

The Meaning of JuJitsu

柔術

by: Reginald Lee Heefner

Most basic books on ju-jitsu gloss over this Japanese term as “the gentle art”. Similarly, the term judo is listed as “the gentle way”, irrespective of whether it refers to the ancient ju-jitsu ryu called judo or modern Kodokan judo founded by Prof. Jigoro Kano in 1882. Both of these are succinct and convenient ways of briefly translating the terms. However, both of these are mistranslations. They are fundamentally derived from a misunderstanding of the full range of meaning of the Japanese Ju and its intended meaning in the context of ju jutsu.

It is unfortunately that these misunderstandings have become embedded over the course of time. This mistranslation of the term Ju as “gentle” causes endless arguments and debates about the use of strength and force in ju-jutsu or judo. This is why I feel that some clarification is in order.

The character 柔 (ju) in Japanese refers to a pliancy and flexibility of both the mind and body to adapt to circumstances spontaneously. That is, the ability to respond to a sudden armed or unarmed attack with a composure and presence of mind — in the midst of the chaos caused by any battle — in order to thwart the attack in the most efficient and effective manner possible, given the relative positions of oneself and the attacker.

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The character 術 (jutsu) means “art”, in the sense of a finely honed physical skill that transcends physical technique when executed. The word originally struck Westerner’s ears as jitsu, much as ju (a long vowel in Japanese) came to be written jiu. These erroneous romanizations not only became embedded in English but also, in the case of jitsu, dominant.*

Early translators, with little knowledge of the art itself, misconstrued the intended meaning of ju and fell into the pitfall of novice translators: trying for a word-to-word equivalence instead of a meaning-based translation to reflect the truly intended meaning in context. Because early translators selected the wrong meaning for the character from the many meanings and ranges of meanings possible, Ju has come to be translated and mean “gentle”, thereby making one infer that the art is gentle and that one does not need to use strength or force. The original meaning was a concept: optimum use of strength and force so that one’s energy is not dissipated needlessly.

Unfortunately, these translators were unaware of the full range of meanings available, which is only natural when dealing with a second language. This is why the United Nations insists that its interpreters and translators only translate into their native language and from the foreign language. This is why, today, we are saddled with “the gentle art” for ju-jutsu and “the gentle way” for judo. When bringing up this issue it is inevitable that one person or another will go to a native Japanese and ask for the correct definition of these two terms. It is ironic that one would go to a native Japanese speaker and expect that person to have such an encyclopedic knowledge of their nonnative English that they could render judgments about translations from Japanese into English.

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As long as one is aware of the original derivation of the terms and their proper meanings in context, we can settle for “the gentle art” instead of the art of pliantly adapting to circumstances.

*There were many competing Romanization systems both then and now, though the most common is the Hepburn System. The most widely taught in schools was developed by Dr. Eleanor Jordan, which strikes everyone as cumbersome though it is linguistically sound. At any rate, what in Japanese is properly jū-jutsu has most commonly become rendered ju-jitsu in English.

It would be a pedantic exercise to try to change this rendition as it is so imbedded that the correct term would not stick. That is why most martial arts scholars and serious students of martial arts end up just learning the characters, as Ben Haryo pointed out in his excellent series of Japanese characters à la Donn Draeger when he was alive.

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