

Cracking the Mold

I can give you a whole philosophy about why the culture started changing in the sixties, rooted in the recovery of the fifties, and manifesting those changes in full during the seventies, but I will spare you that. Suffice to say that, for martial artists, Bruce Lee broke the conservative, stay-within-your-style-and-everyone-else-is-balmy mold, by using whatever worked for him while integrating several arts toward his specific martial purpose.

I bring up changes in the wider culture because they illustrate a principle that we see reflected in post-Lee-era martial arts: “you can’t put the cat back into the box” (the box you were told to think out of) or “once the mold is cracked, it won’t produce the same form”. Once we lived through the sexual revolution, can anyone really expect that we can return to a more sexually unaware and less sexually active culture? Once we have accepted different life styles, do we really think we can go back to expecting that men work a 9-to-5 and women to stay at home and raise 3.5 kids? There were many changes in the last half of the 20th century that I would certainly not want to rescind. Civil rights are the primary among them, but there are also the following: home-based work, increased international trade, Internet communication, personal computers, fuel-efficient cars, etc. Sometimes we arrived at those changes by normal economic and cultural development, sometimes we had to abnormally protest and demonstrate. I would have preferred that protests and demonstrations (many of which led to fear and violence) had not been necessary, did not become “normal”, and that we had been able to depend on economic and cultural development to do the job instead, but it was not to be. I do not want to put many of the changes back in the box, but I sure wish I could put the fear and violence back in the box and bury it somewhere.

One takes the chaff with the wheat and does one’s best to separate the two. Back when it was the default, taken-for-granted position to study only one style of one art (which of course was the ultimate art or why would one have chosen it?), those of us who advocated multiple martial arts did not realize that doing so might result in everyone and his student starting his own martial system based on some small technical revelation and a substantial but obvious re-juggling of familiar curricula. No one could foresee the coming of Soke Recognition Societies and Halls of Fame that could not exist without recognizing those less than stellar martial artists and re-recognizing somewhat more stellar martial artists again and again. We did not foresee that a merging of martial arts intended for self-defense would mean the collapse of those arts into an eclectic mixed martial sport that would be thought even nastier and more dangerous than the arts it was based on.

We could try to put the cat back into the box or cement the mold, but the cat isn't having it and the mold just does not hold. As with changes in the wider culture, I certainly welcomed a lot of the changes in the world of martial arts. I studied six styles of three major arts and dabbled with traditional weapons as well, and I was glad that my teachers did not tell me I was disloyal or could not learn unless I devoted every evening to them. I was happy to see some arts "eclecticized" in order to form a more functional self-defense repertoire, but wish it had been done by instructors or seniors who had paid their dues with decades of study and research rather than with a single decade of rubbing their instructor the wrong way.

But, to mix three metaphors, the cat's out, and the mold won't hold, so those who miss one thing or another about "the old days" have to be satisfied with separating the wheat from the chaff. This is the price of change. Now, my next question is, "How do you do the separating in a world in which every substandard newbie has some Soke Society to recognize him and his revolutionary art?"

More on this next week.