MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

DANIEL MROZ

REVIEW: *MARTIAL ARTS ECOLOGY: AESTHETICS, PHILOSOPHY AND CINEMATIC MEDIATION* (EDINBURGH UP 2026) BY WAYNE WONG

CONTRIBUTOR

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> Wong, W. (2026). *Martial arts ecology: Aesthetics, philosophy and cinematic mediation.* Edinburgh University Press. (304 pages; Hardback; £90.00)

Wayne Wong plumbs the depths of Hong Kong action cinema in a book that overflows with new and useful ideas. Writing of *gōngfū* 功夫 films in their own right, he also uses them as a lens to look back at Chinese theatre and literature, and forward to animation and video games. Readers – be they scholars, artists or enthusiasts across a wide range of genres – have much to be grateful for here.

Previous critics have examined the authenticity and the expressiveness of Chinese martial arts cinema, combing fight choreographies to find real world martial techniques and traces of Chinese theatre or *xìqǔ* 戲曲.[1] Wong invites us to look deeper. He calls our attention to the complementary relationship between action and tranquility, identifying in tranquility a central aesthetic of Chinese martial arts cinema, and an ethos fundamental to the Chinese martial arts themselves. From this insight flows a cascade of concrete and philosophical proposals about how the "art" part of the "Chinese martial arts" works.

Wong crafts a sophisticated matrix of analysis and analogy. He correlates *Hung Gar Kuen* 洪家拳, *Jeet Kune Do* 截拳道, and *Wing Chun Kuen* 詠春拳 – all martial arts styles celebrated in Hong Kong – with the philosophical preoccupations of the *Sān Jiào* 三教 or three teachings of Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. He selects a key movement quality or *jìn* 勁 from each of these three styles as representative of specific martial ways of perceiving, feeling and thinking: the stability and isometric tensions of Hung Gar are expressed as holding or *ding* 定, the syncretic improvisations of Jeet Kune Do as adapting or *biàn* 變, and the connected, face-to-face partner play of Wing Chun as listening or *tīng* 聽 (8).[2] Even if we have not played these styles of *wǔshù*, such movement qualities viscerally recall the kinesthetic responses we've had as spectators, still and contemplative in our seats, yet in our imaginations moving in sympathy with the choreographies on screen.

Wong coins the English term *Martial Ideation* to conceptualize how such "moments of profound calmness amid chaos are constructed and experienced" in Hong Kong action cinema (3). His central preoccupation is "the ethereal and ephemeral space of serenity that martial arts filmmakers intricately craft amid intense conflict" (4).

Martial Ideation is Wong's applied translation of the polysemic Chinese logograph yì 意. As a noun, yì can mean desire or intention, as well as simply idea or thought. As a verb, its meanings evoke the English to expect, to anticipate or to foresee. Elucidating a longstanding cultural precedent Wong explains that:

> Ideation is often regarded as the highest artistic aspiration in traditional Chinese art forms such as poetry and painting. It emphasizes a unity between the observer and the observed, seeking to evoke a transcendent state that goes beyond mere representation to capture the essence and ethos of a scene or emotion. (4)

In his contemporary redescription, martial ideation emerges in moments where "characters or spectators encounter tranquility amid conflict or violence," and is "aesthetically embedded in the motifs of stability, fluidity, and sensitivity" (5, 9).

Wong offers concrete cinematic examples of this experience throughout the book. I offer this general analogy: watching the tumult of exchanges in a Chinese martial arts film is like watching a natural phenomenon such as a roaring fire, or waves breaking on the shore. The fire and water change shape, speed and trajectory every moment, and yet they are always the same. While these natural phenomena can be violent, contemplation of constancy in change can lead us from the anxiety of suspense and the shock of surprise to the creativity of contemplative reverie.

To further explain ideation, Wong offers Anglophone readers a primer on Chinese aesthetics. Beginning with the earliest records, he traces the development of aesthetic criteria in critical works on poetry and painting, pauses to note the significant Buddhist influences of the Tang dynasty while introducing Wang Changling 王昌齡 (c. 690–c. 756), and emerges in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Wong draws on philologist Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927), and the philosophers of aesthetics Zong Baihua 宗白華 (1897–1986) and Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 (1897–1986). He redescribes Wang Changling's milieus of poetic experience in cinematic terms, while integrating Zong Baihua's balance between absence *xū* 虛 and presence *shí* 實, and Zhu Guangqian's articulation of viewers' active role in formulating ideation into their original aesthetic gestalt.

Readers unfamiliar with Chinese thinkers will be reassured by Wong's parallel use of Euro-American aesthetics. He is thorough indeed: how many times has Cleanth Brooks been resurrected in writings on martial arts cinema? Wong's discussion of Gilles Deleuze, likely more familiar to today's readers, is detailed and useful. Wong explains that he wishes to use contemporary Euro-American writings to complement the ideas of historical Chinese philosophers, yet his presentation of a major intellectual tradition ignored in the West by all-but-specialists gently and wisely parochializes Anglophone theory writ large, even if this is not his explicit intention. Wong's use of Chinese thinkers for big-picture

[1] I've used traditional Chinese characters throughout, common spellings for Hong Kong martial arts, and Hanyu Pinyin for Mandarin words.
[2] All citations are from Wong, 2026.

ideas is enhanced by his choice of tools for downstream, cinematic analysis. David Bordwell's *middle-level research* and *piecemeal theorizing* focussed on "localized film-based problems" allow Wong to prioritize the specificity of Chinese martial arts cinema. At the same time, he suggests ways of seeing and theorizing the particular kinesthetic responses such precision elicits in viewers that go beyond the formal consequences that Bordwell finds in its "strict patterning" (29, 30).

Judicious shifting between synoptic description and disciplinary detail allows Wong to ultimately offer an alternate view of the cultural history of Chinese wǔshù. In China today, traditional martial arts are usually referred to as Chuántǒng Wǔshù 傳統武术 to distinguish them from the sporting wǔshù institutionalized by the state after 1949. This broad category is made of up two subsets: *Jīngdiǎn Wǔyì* 经典武藝 or classical martial arts and *Mínjiān Wǔyì* 民間武藝 or vernacular martial arts. These distinctions are largely social. Jīngdiǎn Wǔyì refers to martial arts associated with centers of current and historical power. Classical styles like *Tàijí Quán* 太极拳, *Xíngyì Quán* 形意拳, *Bāguà Zhǎng* 八卦掌, *Bājí Quán* 八極拳, *Pīguà Zhǎng* 劈挂掌 and *Tōngbèi Quán* 通背拳 were given their present forms in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by mostly literate Beijing urbanites. *Shàolín Quán* 少林掌 and *Wǔdāng Quán* 武当拳, re-created in the later 20th century are also considered classical, holding prestige through their association with historically significant religious sites from the Ming dynasty.

Mínjiān Wǔyì refers to the regional folk styles of wǔshù played by local communities across China. These arts are often more visibly linked to historical Chinese religious culture. They are practiced in local temple courtyards by self-governing, family-like groups, and performed as part of the annual calendar of religious observances, in which they fulfill a tacit apotropaic or even exorcistic role. *Méihuā Quán* 梅花拳, which still contains folk religious rituals, is a useful contemporary example.

While iconic in Hong Kong and well-known to Euro-Americans for contingent, historical reasons, seen from the centre, Hung Gar, Jeet Kune Do and Wing Chun seem closer to Mínjiān than to Jīngdiǎn Wǔyì, so many local footnotes in the history of the martial arts. Wong, however, employs them as he found them: neither vernacular nor classical, yet at the hub of a vital urban cinematic culture, directly informed by millennia of Chinese thought, radiating outward internationally in surprising new ways.

Martial Arts Ecology has great explanatory power. It articulates an experience of Chinese martial movement which I believe is foundational for those who play martial arts themselves, for performers and choreographers, for stage directors, cinema directors, directors of photography, cinematographers, animators, game developers, audiences, gamers, and scholars. Wong's account of how moments of profound calm are created within chaos, how they operate, and his framing of them in terms of Hong Kong martial arts and Chinese philosophy is persuasive. I am grateful for this outstanding contribution.

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