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Art in Martial Arts: The Truth of the Subculture of Taekwondo

“*Charyut! Kyungnet.*” Attention! Bow. Before and after every taekwondo practice, all students have to line up in neat rows with their hands strictly by their sides, face the Korean flag, and bow to it in unison to demonstrate respect. To the untrained eye, this exhibition of discipline and respect often goes unnoticed as outsiders solely attribute martial arts to fighting. Though taekwondo involves a form of fighting, it is an art more than anything. It is a traditional Korean martial art that heavily impresses five tenets upon its athletes: courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control, and indomitable spirit. Beyond this, my specific experience with taekwondo has emphasized respect, humility, perseverance, self-control, and honesty. These values can be seen throughout its practices, scene space, and members. People hold this misconception that taekwondo is just a violent sport due to its fighting component; in reality, it involves a myriad of other components that express creativity, discipline, and technicality, ultimately making taekwondo an art.

One of the ways in which taekwondo members have established and solidified their identities in taekwondo is through “scene,” which exhibits taekwondo’s core values. Pepper G. Glass explains in *Doing Scene: Identity, Space, and the Interactional Accomplishment of Youth Culture* that there are three processes that participants of subcultures go through to make a scene space. First, members establish a space. Second, they add symbols and hold

events to transform the place into scene space. Last, they designate certain areas to manage the boundaries of the space (699). Essentially, scene is where a subculture's values are set. Taekwondo members' scene is their *dojang* (practice facility). My coaches first established the *dojang* space by finding a building in a good location that had a lot of open space to hold practices in. Once they bought it, they transformed it. They did this by putting down traditional red and blue mats, covering most of the floor. They put taekwondo trophies on one wall, a huge mirror on another, and plaques on another. They put up the taekwondo belts in ranked order above the mirror. The display of trophies, plaques, and ranking of belts signify both hard work and perseverance. In the front of the room, they hung up the Korean flag, which students pay their respects to before and after every practice. In one corner of the room, just outside my coach's office, there is a sign that lists the values of the *dojang*: respect, humility, perseverance, self-control, and honesty. Every aspect of the *dojang* has been intentionally transformed; it is where taekwondo members "develop [their] identities, beliefs, styles, practices, and artifacts" (Glass 697). Through the *dojang*'s specific style and exhibition of many artifacts, it encourages and reminds its members to always strive to adhere to its values.

These values are reinforced every practice — some days more than others. One day when it was strongly reinforced for me was during the summer a couple years ago. Practice had ended. Everyone was sweating in their *doboks*, which are the uniforms we have to wear for taekwondo — thick, long-sleeved uniforms. The usual members were quickly packing up to leave while some of my teammates and I stayed on the mats because we wanted to practice certain techniques a little more. The *ahjummas* (Korean middle-aged ladies, who were also my teammates' moms) were as loud as ever, ranting and giggling among themselves, while filling the *dojang* with the aroma of freshly peeled tangerines they had brought. My coach

came over to my friend and I and told us to go through all 24 of these routine sparring steps we have had to memorize over the years. We sighed because we wanted to work on new, cooler board-breaking kicks, but eventually we got into our correct positions, ready to do the steps. Each step requires two people — one for offense and one for defence. As soon as my coach walked away, my friend and I sloppily rushed through each one and *kihaped* (mandatory performed yelling for taekwondo techniques) unnecessarily loudly to make it seem like we were putting in more than enough effort. Of course, my coach glanced over, caught us, and came over again — but this time to lecture us. He asked us if we took taekwondo seriously. He reminded us that as higher belts, we set the example for lower belts, so we should always give our 100% for even the most simple and boring routine. By putting in this unceasing effort, we show respect, humility, and discipline as taekwondo athletes. “Understand?!” our coach boomed. “Yes sir!” we replied, lowering our heads a little to brace ourselves from the next thing he was going to say that we knew all too well of — push-ups. Sure enough, our coach told us to drop and do 30 push-ups as a consequence of our behavior. We silently protested, but immediately yelled, “Yes sir!” and dropped down to the floor. After each push-up, we had to yell the number of it followed by “Sir!” If our form was poor, or if we weren’t loud or fast enough, we knew he would make us start the count all over from the beginning. One of our teammates laughed at us, so of course, our coach made him join us in our punishment. Even in this consequence, we had to show our complete sincerity for the sport.

As much as taekwondo is about its values, its art aspect is what makes it a beautiful sport — not just one about fighting. It involves *poomsae*, in which there are many different types; *poomsae* is a set sequence of movements that consists of various techniques that are arranged in a specific and logical way. This is usually considered the art part of taekwondo.

This past week, I held a phone call interview with one of the students at my taekwondo *dojang*. One of the things I requested of him was to talk about how taekwondo is an art. He said:

“There are multiple aspects in which taekwondo is an art. It is so much more than what’s shown in the Olympics, which is just sparring. There’s also *poomsae*, freestyle demo, board breaking, etc. *Poomsae* is about how well you execute and interpret a given routine, and creative *poomsae* [a specific, freestyle form of *poomsae*] is even more than that: it is strict to a certain extent, and then there’s music, rhythm, and pace involved. Yes, you need physical abilities, but to put it all together requires your own interpretation of how taekwondo is. Things can be technically correct, but expression needs to be involved. Facial expressions, snap, trajectory, balance, eyesight, breathe - miniscule details that change your place in the competition — that’s the art.”

As he explains, there is a great amount of intentional expression and interpretation of details that are involved in taekwondo. There is freedom to execute certain techniques in certain ways to some extent through *poomsae*, and even more so in creative *poomsae*. The art ranges from disciplined movements to creatively interpreted ones.

Ultimately, taekwondo is so much more than meets the eye. It is not just a sport that involves fighting; that is just one aspect among many others. Taekwondo is a special form of martial arts that emphasizes specific values that reign over all other aspects. Through its scene space, artifacts, and overall subculture practices, it challenges its members to hold values of perseverance, humility, and discipline. At the same time, it promotes creativity and freedom of expression through its *poomsae*, which is essentially a form of art. Unpacking

these values and art aspects of taekwondo reveal its true and beautiful nature; it is more than just fighting — it is an art.

Works Cited

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