A New Origin and Function of Poomsae in Taekwondo Training

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to establish a new paradigm for the understanding of poomsae in Taekwondo training. Until now poomsae have been considered as a system of connected offensive and defensive drills for teaching the fundamentals of combat. Hence, they are understood as a means and preparatory stages for attaining fighting skills, and consequently, they are treated as a secondary activity to kyorugi (sparring). Contrary to this understanding of poomsae, we want to argue that poomsae training has its own end, independent from kyorugi training. To demonstrate this point, we will focus on the relation between poomsae and the Chinese gymnastic exercises known as daoyin-sul or daoyin exercises (i.e., Daoist exercises of guiding and pulling), which are performed in conjunction with breathing techniques and the stretching of the body to accumulate qi (vital energy) in order to provide a foundation for the potential to realize the pure self.

Introduction

Within this paper, the term Taekwondo shall refer to the sport aspect of the Korean martial art known as Taekwondo, which is overseen by the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF) and the Kukkiwon in South Korea. The training of WTF Taekwondo involves two essential components: kyorugi (sparring) and poomsae. Generally, poomsae can be described as a “prearranged set of defensive and offensive movements executed to teach the fundamental movements of a martial art” (18). Moreover, kyorugi has been emphasized more than poomsae in the historical development of Taekwondo.

We can provide two reasons for such a development. First, in order to promote Taekwondo internationally, the founders of Taekwondo decided to brand it as an exciting combat sport. In fact, the first Taekwondo competition held in 1962 was a kyorugi competition (34). Second, Taekwondo can also be practiced as a self-defense system (8, 19, 34). In order to prepare for combat, a person needs to engage in simulated fights, which is the primary reason to engage in kyorugi (25). Taekwondo training therefore focused on attaining combat skills, and kyorugi was conceived of as more important than poomsae. In recent times, however, this has changed.

When we examine the recent developments of Taekwondo, we discover the remarkable advance in poomsae competition. In 1996, the first poomsae competition was organized, and nowadays poomsae players can participate in elite-level international
competitions. Congruent with this development, Taekwondo practitioners have begun to seek a better understanding of poomsae. The reason for this is that, from the start, General Choi, Hong Hee saw the training of Taekwondo as a combat activity. This is shown in the fact that he introduced Taekwondo as a part of military training (9). If Taekwondo is understood as a combat activity, then kyorugi becomes an essential aspect of Taekwondo training, and many researchers have argued just that (6, 18, 34, 47, 48, 49). Moreover, a leading Taekwondo textbook published by the Kukkiwon states that poomsae practice enhances kyorugi ability, and that “kyorugi is a practical application of the poomsae [sic]” (25). That is, the training of poomsae is only a means for kyorugi. Taekwondo training consists of attaining combat skills, and poomsae only provides prearranged sets of skills useful when performing kyurugi. Because poomsae is closely bound to improving combat skills, it only has been understood a prearranged set of combat drill movements (6).

Many martial artists feel their practice should have some combat functionality (1, 2, 14). Allen states, “[m]artial arts practice resembles sport in being convention-dependent. But the major difference between martial arts and sports is that martial arts have an external value independent of practice, as instruments of violence” (1). Poomsae were designed “to be an instrument of violence, and which, when competently performed, express that violent intentionality” (1). He continues by claiming

> practically all martial art techniques are what a dancer would call steps:

Movements and combinations susceptible of demonstration and repetition. Training the steps is partly about getting the right form, becoming habituated to initially difficult details of position and posture. (1)

Poomsae practice also “reinforces basic techniques and helps the individual to develop control, confidence, balance, and coordination” (11). In order to master the mental and physical skills necessary to survive a violent encounter, repetition of techniques must be performed to ensure a technique becomes innate (27). Yet again, these drills were simply considered a means for kyorugi skill acquisition.

But is poomsae only a means or a preparatory stage for kyorugi? Or, does poomsae training have its own purpose independent from the combative activity? In dealing with these questions, we argue that there are two conceptualizations of poomsae. First, there is a derivative conception of poomsae that deals with a prearranged set of combat drills. This understanding of poomsae is what has been known in modern times. Second, we believe there is a primordial conception of poomsae whose function has little to do with combative skills, which is closely bound up with daoyin-sul or daoyin exercises, a Chinese style of gymnastics that can be translated as the art of guiding and pulling. By connecting Taekwondo poomsae with daoyin-sul, we seek to create a new understanding of Taekwondo poomsae. The purpose of elucidating this connection between poomsae and daoyin-sul training is to offer a reinvigorated avenue and purpose for Taekwondo training generally and

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1 Interestingly, some researchers claim poomsae practice, especially WTF style poomsae, has little to do with kyorugi (6, 34). It is important to note that these authors were examining direct physical links between poomsae techniques and the skills typically utilized in kyorugi. For the purposes of this paper, we consider the whole of Taekwondo practice as means of self-cultivation with multiple activities designed to achieve that aim. Thus, poomsae and kyorugi, both being essential elements of Taekwondo training, can be mutually exclusive in their physical goals, but they both contribute to the overall development of Taekwondo practitioners.

2 Emphasis made by the source’s author.