

Innovative Traditionalists

Although Jigoro Kano, the founder of Judo, is not considered a wild-eyed rebel, his non-traditional methods are often overlooked. Notably, he founded a system at the ripe age of 22, after having studied only two traditional arts (Kito-ryu and Tenshin Shin'yo-ryu) for only a few years. He opened his Kodokan to women and, although they had to wear the white stripe through the center of their belts (that changed in the last half of the 20th century), he felt they had better judo skills than the men, who tended to muscle their opponents. The Kodokan allowed other systems to train under its roof, becoming an early example of the type of multiple martial arts school we have today. He spoke English and studied Victorian society, wanting to adapt some of its ways to the Japanese martial arts world. He initiated the use of colored belts to signify rank and applied his new dan/kyu ranking system to judo, instead of the older licensing system.

Decades ago, I started using the term “innovative traditionalism” to describe how I categorize my preferred martial studies. I got the idea from a letter to the editor of *Black Belt* magazine whom I would love to credit, but whose letter I was not able to find when I went through old issues. For a lot of people, Traditionalism is the hallmark of dyed-in-the-wool rigidity while Modern/Progressive/Innovative martial study is the hallmark of flexibility and adaptation to the contemporary world. Obviously, I don't see it that way. Many founders of the arts that we consider traditional were innovative, thus leading them toward breaking away from some older tradition. Kano is a perfect example. Having witnessed the slow changes in “traditional” ju-jutsu that had led it to being more of a circus act or tough-guy show than a martial practice, Kano wanted to preserve the essence of what he felt were the values of old ju-jutsu. In order to preserve the old, he had to break away from it.

In order to spread Okinawan karate to Japan, Funakoshi had the effrontery to research kata not of his own style and incorporate them into his teachings. “But, doesn't that mean he was being disloyal to his own Shorin system?” Maybe. Or, he was serving the higher purpose of preserving Okinawan karate, which at the time, was too insular (literally) and therefore isolated to stand a chance of being preserved except as an idiosyncratic practice of a relatively minor culture.

In our own time, martial artists/scholars like Patrick McCarthy have had the courage to study generic “karate”, rather than only the specific system that they started with, and use the resulting eclectic karate system to benefit other people's karate training.

Of course, once people feel it is safe to break from tradition, they make a tradition out of breaking with what they learned. This has its own share of problems, the result of which is a glut of concerned traditionalists who feel it safer to stay with their given tradition than to challenge it, no matter what their ranks or years of experience. The distinction is that those traditionalists who broke with a set tradition (Shu) by founding new traditions were often put into situations that compelled them to go from

varying the set tradition (Ha) to founding a new tradition (Ri). Morihei Ueshiba, for example, was a Daito-ryu student of Sokaku Takeda, but Takeda Sensei travelled the country teaching Daito one way to one person, and another way to another. Ueshiba did not have the benefit of constant or consistent instruction. His first journey into Ha might have been when he taught an unnamed version of Daito at Osaka's Asahi Newspaper, which later became known as Asahi-ryu. However when Takeda showed up in Osaka, Ueshiba left the instruction to his master. Did he do so in order not to cause himself embarrassment for teaching less skillful techniques or because he was simply politely deferring to a senior? It may have been a little of both, but if Takeda was not nearby to teach him regularly, he had little choice but to continue his varying the tradition by introducing Ueshiba-ha Daito before launching more fully into Aikido.

Were Ueshiba, Funakoshi, and Kano rebels or traditionalists? Were they self-styled progressives without proper backgrounds or were they traditionalists unafraid to vary from the tried and true? Or were they simply innovating because they felt they had to, thus making them innovative traditionalists?