

Traditional Martial Arts and the Alpha Male

Now that I have spewed somewhat stylishly regarding the decadent West's love affair with the Alpha Male and how that accounts for the popularity of so-called Mixed Martial Arts, let it not be said that I don't scrub a little behind the ears before categorizing someone else with the great unwashed.

Are traditional martial arts immune from the Western penchant for wanting to know who is top dog? It is one thing to say that traditional martial artists aspire to the ideal of self-improvement without the necessity to prove oneself by beating up an opponent, but a clear perusal of reality supports the ideal that hero-worship and finding the alpha to follow may just be more universal than Western culture, despite Eastern philosophy's inroads to the contrary.

Traditional martial arts are strictly hierarchical. That means that each art, league, or school has its hot shot at the top. You honor Sensei Smith who bows to Shihan Smythe who kowtows to Hanshi H. Shot because he is either the inheritor, founder, or rank-giver for the Federation of Martial Blacksmiths and he has forged the way for others to follow. In the early days of traditional karate in the US, tournaments were thought to be the way for different styles to get together and share, thus forging a brotherhood of mutual respect. Well, sorta. We still all wanted to worship Chuck Norris, Mike Stone, Joe Lewis, and Bill Wallace who had near undefeated tournament records. We followed the charismatic Hirokazu Kanazawa, not because he spoke English and taught in Hawaii or England, but because he was co-victor (with Takayuki Mikami) in the first All-Japan Championships. We fell in love with Bruce Lee, not because he was an action movie star with phenomenal screen presence, but because he didn't mind taking on a challenger who thought that movie stars couldn't really fight.

In short, even those of us in the traditional martial arts, constantly disgusted by the lack of character and penchant for violence displayed by cage-fighting competitors, worship the alpha male. Although we know that non-violence is a better philosophy than climbing over competitors, we want a tough-dude to identify with. Even those among us committed to the idea that self-improvement is better than other-depredation, want to be in the ruling class (at least in our minds) by being if not an alpha, then a beta, just a little below the hottest hotshot we can connect with.

Want to know why there is so much political backbiting, manipulating, and infighting in the traditional martial arts? Because traditional martial artists are too "spiritually elevated" to physically combat each other over their differences. We know that might does not make right, but somehow we think that winning a political battle does. In order to keep our own mental status just a level or two below the pack's alpha male, we will make sure no one passes our rank or title — if they do, it was surely because of political pull, not because they earned it — and we will, to the best of our ability make sure that no foreign frogs sully our pristine little ponds.

So, what MMA tough-guys do with their bodies, traditional budo hotshots do with their politics. Frankly, Scarlett, I don't much like either extreme and fail to see why self-evolved masters with good technique, good teaching ability, and a kindly view of the world don't get more worship from the Beta-boys looking for their Alpha Male role models.