

BOOK REVIEW

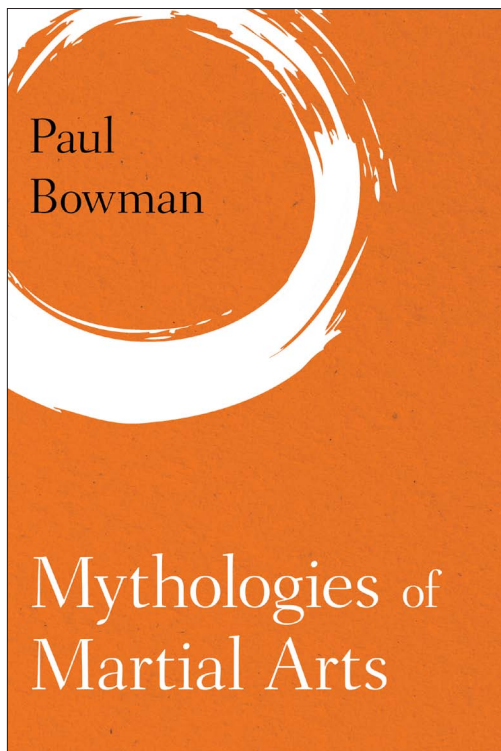
Mythologies of Martial Arts

(Martial Arts Studies, 2)

Paul Bowman

Rowman & Littlefield, 2017

186 pages



In 1926, the famous ethnologist Bronislaw Malinowski stated that ‘the study of myth has become a point of contact for various branches of academia’ [Malinowski 1986 [1926]: 141]. Had he known that, almost one hundred years later, a branch of academia would develop that calls itself ‘martial arts studies’, he probably would not have been surprised to hear that it, too, has its own take on mythology. This comes in the form of a short monograph entitled *Mythologies of Martial Arts*, the second title in the new Martial Arts Studies book series published by Rowman & Littlefield. It is authored by Paul Bowman, the editor of that book series, one of the editors of this journal, organizer of the annual Martial Arts Studies conference, and professor of cultural studies at Cardiff University.

Mythologies of Martial Arts takes up several of the strands Bowman laid out in his previous book, *Martial Arts Studies: Disrupting Disciplinary Boundaries* [Bowman 2015]. As the title of his latest effort implies, his focus is on the ideological narratives that surround, permeate, and define martial arts, as well as on the ways martial arts are practiced, perceived, and culturally understood (or misunderstood). While Bowman’s theoretical approach is deeply rooted in (mostly French) postmodernism, and indebted to Hegelian and Marxist thought, his ideological impetus is that of Anglo-American cultural studies. To fully appreciate Bowman’s work here, it will be important to clarify the methodological differences between Anglo-American cultural studies and their German and French counterparts. As it is known in German, *Kulturwissenschaften* (and, similarly, disciplines like medieval and early modern history, social anthropology, economics, etc.) explicitly avoid making normative judgements about the subjects they research and attempt instead to analyze, understand, and describe from a neutral perspective (although whether neutrality is truly possible is itself a subject of debate). Cultural studies, on the other hand, were from their outset designed as political projects; they do not simply want to *understand* the world, they want to *change* the world.¹

Bowman is an exponent of the latter branch, and he will not shy away from coming to explicit conclusions and judgements that, for example, a Swiss researcher might leave implicit or simply keep to himself/herself. To Bowman, moreover, all mythology is on the verge of creating hierarchies of power, power that can and often will be abused and result in injustice. Consequently, he perceives the eradication of mythology as an act of liberation [Bowman 2017: 94], especially when it comes to myths of authenticity, origin, and lineage.² Unusual as such statements

REVIEWER

Sixt Wetzler, *Deutsches Klingensmuseum Solingen*. This contribution is a revised version of a review published in *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* [Wetzler 2017].

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1 For a more elaborate discussion of these differences, see Lutz Musner [2001]. For a more elaborate discussion of these differences specifically in relation to martial arts studies, see Wetzler [2015].

2 This claim may be confirmed or denied with reference to Bowman’s discussions of these issues in chapters 5 and 6 in **Mythologies of Martial Arts**.

(in themselves ideological) might be for readers from a different academic tradition, they do not diminish the accuracy or worth of the book's observations and interpretations. On the contrary, these observations and interpretations contribute to the book's importance.

As he has himself pointed out continuously throughout his writings and lectures, Bowman is mortified by anything fixed, of the process of petrification inherent in crafting definitions, even of the idea of (static and unchanging) 'truth' as such. He perceives culture(s), the martial arts therein, and its/their martial narratives as networks of meanings, attributions, and 'supplements', none of which exist in isolation but rather are constituted by and through the other cultural condensations in this network. Following Stuart Hall, Bowman thus calls for 'conjunctural analysis', which he argues enables scholars to understand a given phenomenon within its contextual dependencies and temporal fluidity – a perspective that, even if the jargon might be different, will likely come natural to many of us. He applies the method of conjunctural analysis with great success to his subject, the popular martial arts discourses of the 20th and 21st centuries. His approach is never straightforward, but (possibly because of that) his results are convincing.

The predominant questions in many martial arts discussions, be they among practitioners or academics, are 'What is...?' and 'What was...?' The questions raised (and often quite satisfyingly answered) in the book, however, are more along the lines of 'How do/did they imagine it to be?'; 'How do/did they tell others and are/were themselves told to imagine it to be?'; and, most importantly, 'Why do/did they want to imagine it to be that way?'³ Guided by these questions, Bowman discusses the status of Asian martial arts in the West. He focuses on matters of cultural exchange and assumption, and particularly on ethnicity and orientalism; on the notion of *qi* in Western and Eastern discourses; on authenticity and lineage; on the vicissitudes of aesthetics in action cinema; on gender discourses; on the ping-pong of 'mythological' narratives between East and West; and on the 'mythological' undercurrents in martial arts studies itself.

However, Bowman's 'addiction' to the notion of instability and fluidity might also underlay what I perceive to be the main weak point of the book. Despite its title, it lacks a theoretical discussion of the terms 'myth' and 'mythology' (often used interchangeably). This is problematic insofar as both terms have been inflated to such a degree and used in so many different contexts that it is impossible to know what someone means when they use either term. Malinowski described the chaos aptly and, if anything, the situation has gotten worse in the last hundred years. Bowman starts his text with a reference to Roland Barthes (not surprising given his affinity for 20th century French thought, not to mention the title of the book itself). Barthes' understanding of myth as condensed ideology fits neatly into Bowman's discourse analysis and Bowman utilizes it well. Yet, in other sections the book, he shifts to much more traditional notions of myth as the opposite of logos, and usually without calling attention to (without noticing?) the shifts. In line with Stanley Henning's work [1981], which often aims to 'debunk' popular Chinese martial arts histories, myth is for Bowman a synonym for 'historical lie'. The book would have benefited from a short introductory discussion of the possible meanings of myth, as well as a clearer awareness of which of these meanings is being deployed at which points. Such a categorization – explicitly not a closed definition, and thus fitting nicely within Bowman's larger approach – has been given by Jan and Aleida Assmann [1998] and offered to martial arts studies scholars in an article edited by Bowman himself [Wetzler 2014].

The second point of critique is that this volume displays a certain degree of 'Asiacentrism'. Though Bowman often speaks of 'martial arts', in 95% of cases, he is really only referring to *Asian* martial arts. He often lists 'wrestling, boxing, and martial arts' one after the other, thereby juxtaposing Western and Eastern traditions.

3 Of course, 'they' can become 'we' at any point.

In this respect, his unwillingness to define what martial arts are (though theoretically well grounded) may pose a problem. Intuitively, Bowman has already decided that martial arts are 'from the East'. This notion is historically inaccurate, as martial arts can be found almost anywhere at almost any time. This, I am sure, is not news to anyone, Bowman included. But it is high time for martial arts studies scholars to actually acknowledge this fact. Even within popular culture (which, for a long time, did separate European fencing, boxing, and wrestling from 'proper', Asian martial arts), it is no longer a truism in the 21st century that martial arts are from the East. In fact, in this day and age, after the MMA revolution, it may even be doubted that martial arts are primarily associated with Asia or serve primarily as a 'marker of Asian-ness'.

Today, MMA reigns supreme, and it is significantly regarded as a Western or global phenomenon. It is as much boxing as it is muay thai, as much wrestling as it is jiu jitsu, as much sambo as it is judo (speaking, absolutely in line with Bowman, not about sambo's history as a direct offspring of judo, but about its perceived 'Russian-ness'). MMA is as much North American, Brazilian, and Russian as it is Japanese or Thai (and remarkably non-Chinese). The iconic symbol of MMA is not the Japanese samurai or the Shaolin monk, but rather the Roman gladiator (or even, thanks to the movie *300*, [2006]) the Spartan warrior. And the MMA movie *Warrior* [2011] significantly had no need for any Asian characters or references [Barrowman 2015: 82].

Thirdly, Bowman seems less interested in the transmission and execution of martial arts techniques themselves than in the narratives being told about them. In itself, this is not a shortcoming. Yet, at several points in the book (see, for example, his discussion of taiji principles [Bowman 2017: 165]), one gets the impression that the author himself is at risk of falling into the 'mythological trap', rephrasing common ideas on what martial arts will do with a body.

Nevertheless, *Mythologies of Martial Arts* is a treasure trove of stimulating thoughts and new ideas, as well as an ammunition belt to arm scholars entering into discussions about the self-stylization of the martial arts. The book thus comes highly recommended. The term 'inspiring' is often used too hastily, but here, I use it deliberately. While reading the book, at least once every third page there was a moment when I would have liked to call the author (or any of my martial arts studies colleagues) to discuss what I had just read. This does not mean that I agree with everything on those pages. For example, I wanted to ask if the rather negative view on myth should not be balanced with the productive capacity of myths, what Hans Blumenberg called 'Arbeit am Mythos' (work on myth) [1985]. Also, scholars of the historical European martial arts will likely feel compelled to point out how well known Asian styles already were in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the West, and that kicking techniques (described, by Bowman, as purely Asian) were beautifully illustrated in a German 'kickboxing manual' from 1863 [Happel 1863]. But even at the points where readers may disagree, engagement with the book never comes to a standstill; Bowman's very personal, often humorous, and always enjoyable style of writing positively engages and all but invites disagreement, and there is the distinct sense that he is looking forward to the discussions the book may catalyze.

Finally, the goals of Anglo-American cultural studies (as discussed above) suggest that this book may have an impact that transcends purely academic reflection. *Mythologies of Martial Arts* calls on martial artists to reconceptualize and possibly even challenge their own mythologies. On this front, Bowman's insights offer a healthy antidote to a scene where people so enthusiastically divide themselves along the lines of invented images and narratives.

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