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Korea - The Black Ships of Kendo
-The Internationalisation of Kendo
and the Olympic Problem-

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Introduction

Budo is one of Japan's most significant contributions to the world's athletic heritage. In fact, I consider budo to be Japan's most successful cultural export. Wherever you go in the world, even in the remotest towns of the farthest countries, there is a high probability that there will be a 'dojo' of some sort in the community. In that dojo you will find the local people barefooted, dressed in Japanese dogi, obeying commands in the Japanese language, bowing the Japanese way, and more often than not, there will be a Japanese flag or a picture of some great Japanese master from the past occupying a prominent part of the dojo. Interestingly, probably not one of the members will have ever been to Japan, and contact with Japanese people will be limited. There will always be some idiosyncrasies stemming from the fact that it is not actually Japan, and there are many aspects which have to be adapted to suit that particular social milieu. Nevertheless, the locals would have been attracted to the study of budo for a number of different reasons:

Cultural reasons (in the case of Nikkeijin or newly settled Japanese families in an attempt to keep contact with their Japanese heritage. Also, Japanese exchange students or businessmen, wanting contact in the community, or general interest in Japan by local people.)

Combat reasons- (to learn how to fight, self defence skills, armed forces, police etc.)

Physical fitness.

Mental well-being. (Some people start martial arts training in the hope that they will increase in self-confidence and discipline. This also corresponds with parents who encourage their children to study the martial arts for the same benefits.)

As a competitive sport.

Pursuit of spiritual development and enlightenment. (There is a significant attraction to the perceived 'mysterious' metaphysical attributes of the Eastern martial arts.)

Strategy. (Although by no means a driving force now, in the days of Japan's bubble economy, there were widespread opinions that Japan's economic and business success was based around management practices stemming from 'samurai strategy', prompting small numbers of businessmen to take up martial arts training.)

Forced participation by Japanese government or military in WWI and before. (Koreans and Taiwanese as Japanese satellite states, and also a very small number of POWs who were inadvertently learned the arts though being practised upon by Japanese guards or soldiers. Although an extreme minority, there are a number of jujutsu schools in the West whose founders claim to have learned the art through such means.)

Recently, a new phenomenon has started to become apparent. One of the most significant contributors to the popularisation of budo in recent years is not only the Japanese, but also the Koreans. There has been a noticeable trend in the appearance of dojang around the world rather than dojo. Dojang is the Korean word for dojo, and where the Japanese left off, the Koreans are taking positive strides to pick up on the basis of most of the reasons I have outlined above. Particularly in regions where Korean immigrants are numerous, yudo dojang are springing up in place of judo dojo, taekwondo provides an attractive alternative to karate for self-defence and has the added bonus of being a competitive Olympic sport, hapkido is Koreanised aikido, and more recently, kumdo is making inroads into the kendo world attracting mainly Korean immigrant children at this stage, but has the potential to change the face of kendo internationally, which will eventually have far reaching consequences even in Japan.

This interesting phenomenon of the gradual 'Koreanisation' of budo overseas is perceived by the Koreans as the internationalisation of their own Korean martial arts heritage. The Koreans are aggressive in their dissemination, sometimes nationalistic, and often very commercial in their approach, providing attractive packages for their students and instructors alike, not to mention propositions of business partnerships with already existing dojo.

What effect could this possibly have on Japanese budo? In this paper I will consider the case example of kendo. The situation concerning the spread of kumdo as opposed to kendo has become particularly conspicuous in Japan recently due to the World Kumdo Association (WKA) inauguration in Korea, and their overtly opposing policies to the current chief international governing body of kendo the Japan based International Kendo Federation (IFK). In particular, the WKA's mission to turn kendo/kumdo into an Olympic event is something vehemently opposed in traditional Japanese kendo circles. Nevertheless, my findings actually show that although the specialist kendo journals are touting this development as a major concern, the reality is that the situation is not as critical as they advocate, at least at this stage. Still the formation of the WKA has rekindled an old debate concerning the question of 'strong kendo' (sports oriented) and 'correct kendo' ('traditional' and culturally oriented). The Olympics are the apex of the sporting world, but is considered unattractive by many Japan-centric kendoka. However, judging by the status quo of kendo in Japan there are significant contradictions and inconsistency in ideals and reality that must be addressed. In this sense, I consider the kumdo tremors coming from Korea as a 'Black Ship', which will provide the impetus for earnest self-reflection of what kendo is to people in the 21st century.

Kendo or Kumdo?

Many Koreans still remember the brutal Japanese occupation lasting from 1910 until the end of World War II. During this period, Koreans were in many ways forced to disregard their own culture in a process of 'Japanisation'. The ensuing brutality represented an across-the-board attempt to root out all

vestiges of Korean culture, and to forge the nation into the role of a Japanese satellite state. In Japan, kendo and other budo arts were eventually elevated to compulsory subjects in schools(1) and utilised by the fascist government to encourage fighting spirit, instil nationalistic fervour, and nurture pride in Japan's noble warrior past and the consequential moralistic values based on a Showa reinvention of 'Bushido', which was perceived as making Japan unique in the world.(2)

As colonies of Japan, the Taiwanese and Korean populace were also 'encouraged' to participate in these activities.(3) Koreans took to budo with unexpected enthusiasm, and even when the war ended and the Republic of Korea was established, they maintained a commitment to kendo that persists to this day, evident in the comparatively high level and large population of enthusiasts. (4) However, in many ways the old wounds of the occupation have still not healed, and in a nationwide revisionist stance, Koreans for the most part refuse to entertain the notion that the sport's origins lie in Japan, and instead call it "kumdo", insisting that it originated in Korea.(5)

For example, to demonstrate this revisionist mentality, I have quoted the historical information placed on the official homepage of the Korea Kumdo Association.(6)

“Our nation boasts a long history and tradition of swordsmanship. In the Koguryo dynasty (?-688) mountain ascetics perfected their technique in sword and other weapons. Similarly, the Paekche kingdom held specialist departments for the manufacture of swords, and there are records suggesting that sword masters were sent to Japan to teach swordsmanship. However, kenjutsu developed greatly during the Silla dynasty (668–935). Where a military academy was established in the capital city of Kyongju and was open to young men of aristocratic birth. Upon completion of their training, these young men were given the title hwarang, meaning Flower Knight. This period was indeed the time when the military arts flourished. One of the most significant contributions to future swordsmen to come from this period was the book Bon Gook Gum Bup (●●●●●). This treatise forms the basis for two-handed sword techniques and modern kumdo...The Koryo dynasty (935-1392 AD) inherited the Silla kenjutsu legacy and continued to develop it further. However, during the Chosun dynasty (1392-1910), military arts became disfavoured compared with civil arts, and fell into disarray. On the other hand, during this period, the recipients of our culture in Japan continued to develop the culture of the sword and it began to flourish over there.”

The official explanation continues to inform readers that in the middle of the Chosun dynasty, the importance of the military arts was once more recognised through the experience of a number of wars and rebellions. During the Chungjo era (1776-1800) the text Sok Pyungjang Tosul (●●●●●●●) (Revised Illustrated manual of Military training and Tactics) included sword techniques among the twenty-four martial arts recorded, and was adopted in the instruction of military training.

From there, the official history proceeds to explain how kenjutsu (gekiken●●) was taught at the Korean police academies from 1896, and then from 1904 in the military academies. Also, there is mention of a tournament held between the Korean police and their Japanese counterparts in 1908. In September of the same year, gekiken was also included in the first official national physical education program for the general public. According to the text, the term gekiken was changed to kumdo in 1910, although

Japanese records state this as happening in Japan on August 1st 1919. Nevertheless, it is stated that this change in nomenclature helped promote kumdo as a sport with a popular civil following. Similar to trends in Japan, kumdo was also introduced into schools from 1906 (although Japan was in 1911), and was recognised as an official curricular subject in junior high schools in 1927 (again, Japan was 1931.)

(8) I have placed the rest of the information found on the official KKA website in a table for easy reference. It is interesting to note that for the most part, development of kumdo in Korea was fairly much in parallel with Japan, although in some cases Korea's advancements seem to predate Japan.(7)

1935 Kumdo included in the 16th National Chosen Sports Festival

1938 National Chosen Sports Festival prohibited by Japanese

1945 Kendo began to flourish again after Korea was liberated from Japanese colonialism

1947 Korean kumdo began to restructure itself with the holding of the Seoul Police Kumdo Tournament

1948 Approximately 100 highly ranked kumdo instructors gathered in Changdeokgung Palace and formed the predecessor to the Korean Kumdo Association

1950 The 1st National Police Kumdo Tournament was held

1952 A committee was created to oversee the formation of the KKA

1953 The KKA was inaugurated and became affiliated with the Korean Amateur Sports Association

The 1st National Individual Kumdo Championships were held

(*Same year that the All Japan Kendo Federation was formed)

1956 Kumdo was once more included as an official event of the National Sports Festival after a break of 20 years

1959 Kumdo became increasingly popular with the President's Cup Grade Category Tournament, and the National Student Championships

1964 The Student Kumdo Federation became affiliated with the KKA

1970 The Student Federation separated into the Collegiate Federation and the Secondary Schools Federation

The International Kendo Federation was formed, and a Korean became the Vice President

1972 Kumdo was included in the National Youth Sports Meet

1979 The news agency Dong a Ilbo joined forces with the KKA in sponsoring the President's Cup National Championships

1988 The Korean Social Kumdo Federation was formed and followed by the 1st National Social Championships

1993 Inauguration of the SBS Royal National Championships

Korea obviously has a long history of kumdo although some of the top KKA officials readily acknowledge that the modern form of kendo/kumdo widely practiced today was in fact systemized by the Japanese. "However, the further development of kumdo from now on rests in our hands, and we must strive to overtake the Japanese in matters of theory and technique. This is what we must do to reinstate Korea as the true suzerain nation of kumdo."(9) This may seem like a preposterous claim to Japanese kendoka, but is it?

Despite wrangling of suzerainty, kumdo and kendo are essentially the same, save for a few cosmetic differences. Koreans use their native language in the sport, have changed the colour of the scoring flags

(blue and white as opposed to red and white), and have abandoned the squatting bow (sonkyo) and certain other forms of Japanese etiquette considered important aspects by Japanese fencers. Also, there was a successful move to change certain parts of the attire used in kendo. Many Korean now use hakama that have no koshi-ita, and are secured with Velcro belts. This was argued as being more practical, and indeed it probably is, however it is also a clear form of protest against the overt Japanese dictation of what is acceptable in kendo and what is not.(10) Apart from these superficial differences, a casual observer would be hard pressed to tell the difference between a kendo and a kumdo practitioner.

Both arts seek to score points on one another by striking designated targets: men (mori), do (gap), kote (ho-wan), tsuki (mok) with a bamboo or carbon-graphite shinai (jukdo). Both use the same kinds of bogu (hogoo) and a stomping lunge (fumikomi-ashi) is usually employed to strike, often leading to the combatants' bodies colliding sharply as they cry out or "kiai" (kheup). Both maintain a sporting character, with many regional and national tournaments hotly contested at all levels. Both also maintain a strong metaphysical character, including meditation before and after practice, ritualised bowing, and zen-conceptions of achieving victory by emptying the mind of distracting thought of any kind. Both also purport to be 'ways' for developing character, body, and mind.

In fact, in many countries around the world kumdo and kendo coexists side-by-side, and apart from a few differences in terminology, most people accept that they are doing essentially the same thing, and train and compete in the same environment. Recently with the ban on Japanese culture lifted and the ensuing popularity of things Japanese among Korea's youth, even a number of young Korean fencers are starting to admit in whispered tones that they are essentially practicing a Japanese sport, and are starting to question the cultural insistence by their seniors that Korea is the suzerain nation of the art. Although, to many of the older generation who still practice kumdo actively, any hint of Japanese influence or suzerainty of the modern form of kendo/kumdo is abhorrent.

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