

## Report on the Conference for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Choi Hong Hi: Taekwon-Do and Life; How to View Choi Hong Hi

John A. JOHNSON\*  & Sanko LEWIS 

*Department of Taekwondo, College of Physical Education, Keimyung University (Republic of Korea)*

Recepción: 04/12/2018; Aceptación: 14/01/2019; Publicación: 16/01/2019.

### REPORT

#### Abstract

General Choi Hong Hi has long been a controversial figure in the Republic of Korea (ROK; South Korea) despite his extreme influence on Taekwondo. The “Conference for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Choi Hong Hi: Taekwon-Do and Life; How to View Choi Hong Hi” was held on November 28, 2018 at the Korea National Sport University. This report on that conference intends to disseminate the speakers’ findings to a wider audience and establish new directions for academic discussions on International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF) Taekwon-Do. This conference also illuminated some problems with Taekwondo literature; namely that ITF literature is greatly overshadowed by research on its Olympic counterpart. Additionally, it seems that the only ROK Taekwondo governing body interested in reestablishing General Choi’s legacy is the Taekwondo Promotion Foundation. Nevertheless, even though he was a taboo topic in the ROK a decade ago, the political climate in the ROK has changed and General Choi’s legacy is re-emerging slowly.

**Keywords:** Taekwondo; International Taekwon-Do Federation; ITF; Red complex; Taekwondo Promotion Foundation; martial arts; combat sports.

#### Informe sobre la Conference for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Choi Hong Hi: Taekwon-Do and Life; How to View Choi Hong Hi

##### Resumen

El General Choi Hong Hi ha sido durante mucho tiempo una figura controvertida en la República de Corea (ROK; Corea del Sur), a pesar de su enorme influencia en el taekwondo. La “Conference for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Choi Hong Hi: Taekwon-Do and Life; How to View Choi Hong Hi” se celebró el 28 de noviembre de 2018 en la Korea National Sport University. El presente informe sobre dicha conferencia tiene el propósito de difundir los hallazgos de los conferenciantes a una audiencia más amplia y establecer nuevas líneas de debate académico sobre el taekwondo de la Federación Internacional de Taekwon-Do (ITF). Esta conferencia también sacó a la luz algunos problemas existentes en la literatura sobre el taekwondo; a saber, que la literatura de la ITF está muy oscurecida debido a la investigación existente sobre su contraparte olímpica. Además, parece que el único órgano de gobierno del taekwondo de la ROK interesado en restablecer el legado del General Choi es la Fundación para la Promoción del Taekwondo. Sin embargo, aunque era un tema tabú en la ROK hace una década, el clima político existente en el país ha cambiado y el legado del General Choi está resurgiendo lentamente.

**Palabras clave:** Taekwondo, Federación Internacional de Taekwon-Do; ITF; Complejo rojo; Fundación para la Promoción del Taekwondo; artes marciales; deportes de combate.

#### Relatório sobre a Conference for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Choi Hong Hi: Taekwon-Do and Life; How to View Choi Hong Hi

##### Resumo

Apesar da sua enorme influência no taekwondo, o General Choi Hong Hi foi durante muito tempo uma figura controversa na República da Coreia (ROK; Coreia do Sul). A “Conference for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Choi Hong Hi: Taekwon-Do and Life; How to View Choi Hong Hi” celebrou-se no passado dia 28 de novembro de 2018, na Korea National Sport University. O presente relatório analisa esta conferência, que teve como objetivo difundir os trabalhos dos palestrantes a uma audiência mais ampla e estabelecer novas linhas de debate académico sobre o taekwondo da Federação Internacional de Taekwondo (ITF). Esta conferência permitiu também apresentar alguns problemas existentes na literatura sobre o taekwondo; ou seja, que a literatura da ITF é bastante ofuscada pela pesquisa sobre sua contraparte olímpica. Por outro lado, parece que o único órgão de governo do taekwondo da ROK que está interessado em restabelecer o legado do General Choi Hong Hi é a Fundação para a Promoção do Taekwondo. Este tema era tabu há algumas décadas, mas o “clima” político existente no país tem vindo a mudar e o legado do General está ressurgindo lentamente.

**Palavras-chave:** Taekwondo, Federação Internacional de Taekwondo; ITF; Complexo vermelho; Fundação para a Promoção do Taekwondo; artes marciais; desportos de combate.

\* E-mail: [beowulf600@gmail.com](mailto:beowulf600@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

General Choi Hong Hi has long been a controversial figure in the Republic of Korea (ROK; South Korea) despite his extreme influence on the ROK national sport of Taekwondo. Speaking strictly from a historical perspective, “[f]ew...can challenge the centrality of Choi Hong-hi in the sport’s development” (Korea Foundation, 2013, p. 44). Any attempt to list his contributions to Taekwondo, its development, and impact and importance to both the ROK and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK; North Korea) could not fully portray his significance on how the world was first introduced to and now views Korean culture. Therefore, let it suffice to state that as a ROK major (two-star) general, General Choi Hong Hi laid “the groundwork for decades of rapid expansion in indigenous martial arts to a generation of soldiers who would go on to fight in one, and in some cases two, major wars” (Korea Foundation, 2013, p. 47), is credited with coining the word “Taekwon-Do” (Kim, Kim, & Kim, 2004), and lead the first national and international Taekwondo organizations (i.e., the Korea Taekwon-Do Association [KTA] and the International Taekwon-Do Federation [ITF], respectfully) (Johnson & Vitale, 2018).

General Choi disagreed with the political policies of the dictatorial ROK President Park Chung Hee. For this, he was forced into exile to Canada while Taekwondo in the ROK began to develop into a sport, as opposed to the martial art of self-cultivation General Choi advocated (Korea Foundation, 2013, p. 54-55). During this exile, General Choi became *persona non grata* in the ROK and sport Taekwondo world in part due to his personal ideology of being willing to teach Taekwondo anywhere to anyone, including the communist DPRK where he introduced Taekwondo in 1980 (Johnson & Vitale, 2018). These activities, and in particular his relationship with the DPRK after his exile, led to the ROK Taekwondo community vilifying his name and ignoring his influence on Taekwondo for decades. Meanwhile, Olympic Taekwondo in the ROK quickly grew to be more powerful and influential on the world stage. Today, the general ROK populace is unaware of General Choi’s contributions to Taekwondo and the global spread of their culture.

The ROK’s recent openness to engage in dialogue with the DPRK most likely facilitated the “The Conference for the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Choi Hong Hi: Taekwon-Do and Life; How to View Choi Hong Hi.” The conference was held on November 28, 2018 at the Korea National Sport University and was an important step in reintroducing General Choi’s name and legacy in the ROK and the global Taekwondo community. This report on that conference intends to disseminate the speakers’ findings to a wider audience (as the conference was held and the proceedings are in Korean) and establish new directions for academic discussions on ITF Taekwon-Do. Furthermore, this report intends to further explicate General Choi’s role in Taekwondo and ROK history in continuance with the goal of the conference.

### Notes on Terminology

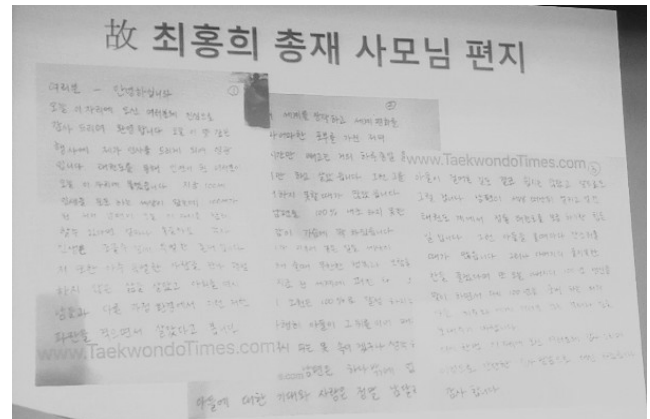
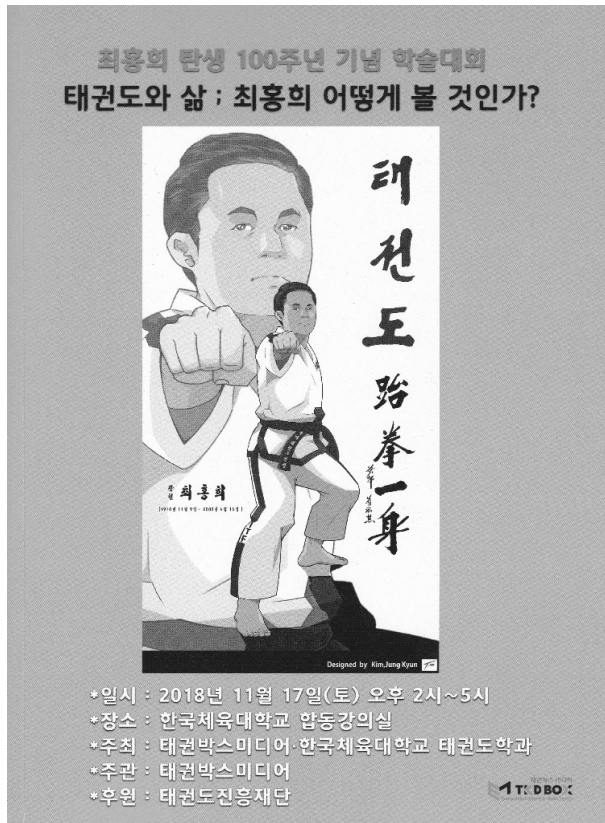
Since it is the most common romanization of the word in scientific literature, the spelling of *Taekwondo* was used to avoid confusion. *Taekwon-Do*, as used by the ITF, was General Choi’s preferred spelling as he believed the physical aspects of the art (*tae* meaning “foot” and *kwon* meaning “hand” or “fist”) should be separate from its philosophical aspect (*do* meaning “the way” or “path” of life). *Taekwon-Do* is therefore used only in proper names of that style’s governing bodies. Korean names are rendered in the Asian tradition of surname first and given names last, and all Korean terms are rendered into English using the McCune-Reischauer Romanization system.

## 2. The Conference

The conference was in honor of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of General Choi (Figure 1). Organized by TaekwonBox Media, its purpose was to reassess General Choi’s contribution to Taekwondo. Professor Jang Kwon (Korea National Sport University’s Department of Taekwondo) and TaekwonBox Media President Koo Mingwan began the conference with opening statements. General Choi’s widow Choi Joon Hee wrote a letter of gratitude for the conference, which was read aloud during the opening ceremony (Figure 2). Attendees included the Taekwondo Promotion



Foundation (TPF) Chairman Lee Sang Wook, several professors and researchers from leading Taekwondo colleges, and Taekwondo Studies students (Figure 3).



**Figure 1.** Cover of the conference proceedings. The cover was designed by Kim Jung Kyun and features General Choi Hong Hi in ITF Taekwondo uniform. The conference title is in Korean at the top. The Korean characters to the left of General Choi’s forward leg read: *Chang Heon* (General Choi’s pseudonym and the name General Choi gave to his style of Taekwondo) and his name. The first three Korean characters along the right side of the cover read *Taekwondo* (태권도). Underneath those characters is the statement “Whole life is devoted to Taekwon-Do” (跆拳道一身) written in hanja (the Korean version of Chinese ideograms), which encapsulates General Choi’s personal philosophy. The Korean at the bottom provides the date, location (Korea National Sport University), sponsor (TaekwonBox Media), and supporting organization (Taekwondo Promotion Foundation; TPF).

**Figure 2.** A handwritten letter of appreciation from Mrs. Choi Joon Hee, the widow of General Choi Hong Hi.

**Figure 3.** Participants of the congress. The front row includes, from right to left, Dr. Sanko Lewis (author), John A. Johnson (immediately to Dr. Lewis’ right; author), and Lee Sang Wook (middle of row, in light colored suit), the chairman of the Taekwondo Promotion Foundation (TPF). Photo courtesy of Yoo (Sean) Seung Hee.

The first session of the conference featured two speakers. The first presenter was Dr. Heo Keon-sik (PhD), General Director of the Chungju World Martial Arts Masterships Organizing Committee, and the title of his presentation was “The Martial Artist, Choi Hong Hee.” He approached General Choi’s legacy by examining other martial art founders, namely Kano Jigoro (Judo), Gichin Funakoshi (Shotokan Karate-do), and Masutatsu Oyama (Kyukushin Karate). He noted how each of them studied a previous martial art and then changed it into something new. By comparison, he argued, that General Choi did the same within the Oh Do Kwan (the name of General Choi’s school in the ROK military from which Taekwondo evolved). Dr. Heo also differentiated between the “core” of ITF (i.e., General Choi’s Taekwondo) and World Taekwondo (WT)/Kukkiwon/Olympic Taekwondo. For Dr. Heo, the core of Olympic Taekwondo is sport competition, whereas in the ITF it is traditional martial arts. Interestingly, Dr. Heo frequently mentioned “Red Complex” (pronounced in Korean as *redŭ k’omp’ülleksŭ*), which is “an ideological complex [in the ROK] to avoid anything related to Marxism [such as the color red and] is a representative ideology of North Korea” (Cho, 2007, p. 201), caused some members of the audience to become uncomfortable.

The second speaker was Dr. Han (Mikhail) Byung-Cheol, a martial arts movement researcher at the 88 Exercise Science Institute. Dr. Han also looked at the Oh Do Kwan as the root of ITF Taekwondo, noting that it started with Karate training but evolved. He suggested that ITF Taekwondo concepts of power generation were derived from various other martial arts influences that were part of the collective knowledge of the early ITF Taekwondo pioneers, which included Karate, Western boxing, some Chinese martial arts, Taekkyeon, wrestling (possibly implying Judo or Korean traditional wrestling, Ssireum), fencing, Muay Thai, and weightlifting. Dr. Han then spoke about the unique method of movement performed by ITF practitioners known as sine wave movement.<sup>1</sup> He pointed out that ITF Taekwondo's conception of force shares concepts with the knee-bending principle in Taekkyeon, and certain concepts of movement within the Chinese internal styles; e.g., Hsing-I Quan, Taiji Quan, and Baguazhang. Outside of one non-peer reviewed article (Adrogué, 2010), this concept has yet to be discussed in academic Taekwondo literature.

Additionally, Dr. Han stated that General Choi should get credit for being the "major shareholder" in the foundation of Taekwondo, for his attempt to break away from Japanese Karate, for introducing Taekwondo to the DPRK, for preserving Taekwondo as a martial *do* (martial way of life), and for being a Korean patriot. He concluded his talk by addressing the tasks ahead. He suggested that an objective reappraisal of General Choi's contribution is required, that it should be "beyond ideology," that General Choi should receive amnesty (he was declared a traitor by the Park Jung He regime), that there should be an independent study of General Choi's work, that a Choi Hong Hi memorial should be established, and that inter-Korean Taekwondo exchanges should continue to occur.

The second session of the conference was a panel discussion that included Dr. Heo; Dr. Han; ITF Korea Secretary General Yoo (Sean) Seung Hee; Professor Kwak Jung Hyeon of Gachon University (Seongnam, ROK); Professor Ji Hyeok of Gwangju University (Gwangju, ROK); and Dr. Park Seong Jin, a Taekwondo researcher (Figure 4). Each panelist gave a short presentation to which Drs. Heo and Han responded. The panelists' presentations were mostly personal reflections on the future of ITF studies and not based upon scientific research. For instance, Dr. Kwak Jung Hyeon discussed the change of Taekwondo from a martial art to a combat sport, a topic covered in much deeper detail by Moenig (2015). Additionally, Mr. Yoo (Sean) Seung Hee stated emphatically that ITF Taekwondo is not the property of the DRPK and that it was sometimes embarrassing to teach ITF Taekwondo in the ROK due to its supposed connection to the DPRK. Afterwards, audience members were invited to pose questions to the panelists. For instance, one question from a university student was why General Choi's contribution to Taekwondo were not taught to them in university. The answer was simply because of Korea's "Red Complex." The conference ended in a photo session and a dinner provided by the hosts.



<sup>1</sup> ITF sine wave is a three-stage movement characterized by the lowering of the body's mass followed by raising it and then dropping it to increase a technique's power by incorporating the pull of gravity.

**Figure 4.** The panel discussion. From left to right: Kwak Jung Hyeon (PhD), Yoo (Sean) Seung Hee, Heo Keon-sik (PhD), and Han Byung-Cheol (PhD).

### 3. Discussion

General Choi's claim to be the founder of Taekwon-Do is not without controversy. While he is mostly recognized to have coined the word *Taekwondo*, he was not the only person to teach an unarmed method of self-defense in the ROK during the early years of Taekwondo's formation. Moreover, his willingness to overlook the Cold War political landscape to bring Taekwondo to communist countries cost him respect and even the opportunity to be buried in the ROK (George Vitale [Committee Member; The National Committee on North Korea, USA; ITF Spokesperson], in discussion with the first author, August 7, 2018).

This conference also illuminated some problems with Taekwondo literature. With the exceptions of some biomechanics studies (e.g., Heller et al., 1998; Wąsik, 2007, 2009, 2011) and historical articles (e.g., Heo, 2015; Johnson & Vitale, 2018), ITF literature is greatly overshadowed by research on its Olympic counterpart. It is therefore understandable that the two main presenters would not be well-versed in ITF literature.

That cannot be, however, an excuse for misreporting on General Choi's widely published theories. For example, Dr. Han discussed sine wave as General Choi's Theory of Power. However, General Choi's Theory of Power possesses six components (reaction force [i.e., Newton's Third Law of Motion], concentration, breath control, mass [i.e., manipulation of body weight], speed, and equilibrium [i.e., a practitioners' balance]) that synthesize in Taekwondo techniques (Choi, 1987, p. 14-47). Sine wave is the mnemonic name of the motion utilized by ITF practitioners that is characterized by a down-up-down motion (i.e., relaxation-rising of the body's mass-utilizing the body's mass to propel and drop the attacking or blocking tool into the target, respectfully), which resembles the smooth periodic oscillation of a sine wave. Sine wave is therefore a theory of motion, not General Choi's six-component Theory of Power as suggested by Dr. Han. Moreover, the idea that Taekwondo was largely influenced by Karate, some Chinese martial arts, and Taekkyeon is fairly well established (Moenig, Cho, & Kwak 2014). However, fencing and Muay Thai have not been mentioned in Taekwondo literature as sources for the martial art or combat sport; and while weightlifting is included in some sources as of possible benefit, it is never mentioned as a source in the development of Taekwondo. There are some parallels to be drawn between those activities and Taekwondo as they share some kinesthetic principles, but that does not mean General Choi or others intentionally borrowed from them to create Taekwondo.

Any academic argument must be balanced. Outside of the "red complex," little discussion was given to General Choi's questionable activities. While the conference was clearly for the elucidation and dissemination of General Choi's Taekwondo legacy, the speakers could have addressed some of the controversies surrounding him. One of those disputes, for example, is how much he did or did not borrow from Shotokan Karate-do. Moening, Cho, and Kwak (2014) discuss Karate's impact on Taekwondo techniques, but what has yet to be mentioned is how the abovementioned theory of power also draws specifically from Nishiyama and Brown's book *Karate: The Art of "Empty Hand" Fighting* where three components of Karate's own power generation theory are copied (1960, p. 19-20). This is probably the text that General Choi was accused of plagiarizing in the late 1960s (Choi, c2000, p. 146; as referenced by Gillis, 2016, p. 73 and Moening, 2015, p. 74). Another issue that is commonly misunderstood is when General Choi introduced Taekwondo to the DPRK. Even in pro-ITF media, it is insinuated that he did so far before 1980 (e.g., Kim, 2018), which only contributes to the tarnishing of his reputation. Similar to the aforementioned criticism, the speakers should be more aware of the deeper issues involved in ITF literature than to solely praise General Choi if those issues are ever to be resolved.

### 4. Conclusions

When academic research defeats social or personal bias, it is a triumph for all involved; however, the long-term implications of this conference are uncertain. Future events could focus on Dr. Han's ideas for future ITF studies, which were sound steps for future ITF studies. Forthcoming

academic events should also be conducted in English, more open to the public, and include international scholars. There are indeed two non-Korean ITF researchers (the current authors) and a non-Korean Kukki-Taekwondo historian/professor in the ROK who could have given a more balanced and comprehensive account of General Choi. Furthermore, Dr. George Vitale, possibly the world's leading Taekwondo historian who is located in the US, was not invited despite his many presentations in the ROK on General Choi and the ITF. Any of the above controversial issues surrounding General Choi's legacy (i.e., the influence of Karate or the plagiarism accusation) should be examined in future studies as well.

The ITF split into three organizations after General Choi's death in 2002 (Johnson & Vitale, 2018), yet only one of those organizations was represented at the conference (panelist Master Yoo [Sean] Seung Hee is a member of the ITF headed by President Choi Jung Hwa, General Choi's son). Most critically absent from this conference was the ITF organization operated by DPRK officials and that is presided over by President Ri Yong Son. It is this ITF with which the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and WT engage in international relations work. For a fair and holistic discussion on the ITF, representatives from all three ITFs as well as other grand masters who began their own organizations after General Choi's passing should be present. All of these voices from the people who knew him best could provide a deeper conscious on General Choi and his work.

Likewise, although the TPF president spoke at this conference, his presence alone does not constitute a complete acceptance of General Choi's legacy in the ROK or the annals of Taekwondo research. First of all, although the TPF supported the conference, the fact they were not listed as the primary organizer or sponsor may indicate that TPF Chairman Lee Sang Wook's participation was personal rather than professional in nature. Secondly, the leaders of other Olympic Taekwondo governing bodies (e.g., WT and the Kukkiwon) were not present, nor did those agencies sponsor the event. Combined with the fact the only other outward display of General Choi's contribution to Taekwondo in the ROK was when the TPF inducted him into their Hall of Fame, it seems the other Taekwondo governing bodies are not interesting in joining the discussion of his legacy.

The lack of support from ROK Taekwondo governing bodies combined with the conference's small, low-key nature indicates that the conference was not a major step forward for the advancement of Taekwondo knowledge, but rather a crack in the decades-old wall of resentment against General Choi. Considering that even a decade ago he was a taboo topic in the ROK and researchers at the time were warned to avoid publishing about him as they might be investigated by the ROK National Intelligence Service (NIS), the conference is of great significance in the movement to undo the General Choi's tarnished reputation. Recently, the political climate has made a 180-degree turn. General Choi's legacy is re-emerging slowly and conferences like this indicate he will eventually receive the credit as the "major shareholder" of Taekwondo in the ROK and worldwide Taekwondo communities.

### Funding

This research was supported by the Keimyung University research grant of 20180269.

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### Author's biographical data

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**John A. Johnson** (USA) is an assistant professor in the Department of Taekwondo at Keimyung University (Daegu, South Korea). He received his PhD from the Department of Taekwondo at Kyung Hee University (Suwon, South Korea), and was the first ITF Taekwon-Do practitioner to do so. Dr. Johnson's research focuses on Taekwondo international relations, pedagogy, and philosophy, but he has published in other academic fields as well. He is the executive director of the International Association for Taekwondo Research ([www.actataekwondo.com](http://www.actataekwondo.com)) and vice president of the International Academic Conference for Taekwondo ([www.iactkd.com](http://www.iactkd.com)). Email: [beowulf600@gmail.com](mailto:beowulf600@gmail.com)

**Sanko Lewis** (PhD) is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Humanities at Sahmyook University (Seoul, Korea). He received his PhD from the Department of Taekwondo at Kyung Hee University (Suwon, South Korea), and his dissertation focused on the use of Mohism to resolve the paradoxical ethics of war and self-defense in East Asian martial arts. Dr. Lewis is a multi-disciplined university lecturer, and his academic foci are East Asian Philosophy and Martial Arts Studies, as well as English Literature & Creative Writing. Dr. Lewis is the Constitutional Director, Research Director, and International Liaison Officer for the national governing body for the South Africa (ITF) Taekwon-Do Institute (SATI). Email: [sankolewis@gmail.com](mailto:sankolewis@gmail.com)