

Title

Embodying the Dao: Tae Kwon Do *pumsae* as Moving Meditation

Abstract

Tae Kwon Do scholarship has focused primarily on the discipline's mythologized beginnings or technical developments into a combat sport (Moenig 2015). Some recent articles describe connections between Tae Kwon Do and Eastern religious systems (Martinez 2018), but these explorations only scratch the surface by investigating the presence of symbols like the *taegeuk* in training studios. My presentation takes this research one step further by examining the connections between the eight color-belt *pumsae* (forms) recognized by the World Tae Kwon Do Federation (WT) and Daoist cosmological principles extending from the *I-Ching*. Furthermore, I analyze these forms within the historical context of their design to suggest that this imbuing of spirituality into martial practice may have functioned more as a way to appeal to Western audiences than any type of genuine attempt to transform Tae Kwon Do into a more reflective, meditative practice.

My research interrogates a variety of Tae Kwon Do manuals to understand the methods by which a practitioner embodies these eight principles of *palgwe/bagua* through *pumsae* practice and what this means for the larger spiritual cultivation of the martial artist. As Udo Moenig (2015) has already pointed out, this self-cultivation component is not always stressed at every *dojang*, thus leaving contemporary Tae Kwon Do in a state of fractured identity. With this in mind, I use autoethnographic notes as an observer-participant to better contextualize how the average American practitioner understands or ignores the spiritual component of their practice.

My audience will receive a keener understanding of how the *palgwe* correlate with Tae Kwon Do *pumsae*, the historical exigency for their design, a contextualized understanding of how spiritual components are (mis)understood by contemporary practitioners, and a theory of what these components could mean for transferable inter/intrapersonal skills development.

Key Words

Tae Kwon Do, Daoism, *pumsae* practice, embodiment, self-cultivation

Bio Note

Spencer Todd Bennignton is a PhD candidate at the University of South Florida studying Rhetoric and Composition. His research focuses primarily on the ways Tae Kwon Do are communicated to audiences inside and outside the discipline for rhetorical effects. He explores these connections as a researcher and as a practitioner both in academic arenas as well as more public facing ones like the web platform he founded in 2018, rhetoricalroundhouse.com

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