

BOOK REVIEW

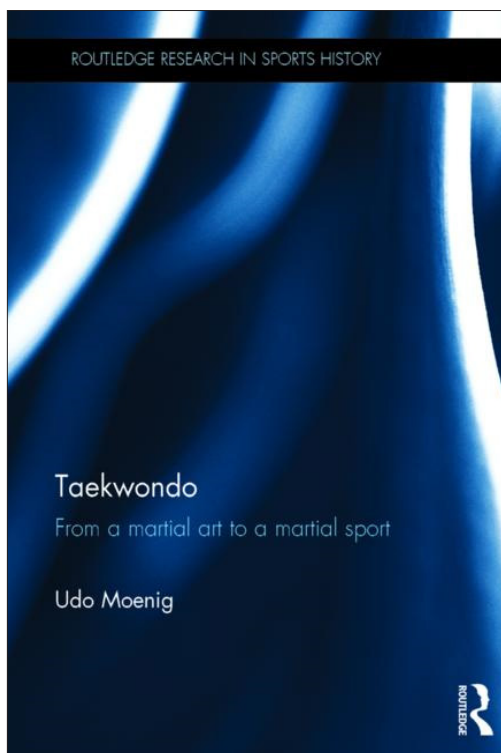
Taekwondo: From a Martial Art to a Martial Sport

Udo Moenig

Routledge, 2016

230 pages

\$40 USD (paperback)



Until quite recently, the nearly eight million practitioners of modern taekwondo across the globe were being sold fabricated and stereotypical mythologies as the definitive history of their art. What's worse, this misinformation wasn't simply transmitted by word-of-mouth or by well-meaning instructors: this fiction was propagated by decades of taekwondo training manuals and corroborated by the Kukkiwon, the headquarters for the World Taekwondo Federation [2013]. It was a romantic legend, a sort of slave narrative of an ancient Korean fighting system nearly snuffed out during the brutal period of Japanese colonial rule prior to World War Two. It was a story of traditional taekwondo covertly practiced in secret rituals, folk games, or ancient ceremonial performances in order to survive attempted cultural erasure, the spread of communism, and the devastation of the Korean War. But, despite the appealing plot line, this long-standing myth was nothing more than an invented tradition, nationalist propaganda rife with all the usual baggage this kind of rhetoric incurs.

Thankfully, this deceit has started to become thoroughly challenged. Udo Moenig's monograph *Taekwondo: From a Martial Art to a Martial Sport* [2016] is a work that shines a light on the problem of entrusting a state-sponsored agency like the Kukkiwon as the custodian of taekwondo's history and philosophy. Moenig, a lecturer in the taekwondo department of Youngsan University, is the first foreigner to teach taekwondo at University level in Korea. A native German, Moenig remarks in the introduction to his work that since 'critical studies regarding taekwondo's history are rare ... [and not particularly] welcomed as research topics in Korean universities ... an outsider's perspective is necessary to kindle some degree of critical discussion and debate' [9]. Moenig's background as a German National taekwondo team competitor, his formal education in Asian Studies and Physical Education, and his thorough enculturation in Korean society solidify his credibility as this necessary 'outsider' voice.

The compelling absence of a critical conversation surrounding taekwondo's history, development, and potential futures lends further credence to the idea that the community needs a fresh perspective. Moenig only identifies eight distinct scholars who have published in this area from 1986-2008, and nearly half of these texts are only available in Korean. One of the greatest strengths of Moenig's work is its ability to put this literature into conversation with a variety of primary texts written in Chinese, Japanese, German, and Korean for English-speaking audiences. Of the available literature, Moenig is most influenced by the work of Steven D. Capener [1995, 2005], the first non-Korean to investigate the inconsistencies inherent in taekwondo's history and philosophy as well as, later, its Olympic debut. There have been significant changes to the sport of taekwondo in the last two decades, however, and Moenig's work offers an updated consideration of taekwondo's potential future as a combat sport.

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10.18573/74

In addition to this invaluable synthesis of the available literature regarding taekwondo's history, Moenig provides new quantitative data in terms of the technical development of the Korean art. As a result, the book can be said to be structured by two fundamental research questions: (1) 'Where did taekwondo come from?' and (2) 'Where is it going?' Ultimately, the major theme of the book is a disciplinary one, a justified concern given taekwondo's relative adolescence as an officially recognized Korean martial art and Olympic sport. Because of this, Moenig sees modern taekwondo as perfectly positioned for an intervention, one that could reconcile the sport's aims and goals with student training regimens and curricula. The argument that Moenig puts forward is that taekwondo has undergone an 'incomplete transformation' from martial art to combat sport in the last fifty years [186]. In order to complete this transformation and secure a future for taekwondo, practitioners, master instructors, and accrediting agencies need to come to terms with the incommensurability Moenig so artfully outlines in his juxtaposition of 'traditional' and 'modern' training methodologies and philosophies.

To prepare his readers to understand just how incompatible these conflicting ideologies can be, Moenig devotes the first three chapters to debunking some of the commonly held myths regarding taekwondo's origin story in order to shift towards arguing for its potential future. For example, Chapter One begins with a discussion of *t'aekkyon*, a Korean folk game involving sweeping leg techniques and wide-arcing kicking motions. Various taekwondo manuals describe *t'aekkyon* as the ancient martial art from which modern taekwondo is derived and blame Japanese annexation for its near-extinction. Moenig systematically illustrates how commonly employed 'evidence' supporting these claims has been misinterpreted, sometimes quite intentionally [20]. Moenig confirms the accounts of historians like Gillis [2008] who describe how officials under the Park Chung-Hee dictatorship (1963-1979) took advantage of the lack of public knowledge regarding *t'aekkyon* and began establishing a falsified link from the supposedly ancient Korean fighting system and the newly named taekwondo.

Moenig describes this effort to ratify taekwondo as historically and culturally Korean as an 'invention of tradition', a technique that is often used to provide some sort of cultural foundation or 'social cohesion' to the state [25]. This claim is presented rather sympathetically, despite Hobsbawm and Ranger's [1983] term often being associated with authoritarian rule like that of Nazi Germany. Moenig explains how taekwondo was certainly used as a propaganda tool similar to the earlier implementation of karate in Japanese public education, but that it was used at a time when the newly established South Korea was one of the poorest and most war-ravaged countries on the earth, a time when its citizens needed something to help them re-establish their identity as proudly Korean [47]. But taekwondo isn't an evolution of a native Korean martial arts culture – in fact, it began, quite simply, in Okinawa.

Moenig provides explicit detail in Chapter Two regarding the leaders of the five major *kwans* (schools or styles), all of whom trained in shotokan karate and most of whom trained in Japan directly under the legendary Funakoshi Gichin. Moenig builds on Madis's [2003] work by demonstrating through a timeline of taekwondo manuals how the early Korean publications were, in many cases, identical to Japanese karate handbooks. Founding fathers like General Choi Hong Hi, for example, were accused of blatant plagiarism when reprinting karate *katas* (forms or patterns) in their own publications.

Despite the attempt to rename and rebrand (beginning in 1955), taekwondo for all intents and purposes was Korean karate until the late 1960s. This meant that almost all technical instruction and training regimens were borrowed from the Okinawan art and slowly adapted, modernized, or Koreanized in the act of nation building. Moenig labels the practices and philosophies of this early period as 'traditional taekwondo' and discusses how it is primarily marked by the activity of *p'umsae*, or forms practice, something he discusses at great length in Chapter Three.

Even when instructors like Choi and later the Korean Taekwondo Association developed forms that were distinctly different from their Japanese predecessors, taekwondo was still a martial art defined by Funakoshi's pedagogy of self-cultivation through repetition and physical meditation. Perhaps a better answer to the question of taekwondo's origin lies in what Moenig describes as Korea's true contribution to the evolution of East Asian martial arts: mainstream, full-contact sparring.

The second half of the book describes the development of what Moenig delineates as 'modern taekwondo', the Olympic combat sport defined by competitive sparring. Chapter Four describes the origins of full-contact sparring by detailing its roots in competitive kendo or experimental *Renbukken* karate tournaments. Chapter Five goes into more detail about how competition rules and equipment changed over time, and why this had such an impact on the technical development of taekwondo. Finally, Chapter Six demonstrates how, through free-sparring, taekwondo evolved rapidly from its traditional stances, kicks, and strikes to a more dynamic and fluid combat sport for modern competition, one with its own distinct techniques and maneuvers.

These three chapters together represent Moenig's fresh contribution to martial arts studies scholarship in that they provide data supporting the claim that there is a clear schism and crisis of identity in the contemporary discipline of taekwondo. Because of the evidence so cleanly presented in these chapters, Moenig is able to support his argument that traditional forms training as adopted from shotokan karate in the formative years of taekwondo are actually *at odds with* the contemporary practice of Olympic style sparring. Furthermore, if this issue is not addressed by a reevaluation of taekwondo curriculum design, the sport risks further fracturing into irreconcilable splinter groups, a future that could endanger the Olympic position that the South Korean government worked so hard to procure.

Moenig hints at some implications for this research, namely that the practice of p'umsae training be updated to better accommodate the needs of taekwondo practitioners. This has been done before in the early 1970s when the WTA released the *palgwe* and *taegeuk* forms, but the motive for this action had more to do with distancing taekwondo from karate than it did with preparing students for free-sparring. Still, Moenig argues that training in this antiquated way is actually a hurdle for students to overcome should they choose to pursue full-contact sparring. In short, the educational model (taekwondo curriculum) does not connect to or support desired learning outcomes (sparring competency) and, therefore, one or the other needs to be changed.

This research opens the door for a variety of other taekwondo scholars to contribute to the conversation of the style's history, its present state of affairs, and its possible future roles. For example, while Moenig does a fantastic job of debunking certain popular myths (like taekwondo's origin in t'aekkyon) and establishing a historical lineage to Okinawan karate, there is still historical work to be done investigating connections between Chinese cosmology and taekwondo p'umsae (a connection Moenig only partially addresses in Chapter Seven). This dismissal of the modern palgwe and taegeuk p'umsae systems and their potential embodiment of Daoist philosophy reveals the only weakness of Moenig's argument: his predisposition towards modern taekwondo's Olympic sport position implicitly relegates some contemporary taekwondo practices (like forms competitions, demonstration festivals, and aerobic exercise) to allegedly insignificant extracurricular activities that could/should be eliminated. In addition, while Moenig thoroughly outlines a theory of how taekwondo techniques developed through sparring practice over time, further quantitative data could help validate these claims and provide insight into how best to rectify the issue of current pedagogy not matching practitioner learning outcomes.

That said, *Taekwondo: From a Martial Art to a Martial Sport* is the most authoritative and useful text for any scholar interested in the history of taekwondo's transformation from shotokan karate to a truly Korean intangible cultural heritage. Not only does this work compile and organize a body of literature that has hitherto remained fairly scattered, it adds to the scholarly understanding of how taekwondo sparring evolved over time through new data and evidence. Finally, this work addresses a clear disciplinary problem in the current state of taekwondo, and in doing so invites further research to address this issue for the future of the sport.

While the first generation of taekwondo pioneers were responsible for importing karate to Korea, and while the second generation helped to rebrand this practice into a distinctly Korean sport garnering significant international praise and recognition, it is the duty of the third generation to move beyond the invention of tradition for national pride. Instead, with the help of work like Moenig's, taekwondo scholars must work to concretize shared goals, educational philosophy, and a unified technical curriculum for the purpose of securing a future for the art as well as the sport.

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Cardiff University Press

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Journal DOI

10.18573/ISSN.2057-5696

Issue DOI

10.18573/mas.i7

Accepted for publication 30 December 2018

Martial Arts Studies

Journal design by Hugh Griffiths

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