



Where Martiality and Religion Meet: Health, Sport, War. Editorial

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EDITORIAL

WHERE MARTIALITY AND RELIGION MEET: HEALTH, SPORT, WAR

GABRIEL FACAL AND LAURENT CHIRCOP-REYES

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ABSTRACT

This editorial presents the main questions that drive this themed issue on the links that exist between martial arts practices and religion. How can terminological, categorical and definitional boundaries be delineated to frame the two notions? What are the contemporary dynamics that redefine their relationships, from the processes of formalisation and specialisation, to the phenomena of patrimonialization, crossbreeding, hybridisation and (re)invention? How might martial arts become a practice of peace? The various contributions in this collection provide several elements of an answer to this question, by offering insights into the violent and conflictual propensities of martial practices but also into their ethical, ritual, performative, therapeutic and regulatory dimensions.

This themed issue of *Martial Arts Studies* has its origins in a research group initiated and co-organised by Paul Bowman (Cardiff University), Laurent Chircop-Reyes, Jean-Marc de Grave, Gabriel Facal (Aix-Marseille University) and DS Farrer (Palau University). The group aimed to research the links between martial arts and religion. A first workshop was held in 2019 in Aix-Marseille Université,¹ entitled 'Terminologies and categories of martiality: Etymologies, religious and secular dimensions, and related practices'. The workshop sought to frame the ways that categories and terms are constructed in different socio-cultural contexts, both academic and cultural. Case studies included India, Indonesia, Brazil, France, mainland China, Taiwan, and Japan.

Inevitably, questions of an encompassing denominative category also arose. An idea was formulated to use a conceptual category that could incorporate different degrees and contexts of what the term 'martial' expresses. The term 'martiality' was proposed.

This workshop prefigured the 6th annual Martial Arts Studies International Conference, scheduled for 2020, and entitled 'Martial Arts, Religion and Spirituality'.² The conference ultimately took place online, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was co-organised online by Laurent Chircop-Reyes and Gabriel Facal, under the guidance of Paul Bowman, Jean-Marc de Grave and DS Farrer.³

Martial Arts Studies is an emerging field of research at the crossroads of several salient research areas of the humanities and social sciences. This research nexus includes studying questions of the transmission of knowledge and skills, embodied knowledge, physical culture and sports, relationships to authority, security, commercial exchange, ritual and initiatory activities, mystical and spiritual practices, existential philosophies, and more.

1 10–11 July 2019 at Campus Schuman, Aix-Marseille Université (AMU), Aix-en-Provence. The event was made possible thanks to generous financial and scientific supports of the Aix-Marseille University (AMU), the French Asian research unit (IrAsia/CNRS – Institut de recherches Asiatiques, UMR 7306), and the French Academic Network for Asian Studies (GIS Asie).

2 6th conference of the Martial Arts Studies Research Network, 15–16 July 2020, IrAsia, Marseille.

3 The project was funded by IrAsia, AMU, and the GIS ASIE. We are thankful to all the partner institutions, to the scientific committee as well as to the chairpersons. Around 50 participants, including presenters and discussants, were able to discuss in nine panels focused on 1) Performing arts 2) Cosmologies 3) Classical and popular representations 4) Ethics and moral values 5) Popular religions, health, globalisation 6) Asceticism 7) Channelling violence in collective rituals and sport 8) Ethno-religious identities, nationalism and politics 9) Methodological issues. For more details about this series of prefigurative events see Jean-Marc de Grave [2020].

Regarding the last themes in this list: martial arts are sometimes interpreted as paradoxical 'paths to peace' [Ueshiba 2002], following the example of religious ideologies that convey messages of peace but serve as a support for political and warlike conflicts [Judkins and Molle *forthcoming*]. This apparent dissonance may be observable in the great diversity of traditions and forms of combat. This tension between martial/peace, and violence, reveals to some extent that the martial efficiency generally invoked cannot be completely separated from social, moral, ethical and practical values. Learning is part of a process – initiatory and ritual to different degrees – aiming as much at the incorporation of techniques as at the integration of ideas and values [Svitych 2021].

It is in this general perspective of linking the apprehension of warfare and peaceful pathways that this special themed issue section seeks to question the relationship between martial arts and religion. By approaching martial practices through the notion of 'martiality', we consider a wide scope of dimensions, including codified agonistic practices, self-defence and combat sports competitions. This range and scope allows us to better reflect on the heuristic implications of the links of martial practices to religion.

To approach this second term, we chose to use the notion of 'religion' in the singular, the intention being to provide it the capacity to relate to *le fait religieux* (lit. 'the religious fact'). In *An Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, Claude Lévi-Strauss described what he had understood of the 'religious fact', through Mauss's perspective, as follows: we are dealing with an order of facts, he writes, 'which should be studied without delay: those facts in which social nature is very directly linked to man's biological nature' [Lévi-Strauss 2013: 10].

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) defined this sociological object through a concept that 'seemed to allow him to bypass the obstacle of ethnocentrism: the sacred' [Husser 2020: 8–11]. The author of *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* defined religion as 'a system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred, i.e., separate, forbidden things, beliefs and practices which unite those who adhere to them in a single moral community called the Church' [Durkheim 1960: 65, quoted in Husser 2020: 8–11]. Prior to any mythical or doctrinal discourse, therefore, religious beliefs, practices and institutions find their foundation in a collective emotion, the experience of an impersonal force that is projected into 'sacred things' that each culture names and organises in its own way [Husser 2020: 8–11].

Accordingly, in this themed issue, we conceptually understand religion as the essence of what is religious in different cultural contexts, beyond possible formalisation and institutionalisation. As a result, religion

can be grasped in its multiple aspects, including through secularity and secularism [Cibotaru 2021].

These broad understandings of martiality and religion are considered through the variety of methodological and analytical approaches, both disciplinary and interdisciplinary, that the authors develop in the following articles. These approaches concern ethnology, social anthropology, psychology, history, philology, sociology of sport and historical archaeology. They translate in methods of participation-observation, the study of ancient texts, the analysis of cosmological patterns and the sociological analysis of body techniques.

The issue falls into two sections. The first covers different geographical and temporal contexts. The second applies its insights to a specific case, focusing on Chinese martial arts.

Historical archaeologist Maciej Talaga's article opens the first section. It is titled, "Have the highest righteous fencer in your mind's eye": medieval martial ethic as a conceptual repository for the just war theory'. This article aims to question the role of violence experienced on the personal level in shaping conceptualisations of waging war, from the perspective of discursive memory, in the 14th/15th century Late Middle Ages Germany. Based on the qualitative study of the so-called Nuremberg Codex, Talaga explores the ethical and moral conditions of a just war, underlining the modalities of this ideology. He finds that the axiological dimensions were embedded in wider social considerations, such as how a particular understanding of war enabled one to gain honour, a core value at the centre of upward social mobility. Talaga also stresses that restraint in combat was not only linked to manhood and proper conduct, but also to martial strategy and efficiency. Self-control and measure ensured fencers' strength, speed, precision and rapid footwork. Overall, what emerges through the study of ethics in combat at this period is that 'martial prowess alone did not guarantee success in combat': the fighter also required God's favour. For example, in duels, both parties took oaths of innocence, sanctioned by God through the final fate of the duellist. Talaga concludes that research on martial arts ethics may adopt a counter-intuitive stance by taking into account how bottom-up flows of ideas, rooted in first-hand experience of combat, inflect ethical conceptualisations.

The second contribution is 'Framing Spirituality in Martial Arts: an Embodied Comprehension Through Phenomenology' by psychologist Thabata Castelo Branco Telles. This work mobilises Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to highlight both the pre-reflexive dimensions of fighting techniques in motion (that she refers as 'awareness') and reflexive relation with the object (what she terms 'consciousness'). Through philosophical and methodological perspectives,

phenomenology enables one to describe how spirituality in martial arts entails a tension between the embodied experience and the reflective-introspective philosophical life discipline (an existential philosophy).

There are at least two implications for martial arts practice. First, many martial arts encompass the practice of trance, possession, or mystical states (which she describes as 'pre-reflexive') and either the acquisition of invulnerability or extraordinary destructive power. Through the martial practice, there is the construction of bodily intelligence, and the synchronisation between body and mind/spirit; their boundaries are blurred; their unification is looked after, particularly in the mystical practice – what is called the 'state of flow' in modern sports.

A second category of martial practices attempts to reconcile the practitioner with the inevitability of their own death and to cultivate peace and socio-cosmic harmony. Employed as a spiritual pathway, daily discipline, body-mind control and social relational harmony entail a phenomenological consequence: the practitioner is shaped through the practice, their body and state of mind being progressively transformed. Martial practices often encompass both ritual and religious dimensions, complementary to each other.

In 'The Kalaripayat Salutation: Movement Makes Meaning', Gitanjali Kolanad asks us to consider how a kick might come to transcend its ordinary signification and take on ritual meaning, and how this meaning may be influenced by Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. Through in-depth ethnography, the author describes several variations of the *Kalaripayattu* ritual salutation, called *vanakkam*. The devotional character of the salutation is expressed in both representational movements (the offering of flowers, bowing) and in the combat movements, practised under the auspices of tutelary deities.

The movements mobilise both individual and interpersonal codes of behaviour, which unite particular sets of gestures, footwork and choreographies with external attitudes and internal states of mind. Thus, movements intended for combat are not dissociated from an internal struggle for self-control and discipline. At the highest levels, this embodied mastery enables the practitioners to overcome their limitations and progress along their devotional path. These internal features are reflected in symbols and aesthetic signs whose interpretation varies according to the religious tendencies (whether Hindu, Muslim, or Christian) of the practice centres, the *kalaris*. The polysemy of the movements is complicated by the continuities existing between kalaripayat, theatrical performances and dance forms, showing the holistic background of these martial-devotional practices.

In the second part of the issue, two authors offer contrasting perspectives on Chinese martial practices. Chinese non-military practices, designated by the generic terms of 'martial arts' (*wushu* 武术), 'art of fist'/boxing (*quanshu* 拳術) or by the more popularised term *gongfu* or *kung fu* (功夫: lit. skills, time, work or effort), can be observed in many forms. These terms refer to a large variety of heterogeneous practices and meanings. In China, martial arts are practised by a vast part of the population, who lack any direct links with the security professions (such as police, military or security, etc.).

Access to martial knowledge was in the past partly organised by state or private military structures [Lorge 2006], such as armed escort companies [Chircop-Reyes 2018, 2021a], secret societies and sectarian organisations [Esherik 1988], or rural people concerned with the protection of villages [Kennedy and Guo 2005], and partly in the domain of 'popular' forms of martial practices performed in the street [Graff and Higham 2021: 110]. Today, Chinese martial arts are practised and transmitted by diverse parts of the population. They have been reimagined as combat sports in both amateur and professional contexts, gymnastic demonstrations (such as *taolu* 套路) or curative practices (*yangsheng* 養生) [Despeux 1981].

It is also important to note that the expression of martiality is observable in different religious contexts such as those reported by Fiorella Allio [2000] and David A. Palmer and Martin Tse [2021]. Traditional martial arts practices are often transmitted through local networks consecrating the relationship between master and disciples (*shitu guanxi* 師徒關係). Through an initiation ritual, the initiate enters the fictive lineage of the master and is therefore bound to the community by symbolic family ties. Individuals identify themselves with regard to their position in the lineage but also by their belonging to this community in contrast to other lineages.

Following this is Pierrick Porchet's 'Re-Appropriating Traditional Chinese Culture within the Wushu Elite Sport Context: Continuity and Rupture'. This study develops the idea that the creation of a competitive sport framework for Chinese martial arts has introduced a paradigm shift concerning the traditional transmission framework.

The final article focuses on the art of *taijiquan*. In 'Tai Chi Forms Designed to Treat Depression' Joan Listernick investigates whether specifically tailored forms that fit better into Western perspectives on treating illness could be more readily assimilated into Western healthcare systems, and whether they provide improved outcomes for the conditions targeted. She raises the question of the usefulness of such forms for patients with comorbidities, and whether tailored forms 'treat' one illness, but have less effectiveness in preventing the onset of other

illnesses. In addition, she also asks what may be lost in the process of simplification or targeting. Ultimately, argues Listernick, the analysis of the creation and dissemination of tailored forms is significant for understanding the history and development of *taijiquan*.

Collectively these articles provide insights on different levels in which martial arts and religion connect, disconnect and intermesh. While martial arts have emerged across vast areas of geography and time, their relationship with religion and spirituality remains a *longue durée* social phenomenon. Indeed, ritual and initiatory, alchemical, shamanic, hygienic and ascetic endeavours combined with martial arts practice are born and structured around conceptions of the human body and spirit based on contextual cosmological and ideological principles which vary between cultures. In our conference, a panel titled 'Ethnoreligious identities, nationalism and political uses' focused on the construction of social groups through martial arts practices and their religious references. The topics of those papers ranged widely from local groups seeking cohesion to defend minority rights and marginalised communities, to nationalist militias and vigilantes defending exclusionary ideologies within advanced developed countries. We find these trends in numerous national contexts across the world: in Indonesia, with Islamist-nationalist militias linked to ruling oligarchies [Facal 2020], or in Japan, where in the 1920s and 1930s martial art names became standardised in public discourse by adding the suffix '-do', in order to disguise a coercive agenda by presenting *budo* primarily as a spiritual endeavour [Bodiford 2010: 361].

Seized in their diachronic dimension, these practices show that they are accompanied, to different degrees, by religious sentiment as soon as the practitioners are concerned with establishing, maintaining or reconstructing an ideological and social coherence. *Le geste martial* (lit. 'the martial gesture') [Jaquet and Kiss 2015] becomes ritualised, while martial thought is structured around rules, codes as well as ethical and moral values developed by the social groups concerned. Through mystical experience and related ascetic practices, existential philosophies are put to the test [Farrer 2009]. In parallel, war and combat are trials to the apprenticeship of daily discipline and training. The different temporalities and intensities of both religion and martial arts can contribute to their intermeshment, as found through the identity between the religious centres and the martial initiation ones. Apart from the well-known monasteries in China (Shaolin and Wudang, for example), the Malay world hosts Islamic boarding schools that are also martial initiation centres and that can serve as training places for religious and anticolonial rebellion [Facal 2017].

This intermeshment opens the question of the original conditions of the intersection between religion and martiality. J.-M. de Grave offers

propositions to help envisage this historical encounter. In his closing remarks to the 6th Martial Arts Studies conference, he cited the work of the anthropologist Robert Creswell about the importance of the storage of grain in the development of human civilisation during the Neolithic era. For him, this technological advance is at the centre of the social specialisation of the religious. From the moment a religious clergy asserted itself as a particular social category, to establish links with the entities protecting the products of the harvest, something fundamentally new existed. This clergy had to resort to other social categories, like the police, as guarantor of the grain protection, and later, to the State, to advance itself. Through this historical development, we see how the division of labour was progressively imposed on a large scale and, with it, technical specialisation.

This social and technical fragmentation can be put in perspective with the specialisation found today within martial arts: health, gymnastics, self-defence methods, sports combat, and so on, develop in parallel with processes of classification – including the process of making them classical – and of patrimonialization. The practices are then absolved of some of their constitutive dimensions, of ritual, political, martial order, as well as of their social ‘relevance’, i.e., the values conveyed that are or were important for people. In the end, it may be this that determines the continuation or disappearance of the activities.

The following contributions to this discussion also illustrate the processes of innovation and hybridisation, as well as fragmentation or patrimonialization, and individual incorporation, interpretation, dynamic creation of meaning and initiatives for sharing and transmission. Through this diversity of processes, the reader is invited to reflect on the ongoing shifts of both martial arts’ and religion’s social relevance. These sometimes result in increasing fragmentation, technical specialisation, loss of global coherence and, finally, the disappearance of the practices. Certainly, these are all fears that have been referenced in regard to the current state of the traditional Chinese martial arts. On the opposite end of the spectrum, some articles show how martial arts can become resources to build community cohesion, to fix collective points of reference, and to shape common directions by blurring between social categories (e.g., priest and warrior). This special issue thus leads us to ask: Where is the religious in the coherence of martial arts social groups? And how can we observe and think about these things?

When we consider the diachronic transformation of the relationship between religion and martiality, another interrogation arises. What were the conditions for the emergence of war as a specialised field of activity? In this regard, De Grave mentions the Amerindian Achuar for whom there is no word designating peace, because vendetta is

central and war permanent [see Descola 1993]. In modern ideology, the notion of peace is, on the contrary, central, but one never acquires it completely. A final question then arises: how might martial arts become a practice of peace?

The various contributions in this collection provide several elements of an answer to this question, by showing how ethical codes are formalised and give rise to a warrior ethos that guarantees certain forms of social stability [see Talaga, this issue]. In connection with this historical heritage, we observe, today, new ways of transmitting, living and applying martial techniques, particularly in the course of the ‘invention of martial arts’ through popular media [Bowman 2021]. The traditional ritualised, lineage-based and confidential art of combat is now an integral part of an inclusive popular culture and can now be practised as a support for personal development concerns that are less warlike than spiritual. The idea of ‘mindfulness’, for example, is being applied in a variety of contexts from the commercial to the medical and therapeutic.

On the other hand, we can see that the alliance between religion and warfare do not always convey ethics of harmony and peace and spirituality. On the contrary, they can also express intolerance and violence [French 2017]. This lethal alliance is manifested in contemporary times, with the persecution of the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar by the military, with the help of extremist Buddhist monks [Arnold and Turner 2018]. The relationship between religion and conflict, in the broad sense of the term – including war, brigandage, looting, etc. – can sometimes manifest in unexpected inversions of status, when, for example, the priests become war makers and martial arts practitioners guarantee forms of social stability and cohabitation [Chircop-Reyes 2021b]. The literature has already produced fine-grained studies on the role of combat sports institutions to regulate urban violence [Wacquant 2000] and, suggested poor supervision of these structures can provide springboards for violent extremist cells [Chapitiaux 2016].

From the perspective of the applied social sciences, the articles in this special issue may be useful to practitioners themselves. Yet they could also give policymakers better tools to understand martial arts phenomena as they emerge in different parts of society. Finally, this issue prefigures particular questions that will be raised during the 2022 Martial Arts Studies Conference (Lausanne, Switzerland, 29th June – 2nd July 2022) on the tensions and creations that emerge at the crossroads between tradition and globalisation.

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