

Introduction

Chinese martial arts has a written history and is part of the society in which it developed. One of the greatest myths about Chinese martial arts as a whole is that it has no written record. Many people assume or assert that the only source of knowledge about its origins and development is the tradition orally transmitted from martial arts teachers. Adding to the misunderstanding of the past, this imagined oral tradition seldom places the martial arts in the broader context of Chinese history or, when it does, uses a simplistic, static, and inaccurate description of that past. In fact, the amount of available written material on martial arts in Chinese history is enormous. As a first step in confronting such a vast body of information, this book will describe the origins and development of the Chinese martial arts across Chinese history. I will argue that these arts are the developed physical practices of armed and unarmed combat, which must be understood primarily as military skills, not methods of self-cultivation or religious activity.

That said, although the martial arts stemmed from military requirements and related activities like hunting, these skills took on added meaning as markers of status and of certain mental or spiritual qualities. Warfare and hunting were important in the identity of early Chinese aristocrats, for example, and their class was closely associated with chariot-borne archery. Aristocrats not only fought with certain weapons but they also fought under specific rules of combat that reinforced their shared sense of class. As time went on, changes in society and technology undermined the military, economic, and political basis for these chariot-riding aristocrats. Armies grew in size and improved in armament, thus spreading the skills of warfare further out among the common people. Government officials were expected to lead in wartime, and farmers were

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expected to become soldiers when needed. In unstable and war-ridden times the martial arts were thus widely practiced throughout Chinese society.

As Chinese society grew in size and complexity, individuals developed greater and greater specialization. While most of society, of course, remained farmers, and the government continued to require them to perform military service, some men specialized in martial skills, from hand-to-hand combat to leading armies. With the decline of the aristocracy, the lower ranks of the elite, the *shi* 士, gentlemen or knights, were able to rise to the upper ranks of government through their skills and knowledge. Some of these gentlemen, like Confucius (551–479 BCE), sought to reform government and society through their ideas. Failing to find a sympathetic ruler, Confucius became a teacher, instructing men in the manners of gentlemen and inculcating them with his ideas of proper governing. Other men specialized in military skills, working as generals, officers, bodyguards, and duelists. There was still considerable crossover, as even Confucius had students with martial skills and was himself trained in the basic skills of a gentleman, such as archery.

While the *shi* of Confucius' time were certainly trained in the martial arts as part of their basic education, it was extraordinary for men who would call themselves *shi* fifteen hundred years later to be similarly trained. Chinese society and culture were not static, and as they changed, the practice of martial arts and the meaning of this practice also changed. Even within a given time period, the individuals who practiced martial arts, and their sex or ethnicity, could produce dramatically different meanings. Some women were practitioners, and certain martial arts were primarily, if not exclusively, associated with particular ethnic groups. The various steppe groups were generally superior horse-archers, even while many Chinese warriors also maintained these skills. Martial arts also played a role in gender construction, though the gender connotations of martial practice in China, among the Chinese and among other ethnic groups, differed significantly from Western traditions. War was a highly gendered activity, and therefore the majority of people practicing martial arts were men, but this was not exclusively so even among the Chinese.

As in Europe, some religious orders became closely associated with martial arts. Most of these associations in China were developed, or at least amplified, by fiction in the form of plays, literature, and eventually film. Fiction is a powerful force in assigning meaning within culture, and it has played an important role in defining martial arts in China, particularly from the second half of the imperial era until the present. At the same time,

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however, the represented world of fiction frequently deviates sharply from the real practice. While this book makes some use of fiction in the discussion of the martial arts, it focuses primarily on the reality of its practice.

The modern understanding of martial arts as only unarmed fighting skills for self-defense, abstracted movements for self-cultivation, or the wielding of archaic weapons for aesthetics or improved health is a modern perspective inconsistent with most earlier practice. By contrast, the performance of martial arts for entertainment and even ritual is fundamental and original to their practice. Nevertheless, the modern understanding of Chinese martial arts is not wrong because it differs from its earlier place in Chinese society; it is simply an example of how things change. And indeed it is hard to fix martial arts into a single meaning in the modern era since Chinese society is itself currently in flux.

The reader should therefore be clear that Chinese martial arts is a vast and complex subject with not only continuous change over time but also dramatic regional, ethnic, gender, and functional differences. This book is an attempt to provide a survey of martial arts in Chinese history without any pretension of comprehensiveness. Before beginning the chronological history in Chapter 1, I will therefore deal with a few general issues in the remainder of the introduction. First, I will define what I mean by “martial arts,” presenting a broader explanation of this term than is commonly used, justifying this for the reader. Second, I will discuss the problem of authenticity, including some of the modern issues of styles and values. Finally, I will present a technical philological explanation of the terms used in Chinese and English to refer to martial arts. I will leave for the conclusion a more general discussion of some of the issues that the study of martial arts raises.

DEFINING MARTIAL ARTS

In this book, I define “martial arts” as the various skills or practices that originated as methods of combat. This definition therefore includes many performance, religious, or health-promoting activities that no longer have any direct combat applications but clearly originated in combat, while possibly excluding references to these techniques in dance, for example. Admittedly, the distinctions can be muddled as one activity shades into another. In addition, what makes something a martial art rather than an action done by someone who is naturally good at fighting is that the techniques are taught. Without the transmission of these skills through

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teaching, they do not constitute an “art” in the sense of being a body of information or techniques that aim to reproduce certain knowledge or effects.

Stanley Henning pointed out to me on several occasions that the practice of martial arts is extremely individual. Every practicing martial artist is aware that a person’s own performance of the skills that a teacher is imparting is biased by both the teacher’s and the student’s natural inclinations. These biases come in addition to the particular art’s own body of skills, which are necessarily selective rather than comprehensive. There is no such thing as a single art or “style” that contains every possible martial skill. Many martial artists therefore study under multiple teachers to both broaden their skill base and mitigate the biases of a given teacher. As a consequence, there is an inherent tension between what an individual does and what an individual teaches, or has been taught. Martial arts as a living tradition is like any craft tradition in that skills must be taught, learned, and performed by individuals who innovate even while reproducing the tradition. I will return to this issue later.

There are many skills, techniques, practices, and traditions that would fall under my definition of martial arts. Consequently, throughout this book I use the term in two ways. It is used first in the singular, referring to the complete group of skills covered by my definition. The second sense of the term, which I use much less frequently, is as a plural term for the disparate arts, styles, and practices at a given time or place. Martial arts styles appear quite late in Chinese history, by the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) or possibly slightly earlier; before that, martial skills were not grouped together into distinct named sets. At most, a student learned the martial art of a particular teacher. Those arts descended from a teacher, or sometimes associated with a location, defined themselves in lineage terms traced back to a founder. Founding teachers were often mythical or were provided with legends that made them the unique source of skills (which actually stemmed from the ongoing martial practices of the founder’s time).

This definition of martial arts has several advantages: first, it is not specific to any culture and therefore emphasizes the universality of trained forms of combat in different places and times. Second, it ties practices back to their original intent, that is, to improve the performance of violence. Third, it includes all combat techniques, not just Asian empty-handed fighting. Fourth, it eliminates our contemporary and entirely erroneous perspective on these practices in China that defines them in terms of peace, self-defense, and religion.

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All cultures have martial arts; highly developed fighting techniques are not unique to East Asia. It is merely a modern construction that consigns boxing and wrestling, for example, to the realm of sports (and Olympic competition) and extremely similar East Asian fighting techniques to acceptable activities for middle-class Westerners. Even fencing, shooting, and archery qualify as sports, albeit not very popular ones, while East Asian forms of fencing, archery, or other weapon use are martial arts. There are historical reasons for these constructions of the meaning of martial arts in contemporary English, but they create an artificial and distracting barrier to understanding Chinese martial arts in its real social historical meaning. What makes Chinese martial arts distinct is not that China has them and other cultures did not and do not, but the particular forms and meanings of the practice.

At root, martial arts is about skill with violence. Even in its purely performative manifestation, the movements of martial arts are about effective violence. It is because effective violence can be physically elegant and aesthetically pleasing that it has taken on such a broad and long-standing place in theater and film. Martial arts is visually compelling to many people, and watching it became a form of entertainment. Its connection to the power of violence is what makes it different from a dance constructed on purely aesthetic grounds.

Martial arts performance and the critical military core of martial arts practice emphasize the use of weapons. It is better to be armed in a fight, and learning to use weapons is and has been basic to martial arts training for most people in history around the world. We must include learning to use firearms in this category as well. There is no heuristic reason for excluding weapons (including firearms) from the consideration of martial arts, except to effect an artificial and misleading demilitarization of East Asian martial arts. It is logically challenging, though obviously not impossible, to construct Chinese martial arts practice with swords and other weapons into a nonviolent practice. But for most of Chinese history, archery, with a bow or crossbow, was the primary martial art; firearms were added to the list of martial skills as they became available. The current emphasis in the West on empty-handed martial arts speaks to the Western ideas of China (which have seeped back into China) and to the nature of Western society.

It is a modern perspective, both inside China and abroad, that Chinese martial arts is only about self-defense and self-cultivation. This connection to nonviolence is further enhanced by a vastly distorted connection between religion and the martial arts. Martial arts preexisted both

religious Daoism and Buddhism and was mostly practiced outside the religious context. Only by excluding soldiers and militiamen, who constitute the vast majority of martial artists in all time periods including the present, and focusing on the relatively tiny number of civilian martial artists can we make self-defense the main goal of martial arts training. An even smaller group of martial artists practiced martial arts, mostly archery in the Confucian tradition, primarily for self-cultivation. The use of martial arts to promote health alone is likely no older than the nineteenth and possibly even the twentieth century.

AUTHENTICITY AND REAL KUNGFU

A history of Chinese martial arts has to confront the issue of authenticity because history is frequently used to authenticate these skills. A related question concerns “secret” teachings and “real” martial arts transmitted through “true” masters. While these questions do not naturally arise from the historical sources prior to the sixteenth century, they do emerge as issues in the sixteenth century and continue to the present day. The twenty-first-century martial artist and the historian of martial arts often seem to be in a perpetual search for a true or authentic martial art that is in some way “real” and effective in ways that inauthentic martial arts are not. Somehow the acquisition of this true martial art would confer invincibility and enlightenment on its practitioner. Since by this definition the art so acquired would make its practitioner superhuman, no ordinary teaching could achieve this. Thus, the teaching must be a secret passed from master to select disciples by direct transmission and seldom written down.

The standard for what would constitute an authentic martial art is therefore both impossibly high and extremely compelling. There are few, if any, reliable objective markers of someone attaining such perfect skill in a perfect art. Some martial artists argue that their success in dueling or tournament performance clearly demonstrates their attainment of great skill and the superiority of their style of the arts. Others counter that the parameters of these contests are so artificial and the scope of the skills required for success in them so narrow that they are meaningless as a marker of true martial arts skill. Worse still, the artificial confines of the event and the competitive attitude of the participants are directly contrary to any true martial art. A further problem is that tournament fighting is almost exclusively a forum for the young – in itself a guarantee of shallow understanding of profound arts.

Authenticity is an argument for the value of a particular practice or way of practicing rather than a historical artifact. There is no established authority that determines what is or is not authentic, even though particular organizations may set their own standards and declare any deviation from those standards to be wrong. A good comparison would be Chinese food. Who determines what is authentic Chinese food? If a Chinese person in China adds a new ingredient to her cooking, does that make it inauthentic? Europeans introduced chili peppers into China from South America, and they are now a standard and accepted part of many regional Chinese cuisines. Therefore any food using chili peppers is not authentic by pre-Ming Dynasty standards. And what of the individual? If a Chinese person (however understood) cooks a Chinese recipe poorly, is the resulting dish more authentic than the same recipe cooked well by a non-Chinese? There is no clear answer to these questions in either cooking or martial arts.

Both contemporary and premodern practitioners of the martial arts often lay claim to ancient origins for their techniques. As with the histories of many physical practices before the age of video recording, it is functionally impossible to compare an earlier with a contemporary practice. We are forced to compare descriptions and static drawings with current practice, leading to ambiguous results. Douglas Wile has attempted to find broad connections between Ming Dynasty martial arts and more recent Taiji forms as a way to lengthen Taiji's history.¹ Wile wisely treads carefully around the defining legends of Taiji, choosing to downplay their tendentious and entirely fictional construction. For many practitioners, the legends, though they see them as truth and not fiction, validate their martial art, giving it a greater value than its purely physical and mental benefits alone.

The Shaolin Buddhist Temple serves a similar function, authenticating martial arts by direct or indirect association. Meir Shahar's book, *The Shaolin Monastery*, provides a great deal of scholarly information about a key facet of the modern understanding of Chinese martial arts; it does so, however, without directly stating that the evidence the author presents does not support the idea that Shaolin was important for martial arts before or after the Ming Dynasty.² Even during the Ming Dynasty, Shaolin was only one part of a vast landscape of martial arts practice. And of course martial arts was practiced in China for thousands of years before Shaolin was founded. Buddhism did not bring martial arts to China, though large Buddhist institutions, like other large landowners, employed armed, trained security forces.

Common to all of the arguments about authenticity is competition in the marketplace for martial arts students and legitimacy. Someone interested in learning martial arts must not only choose a teacher or style but must also justify that choice. This was true in the Ming Dynasty when Qi Jiguang (1528–88) surveyed a number of martial arts styles to determine the most effective techniques to teach his soldiers, and it is true for martial arts teachers today. Some schools stress their pragmatic value in self-defense, disparaging other schools for flowery and impractical techniques. Other schools argue that their martial art is deeper than just self-defense and will yield greater personal benefits than merely combat effectiveness. Every school tries to prove its case with a very limited set of arguments: practicality, pedigree, a teacher's accomplishments, and disparagement of the competition. All of it distills down to "they are bad, we are good."

A claim to ancient pedigree can in a positive way be seen as an attempt to substantiate the effectiveness of a technique through its continued practice. Thus, for something to have been used and maintained by generations of practitioners is proof that they found it useful. Unfortunately, no currently practiced style of Chinese martial arts can reliably trace itself back more than a few centuries, and most much less than that. This is not to say that the individual techniques making up any current style are inauthentic or in some way false, but that the particular organization and theory of a designated style cannot be legitimated by an ancient pedigree. Most of the techniques used in current martial arts are much older than any style, and many may well be ancient.

It is the techniques and skills that are "authentic" in Chinese martial arts, not particular schools or styles. This authenticity, if we even allow such a fraught concept, comes from these techniques being practiced as martial arts for combat or performances over centuries and even millennia in China. To say, as some martial arts teachers currently do, that modern Wushu is not the real Kungfu has no historical or truth value; it is merely marketing. Just as the meaning of practicing martial arts in Chinese society has changed as Chinese society has changed, so too does the meaning or value of martial arts vary widely with each individual practitioner.

The site of martial arts practice is the individual, and the value of this practice can be judged only in relation to that person. A soldier may learn techniques that worked for others in combat, yet fail in battle himself, without invalidating the use of those techniques. Most people who learn martial arts for self-defense will never actually use it. Those who practice a martial art to improve their well-being succeed only if they actually feel

better for doing it, regardless of the pedigree of the style. At some point a practice may stray so far from earlier techniques as to no longer qualify as martial arts, or be so badly taught or performed that it fails in its intended effect. Authenticity is in the eye of the beholder, but also in the marketing campaigns of many schools.

KUNG FU, GONGFU, QIGONG, AND CHINESE TERMINOLOGY IN ENGLISH

Like the Chinese martial arts themselves, the terminology used in Chinese to discuss the martial arts has changed over time. To add to the confusion, many Romanization systems – and sometimes no discernible system at all – are used to render Chinese pronunciation into Western alphabets, making very unclear just what is being discussed. This is particularly true when different dialects are involved. Movies and twentieth-century popular culture have further garbled transmission. Yet there is more at stake in questions of terminology than simple clarity. When a new term is introduced in Chinese, it is important to know whether it denotes a new practice or style, or if it is a new name for something older. Since newness is not usually prized in the martial arts, new practices often claim old pedigrees, whether specious or not.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* incorrectly defines “Kung-fu” or “kung-fu” as the 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.³ (This might have to be modified, however, as Bruce Lee used the term “gong fu” in an unpublished essay in 1962.) Nevertheless, clearly its use in English began in the twentieth century. “Kung-fu” is the Romanization for the Chinese characters 功夫 in the Wade-Giles system, and “gongfu” in the Pinyin system that is currently the most widely used, though “gongfu” has thus far not entered English dictionaries. 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.⁴ But by 1984, “gongfu” was indeed used in the particular sense of martial arts in a Mainland Chinese newspaper.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

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Modern Chinese speakers usually refer to “wushu” 武術, literally “martial arts” or “martial techniques” when discussing the martial arts as a whole. The term first appeared in the early sixth century in the *Wen Xuan* 文選. (The *Wen Xuan*, or *Anthology of Literature*, was compiled by Xiao Tong (501–31), the Crown Prince of the Liang dynasty, and became a basic reader for Chinese literature from the Sui dynasty until the end of the Qing dynasty.) A slightly earlier term “wuyi” 武藝, also literally “martial arts,” was also generally used from the early third century, though it has not continued into Modern Chinese (the “yi” of “wuyi” is the same “art” used in the Confucian “Six Arts”). The emergence of these two terms, wuyi and wushu, may indicate the development of a new mental category of activities that had not been separated out before. The Confucian Six Arts encompassed the set of skills necessary for a gentleman, most of which had martial applications – indicating that a gentleman was supposed to be able to lead in peace and war. Most recently, the Chinese government has established wushu as the international term for its competitive sports version of Chinese martial arts.

The earliest term, however, was “Jiji” 技擊, “boxing,” which is attested in the works of the philosopher Xunzi (313–238 BCE).⁷ Many different words were used to refer to Chinese martial arts and the individual skills that comprise it over China’s long history. We cannot, therefore, insist upon a single term for martial arts during all of Chinese history, though wushu comes quite close; this is even more true when we move into the realm of English, or other foreign languages. “Kungfu” in all its spellings now seems to be the English term for Chinese martial arts, however constituted. I have chosen not to use kungfu in that way in this book, however, because its use in English is so recent.

Chinese usage has clearly changed in the last decades of the twentieth century, if not somewhat earlier. In *American Shaolin*, Matthew Polly tells of a Shaolin martial artist who states: “Everyone knows that *laowai* are no good at kungfu.”⁸ Polly clarified this for me: “So when Coach Yan said to me, ‘The Laowai are no good at kungfu,’ [h]e meant ‘gong fu.’ White boys weren’t good at the deeper aspects, the Ch’an of it. Or the fighting of it. And I remember this distinctly because there was a challenge match on the line. And in such a context, the term ‘gong fu’ would always be used instead of ‘wushu.’ So while wushu may be the category, ‘gong fu’ is something special.”⁹

Another term that has become prominent recently, and is subject to considerable confusion, is “qigong” 氣功. Although a recent study found the earliest use of this term in 1934, current practitioners usually described