



Editorial:
Martial arts Studies

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Keywords

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Abstract

This is the editorial for the 'Martial Arts Studies' issue of *JOMECE Journal*, published in June 2014. It briefly introduces the emergent field of martial arts studies, comments on its current manner of development, and suggests that a useful way to characterize works of martial arts studies (as opposed to 'studies of martial arts') relates to their interdisciplinarity. Based on this, it indicates some of the key features of current work in martial arts studies and reflects on the wider value and potential contributions of this emerging interdisciplinary nexus vis-à-vis the academic fields and disciplines from which it is emerging and back into which it is likely to feed. In this light, the editorial proposes that the present collection of articles makes an important contribution to the ongoing development of martial arts studies.

Contributor Note

Paul Bowman is the founding editor of *JOMECE Journal*. He teaches cultural studies at Cardiff University, where he is Director of Postgraduate Research Studies in the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. He is author of numerous books, including *Theorizing Bruce Lee* (2010), *Beyond Bruce Lee* (2013), *Reading Rey Chow* (2013), and *Martial Arts Studies* (forthcoming, 2015). He is a long practicing martial artist.

Academic studies of martial arts are widespread. Indeed, studies of many aspects of martial arts have been appearing within and around a surprising number of disciplines for a considerable number of years. However, not all 'studies of martial arts' are examples of 'martial arts studies'. Indeed, it is possible to propose that martial arts studies is (or is at least becoming) something quite distinct from many other forms of scholarship on martial arts.

Of course, there is no pure or simple divide or distinction between 'studies of martial arts' and 'martial arts studies'. Nevertheless, in its contemporary incarnations (there have been earlier ones, and these have travelled under different names),¹ 'martial arts studies' is a loose interdisciplinary formation with few fixed disciplinary coordinates and fewer standardised features. This is because 'martial arts studies', if it is anything, is not one thing.

Any survey of the academic literature published on diverse aspects of martial arts (in relation to history, culture, society, nation, religion, film, subculture, pedagogy, etc.) suggests that for a long time, martial arts studies has been trying to emerge. Certain impulses and tendencies are discernible in the literature across an exceptionally broad range of disciplines. Indeed, the prehistory of today's emerging martial arts studies is full of works travelling under different disciplinary designations and exhibiting a variety of different academic and intellectual features. These features have so far mostly been determined by the disciplinary spaces

within which they have been carried out. In other words, for many years, martial arts studies have been either carried out predominantly according to the approaches, practices and procedures of relatively rigid disciplinary spaces, on the one hand, or indeed outside of academia altogether, in the very wide publishing world of semi-, para-, and quasi-academic books, magazines and journals on martial arts.

However, thanks at least in part to the transformation of communication networks and the increasing porousness of disciplinary boundaries (and indeed the growing vagueness of the supposed lines separating the 'inside' from the 'outside' of academia or the university), today martial arts studies is emerging in its own right. In other words, martial arts studies is today developing as a field of enquiry and exploration elaborated not within (and within the terms of) one or another discrete discipline, but rather by way of direct and indirect conversations between researchers and writers whose starting points may differ widely but whose interests intersect and whose encounters inevitably traverse both disciplinary and geographical boundaries.

Moreover, at least as much as this has been enabled by connections and communications facilitated by the internet, and as much as it has involved contingent encounters between like-minded researchers, the current state of development of martial arts studies also seems to evince a clear and widespread recognition of the necessity of interdisciplinarity. There seems to be a growing realisation that any formulation of the object 'martial arts' today will necessarily call out for an engagement that has to be open to a very wide range of registers – historical, sociological, physical, pedagogical, psychological,

¹ For recent discussions of the prehistories of today's martial arts studies, see Farrer and Whalen-Bridge (2011) and Garcia and Spencer (2013).

economic, technological, epistemological, ideological, audiovisual, and so on. Accordingly, because of this growing recognition, it seems that researchers of martial arts studies are currently open and amenable to the implications of the necessity of theoretical and methodological interdisciplinarity in approaching *almost anything* (possibly everything) to do with martial arts.

This is arguably different from the situation even a few years ago – certainly decades ago – when *discipline* was king and interdisciplinary fields like cultural studies and media studies were widely eyed with suspicion at best and, more often, contempt. However, today it is hard to avoid the slipperiness and multidimensionality of the objects, processes and logics of the field or fields called up by any focus on martial arts in the contemporary media saturated world. Because of this, even studies focusing on the most physical, embodied and practical dimensions of martial arts would seem more and more obliged to face up to the presence, place, work and effects of film, TV, fiction, YouTube and the complex power of the mediascape.

Or so one might think. But these things are never pre-ordained, and this kind of perspective may not arise naturally or spontaneously, or even at all. Indeed, unfortunately, even in many of the most progressive interdisciplinary approaches to martial arts, the complex significance of the mediascape for many aspects of martial arts remains all too often unrecognised, undervalued, downplayed, or even fundamentally excluded. Very often, studies of martial arts begin with a quick mention of the influence of Bruce Lee, before quickly moving on to other things, never to return to the place and role of this often profoundly foundational,

influential, initial and initializing ‘media supplement’.

The tendency for academic work to subordinate or exclude the media supplement in studies of martial arts was something that prompted the precise orientation and bias of my call for papers for this issue of *JOMEC Journal*. My contention in the call for papers was that media, mediation and mediatization of all kinds is increasingly complex and crucial, and should be central to any thoroughgoing understanding of martial arts – in relation to culture, society, identity, or anything else – in the world today. Accordingly, the call for papers stated clearly that this present collection would be deliberately biased in favour of works that engaged with the place and significance of media in martial arts studies.

The collection of essays that follows this editorial is the result of that call for papers. It is a collection of articles coming from the broadest range of scholars, from the most well established and best known in the field to the youngest and newest. Moreover, the articles come from and refer to a wide range of disciplinary fields. The overall effect is hugely stimulating, and it seems clear that this collection can reasonably be expected to make a significant contribution to this burgeoning field, informing and influencing its future development. At the very least, because of the existence of this collection, one might justifiably expect all future researchers and writers on martial arts to feel the need to pause and reflect on the presence, place, work and significance of media and the mediascape in even the most embodied aspects of practices of martial arts.

So as not to hierarchize or compartmentalize, and in order to maintain the

sense of its disciplinary diversity, I have deliberately not grouped the articles into thematic sections. Instead I have merely organised the essays alphabetically (by surname of the author). Readers will always bring their own agendas, preferences and biases to such a collection, but my hope is that readers from one disciplinary orientation may explore articles herein that derive from different disciplines. To the extent that this happens, then the collection will be a success. Such a reception would even to some extent reflect the convivial ethos of its production. For, the ethos in the creation of this collection has been one of collegiality, openness, help and mutual respect throughout. Contributors have often conveyed a sense of excitement at the coming together of this collection, and at what it signals and could enable for future works or martial arts studies, and indeed the future development of the field as a field.

Of course, up until now, martial arts studies has existed more as a loose network – often a field without a name. But with collections like this appearing, following on from important earlier collaborations, publications and projects, martial arts studies is increasingly gaining visibility – and momentum. As one contributor put it in a recent email to me, such collections have the capacity to feed into much more than the development of one discrete field; they also have the propensity to flow back out into and to transform the other disciplines that connect with it in various ways.

Such would be one wider ‘disciplinary hope’ vis-à-vis the potential of martial arts studies. But before and after such concerns, what resounds clearly from the very diverse range of works comprising

this collection, is the enthusiasm, excitement, and conviction that all of this *matters* and can make a difference, in myriad ways.

Indeed, even if today’s martial arts studies could be said to have a long (pre)history already, much of the excitement about the field today relates to the fact that many of its conversations are really only just beginning. Many articles in this issue have been built on insights developed by the earlier works of some of this collection’s own contributors; the articles gathered together here will themselves constitute the foundations for further conversations.

Where will these conversations take place and what will be their effects? The answers to such questions depend entirely on the efforts of individuals and institutions. Collective efforts and group collaborations seem key here. For this reason, the first of hopefully many conferences of martial arts studies has been planned to follow up on this publication. Accordingly, all being well, June 2015 will see the first major international martial arts studies conference at Cardiff University. Watch this space.

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