

Historical aspects of t'aekwōndo

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Abstract

The roots of t'aekwōndo as portrayed in the popular literature seems to be at odds with the evidence available in the historical scripts. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to clarify selected concepts that have been mentioned as related to the “history” of t'aekwōndo. Secondary and tertiary historical sources in (classical) Korean, English and German were used as well as etymological analysis. According to the historical sources, the hwarang were not an exclusively military group. They were entertainers for the royal family with a clear religious character. T'aekkyōn, always claimed to be the forerunner of t'aekwōndo, was a game that was also known in Japan in which the participants tried to unbalance or trip each other by leg sweeps or by pushing. However, the original word was t'akkyōn, pushing (with) the shoulders. Based on current historical evidence it seems reasonable to conclude that there is no historical legitimacy of t'aekwōndo as an age-old martial art. Just like in any other sport, winning in t'aekwōndo is paramount and competitors may rely on sport scientific support to optimize their performance.

Key words: T'aekwōndo • t'aekkyōn • hwarang • history • wōnhwa • karate

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BACKGROUND

As is well known, t'aekwōndo (k. 태권도, c. 跆拳道) is a modern sport from the twentieth century. In the mid-1950s a committee in Korea decided to label the martial art, that was hitherto known under various names (see below), t'aekwōndo. Invariably one will read about the “history” of t'aekwōndo in a range of, mostly popular, publications. However, the authors rarely, if ever, seem to give the reader the impression of being aware of historical research in the area. In the first part of this article some of these historical findings will be reviewed. Although they are not at all related to t'aekwōndo, they always appear to be linked to it to give the sport historical legitimacy.

The “history” of t'aekwōndo is invariably always associated with the **hwarang**, especially in publications for the general public [e.g., 1–3]. The first treatise in English on the Korean hwarang (k. 화랑, c. 花郎) was written by the Jesuit Dr. Richard Rutt in 1961 [4]. The best trans-

lation for hwarang is ‘flower boys’ [4,5], for it is a literal rendition and does not violate Korean and Chinese grammar [4]. Other translations, such as ‘flower of youth’ [3], ‘flowering knights’ [6], or ‘flower of manhood’ [7] are grammatically incorrect. The concept of the hwarang as a military cult did not become well known until after World War II when the Japanese started to promote the way of the warrior (bushidō) [4].

Objective

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to clarify selected concepts that have been mentioned as related to the “history” of t'aekwōndo.

METHODS

Our knowledge of the hwarang is mainly based on the Samguk Sagi (History of the Three Kingdoms), compiled in 1145 by the soldier-statesman Kim Pusik (1075–1152), and the Samguk Yusa (Memories of the

Hwarang: Flower boys.

Three Kingdoms), written by the Zen monk Iryōn (1206–1289) in 1279. The Yusa was based on work that cannot be found anymore [8].

One of the primary sources that was used by the Sagi and Yusa was the Hwarang Segi (Chronicles of the Hwarang, k. 화랑세기, c. 花郎世記) by Kim Dae Mun (fl. 704), which has been lost since around the 14th century. The Samguk Sagi, Samguk Yusa and the Haedong Kosungjōn (k. 해동고승전, c. 海東高僧傳, Lives of Eminent Korean Monks), compiled by Gakhun (k. 각훈, c. 覺訓, the dates of his birth and death are unknown) in 1215, all refer to the Hwarang Segi when discussing the hwarang [5].

In both the Sagi and Yusa one can only find a brief description of the origin and nature of the hwarang. In the biographies of aristocrats, which are part of the Sagi and Yusa, one may find indications that they were members of the group. However, the background of the compilers of the Sagi and Yusa, i.e., a soldier and a monk, respectively, is clearly noticeable in the way they treat the subject. Nevertheless, both agree on the religious orientation of the hwarang, i.e., they were considered to be related to the Maitreya (k. Mirūk, Buddha of the Future) cult [8]. The Maitreya was even believed to have appeared as a hwarang [9]. Rutt [4] related that the Maitreya is referred to in the Samguk Sagi as sōnhwa (k. 선화, c. 仙花). The second Chinese character, 花, means ‘flowers’ (see ‘hwa’ in wōnhwa), while the first, 仙, refers to ‘an immortal’, ‘a fairy’ [10].

Wōnhwa: Original flowers.

RESULTS

Hwarang

The forerunners of the hwarang were the wōnhwa 原花, or 源花 (k. 원화, ‘original flowers’), a band of women instituted by King Chinhūng (r. 540–576) in 576. The wōnhwa were probably shamans or at least shamanistic in nature [4]. Since the rulers were worried that they did not understand their people anymore, two beautiful women, Nammo and Chunjōng were selected with some 300 followers, who were taught filial and fraternal piety as well as loyalty and sincerity. Although it is claimed that they assisted in governing the country, no details were provided. However, the two women grew jealous of each other and Chunjōng decided to kill Nammo, after which the group broke up. According to the Yusa, Chunjōng was sentenced to death, after which handsome boys/young men were selected, whose primary function was to entertain the court [4]. Yi [11] suggested that, although it is generally agreed that the hwarang originated around the first half of the reign of King Chinhūng, they may have existed during the reign of King Pōphūng [514–540] in 525. However, there is

also the suggestion of the hwarang having been institutionalized in 562 [4].

The first person believed to have been a hwarang was called Sadaham (k. 사다함, c. 斯多唎), who, according to the Sagi, became a hwarang in 562 [4]. He belonged to the aristocratic chin’gol, the second highest so-called “bone ranks”. Late Silla society was divided into “bone ranks”, a hereditary class system, with the royal family recruited from the sōnggol, the highest bone rank, which came to an end in 653 when its last Queen died without leaving an heir. In practice, however, the distinction between the sōnggol and chin’gol disappeared, so when the former ceased to exist, the next ruler was recruited from the latter [8].

From the Sadaham story, according to Rutt [4], we learn from where the hwarang were recruited. In addition, one could apparently join the group as young as 15 years of age, or even younger. Sadaham had to secure permission from the King to join and take a leading role in a war against Kaya (k. 가야, c. 加耶 or c. 伽倻, also known as Kara or Karak, circa 300–562). Finally, Sadaham’s followers were not called hwarang but nangdo (c. 郎徒, followers of the hwarang).

Kim Yusin (595–673) was probably the hwarang, who best embodied the ideal of the group as a military institution [4]. He became a member at the age of 15 and, according to the Yusa, a master swordsman three years later. Characteristics attributed to Kim Yusin were later transferred to all other hwarang. He did not become a soldier until he was 34 years, however, but he is credited with fighting in the unification war against Paekche in 660 and in the battle of P’yōngyang in 661. He died when he was 79 years old. According to Rutt [4], it is not clear what difference it made to Kim to have been a hwarang above and beyond being a general. Interestingly, Kim was bestowed the title Yonghwa Hyangdo (k. 용화향도, c. 龍華香徒) when he became a hwarang, according to the Sagi. Hyangdo (香徒), as used in the Sagi, means “fragrant one”, while in the Yusa it was sometimes used to indicate “the devout Buddhist laity” [4]. Taken together, Yonghwa Hyangdo would mean “the Dragon-Flower devotee” [4, p. 13]. Henthorn [8] suggested that a dragon cult of pre-Buddhist origin may have existed in Silla. The dragon was seen as guiding and counselling men.

Neither the Sagi nor the Yusa claimed that the hwarang were an exclusively military group. Only the Sagi, compiled by a general, makes mention of the hwarang producing military leaders. On the other hand, both the Sagi and the Yusa recount the religious character of the hwarang, which is taken to indicate that any reference

to the hwarang as mainly a military institution should be viewed with extreme caution [4].

T'aekkyōn

In addition to the hwarang, t'aekkyōn (k. 태권) is usually presented as being related to t'aekwōndo [e.g., 2]. It is commonly translated as (an art of) 'kicking' [3] or 'foot technique' [2]. More than a quarter of a century ago no Chinese characters could be found for the name [12]. The significance of this is that Chinese was the written language for the Koreans for centuries, while the spoken language was Korean. It was not until the mid-15th century that the Korean alphabet was created and, over time, purely Korean words entered the language, i.e., with no Chinese characters with which to write them. It is estimated that some 50–60% of Korean words are Chinese loan words [13]. In other words, if the word t'aekkyōn had been used in ancient texts from before the mid-15th century, it should have Chinese characters. Since none were found, it most likely is a new Korean term.

According to The New World Korean-English Dictionary [14], t'aekkyōn means 'kicking and tripping art (as a sport)'. It does not provide any Chinese characters for t'aekkyōn, but instead offers a synonym, i.e., gakhūi (k. 각희, c. 脚戲). The first Chinese character with which gakhūi is written means 'foot' or 'leg', while the second means 'to play'. It was not until Henning's [15] authoritative article that it became clear that the original word was t'akkyōn ('push the shoulders', k. 탁견, c. 托肩). The author relates that the use of t'aekkyōn was probably "based on a lack of knowledge of the Chinese characters or an attempt to disassociate it from possible foreign origins" (p. 11). Citing Chung Kyeong Hwa in an interview from July 1990, Young [6] asserts that the pronunciation of the same Chinese characters varied from t'aekkyōn to t'akkyōn. Interestingly, the Great Chinese-Korean Dictionary [16] clearly indicates that the pronunciation for the Chinese characters 托肩 is 탁견 (t'akkyōn) and not 태권 (t'aekkyōn). Please also note that the first Korean character in both words is written differently, even though the whole word in both cases has the double *kyōk* (k) sound in it. As alluded to above, Pieter [12] was not able to locate the Chinese characters with which to write t'aekkyōn and recent research so far [see 15,17] seems to support his claim.

It is often alleged that the name 't'aekwōndo' was chosen for its similarity in pronunciation to 't'aekkyōn,' which was considered its precursor. The first Korean character in both 't'aekwōndo' and 't'aekkyōn' is the same indeed. Left out of the assertion, however, is that the original word is actually 't'akkyōn', the first character of which is totally different from that in 't'aekwōndo'. T'aekkyōn

is a game that was also known in Japan in which the participants tried to unbalance or trip each other by leg sweeps or by pushing [18]. Gradually, Confucianistic values were attributed to the current game known as t'aekkyōn to improve its respectability as a modern oriental sport, since it was originally associated with criminal activities [19]. Research has shown that t'akkyōn more or less disappeared as a folk game shortly after the start of the 20th century [19].

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The best known Korean names for karatedō are tangsudo and kongsudo. Tangsudo (당수 도) is the Korean pronunciation of the Chinese characters (唐手道) with which karatedō was first written. *Kara* (k. tang) referred to the Chinese T'ang dynasty (618–907) and stood for everything that was foreign, especially Chinese. In Okinawa it was pronounced as *wāde* [20]. Later, *kara* was written with another Chinese character 空, meaning 'empty', 'hollow' [10], which was pronounced *kong*공 in Korean. *Su* (k. 수, c. 手) is Sino-Korean for *te* in Japanese, meaning 'hand'. According to Bittmann [20], the first written reference to karatedō as 'China hand' did not appear in Okinawa until 1867 in the program of various arts, stage and martial arts exhibitions, while 'empty hand' did not occur until 1905. However, it was not until the 1930s that 'empty hand' became widespread. Funakoshi Gichin (1868/1870–1957) is credited with introducing the concept of 'Way of the empty hand' in 1929.

Karatedō was introduced to Korea after the Second World War by Koreans who came back from Japan. They introduced it as either tangsudo or kongsudo with its concomitant technical arsenal and philosophical orientation, the latter of which was basically Chinese in origin [21]. According to Capener [21], the need to Koreanize karatedō was expressed by changing the name, the development of a set of techniques different from the Japanese original and by attempting to come up with a "history" to legitimize the new sport as uniquely Korean. The name was changed to t'aekwōndo in 1955. Ch'oe Hong Hūi (Choi Hong Hi, 1918–2002), who claimed to be the instigator of the new name, was a member of the committee that agreed to use t'aekwōndo instead of such names as tangsudo or kongsudo [22]. Ch'oe himself said that there was no t'aekwōndo before Christ [22], thereby confirming what historical research has shown. Although it was decided in 1955 to use the name t'aekwōndo for the new sport, it was not until 1965 that the Korea T'aesudo Association changed its name to Korea T'aekwōndo Association.

From a technical perspective, the development of the so-called *t'aegūk* (k. 태극, c. 太極) forms was initiated

T'aekkyōn: Pushing with the shoulders.



in the early 1970s. These forms were a clear departure from those originally practiced by the International Taekwondo Federation (ITF), which were basically karatedō *kata* [1]. Contrary to the old and new ITF forms, however, the variety of techniques in the *t'aegŭk* patterns is lacking. Another departure from the karatedō-oriented techniques may be found in the full-contact sparring component of sport t'aekwōndo.

The third aspect of the Koreanization of karatedō in Korea, according to Capener [21], was the creation of a “history” of t'aekwōndo. Several studies on the historical claims of the sport, some of which have been reviewed here, have clearly shown the weaknesses in these assertions.

Another name often linked to t'aekwōndo is *kwōnpōp* (k. 권법 c. 拳法), which is pronounced *quanfa* in Chinese and *kempo/kenpo* in Japanese. *Pōp* means ‘statutes’, ‘laws’, ‘regulation’, ‘plan’, ‘method’ [10]. *Kwōnpōp*, then, means ‘system of the fist’ or ‘law of the fist’, or even ‘the science of boxing’ [10] and refers to karate from the Ryūkyū of which Okinawa is the main island [12]. *Kwōn* is the same word as *kwōn* in t'aekwōndo. It may be found in 空拳 (k. 공 권 *kongkwōn*) instead of 空手 (k. 공 수 *kongsu*) [10]. Henning [15] recounts that *kwōn* also means ‘strength’ in addition to ‘fist’ and that it was not used to refer to boxing in China until the Southern Song (1127–1279).

According to Henning [15], no evidence is available that the word also referred to boxing in Korea, except in the *Muye Dobo T'ongji* or Illustrated Manual of Martial Arts (k. 무예도보통지, c. 武藝圖譜通志) [23], which was reportedly published in 1790. Henning [15] translated the title of the book as “Illustrated Encyclopedia of Martial Arts Manuals”, which more accurately describes the way it was compiled, i.e., it gave a comprehensive view of Chinese, Japanese and Korean martial arts systems using mainly Chinese sources of martial arts manuals with some Japanese and, to a lesser extent, Korean, works as well [15,24]. Although some authors include the word “Korea” or Korean” in the title when referring to the *Muye Dobo T'ongji* [e.g., 22], the original compiler did not feel the need to do so [24]. In fact, none of the current Korean martial arts can lay claim to any direct connection to the *Muye Dobo T'ongji* [15,17,24]. In other words, any reference to the *Muye Dobo T'ongji* to legitimize t'aekwōndo's history is without any foundation.

The *Muye Dobo T'ongji* was written in classical Chinese with a translation in classical Korean in a later edition [23]. The primary author was Yi Dōng Mu (k. 이덕무, c. 李德懋, 1741–1794), who was a government official and martial arts practitioner [24]. Yi, Lee or I is the transliteration of the same Chinese character: 李 (k. 이). The other authors, who contributed to the book, were Pak Je Ga (k. 박제가, c. 朴齊嚳) and Baek Dong Su (k. 백동수, c. 白東脩) [24–26]. The book mainly deals with armed Chinese martial arts with a chapter devoted to Japanese swordsmanship. Book IV includes a short chapter on *kwōnpōp*.

Finally, there is the word *subak* (k. 수박, c. 手搏). *Su* is the same Sino-Korean word for ‘hand’ as in *tangsudo* or *kongsudo*. *Bak* means ‘to strike with the fist’, ‘to box’ [10]. The word is mentioned in the *Muye Dobo T'ongji* where it refers to ‘wrestling’ (k. kakjō, 각저, c. 角觥) in the chapter on *kwōnpōp* [23]. The chapter is mainly taken from Ming dynasty (1368–1644) general Qi Jiguang's (c. 戚繼光, k. 척계광, Ch'ōk Kye Gwang, 1528–1587) *New Book of Effective Discipline*, published around 1561 [15,24].

Subak (c. *shoubo*) was practiced during the unified Silla period (668–935) [15]. T'akkyōn may have originally referred to a specific *subak* or *kwōnpōp* technique to throw the opponent off balance [15]. However, *subak* in this case may refer to the Chinese *shoupai* 手拍 instead of *shoubo* 手搏 [15]. According to Henning [15], the term for ‘wrestling’ was changed to *kangnyōk* (k. 각력, c. 角力) (a.k.a. 씨름 *ssinŭm* in colloquial Korean) in the Yi dynasty (1392–1910).

Based on current historical evidence it seems reasonable to conclude that there is no historical legitimacy of t'aekwōndo. According to Capener [21] “traditional” t'aekwōndo is basically Japanese karate, including its terminology, techniques and training methods. Uniquely Korean, on the other hand, is sport or Olympic t'aekwōndo that would more rightly deserve the connotation “traditional”, for it is totally different from karate in terminology, techniques and training methods. It does not have a history dating back to the era before Christ and is also not based on Chinese philosophy the way karate is. It was developed as a modern sport in the 1960s and 1970s. Just like in any other sport, winning is paramount and competitors may rely on sport scientific support to optimize their performance.

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