

Country Rivalries

It is almost embarrassing to detail this sort of ancient, often outdated conflict, but a potential martial artist has to be able to weigh the words of those martial artists who wish to offer advice. Too often their opinions of an art are shaded, sad to say, with the biases held in the country of their art's origin -- even if their direct instructor was not Asian and experienced none of this bias himself.

I do think that martial arts should be evaluated, but as objectively as possible, using the admittedly subjective standards of each martial artist. This sounds ironic (how can you be objective and subjective at the same time?), but it is quite realistic. One first has to know one's subjective values and then judge each art as objectively (disinterestedly) as possible on those standards. Okay, here goes....

The Chinese martial artist, recognizing that he has the oldest martial tradition in Asia, tends to look at the other countries a Johnny Come Latelies. The other traditions, they feel, suffer from not being at the source. Add to this the Sino-Nippon War (1931-45) and you can see why The Chinese do not favor the Japanese.

The Koreans are ticked at the Japanese for occupying their country in the first half of the 20th century (1910-49), while the Japanese are ticked at the Koreans for supplying the ships that helped two failed Chinese invasions way back in the 13th century. The defense of these invasions left Japan financially destitute. Since that time, various warlords of Japan have had their sights on conquering the Asian mainland, aspirations that came to a head in World War II, giving other Asian cultures a reason to dislike the Japanese.

The Japanese looked down on the Okinawans for years as peasants, assuming Okinawa as their property during the time when Okinawa gave allegiance to the then more powerful China (14th century.) The Japanese managed to borrow horseback riding, ideograph writing, and swords from Korea or from China through Korea, Japanizing them so as not to admit foreign influences. They did the same with Chinese Chin-na (standing grappling) and with Okinawan Karate.

The Okinawans tended to revere the Chinese, especially as a dominant source of their martial arts, but were not pleasantly disposed to the Japanese who occupied their country in the early 17th century as a sort of consolation prize to the Satsuma clan, which had lost dominance in one of Japan's many internecine wars. Later, in the early 20th century, Okinawa accepted their position as part of greater Japan and is now an official prefecture.

Chinese stylists consider other martial arts just rudimentary aspects of their complex, detailed systems. Japanese martial artists think that Chinese arts are too complex, too flowery, and not functional enough. Korean stylists feel that Japanese and Okinawan stylists use the hands too much and do not emphasize power. The Japanese and Okinawan stylists feel that Korean stylists use the feet too much and have given up functional self-defense for sport.

As previous articles in this series will suggest, these biases are based on true emphases within the cultural arts, but only on the *emphases*, not the whole of the arts. Chinese arts can, indeed be un-flowery and very powerful. Japanese arts can be, on the other hand, formalistic and not geared to self-defense. Some Korean arts, although emphasizing kicks, are also good at throws and locks.

Where does BUSHIDO-KAI stand in all of this? Perhaps I have been unconsciously hard on the Japanese traditions because I am predominantly a Japanese stylist, however I look at my arts holistically. I see the history of our Takeshin (Bamboo Heart) Karate as Japanese with an Okinawan and Chinese origin from which we draw principles and techniques. I see our Takeshin Aiki-ju-jutsu as strongly Japanese in origin, but also rooted in a Kamishin-ryu that was Japanese/Korean/Chinese in origin. At BUSHIDO-KAI, we cannot afford to demean any cultural tradition because often, it is part of our own.

I think other traditions are more in that boat than the boat they think they are in. If they look at the history of their art, they will often find the influence of other cultures. Rather than worry about which culture's martial art can kick butt, they may consider worrying about whether they have learned their own art at a depth which facilitates their can handling any attack from a bad-guy, rather than a criticism from a neighboring culture.

Next time, it's My Johnny is a Blue Belt.