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Internal and External; Soft and Hard; Northern and Southern.

A “student” of a martial art is a practitioner of the art, sometimes highly skilled. I don’t separate students, adepts, and masters. “Student” means all of them.

Asian martial arts are often distinguished by using three categories, each category made up of opposites:

(1) Northern (Chinese) versus Southern (Chinese)

(2) Hard versus Soft

(3) Internal versus External

Although “Northern” and “Southern” referred originally to China, they now mean the kind of art that people think originated in the North or South of China, and is characteristic of the North or South, although now it is practiced elsewhere. For example, Okinawan karate came from Southern styles but it is now practiced in Japan, Europe, and North America.

The categories can overlap, so you can have a Southern Internal or a Southern External Style, and an internal style can be sometimes soft and sometimes hard. The overlap is not consistent, and that is what makes the categories both useful but of limited use.

The categories are somewhat true but not entirely true. No category is accurate by itself and the overlap of categories is even less accurate. Getting stuck in the categories is a big mistake. Use the categories at first to get a general sense of differences between martial arts, but then discard them. Learn to see the potential in whatever martial art you study, and learn to see the potential in other martial arts as well.

In stereotype, Northern Chinese styles use high stances, kick a lot, use kicks to the front and to the side, and rise to the balls of the feet. They do not necessarily kick or punch hard, but they kick and punch often. Northern styles are like what Americans think of as “kickboxing”. In contrast, Southern Chinese styles use low stances, have few kicks, kick almost always to the front (including crescent kicks), use few side kicks, use arm techniques more than kicks, and stay flat on the feet. Southern styles use powerful focused punches, blocks. They throw few punches or kicks and try to make each punch or kick very hard and decisive. Their kicks and punches tend to be linear. Northern styles are “acrobatic” while Southern styles are “stodgy”.

Chuck Norris, Jackie Chan (Chun Lom), Jet Li, and Bruce Lee seem to fight in northern styles. All use a flurry of techniques, including many kicks to the side. They do rise to the balls of their feet often, and sometimes stay there. Bruce Lee was greatly expanded the use of the side kick in his original style (Wing Chun) and he used his legs often. Yet all these students hit hard. Tae Kwan Do, a Korean art similar to Japanese karate, likely received influence from northern China, and its students are adept high kickers,

often able to kick the head. They too use a flurry of kicks and punches. Yet its students have as much power in their techniques as other styles, and they try to end fights quickly.

Karate is originally from Okinawa – see the “Karate Kid” movies. Karate received influence from southern styles, and originally it had only a few simple, powerful, low kicks, all to the front. It is flat footed. Yet Okinawan karate also originally had leaps and spins, and it had circular movements, grappling, throws, and joint locks. Karate quickly developed side kicks after it moved to Japan after about 1920. Tai Chi is soft and internal (see below), and had roots in the South. But also is flat-footed, has few kicks, all its kicks are to the front, and it stresses arm and body. Originally Western boxing had grappling, throws, take-downs, locks, low kicks, and submissions. Like other distinctions in martial arts, the North-South distinction can be useful to gain some orientation at first but is not something to rely on.

Stereotypically, hard styles concentrate on punches, kicks, and blocks. They do not use many throws or joint locks. They do not include many ground techniques. They put maximum force into their techniques; blocks in a hard style cause damage. Hard styles use the muscles and bones to generate momentum, leverage, and torque. Sometimes they use compression of the body to move “energy” from the center of the body to a punch, kick, or block. They confront opponents “head on” and try to end a fight quickly by causing a lot of damage. Their techniques tend to be linear but need not be. Punches are aimed anywhere in the body that can do damage, although they prefer to strike soft tissue where they can do the most damage. Typical hard styles are Thai boxing, Okinawan karate, and Japanese karate, Tae Kwan Do, most Shaolin-derived kung fu, Western boxing, savate (sabat), and kickboxing.

Soft styles avoid direct confrontation. They circle around an opponent. They lead an opponent away. A block redirects a strike or a kick rather than aims also to cause damage. Techniques tend to be circular. They use many throws and locks. They try to strike at soft tissue such as the eyes, neck, and heart, and try to avoid hard tissue such as the skull or sternum. Typical soft styles are judo, aikido, Tai Chi, Pa Kua, Hsing I, hapkido, and Indonesian Silat.

This distinction too breaks down. All hard arts have round techniques and can move around opponents. All hard arts recognize that it is better to strike soft tissue than hard tissue. All hard arts know that not all blocks can break an arm or a leg; you get what you can. All hard arts use throws and locks. Soft arts can get quite hard when the time comes. Silat prides itself on being able to kill at a single blow. Tai chi employs a hand technique (“chicken beak”) that is specifically for use against hard tissue, including bone. Punches in Tai Chi, Pa Kua, and Hsing I hurt. Judo techniques can break arms and legs. Pa Kua has no trouble using muscular twisting and muscular force to get the job done.

In stereotype, internal styles rely on “chi” or “internal energy”. I do not try to explain what chi is, how it is used, or how to cultivate it. I know a little, but only a little. Internal styles tend to be soft. Internal styles use chi to anticipate strikes, block strikes, and make strikes. You hit a person by projecting your chi into the opponent, not by using your muscles to develop force or using body compression to develop force. Your chi can reside all over your body, and you can get chi from the environment around you as well. Mostly you store chi in a reservoir about five centimeters (an inch and a half) below your navel. You draw from that reservoir when you block or strike. You develop a feel for yin and yang so you can know when your opponent is strong and weak, and can take advantages of the strength and weakness. Blows are aimed at weak parts of the opponent’s body such as the eyes, throat, heart, and nerve points. You “float”

when you move. Although it sounds contradictory to floating, the soft styles that I know stay flat footed and low to the ground. Really there is no contradiction. You stick to the opponent by maintaining physical contact at nearly all times. The paradigm internal arts are Tai Chi, Pa Kua, and Hsing I.

In stereotype, external styles tend to be hard. External styles use muscles, bones, and torque to make power. Nearly all blocks and strikes are delivered with enough force to cause damage. Blows are “focused” to concentrate the energy and to cause the most damage. Even blocks damage an opponent. Blows are not necessarily aimed at weak points. You move close to and away from an opponent, in-and-out, and do not maintain physical contact except to throw him-her. Internal artists say external artists use the center of the chest and back as the reservoir for energy and draw their energy from there, in contrast to the reservoir under the navel that is used by internal artists. Yet the external styles I have seen insist that they draw power from the same center as internal styles in much the same way, and call the energy “chi” or “qi”, or, in Japanese, “ki”. The paradigm external arts are Okinawan and Japanese Karate, Korean Tae Kwan Do, Muay Thai (Thai boxing), and Western boxing.

As usual, the distinction does not hold up. External artists have strong damaging blocks in their arsenal but many blocks in practice are soft and guiding rather than hard and damaging. When an external artist moves in, he-she does stick to the opponent to maneuver the opponent and to guide attack, just as does an internal artist. Internal styles can move back and forth from an opponent, and do not always stick to the opponent. External arts use throws and joint locks. When internal arts use throws and joint locks, they use them much the same way as external arts, and intend to hurt a thrown opponent and to break a locked joint. Internal artists also know how to do damage with blocks. Internal arts tend to start soft and to end up hard. External arts tend to start hard and end up soft.

My only martial arts are Tai Chi (Southern, soft, and internal) and Japanese karate (Southern, hard, and external). They are not the same but they are not nearly as distinct as the stereotypes indicate. Nearly all the same ideas appear in the practice forms of both arts. Studying one helps with the practice of the other; they never interfere. Karate can be done softly while Tai Chi can be done quite hard. Tai Chi does use chi in theory (the “chi” in “Tai Chi” is not the same word as “chi” in “energy”) but I never advanced to the point where I can use chi much. You can do Tai Chi fairly well without relying much on chi. Karate insists that it draws on chi from the center of your body below the navel when it punches or kicks hard, and when it does damage. When karate players break boards, they say they use chi, and they say they draw energy from their body center. The famous “spirit shout” of karate, “kia” (kee aii) both brings chi up from the center and graphically illustrates the use of chi. From what I have seen, among adepts, the karate use of chi is not as advanced as the Tai Chi use of chi as long as the Tai Chi student really knows what he-she is doing and is not simply putting on a show.

If you insist on centering your art around chi, or if you are curious about chi, then you should start with an internal art that has chi at its heart and that insists on strong chi training. The standard “Big Three” internal arts are Tai Chi, Hsing I, and Pa Kua. Oddly enough, Tai Chi as it is taught in the United States has little real chi training. Have a clear frank talk with the Tai Chi teacher about the role of chi in teaching. Depending on the group, Aikido can have true chi training. Again, although chi plays a big role in Aikido ideas, often it is not an integral part of the training.

Some instructors use false tricks to convince novices that they know about chi, such as the “unbendable arm”. Please be careful about such tricks, and ask for more than a mere trick. I have never seen any instructor who claims to use advanced chi really use it; but I have never seen an instructor who claimed to use advanced chi who also was from Asia or who had studied deeply from a master. The teachers I knew from China, or who had studied with a master, and had some knowledge of chi, did not make a big deal about chi or about what they knew. To me, it seems the more people know about chi, the less they say; and the more they say, the less they know.

Practitioners of different arts like to say that their art is effective in practice while other arts might be more dramatic, have more techniques, or showier, but are not effective in practice. When students of different styles debate this point, they sometimes get into fights. Typically, external hard styles tend to give some basic competence quicker. That does not mean external hard styles do not continue to develop more subtle forms of competence. That does not mean external hard styles are less or more effective than internal soft styles over the long run. As I said above, over the long run, external hard tends to become internal soft, and vice versa.

Practitioners of hard external styles like to say that soft internal styles are beautiful to see but not at all effective in real situations, even after decades of practice. Practitioners of soft internal styles strongly deny this accusation. This accusation does have some truth. No, I will not fight internal artists to prove my point. Hard external styles always have some realistic practical application but even that can vary and is the subject of debate. Internal styles tend to be impractical because many students are drawn to the mystical flowery showy aspects of internal arts and many students completely overlook the martial basis of the art. When people practice supposed martial arts for health-and-mystical reasons rather than as martial arts, people always practice an internal art such as Tai Chi or Pa Kua. The emphasis on teaching of soft internal arts now is not on martial use. Schools make standard techniques flowery, and develop dozens of flowery variations of standard techniques, in order to “tweak” the stimulation of chi and so increase health and mystical prowess. Of course, when taught in this way, internal soft styles are showy and ineffective. Yet internal soft arts can be effective when aimed at martial use. Tai Chi has about 35 basic moves that are all quite effective for fighting when they are taught for fighting and when they are not overly-elaborated, overly softened, and dramatized. Sometimes external hard styles aim at show for kata (standardized routines) competitions, and then they are as useless and overly dramatic as soft internal arts – I still recall watching with horror and fascination as a young woman let down her very long hair to do her kata from a hard internal art in a competition, and her hair swirled around her in ways that invited disaster in a fight, thereby negating the main purpose of the kata. I have since seen that show repeated many times by practitioners of several arts.

Dozens of books now have been written on practical applications of both internal soft and external hard martial arts. Most are not very good. I do not review them here. If you want a glimpse of how an internal soft martial art can be practical, I suggest two books by Dennis Rovere and Chow Hon Huen: (1) “The Xingyi Quan of the Chinese Army” (primary author Dennis Rovere); and (2) “Chinese Military Police: Knife, Baton, and Weapon Techniques” (primary author Chow Hon Huen). “Xingyi” is “Hsing I”. “Quan” is the same as the “Chuan” in “Tai Chi Chuan”, and here means “martial way”.

Whether you like internal or external, hard or soft, northern or southern, is partly a matter of taste. Nearly all martial arts schools allow people to watch before joining. I suggest you visit several schools and talk

to students of several styles. Get reasonable skill in only one style before seriously trying another. But then don't be afraid to "cross train" by trying another. It does take an entire lifetime to master any one art, so likely you cannot master more than one art, or at most two, but the time spent doing cross training will not set you too far back in your main art(s). Cross training also helps soften the silly antagonism that styles sometimes feel toward each other.