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# IDEOLOGICAL EFFICACY BEFORE MARTIAL EFFICACY ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MARTIAL ARTS, THEATRICALITY AND SOCIETY MARTIN MINARIK

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## ABSTRACT

This article relates the training of gendai budō/mudo to theatrical performance. While there are already studies that discuss theatricality in martial arts, the aim of this paper is to provide a systematic overview of the theatrical structuring of elements of martial arts training. This could be further developed in the study of different martial arts and in comparative case studies. For this purpose, Andreas Kotte's theory of scenic processes is used to arrange different phenomena in martial arts training systematically, representing the constitutive aspects of theatricality as derived from theatre and performance art. Gendai budō/mudo are used as cases to elaborate a systematic approach to the analysis of martial arts as theatrical performance. These examples were chosen because of their emphasis on aesthetics and technical expertise, rather than practical fighting applications. While theatricality in martial arts is usually seen as something for enjoyment or possibly to improve and display athleticism, it is argued here that theatricality has to be viewed as a mode of communication to convincingly elevate and spread information. It is therefore possible to trace ideological features such as norms, values, and ideals in the theatrical staging of martial arts training.

## COMBAT AND PERFORMANCE AN INTERCHANGING RELATIONSHIP

The boundaries between martial arts and performance arts, such as theatre and dance, are fluid. Some readers might find this claim surprising if they believe that the goal of martial arts in general is to deal effectively with physical violence. Axel Binhack describes *Kampf* (German for combat) as a focused form of physical interaction driven by the aim of speedy resolution [Binhack 1998: 31]. From a cultural-theoretical point of view, martial arts in fact serve a much broader range of purposes than only as preparation for physical combat [Bowman 2015, Wetzler 2015]. As Sixt Wetzler argues, martial arts practice can be given a range of orientations, such as preparation for violent conflict, play and competition, performance, transcendent goals, and health care [Wetzler 2015: 26]. Different martial arts can involve one or more of these roles, while a single martial art can also serve various purposes depending on the practitioner. This paper focuses on martial arts as performance, and, more precisely, as *theatrical performance*.

The empirical basis of this paper is built upon the author's own martial arts practice. The research, however, has not been conducted in a systematic manner and instead draws from the continuous practise of different types of martial arts in several schools and contexts. This not only includes the training itself, but also informal discussions with teachers and students alike. While the author's martial arts training began in 2002, the intentional self-reflective practice of martial arts research started in 2010. Since 2002, the author has continuously trained in kukki-style taekwondo under different teachers in Germany, Austria and South Korea, while also training in other styles for varying periods of time. Some training went on for several years, while other training only lasted for a few sessions. The styles which were practised for a longer period of time include *lee gar kung fu*<sup>1</sup> in Germany (3 years), *haidong gumdo* in Germany (2 years), capoeira in Turkey and Germany (2 years), *shorin ryu seibukan karate* in Germany (ongoing since 2017), and MMA in Germany (ongoing since 2017). Other martial arts were participated only briefly. These include *taekkyon*, judo, modern wushu, jeet kune do and wing chun. All observations regarding modes of structuring training sessions and specific exercises that are not explicitly cited from pre-existing studies refer to the author's personal experience. Given the aim of this paper, which is to provide an introduction to a possible mode of viewing and analysing martial arts, such an approach seems adequate and legitimate.

## PERFORMANCE AND THEATRICALITY AN OVERVIEW

*Performance* and *theatricality*, as used in this paper, are both terms that are drawn from the academic fields of theatre and performance studies. They are now used in a broad spectrum of academic fields and disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, religious studies, gender studies, and cultural studies. Since these terms are widely used, their definitions tend to vary depending on the discourse in which they are embedded. Scholars from many different academic fields, however, agree that performance can be defined as a mode of physical action in a social context which, to a certain degree, relies on an interaction between performer and spectator, which can also be unified in one person [Klein and Sting 2005; Kotte 2005; Fischer-Lichte 2014].

Performances rely on the principle of 'restored behaviour' [Schechner 1988], which means that performances are always an interplay of previously appropriated behaviour and spontaneous adaption. Performance can apply to art as in stage productions, as well as to different cultural performances such as rituals, ceremonies, feasts, and other cultural events. Performance may also apply to social performances in everyday life, as in such (academic) expressions as 'performing class' or 'performing gender'. Theatricality describes the totality of heterogeneous material that makes up what is called theatre. As well as referring to institutionalised theatre, it is used to describe phenomena in everyday life that employ similar modes of (re)presentation: costume, requisites, gestures, and acoustic signals [Goffman 1959, Burns 1972]. Additionally, Erika Fischer-Lichte describes the use of *signs of signs* as an elementary characteristic of theatricality. What is used in theatre is to be viewed as a sign which again refers to a sign, one that is already employed in a specific cultural context [Fischer-Lichte 1983a]. What I call *theatrical performance* is an intentionally staged and aesthetically sophisticated system of heterogeneous signs, which can be analysed through a phenomenological and semiotic approach [see Fischer-Lichte 2014: 55ff].

1 Not to be confused with the Southern Chinese family-style of *lee gar kung fu* (李家功夫).

## MARTIAL ARTS AND PERFORMANCE

There already exist a few publications that focus on the historical connection between martial arts and performance. Most of the publications on the history of martial arts, especially on the Chinese styles, at least mention an interdependency between martial practices and performance arts. The most notable historical argument in the literature is probably the essay ‘Theater of Combat: A Critical Look at the Chinese Martial Arts’ by Charles Holcombe [Holcombe 1992], which explicitly focuses on the links between the martial arts and Chinese theatre. In his recent book *Possible Origins: A Cultural History of Chinese Martial Arts, Theater and Religion* [Philipp 2016], Scott P. Philipp goes so far as to state that what is now divided into these three categories was once one single entity. In his essay ‘*Taolu*: Credibility and Decipherability in the Practice of Chinese Martial Movement’, Daniel Mroz argues the same hypothesis with reference to Holcombe [Mroz 2016: 44].

One thing is clear: Traditional combat systems have played an influential role in historical stage arts as well as in contemporary global works on stage and screen. In Asian traditions like the Beijing or Cantonese opera, or Japanese *kabuki*, the display of martial arts is comparable to the role of ballet in classical European opera or the French *comédie ballet*. Martial arts, especially fencing, were also important in European theatrical traditions. Apart from the historical staging of classical plays, martial arts still enrich onstage performances. Choreographers like Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui [*Sutra* 2008] and Ferenc Fehér [*Tao Te* 2015] use Asian martial arts while searching for new modes of aesthetic expression. Others, like Daniel Mroz [2011] and Philipp Zarilli [1993, 2000], use Indian and Chinese martial arts in the basic training of their actors. In other words, they use martial arts in the same way as Wsewolod Meyerhold, who included boxing in the training sessions of his actors in the 1920s [Engel-Braunschmidt 2001: 156].

This paper explores the regular and routinized training of East Asian martial artists, particularly in what is known as *budō*, as a theatrical performance. When speaking of East Asian martial arts, I mostly refer to the martial arts of Japan, Korea, and China. However, instead of trying to include the whole variety of East Asian martial arts, the focus in this study lies upon the Japanese *gendai budō* (現代武道) and the Korean *mudo* (무도). These arts heavily imply or explicitly state a focus on character development – most often represented by the suffix *do* (道/道) as in *ju-do* (柔道), *karate-do* (空手道), *aiki-do* (合気

道), *iai-do* (居合道), *ken-do* (剣道), *taekwon-do* (태권도),<sup>2</sup> *hapki-do* (합기도), and so forth. Some of these arts, such as judo, kendo, and taekwondo, also display a strong emphasis on competition. This fact cannot be neglected, but apart from the purely technical training of martial athletes, the competitive aspect of these styles makes up only one aspect of the art as a whole. In fact, in orthodox schools of *budō/mudo*, a sporting focus is frowned upon. This broader view of *budō/mudo* is used throughout this paper.

A direct Chinese equivalent for the term *budō/mudo* does not exist, although characteristics of *budō* are also present in modern systems such as the *Chin Woo Athletic Association* (精武体育会)<sup>3</sup> as well as the *Guoshu* (國術)<sup>4</sup> movement.<sup>5</sup> The core principle is the idea of character development through the physical practice of martial arts, both individually and (even more importantly) as part of a social group. From this point on, I will refer to *gendai budō* and related martial traditions only as ‘martial arts’. The central question is: What are the different features of training that make it a theatrical performance? Answering this question may help us to develop a fruitful way of understanding martial arts training as theatrical performance. After addressing this issue, I will demonstrate how such an understanding can be applied to our analyses and understandings of the martial arts in/and society as a whole. In other words, understanding what makes martial arts training a theatrical performance might help enrich considerations of the social dimensions and ‘relevance’ of martial arts.

2 Depending on the organization, this martial art is spelled either taekwondo (Kukki/WTF), taekwon-do (Chang Hon/ITF), or occasionally tae kwon do. In this essay however, I will use taekwondo as a generic term.

3 **Chin Woo Athletic Association** is not a martial art system itself, but rather an organization, that combines and promotes different systems of Chinese martial arts. Their total approach to martial arts however, using them as a collective pedagogical tool, is very similar to that of Japanese *gendai budo*, or Korean *mudo*.

4 As with the **Chin Woo Athletic Association**, the *Guoshu* movement does not refer to one system or style, but rather a specific approach towards the practice of martial arts.

5 It would also be short sighted to say that *budō* and *mudo* are just two words in different languages for the same phenomenon. The milieu these arts were shaped in has led to the emergence of substantive differences. Nevertheless, in this case I shall focus on commonalities rather than differences.

## TRAINING AS PERFORMANCE

Looking at martial arts training as performance is not entirely novel. However, scholarly works following this approach are rare. The most explicit attempt has been an essay by Deborah Klens-Bigman with the programmatic title of 'Toward a Theory of Martial Arts as Performance Art', first published in the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts* in 1999, and later republished in the book *Combat, Ritual, and Performance: Anthropology of the Martial Arts* [2002]. Klens-Bigman's theory has not gone unchallenged [Harrison 2007]. Nevertheless, she was the first to establish a comprehensive theory of the theatrical elements within martial arts training.

To do so, Klens-Bigman used a theoretical framework formulated by Richard Schechner [1988, 1993] to analyse the process of training and rehearsal in theatre and performance. She then located core principles of actor training in the practice of martial arts, specifically iaido. She showed that, similar to workshops in actor training, martial arts practice also provides a safe space where actions can be elaborated and experimented with [Klens-Bigman 1999: 10]. On the physical performance of technique, she states that, especially in the practice of solo forms, the martial artist has to *act* as if fighting actual opponents to express a 'truth of action' [Klens-Bigman 1999: 13]. In conclusion, she points out that martial arts training has to be viewed as theatrical performance, and establishes hypotheses for further study. However, she does not provide a systematic framework for this kind of analysis.

Another approach to the problem of martial arts as performance has been provided by D.S. Farrer. A cultural anthropologist, Farrer has studied several martial arts from (South) East Asia, especially *chow gar* southern mantis kung fu, *seni silat haqq melayu*, and *jingwu* while conducting 'performance ethnography' research [Farrer 2015: 35]. He uses the term 'performance ethnography' in the same way as Philipp Zarrilli, who had for his part undertaken similar studies of the Indian martial art *kalaripayattu* [Farrer 2009, 2013, 2015; Zarrilli 2000]. Both describe a methodology where a researcher 'joins in and learns a martial art from the ground up as a basis for writing and research' [Farrer 2015: 35]. This view does not necessarily postulate that the training itself is a theatrical performance, but rather that it is a social performance in the sense widely used in contemporary social and cultural theory.

In his paper 'Efficacy and Entertainment in Martial Arts Studies: Anthropological Perspectives' [2015], Farrer takes a further step towards theatricality as part of martial arts practice. Here, he introduces Schechner's 'infinity loop model' to describe relations between the aesthetic and the practical aspects in martial arts. The infinity loop model was introduced by Schechner to describe the interdependency between what he calls *social drama*, an actual social conflict, and *aesthetic*

*drama*, or ritual and eventually theatre. According to him, both flow into each other. Themes and topics from an actual drama in social life are displayed and reflected upon in aesthetic drama. This gives relief and conveys implicit knowledge on the solving of future social conflicts [Schechner 2006: 75].

Farrer uses this model to describe how martial technique can flow between combative application and aesthetic expression. Martial technique can be derived from actual combat and transformed into tools of aesthetic expression. For him, problems occur if the emphasis in this interchanging relationship is too far slanted on the aesthetic side, i.e. if there is too much focus on the aesthetics while actual combat is neglected. This may result in the spread of false assumptions regarding the application of martial technique. In this context, he introduces the terms *efficacy* and *entertainment*. For him, martial arts contain both, to different degrees. While Schechner uses these terms rather polemically to differentiate between contemporary (Broadway) theatre and socially relevant rituals, Farrer uses them to differentiate between martial arts as fighting and stage arts [Farrer 2015: 37ff]. He concludes that there is an ever-present aesthetic aspect within martial arts practice. However, it must be viewed as such, and not mistaken for practical fighting skills.

Reciprocally, it should be noted that there is also a kind of practicality within the aesthetic realm. The aesthetic is the mode in which martial arts function as cultural phenomena. When defining martial arts as cultural frames for social actions, the aesthetic has to be viewed as a mode through which information is communicated. Thinking about *budō/mudo*, which employ a pedagogical approach, raises questions about the role of aesthetic images in the transmission of norms, values, and ideals.

How can this process be studied in martial arts training? A systematized model of martial arts training as theatrical performance could facilitate further in-depth studies. Andreas Kotte's model of *scenic processes* ['Szenische Vorgänge' Kotte 2005: 15ff] is a useful theory when applied to martial arts training because of its comprehensiveness. Kotte defines *scenic processes* as the most fundamental criteria for theatre and theatricality. They consist of two factors, which are *accentuation* (*Hervorhebung*) and *decrease of consequences* (*Konsequenzverminderung*) [Kotte 2005: 45]. *Accentuation* is a mode of display that Kotte describes as elevation or alteration from the 'ordinary life' or ordinary behaviour. It creates an aesthetic interaction between actor and spectator. In the case of martial arts training, both roles are immanent in each disciple. The disciple acts, and simultaneously observes him or herself, the other disciples, and the master. *Decrease of consequences* means reduced consequences while performing an action, thereby creating a safe atmosphere for the performance of *accentuated actions*.

## MARTIAL ARTS TRAINING AS SCENIC PROCESS DECREASE OF CONSEQUENCES AND ACCENTUATION

One can simply look to the concept of 'training' itself to understand the decrease of consequences within martial arts practice. To create a situation in which physical actions can be explored, trained, and experimented with, a reduction of possible consequences is necessary. This decrease of consequences is in most cases accomplished by instituting specific rules which are either articulated or emulated. In martial arts training, this process can be observed in all kinds of training scenarios. The utilisation of specific pieces of equipment like heavy bags, kick shields, and mitts is an obvious mechanism for the reduction of consequences. In karate-do and taekwondo, a so-called 'forging post'<sup>6</sup> is used as well. A forging post is an erected wooden plank that is fixed to the ground. In size, it measures to about the height of the practitioner's shoulder, while the width is about 10 cm. The striking surface is padded either with rice straw or other materials. It is usually used for practising straight strikes, but can be used for a wide variety of techniques as well. All these props allow an execution of techniques with full force, without the danger of hurting a partner.

'Basic technique', which in this case refers to structured defensive and offensive moves<sup>7</sup>, is known as *kihon* (基本), or *kibon dongjak* (기본 동작), and is initially learned in individual or solo practice, with students normally standing in rows. In this case, attacks and defences are withdrawn from their actual context, as is also the case in forms practice or in application drills with a (fully or partly cooperative) partner. The compliance of the partner eliminates any distraction from the actual execution of a technique, enabling unimpeded focus on aesthetic expression.

To a lesser degree, the concept of decreased consequences is also observable in the practice of pre-arranged sparring.<sup>8</sup> In this case, it is forbidden to use full force on the partner. Additionally, all phases of

6 While the Japanese term *makiwara* (巻藁) is used exclusively in karate, taekwondo uses different names, such as *dallyeon mok* (단련목), *dallyeon joo* (단련주), *dallyeon dae* (단련대). *Dallyeon joo*, however, is used most widely [Choi 1987; Milnes 2009].

7 In the current discourse, the term technique is used to describe what in martial arts would equal to the term style. Technique in Performance Studies refers to a whole systematised body of knowledge [Spatz 2015: 27ff]. Here, technique refers to the single movement, which in total makes up the body of knowledge of a style.

8 In karate-do and taekwondo/taekwon-do, pre-arranged sparring is mostly referred to as: *sebon-/hanbon-kyorugi* (세본겨루기/한본겨루기), *sambo-/ilbo daeryeon* (삼보대련/일보대련), *kihon-sanbon-/kihon-ippun-kumite* (基本三本組手/基本一本組手).

attack and defence are predefined and rigidly structured. All of this is evident in the progression of attack and defence, which in taekwondo is initiated by the attacker by moving the right foot back in a low front stance (*앞굽이*) and simultaneously executing a left sided low block (*Arae Makgi*, 아래막기) while executing a yell (*Ki Hap*, 기합).<sup>9</sup> The defending person answers this with a yell as well, and indicates that the attacker can launch their assault. This is usually done with a straight punch to the chest while moving forward in a low front stance. Depending on the arrangement, the attacker can attack once or more while the defender has to deflect the attacks and counter with a prescribed combination.

The performance of forms in martial arts training also follows the same principle of decreased consequences. In martial arts such as karate, taekwondo and related arts, forms<sup>10</sup> are performed exclusively in a solo manner. In others such as judo, forms are executed with a partner as a form of pre-arranged sparring. Forms as solo practice, however, allow for a different quality of decreased consequences. Not only does this mode of practice provide a secure context, it also enables the practitioner to execute techniques exclusively by the logic of aesthetics. In pre-arranged sparring, there is still a partner that might end up at the wrong angle or distance, and this will influence one's execution of the techniques. In the practice of solo forms, as in budō/mudo, there is no such complication to disturb one's aesthetic expression.

Accentuation, according to Kotte, includes *spatial accentuation*, *gestural accentuation*, *acoustic accentuation*, and *accentuation by tangible attributes* (*örtliche Hervorhebung*, *gestische Hervorhebung*, *akustische Hervorhebung*, *Hervorhebung mittels dinglicher Attribute*) [Kotte 2005: 28]. The spaces in which martial arts training takes place are accentuated in many ways. Mostly referred to as a *dojo* (道場) or *dojang* (도장), the space usually displays a variety of specific decorations. These can vary and often include cultural and nationalistic imagery, though one may also detect pop culture references. Recurring motifs include pictures of historical masters, contemporary idols, or specific calligraphies that include the style's name, sayings of past masters or the school's rules. National flags and different artefacts are used as well. Their function is to designate the space as a special one wherein personal or collective fantasies are experienced [Bowman 2015: 56ff].

Decoration, however, is only a part of this process. The symbolic nature of the space is also constructed by the performance of articulated rules and structured routines. Both entering and leaving the space is structured by predefined 'social choreographies' [Klein 2009]. In the

9 In Japanese *kiiai* (気合).

10 *Kata* (型)/*poomsae* (품새)/*tul* (틀)/*hyeong* (형)/*taolu* (套路).

case of karate-do, according to Christian Oehmichen, you bow while expressing 'Oss' [Oehmichen 2012: 60]. In iaido, entering and leaving is done silently, with a formalised bow to the main calligraphy with the name of the style [Klens-Bigman 1999: 10]. In taekwondo, entering and leaving the space is done in a similar way, though the bowing is directed to the Korean national flag rather than the calligraphy [Minarik 2014: 84]. Bowing is a central gesture, not only when entering and leaving the space, but also during predefined rituals, that mark the beginning and end of a training session. Oehmichen describes this detail in the case of karate-do:

**In the most extensive mode, all disciples line up according to their rank ... In front of them stands the teacher or Sensei ... Usually the highest ranked student, who stands at the right side of the front row, leads the ceremony by verbal commands. First, he yells 'Mutsuobi-dachi', which means to take up an attentive position, followed by the command 'Rei', which means to perform a respectful bow. After that, 'Seiza' is commanded, which means to take a seated position; ... Usually, you initially bend your left knee, to intentionally show your heart to the Sensei in front of you ... Now follows the command 'Shomen ni Rei', whereupon everybody bows to the training hall as a symbol of the art ... After this, the master turns to the disciples, whereon the highest ranked student gives the command 'Sensei ni Rei', which requests the students to bow to the master ... Now, the highest ranked student turns to the other students and gives the command 'Otagi ni Rei'. Consequently, all students bow to each other. After that, all students are commanded to stand up. The master stands up first, followed by the disciples. Everybody again takes the initial 'Mutsuobi-dachi'. Finally, a last time 'Rei' is yelled, whereupon everybody bows to the front.<sup>11</sup>**  
[Oehmichen 2012: 60ff]

11 'In der längsten Variante stellen sich alle Trainierenden gemäß der Graduierung in einer Reihe auf ... In einigem Abstand vor dieser Reihe steht dann der Trainer oder Sensei ... Im Regelfall äußert der höchstgraduierte Schüler rechts außen die Kommandos, welche den jeweiligen Abschnitt der Ritualhandlung einleiten. Zunächst ist dies das Kommando 'Mutsuobi-dachi', welches das Einnehmen einer bestimmten Stellung bedeutet, gefolgt vom Kommando 'Rei', was dann die Respekt bekundende Verbeugung meint. Danach erfolgt das Kommando 'Seiza', was das Absitzen aller einleitet; ... Im Normalfall beugt man erst sein linkes Knie, mit der Intention, sein Herz offen nach vorne zum Sensei zu zeigen. ... Nun erfolgt das Kommando 'Shome ni Rei', daraufhin wird seitens aller Beteiligten eine Verbeugung vor der Halle als Sinnbild der Kunst ausgeübt ... Nach dieser ersten Verbeugung setzt sich der Sensei zur Gruppe hin und der höchstgraduierte Schüler gibt das Kommando 'Sensei ni Rei'. Danach erfolgt seitens der Schüler eine Verbeugung zum Meister; ... Der höchstgraduierte Schüler setzt sich nach Links hin um, ... und es erfolgt das Kommando 'Otagi ni Rei', als Verbeugung aller Schüler zueinander. Danach wird ein Kommando zum Erheben aller seitens des höchstgraduierten Schülers ausgesprochen. Der Sensei erhebt sich zuerst, daraufhin folgen von rechts außen in der Reihe alle Schüler und nehmen wieder die Stellung 'Mutsuobi-dachi' ein. Als abschließendes Kommando erfolgt wieder ein 'Rei' und alle verbeugen sich erneut in Richtung der Hallenwand'. [Oehmichen 2012: 60ff]

Klens-Bigman describes a very similar, but less extensive, ceremony in iaido. Here, the first bow addresses the main calligraphy of the training hall, the second is to the master, and a third one is directed toward a decorative sword [Klens-Bigman 1999: 10]. In taekwondo,<sup>12</sup> a similar ceremony is performed to start and close the training session. As in Oehmichen's example, the highest ranked student is the master of ceremonies. Everybody is lined up according to their rank, usually with the highest ranked student on the right side of the front row while the master stands in front of them facing the front of the hall. On command, everybody turns to the reverse side of the hall to adjust their clothing. They turn back to the front as commanded. This is followed by the command 'Charyeot! Kukki-ye Kyongne!', which can be translated as 'Attention! Bow to the flag!' On command, everybody stands at attention and bows to the flag. This is followed by the command 'Charyeot! Sabomnim-kke Kyongne!', which means 'Attention! Bow to the instructor!' [Minarik 2014: 97]

*Gestural accentuation* is defined as a mode of action where the body is used as a semiotic vehicle to create a separation from what would normally be described as ordinary actions [Kotte 2005: 25]. This is a very broad definition. Gestural accentuation can mean, for instance, performing everyday movements in an exaggerated manner. Richard Schechner states that stylized and rhythmic performance of movement are essential for theatre and also performance in general [Schechner 2006: 65]. While Schechner does not use the term gestural accentuation explicitly, he does refer to the corporeal dimension of theatrical performances, a concept which, in martial arts training, is quite evident.

The basic issue when using Kotte's concept of gestural accentuation is how gestures in martial arts training differ from those in ordinary life. Fighting and the intentional practice of martial moves are to be mentioned as optional cultural factors. Especially in democratic, humanitarian societies, unregulated or non-consensual physical violence is seen as transgressive. Here, the sheer practice of martial technique can be seen as gestural accentuation. Apart from that, there is another possible conception. If combat, as a form of condensed interaction between individuals that strives towards its shortest conclusion, is postulated as 'natural', as part of 'everyday life', then the techniques of martial arts are to be defined as something that is elevated from this 'everyday life' through stylized, formalised, and rhythmic actions.

These are to be found in basic technique, forms, and pre-arranged sparring. The body of knowledge consists of motions that are executed in a wide range of motions and with an exaggerated chambering of actions. Chambering usually means to move the limbs involved in the opposite direction to the actual vector of action. This is also a concept that is described by theatre director and anthropologist Eugenio Barba

12 At this point, 'taekwondo' explicitly refers to kukki taekwondo (WTF).

when outlining constitutive principles of *bios*, or the physical stage appearance of performers [Barba 1996, 2006].

The *principle of opposition*, as he calls it, is also to be located in the basic techniques of *chen taiji quan* [Mroz 2016: 46]. Also, by practising techniques in slow motion, with excessive chambering, it is clear that they are performed so as to become meaningful for each disciple by being decomposed into discrete phases to make their body mechanics more legible [ibid.]. All of this suggests what Barba calls the *principle of equivalency*.

Much martial arts training includes a wide range of kicking techniques, and some styles include many that can be regarded as *exceptional* kicking techniques [Minarik 2014: 126]. These are executed while jumping and/or spinning, and are targeted above waist level. This can be viewed (as can throwing in grappling arts) as an example of what Barba calls the *principle of balance* [Minarik 2014: 118; Mroz 2016: 46]. The sum total of these accentuated gestures as techniques and choreographies makes up the explicit embodied knowledge of martial arts.

*Acoustic accentuation* in martial arts training is to be found in the previously mentioned martial yell, or *kiai/kihap*. The uttered sound may vary from disciple to disciple, but the main principle remains the same: To accentuate one's breathing during the technique. By explosively exhaling, the lower torso is contracted rapidly, which further enhances the force of the technique. The martial yell is also used to emphasise one's focus and presence with respect to a possible enemy, the other disciples, or oneself. From a cultural perspective, the act of yelling might be viewed as something that does not conform with the norms of everyday life. The use of unusual language, be it a foreign language or an antiquated one, serves a similar purpose.

The usage of stylized clothing, accessories, and artefacts can be viewed as *accentuation by tangible attributes* [Kotte 2005: 28]. In martial arts, the wearing of special uniforms is omnipresent. The *dogi* (道着) in karate-do or judo, the *hakama* (袴) in kendo or aikido, as well as the *dobok* (도복) in taekwondo or hapkido, are the most prominent examples of something similar to a costume in theatre. The *martial dress* creates a sense of community. In its semiotic dimension, it may also refer to certain philosophical concepts [Minarik 2014: 88ff], historical eras (historical dress), and social groups (e.g., historical warrior classes).<sup>13</sup>

13 Most obviously, this refers to the Japanese Bushi, or Samurai. However, a very recent example is to be found in the Korean martial art of taekkyeon (daehan taekkyeon), where a research project was conducted to develop a taekkyeon uniform based on the *cheollik*, a dress worn by officials and soldiers of the Goryeo-Dynasty (918-1392). This uniform was adopted in 2002 [Rubbeling 2014: 149].

The usage of historical weapons, primarily perhaps the Japanese katana (刀), can be seen as a materialization of a romanticised past; as the pinnacle of ultimate swordsmanship through the merging of courage, physical excellence, and wisdom. Apart from *martial dress*, there is typically a lot of emphasis given to wearing a special belt, which usually indicates the rank of the disciple in the hierarchy of the system. It is known as *obi* (帯), or *ddy* (띠), and can even take a role similar to a spiritual fetish [Böhme 2006: 17]. According to this belief, the belt absorbs the fighting spirit of the practitioner, which is generated through hard and diligent training. Therefore, one should abstain from washing the belt, to not wash out the fighting spirit. Apart from any spiritual meaning, the black belt bears a particularly heavy symbolic meaning. Both laymen and practitioners view the black belt as a symbol of mastery. In any case, the black belt marks a certain position in the hierarchy. By using golden stripes on the belt, the hierarchical categories are further delineated. Judo and most styles of karate-do use a red-and-white belt, and finally a red belt, to further distinguish the highest ranks.

Decrease of consequence and accentuation are constitutive aspects of martial arts training. It is an aesthetically staged form of interaction that occurs in a safe and accentuated environment, while including different manifestations of gestural, acoustic, and object-related accentuation. It therefore can be viewed as a *scenic process*, a form of theatrical performance.

Following Elam [1980/2002] and Fischer-Lichte [1983a, b, c; 2014], martial arts training can be seen as a coded form of aesthetic performance which can be deciphered, but only to a certain degree. However, when considering present debates in German theatre and performance studies [Klein and Sting 2005; Fischer-Lichte 2012; Klein and Göbel 2017], a purely semiotic-centred approach to martial arts training would be insufficient. Elements of gestural, acoustic, and object-related accentuation can be deciphered and analysed to some extent as signs that refer to specific cultural, political, and social entities. At the same time, signs can be de- and re-contextualized [Derrida 1972/1999]. Therefore, they cannot be unambiguously deciphered without considering the context of the specific training. This also includes activities and relationships that go beyond the training situation itself, and the social setting within which the practice is embedded. The elements of gestural, acoustic, and object-related accentuation must not be viewed solely as signs with a specific semantic correspondence, but also materialistically as entities by/through which meaning is created and re-shaped in the process of training.

As already mentioned, the theatrical staging of martial arts training varies. The decrease of consequence varies depending on the mode of pre-arranged sparring, or how much emphasis is put on the practice

of basic techniques and form. However, the emphasis placed on these forms of practice is usually very high.

The type of accentuation also varies. The intentional accentuation of the space, actions, clothing, and accessories may vary in appearance, but always occurs in one form or another. What does this have to do with the proclaimed emphasis of martial arts on personal and social development? Theatrical staging does not totally exclude the possibility of teaching techniques for actual combat in martial arts training. It does, however, put the emphasis on aesthetics, while simultaneously lowering the attention paid to the practice's combat efficiency. This describes what Farrer would call a case of entertainment before efficacy [Farrer 2015]. The lack of combat efficacy, however, does not mean a lack of any effectiveness at all.

## MARTIAL ARTS, SOCIETY, AND THE ROLE OF THEATRICAL STAGING

What is known today as the modern East Asian martial arts began to develop out of the massive changes that took place in those societies in the 19th century. This was due to the agglomeration of cultural, political, and social interaction that was forced upon the region not only by Western countries but equally by the political and social changes that took place within those countries themselves. In the cultural competition for global acceptance and regional domination, martial arts started to be employed as a means of physical education for the individual, social, and eventually body politic, embodying norms and values that were relevant at that time. While judo was meant by its founder Jigoro Kano (1860-1938) to be a vehicle to build strong and humanitarian individuals who would prevail on a global stage, kendo and karate were later used as pedagogical tools in times of imperialism, to implement an ethic of nationalism, militarism, and ultimately a form of fascism within Japanese society [Meyer 2014: 69]. Chinese martial arts were similarly restructured under the influence of progressive nationalist tendencies in the late Qing Dynasty and early republican era (end of 19th century and beginning of 20th century) by organizations such as the Jingwu Athletic Association (精武体育会) and later the Central Guoshu Institute (中央国术馆) [Filipiak 2001; Morris 2004; Kennedy and Guo 2005, 2010]. What they sought is very aptly stated by *xinyi quan* master Sun Lu Tang in the preface of his book *The Study of Xinyi Boxing* [1915]:

**A strong country cannot be composed of weak people. We cannot make people strong without physical training. To brace up the people by physical training is the way to strengthen**

**the country ... Martial arts has been put into the curriculum in schools so that the students can be trained in both literary and military arts.**  
[cited in Kennedy and Guo 2005: 106]

Chinese martial arts underwent radical changes at that time towards an ideal, which Philipps has characterized as the 'YMCA consensus', defined as an orientation towards Western ideas of scientific rationalism, humanitarianism, and rejection of archaic superstition [Philipps 2016]. In 1923, the first Chinese Wushu Games were held in Shanghai. In 1928, the Guoshu Guan, the national wushu-centre, opened in what at the time was the capital, Nanjing. Under the influence of the People's Republic, martial arts were at first frowned upon but from the late 1950s willingly employed as a pedagogical tool and global flagship of Chinese culture [Brownell 1995].

Contemporary Korean martial arts developed mainly after the Korean War (1950-1953), and under the heavy influence of Japanese styles such as karate-do, judo, and kendo. Among Korean martial arts, taekwondo has a special position as *kukki* (국기), or 'national force', which is the name president Park Chung Hee officially gave it in 1971 [Moenig 2016, 2017]. From the beginning, taekwondo was meant to be a form of identification, emancipation, and empowerment for the Korean people, as well as a global trademark. It emerged as a cultural performance by which the newly established country demonstrated its confidence both to itself and to the world [Minarik 2014: 137ff]. Historically, in all three states the restructuring of existing martial technique, and the creation of what we know as martial arts, occurred at roughly the same point in time.

How is the contemporary practice of martial arts to be understood against this background? How is martial arts training staged in the current era, and how is their semantic content appropriated to be practised as martial ways in a democratic culture? Which norms, values, and ideals are staged in the contemporary practice of martial arts? How have cultural, social, and political discourses affected the aesthetics of martial arts? These questions remain open, but still are necessary to evaluate the social and political relevance of martial arts. An aesthetic and dramaturgical analysis of selected martial arts training might support this endeavour.

## CONCLUSION

The relationship between martial arts and performance art goes much deeper than many practitioners would like to admit. Martial arts have often played an integral role as cultural performances, as parts of rituals, and as social celebrations of different kinds. Martial arts have also had a deep impact on both historical and contemporary stage arts. The subject of this paper has been the training of gendai budō/mudo as theatrical performance. While there are already studies that discuss theatricality in martial arts practice, the aim here was to provide a systematic structuring of theatrical elements in martial arts training which could further be applied to the training of different martial arts in comparative case studies. For this purpose, Andreas Kotte's theory of scenic processes was used to arrange different phenomena in martial arts training in a systematic structure, representing the constitutive aspects of theatricality as derived from theatre and performance art. It has been shown that the training of gendai budō/mudo consists of a decrease of consequences and a high degree of accentuation, namely spatial accentuation, gestural accentuation, acoustic accentuation, and accentuation by tangible attributes.

Gendai budō/mudo were used to elaborate a systematic approach to analyse martial arts as theatrical performance for their emphasis on aesthetics and technical expertise as opposed to practical fighting applications. However, while a high degree of theatricality is present in these systems, it is of course also seen elsewhere and not only in East Asian martial arts. In fact, with this model, it is also possible to determine the level of theatricality in martial arts training and their practice as a whole: Not only in obviously stylized systems, but also in less 'traditional' systems, and even in self-stated practical systems that claim to have dropped any outdated or unpractical theatricality in training.

While theatricality in martial arts is usually seen as something for enjoyment or possibly to improve and display athleticism, it has been argued here that it is far more than mere entertainment. Rather, it is a mode of communication to convincingly elevate and spread information. It is therefore not coincidental that the highly theatrical gendai budō/mudo were formed in an era where martial arts were being used as pedagogical tools for physical education. Under this paradigm, martial arts were restructured and aesthetically modified and reshaped. It is therefore possible to trace ideological features such norms, values, and ideals in the theatrical staging of martial arts training.

So, what kind of aesthetics do martial arts use now, and what kinds of norms, values, and ideals are being promulgated in the contemporary practice of martial arts training? These questions are currently being investigated in the author's research on the practice of taekwondo in South Korea. An ethnographic case study of the training practice in a selected taekwondo school in Seoul has been conducted, along with additional surveys of the various manifestations of taekwondo in South Korea.

On the basis of this work-in-progress, it can be stated that generalizations concerning systems of martial arts, in this case taekwondo, should be avoided. Even in one system, as in the highly systematised kukki-taekwondo, there are a multitude of training objectives such as Olympic sparring, forms-competition, physical education, and self-defence training, which all have different training designs and incorporate different levels of theatricality. Valid statements on the theatricality of martial arts training, and consequently the staging of norms, values, and ideals, can only be given on the basis of particular case studies. Hence, the function of this paper is not the offering of a 'complete' theory of martial arts training as theatrical performance. Rather, it provides a framework by which individual case studies can be conducted.

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