

# In which Ways is Karate (dō) Japanese? A Consideration on Cultural Images of *Bushidō* and *Nihonjinron* in the Postwar Globalization of Martial Arts\*

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## Abstract

This article explores effects of globalization on the political and discursive construction of contemporary karate. First, it provides an overview about the role of martial arts and *bushidō* in the *nihonjinron* ideologies rhetoric and their postwar spread. Secondly, it surveys the importance of popular culture and emerging global media in propagating karate's diverse and multivalent images, ethnic, social, economic, and political, both inside and outside Japan. Finally, it concludes with some reflections about the controversy on karate Japaneseness/Okinawaness advocating for a reconsideration of the many traps of methodological essentialisms.

## Introduction

Contemporary pop culture and its lexicon offers a perfect setting to analyze karate as a symbolic mechanism of (re)presentation both inside and outside Japan. Actually, many of the cultural images of karate persisting nowadays grew in the postwar period and were deeply shaped by the repercussions of globalization. Karate, contrary to the common perception, is far from being a fixed and uniform phenomenon, but houses diverse and multivalent layers of political, ethnic, social, and economic meanings. I argue that by asking about the origins and contents of karate representations in popular culture we can trace and understand the puzzling reality of this Japanese martial art, trapped in a cultural dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, actually at the margins of proper *budō*. Due to its multicultural and varying social class associations, karate meets many challenges in obtaining full credit in the land

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of *bushidō*. The cultural richness and social diversity of karate are ultimately against *nihonjinron* ideologies and demonstrates that there are many ways to be Japanese.

In these regards, it would be difficult to find a stronger sign than the fact that the *Kodansha Encyclopedia* does not qualify karate along with the traditional martial arts of Japan, but concedes that it is “loosely referred to as such outside of Japan” (Kodansha 1983: 158).<sup>1</sup> The main reason for karate to be doubted as a Japanese traditional art is due to its origins, that go back to the time when the Okinawa archipelago formed the Ryūkyū Kingdom (1429-1879), a political entity that maintained a dual tributary and diplomatic relationship with Japan and China. Finally, the kingdom was assimilated by the modern Japanese nation and became the Okinawa prefecture.

With the birth of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, karate entered the school system and was included for the training of the military and policemen in Okinawa. Early in the 20s the Okinawan martial art began to acquire a name in Japan, especially among university students in Tokyo and Kansai areas, where renowned Okinawan born masters like Funakoshi Gichin (1868-1957), Mabuni Kenwa (1889-1952), and Uechi Kanbun (1877-1948) had begun to formally teach karate (*Okinawa, the Birthplace of Karate* 2017: xxi-xxiii). Still, because of its Okinawan roots, karate was usually perceived as a peripheral and uncivilized art that moreover lacked proper systematization. The matter was to be empathically addressed after the acceptance of karate by the Dai Nippon Butokukai (1933).

The development of Japanese martial arts came to a halt following the Japanese defeat in the Second World War. In 1945 Okinawa suffered one of the war bloodiest encounters, lasting three months, and

popularly known as “The Typhoon of Steel” by the vast number of projectiles that covered Ryūkyūan territory. It brought havoc and numerous disgraces to the southern islands. The colossal loss of lives that reached up to 150.000 individuals according official sources, accounted 1/4 of the total archipelago population at that time and 1/3 of the main island of Okinawa (Oguma 2014: 3). Naturally, the Okinawan death count included karate masters, relatives and young apprentices, eroding, so to speak, the ‘natural’ line of cultural transmission, in a phenomenon that affected the whole socio-cultural sphere of the archipelago. Besides the irreplaceable loss of human lives were karate masters’ homes, dojos and clubs, and the destruction of large amounts of karate-related material culture: weapons, objects, literature, and many precious assets; another case of the unspeakable destruction and obliteration that the Second World War with its horrors brought to karate, Okinawa and Japan.

The institutional architecture of postwar karate is multiple and involves a complex set of local, national and international organizations and federations, forming, allying, dividing, in a routine that extends to our current era. Instead of untangling such mazes, this article addresses some reflections on the representational status of karate as an iconic expression of Japanese culture, following its fast worldwide spread after the Second World War. To do so, nonetheless, I will begin by taking a small glimpse into 2017.

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<sup>1</sup> “Karate was historically most widely practiced in China and Okinawa and thus is not considered one of the traditional Japanese martial arts; it is, however, loosely referred to as such outside of Japan.” (Kodansha 1983: 158). This 80s definition is still active at newer editions; see: University of Hawaii - Okinawa Collection Blog (2019: n.p.)

## ***Nihonjinron* rhetoric and its postwar spread in the international sphere via martial arts**

On October 25, 2016, 3973 people gathered in Kokusai Dori, the main tourist street of Naha, Okinawa's capital city, to carry out the "Karate Day Anniversary Festival" and beat the Guinness World Record of "simultaneous karate demonstration with the largest number of participants."<sup>2</sup> The attempt coincided with the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1936 Masters Meeting, a date designated as "The World Karate Day" by the Prefecture of Okinawa. All around the world karateka, from multiple nationalities, were targeted and encouraged to participate in the celebration, which consequently received an international echo. The massive demonstration also served to supply the opening and closing footage of an upcoming episode of the NHK World-Japan documentary series "Japanology Plus" entirely dedicated to Okinawan Karate, aired on 9 February 2017.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, to which extent is it accurate to speak about Okinawan karate in terms of Japanology? Japanology comprises conceptually a double meaning deriving from the suffix *-logy*: i) a way of speaking, the discourse about "the Japanese", and ii) the study and science of "the Japanese" as a topic. Thus, the notion of Japanology is able to entail, under the appearance of a science, the cultural nationalism ideology embedded both in *nihonbunkaron* ("discourse about the Japanese culture") and *nihonjinron* ("theories about the Japanese").<sup>4</sup> According to Oguma, who

challenges commonly accepted views on the matter, the belief in the Japanese as a homogenous group is not so much the result of prewar Japan, when the discourse of The Great Japanese Empire relied upon the possibility of a multiethnic nation, as of postwar Japan when revised historiography settled the theory and myth of the national ethnic homogeneity (Oguma 2002).<sup>5</sup> From this standpoint, a good part of postwar Japanese anthropology and sociology has dedicated many efforts to deconstruct the *nihonjinron* ideology of homogeneity, heading to:

a depiction of contemporary Japan as a multiethnic and stratified society where class, culture, and ethnic differences play a significant role. The displacing of the homogeneity paradigm to a diversity framework has thus given rise to the questioning of the monolithic and essentialist definition of Japanese identity forged in the ideological narrative of the *Nihonjinron* ('discourse on Japaneseness') literature. (Guarné, Yamashita 2015: 57).

*Nihonjinron* takes part in a scheme where partisan interpretations of history, otherwise managed by all nation-states, are exploited to erect and sanction the existence of precise leading and all-encompassing representational devices. Concurrently *nihonjinron* has been subject to an extensive diffusion by the worldwide popular mind, being reproduced as a stereotyped practice. The boom of postwar Japaneseness was initiated by the 60s economic miracle in Japan. During the 70s and 80s, the fascination for

<sup>2</sup> See Ryūkyū Shimpō (2016: n.p). The event succeeded in outperforming by large the previous achievement in India (2013) with 809 people. However, in 2018 India regained the record by carrying out a demonstration that included exclusively 5797 women commemorating International Women's Day.

<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that this episode (season 2, number 31) is at the top ten of over 200 available in an unofficial collection of Japanology Plus that can be found on the web; thus, demonstrating the capacity of karate to project a global image of Japan.

<sup>4</sup> *-logy* is partly *logos*: account, ratio, reason, argument, discourse; and partly *log-* (var. of *leg-*, *legein*): gather, choose, recount, say. See Hoad, T. F. (1993: 270).

<sup>5</sup> "After the rise in anthropology and historiography of the homogeneous nation theory and the collapse of the prewar mixed nation theory, there was nothing left to prevent the myth of ethnic homogeneity from taking root. Japan came to be viewed as an isolated, remote and peaceful island nation, in which a homogeneous nation had lived from time immemorial" (Oguma 2002: 316).

the new Japanese syncretic modernity and the global re-encounter with the Other encouraged the second wave in the creation of a Japanese cultural nationalism (Befu 1993, 2001; Sakai 1997; Guarné 2017). The many effects of *nihonjinron*'s deceiving reflexivity, grounded on the local-global connection, far more than the category *per se*, are today still hampering a paradigm shift within the field of Japanese studies. As Aike P. Rots has noted, this is very much related to methodological nationalism, as well as the deficit of transnational comparative perspectives and attention to minorities when studying Japan. Such circumstances are affecting also the research on outlying zones like Okinawa or Hokkaidō, that furthermore "are left to ethnologists and anthropologists, thus perpetuating power inequalities between centre and periphery" (Rots 2019: 3).

Essentialism is also a problematic and sensitive issue also from the point of view of sociology and cultural studies. It was back in 1989 that Pierre Bourdieu gave a lecture at the University of Tokyo entitled "Social Space and Symbolic Space". Besides making clear the potentialities of using relational thinking and his own work on French society, particularly *Distinction* (1984), when studying Japan, the well-known sociologist addressed the many traps that substantialism and essentialism pose to properly understand cultural practices and societal changes:

I shall not talk to you about the "Japanese sensibility," nor about the Japanese "mystery" or "miracle." I shall talk about France, a country I know fairly well, not because I was born there and speak its language, but because I have studied it a great deal. Does this mean that I shall confine myself to the particularity of a single society and shall not talk in any way about Japan? I do not think so. I think, on the contrary, that by presenting the model of social space and symbolic space that I constructed for the particular case of France, I shall still be

speaking to you about Japan (just as, in other contexts, I would be speaking about Germany or the United States).[...] The substantialist mode of thought, which characterizes common sense - and racism - and which is inclined to treat the activities and preferences specific to certain individuals or groups in a society at a certain moment as if they were substantial properties, inscribed once and for all in a sort of biological or cultural *essence*, leads to the same kind of error, whether one is comparing different societies or successive periods in the same society [...] one has to avoid turning into necessary and intrinsic properties of some group (nobility, samurai, as well as workers or employees) the properties which belong to this group at a given moment in time because of its position in a determinate social space and in a determinate state of the *supply* of possible goods and practices. (Bourdieu 1998, 4).

It is interesting to remember how the notoriety of karate translated into the realm of business management and efficiency following Japan's economic miracle. Such international success deepened the renewed attraction towards the samurai ethical codes to the point that they came to be associated with the peculiarities of the Japanese businessman. The process of creating a huge layer of workforce devoted to economic growth, by applying martial principles inherited from *budō* through the practice of sports has been defined as "salariman-ization" (May 1989: 168). The salaryman or *kigyō senshi* ("corporate warrior") is a national symbol of late 70s - 80s Japan, and one of the most universal stereotypes of the Japanese working culture. In order for foreign business cultures to explain and learn from the Japanese firms' principles in investment, marketing strategies, and decision making, karate used to be and still is commonplace (Cotter, Henley 1995; Hin and

Serpa 1997; Shafer 2005). The nationalist depictions based on “karate economics”, however, tend to entail many re-inventions and assimilations that exemplify the split between the domestic and the foreign consumption of the Okinawan martial art in reference to its aesthetics, as we will later see:

While military science offers a novel perspective for assessing competitive marketing situations, the Japanese martial art of karate may generate further insight for Western decision-makers in marketing strategies and tactics. Offered is an overview of the karate principles of “no-mindedness,” the “soft look,” and “non-interruption” with examples of their specific use by Japanese firms in business competition with Western companies. (Cotter, Henley 1995: 20).

Historically Japanese martial arts, and their ethical expression *bushidō*, have been placed among other samurai class performing arts as distinct elements in constructing and perceiving Japan and *nihonjinron* discourses. First in the transitioning narrative between Tokugawa Japan and the political construction of the modern Meiji civic nation by the intercourse of the political, economic and intellectual elites deeply influenced by international geopolitics (Benesch 2014).<sup>6</sup> Then to support the ideology of extreme nationalists and the increasing militarism driving an Imperial Japan to the Second World War disaster. When the horrors of war were being left behind by the passing of time, martial arts and the appeal of the philosophical-aesthetic complex of *bushidō* gradually rose again as a major component of the *nihonjinron* theories, this time cleansed from totalitarian deviations.

Postwar karate cannot be understood without attending to a radical shift in Japan’s situation and the global geopolitics regarding sports. After the Second World War, the nation had become a de facto occupied territory under the exigencies of the U.S., and the dismantling of the imperial political ideology started. The practice and the mere use of the term *budō* in schools or physical activities were prohibited by the allied forces (Pita 2014: 327) as a result of their practical and ideological involvement with prewar Japanese ultra-nationalism. Sports, nonetheless, were globally reshaped in the aftermath of the Second World War to serve as tools for pacification and democratization. Therefore, in Japan an increased de-militarized re-sportization of martial arts became the central opening for their progressive revitalization during the 50s:

The period directly following Japan's defeat in the war was characterized for the dissemination of sport and the “democratic” principles of life, just as the war and pre-war periods had been highlighted by the weighting of *budō* upon sport and the expansion of militaristic totalitarianism. In the new historical conditions, sportization became the social path towards the “democratic-pacific” claim of *bujutsu* in the same manner that at the end of Meiji it had been the path of their adaptation to the “civilizing” modernization. But in order to re-sportize *bujutsu* it was necessary to work on both the transformation of its name and its image. (Pita 2014: 328-329).<sup>7</sup>

By its part, in Okinawa, which was thoroughly occupied by the U.S. military and ceased to pertain to the national territory of Japan between 1945 and

<sup>6</sup> A capital figure was Ozaki Yukio (1859-1954), journalist and influential politician who “attempted to create—or, according to his later writings, revive—a Japanese institution that corresponded to what he saw as the key to the success of British merchants and diplomats on the international stage: the English notion of gentlemanship.” (Benesch 2014: 48-49).

<sup>7</sup> Translation is mine.

1972,<sup>8</sup> karate was steadily prospering. By means to U.S. military personnel, and especially since the Vietnam War, karate rapidly grew in popularity as an icon of Japanese martial arts. Actually, colonizers were colonized by the fascinating, yet threatening, images of martial arts as deeply rooted traditions. Hence, under the U.S. administration, karate in Okinawa was used again as a political tool, a cultural weapon for encouraging Ryūkyūan pride. It was back in 1956 that the name “Okinawa Karate-dō” appeared for the first time (*Okinawa, the Birthplace of Karate* 2017: 179). Stephen Chan, who has characterized the martial arts as “hybrid totems” (2011), discerns how around that time U.S. practitioners in the archipelago began to value Okinawan karate particularities in contrast to the Japanese interpretations, hence fostering and impacting the development of the art: “in Okinawa, with all its U.S. bases, had been influenced in turn by the American airmen who had become devotees of the ‘Okinawan’ Way.” (Chan 2011: 187).

Amidst the numerous discontents that the construction of military bases, the displacement of inhabitants from their lands, and not few cases of soldiers’ abuses towards the peoples of the archipelago, karate provided an intercultural vehicle for a positive and peaceful encounter between Okinawans and U.S. nationals. On the other side, put between the cultural pride and the intercultural dialogue on the basis of peace culture discourse, karate contributed indirectly to justify, or even partially conceal, the military occupation as a process of liberation and reparation from the Japanese excesses. Miyahira Katsuyuki (2005) provides an excellent analysis of the rhetoric of peace as a warrant of U.S. occupation and the geostrategic alliance with Japan that has in Okinawa a hot spot. He identifies many of the prevalent discourses about peace in postwar Okinawa, that drawing on metaphors put

peace necessarily into the future, always under threats of aggression, hence justifying readiness to fight, armament, and the occupation of the islands:

For the JOURNEY-WAR metaphor to be effective, a destination/goal must be set in the future, and the path to the destination is posed as something that is fraught with threats and dangers, which in turn necessitates constant struggle against them, even in peacetime. This line of reasoning is one of the ways in which constant armament continues to be justified in the eyes of a “nurturant provider” (Miyahira 2005: 32).

Many parallels to karate arise from such discursive alliances. Martial arts training aligns with the requirement of weaponizing the body in times of peace in preparation for war. In the same manner, the longstanding myth of karate as a peasant Okinawan fighting method created to defend from the violent Satsuma samurai (Meyer 2008: 27-28) derives from the times of U.S. occupation, or at least gained global dissemination during this era. The earliest written account I have found in popular culture correlating karate, unarmed Okinawan peasants and Japanese coercion appears in Ian Flemings’ 007 novel *Goldfinger* (1959):

you were asking where Karate originated. It originated in China where wandering Buddhist priests became an easy prey for footpads and bandits. Their religion did not allow them to carry weapons, so they developed their own form of unarmed combat. The inhabitants of Okinawa refined the art to its present form when the Japanese forbade them to carry weapons. (2002:170).

Karate narratives such as this, closely tied to

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<sup>8</sup> For early instances on the Okinawan reversion debate and how it was affected by the U.S. bases problem and the controversial situation of Koreans and communism in Japan see Uechi (2019).



the supposed absence of military and warfare in Okinawan history (Smits 2010), ultimately convey the message of the need for the United States to protect the peaceful Okinawans from higher powers, either Japanese in the past or Chinese in the future. As it can be seen, postwar karate cultural images enlarged the extent and ideological range of its geopolitical functions by means of globalization and the unfolding of new politico-cultural conflicts.

### **The role of the emerging global media in propagating the multiple sociopolitical images of karate**

The increased worldwide appeal of karate was accompanied by a dialogical intensification of the Okinawan martial art fame in Japan. During the 60s, the country was experiencing a remarkable economic development and the renaissance of its national pride (Allison 2004), leaving behind negative images of the immediate postwar days. Under these circumstances, *Bushidō* re-emerged as an honorable frame of reference for a new generation of Japanese. Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) and his book *Hagakure nyūmon* ("Introduction to Hagakure", 1967) were essential elements for repairing the popular image of Japanese martial arts with actualized cultural attachments. Not by chance, Mishima's work was translated into English in 1977 with the title "The Way of the Samurai: Yukio Mishima on Hagakure in Modern Life". After training in *kendō* ("the way of the sword") and *iaidō* ("the art of drawing the sword") it was

precisely in 1967, coinciding with the publication of *Hagakure nyūmon*, that Mishima started his training in karate at Japan's most powerful karate organization, the Japan Karate Association (JKA), founded in 1948 with the Okinawan born Funakoshi Gichin as supreme master. Three years later, shortly before his suicide in the *Mishimajiken* or "the Mishima incident", the literary star participated in the 13<sup>th</sup> All-Japan Karate Championships at the Budōkan in Tokyo (1970). Mishima was a capital figure in restoring and popularizing the international image of *bushidō*, now a mass phenomenon, formerly a hideous and deplorable referent (Pita 2014: 331-332). Japanese martial arts constituted again one of the prevailing modes for the global dissemination of Japanese representational images and their underlying ideologies, deemed together with practices like the tea ceremony or *haiku*, categorized amongst what Eiko Ikegami defines as 'tacit modes of communication', "so often described as 'mysterious aesthetic spirituality' by the Western media" (Ikegami 2008: 221)<sup>9</sup>.

Despite worldwide demand for karate and *budō* restoration, during the 70s and 80s the Okinawan martial art continued to be trapped in a center-periphery duality by cause of its origins. Overseas, karate was the main icon of Japanese martial arts, even of Asian arts themselves, as witnessed by the numerous films that used the word "karate" in their productions, even though they featured Chinese or Korean martial arts. There was a period in which karate, martial arts or kung fu were near synonyms in many Western countries' pop culture.<sup>10</sup> In this scheme, the U.S. cultural industries radiated karate and East

<sup>9</sup> According to Ikegami Japanese 'tacit modes of communication' can overcome body-mind duality by aesthetic practices "beyond reasoned logical investigation or linguistic articulation": "The emphasis on tacit modes of knowledge and communication is a distinctive feature of the Japanese Performing arts that attained virtually meta-canonical status [...] Zeami's prescription of ideal performance with an empty mind was not exceptional. Various performing arts, including martial arts, developed a similar ideal. Although some arts, such as the tea ceremony and *Nō* drama had developed more articulated ideologies with a clear connection to Buddhist ontology, others transmitted a similar understanding of physical discipline and spirituality as 'taken for granted naturalness' through their practices." (Ikegami 2008: 221,225).

<sup>10</sup> Think, for instance, of Bruce Lee's first Hong Kong movie *The Big Boss* (1971) translated in Spain as *Karate a Muerte en Bangkok*; or the much later American movie *The Perfect Weapon* (1991) where the main character learns martial arts in a Korean neighborhood, under Korean masters, whose *dōjō* announces "karate" in large letters.

Asian Martial arts through the globe.

Although the arrival of martial arts to the U.S. dates back to the first Asian diasporas at the end of the 19th century, as I have noted before their widespread expansion occurred after the end of the Second World War. This was a geopolitical scenario defined by: 1) U.S. military interventions in Asia, anxieties of the Cold War and fear of the Asian Communist threat; and 2) the opposition to the Vietnam War, the anti-colonial and civil rights movements, and the international students' protests. Such context necessarily conditioned the perception of martial arts by way of the discovery of an exotic and dangerous otherness, which – though enthralling to some – threatened national security. The circumstances of this cultural contact commanded primarily by conflict as a form of socialization,<sup>11</sup> is critical to accurately interpret the geopolitics of martial arts in the U.S. and in global culture. For many U.S. soldiers, stationed in high numbers in Okinawa as gateways to the Korea (1950-53) and Vietnam (1955-1975) wars, martial arts were a way to sublimate the violent encounter with otherness and thus reconfigure their identities. This vis-à-vis confrontation also awakened in U.S. personnel a genuine taste for martial arts, for which they were accepted as positive physical and spiritual practices worthy of being taken “back home”. A significant number of ex-combatants began to open

schools in the U.S., and martial arts captured massive public interest, sometimes with nationalistic re-readings that gave rise to the self-titled American Martial Arts (Miracle 2015).

On the other hand, martial arts were also re-appropriated by countercultures and minorities to symbolize political-cultural resistance, evidencing the complexities of their manifestations as icons of the global imaginary. From the late 1960s Asian-American and African-American peoples developed new cultural references based on the archetype of the Asian martial artist and the otherness of his physical, ethical and philosophical characteristics. A conspicuous example is the inclusion of martial arts into the formative activities of the Black Panthers movement, or the many cross-pollinations between martial arts cinema and the *blaxploitation* genre, that transcended to hip-hop music and other arts.<sup>12</sup> In Japan, under the political turmoil caused by the protests against the U.S.-Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security (1960), commonly known as *Anpo*, students and workers often saw their anti-system struggles resembled in martial heroes appearing in films and manga, like in those created by Kajiwara Ikki (1936-1987), father of the *supo-kon* genre (Abe 2013).<sup>13</sup> Against the hegemonic background, martial arts frequently represented for the popular imagination a successful break of the governing order

<sup>11</sup> For a classical reference of conflict as a primary form of socialization with philosophical echoes that may make us think of the so-called non duality of Asian thought see Simmel (1904): “Conflict itself is the resolution of the tension between the contraries. That it eventuates in peace is only a single, specially (sic) obvious and evident, expression of the fact that it is a conjunction of elements, an opposition, which belongs with the combination under one higher conception. This conception is characterized by the common contrast between both forms of relationship and the mere reciprocal indifference between elements. Repudiation and dissolution of social relation are also negatives, but conflict shows itself to be the positive factor in this very contrast with them; viz., shows negative factors in a unity which, in idea only, not at all in reality, is disjunctive.” (Simmel 1904: 490).

<sup>12</sup> “African American interest in the martial arts is ubiquitous in the contemporary United States. It can be seen in the burgeoning numbers of black youths enrolled in self-defense classes and in hip-hop culture. African Americans’ fascination with the martial arts cuts across artistic genres. [...] The RZA, the founder of the Wu Tang Clan, for example, wrote the scores for Jim Jarmusch’s crime drama *Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai* (1999) and Quentin Tarantino’s homage to Hong Kong kung fu films *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* (2003) and *Kill Bill, Vol. 2* (2004).” (Cha Jua 2008: 1999). Tarantino’s homage to Hong Kong martial arts films in *Kill Bill*, nonetheless, takes part mostly in Japan and U.S. soils. The main character, played by Uma Thurman, travels to Okinawa to obtain a katana expressly manufactured by the hands of Hattori Hanzo, a character alluding to the famous 16<sup>th</sup> century Japanese samurai.

<sup>13</sup> *Supo-kon* is formed by *supōtsu* (sport) and *kōnjo* (guts). Kajiwara was the pseudonym of Takamori Asao, author among others of the boxing hero *Ashita no Joe* (“Joe of Tomorrow”, 1966), *Judō Itchoku-sen* (“Devotion to Judo”, 1967) or *Karate baka ichi dai* (“The Lifetime of a Karate fool/obsessed”, 1971).



and the epistemological axis, illuminating alternatives to class domination, imperialism, and the modern war machine (Kato 2008; Cha Jua 2008; Farrer and Whalen Bridge 2011).

To sum up an additional layer of complexity, inside the global circulation of martial arts, karate turns out to be a central emblem for the reinstatement of the Japanese nation as a leading cultural power in the East Asian Region. In *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics* (2004: 86), Joseph S. Nye points out martial arts as one of Japan's main repositories for the exercise of soft power on an international level, thanks to their cultural attractiveness. Thus, given martial arts' ascendancy over other cultures and societies, based on both spiritual principles and fascinating images, karate was instrumental to Japanese cultural diplomacy in contemporary world politics. For example, this was recognized by Kondō Seiichi, former Japanese Ambassador at UNESCO between 2006-2008 and Director General of the Japan Cultural Affairs Agency between 2010-2013:

Speaking to Prime Minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō in 2004, a representative of the Iraqi karate world noted, 'We always invite *sensei* [teachers] from Japan,' so as not to lose the spirituality of Japanese martial arts. Whether it is anime or martial arts, what lies in the background of their popularity is apparently an unarticulated affinity to the traditional Japanese culture and philosophy that continue[s] to survive in the midst of modernization. (Kondō 2008: 200).

In spite of a long history of political instrumentalization during the 20<sup>th</sup> century to serve the nation-state, martial arts continued to be a multiple and elastic vernacular culture. In fact, martial arts were also able to undermine the prevailing status. As noted above, they put into question both hierarchies and certain modes of substantial thought, not only through their own practices but especially through their varied

expressions in movies, books, comic-books or the *star-system* (celebrities like Sean Connery, Steve McQueen or Elvis Presley practiced and promoted martial arts). In this sense, the enormous popularity that reached the martial arts cinema in the 70s cannot be explained without the charismatic presence of Bruce Lee leading the martial arts cultural craze. Lee first capitalized on karate to gain ascendance as his legend began at the 1964 Long Beach International Karate Championships, where he exhibited the famous one-inch punch. Soon after Lee introduced Chinese martial arts to the public as a superior tradition, an opposing force against the not so distant Japanese hegemonic imperialism in East Asia, which actually had appropriated karate from its Chinese origins:

The proclamation of a popular cultural revolution, which swept the world from Hong Kong, can be traced back to Bruce Lee's statement on *gung fu* (Cantonese spelling of kung fu) made in 1965 when the term was virtually unknown to the rest of the world. A few years prior to the official outbreak of the revolution in Hong Kong, Lee happened to be interviewed by the Twentieth Century Fox studio as part of the screen test for an actor skilled in the 'Oriental' martial arts. At this occasion, Lee in effect unleashed the power of ancient Chinese martial arts by removing the veil of hitherto kept secrecy: "Well, gung fu is originated in China. It is the ancestor of karate and jujitsu. It's more of a complete system and it's more fluid." (Kato 2007: 9).

The 80s saw the production of the extremely successful martial arts drama *The Karate Kid* (1984), starring an Italian-American and a Japanese immigrant. The movie builds its argument on the controversy between the tough military-like training of the Cobra Kai American karate and the fine ascetics and mastery of Mr. Miyagi, Okinawan born.

The teachings of Mr. Miyagi, based on the Okinawan master Miyagi Chōjun (1988-1953), founder of *Gōjū-ryū* karate,<sup>14</sup> synthesize the pacifist maxim *karate ni sente nashi* or “there is no first strike in karate”.<sup>15</sup> Whereas the 1984 movie stands out in the popular mind, the sequel, *The Karate Kid II* (1986), reached greater box-office returns. Interestingly it moves its action to Okinawa, where Miyagi has to face an old antagonist with yakuza-like behavior that tyrannizes his home village. Many Okinawan topics like the *O-bon* (day of the ancestors) festival and dances are depicted through the footage.<sup>16</sup>

Whereas global karate semiotics in the 80s were hanging between violence and the memory of modern samurai imperialism to the delicacies of Japanese aesthetics and martial ethics, in Japan, the situation of karate was, simply put, less virtuous. Despite its popularity, and illustrious exceptions like Mishima, the Okinawan martial art, usually conceived as a tough barehand fighting technique based on heavy punches and kicks,<sup>17</sup> remained at the perimeter of the high culture. Karate had largely impacted the social imaginary, and its practice was considerably widespread in the mainland. The overall sensitivity, nonetheless, still situated karate far from the center of *budō* arts, and clearly way under the refinement and Zen spiritual depth demonstrated by *kyūdō*, *iaidō* or *aikidō*, to cite some.

Having its national center in Osaka, where the

20<sup>th</sup> century Okinawan migration to the mainland concentrated, karate was perceived, in general terms, to be a rough martial art, typical of working classes and brusque or ill-mannered individuals. These portrayals are evidenced in classical depictions of karate protagonists in Japanese movies, as we later see.<sup>18</sup> Henceforth, within Japan, karate continued to be a martial art mainly of the social and cultural margins, although at the same time prominent political figures like the new prime minister Suga Yoshihide (born 1948), who last year received an honorary 9<sup>th</sup> dan by the JKA, practiced karate in their university days. Pending on future research, I hypothesize that there is a neat social class component of karate and karateka *habitus* regarding the position and dispositions in the social and symbolic space of practices and tastes in Japan, to follow Pierre Bourdieu's terminology (1984). This coexists with the importance of university karate clubs, particularly during the postwar period, and associations like the JKA as institutions to obtain and exercise power within the Japanese society.

In any case, a good indicator of karate's social status in Japan (and abroad) is the scarcity of research when compared with other Japanese martial disciplines like *kendō* or *judō*. Michael Molasky, a well-known scholar of Okinawan literature and Asian Cultural studies at the Waseda University has recently called attention to such lack of sources. Hence for example, The Research Journal of Budō (*Budōgaku kenkyū*) of

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<sup>14</sup>This conflict between violence and non-violence which lies as the minimum constituent of *The Karate Kid* plot is based on the life experience of the screenwriter, Robert Mark Kamen. Kamen explained to *Sports Illustrated* that in his early youth he was beaten up by some bullies, and therefore he began to take karate classes: “His earliest instructor was a truculent Marine captain who preached raw violence, which helped on the revenge front but which left Kamen desiring a deeper spiritual connection with the craft. He branched out and discovered Okinawan Gōjū Ryū, a defensive style designed to turn aggression on the aggressor with smooth blocks and sharp counterstrikes. Kamen trained four hours each day, seven days a week, under a teacher who spoke little English but who had learned directly from the founder of Okinawan Gōjū Ryū: a sensei named Chōjun Miyagi.” (Prewitt 2018: n.p.).

<sup>15</sup>However, the interpretations of this motto differ among many Okinawan masters. See Tankosich (2004).

<sup>16</sup>Several years later, the 2010 version would feature an African American and a Chinese master. This January 2021, another sequel, the *Cobra Kai* series (2018), is breaking audience records in Netflix.

<sup>17</sup>Karate has a rich tradition of weapons, *kobudō*, that has been largely overlooked.

<sup>18</sup>For possible analogies with the case of Spain see Sánchez-García (2008); and Pérez-Gutiérrez, Brown, Álvarez-del-Palacio, and Gutiérrez-García (2015). Karate in Spain is between the “strong” instrumentality of boxing as desired by working-class practitioners with less legitimized cultural capital, and the “soft” self-realizational purposes of *aikidō* more prone to be in the orbit of middle classes and bourgeoisie.

The Japanese Academy of Budō (*Nihon budō gakkai*) has since 1968 published 1.464 articles dedicated to *kendō*, and 1.415 to *judō*, whereas those dedicated to karate count only 198. Molasky rightly points out: “Considering the worldwide prominence of karate as an iconic Japanese martial art [...] I suspect that many readers will find these numbers to be as surprising as I did.” (Molasky 2018: 7).

Contrasting with this scant academic attention, a look on the products of cultural industries like movies, manga and videogames, provides excellent ground to inspect the cultural referents constructing karate images in Japan. In this regard, among manga works outstand a title, immensely popular in Japan but practically unknown overseas, named *Osu!! Karate Bu*. It was published at the *Weekly Young Jump* from 1985 to 1996. The story follows the quarrelsome misadventures of an infamous karate club formed in an Osaka technical school. The Rakuten kobo webpage offers this plot briefing of *Osu!! Karate-Bu*: “Kansai Fifth Technical High School is famous all over Osaka for its thugs. Here the weaklings get beaten into virtual slavery. In order to change his weak self, Matsushita joins the karate club...?!”.<sup>19</sup> The motifs of karate, a wild strong character, and gang subcultures all in conjunction make a classical trope of contemporary Japanese pop culture. Therefore, by subgroup continuity, karate has been frequently and closely associated with the Japanese yakuza,<sup>20</sup> as demonstrated by films like *The Street Fighter* series (1974), starring Sony Chiba, or *Bodyguard Kiba* (1993) one of the very first movies of the famed Japanese filmmaker Takashi Miike. Remarkably both narratives mingle karate with the presence of Yakuza in Okinawa.

The question of ethnicity with regards to karate must be considered as well, and not only concerning Okinawans but also *zainichi* (lit. “Korean living in Japan”, used for Korean descendants). From the 70s to the 90s, the dominating figure of karate in Japan, at least in pop culture, was Ōyama Masutatsu, a *zainichi* born as Choi Yeong-eui (1923-1994). Mas Ōyama developed a new and spectacular karate style, *Kyokushin* (literally “the ultimate truth”), nicknamed “The Strongest Karate”, almost freed from kata, and hence focused on full-contact combat with a heavy use of kicks. The master’s renown was built in championships and demonstrations, upon mountain training retirements, legendary barehand bullfighting and bottleneck cutting. He also was protagonist of a tour, allegedly undefeated, through the United States.

Masutatsu saw his biography turn into a highly successful *supo-kon* manga (and an anime adaptation) entitled *Karate baka ichi dai* (The Lifetime of a Karate fool/obsessed), published by the *Weekly Shōnen Magazine* between 1971 and 1977, and written by Kajiwara Ikki, who was a disciple and had a close personal relationship with the karate master. Ōyama’s deeds were immortalized too in a trilogy of Japanese movies: *Karate Bear Fighter* (1975), *Karate Bullfighter* (1975), and *Karate for Life* (1977) starring one more time Sony Chiba, a *Kyokushin* black belt himself and Ōyama’s student. Masutatsu, frequently known as ‘The God Hand’ – a sign to the *ikken hissatsu* or the ability to kill a man with just one blow,<sup>21</sup> bore an enormous symbolic presence in Japan and abroad. During the 80s, he, a *zainichi*, provoked a karate boom that trespassed all frontiers, being the most illustrious and worldwide recognized Japanese karate master of the time. Not by chance, John Lie in *Multiethnic*

<sup>19</sup>The tone of the manga was, nevertheless, highly humoristic. The fame of *Osu!! Karate-Bu* translated into live action movie in 1990 and a *Super Famicom* fighting game in 1994.

<sup>20</sup>For an overview of actual involvements between Okinawan Yakuza and karate dojos in the 60s see Quast (2015).

<sup>21</sup>References to the mythical capacity of karate to kill in one blow are documented in early research works of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by western scholars specializing in Japanology and visiting Okinawa: “Their skill in boxing is such that a well-trained fighter can smash a large earthen water-jar, or kill a man with a single blow of his fist.” (Satow, 1874: 313).

Japan cites Ōyama as “the person most responsible for its [karate’s] popularity in the West.” (Lie 2001, 64). This shows the complexity of conceptualizing karate with regard ethnicity as one of Japan’s most prominent advocates was of Korean descent.

The Kyokushin master served too for inspiring the most important fighting videogames of the late 80s and early 90s, that later evolved into iconic franchises. Actually, emerging media like videogames were a fundamental vector for propagating and underpinning karate images worldwide, with titles like *Karate* (1982), *Karate Champ* (1984), *Karateka* (1984), *The Way of the Exploding Fist* (1985), or *International Karate +* (1987) being created by Japanese and Western companies. The 1984 production, *Karateka*, created a milestone in videogames history because it was the first time that rotoscoping technology for motion-capture animation was used for producing realistic karate movements.<sup>22</sup> Returning to Ōyama, illustrious characters like Ryū, main protagonist of the *Street Fighter* series (1987- 2018), or Mr. Karate, from *The King of Fighters* franchise (1994 - 2016), are based on the Kyokushin founder. The same Yukio Mishima was molded into the *Tekken* (1994 - 2017) fighter Kazuya Mishima, founder of the fictional “Mishima-ryū Karate”, which at the same rests on Ōyama’s *Kyokushin*.

## Conclusion

A closer look at cultural images of karate exposes the often poorly perceived, but constitutive, multiculturalism of Japan and its society, as well as the existence of a social stratification that has been notably veiled both at the national and international levels by the *nihonjinron* ideologies. As this article has sought to explain, the idea of karate as a tradition *tête à tête* with

other Japanese martial arts at the core of *bushidō* is arguably problematic. The very same occurs when we try to sustain karate as a fine component of *nihonjinron* essentialism and homogeneity in historical terms, whether in the distant past or in contemporaneity. There appears to be a lack of full cultural legitimacy of karate as a distinctly Japanese expression by reason of its origins in the Okinawan archipelago. Situated at the outer geographical and political boundaries of the Japanese nation, Okinawa and the Okinawan peoples, along with Ainu or *zainichi* Koreans, and the *burakumin*, are part of the sociocultural groups and minorities with a long history of marginalization in Japan. These marginalized groups have suffered social stigmatization, and its individuals and collectives have usually faced socio-economic discrimination. Ethnicity, social class, and culture compose fulcrums of Japan’s sociological space that present significant correlations often overlooked. This convergence can be observed with precision in many facets of karate’s cultural history, some of them introduced in this article. One of my main arguments is that, despite its global dissemination and fame during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, karate is not deemed as a fully “Japanese” refined art inside Japan, nor its peaceful attributes exactly evident, for it is an expression of rudeness:

The writer C. W. Nicol, who did a lot of martial arts training in his initial years in Japan, recalled, ‘To be in the same room with the *karate* master Masutatsu Ōyama (1923–1994) [notorious for slaying bulls with his bare fists] was a frightening experience, but when I visited Ueshiba Sensei I felt nothing but warmth and light. Nonetheless, I still went flying when I tried to attack the aikidō master.’ (Stevens 2002: 20).

Still being placed at the lower and edging tiers of

<sup>22</sup>See the entry “First motion-capture animation in a videogame” at the Guinness World Records Webpage.

genuine *bushidō*, karate fulfilled an inalienable asset for the postwar symbolic capital and ideological structure of the Japanese state, particularly in the international sphere, as it evolved into one of the main icons of the postwar cultural globalization, via actual practice and media consumptions.

On the one hand, karate served to strengthen the circulation of *nihonjinron* ideologies, intimately mingled with the restoration of Japanese martial arts and the fascination for the *bushidō* ethos. On the other, karate was re-appropriated by many countercultures to disclose their messages. While growing as an expression of Okinawan cultural resistance and peace metaphor, karate also publicized worldwide the superior organization and productivity of Japanese society and its essence, which supposedly explained the postwar economic miracle.

The Okinawan martial art could equally house the traditionalist turns of a Japanese literary star, Mishima Yukio; make a *zainichi* Korean, Ōyama Masutatsu, the national and international hero of Japanese karate; it could metamorphosize an Okinawan master, Miyagi Chōjun, into the famous Mr. Miyagi of the *The Karate Kid* movies; nurture the creation of “American karate” or inspire black contracultural movements; be claimed by Bruce Lee as of Chinese origins to reinstate the authority of Chinese martial arts over the Japanese ones; give birth to large numbers of videogames inside and outside Japan; or signify the hard-work spirit of Japanese corporations and their salaryman.

Karate is a polyhedric culture, whose practical boundaries cannot be segregated in ethnic, class, or even necessarily cultural or national breaks. Karate can neither be limited by nor excluded from *bushidō* and *nihonjinron* notions. It finds itself constituted upon manifold interpretations and social practices, that make the martial art originated in Okinawa circulate between the centers and the peripheries of Japan. Furthermore, it is affected by interceding circumstances stemming from

transnational processes. During its modern history karate has gained degrees of social and geographical interculturality. First, it became a pedagogical-political tool to serve both Okinawa assimilation and resistance inside the nation-building of prewar Japan (Meyer 2008). During the postwar recovery and the economic miracle of the 60s, the 70s expansion, and the 80s bubble, karate was demonstrating again high sociocultural malleability and multiple layers of significance; compiling a salient icon of the global mass culture that overwhelmed any other martial art in disseminating core values of the Japanese nation-state. In this period, regardless of maintaining its representational status as a genuine expression of the Japanese culture, karate embodied a composite, profound and contradictory subject closely related to geopolitics and globalization. The Okinawan origins likewise the national and international adaptations and re-elaborations of karate, produced a *de facto* multi-blended reality, at once essentialist and non-essentialist, hegemonic and contra-hegemonic.

May it seem an aporia, the aforementioned irresolvable disjunctions conform the best approach to understand karate. In way of an example, I would like to call the attention to a minor linguistic matter that nonetheless informs about this karate reality: It is worth noting that unlike *judō*, *aikidō*, *kyūdō*, *iaidō* and so on, karate is mostly written and spoken without the *-dō* particle alluding to the “way” of Japanese martial arts. Recall at the same that the *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan* does not define karate as a traditional martial art of Japan.

Karate builds a cultural representative that today in Japan is paradoxically more recognized as a national symbol than as an appealing practice (Manzenreiter 2013: 99), or an enticing academic object of research. The complex ambivalences of karate’s center-periphery dialectics continue commanding its recent developments. At present, karate is at an inflection point for officially institutionalizing and re-building



its position as an intrinsic expression of Japan's local and national traditions, with its candidature to the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage and the 2021+1 Tokyo Olympic Games at the horizon. These processes, comprising domestic and international relations, economic planning, soft power exercises, cultural diplomacy, as well as national assets, local heritage and tourism industries, raise again the question about the Japaneseness - Okinawanness of karate (González de la Fuente and Niehaus 2020). The Okinawan karate - Japanese karate controversy is nowadays even more correlated to globalization and geopolitical arenas than it was in the past.

To end I would like to recall Bourdieu's words at the beginning of this text. His reflection on substantialism is perfectly applicable to the cultural practice of karate during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as explored by this article. In general terms I consider essentialism, either Okinawan or Japanese, as a mirroring veil for the relation between Okinawa and Japan, hence acting mainly in the service of exclusion and not inclusion. Furthermore, by association with ethnic origins and social class practices, essentialism correspondingly affects karate's sociocultural property and properties.

Far from being a steady reality, karate understandings, visions, and affective associations are largely determined by the historical moment, and the effective supply of modes of consumption. Such modes of consuming and categorizing karate entail at the same time a relational sphere of positions, habitus and choices emanating and modifying the previous structure of its cultural practice. Hence, as it does societal and cultural change, karate is chained – both possible and restrained – by this dialectical architecture of pre-existing conditions and emerging circumstances. An architecture that has grown extremely intricately by the effects of martial arts postwar globalization upon the Japanese self and its international images.

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