

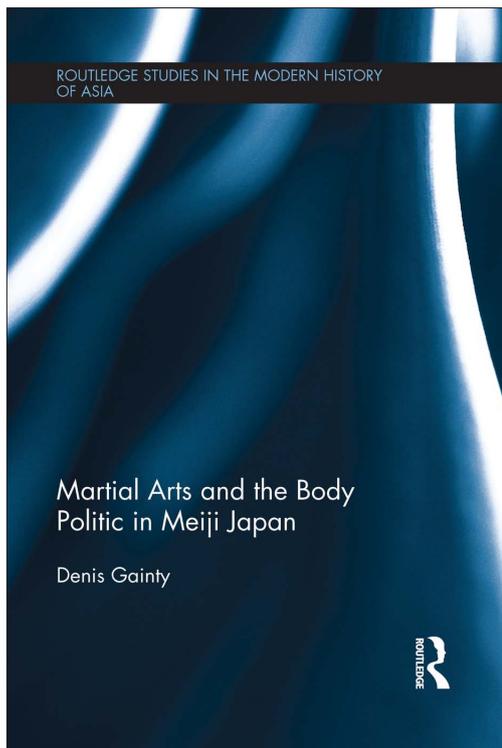
BOOK REVIEW

Martial Arts and the Body Politic in Meiji Japan

in memory of Denis Gainty

Routledge, 2013

208 pages



REVIEWER

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The passing of Denis Gainty in 2017 robbed the martial arts studies community of a promising voice. The earlier death of G. Cameron Hurst, Gainty's dissertation advisor, in 2016 had already been a blow to students of Japanese martial arts history. Hurst's seminal monograph, *Armed Martial Arts of Japan: Swordsmanship and Archery* [Hurst 1998], established a scholarly discussion of these subjects that transcended the early efforts of Donn Draeger and other, more popular, writers of the postwar era. Hurst helped to lay the foundations for the current flowering of martial arts studies. It is tragic that the field would lose both a critical pioneer and one of his most promising students in such a short period of time.

Gainty's most enduring academic legacy will surely be his work *Martial Arts and the Body Politic in Meiji Japan* [Gainty 2013]. Whereas Hurst produced a broad study, examining the evolution of swordsmanship and archery throughout Japanese history, Gainty cogently argued for more tightly-focused studies. Rejecting standard historical approaches and the sociological variables that characterized much of the previous work in this area, Gainty instead sought to craft his own 'historio-ethnographic' method which, while accounting for the basic structure of a situation, privileged the auto-biographical writings of Japan's martial artists [5]. In this way, individuals who cultivated these bodily disciplines were allowed to describe and interpret their own experiences.

From the start, Gainty lays out an ambitious project designed to complicate much of the 'received wisdom' shaping discussions of the modern Japanese martial arts. *The Dai-Nippon Butokukai* (Japan Martial Virtue Association) was a critical institution responsible for much of the popularization and standardization of the martial arts (particularly kendo) in the Meiji and Showa periods. Still, the English-language literature has largely neglected this critical institution. Hurst dedicated only a few pages to exploring its contributions, and most of that discussion revolved around elite government figures and their competing political agendas [Hurst 1998: 158-165].

In contrast, Gainty focused his entire volume on a finely-grained social and institutional history of the group. His carefully constructed case study results in two major findings. First, Gainty argues quite convincingly that the standard view of the Meiji period as an era in which the martial arts stagnated and nearly vanished is profoundly mistaken. This view is actually the product of romanticized notions equating the Japanese martial arts with the Samurai class. In reality, Japanese civilians had practiced (and taught) many of these systems for quite some time. Far from imperiling the martial arts, the disappearance of the Samurai as a visible social class actually opened a space where these arts could be appropriated by new cultural, economic, and governmental forces. When we set aside misty visions of the vanishing

Samurai, what we actually find is a period of rapid growth and dynamic change within the Japanese martial arts. Much of Chapter One is dedicated to articulating Gainty's historical arguments on this point.

In Chapter Two, Gainty lays out his other, more theoretically significant, argument. After presenting a careful reconstruction of the various personalities that directed the creation of the Butokukai, he goes on to examine the group's relationship with the Japanese state. In prior discussions, the Butokukai had been portrayed as an institution used by the Japanese government to promote the martial arts as a means of militarizing Japan's population for its own imperialist ends. In essence, practices like kendo, taught in every school in the country, became a means by which the state's understanding of what it meant to be a member of a modern Japanese society was imposed on the population.

Through careful process tracing, Gainty demonstrates that this conventional understanding is essentially mistaken. It was prominent martial artists who spearheaded the creation of the Butokukai and then lobbied the state in an effort to have their social values and views of what constituted Japanese modernity accepted and validated. The success of the Butokukai illustrates the ways in which individuals who held a certain type of (previously marginal) social capital were able to use the Meiji system's democratic features to form a complex partnership with elements of the state for the promotion of their values on a scale that would have been unthinkable otherwise. Some parts of the Japanese state (including its law enforcement structures) were quickly won over by these arguments and became critical early backers. Other ministries (most notably those dealing with education) relented in their opposition only after decades of lobbying.

The question of agency rests at the heart not just of Chapter Two but of Gainty's entire project. He quickly concludes that concepts such as 'state cooptation' or Hobsbawm and Ranger's 'invented tradition' are unable to accurately describe the Meiji revival of the Japanese martial arts [149 n.12, n.25]. Gainty then challenged the approaches (or at least the popular application) of authors such as Foucault, Bourdieu, and Mauss, who tend to see power as a force that the state enacts upon bodies. In their place, Gainty takes up theories of embodiment and argues that the physical practice and experience of the martial arts became a way for practitioners to construct their own (multiple and sometimes contradictory) visions of what it meant to be a member of modern Japanese society. In some cases, martial artists were able to capture aspects of the state (through educational reform), while in others the explicit endorsement of their values and practices provided them with an empowering means of enacting their place in the *kokutai* ('body politic').

The possibility of multiple modernities is taken up in the volume's third chapter. Chapters Three and Four present the reader with some of Gainty's best executed historical research. The first of these examines various accounts of the opening of local Butokukai training centers. It uses these spectacles to argue that, far from imposing a single unifying national identity on its membership, the Japanese martial arts remained a mechanism for the development of both local identity and the 'localization' of national identity throughout this period. Rather than the monolithic organization that is often imagined, the institutional structure and publications of the Butokukai itself became sites of contestation as various sets of identities and norms sought legitimacy.

Gainty's attention shifts back to the state in Chapter Four. Yet, once again, the emphasis remains on the complex interplay between the state and those martial artists who sought engagement with it. Most of this takes the form of a discussion of the physical education curriculum reform process which brought the martial arts into middle and high schools across Japan. This eventually happened despite the initial opposition of the Ministry of Education.

In Chapter Five, 'Giving the state its legs: rethinking agency and the body through the Butokukai', Gainty directly addresses (and seeks to problematize) the easy dichotomy separating the individual and the state. He also explores the work of Mark Johnson [1987] and Lakoff and Johnson [1980, 1999] as it applies to the primacy of embodied experience. Their arguments provide a theoretical framework capable of supplanting more generally accepted critical theorists such as Foucault and Bourdieu. All of these points are summarized and contextualized in a brief concluding discussion.

While slim (Gainty's volume has only 146 pages of actual text), readers would do well not to underestimate this text's ambition. It seeks to make both critical contributions to our historical understanding of the Japanese martial arts while at the same time advancing an ambitious theoretical agenda which has clear implications for the broader martial arts studies literature. While relatively sophisticated, individual chapters from this volume would make a valuable contribution to undergraduate reading lists. Gainty's historical overview of the Japanese martial arts in the late Tokugawa and Meiji periods would be particularly valuable as introductory readings.

Still, I suspect that this book will be most at home in graduate seminars. In such a setting, students can be encouraged to engage with the theoretical critiques that Gainty advances throughout the book. And any scholar writing on the relationship between the martial arts and the modern state will want to have Gainty in their literature review. This last recommendation is not limited only to students of Japanese history.

I find myself drawn to Gainty's core insight that the creation of martial arts communities can be understood as a powerful act by which individuals seek to advance their own notions of how a modern society should function vis-à-vis the state. I suspect that this argument would actually be much easier to make when looking at the development of martial arts traditions in other places, such as Republican China in the 1920s and 1930s.

The relatively strong and centralized nature of the Japanese developmental state means that Gainty sometimes struggles to illustrate his points. In truth, readers who lack faith in his central arguments are likely to find a fair amount of support for a more statist interpretation of events in many of his examples. By focusing on the Butokukai, an institution that appears wholly enmeshed with the state, Gainty has tested his theory against a 'hard case'. In large part, his basic insights about the role of agency survive. As such, students of martial arts studies may wish to consider in what other cases his theoretical framework might find purchase.

Perhaps the greatest weaknesses of this work, however, arise from its silences. In his conclusion, Gainty notes that the embodied experiences of certain types of Japanese citizens received little validation or exploration within the annals of the Butokukai. While women trained in the martial arts, their voices have been notably absent from his historico-ethnographic study. One also wonders about the perspective of children. After all, by the end of this volume we have gained substantial insight about the goals and identities of a small group of relatively elite martial artists who were able to petition the government to include martial arts instruction in school curricula, yet there is no discussion of the embodied experiences and understandings of the students who were subjected to these (sometimes brutal) practices in the 1930s and 1940s. One wonders whether they experienced the same 'agency' that Gainty so enthusiastically discovers in the late Meiji.

Notions of agency must also be tied to an acknowledgment of culpability, particularly when we consider the uses that many of these martial skills would be put to on battlefields in China and across the Pacific. Gainty argues convincingly that Japanese martial arts reformers succeeded in their efforts to sway the state and to place their values (and social capital) at the center of Japanese identity. Many of the specific texts he discusses involve members of the Butokukai promoting nationalism, militarism, and imperialism. Indeed, the normalization of such values was precisely what gave the Butokukai its institutional authority.

Yet, Gainty refuses to engage in a sustained discussion of what responsibility the Butokukai, or other martial arts institutions, must bear for the ideas that they either accepted or in some cases worked diligently to promote. Questions of culpability are easily elided if one accepts that these ideologies were an alien imposition by the state onto society. When that myth has been exploded, however, difficult questions emerge which must be addressed in a sustained and thoughtful way. Gainty's theoretical insistence on the multiplicity of embodied experience seems to offer no answers in that realm. One wonders what guidance the critical theorists, dismissed in the opening pages of this volume, might have offered on the normative dimensions of Meiji martial arts history.

Still, Gainty's volume provides English-language readers with the best account of the development and significance of the Meiji era martial arts to date. It is a work of great ambition which, when read in conjunction with the earlier contributions of Hurst, suggests how far the field has come. By carefully addressing basic questions, Gainty has given us a work that transcends the narrow confines of Japanese history. His insights about the development of martial arts and the modernizing state will be of interest to all students of martial arts studies.

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