

Orientalizing the West?

Marshall McLuhan wrote, “Electric circuitry is Orientalizing the West. The contained, the distinct, the separate—our Western legacy—are being replaced by the flowing, the unified, the fused.” I would argue that if this is happening, it is happening at the very time that the cultural signposts of the East are being overcome by a Western worldview.

McLuhan wrote his famous *The Medium is the Massage* in 1967, quite a while before personal computers and the Internet cross-fertilized cultures. I would agree that things are being fused, but I do not see that as “Orientalizing the West”. The presumption McLuhan makes is that the legacy of the West is one of separation. Does he assume that the celebration of individual rights makes for a de facto separation of what could have been unified? Western recognition of individual rights has made people free to unify or to segment, as they see fit. Forced unification, as in tribal or totalitarian cultures, flies in the face of freedom.

In some ways, McLuhan was prescient. In others, he was off the mark. The East has definitely become more westernized since the end of World War II. In Japan, for example, popularity of traditions such as the budo have been soundly replaced by *basabaru* (baseball). Japan and Korea produce automobiles second to none. Geisha are rarely seen on the streets of Tokyo while *sararimen* (salary-men: white collar workers) are abundant. In the West, Asian martial arts have taken over all types of movie fisticuffs. If you don’t know karate, you ain’t a hero (unless you wear spandex tights and have super powers). The cultures have clearly homogenized, but I would ask Professor McLuhan, “What about the East seems fluid and what about the West seems segmented?”

Isn’t it more likely that martial arts styles are kept rigid and separate in the East, where the West tends to integrate and combine them? If so, the West may be “fluid” while the East was never that way.

Perhaps McLuhan was speaking about people’s perception of reality: Westerners thinking in terms of categories such as religion, job, political party, etc. while Easterners seemed more ready to accept and adapt things from other cultures. In this way, we accept the idea that Westerners are more “separate” and Easterners more “unified”. But what has that to do with electric circuitry, as McLuhan states?

Had McLuhan written his book thirty years later, he might have substituted “digital communication” for electric circuitry and accepted both that cultural sharing “Orientalizes” the West and also that it “Occidentalizes” the East. If so, it effects the traditional Asian martial arts in this way: (1) budo is an homogenizer that links students from many different cultures, (2) non-Asians are able to witness techniques and kata from Asian systems on the Internet such that they can make their own judgment as to stylistic effectiveness (in other words, style-centric sensei can no longer propagandize as successfully for their own system), and (3) except for the rare high level master, Westerners can attain a level of mastery of the budo equal to Asians who have abandoned their traditions in pursuit of a Westernized sport version of the arts.

If electric circuitry and digital communication has homogenized East and West, it has not resulted in one becoming more separatist and the other more flowing, rather it has resulted in one accepting the value of system of the other and preserving it until the spinning hook kick of time brings us around full circle.