



兵法二天一流

Hyoho Niten Ichi Ryu France

With Nguyen Thanh Thiên, Responsible for France on behalf of Iwami soke

In former days, seized by the hope of living unforeseen epic times, he would have embarked on a caravelle seafaring towards Cipangu. In these remote islands, perhaps would he have encountered a samurai, armed just like him with two swords ... A swordsman, and heir of our era, Ricardo Pous Cuberes, a teacher of historical and theatrical fencing in Catalonia, verily made this voyage into space and time. The story begins in Oviedo in 1996, during the first international festival of traditional martial arts organised in Spain and attended by the Japanese master Imai Masayuki, the 10th successor (soke) of the renowned fencer Miyamoto Musashi.

Impressed as well as intrigued by Master Imai's demonstration of ambidextrous fencing, Ricardo Pous got in contact with him and the following year, addressed to him the treatise he had just written (1). Some time later, he learned by return of post that his treatise had been translated, read and analysed, and that he was invited to Usashi, on the island of Kyushu in Japan, where the physical and spiritual centre of the *Hyoho Niten Ichi Ryu* school can be found (2). That is where the *katana* and the rapier, the short Japanese sword and the Spanish dagger could finally defy each other. No blood was shed, since the primary function of the sword, far from being to slay or mutilate, is, according to Master Imai, to "sever the tissue of illusions that masks the true human heart". This is how both swordsmen succeeded in transcending artificial antagonisms, and bringing together continents in the space of an encounter and a hearty exchange, whereby the elderly, facetious master delighted in jostling the etiquette (2). The interview extract was published in April 1998 in the magazine *Arts et Combats* when I was its editor-in-chief for the traditional martial arts section. Master Imai had recently come to Paris to present his art at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in the framework of the Year of Japan in France. I had met him twice, first at the hotel Nikko, then at the Invalides to admire the collection of ancient arms and armours at the Army Museum there.

Gesture poetry

According to Ricard Pous Cuberes, "the *Hyoho Niten Ichi Ryu* school of Master Imai is not only a fencing school, it is first and foremost a school of poetry". A gesture poetry that speaks the language of the soul and that the audience of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées will probably have felt while admiring the perfect execution of *kata* by Master Imai and the two experts accompanying him - the *menkyo kaiden* Kiyonaga Fumiya and Iwami Toshio. Along with these three *sensei*, we endeavoured to go beyond appearances to find the true spirit of the practice. It should be acknowledged that Master Imai, at over eighty years of age, retains an unusual forcefulness, an unscathed passion, and was a precious help to us in carrying out this endeavour.

José Carmona: Imai *sensei*, for over seven decades you have been dedicated to the Way of the *budo* (martial arts). What has been your conception of the art of the sword during all these years?



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Imai sensei: *A lifetime of practice has allowed me to seize the difference between the technique (jutsu) and the Way (do). Ken-jutsu (sword technique) teaches us how to practice, how to fight. It is not only about movements or strategy, it is also about the mental stance, the implication of reflection and heart within the action. Although I started the study of kendo at a very young age, I must admit that I only realised the spirit of it at a later stage, when I reached seventy years old! Prior to this, I would fight with much ardour, winning victories which left me in a state of exhaustion. When comprehension dawned upon me, my perception of the opponent completely changed: I would no longer feel his strength, height, weight or youth, there was no more opposition, only a sense of lightness...The true “Way of the sword”, kendo, is not a fighting technique but a way to unify the human and the divine. It is a spiritual practice, a way for humanity.*

Transcending the rules

José Carmona: Could you tell us about the specificity of the *Hyoho Niten Ichi Ryu* of which you are the tenth *soke* (representative) since its Founder, Miyamoto Musashi?

Imai sensei: *The practice of the double sword is prior to Miyamoto Musashi, who codified it within his ryu (school). The kata transmitted through the ryu (essentially there are seven which are performed one sword against another, and five which are performed two swords against only one, ed.) could be compared to exercises consisting in immersing oneself in the master’s teaching, his technique but also his spirit. However, through these tools, each and everyone has to manage to express his difference, his unicity. In fact, there are no rules. For instance in the execution of kata, we hold the katana on the right and the short sword on the left, but all in all, this is of no importance, we could very well do the reverse. The kata allow us to find the way which itself transcends all rules. From this viewpoint there are no fundamental differences between ken-jutsu schools.*

José Carmona: On this point, Ricardo Pous Cuberes, who now follows your teaching, is a specialist in the Western tradition ambidextrous fencing. Would you say there are common points between this method and the *Hyoho Niten Ichi Ryu* school?

Imai sensei: *In former times, we used to think that only Japan knew the way of fencing, knew its authentic spirit. On reading the treatise written by Mr Ricardo Pous Cuberes, we not only discover an unsuspected richness, but above all, similar concepts and vocabulary in common. For this reason, I am transmitting the school’s kata, which it will be up to him to perpetuate after me...*

[Interview by José Carmona, 1998]

(1) *Libreta de las combinaciones de la espada ropera con la daga*, chez l'auteur, 1995.



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- (2) *Since Iwami soke has succeeded Imai soke as 11th successor to Miyamoto Musashi, the center of the school has been relocated to Kokura, Kitakyushu, Japan.*
- (3) Inside the dojo and before the eyes of bewildered disciples, Master Imai, holding his rapier, mimed a combat against his guest armed with... a katana! As surprising as this may seem, Master Imai was particularly fond of Western cloak-and-dagger films.

Post-scriptum: Fourteen years have passed since this encounter. After a second trip to Japan and several astounding episodes, Ricardo Pous Cuberes pursued his personal progression by publishing two essays devoted to ancient European fencing; one about the writings of a master of Spanish *destreza*, Nicola Tamariz, the other about the work of the French Henry de Saint-Didier, the *Traité contenant les secrets du premier livre sur l'épée seule, mère de toutes les armes* (1573) [Treatise containing the secrets of the first book on the sword alone, mother of all weapons]. As for Master Imai, he passed away in 2006. The *Hyoho Niten Ichi Ryu* school was nevertheless established in France thanks to Philippe Nguyen (Nguyen Thanh Thiên), who followed Taiji quan lessons at the Siming Academy. Knowing the latter's interest in Japanese martial arts, I put him in contact with Ricardo during a rapier and dagger fencing presentation organised for my students. Since then, Philippe has become the representative of the official successor of Master Imai, *sensei* Iwami.

Translation: Jouanah Ghori