

Article

Conditioning Weapons: Ethnography of the Practice of Martial Arts Training

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Abstract: Drawing on the inspiring work by Wacquant about apprenticeship in boxing, I present data generated from a five-year ethnographic study of one Wushu Kung Fu Association in Italy. Drawing on a Bourdieusian version of theories of social practice, the aim is to investigate in depth the relationship between habitus and materials, as it seems an underestimated issue both in Wacquant’s presentation and in most martial arts studies developed from his work. The aim is to explore the relationship between the practitioner and the set of weapons—a chief part of the martial art training—as an endless work of conditioning. To this aim, according to what Wacquant calls “enactive ethnography”, I completely immersed myself inside the fieldwork in order to be able to explore the phenomenon and to personally test its operative mechanism. The challenge here is to enter the theatre of action and, to the highest degree possible, train in the ways of the people studied so as to gain a visceral apprehension of their universe as materials and springboard for its analytic reconstruction. Drawing on the difference between the cognitive, conative, and emotive components of habitus through which, according to Bourdieu, social agents navigate social space and animate their lived world, I show how conditioning works not only on the conative or cognitive components (learning techniques and incorporating kinetic schemes), but how a deeper psychological form of conditioning also comes into play, which aims to neutralize the shock due to the fear generated by the threat of a contusion. It is at this point, therefore, that the affective component of the habitus becomes crucial in constructing a sort of intimacy bond with the tool. The detectable transformation in the habitus of the practitioner, eventually, can be deciphered, starting from the characteristics of the tool that produces, in the ways and limits given by its material features, such a transformation. In the end, I stress the relevance of recognizing the active role of objects in transforming the habitus and I briefly discuss the potentiality of enactive ethnography in analyzing social practices.

Keywords: habitus; theories of practice; enactive ethnography; martial arts studies; Wushu kung fu

1. Introduction

The research presented here has been organized according to the approach suggested by Löic Wacquant [1–3] and subsequently employed by the increasingly numerous attempts to analyze martial arts worlds¹.

At the beginning, the attention was directed to the body pedagogies built through the discipline of a particular traditional martial art; that is, the social construction of a specific martial artist habitus.

¹ More general approaches are those by Cynarski et al. [4] and Gaudin [5]; analysis concerning the transposition of “Eastern” practices and disciplines into “the West” are in Farrer and Whalen-Bridge [6]; approaches closer to that adopted here are the collection of essays by Sanchez and Spencer [7] and the review by Channon and Jennings [8]; finally, for a definition of the emerging subdiscipline of martial arts studies, see Bowman [9].

However, as my dual path of participant observer in the field and as a kung fu student progressed [10], I realized that the question centered only on the social conduct of the agents did not allow me to explain what distinguishes kung fu from boxing or from other Oriental disciplines. In other words, I realized that the approach proposed by Wacquant, which condenses the boxing practice “essentially to a process of the education of the body, to a particular socialization of physiology” [1] (p. 61), did not allow me to question a crucial part of the martial artist’s work: the interaction between social agents and the material equipment of practice [11,12]. As I will try to show in what follows, I find convincing Wacquant’s methodological suggestion to take the habitus as an indicator of the empirical research activity [2], what he later defined as “enactive ethnography” [13]. However, it seems to me that confining the research object to the habitus could be misleading. In fact, other crucial elements contribute to create social practices, in a way that is anything but passive or simply accessory. Therefore, it is on this specific point that I will construct the central topic of this article, focusing the research question on the examination of the active presence of material elements in relation to the agents’ social conducts, in order to account for the multifactorial aspect of social practice [14,15].

In order to do this, I will begin with a brief methodological note where I explain how I got access to the field and what materials and methods I have selected for this purpose; then, I will proceed by illustrating the theoretical framework from which I developed the research question, starting from the recent debate around the so-called theories of social practice [12,16]; finally, I will present and critically discuss the main findings of my field experience, to conclude with some more general reflections on the heuristic potentialities of a combination of the social practice approach and the enactive ethnography [13].

2. Materials and Methods: Ethnography of the Wushu Kung Fu

The possibility of integrating Wacquant’s suggestions [1,17] with theories of social practice [12] emerged out of several moments I experienced during five years of ethnographic work I carried out inside one of the main associations of “Oriental disciplines” currently existing in Italy². It is, in fact, an Association based in Genoa with several branches scattered throughout the peninsula, where the teaching of the *chuangtong wushu kung fu*³ is carried out as a traditional Chinese martial art [23].

I trained an average of 3 hours a day for 5 days a week, from January to December, distributed between weekly lessons, private lessons with my master, monographic *stages*, and free training sessions with my peers. From December 2012 to January 2017, I have been able to carry out repeated and detailed participant observation sessions, subjecting myself to the logic and forces of the practice of wushu kung fu. Methodologically speaking, therefore, I carried out a sort of “enactive ethnography” as suggested by Wacquant in the wake of his work on boxing [13].

This particular technique, while on the one hand suggests “to more closely link ethnography to a specific theoretical framework” [13] (p. 4), in order not to suffer from some seductive ingenuities of postmodern storytelling such as self-ethnography [24] or in what Wacquant calls the “epistemological illusions” of the *thick description* [25], on the other hand, it needs a greater ethnographic involvement on behalf of the researchers—*intus et in cute*, in Wacquant’s words [13]—as they must be able to learn and master the practice that they claim to study.

“For contemporary objects, the best method is what I now call enactive ethnography, that is, immersive fieldwork through which the investigator acts out (elements of) the phenomenon

² I do not intend to deal with the debate on orientalism [18] addressed elsewhere [19] with different research interests. I use the expression as the social agents in the field do in order to distinguish between different practices, as different national research institutions do [20,21].

³ It is worth clarifying that the term “kung fu”, with which Chinese martial art is usually identified in the West, actually comes from two ideograms that represent the “hard work” necessary in every social practice to carry it out with a high degree of skill. Thus, the expression “chuangtong wushu kung fu” identifies the current practice of traditional Chinese martial arts, precisely to differentiate it from the wushu forms born recently and related to artistic and acrobatic gymnastics [22].

in order to peel away the layers of its invisible properties and to test its operative mechanism. [. . .] The first commandment of incarnate inquiry, then, is to enter the theatre of action in some ordinary capacity and, to the highest degree possible, apprentice in the ways of the people studied—be they pugilists, professors, or prosecutors—so as to gain a visceral apprehension of their universe as materials and springboard for its analytic reconstruction.” [13] (pp. 5–6)

In this way, through a reflective investigation of the researcher’s habitus as they are involved in the practice, it is possible to highlight three components of such a habitus: the cognitive, the conative, and the affective one [26]. In other words, it is possible to investigate, separately, the transformation of the perceptive capacities of reception of the world (the cognitive), of proprioceptive and kinesthetic capacities (the conative), and the emotional energies (the affective) inscribed “in the objects, undertakings, and agents that populate the world under consideration” [17] (p. 9).

According to this operationalization, I immersed myself into the practice of *wushu kung fu*, accumulating, in addition to field notes, narrative interviews with my training partners [23], with other students from other locations [27], and with several instructors of different locations [28] as well as with my Master on two different occasions. Moreover, every six months, I tried to organize the material in an organic way, proceeding with possible codifications, whenever possible [29]. Yet, when transcribing the fieldnotes, I often followed the technique of jottings [30], focusing on particular events or situations that, from time to time, seemed to me to effectively be able to translate my topic of investigation.

Thanks to the systematic adherence to this method, I gradually realized that my habitus as a martial artist and, in particular, as a *kung fu* practitioner, was slowly but progressively changing in its three components—cognitive, conative and affective—suggesting once again the potential of this tool as an indicator of the progress of research activity. However, the more I proceeded in this direction, the more evident it was that confining the research question only to habitus transformations was reductive when not misleading. In fact, the time spent practicing in the *kwoon* environment brought about the necessity to adapt my body history with the history of such an environment, gradually showing that in addition to the process of incorporation, other elements actively contributed to socially defining the practice of that particular martial art, differentiating it from other martial disciplines.

3. Beyond *Habitus*: From Carnal Sociology to Theories of Practice

After his celebrated work on the pugilist apprentice [1], Wacquant has returned many times to the issue of habitus [2,3,13,17,26] to specify the use that can be made of such a concept to study certain social practices, within the Bourdiesian framework [31,32]. In particular, in addition to the methodological question discussed above, it seems useful to isolate a crucial point of his work of theoretical refinement of the habitus concept, what he himself defined as *carnal sociology* [33].

Ultimately, he claimed that habitus is, heuristically speaking, a *detachable capsule* [26], from the complete panorama of Bourdieu’s theory [31], for the purposes of a dispositional theory of action. From this point of view, habitus works as the principle of action only—and exclusively—when it is activated by objective possibilities, hence only within the dialectic relationship between two states of the social, between history in bodies and history in things, or, more precisely, between “the history objectified in the form of structure (. . .) and the history incarnated in the form of habitus, a complicity which is the basis of the quasi-magical participation between these two realizations of history.” [31] (p. 150–51)

In the case of the *enactive ethnography* that I have employed in my research, that means that I needed to submit myself to the forces of *social gravity* [13] operating in the field of martial arts; that is, exposing myself over time to those systems of activation triggered by the encounter between the social history embodied in one body (habitus) and the social history fixed in places and objects (the material equipment of practice) [31]. However, in order to take seriously and thoroughly Bourdieu’s intuition of

the encounter of two stories [31], the second part seems to be decisively underestimated in Wacquant's account and, even more, in most of the subsequent literature that emerged from his work [34–36].

As Wacquant himself argued [17] in response to Mialet [37], the objection from the actor network theory [38], though it raises the question of the relationship between human agents and nonhuman materials, does not seem satisfactory. In fact, it does not seem resounding, neither from the methodological point of view, repositing “the spectator's point of view” [26] (p. 13) that the “enactive ethnography” tries to correct; nor theoretically, where it seems that the networks of people and objects lack of any “carrier of subordination” (*ibid.*). In short, such accounts, although explicitly focusing on the materials of practice, they seem to crucially underestimate the sociologically critical question of symbolic power.

While practicing the *shuai chao* (wrestling) in a room furnished with *tatami*, *ring*, and *timers* or while practicing some *tao lu* [codified sequences of techniques] with traditional weapons such as the *tan tou* (the curved sword) or the *kwan tou* (the chinese halberd), it became increasingly clear to me that the issue of materials needed to be investigated as something more than a mere supplement to habitus transformation [11]. The question, therefore, becomes how to bring into the analysis the active role of objects and their interaction with social agents' bodies, while maintaining the heuristic potentialities of habitus [31].

Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of practice [31], then, I turned to a more recent set of theories that explicitly work around the same concept of social practice [12,14,15].

“A ‘practice’ (...) is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.” [15] (p. 249)

Thus, from an exclusive focus on social agents and their conduct [1,17], we move towards the social practice understood as the result of the active integration of interconnected groups of elements [11,16]. Yet, from this point of view, the distribution of the agency [39] between the different elements becomes the main focus of the empirical analysis [40,41], instead of relying entirely on the habitus.

During the fieldwork, for operational purposes, it is useful to distinguish between “practice as entity”—the theoretical research object from which to start before entering the field, ready to be put into discussion through the ethnography [29]—and “practice as performance” [12,15], that is to say, each single empirical manifestation of the particular integration between the elements that is collected during observations. Accordingly, some of these elements and links will occur more often in different performances and they could be isolated as hegemonic in the creation of such particular practice with respect to other components.

On this basis, therefore, it becomes possible to define *wushu kung fu* as a social practice [42] resulting from a certain interconnection between different habitus (students, instructors, teachers, etc.), different materials (gloves, *tatami*, *kwoon*, weapons, etc.), and different social representations (magazines, films, web videos, myths and oral legends, etc.). Such particular systems of activation are in fact the outcome of the power relationships that emerge historically from the different distribution of the agency.

In the following, I will try to give an account of the path I have faced in my five years of *enactive ethnography*, focusing on the relationship between habitus and material apparatus in the practice of *wushu kung fu*.

4. “This Is Kung fu”: The Arrangement between Agents and Materials

The first and most important material element interacting with the habitus helping to make the practice of *wushu kung fu* different from other sporting practices [43], as well as from other martial arts [44], regards the place where this activity takes place daily: the *kwoon*.

I took a break from the task of welcoming and guiding the public through the different *Kwoon* rooms during an open day of presentation to the external public. After several tours, I realized that I am taking this place for granted. It is more than 1000 square meters, divided into 6 different rooms, plus a very large courtyard. Each room is furnished and organized for a specific type of training. There is the *mirror room* for the individual work of adjusting the techniques, there is the *arms room* in which the multiple traditional weapons of wushu kung fu are bundled up in order, along the perimeter of the room. There is the *room with the bags* dedicated to training with bags of different weight and measure; there is the *ring room* and some others. It seems clear that this place is something different from a *gym*. (Field note, 27 September 2014.)

Everything that is—and that is not—inside is important, in this case, to grasp the importance of the *kwoon* as an infrastructure of the practice [16], especially compared to its being something different from a cross-fit “box”, for example, as well as from a karate “dojo”. Beginning with the specific furnishings and the different objects that are brought here together under the same roof: for example, it is a place where we find an altar in every room and, at the same time, a ring for sparring and fighting sessions; we find a fully equipped room for bodybuilding and, at the same time, incense burners and soft lighting for meditation practices.

I have just finished a standard class. We started in the “ring room” with a circuit training very similar to what would now be called “cross-fit” with kettlebell, box jump, etc. ... then we practiced 15 rounds of fighting both standing and on the ground... then we moved to the “weapons room”, to try out some combo [combinations] of “lop sao” [fighting improvisation using codified techniques] ... then, the lights turned off and the small [lights] of the altar turned on, in order to start a short guided practice of “tzu chan” [meditation on emptiness]. At the end, I went to the instructor: “Nice work! Switching from sparring to meditation like this ... Thanks V.” And he just replied: “Well ... you know ... *this* is kung fu” (Field note, 8 May 2013.)

What matters, in the case just reported, concerns the objective possibilities and affordances [11] provided by the objects on the scene and, even more, the type of practical trigger created by bringing together in the same situation different objects, each characteristic of different practices (cross-fit, boxing, meditation). In this case, the statement “*this* is kung fu” coming from my instructor could be interpreted in the sense of the proposition of Gilbert Ryle, quoted by Bourdieu, according to which:

“(. . .) just as we should not say that a window broke because a stone hit it, but that it broke because it was breakable, one should not say that a historical event determined a behavior but that it had this determining effect because a habitus capable of being affected by that event conferred that power upon it”. [31] (p. 149)

“*This* is kung fu”, at that moment, for me and my instructor, was only the effect produced by the encounter between a specific set of material elements and a set of habitus that could be invested—in different degrees—from such a new combination of objects. In other words, it works for us as a particular form of symbolic capital [31]. In fact, the *kwoon*, as a physical space that contributes to the practice of *wushu kung fu*, actively integrates a set of materials taken, in part, from the world of fitness and combat sports (the body-building gym with its devices and the boxing gym with its equipment) and partly from the world of “oriental disciplines” related to soft gymnastics, yoga, and meditation (the monastery with its rooms and altars; the school with its symbols hanging on the walls and photos of the ancient masters).

To expand this reading, it is useful to move on to a second set of material elements: clothing and apparel. It is worth highlighting two aspects: the school uniform and the equipment for the sparring practices during combat sessions.

In the first case, shoes are crucial; specifically, the Feiyue, a brand of sneakers produced in Shanghai since 1920. The two ideograms of which the name is composed means “to fly over” or “to overtake”, that in the marketing narrative of the Chinese brand, aims to recall the sensation of lightness and plasticity of the object, as well as the dimension of spiritual elevation of the body and of the mind. It is an object historically born together with *wushu* in China, right at the turn of the 1920s and 30s and subsequently linked to the world of Chinese martial arts. However, once again, it is not just a matter of discursive invention. In fact, since 2006, Patrice Bastian, a French entrepreneur resident in Shanghai, together with a group of artists and designers, has taken over part of the company and redesigned the shoes in shape and materials to offer them to Western consumers as everyday sneakers.

Trying to perform a *juk gen tek* (hook kick) with a pair of shoes other than the Feiyue of Chinese production, anyone can easily feel the difference. Such particular shoes, in fact, allow an ankle mobility and a variety of foot settings to support some basic *kung fu* kick techniques that other shoes could not equally permit, due to the different type of design and materials employed in their manufacture⁴.

I just finished 45 min of training with two mates. I am wearing the uniform of my school, a black shirt with the logo of the school on the back, green belt that represents my grade, long black trousers of light canvas with low crotch but I have forgot my Feiyue. I thus borrowed some barely new Mizuno. I have always used the Mizuno in the past to do training when I played football and I still use them when I go running. However, today, in trying a couple of techniques taken from a form of Tang Lang Chuan [mantis style] that requires rapid changes of direction and repeated jumps in a very short space, I had to stop several times and at some point I took a serious retort at the right ankle ... Moreover, I could not feel the setting of the foot and I could not see if I armed the technique correctly. (Field note, 26 May 2014.)

In this case, the shoe creates the kick in its becoming one with the foot. Only that particular object, made in that particular way, and only when it meets a habitus susceptible of being invested in by those characteristics of flexibility, lightness, and fluidity—thanks to the pedagogy of the body inscribed through the sensory, kinesthetic, and affective training—allows to account for the social genesis of a certain practice. In short, *this* (arrangement) *is kung fu*.

Another example of such material/body arrangements—that is, the active integration between the subelements of the habitus and those of the materials—is related to the protections used for *sparring*: in particular, in the case of gloves.

There is a quite complex typology, which divides the types of gloves according to the practice for which they are designed: once again, weight, measures, and design of the object grant a space of possibilities to the body of the practitioner, helping to bring out those techniques that eventually make a practice what it is. For example, a technique typical of Mixed Martial Arts such as overhand (semicircular fist carried with the arm opposite to the advanced leg), designed to overcome an opponent’s guard with gloves that protect only the knuckles, would be completely meaningless in a Muay Thai context, with an opponent who has two larger and more padded gloves at his disposal to protect his whole face in a guard position.

During one of my first free sparring sessions, in fact, I experienced at my expense the practical importance of this kind of encounter between habitus (my unexperienced skill in creating combinations of techniques) and objective affordances (what gloves can or cannot support).

I’m back from the sparring session. I have blood that comes down my right nostril and an eye that hurt a lot... The first 3 rounds with big gloves I did well and I also manage to play some

⁴ For example, the padding of the sole—much thinner in the Chinese version than the French one, to facilitate rapid changes of direction and jumps—and the material of the canvas of the shoe—much thinner and porous in the Chinese version, to make possible larger movements of the ankle joint and unconventional foot settings in walking or running.

evasion/attack techniques... then we start sparring with the little gloves ... with grappling also... I started very confident, but soon something went wrong ... I block a back kick to my face with a [a technique of] *tan sao* [forearm] and I step back ... but my opponent promptly came towards me and started a combination of techniques ending with an oblique trajectory, characteristic of a technique called *chuan pao* [leopard's claw], formed by tightening the fingertips of the four fingers on the top of the hand palm in order to hit me with the knuckles. Instinctively, I put my arms in the guard position just like during the previous rounds, but his last shot easily found space in the middle of my arms and hit me between the nose and the left eye. The strong pain led me to a very little honourable gesture, as I had to stop the sparring. (Field note, 12 March 2013.)

Finally, a last group of material elements to consider in order to reconstruct the practice of *wushu kung fu* is the training equipment and, in particular, the weapons. In fact, in this case, what Wacquant called the "subordination vector" [26] (p.13) seems to be led by the object itself [11,41].

5. Weapons at Work: *Conditioning and Channeling*

The expression "forms" (*tao lu*), in *wushu kung fu*, refers to exercises consisting of sequences of codified movements based on martial and philosophical principles related to different combat styles. I have dedicated most of my fieldwork to the study of these forms, which are in fact also one of the main criteria of evaluation during students' examination in order to pass gradings. In the first instance, it is a labour of learning to memorize the codified movements through the imitation of the Master or of the instructors. Once the body is able to perform the movement without the intervention of voluntary memory, the student moves on to the next phase of perfecting the technical gesture, repeating, over and over again, small sequences of the form.

The daily practice of these codified sequences of movements resemble the "process of education of the body" and the "particular socialization of physiology" that Wacquant identified as the heuristic fulcrum of the explanation of boxing practice [1] (p. 61). Alongside this undoubted body pedagogy, however, my years of training in the forms with weapons have led me to identify two different moments of transformation of the habitus. This is the work of body conditioning and the work of channeling; ultimately the body and soul of *wushu kung fu*. I will now analytically separate them only for the purpose of explanation, yet they actually intertwine continuously in practice.

5.1. *The Effects of Materials over Habitus: Body Conditioning Practices*

The expression "body conditioning" is usually learned in the first year of practice in *Kwoon*, and it refers to a set of exercises and training routines, which bring to a particular body adaptation to training instruments, to improve both the musculoskeletal structure and certain kinaesthetic functions. In fact, there are particular training tools that identify a single martial art or even a single school or style of the same art. It is the case of the wooden boards (or bricks) to be broken with a hand or leg technique, just like some more complex devices, such as, for example, the steel rings typical of the Hung Gar style.

I have just finished a private lesson with my Master. The topic was the technical execution of a Hung Gar form [a style originated in Southern China]. In the end, my Master showed me some traditional body conditioning systems typical of style. While I was practicing some sequences of the form, he picked up 12 steel rings, each about 2 cm thick and 10 cm in diameter. They weigh 2 kg each. So he said to me: "Stretch your arms with your palms upwards" and then he inserted 6 rings per arm. I immediately feel the weight of the metal on the biceps and on the forearms. "Now put yourself in position and try again to practice the form" he told me, "but be careful, you have to control every movement, otherwise the rings slip away; and you must resist the kickback when you hit the arm muscles without losing the correct position of the arms. "Right", I said. Yet, it was not only quite difficult as a motor scheme, but most of all it was very painful: every time I felt the steel hammering on

the bone, I could not help them dropping. Each time, he picked them up, re-positioned them on my arms and told me to try again. (Field note, 24 April 2014.)

In the case just reported, it was not only a question of cognitive skills. This type of conditioning, in fact, causes a desensitization of the part where the tool intervenes and, at the same time, through repeated and constant microtraumas, aims to cause a similar treatment to a bone callus, in addition to a thickening of the skin. In short, an actual change of the body and of its objective possibilities was generated by the characteristics of the physical tool. In fact, for a good result of the exercise, as my Master constantly repeated to me, it is necessary to “make the rings work” and make one’s body as docile as possible to such an instrument.

From this point of view, it is not just a matter of conditioning that works on the cognitive components (understanding how to perform an exercise never done before) and conative (incorporating a kinaesthetic and physiological scheme); a more significant affective component comes into play, through a psychological and emotional conditioning which aims to neutralize the shock due to the fear generated by the threat of a contusion [27,28]. After years of practicing with such objects, body and soul are trained to block, without hesitation, basically any type of stroke.

Therefore, the affective component of the habitus becomes crucial in constructing a sort of intimate bond with the material tool, so that the latter can do its job. The detectable transformation in the habitus of the practitioner, therefore, can be deciphered, starting from the characteristics of the tool that triggers this transformation, according to the ways and limits given by its characteristics [11].

In the case of the interaction with a weapon—understood as a sophisticated training tool—this type of active integration, activated by the characteristics of the object, becomes even more evident. The practice with weapons, in fact, in *wushu kung fu*, is programmatically oriented to handle these different tools, each according to the specific characteristics that distinguish it, to develop different qualities of the practitioner: for example, precision and fluidity through the handling of the spear, strength and control with the halberd, balance and coordination with the straight sword.

For example, it is so the case of *Kwan Tou* (Chinese halberd). My first contact with this weapon was not easy. It is a very heavy weapon and with a balance that is very difficult to manage due to its physical structure.

I’m in the weapon room. I took the *kwan tou* out of the rack in which it is positioned. In the version I have in front of me it is a stick of about 170 cm and 2 cm in diameter on which a monofilament blade similar to a sword is inlaid, with a double tip in the middle and on top of the blade and with the back from the line jagged with rings that are intended to confuse the opponent with their movement and noise. With my height of 175 cm and a weight of just over 60 kg, getting to the bottom of the form that includes just over 100 high-speed techniques represented a major challenge. I performed the form 3 times with my training partner who exceeds me in weight and height, 185 cm, 83 kg. Not only did I get much more tired than him at the end, losing in precision and strength in the techniques, but especially in many passages I felt I lost control as if it was the weapon directing my shots, more than the other way around. (Field note, 13 June 2014.)

Here, it is the tool that leads the practice, becoming not by chance an almost incarnated social agent, to be listened to (both kinesthetically and emotionally) and (cognitively) understood, while the practitioner’s body requires the ability to submit as much as possible to the characteristics of the object, to pull out as much as possible from the object itself. The tools with which the conditioning is practiced, in other words, according to the specific characteristics of weight, shape, materials, and design, contribute to manufacturing the body and soul of the practitioner to the extent that the latter is conditioned, in order to finally accomplish properly the practice of *wushu kung fu*.

5.2. The Effect of Habitus on Materials: Channeling Practices

In the vocabulary used by social agents involved in the field (*emic*), the channeling work is about the ability to train the body, mind, and spirit in order to canalize all of them into a single point of the body capable of producing a technique otherwise impossible using only the muscle and bone strength of the body. In the heuristic language of my analysis (*etic*), it is a matter of understanding how the three components of the habitus (cognitive, conative, and affective) are able to work synergistically not only among themselves, but in accordance with a particular object.

I have just finished a Tai Chi class [Taoist-style from Northern China]. The instructor explained to us how in the West, such a style is often reduced to little more than a soft gymnastics for old people, whereas in ancient times it was practiced as a real kung fu style, for both self-defence and well-being. “The work of Tai Chi is a work on the channelling of energy,” she told us. “You have to learn to recognize and feel the qi [energy] that flows within you and let it flow to a point ... throughout your technique”. She takes a candle from the altar and fixes it on a table, lights it up and positions herself for a fist technique, mimicking the gesture in slow motion ... then she measured a distance of about 15 cm between her extended arm and the candle flame... and finally, after some breathing cycles, she exhales together with a quick punching gesture but without muscular tension and extinguishes the candle without touching the flame ... “See ... ” she tells us, “Tai Chi teaches that we are channels for the energy flowing. (Field note, 16 July 2012.)

Here, it is clear how a different habitus could be able to interact differently with the same material of practice. To demonstrate the specificity of such a practical knowledge, Bourdieu appropriates Heidegger’s famous example of practical dealings with a hammer. The agent’s relation to the world, in fact, is “a relation of knowledge: the habitus suited to the hammer (. . .) is the one that is capable of hammering; the habitus is what responds appropriately to the solicitations of a social object.” [32] (p. 243). Such a bodily *hexis*, in Bourdieu’s words [31], is often the result of a sort of addiction to the instrument, that is the outcome of indulging in the aims that are inscribed in the device as a tacit instruction for use; ultimately, it is the result of having been used, if not exploited, by the instrument (*ibid.*).

Likewise, in the practice of the form of Tai Chi with the straight sword (*jian*), an almost opposite weapon to the halberd described above in weight, shape, and martial and philosophical aims, this type of interaction is explicitly manifested.

“Try again ... this is not good ... do not you feel it? You should feel it ... the position is good ... you know ... don’t worry about that ... you have to try to feel the sword... you have to let yourself to be led by her ... do you understand?”. I did not understand. I repeated the movement a hundred times: it was about forming a bow with the sword above the head, following it with the eyes and ending in balance on one leg, with the hilt of the sword approximately above the right shoulder and the left hand in guard position, with the sword parallel to the ground. Every time, either I was wrong in the final position or I was losing my balance. The instructor who followed me, continued: “Stop thinking about your body, or the movement of the sword, if you think about it, you lose everything ... you have to become the instrument to let you express the characteristics of the sword, do you understand? Not the other way around...” I still could not understand. She continued: “You have to find your balance with her, which is different from mine and that of others ... you have to feel like pulling the sword out of the sword ... and until you can’t feel it ... you just need to keep trying.” (Field note, 3 January 2013.)

To conquer the kind of skill needed to extinguish a candle with a fist technique without touching the flame, or to “feel the sword” and instantly find a position of balance; that is, to durably transform a

habitus, incorporating the type of *hexis* that makes us say, by only seeing a position of guard with the sword, “this is kung fu”, it is necessary to be conditioned by material instruments. In the case of *wushu kung fu*, it means to learn to become a channel for these instruments and, in particular, for the aims that are inscribed in it [31] as explicitly emerging in the interaction between practitioner and weapons, through the long and “methodical training” that passes through the execution of the forms.

It is, all in all, a methodical counter-training, capable of hardly transforming a habitus [31], by intervening in its three components: the cognitive, the conative, and the affective one. This also means that a habitus capable of *feeling* a sword; that is, interacting with it and letting it work, will be able to “take out everything in the sword”, as my instructor reminded me. Eventually, this power of recognizing what is and what is not kung fu is inscribed in the bodies of the social agents and in their judgment schemes, as it is inscribed in the tools and materials that make this practice, which provides, in turn, the potential triggers for different components of the habitus.

6. Concluding Remarks

Since I started from the theoretical and methodological intuition of Wacquant, it is useful to come back to his words:

“At the end of this initiatic march (. . .) boxing reveals itself to be a sort of “savage science,” an eminently social and quasi-scientific practice, even as it might seem to involve only those individuals who risk their bodies in the ring in a singular confrontation that appears rough and unbridled; and the pugilist emerges as the product of a collective organization, which, while not thought out and willed as such by anyone, is “nonetheless objectively coordinated through the reciprocal adjustment of the embodied expectations and demands of the occupants of the various positions within the space of the gym.” [1] (p. 149)

This claim summarizes the results of his renowned work, which was intended to begin “a re-reflection on initiation into a practice of which the body is at once the seat, the instrument, and the target” [1] (p. 27) and which aimed, in this way, to give an account of the practice of boxing, to “suggest what his specific logic, and in particular that of his learning, can teach us about the logic of every practice” (*ibid.*). During my 5 years of ethnography in a school of *wushu kung fu*, I experienced many of the training practices (roadwork, floorwork, hitting, bagging, sparring, etc.) of which Wacquant and many other scholars described as peculiarities of the martial arts as social practices. The more hours of observation and training I accumulated, the more my field notes and my habitus as practitioner clashed—often literally—with the material equipment [11] that often contended the scene with the carnal and sensorial one [13]. For this reason, I have chosen to adopt an investigation approach linked to the new generation of theories of practice scholars [12,16,42], trying to adapt it, however, to the heuristic potentiality of habitus.

In this work, I focused on the particular synchronic link between habitus and materials, putting aside the diachronic dimension of the emergence and decline of the practice with respect to other competitors; for example, with respect to the very current relationship between traditional martial arts and combat sports. Instead, I tried to highlight three issues that seem central to the analysis of the practice of *wushu kung fu* and its specific logic, which I now try to summarize.

First, the empirical and theoretical relevance of the material element and its ability to actively contribute to the manufacture of a social practice and not only as a mere complement awaiting a social agent who can give life to it [11,45]. A good example of a certain tendency of literature to keep the social agent at the centre of the scene can be found in the excellent analysis of circuit training by Crossley [43]. While he pays attention to what he calls “the lived space of the circuit” [43] (p. 50), as indeed few other scholars do in this type of debate dominated by incorporation techniques [8], he concludes treating such a space as something which is not at all “alive”, since it is made so only by social agents through body techniques [46].

“The stations of the circuit have no existence apart from the agents, who (using their practical knowledge of exercise qua body techniques) transform particular areas of the gym, for a limited time, into “stations”. (. . .) However, the point remains: the space of the circuit training class, qua training class, is instituted through the activities and interactions of the embodied agents involved in the class and the practical knowledge and understanding embodied in those activities” [43] (p. 52)

Conversely, when the social practice becomes the unit of analysis [12], taking seriously the Bourdieusian intuition on the encounter between the social history embodied in one body and the social history objectified into things [31], the materials of practice begin to take an active part in the so-called “dance of agency” [47]. Thus, in order to call in question the social genesis of handiness in the use of a tool, one should not ask what body techniques make that instrument more or less “alive”, but what practice emerges from the active integration between that particular set of objects and a particular set of habitus components.

Secondly, it is worth underlining the potential of enactive ethnography, especially when combined with the approach of practice theories [48]. In reconstructing a social practice through this particular ethnographic method, the Simmelian notion of reciprocal effects [49] is convincingly reaffirmed, since the focus is drawn to the plurality of correlations between elements as evidence of their active integration in the formation of a particular social practice. These correlations are certainly not intended as determinants of an action, but rather as conditions for the possibility of the lasting arrangement of a certain course of social action [16].

Eventually, the practice of *wushu kung fu* can serve as an extreme example of what every social practice is [40,45,50], with its training procedures based on integration between elements. Paraphrasing the expression by Wacquant for which we would all be martial artists, in accordance with this theoretical shift from social agents conducted towards the (material) conditions of activation of social practices, we could say that, to a certain extent, all social practices are (analyzable as) practices of *wushu kung fu*. However, there is an important distinction that needs drawing out here, which concerns precisely the issue of agency and structure that I tried to deal with during the article. In fact, *wushu*, as a particular case of physical culture, is for the most part a voluntary activity where individuals engage in these social practices with a view to becoming changed, and hence are typically more receptive. Despite that on a general level, we might study social practices focusing on their conditions of activation, there are important differences with social practices that are prescribed (for example, physical education class, where a teenage pupil has no intent on engaging in a tennis class). In this scenario and many others, the same mechanisms of active integration between elements, which I hope to have explained here, might still be present, although certainly it would operate quite differently.

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