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CORPOREALITY IN MARTIAL ARTS ANTHROPOLOGY

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ABSTRACT
The aim of this paper is to discuss the subject as well as the problem of corporeality in the anthropology of martial arts. The authors wish to begin with the concept of corporeality as it is found in the available literature on the subject. The main issues which require additional contemplation are: the anthropology of the psychophysical progress, the humanistic theory of Eastern martial arts and the sociology of fitness culture. Anthropological research on martial arts attempts to explain the place and meaning as well as the significance and value of humans practicing the various psychophysical forms of East Asian martial arts. Therefore, emphasis must be placed on the numerous varieties of martial arts and the resulting examples and cultural values found therein. Through such a perspective can corporeality's place and importance be examined. Among the classifiable models found in somatic culture, one of the most fundamental is the model of asceticism and self-fulfillment. Historically significant and still relevant is also the example of fitness, connected with treating the body as it were an instrument. Within the context of martial arts being used as a psycho-educational form of education, the body fulfills, above all, the role of a tool to be used on the way towards enlightenment and wisdom. It is utilized specifically in spiritual progress. Improving one's physical abilities is therefore an ascetic journey of physical perfectionism and technical accomplishment all towards achieving spiritual mastery. In some cases, spiritual development is described in terms of energy (qi, ki) and connected with the capacity of one's health. Yet, the motivation for participating in martial arts more often comes from the body itself and its psychophysical health rather than moral and spiritual improvement. However, in our era of globalizing and commercializing almost all aspects of culture, some confusion can emerge from the polymorphic treatment of corporeality in martial arts as is now practiced around the world.

Key words: human body, patterns and values, psychophysical progress, ascetic pattern

A literature review

Non-ideologically determined physical exercise, or sport for all, has been practiced from the beginning of civilization to today for pleasure, splendor, emotion and other themes. Nonetheless, a lifestyle based on entertainment, leisure, appearance and the consumption of specific services has now become, in a way, an enforced standard of living. This is in part of an era of cultural globalization, which through the media, imposes specific paradigms of behavior and conduct consistent with the dominant ideology of postmodernity (liberal and progressive). A pop culture lifestyle is especially disseminated through television and lifestyle magazines [1].

Malacrida and Low [2] summarize in their book the sociology of the body, as well as the sociology of health and illness, elements of social theory on the concepts of the body and the ideology of “gender”. Here, such an outlook is dominated by a feminist perspective and extrapolates its interpretations as such. The content is fairly consistent with what is found in other new books [3–5] The impact of popular ideology on the current dominant theories found in cultural academia and in the different subjects of the humanities is clearly visible [6, 7].

The religious, Christian model applied within the framework of corporeality is less prevalent. However, analysis on this subject can be found. Here, attention is drawn to the dangers of reducing human self-consciousness to corporeality [8, 9], a reduction named by Pawlucki [10] as corporealism, which stands opposed to the idea of personalizing pedagogy in both sport and health. Bodily exercise, which lacks a deeper moral meaning, does not establish humanistic knowledge and wisdom, which is exactly something that should be conveyed by its instructors. It is in this way that a religious facet of corporeality is manifested, where “the human body is an ideal meeting place for theology and science because it displays the fullest spectrum of the manifold wisdom of God” [11, p. 39].

The humanistic-oriented sociology of physical culture, when analyzing issues concerned about the body as a social fact, takes into account the religious characteristics of the body, its symbolic elements as well as the problems with controlling the body, such as in covering or exposing it, situational behavior, socially accepted forms in presenting the body as well as
physiological responses (yawning, sneezing, etc.) [12]. Corporeality, understood through a socio-cultural prism, is also a study of the ways on how we use the body, the preferences of specific physical (also known as somatic) models, reflection on autotelic and instrumental values as well as on the axiological sphere, and on the ontology of man as a corporeal being [13].

These concepts and analysis trends are concerned with the numerous forms of physical exercise, especially in sports and recreation. As such, they also relate to martial arts and the practitioners of such psychophysical forms of self-improvement. However, analysis of the corporeality found in martial arts requires special consideration, as it is different from other forms of physical exercise due to the values, objectives and methods used.

In popular and “commonsensical” opinion, it is believed that the main point of practicing East Asian martial arts is that they serve as a form of self-defense, in protecting one's life and health, which in particular means protecting the body. Martial art training, at least in the initial stage, consists of learning falls and moves in order to properly fall onto the ground or onto other hard surfaces in both training and in the various life situations. However, this interpretation does not only best benefit the purpose and value of martial arts training, but indicates a lack of understanding of its deeper meaning. In addition, an attempt at using a hermeneutical analysis of the language found in Asian traditions of words connected to energy and the “corporal quality of energy” [14, pp. 131–132, 273], called in schools as taiji quan, qigong, aikijutsu or hapkido (qi, chi or ki), does not explain the goals of these traditions (besides the obvious health reasons).

As indicated by researchers of Asian philosophy, the aspect of physical fitness as a virtue in the canon of ethical warriors [15] or as a bond between ethics and aesthetics, as in Zen Buddhist tradition, is just a fragment of what the way in martial arts entail. Such a way involves various systems of psychophysical training, from the meditative-religious tradition of martial arts (in Japanese bujutsu) to the way of the warrior (budō), which was concluded long ago from the fieldwork and observations of Michael Maliszewski [16, 17] from the Chicago School.

According to this author, a complete approach to the issue at hand calls for the adoption of, from a research perspective, an anthropological study of psychophysical progress [18]. Therefore the “way” (progress) of martial arts can be defined as follows: the way of martial arts (Japanese budō) is various forms of physical, or to be more precise, psychophysical, instruction, which on the basis of the tradition of the warrior’s code and in training fighting techniques, leads to psychophysical mastery and self-fulfillment. At the same time these are processes of education and positive asceticism. Positive asceticism combines bodily exercise with conscious self-discipline; it focuses on moral and spiritual progress [19, pp. 20–21]. “Both yoga and Asian martial arts provide a prescription in achieving spiritual progress through using the proper form of implementation. The philosophy of Asian countries is almost identical to religious practices through the expression of body movement and active self-expression in a variety of ways. It is a manifestation of ancient Asian thought and spiritual culture which holds that spiritual development is closely connected with exercise of the body” [19, p. 148]. The difficulty of clearly classifying martial arts within the sphere of physical culture stems from the necessity in understanding it holistically. It is a discipline on the outskirts of psychophysical culture, based on tradition, where there is no clear division between what is spiritual or physical.

**Corporeality in the anthropology of psychophysical progress**

In the spirit of the new systematic paradigm between man, culture and society, we perceive human psychophysicality as something too comprehensive, with its higher-order needs, goals and aspirations, as well as in its spiritual development. This kind of perspective is founded upon the basics created for studying the cultural phenomenon of martial arts theory, a humanist theory of martial arts and of adequate anthropology [19–21]. **Martial arts anthropology** is a form of anthropology of psychophysical progress, similar to the social philosophical concepts of Erich Fromm [22] and his idea on the creation of a new science about man.

Martial arts anthropology does not apply to combat sports, in which competitive domination has replaced the tenant of finding a moral way towards self-improvement (transgression, transcendence). There are schools and systems (educational programs) that combine the way of martial arts with sport. However, many experts point to a discrepancy between the purposes of sport and martial arts [23, 24, 19].

The specificity of Asian physical culture determines its ascetic qualities. Asceticism must be understood here as a way of observing ethical principles and in practicing psychophysical exercises with the goal of, above all, spiritual development. Physical perfection enables or allows one to achieve spiritual mastery [23]. Despite the different philosophical conditions (ontological assumptions) of Indian yoga and Chinese Taoism, both have developed similar psychophysical practices, in which meditative, breathing, static and dynamic exercises are used to strengthen the body and in finding a state of inner harmony and liberation or sanctification. The ascetic principles between Chinese kung-fu and Zen Buddhism are also similar [15].

A similar understanding between the path of meditation and psychophysical training was found in the
works of a pair of Korean-American interpreters of martial arts philosophy, Daeshik Kim and Alan Back. Although they write on the ethics of martial arts, they do not explicitly differentiate corporeality nor do they emphasize its role. “The way to go” is a way of practice, and therefore one of exercise, fighting, compliance with the set rules, etc., but the body and corporeality are not particularly exposed here [24, 26].

It is debatable whether this is indeed philosophy, or simply philosophizing. Nonetheless, a conversation on this subject could be expounded through the use of practical biosophy (as understood from Fromm [22]), which is a wisdom of life attained by the masters of different philosophical beliefs. To what extent is Asian biosophy original, as exemplified in Chinese and other East Asian martial arts? “The way of kung-fu is, contrary to our belief, something which we would not find in the spiritual history of Europe. The ideal of self-improvement, striving for excellence, was already known in the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. Both the Greeks and Romans, like the Chinese, valued the art of living wisely and well, and in resisting evil. They understood the value of focusing on one goal, no matter how simple it may be. They noticed that in human development, the pursuit of a goal may be more important than in attaining it” [27]. However, it seems that the metaphysical understanding of sport and, in particular, the spiritual improvement of oneself in conjunction with physical exercise has become totally lost in Western culture [28].

The psychophysical customs of East Asian martial art systems also confront the so-called mind-body problem. The experience of unifying one’s own body, mind and spirit, resulting from the specific practice of biosophy (the philosophy of life, or wisdom of life) points to a holistic anthropological paradigm. Philosophical wisdom, including Eastern philosophies, is more practically oriented and less theorized than academic philosophy. Experience from bodily practice, in other words within the field of physical culture, allows for better understanding the rational and intuitive as well as natural and cultural, somatic and spiritual aspects of humanity. A system without values, morals, ontological and teleological analysis would be incomplete. The Delphi oracle’s statement of “know thyself”, invoked by Socrates and Goethe, is especially close to the ideas of Taoism and Shinto, which co-created the philosophical context found in samurai imagination. Similarly, the Stoic’s “ataraxia”, a higher state of harmony with nature, is close to the Taoist concepts of balance, such as in yin-yang and of “wu-wei”, of knowing when not to upset a state of harmony.

The models, values as well as dimensions of martial arts

The general references proposed by Dziubiński and Krawczyk [12] on the models of Western somatic culture and to the actual Asian martial arts practiced in Europe can be presented as follows:

1. The aesthetic model, which contributed to the dominant contemporary ideal of harmony, strength and physical fitness in the aesthetic canons of beauty of the body, sporting trends and a lifestyle of sport. The aesthetic values of martial arts are one of the themes of interest by not only athletes but also the organizers of large events and of filmmakers in the martial arts genre. This raises a digression that the harmonious build of those engaged in various universal forms of martial arts simply look better than the representatives of other sports.

2. The hedonistic model, related to (in this context) to kinetic experiences. Here, kinetic movement is treated as source of recreation, and this is the motivation of many to take part in martial arts. A European does not need to practice martial arts with any religious solemnity or to combine his training with meditative focus or experience any religious rituals. Nevertheless, there does appear a kind of “samurai spirit” that is found in practicing martial arts not just for happiness and entertainment, but for self-improvement.

3. The ascetic model, which originally meant a depreciation of the body and bodily needs. It currently functions in the ideologies of self-realizing psychophysical systems (the modern teachings of the Catholic Church, religious decrees, the philosophy of martial arts, especially the Japanese understanding of budō etc., with its high demands in ethics and self-discipline) which are contrasted to the consumerism of rich, Western societies. The asceticism of budō came from the soteriology of Zen Buddhism, which became an ideology behind many Japanese martial arts. Budō is essentially a “spiritual way”, through which the practice of physical exercise derived from the tradition of Buddhist and Taoist monasteries and Zen meditation allow one to achieve an internal (psychophysical) sense of unity and harmony of the macrocosm. Overcoming one’s own weakness (the main slogan found in karate-dō) and the mystical components are what constitute the origins of martial arts from the Far East.

4. The hygienic model, which realizes existential and utilitarian objectives, was disseminated largely due to the work of educational and health services. It is associated with preventive health care and the development of physical fitness in youth. One of the physical education and health systems is, for example, jujutsu, popularized in Poland and in Europe since the early twentieth.
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Table 1. The varieties of sports within the system of social structure and the main motivators for its participants [30, p. 87]

| Sport – as entertainment for bored gentlemen | Active participation | Fall of feudalism, rise of capitalism |
| Sport – as entertainment for the masses, pop-culture spectacle | Business, taking part in a spectacle | Capitalism and real socialism |
| Professional work, achieving an objective | Economic objectives | Capitalism |
| Professional work, achieving an objective | Political and economic objectives | Real socialism |
| **Psychophysical culture** | Self-realization activity | Postmodern society |
| **Health culture** | Activity for broadly defined health reasons | Postmodern society |
| Corporeal culture (physical recreation) | For pleasure, beauty, emotion or other motives | From ancient times to today |

century. Currently jūdō, karate, kendō and aikidō are part of school programs not just in Japan. They foster an integration of the body and mind by improving concentration, motor coordination and improve the overall condition of the body, which develops the so-called positive health potential.

5. The fitness model continues chivalry and military traditions. Today it seems to be useful especially for the armed forces and as an idea compensating the civilizational phenomenon of a lack of physical fitness and exercise, causing overall atrophy and a number of lifestyle diseases. Asian military tradition in martial arts is also a valuable part of cultural heritage which is quite widely used in the army, police and other uniformed services.

6. The agonist model, which affirms the category of bravery, expressed in fighting and sport competition. Agonistic behavior was originally limited to a social class, one of aristocratic sport. Together with the ideas of purely amateur sport and the principles of fair play, this model created the canon found in contemporary axiological sport. Asian martial arts accept in a large part the concept of international competition and often take on the ideas of Olympism. However, some martial art schools and organization strongly reject the paradigm of sports rivalry.

The variety found in martial arts finds that they are practiced for health, self-defense, self-expression, self-fulfillment, sport, recreation, for improving one’s character or for rehabilitation. Its students find in it a fragment of the rich culture of the Far East, one of physical exercise combined with a spiritual ritual, a code of ethics, the religious and philosophical or even ideological practices of the various schools of martial arts, their traditional medicine and the teaching language used by its teachers. This broad cultural context requires a particular system in order to distinguish it in matters of perception as well as in its research possibilities [29].

The seal-realization model, in the context of one’s own corporeality and the self-consciousness of one’s identification, is a part of the concept of the evolution of sports culture in relation to the systems of social order and the main motivation for its participants [30] as well as the more general concept of the “anthropology of spiritual progress” found in human psychology. It is a manifestation perceived by postindustrial society and postmodern culture while at the same time one that is psychophysical and of health (health understood in a holistic context) and consistent with the value-objectives (categorized by Merton) and “self-realization” motives and for “broadly defined health”. Far Eastern concepts of psychophysical education are a part of, or are, in health and psychophysical culture and in the lifestyle of self-realization, an active lifestyle that is creator of post-industrial and postmodern societies. (Tab 1.).

This model can be described as an ascetic psychocultural model, as human activity is specifically directed here in moral and spiritual development. Positive asceticism is the practice of physical exercise, where the strive for perfection is the only vehicle of physical progress in the highly ethical, humanist way of humanity [25]. This model is apparently now featured in Far Eastern psychophysical customs, such as yoga, meditation methods, qigong, taiji quan, as well as in the way of martial arts (budō). Its aspects are divided here differently, from health to education and utilitarian motives.

The ascetic aspect and shūgyō are concerned about the body as an instrument of introspection and self-discovery, one of experience and the study of martial arts through their practice, in order to overcome pain
and weakness. The ethical and ascetic way of the warrior is similar to religious practices. It combines the trainings of the body, spirit and mind; it builds utilitarian skills and allows for spiritual development. It motives are different than those in sport. The process of learning its ways (in Japanese shūgūyō) is through active, physical or rather psychophysical, participation. Shūgūyō, within the field of budō, can also be: 1. Bodily exercise, as a form of positive asceticism (improving the body for moral and spiritual advancement); 2. The process of learning and the practical teaching of the system of a particular form of martial arts; 3. The epistemological method used, dependent on the possibility of scientifically interpreting the psychophysical problems of this kind. Epistemology is used here in the sense of it being a way of learning martial arts and of self-discovery, used in the study methodology of martial arts [19]. Here, the way of learning is done through exercising one’s body.

The educational aspect of martial arts was especially stressed by Jigorō Kanō. According to this educator, corporeality is supposed to be one of means of education [31]. Naturally, it is to be used in conjunction with education, morality, and cultural tradition. An unusual value in the psychophysical education of budō stems just from this fact, that martial art schools implement an educational system and not just technical training (fighting skills).

The utilitarian value of martial arts is one that martial arts theorists focus on [32–34]. They emphasize the use of the body in fighting, as a main instrument, as a weapon, tool or method of fighting. It is this unique theme, the effectiveness of martial arts techniques, which was one of the main causes of its global popularity. However, can their description correspond to a more external word, one either more physical or technical?

The first authors practicing in Japan under the guidance of eminent budō experts had the opportunity to see the utilitarian value (the application of various techniques in self-defense and fighting in life-threatening situations) which had a second or even third meaning. The way of martial arts is more in teaching character and a specific way of life, a combination of dialogue and life encounters, as defined by Martin Buber, especially between the student and the teacher. It is a process of personal growth and in the learning about the culture heritage of ancient masters (as a specific institution of military tradition). This particular cultural aspect appears to be more important for the Japanese in promoting their own national tradition, and in the exporting and selling abroad of the noble messages of their forefathers.

Does the modern form of martial arts, as practiced throughout the world and as a result of centuries of evolution, owe its popularity only to its ability in perfecting fighting techniques? Or could there be something else? Undoubtedly, many people are interested in in just the fighting aspect and the effectiveness of self-defense of the many subsystems of martial arts, or in other words, the technical-tactical tidbits packed into a crash courses on martial arts. For these people, the utilitarian value of these forms of martial is backed by the goal and motivation of exercise. However, in the traditionally-oriented ways of martial arts there is a process of evolution in the objectives and methods of its participants, where psychophysical exercise is increasingly used to attain a wider form of perfectionism. Changing its military objective into one that is “non-military” leads to a modification of the methods and preferred training used in its teaching techniques [35].

The cultural tradition and the richness of movement, the aura of mystery and exoticism, the imagery of martial art masters battling against archetypal heroes, these are the modern day myths that the media and numerous other sources propagate which resulted in the globally popular phenomenon of martial arts. The global popularity aspect gained, thanks to the democratization and commercialization of its culture, a lot through the culture of the body, as we would have said for Eichberg [14]. The elite form of ancient martial arts has gone under the process of globalization, wherein human corporeality is found in all the continents, races and religions of the world, of which all can experience this form of ancient practical knowledge. This kind of phenomenological analysis is also found in those countries where martial arts are emerging [36, 37] and in the fact that global scientific discourse on martial arts acknowledges its globalized culture [38, 39].

The health aspect comes from the presence of medical knowledge within the content of the educational school systems within traditionally oriented forms of organization. Martial arts are not only a way to defend the body (self-defense) but also a way of strengthening the body, in overall wellness, as well as it in having preventive and therapeutic effects [40]. They provide a high level of overall fitness as well as develop the positive health potential of the body. The motivation for doing such more often comes from its effects on the body and psychophysical health than from moral or spiritual improvement factors.

Training for health and for self-improvement and not for the occasional feeling of satisfaction, or in attaining self-defense skills, improving concentration, or emotional self-control etc., results from an appropriate level of knowledge in the field of physical culture (exercise and sports). The popularity of this kind of psycho-cultural form also comes from the growing needs of self-realization as found in the populations of more developed countries. It is not irrelevant to today’s openness in cultural dialogue and in the reaping of valuable non-European cultural patterns that led
to the controversial New Age movement as well as it being carried out by a fairly large group of researchers (beginning with Eliade) in a form of long-standing cultural dialogue.

On the other hand, a certain problem may be the occurrence of axiological chaos (a confusion of different traditions, values and negative values). The former elite educational systems have, as mentioned before, come under the process of democratization and commercialization, sometimes to extreme forms [41]. In addition, some forms have become politicized [42]. Extreme commercialization, linked together with mass culture, has caused degradation in the axiological potential in the way of martial arts and other forms of psychophysical improvement. Martial arts are brought down to the level of purely brutal fighting (in film, fights in cages, etc.) [39] or are presented as magic rituals, whose exotic packaging is helpful in only selling it as a product. Undeniably, the ritual aspect accompanied martial arts from its beginnings, as in the case of sumō. However, today these rituals and forms of magic are no longer important.

Continuing, the realization model, which binds physical progress with auto-creation objectives, is the least noticeable in media presentations. The trends that result from either its exotic nature or from its extreme commercialization end up in losing martial arts’ deeper meaning. Nonetheless, self-identification through corporeality is in this case particularly noteworthy. Physical exercises help its practitioner in better understanding his own self and in the everyday individual processes of aspiration in fighting against one’s own weaknesses [7].

**Conclusion**

The way of martial arts, through a psychophysical educational system, has the body primarily used as a tool in the way to enlightenment and wisdom. It is especially useful in spiritual progress. Improving one’s physical skills is therefore an ascetic way, which through physical perfection and technical accomplishment, leads to spiritual mastery.

In some cases, spiritual development, described in terms of energy, is associated with health potential. However, the motivation in this case comes from the body itself and from psychophysical health, not moral and spiritual improvement.

The utilitarian value comes from the use of the body as a weapon. Connected with it is the fitness model, the treating the body as an instrument, which is still historically significant and present in its modern-day form. The desire in strengthening the body and in gaining useful skills does not, of course, preclude the pursuit of other objectives.

Among the classifiable models found in somatic culture, the most original is the model of asceticism/self-realization. However, in the era of globalization and commercialization most areas of culture, misperception can stem from the models and polymorphic treatment of corporeality as found in arena of globally practiced martial arts.

**References**


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