period, that Chinese modernity could only be attained through the negation and destruction of its own traditions. Martial arts literature challenges our conventional sense that literary modernity belonged to those 'iconoclasts' who promoted the Europeanization of the

Chinese language. The submerged political history of martial arts literature reveals one of the modes in which a desire for the West and its rationalism colonized Chinese intellectuals' consciousness in their self-appointed roles as saviors of the nation. For Liu Zaifu, Jin Yong's achievements and the reasons for his newfound canonicity reside precisely in his ability to develop an 'anti-Europeanized Chinese writing' against the May Fourth enlightenment ideology and Europeanized sentence structures, and Jin Yong's writing has succeeded in preserving China's 'accumulated cultural treasures'. (14–15)

At the end of this paragraph it is as if (as they say of energies in taijiquan) 'old yin' turns into 'young yang'. For it strikes me that this paragraph means that the modernizers and nationalizers of the twentieth century were only operating according to one possible nationalizing logic—one whose motto would be 'in with the new'. However, the contemporary rediscovery of tradition, such as Liu describes, smacks of a rather nostalgic (even postmodern) nationalism. Thus, to continue with another allusion to Shakespeare, although Liu claims to come to bury nationalism here, this also seems to amount to a certain kind of praising. To my mind, there is only something—and not everything—in Liu's reference to the argument that 'martial arts novels serve the repository of what Paul Ricoeur, Richard Dyer, and Fredric Jameson have called "the Utopian impulse" of society: the collective desire for a classless society that the development of capitalism fails to suppress' (15). The absence of—or the bypassing of—the state in martial arts literature is crucial to Liu's sense that martial arts literature stands as a rumination on other (non-statist) forms of sociality. And I accept this argument. However, because it involves absence and bypassing, the use of traditional academic terms like 'resistance' is what leads the sense of the argument in the wrong direction. Consider, for example, this passage:

martial arts literature offers an important form of subaltern resistance to the logic of internalized colonialism. If what made the martial arts novel aesthetically disreputable half a century ago is also what makes it a privileged object of cultural studies today, we have in this genre a unique opportunity to understand the lost organicity of Chinese culture before the bureaucratic rationalization of modernity. (15)

Crucial to making this paragraph 'work' are certain points that Liu neglects to mention, such as the important Lacanian poststructuralist point that an idea like 'lost organicity' does not have a referent. There never was a unity, organic wholeness, or plenitude. This is a retroactively constituted nostalgic myth of something that never existed, precisely because it is impossible (because the things closest to what it could possibly refer to are either the Garden of Eden or the womb). But there are other

problems here, too. For if martial arts literature is indeed a continuation through modernity of a high cultural form, then it seems problematic to represent it as a kind of ‘subaltern resistance’. Moreover, as Rey Chow might point out, this construction of *literature as resistance* smacks of the ‘repressive hypothesis’ that Foucault himself first seemed to hold (vis-à-vis the status of ‘literature’ in the face of the ‘bureaucratic rationalization’ of language) before going on to challenge precisely such a view later on in *The History of Sexuality* (Chow 2002; Bowman 2013b). In other words, Liu seems to be forwarding the idea that a certain type of literature is non-nationalist and actively ‘resistant’ *in and of itself*. Chow has deconstructed this poststructuralist fetishistic overvaluation of literature on several occasions, but especially in *The Protestant Ethic*. And Liu seems to be replaying the problem here. What is perhaps most problematic in the passage quoted above is the implied sense that there really was an organicity before the emergence of modernity. If this claim is being made, then Liu is being carried along by what Chow calls ‘primitive passions’ (Chow 1995, 2002; Bowman 2013b). Of course, there is good reason to give Liu the benefit of the doubt and note that he is probably not falling into the trap of ‘*really*’ making such a claim. But the problem remains, that the terms being used to structure his framing of his project are a minefield. Consider this passage:

The mythic time of the wuxia imaginary belongs to the time of pre-capital; it constitutes an idealized space in which the subject and the object of social life are still unified before their fragmentation by the advent of capitalist modernity. What was once considered the result of an infectious, commodified mass culture is today China’s Homeric epic. (15)

Even though the first clause makes it clear that wuxia is set in ‘mythic time’, the unwary reader may still easily come away with the sense that there really was a time ‘in which the subject and the object of social life [were] still unified before their fragmentation by the advent of capitalist modernity’. But, as contemporary theorists from the Lacanians of the 1980s and 1990s to Rey Chow today have all made clear in various ways, the sense of a mythic completeness and unified wholeness in the past is itself a symptomatic fantasy always (re)invented in the present. Liu surely knows this, for it constitutes pretty much the horizon and backdrop of the realms of the literary and cultural theory within which this work exists. But the wording of much of the framing of the problematic tends to drive the text in directions I believe it would rather not go. A language of ‘resistance’, ‘subalternity’, and so on, does not seem entirely appropriate to a text which seems really to be more organized by a ‘yes, and . . .’ spirit, rather than a



‘no, but . . .’ spirit. As Derrida once argued, the deconstructive approach should be one which embraces the logic of ‘yes, and’ rather than ‘either/or’ (Royle 2000). So, here then, the martial arts literature can be shown to be also all of the things Liu says it is, as well as having functioned in the ways he demonstrates it ‘shouldn’t’ (only) have.

In order to set out some of the alternative approaches to, and uses and values of, martial arts literature, Liu turns elsewhere. He introduces ‘only a few examples of critical uses of the lessons of martial arts today’, but insists that the ‘boundless political possibilities of critical martial arts are something we are only beginning to imagine’ (16). However, in reading Liu’s account of these possibilities, it seems that to find any of them, one has to look outside of China itself and indeed, arguably, outside of and away from literature per se. As his formulation of the question reveals, Liu looks away from China and to ‘the global citizen’ when formulating the question itself:

What difference, then, does it make when we cease to view this form of literature as the stuff of cheaply produced B-list midnight movies and the window on the colonial psyche of the Chinese people, and instead begin to view it as a serious mode of social thought, as an intellectual resource of importance for contemporary theory and cultural practice from which all global citizens have something to learn? (15–16)

The question (re)introduces ‘movies’ and also ‘global citizens’ in what was ostensibly meant to be a question about literature. Consequently, the answer comes as an answer to a question about movies and international (non-Chinese or diasporic Chinese) people:

Inspired by Guattari and Deleuze’s notion of ‘minor literature’, Meaghan Morris characterizes martial arts film as ‘minor cinema’ that serves as a critical pedagogical tool in the classroom for the study of class consciousness. While ‘major cinema’ is ‘global’ (difference-denying), ‘minor cinema’ is ‘transnational’ (community-building). For Morris, martial arts cinema is a historical example of how a minor cinema from a distant culture (Hong Kong) can reshape world culture through the preservation of spaces that are rapidly disappearing—urban slums, motels, buses, factories, and other ‘any-space-whatever’ filled with distressed futures and chronic dereliction and loss-against the apocalyptic, spectacular, U.S. patriotic (‘saving the world’) or global folkloric design of Hollywood’s big-budget major cinema. (16)

In other words, this is an answer about martial arts film, not literature. Moreover, it is arguably also an answer about something that is only ‘minor’ when viewed from a certain place and a certain perspective—one that

might provocatively be characterized as having been constitutively blinded to the possibility that martial arts literature and film today in China and in Hong Kong are neither ‘minor’ nor ‘not nationalizing’. Martial arts may well still be ‘minor’ in the United States and Europe. Morris’s argument was actually about the minor genre of U.S. produced martial arts films for the U.S. market—normally ‘direct to video’ films with very small circulation (Morris 2004). Is this an argument that can be translated or transposed to Hong Kong or China?

Then Liu turns to another academic treatment of the cultural and ‘political’ effects of martial arts film (not literature) during the 1970s:

Similarly, Vijay Prashad observes in an important book on Afro-Asian connections that, historically, martial arts culture has produced political solidarity and interracial cross-identification between oppressed peoples across the globe—a strange ‘alliance between the Red Guard and the Black Panthers’ from the Cultural Revolution in China to the Civil Rights movement in the States—that is otherwise unthinkable. What Prashad cleverly terms ‘Kung Fusion’ indicates a form of ‘polycultural’ communication that is distinct from the multiculturalist celebration of diversity (similar to Morris’s distinction between the transnational and the global). Amy Abugo Ongiri argues that by recognizing the historical role played by kung fu visual icons in the formation of a Black aesthetic that she calls ‘spectacular Blackness’, and by recognizing the interconnections and dialogues between Asians and African Americans, we can refuse America’s racial ideological landscape that constructs these communities as polar opposites in debates surrounding affirmative action and the model minority myth. (16)

Now, I do not disagree with any of this in and of itself. But the few evocations of certain readings of the significance of martial arts films on groups, communities, cultures, and literacies around the world in the 1970s that Liu gives here are both a world away from literature and from China. Perhaps this is because, in the effort to set out his sophisticated and fascinating study of Chinese martial arts literature, Liu goes too far in the direction of constructing it as somehow free from the reactionary forces and historical processes that he sees as having militated against it throughout the twentieth century. Or perhaps it is because such dramatic examples of ‘polycultural’ building cannot be found in the realms and registers of literature, compared to the proliferation of such examples around film. Or perhaps it is because the gravitational pull of issues of nationalism in and around both martial arts literature and film in and around China is something that has not only been produced by Western theorists but also by *Chinese* literature, film, and nationalism.

## NATION AND SIMULATION

Things become more complicated when we shift our attention from either martial arts literature or film to martial arts practice and the question of nationalism. For instance, Frank states the relation to be as follows: ‘taijiquan is a master symbol of Chinese nationalism’ (Frank 2006: 186). Many are critical of the arguments of scholars like Frank—and Douglas Wile, too—who claim strong connections between taijiquan and nationalism. This criticism seems to arise because a lot of the development of taijiquan *predates* the modern Chinese nation-state. Accordingly, to attribute a nationalistic fervour or even flavour to the first archivists and intellectuals of taijiquan seems anachronistic. Put differently, to connect something like taijiquan and nationalism could be characterized as a problem of *projection*, of projecting our present values backwards in time, from the position of the present—as if there had always been nation-states. This is related to one of Althusser’s definitions of ideology: the belief in the eternity and natural inevitability in all times and all places of the truth and reality of the values of the present. In other words, the challenge seems to be: How could something possibly be nationalistic *before* nationalism or *before* the nation? The way Adam Frank explains it is like this:

Like the Alamo’s position in the construction and experience of Texas modernity, taijiquan in China ‘is a shrine committed to memorializing a past event by authenticating a singular version of it’ (Flores 2002: 33), but in this case, the ‘event’ is an ancient China whose history has been reconfigured by successive winners in the constant shift of dynastic power that has occurred over the centuries. (2006: 185)

Although it is common to approach such matters by way of reference to Benedict Anderson’s work on the origins and spread of nationalism, Jacques Derrida’s thinking of temporality in works such as *Politics of Friendship* (Derrida 1997) is also helpful. For there are indeed all sorts of conceptual and terminological difficulties involved in thinking back and discoursing on states of affairs before the establishment of nations. This is because nationalistic thinking—that is, thinking according to, or in the terms of, nation-states—is so ingrained in us as to be almost inescapable. And yet, as Anderson notes in the early pages of *Imagined Communities*, the paradox is that while nations so often seem to present themselves as *ancient*, they are really *modern* inventions. Before nations, there were monarchies, aristocracies, blood and feudal ties, and above all, in Europe, religious denominations. The idea of a nation was born comparatively recently, with (argues Anderson) the birth of the printing press as a technology that had all sorts of

linking, connecting, and standardizing consequences and the demise (partly because of the birth of the printing press) of the monopoly of Church Latin over the written word. This occurred because the printing press enabled the rapid dissemination of texts in indigenous languages. Martin Luther's protestant 'heresy' arguably only succeeded in challenging Rome because of the speed with which Luther's text was disseminated, in German.

Certainly, Frank does fascinating things with his creative reading of Benedict Anderson. For instance, he connects taijiquan and Chinese nationalism like this:

While Anderson is primarily concerned with print-capitalism in the creation of 'vernacular languages of state', I am extending his argument here to include taijiquan as a kind of kinesthetic vernacular language of state. Regardless of whether the language we are talking about is print or architecture or movement, the state controls the standardization of that language and privileges its standardized forms over other languages. Thus, certain taijiquan forms become vernaculars of the Chinese state, while others are ignored or subsumed within the nationalist discourse, if not banned outright. What goes on in park practice or sequestered, secret practice in family homes is often in tension with standardization. For the individual practitioner who might dabble in a family-based, 'traditional' form and something like the forty-eight-movement form developed for national and international competition, the contradiction between state and teacher, between interpretations of Daoism and socialism, between a family's history and a nation's history, may occur within a single body. (161)

But, is it really the case that—and, if so, how did it come about that—in Frank's words, 'at the level of the nation, taijiquan has become not only the single most popular exercise in China but also one of the most visible symbols of Chineseness that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) projects to the world'? (158–59) Frank's own answer starts from referring to the promulgation of taijiquan as 'part of the construction of a whole national discourse about "strengthening the national body" that arose in China in the 1920s' (159). From this, he contends, taijiquan 'emerged from that discourse as a kind of "master symbol"'.

The temporality of this argument is unclear. But the word 'emerged' suggests that it was not always the case that taijiquan was the necessary or inevitable master symbol of Chineseness. In other words, we are dealing here with a process of *becoming*, rather than fixed or essential *being*.

In *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida introduces the term *teleiopoiesis*. This is a term he uses to describe the logic of the establishment of meaning and value for entities. What it means in practical terms is this. If we believe that a martial art—say, *mulanquan*—is ancient, and stretches back to the

historical era of Mulan, then we are a lot more likely to accord it a position of respect, or even reverence, than we are if we believe it was dreamed up by state apparatchiks, in 1999 or even 1971. As we saw earlier in the discussion of Chong, temporality, history—time—can be manipulated, for all manner of reasons. If newness is valued, then some old thing can be repackaged as brand new. If age is valued, then we can construct a lineage that shows we are direct descendants of Zhang Sanfeng or Bodhidharma. This is politically important in terms of our lives and values because where we believe we come from determines very much where we think we are and where we feel we should be going. This is known and exploited by ideologues and marketers alike. Frank contends that romantic, nostalgic, phantasmatic, allochronic, self-orientalizing nationalism permeates every level of discourse in and around taijiquan in China. ‘Martial arts tournaments, martial arts tourist sites, and research produced in Chinese sports science and history journals contribute to a picture of how a nationalistic discourse has developed in regard to martial arts in general and taijiquan in particular’ (159). Moreover, he argues:

Most taijiquan practitioners in the PRC, despite their attraction to one style or another, are not really practicing a particular taijiquan. Rather, by playing the slow form or learning a sword dance or two, they are enacting an imagined moment in the past in order to experience who they are, or who they are supposed to be, in the present. Taijiquan, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz, produces both a ‘feeling of’ and a ‘feeling for’ Chineseness. (158–59)

But where did it all come from? Nationalism does not arise in a vacuum. According to Anderson, different nations were essentially forced into existence by virtue of the pressure on kingdoms and geographical spaces to self-identify as nations and play the (inter)national ‘game’, or to be pounced upon and become colonized. The older imperial orders were increasingly challenged by national forces of all orders. In the case of China,

revolutionaries led by Sun Yat-sen acquired the right combination of military strength, political influence, and luck to stage a successful revolt and dismantle the imperial structure. Many of these radical revolutionaries, including Sun himself, were educated in Japan, the United States, or Europe. Their overseas experiences and educations heavily influenced their notions of China’s priorities, the foremost of which was the cultivation of national identity—a sense of ‘Chineseness’—that superseded the allegiance to local place and local language that had historically provided fertile ground for warlordism in China. They also hoped to use an energetic nationalism to overcome the sense of inferiority that many Chinese had felt in the seventy-five years since the Opium War. (161–62)

Key to the constitution of nationalistic sensibilities was the generation of a certain type of pride. And, according to Frank, ‘the recently constituted modern Olympic movement, which almost immediately became a proving ground for national pride, held a special attraction for new officials concerned with “strengthening the national body”’ (162). The rationale, according to Frank, was that ‘if Chinese athletes could excel in even a few Olympic sports, the resulting national pride would facilitate a sense of nation among the masses. It would also inevitably raise the new government’s standing in the international community’ (163):

Policy makers in the new government took this world of possibility to heart. Among other strategies, they reasoned that the easiest and quickest way to collect Olympic gold medals would be to advocate for the inclusion in the Olympics of ‘folk sports’ (*minzu chuantong tiyu*) at which Chinese athletes could immediately excel (Jing Cai 1959; Zhang Shan et al. 1996; Xu, Zhang, and Zhang 2000; Morris 1998). The most popular and obvious choice among these sports were martial arts, since high-level teachers already existed, and, to some degree, international interest had already been generated in Asian fighting arts through the slow popularization of Japanese judo, which began with the synthesizing of the art in the 1880s by Dr. Jigorō Kanō, ‘a Japanese reformer steeped in the lore of Western physical education’. (163)

Frank has much more to say about the strengthening of the hold of nationalistic discourses on taijiquan. These occur in the modern era, but they build on materials ‘fit for purpose’, so to speak. So, rather than accusing academics such as Wile and Frank of projecting modern discursive formations (whether nationalism or Chineseness) back in time, it seems better to acknowledge the complex and subtle ways in which notions of the ‘back in time’, such as ‘ancient’ or ‘essential Chineseness’, are often decidedly modern discursive constructs. As Rey Chow argues in *Primitive Passions*, a passion for the idea of the primitive (the ancient, the timeless, the state of nature, and so on) emerges in times of crisis in modernity or postmodernity (Chow 1995). Modern discursive formations and socio-political configurations are actively involved in the construction of the very notions of the ‘back in time’ against and through which they are defined, as both history and, romantically, destiny.

## HEGEMONY AND IDENTITY

At this juncture, it will be useful to work through some of Adam Frank’s points in relation to the ideological establishment of the identity of taijiquan in China through the twentieth century. He observes:

For the reformers who began the slow process of modernizing China's bureaucracy in 1912 . . . the challenge was to channel this resentment [at the losses of the Opium War] into a positive energy that would place China in a strong-enough economic position on the world stage to eventually allow it to wrest foreign concessions and 'leased' territories such as Hong Kong and Macau from foreign control. The creation of a national physical fitness movement was one among many such projects. (Frank 2006: 162)

Strong bodies, strong personal characteristics, strong sense of worth and identity, strong nation: such is the logic. This is part of domestic policy. As mentioned earlier, many of Sun Yat-sen's revolutionaries had been educated in the United States, Japan, or Europe, and their 'overseas experiences and educations heavily influenced their notions of China's priorities, the foremost of which was the cultivation of national identity' (162). Part of that nationalistic fervour was to be produced through sport. This project culminated in the famous appearance of taijiquan at the 1936 Berlin Olympics:

The year 1936, when the famous Berlin Olympics in which Adolph Hitler walked out on the ceremony that saw Jesse Owens and other African American athletes anointed with medals, was also seminal for early Chinese attempts to make taijiquan an Olympic event. Participating nations were given an opportunity to show off their national athletic arts. The Chinese fielded both men's and women's martial arts teams that performed short, modified taijiquan sets created by several teachers just for the occasion. (166)

Unfortunately, perhaps, 'this planned, intellectualized approach to taijiquan virtually disappeared with the Japanese occupation that began in earnest in 1937', not least because of the fact that 'within a few years, most of the top martial artists had been killed or fled' (167). After the war:

The Party's glorification of martial arts and the ongoing push to popularize taijiquan were both a continuation of Guomindang support for martial arts before the war and a continuation of the cultural policy that Mao outlined during the 1942 Yenan Forum (. . .). Taijiquan and other 'regional' martial arts were folded into the category of *minzu chuantong tiyu* ('traditional folk sports'). (168)

Frank notes that 'the Cultural Revolution disrupted and almost destroyed [many] martial arts organizations . . . which were branded by Red Guards as examples of feudalism' (168). However, by the 1980s the Chinese Communist Party were starting to become much more supportive of the idea of legitimizing martial arts institutions, and also of actively promoting the sporting dimensions of martial arts again:

By that time, the Party became even more energetic about promoting the tournament system, and local, provincial, and national-level professional martial arts teachers found opportunities to link with their foreign counterparts as the door to cultural exchange opened wider. The International Shaolin Festival at Zhengzhou became one of the most visible manifestations of this combination of local interests and state-level cultural policies. It also served as a kind of sensual festival of identity construction, where audiences and performers could exchange notions of nationalism and internationalism through the structured world of the tournament. (168)

Throughout all of these historical transformations, the interplay of personal senses of identity, group senses of identity, and national senses of identity should be emphasized. Frank contends that in the atmosphere in and around these major tournaments in China ‘those of us who practiced Chinese martial arts shared a camaraderie that seemed to transfer readily across national, cultural, even stylistic boundaries’. Then, ominously, the first line of the next paragraph reads: ‘At least on the surface’ (Frank 2006: 157). The sense of foreboding conjured up here refers not to enmity, but rather to the force exerted by nationalistic identifications that subtend and often trump any other form of bonding at these events. This is so, even though, as Frank observes:

Throughout the city, but especially in the vicinity of the stadium, banners proclaimed unity in Chinese and English: ‘To make progress together’ declared one banner in English, while a Chinese rendition said ‘Using martial arts to become friends and make progress together’ (*yi wu hui you gongtong jinbu*). As one of the largest comprehensive martial arts tournaments in China, the Zhengzhou tournament attracted participants from dozens of countries. (157)

This all indicates the emergence a new form of business ‘marketing logic’, organized by branding and ‘networking’, the aim being to make contacts. The branding plays on the strange nexus of ‘popular conceptions of Daoism as individual cultivation’ (185) combined with stalls selling ‘souvenirs that seemed to have little or nothing to do with martial arts but had much to do with martial arts tourists fulfilling a dream by traveling to China for the first time’ (157).

Significantly, Frank emphasizes that the events are thoroughly internationalized.<sup>1</sup> Their organization not only enables but actively promotes a preferred type of martial arts tourism.<sup>2</sup> Via these and other examples (including discussion of Chen village and the Shaolin Temple tourism) of the logic of commodification conceived as part of a new ‘vernacular language of state’, Frank hammers home the point that



the Chinese government had been very astute in understanding that martial arts in China are simultaneously separate and of a piece. In the nationalist project, Shaolin and taijiquan were not only easily lumped together but actually lumped together in the public imagination through movies and television. Therefore, it was no surprise that the tournament in Zhengzhou, ostensibly devoted to Shaolin, included taijiquan events, or that Shaolin people competed in full-contact fighting and push hands at taijiquan events. Images of the nation thus became inextricably tied to images of martial arts. (182–83)

Martial arts, then, become a vehicle for the articulation of a dimension of national identity (qua nationalism). But this articulation is also couched as inclusionary and border crossing: it involves appeal to an international community of practitioners, fans, believers, and consumers. However, this culture crossing is subtended by an economic logic: making connections, networking, making ‘progress’ happen. None of this is to say that individual entities or the events themselves are false or fake. Rather, it is to indicate the extent to which identities are double—sometimes even duplicitous. The devout spiritual believer who purchases accordingly, the friends who are friends purely because of their business aspirations, the international connections made for nationalist reasons: none of these things are new or scandalous or unique to martial arts. They are discursive forces and relations that constitute relations and identities.

We will return to these entanglements again. But at this juncture, having followed the writing of several key thinkers throughout this chapter, I would like to offer two further disruptive readings of martial arts in terms of identity. The first offers an alternative way to think through matters of martial arts, identity, and transnationalism. The second explores some of the issues raised in the earlier sections of this chapter via the reading of an appropriately international, or transnational, film.

### **ECLIPSING THE HUMAN**

The first reading is inspired by an image. When I was a child, I saw an item on a children’s television news programme about an imminent total eclipse of the sun. The item centred on jet aircraft being sent out to ‘chase’ the eclipse. The idea, as I recall, was that the jets would try to maintain a position such that the total eclipse could be experienced for as long as possible. Scientific equipment of all sorts could thereby film, record, photograph, and variously monitor the eclipse for as long as possible. And this was said to be important, I recall, because having the sun blocked out in this way would enable many more things to come into view than could normally be

perceived. In other words, blocking out the sun enabled scientists to see and study and learn a lot more about the sun. Blocking out the sun in the study of the sun drew into visibility things to do with the sun that the sun itself normally blocked out.

This is the analogy or metaphor that I propose to use to rethink certain issues in martial arts studies here. I want to block out or bracket off the very thing that seems absolutely central and fundamental. The image of the sun as at once both centre and source of light, while also at the same time (and by the same token) the absolute blind spot, is one that philosophers have used in various ways for quite some time. For instance, the sun has been a metaphor for *the paradigm*, for the *way of seeing*—or, as the old *zenrin* poems put it: for ‘the eye that sees but cannot see itself’ or ‘the sword that cuts but cannot cut itself’. And the figure that I want to block out, here—perhaps surprisingly—is the figure of the martial arts expert or master him or herself. The practitioner might seem like a peculiar figure to want to exclude from a discussion of martial arts. But I want to do so in order to see whether we can see more clearly some things that a too-focused focus on the figure of the martial artist might remain blind to.

In any eventuality, such an exercise might potentially be helpful for martial arts studies, just as eclipse gazing might be helpful for studies of the sun. It might be the case that we can see more things related to the supposedly ‘primary’ object when that primary object itself is deliberately blocked from view. Indeed, in the terms of deconstruction, it is not only important but also necessary (albeit insufficient) to invert the presumed hierarchy of things in order to detect the presence and force of confluences, blocks, traps, and displacements—or even to effect certain displacements that are already ‘trying’ to happen, or happening, at the same time as being blocked from happening because of the hold and sway of the presumed hierarchy of things. To rephrase this, we can put it back into the terms of our eclipse-gazing metaphor: surely one of the things that the sun blinds us to is the whole range of other things that we are actually concerned with. Are we really concerned with the sun, or are we concerned with the effects of the sun on other things? Thus, similarly, with the figure of the martial artist: What is the nature of our investment in this object? What is it that we are really interested in? This is not a personal question about personal motivations. It is a rhetorical question about discursive operations. The idea is that if we block out the figure of the martial artist, we might be able to see what this or that discourse about this or that object or topic is, in a sense, ‘really about’—or *also about*.<sup>3</sup> This formulation may seem convoluted. But another—Derridean—way of putting this might be to say that discourses on a certain subject cannot but drift, diverge, double,

and disseminate away from that subject (Derrida 1981). This is because, although, say, martial arts themselves may be the nominal or notional focus, they will invariably also be or become in some sense subordinated or marginalized to other concerns and questions—political, economic, cultural, managerial, academic, and so on. As Derrida would have said, the discourse is always going to be double, divided, maybe even duplicitous (see Bowman 2007a). The approach is as much a part of the focus as the thing approached.

Many studies of martial arts are organized by a focus on the figure of the referent of the martial artist. But what happens when we don't organize our studies around individuals or groups; when we think martial arts outside of martial artists? This may seem impossible. Martial arts need martial artists. Nevertheless, to see what happens when we eclipse the figure of the martial artist, we might consider the case of their spread and development—something that on first glance may seem to be necessarily and apparently entirely and inescapably embodied.

Studies of the spread and development of martial arts are very often organized by matters of the actions, movements, and migrations of certain key people—key teachers, in particular—or, conversely, the migration of students to and from these key teachers (Assunção 2005; Frank 2006). This is hardly surprising. Martial arts practices are essentially physical, embodied, interhuman, tactile, sensuous activities. They are ultimately wedded and welded to human bodies. Embodied, physical, face-to-face, body-to-body contact is roundly regarded as the prerequisite for any kind of teaching, learning, or transmission (Downey 2005; Frank 2006). However, at the same time as this, all studies of martial arts dissemination are obliged to acknowledge, to a greater or lesser extent, that what went on *around* the key people made the most difference. Indeed, what went on *around* the key people is what made those people turn out to be key.

For instance, as is well known, 'oriental' martial arts 'arrived' in Western popular consciousness thanks to the film and media explosion in the representation of these arts in the 1960s and early 1970s (Krug 2001). It was not until this time that Westerners even started to make enquiries about Asian martial arts. Non-Asian practitioners of Asian martial arts were, before the 1960s, rare and exceptional idiosyncrasies. It was the appearance of Asian martial arts in film and television that caused the boom in practice. The boom in practice was not simply caused by a boom in Chinese, Japanese, or Korean immigration into the United States, Europe, or the UK. In fact, these embodied human practices can be said to have migrated separately—often paradoxically disconnected from any migration of the humans who were their embodiment. For instance, in the UK throughout

the 1980s and 1990s, the nominally Korean art of taekwondo became by far the most widely practiced Asian martial art. But its spread had no connection to Korean migration. The martial art spread through franchises, syndicates, memberships, and institutional hierarchies.

Similarly, in the United States, legend has it that before Bruce Lee started doing so, no Chinese would teach the ‘secrets’ of kung fu to white or black Westerners. Of course, things are not so simple. There were indeed reputed to be a number of non-Chinese students of Chinese martial arts in the West before Bruce Lee started to teach non-Chinese—including, indeed, non-Chinese students being taught by Wong Jack Man, the person Bruce Lee legendarily fought in San Francisco (in the fight that led Lee to reconsider and revise his fighting style and training methods). According to the most popular version of the legend, Lee was challenged to a duel by the Chinese martial arts community *because* he was teaching Chinese secrets to non-Chinese. However, according to Wong Jack Man, the fight only occurred because Lee had issued an open challenge at a demonstration, claiming that he could beat any martial artist in the area. Indeed, he did beat Wong, but the important point is that the fight arose not because Lee was teaching non-Chinese students but because he issued a challenge. The Lee estate and Hollywood hagiographies have preferred to represent Lee as someone who was besieged by racism from all directions—from the white American community and from the Chinese community.

Rather than that, the crucial point to be emphasized about who Bruce Lee taught is this: the significance of Bruce Lee was not that he taught non-Chinese people but rather that *he taught Hollywood actors, directors, and producers*. This had exponential knock on cultural effects. Before this, the fact is that the primary reason why whites and blacks were not being taught kung fu was not that the American Chinese community was racist (see Chong 2012); rather it was because *before Chinese martial arts began appearing on screen, no one was asking to be taught kung fu*. Some whites and blacks in the United States were learning Japanese and Korean martial arts, of course. But the fact is that these were only really known in the United States because ex-U.S. military personnel, returning from Japan and Korea, began to teach them. The massive proliferation of martial arts occurred because film and media images constituted the desire. Subsequently, this also arguably constituted the sense in Asian countries that there was a demand for Asian martial arts in the West. It was this sense of a possible U.S. demand that pulled Chinese martial artists towards emigration to the United States and other countries. Adam Frank’s ethnographic works frequently relate conversations about the fact that Chinese martial artists emigrate *because* of perceived demand for their skills in Europe or

the United States (Frank 2006, 2014). This demand comes from a desire that is constitutively mediated, put in place by film and television.

In a sense, then, questions of martial arts migration and questions of human—say, Chinese, Japanese, or Korean—migration are really two very different questions. They have different temporalities and different logics, even if they might overlap. Yet, posed like this, it seems illogical: it seems counterintuitive to try to separate the ‘martial artist’ from the ‘martial art’. Indeed, phrased like this, we are in the conceptual terrain of thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche and Judith Butler and their various explorations of conceptual pairs like ‘the dancer and the dance’, ‘the actor and the action’, ‘the doer and the deed’, and so on (Butler 1990). Ultimately, the radicality and productivity of the lines of thought of such thinkers relate to their argument that it is in a sense an ontological mistake to hold an idea of a pre-existing actor outside of the action. The agent or actor only comes into existence as such in and through involvement in the social practice, which itself exists only insofar as it is defined as what it is by the force of social convention.

Given this, what does it mean to try to separate the martial artist from the martial art? The martial artist only exists in and as the practice of the martial art. The martial art only exists in its embodied practice. Their conceptual separation now has the status of a problem badly posed. Nevertheless, my contention would be that, in line with certain of the implications of Butler’s poststructuralist understanding of ‘discourse’ and ‘performativity’, although the martial artist must necessarily be a completely embodied entity, there can and will be all manner of jumps, breaks, discontinuities, and ruptures involved in the spread and development of martial arts. Indeed, arguably, there always will be: arguably, every kind of ‘communication’ or passing on and passing over in martial arts must inevitably involve an element of discontinuity and rupture (Bowman 2010a). The inheritor is never a pure *repeater*, but always to some degree an impure *reiterator* (Derrida 1988). This is amplified in a media age. We can see this very clearly in the way that the cinematic ‘movement image’ of Bruce Lee both sparked a set of desires and taught one or more lessons in and through the same movements/images (Chong 2012). Lee produced a much-remarked mimetic tidal wave. He taught the world that it wanted something it had largely never even dreamed of. And he showed the world how to do it, outside of all physical contact and all formal pedagogical relations.

Lee’s films produced many mimics. His movement-image supplemented and subverted many formal pedagogical relations. After Bruce Lee, judo throws and Shotokan kicks were simply not enough. So-called classical karate came to seem stultified and stultifying (Lee 1971). Indeed, it is to Bruce Lee’s movement-image, on the one hand, combined with the power

of the franchise system on the other, that we can attribute the subsequent popularity and proliferation of the flamboyant and high-kicking Korean martial art of taekwondo. This came to pass because of the desire to kick high, which itself was fostered by the cinematic spectacle and subsequently fed by the institutional proliferation of taekwondo associations.

The cinematic martial arts spectacle (especially Bruce Lee) had multiple and contrary effects. It sent some people running to formal martial arts schools—of any kind—whatever was available. It sent other people running away from formal martial arts schools—and running into inventing their own hands-on, DIY approaches to martial arts—in accordance with the ethos of Bruce Lee’s anti-establishment *jeet kune do* (Bowman 2010b, 2013a). Styles, techniques, and movements were copied from films. Weapons were crafted in school metalwork and woodwork rooms. People wearing black belts emerged from out of nowhere. Training videos and then DVDs came onto the market. Then there was YouTube. . . . Now, whether yours is an orientalist phantasy involving swaying bamboo, Chinese string music, and silk pyjamas, or proletarian Chinese street clothes in back alleys between tower blocks, or Thai boxing shorts on the beach, or military combat pants and army boots in pub car parks, there is a DVD or YouTube feed for you.

Manifesting as movement-images, martial arts migrate from body to body like a virus. Some are even reanimated from the frozen mists of time, like the long dead ancient Greek art of Pankration, which was reconstructed post–World War II. Virus combines with virus, mutates, and sometimes threatens a new pandemic. The first great pandemic was carried by celluloid in the 1970s, when it seemed ‘everybody was kung fu fighting’. Infection rates are difficult to gauge, but what is clear is that the young are most at risk. Another pandemic seemed imminent in the wake of *Batman Begins* (2005), when the unusual new martial art used in the fight choreography was given almost as much attention as the other aspects of the production. Capitalizing on this publicity, the devisers of the fighting style itself (‘KFM’ or ‘Keysi Fighting Method’) embraced both DVD and online means to disseminate their ‘new’ art as quickly and as widely as possible. They made and sold a full range of training videos, from white belt level through to black belt level. Ironically, this most mediated of martial arts innovations painted itself as most physical, most ‘real’. It had to be trained with a partner, or ideally two; and it was touted as being born on the street and designed for the street.

This happened in the ‘noughties’; but TV’s Ultimate Fighting Championship (the UFC) had achieved something similar—and on a much bigger scale—in the early 1990s. Presenting itself as having ‘no rules’ and as being ‘ultimate’ and completely ‘real’, the UFC initiated the deconstruction

of styles in the name of ‘reality’. But ultimately it developed according to the dictates of televised media spectacle: it had to have fixed round lengths (for ad breaks), spectacular techniques (to avoid viewer boredom), and fixed match lengths (to facilitate programme scheduling) (Downey 2014). Soon, the UFC’s deconstruction of styles produced its own style, ‘mixed martial arts’ (MMA). MMA itself was a hybrid form, hegemonized first by what was either called Gracie jiu-jitsu or, more commonly, Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ). In fact, the UFC had been the brainchild of the Gracie family, who had devised it as a way to legitimize, popularize, and monetize their style. BJJ is now one of the most widely known and popular martial arts styles in the world.

What is clear about the many recent mutations of ‘real’ or ‘reality’ or ‘street’ or ‘no frills’ martial arts is that they are constitutively mediated—postmodern cultural productions for a media age. And, as case studies, they cast light on many important issues related not only to martial arts but also to culture, its causalities, relations, and effects. My argument in this ‘rewriting exercise’ has been that the role of mediatization, while easily regarded as *secondary*, is arguably *primary* and constitutive for the dissemination of martial arts—whether those arts be postmodern, hybrid, ‘classical’, ‘traditional’, or whatever. In this relation, the much-fetishized figure of the martial art expert is arguably secondary to the media-image, both in the sense of ‘coming after’ and in the sense of coming ‘because of’ or, indeed, ‘in response to’.

Having thus eclipsed the figure of the martial arts migrant in the name of attempting to think this character’s relations and effects, what happens if we now let the martial arts migrant figure return? As Roland Barthes put it, of the figure of the author, this character can now return, but must now be regarded as a ‘figure in the carpet’, and not as the origin and basis of the relations in which we might still want to think of him or her as the ‘centre’. This is because, in Derrida’s sense, the centre is a presence-effect. In Foucault’s sense, the central figure is an effect of a network of power/knowledge. In the sense I have been using here, the central figure is a simulation who looks most uncannily like David Carradine’s wandering, orientalist, ‘yellowface’ Kwai Chang Caine character from the 1970s TV show *Kung Fu*: in other words, a completely fictional yet absolutely true entity who shows that martial arts migrate not just through blood, sweat, and physical contact but by a process of transmigration from screens to minds to bodies.

Building on this, in my second concluding discussion, I will examine the way many of the themes of this chapter are played out within a peculiar ‘cross-cultural’ or ‘transnational’ film, Keanu Reeves’s directorial debut, *Man of Tai Chi* (2013), and relate these to wider questions of nation and martial arts in the twenty-first century.

### PRIMITIVE PASSIONS AND CRISIS MODERNITY

In a 1995 book on the themes of visibility, sexuality, ethnography, and contemporary Chinese cinema (Chow 1995), Rey Chow offers an argument about what she calls *primitive passions*. This is a concept so central to her analysis of ‘contemporary Chinese films’ that she elevates it to the book’s very title. Early on, she sets out a list of seven key points about ‘primitive passions’. These are:

1. The interest in the primitive emerges at a moment of *cultural crisis*—at a time when . . . the predominant sign of traditional culture . . . is being dislocated amid vast changes in technologies of signification. . . .
2. [In such a context] fantasies of an origin arise. These fantasies are played out through a *generic* realm of associations, typically having to do with the animal, the savage, the countryside, the indigenous, the people, and so forth, which *stand in* for that ‘original’ something that has been lost. . . .
3. This origin is . . . (re)constructed as a common place and a commonplace, a point of common knowledge and reference that was there prior to our present existence. The primitive, as the figure for this irretrievable *common/place*, is thus always an invention after the fact—a fabrication of a *pre* that occurs in the time of the *post*. . . .
4. The primitive defined in these terms provides a way for thinking about the *unthinkable*—as that which is at once basic, universal, and transparent to us all, *and* that which is outside time and language. . . .
5. Because it is only in this imaginary space that the primitive is located, the primitive is phantasmagoric and, literally, ex-otic. . . .
6. In a culture caught between the forces of ‘first world’ imperialism and ‘third world’ nationalism, such as that of twentieth century China, the primitive is the precise *paradox*, the amalgamation of the two modes of signification known as ‘culture’ and ‘nature.’ If Chinese culture is ‘primitive’ in the pejorative sense of being ‘backward’ (being stuck in an earlier stage of ‘culture’ and thus closer to ‘nature’) when compared to the West, it is also ‘primitive’ in the meliorative sense of being an ancient culture (it was there first, before many Western nations). A strong sense of primordial, rural rootedness thus goes hand in hand with an equally compelling conviction of China’s primariness, of China’s potential primacy as a modern nation with a glorious civilization. This paradox of a *primitivism that sees China as simultaneously victim and empire* is what leads modern Chinese intellectuals to their so-called obsession with China. . . .



7. Although there may be nothing new about reinterpreting the past as a way to conceive of the present and the future—and this is definitely one possible way of understanding primitivism—my proposal is that this ‘structure of feeling’ finds its most appropriate material expression in film. (Chow 1995: 22–23)

Obviously, a lot has happened since the publication of *Primitive Passions* in 1995. The films Chow herself analysed in the early 1990s can hardly still be considered ‘contemporary’, for instance. Furthermore, even the term ‘Chinese film’ can hardly be taken to have the same referent or to refer to the same spaces, entities, institutions, and processes as were operating in the early 1990s. Indeed, one might say, perhaps the very notion of ‘film’, on the one hand, and ‘China’ or ‘Chinese’ on the other, might be said to have changed significantly, in any number of ways.

But what about Chow’s central paradigm or analytical optic—namely, her conceptualization of ‘primitive passions’? For, if all of the other terms might be said to have changed—‘contemporary’, ‘Chinese’, and ‘films’—then one might enquire as to the status of primitive passions within *today’s* ‘contemporary’ ‘Chinese’ film. In other words, are *primitive passions* always the same? Are they always the same in film theory and in film practice? Are they the same, East and West? Are primitive passions universal or do they differ between geographical cultures? Do they change over time? Are they culturally or ethno-nationalistically determined?

Chow herself argues that ‘primitivism’ is ‘the imaginary foundation of industrialized modernity’ and that it ‘is crucial to cultural production regardless of the geographical setting’ (24). If we connect this to her first claim (in point 1, quoted above) that ‘interest in the primitive emerges at a moment of *cultural crisis*’, then it seems that ‘industrialized modernity’ equals or produces ‘cultural crisis’ in which primitivism arises as a symptom, side effect, or consequence of modernity. Accordingly, we might expect to find symptomatic ‘primitive passions’ wherever there is ‘crisis modernity’. And if there is ‘crisis modernity’ East and West, what might be the specifics of its elaboration in contemporary martial arts film?

It strikes me that a lot of Chinese martial arts films—including (perhaps especially) Hong Kong films—do indeed replay, reiterate, or act out certain symptomatic responses to ‘modernity’ and other forms of ‘crisis’—whether colonial, imperial, or gangster capitalist. One of the most enduringly influential examples is Bruce Lee’s 1972 film, *Jing Wu Men (Fist of Fury)* (Lo 1972), in which the Jing Wu martial arts association is persecuted by belligerent Japanese martial artists in early twentieth-century Shanghai. In this film, the crisis faced by the Jing Wu association seems transparently

to stand for that of China—embattled, besieged, fragmented, divided, exploited, and oppressed, by internal and external forces. And this theme—a *time* and *condition* of crisis—persists in Chinese martial arts film (however defined: ethnically and linguistically Chinese film; not merely PRC film) all the way through to today. It even structures Wong Kar-wai's recent film, *The Grandmaster* (Wong 2013). And despite *The Grandmaster* initially being touted as another rendition of the story of Ip Man, the teacher of Bruce Lee, and hence an internationally popular figure, it is actually much less about its lead male character and much more about the easily allegorizable theme of the desire to unify northern and southern Chinese martial arts into one institution—an institution that, in the film, tears itself apart and then implodes.

So, to reiterate, a great many Hong Kong, Taiwanese, and Chinese martial arts films are structured by, or are elaborated as, a symptomatic response to 'crisis'—whether that crisis be precipitated by Japanese, Russian, or Western imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, or the 'progress' of industrialized modernity. However, the fantasies that arise in martial arts film do not 'typically hav[e] to do with the animal, the savage, the countryside, the indigenous, [or] the people', as Rey Chow contends. They are certainly, to use Chow's phrase, organized by the championing of 'an earlier stage of "culture"'. But I would hesitate before moving on, as Chow does, to the assertion that this 'earlier stage of "culture" [is] thus closer to "nature"'. For what is valued in martial arts films is precisely institution, discipline, respect, tradition, and, in other words, a *constructed and achieved culture*. So I would supplement Chow's formulation by appending the word 'Chinese' to 'nature': therefore, the 'earlier stage of culture' that is championed in martial arts films is not closer to '*nature*' but rather to a fantasy of *Chinese nature*. And, here, Chinese nature *is* culture.

As Chow says, here we are dealing with a paradox. And I am not disagreeing with her. All I want to do is explore this paradoxical situation in a different way. Specifically this: in Chinese martial arts film, crisis typically comes at the fraught moments and processes of the passing on and passing over of the legacy, the tradition, and the institutional inheritance. In an almost explicitly Derridean way (Derrida 1981), the problem explored by these martial arts films is this: how to ensure the smooth Socratic/Platonic transmission of fixed, stable, and complete knowledge from master to disciple/successor in the face of the interrupting, disrupting, subverting, and perverting agency of an external force. In Derrida's terms, what the institution wants is *insemination*: pure, uncorrupted, undiluted, unmodified *transmission*. What the world constantly throws up is the threat of *dissemination*: impure, corrupted, diluted, incomplete, modified *scattering*.

In martial arts films, then, the primitive passion is not a simple fantasy about nature versus culture. It is rather a fantasy about an impossibly idealized relation of inside to outside. The outside is not necessarily bad, as long as (to echo Derrida) it leaves the inside to remain inside, while it, the outside, remains outside. The problem that Chinese martial arts films explore is therefore the problem of maintaining the institutions. It is rarely, if ever, nature versus culture. It is almost always institution versus institution. If this characterizes a tendency within the institutions of Chinese martial arts films, we might ask: What about other cultures or institutions of martial arts film?

### PRIMITIVE PASSIONS EAST AND WEST

Interestingly, it is much easier to find straightforwardly primitivist fantasies and primitive passions in *Western* martial arts discourses and Western (primarily Hollywood) approaches to martial arts style and martial arts-inspired film. At the pinnacle of this discourse, in the field of martial arts practice, would be the Ultimate Fighting Championship. From its inception, the UFC declared itself to be the ultimate in the sense of most 'real' because it initially claimed to have 'no rules'. This was a rejection of rules and limits—or indeed culture—in order to cut through the conventions and limitations produced by—precisely—'culture'. But, from the outset, the UFC played the paradox of, on the one hand, letting different *styles* meet each other in an unfettered space, to see which *style* was best, while, on the other hand, letting primitive barbaric animality reign.

The first child of the UFC was what is now known as 'mixed martial arts' (MMA), a combat sport that both plays and erases its status as a style, discipline, or cultural practice. On the one hand, it is a sport, a discipline, a culture. But at the same time its rhetoric and discourse fantasize about pure primitive animality.

The exemplary cinematic version of this impulse away from tradition, rules, and conventions and towards a different sort of fantasy of 'primitive nature' is *Fight Club* (Fincher 1999). In both actual MMA and the film fantasy of *Fight Club*, the primitivist fantasy is the same: it is one of rediscovering a *repressed* primitive 'truth'—that is, the primitive nature that has been repressed by 'culture' and resides within each one of us. As commentators have noted, *Fight Club* is a kind of study of one possible response to the crisis of masculinity in an alienating consumerist society (Giroux 2002). In other words, *Fight Club* may be about the UFC and MMA as primitivist responses to the crisis of masculinity in consumer culture.

To summarize my argument so far, then: my proposal is that in as many Chinese and Hong Kong martial arts films as I have seen, the ‘primitive passion’ takes the form not of a desire for a state of nature but for an unmediated (or, indeed, metaphysical) transmission from master to disciple<sup>4</sup> in the face of one or another kind of crisis of external intervention.<sup>5</sup> The passion here is for an idealized institutional condition, or state, but not simply for a ‘state of nature’. Rather, the ‘state of nature’ primitive passion is much easier to find in Western martial arts discourses—as exemplified by what I have come to think of as the *Fight-Club-ization* of Western martial arts discourse.

Of course, my schematic separation of East from West, or China from the United States, here, may be cause for concern or consternation. Indeed, it should be. The traffic between East and West in film and martial arts has long been taking place. Yuen Woo Ping and myriad lesser known luminaries are surely just as likely now to keep apartments in Hollywood as in Hong Kong, Taipei, or Beijing, and at the same time. Furthermore, as Jane Park has demonstrated in her book *Yellow Future*, we can see more and more of what she calls ‘oriental style in Hollywood cinema’ (Park 2010). So, can the reverse also be demonstrated? Can we see Hollywood style in ‘oriental’ cinema? Doubtless, we could find many ways to answer in the affirmative.<sup>6</sup> But I propose to explore this matter in terms of an example that might problematize an easy understanding of the term ‘Chinese cinema’ and that might illuminate some more the connections between film, culture, primitive passions, and crisis.

### MAN OF TAI CHI

Keanu Reeves’s recent directorial debut is called *Man of Tai Chi* (Reeves 2013). It is a multilingual film. It flits between Beijing and Hong Kong and between English and Chinese. It flits also from bustling Beijing city to its less modern hinterlands and from multibillionaire lifestyles to the bureaucratic banality of planning and development legislation, as well as a dilapidated temple whose sole occupant is the mandatory white-haired taiji master. The dilapidated temple is, of course, a relic of Chinese heritage. The white-haired sifu is, then, one of the last living residues of a former pinnacle of Chinese culture, or ‘Chineseness’.

The person who navigates these waters is Tiger Chen, the sole student of an obscure style of taiji. He is almost ready to receive the final transmission, but, his sifu says, he is not yet in control of his chi—rather, his chi is controlling him. Moreover, Tiger is evidently keen to dabble in the dark

side and to explore the use of power and violent force in combat, rather than sticking to the taiji principles of softness, sensitivity, yielding, and neutralizing. Tiger, then, is at a crossroads. The first time we see him, he is practicing standing-tree qigong at 5 a.m. Then he gets in his car. The first words we hear are in English, coming from the radio, and he repeats them, practicing his English: today we have to 'do the right thing'. 'Do the right thing', he says. And this is what his story will be.

His sifu does not want him to use force or indeed to use taiji to fight. But Tiger enters a televised contest and uses taiji to beat opponent after opponent. Keanu Reeves, who plays the billionaire 'Donaka Mark', and who we have already seen murder a fighter who refused to kill his opponent, sees Tiger on the TV and declares, with delight, '*innocent!*'. Tiger is an innocent and the evil Donaka Mark wants him to participate in his own illegal no-holds-barred matches.

When approached, Tiger declines the offer, despite the enormous wage he is offered, because it would be dishonorable to fight for money. But when his sifu is given an eviction order because his temple is deemed unsafe and has been scheduled for demolition and commercial redevelopment, Tiger decides to take up Donaka's offer, in order to fund the repair work within thirty days. As his secret fights become more brutal, Tiger continues to compete in the televised contests but becomes noticeably more brutal here, too, until he is disqualified from the final for using such excessive force that the judges and audience deem his approach to be 'completely against the spirit of this competition'. The spirit of the competition is style against style. But what Tiger has done is move from style into brutal animality.

Tiger's animality emerges through his progressive brutalization in Donaka's contests. But, more fundamentally, it comes from the fact that, as Donaka and his henchmen begin to remark, 'he likes it!', 'he enjoys it!' In other words, it comes from a spark of primitive blood lust within him that they are drawing out and bringing to the surface. This is the spark that his sifu called his 'not being in control of his own qi.' We can translate this into: his lack of maturity. He is not ready. He stands at the crossroads. He has to decide, to do the right thing, or the wrong thing.

Before the final contest, Tiger witnesses a film that is being played to the audience. It is about him. He has been constantly secretly filmed since Donaka first spotted him. The film's voiceover tells both Tiger and the audience that the idea was to transform an 'innocent, pure hearted man of tai chi' into a killer. Donaka reiterates: This was never about illegal fights to the death. This was about transforming an innocent into a killer.

In light of a consideration of primitive passions in Chinese and U.S. martial arts films, what can we say about *Man of Tai Chi*? Thematically, it

is perhaps less a ‘Chinese’ martial arts film than it is a reworking of the Eddie Murphy film *Trading Places* (Landis 1983) combined with *The Truman Show* (Weir 1998) and *Return of the Jedi* (Marquand 1983). Visually, the film seems to try to avoid looking too much like *The Matrix* (Wachowski and Wachowski 1999), despite seeking to cash in once more on what happens when Yuen Woo Ping choreographs Keanu Reeves. Indeed, before it was released, the pre-publicity for *Man of Tai Chi* was almost exclusively one snippet of information: namely, that the idea for the film was born when Keanu Reeves was being trained by Tiger Chen for his fight scenes in *The Matrix*. Reeves and Chen became friends and then collaborators on the project—which was ultimately funded by both Chinese and U.S. investors.

Accordingly, we might want to ask: Is this a Chinese film? Perhaps such an ethnonationalist question betrays a kind of primitive passion still current in a regionalist approach to film studies that proceed in the manner of area studies, despite the fact that the kind of multinational assemblage of interests and agencies that produced it is not geographically unified any more (Chow 1998; Hunt 2003). But *Man of Tai Chi* certainly seems to import themes that I have been associating with a Hollywood tradition—although it may be the case that where I see *Trading Places* and *The Truman Show*, other people might see Asian precedents and antecedents that I simply don’t know about. In any case, it is clearly a modulation, modification, and translation of different devices, formulas, and codes. But what made me sit up and pay attention to this particular film—even more than I did in the face of a film like *The Grandmaster*—is the fact that this one seems to import what strikes me as a uniquely *Western* primitive passion into an otherwise overwhelmingly Eastern situation. Its primitivism is vaguely Freudian: its idea is that beneath the limitations of cultured life, the constructs of culture or enculturation, is a raging id of murderous animalism. Unleashing primal brutality is painted in *Fight Club* (and Western MMA) as *emancipation from culture*—as transcultural *truth*. Keanu Reeves’s Donaka Mark’s last words, after Tiger delivers the most lethal blow of taiji, are ‘I knew you had it in you’.

However, this is not *Fight Club*. What kills Donaka Mark is not Tiger’s primal hate, or indeed joy. It is, rather, the most mythical technique of the most mythical taiji—a so-called spirit punch, in which what hits is the qi rather than the body. Thus what kills is a fantasy of the fantasy of the highest state of culture, and what is killed is the primitive passion of individualism.

Then the scene changes. The sharp-suited business developers stand side by side with the urban planning bureaucrats in front of the old white-haired taiji sifu, who makes a speech about development and culture. Then the

sifu signs a document with a traditional ink stamp and we learn that the temple will be developed as a kind of theme park. This idea alludes loudly to that most famous of Chinese theme parks, of course, the Shaolin Temple. In both, ancient authentic Chinese culture will be ‘preserved’ precisely in Baudrillardian simulation (Baudrillard 1994), as a simulacrum, and in a manner much more perfect than the hysterical virtual simulacrum of millennial fears that we saw in *The Matrix*. Rather, here, in the words of Rey Chow: ‘This origin is . . . (re)constructed as a common place and a commonplace, a point of common knowledge and reference that was there prior to our present existence. The primitive, as the figure for this irretrievable *common/place*, is thus always an invention after the fact—a fabrication of a *pre* that occurs in the time of the *post*’. Accordingly, *Man of Tai Chi*—as both Chinese and not Chinese, and not Chinese *and* Chinese—is a film which illustrates the ongoing simultaneous deconstruction and intensification of ‘China’, in a manner that is suggestive for the approach of martial arts studies to perhaps any ‘national’ practice in the contemporary world. Moreover, within this chapter’s exploration of writing, nation, and narration, we have also encountered problematics related to reality and style, culture and animality, and so on, which deserve to be probed further. It is to them that we now turn.





# 3



## The Reality of Martial Arts

The discussion of notion of the *Fight-Club-ization* of martial arts that emerged in the previous chapter deserves some attention. The emergence of a ‘reality drive’ in martial arts—especially in contemporary Western contexts—is an interesting and important phenomenon, which has disrupted the boundaries between many martial arts. This chapter will explore the matters that arise in and around a consideration of the desire for reality in martial arts training. It will do so first via an examination of one case study of the spectacular history of one contemporary Western reality martial art, before opening out into a consideration of the matters that have arisen in relation to ‘traditional’ martial arts.

### THE REALITY DRIVE

In late 2012, news emerged of the break up of a martial arts institution that had seemed to be taking the martial arts world by storm (Holland 2012). Keysi Fighting Method (or KFM) had been founded by a Spaniard, Justo Dieguez, and an Englishman, Andy Norman. Before inventing KFM, both Dieguez and Norman had been qualified *jeet kune do* (JKD) instructors under Bruce Lee’s senior student, Dan Inosanto. Through this institutional connection, they had met and trained together on an associated international jeet kune do circuit (Norman n.d.). Within this context, and

by working together regularly, Dieguez and Norman came to devise an approach to self-defence training that became regarded as a new and discrete fighting system; one that went on to be touted, by themselves and others, as revolutionary.

However, in elaborating their new approach, the shared jeet kune do past of Dieguez and Norman was consistently downplayed. Their names were removed from the list of JKD instructors on Dan Inosanto's website, and they almost never mentioned JKD or any of their other martial arts training in any of their public statements about KFM, whether in interviews, articles, or on their website. In fact, both Norman and Dieguez seemed actively intent on distancing themselves from any institution of any kind and, instead, on presenting KFM as a practice of and for 'the street'. Certainly, in all public discourse, KFM was consistently said to have been developed 'on the street' and 'for the street'. (When Norman did briefly mention his former martial arts training, it was only as something he discovered the hard way that 'did not work' and, hence, as something he rejected in devising KFM 'on the street'.) In other words, its own actual institutional history and formation was obscured from view, pushed out of the way, and replaced by a powerful mythology, which said: this is not an *institutional style*; this is *real*.

This 'reality drive' (that is so often coupled with the disavowal of institutionality) is the focus of this chapter. It is certainly not something that is exclusive to KFM. It is arguably central to many—if not all—martial arts. It is certainly central to a whole movement of modern 'reality martial arts'—a movement characterized heavily by the explicit rejection of ideas like 'tradition' and 'style'.

However, the way KFM spokespeople like Norman and Dieguez formulated their own rejection of style is significant and helps to historicize and characterize its discursive context. At the very least, there is a certain irony in their downplaying or disavowal of KFM's jeet kune do origins. This is because, in KFM's distancing itself from 'institutional style' and aligning itself instead with what we might call 'street reality',<sup>1</sup> KFM actually (wittingly or unwittingly) repeated the very rhetorical gesture used by Bruce Lee in his articulation of jeet kune do in the late 1960s: this is not an *institutional style*, said Bruce Lee; this is *real* (Lee 1971; Bowman 2010b, 2013a).

The conscious or unconscious reiteration by KFM of Bruce Lee's famous disavowal of style in the avowal of a commitment to 'reality' is what leads me to single it out as a representative of contemporary 'reality martial arts'.<sup>2</sup> There are other equally significant potential examples that could have been studied. Indeed, part of my argument is that much of what we can learn from the case of KFM can be applied to other examples and

can enrich our understanding of martial arts in/and/as culture more broadly. However, KFM also appeals particularly because surely few (if any) other examples of ‘non-styles’ both reiterate and replay Bruce Lee’s renunciation of formal martial arts styles so completely, while at the same time being so directly and absolutely indebted to Bruce Lee’s own anti-institutional approach. The founders of KFM had previously been certified jeet kune do instructors, after all. However, in any case, the ultimate concern of this chapter is a consideration of the eternally returning martial arts desire to *achieve reality* in combat training. Going hand in hand with this will be questions of institution and institutionalization—which, it seems, always hound this primary concern.

Indeed, a first thing to be said about this desire is that it constantly seems to be frustrated. It is as if *any* established mode or manner of training for combat will always—sooner or later, here or there—come to be deemed at best *asymptotic to reality* (approaching it but never getting there) or at worst as *leading away from reality*. It appears that martial arts seem constantly to be devised and revised, invented, rejected, and reconfigured, in attempt after attempt to measure up to the perceived demand of capturing and mastering reality. At all times, as sure as night follows day, what occur are splits, factions, revolutions, and heresies.<sup>3</sup> Aside from ‘political’ institutional disputes, the reasons given for breaks and rejections often boil down to contentions that the old institution wasn’t managing to measure up to the demands of reality. Bruce Lee said this, if not first then certainly most famously, vis-à-vis his ‘rejection’ of all traditional martial arts (Tom 2005). Unfortunately, however, the new institutions themselves seem destined to follow the same trajectory, never quite becoming or remaining ‘real’. Even JKD instructors peel off and invent their own styles. Practitioners become dissatisfied with established approaches. Revolutions occur and recur. And each revolution attempts or claims to bridge the reality gap.

The recurrence of paradigm shifts and revolutions in martial arts—or, indeed, the persistence of what Roland Barthes called the ‘jolts of fashion’ (Barthes 1977: 154) in martial arts—and the apparent impossibility of realising Bruce Lee’s dream of a world in which there would be no martial arts styles suggest that the reality gap (the distance between training becoming a style and the perceived demands of real combat) is never decisively bridged, even if the gap can be papered over or decorated in ways that satisfy different people for different reasons at different times.<sup>4</sup> But what always bubbles away beneath, around, and within—and what always threatens to erupt within and subvert—any given martial art at any time are *challenging* discourses, structured by the evocation of an art’s unsatisfactory position in relation to ‘reality’. The potential worry, suspicion, or

challenge is always that this or that style is, in Bruce Lee's words, nothing more than a 'fancy mess' of 'organised despair' (Lee 1971). When this idea gains the upper hand, it can cause practitioners to quit training, switch teachers or clubs, change styles, or break away to invent their own new (or 'authentic') approach.

All of this might be recast philosophically as a set of problems caused by the unknowability and unpredictability of the *event* of real combat. Because such an event could take place anywhere, and involve any of an infinite range of variables, the problem faced by martial artists is always one of how to train so as to stack the deck in one's favour. Even after pondering probabilities and improbabilities and making decisions (or 'guesstimating') about likely 'real scenarios', training will always be limited. This is so even though some styles—such as KFM or (more famously) *krav maga*—specialize in training for ever more different combat environments and scenarios. Such approaches to training ultimately seek to 'emancipate' the practitioner, in the sense of aiming to turn them into someone who can function dynamically, efficiently, and even creatively within ever more different contexts.

Arguably, the styles of training developed in approaches such as KFM and krav maga exemplify a general paradigm shift or revolution that has been taking place in martial arts practices in the West at least since Bruce Lee popularized the idea of interdisciplinarity, or indeed antidisciplinarity (Bowman 2010b). That is to say, rather than being based on training the body via endless repetition (as in 'classical' karate classes, which 'traditionally'<sup>5</sup> involve large groups of students marching in formation and performing set techniques, or kata), they often start not from training the *body* to be able to perform certain movements (blocks, strikes, kicks, throws, etc.), but rather from training the *mind* to be able to perceive threats and to handle the shocks and stresses of violent situations.

Thus, rather than the implicit logics of traditional martial arts training, newer self-defence approaches often base themselves on an *explicit* psychological theory, in which the training of mind, attitude, perception, and emotion are emphasized from the outset. This new psychological approach is something that can be distinguished from what are called 'classical' or 'traditional' approaches to martial arts training. The latter do not necessarily have an explicit or univocal position on the subject, even if many are clearly informed either by an ethos that internalizes 'toughening up' through punishing training, or one is focused on developing an 'indomitable spirit' or, indeed, 'remaining calm under pressure', and so forth.

Nevertheless, even in the most dynamic types of scenario-based training, a certain paradox will not go away. This is because, in any training,

*repetition* is essential. And, as many practitioners of such approaches to self-defence and martial arts have suggested, the risk is always that repetition can lead to what Jacques Rancière would call ‘stultification’—namely, the reduction of a practitioner’s capacities to the robot-like repetition of a set of institutional strictures (Rancière 1991).<sup>6</sup> In other words, the pedagogical situation can be regarded as the scene of an essential problem. Repetition is *necessary*, and enabling, but it is also *limiting*. The expert will be trained to master many possible situations and scenarios, but the consequence of the training (or disciplining) of the practitioner’s body is that it will come to move and behave *only* in the ways that are trained into it (Foucault 1977).

This is related to a second paradox—one that has been much debated in different ways by both philosophers and martial artists. This paradox relates to the fact that *training for reality* must always involve and rely on, at some level, *unreality* or ‘simulation’ (Baudrillard 1994). The self-defence author Rory Miller refers to this as the inevitable ‘built in flaw’ of all training (Miller 2008). You cannot ‘go 100 percent’ in training, because of the inevitability of injury or death were you to do so. (Reviewers and readers of earlier versions of my argument here have raised questions about this claim. However, Miller’s point is simply that if a martial art is designed to be lethal, or even to inflict serious damage, then you obviously and necessarily *cannot* go 100 percent in training, unless you are prepared to end lives or permanently incapacitate yourself or your training partners. Hence Miller’s contention that all martial arts training involves a necessary and ineradicable ‘built in flaw’. But there are other reasons for not ‘going 100 percent’: these include placing certain parameters around various scenarios or exercises for pedagogical purposes, to enable the practice or emphasis of certain aspects of combat and not others, and so on. And this extends beyond martial arts training proper: Wacquant’s discussion of this in the context of boxing sparring, for instance, is relevant here (Wacquant 2004).)

Equally, you cannot ‘know 100 percent’ about reality because the context in which an event of violence could occur cannot be predicted with 100 percent accuracy. The most one can hope is that the training simulations one has been taught to master approximate to the key features of the event of combat. In Aristotelian terms, *certainty (apodicticity)* is impossible; one has to work to master probabilities (*phronesis*).

Put differently, if one really is concerned with questions of violence and reality, then the *decision* to commit to one style of martial arts as opposed to any other involves a leap of faith (For an important reflection on the place of faith and uncertainty in decisions, see Derrida 2001, 1996). The hope is that the training will prove adequate in reality, if and when required.

The fear is that one is deluding oneself, or being satisfied with simulations. The problem is that, in any eventuality, all roads are leading to institutionalization. This is because *ways of training become styles* (institutions)—*disciplines* that produce the bodily propensities, reflexes, and dispositions that sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant have approached in terms of ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1979; Wacquant 2004) and which others more recently have attempted to conceptualize as ‘martial habitus’ (Brown and Jennings 2013).

According to my rationale, if we understand bodily training like this, the other side of ‘emancipation’ is always going to be ‘stultification’ (Rancière 1991). This means that, despite the hopes of evangelical thinkers of emancipation such as Bruce Lee, advocates of movements such as MMA, and even perhaps Jacques Rancière (the key theorist of ‘pedagogical emancipation’ that I am drawing on here), liberation or emancipation *from* style, on the one hand, and stultification *by* style, on the other, seem to emerge reciprocally and to be opposite sides of the same coin. Put differently: even if it may be the case that at some level the desire to ‘master reality’ is what prompts such activities as martial arts training in the first place,<sup>7</sup> the end result is always a kind of *disciplining* and hence *institutionalization*.

In a psychoanalytical register, Slavoj Žižek illustrates the problem like this: ‘let us imagine an individual trying to perform some simple manual task—say, grabbing an object that repeatedly eludes him: the moment he changes his attitude, starts to find pleasure in just repeating the failed task (squeezing the object, which again and again eludes him), he shifts from desire to drive’ (Žižek 2005: 10). So, if I am hungry and trying to catch a fish by thrusting my hand into a river or pool, I am acting on my desire. I desire to catch the fish. However, the moment I start to take pleasure in the act of thrusting my hand, or take pleasure in the refinements of my technique, I am moving from *desire* and into *drive*—and drive, in this context, is all about the pleasure to be generated from a potentially endless and possibly pointless repetition. Catching the fish, or grabbing the real thing, threatens to become, in a perverse way, *less* important than going through the motions of ‘trying’—and ‘trying well’ or ‘trying properly’.

This has an obvious parallel in the criticisms made of ‘classical’ arts that emphasize forms, drills, and katas, rather than the unstructured, free sparring or constantly experimental approaches of modern sport and reality martial arts. However, as Žižek’s formulation suggests, there may be no escaping the drift and switch from desire to drive. Even if we enter a martial arts class because we fear attack, sooner or later we will want to know how to do things *properly*, and we will more and more police ourselves and take *pleasure* in doing things ‘properly’. And *taking pleasure in propriety*

is arguably a key aspect of institutionalization (Douglas 1986; Bowman 2007a). Given this, we should enquire further into the place of reality, un-reality, and institutionalization in KFM and other reality martial arts.

### VISIBILITY, PHYSICALITY, AND MEDIATED REALITY

KFM became globally visible when it was thrown into the spotlight by the box office success of the 2005 film, *Batman Begins* (directed by Christopher Nolan). Norman and Dieguez's fighting system had been selected to feature prominently within the fight choreography of *Batman Begins* because, according to online interviews with co-founder Andy Norman (Norman n.d.)<sup>8</sup> and also interviews on the DVD-extras with the director, the star (Christian Bale), and the film's fight choreographer,<sup>9</sup> the look and feel of the techniques and movements of KFM were very different to anything that had been used in Hollywood movies before.

Accordingly, KFM was employed as a way to help make the film look excitingly 'different'. The key features of this visual difference hinged on the fact that KFM looked rough, raw, and brutal in ways that Hollywood had not really explored or exhausted before. There were no big kicks in KFM; there were not even many extended techniques, neither the swinging arm techniques seen in some styles of kung fu, like hung gar, Shaolin, or choy lee fut nor even the long straight punches of karate, taekwondo, or boxing. Rather, everything was close-in, compact, and brutal. KFM was all elbows, head-butts, shoulders, and knees. The image used by its founders was that of a bull—indeed, the basic defensive-aggressive posture (and core) of KFM is a position one might adopt if one were to do an impression of a bull. This they called 'the pensador', or 'thinking man'. In it, the palms are held on the head, the body is hunched, and the elbows are used as both shields and battering rams against (and for) all forms of attack.

This posture was selected as the core defensive-aggressive position of KFM for a double-pronged reason: on the one hand, it is very close to the position people seem *automatically* or *naturally* to adopt when being beaten, especially by more than one attacker; and on the other hand, this position is also strangely ideal for launching a range of very close-quarter and very destructive counterattacks, especially with elbows, knees, and head. Of course, this propensity is *only* a propensity to the extent that you have been *trained* to perceive or to 'realize' this movement-possibility, and if you have practiced diligently so that your body can successfully move in accordance with this realization in highly stressful and painful situations. (In her book on pedagogy, the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick discusses Zen

and other forms of Buddhist pedagogy, which emphasize the importance of ‘realizing’ as a crucial form of perception and propensity. In one scenario discussed, a walking Zen practitioner bumps into a tree. When asked why she didn’t see the tree, she replied that she had *seen* the tree, she just hadn’t *realized* it. A similar situation exists in martial arts: one may *know* where hands and feet, my body and your body, targets, threats, openings and points of resistance, and so on, *are*, but ‘realizing’ them as possibilities—being able ‘spontaneously’ and ‘naturally’ to act on them—is quite another matter (Sedgwick 2003).) Learning how to move such that the pensador can become an effective block and attack position is not actually as easy or as ‘natural’ as KFM discourse seems often to suggest.

KFM certainly helped add to the novelty and appeal of *Batman Begins*.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, it went on to appear in many other Hollywood blockbusters. However, other than its actual appearance within the film’s fight choreography, what was crucial to its global visibility was that a range of interviews, ‘making of’ clips, and other extras appeared on the DVDs, and subsequently on the Internet, all focusing on what went into the choreography of the film. It was *this* visibility—itself a possibility arising hand in hand with the institution of DVD-extras<sup>11</sup> and the circulation of snippets of pre-, para-, and extra-texts on the Internet—that gave Dieguez, Norman, and KFM enough exposure to make KFM internationally known (Bowman 2013a).

KFM took off in the wake of this exposure. However, allegedly because of the high number of companies in the world also called KFM (including many radio stations), the acronym eventually came to be dropped. Consequently, the name was changed simply to Keysi. This is pertinent because it was around the time of this name change that the partnership between Dieguez and Norman broke up. In fact, it seems likely that the moment of the name change from KFM to Keysi was also the moment of the breakup of the Norman and Dieguez partnership. Henceforth, other than being indelibly tattooed on the bodies of some of its original students and teachers, from late 2012 KFM, as once was, was no more.

Dieguez continued with a style now called ‘Keysi’. Norman became involved in a number of projects, including a UK-based one called ‘Defence Lab’. The activities of the other people who appear in the early KFM training videos are not as well known, but some of the ‘ambassadors’ (instructors) who appear in the early KFM training videos continue to pop up here and there on the Internet, sometimes in videos associated with Dieguez, sometimes with Norman, and sometimes fronting their own schools and/or new styles or systems.

Clearly, the partnership may have ended for any number of reasons—personal, financial, ideological, philosophical, logistical, pedagogical,



theoretical, or practical. There is no need to speculate on personal or financial matters here. But it may be of more than anecdotal interest for a cultural study of KFM to note that Norman and Dieguez were said to have separated because each wanted to pursue a different business model: Norman wanted to develop a franchise system, while Dieguez reputedly wanted to remain small-scale and hands-on. This, in itself, might signal the presence of different ideological and theoretical-pedagogical biases, rather than just different ideas about how best to make a living from KFM.

But whether the split was led by financial concerns or personal matters or—more interestingly—by a differing theory or ideology of pedagogy and knowledge dissemination, what should not be overlooked is the significance of the initial (post-*Batman Begins*) way that Norman and Dieguez had disseminated the training methods of KFM. If they had operated exclusively small-scale and hands-on before *Batman Begins*, after this film their ‘teaching’ moved quickly into the realm of online ‘courses’ that took the form of DVDs and downloadable MPEG videos, each containing a different ‘belt’ level. As one progressed through the levels, the cost of the next DVD or MPEG increased. The black belt course was the most expensive.

Accordingly, given KFM’s early use of computer-mediated communication in the dissemination of its syllabus, it seems somewhat unfair to go on to frame a disagreement between the two founders in terms of one founder wanting to ‘remain’ more hands-on and intimate with students (presumably in order to ‘maintain standards’), while the other founder is framed as having somehow transgressed some ‘initial-authentic’ intimacy by wanting to *materialize* and embody the initial DVD and MPEG mode of dissemination by setting up a franchise system based on the production and establishment of actual human ‘hands-on’ instructors in physically present schools. What is most important here is that foregrounding this situation might help us to identify and isolate the paradox not only of KFM discourse but also that of *all* ‘real’, ‘practical’, or ‘no frills’ martial arts in a media-saturated world. The paradox is this: on the one hand, such martial arts are resolutely and absolutely ‘about’ the physical, the ‘hands on’, the ‘real’; but, on the other hand, and to a much greater extent, they are known, disseminated, and circulated by various media—film, DVD, VCD, MPEG, YouTube, and Torrent sites. The vicissitudes of this paradoxical situation deserve some attention.

### **MIND, BODY, AND MEDIASCAPE**

Just as it is eminently reasonable to argue that Brazilian jujitsu (BJJ) and mixed martial arts (MMA) exploded into widespread visibility as a result

of the televising of the Ultimate Fighting Championship/Competition, the UFC (Downey 2014), so one might say that KFM came to have the visibility and stature it did *solely* thanks to its incorporation into the choreography of the film *Batman Begins*, and the space devoted to discussing KFM in the DVD-extras and promotional behind-the-scenes clips that became available around the feature film itself. In other words, BJJ, MMA, KFM, and arguably now many other martial arts all share certain key characteristics and a paradox: *all of them champion 'bare/brute reality', but all are constituted by and cannot but operate and exist within and according to the terms of the mediascape.*<sup>12</sup>

Increasing academic attention is being given to televised 'combat sports', such as MMA (Spencer 2011; Downey 2007). But, here, I am more interested in institutions like KFM, which represent a different but equally important aspect of the reality movement in martial arts. Approaches to combat such as krav maga and KFM may seem to be 'the other' of sporting martial arts (even MMA) because they have very different discourses and attitudes towards 'reality' and 'combat' than combat sports. Indeed, reality martial arts such as KFM and krav maga regard themselves as *more radical* or *more real* than even extreme combat sports, such as BJJ and MMA.

Yet, despite its claim to 'street' credentials, KFM remains as wedded to the mediascape as MMA. It is certainly indebted to it for its popularity. Krav maga, however, is rather different. Being born in a Jewish ghetto in World War II and subsequently being institutionalized as the name of the hand-to-hand combat training of the Israeli military and security forces, krav maga has a very different history and discursive existence to KFM. The latter was born on the jeet kune do circuit and was designed with European nightclubs, pub car-parks, and city streets in mind, rather than highly securitized military situations (for krav maga, see Cohen 2009).

Most importantly, though, as well as having different histories, different pre-suppositions about 'real situations', and different *ethoi*, krav maga and KFM also have different relations to media and mediatization. KFM's relation to media is closer to MMA's than krav maga's, even though it orientates itself differently in important respects. Ultimately, however, even though reality martial arts like KFM may wish to align themselves more with krav maga than MMA, there are crucial differences between krav maga and KFM and important similarities between KFM and MMA. These boil down to the role played by the mediascape for their existence. Put bluntly, krav maga does not 'need' the media, whereas the popularization and dissemination of KFM was entirely determined by what we might call 'DVD-extra visibility'.

In any case, the point to emphasize is that the mediascape is the disavowed but constitutive supplement to many reality martial arts. In Derrida's sense, the mediascape is a 'dangerous supplement' for reality martial arts because the putative fakery of mediatization is at once part of their conditions of possibility for existence and yet their declared antithesis (Derrida 1976). Film is fake, remember, while MMA and KFM insist they are 'real'.

### THRILLS, FRILLS, AND INSTITUTIONAL STILLS

The problem that reality martial arts discourses have with the cinema is not unrelated to the problem they have with classical or traditional martial arts. This relates to 'frills'. Cinema has frills. Showy, spectacular, and 'traditional' martial arts all have frills. But, the crucial question for 'realists' in martial arts is this: Does reality have frills? The consensus among nontraditional martial artists always resounds in the negative. The reality of combat is overwhelmingly defined in some way as having 'no frills'. But, again, such a position quickly becomes grey and uncertain. How does one define a frill? Is a head-kick frilly? Or a side thrust kick? Is an arm-bar frilly? Or the whirling sinawali (the crisscrossing figure eight pattern) that is the core of stick and knife fighting arts like *escrima*? Proponents of fighting at kicking distance and proponents of ground-fighting, as well as proponents of knife fighting, and so on, are all *equally* likely to be accused by each other of living in a reality-denying dream world—because any of these practices can be deemed 'too risky' or 'too unreal' for various reasons.

Interestingly, in the case of KFM, during the last few years of the Norman-Dieiguez relationship, there were more and more blog posts, comments, discussions, stories, and opinions circulating on the Internet among practitioners and former practitioners of KFM who reputedly came to feel disgruntled with the development of the KFM syllabus. At first, so these stories went, KFM had been radically practical and entirely pragmatic. But as time went on, showy frills and frilliness, in the form of more spectacular or less plausible techniques, sequences, tactics, and strategies, were added to the system.

Whether this is true or not, it raises a question connected to any focus on 'reality'; namely that of syllabus development. For, if *any* martial art presents itself as *already* being able to do what it says it can do, then how can change be legitimated? Given the implications of any discursive positioning which involves a claim of *already knowing*, then any 'development' within the syllabus is likely to throw up some problems. This is because, on the one hand, the martial art claims to have *already* identified and to have

*already* conceptually, physically, and strategically mastered the problems and possibilities of certain sorts of physical encounters. Each art or system claims to be a unique approach to such situations. It claims *to know*, already. How, then, can change justifiably (non-hypocritically) happen?<sup>13</sup>

In the case of KFM, its training videos regularly reiterate the maxim that no student or practitioner should ever say or think anything like, ‘Yes, I’ve got that, I understand that; now, what’s next?’ This is because, as the course narrator (Andy Norman) informs us, believing you have mastered something—believing you have ‘done it’ or ‘finished learning it’—is an arrogant mistake that could cost you dearly in a real situation. *The basics* must be ingrained and regularly repeated, regularly trained.

However, in the next breath, KFM discourse states that the system is ongoing, unfinished, evolving; that practitioners can and should explore and improvise; and that no one but you/the individual can really come up with the right answer to any problem or ‘question’. Even if the same attack were directed at everyone, each individual should really have explored and experimented in training in order to feel confident that their response will work for them. This is because, if an attack is regarded as the posing of the question, ‘How are you going to deal with this?’, then the answer, we are told, could vary infinitely or infinitesimally from person to person. In this, KFM discourse closely reiterates Bruce Lee’s jeet kune do discourse (Inosanto 1994; Bolelli 2003).

On a first reading, these two sorts of statements seem to contradict each other. For, taken together, the statements seem to say: you must drum these movements into yourself, and never move away from trying to perfect them, while, at the same time, you should constantly experiment, or at least understand that your system is liable to change in response to the results of the experiments and explorations of your teachers or the founders.

However, on an *institutional* level, the two statements are not contradictory. Indeed, they sit quite comfortably together in the tacitly assumed context of an institutional hierarchy. The implicit logic is as follows. One needs to have internalized and naturalized the movement skills *of* the system (the movement skills that *are* the system) before one can experiment with it *properly*. I emphasize again the word ‘properly’ because, although it is theoretically possible that anyone could knock anyone else out and although any wildly flailing novice may indeed manage to land some strong blows on a trained martial artist, the point is that *one is not doing KFM if one is flailing wildly*. One is not doing any ‘system’ or ‘art’ if one moves outside of the rules of its movement principles or logics. One is not doing capoeira if one is break dancing or ‘tricking’.<sup>14</sup> Equally, one is not doing capoeira if one is doing taekwondo or judo. In other words, one must learn

a system ‘mechanically’ in order to learn how to play with it ‘artistically’ or to come to attain the competency to know that you are actually in possession of what you are experimenting with.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, although the system may not be absolutely or classically ‘hierarchical’, in the negative sense of students not being allowed to question teachers, it is hierarchical in the sense of operating according to the assumption that time and properly guided effort in learning the mechanics, strategies, and tactics—the *discipline* and the *language*—of the system will result in increasing competence over time. Thus, the assumption is that ‘beginner questions’ can be answered easily within the terms of the system itself, whereas more ‘advanced questions’ or problems that probe at the limits of the system in its present form could challenge the present form of the system. These would apparently necessarily have to be formulated by more advanced participants or advanced challengers from outside of the system.

So KFM is (or was) an institution. But given its DVD-extra and rather freely flowing mode of online distribution (it is still possible to download many of the KFM training videos for free, albeit illegally), one might wish to ask, what kind of institution is it, was it, does it continue—‘hauntologically’, ‘spectrally’<sup>16</sup>—to be?

### POST-DVD PEDAGOGY AS BODY TECHNOLOGY

All institutions change. Sometimes institutions change at a glacial pace. Sometimes they have very visible revolutions and reconfigurations. And sometimes historical and ideological processes obscure the points of invention, mutation, or transformation.<sup>17</sup> Keysi Fighting Method came and went very quickly. But the dynamics that we can see at play here, I think, can be seen to be at work in many martial arts institutions at different times. Indeed, perhaps the very rapidity of the formation, proliferation, and fragmentation of KFM can be treated as a kind of ‘hyperreal’ instance exemplifying wider principles and movements. It is likely that it all happened so fast for KFM because it was catapulted into the limelight via its association with Hollywood films. This is certainly why and how the world came to know it. And the significance of this deserves some consideration.

Of course, ‘knowledge’ of almost all martial arts in the West has long been closely connected with their cinematic representation (Krug 2001). But ‘knowledge’ of KFM was not circulated in the same way that ‘knowledge’ about other martial arts had been circulated, prior to DVD and the Internet. Rather, with KFM, fans were not merely trying to mimic the martial

moves they had seen in the movie. Rather, the DVD-extras offered little insights, pedagogical documentaries, and signposts to further pedagogical resources to come—resources that Dieguez and Norman quickly went on to provide with their range of training MPEGs.<sup>18</sup>

This is important because it illustrates the fact that this type of DVD-pedagogy differs from earlier forms of cinematic dissemination and hence suggests a different form of what Morris calls ‘popular cultural formation’ (Morris 2004; Morris, Li, and Chan 2005). The types of popular cultural formation explored so well by Morris involved fandom that often featured a certain kind of mimicry of the cinematic spectacle, whether via cinema or VHS reception (see also Morris 2001; Brown 1997).

What KFM’s difference suggests is that, even though it is ‘yet another’ case of a fashion that is almost entirely ‘cinematically’ constituted, mediated, and disseminated, it is one that is unique enough to call for a further—and perhaps ultimately quite different—consideration of the relationship between bodily practices and institutions. This is because the ‘post-DVD textuality’ (Hunt 2014) at play in this case involves a specific pedagogical interpellative mode, which is a species or relative of—while remaining different from—either fiction film or documentary. And the effects of this DVD and post-DVD pedagogical interpellation are potentially profound.

KFM and other such training videos are of course ‘merely commodities’. However, they are also active in the production of identification and even a kind of ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 1991; Spencer 2014). When acted upon, they become body technologies, transformative of lived bodily ethos, topos, and habitus. When consumed and explored by *existing* martial artists, their lessons become supplementary to and potentially subversive or deconstructive of existing forms of martial arts practice. This is because, unlike certain other forms of dissemination, demonstration, discussion, idea sharing, and community building that take place *within* a style, KFM primarily *arrived from the outside* and amounted to an approach and set of principles and techniques that supplemented and even subverted extant practices.<sup>19</sup>

The ‘challenge’ posed by KFM to other martial arts styles devolved on offering a different set of propositions about the reality of combat. Its distinguishing and definitive proposition was that, contrary to most martial arts practice, which is based on the idea that combat involves facing one opponent (and hence involves training for one-to-one combat), KFM proposes that it is most likely that it will be *more than one* assailant that will attack you. Hence, runs the reasoning, the core of training should always start from the assumption of multiple attackers.

Changing the assumptions about the context and organization of violent events changes understandings of, or beliefs about, combat and thereupon training methods and practices, too, because of the reconfigured sense of the character of reality and hence what is 'natural' or 'essential'.

Thus, we are thereby obliged to engage with the question of the 'nature' of combat, as assumptions or theories about it feed into the form and content of martial arts practices and discourses. Indeed, there is no escaping from the question of 'nature' or 'the natural' in martial arts discourse. They are terms whose meaning is defined in close connection with understandings of reality. In fact, the status of ideas about 'nature' in martial arts discourses of all kinds run deep.

### THE REALITY OF COMBAT

A number of traditions of sociological and anthropological work strongly suggest that bodily propensities, dispositions, and capacities are more often than not strongly *cultivated* (Mauss 1992; Bourdieu 1979). Accordingly, the idea of 'the natural' (or indeed the universal) becomes correspondingly problematic. Specifically, what becomes problematic is the connection of ideas like 'the natural' or 'the universal' to ideas like the essential, the timeless, or fixed and unchanging reality.

The inexorable proliferation of ever more paradigms and approaches to hand-to-hand combat, and the ongoing development of individual styles themselves, all demonstrates that there is no single theory of the reality of violence or combat. Different styles are implicitly or explicitly organized by different theories of how combat works and how to master it. They are each, in effect, performative interpretations of their implicit or explicit theories.<sup>20</sup>

The question, 'Which theory is right?' is the eternally returning question of the anxious martial artist. As is well known, Bruce Lee believed there was only one reality of combat: simplicity and directness (Lee 1971). For Lee, any approach that complicated things any further than this was veering away into confusion, floweriness, frilliness, and ultimately, despair. Of course, Bruce Lee's thinking was arguably organized (indeed, 'hegemonized') by his teenage training in *wing chun* kung fu, and this clearly influenced his thinking and approach even after he had gone on to declare that he no longer had any connection to any style.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than holding Lee's position, then, it seems better to say that, rather than being 'fixed', the reality of combat or violence is always produced in the encounter between two or more combatants in a specific physical and

cultural context. The ‘reality of combat’ between two untrained fighters will be very different to that between two people trained in boxing, or one trained in boxing and one trained in wrestling, or a judoka and a karateka, or if the ground is wet or dry, flat or uneven, and so on. Furthermore, the ‘reality’ is fundamentally experiential and always therefore radically perspectival. It has no simple univocal objectivity. Rather than looking for one, a more pertinent thing to note in the context of this discussion is that martial arts institutions (re)train bodies to behave in particular ways. Human bodies and their capacities and propensities are moulded, produced, and policed by institutions. In Foucault’s vocabulary, *institutions discipline bodies*. Institutions *produce* disciplined bodies.<sup>22</sup>

One of the implications of Foucauldian arguments about the relationship between bodies and institutions in a disciplinary society is that we have to *de-naturalize* our understanding of human physical propensities. We have to denature the body. This idea may seem slightly peculiar, but it is an active element of the teaching and learning practices of a great deal of martial arts, wherever learning requires the repetition of an ‘unnatural’ technique, movement, or movement-system, until it *becomes* natural to the practitioner. This is both banal and yet important to emphasize because the becoming-natural of movements or movement principles might also helpfully be thought of as the becoming-institutionalized of the body.<sup>23</sup> The point at which the unnatural or initially non-spontaneous movements of the martial arts become internalized, such that the practitioner does them naturally, is the point at which they have developed, in a Foucauldian sense, a disciplined or ‘docile body’ (Foucault 1977).

‘Docility’, in Foucault’s usage, refers to a lack of bodily resistance to a power system or institution, rather than sedentariness. A body is docile in relation to an institution, as seen when it acts without resistance or smoothly in accordance with the principles of the institution. Thus, the soldier who has been trained to react in a certain way when hearing gunshot (for example, immediately drawing their own weapon and charging forward in response to this or other sights, sounds, and signals, rather than behaving differently, say, screaming in fear, running away, or cowering in a doorway) or the pugilist who senses it as soon as the opponent is in range and strikes automatically or the ‘internal’ martial artist who senses, yields, and redirects the incoming force without thinking can each be said to be ‘docile’. Docile means disciplined, and disciplined means entirely part of a movement system. The martial arts master of an established traditional system would thus be a prime example of a Foucauldian docile body.

Of course, saying this much is merely to reiterate the relatively commonplace point that ‘the natural’ in bodily movement is almost entirely



an effect of training. ‘Natural movement’ is institutionally constructed. On one level, this is uncontroversial when applied to many aspects of our lives, including martial arts practice. After all, one *learns* a movement system and it *becomes* ‘second nature’. But there is more to the notion of ‘nature’ as it functions within and structures many aspects of various martial arts discourses, and as it works to institute various senses of ‘reality’.

## THE TWO NATURES

At one end of the spectrum of martial arts discourse, ‘nature’ is distinguished from ‘institution’ or ‘style’ (Lee 1971, 1975; Lee and Little 1997; Miller 2000). Nature is valued as good, real, true, superior, and so forth. Style is regarded as limitation, stultification, stricture, convention, and so on (Bolelli 2003). The exemplification of this would be the ‘modern’ (post–Bruce Lee) dictum of ‘discover your own natural movement’. This position sounds all very well and good. However, in Foucauldian terms, closer inspection of this position suggests that it is organized by a ‘repressive hypothesis’ (Foucault 1978). The implication of this is that styles or institutions are ‘repressive’, that they ‘repress’ something that therefore needs to be freed or emancipated (nature). In Bruce Lee this argument has a clear countercultural resonance (Bowman 2008b, 2010b). But even when it is disconnected from any kind of countercultural discourse, we can perceive the presence and effects of a ‘repressive hypothesis’ in the attitudes of many modern nontraditional and anti-traditional approaches to martial arts. For them, ‘styles stifle nature’, and nature is what arises naturally and spontaneously. Your nature and my nature may well differ. Hence, in this discourse, nature is individualistic.

At the other end of the spectrum of uses of nature would be the ‘ancient’, ‘timeless’, ‘essential truth’ perspective, in which ‘nature’ is the truth and reality that was discovered by Taoist ancients. This perspective is often *al-lochronic* (Fabian 1983), *orientalist* (Said 1995), ‘self-orientalizing’ (Frank 2006), or ‘Western Buddhist’ (Žižek 2001). In this perspective, nature is universal, timeless, and essential—to be discovered by individuals, indeed, but it will always be the same nature. Here, institutions are *necessary* for showing the way. They are not repressive; they direct (Ronell 2004).

These two ends of the spectrum of the uses of ‘nature’ in martial arts discourse are often presented as if they are opposites and antithetical to each other (Bolelli 2003). But are they? Certainly, both positions share the term ‘nature’ yet disagree about what this term means or what a martial art’s relation to nature is.<sup>24</sup> But what role does nature play in each position?

On the one hand, we might group contemporary ‘scientific’ or ‘verificationist’ martial arts into one group. Bruce Lee spearheaded this approach to martial arts in the west (Bowman 2010b). The key principle of this approach is to establish what works best and most efficiently, based on systematic research and individual experience. However, even if verificationist martial arts aspire to be ‘scientific’ in approach, that scientific approach is often closely tied to a belief in ‘discovering the natural’ in terms of establishing and cultivating individual propensities. This position is based on a belief that every body has its own ‘natural degree zero’ and that the best thing to do is to ‘find’ that nature for oneself, rather than joining an institution and having an artificial system imposed upon the body (Miller 2000). This ‘natural’ is regarded as individual, contingent, and bodily. *My* natural movement may be different from *your* natural movement, but we will both have ‘natural movement’. It may be unnatural for me to try to mimic your style of movement because we may be different sizes and shapes and have different histories or ‘primary habitus’ (Hilgers 2009). This is the ‘find your own truth’ version of nature. It is often anti-institutional and overwhelmingly verificationist (Bolelli 2003).

The putative polar opposite position of the supposedly modern verificationist martial arts approach would be that occupied by the ‘ancient and timeless’ camp. This might be exemplified by the contemporary ‘Taoist’ taijiquan and qigong nexus, the discourse or ideology of which insists that ‘nature’ is constant, timeless, and universal (Wile 1996; Frank 2006). Admittedly, ‘constant’ here refers to a constant state of change in the interplay of yin and yang, but the point is that in contradistinction to modern ‘evolving’ martial arts and combat systems, the discourse of ‘Taoist’ martial arts is one which values tradition and institution.

All martial arts have their traditions, of course, and all martial artists have their places within and their relations to traditions. But the point to be emphasized here is that vis-à-vis ‘nature’ or ‘reality’, there are at least two different pedagogical paradigms in play: verificationist approaches to martial arts seek to advocate experimentation and development: you find out what works for you; you can take advice or not take advice, the choice is yours. But traditionalist approaches hold that the wisdom is encoded within the traditional forms, kata, and training exercises (such as step sparring, technique sparring, push-hands, sticking hands, or even in standing qigong, meditation, and so on).

More precisely, in traditionalist martial arts, one *may* experiment, but only in terms of applying principles. Transgression of the principles is transgression of the wisdom encoded in the martial art. Thus, in taijiquan push-hands, it would simply not do to smash into your partner with punches

and kicks that force their way through your partner's posture or moves—unless one were doing so deliberately in order to help the partner to practice taiji principles against a non-taiji opponent. But essentially this would be force against force, which is anathema to taijiquan principles. So, doing this would mean that you weren't doing taijiquan.

In other words, and to recap: there are two senses of nature in play here, both with different sorts of institution around them. The nature to be discovered in modern verificationist martial arts will always be singular or particular to the individual. The nature to be discovered in traditionalist martial arts will be regarded as universal or timeless. Both senses of nature involve a different sense of 'institution'. 'Nature' in taijiquan discourse takes the form of timeless universal principles, which translate into timeless natural biomechanical principles. Because of this, institutions are regarded as necessary and necessarily to be respected. This is because the student must be conformist in order to learn how to embody and actualize universal principles in prescribed movements and logics of interaction. The pedagogical institution is one of simultaneous cultivation *and* stripping back or removal of encultured 'mistakes' (resisting or meeting force with force being a prime example). This discourse affirms that what is being taught is natural but that our everyday lives have made us forget how to move, act, and react 'naturally'. Paradoxically, 'natural movement' is (re)learned by perfecting the most unnatural looking of movement sequences, such as a taiji form.

Verificationist martial arts are predisposed to regard such an approach to learning as conformist and stultifying—indeed, as a movement away from the natural or from the proper nature of combat, without any proper return to it (Lee 1971). Tales abound, in the world of modern innovations into martial arts training, about martial artists discovering painfully that they had been deluded about the nature of combat by their 'classical' martial arts training; about how in their first 'real fight' fear and adrenaline made them freeze or made all of their techniques fail; about how they lost their balance or grip or coordination and couldn't compensate; about how they had never trained for being attacked by multiple opponents, and so on (Miller 2008; Miller 2000). Thus, a 'martial art' like taijiquan can and is often easily taken to represent the most fake and artificial of institutions.

## INSTITUTING NATURE

However, according to the terms of my argument, neither traditionalist martial arts like taijiquan nor anti-traditional martial arts like KFM

are necessarily any closer to the ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ of combat. They are both merely performative embodiments of different theories, organized implicitly or explicitly by different premises or presuppositions about the nature of the event. The natural in taijiquan and other ‘internal’ martial arts involves adopting a strong, relaxed posture with a straight spine, rounded shoulders (and ‘*qua*’), bent and relaxed elbows and knees, and so on, in order to enable the greatest sensitivity and smoothness of response and movement. (There are also ‘philosophical’, cosmological, or esoteric and vitalist reasons given for the posture considerations of taijiquan—which refer to the circulation of *qi*—but insofar as it is approached as a martial art, the posture considerations of taijiquan relate chiefly to enabling sensitivity (listening, sticking, yielding) and the ability to respond spontaneously.)

On the other hand, in a verificationist approach like Keysi Fighting Method, training such a posture would represent indulging in the height of artifice and inefficiency. In Keysi, ‘the natural’ refers to what ‘a person’ would be *likely* to do *spontaneously*, almost as an involuntary reflex, when attacked by multiple opponents; specifically, as discussed, putting your hands on your head and hunching down into a ball to protect your head, face, neck, chest, belly, and groin.

Arguably, then, another key difference between taijiquan and KFM involves a different theory of the relation between untrained and trained reactions. That is to say, while many ‘classical’ martial arts clearly seek to train any kind of ‘foetal position’ reaction *out* of students, Keysi seeks to build upon it and transform it into a robust response. As mentioned, this is based on the assumption that you will tend to curl up like this automatically and that, despite its potential shortcomings, it can be modified slightly to become a good strong starting position for a counterattack. The putative proximity of the pensador position to ‘untrained reactions’ is precisely why the pensador becomes the basic and central stance. It is clearly very different to the ‘natural’ position of taijiquan. But in Keysi, the pensador is accorded superiority because it is so close to what its theory states will come naturally to any untrained person anyway. What Keysi strives to do is to build strong strategies, tactics, and movement principles from what comes ‘naturally’ to untrained people (and trained people, when overwhelmed in a fight).

Nevertheless, both Keysi and taijiquan movement principles require *cultivation* to work at all. Both require quite precise forms of biomechanical coordination. Both also require a metaphorical coordination or alignment of the mind and the body. Without this, no ‘technique’ or other aspect of the martial art will ‘work’. In fact, both require quite precise forms of cultivation.

Cultivation is a complex term. It refers to relations between the biological and the social or institutional. It clearly involves nature, but nature trained. ‘Cultivation’ is connected with ‘culture’, in all senses, and can be used with reference to anything from the earliest traces of the historical emergence of human society to the cellular contents of a test tube in the most contemporary of laboratories, as well as the most formative stages of infant development, any aspect of education, as well as the most avant-garde artistic installations, aesthetic or intellectual productions and experiences, and so on. As seems clear from many debates about the relations between technology and biology, trying to ascertain what is part of the natural and what is part of the artificial or the technological in the modern world is very often a very grey area indeed. This is as much the case in martial arts as it is in agriculture, food science, sport, medicine, marketing, or any other area involving ‘cultivation’.

Moreover, in martial arts, we are dealing with the institutional management of different kinds of material, of different ontological and epistemological statuses: from hopes, fears, and fantasies (or phantasies) to bodily propensities and pedagogical paradigms in particular technological environments and discursive contexts. In all of this, the idea of ‘reality’ in martial arts is always discursively constructed, in and by institutions that are born within and feed back into these discourses.<sup>25</sup> This reality is always therefore in some sense irreducibly theoretical and informed by narratives, myths, and legends of all orders, from anecdotes about ‘fights we have known’ to YouTube clips we have seen. The theories are actualized in their performative elaboration; the dojo, kwoon, and training hall act as laboratories where reality tests are run and rerun. *Habitus* and *illusio* arise together, prompted by a ‘reality’ that exists as a future threat, a monstrous spectre, that demands to be warded off or paid off up front with blood and sweat and devotion, while pain shades into pleasure as we are seduced into believing that what we are doing must be real (Green 2011). And from desire emerges drive and pleasure, pride, propriety, and identity, each becoming entangled with the others and becoming indecipherable, inextricable—as institution wrestles with the enigma of reality and each moves into focus and the foreground as the other moves out and recedes, as if the one is always yin to the other’s yang, or each is the *différance* of the other.

## CONCLUSIONS: LEARNING WITHOUT LEARNING

Bruce Lee spawned a movement in martial arts, whose imperatives boil down to an anti-institutionalism, on the one hand, and an intimate

experimental and verificationist ethos, on the other. Indeed, in its most radical receptions, the Bruce Lee message can actually be interpreted as: *Don't join a school or club; work it out for yourself* (Miller 2000). This is what Bruce Lee did: he walked away from—actively renounced—martial arts styles. By the late 1960s he was saying that he no longer saw himself as practicing Chinese kung fu at all (Tom 2005).

But in his renunciation of styles and institutions lies the very problem of Bruce Lee. He never completed the syllabus of the martial art he studied in Hong Kong through his teens (*wing chun*). He went to America when he was eighteen and soon started teaching. As a young hotshot he made a name for himself; and in a context saturated by militaristically trained and sports-focused Japanese and Korean martial arts, Lee's Chinese kung fu performances stood out as something else. It was in the U.S. context, saturated by katas and points-based competition, that Lee developed his belief that martial arts seemed to be in a sorry state: Currently, the martial arts are ineffective, he said. They are formal, rule bound, artificial. They are full of strictures, a 'fancy mess', a 'classical mess', 'organized despair'. Stultifying (Lee 1971). And so he began to innovate. He maintained the wing chun centreline; he added Korean taekwondo kicks; he adopted the Western fencing stance; he emulated the techniques used by the best boxers with the most powerful jabs; he began learning the grappling, in-fighting, and ground-fighting of Japanese jujitsu; he explored the weapons styles of the Philippines. And so on (Inosanto 1994).

But, to restate the problem differently: Was this done in ignorance or knowledgeably? Can you really dip into a martial art—one whose practitioners insist it takes years to master—and pull out bits and pieces? Are you really able to *evaluate* them? Are you even able to *perceive* them? Certainly, this kind of thing is nowadays easily sent up, as a joke. In the online comedy mockumentary series *Enter the Dojo*, Master Ken has devised his own martial art, called *Ameri-do-te*, whose motto is 'the best of all, the worst of none'.

The question that is endlessly asked about Bruce Lee is: Was his new hybrid form a real, authentic improvement? Or was it that he could only have had the arrogance to think that *any* martial art needed improving because he had not actually finished the syllabus in *any* martial art (Smith 1999)? There are stories of Bruce Lee returning to see his teachers and classmates in Hong Kong after he had been training away from them in the United States, believing he was progressing on his own. In these stories, we hear that Lee demonstrated how much he had improved. His former teachers and peers, however, believed that he had not improved at all! Indeed, to their mind, how *could* he improve? He hadn't finished learning the syllabus

and so didn't know what he was missing. The conundrum is: Do you have to go through the ranks of the institution before you can know enough to legitimately disagree with the institution or to be in a position to contest it legitimately? Is this logical, reasonable, and necessary or is it an inegalitarian, hierarchical, and possibly even stultifying position?

In the end, our own decisions about this matter little because this kind of thing happens all the time in the world and, perhaps, nowhere more than in and around martial arts institutions. Schools, associations, and styles are instituted, flourish, fragment and collapse, or reform. Agreeing or disagreeing with it is like agreeing or disagreeing with the weather. There are heresies and there are factions. There are paradigm shifts and revolutions. There are mutations and transformations; there are translators and traitors. There is also the growing perception that all styles and systems are hybrids and bastards, each typically claiming a pure lineage, a completeness, a plenitude and unitarity that is actually only pure in that it is purely ideological. Consequently, we are rarely, if ever, in a position to know with certainty whether our martial art is authentic, original, or best. *Your kung fu is not real kung fu; your taiji is hippy taiji, my taiji is real martial taiji; yours is a bastardized form, mine is the original and best.* And so on. These are common accusations.

Of course, it is easy now to say that we know that the idea of the original, like the idea of the authentic, is a red herring. So perhaps we can adjudicate in terms of better and worse. And this is the time-honoured question of martial arts: Which martial art is best? Which martial art works best? Which style would win? Whether or not Bruce Lee really knew the ins and outs of all the other martial arts, was his own construction objectively better or worse than others? Surely *this* can be decided. You'd think. Unfortunately, deciding this is like deciding which is the best move in rock-paper-scissors/scissors-paper-stone. Style against style is only ever person against person in context after context. In other words, interminably undecidable.

Which is perhaps why Bruce Lee never really engaged in polemics against specific martial arts styles. His problem was with the very idea of style, and specifically with the way styles were taught. Styles stultify, he argued. True learning is not about accumulation but about reduction. You have to get to the essence. Hence, he proposed, his approach (jeet kune do), could be taught and could be learned, but could not really be institutionalized. It could not be formalized. It demanded an ethos and an intimacy. It was less about formal content and much more about attitude. Teaching and learning should be experimental, alive, moving, hands on, verificationist, one-on-one. In learning jeet kune do, Lee argued, one is in a sense only

*relearning*—retooling, reorienting, reprogramming, rewiring, rewriting—one's own body. Learning how to 'honestly express yourself' is the phrase Lee would often use.

This started in the 1960s. Bruce Lee became world famous in the 1970s. He either initiated or was at least at the forefront of a massive revolution in martial arts pedagogy that accelerated from that point on in the West: anti-institutional, inventive, verificationist, intimate, one-on-one or one-on-two or one-on-three, and so on. A lot of this inventiveness has proceeded in more or less complete ignorance of classical or formal martial arts disciplines. This anti-disciplinarity has of course produced new disciplines: MMA, or mixed martial arts, was—as its name attests—never meant to be one thing. But over time it has become so (kicking, punching, grappling, ground), with recognizable features and forms.

Whence the paradox: the rejection of discipline is not freedom from discipline. All martial arts revolutions, all martial arts paradigms, all martial arts learning, involve retraining one's body, or bodily propensities. This can *only* happen through a discipline and to the extent that what emerges is a *discipline*. Without the institution of discipline—inherited or invented—you get nothing. No change, no improvement, no event. The discipline can be adopted (like when you take lessons); or it can be invented (like when you devise your own style, techniques, or training regimen). It will always be implicitly or explicitly social or invented from socially circulating materials, discourses, ideas, and principles.

Most revolutions in martial arts paradigms and institutions that I know have involved the rejection of one discipline and the reciprocal construction of another. To stick with Bruce Lee: the legend has it that he had a major rethink after ending one challenge match (with Wong Jack Man) completely exhausted and dejected because he had not won the fight much more quickly and efficiently. Thus, the legend continues, he rejected a lot of the training and techniques specific to the style of kung fu he had hitherto practiced and added weight training, running and other stamina training, boxing style training, and a whole range of pad work and bag work, as well as attention to diet. Some say he also took performance enhancing drugs.

However, much of the logic and structure of the wing chun 'nucleus' remained active within his new creation. As Derrida put it, an institution is not just the four walls which surround us; it is the very structure of our thought. And Bruce Lee's thinking about combat can be said to have remained hegemonized by the structure of wing chun's implicit theory of efficiency in combat.



## UNLEARNING DISCIPLINE

Which raises an interesting question. Can discipline be unlearned? In an obvious sense, yes, of course it can. Lack of practice or improper practice means getting out of practice, getting sloppy, drifting away from the proper, forgetting, getting it wrong. This is as true for spending time away from training as it is for spending time away from academia or as it is for not practicing your foreign language or not practicing *anything*. Indeed, if we follow certain of the implications in Derrida's argument about the inevitability of dissemination, then the question might perhaps be reposed as one of whether it is ever possible to halt the drift and warps and discursive wending *away* from discipline. As Adam Frank argues in his ethnographic and genealogical study of taijiquan in Shanghai, one need only have a quick read of the so-called taiji classics to realize that the art these nineteenth-century texts are discussing is *very* different—very different *indeed*—from anything seen in the parks of Shanghai today. This is because the styles have drifted, bifurcated, intermingled, been subject to fashions, fads, government policies, standardizations, the modernization movement in the early twentieth-century, Maoism, and so on and so forth, such that any practitioner of any form of taijiquan today is literally embodying decades upon decades of writings and rewritings that they cannot but be largely ignorant of. The embodied practice is a material residue of historical layers and all kinds of intervention that are, in effect, the unconscious of the activity.

On a related tangent, Frank also mentions the problem of the vacuum left in Shanghai's parks after the state crackdown on Falun Gong practice in the 1990s. He notes that in order to fill the spaces where Falun Gong practitioners had previously been, the government actually bussed in hundreds upon hundreds—even thousands—of practitioners of a new 'ancient' art, called *mulanquan*. Now, mulanquan is passed off as ancient, but its first appearance in public was in the wake of both the crackdown on Falun Gong and the global success of the Disney animation, *Mulan*. Needless to say, surely most of the now myriad practitioners of this sanitized and state-approved form are ignorant of its peculiar emergence or institution.

But, by the same token, it is only thanks to Adam Frank's publication of knowledge gained on his intimate ethnographic research that I have learned this myself. So can I even be sure that I know it?—This may be a version of a Lyotardian 'postmodern legitimation crisis in knowledge', but it also sums up a problem for anyone who practices what they may want to believe to be an ancient and timeless Chinese or Japanese art: Is this the real thing? Do I really know taiji? Is what I know *really* taiji?

Interestingly, most practitioners of Asian martial arts—Eastern *and* Western practitioners—have not the faintest idea about *or interest in* the actual history of the art they practice. They may believe all kinds of things about a lineage stretching back to Bodhidharma or Zhang Sanfeng or the Shaolin Temple. But most martial arts are *not allowed* to have a history, in the sense of change or development. And this is not necessarily either a problem of orientalism or self-orientalization. Rather, it is a matter of what Derrida called *teleiopoeisis*: the crucially important political process of evoking the ancient and unchanging as a proof of the present.

Nevertheless, history moves. Discourses drift. Stabilizations disseminate. Fashions jolt. There is no pure repetition in embodied, kinetic, or any other kind of mimesis. There is reiteration, which equals the introduction of alterity. This goes on without our noticing. If we noticed it, we would try to halt it. Because our aim is learning, not unlearning. But, if it were: *Could* discipline be consciously unlearned, *deliberately* rejected, and with or without a teacher? Can we unlearn the habits of our own lifetime? Can you teach an old dog new tricks? I would propose that learning something new—something truly different—is often likely to involve a reciprocal unlearning. To stay with the example of taiji: I spent over a decade learning taiji, after having studied several other martial arts at different times for different lengths of time. The discipline of taiji demands more or less exactly the *opposite* of everything I'd ever learned to do before. Learning taiji involved *unlearning* so many accumulated habits: resistance, force against force, using strength, separation, speed. And I would have to say that this kind of thing could not have been learned by me without a teacher. However, the basic teaching was mimetic. (Hands here, feet here. Watch. Copy.) The more advanced teaching was necessarily tactile and hands on. Error was *shown*, in terms of what happened to my body (pain, being pinned in an armlock, or headlock, or throw). Correctness *revealed itself* (in terms of not getting trapped or thrown or in terms of trapping, locking, or throwing the other). The teacher's words were limited to commands, corrections: relax your shoulder, regain your posture, turn from the waist, yield, push.

Unfortunately, this kind of bodily knowledge is all too easily unlearned. It requires such a high degree of proprioceptive sensitivity and control that if you don't use it, you lose it. You can remember it intellectually, you can discuss it in words, but your body loses the ability to know it and do it.

So anthropologists and sociologists speak of bodily knowledge, embodied knowledge, the intelligence of the body. But I don't think they speak of bodily stupidity or the stupidity of the body. Ignorance, perhaps: bodies can be ignorant. Bodies can not-know, can be unaware, or indeed can ignore. But you are unlikely to hear anyone say (other than in jest) 'my body is

too stupid to do push-hands', or 'my body is too stupid to do a jumping spinning back kick'. And you are unlikely to think you are more *intelligent* than your training partners if you beat them in any kind of sparring. You are merely likely to have trained harder, longer, or better. Everyone is equal. Anyone can knock anyone else out. One meaning of 'kung fu' is simply the disciplined, sustained, skilled investment of time and effort. Every martial arts teacher knows that the distance between teacher and student can close fast, sometimes in an instant. Indeed, arguably one of the basic reasons to teach students is to bring them up to a level where they can push you, to make you keep up your own discipline.

Disciplines are invented traditions. The knowledge that disciplines produce is not only disciplinary knowledge but also, and perhaps fundamentally, knowledge of the discipline. This is as true for academic disciplines as it is for martial disciplines. All have their 'reality tests' and modes and manners of verification and self-verification or validation and self-validation. And very often it is possible for even contiguous work in contiguous disciplines to develop in complete ignorance of the work in the other field. This is not because researchers are lazy or stupid. It is rather that the metaphor for disciplinary work itself—specifically, the word 'field' (as in 'disciplinary field' or 'academic field')—is something of a misnomer. This is because, today, at least, so-called academic fields are really rather more akin to halls of mirrors in which you can see yourself and other objects reflected back at yourself, in various shapes and sizes, but without really knowing where the objects are, and without being able to see anyone or anything around the corner or reflected away.

It is to questions of visibility that we will turn, in the next chapter.



# 4



## Martial Arts and Cultural Politics Mediated *Disrupting Political Theory*

There are other dimensions to be explored in the discussion begun in the previous chapter, about reality, martial arts, and institutions. To pick up and start off from Bruce Lee's statements on the matter of the best: Whenever he was asked questions like 'which martial art is best?' Lee would answer with words to this effect: as a species, humans only have two hands and two feet; so really, how many ways to fight can there be? The implication here is that there should be only *one* universal martial art. But Lee preferred to say that he was against styles. Styles 'separate and divide us', he would say. In the terms of cultural theory, one might say that Bruce Lee was against *particularisms*—whether local, regional, national, institutional, traditional, or disciplinary. He was *for* universalism. He was *for* rational 'scientific' experimentation, for testing and verification, for *working out what worked best*. He was against 'tradition without reason' and rejected the idea of *necessary* or *inevitable* differences between cultures, styles, or traditions in martial arts. To him, these signalled only limitation (Lee 1971). His unfinished film, *Game of Death*, was clearly intended to be one long lesson about the need for emancipation from disciplinary stultification.

In effect, Lee believed that martial arts *plural* should be universalized as martial art *singular*. Regional, ethnic, or disciplinary styles should be overcome, and *one* set of—*human*—parameters and potencies should be uncovered. The proper route to this would be through research and experiment. This would necessarily be iconoclastic, colour-blind, transcultural, and

universalist (Miller 2000). Like science. However, Lee didn't use the term martial *science*. He retained the term martial *art*—because, for him, every individual practitioner should find their own way to 'honestly express' themselves. His belief in the inevitability of *individual* difference (but *not* cultural difference) is why, for Lee, hand-to-hand combat remained *art* and not science. There is no 'one size fits all' formula; there is only *feel* and *flow* and degrees of effectiveness, and no simple objectivity: *what works* is what *you* can *make* work. As he once reputedly put it, 'the fastest punch is the one that lands first'. So, Lee's universalist humanism allowed for *singularity* (i.e., *individual* uniqueness) but not *particularity* (i.e., local, regional, or institutional *cultural* uniqueness).

However, in his apparent belief in the *one*, the *ultimate*, the *universal*, both history and theory reveal Lee's theory to be *idealistic*: its inevitable failure illustrates what Ernesto Laclau would term the mutually constituting and reciprocally subverting relations between universalism and particularism (Laclau 1992, 1996; Zerilli 1998). I will say more about this. But first, I want to insist: I am not merely going to use (or abuse) Bruce Lee to '*prove*' this or that point of political theory. Indeed, I want rather to *explore* the issues that Bruce Lee raises for martial arts studies in order both to advance this field and also, at the same time and by the same token, to reveal some *limitations* of political theory. In fact, I want to suggest that the political theory to which we turn to draw such terms and concepts as universalism and particularism may have only very limited applicability to martial arts studies<sup>1</sup>—at least until such terms have been in some sense translated<sup>2</sup> and reconstituted, within very different paradigms.<sup>3</sup> But, the stakes and significances of this exercise do not pertain solely to martial arts studies: I'd go as far as to suggest that perhaps political theory itself has only very limited applicability, *even when used to analyse politics*.

All of this might seem 'theoretical'. But it *matters* in two directions: first, insofar as any kind of *politicized* martial arts studies—like media or cultural studies, and so on—*needs* concepts of politics and the political and, second, insofar as any kind of political studies surely also needs concepts or understandings of media and culture. Given the necessity of political concepts, it may seem reasonable for martial arts studies to import them directly from the field of political theory (Bowman 2007a). But, can we actually *trust* concepts of politics and the political that have been built in political theory? Do they actually *work* in (or for) martial arts studies? Are they the best? Should they be universalized? Or are they particular or singular to political theory?

For instance: What if (as I would argue) political theory (even post-structuralist political theory) were shown to be fundamentally logocentric,

phonocentric, anthropocentric, realist, and metaphysical? If it were, then what status would its concepts have when our concerns lie with media and culture? Such ‘fields’ are not necessarily dominated or driven by written or spoken words or by intentionality, demands, assertions, or collective wills, and they do not necessarily entail self-present entities and identities demanding things of each other. In other words: media and culture must be part of what Laclau calls the (contingent and therefore political) ‘discursive terrain’ (Laclau and Mouffe 1985)—which means that media and culture are therefore strangely *crucial* for ‘politics’, even if political theorists rarely, if ever, seem to stop to think about them (Mowitt 1992; Bowman 2007a).

Accordingly, by focusing on the mediatization of martial arts, I want to highlight some differences between the ‘ways of looking’ (or paradigm) of political studies, on the one hand, and one possible paradigm of ‘politicized’ martial arts studies, on the other. This exercise might be read either as signalling the extent to which disciplinary particularisms and limitations are inevitably involved in the building of any theory; or it might be read as the effort to establish a field, topos, or site of cross-disciplinary *disagreement*, which could *perhaps* come to constitute a contact zone that might creatively modify both fields. In short, my overarching question is: What happens when we think about universalism and particularism, not in terms of ‘political processes proper’, but by way of things that traverse the putatively distinct—but entangled (realms of media, culture, body, *psyche*) and which maybe even supplement politics—such as mediatized martial arts?

## MEDIA TIES

How might mediatized martial arts supplement politics? Many commentators have argued that Bruce Lee was immediately a pole of what Bill Brown calls ‘cross-ethnic identification’ (Brown 1997). Moreover, both T. M. Kato and Vijay Prashad argue that Lee functioned as a key player in decolonization struggles—specifically what Kato (following Jameson) calls the struggles to decolonize postcolonial consciousness (Kato 2007; Prashad 2001). Lee’s amazing choreographies redirected transnational multiethnic desires towards an Asian set of activities (‘Oriental’ martial arts), and he was the first major male alternative to the ubiquitous white Western movie hero (Bowman 2010b, 2013a). Moreover, what Bill Brown calls Lee’s ‘generic ethnicity’ and the emotive ‘ethnic-underdog-versus-the-oppressor’ plots of his Hong Kong films offered a kind of imminently politicizing (albeit fundamentally fantasy) vision of agency.

Of course, Lee himself must be situated in the flows between a hyper-capitalist Hollywood and a colonial Hong Kong. But the *effects* of his texts were arguably felt most powerfully in postcolonial and ghettoized/racialized contexts. What was *seen* in the spectacle there was received as *somehow political* in ways that were not necessarily perceived elsewhere (Bowman 2013a). But what else was ‘seen’? What was ‘shared’ by most viewers? Virtually all viewers, the world over, were seeing what they believed to be *ancient* martial arts, from China and Japan.<sup>4</sup> Of course, these were only ever, at most, ‘invented traditions’ (Anderson 1991; Said 2005), or even Baudrillardian simulacra (Baudrillard 1994). Indeed, the very *object* or *field* called ‘martial arts’ was effectively invented in popular cultural discourses *through* these cinematic ‘(re)presentations’ or simulacra. In a sense, this mediated discourse arrived fully formed and *as if* it were ancient and timeless. Moreover, it had our opening question already inscribed within it: *Which style is best?* This question was there from the start, and it *remains* the animating problematic of discourses about martial arts. But from the start, because of the initial and initializing (re)presentation of the discourse, it was always a question that was tacitly asking: Which *national* style is best? Which *regional* style is best? Which *ethnic* style is best?

On first glance, this kind of ethno-nationalist ordering may seem to be yet another variant of *Western* orientalism, or of the ‘area studies’ mindset (Said 1995; Chow 2006). But, in fact, nationalizing martial arts can very often be traced to historical efforts to make the colony or the postcolony into the nation, or to strengthen the nation, by producing ‘a people’ through structures of feeling involving national or cultural ‘pride’. In fact, one can look at more or less any currently or recently popular martial art style and uncover a close *formative* connection with some kind of state nationalism or nation-building cultural project of the twentieth century. Funakoshi’s *Japanification* and *nationalization* of ‘Okinawan’ Shotokan karate is perhaps the most famous example. But similar processes have taken place in countries like Korea (with *taekwondo*), Indonesia (with *pencak silat*), the Philippines (with *arnis*, *kali*, or *escrima*), Vietnam (with *viet va dao*), Thailand (with *muay thai*), and China (with *Jing Wu*), not to mention the famous case of *capoeira* in Brazil. It is easy to see how this can lead to *essentialism* and to all of the problems that flow from that. But I also want to propose that—more and more explicitly nowadays—martial arts practice can *practically deconstruct* and disrupt the ideas and the structures of nationalism and ethnic essentialism. This is because martial arts are irreducibly *pedagogical* and because their contexts are increasingly global, mediated, and transnational.

Learning a particular martial art inevitably reveals that the supposed *essence* of the particular culture of the martial art is actually a *property*,



*produced by particular training practices* (Foucault 1977). In other words: physical cultural migrants (martial arts students) learn that *essences are learned*, and that *anyone can learn anything* (Rancière 1991)—anyone young enough, at least! Put more provocatively: perhaps *The Last Samurai* (in which Tom Cruise effectively becomes a Samurai through a kind of ‘immersion course’ in feudal Japanese life) or even *Bullet Proof Monk* (in which the lead (white) character masters martial arts by mimicking the moves in films) could be regarded as offering profound insights into cultural pedagogies and human propensities.

Admittedly, this is not the usual sort of interpretation of such ‘Eurocentric’ Hollywood films (Tierney 2006). In fact, critics have always denounced the fact that Hollywood does things like whitening and domesticating ‘Asian’ martial arts. For instance, after Bruce Lee, U.S. films quickly depicted more and more black and white actors as masters of martial arts (Krug 2001). The white Chuck Norris and the black Jim Kelly were among the first Westerners to be depicted by Hollywood as masters of Korean and Japanese martial arts. And the opening of one Steven Seagal film actually depicts him teaching aikido in Japan, in Japanese, to Japanese students, while Japanese elders look on, impressed. Now, Seagal has claimed that this movie scene is actually *autobiographical* (perhaps thereby making this film, or at least this part of the film, into a different case of what Rey Chow calls ‘false documentary’ (Chow 2013)).<sup>5</sup> But it is easy to see why many critics read such texts as either orientalist or just plain offensive.<sup>6</sup>

However, what guides such offence taking, I think, is a problematic conceptualization of culture. Namely, culture seems to be conceived as the *particular property* of a *particular group*. So, when Hollywood depicts Uma Thurman as the best student of Pei Mei or Tom Cruise as more Samurai than the Samurai—some critics take offense. But I would propose that they do so because they tacitly hold the conviction that, *really*, only a Chinese person could (or should) be the superlative kung fu student, and, *really*, only a Japanese person could (or should) embody Samurai ideals. But which is the more problematic position: the one that shows *anyone mastering anything*, or the one that implies that only ethnic and national specimens can master ethnic and national practices?

As introduced in earlier chapters, Rey Chow calls this latter position ‘coercive mimeticism’ (Chow 2002). She proposes that coercive mimeticism is an interpellative process, in which ethnic stereotypes are enforced or pushed onto a subject as if the ethnic stereotype is the ethnic subject’s obligation. And I don’t dispute the widespread reality of this process (Bowman 2013b). But I want to suggest that when culture is apprehended as being a *property*, it can initiate a range of interpretations and relations. Certainly, if

a property is regarded as an *essence*, then this ushers in essentialism. But if a property is regarded as something *produced* through contingent practices and relations, this is very different. For, as all martial artists know, you can only do and be what you have been *taught* and what you have *practiced*. Your being and your abilities are tied to your practices. And this means that, in such relations—pedagogical relations—*properties* are not conflated with *essences*. Rather, properties are regarded as *proper-ties*. And ties can be *untied* and *retied*, differently (Bowman 2001).

### CULTURE UNBOUND

The diasporic dissemination of Asian martial arts around the world and the massive movement of martial arts pilgrims to centres like Hong Kong, Hunan, Tokyo, and Seoul can be regarded as two sides of one vast process of *tying*, *untying*, and *retying* (or indeed *entanglement* (Chow 2012)) that has inevitably produced the enormous proliferation and mutation of martial arts (and everyday lives) worldwide. Chow follows Vattimo and Nietzsche in regarding such flows and contacts as *cultural translations*, involving both the fabling and the weakening of traditions and borders (Chow 1995). But, I would add: such processes also provoke resistance (Bowman 2010a), and there are sometimes surprising twists, torques, inversions, and even startling property disputes, as in the curious case (mentioned in previous chapters) of one nominally Japanese martial art; when practitioners in Japan promoted someone, in Japan, to a tenth *dan* grade *without asking the American-based authorities of the 'institution' for permission, the Americans were furious!* (Krug 2001) To echo Derrida in the essay 'Différance', the desire to build a kingdom is irresistible but so is the inevitability of that kingdom's subversion (Derrida 1982). There will always be kingdom building *and* property disputes. But I want to add: property disputes are also *proper-tie* disputes, disputes about *the proper* as much as disputes about the *ties*. For, if *properties* are produced through the establishment of *proper-ties*, then to change the ties (the relations and contexts) is also to change *the proper* ('the thing itself').<sup>7</sup>

In martial arts, these transformations are tied perhaps now more to mediatization than to human movement and migration. One need no longer find a little old Chinese man to learn martial arts. One merely needs YouTube and a training partner. Moreover, even if one *has* been trained by an authentic/ethnic representative of some 'ancient and traditional' art, the very existence of the world of mediatized discourses cannot but impact upon one's practice. But more fundamentally still: in any case, it is almost

certain that it was a *film* or a *computer game* that led most contemporary martial arts practitioners to seek out the nominally or notionally ‘authentic thing’ in the first place.<sup>8</sup> To borrow a phrase from Donna Haraway, the mediatization of martial arts has led both to the deconstruction and to the intensification of particularisms (Haraway 1991). The desire for authenticity and tradition (or ‘primitive passions’ (Chow 1995)) remains strong (in places—especially films). Accordingly, ‘traditional’ martial arts still flourish. However, there is no guarantee that so-called traditional styles (or should we now call them brands?) of regionally specific martial arts will (or could) survive forever (Judkins 2012–). Most were only ever invented traditions anyway (Chan 2000).

At the same time, the obverse desire—the desire for a different type of authenticity—a more *authentic authenticity*, free from culture—the desire to *invent* some ‘ultimate’ martial art, through iconoclastic and non-traditional alchemy—has produced some dramatically *detraditionalizing* developments. My term for it in this book has been ‘*Fight-Club-ization*’. Most notable among this has been the trail blazed by the Ultimate Fighting Competition (the UFC) and the emergence of mixed martial arts (MMA) (Green 2011).

I discussed this in relation to MMA, the UFC, and KFM in the previous chapter. Pertinent here is the argument that the declared drive to get to the *real* and the *ultimate reality*—or indeed, the universals—of unarmed combat is in a sense tragically flawed by its being necessarily shackled and subordinated to the injunctions and imperatives of mediatization. The society of the spectacle wants its spectacles spectacular and hyper-real, and advertisers want their ad breaks every ten minutes (Debord 1994; Baudrillard 1994). So, MMA and the UFC—perhaps the most brutal and supposedly therefore ‘real’ of televised sport combat—were mediatized and hyper-realized *from the start*, in a way that echoes what happened with the celluloid mediatization of martial arts in the 1970s (Green 2011).<sup>9</sup> Since the 1970s, at least, mediatization has always both fuelled and impeded—or skewed—the evolution or development of martial arts (like the Lacanian object-cause of desire). The drive to answer the question ‘Which style is best?’ via the institution of ostensibly no-holds-barred competitions, such as the UFC, first deconstructed and even seemed to jeopardize the very idea of particular styles surviving. But over time ‘mixed martial arts’ inevitably became just one style among others. Moreover, as brutal and efficient as MMA is, people now know that it is fundamentally a *sport*. And sport—surely—is a very different thing to the martial. Accordingly, those looking for the ultimate *martial* art continue to look. And one place they look is to the unequivocally martial practices of the military.

## UNIVERSAL SOLDIER, POSTCOLONIAL PARTICULARISM

The most well-known military martial arts styles currently available in some form to civilians include the U.S. Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP), the Russian military style called *systema*, the Israeli martial art, *krav maga*, and Filipino martial arts, variously called *arnis*, *kali*, or *escrima*. And so on. There are others. However, none of these martial arts are anywhere near as well known as the arts popularized by cinema in the 1970s.<sup>10</sup> This is perhaps because the impact of that first exposure could never hope to be repeated subsequently. But the difference in popularity is also likely to have arisen because military styles are often ugly, bloody, brutal, necessarily painful, and unpleasant to practice, plus they have no immediate sporting interpretation or application, so they cannot easily be branded as either pleasant or uplifting. Indeed, to extend arguments made by both Bill Brown and Slavoj Žižek at different times: these arts cannot easily be *existentialized* or ideologically recuperated as ‘spiritually uplifting’ or as ‘paradoxically peaceful’ (Reid and Croucher 1984) or ‘self-improving’ practices (Brown 1997; Bowman 2010b, 2013a).

Nevertheless, one such military martial art was selected to be the style of fighting used by a Hollywood action hero in a film that immediately transformed mainstream movie fight choreography by setting a new standard. This was the Filipino art of *kali*, or *escrima*. It was chosen as the style of fighting used by Jason Bourne in the *Bourne Identity* trilogy. The trilogy itself involved more than one director and a very varied crew; but along with the main character, Jason Bourne (played by Matt Damon), one other crucial thing at least that remained constant in the production of the films was their fight choreography and the films’ fight choreographer, Jeff Imada. This is particularly pertinent because, arguably, it was in large part the fight choreography (along with the cinematography) that ‘made’ these films—that made them stand out, that defined them, that made them so unique and memorable. The fight choreography certainly caused ripples that reached the very heart of mainstream movie production discourse, to the extent that even action staples like the eternally returning James Bond movies reacted by changing their cinematographic and action-choreographic styles in response to the paradigm shift effected by the *Bourne* choreography.

With all this in the picture, there are two threads that I want to pick out. The first relates to the political theory terms that I used at the beginning: *universalism* and *particularism*. In Laclau, the universal is an empty place that is variously hegemonized by *words*—by *claims*—or, in Laclau, *demands* (Laclau 2005). These words, claims, demands, and assertions are always traceable back to complexly articulated political wills. So a

demand can always be tied to a particular entity, an entity that Laclau regards as having come into existence with and through, and in and as, the formation of the demand. The aim of the group/demand is to universalize or hegemonize the demand until it is satisfied and they/it can recede into the slumber of realization/satisfaction. 'They' will only persist as an entity to the extent that they are implicit, because hegemonic—or should they need to wake from the slumber of their satisfaction in order to defend their achievements.

So far, so logocentric. One can read virtually *any* passage of Laclau and see that his political theory is phonocentric, anthropocentric, and metaphysical. However, what I hope to be able to suggest in the light of the cases of the mediatization of martial arts that I have mentioned is the way that what we might call *mediatized universals* (in our case, the *performance* of the superiority of various particular martial arts at particular times via complexly articulated technological platforms, relations, and contexts) do not necessarily arise as the result of some simple claim. Claims can be and are made. But the visual spectacle (and the textual complex) is not reducible to the logic of consensus or dissensus that hegemonizes political theory (Laclau 1992, 1996). Moreover, in relation to the political theory claim that universals are produced through the political constitution of the group, let us recall that all of the major popular fashions in martial arts of the world have a complex and shifting relation, not only to media but also to colonialism and postcoloniality. However, they cannot be simply attached to any one identity or any one claim.

The kung fu craze of the 1970s emerged from what Rey Chow has taught us to regard as the highly complex location of colonial Hong Kong (Chow 1998) and it flared up first (and most) in a range of particularly politically and socioeconomically complex urban centres and ghettos, the world over. The first U.S. martial arts actors were trained in the Japanese and Korean arts that they had learned as a direct consequence of American military action and occupation in these areas (it was Japanese and Korean arts that were first imported to America *en masse* by returning servicemen (Krug 2001)). *Karate-do* itself had already been reconstructed as *Japanese* by its 'founder', Funakoshi Gichin, who actually *took* the art from Okinawa to Japan in the early twentieth century. In Okinawa, it had long been called, not 'karate-do' (which was Funakoshi's *Japanification* of the name, meaning as it does *empty-hand-way*) but '*China hand*'—a name that registers the multiply-colonized status of the Ryukyu Islands themselves (Funakoshi 1975).

There are many other examples of complex processes and relations between martial arts and the moves from colony to postcolony to nation. In

Brazil, for instance, there is the case of *capoeira*—which was first an art of African slaves and then a martial art of the Brazilian underclass. All kinds of authorities have, by turns, tried to outlaw it, to sportify it, to gentrify it, to standardize it, and otherwise to domesticate or nationalize it (Assunção 2005; Downey 2005). There have been similar cases in Shanghai with Jing Wu, in China generally with wushu, in Indonesia with pencak silat, in Europe with fencing, and so on and so on (Eichberg 1983; Wilson 2009).

The point I want to make here is that each of these arts clearly in some sense hegemonized various cultural, countercultural, and mainstream scenes, but no audible *claim* has been made arising in formation with them. This is doubtless why critics like Žižek and a number of people discussed by Bill Brown regard the constitution of identities via martial arts films to be symptomatic of *failed class* longing (Brown 1997). But, I would add: when we are dealing with the forces or flows of media and culture, the matter of collective or political identity constantly moves and recedes and never seems to be fully or properly present (like the parallax of a rainbow).

But (I hear the complaint) media and culture are not politics. Yet (I reiterate) they must have *some* relation to politics. As Laclau himself argues, the universal is an empty place, variously filled with hegemonic contents and contestations in the discursive terrain. Media and culture *are* the Laclauian discursive terrain. So what, then, might we make of the curious centring and erasing of Filipino martial arts in *The Bourne Identity* films? I say centring *and* erasing because at no point in the films is the *Filipino* character of Jason Bourne's fighting style ever indicated. Quite the contrary, in fact: Jason Bourne is the ultimate product of the *United States*. His fighting style is presented as a pinnacle only attained by the most elite soldier of the *U.S. military*. In other words, a Filipino particularism is passed off as American dominance.

In Laclauian terms, the universal is always a particularism that has become hegemonic. But here, *U.S.* universalism is represented by a *Filipino* particularism ('under erasure' or '*sous rature*', as they used to say). This is something that Laclauian theory seems ill equipped to deal with. Furthermore, this hegemonic particularism does not *literally* or '*really*' relate to or reflect the achievement of any kind of Filipino demand or to reflect any kind of Filipino political entity. Indeed, if we were to regard culture as *property*, then it would be easy to come to the conclusion that a nasty, white Hollywood has once again expropriated the cultural heritage of one of its own former colonies. This would be an anti-colonialist mode of reading, again. And, again, it would be premised on a belief in property rights.

I do not want to disparage claims of lineage or heritage. Far from it. I am aware that the Filipino martial arts are in a complex and ongoing

dialogue with processes of nation building, community building, culture construction, heritage preservation, and so on, in much the same way as many other martial arts and sports the world over. I am equally aware that many Filipino martial arts masters have died in poverty and that unknown numbers of family schools and styles and lineages have vanished without trace (Wiley 1996). And it is for these reasons and more that I also feel uneasy when I see clips on YouTube of martial arts classes in shiny clubs in the United States or Europe in which students are dressed up in traditional Filipino outfits to practice the art. But, at the same time, I have also heard Filipino masters state (*again*, on YouTube) that the situation is simply this: as soon as Westerners get into something, they dominate it, they master it—and not in a bad way; they dominate it through love, time, effort, and commitment. The vast majority of people in the Philippines do not have the money or time to devote to these arts. Affluent Westerners do. Which is why the martial arts themselves travel, become diasporic, and are much more mobile than the people of the places whence they come. They are often, so to speak, paradoxically *disembodied bodily diasporas*—physical practices moving from body to body without physical contact.

Reciprocally, in response to the mainstreaming of Filipino martial arts in Hollywood choreography, new drives have been initiated both in the Philippines and in diasporic Filipino communities to embrace and showcase *their* martial arts. Documentaries are being produced, traditions are being constructed, reconstructed, (re)invented, fleshed out, fabulated. The post-colonial Philippines and Filipinos are not simply victims. No one has been duped or non-duped (Chow 1993). In fact, the translation between cultures that is occurring here, in and through and around—because of—the image, constitutes the bringing into visibility of that which may otherwise have remained occluded.

Of course, the main text of the *Bourne* trilogy makes absolutely no reference to the Filipino dimensions of Jason Bourne's fighting style. But one need not be Sherlock Holmes (the archetypal fictional Western aficionado of an Anglicized Asian martial art, 'Baritsu' or 'Bartitsu') to find out about the choreographic style.<sup>11</sup> A quick Google search will suffice. And as the many 'making of' clips on YouTube and the 'how to fight like Jason Bourne' websites that have sprung up all let us know: it is *Filipino kali*.<sup>12</sup>

So what can we see here—or not—in this simple action film? What is happening in it, through it, or because of it? I would suggest: we can see some ways in which non-literal, non-direct, and constitutively mediated transactions between cultures can both take place *and* not take place. Western appropriation, here, may not be so unequivocally despicable. The fake image, the simulation, can also be a source of cultural encounter. Cultural

dialogues can be non-logocentric. The forging of cultural relations can be both between or across cultures, *and between a culture and itself*, and on both sides of the spectacle. The film can be read *simultaneously* as yet another moment of the 'internal' relationship Hollywood has with itself, and with other cultures, *and* as a moment of the 'internal' relationship that a postcolonial culture can come to have with itself and its others and its own otherness through the processes of mediatization. It is a cultural translation. And in the words of Rey Chow: 'If translation is a form of betrayal, then the translators pay their debt by bringing fame to the ethnic culture' (Chow 1995: 202).



# 5



## Conclusion

### *Orders of Discourse*

The previous chapters have attempted both to illuminate and disrupt and to orientate and disorientate. They have not tried to define or to delimit, preferring instead either to sidestep the inevitable traps of such an endeavour or to test and explore others' attempts at definition and demarcation. The previous chapter, for instance, explored mediatized martial arts in terms of a certain poststructuralist definition of politics. Through this exploration, some of the limits of that definition of politics were exposed, so the study of martial arts ultimately both illuminated and disrupted another discourse. In the chapter before that, the desire for reality in martial arts was explored via a modern Western case study (KFM) that opened out onto an older Eastern case study (taijiquan), and through the juxtaposition of these different cases, not only were certain discursive continuities introduced and illuminated, but hopefully they may also have been—or henceforth become—in some sense disrupted. Similarly, in the chapter before that, the guiding question was one of how to write martial arts studies; and, again, hopefully the discussion was not only illuminating but also disruptive, at least to the extent that subsequent work in the field might deliberately and self-consciously engage with the questions attendant to one's own voice and one's own orientations, not only as a scholar or researcher, but also as an *institutor*—as someone who not only represents or exists in and as one or another kind of institution, but as someone who actively (re)institutes and (re)orientates in every act of reading and writing

(Derrida 1992). All of which is why, of course, the introduction began from a focus on discipline and disciplinarity.

Prioritizing these questions and themes has necessarily been at the expense of others. Certain prominent—even dominant—themes in and around the burgeoning academic literature on martial arts are all but entirely absent. Gender, sexuality, the construction and performance of identity, sustained attention to class and/or ethnicity, and other questions common to both cultural studies and other contemporary fields, from sociology to media and film to anthropology and even theology and beyond, may be regarded as distinctly underrepresented. This is not because I am ignorant of them. It is rather because my deconstructive training always (dis)orientates my gaze and leads me to the matter of the institutional formulation and elaboration of matters. I regard this institutional focus as both creatively enabling and politicizing. Of course, politicizing does not mean political in a dry sense, but in the exciting sense of affirming that the way things are is not necessarily the way that they have to be, because things are the way they are because they have been and continue to be instituted and reinstituted in one way and not another. Yet reinstitution is possible. There are always opportunities to change things (Derrida 1996; Bowman 2007a; Morris and Hjort 2012).

Hence, in this work I have attempted to emphasize the institutional dimensions both of martial arts and of academic approaches, rather than to replay the instituted themes that structure either or both realms. Some of the best work in and around martial arts studies has explored both dimensions at once—for example, Meaghan Morris's exemplary discussion of martial arts pedagogy, 'Learning from Bruce Lee' (Morris 2001), which intermixes questions of the media formulation of debates on violence, questions of cross-cultural desire and encounter, gender and ethnic identity and identification, teaching and learning in a multicultural media age, and considerably more besides. Although I regard Morris's essay, and her other work on martial arts fandom and popular cultural formations (Morris 2004), as second to none, and although it gave me one of my first insights into what it might mean to think seriously about martial arts within media and culture, I do not believe I have tried to match the subtlety and complexity of Morris's kind of analysis. Rather, I have chosen—to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche—to philosophize with a hammer (Nietzsche 1919). I have sidestepped some matters, slipped or redirected others, and hit out at many more on the way to staging my engagements with concerns that I regard as the heart of the matter. The heart of the matter for me here hinges on *discursive formulation and elaboration*—the discursive formulation and elaboration both of martial arts and of martial arts studies. In what follows I

will attempt to clarify or reiterate, in one sense ‘again’, but in another sense differently, some more of what this textual and discursive approach means, and its significance. To do so, I will turn one last time to Adam Frank, relating several key moments in his work to my arguments about martial arts and martial arts studies. The first moment in Frank’s work that is important here relates to academic discourse.

### ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

Academic discourse may seem inconsequential. It is easy to think that academic work is not connected to anything (Bowman 2007a). However, because academic discourses constitute knowledge, they are central to many things, even if academic work is very often disparaged or undervalued (Bowman 2008a). Academic production, in all its many forms—from papers, articles, chapters, and books, to consultancy and advisory work, to sitting on panels and policy making think tanks, and so on—is something that seems especially open to two types of reception. At one extreme, it can be accepted as *truth*. At another extreme, it can be written off as *wrong*. But there are very many possible positions in between. In addition, as anyone who works in any field of academia will be able to attest, contrary to many of the myths of scholarship, an academic discipline is very rarely, if ever, a field of consensus. Academic disciplines and discourses are overwhelmingly fuelled by disagreement. Academic discourses are precisely that—*discourses*—and in the sense given to the term by theorists like Michel Foucault and Ernesto Laclau (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Accordingly, as with all discourse, one will be able to look for hegemonies, made up of positions, each with different values and orientations, each constituting and investing in different entities and identities. Discourses and hegemonies often invent entities.

We must recall that John Mowitt calls the things that academic subjects focus on and talk about ‘disciplinary objects’ (Mowitt 1992). Disciplinary objects are important because they both derive from and feed back into wider discourses about the world. They may not necessarily be verifiably real (such as God, whose existence is a matter of faith but who exists within and structures theological academic discourses as well as the everyday practices of many people (Bowman 2012)), or they may be actually existing things in the world but given very different characteristics within an academic context (for instance, ‘subcultures’, as experienced and lived by members, may be a world away from the way subcultures are discussed and studied in academia (Gilbert and Pearson 1999)).

Like any martial art, taijiquan can be regarded as a disciplinary object that exists within multiple discourses and senses. In some of them, it reflects and reinforces hegemony in certain ways. In others, it may subvert or change hegemonies. Focusing first on its academic treatment, if we recall Adam Frank's argument that in much Chinese discourse, taijiquan is constructed and treated as a 'master symbol' of 'China' and 'Chineseness' (Frank 2006), then a consideration of the academic treatment of taijiquan will help us to see how academic discourses both derive from and feed back into wider discourses. The relations that Frank discerns between Chinese academic discourses about taijiquan and wider ideologies that circulate about taijiquan are illuminating and should be borne in mind in any martial arts studies that seek to be circumspect, self-reflexive, and critical.

Specifically because taijiquan is treated as a master signifier of China and Chineseness, Frank notes that its martial dimensions are downplayed or even erased in Chinese academic discourse about it. While the martial dimensions of taijiquan are downplayed, other aspects are foregrounded:

The subjugation of the martial, that is, 'the real', is no more readily apparent than in the substantial Chinese scholarly literature that has developed around martial arts in general and taijiquan in particular. In addition to the martial arts training manuals that are popular both inside and outside PRC, a substantial literature has been generated through the sports universities' martial arts departments. Most of these sports universities produce journals, and many of the journals have a section devoted to martial arts history and research. Several independent journals are devoted entirely to either martial arts or sports history, a field that has grown out of the folk sports movement of the 1950s. (Frank 2006: 183)

Two points are worth emphasizing here. On the one hand, martial arts are institutionalized twice over: first, within universities; second, in terms of an 'attending discourse' of academic literature (Derrida 1981). On the other hand, the first discursive operation—the first working over of the raw material of martial arts—can be discerned. Frank notes this in the first sentence: the identity of the entity is worked over in the academic discourse such that its martial dimensions are subordinated to other foci. Then, when these other foci are established, specific ('appropriate') sorts of disciplinary questions and problematics are constructed:

As in the United States, scholarly literature both keys in to existing discourses and generates its own discursive space. The hard science articles are generally devoted to the medical aspects of taijiquan and to issues of kinesiology and physiology. Wang Jinghao's 'Effects and Mechanism of Taiji Exercise on

Hyperlipidemia and Diabetes II' (2001) is a typical example of this literature in that it trades on the language of modern science to validate and reify the 'traditional' (taijiquan) as an essential feature of Chinese identity. (183)

Here, Frank's contention is that even science can become ideological, first in its very orientation (the questions it asks) and, second, in its conclusions (here, the connection between the idea that taijiquan has beneficial health implications and the wider discourse about 'Chinese identity'). Indeed, Frank observes, on the one hand, 'few such articles attempt to refute the health claims made by taijiquan practitioners', in contrast, on the other hand, 'to the scholarly assault on the health claims made by Falun Gong practitioners'. The article by Wang, discussed by Frank, is no exception. 'The "effects" [Wang] speaks of are all positive ones' (183–84).

This is an extremely enlightening set of observations. For, through this, we see that the very formulation of questions and approaches can be driven (both consciously and unconsciously) by wider ideological agendas. Thus, in a discursive environment sympathetic to or supportive of a practice, that practice will be treated accordingly with sympathy and approval. Similarly, the opposite is also true. Even though the borders between taijiquan, qigong, and Falun Gong are often very grey indeed, in the political context of a China that has relatively recently cracked down on Falun Gong practice, these three practices can quite smoothly become formulated as (if) *opposites* in certain key regards. In other words, because of political pressures, or certain discursive orders, values, and imperatives, the questions and conclusions posed 'scientifically' about Falun Gong are negative.

Outside of the sciences in China, Frank observes that the humanities and social sciences, too, 'tend to focus on the relationship of martial arts to other "traditional arts"'. This is so much the case that 'the social science discourse is often explicitly linked with the project of Chinese nationalism' (184). In other words, once again, scholarly discourse marches—consciously or unconsciously—to the beat of wider socio-political discursive drums. Ultimately, in the Chinese context, Frank proposes that humanities approaches to Chinese martial arts are structured by essentialism after essentialism. For instance:

[One] essay accepts the Herderian notion of *das Volk* without question, adapting Herder's position of a single-class society where 'the folk' are on equal footing with elites. [The] discussion of martial arts in the article treats such arts as uniformly ancient, as if they are neither modern inventions nor arts that undergo constant evolution. [Another] takes a diffusionist approach to Chinese martial arts as a means of preserving and spreading fundamental Chinese values. (184)

Frank also points to the frequent circulation within supposedly scholarly work of widely refuted myths and legends about martial arts. What is most pertinent to martial arts studies is not myth busting in itself, but rather the insight that it gives us into the relations between popular or folk ‘knowledge’, mediatized ‘knowledge’, and academic ‘knowledge’. Frank points out that this tendency to recapitulate myths both *comes from* and *feeds back into* wider discourses, in a number of ways:

Scholarly literature on martial arts in Chinese journals also legitimizes tourist sites as master symbols of the nation-state. Historical and scientific articles often repeat taijiquan origin stories, for example, and thereby lend them the weight of authority. The state has thus been able to requisition martial arts in general and taijiquan in particular as ur-symbols of Chinese culture. The production of this image can be quite precise: for example, the symbol that the Chinese Olympic Committee adopted in its successful bid for the 2008 Olympics is an abstracted depiction of the taijiquan move ‘Downward Posture’ (xia shi). This symbol appears everywhere in reference to the upcoming Olympics. (184)

With this type of conjunctural analysis, Frank is able to show the complex interactions between different ‘levels’ and contexts of discourse, including its place and role as an ingredient in nation building, in institutions, and even in bodies, as ideology dissemination for various ends—nationalistic, again, but also touristic. The trade in essentialisms is as good for national myths as it is for stimulating tourism. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this is all condensed in both the symbol and the institutional reality of the Shaolin Temple: ‘The temple had seen its share of trouble’, writes Frank, ‘so the governmental support was crucial, even if the price was a certain shift in identity from religious order to national symbol’ (180). He continues:

Since the mutual decision of the Shaolin order’s abbot, Shi Yongxin, and the Party to promote the Shaolin Temple as one of the chief tourist spots in China, local people had found a steady, if not earth-shaking, source of income (Jakes 2001). The short- and long-term foreign students at the temple schools numbered in the thousands. Single-day tourists like me added thousands more. And the Chinese students who passed through the hundreds of large and small martial arts schools that surrounded the temple and spilled out into the countryside numbered in the tens of thousands. Like the boys who learned Chen style taijiquan in Wenxian County, many of the students in these Shaolin schools were poor peasant children fulfilling a dream come true. (179)

Domestic nationalistic dreams and foreign touristic dreams thus coincide in chiasmatic locations like the Shaolin Temple, as well as in the related

circuit of international taijiquan and kung fu competitions. These events are disseminated as news and as the focus of television programmes, thus amplifying their reach and significance, argues Frank:

The sensual language of the Shaolin Festival in Dengfeng would, within a matter of hours, be communicated nationwide, and even internationally, through the foreign martial arts media present. The color, the music, the presence of Ganesh, and the unified, martial movement of dozens or hundreds of bodies combined to make a powerful statement about an ideal typical Chineseness. (178)

With such observations, we see the complexity of the ideological-institutional traffic between the subject, the nation, the state, and its policies, institutions, and practices, as well as academic orientations, media discourses, and the wide ranging traffic in essentialisms that produce and organize ‘kung fu dreams’ which merge interchangeably with ‘dreams of Chineseness’ and/or ‘Chinese kung fu dreams’.

### MEDIATIZED DREAMS

Indeed, one might say that the ultimate object of politics is *dreams*. What this means might be expressed thus. One way of characterizing the significance of Edward Said’s many works, particularly those on orientalism (Said 1995), but also those on the ideological conflict over Israel/Palestine (Said 2005), and so on, would be to say that Said repeatedly shows certain connections between dreams and politics. Specifically, in Said, Western dreams and fantasies about the Orient organize thinking, writing, and action vis-à-vis countries and peoples deemed to be Oriental; and this thinking, writing, and action feeds back into the production or perpetuation of orientalist dreams. The political implications are perhaps even clearer in his work on the conflicting dreams and fantasies about ‘the Holy Land’ that are held in common by Jews, Muslims, and Christians. These conflicting dreams have fuelled conflict in and around, and over and about, a territory—a territory that is for many of those involved more symbolic than physical—since the Middle Ages, and it continues today (Said 2005).

This kind of relation between dreams and lived practices has many dimensions. For instance, Cohen has shown the strong connections between nationalist ideological discourse and martial arts practices such as krav maga in Israel (Cohen 2009). These connections are not surprising in such a context. But Frank focuses on case studies that may be said to be a world away from the pressures of such intensely militarized, securitized, and

ideologized contexts as those studied by Cohen. Frank looks at the ideological circulation and mutations of taijiquan as a signifier of Chineseness (Frank 2006) in a study which relates more closely to the earlier work of Said than Cohen. But, to be clear, Frank's work is in no way a mere repetition or replaying of arguments made by Said in the 1970s—even though it is not uncommon for academics to continue to reinvent the wheel that was first rolled out in Said's 1978 work, *Orientalism*. Rather, Frank combines Said's insights with those of thinkers like Benedict Anderson and a focus on lived, sensual, experiential relations, in order to configure the relations between dreams and macropolitical forces:

The world of imagination offers an alternative means for understanding identity as something that is both socially and sensually constructed. Imagined identities, like imagined communities, can rise and fall through textual vernaculars. Again, I extend Benedict Anderson's notion of vernaculars here to include more than just print. In the realm of martial arts, they also include film, television, and poetry that is written in classical forms but intended to be recited aloud. (190)

This is why, in addition to focusing on the ethnographic scene of the moment of cross-cultural interaction, Frank shows how even the physical-sensual interplay and senses of identity are supplemented by history and society. He does this by 'tracing a history of how martial arts texts, including visual texts, have contributed to the imagining of self in China' (191). Crucially, Frank shows how easily and frequently there is a slippage between texts of different orders and registers: historical fact is conflated with legends of all orders, whether from folklore, literature, or even contemporary film, in order to give accounts of the present. He observes:

I often asked practitioners in Shanghai to tell me about the origin of the art. With very few exceptions, they began with Zhang Sanfeng. However, as time went on, I noticed that the version of the Zhang Sanfeng story I was hearing bore a striking resemblance to a popular Jet Li film called *Taijiquan Zhang Sanfeng*. Whether the story spawned the movie or the movie spawned this particular version of the story is difficult to determine, but the story, told through film, passed on orally, and passed on through the 'ancient' *Forty Chapters* evokes, in Frederic Jameson's terms, conflicting modes of production that coexist and struggle within the same artistic process. (Frank 2006: 193)

All of the modes of inscription—writing, oratory, folklore, film, and even video games and comics—'serve as teaching devices in the present'. But 'because they are of the past, they also transmit experiences of Chineseness for both Chinese and non-Chinese people. They offer a framework



for imagining the past' (193). The imagination of the past has an effect on the present, and can be manipulated. This is what Derrida referred to as *teleiopoeisis* (Derrida 1997): the manipulation of understandings of the past to orientate fantasies, dreams, imaginings, understanding, and practices in the present. As already briefly mentioned in earlier chapters, Frank gives a stark example in the case of the emergence of *mulanquan*:

The ca. 1937 film *The Legend of Mulan*, for example, depicts the famous tale of a devoted daughter who takes the place of her aged father when troops are called to arms to fight invading barbarians. Within the context of 1937 China, *The Legend of Mulan* may be read both as a resistance to the incursions of the Imperial Japanese Army and as a modernist representation of Chinese womanhood. To echo Douglas Wile's sentiment about the popularity of taijiquan among nineteenth-century elites as a re-masculating process, *Mulan* might represent a call for social action to men who had become politically and militarily impotent under the double weight of colonization and Japanese militarism (Wile 1996). For the modern Shanghai person, however, neither the film nor the legend on which it is based is allowed to inspire resistance. Instead, in the midst of the anti-Falun Gong crackdown of 1999, the story of *Mulan* inspired the creation of a state-sponsored set of sword-and-fan dances, called *mulanquan*, practiced primarily by women. *Mulanquan* became the very symbol of legitimacy. (197)

As such a glaring example of institutional-ideological intervention illustrates, it is not simply beliefs about the past that are modified and manipulated when history is reinvented along different axes. It is also belief and practice in the present. The ideological control of historical knowledge can be used to great political effect. In these examples, we are seeing the state management of Chineseness.

If Frank is right that the construction—or at least popularization—of *mulanquan* was a concerted effort to fill up the space formerly occupied by Falun Gong in China, then it is clear that the political management of imagination in this case is a matter of national cultural policy, one that is likely to have involved deliberation and a calculation that Westerners and other foreigners may be attracted to come as tourists to China to learn a (new) 'ancient' martial art, related to or inspired by the Disney film they had recently seen. Of course, despite its international and touristic dimension, the primary context of such an intervention is in a strong sense internal to the Chinese state. Nevertheless, the *internationalism* of taijiquan and other Asian martial arts—their inevitable drift and migration—is a matter that raises a related question: What is the status of 'taijiquan dreams' elsewhere, outside of China?

## JOURNEY TO THE WEST

Frank discusses martial arts migrants, pilgrims, and tourists throughout his study. At one point he notes the time he disputed his own Chinese teachers' opinions about students of taijiquan. According to Frank, his teachers would often voice the opinion that foreign students were becoming not only the *most diligent* students but also the *majority* of students (202). Frank questioned this claim. But, he reports, in the context of a discussion of the emigration of martial arts teachers from China, there was 'a sense' among the practitioners 'that the little old Chinese man of yore, a symbol that appeared in novels and in films, a symbol of what was wisest and best in Chinese martial arts, had perhaps emigrated to America' (203). He reports that one of the oldest and most senior taiji masters of the association he was involved with in Shanghai, Ma Yueliang of the JTA, 'had apparently noted the change earlier than most' (203) and speculates that Ma's insight arose 'perhaps because he understood both the orientalizing and the self-orientalizing quality of the little old man image all too well through first-hand experience':

foreigners venerated him through racialized lenses, and Chinese people venerated him as some sort of unfrozen mammoth from an idealized past. Yet, in the JTA, it was Ma who frequently commented that over-mystification of the art detracted from teaching it and learning it. Now, in the face of what they considered the new reality of Chinese martial arts, the caretakers of the JTA saw that Ma was right, for the former easy opposition of Chinese and foreigner melted away before their eyes as a new category of 'transnational taijiquan practitioner' emerged. In the face of such change, was it possible that taijiquan was no longer Chinese at all? (203)

The question of transnationalism is pertinent to considerations of any martial art. Certainly today Chinese martial arts are both national and international. They cross borders and are hence transnational. However, as Frank emphasizes, and to reiterate a phrase from Donna Haraway (Haraway 1991) that we have already deployed: the global dissemination (Derrida 1981) of Chinese martial arts involves a double process of the simultaneous erosion and intensification of nationalism wherever they occur. Thus, outside of China, taijiquan and other 'traditional' Chinese martial arts carry the traces and weight both of the Chinese discourse of cultural nationalism and the discourse of Western orientalism (Chow 1993), and these forces often play themselves out in what Frank characterizes as 'the orientalizing and the self-orientalizing quality of the little old man image' (Frank 2006: 203).

But the movement of any solitary signifier (Derrida 1981) or even of any interlocking cluster of signifiers, functioning as a series or discrete and self-replicating serial form (Mayer 2014), will not stay exactly the same, when moving from one context to another. Whether it is one signifier or one cluster of interlocking and interacting signifiers, the movement from one scene of discourse (say, China) to another (say, the United States) will involve a degree of modification, or ‘cultural translation’ (Chow 1995; Bowman 2010a), affecting both the ‘text’ and the ‘context’ (Krug 2001). As Frank puts it,

as a transnational practice, martial arts become a conduit for not only the movement of people but also the movement of identities. The localities that move from one space to another, through film, through products, through practices, and through individuals, constitute and reconstitute many forms of Chineseness. (Frank 2006: 207)

In the face of the problem of the phantasies that structure cross-cultural desire, Frank notes that the unquestionably good thing about martial arts tourism or pilgrimage—or even, arguably, cross-cultural pedagogical relationships of any kind—is this: ‘For foreign martial artists who travel to China in search of not just skills but wisdom, acquired from not just a teacher but a master, participation in the back-and-forth flows of the transnation becomes an unveiling process, a process of peeling away preconceptions’ (207). However, as Rey Chow’s discussion of cross-cultural desire in ‘The Dream of a Butterfly’ (Chow 1998) suggests, the problem is that it is often *the fantasy of the other culture as being something absolutely and enigmatically other that sustains the desire or interest in that other*. Once the fantasy has been ‘unveiled’, the desire of and for either the other or the secret presumed to be possessed by the other, may vanish, dissipate, or at least become jeopardized.

Admittedly, this could be said to depend on the *nature* of the desire, or the nature of the fantasy of the desirer. In Chow’s reading of Cronenberg’s film *M. Butterfly*, she notes that one of the protagonists ensnared in the cross-cultural romance is able to continue to love and desire the other even after all has been ‘unveiled’. The other party, however, is unable to. So, rather than essentializing any of the components involved in such debates—desire, cultural difference, essentialism, and so forth—it seems safer to begin from the observation that *it all depends*. In *M. Butterfly*, the French diplomat who (apparently) falls in love with a Chinese spy clearly has a completely *different relationship to his relationship* than does his partner. And this makes all the difference.

The connections between Chow's discussion of the asymptotic, 'impeded', and constitutively 'imbalanced' character of cross-cultural desire in 'The Dream of a Butterfly' and any consideration of martial arts qua cross-cultural phenomenon are many. For instance, Frank hints at the problems of cynicism and the demise of desire that can both arise when myths have been demystified or 'unveiled'. Discussing the perpetual absence of the mythical 'little old Chinese man' that so many martial arts students may have once desired to meet and learn from, Frank observes that the practitioners are forced to re-evaluate their desires and construct a new relationship with them, to them, or for them—even to revise and reconstitute their desires *tout court*. Either this, or risk the burning out of their martial arts passions.

In psychoanalytic terms, it is *phantasy* that structures desire and sustains interpersonal relationships, whether interpersonal relationships or relationships with an activity. Slavoj Žižek paints a very vivid picture of the place of desire in any sexual relationship: as he puts it, the truth of sexual desire is not two people copulating and looking into each other's eyes and truly seeing or being with each other; it is rather in the fact that even when in the closest physical relationship, protagonists are each still indulging in a phantasy of the other (and indeed a phantasy of themselves as they imagine they are imagined by the other). That is to say, for Žižek, even when two lovers are engaged in passionate sex, they are not exactly or entirely 'with' each other. Ultimately, indeed, each is isolated in their lone onanistic phantasy.

In martial arts desires, phantasy is arguably also in play in a similar way. However, according to Frank's argument, over time this necessarily must change if desire is to transform into love or identity and to persist. As Frank reiterates, 'identity moves'. And perhaps the movement required is that of a movement from *desire* to *belief*. Anyone who has ever been involved in activities like *neigong* exercises—which involve standing completely still for protracted periods of time every single day—should be able to attest to how crucially important *belief* is to our continued involvement in the activity.

From phantasy to practice, it seems clear that the international circulation of martial arts requires an analysis that spans or traverses many realms and registers. For Frank, it 'requires moving beyond the macrolevel discourse through which globalization is usually theorized and instead maneuvering fluidly between history, political economy, and the personal stories of people who are both globalized and conduits of globalizations' (207). This is why it is crucial to remember that, in the case of a Chinese practice like taijiquan, 'the actual movement of the art across borders through real human beings, involves a mutually constitutive dialogue between

transnational images of Chineseness and the actual experience of practice' (208). The actual experience modifies, moves, and perhaps fundamentally transforms the initial state of phantasy, desire, and identity.

I say 'perhaps' because it is not at all clear that such relations (hinging on phantasy) are, so to speak, constitutively 'translated', in the sense of *modified in both directions*, when taijiquan crosses from China to the United States or the West more generally. To clarify what this means, and to try to weigh it up, it is helpful to ponder two different types or registers of cultural encounter that Frank discusses. One is interpersonal. The other is linguistic and conceptual. The two are connected. In the first sort of example that Frank gives, we clearly see the dynamics of a potential transformation of preconceptions (aka 'prejudices'). But it quickly segues into the second, which is far more knotty. Consider the following:

Non-Chinese students come to Wong's studio to experience Chineseness through taijiquan or other martial arts, to actually become Chinese for a few hours during their day. They expect Wong to enact a certain brand of Chineseness. Wong, in turn, both gives them what they want and confronts them about this expectation. The non-Chinese student comes looking for the little old Chinese man (even though Wong is young). Wong, on the other hand, wants no part of it, but he and other teachers who suffer similar instances of orientalization often feel that 'resistance is futile'. After all, taijiquan and qi-related media have become readily recognizable features in American popular culture over the last twenty years. (215)

Thus, in Frank's interpretation, a kind of orientalist desire initiates or plays a constitutive part in the non-Chinese choice of kung fu or taijiquan. The desire is to play at becoming Chinese, or to find out what it's like to be immersed in Chineseness. The teacher may want no part in this, but is nevertheless able *both* to capitalize on it, to a greater or lesser extent, *and* to challenge the cultural presumptions, again to a greater or lesser extent. Reading between the lines (but referring to other moments in Frank's discussion), we might say that various forms of the overcoming of identity take place in the lessons, whether taking the form of 'realizing' that 'we're not so different after all' or, indeed, *forgetting about* identity and difference. Accordingly, we are in the terrain of the possibility for cultural transformation, or at least modification. However, we must remember the twist at the end of the paragraph: 'he and other teachers who suffer similar instances of orientalization often feel that "resistance is futile". After all, taijiquan and qi-related media have become readily recognizable features in American popular culture over the last twenty years' (215). In other words, no matter what interpersonal encounters there may be, perhaps these are

overdetermined in advance by the attending discourse of Chinese martial difference or specificity, which boils down to one word: *qi*. And so many issues condense in and around the discourse of and on *qi* that it warrants our attention.

### THE CONDENSATION AND DISPLACEMENT OF *QI*

Frank homes in on the significance of the term ‘qi’ for the discourse of Chinese martial arts. This is because in it is condensed arguably *everything* about the difference and specificity of Chineseness. Of course, it is perhaps the case that in the West arguably all forms of *Chinoiserie* make some ineradicable reference to qi—from discourses about *feng shui* (which encompass both interior design and urban planning) to discourses about health, calligraphy, and sexuality. Thus, to discuss qi is to discuss Chineseness in *condensation* and *displacement*.

The terms *condensation* and *displacement* derive from Sigmund Freud’s epochal analyses in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. However, although Freud remains important in academic discourse, it was his student Jung who caught on in the popular imagination of counterculture America and Europe. And with the popularity of Jung came a certain reading of Chinese classics such as the *Tao Te Ching*. Frank points out that even a brief history of the treatment of Chineseness in the West reveals ‘that the popularization of taijiquan as a product of Daoism has been closely linked with larger historical and geopolitical forces that have had a special resonance for particular generations’. He continues by noting that ‘in the Europe and America of the 1920s and 1930s, Jung’s and Wilhelm’s work reached a large audience of intellectuals and artists’ (212). However, in a crucial passage, Frank encompasses the range of ways in which the ‘real explosion of Daoism as popular culture in Europe and America . . . occurred in the 1960s, when Daoism, along with Zen Buddhism and various Maharajiisms, spread in the United States’ (213). He observes that taijiquan was ‘very much a part of this resurgent interest in spiritual practices’, not least because, owing to changes in U.S. immigration laws, ‘for the first time in American history, a critical mass of enthusiastic “native” teachers coalesced to support existing interest, as well as generate new interest among a well-educated middle class’ (213). Moreover—and crucially—‘Daoism was one among several exotic philosophies that offered alternatives to existing paradigms, and thus it made an important contribution to counterculture ideology’ (213). With this came a crucial ‘institutional’ response in the West, one that had a significant disruptive discursive impact:

Popular presses like Shambala Books heavily weighted their catalogs toward Eastern mysticism. Editors at Shambala, *Yoga Journal*, *Tricycle*, and *New Age* magazine not only published on the basis of what they thought their public wanted to read, but often led the way in explicitly or implicitly linking practices like taijiquan to Daoism. It is not that the link between Daoism and taijiquan was ‘invented’ during this period. Douglas Wile (1996) argues convincingly that the Chinese literati made the link as early as the mid-nineteenth century. But the hunger for alternative spiritual paths, combined with the marketing of taijiquan as a ‘path to ancient wisdom’, created a perception among American taijiquan aficionados that there were appropriately ancient little old Chinese men out there waiting to share their secrets. Together with the powerful, iconic image of Charlie Chan, the popularity of Confucian sayings in fortune cookies (which were invented in California), folkloric iconography in Chinese restaurants (e.g., Chinese zodiac placemats), and the actual increase of elderly Chinese in the United States that resulted from relaxed immigration laws, the racialized image of the wizened old Chinese man firmly attached itself to the American imagination. True, some of the knowledgeable teachers who came to America at this time were in fact elderly and male. Zheng Manqing, the first great popularizer of taijiquan in the United States, embodied this image for many American practitioners, and that in turn fed the social-sensual construction of Chineseness for many Americans who studied taijiquan. (213)

Moreover, as is widely known, the start of the 1970s brought Richard Nixon’s Shanghai Communiqué, Bruce Lee films, and the TV show *Kung Fu* (212). But in addition to this, Frank spends some time pondering the significance of the first major sighting of taijiquan in a U.S. film: namely, the improvised version of what appears to be the short Zheng Manqing taiji form in *Easy Rider* (1969). He writes:

*Easy Rider*, starring Peter Fonda, Jack Nicholson, and Dennis Hopper, contained not only signs of flower children looking for America and free love, but also the earliest cinematic reference to taijiquan in an American film. Hopper and Fonda are hanging out at a desert farming commune. A theatre group (the Gorilla Theatre) has just finished performing for the community. Fleetingly, we see a man going through what appears to be a half-improvised version of Professor Zheng Manqing’s taijiquan form on the stage. No mention is made of what is happening in the scene. The characters watching the scene appear to know what they are seeing, and the taijiquan all seems very normal to them. What we are left with is an indeterminate exoticization of ‘the Chinese’, sandwiched between images of sharing, free-spirited wandering, and nature. While the scene has no direct significance to the story line of *Easy Rider*, it is in retrospect the symbolic seed of an emerging New Age discourse. As a counterculture symbol, *Easy Rider* also raises the question of whether or not we can read American taijiquan as resistance to state control of the body. (215)

With this, Frank hits on a clear discursive mutation occurring around taijiquan in its migration from China to the United States. From having acquired a kind of ‘nationalist’ (at least in the sense of ‘folk’/‘traditionalist’) valence in China, in the United States it loses this connotation, is stripped of nationalism, and becomes a kind of anti-nationalist symbol of ‘nature’. This reflects its overdetermination by a West-produced ‘Daoist discourse’. It is thus as *something ‘natural’* (and not as *something ‘communist’*) that taijiquan comes to somehow ‘oppose capitalism’ in the 1960s counter-culture of the United States. As Frank puts it, ‘The communal setting of the taijiquan scene in *Easy Rider* and the overall message of resistance to capitalism and of a return to nature coalesce to associate taijiquan with that resistance’ (216). Then, later:

For the *Easy Rider* generation, cultivating qi, along with free love and war protests, was equated with cultivating resistance to the domination of the body. In short, the 1960s in America can be seen as a return to good old-fashioned Daoist resistance to authority. In later American media representations, acts of resistance became closely equated with martial arts. (216)

Because ‘qi-related practices are ultimately concerned with cultivating health in the body’, this prompts Frank to ask the following question: If, first, ‘as Foucault argues, the modern state exerts control over our bodies’, and if, secondly, ‘it is in the interest of the state to keep them healthy’, then might ‘the practice of taijiquan in America constitute a moment of agency beyond state control’ (231)? The answer to this question would certainly be yes, were it not for the complexities of transnational exchanges and their vertiginous macropolitical significance and status. For instance, Slavoj Žižek (as we have seen), has argued that precisely this kind of countercultural ‘resistance’, all wrapped up in a ‘Western Taoism’ or ‘Western Buddhism’ is in fact nothing more nor less than what he calls the ‘hegemonic ideology’ of postmodern capitalism (Žižek 2001). I have engaged with this debate many times so I will not do so again here (Bowman 2007b, 2010b, 2013a). Indeed, the Žižekian argument is of little decisive relevance in considering questions of martial arts and cultural migration and translation. So, I will explore further what I earlier introduced as the more knotty dimension of cross-cultural migration and the question of cultural transformation related to that term of great condensation and displacement for Chineseness, ‘qi’.

As already mentioned, while it seems theoretically possible for practical encounters between people from different cultures to precipitate identity and discourse-modifying transformations, the problem is that these encounters are already, so to speak, pre-constituted or preliminarily ‘mapped



out' by historical discourses which have provided expectations and prejudices, which mediate the encounters of individuals. Frank proposes that the structuring term of 'taijiquan encounters' is the second-order semiotic term 'Chineseness'. But in the last chapter of his book, he refines this to propose that the key discursive operator in all of this is the term 'qi'.

So, what happens when 'qi' is translated from Chinese to English, or from China to America? Frank proposes the following:

When a speaker 'borrows' a word, that act may involve specific strategies to communicate social messages beyond the meaning of the word. In the case of qi, the attempt to define the word actually provides one of the chief contexts for using it. In addition, even while the definition of qi remains unclear to the members of this community in which it appears, it is the very act of using the word that produces social solidarity, enhances the speaker's status, and evokes a shared image of an exoticized Chinese Other that supports a larger transnational discourse about qi. (220)

Thus, English language discourse about qi is always *also* going to be 'about establishing status and solidarity within a community of like-minded specialists' (220). This is because, 'As nonnative speakers, as borrowers, we . . . rely on higher-status members of our peculiar speech community (the community of taijiquan and qigong practitioners) to elaborate the parameters of how and when the word can be used'. He continues: 'We also rely on these high-status members to serve as our conduits to a transglobal cultural phenomenon—the spreading of qi-related practices beyond China' (223). The 'translation' or even just the employment of the term is never neutral. It involves all sorts of hierarchizing and affiliating operations:

As instances of transglobal cultural exchange, borrowed words can take on larger roles as measures of interests and values that cross geographic and political boundaries. Qi is one such instance. The increasing use of qi in English, especially in the last twenty years, provides us with a small window into how values, tastes, and beliefs in American culture—at least predominantly white, middle-class American culture—have paralleled, to some degree, those in Chinese culture. Qi, therefore, serves as an example of a living, moving Chinese identity, an instance of borrowing that goes well beyond language. (224)

Where else does it go? As Frank explains, such 'code switching' can relate to 'asserting political power or emphasizing social factors such as class, educational level, and race' (220). So it also goes into the forming of new group identities, hierarchies, and types of relation. Some of these—perhaps, indeed, the vast majority—are inevitably going to be *commodified* relations. And it is here that processes of pitching, branding, marketing,

packaging, and repackaging come into intimate sensual-social contact with 'identity'. Frank himself discusses the aesthetics of the taiji and yoga exercise VHSs and DVDs of the 1980s and 1990s, but we can clearly easily bring this up to date with our own examples; and what Frank observes of these products remains important:

The tapes, through words and images, tie taijiquan to New Age practices and to American conceptions of physical fitness. Spandex-clad aerobics bunnies emphasize, in our minds, the importance of looking good over an esoteric Daoist quest for immortality. Images of the exotic Chinese also persist, though in a somewhat jumbled form. The Buns of Steel tape, for example, is filmed in a Japanese Garden, evoking nature and 'Orientalness', with the implication that Japanese and Chinese gardens share precisely the same aesthetic values. (227)

As such, in the face of such crass cultural/commodity hybrids, we might enquire into what has changed. On the one hand, images of the 'East' remain orientalist through and through. The representations of 'Chineseness' are saccharine, crude, and both geographically and conceptually incoherent, as with so much pure orientalism. But, on the other hand, *everything* has changed: the language, the elements involved, the juxtapositions and relations, the presence of so much that is Western, and so on. This is both hybridity *and* simulacrum. It presages the emergence of the arguably currently hegemonic 'oriental aesthetic' in Hollywood action cinema that was perhaps born with *Blade Runner* and that was certainly mature by the time of *The Matrix* (Park 2010). Certainly, during the 1990s and early 2000s, 'the "sublime, exotic Orient" aesthetic is a regular feature in martial arts instructional videos that address qi' (225). In such texts, we often see

the picaresque, exotic China: obligatory traditional architecture, astonishingly beautiful gardens, traditional Chinese instrumental music playing underneath [the] images, and all the while, the skyscrapers, overpasses, subways, KFCs, and McDonalds that make up modern Beijing and especially Shanghai are hidden from view, or at least minimized. (225)

However, as the twenty-first century marches on, and as the vast, spiraling constructions of Chinese urban (post)modernity come more and more into the foreground of what Park calls the 'oriental style' of not only action and martial arts films, East and West, but also instructional DVDs and martial arts discourse more widely, one question may now become that of the future of the contours of the representation of qi in the new urban aesthetic of the representation of Chineseness. This question returns us to matters of

tradition, on the one hand, and discontinuity, on the other. It seems likely that this matrix will continue to intensify, through future rearticulations of what Rey Chow calls 'primitive passions', or symptoms of the transnational and the urban (Chow 1995).

Discourses of martial arts register cacophonous and contradictory contingencies, exigencies, and desires. Consequently, martial arts studies must explore the entanglements of its own objects with the cultural, media, academic, political, interpersonal, and sensual realms and registers that flow into and out of what any kind of study of martial arts enables and disrupts. To recast a phrase from Petrus Liu, the object of study 'martial arts' is itself, in a sense, a stateless subject, one that knows no borders or boundaries. Whatever it becomes, martial arts studies must be fit for the chase and able to keep up with the challenges scattered far and wide of this stateless subject, these stateless subjects.



# Notes

## CHAPTER 1

1. The self-styled radicalism of some cultural studies would tend to place business or management studies in opposition to the ethical and political concerns of cultural studies. However, many have argued that any interest or investment in culture and/or society cannot be divorced from an interest or investment in the questions of its *management*.

2. Channon and Jennings themselves call for future research to look into various ‘political’ matters (15–16), for instance—and the determination of any kind of ‘political field’ cannot exclude the theoretical, hermeneutic, and interpretive because politics is essentially an argumentative relation.

3. Ironically, the authors do mention Frank’s PhD thesis (in footnote 26), a work from which his monograph is most likely derived and developed. Given this, it makes the omission of his subsequent monograph all the more peculiar.

## CHAPTER 2

1. ‘The tournament itself adhered to international rules’, notes Frank, ‘rules that had largely been developed as part of a transnational effort led by the Chinese government’s sports bureaucracy to add Chinese martial arts events to the already existing Olympic repertoire of Japanese judo, Western-style boxing, fencing, and various forms of wrestling’ (158).

2. ‘At the conclusion of the Zhengzhou tournament, a few days remained to visit the Shaolin Temple and to attend one of the largest martial-arts-oriented performances in the world: the Shaolin Festival in Dengfeng, a key conduit for both the national and transnational transmission of Chinese identity as it is conceived through martial arts’ (175).

3. My thinking here is informed by Derridean deconstruction, but also by the Introduction and the chapter ‘Where Have All the Natives Gone?’ in Rey Chow’s *Writing Diaspora* (Chow 1993).

4. Derrida famously regards such a desire as ‘metaphysical’ and ultimately ‘European’. Needless to say, many theorists and philosophers have taken Derrida to task for his undeconstructed assertion here—including Spivak and Chow. See (Derrida 1976; Chow 2002; Zhang 1992).

5. In modern kung fu and wushu or wuxia film, this fantasy is often elaborated as or transformed into a nationalist fantasy, à la Bruce Lee’s ultranationalist character Chen Zhen in *Jing Wu Men*, and the subsequent incarnations of this character by Jet Li in *Fist of Legend* and Donnie Yen in *Return of the Fist: The Legend of Chen Zhen*, as well as the slight displacement and transformation of Chen Zhen into Ip Man in the first *Ip Man* films of the current cycle. However, as we saw above, Petrus Liu has argued that, along with ‘mandarin duck and butterfly’ literature, martial arts *literature* was often anathema to any nationalizing discourse (Liu 2011).

6. For instance, in a recent interview, the filmmaker Xu Haofeng—one of the screenwriters of *The Grandmaster*—states that for some years, Hong Kong and Chinese filmmakers would copy Western styles in filmmaking because these styles were regarded as being of the highest and most desirable quality (Xu 2013).

### CHAPTER 3

1. I have deconstructed the widespread obsession with ‘the street’ before, with specific reference to ‘politicized academia’. There I referred to it as ‘street fetishism’ (Bowman 2008b). Many similar obsessions circulate in martial arts discourses. Indeed, in all manner of discourses—academic, political, activist, martial arts, and so on—the term ‘the street’ works as a metonym of and for ‘reality’.

2. There are other reasons, too: I spent some time over a period of years ‘learning KFM’, with no formal instructor and only some downloaded MPEGs, some training partners, and a load of enthusiasm and excitement. During this period, my former taijiquan and kung fu instructor asked whether I had ‘gone Ronin’. I agreed that I had.

3. My focus here is clearly very Western. However, my hypothesis is that similar logics and processes operate in all contexts and that differences are differences of degree and temporality, rather than of kind. For further consideration of Chinese contexts, see Lorge (2012), Shahar (2008), Palmer (2007), Wile (1996, 1999), or the very important ethnographic work of Frank (2006). For Japan, see Chan (2000). For

Korea, see Gillis (2008). For the relations between Japanese and U.S. institutions and transformations in that context, see Krug (2001).

4. For recent contributions to the long-running debate about how and why practitioners come to ‘believe in’ their martial arts training activities, see Wetzler (2014), Berg and Prohl (2014), and Downey (2014), in the ‘Martial Arts Studies’ issue of *JOMEC Journal*. Kath Woodward has also provided an alternative recent engagement with this problematic, exploring a wide range of ways to understand practitioner belief and investment in pugilistic training, specifically boxing—but her insights extend beyond boxing (Woodward 2014).

5. Ironically, so-called traditional martial arts pedagogies are rarely older than the twentieth century (Krug 2001). It was certainly during the twentieth century that karate was institutionalized into the forms recognizable today.

6. For an influential, albeit controversial, discussion of the theoretical relations between stultification and emancipation in pedagogy, see Rancière’s book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière 1991). I have discussed Rancière’s work in relation to martial arts elsewhere (Bowman 2009), but return to it again here because it is extremely stimulating in thinking about pedagogy and institution. I discuss it further below.

7. But this is a simplification: consider the common scenario of children being taken to martial arts classes by their parents. Their motivations can hardly be assessed in the same way as those of, say, a victim of assault who is seeking a way to ward off its recurrence.

8. This interview no longer appears to be available online. Its original location, The Martial Edge, appears to have mutated from a mono-website-based format into a more multiple form, Hydra-like, with no one location, but rather several: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and so on. Older material, such as this interview, seems to have been a casualty of this mutation.

9. At the time of writing, parts of these DVD-extras about KFM can also be found online. For instance, here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFQWXn0MVtU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFQWXn0MVtU).

10. Jane Park deems *Batman Begins* to be part of a movement in Hollywood aesthetics that is borrowing increasingly from the visual styles of Hong Kong cinema (Park 2010).

11. For a discussion of some of the implications of DVD-extras, see Leon Hunt’s article ‘Enter the 2-Disc Platinum Edition: Bruce Lee and Post-DVD Textuality’ (Hunt 2014).

12. For an interesting discussion of the intertextual relations between the UFC and gladiatorial films, see Bolelli (2014).

13. Subscribing to such a position is surely what prevents change from happening legitimately or publicly within traditionalist martial arts. To innovate or alter an inherited tradition implies that ‘you think you know better than the founders or past masters’. Combat sports, such as MMA, fare better as innovation and improvement are fundamental to their discourse. We will return to the significance and implications of such discursive differences below.

14. On the fascinating connections between capoeira and the origins of break dancing, see Assunção's work on the history and spread of this Afro-Brazilian art (Assunção 2005).

15. In both martial arts studies and cultural studies, I have often suggested that this point connects things as diverse as general academic criticisms of 'interdisciplinarity' and criticisms of Bruce Lee's innovations (JKD). This is because interdisciplinary innovations of all kinds receive the same kind of reception: hostility and a claim that the innovators don't know enough about what they are doing to do it 'properly'.

16. These terms come from Derrida (1994) and are helpful for (among other things) rethinking ontology in a media-saturated world.

17. For instance, for the shady case of the simultaneous invention and obscuring of the invention of taekwondo in the 1950s, see Gillis (2008). For the twentieth-century evolution of taijiquan into its present forms, see Frank (2006). For the mythological rewriting of modern Japanese arts as 'ancient' see Chan (2000).

18. For an illuminating discussion of the cultural significance and effects of instructional videos on the dissemination of martial arts, see Frank (2006: 225–27).

19. For a discussion of pedagogical sharing and community building via YouTube, see Spencer (2014).

20. On the notion of 'performative interpretation'—and its connection with a theory of ontology, indeed the ontology of the event—see Derrida (1994).

21. I have discussed this at length elsewhere (Bowman 2010b).

22. Notions like 'enculturation' or 'habitus' do not to my mind offer either the descriptive or the analytical possibilities that Foucault's focus on institutional discourses enables. So in the following, preference will be given to a Foucauldian approach to the relationship between institutions and bodies.

23. See Farrer and Whalen-Bridge (2011b) for a collection of essays, each in its own way addressing the question 'Of what is a body capable?' vis-à-vis martial arts.

24. For an account of this notion of 'disagreement', in which disagreement is formulated not as a dispute in which one party argues white while another argues black, but rather as a situation in which both parties argue white but mean different things by it, see Rancière (1999). See also Arditi (2008).

25. For a precise sense of what is meant by 'discursive construction', see Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and work informed by this school of poststructuralism.

## CHAPTER 4

1. Over twenty years ago, John Mowitt asked cultural studies to hesitate before adopting what was then called the 'post-Marxist discourse theory paradigm' that had become popular in the wake of Laclau and Mouffe's 1985 book, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mowitt 1992). He asked us to hesitate before diving into the conceptual universe organized by terms like *discourse*, *hegemony*, *articulation*, *antagonism*,



*equivalence, difference, and the particularity, Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, and so on, that ultimately followed (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000). He did so because—to put it into extremely simplified terms—there is a lot that this sort of paradigm is *constitutively incapable of seeing*.

2. One beauty of Laclauian theory is that the argument about hegemony can so readily be translated into so many other realms, fields, and registers. This is because hegemony is a relational concept. It offers a way of conceptualizing relationships and hierarchies, values, norms. Thus, there can be hegemony in styles, in fashions, in sartorial norms; in conventions; there can be hegemony in activities, in interpersonal relationships, and of course—indeed, first and last—hegemony in representations. Which is where the notion of *cultural politics* comes into its own or where the notion of hegemony at once illustrates and conceals or flattens out an entire field. Another way of saying this is that Laclauian theory is literalist and realist. For instance, it says that an antagonism will produce an entity or identity in and through and as the production of a demand. Or, it says that cultural particularities will contest and compete with each other for dominance or universalization, *aka* hegemony. All of which implies a very anthropological understanding of a group having its own proper identity—no matter how deconstructed and deconstructive this approach seeks to be. They may not be permanent, and they may not be total, but Laclauian theory's ultimate interest is in the fact that political identities are constituted through the antagonism and the demand. Accordingly, a postcolonialist scholar or theorist may worry that therefore this paradigm remains deaf and blind to all but the noisiest and most present of entities and identities. What of the subaltern? What of the silent or silenced? The unseen? The unheard? The postcolonial media theorist might want to ask: What if the element expropriated from the silent or the silenced is actually showcased and moved centre stage? What if what becomes universalized—what becomes hegemonic—in the mainstream of the mainstream—in other words, hegemonic in the hegemony—is something from the subaltern place, context, people, community? Needless to say, I'm thinking of the incorporation of Filipino martial arts into the choreography of *The Bourne Identity* trilogy.

3. Of course, it is perhaps obvious (once it has been noted) that, just like any other signifier, the meaning of any and all of these terms of philosophy, theory, and politics—universalism, universality, particularism, particularity, and so on—are to a greater or lesser extent *up for grabs anyway*. Nevertheless, as soon as they are ushered in as a *cluster* of terms (rather than individual isolated words), their clustering means that they may tend to predetermine, to imply, to associate with, pre-empt, conjure up, and reciprocally reinforce each other's likely meanings. But still, their precise or particular meanings remain up for grabs. There certainly seems to be very little evidence of any universal or even particular consensus on the meanings of universalism and particularity. Disagreement, slippage, play, drift, *virement*: all are inevitable. According to Jacques Rancière, such is the nature of disagreement: disagreement is not necessarily when two people argue different things, argues Rancière; it is more fundamentally when two people argue the same thing but mean very different things by the same words. We see this, for instance, in the pages of the millennial collaboration between Butler, Laclau and Žižek—the

co-authored book, which became a series of quite serious disagreements between erstwhile putative theoretical allies, entitled *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000). One of the main consequences of this book was that what had beforehand appeared to be a kind of theoretical collectivity, or community, pretty much fractured and fragmented—not least because they couldn't agree on their own apparently central terms and concepts.

4. Of course, no matter how 'old' or 'young' these arts may 'really' have been, the martial traditions, first of China and then of Japan were thoroughly mediatized—by Hollywood, Hong Kong, Japanese, and other regional film industries—throughout the 1970s. But the term 'real' is problematic here: for, with Lee, we were not *really* seeing ancient Chinese arts, but rather his own hybrid style; just as with the Japanese enemies in his films, we were not *really* seeing *real* Japanese arts, but rather those arts as imagined in Hong Kong.

5. See Rey Chow, 'After the Passage of the Beast: "False Documentary" Aspirations, Acousmatic Complications', in Paul Bowman, ed., *Rancière and Film*, Edinburgh University Press, 2013, pp. 34–52.

6. One version of the complaint takes the form of asking why, in the films and fictions of the West, the West is always depicted as the best. But to me this is a 'no brainer'—and it makes me wonder whether such complainants have ever seen the depiction of Westerners in Hong Kong or Japanese martial arts films (especially those that were made with Asian rather than global markets in mind). The same rules of simplifying and stereotyping apply, just using different (but equivalent) cultural material.

7. In martial arts, since their mass mediation, there has been a massive mashing and mushing and slewing and slushing of martial arts practices, often trading under a relatively limited number of names. There have of course been new names coined, and new amendments, modifications, hyphenations, and supplementations to erstwhile entities and identities; but mostly this circulation of the same few names conceals profound loosening, weakening, translation, and transformation in practices themselves. Of course, as Nietzsche pointed out, we always use one word ('leaf') for things that are always different from each other ('leaves'). But I mean something specific: these transformations are tied to mediatization.

8. Put differently: it is equally remarkable to note that in the age of increasingly precise digital audio-visual capture and reproduction, martial arts styles and forms and practices still drift away from former states and mutate. Alteration over time was surely inevitable in the past, when pedagogy was almost exclusively a process of ongoing mimesis—of copying the master in an ever-ongoing, ever-doomed effort to constrain the drift away from the desired pure repetition/replication and towards the loathed impurity of imperfect reiteration/alteration. But the capture of masters performing routines and moves perfectly on DVDs and MP4s has not halted the inexorability of this. If anything, it has amplified it. For, as Derrida wrote (or reiterated) in *Dissemination*, now any sign is cut off from its guarantors, its stabilizers, its 'proper ties', and can be picked up and used by anyone.

9. The UFC was the brainchild of Rorion Gracie, who proposed a martial arts competition with no rules, to truly establish which style was best. The first competition took place in 1993, and the first competitions were in many respects hideously brutal. However, what these first few bloodbaths nevertheless seemed to establish was that the ultimate martial art appeared to be nothing other than Rorion Gracie's own family style of jiu-jitsu—*Gracie Barra jiu-jitsu*. And moreover, the strangest thing about this was that while all the other competitors would batter and bloody and break each other, Gracie jiu-jitsu competitors, by contrast, would essentially just shoot in, take their opponent to the ground and then, either quickly or slowly, but always with the ominous inexorability of a boa constrictor encircling some hapless mammal, they would choke and lock and squeeze the life out of them.

So, was this 'ultimate fighting' really *the* ultimate? Was this the particularism that would be universalized? If so, then the reality of real fighting—and the ultimate of ultimate fighting—seemed to be rather disappointing—or at least considerably less dramatic than many had hoped. Certainly the essential *inscrutability* of a ground fight—the lack of clarity to the viewer of what is going on when two fighters are locked apparently motionlessly in a clinch, and why nothing appears to be happening—was a problem for a television product that had from the start positioned itself as a compelling media spectacle—the spectacle of modern gladiatorial unarmed combat. The society of the spectacle wants its spectacles spectacular. Crestfallen martial artists from styles other than Gracie jiu-jitsu tended to console themselves with the argument that neither the UFC 'octagon' nor any other sporting arena could really be regarded as reality. Reality takes many forms, they would say, and in very few of them is it wise to take your opponent to the ground: the ground may be covered in broken glass, for instance, or, as is highly likely, your opponent's friends will be delighted to kick and stamp on you once you are down. But the UFC itself had a far greater problem: how to solve the problem of ultimate fighting being boring. The result was that so-called *reality martial arts* became thoroughly mediatized—from the ground up. Fighters won points for dramatic moves and lost points if clinches and holds took too long to develop into something more interesting. Rounds were introduced, to enable advertising breaks. In other words, MMA and the UFC—perhaps the most brutal and supposedly therefore 'real' of televised sport combat—was mediatized and hyper-realized, in a way that reiterates, albeit in displaced form, the mediatization of celluloid martial arts in the 1970s.

10. *Kung fu* and *karate* and the spectacular kicking art/sport which rose to prominence in their wake and which remains a children's favourite, *taekwondo*.

11. Now, even though I am aware that the perceived quality of any fight or action *choreography* in a film may be predominantly a product of the quality of direction and *cinematography*, I will emphasize the element of *fight choreography* here, and not that of *cinematography*. I know this to be anthropocentric and a focus that risks missing the fact that what we are dealing with is a *filmic text*. Nevertheless, I will maintain this focus because what Walter Benjamin pointed out so sagely many years ago still rings true: when it comes to moving images, it evidently remains the case that the moving images that fascinate humans the most are moving images of humans. And, I would add, when there is fighting in films, what people

are watching—or *trying* to see (if only the cinematography, the camera angles and movements and all of the other editing techniques will allow)—is the fighting. It is certainly the case that I have never seen any spin-off or ‘making of’ films about *Bourne* that focus on anything other than the fighting. And there are many of these films, all over YouTube and elsewhere online: clips from the ‘making of’ documentaries in the DVD-extras; clips about the techniques and moves of Bourne’s signature fighting style—which we learn from the behind-the-scenes footage and interviews with fight choreographer Jeff Imada to be ‘Filipino *kali*’; clips made into montages of fight scenes from the film; commentaries and demonstration videos made by martial artists trying to clarify or cash in on the craze; even whole new websites called things like ‘How to Fight like Jason Bourne’ (offering clips, essays, instructional DVDs and other training products) have sprung up.

12. The fight choreographer, Jeff Imada, tells us: Bourne does *kali* combined with some military stuff and—in his words—‘some Bruce Lee stuff’. Is this the casual, blasé indifference of ethnic specificities of an arrogant Westerner who simply regards all this ‘stuff’ as ‘stuff’, and conflates it indiscriminately? Maybe. But Jeff Imada is himself the protégé of Dan Inosanto. Dan Inosanto is both ethnically Filipino and a close friend and senior student of Bruce Lee. Indeed, Inosanto is one of the very few people authorized directly by Bruce Lee to teach his martial art. After Bruce Lee’s death in 1973, Inosanto continued to teach both Bruce Lee’s *jeet kune do* and the Filipino martial arts, before going on to work in fight choreography. Jeff Imada, a contemporary and friend of Bruce Lee’s son, Brandon, followed Inosanto into this work.

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