



Myths of the Martial Arts

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Abstract

This essay tries to identify the recurring patterns of mythic narratives with which martial arts at different times and in different parts of the world have described, explained, and legitimized their modes of action, behaviour, and thinking. It proposes that when examining martial arts as ideological systems, Martial Arts Studies could benefit from incorporating concepts and theories provided by Studies of Religion. The essay is accordingly based on the functionalistic concept of myth as a religious narrative as suggested by Aleida and Jan Assmann in the *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* ('Handbook of basic terms for the Science of Religion'). According to them, three basic functions of myth can be identified: laying foundation, creating legitimation, and forming the world. In the narratives of individual martial arts systems, these three basic functions often utilize one or more standard topoi, some of which are described in the essay: mythical founding figures, zoomorphic movement, geometrical foundation, origin on the battlefield, neo-myths of non-violence. These topoi have been developed and used by individual martial arts without necessary influences between the systems. The aim is not to deconstruct and ridicule such myths, but to point out and understand their importance within the transmission and practice of martial arts.

Contributor Note

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Martial arts and reality

As training systems for personal combat, martial arts stand in a difficult relationship to reality: The extreme forms of physical violence they are supposed to prepare their students for can only be simulated to a certain extent, but never fully acted out in training. The result is a gap between the practice and the final goal of the training. This marks a sharp contrast to those combat sports (like wrestling, boxing, MMA or judo) that can immediately legitimize their technical repertoire and training methods by their application. Defined by a strict set of rules, training and practical application of a combat sport can become one, and the validity of training methods be tested in competition. Those martial arts systems, on the other hand, which are geared towards potentially lethal physical encounters, find it – at least in peace times – much more problematic to prove to their students that what they do is *correct*. They have to develop means to install a sense of ‘doing the right thing’ among their followers. On the one hand, this necessity derives from the fact that, at a given time and place, several martial arts systems may compete with each other; therefore, they are forced to bind students to themselves, for ideological, commercial or strategic reasons (strategic meaning: the more men, the more ‘firepower’). On the other hand – because trust in one’s own training is fundamental for emotional superiority (Collins 2008: 20) in real combat – a martial arts system must not sabotage its own students’ fighting spirit by allowing for doubts about its usefulness.

To convince in- and outsiders of the validity of their techniques, tactics and training methods, martial arts tend to talk about themselves in mythical narratives, to ‘mythify’ their origins. As

Ashkenazi writes, concerning the karate training at a Japanese university:

Statements such as *this sort of blow will kill* are implicit and sometimes explicit in the training, but they are not susceptible to examination and empirical verification for legal and social reasons. The propositions are verified, if at all, by reference to what amounts to the mythical deeds of predecessors: the activities of the founder and his teachers in Okinawa. (Ashkenazi 2002: 110)

Before we discuss examples for various types of such mythical narratives in the martial arts, the concept of ‘myth’ as used in this text shall be laid out.

Functionalistic use of the term ‘myth’ and its applicability for martial arts

In this article, the term ‘myth’ is used according to the designation *M3* as proposed by Assmann and Assmann (1998) in the *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe (Handbook of basic terms for the science of religion)*. In contrast to other definitions of and discourses on myth – for instance, the classical dichotomy *mythos/logos*, or the modern myths as described by Barthes (1972) – *M3* describes the concept of ‘myth’ as religious narratives. These narratives form the world that their narrators perceive, lay the foundations for their interaction with the world, and legitimize this interaction; thus, they ‘authoritatively regulate the manifold arrays of social life’ (Assmann and Assmann 1998: 180).¹ One

¹ ‘M3 (funktionalistischer Begriff) definiert Mythos als einen kulturellen Leistungswert. Religionswissenschaft und Ethnologie thematisieren M3 als fundierende, legitimierende und

may hesitate to understand martial arts as religions in the narrow sense of the word. However, for their practitioners they can indeed become ideologies to create meaning, and they share a number of structural similarities to religion – such as ritualized forms of action, symbolic separation of space, hierarchical transmission of knowledge among initiates (Ashkenazi (2002) has exemplarily demonstrated this for *karate* in Japan). As Donohue points out:

The psychic allure of the martial arts is also due to the fact that they are ritual performances which symbolically deal with fundamental questions of human existence – power, the quest for control, the search for identity. These arts then, are not only about human physical potential but about the human struggle to generate a coherent worldview, to invest life with meaning and develop mechanisms for relating to both their fellow human beings and the world they inhabit. (Donohue 2002: 74)

Following Donohue, it seems appropriate to use the concept of myth as proposed by Assmann and Assmann on those narratives by which martial arts refer to themselves. By fulfilling three functions of myth – laying foundation, creating legitimation, and forming the world – they give answers to their practitioners' questions:

1. Laying foundation for action: *Where do the movements of my martial art come from?*

weltmodellierende Erzählung. Vorwiegend an exotischen Befunden schriftloser Kulturen entwickelt, stellt eine solche Perspektive die lebenspraktische Eingebundenheit des Mythos heraus, die darin besteht, die vielfältigen Ordnungen des sozialen Lebens verbindlich zu regeln'.

Martial arts hesitate to understand their own development as a historical process, accompanied by coincidences and contradictions. Instead, they tend to imagine a mythical point of origin in time and/or space which allows a definite allocation. Often fictitious lines of tradition then tie the present state of a martial art to this point of origin, thus suggesting authenticity and creating identity.

2. Creating legitimation: *Why are the movements of my martial art correct?*

The techniques, tactics and training methods of an individual martial art are always and necessarily a systematized selection, out of a far larger number of possibilities, of how to move, think, and teach (Lorge 2012: 207). These selections are not understood as arbitrary, but become based in and affirmed by myth.

3. Forming the world: *Who are we, who are the others?*

Martial arts as social phenomena tend towards pronounced distinctions between outsiders and insiders – one's own group being clearly divided from neutral individuals (non martial artists) and potential opponents (practitioners of other systems). This aspect of integration versus exclusion is tied to the question when and against whom the use of the learned techniques is acceptable. (As a sub-function of the world forming aspect, martial arts myths provide a psychological coping method for the existence of violence: By translating the threatening and diffuse phenomenon of violence into a symbolical language, one's discomposure towards it can be soothed.)

All the aforementioned functions of myth are strategies developed to handle contingency. The attempt to eliminate

contingency, to bring order to a confusing reality, leads to the totalization of meaning that is symptomatic for mythical thought (Assmann and Assmann 1998: 194). This totalization can easily be found in the martial arts: In their aim to create complete interpretations for the problem of personal combat, systems view their own myths as absolute, while critique is regarded as sacrilege. Those who are not willing to share the mythological system of a martial art – those who are not willing to *believe* in it – are sanctioned or expelled, or abandon the martial art by their own will. In this way, and similar to the genesis of new religious groups, new martial arts systems develop; systems that are often distinct from their predecessors more in their self-perception than in their technical repertoire. In extreme cases, the totalization of meaning can make a martial art the dominant ideology of its practitioners: then, the own self, social interaction, even existence itself are interpreted according to its mythical premises.

Types of martial arts myths

In the following, some of the common types of martial arts myths shall be described, via examples. Of course, this list is not complete: further types could be found. Also, we must be aware that often several become merged into one narrative – whereupon even greater becomes their potential to create meaning.

Mythical founding figures

This widespread type of myth locates the origin of a martial art with the initiative of a single, semi-historical individual. This

may be outstanding persons in a country's or group's history, such as Chinese emperors. Or we may hear of figures whose physical disposition implies combative inferiority, only to demonstrate a martial art's qualities by their success in combat. One of the most famous examples for this type are the two female characters who mark the legendary beginning of the *wing chun* system. Several, sometimes widely different versions of the story circulate; the following is probably the most widespread in the West:

After escaping the destruction of the Fujian Shaolin Monastery by Qing forces, the Abbess Ng Mui fled to the distant Daliang mountains ... on the border between Yunnan and Sichuan. One day, she came upon a fight between a snake and a crane (or other animal). She took the lessons she learned from observing the fight between the two animals and combined them with her own knowledge of Shaolin kung fu to create a new style. Ng Mui often bought her bean curd at the tofu shop of Yim Yee... Yim Yee had a daughter named Yim Wing-Chun ... whom a local warlord was trying to force into marriage. Ng Mui taught her new fighting style to Wing-Chun, who used it to fend off the warlord once and for all. Wing-Chun eventually married a man she loved, Leung Bok-Chao ... to whom she taught the fighting techniques that Ng Mui had passed on to her. Husband and wife in turn passed the new style on to others. (Wikipedia 2013, *Wing Chun*)²

² Of course, the use of electronic encyclopedias like Wikipedia in scientific contexts is more than

The meaning of animals as models for martial arts techniques will be discussed later. Interesting is the connection of Ng Mui to the Shaolin temple. Even though the idea of Shaolin as the cradle of Chinese martial arts has been shown to be historically wrong (see, for instance, Lorge 2012: 170-5), it may be the most influential myth in the world of Chinese martial arts, to this day. On the other hand, the fact that both Ng Mui and Yim Wing Chun were women, suggests the superiority of their combat system, which allowed them to use it defeat even experienced male fighters. The story ends with the outlook to following generations of practitioners, whose integrity is thus confirmed.

The motif of 'overcoming physical handicaps by way of a superior martial art' finds its pinnacle in an episode Inosanto (1980: 35) tells about the training of the Filipino martial arts master Floro Villabrille in the early 20th century:

Floro Villabrille started his training at the age of 14. He traveled the length and width of the Philippines researching the art of Kali and studied under many different instructors. His favorite instructor was a female; a blind princess named Josephina. To reach this blind princess, he had to travel many inaccessible trails, finally reaching a village called Gundari on the island of Samar. He stayed in this village for a long time not learning any Kali but just doing menial tasks as cleaning up. Finally he was allowed to practice the art. He states that he doesn't know how the princess saw the blows,

problematic. In this case, however, Wikipedia shall be understood as a primary source, recounting 'what people say'.

but he contends that she was one of his best instructors. After training there for some time, he comes down from the village and competes. While competing in a match and winning, he is approached by a man who asks him where he learned that style. Villabrille tells him that he learned it in the village Gundari on the Island of Samar. The man tells him that is impossible for the village is inaccessible to travel and that he couldn't possibly have reached the village because he was from there. When Villabrille tells him about the blind princess, he realizes that he is telling the truth and starts to cry and embrace him.

Well known strands of martial arts storytelling are woven into this story: The travelling student has to overcome hardships to find the right teacher; before he can study, he must undergo a period of frustration, working in his master's household.³ Most important for our perspective is the fact that Villabrille's teacher was not only a female and a princess (giving her martial art an air of nobleness), but also blind. A system that allows the practitioner to react blindly against incoming strikes must be of ultimate functionality, the myth suggests; and it seeks to strengthen its own credibility by introducing the knowledgeable villager who confirms the existence of the blind princess and her particular fighting style.

³ The motif 'testing a student's dedication by giving him menial tasks' has been made famous among martial artists worldwide in movies such as *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978) or *Karate Kid* (1984). In some way, it is a reflex to the teaching relation known in Japanese as *uchi-deshi* (inside student), where the student lives at the teacher's house and is integrated there beyond the regular training.

Zoomorphic movement

We have already encountered the story of how *wing chun* was devised by Ng Mui after witnessing a fight between a snake and a crane. The idea that the techniques of a martial art are derived from the animal kingdom is a widespread one. While the snake versus crane fight appears more than once in Chinese martial arts history – a similar match inspired Zhang San Feng to found *taijiquan*, as the story goes⁴ – other animals are claimed as original inspirations for different styles, one of the most famous being the mantis as the model for *tanglangquan*:

Tanglang began during the time of emperor Liang Wu, the creator was Wang Lang also known as Fa Ming of Taiyuan, Shanxi. Once the Shaolin temple of Song Mountain was a place where martial artists met to develop their skills. Wang Lang desired to enter the temple, so befriended the Shaolin monks and exchange martial art skill, for many time they would test their skills, Wang Lang would always be defeated and be laughed by the monks, felt humiliated he went away. One day while Wang Lang was resting in the woods, he was disturbed by the noise caused by the fight between a cicada and a mantis, though the cicada have six feet was not able to overcome the two hook claw of the mantis. Finally the mantis seized the cicada (a verse later use in mantis

technique). Wang Lang took home the mantis, where he studied the defensive and offensive movements of the mantis. He was able to observed the mantis' two front hook claws executing split, slash, cunning hook, dodge techniques and he created the hook, grasp, pluck, hang, crush, split, cunning hook, intercept and other techniques, he would further practice and develop the art of Tanglang Quan. After years of training, he went back and fought with the monks, the monks was no match to Wang Lang new fighting skill. The Shaolin Abbot was impressed with Wang Lang's Tanglang Quan, he invited Wang Lang to teach Tanglang Quan inside the temple. While in the temple he created a mantis form called 'Beng Bu'. Wang Lang taught at temple for three years before retiring to Mao mountain. Tanglang Quan was kept and taught only inside the premise of the temple before a monk called Fu Chi would further develop Tanglang Quan and later taught it to a wandering Taoist priest named Sheng Xiao, who introduced and taught Tanglang Quan to the common people. (Tanglangquan 2013)

Several mythemes are formed into one narrative here: Wang Lang as the mythical founding figure; the importance of Shaolin; the overcoming of a physically superior enemy by better fighting skills (in this case, those of the mantis); the founding of a teaching tradition. Especially interesting, though, is the idea that a human can benefit from copying the movements of an animal. For the mythic mindset, these movements' effectiveness is proven by their origin outside the realm of human thought; due

⁴ It is said that on one occasion Zhang Sanfeng observed a bird attacking a snake on Wudang Mountain and was greatly inspired by the snake's defensive tactics. It remained still and alert in face of the birds onslaught until it made a lunge and fatally bit its attacker. This battle inspired him to create a 72-movement T'ai chi ch'uan "set". (Wikipedia 2013, Zhang Sanfeng)

to this origin, they are beyond human critique and thus 'true'. To a mindset like this, myths can legitimize a martial art as a whole (as is the case with *Tanglangquan*), parts of a martial art, or individual techniques (as we will see in the next example). Similar narratives can be found not only in Asia, but all over the world. For instance, an English fencing manual from the 17th century informs us:

Cavere [a method of ducking under an incoming attack] took its beginning from a Cock fight; for Camillo Agrippa, a reverend Master of defense at Rome fifty years ago ... seeing two Cocks combat together, and observing, how when one of the Cocks leaped up to strike the other with his claw, the other seeing him come leaping at him went quite under him on the other side, conceived that he might make use of this in his Art, and coming home made trial of it, and found it a very useful and remarkable observation' (G.A. [anonym], 1639, S. I.6).

Even though the place and time of origin of the two quoted myths are far away from each other, they follow the same underlying structure. As such, the process of constructing such a zoomorphic myth can be understood as an '*ad hoc* etymology of movement': Because a certain technique or posture reminds the practitioners of an animal, it is named accordingly. If this movement/posture is of central importance within the martial art, its name is transferred to the whole system. In the next step, this conceptual connection to an animal is turned into a story and further elaborated on, and finally able to fulfil the functions of myth as described above.

Geometrical foundation

As we have said before, the basic idea behind the myth type 'zoomorphic movement' is an imagined foundation of a martial art beyond the realm of men. Such a foundation need not necessarily lie in animal behaviour. Another prominent concept is the foundation of combative movement in geometry. This concept has been tremendously influential in the history of European martial arts, insofar as, from the 16th century onwards, it dominated the development of fencing. In 1553, Camillo Agrippa's *Trattato di scientia d'arme con un dialogo filosofico* was published. Agrippa (himself not a fencing teacher, but an architect, mathematician and engineer) aimed to base his fencing system upon mathematical principles. The *trattato* provides an illustration of its author, equipped both with a sword, and with a pair of compasses and an armillary sphere, his foot resting on a globe. Anglo remarks: 'The meaning is clear: The author – a distinguished mathematician and engineer – is using both pure and applied mathematics to place personal combat upon a scientific basis' (Anglo 2000: 25). This mathematical perspective argues that the straight thrust must be the preferred attacking technique, since the shortest way between two points is the straight line, and thus the thrust the quickest attack. This assumption, however, is only true in abstract geometry; length of a way and time in which it can be travelled must not be confused, as Swiss mathematician Johann Bernoulli has shown in his discussion of the brachistochrone in 1697.⁵ Agrippa's assumption nevertheless laid the basis

⁵ Contrary to intuition, under the influence of gravity the quickest way for a ball to roll from point A to a lower point B is not a straight line, but a curve (the brachistochrone).

for the thrust-fencing of the following centuries (with modern Olympic epee and foil as the latest descendants) and even influenced the development of martial arts in the present day, such as Bruce Lee's conception of his *Jeet Kune Do* (Wetzler 2012).

By relating fighting technique to abstract mathematical principles, martial arts assure themselves that their techniques are 'correct'. This is even more so, when these arts are part of a larger ideological context of metaphysical, natural philosophical thought, rather than a scientific worldview in the true sense.

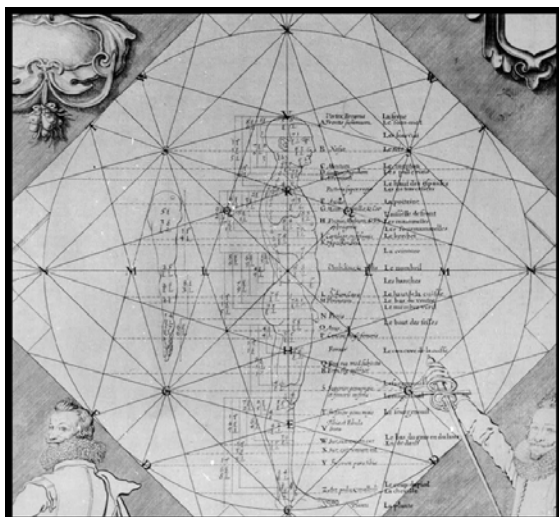


Fig. 1: Cercle Mystereux, according to Thibault

As Greer (2000) points out, the idea that the world is built and ordered according to mathematical principles is key to Early Modern Western esoteric thought. Here, the 'true', the 'correct' and the 'beautiful' become one – a way of thinking that is reflected in Thibault's fencing manual *Académie de l'Espée* from 1630.

This book marks the climax of the myth of geometry in European fencing, as its full title indicates: 'Académie de l'Espée, ou se demonstrent par reigles mathematiques, sur le fondement d'un cercle mysterieux, la théorie et pratique

de vrais et iusqu'à present incognus secrets du maniemnt des armes à pied et à cheval'. The 'mysterious circle' the title speaks of is puzzling complexity. According to Thibault, understanding of and moving according to this circle equals invincibility.

This idea, again, is not restricted to European martial arts. Leo Gaje, grandmaster of the Filipino blade fighting system *pekiti tirsia kali*, explained the geometrical foundation of his art with the help of a diagram:

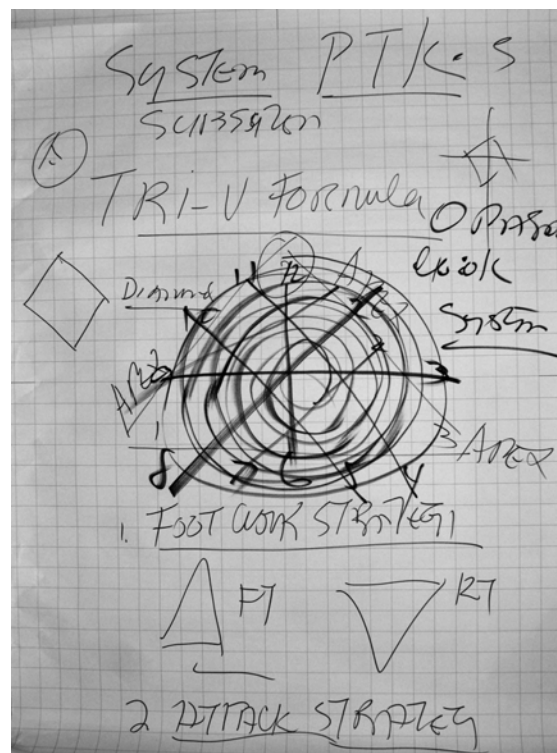


Fig. 2: Geometry of Petiki Tersia Kali

According to Gaje, the foundation in geometrical principles is responsible for the functionality of his system: 'Because we follow the principle of geometrical equation, we have a system of non-counterability' (2011, in personal conversation with the author).

Origin on the 'battlefield'

This type of myth can be seen as a larger, collective version of the mythical founding figure. Here, it is not single person, but a whole group (often ethnic) that has to develop a martial art as an answer to especially violent conditions. One story that is widely known is that of how *karate* was trained and used by the inhabitants of Okinawa after the Shimazu occupation in 1609 to defend (unarmed) against the weapon wielding Japanese. The story might be fictitious,⁶ but it helps – in its different variations – to promote *karate* to this day, as for example on the homepage of the *Japan Karate Association*, the world's largest organization for *karate*.

it is not certain exactly when the art called *Kara-Te* first emerged in Okinawa. It is believed that it developed roughly 500 years ago, when the dynastic ruler King Shoha unified the region after decades of warfare and issued an edict banning the possession of weapons on the island. According to conventional accounts, a similar law forbidding the possession or use of weapons was re-issued and enforced by the Satsuma clan, who had invaded Okinawa in the early 1600's and brought it under the rule of the Japanese Shogunate. It is believed that in this environment *karate* developed as a form of unarmed combat for protecting oneself and one's country, and it was taught and practiced in secret. (JKA 2013)

The narrative reassures the *karate* practitioner about the martial art's

extraordinary qualities: *Karate's* methods can serve as an equalizer even against bladed weapons in the hands of trained soldiers, turning peasants into fighters to be reckoned with. Interestingly, the narration tells nothing about the actual success of these methods. (The fact that Okinawa has remained under Japanese rule until today suggests a limited use of empty hands techniques against spears and swords.)

A more appropriate solution to fight well armed invaders is attributed to the legendary Filipino chieftain Lapu Lapu, under whose leadership native warriors fought back and killed Ferdinand Magellan and his crew on the island of Mactan in 1521. With this exhibition of martial skill, some argue, the Filipino martial arts step into the light of written history. While the battle of Mactan is historically attested, we cannot say for sure if Lapu Lapu's men were indeed trained in a close quarter combat system, or how far such a system was used in the battle (long range weapons probably playing a more important role), and whether their fighting style has connections to modern Filipino martial arts at all. Nevertheless, the myth helps not only to underline the practical value of the Filipino fighting systems, but also serves as a focus for the construction of national identity via these martial arts.

Such narrations can be described as 'umbrella myths' that cover the total of a population's martial arts. Individual styles within these larger groups usually develop their own sub-myths, probably according to one or another of the types described above.

⁶ Even the existence of the respective weapon ban has been questioned, see Wittwer (2005: 81-2).

Neo-myths of non-violence

Many martial arts have undergone transformation processes that put philosophical, esoteric and/or health concerns at the centre of their attention. The conventional narrations of combative superiority can no longer serve them as legitimization for their practices; they are thus forced to form 'neo-myths'.⁷ These neo-myths may, for example, project the connection between bodily exercise and non-combative ideals into a distant past and relate them religious practices – we are then told that the monk Bodhidharma brought the martial arts as meditative practices to China,⁸ that *taijiquan* has been practiced as health gymnastics for centuries,⁹ that Japanese swordsmanship is intrinsically tied to Zen Buddhism,¹⁰ and so forth. Finally, these neo-myths lead to a separation from the martial arts' original background, their combative purpose being completely denied. On the homepage of a German women's magazine, a new health and fitness trend from China is covered, a mixture between *taijiquan* and badminton:

The new trend from China is called Taiji Bailong Ball. ... Xiaofei Sui, who grew up in Hamburg as the son of Chinese physicians, learned it at his parent's health center. And he was fascinated: Racket and ball, he believes, make it easier for Westerners to approach the oriental movement arts. Because we always strive to set something in motion, and to compete with

each other. (Strathenwert 2008: 1)

It becomes obvious what *taijiquan* is and what it is not, in Strathenwert's perspective: 'Taiji Bailong Ball' emerges from a background in traditional Chinese medicine, and its mother arts are referred to not as 'martial', but as 'movement' systems ('Bewegungskunst'). While Chinese martial arts have always included weapon practice, to Strathenwert the use of a racket (something that can be 'set in motion') is noteworthy. And finally, for her the discipline's competitive quality is something new to *taijiquan*. As a system primarily devised for personal combat until the early 20th century, one might wonder what this martial art originally was, if not competitive – physical integrity being the competition's ultimate prize.

The most influential neo-myth of non-violence has managed to thoroughly shape the modern understanding of the martial arts among practitioners and outsiders, Asians and Westerners, academics and non-academics alike: the idea that 'true' or 'traditional' martial arts are always geared towards the perfection of the practitioner's character and a life in peace and harmony. This idea, developed primarily on the basis of 20th century Japanese *budo*, has expanded into the scientific discourse on martial arts and can even be the foundation for attempted distinctions between martial arts and combat sports (see the examples compiled in Leffler 2010). However, one may wonder why the very same martial arts that were used by fascist Japan to physically and ideologically prepare the country's youth for violence, should be the right tool to educate today's youth to be peaceful human beings. Martial arts are vehicles, vehicles that can and will be filled anew

⁷ It remains to research in how far the change of physical practices and these neo-myths are mutually influencing and spurring each other.

⁸ For a history of Chinese martial arts, see Lorge (2012).

⁹ For a history of *Taijiquan*, see Rannée (2011).

¹⁰ For a discussion of this notion, see Bodiford (2010).

with those ideologies that suit their practitioners and their social setting. This is done by the construction and adaptation of mythic narrations.

Conclusion

The tendency to interpret and legitimize their own form and action by mythic narrations seems to be inherent in martial arts. It exists even in those systems that explicitly try to avoid the unreflected assumption of older traditions – Bruce Lee’s famous quote, a martial artist has to ‘absorb what’s useful, discard what is not’ became the unquestioned credo of modern hybrid self-defence systems.

We must be aware though, that these myths are not just lies or tall tales that one must leave behind to develop a true understanding of the martial arts. Henning’s polemic can be understood as a reaction to a naïve belief in their historical truth: ‘This article will ... hopefully extract them [the Chinese martial arts] from the realm of myth and pave the way for placing them in the realm of reputable historical research’ (1981: 173). But he runs the risk of

throwing out the baby with the bath water, by proceeding, in Farrer and Whalen-Bridge’s words, as follows: ‘The scholar will often present her own work against such a foil [i.e., martial arts myths] in ways that contrastively present the “knowledge” of the one against the popular fantasy construction of the Other’ (2011: 7).

Once we have identified the myths of the martial arts as such, they can bear fruit in a twofold way: For the scholar, they are important objects of academic research. Within their respective systems, the myths do not construct ‘logical explanations, but symbolical meaning’ [‘nicht logische Erklärungsansätze, sondern symbolischen Sinn’] (Assman and Assmann 1998: 190-1). They define the boundaries of movements, training methods and tactics, form self-images, and enable people to deal with the phenomenon of violence. For the informed practitioner, training in a martial art becomes a ‘work on myth’ in Blumenberg’s (1985) sense. Without this ‘work on myth’, one may argue, it remains impossible to fully explore the (physical and non-physical) dimensions of a martial art.

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