



# From Individual Heroes to National Performers: The Shift in Taekwondo's Peace Promotion Activities

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## Abstract

The writings of early taekwondo pioneers promote peace through the practice of the martial art and, later, the combat sport. These pioneers charged taekwondo practitioners with a duty to contribute to justice, defend the weak, and build a more peaceful world. National and international taekwondo organizations such as the Kukkiwon, World Taekwondo (WT), and the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF) have taken up the charge of peace promotion through taekwondo by means of transnational events, such as goodwill tours and joint taekwondo demonstrations by adversarial states (e.g., South and North Korea). These activities are soft diplomacy initiatives and have seen some level of success. While these soft diplomacy activities are in line with the goal of peace promotion that the early pioneers advocated, they are qualitatively different from what the pioneers advocated. Originally, the responsibility of peace promotion was on the individual taekwondo practitioner, who ought to cultivate moral character, courage, and martial art skill in order to uphold justice and defend the weak. With the current use of taekwondo for soft diplomacy, the responsibility of peace promotion has shifted from the individual practitioner to the governing bodies, such as WT and the ITF. Instead of focusing on issues surrounding justice and the protection of the weak, these national and international organizations focus on geopolitical cooperation, which is mediated through cultural exchange activities in the form of taekwondo demonstrations. These events involve activities such as acrobatic performances, dance routines, and board breaking that require little combat skill and may not pose the risk of serious injury to the individual practitioners, mainstays of the individual *heroes* of old. The charge to safeguard justice and physically defend the weak, which are acts of true courage as was envisioned by the taekwondo pioneers, is mostly ignored.

**Keywords:** sports diplomacy, cultural exchange, karate, Republic of Korea (ROK), People's Democratic Republic of Korea (DPRK)

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## INTRODUCTION

The notion of peace promotion has been present from very early on in the development of taekwondo, a Korean martial art and combat sport. In recent years, *peace through taekwondo* has received renewed emphasis by national and international governing bodies such as the Kukkiwon and World Taekwondo (WT) in the Republic of Korea (ROK; South Korea) and the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF), the governing body for taekwondo in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK; North Korea). The recent re-establishment of dialogue between Seoul and Pyongyang after the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics, so-called the 'Peace Olympics' in part because it jumpstarted a new era of talks between the warring ROK and the DPRK, was in part the result of "taekwondo diplomacy" [1,2].

Taekwondo as a martial art and combat sport is not an ancient practice as it is often touted. Rooted in ideologies and practices borrowed from (in historically transnational order) China, Okinawa, and Japan, taekwondo has developed a unique pedagogy and skillset [3-5]. One of the more unique aspects of taekwondo's pedagogy is that it was developed to be an international force for peace [2]. It seems "rather awkward" [6] that a martial art and combat sport should be associated with peace promotion, which begs the question, "What is the origin of this paradoxical decision to use a combat system to bring about peace?"

Previous research has shed light on this query. Mönig first introduced the paradox of *peace through taekwondo* in his doctoral dissertation [6]. Lewis sought to develop the idea of how this was possible in his own dissertation in which he presented some of the problems of using taekwondo as a form of soft diplomacy, including the watering down of the techniques taught (i.e., a weaker curriculum) and the loss of cultural understandings and philosophical meanings derived from practice [7]. Johnson and Vitale examined WT and the ITF's current peace efforts to assist the two Koreas to live more peacefully [2], while Johnson elucidated the history of taekwondo's peace promotion and the various peace and humanitarian activities taekwondo organizations are engaged in currently [1]. In 2019, Winright's comparative analysis on the ethics of the use of force with the philosophical ethics of the martial arts compared taekwondo's past and present peace initiatives with similar efforts made by aikido, a Japanese martial art [8].

The current article stands on the shoulders of these studies and adds to the discussions of the impetus of the *peace through taekwondo* concept and today's taekwondo peace promotion efforts. To contextualize our findings, we first performed, however briefly, a qualitative literature review of key pedagogical and philosophical concepts found in karate, one of taekwondo's progenitors, and aikido, a martial art renowned for its peace philosophy. We then examined the most relevant of the earliest taekwondo writings to determine the pioneers' original peaceful intentions for taekwondo and then summarized modern taekwondo soft diplomacy efforts. A comparison of the concept's beginnings to where it is today elucidates how taekwondo's pioneers' vision for *peace through taekwondo* has shifted from individual *heroes* to national *performers*.

### Romanization Note

Before commencing our discussion on *peace through taekwondo*, a quick note on the use of the non-English vocabulary in this research is necessary. The Korean word *taekwondo* has been Romanized in numerous ways by numerous people for numerous reasons. For the sake of convenience, *taekwondo* will be used to denote the overall concept of taekwondo as a martial art and combat sport; the only exceptions being its use in proper names of texts and organizational bodies. Korean and Japanese names are presented with surnames first and in the person's preferred spellings (e.g., *Choi Hong Hi* rather than *Hong-hi Choi*), and Japanese names and terminology are presented in their most common spellings.

## PRE-TAEKWONDO MARTIAL ARTS PEACE CONCEPTS

The precise origins of peace in Eastern martial arts philosophies and pedagogies are obfuscated in the arts' oral histories and a lack of historical documents. Complicating an accurate historical account of peace in martial arts is that no central curricula were established until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Western educational practices were introduced as instructors taught haphazardly and variously. Moreover, "there is no necessary, fundamental connection" between peace and martial arts education [9]. From what is known today, peace was an educational objective instilled in martial arts such as aikido, judo, karate-do, taekwondo, and others by their modern, principal architects. Chinese philosophy influenced undoubtedly the men who established martial arts as we know them today, since these educational systems "did not develop in a cultural and philosophical vacuum, but were affected by the cultural milieu and philosophical traditions in which they developed" [10]. The religions of ancient China became a syncretism that "incorporated the Daoist cultivation of the body with Buddhist-style meditation practices and a Confucian insistence on spiritual and ethical integrity" [11]; in other words, a "three-fold focus on the cultivation of body, mind and spirit" [10]. Taekwondo, a Korean martial art, has long touted its connections to these beliefs systems and worldviews [10,12].

For centuries Chinese traders have brought their wares to Okinawa, the place of origin of karate, exposing them to their religions and philosophies in the process. Karate began in modern-day Okinawa when Chinese traders brought goods, religion, and martial arts to the Ryukyu archipelago centuries ago. As the cultures learned from each other, Okinawa's indigenous fighting system *te* was fused with Chinese techniques, and this morphed into the various styles of today's karate [13,14]. Some Okinawan karate instructors today teach that karate "is meant to strengthen the heart" through endurance and tolerance of rigorous physical practice [15]. Over time, students learn, in addition to self-defense skills, to endure physical and mental hardships and pain. This journey of self-discovery teaches students what they are capable of physically and then encourages them to apply those traits to daily life. Lessons such as these were taught by Funakoshi Gichin, the founder of Shotokan karate-do, when he introduced karate to the Japanese mainland in 1920s.

During the Japanese occupation of the Korean Peninsula (1905-1945), many Koreans learned Japanese martial arts such as Funakoshi's karate-do. Much debate exists over the influence of indigenous Korean martial arts and Chinese martial arts on their modern Korean counterparts [16,17], Japanese martial arts such as judo and karate have greatly affected the philosophies and peace pedagogies of taekwondo [2,18]. Through an investigation in the history of the taekwondo uniform, Kim, Johnson, Lee, and Ha illustrate how the Japanese martial arts of judo and karate helped spawn taekwondo [19], and Johnson details how taekwondo's educational philosophy evolved [1]. Others have shown how the physical techniques and philosophies of Japanese martial arts have been acquisitioned by Koreans to form taekwondo in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century [16,17,20,21], a process that is ongoing and evolutionary even to this day. However, the philosophies, pedagogies, and techniques of martial arts like judo and karate are relatively new invented traditions with origins beginning in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. While moving away from their feudal past into the new, modern, and militaristic Meiji Restoration period, some Japanese saw the benefits of martial arts practice beyond mere pugilistic skills. They recognized the value of "[h]ard work, discipline, self sacrifice, and courage" that are intrinsic in martial arts practice; these are the "values appreciated in every culture" [9] that most likely allowed martial art practice and combat sports competition to become worldwide phenomena in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. After the conclusion of World War II, the Japanese martial arts—much like the country itself—sought a more peace-based philosophy.

Peace as a martial arts educational objective may be best exemplified through aikido, a Japanese martial art derived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century from the samurai hand-to-hand combat skills known collectively as jujitsu. The founder of aikido, Ueshiba Morihei, is well-known for his Shinto-inspired peace pedagogy. More than that, however, is the fact that Ueshiba saw firsthand the horrors of combat, preparation for which may have taught him the practical skills acquired during combat preparation (hard work, courage, etc.) while simultaneously instructing him on the irreversible devastation and destructive capabilities of violence. The latter lesson, incidentally, is not something typically learned by those initiating or calling for violence but rather by those who experience it directly. Ueshiba's practice "was as much about spiritual discipline as it was about physical training" [22], and his

understanding of how to neutralize violence is reflected in the techniques he developed. He taught that aikido techniques should evolve around a center point that is simultaneously one's center of gravity and spiritual center in Eastern tradition. By focusing on this point, the practitioner can enter a physical attack balanced and calm, redirect the energy of the attack, and then neutralize the aggressor without causing harm to either attacker or defender. Ledyard states: "All of the conflict we see in the world today exists inside of each individual [9]. In fact, it is the conflict inside the individual members of the collective that produce the conflict one sees in the world." Thus, the aikido practitioner recognizes the humanity within the aggressor, respects it, and ignores the attack, valuing a peaceful and balanced end of the conflict opposed to domination over the attacker.

Although there is "no clear consensus on the exact nature of taekwondo's pedagogy" [21], Johnson [3] claimed that as taekwondo students become more proficient, individual and distinctive expressions of the martial art become more perceptible, most notably in sparring; after which the skills and knowledge acquired through praxis can be applied to practitioners' everyday lives in order to benefit society. Like aikido, taekwondo advises its practitioners pedagogy to adopt this wisdom into everyday life [1,2] so that the martial art can become what, according to Little [23], Foucault called "practices of the self" [22]. This follows the Confucian educational paradigm of self-cultivation and may be the etymology of the *-do* suffix (meaning "way" in Korean and Japanese) in martial arts such as judo, karate-do, aikido, and taekwondo. For taekwondo practitioners, newfound skills and knowledge should be used for peace promotion [1,2,8]), which would be practitioners' "way" to live. Indeed, the connection of peace promotion with taekwondo is found in the early writings of several of the taekwondo pioneers. For instance, in his 1957 Korean-language textbook *Pasa Gwanbeop*, according to the Kukkiwon (ND) [24], Park Cheol Hee states:

Let's train the martial art and be a model of the nation. Keep incessant training of martial art, your mind and body to build an indomitable spirit. Be a brave man who dash at the cause of justice, dust off the evil mind and worthless thoughts, enlighten evil doers and show the right path..., build a sound character, and make contribution to the world peace and prosperity of civilization. [25]

Here, he advocated martial artists 1) build an indomitable spirit (a personality undaunted by adversity or hardship), 2) fight for justice, 3) build a stable and strong personality, and contribute to world peace through martial arts practice. In 1965, General Choi Hong Hi, the first president of the International Taekwon-Do Federation (the first international taekwondo organization) and a pioneer of taekwondo, wrote in the first book using the term *taekwondo* that the practice should be for self-defense and to defend justice and the weak [10]. Not long after that, according to the Kukkiwon (ND) [24], Lee Won-kuk's *Taekwondo Manual* from 1968 states that taekwondo trainees should love peace, protect justice and humanitarianisms, and not initiate fights [26]. General Choi Hong Hi's 1972 book *Taekwon-Do: The Korean Art of Self-Defense* admonishes practitioners to be gentle to the weak and tough to the strong, be champions of freedom and justice, and build a more peaceful world [27].

Based on the aforementioned writings, we can deduce how the early pioneers envisioned what *peace through taekwondo* entails. Peace promotion started with the individual practitioner building a morally sound character, noted for their courage and indomitable spirit. Practitioners toughen their bodies and perfect their techniques in order to be able to defend themselves, defend the weak from abuse, and uphold justice. The responsibility of this type of *peace through taekwondo* was squarely that of the individual practitioners who also carried the possibility of actual personal risk. When one rushes to the aid of another during a violent encounter, it is very likely that one will feel the brunt of such violence oneself. This *peace through strength*, a strategy that "assumes human beings are inherently violent and that the world is a competitive place" [28], does not assume that *peace through taekwondo* should be nonviolent. Within this lens, the progenitors of taekwondo envisioned it to be a defensive reaction toward aggression against oneself, those under one's protection (i.e., "the weak"), or those affected by injustice.

## PEACE AND TAEKWONDO TODAY

The current discourse on *peace through taekwondo* is not envisioned in the same framework of personal moral and physical development for the purpose of the defense of self-, others-, and justice.

Rather, taekwondo is being used as a type of soft diplomacy, especially between the ROK and DPRK. Initiatives of new, transnational “taekwondo diplomacy” involve taekwondo demonstrations during goodwill tours and international events [2].

Currently *peace through taekwondo* is envisioned as taekwondo demonstrations involving taekwondo performances of fundamental skills, stylized self-defense routines akin to Hollywood action sequences, dance-styled choreography, acrobatics, and board breaking, which are organized by national and international governing bodies for soft diplomacy by means of cultural exchange. The most prominent of these occurred in 2018 and 2019 when a series of joint performances with ROK and DPRK taekwondo demonstration teams were held across the ROK. These demonstrations led to other joint performances at a pre-opening ceremony of the 2019 PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games in the ROK and at taekwondo facilities in the DPRK. These performances initiated a renewed interest in dialogue between the DPRK and ROK as well as the DPRK and the US. A series of summits followed between the leaders of these three adversaries stuck in a 70-year long stalemate.

These events are not sport diplomacy per se, as is often suggested [1,2], as there is no competition between individuals or teams. These soft diplomacy events function more as cultural exchanges. Yet, sports diplomacy may not be a complete misnomer as these activities are intended to be precursors to competitions between ROK and DPRK taekwondo athletes. These demonstrations are also intended to draw interest in unifying the organizational bodies (WT in the ROK and the ITF in the DPRK). A unified taekwondo could further serve soft diplomatic efforts by acting as a “synecdoche” for Korean peace efforts [2]. Another consideration here is that these efforts are endorsed and facilitated by national governments. In particular, the DPRK had to permit their taekwondo demonstration teams to travel abroad and the ROK had to provide enormous and costly protective services for them upon their arrivals [1]. This type of support does not come lightly or cheaply, which indicates the importance of such events between the two Korea’s taekwondo groups.

A shift in how the early writings of some of the taekwondo pioneers envisioned *peace through taekwondo* and how it is currently applied is now perceptible. The early taekwondo texts placed the responsibility of *peace through taekwondo* on the individual practitioner, with a focus on self- and other defense, which may require personal risk. There was also an emphasis on justice. The pioneers charged the taekwondo practitioner to “dash at the cause of justice,” to “defend justice”, to “protect justice” and to “be a champion of...justice” (Table 1). They envisioned the taekwondo practitioner as a type of hero that would quite literally fight for the defense of the weak and protection of justice. Taekwondo’s pedagogy supported this type of activity by 1) providing the physical and mental fortitude and 2) by providing the educational guidance to do so.

However, with current conceptions of *peace through taekwondo*, peace promotion responsibility was co-opted by taekwondo governing bodies and national governments. The focus is not on the defense of self or others, but on performance for cultural exchange. There is almost no personal risk to the participating practitioners (injury during the high-activity performances notwithstanding), and there is no emphasis on justice. Under this conception of *peace through taekwondo*, the practitioners are not *heroes*, as such, but at the minimum *performers* and at most politically correct cultural ambassadors.

Table 1. The shifts from *heroes* to *performers* in *peace in taekwondo*

Hero	Performer
Responsibility lies with the individual	Responsibility lies with the organization
Focus on defense of the self- and others (i.e., those too weak to protect themselves)	Focus is on performance
Personal risk	Hardly any personal risk
Taekwondo practitioners as justice activists: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “dash at the cause of justice” [24,25]</li> <li>• “defend justice” [10]</li> <li>• “protect justice” [24,26]</li> <li>• “be a champion of...justice” [29]</li> </ul>	Taekwondo practitioners as politically correct cultural ambassadors; justice not addressed

## DISCUSSION

The current study further explicates the historical evidence that ties taekwondo, an inherently violent martial art and combat sport, to peace. By investigating the relevant written works published prior to taekwondo's creation and just at its inception we, like others before us, elucidated the paradoxical nature of taekwondo's peace pedagogy. This paradox is lessened nonetheless when taekwondo's peace pedagogy is contextualized with other martial traditions, which developed just prior to taekwondo, that also rejected violence for the sake of violence and instead advocated practice for peace.

Just as aikido does, taekwondo directs students to "build a peaceful" world [29]. Like Ueshiba, General Choi Hong Hi, a South Korean two-star general, saw combat. So, he too knew the values that strenuous martial arts practice could provide students. Ensuring that taekwondo did not advocate violence for the sake of violence, the use of its physical skills for brutality, or intimidation, General Choi instructed students to recite an oath that directs them to using taekwondo for self-cultivation purposes and societal development [1,2].

The existence of this shift from *heroes* to *performers* does not negate the value of taekwondo diplomacy for it created recently a means to open dialogue between the ROK and DPRK at a time of high tension on the Korean Peninsula. As taekwondo's national and international governing bodies continue to seek dialogue through taekwondo in this fashion, this type of soft diplomacy is not possible at individual levels.

The shift from *heroes* to *performers* may be due to the fact that organizational activities are more noticeable and on a much grander scale than what individuals do in their day-to-day lives. Neither political nor international sports media report on taekwondo practitioners living out the tenets of taekwondo and taking up the charge to be heroes of peace and justice. These efforts may be too small to be significant, even for local media, and are difficult to quantify. Indeed, academic research has yet to find a methodology for quantifying taekwondo's micro-effects on neighborhoods and cities to the macro-world of global politics. For instance, an individual taekwondo practitioner standing up to a bully might get no media attention outside of the local press, whereas the visit of a North Korean delegation touring the United States and South Korea makes for a great story. Peace initiatives that affect millions of people are nevertheless worthy of international attention and academic study.

One could argue the concepts of *heroes* and *performers* are simply a difference in responsibility. It is the responsibility of individual practitioners to be heroes for peace in their sphere of influence; it is the responsibility of national and international governing bodies to apply soft diplomacy initiatives, which is applicable to their sphere of influence. Along this line, one could also argue taekwondo pioneers did their job to globalize the martial art, and now it is time for the governments to reap the rewards. Again, the media can easily capture the short spectacles of taekwondo diplomacy events and to summarize their importance, but due to a lack of reporting time it cannot delve into details about who and how enabled them to do so. In these cases, taekwondo organizations and national governments receive credit while the individual actors are typically left unmentioned. This provides another way to interpret our findings, which is that the notions of *heroes* and *performers* were both present from the very start. The ROK government, for example, issued passports with "taekwondo instructor" listed as the owner's profession and provided funding for international taekwondo events, thus showing a link between taekwondo individuals and agencies. Perhaps there was no shift from *heroes* to *performers*; rather, both ways of promoting *peace through taekwondo* were there from early on.

Another question deserving of contemplation is whether this notion of individual practitioners becoming *heroes* for peace is a feasible one. Research suggests the practice of martial arts and combat sports may increase self-discipline and control of aggression [30]. Some studies [31-34], suggest that training in martial arts and combat sports enables women to reconstruct their conception of themselves from weak and possible victims to physically and mentally empowered individuals, which indicates that the self-cultivation pedagogy of martial arts like taekwondo works. However, research on how effective martial arts and combat sports training is for preparing practitioners for real self- and other-defense is lacking, and no research exists on the effectiveness of martial arts practice and

combat sport participation at creating a peaceful community. The question of the micro-effects of taekwondo practice on the macro-world are heretofore unasked and unanswered.

One issue with highlighting national performers today is that the average taekwondo student may not feel obligated to work towards peace. By utilizing national performers who have exceptional physical abilities far beyond that of normal students, the average student may not even realize their potential to bring about a better world. After all, few people are capable or even willing to learn how to flip two meters in the air to break boards, a feat commonly displayed by elite-level taekwondo performers. Fewer still are able to compete at sport taekwondo's highest levels (i.e., the Olympics) where their superstar status could be used for further peace promotion. Glorifying the *performers* who are capable of these feats may overshadow what the local average individual practitioner, the *hero*, is capable of achieving. If so, the original goal of taekwondo peace promotion is lost.

Taekwondo organizations such as WT's Taekwondo Humanitarian Federation (THF), an organization dedicated to teaching taekwondo and marketable skills to refugees, eclipse what individual instructors can do. The work the THF and other taekwondo organizations do is important, valuable, and does contribute to a better, peaceful world. Here again we see WT and THF's overall emphasis is on how they can help an afflicted people or region, not what the individual instructors at the refugee camps do. The national performer in these cases are the organization rather than the local hero.

The issue of *heroes* and *performers* in Taekwondo also brings up numerous questions of justice. Do we really expect all taekwondo practitioners to become "justice activists" as advocated by the taekwondo pioneers? If so, what type of justice should taekwondo practitioners fight for? Is it only regulated to the injustice of bullying and physical violence, or does it include other human rights violations? How about including social issues, such as the #metoo movement, equal marital rights, or pro-life/pro-choice issues? These are cultural issues that taekwondo instructors may not be inclined to support openly, because their businesses may not foster from their defense.

Finally, the concept of justice is vast and complicated. Most taekwondo students (especially children, the target market of most taekwondo schools) are uninterested in this concept, and no evidence indicates parents enroll their children in taekwondo classes to learn justice. They are instead attracted to the thrill of the promise of defeating an opponent in competition or the feeling of safety acquired with self-defense skills. The question of the feasibility of teaching *justice through taekwondo* is therefore problematic due to the innumerable cultural interpretations of justice and a lack of interest in it, not to mention the legalities behind taking justice into one's own hands (i.e., Does taekwondo promote vigilantism?).

The ideas above are limited by the lack of similar studies on martial arts and peace. Future studies should therefore continue to explore the relationships between the pedagogies and philosophies of taekwondo and other martial arts in an effort to determine new and feasible *peace through taekwondo* and *peace through martial arts* initiatives. As seen in current taekwondo soft diplomacy efforts, taekwondo and other martial arts and combat sports can provide more than self-defense skills and competition opportunities. Understanding how these activities can contribute to a better world can only further enrich the lives of practitioners and their neighbors.

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