

Asian Martial Arts & MMA

I spent the best part of November this year in Guang-zhou in southern China where I did some TV work for the 16th Asian Games. There I was able to contrast a number of Asian martial arts including Chinese Wushu, Korean Taekwondo (wtf), Japanese Judo (ijf) and Karate (wkf). Wushu incidentally is written with two Chinese characters – military (wu) and technique (shu). In Japanese the same two characters are pronounced bu-jitsu and mean the military arts but not specifically Chinese Wushu.

It was a big event with over 45 Asian countries taking part and many events including ‘new’ Asian sports such as cricket were included. The event seemed like a challenge to the summer Olympics but how they will fit into the present Olympic four year cycle I have no idea. Perhaps the Chinese are considering a constant two year cycle between these two major multi-sport events. The Chinese have pots of money by the look of it.

My immediate reactions to Wushu was that it was like watching a Jackie Chan movie with lots of gymnastic moves and lots of strikes, blocks and parries but too slick to be true. The Chinese hosts say they want Wushu included in future Asian Games which are held every four years like the Olympics. There is an Asian Championships held each year for the current individual sports. Wushu includes both sparring (competition) and patterns (kata).

One problem I thought was the Taekwondo and Karate scoring systems. It was very common to see one side making a very positive strike only to find that no points were allotted to the attacker and conversely the opponent was granted several points instead. For example in the karate an attack followed by foot sweep followed up by a punch to the man on the floor gained extra points but most of these punch-sweep-punch combinations were not scored! I talked to coaches and competitors at the events and what they said was that the punch – sweep - punch had to blend seamlessly, like saying one-two-three quickly. However armed with this knowledge I still noted many sweep-punch combination were not given any score. The coaches couldn't give any explanation for the scoring either. The judges seem to have complete control of the bouts and could in theory guarantee who the eventual winner of the competition was! This juggling of the scores usually followed an appeal which a contestant and his coach had the right to make if they thought the judges had scored it wrongly.

In fact both karate and taekwondo are rather prone to hypothetical scores in the sense that the strike is never full-blooded like boxing but is either done against an armour-wearing (taekwondo) opponent or pulled short of contact in armour-free karate. Karate and taekwondo make a peculiar contrast. Taekwondo does not allow punches to the head but does allow kicks to the head : Karate stops just short of the target but Taekwondo allows full contact. Taekwondo competitors wear head and body armour but Karate is virtually armour free. The target areas are quite a bit different from each other. The protective armour of taekwondo marks off the target area but punching to the head is not allowed. On the other hand no attacks to the throat are allowed in Karate. However the karate strikes are difficult to judge and may injure the opponent. If a strike accidentally injures the opponent the judge/referee

could penalize one of them. Disqualification may result for any competitor faking an injury. One is still left to wonder how effective either would be with full contact and no armour. However karate and taekwondo are not my speciality so I freely admit I might have got the wrong end of the stick. It all goes back to the rules – they have to be understandable and look good for the sport to flourish. Perhaps Wushu will fill the gap.

In the Guang-zhou Asian Games the majority of the karate and taekwondo competitors did a lot of ‘bouncing’ on the spot just outside scoring distance. This was mixed with shifting the stance between ai-yotsu and kenka-yotsu and then incursions into range with a lot of half-turning front kicks to chudan or jodan and the occasional full-turning roundhouse kick (mawashi-geri). (Apologies for the Japanese terminology). There was however a handful of Asian Games karate competitors who combined a very powerful fast charge at the opponent from some distance away, with fists jabbing fast to the opponent’s face/head and then some really big foot sweeps to throw him down. (The sweepers did not hold the Gi by the look of it). This was then capped with a punch to the man on the ground which afforded maximum scoring. They really looked the business I thought. These fast frontal charges are quite difficult to handle although probably not so for rugby types. It is one type of technique not usually found in judo – namely **tai-atari** – which translate as ‘charging or ramming’. It was part of kumi-uchi which was one of the early ancestors of judo. In Kendo and sumo for example it is an important technique (something for judo coaches to think about perhaps).

When I did karate in Japan it was with Oyama of Kyokushinkai. Full contact kicks to the opponent’s body, legs and thighs were allowed and this often resulted in ‘dead-legged opponents. As I watched the bouncing karate and taekwondo people in Guang -Zhou I thought dead-legging would have been a very useful weapon.

The Guangshou judo event was mainly a head-to-head between the Koreans (6 golds) and Japanese (7 golds). Whenever a Chinese (2 golds) competitor mounted the mat there was a tremendous roar from the mainly Chinese crowd but the Chinese did not do particularly well which surprised me. I thought they would be gluttons for training and that would show in the results. The day before the event started I went to the judo venue and watched the Chinese team train. It was very close to the actual competition and I did not expect to see them sweating blood. However technically their judo had a somewhat out of date air to it. For example the uchi-mata was taught and practised as koshi-waza and there was some half-hearted uchi-komi.

One noticeable thing I noticed in the actual judo competition was the many gymnastic twists and turns (cartwheels etc) out of attacks which sometimes got competitors out of trouble, but not always. These were usually in answer to low maki-komi type moves or for low rolling follow-on moves from uchi-mata, seoi or from tomoe-nage etc. Personally I have always thought with such deceptive moves that the defender’s mistake is to allow the attacker the slightest slack and that the throw should be killed stone dead as early as possible using the knees (within the rules!) and some very sharp grip-breaking at the same time. With correct timing and placing a grip can be totally shattered often to the point where the sinews, tendons or bones of the hand can be injured which I have experienced.

In the 1950s the rules allowed the use of the knee to break low grips but this was stopped for no good reason that I could see at the time or now. In fact the rules said that the legs must not be used to kick a grip off but nobody did it as a kick. The knee was used to push down on the offending grip. Kisaburo Watanabe who was chief instructor at the Budokwai till about 1967 was good at this.

Why ban a good grip-break you may wonder. The answer is I think that there is an underlying Japanese aesthetic component in the judo rules which says in so many words that the judo has to look good. Messy moves are not wanted by the Japanese even if they are effective. A number of the rule changes that were brought in were influenced by this.

I have always mentally compared my sport of judo with other martial arts in terms of their combat/self-defence potential and usually judo stacks up pretty well. I think that is because when I started judo there was a lot of emphasis on judo for self defence or combat. We gave many self-defence demonstrations in summer fairs and the like and used to take on any member of the audience who fancied their chances. In the dojo the attitude was - keep your wits about you since somebody might jump on you. Sensei Leggett would occasionally slap the head of anyone not fully alert in randori. However self-defence and combat are two different things.

Judo randori gives one the ability to throw (heavily and dangerously if needs be with a little adaptation) and apply locks, wrenches and strangles both standing or on the ground. The training is rough and often painful both of which accustoms one to the self-defence situation. Similarly rugby footballers are fit strong men used to taking punishment on the field. They might not have much in the way of formal martial arts training but what they have goes a long way.

In the seventies I knew some karate guys who occasionally went out looking for trouble to test their karate. What they all said was how surprised they were when they found it difficult to use in a crowded pub or club especially when their opponents were crowding them or hanging on.

In the sixties when many judo guys worked on the doors of clubs and pubs in the West End of London they often said that judo worked best for the trouble they encountered which is not surprising as they usually ended up man-handling people. However they emphasized that groundwork was not recommended unless in a straight one to one situation with no onlookers nearby. This was also a time when knife and gun crime was rare. All of them stressed how useful big throws were on a hard surface. Apart from the impact of the fall, being turned upside down was very disorientating and disturbing for many would be attackers.

I notice that both karate and taekwondo ban grappling and big/high throws in their rules (but not foot-sweeps in karate!). The various martial techniques exist uneasily side by side in the some martial arts. When I boxed in the army I itched to try some leg throws when in a clinch and often after the judo in the Budokwai we put on gloves and mixed strikes and throws etc. After a few bloody noses we soon learned to watch out for punches and kicks.

I was struck yet again by the need for well-thought out and well-written judo rules. It was only two years ago in the Beijing Olympics that one taekwondo player ended up kicking the referee in the head for a decision he had made. This was accompanied by all sorts of Shenanigans which caused considerable disruption of the event and a lot of hasty rewriting of the rules. What seems to be lacking is any kind of methodology for rule improvement and change. If a problem arises the rules are looked at, otherwise not. Some rules are so general as to be meaningless. For example acts 'contrary to the spirit of judo' can result in disqualification. A piecemeal approach to rule reform often makes matters worse. *Legislate in haste – repent at leisure* is an apt English parliamentary saying.

The first stage of any reform might be to set out in skeleton form the structure of the rule book and merge articles which deal with the same thing. This stage could set out the purpose of individual rules and check whether they are fit for purpose. Where a rule has become obsolete or redundant it should be deleted. A distinction could be made between rules written for competitors and rules written for referees or tournament officials. It is necessary to know who you are talking to when writing the rules I think. Large early sections of the IJF rules dealing with equipment specifications are irrelevant for most competitors.

The second stage should be to rewrite the existing rules in good English and clarify any ambiguities. The current judo rules are not written in good English. They often look like a poor translation from French. An outsider reading our rules might conclude that judo people are not very literate. (Let somebody in the French Judo Federation write the French version of the rules and so on for all the IJF official languages). In translations of this sort it is usual to get a native speaker (of English etc) to write the final document. This would be a lot of work I know but the rules are important.

Finally we need a fixed timetable for rule reviews, say within a year of the previous Olympics (ie. every four years) and examine the rules in the light of the previous changes and whether they are fit for purpose. It will take some time to form a good set of rules but in the long run it will pay off.

However I am rambling a bit. It was good to spend nearly a month in China and observe their martial arts in action and compare them with judo. Japan has often been described as an off-shoot of the massive and much older Chinese culture which dominates all things Asian and I was looking forward to checking out Shuwaitjiao (said to be like judo and wrestling), Chinna, Taiji-chuan, Shaolin-chuan, Hsing-I, Pakua etc etc which I learned a bit about when I did Tai-ji with Mr Wong in Tokyo. I was curious to see how similar they might be to Japanese martial arts. From the bumph available at the various venues and the short explanatory films about each art which were shown during the competition there were some inconsistencies and it seemed as if our Chinese hosts were not that certain about their own martial arts or the Japanese and Korean ones. (I read somewhere that the Chinese communist government made some effort to standardize their various martial arts around 1929). However I learned that Chinese martial arts go way back (4500 years) and that their names varied from dynasty to dynasty and were pronounced differently (the pronunciation of many has been lost) which tends to create confusion.

Various contrasts are used to describe Chinese martial arts. They say that there is first a basic divide between unarmed and armed methods (including unarmed against weapons), then Southern and Northern martial arts (Shaolin-Chuan and Taiji-chuan), similarly Hard (Go) and Soft (Ju) styles and finally Internal and External physical training and health methods (Yojō-jitsu in Japanese).

There was quite a difference I thought in the respective mentalities of some competing countries. The Japanese and Koreans seem to be made of sterner stuff whereas the Chinese were more friendly (at least the many Games guides and assistants were) but perhaps more volatile and tricky. I went on a number of official tours and watched displays of ancient Chinese culture in and around Kuang-zhou and ended up being treated like a state guest (I think it was my TV accreditation that did the trick). More than anything I was impressed by the massive development of Kuang-zhou with its many huge futuristic skyscrapers and fly-overs. Going anywhere by fast coach usually took an hour or more and strong nerves were required when over-taking another large coach when up high on a narrow flyover. The views were spectacular though.

With any comparison of the competitive martial arts I have found that there are usually banned techniques and weak points to be found in all of them. For example there is the near-universal ban on biting and gouging although I once saw the great Anton Geesink hastily release a jūjūgatame when his leg got bitten. (I think it was more of a threat than a bite). To check out the weaknesses go to the Prohibited Acts and Penalties section of the rules - they can be very interesting.

What I have noticed in many of the pro fights such as in cage fighting between various martial artists is how biased they are. This is because I suppose they are presented to entertain and thus lean heavily towards the boxing format. Judo is a form of jacket wrestling which assumes that the most common wear in combat will be every day clothes and shoes and that the combat arena will be a hard surface of some sort (as in a street, club or pub). Summer presents a bit of a problem of course but most of the year jackets of some sort would be appropriate. So if I was in a match against a boxer for example I would expect both of us to wear a gi and that it be done on a hard solid floor. Fighting on mats or in a ring with a sprung floor would be out. Similarly I would expect that no mitts be worn. It's bare hands or nothing - as in the outside world. I can already hear those saying that this loads it too heavily in favour of the judo fighters but it mostly follows logically from what one regards as the most common fighting situation. The current formula of slippery bare-topped contestants, wearing boxing gloves or mitts, in a sprung square boxing ring puts judo fighters at a disadvantage.

The medieval Japanese samurai were the first to define when, where and why the martial arts were needed (such as in battle, on rough ground against multi assailants and against particular weapons) and then devise a general counter-measure to them in a package that would help the samurai to defeat the enemy and stay alive in battle. The general word for this type of training would have been, Budo – the Way of the Warrior - and would have included Heiho meaning the study of Tactics and Strategy (or the Art of War). The one indispensable element in all of them would have been hard prolonged training to breed tough, fit warriors and a willingness to die if necessary. See the Budōshōshinshū which is the bible of the Budo-ka.

The first major distortion of any competitive martial art is invariably in the imposition of rules to enable the training to take place and then the next one is the imposition of a semi-competitive form (randori/jiyu kumite) to get closer to the real unpredictable situation. However the battle scenario can be very varied and no single martial art can cover all the possibilities. So samurai training in the Tokugawa period consisted of six or more martial arts known as the *Rokubugei* (the Six Martial Arts). One list I saw contained eighteen martial arts!

I notice on the internet that someone has stated that I recommend MMA (and not judo?) which is news to me. However whoever it was has missed the point I think. Judo has been a mixed martial art right from the start decades before anybody had heard of MMA. Jigoro Kano in fact left his judo somewhat open ended. Try looking for atemiwaza, aikido, karate and joint locks of one sort or another in judo. It will not take you very long to find them. Also check out judo influences on other martial arts. Apart from some weapon martial arts there are very few 'pure' martial arts. The only arguable point is the proportion of the various martial techniques to be found in any one of them. Somebody who says 'I do MMA' is not saying much at all as is somebody who says he does a **mix of martial arts**.

There is however a subtle difference between self-defence and combat. Self defence is about defending yourself in the street against anybody including no-hopers perhaps. Combat is more gladiatorial and the chances are that you will end up against somebody who is very capable. Combat has very little philosophy to it and does not present itself as being of any value. It is purely a matter of winning or losing and taking the money like pro-boxing.

Perhaps the basic divide is between using weapons, punching/kicking or grappling. It will depend on the psychology of the fighters as to which they prefer. Combat in whatever form is tough. I don't think one could 'recommend' it since it would be a bit like recommending pro-boxing and I don't think you would end up with that many people doing it. Similarly I don't think that people would enjoy judo that much if done on concrete and in bare feet. So what would be its value if only a small minority did it?

Commentating on judo, karate, taekwondo, wrestling and sumo forces one to become knowledgeable about their rules but I am interested in them anyway. Martial artists should be curious about martial arts as a whole since there is much to learn from them that can be applied to their own speciality. This is the Way of the Warrior (Budo) and the Art of War (Heiho).

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