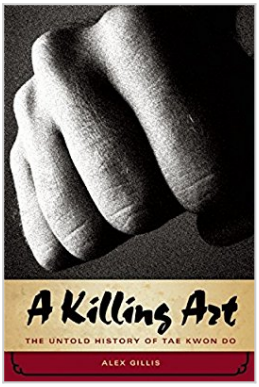

A Killing Art: The Untold History of Tae Kwon Do

By Alex Gillis

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Obscure documents, Korean-language books, and in-depth interviews with tae kwon do pioneers tell the tale of the origin of the most popular martial art. In 1938, tae kwon do began at the end of a poker game in a tiny village in a remote corner of what is now North Korea by Choi Hong-Hi, who began the martial art, and his nemesis, Kim Un-Yong, who developed the Olympic style and became one of the most powerful, controversial men in sports. The story follows Choi from the 1938 poker game where he fought for his life, through high-class geisha houses where the art was named, and into the Vietnam War where the martial art evolved into a killing art. The techniques cut across all realms—from the late 1960s when tae kwon do-trained Korean CIA agents kidnapped people in the U.S. and Europe, to the 1970s when Bruce Lee, Chuck Norris, and other Hollywood stars master the art's new kicks. Tae kwon do is also a martial art for the 21st century, one of merciless techniques, indomitable men, and justice pumped on steroids.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Gillis, himself a tae kwon do black belt, succeeds in debunking the sport’s mythology . . . When he writes about corruption and backroom dealings, his voice is compelling and the depth of his research astounding . . . *A Killing Art* is fascinating, fast-paced, and reads more like a spy novel than a history. Beyond that, it evokes a certain voyeuristic pleasure that comes with unearthing the sordid past of something seemingly harmless.” —*Quill & Quire*

About the Author

Alex Gillis is a university writing instructor and a professional journalist specializing in literary nonfiction and investigative research. He has trained in tae kwon do for 25 years and is a third-degree black belt. His instructors were some of the pioneers of the martial art, and he had rare access to these men and their families and disciples. He lives in Toronto.

When I need a break from my life, when I need to confront stress, fear, and madness, I flee to a place of power, to a room where meditation meets brute force. I climb to a third–floor studio or descend to a basement gym, and as I feel a hardwood floor or a padded cement slab under my bare feet, I smell the sweat and effort of those who came before me, and I hear their laughter and yells, and, occasionally, I remember the blood that fell. I find reprieve in sweat and struggle.

This is not a hobby for everyone, and it is perhaps odd to call it a “break,” especially because the Korean martial art that I practise, Tae Kwon Do, is extremely difficult to master and can lead to real breaks — bone breaks. Its creators embedded innumerable tests within its techniques, but the training is usually safe, and I always look forward to going. I walk into my *dojang*, the Korean name for a martial arts gym, hoping that my instructor, Mr. Di Vecchia, will be there with his old stories and wisdom, that Floyd will be stretching and preparing for one of his spectacular jumping front kicks, that Marc will show us the mid–air split kick once again, and that Martin will push us with his spirited sparring at the end of class. Anyone can begin the fundamentals of the art, but few can stick with it as these men have. I began Tae Kwon Do when I was a teenager, twenty–five years ago — when the art peaked in many ways — and I met these martial artists over the decades, as the physical moves hardened my muscles and strengthened my heart and mind.

The Koreans who created the martial art consciously set out to strengthen individuals and, eventually, entire nations. Tae Kwon Do is an art of self–defence, but if you enter the closed rooms of its history, you realize that it is the art of killing and if practised with care and intent, an art of empowerment. It can empower more than the body. The best martial artists apply physical techniques to mental states; they can erode or raise emotional substrata; they can build or destroy reputations, careers, friends, families, and countries. The complex paths they take — for better or worse — often depend on age–old loyalties and new–found betrayals.

I discovered this the hard way many years ago. On April 20, 2001, in the year of the Snake, I walked into the Novotel Hotel in Toronto, Canada, to wait for the “Father of Tae Kwon Do,” General Choi Hong–Hi, who would lead a three–day seminar for black belts. I was naive then, and revered the eighty–two–year–old Choi

and the other founding members of Tae Kwon Do, including a man named Kim Un–yong, and I felt intimidated walking into the seminar room, partly because Choi was a hard taskmaster. He had become a major–general in the South Korean army at the age of thirty–three, and even though he had retired from the military in 1962, he was still known as “the General.” He and his men had sacrificed their bodies, careers, and families to perfect a martial art now practised by more than 70 million people in nearly 180 countries.

I can picture the first day of his 2001 seminar as if it were today: I wait in the Amsterdam Room of the Novotel with 100 black belts from the United States, Canada, Chile, Peru, Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina, and Honduras. Standing among the bowing, whispering martial artists, I feel as though I could be waiting within a palace of the Chos?n dynasty in 1394 — I imagine the ancient warriors waiting for dynastic rulers, the floors heated in the old style (invisible and underground), and the Korean geisha girls ready to sing the *p’ansori* verses that praise Confucian values and sagacious leaders.

The General and his men are extremely late, however. He is upstairs, talking and arguing with his son and the masters and grandmasters who will help during the seminar. These men once fought, parted, and threatened to kill one another over politics and, in some cases, over personal matters, but the masters and grandmasters know they owe their fortunes and reputations to the General, and everyone is trying to reconcile past threats with present ambitions.

Users Review

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