

THE IMPORTANCE OF MARTIAL ARTS RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

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FIGHTING

FROM AN INSTINCTIVE ACTIVITY
TO A SYSTEMATIC ART OF COMBAT.

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MICHAEL A. DeMARCO, M.A.



INTRODUCTION*

In this forum, we have been offered a great opportunity to gather in this ancient town that has served as the backdrop for much history. Here we can exchange points of view and current interpretations concerning a subject that obviously interests all of us and, in many cases, has even give a singular professional direction to our lives, motivating and fulfilling them in unique ways that may be difficult – if not impossible – to attain elsewhere. This subject, of course, is the martial arts in all their diversity of methodologies, practices, theories, cultural backgrounds, and forms of etiquette. Although I am limiting the scope of this presentation to the Asian traditions, the ideas presented here can be applied to Western traditions as well.

THE COMMON VIEW

Outside the academic realm, most discussions concerning Asian martial arts focus on a particular style or on comparing styles, especially their repertoire of techniques, sometimes bits and pieces of history and seasoned with philosophical proverbs and parables from the “mysterious East”. These discussions usually are based on a common perception of the martial arts largely obtained through the mass media – an entertainment industry strongly based more on creative fantasy than concrete fact (Grady, 1998: 88-93; Palmer and Meyers, 1995; Logan, 1996; Smith, 1999: 342-356). This has lead to further variations on the theme which we see in extreme forms such as cartoon animations and video games.

Another influential source that has affected our perception of the Asian martial arts is martial arts instructors themselves (Hurst, 1995: 13; Smith, 1999: 327-341). Of the thousands teaching today, most have only a superficial familiarity with the cultures in which the arts they teach originated (Monday, 1994: 81; Hershey, 1994). As a result, very few instructors have fully grasped the technical, historical, and philosophical fullness of their martial systems (Friday, 1995: 33, 36).

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From the powerful forces of mass media and the presentations given by instructors that have re-interpreted and often misinterpreted these arts, what perceptions of the martial arts are achieved? The image most often left in the minds of the general public is that martial art theory and practice is juvenile and or violent in nature. However, we cannot afford to smile at the simplicity of this perception merely because most of us participating in this congress have a greater familiarity with martial traditions than those who have not taken a professional interest in the subject. These perceptions, however misleading, will determine the public attitude towards the martial arts and their practitioners.

THE GLOBAL VIEW

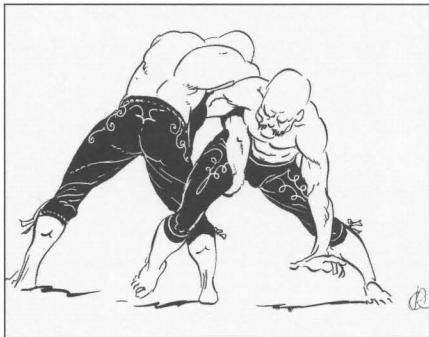
The martial arts as a whole have developed into a particular social phenomenon embodying a significance and complexity far greater than that which could be assigned to any individual art. In turn, each art reflects and is enhanced by the vitality of them all, while simultaneously adding to that wholeness by its own special characteristics and energy to that totality (Donohue, 1993: 41, 44-47).

Today, as throughout history, this dual aspect confronts us on one side with the singularity of these arts, each highly refined and actively pursued in countless centers of instruction all over the world; on the other side, it also confronts us with their global presence in a world increasingly connected through advancing communication technologies which place each martial art within the larger context of modern life and subjects them to the powerful social forces that activate them (Draeger & Smith, 1969; Ratti & Westbrook, 1971; Reid & Croucher: 1995).

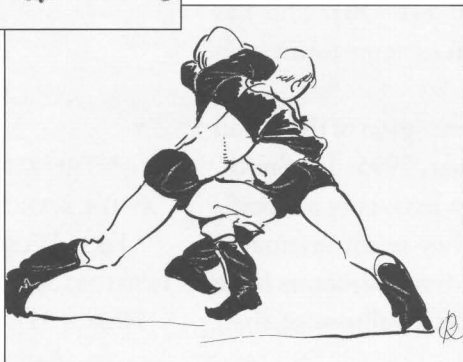
This polarity – the individuality of each martial art and their synergistic totality in the larger context within which they operate – subjects every martial art to forces that can significantly affect both their practices and the theories explaining and justifying them. Therefore, the problem we face is twofold: to ensure both the individuality of each martial art – each being endowed with its own integrity, history, program, adherents, teachers, etc.; and, at the same time, to ensure and respect their global social context, as a body of methodologies that modern societies have found valuable or, at least interesting. But, in terms of quality, this must be done at the highest level of practical and theoretical excellence.

Simply stated, our efforts should be concentrated upon encouraging both the martial arts' singularity and totality – each aspect reinforcing the other. With regard to the theories that accompany and justify their practice, have we truly exhausted the field of study of each and all the martial arts we have come to know, practice, and cherish? Self-proclaimed "masters" will shout "Yes!" However, Western scholars' obvious neglect of the Asian martial traditions indicates we are only beginning to mine this field.

TURKISH WRESTLING.

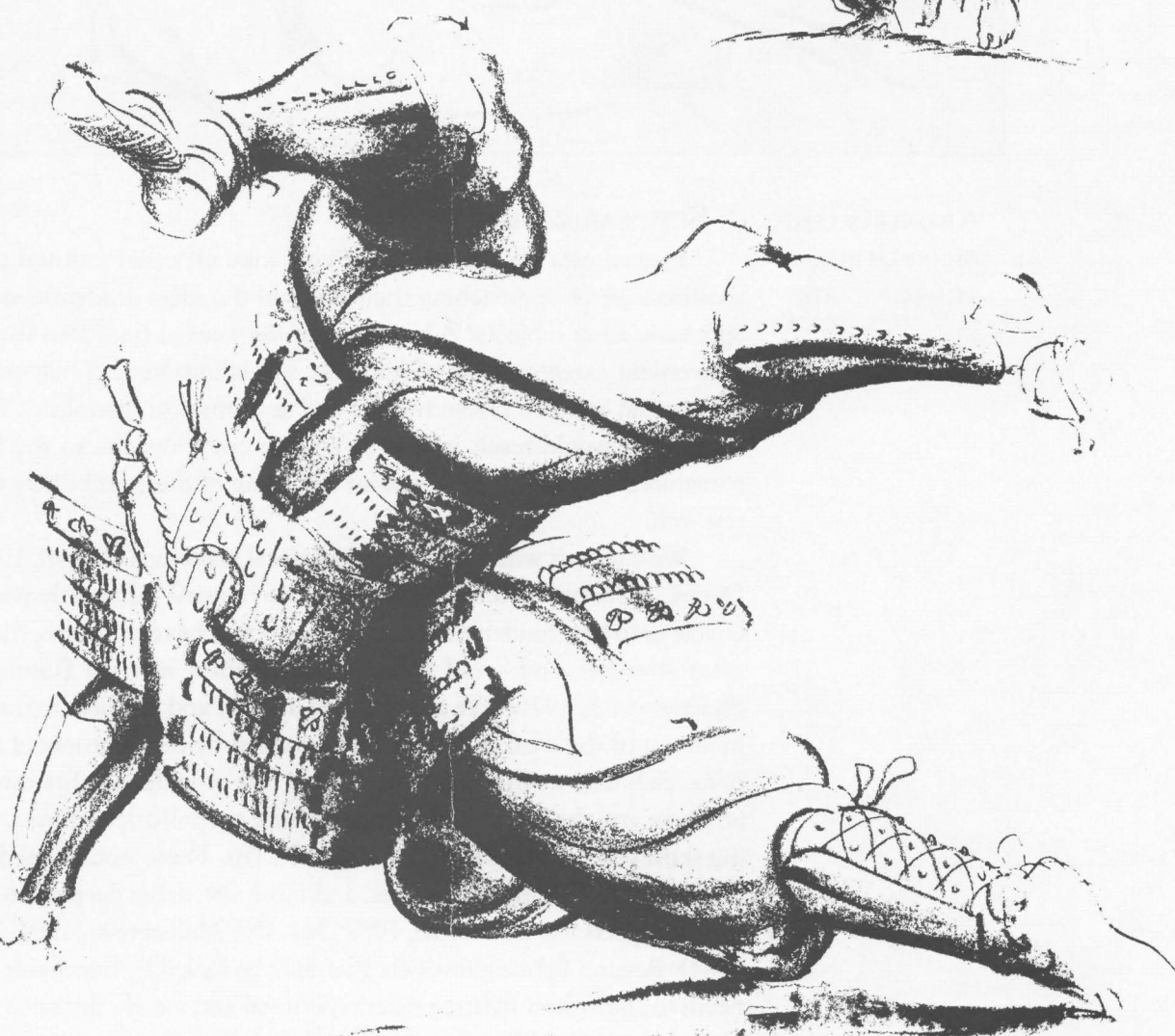


MONGOL
WRESTLING.



COMPETITION
JUDO.

DEADLINESS OF JAPANESE
BATTLEFIELD ARTS.





A SAMPLE OF OUR
BEGINNINGS IN THE
COMBATIVE ARTS.

A SCHOLARLY VIEW

Martial arts are a cultural activity. Like all other cultural activities, shouldn't we be approaching their study in the same academic manner we approach other subjects? A brief look at the martial traditions through the convenient categorization of academic specializations can help us validate the martial arts as a research topic and as a physical discipline. To do this thoroughly would result in a multivolume encyclopedia, so the following paragraphs will only serve to point out some of the possibilities for future research.

We can start with the human biological make-up (Gabriel, 1990: 1-18; Dupuy, 1976: pt. 1; Reid, 1976). What do humans inherently possess that enable us to be formidable fighters? Animals may have the horns, hide, claws, great strength, and speed to aid them in their survival (Leimar, 1988; Shuttlesworth, 1976). We must rely on instinct and intellect to make maximum use of the weaker possibilities provided by our anatomy of flesh and bone. Scholars in the physical sciences can provide insights into human anatomy and the body mechanics that have partially determined our fighting skills (Pieter & Heijmans, 1997: 210-219). These studies need to go far beyond mere fighting techniques, and must also delve deeply into psychological aspects too (Donohue, 1987: 341-350; Maliszewski, 1992: 7; Payne, 1981). Beyond fighting instincts that may be fueled by hormones, research needs to clarify how fighting reflects personal and social ethics and morality. Criminologists and lawyers need to better define what constitutes an act of violence and what constitutes true self-defense. And certain political questions require answers. Should martial arts instruction be controlled (Friman,

1998: 22)? Should teachers be certified by elected boards? How can instructional quality be ensured?

We can look to our human ancestors in order to better understand what we have inherited. Archeologists have collected useful information and artifacts to help us examine martial traditions from pre-history to relatively recent times (Gabriel, 1990: 19-34). Overlapping with other specializations, such as anthropology and art history (DeMarco, 1996: 102), they have a developing picture of the use of martial arts in various cultures, including their weaponry (Amdur, 1995; Werner, 1989). The design and use of weapons – from the Stone Age onward – tell us about how man fought and developed skills over the centuries (Yang, 1999). To give a few examples, artwork depicting detailed techniques of hand-to-hand combat have been found at a temple complex at Beni Hassan in Egypt (Weller & Grossman, 1998) and the Mesolithic cave paintings found at Morela la Vella, Spain (O'Connel, 1989: 27), both dating over 22,000 years ago.

Research in the physical sciences and the history and development of weaponry and warfare are fundamental to martial arts research, but other areas are nearly as important. One area that provides interesting insights into the martial mind is linguistics (Florence, 1995: 18). For example, the Chinese character for “country”, *guo*, is composed of elements representing a boundary, in which weapons protect an estate. On the land may be castles and other fortresses representing great architectural and engineering skills (Needham, 1954-80) and these governed by political organizations that influenced martial evolution. Of course, geography plays a role in city planning and defense and great military centers arose under ideal conditions. For example, the Chinese city of Wuxi was famous for its metal used in weapons. It developed because of the vast amounts of tin found in the area. But the name “Wuxi” means “without tin”! In earlier times, it was named “Youxi”, “with tin” (Kaplan et al, 1988: 649). When the tin mines were exhausted, the name was changed and the city declined in military importance.

Particular martial art systems, practiced individually or in groups, have developed according to specific needs (Friman & Polland, 1994: 47; Moynahan, 1963; Lohse, 1999: 27). These cover a spectrum of styles whose systems may or may not include weapons, from deadly battlefield combat arts (Applegate, 1991; Egbert, et al, 1954) to martial sports with rules and regulations (Pieter & Heijmans, 1997; Poliakoff, 1987), from martially-inspired exercise forms (DeMarco, 1998) to pure entertainment (Pauka, 1998; Klens-Bigman, 1999; Hobbs, 1995).

When we look at the variety of so-called “martial arts”, we understand that they can range from those which are 100% combative and extremely practical in fighting methods to others that are less effective from this standpoint. We can compare the variations that appear in martial arts with those found in other arts, such as music and painting. Jazz, classical, rock-n-roll, etc. are all considered forms of music, but have great differences in form and feeling. Paintings by particular individuals or groups may represent different schools, such as Realist, Impressionist, or Modern, but all are forms of painting.



WITH CIVILIZATION, THE INTELLECT
ENHANCED TRAINING AND PREPARED
ONE WITH LETHAL COMBAT SKILLS.



Each martial art and tradition has its own role in society and this is what makes the martial arts such a rich field for scholarly activity (Pieter, 1993: 27). The previous paragraphs have hinted at how people from every academic specialization may research, document, and analyze martial arts over a history that dates to prehistoric times. This scholarly approach is necessary simply because martial traditions are not a superficial element in our cultures, but are an essential key to understanding our human condition and a broad spectrum of socio-political relationships.

Martial arts research is vital to further understanding the individual martial arts found throughout the world, as well as to gaining a broader, global perspective of the commonalities all martial traditions share as well as their differences (Pieter, 1993; Galas, 1997: 20, 41; Donohue, 1997: 90, 100-101). At the same time, this research will result in better teaching methodologies and may even give us better reasons to practice martial arts.

Present research has focused much on aspects of health and sport (Maliszewski, 1992a; Niiler, 1998: 65-66; Stebbins, 1993: 53). As a matter of life and death, the martial arts have developed systems of movement that are unsurpassed as exercising methods beneficial for the body, mind, and spirit. They were developed in realistic settings, such as the battlefield, where aspects of religion and medicine were entwined (Maliszewski, 1992b). But, even martial arts that can provide the greatest potential benefits can be abused through poor instruction or utilized improperly by students of poor character. These arts are all too easily warped by egotistic and financial motivations (Friman, 1996: 18; Henning, 1998: 93). Unlike most other sport and recreational activities, the martial arts by their very nature pose inherent dangers. All of us involved in martial research and practice need to be aware of this and accept the responsibility that comes with our work.

CONCLUSION

I think that I should stop at this point, and call upon all of you to enliven and complete the picture. I extend my best wishes to each one of you for success in your efforts to enhance the martial arts in our age, for the benefit of present and future generations of practitioners whose lives can be enriched through the attainment of the goals mentioned earlier. Each time a new student steps into a training area and makes his first salutation: these arts promise the attainment of self-reliance, health, courage, determination, and peaceful, creative empowerment for individual practitioners and, in the larger context, for their societies (Lehrhaupt, 1992: 61; Neide, 1999; Peck, 1999: 83).



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