

ITF Taekwon-Do pedagogy in North Korea: A case study

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Abstract

Background. Despite the style of Taekwon-Do taught by the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF) being founded in the Republic of Korea (ROK; South Korea), it is known predominately as “North Korean Taekwon-Do.” *Problem and Aim.* Taekwon-Do was introduced to the People’s Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK; North Korea) in 1980, but since then no studies have reported how it is practiced in that country due to the DPRK government’s restricting access to its populace. This research aims to begin establishing if there are differences in pedagogical purpose and praxis in DPRK Taekwon-Do. *Methodology.* An internet search for individuals who traveled to the DPRK to practice Taekwon-Do specifically was conducted. A systematic literature of ITF pedagogical materials was performed, and a multipurpose, qualitative questionnaire was implemented. Out of the seven individuals who were identified and contacted, two agreed to participate in the current study; however, one of those two were disqualified due to incorrectly completing the questionnaire. A descriptive, non-experimental case study of one subject (Singaporean female aged 36 yr.) was then conducted. A qualitative analysis of the data resulting from the questionnaire and follow-up interviews was performed. *Results.* All five areas of the ITF’s curriculum (i.e., fundamental techniques, *tul* [forms], sparring, *dallyon* [forging or conditioning of the body], and self-defense) and the three levels of Taekwon-do’s pedagogy (i.e., *musul* [martial technique], *muyae* [martial artistry], and *mudo* [martial way]) were found in DPRK Taekwon-Do. *Discussion and Conclusions.* Despite the severe limitations of being unable to interview DPRK Taekwon-Do practitioners directly and the smallest small sample group possible, it was learned that DPRK instructors most likely teach all aspects of General Choi’s Composition of Taekwon-Do, and the stratified Taekwon-Do pedagogy theory was found in the subject’s practice in the DPRK.

Keywords: Martial arts; combat sports; taekwondo; *musul*; *muyae*; *mudo*; International Taekwon-Do Federation; behavioral-rational curriculum.

1. Introduction

Despite the style of Taekwon-Do taught by the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF) being founded in the Republic of Korea (ROK; South Korea), it is known predominately as “North Korean Taekwon-Do”. Taekwon-Do was introduced to the People’s Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK; North Korea) in 1980, but since that time no studies have reported how it is practiced in that country. The heavily restricted travel regulations placed on tourists to the DPRK impairs the collection of data from direct sources from DPRK Taekwon-Do students. Hence, why no academic studies have been conducted on Taekwon-Do as it is practiced in the DPRK. More problematic for the art are the unconfirmed allegations that the DPRK has sent its Taekwon-Do instructors abroad as espionage agents.

2. Objectives

What is known about ITF Taekwon-Do in the DPRK can only be gleaned from first-person accounts and videos from media outlets. By combining these sources and then examining them through a behavioral-rational orientation of the ITF curriculum, this case study asks: *How is*

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Taekwon-Do taught in the DPRK? As such, its secondary research objective was to determine if the Taekwon-Do pedagogy as General Choi Hong Hi established been lost in the DPRK.

3. Methodology

Taekwon-Do practitioners who had traveled to the DPRK to enhance their Taekwon-Do skills and knowledge were identified through pictures and videos posted on their Facebook accounts. Only seven prospective subjects were found and contacted via Facebook's personal messaging service. They were informed of the purposes of the study, the need to perform a follow-up interview after the completion of the questionnaire, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Out the seven individuals contacted, only two replied and completed the questionnaire. One of the questionnaires was rejected as it was completed incorrectly, and no follow-up interview was conducted with that respondent. The sole subject was a 36-year-old Singaporean female employed as a corporate lawyer and a Taekwon-Do instructor. Similar methodologies have been employed in other DPRK studies (see e.g., Li & Ryan 2018; Kim, Timothy, & Han, 2007) and the martial arts (Cynarski & Swider, 2017).

A literature review of the ITF pedagogy was also conducted, and General Choi Hong Hi's (the first ITF president) 5-part "Composition of Taekwon-Do" (i.e., fundamental techniques, *tul* [forms], sparring, *dallyon* [forging or conditioning of the body], and self-defense) was identified as the principle learning objectives of the physical practice of Taekwon-Do. Further, Taekwon-Do pedagogy can be considered a stratified process that leads students from learning fundamental techniques (Korean: *musul*) to a personal expression of Taekwon-Do (Korean: *muyae*) to a way of life (Korean: *mudo*). As such, it was determined that the ITF uses a behavioral-rational curriculum design. In this fashion, the Composition of Taekwon-Do (Choi, 1985) and the Stratified Taekwon-Do Pedagogical Process (Johnson, 2017) were used to ascertain if Taekwon-Do is taught today in the DPRK for self-cultivation and societal betterment purposes as General Choi originally intended (Johnson, 2019). Other evidence (i.e., pictorial and video evidence provided by the subject, mass media videos of DPRK Taekwon-Do demonstrations, and the subject's notebook) were used to collaborate and verify the information provided in the interviews and for cross-referencing purposes.

3. Results

The subject's answers to the questions ($n = 5$) on their practice of the ITF Composition of Taekwon-Do were primarily considered for the purposes of this study. The subject practiced fundamental techniques and patterns (*tul*/form) in the DPRK, but did not practice *dallyon*, *tul*, or sparring. Evidence of all three levels of the Taekwon-Do stratified pedagogical process (*musul*, *muyae*, and *mudo*) was present in DPRK's instruction.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

Although "no clear consensus on the exact nature of taekwondo's pedagogy" exists (Capener, 2005), General Choi nevertheless stated that Taekwon-Do practice should, in theory, use the mental and physical strength skills acquired through practice to develop one's self and one's society outside of the Taekwon-Do school. According to Johnson's (2017) stratified Taekwon-Do pedagogy, DPRK Taekwon-Do practitioners progress through the physical (*musul*) to the creative (*muyae*) levels of Taekwon-Do to the final goal of living an ethical life guided by the lessons learned through Taekwon-Do praxis (*mudo*). When seen through a sport pedagogy lens, this can be understood as teaching *about*, *in*, and *through* taekwondo, respectfully (Armour 2013, p. 13). As students become more proficient, individual and unique expressions of the martial art become more perceptible, most notably in sparring and, later still, in how various skills and knowledge acquired through praxis can be applied to practitioners' everyday lives.

Despite the severe limitations of being unable to interview DPRK Taekwon-Do practitioners directly and the smallest small sample group possible, we found that DPRK instructors teach all aspects of General Choi's Composition of Taekwon-Do and the Stratified Taekwon-Do Pedagogical Process were found in our subject's practice in the DPRK. Following the latter concept, Taekwon-Do's fundamental movements and patterns are formalized, but certain individual differences, such as adjustments for practitioners' body styles, can be permitted. As practice continues and students



become more proficient, individual and unique expressions of Taekwon-Do become more perceptible, most notably in sparring and, later still, in how various skills and knowledge acquired through practice can be applied to practitioners' everyday lives.

This study determined that DPRK Taekwon-Do instructors teach for self-cultivation and societal betterment purposes, thus exemplifying *mudo*. As such, it indicates Taekwon-Do is instructed in the DPRK as mandated by General Choi. However, these findings beg the question of whether the stratified Taekwon-Do pedagogy or if a more concentric pedagogy (i.e., Japanese) provide faster and/or better moral/social/behavioral benefits. Future studies should determine this to ensure Taekwon-Do is effective in its global peace initiatives.

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