

# BOOK REVIEW

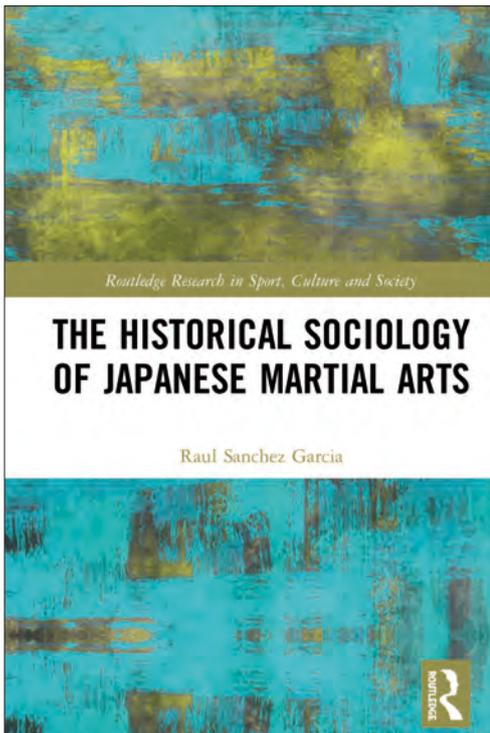
## The Historical Sociology of Japanese Martial Arts

Raúl Sánchez García

Routledge, 2020

252 pages

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## REVIEWER

Tetsuya Nakajima is an Associate Professor in the College of Education at Ibaraki University in Ibaraki prefecture, Japan. His research focuses on sport anthropology and Japanese martial arts history. He has published on the history of martial arts in Japan. His most recent book is *Kindai Nihon no budo-ron* [Discourse on Budo in Modern Japan – The Origins of the ‘Sportification of Budo’ Problem] (*Kokushokankokai*, 2017).

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## 1 SOCIOLOGICAL RESEARCH INTO JAPANESE MARTIAL ARTS

*The Historical Sociology of Japanese Martial Arts* [Routledge 2018] contains a comprehensive history of Japanese martial arts compiled by Spanish historical sociologist Raúl Sánchez García. However, it is not simply an overview intended to introduce Japanese martial arts to the West. As may be construed from its receipt of the 2020 Norbert Elias Book Prize, the book deploys Norbert Elias's concept of the 'civilizing process' within a study of the field of Japanese martial arts. According to García, although Elias was particularly fascinated by the Japanese civilizing process, he concluded his research career without turning his attention to that country's iconic martial arts. García has developed his own career as a researcher in the path laid down by Elias' sociology, and this work displays a determination to tackle some of the challenges that Elias left unfinished.

However, García does not depend solely on Elias's arguments surrounding the civilizing process. The person who developed the thesis at the core of Elias's theory of a civilizing process – the 'controlled decontrolling of emotion' – was the Dutch sociologist Cas Wouters [Wouters 2007]. In the 1960s and 1970s, traditional Dutch society was disrupted by the arrival of the 'permissive society'. Wouters asserted that, even so, it remains possible to observe civilizing patterns, even in societies with unclear and diverse patterns of behavior. To substantiate his claims, Wouters proposed the binary of 'formalizing and informalizing', and analyzed the circumstances surrounding the transformational processes of the mutually expected self-restraint that existed between individuals and society. Wouters's informalizing is a concept created through the development of Elias's civilizing; however, García employs it in tandem with Elias's concept of civilizing, thereby establishing the four frameworks of civilizing–formalizing, decivilizing–formalizing, decivilizing–informalizing, and civilizing–informalizing. These frameworks are then leveraged to analyze the history of Japanese martial arts.

There have been others who have leveraged Elias's sociology to study Japanese civilizing patterns before García. In her book *The Taming of the Samurai*, Eiko Ikegami focuses on the ruling structure of the samurai who controlled Japan for 700 years, up until just before the country's modernization [Ikegami 1995]. This is where she discovered the path of the civilizing of Japan. However, Ikegami explicitly states in her study that she does not deal with the topic of Japanese martial arts, which are popular in the West. Therefore, García's research complements and expands that of Ikegami. As such, the book might be considered a significant contribution to Japanese Studies in this context.

From my own perspective, I am not an expert in the field of sociology (I have a background in social history and anthropology), but I am someone who specializes in the study of Japanese martial arts. For this reason, I cannot critique García's use of the theories of Elias and Wouters from a position of expertise. So, what follows is a summary of the book, with details of how it is constructed, concluding with some pronouncements on its significance as well as the challenges it poses.

## 2 BOOK SUMMARY

The book is divided into three parts excluding the introduction and the epilogue. They are as follows: Part I covers ancient and medieval Japan, Part II details the early modern period, and Part III looks at modern times. Part I explains the process of the development of martial 'ryu' (schools or styles). Upon hearing this term, one might typically think of *jujutsu* or *kenjutsu* (the latter being Japanese swordsmanship). Or one might think of such martial arts as judo or aikido; and in the modern day, perhaps even Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ). *Kenjutsu* often connotes the image of samurai via association with, for example, the book *The Five Rings* by Miyamoto Musashi, which together can act as an easy proxy encapsulating 'Japanese martial arts' as such. In reality these martial arts emerged in the era covered by Part II. The period covered by Part I primarily requires dealing with archery, horsemanship, and sumo. In ancient times, none of these pursuits rose to the level of a coherent martial ryu. However, it is a matter of historical fact that from the 9th century sumo and horse-mounted archery began to be incorporated into military training and court rituals.

The Japanese Middle Ages began at the end of the 12th century, with the country transitioning from an aristocratic to a samurai-led society. Subsequently, between the 14th and 15th centuries, the martial ryu that would become the forbearer of the various schools was established. The schools of horsemanship and archery were also formed at this time.

García focuses on how the genetic make-up of these martial arts was influenced by both Esoteric Buddhism and the Shinto faith. In the Japan of ancient times and the Middle Ages, Buddhist monks and Shinto priests doubled up as both learned academics and technocrats, making them indispensable to any discussion of the formalizing-civilizing of martial arts. Religions such as Esoteric Buddhism, which reflect the spirituality of the individual and work toward achieving a higher spiritual plain, greatly influenced the development of martial arts system. *Shukendo* (a form of Shinto) is still practiced in some places, but the methods involved in this practice have been incorporated into martial arts. In other words, the system of self-restraint that involves controlling one's emotions and self-objectivization was integrated into the violent martial arts system. Here we are offered a glimpse into one part of the Japanese civilizing process.

However, the martial ryu formed from the 14th to 15th centuries is not limited solely to the arts of archery and horsemanship. It has been noted that in the 14th century, a school of swordsmanship known as *nen-ryu* existed. From the 16th century onwards the number of martial ryu surrounding swordsmanship and spears increased. Many of the founders of such schools were mid- and lower-ranked samurai who fought on the front lines. This trend was reflected in the fighting style of the time.

Part II corresponds roughly to the time of the Tokugawa Shogunate. During this period, the political system was stable, and the transformation of samurai from warriors into bureaucrats continued. The aim of martial arts in this period was shifting from practical usage on the battlefield to refinement of an art. Simultaneously, the number of teachers and dojos where samurai could learn martial arts as a refined discipline increased. In martial arts dojos, skills were practiced in pairs known as *kata*, but matches with other martial ryu were forbidden by dojo leaders. The reason for this was that any action that might instigate conflict was banned by the Tokugawa Shogunate. Moreover, shoguns and *daimyo* feared that martial ryu could form organizations that crossed feudal domains. This would create the potential for organizations of martial ryu to morph into rebel organizations against the shogunate.

A culture emerged in which martial ryu masters would transmit both their secrets and the right to pass on licenses to students. Other ryu involved in tea ceremonies and flower arrangement were not classed as violent organizations; therefore, it was possible, using these ryu, to create pyramid-style organizations that traversed feudal domains, in which the transfer of secrets and the ability to confer licenses by elders could be isolated and independent. However, regardless of the degree of formalizing in martial arts, the danger to the Tokugawa Shogunate did not dissipate. Ultimately, a large number of independent martial ryu developed in every region throughout Japan.

Part III discusses the modernization of martial arts. First, in the Meiji Period, martial arts were reconstituted as a national culture that formed a shared national consciousness. The nucleus of this transformation was the Kodokan Judo Institute and the Dai Nippon Butoku Kai. From the Taisho era, while martial arts were established as a form of national culture, new styles in addition to kendo, judo and archery – such as karate and aikido – emerged. Japan was involved in the Second World War, and through this process, the links between martial arts and the military were strengthened, with a corresponding turn toward the framework of decivilizing-formalizing.

García convincingly demonstrates that through adopting the concept of formalizing, it is possible to analyze in more detail the nature of the decivilizing of Japan's martial arts in the Showa Period. Since the Second World War, unarmed martial arts (known as *kakugi*) have remained present in the Japanese school system, and new forms, such as mixed martial arts (MMA), have spread through Japanese society.

### 3 THE SIGNIFICANCE AND CHALLENGES OF THE BOOK

This book is one of the first to use Elias's sociology so centrally in considering the social history of Japanese martial arts, and is perhaps unique in its vast historical scope and sweep.<sup>1</sup> Many experts – particularly in the Japanese academy – who research the history of Japanese martial arts focus primarily on the Tokugawa Shogunate and the Meiji Period. Perhaps because of these two factors, this kind of research rarely appears in the Japanese context. Were such an expansive piece of research to be attempted by a single person in Japan, they would be expected to have an almost impossibly high level of knowledge. Indeed, perhaps García felt able to tackle such a broad historical field precisely because he is neither Japanese nor working in Japan.

By contrast to García, most Japanese researchers tend to take only one period and martial ryu as their focus, and they tend to analyze their chosen topics within martial arts history only from a narrow perspective. However, García offers a method with which to view the history of Japanese martial arts while employing a macro perspective. Thus, another way in which this book is important relates to its great contribution in the form of a strong theoretical point of view, which could be adopted or explored by other scholars of martial arts history in Japan.

While this was not touched on in the earlier summary, the book devotes a great deal of space to explaining Japanese history. However, in his introduction, García states that he cannot speak Japanese and that therefore, one limitation of the research is that he was unable to examine documents written in Japanese. I also think this

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1 There have been studies of Japanese martial arts using Elias's sociology before this book. For example, Alexander Bennett also referred to Elias's theory of civilization in his book but does not apply it to the ancient period or the Japanese Middle Ages. See Bennett [2015].

is a difficult point of this book. For example, subjects such as the emergence of samurai warriors are themes about which a consensus has yet to be reached by researchers of Japanese history in Japan itself. However, I was surprised that despite not being able to consult documents or research papers written in Japanese, García was able to compose a history of Japan from ancient times to the modern day. This clarifies the extent to which there has been a great deal of research compiled outside of Japan regarding Japanese history. More importantly, this includes research that leverages topics not yet fully pursued in Japan, such as research into *tengu* (a creature found in Japanese folklore) and research into experts of violence in modern Japan. It is telling, in this regard, that a translation of the originally English language book *Ruffians, Yakuza, Nationalists: The Violent Politics of Modern Japan, 1860–1960* has recently been published in Japan [Maruko Siniawer 2008, 2020]. In fact, it appears that research into these ‘Japanese’ topics is more advanced abroad than it is in Japan.

Overall, it was impressive that it was possible for García to have a detailed discussion Japanese martial arts history using only English language sources. The book deals with many historical facts that are not even known in Japan outside of highly specialized research circles. These topics include how martial arts were influenced by Esoteric Buddhism and Shinto when martial ryus were emerging; the unique aspects of the rights to transmit martial arts during the period of the Tokugawa Shogunate; and how not only samurai, but also farmers practiced martial arts.

However, I have doubts as to whether Elias’s sociology was sufficiently leveraged in this work. While the book is interesting as a comprehensive history of Japanese martial arts, it was less helpful in conveying the specifics of how the people’s discomfort with violent behavior expanded in certain periods and what moves were made to suppress this. Moreover, in his epilogue, García establishes four quadrants – using the concepts of civilizing, decivilizing, formalizing, and deformalizing – positioning different forms of martial arts as a mirror reflecting the varying conditions of each era. Yet one must conclude that much more research based on historical facts is necessary before we would be able to establish whether the positioning of these four quadrants is correct.

As such, the strength of the book lies in its ‘figuration’, in seeing society as an interdependent network; however, perhaps greater consideration could have been given to the forms through which individual people within the interdependent network suppress and express their emotions. At the end of Part I, García touches on how the systems of practice of Esoteric Buddhism were adapted into martial arts. However, in my opinion it may have been easier to connect the unique features of martial arts to the arguments of Elias and Wouters by considering the Japanese patterns of how the individual releases and expresses emotion centered on the idea of *Shinpo*, which itself relates to the objectification and control of the mind.

For example, allow me to consider how the practice of kata in the Tokugawa Period was tied to Shinpo. In the martial ryu of the Tokugawa Period, it was generally believed that one’s skills improved in step with one’s state of mind. For this reason, it was necessary for practitioners to reflect on their own state of mind and leverage the results of this reflection in the next lesson. The introduction of Shinpo into martial ryu allowed practitioners to control their inner selves. It is important to note that in a practice such as kata in which aesthetics are highly valued, it is only the master’s viewpoint that decides what kind of performance is good. In other words, the master is the only person in each martial ryu who can evaluate the performance of the kata. This means that in the practice of kata in the martial ryu of the Tokugawa Period, it was demanded that the individual accept the opinion of their master in evaluating their method of reflecting on their own state of mind. This involved a process of accepting the feudal social relationships of the master, also acting as a method of training self-restraint on the part of samurai at the beginning of the Tokugawa Period.

In reality, the Shinpo incorporated into every martial ryu often included the skills-related teachings of selflessness and freedom from obstructive thoughts, as well as Confucian teachings surrounding social relationships. This tendency became more pronounced with the passage of time. However, the moment one had mastered all kata and reached selflessness and freedom from obstructive thoughts, they were allowed to become independent of their master. Some of these individuals would go on to establish martial ryu themselves. Those who gained their independence were allowed to express their own sense of violence through a kata as they wished.

In addition, those who gained their independence were most often vassals and ordinary people, and while they were unable to transcend their ordinary social milieu, they stood tallest in the field of their practice. Even if they were a farmer, they could rise to become the master of a samurai. Is this not a Japanese way of controlling and expressing emotion? In other words, martial ryu acted as a type of pressure release valve to maintain the Tokugawa Shogunate, or to frame it in terms of Elias's work, they became a sort of enclave.

The experience of reading this book was deeply significant to me as a scholar, as it has led to the aforementioned epiphanies. I expect that the book will continue to be the kind of work that is valued by a wide and diverse audience in the future.

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