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The Evolution of Japanese Martial Arts

Asian martial arts have captivated the minds and imaginations of the West for centuries. Whether it's the exotic weapons of China and Malaysia, the ferocity and honour of the Samurai, the esoteric mysticism of the Shaolin monk, or the demon powers of the Ninja, these things and more have found their way into the fantasy and fiction of the Western world.

Even today's sports are influenced heavily by these Asian fighting ways. Judo and Taekwondo have been Olympic Sports for some time; Karate and Wushu are being considered for the same. Let us not forget the current obsession regarding the sport of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA). One of the chief components of MMA is Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, which is derived from the Judo of Kano Jigoro: a student of several schools of jujutsu and teacher of *Nihonden Kito-ryu Judo* (Adams, par. 1-24).

In order to approach the topic of the development of *budo*,¹ from its beginnings on the battlefields of Japan's past to the martial art as we know it today, one needs to have an understanding of the historical period and culture in which the art was born.

The chronology of Japanese history uses many overlapping names for the different aspects of the same period of time. The story of *jujutsu*, for instance, spans two well established shogunates, and four periods of time which share the designation 時代 [Romaji²:

¹ 武道 - Budo - Warrior way

² Romaji - Japanese words written with Roman Letters

jidai], meaning era. *Shogun* were military dictators, who were the de facto rulers of Japan between 1192 and 1867. The history of Japan notes three shogunates: the *Kamakura* shogunate (1192 - 1333), the *Ashikaga* Shogunate (1336 - 1573) and the *Tokugawa* Shogunate (1603 - 1867). Each of these shogunates also have a *jidai* name associated with them: *Kamakura jidai*, *Muromachi jidai*, and *Edo jidai*, respectively. The two periods of time which concern the evolution of jujutsu are the *Muromachi jidai* and the *Edo jidai*. Between the *Muromachi jidai* and the *Edo jidai* is the *Azuchi-Momoyama jidai*. This is a period of time between 1568 and 1603 which spans the short lived reigns of two shogun: *Oda Nobunaga* and *Toyotomi Hideyoshi*. Within these greater eras, there are smaller periods of time that are also called *jidai*. In the *Muromachi jidai* are the *Nanboku-cho jidai* (1332 - 1392),³ and the *Sengoku jidai* (1467 - 1603)⁴ (Kure, 188-189). This period is followed by the *Edo jidai*, which is the time of peace ruled by the *Tokugawa Shogun*. It is in this period where *jujutsu* takes on the form which is most familiar to us now.

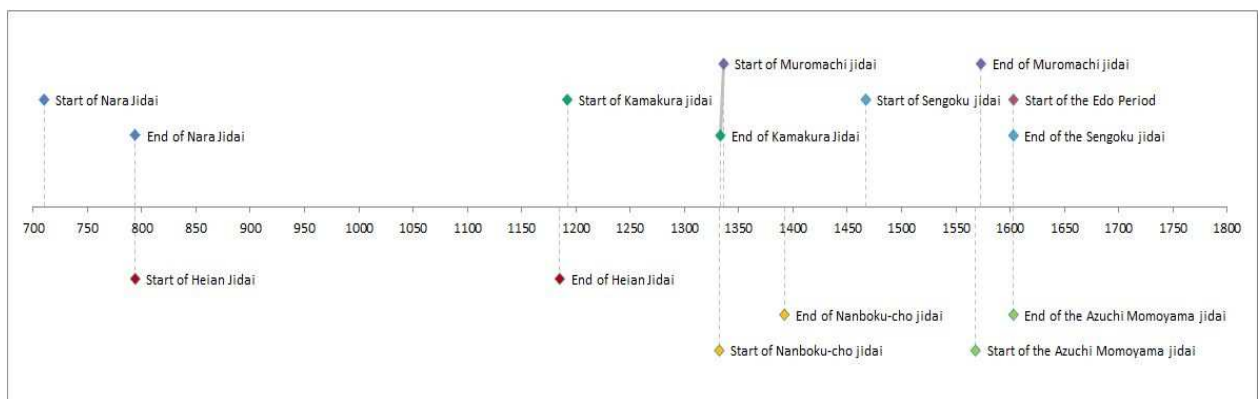


Figure 1 - Timeline of Japanese History

As the native language of a culture often provides unrivaled insight into that culture, it is important to fully understand some of the nuances behind the Japanese language, specifically *kanji*.

³ 南北朝時代 - Nanboku-cho jidai - lit. Northern and Southern Dynasties Period

⁴ 戦国時代 - Sengoku jidai - lit Age of Civil War

Kanji are ideograms⁵ which entered the Japanese language from China. According to the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*,⁶ in the 5th Century a scholar named *Wani* was sent to the Japanese. This scholar is said to have brought Confucianism and Chinese characters with him (Chamberlain, 313). For much of Japanese history, these *kanji* were used for the sound of the Chinese pronunciation, more so than the meaning attributed to them by the Chinese. Today, their meanings are as important as the sounds that they represent. For this reason it is sometimes helpful to break Japanese words down into their component *kanji* to explain what a word or concept is, in addition to the meaning of the *kanji* as a single unit.

Before being able to focus on the development of *jujutsu*, it is particularly important to first explore the culture of Japanese martial traditions. Specifically, this includes the concept of *ryuha*, their formation, the differences between them, and the way that they are passed on.

The term 流派⁷ [Romaji: *Ryu ha*] is typically defined as ‘school of thought.’ This, as Dr. Kacem Zoughari says in the documentary *Kako, Genzo, Mirai*, is a bit of a misnomer. *Ryu* means flow. This is used as a manner of expressing the flow of thought from one person to the next, as well as a flow of consciousness or experience. This concept actually leads to a proper explanation of how *ryuha* develop. In a very generalized way, *ryuha* come about because a person survives a battle and has an epiphany about what allowed him to survive. He then sets out to teach the methods that allowed him to persevere. However, this is not yet the point where it might be called *naninani*⁸-*ryu*. Years pass, and his method gathers students. Some of these students show promise and become teachers of his method. The founder then

⁵ A character symbolizing the idea of a thing without indicating the sounds used to say it. Examples include numerals and Chinese characters. (Ideogram - Definition of Ideogram in English | Oxford)

⁶ The *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shiki* are semi-mythological histories of Japan. They encompass the time from the creation of Japan until the 7th century.

⁷ 流派 - *Ryuha* - Schools of thought, -流(*ryu*) a suffix referring to the preceding term as a school. E.g. *Daito-ryu*

⁸ *Naninani* - Japanese for such and such.

gets old and appoints someone to take over in his stead. Thus passes the first generation. Several such generations may pass before things become codified as formal *ryuha* (Zoughari).

This, then, brings us to the culture and traditions surrounding the succession of the originator and the manner of transmission.

The term used for the head of a lineage in Japanese is *Soke* [Kanji: 宗家, Meaning: Origin of the Family], or *Iemoto* [Kanji: 家元, Meaning: Family Beginning]. This person chooses a successor from among their students to carry on the traditions and knowledge of the art. Below the soke are *shihan* [Kanji: 師範, Meaning: Example Teacher], or *hanshi* [Kanji: 範士, Meaning: Example Samurai/Gentleman] who act as the senior instructors. Below them are the various grades of *sensei* [Kanji: 先生], which translates loosely to one who has gone before [Lit: Born Before]. In classical martial traditions there were a series of *menkyo* [Kanji: 免許, Meaning: license]. Typically there are several levels to the *menkyo* system. The two most important are the *menkyo* and *menkyo kaiden* [Kanji: 免許皆伝, Meaning: license of complete transmission]. The first of these is a teaching certification: it says that the *ryuha* will support you as a teacher of its secrets. *Menkyo kaiden* is a license saying that the headmaster of the art has taught you everything there is to know about that *ryuha*. Typically the people who received *menkyo kaiden* either become the heir to the *ryuha*, or go on to start their own branches of the *ryuha* (Zhougari).

In the *ryuha* found in the *Muromachi jidai*, the primary method of learning the skills of the school is through *kata*: patterns of movement which are intended to convey some fundamental idea. As you progress through the above mentioned licenses, you encounter more complicated *kata*, which results in strings of these fundamental ideas being hidden amongst superfluous movements (Sheriff, 0:1:30-0:2:00). These fundamental ideas are

transmitted in a few ways, and Kacem Zhougari, in particular, speaks of three mechanisms of transmission: *Densho*,⁹ *Kuden*,¹⁰ and *Taiden*.¹¹ *Taiden*, Zhougari posits, is the most important of these three. *Taiden* can be thought of as very similar to muscle memory, as it is the repetition of *kata* with the teacher correcting you. *Kuden* are the things that your teacher tells you about the art you are learning. *Kuden* might be the secrets of the school [Kanji: 奥伝, Romaji: Oku den, Meaning: inner teachings], or it might be something as simple as how to place one's feet. *Densho* are the written transmission: the text books given to the teachers of the art. *Densho* are aides-memoire intended to assist teachers in remembering the specific forms the school teaches. The *densho* of a school will often obscure important things, and they always rely on the student to know the *kuden* of the ryuha. An example that can be found in *Kukishin ryu densho* is the text describing the following *kata*, called *Suisha*:

“*Uke* does a right *Jodan Tsuki*, *Tori* does a left *Jodan Uke*, and ducking low strikes to *Nasai*. *Uke* then strikes with a left *Jodan Tsuki*, and a right *Jodan Tsuki*. *Tori* does a right then a left *Jodan Uke* grabbing the wrist with the final block. *Tori* then kicks the left leg with his right foot to *Sai*. *Tori* then grabs the neck, and finishes with *Uchi Mata*” (Kukishinden Ryu Densho, Shoden No Kata)

Here the *kuden* are the targets “*nasai*” and “*sai*” and the form of the final technique in the *kata*: *uchi mata*. In this way, the three forms of transmission work together to provide a full understanding of the skills found in a specific school.

The first mention of Japanese martial traditions is found in the *Nihon Shoki*, which speaks of a wrestling-like competition known as *chikara kurabe*. According to the *Nihon Shoki*, in the 7th year of the rule of emperor *Suinin* [23 BCE] there was a contest of

⁹ 伝承 - Densho - Written transmission

¹⁰ 口伝 - Kuden - Oral transmission

¹¹ 体伝 - Taiden - Body transmission

strength between *Nomi no Sukune* and *Taima no Kuyehaya*, the description of which is found below.

“7th year, Autumn, 7th month, 7th day... The two men stood opposite to one another.

Each raised his foot and kicked at the other, when *Nomi no Sukune* broke with a kick the ribs of *Kuyehaya* and also kicked and broke his loins and thus killed him.

Therefore the land of *Taima no Kuyehaya* was seized, and was all given to *Nomi no Sukune*.” (Aston, 11)

This brutal contest is believed by some to be the predecessor of *Sumo* wrestling.

The next major landmark in the history of budo is a ritual found in the Shinto faith called Shinji-Zumo. This ritual wrestling match was said to predict the rice harvest. It came to be performed in front of the ruling emperor or empress. By the Nara jidai¹² Shinji-Zumo was an annual court event. During the Heian jidai¹³, it became a court entertainment called Sumai no Sechie. By the time the samurai came to power in the Kamakura jidai, Sumo had become a sport favoured by the samurai as a training tool, and for entertainment (Shapiro, 13-15)



Figure2 - Sumai No Sechie

The next landmark in budo’s history can be difficult to pinpoint in time, because ryuha often have legendary origin stories. This is complicated by the fact ryuha very often also have several branches, which may have different tellings of the history of that particular

¹² Between 710 and 794 CE

¹³ Between 794 and 1185 CE

school. Kukishin Ryu,¹⁴ for instance, has a few distinctly different origin stories which are separated in date by almost 300 years. The lineage story taught in the Kukishin Ryu starts in 1318, when a Student of Shinden Fujiwara Muso-ryu, named Yakushimaru Ryushin, saved the life of Emperor Go-daigo (Organization for Preserving Kuki Shinden). There is also a story passed along through a Japanese martial arts researcher named Manaka Unsui, which traces the lineage back farther than that. His research shows:

“Around the year 1000 (the exact date cannot be made out), Nawa Shinzaburo Motonaga revived the Tosui Ryu and became its first Soke...In about the year 1336 Yakushimaru Kurando Takamoto, who had studied under the Kishin Tosui Ryu, was given the surname Kuki (which means "nine demons") after saving the life of Emperor Godaigo, and he went his own independent way to create the Tosui Kukishin Ryu.” (Mitchell)

As one can see, while the two stories are very similar there are a couple of notable differences. The first of which is the name of the parent school or martial art, while the second major difference is the lineage and name of the original school. It is also interesting to note that while it is said that Nawa Shinzaburo Motonaga “revived” the school in approximately 1000 CE, Tosui Ryu was supposedly created by Otomo no Furumaro in approximately 754 CE (Mitchell). As it is difficult to find reference to the Tosui Ryu or Kishin Rosui ryu outside of the research of Manaka Sensei, it adds a little bit more to the mythological sense of these so-called origin stories.

These complications aside, the earliest extant ryuha are agreed to have been founded in the 14th century: the beginning of the Muromachi jidai. Japanese unarmed martial arts are

¹⁴ 九鬼神流 - Kukishin Ryu - Nine Gods Spirit School (Also Nine Demon Gods School) - A school of Martial Art with a bit of controversy regarding its origin story.

roughly divided into two groups. There are schools derived from Chinese martial arts, called Kenpō [Kanji: 拳法], which is a Japanese rendering of the Chinese Quán Fǎ [Ideogram: 拳法] meaning “Fist Method.” These are schools which focus on striking. The other group of schools are native to Japan and feature grappling more than striking. Different ryuha use different names to describe the same principles. The most notable names for this collection of arts are: jujutsu [Kanji: 呪術, Meaning: Soft Art], Kumiuchi [Kanji: 組打ち, Meaning: To wrestle and strike], Taijutsu [Kanji: 体術, Meaning: Body Art], and Koshi no Mawari [Kanji: 腰之廻, Meaning: Around the hips, or rotation of hips] (Skoss). For the sake of ease, this paper will just use the word jujutsu, unless referring to a specific usage of another name.

It is during the Muromachi jidai where the most refinement of jujutsu occurs. The Muromachi jidai was defined by warring factions attempting to claim the title of Shogun. This time of war required the warriors and martial artist to figure out what works, or die. The jujutsu of the Muromachi jidai centres around bringing a person to the ground and pinning them so that they can be more easily dispatched. The focus is on using redirection of momentum as well as leverage to achieve maximal effect with minimal effort. Many techniques in modern budo start from a position, known today as Kumiuchi, which features one hand grabbing the lapel of the opponent, and the other hand grabbing their sleeve. This is a holdover from yoroi kumiuchi [Kanji: 鎧組打ち, Meaning: Grappling and Striking in Armour]: grabbing the lapel is a substitute for grabbing the cords suspending the *Do*.¹⁵ This artifact of the Muromachi and Sengoku jidai is still seen in martial arts classes around the world.

¹⁵ This is Kuden, taught to me by several teachers over the years. I was recently reminded of this in the transcript of a seminar taught by Dr. Kacem Zoughari.



Fig 3 - Yoroi Kumiuchi

While our society focuses on pre-17th Century history, it is in the time after the Sengoku jidai that we see the beginnings of the change towards the form that jujutsu has today. The Edo period was a time of relative peace. The first change to come about in the martial arts of the Edo period was the modification of techniques to be effective in street clothes; this was called suhada bujutsu [Kanji: 素肌 武術, Meaning: Bare Warrior Art]. This manifests in an interesting way. During the Muromachi jidai there was very little striking found in the unarmed fighting methods of Japan. This was for the simple reason that striking a man in armour does more damage to yourself than it does to him. With the change towards fighting in street clothes more options for striking present themselves (Skoss).

The next and more major change was a social one. With the cementing of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Samurai became bureaucrats and maintaining social order became a more important feature of a Samurai's duty. As such, the unarmed fighting techniques of the Edo period are more centred around the restraint of the aggressor. A good example of this

change is found in the art of Hojojutsu, which is the art of restraining prisoners of war. In the Muromachi period, this art featured the use of hooks and needles as anchors for the restraint tie. In the Edo period, Hojojutsu developed into a highly ritualized system of tying prisoners, which were governed by rules that required that the prisoner was not harmed (Clever, 2).

Another change produced by the two hundred years of peace that was brought about by the Tokugawa Shogunate was that the unarmed fighting methods diversified. Throughout Japanese history, armed martial arts were known by the name of the weapon with jutsu added. Kenjutsu [Kanji: 剣術, Meaning: Sword Technique/Art] and Sojutsu [Kanji: 槍術, Meaning: Spear Technique] are good examples of this. Unarmed fighting methods though had a tendency to use the above mentioned names, which are not particularly descriptive. In the Edo jidai ryuha began changing the name of the art they practice to reflect the “weapon” or principle which drove them. Schools of Koshijutsu [Kanji: 骨指術, Meaning: Bone Finger Art, colloquially: Nerve Striking Technique], Koppojutsu [Kanji: 骨法術, Meaning: Bone Law Technique, Colloquially: Bone Breaking Technique] and Aikijustu [Kanji: 合気柔術, Meaning: The joining energy soft/supple technique] are examples of this. This time of peace lead to the progressive refinement of these varied unarmed fighting techniques, which later evolved into the schools of martial art that are seen throughout the world today.



Figure 4 - Suhada Bujutsu

In conclusion, unarmed fighting methods in Japan have a long history going back to the semi-mythological account of the Empire called the Nihon Shoki. It started with wrestling matches tied to harvest festivals, and evolved into a group of complex and distinct arts governed by linear heads of school going back many generations. These methods were codified in the Muromachi jidai, a time of war, and refined throughout the long period of peace that was the Edo jidai. The modern era saw these schools of martial art evolve into the martial sports which excite audiences today.

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Fig 3 - Via <http://bujinkandictionary.wikifoundry.com/page/Kumiuchi>

Fig 4 - via <https://iwato1810.wordpress.com>