Ways of the SPIRITUAL WARRIOR

East Asian Martial Arts and their Transmission to the West

Dr Stewart McFarlane
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EAST ASIAN MARTIAL ARTS AND THEIR TRANSMISSION TO THE WEST

Dr Stewart McFarlane
INTRODUCTION

This collection of four chapters are some of the results of my thirty-five years training and thirty years researching in martial arts. My research has included training with some of the leading masters of the major forms of East Asian martial arts.

If you ever wondered why martial arts movies starring Jackie Chan or Jet Li are so popular, or why some people devote years to training in aikido, t’ai chi ch’uan, kendo, kung fu and other styles, sometimes spending years in Asia mastering their chosen style; then the chapters in this book will go some way in explaining why.

The first two chapters, “Warrior Myths and Tales of Power: Asian Martial Arts in the West” and “Buddhism and the New Warriors, Eastern Martial Arts in Western Contexts” attempt to explain the fascination which Asian Martial Arts hold for many Westerners, either as forms of entertainment through movies and other media, or as committed lifestyle choices, involving years of disciplined training and engagement with a foreign culture and language, and often embracing a radically different way of seeing life and one’s place in it.

As is clear from these two chapters, I am particularly interested in those Western martial artists who engage with martial arts a spiritual discipline or moving meditation, and often express their interest as a form of personal development, growth or spiritual transformation.

A useful concept in this discussion is the notion of “cultural distancing”; where the level of engagement with an Eastern martial art as a spiritual practice or a means of personal transformation is often accompanied by a distancing or sense of alienation from “mainstream Western culture”.

These two chapters include an overview of the multiple roles and functions that Asian martial arts play in their indigenous contexts. These include means of combat, ways of educating and training the young, achieving social cohesion and cooperative attitudes through disciplined training, serving the community through either policing and protection or through ritual performance and even exorcism, cultivating higher order mind and body skills and focus, preventative health measures; and achieving spiritual and transformative benefits. Given this multiplicity of possible functions and roles, the complex appeal of martial arts in both East and West is not surprising.

The second chapter “Buddhism and the New Warriors….” attempts to bring some structured understanding to this complexity, by means of key categories derived from the study of Buddhism in Society. The categories I have developed are:

1) Soteriological martial arts which relates to martial arts trained overtly as a spiritual and meditative discipline and incorporating specifically Buddhist higher order concepts such as mindfulness, non-discursive awareness, mental focus and liberating insight, Enlightenment.

2) Karmically orientated martial arts which are more concerned with the discipline and empowering potential of the training as mental powers and focus develop.

3) Apotropaic, which means the pursuit of martial arts discipline and training and especially rituals as a means of achieving control, which is considered by some participants to be “magical” in nature.

4) Inner Warrior Martial Arts incorporates elements of the three categories listed; but appropriates and retranslates them into more contemporary psychological terms, rather than using the traditional Buddhist concepts. They often use developed notions of mind-body training skills, and apply them to dealing with issues of everyday life i.e. dealing with one’s family, driving a car, improving your sex life or improving your golf swing.

5) The final category of Lifestyle Warrior involves the use of martial arts to pursue pragmatic, often materially and commercially exploitable benefits, such as those employed in
“Black Belt Manager” programs, sales and marketing techniques and how to function effectively in the “boardroom jungle”.

The third chapter, “Bodily Awareness in the Wing Chun System”, looks at a specific Chinese martial art, and how concepts derived from the Chinese Taoist and Buddhist milieu in which it developed, provides an effective means of integrating mind and body and understanding their functioning in practical terms, producing a highly sophisticated and effective martial art.

Those who have read my book, “T’ai chi ch’uan, Wisdom in Action in a Chinese Martial Art”, will recognise that Wing Chun and T’ai chi share the same underlying dynamics and the understanding of reflex sensitivity skills, as well as the “holistic” understanding of mind-body integration, is apparent in both these systems.

If you have ever wondered why so many Asian Martial Arts are so closely related to the usually peaceful religion of Buddhism; then the fourth chapter, “Fighting Bodhisattvas and Inner Warriors - Buddhism and the martial traditions of China & Japan” helps to answer that question.

It is the most detailed in terms of textual and cultural analysis. It looks at specific stories from the martial “myths of origins” as well as the Sino-Japanese Buddhist texts, and from secular literature, to establish the multifaceted associations between Buddhism and martial arts in China and Japan.

These types of association are organised into five key themes:
1) Discipline and asceticism
2) Fear and Death
3) Mental Cultivation
4) Ethics
5) Magic and Ritual Empowerment

Textual and literary examples are cited to illustrate all of these themes, with the exception of item 5), which is largely addressed by material from my long-term fieldwork in Taiwan with ritual troupes who train in traditional southern Chinese style martial arts and weapons systems, and employ them in the ritual protection of communities and temples and, specifically, to perform exorcisms and drive out malevolent spiritual forces, and encourage the attendance of the beneficial gods at important community festivals.

Considerable discussion is focused on these troupes because the magical dimensions of both Buddhism and East Asian martial arts are often ignored in Western discussions. The troupes preserve some very traditional forms and styles of Chinese martial arts, as well as illustrating how ritualized martial arts have helped to re-enforce cohesion and solidarity in local Taiwanese communities. My account illustrates how martial arts can be as much about spiritual power and ritual effectiveness as about technical or fighting skills. Many advanced members of Sung Chiang Chen troupes demonstrate all the above qualities.

The purpose of the chapters in this book is to inform readers who are interested in martial arts, both as cultural expressions in traditional Asian contexts and in the West, as well as those interested in them as practical ways of training and developing mind-body skills.

I do not claim definitive or final answers in any of these chapters; only to pass on what I have learned through training, interviewing and observation, as well as researching texts and critical discussions. I shall be content if my findings stimulate and even provoke others to reflect and perhaps research further, and explore this fascinating field for themselves.
Jackie Chan – his real name is Chan Kong-sang, meaning ‘Born in Hong Kong’ – April 7th 1954. He is also known as Big Brother, or ‘Dai Goh’.
Over the past thirty years I have trained in a number of Japanese and Chinese martial arts, and for the past twenty-five years I have used ethnographic fieldwork and historical methods to gain a better understanding of the nature of East Asian martial arts and their dissemination in the West.

THE APPEAL OF ASIAN MARTIAL ARTS

Asian martial arts now exert a powerful appeal to many Europeans and Americans. For a significant minority this involves a serious commitment to long-term training with a teacher or club, and an eventual level of effectiveness in the chosen art. For those who start training in an Eastern martial art it is often their first serious exposure to an Asian culture, to its unfamiliar language and concepts conveyed in the technical vocabulary of the system, to an Asian system of etiquette, ritual, education and modes of authority. In interview responses, serious practitioners almost invariably see their engagement with martial arts as more than mere sport or recreational activity. Many regard martial training as a means of personal transformation, as improving their sense of worth, quality of attention, as well the acquisition of physical skills such as strength, balance and co-ordination.

For many Westerners, contact with Asian martial arts is more indirect and the appeal is more vicarious. In movies or television dramas, enigmatic Eastern masters train their Western students in a dazzling range of unarmed skills and weapons systems, while at the same time facilitating their path to self-knowledge, personal growth or spiritual understanding. This theme is reworked with apparently endless variation in popular entertainment.

The Karate Kid movies, based around an American teenager's apprenticeship in Okinawan Karate, with the mysterious father figure Mr Miyagi, are a well-known example. This theme is now updated with the 2010 “Karate Kid” movie, set in China, with Jackie Chan in the role of the teacher/father figure. The Mutant Ninja Turtles, trained in Ninjutsu by the transformed rat sensei Master Splinter, provide another.

It is not surprising that the images and associations of Asian martial arts in the minds of many Westerners are mysterious and contradictory. To some observers Eastern martial arts are about the gentle meditative movements of elderly Chinese masters as they train T’ai chi ch’uan and ‘pushing hands’ at dawn in the parks of China. To others they are the explosive violence of a Thai Boxing tournament, or the sweat and noise of a karate dojo (training hall) as ranks of white suited karateka respond to the teacher’s commands with a numbing yell (kiai).

TRADITIONAL ROLES

In many Asian societies, martial arts have significant roles in the traditional culture. They often provide means of cultural induction and discipline for young men, fictive kinship, territorial assertion, and symbolic resistance. They are used as sport and recreation, as means of limiting conflict through ritualised combat. They are used as means of cultural celebration and dramatic performance, as in the case of many of the plots and action sequences of Chinese opera. Chinese martial arts have an important role in ritual exorcism in some communities of southern Taiwan, and in former times in rural communities in southern China. Historically, millenarian movements employed Chinese martial arts as part of military training for anti-imperial rebels as well as means of spiritual empowerment.

Japanese martial arts were largely developed by the warrior

1 DONOHUE, J.J. Warrior Dreams. The Martial Arts and the American Imagination, Bergin & Garvey, 1994, ch. 4.
class of professional retainers in order to instil discipline, resilience and martial skills. As Japan became pacified under the Tokugawa shoguns (1600-1867 CE), the martial methods and skills (bujutsu) of the samurai were gradually transformed into martial arts or martial ways (budo). Mental resilience, inner discipline, control and focus were emphasised, thus transforming the fighting methods into more stylised martial arts, cultivated more for their aesthetic and spiritual benefits than for combat efficiency. Not all lineages or arts made the shift from martial methods to martial ways.4

THE ROLE OF FOUNDATIONAL MYTHS

It is quite apparent that in most Eastern martial arts, the symbolic, ritual and mythic dimensions of the arts are as important as their combat effectiveness. Traditional Eastern martial arts usually have established myths of origin in which the roots of the style are narrated. An example would be the story of the origins of Shao Lin temple boxing (popularly described as kung fu), with the meditation master Bodhidharma in the sixth century CE. The myth states that Bodhidharma’s arts were preserved at the Henan Shao Lintemple until its destruction in the eighteenth century by the Manchu government. The five surviving monks, known as the Five Ancestors went into hiding and transmitted their skills secretly, reputedly forming the basis of all Shao Lin boxing styles that are practised today.5

The internal martial systems of China such as T’ai chi ch’uan (Supreme Ultimate Boxing) have strong mythic associations with the Taoist monastic centre at Wu Tang mountain. Taoist ideas of balancing of yin-yang forces, focussing attention and guiding ch’i (configurational energy), and use of internal power (ching) with minimal force, pervade the classical accounts of these systems. The fact that the myths of origins cannot be historically confirmed does not undermine their appeal. These mythic and romantic dimensions re-affirm many of the traditional values of the martial arts lineages, such as group loyalty, integrity, and the use of martial skills only in emergency or in the service of a just cause.6


5 ibid pp43-46.

Right: the body as a landscape representing the flow of ch’i (qi)
HEROIC NARRATIVES IN MARTIAL ARTS

Almost as important as these foundational myths are the personal narratives of the great masters and of one's living teachers, these help to assert their status and authority. One common theme of these stories is the encounter of the adept or master with a representative of Western power or colonial authority, and the master's demonstration of his superior martial skill, or level of control and restraint. Such stories provide ready material for dramatic presentation in movies and television. This is well demonstrated in many of the Bruce Lee movies in the late sixties and early seventies. The plots frequently portray the diminutive Lee using his skill, speed and power to defeat large and ruthless Western opponents. His role as a powerful and charismatic Chinese cultural hero with an international appeal is a significant one.

CULTURAL DISTANCE AND THE QUEST FOR EASTERN WISDOM

It is clear that Western practitioners are not immune to the appeal of mythic, heroic, ritual and symbolic of Eastern martial arts. In the course of my research, the students of senior Western teachers of martial arts have regaled me with heroic narratives that follow a strikingly similar pattern to their Eastern antecedents. Many interview respondents, as well as published accounts by advanced Western practitioners, value the association of their art with Taoism: in the case of T’ai chi ch’uan or Buddhism in the case Shao Lin boxing, or with Zen in the case of some Japanese sword training lineages. Some of these are led into a serious engagement with Buddhist and Taoist practice as a result of their contact with these traditions through martial arts training. In his work on the changing expressions of Judo culture in the 1950s and 1960s, Goodger has noted how the early pioneering "elite" Judo practitioners were strongly attracted to Zen and to certain traditional Japanese values, and were notably "culturally distanced" from conventional British society and values in the 1950s.

Interestingly, as Judo became increasingly institutionalised, routinised and sport orientated in the 1960s, the degree the character of the core group changed. A decade later, senior practitioners tended not to be culturally distanced and not to have a strong interest in Zen and Japanese culture. What Goodger does not observe is that those with a spiritual orientation, who were drawn to martial arts, simply re-oriented that interest into more appropriate martial arts. Many in the sixties and seventies were drawn to Aikido, which like Judo is a modern martial art, based on older bujutsu warrior systems.

Above: aikido in action

The founder of aikido, Ueshiba Morihei, was not a Zen practitioner, but was a follower of a theistic, shamanistic Japanese New Religion called Omoto-kyo. Those Western aikido practitioners who have a spiritual orientation, almost invariably relate their aikido to Zen. Many Western T’ai chi ch’uan practitioners see their training as a form of moving meditation. Those with an interest in New Age values and movements, who see T’ai Chi training in terms of meditation and personal growth, closely conform to Goodger’s concept of cultural distancing.

10 Kano Jigoro (1869-1932) developed his Kodokan Judo system from 1882, and viewed it as an integrated system of spiritual, moral and physical education. Ueshiba Morihei (1883-1969) developed his aikido system between 1924-1942 and saw it in even more explicitly spiritual and visionary terms than Kano’s Judo.

Modern karate in the West is mainly seen as a sport or self-defence system and has a large following amongst young working class men. The pioneers of karate who brought the Chinese influenced Okinawan fighting system to Japan in the 1920s and 30s, saw their art as a form of moral and spiritual training. On this basis, it was incorporated into the Physical Education curriculum of Japanese Universities. Some US military personnel based in Japan and Okinawa in the late 1940s and 50s took an interest in training the art, and the route for karate's transmission to the West was established. For a minority of karate practitioners, the art continues to have moral and developmental implications. Though the attempt by some in the 1970s to link karate with an explicitly Zen form of spirituality is now rare.

The early to mid-seventies saw the Kung Fu explosion, largely due to the influence of Bruce Lee. He was a Chinese American who trained in the Wing Chun system in Hong Kong, and developed an highly eclectic martial arts style and philosophy which he called Jeet Kune Do. He adopted an innovative approach to martial arts combined with an interest in philosophy and spiritual growth, largely inspired by Krishnamurti and his reading of Zen and Taoism. As a martial artist of grace, power and athleticism, Lee achieved short-lived success as an actor, first in Hong Kong “kung fu” movies, then internationally. Despite his death in 1973, he inspired a generation of martial artists. Movies are still made about him and his photograph on the front cover still sells martial arts publications.

Overleaf: Morihei Ueshiba (d.1969) was a famous Japanese martial artist and founder of Aikido. Ueshiba trained a large number of students, many of whom have grown into great teachers in their own right.

Above: Characters for “aikido” on scroll behind the aikido players

Opposite: Bruce Lee - widely considered by many critics, commentators, media and other martial artists to be the most influential martial artist of modern times. He became an iconic figure known throughout the world.

It is clear that very different motivations can underpin the Western practice of Asian martial arts. In one group we encounter educated, middle class practitioners of T’ai chi ch’uan, who pursue physical and psychological wellbeing, and see their T’ai chi training as a combination of personal development, preventative medicine and moving meditation. In other groups, we encounter predominantly working class young men who train in Thai boxing or street fighting styles. In such groups, the emphasis is on effective combat methods, physical fitness, and "realistic" sparring, with as much contact as is possible without serious injury. What is surprising is that the reported benefits of long-term training amongst the different groups are often remarkably similar. Many report an increased sense of confidence and wellbeing, an improved ability to focus, greater sense of awareness and responsibility.

Li Lianjie (born April 26, 1963) better known by his stage name Jet Li, is a Chinese martial artist, actor, film producer, wushu champion, and international film star who was born in Beijing, China. As he gained notoriety for his wushu prowess, making his debut in the 1982 film 'Shao Lin Temple' – in 1998 Li made his American film debut in Lethal Weapon 4. He then took on the lead role in the hit Romeo Must Die. In 2007, Li started his own non-profit organization called 'The One Foundation' supporting international disaster relief efforts - something that is very dear to his heart after experiencing the 2004 tsunami.

MOTIVATIONS, BENEFITS AND FUTURE TRENDS
Many of the reported benefits of martial arts conform closely to Csikszentmihalyi’s findings on the activities that promote a state of mental focus and flow, resulting in the exhilaration of optimal experience. Not surprisingly, martial arts concepts and training methods are now being incorporated into personal development programmes for those involved in management training. Many who endorse the spiritual values of the New Age or “Self Religions” continue to be attracted to T’ai chi ch’uan. Mythopoetic men’s groups are often attracted to the warrior imagery, apprenticeship models and the initiatory structures provided by martial arts.

The interest in martial arts from Asian traditions other than China and Japan is now very apparent. Indo-Malayan martial arts such as Javanese penjat silat, a formerly secret system that incorporates Islamic and Hindu mystical concepts, are now attracting attention. Despite the proficiency of Western teachers of many Eastern martial arts, an extended apprenticeship with an advanced Eastern master remains the ambition for many serious martial arts practitioners. The combination of the magical appeal of Asian martial arts, the undoubted psychophysical benefits that martial arts training can bring, and the real creativity of some advanced martial arts teachers, means that their future in the West seems assured.

Michelle Yeoh – she was voted by “People” magazine as one of the ’50 Most Beautiful People in the World’ and one of the only female stars whom Jackie Chan allows do her own stunts – it was in a Jackie Chan commercial that got her started in acting – she has been known as the ’queen of martial arts’ in the male-dominated genre of Hong Kong action films.

13 PATER, R. How to be a Black-belt Manager. Thorsons, 1989.

Stewart McFarlane in "flow" while training T’ai chi ch’uan form
BUDDHISM AND THE NEW WARRIORS: EASTERN MARTIAL ARTS IN WESTERN CONTEXTS

The association between Buddhism and Eastern martial arts is now well established in the West. The recent European performances of the troupe of "Shao Lin monks" from the Shao LinWu Shu (Martial Arts) Training Centre, have received considerable attention in the media. Despite the unease of some Buddhist scholars (Conze 1974 p94, Keenan 1989), the connection is reinforced by a number of serious groups and teachers who actively integrate martial training with Buddhist practice, and by a substantial literature in Western languages.

Most of this material is orientated towards training in particular styles or systems, rather than to a contextual or historical understanding of Asian martial arts. Interest is reinforced in films, television and popular magazines, where an aura of mystery and power associated with Buddhist orientated martial arts is evoked. An early example of this interest began with the US television series "Kung Fu" which ran in the early seventies, and featured the Chinese-American Shao Lin monk who sought only a peaceful Buddhist way but in every episode was forced to demonstrate his awesome kung fu skills on behalf of the weak and powerless. Media and popular cultural representations of Buddhist esoteric wisdom and martial skills are still in evidence, and can be identified in the plots of martial arts movies, cartoons, even yoghurt commercials.

The popular appeal of systems that blend dazzling martial skills and techniques with esoteric mystical teachings seems irresistible to some consumers of popular culture. For the more pragmatic and sceptical, there are martial arts with more modest and common sense claims to personal transformation and spiritual growth. Arts such as Japanese Aikido and Chinese T'ai chi ch'uan often fall into this last category. Questionnaire respondents giving reasons for commencing training in these systems, frequently mention the appeal of a system with an explicit mental and spiritual dimension to the practice. The combined appeal of access to esoteric wisdom, physical skill and the ability to defend oneself, improved health and fitness and personal growth or spiritual transformation, are obviously quite powerful as factors accounting for the initial appeal of martial art training to many Westerners. I should add that the rigours of martial arts training, the time and dedication required in order to progress, means that the dropout rate in all martial arts, whatever their orientation, is something in the region of seventy five percent.

I shall begin by giving a brief background to the association between Buddhism and martial arts in China and Japan, indicating the differences between them. I shall then sketch the early phases of the Western encounter with Eastern martial arts, and explain the rapid expansion since the 1970s. Finally, I shall try to employ some familiar categories from M.E. Spiro’s work on Buddhism in society, in order to characterise the diversity of orientations now evident amongst teachers and groups.