

Martial Arts: A Global Bridge in Sport and Film

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Mohandas Gandhi once claimed that “a nation’s culture resides in the hearts and in the soul of its people” (Caswell). Even since the mid-20th century, insightful philosophers like Gandhi have recognized the ever-present cultural rifts that carve up the human race: ethnicity, religion, mannerisms, cultural ideals, and many more. Current linguists’ estimation of roughly 6,909 existing dialects shows that even language, our most fundamental method of conveying meaning, has managed to separate us (Anderson). As anthropology becomes increasingly prominent in the realm of academia, scholars are seeking to understand those cultures and find the similarities that unite us. There must be features that cultures share despite these innumerable differences, for, according to expert evolutionary scholar Matt Ridley, “across time just as much as across space, the fundamentals of our nature are universally and idiosyncratically human” (Ridley). One feature time and again has proven our shared humanity: martial arts. Due to the globally pervasive nature of violence and political strife, “martial arts” in both sport and film has been a bridge between Eastern and Western cultures serving to unify our complex world.

- *Sport* -

In the mid-8th century, one of the earliest and most ritualistic martial arts was slowly developing on a strand of islands in the Pacific Ocean. These islands were Japan, and the sport would soon be known as “sumo.” Over the next few centuries this grassroots sport was “refined from a brutal submission spectacle into a highly ritualized toppling match in which victory could be gained by forcing the opponent out of a 15-foot circle” (Sumo). Sumo

matches consisted of two specially bred and trained wrestlers, aspiring to be the biggest and strongest men around and someday attain the esteem of a *Yokozuna* champion.

Unfortunately, while sumo was once encouraged by the Japanese empire, the practice of this art was soon prohibited when the shoguns acquired political power in 1185. The sport suffered a near-fatal downturn until centuries later in 1600 when it was revived and informally became Japan's national sport. Consequently, a tradition of six annual tournaments commenced that continue to be known for "attracting immense crowds" (Sumo). Throughout its history, sumo has represented "the undefinable uniqueness of Japanese culture" and managed to remain both traditional and extraordinarily popular throughout its lifetime (Sports).

Similarly, but not simultaneously, a formally established Western style of wrestling developed in the later 18th century, taking its roots from ancient Greek and Roman fighting styles. However, the separate organization of two sub-categories (Greco-Roman and freestyle) developing in Europe and in the United States prevented Western wrestling from ever achieving the same degree of national or international renown as sumo. Regarding technique, there are only slight variations in the rules between these two subcategories, the most well-known being that below-the-waist holds are prohibited in the Greco-Roman style. Naturally, regulations are much less rigid in the freestyle form (Wrestling). Again, while neither style was ever extremely popular among the public, they were both incorporated into the Olympic Games, first Greco-Roman in 1896 and freestyle in 1904.

In technique, Eastern sumo wrestling and Western contemporary wrestling share many similarities. As their names imply, both involve wrestling, or grappling with one's opponent and manipulating their body into a position of submission. In the case of sumo, the competitors' object is to throw their opponent by the belt outside a marked circle of 15 feet in diameter or force their opponent to touch the ground with anything other than the soles of their feet (Sumo). On the other hand, Western wrestling bouts are determined by whichever competitor forces the other into a supine position or hold the opponent in a certain submissive position for a minimum period of time (Wrestling).

Many of the key differences between sumo and Western wrestling can be attributed to the cultural divide between Japan and the Western world. For example, the ideal body shape in a sumo wrestler isn't remotely similar to that of the ideal wrestler. In sumo, the goal is to be as heavy and strong as physically possible in order to ensure one's ability to overpower his opponent with brute force; those predisposed for sumo are "specially selected youths...brought up into the profession and fed a special protein diet, which creates immense, bulky bodies. Exceptionally agile men weighing 300 pounds or more are common in this sport" (Sumo). Men like Takanoyama Shuntarō, who weighs a mere 216 pounds, could easily be paired with Yamamotoyama Ryūta, who more than doubles his weight at 584 pounds ("List of Active Sumo Wrestlers"). While many may consider this trend a disadvantage for the smaller of the two competitors, it is often the case that light sumo wrestlers are successful against significantly heavier opponents because speed, like in Western wrestling, is also a path to success in sumo. With wrestling, however, great

strength and exorbitant weight aren't as necessary "since most of the maneuvers employ the principle of leverage; quickness and good physical condition are far more essential" (Wrestling). Additionally, the presence of weight classes in Western wrestling is an additional factor, as well as boxing, that is absent from Eastern martial arts like sumo. Instead, sumo compensates for its lack of weight classes with its own unique feature: pre-bout rituals. The rituals are highly reminiscent of "what visitors do before praying at a Shinto shrine, where they are required to wash their hands and mouth in a natural spring or rock-hewn pool before entering a shrine to purify themselves" (Hays). The process of performing the traditional rituals is highly spiritual and highlights the fundamentally Japanese respect for tradition.

Viewership and popularity for Western wrestling are not comparable to that of Japanese sumo. Whether the reason is that the United States lacks a centralized professional (non-fake) wrestling league, or the multitude of other more popular sports that exist in the Western world, viewership is low when compared to sumo, though gradually increasing. The NCAA recently boasted a record-breaking 8 million viewers in the collegiate wrestling championships, a mere fraction of the number of viewers of the six annual sumo tournaments in Tokyo (Volner). In Japan it is abnormal for a sumo tournament to not have sellout crowds: "people waited in long lines for the tickets which inevitably sold out the first day they went on sale" (Hays). Not surprisingly, live viewership has declined slightly as television networks have begun broadcasting tournaments, which has made it easier for

viewers across the globe to watch sumo, thus aiding the process of cultural diffusion and awareness.

When considering the social purpose of sport from an anthropologist's outlook, the most critical step is understanding the sport's appeal to the public. Since sport is entertainment, any sport's aura depends more upon the public's view of it than the rules or the few involved athletes. It is all about the culture. As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht describes in his novel In Praise of Athletic Beauty, "if you ask intellectuals why they think sports events attract so many thousands of spectators, instead of invoking aesthetics, they will most likely revert to condescending truisms from pop psychology," meaning that the common conception behind the appeal to sports is its role in satisfying stress-relief, the fulfillment of victory, or our innate love for competition (Gumbrecht). However, Gumbrecht rejects these, suggesting that all sports "have respectable roots in the realm of aesthetic appeal" (Gumbrecht). Though different in many ways, wrestling and sumo share a common factor known as "aesthetics" that is responsible for magnetizing its followers and enticing athletes to join and compete. For sumo, this aesthetic is *tradition*. Japanese people are renowned for their culture of respect, honor, discipline, and most of all tradition. For example, "the colourful traditional costume worn by sumo officials suggests that the sport has evolved almost unchanged since the 11th century, [although] the costume was actually devised in 1909 during a period of intense nationalism" (Sports). The aesthetics involved in sumo are also certainly physical to an extent, not in the sense that sumo bodies are beautiful, but rather awe-inspiring. The fact that the traditional pre-bout rituals, which have been

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performed for over a millennium, are so lengthy and elaborate while the bouts often last a few brief seconds accentuates the fact that the Japanese public cares much more about the history and traditional culture behind the sport than the actual wrestling that occurs in the ring. On the other hand, in Western wrestling the aesthetic appeal is the *violent aura*. John Fiske writes in Understanding Popular Culture that “if sport is clean, and capitalism is clean, then wrestling is triumphantly, defiantly dirty,” thus drawing a rift between “cleaner” sports versus martial sports (Fiske). The Western world likes dirty sports. America even prefers it; the U.S. gave birth to American football, arguably the dirtiest of all non-martial sports. In another sense, this is the reason that the top-grossing American films are almost entirely action movies. Some anthropologists have called this Western fascination with violence the rubbernecking effect; with regards to martial arts, this is known more specifically as the spectacle of suffering. Frankly, our human tendency to marvel at the harshness of violence cannot be avoided. This is how the industry for diversions from standard wrestling, such as WWE and UFC, arose and became popular. Though WWE is universally known for being fake and the UFC is notorious for its brutality, the Western world continues to watch because they want to.

The martial arts global bridge phenomenon is visible through other practices as well; the development and diffusion of karate and wing chun kung fu illustrate how once traditionally Eastern forms of martial arts are capable of spreading to and gaining popularity in the West. Karate first developed in Okinawa during the 17th century, spread to Japan by 1920 and was practiced worldwide by the late 20th century (Karate). Wing Chun, a Southern

Chinese variation of kung fu, is older; it is hard to estimate the exact age of such a martial art “dialect” per se, but experts posit that wing chun kung fu stemmed from a thousand-year-old form of kung fu that centralized roughly 300 years ago (Creel). These martial art forms are very similar in that they are unarmed and centered around self-defense. In technique, they vary only slightly. Karate practitioners focus on “concentrating as much of the body’s power as possible at the point and instant of impact” (Karate). Wing chun prioritizes “direct, close-contact fighting, a combination of straight and intercepting lines and deflecting arcs” (Vojkovic).

The biggest similarity between karate and wing chun is not in their techniques, though, but the exponential way in which they spread globally. Both of these forms were uniquely rapid in how they managed to diffuse, but for those who know these arts, it is no surprise. Steve Creel noted that “the main reasons that Wing Chun has grown in popularity is that (1) it is very practical in the modern world, (2) it can be learned in a relatively short period of time, and (3) it can be practiced by people of all sizes, shapes, and degrees of athletic ability” (Creel). These three components (practicality, conciseness, and adaptability) were absolutely instrumental in the spread of both of these forms across the globe. One commonality between these forms is their rootedness in Daoism; the quasi-spiritual nature of these martial arts gives them a sense of justifiable legitimacy while also granting practitioners the satisfaction of self-discipline and confidence. As previously mentioned, karate and wing chun are self-defense arts, intended to protect practitioners from hostile encounters with a variety of defensive techniques. Additionally, wing chun is particularly

effective in that “other systems block and then attack; Wing Chun defends and attacks simultaneously” (Creel).

Even with all of these critical features, one cannot possibly overlook the role of film in making these once Eastern arts global practices. The two biggest icons for karate and wing chun in 20th century cinema were Pat Morita and Bruce Lee. Morita, or Mr. Miyagi in the 1984 film “The Karate Kid,” assumes the role of a simple, foreign man trained in the exotic art of karate, which he passes along to Daniel in an act of justice against bullying. This successful film put karate in an extremely lofty light, under the subconscious suggestion that learning karate will help you face your fears and win the beautiful girl in the end, a highly appealing notion for westerners. Additionally, if Karate Kid had not managed to introduce eastern martial arts to the United States, then the advent of Bruce Lee certainly would. Lee studied Wing Chun under Master Yip Man, the most famous practitioner of the art in history. In adulthood, Bruce Lee became arguably the most famous martial artist in film, rising to fame in the mid-19th century in movies such as “The Green Hornet,” “Fist of Fury,” and “Enter the Dragon” that showcased his talent in kung fu (Biography.com). While some would think that his unexpected death would cause a gradual recession of Western excitement for wing chun, the exact opposite occurred: “Lee’s sudden death left fans reeling, and in their attempt to come to terms with what had just happened they turned to Wing Chun both to understand their idol and to find the path of personal liberation that he had promised them. Popular interest in the Chinese martial arts exploded. Not surprisingly Wing Chun was the greatest beneficiary of this unexpected, and largely undeserved,

windfall,” and as a result “noticeable spikes in Wing Chun class enrollments” ensued (Judkins). The resulting diffusion gave rise to schools like Meng’s Martial Arts of Katy, the largest Wing Chun school in pan-America. The globalization of wing chun was made possible because of its prevalence in the cinema; other eastern systems that lacked this feature saw nowhere near as sizable of a diffusion to the West.

The variance of wrestling between the East and the West, as well as the dissemination of karate and wing chun, illuminate a broad scope of cultural influence on martial arts sports across the globe, creating a bridge that is likewise mirrored in martial arts films.

- *Film* -

The Merriam Webster dictionary defines the broad scope of martial arts as the “various sports or skills that originated as forms of self-defense or attack.” Based off of this limited definition, one can see how most people tend to associate martial arts with fighting. Subconsciously, we place a much heavier emphasis on the MARTIAL, meaning war, rather than the ART itself. This is not an abnormal tendency; as previously described, people across the world, Westerners especially, are fascinated by violence, and this is an innate human characteristic that the film industry has tended to exploit. Quentin Tarantino once stated simply that “violence is one of the most fun things to watch.” The goal of the film industry, obviously, is to gross the most amount of money possible by producing the most

appealing film for the public audience. What better way to maximize the number of viewers than appealing to their intrinsic desire to watch violence, better yet aesthetically pleasing or masterfully performed violence?

Violence is universal in nature. Throughout history, violence has been a means of obtaining territory, wealth, mates, etc., and we are born with the capacity to be violent in order to defend or attack whenever necessary, as this is human instinct. This is important to acknowledge in our understanding of the role of martial arts in the world altogether, as well in film alone. Many people have begun to suggest that much of the interpersonal violence that occurs today, at least in the West, is a result of the normalization of violence in media (movies, video games, song lyrics, etc.). However, filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino often argue that “the issue [with cultural violence] is gun control and mental health,” likely because they want to perpetuate their industry and source of profit (Dibdin). Nevertheless, violence in media persists.

Effectively capturing film is certainly challenging. As Krenig describes in Fight Choreography: The Art of Nonverbal Dialogue, there is a perfect balance of lighting, angles, choreography, and more that filmmakers strive to achieve (Krenig). These stimuli are intended to make fight scenes more realistic and engaging for the audience. One of the main questions we can ask then follows: what factors make films the most appealing to Western versus Eastern audiences? We can explore this question through patterns in successful films involving martial arts among both audiences.

Through popular violent Western films, two trends are blatantly obvious. The first is gaudiness. Western films tend to exaggerate martial arts simply because, from an aesthetics viewpoint, it is more pleasing. One of the biggest examples of gaudiness occurs in the 2004 film “Kill Bill: Volume 1.” When Uma Thurman is attacked during her wedding rehearsal by her ex-partner assassins, she seeks to avenge the death of her fiancé and unborn child by tracking them down and murdering them all. Chapter 5: Showdown in House of Blue Leaves, for example, begins with one of Thurman’s ex-assassins decapitating a henchman for mentioning her mixed heritage. Later in the chapter, Thurman takes on “the Crazy 88” in the most graphic scene in the movie and the bloodiest film sequence I have ever watched. The director Quentin Tarantino obviously had in mind an image of a ruthless, war-like showdown for this awesome scene. While some critics may suggest that Tarantino went overboard with the amount explicit content in scenes like this, no critic can argue with the tremendous success that Kill Bill: Volume 1 had, earning 180.9 million dollars in the box office; movie critic Jonathon Rosenbaum stated that the first Kill Bill was “gory and adolescent...which explains both the fun and the unpleasantness of this globe-trotting romp” (Rosenbaum). Obviously, the gruesome action scenes generated an unexpected degree of pleasure that made the movie a major hit in the United States, and the excessive goriness was an attractive, not repelling, facet of the film. To be fair, Eastern movies too can appeal to audience’s captivation for graphic action; plenty of blood-spurting decapitations appear in Shaw Brothers’ films like the “36th Chamber of Shaolin” or “Shogun Assassin.” However, the Western film industry has been the one pushing the boundaries of what viewers are comfortable with watching, as seen in the exponential rise in brutality in action and horror

movies alike in the United States over the past four decades. Thus, gaudiness in violence is particularly prevalent among most Western action martial arts movies.

Secondly, a trend of innately skilled Caucasian masters has been noticed among Western action movies. Paul Bowman quotes Sean Tierney's observations in Theorizing Bruce Lee: Film-Fantasy-Fighting-Philosophy of "speed, efficacy, and unorthodox yet highly efficient means by which Whites learn martial arts is a recurring motif in Western film" (Bowman). He cites "The Matrix" (1999), among other films, as his primary example of this pattern of enhanced martial arts capacity in white practitioners with the character Neo, who was "imbued with exemplary martial arts skill in seconds through the use of computers" (Bowman). While the computer was purposefully used in the plot to enhance Neo's kung fu skills and demonstrate the capabilities of the matrix, analysts like Tierney and Bowman believe that the director made this decision to appeal to some innate Western desire to see white protagonists learning martial arts without excessive training. This pattern is present in other films as well, such as the Bourne Series, in which Jason has no memory of his past but is gifted with the ability to fight masterfully. In the Marvel film "Deadpool," Wade Wilson who ultimately becomes the notorious anti-hero Deadpool reveals that he was once a part of the special forces, but that does not explain how he ultimately masters the use of the katana, the traditional Japanese samurai sword that definitely was not a weapon used by the American military.

There are exceptions to this claim, of course. "Kill Bill: Volume 1" was an anomaly in martial arts films in that the protagonist, known as "the bride," was female. The movie

makes clear as the plot proceeds that the bride was originally a part of a group of highly dangerous assassins known as the Deadly Viper Assassination Squad. This justifies the proficiency in martial arts that she demonstrates later in the film as well as in the sequel, “Kill Bill: Volume 2.” These movies were highly successful while simultaneously diverting from the trend observed by Tierney. “Batman Begins,” for one, also defied this pattern; when traveling around the world, Bruce Wayne begins to train under the tutelage of the League of Shadows in east Asia. Another legitimately trained, white protagonist; another successful movie. Lastly, in “Karate Kid” (1984), Daniel LaRusso undergoes the epitome of a started-from-the-bottom story with regards to martial arts. He transitions from having only a basic knowledge of karate (from a cheap, television tutorial) to becoming the equivalent of a black-belt student in a matter of months. While this is highly unrealistic under today’s definition of a student of black-belt quality in karate, the fact is that a significant portion of the movie is dedicated to Mr. Miyagi’s unorthodox training methods for his new student. Like in the Rocky series, one of the main messages of this movie is the power of perseverance and hard work, satisfying the cliché adage: “anything can be done if you put your mind to it.”

Frankly, whether or not the presence of an untrained yet successful white protagonist directly causes Western martial arts movies’ success is hard to say, as there are clearly many other factors involved.

With regards to Eastern martial arts movies, the most prevalent pattern has been the theme of *social justice*. In particular, this is a major pattern among Shaw Brothers' films "The 36th Chamber of Shaolin," "The Eight Diagram Pole Fighter," and "Five Deadly Venoms." In the first of these, "The 36th Chamber of Shaolin," the protagonist flees from the repressive Manchu government to an ancient Shaolin temple in the hopes of learning kung fu. After years of training, the grandmaster gives him the opportunity to specialize in one of the thirty-five existing "chambers" of kung fu study. Instead, he requests the ability to create a 36th chamber, in which he hopes to introduce Shaolin to the Chinese people, so they can succeed in their rebellion. In "The Eight Diagram Pole Fighter," almost all members of the protagonist's family are murdered by the dynasty's army. Similarly, he flees to a Buddhist monastery in the mountains, where he becomes proficient in pole fighting, developing his own technique. He ends up using his new skills in order to avenge his family's death by rising against the dynasty in the end. Lastly, in "Five Deadly Venoms," a dying sensei worries that his once pupils are abusing their kung fu for scheming. His five ex-students, each proficient in their own styles of kung fu, attempt to undercut each other by using bribery to exploit the corruption in the Chinese legal system. The sensei's final student pursues the group and ultimately brings balance by siding with the Lizard student and vowing to use their riches for good in order to fix their tainted reputation.

Among all of these films, political strife is highly present. The first two films revolve around an oppressive regime that abuses its people. In these movies, kung fu is introduced in society in order to unify the people against their common enemy and give

them a fighting chance in defeating their oppression. This repeated theme appeals to Eastern audiences simply due to their history: for example, Chinese history is riddled with back-to-back dynasties and overthrows. These contemporary films therefore capitalize on a sense of Chinese pride in their culture for saving their ancestors from unworthy rulers. On the other hand, “Five Deadly Venoms” is a blatant attempt to expose governmental corruption. Scenes involving bribes to court officials and witnesses can be seen as an attempt to shed light on what goes on “behind the scenes” in corrupt governments and how kung fu is the ultimate form of justice that succumbs to no bribe.

Until now, there has been more discussion of the differences between Western and Eastern film and the necessary adjustments made for their respective audiences, yet not as much regarding the role of film in the martial arts global bridge. Though there are thousands (likely millions) of brief, subtle references to martial arts in film from one side of the world or the other, no greater example of cultural incorporation occurs than in the recent kids’ action movie, *Kung Fu Panda* (2008). The global crossover is established from the exposition of the film by setting the scene in China. While the “Furious Five” are strictly used as legendary ancient warriors in the film, the selection of which animals were to be members of this esteemed group is of utmost importance. Upon delving further into the history of Chinese kung fu, one can determine that the “Furious Five” are based on different ancient kung fu styles or forms: Tiger, Crane, Leopard, Snake, and Dragon (Xiao). Each style actively mimics the movements of its respective animal, and one can see how the director drew directly from Chinese culture. While *Kung Fu Panda* was not nearly as

immensely popular in China as it was in the United States, this should not be the focus. Clearly, Chinese culture, the source of this movie's storyline, was aided by the process of cultural diffusion and became accepted and popularized in the West over a matter of years. Hence, the martial arts global bridge.

No one that preaches a singular global human culture will be taken seriously in academia among anthropologists. Those that try to ignore the clear cultural divide between the East and the West are simply kidding themselves. Recognizing the differences between these spheres is the first step in appreciating the different facets that each offers to the world. On the other hand, martial arts have effectively sutured the wound of isolated cultural development throughout most of history. Though technique differs among different sports, and the ever-present variations between directors' styles in Eastern versus Western films cannot possibly be overlooked, we are all united in our common capacity for intense violence. In a more positive light, the numerous martial art forms that have been developed over thousands of years constitute methodical approaches to addressing this propensity for violence in a structural, athletic, and beautiful way. By making sport and entertainment out of one of the most principal vices in our culture, humanity has managed to unite our divided world and make amends for our violent history.

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