

To AJKA-International
AJKA-I of PA
Instructor Trainee's Report #32

**Subject: Mutual Influences between Oriental
Culture and Martial Arts**

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It is very difficult for a westerner to make accurate observations of the relationship between Oriental culture and martial arts. Referring to the Japanese culture, one of the main cultural differences between Japanese and Western cultures is that Japanese appear to treat the three aspects of human life: mind, spirit and body – more as a cohesive working unit than westerners do.¹ Westerners do not seem to be aware that in the case of humanity the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. All factors working together are a part of the entity, but the entity is greater than any of the parts.

The Japanese not only accept this very matter of fact, but they use this knowledge when attempting to develop the self. They are aware of the interplay of the three factors and that by working on one aspect of the trinity you can influence the others and by doing that the whole entity of the self or person improves.²

The word karate is a combination of two kanji characters – “kara” and “te”. Originally, Kara and Te were written as 唐手 and were defined as "Chinese hand". The meaning was a way of expressing that this form of martial arts³ was derived from China.⁴

However, the shift in definition was the result of Okinawans taking advantage of a homonym; two words with different definitions but identical pronunciations. Id. The kanji “kara” and “te” were changed to 空手 which means “empty hand”.⁵ Adding the suffix “-do” (“karate-do”), meaning “way,” implies karate as a total way of life that goes well beyond the self-defense applications. All the martial arts forms have the ending “do” --this signifies “the way” or the road.⁶ This means the use of the self defense form to better the self mentally, spiritually and physically. Moreover, adding a “ka” (Karate-ka) means “a practitioner of karate”.

¹Hassell, Randall G. Shotokan Karate: Its History and Evolution. Rev. ed. St. Louis: Focus Publications, 1995

²Imamura, Hiroyuki. “philosophy & History of Japanese Martial Arts: Idealism or Pragmatism? Edited by Anthony T. Nakazawa. Journal of Asian Martial Arts. 1 (October 1992), 51-60.

³ Martial arts is defined as any of various systems of self-defense originating in the Orient such as karate, kung fu . Webster's New World Dictionary; Third Edition, Simon & Schuster 1991, p. 830

⁴ Funakoshi, Gichin, Karate Do: Kyohan, Kodansha Ltd, Tokyo, Japan, 1973 p. 3, fn.1

⁵ The earliest known document reflecting this change is Chomo Hanashiro's "Karate Kumite," first published in August 1905. Funakoshi Sensei, while not the first to use the "empty hand" (kanji) for karate, he was influential in popularizing this meaning by calling on his colleagues to abandon the "Chinese Hand" meaning of karate in favor of "empty hand." John Sells in his book, "Unante: The Secrets of Karate" notes that as early as 1933 the head of the Butokukai (the semi- official Japanese organization founded in 1895 to preserve and promote the martial arts and ways in Japan) while visiting Okinawa suggested the change in characters. Funakoshi in his 1935 book, "Karatedo Kyohan" did reflect this change (empty hand)

⁶ Haines, Bruce. Karate's History and Traditions. Rev.ed Rutland and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1995. (revised Edition of Reference 8)

If we were to define Karate in only one word it would be “Budo”. While the kanji is translated as the “martial way” it is the means by which karate becomes a “human development tool” used to cultivate great human character.⁷

Westerners are more commonly interested in self-defense for its own sake and though they may wish to better themselves most would not conceive of practicing or exercising in just on limited field to improve all facets of their lives. The use of martial arts as such a discipline is unique to the Orient and from the point of view of Japanese history it has been proven as it relates to karate that this inner development in turn helps the karate-ka with their mind, spirit and body.

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⁷ Nishiyama, Hidetaka, Karate The Art of “Empty –Hand” Fighting, Tuttle Publishing 1960 p.13