

# BOOK REVIEW

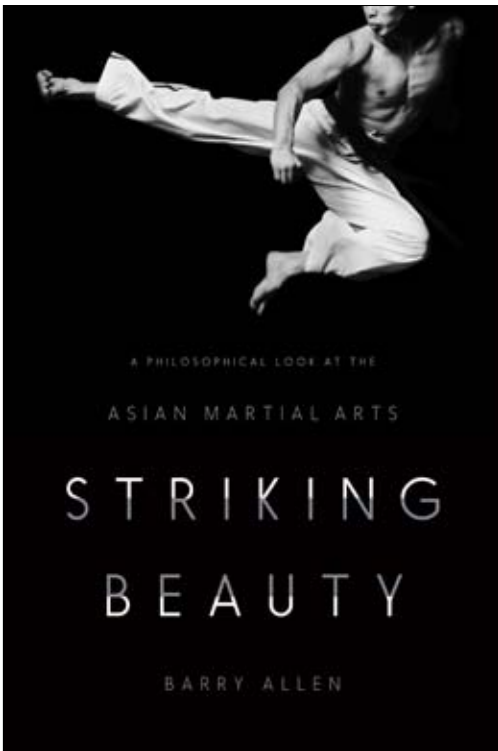
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## Striking Beauty: A Philosophical Look at the Asian Martial Arts

Barry Allen

Columbia University Press, 2015

272 pages     \$30 /£22



In his new book, *Striking Beauty: A Philosophical Look at the Asian Martial Arts* [2015], martial artist and author Barry Allen seeks to address the following question: ‘Where is the beauty in something so vested in violence?’ In order to understand the ‘paradoxical relationship with beauty and violence’ evidenced by the martial arts, we must, he proposes, ‘know something about the Asian martial arts themselves’ [ix]. The question that Allen has chosen to address, and the position from which he tries in his book to address it, already signals the book’s significance for martial arts studies scholars. Outside of the academy, Allen’s work is equally significant, for this paradoxical relationship with beauty and violence is also revealed in our everyday encounters with martial arts. Whether as practitioners, scholars, or practitioner-scholars, we all conceive of the ‘essence’ of martial arts differently. Some think that the emphasis lies in the word ‘martial’, i.e., in the practical, combative, *violent* aspects of the martial arts. Others think that the emphasis lies in the word ‘arts’, i.e., in the potential for deep, philosophical, *nonviolent* enlightenment.

This seems to be a never ending debate. Allen’s book, then, can perhaps offer us some useful perspectives on how to approach this issue in our scholarship and our practice. This does not, however, exhaust Allen’s project, for his ambition is much greater than this. Instead of focusing on one particular school of martial arts, or even one particular country, he is keen to analyse the entire phenomenon of what he calls ‘the Asian martial arts’ as a whole, an ‘originally Chinese, then East Asian, and now global’ tradition of ‘usually unarmed personal combat’ [ix]. In this sense, the term ‘martial arts’ is being used as an umbrella term for diverse cultural phenomena. Such an approach can, indeed, provide us with different perspectives on the ‘bigger picture’, but it also inevitably lacks the kind of focused attention that helps us understand particular cultural traditions and their unique philosophies.

In Chapter 1, Allen explores ‘the Asian martial arts’ by positioning the phenomenon in the context of Chinese philosophical traditions such as Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and the military ‘art of war’. Allen attempts to trace the usage of the term *wushu* back to its original usage in the Chinese language. He claims that *wushu* dates back to the sixth century, while *wuyi* dates back to the seventeenth century. Allen insists that *wushu* is the more accurate term for describing what we call ‘martial arts’ nowadays, as in his view, contemporary practices tend to disengage from their Chinese philosophical heritages.

In my view, this argument is slightly problematic. Even though many types of Asian martial arts are influenced by Chinese philosophical traditions, I do not think the term *wushu* should be the default term for all martial arts. For instance, as an aikidoka, it would be strange to think about aikido as a type of *wushu*. Not only is this a dubious proposition, the argument is not developed enough to encourage substantial debate. Allen’s survey of *wushu* relies exclusively on secondary sources, and in

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particular, on Peter A. Lorge's *Chinese Martial Arts: From Antiquity to the Twenty-First Century* [2011]. If it is truly Allen's contention that we should theorize the martial arts according to the concept of wushu, then more research into early, primary sources and manuscripts is necessary. How was the term wushu adapted and revised when it travelled to different places within Asia? Did this influence the names given to later martial arts styles? If so, how? The argument is not completely without merit, but in the state presented here, it is not sufficient.

Further, Allen briefly introduces the history of Indian Buddhist monk Bodhidharma and his travels in China. He claims that Bodhidharma introduced both Chán (Zen) and physical training to the local monks, making him, on Allen's account, 'the founder of Chán (Zen) Buddhism and thus also the father of the Chinese martial arts' [3]. Allen considers the link between Bodhidharma and the Asian martial arts to be underrepresented in historical accounts, and for his part, he credits Bodhidharma with combining spiritual meditation and physical training into a specific form of practice. From here, Allen proceeds to link martial arts to Sunzi's *The Art of War*, in which Allen is fascinated by its similarity to the Daoist tenet of 'fighting without fighting'. In particular, Allen discusses at length the notion of 'effortless effectiveness' [33] and its salience with respect to *The Art of War* on the one hand and martial arts practice on the other. Again, Allen brings up an interesting point but does not mount a convincing argument. Although there are vague connections, *The Art of War* is in fact very specific in its strategic discussions, and to focus only on the vague similarities to aspects of martial arts practice ends up devaluing *The Art of War*, obscuring the context in which it was written and the purpose it was designed to serve.

In Chapter 2, Allen moves from the relevance to Asian martial arts of traditions in 'Eastern' philosophy to traditions of 'Western' philosophy. As he prefaces the chapter: 'I [will] explain why a chapter on Western philosophy cannot have much to say to these arts, not for accidental reasons of language and geography, but because this philosophy tends to be struck mute before anything as corporeal as the martial arts' [61]. In Allen's view, Western philosophy is 'a movement of nature rationalism, conceiving nature as a rational order, a cosmos with a principle that is both intelligible and intelligent' [61]. Allen thus sets up 'Western Philosophy' (if only it could be one unified *thing*) as the 'Evil Other' in his philosophical history of martial arts. This is not the first time this binary has been deployed. Allen's purpose in deploying it is to foreground the mind/body conflict, which he identifies as a hallmark of Plato's metaphysics and which he traces from Plato throughout the 'whole' of 'Western Philosophy'. In doing so, the initial question of the paradoxical relationship between beauty and violence in martial arts seems to get lost (unless Allen wishes to map beauty/violence onto mind/body, although if this is his intent, it remains unclear).

By Chapter 3, as if sensing he had lost the initial thread, Allen tries to return to the question 'Where is the beauty in something so vested in violence?' by considering martial arts in relation to athletic competition and artistic performance:

**Martial arts practice is like sport but not sport and dancelike but not dance. It constantly refers to violence but refuses it a place in the training. The training is athletic, as it is in sport and professional dance, yet the competence that the martial arts teach stands apart from those of sport or dance by means of its external, instrumental value as a weapon. It is precisely this external, instrumental effectiveness, the weapons potential of martial arts, that accounts for the striking beauty of its movements. [112]**

Allen investigates the notions of athletics, sport, sport aesthetics, martial art aesthetics, and dance in order to strike a balance between beauty and violence:

**Movement tends to become aesthetically interesting as it becomes fluid, flowing, efficient, visibly**

energetic, and seemingly effortless, the design qualities of Asian martial arts techniques. Training becomes a theatre of skilled movement for the agent and an audience of teachers and fellow students. [158]

In Chapter 4, building off of the previous chapter's consideration of physical competence in sport and performance, Allen turns to the issue of what a body can do. He does this by constructing the martial body as a weapon: 'The techniques that the Asian martial arts teach are weapons. There is no other way to put it, which means that training in these arts is training in the use of weapons' [159]. I disagree with Allen's conceptualisation of the martial body as a weapon. A weapon does not have a conscious purpose, it does not have agency. A weapon does not *do* anything, it is *used, by someone, to do something*. Who – or what – 'uses' the martial body? Either the practitioner is self-aware or not. The logic to conceptualise the martial body as a weapon seems to be an effort on Allen's part to justify the violent element of martial arts. This is a problem, however, and it is related to the usage of 'the Asian martial arts' as an umbrella term, for different martial arts conceptualise violence differently.

Instead of investigating how one specific martial art conceptualises violence, Allen turns his discussion into a more general survey of different aspects of violence such as 'dread violence', 'representations of violence', 'violence and power', 'war and violence', 'terrible beauty', 'ethics and arts of violence', and so forth. All the while, there is an ever-widening gap between these discussions and Allen's initial question. How do these discussions contribute to a potential answer? One can be very violent but not necessarily a martial artist; similarly, a martial artist does not need to be violent in order to be a skilled martial artist. What Allen is trying to approach or grasp between violence and beauty, it seems to me, is a notion of *adaptability*. The beautiful aesthetic is enabled by the body's adaptability through mental and physical conditioning; likewise, adaptability is prized in combat situations including self-defence and sport. Some martial arts might be more violent than others, but violence, Allen seems to realise over the course of his book, has never been the essence of the martial arts; rather, the skills a martial artist acquires, skills in both intellectual and physical activities, are what need to become our focus.

In his epilogue, Allen returns to the fascinating paradox that inspired him to write this book, that 'something so warlike in conception should be beautiful to watch and joyful to perform' [206]. The way we can reconcile this paradox, Allen believes, is for us to realise, with him, that 'martial arts are not vested in violence. They are vested in life and address the ethical problem of a response to violence' [206]. Allen's epilogue is my favourite part of the book. 'Martial arts' means different things to different people, and Allen's book may not settle once and for all the debate on the 'essence' of the martial arts, but his book is significant for the passion with which he braves his philosophical journey. His joyful position, reached at the end of his journey, may serve as the final word in my review:

[Martial arts practice] resonates with everything it touches, changing how you think and act, perceive and feel. The beginning of power, knowing what your body can do, is the imagination of power, daring the experiment, and, only in that way, becoming more consistently who you are. [212]

## REFERENCES

Allen, Barry. 2015. *Striking Beauty: A Philosophical Look at the Asian Martial Arts*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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