

Savior or Destroyer?

In nearly every nation in Europe, Australasia, and the Americas (and several in Africa), Asian martial arts are practiced with the idea of both maintaining and advancing traditions started in China, Japan, Korea and other Asian countries. Because methods of martial study and the countries that preserve them vary so much, it may be easier to generalize, for the purpose of this essay, by taking one art from one country and consider how it has developed on one kind of foreign soil. To this end, consider Japanese karate as it has taken hold in America.

The USA has offered fertile soil for the growing of a Japanese crop that has, to a large extent, changed its nature on its own, native soil. While Western sport has strongly influenced Japanese karate such that it is becoming more difficult to find a non-sportive, traditional karate school in Tokyo, Eastern-style self-discipline and self-development have influenced the Western interpretation of karate such that even the Western sportive version (competition karate) is imbued with Asian propriety and reserve—well, sometimes, at least. To some extent, the West has become the savior of the Eastern tradition of karate. But also, in methods too obvious to innumerate, the West has become its destroyer (or at least its transmuted).

Modern Western karate does not look quite like traditional Eastern karate. In the West, the traditions have often given way to self-aggrandizement and merchandizing, both of which exist in the East but are frowned upon more often. The West has changed the nature of the art, the uniform, the procedures, and in essence, has contorted the traditions such that it has created new traditions, barely recognizable to Japanese, let alone Okinawan traditionalists.

But what would karate do without the West? Imagine Okinawan karate freshly landed and taking hold in Japanese universities, changing its form as it grew, becoming not only more Japanized, but more competitive, and leaning toward the *ippon* victory of judo and kendo. Japanese karate favors the idea of a “one-punch kill” not simply because it flaunts its obvious power, but because its sister sports judo and kendo measure success with a one-blow victory. The Western version of Japanese karate, ironically, brags about its ability to put a person out of a fight with one blow and then makes its tournament rules require three points. The Western version brags about its realism (converting its non-contact karate to full-contact kick-boxing and then to no-holds barred contests), then forgets about not only the one-punch kill, but also its three points, the character-building in its “traditional” sport emphasis, and goes instead for the big buck and the flashier spotlights.

But in changing the face of karate, the West also presents many faces to choose from. In making karate a consumer item, it compels variety and a niche for everyone. Personally, I don't appreciate many of the niches, but without them, Eastern martial arts might easily have stayed as a semi-classical curiosity for Western tourists to watch at The Budokan in the way tourists in Beijing watch a Wu-shu

show. In other words, karate might easily have taken a road almost as unsavory as the one ju-jutsu was taking before Jigoro Kano modernized it and Westernized it, while still managing to keep it Japanese.

The Western world is in love with not one idea of Asian martial arts, but with its own ideas of what Asian martial arts can be. Without that free development and variety made possible by the influences of the West, the East might have had less to offer the world and the world would have fewer ways to access it, mold it, and keep it going.

None of us have to like all its manifestations, but we should at least appreciate that manifestation of the many may mean survival of the few we do appreciate.