Acceptance and sublimation of aggressiveness and violence in Japanese martial arts: from a view-point of the history of the techniques and equipment used in budo

Susumu Nagao
Meiji University, Japan

Abstract

Japanese martial arts have been developed and passed down under the proposition of ‘sublimating the violence inherent in the martial arts while accepting it.’ Let me cite a few examples of this from my perspective as a researcher with a focus on the history of the techniques and equipment used in the martial arts. In kendo, the Japanese art of fencing, a shinai (bamboo sword) and several pieces of protective armour—men (face guard), kote (hand and forearm protectors), dou (breastplate), and tare (groin and leg protectors)—have been developed, which allow a kendoka (kendo practitioner) to make direct full-contact blows and thrusts that were impossible to make in Kata Kenjutsu (traditional swordplay). Through the use of this armour, we can ensure safety and give consideration to avoiding fatal injury while accepting—to an extent—the violence inherent in martial arts. The main purpose of the art of grappling in jujutsu or judo is to gain a victory by holding down, ‘pinning’ or otherwise restraining an opponent, not by delivering a death blow. Such a proposition can also be seen in binding techniques where the knots and lashings used to tie up an opponent are designed so that the opponent can be released at any time. As can be seen from the above, the concepts inherited by Japanese martial arts are effective measures by which to explore the theme of the HMA Congress.

Key words: injury • jujutsu • judo • kendo • sword

Published online: 17 September 2015
Copyright: © 2015 the Author. Published by Archives of Budo
Contributor: Susumu Nagao conceived the study design, collected and analysed the data, prepared the manuscript and secured the funding.
Funding: None
Conflict of interest: Author has declared that no competing interest exists
Ethical approval: Not required
Provenance and peer review: Under responsibility of HMA Congress
Corresponding author: Susumu Nagao, School of Global Japanese Studies, Meiji University, 1-1 Kanda-surugadai, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 101-8301 Japan; e-mail: nagao@meiji.ac.jp
Open Access License: This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial 4.0 International (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and is otherwise in compliance with the license

INTRODUCTION

First of all, I would like to express my respect to the mission of the Congress, ‘a scientific argument justifying the permanent strengthening of all dimensions of health through rational practice of martial arts as a counterweight to the expansion of a culture of violence’. My belief is that the legacy that Japanese martial arts have inherited can contribute to the mission of the Congress to a certain degree. In my opinion, since the late Muromachi period, Japanese martial arts have been developed and passed down under the proposition of ‘sublimating the aggressiveness and violence inherent in the martial arts while accepting it’. As the field of my research is the history of the techniques and equipment used in the budo, especially kendo, I will explain my position by presenting a few examples from my perspective.

EXAMPLES IN SWORDPLAY AND KENDO

Rites relating to swords date back to the age of Gods and ancient times, and the techniques used to make a warped sword—called wantou, a characteristic sword of Japan—to the middle of the Heian period (10th Century). The origin of today’s kendo (an athletic sport in which a practitioner wears four pieces of protective armour—men (face and head guard), kote (hand and forearm protector), dou (breastplate) and tare (groin and leg protector)—and delivers blows and passes to an opponent with a bamboo sword called a shinai) can be found in shinai uchikomi geiko (practice striking and thrusting with shinai and protective gear) that had been established in the middle Edo period (1710’s).

The time during which Kamiizumi lived (1508? – 1577?) was the middle of a turbulent warring period in the Age of Civil Wars. Why then did Kamiizumi dare to devise the fukuro shinai and the theory of marobashi in such times? From the age of his maturity to his later years, the production, distribution and use of guns increased in Japan and the gun played the major role on the battlefield. It is presumed that Kamiizumi was aware of the limitations of battles among individuals armed with the Japanese sword, and looked to a way of keeping swordsmanship alive in such times. The techniques and the theories created by Kamiizumi were handed down to the Hikitakage-ryu School and the Yagyu Shinkage-ryu School which were derived from the Shinkage-ryu School.

Kamiizumi was the lord of Ohgo Castle in Kohzuke Province (present-day Gunma Prefecture). After losing a battle with the Hohjo Clan, Kamiizumi surrendered the castle. During his time with the Nagano Family, whom he served thereafter, he suffered misery due to the fall of castle. Eventually, he embarked on a training tour around all of Japan with his disciples, and mastered swordsmanship and the art of war. Kamiizumi was the master of three key origins of swordsmanship: the Nen-ryu, Shinto-ryu and Kage-ryu schools. His most important act was to extract kimyo (a secret distinct from other schools) from the Kage-ryu School and established the Shinkage School.

Specifically, kimyo means the techniques and theory known as marobashi. This is a smooth circular and free motion conducted according to an opponent’s action without deviating to any of the four dimensions—ken (attack), tai (defence), hyo (front), ri (back)—and resembling a round ball rolling on a board in body, mind and sword (Ref. Seiden Shinkage-ryu by Toshinaga Yagyu). This marked a conversion from setsunintou, sword to kill people by overwhelming an opponent by power and speed; to katsuninken, sword to take advantage and control of opponent’s attack (the terms setsunintou and katsuninken are derived from Zen words).

ARTIFICE OF SHINAI IN THE SHINKAGE-RYU SCHOOL AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

In chronological order, the hikihada shinai was devised by Nobutsuna Kamiizumi in the late Muromachi period (around 1550’s). The leather wrapping on a sword scabbard is called the hikihada, and a hikihada shinai is a piece of bamboo measuring around 38-39 inches (97-100 cm) in length inserted into a hikihada with a split from the centre to the front. It also is known as a fukuro shinai. In a practice or a match (duelling) of that time, a practitioner usually used a wooden sword, but it was not common for real swords to be used, which might occasionally result in wounds or death. With the invention of the non-painful and non-lethal fukuro shinai by Kamiizumi, practitioners of the school of Kamiizumi (the Shinkage-ryu School) could practice direct full-contact blows against each other, and were no longer limited to sundome (non-contact) blows.

Kagetomo Hikita (1537? – 1605?) was one of the early disciples of Kamiizumi. Hikita served the Hosokawa Family. When he was on the verge of turning 60, Hikita asked for leave and left on a training tour (knight errantry) around all of Japan from 1595 to 1601. During his training tour, the Battle of Sekigahara—the biggest battle in Japanese history—took place in 1600. What drove Hikita in his golden years to go on a training tour around Japan in such turbulent times was a sense of crisis that the Shinkage-ryu School established by Kamiizumi had
split into several sects in which the instructions and the understanding differed among students.

According to *Hikita Bungoro Nyudo Seiunsai Kaikokuki*, which described the training tour of Hikita, he faced 24 opponents in matches during the training tour. The breakdown of weapons that the opponent used in the matches was: wooden sword 10 people; *fukuro shinai* 5 people; stick 2 people; cane 1 person; either a stick or a cane 1 person; and unknown weapons 5 people. No opponents used a real sword, and the majority of opponents used a wooden sword in the match. Furthermore, no description appeared in the book of Hikita killing or injuring an opponent or of he himself being injured.

The savage atmosphere that was seen in the matches of Musashi Miyamoto who walked across the provinces of Japan in later years was not felt in *Hikita Bungoro Nyudo Seiunsai Kaikokuki*. Of course, even a wooden sword has lethal potential and some of Hikita’s opponents used a metal-reinforced wooden sword or a stick measuring 152 to 182 cm in length. Hikita’s courage in fighting his opponents with a *fukuro shinai* measuring just 100 cm in length and his ability to gain victories in all the matches is deserving of admiration [1].

During Kamiizumi’s tour, one opponent, Munetoshi (or Muneyoshi) Yagyu, who was the leading swordsman in the *Goki* (five provinces closely to the Emperor Home City Kyoto, an area to the south of Kyoto, Osaka and Nara prefectures), lost his match with Kamiizumi and became a disciple of Kamiizumi. Kamiizumi presented Munetoshi with a challenge to fight in the battlefield had decreased in the extreme,

sufficiently well with just a *fukuro shinai*—regardless of how strong the opponent’s weapon was.

A son of Munetoshi, Munenori Yagyu (the author of the *Heiho Kadensho*) who served the Tokugawa Family as a sword instructor, applied the concept of *setsunintou* and *katsuninken* to politics in his understanding. Force is violence, and a weapon is an unfortunate and ominous instrument in the first place (the concept of *setsunintou*). However, Munenori developed a theory that stated that killing a bad person (*setsunintou*) could save the lives of many people (*katsuninken*). In other words, the use of a weapon for building peace changes the unfortunate and ominous *setsunintou* into *katsuninken*. His way of thinking was reflected during the reign of Iemitsu Tokugawa, the third shogun of the Tokugawa Family, who adored Munenori as a mentor or father figure.

The foundation of the Tokugawa shogunate, which lasted for 260 years, was said to be established during the reign of Iemitsu, to which the Yagyu Shinkage-ryu School made a substantial contribution. Iemitsu frequently held cavalry battle games called *shinai-uchi* in the fields near Edo as training for samurai. Samurai who attended *shinai-uchi* training used a *fukuro shinai* as a weapon, not a sword or a wooden sword. It is presumed that *shina-uchi* were held to release the pent-up energy (violence) of *samurai*. However, Iemitsu’s plan was actually to limit the weapons that could be used in offensive and violent scenes to the *fukuro shinai*, which was a symbol of peace.

**IMPROVEMENT IN PROTECTIVE ARMOUR AND ESTABLISHMENT OF SHINAI UCHIKOMI GEIKO IN THE JIKISHINKAGE-RYU SCHOOL**

Based on the findings of the research into the history of swordplay, training armour was used in the late 1600s. However, this armour was fairly primary the face guard (*men*) made of bamboo strips not metal strips, and there was no padded cap inside—it was simply placed on the head. In the same manner, the hand and forearm protector (*kote*) was created based on the glove for the right hand that was used in Japanese archery (*yugake*). Those were also in a primary form, and had the purpose of minimizing injury during practice with wooden swords [2].

Sword practice at that time consisted mainly of practicing forms (*kata*) and, except for the schools such as the Shinkage-ryu School that used *fukuro shinai*, most schools used wooden swords and practitioners practiced *sundome* (non-contact) blows. Additionally, by virtue of the stable feudal system, opportunities to fight in the battlefield had decreased in the extreme,
which reduced the fighting spirit of samurai. Thus swordplay came to respect the beauty of style, including accomplished form and elegant action, which was called kaho.

In the 1710s, Mitsunori Yamada and his son Kunisato Naganuma, who belonged to the Jikishinkage-ryu School—which was part of the lineage of the Shinkage-ryu school, improved the training armour to depart from the kaho trend and establish sword training that was genuinely useful and effective. The men was fitted with a padded cap and the dou was made from bamboo based on battle armour (takegusoku). With a fukuro shinai of 3 feet (91 cm) in length added, shinai uchikomi geiko was established so that practitioners could make full contact blows [2]. In other words, they sought to replicate battle while freeing practitioners from concerns about injury while allowing the aggressiveness and violence inherent in swordplay, and also to attain the purpose of training for educating samurai.

**DEVELOPMENT OF SHINAI UCHIKOMI GEIKO**

In the 1750s, shinai uchikomi geiko that used training armour—men, kote and takegusoku—was encouraged also in the Nakanishiha Itto-ryu School. Each school in the domain started to adopt the practice of disciplinary training using training armour. In the 1780s, Sadanobu Matsudaira, the lord of the Shirakawa Domain (later roju—the shogun’s council of elders), urged the inclusion of elements of actual battle and discipline in all martial arts including sword and spear. Sadanobu ordered the domain to do so saying “The logical school is popular in recent swordplay as is the case with Zen. However, swordplay is supposed to study victory or defeat in the course of nature by striking each other without thinking logically. We should learn from schools teaching the art of the spear and the swordplay involving trusting and striking while wearing training armour.”

Around the same time, Yasuchika Matsudaira, who was the lord of the Mimasaka/Tsuyama Domain and had a deep friendship with Sadanobu, decreed that both domains were relatives of the Tokugawa Family (Shinpan), although they were located on opposite sides of Japan, and geographically stood at the forefront in confronting outside feudal lords of powerful domains (Tozama Yukan). Therefore, both domains placed importance on these policies as measures to educate samurai.

The background to the use of such disciplinary training and the encouragement of matches with other schools in the Shirakawa and Tsuyama domains was that both domains were relatives of the Tokugawa Family (Shinpan), although they were located on opposite sides of Japan, and geographically stood at the forefront in confronting outside feudal lords of powerful domains (Tozama Yukan). Therefore, both domains placed importance on these policies as measures to educate samurai.

The encouragement of shinai uchikomi geiko missed the original purpose (secure the elements of actual battle and disciplinary training) over the course of time, which increased the number of those who participated simply seeking the amusement and fun of the swordplay wearing training armour. That was a remote cause of swordplay uniting with competitive performances in the later times [3].

After the establishment of the feudal system, training tours around the country (knight errantry) or matches with other schools were prohibited in public because they might cause trouble. However, from the 1790s onwards, some people went on training tours pretending to go on pilgrimages to places such as Ise or Konpira shrine, and positively exchanged information on sword techniques and how to make training armour. In the 1830s, the training armour had a close performance to that of the today’s armour, and a shinai or called wari-shinai, was employed that was made of a large piece of bamboo split into 4 or 5 parts, nearly the same as today’s shinai.

A particularly strong fighter was Susumu Ohishi, who was a feudal retainer of the Yanagawa Domain in Chikugo. Standing 2.12 m tall, Susumu was a master of the spear, and he would come uninvited to training halls in Edo and defeat everyone in sight using a naga-shinai of 5 feet 3 inches (about 161 cm) in length. Therefore, each training hall had a naga-shinai as a countermeasure when fighting against Ohishi. Additionally, foot movements called okuri-ashi or fumikomi-ashi (stepping-in) were frequently used that had the same footwork as the foot movements used in today’s kendo.

As seen from the above, although shinai uchikomi geiko was developed to attain the elements of real battle and disciplinary training in the beginning, it improved to using nearly the same equipment and techniques as today’s kendo and united the technique that deviated from a real battle with the use of sword,
Subsequently throughout the 1850s, the techniques of swordplay were divided into two types; techniques to be used in kata or a fight with a real sword, and techniques for competition. As a major example, we note Shusaku Chiba, who was the founder of the Hokushin Itto-ryu School (lineage of the Nakanishiha Itto-ryu School). Shusaku systematized techniques unique to swordplay using a wari-shi-nai, including fumikomi-ashi stepping, and used them separately from the techniques for kata or fighting with a real sword.

On the other hand, Nobutomo Odani who belonged to the Jikishinkage-ryu School and served as a chief of the shogunate military academy (Bakufu Kobusho) aimed to find a compromise between the elements of real battle and disciplinary training and the equipment and techniques unique to the swordplay with the use of a shinai. As a representative example of his efforts, Odani set the length of shinai as 3 feet 8 inches (about 115 cm) as a rule at the academy, which was nearly the same length as the shinai used in today’s kendo of 3 feet 9 inches (about 118 cm).

Judging from the equipment and the technique, kendo had already been provided with the completeness and the same content as today’s kendo by the end of the Edo period. It can be said that kendo is a physical exercise culture in that it avoids deviation from the elements of real battle and disciplinary training as far as possible, while allowing the aggressiveness and violence inherent in swordsmanship to a certain extent and, at the same time, generates and passes on the competitive techniques unique to swordplay using a shinai. These characteristics of kendo have allowed it to be passed down until today as a measure for recreation or education based on the safety secured from the use of training armour and a shinai.

Fainting caused by choking, known as ochi, is loss of consciousness caused by transient functional disorder. During a judo match, after an umpire declares the conclusion of a match, prompt treatment helps quicken the natural awakening from ochi, which is commonly known as “resuscitation” (katsu). Kappou, which has been inherited by jujutsu, is said to have a wide variety of contents. Kappou as used in today’s judo has several types of restoring breathing that are used to aid recovery from fainting caused mainly from choking, and there are several types of restoration techniques for testicles that have been pushed up into the abdominal cavity by kicking them [5]. The Takenouchi-ryu School is one of the oldest schools of jujutsu in Japan, and was formally known as Takenouchi-ryu Jujutsu Koshinomawari Kogusoku, which was a comprehensive martial art with grappling with an opponent in the Age of Civil Wars called “torite koshinomawari kogusoku” as a core and said to be the origin of jujutsu (Ref. Website of Old Martial Arts of Japan). As you can see in demonstrations by the Takenouchi School, the style employed kappou and hojojutsu in addition to the techniques of jujutsu. Furthermore, the knots and lashings used are designed to permit the easy release of an opponent.

Hojojutsu is said to be come from China along with arresting tools in the middle of the 1500s. The art was improved and developed during the course of its in other words, competitive techniques (a major example being fumikomi-ashi).
dissemination to various places in Japan, and handed down, and dozens of schools were derived over time. The principle of the art in each school is based on hajakensho (manifest the correct path by destroying false doctrine). A truncheon (jitte) is likened to the sharp sword that can drive off Satan (Goma no Riken) that is held in the right hand of Acala (Fudo Myoo), and the arresting rope to a rope for binding evil and rescuing people (Fudo no Kensaku) that is held in the left hand of Acala.

In the Edo period, use of an arresting rope was deemed to be an act of divine mind. The art of the arresting rope has two types: one is called haya-nawa, and the other is called hon-nawa. Haya-nawa means to capture a criminal at the time of arrest by winding the rope around a wrist or the neck to overcome resistance and prevent escape on a temporary basis. The technique needs to be completed in as short time as 10 seconds for both winding and releasing, efficiently and without causing injury or neuropathy.

Hon-nawa uses no knots after winding the rope around a subject in contrast to haya-nawa. This was intended to avoid disgracing a suspect by tying her/him at the time, when whether the suspect was a real culprit had not as yet been determined, and to avoid the possibility of dispute. Hon-nawa means to tie a criminal with a rope so that she/he cannot free her/himself from a rope, taking into account her/his gender, position, occupation, circumstances and other conditions. There were hundreds of types of hon-nawa from dozens of schools [6]. In any case, speed—without causing injury or neuropathy and speed of easy release—are noted as characteristics of the Japanese art of Hojojutsu.

**Conclusion**

As mentioned above, Japanese martial arts and military arts have, since the late Muromachi period inherited the undercurrent spirits and thoughts of set-sunintou, katsuninken that has been handed down by the Shinkage-ryu School. That can be found in the following:

1) The thoughts and the techniques of the Shinkage-ryu School is to give scope to an opponent’s attack (force) as a first step and to take control over this force by muto-no-kurai;

2) Sublimate and inherit aggressiveness and violence for educational purposes by securing safety through the use of a shinai and training armour (examples of swordplay and kendo); and

3) Technical composition aiming to take control of an attack or violence temporarily, rather than to deliver a death blow (examples of jujutsu, judo and hojojutsu).

I hope that my opinions will provide some useful references to the argument in the Congress.

**References**

5. Masataka Tezuka: Kappou of Jujutsu -Focusing on the Tenjin Shinyo-ryu School of Jujutsu Kappou, Collection of Treatises issued by the Institute of Humanities, Meiji University, No.45,1997