



**'Become your Best':
On the Construction of Martial Arts
as Means of Self-Actualization and Self-Improvement**

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Abstract

Martial Arts are accessible in terms of the ways they are *mediated* – through bodies, practices, discourses or institutions. With the establishment of (digital) media technologies and their subsequent global circulation and respective local reterritorializations, a new dimension has been added to such processes of medialization. Martial arts ‘and/as’ media have become entangled in a mutually constitutive relationship, where the one cannot be analysed without taking the other into consideration. Taking this as a point of departure, this article analyses the (virtual) representation of ‘Shaolin Kung Fu’ in relation to the Shaolin Temple in Germany. We argue that this case provides a central vantage point from which to analyse the construction of martial arts as means of self-actualization and self-improvement. One of our assertions is that this understanding of martial arts is not inherent or essential, but an ascription that came into being and has gained plausibility in concrete socio-historical contexts. Following the analysis, we will therefore reconstruct three central transformation processes that led to the establishment of such an understanding of martial arts: Retracing (1) the provenance of the idea of martial arts practice as means of self-cultivation and religious exercise in China; (2) the integration of martial arts practices into discourses on how to ‘strengthen’ and ‘modernize’ China in the late 19th and early 20th century; and (3) the reconfigurations of martial arts discourses in the wake of their mediatization and worldwide circulation. We regard this work to be an example of what Thomas Tweed called a ‘translocative analysis’ (Tweed 2002; 2011) and want to highlight the importance of taking into account mediatization processes as well as images and discourses circulating in the global media sphere when approaching the field of martial arts studies.

Contributor Notes

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Introduction: On Martial Arts 'and/as' Media

On the 9th December 1971 the martial artist and actor Bruce Lee (1940-1973) sat down for an interview with the Canadian author and journalist Pierre Berton (1920-2004) for his *Pierre Berton Show* in Hong Kong (Little 1997: 18). During the interview Lee states that he himself became everything he is – an actor, a martial artist and a worthy human being – through martial arts practice. Of martial arts he says this: 'Man, listen, you see, really, to me, ok, to me, ultimately, martial art means honestly expressing yourself'. Soon thereafter, in describing the relationship between the practitioner and the technique, he adds: 'Now, that is that type of thing you have to train yourself into, to become one with the punch' (Little 1998).

This idea, of martial arts as a 'practice of self-expression' and as means of 'becoming yourself', has since become one of the central narratives in contemporary martial arts discourse. Lee himself can be regarded as a central nodal point, one that actually constitutes, consolidates and distributes the discourse on martial arts as means of self-actualization and self-improvement. Indeed, Lee can be regarded as the centre of gravity of a multifaceted discourse, materialized in TV productions, movies, books, digital media, merchandise and countless other ephemera. This discourse, however, not only constitutes and perpetuates a notion of martial arts as means of self-actualization and self-improvement. It also literally '(re)produces' Lee himself, in that the discourse surrounding Lee constantly remakes and reshapes its own centre of gravity. Just as for Baudrillard, in his discussion of media

representation, 'maps' no longer necessarily point to a concrete, 'actual' territory, but *at each other* – and in doing so generate 'a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal' (Baudrillard 1994: 1), so too do the various re-productions of Lee no longer necessarily point to the 'actual figure' of the martial artist, actor and celebrity Bruce Lee. Rather, they reference each other, thereby generating Lee as a 'hyperreal' figure within the contemporary field of martial arts discourse.

This short discussion serves to illustrate that, regardless of how one may theorize them as a phenomenon or set of phenomena, and regardless of which disciplinary angle one might use to investigate them, martial arts are accessible in terms of the ways they are *mediated* – through bodies, practices, discourses or institutions. This is certainly always the case in any investigation into the discourse and practices revolving around Lee, but Lee is not the exception. Rather, the example of Bruce Lee exemplifies the general situation vis-à-vis any approach to martial arts. Accordingly, we will use the term *medialization*.

Defined in broad terms, *medialization* can be understood as a general condition of culture. However, with the establishment of digital media technologies, the subsequent global integration and circulation of 'media flows' (Appadurai 1996), and their respective local reception and adaptation processes, a new dimension has been added to processes of medialization. This can be referred to as 'mediatization' (Krotz 2007). In the complex mediatization processes, media 'and' martial arts have become entangled to such an extent that it is no longer possible to disentangle them.

Taking up Jeremy Stolow's discussion on the relationship of media 'and/as' religious practices, where processes of medialization and media practices become the constitutive condition as well as visible performance of the religious practices themselves, martial arts 'and/as' media, too, may be regarded as braided in a mutually constitutive relationship, where one cannot be analysed without taking the other into consideration.

In increasingly intimate ways, this economy of mediatic practices and consumer products ... precedes and organizes the very condition of possibility for local, everyday embodied forms of religious practice and affinity. This suggests that 'media', in all their economic, symbolic, performative and techno-prosthetic dimensions, have become central to the terms of interaction within and among the embodied regimens and imagined worlds that constitute the sacred in the global present. (Stolow 2005: 123)

We take these considerations on martial arts 'and/as' media as our point of departure because they highlight the importance of taking into account medialization processes as well as images and discourses circulating in the global media sphere when approaching the field of martial arts studies.

In this article, we analyse 'Shaolin Kung Fu' in relation to the Shaolin Temple in Germany. We argue that this case provides a central vantage point from which to analyse the construction of martial arts as means of self-actualization and self-improvement. We attempt to identify key patterns of the construction of martial arts as means of

self-actualization and self-improvement. The analysis therefore covers both the *what* and the *how* of the (re)presentation, and in doing so introduces central narrative 'codes' that permeate and structure the presentation, as well as the aesthetic and performative markers that constitute how the presentation is happening.¹

The Shaolin Temple Germany

The Shaolin Temple Germany in Berlin is considered an official branch temple of the Shaolin Temple of Songshan, China. Following a long period in which the Chinese temple was neglected (due to the strict regulation of religious practices in the People's Republic of China), in the 1980s the Shaolin Temple was rebuilt and integrated into a touristic infrastructure. It is now one of the main tourist attractions in Henan province. Moreover, the current abbot, Shi Yongxin (1965-), has attempted to build an international network consisting of branch temples and a worldwide touring Shaolin Show Team, in order to promote both the Shaolin Temple and its religious and martial practices. In 2001 Shi Yongxin sent four monks to Berlin, Germany, to establish an official overseas branch temple. Since then, the monks and associated teachers have offered various Shaolin Kung Fu classes alongside a variety of other activities. These are introduced and announced on the temple's official website (Lüdde 2008: 29).

¹ The analysis is based on material available in and through the Shaolin Temple Germany's official website (<http://www.shaolin-tempel.eu/>). Research findings of Johanna Lüdde who in 2005 to 2006 conducted fieldwork at the temple will at times be used complementary to the material of the website (Lüdde 2008: 29).

Central Narrative Codes: 'The Ideal State of Being' and 'Working on the Self'

There are two central narratives which structure and organize the (re)presentation and understanding of martial arts on the temple's official website. The first is the assumption of an 'ideal state of being' that every individual should strive for. The realization of such an 'ideal state of being' is described as 'individual self-actualization', and described as a 'supreme level of body and mind', 'complete self-fulfilment', 'every individual's ultimate purpose in life' or simply 'the best of us'. It is further connected with the image of a healthy body, the ability to focus the mind, exercise complete body control and, if necessary, being proficient in self-defence. With respect to societal positions and intersubjective relations, the ideal state of being is said to guarantee a 'stable society' and a 'peaceful and harmonious living together' whereby every individual exercises self-restraint and lives according to and conforming to the rules of etiquette as well as his or her personal duties. In other words: having achieved this ideal state of being, all kinds of individual behaviour and personal characteristics that might be poisonous for a peaceful and harmonious living together according to a given societal order (actual or assumed) can be overcome.

The second central narrative concerns the way by which such an ideal state of being is said to be achieved; namely: through nothing other than constant 'work on the self'; that it is only through ceaseless 'critical self-evaluation' and 'diligent self-disciplining' that such an ideal state of being can be realized. 'Severe discipline' and 'relentlessness against oneself and one's body' is what is

needed to form and shape the self and to *improve* one's bodily and mental qualities, step by step, moving towards the goal of complete self-actualization. Hence, cultivating an 'iron will' and developing 'stamina' to be able to undergo such self-disciplining exercises are said to be both condition and objective of martial arts training.

According to the emerging picture to be drawn from this analysis, martial arts practices are not only a matter of the *kwoon* (training hall or club). Rather, they can be translated into knowledge about how to realize oneself and master everyday life beyond the club and beyond the concrete hours of training. This observation resonates with Tamara Kohn's (2010) research findings on Aikido practice in the UK, France and California. She argues that:

basic principles are clarified and taken into the body only through repetitive and reflexive practice on 'the mat' over many years, but they are also simultaneously understood through a consciousness of their general applicability in the process of living from day to day. (Kohn 2010: 175)

Such an understanding of martial arts also echoes Michel Foucault's notion of 'technologies of the self' that he formulated in his work on Graeco-Roman philosophy and Christian monastic rules (a notion that has been thoroughly debated and applied widely in studies of sport and physical culture (see, for example, Rail and Harvey 1995)). Foucault writes:

technologies of the self ... permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on

their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault 1988: 18)

Hence, martial arts may be understood as precisely such 'technologies' that enable subjects to transform their selves through disciplining 'operations' on the body and perhaps to achieve and realize an ideal state of self-actualization. In connection with the Foucauldian notion of power, these theoretical reflections help to illuminate why the construction of martial arts at hand is not necessarily to be perceived as a purely restrictive and authoritarian practice involving the exercising power over a subject, a subject who cannot but surrender in the face of overwhelming disciplining efforts. Rather, the power over and/or empowerment of the self and the body gained through martial arts practices is a simultaneously disciplining and creatively productive force, as well as resource of pleasure:

If power was anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it? What gives power its hold, what makes it accepted, is quite simply the fact that it runs through, it produces things, it induces pleasure, it forms knowledge, it produces discourse; it must be considered as a productive network which runs through the entire social body much more than a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault 1980: 119)

This specific Foucauldian conception of power is the key that makes the entanglement of a postulated ideal state of being and its proposed realization through constant work on the self into a powerful and attractive promise with a distinctive positive flavour. Aspects of this powerful and attractive promise become graspable in participants' comments on their training experiences in an introductory video presented on the temple's website. One of the attendees, soaked in sweat, is being interviewed during a training lesson and offers the following explanation:

I like doing it so much, because it is so much fun and you go to the limits of your own body's capacity. ... I think the most difficult part is to stay on the ball; success, of course, comes not by chance or right from the start. You have to do it for quite some time and then you improve bit by bit and then you're happy and then, again, you have a period when you don't progress and then you're frustrated. Well, I also paused for two years, but then I came back again, I somehow lost my appetite, it somehow became boring, because I did not make any progress, but then it started being fun again, and I was motivated again and came back.²

It is however crucial to acknowledge, that this understanding of martial arts is not something inherent to such practices. There is no essential ideological or discursive logic underlying martial arts in general. Rather, this is an ascription that

² <http://www.shaolin-tempel.eu/shaolin/index.php/de/shaolin-tempel/uebersicht-shaolin-tempel/49-shaolin-in-berlin> [accessed on 2013/11/25]. Original in German, English translation by the authors.

came into being and has gained plausibility in concrete socio-historical contexts. These will be explored in more detail below.

Performative Markers: 'The Oriental Monk' and 'The Disciplined Body'

Placed next to the website's introductory text on 'Kung Fu', on a subpage titled 'Shaolin Kung Fu', the reader is confronted with an illustrating picture. It depicts an apparently male figure wielding a sword and wearing the orange vestments typical of the Shaolin monks' habit. Reading the picture against the subpage's self-declared intention to introduce the 'art of Shaolin Kung Fu', and given the fact that neither the picture itself, nor a caption nor the surrounding texts allow for any conclusion concerning the identity of the character, the figure arguably comes to stand for 'the Asian martial artist' *par excellence* – namely, a certain 'stock figure' of popular culture:

The Asian martial artist is one or another stock figure who is held to be able to perform the most remarkable of physical feats, and to be able to do this with an amazing calmness, tranquility and equanimity, and to have been able to achieve this state and execute this feats because of his or her dedication to an embodied performance of a philosophy that demands exquisite physical discipline, or a physical discipline informed by a philosophy. (Bowman 2012: 7)

Thus, the picture may be understood within the context of a specific discursive formation, one that Jane Naomi Iwamura (2011) called the 'Oriental Monk'. This is a critical figure that she delineates in her

work on the representation and reproduction of supposedly Asian religions within and through popular media in America:

The term *Oriental Monk* is used as a critical concept and is meant to cover a wide range of religious figures ... from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.... Although individual figures point to a diverse field of encounter, all of them are subjected to a homogeneous representational effect as they are absorbed by popular consciousness through mediated culture. Racialization (more correctly, 'orientalization') serves to blunt the distinctiveness of particular persons and figures. (Iwamura 2011: 6; italics added)

Within the context of this discursive formation, the picture is both a product of these discursive structures as well as a force that (re)produces them. As such, the key elements of the picture point to the depicted figure's connection with the Shaolin Temple and portray him as an 'authentic practitioner'. Simultaneously, however, the picture also resonates with a specific 'network of representations' (Iwamura 2011: 6) connected with the discursive formation of the 'Oriental Monk'.

Indeed, recognition of any Eastern spiritual guide, real or fictional, is predicated on their conformity to general features that are paradigmatically encapsulated in the icon of the Oriental Monk: his spiritual commitment, his calm demeanor, his Asian face, his manner of dress, and – most obviously – his peculiar gendered character. (Iwamura 2011: 6)

On the part of the beholder, such a depicted figure leads to associations connected with images and events of a 'popular consciousness' (Iwamura 2011: 6), one developed in the West at least since the figure of the 'Oriental monk' first entered the stage in 1970s popular media. As both Bowman and Iwamura highlight, ever since that time, this figure has been constitutive of and for the representation and recognition of 'Kung Fu', and not just for that of the 'Shaolin Monk'.

This is because our access to, our understanding (or pre-understanding) of, and our involvement (or pre-involvement) with either of these two things – martial arts and Oriental philosophy – and *especially* in their conjunction – is always and already informed and organized by media representations, historical discourse and filmic fantasies. (Bowman 2012: 2; italics in original)

Also embedded into the Shaolin Temple's introductory subpage on 'Shaolin Kung Fu' is a short documentary film. In contrast to the picture we have just discussed, the film not only shows a greater variety of motion sequences (with all kinds of different accessories and weapons), but it is also presented on the basis of different kinds of 'performative' or 'aesthetic markers'. For the main part, the documentary film shows lay persons exercising in simple and functional training suits while the temple's monks appear in the same manner of dress as teachers and instructors. The film's emphasis is on rapid, acrobatic and apparently physically demanding movements. The viewer encounters mainly male, adolescent students who almost without exception are soaked in sweat and breathe heavily when in front

of the camera. Time and again the film shows training sequences of students practicing movements and instructors correcting them. The audio track accompanying these movements foregrounds the sounds of all kinds of strokes, kicks, calls and shouts. Other sonic elements, like the words being spoken by the instructors, are subordinated, and from time to time obliterated in a soundscape overwhelmingly consisting of the students' stamps, punches and shouts.

The performative marker organizing the documentary film may be described as the 'disciplined body', with the disciplined body *par excellence* being the one that accomplishes the martial arts movements successfully. This state of accomplishment is set apart as an extraordinary achievement through the depiction of the great amount of physical demands and discipline necessary to realize it. This kind of depiction is additionally brought forward in various student testimonies that accompany the training sequences and attest to the enormous physical demand of the exercises: 'Sometimes it is extremely exhausting. One does need a lot of strength'; 'I love doing it ... as it forces me to push the envelope when it comes to my body'.

This performative or aesthetic construction and representation of martial arts resonates with the rhetoric of the 'work on the self' discussed above, and it reiterates and reinforces elements of the same promise:

And the martial arts myth or promise is precisely this: through nothing more than physical discipline, dedication, devotion and diligent training, you too can become closer to the invincible

ideal depicted in these films and programmes [i.e. martial arts movies and series]. (Bowman 2012: 5)

The disciplined body as performative marker can thus be read as an offer to the recipient, promising that in general *everybody* is able to learn and accomplish Shaolin Kung Fu, if they are willing and ready to perform and internalize the necessary discipline.

The Field of 'Asian spirituality'

In the context of accelerated worldwide circulation and reterritorialization (Inda and Rosaldo 2002: 10) of martial arts practices since the 1970s, innumerable Kung Fu schools opened their doors all around the globe. Whereas many of them refrained from utilizing religious rhetorics and markers in their construction and presentation of Kung Fu, the example at hand is described as an explicitly 'religious setting', namely that of a Chan-Buddhist temple complex. Hence, in this specific context the construction and presentation of martial arts is closely connected with religious rhetorics and narratives out of a Buddhist context as well as a wider field of what may be called 'Asian spirituality'. Such religious contextualization is overdetermined. It is already present at the beginning of the most famous creation narrative of the origin of martial arts. Along with what is now called Qigong, the so called 'martial (arts) virtues' are often thought to come from Bodhidharma, a legendary Indian monk, who is said to have invented and established Chan-Buddhist and martial arts practice at the Shaolin Temple in China (Shahar 2008: 165-173; Faure 1992).

Within this nexus of Chan-Buddhist rhetorics, martial arts and normative-ethical prescriptions, the current abbot of the Shaolin Temple in Germany attributes to martial arts practices a specific function. According to the abbot, martial arts practices are religious practices 'in motion' and as such they serve as complementary counterparts to religious practices 'at rest', such as the recitation of sutras. Both 'modes' of religious practices ('in motion' and 'at rest') are understood as complementary 'halves' of one 'harmonious whole' and, together with the aforementioned martial (arts) virtues, they mutually influence each other. Though the abbot emphasizes that to undergo martial arts training at the temple one does not need to conform to some kind of Buddhist practices, he nevertheless stresses the fact that Kung Fu training without a 'proper Buddhist background' will always leave the martial arts training somehow incomplete. The Shaolin Temple Germany therefore actively encourages its students to study the 'martial (arts) virtues' presented as a list of normative moral and ethical statutes.

The constitutive relationship and dependency of martial arts practices and some kind of Buddhist background understanding in the construction and presentation of Kung Fu within the Shaolin Temple Germany's website resonates with an understanding of martial arts as 'embodied knowledge' as brought forward by John Farrer and D. S. Whalen-Bridge (2011).

Considering knowledge as 'embodied', where 'embodiment' is an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source or intersubjective ground of experience', means understanding martial arts through cultural and

historical experiences; these are forms of knowledge characterized as 'being-in-the-world' as opposed to abstract conceptions that are somehow supposedly transcendental. (Csordas 1999, 143) Embodiment is understood both as ineluctable fact of martial arts training, and as a methodological cue. (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011: 1)

'Embodiment' within the context of martial arts practice may thus be understood as the internalization, incorporation or 'inscription' of specific historical and sociocultural norms and narratives in and onto the practitioner's body. Andreas Reckwitz, too, drawing on his work in the field of the sociology of culture, highlights the bodily and practical dimension of knowledge in what he calls a praxeological approach (Reckwitz 2008). He highlights how knowledge is always anchored in social practices as 'the product of training the body in a certain way' (Reckwitz 2002: 251; 2008: 106-112).

[W]hen we learn a practice, we learn to be bodies in a certain way (and this means more than to 'use our bodies'). A practice can be understood as the regular, skillful 'performance' of (human) bodies. (Reckwitz 2002: 251)

Knowledge as 'ways of understanding, knowing how, ways of wanting and of feeling' (Reckwitz 2002: 253) is both inscribed in and onto the body as well as 'performatively' applied. Moreover, knowledge is 'largely implicit and largely historically-culturally specific' (2002: 253) and thus escapes the notion of 'explicable rules' and sometimes even any kind of verbal enunciation. Knowledge, according to Reckwitz, is

what *already* holds together a certain practice rendering it meaningful while at the same time knowledge is made visible and sensible through practices (253). Another integral part of 'skillful performances' are objects, artifacts or 'things'; they may even be constitutive for a certain bodily performance and together with knowledge build what Reckwitz calls 'body/understanding/things complexes' (259; 252ff; 2008: 115). Bringing together Reckwitz and Farrer and Whalen-Bridge allows to understand how in martial arts practice, knowledge – understood as inexplicable historically and culturally contingent forms of 'understanding, knowing how, ways of wanting and of feeling' (Reckwitz 2002: 253) – and bodies as well as objects are braided in a mutually constitutive and meaningful relationship.

Upon returning to the abbot and his explanation on the relationship between Kung Fu and some kind of 'proper Buddhist background', these considerations on how to think martial arts practices as 'embodied knowledge' may seem to have taken a rather long and circuitous route. However, we understand these considerations, together with Reckwitz, as 'a sensitizing framework ... that opens up a certain way of seeing and analyzing social phenomena' (257). In this case, they constitute the backdrop against which the abbot's specific understanding of martial arts is to be read here: When the abbot stresses that without a 'proper Buddhist background' martial arts practice will remain somehow incomplete, then one might understand such a 'Buddhist background understanding' for and of martial arts practice as to form one part of a body/understanding/things-complex constituting Kung Fu practices. As such it renders martial arts practices meaningful in a way that escapes the notion of a

'supplementary Buddhist explication' as set apart from the 'actual' bodily movements. The intricate, preceding as well as performative character of knowledge in this understanding finds its expression in aphorisms on the website such as: 'The aim of practicing Shaolin Kung Fu is not fighting but realizing the Buddhist principle of compassion'.

It is however crucial to note that this Buddhist reading of Kung Fu is not the only semantic framing that can be found on the temple's website. Besides the Buddhist framing, the website's construction and representation of Kung Fu may also be read on the context of the wider field of what may be called 'Asian spirituality' (a field that may be understood as also encompassing Buddhist rhetorics). Bowman captures this complexity of meaning inherent to the term 'Kung Fu' (and 'martial arts' in general) by referring to them as 'culturally and discursively *over-determined*' (Bowman 2010: 34; emphasis added). Thus, however consciously one might try to (re)frame the term 'Kung Fu', one will never be able to divorce this signifier from certain Orientalist notions about a (supposedly) 'Asian Other' grounded in the 'network of representation' (Iwamura 2011: 6) that also produces the (virtual) figure of the Oriental Monk. It is, to make a quick reference to Ernesto Laclau, this 'overdetermination' that gets in the way of stabilizing the 'floating signifier' of 'Kung Fu' within a specific set of semantic ascriptions (Laclau 1994: 157). Located within such an unstable semantic field of 'Asian spirituality' however, the term is, as Bowman points out, not 'graspable' for concrete reception processes:

But for the signifier to translate into practice it cannot remain in this

form. It must, in other words, be translated into intelligible terms, and articulated with extant practices. (Bowman 2010: 34)

Within the context of concrete reception processes, the term Kung Fu will therefore always be supplemented with additional 'discursive material' to temporarily stabilize its 'semantic floating'; or, as Bowman puts it, using Gary Krug's vocabulary: 'to provide depth of discursive texture' (Krug 2001: 400, in Bowman 2010: 34). In the case of the Shaolin Temple Germany's website, the homepage itself offers the recipient discursive material to supplement the floating signifier Kung Fu. However, even such a self-proclaimed Chan-Buddhist reading is, as just pointed out, not able to permanently divorce the signifier from the 'basic noise' of an orientalism. Indeed, even within the context of the Shaolin Temple's own website (a context which affirms itself as explicitly 'Chan-Buddhist'), the signifier remains open for diverging readings.

The Transcultural Construction of Martial Arts as Means of Self-Actualization and Self-Improvement

Through this case study, we hope to shed light on the construction of martial arts as means of self-actualization and self-improvement. One of our assertions is that this understanding of martial arts is not inherent or essential, but an ascription that came into being and has gained plausibility in concrete socio-historical contexts. In the final part of this article, we will reconstruct three central transformation processes that led to the establishment of such an understanding of martial arts within a field that is now commonly referred to as Chinese martial arts. We regard this work to be an

example of what Thomas Tweed called a 'translocative analysis' (Tweed 2002; 2011) – namely, an analysis that traces various exchange and reterritorialization processes within and between Asia and Europe and which, in tracing these movements and local processes of reception, attempts to sketch a network of tentative relations. Within this network, the local processes of reception are considered to be central hubs – transfer and distribution sites where discourses and practices are adapted, transformed, and reconfigured. Making no claims of completeness, in the following we will spotlight three nodal points, selected because they seem to play a crucial role in the construction of martial arts as means of self-actualization and self-improvement.

Bodhidharma's Kung Fu – Martial Arts and Notions of Religious Self-Cultivation

As shown in the above analysis, the representation of Kung Fu within the Shaolin Temple Germany's virtual presence is intimately linked with religious rhetorics. Indeed, as Stewart McFarlane puts it: 'The association between Buddhism and eastern martial arts is now well established in the west' (McFarlane 2001: 153). This first section will therefore retrace the provenance of the idea of martial arts practice as means of self-cultivation and religious exercise in China.³

³ *Provenance* is thereby not thought to mean 'authentic origin'. Rather, following Michel Foucault's concept of 'genealogy', the authors seek to retrace the historical and socio-cultural conditions that facilitated the opening of martial arts discourses in Ming Dynasty China that enabled the entanglement of martial arts practices with religious, spiritual and therapeutic ascriptions. In doing so the investigation does not

Today, most scholars working in the field of Chinese martial arts and the history of the Shaolin Temple in China agree that before the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD) there is only scarce evidence for Shaolin monks practicing any kind of martial arts.⁴ Only during the Ming Dynasty are we suddenly confronted with plenty of different sources that all attest to monks practicing bare-handed fighting techniques at the temple (McFarlane 2001: 154; Shahar 2008: 55ff). In his work on the history of the Shaolin Temple, Meir Shahar investigates the origin of the strange popularity of bare-handed fighting styles during the Ming and later Qing Dynasty – a time when more effective and lethal fighting techniques had already eclipsed the importance of bare hands in actual combat (Shahar 2008: 137). He observes that the outcome of diligent bare-handed fighting practice is, from the Ming Dynasty onwards, couched in new terms and concepts, not used before. These new terms were usually used to describe the experiences of religious self-cultivation, mostly out of Daoist as well medical and therapeutic contexts (mainly *daoyin* and *yangshang* practices).⁵ Drawing on the work of Tang Hao and Lin Boyuan, Shahar discusses a heterogeneous synthesis of various bodily practices as

seek to produce 'historical continuity' but, to borrow from Michael Ruoff, aims at reconstructing heterogeneity that only in retrospect becomes meaningful as condition of becoming (Ruoff 2007:128).

⁴ For sources attesting to an (martial) involvement of Shaolin monks in imperial campaigns as well as in defending the temple's property see McFarlane (1990: 402) and Shahar (2008: 9-52). These early sources, however, are silent about where or how or even if at all the involved monks were trained and educated in martial practices.

⁵ For an introduction to *daoyin*- and *yangshang*-practices see Engelhardt (2000) and Penny (2000).

well as discursive ascriptions in Ming Dynasty's bare-handed fighting styles:

The late Ming and early Qing techniques of Shaolin Quan, Taiji Quan, and Xingyi Quan were couched in a rich vocabulary of physiological and spiritual self-cultivation. They were marked by a unique synthesis of martial, therapeutic, and religious goals. Practitioners were no longer interested in fighting only. They were motivated instead by considerations of health, at the time that they sought spiritual realization. (Shahar 2008: 137)

It is within this 'synthesis' that, according to Shahar, the notion of martial arts as means of self-cultivation and spiritual exercise was born.⁶ He further traces this development through various martial arts manuals, discovering central key terms in the establishment of martial arts as means to connect religious narrations with the body of the practitioner:

Martial artists identified within their bodies the universal forces of *yin* and *yang*, the five elements, and eight trigrams, investing the martial arts with a cosmological dimension. The intricate interplay of *yin* and *yang* serves in all *quan* styles to illuminate the twin concepts of defense and offense, contract and expand, close and

open, soft and hard. Xingyi Quan identifies ... five striking techniques ... with the five elements of metal, wood, fire, and earth respectively; and as indicated by its name, the Eight Trigrams Palm (Bagua zhang) revolves in concentric movement around the eight configurations that are described in the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing*). (Shahar 2008: 153ff; italics in original)⁷

Shahar's work offers valuable insight into the opening of martial arts discourses in Ming Dynasty China, discourses that enabled the connection of martial arts practices with religious ascriptions and notions of the body. This connection facilitated the later interpretation of martial arts as a practice targeted at experiencing religious narrations in and through the body. In other words, during the Ming Dynasty a discursive space was opened in which martial arts practices were transformed into techniques that made accessible to the practitioners a specific (bodily) religious knowledge generally assumed to be inaccessible to human experience (Prohl 2012: 388). Martial arts practices became, at least potentially, 'sensational forms' (Meyer 2006) that enabled religious practitioners to experience (sensibly/sensuously) and embody a supposed 'transcendence' in and through their martial arts practice. Martial arts discourses were thus generally open for readings that connected martial arts practices with

⁶ Shahar further highlights the importance of a wider sociocultural context that he calls 'Ming syncretism' for these developments that enabled 'Daoist mystics to explore Buddhist-related martial arts and allowing Shaolin monks to study Daoist gymnastics' (Shahar 2008: 181) as well as certain socioeconomic characteristics of the local site of Henan as 'hotbed' for the development of new bare-handed fighting styles during the Ming and Qing Dynasty (388).

⁷ It is however important to notice, that the above mentioned concepts figure in different semantic fields and therefore, as Shahar put it may 'imply] diverse things to different martial artists' (Shahar 2008: 146). Further research may contribute to the question of the reception of such martial arts manuals and texts investigating the scope and potency of religious rhetorics in martial arts practices of that time.

self-cultivation and spiritual aspirations, laying the foundation for the establishment of an understanding of martial arts as 'more than mere fighting techniques'.

Kung Fu and the 'Renewing of the People'

The next historical spotlight concerns the integration of martial arts practices into discourses on how to 'strengthen' and 'modernize' China in the late 19th and early 20th century. These discourses arose out of the encounter with European and Japanese imperial ambitions and concerned the burning question of how to withstand such foreign imperial ambitions and ultimately how to join the ranks of the perceived modern and 'able-bodied' nations of the world. Our argument is that the integration and subsequent reconfiguration of martial arts constitutes another crucial site in the construction and establishment of martial arts as means of self-actualization and self-improvement.

Discourses on strengthening and modernizing China centred prominently on social Darwinist interpretations of the current state of the world, introduced among others through popular translations of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer (Morris 2000: 878ff). In his publication 'On Renewing the People' Liang Qichao (1873-1929), an influential Chinese reform thinker of his time, states: 'in an age of struggle among nations for the survival of the fittest while the weak perish, if the qualities of citizens are wanting, then the nation cannot stand up independently between Heaven and earth' (Liang 1994: 9, translation following De Bary und Lufrano

2001: 290). The fitness and strength of a nation was, in other words, thought to be the strength and physical fitness of its 'assembling' people who with their respective individual bodies constituted one common 'national body' (Liang 1994: 1). The key to strengthening the nation was therefore the individual body itself that, according to Liang, should at best be disciplined – and presumably following the apparently effective methods applied by 'the European nations'. These should be adopted and appropriated for 'use' in the Chinese context in order to best overcome the 'shortcomings' of the 'Chinese people' (Liang 1994: 8ff).

The 'approved European methods', were, according to Liang, nothing other than sports, gymnastics and physical culture (Liang 1994: 160).⁸ The underlying logic that made physical culture *work* as a way to strengthen individuals and make them into a proper 'national body' was a new conceptualization of the self in social Darwinist terms:

⁸ Christopher A. Bayly highlights that with the ascent of imperial empires in the late 19th century, the world experienced a new dimension of global interconnectedness, integration and dependency (Bayly 2004: 1f.). New communication technologies, networks of trade and commerce alongside new translocal political institutions like colonies or semi-colonies enabled and enforced new modes of transcultural exchange that spearheaded multiple processes of reception, negotiation and reconfiguration. Such processes in turn 'created many hybrid polities, mixed ideologies' whereby the local actors and communities were not simply 'passive recipients' but '[t]heir reception and remolding of Western ideas and techniques for their own lives set limits to the nature and extent of their domination by European power-holders [1-3]. It was within these complex processes that new concepts of physical culture, foremost an American notion of sport and athletic competitiveness entered Chinese local contexts.

In a world narrated by Spencer and Darwin, the individual self was now a self-enclosed container. The self which every person was, was now seen to contain within itself a trainable and improvable whole, whose condition carried critical importance for the welfare of the greater community. Here, mind and body were understood as separate and independent, but still mutually influential entities. (Morris 2000: 879)

However, while there was little disagreement on the idea of a self being conditioned through disciplining the body, not everyone agreed on the methods or ways to pursue such 'self-disciplining'. It was within this debate that martial arts entered the stage.

At that time, during late 19th and early 20th century China, martial arts occupied a quite peculiar and ambivalent position. They were a popular projection surface for the argument about China's 'superstitious backwardness', something that supposedly held China back from joining the ranks of the powerful, modern states. Thus, in 1918 Lu Xun comments harshly in a newspaper called 'New Youth':

There are many now who actively support and advocate boxing.... These educators take these old ways 'passed down from a mystic woman of the highest heavens or some such, to the Yellow Emperor, and then to some nuns', now called 'new martial arts' or 'Chinese calisthenics' and tell the youngsters to practice.... We have seen all this before in 1900. That time it ended up in total destruction of our reputation. We will have to see

what happens this time. (Lu Xun 1918: 514ff, in Morris 1998: 450)⁹

Others however, saw martial arts as a 'truly Chinese' physical culture (Brownell 1995: 38) that only needed some adjustments according to lessons learned from 'Western physical culture' to make them a perfect part of the project of strengthening the 'national body' (Morris 1998: 499; Brownell 1995: 38). Thus in 1918, a proponent of this so called 'revivalist movement' (Brownell 1995: 38) writes:

If the conservatives were to add the new movements of Swedish and German calisthenics to their boxing and wrestling, and if the reformers added the old movements of Chinese boxing and wrestling to their calisthenics, then both sides could comprise, and create a new spirit combining old and new ... In recent times the goal of spreading martial arts is different than the original goals. In ancient times martial arts were used to kill people, while today, they are used to educate people. (Jun 1918: 1, in Morris 1998: 440)

However, although no agreement was reached about the suitability of martial arts – and heated disputes were carried out in public spaces – these debates changed martial arts discourses profoundly. A good example is the case of the Jingwu Association (or, Pure Martial Physical Culture Association), a martial arts association, founded in

⁹ With the date 1900 Lu Xun makes a reference to the so called Boxer Uprising that took place around that time. The 'Boxers' explicitly referred to martial arts as means of embodying supra-human and religious aspirations (as described above) foremost the promise of invulnerability in combat (Hsü 1995: 391).

Shanghai in 1910, that set itself the goal of promoting martial arts as a physical culture suitable for the modern world:

In order to make martial arts into an acceptable pastime for citizens of the new Republic, the ancient skills had to be shown to be conducive to the new modern ways. The Jingwu Association called the movement the 'new martialization', and followed the slogan 'scientize martial arts, and spread them to the millions'. This scientization required purging the Pure Martial arts [sic] of superstitious relics (...). (Morris 1998: 447ff)

Such reconfigurations of martial arts discourse in the light of 'the new modern ways' or 'scientization' (Morris 1998: 447) not only altered the vocabulary used to enunciate these practices. With the integration of the aforementioned new conceptualization of the subject, that assumed a 'self' that may be polished and improved through disciplining the body, a central foundation of martial arts practices was reformulated.¹⁰ These

¹⁰ The above used singular in 'subject' and 'self' is not meant to avert from the fact that the reception of new notions of 'self' and 'subject' in 19th century China was in fact an open-ended negotiation process, to which the emergence of a whole array of neologisms for the translation of the English word 'self' (sometimes via borrowing from Japanese) during that time bears witness (Liu 1995: 82). With a view to so such open-ended 'translingual practices' (82), Lydia H. Liu reminds her readers to bear in mind that 'the historical contingency of meaning requires that the notion of the individual be studied as a historical category rather than assumed as a superior, transcendental value' (86). It is however beyond the scope of this article to map the various 'twists and turns' (84) of this reception process, for more details see Liu (1995), Liu (2002), Ames (1994, 1998) and Hall and Ames (1998).

reformulations, too, impinged on what ascription to martial arts practices were considered appropriate and plausible. Hence martial arts discourses became generally open to readings that explicitly constructed martial arts as means of self-actualization and self-improvement.

Bruce Lee's Kung Fu – Mediatization and Worldwide Circulation

Upon returning to the figure of Bruce Lee, our last historical snippet will sketch the reconfigurations of martial arts discourses in the wake of their mediatization and worldwide circulation that began prominently with TV and movie productions in the 1970s – productions that inaugurated the phenomenon that David Desser called the 'Kung Fu Craze' (Desser 2000), or what M. T. Kato called the 'kung fu cultural revolution' (Kato 2007: 10). Before these mediatization processes, 'Kung Fu' was practically invisible. As Leon Hunt observes:

In 1963, Bruce Lee published *Chinese Gung Fu: The Philosophical Art of Self Defense* in the United States.... Except to martial arts cognoscenti (and not many of those) 'gung fu' (or 'kung fu') was virtually unknown outside South-East Asia and diasporic Chinese communities.... Ten years later, 'kung fu' had permanently entered transnational imaginary – it was the name of a television show, a genre, a pedagogic industry, the subject of comics, magazines and other merchandising. (Hunt 2003: 1)

Bowman argues that, through the impact of his TV appearances and movies, Bruce

Lee can be regarded 'as a founder of discursivity' (Bowman 2011: 2) because his texts imprinted 'a whole new family of' of Kung Fu associations on a translocal 'popular consciousness' (2011: 2).¹¹ As he puts it: 'Into Western popular consciousness it [i.e., Bruce Lee's famous movie *Enter the Dragon*] punched a paradigm, a whole new aesthetic vocabulary, a whole new perceptual-aesthetic field' (Bowman 2011: 2).

Numbered among these new associations was Lee's understanding of martial arts as 'practice of *self-expression*' and of 'becoming *yourself*' – as we pointed out in the beginning of this article. Scattered references to this specific understanding of martial arts are found in many of Lee's publications and media productions. As Lee put it in one of his interviews:

Self-actualization is the important thing. And my message to people is that I hope they will go towards self-actualization rather than self-image actualization. I hope that they will search within themselves for honest self-expression. (Little 1997: 143)

As Lee became the centre of gravity of a multifaceted discourse, materialized in TV productions, movies, books, digital media, as well as merchandise and countless other ephemera, he, too, came to constitute a central nodal point distributing and consolidating such an understanding of martial arts as means of self-actualization and self-

improvement. Davis Miller (2000) thereby cautions his readers to bear in mind, though such a conceptualization may sound highly familiar to contemporary readers, this was not the case for the 1970s audience:

In the years since Lee's death the notion that we can be whatever we want, that we can liberate ourselves, has become the stuff of corporate advertising, of the self-help genre of non-writing, of government sanctioned propaganda, of half-hour infomercials. In the early 1970s the concept of self-actualization seemed shining and new. (Miller 2000: 116)

Similarly, Bill Brown, too, notes:

Violence has been evacuated from the martial arts aesthetic, and ... has been transcoded into a search for the self. By 1980 one could learn on the pages of the *Atlantic Monthly* that the 'real value lies in what martial arts tell us about ourselves: that we can be much more than we are now'. (Brown 1997: 37)

These observations echo this article's proposition that no ascription to martial arts is ever 'inherent' or 'essential' to these practices. Ascriptions are enabled and made plausible within specific discursive formations.

Conclusion

This article has built on the assumption that with the establishment of (digital) media technologies and their subsequent global circulation and respective local reterritorializations, martial arts 'and/as' media have become

¹¹ These new associations included, according to Bowman, both new 'terms' such as 'martial arts, karate-do, 'black-belt', kung fu, Shaolin Temple, Shaolin Monk' and new 'connections' such as 'Zen und pugilism, Buddhism and battle, meditation and martial arts, fighting warrior monks' (Bowman 2011: 2).

entangled in a mutually constitutive relationship, where the one cannot be analysed without taking the other into consideration. Taking these considerations as a point of departure, we analysed central narratives and performative markers in the construction of martial arts as means of self-actualization and self-improvement by presenting a detailed look at one specific (virtual) representation. This understanding of martial arts, however, is not essential to these practices, but is rather the product of contingent ascription processes that have been enabled and that have gained plausibility in specific historical and sociocultural contexts. Subsequently we sketched three central nodal points within the network of relations and transformation processes that led to the establishment of an understanding of martial arts as means of self-actualization and self-improvement. We fully acknowledge that what has thereby been presented is a long way from being an exhaustive analysis. Such an endeavour would exceed both the scope of the article at hand as well as our current capacities. Rather we hope to open up a space for new discussions and research into the transcultural formations of the contemporary global field of Chinese martial arts. To borrow from Weber's famous work on science and research:

Every scientific 'fulfillment' means new 'questions', it *is intended* to be surpassed and rendered obsolete. ... We cannot work without hoping that others will get further than we have. (Weber 2008: 34)

Epilogue

Several decades after Bruce Lee sat down for his interview with Pierre Berton in 1971, the actor, martial artist and director Donnie Yen (1963-) gave credit to Lee and enunciated under the rubric 'philosophy' on his official website that he understands martial arts to be 'a form of expression, an expression from the inner self to your hands and legs'.¹²

¹² See <http://www.donnienyen.asia/?p=799&lang=en> [accessed on 2013/05/21].

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