

The Construction and Export of Culture as Artefact: The Case of Japanese Martial Arts

STEPHEN CHAN (2000) *

I WILL NOT BE SO EDIFYING

and inspirational as our previous speaker not because I am lacking inspiration from my background; I was raised as a Calvinist in the Netherlands, and there was a lot of sin in the world and a lot of redemption, too, for some. However, I felt that I should distance myself a little bit from that background and try to follow at least some of the elements of the Eranos tradition, namely comparative religion, and the study of religions from a comparative perspective, which as we saw in the film *Eranos Reborn*, was of course done by people like Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade. I am also inspired by this place, Monte Verita, more Eros than Eranos actually, and by the traditions of the body, some of them sexual, some of them really expressionist, the tradition of performance, and of dance. Of course, Ascona has a very strong artist tradition and indeed a tradition of free expression through dance. This is to some extent my topic; it is the topic of the disciplines of the body, so a little less free but more disciplined, in Yoga and Chi Gong.

What I will do is make an excursion through India and Indian traditions, as well as China and Chinese traditions, and I shall actually look, at these from the perspective of the encounter with the West. So it is almost the whole world, but it is not the entire cosmos, so I am actually still in some historical scope. I will also look at these traditions, not from a phenomenological aspect, which was of course the perspective of people like Otto and Eliade, and was very much textual based, but more from the perspective of social history and political history, and how these disciplines of the body are embedded in a political and economic environment; therefore, we will see how this changed and evolved, so that these practices do not have an essential, unchangeable meaning, to be discovered in old texts, but are actually related to an ever changing environment, in which they have a political significance. This may be strange to some people, because they generally believe that so-called spiritual traditions are higher, transcendent, and have nothing to do with the mundane; they think they are actually pleasant in a sense, because one can engage with them and become more perfect and more understanding in one's own life. They are then often not seen as disciplines directly related to something negative that people normally want to escape from, like political or economic history, for example. I have found in my own work that they are basically very much connected to socio-economic change, and I will give you a few examples later on. In general, and this is a feeling shared not only in the West, but also in the so-called East, spiritual traditions are seen as 'outside' traditions. We see ascetics living in caves in the Himalayan mountains, and so it should be, so that you do not encounter them and they can therefore stay inspirational.

To give you an example, this feeling was expressed in Indian newspapers in the year 2000, when I visited a large bathing festival in Northern India in Allahabad. In the Hindu tradition it is called

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Prayag, the Kumbh Mela, and this occurs once every twelve years, when about twelve million pilgrims visit the place; it is, in fact, one of the largest pilgrim festivals in India. However, it is also a gathering of ascetics. I myself have worked among India's ascetics, the sadhus, for thirty years now. The Kumbh Mela is a very important gathering for these ascetics. In one of the many subsequent newspaper reports, a journalist said, 'Well, you see them now dipping in the Ganges, but in a few days, they will happily go back to their caves in the Himalaya.' There is no doubt about it, this is not true. Most of these ascetics actually have a cellphone (although it is rather difficult to see where they put it, given that some are nagas, which means naked, and makes one wonder about the miracles of life). They do not really go back to the Himalaya, they are very much present in Hindu daily life, and I shall expand on that a bit further, starting with Yoga and then going on to Qi Gong.

Let me preface that with my perspective, which is a bit different from Eliade's. Eliade wrote a very good book, *Yoga - Immortality and Freedom*, incorporating important research on the sources of Yoga and on some theories of how Yoga as a breathing technique is related to shamanistic practices. His book is a very scholarly work, very much based on the textual tradition. This is not because Eliade, a Rumanian, had not gone to India; he did, and had lived there with his professor. He even studied Sanskrit and therefore had access to those sources. Although he stayed in Calcutta, he does not mention the performance of Yoga in his time; he does not look at which kind of social groups actually do Yoga, and what the changes were, say at the beginning of the century, when he was in Calcutta changes from those ancient practices when he studied the texts, and the contemporary practices he could have encountered in Calcutta.

THE JAPANESE MARTIAL ARTS

Much that seems to be antique is not. Just as the modernity of Europe - its scientific rationality and liberal freedoms - arose with the 18th-century Enlightenment, so the organization of Japanese culture arose from the era of the Shogunate (1600-1868) and the need to unite Japan into a single and, above all, governable state. Before then, competing clans, provincial warlords and court factions had made of the emperorship something to be twisted and turned for political advantage. What was needed under the Shogunate was not only firm government but firm culture of hierarchy, obedience and reliability - even in the face of death.

Manifestations of such a culture certainly existed in pre-Shogunate Japan, but it was with the publication of the *Hagakure* ('Hidden among Leaves') in 11 volumes in 1716, that the laws or expectations of bushido ('the warrior way') were codified. Other similar texts appeared in the same part of the 18th century. In contrast to the individual freedoms and institutional responsibilities established in Europe, the context of life in Japan was one of strict manners, appearances and the reliable obediences spoken of earlier.

What arose here was not only an ordering of society by control of the behaviour, in particular, of nobles and their samurai retainers, but also a code of aesthetics. One must be groomed even when (especially when) facing death. One must drink tea in a certain way (the *Budo Shoshin Shu* document of this period permits samurai to drink tea using 'an unvarnished teapot and modern cups'). This sort of controlled culture existed earlier but, under the Shogunate, it was unified and codified, imposed and expected, and described as 'modern'. What are now taken to be the customs of Japanese antiquity took on a consistent form from only two to three centuries ago.

The idea of codifying everything spread to the practice of martial arts. Here, however, it must be said that none of the present martial arts forms in today's Japan, with the possible exception of *Kyudo* (the way of archery) and *Sumo*, took on their present codified forms until the last

century. Even Kendo, Judo, Aikido and, especially, Karate, have near or actual 20th-century origins - although they can, of course, claim ancestors. Karate did not really receive its popularly recognized form until after the Second World War. By the time of the 'modern' martial arts, therefore, there was in fact an industrial move towards modernity in Japan. Here, the rigours of industrial production were married to the codified reliabilities of only a slightly earlier era. Martial arts in Japan represent this fusion: lines that are clean, precise; in set movements (*kata*) that are prescribed and described as antique (few really are); practised in *ryu* (systems of hierarchy and codification); but which simultaneously provide an escape from the pressures of modern life, while being increasingly dominated by the need for rules that meet televised sporting criteria. Even practice with the naked sword (*iaido*), although very old, emerged only from closed *ryu* this century and, with its increasing popularity (it is done as solo *kata* and has qualities of meditation), has been given a simple face: the *sei tei kata* (officially sanctioned movements) allow for the existence not only of a governing body, but of a swordsmanship that is easy to teach, learn and govern. If this seems like something out of the Shogunate, the actual movements of the *sei tei* are very much the cleaned up, unfussy agreements of a contemporary committee of experts, seeking to be simultaneously and convincingly 'antique' but attractively (in the trawl for students and media exposure) modern.

Is all this a cynical view? Not at all. The romance the West holds for Japan is greater than that held by the Japanese themselves. For the Japanese, it does not matter if the outward forms change; that the forms were codified only recently; that all of society was codified only recently. The idea of a uniform, ageless spiritual content is something that absolves all modernity; and transcends modernity itself.

Thus, with *iaido* and, particularly, *kyudo*, the idea of meditation and solo practice are assembled into a seamless circle: one meditates while being still; out of this meditation a single short series of actions arises; the actions resolve themselves in stillness once more; this is visible to the onlooker; the practitioner is of the same meditating mind throughout. Being still, or in action, his (and today, also her) mind is as clear as water, and is uncontaminated by conscious or rational thought. It is this idea of an essential stillness, an intrinsic emptiness within the practice of the forms, that allows the martial arts to claim an antique ancestry that is very closely allied to religious and spiritual belief and practice in Japan. Here, we are talking precisely of the Zen school of Buddhism and the possibility of insight after years of mindless (*mushin no shin*) practice, or practice that values that which lies below or beyond consciousness. Eventually, the arrow finds its own mark; the sword cuts its own pattern; the person merely holds the weapon; he or she does not control it; the mindlessness of the person matches the mindlessness of the weapon; they move as one. Descriptions of this sort are invariably circular - which is, again, in Zen probably appropriate.

This is all very well and good in solo practice with a weapon. What about empty-handed practice against an opponent? Here, it must be said that the only truly successful martial arts form is *Aikido* (the way of matched harmony), in which the energies of the opponents merge, and one seeks to use the attacking energies of the other as the fulcrum of his/her defence. Thrusting energy is fed into receptive energy which allows a counter-attack of thrusting energy once more. The circularity here is again accomplished without conscious mind. Formally founded by Morihei Ueshiba in 1938, *Aikido* had its roots in *Daito ryu*, a form of *aiki ju jutsu* that is indeed antique. However, Ueshiba was also deeply influenced by the *Shinto* teachings of Deguchi Wanisaburo, which saw not only that there is a universal mindlessness (the unconscious unifying force of the universe in *Zen*), but, on earth, a unity between human energy and nature's energy. The idea of tapping into spiritual or cosmic energies at all levels, from above and below (or simply from all

around), and acting (certainly fighting) as if at one with these energies, is the *Aikido* ideal. In this flow of energies, an opponent is shown great respect, not only because of ritualized and codified courtesies, but because each may understand and be part of the same flow of energies. Although *Judo* and *Karate* claim similar attributes, this is far less the case today. Founded by Jigoro Kano in 1882, *Judo* has become, 100 years later, a sport that has lost much of its earlier finesse and spiritual intent and, as Olympic audiences clearly see, is an athletic endeavour first and foremost. Kano founded the system of black belts, since adopted by most martial arts, especially *Karate*. Brought to Japan from Okinawa in the 1920s by teachers such as Funakoshi and Mabuni, this peasant martial art reveals most radically the lengths it is possible to go to acquire respectability in Japan. The courtesies are imported into it, as are declared concerns for *Zen* and *Shinto*. It is rigorously codified, in each of over 200 competing mainland Japanese *ryu*, and it has, like *Judo* before it, reached out to a mass audience where it is becoming governed by sports techniques. The courtesies are what remain of the attempt to make this martial art seem Japanese. It is an art that has grown by integration, and is the least pure of all the martial arts in Japan today.

Even so, as time has passed and what is modern assumes - even if only by its own insistence - the patina of antiquity, the qualities of spiritual peace and harmony, and of courtesies and respect, become part of the official heartland of the martial arts. If it were not for Ueshiba, however, probably all martial arts would be regarded as *Sumo* is: an antique entertainment, fought out by antique rules, before a modern, televised, unspiritual audience - full of courtesies and hierarchies, but full also of sporting tricks like 'psyching out' the opponent in the full glare, and as an integral part, of the lights and television.

The residual or declared or adopted values of spirit and good behaviour and mindlessness these days owe less to *Bushido* than to what may be called *Budo* (the way or spirit of combat). This is a much more malleable concept for the modern age. It does not force the warriors obedience to a government, but is still full of the courtesies and unconscious skills that *Bushido* was said, in the 18th century, to incorporate. *Budo* is both pragmatic therefore (it fits into a democratic age), and at the same time, a declared anchor for values from another era: it is a demilitarized, but still not quite secular version of *Bushido*; and is inlaid with the motifs of antiquity sufficiently for all martial arts to claim affiliation to it.

If this is not a cynical view, then does it evince disappointment? No, it does not. This is not because it is convincing, both to a very great number of the practitioners of Japanese martial arts, and to onlookers of these arts, and to viewers of Japan as a state, a nation and a culture. The martial arts are part of that culture and have played a major role (however self-serving at times) in keeping alive a widespread adherence to *Zen* and *Shinto*. Finally, the content is greater than the form. The form seems old; the content has much greater claims to being timeless, unconscious, spiritual. Of the forms, let *Kyudo*, *Iaido* and *Aikido* stand as the most successful of the claimants to antique and spiritual content.

When the arrow flies unconsciously, the sword springs from its scabbard without thought, or the *Aikido* master leads his opponent in a circle of energy, and all practitioners treat one another with the courtesies of a unified universe, then what happened under the Shogunate was only an important shell.

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