

## BOOK REVIEW

# ***A Review of A Killing Art: The Untold History of Tae Kwon Do – Updated and Revised Edition***

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Alex Gillis. 2016. *A Killing Art: The Untold History of Tae Kwon Do – Updated and Revised Edition*, 1st printing. Toronto, Canada: ECW Press, Inc. ISBN-10: 1770413006. 264 pages. \$16.95.

### **Purpose**

The primary purpose of Gillis' *A Killing Art* is to provide a thorough and unbiased account of Taekwondo's formative years. As such, a minor objective of his work was to explore the personalities and political systems that established Taekwondo. This "leaner and faster" (7) edition provides more references and updated chapters than the book's first printing.

### **Audience**

The target audiences for *A Killing Art* include all Taekwondo practitioners as well as Korean and martial art historians. Individuals interested in the Korean War, Asian politics in general, or Korean culture will also find the book valuable. Interestingly, Gillis' journalistic approach makes the content compelling to individuals who enjoy international thrillers or political novels.

### **Description**

*A Killing Art* tells the story of Taekwondo chronologically through the lives of General Hong Hi Choi and then Dr. Un-yong Kim as well as the other individuals who formulated Taekwondo as a martial art and combat sport. Gillis concentrates particularly on General Choi and Dr. Kim seemingly because their personal and professional lives are inseparable from the development of Taekwondo. While focused the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF) and the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF), slightly more emphasis is given to the ITF and its contributions to Taekwondo's formative years.

The book opens with Choi's life and how he established Taekwondo and its first organizational bodies. The first few chapters describe the events of his life succinctly, most probably because that information is readily available in Choi's own works (2, 3, 4, 5). The book then moves into the development of Taekwondo as a combat sport under Dr. Kim and the WTF. The final chapters focus on the effects of Choi's passing on the ITF, the successes of the WTF, and a discussion on Grand Master C. K. Choi, a pioneer of Taekwondo.

Each chapter is teeming with details Gillis garnered from the individuals who formulated Taekwondo. Chapters of particular interest to those interested in ITF history include "Through Ten Million Opponents Might Rise against Him," "Tae Kwon Do Named in a Korean Geisha House," and "The Little Giant Dies and Tae Kwon Do Falls Apart." WTF proponents would enjoy and can reflect easily on the information found in the "From Spooky Kukki to WTF" and "Cheating in the Olympics" chapters. More politically-minded readers would be interested in the chapters entitled "The Aces, Cults, and Spies in Tae Kwon Do," "Kafka Would Have Cried: The East Berlin Incident," and "As if in a Bruce Lee Movie."

### **Features**

Gillis, an investigative journalist and long-time Taekwondo practitioner, penned a distinctive and stimulating reading experience. There are three aspects to this book that distinguish it from other Taekwondo historical texts. Most importantly, the book is heavily referenced with endnotes and an extensive bibliography. It may be the first time professional journalistic techniques have been used in book format within the subdiscipline of Taekwondo History. Gillis' captivating

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writing style is also distinctive. As can be seen from the aforementioned chapter titles, Gillis excites the sometimes droll events of Taekwondo formative years in engaging prose. At times, the book reads like a spy novel, but the hundreds of footnotes peppered throughout the book remind the reader the topic was approached earnestly and professionally. Thirdly, *A Killing Art* is written without nationalistic purposes. Nationalist biases have long influenced Taekwondo historical writings (1, 9), and many WTF sources ignore the years between when the ITF was established and forced out of South Korea (6, 10). Gillis, on the other hand, is impartial by discussing the grievous and inimical events that occurred in- and outside of Korea by the ITF and WTF.

### Assessment

The above-listed features of the book are also its strengths: it is a well-researched, enjoyable, and honest read of Taekwondo history. While cited properly and meticulously, Gillis' book is not written for the academic. It is thus an excellent accompaniment to Kimm's *Taekwondo History* (8) and the more scholarly *Taekwondo: From a Martial Art to a Martial Sport* (10) by Moenig.

The book has a couple of shortcomings. First, due to Gillis' overemphasis on ITF history, the reader is left with the impression that he is minimizing the WTF's huge contributions to Taekwondo as a combat sport. To this point, the later chapters do not offer the level of detail about the WTF's impressive accomplishments in recent years that the initial chapters do concerning the ITF's early accomplishments. Second, the book almost exclusively examines ITF and WTF history and rarely mentions the other influential Taekwondo organizations, such as the Kukkiwon, Korean Taekwondo Association (KTA), American Taekwondo Association (ATA), and numerous other smaller, independent organizations.

The updated edition of *A Killing Art* is a significant,

lively, and informative read. It is told by a professional journalist who uses the standards of the profession to make complicated political and cultural issues assessable to the average reader. Despite a couple of limitations, it is an essential text in any Taekwondo and/or Korean history library. The book earns a 4.5 out of 5 stars for its important contribution to Taekwondo History, where the minor abovementioned shortcomings limit the book from being a groundbreaking contribution to that subdiscipline.

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