

Signs and Symbols

“We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.”
— Jean Baudrillard (*Simulacra and Simulation*)

In today’s traditional martial arts, many martial artists have come to believe not that their art is an idealized representation of the martial, but that it is *itself* the martial. Martial artists often believe that the engagements they deal with in practice are as close to actual personal combat as can be. They therefore come to the conclusion that since they study a warrior art, they are *per force* warriors.

Hegel saw a similar problem in philosophy. In *Phenomenology of Spirit* he wrote “to help bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title ‘love of knowing’ and be ‘actual knowing’ — that is what I have set myself to do.”

Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) proffers the idea that knowledge is less a series of facts than a replacement of worldviews. One worldview: In Japan circa 1600, the martial arts were for battlefield combat. Simulation was necessary but needed to be realistic, simple, and nasty. The armored grunts at the front line needed to use these skills to beat the hell out of the other clan’s grunts that were similarly trained. The harder and more realistic one’s training, the more likely one would emerge victorious. Another worldview: In a post-Sekigahara Japan (after 1603), even the strictly martial could gradually afford to accept the experimental, the unusual, and the fascinating because it was more important to condition the troops than to fight a battle. They had to be tough, but not so nasty as to be drooling at the idea of counting coups at the end of the day.

Flash forward to the Western world post-World War II world-view. The symbol for a confident man was either Charles Atlas or the Heavyweight Boxing Champ. Sportive boxing, and to a lesser extent sportive wrestling, were much more appropriate as “the manly arts” than were that dirty fighting known as jiu-jitsu. After all, those sneaky Japanese lost the war. Why would real men want to sully their Western sensibilities with that tricky Jap claptrap? But Western wrestling sacrificed its sportive side to the god of professional showmanship. Judo suddenly seemed an interesting alternative—it was a sport but could also be used for self-defense, so Asian martial arts filtered back into Western sensibilities through the door of the judo dojo. In those days, “judo” was short for Asian self-defense. Even professional wrestlers used “judo chokes” and “judo chops”. Judo’s era did not last long because its sport-side neglected its self-defense side and the average person wanted self-defense, especially in the turbulent sixties. Karate popped up, nicely filling the self-defense gap, but left practitioners wondering if, practicing with no contact, they could really put down an antagonist. It too meandered down the sport route since its safety rules were clearly more sportive than self-defensive.

First, the guy in a karate gi became the symbol for don’t-mess-with-me manliness and self-confidence; then, the monk in the robes softened the attitude with Asian philosophy, keeping his redoubtable combat skills

in repose until absolutely necessary. The Billy Jack character of the same era was, after all, an American sort of monk, retired to the woods and attached to a pacifist school for teenagers. The former Green Beret could knock your head off, but like Kwai-chang Caine before him, kept his cool for as long as the writers dared keep the audience on edge.

The boxer, the black belt, the fighting monk, and Billy Jack were all characters that represented our changing martial ideals—our worldviews as to what we thought martial arts should be. Back then we were conscious that these people were symbols—idealized aspirations to stimulate our own accomplishments. Not any more.

Next week: how symbols have become our new reality.