

BEYOND THE FIGHT:

The Cultural Life of
Martial Arts
in the Digital Age



THE CULTURAL LIFE OF MARTIAL ARTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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TRADITION / MODERNITY

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1. A Beginning, A Demand

When people hear the term 'Martial Arts', similar images generally spring to mind: victories and defeats in the ring, clashes between the strongest fighters, the glory of champions, and the thrilling moments of street fighting that are constantly circulating online. At the same time, free educational content on YouTube has gradually become an important way for many people to learn Martial Arts techniques (Cynarski, 2025). However, the true art of Martial Arts runs far deeper than these superficial displays.

Martial Arts have never been just about fighting. They are also a way of learning how to live. Across different Martial Arts traditions, training, rituals and long-term commitment help practitioners develop qualities such as respect, discipline as well as responsibility (Sinulingga et al., 2024). In this sense, Martial Arts reach beyond the boundaries of sport. They are cultural practices that support personal development, strengthen communities, encourage intercultural exchange and contribute to education (Jiang et al., 2025). Martial Arts teach people not only how to defend themselves, but also how to better understand themselves. Thus, the value of Martial Arts is therefore found not only in what happens during a fight, but in the way they shape people, communities and cultural understanding.

It is a pity that these values seem to be increasingly overlooked. Compared to the friendly hugs exchanged after a sparring session or a coach's heartfelt explanation of the historical significance of a particular Martial Art, a spectacular knockout is far

more likely to go viral on social media. Consequently, people's deeper understanding of Martial Arts is increasingly influenced by competitive combat rather than the culture itself. Many people know what Martial Arts 'look like', but few truly understand what they 'mean'.

Most importantly, this change stems not only from social media, but is also linked to brand design, advertising communication as well as visual communication methods. Posters, logos, clothing, websites and promotional videos are all constantly shaping the public's first impression of Martial Arts. In order to attract people's attention, they often emphasise strength, competition and aggression. Although this method can help Martial Arts events, brands and clubs attract more attention, it may also reduce Martial Arts to a specific image, whilst overlooking the cultural traditions behind them.

It was precisely in this media environment that I began to ponder a question: As more and more people come to know Martial Arts through visual media, what is it that they are actually coming to know—Martial Arts themselves, or a repackaged image of Martial Arts?

This question stems not only from my research, but also from my personal experience. As a designer and a Martial Arts coach, I refuse to accept a view of Martial Arts that begins and ends with fighting. Therefore, I believe that design is not merely a tool for communication; it also bears the responsibility of cultural communication. Design

should not merely serve to bring Martial Arts to the attention of a wider audience, but should also help more people to understand the values underlying Martial Arts; it should not merely attract attention, but should also provoke thought; it should not merely build a brand, but should also rebuild the connection between people and their culture, history, and the spirit of Martial Arts.

This research begins with a refusal.

I refuse to accept that the only way Martial Arts can survive in the digital age is by being simplified, commercialised or stripped of their cultural depth.

Instead of accepting this reality, I want to ask a different set of questions.

What would happen if design could encourage people to slow down?

What if Martial Arts branding carried cultural memory instead of serving only commercial goals?

If visual communication could help people truly understand Martial Arts, rather than merely watching them, what changes might this bring about?

Behind every fight lies a culture.

Behind every movement lives a history.

Behind every image is a story that deserves to be remembered.

2. In Other Voices

2.1 Before We Begin Listening

Martial Arts have never belonged to a single voice.

To the coach, it means daily training, teaching and responsibility. To the designer, it means images, branding and cultural stories waiting to be told. To the academic researcher, it means a form of cultural exploration that constantly evolves in response to societal developments. To the common practitioner, their first impression of Martial Arts often comes from the screen, rather than the Martial Arts club.

None of these voices can define Martial Arts on their own. They each represent only a part of how Martial Arts are disseminated in the digital age. However, when these voices are brought together, they collectively reveal the unique tensions facing Martial Arts: there is a constant dialogue and clash between tradition and innovation, culture and commerce, personal experience as well as visual communication.

In this chapter, I do not seek to find a definitive answer regarding Martial Arts, nor do I intend to judge which viewpoint is more correct. I am instead hoping to create a space that can accommodate the diverse voices within Martial Arts, allowing them to listen to one another, respond to one another, and even disagree. Because listening itself is also part of my research.

Perhaps understanding Martial Arts today is not about finding a single answer, but in recognising that every voice tells a different story. And every story reveals another way of seeing what lies beyond the fight.

Listening, then, is where this research begins.

2.2 Voice1 Head Muay Thai Coach: KRU MUSTAPHA

My name is MUSTAPHA , and I am currently the Head Muay Thai Coach at the Lion MMA Club in Phuket. Many people know me because I'm currently teaching at a gym, or because I once won the Lumpinee Boxing Stadium championship. But few people know that, before all that, I was just a kid born into an ordinary family.

My family has always struggled financially. When I was a child, we didn't have many choices. In Thailand, many children take up Muay Thai not to become stars, nor because they enjoy competing, but because Muay Thai offers us a chance to change our lives. I first stepped into a gym when I was about six years old. From that day on, the gym practically became my second home.

When I was a child, training was nowhere near as comfortable as it is now. I went to practice every day—first running, then jumping rope, and then repeating the most basic techniques—kicks, jabs, hooks, over and over again. Back then, I didn't

understand why I had to practice the same move hundreds of times. I just found it exhausting and would secretly wish, 'If only I didn't have to train today.' But my coach always told me, 'True Muay Thai isn't about learning how to hit others; it's about learning how to control yourself.'

It was only later that I gradually came to understand that he wasn't just talking about the fight—he was talking about life.

My first fight actually went really badly. I lost, and I didn't stand a chance. After the fight, I felt like maybe Muay Thai wasn't suited for me. I started doubting myself and lost the confidence to keep competing. At that time, my coach didn't criticize me or tell me to try harder. He just trained with me every day and told me, 'It's okay to lose a fight; the most important thing is not to lose to yourself.'

Even today, I still remember those words.

For many years afterward, whenever I felt that training was too exhausting or a match was too difficult, I would recall what he said. And that's exactly why I persevered.

Over the course of my 20 year career, I've competed in countless fights, and I've experienced injuries, defeats, and comebacks. I eventually won the Lumpinee Boxing

Stadium championship. Many people think that being a champion means glory, but for me, it means responsibility.

When I won my first substantial prize money, I didn't go out and buy something for myself; instead, I used it to improve my family's living conditions. I bought my family a bigger house, and I was finally able to relieve my parents of the hardships of daily life. At that moment, I truly realized that Muay Thai had changed not only my career but also the fate of my entire family.

That's why I've always believed that the greatest power of Muay Thai has never been about knocking out an opponent, but about empowering an ordinary person to change their own life.

These days, I devote more time to teaching. My greatest strength is training in elbow techniques. Many people think elbow strikes are merely offensive moves, but I believe that truly effective elbow strikes come from patience, judgment, and timing—not from brute strength alone. I often tell my students not to rush into attacking; they should learn to observe first. A good fighter isn't just someone who moves quickly; more importantly, they know when to strike and when to wait.

Aside from the technical skills, I prefer to teach Muay Thai culture in class. Before every formal training session, I introduce my students to the Wai Kru (respect dance). Many foreign students initially think of it as just a pre-competition ritual, but I tell them

that it represents respect, thankfulness, and a reminder not to forget who brought you to where you are today.

I also tell them the stories behind some of the techniques. Why did certain techniques develop the way they did? Why do different regions have different styles? There are no standard answers to these questions, but they help students understand that Muay Thai isn't just a combination of a few movements—it's a living piece of cultural history.

I hope my students will not only learn how to win fights, but also understand why they practice Muay Thai. If they leave here having remembered nothing more than a set of combinations, I'll feel that my teaching has been incomplete; but if they've learned to respect others, face defeat, keep patience, and begin to understand the culture behind Muay Thai, then whether or not they continue fighting in the future, I'll consider that they've truly learned Muay Thai.

Because these are things my coach once taught me.

Today, I'm simply passing them on to the next generation.

2.3 Voice2 The Brand Designer: RUI LI

My name is Li Rui. I graduated from Goldsmiths, University of London, and now work in brand design in Shanghai. I recently took on a brand design project for a Shanghai boxing club. This is the first time I've actually worked on a design project related to Martial Arts. To be honest, before this, I had virtually no in-depth understanding of Martial Arts culture. In my mind, I'd always imagined that people who practise boxing must be really good at street fighting.

After truly getting started with the design, I realised that my understanding was far from sufficient.

Following my usual approach, I began by gathering case studies of brands on the market. I looked through a vast number of logos, posters and brand identity systems from boxing gyms and combat sports brands, both domestic and international, in the hope of finding some design inspiration. However, the more I looked, the more confused I became. Almost all brands employ a similar visual language: images of strong men, Martial Arts moves, paired with bold, powerful typefaces. Whilst these designs convey an impression of strength and aggression instantly, they also make the various brands look increasingly similar to one another.

I began to ask myself one question over and over again: if all boxing gyms look the same, why would consumers remember any one of them in particular? If a brand

merely repeats visual symbols associated with 'strength' and 'fight' time and again, what is it truly communicating?

These questions led me to put the design on hold for the time being. I realised that perhaps what really needed to be explored was not the logo itself, but the culture it represents.

So, I began reading up about the history of boxing and other Martial Arts. I discovered that every Martial Art has its own history, etiquette and cultural context, yet these elements have almost entirely disappeared from many brand designs. Visual design constantly emphasises competition, victory and physical strength, yet few people seek to convey why a Martial Art came into being, how it has influenced a community, or why it has endured to this day. I began to explore ways of reintegrating culture into the design, rather than simply placing 'fight' at the centre of the composition. For this project, I chose not to adhere to the visual style commonly found in traditional boxing gyms, but instead sought to blend the history of boxing, its classic moves and training culture with a visual language more in tune with the aesthetic sensibilities of young Chinese people. For example, I drew inspiration from the colour palette and compositional techniques of vintage American illustrations, with the aim of creating a sense of community imbued with the vibrancy of everyday life; I incorporated elements of street graffiti to bring the space closer to contemporary urban culture; and I also included some installation art. My hope is that, upon entering the boxing gym,

visitors will see not merely a training space, but will step into a narrative environment centred on boxing culture.

Slowly, I began to realise that brand design shapes not merely a visual identity, but the way people understand a culture. For many who have never encountered Martial Arts, the brand may well be their first window into the sport. If the brand merely showcases strength, people will assume that martial arts are nothing but strength. If the brand can convey the culture, people will have the opportunity to see the history, values and human connections behind Martial Arts.

I am convinced that a good Martial Arts brand should not merely be about people remembering a logo, it should make people want to step into this space, discover the stories it embodies, and rediscover the true meaning of Martial Arts.

2.4 Voice3 The Academic Researcher: WEN MING YANG

In the process of researching Emei Martial Arts, I have gradually come to realise that traditional models of cultural transmission are no longer sufficient to fully illustrate the developmental trajectory of traditional ethnic sports, whilst advances in digital technology have created more effective conditions for the long-term preservation of cultural materials, the sharing of knowledge and public dissemination.

Based on this idea, I have designed an application framework centred on the promotion of Emei Martial Arts culture. I hope that it will not only demonstrate Martial Arts movements, but also help learners develop a more comprehensive understanding of the culture. The platform first uses digital imaging and 3D visualisation technology to organise and present the classic techniques of Emei martial arts, enabling learners to observe and learn the movements more directly.

At the same time, I have also added a section on history and culture, bringing together information on the development of Emei martial arts, its various styles, and relevant literature. My hope is that users will not only know 'how to practise', but also understand 'why they practise in this way'.

I believe that the study of martial arts is inseparable from interpersonal interaction. Therefore, the platform also features an interactive community, enabling learners to share experiences and discuss issues with experts and fellow practitioners, thereby transforming the digital platform into a space for continuous learning and exchange,

rather than merely a repository of information. Furthermore, I have sought to combine wearable devices and smart interactive technology to provide feedback on the learner's movements, and by drawing on the training experience of martial arts masters, to help users engage in continuous reflection during their practice, rather than merely repeating the movements.

voice3 is reconstructed from Yang's discussion on the digital preservation and dissemination of Emei Martial Arts (Yang, 2021).

2.5 Voice4 Professional Muay Thai fighter: Claire rankinex

I grew up in Scotland. My parents separated when I was very young, and I was raised by my mother. Growing up, I rarely had my father's presence or guidance, and for a long time, I struggled to find my place in the world. It wasn't until later that I was introduced to Muay Thai. At first, I was simply drawn to the sport. But it was only when I actually set foot in Thailand and stepped into a Muay Thai gym that I realised Muay Thai was much more than just a combat sport. It was a journey that taught me how to face myself.

I decided to leave the UK and travel alone to Thailand, several thousand kilometres away, to begin training at Top Team in Phuket. At first, everything felt unfamiliar. The language, the surroundings and the intensity of the training were all completely different from what I was used to. But it was here that I gradually found myself.

During my five years at the Top Team, I met my coach and found a real family.

My coach taught me more than just how to throw a punch, how to defend myself and how to win a match. He taught me respect, discipline and responsibility. He made me realise that a true fighter is not one who is free from pain, but one who maintains their conviction in the face of pain; not one who always wins, but one who is willing to get back on their feet after defeat.

We went through 31 fights together, won belts across different weight classes, and faced blood, broken bones, cuts, Taken away by ambulance, stitches, and losses. But none of those moments broke me. Instead, they helped me understand myself better.

You have become the father figure I never had in my life.

Through Muay Thai, I have learnt to control my emotions, to respect my opponents, and to respect the traditions and spirit behind the sport. True martial arts are not just about knocking someone down. They are about overcoming your own fears, weaknesses, and limitations.

Five years ago, I came to Thailand in search of Muay Thai; five years on, I realise that what I truly found was myself.

I am no longer that child from a broken home, lacking direction. I have become a fighter. But this strength does not come solely from the body; it comes from within.

I am grateful to my coach and to Muay Thai, not only for making me a better fighter, but for helping me become a better person.

2.6 Closing

The four voices in this chapter are not four separate answers, but four different ways of seeing Martial Arts.

As the researcher, I do not stand above these voices searching for a final definition. Instead, I stand between them, listening, connecting and allowing contradictions to exist. Because Martial Arts are not a fixed object; they are constantly being created through movement, memory, experience and exchange, especially within the digital age.

Perhaps the meaning of Martial Arts is not found in a single voice, but in the space between voices — where tradition meets innovation, where the body meets culture, and where individual stories become part of a larger human experience.

This research begins with listening. Through listening, I seek not to define Martial Arts, but to understand how they continue to live, transform and speak in the world today.

3. Scenes from a Researcher's Life

3.1 Between the Club and the Studio

My research did not begin in a library. It began much earlier, with my own experience of learning Martial Arts.

When I first started training, I was drawn to the physical side of Martial Arts. Like many people, I wanted to become stronger, learn techniques, and understand how to fight. At that time, I did not think much about what “Martial Arts culture” actually meant.

But the longer I trained, the more I began to notice the smaller things: the way students greeted their coaches, the brief silence before a difficult training session, and the respect between two people after intense sparring. I saw people gradually learn to control their emotions, and I watched those who once lacked confidence slowly begin to believe in themselves through training. These experiences changed the way I understood Martial Arts.

Later, when I began teaching Muay Thai, I moved from being a “learner” to someone responsible for “passing something on”. I gradually realised that teaching was not simply about showing another person how to perform a technique. Every student entered the gym with their own emotions, fears and life experiences. What Martial Arts pass from one generation to the next is never just technique. Patience, respect,

discipline and confidence are also developed through everyday training, yet these qualities are difficult to capture in a photograph or communicate through a short video.

As my Martial Arts experience began to overlap with my work as a designer, a question emerged that I had never seriously considered before: When Martial Arts culture has to pass through design in order to be seen by more people, what do we choose to carry forward?

I stopped asking only what a martial arts brand should “look like” and began to think more about what it should help people “understand”.

This shift also changed my position as a designer. Before I begin designing, I need to listen, observe and record. What do coaches believe is most important? What do students actually remember? How does a gym develop its own culture? And how might someone who has never practised martial arts understand the visual messages we create?

Therefore, design is no longer the starting point of this research. Listening and observing come first, and this is where I slowly begin to move from being a designer towards becoming a researcher.

3.2 Between the Club and the Studio

3.2.1 I Listen — Interviews

I do not want my own experience to become the only basis for this research.

Interviews therefore give me a way to bring other people's experiences into the research. I want to listen to voices from different positions: coaches who have spent years training and teaching, designers who have worked on Martial Arts branding projects, researchers who study cultural communication, and people who are currently learning Martial Arts.

I am interested not only in the answers they give, but also in the stories behind those answers.

When did Martial Arts begin to mean something to them? What do they believe is worth preserving? What do they think has already changed? What might a designer notice that a coach does not? And what might a beginner see that a long-term practitioner has stopped noticing?

These different voices do not have to agree with one another. In fact, I hope they will challenge some of the assumptions I already have.

For me, an interview is more than a tool for collecting information. It is a way of allowing someone else's experience to enter my research and interrupt the way I already think.

3.2.2 I Watch — Participant Observation

After the interviews, I return to the gym. This is because the way people describe what they do is not always the same as what actually happens in practice. A coach may talk about “respect”, but I want to understand how respect appears in everyday training.

Is it found in the way people speak to each other? Is it shown in what happens before and after training? Or can it be seen in the way an experienced student helps someone who has just walked into the gym for the first time?

I observe the training process, the interactions between coaches and students, and the relationships among students. I also pay attention to the visual elements inside the gym, looking at how cultural values are expressed through the space—or sometimes, how they are not expressed at all.

I am especially interested in recording moments that might normally seem “too small to be worth recording”: a bow, a touch of gloves, a coach correcting the same movement for the tenth time, or a student sitting alone after a difficult round of

sparring.

From the outside, these moments may not seem particularly exciting. But perhaps it is in these small actions that culture actually takes place.

3.2.3 I Compare — Case Studies

I move my attention away from my own gym and my own experience as a designer.

Case studies give me the opportunity to look at practices that already exist, rather than always beginning with my own experience. I want to select Martial Arts gyms, organisations and brands from different regions, cultural contexts and forms of communication, and place them alongside one another for observation and comparison.

My aim is not to decide which brand “looks better”, nor am I searching for a successful example that I can simply copy. What I really want to understand is: when martial arts enter different social and cultural contexts, how are they represented in different ways?

For this reason, I will not look at a logo alone. Websites, posters, social media, clothing, videos and the physical space of the gym can all become part of my

research. For someone encountering a particular martial art for the first time, these elements work together to shape their first impression.

To me, each existing case is almost like a design experiment that has already taken place. Some choices may successfully create a connection between people and culture. Others may leave only a strong but limited visual impression. Some may be exploring new ways of telling the stories of tradition.

By comparing these different practices, I hope to step outside my own design habits and discover possibilities that I may have previously overlooked.

3.2.4 I Reflect — Diary Research

I want to use a research diary to record the changes that take place as I move between training, teaching, observation and design. It may include notes, photographs, sketches, fragments of conversations, design experiments, and questions that I do not yet have answers to. Research rarely follows a straight line, and the diary allows me to keep track of these changes while continually reflecting on my own decisions.

Why did I choose this image? Does my design come from the research, or from my own visual preferences? Am I communicating culture, or unintentionally creating

another stereotype?

The diary is not there to prove that my design decisions are right, but to record the moments when I begin to question them.

This has also made me realise that reflection does not only happen after the design is finished. Reflection is part of the design process itself.

3.3 Becoming the Researcher

For me, interviews, observation, case studies and research diaries are not four separate methods, but different ways of understanding the same question. I listen, observe, compare and reflect, and only then do I begin to design. The further my research develops, the less I believe that design can offer a single or complete answer to Martial Arts. What I really want to explore is: can design create more space for the different meanings of martial arts to be seen? My research begins with my own experience, but it cannot end there. I enter this research as a Martial Arts practitioner, coach and designer. These different identities give me different perspectives, but they also bring different blind spots. Becoming a researcher does not mean leaving these identities behind. Instead, it means learning to look at them again, while constantly moving between training and observation, experience and evidence, culture and communication.

4. Ecologies — Interrelationship Mapping

This map (Figure1) helps me understand Martial Arts culture as a connected system rather than a single subject. At the centre is Martial Arts Culture, surrounded by history and tradition, cultural values, education, digital media, design, audiences, Martial Arts clubs and community. These elements do not exist separately. They constantly influence one another.

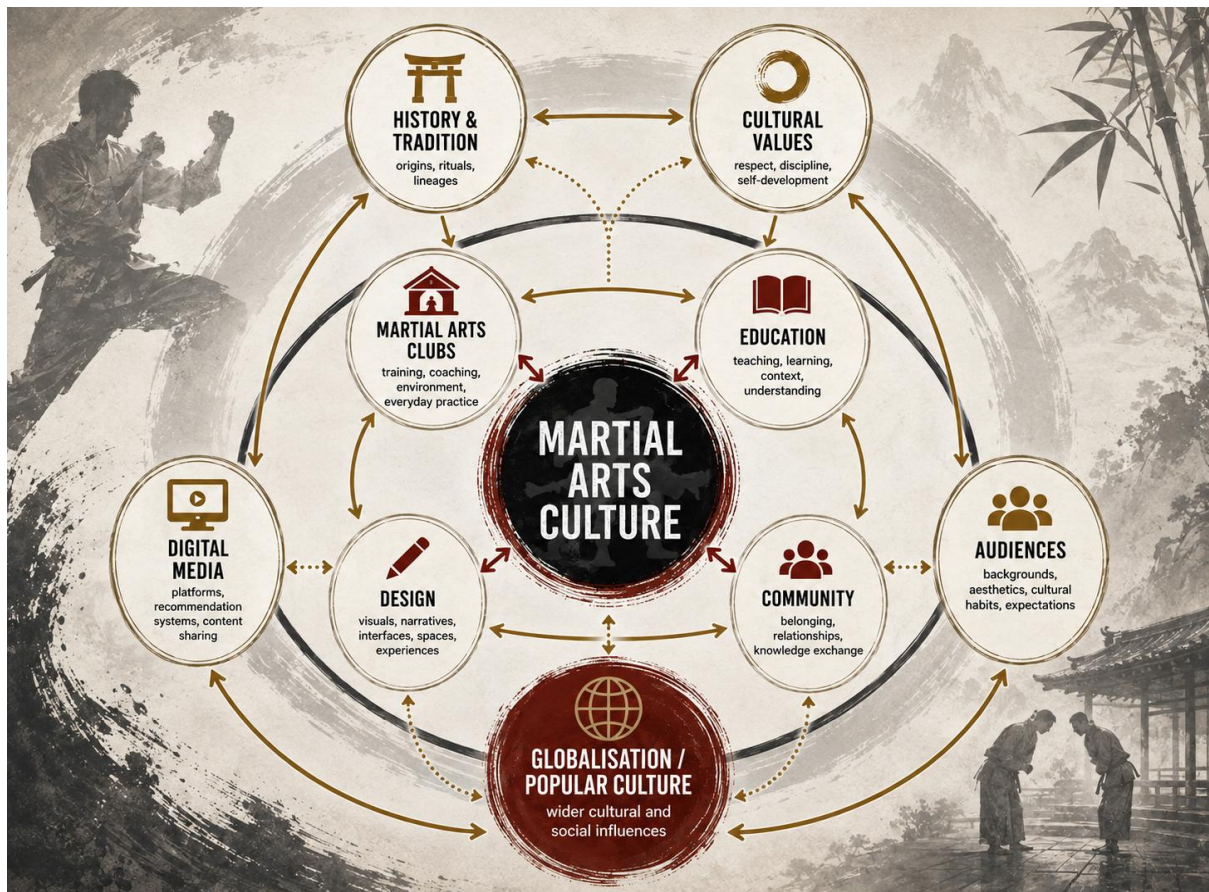


Figure1 Interrelationship Mapping

At the micro level, my research focuses on what happens inside Martial Arts practice: the relationship between coaches and students, the culture of Martial Arts clubs, teaching, everyday training, visual communication and design practice. These are the places where I can directly observe how Martial Arts culture is experienced, interpreted and passed on.

At the macro level, these everyday practices are shaped by wider forces such as history, globalisation, popular culture and digital media. History and tradition influence the values carried by Martial Arts, including respect, discipline and self-development. These values then continue through training, teaching and community life.

Design sits between these two levels. It can translate stories, values, spaces and experiences into visual forms, narratives, interfaces, digital content and physical environments. These forms then move through digital media and reach different groups of people through platforms, recommendation systems, content sharing and wider circulation.

But this relationship is not one-way. Design influences how people see and understand Martial Arts, while audiences also influence design. People from different backgrounds bring different aesthetic preferences, cultural habits, life experiences and expectations. These differences can shape the way martial arts are visually communicated and experienced.

For this reason, I do not see design simply as a way of packaging Martial Arts culture. It works more like a connection between culture, media and people. Design makes choices about what becomes visible, what receives attention and how cultural meaning is translated into forms that can be understood by others.

Martial Arts clubs are another important part of this ecology. They are not only places for physical training, but spaces where culture becomes part of everyday life.

Education also matters because it can turn attention into understanding, helping people connect images and experiences with history, values and practice. Through shared training, relationships and knowledge exchange, these experiences can then develop into community.

For me, the most important point is that Martial Arts culture is always moving through these relationships. History shapes values; values influence practice; design shapes communication; digital media affects visibility; audiences influence expectations; and clubs, education and communities influence how Martial Arts continue to develop.

This map also changes the way I understand my own position as a designer. I am not standing outside Martial Arts culture and simply giving it a new appearance. I am already part of this ecology. My role is to understand where design can enter these relationships, what it may change, and how it can help more parts of Martial Arts culture become visible.

5. Beyond the Image: Meditation

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I view the work from the perspective of an audience member encountering it for the first time. Rather than explaining the posters, I focus on what the audience might notice, question or misunderstand, and how their understanding may gradually change through the experience of looking.



Figure 2 Design outcome

5.2 The First Encounter

I stand in front of the first image(Figure 3), and there is almost too much to see.

Fighters, teachers, training spaces, cities, screens and bodies appear together. Muay Thai, boxing, Wing Chun, Karate and other Martial Arts seem to belong to different places, yet here they are brought into the same visual world. Around them are words that I already know: discipline, respect, courage, humility, focus, balance, unity and self-mastery. These words feel familiar, but I am not sure whether I have ever connected them with the martial arts content that usually appears on my phone. Most of my encounters with Martial Arts have been much shorter than this: someone wins, someone falls, a technique is replayed from another angle, and I watch, scroll and move on. Here, however, I cannot move on so quickly. There are too many details asking for my attention. Fighting is still present, but it is no longer the only thing I can see. I notice teachers standing beside students, groups training together, different environments and different ways of presenting the body. For a moment, Martial Arts feel less like a collection of fighting styles and more like different ways of carrying values, relationships and cultural memories.



Figure 3 Martial Arts Cultural Design Project

5.3 Familiar and Unfamiliar Cultures

The Muay Thai (Figure 4) and boxing (Figure 5) images create two very different feelings. I recognise the fighters in the Muay Thai poster immediately, but much of the world around them is unfamiliar to me. The training space contains ritual, architecture, objects and people whose meanings I do not completely understand. I know what a Muay Thai kick looks like, but I realise that I know much less about what exists around that kick: who teaches it, what traditions accompany it, and what kind of cultural memory it carries. I have watched Muay Thai before, but perhaps I have mostly seen the part that is easiest to show. The boxing image feels more familiar. The red glove, American flag, old gym, city and references to Rocky already belong to a visual language I recognise. I know how I am expected to read this world: struggle, courage, hard work and the dream of becoming a champion. Yet this familiarity creates another uncertainty. How much of what I think I know about boxing comes from boxing itself, and how much has been taught to me by films, advertising and popular culture? Looking between the two images, I begin to realise that unfamiliarity and familiarity can both hide things. In one image, I do not know enough to understand the culture. In the other, I may feel that I already know so much that I stop asking questions.



Figure 4 Muay Thai Cultural Design Project

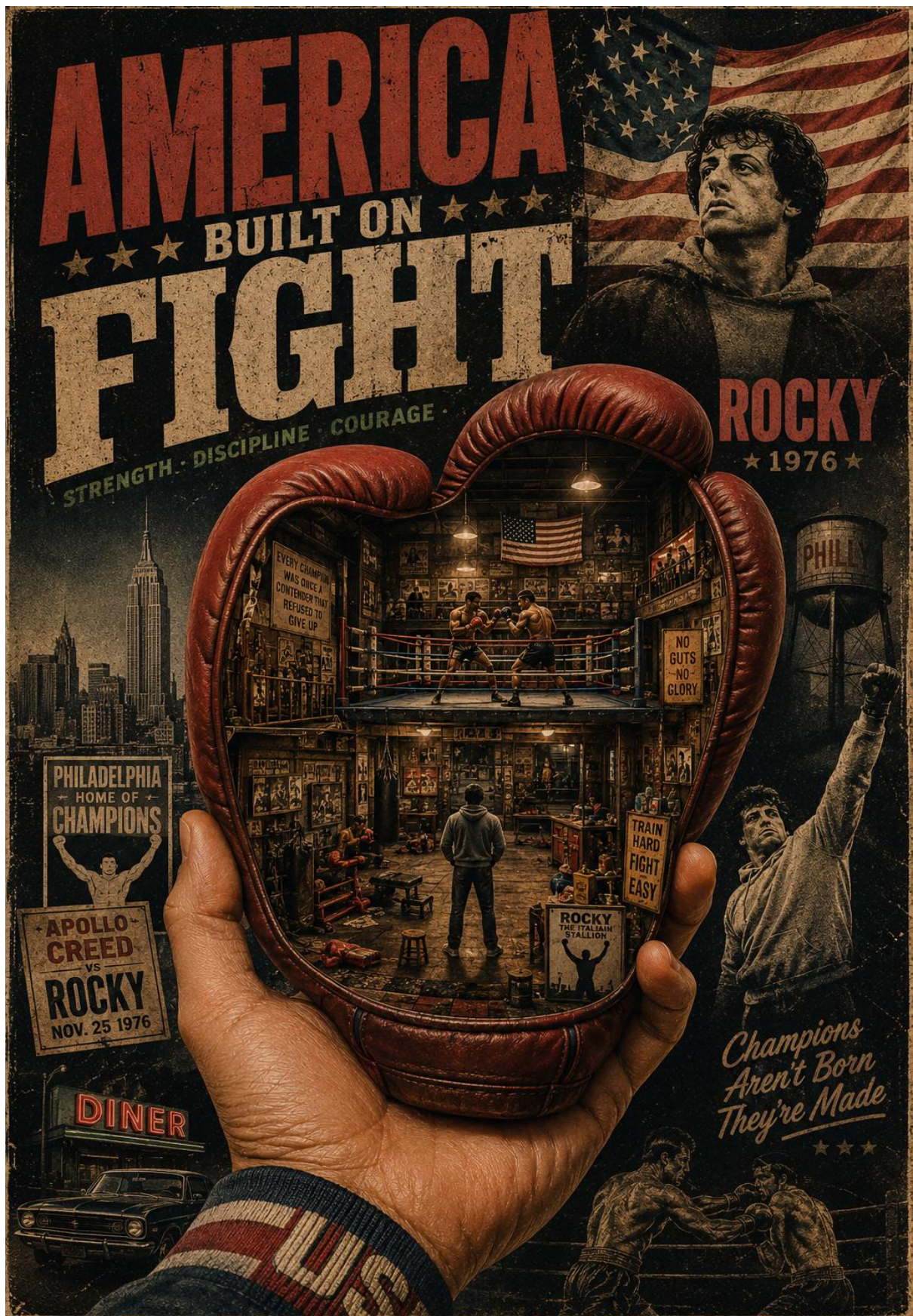


Figure 5 Boxing Cultural Design Project

5.4 Tradition as Something Living

Wing Chun (Figure 6) and Karate (Figure 7) make me look at Martial Arts differently again. In the Wing Chun image, wood replaces leather, and the space feels more intimate. The wooden dummy stands at the centre, surrounded by teachers, students, portraits, weapons and traces of another time. Some of these things are familiar from films, which makes me realise that I knew the image of Wing Chun before I understood the practice itself. Yet the longer I look, the less interested I become in a single technique. I begin to think instead about how a movement travels from one person to another: it is demonstrated, corrected, repeated, remembered and eventually passed on. Tradition suddenly feels less like something stored in the past and more like something that must continually be practised in the present. The Karate image creates a quieter feeling. Students repeat movements across different levels of the training space, surrounded by architecture, landscape and the city beyond. There is strength in the image, but it does not need to be loud. Looking at these two works, words such as respect and discipline begin to change meaning for me. Respect might appear through ritual, through the relationship between teacher and student, or through the way people share a training space. Discipline might exist in repeated movements, in returning to training, or simply in continuing when the body is tired. Perhaps different Martial Arts can carry similar values without needing to look the same.



Figure 6 Wing Chun Cultural Design Project



Figure 7 Karate Cultural Design Project

5.5 Looking Again

When I return to the first image, nothing in it has changed, but my attention has. At the beginning, I mainly saw fighters and different Martial Arts styles. Now I begin to see relationships. I see teachers and students, spaces in which knowledge is shared, and histories surrounding the bodies that first caught my attention. I also notice the screens and networks that connect these practices to a much wider world. What once seemed like separate images of Martial Arts now feels more like an ecology: culture moving between bodies, places, objects, memories and media. At the same time, I become aware that every image makes a choice. Something is placed at the centre while something else remains outside the frame. A poster cannot contain the whole history of a martial art, just as a photograph cannot explain years of training. I may misunderstand a symbol, romanticise a tradition, or connect an image with something I have seen in a film. I cannot completely escape the visual references I already carry with me. Yet perhaps these images do not need to give me a complete answer. Their effect may lie somewhere else: in making me notice that my first impression was incomplete. Instead of telling me exactly what Martial Arts culture means, they make me more aware of how quickly I had previously decided what Martial Arts meant.

5.6 What Travels Through the Screen?

I begin to wonder what happens when these cultures leave the gym and travel through images. A punch is easy to communicate. A knockout can be understood almost instantly, even by someone who knows nothing about the Martial Arts behind it. A spectacular kick can cross languages and countries within seconds. Respect is more difficult. Discipline takes time. History does not easily fit into a short video, and the relationship between a teacher and a student may take years to understand. Perhaps this is why I have encountered Martial Arts so many times online while seeing so little of what surrounds the fight. It is not necessarily because the culture has disappeared, but because some things move through digital media more easily than others. This also makes me question the images in front of me. Can a poster really carry culture? Can design make something as slow and lived as tradition visible without turning it into another attractive surface? I do not know. The images themselves cannot give me a final answer. They are still designed objects, and they still select, simplify and frame what I see. But they have slowed down my looking. Instead of asking only who is fighting, which technique is being used or who might win, I find myself asking where these practices came from, why particular objects and rituals matter, and what might be lost when martial arts move from a training space into an image on a screen.

5.7 Beyond the Image

These images do not make me an expert in Muay Thai, boxing, Wing Chun or Karate, and I still remain outside many of the experiences they represent. Yet I no longer feel that being outside means I can only see fighting. The posters have given me another way into Martial Arts—not through learning a technique, but through becoming curious about what exists around it. I begin to ask who taught this person, why they train in this way, what this space remembers, why a ritual continues to be repeated, and what changes when a martial art moves from one culture into another. Perhaps this is what stays with me after I leave the images. They have not given me a complete definition of Martial Arts culture; instead, they have made something familiar feel slightly unfamiliar again. The next time a fighting video appears on my phone, I may still watch the punch, admire the technique and want to know who wins. But perhaps I will also notice what happens before and after it: a bow, a greeting, a coach waiting in the corner, a repeated ritual, or the years of training hidden inside a movement that lasts only a second. The fight has not disappeared from my view. I have simply begun to see that it was never the whole picture. I thought I was looking at Martial Arts. Now I wonder what else I had not been looking at.

6. To the Stranger

6.1 Letter

Dear Stranger,

If you have found this research because you are also interested in Martial Arts, culture or design, I want to leave you with one thought: do not begin with the image. Begin with the people and culture behind it. Throughout this research, I have learned that martial arts cannot be understood only through fighting, techniques or the visual symbols we already recognise. Its meaning also exists in training, rituals, history, relationships, discipline, respect and the everyday experiences shared between coaches and students. These things may be less visible, but they are often where culture continues to live.

If you are a designer working with Martial Arts, spend time inside the places you want to represent. Listen before you design. Talk to coaches and students. Observe how people train, how they communicate, what they repeat, what they protect and what they consider important. A logo, poster, video or digital platform can make Martial Arts more visible, but visibility alone does not create understanding. Design always makes choices about what is shown and what is left outside the frame. Those choices carry responsibility.

I would also encourage you to question the images that already surround Martial Arts. Fighting, strength and competition are part of Martial Arts, and they should not simply be removed. But they do not need to become the whole story. Ask what happens before the fight, after the fight and beyond the camera. There may be other stories waiting there: a teacher passing knowledge to a student, a ritual repeated across generations, or a community built through years of training.

Most importantly, do not expect design to provide one final definition of Martial Arts culture. Different Martial Arts belong to different histories, places and communities. What works in one context may become misleading in another. Keep observing, testing, listening and questioning your own decisions.

My research began by asking how design might help people see Martial Arts beyond fighting. I leave the question open for you:

What else has not yet been seen, and how might your practice help someone notice it?

Yours,

A fellow researcher

7. Afterword: What the Writing Taught Me

Writing this dossier has changed the way I understand research. At the beginning, I often thought of research as something that happened before design: I would collect information, understand the problem, and then begin making. But through writing, I realised that research and design are not two separate stages. Writing itself became a way of thinking, questioning and sometimes changing what I thought I already knew.

Moving between different forms of writing also made me look at my research from different positions. The manifesto helped me understand what I wanted to challenge. Other voices reminded me that my own experience could never be the only perspective. Writing about my methodology made me more aware of how my identities as a Martial Arts practitioner, coach and designer influence the way I observe. The ecology map pushed me to see Martial Arts culture as a network of relationships rather than a single subject, while the meditation asked me to step outside my own intentions and imagine how the work might be understood by someone else.

Most importantly, writing taught me to become more comfortable with questions that do not have immediate answers. I no longer see research as a process of proving that my design decisions are correct. Instead, I see it as a process of listening, observing, making, questioning and returning again.

I began this dossier as a designer researching martial arts culture. I finish it more aware of what it means to become a researcher: not to know everything, but to keep learning how to look again.

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