

REMARKS ON THE INFLUENCE OF JAPANESE MARTIAL ARTS IN THE WEST

Constantinos Grivas

Environmental studies & research
Athens Aikido Society & International Shiseikan Budo Association, Meiji Jingu
Shiseikan Budojo
iespa@hol.gr

Résumé

Le Japon et sa culture sont souvent représentés par des images stéréotypées, la plus fréquente (et la plus impressionnante) étant celle du samurai, l'image de la classe guerrière du pays. Les racines presque mythologiques des arts martiaux japonais sont souvent reliées aux rites de Shinto et aux régions de Katori et de Kashima. Cet article clarifie certains termes souvent utilisés, mais généralement mal compris. Il présente aussi une approche critique de l'œuvre des trois personnalités importantes, responsables du transfert de ces arts vers l'Occident. Enfin, il étudie l'importance de cet aspect particulier de la culture japonaise auprès des sociétés occidentales.

Mots-clés

Arts Martiaux, mythologie Japonaise, Shinto, Budo

Abstract

Japan and its culture are often expressed through certain stereotypes, the most impressive of which is the samurai figure, the representative of Japan's warrior class. Japanese martial arts acclaimed mythical roots relate them to Shinto and the areas of Katori and Kashima. Furthermore several widely used, but generally misunderstood terms, are clarified. Three important personalities for the transfer of these arts in the West are critically re-examined. Finally, we briefly investigate the importance of this side of Japanese culture for the western societies.

Keywords

Martial arts, Japanese mythology, Shinto, Budo

Introduction

Martial arts represent one of the most familiar aspects of the Japanese culture, not only directly as practicing arts, but also indirectly as an important influence on other art forms, like literature (comics included) and cinema. Their influence in the western societies is very extensive to be covered in an article, especially due to the technical aspects of the martial arts. Our goal here is to point out some important, though neglected issues for the better understanding not just of the martial arts themselves, but of the Japanese culture in general and the way it was perceived by the westerners. These points include the deeply rooted in Shinto mythology of the Japanese martial arts and the clarification of some important terms. Three different personalities are going to be examined, a Japanese and two westerners, who played key roles in the dissemination of the Japanese martial arts in the West. Finally, it is crucial to determine somehow the importance of the influence of this form of Japanese culture for the western societies. These issues apply to other aspects of the Japanese culture as well and especially the traditional arts and crafts.

Mythical roots

A well-known ukiyo-e woodprint theme depicts the deity Takemikazuchi-no-mikoto (or Takemikazuchi-no-Ōkami) using his sword to keep the giant catfish Namazu under control. Namazu supposedly lives in the mud under the Japanese islands and is responsible for earthquake activity. When Takemikazuchi relaxes his control on the fish, the later can cause catastrophic earthquakes in the country. So, the divine sword keeps the land and the people safe and prosperous. This is a clear image of the importance of the Japanese sword. Takemikazuchi, worshipped in Great Kashima Temple (Kashima Dai Jingū), descended in Japan to subdue the local deities in behalf of the heaven ones. He demonstrated his superior skills to local deity Ōkuni-nushi by sitting cross-legged on the tip of his sword. When Takeminakata, son of Ōkuni-nushi, challenged Takemikazuchi and grabbed his hand, he instantly transformed it to a sword, forcing Takeminakata to release him. Then it was Takemikazuchi's turn to grab Takeminakata and immobilize him to win the battle. This duel is considered by the Japanese as the mythical origin of *Sumo*, a traditional wrestling mingled with Shinto rituals.

The first historically recorded schools of Japanese martial arts were founded at the areas of **Katori**, by Iizasa Chōisai Ienao (1387-1488) (*Tenshin Shōden Katori Shintō-ryū*) and **Kashima**, by Matsumoto Bizen-no-kami (1467-1524 1543) (*Kashima Shin-ryū*) and Tsukahara Bokuden (1489-1571) (*Kashima Shintō-ryū*) (Otake, 1977; Friday, 1997). This could be attributed to the presence of iron nuggets in these areas and the consequent gathering of ironsmiths there. The huge straight sword *Futsu-no-Mitama*, kept in Kashima temple, is considered today a national treasure of Japan. In both Kashima and Katori temples they worship warrior deities, e.g. the above mentioned Takemikazuchi and Futsunushi (Futsunushi-no-Ōkami) respectively.

Ukiyo-e woodprints depict also sacred rocks (*kaname-ishi*), like the ones found at Kashima and Katori areas, that hold in place the whole Honsu Island. It would be interesting to compare the two *kaname-ishi* rocks with the 1-2 pegs (*mekugi*) used to hold the hilt (*tsuka*) connected with the sword (*katana* or *tachi*). Unfortunately the symbolism of the Japanese

sword is quite elaborate to be included here. It's intriguing anyway that most contemporary Japanese are not aware of such associations.

Terminology

Even in early Japan there was a prevailing idea that the optimum expression of the *Japanese spirit* (*yamato damashii*, 大和魂) emerges in the warrior class (*samurai*, 侍). The term *bushidō* (武士道), usually translated as “the way of the warrior”, appears for the first time in 17th c., but receives wide acceptance only after the 1899 publication of the work “*Bushido: The Soul of Japan*” by Nitobe Inazō (Friday, 1994), who we're going to discuss later. Some older terms like *mononofu-no-michi* (“warrior's path”, 武士の道, actually *dō* or *michi* are different pronunciations of the same ideogram), *tsuwamono-no-michi* (“soldier's path”, 強者の道), *yumiya-no-michi* (“bow and arrow path”, 弓矢の道) etc., were used to define the military way of life, that embodies the Japanese soul/spirit (*yamato damashii*) and emanates during a time of emergency (Inaba, 2008a; Inaba, 2008b; Inaba, 2013). In the following paragraphs the term *bushidō* is used with the meaning of a warrior's spiritual practice, an interpretation followed by some contemporary practitioners of Japanese martial arts (Inaba, 2008a; Inaba, 2008b; Inaba, 2013).

It seems that martial art schools (*ryūha bugei*) took shape in response to intensified demand for skilled warriors spawned by the onset of the Sengoku period (1467-1568). Until recently it was believed that the peaceful Tokugawa period – that began around 1600 – brought fundamental changes to the practice of the martial arts, the most significant of them being the reform of motives and tasks underlying practice. But, a growing body of evidence points to the conclusion that these martial art schools aimed from the start at conveying more abstract ideals of self-development. Actually the timing of this change at the turn of the 16th c., coincided with similar tendencies in many other Japanese art forms, like flower arrangement (*ikebana*), calligraphy (*shodō*), painting (*kaiga* or *gadō*), music (*gagaku* etc.), drama (*nōgaku*) etc. (Friday, 2005). But for the martial arts themselves it is probably easier to understand the reasons for the necessity of spiritual training. It was naturally inserted because of the psychological reaction of a living creature that detests death. While encountering a threatening situation and the mind becomes unrest and distracted, it creates a cause for defeat, since accurate and calm judgement and course of action are impossible (Inaba, 2006).

The term *budō* (武道), comprised from ideograms *bu* and *dō*, found also in the term *bushidō*, is usually translated as “the way of the martial arts”, while the term *bujutsu* (武術) or *bugei* (武芸) as plain “martial art”, referring actually to the purely technical part of the martial arts. Martial art schools that appeared in Meiji (Showa) period are named “modern *budō*” (*gendai budō*, 現代武道), in contrast with the older schools labeled *koryū* (old schools, 古流), *ryūha* or *kobudō* (old *budō*, 古武道). Well-known martial arts like Judo, Kendo, Iaido, Aikido etc., belong to the modern *budō* category. These schools were formed by personages that tried to reform *budō* following different approaches. Judo, a typical example, was founded by Kano

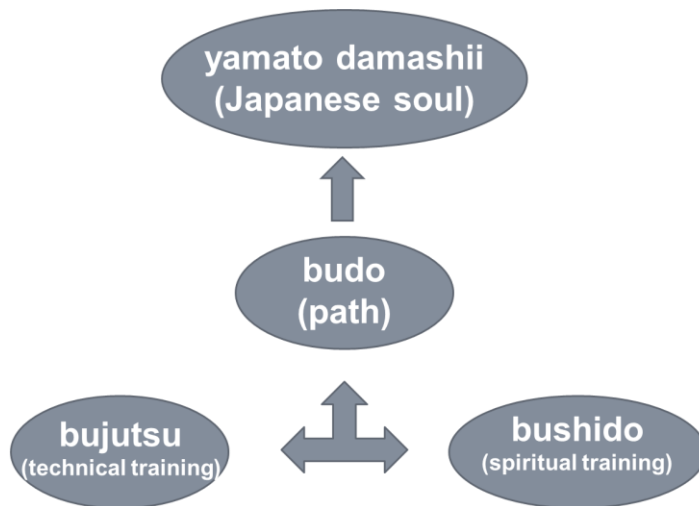
Jigoro in between 1882-1884 as an integration of older *Jujutsu* schools, like *Sekiguchi*, *Kito* and *Seigo Ryu*. Already in 1911 Judo was officially introduced in the Japanese educational system. During Kano's 1934 visit in Athens, he presented a very interesting lecture at Parnassos Philological Society (June 5th, 1934), under the title "Principles of Judo and Their Applications to all Phases of Human Activity" (Grivas, 2005). Most *modern budō*, with the striking exception of Ueshiba Morihei's Aikido, turned to the organization of competition systems, which started to play an increasingly important role in their curriculum.

Usually students start practicing in a *budojo* (*budō* place) are taught initially techniques (*jutsu*) and later seek for spiritual practice, that should target to the understanding of a person's real character and sentiments, as well as to the research for spiritual values, seen through the perspective of traditional culture. Evolving from techniques to spiritual training and knowing the interconnection of these two aspects, they can achieve simultaneous improvement (Inaba, 2013).

According to the understanding of *budō* teacher Inaba Minoru (2008a; 2008b; 2013), who follows both the tradition of *Kashima Shin Ryū* and Aikido, *budō* today should stand for a way of life aiming at the pursuing of a personal *bushidō*, whilst maintaining a feeling of intensity emanating from the threat of dying. This strenuous condition must be applied during *bujutsu* practice, so to finally become *budō*. In this way it is possible to obtain fighting skills and principles, and thereby cultivate a strong spirit which transcends life and death (Inaba, 2013). Therefore, the study and implementation of the Japanese warriors' spirit and values guides to the research for the deeper soul. Applying practically the spiritual training, a practitioner must be prepared for battle, even when it's possible to lose his life. The power produced during this procedure is the spirit of *budō* (Inaba, 2013). The essential quality of this spiritual power is the readiness to abandon self, an attitude certainly admirable. However, admiration is only an emotional response. If it is to become inspiration and guide for action, the attitude of self-abandonment must be understood and cultivated. It isn't a virtue just for the sake of itself, except perhaps in the case of a hermit. It becomes a meaningful attitude when it is decided for the sake of something broader than self, but with which the self can identify. Progress towards perfection in martial arts is an individual effort, but according to the tradition of Japanese *budō* it is not motivated by individualism. Rather, it should be fueled by noble ideas and the will to put them to practice (Papathanasis, 2008).

The following diagram (Diagram 2) is an effort to illustrate the relations between the different terms mentioned above. The effective simultaneous **technical** and **spiritual training** (*bujutsu* and *bushidō* or *bushi no michi* respectively) results in the shaping of the **path** (*budō*), targeting to the reconnection with the special characteristics of the **Japanese soul** (*yamato damashii*).

Diagram 1. Relations between technical and spiritual training (*bujutsu* and *bushidō*), the path or “way of the warrior” (*budō*) and Japanese spirit/soul (*yamato damashii*)



(based on Inaba, 2008a; Inaba, 2008b; Inaba, 2013)

Undoubtedly, in the past the key for shaping *budō* was the preparation for actual battle. This part – the military profession excluded – can be achieved only with the retaining of a special spiritual and psychological pressure during training, a state that struggles to approximate the situation of life and death of the older schools. Unfortunately, the majority of modern martial arts claiming they practice *budō*, do not retain this crucial characteristic, focusing either on the athletic part (especially competition) or in forms, in a way of choreography. This criterion seems to be of utmost importance for the future evolution of the Japanese martial arts and the way they are perceived by the western societies.

Controversial pioneers

As was mentioned before the term *bushidō* started to gain popularity after the 1899 publication of Nitobe Inazō’s work with the same title. Nitobe (1862-1933) studied agricultural economics at the Sapporo Agricultural College (today part of the University of Hokkaido). He was baptized a Methodist and continued his studies in literature and economics at the Tokyo Imperial University. Disappointed from the educational level he traveled in the USA, where he stayed for three years (1884-1887), studying economics and political science at the Johns Hopkins University. During the same period he became a Quaker and met his American future wife. Following another three years of studies at the Halle University in Germany, he returned home. Among others he served in official positions, like the technical advisor of the Japanese colonial administration in Taiwan (1901), law professor at the Kyoto (1904) and Tokyo (1913) Imperial Universities. He participated in the organization of the Japan Council of the Institute of Pacific Relations and the League of

Nations (1920). However, the most striking fact of his biography is that Nitobe had no actual training in the martial arts, either technical or spiritual.

His *Bushido* became enthusiastically accepted in the West, but it was received with severe criticism in his own country. Notable among its critics were Inoue Tetsujirō (1855-1944), a prominent lecturer on *bushidō* himself and Tsuda Sōkichi (1873-1861), a prolific historian on national ideology (Benesch, 2014). Nitobe's book became widely accepted in Japan only after 1980. The very idea of a samurai's moral code is the product of 17th and 18th centuries, when Japan was in peace and the warrior class was dealing more with bureaucracy and state administration, than battles or dueling (Friday, 1994). The seven virtues of the warrior, as were romanticized by Nitobe include: rectitude (*gi*, 義), courage (*yū*, 勇), benevolence (*jin*, 仁), politeness (*rei*, 禮), sincerity (*makoto*, 誠), honor (*meiyo*, 名誉) and loyalty (*chūgi*, 忠義). The strong Christian flavour of Nitobe's ideas is certainly difficult to identify with samurai ethics of the period of Takeda Shingen (1521-1573), Uesugi Kenshin (1530-1578) and Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582), the very dawn of the old martial art schools.

Eugen Herrigel (1884-1955) was a German neo-kantian philosopher, who taught at the Tohoku Imperial University, in Sendai, Japan, between 1924-1929. During his last three years in Japan he studied the art of Japanese archery (*Kyūdō*, 弓道), under Awa Kenzō (1880-1939). Coming back in Germany he was appointed as professor of philosophy at the University of Erlangen. His famous book "Zen in the Art of Archery" (Herrigel, 1948/1953) was meant to become until recently the main introductory work for everyone that wanted to study the "philosophy of the martial arts". But this convenient Herrigel's myth stumbles at some important obstacles. Firstly, the writer himself wasn't versed in Japanese and for understanding Awa's theoretical explanations he was solely based on his translator, who according his own words found great difficulties in explaining the complicate conversations between Herrigel and Awa (Komachiya, 1940). In result some plain technical terms appear in Herrigel's book with a strong mystical flavor. Neither Herrigel nor his archery teacher were delved into Zen Buddhism. Furthermore Awa himself was considered by other Kyudo masters as an eccentric personality. On that period Awa was trying to form his ideas in the shape of a religious movement, an effort not so representative of the actual Kyudo practiced at the time. Herrigel's personal opinions were highly respected in the West and can be held responsible for two biased ideas dominating for decades among westerners involved in Japanese martial arts: the intense "spiritual" or "mystical" halo surrounding these arts, often in the expense of their technical side and their firm connection with Zen Buddhism. As it was mentioned before, especially the older schools inclined more towards Shinto, Tendai or Shingon Buddhism (like in the case of the *yamabushi*, 山伏, mountain ascetics).

In contrast with academic circles was Donald Frederick "Donn" Draeger (1922-1982), an American officer and martial arts specialist. He served in the US Marine Corps during 1943-1956 and fought in Iwo Jima. He had started his Judo training at the age of 8 in Chicago, under American teachers. In Japan he intensified his training in Judo, Kendo, Iaido, Aikido and Karate-do, while he was the first non-Japanese student of *Tenshin Shōden Katori Shintō-ryū* and *Shindo Muso-ryū* (staff school, *jōdō*). He wrote and translated important books for the history and transmission of martial arts. His three-volume "Martial Arts and Ways of Japan" (1973-1974) is still an important reference work for any contemporary researcher of the Japanese martial arts. Draeger's book follows the historical distinction between old *bujutsu*

(*Volume I: Classical Bujutsu*, 1973), old *budō* (*Volume II: Classical Budo*, 1973) and modern *bujutsu/ budō* (*Volume III: Modern Bujutsu and Budo*, 1974).

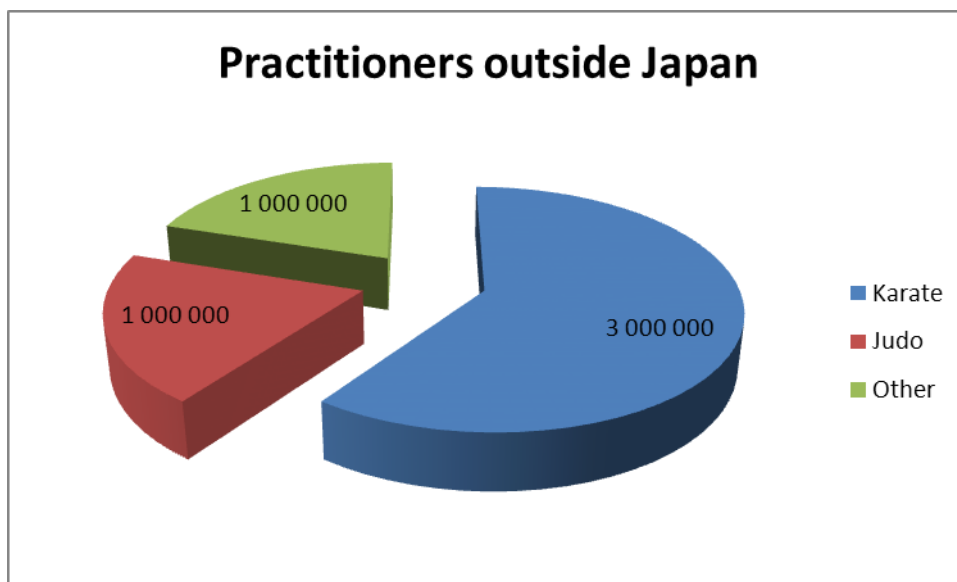
These three personalities played a completely different role in the forming of the westerners' opinion on the Japanese martial arts. Both Nitobe and Herrigel, being academics, were responsible for the establishing of their strongly personal and eccentric view on the *budō* in the West, while Draeger, with his military background, contributed significantly in the more processed contemporary approach in the martial arts of Japan.

Influence in the West

According to the data of the International Budo University Japanese martial arts' practitioners outside Japan are roughly estimated at 5 million. These include approximately 3 million Karate practitioners (*karateka*) and 1 million *judoka* (60% and 20% respectively), while the rest are training in Kendo, Aikido, Iaido, Naginata-do (type of pole weapon) etc. (Diagram 2). In accordance with the same source, numbers of practitioners in Japan present similar levels. Consequently, there is no doubt that the direct influence of the Japanese martial arts is inferior to other much more popular art forms, like cinema and manga.

Diagram 2. Numbers and percentages of practitioners in the Japanese martial arts outside Japan

From a total of 5 million, 60% is practicing Karate and 20% Judo. The rest 20% includes practitioners in Kendo, Aikido, Iaido, Naginata-do etc.



(source: International Budo University)

Except from plain numbers there are some instances where training in martial arts can have interesting political implications, as in the case of friendship and mutual respect between Steven Seagal (7th dan Aikido) and the Russian President Vladimir Putin (6th dan Judo). In an interview to the state-owned Russian newspaper *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* in March 2014, Seagal

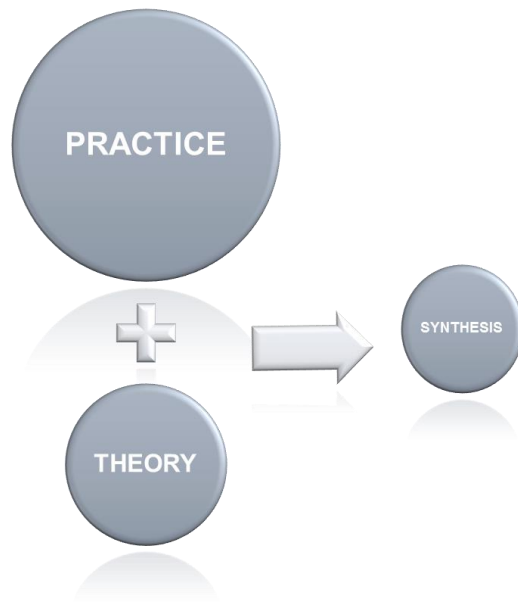
described President Putin as “one of the great living world leaders” and he openly supported the integration of Crimea in the Russian Federation (Brennan, 2014).

Japanese martial art practitioners can be grouped generally in three major categories (Diagram 3):

1. Groups interested exclusively on the practical side of the martial arts. Since acts of violence in societies still present a major problem, there is always an interest on the practical application of the martial arts for self-defense. Furthermore, as was mentioned before, a large percentage of practitioners are attracted by the participation and distinction in tournaments. This is especially true for Judo (participating in the Olympic Games since 1964 in Tokyo), Kendo and Karate-do.
2. Groups interested mainly for a theoretical approach. These groups are scanty and include people who perceive training as participation in Japanese culture, an academic object of research etc. This category must also include a wider audience that is interested for specific martial art texts, but from a radically different point of view. Typical example of this approach is the extensive reading among western businessmen of the “Book of Five Rings” (*Go Rin No Sho*, 五輪書), written in the period 1640-1645 by the famous sword master Musashi Miyamoto (1584-1645). They conceive Musashi’s written experience and stratagems as guidelines for conducting a successful career.
3. Groups trying to combine both technical and spiritual training. Unfortunately the numbers of practitioners following a synthesis approach are very low. Nevertheless there are a few organized efforts inside and outside of Japan. Examples include the aforementioned International Budo University and the International Shiseikan Budo Association, affiliated with the Meiji Temple (Meiji Jingu). The latter offers scholarships for the parallel study of *budō* and Shintō. In one of these scholarships the subject focused on the role of martial arts in the development of ethos and psychological strength, characteristics that can prove especially useful during a national crisis. Furthermore the Greek writer used as her examples the Fukushima nuclear accident in Japan and the Greek financial crisis (Picha, 2013).

This general differentiation is based on the distinction between *bujutsu*, *bushido* and *budō* that was discussed before. Its value can be meaningful only in a context of developing a more thorough future for the Japanese martial arts.

Diagram 3. The three major categories of Japanese martial art practitioners, according to their approach on the subject of technical and spiritual training (practical or exclusively technical approach, theoretical or exclusively spiritual research, synthesis or combining approach).



Conclusions

The dissemination of Japanese martial arts in the West was characterized by conceptual and historical misunderstandings, several of which are still in effect in contemporary Japan. Due to the popularization of some pioneers' personal ideas (like Nitobe and Herrigel) there is considerable confusion on terminology (*bujutsu*, *budō*, *bushidō* etc.) and the actual structure of training in the old schools, as well as a biased tendency to connect the martial arts with Zen Buddhism. Spiritual training was probably naturally inserted in martial arts' training to keep the mind from becoming unrest and distracted, a definite cause for defeat. In any case the direct influence of these arts cannot be considered important in terms of numbers of participants. On a more personal level there are some considerable exceptions with interesting political implications. The differentiation of Japanese martial art practitioners in three major categories – practical or exclusively technical approach, theoretical or exclusively spiritual research, synthesis or combining approach – follows in fact the distinction between technical and spiritual training (*bujutsu* and *bushidō*), as well as their synthesis in the “way of the warrior” (*budō*), an idea supported by some contemporary teachers. Without neglecting the already prestigious role of the martial arts in sports and education, it can be proposed that the synthesis of technical and spiritual training consist an excellent – although particularly difficult – path to achieve those special qualities that can salvage a culture from deterioration or alteration. Actually, the true *budō* training has to be continuously devised in both the spiritual and the technical dimension, with the tension of real fighting. Motivation behind self-development is crucial. Although progress towards perfection in martial arts is an individual

effort, according to Japanese *budō* it is not motivated by individualism, but by noble ideas and the will to put them into practice.

NOTE: Japanese terms are written with the use of added characters. Japanese names are written with the Japanese way, surname first.

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