

## *Cross-cultural Mutations*

*Basabaru* is the Japanese term for baseball. It looks like the American sport, in fact it is substantively the same, but it is also somewhat different.

A dish of Szechuan cuisine can be chosen from many Chinese menus anywhere in the world. It has the same name, but tastes somewhat blander when served in County Cork, Ireland than in Chenghua, China.

In the West, we say we train in Japanese karate, but really most western karate aficionados do a mutation of karate, kickboxing, and sport fencing, although they think it is what Gichin Funakoshi did in junior high school or what Chojun Miyagi did in his backyard.

Things change and while changing are often transported to different parts of the world. Once adopted by foreign cultures, they mutate. The term commonly used is “cross-cultural fertilization”. It means that an item identified with one culture (Indian Yoga, for example) finds enough adherents in a foreign locale (Carson City, Nevada, for example) that it flourishes. But when it flourishes, it is fertilized by different soil, so it grows more like Gregor Mendel’s cross-fertilized pea plants than a pea plant native to a Moravian forest (or even a Moravian monastery garden).

Just as species of birds change beak size when isolated on an island where a different beak size is required to access food supplies, so too do culturally specific arts change their details (and sometime their entire intent) when developing on new soil. In some cases, we can bemoan the loss of the original techniques/practices/intent of karate. In other cases, we have to recognize that without a cultural motivated mutation, the art would not have grown at all.

One of the questions asked me in the recent Masters Magazine interview, but not published, was **“Do you think different ‘styles’ are truly important in the art of karate? Why?”** Here was my response:

Yes and no. I think it important to study a specific style in order to concentrate one’s mind. How would you get a BA in college if you studied an equal amount of biology, literature, math, sociology, psychology, a foreign language, and a dozen other subjects for four years? A BA in what? The broad liberal arts background is important, to be sure. That’s why there are general education requirements for most freshmen. Just as important, however, is concentrating on one subject. That major subject is concentrated even more in graduate school.

Logically then, students are best served by studying one discipline in depth after developing a broad foundation. What most students (and teachers) don’t see, however, is that depth leads back to breadth. That’s why the broad background was important in the first place. Too much depth and one becomes an expert at a sliding sidekick, but unable to escape a simple wrist hold.

When you leave graduate school, you need to apply your study in a much broader way. Styles, like graduate fields of concentration, are important while the student is formally developing. However, generic principles are much more important after the specific details are mastered.

For the seasoned martial artist, I see the developmental path as follows: **specific style** (e.g. Shotokan, Shito, Goju, etc.) to **broader art** (Japanese Karate) to **artistic field** (Asian Martial Arts) to a rather **generic field** (Holistic Martial Arts.)

How does this answer connect to the subject of cross-culture hybridization? Unfortunately, in my opinion, the arts we have inherited have brought along with them stringency against mixing and matching. And yet, as Westerners we not only have a penchant for mixing, but cross-culturalization itself inevitably brings about mixing almost to the point of mutation. Because this is an unavoidable occurrence, I would not argue against it—to do so would put me on the side of reactionaries who think that purer is better without realizing that t'ain't nothing really pure. Rather I suggest instead that people tend to intentional hybridize their arts too soon. And that, in this writer's opinion, is like trying to go to the generic field of martial arts without first having mastered at least the fundamentals of any specific style.

As a multiple martial artist myself, I never believed in the Japanese dictum of “If you chase two rabbits, you will catch none.” Rather, I felt that you should feel free to chase all the rabbits you want; just don't expect to catch them all at once.