



## Empty Mind Films:

### *An Interview with Martial Arts Documentary Filmmaker Jon Braeley*

By Michael Ishimatsu-Prime

Briton Jon Braeley is possibly the pre-eminent martial arts documentary filmmaker working in the world today. His catalogue includes *The Shaolin Kid: A Boy in China*, *Art of the Japanese Sword*, *Masters of Heaven and Earth*, and *The Zen Mind* to name but a few. Now based in Miami, Florida where he runs Empty Mind Films, his production company, he has made many documentaries on Japanese and Chinese martial arts, as well as Eastern spirituality and medicine. Braeley's latest work sees him venture for the first time into a series format that covers the Japanese budo arts. Kendo World caught up with him during the editing stage of the series that will feature kendo.

**Kendo World:** *The first episode of your new series, Warriors of Budo, went on sale in October 2014. Can you give us an overview of the series, what is it about, what can we expect to see?*

**Jon Braeley:** Initially, the idea was to make an updated version of the BBC documentary series from the 1980s called *The Way of the Warrior*, which covers the main arts that are designated as budo by the Nippon Budokan, such as aikido, karate, Shorinji Kempo, and kendo. We also wanted to introduce one or two new masters that represent different aspects of those arts.

In the new series we decided to start with karate because it will show the history of the martial arts a little bit easier than, for example, kendo, whose history remains firmly rooted in Japan. However, karate came from China, and in fact, India before that. We therefore thought that we would feature karate as the first episode, specifically Okinawan karate, with Higaonna Morio-sensei, 10-dan karate master of Gōjū-ryū who was actually in the original *The Way of the Warrior* BBC series. In the first



*Empty Mind Films' Jon Braeley*

20 minutes of the program we show the history of the martial arts from the Shaolin Temple to *tai ji quan* (*tai chi*), and then how they came into Okinawa, and from there into mainland Japan. Even today, budo arts like karate, judo and Shorinji Kempo are still influenced by the Chinese martial arts on which they are based, and aikido to a certain extent, too.

The second episode will be on mainland karate. We had to dedicate two episodes to karate because of the number of styles, and also because it's the most popular martial art in the world. We have got one of the Japan Karate Association's former top instructors, Yahara-sensei, who split away to form a new association called "Karate-no-Michi". From the JKA we have Naka-sensei, who starred in a movie called *Kuro Obi* (Black Belt) and *High Kick Girl*. Naka-sensei allowed us to feature behind the scenes interviews on movie sets and showed us how martial arts are filmed in the movies. Wadō-ryū karate will be also featured at their Hombu Dojo where the current head, Ōtsuka Hironori gives a terrific demonstration of how to defend against a live blade or *shinken*.

Episode three will be aikido, specifically Yoshinkan aikido; episode four will feature Shorinji Kempo; episode five, judo and jujitsu; and episode six will be on kendo, and it will also feature naginata, jukendo, tankendo and



Higaonna Morio-sensei for WoB



Otsuka Hironori-sensei for WoB



With Kanazawa Hirokazu



Wu style tai chi, HK, 1977

iaido. Jodo is not featured yet but we're trying to arrange that now. It's currently six episodes, but it could end up becoming seven. Most of the footage has been shot, but we still have a little bit of kendo left to shoot. If I'm being optimistic, all the episodes should be screened within 12 months.

Each individual episode will be feature-length; the time will just run itself. Aikido is about 75 minutes and I think that the kendo episode will end up about that as well. The reason why it's an episode series, unlike the feature length format that I usually make, is because when they are finished, they will be edited into 60-minute episodes for TV. Many satellite and cable companies in Europe and Australia have already shown an interest in this series.

**KW:** *I saw in the preview that for the kendo episode you filmed in K8-dan Ozawa Hiroshi-sensei's dojo, Kōbukuan.*

**JB:** That's right. We did a very big interview with him that lasted for about 2.5 hours. I love his dojo, it's beautiful. We filmed some *koryū* there as well as a kendo lesson.

**KW:** *What does Ozawa-sensei discuss in his interview?*

**JB:** He actually discussed 21-year-old Takenouchi Yūya's victory in the recent All Japan Kendo Championships. While he was watching his matches, he was wondering how he would be able to face someone like that who is younger, faster and physically stronger than him. He said that he would have to keep his *kamae* and maybe do a *kaeshi-dō*. That would be preferable to *dehana-waza* because of the speed of Takenouchi's reactions.

**KW:** *Does the kendo episode focus on a specific aspect of the art? What did you want to show about kendo?*

**JB:** Rather than focus on one aspect of kendo, we instead show it in relation to the other sword arts and weapons with *koryū*, as well as jukendo and tankendo, jodo and naginata. There is also iaido. For the kendo itself we filmed across two All Japan Kendo Championships and two class practices, along with a number of annual *taikai* and *enbu*, so there is a lot of varied kendo content.

**KW:** *Did you film any kendo elsewhere?*

**JB:** We have also filmed *keiko* at Haga-ha Dojo at the Nippon Budokan. They do old, pre-war style kendo, and when they get going they end up doing jujutsu and start throwing each other. They have never opened their practice to film crews, but through a lot of contact with them, including sending them samples of our previous releases to show that we make serious documentaries, we were given permission to film them in November. They have seen our approach and know that we want to see the traditional side of the martial arts. We don't want to exaggerate or sensationalise the martial arts. We just want to show what they are.

We interviewed Uki Terukuni-sensei of Haga-ha. He said that a live blade is called a "*shinken*". That word is also used in modern Japanese to describe being serious about something. Therefore, everyone in his dojo, even beginners, uses a *shinken*.

He doesn't feel that there are such things as *kobudō* (old-style budo) or *kobujutsu* (old-style martial arts). If the *iai* and kendo from the actual period are practised without forgetting its origin and essential spirit, there is no need for such words as "old".

**KW:** How many countries and locations are featured in Warriors of Budo?



*Haga-ha Dojo kendo practice for WoB*

**JB:** Japan, China and India. India was only featured in the karate episode as there is an Indian martial art called *kalaripayattu*, which is an early version of Shaolin *gong fu* (kung fu). When you look at this early martial art you can actually see pieces of kata that they still do in Okinawa today that are identical.

**KW:** *In the past you have covered different arts from different countries like Japan and China. Even though there are these differences, do you approach the subject in the same way?*

**JB:** Kind of, yes. There's a big overlap, and I think that when you train in a Japanese martial art like kendo or aikido, and to a certain extent karate, you get a little bit blinkered because they're very specific martial arts. I used to be like that until I started to make films. When you go to China and see the hundreds and hundreds of martial arts styles there, there's a huge overlap between them and you see very similar techniques and teaching methods as you see in Japan. I was surprised many years ago to see that and I'm still uncovering it now. I still go to the Shaolin Temple and see a monk teaching something that looks like aikido. I believe that if you were to give a *shinai* to a Shaolin monk, he would know what to do if facing a kendoka. They are very similar, and they teach things like jodo, so we do approach things in a similar way. I think that in Japan the martial arts are much more

ordered, and that comes from centuries of a very orderly way of doing things. There used to be many more schools of *kenjutsu* than there are today that had very specific techniques and training methods, whereas in China, it's much more chaotic. What you would call a *ryūha* in Japan is probably what you would call a family in China with the same name. For example, the Chen family would all do Chen Tai-chi in a village called Chen. Or *ba gua zhang* which includes a sword form using a very broad sword, but it is specific to a family group. It's very muddled like that in China, and there are hundreds of different lineages. But in Japan it's very orderly and specific.

**KW:** *You don't have experience in all the martial arts that you cover, so is that a hindrance when making a documentary?*

**JB:** It can be a hindrance, but also a plus. My naivety about a certain art can make me ask questions that might be overlooked by someone who practises that art. We aim our documentaries at people who have an interest in martial arts and who maybe have never seen a martial arts program before. Therefore, we want to come into the dojo and say, "Tell us what you are doing." However, if you have an experienced background in kendo, for example, you might miss things that would be important to people with no experience.

I obviously get advised on what questions we should ask; I don't want to appear to be an idiot. We also have



*Ozawa Hiroshi-sensei at Kobukan for WoB*

to be careful when editing. Although I have a karate background and have practised it for almost all my life, when we were in Okinawa filming Gōjū-ryū karate, even though I practised that style for a while, I still sought the advice of some Gōjū-ryū practitioners during the editing stage. My assistants are chosen carefully for the skills they bring to the shoots, for example Juandiego Fonseca in Japan who practises both kendo and kyudo and is invaluable as a member of our film crew.

I don't think it's impossible if you have no experience to make a documentary. I think that it's more important to have the philosophical and conceptual background of the art when you enter a dojo. You need to know the etiquette of the dojo when you go there, something that is more important in Japan than China. It is also important knowing the way to deal with a master of the art. For example now, with the Shaolin Temple in China, you cannot just go there and film anymore. They have stopped everyone. I was able to film there in February because I have an insider – a new assistant who was born in the temple and whose mother works there as a guide. I didn't use my usual assistant who has worked for me eight years full-time. I think that is more important than knowing the specific martial arts.

You also need to be able to approach the subjects in a manner that shows respect, not asking stupid questions like, "Have you got the death touch?" I actually just

received a very nice email from the head of Higaonna-sensei's Australian dojo. He saw the documentary we just released on karate and he said that it is the best documentary he has seen that has featured Higaonna-sensei because we put the viewer into the dojo without any distractions. We just let the lesson flow, and if Higaonna-sensei wanted to say something into the camera we let it happen. We are trying hard to put the viewer in the dojo to experience the class as it unfolds. That was our philosophy with Warriors of Budo.

**KW:** *What is difficult or challenging about filming martial arts?*

**JB:** Right now the challenge is physical. In three days I'm heading to Wudang Mountain, China, and I'm nervous because it's really backbreaking. My two camera bags weigh about 50kg and going up and down that mountain is going to be quite stressful. Bending down over a camera for about six or seven hours is hard.

With regards to the actual filming, we have often been complimented about how we do not get in the way when we film, and people have said that they hardly know that we are there. Higaonna-sensei in Okinawa said that when he looked at us, I always seemed to have the camera pointing in the right direction. That's important – having the camera pointing in the right place. If it's not, the

instructor or the teacher will realise that you don't know what you're doing.

The actual shooting itself is not so different from how you would shoot anything else. Focusing is difficult because I do it manually. I am from the old-school where you shoot with your hand constantly on the focus ring. We shoot hours and hours of material, and out of five or six hours of footage, if we're lucky, we might get ten or fifteen minutes out of it. Getting good audio is also very challenging, and also the look of the dojo. Japanese dojo are damp and the lighting is often fluorescent which does not yield a nice image. It can cause a flicker on the camera so you have to change the frame-rate to avoid cycle phasing. In China, they all train outside and it is nice to have natural lighting.

**KW:** *Is there a standout sensei or teacher that you have interviewed?*

**JB:** There have been so many, and I don't want to list too many karate *sensei*, but one is Kanazawa-sensei, one of the original instructors who left Japan to teach overseas. I did a very interesting interview with him in 2003; he was a very humble man. I think that with most of the top *sensei*, their humility is amazing. They deny their prowess in the arts, and say it's just training and that anybody can do what they do – you just have to put the hours in. We all know that's not true, there's only so much technique that you can learn. After a certain point it comes down to the strength of your mind. It is will and determination and your approach, and some of the top teachers exhibit that.

When it comes to the top masters, we are very lucky that we have been able to interview those at the very top of each art. It was one of the principles that we started Empty Mind with – if we can't get number one, we might settle for number two, but not three. The very first martial arts interview that we did was with aikido's Ueshiba Moriteru-sensei, the grandson of the founder, Ueshiba Morihei.

This is what I think sets us apart from our competition. If you look at some of the American TV programs, many of them do not seek out the top masters for a particular reason. It is because quite often when you interview people at the top, they tend to not really need to say too much, and in fact, the interviews can sometimes be a little boring. They don't need to sensationalise or capitalise on who or what they are, and use their position and strength to inflate their ego. So in fact, sometimes those types of interviews do not yield what a TV audience will want to see. Therefore, National Geographic and Discovery Channel tend to interview people lower down, who kind of have words fed into them and are somewhat manipulated, something



*With Kayla Harrison, U.S. Olympic judo gold medalist, for WoB*

which I have accused filmmakers of doing many times.

In *Warriors of Budo*, we went to Massachusetts to interview Kayla Harrison, the U.S.'s first gold medal judoka. She won gold at the 2012 London Olympics. She was incredible. We are always trying to find women in our martial arts documentaries; we don't want them to be full of testosterone.

**KW:** *Are there any arts that you have not yet covered that you would like to?*

**JB:** I have wanted to film Muay Thai boxing for a number of years. We got approved by the World Boxing Council in Bangkok in 2006. We were due to film but that was when a big tsunami hit which wiped out the training camp where we were supposed to go. All the kickboxers fight in Bangkok in the arenas, but they actually train and live in the islands in the South where it is cheaper. We scheduled it again and then it got cancelled by the government due to political problems.

There are still some small martial arts in China that I'd like to cover, but there are literally hundreds and I can't cover them all. We're going back to Wudang Mountain where I made a documentary called *Masters of Heaven and Earth*. We're going to cover it from a different angle and cover the health aspect of *qi gong* and its internal breathing and relate that to medicine, but there will also be some martial arts in it, too. It will be called *The Immortal Path*.

With regards to Japan, I don't think that we have covered kendo enough, and some of the other sword arts, but we're trying to do that now.

I'd also like to do sumo but that is proving to be difficult what with the politics involved. Sumo is split



*At the All Japan Kendo Championships, 2014*

into two: professional and amateur. On the professional side, film crews were banned because of all the scandals, corruption and bribery. They always think that you're going in there with an agenda, or to try and expose something. We approached the sumo federation and said that we're only interested in sumo as a martial art. They said that it wasn't a very good time — apparently there was some “house cleaning” going on. We also experienced the same thing at the Kodokan when we were trying to film judo there. At first we got flatly refused, due to some internal issues. Some people got fired and the government had threatened to come in and sort the organisation out. We were asked to wait six months, which we did, and in the end managed to get permission. We'd probably be able to film amateur sumo, but really, we want to film the professional side of it. As I've said before, I don't want to settle for second best, and as sumo is also a professional sport, I want to film that.

**KW:** *What made you give up a stable job as an architect to become a documentary maker?*

**JB:** I was an architect in the north of England for about 12 years. I gave that stability up, and England, too. I felt it was about time for a change, a *cliché*, I know. I left England for a new challenge and moved to New York. I worked as an architect there for a little while. I had always been a photographer – a passion I had in England not related to work. I was always taking photographs, and had studied it at university when I did a Fine Arts and Photography course, before I switched to architecture. Another passion I had was karate, which I started when I was 15 years old and have basically never stopped. I did other martial arts in England, too. I did aikido for a year

and *tai chi* for a couple of years when I was 20, and even went to Hong Kong to study there.

I never thought that my passions for photography and martial arts would join together, but that's what happened. I moved to New York in 1990 and worked there for five years and then moved down to Miami. In 1997 I made my first documentary, but it was not related to the martial arts. It was about a Russian Olympic coach who was teaching Russian Olympic athletes but then defected. He came to the U.S. and taught a new method of running.

In 2000, an interesting thing happened. I got a call from a TV production company and they asked me to introduce them to martial arts people that I knew because I travelled around a lot to train. It turned out that I didn't do it because I checked them out and they were part of a well-known cable television channel. Everybody said that I should do be doing that myself; that provided the spark that created Empty Mind Films back in 2001. Instead of doing it as a hobby, I decided to do it properly. I had a photography studio at that time in Miami and I got rid of everything and switched to video, went on a training course in Los Angeles at Paramount Studios where they did a one-week boot camp to train filmmakers. I went on a few of those and then felt empowered enough to come to Japan to start making documentaries, that was the beginning of the first documentary—*The Empty Mind*—that was released in 2003. It was a bit ambitious because we wanted to connect all the top masters in one documentary. I felt that if you were to take a top martial arts teacher from Japan and one from China, and put them side by side, they could finish each other's sentences. They are so similar in their attitude, their knowledge, the way they teach, everything. We felt that a lot of people don't see that link between the top instructors. We travelled across Japan and filmed karate, aikido and other arts, and then we went to China to the Shaolin Temple in 2003. Also, I went to Wudang Mountain, a very famous martial arts location, which is where I'm going again in a few days.

**KW:** *Can you please elaborate more on your martial arts background?*

**JB:** I started karate when I was 15 years old. I came from a very tough neighbourhood in the north of England. We were very poor and I had five brothers who all went to work in the steel factories. You had to be able to look after yourself – that or be a very fast runner. I started karate because I was scared of getting beaten up. My confidence was so low at that point, so I liked having the skills to be able to deal with people if I got into a situation.

One of my brothers was in a band, and it just so hap-

pened that his manager was a black belt in karate. Once a week he would take me to the local YMCA to teach me karate. For the first year it was just the two of us. I was too shy to join a club, and I didn't have the means to do so anyway. A year later he then found me a club and that was when I really realised, "Oh wow, this is amazing." I was 16 at that time and had a part-time job, working my way through school. My first teacher was Roy Stanhope, and he is still the international coach in England. He was a legend in my hometown, driving a Lotus.

Bruce Lee and the program *Kung Fu* with David Carradine were all the rage at that time, so all the exposure to martial arts at that time came from China, like kung fu, never Japanese arts. However, in England, the only martial arts teachers then were Japanese. There was very little kung fu to be learnt in England. I naturally went to karate as that was the most popular one, that and judo. I did Shotokan karate, which is probably the most popular form of karate in the world, and it really paved the way for the martial arts to spread internationally.

**KW:** *Your background is karate, but have you got an interest in starting one of the other arts that you have covered?*

**JB:** I have a great feeling for aikido. As you get older, your art becomes more relaxed and softer. When I was young, my karate was all about strength, that was the Shotokan karate way—one punch to win. As you get older you realise the potential that being soft has and it can be advantageous. Your speed can increase with softness and your movements get better. For that reason, I have an interest in aikido.

I would love to do kendo, but the main reason that I'm not is because I couldn't carry the equipment around! I always felt that the true essence of the martial arts is that you should be able to do them in your clothes. Therefore, I have always been drawn to the weaponless martial arts like karate, aikido and judo.

**KW:** *What other projects are you working on at the moment?*

**JB:** We always have two or three projects running at the same time. Beside *Warriors of Budo* and *The Immortal Path* which I have mentioned, I shot a movie in India in 2013 about UFC champion Jonathan Brookins who was very jaded with the MMA scene, even though he won the final of the UFC a year before. He was burnt out with the fight scene, as well as fighting his own demons, so he moved to India to detox and travel on the yoga path in places like Rishikesh. We filmed him in the USA before he left and while he was in India. He's a very intelligent guy actually,



really articulate, so the interviews are very enlightening, to use a pun. He is now back in the USA and fighting again. He recently came to Miami to see me. Then in 2015, we are scheduled to start shooting a documentary called *Danger Close* with a Special Forces veteran. This is a big departure from martial arts but the connection is that this Special Forces soldier is a weapons expert that combines his martial art training into his shooting technique, but I am not allowed to say any more than this. It is very intense to watch him move and shoot a gun. When we first met to discuss the movie he asked me if I am OK with loud bangs! We have been waiting four years for him to retire but he keeps getting asked to go back. He is on his way back from his last tour in Afghanistan at the moment and I hope to see him at Christmas.

**KW:** *How and where can people find your work?*

**JB:** On our website – [www.emptymindfilms.com](http://www.emptymindfilms.com) – you can download or rent our films. We also have a YouTube channel ([www.youtube.com/user/emptymindfilms](http://www.youtube.com/user/emptymindfilms)) or you can buy our documentaries through Amazon and a number of online distributors. Our programmes are also often on TV.

**KW:** *Thank you for your time and best of luck with Warriors of Budo and your other projects.*