



World Taekwondo (WT) versus the Kukkiwon: *Disputes over Black Belt Promotional Rights*

Udo MOENIG and Hyun Min CHOI

Abstract

When many people think of Asian martial arts, they picture the white uniform and black belt as used in many Japanese and Korean martial arts. With that image in mind, belt-rank promotion and the often-theatrical fashion of these events symbolize an important ritual in fostering loyalty and reinforcing hierarchy. It is a significant source of revenue for martial arts schools and organizations. Against this backdrop, this article focuses on the popular Korean martial art of taekwondo, which is also an Olympic sport. Participation in the Olympics and other international taekwondo events requires a black belt certificate issued by the Kukkiwon (Gukgiwon), a quasi-South Korean government-supported organization. On the other hand, the Olympic sport of taekwondo is administered by World Taekwondo (WT), an international sports organization. In 2017, the idea arose within WT of issuing its own black belt certificates, thereby sidelining the Kukkiwon. Accordingly, this article aims to describe the present conflict between these institutions, which is threatening the survival of the Kukkiwon, which is not only a symbol of taekwondo but also of Korean national identity.

Keywords: World Taekwondo (WT), Kukkiwon, WT Asia, conflicts over black belt promotion, *dan* certificates, conflicts over revenues, martial arts

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Introduction

A popular image of Asian martial arts is the white uniform and the black belt as used in many Japanese and Korean martial arts, such as *jūdō*, *karate-dō*, and taekwondo (*taegwondo*). However, neither the white uniform nor the black belt existed before the 20th century. Prior to their introduction, practitioners of judo in Japan and karate in Okinawa used their daily attire during training sessions and the hierarchy within a martial arts school was not visually observable (Lowry 2006, 39; Watson 2008, 5; Moenig 2015, 50).

In the present hierarchical structure, the white belt classifies the complete beginner and the different colored belts, or different *geup* 級 (*kyū* in Japanese), indicate the progression of the student. However, the exact color system or order has frequently been changed or modified and they often vary greatly, depending on the martial art. Generally, the black belt rankings, or *dan* 段 (*dan* in Japanese), signify the master ranks; although some systems use different colors to indicate the highest ranks, such as an optional white and red belt in *jūdō*, or a red belt in Brazilian *jiu-jitsu*, which is an offspring of *jūdō*. Moreover, the exact number of master ranks varies among martial arts: some use nine and others ten master ranks. Over time, rank promotion became an important additional source of revenue next to training fees for many martial arts organizations, schools, and individual instructors, since they started demanding fees for promotional tests and certificates. Nowadays, these fees can be high, especially in Western countries, such as the United States. According to one source the testing fees for colored belts range between US\$30 and US\$100, and the average fee for a first *dan* black belt is around US\$500 in taekwondo schools in the United States.¹ In addition to revenues for schools and organizations, belt rank promotions, and the often theatrical fashion of these events, represents a way to bestow prestige and assert power and control over students. Overall, in martial arts rooted in Japanese traditions, such as taekwondo, belt rank

1. Mathew Booe, "How Much Does It Cost To Get A Black Belt In Taekwondo?" Little Ninja Parenting, accessed February 10, 2024, <https://littleninjaparenting.com/how-much-does-it-cost-to-get-a-black-belt-in-taekwondo/>.

promotion symbolizes “an important ritual in fostering loyalty, demonstrating status, and reinforcing hierarchy through rites of passage” (Moenig and Kim 2017, 10). Moreover, the symbolism of these events is often tied to the numerous “invented traditions” in relationship to martial arts history and philosophy (Moenig and Kim 2017; see also Gainty 2013; Moenig and Kim 2016; Capener 2016; Bowman 2017).²

With this background in mind, this article focuses on the Korean martial art of taekwondo, which along with *jūdō* is an Olympic sport.³ However, taekwondo athletes are unable to participate in the Olympic Games or other large, international tournaments without having at least a first-degree black belt, or *dan*, issued by the Kukkiwon 國技院 (Gukgiwon, or ‘Gymnasium of the National Sport’),⁴ the so-called World Taekwondo Headquarters, located in Gangnam, Seoul. On the other hand, World Taekwondo (WT; formerly called the World Taekwondo Federation, WTF), the international governing body of the Olympic-style sport of taekwondo, oversees international taekwondo competitions, such as those at the Olympic Games. The institutions are separate entities, serve different purposes, and have separate leadership. As a result of this disconnection, in 2017, the idea of a WT-sponsored *dan* emerged among leading WT members (Moenig and Kim 2017). However, since *dan* promotion is the major source of revenue for the Kukkiwon, a serious conflict of interest arose between these institutions. Thus, this article aims to explain the background and roots of the conflict and its possible future resolution.

Taekwondo was indeed the first successful world-wide cultural export from Korea, long before the “Korean Wave,” or Hallyu 韓流. In this context, the Kukkiwon is not merely a revered martial arts institution around the world but is actually an icon of Korean culture. Moreover, the Kukkiwon is also a symbol of Korean national identity since President Park Chung-hee (Bak Jeong-hui, 1962–1979) declared taekwondo a nominal “national sport”

2. For the concept of “invention of tradition,” see Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983).

3. Taekwondo first appeared at the Seoul Olympics in 1988 as a demonstration sport, and then again at the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. It entered regular competition as an official Olympic sport at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

4. Literally: national (*guk* 國), technique (*gi* 技), institution or hall (*won* 院).

of South Korea in 1971.⁵ Therefore, the fate of this legendary institution should be of interest to the wider, general public.

This article is primarily a literature review, but this study also relies greatly on some personal interviews conducted with central figures involved within World Taekwondo Asia and the Kukkiwon. World Taekwondo Asia (WT Asia), interchangeable with the term Asian Taekwondo Union (ATU), is one of the five continental organizations of World Taekwondo and the official governing body for taekwondo in Asia. The individuals interviewed for this study are Lee Kyu Seok, the current president of WT Asia and one of the vice-presidents of WT,⁶ and Nam Sang-seok, a senior research fellow at the Taekwondo Research Institute of [the] Kukkiwon.⁷ These two central figures discussed and revealed quite sensitive information that helped provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the current conflict over belt-granting rights.

This study begins by focusing on the origins of the belt-ranking system. Subsequently, it will briefly detail the formation of the different taekwondo institutions in connection with the right to hold black belt promotion tests. After explaining the roots of the disagreements between World Taekwondo and the Kukkiwon, this article will discuss the financial implications. Lastly, this article will focus on the current conflict and its likely inevitable outcome in the near future.

5. Taekwondo was only officially designated the “national sport” of South Korea by the National Assembly in 2018.

6. All five continental presidents are also automatically considered vice-presidents of WT in addition to WT’s regular vice-presidents. See Asian Taekwondo Union, accessed February 11, 2024, http://www.wtasia.org/gboard/bbs/board.php?bo_table=introduction&wr_id=1&sca.

7. Taekwondo Research Institute of Kukkiwon, “Research Committee,” accessed February 11, 2024, <http://research.kukkiwon.or.kr/%ED%8E%B8%EC%A7%91%EC%9C%84%EC%9B%90%ED%9A%8C>.

The Origins and Significance of the Belt-Ranking System

Kanō Jigorō (1860–1938) practiced several *jū-jūtsū* 柔術 (‘gentle technique or skill’) styles, which are mostly unarmed combat or self-defense systems, in his youth. However, he felt the need to reform the traditional Japanese martial arts to make them suitable for modern times. Therefore, he created his own style, named *jūdō* 柔道 (judo or ‘gentle way’), in 1882, which is based on several traditional *jū-jūtsū* styles. As part of the modernization process, Kanō introduced a practical, robust, and standard uniform for training in 1907, the *jūdōgi* 柔道着 (or 柔道衣), instead of using ordinary clothing. A distinction between beginners and advanced students or a sort of “ranking system” was nothing new to Japanese martial arts. However, when Kanō travelled to seminars at his many affiliated *jūdō* clubs across the country, he wanted to be able to recognize the approximate basic ability or technical level of students right away, without lengthy training activities or observation. In addition, Kanō wanted to match opposing students in sparring in a fair manner. Therefore, he had the idea of distinguishing students’ abilities with different colored belts, which also carried the practical function of holding the *jūdōgi* together. However, during the system’s introduction in 1883, the classification was very simple and distinguished only between *yūdansha* 有段者 (‘a person with *dan*’), a black belt (*kuroobi* 黒帯), and *mudansha* 無段者 (‘a person without *dan*’), who wore a white belt (*shiroobi* 白帯). The idea was likely borrowed from the Chinese board game of *go* 圍棋 (‘encirclement board game’), which uses similar classifications for its players and features the colors white and black for its stones. The multiple color student belts and the various black belt master classifications were introduced during the late 1920s and 1930s. Accordingly, a system of belt-rank promotion tests was gradually introduced, administered after certain periods of time as well (Kano 2005, 7–35; Watson 2008, 1–16; Gainty 2013, 25–26, 31).⁸

Funakoshi Gichin (1868–1957), the so-called “father” of Japanese

8. See also, Judo Info Online Dojo, “The Judo Rank System – Belts,” accessed February 10, 2024, <https://judoinfo.com/obi/>.

karate-dō, introduced karate from Okinawa to Japan in 1922. During this process, he befriended Kanō and was impressed with his educational innovations and philosophical doctrines. Both Kanō and Funakoshi were school educators by profession; therefore, they looked for structure, safety, and scientific methods when teaching martial arts. Thus, following Kanō's lead, Funakoshi adopted the idea of students wearing a standard uniform during training lessons. The *jūdō* uniform was very thick and sturdy as it was designed for grappling and throwing, so that it would not easily tear. However, this was not necessary during karate training, since grabbing an opponent was a much lesser training activity and the focus was more on striking. Therefore, after initially using the *jūdō* uniform, it was modified for karate using a thinner fabric, which was also less hot during the summer season. Moreover, together with the uniform, Funakoshi also naturally introduced the belt ranking system to karate (Clayton 2004, 99; Hassell 2007, 21–51).

The belt-ranking system together with the white uniform was also transferred to Korea, since *jūdō* (*yudo* in Korean), together with *kendo* 剣道 (*geomdo* in Korean, or 'way of the sword'), was first established in Korea during the 1890s and more broadly proliferated at the beginning of the 20th century under Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), as part of the public education system, similar to the situation in Japan. Subsequently, karate, under a variety of different karate-based terms, was also introduced by Korean students who returned from Japan to Korea between 1944 and 1946, where they had learned karate. Karate took root in the Seoul area in five different schools or *gwan* 館 (*kan* in Japanese; literally 'house' or 'hall') during that period. As a result, after Korea's colonial liberation with the end of the Pacific War in 1945, and the subsequent division of Korea, karate existed only in the South. As karate was introduced, the belt-ranking system and the white uniform were naturally also adopted in Korea. Over the decades, these different karate schools united under various umbrella organizations. Moreover, the various terms used for the marital art, all basically of karate origins, were gradually replaced with the term "taekwondo," coined in 1955, but more or less universally recognized in South Korea only in 1965 (Capener 1995; Kang and Lee 1999; Madis 2003;

Na 2005; Moenig 2015, 34–65).⁹

The white uniform and the belt-ranking system have been exclusively used in Japanese-based martial arts. Since most modern Korean martial arts, such as taekwondo, judo (*yudo*), and hapkido (*hapgido*), originated from Japanese martial arts, the system is widespread not only in South Korea but also in the North, because taekwondo was introduced there in 1980 (Gillis 2008, 151–153, 34–65; Moenig 2015, 34–65).¹⁰ On the other hand, Chinese martial arts never developed or adopted such a system; although some Chinese martial arts, established in other countries, have more recently also introduced color belt ranking systems with revenues in mind. However, the Chinese ranking systems, and especially the attire, are clearly distinguished from Japanese-based martial arts. In general, during the adoption of belt-ranking systems in martial arts, “credibility through lineages has been replaced by [formalized symbols, such as a black belt, and] certificates from an international governing body” (Lewis 2023).

The Formation of the Taekwondo Institutions in Connection with Belt-Rank Promotion

Initially, in the absence of a unified umbrella organization for taekwondo in South Korea, belt-rank promotion was administered by the different *gwan*. Typically, a *gwan* began as a single school, but later expanded to other locations and often developed into an organization with thousands of members. Each *gwan* guarded its rights to conduct belt promotion

9. From 1944 to the late 1950s, the terms *dangsudo* 唐手道 (‘way of the Tang hand,’ referring to the Chinese Tang Dynasty), *gongsudo* 空手道 (‘way of the empty hand’), and *gwonbeop* 拳法 (*quanfa* in Chinese; *kenpō* in Japanese; ‘fist method’) were used in South Korea. The two former terms are the Korean transliterations of the Japanese term, *kara-te-dō*; the latter is a Chinese martial arts term which was also used in Okinawa and Japan as a reference to karate. Chinese martial arts played an insignificant role in the formation of taekwondo.

10. Hapkido 合氣道 (*hapgido*, ‘way of the unifying life energy’) is the Korean transliteration of the Japanese martial arts’ term *aikidō*, which is *Daitō-ryu Aiki-jūjutsu* based.

independently and students were unable to transfer their belt ranks to other *gwan*, since there was no system for mutual recognition. This policy helped to keep students loyal to their respective *gwan* (Kang and Lee 1999, 2–61; Seo 2007, 15–50; Heo 2008, 39–108; Moenig 2015, 34–65; Moenig and Kim 2017).

With the formation of the Korea Taekwondo Association (KTA), the domestic governing body of taekwondo in South Korea, in 1965,¹¹ the content and requirements of black-belt promotion testing became increasingly streamlined but were still mostly controlled and administered by the individual *gwan*. This changed with the promotion of Kim Un-yong (1931–2017), a former KCIA (Korean Central Intelligence Agency) officer, to the president of the KTA in 1971. Kim aimed to control the *gwan*; therefore, he introduced a variety of regulations. Ultimately, Kim's goal was to dissolve the individual *gwan* and unify all taekwondo schools and clubs under the KTA umbrella. During this process, Kim founded the Kukkiwon, also known as the World Taekwondo Headquarters, in the period of 1972/1973. At the same time, Kim launched the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF) as an international governing body in 1973. Initially, the Kukkiwon was supposed to house the KTA; however, after the successful launch of the international umbrella organization in cooperation with the implementation of the 1st World Taekwondo Championships held in the Kukkiwon, the WTF moved in instead. Moreover, Kim was in charge of all three organizations as their undisputed leader (Kang and Lee 1999, 62–94; Seo 2007, 55–59; Gillis 2008, 88–102; Moenig and Kim 2017).

One of the vital goals under Kim's leadership was to gain a monopoly over black-belt promotional rights, since this was a key part of the taekwondo power structure and loyalty system. At first, the KTA administered promotional tests parallel to those of the *gwan*. However, in 1978, under the direction of Kim Un-yong, the *gwan* officially lost the right of blackbelt promotion and the right to issue domestic black belt certificates

11. The first Korea Taekwondo Association was founded in 1959, but dissolved in 1961, to be replaced with the Korea Taesudo Association, which was then renamed the Korea Taekwondo Association in 1965.

was handed over, first to the Korea Taekwondo Association and then to the Kukkiwon. Even after their official termination, some *gwan* continued defiantly to issue their own black belt certificates for a period of time. While dissolving the *gwan* was not completely successful, they decreased greatly in power and relevance and the few surviving *gwan* at present represent something akin to nostalgic fraternity clubs (Kang and Lee 1999, 75–76, 97–99; Chong Woo Lee, as cited in Yook [2002, 305]; Seo 2007; Moenig and Kim 2017).

On the other hand, color belt promotion has been left to individual taekwondo schools; although the individuals who conduct color belt promotion tests need to have certain certifications, such as being fourth *dan* and having an instructor's license, both issued by the Kukkiwon. The Kukkiwon has been increasingly in charge of administering most of the practical, technical aspects of taekwondo, such as biomechanical characteristics of technique execution, instructor licenses, research, publication of textbooks and journals, and other elements in relationship to taekwondo.¹² In contrast, since its establishment in 1973, the World Taekwondo Federation (now World Taekwondo) has been in charge of organizing and administrating international competitions and international refereeing, while also managing competition rules and format. In addition, since taekwondo became an official Olympic sport in 2000, great focus has been on managing diverse affairs related to the Olympics. On the other hand, in South Korea, the Korea Taekwondo Association has been responsible for domestic referee training, licensing, competitions, and other domestic taekwondo affairs.¹³

12. See Kukkiwon (World Taekwondo Headquarters), "World Taekwondo Academy," accessed February 14, 2024, <http://wta.kukkiwon.or.kr/en/trainingAd/trainingKr?menuid=&topMenuid=&lang=en>.

13. World Taekwondo, "Vision, Mission, Strategy," accessed February 10, 2024, <http://www.worldtaekwondo.org/about-wt/about.html>; Korea Taekwondo Association (KTA), "Saeom mokpyo mit gineung" (Business Goals and Functions), accessed February 10, 2024, <https://koreataekwondo.co.kr/c001/c0012>.

The Roots of the Conflict between World Taekwondo and the Kukkiwon

With the establishment of the World Taekwondo Federation in 1973, a rule was instituted that athletes needed at least a first *dan* issued by the Kukkiwon in order to compete in international events organized or sponsored by the WTF, such as the World Championships.¹⁴ Despite the opposition of the Kukkiwon, individual, national associations of countries began issuing their own black belt certificates, which, however, are not recognized at these international competition events. As a result of these *dan* certificates which are not universally recognized, there are issues, because of the requirement that athletes earn a black belt certificate from a South Korean government-controlled institution, the Kukkiwon, which has never been technically, officially, or legally connected to World Taekwondo. A Kukkiwon-issued *dan* is even a requirement for participation in the taekwondo event at the Olympics, which likely also contradicts International Olympic Committee (IOC) rules and regulations in some manner. The existing situation was probably not perceived as a problem in the past when Kim Un-yong and basically the same administrative staff controlled and handled all three organizations—the KTA, the WTF, and the Kukkiwon. Vice-presidents, secretary generals, and other positions were exchanged or replaced between individuals working in these three organizations, which constituted mostly the same group of people, all Koreans. Moreover, Kim Un-yong's signature appeared on all Kukkiwon black belt certificates, so there appeared to be no issue or conflict. This situation, however, ended in 2004, when Kim Un-yong was forced to resign his leadership in all three organizations over accusations of embezzlement and corruption (Gillis 2008, 193–201; Moenig and Kim 2017; Choi 2007).

When Kim Un-yong resigned, Choue Chungwon (born 1947) was elected the new president of the World Taekwondo Federation. Choue has

14. Since the First and Second World Taekwondo Championships were conducted in the Kukkiwon, the Kukkiwon was probably able to insert itself in the process; even though local Korean black belt promotion was the business of the KTA and the individual *gwan* at that time.

been actively involved in taekwondo issues since 2009, when he became chairman of the World Taekwondo Peace Corps Foundation. Moreover, prior to this, as one of the two heirs of Kyung Hee University and as its president from 1997 to 2003, he had been exposed to taekwondo politics, since Kyung Hee University has one of the most influential and largest taekwondo departments in South Korea. However, Choue lost his influence over Kyung Hee University when he had a quarrel with his older brother Jo Inwon in 2008 (Kim 2008).¹⁵ As a result, the taekwondo program at Kyung Hee University was somehow sidelined by the WTF/WT and now has a diminished influence.

Nevertheless, due to his former position as Kyung Hee University president and his connections with other educational institutions, the sports world, and politics, Choue was elected president of the WTF/WT. However, since Choue had no practical taekwondo background, he had also limited personal relationships with staff members and the leadership of the Kukkiwon and the KTA. In fact, in the early 2000s these organizations were still mostly dominated by members of the second (1960s) and third (1970s) generation of taekwondo leaders. In contrast, under the leadership of Choue, many positions in the WTF/WT have been given to foreigners, who harbor no loyalty conflicts with or sentiments toward the Kukkiwon. Only two of the eight vice-president positions of WT are currently held by Korean nationals.¹⁶ Therefore, the current conflict between WT and the Kukkiwon was perhaps accelerated because of a lack of personal relationships or concern between WT leadership under Choue and the Kukkiwon. Some individuals might even perceive the relationship between these institutions in antagonistic terms.

15. See also World Taekwondo, "Vision, Mission, Strategy," accessed February 10, 2024, <http://www.worldtaekwondo.org/about-wt/about.html>.

16. World Taekwondo, "Council," accessed February 16, 2024, <http://www.worldtaekwondo.org/about-wt/council.html>.

The Technical and Financial Aspects of Kukkiwon Belt Promotion

At present, the Kukkiwon holds, at least in South Korea, a monopoly over issuing black belt ranks from the first to the ninth *dan*. Naturally, the monopoly is only over taekwondo schools affiliated with the KTA and World Taekwondo. In addition, in other countries, practitioners have the alternative of receiving a black belt certificate issued by the national association, which, as discussed before, has limited international recognition. Some practitioners, even if they do not participate in international competitions, also choose to purchase a Kukkiwon certificate in addition to the certificate issued by the host nation, which is an expensive personal choice with the motive often being bragging rights.

The Kukkiwon ninth *dan* is the highest degree and held by 1,246 individuals, although two individuals, Ban Ki-moon (former secretary-general of the United Nations and a South Korean national) and the current pope, Pope Francis, were bestowed with an honorary tenth *dan*, which requires no test or practical skills. Other celebrities, such as former President Donald Trump and President Vladimir Putin, received *only* an honorary ninth-degree black belt (Moore 2021).¹⁷ Regardless of the *dan* degree, the bestowal of honorary black belts is a highly political issue and probably often coordinated with general South Korean foreign politics.

Naturally, in ordinary cases, a black belt degree is only issued when an individual passes a test. Test requirements typically consist of performing sparring, *pumsae* ('forms,' or choreographed routines), and basic movements. Higher black belt degrees, depending on the level, require essays and breaking boards. Tests by national associations are often more demanding and frequently include more testing elements, such as self-defense, a lot of board breaking, and traditional elements, such as one-step sparring, which the Kukkiwon mostly eliminated. According to the

17. Also, Nam Sang-seok, senior research fellow at the Taekwondo Research Institute of Kukkiwon, telephone interview by authors (in Korean), March 7 and March 10, 2023. It should be noted, Putin's black belt was recently revoked because of the invasion of Ukraine.

Kukkiwon, there are more than 5,390,000 Kukkiwon black belt holders world-wide (Bae 2017).¹⁸

In South Korea, the cost of a first-degree black belt test is typically between 120,000 *won* (US\$92)¹⁹ and 150,000 *won* (US\$114), although it can also be exceedingly higher in affluent neighborhoods, such as Gangnam, Seoul. However, the Kukkiwon receives only 10,000 *won* (US\$8) for a *pum* 品 (the equivalent of a *dan* for children),²⁰ 12,000 *won* (US\$9) for first- to third-degree black belts, and 16,000 *won* (US\$12) for fourth- and fifth-degree black belts. The rest is kept or split by the instructors, gymnasium owners, and/or regional organizations to which the student belongs. In other countries, the test fees have wide ranges and the Kukkiwon takes various shares, differing between high-income countries, such as the US and Western Europe, and, as for example, low-income African nations. Thus, the fee depends on the GDP of a country and is recalculated each year. Overall, the Kukkiwon budget for 2023 is estimated at approximately 26.2 billion *won* (US\$20 million), of which the Korean government will have provided 9.8 billion *won* (US\$7.5 million). The income from the issuance of domestic Korean *dan* certificates is estimated to be 12.4 billion *won* (US\$9.5 million) and from overseas certificates 4 billion *won* (US\$3.05 million). The rather small proportion of overseas revenues is the result of national taekwondo organizations issuing their own certificates, since they typically do not offer Kukkiwon certificates. Most of the combined revenues earned by the Kukkiwon and the substitutes provided by the government are used for internal salaries, internal department progress costs, and for dispatching instructors overseas. However, some of this information can be quite delicate

18. Kukkiwon (World Taekwondo Headquarters), "Promotion Test," accessed April 11, 2023, [19. All exchange rates are approximated up or down and calculated on April 17, 2023.](https://www.kukkiwon.or.kr/front/pageView.action?cmd=/eng/evaluate/infomation;NamSang-seok, senior research fellow at the Taekwondo Research Institute of Kukkiwon, telephone interview by authors (in Korean), March 7 and March 10, 2023. For the number of black belt holders world-wide, see a link from the Kukkiwon webpage cited above. The numbers are updated monthly.</p>
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20. The term *pum* is derived from the term *pumsae* 品勢 ('frame' or 'forms'), which replaced formerly used karate-based terms for forms. A black belt equivalent for children, or a *pum*, was only introduced by the Kukkiwon in 1975.

and is often confidential and not publicly available, despite the Kukkiwon's disclosure obligation as a governmental entity (H. Han 2022).²¹

The Current Conflict between World Taekwondo and the Kukkiwon

The black belt promotion system and politics of the Kukkiwon have caused many problems and conflicts between national associations and individual taekwondo instructors residing in their countries. In theory, each national association should be in sole charge of belt promotion and issuing black belt certificates in harmony with the Kukkiwon. However, some (most often) Korean instructors residing in foreign countries received the authority directly from the Kukkiwon to promote students to higher *dan* degrees in the name of the Kukkiwon, thereby sidelining the national association in the country where they work, and to issue their own certificates. As a result, there has been great distrust of the Kukkiwon *dan* certificate issuance policy and process, since these non-aligned, individual instructors and their independent schools or organizations are often unfriendly, or even confrontational, towards the respective national association, and Korean instructors often feel superior to their local peers. Unsurprisingly, these non-aligned schools do not pay membership fees for their students or schools to the national taekwondo associations. This was a leading reason national associations established their own certificate issuance systems not requiring the Kukkiwon certificate or stamp (Choi 2007).²²

Subsequently, these conflicts between national taekwondo associations and the Kukkiwon inspired the idea of an alternative to the Kukkiwon *dan*, and a natural substitute would be certificates issued by the international governing body of taekwondo, WT. However, initially, there was no agreement on an independent WT *dan*. Yet, under Choue's leadership, the

21. Also, Nam Sang-seok, senior research fellow at the Taekwondo Research Institute of Kukkiwon, telephone interview by authors (in Korean), March 7 and March 10, 2023.

22. Also, Lee Kyu Seok (Yi Gyuseok), interview by authors, Seoul, March 23, and April 1, 2023; Nam Sang-seok, senior research fellow at the Taekwondo Research Institute of Kukkiwon, telephone interview by authors (in Korean), March 7, and March 10, 2023.

issuance of WT *dan* certificates appeared for the first time in an official proceeding at the World Taekwondo (WT) General Assembly held in Thailand in 2017. According to WT Asia President / WT Vice President Lee Kyu Seok, these negotiations were held in private, not recorded, and conducted only among the five presidents of the continental federations and WT President Choue.²³

After the gathering, all continental federations, except for the Asian federation, prepared to issue their own *dan* licenses. Moreover, WT made samples of certificates to be issued by WT and showed them to the presidents of the five continental federations. The certificates held the signatures of the president of WT, the president of the respective continental federation, the president of the respective national association, and, lastly, of the taekwondo instructor of the respective school, gym, or club.²⁴

Even Kukkiwon officials admit that many countries want to get rid of the certificate issuance controlled by the Kukkiwon.²⁵ However, since WT Asia did not support the idea and did not sign the agreement over an independent WT *dan* certificate at the 2017 WT General Assembly, the project is on temporary hold. At the moment, WT is awaiting permission from the president of the Asian taekwondo federation, Lee Kyu Seok, to issue WT's own certificates.

In an attempt to smooth things over, in 2023 the Kukkiwon began to eliminate the policy of granting promotional rights authority directly to individual instructors residing overseas, as previously done. In addition, the Kukkiwon belatedly gave permission to national associations to issue their certificates independently, which has been a matter of fact for a long time. In 2018, the Kukkiwon promised to pay 1.9 billion *won* (US\$1.5 million) annually to WT, under the condition that WT agree not to issue licenses and certificates independently from the Kukkiwon; but the Kukkiwon has not honored this promise so far.²⁶

23. Lee Kyu Seok (Yi Gyuseok), interview by authors, Seoul, March 23, and April 1, 2023.

24. Lee Kyu Seok (Yi Gyuseok), interview by authors, Seoul, March 23, and April 1, 2023.

25. Nam Sang-seok, senior research fellow at the Taekwondo Research Institute of Kukkiwon, telephone interview by authors (in Korean), March 7 and March 10, 2023.

26. Lee Kyu Seok (Yi Gyuseok), interview by authors, Seoul, March 23, and April 1, 2023.

WT expects the revitalization of the *dan* promotion industry as a result of an independent WT *dan* certificate, since WT would promote and manage a WT *dan* in a much more systematic and transparent fashion than the Kukkiwon. In fact, the Kukkiwon's *dan* certificates are relatively unsought after overseas. As a result, the revenues from issuing *dan* certificates abroad are much smaller than the revenues from issuing *dan* certificates in South Korea. If WT begins issuing their own *dan* certificates, it is broadly expected that most of the 210 WT member countries will issue certificates in cooperation with WT. According to estimates, a WT *dan* certificate would boost the industry by approximately 10 billion *won* (US\$7.6 million) in annual, world-wide revenues, which is more than double the present amount. Moreover, it is expected that a part of these revenues would eventually flow back and help the development of individual, national associations.²⁷

Paradoxically, one recent limited survey among taekwondo leaders found that, at least among Asian taekwondo leaders, a majority did not see the necessity of a WT *dan* and they appear to be very sympathetic and loyal to the Kukkiwon, a sentiment, however, not necessarily echoed by non-Asian taekwondo leaders (Moenig et al. 2023).²⁸ Kukkiwon officials argue that WT is a sports organization and, therefore, should not be able to issue *dan* certificates, which represents a martial arts certificate and lies within the sphere of the Kukkiwon. The Kukkiwon will perhaps offer financial support to WT again or suggest some joint issuing of certificates. However, according to Lee Kyu Seok, the Kukkiwon is likely insincere and wants to cling to its power.²⁹ In essence, the planned issuance of WT's *dan* certificates threatens the Kukkiwon's survival. On the other hand, the issuance of WT black belt certificates would bring many benefits to individual, national associations.

27. Lee Kyu Seok (Yi Gyuseok), interview by authors, Seoul, March 23, and April 1, 2023.

28. The survey was conducted among present and former national team coaches.

29. Lee Kyu Seok (Yi Gyuseok), interview by authors, Seoul, March 23, and April 1, 2023.

Conclusion

Belt promotion tests have transformed the skill-based assessment test of many martial arts to a commercial-based enterprise due to the often-high promotion fees. And since this has become a very lucrative business for instructors and martial arts organizations, unqualified students are quickly and more frequently tested and promoted to higher degrees than in the past. Moreover, rapid belt rank promotion might also be connected to cultural shifts in younger generations. In WTF/WT taekwondo, this domain has been handed over to the Kukkiwon.

The Kukkiwon was initially a non-profit, private foundation. However, in 2010, the South Korean National Assembly enacted a “special law” for the advancement of taekwondo. As part of the law, the Kukkiwon transformed from a “foundation” to a ‘special corporation’ under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Sports” (Moenig and Kim 2017). Under this arrangement, the Kukkiwon has the right to financial government support, but transformed from a “non-profit to a profit” organization (Moenig and Kim 2017). This designation was the result of the many financial scandals of the Kukkiwon over the years and of accusations of improper belt promotions for financial reasons or motives of nepotism (Choi 2007). However, even after it became a quasi-governmental institution under the oversight of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, scandals related to corruption and nepotism have not disappeared. For example, according to inspection results from 2019, the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism accused Kukkiwon officials of “[a]buse of director authority: Promoting profit-making businesses in violation of the law, excessive payment of legal fees, payment of honorary/ eligible severance pay, improper hiring procedures” and many other offenses.³⁰ As a result, “[a] suspended prison sentence [was] confirmed for former Kukkiwon secretary general

30. Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, “Bodo jaryo: Gukgiwon samu mit gukgo bojogeum geomsa gyeolgwa balpyo” (Press Release: Announcement of Kukkiwon Affairs and Government Subsidy Inspection Results), February 28, 2019, accessed February 16, 2024, https://www.mcst.go.kr/kor/s_notice/press/pressView.jsp?pSeq=17138.

Oh Dae-youn [in office 2017–2018], who changed Kukkiwon’s honorary retirement allowance guidelines and received severance pay” (M. Han 2021). In many of these incidents, politicians and National Assembly members have been regularly involved in accusations of meddling in Kukkiwon affairs (Kang 2019). And since belt promotion revenues are the major source of funding for the Kukkiwon, the financial aspect related to belt promotion led to a major conflict between the two principal taekwondo institutions, the World Taekwondo and the Kukkiwon.

Overall, there seems broad agreement that WT will likely be more effective in terms of generating revenues for *dan* promotion internationally, and WT would likely also force its standards on the KTA to some degree, thus also damaging the Kukkiwon’s main source of income. However, despite recognizing the potential, positive effects of a WT *dan*, and also considering the rampant corruption within the Kukkiwon, WT Asia President and WT Vice-President Lee Kyu Seok is the central figure in blocking the process. His decision is likely influenced by nostalgic feelings toward the Kukkiwon, which is taken as symbolic of the South Korean nation. Evidently, WT-style of taekwondo is also often referred to as *gukgi taegwondo* (‘national sport taekwondo’), a term coined by the late military dictator and president, Park Chung-hee in 1971. Subsequently, the Kukkiwon was also named after this expression, which also created a contrast to other taekwondo organizations, such as the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF), which moved its headquarters eventually under North Korean leadership, to Vienna, Austria (Seo 2007, 75–76).³¹ Lastly, as a matter of transparency, it should also be mentioned that Lee Kyu Seok ran unsuccessfully for the WTF presidency against Choue Chungwon in 2004, which might also play a role in his resistance.

To sum up, WT Asia and Kukkiwon officials seem to agree that the time will come when WT will issue its own *dan* certificates. The issuance of WT *dan* certificates is blocked only due to the objection of WT Asia.

31. The ITF split into three organizations around the time of the death of its founder Choi Hong Hi (1918–2002). However, the main organization still remains in North Korea (see Moenig and Kim 2021).

However, if the current president of WT Asia retires, the WT *dan* certificate will certainly become reality, which might very well usher the Kukkiwon, the so-called “World Taekwondo Headquarters,” into the realm of history.

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