

Evolution of "Tradition"

by George E. Mattson

I have been giving a lot of thought as to why the martial arts are so different in China than in Japan, Korea, Okinawa, or the West. Movements are movements and aside from the obvious physical techniques that differentiate the Chinese fighting arts from what we call "traditional karate," I would like to explore some other components that contribute to this phenomenon. Does the way we teach the art make a difference? Do we view karate as some kind of religious experience, preserving ritual and meaningless approaches, instead of allowing the art within us to evolve naturally? As black belts, do we continue to practice basic exercises and techniques we learned as beginners — out of a misguided belief that the moves are part of the "tradition"? Perhaps what has emerged from the Chinese root systems are better than the original. On the other hand, it is possible that many of us are focusing on only one dimension of our karate, missing the



Shushiwa: the teacher of Uechi-Ryu founder Kanbun Uechi.

essence of the art that the Chinese, and probably Uechi Kanbun, possessed. Are we hung-up with the *ich, ni, san* of the moves, rather than allowing the internal moves to grow and evolve from the basics....

KARATE AND BASEBALL

Suppose in 1856 a Chinese youth went to a baseball game and became determined to learn the sport. After the game, he met one of the players and struck a deal to cook for the player in return for baseball lessons. The youth was scheduled to return to China in a year and made the baseball player promise he would teach him the complete game in that time.

The baseball player was unfamiliar with teaching a sport he took for granted, in a way that the youth might learn in a short

time. Wanting to stress the importance of basics regarding the stances, grips, and swing patterns, he created a practice routine that emphasized all these areas. The youth memorized these drills and practiced them religiously.

After a year of dedicated and disciplined instruction and practice, the youth had to return to China. Although the youth had learned the rules of the game and had played in a few practice sessions while in America, his understanding of the game remained limited and preoccupied with the drills more than the game itself.

A hundred years elapse and the art of baseball in China has evolved into a very popular activity. Not so much as a sport, but as a healthy art involving mind and body unity flowing out of the practice of the art. The sport side of baseball has created many problems for the art, since many practitioners were simply playing the game, without the structure and discipline found in the art. The descendants of the original youth, who were charged with keeping the art pure and traditional, were having difficulty because many of the senior students were breaking away and forming offshoots of the original art, creating their own forms and drills, feeling they had discovered or were preserving the best of the art of baseball.

China was essentially closed-off from the West, particularly the United States, from 1949 to 1979. Communications and interaction of any kind were basically forbidden by the Chinese Government, but pictures of the grandmaster who originally brought the art of baseball to China were hung in all baseball practice fields, along with the grandmaster's American teacher. In deference to the original Chinese man who brought the art from America, his students renamed the style "Wu's style of baseball."

In 1984, when I made my first trip to China with the Uechi family as guests of the Chinese Government and the Fujian Wushu Association, it seemed everyone was familiar with the "activity" of "ancient exercises." They performed these "exercises" much in the same way we play baseball or basketball. One could go to any park in the morning or evening and simply join in with any group of your choosing. No one gave out degrees or certificates. You simply "played" the game! There were no "schools" of officially recognized styles as we know them. Anyone who wished to

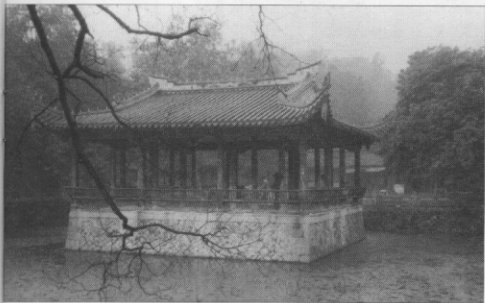


Temple guardians in the famous Fuzhou monastery.



Typical moments captured on film of downtown Fuzhou residents going about their business.

itional" Karate



Outdoor pagoda in Shanghai where citizens practice their martial arts exercises.



Chinese local residents work out in the public parks.



Historic meeting of the Uechi family, Ryuko Tomoyose and American delegation.



Okinawans, Chinese and Americans exchange friendship flags. "Four Seas - One Family".



Fuzhou Martial Arts Association presents first photo of Shushiwa to American Group. Left to right, Buzz Durkin, George Mattson and Marty Dow.

expand on what they were taught, was able to take the activity into a different direction with little fanfare or resistance. Wealthy families in another century (and probably today) could hire a famous teacher to create a special program/system for their family or for one of their children. One did not have to live in the Shaolin Temple to learn exercises for health and self-defense!

Imagine the current students of the original Chinese youth in my story, visiting the USA and seeing an actual baseball game for the first time, trying to identify the styles of individual batters and fielders, trying to find the "roots" of their "Wu" style!

Their dilemma is not unlike our Uechi-ryu group who traveled to China for the first time, seeing the thousands of different "styles" being practiced everywhere, trying to locate the "roots" of the Uechi style.

Imagine the confusion and shock on the part of Chinese people coming to the USA in the early 1960's and 1970's, happy to find work as waiters, then being besieged by countless Americans assuming every Chinese was a gongfu master. And indeed, every Chinese had an understanding of gongfu just as every American traveling to China would have an understanding of baseball. Given the choice of continuing to

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be a waiter in a Chinese restaurant or an exalted grandmaster of his own gongfu school in America explains why there was such a proliferation of gongfu during this period. If the situation were reversed, I am quite sure many of us would elect to open a baseball school in China.

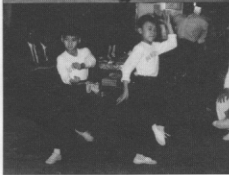
At the end of the Uechi-ryu group's visit to China in March 1984, we were honored with an official banquet and were invited to participate in a joint demonstration at a public theater in downtown Fuzhou. Our group demonstrated all the Uechi-ryu kata, kumite drills, and bunkai, then our hosts proceeded to bring out many of their experts who skillfully went through their paces. A cute children's team performed beautifully executed sword forms and two-person exercises.

Gifts were exchanged and the official event ended. Marty Dow, our group's unofficial translator, had made a point of "working" the crowd wherever we happened to be, talking with individuals who normally would never communicate with "strangers." One of the spectators was an old man who had been particularly attentive during the demonstration and who made a point of speaking with Marty as he moved through the hall. The old man claimed to know the movements we were doing. He proclaimed he was the number one student of a teacher who did these moves and who also used to talk about an Okinawan student matching Uechi Kanbun's description. The old man refused to make himself known to the official wushu organization sponsoring our trip. He was "on the outs" with the current administration and felt it best not to announce his presence.

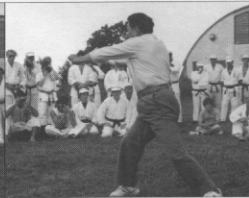
As a parting comment, the old man mentioned that "the Okinawans took a segment of China's history and preserved it in a time capsule." When I first heard this statement, I took it as a compliment, but later realized that the words might be read in a number of ways. In my original story, we might, as Americans, say the same to the group of "Wu" baseball students. After all, they did preserve something of historical significance regarding what the original "Wu" taught them over a hundred years ago.

But does the "time capsule" view of "Wu" baseball have any relevancy for baseball today, any more than does what Uechi-ryu today, reflecting over a hundred years of preservation of what Uechi Kanbun learned in Fuzhou, mean to the fighting arts of China today?

I find the current state of "traditional" Japanese/Okinawan/Korean martial arts to



1965 historic meeting in Taiwan. This demonstration honored guests from Okinawa and America. Present were Kamei Uechi, Ryuko Tomoyose, George Mattson and Charles Earle.



Following the 1984 visit to Fuzhou, a delegation was sent to George Mattson's Summer Camp the 2nd week in August, 1984. Crane master (left) Tiger master Zhang Tian Ci.

be bogged down in a quagmire of "what's valid" and "what's legitimate" rather than questioning what will effectively accomplish what the student and teacher want it to do.

If a teacher spends a lifetime practicing and teaching important drills, but never gets his students beyond a basic level of understanding (because the teacher has never gotten beyond the basic levels of understanding himself), the art has little similarity to what the teachers in China intended.

The Japanese and Koreans received their introduction to the martial arts from China. Many of those responsible for popularizing the fighting arts in these countries had very

limited exposure to an instructor. Culturally, Japan; Korea; and, to a lesser extent, Okinawa practice their native sports/arts with military ritual and precision. When the empty-handed arts were introduced, they simply added military discipline, rituals, and Japanese-based philosophy to the newly discovered Chinese exercises. Because of the limited nature of their understanding of these "arts," the rituals linked with the movement's performances authenticated the program's relevancy. The roots of the art were limited, but firmly entrenched. Due to the popular nature of physical fitness, self-defense, and Japanese "martial"



Fuzhou teachers from various systems attend and teach at George Mattson's Summer camp every year since 1984.



George Mattson and the children's demonstration team at the 1984 tour.



Fuzhou China Deputy Major, Chen Jing Mao and American Uechi-ryu Karate instructor George Mattson following the Fuzhou International Martial Arts Demonstration.

philosophy, these newly defined arts took hold and achieved lives of their own. Because the rituals of the new art had intrinsic value and helped students on many levels, no one ever questioned the value of doing mechanical moves and rigid patterns that could never be used in a real fight!

Sport karate evolved almost independently and on a "if it works, use it" theme. The "art" of "traditional" kata was often totally ignored as the sport focused on "borrowed" techniques picked up in tournaments and seminars. Few people questioned why they practiced one way while wearing their "traditionalist" hat and another in their sport!

Not until Bruce Lee voiced his "Classical Mess" anthem did anyone question the "martial" mentality of the non-Chinese

approach to teaching and learning gongfu/karate. When we hear such a bold and damning statement, the "traditionalists" gather around the wagons and loudly denounce the infidel. However, Bruce Lee's comments do represent the feelings of most Chinese experts! And only by looking at the martial arts experience objectively and perhaps with a ridiculous baseball metaphor, can we appreciate Lee's statement. A Chinese teacher at the 1994 Summer Camp put it another way, "You break the movements up into small segments to teach. But it appears that you are still breaking the movements up when you perform full speed!" Although we talk about eventually being able to perform the moves "instinctively" and "naturally," in fact, we are too hung up on the minutia of

the finger position and exact definition of an elbow strike.

Before anyone gets the impression that I am "knocking" modern karate, let me clarify a few things:

1. In many ways, what we do today is superior to ancient martial arts. What sport is not? We take from the past and benefit from modern knowledge and methods. Ironically, many innovative instructors are "reverse engineering" their art, getting rid of immature techniques and beliefs regarding their training. Cross training has helped a great deal as well, especially in understanding advanced principals locked in "time capsules" of misunderstanding and practice.

2. Our karate suffers when we clothe the art in a shroud of mystery and quasi-religious ritual, which prevents objective understanding and improvement to our art. Let's explore and study our karate with open and inquisitive minds. Do not get bogged down with the restrictive and mechanical basics we learn and teach new students. At some point, let go! Get with the flow and freedom of expressing the movements in a way that can be used in the real world of today. You are not losing anything but your white belt understanding of what you are doing.

3. We, the foreigners who adopted the various "fighting arts," are responsible for making our teachers focus on the commercial possibilities of the "self-defense exercises" they took for granted. We demanded organization, levels of accreditation, and certificates to show off. I am not saying this is bad, only that the emphasis altered the way the art was passed on from teacher to student. As responsible, thinking individuals, we should put things back into perspective as we take our martial arts into the 21st century. ☯

The author is the President of the Uechi-ryu Karate Association: North American Chapter. (NAC) For information regarding Uechi-ryu Karate, call George Mattson at 508-586-3969 or check out the Uechi-ryu Karate Association's On-Line Magazine at <http://www.uechi-ryu.com>