An Island of Koreanness in the Sea of Americanness:
An Ethnographic Case Study of Intercultural Communication in Two Tae Kwon Do
Schools in the U.S.

Yang-Soo Kim, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Department of Speech & Theatre
Middle Tennessee State University
Murfreesboro, TN 37132
(Phone) 615-494-8756
(E-Mail) yskim@mtsu.edu

Yang Soo Kim is an Associate Professor at the Department of Speech and Theatre, Middle
Tennessee State University. Correspondence concerning the paper should be addressed to:
yskim@mtsu.edu
Abstract

Tae Kwon Do schools in the U.S. serve not only as places to teach and learn exotic kicking skills, but also as a unique social context where significant intercultural communication takes place. American practitioners experience different cultural norms and rules embedded in Confucianism and Buddhism. This ethnographic study examines communicative interaction between Asian masters and American practitioners and how different Asian cultures are represented at two Tae Kwon Do schools in the U.S. The intercultural communication experiences within the schools illustrate a reversal of the asymmetrical power relationship between Euro-Americans and Korean-Americans in the American society at large. The study discusses how Y.Y. Kim’s (1997, 2005) theory of interethnic communication explains this culture reversal phenomena in Tae Kwon Do studios.

Key Terms

Reversed power in intercultural Communication

Tae Kwon Do

Oriental Martial Arts

Intercultural communication in martial arts studio
Asian martial arts have become an integral part of the modern sports and physical activity lifestyle in many western countries (Ko, 2007; Yang, 2000). In the U.S., for example, the number of martial arts participants increased by 60% in just eight years, from 3.6 million in 1993 to 6 million in 2001 (NSGA, 2002). Among these, Tae Kwon Do and Judo have become the most popular worldwide. The World Tae Kwon Do Federation (WTF) is made up of 185 national governing bodies, and the number of Tae Kwon Do practitioners in the world is estimated to be 70 million (WTF, 2007).

Typical reasons for entering martial arts training include self-defense, health and exercise, and discipline (C. Kim, 1991; Hutson, 2008; Robinson, 2001; Wingate, 1993). Research on participation in martial arts in North America indicates that in addition to physical fitness, psychological and motivational factors influence the selection of martial arts as a sport and fitness endeavor (Knoblauch, 1985).

Martial arts have also become popular for children, and a number of studies have cited important psychosocial benefits: obedience and respect (Ferguson, 1995), self-regulation (Lakes & Hoyt, 2004), aggressive impulse control (Twemlow and Sacco, 1998), reduced juvenile delinquency tendencies (Trulson, 1986; Zivin, Hassan, DePaula, Monti, Harlan, Hossain, & Patterson, 2001), and an increase in perceived competence in areas ranging from social and cognitive skills to maternal acceptance (Greenberg, 2000).

With this growth in popularity in North America, some changes to the psychological and cultural meanings have been noted (Columbus and Rice, 1998; Staley, 1983), yet in general the martial arts studio still plays a special role as a social entity. Carruthers (1998) indicates that a martial arts studio embodies cultural identity in the form of the school’s practices, such as the monological relationship between pupil and teacher and the concept of social structure and body. As martial arts embrace sedimented cultural beliefs, values, and practices (Back & Kim, 1984; James & Jones, 1982), Tae Kwon Do schools in the U.S. act not only as places in which to teach exotic kicking skills, but also as places where social and cultural encounters between East and West take place.

Particularly, American Tae Kwon Do schools with Korean masters act as a place where cultural dominance is reversed, as illustrated in the relationship between the ethnic-minority master and ethnic-majority practitioners. Few communication studies examine this culture-reversal phenomenon based on a substantial interethnic/intercultural communication theory.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to take a close look at the cultural climate within Tae Kwon Do schools in the U.S. and at how the traditional values ingrained in oriental martial arts affect the communication activities within those schools. By combining participant observation and in-depth personal interviews, this study, based on Kim’s contextual theory of interethnic communication, examines the nature of intercultural interaction at two Tae Kwon Do schools in the U.S. and reveals how different cultural norms and rules play out and govern the intercultural communication and relationships between the Korean masters and the American participants in this social context apart from the outside world of Western dominance.

**Brief summary of Kim’s Contextual Theory of Interethnic Communication**

Based on open-systems perspective, Kim’s contextual model (1997, 2005) focuses on a single communicator. The theory describes how various elements of interethnic behavior serve associative and dissociative functions in interethnic relationships. The theory explains the dynamic interface of the communicator’s behavior—associative (“coming together”) or dissociative (“coming apart”)—and three layers of external contextual factors: the communicator, the situation, and the environment. The “Communicator,” the first layer of the
context, serves as the most immediate context for specific encoding and decoding behavior. This factor indicates psychological dispositions such as identity inclusivity (or exclusivity), including the personal qualities like intellectual/emotional openness and flexibility, and identity security (or insecurity). This factor is regarded as the more or less enduring core elements of personhood that influence and are influenced by a communicator’s associative or dissociative interethnic behavior. The second layer of the context is the “Situation” of the interethnic encounter itself, which is defined as “the conditions of the immediate social milieu in which a person is engaged in interethnic communication.” The factors of the situation indicate ethnic proximity/distance, including extrinsic ethnic markers (e.g., physical features) and intrinsic ethnic markers (e.g., internalized beliefs and values) which tend to promote associative and dissociative interethnic behavior based on higher degrees of similarities/comparability. Other situational factors include the presence (or absence) of shared (or separate) goal structures, including mutual goal structures or common interests promoting associative behavior, and personal network integration, including the portion of outgroup ties, intimacy of the heterogeneous interpersonal network, and the importance of the relationship with outgroup members, promoting associative interethnic relationships. Surrounding the situational level is the “Environment,” a larger social milieu, including institutional equity (or inequity), which refers to fairness and justice, ingroup (ethnic group) strengths/weaknesses in the surrounding community, and environmental stress, which is a tension from factors such as limited resources and economic hard times, intensifying intergroup dissociation or conflict.

Korean and American Key Cultural Values

Most cultural research on South Korea has been done to compare South Korean values with those in Western countries based on Hofstede’s (2003, 2001, 1991) dimensions. Of the five dimensions of national cultural values Hofstede identifies, power-distance and individualism/collectivism are most relevant to this study. Power-distance refers to the extent to which individuals accept hierarchical power distribution (Hofstede, 2001) and reflects the perceived distinction between those in higher and lower positions in a society or organization (Gray & Marshall, 1998). Individualism/collectivism refers to “the degree of interdependence a society maintains among individuals” (Hofstede, 1984, p. 83) and contrasts group-based values (Park, Rehg, & Lee, 2005) with individual goals or interests, personal freedom, and free expression (Hong, 2003).

Using Hofstede’s taxonomy, South Korea could be situated in the continuum of higher power-distance and collectivist countries. Confucianism has had the most dominant influence on the traditional values of South Korea (Lee, 1983; Park & Cho, 1995) and Confucian ideology stresses hierarchy and social order (higher power-distance). Koreans also make a strong distinction between ingroups and outgroups (collectivism), yet status determines the position and treatment that one receives within each group. Some studies argue that Korea has been undergoing remarkable sociocultural changes in the wake of rapid industrialization and greater contact with Western cultures (Huyn, 2001; Lee, 1999). However, Kohls (2001) illustrates that

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1 For more discussion, see Gray & Marshall (1998), Gudykunst & Kim (1992), Park, Rehg, & Lee (2005), and Triandis (1988, 1983). Increasingly, scholars have argued about Hofstede’s taxonomy because there are tendencies of decreasing cultural gaps across national boundaries and transparent cultural differences among members within a culture due to globalization (Cheney, Christensen, Zorn & Ganesh, 2004). Also, Triandis (1993) argues that “individualism and collectivism can coexist and simply emphasize a culture, depending upon the situation” (p. 162).
certain core values—including group orientation, hierarchy, and others—have remained relatively static in Korean society and are likely to be constant in the future.

In contrast to traditional Korean culture, mainstream American culture might be characterized as individualistic and displaying lower power-distance, influenced by the Protestant work ethic (Hargittay & Kleiner, 2005), which is based on the abilities of the individual to bring about his/her own success. American society projects the values of equality and independence, makes little distinction between ingroups and outgroups, and has “greater equality between societal levels” (Hofstede, 2003, p. 2). Many Americans address others by their given names immediately upon meeting and practice informality in most aspects of their lives (Kohls, 2001), believing that the individual transcends the particulars of group identity, rank, status, and hierarchy.

Methods

The study was situated in two Tae Kwon Do schools located in a medium sized city in Oklahoma (hereinafter called “school X”) and in a metropolitan city in central Tennessee (hereinafter called “school Y”) in the U.S. The study combined participant-observation with audio-recorded formal interviews. At each school, the author observed the classes and interviewed Korean Tae Kwon Do masters, mostly American adult practitioners and parents of young practitioners.

The Research Setting: Two Tae Kwon Do Schools

School X is approximately 2,000 square feet in size and school Y, 3,000 square feet in size. Each school is equipped in its large central training hall with several different kinds of training equipment (e.g., kicking pads/dummies, punching bags, and a variety of weapons including swords, long staffs, cajoles, etc.) and several large glass mirrors on the wall. One or two office rooms are available for the master, and there is a waiting lounge for parents or spectators. A flag of the World Association of Tae Kwon Do (or school flag of school Y), an American flag, and a Korean flag hang on the main wall. On one side of the wall are draped the different colors of cotton belts that show the rank systems and levels all practitioners are to achieve as they progress. An illustration of the several different forms of Tae Kwon Do according to the belt color is posted on the other side of the wall. In school Y there are framed photos of the black belt holders in the school hanging over the mirrors. These photos are arranged according to seniority in terms of the degree of the black belts and the length of practice. Over these framed photos are written statements which read: “Humble, Gentle, & Strong. Your goal is a black belt.”

School X has fifty students, mostly Americans, with the youngest being three years old. School Y has 150 children (beginning at age four) and 100 teen and adult practitioners.

Participants

In school X, two Tae Kwon Do masters and 29 Americans (including 17 adult students, 8 parents and 4 young practitioners) participated in in-depth personal interviews. Interviewees were selected based on the students’ age and length of training. “Grand Master A” is a 42-year-old Korean male who is a seventh-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do and a fourth-degree black belt in Kung Fu. He has 34 years of martial arts experience and has been in the U.S. for eighteen years. “Master B,” or “young master,” is a 29-year-old Korean male who has been in the U.S. for 15 months. He is a fourth degree black belt and majored in Tae Kwon Do at a university in Korea. He has practiced Tae Kwon Do for 15 years and won the Korean national championship four times.
In school Y, Tae Kwon Do masters and selected practitioners (11 adults, 11 parents of younger practitioners and 9 young practitioners) participated in the in-depth personal interview. An American assistant (black belt) in the office helped recruit the interviewees. “Grand Master C” is a 43-year-old Korean male who is an eighth degree black belt. He served in the special forces in Korea for his military service. He has been in the U.S. for 15 years. In his 39 years of Martial Arts experience, he was both a competitor and an instructor of the Korean special forces Tae Kwon Do team for four years. Another master, “Master D,” is a 37-year-old Korean male who is a fourth degree black belt. He has been in the U.S. for eight years and has 27 years of martial arts experience.

Another interviewee, outside the two schools. To incorporate more insights of Tae Kwon Do masters, a retired Tae Kwon Do instructor (“Grand Master E”) in the metropolitan city of Tennessee was included in the study. He is a 65-year-old Korean male and an eighth degree black belt. He taught Tae Kwon Do at a university program in Tennessee, for 35 years. He was the founder of the Tae Kwon Do program and a well-known and respected Tae Kwon Do master in the university community.

**Data Collection Procedure**

Observations and interviews were conducted by the author during class sessions at School X between May 2005 and June 2006. At School Y, the data were collected between February 2007 and December 2007. As the author’s own son was taking Tae Kwon Do classes at each school during these periods, and as the author was an active member of the Kung Fu class at School X, the author was widely known to the Tae Kwon Do students and their parents at both schools. Immersion in the ‘field’ of study is a requirement of participant observation (Frank, 1997), so the author often participated in Tae Kwon Do class as a practitioner for the periods of the study. This provided the opportunity to watch and talk with other practitioners during/after the sessions and to be included in candid conversations with the parents in the waiting lounge about their perceptions of oriental martial arts. Field notes were recorded of participant observations (Emerson, Fritz, & Shaw, 1995) during and immediately following observation and participation in the class by the author. The students’ journals were also used for this study.²

The location of all interviews at School X was the Tae Kwon Do school or the cafeteria nearby. At School Y, the interviews were mostly conducted in the Grand Master’s office. For the younger students at both schools, a consent form from the parent and assent from the young interviewees were collected at the same time. Most of the interviews were audio-recorded with the written consent of the interviewees. The interviews usually took almost 45 minutes.

The author interviewed “Grand Master E” at the local church where he and the author attend, after a Sunday worship service on July 26, 2007. It took almost 40 minutes. The interview was audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewee.

Along with background information, the open-ended interview questions dealt with the reasons and benefits of Tae Kwon Do training, their perceptions of Tae Kwon Do, their perceived image of martial arts masters, communication differences/difficulties in the interaction between practitioners and martial arts masters, different cultural rules/norms played out in the martial arts studio, practitioners’ reaction to and understanding of these different rules and norms, and overall positive/unpleasant experiences in the Tae Kwon Do school. For interviews with

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² All black-belt students (young children) are required to write a journal titled “What Tae Kwon Do means to me.” On the belt test day, they read their journals in the presence of parents and spectators and share their long, personal journey to the black belt. Then they turn in the journals to the master.
younger students (10-17 years old), the wording of the interview questions are slightly modified for their better understanding.

**Data Analysis**

Along with the field notes and students’ journals, all questions and responses to open-ended interview questions were transcribed in their entirety by university transcribing services and/or American graduate students. Following standard practice for deriving emic categories, the analysis of the patterns in the participants’ talk emerged through repeated passes through the data (Bloom, 1978; Gaskins, Miller, & Corsaro, 1992, Miller et al., 2003). Based on the emerging themes, the verbatim data was grouped into common categories as the author reviewed and re-reviewed the transcripts of interviews and field notes to discern the main ideas expressed by the participants. These categories were further developed and refined through the peer examination of graduate students and faculty members to produce themes that offered a clear understanding of the experience of participating in a Tae Kwon Do class. Peer examination (Krefting, 1991) ensured that all decisions and interpretations were justified. In presenting the analyses, the author quotes at length from interviews to show how the talk unfolded and to make the participants’ voices available to the reader. The three major themes (principles) that were identified as being associated with the experience of Tae Kwon Do practice include 1) *Respect*, 2) *Discipline*, and 3) *Hierarchy*.

**Results**

**The Class Routine**

As the Tae Kwon Do school is considered to be a sacred place, training in Tae Kwon Do schools is conducted with strict discipline and rules. The two schools involved show similar training routines. The typical class session includes laps around the studio floor; warm-ups; practice in kicking, forms, self-defense, and/or weapons techniques; sparring; skills demonstrations by the masters; and squats, push-ups, or jumping jacks to cool down. Students sometimes sit on their knees and meditate for five minutes, which allows them to calm down and control their mind before leaving the martial arts training. Students are usually allowed only a one-minute break to get a drink halfway through the lesson.

Interspersed throughout the session are the formal elements of bowing to the masters and black-belts, lining up to wait for commands (which are normally given in Korean), and respectfully saying “Yes, sir” and *Gam-Sa-Ham-Ni-Da* (“thank you”) to the masters and *Su-Go-Ha-Shut-Sum-Ni-Da* (“good job”) to one another, which is a sign of respect to ingroup members in the martial arts world.

These routines physically challenging but are intended to build up patience and endurance and to discipline students’ concentration, perseverance and patience. The formal elements teach respect and obedience toward the masters, the higher-ranked students, and the studio itself.

Formal structures are also applied to spectators, though the norms permit some leeway. Members of the audience, including parents and friends in the waiting lounge, are not allowed to whistle, clap, or chat during the session. However, parents sometimes give nonverbal feedback by raising their thumbs to encourage and compliment their children for their fine performances. Children are proud of themselves when they do well; they glance at their parents, returning contented smiles to the nonverbal support. This nonverbal interaction makes the martial arts class a holistic experience for all who are present in the school.
Organizing principles: Respect, discipline, and hierarchy

Respect

The most prevalent principle played out in the two Tae Kwon Do schools is respect toward the master and the dojang (“studio”). Even though the students pay tuition for the class and there is a business aspect in the school, the relationship between the master and students is a strict teacher-pupil relationship, and respect toward the teacher must always be obvious. This status of the master coheres with the traditional role of the teacher in Eastern culture. According to the Confucian philosophy of decorum, it is believed that a king, a teacher, and a father are identical and should be treated equally with great respect. Projecting an image as respectful, powerful, and caring, the master must always be a source of strength and a role model for the pupils. The interviewees in the two schools provide similar viewpoints on the image and status of their Tae Kwon Do masters. The interviewees in school X comment as follows:

#1. Practitioner (31 years old): It [the image of the master] seems more like a father-figure. You really respect, most respectful. You answer, ‘Yes, sir’ or ‘No, sir.’ There is also a mutual respect there. I have known swimming coaches and track coaches before; there is absolutely zero respect, achievement was very difficult even though we worked for it.

#2. Practitioner (40 years old): You’re under him [master] and so you listen to him. You’re attentive and you respect him and because he is your teacher and I just, you know, he’s almost a powerful person in that respect. In the school, he is the absolute power here. It is not a democracy in here and that is fine.

Interviewees in school Y also indicate a similar image of their master:

#1. Practitioner (47-year-old black belt student): [It’s] related to the relationship between the student and the master that you don’t see just anywhere in American life. I can’t think of any place that I’ve ever been where that relationship is the same as it is. He is a very authoritative figure in this school… everybody refers to him as Master C, without exception. Nobody walks in says “Hey there C.”

#2. Practitioner (42-year-old black belt student): Very high respect….powerful, very giving, able to shape somebody, help in any condition at any age, help somebody find a good life and make a good way into the future. Honest and loving and caring people, just very giving and nurturing, but very demanding and strong at the same time.

Grand Master A mentioned that this teacher-pupil relationship is limited to inside the school boundaries and masters cannot reinforce this unique relationship outside the Tae Kwon Do school. However, one interviewee (47-year-old black belt student) in school Y indicates that the same teacher-pupil relationship still persists outside the school:

He (Grand Master C) lives across the street from me…he is my martial art master, but he’s also my neighbor, and he is a friend of mine…But when we are talking to each other in the yard, you know what I call him? I call him Master C. He is still Master C.

Grand Master E also explains his experience about this strong teacher-pupil relationship outside the school:

…I was mowing the lawn at my home during the weekend….a black belt student stopped by my home….seeing that I was mowing, he took off his jacket and volunteered to do it on behalf of me….It [mowing the grass] has nothing to do with martial arts, but the respect toward the master still persists [outside of the Tae Kwon Do school setting].

In addition to respecting the masters, the value of respect is directed toward the dojang. In school X, this is seen through the custom of black-belt students volunteering to clean up the...
floor after practice, while in school Y, this same value is acted out when the practitioners clean the windows of the dojang during the break. Both of these practices reflect the traditional value that the dojang is a sacred place which needs to be kept clean before and after practice.

**Discipline**

In both Tae Kwon Do schools, discipline comes into play alongside respect as a master creates and executes rules as the sole owner and ruler of this small island. When the master commands “attention,” for example, no extraneous body movement is permitted, not even an adjustment of a uniform, and a prolonged smile or a whisper is met with a loud reprimand by the master. One parent (of a 17-year-old girl) in school X mentioned increased patience as a great benefit of this discipline: “My daughter learned devotion and patience from martial art training. She can now manage a really disciplined life in both the home and the school. I am really proud of her.”

In school Y, young children learn patience when the Master commands meditation for five minutes with their eyes closed. Grand Master C explains the importance of discipline in this area of patience:

> Tae Kwon Do is the martial art that teaches patience. Without patience, you cannot complete your training and you cannot grow respect [toward others]. I believe the most important thing [in Tae Kwon Do training] is patience.

Other aspects of discipline include perseverance and neat appearance. In school Y, one adult practitioner came back to class after a long period of absence. After accepting the student, Master C commanded him to do push-ups in the waiting lounge before entering the training mat, followed by physical punishment using a sponge staff. Even though the punishment was light, this was a symbolic act of punishment of slack behavior of missing the class for a long time. In addition, the master disciplined the students about neat appearance. One day after the class, Grand Master C told a 14-year-old practitioner to cut his hair. The author then interviewed this teenage student, who indicated his willingness to follow his master’s command:

> I had a Mohawk and he told me to cut it off, so I cut it off, and I’ve got this little nub. He wants me to cut it off more….Yeah, I am paying him to go here and everything, and it’s like “Come on, man.” I was going to cut this off anyway, but I wanted to make it purple.

In response to more serious violations, masters may even deprive the student of the chance to take a lesson or a belt test. When this harshest sanction happens, a student cannot advance to the desired level, while the lower belts can still advance to that student’s level or higher. In the hierarchy of the school, this sanction is like a demotion to the student and a big humiliation among peers in the school.

All these different rules and norms are acted out in Tae Kwon Do schools. Unlike most dominant group members, those who join this small island of Koreanness voluntarily posture themselves as learners under the supervision of a master from a non-dominant culture and are ready to accept the different cultural norms, rules, and procedures included in the mystic oriental martial arts class.

Although some students and parents may initially regard this formality of discipline as excessive, most come to respect the value of the way discipline is taught based on their understanding of the worth of training and their receptivity of the different culture. In school X, one interviewee commented on this understanding:

> #1. Parent (of a 13-year-old girl and a 9-year-old boy): The Korean society is a self-disciplined society; martial arts reinforce the system. I like it and want kids to be a part of the culture. . . Korean Tae Kwon Do school is very respectful. It teaches children respect,
not necessarily to respect only your elders but your higher belts. . . We [Americans] have lost this value but the martial arts school teaches it.

In school Y, several interviewees also commented:

#1. Parent (of a 4-year-old): Obedience…discipline….also respect…I value it because I grew up with it. That’s part of the reason why he [my child] still continues to come here…we would like that reinforced and we like the behavioral changes.. in him [our child]…I think it should be the way that it is…It is America, so people have a choice. And if you choose not to participate or accept any aspect of any culture, then you don’t have to come. So once you do decide to come, you should respect that culture and respect their norms and respect their traditions.

#2. Practitioner (39 years old): When I come through that door, I come through voluntarily because I want to be part of what is in here…..because this is what I want. And when I volunteer for something, I accept the standards that are placed on me.

Hierarchy—age and belt color

In contrast to the equality emphasized in typical American environments, the Tae Kwon Do school is rigidly constituted and offers a relatively self-enclosed site where a student may progress through hierarchically ordered statuses, the ranks being determined by age and the color of the cotton belt. Belt color comes first, but if two participants have earned the same belt color, then age is considered in determining seniority. Once during a session in school X, two children scrambled and tumbled down while they were playing around. The master summoned the two at once, because disruption and distraction are not allowed during the class. Though both had black belt status, after asking their ages, which were twelve and ten, the master strictly reprimanded the 12-year-old boy, saying, “Since you are older here, you are always responsible for this. Understand?” The older black belt student instantly acknowledged his responsibility as a senior.

Parents and students in each Tae Kwon Do school offered their opinions regarding this system of hierarchy as represented in these comments. In school X, the interviewees commented as follows:

#1. Practitioner (16 years old): I think seniority, sometimes it works with some aspects. I respect the fact that with the elders, like we look up to Grand Master A and Master B because they’re older than us and they’ve been around longer. Quite frankly, they would know more than we do about things…

#2. Practitioner (28 years old): I agree with the program for the most part, because you have to work for your belt. It doesn’t bother me to have someone younger give me orders.

In school Y, the interviewees also reported their thoughts:

#1. Practitioner (47-year-old black belt student): Regardless of your age, you’ve earned this rank. That’s probably a little more difficult to do out in general life, for a 10-year-old to earn a rank that’s much higher than a 50-year-old. And that can happen here. …when you step on the mat, belt color, if you’re the same age and the same belt, then the age wins out, but otherwise, belt color rules. It doesn’t bother me.

#2. Practitioner (35 years old): It is pretty different. If I go up to a friend of mine, I might say ‘Hello John’ or ‘Hello, Nathan,’ but if I know someone’s a black belt, I would address them as sir, even if they’re wearing plain clothes…It doesn’t bother me. I accept it as part of my education in martial arts.

In this ladder of hierarchy, earning a higher belt is important and can be done through a serious ritual—the belt test. After completing three preliminary tests to earn stripes on a current
belt, students go through more formal routines in the presence of an audience. This is a special
time for students to show their competence, progress, and maturity and upgrade their status.

In school X, in addition to the skills test, some simple knowledge of Korean is required of
all students. Students are required to say the Korean words for such commands as attention,
bow, ready, begin, and ease. They must also learn terms of politeness, such as “how are you?”
and “thank you”; words for colors, like blue and red; and the words for numbers from one to
twenty. Even though the words are difficult to remember and pronounce and the need for
learning Korean terminology may seem strange at first, the students demonstrate willingness to
learn and gain respect for the culture. Typical participants have commented about learning
Korean as follows:

#1. From the journal of a nine-year-old black belt student: In the beginning, learning some of
the Korean words was challenging; but after Master A corrected me, I finally caught on. . .
Finally, I learned how, and my knowledge has increased.

#2. Practitioner (28 years old): The first time, I thought it was kind of stressful. It was
overwhelming when I was a white belt. Now, I am understanding the terms, getting them
memorized, and it is just a part of the package. It gives me an even better respect for the
form and for everyone involved.

The earning of a new belt is a symbolic separation from the old status, a clear evidence
that students have successfully gone through all the required rituals to gain their new status. In
the context of the school, all multiple identities and any status brought from the outside dominant
society are collapsed into a single identity based on age and belt color. Thus, Korean cultural
norms of seniority unusual to Americans prevail in this small island of Koreaness.

Different Leadership Styles among Tae Kwon Do Masters in the two schools

Even though the two Tae Kwon Do schools both present a unique setting where Korean
norms and values including respect, discipline, and hierarchy are acted out, the degree and
methods of reinforcing these values vary depending on the style of the master.

In school X, Grand Master A reinforces the rules and norms in a relatively strong
manner. A college student who was a new member of the class greeted the master by casually
waving to him. Master A instantly corrected his greeting and taught him how to bow and
respond during the session. Later, the master explained more fully the traditions of Tae Kwon
Do and its etiquette. He used the following analogy when he discussed the differing cultural
standards between in- and outside school, saying, “Once you walk into this martial arts studio,
your time and space go back to the ancient Buddhist temple where the martial arts were practiced
one thousand years ago. The different rules and norms apply here.”

In contrast, school Y portrays a more adaptive leadership style. Both masters in this
school said that even though the Korean values of respect and discipline are persistent and
reinforced within the school, the combination and blending of the two cultures is an important
part in their teaching and all the values should be reinforced in a way that is not overwhelming.
Grand Master C commented: “We should go between Korean culture and American culture. I
should not do it my own way all the time....As a matter of fact, I do not use Korean language
that much [in conducting class]. Even though this is a Korean martial art, another aspect [of the
dominant culture] should be blended into training.”

This different leadership style dictates the climate of school Y. A 42-year-old American
woman is working as the office manager. She is a second-degree black belt and has practiced
Tae Kwon Do almost five years, so she also helps the master in conducting the class. Situated
between Korean culture and American culture, she obviates probable misunderstandings which
might be caused by the master’s insufficient English language competence. In addition, the forms demonstration posters displayed outside the school are all of Americans, while the posters of Korean masters are inside, near the office. This is a good contrast and balance between the two cultures.

Along with these two styles of leadership, there is a genuine, traditional, authoritative leadership style. Grand Master E illustrates this leadership style while explaining his teaching philosophy:

Tae Kwon Do training is the process of transforming Americans into Koreans…the class is conducted in Korean. Practitioners should learn Korean and immerse themselves into Korean [culture]…. Tae Kwon Do is a philosophy and a way of life….to learn this, you cannot ignore its philosophical background….Oriental philosophy suggests that students even bow to a teacher who is walking down the other side of the street. Typical Americans do not understand this. But I taught them to do that. I told my students: “If you do so, you will get respect from someone else.” So, these norms and values almost became their [American students’] habits.

The author had a chance to observe how Grand Master E’s students got used to Korean cultural norms and how these played out in their interaction with the master and other students during a reunion at a Korean restaurant in the Nashville area. The American students have a variety of professions like lawyers, medical doctors, or Tae Kwon Do instructors. They paid utmost respect to Master E by bowing and shaking hands with both hands. When introduced to each other, the Americans bowed to each other, exchanged their business cards with both hands, and shook hands with each other using both hands, following the typical Korean norms and rules in their interactions.

In summary, the Tae Kwon Do school in the U.S. defines itself as an Eastern cultural entity that is situated in the middle of a predominantly Western cultural environment. Within the larger context, the school offers social structure and reality rooted in oriental cultural tradition. It draws its members from the outside world of Americanness and trains them in different norms and values. In this small island of Koreanness, the master rules with absolute authority while exercising his own leadership style.

**Discussion**

This ethnographic case study has examined two Tae Kwon Do schools in a Midwest and Southern state as a unique social context where specific intercultural communication activities occur. Along with participant observations, in-depth personal interviews were conducted with four Korean Tae Kwon Do masters, a retired master from a university Tae Kwon Do program, adult and young Tae Kwon Do practitioners, and the parents of young practitioners in the two schools.

The author has described the communication practices within the schools by identifying the formal structure of class routines, the strict rules accompanying the class routines, and the absolute authority with which the martial arts master manages and directs the entirety of instructional activities. Different behavioral norms, such as the act of bowing and the use of the Korean language during the class proceedings, have been identified as elements that help to differentiate the normative cultural grounding of the schools from that of the surrounding predominantly European-American cultural milieu. These cultural and linguistic practices at the school serve as implicit markers of the Korean “ethnolinguistic vitality” (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977) in the schools.
It has also been found that the practitioners themselves embrace the rules and routines, voluntarily suspending their own individualistic and egalitarian values and, instead, adopting the values and norms of the school. Rooted in the collectivistic cultural tradition associated with Tae Kwon Do, three cultural themes—respect, discipline, and hierarchy—serve as the core organizing principles underpinning the entire school operation. A Confucian seniority-based hierarchy dictates all social relationships within the school, with the master at the top and the status levels of students differentiated according to belt color, age, and length of training. With the image of a father and of a respectful, moral example, the master disciplines the students physically and mentally by requiring them to follow the rules of respect. At the same time, methods of teaching and enforcement differ slightly according to the individual differences of each master’s leadership style and teaching philosophy.

The participants’ acceptance and adoption of these values and norms reveal a unique situation of reversed power in interethnic communication. The master’s ethnic-minority status is replaced by an absolute authority he asserts as a Tae Kwon Do master. The students and their parents, whose ethnic status in the larger society is dominant, willingly subordinate themselves to the hierarchical power structure embedded in the martial arts tradition and enforced by the master. Their individual identities outside the school are replaced by the identities ranked according to the Tae Kwon Do belt system. The master himself, in turn, practices his own self-control and self-discipline, thereby serving as the primary role model for his students.

The voluntary nature of this asymmetrical power differential is what makes the communication experiences in these schools unique. This phenomenon is a departure from the commonly accepted view in social psychology that asymmetrical relationships tend to impede cooperation and relationship building between individuals of differing ethnic/racial backgrounds (Brewer & Miller, 1984). In the context of the Tae Kwon Do school, the hierarchical social structure is readily accepted, even appreciated, by the participants as an integral part of the process of mastering the art of Tae Kwon Do.

A theoretical anomaly such as this phenomenon can be understood by applying Y. Y. Kim’s (1997, 2005) contextual theory of interethnic communication.

**Explanation of culture reversal in Tae Kwon Do schools**

From this theoretical perspective, the successful intercultural communication activities within the Tae Kwon Do school between Korean masters and American practitioners can be explained as an interactive outcome of three main factors: two communicator factors and one situational factor:

1. **Identity inclusivity**, which is openness and willingness of the European-American participants/parents who voluntarily choose to accept the rigid Korean cultural values and norms as part-and-parcel of the martial arts tradition—adult practitioners and parents of young practitioners are willing to learn those values; there is the visible reputation of Tae Kwon Do already established in American society at large—Tae Kwon Do training has been proven to be good for disciplining kids;

2. **Identity security**, which is the acknowledged authority/competent leadership of the master himself within their schools that engenders among the American participants an acceptance and appreciation of the reversed power structure that is respectful, disciplined, and hierarchical. These common values are acted out with different flavors, creating different climates depending on the leadership styles of the master—traditional, relatively strong, and adaptive styles;
(3) **The shared goal structure**, which is the common focus and the mutual interest in Tae Kwon Do between the American parents/practitioners and the Korean masters.

As these two communicator factors and one situational factor come together as multilayered forces in the practice of the art of Tae Kwon Do, these three factors help override one of the environmental factors, ethnic group weakness. The general status differential in the society of the majority European-Americans and the minority Korean-Americans loses its salience and relevance, creating successful associative interethnic communication in Tae Kwon Do schools in the United States.

While the present case study of two Tae Kwon Do schools suggests a potentially significant line of inquiry in intercultural communication, the generalizability of the above-described intercultural communication can be assessed through ethnographic studies at additional Tae Kwon Do schools at different places. Studies of other martial arts schools, such as Kung Fu, Aikido, Judo, or Gumdo ("Oriental fencing"), can help broaden or refine and present insights into the reversed asymmetrical power relationship that characterizes the intercultural communication experiences examined in this study. Other studies may be conducted in contexts other than that of martial arts schools, such as small business organizations or international companies that are owned and operated by individuals of ethnic minority background with a large number of employees from a dominant ethnic group.

**Conclusion**

Tae Kwon Do schools in the U.S. offer a small, unique society in which typical Korean norms and rules govern all behaviors in an asymmetrical power structure. The school exists in the midst of a town in the U.S., and the members bring into the school their own life experiences, multiple identities, cultural norms, and values from the external American society. Even so, the Tae Kwon Do schools stand apart from these traits of Americanness. As illustrated by the etiquette of behavior towards the master and other members, in conjunction with the attitude towards the martial arts studio, the school offers a unique picture of a different world to American participants when they walk into this small island of Koreanness.
References


