

ESSAY BOOK REVIEWS

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For High School Students
from the Mid-Atlantic Region

Each year two prizes for the best essays examining a topic related to Asia written by high school students from the Mid-Atlantic Region are awarded by the Mid-Atlantic Region/Association for Asian Studies (MAR/AAS). \$350 is awarded for the best essay and \$175 for the runner-up. Prize recipients and their teachers will be recognized during the annual Fall Meeting in October 26, 2002 at the Community College of Baltimore County—Essex Campus.

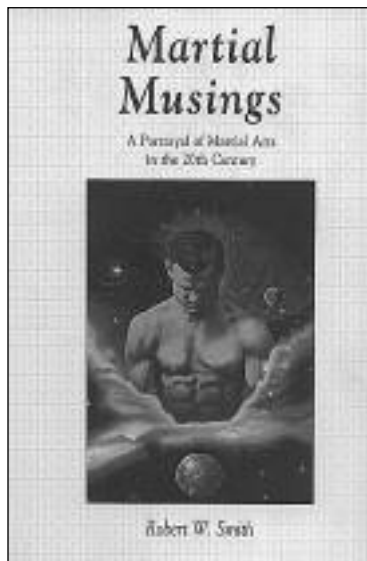
Papers may examine any of the cultures or countries of Asia from any disciplinary standpoint: history, anthropology, religion, economics, literature, political science, or art history.

A panel of scholars and teachers will read each submission from the membership of MAR/AAS. It will be judged on the quality of written expression, on the level of the writer's demonstrated understanding of the topic, and on its scholarship. The winning essay is published in the *MAR/AAS Asia Newsletter* and is also posted on the MAR/AAS web site: <http://www.maraas.org>. For additional details, contact the web site or:

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Martial Musings
*A Portrayal of Martial Arts
in the 20th Century*

BY ROBERT W. SMITH
ERIE, PENNSYLVANIA, VIA MEDIA PUBLISHING, 1999
400 PAGES. 300 ILLUSTRATIONS
ISBN 1-893765-008 HARDBACK



A well-written memoir is a sure-fire way to make Asian history and culture come alive for students who approach the subject with little or no knowledge. If the memoir can teach and contextualize as well as inspire curiosity about Asia, all the better. In *Martial Musings: A Portrayal of Martial Arts in the 20th Century*, Robert W. Smith not only offers us the story of one man's joyous, passionate, and often genuinely

daring romp through the modern martial arts, he does so by interweaving his subject with the multiple perspectives of international relations, literature, and American popular culture. *Martial Musings* thus provides us with a way of seeing these subjects that avoids the "usual suspects" of chronology, great events, and great (mostly male) lives.

Ex-Marine, CIA analyst, literary critic, writer, and, at times, unabashed liberal, Smith enjoys near legendary status in the American martial arts world as a pioneer, popularizer, ethnographer, and scholar. His post-World War II immersion in the American (and consequently Japanese-American) judo world, his personal survey of Taiwan's martial artists while stationed there with the CIA in the 1960s, and the subsequent books, articles, and photographs that emerged from this work opened the door for countless Americans who sought the "real stuff" in later years. (I write this review from Shanghai, where I am conducting my own ethnographic research on martial arts; as Smith himself might put it, "I sit at his feet.")

The book is roughly divided into five sections: Smith's childhood, his post-World War II experiences with judo and boxing, his rich encounters with the martial arts in Taiwan, his life as teacher and popularizer upon his return to the U.S., and, briefly, his experience as a literary critic for the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, and several other newspapers and magazines.

Smith's story begins and ends in the present, in retirement in the Smoky Mountains. The author is generous with literary allu-

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sions throughout, ranging from Dorothy Parker to Sir Richard Francis Burton to W. B. Yeats to Ray Bradbury. Virtually every page is sprinkled with such references, a good deal of them Japanese and Chinese poets. Yet, never does this ample use of allusion deteriorate into pedantry. Smith is literate without being a literatus, and he is dedicated in *Martial Musings*, as in many of his other writings, to dismantling Neanderthalesque stereotypes about martial arts and martial artists.

From North Carolina, we are soon transported back to the difficult, but intellectually inspiring years in the orphanage where the author was raised. "We all loved the same old bitch in those days, and her name was nostalgia," Smith quotes Scott Fitzgerald. But for Smith it is highly selective nostalgia, and we often get the impression that his overriding agenda for the book is to maintain the dignity of privacy. Smith is, for example, relatively silent regarding his five years as a Marine in World War II. He picks up again in 1946, when he begins to hone some of the boxing skills he had been exposed to in the military, ultimately coaching successful Golden Gloves teams. About the same time, Smith informs us, he began to learn judo in Chicago, a sport that he was to embrace as practitioner, teacher, and organizer for the next thirty years. Along the way, we meet the often larger than life (but very real) cast of characters who Smith befriended in the world of Japanese martial arts, among them Donn Draeger, a highly skilled martial artist and the creator of the academic discipline of hopology (the study of weapons and fighting systems); Morihei Ueshiba Shihan, the founder of aikidō; and John Bluming, a formidable judo practitioner and personal bodyguard to Dutch Prince Bernard.

In 1959, the CIA posted Smith to Taiwan, where he remained for more than three years. Smith has already written about his training with Taiwan's best and brightest in a previous book, *Chinese Boxing: Masters and Methods*, but *Martial Musings* is a much more personal account, less about training methods and techniques and more about personal relationships with the many teachers he encountered and with whom he forged lifelong friendships, including the great popularizer of *taijiquan* in the United States, Zheng Manqing. The diminutive Zheng, well respected in Taiwan as a poet, musician, painter, and practitioner of Chinese medicine, had few equals in the martial arts world. Smith was largely responsible for bringing Zheng to the U.S., and it was Zheng, the sensitive artist who could kick some butt, who attracted an odd mix of hardcore martial arts and sixties counter-culture aficionados to his New York studio. The latter group essentially recreated *tai chi* as nine parts esoteric meditation exercise, one part dance, and zero parts fighting art. Smith has little time for this wafty crowd and spends considerable space decrying the propensity of American *taiji* practitioners to see Zheng through racist lenses as the mystical old Chinese sage. For Smith, the reality of the man far exceeded the romantic fictions created around him.

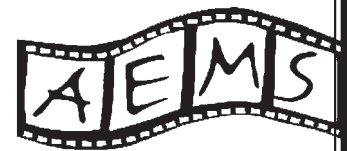
Like any work of the heart, *Martial Musings* has its problems, not the least of which is an apparent unwillingness on the part of Smith's editors to hone and shape the book. To Smith's credit, his "rough edges and all" style comes off like a cross between Thomas Wolfe in *Look Homeward Angel* and Woody Guthrie in *Bound for Glory*. Like Wolfe, Smith is not afraid to pull out all the stops in his use of the English language. Like Guthrie's work, the separate parts of *Martial Musings* often work better alone than together. In the Asian Studies classroom, doling out Smith in small doses throughout a term may be more effective than tackling the book all at once.

It is no accident that Smith acknowledges a fellow renaissance man like Sir Richard Francis Burton (explorer, swordsman, translator of the *Kama Sutra* and *The Arabian Nights*) and a fellow romantic visionary like Ray Bradbury (the first man on Mars?) within the same pages. Both share Smith's passion for being alive. Above all else, it is in conveying this passion that *Martial Musings* proves most valuable. ■

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