

**Book review: Paul Bowman, *The Invention of Martial Arts: Popular Culture Between Asia and America* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2021), 280 pages, ISBN 9780197540343.**

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Paul Bowman's latest book is a journey into 'media archaeology', going beyond the usual classics (martial arts movies and novels) into the less explored or even uncharted medias (pop music, TV commercials, newspapers, cartoons, technical literature. etc.). The author has undertaken a fresh (and refreshing) investigation of the notion of martial arts as a discursive entity (p. 15) in English speaking language media, mainly in the United Kingdom but also in the United States. It is, on the one hand, a history of the meanings and representations of martial arts as an overarching concept. On the other hand, it is an argument bound in theoretical concepts and ideas (cultural studies) about what martial arts mean and, more importantly, about how they were(/are) received and used.

The main argument is that the term 'martial arts' is used ('invented', p. 240) as an overarching concept in popular culture only from the 1970s onwards. That term, however, does have a history, which the author traces back mainly in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. The book is constructed in a series of chronologically organised chapters that explore different kinds of media with a range of in-depth case studies. The author uses each chapter to unfold the discussion about the invention of martial arts' argument, as well as addressing relevant connected issues.

The first chapter (Conceptual Foundations) lays down the basic ideas and concepts, allowing Bowman to develop his argument for the need to stay away from a formal (final?) definition of martial arts, as well as how to deconstruct the concept in a transhistorical fashion by using cultural theory. Chapter two (Modernity, Media and Martial Arts: From the Beginning at the Origin to the Origin of the Beginning) opens with the concept of 'origin destination' (p. 37), to which I will return later, to offer an example of an alternative approach to the history of martial arts. It showcases Bartitsu (an early mixed martial arts system) as a catalyst because of both its mention in the Sherlock Holmes novels and its association with the Suffragette movement (self-defence). The third chapter (Martial Arts into Media Culture) explores the inclusion of martial arts in comics, TV series, adverts, and popular songs, from the World Wars up to the 1970s. In chapter four (Everybody Was Kung Fu Citing: Inventing Popular Martial Arts Aesthetics), the song 'Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting' is used both to demonstrate the entry of martial arts as overarching concept into popular culture but also to address issues of orientalism, ethnic stereotyping, and cultural appropriation. Chapter five (From Linear History to Discursive Constellation) sketches martial arts' discursive trends and imagery (as well as practice) in popular culture in a range of media from the 1980s onward, showing how diverse but

interconnected these are up to 1993 with the Power Rangers, the Wu-Tang Clan album and the first Ultimate Fighting Championship. In connection with chapter five, chapter six (The Meaning of Martial Arts) maps the cultural and political interests behind shaping the previously identified discourses, images, and practices, insisting on the concept of a 'floating signifier' (p. 134), with a final landing on issues of feminism and gender. Bowman's seventh chapter (I Want my TKD: Martial Arts in Music Videos) explores music videos, categorising the role of martial arts 'aesthetics' in different musical genres with a focus on the representation of the body. Chapter eight (Martial Ads) uses TV adverts to present different treatments of the Chinese and Japanese martial arts, exploring whys and wherefores of their media representations. This leads to the distinction between traditionalist and modern martial arts, which is discussed in the two last chapters. Chapter nine (The Invention of Tradition in Martial Arts) showcases tai chi (taijiquan) in order to address the problematic issue of both authenticity and change in (traditionalist) martial arts by using the concept of 'reiteration'. The last chapter (Inventing Martial Subjects: Toxic Masculinity, MMA, and Media Representation) moves to the more recent practices of western Mixed Martial Arts for an analysis of political and gendered identities in combat sports from the perspective of media, cultural, and martial arts studies.

I would like to dwell on two issues addressed in the book which are especially relevant for the European martial arts both as a field of research and as a modern practice for the Historical European Martial Arts (HEMA) community, which Bowman qualifies (correctly) as 'postmodern' rather than 'premodern' (p. 22). The first is the concept of 'origin destination' (p. 36-7), delineating the fantasist idea of an 'ancient' past, 'lost in the mists of time', that is regularly found in traditionalist martial arts ideas. Bowman uses this concept to analyse scholarship discourses about the origins of martial arts. Without generally undermining myth-busting studies on the origin of any Asian or European martial arts, he shows that the quest for authenticity (for both the researcher and the practitioner) is a *lien commun*, which tends to divert the attention to something that is abstract and disputable or, in other words, essentialist. The need to question the researcher's (or practitioner's) motives in doing so and the status of institutionalised (or the mythical faith in) origins, as done in chapter nine for taijiquan, is striking and calls for a critical analysis of the discourses, which can be categorised as essentialist. Such critical distance is rarely found in studies regarding European martial arts, as for other martial arts in passing.

The second issue is the rather surprising statement advising against producing a formal, definitive definition of martial arts. By using the concept of a 'floating signifier' (p. 134-5), taken from the political theorist Ernest Laclau (1996), Bowman explains why it is almost impossible to offer a definition without influencing (or occulting) one or the other aspect constituting martial arts as a discursive entity. Rather, he suggests other ways to deconstruct the meanings of the concept, especially when it is applied to practices being rediscovered or re-invented, such as HEMA (p. 137). For lack of better terms, shall we refrain from using the terms 'martial arts' to qualify (a conglomerate of evolving and

changing) set practices, discourse about practices, or traces about these that have been found in unearthed objects or archival documents? Of course not, but the author calls for critical distance about the use of words, especially when bound to discourses about cultural objects such as martial arts practices. The ‘origin destination’ and the ‘non-definition’ of martial arts allow one to qualify Bowman’s approach to the history of martial arts as sceptical (without being a marker of denial). Otherwise explained, the author draws attention, above all, to the dangers of writing the history of the martial arts. These elements and the tools he offers in his book are absolutely essential for navigating historiography in the field of martial arts studies.

Bowman’s *Invention of Martial Arts* is built on strong foundations notably laid down by his previous monographs or edited books in the field of martial arts studies (*Deconstructing Martial Arts*, 2019; *The Martial Arts Studies reader*, 2018; *Mythologies of Martial Arts*, 2016; *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries*, 2015). It receives, however, a greater exposure through the publishing house (OUP), compared to his previous publications. Well-documented, thoroughly thought, well-written and not too long, this book is an achievement and a must-read that goes far beyond the field of media studies, cultural studies, or martial arts studies.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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