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THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS IN THE WRITINGS OF JOHN DUDGEON, HERBERT GILES AND JOSEPH NEEDHAM

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ABSTRACT

This essay focuses on the early stages of the establishment of both knowledge and misconceptions about Chinese martial arts in early to mid-20th century English language writings. It uses both primary texts and critical literature, including work by John Dudgeon, Herbert A. Giles, and Joseph Needham. The study explores the ways in which their different backgrounds, purposes and interpretations of these authors produced sometimes similar and at other times contrasting images of Chinese martial arts. However, I argue that the three primary images drawn by Dudgeon, Giles, and Needham share overarching similarities, based on shared Greco-Roman assumptions about the 'complete human being'.

INTRODUCTION

From the 16th century, China and its civilization was no longer merely an image, a fantastical country encountered only by travelling merchants such as Marco Polo. It was becoming a reality for increasing numbers of travellers. Some of these were scholars interested in researching Chinese medical, physical culture and scientific developments. Thanks to this scholarly interest, numerous Chinese achievements came to be studied by European scholars, including those practices that would eventually come to be known by such names as *cong-fu* or *kung-fu*. Consequently, it was during this period that both knowledge and misconceptions about 'Chinese boxing' as a corporeal practice began to spread, initially to Britain and subsequently to other European countries.

This essay focuses on these early stages in the establishment of both knowledge and misconceptions about Chinese martial arts in English language writings of the early to the middle 20th century. It studies both primary texts and critical literature, including a lengthy article of the surgeon John Dudgeon, two works by the scholar Professor Herbert A. Giles, and lastly the voluminous contributions of sinologist Joseph Needham. In comparing and contrasting these influential authors, I explore the ways in which their different backgrounds, purposes and perspectives produced sometimes similar and sometimes contrasting images of Chinese martial arts. At the same time, however, I argue that the three primary images drawn by Dudgeon, Giles, and Needham share overarching cultural conceptions, informed by Greco-Roman assumptions about the 'complete human being' and its relationship with Chinese conceptions. Interestingly, they also share also a general interest in the mystical force of *qi* and in how this was said to change the body when training or performing martial arts. In the context of this discussion, it is also useful to indicate some of the ways that subsequent waves of Western scholarship have approached the same subject.

Certainly, since the dawn of Chinese civilisation martial arts have been developed to conquer or to protect borders [Lorge 2012: 89-90], to defend people's honour [Liu 1967: 6] or as a way to settle quarrels [Lewis 1990: 80-81]. They have been a consistently present piece of the culture. Despite this, Chinese martial arts do not seem to have not been studied adequately in western academia. Western scholars of literature have not looked at or translated much of the corpus of military treatises, and certainly not with the same degree of interest as has been shown in poetry and other literature. Indeed, Western academia has struggled to come to terms with such corporeal skills as those used throughout history to wage wars and stage fights in between and during periods of peace, stability and good government.

It has only been since the middle of 1950s – and only sporadically – that European and American scholars have studied the military culture of China through the lens of the dyad formally known as *wenwu* 文武 (civilising-martial) [Fried 1952; Abbink 2000: xiii, xiv]. The *wenwu* is a cultural pattern mentioned very early in Chinese history by Confucius in the *Analecs*, and it is present in other East Asian cultural contexts too. In these contexts, it is said that ideally a person should cultivate both aspects; the educative and literary, on the one hand, and the more physical and militaristic, on the other. This seems to encompass a traditional schema aiming at developing a balanced person.¹ Arguably, this is comparable to the Greek concept of *paideia* – a comparison that I use in this article as a shorthand way to encapsulate and communicate the terms of cross-cultural comparison for this discussion of early Western attempts to comprehend Chinese martial arts and culture.

Wenwu can be studied and used in a broad meaning, at state level, and in a narrow sense, as well at individual practice level. Arguably, the *wenwu* is a cultural lens through which it is possible to observe martial arts development throughout Chinese history and as a way to study the fluctuating focus of the ruling class on military or civil activities; such as when promoting one at the expense of the other and vice-versa. At time, in Chinese history, the bureaucratic state often tried to refrain or to prohibit a wide spreading of *wu* activities (in vain) up until the end of the 9th and the beginning of the 10th century (the end of the Tang dynasty). Since that period, and in particular since the 10th to 13th centuries (the Song dynasty), the focus shifted toward the *wen*, to the exclusion from public discourse of the *wu* activities.

Yet among the general population there remained an interest in keeping a cultural eye on *wu* activities, for a variety of reasons. Indeed, later on in Chinese history this official imbalance was supported by a biased interpretation of the Confucian message, culminating in the motto developed during the last dynasty in China (The Manchu Qing, 1644-1911): 'give importance to letters; neglect the military' (*Zhongwen qingwu* 重文轻武).

When Chinese culture was experienced in Europe, it was in the context of a literati class decidedly averse to daoist practices, body culture and, consequently, martial arts. In this context, martial arts were not being given their due attention by the Chinese. This is not argued directly by any of the key authors under analysis here: Dudgeon, Giles and Needham. Rather, what such authors have done, it appears, is to locate their interpretations of martial arts within the cultural frame, in ways that associate martial practice to a civil realm, as either therapeutic, sportive or physical. Certainly, neither Dudgeon, nor Giles, nor

1 See for example the interview with Gōng Bǎozhāi 官寶齋 published in the *Pa Kua Chang Journal* Vol 4, N. 5, July August 1994, pp. 3-14.

Needham mentioned once the wenwu dyad in either Chinese or English translation. Yet, I argue, the wenwu pattern should be applied to this context and indeed to a much larger frame than the paideia. This can be seen in that it has been used in many projects, even including urban planning, for instance [Gawlikowski 1989: 60].

Scholars such as Dudgeon, Giles and Needham were certainly working during a period of intellectual rediscovery and fervour as they explored a very different civilisation. It evidently seemed natural to them all to make certain comparisons to Western (Greco-Roman) concepts and socio-economic models [Dawson 1964: xiii-xix, Finlay 2000: 272-274].

The study undertaken here focuses on influential early scholars working in English between the turn of the 19th century to in the middle of the 20th century. Their aim was, first of all, to 'break the ice' of academic silence, and to begin to change the status of the subject area of combat and violence from being 'taboo' or verboten. Secondly, such scholars inaugurate the study of the body in a certain way, by looking at both civilisations' practices of health and sport, and as a (quasi)religious search for immortality, as well as being part of Chinese scientific and technological development. Other scholars, especially since 1969, continued in the tradition of Dudgeon, Giles and Needham. Hence, their historical importance as interlocutors is clear.

1. THE ICEBREAKER JOHN DUDGEON (1837 – 1901)

To understand the work of John Dudgeon and to appreciate his effort, we need to recall the cultural scenario and the environment he worked in. At the end of the 16th century, Italian missionaries, led by Matteo Ricci, were the main known group of Europeans to go to China, seeking to evangelize the country – or, to convert the Chinese to Christianity. A few centuries later, during the last dynasty the Qing, some British missionaries travelled to continue the evangelical project. However, some were not only men of faith; they were also men of science. Some were physicians who went to China also to observe the local forms of medical knowledge and lifestyle in general, and they went on to produce important works, which affected subsequent Western understandings of Chinese physical and medical culture.

Both groups, Chinese and Western, when they came into cultural contact, tried to clarify and explain each other's culture. For the non-Chinese, this was a difficult task, perhaps nowhere more so than when

it came to discussing the Chinese notion of qi. Many saw the qi as a relevant matter and wanted to engage with this notion, including Tang Zonghai 唐宗海 (1851-1897). Tang used the model of steam and engine to explain it. More importantly, Tang identified the notion of qi as the cultural mark between West and East [Lei 2012:319]. An explanation of qi was necessary in order to clarify the cultural divide muddled by the Western assumption that Chinese traditional medicine is based on purely superstitious elements [Gao: 102, 105].

The translation of qi and explanation of how it works was an important and difficult task. This was the goal aimed at, for instance, by *The Chinese Medical Missionary Journal* at the end of 19th century, via a series of publication projects and translations. John Dudgeon took part in this project with translations with the aim of trying to reverse the 'superstition' stereotype about Chinese medical knowledge. An important part of this publication was dedicated to the healing arts and John Dudgeon made an important and contribution, seeking to establish a positive explanation of qi within physical training. This was based on his observations of Taoist monks practicing *yangsheng* (養生, meaning 'to nourish life'), later relabelled as *qigong*.²

John Hepburn Dudgeon (1837-1901) was a Scottish from Galston, Ayrshire; a protestant Presbyterian, who attended the University of Edinburgh and who later received a Master of Surgery medical degree from the University of Glasgow in 1862. In his thirties, Dudgeon's health deteriorated due to a fever, and he was advised to travel to countries with a better climate, such as Japan, for example. Instead, contrary to all expectations, Dudgeon travelled China from north to south, where he recovered. He decided to remain in Beijing to try to understand more clearly why the Chinese had such a great life expectancy [Li 2009: 22-23]. He worked in Beijing for the British Legation, performing medical duties and translating documents into Chinese [British Medical Journal 1901: 16-679].³ In 1864, he worked at the Peking Hospital in connection with the London Missionary Society.

Dudgeon described his experience in China as like living in a huge necropolis where the 'sanitary conditions deplorable'. In particular, he described Beijing's environment as 'a receptacle of all manner of filth because no one was responsible for their cleanliness'. He found the 'absence of public toilets in Beijing irritating', as it resulted in a metropolis-sized opened-air latrine. And yet, despite all this, he was

2 In 1949, Huang Yueting 黄月庭 coined the term qigong. See also <http://www.eastasianhistory.org/40/Otchode-and-Penny> [accessed 15 September 2019].

3 For more bibliographical information, see *The British Medical Journal* [1901], March 16, p. 679.

surprised by the incredibly strong immune system of the Chinese people, and found this living environment to confound all medical expectations, noting: 'It might be supposed from the physical conditions of Peking which I have attempted to describe, that fevers and all manner of epidemics would be most fatal. This was not the case' [Li 2009: 25].

Dudgeon wanted to know what made the Chinese people's body constitution so strong as to be able to flourish in such conditions. He wrote, the Chinese 'have a good many lessons yet to teach us in respect of living and practical health' [Li 2009: 27]. He looked closely at their living habits, diet, clothing, working lives, social patterns and physical activities [Li 2009: 28-29], and he noted how different and more human-centred life appeared to be, in comparison with that of the industrialising world.

During this period, Dudgeon produced a series of accounts and translations. Some gave general information, such as the article, 'The Population of China'; others were more specialised, such as 'A Modern Chinese Anatomist', 'A Chapter in Chinese Surgery', and his translation of the text, 'Complete exam' (my translation: *Quanti tongkao*, 全體通考).

Of most relevance to us is a work titled 'Kung-fu or Medical Gymnastic' [Dudgeon 1895]. This appears in the Li Sheng-jen bibliography as 'Kung-Fu or Tauist Medical Gymnastics'.⁴ It is disappointing that this work is not mentioned in the pages of *The British Medical Journal* (a valuable source which provides key information about his life), for Dudgeon's 'Kung-fu or Medical Gymnastic' is not only a record of Chinese 'medical gymnastic', it was actually only the second ever (and the first British) article to argue that martial arts (*wushu* 武术) – or, to use the southern Chinese term, *kung fu* (功夫) – had roots in the Daoist practice of *qigong* (literally, 'qi work', 氣功), and hence to promote the idea that kung fu was originally therapeutic. Given the enduring prejudice against taking seriously martial/physical culture, this omission may well be deliberate [Li 2009: 33].

The first European article to argue similar things about wushu/kung fu was written by the French missionary Pierre Martial Cibot (1727-1780). In 1779, Cibot had written an article titled 'Notice du Cong-fou, des Bonzes Tao-sée'. In this article, he records the practice of certain postures associated with healing and relates them to Daoist alchemy. Almost a century later, Dudgeon was asked to work on this subject in

order to answer specific questions that had been left unclear by Cibot and to expand generally on the subject. Specifically sought was 'detailed information on the positions and breathing movements' [Dudgeon 1895: 357-359]. Arguably, this work could be regarded as marking the very beginning of the era of aesthetic interest in all things Chinese, now known as *chinoiserie*.

Just like Tang Zonghai, Dudgeon was required to work on the idea of qi, not least because of its significance as representing the depth of the cultural division between East and West. Recent scholarship, such as that of Linda Barnes [Barnes 2004: 72-125, 126-211] and Jonathan Spence [Spence 1992: 141-54] emphasizes the profound differences that were becoming apparent between European and Chinese approaches to treating diseases in the 17th century. They also note the growing curiosity about Chinese therapies that emerged among European physicians of the time. Barnes writes: 'Chinese and Western practitioners learned radically different and even incommensurate ways of reading the body' – differences that indicate 'the disparities rooted in different cosmologies' [Barnes 2004: 85]. In particular, Barnes stresses the attention that some Europeans paid to the Chinese approach to reading the pulse in order to reach a diagnosis [Barnes 2004: 92-104], as well as interest in the conceptions of qi and its various levels of sophistication, such as the seminal essence (*jing* 精) and spirit (*shen* 神) [Barnes 2004: 87-92].

According to Barnes, the sense was that qi was the primary and principal cultural issue that needed to be dealt with if European researchers were to be able to represent approaches to physical and medical therapies to a wider European audience. However, as she writes, although 'some writers attempted to explain core Chinese concepts to European audiences' (for example, 'Ten Rhijne translated qi as "Spirits", equating it with Galen's "animal spirits"'), the problem was that, 'while both terms involved vital force and blood — making the connection natural — it was still wrong' [Barnes 2004: 87].

In fact, the understanding of qi went through various translations: at various times, qi was taken to be a 'spiritual substance', an 'animal spirit', a combination of circulating 'blood and humours', and an element coupled together with the spirits. These differences show the difficulties that Europeans had in translating and incorporating such a complex concept into the Western intellectual environment [Barnes 2004: 87-89]. Physicians were still regarding the human body as a 'structure' that allowed them 'to recognize changes [...] and corresponding problems in the mechanism's capacity to function' [Barnes 2004: 85].

It is important to recall the problems that Europeans had when dealing with qi, because – crucially – *Dudgeon never actually mentions it* in 'Kung-

⁴ Kungfu or Medical gymnastics' is a lengthy article of over 220 pages. It is organised into 15 parts, combining explanations and discussion plus a selection of drawings. The article does not have an index or a bibliography, and its parts are not technically chapters, although there are occasional footnotes.

fu or Medical Gymnastic'. Rather, he simply uses Western words. This suggests that Dudgeon seems to have preferred a strategy of trying to avoid confusing the reader, which the introduction of matters such as different and difficult-to-translate cultural and cosmological notions could well have done. While this seems like a reasonable strategy to use in order to keep the attention and comprehension of the reader, unfortunately, it sidesteps and defers dealing with one of the enduring and perhaps fundamental cultural questions that has recurred in Western discourses with Chinese thought since then – namely, clarification of what is perhaps the key to Chinese culture: the notion of qi.

In lieu of any philosophical explanation of qi, Dudgeon includes a brief explanation of the principles of *yin* (阴) and *yang* (阳) [Dudgeon 1895: 370-372]. However, even in this explanation, he refers to plant and animal forces: yin, allegedly a vegetative force, has to be combined with yang, allegedly a muscular force, in the production of an equilibrium of physical forces, the *t'ai-chi* (太極). By the end of this explanation, Dudgeon goes on to construct a universal (religious) image of kung fu, one based in an idea of the creation of physical and spiritual harmony, a harmony that he relates to Indian and Greek conceptions:

Such are the principles upon which reposes the theory of Kung-fu of the Chinese, like that of their chemical and pharmaceutical medicine, and also that of their religious, social, and philosophic doctrines; for the Chinese [...] carry always their considerations into all the elements of his nature and his constitution [...] Indeed, this will be a curious history to write [...] that of these old priests of Tao – these remains still living of the first Brahmins of India [...] Depositories of the tradition, these founders of nations carried the doctrine of Kung-fu from the common cradle into all the countries where they established themselves. [Dudgeon 1895: 371-373]

Dudgeon's Kung Fu Was Barely a Fighting Method

The importance of this work is that, in the British construction, Chinese martial arts are rendered as a therapeutic system rather than a pure fighting art; and it all starts with a general introduction about the sense of the importance of physical motion to preserve health and strengthen the body [Dudgeon 1895: 341-375]. There are only tangential references to kung fu as something that is, was, or could be utilised in any kind of combat situation. In fact, Dudgeon rarely mentions any violent or combative implications in relation to kung fu (as it is known today). Of course, even with reference to ancient Greek and Roman contexts, Dudgeon held that contests were held primarily to reinforce the body. A similar assumption is also found in relation to

other ancient societies, such as Hindu and Chinese societies. Dudgeon notes that these latter societies produced a body of literature in which the preservation of health was regarded as relating to such matters as the changes of the seasons, the climate, food, and ways to arrange the house [Dudgeon 1895: 343-344].

However, although Dudgeon was evidently not looking at the potential martial meanings of kung fu, he nevertheless came rather close when arguing that in the Chinese national curriculum kung fu included the practice of archery and horsemanship. But, Dudgeon connected it with the Greek assumption that a 'sound mind in a sound body' [1895: 342] was the ideal of physicians and philosophers and argued that any kind of dynamic activity provides a benefit, whether that be 'walking, dry-rubbing or friction, [or] wrestling, etc.' [1895: 342]. In addition, Dudgeon adds the Greek word *athlos*. Hence, *athletae* can be associated with the benefits experienced from practicing kung fu. Iccus of Tarentum and Herodicus of Selymbra were two Greek gymnasts who cured diseases through movements. In particular, as Dudgeon indicates, Herodicus used gymnastics and fighting for medical purposes: 'Hippocrates, who was one of his pupils and superintended the exercises in his *palaestra*, tells us that Herodicus cured fevers by walking and wrestling, and that many found the dry fomentations did them harm' [Dudgeon 1895: 343]. This is where it seems most possible to see the cultural parallel between the Greek *paideia* and the Chinese *wenwu*.

Reciprocally, in Dudgeon's exploration of the culture of physical movements in China, he found that the activities familiarly referred to as gymnastics in the West were very similar to those practiced in China. He notes that, since the time of the Great Yǔ (大禹), the Chinese have had systems of movement to preserve health. These movements later took the shape, he notes, of military exercises (although Dudgeon does not mention martial arts) and ritual dances with shields and banners (called *Tà Wǔ*, 大舞) which were performed as entertainment at the imperial court. Dudgeon proposes that these dances showed a circular trajectory aimed at preventing endemic and epidemic maladies [Dudgeon 1895: 345-346].

It is unfortunate that Dudgeon was not able to continue his investigation into the culture of China. As he writes:

The result of my attention having been called to this treatment is the following article on Kung-fu, which was submitted to Dr. Roth, and by him recommended for publication. I was unwilling at the time to present to the medical profession or to the general public a subject so meagrely handled, and during all these years have waited for the convenient time to devote to it more study and research, with the view of supplying at

least sufficient details to render anyone ignorant of Chinese and medicine able to grasp the subject and determine its usefulness or otherwise as prophylactic and curative agent. Unfortunately, the press of work necessitated by the card of a large hospital and other duties, has prevented me from pursuing further this study.
[Dudgeon 1895: 358]

Overall, however, Dudgeon had managed to build an original picture in which an ancient Chinese culture of gymnastics met an equally ancient Greek culture of palaestra. At first, one might suspect that this kind of conception could be connected to what we now call 'eurocentrism' – a cultural viewpoint that began to flourish after the 18th century, when observers increasingly built frames of knowledge that projected one intellectual structure onto the entire world, China included [Barnes 2004: 126]. However, it is also possible to hold a different view of his work: after all, Dudgeon was actually trying to introduce his fellow countrymen to aspects of life quality within a different social and economic system.

The Impact of Dudgeon's Use of the Term 'Kung-fu'

Perhaps some readers of Chinese culture today will associate the term kung fu primarily with the figure of Bruce Lee (Li Zhengfan), who first popularised this term in Western countries via prominent television and film roles in the 1960s and early 1970s. But long before this, Dudgeon had provided a brief but influential and relatively comprehensive explanation of the meanings of kung fu. First, Dudgeon mentions the ability to perform an art; second, the application of bodily exercises in the 'prevention or treatment of disease' [Dudgeon 1895: 347]; third, he associates this concept of physical or artistic work with the way certain 'Tauists' (as it was transliterated at the time) hold their postures. With respect to this third sense, Dudgeon also states that Taoists (or Daoists, in pinyin) had long been practicing kung fu in the search for the *elixir vitae* [Dudgeon 1895: 347]. In the last part of his discussion of the semantics of the term kung fu, Dudgeon quotes a certain Lady Manners, who in the magazine *Nineteenth Century* stated that the Chinese had learned gymnastics and the 'Science of Living' from the Indians [Dudgeon 1895: 349].

Kung fu had and still has more than one meaning: In the Mathews' Dictionary of classical Chinese we find the term related to 'ability', 'work', and 'service'. These three meanings have broad applications, certainly beyond the sphere of physical culture. The modern Oxford Chinese Dictionary provides some different terms, such as 'time', 'effort', and 'workmanship'. Moreover, these three go under a variation of the original graph 工夫. They still show a broad application in

meanings. However, what none of them mention is *the combative*. Therefore, one may be inclined to wonder where the combative meaning actually comes from.

Dudgeon's Sources

Although sources regarding Daoism were not widely shared by missionaries at the end of the 19th century, Dudgeon did manage to see some Chinese texts. If we examine his section 'Books on Kung-fu' [Dudgeon 1895: 500-509], it is clear how many relevant texts were hardly known even to scholars, to say nothing of any kind of wider Western audience. Interestingly, however, a good portion of the section 'Books on Kung-fu' is dedicated to the figure of the Indian monk Ta-mo (達摩, which is a short version of the name for Bodhidharma) and two texts attributed to him: *The Washing Sinew Book* (*Hsi-sui-ching* 洗髓經)⁵ and the *Transforming Meadow Book* (*I-chin-ching* 易筋經)⁶ – which Dudgeon says is in the Indian language. The figure of Bodhidharma and the two texts are related to the *Shao-lin-sze* (少林寺) and the practice of martial arts and kung fu. The part 'Books on Kungfu' quotes eight books, out of which six are Daoist sources and two are Buddhist, attributed to the mythological Indian patriarch Ta-mo (or Damo). These connections endure: modern publications still often make these same connections.

In any case, it seems clear that Dudgeon knew that kung fu was also a combat art, even if he was not interested in its martial aspects. Interestingly, a good part of his work is concerned with the technical description of the postures included in the text, *Eight Ornamental Sections* (*Ba-duan-ching* 八段經) [Dudgeon 1895: 375-385]. The description of the movements deserves our attention. Large diagrams are preceded by a couple of lines that briefly describe to the reader how to perform the movement. For instance: 'The eyes must first be shut, and the heart dark [...] the fists must be tightly closed, and the heart at rest, and both hands placed behind the vertex (of the head); then 9 respirations' [Dudgeon 1895: 377]. Furthermore, the majority of those movements are given as animal names. The animal is referred to in order to evoke the general movement pattern and to describe the part of the body that will benefit from the therapeutic performance. For instance:

The Tiger. Close the breath, bend the head, close the fists tightly, and assume the severe form of a tiger. The two hands are

5 The pinyin is **Xisuijing** and in this text the words are in the wrong order. The correct rendering is 洗髓經.

6 In pinyin it is **Yijinjing**.

slowly to lift a supposed weight of 1000 catties; the breath is to be retained till the body is upright, then swallowed and carried down into the abdomen [...] By this sort of movement, the air and pulses of the body will be harmonized, and the hundred [i.e., all] diseases prevented from being produced. [Dudgeon 1895: 386-387]

Conclusion

Dudgeon's translations and his account of kung fu were and still are an important early contribution. The conception of kung fu evident in Dudgeon's work suggests, first of all, that it was part of a Chinese conception of kinetic exercise; certainly not just for entertainment, but for the higher purposes of treating sick people and also involving the noble idea of a 'sound mind in a sound body'. In other words, despite Chinese practices involving great differences from European ones, Dudgeon still saw a significant educative point, and he was very interested in bringing back to Scotland a useful practice to improve people's health. In this sense his work perhaps ought not to be considered 'Eurocentric', but rather a kind of restoration of a 'forgotten' Greek cultural piece, revived by a different cultural perspective.

His interest had an impact on the orientation of later publications throughout the 20th century and even into the 21st century, insofar as the association of Chinese martial arts with Daoist practices such as qigong is still widespread, indeed taken for granted – at least in popular discourses, if less so today in academic discourse. Overall, John Dudgeon was not primarily interested in looking at the combative and masculine aspect of body movement. But this had little in common with the conception of Chinese martial arts that emerged in the account of Chinese boxing produced by his contemporary, Herbert Allen Giles. Accordingly, it is to Giles' work that we should now turn.

2. A CONTINENTAL STUDY OF 'JIU-JITSU' AS ANTI-WESTERN MARTIAL ART HERBERT ALLEN GILES (1845 – 1935)

The same cultural mood as described in the introduction surrounded the first English scholar who wrote about sports in China and in particular about the martial arts. It seems a shame that no Western scholar became interested in Chinese sports and games or wrote about them before Herbert Giles [Brownell 2008: 29; Blanchard 1995: 102]. Giles was interested in the continental origin of 'jiu-jitsu' as well as

Chinese martial arts in general. His intellectual trajectory around physical culture moves from the sports of polo and football, to the Chinese origin of jiu-jitsu, and it ends with the Chinese arts of fighting regarded as part of a tradition 'existing only in the record of books' [1911: 151].

In the century before he wrote these works there was a prevailing image of China as totally dictated by an Imperial literati class who never gave specific historical importance to physical exercise and to martial arts. The invisibility to Western scholars of body culture and martial arts in Chinese culture perhaps reflects a Western bias against studies of the body and physical culture, but it certainly resulted in strengthening limited and limiting perspectives. The bias against examining martial arts is not just intellectual; it is also cultural. In the case of Giles' works, however, cultural biases and assumptions played a comparatively different role. Giles did not rail against Japanese martial culture. Rather, he railed against the transplanting of Chinese martial culture.

The Japanese culture of martial arts made its way to Britain in two stages; first, after the Sino-Japanese war (1894-5) and, second, after the Russo-Japanese war (1904-5) [Hashimoto 2011:70, 72]. The Bushido code attracted sufficient interest to cause jiu-jitsu to become available on British soil.

Overview

Giles' oeuvre was fourfold: he produced reference works, textbooks for languages including dictionaries, translations, and lastly he worked on miscellaneous different themes, including translating specific forensic texts. Giles, together with Thomas Wade, created a method to transliterate Mandarin into alphabetic languages; this is also still used today although it is now second to the more recent standard, *pinyin* 拼音.⁷ Giles was a distinguished scholar, known for his style and his criticism of other works. However, his character once caused him to be removed from a diplomatic position in China, because 'did not suffer fools gladly' [Aylmer 1997: 4].

Giles knew that 'life in China is not wholly made up of book-learning and commerce' [1911: 148], and on 9th November 1905, while watching a game of rugby, he wondered about sports played in China in ancient times [1906: 508]. Among his subsequent publications is a 1906 work on Chinese sports, titled 'Football and Polo in China' [Giles 1906] along with another one in the same year titled 'The Home of Jiu Jitsu'.

7 The full name is Hanyu pinyin 汉语拼音 which means literally spelled sound of Han language. This was a system created by the end of 1950s by the Chinese government.

This was included in the project *Adversaria Sinica*. A few years later, in 1911, a very small book called *The Civilisation of China* contains a brief mention of Chinese boxing (in the third chapter covering the 'Philosophy and Sport').

Giles worked to counter the image of an over-intellectualised and effeminate China, in a sense trying to restore the balance of *wenwu*. He argued against the presumption that China did not have a valuable physical and martial culture and that the Chinese, just like the Japanese, had a significant martial tradition. Nevertheless, in Giles' approach to martial arts, you can still see the presence of what would become some enduring cultural problems, which still recur today, related to terminology, associations with religion, and function.

A Unique Interest in Fighting Arts

Jiu-jitsu, Jiu-jutsu or Jujutsu? And Kung-hu? How difficult it has been for people to agree on how to transliterate *jūjutsu* (柔術), *wǔshù* (武術) and *gōngfū* (功夫) into alphabetic non-tonal languages. Modern readers of Japanese language may be used to seeing the term in its contemporary transliterated form, which uses the Hepburn system (i.e., 'jutsu'). The Hepburn method was developed by the end of 19th century, in 1887; almost twenty years before the publication of the article under analysis and yet the method did not reach an adequate audience to be familiarised with. It was still too early for the British readers of Japanese language. Authors of previous publications show a couple of more different transliterations: 'Jiujutsu' and 'Ju-jitsu' still quite different from the contemporary standard 'Jūjutsu'.

Jūjutsu made its way into the British imagination via a fascinated Rudyard Kipling, who believed it was an interesting alternative combat method to wrestling, peculiar because it was decidedly less muscular. It seemed a novel way to defeat a stronger and bigger opponent, one that fed directly into the Victorian desire for new 'freak show' material. All of this was enough to tease Giles to enquire into its possible continental roots.

Giles' two works on Chinese martial arts are both original in their scope. *The Adversaria Sinica* project started in 1905 as a series of notes on a range of topics. He was interested in writing articles about Chinese dance and 'jiu jitsu'. The picture he built is one of a practice of self-defence becoming a sport and later being transformed into the science of boxing. Moreover, Giles states that Chinese martial arts are the origin of the Japanese art of jiu-jitsu. Academic sources of information about the introduction of jiu-jitsu in Britain are scarce. There are only three early articles in the *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* that mention the Japanese art of self-defence by the end of 19th century

[Lindsay, Kano 1889; Shidachi 1892; Barton-Wright 1902], and only relatively few other articles in newspapers or magazines.

However, it is evident that this Japanese art had been introduced into Britain by the late 19th century. Moreover, it is highly likely that Giles was aware of and could well have seen performances of versions of jujutsu in Britain: Bartitsu and 'jujitsu' certainly had prominence in London at that time, and Bartitsu was well known to have been influenced by the Japanese art. But, Giles evidently came to the conclusion that there is a technical and cultural link between Chinese and Japanese arts. Eastern civilisations share a martial heritage which needed to be explored. So, Giles questioned and reflected on the origins of both, and weighted his interpretation of their origins towards China. As he wrote: 'So much has been lately said and written about *jiu jitsu*, the Japanese form of self-defence, that it may be of interest to see what China, with her vastly longer national life, has achieved in the same direction' [Giles 1906: 132].

Sources, Resulting Images and Problems

Giles' article on Chinese boxing represents a breakthrough in a field dogged by problems that had arisen because nobody had hitherto attempted to trace the origins of the arts by looking at the classical literature. But, Giles explored a new territory of specialised literature and translated it [Henning 2003: 26]. In so doing, he brought to the attention of English language readers a wide variety of textual sources never seen by them. These sources included the *Official Histories* of Qin, Han, Five Dynasties, Wei and New Tang,⁸ the *Topography of Ninpo* (寧波府志), the story of the Shao-lin monastery, and the military treatise, *New Book of Effective Discipline* (Jixiao xinshu 紀效新書) [Giles 1906: 137].

However, further exploration into the corpus of knowledge that Giles' work opened up allows us to see that there are some omissions regarding authors and facts, and also some problematic conceptions. For instance, Giles does not clarify who wrote the *Canon of Boxing* (*Ch'üan ching* 拳經) [Giles 1906: 134], nor does he clarify the distinctions he makes between 'exoteric' (*waijia* 外家) and 'esoteric' (*neijia* 內家) self-defence arts [Giles 1906: 135]. All of this is a very important, complex and deep topic. Yet, Giles assumes he can use 'exoteric' and 'esoteric' without any kind of explanation. The critical reader is left with many questions unanswered; but, more consequentially, many uninterrogated conceptions entered and have continued to thrive in the imagination

8 These are those directly mentioned. These are the Qinshu 秦書, Hanshu 漢書, Wudai 五代, Weishu 魏書 and Xintangshu 新唐書.

of readers. Many anglophone readers have become fascinated by such distinctions. Indeed, arguably Giles has contributed to a rather mystical construction of Chinese martial arts, one that is still alive in 20th and 21st century publications.

What seems to have most caught the attention of Giles can be seen in his descriptions of jiu jitsu roots, including a variety of Chinese boxing, where he conveys his sense of the unusual *gentleness* of certain movements. This can be interpreted as a residue of that picture of an effeminate or over-intellectualised China [Brownell 2008: 29]. Certainly, Giles stresses the concept of gentleness in jiu jitsu and also in the movements described in the Chinese military treatise, that he quotes at length:

Boxing seems to be an accomplishment of no real value in serious warfare. At the same time, inasmuch, as a study of this art in its elementary stages involves flexibility of the arms and legs, together with activity of the body [...] holding the adversary face upwards lies its gentleness.
[Giles 1906: 137]

Consider also his comment: “The use here of the word *jou*, “gentleness”, is peculiarly noticeable, the Japanese term *jiu jitsu* being the equivalent of the Chinese *jou shu* “gentle art” [Giles 1906: 137-8]. This interest and fascination, this way of looking and seeing, is undoubtedly a reflection of his overall approach to Chinese civilisation, contrasting the stereotyping image of China he had received.

Interestingly, in ‘The Home of Jiu Jitsu’, Giles uses the word ‘boxing’ or ‘boxers’ most frequently – 15 times, whereas ‘self-defence’ is used four times, and only once are other technical terms related to fighting (armed and unarmed) used. This is not simply a matter of translation. In fact, the same problem seems evident within the Chinese texts themselves, in which the words for what we are dealing with here also vary: from *jiaodi* (角抵 horns down) to *ch’uanpo* (拳搏 fight) to *ch’uan* (拳 – *quan*, in pinyin – box). For his part, in English, Giles alternates between such terms as ‘self-defence’ and ‘boxing’ or ‘science’; he also once uses the French word *savate* [Giles 1906: 135].

Chinese authors have usually used the word *quan* 拳, in combination with other key terms, to express ideas of fighting that include bare-handed fighting and weapons-based approaches. In modern Western works, there is often a drift between various words for ‘martial art’ – from wushu to kung fu and so on – because they all seem generally to refer to the same kind of human activity. Arguably, this was more acceptable in Giles’ time, when fewer people seemed interested in the topic, but it always allows confusion to flourish. Nonetheless, neither

of the two authors whose work I have discussed to this point have contributed much by way of clarifying an approach to the Chinese martial arts. They have, rather, informed a huge warrior heritage; which is already unusual for that time in academic works.

The nouvelle picture

Giles produced another interesting image of martial arts in his later publication, *The Civilisation of China* [1911]. Here, his argument is on a broader scale as it includes sports in general, associated with thinkers, and these ‘sports’ involve martial arts. In the chapter ‘Philosophy and Sport’, Giles proposes that the activities of thinking and practicing (should) have always gone hand in hand, and that it is a shame that sports and recreational activities in China have ‘passed out of the national life, and [exist] only in the record of books’ [Giles 1911: 151].⁹

For Giles, Chinese boxing flourished in a Buddhist monastery and gave life later in Japan to the art of self-defence called jiu jitsu. In discussing it here, he again repeats the term ‘gentle art’ (柔術). Regrettably, Giles did not expand on this very deep and controversial topic,¹⁰ and simply asserts and association between Chinese martial arts and religious practice. We have to wait until the 1990s for scholars to seriously tackle this [e.g., Kurland 1996, Raposa 2003, Shahar 2008].

Conclusion

Giles’ work was one of those rare contributions to the Western narrative of Chinese martial arts history, pioneering research as it did that because countered the assumptions about China in the West. Moreover, Giles was searching for the same artistic ‘strength’ in China that others saw in Japan, and argued Japanese martial arts had their origins in China. However, aspects of his work still confuse the understanding of Chinese martial arts in the West. Readers have been left unclear as to whether Chinese martial arts are simply religious practices, gymnastics, a form of dance, a science, or an Eastern version of boxing, along with how and why they were practiced in a Buddhist monastery. In addition, Giles raised the topic of exoteric and esoteric distinctions, but he does not delve further into this matter.

9 Consistent with my own argument, Susan Brownell also locates Giles’ vision, although very briefly, in a subtle counter-context of Chinese conception similar to the Greek conception of a sound mind in a sound body [Brownell 2008: 29].

10 This short passage on martial arts occurs within a discussion of sports in ancient China and is followed by a whole chapter titled ‘Recreation’ [Giles 1911: 159-78], which includes such activities as skating, acting, gambling, and so on.

Most importantly, perhaps, Giles' attempt to cast light on the civilisation of China and martial arts in terms of the Greek ideal of a 'sound mind in a sound body' (similar to Dudgeon) is significant. Certainly, today – to avoid problems of cultural and methodological problems and biases related to eurocentrism – Western scholars tend to try to build their images and understandings of Chinese martial arts using also Chinese criteria (or else they at least insist on careful self-reflexivity about categories), rather than promulgating pre-established Western criteria, categories, and values. But, as I have argued, both Dudgeon and Giles were not looking either to prove Western superiority or Eastern inferiority, but rather to perceive and examine cultural differences.

But the historical question is one of whether Giles had indeed detected a possible Chinese ancestor to jiu jitsu. Again, Giles merely states that the Japanese learned it from the Chinese and add that, once the Japanese brought it home, they added something to it, and now they also teach it to the West [Giles 1906: 38]. It is these simple assertions in Giles that remain most problematic.

In the third and final section of this essay, we will end with a brief consideration of the work of Joseph Needham. This is important and illuminating because it reveals how Needham put aspects of the two earlier conceptions together: on the one hand, Dudgeon's conception of kung fu as a Daoist therapeutic method and, on the other, Giles' contention that oriental fighters could beat Westerners in unarmed combat.

3. A VISION OF CHINESE 'SCIENCE AND CIVILISATION' OF MARTIAL ARTS JOSEPH NEEDHAM (1900 – 1995)

Noel Joseph Terence Montgomery Needham was an eccentric Londoner – a biochemist, who fell in love with China when he was working as a researcher for Cambridge University's biochemical laboratory. My argument is that his perspective as a scientist impacted his reading of the Chinese martial arts, and that we have to take his background into consideration when engaging with his work.

As a scholar and researcher, he was sent to China to try to bridge the cultural gap between 'West and East'. He also contributed to the Sino-British Science cooperation office in 1942, among other projects, and also helped to create the science division of UNESCO in 1946.

Science and Civilisation in China is comprised of seven volumes across twenty-seven books. Within the seven volumes, two different methods of transliteration were used: first, the Wade-Giles and, in the last volume, pinyin. But there are also exceptions to these systems – for instance, in the way he transliterated the aspirated sounds, which he rendered with the letter 'h'. This resulted, for example, in 'chhi' in the place of 'qi'. In his work on qi and other aspects of physical culture, Needham can be understood as a scientist exploring biomechanical forces within the human body. His huge body of work distinguished him as a historian of Chinese science.

Needham's mission

Needham's work can be regarded as a response to the belief that most of the world's scientific and technological achievements came from Europe or the Western world. He offered the perspective that world civilisations had long influenced each, and also reported on many of the scientific and technological achievements of China that had hitherto been unacknowledged [Low 1998: 1]. Again, this worked to counter the lingering image of a culturally stagnant China [Wright 1960: 189-190, 200].

At the same time, Needham wondered why industrialisation and modernisation was not occurring in China. One of the key questions he asked and explored was why post-Renaissance inventions did not lead to an upsurge of industrialisation in China [Needham in Dawson 1964: 284]. Interestingly (and problematically), however, there is evidence that his own subjective opinions and beliefs affected his research, including his religious and political views. In fact, contrary to the view that rigorous scientific research should be impersonal and unbiased, Needham believed that every author should, so to speak, send a personal message to the readers.

He held strong positive opinions about a socialist world in which there should be a common welfare state based on a religious conception too. He also regarded such common welfare as a realisation of the Kingdom of God on Earth. All of this was part of his message to his Western colleagues – many of whom were, on the contrary, working to praise the results of capitalist industrialisation [Finlay 2000: 272-275].

The question for martial arts studies is that of how he approached such quintessentially Chinese cultural body technologies such as taijiquan and qigong.

Technology, physiology or alchemical work?

Needham's vision of the Chinese martial arts emerges in three volumes of his *Science and Civilisation in China*: volume 2, volume 5 part 5, and volume 5 part 6. As a physical activity, Needham approaches these arts as a kind of alchemical technology and also as a popular interpretation of the more complex military machinery. His vision of martial arts in China military machinery can be seen to reside somewhere between the idealised gestic (tales) of knight errant figures (*youxia*, 游侠) [Needham 1994: 87], the popular image of a hero, to that of a more 'scientific' image of a Chinese therapeutic method. This is a very wide spectrum and lacking in details when he tackles the martial arts. This mainly occurs in the footnotes, where we see, for instance, 'Wu Shu' fleetingly explained as 'the military arts' and as the 'common name for different kinds of physical exercise and fighting techniques. Some made use only of the hands and the whole body, like the famous Chinese kung-fu or Japanese judo and karate; other used the traditional eighteen weapons' [1994: 87, footnote b].

The gestic of chivalrous figures and their combat arts are included in Vol. 5, part 6, where Needham looks at military technology and culture, and how its popularity spread among the people. The proto-scientific dimension arises from his sense of its Daoist traits. However, a deeper and wider vision starts to emerge along these now-familiar lines. For instance, Needham occasionally uses the word 'art', but in the majority of cases, he uses the familiar Western word 'gymnastic', in a sense variably associated with either 'massage' or 'exercise': 'gymnastic technique', he says, is 'called tao yin, i.e. extending and contracting the body'. He speculates: 'Perhaps it derived from rain-bringing shamans dances. In later times the names *kung fu* and *nei kung* [...] originated [...] in Chinese, as in Greek, medicine' [1956/2005 2: 145-146].

In his uses of these words, there is always the conception either of a body in motion or a body to be treated. For Needham, Chinese boxing is often associated it with Daoism. Interestingly, though, although for Needham Daoism is a 'system of mysticism' [Needham 1956: 33], mysticism itself is not regarded as non-scientific. But, in the end, once again, we are left wondering whether Chinese kung fu is a therapeutic method or a fighting one.

However, later in his career, we find a body culture of corporeal technologies used to heal or to harm. This becomes clear in the last chapter, 'The lore of vital spots', in a later work written with a Chinese colleague (and lover), *Celestial Lancets*. This later work derives from two sources of information and inspiration: first, a translation by Herbert Giles of a text about ancient forensic medicine, titled 'Hsi Yuan Lu' ('Xiyuanlü', 洗冤錄 – 'Instructions to Coroners'; also translated by Lu

Gweidjian as *The Record of Washing away of Wrongs* [Needham and Lu 1980, Digital Printing 2009 :309-310]). And second, the tradition of Japanese martial art, specifically karate [314-315].

Ultimately, Needham's message and contribution in *Science and Civilisation in China* has similarities to both Dudgeon's work and Giles'. On the one hand, it sets out a 'natural' approach to fighting the side effects of the industrialising society (Dudgeon); on the other, it attempts to convey to Westerners the ways in which Chinese civilisation created something useful before the Western world did (Giles).

Needham's sources and legacies

Contrary to the other two scholars, whose works do not contain much in terms of bibliography, in Needham case, the reference list is huge. The bibliography for volume 5 part 5 amounts to almost two hundred pages, and it is so voluminous as to be organised into three parts, including sources in foreign languages, sources before a certain date and afterward, and journals in western languages.

It is important to note that, in his references, Needham refers to – indeed, relies upon – the works of Dudgeon and Giles. Hence, we get a sense of the impact of these two authors on his own (equally influential) thought. Needham takes the two different images – the Chinese therapeutic kung fu of Dudgeon and the Chinese boxing of Giles – and makes them converge into one of ritual dance and development through physical exercise aided by internal alchemical work.

At this point the contemporary reader familiar with the martial arts practice may even wonder whether Needham had ever seen an ordinary fighting performance when he was a diplomat in China. It certainly seems that his work is not based on personal experience. Indeed, it is true to say that a contemporary reader may have a lot more information available (especially via the internet); yet we talk about the same phenomena. This sense arises on occasions such as when Needham writes, for instance: 'Chinese boxing (*chuan po*) as an art with rules different from that of the West and embodying a certain element of ritual dance probably originated as a department of Taoist physical exercises' [Needham 1956: 145-146].

He also continues to confuse British boxing with Chinese fighting arts. The reader may be confused with regards to which method or style of fighting Needham may be referring to at any given point. By contrast, in his later work, *Celestial Lancets*, Needham and Lu go into more depth and they do provide more technical descriptions of which martial arts they have been looking at and what movements. They also classify them as originating from one source in China. Needham

mentions again the traditional division between exoteric (*waijia* 外家) and esoteric (*neijia* 内家), along with the Shaolin monastery and the traditional figure of Bodhidharma. Therefore, it is clear that Needham and Lu did do more research for this work and put forward several important sub-topics; but, again, this lacks exhaustive information and explanation.

Partial conclusion

The way Needham approached it, Taoism is a bodily practice aimed at loosening and strengthening the body, and enabling it via rituals to transform itself, 'internally, thanks to a process called 'inner alchemy'. Inner alchemy and spiritual alchemy are processes [Kirkland 2004: 192-193] which can be found in martial arts practices too. That is what Needham had been looking at when he encountered the works of Dudgeon and Giles. But Needham approached Taoism as a biochemist and, indeed, as an amateur Morris Dancer too. I mention this because personal passions may well be pertinent to personal interpretations. Needham's passion for dancing quite possibly informed his perceptions of much movement.

Furthermore, Needham presents the topic of the tradition of vital spots and consequently recasts martial arts in a very non-European way. He also frames it as an art 'in the service of man's aggression' [Needham and Lu 1980: 302], thereby making the image decidedly less philosophical, and very far from physiotherapy. Moreover, he starts to connect Chinese boxing names together with Japanese versions, thus offering the idea that what is true for wushu may also be true for *bujutsu* (武術).¹¹

It is neither the aim nor within the scope of this essay to analyse every chapter, paragraph or statement about all the associated subtopics of Chinese martial arts, nor to review his translations – about which there is much more to say. (Such work has been broached famously by Stanley Henning's important contributions.) A key concern has been with the question of, overall, what might a reader, interested in martial arts, gain out of Needham's work. In short, we chiefly learn that they are one of several species of Chinese physical exercises; that they were a chivalrous form of living (used also by Chinese alchemists) that in more modern times these can be practiced as a form of therapeutic diverse gymnastics; and also (from Celestial Lancets), the reader learns that martial arts represent the reverse side of acupuncture and massage, as they can be used aggressively, and can be fatal.

11 This is the Chinese 'wushu' simply written according to the Japanese transcription method.

CONCLUSION BEYOND EUROCENTRISM AND INTO POLITICS

This study reveals the early construction of multi-layered images of Chinese martial arts. On a first level we have Dudgeon, who provides a therapeutic interpretation. Giles constructs an East-Asian version of boxing. And Needham offers a bio-energetic picture. Further research allows us to see wider, deeper, and with more complexity. However, we can appreciate this by looking at the cultural framework these authors were working within, to try to understand the problematic they faced.

The images and ideas about China they were working within, through and against, were created by the generations of previous scholars and missionaries of the 19th and early 20th century. These were images of a country immersed in a regressive, Confucian culture of respect for the past which cannot be challenged, and which does offer any exploration and innovation; a country with a love for literary learning that overshadows body practices. Wherever body practices had been found – as in the Daoist practice of *yangsheng* – this was classed as superstitious and therefore considered unworthy [Kirkland 2004: 192-193]. Daoism itself is a tradition which, when brought to the West, has been looked at in its theoretical and speculative aspects mostly [Seidel 1997:39]. Few to none were looking at its practical and physical aspects.

In this sense, despite the misunderstandings and cross-cultural complications they were working against, my argument is that these three scholars did important work in attempting to bridge a gap and to work against the mainstream. All three seem to concur that the Chinese developed body technologies for fighting, but Dudgeon and Needham were not interested in that aspect of martial arts; only Giles was.

By looking at Dudgeon's work from a broader perspective one can see why his editor wanted him to stop exploring and writing. It had little to do with the interests of the wider scholarly community of the time. But Dudgeon was very eager to show the readers and the scientific community how to improve living conditions and life expectancy by using what nature provides you with, starting (and staying) with your own body. His conclusion from his studies was simply that humans have to move and exercise on a regular basis.

Because of this, the cultural comparison that I have made between the Greek *paideia* and the *wenwu* remains helpful, relating as both do to life/world and mind/body balance. None of these authors mention the Greek ideal of *paideia*, however. I have used this as a conceptual device. But what is certain is that none of this is 'merely' to do with exercise. Dudgeon's vision, for instance, goes way beyond the kinetic, and he was, it seems, dreaming of a different lifestyle and a different social and economic system.

There is a strong cultural and political link between Dudgeon and Needham as they worked to analyse Chinese cultural practices such as martial arts in order to establish and clarify their cultural benefits, and accordingly to offer an alternative vision for a political, economic and health system in the Western world. In other words, at the end of 19th to the middle of the 20th century, we find in their works a counter discourse to capitalism.

The work of Dudgeon was judged as not worthy of mention by the London Missionary Society because it did not fit in with the Society's policy of converting the Chinese to Christianity. Similarly, Needham was perceived as not backing up pharmaceutical multinationals in their financial enterprises in relation to military and pharmaceutical goods. Instead, he seemed to show that China, the future big political and economic power, did not need all those Western made-by-goods [Needham 1964: 307].¹²

Ultimately, we can say of these three authors that their works can be located within an intellectual tradition established towards the end of a period started in the 16th century; a tradition that had established what we now call a Eurocentric approach to the East Asian world. Dudgeon, Giles and Needham were at root very curious about physical activities that looked so unusual to their eyes, and each wanted to find out more. However, they were, perhaps unconsciously, also doing politics by reversing ideas and proposing sustainable solutions to Western medical problems via suggesting new type of therapies.

Dudgeon built an image in which Chinese kung fu appears to be a kind of materialisation of a Greek ideal and to offer a Chinese answer to the European medical quest for the treatment of illness without surgical intrusion into the body – a kind of sustainable method. Giles was implicitly equally inspired by the same Greek ideal, moreover he had a personal interest in the cultural activities of China and how efficient in a fight the Chinese can potentially be as a military threat. This led him into an interesting exploration of some (but not all) still-relevant texts. Needham, like Dudgeon, continued to construct an image of Chinese martial arts, comparable to the same Greek ideal, while maintaining a sense of possible Daoist origins, an awareness of the Daoist interest in the personal attainment of immortality, and the cosmologically challenging topic of vital spots. And yet again Needham, too, had a political message to be delivered to the audience: that there is a sustainable method to approach life and also that Western scientific discoveries perhaps are not completely Western.

12 China was, and still is, a huge country, perceived as a huge customer for Western products; however, China was self-sufficient, so it did not need to buy. Moreover, it was shown as a possible alternative to Western civilisation and prosperity; what a disaster for all those people who invested time and money into the Industrial Revolution for not being able to export and needing to divert to another, different market.

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