

The ITF and the WTF: Two paths of Taekwondo

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On the surface, modern Dojangs provide little insight into the complicated history of Taekwondo, an art born out of an occupied and war-torn nation and refined by men facing deep-rooted personal and political strife. The consequence of this tumultuous beginning was an art that was fractured into two rival federations soon after it was created. The World Taekwondo Federation (WTF) and the International Taekwondo Federation (ITF) share many things, including country of origin (Korea), a common heritage (an amalgam of novel Korean creations and traditional Karate techniques), and an impressive array of technically complex and physically demanding kicks. Despite these similarities, the two major styles of Taekwondo can appear vastly different, each with its own forms, sparring systems, and style of movement. Although there were a host of contributors to the development of Taekwondo, each federation had a leading player; General Choi Hong Hi for the ITF, and Dr. Kim Un-Yong for the WTF. Both federations have weathered the storms of scandal, in-fighting, and the struggle for funding and international recognition.

The aim of this paper is not to suggest the superiority of one style over the other, but rather to explore the differences and similarities of the two styles as well as to describe the events that led to the sundering of the art so early in its development.

The History of Taekwondo

Despite the widespread popularity of Taekwondo, the history of this art is far from established and remains a source of contention. Although modern Taekwondo emerged as a unique fighting art in Korea during the latter half of the 20th century, the path of the art prior to this stage is a point of argument for many in the world of Taekwondo. Taekwondo is often cited as being an ancient Korean art, but this claim is frequently disputed by historians (Capener, 1995; Gillis, 2008; Tedeschi, 2003). One apparently specious connection between modern

Taekwondo and early Korean fighting arts is the claim that the Hwarang warriors of the Silla era used Taekwondo. Although it must have been alluring to the leaders of Taekwondo to think of the groups of young aristocratic warriors practicing Taekwondo from as early as 37 BC, there is a paucity of documentation from this time and these claims are equivocal at best (Gillis, 2008).

There were undoubtedly many fighting arts, including systems of wrestling, sword-fighting, and empty-handed self defense, on the Korean peninsula prior to the 20th century, but none of these can accurately be labeled Taekwondo (Tedeschi, 2003). A Dutch sailor who was shipwrecked in Korea during the 1600s described a system by which trained monks (apparently well-respected for their military prowess) were called upon 'in times of extreme need' to protect the communities surrounding their monasteries (Savenije, 2002, p.1). Although these monks occupied their own niche outside of the standard military hierarchy, they were nonetheless part of the armed defense system, rather than troupes of unarmed warriors battling enemies with some inchoate form of Taekwondo.

The story of the contemporary art of Taekwondo really begins with the introduction of Karate during the Japanese Colonial period. Japan freely imported both technological and artistic innovations from Korea during the 1st century, but by the 20th century the tide had reversed and Japan took control of the Korean peninsula (Cumings, 2005). The Japanese occupation of Korea and the concurrent cultural imposition created the need for an empty-handed system of self-defense and provided such a system in the form of Karate. General Choi found himself studying Karate in order to protect himself from harassment by the Japanese and their sympathizers, a situation that was common among those who later went on to found the Taekwondo schools in Seoul (Gillis, 2008).

That all of the leaders of the early Taekwondo gyms held black belts in Karate and founded their schools under the name of Tang Soo Do (Korean for Chinese hand- the translation of the Kanji for Karate) is a fact that is often down-played, or omitted outright, in the history offered by both the major federations. The official history as given by the WTF claims that Taekwondo was being practiced during the Silla Dynasty and contains not a single mention of General Choi (World Taekwondo Federation, 2009a). The WTF credits the first demonstration of modern Taekwondo to Song Duk-Ki, who was, in fact, a practitioner of Taek Kyon, a folk game that had become so uncommon by that time that Song could not find a partner versed in Taek Kyon to use for the demonstration (Capener, 1995; World Taekwondo Federation, 2009a).

The ITF version of the history of Taekwondo recognizes that forms of unarmed self-defense have likely been present throughout history of the Korean peninsula, but confines Taekwondo to the 20th century by defining it as the art that is practiced in accordance with the philosophy and techniques taught by General Choi (International Taekwondo Federation, 2006). That does not mean, however, that those at the ITF have not made efforts to embellish the Taekwondo's pedigree. When accounting for the origin of Taekwondo, General Choi claimed that he had based the art on Taek Kyon, which he had learned as a child (Capener, 1995; Gillis, 2008). Taek Kyon likely became popular in southern Korea during the Choson era although it later fell into disrepute due to its associations with gambling and other vices and was eventually banned by local authorities (Capener, 1995). The status of Taek Kyon was elevated from a forbidden folk game to the honorable foundation for a beloved Korean martial art. Taek Kyon's sudden promotion occurred in order to appease the fierce nationalism of the time and gain the support of Syngman Rhee, the South Korean president (Gillis, 2008). In fact, the martial art that was practiced in Seoul in the 1950s and was being taught to South Korean soldiers was

essentially the Karate that General Choi and thousands of other Koreans had learnt during Japan's occupation (*ibid*). The political atmosphere surrounding the formative years of Taekwondo was pro-democracy to the point of hysteria, with violent suppression of any perceived links to either the Communism of North Korea or the Japanese culture of the Colonial decades (Cumings, 2005). Finding a name for the revamped Karate that General Choi was promoting became a matter of political survival, as it would have been ill-advised to remind the President of the foreign origins of the art. In 1955 General Choi proposed that Tang Soo Do be renamed Taekwondo. Although General Choi was the head of one of the major Seoul training halls (not to mention a General in the South Korean Army), others in powerful positions within the art decided initially to keep the name Tang Soo Do and later to change it to Tae Soo Do (Gillis, 2008). The internal disagreements of these early years continued on into the 1960s, during which time Taekwondo officially separated into the ITF and the Korean Taekwondo Association (KTA), and the 1970s, when the KTA became the WTF (Tedeschi, 2003). General Choi became a pariah in South Korea and drove the wedge deeper between the two federations when he visited North Korea in 1980 (Gillis, 2008). Since the split, both the ITF and the WTF have disseminated their particular brand of Taekwondo around the world.

The ITF and WTF Compared

Body Movement

One of the most instantly recognizable features of ITF Taekwondo is the application of the 'sine wave' during the transition from one stance to another, giving many ITF movements a characteristic up and down motion. General Choi professed that dropping the hips synchronously with the final moments of a strike or block harnesses the power of gravity and

allows for faster, and thus stronger, techniques. The up and down motion of Choi's original sine wave is subtle, although it is sometimes over-emphasized in modern practice (Anslow, 2004).

The sine wave has always been present in ITF Taekwondo to some extent, but in the early 1980s General Choi began a campaign to more explicitly define and utilize the sine wave (Anslow, 2004). Choi used the sine wave as a tool to further differentiate his Taekwondo both from its Karate heritage and from the WTF Taekwondo that was spreading rapidly from Kim Un-Yong's gyms in Seoul (Gillis, 2008). In this attempt to distinguish ITF Taekwondo, Choi managed to alienate a large number of his high ranking instructors. Choi began his sudden push of the sine wave theory during an already divisive visit to North Korea, and then proclaimed that any instructor not emphasizing sine wave was not practicing true ITF Taekwondo, which forced instructors to choose between being disowned or becoming associated with a style perceived by some to have come from the rogue state of North Korea (Gillis, 2008).

The sine wave remains controversial today, and not all self-proclaimed ITF schools subscribe to the sine wave theory (although it is included in the ITF official syllabus). Instructors incorporating Choi's theory of power into their teaching do so to varying degrees, and of course each student executes their techniques uniquely, with the result that the extent to which the sine wave movement is accentuated varies greatly from one performance to the next.

The movements in WTF Taekwondo can generally be characterized as being less concerned with the strength that comes from a solid base and more focused on the rapid movements required for Olympic style sparring. Stances in the WTF tend to be shorter, with a higher centre of gravity. This is a major departure from the deep and rooted stances of Karate, and serves to identify Taekwondo as a distinctive Korean art. The WTF's current set of junior grade forms provides examples of this style of movement.

Forms

Forms are an integral component of any martial art, and can often be used to identify a club's or performer's style or affiliation. In Taekwondo, the development of unique forms helped to establish it as a separate art from Karate.

The ITF refers to its forms as 'tul' or 'hyung' and recognizes the Chan Hon as its official series. The Chan Hon were developed by General Choi and other ITF leaders in order to replace the Pinan and other karate forms practiced during Taekwondo's early years. There are 24 forms in the series, representing the 24 hours in a day. General Choi considered that the life of a man seems as fleeting as the length of a single day when compared to the eternity of time. According to the general, a person's entire lifetime actually is represented by just 24 hours. In the early 1960s General Choi's relationship with South Korean president Park Chung Hee, already soured by an incident from the past in which General Choi had voted in favor of Park's execution, deteriorated to the extent that the President exiled the General to Malaysia, albeit under the auspices of ambassadorship (Gillis, 2008). It was during his stay in Malaysia that General Choi, along with some of his loyal senior students, created the majority of the Chan Hon (*ibid*).

At the time of the Chan Hon's development, Korea was in a state of fervent nationalism and recovering from rapid shifts in internal power. A revolution in April of 1960 purged the government and military of the last vestiges of those who had served the Japanese, while a peaceful coup ended the fleeting presidency of the civilian Chang Myon and placed General Park Chung Hee at the reins in May of 1961 (Cummings, 2005). Although General Choi supported the ousting of President Chang, he was unaware that the man who would fill the void would be General Park, a personal enemy of General Choi's (Gillis, 2008). Despite General Choi's tenuous relationship within this new political hierarchy, or perhaps in part because of it, the

Taekwondo forms he developed are steeped in Korean national pride. The Chan Hon were the first forms unique to Taekwondo, providing them an inherent sense of nationalism. Every aspect of the forms, from the number of movements to the shape of the performance represents an event or person significant to Korean history. The final tul, Tong-Il, represents the thus-far elusive unity of the Korean peninsula (Com-Do Corp, 2010).

The WTF forms are known as poomsae and currently include eight Taeguk forms and nine dan-grade forms. The Taeguk were introduced in 1972 as a replacement for the Palgwe, the original gup-grade forms developed in 1967 by the WTF (Overfelt, 2006). Although the Palgwe are Taekwondo forms developed by the leaders of the WTF, they are similar in composition to Pinan and other basic Karate forms. This visual reminder of Taekwondo's connection to Karate might have contributed to the ousting of the Palgwe by the more distinctive Taeguk. Both the Palgwe and the Taeguk are based on principles from the I'Ching, an ancient Chinese text of divination, perhaps in order to afford these modern forms a sense of antiquity. Taeguk stands for the sense of balance created by the harmony of yin and yang while Palgwe refers to the eight trigrams that represent the primal elemental forces of the universe.

The WTF black belt forms, symbolizing concepts from Korean philosophy were first developed under the Korea Taekwondo Association of the 1960s (Tedeschi, 2003). The first of the black belt patterns, Koryo, stands for spirit of strength and learning inherited from the eponymous dynasty that lasted from 918 to 1392 AD (Lee and Rieke, 1999). Keumgan, the Diamond Form, is meant to portray an unbreakable spirit as well as the splendor of the Korean Diamond Mountains (WTF, 2009b). Taebaek represents the sanctity of the humanitarian spirit as described by the legendary founder of Korea (*ibid*). Sipjin, meaning 'decimal' pays reverence

to the benefits of order and regulation (Lee and Ricke, 1999). The remainder of the forms are named for the various fundamental elements of the world as viewed from Confucian philosophy.

Sparring

Taekwondo sparring offers practitioners the opportunity for individual competition, while improving physical fitness, reaction time, and strategy development. The sparring styles of the ITF are radically different from those of the WTF.

WTF sparring is referred to as Olympic sparring, owing to the fact that it is this style that was incorporated first as a demonstration sport and later as an official sport in the summer Olympics. Also known as 'full contact', this style allows full power kicks to the body and head, but limits the permissible striking surface of hands to forefist punch only, and forbids any hand contact to the head. Competitors wear body armor, forearm, shin/instep guards, and head gear in order to allow this level of contact with relative safety. Although the rules have been revised on multiple occasions since the sport's inception, the current scoring system favors the use of kicks over punches. The WTF won an important victory on the road to inclusion in the Olympic games when Kim Un-Yong convinced the General Association of International Sports Federations to give membership to the WTF in 1975 (Gillis, 2008). In 1988, South Korea hosted the summer Olympic Games and WTF sparring became a demonstration sport. Investigators addressing claims of abuse of the IOC selection system described South Korea's bid for the 1988 games as 'bribery' (Committee on Commerce US House of Representatives, 1999). The allegation of bribery was not the only unpleasant incident associated with the 1988 Olympics in Seoul. After the conclusion of the Taekwondo games saw South Korea finish with over half of the total gold medals, accusations began to surface that the South Koreans had employed a sophisticated method of rigging the matches (Gillis, 2008). This was not an auspicious start for a

sport that was supposed to embody the virtues of integrity and self-control. Despite these and other scandals that have since surrounded WTF sparring, the competition side of Taekwondo has managed to remain popular around the world.

The ITF also incorporates sparring into its curriculum. ITF sparring more closely resembles that of Karate, with a balance of hand and foot techniques. Protective equipment includes foot and hand padding, and usually headgear. Sparring is continuous, as in WTF, but contact with the head is allowed with both foot and hand techniques, and contestants may strike with parts of the hand other than the forefist. Points are awarded for contacting the target areas with the hand or feet, but heavy impacts are not allowed. Like the WTF, the ITF holds worldwide competitions, but ITF sparring has not reached the levels of fame, or infamy, achieved by the WTF.

Conclusion

It might seem difficult to reconcile the comparatively benign appearance of the art being practice in dojangs today with the desperate ferocity of early Taekwondo, but removing the protective pads and the imposition of rules quickly reveals the potentially devastating nature of the techniques. Stripping the art of its regulations, complicated aerial maneuvers, and brightly colored belts and paring it down to its most basic fundamentals also exposes the closeness of its connection to other martial arts. The struggle to find a unique Taekwondo identity amidst the destabilizing political turmoil of Post-war Korea ended in the creation of two fully-formed federations. It is a testament to the popularity of this relatively young art that Taekwondo has managed to support these two independent federations. In spite of the insecurities, financial troubles, and misdeeds of the past, both Taekwondo federations continue to bring this exciting and ultimately honorable martial art to schools and clubs around the world.

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