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East meets West:

-The Secrets of French Judo-

August 27th, 2007

The success of judo in France is seen in the victories of its champions and in the unique membership of the French Judo Federation. On the international scene, the organizational capacities and the teaching abilities of French judo leaders and coaches have for long been a model. In a country of over 60 million inhabitants, about 600 000 of them are registered judo players making judo sport number three after soccer and tennis. Still, when geographical and cultural differences between France and Japan are considered the implementation of the Japanese method is even more puzzling. There is no other country in the world where judo has permeated so deeply a Western society. Contrary to European countries like Great Britain, Germany or the United States of America and Brazil, France and Japan never had strong military or commercial bonds. The Japanese community in Paris has always been rather small compared to those of Hawaii and California. In 1930, while 279 000 Japanese nationals were numbered in the USA, less than 800 individuals were listed in the French national census. Even if contacts were established in the late 1800s between Paris and Tokyo, France chose the Russian side in 1904 and Japan fought with Germany in 1940. Political and economic relations did not really develop fully before the last decades of the twentieth century. Consequently, the extraordinary development of judo in France happens to be even more astonishing when one knows that in 1948 there were only about 4 000 judo players, three thirds of them being from Paris and its surroundings.

What are the “secrets” of French judo? In order to understand these figures and to answer the question of the growth of the Japanese method in France, we will

distinguish two periods: the rooting of the image of the Japanese combat system and the diffusion of the method of Kano. Three reasons will be exposed. The first one is linked with the impact images of Japan had upon France. The French admire the country that originated legendary samurai and defeated the Russian Empire in 1904. This fascination for traditional Japan that started in the early 1900s has not declined today.

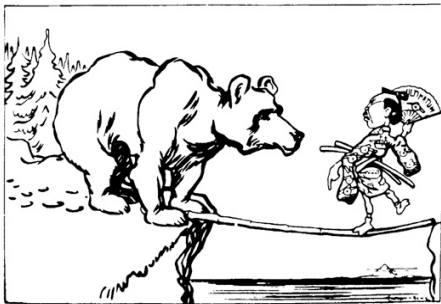
The second reason centers on the means found to bridge the cultural gap between France and Japan. Judo considered as a cultural product has been transformed to match French mentalities. In other words, in France, judo has achieved a “Frenchification process”. It was well adopted because it was well adapted.

The third reason is related to economic aspects. Whereas budo teaching has been traditionally free of any type of commercial influence in Japan, martial arts have rapidly been equated with a consumption product in France. The first generation of Kano’s method apostles implemented a system which granted their pupils with the highest quality of services. In the French judo world making money was not a taboo word.

The Fascination for Japan

The rooting of the Japanese art of fighting in France reflects the spirit of the times. Its transplantation was made possible because of a combination of social, cultural and political events that led to a jujutsu vogue in the first decades of the 20th century. The discovery of the artistic and military prowess of the Country of the Rising Sun had a strong appeal on Western mentalities. Fascination started after Commodore Perry’s expeditions forced Japan to enter into trade and diplomatic relations with the Western world. Imported works of Japanese art and Japanese pavilions at various World Fairs had a powerful impact on art lovers and mostly on impressionist painters. The influence of “Japanism” was strong. Artists in France found new sources of inspiration in Japanese culture and aesthetics. The modern-day tourists who flock to

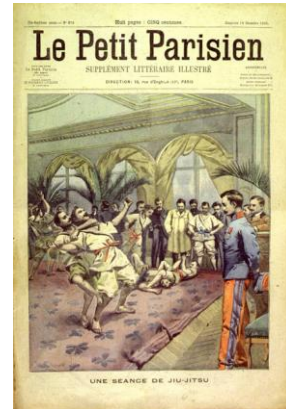
Monet's house in Giverny can clearly see from the numerous Japanese sketches that decorate the walls how influential they were to his art. His works like the paintings of Manet, Gauguin, Van Gogh and many others strengthened the growing interest in Japanese culture. Asian designs and motifs became extremely popular. Japanese goods and artifacts including pieces of art, bone china, and literature appealed to many. Lectures and articles praised the rare charm of Japanese life with its quaint and delightful rites and traditions. Like Lafcadio Hearn in the USA, Edmond de Goncourt, Pierre Loti and Paul Claudel were the first celebrated writers to introduce Japan to French readers. Others like Jules Verne, in *Around the World in Eighty Days* contributed to the knowledge of the Far East.



French political cartoon, 1905

At the end of the 19th century, Japan became the leading political and military powerhouse throughout Asia. Japan's diplomatic history entered a new phase. With these developments, Japan came to compete with Russia and China for influence in the Far East. In March 1905, Mukden, the most important battle in the war between Japan and Russia was seen as the first great victory of the Japanese, and an astonishing revelation of Japanese strength for most people. The efficiency of the Japanese army during hand-to-hand fights puzzled observers. The victory of admiral Togo, who crushed the Russian fleet in the straits of Tsushima, put an end to this war. The amazing victory of Japan over Russia reinforced the myth of Nipponese invincibility. Better than a simple publicity gimmick,

the image of the "small Yellow Man flooring the Russian ogre", was clear evidence of the spectacular efficiency of jujutsu. In France, the appearance of the word jujutsu reflects international news. The first article talking about jujutsu was published in *La Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1895. The first jujutsu club was opened in Paris near the Champs-Élysées in 1905.



French newspaper, 1905

In the same ways as Japanese people were attracted to baseball, people in France were charmed by this new way of self-defense. Jujutsu sold well in the early days of the 20th century. Because it appealed to the British aristocracy and to the anglophile Parisian elite, the very people who appropriated sports and physical activities and turned them into symbols of status, jujutsu had become more than just another type of wrestling. It rehabilitated the use of fair force. Used with anatomical precision, this strength useful and aesthetic had the better of toughness and rash brutality. It was meant to be used by the weak against the brutal aggressor and it immediately appealed to the French from all walks of life. Thus, as jujutsu served the hand of justice it reached official recognition.

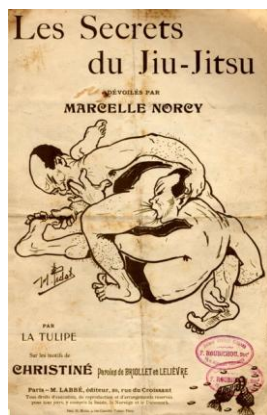
Distinctive and efficient, jujutsu was presented as pivotal because the rate of urban criminality had been steadily rising. In the beginning of the 20th century, Parisians dreaded the hooligans and muggers of the poorer suburbs, the so-called "apaches". For that purpose, Parisian sports promoters claimed: "Bash Apaches with Jujutsu". In those days jujutsu was

clearly displayed as an exotic practice. It was part and parcel of the culture of sensationalism typical of the press of that period.



“Bash the Apaches with Jujutsu, 1905

But, because French jujutsu was stage-oriented it was dependent on personal interests, which cramped its development at the beginning of the century. However, even after the first jujutsu club closed, the Japanese art of combat continued to be regularly illustrated. Numerous books, songs, postcards, cartoons and films stress the persistence of the popular taste for the efficiency of the “Japanese method of wrestling” and its image of invincibility. It was definitively entrenched in the minds of the people.



Song, “The Secrets of Jujutsu”, 1905

Admiration and respect but also fear triggered a fascination for the Japanese art. After World War II, this image was highly beneficial to judo teachers who attracted crowds to their exhibitions. In the early 1950s, attendance in Marseille, Paris or Toulouse reached

more than 5 000 people who came to watch Japanese experts and French black belts display their skills in judo and self-defense.



Pre-Worl War I jujutsu and judo books





Pre-Worl War I postcards



Cartoons, 1905

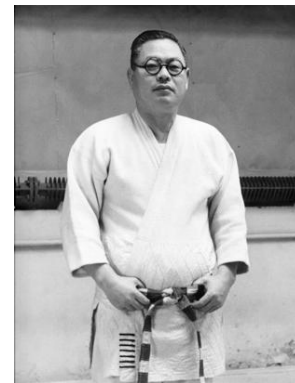
Few things have changed today. Admiration for Japanese champions is still vivid. One significant example can be given. In February 2007, during his tour in France, M. Yamashita Yasuhiro was greeted with enthusiasm and fascination everywhere. When he gave a judo lecture in Bordeaux, for instance, French judo players expressed their respect and admiration to the most revered judo champion in Japan. Eight hundred people gathered on the mat and seven hundred were watching from the bleachers.

In the 1940s, a distinction began to be made between jujutsu and judo. At the same time transformations were introduced to adapt the method of Kano to French mentalities, to reduce the cultural differences that could not be bridged easily.

“Judo is like corn or rice,

it must be adapted to its soil”

This quote from Kawaishi Mikinosuke gives a key to understand the transformations that occurred during the 1940-1950s in France. Kawaishi was born in Himeji in 1899. After graduating from Waseda University, he departed to San Diego, in 1924. In California, as a judo yodan and a kendo shodan he gave martial arts lectures to Japanese community members.



Kawaishi Mikinosuke

Then he moved to Sao Paulo, Brazil, and came back to the USA to New York. In 1931, he reached London. Four years later he arrived in Paris where he stayed until his death in 1969.

Kawaishi’s method is based on 147 techniques. Many techniques are included that are ignored in the Kodokan Gokyo such as kubi nage, ko tsuru goshi, hizi otoshi, mochiage otoshi, kashira gatame, ebi gatame, do jime, hiza jime, ashi dori gatame, ashi kannuki... Kawaishi trained in the 1920s. His judo style was more static and jujutsu influenced than the style of the Kodokan experts of the 1950s. However, under Kawaishi’s leadership, judo itself was not changed. Only the way of teaching was adapted. First, instead of Japanese names a numbered classification was used to designate judo throws and holds. O soto gari became then the first leg movement, de ashi barai, the second leg movement, hiza guruma, the third leg..., uchi mata, the tenth hip... hon gesa gatame, the first hold, kami shiho gatame, the third hold, yoko shiho gatame, the



fifth... Technique names were easier to memorize.

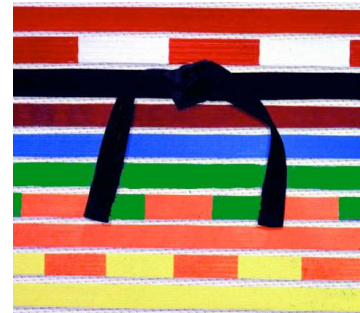
However, these changes are not fundamental. Two things are more characteristic of Kawaishi's system. First, techniques taught to pupils include self-defense. Because of the social context, Kano separated judo from jujutsu. For the same reason, Kawaishi used self-defense as a tool of development. In France, like in many other European countries defending oneself appeared to be the main motivation force among practitioners. Second, Kawaishi, helped by a scientist Moshe Feldenkrais, designed a judo syllabus establishing grading rules and depicting precisely the contents of each kyu program and a minimum time of practice. Kawaishi borrowed from the Budokwai in London the colored-belt system that was invented by Koizumi and his group in the mid-1920s. According to

Kawaishi' system a sixth kyu or white belt had to learn 6 leg throws, 4 hip throws, 2 shoulder throws, 1 sutemi, 5 osae waza and 3 shime waza. The yellow belt or fifth kyu program was 6 leg, 8 hip, 3 shoulder, 1 sutemi, 3 arm, 8 osae waza, 1 kansetsu waza, 7 shime waza. Minimum practice time was six months to reach green belt level, two years for brown belt. A beginner knew he could enter his black belt test after three years of regular practice.



Kawaishi's Method

Large posters pinned on dojo walls attracted students willing to train hard for their next kyu grade exam. Judo teaching was consequently easier to understand for beginners and easier to teach by coaches. Nowadays, this system has been developed. About 50% of all French registered members are under eleven. Thus new intermediate kyu grades with checkered belts have been added for young kids.



Today's French Grading Scale

Additionally, ways of teachings with games and learning tasks have been improved and adapted to the psychological and physiologic characteristics of a population getting younger and younger. For beginners judo has become a physical method of education meant to develop motor skills and proper behavior.



In France, judo on the seaside in the summer time

Here, another aspect must be highlighted. In the USA and in Great Britain, judo evolved among Japanese communities or Japan enthusiasts. There Kano's ideas and Kodokan rules were strongly rooted. In such places dojos were branches of the Kodokan Institute. But, Kawaishi had a different perspective. He wanted French judo to be independent. In February

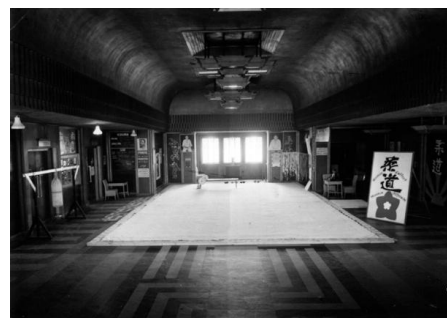
1948, he wrote in English to Paul-Bonét Maury, French judo president: “Judo in Japan, now, have no control [...] My Judo Federation has 400 black belts and I am trying to form an International Judo Union. Judo history is quite changed and we must organise a democratic sports Judo. I hope you understand it. After I returned to Paris, I attempt to invite a highest Judo-Kan in Japan to Europe and will do something. Can’t you guess it? A strong and big French Judo Federation must have a own strong influence, and of course no more under Japan. Japan has no more school Judo by order. French Judo has only hopefull future.” In spite of its strategy of independence, French judo has always revered Japanese judo. However, for French coaches and leaders admiration equaled emulation and challenge. Thus France has always been very respectful of Japanese judo but at the same time it developed a strong desire to build up its own style of judo.

Jujutsu and judo have built up a bridge between French and Japanese cultures. However, the changes that were introduced into the method of Kano were not a transgression of his philosophy and principle. They resulted from the cultural assimilation of Kodokan judo to French mores and usages. The last reason that turned French judo into a success story deals with economic and financial aspects.

“Judo is good business”

Kawaishi was a judo expert. He was also the guide of French judo. He showed French teachers how to make their living with judo. Until recently, the vast majority of dojos in France were private. Until the late 1960s, in many places, monthly fees were not low. Even if judo, in those days, cannot be compared to tennis, horse riding or fencing, its practice was not cheap. The first judo players were doctors, lawyers, traders... in other words middle class and wealthy people. Because they were making their living out of judo teaching, French coaches developed a professional approach. They devoted themselves to judo, buying books, magazines,

films, driving miles and miles to attend lectures or clinics with Japanese experts. Summer camps were full of black belt instructors who regularly spent their holidays with their families among judo enthusiasts. Rare enough to be mentioned, a special regulation was issued in November 1955 regarding judo and jujutsu teaching in France. According to this law, no one could teach judo for money without a diploma of “judo jujutsu professor” delivered by the French Ministry of Sports. Such an important state regulation played a significant role in the coherence and cohesion of French judo.



A private dojo in paris in the 1950s

Today France counts about 7 000 judo teachers. Six per cent of them are full time teachers and 38% are part-time teachers. The other 57% are volunteers. It also means that a high degree of quality is expected and required. The result is a membership of 600 000 registered people.

Conclusion

What are the secrets of French judo? The initial vogue for Japan, the “Frenchification” of judo and good business acumen offer three answers to that question. However, the success of judo in France is less a model than an example of the way a cultural product like the method of Kano could be adopted and adapted by a Western country. French Judo has developed a history of traditions and a tradition of innovations. Here is the French paradox. French judo is unconditionally full of admiration for Japanese judo. But, at the same time, it is imperiously willing to remain specifically French.

Adaptations and changes that occurred in the judo world prove that Kano Shihan's goal has been achieved. Judo is now part of the cultural patrimony of humankind. Some of these changes might be viewed as alterations of the original method. Yet, they never were detrimental to the spirit of judo. Actually, the way judo has diffused all over the world shows the interest, consideration and also respect Western countries pay to the culture of Japan. Thanks to Kano Shihan and his followers, East met West successfully and judo is now viewed worldwide as the main educative sport of the 21st century.



Kano Shihan

Further reading:

In French

Michel Brousse, *Les racines du judo français. Histoire d'une culture sportive*, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2005, 367 p.

In Japanese

Shinji Hosokawa, "The roots of jujutsu and judo in France" (1-4), *Tenri University Journal*, n° 203, n° 206, n° 209, n° 212, 2002-2005.