

The Philosophy of the Martial Arts: Myth and Reality

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What we try to do in this paper is to trace the history of the martial arts, from their origins in ancient Chinese military training, to their assimilation of Daoist and Ch'an (Zen) Buddhist values, resulting in their transformation from mere techniques of self-defense to a wide variety of practices aimed at self-cultivation and personal well-being as well as combat training. Then we will discuss how the resulting tradition has been recreated by the media, which in the process has stripped it of significant philosophical and spiritual elements.

The origins of the martial arts are quite murky. They can be traced back at least 3500 years, to scattered references in the *Classic of History*. The graph 'Wu', which is translated as 'martial,' symbolizes a shield stopping a spear. There is no evidence that the early concept of Wu involved much more than self-defense, possibly of foot soldiers and peasants alike, against well-equipped enemies.

The earliest reference to the martial arts involving a philosophical dimension is found in a conversation between the King of Yueh and a female warrior:

The art of swordsmanship is extremely subtle and elusive; its principles are most secret and profound. The Dao has its gate and door, its yin and yang. Open the gate and close the door; yin declines and yang rises. When practicing the art of hand-to-hand combat, concentrate your spirit internally and give the impression of relaxation externally. You should look like a modest woman and strike like a ferocious tiger. As you assume various postures, regulate your *qi*, moving with the spirit.¹

What is intriguing about the above exchange is not only that a female warrior is lecturing the King (few men would have had the opportunity to do so, let alone women) but that she refers to key terms from the *Book of Changes* such as yin and yang as well as *qi* (vital force), which became an integral part of Daoist philosophy. *Qi* in this context refers to a vital force which not only revives and strengthens both the body and mind, but which can potentially generate sufficient power to defeat a challenger. What is equally intriguing about the female warrior's speech is that Daoist terminology is hard to find in martial arts discourse until the Qing dynasty and the emergence of the Taiji classics, which feature Daoist ideas very prominently. Under the influence of Daoist thought, Taiji and other martial arts turned into a means of personal enrichment of the abstract kind, including the cultivation of harmony between mind and body, heightened concentration and self-control. This is evident in the writings of the eighteenth century martial artist Ch'ang Nai-chou, who frequently refers to the cultivation of *qi*.²

One sees a parallel phenomenon taking place between Buddhism and Kung Fu, a relationship which according to legend emerged in the Shaolin temple. The widely accepted story is that Bodhidharma, the founder of Ch'an Buddhism, stayed at the Shaolin and taught Kung Fu to the community of monks as a method of keeping them invigorated during periods of meditation. Yet recent scholarship which has involved a detailed study of documents at the Shaolin, has not turned up any evidence that Bodhidharma stayed at the temple, or that he taught Kung Fu. Neither does one find any reliable record indicating

¹ Douglas Wile, *T'ai Chi's Ancestors: The Making of an Internal Martial Art* (New City, NY: Sweet Ch'I Press, 1999), 5-6.

² Douglas Wile, *T'ai Chi's Ancestors: The Making of an Internal Martial Art*, 82-187.

that the Shaolin monks used Kung Fu as a means of self-cultivation or simply as a method of keeping awake during their lengthy meditation sessions.³

Nonetheless it is clear that the temple was highly reputed for the martial art skills of its residents, who cultivated Kung Fu assiduously to defend themselves from marauding armies and bandits, in an area devastated by poverty and unrest. It is perhaps a little more troubling to learn that these Buddhists went as far as assisting the government in putting down local rebellions and enemies of the throne.⁴

Curiously enough it is not in China, but in Japan, and especially the Tokugawa period, that the impact of Buddhist thought on the martial arts appears profound and well documented. The Samurai class had of course invented a wide array of martial arts practices including the use of weapons as well as “open hand” combat, which they polished and handed down through a still greater number of schools or “Ryu.” These skills were in great demand prior to the Tokugawa and especially the Sengoku or Warring States period (fifteenth to sixteenth centuries), which was steeped in conflict among warring Daimyo who had spun out of the central control of the military government in Kyoto.

From 1600 a new era of stability reigned following the unification of Japan by the victorious Tokugawa clan after the monumental battle of Sekigahara. The Samurai became virtually unemployed, yet they were too politically powerful to be disbanded. As a result they were transformed into a harmless aristocracy and encouraged to use more peaceful means of maintaining order (including the class system, which worked nicely for them) such as the promotion of religious values and Confucian ethics. It is at this point that the impact of Buddhist thought on the Samurai, and on the martial arts that they practiced, grew especially strong. Zen Buddhism, including the concepts of “concentration” and “mindfulness,” two paths of the celebrated Eightfold Path taught by Buddha, exerted a strong influence over the growth of the martial arts. Concentration, which involved “quiet sitting” or meditation, became an integral part of martial arts curricula. Mindfulness, another branch of the Eightfold Path, which involves awareness of one’s surroundings as well as one’s own physical and mental processes, was absorbed into martial arts practice.

Having imported a variety of influences from Daoism, Buddhism, and to some extent Confucianism, contemporary martial arts, to some degree or other, emphasize self-control, mind-body coordination, and concentration. Thus in terms of their *raison d’être* they place more emphasis on self-cultivation than self-defense. According to Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of Shotokan Karate, the highest goal of Karate practice is “to seek perfection of personality rather than to prevail over others.”⁵ The International Taekwondo Alliance argues that the “purpose of Taekwondo education is to prepare students for the responsibilities of citizenship. Taekwondo is about real and powerful experiences, resulting in the discovery of innate capabilities and a heightened sense of responsibility. Taekwondo students are challenged to do what is right and ethical, despite skepticism, and despite the pull of the outside world.”⁶ Such concepts as “citizenship” and a “sense of responsibility” might well stem from Confucian ethics, which still exert an influence on South Korean institutions. According to Shi Yong Xin, master of the China Shaolin temple, which claims to be the origin of Chinese Kung Fu, “Kung Fu

³ Meir Shahaar, “Ming-period Evidence of Shaolin Martial Practice,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. LXI No. 2 (December 2001).

⁴ Meir Shahaar, “Ming-period Evidence of Shaolin Martial Practice,” 205.

⁵ Gichin Funakoshi, *Karate-Do: My Way of Life*. Tokyo; Kodansha International, 1981.

⁶ <http://www.tkd.org/visitors/history>

is actually a comprehensive cultural and spiritual system rather than mere boxing.”⁷

This is merely a selection of quotes from a large pool of sources indicating that the contemporary practice of the martial arts in East Asia places a strong emphasis on internal goals, as well as external skills.

Up to this point, we have traced the transformation of the martial arts under the influence of East Asian philosophical and religious traditions, from their originally narrow focus on self-defense to a wide variety of sophisticated practices aimed at mental as well as physical well-being, including the cultivation of personal virtues.

Parallel to the growth of Martial Arts as a means of self-defense and self-cultivation, an entirely new dimension of the martial arts emerged with the Beijing opera in the mid-19th century: the world of Martial Arts entertainment. In this world, which has had an enormous impact on public perceptions, the martial arts are mostly depicted as Martial, in the etymological sense of the term, i.e. warlike. The protagonists of early Chinese Martial Arts films, inspired by the Beijing Opera, were endowed with magical and superhuman skills which they used in battles with evil enemies. With a few notable exceptions, the internal, introspective dimension was gone, or at least heavily diluted, presumably as viewers were deemed to have no patience for serene and meditative protagonists who were trained to avoid combat if possible.

Furthermore, because the majority of performers were actors who acquired or feigned martial arts expertise, these skills were often distorted or lost in a whirl of acrobatic and aerobic displays. Until the fifties, Chinese Martial Arts films were thus filled with feats of superhuman strength accomplished by flailing limbs and whirling torsos that, on more than a few occasions, barely resembled martial arts practice. Thus the mildly derogative term “chop socky movies” was coined for some of the more action-based films produced in Hong Kong.

In the 1950s a new series filmed at the Shaw brothers studios in Hong Kong, based on the exploits of a highly accomplished Kung Fu master called Huang Fei Hong, introduced a novel sense of realism. The main actor Kwan Tak Hing was as equally accomplished in various styles of Kung Fu as he was in acting, and is reputed to have acquired as much expertise as the master whose role he was playing.⁸ Another effort aimed at greater realism, inspired by the gritty masterpieces of Kurosawa, was the series depicting the “One-armed Swordsman,” produced by the Shaw brothers, and directed by Chang Cheh. An enormous success financially, the “One-armed Swordsman” involved less gravity-defying leaps and other feats of superhuman strength, and more gory realism, including suitable volumes of blood and chopped limbs that one would expect from sword-fighting.

But it was the Chinese-American Bruce Lee who, having acted and practiced Kung Fu in early childhood, and devoted himself to intensive training in a whole range of Martial Arts, stunned the world with his realistic fighting skills, exhibiting enormous power and versatility. The Bruce Lee genre was still highly action-oriented, and the story line seemed tailored to showcase the impressive skills of the protagonist rather than to convey a psychological or philosophical message.

Lee later became tired of “chop socky movies” and his various writings on the martial arts reflect his

⁷ <http://www.chinashaolintemple.com>

⁸ Richard Meyers et al., *From Bruce Lee to the Ninjas: Martial Arts Movies* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press 1991, 56-57.

growing appetite for literature on Chinese philosophy. His well-known statement, “Be formless... shapeless like water. If you put water into a cup it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle it becomes the bottle” was clearly inspired by Laozi’s references to the flexible, Dao-like nature of water in the *Daodeching*.⁹ Thus it comes as no surprise that Lee was one of the inspirations behind the philosophically inclined U.S. TV series “Kung Fu,” which portrayed the experiences of a half-Chinese half-Caucasian Kung Fu master in the wild West of the 1800s. Cowboys and Chinese Kung Fu masters would appear to be a rather explosive and violent combination, but paradoxically this series was imbued with allusions to fair play and interpersonal harmony based on Daoist and Buddhist philosophy. The protagonist, played by David Carradine, regularly recalls his training at the Shaolin temple, and tries to apply the teachings of his Ch’an (Zen) master in the tricky situations that he encounters. Some of the episodes include less than five minutes of martial arts combat, and much more exchange between “grasshopper,” the name given to him at the Shaolin, and his sagely master.

Some critics of martial arts in the media distinguish between the “Beijing Opera genre,” which emphasizes dramatic, action-packed displays, and the more realistic “Shaolin genre,” which tends to reflect the philosophy of the martial arts more closely. In practice many productions contain a mix of both, and such modern examples might include “Karate Kid” and the nostalgic, romanticized, “Last Samurai.”

“Karate Kid” tells the story of a young man called Daniel who is viciously bullied by the students of a misguided Karate instructor, and consequently taken under the wing of Mr. Miyagi (Pat Morita), a gentle Japanese-American who teaches him the philosophy behind Karate as the key to victory over his opponents. Their relationship is strongly reminiscent of that between Zen master and novice monk. Daniel has no idea why his sensei is asking him to polish cars from morning till night (“wax on, wax off,” is the guiding mantra). This repetitive practice reflects the message behind the well-known Zen story depicting the unusual awakening of an impatient young monk. On asking his Master how he can achieve “Buddha Nature,” he is given the shouted command “go and wash the dishes!” Why didn’t the master give him a koan (the secret instruction from master to student that is meant to guide the student in meditation and lead to a grand awakening)? It is only after months of repeated questioning, and of repeatedly having to wash the dishes, that he realizes what is going on. The command “go and wash the dishes!” is itself the koan. In other words, the Dao of Buddhism is found in mundane activity rather than abstract speculation and self-absorption. Miyagi is trying to teach the impatient Daniel that his basic attitude, including the exertion of self-control and deep concentration, is the key to the mastery of Karate.

A parallel example of the influence of Zen culture on big screen martial arts is the relationship between Luke Skywalker and Yoda, who regularly provides cryptic, koan-like guidance. On the other hand the cultivation of the “force” seems intriguingly parallel to the cultivation of *qi* or vital force in Taiji.

One might draw the conclusion that Zen Buddhist and Daoist philosophies are slowly occupying a greater role in the depiction of martial arts on the big screen. Yet it doesn’t take much reflection to realize that “Beijing Opera” style modern martial arts productions such as the “Matrix” are still going strong. And if one includes certain types of computer software in the category of martial arts entertainment, then the philosophical landscape appears pretty barren indeed.

⁹ Davis Miller, *The Tao of Bruce Lee*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.