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In this engaging book, Anthony Schmieg sets himself a momentous task, to untangle the traditions, underpinning ideas and myths surrounding Chinese martial arts systems. His expressed aims are to describe the ‘particular worldview of high martial artists’ (Preface) and to ‘establish a guide-post for sincere future scholars of the Chinese martial arts’ (Introduction, p. 6).

This book is grounded in the experience and training history of the author with his master Dr. Xia Boyan in Taiwan beginning in the 1970s. It provides an account and elucidation of many fascinating dimensions of the cultural worldview, philosophical concepts and practical tenets that surround the Chinese martial arts and Chinese medicine. In doing this, it offers a rare attempt to bring together practice and thinking in relation to these complex cultural phenomena. Schmieg readily acknowledges the difficulties of this task, given the ‘spiralling helix of inclusiveness’ in the book’s terrain (p. 4). He is also very clear that whilst his aims are scholarly in intent, the approach of the book does not follow formal academic practice and its presentation is not systematic, but mirrors the way in which he was taught the art.

It is important to note that efforts to bridge these worlds are extremely rare: most literature regarding martial arts is either i) pedagogical in orientation—‘how to’ guides written by practitioners as supplements to practical training; or ii) scholarly work dealing with martial arts but written without any practical insight. The latter are often related only tangentially to the
martial arts, in the context of studies of political history or medical systems. There are few exceptions; only a small handful of scholar-practitioners, such as Phillip Zarrilli, have embraced both worlds successfully.

Anthony Schmieg, as a physician and martial artist, offers another effort to cross these boundaries, and the value of his work should be viewed in this context, including the originality of its focus and style. At many points, the book is peppered with Chinese sayings and contains insight into the meaning of these formulas within their broader cultural context; for example the necessity of ‘eating bitterness’ (chi ku) and ‘unobtrusive influence’ (mo lua). This provides a tangible closeness to the worldview and mindset of the martial artist, which is a rare achievement and one of the book’s distinctive features. The author refers to the lack of scholar-practitioners in this area and admits that to publish ‘insider’ perspectives can contravene the secrecy of martial arts communities. This in itself is revealing, as is his stated intent of doing this in order to help preserve and repair these practical traditions.

The book is not presented as a formal contribution to the academic literature, although in the Preface the author expresses the desire that its scholarly value will be evident. In many ways, this is the case. The positive contributions that this book makes to knowledge of martial arts practice are several. It also provides a welcome and clear refutation of several myths surrounding Chinese martial arts, dealing with the erroneous assertion of the influence of Indian Buddhism, distinctions between Chinese boxing schools between hard/soft, internal/external and northern/southern, the thorny issues around the origins of t'aijiquan and the invulnerability legends of martial arts masters.

Most importantly perhaps, it explores at a deep level the function of Chinese martial arts within culture, showing connections and analogies with Chinese medicine in order to explain the role of martial arts in the pursuit of societal balance and harmony. Overall, the balance of attention is on martial arts rather than medicine, and the author does not refer to many classic texts in the history of medicine. The relationship between martial arts and medical practices in Chinese culture could itself form the basis of a dedicated book and the links are framed in various ways: for example, ‘the martial arts are a subset of medicine’ (p. 30) and martial artists as the physician’s instrument to rid society of its diseased elements (p. 181), but that both formed an ‘ancient alliance’ (p. 117) to enhance cultural order and reduce disorder, that was severed during the Cultural Revolution. Some of this material could be explained and justified more fully, but this is symptomatic of the difficulty of engaging in such sizeable challenges within the space of one book.
A deeper exploration of the book’s content confirms the primary focus on martial arts and the Introduction flags the fundamental difficulty in the book, due to the way that martial arts and Chinese culture are entwined. Chapter 1 points out the cultural and linguistic problems that surround the study of Chinese martial arts (as well as the Chinese historical record in general). Schmieg makes thoughtful comments on the issues for research methods and on p. 8 unpacks his understanding of the term ‘traditional Chinese martial arts’, but there is no clearly defined scope in terms of the overlaps with other martial systems and artistic traditions. Chapter 2 focuses on Daoism as the platform for the Chinese understanding of change and its reflection in human relationships. Valuable discussion is provided on the concepts of balance that support the Chinese worldview, for individuals and for the state, as well as the ‘psychosocial tools’ of the martial arts discipline, particularly the shifu-shih teaching relationship. Schmieg argues that the martial arts tradition ‘fulfilled its social contract and retained cultural legitimacy’ (p. 38) by remedying disordered social elements. In chapter 3 he expands this theme of the martial artist as promoter and regulator of human culture, discussing the role of the sage, the man of action and the ‘wandering swordsman’ (you xia).

Chapter 4 draws out ‘core principles’ about how societies act, emphasising how Daoism supports the ‘primary’ traditions or ‘pluripotent’ techniques of Chinese martial arts. In chapter 5 these primary traditions are contrasted with the ‘mutable forms of modern martial arts disciplines’ (p. 102). The author provides informed commentary on the effects of the Cultural Revolution and the use of certain lenses by Western scholars engaged in research in China in the later twentieth century. Chapter 6 examines the separation of military culture (jun) from martial culture (wu), in terms of military activity as overt in service of government, as opposed to the covert, Daoist-influenced martial systems. Chapter 7 compares Japanese martial arts practices, noting key differences in their teaching relationship dynamics and supporting religious and philosophical traditions. Schmieg is clear about the original influence of Chinese upon Japanese systems, whilst acknowledging the blending at all levels in modern Asian martial arts. In chapter 8, he refutes many of the popular myths in martial arts discourse, noting that these are often generated outside martial arts circles and by scholars who lack understanding of the informing traditions. Finally, chapter 9 reiterates the critical role of Daoism in providing core tenets and values that guide Chinese martial arts and their societal role in promoting and sustaining human culture, a role increasingly compromised by dominant discourses and practices of scientific materialism.

Overall, however, there is tension at its heart of this thought-provoking book, since its aim is to explore cultural practices and philosophical foun-
dations, but its arguments are not grounded in systematic or transparent approaches to social and cultural analysis. This is a major drawback, as several terms used to support key points need to be critically explored, rather than taken at face value. These problematic ideas recur throughout the book, including:

1. *The notion of ‘traditional’*: Schmieg demonstrates much insight into politically-influenced changes to martial arts and medical practices in East Asia, but at no point is the concept of ‘tradition’ given a clear frame of understanding to help the reader to make sense of these shifts. Where his definitions are set out on p. 8, ‘traditional’ has no defined scope that can be mapped against the evolution of martial arts in China in recent centuries. The difficulties are acknowledged in Chapter 1 and elaborated in chapter 8, but the book therefore lacks a framework with which to view the concepts of ‘primary’ and ‘derivative’ martial arts that are fundamental to its theme. In chapter 8, the author accuses scholars of being ‘unaware of the distinction between primary and derivative traditions’ (p. 161) but this scorn seems unwarranted when in fact historical scholars use more subtle understandings of ‘tradition’ than those presented in this book.

2. *The idea of ‘high’ martial artists*: the book is centred around a concept of elite skill and capability in a select core of practitioners who have considerable influence on their surrounding society. However, this unstable concept is also dependent on the framing of ‘tradition’ and therefore lacks clear foundations. In Chapter 1 some descriptors for the ‘high-low’ spectrum are given on pp. 17-18 with reference to artistry in Chinese martial arts being due to the insertion of ‘the Daoist principle of unity’ (p. 17) and that combat techniques are ‘adjuncts’ to this tradition (p. 19). In Chapter 2 it is argued that this is not a concept of quality but of the extent of influence, impact or direct contact. In chapter 3 we learn that ‘high boxing is the low subset of the martial arts’, in turn a subset of medicine, which is a subset of Daoism, with the admission that ‘these categories are not easily compartmentalised’ (p. 56). Chapter 4 notes that primary or high traditions require literature, social vehicles for transmission, and vision of both their universality and their application. They are presented as ‘pluripotent’ overarching frames for multiple specific *xiào* (little traditions)—but again this is hard to schematise and Schmieg acknowledges the commonality in all arts and occupations.
3. The framing of 'Daoism': throughout the book, Schmieg refers to Daoism in ways that suggest its boundaries and interactions with other streams of Chinese philosophy are relatively clear. This book is underpinned in many places by reference to relevant literature, but one weakness concerns its use of ‘Daoism’ as though it were a system distinct from Confucianism (and other strands of Chinese thoughts) at all points since the Warring States period. Chapter 1 presents Daoism as quintessentially Chinese, but does not highlight this as key to the definition on p.8. Readers may not be aware of the level of interchange between streams of Chinese philosophy and much popular martial arts discourse is unclear about their Confucian and Daoist foundations, not to mention the neo-Confucian synthesis. On this front, the book does not help to illuminate the issues and adds further confusions such as the idea of ‘applied Daoism’ (p. 107).

There are no easy boundary lines to be drawn around these issues and while it may not be clear about the frontiers of these traditions, this book goes a long way to bring them to life, with much credibility and depth of source material. Watching Your Back is a fascinating and educational journey into the complexities of martial arts culture, forming a new approach to crossing difficult terrain at the interface between practice and scholarship. Its approach is original and as the author states, it does not follow the methods and rules of systematic scholarship. However, its value is still apparent and its evidential foundations, in various senses ethnographic, practice-based and orally transmitted, are nonetheless strong. One is left wishing for a more thorough explanation and reflection on the sources and informants that have contributed to the book, even if just to underline these differences. This book is far more than reportage of the worldview of one martial arts master, from the viewpoint of a committed student. Despite its flaws, it deserves to be understood in terms of its strength of purpose and depth of insight. If the author is right, that the martial arts carry the essence of human culture, then valuable books about them require these distinctive and unique approaches.