

**International Symposium on Japanese Studies, Center for Japanese Studies, University of Bucharest, 1-3 March 2014**

**‘The importance of doing and being myself’: The impact of traditional martial arts practice on the lives of contemporary practitioners.**

My research takes an ethnographic approach to examining the classical martial system of Takenouchi-ryū Bitchūden (TRB), exploring it as a form of education and character development. Students devote years to this intensely mentally demanding and potentially dangerous physical combative art. What practitioners learn; the impact it has on their lives, identities and conceptions of self; and how *koryū bujutsu*<sup>1</sup> relate to life, leisure and education in Japan are the main focus. Fundamentally, the aim is to discover how and why the practice of TRB affects the lives of its members.

Research on martial arts includes translations of *samurai* literature; studies of the *samurai*; histories of the martial arts; modern writings on techniques and philosophy; catalogues of extant *koryū* and their characteristics; and popular manuals. However, studies taking an ethnographic approach are concentrated almost exclusively on modern martial arts and there are very few in-depth explorations of the *koryū*. Although they no longer play a central role in the training of the élite, the *koryū* ethos and values continue to influence both current sports and wider aspects of contemporary culture.

This paper will focus on individuals’ experiences of and attitudes towards this traditional practice and the role it plays in their modern lives. The primary source of data is from fieldwork carried out at the head *dōjō*. The *koryū* are

impenetrable, even for Japanese, however, a longstanding association provided unprecedented access to carry out in-depth interviews with both new and senior members of the group.

The research shows that far from being 'just a hobby', for exercise or a form of historical reenactment; what people learn influences their daily existence, including work and relationships with others. Long-term participants see it as an integral aspect of their lives, an important source of well-being and intrinsic to how they deal with the challenges of life in contemporary Japan.

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<sup>1</sup> *Koryū bujutsu* = 'old' style pre-Meiji martial traditions