

COACHING / TRADITION & INNOVATION

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Fighting arts: between formality and spontaneity¹

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Abstract

Background. The cultural phenomenon of ‘fighting arts’ requires interdisciplinary research focusing on multiple aspects. The current study adopts a viewpoint defined by the General Theory of Fighting Arts. It also uses related conceptual terminology. The preferences related to the basic teaching method – the forms or rejection of these – are treated here as a specific institution, or ‘habitus’. **Problem and Aim.** We are seeking to answer the following question: What is the attitude to safety and combat, to practice and to health, depending on the choice/preferences of formality or spontaneity?

Method. The study applies, in a complementary way, two methods of qualitative research: long-term participant observation, and content analysis of the related literature. A broad discourse of the thematic sources and elaborations have been taken into account together.

Results. It is possible to identify extreme attitudes (practice of technical forms exclusively, or complete/nearly complete renunciation of these) as well as a number of intermediate forms. Traditionalists are eager to study original forms, while revolutionaries (such as Bruce Lee) prefer sparring. Generally speaking, practice of forms and recreational training produce more health-related benefits, while fighting practice leads to faster acquisition of fighting skills.

Conclusions. An individual’s attitude to formality and spontaneity results mainly from their approach to tradition. Moderation and balance between the formal and the spontaneous appear to lead most effectively to success, without a risk of health loss. The success/award will consist of effective training, fighting skills, good health potential and a sense of security. This however requires years of practice. Any shortcuts are highly risky.

Introduction

‘Martial arts’, or more broadly, ‘fighting arts’ [Cynarski 2019] are a type of physical culture known worldwide. A trend related to the practice of these arts has passed, along with the martial arts movies of the 1980s. However, the cultural phenomenon of fighting arts is deserving of interdisciplinary exploration.

Theoretical perspective, in this case, is jointly provided by a variety of conceptions – ranging from analyses of the methods or techniques of using one’s body [Mauss 1971; Weis 2017], to deliberations related to philosophy of flexibility [Sennett 1998; Blanchet 2008] and combat philosophy [Lee 1975; Zuk 1996]. This variability,

described by Marcel Mauss, is determined by cultural factors. When this relates to martial art techniques, it is likely that formal, traditional approach blocks or hinders the process of change. Anthropology of martial arts requires a systematic approach focusing on multiple aspects [Bolelli 2008; Figueiredo 2009; Papakitsos, Katsigiannis 2015; Cynarski 2019]. Since technical forms are a medium for conveying achievements of old martial arts masters, as a kind of ‘recorded movement’, we are also going to refer to the concepts of ‘habitus’ proposed by Bourdieu and HAPV by McCarthy.

Let us define the **conceptual language.** We understand ‘martial arts’ as a historic category of flawless methods of unarmed combat fights and the use of weapon combined with a spiritual element (personal development, also in its transcendent sphere) [Cynarski, Skowron 2014]. We accept the concept of an ‘institution’ in a broad, sociological sense, as a socially approved way of dealing

¹ This paper was partially presented as an invited keynote lecture during the 9th IMACSSS Conference 2020 in Putrajaya, where an abstract was published in the Abstract Book, too [Shapie *et al.* 2020: 23–25].

with a given matter. ‘Institutionalisation’, as a process of creating new institutions, must be understood from this sociological perspective.

The term “Habitus” is understood as defined by Bourdieu [1977]. It is a “habit” or “custom”, state of mind, and practical knowledge, how to do something, and also an applicable institution. This may apply generally to sport and physical culture. Experiences of players and coaches co-create a coaching *habitus*. The *habitus* within rugby clubs is used for “good coaching” [Light, Evans 2015]. By analogy – in *dojos* for martial arts it is useful for being a good *sensei* (who is a teacher more than a coach). Preferences related to the basic teaching method, the forms or rejection of these, are treated here as a specific institution, or *habitus*.

Teaching programs in classic martial arts schools are almost exclusively based on ‘technical forms’ (specific patterns of movements), in Japanese called *kata* [Sugino, Ito 2010; Cynarski 2017a]. Yet, the forms created centuries ago not cultivated exclusively by these schools. In *karate*, *taekwondo* and many other Asian martial arts, technical forms are rather commonly used even today, as a traditional method of teaching the secrets of a given school and style [cf. Layton, Higaonna, Arneil 1993; Kogel 2010; Yu *et al.* 2015]. Patrick McCarthy is a proponent of the HAPV: *Habitual Acts and Physical Violence Theory* (on the example of forms of *karate*), and an expert in anthropology of martial arts [Sieber, Pawelec 2016]. In this meaning, it would be a technical *habitus*, formalised.

Let us try to answer the problem question: What is the attitude to safety and combat, to practice and to health, depending on the choice/preferences of formality or spontaneity?

The study applies, in a complementary way, two qualitative **research methods**: long-term *participant observation* [Emerson, Fretz, Show 2001] (over 40 years), and content analysis of the related literature. A broad discourse of the thematic sources and elaborations has been taken into account together [Krippendorff 2004].

Results of scientific research

Technical forms for centuries have been used as the basic method of conveying the technical knowledge of a given style, about tactics and experiences of masters from previous generations. Only in *karate* (Okinawan-Japanese tradition) as many as 76 *katas* are distinguished and named by Lind [1996: 431-439]. This list does not relate to forms with “*karate weapons*” (*bo*, *sai*, *nunchaku*, *tonfa*), or types of styles originating from other places than Japanese islands [cf. Cynarski, Yu, Borysiuk 2017]. On the other hand, over 150 different forms are practiced only in the south-Chinese style of *Choy Lee Fut kung-fu*.

In such classic schools as the Japanese *Tenshin-shoden Katorishinto-ryu*, forms are the only method of teaching martial arts. The roles of attacker and defender are defined. This applies to the use of various traditional weapons [Sugino, Ito 2010; Cynarski 2017a; cf. Mol 2001]. Here forms are perceived as a value. We can talk about the conservatism of a traditionalist who appreciates originality and the old age of the cultivated techniques as much as a numismatist values a rare coin. This may be linked with conservatism in the sphere of axiology and worldview, but not necessarily. However, ideologies underlying martial arts are flexible to a degree [Donohue 1997; Cynarski, Obodynski 2005], as a result of which they may be adopted by communities representing various cultures.

Issues related to “tradition versus innovation” in martial arts were discussed by a panel during IMACSSS ‘2018 Congress in Rzeszów. For instance Kurt Weis [2018] made a reference to the ancient Indian martial art of *Kalaripayattu*, today using similar teaching methods as those applied centuries ago. This is also a form of physical and spiritual exercise, closely linked to traditional medicine [Weis 2017]. On the other hand, Abel Figueiredo proposed a wide context for scientific considerations comprising both ancient martial arts and contemporary competitive sport [cf. Figueiredo 2009].

Modernisation and modifications occur in institutions operating within schools and major martial arts organisations. This applies to grades (awarded to students and masters), to licences (for teaching and awarding of grades), to the management of a given organisation and to ceremonial aspects. In schools and styles switching towards competitive sports or commercial teaching of self-defence, the culture aspect is reduced. On the other hand, organisations refusing to “go competitive” or to modernise, emphasise the genuine aspects of their operation, and make effort to preserve routines established in the past.

The traditionalist approach stands in opposition to **anarchy** in response to existing forms, teaching methods and combat tactics. Bruce Lee was among the first ones to renounce the ancient system of combat teaching. “*No way*” in the *Jeet Kune Do* by famous Bruce Lee was a kind of revolution against ancient martial arts systems and traditional teaching methods [Lee 1975; Bolelli 2008]. Classic systems were based on the teaching of numerous technical forms. Bruce Lee rejected this and also modified the repertoire of techniques. He denied techniques not useful in real combat, and borrowed numerous others - including western boxing and fencing. He emphasised ingenuity and innovation, claiming that there are no limits - you can and should be experimenting. He experimented with exercise equipment, safety equipment (protective pads), training methods, and technical-tactical skills. He opened the way for new combat sports and eclectic systems. In particular, in the

ideological sphere, Lee followed Taoism and Zen Buddhism. He believed that life is a struggle, and the pursuit of freedom also applies to the struggle. He wrote about the way to Truth [Lee 1975: 6-9] and sought the truth about fighting. He thought that we should reject the limiting forms and that it was necessary to simplify what was too complicated. The principle of water, which adapts to a situation (by assuming the shape of a vessel) results from the philosophy of Taoism [Cynarski 2018a]. Lee preferred sparring and free fighting [Little 2003: 24-25].

Russo [2016: 73-83] writes that “The Innovator” (Bruce Lee aka Lee Jun Fan) went from the criticism of classic *wushu* to the concept of *Jeet Kune Do* - the “Way of the Integrated Fist”. Originally, Lee interpreted the classic *wushu* / *kung-fu* [cf. Wong, Lee 1961; Lee 1963/2008], then stated the need for modernization. He was interested in boxing, sport fencing, *taekwondo*, *judo*, *jujutsu*, etc. [cf. Czajkowski 2005; Bowman 2013; Russo 2016: 84-92; Rodriguez-Sanchez 2019]. On the basis of these, he created the concept of *Tao Jeet Kune Do* [Lee 1975]. However, Bruce Lee, by creating his own style of *Jeet Kune Do kung-fu*, introduced his own distinctive formal arrangements [cf. Lee 1975; Butrym, Orlinska 1983: 54; Cynarski, Yu, Borysiuk 2017].

Certainly, this is not a bipolar system. For years practice of forms has been supplemented with forms of *randori* (sparring) or *jiyu kumite* (free fighting) – in *judo Kodokan*, *karate Kyokushin*, *jujutsu Idokan*, etc. The practice of the latter, in addition to *randori* comprises the so-called *jiyu keiko* – free practice, allowing trainees to advance their own inventiveness and improvisation skills [Cynarski 2009]. *Randori*, a method of perfecting one’s technical and tactical skills, was introduced into the teaching of classical techniques by GM Minoru Mochizuki, who created a series of counter-techniques for old techniques of *aikijutsu*. Initiated this way, *aiki-jujutsu* today is cultivated by *hanshi* A. Floquet, R. Maroteaux, S. Cynarski and others. All of them teach both *kata*, and *randori*.

What is the attitude to safety and combat, to practice and to health, depending on the choice/preferences of formality or spontaneity?

Fighting for one’s life, in self-defence, in a real situation involves the use of all available means. Response to an attack must be adequate, immediate and spontaneous, and the applied technique must, first of all, be effective [Cynarski 2017b]. Definitely, *sparring* makes it possible to learn real fighting skills faster, which is particularly important if one does not have 10 years to work out the large catalogue of technical forms. And a sense of security is only gained after one has acquired real fighting skills [cf. Ambrozy, Ambrozy 2000; Rzany 2001; Kernspecht 2012]. Similarly, **sport fighting**, despite the conventions set forth by the rules, requires a practice in accordance with a suitable sport-type formula. Cultivation of technical forms may seem like a waste of time for

a sports person unless he/she is training to participate in *kata* competition [cf. Cierna Augustovicova *et al.* 2018]. In this case, forms have to be learned by necessity, for instance in order to acquire a higher grade in *karate* or a higher master grade in *judo*.

Training versus health – this is an issue which certainly must be addressed. The purpose of the training may be a precondition, and the method is the main determinant. Competition-related training, subject to sub-maximum and maximum stress, is not beneficial for health [*Sport ...*, 2018]. Even more hazardous are head impacts and shocks experienced while falling. The formal practice may be recognised as the safest way to learn fighting techniques. Health gains are in particular linked to the rejection of large loads, in line with the principle of moderation known since Antiquity (Aristotle and earlier sages) and the Taoist way of balance [Cynarski 2018a]. Traditional martial arts also comprise exercises directly addressing trainees’ health [Cynarski 2009; Weis 2018].

In the current times driven by the desire to rapidly attain goals, sport-type training is to lead to success in sport, frequently at the cost of overloading the organism. Individuals who aimed towards the extreme in the area of martial arts paid with their health for that. Neither Bruce Lee, nor Masutatsu Oyama (the proponent of the concept of “the Ultimate Truth” – *Kyokushin* [Oyama 1979]) lived in good shape until old age. In particular, no shortcuts are worth the effort. Gaining mastery is a long-time process. Hence, educational systems of the specific ways of *budo* and the like, spread the process into a number of years, e.g. about ten years to achieve the first degree of mastery. The training method will usually be correlated to the fighting method. Basically, a different training routine is used to prepare for sports competitions, and different for self-defence practice (frequently in situations a few against one).

Formality or flexibility? Definitely, both are needed – respect for martial arts heritage and a certain amount of flexibility in making use of various methods, techniques and tactic skills (both in sport and in real fighting). Instructors and students are free to choose the style, the place of practice, the way (specific methods) and approach to tradition. Limitations to this freedom should be defined by reason and by the moral principles of those involved in the training process.

Today many people apply the strategy of flexibility in politics and business [Sennett 1998], which may be interpreted as a type of opportunism and chameleon strategy. Yet, is it not true that a warrior of a “moral way” should always follow noble virtues (Jap. *butoku*) [Zuk 1996; Maroteaux 2007]? Ethical norms are reflected in pedagogical efforts in the teacher-student relation. If a student comes to gain knowledge, the teacher is responsible for conveying it. Hence, the type of training provided to the student depends more on the teacher. Flexibility is here one of the most important principles in fighting

tactics. Daniel Blanchet (10 dan *jūjutsu*) refers to it as philosophy of flexibility [Blanchet 2008].

All this could look completely different one hundred years ago, or in fact today in a small private school of a specific *sensei* (teacher), and still different in a large organisation operating globally. These large organisations aim to win new markets and expand even further. Factors of greater importance in their case include management of knowledge [Allee 1997; Krupa 2001], people (human resources) or crisis, if needed. This particularly applies to large sports and commercial organisations. In this case flexibility seems to be a necessity.

Conclusions

An individual's attitude to formality and spontaneity results mainly from their approach to tradition. Traditionalists willingly restore old ceremonies, clothing and weapons, which in the case of national heritage is of value by itself. In turn, those eager to modernise martial arts try to modify, adapt and synthesise martial arts techniques and teaching methods. Generally, for a young and strong person, the ability to compete and fight is frequently a goal of practice. On the other hand, in the case of a mature man (there are also female warriors) these more often are timeless values and deeper motivation. This however is only a hypothesis, resulting from long-term observations conducted in the community, yet requiring further study.

Moderation and balance between the formal and the spontaneous appear to lead most effectively to success, without a risk of health loss. The success/award will consist of effective training, fighting skills, good health potential and a sense of security. This however requires years of practice. Any shortcuts are highly risky.

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Sztuki walki: między formalnością a spontanicznością

Słowa kluczowe: instytucja, elastyczność, formalność, kata, zdrowie, bezpieczeństwo, metoda, sztuki walki

Abstrakt

Perspektywa. Fenomen kulturowy „fighting arts” wymaga badań wieloaspektowych, interdyscyplinarnych. Podejmujemy je tutaj z perspektywy Ogólnej Teorii Sposobów Walki [Cynarski 2019]. Przyjmujemy też odpowiedni dla wskazanej koncepcji język pojęciowy [Cynarski, Skowron 2014]. Preferencje w zakresie podstawowej metody nauczania – formy lub ich odrzucenie – traktujemy tu, jako specyficzną instytucję lub „habitus” [Bourdieu 1977].

Problem i cel. Poszukujemy odpowiedzi na pytanie: Jak wygląda stosunek do bezpieczeństwa i walki, do treningu, i do zdrowia, według wyboru/preferencji formalności lub spontaniczności? Metoda. Zastosowano komplementarnie dwie metody badań jakościowych: długoletnią obserwację uczestniczącą [Emerson, Fretz, Show 2001] i analizę treści literatury przedmiotu. Uwzględniono łącznie szeroki dyskurs tematycznych źródeł i opracowań [Krippendorf 2004].

Wyniki. Występują postawy biegunowe (tylko ćwiczenie form technicznych oraz zupełne lub prawie zupełne ich odrzucenie),

a także wiele form pośrednich. Tradycjoniści chętnie studiują oryginalne formy, a rewolucjoniści (jak Bruce Lee) preferują sparring. Ogólnie biorąc ćwiczenie form i trening rekreacyjny jest korzystniejszy dla zdrowia, a ćwiczenie walki przyspiesza zdobycie umiejętności walki.

Wnioski. Stosunek do formalności i spontaniczności wynika głównie z odniesienia do tradycji. Umiar i zrównoważenie

pomiędzy tym, co formalne, a tym co spontaniczne zdają się być najlepszym sposobem na sukces bez ryzyka utraty zdrowia. Sukcesem/nagrodą będzie efektywny trening, umiejętności walki, wysoki potencjał zdrowia i poczucie bezpieczeństwa. Wymaga to jednak długoletniego praktykowania. Drogi na skróty są bardzo ryzykowne.