

The institutionalization of taekwondo in South Korea

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Abstract

Taekwondo, designated as the official 'national sport of the Republic of Korea,' has been a source of pride and a point of reference for the Korean people. A great variety of academic articles and books have been published over the last decades about the general historical formation of taekwondo; however, the topic of taekwondo's institutionalization in South Korea has been largely neglected or ignored. At some point in their lives, almost every South Korean, particularly within the male population when they enter military service, undergoes some form of taekwondo training. No other country in the world integrates martial arts in such a wide-ranging manner. Hence, this article aims to explain the broad integration of taekwondo into the public and higher education system and the military of South Korea. Subsequently, this study details taekwondo as a career opportunity in South Korea, which is highly unique among nations. Lastly, this article focuses on the broadening and specialization of taekwondo activities with the spread and popularization of 'demonstration' and 'forms' taekwondo. In summary, this article aims to explore these phenomena and contribute new insights to the field of Taekwondo Studies.

Keywords: Martial arts; combat sports; taekwondo; institutionalization; physical education; military; higher education; career.

La institucionalización del taekwondo en Corea del Sur

Resumen

El taekwondo, designado "deporte nacional oficial de la República de Corea", ha sido motivo de orgullo y punto de referencia para el pueblo coreano. En las últimas décadas se han publicado numerosos artículos académicos y libros sobre la evolución histórica general del taekwondo; sin embargo, su proceso de institucionalización en Corea del Sur se ha descuidado o ignorado en gran medida. En algún momento de su vida, casi todos los surcoreanos, sobre todo los varones cuando entran en el servicio militar, reciben algún tipo de entrenamiento de taekwondo. Ningún otro país del mundo integra las artes marciales de forma tan amplia. De ahí que este artículo pretenda explicar la amplia integración del taekwondo en el sistema educativo público y superior y en el ejército de Corea del Sur. Posteriormente, se centra en el taekwondo como una oportunidad profesional en Corea del Sur, un caso singular en el ámbito internacional. Por último, se centra en la ampliación y especialización de las actividades de taekwondo, con la difusión y popularización del taekwondo de "demostración" y de "formas". En resumen, este artículo pretende explorar estos

A institucionalização do taekwondo na Coreia do Sul

Resumo

O taekwondo, designado como o "desporto nacional oficial da República da Coreia", tem sido uma fonte de orgulho e um ponto de referência para o povo coreano. Nas últimas décadas, foi publicada uma grande variedade de artigos académicos e livros sobre a formação histórica geral do taekwondo; no entanto, o tópico da institucionalização do taekwondo na Coreia do Sul tem sido largamente negligenciado ou ignorado. A dada altura das suas vidas, quase todos os sul-coreanos, particularmente a população masculina quando entra para o serviço militar, passa por alguma forma de treino de taekwondo. Nenhum outro país do mundo integra as artes marciais de uma forma tão abrangente. Assim, este artigo tem como objetivo explicar a ampla integração do taekwondo no sistema de ensino público e superior e nas forças armadas da Coreia do Sul. Posteriormente, detalha o taekwondo como uma oportunidade de carreira na Coreia do Sul, o que é altamente singular entre as nações. Por último, foca o alargamento e a especialização das atividades do taekwondo com a difusão e popularização do taekwondo de "demonstração" e de "formas". Em suma, este artigo tem como objetivo explorar estes fenómenos e contribuir com

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fenómenos y aportar nuevas ideas al campo de los estudios sobre el taekwondo.

Palabras clave: Artes marciales; deportes de combate; taekwondo; institucionalización; educación física; ejército; enseñanza superior; carrera profesional.

novos conhecimentos para o campo dos Estudos do Taekwondo.

Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; desportos de combate; taekwondo; institucionalização; educação física; exercício; ensino superior; carreira.

1. Introduction

Taekwondo (*t'aegwǒndo*), designated as the official 'national sport of the Republic of Korea,' has been a source of pride and a point of reference for the Korean people.¹ As an Olympic sport, it is one of the most recognizable symbols of Korean culture around the world and was arguably the first Korean cultural export and a source of soft power, long before the so-called 'Korean Wave' or *Hallyu* (韓流) (Moenig & Kim, 2021).

Initially, from karate's introduction from Japan to Korea under a variety of names toward the end of the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) until the 1960s, martial arts training was not so much considered a 'sport' but more of a method to acquire proficiency in self-defense and practical fighting. This kind of training was also popular among police forces for the detention of criminals. Moreover, it was also progressively introduced to the South Korean armed forces after the Korean War (1950-1953) (Madis, 2003, pp. 191-201; Moenig & Kim, 2021).

Choi Hong Hi (Ch'oe Hong-hŭi, 1918-2002), a major general in the South Korean Army, coined the term 'taekwondo' in 1955, which became over time the officially and almost universally used name for the karate-based martial art. The name change was motivated by political and nationalistic tendencies in South Korean society; ultimately, it represented historical revisionism by increasingly denying Japanese roots and claiming instead indigenous Korean heritage of taekwondo. After Choi's disagreements with great parts of the Korean taekwondo community, he founded the rival International Taekwon-Do Federation in 1966, which he relocated abroad during the early 1970s. Subsequently, Choi introduced his style of taekwondo also to North Korea in 1980, which ultimately made taekwondo a tool in the wider opposing politics between the North and South (Kim, 1990; Capener, 1995; Madis, 2003, pp. 191-207; Moenig, 2015, pp. 34-56; Johnson & Vitale, 2018).²

Before Park Chung Hee's (Pak Chŏng-hŭi, 1917-1979) military coup in 1961, the South Korean society was in turmoil. Under his guidance as military dictator and president until his assassination in 1979, South Korean society was stabilized, overhauled, and modernized but also repressed. In line, taekwondo's leadership and organization were restructured, and taekwondo was progressively institutionalized and gradually promoted as an international sport with a lesser emphasis on the objectives of traditional martial arts training. The Park-regime thought of sports as an instrument to improve South Korea's reputation internationally, but also as a mechanism to influence and distract the population, much in the sense of the Roman Empire's slogan, *panem et circenses*. Moreover, vigor and success in sports was perceived as a means to prove supremacy over other nations, races, political systems, and, especially, also the Communist North. Under these circumstances, the elevation of taekwondo as a 'sport' and a type of method to further physical strength and obedience for large segments of the society, such as the youth and the military, suited the regime's goals. Besides, the promotion of taekwondo to be included into the Olympic Games, inspired by the Japanese judo success, was one of the ultimate objectives. Thus, taekwondo was promoted to a nominal 'national sport' of South Korea by Park Chung Hee in 1971 (Park, 2010; Moenig & Kim, 2017). As a consequence, from this time on, taekwondo has been increasingly integrated into the public education program, followed by the integration of taekwondo into the higher education system of universities in South Korea.

¹ Taekwondo was only officially declared the South Korean 'national sport' by the National Assembly of South Korea in 2018 (*The Korea Times*, 2018).

² The name 'taekwondo' was partly based on former karate terms and an attempt to associate the Japanese-based martial art with the native *t'aekkyŏn*, which was a folk game; although the association was purely based on similarity of pronunciation.



A variety of articles and books have been published over the last decades about the general historical formation of taekwondo. These works discuss taekwondo's Japanese origins and the formation of taekwondo's governing bodies, the Korea Taekwondo Association in 1965,³ the Kukkiwon in 1972/73, and the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF; now renamed World Taekwondo, WT) in 1973, which is all well-researched and documented (Kim, 1990; Capener, 1995; Kang & Lee, 1999; Madis, 2003; Sö, 2007; Gillis, 2008; Hö, 2008; Moenig, 2015). Therefore, these topics are not the focus of this study. Moreover, this article concerns only Olympic-style taekwondo and not other smaller alternative organizations, such as the several taekwondo groups using the name International Taekwon-Do Federation or some variant thereof. Some studies mention taekwondo's role in the military (Gillis, 2008; Moenig & Kim, 2021), but the topic of taekwondo's integration into the physical education program of public schools and universities of South Korea has been largely neglected and is not very well-researched and explored. South Korea's integration and institutionalization of taekwondo in the physical education program of public schools, universities, the military, and the private employment sector is very unique, especially, considering its extent. At some point of their lives, the majority of South Korean, at least among the male population, experienced some kind of taekwondo training. Consequently, this article tries to shine some light on this topic.

The main aim of the present study is to explain the broad integration of taekwondo into the public and higher education system, the military, and general society of South Korea. To this purpose, it will initially discuss the integration of martial arts into the Japanese education system and the military during the early 20th century, which was also partly introduced to Korea during the Japanese colonial rule of Korea (1910-1945). This example probably inspired the integration of taekwondo into the South Korean education system and military later. Subsequently, this article will focus on the introduction of taekwondo to the South Korean military and the curriculum of the physical education system of public schools, which is followed by a discussion about the establishment of official taekwondo training to the curriculum of universities during the 1980s and beyond. Thereafter, this study will explore the topic of professional taekwondo teams and other ways of employment for students who graduate from these programs, and the possibilities and limitations these students face. Lastly, this article will focus briefly on the more recent popularity of demonstration and forms taekwondo, which opened new dimensions to the meaning and perception of taekwondo.

2. Materials and methods

The principal method of this study is a literature review, which involved academic sources, non-academic press releases, and a variety of homepages from the internet. In particular, an intensive internet search of homepages of schools, universities, and taekwondo teams and organizations was conducted. In addition, in support or in the absence of any written sources, this article relies on oral sources, specifically from three interviews with central figures in the field. In particular, Lee Kyu-seok (Yi Kyu-sök, born in 1942), the current President of the Asian Taekwondo Union (ATU, the continental federation of the WT) and one of the vice presidents of the World Taekwondo (WT), agreed to an interview on November 20, 2023. Lee is one of the few surviving second generation taekwondo leaders, and he provided great insight for this study in the absence of other sources. Another interview for this study was conducted with Park (Pak) Hae-man (born 1932), who is another important taekwondo pioneer. Park is the current president of *Ch'öngdo Kwan*. However, he is of minor importance for this study, since he is quoted only once. Both individuals were aware of the nature and use of their information for this article. Naturally, considering their long-time involvement in the South Korean taekwondo establishment, some bias in their answers cannot be completely ruled out. However, the questions were largely chosen for content rather than opinion, and the individuals' answers appeared honest. In addition, considering the length of the time past of some of the events described by these individuals, it cannot be ruled out that their exact recollections might have suffered somehow considering the decades past. Lee's personal interview (November 20, 2023) was audio recorded and conducted over the telephone. Pak's personal interview (October 5, 2022) was conducted in-person at the Kukkiwon, Kangnam, Seoul. Both

³ The first Korea Taekwondo Association was formed in 1959, but it restructured and renamed 'Korea Taesudo Association' in 1961. It was renamed again to 'Korea Taekwondo Federation' in 1965.



interviews lasted about 30 minutes. Both interviews were semi-structured and conducted by one of the authors. Subsequently, the content of the interviews was summarized and translated into English. In addition, a brief and simple inquiry (notes taken only) was conducted over the telephone with Ham Chun (March 4, 2024), a secretary at the Korea Professional Taekwondo Federation, about the current number of professional teams in South Korea. The overall data was collected by three researchers but the interviews were conducted by one researcher, a native Korean speaker, who previously worked for the former World Taekwondo Federation and the Kukkiwon. Moreover, the individual was a former student of Lee Kyu-seok, which gave him unrestricted access.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Martial Arts in the public education system of Imperial Japan and its influence on South Korea

Unlike Western combat sports, such as boxing and wrestling, which often display more individualized training routines and methods, the Japanese and Korean martial arts favor military-style, synchronized formations and training methods, and a military-like hierarchy among students and instructors. This represents partly a vestige of the militaristic roots, culture, and attitudes of many East Asian martial arts, but also reflects the strict Confucian customs and norms present in all walks of life in East Asian societies. Confucianism, in particular, enforces a strict hierarchy according to age and status, which is also strongly evident in general martial arts training. Younger students have to subordinate and the belt rank reflects the status of a student in the general hierarchy and power structure. Moreover, martial arts training was supposed to enhance the physical strength, obedience, and discipline of the youth. Hand in hand, the East Asian martial arts are also often associated with nationalistic narratives about their origins, which are, albeit, frequently ‘invented traditions.’⁴ This form of physical activity and spiritual indoctrination was very fitting as a mass movement for the militarisation of the general population of the authoritarian and ultra-nationalistic regime of Imperial Japan, and later of the military dictatorship of the Park-regime in South Korea (Park, 2010; Moenig & Kim, 2016; 2017).

The introduction of martial arts lessons, as in the case of taekwondo, to public schools was not without predecessors in East Asia, when Ankō Itosu (1831–1915), an influential Okinawan karate master, helped to pioneer karate training in elementary schools in Okinawa at the beginning of the 20th century. Subsequently, under the guidance of Kanō Jigorō (1860–1938), the founder of judo, and the conservative and nationalistic Dai Nippon Butoku Kai (DNBK 大日本武徳会 ‘Greater Japan Martial Virtue Society’), an organization which aimed for the restoration of the traditional Japanese martial arts, kendo, and judo training was introduced to the curriculum of public schools in Japan in 1911. Naturally, kendo and judo training were also established as a training activity in the armed forces of Imperial Japan. Simultaneously, shortly before the Japanese colonial rule, kendo and judo training were first established in the Korean police forces and the national military academy. Furthermore, under Japanese colonial rule, kendo and judo was progressively introduced to the physical education curriculum of public schools in Korea during the 1910s and 1920s (Bennett, 2005, p. 330; 2015, p. 211; Na, 2005, pp. 173-5; Moenig & Kim, 2019). As a consequence, martial arts training as part of the curriculum of public schools and the military was familiar to Koreans when they gradually introduced a modified form of karate training under the newly created name ‘taekwondo’ to the military and public education system.

3.2. The *kwan* and the establishment of the first taekwondo clubs with a recreational purpose at South Korean universities

A *kwan* (館 literally ‘hall or house’; Japanese: *kan*) in Korea started as a private single martial arts school or gymnasium for profit, mimicking their Japanese predecessors. The original later designated ‘five founding *kwan*’ were all established between 1944 and 1946. All of the Korean founders, with the exception of one, returned from their studies at Japanese universities, where they had learned karate at university clubs.⁵ Funakoshi Gichin (1868–1957), often called the ‘father’ of

⁴ For the concept of ‘invention of tradition,’ see Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983.

⁵ Only Hwang Kee (Hwang Ki, 1914–2002), the founder of *Mudōk Kwan* (Moo Duk Kwan), was the only one to never visited or studied in Japan. Instead, he learned karate from Funakoshi Gichin’s karate books.



karate-dō, was one of the pioneers who introduced karate from Okinawa to Japan during the early 1920s. He was also the founder of the *Shōtōkan* (松濤館 ‘gymnasium of pine-waves’) karate style,⁶ which became the largest and most influential karate organization during that time. Most of men who are now considered the first-generation taekwondo leaders did in fact learn *Shōtōkan*, which they later rebranded as taekwondo. The original five *kwan*, all established in the Seoul area, spread out over time and opened other schools in different locations. Thus, a *kwan* could be an individual gym or an organization with gyms in multiple locations. Besides, over time, many students split from the original *kwan* and founded their own *kwan*. By the 1970s, approximately 43 distinctive *kwan* existed in South Korea (Kang & Lee, 1999, pp. 2-94; Madis, 2003, pp. 191-202; Moenig, 2015, pp. 39-56; Moenig & Choi, 2023).⁷

Funakoshi established many karate clubs on purpose at Japanese universities in order to attract the elite of Japanese society (Funakoshi, 1973, pp. 3-11). Karate clubs at universities were meant for recreational, social, and physical activity outside of the official academic curriculum. Likewise, some martial arts *tongari* (俱樂部 ‘club’) were also established at universities in South Korea, but initially under the karate name *tangsudo* (唐手道 ‘way of the Tang [China] hand’⁸), which represents the Korean transliteration of the Japanese term, *karate-dō*. In contrast to the private-owned *kwan*, taekwondo clubs at universities in South Korea have been public and usually non-profit entities. In the past, some of the clubs were promoted by a member(s) of a certain *kwan*, while others were more of a mix of members of different *kwan* (Lee, personal interview, 2023).

The first university *tangsudo* club was established at Sungkyunkwan University before the Korean War (1950-1953) in the Chongno area, Seoul; although the exact year is not known. The club was strongly influenced by the leading *kwan* at that time, the *Ch’ōngdo Kwan* (Chung Do Kwan), which was the first *kwan* founded in 1944. The second club started in the same neighborhood at the College of Commerce at Seoul National University (now relocated), which is considered the most prestigious university in South Korea. The club was founded in 1955 by also members of the *Ch’ōngdo Kwan* and named *Sangsong-hoe*,⁹ after the place. This club boasts the longest continuing history of university taekwondo clubs in South Korea (Seoul National University/Business School, n.d.; Lee, personal interview, 2023). Subsequently, taekwondo clubs were established at Yonsei University and Hanguk University in Seoul in 1956 (Hö, 2008, pp. 229-230), which are also among the most prominent universities in South Korea. The establishment of clubs at universities was important because it was the first contact of taekwondo with the higher education system in South Korea. Moreover, the students of these universities represented the elite of South Korean society, which was essential for future sponsorship and promotion. In parallel to the introduction of martial arts training to universities, the South Korean military established martial arts instructions as a physical fitness and hand-to-hand combat training activity around the same time.

3.3. Taekwondo’s introduction to the South Korean military

The first military force in South Korea in which martial arts training was established was in the Army in 1952, during the Korean War. Uhm Woon Kyu (Ŏm Un-kyu, 1929-2017),¹⁰ a taekwondo pioneer and member of the *Ch’ōngdo Kwan*, joined the 1st Corps Command and started teaching *tangsudo* to his soldiers (Pak, personal interview, 2022) (Figure 1).

⁶ Funakoshi never considered his *Shōtōkan* karate, which was the name of his headquarters gymnasium and also his pen name (*Shōtō*), as a distinct style. The distinction was only made by his students.

⁷ Taekwondo did not exist at that time in North Korea, and it was only introduced by Choi Hong Hi to North Korea during the early 1980s.

⁸ Funakoshi changed the Tang (唐) character with the ‘empty’ (空) character for political reasons during the 1930s. Both pairs of characters (唐手道/空手道) have the same reading in Japanese, namely *karate-dō*. However, they are pronounced different in Korean that is *tangsudo* and *kongsudo*. Both terms were used in Korea, but the former (*tangsudo*) was more popular, probably also for political reasons (see Moenig, 2015, pp. 44-50).

⁹ The club was named after its location, *sangsongnim* (商松林) or ‘business pine forest.’ *Hoe* (會) means literally: ‘to gather or meet,’ in the sense of ‘club.’

¹⁰ Uhm became the second president of the Kukkiwon in 2004 after Kim Un-yong’s resignation.



Figure 1. Uhm Woon Kyu (middle row, first from left) and Lee Kyu-seok (front row, third from left) after a Ch'ŏngdo Kwan university sparring competition in 1960.



Source: Courtesy of Lee Kyu-seok.

After the Korean War, Choi Hong Hi introduced martial arts training in his army unit on Cheju Island in 1954, under the karate-term, *tangsudo*. This was done with the help of members of the *Ch'ŏngdo Kwan*, who probably did the practical teaching. Choi is usually credited of pioneering taekwondo in the military. Choi also states that he taught taekwondo (or *tangsudo*) to his troops (2008, pp. 233-234), elsewhere he or some claim that he left this to his subordinates. It is more likely that various *Ch'ŏngdo Kwan* members were really the driving force for *tangsudo*'s broad introduction to the military, and Choi was only able to claim credit due to his high military rank and status. Subsequently, the following year, Choi invented the name 'taekwondo' and replaced the term *tangsudo* accordingly. Simultaneously, martial arts lessons were also added to the curriculum of the Korean Military Academy in 1954 (Hö, 2003, p. 225; Moenig & Choi, 2023).

Early martial arts training routines in the military were typically a mix of various activities, such as forms training, self-defense, and a variety of basic and physical exercises, similar to conventional karate training.¹¹ In contrast, taekwondo teams with specific training purposes were set up only during the late 1950s and 1960s. Initially, demonstration teams for public martial arts exhibitions and sparring teams for the purpose of participation in competitions played a leading role in this process. The first ever established quasi-official taekwondo team was a demonstration team in 1959, which consisted of members of Choi Hong Hi's military unit. The team was assembled and lead under the leadership of Nam Tae Hi (Nam T'ae-hŭi, 1929-2013), Choi's right-hand man, on occasion of giving a demonstration tour to Vietnam and Taiwan. Subsequently, the first taekwondo trainers of the military were dispatched to South Vietnam during the Vietnam War (1955-1975) in 1962 to train South Vietnamese soldiers in hand-to-hand combat. At the same time, Choi, at this point retired from the military, toured many parts of the world with his demonstration team of ex-soldiers

¹¹ Free sparring as a regular training routine was not very wide-spread at that time yet.

during the 1960s. These developments promoted the spread and popularity of taekwondo abroad (H. Kim, n.d.; Moenig & Kim, 2021; Lee, personal interview, 2023). Subsequently, the introduction of Korea-wide sparring competitions in 1962/1963 aided the formation of taekwondo sparring teams by the different branches of the military (Figure 2): the ROK Army, ROK Air Force, and ROK Navy.¹² However, the exact formation of the various military teams is not very well-documented.

Figure 2. The ROK Army Team after competition in 1973.



Source: Courtesy of Greg Kailian (back row).

A variety of taekwondo and other sport teams had been operated by the different branches of the South Korean military during that time. However, an official 'Korea Armed Forces Athletic Corps' was only established in 1984, which integrated elite athletes of the various sport teams of all branches. A taekwondo team, named Sang Moo (尙武 *Sangmu*, 'cherished martial') Team, was also set up as part of this unit (Korea Armed Forces Athletic Corps n.d.). Thus, the Sang Moo Team is the permanent and official taekwondo team of the combined Armed Forces of South Korea. Since military service is mandatory for all men, new conscripts who are elite taekwondo athletes are directly enlisted to the Sang Moo Team. However, various military units keep operating their own teams as well. Moreover, temporary taekwondo teams are often formed by a variety of military units to participate in the annual Defense Military Taekwondo Contest,¹³ a nation-wide taekwondo tournament only for the military. Generally, all conscripts are required to earn a first degree black belt during their basic training. Moreover, weekly taekwondo training is carried out by all South Korean soldiers, but it differs among units and often depending on the availability of qualified instructors (Korea Taekwondo Association, 2022; Lee, personal interview, 2023). Hence, the South Korean military had an important influence on the development and universal spread of taekwondo. However, taekwondo training became only commonplace in South Korean society with its introduction to the public school physical education curriculum.

¹² The competition was in 1962 without the *hogu* (the body protector), and in 1963 for the first time with the *hogu*, which greatly influenced the technical direction of taekwondo sparring.

¹³ 국방부장관기 Kukpang bujanggwang'gi.



3.4. Taekwondo's introduction to the regular curriculum of public schools and universities in South Korea

South Korea under the Park-regime often imitated Japanese prototypes in the political, social, and economic spheres (Park, 2010), but also in the realm of sports. This is particular obvious in taekwondo's elevation to a national sport.¹⁴ Therefore, after being declared a nominal 'national sport' of South Korea by President Park in 1971, elementary schools were required to introduce taekwondo officially into their physical education curriculum in 1974 (Son & Sö, 2017, p. 137). This coincided with the founding of the Kukkiwon, or the World Taekwondo Headquarters, in 1972/1973, which thereafter was increasingly responsible for most of the technical matters, standardization, education, and testing of Olympic-style taekwondo activities (Kang & Lee, 1999, pp. 78-94). After the official introduction of taekwondo training to the physical education curriculum of elementary schools, the taekwondo program was expanded to middle and high schools in 1996 (Son & Sö, 2017, p. 137). However, despite being part of the official physical education curriculum, most schools teach taekwondo only insufficiently during physical education lessons. This is often the result of the lack of qualified instructors. In fact, it should be emphasized that taekwondo is more of an afterschool activity for elementary and middle school children in private gyms than a regular or frequent school sport activity (Lee, personal interview, 2023).

Similar to public schools, some departments of physical education at universities started offering majors in taekwondo. In parallel, they also founded taekwondo teams attached to their departments (Figure 3). Subsequently, some universities started to open 'departments of taekwondo,' which, similar to departments of physical education, enable students to earn a four years bachelor's degree majoring in taekwondo. However, the difference is that the whole curriculum of a Department of Taekwondo is solely geared toward taekwondo education. The first specialized Department of Taekwondo was established at the former Judo College,¹⁵ now renamed Yong In University, in 1982. Korea National Sport University (KNSU) started its taekwondo department in 1997, but had a taekwondo team and taekwondo major before. Kyung Hee University started its Department of Taekwondo only in 2002, but offered a taekwondo major since 1982. These three universities are historically the most important universities featuring taekwondo programs. After taekwondo became an official Olympic sport in 2000, many universities introduced taekwondo departments. Accomplished athletes typically receive scholarships from these universities, and the curriculum consists of a mix of practical (athletic activities in the gym) and theoretical classes (academic classes in the classroom) with usually an emphasis on the development of practical taekwondo skills (Lee, personal interview, 2023; Kyung Hee University/Departments/College of Physical Education, n.d.).¹⁶

The social environment among school and university teams was an important factor in the development of taekwondo. The formation of teams at high schools and universities and the constant training accelerated the technical development of taekwondo, since large groups of young students explored and pushed the limits of taekwondo technique in new ways during sparring and training in often playful and creative ways (Lee, personal interview, 2023).

Currently, there are about 170 middle school taekwondo teams and 130 high school taekwondo teams in South Korea. This is the number of teams registered at the Korea Junior Taekwondo Federation (n.d.)¹⁷ for participation at the nation-wide middle and high school competition in 2023; although the number of registered teams varies every year. Successful students have the possibility to join a university taekwondo team; however, as a result of the shortage of students and athletes nowadays, partly due to the low birthrate in South Korea, many teams often accept also lesser skilled students to fill the ranks. Recruitment depends also on the quality of the

¹⁴ Japan had a similar tradition with *sumō*, usually translated as 'Japanese wrestling'.

¹⁵ 유도대학 Yudotaehak.

¹⁶ Lee was personally involved as professor in the creation of the Department of Taekwondo at Yong In University. There is a discrepancy on the homepage of Kyung Hee University as it states its Department of Taekwondo was established in 1982, while also claiming taekwondo was offered only as a major in the Department of Physical Education after 1982.

¹⁷ 한국중고등학교태권도연맹 Han'guk chunggodŭnghakko t'aegwŏndo yŏnmaeng.



team. University coaches typically scout high school teams for winners of national competitions and offer them scholarships (Lee, personal interview, 2023).

Figure 3. Training of the Sparring Team of the Department of Taekwondo, Youngsan University.



Source: Udo Moenig.

In addition to the existence of many middle and high school teams, 35 university taekwondo teams participated at the 50th National University Taekwondo Individual Championships in 2023 (Korea Taekwondo University Federation, 2023),¹⁸ which is probably the number of existing university sparring teams. Some of these teams are integrated into a physical education department but most are part of a department of taekwondo, which 23 universities feature with a four-year B.A. program majoring in taekwondo. In addition, eight two-year colleges have also departments of taekwondo (Adigo, 2024). Lastly, only Yong In University features a 'Graduate School of Taekwondo' at the moment; although several universities offer various taekwondo programs as part of their curriculums at their graduate schools of physical education, as for example, Kyung Hee University. Naturally, the master's and PhD degrees in these programs are not in taekwondo but in physical education (see Yong In University, n.d.; Kyung Hee University/Graduate School of Physical Education, n.d.).¹⁹

The Korean taekwondo community also tried to export its system of departments of taekwondo to universities in the United States. The South Korean government, World Taekwondo, the Kukkiwon, local governments, and Korean individuals, sponsored a few such projects at American universities. The first such program started at UC Berkeley in 1995 with a \$1 million grant from the South Korean government, but it discontinued in 2018 (*Sunday Journal*, 2022). A similar program existed and discontinued at Concordia University in Canada, and a few more are established at American universities. After the introduction of taekwondo to universities in South Korea, professional teams began to emerge where elite students could find employment as professional athletes after graduation from university.

3.5. Taekwondo as a profession: professional taekwondo teams and general employment

¹⁸ 제50회 전국대학태권도개인선수권대회 Che 50hoe chŏn'guk taehak t'aegwŏndo gaeinsŏnsugwŏndaehoe.

¹⁹ A few universities featured graduate schools of taekwondo before (for example Youngsan University), but the number is fluctuating due to a lot of restructuring (because of a lack of students) and the separation and overlapping with the physical education departments is often not so clear.



The exact number of teams on the middle school, high school, and university level is difficult to pinpoint because of the constant fluctuation and the lack of official statistics. In comparison, the number of professional teams is better recorded. The basic qualification to go from a university taekwondo team to a professional team or the military Sang Moo Team is winning national or international competitions; although individual teams have often various standards. One of the first professional taekwondo teams in South Korea was established in 1983 by the Sörak Cable Car Co., Ltd. and Korea Sports Co., Ltd. (Hanguk Sports, a martial arts company), to participate in competitions. The same year, Korea Sports sponsored the graduates of the former Söngdong Commercial High School,²⁰ when they participated in a competition as the Söngdong OB Team (Sö, 2021).

In 2024, 33 professional teams were in operation (see a list of the teams at Tae Kwon, n.d.). In addition, six professional teams exist which are not registered with the Korea Professional Taekwondo Federation. Only one of the teams is a forms team only, the P'och'ön City Hall P'umsae Team (Ham, personal interview, 2024).²¹ All the professional teams used to be sparring teams only, but some teams start adding also forms and demonstration teams lately. Typically, cities, city districts, and counties often sponsor professional taekwondo teams or teams of other sports. In addition, a few large companies sponsor professional taekwondo teams. The most famous has been perhaps the Samsung Ace 1 team, founded in 1999. The team, formerly lead by Kim Sei Hyeok,²² has been probably the single most successful team worldwide, with athletes winning five gold medals at the Olympic Games in addition to many other international titles. Another very successful professional team is the Korean Gas Cooperation Taekwondo Team founded in 1997 (Ace 1, n.d.; Korea Gas Cooperation, n.d.).

After retiring from competition, more successful athletes have also the possibility to join the various teams, middle school, high school, or university, as coaches. In the past, many athletes also migrated to various countries around the world as instructors or sometimes as national team coaches. The United States was one of the preferred destinations. However, nowadays, due to the increased prosperity of South Korea, this is a lesser chosen option for taekwondo athletes, who often prefer to stay in their native land. Moreover, Korean coaches for national teams are less sought after in other countries, because many countries often produced their own successful athletes in international competitions. This is partly the result of a far lesser dominance of Korean athletes compared to the past (Lee, personal interview, 2023).

University taekwondo students, who did not compete in tournaments but chose to make taekwondo their profession, typically join a private taekwondo gym as instructor after graduation. In 2023, 9656 taekwondo gyms had been registered with the Kukkiwon. This number is probably fairly accurate in reflecting the overall number of taekwondo gyms in South Korea, since most Korean taekwondo gyms are affiliated with the Kukkiwon and the Korea Taekwondo Association, and only few independent gyms or organizations exist. Over five million *p'um* (Poom, the equivalent of a black belt for minors) holders and four and half million South Korean black belt (*tan*) holders were registered with the Kukkiwon in 2023 (Kukkiwon, 2023). However, most of these individuals are not active. Moreover, non-black belt and non-*p'um* holders are not registered with the Korea Taekwondo Association or the Kukkiwon; therefore, the actual number of active taekwondo practitioners in South Korea is difficult to estimate. According to an older statistic provided by KBS News (2010), about 875,000 taekwondo practitioners in South Korea were active at that time, but only about 0.6% were adults. Moreover, these adults were likely almost all athletes and/or members of university departments and various teams, since ordinary private gyms typically not offer adult classes. In fact, taekwondo is broadly considered an activity for children or professionals, such as elite athletes and instructors. Most classes are for elementary and middle school children and high school students typically stop practicing taekwondo due to the pressure to prepare for the national university

²⁰ 성동상업고등학교 Söngdong sangöp kodüghakkyo. Only a few university teams existed at that time. Nowadays, hardly any high school graduates are able to go straight to a professional team.

²¹ 포천시청태권도품새팀 P'och'ön shich'öng t'aegwöndo p'umsae t'im.

²² Kim Sei Hyeok (Gim Se-hyök) has been the most successful taekwondo coach in the world, coaching the Korean Taekwondo National Team numerous times during the Olympics and other international events.



entrance exam. The former report also mentions the existence of over 13,000 taekwondo gyms in South Korea in 2009. In comparison, the less than 10,000 existing gyms at present represents a stark decline. The decline is related to South Korea's very low birthrate and the emergence of a variety of alternative recreational activities for children, such as football clubs and other popular sports, which did not exist in the past (Ahn, 2023; Lee, personal interview, 2023). Despite these declining numbers, taekwondo training activity broadened but also specialized during the past three decades, which in turn also attracted new audiences. The sparring element of taekwondo was leading in terms of institutional support due to its Olympic status and long history. However, 'demonstration' (示範 *sibŏm*, in the sense of exhibition or performance) and 'forms' or 'pattern' (品勢 *p'umsae*, literally: 'form movement, power, or flow') taekwondo caught up as popular competition sports and start to rival sparring taekwondo for public spotlight.

3.6. The widening of taekwondo's training activities: the formation of a large number of demonstration and *p'umsae* (Poomsae or forms) teams

Over the course of taekwondo's evolution from the mid-1940s to the present, a variety of new training activities were added to the general training repertoire of taekwondo. Nowadays, taekwondo is practiced for a variety of reasons, such as fitness, recreation, self-defense, or as a sport. Moreover, taekwondo has become especially popular as an educational tool for elementary and middle school children with often play-like activities. With such a diverse range of training activities, taekwondo's appearance can vary widely. It can resemble an aerobic style workout with music and dance, a theatric acrobatic performance, a display of *p'umsae* practiced for forms contests, or as a sport geared towards full-contact sparring competitions. However, these distinct training activities of taekwondo are not clearly separated in most ordinary taekwondo clubs and commercial gyms where training is often a mix of all these elements, sometimes within the course of a single lesson (Moenig, 2015, pp. 175-185). However, as formerly discussed, the formation of taekwondo teams, with a specific training purpose, lead to an increasing specialization of elite taekwondo athletes. The first activity in this development was taekwondo sparring with the formation of many sparring teams. Subsequently, demonstration and forms taekwondo pursued a similar path in the last few decades with the establishment of many demonstration and *p'umsae* teams.

Following Choi Hong Hi's example of forming taekwondo demonstration teams consisting of soldiers, the first elementary school taekwondo team was established at Namdaemun Elementary School, Seoul, in 1967.²³ The team played an important role in the promotion of children's taekwondo by giving demonstrations in South Korea and overseas. However, the most important children's demonstration team turned out to be the Midong Elementary School team in Seoul, founded in 1973. The team, under the guidance of Lee Kyu-hyung (Yi Kyu-hyŏng), won the 1st National Taekwondo Children King Competition²⁴ for elementary school children featuring, next to sparring, demonstration taekwondo in 1978. Subsequently, Lee was in charge as vice leader of the famous opening ceremony taekwondo demonstrations at the 1986 Seoul Asian Games and, especially memorable, the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Moreover, Lee was in charge of the Korean National Demonstration Team from 1973 to 2005. Lee and the Midong Elementary School team turned out to be very influential in the early years of demonstration taekwondo (Ch'oe, 2011; Taekwondo Wiki, n.d.). In contrast, the first nation-wide *p'umsae* competition was only held as part of the 11th National Taekwondo Children King Competition in 1990 (Chŏn, 2011). Thus, forms contests were also first pioneered, albeit lately, at the elementary school level.

In comparison to elementary schools, the first university taekwondo demonstration team was established at Yong In University in 1983 (Yongin University Taekwondo Demonstration Team Introduction, n.d.). The first Hanmadang (한마당 referring to a 'festival'), a spectacular taekwondo circus-like event, which features board braking, forms competitions, and aerobic events, was held in 1992 (Ch'oe, 2011). The annually-held festival increased the popularity of demonstration events and the formation of demonstration teams. In 2018, 36 universities had demonstration teams, which is

²³ The team discontinued in 1979.

²⁴ 전국태권어린아왕대회 Chŏn'guk t'aegwŏn ōrini wang taehoe. This competition used to be the biggest competition event for children in South Korea. However, a great number of nation-wide events exist today.



probably similar to present days. Moreover, demonstration competition individual and team events are held annually on the national level (Taekwondo cultural contents media, 2018). However, quarrels over competition rules are complicating the expansion of demonstration competitions at the moment. The most important taekwondo demonstration teams in the world are the World Taekwondo Demonstration Team and the Kukkiwon Demonstration Team, followed by the Korea Taekwondo Association Demonstration Team and the K Tigers team (Lee, personal interview, 2023). The World Taekwondo Demonstration Team, especially, raised awareness greatly of taekwondo demonstration performances after it reached the finals of the popular NBC show, *America's Got Talent*,²⁵ in 2021 (Hwang, 2021).

In contrast to demonstration teams, the first university taekwondo *p'umsae* team was founded at Korea National Sport University only in 2006 (Korea National Sport University, n.d.). However, most universities with a taekwondo program feature now *p'umsae* teams next to sparring and demonstration teams. Forms training and competition is usually a solo-performance by a practitioner of a set of prearranged striking and blocking techniques, in contrast to free sparring. World Taekwondo spurred a lot of the interest in *p'umsae* and demonstration by creating competitions for these specialties. In addition, the division of taekwondo skills into specialties has been most likely facilitated by Korean universities by offering different educational tracks in their taekwondo departments. Moreover, these specialized students rarely train in the other disciplines, which raises the question if this development actually benefitted general taekwondo education.

Figure 4. Gymnastic-like demonstration taekwondo of Youngsan University Demonstration Team.



Source: Courtesy of Juergen Leitner.

In 2023, 28 university teams participated in the 46th National University Taekwondo Individual P'umsae Championship (Korea Taekwondo Association, 2023). With increasing popularity of forms competition events, *p'umsae* was declared an official discipline at the 2018 Asian Games in Indonesia (Jung, 2023). However, sparring teams are still exceeding the number of demonstration and *p'umsae* teams by far, because of the existence of numerous national and international competition events with long histories. Moreover, taekwondo sparring is the only taekwondo event which is an official Olympic sport. As a result, sparring taekwondo, in terms of private and governmental financial support and sponsorship, still holds a great advantage over forms and demonstration taekwondo. There is no evidence that demonstration and forms taekwondo increased the overall number of taekwondo students in South Korea or worldwide, but it is highly suspected to have diverted attention and popularity away from sparring.

²⁵ The Kukkiwon Demonstration Team participated previously on *America's Got Talent*; see: World Taekwondo Demonstration Team at *America's Got Talent* (2021) on YouTube.

4. Conclusions

The Japanese introduced kendo and judo training in a very structured and uniform fashion to the physical education curriculum of public schools already during the early 20th century. Next to a method of physical fitness training, the program was also intended of fostering discipline, militarism, and nationalism among the youth during that time of war and expansion of the Japanese Empire. The programs were also gradually introduced to Japanese-controlled colonial Korea.

Likewise, kendo and judo, and to a lesser degree karate, were also practiced in the Imperial Japanese Armed Forces as methods of enhancing the physical condition and hand-to-hand combat skills of soldiers. After liberation from Japanese colonial rule in 1945, which brought the division of Korea into North and South, similar programs were also established in the South Korean Army after the end of the Korean War, featuring taekwondo. Moreover, taekwondo and martial arts training was also popular among the police and other governmental security forces, such as the presidential guards (Gillis, 2008, p. 58). Subsequently, when taekwondo was declared a nominal national sport of South Korea in 1971, taekwondo lessons were also progressively introduced to the public education program as part of the general physical education curriculum of elementary, middle, and high schools. This was partly imposed by the Park-regime to foster and reinforce the emerging international image of South Korea as 'the country of taekwondo.'

In parallel, taekwondo was also introduced to the higher education system of South Korea. Initially, taekwondo clubs and teams were established at universities and in 1982, the first Department of Taekwondo was founded. Nowadays, a variety of universities have such programs and many more have taekwondo teams integrated into their physical education departments. However, finding employment after graduation is getting increasingly difficult, which calls into doubt the usefulness of such programs for gaining professional employment post-graduation. Due to the low birthrate in South Korea, many taekwondo schools struggle to survive and the competition is fierce. Moreover, many alternative sport activities, which largely did not exist in the not so distant past, are in competition for always fewer students. Overall, taekwondo as an activity for children is definitely in decline in South Korea.

The broad integration of taekwondo into the education system, military, and as a career opportunity in South Korea is highly unique. Most Korean coaches and instructors in South Korea and abroad are a product of this system. No other country in the world integrates martial arts in such a manner. However, the continuing strong support for taekwondo is not guaranteed. If taekwondo should lose some day its Olympic status, much of the current system would likely suffer. Moreover, internationally, interest in taekwondo would probably wane and financial support by many governments to taekwondo federations and athletes would presumably come to a halt. Ironically, demonstration taekwondo, which enjoys limited sponsorship, may continue to capture the interests of future generations and become the new face of taekwondo worldwide.

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Lee, K. Personal interview (audio recorded) in Korean conducted over the telephone (2023.11.20).

Pak, H. Personal interview (audio recorded) in Korean conducted in the Kukkiwon, Kangnam, Seoul (2022.10.05).

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