Chinese Martial Arts

From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century

In the global world of the twenty-first century, martial arts are practiced for self-defense and sporting purposes only. However, for thousands of years, they were a central feature of military practice in China and essential for the smooth functioning of society. Individuals who were adept in using weapons were highly regarded, not simply as warriors but also as tacticians and performers. This book, which opens with an intriguing account of the very first female martial artist, charts the history of combat and fighting techniques in China from the Bronze Age to the present. This broad panorama affords fascinating glimpses into the transformation of martial skills, techniques, and weaponry against the background of Chinese history, and the rise and fall of empires and their governments and armies. Quotations from literature and poetry, and the stories of individual warriors, infuse the narrative, offering personal reflections on prowess in the battlefield and techniques of engagement. This is an engaging and readable introduction to the authentic history of Chinese martial arts.

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I was not born a warrior. I am not tough, strong, fast, agile, or brave, so I have none of the natural gifts necessary to be good at martial arts. Despite these limitations, I have loved martial arts for as long as I can remember, and I have actively practiced various arts since the age of fifteen. This book therefore has more personal significance for me than other academic work I have done. It also means that I have more than just an intellectual debt to acknowledge in the writing of this book; I have a debt to all of my martial arts teachers as well. Though I cannot claim intellectual or scholarly gifts any greater than my physical or spiritual ones, I do offer this study as some measure of recompense for the many teachers who did their best for me over the years.

In the intellectual realm I owe a vast debt to Stanley Henning. His article, “The Martial Arts Encounters Academia,” is a model of clarity and rigor and should be the starting point for anyone beginning to write on Chinese martial arts. Beyond his many valuable articles, Stan has been a real mentor to me in this field, through e-mail and phone calls, supplying me with critical insights and citations. One day I hope to meet him in person.

Matthew Polly, whose excellent book on the modern Shaolin monastery has received so much well-deserved praise, kindly answered several technical linguistic questions of mine and supplied me with a few choice anecdotes. Unlike him, however, I have no intention of getting into a ring for a real fight. Ralph Thaxton made his research on post-1978 China available to me, vastly improving my coverage of the late twentieth century. Brian Kennedy kindly helped me find materials during a visit to Taiwan. My colleague Ruth Rogoski supplied me with several critical
citations. Yuh-fen Benda greatly facilitated my research, on one occasion
turning what would have been a week and a half of work into little more
than an hour.

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gave me was all to my benefit, even if it probably hurt more than the lessons
of my martial arts teachers.

I have been very fortunate in martial arts teachers over the years. All of
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Finally, and most important, I must thank my family, from my parents
who supported me in studying martial arts as a teenager and studying
Chinese and Chinese history in school, to my wife and children, who have
accepted my physical and mental absence as I researched and practiced
martial arts. All of them (particularly my mother) resolutely accepted the
odd dings and dents incurred when an incompetent clod tries to learn how
to perform complex and elegant maneuvers.

Just as this volume was completed my Classical Chinese teacher, Yang
Youwei, passed away in Taiwan. I have therefore dedicated it to his
memory.