Argumentative Example

Traditional Martial Arts: Timeless in the Modern World

She steps into the blood-stained ring, ready to face her next opponent. She is cool and ready, her eagle eyes fixed on her opponent, Cat Zingano, a veteran fighting champion. Zingano has been a crowd favorite for awhile, but she is ready to take the crown. As the signal rings to mark the start of the fight, Zingano comes at her with a flying knee, telegraphing her movements a moment too soon. She anticipated this and knew exactly how to counter. Zingano was injured awhile back and coming at her with her injured knee was meant to surprise her – it did not. She grabs the flying leg and throws Zingano down. SMASH! Zingano takes over, but in the blink of an eye – FLIP – she takes over like a swift ninja and expertly wraps over the top of Zingano, clinching her opponent in a superb arm bar. The fight lasts 14 seconds and she is crowned the new champion.

She is Ronda Rousey and this is the UFC, the Ultimate Fighting Championship, a professional fighting organization since 1993, where mixed martial arts (MMA) fighters meet to battle it out on live TV and vie to be crowned the champion. MMA is the cool new kid on the block and is thought to have replaced older brother, traditional martial arts (TMA). Today, some view TMA systems to be outdated and impractical for today’s modern world of MMA and self-defense altogether. By contrast, it can be said that because of the mental training from philosophical beliefs and underlying techniques, TMA systems can provide thorough training for fighting and self-protection and is the root of all fighting systems.

To understand the reasons behind TMA and MMA, let's look back at the history. MMA, which emerged in the 1980s, is a full-contact combat sport using three different techniques: striking, submission and takedowns. So you can punch, kick, elbow, knee and grapple your opponent in KO, knockout, or TKO, technical knockout. TMA, which started centuries ago, is a system of combat practices with philosophical teachings designed to train the mind as well. TMA is one style; the MMA fighter can train in many styles. An MMA fighter may have a foundation in one particular style of TMA, but they adapt their style and use different martial arts to meet an equally well-rounded opponent in a controlled fighting ring. Most MMA fighters use Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, a Brazilian and Japanese grappling martial art from early 1900s, and Muay Thai, a striking martial art from 16th century Thailand, in their training. Basically, the MMA fighter will solely concentrate on the ‘martial’ in martial arts. The fighting part is really a small part of a vast journey for a TMA practitioner.

But even the most successful MMA fighters will still tap heavily into their TMA roots. Rousey, arguably the most popular UFC fighter of all time, is not an athlete born in the sweaty pits of a kickboxing gym. She is a traditional martial artist in Judo, a Japanese martial art from the late 1800s. She won Bronze competing as a ‘judoka’, judo practitioner, in 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, China. Her success in the UFC Octagon ring comes not from her boxing techniques, but from the traditional judo style of throwing footwork, locking and choking. Her armbar on Zingano was a straight judo technique. Rousey’s TMA roots have given her an edge from any other female UFC fighter. In the beginning, UFC was an arena to test out style vs. style and it was not uncommon to see TMA styles at the time. Somehow there was a shift and now it is MMA fighter vs. MMA fighter, each opponent having trained on striking and grappling. There are even UFC gyms that train specifically for that. Of course, Rousey will be training in a UFC gym now, but her judo training always comes out when she is competing. We must remember, however, that all MMA techniques originate from a TMA system and have been adapted with time.

A TMA practitioner like Rousey will likely tap into her mental training as soon as she steps foot into the ring. Mental training is a vital part of the TMA training curriculum. From good mental training such as breathing and meditative exercises, one will develop their own confidence, control, focus and discipline. Mental training comes from the philosophy behind the martial art. For example, Aikido, a Japanese martial art of locking, controlling and throwing techniques, is entirely based on mental training. George S. Ledyard of Aikido Eastside says “the first movement in a martial interaction is that of the mind. So, the ability to join with an attack starts with proper perception of the intent of the attacker” (“The Ultimate Beginner’s Guide to Martial Arts” 17). The study of a TMA system is much like the study of a spirituality, understanding the force of our energy within. MMA fighters do not view their training as such and focus on the physicality of their fighting.

However, the talk of mental training has been glamorized by mystical properties in some cases. When we talk about mental training in TMA, some practitioners will bring up ‘qi’ or ‘chi’, a concept of life energy or energy force in many East Asian martial arts. Supposedly, a martial artist can channel super strength and power from focusing on their qi. However, there is no scientific backing for the existence of qi (“Superhuman Powers”). The mysticism from the idea of qi is somewhat ridiculed by MMA practitioners. In the history of UFC, not one knockout has come comes from the super power of qi. Of course, if science can't prove it, it can't exist, right? By not teaching the idea of qi, MMA fighters pave a more realistic and practical approach to fighting and self-protection and do no purport a false sense of super-strength. For example, a National Geographic special featured George Dillman, a 9th Dan karate master, to test his claim of super strength from his qi. Dillman used his no-touch technique on his students and they went sprawling to the floor. He then used in on Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu students from a different school and they felt nothing – there was no effect on them whatsoever. (Thalken 120-121). It was an embarrassing failure, but an example of the false sense of power we can obtain from ‘qi’. However, whilst qi is still questionable, there is more to mental training than just qi. Confidence, focus, discipline and self-awareness are not only skills adapted from mental training, but life lessons for better personal development.

Nevertheless, the lack of mental training in MMA can lead to a lack of discipline, causing a troubling rise of violence. According to Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel, the volume of domestic violence arrests that included MMA fighters was more than double that of the average national rate in the U.S. Using public records as their main resource, Real Sports determined that the national rate of domestic violence arrests is around 360 per 100,000 men. On the same chart, they contrasted that against NFL players, which found 210 arrests per 100,000, while MMA saw a staggering rise to 750 (“Episode 7”). It seems the boost of power and self-confidence in MMA training is lacking a control factor and paving a way for bullying.

Speaking of bullying, let's shine a light on the younger generation. The growing social problem of bullying affects mostly the children – seen on social media, news, or even in your own home. TMA has been a foundation for building strength and confidence not just for adults, but for growing children too. If a parent is looking for an activity to build discipline and focus in their childs, they usually contact a Karate dojo or Taekwon-do dojang, not an MMA gym. Stacy Nemour, a kung fu teacher for children says: “At the beginning of every class I always talk with my students about how Kung Fu is truly a peaceful art; whenever possible it’s always best to walk or run away from a fight and go tell a teacher or parent.The rule is that it only should be applied if one is in serious danger. If they practiced it on family, friends, animals, that would result in being banned from the class. That worked!” (Nemour). With growing statistics about violence in MMA, it is no wonder some deem MMA as inappropriate for children. Paul Dennis, former Maple Leafs player-development coach and now high-performance coach at York University thinks UFC should be banned and young people regarding fighters as role models is worrisome “If (the children are) in there for all the benefits (discipline, self-esteem, perseverance), it’s positive and healthy, but if they're in there because mom and dad want them to become the next alpha male, I think it could be a serious problem. I think it sets a precedent for nothing but future catastrophic injuries among our youth” (Hunter). Rousey on the other hand believes MMA is not too violent for children and encourages them to watch the fights “I think it’s called martial arts for a reason, it’s an art” (Irving). The jury is still out on teaching children the values of martial arts through a traditional system or through an MMA school. Sending your child to a TMA school will almost certainly guarantee the teaching of discipline, but in an MMA school, the lines between friendly competition and bloodshed are often blurred and with the developing conscience of youths, they cannot make a controlled decision about their opponent as much as an adult. That is what children have to learn first before using their bodies as a lethal weapon and this is taught through mental training – in a TMA environment – first.

On the other hand, it is undeniable that MMA has revolutionized the fighting world as an innovative fighting system. By allowing the use of more than several martial arts, a fighter can adapt their own personal abilities and see what works best for them. The conditioning and strength aspect of MMA can often surpass that of a TMA practitioner, allowing a fighter to gain incredible amounts of stamina. MMA training is directly correlated to street fighting and therefore can be easily translated to self-defense. TMA, on the other hand, was created long ago during a time of wars, where soldiers fought on battlefronts and used their TMA training specifically for that. Whilst we have military still train for such, our world has evolved and no longer has the bloody wars from centuries ago. Since the inception of UFC, the gladiator-style fighting has developed entertainment value and has become popular mainstream culture for the general public. TMA though, has been put on the back burner since the hype from *The Karate Kid* died down. An MMA fighter will train for a specific fight, usually for an amateur MMA fight or UFC, which lead to goals being met more quickly, whilst the TMA practitioner will likely go on a sole self-discovery journey of working on techniques and seeing what works, what doesn't work. There is no specific fight for them to train for, which perhaps does not utilize their skill as much as an MMA fighter.

Furthermore, MMA does not falsify feats of strength in their training. “To train in a live environment with resisting opponents constitutes another element of what it means to be a mixed martial artist” (Spencer 76). Some argue that one of the reasons TMA is outdated is because of training with an “unresisting opponent”. That means they will train, for example with their opponent throwing a punch, but it will be thrown stepping forward once, punch straight and in the middle, and arm staying straight out and extended. In real life, this would certainly not be the case. Imagine being picked on the street by some big bully. You think he would punch once, arm out straight? Of course not. In real life, your opponent would have already thrown a second punch, shoved you, etc. This is how MMA fighters train – with resisting opponents. “To be chaotic and not static or predetermined signifies that the training sessions of MMA fighters are open to utilization of body techniques both on the ground, standing or in the clinch. In this open system, training is always scenario based, often emulating actual combat situations” (Spencer 77). By training with a resisting opponent, a fighter will learn to adapt their techniques and see what works best for their abilities. They will work on their reflexes and become used to what is expected in a fight – whether it's in a tournament or on the street defending themselves.

However, from personal experience as a traditional martial artist, it can be said we learn to ‘translate’ movements. Nothing is literally translated exactly how it is. In that case, TMA would be outdated. I approached my teacher recently and asked him about a particular movement in a Taekwon-Do poomsae (pattern). It's called the ‘W’ block or the mountain block, where you keep your fists up, at your side, not in front, and level to your head. This makes your upper torso look like a giant W. In the form, you move side to side, stamping your heels down on the floor, while blocking with your upper arms. It is not the most elegant move and has been likened to looking like a stamping gorilla. I asked “How is this practical at all?” My teacher said to grab a dummy gun or knife we use to practice self-defense. He told me to point it at his neck from behind, as though I was mugging him. Very naturally, he held up his hands as if to surrender to my staged mugging. As he held up his hands, he very quickly turned around, using the exact same footwork as the ‘W’ block and naturally swung his arms up to redirect the gun away from him. “That” he said, “is what ‘W’ block is for. It looks stupid, but the form is to train the body to respond via muscle memory in the correct way.” This made me realize that TMA practitioners are in fact translators of an ancient language: their TMA style. The movements may seem impractical, but the footwork and general body movement is all there, ready to adapted and applied to any real-life situation.

In conclusion, whilst MMA has been an innovative form of fighting and certainly put a spotlight on the martial arts community to the general public, TMA techniques have resonated through the ages and will be a basis for all for fighting and self-protection to come. Every new and emerging technique from MMA can be linked back to a TMA practice. We can see from the mental training and the translation of what appear to be rigid impractical movements, TMA does indeed have merit. If the martial artist looks carefully, they can translate the movements to adapt accordingly. And finally, what is the difference between ‘martial arts’ and ‘sports’? The answer is martial arts stops violence and sports does not. It is not wonder TMA systems will always be under the umbrella of “martial arts”, whilst MMA is often touted as a “sport”. Perhaps if we went back to the early time in UFC, when the fights were about style vs. style, the public would have a better understanding of TMA and the benefits it has compared to MMA, such as better control and discipline, and less violence.

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