

## EDITORIAL

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# THE MIRRORED MAZE OF MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES: FROM RESEARCH NETWORK TO SCHOLARLY ASSOCIATION

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Martial arts studies, academic field, discipline, discourse, research network, research association

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## ABSTRACT

This editorial reflects on the status and development of martial arts studies as an academic field. It considers the differences between the notions of academic discipline and academic discourse. It suggests that the common metaphor of an academic 'field' is inappropriate for describing the terrain or topography of an academic discourse or discipline, and proposes that a better metaphor for describing this realm might be 'mirrored maze'. After characterising this situation, the editorial recalls the recent history of the establishment of anglophone martial arts studies via the establishment of the Martial Arts Studies Research Network. Following this, the editorial announces that, after almost a decade of development, the latest stage of the martial arts studies project is the creation of The Martial Arts Studies Association.

## INTRODUCTION: HOW LONG HAS MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES EXISTED?

How long has martial arts studies existed? There have been many studies of different aspects of martial arts across different disciplines and in different languages for many years. But this does not mean that martial arts studies, as an academic discourse, has existed all that time. Before martial arts studies developed in the anglophone academic world, scholarly studies of martial arts were quite episodic or isolated. Indeed, when appraised in terms of other academic concerns, such studies ran the risk of being written off as idiosyncratic, eccentric, or trivial [Bowman, 2019, pp. 19–32; Bowman & Judkins, 2017]. Academics who sought to research and write about martial arts were forced to justify this focus by appeal to the aims and concerns of their disciplinary field. Hence, historians could argue that the discipline of history should not overlook martial arts as a part of history; anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists or subcultural studies scholars could justify the study of martial arts groups on the basis of the fact that (no matter how odd) martial arts groups were nonetheless *social groups*. And so on, through the disciplines.

In this way, scholarly studies of martial arts have long been possible. But when was the field of martial arts studies born, created, or constructed? To answer this question, we need to work out what it means to say that any academic field exists.

## WHAT IS AN ACADEMIC FIELD?

Back in 1996, when discussing the still quite-young field of cultural studies,<sup>1</sup> John Storey proposed that for an academic discipline to exist, there needs to be a broad agreement about three things: first, about ‘the object of study’; second, about some ‘basic assumptions which underpin the method(s) of approach to the object of study’; and three, a shared awareness of ‘the history of the discipline itself’ [Storey, 1996, p. 1; see also Young, 1999]. In other words, in Storey’s sense, there needs to be a community of scholars who broadly agree on some starting points about what they are looking into, and how they are doing it, with a shared awareness of the past and ongoing attempts of scholars to develop insights into the ‘object’.

However, there is a paradox around disciplinary formation. This is because, for an academic discipline (or field, or discourse) to exist, there cannot be complete agreement on everything (object, aims, theory, method). If there were, there would be consensus and ultimately nothing new to ask, explore, or pursue. The ‘object’ would have the status of a problem to be solved, or a question to be answered; and, once answered, that would be the end of the matter. Put differently, despite

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1 Although the origins of cultural studies can be traced back to the 1950s, with the first centre for cultural studies being founded at the University of Birmingham in 1964, the first major internationally-marketed anthology that proudly declared the existence of a new field called ‘cultural studies’ was not published until 1992 [Grossberg & Nelson, 1992; Hall, 1992].

what we may presume about academic fields, an academic field is perhaps the one place that will not have all the answers to all the questions about the very thing it would seem to be set up to find out all about – whether that be sociology about society, anthropology about the human, psychology about the mind, or indeed martial arts studies about martial arts. This is not to say that a discipline does not have any answers about its eponymous object (in the way that being ignorant about a subject means you have no answers). Rather, a discipline tends to have too many different possible answers. This is caused by the proliferation of different formulations of questions, objects, theories, methods, and modes of interpretation. A discipline is a space for the proliferation of hypotheses, questions, theories and methods, and hence, in a sense, the generation of uncertainty.

As Rey Chow once put it (also writing about cultural studies): while other academic disciplines may be comfortable with one or another understanding of the meaning of the word ‘culture’, the field of cultural studies itself is constantly agonising about what an adequate understanding of culture could possibly be, often even doubting whether such a thing as ‘culture’ even exists at all. As Chow sees it, the fact that no one in cultural studies can agree on what culture is, is one of the key forces that actually sustains the field.

## THE PARADOX OF ACADEMIC ENQUIRY

Thus, the paradox of academic disciplines and fields is that they often seem to achieve uncertainty, which would seem to be the very opposite of what they set out to achieve. It is as if the way that academic discourses approach things (inviting more questions, more quibbles, more qualifications, more hypotheses, more theories, more angles, more precautions, and so on) means that they can never achieve what they seemed to want to achieve (i.e., sure and stable knowledge). However, in an academic discourse or discipline, both of the following apparently contradictory propositions coexist at the same time: 1. academic discourse does seek to establish new knowledge; yet 2. academic discourse does not tend towards agreement.

Along with the tendency to dispute and disagree, another factor bearing on the lack of stasis or enduring ‘agreement’ in an academic field relates to what Knorr-Cetina described as the constant self-unfolding of an object of study [Knorr-Cetina, 2003]. An object of knowledge (or, rather, perhaps a better term would be an object of study) is continuously self-unfolding [Knorr-Cetina, 2003; Spatz, 2015]. On the one hand, it remains interesting precisely to the extent that it stimulates new questions, new avenues of exploration, new and unexpected insights, and evermore new puzzles. On the other hand, and at the same time, if you modify the frames and tools used to conceptualise and approach something; if you change the hypotheses made about it and the questions posed about it, then different things can be seen. As the literary theorist Paul de Man once argued, every insight is premised on a certain kind of blind-spot [De Man, 1983]. Hence, new insights emerge by noting the blind-spots of previous work and changing the frames to ‘fix’ the perspective. Of course, even the newly ‘rectified’ perspective will have its own blind-spots, or things that it cannot (currently) perceive.

In discussing the development of scientific knowledge, Jean-François Lyotard picked up Ludwig Wittgenstein's term 'language game', to argue that research is always premised upon the creation of a language game [Lyotard, 1984]. Different disciplines, and different subsections within disciplines, each construct different theoretical universes – different paradigms or 'interpretation machines', that are used to conceptualise and explore objects and problems in different ways [see also Kuhn, 1962].

## ACADEMIC FIELD, OR MIRRORED MAZE?

Accordingly, if we follow the implications of Lyotard's thinking, then we will come to the realisation that the very idea that academic 'fields' are anything like real-world fields is fundamentally mistaken. The metaphor is misleading. An academic field is not at all like a farmer's field, which we imagine as flat and rectangular, in which you can stand anywhere and see anywhere else within it, and in which all the crops are uniform. An academic 'field' is not at all like this. Perhaps a better metaphor than 'academic field' would be 'academic hall of mirrors' – a hall of mirrors that is also a maze. In a hall of mirrors in a funfair, you never quite know where you are; there seems to be no fixed, natural, stable perspective; you cannot see yourself or other people or objects in a normal way at all. Size, perspective, shape, movement and form are all determined by the angles, curves, and interrelations of different mirrors, and one's position in relation to them.

Unlike glancing around in a field, finding one's way around in a mirrored maze would involve a serious and sustained effort. Learning how to use the different mirrors and positions for different purposes would be another task. This would be made all the more difficult if other people were constantly moving the mirrors and other materials around too. But this is precisely what happens in the mirrored mazes of academic discourses. The history of a discipline itself is the history of these changes and developments. But this 'history' is not only a story. Rather, disciplinary history leaves traces, which are still available in the present, in the form of the different assumptions, hypotheses, paradigms, methodologies and positions available to a researcher.

Of course, there is one perspective from which a mirrored maze or a hall of mirrors becomes clear and navigable. This is the plan-view, or map. In the academic world, there are a few different actualisations of this metaphor. The key one – the most fluid and responsive – is the academic journal. If, hypothetically, one academic field had one academic journal (a proposition we can complicate in due course), then each published issue of that journal might be regarded as a kind of plan-view snapshot of the landscape at a given time. Of course, an academic journal issue is not merely a neutral or simply objective reflection of what is going on in a landscape at a given time. As Jacques Derrida might say (following J.L. Austin), it is not merely a 'constative' or merely descriptive statement about what is going on; it is also 'performative' – helping to produce or generate the state of affairs that it might seem merely to describe [Derrida, 1988]. A journal is performative in that it solicits, selects, curates, and performs the state of the discipline. Nor is the journal of a field simply a kind of census; rather, it is closer to what Michel

Foucault called 'panopticism' – a mode of monitoring that arguably changes the behaviour of those being monitored [Foucault, 1977, pp. 170–171]. The journal generates the work that defines the field.

There are other ways of constructing a plan-view or map of an academic landscape. At one end of the spectrum, the encyclopaedia, the glossary, the edited collection or the textbook, all work to reify, spatialise and hierarchise what might otherwise feel amorphous and chaotic. At the other end, the academic conference feels the most alive – like going to a zoo rather than a museum.<sup>2</sup>

## THE REALIA OF DISCOURSE

In other words, it is the existence of these entities – the conference, the journal, the collection, and so on – that constitute the conditions of possibility for the actual ongoing existence of an academic- ... what shall we call it? Field? Mirrored maze? Perhaps the best term is discourse. This is because, after Foucault, the term 'discourse' means both literal 'conversation' and all of the other ways that a 'conversation' might be said to take place in indirect ways, such as in written texts, in institutional documents, in policies and constitutions, in direct inspirations and vague influences, in intertextual allusions and knock on consequences, in the setting up of new modules on degree programmes, and the creation of new degree programmes themselves; in the production of new PhD projects and the recognisable institutional or professional ability to supervise those projects; in the ability to demonstrate the credentials and to present oneself as appropriately 'qualified' to win grants and funding; and so on.

In a strong sense, it is the existence of an interconnected, interacting, communicating publishing ecology which most attests to the degree of existence of an academic discourse. The more interconnected and self-aware the publishing network, the easier it is to navigate the terrain. Before the birth of martial arts studies, even the elementary scholarly task of carrying out a preliminary literature review (which is, of course, the fundamental stage of any research project) was no easy task. This is because there was no coherent discourse, no connected conversations. A chapter in an anthropology book here, a mention in a history book there; an essay in a book of film studies here, a reference in a philosophy book there; mountains of amateur scholars each claiming to develop the first ever theory of this or that to do with martial arts – and all the rest of it – does not make a discourse, a discipline, an interdiscipline, or a research nexus. An academic discourse requires literal discourse – conversation, debate, disagreement, challenge, collaboration, cross-fertilization.

Over the last decade, things have become a lot clearer, and literature reviews a lot easier. For within the last decade, martial arts studies has

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, as noted by Rey Chow (following John Berger), even when viewing animals in a zoo, one is not 'really seeing' them, as the entire experience has been constructed and organised by the frames and walls of the zoo. The way we view animals in a zoo is constitutively warped or out of focus – as if we are in a hall of mirrors without realising it [Chow, 2002, pp. 95–127].

announced itself in all of the key ways described above – from scholarly blogs through to journals, along with conferences and numerous books, along with social media groups and email lists, all self-identifying as ‘martial arts studies’. Of course, this has been hugely enabled by the technological advances that have generated a massive increase in ever more easily (and thoroughly) searchable online archives and databases in university and national libraries around the world. But it has also been the result of a self-conscious set of projects in different linguistic (if not national) contexts around the world.

## MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES AS A PROJECT

Here we can only deal with anglophone martial arts studies. When was its birth? There are many possible points that could be suggested – and each of these has its own prehistory. However, a key work to propose the existence of a nascent martial arts studies was Farrer and Whalen-Bridge’s edited collection, *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World* [Farrer & Whalen-Bridge, 2011]. Like other works appearing at this time [see, for instance García & Spencer, 2014; also Spencer, 2011], this work conveyed a clear narrative account of the history of the development of the anglophone academic study of martial arts. To return to John Storey’s argument that was evoked earlier: this is significant because the ability to narrate the stages of a shared history is a key component in the establishment of a field or discipline. However, what was unique about Farrer and Whalen-Bridge’s work was the recognition that the growing body of studies of martial arts across the arts, humanities and social sciences could perhaps be regarded as the emergence of something that, they suggested, should be called ‘martial arts studies’.

Inspired by this proposition, in 2013, Paul Bowman sent out a call for papers for a special themed issue of *JOMEC Journal* – an issue that would be called, simply, ‘Martial Arts Studies’. This issue came together and was published in 2014. It was a rich, expansive and disciplinarily diverse issue of the journal, with contributions from all over the world and all across the humanities disciplines, preceded by an editorial reflection on the arrival of this exciting new nexus [Bowman, 2014].

This was followed up in 2015 by the first of what would become an annual international conference, initially hosted in the School of Journalism, Media and Culture at Cardiff University. In the same year, the monograph, *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* [Bowman, 2015] was published, and Bowman secured a grant from the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to establish the Martial Arts Studies Research Network. In the same year, the first issue of the journal *Martial Arts Studies* was also published.

This flurry of activity in 2015 might be regarded as the definitive date of birth of anglophone martial arts studies as a self-conscious research area – or maybe the date it started walking. Researchers from other national, regional and linguistic research networks and associations attended the Cardiff conferences and published in our journal, and of course anglophone scholars reciprocated. Conferences, publications and

collaborations flourished. These activities were also bolstered in the book domain by a martial arts studies book series, which between 2016 and 2022 published five seminal works [Amos, 2021; Bowman, 2017; Goto-Jones, 2016; Molle, 2022; Trausch, 2018], plus the first reader of this emergent field [Bowman, 2018]. And then the lockdown of 2020 saw the arrival of The Martial Arts Studies Podcast.

The project of creating martial arts studies as an academic discourse can therefore be said to have been a major success during these years. It is now not uncommon to hear people talk about martial arts studies as if it is quite simply, obviously and self-evidently a thing that just naturally exists. A generation of PhD graduates now self-identify as martial arts studies scholars. Academics working in other areas make reference to martial arts studies as a field.

## BEYOND THE NETWORK

Clearly, the work of the Martial Arts Studies Research Network has now produced more than a loosely connected network of researchers. Martial arts studies is now definitely a 'field' (or mirrored maze); and arguably well on its way to becoming a discipline – with fundamental questions, canonical texts, entrenched problematics, and established approaches. So, the question, then, is: what is the next stage for martial arts studies? With evermore researchers working in the area, with more modules and programmes and even degree programmes being developed; with more journals and publications, and certainly more conferences; with more grant applications and successes; with more connections being forged between and beyond universities and other institutions; the question, really, is: what is needed?

Given the growth and proliferation of martial arts studies across so many contexts, there is arguably now a need for further institutional development – some way of enabling the field to flourish further, and in new ways; some way of further raising the profile of the field and those who have contributed to it.

After much debate and deliberation among research network members, it was felt that the time was now right to found a martial arts studies association – a scholarly association or learned society, whose first focus would relate to the further development of the highest quality scholarship. Hence, our founding of The Martial Arts Studies Association as a scholarly association or learned society whose mission is to promote and advance the academic study of the martial arts. The Martial Arts Studies Association seeks to foster work that is rigorous, original and significant, and to continue to bring diverse academic discourses into dialogue with one another. It also seeks to promote and disseminate martial arts studies scholarship outside of the university context, primarily by advocating open access publication and non-profit events and activities.

The original Martial Arts Studies Research Network of course continues, in the same way. Alongside this, the principal activities of the Martial Arts Studies Association remain, first, partnering with univer-

## Editorial

Paul Bowman, Alex Channon, Ben Judkins, Lauren Miller & Wayne Wong

sities and other institutions to hold academic conferences, and second, continuing to publish the highest-quality peer-reviewed academic scholarship in our open access journal, *Martial Arts Studies*.

The Association will also seek to generate, foster and support other types of publication, activity and collaboration; to offer recognition for outstanding contributions to the field; and to guide external agents and agencies (such as research councils) towards scholars with specific expertise who will be able to offer expert consultancy or peer review.

The governance structure and terms of association of the Martial Arts Studies Association will always seek to be simple and transparent. In its founding form, it consists essentially of a board and members. The founding members of the board are a small group who have been extremely active and collaborative in the promotion and development of martial arts studies during the last decade. Anyone who wishes to be a member will be invited to apply, via submission of a CV and a brief statement about their past, current and intended future contributions to the academic field of martial arts studies.

In due course, the Association will also have fellows. Fellowship will also be based on application or nomination, and fellows will be selected based on their consistent and significant contributions to martial arts studies, via (for example) conference participation and organisation, and/or contributions to the journal, in terms of publishing or reviewing. A fellowship of the Martial Arts Studies Association is intended to be an honorary award, one that signals the high esteem within which a scholar is held in the field of martial arts studies.

## WHY THE ASSOCIATION?

Some might ask why – as in: why we are engaging in this development, and/or why anyone might want to get involved. To take the second question first: As the Martial Arts Studies Association grows and develops, it is anticipated that membership will attract an ongoing range of benefits, such as extra focused events open only to members; access to unique research materials or resources related to martial arts studies; enhanced networking opportunities with fellow scholars, researchers, and practitioners in the field; priority consideration for presenting research at conferences organised by the Association; opportunities to collaborate on joint research projects or publications; access to specialised workshops or training events; eligibility for awards or grants offered by the Association to support research endeavours; participation in webinars or virtual discussions led by prominent scholars in martial arts studies; recognition through the Association's official website and publications; potential discounts on publications, books, or other academic materials related to martial arts studies; opportunities to serve as peer reviewers for the Association's publications; the chance to host or organise Association-sponsored events or workshops; and eligibility for leadership roles within the Association, such as Board positions.

Anyone who is already interested or invested in the field of martial arts studies will perceive the benefits of such extra dimensions. They



might also intuit the need for them. Not all events can or should be entry-level, or open to all. To take a discourse or a practice to a higher level requires more intensive and advanced events and interactions. An analogy from the field of martial arts practice seems apt here: basic entry-level fundamental classes are absolutely essential in teaching and learning martial arts. But one can only hope to grow as a practitioner by attending more advanced classes too. And those who teach the advanced classes need to immerse themselves in even higher level practice, in order to push their own development, and hence the development of the art or science itself. Hence, the Martial Arts Studies Association seeks to generate further opportunities for advanced study within, and for the advancement of the academic field, discipline, discourse, or indeed mirrored maze of martial arts studies.

This does not contradict our open access ethos. It does not constitute a closing down of opportunities. Rather, it constitutes the further proliferation of access points and a wider range of opportunities. The Martial Arts Studies Association exists to enable more – more varied, more diverse, more variegated – opportunities for the development, both of the 'field', and of those working within it.

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