A Role for Poomse in Taekwondo

The development of Taekwondo may be viewed in several relatively distinct stages. To some extent, the understanding of these stages is important to understanding Taekwondo, as it is practiced, today, but in many ways ignored or distorted in modern Taekwondo practice and philosophy. Poomse perhaps suggests a mechanism for recognition of ancient concepts of Korean fighting which may be used to further define and reinforce the philsophical basis of Taekwondo.

The evolution of Korean fighting arts perhaps truly began with the observation by Koreans of successful Chinese fighting techniques during an invasion of Korea in 108 B.C.. This prompted a long development of indigenous fighting styles, prompted to a great extent by military conflict and competition between rival Korean kingdoms, culminating in the Hwarangdo of the Shilla kingdom during the seventh century A.D.. The remarkable stone figures found on the temple wall at Kyongju, Korea, dating from nearly two millennia ago, suggest that the Korean martial arts early on had developed an aesthetic component, identifying and perpetuating idealized fighting stances and gestures.[1] The development of such idealized and refined movements, or "forms", is an essential corollary to the development of an identifiable martial art and the extent and refinement of these forms distinguishes martial arts from other military training or athletic activities.

The unification of the Korean kingdoms in 676 A.D.[2] removed much of the impetus for martial training, as the enemies were no longer continually warring

[1] Similar statutes, however, have been unearthed from India, China and Korea, and appear to represent a stylized Buddhist deity. Robert W. Young, "The History and Development of Tae Kyon," Journal of Asian Martial Arts, 2:2, 1993, p. 49.

[2] Ki-baik Lee, A New History of Korea (London: Harvard University Press, 1984) p. 69.

factions located at alarmingly close distances. After unification, Mongol and Japanese threats, while engaging the Koreans in major military actions from time to time, did not seem to stimulate a martial culture except as it perpetuated certain bureaucratic classes. Indeed, martial culture was replaced or supplanted by *yangban*, or bureaucratic, culture. Particularly as military efforts became more technologically oriented, the impetus for personal martial training in general, and a genuine need for martial arts as an organized methodology of training, disappeared almost entirely. Yi (Chosun) dynasty officials, caught in a continually changing balance of power between China, Russia, and Japan, saw manipulation of political interests through diplomacy as a more practical means of attempting to preserve Korean autonomy than promoting a widespread martial attitude that included a moral as well as physical martial practice. This second phase of the history of authentic Korean fighting arts, for which Taekwondo seeks to be an heir, was one of decline.[3] During the long Yi dynasty, martial traditions virtually disappeared as the fighting styles themselves became recreational, evolving into an interesting foot and balance game (Tae Kyon) or into sporting competitions (Subak) where wagering for money was a commonplace spectator activity. While the significance and importance of the sporting aspects during this time cannot be underestimated, it is difficult to assert that ancient Korean martial arts survived the Chosun dynasty.[4] See, Steve Capener, "Problems in the Identity and Philosophy of Taekwondo and Their Historical Causes," Korea Journal, Winter, 1995, 80, 89. Capener distinguishes the differences in a different way, stating that Karate relied on "attack, block, counterattack," whereas Taekwondo can be described as "attack, counterattack."[5]

Korea's status as an occupied country from 1910 to 1945, and the Korean civil war from 1950 through 1953 awakened in Koreans a new appreciation for military

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[3] Daeshik Kim, "A Comprehensive View of the Oriental Martial Arts: The Foundations of Tae Kwon Do," Taekwondo (Seoul: Nanam Publications Co., 1992) Vol. I, p. 27.

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[5] Steve Capener, "Problems in the Identity and Philosophy of Taekwondo and Their Historical Causes," Korea Journal, Winter, 1995, 80.

training, for physical development and education, and also a nationalistic interest in Korea's own ancient military and cultural heritage. Although there have been some attempts, for nationalistic reasons, to create a tradition of Taekwondo which can be traced from ancient times to the present, there is no significant historical basis for this. Koreans interested in a resurrection of ancient Korean martial arts could only rely on Chinese, Okinawan, and Japanese martial sources for rekindling martial arts in a Korean context.[6] The irony of this was that, particularly in regard to Okinawan and Japanese martial arts, it was possible -- even probable -- that these arts had originally derived from Korean sources over a millennium ago.[7]

However, in synthesizing a "Korean" martial art, interested martial artists had to rely on their own individual backgrounds for creating a modern "Taekwondo". In virtually all cases, these martial backgrounds had been obtained during the Japanese occupation, either under the instruction of Japanese Karate instructors during civilian service in Japan and the Korean homeland, in military service under the auspices of the Japanese army, or in Manchuria where Koreans were exposed to both Japanese Karate instruction from military sources and also Chinese martial arts.[8] Choi Hong Hi taught Karate to Korean army in 1946, but felt a need to develop "our own national martial art" and spent the next nine years developing "new techniques."[9] These appear, however to have been variations of standard Karate techniques.

For these reasons, post-war "Taekwondo" in Korea was patterned almost entirely

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[6] Cho, Sihak Henry, Korean Karate (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1968), p. 17; "The modern karate of Korea, with very little influence from *tae kyun*, was born with the turn of the 20th century when it was imported directly from China and also from Okinawa through Japan."

[7] Chan-Mo Chung, "History of Taekwondo" The 16th International Referee Seminar Textbook (Seoul: World Taekwondo Federation, 1988) p. 18. Also, Donn F. Draeger and R.W. Smith, Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts (New York: Kodansha International, 1969) p. 76.

[8] Tae Kwon Do Times, "The Grandmasters Speak, Part II", May, 1992, pp. 50-57.

[9] Choi Hong Hi, Encyclopedia of Taekwondo, (Ontario: 1987) Vol. 1, p. 39.

after Japanese Karate, because most founders of Korean martial arts schools were trained in Karate or related martial arts, and held black belt ranking in Karate.[10] These Karate black belt holders, typically second and third dans, then became eighth and ninth dans as heads of their own martial arts schools as indigenous schools (Kwans) proliferated in Korea immediately after the armistice in 1953.

> The masters of the past designed the formal exercises as archetypal patterns of fighting practice. -- Richard Chun [Taekwondo, New York: Harper & Row, 1976, p. 370]

It is not remarkable, then, that "Taekwondo" as it was formulated as a national unified martial art in 1956, resembled in many aspects a variant of Shotokan Karate, including the use of forms, or Poomse, which were substantially similar in their "Pinan" forms with Shotokan "Heians".[11] This period, which lasted from 1954 through 1971, reflects a third phase in the development of "Taekwondo". It was period of political consolidation and organizational development of Taekwondo, but which essentially relied on the Karate credentials of the original *Kwan Jang Nim* (founders of schools) for the technical aspects. Although different "forms" or poomse were developed during this time, they retained an intrinsic Japanese or Karate character in technical style, use of stances, and overall purpose.

In 1971, an unfortunate political schism ruptured the Taekwondo community when Choi Hong Hi, who had been one of several influential organizers of the consolidation of various schools into a "Taekwondo" mainstream, became embroiled in political disputes with the South Korean government. This dispute had both personal and international political overtones, and it resulted in the departure of a key leader from the physical location of the vast majority -- at that

[10] Robert W. Young, op. cit. p. 59

[11] Chris Thomas, "Did Karate's Funakoshi found Taekwondo?" Black Belt, November, 1988, pp. 26-30.

time -- of Taekwondo practitioners and other influential leaders. His embrace of North Korean political values and perspectives alienated him from the vast majority of his former supporters who objected to the political role and purpose that Choi began to espouse for Taekwondo.

The timing of Choi Hong Hi's departure, and the impact of his absence from the organizational mainstream of Taekwondo, while in many ways unfortunate, was also fortuitous. His departure marks the flowering of the development of Taekwondo as an authentically distinct martial art. Choi's influence, as someone trained in Shotokan Karate, was to preserve both a Shotokan style and philosophy in Taekwondo. A younger generation of Koreans, however, were coming to the forefront of influence in the 1960's and early 1970's; Koreans who had not trained under Japanese instructors. This fourth stage in the development of Taekwondo began, then, approximately with the organization of the World Taekwondo Federation in 1973, although the influences toward change were apparently already well-developed, but latent until the change in political structure allowed their full expression.[12]

At that point, Taekwondo began to adopt a fighting style which was more fluid and dynamic, and which relied more on speed, timing and strategic body movement. Competition rules were extensively modified to encourage higher level athletic skill development, and to remove techniques which had no particular athletic development potential. This development remarkably paralleled Dr. Kano's revolutionary re-synthesis of Ju Jitsu techniques in Japan of nearly a century earlier. Continuous movement was encouraged, and "flag" scoring was eliminated. Taekwondo began to effectively utilize a competition format as an integral part of

[12]Capener, op.cit. believes that the changes in modern Taekwondo were well underway in the mid-1960's, incorporating the high ideals of sport competition with the development of dynamic motion skills, under the auspices of the Korean Taesoodo Association. Choi Hong Hi's organization of the International Taekwondo Federation in 1966 represented an early resistance to the approach that the KTA, which became the Korea Taekwondo Association in that same year, was already taking with the development of modern Taekwondo.

physical training and physical education.

> *Kata*, which means "form", is a system of prearranged movements that teach the fundamentals of attack and defense. -- Jigoro Kano [Kodokan Judo New York: Kodansha International, 1986, p. 21]

At this point, the "forms", or poomse, were reformulated, to incorporate more realistic "natural" stances, in the Taegeuk series. However, while these forms differ markedly from Karate or earlier Taekwondo forms in utilizing stances more typically used for fighting or self-defense, and in an attempt to pattern the movements to follow the "trigram" patten of movement,[13] rather than the "H" pattern typical of other forms, these are the only changes which this reformulation made, and so the Taegeuk series represents nothing more than that: a reformulation. The practice patterns remain based, in both structure and theory, on Karate forms.[14]

It can be accurately said that while Taekwondo has, in many ways, evolved into a unique and dynamic martial art, the essence of Taekwondo is poorly reflected in any of the commonly recognized Taekwondo forms patterns, whether they be Pinans, Chon-ji, Palgue, or Taegeuk. Further, none of these forms patterns represents anything more than an arbitrary series of movements which, over and over, explore variations of combinations of a very few kicking and punching techniques, and poorly represent, at any given level of form, a correlation with the overall skill level expected at any particular level of study. Ultimately, Taekwondo forms fail almost entirely to represent any of the distinguishing characteristics of Taekwondo. At the same time that Taekwondo forms are difficult to distinguish from Karate types of

[13] Sherman W. Kwok, "The Forms of Taekwondo: Taegeuk and the *I Ching*," The Monograph (Berkeley: UC Martial Arts Program, May, 1994), p. 92.

[14] Funakoshi indicated that his Heian forms were based on older Okinawan forms, and suggested, that, because the Okinawan names were Chinese, the origins of the Shotokan forms appeared to have been relatively ancient. Gichin Funakoshi, Karate-Do Kyohan (New York: Kodansha International, 1973) p. 35.

forms, they also fail to provide a mechanism for the preservation of either historical movements or a repository for the non-competition skills which may be practiced in Taekwondo, such as self-defense.

To some extent, this seems to be true of many martial disciplines which purport to include forms practice as an essential part of overall training, but where the forms practiced are repetitious, narrowly restrictive in both directional movement and skills involved, and where the primary purpose to students seems to be to emphasize the development of the character trait of perseverance, not because the forms necessarily represent new challenges, but simply to overcome the boredom of performance, as opposed to a feeling of accomplishment.

> The *Hyungs* are the student's line between Taekwondo training and actual fighting -- Jhoon Rhee [Chon-ji of Taekwondo Hyung Burbank, California: O'Hara Publications, 1970, p. 12]

> The names of the *Kata* have come down to us by word of mouth -- Gichin Funakoshi [Karate-do Kyohan, New York: Kodansha International, 1973, p. 35]

There is no compelling rationale for forms practice to be so narrowly defined in both function and movement as to represent, to many students, the part of martial arts that they don't want to practice. And there is no advantage to be gained to a martial philosophy, which can utilize forms as the continuous, standardized method of transmission of skills and knowledge -- a body of technical tradition -- to configure the forms in such a way as to represent only the lowest common denominator of a technical syllabus.

> A primary training method of the classical martial arts, that of kata, or prearranged formal techniques, was borrowed by advocates of empty-handed jujitsu styles to broaden their technical bases and to provide practical outlets for their practitioners -- Tadao Otaki and Donn Draeger [Judo: Formal Techniques Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1983, p. 21]

Forms were first incorporated into modern martial art teachings by Jigoro Kano when he founded the Kodokan Judo. Although it took nearly 70 years for the "forms" to reach their current definition, the Kodokan Judo forms provide an interesting, indeed fascinating, use of forms for a variety of purposes all of which contribute to an ongoing unity of technical definition and historical understanding. Several of the Kodokan kata demonstrate an intriguing preservation of Jujitsu practice methods and become more useful as a martial historical record with the passage of time.

Firstly, a primary form -- the Randori-no-kata -- is dedicated to preserving and defining the basic technical competition syllabus of Kodokan Judo, that is, those techniques which ultimately distinguish Judo from other martial arts. It is divided into two sub-parts. In the Nage-no-kata, the throwing and sacrifice techniques are organized into logical groupings of movements. In the Katame-no-Kata, matwork, arm-bar, and choking techniques are similarly organized into a sequential exposition of the skills. Both Kata are organized into a highly formalized, stylized ritual that provides an overall aesthetic context as well as an interesting method of demonstrating the individual techniques. At the same time, the performance of these Kata utilizes formalities which always remind the practitioners of, and demonstrate to the audience, the oriental foundations of that martial art.

> In simple, practical, terms, kata is a contrived movement pattern, which is intended to improve skills by increasing accuracy, through the medium of discipline that the repetition of the sequence imposes on the participants -- Geoff Gleeson [All About Judo London: A&C Black Publishers, 1975, p. 87.]

However, the use of Kata by the Kodokan Judo developed much further. Two forms were created to preserve and identify fundamental self defense techniques. One of these is of relatively recent origin (the *Kodokan Goshin Jutsu*, accepted in 1958)[15], demonstrating that the formulation of the kata themselves can be an ongoing historical process. A "gentleness" form (Ju-no-kata) expresses techniques useful in Judo for demonstrating fundamental movements. Another form, the *Kime no Kata,* demonstrates the kicking and punching techniques which are not permitted in competition Judo. An "ancient forms" series, *Koshiki no Kata,* preserves ancient jujitsu technical skills that are not found within the competition format of Judo. A highly unusual, philosophical form, *Itsutsu No Kata*, seeks to identify the natural movements of the universe which may be found to describe the fundamental theory of Judo skills, without utilizing combative movements at all!

> Through practicing Taekwondo Poomse, we can apply the techniques of hand and foot and the changes of stance learned from the basic techniques adaptable to actual fighting. - World Taekwondo Federation
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> Taekwondo Handbook (Seoul: 1992) p. 35.

Even as competition rules and strategies change and evolve, the official Kata of the Kodokan Judo provides a powerful core of technical skills and philosophical expression which not only contain the fundamentals of competition Judo, but the framework for the study of all of Judo. No other martial art has such a well-

[15] Jigoro Kano, Kodokan Judo (New York: Kodansha International, rev. ed. 1986), p. 146.

defined curriculum, so well defined and expressed in its Kata forms.

This example provides, for Taekwondo, a masterful exposition of the depth and breadth of identification, expression, and preservation of both technical skills and historical and cultural identity that the use of "forms" can provide.

The self-defense forms of the Kodokan, for instance, suggest obvious important parallels for Taekwondo. Students are frequently taught a variety of self-defense skills within their Taekwondo classes, but these skills are not specifically identifiable with Taekwondo and are not set forth within any official curriculum of Taekwondo. Rather, such instruction occurs strictly on an ad-hoc basis, dependent entirely on the background and enthusiasms of the individual instructors. A self-defense form, created and approved by the WTF, would assist Taekwondo practitioners everywhere in identifying a core of techniques which can provide the framework for self-defense training in a Taekwondo context. Other forms could preserve various aspects of technical skills deemed important, or identify significant historical aspects of Taekwondo development.[16] Cultural symbolism could be incorporated into forms which would preserve a Korean aspect for Taekwondo which may become otherwise diluted as Taekwondo enjoys increasing universal appeal and development.

Taekwondo and Karate continue to share the same philosophy toward forms; that they represent building blocks for the punching and kicking techniques used in sparring or self defense. But as Taekwondo has developed a unique style of combat and competition, utilizing for instance rapid and precise defensive footwork and kicking movements as a substitute for more rigid blocking and punching defenses,

[16] "[W]e should explore technical aspects of ancient martial arts training and seek to revive skills, fighting techniques and training methods which are referred to in legend but have been forgotten. This could serve to enhance ... poomse ...". Sung K.S. Hahn, "Korean Traditional Thought and its Connection to Taekwondo," US Taekwondo Journal 4:2, Fall, 1985, 11.

Taekwondo forms have not shared in that development, but instead continue to represent the practice of Karate techniques in a Karate context.

Kano, in the development of Kodokan Judo Kata, believed that forms were essential methods of practicing the dynamic movements of the martial art. But he also saw that "what is deficient in randori must be supplemented by kata."[17] Just as significant as Kano's perception of forms providing a broader basis for a martial syllabus than to merely reinforce its fighting form, was his effort to utilize forms as a method of transmitting historical methods of combat:

[17] Donn F. Draeger and Tadao Otaki, Judo: Formal Techniques (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1983) p. 25.

The founder, out of respect for his former teachers and their styles of jujitsu, built a monument to them in the form of Kodokan Judo kata.[18]

[18] Ibid. p. 45.

Formal drills are essential to an Eastern Martial Art as an art. Without ... forms, it would lose its status as art. Daeshik Kim , "The Future Course of the Eastern Martial Arts," Taekwondo (Seoul, Na Nam Publishing Co., 1983), V. 2, p. 216.

Importantly, identifiable forms provide a ready-made method of communication with the public which can demonstrate the essential components of Taekwondo as determined by the WTF, rather than the current method which relies entirely on ad-hoc demonstrations put together by individuals and which vary considerably from place to place and time to time, but also typically only demonstrate the "flashy" kicking skills, leaving an impression that Taekwondo is almost exclusively a kicking martial art with little depth into the broader aspects of human movement skills and self-defense.

Within the genius of any master lies the ability to design new kata that are both meaningful and lasting. -- Donn Draeger. Classical Budo (New York: Weatherhill, 1973) p. 60.

As the Taekwondo community moves toward the year 2000, Olympic inclusion, and increasing public scrutiny, poomse, if truly an important part of Taekwondo theory, perhaps should be re-created to make it not only more palatable for the public but create for poomse a more useful role as a training tool. There are certainly precedents for such a re-evaluation. Chojun Myagi, for instance, developed forms which made his style, Gojo Ryu Karate-do, more understandable to the public.[19]

The current forms approved by the WTF are not particularly exciting, do not demonstrate any aspect of skill that is particular to Taekwondo, are nearly devoid of technical challenge, lack roots specific to Taekwondo, and are considered boring by most practitioners. Further, they preserve few skills that are not better practiced, more realistically, in the dynamic competition format.[20] Conversely, modern

[19] John Porta and Jack McCabe. "The Karate of Chojun Miyagi", Journal of Asian Martial Arts 3:3,1994, p. 63.

[20] Indeed, Dr. Kano believed that "both kata and randori are forms of mental training, but of the two, randori is the most effective." Kodokan Judo, op. cit. p. 22. Accordingly, most of the kata of Kodokan Judo do not reiterate technical skills found in free practice, where such skills are best practiced. In Kodokan forms, it is significant that only one official form, the *Randori no Kata* (broken into *Nage no Kata* and *Katame no Kata*) represents skills found in the practice of randori, or free sparring. The remaining six of the official Kodokan Kata forms represent practice of skills or movements which cannot be utilized in Judo competitions, such as self defense.

Taekwondo has made few efforts to develop forms that would identify and preserve important aspects of Taekwondo that are not suitable for definition or execution in the dynamic, active sphere of practice.

When Jigoro Kano formulated the Kodokan Judo, he did so as the first modern exponent of martial sport, with an intelligent eye toward preserving martial skills, martial virtue and martial history through forms, while opening martial arts to new ideas through free movement. When Gichin Funakoshi formulated Karate-do, he did so with the thought that forms practice should define, rather than compliment, martial practice. Modern Taekwondo seems caught, somewhere in between the powerful vision of Kano and the restricted perception of Funakoshi. It has adopted Kano's belief that the sport form is the only realistically viable approach to universal humanity as well as technical development, but it stays tied to Funakoshi's view that the ancient ideas of combat movements must define the modern forms practice and that modern forms practice ultimately defines the martial art. As a result, Taekwondo forms are practiced to maintain an illusion that they represent fundamental Taekwondo movements and strategies. But, they do not, and have not for nearly 40 years. Kano's expanded vision of forms and Funakoshi's restricted use of forms are incompatible.

Poomse can perform very real and very useful functions for a martial art. The current status of forms within the Taekwondo community, however, restricts forms to those functions which are the least useful to practitioners in a "forms" format, and ignore entirely those functions for which forms would serve extremely useful, important, and unifying purposes for modern Taekwondo.