Fear and Feminism in Martial Arts

I don't often admit that I practice martial arts. My reluctance to make this confession in polite social settings does not stem from modesty, nor fear of ridicule or disbelief or even an impromptu challenge to my skills. I'm not worried that my involvement may conjure up thoughts of 'foreign' cultist rituals, as martial arts despite a lingering "chopsocky" stigma has diffused enough into the mainstream consciousness.

What unsettles me is the inevitable reaction of mock fear and misplaced confidence. "Do you have a black belt?" they probe and, given the affirmative, exclaim, "That means you can kick my [insert body part here]." Certainly my very physical dimensions would seem to obviate these suppositions: As a Chinese female standing at the disputed height of 5'4" and varying weight not to exceed 130 pounds, I do not intimidate in the average American urban landscape (even with a broad skeletal framework for my size). Such puniness in the relative schema of evolution might even invite an assessment that I am eligible for any form of aggravated hostility.

Yet to more than a handful of the general public, especially those of the female sort, a black belt comes grafted with suprahuman qualities. Having been raised in a climate where the verb "victimize" has become part of the female vocabulary, they construct a fantasy life in which I can walk defiantly in forbidding alleyways, alongside abandoned railroad tracks littered with dumped corpses and through neighborhoods where the drive-through fast-food windows are bullet-proofed.

Admittedly, I myself have entertained such misguided bravado, but I do

not often stray from a duller, saner paranoia. Indeed, learning martial arts has meant a diminished sense of freedom. One Tuesday night, for instance, my

friend and I were looking for a parking spot near a downtown movie theatre. As we circled the block, I was muttering, "No, not that one, that's next to scaffolding. Not this street, it's sort of out-of-the-way and it'll be late when we get out. That one might be okay; we can take that one if there's not one in front." My friend asked me in amused exasperation, "Is this what you learn as a black belt?" to which I responded, "of course." (We eventually agreed upon a space around the corner in front of a hotel.)

Although I've had this kind of awareness drilled into me since childhood, the occasion typifies the utterly unglamorous application of my training. It certainly does little to lend to the martial arts' reputed invincibility.

Nor does my admission that I harbor a history of physical ineffectualism add to its mysticism. I could not swing a bat, throw a ball (wiffle or soft), dribble, catch or dodge any speeding projectile, run without cramping, pull up on a chin bar, push up from a chair edge, balance on a beam or cartwheel. I was an unwilling pawn in that perpetual struggle between team captains as to who could take the sacrifice. My few triumphs emerged in soccer due in part to my practice of kicking kindergarten schoolmates in the shins, in field hockey because I enjoyed hacking a stick at people's feet, and in high school volleyball where I was one of the few girls who didn't scream at a fast-approaching white Voit ball. Even during my martial arts training, I lacked the instinct of balance innate to most living creatures. Apparently, while I could easily master intellectual abstractions, physical expressions were dumbfoundingly elusive.

The disillusionment, especially for some of the women who ask, comes

from the hope that learning martial arts will eradicate the vulnerability deemed part of the female make-up. They still want to know they can attain a level playing field even though women historically have had their physical

development arrested and potential denied. Martial arts, to the layman, has been the exclusive province of men, and the few women who trespass this become privy to their secrets. That one is not "empowered" almost begs the usefulness of martial arts, especially from those who see the discipline purely for its self-defense ends. After all, legal and social shifts in American society have begrudgingly conceded the woman's right to say "no." Martial arts should be the ultimate defiance in this movement.

I think the core of this disappointment comes from the separation women feel from their own physical accomplishments. Historically, socially, in literature and in reality, females learn not to trust their own bodies. Simone de Beauvoir, in examining the rites of womanhood in *The Second Sex* declared, the

> lack of physical power leads go a more general timidity; she has no faith in a force she has not experienced in her body; she does not dare to be enterprising, to revolt, to invent; doomed to docility, to resignation, she can take in society only a place already made for her.[1]

While natural uncoordination accounts for my lack of physical self-confidence, I lay some blame to a lopsided '70s physical education. My otherwise enlightened elementary school sometimes allowed the boys escaped to the outside for wholesale sanctioned pummeling. During this flight to freedom, girls rarely saw the light of day and had to balance on beams four measly inches wide and four precarious feet high (a dizzying height for a five-foot six-grader). Although Title IX of the Civil Right Act in 1972 wielded legal brunt and financial force to address such inequalities, the creeping pace of justice cannot exterminate infrastructural sexism in one generation.

[1]Beauvoir, p. 371

My Oakland private high school, where Title IX would not come into play, egregiously separated boys and girls completely until their senior year electives. Even worse, the girls participated in sorrowful imitations of real sports. Our equivalent of indoor hockey consisted of brandishing a stick half-cocooned in Styrofoam and a Nerf-like foam ball that substituted for a puck. The indignity alone was enough for any girl to forswear sports all together.

Just when boys "go through a real apprenticeship in violence, when their aggressiveness is developed," girls forgo the rough-and-tumble. While sports are available, Beauvoir dismisses the "specialization and obedience to artificial rules, [which] is by no means the equivalent of a free and habitual resort to force… it does not provide information on the world and the self as intimately as does a free fight, an unpremeditated climb." [2]

What has been discouraged is the sense of play, the spontaneity of human action. Donn Draeger and Robert Smith, noted martial arts historians, distilled this sensibility in their book *Comprehensive Asian Martial Arts*.

> Like dancing, boxing is a form of communication and enables man to rediscover his body as a tool of expression. It permits the development of a superb kinesthetic sense that allows us to understand fully our body in a spatial context. Thus Chinese boxing has the flavor of play, and as F.C.S. Schiller (b. 1864) said, "Man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays."[3]

Arguably a derivation of survival skills, play also fosters culture in building community bond, learning social behavior and sustaining traditions. Organized sports codify rules defining what and who are acceptable. Those traditionally outside these boundaries—minorities, women, the handicapped—exist only as bystanders.

[2]Beauvoir, p. 369
[3]Draeger, Donn and Smith, Robert, pp. 11–12

This sense of play extends to spectatorship as well. I, like a number of women, have never felt the urge to make seasonal pilgrimages to football stadiums or hang out berating the large-screen TVs in sports bars. Rather than a deep-seated genetic disinterest to tobacco spitting, crotch scratching and head butting, I had never cultivated that personal kinship to organized pain. Part of the experience is to share in the fantasy, to imagine oneself as the Wheaties champion or sneaker idol. For me, and for a few other women, the fantasy does not have the personal roots. It also becomes a bit unwieldy after adding in a separate locker room, enough bathroom stalls for their female fans, the notion of equal pay, contract clause guarantees against sexual harassment, and so on.

The surviving arguments I had always heard for this separate-but-unequal treatment always cited the differences in strength and size. Few would dispute the basic anatomical fact that women have smaller muscles and lower absolute strength. Yet to infer that these measurements bar any competition or cooperation between men and women in all physical arenas is moronic. Moreover, those physical differences don't measure up until well into adolescence. From age 9 to 12, girls have similar or greater body mass, height[4] and aerobic capacity[5]. As far as strength, boys edge out girls on the average by about 1 to 2 kg until after puberty. Motor skills (throwing, kicking, catching, jumping, hopping, and skipping) "develop and improve at a similar pace in both sex groups."[6]

Puberty also sets in at an uneven pace. The "difference in body sizes and strength of early and late maturers *within* a gender group far surpass the *intergender* differences." In fact,

[4]"Endurance Training," Thomas D. Fahey, p. 132
[5]Maron BJ, Epstein SE, and Roberts WC
[6](Fahey, p. 137)

> [b]ased on anthropometric and fitness-related considerations alone, therefore, prepubescent girls can compete successfully with boys in contact and collision sports, and with no undue risk of health. An early maturing girl, in point of fact,. may have an edge over boys who are average maturers. It seems as though matching of prepubescent and circumpubescent opponents by body size and maturation level has more relevance to health than the separation into gender groups." [7]

Whatever the physical evidence may be, whatever statistics or sociological theories I had absorbed, the first three years of my martial arts training were an exercise in misery and flashbacks of my girlhood ineptitude. I projected frequent moments of sheer incompetence. Some semesters I could perform a technique without flaw, then completely backslide the next. As it was—and is—I cannot think spatially and have a poor visual memory. Pursuing a science/medical study—the more trodden path of my ancestors—instead of liberal arts training might have smoothed my learning curve. A learned grasp of anatomy and physics would have made cognitive digestion a bit more palatable.

Moreover, I felt apologetic when I had to slow the pace until my partner (who often had previous experience) and I were practically at a standstill. While primary instruction was detailed, the more disapproving-army-sergeant-style instruction favored by a few assistant instructors intimidated me and the soft-soaped encouragement by others left me confused. I knew I carried a personal history of playground indignity, so probably felt more keenly the half-veiled exasperation and disdain. My failures and comparatively slow promotion up the ranks led me to brood whereas for others it would have motivated. Even during occasional dreams of martial arts, my unconsciousness unfortunately tended to translate insecurities rather

[7]Fahey, p. 137

than reinforce lessons learned. I could barely lift my arms in the dream struggles much less land a punch.

I also noted unconscious, intentional and mutual sexism in practice. There was no lack of female martial artists, although they were not called upon as often to demonstrate a technique taught to the class. When the class broke up to work in partnerships, people gravitated towards those of their own gender. When I was paired with a female, I was loath to practice too arduously because I didn't want to hurt them. While I sought larger, male partners, they subscribed to that principle with me. This mutual delicacy stilted my progress, and my overcautiousness has blossomed some bad habits that still persist. When I became a higher rank, I joined the sparring line and we would all wait for lower ranks to come to us. People tended to choose the larger and the masculine, and it reminded me of being picked last for the kickball teams in gym. (Fortunately, I had opportunities to express my aggression upon those who I knew practiced this selectiveness.)

Regretfully, I cannot attribute my steadfastness in the martial arts to any growing spiritual exploration, intellectual query into its history, or an emerging physical elegance that yielded self-confidence and higher grades. I cannot even credit a role model, intimate camaraderie or a sense of community. Undiluted stubbornness, a warped feminism, and too many childhood weekends at a now-defunct Boston Chinatown theatre urged me on.

Indeed, with some chagrin, I must credit more than a healthy portion of my staying power to kungfu double features. Aside from questionable tastes and ancestral pride, my appreciation revolved around a world in which Chinese men and women possessed strengths that certainly weren't apparent in American film. I had to pull contemporary female role models from the

small screen, but they either had bionic implants, were Amazonian grotesques or needed frequent rescue despite their police training.

Meanwhile, in the Chinatown theatre, I sat through the seemingly astounding pageantries of fisticuffs, footwork and weaponry. They definitely contrasted the weeping Taiwanese melodramas that dominated ’60s and early ’70s Chinese cinema, in which women fatally rejected medical care to save money for their dissolute men, took concrete dives off a bridge after bearing illegitimate children, or became insane from infidelity. The kung fu films were far more vigorous and energizing, even when the hero(in)es died tragically. Like musicals, these movies built a paper-thin plot around elaborately choreographed numbers. Within the reinterpretations on tales of vengeance, in which one or more hero(in)es sought to avenge the death of their teacher/parent/sibling/spouse/immediate kin (usually in that order) against an evil marauder/gang/government entity, heroines—although certainly far less in number—matter-of-factly blended in the heroic landscape.

These cinematic intermissions sustained me with faint hope that I could have this strength of self-reliance. After all, the training sequences hinted at the exquisite agonies that a martial artist had to endure. That I did not have to hang upside down next to a bucket and fill it teacup by teacup with water from another bucket on the ground was a blessing. Rolling across the room was not the same as practicing footwork over sharpened bamboo, doing push-ups was mercifully simple compared to performing thumb push-ups perched over a well and a raw egg under each hand.

I never quit, although for a year I sat at the blue belt (sixth through fourth kub, the level in which people know enough to be dangerous but their ignorance is even more so), although I took liberal time off for academics. What I couldn’t accomplish in dexterous finesse, I overcompensated by

pretending I was several sizes bigger and doing techniques better left to behemoths. For demonstrations I could sling a 230-pound male with good weight distribution in a fireman's carry. In the meantime, I was pounded to the ground when sparring anyone with a modicum of speed and 30-pound edge.

Self-deprecating humor became my saving grace and defense mechanism. I certainly knew how to talk, and this served me in good stead when given the opportunity to teach a technique even if I couldn't do it well myself. With my opportunity to teach, I freely aired my pet peeves and would have the class find partners not of their gender. When I passed two women practicing together, I'd say to one, "You could hit her harder. She can take it."

Ironically, push-ups have become a symbol to me in basic physical proficiency. I had a passing discussion with a peer who calls himself a dilettante in the martial arts, but whose proficiency, intellectual inquiry and frightening demeanor during practice distinguish him as an expert. During my campaign of mercilessly chiding women for doing push-ups off their knees, he granted my "feminist agenda" but argued, quite rightly, that true martial arts was not push-ups or even warm-ups.

Yet push-ups easily symbolized the gap in minimal physical foundation necessary to do any activity, martial arts aside. If a female at third kub level could not do even 10 push-ups without crumpling, her overall efficacy had to be called into question. While even 1000 daily push-ups did not guarantee against a purse-snatcher or impart the philosophical underpinnings of ki, the bodily investment was one that most males had long ago made.

Ultimately I do not want to equate martial arts with physical acumen or with sports. In fact, I do not even want to mistake self-defense for martial arts, although all these are legitimate motives for practice. Although male-on-

male violence is more prevalent, male-on-female violence implies a far more personal level of assault. Assault on men often is for gain (or retaliation for that gain) whether in territory or status. Attack on women often is for control.

I have no idea how I will fare in a fight, although terms such as "beaten to a pulp" and "within an inch of my life" come unbidden to my mind. Even after 10 years of spin kicks, jabs and stomach throws, my goal remains never to get close to a situation in which I'd have to resort to that. Moreover, much of my practice comes from learning how to protect myself as I am thrown, choked, pushed, pulled, kicked, punched, eye gouged, half-nelsoned, head-butted, knifed, caned, pinned to a wall, slammed to the ground and having my hair pulled. Ironically, my hyperextended elbow, my hamstring pulls, my throbbing lateral strains and my aching upper and lower back will probably be the most suffering I undertake in my lifetime, and all from martial arts (also bad posture and computer use). In an exaggerated example of cognitive dissonance, I justify these lasting discomforts with a list of narrow escapes and close situations that might otherwise surface.

Also, while I always must nurture the fear of the unknown, I know what forms it might take. True, the more I learn, the more I am struck with my ignorance and with the ingenuity of human aggression. The nuances of pain and the psychology of skirmishes are still beyond me, also because I still hold onto and nourish fears. I am unwilling or unable to venture into that physical commitment and combative mindset that would open up another level of understanding.

Ultimately, I do not consider myself a true martial artist. While I am playing catch-up in the physical world, the next realm lies in philosophical exploration. I don't imply there is a separation between the physical, the spiritual and the intellectual learnings. Just as spirituality permeates Thai

business transactions, art imbues Balinese structures and religion dictates Judaic dietary habits, martial arts is a discipline of movement and philosophy. Yet to seek its history, study its myths, its cultural origins, its political infighting, its adaptations to different societies and its implications as martial arts evolves in the future—these are all what lie before me.

In the meantime, I am learning just to take one step in front of another while always looking about me. I'm also learning to take these steps without constantly asking myself as to why and whether I deserve to I take these steps. Those questions are no longer relevant. What I need learn now is just what questions to ask.