

Foundation and Interpretation of Taekwondo Etiquette

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Introduction

The study of taekwondo enjoys widespread popularity in the United States.¹ Millions of Americans train regularly at a martial arts school. Upon arrival they may change into uniform, being careful to tie their belts “just so” and subsequently following various rituals for bowing, shaking hands, and so on. Few Americans question the roots of these practices but they follow them diligently anyway. At the very least, the foreign gestures and phrases further romanticize their mystical notions of the martial arts. This mode of thought blindly accepts that performing them demonstrates respect, dedication, and other characteristics of a good student. Deeper inquiry reveals that the etiquette of taekwondo is not merely a set of rules; it is the intersection of broader influences. And understanding those influences and their American counterparts enables etiquette to be valued, applied, and taught within the context of American culture.

Motivation

My mother, a naturalized Korean immigrant, wanted my older brother and I to study martial arts for both physical fitness and personal development.

Thus, at age eleven, I started training in taekwondo in my small hometown in southern Illinois under a Korean master. The choice of taekwondo over other martial arts and my Korean ancestry are not a coincidence. Even though she did not raise us by the Korean customs of her youth, my mother would sometimes provide an explanation of traditional Korean values (usually as a lecture). In the course of studying taekwondo, I learned about additional Korean customs and etiquette albeit in a martial arts environment.

For a variety of reasons, when high school began, my taekwondo training ended. Finally, twelve years after I stopped my training, I joined a taekwondo club at work and eventually started training at a nearby university club as well. Initially, I worried about the differences in techniques I would have to identify and adjust to. Much to my surprise, while my techniques adjusted, the differences in attitude and behavior were a more complicated and frustrating problem. The conflict was not between “good” and “bad” attitudes and behavior, rather it was the difference between what two people considered being “good”. The fact that I repeatedly witnessed these conflicts indicated that not all parties involved knew how to examine and resolve the problem. Actions that were taken for granted when I was isolated in my small town taekwondo school, such as knowing when and how to bow, could lead to awkward situations. I hope this paper will help demystify the origins of taekwondo etiquette and make it easier to learn, discuss, and promote.

Organization

This paper contains five major sections:

1. Definitions
2. Korean Background
3. Military Background
4. Military, Society and Taekwondo
5. Challenges of Teaching Taekwondo Etiquette in American Society

The section on definitions is fairly straightforward. The sections on background information are much more complicated. A substantial portion of the paper is dedicated to the historical influences of social etiquette in Korea. It also describes some of the major concepts of military etiquette and examines how much of taekwondo etiquette is derived from military or social influence. The final section on challenges provides additional insights into potential problems for applying taekwondo etiquette in American society.

1. Definitions

Etiquette

Main Entry: **et·i·quette**, Function: *noun*,...: the conduct or procedure required by good breeding or prescribed by authority to be observed in social or official life.²

Etiquette defines “conduct or procedure” but it does not explicitly mention any moral or ethical consideration. Any such connection is based on the motives of the authority in question. Such a broad

definition may be surprising, and many people do not realize they are routinely observing various etiquette. Tipping after a meal, shaking hands when introduced, raising your hand to ask a question in a classroom—all of these behaviors are etiquette learned over time and often without any explicit study of etiquette.³

Protocol

Main Entry: **pro·to·col**, Function:
noun,...³ **a** : a code prescribing strict
adherence to correct etiquette and
precedence (as in diplomatic exchange
and in the military services).⁴

Again, we have a definition that is very short, and at first glance the reader may wonder, “So what is the difference between protocol and etiquette?” Etiquette just defines conduct and procedures. Protocol dictates that you actually adhere to that etiquette. It is also significant that the definition includes the qualified phrase “correct etiquette”. For example, when international diplomats travel abroad they may know the etiquette from dozens of countries for greeting people, yet it is obviously important to know which one is appropriate when meeting a particular person in a particular country.

The Concept of Civility

As mentioned earlier, there are specific etiquettes for a wide variety of situations. There is also a concept of etiquette for general behavior of the members of an entire society. This is often referred to as civility. The root “civil” means, “relating to, or involving the general public, their activities, needs, or ways”.

Looking back to the definition of etiquette, civility implies that the general public's welfare is the source of authority, and the prescribed conduct defines how to interact with the general public. Because it regards the good of the general public, civility is open to moral and ethical interpretation as to how "good" is measured. Regardless of a particular society's notion of good, the purpose of civility is not to hold everyone in a society to the highest standard; rather it provides the minimum standard required to hold society together.⁵

In that regard, the lowest acceptable "good" a person can do is to avoid harming other members of society. That is a much more complicated task than it may seem, especially in areas of high population density such as cities. The need for civility is based on the fact that most people are and will continue to be strangers to one another. Basically, if you already have a relationship with someone, such as a friend or family member, you obviously have an interest in treating that person well. However, when interacting with a stranger, civility requires a sense of sacrifice. In other words, you treat others with civility without any guarantee of reciprocation. Furthermore, it is easy to find many examples of how civility makes everyday life easier. For instance, a person may accidentally jostle a stranger on a bus or in an elevator. Simply saying, "pardon me," ends the accidental encounter without any hostility. In this example both parties act with civility—even the person who was jostled. A sense of civility guides that person to accept the apologetic gesture rather than become hostile.⁶ To quote sociologist John Cuddihy, civility allows us "to

live with unknown others without transforming them into either brothers or enemies.”⁷

Summary

- Etiquette = required conduct or procedure.
- Protocol = strictly following proper etiquette.
- Civility = basic etiquette followed by society so people may easily coexist.

2. Korean Background

Societies with political structure first appeared in Korea about 2500 years ago, and during the interim, hundreds of government and military reorganizations occurred.⁸ By comparison, modern taekwondo has only existed since the middle of the twentieth century. For those familiar with Korean culture, much of the etiquette is obviously derived from both Korean society at large and from military culture in particular. What may not be so obvious is the relative amount each contributes and how this contrasts with the American experience. Thus we briefly review the background of these sources and then examine their influence on taekwondo.

Korean Social Etiquette

Historically, Korean society has been greatly influenced by its relationship with China. The two great forces that have shaped Korean social policy, Confucian philosophy and Buddhist religion, were both brought to Korea from China. However, Korea adapted and then extended these notions to meet the

particular needs of the Korean people. As each belief system went through major changes, so did the government institutions and social order that they inspired.

Historical Influences

Buddhist religion was introduced into Koguryo, the northernmost of the three kingdoms of pre-unified Korea, in 372 AD. Though there are many schools, or sects, within Buddhism, the royalty of the three kingdoms supported those that reinforced the authority of the king.⁹ Some of these sects promised spiritual salvation through means as simple as chanting on a regular basis—a particularly appealing notion for the general population that was largely illiterate and oppressed. Other sects stressed the study of works by various important Chinese (and later Korean) monks. However, even the textual schools were focused on spiritual matters and predominantly did not deal with philosophies of public policy.¹⁰ However, as an increasing number of Buddhist monks from China came to the countryside of Korea, they increasingly influenced the morality of the common people and soldiers. But Buddhism was not the first import of Chinese culture. Members of the aristocratic class, in their trade with China, had already become interested in the dominant social philosophy of China—Confucianism.

The Chinese philosopher Confucius lived from 551 BC to 479 BC. The central theme of Confucius' lifelong philosophical work was the nature of how people should treat each other. Instead of spiritual salvation, Confucianism focuses on morality and

social order against the backdrop of the natural order of the universe. It holds that harmony is obtained when all things obey this universal order. In this system, everything from nations to individuals was arranged in a hierarchical relationship. Thus, the same governing principles applied to leaders of nations as they did for leaders of families. Relationships were correspondingly characterized more in familial terms than legal ones. For example, China often viewed Korea as its “little brother” and would attempt to intervene in Korea’s internal affairs on the basis of duty and not because of any legal treaties.¹¹ Initially, all of this was captured in the *Confucian Analects*, a collection of his sayings, and five classic Chinese anthologies.¹² Important works by later Confucian scholars often complemented these studies.¹³

By 372 AD, the same year Buddhism was introduced in Koguryo, all three kingdoms of pre-unified Korea actively cultivated Confucian philosophy.¹⁴ And by the time of the unified Silla kingdom, Confucianism rivaled the influence of Buddhism, as evidenced by the establishment of the National Confucian College in 682. As its value to policymaking grew, Confucianism became a prerequisite for holding government offices and examination schools were established throughout the country. Prior to this point when both the royalty and aristocracy officially endorsed Confucianism, the “bone rank” system based on royal lineage stratified the aristocratic society into distinct levels, with powerful families trying to gain influence through marriage.¹⁵ Thus, the study and mastery of Confucian philosophy provided aristocrats with an alternative to

manipulating bloodlines to increase their political status. By the Choson dynasty of the sixteenth century, Neo-Confucian philosophy had displaced Classical Confucian philosophy in the government.¹⁶ Instead of requiring memorization of classic works, it described universal order in the metaphysical terms of “i” and “ki”. The first, “i”, describes the nature of how things should behave, and the second, “ki”, describes their physical manifestation and energy.¹⁷ In both classic and Neo-Confucianism, the goal was still social harmony.

It is important to distinguish philosophy from religion. For several hundred years, both Confucianism and Buddhism coexisted peacefully in Korea. For example, in eighth century Koryo, many in the aristocracy saw the former as a means of maintaining social harmony and the latter as a means of spiritual salvation. However, there were many periods of intense and bloody confrontation known as “purges” where each side would try to completely eradicate the other. By the eleventh century, the Neo-Confucianists had dealt Buddhism a crippling blow from which Buddhist influence over the government never fully recovered.¹⁸

Civility in Modern Korea

It would not be appropriate (or possible) to discuss the many details of Classical Confucianism in such a brief paper as this, but a few that are directly relevant to modern Korean society require attention here. Classical Confucianism encompasses five virtues:^{19 20}

- *Jen* - The characteristics of a moral person: benevolence, liberality, loyalty,

diligence, and generosity.

- *Li* - The means for expressing *Jen* in daily life. This also includes a hierarchy of five social relationships: parent-child, husband-wife, older sibling-younger sibling, elder friend-younger friend, and ruler-subject.
- *Yi* - Duty.
- *Chih* - Wisdom and knowledge, both practical and moral.
- *Hsin* - Faithfulness and trustworthiness.

The importance of all of these virtues is still evident in Korean culture today, particularly *jen* and *li*. *Jen* still reflects how most Koreans view morality. And *li* is readily apparent in how Korean social etiquette is very sensitive to the same five relationships defined by Confucius. Koreans generally do not think of relationships as being between equals, but always in terms of a senior and a junior, even among personal friends. The terms “senior” and “junior” are more appropriate than “superior” and “inferior”. The senior’s duty is to be benevolent while the junior’s duty is to obey the senior. One is not better or worse than the other, as over time all people serve as both juniors and seniors. This also explains why the elderly are traditionally treated with such high regard.²¹

In Korea, as well as other countries heavily influenced by Confucian philosophy, daily customs reinforce this order. Although not formally defined as such, there are different degrees of formality in speech. The highest is for speaking with distinguished elders or those in high official positions. A second form is used when speaking to people of the same age

or similar official position. The third is used when speaking to a younger adult or a junior position. And there is a fourth form for speaking to children. Other customs sensitive to position are the practice of bowing to greet someone (the angle varies), handing items to someone, and even the pouring of beverages. Because this sense of order has endured for so long in Korean society, it seems natural to most Koreans. And when someone disregards position, it is viewed as disruptive to social harmony.²²

Summary

- Historically, Korean social etiquette uses Confucian philosophy to define the good of the general public.
- Confucian philosophy defines the good of society in terms of a universal hierarchy, or order, which establishes responsibility for moral behavior between people.
- Moral people are benevolent, liberal, loyal, diligent, and generous.
- Five relationships are parent-child, husband-wife, older sibling-younger sibling, elder friend-younger friend, and ruler-subject.
- All relationships designate a senior and a junior. The senior is benevolent, the junior is obedient.
- Etiquette differs depending on whether interacting with a junior or senior.

3. Military Background

Etiquette in military organizations primarily serves a much different purpose than in the rest of society.

The primary goal of social etiquette, or civility, is to make sure that people can coexist easily with a minimum of confrontation. On the other hand, the primary purpose of etiquette in the military is to support the system of command and control.

Command and Control

What does “command and control” mean? The term is derived from the traditional military relationship of commanders and their subordinates. The commander has authority over subordinates, therefore his or her “commands” impose “control” over subordinates. The authority comes from two sources: official authority and personal authority. Official authority is designated by rank and enforced by the organization. Personal authority can be thought of as a combination of personality, experience, character and a general leadership quality that naturally persuades people to bend to your will.

To observers outside the military, it may seem that rank is a form of reward and prestige. And when viewed in peacetime, the true value of elaborate behaviors such as saluting, formation marching, and polishing boots may not be apparent. However, all of these activities are secondary and are meant to buttress command and control in times of war. The importance of this most basic etiquette, that a soldier must obey the commands of a superior, cannot be stressed enough:

No single activity in war is more important than command and control. Command and control by itself will not drive home a single attack against an enemy force. It will not destroy a single

enemy target. It will not effect a single emergency resupply. Yet none of these essential warfighting activities, or any others, would be possible without effective command and control. Without command and control, campaigns, battles, and organized engagements are impossible, military units degenerate into mobs, and the subordination of military force to policy is replaced by random violence. In short, command and control is essential to all military operations and activities.²³

Certain aspects of military etiquette, often called “military courtesy”, reinforce command and control simply by providing an orderly environment that minimizes uncertainty. Other aspects are of a traditional nature, and relate to inspirational stories of past incidents. Recall that the authority of command also comes from personal authority that is based on leadership characteristics rather than organizational policy. Through centuries of warfare, the concept of the warrior-leader has evolved. In Korea it was the Hwarang of the Silla dynasty. In Japan it was the Samurai. In Western Europe it was the medieval knight. In the twentieth century, military organizations around the world recognized the value of scientific analysis to determine exactly what defined such warrior-leaders.

Scientific Study of Leadership

Prior to World War I (WWI) and World War II (WWII), most students of psychology and military science believed that leadership resulted from the leader’s expression of a collection of key traits. These traits included enthusiasm, tough-mindedness and self-

assurance, among others. The theory seemed reasonable enough at the time, and scientific studies were attempted. The methods used to test this theory were somewhat questionable though. Typically, the researchers would take examples of people who were widely regarded as great leaders and then interview those closest to them in an attempt to categorize different aspects of their personality. The heyday of the “Great Men” theory lasted well into WWII, despite the fact that by the end of WWI, the Russian, French, Italian, Turkish, and several smaller armies had suffered enormous problems with morale while other armies, most notably the British, were still characterized by “pluck” and “steadiness”.²⁴ The theory lasted in mainstream military doctrine until Ralph Stogdill’s landmark study of 1948.²⁵ Originally prompted by the sudden increase in the U.S. military organizations’ need for a continuous supply of well-trained officers in WWII, and sponsored by the Office of Naval Research, Stogdill exhaustively reviewed the studies conducted up to that time and concluded that the “Great Men” theory simply was not true.

An alternative theory that also had a significant following was the “situationist” theory. At first, leaders were proposed to be the result of a situation, and that groups in crisis would find someone to create as leader to meet their needs. Initially there was promising data to support this theory, but in the end proved too simplistic. After all, while there were many cases where an individual rose to become a successful leader in some group, numerous cases of groups which failed to develop strong leaders could also be identified. Psychologists then created “intersectionist”

theory, which basically said that both personality traits and the situation affect leadership. Current theories and studies are based on this notion and typically often involve complex models positing multiply-interacting factors.²⁶ For example, the Hexagonal Box of Leadership, employs theatrical terms: Leaders are agents or “actors”, in situations called “scenes,” performing behaviors (or “acts”), using various means (agency) and that this occurs with purpose (motivation), within a Frame set by the overall historical and political context. In this model, *Act*, *Scene*, *Agent*, *Agency*, *Purpose*, and *Frame* are the six-sides of a hexagonal leadership box that contains all of leadership theory.

Effective Leadership

Describing effective leadership requires a stricter understanding of what leadership means. In Stogdill’s report, over ten pages are dedicated to just categorizing the various definitions of leadership used in other studies. For the purpose of military command and control, leadership is “the process of influencing human behavior so as to accomplish the goals prescribed by the organizationally appointed leader.” The qualification that the leader is “organizationally appointed” is to exclude situations where a leader is designated through personal charisma or by the demands of the group.²⁷

In order for a commander to have the willing cooperation of subordinates, two essential elements must be present: mutual trust, and dependence on the commander. Threat of punishment alone encourages mediocre performance, so there must be a real

dependency between them. By the nature of military organization, the commander is likely to be privileged to information that is not available to his or her subordinates. And in order to survive in a combat environment, it is necessary for soldiers to reduce uncertainty as much as possible. Thus, the commander is in a position to reduce that uncertainty. And even in peacetime, the commander is responsible for the well-being of his or her subordinates. Their well-being may require the transfer of skills (training), counseling, and so on. The relationship is dynamic as the needs of both the commander and the subordinates change over time.²⁸

Numerous studies supported by observations in WWII, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War have also shown that the most effective form of leadership, especially in times of heightened stress, is leadership by example.²⁹ Leadership by example can be thought of as the best embodiment of the two essential elements: subordinates see exactly what to do and trust the command because the commander is also following the order. An extreme example would be leading a dangerous charge towards an enemy position rather than simply ordering your subordinates to go. A more common example is the group commander, who follows orders from his superiors with the same attitude expected of his or her subordinates.

Cohesion and Esprit

Military leaders have always valued a certain sense of group cohesion among troops. This simply meant the individual soldiers felt a sense of belonging to

their unit and, therefore, were less likely to exhibit negative behavior. Group cohesion may be fostered through increased intragroup interaction, shared goals, and competition with other groups.³⁰

Unfortunately, group cohesion is not a guarantee of high performance. Groups that have what the military calls “esprit de corps” exhibit the most desirable qualities. Esprit denotes feelings of pride, unity of purpose, and a sense of belonging to the larger organization and not just their local group. A major factor in esprit de corps has been tradition. Distinctive uniforms, locations, and unique historical events are strong sources of such tradition.³¹

Ethics and Morality

The influence of rank and official authority in command and control can easily be abused. Though obedience of subordinates is essential to wage war effectively, the etiquette of subordinate obedience is not absolute. Again, history shows that the view of ethics and morality in leadership has changed dramatically in the twentieth century. With the increase in public media coverage of warfare and the massive increase in the scale of destruction, the actions initiated by leaders at all levels potentially have grave consequences. To quote Lt. Col. George Bristol (USMC), “If you lose your cool, you’re an international incident waiting to happen. An 18-year-old can make a decision that turns a humanitarian mission into a combat zone.”³²

Ethics, in an organization, are a set of standards that attempt to define what is right or appropriate and what is wrong or inappropriate. Ethics may be

expressed by establishing key principles or behavioral standards, and they must be consistent with the moral values of the organization. To look at ethical leadership in practice, we look at two different viewpoints: the act of leading and the morality of decisions.

All members of the military organization are keenly aware of each other's rank and functional position. An ethical leader uses command authority in a way that is consistent with the overall command and control structure. Examples of unethical leadership include issuing commands on the basis of personal preference instead of official position, "playing favorites", or use of individual command authority to circumvent or undermine the command authority of other leaders. Thus, leaders must demonstrate congruence between words and deeds. Behavioral studies of motivation have repeatedly shown that subordinates discredit leaders who do not maintain this congruence and the leaders subsequently lose the ability to command.

Looking at the command itself, both commander and subordinate must account for the morality of their actions in carrying out the command. Prior to WWI and WWII, obedience of subordinates was expected to be absolute, even if the command required immoral acts. Sole responsibility for morality was placed on the commander. However, the policy of "total warfare" of the twentieth century led to unspeakable acts that defied universal notions of morality. Indeed, at the Nuremberg trials after WWII, many officers involved with the genocide of Jews claimed they were not responsible for their actions because they were following orders. At that trial, this

defense, and therefore the doctrine that supported it, was deemed unacceptable and a precedent was set for the evaluation of individual responsibility.³³

This view of moral accountability requires that leaders are not simply messengers for those higher in the command structure. However, it poses the obvious problem of defining a consistent notion of morality among all members of the organization. The solution has been to include heavy emphasis on a set of moral values and a clear statement of organizational purpose from the very beginning of military training. Though they vary between military organizations, these values commonly include honor, valor, integrity, courage, loyalty, and so on. Establishing a history of conduct that exemplifies these values also reinforces these notions. For example, many military organizations provide their members with a history of key battles and stories of individual accomplishments to use as a moral guide. Those in positions of leadership must be especially aware of the need for moral accountability, because a leader's command propagates down the organization to a multitude of subordinates. As noted previously, this is an effective means of establishing esprit and also furthers the notion of leadership by example.

Finally, training also includes procedures for dealing with moral objections without having to abandon the command and control structure. Current leadership training courses emphasize the utility of explaining the motivation for commands given to subordinates whenever reasonable. This minimizes the uncertainty of the subordinates, and is especially important if the officer recognizes potential moral

conflict. This is not to say that subordinates should question the motivation. Instead, by repeatedly giving commands which subordinates clearly see as valid, and thus increasing credibility, subordinates are more likely to follow commands when explanation cannot be given due to urgency or sensitivity of the information.³⁴

Summary

- The primary function of etiquette in the military is to support command and control.
- Besides the official authority of rank, command derives authority from personal leadership.
- Effective leadership is not the sum of individual traits but the result of a dynamic relationship.
- Leadership by example is the most effective form.
- Both commanders and subordinates are responsible for the morality of their actions.

4. Military, Society and Taekwondo

Examining the military and societal influences on taekwondo requires an additional definition:

Main Entry: **mar·tial**, Function:
adjective,...1 : of, relating to, or suited
for war or a warrior 2 : relating to an
army or to military life 3 : experienced in
or inclined to war: WARLIKE.³⁵

Although infrequently used except in conjunction with “law” or “art”, the word “martial” is worth examining by itself. The term “martial art” as commonly used in English has a meaning that is much narrower than the individual words “martial” and

“art” would imply. Specifically, “martial art” commonly refers to the study of Asian combat or self-defense techniques.³⁶ That definition is based on how martial arts are most commonly practiced today.

However, when trying to understand the motives for etiquette in the martial arts, the influence of military and social etiquette are often confused. Without a sufficient background knowledge, many would conclude that taekwondo etiquette is clearly derived from military etiquette—they both use uniforms, rank systems, lower ranks act as subordinates, higher ranks are called ma’am and sir, and they both train people for fighting. Or at least that’s how it may seem—but is it really true? This section shows that taekwondo reflects societal influences more than one might expect.

Military Influences

Many of the Asian martial arts definitely have strong roots with military combat. Korean, Chinese, and Japanese history clearly show that armies often adopted one or more “systems” of combat techniques, and these systems are what were later referred to as martial, or “combat”, arts. Often, these combat systems were meant as a means of last resort when hand-to-hand combat became inevitable.

Ethical and Moral Lineage

In taekwondo, just as in general society or the military, etiquette must be observed in relation to the moral values it upholds. Without understanding this morality, then observation of etiquette is merely “following orders” and does not fulfill its purpose.

The famous Hwarang warriors followed five virtues established by the Buddhist monk Won'gwang in the seventh century; these five virtues are:

- Serve the king with loyalty.
- Serve one's parents with filiality.
- Show fidelity in friendship.
- Never retreat in battle.
- Refrain from wanton killing.

These virtues were specifically meant to address morality for warriors, and they likely served as the basis for the similar Bushido code used by Japanese Samurai centuries later.³⁷ These virtues also seem very similar to those promoted by modern taekwondo.

Similarities in Etiquette

To outside observers and taekwondo students alike, there appear to be many similarities between taekwondo and military etiquette. Three very obvious similarities are the use of rank, uniforms, and formalities in greeting and addressing others. A quick comparison of their purposes is provided in the following table.

Etiquette	Military	Taekwondo
Recognition of rank hierarchy in other etiquette.	Provides official authority for effective command and control of subordinates throughout the organization.	Provides a senior-junior relationship for establishing trust and responsibilities.

Etiquette	Military	Taekwondo
Standard uniform and proper maintenance of its appearance.	Uniforms promote cohesion among soldiers. Distinctive features from other services promote esprit. Proper care promotes self-respect.	Uniforms promote cohesion among students. Distinctive features from other schools promote esprit. Proper care promotes self-respect.
Formal greetings and address.	Saluting and addressing senior ranks by proper title signifies respect and recognition of authority.	Bowing and addressing senior ranks by proper title signifies respect and recognition of the junior-senior relationship.

Table 1: Similarities of purpose in military and taekwondo etiquette.

Societal Influences

It is important to note that many martial arts originated outside of military organizations and were subsequently adopted into the military, rather than being originated by it. Some, such as judo, were not intended for combat at all, but did include mock combat, or sparring, as a means of competition for developing personal character. Taekwondo, even though it is a required part of Korean military training, originated from a process outside of the military as well.³⁸ Military martial arts also emphasized training infantry-level soldiers in the use

of weapons, not in hand-to-hand combat with kicks and joint-locks. It is also interesting to note that martial arts that did originate from military organizations often do not include their own unique system of etiquette—the military organization already provides one.³⁹

Ethics and Morality in Modern Taekwondo

The ethics and morality promoted in modern taekwondo, primarily reflect the influence of Korean society, not the military. The eleven commandments of modern taekwondo are:⁴⁰

- Loyalty to your country
- Respect your parents
- Faithfulness to your spouse
- Respect your brothers and sisters
- Loyalty to your friends
- Respect your elders
- Respect your teacher
- Never take life unjustly
- Indomitable spirit
- Loyalty to your school
- Finish what you begin

The commandments regarding relationships with parents, elders, friends, teachers and your spouse obviously reflect the Confucian virtues that are still prevalent in Korean society. So the ethics and morality promoted in modern taekwondo primarily reflect Korean society, not the military. The other commandments are indeed based on the five virtues established by the Buddhist monk Won'gwang in the seventh century. Their preservation in the modern commandments of taekwondo is possibly the

strongest influence on modern taekwondo from military etiquette.

The biggest difference regarding ethics and morality between the military and taekwondo regards accountability. As explained in the background on military etiquette, both commanders and subordinates are responsible for the morality of their actions. However, while senior taekwondo students may feel responsible for teaching morality to junior students, in taekwondo, as in society, individuals have responsibility for the morality of their own actions and only their actions. The responsibility felt by senior taekwondo practitioners for their juniors is born from benevolence, not from an official authority holding them accountable.⁴¹

Differences in Etiquette

Although the purposes seem very similar, the differences are subtle yet extremely important. First, in the military etiquette, command and control is the overall purpose. In the Confucian roots of taekwondo etiquette, harmonious living is the overall purpose.

Second, and most important, military rank and leadership are used to enforce a chain of command that is necessary for fighting organized wars. The objective is to complete missions, win battles, and win wars, even at the expense of soldiers' lives. In taekwondo, rank and leadership are used to establish a clear responsibility for seniors to be benevolent teachers and their juniors to be obedient students. This is necessary to maintain and transmit traditional virtues. In taekwondo, the following of etiquette (protocol) is itself an expression of that morality.⁴²

And the objective of taekwondo is not to win wars, rather it is to improve oneself and to help others improve, thereby benefiting society. A military officer must value mission objectives over the well being of his or her subordinates, and victory has always been a driver towards rank promotion. In contrast, a taekwondo master holds nothing in higher value than the well being of his or her students. And the highest ranks in taekwondo are reserved for those who have made the greatest contributions to taekwondo and society in general, not to those who have won the most fights.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the existence and importance of this difference is the recent U.S. Marine Corps policy change which made martial arts study part of the mandatory training curriculum. Some forms of martial arts training is already used by elite U.S. military forces that value them for their effective techniques. However, this change, which took effect in 2000, is the first time an entire U.S. military force has required such training. This policy change was not motivated by a need to improve physical combat techniques. Instead, it was motivated from the beginning as a means to create ethical warriors. Several branches of the U.S. armed forces have had high-profile incidents involving grossly immoral and criminal behavior of soldiers in non-combat environments. Conversely, at military bases where martial arts programs became available, incidents of such behavior dropped significantly. The martial arts program developed for the U.S. Marine Corps will promote the traditional Marine Corps virtues and a belt-rank system will be used. The former shows that

martial arts etiquette is a means of expressing virtues and morality, otherwise there would be no benefit compared to just reading about the virtues. And the latter shows that the rank system of the military and the martial arts do indeed serve different purposes, otherwise one rank system would interfere with the other.⁴³

Summary

- Taekwondo and the military are outwardly similar in their etiquette.
- Societal influences outweigh military influences in taekwondo.
- The objective of the military is to accomplish missions, win battles and win wars.
- The objective of taekwondo is to improve people and to benefit society.

5. Challenges of Teaching Taekwondo Etiquette in American Society

When equipped with a better understanding of the history and purpose of the etiquette in taekwondo, students have a better understanding and motivation for following etiquette and instructors have a better understanding of how to teach and enforce etiquette. However, there are still areas with the potential for conflict. This section deals with common sources of conflict, particularly in the context of taekwondo and American culture.

Obedience and Authoritarianism

As shown earlier in Table 1, the outward similarities between military and taekwondo etiquette may lead some to believe that taekwondo etiquette is also founded on the same principles of traditional command and control doctrine. Most Americans have some familiarity with, or at least stereotypes of, military etiquette, and it is usually the traditional view of absolute obedience to authority.

Most Americans are not familiar with Confucian philosophy or understand its impact on Korean culture. Hence, they assume that Korean culture is also authoritarian. This misunderstanding can be resolved by explaining the purpose of obedience in taekwondo etiquette is to show respect for your teacher, not to demean or subordinate yourself to others. To quote Master Sung Chul Whang:

Obedience as it applies in the dojang should not be confused with the ideas of obedience that normally spring to mind, which, for many people include slavlike submission of the will, childlike acquiescence, or maybe the tricks of a well-trained pet. The common understanding of obedience frequently includes humiliation and surrender, a loss of the self. Obedience in the dojang does require the student to give up something, but it isn't the self. Rather, it is the ego, the *idea* of the self.⁴⁴

Both teacher and student must also understand that their relationship is completely voluntary. And as such, if the teacher is not benevolent, the student can simply quit. Or if the student is not obedient, the teacher is not obligated to invest their full effort into

teaching.⁴⁵ The best possible situation is for the teacher to have purely benevolent motives and for the student to have complete trust in his or her teacher. In that situation, students improve very rapidly.

Teaching Martial Artists Versus Leading Troops

The same misunderstanding that may confuse students about the meaning of obedience may also confuse instructors when they try to teach. The novice instructor may assume the obedience and respect shown by students to an instructor is the result of official authority vested in the position, much like with military rank. To further confuse matters, most Americans outside of modern military service think of military leadership in the outmoded “Great Men” view.

Regarding the first misunderstanding, it must be understood that the respect and obedience of students is in balance with the benevolence and wisdom of the instructor. Referring back to the quote from Master Whang, the obedience of the student is voluntary and based on this mutual respect and understanding of the student-teacher relationship, not a master-slave relationship. If the instructor takes the student’s respect for granted, it will likely soon be lost.

Regarding the second misunderstanding, it must be understood that popular stereotypes of great military leaders—gung-ho, tough-as-nails, and stubbornly inflexible—are not accurate. Military leadership has been shown to rely much more on the dynamic relationship between the leader and the group. The leader must be ethical, fair, and moral in his or her actions or credibility will be lost. And leadership by

example, not bullying or humiliation, is the most effective way to motivate people. Those are the aspects of true military leadership that should be applied by taekwondo instructors or any instructor in general.

Taekwondo Etiquette vs. Religion

American society holds freedom of religion in high regard. When taekwondo etiquette is described in terms of its Confucian and Buddhist influences, some may misattribute adherence to taekwondo etiquette with a belief in Confucian philosophy and Buddhist religion. In one account of a conversation between the parent of a student and an instructor, the parent valued the physical practice of taekwondo while actively discrediting its values as “Eastern philosophy crap.”⁴⁶

Following etiquette is a part of protocol. Following taekwondo etiquette shows respect for taekwondo and understanding the background of that etiquette provides insight and promotes certain taekwondo values. However, two people can share a common value without sharing the same religion or philosophy. For example, respect for parents is not a value unique to Confucian-influenced societies, and restraint from wanton killing is not a value unique to Buddhist religion. Advocating these values is not the same as advocating a particular religion or philosophy that also advocates them.

Taekwondo Etiquette and Civility in American Society

Students who are not familiar with the details of taekwondo etiquette should behave according to the

most appropriate etiquette they know. For example, if a new student has never learned about the etiquette of bowing, then he or she should use their best judgement and follow the etiquette for a formal greeting as best they know how. For Americans, this means shaking hands, removing hats, and addressing someone by their title and last name. No one has reason to be offended by this the first time—the student is clearly trying to convey respect. However, protocol demands using the proper etiquette, not just any etiquette, and after seeing other students bow, the new student should realize that a different etiquette prevails within the taekwondo school. They should then take the initiative to learn the proper etiquette.

Students are often confused about the protocol for demonstrating taekwondo etiquette while outside the dojang. Students should always ask their master instructor to clarify this, as the protocol may vary, but in general the key is to realize that etiquette must match the situation. For example, if a student meets an instructor while in the workplace, then the proper etiquette is the one for the workplace, not the dojang. Thus, bowing and addressing by taekwondo titles are inappropriate behaviors. If a student and an instructor meet while at a taekwondo competition, then taekwondo etiquette should be followed. While not the dojang, the event is a taekwondo event, not a general social event.⁴⁷ Another rule of thumb commonly used is if two people meet and one of them is in uniform, then you are in a taekwondo situation, not a social situation, so taekwondo etiquette applies.

There are other aspects of taekwondo etiquette that are different than social etiquette in American

society that should be understood. An example I like to use is how people respond to a command to form a line. If the people follow taekwondo etiquette for the dojang, they will run to form a line as quickly as possible and they will do it in rank-order without need for discussion. If the people follow the standards for civil behavior in American society, they will get into a line at their own pace, discussing who should line up where, and offering polite gestures such as “no, please, you first.” Protocol requires the correct etiquette for the situation, and the latter behavior in the example is the wrong behavior to exhibit in the dojang. I hope this conveys the importance of actively learning the proper etiquette for your particular dojang!

Friendship and Respect

The final common problem to discuss is the role of friendship in taekwondo etiquette. It is imperative that students understand that a student and an instructor do not have to be friends in order to have a good relationship in the dojang. While there is nothing wrong with having friendships with other students and instructors, the teacher-student relationship is based on mutual respect and not personal friendship.

In general, students should not feel their progress in taekwondo requires political or social status. Instructors must also try to avoid the appearance of such influence as well or students may not trust the instructor to be fair. Given that people do not spend their lives in the dojang, it may seem strange to be openly friendly and gregarious with someone just before entering the dojang and then be asked to

maintain an attitude of respect and obedience once inside. As long as people understand the value of etiquette, expectations may be set appropriately and this seeming duality becomes easier to accept.

Conclusion

The etiquette followed in taekwondo is based on a respectful relationship between the student and instructor. And while similarities in etiquette exist, the philosophy and motivation behind obedience in taekwondo and authoritarian organizations such as the military should not be confused. By understanding its history and purpose, students and instructors are able to truly appreciate the importance of etiquette in their training and its impact on their lives.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Although generally held to be true, I found it difficult to find published numbers. The best I found was that in 1993 there were four million Americans studying Karate or taekwondo. See "Karate Kids," *Money*, September 1993, page 15, quoted by H. Richard Friman, in "Arts for Sale: Karate Instruction in the United States and Japan," a chapter of *Japanese Martial Arts and American Sports*, edited by Minoru Kiyota and Sawamura Hiroshi. Tokyo, Japan: Research Institute of Educational Systems, Nihon University, 1996, p. 104.
- ² Merriam-Webster On-Line Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com>. Accessed July 18, 2001.
- ³ Etiquette for some broad categories of circumstances have become commonly known by other terms. For example, the etiquette for dining in the company of others is often called "table manners". A wide variety of such instructional texts can be found in bookstores. For a general history and a list of selected books, see "Etiquette," in *Compton's Encyclopedia*.

- ⁴ Merriam-Webster On-Line Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com>. Accessed July 18, 2001.
- ⁵ If civility is the minimum standard, what's the next step up? The Merriam-Webster On-Line dictionary has a very interesting note which shows how several similar terms regarding social etiquette are related:
- CIVIL, POLITE, COURTEOUS, GALLANT, CHIVALROUS mean observant of the forms required by good breeding. CIVIL often suggests little more than the avoidance of overt rudeness <owed the questioner a civil reply>. POLITE commonly implies polish of speech and manners and sometimes suggests an absence of cordiality <if you can't be pleasant, at least be polite>. COURTEOUS implies more actively considerate or dignified politeness <clerks who were unfailingly courteous to customers>. GALLANT and CHIVALROUS imply courteous attentiveness especially to women. GALLANT suggests spirited and dashing behavior and ornate expressions of courtesy <a gallant suitor of the old school>. CHIVALROUS suggests high-minded and self-sacrificing behavior <a chivalrous display of duty>.
- ⁶ Carter, p. 59.
- ⁷ John Murray Cuddihy. *The Ordeal of Civility: Freud, Marx, Levi-Strauss, and the Jewish Struggle with Modernity*. New York, NY: Basic Books, 1974, p. 12, quoted in Carter, p. 58.
- ⁸ Eckert.
- ⁹ Eckert, p. 38.
- ¹⁰ Some Buddhist sutras directly praised the king and stressed the strength of the nation. But again these were in terms more spiritual than political, such as a king and his subjects comprising a single spiritual entity.
- ¹¹ Rees, p. 17.

¹² These were:

I Ching, the Book of Changes,
Shu Ching, the Book of History,
Shi Ching, the Book of Poetry,
Li Chi, the Book of Rites, and
Ch'un Ch'iu, the Spring and Autumn Annals.

The *I Ching* is probably the most well known in the West and offers sixty-four hexagrams of advice (a hexagram is a six-line figure).

¹³ Eckert, p. 52.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

¹⁶ The study of Confucian philosophy had long been required for government positions. This practice led to the formation of the *yangban* class of society. However, Neo-Confucianism was promoted from within that society, often as a means for the younger members of the yangban class to criticize policies of older members by using the often extreme ethical and moral standards which Neo-Confucianism proposed. Thus political ambition certainly played a role in the rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korean society (Eckert).

¹⁷ Eckert, p. 151.

¹⁸ Eckert, p. 102.

¹⁹ Water, p. 26.

²⁰ The Chinese names are given for the five virtues. Also, the source for these descriptions is worth noting. I used this sort of "pocket guide" book just for the descriptions, and not for the analysis of their endurance in modern times.

²¹ Whyte and Kim, p. 46.

²² Whyte and Kim.

²³ USMC, p. 35.

²⁴ Kellett, p. 4.

²⁵ Stodgill's study is referenced by Prince.

²⁶ Prince, chapter 1.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ Prince, chapter 12, p. 2

- ²⁹ Kellet, p. 154.
- ³⁰ Prince, chapter 8.
- ³¹ Kellet, p. 46.
- ³² Andrea Stone, "Martial Arts to Create a New Breed of Marines," *USA Today*, June 19, 2001, Nation section.
- ³³ Prince, chapter 21.
- ³⁴ Many useful examples of how both the commanders and subordinates can improve this relationship are available in the training manuals for military personnel. One useful example is: *The Marine Noncommissioned Officer*, Washington D.C.: Marine Corps Institute, 1976.
- ³⁵ Merriam-Webster On-Line Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com>. Accessed July 18, 2001.
- ³⁶ This is based on definitions found in common English dictionaries. See *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, 2001, s.v. "martial art"; *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Fourth Edition, s.v. "martial art."
- ³⁷ Park, p. 35.
- ³⁸ There is no shortage of debate on the exact circumstances of how the martial art formerly known as taekwondo came into existence. However, all accounts I have found clearly describe its roots as being outside of the military. The strongest military tie to its origins is arguably the fact that several prominent masters of martial arts in Korea at that time had been forced into Japanese military service and were exposed to forms of Japanese Karate and Judo.
- ³⁹ See, for example, texts on Krav Maga (the Israeli defense art) or Sambo (taught in the Russian Special Forces).
- ⁴⁰ Park, p. 2.
- ⁴¹ This statement is not meant to imply that military commanders do not also feel personal responsibility for their subordinates born from benevolence. To the contrary, NCOs in particular often demonstrate feelings of extreme personal responsibility for their subordinates. However, the military does not make such responsibility voluntary.
- ⁴² This is echoed in an article by former USTU President Hwa Chong titled "Taekwondo Kunja." In the article, he

describes how etiquette helps both the teacher and student to reach higher moral standards. See: "Taekwondo Kunja," *AAU Journal*, v. 1, no. 1, Winter, 1979. This article is also currently available online at the Korean Academy of Taekwondo (Aurora, CO) site at <http://tinyurl.com/4tlku>. Last updated February 4, 2001. Accessed August 5, 2004,

- ⁴³ Andrea Stone, "Martial Arts to Create a New Breed of Marines," *USA Today*, June 19, 2001, Nation section.
- ⁴⁴ Whang, p. 25.
- ⁴⁵ I used the qualification "full effort" because most students pay for their martial arts lessons. As such, there is indeed a contractual obligation for the teacher to teach. However, in any class where there are many students and one instructor, the instructor is likely to focus more on teaching those who are enthusiastically trying to learn.
- ⁴⁶ I read about this incident in an article on the USTU website. It's an eye-opener if you wouldn't have guessed someone could have this type of reaction. See: Ronda J. Sweet, "Life in Balance (Why Study Taekwondo Philosophy?)." This article is now posted online at the American Institute of Taekwondo website at http://home.satx.rr.com/ait/info_philosophy.htm. Last updated July 14, 2001. Accessed August 5, 2004.
- ⁴⁷ In my opinion, this also extends to any martial-arts event, not just an event for *your* martial art. For example, I practice taekwondo and hapkido, but when I visit a wushu tournament I still greet wushu masters with the title "Sifu" and address them honorifically.