



Inventing Kung Fu

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Keywords

Kung Fu
Wushu
Chinese Martial Arts
Definition
Globalization
Chinese Martial
Studies
Etymology

Abstract

'Kung fu' has become synonymous with the traditional Chinese martial arts in the popular imagination. Yet some practitioners and writers object to this usage, insisting instead on the adoption of other labels such as 'wushu'. Increasingly authors in both the academic and more serious popular literatures are moving away from 'kung fu', as it is perceived to be both inauthentic and ahistorical. But is this really the case? The following article examines the use of 'kung fu' in both the Chinese and English language literatures on the martial arts from the middle of the 19th century to the 1960s. It finds that the term's adoption as a descriptor of a set of martial practices is older than is generally acknowledged. There are also specific regional and social reasons why certain Chinese martial artists have chosen to adopt and promote this term in describing their own practice. Like the traditional Chinese martial arts themselves, the term kung fu has meant many things to various practitioners in different times and places. By studying the evolution and spread of this terminology, students of martial studies can gain insight into the changing nature of the Chinese martial arts.

Contributor Note

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Introduction: Do you know Kung Fu?

The term 'kung fu' has meant many things to many people.¹ Writers and practitioners have expressed a wide variety of opinions on its various connotations and their proper relationship with the traditional Chinese martial arts. These have ranged from casual acceptance to reflexive dismissal. At least some of this variability stems from the complex relationship between the current cultural guardians of the Chinese martial arts and Bruce Lee (1940-1973). Without his charismatic image and explosive popularity there would currently be far fewer practitioners of the traditional Chinese fighting systems around the world today. Nor would the Asian martial arts enjoy the level of prominence that they currently do within western popular culture.²

At the same time, the 'kung fu craze' of the 1970s-1980s raised difficult questions for many practicing martial artists in both China and the west. Did these systems suffer as they were taken up by hordes of young people, inspired only by the shallow representations of them that they had encountered in the media? Do these now global fighting styles actually reflect the lived experience of Chinese martial artists in the late 19th or early 20th century? Would the arts that we practice today even be technically, intellectually or culturally recognizable to the individuals who created them?

¹ I would like to thank Brian Kennedy and Daniel Mroz for reading drafts of this chapter. Their assistance, insights and critical comments were both helpful and much appreciated.

² For a discussion of Bruce Lee's and his relationship with modern popular culture see: Bowman (2010, 2013). For an introductory discussion of the life and career of Lee see Halpin [2003: 111-128].

For some the term 'kung fu', popularized by media figures like Bruce Lee and David Carradine, has become a symbol of this anxiety. Does this label signify the appropriation and commercialization of a once authentic cultural practice? Or are there legitimate reasons why it has come to be closely associated with the traditional Chinese martial arts in the global marketplace?

This anxiety is evident in any number of places, including recent publications. Increasingly we are seeing a rhetorical move away from 'kung fu' and towards alternative terms and phrases, such as 'traditional Chinese martial arts' (TCMA), 'wushu' or even 'hand combat'. This choice of preferred terms is often explicitly embedded within a critique of 'kung fu' as an inauthentic descriptor of the martial arts. In the current era it seems to have come to symbolize both an authentic cultural practice as well as commercial appropriation, depending on the speaker and context.

Fewer and fewer authors, writing in either the academic or higher quality popular literature, seem willing to use this term. Instead a variety of other names are employed. But the evolving literature has not yet settled on a single agreed alternative. You can study the 'traditional Chinese martial arts', but it's a mouthful. You can write about 'hand combat', but it often makes for awkward sentences. You might say that you practice 'wushu', except that many traditional teachers want to distinguish their styles from the official sport (xiandai wushu) backed and subsidized by the Chinese government. Occasionally these practices are even referred to as 'boxing', with some reservations, as the Boxer Uprising was not the finest moment for the traditional Chinese martial arts. In summary, there seems to be evidence of

a general perception that the phrase 'kung fu' lacks both the gravitas and historical authenticity to be truly legitimate.

But what do we actually know about the origins and evolution of 'kung fu'? Is it really a problematic or incorrect term for the traditional Chinese martial arts? To answer that question we need to ask about the meaning and use of the word in Chinese, and its subsequent appearance in English. Specifically, how was this phrase used in the various regions of China during the 19th and early 20th century? When did it first appear in the English language? Did native Chinese speakers ever use this phrase to refer to the martial arts when writing in English? If so, why did they select it over the myriad of other possible names for the martial arts?

These are fascinating questions. They could potentially reveal something about the processes of cross-cultural communication and translation as they relate to the traditional Chinese fighting arts. In short, they are the sorts of issues that the field of martial studies should be deeply interested in. We are also lucky to have a rich database of 19th and 20th century primary source publications, many of which are in English and are readily available, that can throw light on the mystery. Unfortunately the academic literature has little to offer on the subject, and much of what has been said is either incorrect or misleading.

This article provides some basic answers to each of the questions posed above. I conclude that while there are historical problems with 'kung fu', they are no more severe than any other term that we currently use to denote the totality of the Chinese martial arts in English. None of these expressions are completely neutral. In fact, the subject is (and

historically has been) politically fraught. 'Quanban', 'guoshu' or 'wushu' (to name just a few possible examples) are not free of social and historical baggage. Each one of these titles was coined or popularized at a specific point in time to advance a certain unifying view of what the martial arts were, as well as what they should become.

The current use of the phrase kung fu is not, as so many popular sources have claimed, the result of gross ignorance by western students. It was first applied to the martial arts by Chinese practitioners who were looking for a new vocabulary to explain their practice in the early 20th century. The phrase was later popularized in the English language literature by Chinese writers and teachers who sought a shorthand summation of the Chinese martial arts.

Many of these individuals were from southern China and their adoption of the term reflected then current usage in conversational Cantonese. In fact, there is an undeniably regional dimension to this discussion. While usage of the phrase has certainly evolved over time, careful western students of the Chinese martial arts have never been as ignorant of its origins, nuances and meanings as some modern writers on the subject might lead one to suspect.

The following essay begins with a brief review of what the current literature has to say on the origins and (mis)uses of the term 'kung fu'. It then turns to a survey of actual instances of the phrase's publication and usage in English language texts, printed in both China and the West, between the 1860s and the 1960s. Note that all of these instances of the term's use predate the subsequent explosion of interest in the Chinese martial arts that began in the 1970s. While by no means exhaustive, these

examples demonstrate that the history and usage of this phrase in English language publications is richer than one might suspect. Finally I will ask what sort of role the name 'kung fu' can play in current discussions of the Southern Chinese fighting styles and the field of martial studies more generally.

'Kung Fu' in the Chinese Martial Studies Literature

Recent discussions of the term kung fu range from cool and neutral on the one hand, to exhibiting clear disdain on the other. Current authors tend to avoid the term as inauthentic, though explanations of why seem to vary and are rarely substantiated. Some of the assertions advanced in these accounts also create a paradox. Typically western readers are informed that no one in China actually says 'kung fu', except when they are talking about movies, comic books, novels and video games. Yet given that most people only know about the martial arts through these mediums (unsurprisingly, most Chinese citizens do not actually study the traditional modes of hand combat), this poses something of a problem. The majority of the Chinese population knows and uses this phrase with reference to a popular culture phenomenon in pretty much exactly the same way it is used in the west. Yet somehow it is illegitimate for them to say it?

So who exactly uses the phrase 'kung fu'? How did it become a noun with reference to the martial arts? Is this usage regional, generational or something else entirely? And how did it end up dominating our vocabulary in the west?

In their introduction to Chinese martial studies, Kennedy and Guo inform readers that:

'Kung Fu' in Chinese simply means 'effort' to do or achieve something. Students can use the term 'kung fu' to pass their school exams. Native speakers of Chinese use the term 'wushu' as the general term for the martial arts. 'Wushu' literally means martial method'. (Kennedy and Guo 2005: 7)

In his 2006 ethnographic study of the Wu style Taijiquan community in Shanghai, Adam D. Frank provides a more nuanced investigation of the same terminology. His definition contains a number of features that are particularly important to the current discussion:

'Gongfu', commonly written in English as 'kung fu', also refers to 'skill', 'work', or 'time'. The 'kung fu' that has become part of American vernacular functions in English as a kind of catch-all term for Chinese martial arts, but it is more often used this way in Chinese, for example, when the conversation revolves around foreign practice of the martial arts or when the term *wushu* is avoided. *Wushu* is the term for 'martial arts' in Mandarin Chinese, but it has acquired a complicated association with performance-oriented martial arts that have little or nothing to do with combat training. Practitioners will usually refer to a particular art by its style name or family association [Frank 2006: 243, note 2].

Stanley Henning, another respected author in the field of Chinese martial studies, has also provided a slightly more detailed discussion of the origins and

usage of the term. His definition highlights a number of the issues that we will be dealing with in the remainder of this article.

Finally, the term kung fu (gongfu) merely means 'skill' or 'effort' in Chinese. In the eighteenth century a French Jesuit missionary in China used the term to describe Chinese yoga-like exercises. It was accepted for English usage in the United States during the 1960s to describe Chinese hand combat practices seen outside Mainland China as being similar to Karate. It was used in the Hong Kong movie scene and widely popularized by the *Kung Fu* television series (ABC, 1972-1975). Consequently, it is now a household word around the world, even in China where it is used to describe the highly gymnastics-oriented genera of martial arts movies (*gongfu pian*). This term also seems to evoke a fanciful, exaggerated association of the martial arts with [the] Shaolin Monastery – a distorted image of these arts, whose origins go back much farther and whose practice was more widespread than this image evokes. [Henning 2010: 98]

Lastly I would like to introduce Peter Lorge's contributions to this discussion. His 2012 book *Chinese Martial Arts* is currently the only single volume introduction to the academic study of this material published by a major university press. As such it is particularly important to consider how he treats the subject.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* incorrectly defines 'Kung-fu' or 'kung-fu' as a Chinese form of Karate. It is perhaps on firmer ground in referring to a 1966

article in *Punch* as containing the first attested mention of the term in English. This might have to be modified, however, as Bruce Lee used the term 'gong fu' in an unpublished essay in 1962. Nevertheless, clearly its usage in English began in the twentieth century... In Classical, Literary, and Modern Chinese, the term is not specific to the martial arts, however, meaning effort, skill, accomplishment, or a period of time. But by 1984, 'gongfu' was indeed used in the particular sense of martial arts in a Mainland Chinese newspaper. The use of Kung-fu or gongfu in English may be due to a misunderstanding or mistranslation of modern Chinese, possibly through movie subtitles or dubbing. In any case, it was not a word used in Chinese to refer directly to the martial arts until the late twentieth century. Chinese speakers seldom use the term gongfu, except when speaking English, where it seems to accord with contemporary English usage. [Lorge 2012: 9]

While by no means exhaustive, the preceding four examples are representative of the better discussions of the term 'kung fu' that the field of Chinese martial studies has generated. Of course all of these treatments are fairly brief. It does not appear that any scholar has produced an article or monograph focused exclusively on this subject. The question always seems to be addressed in passing while moving on to other issues.

The statement by Kennedy and Guo is terse. They avoid most of the pitfalls that ensnare some of the later authors, probably because of their familiarity with

the Jingwu Association which (in the 1920s) embraced the term 'kung-fu' and selected it (with no direct precedent that I can find) for their English language discussion of the Chinese martial arts [Kennedy and Guo 2010: 133-142].

The discussion provided by Stanley Henning starts off well. The reference to the 18th century French missionary is interesting. As we will see, a number of English-speaking missionaries independently discovered the term being used in their own local districts, though it was employed somewhat differently from what we typically encounter today. Some of these early observations will be discussed in the next section of this article.

Unfortunately, the second half of his argument shows an unnecessary, almost partisan, disdain for the Shaolin martial tradition. Still, his observation that 'kung fu' tends to be associated with popular (and often mythic) beliefs about the Shaolin Monastery is important to remember. This is especially true in the south where the origin myths of most of the Cantonese fighting systems claim direct descent from that temple's hallowed halls.

Peter Lorge's passage is the most problematic of the group. As we will see below, the term did not enter either the Chinese or English languages in the late 20th century. It was well attested in both by the end of the 19th century.

The real weakness in his approach to this question seems to be his dependence on the normally reliable Oxford English Dictionary. Unfortunately its discussion of the origins and first appearance of kung fu failed rather profoundly. Nor does Lorge's conjecture about the phrase being a mistranslation

of a bad martial arts film hold up to scrutiny.

Of the various definitions provided above, only that of Adam D. Frank appears to be the product of extensive original research. His discussion contains valuable information on how the term is actually used by practicing martial artists in China today. Throughout his book Frank shows great sensitivity to time, language and place. As such his discussion of the use of the word 'kung fu' reflects what is going on in the Mandarin speaking Taiji community of Shanghai. These qualifications are important as they begin to suggest that groups in other areas, or those speaking different dialects, may use these terms slightly differently. Traditionally the martial arts have been, in many ways, an expression of regional popular culture.

Frank's observation that kung fu is often used in reference to foreign martial arts students is fascinating and, in my own experience, accurate. I suspect this has something to do with the fact that these foreigners were often introduced to the arts by southern Chinese immigrants in North America, Europe and Australia, who used the term much more freely. In fact, many traditional practitioners outside of China quite consciously adopt the term kung fu to distance themselves rhetorically from the officially sponsored varieties of wushu that are so heavily promoted in the People's Republic of China [Mroz 2011: 47].

In short, the growing popularity of the term may stem from a Cantonese usage being exported into Mandarin popular speech via North American and Western European culture. This is a wonderful example of the increasingly globalized nature of the Chinese martial arts. Alternatively, this could be taken as a warning about the corrosive effects of

unchecked globalization for those seeking to use the martial arts as a tool to create and perpetuate a certain unified vision of traditional Chinese culture.

On one level this discomfort with the southern use of the term kung fu seems to be just another case of a much broader set of social tensions and suspicions. As the old Northern expression goes, 'I fear neither heaven nor earth, I only fear Southerners trying to speak Mandarin'. Yet fear about global encroachment and the resulting need to preserve 'Chinese values' has probably created greater sensitivity around this issue.

Also important is Frank's forthright acknowledgement that while 'wushu' is the officially approved term for the government backed martial arts sector, it has problems, much as 'guoshu' did before it. Many folk students and teachers of the traditional styles (those that are not supported by the government) specifically avoid it, either for political reasons or because they don't want to be confused with state sponsored wushu sporting events. Since the martial arts are not discussed in the abstract as commonly as individual styles, such avoidance is not really difficult. Yet if one is looking for an alternative to the term wushu, 'kung fu' is a popular choice in some circles.

Nor are folk masters the only ones to register some unease with the current official terminology. Ma Mingda, a professor of history and noted scholar of the Chinese martial arts at Jinan University in Guangzhou, has expressed discomfort with both the terms 'wushu' and 'sanda' (the name for a type of modern, and widely practiced, Chinese kickboxing). In his opinion both of these

names separate the modern disciplines too far from traditional practice.

He has instead advocated the use of 'shanshou' and 'wuxue', which basically means 'martial arts studies'. Ma feels that this latter term would encourage students to examine not only the physical elements of the arts, but their historical and cultural aspects as well. Of course one of the central goals of the early post-1949 wushu program was to purify China's unique forms of physical culture by stripping them of their traditional 'superstitious' and 'feudal' elements [Acevedo, Cheung and Hood 2008: 76-80].

Adam Hsu, who was born in Shanghai and currently resides in Taiwan, is another important writer and student of the Chinese martial arts who has made a conscious decision to distance himself from the term 'wushu'. He also appears to be motivated by a discomfort with the way that government backed xiandai wushu has evolved over time and the (in his opinion) detrimental effects that it has had on the more traditional styles in the People's Republic of China. In his writings he always refers to these later arts as 'kung-fu' [Hsu 1997: 17].

Many of the Chinese martial artists who emigrated to North America and Europe between the 1950s and 1980s had little love for the government on the mainland. Its various attempts to reform the traditional arts were sometimes seen as profoundly misguided by older folk masters. Perhaps we should not be surprised that a number of these individuals, all native Chinese language speakers, adopted 'kung fu' as their preferred catchall phrase. It is even more understandable when we remember that many of these individuals were Cantonese speakers from Guangdong and Hong Kong.

Kung Fu and Chinese Physical Culture, 1860-1900

Ultimately we can only understand how kung fu came to be associated with the traditional martial arts by observing the introduction and evolution of this term in the historical record. It has been in use far longer than the editors of the Oxford English Dictionary would suspect. The first English language reference to 'kung fu' as a practice somehow related to self-defense can be found in an 1869 vocabulary list. Where necessary I have adopted standard spellings and grammatical usage to aid the reader:

The Art of Self-Defense in China

Priests in China have long practiced military and callisthenic exercises, for defending their temples, and persons, on their journeying, and to mortify the flesh. A monastery near *Hwang-pi*, in the prefecture of *Han-yang* [modern day Wuhan], contains four hundred priests, of whom more than a hundred are skilled in the military arts, fencing, boxing, and the use of the *nú*, or the ballista, with which they defend their neighborhood from marauders.

From the *Sháu-lin kwan p'ü*, we learn that the priests of the monastery of *Sháu-lin*, in Henan, have been long celebrated for their skills in single-stick exercise.

Kung-fu, is a species of disciplinary Calisthenics, practiced by Daoist priests.

Kiau-ta, is the name of the *maître d'armes*, or *kiau-sz'*, who teaches boxing, fencing, and sword exercise. This name has been unfortunately given to the Christian Teacher, a man of peace. *Shwa*

Kwan to fence with quarter staves, and *shwa teng pai* to play with foils and shields, are other terms used.

Hankow. F.P.S. [Smith 1869: 88]

The author F. P. S. who submitted the entry on 'self-defense' (which seems to be the preferred English language term for the martial arts in the late 19th century) was in fact Dr. F. Porter Smith. Smith was a physician and medical missionary who helped to open the Methodist hospital in Hankow in 1864. The historical record contains a fair number of references to him and we know something about his life.

Unlike some other missionaries Smith was not dismissive of the Chinese people or their culture. He was a talented physician, a good observer and he was quite interested in local medical knowledge. In addition to medicine he wrote on natural history, biology and society.

Obviously the arts of self-defense were not his greatest passion. He was much more interested in medicine, both eastern and western. At the same time I don't think there is any *a priori* reason to doubt the veracity of his brief summary of local vocabulary usage and folk knowledge regarding the traditional fighting styles. Unlike many later practitioners and popular writers on the martial arts, he had no motive to exaggerate his accounts.

It is very interesting to note that even as far back as the middle of the 19th century Henan's Shaolin monastery commanded considerable respect in other provinces. Its martial monks were still remembered for their excellence with the pole, which they had exhibited during the Ming dynasty [Shahar 2008: 55-113]. It is also fascinating to note that

the local residents were also discussing other temples with existing martial monk traditions during the last quarter of the 19th century.

Smith introduces the term 'kung-fu' in the middle of what is essentially a vocabulary list. All of the other words in the list relate to combat practices, but this one appears to be an exception. It is included in the same set of social activities that constitute the 'martial arts' (as we imagine them today), yet it is somewhat set apart as a distinct set of practices.

This list seems to imply that some martial artists might practice kung-fu, but clearly they are not the same thing. Instead he describes it as a sort of physical culture practiced by Daoist priests. It seems likely that he is thinking of practices similar to those outlined in the *Tendon Changing* and *Marrow Washing* classics.

In this passage 'kung-fu' seems to have a dual meaning. On the one hand it refers to the effort or devotional activity of the priests, but on the other it is also being introduced as a proper noun. It should be remembered that all of Smith's vocabulary for his various entries came from local informants.

This passage seems to open an interesting window into the vernacular language of martial artists in central China during the middle of the 19th century. Kung fu was a known term, but it was not an analogue for 'chuanfa', 'quanban', 'ji ji' or 'wushu'. Instead its meaning seems to be morphing through vernacular usage from something like 'really hard work and excellence' to 'the sorts of hard work and physical culture practiced by mysterious individuals on the edge of the martial arts community'.

It is also interesting to consider the timing of this account. Smith's entry was published in 1869. The late 19th century saw the development of a more elaborate metaphysical framework around at least some of the martial arts. This is the same period of time during which the Taiji Classics were being composed and Wu Yu-hsiang, Wu Ch'eng-ch'ing and Li Yiyu were making their various contributions to the refinement of Taiji's theory and practice [Wile 1996: 16-33]. These same trends are prefigured in the earlier career and writings of Chang Naizhou (1724- ca. 1783), the first author to give us a fully developed theory of the 'internal arts' [Wells 2005: 1-46]. Yet documents related to the later development of Taiji seem to indicate that these trends were more readily apparent in the second half of the 19th century.

While the issue requires substantial further research, Smith's linguistic notes suggest that these more metaphysical interests may not have been limited to a handful of elite, highly educated, martial artists (such as the Wu brothers). Many of these same basic impulses may have found a more plebian form of expression in various self-cultivation exercises, which were becoming increasingly common in martial arts circles. In her study of 20th century Qigong the anthropologist Nancy Chen has noted that such exercises are often associated with feelings of increased wellbeing, energy and even invulnerability [Chen 2003: 9-12]. It is not hard to understand why martial artists in late 19th century China might find such exercises increasingly useful as they attempted to negotiate the rapidly evolving social, economic and political landscape.

Our next example of kung fu's usage in an English language publication seems

to confirm the connection between it and the emerging idea of 'physical culture' as a form of self-cultivation and health maintenance. In 1895 Dr. John Dudgeon published what was probably the first comprehensive Qigong manual seen in America or Europe. Obviously the terms 'Qigong' is something of an anachronism, as the word was initially popularized by government officials working in China during the 1950s [Chen 6-7]. When he spoke about Chinese physical culture practices focusing on gentle calisthenics and breathing, Dudgeon used the term 'Kung-fu', much as Dr. Smith had 30 years earlier.

The Chinese, like the Hindus, have quite a large number of works on the means of retaining health. These have reference to climate, seasons, time of the day, food, bathing, anointing, clothing, housing, sleep, etc. Exercise receives always a high place in all such works; for it increases strength, prolongs life, prevents and cures disease by equalizing the humors, prevents fatness, and renews and increases the power of resistance. In the Book of Rites (1,000 B.C.), we find archery and horsemanship laid down in the curriculum of study to be pursued at the National University. At the present day in China, besides the exercises involved in Kung-fu, the various exercises that prevail in Europe are practiced publicly and privately by all classes, especially by the Manchus, and to a much larger extent than among ourselves. Our present mode of warfare has done much to put an end to gymnastics as a part of education and a means conducive to robust health. [Dudgeon 1895: 69-70]

He then goes on to define his terms in greater detail:

The term Kung-fu means work-man, the man who works with art, to exercise one's self bodily, the art of the exercise of the body applied in the prevention or treatment of disease, the singular postures in which certain Tauists hold themselves. The expression Kung-fu is also used, meaning work done. The term Kung-fu, labour or work, is identical in character and meaning with the word Congou, applied in the South to a certain kind of tea. In China it is applied medically to the same subjects as are expressed by the German Heil Gymnastik, or Curative Gymnastics, and the French Kinesiologie, or Science of Movement. [Dudgeon 1895: 73]

Dudgeon was a fascinating individual. Like Smith he was a trained medical doctor. He left his home in Scotland and traveled to China where he served as a surgeon, translator and medical missionary. As should be obvious from the quotes above he was very attentive to, and impressed by, certain aspects of China's ancient medical heritage. He, and a small group of like-minded 19th century physicians, believed that the sorts of traditional practices which we currently term as 'Qigong', or associate with modern Taiji Quan, could be used to treat the increased incidence of 'lifestyle diseases' (obesity, diabetes, etc.) that were already starting to appear as society urbanized and life became more sedentary in the industrialized west.

Dr. Dudgeon's language skills were also notable. He was responsible for translating many of the foundational texts of western medicine into Chinese for use in the training of medical

students. In fact, he translated and published the first edition of *Gray's Anatomy* to appear in Chinese. While random error is always a possibility, it seems much more likely that his usage of the word 'Kung-fu' reflects what he found in his local environment as he made this subject a topic of detailed study.

What he explicitly tells us is similar to what Smith implied. Kung-fu most directly refers to the work or effort that someone puts forth, but it has also come to refer to a set of exercises designed to promote longevity and health. He gives us further clues as to what this usage means when he compares ancient Chinese Daoist practices to German or French curative gymnastics.

Through these passages we can see that in the late 19th century the term 'Kung-fu' is picking up a new vernacular association. It does not mean the 'martial arts' per se. This pattern of usage is more expansive than that. Clearly a number of individuals had taken to using it as a term of art describing at last one aspect of China's indigenous physical culture practices.

If Dudgeon's concept of kung fu were a circle on a Venn diagram I suspect that the traditional 'martial arts' would be one area either wholly or partially within its much larger circumference. Unfortunately it is hard to know this with certainty as Dudgeon does not appear to have found the more defensive elements of traditional boxing to be all that interesting. Being a doctor he focused on medical exercises and their applications. Still, his discussion is useful in that it appears to clarify what Smith had implied. These various terms, while conceptually unique, were related on a fundamental level, at least in late 19th century popular usage.

Kung Fu and the Martial Arts, 1900-1965

The next appearance of this phrase in a major English language publication narrows the conceptual distance between kung fu as a distinctively Chinese type of physical culture and the martial arts as they are currently understood today. This usage begins to appear in print around the turn of the century. Of course it is only with the outbreak of anti-Christian violence during the Boxer Uprising (1899-1901) that the western reading public really began to formulate any widespread impressions of the traditional Chinese hand combat systems.

Like most other periodicals the *National Geographic Magazine* reported extensively on the Boxer Uprising. Some of their articles came out as the situation was still heating up, prior to the eruption of the actual crisis. These make for interesting reading. They are a helpful historical reminder of what was, and was not, generally understood about these events by the western public.

To get a better grasp of the dynamics of the situation, magazine reporters turned to Chinese immigrants in America for background information and explanations. These sources sometimes erroneously claimed that the Boxers must be the same as the criminal and political syndicates that wished to 'overturn the Qing and restore the Ming'. Interestingly these opinions seem to have been accepted at the time even though the reporters knew that this directly contradicted statements being made by the leaders of the Boxer movement in northern China.

As Esherick pointed out in his pioneering study of these events, the Uprising was actually a revival movement meant to

support the Qing dynasty from the threat of foreign encroachment [Esherick 1987: 68]. The simplest reading of this situation turned out to be the most accurate. Still, the *National Geographic* discussion is informative as it reveals the state of public discourse:

They have confidently asserted that those initiated into the mystery of this cult, and whose 'Kung Fu' or exercise of its rules is perfect, would by virtue of this practice become invulnerable, and thus be protected against all bullets or knives. [Davies 1900: 282]

This passage from a 1900 article describes the Boxers training in preparation for their uprising against the foreign elements in Chinese society. Here the phrase 'Kung Fu' is used both as a reference to one's personal exertions and as a synthesis of the complete martial practices of these individuals. Some of these practices were physical, such as training in Plum Blossom Boxing or some other style, whereas others were magical and had to do with the creation and ingestion of certain charms that were thought to convey magical power and invulnerability. Other aspects of this discipline had to do with observing ritual taboos.

The failure of the Boxer Uprising, and the international occupation of the capital which followed, nearly destroyed the martial arts as a going pursuit in China. Educated citizens turned in mass against the 'backwards practices' and 'superstitious beliefs' of Shandong's impoverished peasants (i.e., the martial arts), which had nearly cost the nation its freedom. The small number of reformers and intellectuals who wished to promote the Chinese martial arts within this generally hostile atmosphere spent a huge amount of time trying to distance

what they viewed as the real and authentic martial traditions of China from the backwards, quasi-magical, superstitions of the past.

Modern Chinese martial artists are still living with the results of these subsequent reform and modernization efforts. As a result there is a real temptation to dismiss a quote like the one above because 'everyone knows' that these esoteric practices are not actually part of the 'martial arts' at all. This modern tendency ignores the fact, illustrated so well by Esherick's extensive research on the Yi Hi Boxers, that there were fewer clear-cut boundaries between the various categories of 'self-cultivation' and 'martial practice' to the individuals who actually participated in these movements.

Talismanic magic and mystical breathing practices were simply part of the basic physical culture that went into strengthening the body and perfecting the martial arts in many circles during the late 19th century. While this is not a view of the martial arts that almost any modern practitioners in either China or the west would be comfortable with, it appears to have been fairly common at the time. Certainly it was a pattern of associations that re-emerged time and again in northern China's many popular uprisings.

This quote from the first year of the 20th century suggests just how deeply entangled kung fu, as a sort of physical culture, had become with the idea of the traditional martial arts. While the peasants profiled in Esherick's study had a different understanding of how you strengthen the body than the readers of Dudgeon's medical text, both were willing to apply the term kung fu to their practice. This basic terminology was also

spreading across the Pacific, to North American publications and periodicals.

Things really came to a head following the 1911 revolution. The single most common term for what we think of as the traditional martial arts prior to 1911 was probably 'quanbang' meaning literally 'fist and staff' [Henning 2010: 96]. But this name had a problem and it quickly faded from use after the fall of the Qing government. The term carries distinct political and social connotations, with which many individuals were no longer comfortable in the post-revolutionary period. The Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty had used the term to refer exclusively to the indigenous martial arts of the ethnically Han population. Worse yet, it implied a subtle comparison to the 'Manchu' arts of archery and horsemanship. These skills were viewed as being true military assets. They even formed the backbone of the military examination system [Selby 2000: 348-359].

Boxing and pole fighting (favored by the majority Han population) were not seen as serious military arts. While both were very popular, officials tended to view them as a form of civilian recreation and even linked them to hooliganism.³

³ The Chinese government had a complicated relationship with the world of the civilian martial arts. Martial arts instructors were often employed by the military for various purposes. Still, the persistent association between traditional modes of hand combat and anti-social or criminal behavior led to frequent bans. Of course the very frequency of these measures leads one to suspect that their enforcement was spotty at best. A good example of the Qing's concern with 'quanbang' was reported in the *Asiatic Journal* in 1822. It reads as follows:

'FORMATION of BANDS WHO PRACTICE BOXING, CUDGELING, & C.: It is stated to the Emperor that the men who navigate the grain boats up the grand canal, from Che-

Indeed, the term 'quanbang' does seem to denote a specific corner of civil society. It was likely the rise of anti-Manchu sentiment accompanying the end of the Qing dynasty that elbowed the name out of popular use.

So what should we call the Chinese martial arts? This has been a long-standing problem for certain writers and intellectuals within the hand combat world. For the next 30 years one group of martial arts reformers after another would advance a series of names in a bid to clarify, unify and control China's diverse martial heritage.

While the Jingwu (Pure Martial) movement was not the first of these groups, it clearly had the greatest impact. As Andrew Morris, Brian Kennedy and Stanley Henning have all noted, Jingwu was the first organization to successfully brand and market the Chinese martial arts in a modern way [Henning 2003: 17-

keang province northward, have formed themselves into bands, who practice boxing, cudgeling, and the use of various weapons, for the purpose they say, of defending themselves against robbers; but really for the purpose of domineering over any person who may thwart their will. A case is just now considered in which they killed one man, and wounded three others. They are perfectly organized, and hundreds of them collect, in a moment, at the cry of a captain, whom they have appointed over them; and of whom they have made an idol image, which they worship evening and morning.—*Indo-Chinese-Gleaner*, Volume XIII, January to June, 1822. 'Asiatic Intelligence', March, 298.

Similar reports of government crackdowns on quanbang were fairly common throughout the late imperial period. In reviewing them it quickly becomes apparent that martial artists in the Republican era would probably be unhappy with the term's deep associations with both ethnic subjugation and public disorder. Creating new terms to rebrand the martial arts was essential to their preservation.

19; Morris 2004: 195-204; Kennedy and Guo 2010]. They even established their own training and franchising system. Perhaps their most important innovation was to introduce the martial arts to new groups of people who had traditionally not practiced them in great numbers. Educated, middleclass urban residents were the main target of their vision of a 'reformed and modernized' martial practice.

This group had traditionally had very little contact with hand combat. During the late imperial period boxing was often considered an aspect of parochial agrarian life. As China's cities grew and modernized, the reformers behind the Jingwu Association realized that this would need to change. A new look was needed if the martial arts were to attract modern students. As rural norms, values and fashion increasingly became objects of derision during the 1910s-1920s, the pressure to rebrand the martial arts increased.

These efforts to modernize and change the public perception of the martial arts can be seen in a number of specific reforms. Jingwu was the first major organization to teach large numbers of women and to actively encourage female participation on equal footing with the men [Kennedy and Guo 2010: 15-16; Morris 2004: 192-200]. Just as importantly, Jingwu went to great lengths to export their reformed martial arts throughout the Chinese diaspora. They opened numerous schools in South-East Asia all the while promoting a specific vision of the 'greater Chinese nation' [Morris 2004: 48-69].

This internationalizing impulse had far reaching effects, and it deserves careful consideration. It is interesting to note that Jingwu produced some material in foreign languages with the goal of

promoting and explaining the traditional Chinese martial arts to the global community. At least one of these pieces was written in English.

This material is fascinating as it allows us to observe directly how they explained the Chinese martial arts, and what vocabulary they favored in doing so. The best example of this writing can be found in the English language appendix to their 'anniversary book', published in Shanghai in 1919. While the original source is quite rare, Kennedy and Guo have been kind enough to reproduce the entire text, verbatim, in their 2010 volume:

Since the days of Hwang Ti till the Boxer Upheaval in 1900 entrance to military service was by way of examination of the knowledge of 'Kung fu'. No man in the service was not versed in it and the military leaders could only distinguish themselves by being its master. Because of the wretched condition of communication and the lack of police organization, 'Kung fu' was a necessary equipment of every businessman in traveling. Many a story is told of travelers meeting gangs of desperadoes and extricating themselves through defeating their opponents at 'Kung fu'. In those days daring men with good knowledge of 'Kung fu' carried on a business that was called 'Piao Chu'. At a certain charge 'paopiao' would be sent to accompany the travels through bandit-infested areas and whose service was like that of a personal guard. [Kennedy and Guo 2010: 134]

This is a very revealing passage. It is of critical importance to our understanding of the evolution of the vernacular use of

the term kung fu and its relationship with the English language. This is the first instance that we have seen in which it is used explicitly as a proper name for the traditional Chinese martial arts. The brief historical discussion of the evolution of these arts leaves no doubt as to what they are talking about.

So are the authors of the Jingwu Association (all of whom were quite well educated) ignorant of the term's original usage? Is the previous passage a departure from the evolutionary trend that we have been following since the late 1860s? In both cases the answer would seem to be no. In a different English language passage in the same volume the authors explicitly define the term for their English language audience.

'Kung Fu' has been called boxing, but it is no more than gymnastics combined with that sporting contest which young men so greatly delight. [Kennedy and Guo 2010: 137]

Gymnastics is the critical idea here. Jingwu was first and foremost a physical culture reform movement. It sought to strengthen and save the nation by purifying and modernizing its indigenous physical culture (the martial arts) and teaching them to as many people as possible. Western exercises were taught as well and all of this seems to have fallen under the rubric of 'gymnastics'. Their use of the term is expansive and seems to encompass their entire emphasis on physical training rather than just the Olympic sport that later became so popular in China.

In these passages kung fu keeps its connotation as being a physical culture movement. Yet in their zeal to achieve 'national salvation', the Jingwu movement did away with 'superstitious' and

'backwards practices' (like magic and the ancient Daoist longevity practices) while focusing only on what was 'useful' (physical fitness and self-defense). They hoped that these rectified and modernized martial arts would strengthen China by improving the overall physical and moral fitness of its citizens. Rather than seeing their use of the phrase 'kung fu' as a radical departure from the past, I suspect that to them it was a logical continuation of the term's long standing association with physical culture and the group's reformist agenda.

The question of the direction of transmission of the vernacular usage of the term 'kung fu' in Chinese is an interesting one. This is one area that needs more research. The previous texts would seem to suggest that the evolution of this term probably happened in the north and was spread to the south. However, it should be noted that many of the creators and leaders of the Jingwu movement in Shanghai were in fact businessmen whose families came from Guangzhou [Kennedy and Guo 2010: 23-25]. It may be possible that their usage of the term reflects their southern background. A definitive answer will have to wait for another day.

What we do know is that a number of important martial artists from southern China adopted the then current usage of the term and helped to spread it to the west. Hong Kong itself was a critical link in the dissemination of all sorts of martial arts styles and concepts. Perhaps we should not be too surprised to see foreign martial artists speaking with a Cantonese cultural and linguistic accent.

Kung Fu Comes to America

Numerous Chinese immigrants traveled to North America over the course of the 19th century. Most of these individuals hailed from the coastal regions of Fujian and Guangdong provinces, areas noted for their rapid population expansion and interest in the martial arts. Yet it was not until the middle of the 20th century that these combat traditions established a reliable foothold on the other side of the Pacific. Prior to the 1960s relatively few explicit discussions of Chinese martial practices were seen in the English language press. Sensationalized stories about organized crime, piracy and 'Tong Wars' were relatively common and popular with readers. But with a few notable exceptions these features did not tend to focus on what we would currently think of as the martial arts.

There was a generalized knowledge that 'boxing' existed in China. The memory of the Boxer Rebellion had never totally faded from public consciousness. Travelers, sailors and military servicemen who had been to Shanghai, Hong Kong and Taiwan often had a chance to observe these fighting systems. Yet most of the growing awareness of the Asian martial arts in the 1930s-1950s focused on the Japanese styles and Judo in particular. The few discussions of the Chinese martial arts that I could locate in the pre-1949 period tended to be short and lacking in nuance. The following, taken from a 1925 survey of Asian seaports, is a typical example:

There is also a national boxing, called kung-fu, in which kicking and gouging are permitted... [Macmillian 1925: 229]

Little teaching of traditional hand combat appears to have happened in the Chinese-American community prior

to the 1970s, and almost none before 1949. There were hardly any martial arts schools in the west. Of course these had only become common in Chinese cities during the 1920s [for an overview of this period see Lorge 217-225; Morris 185-230].

Social attitudes seem to have been the biggest barrier to the spread of kung fu in North America. Many individuals who were in their teens prior to the 1970s have reported that their parents actively dissuaded them from studying the martial arts because of their perceived connection to organized crime [Fung 2008: IX]. The social stigma against the hand combat systems that was so much in evidence in late imperial China seems to have followed them to America. Nor was this reputation for marginality always undeserved.

One of the first individuals to open a public martial arts school in the United States was Lau Bun. A Choy Li Fut teacher, he rose to prominence through clashes with law enforcement (specifically immigration officers) before going on to provide security for the Tongs in San Francisco.⁴ All of this stands in marked contrast to the Japanese American community who from the 1920s-1970s enthusiastically embraced different conceptions of 'Budo' as part of their hybridized national identity [Svinth 2003: 149-166].

Of course this social stigma did not prevent all young adults, of both Chinese and western extraction, from wanting to learn more about the martial arts. Americans had been exposed to various Asian fighting traditions in the Pacific

⁴ For a short discussion of Lau Bun's career, typical of how he is remembered within the TCMA community, see: <http://plumblossom.net/ChoyLiFut/laubun.html>. Accessed January 6th, 2014.

campaigns of WWII, the Korean War and in Vietnam. Globalization in the form of trade and immigration also brought additional knowledge about these systems to the US in the post-war era.

Judo had become a relatively popular sport after WWII (it was first introduced to the Olympics in 1964), and Americans started to seek out different Asian fighting styles as their interest in the history and variety of the martial arts grew. During the 1950s and early 1960s most of this enthusiasm was channeled into Japanese schools. For all of the popular talk about how ethnic Chinese masters in North America refused to teach 'outsiders', the simple truth was that there weren't that many 'masters' to begin with, and practically no one was showing up and asking for instruction prior to the late 1950s (at the very earliest).

By the 1960s this had started to change. New immigrants from China were bringing their martial skills to the USA. Additionally, the few individuals who did teach the traditional Chinese martial arts in cities like San Francisco and New York were starting to discover that their skills were suddenly in demand.

Ark Yuey Wong was one of the few well known Chinese martial arts teachers whose reputation reached beyond his immediate community in the 1950s. In 1958 he expanded his efforts, taking on Jim Anastasi as his first Caucasian student.

In many ways Ark Yuey Wong was very traditional. He was born in Guangzhou in 1900 and taught a number of southern shaolin styles including Five Ancestors and various animal forms. It appears that he used the term 'kung fu' in reference to the traditional Chinese martial arts, and even included it in the titles of his

books. These were some of the earliest publications on the Southern Chinese martial arts in the English language. In 1965 he released *The Grand View of Kung-Fu* and five years later *The Secret of Kung-Fu*.

One did not have to travel to California to be introduced to kung fu. For a small fee the Chinese martial arts renaissance could come to you. Starting in late 1958 readers of *Popular Mechanics* were invited to learn the secrets of kung fu with advertisements like the following:

KARATE Kung Fu, deadly oriental Defense. Power that Breaks planks Barehanded. Illustrated Manual \$3.98. J. Yim Lee, 584 Valle Vista Ave., Oakland 10, Calif. [*Popular Mechanics*, December, 1958: 49]

DEADLY oriental Fighting Arts – Elemental Karate Kung-fu. Illustrated manual \$3.98. Oriental Book Sales. P.O. Box 1183. Oakland 7. Calif. [*Popular Mechanics*, December, 1959: 47]

These advertisements were seen by a very large number of readers and were probably many Americans' first exposure to kung fu. Anyone who sent in their \$4 would receive a copy of one of the books that James Yimm Lee (the consummate DIY martial artist) had written, published and distributed himself. Published in 1957-1958 these were *Secret Fighting Arts of the Orient* and *Kung Fu Karate: Iron Hand/Poison Hand Training (Break Bricks in 100 Days)*.

While their titles were foreboding, these small books were actually full of solid and practical information (especially by the standards of the 1950s.) Unlike Ark Yuey Wong or Lau Bun, James Yimm Lee was an American. He was born in Oakland in 1920, and had served in the

Army (where he was stationed in the Philippines) during WWII. During the 1950s he studied with T. Y. Wong in San Francisco and later was a friend and confidant of Bruce Lee. Today his early self-published books are hard to find collectors' items. James Lee is important precisely because he is a member of the first post-WWII generation of Chinese martial arts pioneers in the US. Like other teachers in the 1950s, he relied on the term kung fu to describe the vast body of Chinese martial arts in the abstract. This usage would become increasingly common in the coming decades.

Another early publication on the Chinese martial arts was released in 1961. This book, co-authored by Tim Yuen Wong and James Yimm Lee (using his Chinese name), included a more extensive discussion of what exactly kung fu students were getting themselves into:

Original karate, like Chinese Buddhism, which has millions of Chinese adherents, basically was India's contribution to China. The basic essence and fundamentals of this health building and at the same time, deadly, system was introduced into China by Dot Mor [Bodhidharma] of India.

He was instrumental in establishing the Sil Lum Monastery – Sil Lum means 'Young Forest'.

Here Chinese Karate under the expert hand of Dot Mor was practiced, nurtured and improved throughout the years....

Now in Kung-Fu, if we can imagine the teachings of Dot Mor as the main source of the river, and the river is Sil Lum Monastery of China, where the arts were improved and

flourished, and this river separates into five main and distinct tributaries, the 5 basic branches of Sil Lum Kung-Fu.

Namely, Hung, Low, Li, Choy and Fut branches of Chinese Kung-Fu, and from these 5 outlets it separated into more and more streams. This will illustrate how the arts have been diluted and changed through the centuries under the teachings of various masters located in different areas. [Wong and Lee 1961: 2-5]

Here we see a basic outline of the southern Shaolin foundation myth that is so important to the martial styles of Fujian and Guangdong. 'Kung-Fu' is used as a noun in these passages. It is a body of knowledge that is synonymous with all of China's fighting traditions, both ancient and modern.

One might accuse individuals such as Wong and Lee of being unscholarly in their use of terms. While talented martial artists, and important pioneers in their field, these men were not primarily students of Chinese language and culture. This brings us to Dr. William C. C. Hu, the first public intellectual within the American Chinese martial arts movement.

Dr. Hu emigrated from Southern China to Hawaii. Eventually he came to the University of Michigan (and later Cornell and Stanford) where he taught history and Asian Studies. In addition to his scholarly contributions, he wrote a number of more popular works attempting to explain different aspects of Chinese culture. His book on Lion Dancing is still considered a classic [Hu 1995].

Fortunately Dr. Hu was also a martial artist. He taught a few individuals personally, but his most important impact on the development of the traditional arts in the West probably came through his regular columns in *Black Belt* magazine. During the 1960s-1970s this publication was the most important news outlet for the entire American martial arts community.

The magazine's early issues (1961-1963) are dominated almost exclusively by the Japanese arts, and most of that attention is devoted to Judo. Its pages then go on to document the slow discovery of the Chinese martial arts as the decade progressed. From the middle of the 1960s to the middle of the 1970s Hu's articles on the Chinese fighting arts and culture became a somewhat regular feature.

In these pieces he dispelled myths, related legends and generally tried to keep his readers informed. Much of that information is now somewhat dated, but at the time it was priceless. It was probably the most accurate information that many American students received about Chinese martial culture in the 1960s. It is sad that Dr. Hu's important contributions to the development of the Chinese martial arts in North America have largely been forgotten. He was a critical force in legitimizing and spreading the martial aspects of Chinese culture.

Black Belt has posted parts of their archives on-line, including some of Dr. Hu's old columns. Hopefully this will help to remind modern students of his contributions. For our purposes it is important to note that Hu was also the individual who in 1962 introduced *Black Belt*, and its many readers, to the term 'Kung-fu'. This occurred in his very first article, which provided its audience with

a discussion of the historical origins of Karate:

Inasmuch as one would like to believe that Daruma was the founder of Karate, and that Ch'an or Zen is the essence, nevertheless it must be refuted. On one hand, Buddhism is a non-violent religion, and is disinterested in worldly attainments; and on the other hand, a highly developed form of kempo, or popularly called Kung-fu, was already in existence in China before his arrival.

...

The highly developed forms of Kempo or Kung-fu in China may have been exported to the nearby countries that were under the Chinese civilization. [Hu 1962: 10-13]

Dr. Hu clearly uses the term 'Kung-fu' as a short hand for China's martial heritage, in much the same way that the Jingwu Association did in 1919. Unfortunately he did not stop to explicitly discuss his terms. Yet to help his western readers he did include a large graphic at the side of his column that showed the word's Chinese characters. Its component elements were defined as 'work' and 'mastery'. Apparently he did not see the two uses of this term as somehow invalidating each other.

Hu continued to use 'kung fu' in his articles and eventually other authors followed suit. This may not be a coincidence, as *Black Belt Magazine* lists him as an associate editor during the 1960s. These articles would have reached a vastly greater audience than the self-published works of Lee and Wong.

William C. C. Hu was an educated individual with academic expertise in the area of traditional Chinese popular culture. He could have chosen any term that he wanted to describe the Chinese fighting systems. In the early 1960s he was approaching what was still a largely blank slate. Given the circulation and importance of *Black Belt* among North American martial artists, it might be more accurate to ascribe the subsequent popularity of this term in the west to Dr. Hu, rather than Bruce Lee or David Carradine. By the time they reached the peak of their cultural relevance in the 1970s they were simply employing a vocabulary that was already firmly established.

Still, if Dr. Hu introduced the term to a mass readership, it was Bruce Lee who immortalized it. A brash young actor and martial artist from Hong Kong (though an American citizen by birth), Lee sparked the 'kung fu craze' of the 1970s while demonstrating the increasingly globalized nature of the Asian martial arts. While both martial artists, Lee and Hu were very different individuals.

Lee was not highly educated when he first arrived in the US. What he knew about the Chinese martial arts he learned on the streets and in the Wing Chun schools of Kowloon. Given this difference in age, education and background it is interesting that Lee also preferred the term 'Gung fu' as a catch all description of traditional Chinese hand combat. He used the term in the title of his very first publication, *Chinese Gung-Fu: The Philosophical Art of Self Defense*. Later in 1963 Lee worked on the manuscript for a longer work (which was never published during his lifetime) called the *Tao of Gung fu*.

Both works refer to 'Gung-fu' numerous times, simply using the words as the

proper name of the Chinese martial arts. While Lee spends quite a bit of time describing his ideas about the proper execution of 'Gung-fu', he never stops to have an in-depth discussion of the term's etymology. The following is a typical example of his usage.

Gung fu, the ancestor of karate, judo, etc., is one of the oldest known forms of self-defense and can well be called the concentrated essence of wisdom and profound thought on the art of combat. [Lee 1997: 21]

Of course none of this had a great impact on western thinking in 1963. Lee would not achieve general recognition among North American martial artists until after his television role in the Green Hornet, and he would not become a household name until after his death. Still, Bruce Lee's use of the term kung fu early in his career is interesting precisely because it reflects a broader vernacular speech pattern in southern China.

Ed Parker is another key figure in the popularization of the martial arts in America during the post-WWII period. While his background in the Chinese fighting systems was not as extensive as the preceding authors, he was one of the early figures in the American martial arts community to recognize their value and to start to actively promote and market them. In fact, Ed Parker did much to help launch Bruce Lee's career.

In the early 1960s one of the few works on the Chinese martial arts available to American students was his volume *The Secrets of Chinese Karate*. Much of the text for this book was developed and written by James Lee (no relation to the other individuals of the same name), who later split with Parker. While this text uses a variety of names for the Chinese

martial arts, it is also aware of 'Kung-fu'. Though not the most commonly used term in the book, the author does stop to briefly discuss the origin and meaning of the name:

The word presently used for this term by Western Chinese is Kung-fu. This term is an adjective meaning skill, time, a period used by a person to do a specific type of work, ability, superbness, or a duty or job done. [Parker 1963: 20]

This is a very interesting description. The author acknowledges the term, while at the same time implying that it is increasingly popular among the sorts of Chinese individuals that one encounters in the west, and not in Mainland China. Of course by this point the Communist government had created their own plan for rectifying the martial arts and promoting them under the term 'wushu'.

In itself this is a perfectly good name. Yet as Adam D. Franks and Daniel Mroz have already reminded us, its implications became increasingly complicated for traditional practitioners outside of the People's Republic of China. As performance wushu evolved and diverged ever more noticeably from the folk arts being taught in the west, a number of traditional teachers continued to favor the term kung fu.

Multiple variables contributed to this linguistic divergence. We have reviewed a number of them in this article. Yet translation errors, misunderstanding and simple ignorance were not among them. There was much that the western martial artists of the 1960s did not understand about the traditional Chinese combat systems. Yet the literal translation of the term 'kung fu' seems to have been the one trivia point of which practically everyone was aware.

Does Kung Fu have a future in Chinese martial studies?

The Chinese martial arts are not, and have never been, a singular fixed object of study. Rather they are a continually evolving, socially mediated, cultural process. So is the vocabulary that we use to describe them.

In actual usage the term 'kung fu' does not denote a single practice or meaning with regards to Chinese martial culture. It has meant many things to many people. This article has demonstrated that its significance has varied both by geography, social setting and dialect. Its rich and varied connotations have also evolved over time.

Kung fu's use within the current global martial arts community shows a number of continuities with the past. Yet it also reveals major disjoints. This is what makes a detailed examination of the term so interesting. It illustrates and reminds us of the larger processes of rhizomic differentiation and change that are always at work within the hand combat community.

In their discussion of the emerging field of martial studies, Farrer and Whalen-Bridge warned readers against falling into the trap of 'essentialism' [Farrer and Whalen-Bridge 2011: 2-5]. Given the rich historical, social and political associations of the various martial arts, it is entirely too easy to assume that a given style always reduces down to a collection of scripted behaviors and 'national types'. In doing so we lose sight of the fact that all of these practices are living social processes. That in turn limits the number of methodologies that we can employ within the field of martial studies.

Obviously researchers need to be sensitive to the historical and theoretical implications of their terminology. Kung fu might not be an appropriate label in many circumstances. Yet when investigating the Southern Chinese martial arts and their many

manifestations within global markets, it may be the label of choice. Between its widespread historical use by actual practitioners, and the many social and cultural questions which it points to, kung fu is likely to remain central to our discussions for years to come.

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This article was first published in *JOMEK Journal*

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ISSN: ISSN 2049-2340

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