

Genealogy Both Legitimizes and Limits

In the '60s and early '70s, tracing a martial artist's genealogy was the way to determine if he were "legitimate." Legitimacy was all the rage because the way you determined the value of instruction in your traditional Asian art (there were no non-traditional arts at that time) was if Asian authorities overseeing that art recognized it. The instructor would need to have a lineage traceable to the founder of the art.

Illegitimate instructors would either promote themselves (belts and blank certificates are always cheap) or join questionable associations that would handle the promotion for them. In those days, Asian arts were run by Asians who jealously guarded rank and sometimes kept it a little too close to the Orient for the Occidental sense of fairness. Some Westerners asked themselves why they should not simply associate with others and go off to form their own style, art, or federation? Some did. As a founder of an art, the prodigal student set his own standards. He immediately became, let's say, a tenth-degree black belt (the highest rank in the traditional systems) and some even invented new levels to claim: twelfth or fourteenth degree black belts. If they were fairly talented in the martial arts, little harm was done right away since their students would aspire to yet high standards. If they were not as talented as they thought they were, they would promote students who cheapened the rank they wore.

Occasionally, a not-so-talented, quick-to-rank teacher found himself with a really talented, sincere student — someone who would achieve in any system and who might go on to instructor status. If this were the case, a potentially good teacher would have studied under a not-so-good teacher who had awarded credentials based on limited criteria or a faulty judgment. This less-than-common but less-than-rare incongruity makes it impossible to determine the value of an instructor via lineage.

Once upon a time, there were just a few major karate styles that were exported, judo was cut of one cloth, aikido of one or two major styles, and Tae Kwon Do was the Korean kind of karate that did not yet have national or international organizations competing with each other. Chinese martial arts had many styles, to be sure, but most people saw them as either hard or soft (and most did not have clear picture of what that meant). These were the traditional systems that dominated the martial arts scene and to which all teachers traced (or tried to trace) their lineage.

Once the traditionalist mold was broken, however, every other Easterner, Westerner, and half the people in between created their own styles, arts, and combinations so that genealogy came to mean nothing except to students of martial history. Genealogy, which once limited the free expression of the Western martial artist, also served to legitimize him. Now there is no stricture and thus no structure by which to check legitimacy and the value those "legitimacy" labels imply.

The martial arts went through a mini-version of what society went through. Structure was challenged (in the 1960s and '70s) and stricture disappeared, but no standards replaced those that departed. Everyone, now free

of standards, could be anything he or she wanted. As a result, high school graduates could not read and college graduates could not spell. After all, any standard is as good as another.

Perhaps genealogy was never the best way to judge martial artists, but a *lack of any* standard is not the best way to keep martial artistry worthy of envy and respect.

Judgment by genealogy can limit talented students capable of achieving and teaching outside of a genealogy. So how does one judge the value of a teacher, for example, if not by his genealogy? As we have said in a previous article, experience is a better determinant of quality than genealogy; but usually prospective students do not have the experience to recognize a prospective teacher's experience, so they use the shortcut of credentials and genealogy in the same way they would use the reputation of a builder to determine which home to buy. If we want prospective students to judge their prospective teachers fairly, the only way, it seems, to secure the quality of their judgment is to provide them with recommendations from an objective board, a bar association, or the blessings of Oprah Winfrey. No Oprah awards for martial arts schools? Guess the prospective student will have to refer to *Martial Arts Consumer Reports*. What? No such magazine? No bar association, no board? Guess we'll have to call in the government!

Next time, we'll discuss the inappropriateness of government regulation to secure consumer quality in the martial arts.