

Communicating martial arts knowledge: Conferring over a wealth of possibilities

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REPORT

Abstract

The 3rd Annual Martial Arts Studies Conference held at Cardiff University (11-13 July, 2017) was an eclectic collection of keynotes, papers, workshops, networking and social events. It connected PhD students, established professors and practitioner-instructors in university lecture rooms, public parks and music halls across three days of academic, social and physical activities. From historical studies of Chinese martial arts to the performance of Indian styles, it brought together scholars, practitioner-researchers and martial artists for a supportive, but also scholarly, gathering – one which was both thematically open but at the same united by an exploration of the communication of embodied research and knowledge. In sum, the conference demonstrated that martial arts studies, as a still young field, shows a wealth of promise, with emerging leaders, topics and debates that will stimulate future research, cross-continental collaboration and intercultural dialogue.

Keywords: Martial arts; martial arts studies; interdisciplinarity; embodied knowledge; global scholarship; research community.

Comunicando el conocimiento sobre las artes marciales: debatiendo en un mar de posibilidades

Resumen

La 3rd Annual Martial Arts Studies Conference, celebrada en la Cardiff University (11-13 de julio de 2017), fue una ecléctica colección de conferencias, comunicaciones, talleres, redes de trabajo y eventos sociales. Conectó a estudiantes de doctorado, reconocidos profesores y practicantes-instructores de artes marciales en aulas universitarias, parques públicos y salas de música durante tres días de actividades académicas, físicas y sociales. Se expusieron desde estudios históricos sobre artes marciales chinas hasta demostraciones de artes marciales indias, reuniendo a estudiosos, practicantes-investigadores y artistas marciales en un evento académico y colaborativo, temáticamente abierto pero al mismo unido por la exploración de la comunicación de la investigación y el conocimiento encarnado. En síntesis, la conferencia demostró que los estudios sobre las artes marciales, como campo de conocimiento aún joven, son tremendamente prometedores, con líderes emergentes, temas y debates que estimularán la investigación futura, la colaboración transcontinental y el diálogo intercultural.

Palabras clave: Artes marciales; estudios sobre artes marciales; interdisciplinaria; conocimiento encarnado; erudición global; comunidad investigadora.

Comunicando o conhecimento sobre as artes marciais: debatendo um mar de possibilidades

Resumo

A 3rd Annual Martial Arts Studies Conference, celebrada na Cardiff University (11-13 de julho de 2017) foi uma ecléctica “coleção” de conferências, comunicações, workshops, redes de trabalho e eventos sociais. Conectou estudantes de doutoramento, professores e praticantes-instrutores de artes marciais em aulas universitárias, parques públicos e salas de música durante três dias de atividades académicas, físicas e sociais. Expuseram-se desde estudos históricos sobre artes marciais chinesas até demonstrações de artes marciais indianas, reunindo estudiosos, praticantes-investigadores e artistas marciais num evento académico e colaborativo tematicamente aberto, mas ao mesmo tempo unido pela exploração da comunicação da investigação e no conhecimento incorporado. Em síntese, a conferência demonstrou que os estudos sobre as artes marciais, como campo de conhecimento ainda jovem, são extremamente prometedores, com líderes emergentes, temas e debates que estimularão a investigação futura, a colaboração transcontinental e o diálogo intercultural.

Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; estudos sobre artes marciais; interdisciplinaridade; conhecimento incorporado; erudição global; comunidade investigadora.

1. Martial arts and methods: The conference at a glance

Cardiff University is fast becoming a hotbed of martial arts scholarship, and it was the scene, for the third consecutive time, for what was first called “Martial Arts Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Conference.” Since then, recent projects have asked questions around what

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martial arts studies are (Bowman, 2015) and what a martial art can be and do (Goto-Jones, 2016). Some, such as German blade specialist Sixt Weztler, claim, that we must take martial arts seriously as a coping strategy for interpersonal violence. Around such debates, Martial arts studies (MAS) have been established as a field of knowledge in the English speaking world and elsewhere, thanks also to the efforts of contributors to the first two conferences, which were part of the AHRC-funded network (see www.mastudiesrn.wordpress.com).

Central to this gathering were questions of how we (as scholars and practitioners of martial arts) can communicate our knowledge and findings. One of the keynote lectures by US scholar Benjamin Judkins provided a poignant reminder of who we are writing (and speaking) for: 1) The academic in a particular discipline (such as a political scientist); 2) the martial arts practitioner (such as a Wing Chun exponent), and 3) a martial arts researcher (as the vast majority of readers of the *Revista de Artes Marciales Asiáticas* are). The ‘public’ in general could also be considered here, as well as policy makers, politicians and other stakeholders in the martial arts world.

This keynote was related to an outdoor four-way workshop entitled “Communicating Embodied Knowledge.” Paul Bowman, the conference organiser, led a ‘roundtable’ discussion (or a circle on the grass in this case!) on how to write martial arts scholarship. This dialogue was inspired by Loic Wacquant’s (2009) call for researchers to reconsider their established writing genres. Although not a new debate (it had been outlined by Van Maanen back in 1988 and, more specifically, in sports studies by Sparkes in 2002), it is a pertinent time to ask how researchers can combine confessional, realist, impressionist, reflexive, and authoritarian tones whilst maintaining a balance of theory, method and topic.



Picture 1. Participants at Paul Bowman’s workshop “Communicating Embodied Knowledge”.

So far, methods have been overlooked by martial arts researchers, and from this discussion came the idea for an online (and thus continually updated) encyclopaedia of martial arts studies. After the conference, Quebec-based researcher Sylvain Gagne sent me and Paul Bowman a link to an exemplar online handbook of narratology. Meanwhile, veteran Cardiff-based ethnographer Sara Delamont suggested the need for a handbook on methods, with chapters ranging from surveys and quasi-experiments to ethnography and forms of analysis (and, consequently, writing and representation). Other groups used the same workshop to examine the potential for interactive partner training as an expression of concepts and ideas.

The remaining keynotes provided a solid illustration of creative and systematic martial arts research that showed elements of originality, rigour and significance – the hallmarks of the current Research Excellence Framework (REF – www.ref.ac.uk) in the United Kingdom, which concerns many of the contributors from British universities. Peter Lorge, an American sinologist and pre-modern historian, provided an overview of the invention of traditional martial arts. Using his recent

research into digital archives, he returned to common sources on martial arts ‘knowledge’ in 17th century China, and questioned conventional viewpoints on what scholars think they know about the development of ‘traditional’ systems. The lecture by Australian cultural studies pioneer Meaghan Morris, returning for another plenary at the Martial Arts Studies conference, assessed the role of history in Hong Kong martial arts cinema. As evidence of the dialogue between scholars, she used Lorge’s talk as a basis to consider a movement from original source material to ‘real’ films and how they take us away from ordinary reality.

2. Case study panels: Pedagogy, pain and narratives

The panels provided excellent balance throughout this exciting three-day conference. Arranging panels is never a simple task. The resulting effort provided a range of topic-based streams, including those on regions (Hong Kong and China), on areas of the social sciences (pedagogy and narratives) and also martial arts studies itself.

I had the pleasure of chairing the pedagogy session, which contained two papers that together expressed the diversity of academic disciplines and methodologies: one from a coaching scientist (Dave Bright) and one from a sociologist of education (Sara Delamont). Delamont provided an account of the history of *Savate* in the UK through the life of one notable competitor and instructor, James Southwood. Bright employed video analysis and a talk feedback approach which contrasted with Delamont’s traditional written paper, read in an articulate and free manner without the aid of audio-visual technology. Both presentations showed just how inclusive martial arts scholarship has become: spanning paradigms, generations of scholars, sciences and studies alike, as well as methodologies and theories. This was further illustrated later that day, when Delamont returned to give a confessional account of her team’s work on injury narratives (or the lack of them) in Capoeira and Lyn Jehu’s paper offered an assessment of mental toughness in a Welsh Karate school – both using different interviewing strategies.

The next day’s narrative session included my own postcolonial analysis of the creation of Mexican martial arts as part of the broader movement of *Mexicanidad*. It also provided other illustrations of how to tell a story of movement and change including Leo Istas’s overview of the longstanding, yet ever changing, martial education in Germany from a historical perspective. This was accompanied by the practice and performance of two Indian martial arts, *Kalaripayattu* and the lesser-known *Silambam* by PhD student P. S. Gowtham. Unfortunately, Gowtham was unable to join the delegates due to complications with his entry to the UK. Nevertheless, he posted a carefully crafted video on the Martial Arts Studies YouTube site so that we could enjoy his talk even in his absence. This was tied to his own professor’s (Gitanjali Kolandad) keynote on the balance between dance and fighting, which are united by physicality yet divided by interpretation.

The physical and interpretive elements of this gathering bring me back to my own preferred approach: one based on my positionality as a sport and exercise sciences graduate who has now attended his second MAS conference, albeit with the inevitable limitation of a personal perspective. It is as Judkins reflects in his recent summary of the conference:

There are two kinds of conference reports that one can give, and one type is considerably more fraught than the other. It’s easy enough to outline the structure, panels and keynotes of a conference; to talk about the warm and welcoming conference venues, or the hours of pleasant discussion and socialization. Yet no two people will attend the same mix of panels, or have the same conversations. In a very real sense no two of us ever attend the exact same conference. This makes the task of offering an overall set of “impressions” and “assessments” more difficult. Still, it’s a task worth trying.

3. Becoming connected and sustainable: Where media meets academia

Considering this, I have opted to follow a loose structure that was based on the nature of martial arts studies itself rather than the chronological order of events. The advance of new technologies to record and disseminate the original presentations (made possible by Cardiff University in their quest to “look to the future” – www.cardiff.ac.uk) and a range of interviews (thanks to the fledgling local firm DojoTV – www.dojotv.co.uk - who work closely with the MAS



network to cover their events) and some emerging reports elsewhere by the likes of Swiss medievalist Daniel Jaquet (see www.djaquet.info/blog), all provide diverse reportage. I trust my own review adds something to the emerging historical record: Martial arts scholarship captured and curated for generations to come.



Picture 2. The networking events fostered collaboration for the future

Thinking of the future, a further point should be made on the role of a specific term, 'history', which was mentioned at various points over the course of the three days. History, or perhaps we could call it just a 'story', is full of possibilities in making: of a special collection on research methods; an online handbook; cross-continental collaborations; multilingual outputs; crossovers between Cardiff, France (JORRESCAM) and Germany (DVS Kommission Kampfkunst) (and I would add Canada to the list of potential centres of excellence), an emergent local research network in Wales and various media support offers. More broadly, as can be seen by the mention of the countries, speakers and arts in question, it was a truly an international and an interdisciplinary conference in every sense of both terms. To consider the ambitions of the research network itself:

The primary objective of the *Martial Arts Studies Research Network* is to connect up disconnected disciplinary and cultural discourses on martial arts by fostering dialogue through cross-disciplinary events. In connecting and engaging diverse researchers, the network will develop knowledge of the significance and impact of martial arts in the contemporary world and set the agenda for future research in the interlocking multidisciplinary fields around them.

Martial arts studies are interdisciplinary as they unite disciplines to look at common themes and objects of study: The invention of tradition; the body; mythologies, and teaching and learning. This point was stressed by Paul Bowman at the close of the conference. The field also makes use of various sub-disciplines (such as the 'sociology of medicine' and the 'psychology of sport') along with transdisciplinary applications in teaching, coaching, cultural critique, communication and demonstration and performance.

Much like my own area of sport and exercise sciences, this is burgeoning and healthy, but always open to contention in terms of what is included and excluded by journal editorial committees and conference panels. That is particularly true as politics and economics encroach upon new fields of (embodied) knowledge and practice. The object of study is international in the sense that the practice of martial arts is a global phenomenon, produced by cultures and peoples from all corners of the globe, intercultural in their practice and cross cultural in their study. This conference was a moment to confer on *what* is studied, *how* this can be done and the *possible ways* to communicate this work to interested parties.

To conclude, despite the hazy boundaries between disciplines and frontiers, martial arts studies will continue to flourish as long as groups, networks, committees, federations and 'independent' scholars work as a cooperative and supportive community. The thoughtful questions and strategic suggestions from the audience demonstrated such a community in the making: one not only 'imagined' in Anderson's (2004) sense, but alive and, quite literally, kicking.

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