

# The Making of a Modern Myth: *Inventing a Tradition for Taekwondo\**

Steven D. CAPENER

## Abstract

*In their recent article entitled “Evidence of Taekwondo’s Roots in Karate: An Analysis of the Technical Content of Early Taekwondo Literature” published in the Korea Journal, Udo Moenig, Cho Sungkyun, and Kwak Taek-Yong present compelling empirical evidence that taekwondo originated from Japanese karate in the mid-twentieth century. The present article aims to discuss the implications of that assertion in the context of the nationalist project to invent a tradition for taekwondo. This article postulates that such myth-making is possible even in the face of strong empirical evidence to the contrary due to an anti-intellectual and anti-empirical nationalism that operates in the production/suppression of knowledge, especially in regard to issues that involve Korea’s complicated historical relation with Japan. This article discusses the process of the construction of an indigenous origin narrative for taekwondo and the response to that narrative in the form of a counter-narrative that postulates the role of karate in taekwondo’s formation. The construction and rationale of the indigenous origin narrative is then examined through the lens of the modern phenomenon of the invented tradition.*

**Keywords:** taekwondo, indigenous origin, anti-intellectual, anti-empirical, nationalism, Japanese karate, invented tradition

---

\* This article was supported by research funds from Seoul Women’s University.

Steven D. CAPENER is Associate Professor of Literature and Translation Studies at the Department of English Language & Literature of Seoul Women’s University. E-mail: sotaebu@yahoo.com.

## Introduction

A recent issue of the *Korea Journal* (vol. 54, no. 2) published an intriguing article, “Evidence of Taekwondo’s Roots in Karate: An Analysis of the Technical Content of Early Taekwondo Literature” (Moenig, Cho, and Kwak 2014). Taking taekwondo as its object of analysis, the authors challenge us to think more deeply about Korean modernity, nationalist mythologies, and contemporary Korea’s fractious relationship with Japan. In direct fashion, Udo Moenig, Cho Sungkyun, and Kwak Taek-Yong tackle the thorny issue of taekwondo’s origins, stating boldly that the (nominally) national sport of the Korean nation emerged from the Japanese karate practiced by Koreans residing in Japan in the 1930s and 1940s. The writers use rich empirical evidence to make an argument that contradicts the official narratives of the Korea Taekwondo Association, the World Taekwondo Federation, and the International Taekwondo Federation, all of which insist that taekwondo has as much as a 2,000-year history of development in Korea stretching back to the *hwarang* 花郎 (“flower youth”) of the Silla kingdom (57 BC–AD 935) and beyond (some even claim the sport has existed for 5,000 years).

As anyone who follows current Korean political affairs will realize, the assertion that taekwondo—touted as one of the key elements of traditional Korean culture by no less than the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism—originated only seventy or so years ago and was imported from Japan is going to create controversy. I know this very well from the response I received to an article entitled, “Problems in the Identity and Philosophy of Taekwondo and their Historical Causes” (Capener 1995). To my knowledge, this was the first article in English to provide a comprehensive account of the modern, Japanese origins of taekwondo. The commentary and debates that followed were heated, emotional, and most of all, poorly informed. I further developed my argument in my Seoul National University doctoral dissertation, “The Modern Significance of the Transformation of Training Values in East Asian Martial Arts” (Capener 1998).

In spite of the convincing and easily produced evidence of taekwondo’s origin in Japanese karate, any assertion that taekwondo did not originate in Korea continues to create controversy.<sup>1</sup> But reactions to information deemed

to disadvantage Korea in its dealings with Japan are part of a larger problem that rears its head in debates about industrialization, modernization, education, literature, and many other areas of modern society: how to properly account for the historical relationship between Korea and Japan. Korean nationalist discourse in all of the previously mentioned fields has traditionally been focused on the *minjok*<sup>2</sup> as the essentializing trope around which such discourses are constructed, and Korean literature provides a good illustration of this phenomenon. Cha Seung-ki discusses how nationalist ideology, by directly intervening in literary history and imagining powerful utopias, tries to compensate for *lack* (*gyeolpip*) and *absence* (*bujae*) in the *distorted*<sup>3</sup> process of the unfolding of history on the Korean peninsula in the 20th century when seen as the history of the *minjok*. Nationalist ideology compensates for this *lack* and *absence* in literary history by producing the substance of the national spirit (*minjok jeongsin* 民族精神) or the People's emotions (*minjok jeongseo* 民族情緒), such as *resilience* (*kkeungi* 끈기) or *unrequited suffering* (*han* 恨).

However, when even such a priori substances are not assumed, the (nationalist) ideology of Korean literary history that operates under the assumption that the ethno-nation has not achieved full subjectivity excludes or oppresses any writer that does not buy into the view of oneness of identity based on the ethno-body or does not negotiate with the ethnic historicizing that has created its own historical objectivity. This is because the discourse of literary history has already been determined. Of course there can be diverse views on literary history according to different political orientations or divergent views. . . . However, such divergent

---

1. For instance, see the first Korean language elucidation of taekwondo's Japanese origins written by Yang Jin-bang (1986) in the form of a Seoul National University master's thesis; another well-researched English-language history source is Madis (2003); and also see the recent publication by Udo Moenig (2015).

2. I have used the term *minjok* 民族 throughout this article to represent the supra-territorial notion of shared "Koreanness" that subsumes both ethnic (blood) and national (political) identity. It bears mentioning that this concept was introduced by Japan (*minzoku*) in the attempt to ethnically link Koreans to the Japanese Yamato line.

3. Here, Cha is referring to the colonial experience, division and the war, the Cold War, etc.

views are merely a difference of opinion as to which direction the mega-history of the *minjok* should proceed, the history that comprises the content of the *minjok*'s literary history is assumed to be self-evident and there is no room for difference.

The *minjok*'s history became "the essential and irreplaceable organizing factor necessary for human existence. And even if the basis of that history includes fabrications, those fabrications operate and are practiced within reality and so they serve a function. . . ."

The problem occurs when history (including literary history) is used to breathe life into a particular ideology such as nationalism (*minjokjuui*). A history (literary history) that serves a particular ideology cannot historicize itself. When we lose awareness of the fact that the history of the *minjok* is "constituted," history (including literary history) becomes nothing more than a method to portray the privileged position of the *minjok* (Cha 2001, 63–64).

Nationalism's role in inventing traditions in order to "portray the privileged position of the *minjok*" is, of course, not unique to Korea as can be seen in Eric Hobsbawm's discussion of this phenomenon in his book *The Invention of Tradition*. However, when it comes to Korea's historical relationship with Japan, the process of invention included (as stated in the previous quote) the process of removing elements of history that did not correspond to those narratives that were attempting to *constitute a privileged position* of the *minjok*. As I just stated, this process includes removing or reframing certain elements and is sometimes accompanied by *fabrications* that serve useful functions. The recollection of colonial modernity itself has, from certain nationalist perspectives, been subjected to this process.<sup>4</sup>

---

4. According to Shin Hyeong-gi, certain nationalist and socialist writers characterize colonial modernity as "the bastard child of rape," saying that this modernity was achieved through oppression and exploitation that interrupted a nascent, native modernity and severed the continuation of indigenous Korean culture. Therefore, the only way to rectify this tragedy and retrieve national identity was to reject this foreign modernity by employing a powerful nativism (*hyangtojuui*), capable of imagining a pure ethnic site inhabited by the *archetypal* Korean stretching back into hoary antiquity (Shin 2003, 117).

Anthony D. Smith discusses how the ethnic past is recalled in the process of constructing a nationalist consciousness:

The nationalist appeal to the past is therefore not only an exaltation of and summons to the people, but a rediscovery by alienated intelligentsias of an entire ethnic heritage and of a living community of presumed ancestry and history. The rediscovery of the ethnic past furnishes vital memories, values, symbols, and myths without which nationalism would be powerless. But these myths, symbols, values and memories have popular resonance because they are founded on living traditions of the people (or segments thereof), which serve both to unite and to differentiate them from their neighbours. This unity is in turn based on the powerful myth of a presumed common ancestry and shared historical memories. To achieve success, the nationalist presumption must be able to sustain itself in the face of historical enquiry and criticism, either because there is some well attested documentation of early ethnic origins or because the latter are so well shrouded in obscurity as to be impervious to disconfirmation and refutation (Smith 1998, 45–46).

Of course another means is available for creating a *unity* of ethnic memory, and that means involves the creation of certain orthodoxies through repetition of useful narratives while repressing or censoring contradictory ones. Such manipulation of origin and development narratives is essentially what has happened in the discourse of taekwondo history.

A good example of this manipulation was seen in 1990, when former Korea University philosophy professor, Kim Yong Ok, published a book entitled *Taekwondo cheolhak-ui guseong wollli* (Principles Governing the Structure of Taekwondo Philosophy). The book provides not only a well-elucidated account of taekwondo's importation from Japan, but also presents a very sophisticated analysis of the process itself. KBS reported the pending publication of the book on its prime time news and Kim Yong Ok's claim of Japanese origins for Korea's *traditional* martial art. Rather than engage Kim's assertions, he was censored. Kim was removed at the last minute as the keynote speaker of an academic symposium being hosted by the Korea Taekwondo Association and attended by most of the scholars who were writing on taekwondo at the time (and his paper was taken out

of the proceedings). This particular incident was related to taekwondo history, but it also characterizes a pervasive, ideologically driven, anti-intellectual nationalism that exists in a surprisingly large segment of Korean society.

Such an environment, characterized by an intense popular resentment of, and animosity toward, Japan where real political advantage is at stake, creates pressures that affect the process of establishing, discussing, debating, and interpreting historical facts. Simply put, the intense pressure to demonstrate a position advantageous to Korea in most discussions of historical relations leads to the revision, exaggeration, falsification, and fabrication of historical events and narratives with the aim of portraying them in Korea's favor. This compulsion toward ideological conformity earned Kim Yong Ok much public excoriation, including threats to his safety, for bluntly stating in his book that the orthodox version of taekwondo history claiming an ancient indigenous tradition is a complete fabrication (Y. Kim 1990, 70).<sup>5</sup>

A good example of these pressures resulting in historical fabrication can be seen in an incident that occurred in 1992. The government tasked the navy with finding physical evidence of the existence of Admiral Yi Sun-sin's turtle hips. For more than a month the navy patrolled the shallow waters off the southwest coast of Korea using sophisticated sonar equipment in search of the remnants of any of the ships that were supposedly used in one of Korea's most cherished anti-Japanese narratives: the defeat of a numerically superior Japanese fleet by Korea's most iconic figure in his legendary turtle ship. Later accounts revealed that there was enormous pressure to make a conclusive discovery, and, unsurprisingly, not long after the search commenced a cannon was pulled up from the seabed with an inscription identifying it as having been on Admiral Yi's very turtle ship. The naval officer was given a hero's reception and a medal presented by President Kim Young-sam himself. The cannon was designated National Treasure No. 274 and was immediately displayed in the national museum,

---

5. Kim's conclusions were unambiguous: "There was no taekwondo in Korea. Everything that we now call taekwondo, in all of its forms, was one-hundred-percent made in Japan. This statement contains not even the slightest exaggeration."

the press trumpeting the finding as proof of Korea ingenuity. Thereafter, however, doubt surfaced as to the authenticity of the cannon due mostly to its remarkably good condition. An ensuing carbon dating procedure showed in 1996 that the cannon was only a few weeks old when *discovered*. It had been fabricated by a craftsman in Insa-dong at the behest of the naval officer and was subsequently stripped of its designation as national treasure.<sup>6</sup>

Similar to the spoof of an antique cannon turning out to be a modern fabrication, taekwondo has been promoted as perhaps the most internationally recognizable of Korea's longstanding cultural artifacts, indeed as its *national sport* representative of Korea's physical culture and national spirit. Therefore, if it can be shown that taekwondo's origins are Japanese and date only to the late colonial and early liberation periods, this discourse is severely jeopardized. In my 1995 article in the *Korea Journal* referenced previously, I summarized this problem as follows:

It has been postulated that taekwondo is Korea's most effective diplomatic tool, achieving what Korea's most skilled diplomats have been unable to accomplish, that is, bring the citizens of advanced western countries to an attitude of respect before the Korean flag. It has been further argued that taekwondo, as the Korean national sport, and one of the repositories of traditional, indigenous culture, plays a vital role in preserving traditional Korean culture in the face of western cultural imperialism. Taekwondo, as a martial sport, has been given these rather weighty responsibilities because taekwondo has been popularized as a unique product of Korean culture, continuously extant in Korean history since the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period, some 1300 years ago. The importance placed on this history of unique development within Korea is understandable as it provides taekwondo with a Korea pedigree (*jokbo*) granting legitimacy as a traditional Korean institution imbued with an ancient and mysterious past that not only holds great appeal to non-Koreans, but also serves as a source of national pride to Koreans themselves who crave an internationally recognizable symbol of their culture (Capener 1995, 80).

---

6. For full details of this incident see <https://ko.wikipedia.org/wiki/귀함별황자총통>.

Following my argument, authors of “Evidence of Taekwondo’s Roots in Karate: An Analysis of the Technical Content of Early Taekwondo Literature” also assert that taekwondo’s origin is found wholly in Japanese karate. The argument is that Korean exchange students in Japan in the 1930s and 1940s learned Japanese karate (mostly but not exclusively Funakoshi Gichin’s Shotokan version) and then returned to Korea just before and after liberation in 1945 to open their own schools (*dojang*). Most of them used the Korean phoneticization of karate (*gongsu* 空手 or *dangsu* 唐手) to describe what they taught and there was little effort to portray their martial art to the public in any other way. In fact, its Japanese origins were seen as a mark of authenticity and were not concealed.

What Moenig et al.’s article does that is original is to carry out a comparison of the early Japanese and Korean technical literature in an attempt to demonstrate that what was being practiced in Korea in the 1950s and 1960s was no different than what was being practiced in Japanese karate schools of the time and, in fact, had originated there.

In this article, I will first touch on when, how, and why the argument about the indigenous origins of taekwondo was formed by focusing on this process during the Park Chung-hee regime. Then I will discuss challenges to this narrative and how they have been received.

### **Creating a Narrative of Indigenous Origin for Taekwondo**

Moenig et al.’s article articulately discusses the technical connection between Japanese karate and the martial arts being practiced and taught in Korea after liberation (and before the name taekwondo was adopted), providing an empirical method of comparison that effectively circumvents the specious arguments about taekwondo being an extension of *taekkyeon*. This comparison is successfully drawn because nothing remotely resembling *taekkyeon* techniques can be seen anywhere in these Korean texts.<sup>7</sup>

---

7. In an attempted rebuttal of the origin argument regarding Japanese karate, Lee Chang Hu, in his 2010 book entitled *Taekwondo hyeondaesa-wa saeroun nonjaengdeul* (Modern

In their approach, Moenig et al. compare the instructional photographs from the first generation of Korean-authored taekwondo texts with Japanese-authored texts that had been published earlier. They find that the content of the Korean taekwondo texts is, for the most part, identical to that of the earlier karate texts in terms of the techniques presented and how they are explained with absolutely no content that could be construed as *taekkyeon* or *subak*. This article presents an empirically grounded challenge to the argument that taekwondo came about through a melding of karate and indigenous (*taekkyeon*, *subak*, or *gwonbeop*<sup>8</sup>) martial arts. However, what it does not do is discuss the rationale for, or the process of, creating a mythology of taekwondo's indigenous origins. In other words, what the Moenig et al.'s article does is demonstrate *how* the myth was created; however, of equal importance to this question is the matter of *why* it was created.

In order to come to an answer to the second question, we must look carefully at the period of occupation. During the colonial period (1910–1945), Japan was undeniably not only the source of the (Western) modernity pouring into Korea, but also the provider of the first systemized, concrete concept of martial arts. Yang Jin-bang has stated that the 1914 introduction of judo 柔道 and kendo 剣道 into both the Korean and Japanese public school curricula was the first formal contact Koreans had with such concepts as the notion of an indigenous, systemized martial art never existed in the country before that time (Yang 1986, 10–11, 35). Therefore, in the

---

Taekwondo History and Recent Debates), includes a picture of a *taekkyeon* practitioner performing a jump back spinning kick. Lee points to this image as evidence of a technical relationship between *taekkyeon* and taekwondo (Lee 2010, 33). The problem is that such techniques in *taekkyeon* are very recent additions and, ironically, derive from taekwondo. Once *taekkyeon* began to be contested as a sport, it underwent a process of technical evolution very similar to that of taekwondo, incorporating taekwondo techniques like the one described here that do not exist in previous *taekkyeon* textbooks, such as Song Deok-gi and Bak Jong-gwan's *Taekkyeon* (Song and Bak 1983).

8. *Subak* (手搏) was an unarmed form of fighting using mostly the fists that appears sporadically in Joseon era texts. *Gwonbeop* (拳法) is the Korean pronunciation of the term that generally refers to Chinese martial arts, *quanfa*.

initial phase of development of these martial arts schools in Korea, a Japanese lineage (*jokbo*) was essential in establishing orthodoxy. This origin explains not only the use of Japanese names for what was being practiced, such as *gongsudo* or *dangsudo* (both pronounced karate in Japanese), but also the use (without exception among all schools regardless of name) of 1) Japanese karate techniques, terminology for these techniques (no Korean terms had yet been developed), and training methods; 2) Japanese etiquette and rituals (i.e. how to enter and leave the training hall, line up, address the instructor, fold the uniform, wear the belt, sit, stand, and count); and, 3) the white uniform, belt, and ranking system of *geup* (J.: *kyu* 級) and *dan* 段. In fact, all the schools followed the norms and procedures that the instructors had learned in Japan to the letter. In this way, a high level of technical and procedural uniformity existed among the various schools in Korea following liberation in 1945. To reiterate, no need was perceived initially to Koreanize taekwondo's origin and, in fact, would have seemed ridiculous to first generation instructors who, with the single exception of Yun Byeong-in (who named his school the Gwanbeopbu), all derived their legitimacy from their Japanese lineages (Capener 1995, 85).

In fact, not until well over a decade after the opening of these schools in Korea were any assertions made about their origins being other than Japanese. Most famously, a taekwondo manual written by Choi Hong Hi in the mid-1960s claimed that taekwondo was developed by him and was the result of combining the Shotokan karate he learned in Japan and *taekkyeon*, something he alleges to have practiced in his youth. A similar assertion was made by Hwang Kee, the leader of the only school that did not adopt the new name taekwondo in the 1960s; however, he retained the name *dangsudo* instead.<sup>9</sup>

With the international exposure to taekwondo resulting mostly from the dispatch of Korean instructors to teach the martial art to South Vietnamese forces (and to a limited extent, American soldiers) during the Vietnam War, the need to create a more authoritative Korean pedigree began to be felt. Thus, the narrative shifted in the early 1970s to taekwondo being the

---

9. I will address Choi's claims later in this article.

latest manifestation in the long historical development of native Korean martial arts. This change was the result of a paradigm shift beginning in the early 1970s based on several important occurrences: the unification of the various gymnasiums under the name taekwondo, the establishment of a central gymnasium (Kukkiwon), the publication of an official taekwondo journal, and the accelerating process of making taekwondo a sport (U. Kim 1973, 24). One more issue to be noted was the international appeal of taekwondo being realized within Korea.

Another factor also propelled the development of the indigenous origin narrative: Park Chung-hee's project of using nationalist symbols, images, rhetoric, and histories to construct a mass society and legitimize his rule.<sup>10</sup> According to Seo Seong Won, former media director for the Kukkiwon, three approaches to taekwondo history have developed: 1) the traditional historical view (indigenous origin), 2) the real historical view (Japanese origin), and 3) the neo-traditional historical view (recognizing some influence of Japanese karate). Seo states:

As recently as ten years ago, the texts published by the Kukkiwon, the Korea Taekwondo Association, and various other taekwondo organizations followed the traditional historical view. And the taekwondo departments of universities and taekwondo training halls around the country insisted on the indigenous nature of taekwondo. Song Hyeongseok has called this the "institutionalization of taekwondo."

The traditional historical view of taekwondo's origins was transplanted onto taekwondo's academic community in the 1970s as a response to the demands of the military government to instill a sense of cultural superiority in the people. As taekwondo was tasked with being the standard bearer of raising national prestige and defending the fatherland, the roots of the traditional historical view based on ethnic nationalism sank deep (Seo 2012, 191).

---

10. I am using the term "mass culture" in the sense used by William Kornhauser in *The Politics of Mass Society*: mass culture is comprised of elements from all classes and "this common property of a mass base (rather than a class base) helps to explain the similarities between fascism and communism, namely their totalitarianism (Kornhauser 1959, 15).

This process of mobilizing taekwondo for nationalist purposes was clearly described by Gu Hyo Song:

The fact that we must pay attention to is the designation of taekwondo as the “national sport” in 1971 during the Park Chung-hee regime. The period from the late 1960s to the early 1970s was when nationalist chauvinism really took root in Korean society. It was stamped on our brains that Hangeul is the world’s most beautiful writing system, that the mountains and rivers of Korea possess the best vistas on the globe, and that Koreans are the smartest people on the planet.

Taekwondo was systemized into its modern form around the time of the advent of the Yushin regime. As the Americans and the Chinese were having a summit brought about through the Nixon Doctrine and ping-pong diplomacy, Park Chung-hee was advocating a “self-reliant national defense.” Park looked around for something to use and realized that he had taekwondo. Loyalty to country was taught in all taekwondo schools and students were made to salute the national flag. Taekwondo ideology was made to fit Park’s ideological needs (Gu 2006).

Park’s nationalism emphasized ethnic purity and superiority. Ironically but perhaps inevitably, this attitude was identical to (and learned from) the Japanese ethos of imperialism. Japan justified its imperial expansion in Asia and the colonization of Taiwan, Korea, and Manchuria based on the belief that the Japanese were racially and culturally superior to those they were colonizing. Accordingly, Kang Myeongkwon states that nationalism is the essential mechanism for planting the illusion of belonging to a homogenous group. He discusses the two elements of this mechanism as follows:

First is purity (*sunsuseong*). Homogeneity demands purity, that is, sameness in all dimensions and this requires the exclusion of any heterogeneous elements. In other words, nationalism establishes itself first based on elements that ensure purity. This purity exists only in the sense of the Platonic ideal, not in reality. But nationalism wraps itself in this cloak of purity that it insists actually exists. And when no manifestations of this purity are available for use, they are fabricated. Second is superiority (*uwolseong*). It is one thing to believe that one is part of a homogenous

group, but in order to elicit willing and active participation in that belief, the superiority of the group is emphasized. . . . Purity and superiority are the two mechanisms employed by nationalism. However, these two characteristics are not based in reality; their existence is a pretense or a fabrication and therefore it is inevitable that they will be placed into a mutually contradictory relationship (M. Kang 2007, 17–18).

As indicated by Gu and Seo previously, in constructing the myth of taekwondo's indigenous origins, the rhetoric of both purity and superiority were employed and taekwondo training in gyms, high schools and colleges, and the military became a means of nationalist indoctrination.

In fact, beyond merely instilling nationalist and patriotic loyalties, President Park's use of sport and mass games had several other purposes. He often referred to the role of sport and martial arts in building a strong nation, enhancing national prestige abroad, buttressing national defense, and reinforcing the positive image of a strong martial leader. In the 1960s, he made the practice of taekwondo in the military mandatory, thus adding enormous institutional support to its domestic development. According to Moon Chung-in and Jun Byung-joon, "Park was thoroughly militaristic in mentality, in the fashion of Japan of the 1930s and 1940s" (Moon and Jun 2011, 118). Park went on record saying that he was trying to modernize the country in the same way that the modernizing elite of Japan had done during the Meiji Restoration, adding that he "was studying the history of the Meiji Restoration in that context. . . . I am a graduate of the Japanese Imperial Military Academy, and I still believe that Japanese education is the best way to cultivate a strong army" (S. Yi 1993, 23).

What Park is referring to when he talks about "Japanese education" is, at least partially, martial training and spirit. From his school days on, Park Chung-hee was obsessed with two military figures: Napoleon and Yi Sun-sin. Park kept a portrait of the diminutive Napoleon on the desk of his boarding school and referred to him as the "hero Napoleon." Likewise, he so revered Admiral Yi Sun-sin (he had read Yi Gwang-su's book on him) that when he became president he had a grandiose monument built to the admiral in Ansan and raised the statue of him that still dominates the main thoroughfare of Gwanghwamun in downtown Seoul (Lee Chong-sik 2012, 45–46).

Accordingly, in order for taekwondo to fulfill its role as a means of nationalist indoctrination, it needed a relatively pure pedigree. Two of the early architects of the indigenous origins and development narrative were Jo Wan-muk and Chung Chan-Mo. In dealing with the problem of taekwondo's origins being substantially found in Japanese karate, a simple yet clever strategy was employed. In an article entitled "Taekwondo History," published in what was only the second issue of the official journal of the Korea Taekwondo Association, Jo made the following claims as to taekwondo's origins:

1. The origins of Japanese karate are Okinawa-te (Okinawa hand techniques), and the Okinawans developed this after learning our *subakhui*; therefore, Japanese karate comes from Korean *subakhui*.
2. After liberation, *subakhui* regained its original name of *tae/takkyeon* and then came to be called taekwondo after which it developed systematically (Jo 1971, 64).

A number of glaring problems are asserted in this passage. The first is that no evidence exists whatsoever that Okinawans learned any kind of physical culture from the people of the Korean peninsula. More than likely the process happened the other way around. The second is that the term *subakhui* far predates *taekkyeon*, so the latter could in no way be the original name.<sup>11</sup> Such shabby scholarship, however, is typical of nationalist writings on taekwondo history. Chung Chan-Mo took the fallacy of indigenous origin even further starting in 1972 with articles bearing such titles as, "Godae uri nara taekwondo baljeon-e gwanhan gochal" (The Process of Development of Korea's Ancient Taekwondo, 1972), "Samguk sidae taekwondo-e daehan yeongu" (A Study of the Taekwondo of the Three Kingdoms Period, 1976), "Hanguk godae taekwon-ui baljeon gwajeong-e gwanhayeo" (Regarding the Process of Development of Ancient Taekwondo, 1979), "Goryeo sidae taekwondo baljeon gwajeong-e gwanhan yeongu" (A Study on the Development Process of Taekwondo During the Koryeo Period, 1981), and the

---

11. Na Yeong-il states that references to *subak* disappeared from Joseon era documents long before the terms *takkyeon* or *taekkyeon* appeared (Kang and G. Yi 2002, 17).

book *Taekwondo* (1982). In his writings, Chung essentially ascribes the name, *taekwondo*, to any of the various, very sparse references to empty-hand martial arts practice found in the Korean historical record, including *subak* and *taekkyeon*, and traces their origins to the *hwarang* youth of the Silla period.

Due to the desire to promote taekwondo as representative of a Korean culture replete with admirable martial qualities, and due to certain nationalist demands to rewrite aspects of colonial history, this narrative, through frequent repetition, soon became the orthodox version of taekwondo's origins and development. A good example of this historical revision is a book published in 1999 by Han Sang-jin and Park Jun-seok entitled *Taekwondo iron-gwa simpannon* (Theory and Principles of Judging in Taekwondo). In this book, the authors parrot Chung's narrative, stating that "Taekwondo was systematically developed during the Goryeo period reaching a nearly perfect level of practical utilization during this era and becoming fixed as an important form of social and cultural activity" (Han and Park 1999, 123). The passage serves as one example of the way in which myth becomes taken as fact; that is, if a claim is repeated in print often enough, it can become the dominant narrative no matter how factually groundless it might be.

This narrative of taekwondo's native origins finally came under attack in 1986 in the form of a master's thesis at Seoul National University entitled "Haebang ihu taekwondo-ui baljeon gwajeong-gwa geu yeoksajeok uiui" (The Process of Development of Taekwondo Following Liberation and its Historical Significance). In his thesis, Yang Jin-bang was the first to argue the obvious connection between what the first generation gymnasium leaders had learned and what they were teaching. The results of his research showed that, without exception, all of the original five *gwan* (school) founders were teaching exactly what they had learned from their teachers in Japan with no deviation or variation (Yang 1986), except for Hwang Kee, who admitted that he had learned Shotokan karate mostly from Japanese textbooks (Moenig, Cho, and Kwak 2014, 157).

The second major challenge to the indigenous origin and development myth came in the form of a book written in 1990 by former Korea University philosophy professor, Kim Yong Ok. Kim dramatically states in his

book that, “There is no taekwondo in the Republic of Korea. Every form of martial art that we call taekwondo was made in Japan” (Y. Kim 1990, 89). Kim’s assertion was based mainly on the groundbreaking research of Yang Jin-bang about the backgrounds of the *gwan* founders, but he goes further in discussing the differences in culture between Japan and Korea, arguing that Korean culture, unlike that of Japan, was antithetical to the development of a well-established martial culture (Y. Kim 1990, 118). In making this argument, Kim forcefully refuted any connection between *taekkyeon* and taekwondo. Kim’s book opened with a photograph taken by American missionaries and reproduced in a book entitled *Korean Games* (1895) by an anthropologist named Stewart Culin of two Korean children playing a game that Culin identifies as “*takyun*.”



**Figure 1.** From the book *Korean Games* (1895) by Stewart Culin, an American anthropologist. In the text he identifies this image as a game played by children, adding that it was also played in Japan.

Source: Stewart Culin (1895).

As stated earlier, such assertions from a well-known public intellectual immediately created an uproar that resulted in a backlash, the reverberations of which are still being felt. Numerous articles and books have been written in an attempt to refute Kim’s book, most relying on the circular reasoning that it cannot be said that taekwondo derived from Japanese karate as karate originally came from Okinawa, and Okinawans learned it from Korea, so that makes it Korean.

This willful aversion to facts that contradict the Korea-centric version of taekwondo history is not limited to the taekwondo and academic communities but can be found among the laymen as well. In 2006, an invited lecturer at the Seonbi Culture Training Center in Yeongju City, during a lecture to students on etiquette, stated that taekwondo had derived from karate. A parent, upon hearing this claim from their child, immediately contacted the lecturer and asked on what basis the assertion had been

made. When the lecturer replied that Kim Yong Ok had made this argument in his book, the parent complained to Yeongju City authorities demanding an apology. The lecturer was warned by the city and forced to issue an apology.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, like other issues involving Japan and the colonial period, the debate about taekwondo's origin is often influenced by popular (nationalist) sentiment and sometimes even played out in the arena of public opinion instead of being decided by the dialectical process of scholarly research based on empirical evidence. In fact, all of the research I have read that aimed to prove taekwondo's Korean origins suffers from the same fatal flaw: it begins with the conclusion and works backward to the thesis. In other words, it follows the circular logic that taekwondo is originally Korean (beginning with the conclusion) and selectively cherry-picks any detail that might be construed as evidence to support this claim, while ignoring much of the information that would demonstrate the thesis to be untenable. Added to this fallacy is the tendency toward fabrication. Both the taekwondo textbook of 1976 put out by the Ministry of Education and Chung Chan-Mo's 1982 textbook assert that *taekkyeon* was outlawed by the Japanese colonial authorities because it could potentially lead to anti-Japanese resistance. Both texts actually go incomprehensibly further in trying to explain the use of the term karate (*gongsudo* or *dangsudo*) and the practice of karate forms (*pumse* or *hyeong*) in post-liberation Korea by claiming that, due to *taekkyeon*'s similarity to karate, the Japanese forced Koreans to call *taekkyeon* karate and incorporate karate forms into its practice (Ministry of Education 1976, 47; Chung 1982, 24). Nonetheless, this allegation has passed unchallenged, insinuating itself into orthodox discourse by virtue of its appeal to nationalist sentiment. To briefly explain the fallacy, three main reasons justify the immediate challenge and rebuttal of such assertions: 1) absolutely no record exists of such an edict being issued by Japanese colonial authorities, even though such records are extremely well preserved; 2) it makes absolutely no sense to outlaw *taekkyeon* due to its supposed utility as a means

---

12. Seo Seong Won, "Taekwondo yeoksa nonjaeng-eun 'hyeonjae jinhaenghyeong'" (Historical Battle Surrounding Taekwondo "Ongoing"), last modified July 8, 2010, <http://www.taekwonline.com/detail.php?number=1138>.

of rebellion while at the same time *requiring* Korean students in the public school system to practice judo and kendo, both far more practical for combat; and 3) if it were true that the Japanese had banned *taekkyeon* due to its potential as a means of revolt, how could they then force Koreans to call it karate and include Japanese forms in its practice?

To reiterate, absurdities like the preceding cases were published not only by scholars *researching* taekwondo, but also by the Korean Ministry of Education as well. Moreover, in spite of the obviously risible nature of these claims, they and others related to the indigenous origin mythology have endured despite empirically solid evidence to the contrary. A relatively recent text (2008) entitled *Daehan minguk taekwondo ocheonnyeonsa* (Five-Thousand-Year History of Taekwondo of the Republic of Korea) regurgitates this logical non-sequitur verbatim, claiming on the one hand that Japanese colonial authorities prohibited the practice of “traditional Korean martial arts” due to their potential use as a means of resistance, while, on the other hand, stating that the same authorities promoted the practice of Japanese martial arts, such as karate, kendo, and judo (Choe 2008, 56–57). This text adds a new twist as well, claiming that the origin of the white practice uniform (*gi* or *dobok*) is actually the white everyday clothing traditionally worn by Koreans of the Goryeo period (Choe 2008, 164).

The fact that such obviously nonsensical claims go relatively unchallenged demonstrates that this position of taekwondo as the outcome of the traditional and unique flow of Korean history over centuries rejects empirical evidence in order to appeal to ethno-nationalist sentiment. Of course, as mentioned previously, this anti-intellectual, anti-empiricist, nationalist approach becomes even more impervious to reproach when employed in the ongoing struggle to deny Japan any leverage in the never-ending attempt to overcome real and perceived past humiliations.

While Moenig et al. used an empirical approach based on a comparison of techniques represented in early taekwondo and karate instructional materials, ample testimony can also be found from the primary first and second generation taekwondo leaders clearly establishing taekwondo’s direct descent from karate as it was learned in Japan. No Byeong-jik, founder of the Songmugwan gymnasium, stated frankly, “I taught my students at

the Songmugwan exactly what I learned from Master Funakoshi when I was studying in Japan” (Choe 2008, 12).<sup>13</sup> Many of the early taekwondo founders were very frank about the Japanese origins of what they were practicing as can be seen in Yi Won-guk, the founder of the very first modern martial art gymnasium in Seoul, the Cheongdogwan, giving the following rationale for Koreans training in karate:

The karate we learned came from Okinawa, which was under similar circumstances as Korea in that they had no weapons. So I thought it important to teach this unarmed martial art in Korea (W. Yi 1968, 34).

In fact, the only early instructors that claimed other than a pure Japanese training background were Choi Hong Hi, Hwang Kee, and Yun Byeong-in (YMCA Gwonbeopbu). It appears that Hwang may have been mostly self-taught. Choi, on the other hand, received a 2nd degree black belt in Japan and claims to have combined this training with *taekkyeon* techniques after ten years of research.

I was born with a weak constitution and so the martial arts I chose were *taekkyon*, which originated in the 6th century, and *dangsu*, which was introduced into Japan in May of 1922. . . . For ten years I researched *taekkyeon*, which only uses foot techniques, and karate, which relies on hand techniques. I then developed a martial art that can be practiced regardless of size, sex or age and this became known as taekwondo (Choi 1972, Introduction).

This assertion has long served as the basis for the nationalist viewpoint’s insistence on a *taekkyeon* element in taekwondo’s origin. The claim has stood, although Choi was not the founder of one of the original schools. Choi claims to have learned *taekkyeon* from his classical Chinese and calli-

---

13. This statement demonstrates the point made previously that the first generation taekwondo leaders derived their authority and authenticity from their Japanese lineage and, rather than trying to disguise it, openly advertised it. For other such testimonies by early taekwondo leaders and a well-researched treatment of the process of formation of modern taekwondo, see Heo (2008).

graphy teacher Han Il-dong, a claim I have previously called into question (Capener 1995, 84). In an interview in 2001, Choi Hong Hi recanted his claim to have studied *taekkyeon* and further stated that *taekkyeon* had no relation to *subak*. In addition to stating that he never learned *taekkyeon* as he had claimed, he also clearly states that there was nothing for taekwondo to take from *taekkyeon*.

Han: You have written in your autobiography that you learned *taekkyeon* from Han Il-dong. Did Mr. Han *actually* teach you any martial art techniques and say they were *taekkyeon*?

Choi: That gentleman was good at *baduk*. He always had a *baduk* board with him. . . . In the evening Mr. Han and the village elders would gather at our house and tell martial art stories. They wanted me to grow up hearing these stories. And they talked about *taekkyeon*. Said they had done it. However, I never learned *taekkyeon* from him. I saw him kick a shuttlecock once. . . . Who was that guy that did *taekkyeon* over in Sajik-dong after liberation? Oh. Yea. Song Deok-gi!

Han: Did you ever meet him?

Choi: I met him. There was nothing to *taekkyeon*. Nothing more than a few of these kinds of foot moves (standing, Mr. Choi demonstrated a couple of kicking motions). *Taekkyeon* didn't come from the Silla era. It popped up sporadically here and there around the end of the Joseon dynasty. There was no system to it. *Taekkyeon* could not have possibly existed in the Silla era (B. Han 2003, 192–193).

This set of remarks is extremely damaging to the indigenous origin theory. In fact, Choi Hong Hi goes even further and admits that it was not until the late 1970s that he was able to develop his brand of taekwondo away from its karate origins due to the expected backlash from his senior students, who did not want to weaken their pedigree.

Han: In your 1966 textbook *A Guide to Taekwondo*, the horse-riding stance has the knees facing outward in karate fashion. In your

1972 textbook *Introduction to Taekwondo*, they are turned inward in a more stable fashion.

Choi: Well, even up until 1979 the karate influence remained. That's because I still had all the Korean instructors around me (B. Han 2003, 196).

On other words, Choi is acknowledging that his students would have rebelled if he had done anything to weaken the lineage of Japanese karate that actually gave them legitimacy.

The most damaging testimony to the indigenous origins theory, however, came in a 2002 interview in the *Shin Dong-A* monthly magazine with Yi Jong-u, a first generation student at the Joseon Yeonmugwan of Jeon Song-seop, former vice president and secretary general of the World Taekwondo Federation, long time president of the Jidogwan, and one of the original architects of sport taekwondo. In this interview, he very candidly discusses taekwondo's origins and the background of Choi Hong Hi.

Interviewer: During his time in the military, Choi Hong Hi said that from 1949 on for the next ten years he conducted research that culminated in his establishing modern taekwondo.

Yi: That assertion is not even worth considering. Yun Byeong-in, the founder of the Changmugwan and the man that taught karate to Kim Un Yong met Choi Hong Hi in Japan and asked to him to train together but Choi refused. Later, in the military he put a few things together and called it a martial art but they were all Japanese. He used all karate basics. Only the name was taekwondo, everything else was karate.

Interviewer: Many taekwondo textbooks claim that taekwondo's roots go back to the Three Kingdom period. Even taking into consideration the poetic license of historical imagination, this seems like too much.

Yi: I was one of the people writing those books. We didn't have anything else to offer. In the early days of trying to introduce taekwondo abroad, if we said it was an ancient, traditional Korean martial art,

we gained some bragging rights, plus this played well abroad. However, even if there are similarities, this just isn't the truth.

Interviewer: In that case, are there no real similarities between that (what you did) and our traditional martial arts?

Yi: At first glance there may seem to be, but the basic movements are completely different. Therefore, in reality there are no actual similarities.

Interviewer: Does that mean that in the process of taekwondo's formation after liberation there was nothing but karate? Nothing else was included?

Yi: That's the only honest answer. I've written books saying that taekwondo was made of all kinds of other things. But it's time to tell the truth. I'm the one that called all the instructors together who were teaching karate and made the taekwondo forms. That was my doing. Taekwondo is well established now so we can tell the truth. (*Shin Dong-A*, April, 2002)

When the weight of the empirical evidence of taekwondo's importation from Japan after liberation in 1945 is considered, the following conclusion seems clear and incontrovertible: had Japanese karate not been brought into Korea at that time by Koreans who had learned it in Japan, there would be no taekwondo as we know it today. This being the case, how do we explain the anti-intellectual, anti-empirical, nationalist intransigence in clinging to untenable claims or even distorting and fabricating history?

### **Inventing Tradition: The Making of a Myth**

The idea that what is presented as age-old tradition is often, upon closer examination, a modern construct, was put forward in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's critical work on nationalism and developed in the book of essays, *The Invention of Tradition*. Repackaging a shiny, modern, new phenomenon as ancient and indigenous is, in fact, what taekwondo's Korean

leadership did, particularly from the early 1970s on. However, heaping irony upon irony, they were merely reapplying what they had learned from Japan. The introduction to the book, *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan* states:

Readers will be surprised to discover the recent origins of “age-old” Japanese traditions. Examined historically, familiar emblems of Japanese culture, including treasured icons, turn out to be modern. Much of the ritual and the rules of Japan’s “ancient” national sport, sumo, are twentieth-century creations (Vlastos 1998, 1).

In fact, the image of the Meiji Emperor underwent just such a modern transformation.



**Figure 2.** This is the Emperor in 1872 in full traditional regalia

Source: Wikipedia.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 3.** This is the same Emperor in 1873

Source: Wikipedia.<sup>15</sup>

---

14. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emperor\\_Meiji](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emperor_Meiji).

15. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meiji\\_tenno1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Meiji_tenno1.jpg).

The Meiji Emperor had been remade, literally overnight, into an image appropriate for a new, modern, militarily powerful Japan. The Meiji reformers felt this image necessary for the leader of a powerful new empire.

As the Joseon dynasty (1392–1897) came to a close and the (short) era of the Great Korean Empire (1897–1910) opened (at the urging of the Japanese), King Gojong follows the Japanese formula to the letter in his transformation from King to Emperor.



**Figure 4.** King Gojong. Confucian ruler in native garb

Source: Wikipedia.<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 5.** King Gojong as highly-decorated Field Marshal.

Source: Korea Times.<sup>17</sup>

This transformation, as well, happened practically overnight and was accompanied by the invention of a new tradition: the strong ruler who derived his authority and charisma from his identity as a Generalissimo.

A particularly relevant treatment of just such an overnight transformation can be found in one of the essays in *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, entitled “The Invention of the Martial Arts.” The author, Inoue Shun, shows how the founder of Japanese judo, Kano

16. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gojong\\_of\\_Korea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gojong_of_Korea).

17. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gojong\\_of\\_Korea](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gojong_of_Korea).

Jigoro, modernized an already existing jujutsu into a sport by rationalizing and systematizing its practice. He called his new invention judo, using the character *do* to distinguish it from the earlier martial arts known as *bugei* 武芸 and *bujutsu* 武術, which were oriented to actual combat. This process of systemization and rationalization included the use of uniforms, belts, and a ranking method known as the *kyu/dan* system. It is well known that Kano invited Funakoshi Gichin in 1921 to the Kodokan, headquarters of judo, to have him demonstrate karate. Thus, Funakoshi adopted the ranking and belt system from judo and introduced it to karate. This process has been the system of rank and promotion for everything practiced under the rubric of taekwondo since day one.

While Kano himself was a political moderate and from 1909 a member of the International Olympic Committee, the Japanese government appropriated the martial arts of judo and kendo for use in imbuing and strengthening “Japanese spirit” as ultra-nationalism came into ascendancy over other, more liberal, modes of thought in the 1930s. According to Inoue,

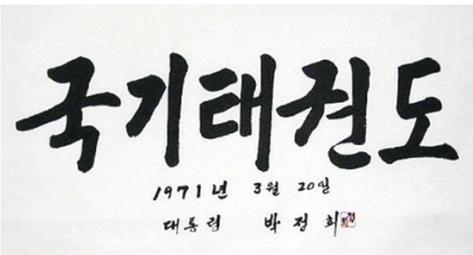
The martial arts were raised to the status of *kokugi* (national sport) and became part of the ideological apparatus of mobilization for total war. . . . As promoted by the state, however, the goal of *budo* 武道 training diverged sharply from Kano’s goals of pursuing self-perfection and improving society. Now *budo* was encouraged as a means of fostering the spirit of “self-abandonment” and “devotion to the nation-state” (Inoue 1998, 171–172).

In this way, Kano’s judo is appropriated by the government and tied to timeless Japanese virtues. Through this conflation, *budo* comes to represent the “pure Japanese spirit.” This transformation was the natural result of a recently modernized nation-state that was trying to move forward while simultaneously creating a backward-looking tradition with which to buttress new institutions and practices. Hobsbawm describes this process:

Like most serious students, I do not regard the “nation” as a primary nor as an unchanging social entity. It belongs exclusively to a particular, and historically recent, period. It is a social entity only insofar as it

relates to a certain kind of modern territorial state, the “nation-state,” and it is pointless to discuss nation and nationality except insofar as both relate to it. Moreover, with Gellner I would stress the elements of artifact, invention and social engineering which enter into the making of nations. “Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men, as inherent . . . political destiny, are a myth; nationalism, which sometimes takes preexisting cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates preexisting cultures: *that is a reality*” (Hobsbawm 1990, 9–10).<sup>18</sup>

Inventing and obliterating were the two operative processes in the course of fixing taekwondo as part of Korean culture prior to the advent of the nation. And, precisely as Hobsbawm and Gellner state, it was the advent



**Figure 6.** The scroll penned by President Park Chung-hee and delivered to the Korea Taekwondo Association. It reads, “Taekwondo, the National Sport.”

Source: Wikipedia.<sup>19</sup>

of the Korean nation-state that gave impetus to the perceived need to do so. In the same way that Japanese *budo* was elevated to the status of *national sport* (along with sumo), so too was taekwondo arbitrarily declared Korea’s national sport by then president Park Chung-hee in 1971, just as construction of a national sport training hall was commencing.

This hall, the Kukkiwon,

18. Here Hobsbawm is quoting Ernest Gellner (1983, 48–49). In this context, the title of Choe Jeom-hyeon’s book, *Daehan minguk taekwondo ocheonnyeonsa* (Five-Thousand-Year History of Taekwondo of the Republic of Korea), is particularly salient to Hobsbawm’s and Gellner’s point about modern nation-states engaging in tradition-creating and myth-making, for it implies that the taekwondo of a recent and modern nation-state (the Republic of Korea, established in 1948) possesses a history of five thousand years.

19. <http://www.kukkiwon.or.kr/front/kor/promote/news.action?cmd=View&seq=1209&category=1&pageNum=&searchKey=&searchVal=>

was constructed with government funds on land donated to the newly created World Taekwondo Federation by the government. Continuing with the imitation of Japanese practices in creating tradition, this name was apparently taken from the name of the sumo headquarters (Kogukigan 国技館), which uses exactly the same Chinese characters. The sumo headquarters was built in 1909 in Ryogoku.

All of this inventing seems comically redolent of the process of self-invention that Don Quixote undergoes in his transformation from Alonso Quixano to Don Quixote de La Mancha.

Four days were spent in thinking what name to give him, because (as he said to himself) it was not right that a horse belonging to a knight so famous, and one with such merits of his own, should be without some distinctive name, and he strove to adapt it so as to indicate what he had been before belonging to a knight-errant, and what he then was; for it was only reasonable that, his master taking a new character, he should take a new name, and that it should be a distinguished and full-sounding one, befitting the new order and calling he was about to follow. And so, after having composed, struck out, rejected, added to, unmade, and remade a multitude of names out of his memory and fancy, he decided upon calling him Rocinante, a name, to his thinking, lofty, sonorous, and significant of his condition as a hack before he became what he now was, the first and foremost of all the hacks in the world.

Having got a name for his horse so much to his taste, he was anxious to get one for himself, and he was eight days more pondering over this point, till at last he made up his mind to call himself "Don Quixote" (Cervantes Saavedra et al. 1981, 10).

Of course, to reverse the allegory, the name he gives himself is taekwondo and that of the horse that he will ride into the future, the Kukkiwon. The analogy is a not a facetious one but illustrates the extent to which an identity was created for taekwondo out of thin air. In the same way that Don Quixote fabricates a new identity for himself and his horse to fit the narrative he had imagined himself living, so too did the imperatives of nationalism demand such a story be fabricated to situate taekwondo within the flow of the (imagined) Korean national (ethnic) narrative. And it bears repeating

that this invention of a tradition for taekwondo was just as much a product of exposure to modern Japanese practices as was the introduction of Japanned karate into Korea.

## Conclusion

While there have been seminars hosted by taekwondo organizations in Korea with the theme of discussing taekwondo's history, and while the *real historical view* has been proposed at these events, such efforts have made no difference in how taekwondo history is officially presented by taekwondo organizations. To my knowledge, all taekwondo organizations in Korea, including the thousands of gymnasiums, promote some version of the indigenous origins view. With the overwhelming evidence available to the contrary and first hand testimony by early leaders, including Choi Hong Hi and Yi Jong-u, that taekwondo originated from karate, how should we understand the lack of willingness to officially acknowledge (and accept) this empirically supported view? It seems clear that the treatment of taekwondo history is affected by the complicated aftermath of the colonial experience. Kim Chul summarizes the nationalist imperative to employ national history in the project of cleansing the collective memory of the stain of collective failure:

Nationalism or national history are based on the desire to erase the subservience and betrayal that stain the story of national origin in order to reconstitute it as one possessing human dignity (a desire all too human). It goes without saying that such a desire possesses huge appeal in the realm of the collective memory. And the more wrought with oppression and suffering one's self-image is, the stronger this desire becomes.

However, when a natural human desire becomes an obsession, a queer form of blindness and inversion occurs. In order to establish an ideal self-image, truth and memory undergo a new process of adjustment, arrangement, interpretation, curtailment, enlargement, utilization, elimination and suppression. Where there is an incessant desire to purify one's origin and history, where one is obsessed by a fixation on

oneness or sameness, the mirror of history cannot reflect the true self. The only thing reflected is the shiny image of “we” wrapped in the need for a kind of morality. This is obviously not the real me but merely the “me that I wish to see.” And “Japan” serves the function of the mirror that shows me this “me that I wish to see.”

Another side of such a desire or fixation is a self-portrait stained with the memory of colonial exploitation and loss, a portrait of a polluted, fractured, and crossbred culture. Such memories are a filth that clings to the body, and the moment one tries to flee them, one arrives again at the same nightmares. The simplest and most convenient method of escaping from those memories that shake the foundations of a secure, unified self, is the omission or cutting off from “my” origin those things “that are not me” (C. Kim 2009, 158).<sup>20</sup>

This quote explains the reason why *gongsudo*, *dangsudo*, *karate* and the like had to be replaced with *taekwondo*, a word that evokes *taekkyeon* and therefore points back to “the me I wish to see.”

The predicament that this approach to taekwondo history creates is, once again ironically, that the insistence on maintaining the myth of indigenous origins actually prevents taekwondo from establishing a Korean-based identity, that is, one deriving from sport taekwondo, the only form that was actually developed in Korea by Koreans.

---

20. Kim explains this last statement as follows: The fact that the Hangeul Movement of the Korean Language Society (Joseoneo Hakhoe), the epitome of the people’s resistance during the colonial period, took place with the secret cooperation of the Government-General; the fact that the Korean Language Society remained silent when, in 1938, the Korean language was facing a crisis in maintaining its existence; and the fact that under wartime conditions, the official journal of the Korean Language Society published materials in support of the war have all been erased from memory. After liberation, the journal *Hangeul* of the Korean Language Society (Hangeul Hakhoe) was re-issued in a facsimile edition in which all praise of the emperor had been erased, and wherein it described its history as one of “fighting unarmed in a war to protect the spirit of the Korean people from the hand of the devil.” This is a typical example of how *Japan* is used to forget the “real me,” and create the “me that I want to see.” This example, of course, has important implications for the discussion of *forgetting* painful or inconvenient truths and replacing them with more palatable ones. For a more detailed discussion, see Kim Chul (2009).

---

**REFERENCES**

- Capener, Steven D. 1995. "Problems in the Identity and Philosophy of Taekwondo and Their Historical Causes." *Korea Journal* 35.4: 80–94.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. "Dongyang mudo-ui byeoncheon-gwa hyeondaejeok uimi" (The Modern Significance of the Transformation of Training Values in East Asian Martial Arts). Ph.D. diss., Seoul National University.
- Cervantes Saavedra, Miguel de, John Ormsby, Joseph Ramon, and Kenneth Douglas. 1981. *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha: The Ormsby Translation, Revised, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*. New York: Norton.
- Cha, Seung-ki. 2001. "Minjokjuui, munhaksa, geurigo gangyodoen hwahae" (Nationalism, Literary History, and a Forced Reconciliation). In *Munhak sok-ui pasijeum* (The Fascism That Exists within Literature), edited by Kim Chul and Shin Hyeong-gi. Seoul: Samin.
- Choe, Jeom-hyeon. 2008. *Daehan minguk taekwondo ocheonnyeonsa* (Five-Thousand Year History of Taekwondo of the Republic of Korea). Seoul: Sang-A.
- Choi, Hong Hi. 1972. *Taekwondo gyoseo* (Taekwondo Message), Seoul: Jeonyeongsa.
- Chung, Chan-Mo. 1982. *Taekwondo*. Seoul: Dongyang Munhwasa.
- Culin, Stewart. 1895. *Korean Games, with Notes on the Corresponding Games of China and Japan*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Gellner, Ernst. 1983. *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Gu, Hyo Song. 2006. "Balchagi jeon-e wen gukgi-e daehan maengse?" (Why Do We Bow to the National Flag in Taekwondo Schools?). *Hankyoreh* 21, March 7.
- Han, Byeong-cheol. 2003. *Gosu-reul chajaseo* (Finding the Masters). Seoul: Yeongeon Munhwasa.
- Han, Sang-jin, and Park Jun-seok. 1999. *Taekwondo iron-gwa simpannon* (Theory and Principles of Judging in Taekwondo). Seoul: Honggyeong.
- Heo, In-uk. 2008. *Taekwondo hyeongseongsa* (History of the Formation of Taekwondo). Paju: Korean Studies Information.
- Hobsbawm, Eric J. 1990. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hobsbawm, Eric J., and Terrence O. Ranger. 1983. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Inoue, Shun. 1998. "The Invention of the Martial Arts: Kanō Jigarō and Kōdōkan Judo." In *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*, edited by Stephen Vlastos, 163–173. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jo, Wan-muk. 1971. "Taekwondosa" (History of Taekwondo). *Taekwondo* 2: 54–64.

- Kang, Myeongkwan. 2007. *Gungmunhak-gwa minjok geurigo geundae* (Korean Literature, the Nation, and the Modern). Seoul: Somyung.
- Kang, Won-shik, and Yi Gyeong-myeong. 2002. *Uri taekwondo-ui yeoksa* (Our Taekwondo History). Seoul: Sanga Productions.
- Kim, Chul. 2009. "Gaengsaeng-ui do hogeun miro" (The Road to Redemption, or the Maze). In *Singminji-reul angoseo* (Embracing the Colony), 37–88. Seoul: Youkrack.
- Kim, Yong Ok. 1990. *Taekwondo cheolhak-ui guseong wollli* (Principles Governing the Structure of Taekwondo Philosophy). Seoul: Tongnamu.
- Kornhauser, William. 1959. *The Politics of Mass Society*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Lee, Chang Hu. 2010. *Taekwondo hyeondaesa-wa saeroun nonjaengdeul* (Modern Taekwondo History and Recent Debates). Seoul: Sanga Productions.
- Lee, Chong-sik. 2012. *Park Chung-Hee: From Poverty to Power*. Palos Verdes, Calif.: KHU Press.
- Madis, Eric. 2003. "The Evolution of Taekwondo from Japanese Karate." In *Martial Arts in the Modern World*, edited by Thomas A. Green and Joseph R. Svinth, 185–208. Westport, Conn. and London: Praeger.
- Ministry of Education, Republic of Korea. 1976. *Taekwondo*. Cheyuk Gyoyuk Jaryo Chongseo, no. 40. Seoul: Ministry of Education.
- Moening, Udo. 2015. *Taekwondo: From a Martial Art to a Martial Sport*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Moening, Udo, Cho Sungkyun, and Kwak Taek-Yong. 2014. "Evidence of Taekwondo's Roots in Karate: An Analysis of the Technical Content of Early Taekwondo Literature." *Korea Journal* 54. 2: 150–178.
- Moon, Chung-in, and Jun Byung-joon. 2011. "Modernization Strategy: Ideas and Influences." *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, edited by Byung-kook Kim and Ezra F. Vogel, 115–139. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Seo, Seong Won. 2012. *Taekwondodyeon* (The Tale of Taekwondo). Seoul: Anibig.
- Shin, Hyeong-gi. 2003. *Minjok iyagi-reul neomeoseo* (Beyond Talk of the Nation). Seoul: Samin.
- Smith, Anthony D. 1998. *Nationalism and Modernism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Song, Deok-gi, and Bak Jong-gwan. 1983. *Taekkyeon*. Seoul: Seorim Munhwasa.
- Vlastos, Stephen, ed. 1998. *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Yang, Jin-bang. 1986. "Haebang ihu taekwondo-ui baljeon gwajeong-gwa geu yeok-sajeok uiui" (The Process of Development of Taekwondo Following Liberation and its Historical Significance). Master's thesis, Seoul National University.
- Yi, Sang-u. 1993. *Park Chung-hee, pamyel-ui jeongchi gongjak* (The Ruined Political Maneuvering of Park Chung-hee). Seoul: Dong-A Ilbosa.
- Yi, Won-guk. 1968. *Taegwondo gyobeom* (Taekwondo Manual). Seoul: Jinsudang.