

Inheriting Biases

For decades, the dojo's post-exam activity was dinner at one of the local Chinese culinary establishments. Even though all three of our arts were of Japanese origin, there were no Japanese restaurants available unless we wanted to travel to Cambridge, an hour away. Two of our arts had Chinese roots, so that symbolism, although weak, was good enough. Besides, the restaurant had great service, reasonable prices, and no MSG.

In a way, we were hailing back to the day when Westerners did not know Chinese cuisine from Polynesian cuisine, Japanese from Korean, nor could they decipher a Japanese accent from a Chinese, or Korean Hangul from Japanese Kana. It was all Greek to them, unless of course, they were Greek.

It was understandably appropriate for each culture to have its separate identity especially since those cultures had conflicted so much in the past. Japan had occupied Manchuria (1931-32) and Korea (1915-45) supposedly to even the score for two invasions hundreds of years before (1274 and 1281). China had dominated Okinawa and Korea. The Japanese called Koreans "garlic eaters" and found it natural to look down their noses at other Asian cultures. They had respected the Chinese for centuries until the Chinese culture become dominated by Europe (c.1900), then the Japanese called them "the sick men of Asia", ignoring of course, their own capitulation to Commodore Perry's "trade mission" and the Convention of Kanagawa in 1854.

What had all this vitriol to do with us, a small group of martial artists, all under 40 years of age, whose memories of Asian conflicts could go back no further than Vietnam? Although we had lived through race riots in our own country and felt ourselves above such absurd biases, we seemed to have inherited ancient biases from the martial arts we studied.

Biases occur when too many people develop in an area in which there is too little diversity. Naturally, people like people who are like them, so they stick with their own. Since people are also afraid of the unknown, by extension, they become uncomfortable with the unfamiliar. But, gosh, doesn't familiarity breed contempt? Sometimes, but sometimes it breeds contempt for those who are unfamiliar.

On the other hand, if there is too much diversity, people feel adrift, wanting an identity. A similar thing happens to martial artists. In the early years of Asian martial arts in the west, there was more identification with judo than with karate (both of Japanese origin). No national bias was implied because Chinese Kung-fu and Korean Tae-kwon-do were barely accessible. People still were biased, but toward their specific Japanese art. When Korean and Chinese arts grew more popular, the biases became more cultural than style-oriented.

Eventually Bruce Lee began to integrate arts, incorporating fencing, boxing, wrestling, and Korean kicking into his Chinese wing-chun roots. But then people tended to be biased to an admixture of martial arts rather than a single-minded martial art. That tendency toward "absorbing what works" became crystallized in today's MMA, where everything can be learned, but nothing need be learned in any greater depth than required for the next match, nor need anything be adapted for the street.

It seems, therefore, that there is no “best way”. To be free of bias is to be free of subject matter. To be biased is to be locked into a very limited set of subjects.

Let’s try to sort this out logically. (If you are biased against logical sorting, feel free to visit the sorting rack as a tourist). First, let’s stipulate that race and nationality, although they may influence cultural tendencies, do not predetermine quality. The quality of a kick is not superior because the kicker is Korean, nor is the quality of a judo throw better because the thrower is Japanese. It is not national culture that matters when it comes to biases in the martial arts; more important are the emphases appropriate to the situation at hand and quality of execution.

More logical sorting next time in Diversity vs. Bias.