

# Martial Arts in/as Science Fiction

Luke White (l.white@mdx.ac.uk)

*Paper for the 9th Annual International Conference of the Martial Arts Studies Association  
and Martial Arts Studies Research Network, Cardiff University, 4–6 June 2024.*

## Part 1: Martial Arts *in* and *as* Science Fiction

### A Clash of Genres?

It may initially seem somewhat odd to bring together kung fu and science fiction as a topic of study. Our first thought might be the extent to which we are dealing with two rather distinct and perhaps even diametrically opposed genres. While science fiction is premised around a techno-scientific future, martial arts media are typically located in an ancient past. In the *wuxia* film, for example, swordsmen and swordswomen with fantastical powers inhabit a realm where deep history and mythology bleed into one another. Of the 250-odd martial arts pictures made by Shaw Brothers between 1965 and 1985, I can only think of one – *Inframan* (1975) – with prominent science fiction elements.

However, martial arts, it seems, are everywhere in science fiction. In 1964, well before the kung fu craze, Frank Herbert's Orientalist and neo-medieval *Dune* abandoned laser guns for sword-fighting and introduced the 'weirding way' of the Bene Gesserit nuns, who are able to overcome armed opponents through mindful control of breath, body and energy. Then in

1966, during the same season that Bruce Lee appeared on American screens in *The Green Hornet*, William Shatner was taking what *Star Trek* fans lovingly term ‘Kirk Fu’ to the entire galaxy. Later *Star Trek* series, of course, would introduce *mok’bara*, a kind of Klingon Tai Chi, and the [also Klingon] art of the *bat’leth*, a weapon somewhat resembling the Chinese deer-horn knife. By the summer of 1970, the ‘Third Doctor’ Jon Pertwee was introducing ‘Venusian Aikido’ to the repertoire of *Doctor Who* as part of an attempt to make the series more action-packed.

Then, released in 1977, *Star Wars* – the film series that above all others put SF at the heart of the cinematic mainstream – borrowed eclectically from both samurai and kung fu cinema to offer us something rather like a *wuxia* in space – with warrior monks, lightsabers and the yin-yang mysticism of ‘the Force’.

Martial arts, furthermore, became a prominent element of the techno-Orientalist world imagined in the cyberpunk literature of the 1980s and 1990s. This found cinematic expression in *The Matrix*, where Neo uploads the world’s martial arts into his brain (see figure 1) and trains in a virtual dojo with Morpheus... The *Matrix*’s combination of digital effects with Yuen Woo-ping’s choreography and wirework also created the blueprint for the action style of the Marvel and DC superhero franchises that dominate the box-office today – and, as exemplified in the various Avengers, X-Men, or Fantastic Four films, proceed in a largely science-fictional mode.



*Figure 1: Neo (Keanu Reeves) uploads the world's martial arts to his brain in The Matrix.*

*Video still. © 1999 Village Roadshow Films.*

So, whilst science fiction has been a relatively marginal presence in Asian martial arts media, images of martial arts have been ubiquitous within Western science fiction, in a way that seems to call for some analysis. Indeed, this seems to have been a key space within which Asian martial arts were received within the Anglophone cultural imagination.

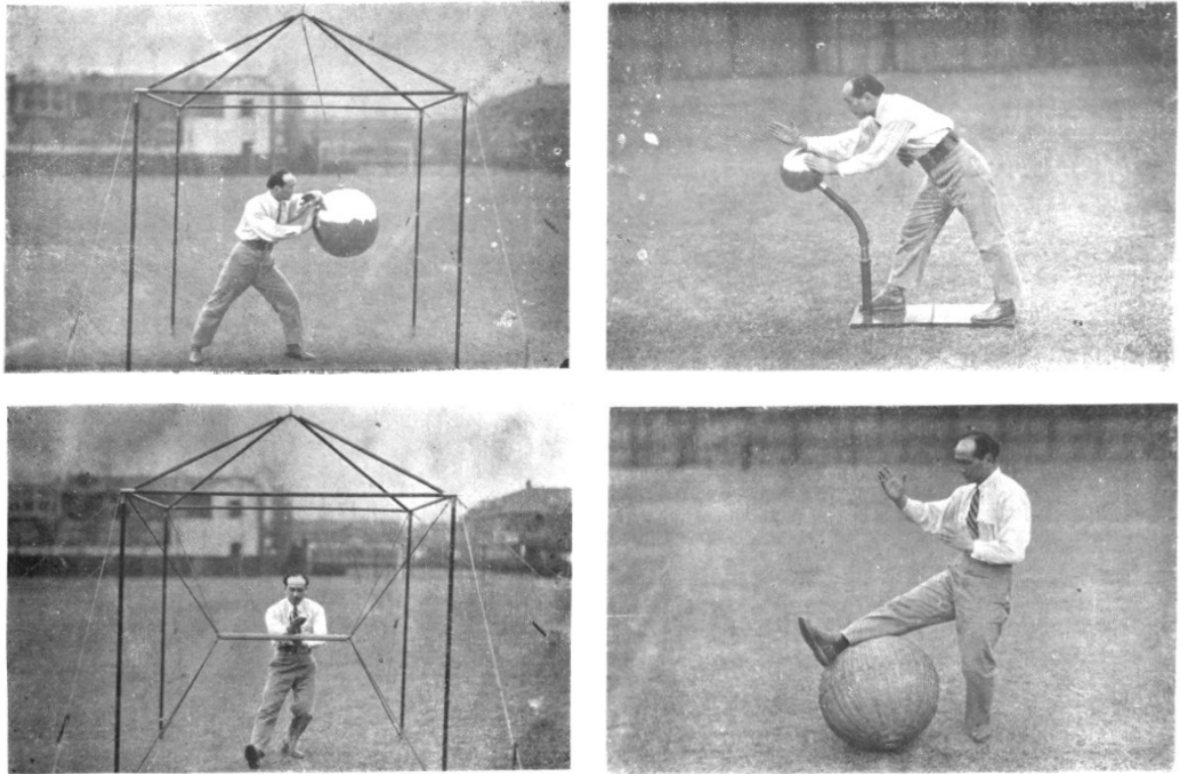
Moreover, martial arts studies scholars such as Paul Bowman (2019) have argued that the ‘media supplements’ of the martial arts are not merely incidental to their practices but are an inextricable part of them. The fantastical and science-fictional martial art of lightsaber fighting, for example, has made the leap from the cinema screen to ‘real life’ dojos and competitions across the world (Judkins 2016), acting for its practitioners as a valid substitute for ‘traditional’ combat styles and fulfilling, we must presume, many of the same fundamental desires and investments. Can we, then, think about martial arts not only *in* science fiction, but also *as* science fiction? And in that case, can approaches from science fiction theory help think about martial arts practices and media alike?

## Back to the (Kung)Future

In spite of the examples I have just been giving, it is not only in the present and in the West that we might find such science-fictional martial practice. Republican-era Chinese martial arts manuals slip in register with astounding ease from mythical stories of mystical sages and Daoist philosophising to scientifically rationalised discourses on health and fitness that evoke utopian visions of a future China strengthened and healed through modernised technologies of the body. They, too, this is to say, engage in a kind of ‘speculative fiction’. Such discourses of martial modernisation grew up in the wake of the trauma of the Boxer Rebellion and alongside an interest within intellectual circles in the works of European writers such as Jules Verne and H.G. Wells of such intensity that China had an operative category of ‘science fiction’ (*kexue xiaoshuo*) in the first decade of the twentieth century, well before the term was coined in English (Isaacson 2013: 35).

Perhaps the most vivid example of this lies in the labours of Chu Minyi, a prominent intellectual and political figure who took up a senior position in the Republic’s Guoshu Institute. Educated in France, Chu became a physical culture enthusiast, but promoted the circularity of Tai Chi movement as more biomechanically rational than the harmfully ‘angular’ motions of European calisthenics. His 1929 book, *Taiji Boxing Photographed* included a preface extolling the scientific benefits of the art and its use in ensuring the progress of the nation. It also included: a reprint of the Yang-family Tai Chi ‘classics’; photographically illustrated instructions on his teacher Wu Jianquan’s form; and documentation of his own ‘scientific’ apparatuses for enhancing solo practice (see figure 2), which would not have looked out of place in the cockpit of a flying saucer in a 1950s American B-movie... Chu also had these apparatuses recorded in an educational cine-film, and presented them at the International Exposition of 1930 in Liege. Chu also organised a performance of Chinese martial arts at

the 1936 Berlin Olympics closing ceremony, and the centrepiece of this was a display of his own simplified and rationalised version of a Tai Chi calisthenics, which Adam Frank (2006: 166–7) has noted seemed to owe more to Bauhaus modernism than the misty mountains of ancient Wudang.



*Figure 2: Chu Minyi's 'scientific' Tai Chi training devices, from his book  
Taiji Boxing Photographed (1929).*

When writing, Chu, furthermore, went beyond the standard nationalist rhetoric, envisioning the rationalised Chinese martial arts as heralding a universal human civilization of utopian peace and prosperity. Slipping beyond even the limits of earth and humanity, then,

such scientific kung fu could be, in his words, ‘internationalized, globalized, and humanized throughout the universe’ (cited by Morris 2004: 221).<sup>1</sup>

## **Part 2: Martial Arts and Science Fiction Theory**

Nonetheless, when we put aside particularly apt examples such as Chu Minyi, the idea that martial arts is essentially science-fiction is not meant literally: I mean the equation as a heuristic device rather than a matter of hermeneutics – as an experiment to see what comes into focus through the conjunction. What does seem to emerge is a set of significant affinities between the two. Turning to science fiction theory to start to conceptualise this further, one set of ideas there that resonates in the realm of martial arts are those revolving around the tension between the ‘real’ and the ‘fantastic’, which remain core anxieties in the reception of both SF and the martial arts. Within an epistemologically empiricist-realist culture that takes the naturalist novel as its model of literary orthodoxy and privileges mimesis over fantasy, an enthusiast of either SF or martial arts can quickly be seen as subject to nerdishly aberrant, ‘escapist’ desire.

---

<sup>1</sup> The quote here is from the ‘inaugural essay for the *Guoshu Unification Monthly*’.

Judkins (2016a) discusses another article for the *Educational Review* in 1928, titled ‘Central Committee Member Chu Min Yi’s Great Hopes for the Guoshu: Presenting Glad Tidings to All of Humanity’, which presents a similar argument regarding the importance of the scientised martial arts not only for Chinese national strength, but as a gift to humanity as a whole.

## **Darko Suvin and the Problem of Fantasy**

Probably the most influential attempt to define the SF genre in the face of this prejudice – and to valorise it as a meaningful literary project rather than infantile fantasy – is Darko Suvin's *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979). In this, Suvin maps SF against two other genres.

First, SF differs from the 'realist' or 'naturalistic' fiction that dominated the modern European novel, in that there is some 'novum' – a difference – that separates the imagined world of the novel from the humdrum world of the here and now in which realist literature is set.

However, Suvin is also careful to separate SF from the fantasy story – a genre for which he has nothing but scorn. Although SF and fantasy share a concern with strange, novel realities (with an element, this is to say, of 'estrangement'), what Suvin argues distinguishes them is that SF asks its readers to engage with fantastical realities through a mode of thinking that is rational, science-based, critical and realistic. Fantasy, bathing us in the irrationality of myth, he thinks, is proto-fascistic; SF, returning us to a materialist perspective but allowing us to imagine a future different from our own, is revolutionary. I don't have time today to discuss the problems with Suvin's analysis, or the value judgements that he draws from it,<sup>2</sup> but the thing of value to note for martial arts as well as science fiction studies is the way his schema breaks from thinking the fantastical and realistic as a simple spectrum, but allows us to think about their operation alongside each other, interacting multidimensionally.

A first way to map this back to the realm of martial arts is in terms of the transformations in Hong Kong action cinema of the 1960s and 1970s which led to the appearance of

---

<sup>2</sup> For criticism of Suvin's distinction between SF and fantasy, see for example Mieville (2009). There's a more general discussion of Suvin's ideas and the difficulties of defining science fiction in the first chapter of Roberts (2002: 1–46).

‘kung fu’ as a genre distinct from *wuxia*. When Shaw Brothers announced, in 1965, a ‘new action era’, it was in the name of a new ‘realism’ that left behind the fantastical elements of older swordplays (Gravestock, 2006).

Kung fu – especially as exemplified by Bruce Lee – thus sought to render the impossible perfection of the warrior body through a cinematic ‘reality-effect’. It often did this through the actually near-inhuman skills of its stars, collapsing the ‘real’ bodies and performance of the actors and stuntmen with the abilities of the characters they play, but also enhancing these through narrative, camerawork, editing, and effects. (This is to say, however amazing a martial artist he was, even Bruce Lee couldn’t fight like the characters he played!) Here, like the SF story, we are asked to engage in a ‘cognitive’ response - not simply enjoying the bizarre idea that humans might be able to fly, shoot bolts of *qi* from their hands or make their bodies invulnerable to weapons, but rather inviting us to view the depicted fantasy of violent action in a more realist mode... But the relation to a fundamentally fantastical level of skill and mastery and our reception of this through the spectacular and the marvellous ultimately locate kung fu not in the literary space of naturalism but one much closer to science fiction.

Beyond the screen and in the dojo, many martial arts make claims more in the epistemological mode of the naturalist novel – they aim to give us ‘the truth’ of self defence on ‘the street’, for example. However, I suspect that modern martial arts practices inhabit an intermediary space similar to that of the kung fu film or the SF story, which asks for a mixture of cognitive exploration (in terms of the ‘real’) *and* a negotiation of spaces of fantasy.



### Part 3: Fantasies

The realism involved here is, moreover, *itself* a kind of fantasy, a fantasy about our relation to reality. What martial arts discourse and science fiction share in cleaving to this ‘realism’ is an orientation to the idea of the ‘modern’ as a mode of scientific rationality, envisioned through the image of progress. This is explicit, of course, in science fiction’s concern with futuristic technology and its rejection of myth and magic, but it is also a core part of modernising martial arts discourse spanning from Republican-era reformists such as Chu Minyi right up to the mixed martial artists of the present.

But the fantasy of modernity, science fiction theorists have been quick to point out, is not only one of *time*; its temporality was fundamentally also *spatialised*, in an image of empire (Grewell 2001; Kerslake 2007; Rieder 2008). For such theorists, more fundamental to the genre than its iconic motifs of starships, laserguns and robots are the narrative tropes of exploration, encounter, invasion, settlement and civilizational war (Grewell 2001). Mapped along a centre-periphery axis, the nineteenth-century conception of ‘progress’ that formed the SF genre was imagined in terms of a racialising social-Darwinist narrative, which viewed ‘The West’ as the summit of development and ‘The East’ as a lingering atavism of the primitive (Rieder 2008: 23–27).

Science fiction’s vision of the future has therefore always remained saturated with Orientalist imagery. Once the past is mapped into the space of the present, the future, too, can be packed with all the colour of a past that is never quite lost, however anachronistic it appears. This, then, may be one reason that we find martial arts so insistently in European and American science fiction media, where they increasingly became a part of that colour through which the Orient – and indirectly progress, too – was imagined in the late twentieth century.

However, science fiction has also – perhaps from the outset – not only been a literature expressing colonialism’s world-view, but also one in which empire was questioned and confronted. John Rieder (2008: 20–21), for example, has highlighted the extent to which exploration and expansion also involved a ‘Copernican’ unseating of European subjectivity from the centre of its universe, finding itself just one of many forms of life and society. Science fiction, with its insistent concern with alien ‘contact’, is a literature that registers and explores the unsettling effects of this. As its enthusiasts often emphasise, SF often involves sympathy or identification with the ‘alien’ and the ‘other’. We might extend Rieder’s argument to note that Asian martial arts practices and their media supplements – given their globalised nature – are also a means through which such ‘contact’ is negotiated and worked through.

In this regard, it seems significant that the examples of martial arts in science fiction media that I started with seem to explode into view exactly at the moment that the age of empire was giving way to decolonization and postcoloniality. Each is also remarkable for the ways that they – in however problematic a manner – sought to navigate a postcolonial universe. For example, *Dune*, however much it was packed with Orientalist stereotypes, has been lauded as a work allegorising and challenging the ongoing existence of an American petrochemical empire and offering a complex critique of the disintegration of the nationalist Third World revolutions of the postwar period, in many ways in line with later waves of postcolonial thought (Gaylard 2010). In spite of its reiteration of the frontier myth, *Star Trek* was also radical in its envisioning of a multiracial future (Roberts 2002: 127–31), and *Star Wars*, too, although it mapped its universe through the familiar and highly racialised landscape of nineteenth-century empire, also envisioned its heroes in the mould of Vietnam’s guerrilla war against the high-tech might of US imperialism (De Kosnik 2015: 98).

## In Place of a Conclusion: Toward Kungfuturism

This paper set out to examine the ‘elective affinities’ between science fiction and martial arts. I’ve argued that such affinities stem from a shared fantasmatic colonial and postcolonial space-time of modernity, and this helps make sense not only of the swelling presence of images of martial arts in Anglophone science fiction, but also a longer presence of something rather like ‘speculative fiction’ in the modernising martial arts themselves. I’ve also sought to suggest that the ‘realism’ with which martial arts are often treated in their popular discourse is itself a product of the colonial space-time of scientific progress.

But I’ve also proposed that thinking of martial arts as speculative rather than just realist means they might not only replicate dominant ideologies, but also contest them. The concern with the other and alien in science fiction, for example, has also meant that it has been increasingly explored from non-white and non-Western perspectives – a phenomenon that, within the Black American context, Mark Dery (1994: 179–187) termed Afrofuturism. For a range of Black writers, artists, and musicians, it was the engagement with the speculative that allowed an emancipation from the oppressive weight of ‘what is’ (the demand to ‘keep it real’) and provided a license to imagine the world differently (see e.g. Nelson 2000: 37). Given the prominent place of martial arts in Black American popular culture, it’s hardly surprising that they played an important part of the Afrofuturist imaginary, too.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Examples range from Samuel R. Delaney’s classic 1967 novel *The Einstein Intersection* to the techno-primitivist weaponry and warrior ethos of Wakanda in the Black Panther films via the post-apocalyptic landscape of the *Afro-Samurai* anime series and musical projects as diverse as the Wutang Clan’s rap and Photek’s drum and base soundscapes – or, for

To bring this paper on speculative martial arts to an end, then, I'd like to finish with some speculation of my own: on the model of this Afrofuturism, might we also imagine a *Kungfuturism*, whose outlines can be traced from Chu Minyi's Republican-era tai chi manuals through Japanese *tokusatsu* television and American New Wave science fiction to Afrofuturist rap videos – and even perhaps the rise to global prominence in the last decade of Chinese science fiction?

---

that matter, Afrika Bambaataa's *Planet Rock*, the single which pioneered hip-hop bringing together warrior mythology with the futuristic sounds of Kraftwerk's synthpop.

## References

- Bowman, Paul. 2019. *Deconstructing Martial Arts*. Cardiff: Cardiff University Press.
- De Kosnik, Abigail. 2015. 'The Mask of Fu Manchu, Son of Sinbad, and Star Wars IV: A New Hope: Techno-Orientalist Cinema as a Mnemotechnics of Twentieth-Century U.S.-Asian Conflicts'. In *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, edited by David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu. Asian American Studies Today. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Dery, Mark, ed. 1994. *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Frank, Adam D. 2006. *Taijiquan and the Search for the Little Old Chinese Man: Understanding Identity through Martial Arts*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gaylard, Gerald. 2010. 'Postcolonial Science Fiction: The Desert Planet'. In *Science Fiction, Imperialism and the Third World: Essays on Postcolonial Literature and Film*, edited by Ericka Hoagland and Reema Sarwal, 21–36. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co.
- Gravestock, Peter. 2006. 'The Real and the Fantastic in the *Wuxia Pian*'. *Metro Magazine*, no. 148, 106–111.
- Grewell, Greg. 2001. 'Colonizing the Universe: Science Fictions Then, Now, and in the (Imagined) Future'. *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 55 (2): 25–47. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1348255>.
- Isaacson, Nathaniel. 2013. 'Science Fiction for the Nation: Tales of the Moon Colony and the Birth of Modern Chinese Fiction'. *Science Fiction Studies* 40 (1): 33–54.
- Judkins, Benjamin N. 2016. 'The Seven Forms of Lightsaber Combat: Hyper-Reality and the Invention of the Martial Arts', *Martial Arts Studies*, no. 2. <https://doi.org/10.18573/j.2016.10067>.

- Judkins, Benjamin N. 2016a. 'Lives of Chinese Martial Artists (17): Chu Minyi – Physician, Politician and Taijiquan Addict'. *Kung Fu Tea* (blog). 27 May 2016.  
<https://chinesemartialstudies.com/2016/05/27/lives-of-chinese-martial-artists-17-chu-minyi-physician-politician-and-taijiquan-addict/>.
- Kerslake, Patricia. 2007. *Science Fiction and Empire*. Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies 35. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Mieville, China. 2009. 'Cognition as Ideology: A Dialectic of SF Theory'. In *Red Planets: Marxism and Science Fiction*, edited by Mark Bould and China Mieville, 231–48. London: Pluto Press.
- Morris, Andrew D. 2004. *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Nelson, Alondra. 2000. 'Afrofuturism: Past-Future Visions', *Colorlines* 3 (1): 34–37.
- Rieder, John. 2008. *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Roberts, Adam. 2002. *Science Fiction*. Taylor and Francis e-Library Edition. New Critical Idiom. London: Routledge.
- Suvin, Darko. 1979. *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

© 2024 Luke White. All rights reserved. The author asserts his copyright over this text. Any reproduction of the work without express written permission is forbidden.