

Fusion, Hybrid, Mash-up 1

There are a couple of restaurants in town that offer both Chinese and Japanese cuisine. Not far away are a few more that mix Japanese and Korean fare. A new one mixes Mexican and Indian tastes. For many years, the Chinese did not get along with the Japanese and the Japanese did not get along with the Koreans; so who would have expected the lunch buffet at The Fusion Grille to be so delicious? I am sure that Mexico never warred with India, but maybe their menus share peppery spices. My taste buds may not have the courage to try their menu, but I certainly find it fascinating. One can argue that Chinese/Japanese cuisine originated either on Formosa (Taiwan) or in Manchuko (Japanese occupied Manchuria). Some daring souls either intermarried or noticed that certain foods of one culture go well with foods of another. A similar argument can be made of Mexican/Indian foods, although the business about occupying the country is fanciful. But in the Mexindia example, it is more likely, I think, that someone just said “Why not?” and tried out the fusion by him/herself. More about “Why not?” later.

To get to these restaurants, I drive my Toyota Prius, a hybrid of internal combustion and electric motors that has great pick-up and saves gas while reducing pollutants.

At the Fusion Grille, a mother orders while her son plays with his Nintendo — Super Mario Bros., by the sound of it. “What? No Wii?” I ask as I pass. “He’s got one at home,” mom answers, “if it wasn’t for Wii Fit, he’d be docile all day.” The inventor of both Super Mario Bros. and Wii Fit, Shigeru Miyamoto, merged the standard computer game with the motion-sensor technology used to release automobile airbags and came up with a game that reacts to *you* — an unlikely merger, to be sure, but more popular than even the most realistic war game on Playstation.

The mashed up dining mixture is called a Fusion restaurant, the automobile engine fusion is called a Hybrid, and the hybrid of sensor and computer game technology is called a “Mash-up” by technology buffs. Each is a different manifestation of the same thing: mixing and matching what seem to be different, even opposing modes, methods, and means.

Martial artists, who were so religious about the purity of their systems in the 1970s, have learned that fusion is an inevitable part of an art’s evolutionary process. Classical martial arts that are considered cultural treasures may stubbornly remain unsullied by other influences, but traditional martial arts whose adherents are hardly devoted historians can’t help but be influenced by other traditional and not-so-traditional martial arts. In the U.S., that admixture first started with open tournaments. If Chuck Norris, a Korean stylist, was surprising Japanese stylists with a spinning heel kick, you can bet some Japanese stylists started practicing spinning heel kicks at home while Sensei wasn’t watching. If Norris was overcome by Tonny Tulleners’ lunge punch, you can bet he visited a Japanese-style school to improve his punches and learn to defend against them.

Bruce Lee accelerated the tendency to mix martial arts by showing that one concentration did not a complete martial artist make. If you punched, he could kick, if you kicked, he could throw, and if you threw, he could grapple. He wasn't interested in the tradition, but in the application, and successful application meant that you had to be well versed in many different "styles".

On the seminar scene, Wally Jay was teaching a ju-jutsu that could easily be merged with another style. That meant you didn't have to give up your karate to learn Jay's Small Circle Ju-jutsu. Remy Presas made the same promise with his Modern Arnis — a weapons style that could be appended to any other system. Of course, originally ju-jutsu was Japanese and arnis was Filipino; but Jay's ju-jutsu was influenced by boxing, judo, and his study under Professor Okazaki, and Presas's arnis merged elements of ju-jutsu and karate with more traditional *escrima*. What was once gradually fused became traditional and then fused with something else. Kano merged Kito-ryu and Tenshin Shinyo-ryu ju-jutsu to arrive at judo. His early Kodokan was a training facility open to many other Japanese systems as well. Aikido founder Morihei Ueshiba merged Daito-ryu Ju-jutsu with his background in sumo, Yagyū Shingan-ryū and Tenjin Shin'yō-ryū jujutsu. Chojun Miyagi mixed Naha-te with Ba-gua to arrive at Goju. Kenwa Mabuni's Shito-ryu mixed Shuri-te and Naha-te. Yasuhiro Konishi formed his Shindo Jinen Ryu (aka Ryobukan) by mixing karate with Takenouchi-ryu Jujutsu and an eclectic philosophy. From the www.shuriway.co.uk site:

In September, 1924, Hironishi Ohtsuka, the founder of...Wado-Ryu..., and Gichin Funakoshi, the founder of Shotokan..., came to the kendo training hall at Keio University. They approached Konishi Sensei with a letter of introduction from Professor Kasuya of Keio University. Mr. Funakoshi asked if it would be possible to use the training hall to practice Ryukyu Kempo To-te Jutsu. During this era, it was unheard of for one martial arts school to allow a...teacher from another system to teach in their dojo. Such a request would be considered a "challenge...." Konishi Sensei, however, was a visionary in the sense that he saw value in cross-training...he agreed to Funakoshi Sensei's request.

Wado founder Hironori Ohtsuka mixed Katori Shinto Ryu ju-jutsu with Shotokan. The list goes on. My point is not only that there are few if any "pure" arts, but also that inevitably, because instructors try to integrate what they know and students try to fill in the blanks in the way Bruce Lee felt necessarily for self-defense ability, things change. Instructors have "married" divergent arts both in their minds and in their muscle memory. Students, see the practicality of admixture, say "Why not merge Hoodoo with Voodoo?"

Martial arts adapt, adopt, mix, match, fuse, mash, and end up as hybrids. To resist this with the idea that "whatever is older is better" is like saying my first car, a '64 Ford Falcon ran better, was more comfortable, and got better mileage than a 2010 Ford Focus, or that my old '72 Toyota Celica could match my 2005 Prius. So, that makes me a non-traditionalist, right? Well, *chigaimas' sumimasen* ("excuse me but it differs") — a polite way to say, "methinks thou hast made an incorrect assumption." Having studied judo, Hakko-ryu Ju-jutsu, aikido, and Shotokan, I was teaching a karate class in my dojo

circa the mid-1970s, when a student at a local college walked in to enroll for classes. I asked about his previous training. He said he had studied a number of things and had formulated his own system. Now here was a real mixed martial arts non-traditionalist. Unencumbered by loyalty to any art, any federation, or any teacher, Myron Meshugass had taken Bruce Lee's advice literally and pastiched the what he knew of the systems he'd spent a few months with. Unimpressive on the mat and unable to follow even the most basic direction, Myron departed the dojo after the predictable month or two, probably disappointed in our "traditionalism", but probably willing to merge whatever he learned with what his "own system" stood for.

It is not a fusion that makes an art traditional. Rather, its ability to endure past its first generation or two — that and its success at getting students from point A to point B without having to seek out new and different arts to fill in the blanks.

More on this subject next week.