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INTRODUCTION

ON MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES IN JAPAN: A PROVOCATION MICHAEL MOLASKY

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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the background of this current issue of *Martial Arts Studies*, followed by an overview and critique of the current state of Japanese-language research on martial arts. My critique is intended as a provocation and does not purport to be a balanced, dispassionate survey of the field. I argue that, while much of the research published in Japanese is of the highest quality, the nation's research on the martial arts has developed largely in isolation and, as a result, is exceedingly narrow in scope. After considering the reasons for this situation, I offer some thoughts about productive areas for future development.

This special issue of *Martial Arts Studies* has its origins in a research group that I organized in Tokyo beginning in Summer 2015. It was funded with a generous grant from the Suntory Foundation and met regularly for two years. The core group consisted of five Japanese scholars, four of whom are specialists in the history or anthropology of Japanese martial arts. The other member specializes in cultural theory and American literature, whereas I work primarily in modern Japanese literature and cultural history and am a relative newcomer to martial arts studies. Paul Bowman was invited by our group to participate in a workshop held in Tokyo in March 2016, and in May 2017 the group traveled to Bath, UK, for a symposium titled 'New Research on Japanese Martial Arts', largely organized by Professor Bowman.

The articles in the present volume by Yasuhiro Sakaue, Tetsuya Nakajima, and Kotaro Yabu emerged from research presented at our Tokyo meetings and at the Bath symposium; those by Bok-kyu Choi and Andreas Niehaus developed from papers that each presented at the Bath symposium. The remaining two articles, by William Little and Raúl Sánchez García, were submitted by the authors and were included in this special issue because they complement the other contributions while broadening the issue's overall scope.

As the only non-Japanese member of the Tokyo-based research group and as a comparative novice in the academic study of martial arts, it may seem curious that I ended up serving as the group's organizer and as co-editor of this special issue of *Martial Arts Studies*. While I make no claims of expertise in the field, I do believe that I am well positioned to facilitate an exchange of ideas between scholars whose martial arts research has been conducted almost exclusively in Japanese and those who read the emerging English-language literature but not Japanese.

I would also like use this forum to offer my impressions of the state of the field in Japan. If these views seem biased or uninformed to readers more familiar with Japanese scholarship, please take my comments as the provocations of a relative novice. Even ill-founded provocations can lead to productive dialogue – which is, after all, the primary aim of this special issue of *Martial Arts Studies*.

When I began reading the Japanese-language research on the martial arts, three characteristics immediately caught my eye because they differed so dramatically from what I had encountered in English-language scholarship. First, nearly all the books and articles were confined to Japanese arts; it was exceedingly rare to find Japanese scholars writing about Chinese, Korean, or other martial arts. Second, even within this relatively narrow purview, there appeared to be inordinate attention given to kendo and judo at the expense of other arts. Admittedly, there is a fair amount of research on swordsmanship and other classical weapons-based arts, and jujutsu has received some attention, but the degree to which research on kendo and judo

dominates the field is likely to surprise many readers of this journal. Third, research on the representation of martial arts in film and other mass media, which constitutes a significant portion of martial arts scholarship in English, is practically nowhere to be found in Japanese. It is my suspicion that any Japanese academic who attempted to address such a topic in relation to martial arts would be readily dismissed by mainstream scholars. Stated differently, film studies and cultural studies have remained notably absent from the Japanese-language research on the martial arts.

There is some data that substantiates my impressions about the inordinate emphasis on Japan-based martial arts in general, and on kendo and judo in particular. Most notably, the Japanese Academy of Budo (*Nihon budo gakkai*) has published data on the number of articles that appeared in the *Research Journal of Budo (Budogaku kenkyu)* from 1968 to the present, and this data further indicates the distribution of published articles by subject matter (kendo, judo, etc.). As of June 2018, a total of 4,202 articles had been published, and a search using the names of specific martial arts revealed the following statistics. The number of published articles on: kendo (1,464), judo (1,415), kenjutsu (swordfighting, 369), jujutsu (271), kyudo (archery, 226), karate (198), sumo (192), naginata (84), aikido (84), shorinji kenpo (Japanese-style shaolin, 38), wushu (19), taekwondo (13), kung fu (6), ninjitsu (5), escrima and other Filipino martial arts (0).¹

In other words, during the past half century, over 99% of the published research in Japan's most influential journal of martial arts scholarship is confined to Japanese martial arts. Granted, one can surely find a small number of articles about non-Japanese arts published elsewhere, but the disparity between Japanese and non-Japanese arts is remarkable nonetheless, and the number of articles solely devoted to kendo or judo amounts to nearly 70% of the total published. When adding articles on kenjutsu and jujutsu, that percentage climbs to over 80%. Considering the worldwide prominence of karate as an iconic Japanese martial art – not to mention the relative popularity of aikido outside Japan compared to kendo, kenjutsu, kyudo, and sumo – I suspect that many readers will find these numbers to be as surprising as I did.

How should we interpret this disproportionate focus on Japanese martial arts? Before offering my own thoughts on the matter, I wish to note another salient characteristic of Japanese-language martial arts scholarship, namely its disciplinary and methodological emphasis on archival-based historical research. In recent years, a few Japanese anthropologists have become involved in martial arts research, but even they tend to rely more heavily on written documents than do most

1 I would like to thank Yasuhiro Sakaue for drawing my attention to this data, which can be found at the link: <https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/browse/budo/-char/ja/>

anthropologists writing in English. Tetsuya Nakajima, whose massive historical study of budo discourse is reviewed in this issue, is such an example, although his focus on the history of budo *discourse* and his rejection of cultural essentialism appears to situate his research outside the mainstream of Japanese scholarship on budo. And although Japan's film industry has made invaluable contributions to the development of the martial arts film throughout the world, the nation's media scholars and specialists of cultural studies have shown scant interest in the cinematic representation of martial arts.

On the one hand, meticulous archival research by historians is the great strength and value of Japanese scholarship to date, in that it mines a body of archival materials that very few non-Japanese scholars are equipped to examine. When such scholarship is made available in English and other languages through translation, it can enrich the global academic discourse on martial arts. Even though it remains largely inaccessible to the outside world, the value of such scholarship should not be discounted. (I should note here that the articles in the present issue of *Martial Arts Studies* written by Yasuhiro Sakaue, Tetsuya Nakajima, and Kotaro Yabu – as well as the book review by Hiromasa Fujita – were translated from Japanese.) Yet, it must be added that the linguistic vacuum in which most Japanese martial arts research has been both conducted and presented can serve to perpetuate the isolation of Japanese scholars, thereby impoverishing the academic discourse inside as well as outside Japan.

At this stage, I am only able to speculate as to why Japanese martial arts scholarship has confined itself almost solely to domestic arts and to a limited disciplinary approach. The reasons are no doubt varied and complex. In fact, this topic itself would make for a valuable area of research. A few possible explanations come to mind, however, and I offer them below as tentative hypotheses (or provocations) in need of thorough investigation in the future.

I suspect that three main reasons account for the current state of mainstream Japanese-language martial arts scholarship: linguistic limitations, ideological conservatism, and institutional recalcitrance. Now that I've made some enemies, let me elaborate.

First, it must be clearly acknowledged that linguistic limitations plague both sides of the language divide: unfortunately, very few non-Japanese scholars of martial arts studies are able to read Japanese texts; conversely, while all Japanese academics are expected to possess reading ability in English, the reality is that few of those primarily engaged in martial arts scholarship possess the fluency to comfortably read entire books in English or to fully participate in international conferences. One need only peruse the list of references at the end of

books and articles on martial arts written in Japanese to confirm that the vast majority of these publications only cite research written in (or translated into) the Japanese language. This linguistic barrier is not easily overcome from either end of the divide, although a greater number of translations in both directions would help begin to bridge the gap. I would also hope that as the field of martial arts studies increasingly gains recognition as a dynamic and rigorous area of academic research, more bilingual scholars with an interest in martial arts will begin contributing to the field in various languages. In fact, there are some hopeful signs that this is already beginning to occur. For example, our 2017 symposium in Bath attracted both Japanese scholars in cultural studies and anthropology who are fluent in English as well as European scholars of Japanese studies who read the language and are conversant with the nation's cultural history.

As for ideological conservatism, which is sometimes manifested as unabashed cultural nationalism, there are ample historical examples from the Meiji era to the present day linking martial arts in Japan to nationalism, militarism, and imperialism. And while I do not consider the vast majority of Japanese martial arts scholars to be fervent nationalists, I do think traces of cultural nationalism and xenophobia can be detected in Japan's martial arts scholarship. This can be seen not only in the exclusion of non-Japanese arts as objects of study, but in the occasional reference to the Japanese arts as embodying some worthy aspect of 'the Japanese character' or even 'the Japanese spirit'.

On the other hand, we should recognize that there are more mundane reasons that, at least in part, explain the disproportionate attention given to Japanese arts in general and to judo and kendo in particular. First, the linguistic limitations noted above combined with the valorization of archival-based historical research as the preferred methodology lead scholars to limit their purview to martial arts in which there is ample documentation and research in Japanese. Because so little research is published on non-Japanese martial arts, the disparity gets perpetuated – not necessarily due to cultural nationalism or xenophobia but simply out of linguistic convenience and disciplinary preference.

Anthropologists as well as scholars working in film and cultural studies are less likely to be quite so constrained by the lack of written documentation, but as I have noted, they remain rare in the world of Japanese martial arts research. Currently, the role of popular media in the representation and diffusion of Asian martial arts (both inside and outside Japan) has largely been ignored in Japanese scholarship. However, as Kotaro Yabu's article attests, there do exist researchers in Japan willing to buck this trend.

Readers of this journal are well aware that media representations, however fanciful, can be just as 'real' in terms of their historical impact as a long-lost instruction manual from an esoteric school of swordsmanship. As Andreas Niehaus demonstrates in his article, Japan has its own rich tradition of popular representations of martial arts through *manga* as well as through film. I should add that many Japanese began their (real life) martial arts study after being inspired by the manga series 'Karate Maniac, First Generation' (*Karate baka ichidai*), which ran continuously from 1971 to 1977 and was subsequently made into a two-part movie. This enormously popular manga series was loosely based on the figure of Masutatsu 'Mas' Oyama and his establishment of the kyokushin style of karate. The field is wide open for those interested in pursuing a broader conception of Japanese martial arts history including popular cultural materials and addressing problems of representation.

As for the disproportionate emphasis on judo and kendo in Japanese-language scholarship, we must remember that, in contrast to karate, aikido, etc., both judo and kendo have long been part of the Japanese public-school curriculum. Scholars of Japanese education history, as well as sports history, are therefore naturally inclined to emphasize judo and kendo over other martial arts. Furthermore, during the Allied occupation of Japan (1945-1952), the American authorities who administered the occupied forces were especially sensitive to historical connections linking kendo and public education to Japanese militarism (see Sakaue's article in this issue), leading many martial arts scholars interested in the early postwar years to focus on kendo. And, of course, judo was the first Asian martial art to become an Olympic sport, so researchers especially interested in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics (or in Olympic history in general) understandably choose to focus on judo over other martial arts. Notwithstanding these qualifications, however, I still believe that contemporary martial arts research in Japan remains unnecessarily narrow and isolated – to the detriment of all researchers interested in martial arts studies, regardless of nationality.

Many worthwhile areas of research await the attention of Japanese martial arts scholars. As noted above, research on non-Japanese arts and on representations of the martial arts in Japanese mass media is sorely lacking. The history of karate has received far too little attention as well, particularly the process by which it was transformed from an Okinawan art to a Japanese one. When – and why – did naginata and kyudo become popular among young women? Gender issues in general have been largely overlooked. What is the historical relationship between particular martial arts and the yakuza gangster culture? What type of interaction or exchange took place between Japanese martial artists and local practitioners of 'native' arts in those Asian countries occupied by Japan during the first half of the twentieth century? And after the war, during America's postwar occupation of Japan's main islands (1945-

1952) and Okinawa (1945-1972), what type of instruction was offered to the occupied forces? Was it watered down 'kid stuff', modified for foreigners, or were they exposed to basically the same curriculum as local students? Instead of hundreds more articles on kendo and judo at the expense of other issues, it is surely time for Japanese martial arts scholars to acknowledge the wider world of martial arts histories and cultures.

Finally, there is the issue of entrenched institutional conservatism, which is by no means a problem that only plagues Japanese research institutions. One need simply recall the brief (still unfolding) history of film studies, cultural studies, gender studies, ethnic studies, etc., in universities throughout the world to appreciate the challenge of gaining 'legitimacy' in an academic institution (Paul Bowman has written extensively about this issue in relation to martial arts studies). Institutions tend to be inherently conservative, in the sense that they naturally want to perpetuate their existence and therefore tend to err on the side of preserving the status quo. I nonetheless remain hopeful that the institutional and ideological barriers in Japanese universities that contribute to the marginalization of Japanese martial arts scholarship can be reduced rather quickly.

I am hopeful because, as someone who began his career as a specialist in Japanese literature, I have witnessed the major transformation of that field over the course of the past twenty years or so. When I was a graduate student in the early 1990s, for example, Japanese literature as an object of research was typically labeled '*Kokubungaku*', or 'National Literature' in Japan. In many universities, these literature specialists were housed in a 'Department of National Literature' that consisted predominantly of scholars whose research – both reading and writing – was conducted almost solely in Japanese. Today, however, these largely monolingual, monocultural academic islands have become far more open to research (and researchers) from outside Japan, and the field of study is now known primarily as 'Japanese Literature'.

Furthermore, there is widespread support for expanding the 'internationalization' of Japan's universities. While I do not expect to see an explosion of new cosmopolitan Departments of Martial Arts Studies in Japan anytime soon, I do think it is reasonable to expect the field to become more open to scholarship and researchers from abroad. This will surely lead to a welcome expansion of domestic martial arts research while providing new opportunities for Japanese scholars to share their work abroad. Such an open exchange of ideas promises to enrich the field overall, and if the present issue of *Martial Arts Studies* contributes to this process in even the smallest way, then it will have been a worthwhile endeavor.

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

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