

Rebuilding the Mold?

The desire, in the post-Bruce Lee era, to use what is useful in self-defense has resulted in two significant changes in the martial arts world: (1) martial artists trying to avoid being considered style segregationists by recognizing valueless mock-traditional styles, and (2) the general population accepting a mixed martial sport as a powerful and functional “self-defense” art.

Changing from a culture of a few traditional, established martial arts to interwoven methods emerging as new systems demands a price. In the world of martial arts, that price is either learning to endure a poverty of quality in exchange for the riches of diversity, or it is learning to confidently separate the wheat from the chaff. But how does one make a judgment about quality if martial systems can be personalized to anyone’s taste? How does one judge the value of a newly “established” art in a world in which every substandard wannabee has some Honor Society ready to recognize him and his revolutionary new art?

Is it inevitable that martial artists turn to government to set up standards to which martial arts schools must comply? Or, to save ourselves from either dictatorial or mediocre regulation, are we fated to create private recognition boards so that their members are assured of at least minimal standards? And who can really decide what standards should be standard?

Government regulations tend to be reduced to minimal safety standards such as first-aid kits, first-aid training, proper sanitary facilities, sufficient light and air circulation, etc. Private recognition boards would do a more directed job, but then there would be competing recognition boards with competing standards potentially attracting more schools by having lower standards. Consumers still would not know if techniques were effective for their needs. Effectiveness is difficult to measure if safety is to be maintained. Even functional martial arts can be insufficient for self-defense. The last decades of the 20th century broke traditions that locked a person into a traditional art that could be functional in certain settings, but may have been incomplete for personal self-defense purposes.

Does the cat ever go back into the bag? Is any mold rebuildable? And if so, are we better off with structured molds that produce higher quality, but not varied enough for self-defense, or are we better off with the broken mold that produces a freer, but often lower quality martial results? I suggest that there may be a way to produce not a mold but a system of molds that begins with rigidity, goes to flexibility, and ends in a kind of Platonic image of one’s ideal. It is called traditional martial arts applied with a free enterprise spirit—you know, a sort of innovative traditionalism.

Now anyone or his uncle can say they follow the path of innovative traditionalism, but that's like someone saying he follows strict traditionalism in his art of Mak Itup Azugo, of which he is the 25th inheritor (each inheritor having held the art in its original form for over two weeks). So, let me detail what I think might be a list of qualities to which an innovative traditionalist should aspire in order to keep the quality of his art alive without restricting it so much that it works only on subtropical beaches on sunny days against semi-aggressive tourists armed with wiffleball bats.

Next time: "Renovating The Traditional Mold"