Western Bushido: The American Invention of Asian Martial Arts

Abstract
Prior to the Second World War, very few Americans were aware that martial arts existed outside of the Olympic institutions (e.g. boxing and wrestling) and it wasn’t until the 1960s and 1970s that Asian martial culture became mainstream in the English-speaking world. This changed when a group of dedicated, unorthodox Westerners applied themselves to the study and dissemination of East Asian martial arts, soon raising their popularity to its current level. This project explores the social and cultural process whereby the martial arts were imbued with a violent nationalist rhetoric in Japan before World War II and came to be a part of daily life in the United States in the decades that followed. Central ideas in this process are the creation of an imagined and exotic Asia and discourses of masculinity as they are negotiated within the larger framework of transforming American society. Source material for this contextual cultural analysis includes archival and interview data as well as popular publications, films, and other multimedia in addition to standard library research. By merging these three methods, it is possible to develop a well-rounded picture of trends in society over time and, in particular, how the folk history of any one group has influenced the broader zeitgeist. In this case, the invented traditions of prewar Japanese martial arts can be seen to travel across the Pacific via American servicemen and undergo radical transformations over time depending on the needs of practitioners and spectators in any given period.

URI
http://hdl.handle.net/1969.1/153986

Subject
martial arts
fighting
judo
karate
kung fu
Asia
America
transnational

Citation
The dedication to loyalty was what made the Bushido Code so unique in comparison to any other such code. “Other virtues feudal morality shares in common with other systems of ethics, with other classes of people, but this virtue—homage and fealty to a superior—is its distinctive feature” (Nitobe, 1979: 56). Jigoro Kano, the founder of Judo, was born just a few years earlier in 1860. These are indeed significant facts given that it was during this era that the martial arts were first beginning to be widely practiced. During the Tokugawa era the teaching of the martial arts had been restricted solely to the samurai class.