

East Asian Martial Arts Cultures of China, Japan and Korea

Perhaps one of the most influential elements of the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean East Asian cultures from early times down to the present has been their concern for and practice of martial arts. This practice has reflected a combination of physical fitness and individual self-respect and survival, and is worthy of serious inclusion in historical studies of these three cultures in addition to religion and other factors. In essence, the martial arts are a reflection of the concern for survival in these nations which goes beyond religion.

In China, which has been my major culture of concern since my studies in the East-West Center, the martial arts were an important cultural element reflecting a Taoist, folk but not purely religious world view, before the introduction of Buddhism. With the introduction of Buddhism the martial arts were practiced by monks to protect valuables and property in a society lacking extensive police forces. The later fame of martial arts practices in Shaolin Monastery included a reflection of its political role as the central monastery among five located in north China and role in helping to maintain peace in the region.

Under the Mongols Shaolin Monastery's head monk, Fu Yu, was given permission to build five Shaolin subsidiary monasteries on China's northern border. Only one was built on Mount Pan, north of Tianjin, but it was not known for martial practices and was destroyed by the Japanese in WW II. It has recently been rebuilt and efforts are on-going to associate it with martial arts practices.

Shaolin Monastery was destroyed at the end of Mongol rule and rebuilt during the Ming period when some of the monks participated without great fame in anti-Japanese pirate operations. Ming leaders were essentially Taoist oriented and one, Huang Zongxi, wrote *Epitaph for Wang Zhengnan*, which claimed Wang, a Ming officer who fought against the Manchu takeover, practiced a Taoist oriented style of boxing, associated with a Daoist monk on Mount Wudang in Hubei Province, called Internal School Boxing. This appears to have been more an expression of anti-Qing views than a serious description of Chinese boxing (Internal is us Chinese - External is those Manchus).

The Japanese were most famous for sword-oriented martial arts but, around 1669, a group that had been practicing weaponless techniques at Atago Shrine on a hill in Tokyo, picked up some techniques from a Chinese, Chen Yuanyun, who had escaped Manchu controlled China, came to Tokyo, and was given credit for contributing to their weaponless style in a stone tablet dated 1779 titled "Rise-Fall Style Boxing Method Tablet". This weaponless style could very well have been related to what became known as Judo which the Japanese entered in the Olympics as opposed to Karate which came first to Okinawa from Fujian China and not directly to the main Japanese islands until just before WW II.

There are no adequate Korean references to their martial arts prior to the Koryo History, completed in 1451 (covering the period 918-1392), although there is evidence that both wrestling and boxing were practiced in the military and likely had Chinese influence. In fact, Korean King Zheng Zu (1776-1800) ordered the publication of *Wuyi Tupu Tongzhi* (Encyclopedia of Illustrated Martial Arts Manuals) 1790 by Yi Dok-Mu. Most of the content was from Chinese Ming period

sources. Korean Taekwondo, a mixture of Korean, Japanese, and Chinese martial arts skills, became a full medal sport at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia.

What needs to be mentioned here is that there appears not to have been any serious connection between Chinese, Japanese, and Korean martial arts and religion other than misperceptions surrounding the Buddhism and Shaolin Monastery role. As for Chinese Taoism, it is the Taoist world view of opposite attributes (Yin-Yang), not the folk religion that is important to Chinese martial arts. This world view extends to national governance under Confucianism, described in the *Record of History* (300 BC) as “When there are civil matters one must be prepared for martial concerns and when there are martial matters one must be prepared for civil concerns” - the management of national affairs.

As can be seen, martial arts are an important element in the cultures of China, Japan, and Korea, reflecting a sense of strength and purpose in their societies.

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