

## *Studio or Dojo? Business or School?*

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For the “uninitiated,” every martial arts facility seems more similar than different. Westerners have no tradition of *dojo* (Japanese: place of the way), *dojang* (Korean), or *kwoon* (Chinese). To Westerners, one goes to a gym for physical exercise, a studio for studying skills such as dance, a business to buy things, and a school to learn something. It takes a small jog of the perceptions to realize that gyms, studios and schools are businesses, that you learn things at a gym and a studio, and that even academic schools provide physical and well as mental education.

Dojo, dojang, and kwoon can be run just like gyms, of course, and to the Westerner who gives it a second consideration, this is not unusual at all. Martial-arts-school-as-business is now the norm all over North America and even in the East. But that is not the way it always was nor the way it has to be.

Decades ago there were no martial arts businesses. Even thirty years ago the majority of schools were clubs. Martial artists, in an attempt to make their avocations produce the returns of a full vocation, became martial business people. If Wall Street Wizards and Entrepreneurs could use Musashi Miyamoto’s *Book of Five Rings* (a book of martial strategy) as a business text, well then, martial artists could use entrepreneurial know-how to enhance their salable endeavors.

The Westerner finds this all very natural, of course, since he/she is used to paying for all sorts of professional and educational services. Capitalism makes a better product for a more reasonable cost, doesn’t it? Quite often it does, but the results of merchandising an art that was once reserved, elite, even secretive has demanded some trade-offs of which consumers are unaware.

In order to make palatable to the quick-fix Westerner a deep, detailed martial art that may have taken one to six hundred years to develop, teachers had to offer a watered down version of the original. After a few generations, the originals have been all but lost. In some cases new martial arts that take the old and simplify them for “modern application” have been invented. The watering-down thus becomes codified.

Because students get relatively skilled in these “new” arts, they do not realize that their ranks may not reflect what ranks meant even a few decades before. Rank inflation for students happens because achieving a rank keeps students interested (hence the origin of all the colored belts); rank inflation for the instructor occurs because he needs to compete with the school across town. If Ken Kempo is a fifth degree black belt, Kerry Karate had better advertise himself as a sixth. It is not unheard of to have an instructor add his ranks in several martial arts to create a eleventh or twelfth degree black belt for himself. (Traditional ranking systems go up only to 10th degree and are awarded to very old and seasoned practitioners.)

To compete with Ken Kempo and Kerry Karate, George Ju-jitsu makes claims based on public perceptions rather than informed recommendations: “We’ve taught 7000 legionnaires in full battle array,” or

“We’ve promoted 500 black belts just last year!” He tries to convince the consumer how good he is according to standards that impress the uninformed consumer. The consumer ends up indirectly determining the quality of the art he consumes. Martial arts businesses then compete for the largest membership rather than to produce the best martial artist. It is not the student who gains the most out of this type of competition.

We live in a time and a society in which most businesses produce much more good than harm. Martial arts inevitably must be business-like simply to survive, but potential students should understand the trade-offs and choose their school accordingly.

*Next week, we will talk about how the size of the school affects the quality of the student.*

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