

Taekgyeon, Tae Kwon Do's Ancient Ancestor, Comes to America

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The modern art of Tae Kwon Do is a child of the unlikely Cold War marriage of two radically different ancient arts, each over a thousand years old. Tae Kwon Do's hard linear style derives mainly from Japanese Karate, while most of the art's dramatic kicks were adapted from those found in the softer and more relaxed native Korean art of Taekgyeon.² While many martial artists are familiar with Karate's story of evolution on the island of Okinawa, few people outside Korea have even heard of Taekgyeon.

Unlike Tae Kwon Do and Karate, whose sharp blocks, strikes, and kicks are completed with tensed muscles, Taekgyeon's corresponding movements are typically semicircular and are performed with gradually increasing and decreasing force; they flow almost without tension, although the limbs executing the movements are at times fully extended. It is part of a Taekgyeon artist's training to learn to stay relaxed, even when sparring, so that he or she can swiftly ward off an opponent's strike with a precisely performed trip, push, or grab. Like the brush strokes of Chinese calligraphy, Taekgyeon's movements have no sharp beginnings or endings. They are imagined to flow gently through an intangible and invisible energy fluid called *Gi*, the analog of the Chinese martial artist's *Chi* (or *Ji*), thought to carry the life force. Korean Taekgyeon masters consider their art a way of contributing to culture and the expression of life itself through the gathering and cultivation of *Gi*. Taekgyeon is sometimes described as calligraphy performed with the human body. Koreans often draw on metaphors from nature to describe Taekgyeon's silky movements—e.g., a soft breeze that can suddenly turn into a damaging gust of wind, or the relaxed flapping of an eagle which allows the bird to glide and hover before it swoops down suddenly to catch its prey. To modern Americans Taekgyeon's springy birdline movements and calls may initially appear alien, or exotic.

Almost all the Taekgyeon that is taught and practiced today falls within the class of *Soegi Taekgyeon*, which is entirely oriented at defense or play. Advanced students may also practice *Guelyeon Taekgyeon*, which is attack-oriented and observes no formal rules. Taekgyeon's most distinctive feature is its dance-like footwork, *pumbalki*, used both in practice and in sparring. In one of three precisely choreographed geometrical three-count or six-count stepping patterns, often practiced to three-beat music (such as a waltz, polka, or traditional Korean music), the body's weight is softly and rhythmically exchanged from leg to leg. This dance-like footwork, especially when combined with rhythmic arm movements, *hwalgaejit*, trains the martial artist's coordination and ability to move gracefully and efficiently while he or she practices technique. When combined with arm movements, *pumbalki* is effectively used in sparring to confuse and divert the attention of a partner, at the same time ensuring that the martial artists maintain flexible body positions that allow blows to be absorbed almost painlessly. The repeated practice of *pumbalki* can be extremely tedious for the beginning student, but if he or she persists the coordination and control required to perform the movements smoothly will train their ability to maneuver easily and quickly. In time they will feel at ease sparring in almost any circumstance or from any fighting distance.

The Roots of Taekgyeon in Korea

Taekgyeon dates back at least to the Goguryeo Kingdom (37 BC – 668 AD); its first recorded evidence is found in wall pictures of 4th or 5th century tombs. (PHOTO) Several classic Korean histories refer to Taekgyeon.³ The fact that the art's wavelike movements are so different from those of other martial arts suggests it is an original art. There is some evidence that Taekgyeon interacted with certain Chinese and Japanese arts, but the historical details are yet to be proven.

While we do not know exactly why Taekgyeon evolved in Korea, it seems safe to assume that its original function was self-defense and that both the art and its institutionalization developed more quickly once the state formed and required a system for defending its borders. Only much later did Taekgyeon become a popular means of exercise and even play. The Goguryeo Kingdom (37 BC-668 AD) was a natural site for the birth of a defensive art because it was bounded by China on the north and by the warring Silla and Baekje Dynasties to the south.⁴ The practice of Taekgyeon eventually migrated into China, Silla, and the Baekje Dynasty, where there is clear evidence of the practice of *Soobak*, a hand-clapping art similar to Taekgyeon and practiced by the teenaged children of royal families. In both Taekgyeon and *Soobak* games, the players interact with each other in a rhythmic stepping (in the case of Taekgyeon) or clapping (in the case of *Soobak*) pattern, with an occasional strike or grab interrupting the rhythmic play. It is believed that the ancient form of Taekgyeon included significantly more hand techniques, perhaps clapping as in *Soobak*.

According to Korea's present Taekgyeon Grandmaster, Jeong Gyeong-Hwa, the practice of Taekgyeon suited the "resolute mindset of the Goguryeo people," who also enjoyed horseback riding and archery. National events often included demonstrations and competitions featuring both *Soenbae*, the early version of Taekgyeon, and *Soobak*. Sin Chae-ho's *Josensanggosa*, refers explicitly to such events during the last part of the Silla Dynasty (57BC to 935AD), and also earlier during the reign of King Jin Hung of Silla (540-576AD), who is known best for conceiving the core of young warriors known as the *Hwarang* (Flowering Youth), that helped to unify the Korean peninsula during the Silla dynasty within the Three Kingdom Period. There is evidence that Taekgyeon was practiced by the *Hwarang*, who were not only martial artists but scholars.⁵ Influenced by both Buddhism and Taoism, they traveled around the country spreading poetry, music, philosophy, values, and, among other things, Taekgyeon, which thus found a place in the country's cultural development. During the Silla Dynasty *Soenbae* competitions were adopted from those held during the Goguryeo Kingdom; they formed an important part of the annual spring and fall festivals held in March and October featuring competitions before the king. These royal events also included sword dances, wrestling, archery, also dramatic demonstrations involving the breaking of ice, water fighting, and hunting animals.. The *Soenbae* competitors represented their neighborhoods and were referred to by the distance of their neighborhood from the royal palace.⁶ The winners received the honorable title of *Soenbae*, meaning light and smooth.

During, the long Goryeo Dynasty, established in 918 AD, and successful in uniting the later Three Kingdoms by 936, Taekgyeon was promoted as the official martial art of Korea. In this period Taekgyeon became a subject of study in the national military, whose service examinations included questions about Taekgyeon. Soldiers were advanced for their good performance of Taekgyeon. But during the subsequent Choson Dynasty (1392-1910), which began with the removal of the Goryeo Dynasty in 1392, the art of Taekgyeon lost some of its earlier social status. Scholars were now regarded more highly than martial artists and military affairs were generally disdained. Taekgyeon was forced to evolve in new directions and it often took the form of game played by ordinary Korean people. The art was performed on holidays, like the Buddhist Baekjoong festival held on July 15 of

the Lunar calendar for purification purposes, or Dano, held on May 5 of the Lunar calendar. Villages would compete with one another in these festivals. As scholars and members of the nobility increasingly developed hostility to the art, especially to *Guebyeon* Taekgyeon, which they saw as dangerous, Taekgyeon became less and less practiced by nobles and more and more practiced by commoners. Their imaginative dance-like Taekgyeon partner games doubled as technique training exercises. These games became integral parts of Taekgyeon practice. A photograph taken by a missionary in 1890 shows two children practicing or playing a game resembling Taekgyeon. (PHOTO).

Between 1400 and 1800, many Taekgyeon artists moved to China because of the disfavor into which Taekgyeon fell during the Chosan Dynasty. In China Taekgyeon is believed by some scholars to have entered or even served as the basis for certain forms of Chinese Boxing, in particular, *Kwe con Bub*. To the Korean historian Shin Chao-ho, the fact that some Taekgyeon movements (especially its throwing techniques) resemble those of Ju Jitsu, while other movements are reminiscent of Tai Chi and other Gong-Fus, suggests that there was considerable influence from Taekgyeon on other early Asian martial arts, as he pointed out in his history of the Chosan Dynasty (*Joseonsanggosa*),

By the early twentieth century, the social influence and status of Taekgyeon had weakened so much that the art was relatively easy for Japanese colonial rulers to abruptly suppress between 1910 and 1945, the period of Japanese domination over Korea. Japanese police officers perceived Taekgyeon as a threat because those who had extensive Taekgyeon training would typically have the edge in gang fights between Koreans and Japanese. The art was outlawed throughout this thirty-five year period of Korean history. As Taekgyeon practitioners risked imprisonment, the art was practiced only by the independent few who took to the mountains or temples where they could practice in secret. The absence of several generations of Taekgyeon students meant that no development of the art took place in that period causing the number of martial artists proficient in advanced techniques to be reduced substantially. In consequence many higher level techniques, including secret advanced strategies, were lost. If Shin Chae-ho's hypothesis is true it is possible that some of the elements of Taekgyeon which were lost during the period of Japanese repression may have survived within the Chinese and Japanese martial arts that Taekgyeon interacted with. Rediscovering the lost movements and tracing them to Taekgyeon would however be a most difficult and politically delicate research project offering a perhaps insurmountable challenge even to the cleverest and most diplomatic historian of Asian martial arts.

The Recovery of Taekgyeon

That Taekgyeon is once again being practiced in Korea is largely due to the strenuous recovery efforts undertaken over the last half-century by a number of passionate Taekgyeon masters and grandmasters. The work to recreate Taekgyeon along its ancient lines was begun by the first modern Taekgyeon Grandmaster Sin Hanseung. (PHOTO) Born in Seoul in 1929, Sin Hanseung had at the age of five seen his grandfather Sin Jae Hyong practice Taekgyeon. As a teenager in middle school, Sin Han-seung initially took up wrestling. But just then, shortly after the end of Japanese rule, many Koreans were, in a surge of nationalist emotion, seeking to study native Korean arts of all kinds. Instead of wrestling, Sin Han-seung resolved to study Taekgyeon. He found three teachers willing and able to help him learn the basics: Song Doek-gi, Lee Yong Choon, and Kim Hong. Song Doekgi had been born in 1882 and had studied Taekgyeon with Master Yim Ho. Sin

Hanseung learned the ancient Taekgyeon form known as *bontebaegi*, which offered a physical catalog of the basic movements.

Sin Hanseung went on to organize what he learned into a system of techniques that could be taught easily to students. He realized that because Taekgyeon, like other martial arts, is primarily transmitted over generations through person-to-person instruction, that the system he learned from Song Doekgi and the other elders was missing some higher-level elements which had neither been practiced nor taught during the thirty-five years when the practice of Taekgyeon was banned. But he was confident that once the art was being practiced again, many of the missing techniques could be recreated.

In an effort to help preserve the art and have it be transmitted over the generations, Sin Hanseung also took steps to arrange government protection of Korean's native martial art of Taekgyeon. This job resulted eventually in the art's present designation in 1983 as Korean national intangible cultural treasure #76, the only martial art so recognized in Korea. The preparation and submitting of properly worded applications to the government toward this end was carried out by Sin Hanseung's advanced student, Jeong Gyeon-Hwa. (PHOTO). In June 1983, Sin Hanseung was appointed as the first Korean Important Cultural Asset #76, the person whose official responsibility was to preserve the national intangible cultural treasure of the same number.⁷ Four years later, on June 28, 1987, shortly before his death on July 2, 1987, of colon cancer, Sin Hanseung appointed Jeong Gyeong-Hwa as his successor.

Born in May 1954, Jeong Gyeong-Hwa began his study of Taekgyeon in 1975. He was well versed in another native Korean art, for as a boy in middle school he had learned Korean calligraphy from his uncle Choi Kyu-Hwan. While he attended high school Jeong Gyeong-Hwa fell ill with pulmonary tuberculosis and it was necessary for him to drop out of school for six months. He withdraw for rest to a Buddhist temple. When his health returned at the end of a seven-month vegetarian diet, he was still very weak from his illness. Then at the age of 21 he also faced the problem of finding a meaningful road to follow in his life.

On the way back home to Seoul, he happened to hear a radio program in which Sin Hanseung was being interviewed about Taek Gyeon. The master martial artist referred to Taekgyeon's healing abilities, Jeong Gyeong-Hwa decided to try to regain his strength by studying Taekgyeon. As a scholar of calligraphy, Jeong was attracted to the cultural side of the traditional native Korean art. And decided to explore it for himself. He learned quickly. Although he had never trained in a martial art, he was fairly flexible having studied yoga, mainly from books. Like most beginning Taekgyeon students he simply endured what he then experienced as the tedium of practicing *pumbalki* for long periods of time, but he soon recognized the beauty and power of the flowing art. He became one of Sin Hanseung's most avid students, achieving his 4th Dong in Taekgyeon on January 17, 1987. On June 1, 1995, he took the reins of the important position of second Korean Human Important Cultural Asset #76.

In the 1999 interview that motivated this article, Grandmaster Jeong explained some of his goals for Taekgyeon. Among them, he wanted to ensure that future generations will have an accurate understanding of the original form of the art, so they are able to pass this on to future generations. At the same time, he is convinced that preserving the art does not require following the original forms and format precisely, but "modifying it to meet the needs of current generations." In that spirit he added *sang hwal che-go*, the life exercise, a short introductory form whose sections resemble Chinese Xigong but constructed out of basic Taekgyeon techniques. He designed the form as an

exercise for developing and harnessing *Gi*. To propagate and develop the art he created a Martial Arts Training Center in Chungju City. (PHOTO) The Korean government provided approximately 2.2 billion won and the center was officially dedicated on May 31, 1997. Grandmaster Jeong set the goal of using the new center as a base for sharing the art of Taekgeon with other countries, a partial insurance against ever again losing important parts of the art. In his words, “Taekgyeon is a Korean cultural treasure, but the world is one. I am working to make Taekgyeon a world martial art.”⁸

Taekgyeon Comes to America

Taekgyeon was revealed to a group of American martial artists shortly after the dedication of the Chungju training center. In February 1998, Tae Kwon Master Namsoo Hyong and his advanced student, Master Blair Sarkiss traveled to Chungju from Savoy Illinois, a small town bordering on the twin cities of Champaign and Urbana which house the main campus of the University of Illinois. Their visit was motivated by their interest to learn just how Taekgyeon is a precursor of Tae Kwon Do and to explore whether Taekgyeon’s throwing techniques might be suitable additions to Master Hyong’s HMD system of Tae Kwon Do. (PHOTOS) Drawn to the noncompetitive philosophy of Taekgyeon, having recently broken from the competitive Tae Kwon Do sparring tradition of his youth, Master Hyong wondered whether the softer flowing movements of Taekgyeon might be a therapeutic alternative for certain students who experienced Tae Kwon Do’s movements as stressful to their joints.

When Master Hyong learned about Grandmaster Jeong’s interest in bringing Taekgyeon to other countries, he invited him to visit his HMD Academy. Before the end of that year Master Jun Choongsoo was sent by the Grandmaster to Savoy to offer a series of classes and demonstrations of Taekgyeon during a month-long visit spanning December 1998 and January 1999. His visit concluded with a spectacular public demonstration of forms and techniques at the Urbana Civic Center accompanied by Korean traditional music performed by the group, *Karakmadang*. One year later the Grandmaster himself visited for several weeks, accompanied by his advanced student Euljeong Kim. They offered both a Taekgyeon demonstration and a seminar about the art at HMD Academy. On a snowy day in January during this visit, the Grandmaster gave me an interview in which he told me much of what I have presented in this article.

The evolving exchange between HMD Academy and the Chungju Training Center led to more visits over the next several years. A most influential visit began in September 2000, when Euljeong Kim (PHOTOS) visited again for almost half a year and offered classes in Taekgyeon publicized in the local news media. Among his early students were Matt Hartman, Klemen Strle, and Lillian Hoddeson (PHOTOS); all would in time become certified Taekgyeon instructors. When Mr. Kim suddenly returned to Korea in February 2001 to face a death in his family, he left behind teaching materials, including instructional videotapes. As the two most advanced students in the Taekgyeon class, Matt Hartman and Klemen Strle lead the group in its continuing practice of Taekgyeon, while everyone waited for Mr. Kim or another Korean Taekgyeon instructor to return to HMD academy and offer more techniques to practice.

There have been many more exchanges since then between Chungju and Savoy. In August 2001, Master Hyong accompanied several members of the Taekgyeon class including, Lillian Hoddeson and Michael Baym on a visit to Korea hosted by Master Cheon Yeop, among the Grandmaster’s most advanced students. Master Cheon enriched the visit with many exciting cultural experiences (e.g., lessons in Korean traditional music, archery, pottery, calligraphy, and *Gumdo*) and

of course much Taekgyeon practice, some of it on mountain tops or on rocky (and slippery) cliffs besides streams. (PHOTOS) The plans for future cultural exchange between Chunju and Savoy were suddenly interrupted by the tragedy of September 11, 2001 and its world-wide political consequences.

Mr. Strle continued to teach the Teakgyeon classes at HMD Academy, but without further input from Korea the technical level of the class could hardly advance. Aware of this obstacle, Grandmaster Jeong and Mr. Kim returned to HMD Academy in June 2004 and January 2005 to teach an intensive Taekgyeon instructor training program. On January 15, 2005 three new American Taekgyeon instructors, Blair Sarkiss, Matt Hartman and Klemen Strle (PHOTOS) were certified. Along with Master Hyong they formed the first group of American Taekgyeon instructors. An Illini Taekgyeon Club at the University of Illinois, whose members included Faisal Mohamed (PHOTOS), became the first Registered American Student Organization to promote the art of Taekgyeon. Mr. Hartman taught the joining HMD Academy-Illini Club's Taekgyeon classes until the summer of 2006 when he moved to Seattle, where he is now teaching both Taekgyeon and Tae Kwon Do. Several months later, Mr. Strle moved to Bosten , where he is presently teaching both Taekgyeon and Tae Kwon Do at his Boston HMD Academy of Tae Kwon Do and Taekgyeon.

The interactions between Chunjiu and Savoy continue. Master Cheon and his wife Hyoseung Jeong visited HMD in August 2006 to offer another inspiring public Taekgeon demonstration. In October Ms Jeong performed Taekgyeon at the Urbana Park District and then at a world martial festival held at the University of Illinois's Krannert Art Center. Relatively recently, in July 2007, Grandmaster Jeong and Master Hyo-soon Park spent two weeks visiting Illinois where they offered an intensive instructor training program to Ms Hoddeson and Mr. Mohamed, who were certified as instructors on August 4, 2007. Almost ten years after Master Hyong's and Mr. Sarkiss's initial visit to the Taekgyeon Training Center in Chunjiu, the art of Taekgyeon is finally established in America. It is already evolving as it adapts to its new cultural context.

¹ Most of the historical material in this article comes from an interview,(henceforth cited as "Jeong Interview") I conducted with Grandmaster Jeong along with Namsoo Hyong, Euljeong Kim and Michael Baym in Savoy, Illinois on January 6, 2000 (transcript in Korean available at HMD Academy, Savoy). For help with transcripts and translations, I would like to thank Ethan Dengate and Jin-Heon Jung. Other material comes from: Jeong Gyeong-hwa, "Taekgyeon: The Root of Korea's Martial Arts," (referred to here as "The Root"). *Koreana: Korean Arts and Culture*, vol 14, No. 4. (Winter 2000), pp. 30-37; "Intangible cultural heritage for Taekkyon – Jeong Gyeong-Hwa: The martial art demonstrating an iron fist in a velvet glove, Taekkyon," *Gopoong*, (April 2007), No. 8, pp 36-8; or "Taekgyeon," pp. 12-17, in *Pictorial Korea, The Monthly Magazine* (April 1999), pp. 12-17.

² See He-Young Kimm, "General Choi, Hong Hi: A Tae Kwon-Do History Lesson," *Tae Kwon Do Times*, vol 20, Number 1, Issue 113, January 2000, pp. 44-58. This article is based on interviews conducted with General Choi Hong Hi by Dr. Kimm on August 1, 1998 and February 27 to March 1, 1999.

³ Among the major historical references are *Goryeosa* (History of Goryeo), *Sejongsillok jiriji* (Cultural Geography in the Veritable Records of King Sejong), *Jaemulbo* (Dictionary of Names of Things in the University), and *Joseonsanggosa* (Early History of Korea), cited in Jeong, "The Root", p. 31.

⁴ "The Root," p.31

⁵ Ibid, p. 32.

⁶ Ibid, p.37.

⁷ Ibid, p. 31.

⁸Ibid.