

# BOOK REVIEW

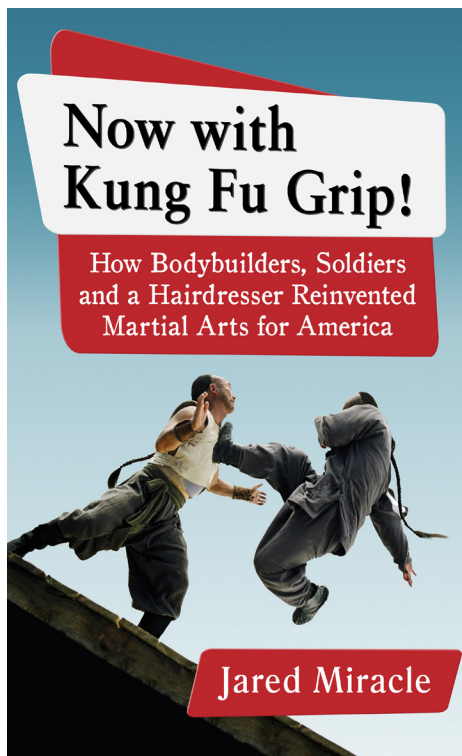
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Now with Kung Fu Grip! – How Bodybuilders, Soldiers and a Hairdresser Reinvented Martial Arts for America.

Jared Miracle

McFarland & Co., 2016

277 pages      \$30 /£24



A growing body of scholarship has examined the introduction, diffusion, and cultural domestication of Asian martial arts in the United States. Veteran martial arts researchers such as Joseph Svinth and Thomas Green have demonstrated the value of both archival and ethnographic approaches to the topic, and new publications – such as Charles Russo’s study of martial arts in the San Francisco Bay area during the 1950s and 1960s – are emerging to shed light on neglected topics. Whereas these studies have tended (judiciously?) to delimit their scope to a relatively narrow historical period, to a single martial art, or to a particular geographic region (or some combination thereof), Jared Miracle’s *Now with Kung Fu Grip!* spans more than a century, explores the history of various martial arts in both East Asia and the United States, and discusses pedagogical practices, professional competitions, and the impact and significance of media creations ranging from martial arts movies to the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* series. This book is, in other words, an ambitious undertaking.

Although the book’s main title might elude readers unfamiliar with American advertising slogans, the intriguing subtitle promises a lively and iconoclastic inquiry into how Asian martial arts in the United States became ‘Americanized’ over time. The five main chapter titles serve to further pique the reader’s curiosity: Chapter 1, ‘The YMCA, Christian Muscle and Breakfast Cereal’, examines the history of various fighting arts in the United States from the late 19th century through to the beginning of WWII, with a focus on the YMCA’s advocacy of what is now known as ‘muscular Christianity’; Chapter 2, ‘Karate, Boxing and Other Japanese Creations’, focuses on Japan during roughly the same time period; Chapter 3, ‘U.S. Occupation and a New Manly Art’, examines how the postwar American occupation of Japan and Okinawa shaped the way in which martial arts were later ‘translated’ for domestic consumption and also features a discussion of Kyokushin karate founder, Masutatsu Oyama; Chapter 4, ‘In Search of the Death Touch’, concentrates on Robert Smith, Donn F. Draeger, and John ‘Count Dante’ Keehan; and Chapter 5, ‘Bigger Muscles, Mutant Turtles and Cage-Fighting Philosophers’, is, in the author’s words, ‘concerned with the transformation of the martial artist identity as it has interacted with discursive masculinity from the 1970s to the present’ 12-13].

In the Preface, the author notes that his aim in the book is ‘to tease out trends in each generation’s approach to the martial arts, both East Asian and Western’ [2], and he describes the process as follows: ‘After sifting through historical material from the past century or so in three languages, interviewing famous – and not-so-famous – fighters, artists, and fans of the genre, and spending countless hours engaging in all elements of the martial arts industry on two continents, a few running themes emerged’ [2]. With all of this build-up, what reader would not be chomping at the bit to devour the main text?

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## REVIEWER

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The book does, in fact, contain much of interest, and its attention to the role of the YMCA in promoting athletics and to the shifting attitudes toward boxing in American society provides a fresh lens through which to view the reception of Asian martial arts in the United States. The author has gathered a diverse range of material from both primary sources and from interviews that he personally conducted, and readers unfamiliar with the colorful characters who fill the latter half of the book will find themselves entertained as well as informed. Those interested in shifting social constructions of masculinity will also find much that is worthwhile.

Notwithstanding its virtues, the book as a whole fails to live up to the high expectations fostered by the chapter titles and opening pages. Perhaps the most serious flaw, in view of the historical nature of the project, is the lax treatment of historical detail and context. This is particularly evident in the sections that dwell on Japanese history (why a book ostensibly about the 'reinvention of martial arts for America' should devote so much space to Japanese history and to the development of martial arts within Japan is already puzzling). For example, in his discussion of judo founder, Kano Jigoro, the author notes that, 'following Western pedagogical practices and almost certainly with the police and military in mind, Kano devised a system of ten grades to identify the level of a practitioner's ability and experience' [53]. In fact, the adoption of the '*dan*' ranking system in judo was borrowed from the long-established systems used in Japanese chess (*shogi*) and Go to rank players; and Kano awarded a student the rank of 'first degree black belt' (*shodan*) as early as 1883, several years before his official contact with the Tokyo Metropolitan Police.

In the book's twenty-five-page 'Conclusion', which serves mainly to recapitulate points discussed at length in the preceding chapters, the author writes: 'From the turn of the century and into the 1910s and 1920s, a forward-thinking professor of education, Kano Jigoro, carried out an intensive study of the Japanese classical martial arts and formulated a system that he called "judo" [152] – this after devoting many pages to a detailed discussion Kano and judo in Chapter 2, and after noting that Kano opened the Kodokan judo headquarters in 1882, which *followed* his intensive martial arts study referred to above.

In the next paragraph, the author mentions that Kano was responsible for introducing Okinawan karate master Funakoshi Gichin to Japanese educational authorities. He then adds, for the reader's edification, that, 'although it was later incorporated as a full prefecture of Japan, at the time Okinawa was still essentially a foreign culture' [152]. The remark about Okinawa's cultural difference from mainland Japan is accurate, but Okinawa was officially made a Japanese prefecture in 1879. Funakoshi would have been about eleven years old at the time.

One would have hoped that such historical inaccuracies were limited to the Meiji era (1868-1912), but the treatment of the postwar era is also problematic. In discussing this period, the author implies that Masutatsu Oyama was the son of Korean immigrants to Japan [76]; rather, he left his family's home in Korea for Japan by himself while still a teenager, and although decades later he became a naturalized citizen, for many years he concealed his Korean origins in an effort to 'pass' as Japanese. Much of the above information is available in Japanese (and probably in English as well), but while the author claims to have sifted 'through historical material from the past century or so in three languages', the book's bibliography only lists works written in English, and it is unclear what other two languages were employed in his research. Written Japanese would not appear to be among them.

The author further states that, 'although members of the occupying forces were probably familiar with judo to some extent prior to arriving in Japan, it was karate that came to be popularized by these men after returning to the U.S.' [82]. Yet during the occupation of Japan, judo was far more well-known and popular among the American troops than was karate (at least among those stationed in mainland Japan), and when fledgling American martial artists returned from their tour of duty and began teaching martial arts back home, judo classes far outnumbered karate classes throughout the 1950s.

At times, the author's treatment of American history is also perplexing. At one point, for example, he makes the following jaw-dropping claim: 'American women attained suffrage in 1920 after decades of public demonstrations and legal arguments. This is a clear indication of the degree to which women had the same autonomy as men' [36].

In terms of its theoretical framework, this book suffers from what appears to be a conflict between the author's acknowledgement of the multifaceted and constructed nature of identity ('masculinities are also fluid, varied, and sometimes contradictory' [34]) and his desire to indulge in essentialist claims relying on monolithic concepts. The following, rather awkwardly-worded, assertion is but one example: 'The attraction of the Asian martial arts for *the American psyche* would appear to be their advertised ability to grant individual power, ensuring the autonomy needed for enacting the lone warrior myth' [87, italics added]. One result of this monolithic approach to uncovering social and psychological motives behind Americans' interest in Asian martial arts is that the author ends up choosing a single social sector – namely, white, Christian, middle class men, typically in white collar jobs – then extends his argument to society in general. To give him credit, he does attempt to historicize, and he also points to instances where images (or fantasies) of working class masculinity are appropriated by the middle and upper classes.

More disturbing is this book's utter inattention to the critical role played by African American communities in the dissemination, popularization, and cultural domestication of Asian martial arts in the United States, particularly from the 1960s onward. Many, if not most, of this book's claims about the appeal of Asian martial arts to suburban, white, middle class American men are unlikely to apply to young, impoverished African American males, who were among the most avid consumers of martial arts movies and constituted an enthusiastic base of practitioners as well. Yet middle class white men are treated as normative throughout most of the book, and generalizations about this population are frequently conflated with those of American society *writ large*.

Finally, this book could have benefited from a hard-nosed editor to weed out the misspellings ('dissent' for 'descent' [35]; 'proselyting' for 'proselytizing' [150]), awkward phrasing and inane sentences ('Education is the key to preventing repeats of history' [165]), and, above all, the repetition of entire blocks of information throughout the book. This reviewer was left with the impression that the author must have rushed off his manuscript to the publisher, which in turn prematurely sent it to press. That is unfortunate, since the book contains the seeds for an immensely valuable project.

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