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ASKING THE QUESTION

IS MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES AN ACADEMIC FIELD?

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes that the emerging field of martial arts studies will benefit by engaging as thoroughly with questions of disciplinarity as with questions of martial arts. It argues that thorough and self-reflexive attention to the problems and possibilities associated with academic work as such will greatly enrich martial arts studies and enable it to develop into as vital and dynamic a field as possible. The article explores martial arts studies in terms of the recent history of disciplinary transformation in the university via the case of cultural studies, and then goes on to explore two different kinds of approach to the academic study of martial arts (first, the work of Farrer and Whalen-Bridge, and then that of Stanley Henning).

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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; 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 both *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 looks 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, 2008, 2012, 2013b], or on the impact of Bruce Lee on global popular culture [Bowman 2010b, 2013a], for example – may have different kinds of question. 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 aim 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 it. 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, half way through the second decade of the 21st 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 conceptualisations 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, organise 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 take-over 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 2007]. 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 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 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; 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 *institution.* 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 recognise, 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 organised by binaries and value systems organised 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 organised 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 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 their 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 non-standard 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 non-standard 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 2007, 2008, 2013c]. The ensuing period of transformation has been characterised 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 conceptualisations? 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 in martial arts studies, for instance, suggests that:

> **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, nutritionist, recreation therapist. The major syllabus itself is made up of modules covering 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: although one cannot entirely gauge the full nature of the content of each module within the degree course, although one cannot presume to know in advance exactly what the 'issues' in taekwondo, taiji, etc. 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 branches 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 institutionalised 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 characterised 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, evermore 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 characterised 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 trailblazing 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 organised 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, marginalisation, exclusion, etc. 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 institutionalisation 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 organised 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 organised by anything like a 'new' paradigm. Business studies would exemplify this equivalent (even if apparently politically or ideologically opposite)[1] 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 organised 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 organised by research publications on the range of topics regarded as defining the field. However, because the object 'martial arts' will be conceptualised and approached very differently depending on the context and

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**.

orientation of the formulation of the term, therefore the publications selected to organise 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, etc. [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 post-operative 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 organise a collection on martial arts in which all of the contributions were required to be organised by Loïc Wacquant's [re]formulation of Bourdieu's conceptualisation 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 organised 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 suggest 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 2007]. *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', etc., 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 to 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 (generalisations, 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 conflations 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 generalisations, simplifications and stereotypes about Asia, they may still unwittingly feed into them. As 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 conceptualising, articulating and expressing non-verbal and non-logocentric 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 organised 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 organised 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; Schmieg 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 advocation 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 approach 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 approach 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 conceptualisations 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 conceptualisation 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 conceptualised, 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 ground-breaking 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 civilisation itself, having been intertwined with its development for millennia. Accordingly, for scholars to ignore, overlook, marginalise 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 recognise 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 multi-volume study *Science and Civilisation in China* [Needham and Wang 1954, 1956, 1959; Needham, Wang, and Lu 1971; Needham and Tsien; 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 recognise 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 Jiujitsu', 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 generalisations 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 generalisations (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-orientalisation* 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. As 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 on 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 ne'er the train 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, whilst 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 organised 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 organised 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 evermore '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, etc., 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 2007]. Needless to say, the problems of establishing 'the' reality and 'the' interpretation cannot but be compounded or even 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 its 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 worldviews 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 that be *The Bible,* the *Tao Te Ching, The I-Ching*, 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 organised by a particular set of questions.

Farrer and Whalen-Bridge point to existing works of martial arts studies and characterise them in terms of their guiding questions and organising 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...

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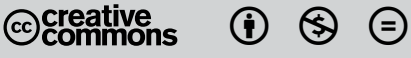

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