

Studying T'ai Chi in South Korea

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I was an oddity in my Korean T'ai Chi class for many reasons. I was forty-eight years old, a female, a Westerner (with white hair and blue eyes), and I understood very little of the language. But I was welcomed into the class by a master teacher, and readily accepted by his students. My T'ai Chi training was the most rewarding feature of a two-year stay in Korea.

I was seeking change and new influences both as a T'ai Chi practitioner and as a potter when I went to South Korea in September 1996. The Korean government had hired me to teach English in a girls' middle school in Wonju, a city of 250,000 in the northeastern-most province. This job made it possible for me to live there for two years, time enough to observe the culture closely and learn from it.

Korea is the acknowledged source of some of the world's finest ceramics and I knew I would see inspiring work there. As for the martial arts, they are an intrinsic part of the Korean past and present. Native arts like Tae Kwon Do and Hap Ki Do are the most popular. But Koreans regard China as a big brother—they revere and eagerly embrace its culture—so the Chinese martial arts are prevalent as well. The “hard” arts of Wushu attract more students than T'ai Chi, but “Tae Guk Kwon” (the Korean name for T'ai Chi Ch'uan) is gaining adherents.

My study of T'ai Chi dates back to 1979 in Illinois. Kao Ching-hua, who learned as a girl in pre-Revolutionary China, taught me a rare variation of the Wu style. This form emphasized mental and physical fitness over the martial applications (although that aspect was not ignored). I am very attached to this graceful, circular style and continue to practice it, primarily as a form of moving meditation and extended Qigong. In the eight years previous to going to Korea, I took advantage of a wide range of instruction, and taught and wrote about T'ai Chi. When I went to Korea, I was looking forward to returning to the role of pure student. I wanted to learn a new form and a new approach.

Even before I began my classes in Tae Guk Kwon, it had become evident to me that Koreans are quite regimented and admire diligence and endurance (and the skills gained through them) above all other personal qualities. In line with this national

characteristic, I expected my training in Korea to be more martially oriented and more athletically demanding than it had been up to then. I was right.

I put off looking for a T'ai Chi teacher until I had a chance to familiarize myself with my teaching duties and with the rudiments of the Korean language. Finally, one evening after school, a bilingual Korean friend accompanied me to the "dojang," or training hall, of Chi Seong-in. Through our interpreter, he and I made arrangements for my study of Tae Guk Kwon. I would learn the short and long Combined Forms as well as various other Wushu skills and some staff.

My teacher is known as "Kwan Jang Nim" to everyone, not just his students. It means "Captain." (Koreans rarely refer to people by their personal names. Titles are used instead.) More than being an instructor or "sa bom nim," he is the captain of all three dojangs in Wonju where Chinese martial arts are taught. He is thirty-six years old, a sixth dan in Wushu, and a fifth dan in Kung Fu. He graduated in physical education from Seoul National University, Korea's most respected school. While I was there he won the gold medal in Tae Guk Kwon at a tournament in Kangnung, another of Korea's larger cities. Typically he acts as a judge at tournaments.

I was astonished by Kwan Jang Nim's skills. One evening I caught, out of the corner of my eye, something suspended above the ground. It was Kwan Jang Nim—airborne. I have seen plenty of martial arts, but I can't remember ever seeing this kind of spring-loaded, perfectly directed energy. He is extremely flexible. The phrase "made of rubber" often came to mind. His fast reflexes, acute awareness, and unshakability also impressed me. He was equally accomplished in both forms and weapons—sword, staff, spear, and numchaks.

At first Kwan Jang Nim seemed severe and humorless, but my opinion changed as I got to know him better. He enjoyed the lessons and treated his students with a genuine fondness. Naturally they returned this feeling. He was polite and very patient with me. He actually had a ready sense of humor, and was an adroit mimic. This required some thickness of skin on the part of his students, but it was hilarious to watch him exaggerate our mistakes.

The language barrier that existed between Kwan Jang Nim and myself was not a big problem. I studied the language daily, and kept a notebook of terms and phrases used in the dojang. I asked Korean friends to explain the meanings of words I didn't know. I was able to discuss with him changes in the schedule and various times and places that I would be picked up for class. (It's customary for students to be ferried back and forth in vans and busses provided by the dojangs). Kwan Jang Nim surprised me with the amount of English he remembered from school. However, communication was complicated by the fact that many of the words he uses are Chinese and particular to Wushu. My Korean friends could not always help me in translating his statements.

One of the things I most appreciated about my teacher was that he slowed his speech for me, repeated things, or said them in simpler ways in order to accommodate my limited Korean. This was unusual. Koreans are not used to talking to foreigners in

Korean, nor are they accustomed to comprehending foreigners who speak Korean with an accent. Particularly in cities outside of Seoul, the general population gets no practice with international conversation. Kwan Jang Nim, however, was willing to work with me.

I often felt that our inability to freely converse with each other had its advantages. I learned by observing and doing. He corrected me by rearranging my limbs or showing me again. I couldn't explain, complain, or make excuses—I just had to do it.

My classes ran from 7:00 to 8:30 P.M. I attended three nights a week. Heavy teaching duties and frequent school-related dinners made more impossible, but I managed to practice another three days a week on my own. Camp Long, an American Army base, was only a few minutes' walk from my apartment. In the summer I trained there on the grass under the shade of locust trees; in the winter I used the comfortably heated gym when it wasn't full of basketball players. Otherwise I trained at home on days that I didn't go to class. I liked this schedule. Practicing by myself every other day gave me a chance to experiment with and get used to unfamiliar movements on my own. When I returned to class, I had made progress, and felt I wasn't wasting my teacher's time while he watched me stumble through the repetitions necessary to grasp something new.

In the first few months I practically had private lessons at the dojang as Kwan Jang Nim concentrated on showing me the basics of the Forty-Two-Step Combined Form. I felt self-conscious about this special treatment. I worried that I was taking too much of his time, possibly intruding on the instruction he would normally give others. This was another good reason to go to class only three nights a week—all the other students attended five nights. As time went on, I was assimilated into the class as an ordinary student, and given the same amount of attention as everyone else.

The people in the classes I attended ranged from eight to eighteen years old, and initially all were male. The senior students regularly trained from 7:00 to 10:30 P.M. Monday through Friday. Kwan Jang Nim worked with them separately after the rest of us went home. This was a strenuous schedule for boys who had nine- or ten-hour days in school and a half-day on Saturday. Occasionally a middle-aged man who was also learning Tae Guk Kwon would appear at the class. He was a professor of Chinese at one of the local universities. He and I, and later another man our age were the only ones studying Tae Guk Kwon. The others were being trained in the "hard" arts of Wushu. Toward the end of my time in Korea a young girl of eleven started coming to the classes. She often stuck close to me during the warm-ups and Wushu training that the whole class participated in. Eventually she was joined by her younger sister. I know it was rough for them—the boys were rowdy in their preclass play and liked to assert themselves over anyone who would let them get away with it. But the girls were feisty—they had to be.

A typical class started with at least twenty minutes of warm-ups led by a senior student. This included jumping jacks, push-ups, sit-ups, stretching, and leg-strengthening exercises. Then, under Kwan Jang Nim's direction, the entire class would often learn and practice Wushu skills such as falls, takedowns, kicks, and strikes.

After this we split up into smaller groups to practice the various forms we were concentrating on.

Kwan Jang Nim said at the beginning that I would learn the “outside” of the sequence first, then gradually learn the “inside.” I had been shown and memorized the movements in a couple of months, but it wasn’t until I had had close to a year of practice that I felt I was comprehending the sequence in any depth. When it came to daily training, Kwan Jang Nim recommended at least fifty repetitions at a time of individual movements. I repeated some movements a hundred times a day. This was necessary to gain an understanding of how the whole body is used and coordinated for a kick, block, or strike. T'ai Chi reveals itself in layers over time.

I was told to stretch three times a day. I managed to incorporate two stretching sessions into my day—before and after school. I’m not naturally flexible and wondered many times if, especially at my age, it was a losing battle. Increasing my flexibility was the biggest hurdle for me in learning this new form, and the first months were excruciating. But I surprised myself. Eventually I was able to almost match his full splits, and the stretching was no longer so painful or time-consuming.

I thoroughly enjoyed practicing with the staff. I regret that I was not taught a form, but I did learn a series of skills. At first I was only a danger to myself (and to the lights in my apartment, until I accepted that I could not train there with a staff). Gradually I became more proficient and reached a level where I could hear the whirring of the staff as it spun, and could be classified at least as a majorette with an attitude. I’m not sure why I became so obsessed with this weapon. Maybe it gave a frustrated potter a chance to use her hands again, and maybe the spinning reminded me of my wheel.

The dojang was equipped with a TV and VCR, and Kwan Jang Nim used videotapes to help teach the forms. He told me to get a VCR for my home, then gave me tapes to copy. I used them assiduously. I have an instructional tape for the short combined form, and one of the Korean national Tae Guk Kwon coach working with his students. My favorite tape—and the most useful—is of the 1996 Asian Games in Pusan, South Korea. I watched it many times and felt that it contributed enormously to my understanding of the long form. Just as I was coming to the end of my stay in Korea, I singled out one competitor as the best. (Until then they had almost all looked equally expert.) In a class later that week, my teacher identified the same man as the one who was strongest in all aspects of Tae Guk Kwon. I took this as an indication that I had finally grasped the inner subtleties of the movements.

During the entire time that I studied Tae Guk Kwon I lived with muscle aches either from the strengthening exercises or from the stretching. Usually both at once. It was important to me to do the push-ups and sit-ups and hold the low stances as well as most of the other students.

I remember one evening when we were doing forward splits. Kwan Jang Nim walked around and, by hooking his foot under the ankle of a student, raised the boy’s

leg off the ground, forcing him a little lower. The boy groaned in pain. I was thinking to myself that he certainly wouldn't do that to me—I'm an adult woman, a teacher, a guest in his country. But soon he was standing beside me and lifting my leg too. At least he did it with his hand, and was gentler about it.

Korea's extremely hot summers and cold winters contributed to the strenuousness of the training. There was no air conditioning in the dojang in the summer and no heat in the main training room in the winter. I quickly generated enough internal heat to become warm in the frigid months; it was the humid ninety-degree heat of July and the surrounding months that was the most difficult to work through.

Koreans don't believe in taking time off for sickness. Students and teachers will attend school no matter how ill they are. They may be half-asleep with medication or barely able to stand through a class, but they are expected to show up, and they do. I had several severe bouts with colds and flu, and contracted conjunctivitis twice—once from a public bathhouse, and once from a swimming pool. The eye infection required antibiotics that enervated me, decreased my appetite, and caused me to lose weight. Sometimes I would get home from school, take a shower to revive myself, and then go to class. A few times, especially when I had the eye infections, I skipped class.

Fortunately I had some experience with hard training as a girl in the United States. I was a competitive swimmer in junior high and high school. We worked out before and after school, and in the summer we trained in outdoor pools with the water temperature as low as fifty-eight degrees. So pushing myself through pain was not new to me, and I understood the necessity of doing that kind of work in order to achieve proficiency.

Discipline in the class was enforced with various sorts of punishment that could be meted out by either the teacher or senior students. Korea is a very hierarchical society, and rank has its privileges. Sometimes students were required to hold a position for a long time—like supporting themselves on their hands while their feet were suspended on the window sill. Or extra repetitions of some of the killer leg-strengthening warm-ups would be demanded. There was also the big stick. Most teachers in Korean schools carry sticks to their classes. These vary in thickness, length, and stiffness, but they are all intended for hitting students on the palms, the backs of the legs, and occasionally the head. Kwan Jang Nim had the biggest stick I saw in Korea. I cringed whenever it appeared even though I knew that, as an adult, I was exempt. I was relieved to see that it was used and received with a certain amount of humor. Still, I heard the crack now and then and knew it hurt. I was uncomfortable being around this sort of treatment of students—both at school and in the dojang.

Kwan Jang Nim told me my intense practice would increase the flow of ch'i. He told me to expect certain symptoms such as hot and cold sensations and itching wrists. I almost laughed when he mentioned the wrists—that was a new one. Then I remembered that I had already experienced this phenomenon while practicing at the army base. I kept scratching my right wrist, and it became very red. I thought something had bitten me, but couldn't find any marks. Then the left wrist started itching,

although not as severely. I couldn't find any bites there either. The itching and redness disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. I continue to experience this phenomenon from time to time, including when I am not doing T'ai Chi.

Sensations of heat were nothing new to me. I had been experiencing intermittent hot flashes for a couple years—I looked forward to a cold flash. It happened for the first time in the midst of summer. I was practicing repetitions of one of the most difficult and complex movements in the sequence during a class—Cover with Hand and Punch with Fist. Kwan Jang Nim was in front of me, modeling the movement. I was sweating profusely when I felt what seemed like a strong current of cold air enveloping me for some seconds. This has only happened to me a few times since, and has always been equally startling and mysterious.

Toward the end of my time in Korea all three Wushu dojangs in Wonju participated in a martial arts demonstration in the municipal gymnasium. It was Children's Day, a national holiday in the spring. I was scheduled to do the Forty-Two-Step Combined Form by myself, and the stage fright I have always dealt with when "performing" T'ai Chi for an audience was kicking in. But when I met Kwan Jang Nim and the other students about two hours before the demonstration was scheduled to take place, he handed me a white uniform to match his own and informed me that he and I would do the sequence together. We would also be accompanied by music. All this was a complete surprise. We practiced two or three times with a boom box outdoors—the tape was a powerful modern/traditional Korean music that sped up the pace considerably. Following this brief preparation, all of us went into the gymnasium to watch and participate in the demonstrations. The boys in my dojang performed impressive exhibitions of forms, sword, and staff. Kwan Jang Nim's and my demonstration came off well. I was glad I was not out there alone, and the addition of music transformed the sequence into an exhilarating artistic performance that left me feeling euphoric by the end.

After two years of living abroad, I was ready to return to my own country. Kwan Jang Nim had given me excellent instruction, broadened my understanding of T'ai Chi and martial arts in general, and added enormously to my life in Korea. My experience as his student brought home the importance of esteeming your teacher. A truly expert and caring teacher inspires students. I was willing to try harder and endure more because I liked and admired him. Practicing the sequence with him was always a treat—no matter how tired I was, I felt a rush of energy.

But it was time for me to practice the new forms alone, try to understand them better through time, and make them my own by increasing the intensity of my mental concentration. (Once the movements are understood fairly well, I believe students need to explore a sequence on their own.) Now that I am back in the United States, I alternate my original Wu style with the Combined Forms, practicing each of them three days a week. And I continue to twirl my staff. I have just begun teaching again. Each week I weave a little more of my Korean experience into the classes.