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Fight Books in Comparative Perspective.

An Introduction

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Abstract – From the famous wrestling scenes of the Beni Hasan cemetery in Egypt to self-defence manuals of the globalised martial arts world of the twenty-first century: the depiction and description of body techniques of combat is a phenomenon that can be witnessed throughout history and across the world. For several hundred years, such techniques – pertaining to the use of edged weapons, impact weapons, and unarmed combat – have been laid down via image and/or text in a large number of fight books from various parts of the world. The volume “Fight Books in Comparative Perspective” collects the contributions to the conference of the same title that was held at Deutsches Klingenmuseum Solingen in 2017, and aims to open up an interdisciplinary discussion of the topic.

Keywords – fight books, technical literature, martial arts, martial arts studies

Martial arts are everywhere, and everywhen. Be it as close-quarter fighting systems, as combat sports, as military or ritual practices, as performances or health exercises:¹ it is difficult to find a culture – historical or modern – that does not possess one or another form of martial art. Though these arts vary from place to place, they often share striking similarities, not only in the movements or “techniques” they perform, but also, for example, in their relevance for social life, in their internal group structures, in their narratives about their own practices, or in the supernatural beliefs they have incorporated.

One such striking similarity, visible even on a material level, is the production of fight books. The term fight books is used mostly by the study of historical martial arts of Europe, the field of study to which *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* is dedicated. Here, “fight books” are understood as:

A vast and heterogeneous collection of manuscripts and printed books, destined to transmit on paper (or parchment) in a systematised way a highly complex system of gestures or bodily actions, often, but not always, involving the use of weapons of different sorts. The system represents a body of experience-based oral knowledge concerning all

¹ Wetzler, ‘Martial Arts Studies as Kulturwissenschaft’.

aspects of individual combat, both armed and unarmed, and taking place in different socio-cultural contexts and material situations [...]²

Even a superficial glance over the martial arts traditions from outside Europe reveals that the “fight book” described here is not at all exclusive to the Western world. On the contrary: China and Japan, to look at the two nations that have probably had the strongest influence on the modern idea of martial arts, have their own extensive and rich histories of martial arts knowledge turned literature. Once the scholar picks up the threads laid out by the European, Chinese, and Japanese traditions, they will become aware that the phenomenon of fight books is much more widespread than one might anticipate. From Korea to South America, martial arts practices have been recorded in both text and image.

Once a society develops a book culture, martial arts usually end up entering it. Among the vast field of books concerned with fighting (including tournament books, military books, and martial histories), fight books, however, mark a distinct category in which bodily knowledge and martial skills form the core content. The notion of literary genres, and their borders, must of course be discussed in the context of the societies that produced the assumed genres. Fight books, however, are indeed specific insofar as they translate combative movements into text and image. The largest corpus to receive attention among Western scholars so far is the Germanic technical literature produced between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries, but there are others, as this volume will point out.

The contexts of production and (assumed) use, and the strategies applied to the transmission of knowledge are sometimes strikingly similar over space and time, but sometimes differ widely. The latter, however, can also be the case when two fight books from the same culture and era are compared.

Considering the differences within the fight book corpus, we may question the restriction of our perspective to the material media of “paper (or parchment)”: there is every reason to set the (known) origins of the fight book in human history with the famous depiction of wrestling techniques in the Egyptian tomb murals of Beni Hasan, ca. 2000 B.C. At the other end of the historical spectrum are the caption of martial arts movement for didactic purposes, first on photograph and then on film, ultimately leading to the online instructional videos of the twenty-first century.

As is often the case in martial arts studies, the various incarnations of a relevant phenomenon – here the fight book – may have been studied within its related and specialised academic fields, while the field itself lacks an attempt to connect these different approaches and the insights they have generated. The editors of this volume believe that discarding the limits generated by disciplinary approaches (or by the differences of the primary sources themselves) will bring new comparative findings for the study of martial arts.

² Verelst, Jaquet, and Dawson, ‘Introduction’, p. 9.

To foster such an interdisciplinary approach in the analysis of fight books, Deutsches Klingensmuseum Solingen (the German Blade Museum) hosted the “Fight Books in Comparative Perspective” conference, in cooperation with *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* and the Kommission Kampfkunst und Kampfsport (Committee for Martial Arts Studies in the German Association for Sports Science), on 9 and 10 November 2017. Sixteen lectures and three posters were given at the conference. The attending scholars came from various academic and practitioner backgrounds. They exchanged their findings and reflected together upon the following topics and questions, among others:

Materiality: What can the material properties of a fight book reveal about its intended function and actual use?

Depiction of technique: What visual strategies are applied to render movement into image?

Textuality: Which terminologies and forms of text are chosen to convey the techniques to the reader?

Weaponry: For which weapons are the described techniques intended, and what does that reveal about their audience?

Martial arts context: What do the books tell us about the martial arts world they are part of?

Wider historical context: Which role do the fight books play in the society they belong to, and how do they reflect it?

This volume contains the majority of the conference proceedings. All sixteen lectures, however, have been videotaped and can be watched on the YouTube channel of Deutsches Klingensmuseum Solingen.³

We hope that “Fight Books in Comparative Perspective” will be able to demonstrate how much a comparative, interdisciplinary approach can benefit the field of martial arts studies. Fight books are one of the most striking and fascinating material aspects of martial arts culture, but they are only one among many. Other (material and immaterial) aspects of the martial arts will have to be taken into similar perspectives.

While some authors in the history of the fight book might have claimed that their works answered all of the mysteries of combat possible, we are well aware that the volume at hand cannot attain such a universality. But it may be a first step towards a better understanding of the fight book as a global phenomenon.

³ DKM YouTube channel.

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