

An Attempt to Define “Taekwon-Do” looking at Bruce Lee, Gen. Choi and his Legacy.

By Manuel E. Adrogué¹

Good definitions try to “trap” in words the essence of that which is to be defined, while at the same time distinguishing it from things which may result confusingly similar.

Aristotle taught that a perfect definition would identify the Proximate Genus (that is, the family of things to which the defined object belongs) and the Specific Differentia (that which makes such object different from other members of the family). And such definition should not bypass the essential qualities of the matter being defined.

Someone might say that TKD is an Asian martial art; another will state that it is the Korean expression of the art of combat based on strikes and kicks. A third person might argue that TKD is a combat sport with two different sets of rules, one of those having Olympic recognition. And finally it would be possible to say that TKD is the formulation of martial arts as proposed by Gen. Choi based on his knowledge of karate and other studies, having his criteria imprinted on techniques organized in patterns that he established for posterity.²

All such definitions reflect reality and identify a Proximate Genus, “martial art”, and a Specific Differentia that varies depending on where the defining agent places himself. Definitions discriminate by separating what something is from what it is not.

But there is one interesting factor which is the practical consequences of adopting certain definitions. Indeed, definitions serve as **a good excuse to turn our backs on certain data and to give preferential treatment to other. And through that, the person issuing the definition may furtively avoid taking responsibility over relevant aspects of the matter at stake**

The problem is, when it comes to a martial arts instructor, the imperative of not playing with people's expectations. Let me clarify:

If as a TKD instructor I devote 90% of my class time to teach a competition method that aims to allow children to gain coordination, coexisting values, self confidence and physical workout habits I should bear in mind that many of my students (or their parents) have probably come to my school with the idea that I would teach them how to deal with violent situations. The fact that I have adopted a limited definition of my activity (because I or my superiors have decided that we are centrally devoted to Olympic sparring, or to score points on my pals using foam pads, or performing patterns as it pleased Gen. Choi) will not change the hard fact that people's expectations will not be satisfied, and will not excuse my from sneaking out from my duties by using **a tricky definition that allows me to gross my students list without making the effort to give them what they came for.**³

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<http://taekwon.com.ar/index.php/english/>

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² I should make clear that this piece is mostly focused on Taekwon-Do usually identified as ITF, although many concepts may apply to other disciplines.

³ This is similar to those unscrupulous Tai Chi instructors who promise, besides wellbeing, health and Chinese culture, “self defense skills”. In 90% of the cases it is a lie, and unless you have been fortunate enough to meet an exceptional instructor (I know some of those) and you are willing to invest long years on it, Tai Chi will not help to

When Gen. Choi's initiative had been running for about five years, circa 1960, his goal was to develop over the basis of his karate **a devastating military combat method**. All fighting skills he might hear about were studied and incorporated. That happened while troops were being trained for the Vietnam War. His famous encyclopedia included throws and jointlocks not because he used to teach them or was knowledgeable on them, but because some Hapkido experts joined his group, and Choi conceived TKD as **a permeable, encompassing, "scientific" discipline** (subject to rational analysis), prompt to improvement, to embrace new information and develop. Choi wanted the very best, and he became famous for never considering anything good enough.



Sometime later, around 1970, Gen. Choi kept insisting on the other Korean leading masters to withdraw the Tangsudo or Kongsudo names (or the temporary Taesudo) to fully embrace the "Taekwondo"⁴ denomination and his patterns, and that they should get rid of Japanese karate forms. In those years the different groups in Korea confronted in the emerging tournament scene where **"new"** kicks were tested and ended up becoming one of the central features of TKD. And that was when TKD mutated from centering around hard blocking, low stances and reverse punches **to fast stepping, dodging and acrobatic kicks**.

A third phase comes with the spreading of TKD in Western countries, aiming towards acknowledgement by the public in a tour-de-force against Japanese karate, which had arrived ten years before. Those spectacular kicks and the **Korean martial artists' fondness for breaking hard objects** proved fundamental.

defend yourself. And the gap between what is promised and what is delivered is found in lots of TKD schools, to the point it has become epidemic.

⁴ Be aware that Korean language does not normally use hyphens.

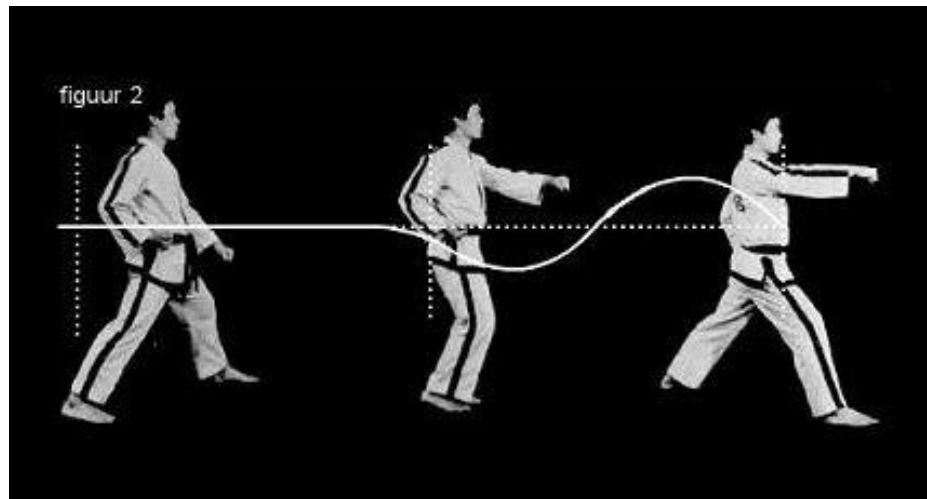
The fourth phase of TKD started in the late 70s and early 80s when an exiled Gen. Choi focused his International TKD Federation (which at a certain point had less than a dozen Korean masters) against the newly established World TKD Federation (funded and supported by the powerful South Korean government).



During the 80s, while the WTF was adapting its sparring competition rules to qualify for Olympic recognition and thus promote the country's image, Gen. Choi resisted politically and focused on fine-tuning the mechanics of the basic motions of his TKD system as he had not done before.

All that translated in a special technical identity based on harmony, softness and efficiency **to attain powerful movements** (conceptually with some relation to Chinese Xing Yi or the Shotokai karate of Shigeru Egami, as we have discussed more than once with Sanko Lewis). The goal was not to improve the application of motions in combat, but to distinguish ITF TKD from its rival WTF with a more sophisticated type of motion, increasingly distant from its karate roots, and some up-and-down oscillation that reflected in a better way Korean kinetics⁵. Besides, it upheld the value of relaxation, something proper of all superior martial arts, and conceived the “sine wave” which became the trademark of Gen. Choi. He knew that his legacy, to overcome the threat of being diluted after his death, should be concrete and easily recognizable, and for that purpose he also devoted his last years to make sure that his 24 patterns were definitively established.

⁵ Rhythmically rise and drop has been pointed out by expert Kimm HeYoung as a feature of typical Korean motion.



Although during the 90s Gen. Choi's method was promoted as "martial art" to be compared to the "sports" WTF, which had banned fists to the face and thus relinquished any ties with realistic combat, but by that time when General Choi was rounding up his ITF method he certainly did not have in mind military usage, as it had been the case in the 60s.

ITF sparring rules were developed on the early 80s and were not related to the sine wave. Knowledgeable voices have singled out how different were the perspectives of Gen. Choi the 1970s man of arms and the old grandmaster deceased on 2002. Both of them command my admiration, but not veneration: I keep the possibility of looking at them with a critical eye, as he himself used to do.

In his encyclopedia, Gen. Choi stated that the art of fighting has received different names around the world, and that it is known as TKD in Korea. So he admitted the essential family common to all martial arts.



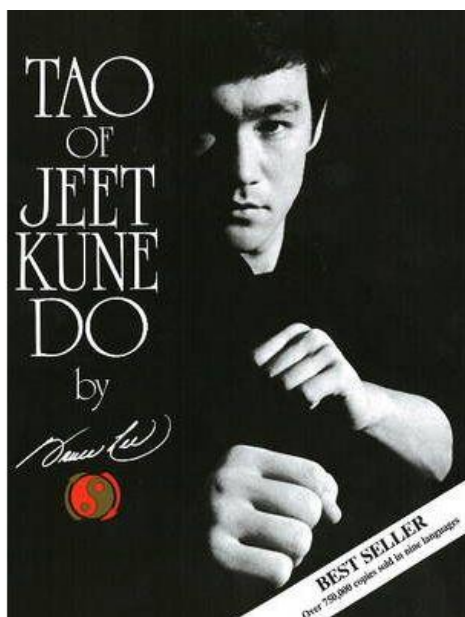
When an instructor invokes his hyper-specialization (maybe in tournament sparring, in a specific way of performing patterns, or whatever), he places himself at the verge of not qualifying as a martial arts instructor; at least what common mortals understand by that designation: someone versed in the art of fighting. Because the more we focus on the Specific Differentia that separates us from other branches the more we neglect **the Proximate Genus that constitutes the art of combat**.

We sometimes hear "no, we don't do throws here", "no, no weapons in this studio", said with pride. How sad! Because that void does not come from a lack of means but from a twisted conviction arising from a limiting definition. If I were properly trained in arms manipulation I would surely be a better Taekwon-Do instructor, as I would be more knowledgeable on the dangers that I am supposed to face.

General Choi never had enough, and when discussing improvement, he would have never admitted "this finishes right here". So why would we stop profiting from all sources that may help us to understand the

art of combat, human movement, bodily control and its energy, whether it is called Kung Fu, Hapkido or whatever name. If TKD is very strong in one area and provides solid knowledge, but is weak in another, why not to check how to improve our weakness. As the famous football star Maradona was fond of saying, "the ball never gets stained" (*"la pelota no se mancha"*), y say "Taekwon-Do doesn't get contaminated" at the presence of another martial art. Grandmaster Han Chang Kim, the legendary father of TKD in Argentina, has told me when I tell him about my off road martial tours "you go, learn, and then you come and show me".

I sometimes watch videos displaying students who perform neat, clean and rhythmical one-step attack and defense exercises. A part of me marvels at such tidiness and harmony in their defenses and counterstrikes. My other, deeper self is scandalized by the detachment of reality of what is being taught in our dojangs. Always lineal, predictable attacks as if in real life we were to be assaulted by someone approaching with a lunge to reach to us with an extended fist or thrust or easy to see sways of knives. By this time we know that violence is ugly, out of control, uncomfortable and sudden. Real world violence belongs to a different dimension than well lit studios, bright white uniforms and smiles all along those in the class. And then I remember Bruce Lee. Is it me or doesn't anyone these days read the "Tao del Jeet Kune Do"???!!! Bruce by 1970 denounced how impractical classical styles had become, stating that the patterns we train –under the name of kata, hyong, tul or poomse- are *"organized dispair"*.



Sometimes it seems that Young people today are not as rebel, full of dreams or challenging as we were, and I am concerned. Or is it that those do not care to enter TKD and go elsewhere? I have met ITF masters who in private admit their martial arts formal techniques would not serve them to defend their lives in a dangerous situation, other than for their sparring skills. They say their patterns are not good for fighting but just for coordination and graceful motions. They are almost pleading guilty vis-a-vis Bruce Lee's accusation. Although I am involved in classical martial art, I surely see Bruce's point, and do my best to cover those weak spots.

And this all leads to the idea of "Legacy", so many times mentioned when talking about Gen. Choi. Legacy is something that a person leaves to others upon decease. In the case of Gen. Choi, it was the

result of a life of struggle and effort, of accumulated accomplishments when he was young, middle aged, and at the dusk of life. Rebel since early, creative in his ideas, bold in his proposals and with a steady hand when executing projects. His legacy is much more than a good brand to sell uniforms.

Why do I keep mentioning Gen. Choi? Because in the creation of TKD two elements converge and blend: both his irreplaceable personal contribution, as well as the collective cultural element (after all, he did not make up the high spinning kicks that have made his discipline famous). But if there is one single person whose vision and decisions marked TKD forever –starting with its name up to its technical features- that man is General Choi Hong Hi.

I have witnessed pointless disputes among instructors from different groups competing to determine who is the most authentic interpreter of Gen. Choi's TKD.

Those who wish to faithfully follow Gen. Choi should remember that, as anyone who died at an advanced age, he had different priorities, interests and concerns along his life, all of which became imprinted in his martial art. This notwithstanding, when he focused on this “mark” (the 24 patterns performed with the sine wave style) on the end of his days, he did not intend to override the devastating aspect of TKD as a combat method, or its permeable quality, or to negate the spectacular kicking developed by the subsequent generation in Korea. Gen. Choi never settled for less than the best.

Maybe there is much more in common between Bruce Lee and Gen. Choi than what it shows at first sight. In spite of the abyss that separates those that today consider themselves to be their respective disciples, they shared a burning passion for the martial art, a non-confirmist view of the world that surrounded them, and a commitment to live life to its full extent.



What is the purpose of this article?

First: To invite instructors to rethink what we are teaching, what are our students' expectations, and whether we are attentive to them. We all agree that TKD is an excellent tool for personal development

and social promotion but, I understand, as long as it remains a martial art that serves the purpose for which it was created..

Second: To propose ITF TKD instructors that we ask ourselves what are we doing to continue the legacy of Gen. Choi. Are we putting real effort to be exponents of a martial art that is lethal, encompassing, consistent, sophisticate, which keeps track on the data provided by science? Or are we simply choosing a convenient definition that prevents us from having to train hard, study, keep learning, or demanding too much from our students with the potential risk of limiting our profit? Beware that what is comfortable may prove to be treacherous when needed most...

Third: To remind ourselves that there are several legitimate and valid ways of living and teaching TKD and to understand Gen. Choi's legacy, and that diverse perspectives over certain matters may add value. What may be best for someone may not be as good for another.

Fourth: To propose that priorities are established in connection with the very positive technical standardization procedures undertaken by the big ITF organizations and their leaders. When priorities are disordered, when a merely desirable goal gets on top of an essential objective, then we are in trouble. That happens, for example, when at judging the execution of a punching technique in a pattern how the knee moves is deemed more important than actually hitting hard.

Postscript. As I listened some weeks ago at Church, in the Gospel according to Saint Luke, Jesus teaches that the God of Israel *is not a God of the dead, but of the living*. And it made me note that in this article I am mentioning the legacy of two deceased persons, Choi and Lee, who had intense and remarkable lives. I believe they would be horrified to know that with time their teachings become something fossil, lifeless, of the dead.

Martial Art is also a matter of the living.

