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Review of *Striking Beauty: A Philosophical Look at the Asian Martial Arts* by Barry Allen

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Barry Allen. *Striking Beauty: A Philosophical Look at the Asian Martial Arts.* Columbia University Press 2015. 272 pp. \$30.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780231172721).

Recently, the martial arts have received greater attention from English speaking scholars, mostly in the humanities and some social sciences (Japanese and Chinese language scholarship, absent in this volume, have been around much longer.) There are sociological and anthropological studies of martial arts practice and practitioners, works that analyze martial arts in various media with martial arts literature, theater, and film studies leading this field, and the occasional historical monograph. There is even a newly established journal, *Martial Arts Studies*, with an affiliated annual conference.

Like other academic martial arts monographs, Allen brings his academic expertise, in this case philosophy, into conversation with his hobby. He uses his knowledge of philosophy to ask whether there can be beauty in an activity that, he argues, was originally intended to train people for violence. He wrestles with the aesthetic qualities of martial arts on the one hand and, on the other, the ethical problem posed by participating in what seems to be an art created for violence. Along the way he uses martial arts as a lens for describing Chinese philosophy because all martial arts in East Asia were influenced by the philosophical and religious traditions that originated or changed in China. He also asks what, if anything, Western philosophy can contribute towards understanding martial arts.

He begins his monograph with a description of Daoism, the philosophical tradition that has had the most impact on martial arts in East Asia. Much in this chapter will be familiar to anyone with even a passing knowledge of martial arts philosophy or Daoism, which should not be surprising because most of the sources used in this chapter, and throughout the book for that matter, are secondary sources in English.

The second chapter, the strongest, covers Western philosophy, Allen's own field of expertise. The classical philosophy of Plato, Socrates, and their intellectual descendants throughout premodern Europe were too dualistic and focused on the soul/mind, having little good to say about the body, thus rendering Western philosophy 'mute before anything as corporeal as the martial arts' (61). The few philosophers who celebrated the body lost the discursive battle and it would not be until the early modern and modern eras when men like Spinoza, Nietzsche, Darwin, and Deleuze highlighted materiality, and with it, the body.

Aesthetics of the martial arts is the topic for chapter three. Here, Allen tries to differentiate martial arts from sports and dance, a topic introduced in chapter two, explaining why activities such as boxing and Indian wrestling are not martial arts. Unlike sports, Allen claims, martial arts were not originally meant for competition but for combat. Thus, there are no conventions such as competition rules in boxing. Allen disqualifies Indian wrestling as a martial art because, he argues, it has no intended instrumental value in combat. Why choose Indian wrestling? It is one of the few martial arts that has undergone a monograph-length academic study in English. A final chapter eventually ties together the notions of violence and power to martial arts and ethics.

Striking Beauty is a provocative work that, in its strongest moments, is thought provoking and enlightening. Unfortunately, those moments are undercut by unsupported, ahistorical assertions and problems with argumentation that weaken Allen's project.

First there is the issue of what Allen means by ‘martial arts.’ At first glance it seems straightforward, ‘the originally Chinese, then East Asian, and now global traditions of usually unarmed personal combat. This is the martial arts of the kung fu movies, China’s contribution to world cinema’ (ix). It is certainly true that a small portion of nineteenth century Chinese ‘kung fu’ in the south made its way to Okinawa where natives transformed it into karate and then became the basis for Korean taekwon do. However, his definition of martial arts would not include other globally popular arts that did not trickle down from China, nor appear in ‘kung fu’ movies, such as judo, aikido, and kendo (he tries to connect judo to China but only one of the handful of styles that comprise modern judo have an origin story about a man from China teaching some movements to Japanese—that hardly makes judo ‘from China’). Sometimes Allen wants to talk about them as well, but only to the extent that it supports his claim that everything ties back to China. So there is discussion of Yagyū Shinkage ryū swordsmanship, a popular sword style from seventeenth century Japan with Zen influence due to the teacher’s relationship to the monk Takuan who used swordsmanship as a way to discuss Zen principles. Scholars have long pointed out the flaws of overemphasizing the Zen influence on pre-modern Japanese arts. Moreover, Yagyū Shinkage ryū is just one of many early modern Japanese martial arts that exist today, disproving his other unsupported assertion that, ‘no Japanese martial art acquired its current form until the twentieth century’ (203). These globally popular martial arts that he ignores undercut his disingenuous claim that ‘what the world knows about Asian martial arts began in China’ (1). Chinese and Indian (Buddhist) philosophy certainly influenced martial arts throughout East Asia, but philosophical influence is not the same as martial arts’ origin.

Second, as suggested above, the problem of definition is compounded by basic historical inaccuracies which are not minor pedantic complaints but represent holes that fundamentally hurt the philosophical argument. The most egregious are on two consecutive pages: ‘Karate derives from Shaolin *gongfu*, which Buddhist missionaries brought to Okinawa along with Zen’ (150). Buddhist missionaries did not bring karate to Okinawa with Zen. Inhabitants of the Ryukyu Kingdom (now Okinawa) moved back and forth from Southern China, as did Chinese themselves, working, trading, et cetera, and it is from that interaction, largely undocumented, that formed the basis for karate. The philosophical point that Allen wanted to illustrate is that the process by which Buddhists deemphasized violence embodied in their *gongfu* practice by ‘spiritualizing’ them. They did this, he claims, by creating prearranged solo forms (drills better known as *kata* in Japanese) and thus this ‘spiritualized’ art became Japanese karate. The Koreans, we are told, did not receive these ‘spiritualized’ martial arts because ‘Koreans were able to sample the Chinese martial arts before their modification under Zen and built their own traditions (of which hapkido is relatively modern evolution) on this older foundation’ (151). Besides the ‘modification under Zen’ problem I noted above, how would Koreans go about selecting Chinese martial arts? Are readers to believe that in some distant past Koreans selected Chinese martial arts as though choosing from a menu, and then never had any additions of Chinese arts in between the ancient past the modern period? Another, larger issue is revealed in the parenthetical comment ‘of which hapkido is relatively modern evolution’—hapkido is Allen’s own art of choice (the book is dedicated to his teacher ‘grand master Don Cha’).

This ties into the third problem, not only in this book but in the genre of martial arts scholarship in general. Often authors are unaware of their own desire to celebrate the authenticity of their chosen martial art. Here, authenticity means either the putatively ancient origins of their art, or its combat efficacy, or both. It is ironic that Allen demonstrates mastery of Western philosophy, including Foucault, but he forgets Foucault’s warning that history should teach us to question the ‘solemnities’ of the origin, not believe in them. Foucault attacked a search for origins, believed to be

a time 'free from the restraints of positive knowledge,' where 'the truth of things corresponded to a truthful discourse,' and always preceding the Fall (see Foucault's '*Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*'). In this book, combative efficacy of the martial arts is Truth and 'spiritualization' is their Fall. The premise of Allen's argument about violence assumes that martial arts are 'designed and trained for competent violence (xi)' in which 'no...movements are symbolic or merely graceful' (135). Looping back to the definition problem, 'My concept of martial arts makes no provision for movements that are merely artful or meditative' (140). That may be, but Allen has no convincing evidence for this concept, and, as scholars have demonstrated, several Japanese martial arts contained movements not meant for combat as such. Even Allen is vague on this point: 'something in Chinese martial arts history troubles my neat distinction between martial arts and dance. China has a long history of involvement between martial arts and theater' (148).

Striking Beauty's problems are not simply minor pedantic issues; they are fundamental to some of the philosophical claims. Martial arts authors, peer reviewers, and academic presses need to be aware of the fantasy narratives that martial artists tell themselves, consciously or not, about their hobby. On this point, perhaps the most appropriate thinkers for a 'philosophical look at the Asian martial arts' might be Lacan and Žižek.

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