**Olympic Samurai: Japanese Martial Arts between Sports and Self-Cultivation**

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**Word count: 12,000 (inclusive of notes)**

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**Abstract:** One of the longest-standing debates in the martial arts relates to their being either ‘sports’ or methods of self-cultivation. Traditionalists often ascribe unique spiritual characteristics to the martial arts, while criticising the ‘sportification’ of certain practices. In this view, the martial arts are seen to have declined from ancient ideals and become focused on ‘superficial’ competition and techniques. This paper argues that the supposedly intrinsic connection between martial arts and mental self-cultivation is largely a product of the last 150 years, and developed from the historical context of Japan’s modernisation in the late nineteenth century, as martial arts were codified while experiencing a powerful challenge from the arrival of Western sports. This dynamic was closely related to the development of the nationalistic ideology of bushido, the ‘way of the samurai’, which was frequently invoked by promoters of the martial arts. In this context, intangible elements such as ‘spirit’ were used by martial artists to include and exclude people along lines of gender, nationality, and ethnicity. This paper uses three Tokyo Olympics, 2020, 1964, and the cancelled 1940 games, to examine how the Japanese martial arts were ‘spiritualised’, and to consider the enduring legacy of imperial ideologies.

**Introduction:**

The Nippon Budokan in Tokyo is one of Japan’s most iconic structures. Built for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics as the venue for the judo competition (*budōkan* means ‘martial arts hall’), the Budokan is a highly symbolic site and structure for the martial arts and modern Japan as a whole. At Tokyo 2020, it will once again host the judo competition, as well as the karate events making their Olympic debut. Non-Japanese martial arts, including taekwondo, boxing, and wrestling, will take place elsewhere. The Budokan’s symbolism is enhanced by its location the north bailey of the former Edo Castle, surrounded by the Imperial Palace, the Yasukuni Shrine for the veneration of war dead, and the former Military Officers’ Club (Gunjin Kaikan). The north bailey itself was occupied by the Imperial Guard from the Meiji period (1868-1912) until Japan’s defeat in 1945, and the former Divisional Headquarters building now serves as the Crafts Gallery of the National Museum of Modern Art. This and other military garrisons were physically and symbolically demilitarised under the Allied Occupation (1945-1952), and came to host parks and cultural institutions to reflect the new democratic Japan. The renaming of the Imperial Castle to Imperial Palace in 1947, along with the conversion of many of its spaces into public parks, epitomised these progressive trends.

At the same time, defeat and occupation caused a nationwide crisis of masculinity, and many cities sought to recover their pre-imperial martial past through the celebration of samurai history and the reconstruction of lost castles.[[1]](#endnote-1) The martial arts played a key role in this process. Like other elements of Japan’s martial traditions, the martial arts had been an important part of the imperial ideology before 1945, causing the occupation authorities to restrict and even ban them along with samurai films and other ‘symbols of militarism.’ After the end of the occupation, the martial arts were revived and portrayed as both modern sports and ancient ways of self-cultivation in an attempt to obscure their association with the problematic decades leading up to 1945. Judo, which had been scheduled to make its debut as a demonstration sport at the cancelled 1940 Tokyo Olympics, first appeared in 1964, while sumo, kendo, and kyudo (archery) all featured on the Olympic program as demonstration sports under the title of ‘Japanese Budo’ (‘martial arts,’ lit. ‘martial ways’).

The 1964 Tokyo Olympics provided an opportunity for a global demonstration of Japan’s recovery from the war and transformation into a peaceful and democratic nation. The Olympics were also an important tool on the domestic level, and simultaneously enabled the rehabilitation of imperial symbols including the rising sun flag, the national anthem *Kimi ga yo*, and the emperor as a visible national leader. Bullet trains, the torch relay, and the official Olympic film all contributed to making the games a ‘Japanese’ Olympics with a reach far beyond the host city.[[2]](#endnote-2) This also reflected the overwhelming power of Tokyo in what remains a highly centralised state, and it was in Tokyo that both internationalism and tradition had to be performed most convincingly. In this context, the martial arts and the Budokan were important witnesses and tools for the joining and negotiation of competing ideologies. The Budokan was designed by Yamada Mamoru (1894-1966) using the most modern technologies, while its eight sides and subtly curved roof strongly referenced the eighth-century Yumedono in Nara and provided a link with ancient heritage.[[3]](#endnote-3) Judo was the only Olympic competition held at the Budokan, along with the demonstration of Japanese budo, while the other combat sports of boxing, wrestling, and fencing were held at other sites, as is also the case in 2020.

Over the decades since 1964, the Budokan has become established as the most important venue for martial arts in Japan. It is the home of the Japanese Budō Association (*Nippon Budō Kyōgi Kai*) the main umbrella organization for the promotion of the martial arts in Japan, founded in 1977 to bring together national bodies for ten of the largest martial arts.[[4]](#endnote-4) These organizations are the official Olympic representatives of their respective disciplines, most prominently judo and karate, and the members of the Japanese Budō Association have the right to hold their national championships at the Budokan. This privilege contributes to the hegemonic status of these organizations within Japanese martial arts, many of which are divided into dozens of competing schools and factions. This in turn gives special weight to the association’s views on the Japanese martial arts, and makes it a suitable point of departure for considering the aforementioned questions.

The current views of the Japanese Budō Association are encapsulated in its official ‘Budō Charter’ (*Budō kenshō***)** which was established in 1977, but reflects much longer trends.[[5]](#endnote-5) A more concise statement, the ‘Philosophy of Budō’ (*budō no rinen*) was developed in the late 2000s, with the English translation completed in 2010 by Alexander Bennett, a prominent figure in kendo and a director of the Japanese Budō Association:[[6]](#endnote-6)

‘Budō, the martial ways of Japan, have their origins in the traditions of bushidō– the way of the warrior. Budō is a time-honoured form of physical culture comprising of jūdō, kendō, kyūdō, sumō, karatedō, aikidō, shōrinji kempō, naginata and jūkendō. Practitioners study the skills while striving to unify mind, technique and body; develop his or her character; enhance their sense of morality; and to cultivate a respectful and courteous demeanour. Practised steadfastly, these admirable traits become intrinsic to the character of the practitioner. The Budō arts serve as a path to self-perfection. This elevation of the human spirit will contribute to social prosperity and harmony, and ultimately, benefit the people of the world.’[[7]](#endnote-7)

This ‘Philosophy of Budō’ is revealing in several ways. First, it reflects the longer history of differentiating between sport and the martial arts. In this reading, sport is denigrated as a superficial physical competition, while the (Japanese) martial arts are vehicles for self-realization, improvement, and morality that operate on a higher level. According to the ‘Philosophy of Budō,’ the ‘study of skills’ seems merely intended to provide focus as one proceeds down the ‘path to self-perfection.’ These distinctions were most clearly drawn beginning the late nineteenth century as promoters of martial arts battled competition from baseball, football, and other Western sports. The emphasis on self-cultivation and ‘spirit’ provided the possibility for a new, national martial masculinity that transcended physical performance in an age marked by insecurities stemming from Social Darwinist theories of racial competition amidst the threatening reality of great power politics.

The notion that the martial arts are fundamentally different from mere sports is also reflected in the reference made in the ‘Philosophy of Budō’ to its origins in the ‘traditions of bushidō,’ the ‘way of the warrior/samurai.’[[8]](#endnote-8) Often portrayed as a supposedly ancient concept, bushido was largely invented in the late Meiji period (1868-1912) and substantially inspired by Victorian ideals of chivalry and gentlemanship.[[9]](#endnote-9) The development and rapid growth of bushido from the 1890s onward was closely related to the explosive spread and mass codification of the martial arts, with both of these developments riding the nationalistic and militaristic wave that followed victory in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. The ‘imperial bushido’ that became a key ideology of the military and state in the decades before 1945 was premised on the belief that Japanese were superior to other peoples due to their innate and largely intangible national ‘spirit.’

The debt to bushido in the ‘Philosophy of Budō:’ is one point of continuity from the imperial period (1868-1945), while another can be seen in the final lines of its original Japanese text: ‘[Budō is] the path to human perfection that contributes to the peace and prosperity of the nation and society.’[[10]](#endnote-10) The narrowly national focus of the Japanese original, as well as its wording, are highly reminiscent of texts written by promoters of the martial arts from the imperial period, which often argued for Japanese uniqueness and superiority. In contrast, the English translation of the ‘Philosophy of Budō’ closes with the words, ‘This elevation of the human spirit will contribute to social prosperity and harmony, and ultimately, benefit the people of the world,’ which do not appear in the Japanese original. Bennett has stated his unease with aspects of the ‘Philosophy of Budō,’ and it seems that his translation consciously deviates from the original.[[11]](#endnote-11) The phrasing ‘his or her’ is also absent from the Japanese text. While this is also realted to the Japanese language’s tendency towards passive voice, the use of this gender-inclusive wording seems targeted to a diverse international audience. The disparities between the Japanese and English versions also reflect the ways in which the martial arts are used to craft similar but subtly different images of Japan for domestic and overseas consumption.

The dominant masculinity of the imperial period and beyond was defined by body, spirit, and nation, and these elements were joined most clearly in the military and the martial arts. The ideal Japanese male was physically fit, resilient, and infused with a ‘Japanese spirit’ that was unique to the nation and closely tied to its idealised martial heritage. In this reading, women, foreigners, and other marginalised groups were by their very nature inferior relative to the masculine ideal. While the military itself was largely discredited by defeat in 1945, the martial arts remained a potent vehicle for the performance of masculinity in Japan, as in many other societies. This intrinsic link with the dominant masculinity has also made the martial arts a field for its contestation, and the modern (re)invention and popularization of the martial arts in Japan was driven by the negotiation of challenges to the emerging ‘national’ masculinity. The competitive and internationalist spirit of the Olympics provides both challenges and opportunities for masculinity and the martial arts.

The Olympic judo competition held at the Budokan in 1964 consisted of four male weight classes. After Japanese judoka took the gold medals in the three lighter divisions, all eyes focused on the premier heavyweight bout between the Japanese champion Kaminaga Akio (1936-1993) and Anton Geesink (1934-2010) of the Netherlands. Geesink, the reigning world champion, defeated Kaminaga after an exhausting bout, dashing local hopes for a clean sweep of the competition. For many Japanese observers, this event was eclipsed later that same evening when the so-called ‘Oriental Witches’ of the Japanese women’s volleyball team defeated the Soviet Union in the gold-medal match.[[12]](#endnote-12) This day saw two significant challenges to traditional masculinity: the victory of a foreigner in the only Japanese competition at the Olympics, and the success of Japanese women athletes on sport’s greatest stage. As with most other combat sports, women’s judo only became an Olympic sport much later, attaining full recognition only in 1992.

This study examines the evolution of the Japanese martial arts across three Tokyo Olympics – 1940, 1964, and 2020 – to consider several larger questions. Is there a difference between sports and martial arts, and how did this differentiation arise? What does the history of the Japanese martial arts tell us about the ability of sport to include and exclude certain groups? How does the legacy of the imperial period continue to influence the martial arts? How are the martial arts used to construct views of Japan at home and abroad? In considering these questions, this study argues that the popularly accepted special relationship between the martial arts and spiritual cultivation is not intrinsic. Instead, it is largely the result of historical conditions that favoured the adoption of religio-philosophical ideals by promoters of the martial arts for purposes of marketing, exclusivity, and nativism. These factors also supported the popular acceptance of the premise that the martial arts had a uniquely spiritual character, which was reinforced by influential narratives of Japanese exceptionalism that often dovetailed with Orientalist views abroad.

The following four sections of this study correspond to the above questions. The first section focuses on the Tokugawa (1603-1868) and Meiji periods to consider the evolution of the Japanese martial arts and their complex relationship with spiritual elements. The second section looks at the first half of the twentieth century to show how these spiritual elements were strengthened and defined along national lines in order to exclude certain groups. The third section considers the legacy of these imperial developments in the Japanese martial arts after 1945, amidst competing agendas towards nationalism and Olympic internationalism. The final section examines how the martial arts have been used in recent decades to construct new identities, especially in the early twenty-first century.

**De-sportifying the martial arts**

One of the most common debates among those interested in the martial arts concerns the practices that qualify as ‘martial arts,’ rather than as some other type of activity. Related concepts include ‘fighting arts,’ ‘combat sports,’ and even budo. If one accepts that martial arts should have some connection with skills used in combat, either historically or in the present, they would encompass everything from wrestling to E-sports, which would have applications in hand-to-hand combat and drone warfare, respectively. Among Olympic sports, martial arts would certainly refer to judo, karate, boxing, wrestling, and fencing, but could also include archery, shooting, and the javelin. Of course, other sports such as weightlifting or athletics would train strength and endurance and thereby be useful for warriors, and the marathon has its origins in the ancient battle of the same name. However, this might be seen stretching the definition of martial arts to its limits. Indeed, for some, the martial arts should strictly refer to training for combat.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The concern in this study is not to classify or define martial arts, but to consider the provenance and significance of these debates in the Japanese context. Typically, the debates over the definition of martial arts serve to exclude certain activities as being something different, and therefore in some way inferior to the martial arts. Some of the most frequently cited characteristics of the martial arts are that they should have a spiritual element and be primarily tools for self-cultivation. As the influential educator, martial arts promoter, and director of the Nippon Budokan, Matsumae Shigeyoshi (1901-1991) wrote, ‘Budo that has lost the self-awareness of human cultivation is no longer budo.’[[14]](#endnote-14) For many people around the world, the martial arts are seen as something intrinsically Asian. While this latter perception is also influenced by the image of the martial arts promoted in global popular culture from the 1960s onward, embodied by figures like Bruce Lee, its roots are considerably older.

The most important period for the development of modern conceptions of the martial arts was the encounter between Japan and Western nations in the late nineteenth century, when the martial arts were codified and enhanced with spiritual attributes to an unprecedented degree. Before this period, the martial arts in Japan had functioned primarily as skills for combat or as sports, usually with a competitive element. In both of these cases, which were not always mutually exclusive, the primary focus of participants was on the relevant skills. To be sure, a few prominent figures discussed their practice in a religio-philosophical context, but these were very much the exception. Spiritual connections, especially to Zen, are most often much later attributions by modern interpreters with a nostalgic desire to portray the past as a golden age in which the martial arts were spiritually ‘deeper’ and more meaningful than in modern times.[[15]](#endnote-15) Martial artists in premodern Japan were no more concerned with spiritual elements than people who practice the martial arts today. On the contrary, it is likely that premodern practitioners were even less engaged in this regard, as they would not have been aware of the much later theories of a special relationship between spiritual elements and the martial arts.

The development of the martial arts can be seen in changes in Japanese terminology, as the umbrella term budo (*budō*; ‘martial ways’) only began to be used to specify the martial arts from the 1890s, as the term bushido (*bushidō*) was increasingly used to denote an abstract ‘way of the warrior.’[[16]](#endnote-16) During the early modern Edo period (1603-1868), budo was used in a more general way to refer to military activities, tactics, and thought. Before the 1890s, the term *bujutsu* (‘martial skills’) was more commonly used as an umbrella term for martial arts. Similarly, specific early modern practices were typically labelled as skills, such as *kenjutsu* (‘sword skills’), *jūjutsu* (‘soft skills’), or *kyūjutsu* (‘bow skills’). It was only with the development of the ethic of bushido in the 1890s that budo began to take on its more limited modern meaning. As part of this process, which was only completed in the early twentieth century, the former ‘martial skills’ were recast as ‘martial ways’ – *dō* (*dao* in Chinese) means ‘way’ – giving them an esoteric and spiritual element and symbolically elevating them above mere techniques.

Although some theorists have sought to trace the origins of the Japanese martial arts to the first millennium C.E., or sometimes to the mythical Age of the Gods, the majority of historians tend to focus on the transition from the warfare of the sixteenth century to the era of peace and stability under the Tokugawa shogunate that began in the seventeenth century. Many of the popular figures related to the martial arts experienced warfare during this time, which also serves as the stage for idealised and often apocryphal accounts of duels and other fights. Significantly for the martial arts, although the Tokugawa oversaw more than two centuries without warfare, the state was organised strictly along military command structures and was ruled by the martial samurai class. Although the political situation meant that the samurai soon became warriors in name only, and those fortunate enough to have employment were essentially bureaucrats and administrators, their position at the top of the social hierarchy was ostensibly justified by their martial prowess. The lack of practical application for martial skills led many to neglect their practice, as scholarly pursuits were more immediately relevant and valued in a peaceful society. The lack of dedication to military skills was a matter of concern for the shogunate, and regular injunctions appealed to warriors to strive for a balance of the civil and martial realms. At the same time, the shogunate was highly wary of potential threats to the public order, including access to weapons and the unregulated practice of martial arts. Accordingly, guns were heavily restricted, the wearing of two swords limited to samurai, and those engaged in unsanctioned duelling and vendettas faced capital punishment.

In this context, the martial arts underwent a process of regulation and sportification not unlike that in Europe. Swordsmanship and other armed martial arts were adjusted in ways that made them less dangerous and more suitable for competition, with an increased focus on the execution of set patterns and the perfection of movements. The development of composite training swords and protective padding in the eighteenth century made more intense sparring possible, although some traditionalists preferred to use metal or wooden swords and restrain their strikes to prevent serious injury.[[17]](#endnote-17) While many samurai demonstrated decreasing interest in the martial arts as time went on, the cultural capital attached to these ‘elite’ practices led to no small interest from commoners, and the martial arts became increasingly commercialised with professional instructors and schools serving a wide audience. Success in competition and progression through the school ranks became increasingly desirable, and a growing body of scholarship has examined the similarities in their development with the growth of sport in early modern Europe.[[18]](#endnote-18) As Michael Wert argues, the degree to which the early modern martial arts were intended to transmit practical combat skills is debatable, and there is strong evidence that they were treated as ‘commercialized cultural arts’ much closer to sports from the very beginning.[[19]](#endnote-19) This view is supported by the fact that the most popular martial arts in the Tokugawa period were styles of swordsmanship, even though the sword had never been a primary weapon in Japanese warfare and had been further marginalised on the battlefield by firearms in the late sixteenth century.

The great popularity of the martial arts also led to significant tensions and official concerns over the threat they posed to the public order, not unlike the situation with football and other folk sports in early modern Europe. In the early nineteenth century, the shogunate legislated to restrict the great number of martial arts schools that enrolled commoners, but this had little effect aside from possibly making them seem even more exclusive and desirable.[[20]](#endnote-20) Another potential source of conflict was competitions between schools and styles, which could blow up into uncontrollable feuds, and competitions between schools were discouraged if not banned (*taryū jiai*) for most of the Tokugawa period.[[21]](#endnote-21) Nonetheless, the lure of competition was great, and there was considerable exchange between martial artists, often with careful safeguards to minimise the danger of loss of face. As economic survival and success often depended on the ability to attract students, there was considerable competition and criticism between schools. Schools that used metal or wooden swords criticised those that used bamboo composites as being weak due to their use of softer weapons and padding, while the latter schools criticised those that used ‘real’ swords of being unrealistic due to having to pull their strikes with minimal or no contact.[[22]](#endnote-22) ‘Authenticity’ and masculinity were important points of criticism (and marketing), but spiritual elements were less significant. Although these might have been relevant in the case of individual instructors with strong religious convictions – as was the case among martial arts instructors in early modern Europe – spiritual elements were not a concern for most practitioners. Insofar as there were attempts to provide spiritual foundations for martial arts, these should be seen alongside the transmission of ‘secret teachings’ as marketing techniques that could increase perceived exclusivity, just as they often functioned for tea ceremony, noh theatre, and other cultural practices.[[23]](#endnote-23) Even if nostalgic later promoters of the martial arts attempted to portray spiritual elements as having been essential in these earlier periods, they were on the whole far less prominent than they would become in the modern period.

The arrival of the Americans and increasing foreign threats in the 1850s and 1860s, combined with domestic challenges, led to attempts to ‘remilitarise’ the samurai for national defense, and interest in the martial arts increased at all levels.[[24]](#endnote-24) While the focus tended to be on the potential practical application of combat skills, the development of the martial arts at this time reflects the problems posed by vested interests. In the field of gunnery, the influence and power of traditional schools that dominated teaching with largely outdated techniques caused great difficulties and delays in the implementation of modern European drill.[[25]](#endnote-25) The practice of swordsmanship also proliferated, and the martial arts schools of the capital, especially, were sites of exchange and debate among retainers from different domains who would ultimately band together to overthrow the Tokugawa regime.[[26]](#endnote-26) This situation gave swordsmanship a ‘national’ significance and a connection to the imperial house, which became focal points of the anti-Tokugawa movements, and later fed directly into the imperial ideology after the restoration of imperial rule under the Meiji emperor in 1868. At the same time, while schools of swordsmanship provided venues to perform a martial masculinity while also discussing national policies, we should not assume that these differed significantly from sports associations in other societies undergoing major political change, such as the Turner movement in Prussia in the nineteenth century.[[27]](#endnote-27) Furthermore, many of the philosophical ideas linked to Japanese revolutionary figures, such as a deep engagement with the philosophy of the Chinese general and Neo-Confucian thinker Wang Yangming (1472-1529), tended to be much later attributions.[[28]](#endnote-28)

Although samurai with anti-foreign and nostalgic ideals were at the core of the anti-Tokugawa movement, the immediate results of the Meiji revolution were to promote widespread Westernization and changes to the old order. The 1870s saw a continuation of a long-standing crisis of the samurai, whose stipends and privileges fell victim to reforms. Already from the 1840s, the popular reputation of the samurai was often one of a haughty elite unsuitable for military duty.[[29]](#endnote-29) In the 1870s, they were increasingly seen as relics of the collapsed ‘feudal’ order and not befitting the ‘civilised’ status to which Japanese leaders aspired. By the 1880s, views of the samurai were largely negative, especially following the devastating Satsuma Rebellion of 1877, which was widely portrayed as a violent attempt of samurai to preserve the old order.[[30]](#endnote-30) This period was also challenging for the image of the martial arts, which were closely associated with the martial masculinity embodied by the samurai, while Western sports and exercise theories became increasingly influential. Kanō Jigorō (1860-1938), whose invention of judo in the 1880s was an influential model for many other martial arts, blended jiujitsu techniques with foreign ideas of self-cultivation. He relied especially on the works of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), and Kanō’s core ‘Principle of the Three Educations’ (*san’iku shugi*) was closely mapped onto Spencer’s thought.[[31]](#endnote-31)

By the late 1880s, however, a number of factors came together that encouraged a major revival and reinvention of the martial arts and other aspects of samurai culture, albeit in new and different forms. Disillusionment with widespread Westernization and the slow pace of reform of the unequal treaties contributed to a nativist backlash. The positive reassessment of the samurai was aided by the passage of time that had dulled memories of the Tokugawa order and made it possible for symbolic appropriation. The idealization of the samurai was further encouraged by Japanese encounters with popular European and American theories that sought the strength of those nations in their idealised medieval past. The Victorian chivalric revival was especially influential, and Japanese thinkers were intrigued by the notion that strength of the British Empire was founded on gentlemanly ideals supposedly traced back to feudal knighthood.[[32]](#endnote-32) This dynamic fed directly into the formulation of the bushido ethic around 1890, especially among Japanese with extensive foreign experience. Japanese Christians were especially enamored with bushido, as its links with the ostensibly Christian chivalric codes of Europe seemed to provide the possibility of using it as a tool for the conversion of their countrymen.[[33]](#endnote-33)

While these early bushido theories were quite internationalist, discourse began to change significantly as the concept was popularised after the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. As an ostensibly martial ethic, bushido was an ideal vehicle for burgeoning Japanese nationalism in the wake of victory over China. The nationalistic climate also contributed to a great proliferation of martial arts schools, as well as clubs within the education system.[[34]](#endnote-34) In this context, martial artists became some of the most fervent promoters of bushido. Although bushido was largely a modern invention, its symbolic connection with the samurai was capitalised on by a wide variety of groups looking to ride the new trend. The first major publication on bushido, a journal titled *Bushidō*, was published in 1898 by the Great Japan Martial Arts Lecture Society (Dai Nippon Bujutsu Kōshū Kai), and contained a mix of patriotic writings on bushido and texts promoting the martial arts.[[35]](#endnote-35) Like other nationalistic publications of the time, the contributions to *Bushidō* stressed Japan’s unique martial spirit that set the country apart. The Lecture Society was one of hundreds of martial arts groups that arose in the 1890s, most of which were eventually amalgamated into the Great Japan Martial Virtue Association (Dai Nippon Butoku Kai) by the early 1900s.[[36]](#endnote-36)

The spiritual qualities attributed to the martial arts were closely related to the popularization of nationalistic ideals of bushido or another unique Japanese spirit. As in other countries, nationalistic thinkers in Japan tended towards exceptionalistic theories that set them apart from – and above – other peoples. The historical situation meant that these martial medievalist ideals were spreading at the same time as the martial arts were being redeveloped and codified under the challenge of the rapid spread of Western sports. Baseball, especially, was becoming increasingly popular in schools and other institutions, and also had martial credibility as the sport played by American and other foreign sailors and servicemen. Baseball games were further described as ‘wars’ fought over the course of nine ‘battles’ that promoted cooperation, physical ability, and other martial virtues.[[37]](#endnote-37) For martial artists, the most obvious criticism of baseball was its foreign origin, which made it unsuitable for the ‘Japanese spirit’ that they tied to the martial arts. Significantly, promoters of baseball saw no problems in appropriating the same reasoning, resulting in a so-called ‘bushido baseball’ that could be used to cultivate Japan’s martial spirit.[[38]](#endnote-38) Indeed, baseball remained a popular sport even in the Japanese military well into the 1940s.[[39]](#endnote-39) The fact that bushido and other spiritual characteristics could be, and were, tied to other sports such as baseball and non-martial activities such tea ceremony reflects the flexibility of these concepts and the contingent nature of their relationship to the martial arts.

**Martial arts in the late imperial period**

The Japanese martial arts gained an increasingly high profile in the first half of the twentieth century, and were disseminated throughout Japan and the world through various media, organizations, and individuals. In this process, the martial arts were used to both include and exclude, and became important tools of both nationalism and internationalism. The same was true of bushido, and the two remained intrinsically linked in the popular mind. As martial arts became core pillars of the militaristic imperial ideology in the years before 1945, they were also vehicles of international diplomacy and the promotion of Japanese culture abroad. These two trends, which were not necessarily exclusive, were reflected in the inclusion of judo at the planned 1940 Olympics in Tokyo, which were ultimately cancelled due to the Second Sino-Japanese War.[[40]](#endnote-40)

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the expansion and success of the military also led to changes in both military and civilian education. For most of the Meiji period, military education and training had been focused on Western drill, while the most popular sport was bo-taoshi, or ‘pole-toppling,’ a game similar to capture-the-flag with a tall wooden pole.[[41]](#endnote-41) Also due to the relatively low educational levels of most recruits before 1900, education tended to focus on physical health and basic commands. Later, with the spread of elementary schooling and higher literacy rates among troops, ethical and spiritual elements became increasingly important in military education, while the government’s National Morality (*Kokumin dōtoku*) campaign sought to inculcate imperial loyalty, duty, and self-sacrifice among the civilian population from around 1910 onward.[[42]](#endnote-42) Imperial bushido played a key role in these pervasive ideologies throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

For promoters of the martial arts, this situation represented an opportunity for state support and greater inclusion in the educational system on a national level. Konoe Atsumaro (1863-1904), the president of the House of Peers, had sought to introduce swordsmanship in all schools in 1900.[[43]](#endnote-43) From 1911, the Ministry of Education approved the teaching of swordsmanship in secondary schools as an elective, and set up the first official training for instructors the same year.[[44]](#endnote-44) Spiritual elements became increasingly important as the martial arts entered the schools, and in 1919 the Dai Nippon Butoku Kai changed its own terminology from bujutsu to budo to reflect this shift, simultaneously formalizing the change in terminology.[[45]](#endnote-45) In 1925, the former prime minister Katō Takaaki (1860-1926) and the president of the House of Peers Tokugawa Iesato (1863-1940) proposed in the House of Peers that the practice of judo and kendo be increased by teaching them in the normal schools, as well as making them compulsory subjects in middle schools.[[46]](#endnote-46) Later, in 1937, the politician Tomita Kōjirō (1890-1976) pushed for the inclusion of kendo as a formal subject in Japan’s elementary schools.[[47]](#endnote-47)

The nationalistic promotion of the martial arts within Japan was also echoed in the colonies, as the practice of Japanese martial arts was a vehicle for citizens the empire to adopt and engage with the culture of the metropole. In Taiwan and Korea, judo and kendo were widely promoted and practiced.[[48]](#endnote-48) In Okinawa, which was absorbed into the empire as a prefecture in 1879, karate was developed from traditional practices into a modern sport by Funakoshi Gichin (1868-1957), who created the most popular school of Shōtōkan and popularised it in the Japanese home islands from the early 1920s. In his development of karate, Funakoshi was heavily influenced by judo, including dress and the coloured belt system.[[49]](#endnote-49) In this way, the martial arts were used to include citizens of the empire through the performance of Japanese culture, even as a stricter interpretation of bushido held that non-Japanese were unable to fully comprehend the martial arts due to the absence of the Japanese spirit.

The Japanese spirit was especially important in the context of kendo, which along with judo was the major martial art of the imperial period. Kendo was more strictly nationalistic and linked with the imperial bushido ideology. The sword that provided an unambiguous symbolic link to both Shinto symbolism and the idealised samurai warriors connected kendo to nativist militarism more strongly than most other martial arts. From 1924, the Meiji Shrine in Tokyo has hosted an annual sports competition on its grounds on the Meiji emperor’s birthday. Kendo was an important part of this event, which was designed to inculcate imperial loyalty, and even today the Meiji Shrine has a very active martial arts hall.[[50]](#endnote-50) Building on the work of Sakaue Yasuhiro and Ōtsuka Tadayoshi, Alexander Bennett provides an overview of the ‘state-driven militarization of kendo’ from the early 1930s, including the takeover by the state of the Great Japan Martial Virtue Association in the early 1940s.[[51]](#endnote-51) Unlike judo, kendo was also directly linked to the battlefield through the popular practice of soldiers taking swords to war, which became symbols of Japanese atrocities in China, especially, but also against Allied prisoners of war.

The tension between nationalist and internationalist ambitions among promoters of the martial arts was embodied by Kanō Jigorō, the founder of Kodokan judo. From the beginning, Kanō sought to make his judo both a modern, scientific sport that would reflect Western norms, including the adoption of spiritual and moral elements outlined by Herbert Spencer. Kanō wrote in 1889 that earlier martial artists had simply focused on practical skills, but his new judo emphasised ‘mental and moral training.’[[52]](#endnote-52) As in other cases, Kanō’s stress on spiritual aspects was partially a marketing strategy that set his school apart from past practice. At the same time, it is important to note that, on the cusp of the great martial arts boom of the 1890s, Kanō, whose judo has been one of the main targets of the fierce critics of the ‘sportification’ of the martial arts, could claim that it was the ‘mental and moral’ aspects of his judo that differentiated it from other martial arts. This spiritual emphasis also helped to popularise judo abroad, as Westerners tended to recognise these ideas from the physical education discourses of their own societies. In Britain, the intangible elements of sports were used to exclude, from public school sports like those at Eton to larger divisions between ‘gentleman amateurs’ and ‘common professionals’ in cricket, soccer, rugby, and boxing.

Even as the other martial arts adopted increasingly nationalistic and exclusivist spiritual elements, Kanō was able to balance the patriotic credentials of judo as a Japanese martial art with more universal elements that helped to give it global recognition as a modern sport. This was aided by Kanō’s standing as Japan’s representative to the International Olympic Committee from 1912 onward. His efforts were decisive in bringing the 1940 games to Tokyo. Kanō himself died in 1938 on a journey for an IOC meeting, and did not experience the cancelation of the Olympics the following year. In spite of his efforts to bring the games to Japan, however, Kanō’s writings on the inclusion of judo as a demonstration sport are ambivalent. On the one hand, he worked tirelessly on the promotion of both judo and the Olympics. On the other hand, Kanō expressed familiar reservations about the inclusion of judo, as he felt that this meant a focus on ‘earlier’ jujutsu practices stripped of spiritual elements.[[53]](#endnote-53) This concern certainly reflected contemporary popular and official views of martial arts in Japan, where spiritual and martial elements were considered essential as the country’s war in China worsened.

From a global perspective, the inclusion of judo in 1940 should be seen in the context of several developments. One is the inclusion of the martial arts of host nations as demonstration sports. At the Stockholm games in 1912, traditional Scandinavian wrestling, or glima, featured as a demonstration sport, while the French kickboxing sport of savate had this role in 1924 in Paris. At the 1936 Olympics, a Chinese wushu performance reflected Germany’s close links with the Nationalist government. Judo was also slated to appear as a demonstration sport in 1940, with the organisers hoping that this would lead to eventual recognition as a full Olympic sport alongside Western martial arts like boxing, wrestling, and fencing. At the same time, judo enjoyed a high profile and participation rate around the world due also to the efforts of Kanō Jigorō.

By 1940, judo had been known in other countries for almost half a century. In Germany, the success of the gymnastics movements connected to a fascination with judo, especially.[[54]](#endnote-54) In Latin America, where the number of Japanese increased as restrictions on Japanese immigration into the Anglophone world became stricter, judo became an important marker of identity. In 1909-12, Japanese embassies around the world submitted reports to Tokyo concerning their local Japanese populations. The profession of ‘judo instructor’ was one of the categories included by the Japanese legations in locations such as Chile, Brazil, Mumbai, Calcutta, and Manila.[[55]](#endnote-55) From this time onward, martial arts have been an important part of Japanese cultural identity in the Americas, especially, also leading to the development of the popular syncretic martial art Brazilian jiu-jitsu. In North America, in spite of widespread racism towards East Asians, judo became very popular, with Teddy Roosevelt learning the sport. His interest was closely tied to Japan’s remarkable success in the Russo-Japanese War, with Roosevelt receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for brokering the Treaty of Portsmouth that ended the war. In addition, Roosevelt was enamored with the notion of bushido, and distributed copies of Nitobe Inazo’s bestselling *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* to friends and family.[[56]](#endnote-56) The popularity of judo and other martial arts in diasporic Japanese communities was not only a part of cultural identity, but should also be seen in the context of the very real threat of racial violence against people of Asian descent in the early twentieth century, especially in the United States, but also Canada.

In Britain, the fascination with bushido and martial arts was also driven by the conclusion of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902, before being reinforced by the Russo-Japanese War. Judo and jujutsu – also transcribed jiu-jitsu or jujitsu – experienced a boom in the first decade of the twentieth century. Instructors from Japan as well as British practitioners popularised the new form of ‘Oriental wrestling,’ often adapting it for specific uses. One prominent group that adopted and adapted jujutsu was the suffragette movement, with Emmeline Pankhurst’s (1858-1928) bodyguards and other women activists receiving training in martial arts. This led to the development of the phenomenon of suffragette jujutsu, ‘ju-jutsufragettes,’ or ‘suffrajutsu,’ in which the suffragettes studied judo or jujutsu techniques for self-defense, civil disobedience, and battles with authorities.[[57]](#endnote-57)

It must be noted that the Western reception and recognition of bushido and the martial arts also played an important role in their development in Japan. The status of Nitobe’s book as a global bestseller further raised the profile of bushido in Japan and boosted Nitobe’s career, even though his specific bushido theories were seen as anachronistic and had little direct influence on domestic discourse at the time.[[58]](#endnote-58) Similarly, Western observers’ accounts of the Russo-Japanese War were translated back into Japanese, providing further support to the growing belief that Japan had a unique martial spirit that drove its victory.[[59]](#endnote-59) Western interest the martial arts was similarly influential, as Orientalist visions of idealized Zen samurai dovetailed with the conceit of Japanese nationalists. Eugen Herrigel’s (1884-1955) *Zen in the Art of Archery*, the first version of which was published in 1936, is perhaps the best-known example of this dynamic, but it represented much broader patterns going back to the Meiji period.[[60]](#endnote-60) The Zen populariser Suzuki Daisetsu (DT Suzuki, 1870-1966) was highly influential in promoting an idealized image of spiritual samurai in both Japan and abroad, and was closely engaged with German theorists in the 1930s.[[61]](#endnote-61) While Herrigel’s work was strongly affected by fundamental communication problems and misunderstandings, many other Western students of bushido and the martial arts unwittingly recognized familiar ideals under an attractive and seemingly mystical Oriental veneer, and their fascination helped to facilitate the promotion of these views in Japan.[[62]](#endnote-62)

At the same time, many criticised judo and jujutsu as unfair and underhanded fighting techniques unworthy of a gentleman, a gendered view that should also be considered in light of its association with the suffragettes. Just as promoters of the martial arts in Japan sought to positively identify their practice with the spirit of the nation, the same message was echoed by critics of Japan and Japanese martial arts abroad. Japan itself was identified with the martial arts, and the supposedly deceptive and deceitful nature of judo and jujutsu was portrayed as reflecting the Japanese character. This fundamentally racist attitude was echoed in British distrust of the Japanese in the First World War. While Japan was a firm ally of Britain, and made a decisive contribution to the war effort through patrols in the Mediterranean and vital escort duties for ANZAC troop convoys to the European theatre, British and American leaders did not trust Japan and feared that Japan would seek a separate peace and possible alliance with Germany.[[63]](#endnote-63) This was in spite of Japan’s military seizure of German possessions in China and the Pacific early in the war, and Japanese openness about communications with Germany. This narrative remained powerful throughout the ensuing decades, and Japanese attempts to broker a truce in the Pacific War were dismissed by American commentators as a deceptive judo move.[[64]](#endnote-64)

There remained considerable respect for the Japanese martial arts abroad, as evidenced by the approval of judo for the 1940 Olympics. Bushido and the martial arts were understandably celebrated in Germany and Italy until the end of the Second World War.[[65]](#endnote-65) In the United States, Japanese Americans invoked bushido and Japan’s martial spirit to argue for their own unwavering loyalty to the United States.[[66]](#endnote-66) Even after Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps, judo continued to be widely practiced, with reports of Caucasian students traveling to the camps to train with their Japanese teachers.[[67]](#endnote-67) Similarly, Marines in the Pacific theatre used judo in their training, even as they fought a devastating war against Japanese troops.[[68]](#endnote-68) The extreme, often dehumanizing racism that marked much of the American approach in the Pacific War often dovetailed with Japanese imperial propaganda that emphasised the uniqueness of Japan’s martial spirit, which the US military selectively adopted.[[69]](#endnote-69)

**Imperial legacies in post-war martial arts**

After Japan’s unconditional surrender in 1945, practices and ideas deemed to promote militarism were banned by the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), the head of the US-led Occupation of Japan. Samurai films and theatre were banned, while swords were confiscated and destroyed. The close connections between the martial arts and the imperial state led to their prohibition in 1945. As the representative of militaristic martial arts, the Great Japan Martial Virtue Association was disbanded in 1946. Denis Gainty has pointed out that of all of the Japanese civilian bureaucrats purged by the Allies after the war, two-thirds suffered this fate due to their membership in the Association.[[70]](#endnote-70) Bennett uses these same figures to calculate that this accounted for only 0.6% of the three million members of the Association in the early 1940s.[[71]](#endnote-71) As the martial arts lost official support, baseball was promoted as a ‘democratic’ pastime that would inculcate the desired progressive values in Japan’s youth, overlooking the martial ideology that had underpinned much of Japanese baseball training in the imperial period.

The beginning of the Cold War and redrawing of international alliances had a major impact on the martial arts. The threat of the Soviet Union and successes of communists in China contributed to the so-called ‘reverse course’ by the US Occupation, under which policy towards Japan shifted from demilitarizing the country to rebuilding it into a key ally in the coming conflict with the Soviet Bloc. In this context, aspects of Japan’s martial culture were allowed to be revived, and SCAP approved ‘the reinstatement of Judo in the physical education and sports activities of all educational institutions’ in September 1950, in response to a request from the Minister of Education earlier that year.[[72]](#endnote-72) The first national kendo federation was also formed in 1950, although the rules and equipment differed considerably from the wartime standards in order to allay SCAP concerns. Rather than the violent single-blow (*ippon*) contests that had dominated in the early 1940s, the new sport used lighter and more flexible bamboo swords to score more points than one’s opponent. As Bennett points out, although mental training and concentration were emphasised by promoters of the new kendo, links with the samurai or ‘Japanese spirit’ had been removed.[[73]](#endnote-73)

In spite of the ostensible break with the past immediately after 1945, the martial arts in postwar Japan had many continuities with the imperial period. This study argues that nationalist and internationalist discourses regarding the martial arts were rooted in imperial developments, and that the use of martial arts to include and exclude continued in the decades after the Second World War, often drawing on precedents from the early twentieth century. The end of the US Occupation in 1952 made possible the larger rehabilitation of elements of the imperial state more broadly, including the revival of bushido, samurai history, and the martial arts. Even before 1952, however, the martial arts had begun to serve as a tool for the reconciliation between Japan and the United States, and the reintegration of Japan into the global community. US soldiers stationed in Japan were introduced to the martial arts through their connections with the Japanese military and police who were now firm allies.[[74]](#endnote-74)

Karate played an especially prominent role in Japan-US relations, as the instructor and co-founder of the Japan Karate Association, Nishiyama Hidetaka (1928-2008) began to train American servicemen in karate in 1952. The following year, Nishiyama was part of a delegation of Japanese martial artists to the United States to teach members of the Strategic Air Command, a connection he maintained over the following decades. Nishiyama moved his base to California in 1961, and became one of the most influential promoters of karate abroad.[[75]](#endnote-75) Many of the most prominent teachers and scholars of the martial arts in the United States were former military personnel who had served in Japan. Donn Draeger (1922-1982), for example, served in a unit that fought at Iwo Jima before returning to the United States to become arguably the most influential writer on the martial arts in English in the postwar period, even if his theories are often at odds with the historical evidence.[[76]](#endnote-76)

Japan’s postwar rehabilitation was most dramatically symbolised by the 1964 Olympics, and the formal inclusion of judo as an official sport reflected the acceptance of martial arts as Japanese traditions rather than symbols of militarism. The performance of martial arts at the Olympics required agreement on a set of rules and a degree of cooperation between competing governing bodies, which was not always straightforward. For some martial arts, recognition by the IOC was an important marker of legitimacy, even for sports that were not part of the full Olympic program. These ‘official’ representatives of their sports are headquartered at the Nippon Budokan. While this is a most prestigious address and designation, links to the Olympics have also resulted in conflict and controversy. On one hand, organizations that were not selected as Olympic representatives could feel disadvantaged. On the other hand, especially more conservative organizations criticise the Olympic forms of their martial arts as having lost the critical spiritual elements that set them apart from ‘mere’ sports. This tension has been at the heart of the Budokan since its opening, when its first president, Shōriki Matsutarō (1885-1969) stated that the first aim of the Budokan was ‘to promote the spirit of budo as the basis for the Japanese national character.’ The other two aims were ‘to popularize budo among the Japanese people, especially for the purpose of rearing healthy youth’ and to work towards making budo a mandatory subject in schools.[[77]](#endnote-77) These aims were entirely in line with those of martial arts promoters in the imperial period, and their national focus is in conflict with the internationalist mission of the Olympic movement.

The complications with Olympism reflect trends from the imperial period in several ways. On an institutional level, the disorder of the surrender led to a situation that was similar to that fifty years earlier. Just as the mass codification of martial arts in the 1890s had led to hundreds of competing organizations that were ultimately absorbed by the Great Japan Martial Virtue Association, the dissolution of this national body led to a similar proliferation of schools and institutions that attempted to fill the vacuum. For example, the Japan Karate Association co-founded by Nishiyama is one of countless national, regional, and international federations that cooperate and compete with one another. Nishiyama was himself involved in founding at least half a dozen further organizations, including the International Traditional Karate Federation (ITKF), which held that mainstream karate had been excessively sportified. At the same time, Nishiyama and the ITKF continued to appeal for association with the IOC and the inclusion of karate in the Olympics, reflecting just some of the complexity of these dynamics.[[78]](#endnote-78) More recently, in 2013-14, the ITKF experienced a rupture as a group broke off to form the World Traditional Karate Federation (WTKF), which also laid claim to being the global representative of ‘traditional’ karate.[[79]](#endnote-79) As part of this conflict, the ITKF posted to its website a letter purportedly from the IOC admonishing the breakaway group for unauthorised claims of recognition and use of the Olympic symbols.[[80]](#endnote-80) The situation with karate, and the majority of other martial arts, remains similar to that in boxing, where a multitude of governing bodies claim legitimacy. In the case of the Japanese martial arts, even if the divisions are often down to financial or personal conflicts, they are often couched in terms of the perceived authenticity of other factions, as made explicit in the division between ‘traditional’ and ‘sport’ karate.

Conservative and traditionalist groups often draw on martial arts narratives developed in the imperial period that emphasise exclusivity often centered around ideas of Japanese uniqueness and martial masculinity. However, these trends are also found in the Olympic martial arts, as reflected in the Budokan. The symbolic value of the Budokan for conservatives was prominently demonstrated in 1968, during the centennial celebrations of the Meiji Restoration. The Meiji Centennial was a highly controversial event that pitted a nationalistic narrative of Japan’s imperial modernization against progressives who saw it as a highly problematic return to wartime ideals. The centennial included events throughout the country, with conservative groups in Hiroshima seeking to rebuild the Imperial General Headquarters building from the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95.[[81]](#endnote-81) The ultimate failure of the Hiroshima project reflected broader public scepticism regarding the centennial, but it remained a major event for conservative groups. The official commemoration of the centennial was held at the Budokan, attended by the emperor, and broadcast on national television.[[82]](#endnote-82) The choice of the Budokan as venue for the ceremony reflected the centrality of the martial arts to postwar notions of tradition and modernity, and the continuing importance of the imperial house.

The meaning of the Budokan for conservatives were also evident in the controversy over using the venue for performances by foreign pop groups, including the Beatles in 1966. Although a financial necessity to ensure the viability of the facility, this practice was widely criticised by martial artists who consider it to be almost a sacred space.[[83]](#endnote-83) The spiritual significance of the Budokan is further symbolised by the annual August 15 National Memorial Service for the War Dead, which was moved from Yasukuni Shrine to the Budokan in 1965 and continues to be held there in attendance of the emperor, empress, and prime minister. The conservative national characteristics of the Budokan demonstrate the most obvious transwar continuities, but even in its internationalism, the Budokan is indebted to developments from the period. This dynamic was embodied by the figure of Matsumae Shigeyoshi, who was head of the Budokan from 1975 until his death in 1991.[[84]](#endnote-84) Matsumae made his career as an engineer and politician, and was purged by the Occupation due to his prominent position in the wartime state. Immediately after the war, he founded Tokai University, and pursued his passions of engineering and martial arts through education.[[85]](#endnote-85) In 1984, Matsumae further founded the International Budo University (Kokusai Budō Daigaku), which, as the name implies, has an explicit international vision in its founding principles.[[86]](#endnote-86) This internationalism is also closely tied to imperial precedents, specifically the prominent Christian bushido discourses of the late Meiji period. Matsumae was himself a Christian, having been taught by the Protestant minister Uchimura Kanzō (1861-1930), one of the most prolific Christian writers on bushido.[[87]](#endnote-87) In 1987, Matsumae published a major collection of ‘budo thought’ in both English and Japanese, which was focused firmly on bushido. The first third of this volume consisted of writings by the Meiji Christians Uchimura, Uemura Masahisa (1858-1925), and Nitobe Inazō, while the second third focused on Eugen Herrigel (1884-1955) and the British journalist and judo teacher Trevor Leggett (1914-2000).[[88]](#endnote-88) Matsumae emphasised the spiritual and educational aspects of the martial arts, and their use for self-cultivation, but in a far more internationalist way. At the same time, his views were strongly influenced by Meiji bushido discourses, which included a certain degree of essentialism that would have been welcomed by the more conservative elements of the Budokan.

**Japaneseness, gender, and the new Olympic martial arts**

As we approach the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the fundamental tensions surrounding the Japanese martial arts are familiar, and the relationship of spiritual elements to the martial arts remains a key point of contention. The shift towards inclusivity and internationalism has continued apace, and women and foreigners increasingly participate in the Japanese martial arts with increasing acceptance from established practitioners. At the same time, more conservative exceptionalist and exclusivist currents remain strong, in a manner largely unchanged from the imperial period. This echoes the development of bushido discourse in the last forty years. Through the globalization of Japanese popular culture and sport, the internationalization of Japanese businesses, and the fading memories of the Second World War, more universalist bushido interpretations have emerged that seek to appeal to women, foreigners, and other non-traditional target groups engaged in sports, business, and the military, as well as media consumers. As in the case of the martial arts, however, conservative interpretations of bushido remain strong, and ‘imperial bushido’ theories have experienced a resurgence since the 1990s, often promoted by individuals with close ties to martial arts and the armed forces.

The dynamics surrounding budo in the early twenty-first century are apparent in the following brief Japanese description at the top of the main ‘About’ page of the official Budokan website:

The goals of establishing the Nippon Budokan were to popularize and promote the traditional budo of our nation (*wagakuni*) among the nation’s people (*kokumin*), especially the youth; to aim for wholesome nurturing through the cultivation of the mind and body with budo; to contribute to the development of the (ethnic) nation (*minzoku*) along with furthering peace and welfare of the world more broadly.[[89]](#endnote-89)

As this description implies, the Budokan remains fundamentally a ‘national’ space, albeit with a slight nod towards the wider world. In contrast, the official English description of the Budokan is more factual: ‘The Nippon Budokan was built in Kitanomaru Park near the imperial palace. Construction was completed on Oct.3, 1964 and was aided by a financial donation from His Majesty the Emperor. The Nippon Budokan has continued to serve as the central organization for the promotion of Japanese Budō.’[[90]](#endnote-90) As in the case of the ‘Philosophy of Budō,’ the messages for Japanese and international audiences retain important differences.

Mixed messages notwithstanding, the Budokan will be a considerably more inclusive space in 2020 than it was in 1964. The martial arts are arguably more popular than ever before, with the rise of mixed martial arts and other combat sports threatening the traditional global supremacy of boxing. In the globalised martial arts marketplace, Japan retains a central, almost mythical role. This is reflected in the inclusion of karate as an official Olympic sport, the first new martial art since taekwondo in 2000. Significantly, as in the case of the introduction of taekwondo, karate will enter the Olympics with an equal number of men’s and women’s divisions, reflecting a major recent shift. Women’s judo, for example, only became an official discipline in 1992, 28 years after the men’s competition. This is in line with broader trends in Olympic combat sports, which have been similarly discriminatory in the past. Women’s wrestling and boxing only became Olympic events in 2004 and 2012, respectively, after the men’s events had already been included for more than a century. Even in 2020, a total of 20 medals are available to male boxers and wrestlers, with 11 medals in play for their female counterparts. Fencing is arguably the most egalitarian combat sport in this regard, with women’s events beginning at Paris in 1924, although men’s fencing has been an Olympic sport since 1896. That said, only from 2008 has the number of men’s and women’s events been equal.

In all of these cases, relative parity for women’s events has been the result of decades of effort against entrenched patriarchal structures.[[91]](#endnote-91) This is, of course, not limited to the martial arts, and discrimination against and exclusion of women and minorities has been common to the vast majority of major sports, including soccer, baseball, and even marathon running. However, combat sports are perhaps especially conservative in this regard, with women often having more restrictive rules and protective gear than their male counterparts. In Olympic boxing, for example, men are no longer required to wear headgear, while it remains mandatory for women players.

In most sports, the trend has clearly been towards greater equality and inclusion as earlier prejudices and misconceptions regarding women’s physiology have been dismissed one after another by medical science. In contrast, the emphasis on spiritual elements in many Japanese martial arts remains a powerful tool for excluding women and minorities from full participation and recognition. On the one hand, as Kris Chapman has argued in the context of karate, by focusing on self-cultivation and spiritual elements of martial arts practice, especially ‘the way,’ the door can be opened to women and other practitioners who were traditionally excluded by a masculinity based purely on physical attributes such as muscular strength or body size. Chapman explores how an emphasis on self-cultivation in the martial arts provides scope for practitioners to subvert the established masculinity.[[92]](#endnote-92) Katherine Sylvester echoes this positive sentiment with regard to her experiences in kendo.[[93]](#endnote-93)

At the same time, this shift in emphasis from strength, victory, and pure physical achievement can also serve to protect certain spheres of the martial arts from women, foreigners, and other groups who may be perceived to threaten existing power structures. As Sylvester describes her own experience, ‘Often I heard teachers comment that women do not have the technical skill or physical strength to achieve 8th black belt although men in their seventies have passed the test.’ According to Sylvester, a male teacher explained that no women had yet passed this exam because, ‘if a woman becomes 8th black belt it will collapse the infrastructure of how kendo is organised.’[[94]](#endnote-94) Kavoura et al argue that even among female judo players, ‘judo was constructed as a sport for all, but also as a male domain and a manly sport with fighting and competition as innate masculine qualities that are not learned.’[[95]](#endnote-95) By tying the ability to comprehend the ‘way’ of a martial art, or other supposedly innate qualities, to characteristics of gender, ethnicity, and nationality, the continued dominance of those who exhibit a traditional masculinity can be maintained.

In the Japanese context, the maintenance of this masculinity is closely tied to bushido, which is often invoked by traditionalists with regard to the martial arts. In this reading, which echoes the essentialism of the early twentieth century, the connection to supposed samurai practices is vital for the legitimacy of the martial arts. These traditionalists may criticise the ‘sportification’ of certain martial arts, while nostalgically appealing to an ‘authentic’ past practice. In this sense, the complaint that ‘The westernization of karate training programs has caused them to become biased by tournament competition. Instead of practicing the art as a whole, instructors and students now focus on becoming proficient in only those techniques that can be used to win matches (Okazaki and Stricevic 1997),’ would not have been unusual a century ago.[[96]](#endnote-96)

**Conclusions**

Although the terminology has differed, the view that the martial arts have suffered from ‘sportification’ has been present in Japanese martial arts discourse for centuries. Critics have long held that other schools and forms have departed from ‘real’ martial arts and become something different, and usually inferior. This narrative has been amplified in the modern period, especially in the context of the Olympics and the diversification of participants. The pervasive notion that the traditional martial arts lost their former strong connections to spiritual self-cultivation in a modern sportification process is not supported by the evidence. Instead, it would be more accurate to say that the development of the martial arts over the past 150 years involved the ‘spiritualization’ of primarily physical practices that could best be described as ‘sports.’

While the connection between mental and physical activity is often important, there is no compelling evidence for a unique function of the martial arts in this regard. In this context, there is no reason why Zen meditation should not be combined with football, or modern sports psychology with karate. Nor does physical activity need to be related to self-cultivation. Instead, the supposedly unique connection between the martial arts and spiritual elements was shaped and enhanced in the process of Japan’s development and increased engagement with the world in the late nineteenth century. In this context, the growth of a martial nationalism from the 1890s, especially, saw the nation become identified with both an emerging bushido ideology, as well as the newly codified martial arts. These two trends merged quite seamlessly as they were often promoted by the same individuals and organizations. The resulting connection of martial arts to a unique (national) spirit greatly amplified what had been a relatively unusual and minor strand among martial arts practitioners before the late Meiji period. As we saw at the Nippon Budokan in 1964, and will undoubtedly again see in 2020, the complex tensions in the martial arts between nostalgia, identity, competition, sport, and self-cultivation are not new, nor are they easily resolved.

1. Oleg Benesch and Ran Zwigenberg. *Japan’s Castles: Citadels of Modernity in War and Peace*. Cambridge University Press, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jessamyn R Abel. ‘Japan's Sporting Diplomacy: The 1964 Tokyo Olympiad,’ *The International History Review*, vol. 34, issue 2, 2012, 203-220; Tagsold, Christian. ‘The 1964 Tokyo Olympics as Political Games,’ *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 23-3-09, June 8, 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Abel, ‘Japan's Sporting Diplomacy,’ 213. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.nipponbudokan.or.jp/about> (Accessed 4 January, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <https://www.nipponbudokan.or.jp/english/budochater> (sic) (Accessed 4 January, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Bennett, *Kendo*, 3-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. <http://www.nipponbudokan.or.jp/english/rinen_eng> (accessed 23 Nov, 2018) [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For a discussion of alternative readings of bushido as a historicised ‘way of the samurai’ or a more universal ‘way of the warrior,’ see: Benesch, Oleg. *Inventing the Way of the Samurai: Nationalism, Internationalism, and Bushido in Modern Japan*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 245-247. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Benesch, *Inventing the Way of the Samurai*. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. <http://www.nipponbudokan.or.jp/shinkoujigyou/rinen> (accessed 15 December, 2019) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Bennett, *Kendo*, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Helen Macnaughton. ‘The Oriental Witches: Women, Volleyball and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics,’ *Sport in History*, vol. 34, issue 1, 2014, 145. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For an excellent overview of these debates, see pp. 2-6 of Paul Bowman. *Deconstructing Martial Arts*. Cardiff: Cardiff University Press, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Matsumae Shigeyoshi. *Budō shisō no tankyū*. Tokyo: Tōkai Daigaku Shuppankai, 1987. ii. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Oleg Benesch. ‘Reconsidering Zen, Samurai, and the Martial Arts,’ *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 14, Issue 17, No. 7 (Sept. 1, 2016). 1-22. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
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