

***The Changing Culture of Traditional Taekwondo
in a Modern World***

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“Martial arts is not about fighting; it’s about building character.” —Bo Bennett

Traditional Taekwondo can trace its beginnings to 6th Century Asia¹, but it is still thriving today worldwide in the 21st Century. Many martial arts schools were not able to survive the 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic but those that were, including my own business (Master Haydar’s Black Belt Academy) in Goodyear, Arizona, United States, have gained many powerful insights about how to attract and retain students in the modern technological world. Although the demographics of the Taekwondo practitioner has changed in the last 1500 years, **the martial art continues to expand its reach through modern technology, flexible class types, adaptable culture and creating motivational goals.**

I have had the pleasure in my life to be able to practice traditional Taekwondo in my home country of Iraq for about 10 years, then in South Korea for more than 10 years, and now with my own business in the United States for the last decade. The role of martial arts in all of these countries is explained in detail in my 6th degree thesis, but the one constant and my grounding force has been the lasting lessons of traditional Taekwondo. In the United States in particular, my experience has shown me that the general public does not often differentiate between different martial arts. A typical parent that is looking to get their child engaged in a martial art might look for a class that offers boxing, karate, jiu-jitsu, Taekwondo or one of the many other styles and not understand the difference. I’ve even seen that some families with experience in Taekwondo specifically might not

¹ [Taekwondo - Wikipedia](#)

understand the difference between traditional World Taekwondo (WT), International Taekwondo-Federation (ITF), American Taekwondo Association (ATA) or even a school that advertises Taekwondo but may not even be affiliated with a singular style. Educating my students on the specifics and history of World Taekwondo and Korean culture is important to me because I am passionate and proud of the system that I have dedicated my life to mastering.



Haydar Baqir in South Korea in the early 2000s

My own martial arts experience started when I was 12 years old in 1989 in Babylon, Iraq. After experiencing violence from local street gangs and getting constantly bullied, I decided I needed to take some action. I had a few friends that had started Taekwondo so I went with them to a local facility that offered several different martial arts. My first experience with Taekwondo had me hooked. In the first few days, I sparred with a couple

of higher belts and found that I had a natural talent for the sport. I also realized quickly that it could be my ticket out of the country if I was successful enough to compete internationally. The school really focused on discipline and physical strength. The two Iraqi Taekwondo masters, Master Hussain and Master Nabil, were dedicated to the sport and their students. They made many sacrifices to continue to expand the gospel of Taekwondo to those of us that really needed something to lift us from the obstacles and horror of living in a war zone. They showed us videos of the first Iraqi Taekwondo team that attended the 1988 Seoul Olympics and that was when I decided my goal was to do the same. That was 30 years ago and a lot has stayed the same with the sport, but a lot has also changed in the world.



(Right) Haydar Baqir White Belt in Babylon, Iraq in 1989

For some historical context, the origins of the martial art came from 6th Century Korean warriors that were being trained for unarmed combat. The focus was to develop strength, speed and ultimately survival skills. These warriors were taught the 5 codes of human conduct: loyalty, family duty, trustworthiness, valor and justice. These ultimately led to the Hwarang tenets of Courtesy, Integrity, Perseverance, Self-control and Indomitable Spirit that we teach today in my school.



Master Haydar Baqir and wife Cassandra in front of their new school in Goodyear, Arizona in 2021 showcasing the 5 tenets of Taekwondo

In the 19th Century, the sport of Taekkyeon appeared in folk games ([Taekkyeon - Wikipedia](#)) and this is the first time Korean martial arts started being looked at as a

competitive game. The idea was to knock down the other player using kicks and throwing techniques while facing each other. Its popularity declined with the Japanese occupation but Master Song Deok-gi kept the cultural importance in the spotlight and his perseverance led to a new generation of Korean tournaments starting in 1985. His steadfast efforts to preserve the art led to the first martial art being identified by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Modern Taekwondo has a lot of similarities to historical Taekkyeon ([Taekwondo is more like original Taekkyon than modern Taekkyon](#)). Taekwondo today includes most of the kicks as well as the ready pose of historical Taekkyeon. It is clear that the significance of Taekkyeon in Korean culture has had a direct impact on Taekwondo sparring (Kyorugi) as we know it today.



Children of the Late Joseon period playing Taekkyon in 1890

Traditional Taekwondo is originally from 1940s Korea and was a combination of the nine different martial arts schools. The name Taekwondo is used as a parent term for the various styles of martial arts. In 1959, the Kukkiwon was formed and decided that that

it would help the 9 styles collaborate to generate a common curriculum for what is now the Olympic-style World Taekwondo (WT). This is the primary style that I have trained my entire life in and continue to evangelize in my school today.

While the original martial art was targeted for select group of warriors, the Taekwondo players of today are different. Worldwide there are an estimated 70 million people that practice the sport. Students in the USA nowadays usually begin training as children as young as 4 years old. We also have a good number of teenagers and adults in our school. The number of girls and women that participate have grown over the years as well. One of the benefits of Taekwondo is that it is really designed for everyone – from a 4-year-old boy to a 50-year-old woman. We hear that people don't feel secure wherever they are in the world. Occasionally the fear is from national or international violence, but it also comes via bullying from peers. As different martial arts have become more popular and mainstream (like mixed martial arts competitions such as the Ultimate Fighting Championship), we have also seen an increase in men and women age 30+ joining our school. The desire to keep everyone healthy – from kids to adults is always one of the main motivators for martial arts schools like mine based in the United States. As traditional elementary schools offer less and less in terms of physical education and extra-curricular activities, parents are looking to supplemental sports to keep their children busy and active. Martial arts also offers a unique opportunity for children to learn how to better focus on skills and how to listen to others. More and more, parents come to me and ask for help with disciplining their children when they are not able to stay in control. While I don't do this directly, it's important to reinforce that all people deserve respect – peers, instructors and parents included. Just like parents don't want their kids to be bullied at school, they

also do not want their children to become the bully. Taekwondo helps foster the spirit of courtesy and collaboration in and out of the dojang. Ultimately, World Taekwondo is a universal and stable environment that can be counted on for many diverse communities.



Oh Taekwondo Dojang in Suncheon, South Korea ~2004

The type of student that starts a martial arts program has changed and that also means retaining students is a completely different matter. Parents are often bringing their children to multiple activities during the week and these activities may change throughout the year. For example, while students may do Taekwondo, they may also participate in dance, soccer or baseball. Sometimes, students lose interest in a sport and their parents allow them to quit. In these cases, I try to compare martial arts training to going to public school... even if the kids don't want to go, the parents strongly encourage and enforce it because it is needed. I honestly believe that the same thing should be applied to a student

starting a sport like Taekwondo. In addition to parents managing multiple students going to multiple activities, we are notified regularly that when the family dynamic changes (like when the parents divorce), there is no longer the availability or dedication to driving kids to all of the post-school activities. Ultimately, when kids lose interest or are no longer motivated, they quit and lose the physical training momentum. The question then becomes, how do we keep students motivated in a very busy and modern world?



Students arm-wrestling at Master Haydar's Black Belt Academy ~2018

In the past, our dojang had a strict set of skills needed to progress to the next belt level according to the traditional Kukkiwon ranking system. What we have found over the past 10 years in our school is that forcing the youngest kids to learn poomsae often resulted in them quitting when they struggled with remembering the moves. As a result, we have introduced forms later and slower than we have in the past. Adding in additional

belt levels that split the poomsae requirements into parts allows the students to stay motivated and happy. We also have multiple classes based on age and level to help ensure that each group can focus on the right skills at the right time. Making sure that new families understand future costs for items such as uniforms, equipment and belt tests also sets proper expectations. We never want our customers to feel like they are caught off guard with unexpected costs.



A student receives his yellow belt at Master Haydar's Black Belt Academy ~2019

During pre-pandemic times, competitions were a huge draw for our advanced students. A few times a year, our school participated in local tournaments consisting primarily of sparring and poomsae. In most cases, these tournaments also encouraged healthy sportsmanship through competition. When kids receive a medal, it further motivates them to work hard to improve their own skills. While mostly positive,

tournaments can also cause the opposite effect. If people feel that something was unfair with the tournament or if the student didn't do as well as they wanted, sometimes it would cause them to just give up on Taekwondo altogether.



*Master Haydar's Black Belt Academy Students pose with medals at the WOT
Championship ~2018*

When the Coronavirus hit in early 2020, every country managed it a bit differently. In the United States and the state of Arizona in particular, the local government shut down non-essential business because of the risk of the pandemic. Unfortunately for many martial arts schools, we were unable to operate but still expected to pay our bills. Many schools didn't make it and now, about a year and a half later, the economy is just starting to pick up again. Pre-COVID, kids were in many activities in addition to attending school all day 5 days a week. Suddenly, students were stuck at home for remote school via

technology and most extra-curricular activities completely stopped since these were not considered essential. Owning a school means that we had to either adapt quickly or give up on the business. Just as public schools started to pivot to online technology, we did the same. We immediately started providing online virtual classes through Facebook and Zoom so that our students could stay socially connected and physically active. As soon as we were able to, we offered various types of classes with a focus on virtual group and individual in-person classes with social distancing. Online classes were not the easiest and it was hard for many people to adapt but for about a year, it was the only social interaction many people had and it was better than nothing. To our surprise, as the pandemic continued, the demand only increased. By early 2021, we had a 25% increase in students as more and more families began to get vaccinated and feel safer sending their children back to in-person activities. We juggled the balance of the demands of the customers and what we were able to do to keep everyone safe. We had to make changes like requiring masks, social distancing and more frequent cleaning but it seems to have paid off.



A student wears a mask during the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020

When I started practicing the sport, it was not common nor easy to see recordings of people competing because the technology just wasn't there yet. In the late 1990s and early 2000s in South Korea, I saw more and more recordings of local, national and international Taekwondo competitions through videos posted on the internet. This technological advancement really allowed competitors to study their own moves as well as their competitors' strengths and weaknesses.

Access to the internet has also allowed students and parents to research different instructors and local schools. For example, a parent would normally start

a Google search with a phrase such as “karate for kids near me”. Generally, parents would look for a school that was close to them that had the best ratings and then try out one more before deciding on a school to enroll in. Location, ratings and price are the biggest factors that determine which facility a prospect might choose. It is not often that someone contacts us specifically looking for a school that teaches World Taekwondo or even someone that wants to make sure that there is an internationally recognized instructor leading the classes. However, if a student moves out of the area, they often ask us to recommend another “proper” World Taekwondo school with a certified instructor.

Technology within the dojang has also allowed us to do things we haven’t before such as utilizing electronic sparring equipment and providing a constant stream of marketing material. The advanced students really enjoy using the electronic sparring equipment in the school as practice for tournaments. The introduction of electronic sparring (eSparring) in tournaments has provided more accuracy overall in tournaments. Instead of relying on individual judges to see a point, the eSparring equipment automatically records scores. This also has led to faster tournaments because it’s quicker to determine the winner. Photos and videos taken by students and instructors are also shared across social media platforms and end up serving as free advertising to friends and families of students. It is clear to me that schools that stay up-to-date with modern technology have an edge over martial arts businesses that do not.



MHBBA student uses electronic sparring at a tournament in 2019

The culture of my school is to have fun while growing internally and improving external skills. “The true work of the martial arts is progress, not perfection,” says Gene Dunn. Some people believe that perfection is expected for people achieving their black belt but what we look for is constant improvement and dedication. We follow the Kukkiwon World Taekwondo system and follow the overall belt system I saw in South Korea, but it has been adapted to the customers in the United States. For example, the youngest students are not asked to perform Il Jang at their first test because it would be too stressful for them and they would quit. Instead, we focus on appropriate skills for the different age and level-based classes. The 4 and 5-year-old children first need to focus on the foundations like balance, flexibility, coordination and control. We want them to have fun but also to develop solid skills that they will need as they progress in the sport. All students

receive motivational stickers on their belts when they reach the target level for a skill. These stickers are used as a motivational tool between belt tests to keep the kids focused.

In the USA, most customers do not understand the differences between different martial arts and don't really care as long as their children are getting exercise and socialization while having fun. Sometimes martial arts programs are introduced within the public schools by someone who is not affiliated with a specific martial art or governing body. We often get students that come to us after going to businesses that they feel focus more on making money than focusing on the wider tradition, culture and benefits of the sport. We are confident that when parents see how my dojang is run, they will see the clear distinction between our traditional martial arts academy and a more recreational and generic "martial arts for kids" program. When our students receive their black belts, they are official Kukkiwon issued certificates which will grant them access to all of the national and international competitions. When they receive this recognition, we are also confident that they can compete at a high standard with the traditional World Taekwondo recognized poomsae and sparring techniques.



MHBBA students practice in 2021

I have worked incredibly hard over the last 30 years to grow achieve my 7th dan and I'm proud of everything I have accomplished so far and what is still yet to come. We value the history and the traditions from which Taekwondo was created. We survived the pandemic because we quickly adapted to a changing world. We stay updated on modern technology and use it whenever we can. **The sport continues to grow locally and worldwide through modern technology, flexible class types, adaptable culture and creating motivational goals.** I look forward to what the next 30 years will bring to my own growth, Taekwondo and the world.