

Furthering taekwondo as an academic discipline: A report on Youngsan University's 1st International Academic Taekwondo Conference

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Received: 25/10/2019; Accepted: 16/12/2019; Published: 18/12/2019.

REPORT

Abstract

The 1st International Academic Taekwondo Conference Youngsan University was held on October 4, 2019 in Yangsan, Republic of Korea (ROK; i.e., South Korea). In an effort to bring together international researchers of taekwondo, three non-Korean presenters were invited and three accomplished academics, two non-Korean, made up the conference's invited panelists. The topics presented were: 1) the shift in taekwondo's peace promotion duties, 2) a discussion of *mudo* ("martial way" of life) in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK; i.e., North Korea), and 3) the decline of taekwondo as a combat sport. Although small in scale, the conference built upon previous taekwondo academic endeavors in- and outside of Korea. Most importantly, the conference highlighted the fact that non-Korean academics are furthering the research field beyond the nationalistic concepts still held in the Korean taekwondo community. The event immediately garnered interest in an expanded conference for 2020.

Keywords: Martial arts; combat sports; academic conference; soft diplomacy; International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF); Olympic Taekwondo.

Profundizando en el taekwondo como disciplina académica: Informe sobre la 1st International Academic Taekwondo Conference en la Universidad de Youngsan

Resumen

La 1st International Academic Taekwondo Conference de la Universidad de Youngsan se celebró el 4 de octubre de 2019 en Yangsan, República de Corea (ROK; i.e., Corea del Sur). En un esfuerzo por reunir a investigadores internacionales de taekwondo, se invitó a tres ponentes no coreanos y a tres reconocidos académicos, dos no coreanos, que participaron como panelistas invitados. Los temas tratados fueron: 1) el cambio en las obligaciones relativas a la promoción de la paz a través del taekwondo, 2) discusión sobre el *mudo* ("estilo de vida marcial") en la República Popular Democrática de Corea (RPDC; i.r., Corea del Norte), y 3) el declive del taekwondo como deporte de combate. Aunque pequeña en escala, la conferencia se basó en iniciativas previas relativas al taekwondo desarrolladas tanto dentro como fuera de Corea. Y lo que es más importante, la conferencia destacó el hecho de que los académicos no coreanos están expandiendo el campo de investigación más allá de los conceptos nacionalistas que aún se mantienen en la comunidad coreana del taekwondo. El evento generó un inmediato interés para celebrar una conferencia ampliada en el 2020.

Palabras clave: Artes marciales; deportes de combate; conferencia académica; diplomacia blanda; Federación Internacional de Taekwon-Do (ITF); taekwondo olímpico.

Aprofundando o taekwondo como disciplina académica: resumo da 1st International Academic Taekwondo Conference na Universidade de Youngsan

Resumo

A 1st International Academic Taekwondo Conference na Universidade de Youngsan decorreu no dia 4 de outubro de 2019, em Yangsan, República de Coreia (ROK; i.e., Coreia do Sul). Em um esforço para reunir pesquisadores internacionais de taekwondo, foram convidados três palestrantes não coreanos e três académicos reconhecidos, dos quais dois não coreanos. Os temas tratados foram: 1) as mudanças nas obrigações relativas à promoção da paz através do taekwondo; 2) discussão sobre o *mudo* ("estilo de via marcial") na República Popular Democrática de Coreia (RPDC; i.e., Coreia do Norte); e 3) o decréscimo da prática do taekwondo como desporto de combate. Embora em pequena escala, a conferência baseou-se em prévias iniciativas relativas ao taekwondo desenvolvidas na Coreia e fora do país. Os conferencistas sublinharam que os académicos não coreanos estão a alargar o campo de investigação que vão para além dos conceitos nacionalistas e que se mantiveram na comunidade coreana do taekwondo. Manifestou-se também o interesse em se promover a realização de uma conferência mais alargada em 2020.

Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; desportos de combate; conferência académica; diplomacia suave; Federação Internacional de Taekwondo (ITF); taekwondo olímpico.

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1. Introduction

On October 4, 2019, the Department of Taekwondo at Youngsan University in Yangsan, Republic of Korea (ROK; i.e., South Korea) hosted its first academic conference on taekwondo. With the theme of “Contemporary Issues in Taekwondo,” the 1st International Academic Taekwondo Conference Youngsan University was held at the university’s Law School Complex. Featuring expert international presenters and panelists from Korea and abroad, the conference sought, according to the university President Gu-Wuck Bu’s own words (2019, p. 2), to “expand [the] understanding of taekwondo’s theoretical foundation and to inform the public that [taekwondo] strengthens spiritual cultivation and moral values as well as physical training.”

There is a growing interest in taekwondo academic knowledge, and the increasing number of conferences around the world attests to this fact. Longstanding academic conferences on martial arts in general have often concentrated on the Japanese and Chinese martial arts (e.g., Bugala, 2016; Cynarski & Kubala, 2013; Cynarski & Niziol, 2015; Vertonghen, 2012), and the Korean martial arts have been somewhat neglected in this process. However, in recent years, a niche area of this research has focused on taekwondo, the Korean martial art turned Olympic combat sport (see Johnson & Lewis, 2018; Johnson, 2019a). Taekwondo academic conferences are often supported financially by the World Taekwondo (WT; the governing body of Olympic Taekwondo) or, as in the case of Youngsan University’s conference, by institutions of higher education (Johnson, 2019a).

The larger of these conferences, like those organized by the International Association for Taekwondo Research (IATR), have featured scores of researchers from across the globe (Johnson 2019a). However, these conferences are often so large that the schedule and venue prevent researchers from interacting meaningfully. This year’s Youngsan University taekwondo conference on the other hand allowed for a more intimate gathering of longstanding and rising taekwondo researchers to share and collaborate on their current areas of study. Despite its small size, the still-burgeoning research field of Taekwondo Studies benefited from this academic conference.

2. The Conference

The 1st International Academic Taekwondo Conference Youngsan University began in the afternoon with a warm welcoming address by President Gu-Wuck Bu of Youngsan University. He began by thanking the organizers and participants for their efforts and help. Subsequently, he expressed his strong support for the Department of Taekwondo, its various projects, and the advance of academic research in the field of Taekwondo Studies.

The conference was chaired by Professor Peter Yun (Youngsan University), who kept a tight schedule and translated from Korean to English and vice versa throughout the afternoon. Professors Hyeongseok Song (Keimyung University; Daegu, ROK), John Frankl (Yonsei University; Seoul, ROK), and Udo Moenig (Youngsan University; Yangsan, ROK) were the invited panelists, all of whom offered extensive martial arts and combat sports expertise within an academic lens. Just prior to the conference’s start, Yun announced a slight change in schedule. Participants were told prior to the conference that each speaker would field questions from three panelists, but this was altered so that only one panelist would ask one question to a speaker at the end of each presentation. The final Q&A session was then opened for audience participation as well.

The conference hosted three international researchers, all of whom earned terminal degrees in some of the ROK’s highest learning institutions focusing on Taekwondo Studies. Sanko Lewis (PhD) began the conference’s presentation session. Originally from South Africa, Lewis now teaches at Sahmyook University in Seoul and is an International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF) instructor. He spoke on the transition of taekwondo’s peace promotion, which is a continuation of taekwondo as a form of soft power and diplomacy (Lewis, 2016; 2017). He stated the onus for taekwondo’s peace promotion was originally on the individual practitioner. However, the current use of taekwondo as a means of soft diplomacy between the ROK and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK; i.e., North Korea) has shifted that responsibility from the individual instructor to international organizations, such as the WT and the ITF. As such, Lewis claims the focus of taekwondo has changed from a purpose of the promotion of justice, and the protection of



the weak in one's community, to a tool of international politics and diplomacy. Moreover, he claimed these engagements between the ROK and DPRK rather correspond to *cultural exchange performances* and do not represent true *sports diplomacy*. Recent studies have supported his claim to some extent (Johnson & Vitale, 2018; Johnson 2019a). In connection to the topic, Lewis also discussed the philosophical talking points in some of the earliest taekwondo textbooks authored by influential taekwondo pioneers, such as Chul-hee Park, Hong-Hi Choi, and Won-Kuk Lee. In addition, he contrasted the various cultural exchanges and events which the former WTF (World Taekwondo Federation, now renamed WT) and the ITF promoted. In conclusion, Lewis illustrated a shift in emphasis from *heroes* (i.e., the individual taekwondo practitioner) to *performers* (dominated by collectivism) in taekwondo demonstrational events. The evident detriment of this transformation is a decreased focus on a moral code for the individual practitioner.

The second presenter was John A. Johnson (PhD), an ITF practitioner from the United States who is a professor in the Department of Taekwondo at Keimyung University (Daegu, Korea). Initially, Johnson emphasized that ITF Taekwondo actually originated also from within the ROK, a fact that surprised the audience. In light of disagreements with leading members of the taekwondo community, General Hong Hi Choi was forced out of the Korea Taekwondo Association (KTA) in 1965. Consequently, Choi founded the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF) in Seoul in 1966 and only introduced the version of taekwondo and the ITF to the DPRK in 1980.

Subsequently, Johnson presented his research on *mudo* ("martial ways"; Japanese: *budo*) in the DPRK. His research, which possibly represents the first study on martial arts culture inside the DPRK, focused on a case study seeking to determine if the ITF pedagogy outlined by the first ITF president General Hong Hi Choi was practiced as intended by the General. Johnson further correlated his findings with his previous theoretical research on the *musul-muye-mudo* (i.e., "martial technique-martial art-martial way") progression (Johnson 2017). Due to the restricted access to the DPRK population, Johnson's study concentrated on non-Korean ITF practitioners who traveled to that country specifically for taekwondo education and training. Although his study had the lowest possible subject population ($n = 1$), he concluded that all five basic components of General Choi's physical education curriculum might be present in the practice of taekwondo in the DPRK. Johnson also linked these findings to his formerly developed stratified taekwondo pedagogy theory (Johnson 2017) in order to demonstrate that the aspects of *musul*, *muye*, and *mudo* were present in the taekwondo education and training activity inside the DPRK.

The final presenter was Stephen D. Capener (PhD), a professor at Seoul Women's University (Seoul, Korea) and one of the first academics to publish research on taekwondo in international journals. Capener's topic was entitled, "How Korea Created and then Destroyed the Martial Sport of Taekwondo," which was an expanded and upgraded version of his previous presentation at Stanford University given in the spring of 2019 (Johnson 2019a).

Initially, Capener outlined the philosophical inconsistencies presented by followers of so-called *traditional taekwondo*. They tend to value transcendence and self-perfection and usually claim that their foremost training objective is supposed to be "real fighting ability." However, their preferred training method, which consists mostly of static forms training, is wholly inadequate to reach this objective. On the other hand, the technical objective of followers of so-called *sport taekwondo* (i.e., Olympic Taekwondo) is "match superiority," which is adequately achieved by their training method, namely full-contact sparring. However, sport taekwondo failed to articulate modern training values and is usually seen only as purely physical activity without any martial art philosophical and educational merits. In summary, these technical and philosophical inconsistencies and contradictions hinder the progression of taekwondo.

Capener's primary argument was that Olympic-style Taekwondo has deteriorated ethically to such a point that its own officials could not referee matches any longer. As a result, the taekwondo community opted for the Protector and Scoring System (PSS) for scoring with the intended purpose of eliminating human subjective judgment and providing transparency in this process. This direction was supposed to satisfy the demands of the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) after investigating taekwondo match manipulations committed by WTF senior officials, referees, and coaches during the 2000 Sydney Olympics and in other events (Yook, 2002; Moenig 2015a; 2015b; 2017). Capener argued, this choice influenced taekwondo's technical

directions profoundly in negative ways and accelerated the sport's decline. While the PSS was intended to prevent human errors and unethical referee behavior, Capener pointed out that humans now no longer control what constitutes a 'proper' scoring point, since the PSS merely records a scoring point when a closed circuit is created upon impact to the device. He continued arguing that orthodox taekwondo techniques are disappearing from competition, since there are easier methods of scoring with unconventional techniques, which, however, are not proper kicking techniques in a conventional sense as they lack power and strong impact. Capener emphasized this latter point with a striking video comparing taekwondo training from years ago with kicking techniques and strikes making hard impact on targets with modern taekwondo training, where athletes stand with one foot in a bucket while flicking the other foot, seeking to merely make contact with the target without much force. Moreover, Capener accused the taekwondo leadership of distrusting its own referee corps because of rampant manipulation and corruption in the Korean taekwondo community, which he stated was a reflection of the general Korean society. As a solution, he advocated a return to conventional scoring, and the creation of an international, professional referee corps. Capener also briefly gave further examples of how taekwondo is losing its established characteristics and spirit. For example, he discussed briefly how new avenues of competitions have worsened the image and functional ability of taekwondo. A very negative example suggested by Capener is the recently-introduced beach taekwondo in which female athletes compete in sport bras and men without shirts. He argues this type of competition serves no further purposes than exploiting the performers' sexuality in a quest for increased popularity in taekwondo competition, unrestrained expansion, and a search for financial gains (see also Johnson 2019b).

After a short break, the Discussion and Q&A session of the conference began. All six panelists and speakers sat across from each other on the stage. At this time, the panelists were also allowed to address their prepared questions to the speakers. For instance, Professor Hyeongseok Song and Professor John Frankl asked Johnson about how the manifestation of *mudo*, which Johnson (2017) described as a personal expression of martial knowledge, could be conveyed in DPRK, a society thought to be highly regulated and without freedom. Not claiming to be an expert on DPRK society, Johnson suggested that his definition of *mudo* allows students to individually extract martial knowledge from their practice and then apply it to their daily lives as they see fit. As such, he explained DPRK citizens would adapt their taekwondo knowledge in a meaningful way to them.

In possibly the most heated moment of discussion during the conference, a participant asked Capener why he believed taekwondo had Japanese origins, something that Capener only alluded to during his presentation. In the midst of the current political hostility between Japan and the ROK, this question could have quickly turned the conference's open dialogue into a heated political debate. Capener quelled the mood by citing his, various Korean researchers', as well as Professor Udo Moenig's numerous publications in top academic journals and monographs that date back more over three decades (e.g., Yang 1986; Kang & Lee, 1999; Capener, 1995; 2005; 2016; Moenig, Cho, & Kwak, 2014; Moenig & Kim, 2016; 2019; Moenig, 2013; 2015a) on the subject. This question also demonstrated that ignorance and Korean nationalism are still driving forces in the historical discussion about taekwondo in the Korean martial arts community. The chairperson then moved on quickly to the next question.

3. Conclusions

Despite its rather small size, the Youngsan University's 1st International Academic Taekwondo Conference helped advance and expand Taekwondo Studies. Most significantly, the conference represented a truly international academic event comparable to larger events, such as symposiums held by the IATR (International Association for Taekwondo Research; see, Lewis, 2017) or iACT (International Academic Conference for Taekwondo; see Johnson, 2019a). In contrast, other so-called international taekwondo academic conferences held recently in the ROK were not held in the *lingua franca* and featured only Korean scholars (see Johnson & Lewis, 2018), which limited their audiences and dissemination of findings.



In addition, the organizing committee's decision to host only non-Korean academics provided other advancements to Taekwondo Studies. As the question posed to Capener exemplified, there is still a rift in understanding taekwondo's history amongst many Korean and non-Korean academics: many Koreans still hold nationalistic views that deny the influence of Japanese Karate on their national sport and martial art (Moenig, 2013; 2015a). Moreover, there has been a reluctance to acknowledge the contributions of the ITF to the worldwide popularity of taekwondo (Johnson & Lewis, 2018; Johnson, 2019b). Therefore, the decision to invite speakers who have advocated these controversial positions and give them a platform in front of a Korean academic audience was a significant step forward in providing an all-inclusive view of taekwondo in the ROK.

Another interesting aspect of the conference was that two of the speakers were speaking from ITF backgrounds. The ITF perspective is, as above, often seriously underdeveloped and underrepresented in academic taekwondo events. This fact might be due to the often-held incorrect assumption that ITF Taekwondo was founded in the DPRK, a misunderstanding which Johnson clarified at the beginning of his presentation. Previous conferences by the IATR and iACT (see Johnson, 2019a; Johnson & Lewis, 2019; Johnson and Vitale, 2018) have attempted to make up for this deficit. In this sense, Youngsan University's openness to invite these speakers indicated a willingness of cooperation and dialogue with ITF academics. As additional proof of this openness, none of the questions from the audience were hostile toward the ITF speakers, as it has often been the case at other such forums (Johnson & Lewis, 2018).

The conference progressed smoothly and professionally thanks primarily to Yun's bilingual (English and Korean) ability. Additionally, one of the highlights was that Youngsan University President Gu-Wuck Bu stayed for the entire duration of the conference. Typically, VIPs do not stay beyond academic conferences' opening ceremonies, so his full participation indicates Youngsan University's complete support of Taekwondo Studies. His passion for developing academic taekwondo and the academic pursuit of it was evident, and a second conference to be held in 2020 at Youngsan University was announced within hours after the end of the event. That conference will focus on the Tokyo Olympics and will invite international scholars from around the globe.

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