



A PHILOSOPHICAL LOOK AT THE  
ASIAN MARTIAL ARTS

# STRIKING BEAUTY

BARRY ALLEN

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Asian Martial Arts*

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FOR GRAND MASTER DON CHA

Once one has traveled through the gates of the sages, it is hard  
to take anything else as a teaching.

MENCIUS



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## PREFACE

When the martial is matched with the spiritual and it is experienced  
in the body and mind, this then is the practice of martial arts.

"YANG FAMILY FORTY CHAPTERS"

When my hapkido teacher, Grand Master Don Cha, watches one of us perform a technique, he often says, "Good!" if it was OK, because he likes to be positive. A more competent performance may earn a praiseful "Excellent!" But we know we are doing well when he exclaims, "*Beautiful!*"

Even though we are training in techniques of extraordinary violence, there is no violence in our training, as we amiably practice with each other in the *dojang*. But *what* we are training in, what it is *for*, is violence. Where is the beauty in something so vested in violence? The question remains unanswerable until we understand something about beauty and something about violence. We also need to know something about the Asian martial arts themselves to understand their paradoxical relationship with beauty and violence.

What I mean by "Asian martial arts" is the originally Chinese, then East Asian, and now global traditions of usually unarmed personal combat. This is the martial arts of the kung fu movies, China's contribution to world cinema. It is also the martial arts one finds taught in practice halls in nearly every major city of the world. One can train in Shōtōkan karate in Nairobi and wing chun in Stockholm. Probably

millions of people, speaking all the languages of the world, have had some training in these martial arts traditions.<sup>1</sup>

The unexampled popularity of Asian combat arts might prompt philosophers to look into the practice and its values and assumptions, but in fact, few have. That is one reason for my writing this book. Another concerns the situation of philosophy in what might be called the post-Western period. Nearly all the martial arts I discuss date back to China. Over the centuries, practitioners and connoisseurs of these arts developed philosophical interpretations in written teachings that draw on the main currents of traditional Chinese thought, making the Asian martial arts a milieu for comparative philosophy. Accordingly, we can look at Chinese philosophy through the perspective of the martial arts and compare what we find in Western traditions. Working out this comparative argument explains my chapters and their topics.<sup>2</sup>

Chapter 1 places the Asian martial arts in the context of China's philosophical traditions. Texts by martial arts masters draw from Daoism, Buddhism (especially Chan or, in Japanese, Zen), and the military art of war philosophy. Confucianism, long China's official philosophy, has a more conflicted relation to the martial arts, and we shall have to ask why.

Chapter 2 shifts to Western traditions, beginning with Greek athletics and a polemic that the first philosophers raised against it. These philosophers invented the idea of "mind" and "body" as exclusive, independent realities and located human excellence on the mental side of our dissevered nature, leaving philosophy with no motivation or resources to think about corporeal arts or their knowledge. Asian martial arts philosophy predictably evades a dichotomy of mind and body. One cannot fight the body and ignore the mind because as Sunzi's *Art of War* says, to fight the mind is the very *dao* of combat. Dualism is not Western antiquity's only legacy to philosophy, however. The same Greek traditions also invented materialism, the first philosophy of the body. Not before Darwin, however, was materialism finally able to discredit idealism and begin to evolve new lines of corporeal philosophy, with possible new ideas for the appreciation of martial arts thought and practice.

Chapter 3 takes up the question about beauty and violence from the aesthetic end. We pass from comparative philosophy to comparative aesthetics, comparing the martial arts with sport and dance. Martial arts practice is like sport but is not sport and is dancelike but is not dance. Unfolding differences among these practices brings the aesthetic distinction of the martial arts into view. We see where the aesthetic qualities of these arts come from and why they have them.

Chapter 4 takes up the other end of the question: the relation between the martial arts and violence. Despite their athletic beauty, ritual etiquette, and ethical seriousness, these arts are combat arts, designed and trained for competent violence. Violence is a complex subject filled with many controversies. By describing some of them, we will be able to see where the practice of martial arts fits in the economy of violence.

This book does not have just one audience, unless it is simply the curious. It is a work of academic philosophy, albeit in an interdisciplinary mode. Sometimes I address questions of aesthetics, especially sport and performance aesthetics and somaesthetics. These arguments may interest those who work in the philosophy of art, of sports, and of the body. Readers unfamiliar with Chinese philosophy will find a curious angle into the subject, while others with expertise in Chinese philosophy may be interested to see its connections with the martial arts made thematic and discussed, as they seldom are. I hope I also have something to say to practitioners of the Asian martial arts, who may be interested in a philosophical appreciation of their practice.

I do not assume personal experience with the Asian martial arts, though I also do not explain them for someone who knows nothing about them. Accordingly, I assume some degree of familiarity on the reader's part. Merely having seen a few martial arts movies would be adequate, although the ideal reader would have a fair level of training (a few years). Some notion of what the Asian martial arts look like and some of their lore is enough, however, provided the reader also is interested in discovering what philosophy can say about this material. It is possible that this book speaks more to philosophers curious about the martial arts than to martial arts practitioners seeking a philosophy of their practice. My purpose is not to explain a "philosophy of the

martial arts.” Instead, I study selected features of Asian martial arts practice and traditions from a comparative philosophical perspective, identifying qualities that seem to me to sustain fruitful questions of the sort that I regard as philosophical rather than historical, technical, or religious.

I should be clear about three other things. There are more martial arts, Asian and otherwise, than I discuss in this book. I write most about the arts in which I have personally trained—kung fu, wushu, taijiquan, wing chun, karate, and hapkido—four Chinese, one Japanese, and one Korean art. I have trained in Korean hapkido the longest and still train for several hours each week. Another point concerns competition, both *kata* (forms) competition, and fighting tournaments, which have played no part in my training experience. I have trained in *kata*, sparring, and grappling, but I have never entered a competition and never will. In my first martial arts studio, where I trained in kung fu for three years, entering competition was expressly forbidden, but in my karate *dōjō*, it was encouraged. In the hapkido *dojang*, no one cares, though no one does it. Accordingly, martial arts practitioners to whom competition is important may find that I neglect their experience. Finally, I have never used martial arts training in a violent encounter. The one time I was confronted by a knife-wielding would-be assailant (actually there were four of them, but only one knife) occurred some years before I began training in martial arts, and I was able to resolve the situation without violence. Nothing that I have learned about self-defense from training in martial arts makes me wish I had done anything differently, except perhaps to have been better at evading the confrontation in the first place.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the martial arts teachers whose patience I have tried, in Canada, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, and fellow students who generously taught me how little I know, especially the training brothers at Hwa Won Yue hapkido under Grand Master Cha.

I am indebted to Weng Haizhen 翁海貞 for her unfailingly generous assistance with the Chinese language, though I must take responsibility for any errors that may have crept in despite her vigilance.

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STRIKING BEAUTY







I

## THE *DAO* OF ASIAN MARTIAL ARTS

### *Themes from Chinese Philosophy*

The *dao* does not contend but is good at victory; does  
not speak but is good at responding.

*DAODEJING*

**W**hat the world knows as the Asian martial arts began in China. China is not the only civilization to have spiritualized combat arts; there are other, no less ancient, examples in India and Mesopotamia. Yet the Chinese, drawing on the resources of a mature civilization, merged their arts of armed and unarmed combat with Buddhist meditation and Daoist inner alchemy, two of the most dynamic currents of their postclassical culture. Creatively synthesizing combative arts with these prestigious teachings reinvented their practice as a way of self-cultivation. Indeed, scholars increasingly recognize that “without reliable research and informed commentary on the martial arts, our knowledge of Chinese society and culture in general is uneven and incomplete.”<sup>1</sup>

The idea that the Chinese martial arts conveyed to nearly all the (later) fighting arts of East Asia (karate, jujitsu, hapkido, taekwondo, and so on) is the dual cultivation of the spiritual and the martial, each through the other, each perfected in the other, with the proof of the perfection consisting in a kind of effortless mastery of violence. The result is very different from Greek or Indian combat sports, and in fact, these martial arts are not sports at all, as the emphasis lies not on

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competition but on self-cultivation. The training is not so acrobatic that it must be reserved to the young; instead, it is approached as a lifelong practice that ties self-cultivation to continuous somatic development.

The prominence of ideas from Zen and Daoism in the martial arts literature is obvious. Confucianism, long China's orthodox system of thought, has had a less conspicuous interaction with the martial arts. Although Confucians did practice archery, they carefully separated power and skill. The prize went to one who could hit the target without penetrating the hide. In other words, the mind that aims the arrow is superior to the martial power that pierces the target. The mind has a virtue of its own and does not require force to be effective.<sup>2</sup>

Chinese martial arts thought refuses this opposition of mind and body (or ritual body and martial body). Martial arts practice is both a way of self-cultivation (as is Confucian ritual) and an effective fighting art. The "Yang Family Forty Chapters," a taiji classic, states,

When the martial is matched with the spiritual and it is experienced in the body and mind, this then is the practice of martial arts. . . . Our ancestors who were masters of the spiritual and the martial taught the arts of self-cultivation through physical culture, but not through the martial arts. . . . I have applied this to the martial arts, but it must not be viewed as a superficial technique. It must remain on the level of physical culture, self-cultivation, the dual development of body and mind, and the realm of sagehood and immortality. . . . My teachings should be transmitted as a martial art for self-cultivation.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, we look at points of interaction between Asian martial arts and sources in Chinese philosophy. I follow up on the allusions that martial masters use in writing about their art and discuss passages of Chinese philosophy that will resonate for modern readers with martial arts experience.<sup>4</sup>

#### SHAOLIN TEMPLE AND THE LEGEND OF BODHIDHARMA

The usual Chinese word for what we refer to as martial arts is *wushu*: *wu*, "martial," plus *shu*, "arts" or "techniques." The term dates from

the sixth century. Another expression is *wuyi*, “martial arts,” used from the third to the seventeenth century. No one category of the Asian martial arts practiced today adequately describes past practice in China, and it would be a mistake to insist on a single term for all of Chinese history for what *we* call “martial arts,” though *wushu* seems to come close.<sup>5</sup>

According to legend, these arts were introduced by Bodhidharma, a Buddhist monk who traveled from India to China in the fifth century and also was the founder and first patriarch of Chan Buddhism. Supposedly he carried a teaching from Buddhism’s homeland that had passed unwritten from mind to mind in an unbroken lineage from Gautama Buddha himself. After arriving in China, Bodhidharma found his way to Shaolin Temple. Dissatisfied with the Buddhist regimen he found there, he retired to a nearby cave, where he spent several years in meditation. Then he came down the mountain and began to teach the monks of the temple. The teaching is called Chan (in Japanese, Zen), from the Sanskrit *dhyāna*, meaning “meditation.” Finding the monks unfit for the demanding meditation he wanted to teach, Bodhidharma, born into India’s warrior class, instituted martial arts training to get them in shape. The same Indian teacher who was the founder of Chan (Zen) Buddhism was thus also the father of the Chinese martial arts.

Bodhidharma seems to have been a historical individual and not entirely legendary. He was a native of south India, a Brahmin, a Mahayana Buddhist, and meditation instructor who arrived in south China in around 479 and moved north to the Loyang (Shaolin) area, where he died around 530. More than that is hard to know from the evidence, which may be thin because Bodhidharma was not as extraordinary in life as later legend made him out to be. His story is almost entirely a fabrication, with some parts added as recently as the twentieth century. Scholars cannot find any mention of Chan anywhere until the eighth century, two centuries after Bodhidharma’s arrival in China, and when Chan does appear, it is not at Shaolin but at the so-called East Mountain School, which was unaware of its descent from Bodhidharma. Eventually, an East Mountain master settled at Shaolin Temple, which became a center for Chan practice. It is apparently at this time, centuries after Bodhidharma, that his name and Shaolin Temple became associated with Chan Buddhism, though still without a martial arts connection.<sup>6</sup>

Buddhism and martial arts should be oil and water. Buddhist law forbids weapons and fighting for monks. Moreover, *ahimsa*, “nonviolence,” is one of the most important precepts in all Buddhist traditions. Self-defense is expressly forbidden to Theravada clergy, as is any association with the military or involvement in combat. Violations of *ahimsa* are supposed to lead to excommunication from the *sangha* (a Buddhist monastic order) and rebirth as an animal or hungry ghost in hell. Designated violations of nonviolence include actual killing, counseling others to kill, or merely entertaining thoughts of killing. Monks are not permitted to carry weapons or even things that could be used as weapons, although every monk carries with him a knife and often a staff. Despite these legalities, China has a long history of military monks. As Buddhism took hold in their country, the Chinese increasingly questioned the necessity of obedience to monastic rules imported from India. A scholar of the subject concluded that the frequency of martial violence among Chinese Buddhist monks was inversely proportional to the actual political and military strength of the state. When the state was unable to handle bandits, rebellion, or enemy invasion, the *sangha* resorted to self-help.<sup>7</sup>

Administrative records document Shaolin monks being prosecuted for rebellion during the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534). By the early Tang (seventh century), evidence of Shaolin military monks abounds (see box). Their first fame was for staff fighting, not hand combat, which did not become a Shaolin specialty until the sixteenth century. Staff fighting draws on a Buddhist heritage, while hand fighting was based on Daoist *daoyin* self-cultivation methods. The *Treatise on Military Affairs* (ca. 1560) says that “the Buddha is an expert magician, master of many techniques, [and] Shaolin hand combat in the entire world is hardly equaled.” The *Exposition of the Original Shaolin Staff Method* (1610) calls their fighting technique “unsurpassed Buddhist wisdom” and observes that Shaolin monks consider martial training as a way to “reach the other shore,” a Buddhist expression for enlightenment. The author describes his own mastery of Shaolin martial art as a Zen “sudden enlightenment.” But there apparently is no reference connecting Bodhidharma to the martial arts of Shaolin Temple before the twentieth century. The connection is first made in a popular novel,

*Travels of Lao Ts'an* (ca. 1907), which was quickly confirmed in the *Illustrated Explanation of Shaolin Boxing Methods* and again in *Secrets of Shaolin Boxing*, both written by unknown authors around 1911.<sup>8</sup>

A passage in a sermon attributed to Bodhidharma explains perfect knowledge as “being always aware and nowhere obstructed.” In the Heart Sutra, a canonical Chan text, these obstructions are called “attainments” and are to be avoided: “Because there is no attainment in the mind of the Bodhisattva who dwells in *prajna paramita* [perfect wisdom,] there are no obstacles and therefore no fear or delusion.” This idea of obstruction secures the affinity between Chan/Zen and the Asian martial arts. Takuan Sōhō, a Japanese Zen master (1573–1645), addressed his “Mysterious Record of Immovable Wisdom” to a martial master. He identified ignorance, which both arises from and feeds

#### THE DYNASTIES OF CHINA

Xia	205–1766 B.C.E.
Shang	1766–1045
Zhou	1045–256
Spring and Autumn Period	722–481
Warring States Period	403–221
Qin	221–206
Han	202 B.C.E.–220 C.E.
Six Dynasties	222–589
Sui	589–618
Tang	618–907
Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms	907–960
Song	960–1279
Yuan (Mongol)	1279–1368
Ming	1368–1644
Qing (Manchu)	1644–1912

delusion, as the chief obstacle to enlightenment. In Zen, delusion does not mean a faulty appearance mistaken for reality; to be deluded is to have a mind that stops. Every stopping point is a delusion, a deceptively glittering jewel in a veil that the evil Maya casts over emptiness. This idea of stopping and its danger makes brothers of the Zen meditationist and the practitioner of martial arts, for whom nothing is as fatal as stopping, or what martial arts practitioners know as a “freeze.” As Takuan stated, “In Buddhism, we abhor this stopping and remaining with one thing or another. We call this stopping *affliction*. It is like a ball riding a swift-moving current: we respect the mind that flows on like this and does not stop for an instant in any place.”<sup>9</sup>

Be like water, even in your mind, especially in your mind: “In not remaining in one place, the Right Mind is like water.” The sagacious

Zen master appreciates the deceptive value of speed in the martial arts. The belief that speed is important is an insidious liability. “When the mind stops, it will be grasped by the opponent. On the other hand, if the mind contemplates being fast and goes into quick action, it will be captured by its own contemplation.” Speed is moving rapidly from one stop to another. More important to the martial arts is that one’s movements are one musical beat, one temporal measure, with a single interpenetrating duration. For that, one must stop stopping: “While hands, feet, and body may move, the mind does not stop any place at all, and one does not know where it is.”<sup>10</sup>

A mind that has stopped stopping is a mind in ceaseless flow. Such a mind is unmovable precisely because it never stops. Moving implies stopping, moving from one stop to another. What never stops is thus unmovable, and the enlightened never stop. The consummate expression of martial efficacy turns out to be what the Zen meditationist attains by a different path. Martial masters confirm the complementarity. “There are many things in martial arts that accord with Buddhism and correspond to Zen,” declared a samurai author. “In particular, there is repudiation of attachment and avoidance of lingering on anything. This is the most urgent point. Not lingering is considered quintessential. . . . If your mind stops and stays somewhere, you will be defeated in martial arts.”<sup>11</sup>

#### THE ART OF WAR

I understand the word “art” in “martial art” as Greek *techne* or, in Latin, *ars*. *Techne* refers to a corpus of knowledge that endows voluntary human action with a predictable outcome. This *techne* knowledge makes the world more amenable to our needs and desires and can be communicated to others. Archery, navigation, dance, carpentry—all are *techne* in that sense, and so are the Chinese martial arts. What is art-like about them is the principled knowledge expressed in a system of techniques and a philosophy of the body.

I apply the same explanation to the Chinese “art of war.” The famous *Sunzi bingfa*, or *Master Sun’s Military Methods*, commonly known as *The Art of War* (or simply as the *Sunzi*), is the greatest work of China’s military philosophy and also the oldest we know of, perhaps

even the first. It begot a tradition of military philosophy that came to include works attributed to Jiang Ziya (Jiang Taigong), legendary strategist of the dynastic Zhou conquest, and by historically attested post-classical figures like Zhuge Liang, China's most storied strategist, and the Tang emperor Taizong (598–649).<sup>12</sup>

The great discovery of the art of war is simply that there can be an *art* (a *dao* and a *techne*) of war: "Victory is something that you can craft and bring into being." War is therefore not condemned to brutality; it becomes instead a problem of art and knowledge. The *art* of war is victory achieved in an artful, even sagacious, way. The challenge (to art and knowledge) is not merely to triumph or cover oneself in glory, but to win the most with the least exposure, doing very little, ideally nothing at all. "To prove victorious in every battle is not the best possible outcome," says Sunzi. "The best possible outcome is to subdue the enemy's troops *without* fighting (*bu zhang*)." The victory of one who is good at war does not depend on divine favor, great courage, or superior force. A strategic commander wins because, having knowledge of the strategic situation, he positions himself where he is sure to win, prevailing over someone who has already lost. Knowing how to arrange that outcome is the art, the *techne*, the cunning technical sagacity of strategy. Since the decisive actions are inconspicuous and nearly invisible, there is nothing glorious in the victories. They look easy, despite being a case of "easy once you see it." If you do not see it and it traps you, you are defeated. It is not a fluke. It is a work of art, *techne*, superlatively effective knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

Sunzi's "no-fighting" principle is sometimes taken to mean that the best victories are bloodless, an interpretation that, however traditional, is probably the wishful thinking of the literati who kept the historical records. Elsewhere in the military classics it is evident that "no fighting" does not mean no fighting *at all*. It means not having to fight a lot, for a long time, with hard losses. The stratagems that make "no fighting" possible are seldom decisive. They merely expose the enemy's weakness, which is then attacked in a more or less orthodox way. Stratagem to Sunzi is not a bloodless alternative to violence but a way to enhance its effectiveness, so that a little can be made to go a long way. All the military classics insist that the commander must strike the right balance



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