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Can we apply the Hwa Rang code to modern life?

Through his creation of Taekwon-Do, General Choi gave himself the opportunity to create an art that is fundamentally based on self defence rather than attack. It also gave him an opportunity to globally spread a snapshot of Korean history, its stories and its patriots, when the cloak of Japanese oppression was lifted after 35 years (1910 --1945).

I have chosen to look deeper into Hwa Rang, specifically examining who the Hwa Rang were, and their five commandments or code, and how they can be adapted to modern life through Taekwon-Do. Although this is the eighth pattern we learn, Hwa Rang was the first pattern developed by General Choi in 1955..

When Japan annexed Korea in 1910 they set about repressing all Korean politics and culture. They used any and all means possible to do this. This included placing spies in all corners of the country (many of these spies were actually Koreans who agreed to work for the Japanese). Leading artists and craftsmen were killed or imprisoned to prevent them passing on Korean culture to the next generation. Hundreds of ancient palaces and temples were also destroyed (*The Korean Mind*, p9).

When General Choi began designing his Taekwon-Do Tuls (patterns) he wanted to revive and remember parts of Korean history. Following is a quote from an interview with General Choi Hong Hi, Founder of Taekwon-Do by Maria Heron, The Times, 1999, (*Creation to Unification*, p3)
“When the Japanese invaded Korea they tried to remove the Korean nationality. You could not go to school and be educated if you were not Japanese. I was left a man with no country and therefore no national pride. The patterns of Taekwon-Do represent the history of Korea from time in legend to this century. The propagation of Taekwon-Do throughout the world has also enabled, through the patterns, a small part of Korean history to be learned by its practitioners. A part of Korea therefore now exists across the whole world and Korea’s nationality and history can never be removed by oppressors again”.

First developed in the mid 6th century (roughly 576 AD) by King Jin Heung of Silla, the first Hwa Rang were actually women called Won Hwa (Original Flowers). Won Hwa consisted of two groups of beautiful women believed to have been brought together to serve as Court beauties and were given training in ethics, sincerity, and loyalty among other things. However the leaders of the two groups became competitive and envious of each other. This led to one of the leaders murdering the other, which in turn led to the murderess being executed and the groups being disbanded.

Sometime after this occurrence the King of Silla, growing concerned about the strength of the country, began recruiting young men from aristocratic families to be trained in areas of the military, religion, and educational activities. They were called Hwa Rang which meant flowering youth or flower boys. While at certain times through history their main function was military focused there was also a lot of focus on religion and a well rounded education. The religious side was based mainly (but not solely) on Buddhism which was expanding through Korea around this time thanks to people like the monk Won Hoy who had trained as a Hwa Rang before turning his back on violence and

pursuing his religious beliefs (*From Creation to Unification*, pg 61). It was also a Buddhist Monk, Won Gwang who created the five Commandments or the Code of the Hwa Rang. Because of their status the Hwa Rang often went on to become successful politicians or furthered their careers in the military.

Below each Hwa Rang commandment is given a modern Taekwon-Do perspective based on applying a mix of our tenets and self defence philosophy.

Be loyal to your King

Hwa Rang

As the Hwa Rang were first formed at the King's instruction their loyalty would always have been to the King. Because they came from aristocratic families, being loyal to the King would have been taught to them from a very young age.

It should also be remembered that because of his power the King could demand loyalty - whether they deserved it or not - from all citizens and punish anyone who was deemed to be disloyal.

A modern perspective

Like their King, your Instructor sets the tone and direction of your Taekwon-Do journey. They have given you so much, including their time, knowledge, experience, and enthusiasm. Often for little or no financial gain, but simply for the love of our Art. In return for all they give, they ask is that;

- you give your full attention in class
- you continue your training in your own time, and don't rely solely on class time
- you learn your theory
- you are willing to travel, to train with other instructors, to tournaments and to attend seminars
- you embody the tenets inside and outside of the dojang - part of this means:
 - you lead by example and teach and encourage others
 - you behave in an appropriate manner inside and outside the Do Jang

As the second line in the student oath says, "I shall respect the Instructor and Seniors "Where would we be without them?"

Be obedient to your parents

Hwa Rang

For Koreans in the era of the Hwa Rang, family was the centre of their lives, and this would have been particularly so for Hwa Rang warriors. Many people lived by the Confucian concept of 'filial piety', which is an attitude of respect for parents and ancestors. Filial piety is demonstrated, in part, through service to one's parents. First and foremost the father (as head of the family) garnered the most respect and power, but the mother and also other elders still commanded respect, allegiance and loyalty.

A modern perspective

In many ways things haven't changed, for most people in our era family is still central in our lives. Certainly children are the centre of an adult's universe. While most adults will help their children in as many ways as possible there does need to be reciprocation from the children.

Generally modern society doesn't often adhere to the strictness of past generations, but children need to be aware of the sacrifices their parents make for them and repay those sacrifices through their words and deeds. In a practical sense this can mean doing their chores as and when required, helping with other tasks without being asked. If asked to help with other tasks, to do so without complaint.

Being courteous (the first tenet), hold the door open and let parents and other elders go through first, stand up when they first enter a room, offer them your seat. When speaking to an adult, look at them, speak clearly and engage in conversation. Our parents and often grandparents, have helped shape the people we have become and are becoming. Their influence will be lifelong. Words and deeds of integrity should honour the adults in a child's life whenever possible.

Be honourable to your friends

Hwa Rang

As the Hwa Rang were drawn from the younger generations of the aristocratic classes they would have depended on friendships to get them through their academic classes and physical training, some of those friendships would have been forged during very rigorous times. This sometimes extended to the warriors forming death pacts, as in the case of Sa Da-Ham and his best friend Moo Kwan-Rang. They agreed that if one of them was ever killed in battle the other would kill himself also. So when Sa Da-Ham heard that Moo Kwan-Rang had died in battle he refused to eat and drink as he mourned, after seven days he died, thus fulfilling his oath to his friend (*Creation to Unification*, pg 101).

A modern perspective

We all have friends, some are closer than others but if they are your friends then you should treat them with respect and integrity. True friends will stick by you when the chips are down, not just when things are going well. This is being honourable to your friends. Remembering of course that all these characteristics should be reciprocated. Treat them as you would like to be treated, don't belittle or shame them, don't talk badly about them behind their backs. Instead encourage and support them in what they do, stand up for them in the face of adversity. But, at the same time don't be afraid to question their bad behaviour or choices. Really good friends are hard to come by, when they do come along don't let them drift out of your life, honour them and hold onto them.

Never retreat in battle

Hwa Rang:

The obvious meaning is plain to see; only go forward in battle. However there would also be other factors to add to it. For example, stand by your friends and comrades, both on and off the battlefield. Stand up for what you believe in and for what you know to be right.

Modern perspective:

The principle of standing up for what you know to be right, can be applied to an anti bullying stance. If you are aware of a person or person's being targeted by bullies, we need to encourage our students to take personal responsibility and encourage students to need to stand with them (the person being bullied) and stand up for them. This may well take you out of your comfort zone, but again, using the Taekwon-Do student oath, by being a champion of freedom and justice and building a more peaceful world, you need to step up.

In today's world of social media and the internet, comments and intent spirals out of hand very quickly. What people are prepared to say on a keyboard, is often far more confronting and mean than what most people would engage in face-to-face. In the past bullying was predominantly face to face, with people calling you names or using physical harm (or the threat of). Today bullying can be done more anonymously, stories can spread on social media like wildfire and once they are "out there" they are there to stay.

While anonymous bullying is more difficult to combat, it still needs to be opposed. Never retreating in battle can be applied in this context by not adding to "the thread". If you know the people instigating the bullying, call them out about it. Try to find out why they are doing what they're doing, is there any truth to what they're saying? People need to be made aware of the damage bullying can do. It causes so much distress and anguish for the victims, leading to isolation, self loathing, self harm and in the worst cases, suicide. Our integrity demands that we stand up to the bullies and work to stamp bullying out.

Make a just kill

Hwa Rang

As with any true warrior, lives are only taken in battle as a necessity. It's not acceptable to kill indiscriminately and without just cause. Even in the heat of battle their ethics demanded that there wasn't just wanton killing. All their training would have contributed to their Self Control.

A modern perspective

Taken from a self defence perspective, rather than making a just kill it's about responding appropriately, which could be considered just. This is because any response involving force needs to be reasonable and proportionate. Also before force becomes your only or final option you first of all need to try and avoid the situation by taking evasive action. If this is not an option then work at de-escalating the situation through physical response (for example, taking a non threatening stance eg. passive stance, rather than trying to "staunch it out"), or a verbal response (for example, try to avoid arguing with them, don't command them and certainly don't threaten them).

If it comes to a physical response then the keywords are *reasonable force*. Do what is required to extract yourself and anyone with you from the situation. When the threat is no more you need to stop your response and move to a safe area. By controlling your response to doing what is needed, only then you will be using the tenet of "Self Control".

Conclusion

So is it a coincidence that General Choi chose the Hwa Rang to base part of the meaning of his first pattern on? I don't believe so, firstly, because it seems General Choi is well known for strategic thought, with no actions taken by chance. Secondly, because the standards set for the Hwa Rang seem closely aligned with our own Taekwon-Do morals and standards expressed through the tenets and student oath. There is further alignment between Taekwon-Do's foundation in the 29th Infantry Division, and a large part of the Hwa Rang training being military orientated. There are also the five Commandments the Hwa Rang followed and how they are comparable with and entwined in our Taekwon-Do tenets and the student oath.

Or, were the Hwa Rang just a myth? A story based around some historical threads passed down through time as some scholars believe, remembering that the Japanese destroyed so much Korean history and culture during their occupation many historical records and documents that could prove Hwa Rang's existence one way or the other have simply been wiped away. Even if this is so, Hwa Rang as an ideology is still a powerful story and certainly provides a wonderful guide to a more wholesome way of life.

References

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