

Traditional martial arts versus martial sports: the philosophical and historical academic discourse

Udo MOENIG*^{1(ABCEF)}, Minho KIM^{2(BC)}, & Hyun Min CHOI^{1(BC)}

¹ Department of Taekwondo, Youngsan University (South Korea)

² Department of Asian Martial Arts, Youngsan University (South Korea)

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Abstract

There have been a variety of attempts by scholars to neatly define and categorize Asian martial arts terminology, often in connection with martial arts history, philosophy, and practical training activities. Overall, the English term 'martial arts' is typically linked to East Asian fighting activities. In comparison, Western fighting methods, such as boxing and wrestling, are almost never referred to as 'martial arts' but mostly labeled 'sports' or 'combat sports.' This is reflected in the basic split of the broader martial arts community, which is between the so-called *traditionalists* and the *modernists*. The former often stress spirituality and mysticism and claim that the primary aim of martial arts is self-defense, while the latter are commonly affiliated with sports training and competitive events. The rift between the two camps is not settled and it represents the main reason of the many conflicting opinions and arguments articulated in the martial arts discourse. The principle method of this study is an extensive literature review with the aim to clarify the confusion by pointing out the many paradoxes present in the historical and philosophical narratives in connection with practical training activities of the martial arts. Besides, this article represents also a critique of the general, academic discourse about the Asian martial arts, which often appears disingenuous and is generally dominated by the traditionalists.

Keywords: Martial arts; combat sports; martial arts terminology; martial arts philosophy; invention of tradition.

Artes marciales tradicionales versus deportes marciales: el discurso académico filosófico e histórico

Resumen

En el ámbito académico, se han realizado numerosos intentos para definir y categorizar con claridad la terminología de las artes marciales asiáticas, a menudo en relación con su historia, filosofía y prácticas de entrenamiento. En general, el término inglés "artes marciales" suele relacionarse con las artes de combate de Asia oriental. En comparación, las artes de combate occidentales, como el boxeo y la lucha libre, casi nunca se denominan "artes marciales", sino que en mayoritariamente se etiquetan como "deportes" o "deportes de combate". Esto se refleja en la división fundamental que existe en la comunidad de artes marciales, en general, entre los denominados *tradicionalistas* y los *modernistas*. Los primeros, a menudo, enfatizan la espiritualidad y el misticismo, y afirman que el objetivo principal de las artes marciales es la defensa personal, mientras que los segundos suelen estar relacionados con el entrenamiento deportivo y los eventos competitivos. La brecha entre las dos facciones no está resuelta y es la razón principal de las muchas opiniones y argumentos en conflicto articulados en el discurso de las artes marciales. El método principal de este estudio es una extensa revisión de la literatura, con el objetivo de aclarar la confusión, señalando las muchas paradojas presentes en las

Artes marciais tradicionais versus desportos marciais: o discurso académico filosófico e histórico

Resumo

Na academia, houve uma variedade de para definir e categorizar, claramente, a terminologia das artes marciais asiáticas, muitas vezes em conexão com à sua história, filosofia e atividades práticas de treino. No geral, o termo inglês "artes marciais" é, normalmente, associado às atividades de luta do Leste Asiático. Em comparação, os métodos de luta ocidentais, como o boxe e a luta livre, quase nunca são referidos como "artes marciais", mas rotulados como "desportos" ou "desportos de combate". Isso se reflete na divisão básica da comunidade mais ampla das artes marciais, que está entre os chamados *tradicionalistas* e os *modernistas*. Os primeiros costumam enfatizar a espiritualidade e o misticismo e afirmam que o objetivo principal das artes marciais é a autodefesa, enquanto os últimos são comumente associados ao treino desportivo e eventos competitivos. A cisão entre os dois campos não está resolvida e representa a principal razão de muitas opiniões e argumentos conflitantes articulados no discurso das artes marciais. O método principal deste estudo é uma extensa revisão da literatura com o objetivo de esclarecer a confusão, apontando os muitos

* Corresponding author: Udo Moenig (udomoenig@yahoo.com)

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narrativas históricas y filosóficas en relación con las prácticas de entrenamiento de las artes marciales. Además, este artículo representa también una crítica del discurso académico general sobre las artes marciales asiáticas, que a menudo parece falso y, generalmente, está dominado por los tradicionalistas.

Palabras clave: Artes marciales; Deportes de combate; terminología de artes marciales; filosofía de las artes marciales; invención de la tradición.

paradoxos presentes nas narrativas históricas e filosóficas em relação às atividades práticas de treino das artes marciais. Além disso, este artigo representa também uma crítica ao discurso académico geral sobre as artes marciais asiáticas, que, muitas vezes, parece falso e, geralmente, é dominado pelos tradicionalistas.

Palavras-chave: Artes marciais; desportos de combate; terminologia das artes marciais; filosofia das artes marciais; invenção da tradição.

1. Introduction

Scholarly studies about martial arts used to be not taken seriously by the general academia in the past. However, over the last decades, academic interest and scholarly journal and book publications with a focus on martial arts have mushroomed (Green & Svinth, 2010; Gutiérrez-García, et al., 2011; 2018; 2020). Donn F. Draeger (1922-1982), the often called ‘father of martial arts studies’ was the foremost pioneer in this regard. He promoted, albeit not very successfully, such an academic field of study through the International Hapology Society, founded in the ninetieth century and headed by him from the 1960s until his death (Miracle, 2015; 2016, pp. 95-117).¹ More recently, several academic journals dedicated exclusively to the study of martial arts have been established and a few are now internationally accredited.² Moreover, Paul Bowman from Cardiff Metropolitan University and founder of the Martial Arts Studies Research Network promoted the term *Martial Arts Studies*, which he named his academic journal after. Due to these efforts, the study of martial arts has finally become a legitimate academic field to some degree (Bowman, 2015).

All cultures and societies, which have been operating armies, established some kind of organized and formal military training for their soldiers and warriors. Such training activities constitute a form of ‘martial arts,’ even though the term is usually not used in connection with modern military training. The word ‘arts’ in this expression could be interpreted as simply referring to a ‘set of fighting skills,’ which is, however, often not the way the term is characterized. In fact, there have been a variety of attempts by scholars to neatly define and categorize martial arts terminology. The English term ‘martial arts’ is typically (but not always) linked to East Asian fighting activities and/or associated with a variety of gymnastic-like, breathing, and other health-related exercises and dimensions, such as the internal flow of *qi* (氣 ‘vital energy’), as well as acupuncture. Moreover, martial arts are often related to moral self-cultivation and presented as a medium for education, often coupled with certain spiritual, mystical, religious, ethical, and philosophical ideas and doctrine originating from East Asia. On the lighter side, they are portrayed by some as means for leisure, sports, fitness, and entertainment. Moreover, practical martial arts activities usually include certain armed fighting methods and unarmed fighting activities. Famous examples of the former are kendo and *kyūdō* (Japanese archery) and of the latter *taiji*, judo, karate, and taekwondo. Most people point to China, Japan, and Korea when referring to Asian martial arts, but some include Filipino martial arts and South East Asian fighting methods, such as *arnis* (Filipino stick fighting) or *Muay Thai* (Thai boxing), as well. Moreover, many of these Asian fighting activities are typically associated with East Asian cultural norms and/or historical events, also often in connection with nationalism (Kano, 2005,

Note on Romanization and names: The Romanization of Chinese words was conducted according to the Pinyin system (without tone markers), Japanese terms conforming to the Hepburn system, and Korean words following the McCune-Reischauer system. However, personal names of well-known individuals, such as Kano Jigoro, and foreign words assimilated into the English language, such as ‘judo’ and ‘taekwondo’, were left according to their arbitrary spelling and/or common usage. Chinese, Japanese, and Korean names are according to tradition, family names first.

¹ Other early pioneers in the field are Robert W. Smith (1926-2011) and Jon Bluming (1933-2018), who both trained judo in Japan together with Draeger (Miracle, 2015).

² The most internationally recognized are the *Archives of Budo* (SCI-E and SCOPUS-listed), the *Ido Movement for Culture - Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology* (ESCI and SCOPUS-listed), and the *Revista de Artes Marciales Asiáticas* (ESCI and SCOPUS-listed).



p. 23; Bennett, 2005; Shahar, 2008; Lorge, 2012, pp. 3-4; 195-202; Wetzel, 2016; Bowman, 2017a, pp. 53-75; Holt 2023). Overall, the English term, 'martial arts,' is only poorly defined and frequently interpreted in a variety of ways. In comparison, established Western fighting methods, such as boxing, wrestling, or fencing, are almost never referred to as 'martial arts' but mostly labeled 'sports' or 'combat sports' (Green, 2010, pp. xv-xviii).³

Regardless of these vague definitions, the principle split in the broader martial arts community is between the 'self-styled *traditionalists*' and the so-called '*modernists*.' The former often stress spirituality and mysticism and claim that the 'fundamental objective' of martial arts training is battle and 'self-defense,' while the latter are commonly affiliated with 'sports training' and competitive events. This division is evident by their contrasting training activities, namely 'forms versus sparring' (Moenig, 2015, pp. 1-2). The purpose of forms training is to copy the teacher as closely as possible by repeating a fixed set of choreographed movements over and over again, until the student is able of 'transcend[ing] the kata [form]' (Friday & Humitake, 1997, p. 107; see also Donohue, 2006), which, according to the traditionalists, is allegedly also a sufficient preparation for real battle or self-defense. This kind of forms training likely originated from 'Confucian pedagogy and its infatuation with ritual and ritualized action' (Friday & Humitake, 1997, p. 105). In contrast, free and creative interaction with the opponent is the objective of sparring and victory over the opponent is the goal in competitive events. Sparring activities, although difficult to compare with modern sports, existed already during ancient times in the Greco-Roman, Middle Eastern, and also Asian societies in the form of various wrestling and boxing systems and competitive events, but also with weapons, such as in the case of the Roman gladiators.

In this context, there is a lot of disagreement about the fundamental value of sports, since many martial arts leaders often thought of sport as merely a physical activity without any spiritual merits (Hurst, 1998, p. 5); on the other hand, they typically thought of traditional martial arts training as being very much a spiritual activity as well, by nurturing philosophical, ethical, and educational values and virtues in students. Moreover, traditionalists typically tie their training activities and philosophies to supposedly 'long' historical traditions, which are, however, often simply fictional and outright 'invented traditions,' as coined by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983). Lastly, these supposedly 'traditions' are often tied to nationalistic narratives of certain nations and cultures.

The rift between the two camps is not well recognized by most martial arts leaders and the general martial arts community as a whole; however, it is the main reason of the many conflicting opinions and arguments articulated in the martial arts discourse. On top of it, despite the animosity between the traditionalist and modernists, large segments of the martial arts community and leaders often claim that traditional forms training is the base for free sparring, despite the principal incompatibility and mismatch of both activities (Moenig, 2015, p. 2; pp. 175-184).

Thus, this study aims to clarify the confusion and contradictions in the general and academic martial arts discourse by pointing out the many paradoxes present in the historical and philosophical narratives in connection with practical training activities of martial arts. Besides, this article represents also a critique of the general, academic discourse about the Asian martial arts, which often appears disingenuous and is generally dominated by the traditionalists. The principal method of this study is an extensive literature review of relevant works published during the last century until the present. In addition to mostly English language publications, the review included also a few non-English sources in order to support some relevant points. Initially, this study will analyze the philosophical and historical discussions surrounding martial arts terminology, followed by giving a general idea about the cause of the schism between the traditionalists and the modernists. Subsequently, the focus is on the invented traditions of the East Asian martial arts narratives, which is then contrasted with the fact that most modern Asian martial arts have actually very short traditions. Lastly, this article will reflect on the fundamental incompatibilities of the traditional forms-based martial arts and the sparring-based martial sports.

³ For example, the Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica define 'martial art' solely in connection with China, Japan, and to a lesser extend Korea (Britannica, 2021).



2. The linguistic discussions surrounding Asian martial arts terminology in relationship to history, philosophy, and politics

The most widely-used generic term in the modern English language to address the topic of this study has been ‘martial arts,’ which is regionally most often associated with East Asia. However, in the East Asian languages of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean are a variety of collective terms describing the martial arts. Table 1 shows some of the most frequently used terms in these countries over the last centuries until the present.

These generic terms for martial arts, but also a variety of others, have been used in these respective countries during different historical periods or also often parallel during certain times. Besides, the names frequently bear various technical, historical, philosophical, regional, and/or political nuances (Hurst, 1998, pp. 11-12). However, all of these terms are mostly simply translated into the English language as ‘martial arts.’ In any case, these terms have been also dominating the academic, linguistic, and philosophical discussions surrounding the East Asian martial arts.

Table 1. Martial arts terminology in the respective transliterations of the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean languages.

| Chinese characters* | Chinese pronunciation | Japanese pronunciation | Korean pronunciation | Literal meaning |
|---------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| 武藝 | <i>wu-yi</i> | <i>bu-gei</i> | <i>mu-yae</i> | ‘martial arts’ |
| 武術 | <i>wu-shu</i> | <i>bu-jutsu</i> | <i>mu-sul</i> | ‘martial skills or technique’ |
| 武道 | <i>wu-dao*</i> | <i>bu-dō</i> | <i>mu-do</i> | ‘martial ways’ |

* The term *wudao* has been historically not used for martial arts in China (see the succeeding discussion; see Moenig, 2015, p. 199).

2.1. Japanese martial arts terminology

Overall, the general academic, linguistic, and philosophical discussion about the Japanese martial arts has been tied to the transition from the traditional to the modern martial arts, with the Meiji Restoration of 1968 representing the historical dividing line (Hurst, 1998, p. 12; Tanaka, 2003, p. 22; Watson, 2008). Draeger started this discussion in the West, when he distinguished between ‘classical *bujutsu*’ (古武術 *ko-bujutsu*) and ‘classical *budō*’ (古武道 *ko-budō*) in contrast to ‘modern *budō*’ starting with the Meiji Restoration (新武道 *shin-[new] budō*), by describing the evolution of the Japanese martial arts. The term ‘modern *bujutsu*’ (新武術 *shin-bujutsu*) plays a lesser role in this discussion since Draeger used it merely as a classification for practical police and military enforcement routines (outlined in three consecutive volumes: 1973a; 1973b; 1974). Moreover, he associated the term *bugei* with *ko-bujutsu* as somehow interchangeable in his earlier work (Draeger & Smith, 1969); although the term *bugei* featured generally less in the linguistic discussions about the Japanese martial arts. Draeger also claimed the purpose of the Japanese martial arts transformed from ‘combat’ to ‘art’ to ‘sports’ in association with these classifications. He preferred the English term ‘classical’ over ‘traditional,’ which only became later fashionable. Despite Draeger’s excellent pioneering work in the field, his classifications were not widely accepted and his theories are now often disputed and discredited (Friday & Humitake, 1997, p. 8; p. 36; Bittmann, 1999, p. 47 (footnote); p. 191; Green, 2010, pp. xv-xviii; Moenig, 2015, p. 147).

However, the main focus of the successive linguistic and philosophical discussions has been the change of the suffix of Japanese martial arts’ names, namely from *-jutsu* (術) to *-dō* (道) (Figure 1), or from ‘practical fighting skills’ to ‘spirituality,’ which was actually initiated by Kano Jigoro (Kanō Jigorō, 1860-1938), the founder of judo, himself (2005, p. 19; see also Naoki, 2005; Capener, 2005; Watson, 2008, pp. 14-16; Moenig & Kim, 2019). By 1919, except for karate,⁴ all Japanese martial arts adopted the suffix, when *ken-jutsu* (劍術 ‘sword skills’) changed to *ken-dō* (劍道 *kendo* or ‘way of the

⁴ Since karate was only introduced from Okinawa to Japan during the early 1920s, the name change, from *karate* to *karate-dō*, did not happen until the mid-1930s, when karate was more mainstream and gradually accepted as a ‘Japanese’ martial art.



sword'), *jū-jutsu* (柔術 'gentle skills') to *jū-dō* (柔道 judo or 'gentle ways'), and the generic term, *bu-jutsu* to *bu-dō*, and even *sumō* (Japanese wrestling) carried the suffix *-dō* for a while. This policy was 'officially' mandated by the conservative and nationalistic Dai-Nippon Butokukai or 'Greater Japan Martial Virtue Society,' which was in charge of martial arts matters and aimed for the restoration of the traditional Japanese martial arts (Bennett, 2015, p. 126; Moenig & Kim, 2019). Overall, the name changes were political motivated and first introduced by Kano when he established *jūdō*, which was based on various *jū-jutsu* styles. Moreover, the process symbolized also the sportification of the Japanese martial arts to some degree. However, by and large, the linguistic discussion seems mostly academic and was often carried on by non-Japanese scholars, since, according to Friday and Humitake (1997, pp. 6-8), most ordinary Japanese do not really distinguish much between the various terms.

2.2. Korean martial arts terminology

Using Draeger's ideas, some Korean scholars also tried to explain the historical evolution of Korean martial arts by defining and categorizing the transliterated terms *muyae*, *musul*, and *mudo*. However, Korean nationalistic and anti-Japanese sentiments are often guiding the narratives. Therefore, the term *mudo*, which is clearly tied to the Japanese martial arts, is sometimes rejected by Korean scholars, because of its associations with Imperial Japan (1868-1947), when Korea was annexed by Japan from 1910 to 1945. Therefore, Korean nationalism features often strongly in the academic discussions of the Korean martial arts, typically denying or downplaying any relationships with the Japanese martial arts. Generally, Korean scholars advocate the use of the term *muyae*, because they argue that the term *musul* is officially used in Mainland China and the term *mudo* has its negative historical associations with Japan. However, ordinary Korean martial arts practitioners seem to use all three terms mostly in interchangeable ways, much in the sense as the term 'martial arts' is used in English (Na, 2005; Lee, 2017; Kim et al., 2001; Yang, 1999; Johnson, 2017; Lewis, 2010).⁵ Overall, the rejection of the term *mudo* by some Korean scholars is utterly disingenuous, since most modern Korean martial arts were introduced during the 20th century from Japan and the suffix *-do* is attached to almost all of them, such as in *taekwon-do*, *hapki-do* (合氣道 Japanese: *aikidō* or 'way of the combined energy'), *yu-do* (judo), and *kōm-do* (kendo). And except of taekwondo, these terms simply represent the Korean transliterations of the respective Japanese martial arts names. The term 'taekwondo'⁶ was only coined in 1955, and earlier names for taekwondo were all Japanese karate-

Figure 1. The Chinese character most often associated with martial arts and spirituality, literally 'way' (Chinese: *dao*; Japanese: *dō*; Korean: *do*). However, in terms of martial arts terminology, the character is only representative for the Japanese and Korean martial arts. (Source: public domain).



⁵ A non-Korean, John Johnson (2017), also uses Draeger's theory, although slightly changing the order to fit a Korean framework, namely from *musul* to *muyae* to *mudo*. Moreover, he applies the concept not from a historical context but as an educational experience of individuals, when they supposedly go to different learning stages in their martial arts progression. Johnson also tries to emphasize how different and unique the Korean martial arts are, while actually simply using Japanese martial arts terminology and ideas.

⁶ The term taekwondo (跆拳道) is usually vaguely translated somehow like the 'way of the fist and kicking,' which represents a mistranslation since the first character (跆 't'ae' or 'tae') does not refer to kicking but means 'to trample' or 'to step down.' The choice of the name was a political one, because the term taekwondo sounds similar to *t'aekkyōn* (see Moenig, 2015, 48-49).



based terms.⁷ Naturally, many of these martial arts transformed greatly since their introduction from Japan to Korea. In any case, the use of the suffix *-do* or *-dō* in martial arts names indicates clearly Japanese origins and its wider use became only fashionable during the 20th century (Moenig & Kim, 2016, p. 142).

2.3. Chinese martial arts terminology

In the case of the Chinese martial arts, a discussion focusing on these three terms never arose, since they never introduced the term *wudao* or ‘martial ways.’ Even though Chinese martial arts are often associated with Taoism (道 *dao*), the term was, however, never attached to Chinese martial arts terminology. Moreover, similar to Korea, the term *budō* or *wudao* is associated by the Chinese with Imperial Japan and Japanese nationalism. As a result, the term has never been considered in the Chinese martial arts discourse.⁸ On the other hand, the linguistic discussions surrounding the Chinese martial arts have been focusing mostly on the divide between the Communist Mainland and the language used in breakaway Taiwan with the politics involved. Before the 20th century, the Chinese used a great variety of regional martial arts names, among them also *wuyi*, until the Chinese Nationalists (the Kuomintang Party) introduced the generic term *guoshu* (國術 ‘national skill or technique’) for martial arts in 1928. After the Nationalists’ defeat and retreat to Taiwan in 1949, the Communist government of the Mainland replaced the term ‘*guoshu*’ with ‘*wushu*’ or ‘martial skills’ as a general term for martial arts activities. The name change was obviously for political reasons, to distinguish from the terminology introduced by the Nationalists. Moreover, there is an often-made sub-division between the internal and external and Northern and Southern styles. However, the often-used popular term in English for Chinese martial arts, kungfu (功夫 *gongfu*; literally ‘effort,’ ‘work,’ or ‘ability’), is not explicitly reserved for martial arts but has broader meanings in China, related to ‘effort, skill, accomplishment, or a period of time’ (Lorge, 2012, p. 9; p. 235).

2.4. Misunderstandings regarding martial arts terminology

In other languages, as for example in German, the foremost used term to describe Asian martial arts related activities has been ‘*Kampfsport*,’ literally ‘combat sports’; although, arguably, the term conveys, for most ordinary individuals, similar meanings as the term ‘martial arts’ communicates in English. On the other hand, the term ‘*Kampfkunst*,’ literally ‘martial arts,’ is used to a much lesser degree (Wetzler, 2015, p. 23, footnote 8; pp. 24-5), mostly by traditionalist-minded individuals.

Another good example of linguistic misunderstandings in the martial arts discourse is the term ‘Brazilian *jiu-jitsu*.’ The spelling of the word represents one of the many random Romanization forms of Asian martial arts terminology in general. Brazilian *jiu-jitsu* is mostly a sparring-based competition sport originating from *jūdō*, which in turn was based on conventional Japanese *jū-jitsu*. Most of the *jū-jitsu* styles were eventually incorporated under the umbrella of Kano’s powerful Kōdōkan (講道館 ‘place for the study of the way’; the headquarters) *jūdō*. However, the name *jū-jitsu* was introduced to Brazil by Maeda Mitsuyo (1878-1941) in 1914, when the term *jūdō* was not universally accepted yet in Japan (Miracle, 2016, p. 131); therefore, its use over the term *jūdō* was arbitrary and by accident. Lastly, the pronunciation and the arbitrary Romanized spelling are partly the result of miss-pronunciations by early Brazilian athletes and instructors and/or perhaps also the result of Hancock H. Irving’s publication, *The complete Kano jiu-jitsu (judo)*, of 1905. Indeed, the term *jiu-jitsu* (and also similar terms) was popular in the West before Hancock’s book was published. For example, in 1888 Kano and Thomas Lindsay gave a lecture at the Asiatic Society of Japan in Yokohama entitled ‘Jiu-jitsu: The Old Samurai Art of Fighting Without Weapons.’ Brousse (2000) states that the word *jiu-jitsu* appeared in England in 1891, and in France in 1895. According to Brousse and

⁷ The formerly used terms *kongsudo* (空手道 ‘way of the empty hand’) and *tangsudo* (唐手道 ‘way of the Tang [China] hand’) are both transliterations of the term *karate-dō*, and *kwōnbōp* (拳法 Chinese: ‘*quanfa*’ or ‘fist method’) is a Chinese martial arts term, which was, however, also used as a karate term (Japanese: *kenpō*).

⁸ Only a few Western-based martial arts instructors or in popular culture (in articles on the internet), who were obviously not aware of any political and historical issues, attached the suffix *-do* or *-dao* to Chinese martial arts names in very recent times.



Matsumoto (1999, p. 92), 'Jujutsu sold well in the early days of this century. Kano remarked that Japan rapidly switched to the term Judo whereas the term jujutsu was kept for long afterward overseas.' The pronunciation and the arbitrary Romanized spellings are partly the result of miss-pronunciations which were very common in many Western countries by the end of the 19th century and first decade of the 20th century.

The philosophical and linguistic discussions surrounding martial arts demonstrate that one should not read too much into specific martial arts names, since the use of certain terminology over others has been often arbitrary, customary, culturally relative, and/or motivated by nationalism. Moreover, many of the linguistic confusions are often the result of a lack of knowledge of Asian languages, history, philosophy, and culture in general. However, the terms are not necessarily mutually exclusive in general idea or meaning. Besides, specific martial arts terminology in line with certain training activities was often associated with or adopted by the traditionalists in order to draw a distinction to the modernists, which will be the focus of the following discussion.

3. Traditionalists versus modernists

Before the introduction of firearms during the 10th century in China, the bow and arrow was one of the oldest and most-used weapons for practical battlefield-purpose among the traditional Asian martial arts; in stark contrast to the sword, which was only considered as a 'supplementary' weapon of last means during battle (Interview with Friday, 2009; Hurst, 1998, p. 34). It is perhaps very difficult to compare ancient martial arts and modern martial arts, since there has been a considerable cultural and practical transformation of these activities. The original objective of martial arts training was combat and self-defense, but the purpose of many modern martial arts changed to a variety of activities, which certainly are no longer intended for or geared toward battlefield use. Draeger (1974, p. 77) asserts that the Japanese were the 'first' to pioneer the Asian martial arts when swordsmanship, which constituted the most dignified discipline in the Samurai ethos, turned from '*kenjutsu*' to '*kendō*.' During this course, the kendo community initiated the continuing antagonism between promoters of the traditional forms/self-defense and the newly-created sparring/sport systems (Moenig, 2015, p. 169). With the broader use of the modern *bōgu* (防具 protective 'armor') and the *shinai* (竹刀 literally 'to bend' or 'to flex,' referring to the bamboo sword) in connection with safety rules during sparring in the 17th century, the ongoing debate about realism in martial arts training started. Traditionalists claim that sports training introduced rules and protective equipment and, consequently, the mindset is different as in real battle, whereas the modernists argue that one cannot attain sufficient skills, timing, and determination by constantly rehearsing a *kata* and fighting with an imaginary opponent (Friday & Humitake, 1997, p. 119). And similar arguments between the traditionalists and the modernists still shape the philosophical debate among most members of the East Asian martial arts community. According to Steven Capener (2020, p. 32),

This [dispute] is the case with some forms of Chinese Wushu, Japanese Karate, and Korean Taekwondo. In Taekwondo in particular [...] traditionalists insisting that they embody the repository of Taekwondo's true essence as a martial art of self-defense, something they claim that sport Taekwondo has diluted [...] thereby denying any philosophical value to martial sport. Ironically, they rely for this deadliness on forms of training that require either no opponent or an opponent with minimal contact and for philosophical superiority on esoteric Asian mysticism.

A resolution to the disagreement seemed illusive until the debut of the Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) competitions during the early 1990s. As a result of these events, the arguments of the traditionalists appear increasingly hollow and greatly canceled out, since the initial MMA fights featured no protective equipment (except a mouthpiece and a groin protector), no time-limitations, and had only very limited rules (only prohibiting eye gouging, biting, hair pulling, and strikes to the genitals); they resembled the closest to 'real' unarmed combat in such circumstances. However, athletes from traditional martial arts were not able to win any of these tournaments and have been largely forced out of these events altogether (Capener, 2005, p. 345; Moenig, 2015, p. 192; Bowman, 2016, p. 926). Thus, forms training, as a solo-performance promoted by the traditionalists, is not a sufficient method to gain proficiency in self-defense. This brings us also to the question, which activity is actually older, sparring-based martial arts or forms-based martial arts.



4. How old are 'traditional' Asian martial arts?

The term 'traditional martial arts' is perhaps one of the most misrepresented and misused terms in the general discussion surrounding martial arts. 'Traditional' projects an image of a long history and various martial arts claim traditions that reach back many hundreds or even thousands of years. In reality, most unarmed Chinese martial arts, such as the Shaolin fighting traditions (*quan*), the many styles of *taiji* (太極 'supreme ultimate') or *taijiquan* (太極拳 'supreme ultimate fist'), and the Southern styles of *Hong jiaquan* (洪家拳 'Hong clan fist') and *quanfa* (拳法 'fist method'), only became more sophisticated and popular during the 17th century or later (Shahar, 2008, pp. 113-137; Nam & Yi, 2003, p. 10). In fact, the most famous of the *taiji* styles, the 24-movement pattern, called *ganhwa taijiquan* (mostly simply referred to as *taiji*) was only created in 1954 on urge of the Communist Chinese government, since it needed a simple gymnastic activity for the masses (Nam & Yi, 2003, p. 16). In the Japanese martial arts tradition, forms-based martial arts developed only because of relatively stable and peaceful periods and the lack of real battles. Most modern Japanese martial arts, such as *sūmo* (Japanese wrestling) and *aikidō*, were only structured to their present form or created after the Meiji Restoration of 1868; judo is not older than about 140 years, and modern Japanese karate was only introduced from Okinawa to Japan in 1922, while the first mentioning of unarmed fighting activities in Okinawan records dates back only to the late 17th century (McCarthy, 2008, p. 14; Bittmann, 1999, p. 92). In regards to Korean martial arts, historical discussions are always very controversial and disputed. However, this study argues that taekwondo is not older than about sixty years, when it gradually started to distinguish from Japanese karate; other modern Korean martial arts were also mostly introduced from Japan or newly created during the second half of the 20th century (Capener, 1995; Madis, 2003; Moenig, 2015, pp. 35-45).⁹

On the other hand, modern western boxing, for example, has actually a tradition as long as or even longer than many East Asian martial arts, formalized more or less to its present form during the mid-19th century when modern rules and boxing gloves were introduced (Marquess of Queensberry rules, n. d.); although nobody would ever identify or label boxing a 'traditional martial art.' Moreover, boxing and, especially, wrestling can be traced back to the Greco-Roman period (332 BCE – 642 CE), ancient Egypt, and other early Middle Eastern civilizations, which makes these activities much older than most recorded Asian unarmed martial arts activities, except perhaps of the various Asian wrestling traditions. Moreover, these Western fighting traditions are often much better recorded than most of the East Asian martial arts activities. Nevertheless, the term 'traditional' seems wholly reserved as a reference for Asian martial arts. The overused term 'traditional' in connection with Asian martial arts appears often a selling point for instructors and authors, who want to promote their martial arts by giving them legacy, credibility, and an aura of mysticism and exoticism. However, despite this popular portrayal, a large number of modern Asian martial arts, especially the unarmed systems, are in fact not old but merely products or creations of the last few hundred years or the last century. As a matter of fact, sparring-based fighting activities are generally much older than solely forms-based martial arts.

5. The modernization of the East Asian martial arts and the invention of traditions in the process

Quoting Bowman in an interview, 'it looks like there just is a competition among East Asian countries, especially, China, Japan, and Korea, to just have the oldest martial culture, to have the oldest tradition' (Bowman as interviewer, 2020, minute 7). And these traditions are often invented in recent times and frequently tied to nationalism. Moreover, in connection to tradition, the educational, ethical, and philosophical aspects of martial arts are often strongly emphasized and dominant (Svitych, 2021; Gutiérrez-García, 2022). However, many elements of martial arts philosophy and education are really only common East Asian cultural values, originating from Confucian, Buddhism, Taoism, or other China-based, Oriental thought systems (Allen, 2021). As a

⁹ Actually, Korean *kuksul* (國術 Chinese: *guoshu*) is an offspring of *hapkido*, therefore Japanese *aikidō*-based, but transformed considerably over the decades. *Kuksul* was originally only named after Chinese martial arts, but it incorporated some Chinese training elements later, which are not present in *hapkido*.



result, despite the competition for the longest martial arts tradition between these respective countries, the narratives invented carry often similarities.

5.1. The Chinese martial arts

The Chinese martial arts have their fair share of invented traditions (Judkins & Nielson, 2015), and the popular kungfu image of unarmed Shaolin monks battling hordes of villains is representative of Chinese martial arts. However, this impression was largely a creation of the Hollywood and Hong Kong film industries when they started producing martial arts movies during the 1970s (Miracle, 2016, pp. 123-130). On the contrary, the original association of the Shaolin monks with martial arts was likely the result of the Shaolin Monastery's large land possessions, which simply required protection. Moreover, the staff was the preferred training tool of the Shaolin monks and 'hand combat' methods, *quan* (拳 'fist'), developed much later and became only more sophisticated during the 17th century. Moreover, during this time, *quan* was associated with acupuncture, *qi*, and 'philosophical and medical dimensions' and both methods, staff training and *quan*, represented rather means for 'Buddhist self-cultivation' than activities for real battlefield use (Shahar, 2008, p. 2; pp. 113-137).

Overall, the Chinese martial arts began to modernize late in comparison to the Japanese martial arts. This was probably the result of the general modernization process, which started later in China in comparison to the Japanese Meiji Restoration. Another problem was that the Chinese martial arts community was regionally very fragmented and geographically located in a much larger country than Japan. Moreover, the social chaos, rebellions, and unrest during the late Qing dynasty (1636-1912) and its resistance to modernization, affected also the military and the martial arts. The Opium War (1839-1842) and the Boxer Uprising (1898-1901) proved the inferiority of the traditional Chinese martial arts in comparison to modern Western firearms and fighting methods. The Boxer Uprising, in particular, was an 'anti-foreign and anti-Christian' rebellion by a group of Chinese martial artists, who believed they could defeat Western firearms with mostly traditional Chinese weapons, such as swords and spears. Their faith was guided by the belief in supernatural powers and esoteric practices for improving 'internal' strength to magically resist bullets, which, albeit, ended in their slaughter. Only after the Nationalists' revolution of 1911-1912, and the establishment of the Republic of China, the general modernization process began (Fairbank, 1983, pp. 176-219; Lorge, 2012, pp. 188-191).

The Nationalist government encouraged the modernization and standardization of the Chinese martial arts. The aim was that martial arts should serve as a principal tool to strengthen Chinese nationalism, improve the general health of the people, and to serve as a form of a uniquely Chinese education system. The period from the 1910s to the 1930s 'became the golden age of Chinese martial arts,' when also the term *guoshu* (now renamed *wushu*) was adopted as a generic name. Moreover, the process also accompanied a glorification of the martial arts. Subsequently, in the second half of the 20th century, the Chinese martial arts became increasingly popular and mystified through novels, and then from the 1970s on through the film industry, which contributed also to their spread to the West (Zhouxiang, 2021, p. 31). In the case of the Chinese martial arts, the film industry, especially, was a major contributor of invented traditions and popular images.

5.2. The Japanese martial arts

Several influential authors on Japanese martial arts describe the *bushi* (or samurai) ethos and their 'ways,' *bushidō* (武士道 'way of the warrior'), largely as a modern invention of the Japanese Imperial era and the concept was actually not well-known before the 20th century. The popularization of the *bushidō* ethos brought along the romanticization and idolization of the traditional Japanese martial arts and the samurai warriors (Friday & Humitake, 1997; Gainty, 2013, pp. 16-34; Moenig & Kim, 2019; Benesh, 2016; Sánchez-García, 2019; 2023; Grigoris, *interview with Friday, 2021*).

On the other hand, Western misperceptions about the *bushidō* ethos were initially strongly influenced by Nitobe Inazō's work, *Bushido – The soul of Japan* (1899, written and published first in English), which wrongly equated *bushidō* with Western chivalry. Somehow similar to the case of Nitobe, Eugen Herriegel, a German philosophy professor, who taught in Japan during the 1920s, exaggerated the Zen (禪 Chinese: Chan) Buddhist aspect in association with the Japanese martial arts,



when he published his influential work, *Zen in the art of archery* (initially in German, in 1936). This work contributed to a lot of misperceptions about the Japanese martial arts in the West and later after its translation also in Japan (Yamada, 2003; Bodiford, 2005; Suzuki, 2005, pp. 16-17; Sánchez-García, 2019; 2023). Draeger (1973a; b; 1974) probably has also his fair share about misrepresentations of the Zen aspect. And during the 1930s, Funakoshi Gichin (1935/2005, p. 7; see following discussion about Funakoshi) started associating karate strongly with Zen ideas and the Shaolin temple in order to give karate a philosophical foundation, which it lacked in Okinawa. The Zen aspect, while existing to some degree in the Japanese martial arts, seems especially distorted and exaggerated in the philosophical discussions surrounding the Japanese martial arts.

At the same time, during the colonial quests and wars of Imperial Japan, the martial arts became a symbol of Japanese militarism and nationalism. In this development, the ultranationalist Dai-Nippon Butokukai, founded in 1895, played a leading role (Bennett, 2015, pp. 123-162; Miracle, 2016, pp. 44-63; see also Gainty, 2013; and Moenig & Kim, 2019; Sánchez-García, 2019; 2023). During this period, nationalistic elements, such as saluting to the national flag (displayed on the wall of every martial arts school) and swearing alliance to the country were integrated into general martial arts training. In addition, militaristic training methods, such as lining up in formations and answering in loud voices or yelling were added, as well (Madis, 2003, 188-189). Ironically, these elements in martial arts training originated mostly from the West. Kano and Funakoshi also promoted the idea of the supposedly 'peaceful and defensive nature' of martial arts education, which directly contradicted the original purpose of martial arts training, namely preparation for war and battle and was also the way the government of Imperial Japan actually utilized the martial arts (Moenig, 2015, pp. 145-169). Most of these recently invented rituals, traditions, and philosophical ideas are still present in the majority of martial arts schools throughout the world, often regardless of Japanese, Korean, or Chinese origins.

5.3. The Korean martial arts

The general philosophical martial arts discourse in South Korea is often deeply tied to or tangled with dubious nationalistic and historical narratives. Taekwondo is by far the most representative and dominant of the Korean martial arts and so-called 'taekwondo philosophy' has always been only vaguely defined, but the discourse has been dominated by certain popular themes and topics often borrowed from the Japanese martial arts. Nationalism and militarism, which featured strongly in the Japanese martial arts of Imperial Japan, were also embraced by the taekwondo leaders under the evolving authoritarian regimes of South Korea's post-colonial period and, similar to judo and karate, contradicted the alleged 'peaceful nature' of taekwondo. Moreover, the term 'ancient' features often central in the Korean martial arts discussion, which typically claims a history of 2000 years (see the latest official textbook of the Kukkiwon, Song et al., 2022, pp. 40-101). This was well-articulated by Bowman (interviewer, 2020, minute 22), when he talked about participating at a conference at the Taekwondowon, Muju, South Korea, in 2015: 'One paper after another, people talking about ancient this and ancient that, and ancient taekwondo, and ancient *t'aekkyōn*.'

With ever increasing nationalism in the post-colonial period, many taekwondo leaders embraced the concept of the '*hwarang* spirit,' which featured strongly in the South Korean, nationalistic ideology of the military in the post-colonial period. Historically, however, there exists no evidence that the *hwarang* had been any kind of warrior group or organization. Instead, the idea of *hwarang-do* (花郎道), or the 'way of the *hwarang*,' had been invented and modeled after the nationalistic Japanese *bushidō* (Korean: *musado*) ideology. In fact, ancient Korean literature mentions the term '*hwarang-do*' (花郎徒), which means, however, 'fellows of the *hwarang*.' But, in South Korean post-liberation publications, the last character '*do*' (徒 'fellows' or 'group') had been often replaced, deliberately or by accident, with the character for 'way' (道), which bears the common pronunciation '*do*' and is commonly associated with martial arts ideology and philosophy (Moenig, & Kim, 2016, p. 143).

Nowadays, many of the former narratives linger on in the general historical and philosophical presentation of taekwondo, such as the current emphasis on the so-called 'taekwondo spirit.' The supposedly new concept is propagated by the Kukkiwon, the so-called 'World Taekwondo



Headquarters,' but seemingly mirrors the '*hwarang* spirit.' The term 'taekwondo spirit' lacked precise definition and a rationale for a while, but lately is associated with the concepts of *kūkki* (克己 'self-denial') and *hongik* (弘益 'public benefit') and defined as the principle of '[o]vercom[ing] yourself and benefit[ing] the world' (Kukkiwon's latest official textbook by Song et al., 2022, p. 106). This disingenuous definition was basically borrowed from the ideology of the 'Fundamental Act on Education' (2021) passed by the South Korean National Assembly, which is based on the ancient Tangun foundation myth of Korea.

Traditional martial arts in Korea, with the exceptions of archery and wrestling (now called *ssirūm*), disappeared during the Chosŏn period (1392-1897), which followed a Neo-Confucian ideology and the Confucian elite dismissed and neglected martial arts activities. As a result, only when the Japanese reintroduced martial arts to Korea, initially in the form of judo and kendo, during the 1890s and the early 20th century, martial arts began to flourish again. Subsequently, karate was first introduced by Koreans, who learned karate in Japan, to Korea between 1944 and 1946. Besides, an indigenous Korean fight-like and dance-like folk game, called '*t'aekkyŏn*,' which disappeared during the late 19th century, was revived during the late 1950s. The emerging taekwondo community of the late 1950s and 1960s was the first to associate *t'aekkyŏn* with martial arts, when they tentatively proclaimed that *t'aekkyŏn* was one of its forerunners. However, in fact, there are no historical connections of any of the ancient Korean martial arts to any of the modern Korean martial arts (Capener, 1995; Madis, 2003; Moenig, 2015 pp. 13-33; Moenig & Kim, 2016).¹⁰ Given the actual, short history of taekwondo, which started around Korea's colonial liberation, in 1945, the term 'traditional' in connection with taekwondo makes little sense. However, typically, the traditionalists 'invent history' and often tie history to a variety of doctrine and to nationalism, which taekwondo presents an excellent example of.

6. The fundamental incompatibilities of the traditional martial arts and the martial sports

As discussed, many of the allegedly 'traditional' and 'ancient' features associated with East Asian martial arts are actually often common Asian cultural values or are largely products of East Asia's modernization process during the during the late 19th and early 20th century. The introduction of a sports character (varying in degree among the different martial arts), the incorporation of a scientific approach to training and education, the adoption of nationalistic elements to martial arts training and ideology, the formation of national and international umbrella organizations, and many of the modern training structures are also examples of this modernization process. And in fact, all these aspects were adopted from the West. On the other hand, some of the spiritual aspects attached to the Asian martial arts during that time were often a backlash and a rejection of the general westernization and modernization process of the East Asian societies, as for example seen in the Chinese Boxer Uprising. In the realm of martial arts, this backlash is especially evident in the rejection of the sports character by proponents of traditional martial arts. This resulted also in the fundamental incompatibly between the rigid traditional forms-based training, advocated by the traditionalists, and the flexible sparring/sports-based training, promoted by the modernists.

6.1. The Chinese martial arts

A modern sparring-based, sporting-style of Chinese martial arts was only established in 1928, named *sanda* (散打 'free fighting'), with little connections to traditional Chinese martial arts. It is essentially similar to modern kick-boxing, using boxing gloves, headgear, and a light body protector nowadays, but allowing additionally a variety of takedowns and throwing techniques, mostly similar to Western wrestling. In terms of protective gear and certain rules, *sanda* was possibly influenced by Muay Thai, since Muay Thai adopted Western boxing gloves in 1929, and *sanda* subsequently during the early 1930s (Kraitus & Kraitus, 1988, p. 15; Lorge, 2012, p. 235; Jiao, 2017). At the same time, a forms-based competitive event was introduced, named *taolu* (套路 'pattern'), which is usually a solo-performance but also sometimes a choreographed partner routine. Despite being associated with

¹⁰ Allan Bäck (2017), for example, admits the flawed historically narratives, but still tries to advocate that myths enriches the Asian martial arts and the educational process connected to them.



sporting events, *taolu* is an activity similar to traditional forms training. With the introduction of *sanda* and *taolu*, the discourse regarding the Chinese martial developed as follows:

Some criticize [...] of transforming wushu into a modern competitive sport and believe [...] the highly standardized taolu and sanda competitions has led to the decline of traditional wushu. Some believe that wushu is totally different from Western sport and therefore should keep its traditional character. (Zhouxiang, 2021, p. 33)

Sanda and *taolu* were both demonstration sport events at the Beijing Olympics in 2008. However, even after intense lobbying by the Chinese government, both activities have not been promoted to official Olympic sports status. The Chinese government sees the traditional martial arts as a cultural heritage, but, unlike the traditionalists, seems to draw no clear distinction to the modern competition-based *sanda* and *taolu*. Thus, it was very embarrassing when recently some *taiji* and other traditional Chinese martial arts masters, delusional about their practical fighting skills, did not mind challenging MMA fighters in bare-knuckle bouts. However, the ‘masters’ became quickly obliterated and humiliated in these contests. These bouts have been widely popularized on YouTube and other social media to the displeasure of the Chinese government, which basically considers the act as an insult to Chinese cultural heritage (see for example on YouTube: TotallyPointlessTV, 2022).

6.2. The Japanese martial arts

Kano Jigoro was the most important leader in the general modernization drive of the Japanese martial arts and beyond. He restructured the Japanese *jūjutsu* systems and named his style ‘*jūdō*.’ Kano, a school educator, incorporated scientific training methods and he introduced also free sparring with rules and patting mats with an emphasis on the safety of practitioners. However, Kano seemed confused about his exact position: On the one hand, he wanted judo to become an Olympic sport; on the other hand, he was critical of sports competitions and advocated that the principal goal of judo should be teaching higher values. Kano saw judo ‘as a way of life’ (Carr, 1993; Gainty, 2013, pp. 25-26.) In Kano’s own words, “‘do’ (way) is the major focus [...] ‘jutsu’ (skill) is incidental’ (Kano, 2005, p. 19). Funakoshi Gichin (1868-1957), the so-called ‘father’ of Japanese *karate-dō*, mimicked and adopted many of Kano’s modernizations and ideas, such as introducing the white, customary training uniform and color belt ranking system, coupled with standardized tests and training instructions. Most of the Japanese martial arts followed Kano’s lead and adopted at least some of his standards. On the other hand, Funakoshi clearly rejected the sports and sparring aspect and so did Ueshiba Morihei (1883-1969), the cult-like founder of *aikidō*, since *aikidō* training never incorporated any free sparring elements at all. Only Funakoshi’s students and his third son, Funakoshi Gigō (1906-1945), introduced and developed the sparring aspect (non-contact or light contact) in karate to some degree (Moenig, 2015, p. 88). Many of the same standards were transferred to Korea with the introduction of the Japanese martial arts and these elements are still clearly visible today.

In general, the period from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries certainly accompanied a universal modernization process of the Japanese martial arts. While Kano promoted a drive toward spirituality, which the traditionalists cherish so much, at the same time, he was also strongly responsible for the sportification process of the martial arts and pursued human perfection through rationalism, by using education as a main means. A similar process happened already earlier in swordsmanship during the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), when heightened spirituality gave also rise to a sport-based training activity, which culminated into the modern sparring-based kendo. Therefore, sportification and spirituality of the Japanese martial arts are also interrelated to some degree; a contradiction in the discussion seemingly unacknowledged by the traditionalists’ camp.

Nowadays, judo is mostly perceived as a sport and it has actually matching training elements, since partner exercises and the techniques are similar executed as applied in sparring. Therefore, partner exercises represent a suitable preparation for sparring;¹¹ unlike in karate, which kept the

¹¹ On a higher level in judo are also sets of ritualized *kata* for self-defense, but the principle execution of technique is similar to the execution of sparring technique.

mismatching forms (solo-performance) and sparring (partner activity) elements as general training activities (Friday & Humitake, 1997, pp. 102-103). Most disqualifying is that the general execution of techniques, such as steps, and punching and kicking techniques, during both activities is often biomechanical very different. And this lack of compatibility of training activities developed especially strongly in karate's offspring, namely Korean taekwondo.

6.3. The Korean martial arts

In taekwondo circles, the term 'traditional taekwondo' is often used to create a distinction to sport/sparring taekwondo (Dziwenka & Johnson, 2015). The sparring component in taekwondo training, at least in some schools, began to rise during the mid- and late 1950s in South Korea, and formally in 1963, with the introduction of full-contact competitions, which was different from karate's non-contact or light-contact sparring engagements. Nevertheless, the forms/self-defense element is labeled 'traditional'; although dating back to its origins only about a decade earlier. Moreover, the full-contact sparring element actually distinguished taekwondo from karate. Full-contact sparring was not widespread in Japanese karate schools at that time, and only some spectacular full-contact, exhibition matches for popular entertainment were occasionally organized. In addition, some fringe elements of the Japanese karate community, such as the *Kanbukan* (韓武館 'Korean martial house' or school; renamed *Renbukai* during the early 1950s) karate during the 1940s, and during the late 1950s, the *Kyokushin* karate style, started to perform full-contact sparring. Incidentally, both styles were actually established by Koreans who lived in Japan and learned karate there (Moenig, 2015, pp. 84-97).

Nowadays, taekwondo embraces many training activities, such as sparring, forms training, demonstration taekwondo, and sometimes other activities like aerobics and all kinds of play-like activities for young children. However, the main split is still between 'traditional (forms/self-defense) taekwondo,' which is linked to orthodox East Asian martial arts training, and 'sparring/competition taekwondo,' which is the Olympic sport (Moenig, 2015, p. 2; Dziwenka & Johnson, 2015). This contradiction in training activities, history, and philosophy was articulated as follows:

Despite this clear dichotomy, taekwondo is historically and philosophically still presented as a single entity that seeks common goals, and claims to have compatible, consolidated training activities [... And m]ost modern day taekwondo leaders want to preserve this [fictional] image of unity. (Moenig, 2015, p. 2)

And these contradictions are present in most Asian martial arts to some degree. Naturally, practitioners of sparring-based martial arts also repeat certain movements, techniques, and combinations, which represents also a kind of 'forms training,' albeit meant as a preparation with the aim of improving efficiency in sparring. On the other hand, solely forms-based martial arts activities developed as a substitute for the lack of participation in real battles, and forms 'practice became an end in and of itself' (Friday & Humitake, 1997, p. 118; see also Moenig, 2015, pp. 175-185).

7. Conclusions

There is a multitude of definitions of the term 'martial arts,' but Bowman (2017b) seems to reject the necessity of defining the term altogether. Despite a number of different opinions, the term is geographically, culturally, and philosophically most frequently associated with East Asia (see also Green, 2010, pp. xv-xviii). In this context, followers and leaders of traditional martial arts seem to have often monopolist the discussion about philosophy and the educational values of martial arts. These individuals appear to hold martial arts philosophy and education hostage with outdated and often irrational views and training priorities (i.e. forms training), in opposition to more practical, sports-based, and rational training methods, concepts, and research. As a result, mysticism, esotericism, exoticism, and romantic and idealistic ideas about martial arts keep often dominating the dialogue. Furthermore, in general, nationalistic, historical narratives tend to frequently cloud an honest discussion about the Asian martial arts. And since martial arts traditions have often been rooted in invented, historical narratives, the philosophies connected to these fictional narratives



appear often fanciful and hollow. Overall, these contradictions are apparent to various degrees in most Asian martial arts.

Actually, many aspects of Asian martial arts education and philosophy represent only ordinary East Asian cultural norms and customs, such as bowing or showing respect for the elders, which are apparent in many walks of life in East Asian societies. These traditions are not reserved for the Asian martial arts and they are not mystical, romantic, or esoteric in any sense. Moreover, many of the allegedly 'traditional' and 'ancient' features of East Asian martial arts were only attached to them at the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when individuals, such as Kano and Funakoshi, both school educators guided by Western ideas, started to modernize the Japanese martial arts. In fact, the Japanese were the leaders in this respect, other nations followed only later. In addition, many individuals involved in this process were often motivated by nationalism, which was based on the Western doctrine of the modern nation-state. Furthermore, in connection with martial arts, the term 'traditional' seems wholly reserved as a reference to Asian martial arts. However, to the contrary, most modern Asian martial arts developed only recently and are not 'traditional' by most definitions. Bowman (2021) contributed a novel theory in this general discussion and argues that the 'invention' of the concept of Asian martial arts is largely a modern product of popular media, such as the Hollywood and Hong Kong film industries. The traditionalists would probably not agree with him.

On another issue, Yang Jin Bang (1996, p. 83) criticizes that 'most [Western authors] read very limited numbers of original sources, and most of the cases the materials are second hand.' This is obviously often the result of linguistic barriers, since most Western authors are not being able to read and speak Asian languages. As a result, the stereotypical romantic, idealistic, esoteric, exotic, and mythical interpretation attempts of Asian martial arts by Western scholars are often not grounded in reality and, therefore, the academic martial arts discourse appears frequently rather 'pseudo-academic' than genuine, what Edward Said (1995) coined 'orientalism' (Bowman, 2016; 2017, pp. 27-9; see also Friday & Humitake, 1997, pp. 7-9; Henning, 2008).

Thus, on the one hand, narratives of Asian scholars seem often biased by bigotry, politics, and nationalism; on the other hand, Western authors often lack general linguistic, cultural, and historical background knowledge about Asian societies. On top of this, the discussion and the general literature, such as academic and popular articles and books, about martial arts is often dominated by authors, in the East and the West alike, who have very limited personal, practical martial arts experiences and skills, let alone any background in competitive martial arts events. On the other hand, many authors who have experience but are very biased precisely because they are 'fanatic' of martial arts.

Lastly, in the realm of practical training activities and philosophy, the 'sport aspect' of the martial arts seems to be the most contentious and, typically, the traditionalists belittle sports as allegedly lacking educational benefits and philosophical and spiritual merits. They consider sports on a philosophical level as mostly irrelevant and perceive sports as a purely physical activity. However, the idea that martial arts convey values and educational benefits, which sports supposedly lack, was never in a satisfactory way articulated or explained. In fact, martial arts education should be sports and sparring-based and rational; in this way, respect, humility, self-discipline, and real fighting skill will usually follow. Yet, the friction between the traditionalist and the modernist camps has never been settled in any of the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean martial arts; although the introduction of the Mixed Martial Arts competitions exposed the irrelevance and absurdity of many of the delusional arguments and claims made by the traditionalists regarding 'real' fighting.

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Authors' biographical data

Udo Moenig, PhD (South Korea), is an associate professor at the Department of Taekwondo, Youngsan University, in South Korea. He earned a PhD in Physical Education from Keimyung University. He was appointed as the first foreigner to teach taekwondo at a Korean university in 2005, and is at the moment the only non-Korean in the field. He researches in the domain of Asian Studies with a focus on martial arts related issues,



such as history, philosophy, and the technical aspects of martial arts. He has extensive practical experience in taekwondo (with a focus on competition) and other martial arts for over forty years. E-mail: udomoenig@yahoo.com

Minho Kim, PhD (South Korea), is a professor at the Department of Asian Martial Arts, Youngsan University, in South Korea. He earned a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from University Bordeaux II, France, in 1999. He researches broadly in the domain of practical and theoretical martial arts studies, but his main research area is cultural martial arts studies and health-related issues. He has been training and instructing martial arts at Youngsan University since 2001. E-mail: menhkim@ysu.ac.kr

Hyun Min Choi, PhD (South Korea), is an assistant professor at Youngsan University. He researches in the fields of martial arts, taekwondo, and sports. He coached the Afghan taekwondo national team at the Beijing Olympics (2008) and the Thai taekwondo national team at the London Olympics (2012). He specializes in sports sociology and is a training expert. He previously worked at the Kukkiwon Research Institute and the World Taekwondo Federation. E-mail: svfef@hanmail.net

