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Eastern martial arts and violence prevention: Reversing a stereotype

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Summary

Martial arts are among the most popular physical activities practiced worldwide; however, there are still concerns among Westerners that incorporating these activities in school programs may lead to incidents of violence. Other professionals, however, maintain that this is a concern caused by the false stereotype of martial arts (as propagated in entertainment and pop culture), and which stems from an ignorance of the true values promoted by legitimate Asian martial arts scholars and practitioners. This paper explores the philosophical and theoretical concepts upon which Asian martial arts disciplines are based, and provides sample research to support the theory that martial arts – as practiced in Eastern tradition – de-emphasize any associations with violence. Further, this paper illustrates that learning and practicing martial arts, in line with Eastern precepts of martial virtue, promotes a healthy active lifestyle, and can in fact *discourage*, rather than encourage, incidents of violence in society.

Key words: martial arts • violence prevention • East-West

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BACKGROUND

Martial arts are among the most popular physical activities for millions of people worldwide, and are promoted as healthy activities people can practice at any age [1]. Despite the widespread popularity of martial arts, however, there have been concerns among many Westerners that teaching and practicing martial arts in school programs could potentially contribute to school or community violence [2]. In contrast, in the East – from whence these disciplines originated – martial arts have long been a required component in school curricula and millions of people of all ages practice martial arts on a regular basis [2,3]. This paper will examine the reasons for perceptions of violence associated with martial arts, the theoretical foundation of martial arts, and the function of martial arts in reduction of violence. The purpose of the paper is to correct misconceptions associated with martial arts and to promote martial arts as a means to advance moral education, develop overall personal health, and to reduce societal violence.

WHAT ARE MARTIAL ARTS?

Generally speaking martial arts are a system of codified combative movements intended to defeat an opponent or to defend oneself from physical threat. While there are many types of martial arts practiced world-wide, Eastern or Asian martial arts are regarded as the most influential, and the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese martial arts (e.g., judo, karate, taekwondo, wushu) – distinguished by their theoretical foundation of Eastern philosophies – are particularly popular. Most Eastern martial arts originated in China [4] and draw heavily upon Chinese philosophy [5,6]. Not to be confused with what in the West may be perceived as “physical” activities, Eastern martial arts are instead considered to be “philosophical” activities. In the contemporary world, these Eastern martial arts are the predominant forms in commercial and public school martial arts programs.

WHY ARE MARTIAL ARTS ASSOCIATED WITH VIOLENCE?

There are two potential reasons behind the concern that teaching martial arts fosters violence: *ignorance*, resulting from the lack of knowledge of the nature of martial arts; and *misunderstanding*, due to misleading representations of the Westernized martial arts through commercialized media. While movies and television are credited with popularizing martial arts, they are simultaneously accused of disseminating the negative, violent image associated with stereotyped martial arts in popular culture. Commercialization paved the way for martial arts to take their featured place in show business, but negatively distorted their image in the process [7]. Presently, the very words “martial arts,” to many people, literally translate as “fighting skills” (the word “martial” derives from the name of Mars, the Roman god of war). As early as the 1970s, Min explained that the initial popularity of martial arts was perhaps not hard to account for since the blatant commercialization of these arts by magazines and the movie industry has had the effect of a massive advertising campaign. The resulting popular image of the martial arts, besides being ridiculously inaccurate, tends to appeal to people’s violent and egotistical impulses. The martial arts expert is pictured in the mass media as a sort of superman who breaks bones with the greatest of ease and who is

continually confronted with situations in which it is (or so the entertainment industry would have us believe) morally right to do so. The martial artist depicted in films, however, belongs to fantasy rather than reality [8].

Martial arts in the East, however, are not seen as a potentially violent pursuit but rather as a philosophical one. Many branches of martial arts have specific rules concerning which body parts can or cannot be attacked, and actual combat is considered to be the very last choice. If combat must regrettably occur, martial artists should choose to retreat, or to simply subdue the opponent, thereby avoiding harm or fatality. These codes and virtues illustrate clearly that martial arts are *not* learned for the purpose of fighting.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF EASTERN MARTIAL ARTS

Styles, and forms might differ, but the intrinsic values, ethics, and virtues for all traditional Eastern martial arts are the same [9,10]. Eastern martial arts are founded upon Eastern philosophies, mainly Daoism (Taoism), Confucianism, and Buddhism [11]. To understand accurately martial arts and their attitude toward violence, one must be aware of the philosophical principles upon which they are based. The main ones are Dao, Ren, Li, He, universe-human oneness, and martial virtue, each of which will be briefly explained.

Dao (道)

Many Western readers may be familiar with Eastern martial arts that end with the Chinese suffix, “dao”, (or “do”), (e.g. Japanese “judo” and Korean “taekwondo”). “Dao” in Chinese literally means way, path, or law. In traditional Eastern culture, the process of achieving a goal is more important than the goal itself: “One is a martial artist only to the extent that one is always striving to *become* a better martial artist” [12]. As such, Dao, as a pathway to truth, is a fundamental concept in Eastern philosophies and frequently used in Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. Eastern martial arts also employ Dao as a route to enlightenment [13,14].

As Lao Zi explains, the “Dao” gives birth to Yin-Yang and eventually to everything in the universe. To Lao Zi (sometimes written as Lao Tzu or Lao Tse, the founder of Daoist philosophy), Dao is “oneness” [15] and appears in the form of Qi. Everything in the universe originates from Qi (also called Yin-Yang Qi, a type of energy), and is the product of the change of Qi. In traditional Chinese philosophy, humans and nature are ingredients of an integral wholeness. Fundamentally, human life – and everything else in the universe – derives from Dao; therefore, Dao is a unity that cannot be separated [16].

Dao exists in the universe as well as in every human being. As Cohn observes, the pursuit of traditional Eastern physical activities, including martial arts, is an active step taken toward the Dao. The objective is to: make the body healthy, to extend its life span, and to open it up to the free flow of Tao. The Tao in its tangible form on earth is cosmic energy or Qi (Chi), a term hard to define and for which ‘energy’ is no more than a crude approximation. Qi is the vital power of the Tao at work in the world in nature, in society, in the human body [17].

According to traditional Chinese medicine, the fundamental cause of disease is violation of the Dao; therefore, the cure requires one to confirm him/herself to the Dao and balance his/her Yin Qi and Yang Qi. The role of traditional martial arts is precisely to circulate, adjust, and balance Yin Qi and Yang Qi, and to eventually direct practitioners to a simple, natural, and healthy way of life, and toward a oneness and harmony among all Yin-Yang relations [14].

Ren (仁), Li (礼), and He (和)

Owing to its great influence on Eastern society, Confucianism is central to Eastern martial arts in terms of value orientation and ethical judgment. At the core of Confucianism is “Ren,” which becomes the central spirituality of “martial virtues” or “martial morals.” Ren can be interpreted as benevolence, humanity, or kindheartedness, and is a principle, which indicates all human relationships, be approached using honesty, tolerance, respect, friendliness, sincerity, and love [18].

Ren is strongly emphasized and promoted within the constitutions and regulations in martial arts schools, and all masters of Eastern martial arts observe the tenet “there are no martial arts without virtues” [19]. It is common practice for masters to focus on the enhancement of students’ virtue and to pass on the finest and rarest knowledge and skills only to those students who best demonstrate these virtues in daily life. Masters would rather let their superior martial arts become extinct than promote students with poor virtues. Hence, in the practice of martial arts, Ren is a prime objective.

When Confucian thought departs from Ren and branches into combat and competition, “Li” (i.e., a conceptual system of courtesy, etiquette, and norms) is always applied. In other words, Li should normalize competition along with the principles of Ren [18]. Let us keep in mind that the Ren ethic in Eastern martial arts is pan-harmonious ethical thought, which refers to the value judgment, which should ideally consider the concerns of the universe, nature, and humans on an equal basis [18]. The core of the value judgment is “He” (harmony), and He is always the principal consideration because, as Lao Zi, claims: “All things bear the negative represented by Yin and face the positive represented by Yang; these two mingled in balance and created harmony” [20]. Confucianism regards harmony as the root of creation, and the prime element for the development of everything in nature.

Whereas Western traditional sports emphasize competition and seek personal value and identity through comparison, Eastern martial artists pursue harmony in the *self*: between parts of the body; between breath and movement; and between body and mind. Harmony between the self and others, on the one hand, and between the self and the universe (including nature), on the other hand, is also diligently respected [21]. Moreover, martial arts instruct that harmony is of high importance within the self, between oneself and others, and between oneself and the universe. As it is of universal importance, the concept of harmony is the highest principle in ethical framework of martial arts [18].

Universe-human oneness (天人合一)

“Universe-human oneness” is believed to be the lofty realm referred to in Chinese philosophies to which all students

of the Dao aspire. The primary concept is that the universe and human beings were originally one and the same thing. Second, it instructs that the ideal or ultimate goal for humans is to consciously reach the state of universe-human oneness where there is no difference between the self and anything else, and no separation between the inside and outside self [19]. For martial arts practitioners, attaining this state is to access the oneness of Dao, harmony, and one’s own heart and true self [19]. To achieve this end, there appear to be two stages of progression that secular practitioners must experience: from big self (i.e., self-identity) to small self (i.e., the self as a diminutive part of nature as a whole); and from the small self to no self (i.e., the self as nature, and nature as self). It is therefore essential to practice martial arts outdoors, where the student can be one with nature’s changing seasons and various weather conditions.

As Abernathy [22] observes, ancient Eastern cultures view nature as a source of inspiration or a model of being; in this, it becomes important to strengthen one’s internal Qi (air and energy) by exchanging Qi inside and outside the body and developing the self-to-nature relationship. In fact, this is considered to be more critical to learning martial arts than merely developing the external techniques. Martial artists are not considered fully disciplined until their internal, external, body-mind *and* martial virtues and skills are developed. Ren, Li, and harmony are all conceptual means to assist practitioners to find Dao toward this universe-human oneness.

Martial virtue (武德)

Another principle in martial arts training is called, “内 (inside) 外 (outside) 兼 (both) 修 (cultivating)”. “Inside” refers to morals, mind, or spirit; “outside” refers to physical strength or skills [18]. In Eastern martial arts, the external forms and skills can be taught; the artistic concept, however – the spirit, and the essence or the true meaning of the Dao in Eastern martial arts – can only be perceived from within [18]. Therefore, although it is essential to master the appropriate physical movements and martial skills, it is also crucial to train the mind or spirit by cultivating Qi. Without internal training, the external physical movement becomes futile. By cultivating these internal qualities, martial arts practitioners are able to demonstrate morals such as respect, self-control, and self-discipline. Good morals stabilize one’s emotions which, in turn, greatly benefit one’s physical abilities and enhance one’s overall martial arts learning. This integration of physical strength, Qi, mind, and spirit is a highly unique approach among physical activities and sports [19,18].

In addition to the influence of Confucianism and Daoism, Buddhist principles (such as respecting the liberty of all living things, and having a merciful and benevolent spirit) also have considerable impact on Eastern martial arts. The Shao Lin Buddhist temple, for example, has become synonymous with one of the most influential martial arts in the world. Representing the Ren thought in martial virtues, many Shao Lin martial arts masters stress employing virtues, rather than combative techniques or skills, to overpower and persuade an opponent. This parallels the teachings of Sun Zi, founder of the military school of philosophy, who advises that the highest level in combat is attained by overpowering one’s opponents without fighting [18].



Martial arts are also considered, as “a philosophy based on the belief that a sound mind is achieved through the development of a virtuous character” [23], and a high code of honour must be upheld at all times. As Schnurnberger notes, a recognizable cultural philosophy is a part of martial arts. It is impossible to be deeply involved in martial arts and not be affected by the philosophy of nonviolence, of respect for your self and your opponent and the emphasis of becoming all you are capable of being” [24].

Kauz [19] identifies the other internal components in Eastern martial arts virtue: a respect for life and nature; developing moderation and balance; educating and training one’s character; observing filial piety and conformity to the social order; and pursuing transcendental enlightenment. Practiced in this way, Eastern martial arts are a means to foster peace and moral education [25] – purposes, which are completely at odds with the way these arts, are generally portrayed in Western media. In fact, when examining the objectives and benefits listed in legitimate martial arts schools in the West, it is clear that their objective is to teach virtues such as respect, self-control, self-discipline, courage, caring, fidelity, integrity, and prudence through the training of self-defense (thereby achieving other beneficial by-products such as concentration, fitness, relaxation, self-esteem, positive attitude, and stress management).

MARTIAL ARTS AS A MEANS TO REDUCE VIOLENCE

Based on the above analysis of the theoretical foundations of martial arts, it is not surprising to see that learning martial arts can help at-risk children and youth, and reduce violence via the core virtues of Eastern martial arts and martial education – a claim that has been supported by numerous studies [26–33]. Coincidentally, martial arts students – especially children and youth who planned to acquire martial arts training as a means of learning fighting techniques – changed their attitudes soon after beginning their programs because “the first thing which a student who seriously studies the martial arts discovers is that they involve an enormous amount of discipline and hard work” and “the second thing that is discovered is that far from turning one into an engine of destruction, oriental combative sports/arts develop self-control” [34]. It has also been observed that students who studied martial arts did not get bullied anymore, not necessarily because they used martial arts to protect themselves or to frighten bullies, but because they enhanced their self-esteem, confidence, and demeanor through learning martial arts, and no longer appeared obviously vulnerable to others [7,2].

CONCLUSIONS

In the introduction to Herrigel’s *Zen: In the art of archery*, Suzuki suggests that Eastern martial arts “are not intended to be for utilitarian purposes only or for pure aesthetic enjoyment, but are meant to train the mind; indeed, to bring it into contact with the ultimate reality... The mind has first to be attuned to be the Unconscious... One has to transcend technique so that the art becomes an ‘artless art’ growing out of the unconscious” [35]. Learning and practicing martial arts will not increase occurrences of violence; rather, it will enhance students’ awareness of vio-

lence prevention and allow them to react calmly and without panic in aggressive situations. This is evidenced in a number of empirical studies [36,37] and, more importantly, anchored in the theoretical foundations of Eastern martial arts. These arts are founded upon the philosophy of Dao which observes the pursuit harmony of self with the universe as an ultimate goal, which is in complete opposition to comparison or competition for the sake of self-realization or self-identity. Martial virtues, primarily rooted in three schools of thought (Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism), allow practitioners to develop as true human beings with love, sincerity, and self-discipline. Thus, Eastern martial arts are a powerful epistemological means to strengthen social harmony and simultaneously enhance the virtue of people and their understanding of nature, life, and the self.

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