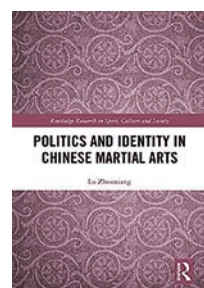


Politics and identity in Chinese martial arts

Henning Wittwer



Reviewed title Politics and Identity in Chinese Martial Arts

Lu Zhouxiang. 2018.
Abingdon and New York: Routledge
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Some readers may raise an eyebrow reading the term 'Chinese martial arts' as it is often entailing stereotypes of an infantile hobby, screaming actors in kung fu films or orientalist fantasies. However, for centuries Chinese martial arts, in the broadest sense of the word, were an important part of the culture of China and played roles in its politics and identity building. In spite of this English language scholarly treatments of their historical, cultural or political dimensions are still rare, which underscores the high relevance of any new publication in this particular field. Lu Zhouxiang's mission in writing the book under review was to highlight and to prove exactly these aspects. Using a historical approach, he starts the first half of his project with developments during the Shang dynasty in the Bronze Age and follows the dynastic chronology until the Qing dynasty. Subsequently the second half of the work covers the 20th Century until the most recent time. Lu's enthusiasm for the subject matter shines through his easy to read, thoroughly referenced text. Each chapter is equipped with its own bibliography. A small drawback is the lack of Chinese characters in many cases, which may render more difficult the identification of some names and sources.

Real fortes of Lu's text are the numerous quotations of various historical sources like poems, songs, chronicles, etc. often translated by the author himself. They make reading the anyway interesting monograph enjoyable and even more entertaining. Right from the beginning Lu manages successfully to demonstrate the importance of martial arts as ritualistic and pragmatic facets in the reality of life of China's early aristocratic respectively political circles. It becomes evident that the nobility's circumstances of living and surviving demanded the appreciation of martial practises. Among other things they assisted in the "construction of the feudal pyramid of power" (p.7) or in diplomatic exchanges (p.20). His investigation of the roles martial arts played in those social mechanisms evinces the importance of academic engagement with Chinese martial arts.

Folkloristic martial entertainment and pragmatic combat skills intermingled and mutually influenced each other under certain circumstances at times. Hence, Lu's well-presented overviews of martial arts related novels and theatre shows through the history may be of special interest to readers with an interest in Chinese literature and drama. Not only were they significant factors in the creation of what Lu labels 'martial arts culture' (p.48), they were also used as means for identity building and political messages (p.119). When politics are involved, the possibility of censorship has to be considered sometimes, which in turn leads to different consequences for martial arts writings and their authors (p.152).

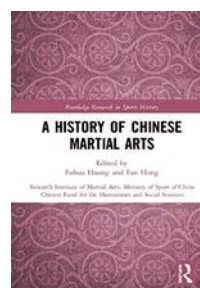
For me one of the most impressive information delineated by Lu is the great extent of governmental support of and involvement into martial arts in the 20th century until today. Besides the obvious and not so obvious effects for China itself, it raises questions about the situations in China's neighbouring nations with their own martial traditions. To give one

example, in 1959 and 1975 China's State Post Bureau issued stamps with martial sports motives (pp. 140 and 150). Similarly in 1964/65 stamps were issued depicting the martial traditions of the Ryukyu Islands which were under US administration at that time (<http://baxleystamps.com/rymartialarts.htm>, accessed 10 March 2019). In both cases native martial arts were officially legitimised and upheld as cultural legacies by these stamps.

In two or three cases the reviewer feels that a little more extended source criticism could have been fruitful. For example on pages 63 and 64 Lu is presenting his rendering of a 17th century epitaph that was and is well known among martial arts literati because of its content. Therein a categorisation of Chinese martial arts into the so-called 'internal family' and 'external family' (Lu's translation) is proposed. A certain Zhang Sanfeng is named as the founder of the 'internal family' of martial arts and said to have acquired his skills while dreaming. Of course, the last statement reveals a legendary character of this story. Rightly, therefore, Lu points out the fact that the Zhang Sanfeng legend was dismissed with scholarly criticism in the 1920s and 1930s (p.115). According to Sinologist Stanley Henning the epitaph in question appears to have been meant as a more or less camouflaged political statement. He argues that it contains several verbal attacks of a Ming loyalist against the then still young Qing dynasty. The latter was established by 'foreign' Manchu invaders, symbolized as 'external family' in said source, while the ingenious Ming are disguised as 'internal family' (Stanley Henning, Chinese boxing: The internal versus external schools in the light of history and theory, *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* 6(3), 1997: 10–19). For this reason we may probably better read it as a political declaration of a person who seeks identity in a bygone period. And because this interpretation would perfectly be in line with Lu's overall discussion, the reviewer somehow sensed a missed opportunity. Lu does not refer to it. Yet, my sentiment with regard to this point is not meant as criticism, but it was merely a brainwave that hit me while reading the book.

Noteworthy – at least in my opinion – are Lu's conclusions regarding the possible future of Chinese martial arts. In tandem with the "increasingly industrialised, urbanised, and globalised world" China is facing, Lu proposes that its native martial arts probably should better follow a path of "reform and modernisation" in the direction of a unified sportive tournament system (p.222). While this suggestion may be helpful in creating a more global identity and stronger diplomatic relations it appears to potentially wipe away all the cultural and technical diversity and depth outlined meticulously in the same work before. Therefore the main argument that Chinese martial arts have "always been evolving" (p.223) appears to me as a sweeping statement. His view is balanced by an earlier presentation of more critical voices of these modernisation and sportification trends, and it is part of his discussion of these disapproving statements. So in the end the reader is provided with reasonable material in order to draw his own conclusions regarding this problem and further engagement with the topic is elicited.

In short, Lu's work offers a real contribution to the understanding of Chinese traditional culture in the form of martial arts, politics, and identity. Sinologists and students of sinology will find it useful in better comprehending the diverse roles martial arts played in Chinese culture. Students of Asian studies in general may be provided with insights and inspiration for future research. Furthermore, it is worthwhile for teachers and practitioners of Chinese martial arts who want to learn more about the history and culture of their passion.



Reviewed title A History of Chinese Martial Arts

Fuhua Huang and Fan Hong (trans and eds). 2018.
Abingdon and New York: Routledge
ISBN 9781138645585

In 1997 a long awaited in-depth historical overview of martial arts in China was published with the support of the Ministry of Sport of China. Since it was written in Chinese the English speaking world had to wait for a scholarly chronical of Chinese martial arts until 2012, when Peter Lorge published his book *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). Because of the later publication date and the importance of the 1997 work it is not surprising to find it in the bibliography of Lorge's work. Still, another six years had to pass until Fuhua Huang and Fan Hong finally present us their easy to read English translation of *A History of Chinese Martial Arts*. Both editors have to be congratulated on their decision to translate such a work with its many technical terms, which require specialist knowledge as well as patience. The list of contributors is impressive and contains some well-known names in the field of Chinese martial arts history like Ma Mingda (editorial committee), Kuang Wennan (author) or Kang Gewu (author) to name just a few.

From the time of the *Sinanthropus* right into the 1990s the subject matter is presented chronological over 10 chapters. Different authors are responsible for different chapters. While the chronological arrangement is similar – but not identical – to Lorge's work, Lorge is providing a discussion on defining the term 'martial arts' in his introduction (*Chinese Martial Arts*, p.3). This is certainly a good starting point for readers without any idea of martial arts; yet, the lack of such an extended definition in *A History of Chinese Martial Arts* is not really a drawback. Because by reading the book under review the term 'martial art' is filled with varied meanings so that a distinguished picture of 'martial arts' in China is created. However, as this short comparison shows Lorge's work may be regarded as complementary to *A History of Chinese Martial Arts*.

A real forte of the work is the many facts which follow sometimes in furious succession, among them biographical and hagiographical entries from classic texts and archaeological findings. Bibliographic references are given at the end of each chapter, so that further research is possible. I wish to highlight this point because the history of martial arts in China is intermingled with many legends. The authors and editors approach many of these legends, which muddle the more factual history, in a critical way. To give one popular example, fabricated tales concerning the Indian monk Bodhidharma describe him as the inventor of 'Shaolin martial arts'. In his section on the 'Origin of Shaolin martial arts' Kuang Wennan clearly refutes such accounts (p.75). Still, a few legends slip through the overall scholarly rigour of the text, like in the case of Chen Yuanyun. Said Chen is treated as the legendary Chinese forefather of Japanese judo (p. 151). More recent research has shown that Chen was probably not involved in martial arts (Thomas A. Green and Joseph R. Svinth (eds), *Martial Arts of the World: An Encyclopedia of History and Innovation*, Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010, 122).

By following the historical survey it becomes obvious that martial arts cannot be regarded as a mere footnote in the history and cultural history of China. In fact they played a central role from the beginning when weapons and their use were not restricted to hunting and fighting, but were present in ritual martial dances or early paintings, too. This eye-opening relationship between martial arts and other, more civil cultural pursuits is also apparent in the chapters on later

periods. In modern China one aspect of this liaison has been labelled 'martial arts diplomacy', and it means that martial arts performances, competitions or training camps are purposeful used for political goals (p.208). Other types of martial arts exchange between China and adjacent nations took place in the centuries before. For example, when the so-called Japanese pirates (*wokou*) invaded China, their Japanese sabres became a threat so that Chinese martial artists seemed to be eager to learn Japanese sabre techniques and to acquire Japanese sabres (p.151). On the other hand, Chinese fighting techniques exerted some influence on the development of martial arts in the Ryukyu Kingdom, the subsequent Japanese Prefecture of Okinawa (p.152). In the latter case the exact details given in the book are slightly outdated; however, the basic idea of a certain Chinese influence remains a fact. So these examples demonstrate clearly that martial knowledge crossed borders of nations, be it for reasons of survival or less cogent motives. Therefore the subject of Chinese martial arts concerns not only China itself but many other Asian countries, and nowadays it has become a rather international phenomenon.

Worth mentioning is a discussion of early Chinese schools of thought and their association with martial arts (p.30). Among them the most obvious and convincing ones are the teachings of Chinese military classics like Sunzi. Insightful comments are given on Confucianism, Mohism, and Taoism with regard to possible influences on martial arts ideologies. Later in the book Kang Gewu in his survey of martial arts in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) underlines that it was in this period that literate martial artists tried to 'enrich the content of their martial arts' by integrating them into traditional Chinese culture (p.160). These considerations are definitely provoking further interest and research into the topic. At the same time they demonstrate that martial arts cannot be generally reduced to only a brutal and mindless physical activity.

Two of the more recent developments presented in the last chapter include a centralisation of sportive martial arts in China and a large scale operation in order to classify martial arts legacies. This second campaign obviously resulted in a huge amount of collected source materials, and raises my hope that other publications on this worthwhile and captivating subject may follow in the future.

In short *A History of Chinese Martial Arts* is a most welcome and interesting book, providing the combined insights of several specialists. Students of Sinology as well as practitioners, teachers or researchers of China's martial arts will find it to be a helpful overview and may refer to it time and again. Furthermore it will be insightful to students of Asian Studies in general in order to understand the importance of martial arts as cultural knowledge that flowed and flows back and forth between China and its neighbours.

Both titles reviewed by
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