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Perception, understanding and adaptation of Asian martial arts in the West: a sociological analysis

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Summary

Making use of terminological instruments of the humanistic theory of Far-Eastern martial arts, the authors analyse the phenomenon of perception and adaptation of Asian martial arts in the West – particularly in Germany and the USA, in the perspective of culture and sport sociology. The paper discusses selected reports of authors undertaking humanistic reflection with reference to the phenomenon of martial arts. General tendencies in the martial arts practiced in the West were presented and detailed differences between American and Middle-European perceptions discussed. The '*budō pedagogy*', as well as intercultural and intercontinental borrowings of *budō* leaders were emphasised.

Key words:

Sociology of sport • Far-Eastern martial arts • Western perception

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INTRODUCTION

The interest in the Country of Rising Sun and its specific culture was shown already one hundred years ago by e.g. Prof. Karl Rathgen [27] or G. Weulersse, a French traveller [37]. They pointed to original and unique specificities like psychophysical culture and the art of *Zen* or *jūjutsu*. In 1906, a Japanese instructor of *jūjutsu*, Katsukuma Higashi [11], demonstrated the techniques of self-defence in a popular newspaper, and his student Erich Rahn (later 10th dan), opened in Berlin the first German school of this martial art. The Western world showed similar interest in the entire heritage of civilisation of the Far East for many years.

The analyses and generalisations presented in this study have been made in view of the sociology of culture and sociology of sport, with the use of terminological instruments of the humanistic theory of Far-Eastern martial arts [9,7]. In their present form, Asian martial arts are considered in several countries of the Western, European and American cultures, in the dimensions of the **perception, understanding and adaptations** of those arts.

According to the *European Charter of Sport*, **sport** means “any forms of physical activity, which through temporary or organised participation aim at working out or improving physical and mental condition, development of social relations or achieving sport results at any levels” [36, pp. 9-15]. Such a broad definition includes Olympic sport, professional sport, “sport for all”, as well as various elements of physical culture, including Far-Eastern martial arts. However, martial arts, especially those of Asian provenience, are situated in the West in the area of mass culture and sport culture [3]. In particular, **the ways of martial arts** (Jap. *budō*) are some forms of psychophysical culture which lead, on the basis of tradition of cultures of warriors, through training of fighting techniques, to psychophysical improvement and self-realisation. At the same time, these are processes of education and positive asceticism. The positive asceticism connects physical exercises with conscious self-discipline and is directed at a moral and spiritual progress (cf. [7], pp. 20-21). The important question is, whether this deeper sense of practice of martial arts is the commonly dominating motive.

The results of research conducted in the USA [4,7,13] and in the Middle Europe [6,10,29] indicate various specificities of perception of the ways of martial arts, their ethos and sense, in Europe (Germany, Poland

and other countries) and in the USA. Do the different cultural traditions, mentalities and ideologies really have an impact on that perception?

Development and evolution of *budō* in German and European perspectives

What is *budō* in Germany and in Europe for the students of these ways? In ‘the pedagogy of *budō*’ the values of martial arts are used as the ways of non-aggression, life and life wisdom [6,24,29]. So, do the practitioners really cultivate the specific axionormative system – this humanised form of the *bushidō* code, called “the moral way of martial arts”?

In the opinion of Feliks Hoff “*Dō* is the reality of *shūgyō*” – an ascetic psychophysical practice and self-discipline [8]. However, in the West, *budō* generally occurs as: 1) A strongly commercialised scene of the area of fitness; 2) An element of New Age movement; 3) A romantic “idealisation” [19]. Moreover, a German researcher [18] notices that martial arts do not ensure valuable educational influence *per se* and their adequate transmission, competently organised instruction and education are necessary, together with an adequate understanding of the specificity of martial arts. Masutatsu Oyama states, as quoted by Hoff, that karate is neither a game nor sport but half-physical and half-spiritual discipline. Hoff further explains (after Werner Lind) that *karatedō* is practiced for self-defence, health and learning the way (*dō*)¹ and that the endeavouring to happiness through “money, sex and success” is not typical of mass culture [19]. The way of martial arts requires long-lasting great effort, persistence and, sometimes, sacrifice. In principle, the today’s *budō* is not the way to enlightenment. The very practice is more important – “I go to my *dōjō* and practice” [19].

On the other hand, one should avoid contemporary mythologising martial arts, i.e. darkening their image. Referring to the popular book *Zen in the Art of Archery* [17], Hoff – an advanced practitioner of the Japanese traditional archery – states that: “*Kyūdō* is not Zen only”. It contains various components and values like other varieties of *budō*. Associating martial arts with Buddhism is rather the result of promoting Buddhism by its believers than an accurate evaluation or a more profound interpretation. The Asian martial arts are, though to a varying degree, rooted in various religious and philosophical traditions ([7], pp. 89-215).

Since 1964 and the Olympic promotion of *jūdō* at the Olympic Games in Tokyo, we may speak of new

¹ By the way, Lind [22], a skilled encyclopaedist, also falls into some idealisations, describing “the philosophy of the way” of *budō*.



times for *budō*. Martial arts evolve gradually from the forms of battle tradition and psychophysical education to record-breaking and Olympic sports. Such a journey was made by *jūdō* and *taekwondo* WTF, and other Far-Eastern combat sports tend to go the same way.

The change of character, purpose and sense of *budō* is shown even in the name. Master Choi Hong Hi (1918-2002) created *Taekwon-Do*, first of all, as a martial art associated with the philosophy of Eastern Asia. He continually improved his art. In the propagandist version, spread until now by the federation ITF, physical activity is still connected with some philosophy of life, though remaining a martial art and combat sport [1]. In turn, *Taekwon-Do*, a utilitarian martial art and a moral way, tend to get converted into *taekwondo*, a modern combat sport performed according to some conventions [16].

A similar situation exists in the varieties of karate oriented at sport competition. Rudolf Jakhel from the University in Ljubljana (Slovenia), holder of 7th dan in sport karate (FEKDA), devoted in his book less than one page to general reference to sport ethics [20]. In general, there are no considerations on a “moral way” and karate becomes a sport similar to e.g. boxing.

Even in Japan, we find today ‘*dō*’ among other notions/slogans such as international openness, democracy, modern sport for everybody, entertainment [19]. Is the deeper sense of the moral way of martial arts really being generally lost?

In the process of record-breaking training, there lacks time and “place” for the whole luggage of cultural tradition, and the long-lasting educational process is replaced by the algorithm of training actions. Therefore, some circles engaged in martial arts decidedly reject any sport competition – whether in the name of values of “the spiritual way”, or for teaching real skills of fighting and efficacy of self-defence.

On the other hand, the very fact of inclusion of psychophysical culture of *budō* into the area of sport and education, as Prof. Horst Tiwald [34] and others do, is an interesting phenomenon for culture and sport sociology.

Martial Arts – made in USA

Donohue in his interpretations of the American perception of martial arts [12] adopts an intercul-

tural perspective, typical of ethnographic and anthropological research. He focuses on the existing adaptations, e.g. the phenomenon of American *dōjō*. He undertakes the problem of mythical dimensions and conceptions of an American student: after having read E.J. Harrison [15] and other similar works, esoterism is sought even in *kendō*. But the Japanese samurai sword is an independent magic requisite. In general, new dimensions and meanings were added to the conceptions “mystery” and “mastery” in the USA. An increasing aggressiveness of martial arts and combat sports practiced there represent certain tendency.

As suggested by Donohue ([13], pp. 21-31), the typology of codified martial arts is shaped after other American authors - D.F. Draeger, O. Ratti, and A. Westbrook [28]. The author of *Warriors' Dreams* takes into consideration the relations of martial arts with the social system – the skills of *bujutsu* in relation to its belonging to the *bushi* class, and also connections with technology, social level, art, effectiveness, etc. How are these social conditionings of martial arts in the country of their origin transferred into their today's American dimension?

The American version of perception, understanding and adaptation is present in local myths, ideologies and cultural values. Donohue compares the spirit of martial arts to the way of the Indian warrior by Carlos Castaneda ([2], pp. 57-60). He also shows 3 American myths of the warrior originating from mass culture: 1) Shane (of the film “Shane”); 2) Roggs (“Lethal Weapon”); 3) Nico (“Above the Law”). What do they have in common? The hero kills the villain. All this passes into the specific image of martial arts practiced in the USA. Donohue enumerates: “feminist karate schools, schools affiliated with ethnic minorities, rough and tumble combat oriented brands of ‘cowboy karate’, to name just a few” ([13], p. 73). He also writes about 30-year old *shihan* (titular masters) of schools of fairly exotic sounding names. It is possible that he does not see (or does not emphasise clearly enough) that some part of esoteric tradition of the East was mixed with effects of the commercialisation process [5,7].

The short periods of silence practiced in some schools at the beginning and ending of training, the American sociologist mistakes for meditation and endeavour to enlightenment. Certain gestures, ceremony and etiquette *dōjō* only add some colour, create the atmosphere of the old tradition. But the very meditation or prayer does not require any special place or ritual. Incomprehensible (also for Donohue) is the amorphous nature of *ki* ([13], pp.

92-93). The popular understanding of the inner power is similar here to the motif of Jedi knight ([13], p. 97) introduced into mass culture by George Lucas in the “Star Wars”.

Donohue ([13], p. 91) states, however, that for the majority of training Americans it is simply a form of recreation. The author of *Warriors' Dreams* notices a multiplicity of motivations to train Far-Eastern martial arts, which, in the case of Japanese martial arts alone, indicates their ideological flexibility. Ideology of various ways of martial arts is adapted to various needs and values-aims (to use the conception of R. Merton) of their cultivation [14].

In particular, the training hall is a real place or, simultaneously, also a fictitious place ([13], p. 114). The attire, most often white or black, and the belt indicating the advancement, are the expression of another role or even identity of the practitioner, like in the orders. The principles and mechanisms of granting master degrees “*dan*” are very much differentiated ([13], p. 109). Moreover, the myth of “Ronin” – man of wave, ownerless samurai, is still popular. The Asian tradition is mixed with pop-culture, an easily digestible mash.

Donohue in his reflections does not undertake the phenomenon of martial arts movies, the genre of movies playing an essential function in global intercultural dialogues associated with the phenomenon of *Martial Arts* [3,25]. He does not take into consideration the pedagogical perspective either, nor the health values of Asian psychophysical practices. These, however, are increasingly more popular due to *New Age* fashions, entering well in the slogans: fitness, ecology, Eastern spirituality, Chinese methods of healthcare, and the like [35,23]. Another thing is that American authors seldom reach to European literature. Beside an interesting research of Michael Maliszewski conducted in the Eastern and South-Eastern Asia with interpretation on the ground of anthropology of M. Eliade, synthesising theoretical works that would correctly interpret the socio-cultural phenomenon of martial arts, are missing in American literature [4,26].

Eclecticism and borrowings, or a new quality?

The knowledge and creativity of teachers and activists of Far-Eastern martial arts is the function of meetings with masters and institutions. The activity of contemporary leaders of *budō* is thus a reflection of their biographies and acquired knowledge on the way of *budō*. Here are the examples:

1. A French master, Roland Maroteaux, created the style *takeda-ryū maroto-ha* based on the school *takeda-ryū nakamura-ha* of Hisashi Nakamura. He also adopted a similar system of titles and licenses of *menkyō*.
2. L. Sieber, a graduate of the school “Jiu-Jitsu u. Judo Schule E. Rahn” and the organisation DJJR e.V., established “Jiu-Jitsu u. Karate Schule L. Sieber” and the association DDBV e.V.
3. American Kempo-Karate (*Jap. kenpō karate*) was established by way of co-operation of J.M. Mitose – W.K. Chow – E. Parker. D. German, a student of Parker, established US TAI-Karate which, in turn, influenced the shaping of German Zen-Do-Karate Tai-Te-Tao (*zendō karate*) [31].
4. As new versions of martial arts were created, many existing terms and concepts were adopted. In Poland, K. Kondratowicz created a new style/school of self-defence “*goshin-ryu*” based on the terms of classical schools of Japanese *jūjutsu* (like *yōshin-ryū*).
5. A certain *novum* is the “development of the way of Judo” under the name Judo-Do, made by J. Fleck. This includes a further generalisation here of that idea (on the entire *budō*) called Ido (Japanese *idō*), made by W. Strauss.
6. By reference to the idea of Strauss and by analogy to the name *shōtōkan* karate, the *idōkan* karate was created [30].

Of course, nothing emerges from vacuum. A comprehensive knowledge of martial arts and combat sports together with great erudition warrant new qualities and values of new syntheses. An interesting eclectic system is the abovementioned *TAI-Karate*. The abbreviation is translated as *Transition, Action, Incorporated – Karate*. In fact, it is a system of martial arts comprising the techniques of *kung-fu* (White Tiger), *taidō*, *kenpō*, *jūjutsu*, and elements of boxing and wrestling. The founder was David German (USA), holder of 10th dan. This system was transferred to Europe by Virgil D. Kimmey who trained and promoted Lothar and Hannelore Sieber (Munich) in 1976-1978. L. Sieber introduced some elements of this system into the *zendō karate* style [31].

The development of this fairly original *Judo-Do/Ido* concept is the doing of masters Hans Schöllauf from Vienna and L. Sieber. Among the historical leaders, holders of the highest degree in *idō* (10th



dan) are, beside the two abovementioned masters, the deceased experts J. Fleck, A. Bauer, H. Klinger von Klingerstorff, J. Ebetshuber, and W. Strauss. L. Sieber included the techniques and methods of *idō* in teaching programmes in his school of martial arts. In Poland, in the sections of Idōkan Poland Association, the same process is ongoing.

Recapitulation

German studies on Far-Eastern martial arts are most often decidedly practical by having adopted the pedagogical perspective. In that way, the works of Tiwald, von Saldern and other humanists [34,24] enter the discourse of subjectivity of man in sport ([36], pp. 4-6), the reflection on pedagogy of physical culture, physical and social-moral education. These are, sometimes, accompanied by strictly sociological analyses.

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