

Review of *Reinventing martial arts in the 21st Century*, by George Jennings

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Received: 11/05/2023; Accepted: 15/06/2023; Published: 19/06/2023

REVIEW

Abstract

In *Reinventing martial arts in the 21st Century* (published by Peter Lang, 2023), George Jennings proposes a hybrid online/offline multi-situated ethnography to account for the circumstances of traditional martial arts nowadays. The book is divided in three parts, preceded by an extended and unusual preface about an ethnographic account of the practice of martial arts before, during, and after the COVID lockdown. Parts one and two present different lines of the recent development of traditional martial arts. Part three is clearly different from the other two, offering a well based ethnographic text on the life courses of some martial artists taken as case studies. Along the text, the author poses a well-balanced set of research techniques and sources to ground his analysis. Jennings affords innovative angles to see the current transformation of these cultural practices. Besides, the book points to a myriad of possible directions that the author will surely explore and further develop in future volumes.

Keywords: Martial arts; combat sports; sport sociology; sport ethnography.

Revision de *Reinventing martial arts in the 21st Century*, por George Jennings

Resumen

En *Reinventing martial arts in the 21st Century*, (obra publicada por Peter Lang, 2023), George Jennings propone una etnografía multisituada híbrida *online/offline* para explicar la situación de las artes marciales tradicionales en la actualidad. El libro está dividido en tres partes, precedidas por un extenso e inusual prefacio; un relato etnográfico sobre la práctica de las artes marciales antes, durante y después del confinamiento por el COVID. La primera y segunda parte presentan diferentes líneas del desarrollo reciente de las artes marciales tradicionales. La tercera parte es, claramente, diferente de las dos anteriores, y ofrece un texto etnográfico bien fundamentado sobre las trayectorias vitales de algunos artistas marciales, tomadas como casos de estudio. A lo largo del texto, el autor plantea un equilibrado conjunto de técnicas y fuentes de investigación para fundamentar su análisis. Jennings ofrece perspectivas innovadoras para observar la transformación actual de estas prácticas culturales. Además, el libro sugiere una miríada de posibles direcciones que el autor, seguramente, explorará y desarrollará en futuros trabajos.

Palabras clave: Artes marciales; deportes de combate; sociología del deporte; etnografía del deporte.

Resenha de *Reinventing martial arts in the 21st Century*, de George Jennings

Resumo

Em *Reinventing martial arts in the 21st Century* (publicado por Peter Lang, 2023), George Jennings propõe uma etnografia híbrida, *online/offline*, multi-situada para explicar, atualmente, o estado das artes marciais tradicionais. O livro é dividido em três partes, precedidas por um prefácio longo e incomum; um relato etnográfico sobre a prática de artes marciais antes, durante e depois do confinamento por COVID. A primeira e a segunda partes apresentam diferentes linhas do desenvolvimento recente das artes marciais tradicionais. A terceira parte é, claramente, diferente das duas anteriores, e oferece um texto etnográfico bem fundamentado sobre as trajetórias de vida de alguns praticantes de artes marciais, tomadas como estudos de caso. Ao longo do texto, o autor propõe um conjunto equilibrado de técnicas e fontes para apoiar sua análise. Jennings oferece perspectivas inovadoras para observar a atual transformação dessas práticas culturais. Além disso, o livro sugere uma infinidade de direções possíveis que o autor certamente explorará e desenvolverá em trabalhos futuros.

Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; esportes de combate; sociologia do esporte; etnografia esportiva.



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George Jennings proposes a hybrid online/offline (Hine, 2008), multi-situated ethnography (Marcus, 1995) to account for the circumstances of traditional martial arts nowadays. His long-term engagement with different disciplines, not only as a participant and project developer (e.g., MMM program) but as a researcher offers a unique combination that produces a book of high quality. He poses a well-balanced set of research techniques and sources to ground his analysis: from participant observation (offline and online) to the analysis of different media (journals, books, podcasts, social media, etc.), Jennings meets the standard criteria to assess qualitative texts such as trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, and confirmability.

The text renders visible the traditional experiential 'I was there' of anthropological endeavour, but it also produces a more interactive and reflexive analysis. During the engagement with other participants, the ethnographer was affected, and his identity changed and was renegotiated along the way. Along the experiential process of different martial arts and practitioners—from Chinese Wing Chun and Taijiquan to European Swordsmanship and Mexican Xilam—Jennings became also more reflective on those intersubjective dialogical experiences between him and the research subjects (Fabian, 2002).

The book is divided in three parts, preceded by an extended and unusual preface about an ethnographic account of the practice of martial arts before, during, and after the COVID lockdown.

Parts one and two present different lines of the recent development of traditional martial arts. Part one, about reinventing the martial arts, deals with the topics of martial arts as arts per se; martial arts as the base for mixed movement system; martial arts as self-help developmental paths, and as therapy. The author provides good evidence for the four strands of the argument, offering present interesting and insightful cases. For instance, in his discussion on martial arts as arts he makes a claim about the very different set of expectations upon martial arts instructors when compared to coaches or instructors of other disciplines such as football. Martial arts instructors are expected to be 'the most skilled person in the room' (p.31), something that Jennings relates to the different artistic component of activities such as martial arts that is not present in conventional sports.

The second part of the book, titled reconstructing the martial arts, discusses the critique to modern organization of martial arts dojos and the revival of martial arts as heritage. The commercialization (McDonalozation) of martial arts is seriously assessed in chapter six. Here, the author dissects the ironic position of participants/commentators of combat sports which contains mocking critiques to traditional martial arts but also vested opinions and interests. In chapter seven, the author introduces his ethnographic research on HEMA (Historical European Martial Arts) and Mexican Xilam, which is quite innovative and breaks the monopolistic view of martial arts as an Asian phenomenon.

The third part of the book is clearly different from the other two, offering a well-based ethnographic text on the life courses of some martial artists taken as case studies. It introduces important topics such as the creation and maintenance of local and international networks, peer, couple and family relationships, etc. The last chapter in this part includes the author's martial journey through a well-detailed autoethnography. This may resonate with some of the experiences that many of those pertaining to the so-called 'fighting scholars' lot have found in their pathfinding to balance a mixed interest between intense bodily practices and academic life.

The conclusion section discusses future lines of studies that will surely be developed by the author. The generic working definition for martial arts provided by the author is also revisited at this point. Also, Jennings reflects here on possible limitations of the text: e.g., language use restricted to English and Spanish; author's bias bound mainly to Chinese disciplines; personal interest in certain manifestations of martial arts (health, self-help, etc.) but not others (combat sports) (p.211),

Apart from the merits of the text, the whole structure of the book presents some inconsistencies. For instance, the preface acts as a paper on its own; some chapters present a discussion section, but others do not. The impression is as if a collection of papers on a broad topic (current situation of traditional martial arts) had been put together for a volume. Maybe the desired intention of the author was to write several books: one for each of the different threads that Jennings summarily presents in each chapter. In fact, he ensures to have a large amount of unpublished



material on different matters. Nonetheless, I understand the pragmatics of publishing prevented the author from achieving that goal. As a result, even though we find an ethnographic patchwork of the global situation of martial arts, some central thread that binds together the pieces is missing.

Despite possible critiques, the text constitutes a remarkable contribution to the academic field of Martial Arts. The quality of the fieldnotes along the whole books is quite high and nicely transmits the experience, values, and opinions of participants. Jennings affords innovative angles to see the current transformation of these cultural practices. The book points to a myriad of possible directions that the author will surely explore and further develop in future volumes.

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