

Everything you know about Taekwondo

Paul Bowman

Cardiff University

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History, in Theory

Today I must speak as a cultural theorist: I can't pretend to speak as a historian when I am surrounded by actual historians. But I am going to speak about history and tradition, because the key terms of this conference's title refer to the 'history, politics and culture' of 'traditional sports and martial arts in Asia'. However, for a cultural theorist, neither history nor tradition are *givens*. Neither history nor tradition are simple referents or neutral entities. Rather, it is not at all obvious what history or tradition *are*, what they *do*, to what ends, where they come from, where they take us, or in what ways they may be used or abused. These are some of my concerns today.¹

Historio-mythography

My title is 'Everything you know about taekwondo'. But I could have referred to any of many traditional Asian martial arts in my title. But I chose taekwondo; not only because this conference is in Korea, but also because taekwondo illustrates very clearly some of the knotty problems and problematics of history, politics and culture that are our theme.

In my abstract I ask what happens if or when everything you know about taekwondo (or any martial art) *changes*. What happens when everything you thought you knew about your martial art requires revision, or even complete rejection? According to certain

psychoanalytically-orientated cultural theorists, if too many of the certainties in our lives turn out to be false too quickly, this can have profound effects on our subjective stability and psychological well-being (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000).

So, what happens if the long term practitioner of, say, taiji, learns that taiji is not actually ancient, unchanging and timeless, but rather more of a nineteenth century ideological invention, and that the putatively ancient form they practice daily turns out to be no older than the 1980s (Wile 1996, 1999)? Or what happens if a practitioner of Southern Shaolin learns that there was no Southern Shaolin Temple to be burned to the ground, and hence no few remaining monks to escape, and that all of the characters in the creation narratives and stories deriving from this are made up too (Judkins and Nielson 2015, Wile 2015)? And what happens if the practitioner of Shotokan learns that Shotokan is really a twentieth century practice (Krug 2001, Chan 2000)? And what happens if the practitioner of taekwondo learns that taekwondo was conceived, devised and named in the 1950s and that it derives from no continuous indigenous tradition (Moenig 2015, Gillis 2008)?

My questions may provoke some historians, and may cause many martial artists to stir. I may be greeted with incredulity, resistance, hostility, rejection. I may be disputed – and my claims met with counter-claims and assertions of different kinds of evidence. This is to be expected, indeed encouraged. But, at this level, it remains a fight between historians and ideologues, each disputing each other's evidence-claims, each denouncing the other as ideologue. Because I am neither, in one sense, I can only really sit on the side-lines and watch. But from the side-lines, it seems clear that there is currently a kind of war raging, between a belief in Asian martial arts as ancient, and a new wave of historians, who increasingly point out both the lack of evidence for claims of long continuous histories for many 'traditional' martial arts, and an abundance of evidence suggesting their rather recent invention.

Because I am not a historian I will not be able to argue competently with historians, or in the terms of the discipline of history. But, because I have raised it, I need to state where I am in this dispute. So, I will come clean and say that the romantic in me always

wanted Asian martial arts to be *really* ancient, but the academic in me has to side with those who show that history tends much more towards discontinuity and rupture than duration and continuity (Kuhn 1962, Foucault 1970), that traditions are invented as ancient in the present (Fabian 1983, Anderson 1991), that lineages and heritages are established and instituted rather than inherited (Chow 2002), and that communities are imagined, primarily so as to be more effectively managed (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Said 2005).

I cannot say that I was delighted when I first learned that the kung fu and taiji that I loved in my thirties was not in fact aeons old, but effectively germinated and elaborated in the chaotic nineteenth century, and regularly reconstituted in the twentieth (Frank 2006, Kennedy and Guo 2010); that the Shotokan karate I studied as a teenager was a twentieth century formalisation (Funakoshi 1975, Krug 2001); and that the taekwondo of my twenties is considerably younger than my own parents (Gillis 2008, Moenig 2015). (By the time I met escrima in my forties, I had learned neither to ask nor to expect too much of history.)

None of this made me happy. But it never stopped me training. Finding out that these histories were not chiefly matters of misty mountains, demigod warriors and Taoist immortals caused definite pangs of disappointment. But I never stopped loving the skills I was learning. Yet part of me still wants my martial arts to be ancient. The question I want to explore today is *why*. Why does the size of a history or length of a lineage matter so much, to so many people, in so many discourses about Asian martial arts?

My aim is not to dispute facts. It is rather to reflect on how and why, when and where, for whom and in what ways *history matters*. Do practitioners care about their martial art's history? Why *should* anyone care? Who is it who cares? What is it that such a care is a care of or a care for? In many cases, it does not actually seem to be a care for *history* at all: as my words have already suggested, what at least some people want, in wanting martial arts to date back millennia, does not seem to be *history* at all, but rather *mythology* (Barthes 1970, Anderson 1991). For, history is made of discontinuities,

breaks, revisions, revolutions, reconstructions, reinstitutions and reimaginings. Only in myth is there permanence and the feeling of temporal transcendence. This means that certain valuations of history are at root investments in myth.²

Self and Orient

We have come to associate all of this with Western orientalism: the fetishistic obsession with the idea that Asian cultural practices are ancient and timeless (Said 1995).

However, we have an obligation to look both ways, or at least to enquire further into the logics and engines driving so-called orientalism (Chow 1998). So we must look not only at the orientalising West but also at the often *equally* orientalising East (Chan 2000, Eperjesi 2004, Wile 1996, 1999); and at other situations that complicate the western-orientalism paradigm (Frank 2006).

One study proposes that when Westerners (and I would add, Easterners too) practise Asian martial arts, part of their desire and part of the pleasure produced by practice relates to what it calls the sensuous feeling of and feeling for Chineseness (or Japaneseness, or Koreanness, or indeed generic Asianness). In other words, bound up in the desire to learn a traditional Asian martial art are Asiaphilic desires, orientalist fantasies and allochronic imaginings of timeless embodied wisdom traditions. But *anyone can harbour these fantasies*. So if we go down to our local dojo or dojang or kwoon, or join the taiji group in the park, part of what we are searching for is the feeling of what it is like to become a part of an ancient culture – to fantasise an involvement in that culture, in its ancientness – and to feel its embodied knowledge, techniques, movement systems, and ‘wisdom’, in our limbs, in our movements, and on our pulse.

Although this kind of structure of feeling seems more pertinent to martial arts like taiji than martial arts like taekwondo, nonetheless in all such cases a sense of ‘history’ is enormously important. Fantasies about ‘history’ are in a sense an integral part of the enjoyment. The longer the history, the better. This is because *history* functions within this orientation as a fetish category around, through and in terms of which

practitioners fantasize (Laclau 2000, Said 2005). The *age* and *origin* of such arts become key coordinates in what Edward Said called an ‘imagined geography’ (Said 2005).³

Note that ‘history’, here, is not a real thing. It is not an actually existing property of the world. It is an element of *discourse*.⁴ And notice also that, because ‘the past is a foreign country’, it can be ‘orientalised’, mythologised, idealised. This is why, in the countries of their origins, ideas of tradition in local martial arts can have ideologically powerful uses and abuses. Here, mytho-histories can easily feature as objects of regionalist or nationalist discourse. As Douglas Wile has argued convincingly, a large part of the intellectual, ideological and philosophical elaboration of taijiquan in China during the 19th century can be understood as a symptomatic response to the perceived cultural threat that the west posed to China at that time (Frank 2006).⁵ Similarly, Stephen Chan has argued that what he calls ‘the Japanese cultural authorities’ have long been more than happy to trade in orientalist myths to cash in on the assumption that all Japanese martial arts are ancient. And as more and more historians are showing, in the post-war (or post-wars) context(s) of both North and South Korea, the perceived need to both de-Japanify and to reconstruct a national culture was acute. It is in this context that the name ‘taekwondo’ was proposed, its obvious direct derivation from Shotokan disavowed, and extravagant claims made about its ancient history and indigenous character.

From this position, the supposed enigma or mystery of what has been called ‘self-orientalisation’ evaporates. Inventing ‘ancient’ traditions in the present makes perfect sense. As Rey Chow has argued, a fascination with the ancient, the pre-modern and the primitive can often be read as a symptom of cultural *crisis*. Chow argues that ‘primitive passions’ are symptomatic of the chaotic or traumatic conditions of industrial modernity and postmodernity. In other words, passionate investment in ideas about ancient natives and their practices can be read as symptoms of anxieties about roots and identity in the present (Chow 1995, Bowman 2015). In this light, ‘history matters’, in this kind of way, in contexts of untethered identity and anxious nationalism. But this kind of history very often boils down to what I have already called myth and what Jean-François Lyotard called ‘narrative knowledge’ (Lyotard 1984).

For Lyotard, 'narrative knowledge' (or cultural/lineage knowledge) is not *simply* a matter of knowledge. It is also a matter of power. For, Lyotard argues, *knowledge legitimates*. It legitimates both itself and also the institutions, practices and people that it supports. To recall the terms of this conference title, knowledge is a part of culture, and *by the same token* a force of politics.

What matters

This much has been known for quite some time: Lyotard was writing in the 1970s. But the question is: what has this got to do with traditional Asian martial arts? My contention is that a very great number of practitioners of avowedly '*traditional*' and '*Asian*' martial arts, have a great deal invested in the ideas of tradition and of specific areas of Asia.⁶ Even without the formalisation of mythology within their curriculum, students pick up bits and pieces of what Lyotard calls 'narrative knowledge' – stories about lineage, masters, legendary fights, legendary locations, the proven superiority of 'our' art, and so on. This is precisely narrative/cultural knowledge in Lyotard's sense: words and phrases within language games that legitimate activities, values, hierarchies and practices. In such language games, anything that casts established knowledge into doubt can precipitate not merely existential crisis but also institutional and cultural crisis. How do we proceed if our history and hence identity is no longer what we thought it was?

For the martial arts practitioner, tradition and history are certainly not 'everything'. Indeed, these are precisely *supplements* in the sense given to the term by Derrida: things from the outside that add to and add on but in a way completes and fills a lack (Derrida 1982, 1998). But, the *inside* of martial arts practice seems clearly to be identified with the practice itself – the *physical* practice – the training, the sparring – the *embodiedness* of the practice.

However, many theorists have proposed that the essence of even apparently totally embodied practices are not simply bodily. As Slavoj Žižek argues, what drives physical

activities is fantasy in the minds of practitioners: in the case of sex, it is the fantasies of both partners that determines and drives both desire and physical sex. So we cannot discount the importance of the ways that cultural fantasies work within us and organise our desires and pleasures.

However, unlike Žižek, I would not stop there. For, we have to remember that, even if a sense of culture or history permeates our relation to a practice, and even if the grand lineage narrative of our style seems important or precious to us, our joys, pleasures, frustrations and desires within that practice relate to the successful execution of a perfect technique with a perfect result. There is no getting away from the fact that executing a perfect head kick, sweep, throw, lock, choke or punch produces delight. And in these moments, fantasies of history or lineage are not at all present. The joy to be had in a jumping spinning kick does not depend on historical narratives.⁷

In other words, *martial arts and martial artists do not need history*. Grand historical narratives are not necessary to the legitimation and legitimisation of martial arts. Such narratives primarily legitimate and legitimise other things anyway: institutional hierarchies, ethnonationalist myths, nationalist structures of feeling, film fantasies, tourist industries, and so on. So, what does the martial artist 'need'?

Performativity

Lyotard proposes that the key alternative and major antagonist facing 'narrative knowledge' is what he calls 'scientific knowledge'. Scientific knowledge, for Lyotard, does not depend principally upon narratives, such as history or lineage, for its legitimation – although narrative cannot be removed entirely from it. Rather, scientific knowledge is legitimated through performativity – through the performative, regular, stable and predictable demonstration of efficiency and effectiveness. And I think that this provides us with the clue necessary for establishing the source of alternative approaches to the legitimation of martial arts: their performative efficiency.

Most martial arts claim not just narrative (historical) legitimacy but also, at the same time, often primarily, *legitimacy based on efficacy* (see also Farrer 2015). All practices taught as martial arts make some claim to practical combative or self-defence utility. The emergence of mediatized competitions such as the UFC and other limited-rules full-contact martial arts competitions in the 1990s arguably pushed the matter of the public verification or verifiability of martial arts efficacy fully into martial arts discourse (Downey 2014). Along with this, a range of online videos have depicted the disastrous outcomes for certain representatives of traditional or mystical martial arts – such as those of qi-masters being battered by full-contact fighters, for instance. In other words, the full-contact arena has gained the status of Lyotard’s science lab; and the digital camera and internet serve to disseminate the results of many experiments (Spencer 2014).

As such, the mediatization of martial arts challenges the legitimacy claims of many traditional martial arts, often revealing martial styles or institutions to have based their legitimacy claims on tautological values that cannot be subject to any kind of verification other than those they choose for themselves.

So, what am I saying? I am saying two things. First, that diligent historiography is revealing many martial lineages to be less than linear, many histories to be primarily *stories*, and many traditions to be at best disjointed and more commonly *invented* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Second, the media saturation of daily life has thrust into the spotlight the question of the verification of the efficacy of martial arts. Both of these factors have *transformed the discursive context*, and hence induced a transformation at the ‘genetic’ level of martial arts.

In other words – and to indulge in some crude periodizing for a moment – if the twentieth saw certain ‘traditional Asian martial arts’ (for the sake of simplicity, let’s say Japanese and Korean martial arts: the case of Chinese martial arts is clearly very different) move first into fields of formalisation (on the one hand, universities, schools, the police, the military, etc., and on the other hand, sport), and from there into film (and hence deeper into mythology), and then into discourses of lifestyles, belief-systems,

self-improvement and, of course, self-defence; so the twenty-first century is seeing, on the one hand, the mytho-histories invented during these periods come under academic scrutiny, and on the other hand, the question of their performativity and efficacy coming under media and cultural scrutiny.

There are many other things going on at the same time, of course. I am not making totalising claims. Discourses are contingent constellations of mobile and moving positions and possibilities, rather than linear narratives. And discursive constellations are always subject to internal and external pressures and forces, which hegemonize and orientate them – not unlike the ways that magnets can organise iron filings into constellations, shapes and directions. In this sense, the hegemonic forces acting on and ‘directing’ martial arts discourses now include not only sportization, militarization and senses of communing with the ancients, but also more intensive scholarly interrogation *and* more intensive mediatized interrogation. This means that the status of ‘history’ has been changed.

Of course, history always matters. We should always historicize. But this means that its status and use must always be questioned. And of course historical ignorance is deeply problematic, but so is ignoring the absence of history, insisting on its presence, inventing it. Claiming an unbroken connection between something like modern taekwondo and pre-twentieth century Korean kicking games without facing up to the central presence of Shotokan via the Japanese military is a bit like claiming an unbroken connection between people tapping their fingers on table tops throughout the ages and the invention of contemporary computer keyboards.

Neither Microsoft nor Apple nor IBM nor anyone else needs to make this kind of narrative or lineage claim. History does not matter much in people’s thinking about computer keyboards. This is because computer keyboards are legitimated principally by performativity – by efficiency *and* enjoyment (to evoke Farrer 2015) – not by narrative.

Of course, neither performativity nor efficacy need boil down to cold, heartless, ruthless efficiency. When I take my youngest daughter down to the local karate club,

where they teach a mixture of karate, taekwondo and kickboxing, I know that what she is doing has about as much connection with Japan or Korea or indeed combat as when I take my other daughter to ballet. But this connection is not the point. The point is the pleasure. The pleasure is part of the efficacy. And the history of traditional Asian martial arts in the present only has a future because of this pleasure.

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¹ But I speak not merely a cultural theorist. Rather, I am a cultural theorist who has loved traditional Asian martial arts for most of my life and I have experienced first hand a fair few of them, as they exist in the UK. So, I speak informed by my experiences and my awareness of the major English language discourses about Asian martial arts. But this limited Western starting point quite quickly leads us to the matter of traditional Asian martial arts in Asia.

² Benjamin Judkins, on the other hand, has recently noted a distinct lack of interest in the history of certain other martial arts, such as kickboxing. Judkins himself is a practitioner of wing chun kung fu who researches and writes on the history of Southern Chinese martial arts. Being so steeped in both practitioner and scholarly discourses of Chinese martial arts, Judkins was evidently rather surprised to be greeted by a comparative lack of interest in martial arts history in his local kickboxing community. If we were to generalise some implications on the strength of Judkins' anecdote, then we might be inclined to propose that traditional Asian martial artists either 'are' or 'come to be' (or perhaps 'learn to be') deeply invested in the sense of the history of their practice, while non-traditional martial artists seem to be rather less so, and seem rather more invested in alternative sets of concerns – such as *efficiency* in combat

or competition, for instance. Of course, we may not be able to generalise from Judkins' anecdote. It may be a case of projection, for instance: Judkins-the-history-obsessed-scholar may be drastically inflating the value he believes practitioners of traditional Asian martial arts ascribe to their history. Or it may be too conspicuously isolated to have any generalizable value. But, as both I and others have argued elsewhere, there are other kinds of evidence to support the idea that one might propose a kind binary or antagonism between two kinds of investment that structure martial arts discourses – and that is the binary or antagonism that can be formulated in terms of such couples as: history versus efficiency, or tradition versus innovation, and so on. The most common way of spatializing the binary, of course, has involved imagining it in cultural or regional terms – wherein 'the East' is said to 'value tradition' while 'the West' is said to 'value efficiency' and to happily deracinate, deconstruct and reconstruct martial arts practices with a view to efficiency (Bolelli 2003). But, of course, these binaries collapse as soon as one sees, on the one hand, the way traditions reconfigure and reconstitute themselves in the light of innovation, and, on the other hand, the way efficiency-focused institutions develop into traditions. So, the idea of 'tradition' that would see 'tradition' as somehow simply in opposition to 'change' is in itself perhaps a romanticisation of 'tradition' – one that is perhaps in the sway of a kind of orientalist phantasy. But what is the phantasy? And whose is it? And why is it there?

³ The third term that triangulates and completes the picture is one's own place in relation to this ancient alterity in the present; namely, the self. Which is one obvious way in which Asian martial arts become bound up in identity – as coordinates of a fantasy life that structures values and activities.

⁴ 'Personal' discourse, first (communing with ancient civilisations is a private fantasy), but one whose raw materials and their configuration have come from a somewhat more public context – such as the vast and deep reservoirs of allochronistic and orientalist renderings of cultural or historical otherness (Fabian 1983).

⁵ Indeed, in Adam Frank's analysis of its status in China to this very day, taiji remains what he calls the quintessential symbol of Chineseness.

⁶ Even the most casual, non-academic, non-reading Western student of the least preachy instructor will doubtless harbour a vague sense of the *ancientness* of the art they practice. This is not alleviated in any way by martial arts institutions that require students to regurgitate verbatim mythological accounts of their art's history, in order to pass their belt/gradings, as is the case with taekwondo.

⁷ True, the source of the satisfaction derived from the physical event is undoubtedly to be found elsewhere by any kind of analyst: why someone wants to kick and why they derive delight from it can doubtless be psychoanalysed, and different kinds of claims can be made about the origin and nature of the pleasure – whether it is regarded as coming from an individual's personal psychological make-up or whether it is regarded as exemplifying wider cultural pathologies (whether of patriarchy or phallogocentrism). But, whatever other conscious or unconscious areas such pleasures relate to, the fact remains that martial arts practices do not *need* mytho-history for their legitimation.