

Silk Road Taekwondo Quest

GREGORY BRUNDAGE



Ti: Silk Road Taekwondo Quest

By Gregory Brundage

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Introduction

Silk Road Martial Art Adventures

In 2015 I was living in Beijing and decided to start writing a series of travel and martial art adventures called: “Silk Road Kung Fu Friendship Tour” to be published in Kung Fu Magazine. It really started in Afghanistan, then came back home to China, before launching across the entire land Silk Roads starting (again) in the ancient capital city of Xi’an and continuing through Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and then Turkey. After that I made separate trips to Pakistan, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Shanghai, and Hong Kong.

It was very near the beginning of that trans-Asia odyssey in Kyrgyzstan that I thought: Why not run a parallel Silk Road Taekwondo Quest series of articles too? Before living (12 years now) in China I lived seven years in South Korea. In fact, I started Taekwondo training in 1969, so we’re the oldest of friends. Besides all that I’d already published quite a number of articles in Taekwondo Times Magazine so we’re old friends too.

And thus began the Taekwondo Quest originally published as a series of articles in Taekwondo Times Magazine.

Welcome to the Silk Road!

The Silk Road is one of the world's three oldest and historically most important overland trade routes with the others being the Trans-Saharan Trade Route and the Roman Roads. The development of the Trans-Saharan trade routes and Silk Roads was greatly aided by the domestication of the noble and often cantankerous camel in the first millennium BCE that made travel across the expansive deserts in both Asia and Africa possible.

The land route of the ancient Silk Roads starts at the Bell Tower in Xi'an in China, one of the two most illustrious ancient capitals of China.

The “Silk Road” however it isn't a single road, but rather a patchwork of different interconnected trade routes gracefully looping through east, central, west, north and south Asia extending outward in three directions from the western Chinese nexus city of Kashgar, to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and westward in the north and Pakistan, Afghanistan and India westward towards the south. Although some geographers estimate the distance of the land Silk Road to be around 4,000 miles, the total length is at least 10 times that due to its multiple winding and often intersecting routes. It was and remains a mosaic of ancient and ever evolving trade routes.

In antiquity caravans of around 1,000 camels would travel these ancient roads, however it was very rare that any one caravan would go the whole distance as goods were usually bought and sold at trading centers called caravansaries (at least in West Asia and the Middle East) along the way.

In 2015 some 58 nations including South Korea signed on to support the development of the Chinese led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The Silk Road Development Fund is considered the spearhead of that effort. Millions of people in developing countries have benefitted from this effort, which includes building hydroelectric dams so rural people can have electricity for the first time in their lives and high-speed transportation systems to make it easier for people in rural, often impoverished areas get to urban centers for education, employment, etc. It is I think, a project with virtue.

The subsequent “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) has other virtues as well. Central Asian nations along the Silk Roads west of China in particular are rich in natural resources including oil, gas, gold, etc. not to mention human resources, and can no doubt benefit greatly from technical and infrastructural assistance to optimally develop those resources, a process widely acknowledged as necessary to help the entire region move forward more quickly in the 21st Century. And then there are the Maritime Silk Road countries, which also benefit hugely from the BRI development projects.

Why is all this necessary? It was about 500 years ago that the great maritime powers of Europe radically changed global trade routes by offering sea transportation as a cheaper alternative to land transportation across great distances. This caused the port cities to flourish, but also led to the demise of the land Silk Road economies. Now, things are changing again, and it’s a more inclusive change.

Chapter 1 of this book is the series of Silk Road Taekwondo Quest stories chronicling my Silk Road Taekwondo adventures from Kyrgyzstan to Turkey. That’s followed by the first part of the Trans-Saharan Taekwondo Quest series written in Ethiopia I’d like to continue when COVID-19 abates. Chapter 2 is a collection of other articles I published in Taekwondo Times Magazine while living in South Korea and here in China.

To some extent this book is a nostalgia tour for me. At the same time, I sincerely hope to encourage more Taekwondoka and other athletes to travel more and I hope to inspire everyone in the world to appreciate the incredible vastness, beauty and wisdom that can be found in the ancient world and teachings, including and especially their arts and sciences.

For other Taekwondoka this book might be an entertaining exploration into the worlds of Taekwondo outside their normal environments.

Taekwondo culture transcends association and federation demarcations because as anyone who ever crossed those lines before knows: Taekwondo is One – it's a world-wide family of like-minded, highly disciplined, high kicking, fun loving, happy healthy martial artists.



Painting of Ottoman Warrior from Doha, Qatar

Chapter 1 Silk Road Taekwondo Quest

구르는 돌에는 이끼가 끼지 않는다.

A rolling stone gathers no moss.



Zen Master Kyong Ho (1849-1912) was the great-grand-teacher of Zen Master Seung Sahn. The following are some of his precepts:

1. Don't wish for perfect health. In perfect health there is greed and wanting. So, an ancient said, "Make good medicine from the suffering of sickness."
2. Don't hope for a life without problems. An easy life results in a judgmental and lazy mind. So, an ancient once said, "Accept the anxieties and difficulties of this life."
3. Don't expect your practice to be always clear of obstacles. Without hindrances the mind that seeks enlightenment may be burnt out. So, an ancient once said, "Attain deliverance in disturbances."

4. Don't expect to practice hard and not experience the weird. Hard practice that evades the unknown makes for a weak commitment. So, an ancient once said, "Help hard practice by befriending every demon."
5. Don't expect to finish doing something easily. If you happen to acquire something easily the will is made weaker. So, an ancient once said, "Try again and again to complete what you are doing."
6. Make friends but don't expect any benefit for yourself. Friendship only for oneself harms trust. So, an ancient once said, "Have an enduring friendship with purity in heart."
7. Don't expect others to follow your direction. When it happens, that others go along with you, it results in pride. So, an ancient once said, "Use your will to bring peace between people."
8. Expect no reward for an act of charity. Expecting something in return leads to a scheming mind. So, an ancient once said, "Throw false spirituality away like a pair of old shoes."
9. Don't seek profit over and above what your work is worth. Acquiring false profit makes a fool (of oneself). So, an ancient once said, "Be rich in honesty."
10. Don't try to make clarity of mind with severe practice. Every mind comes to hate severity, and where is clarity in mortification? So, an ancient once said, "Clear a passageway through severe practice."
11. Be equal to every hindrance. Buddha attained Supreme Enlightenment without hindrance. Seekers after truth are schooled in adversity. When they are confronted by a hindrance, they can't be over-come. Then, cutting free, their treasure is great.

From *THOUSAND PEAKS: Korean Zen, Tradition and Teachers* by Mu Soeng
(Primary Point Press, revised, edition 1991) Accessed from:
<https://kwanumzen.org/resources-collection/2017/9/15/sayings-of-zen-master-kyong-ho>

Silk Road Taekwondo Quest Part 1 Kyrgyzstan

A day with Vitalii Oleinichenko, President ITF Kyrgyzstan and President of the Chuy Regional Taekwondo Federation

July 28, 2015 Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan



It was a bonnie morning when I set out from Almaty's (Kazakhstan) Sayran bus station to travel to Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan's capital city). Border crossings in Central Asia vary greatly and this one was very nice.



Kordai Border station between Almaty Kazakhstan and Bishkek Kyrgyzstan. Photo taken from inside taxi as few drivers really want to stop for humble passengers' needs to take a photo.

Processing was fast and easy. Then I waited a short while for a van/taxi called a *marshrutka* to go to the western bus station (Zapadny Avtovokzal) in Bishkek. Splendid views of snow-capped mountains entertain the visitor to Kyrgyzstan along the way. After a comfortable four-hour ride, we arrived here in Bishkek, the lovely capital city of forested and mountainous Kyrgyzstan. I write "we" because like usual I made friends and learned a lot along the road, for example that there are clean and nice inexpensive hostels in Bishkek close to the bus station.



Those snow-capped mountains may simply look “picturesque” to the casual observer, but were a welcome relief for me because only a week before I’d been in the Tarim Basin in Northwest China - much of which is in the Taklamakan Desert - one of the hottest places on earth. So, the cool mountain air of Kyrgyzstan was a blessed relief in the weeks of late July and early August 2015.

Bishkek is a lovely capital city in the far north of the country with a population of a little under a million people. There are wide tree lined streets, lots of shopping malls, expensive cars, and the downtown area is clean, beautiful and modern.

Most of the martial arts schools close during the summer around here as many people take vacations and most offices are also closed or at least rather quiet.

None-the-less Master Vitalii, a 6th Dan ITF Black Belt and very distinguished champion, Coach of the Kyrgyzstan National Wushu Team and ITF Federation President was very kind to meet me at my hotel this morning for an interview.



After introductions he began to tell me about their ITF team. For example, they recently won six Gold, four Silver and 1 Bronze medal at the World Championships in Jesolo, Italy. He went on for while telling me about the tremendous successes their team had in recent years and it’s always heartwarming to listen to a man who is a master of his craft talk about his passion: Taekwondo! At age 43, Vitalii is a legend here in Kyrgyzstan owing to a great Taekwondo career of his own and his first-rate work nurturing the national team.

In fact, he showed me some photos and videos of his competitions on his large screen Samsung phone and this gentleman had and probably still has some devastating high kicks! His students appear no less spectacular.



Taekwondo is a no-nonsense martial art.



The above young man may not have the size, but he sure has the enthusiasm – even thinking to smile for the photo



That's called the "Hail Mary Kick." Pushed to the corner, the defender launches a beautifully elegant side kick and bang! Game over.



Like most martial artists I've met here in Central Asia he started his martial arts training with Karate which was very popular in the mid-1980s, but in 1990 he switched over to Taekwondo as he loves kicks in particular and as a demonstration sport in the Seoul 1988 Olympics, Taekwondo showed prospects of becoming hugely popular worldwide. Asked where he learned his Taekwondo he replied: "The Polytechnical Institute of Bishkek."

He also mentioned (with a smile) that the President of Kyrgyzstan, Almazbek Sharshenovich Atambayev, has an honorary 9th Dan, awarded to him when he visited South Korea.

Taekwondo was first introduced to Kyrgyzstan in the 1980s when some Ukrainians came and trained people in Taekwondo and Kickboxing, however it officially started catching on here in 1991, when three North Korean coaches came over, Li En Nam, Sin Un San, and Kim Joi Man. He said that the ITF started here mainly for military purposes (this was also the year Kyrgyzstan became independent in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union). So, naturally they felt the need to enhance their own military, and what better way than Taekwondo. Three years later, he mentioned the WTF started here.

He also was very enthusiastic about the upcoming International Championships to be held August 21 to 25 in Issyk Kul, the favorite vacation spot for people in Kyrgyzstan, owing to the extraordinarily beautiful lake and surrounding mountains.

At this time, he said there are about 1,700 Taekwondo students around Kyrgyzstan, in all major cities.



Master Vitali is married and has three children. I asked if his wife does Taekwondo, and he said she did when they first met. I asked her rank and he smiled very broadly and said: “She was a Yellow Belt...” Call me a romantic but I thoroughly enjoy Taekwondo love stories.

In regards to the future of Taekwondo in Kyrgyzstan he said that the Minister of Education has ordered Taekwondo programs be started in all of the schools in the country.



After the interview he took me to one of his training centers called “Strong Gym.”



Yep! Looked strong inside and out. Inside the main training area there were lots of heavy bags and a ring. Team Strong is ITF and their national and international record of victories is impressive.

After that he invited me to lunch and we had a delicious traditional lunch/dinner at an old-style restaurant. We first had *Shor Poe*, a scrumptious beef and potato soup, in fact the national soup, which was followed by fatuously delicious beef dumplings called *Mante*.





Beef and vegetable dumplings – Out-of-this-world delicious and nutritious!

During dinner we talked about a wide range of topics and I learned the word for peace here is: *Mir*, which also means “relationship. After dinner I felt quite satisfied and he said I looked “Kha-eef,” which means “satisfied,” and sometimes “high.” Very funny but true I suppose. Like the Romans who believe: “An army marches on its stomach,” when I’m full from wonderful food, I feel rather high.



After that culturally and gastronomically fulfilling stop he enthusiastically agreed to go with me to one of the more preeminently famous historical Silk Road sites in the world called *Suyab* in ancient times and *Ak-Beshim* in more recent history, later that day.

Ak-Beshim - The Real Silk Roads

Ak-Beshim is located about 50 km east of Bishkek the capital city and eight km southwest of Tokmok, a small nearby town. The trip involved about an hour ride in a comfortable large white air conditioned mini-bus, followed by a 20-minute taxi ride. Not all taxi drivers knew the way, so I was lucky I was with Vitalii and a translator, guide, friend named “Asan.” Note should be made not many people in Central Asia speak English and finding a trusted friend and/or professional guide is a very good idea.

After exiting the taxi, we walked about 800 meters up a dusty road before finding the first ruins and could see a small hill another 500 meters ahead shaped in such a way as to suggest more extensive buildings remains.



Who would guess that innocuous looking hilltop was the apex of a capital city of a thriving empire at the center of the known trade routes of the world? Oh! I wish I had an extra billion dollars to excavate and rebuild it for about 5 km. in all directions!

Getting to the first excavated ruins was an absolute thrill, like stepping through a time portal back more than a thousand years.

How many babies were born, families flourished, goods were traded, and wars were fought here from its first days till its last? Some questions have no answers, as even the published histories by experts disagree on several major timelines.



It may not look like much to the casual observer because the archeologists who excavated this site plastered over everything with a mud/straw mix to protect it from the elements. Still, enough of some structures are there to get a feel for at least some of the buildings.

One of the many reasons this ancient city is so famous is that Chinese Pilgrim monk Xuanzang in the year 629 walked through here too. In fact, it was he who first recorded this ancient trading center for history. It was a young city at that time but it evolved into the great cross-road' metropolis of the Silk Roads in Central Asia.

Protection and Research on Cultural Heritage in the Chuy Valley, the Kyrgyz Republic Ak-Beshim and Ken Bulun, by Shogo Kume, Masashi Abe et al.

“The headwaters of the Chuy River are located in the Tien-Shan Mountains in the Kyrgyz Republic. After the river crosses the northern part of Kyrgyz from east to west, passing northeast of Bishkek, the modern capital of Kyrgyz, it flows into Kazakhstan. The Chuy Valley consists of a vast area of at

land and fertile soils. For this reason, the valley is a valuable agricultural zone, as well as a strategic point of east-west interactions along the Silk Road, which has connected China, India and Iran since antiquity. The predominant sites along the Silk Road during the period from the 5th century to the 13th century, including Balasagun/Burana, Navikat/Krasnaya Rechka and Suyab/Ak-Beshim, are located in the Chuy Valley. All three sites were added to the World Heritage list in 2014...

“In the 7th century, Ak-Beshim became a political center of the Western Turkic Khaganate. Suyab is mentioned in the famous Chinese texts, “Great Tang Records on the Western Regions” and “A Biography of the Tripitaka Master of the Great Ci’en Monastery of the Great Tang Dynasty.” According to these texts, Xuanzang, a Chinese monk, stopped at Suyab on his journey to India and met Yabghu Qaghan, a qaghan of the Western Turkic Khaganate (Kato 1997). It is also argued that Li Po, a famous Chinese poet, was born in Suyab...

The Conservation of Cultural Heritage in Central Asia

Volume 13, 2017, Retrieved from:

https://www.academia.edu/32420572/Protection_and_Research_on_Cultural_Heritage_in_the_Chuy_Valley_the_Kyrgyz_Republic_Ak_Beshim_and_Ken_Bulun

Reverence-Pavilion Mountain, Sitting Alone

Birds have vanished into deep skies.

A last cloud drifts away, all idleness.

Inexhaustible, this Mountain and I
gaze at each other, it alone remaining.

(One of) Seven Poems by Li Po (701-762 C.E.)

Translated by David Hinton, January 24, 2016

<https://www.terrain.org/2016/poetry/li-po-david-hinton>

Results of the Archaeological Project at Ak Beshim (Suyab), Kyrgyz Republic from 2011 to 2013 and a Note on the Site's Abandonment by Masashi Abe

“The history of Ak Beshim (Suyab) probably goes back to the 5th century. At that time, many settlements were founded by Sogdian immigrants from the west and it is generally believed that the site was also founded by these groups. Since then, the settlement grew into a center along the Tian-Shan corridor of the Silk Roads (Kenjeahmet 2009).”

Intercultural Understanding, 2014, volume 4, pages 11-16,

https://www.mukogawa-u.ac.jp/~itics/publications/IU_vol4/pdf/IU_vol.4_1-1_article.pdf

Sogdian language was the Silk Road's *lingua franca* for at least 500 years from the Tang Dynasty era in China in the 7th century CE.



Sogdia or Sogdiana was an ancient Iranian civilization that at different times included territory located in present-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Different forms of Sogdian language were used from Eastern Europe to Western China, and from Mongolia in the north to India in the South.

Ancient texts generally use one of four major Sogdian alphabets: Sogdian Aramaic, Sogdian-Uighur, Manichean, and Nestorian Christian scripts, in addition to Old Turkic.

Manuscripts with old Sogdian Aramaic and Uighur were found in the Dunhuang Caves in Gansu Province, Northwest China. The Sogdian Uighur was used mostly for secular, Buddhist and Manichean documents. Manichean is of Syriac origin, and Nestorian script was used primarily for Christian texts.

For more information on the incredible treasure trove of ancient manuscripts from the Dunhuang Caves, see: <http://idp.bl.uk>, and,

<https://glorisunglobalnetwork.org/dunhuang-manuscripts-an-introduction-to-texts-from-the-silk-road>

Back in Kyrgyzstan a thousand years ago...

Ak Beshim-Suyab, by Gerard Clauson

“The city of Balasagun had a short life, but a glorious one. Traditionally said to have been built by the founder of the Karakhanid Dynasty a little before the middle of the 10th Century, it and Kashgar were the two capitals of that dynasty in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It was the place where the author of the first great Turkish literary work, the *Kutadgu Bilig* was born, and worked. In A.D. 1210 it stood a siege of sixteen days by an army of the Kara Khitay, but finally its massive walls were breached and it was sacked for three days; 47,000 of its inhabitants perishing during those grisly events. The Mongolian invasion very soon followed and from then on Balasagun played no part in history and probably for practical purposes ceased to exist.”

The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, No. 1/2 (Apr., 1961), pp. 1-13, Published By:

Cambridge University Press,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/25202406>

To make a long story short, at least three civilizations fought for control of Ak-Beshim, including Tang Dynasty China, Turkic, and Tibetan. In the end Turkic forces prevailed. This was their turf after all and Turkic horsemen were certainly dauntless warriors.

Unfortunately, excavations had stopped a few years before my visit. This site however deserves an army of excavators working day and night for 10 years at least. I strongly think some parts should be restored as it was THE Central Asia hub of the ancient Silk Roads. Now most of the ancient city is buried under farmland. Though farmland is important, I also believe *with proper protection* this could and should be one of the tourist centers of Asia. I would love to see a resurgence of Sogdian language study in order to better understand the histories of the entire Silk Roads.

As it was, Vitalii and I were free to wander the ancient ruins and wonder about the glory of that ancient civilization. Judging by what I saw, only 1% of the ancient city has been excavated, and only the top layers at that. I always wonder what ancient wonders and wisdom have yet to be uncovered if and when humanity decides to devote more effort to understanding our past.

Surrounded by farms this idyllic reminder of the transitory nature of all things was a beautiful place to spend the afternoon with a super Taekwondo champion like Vitalii. I was truly honored and delighted that he'd consent to this journey with me. During this trip I got to find a bit more about him than during an ordinary interview. For example, I found out his mother's father is from Ukraine, though he showed me his ID cards which states he is Russian. At the same time he is definitely a man born and raised in Kyrgyzstan and proud to be a Kyrgyzstan man and citizen. Asked how he could bridge these inconsistencies, he, my translator and even the taxi driver laughed at my naiveté, knowing the complexity of the history here and how people simply adapt to changing times and circumstances.

Getting back to Bishkek he gave me the phone number of the ITF President for my next stop in Tashkent. This proved to be very helpful as my stop in Tashkent was by necessity, brief.

A family man, champion, master coach, and Taekwondo Federation President, Vitalii Oleinichenko really impressed me as a sincere and kind hearted person.

The combination of great company, an interesting journey, physical excellence, great food and exotic historical treasures made this a very special day I will always remember.



Writer G. Brundage (on left) July 30, 2015 at the International Bus Station in Bishkek Kyrgyzstan. That curious looking gentleman behind me at first pegged me as a smuggler, spy or even worse, a playboy and later turned out to be the bus driver. By the end of our long journey, he was more like an older brother. I admire him, one of the last cowboys riding the long mountainous roads through Central Asia.

Silk Road Taekwondo Quest Part 2 Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Interview with Chairman of the Board of Federation of Taekwon-Do ITF Uzbekistan and Senior Vice-President of Asia Taekwon-Do ITF Federation, Master Han

Road to Tashkent

The bus from Bishkek to Tashkent was a bit more complicated than one might imagine. This was partly because of geography which necessitated traveling through a short stretch of Kazakhstan again. Fortunately, I had a friend I met at the International Bus Terminal in Bishkek that helped guide me through the border crossings. His name was Ali.



Young Ali here helped guide me through one of the more complicated land borders I've been through in the middle of the night. A wise man cherishes his friends and Ali is a true brother of the road.

It was the middle of the night when we got to one border crossing. The walkway was dark, muddy and not entirely clear. In fact, I'd call it dirty, dangerous and confusing. There were fences with lanes going off to who knows where. I was very happy to have Ali along with me. He showed me the way with confidence. At one point about 20 local travelers – laden with all kinds of baggage mostly in burlap bags - pushed their way through the border crossing itself. Ali and I just stood there, surprised, preferring to do the crossing - legally. We stayed in contact after arriving in Tashkent and the last I heard he was a student in Istanbul. Thank you, sir!

By the time I got to Tashkent I'd already traveled some 4500 km. on trains and buses from my home in Beijing. I think it was while gliding along between Urumqi and Bishkek that I dreamed: I must interview Taekwondo masters along this trip! At the same time, I was working full-time in Beijing as a high school teacher at a large private school. For some odd reason however each year at that school the summer vacations got shorter and shorter and shorter. This first trip to Uzbekistan was also ridiculously short because I didn't check my visa. A word to the wise, always double-check your visas! On my second day at the hotel in Tashkent the clerk asked me: Will you be checking out tomorrow? I was a bit surprised. "What?" Then the clerk informed me: "Well, your visa expires tomorrow..." OMG! At the time I thought, OK, this would be a great place to start the next segment of my Silk Road travels! So, my interviews here in Tashkent – this time – were brief.

Interview with ITF Master Han

August 1st, 2015 First I have to thank ITF Taekwondo Master Han for finding time to interview with me on very short notice and especially coming to my hotel for the interview. I didn't know it at the time, but he's one of the luminaries of Taekwondo and all martial art circles along the Silk Roads.



Meeting Master Han at the door of my hotel room I instantly knew he was Korean. Of course, his name is some indication, but for someone who's lived in Asia for most of the time since 1992, and in Korea for seven years I know pretty quickly if someone is Korean just by the way they look, move and talk. Though maintaining their traditional culture better than most, e.g., most still bow as part of their regular culture (at least when in Korea, and/or meeting Koreans, and/or in the context of Taekwon-Do), most Koreans are very straightforward people with little or no dancing around the point. They are very proud to be Korean, and even if they are born and grow up in foreign countries, they are and will always be Korean.

This may be slightly less true with this younger generation now that has grown up on a steady diet of western movies, music and games, but Master Han is unmistakably Korean, and unmistakably a true master of Taekwondo. But during this interview I learned he's a lot more than that; he's got a warm heart, he is a gentleman, a family man and inheritor of a fascinating multigenerational family history in Central Asia.

Master Han began by giving me a very brief outline of the history of ITF, including obviously some mention of its founder General and Grandmaster Choi Hong Hee. To quote Wikipedia's very succinct summary: "Choi went into exile in Canada after the South Korean government objected to his introduction of the sport into North Korea, and the South Korean government formed the WTF in 1973." I think that's only slightly misleading because so great was his love of Taekwondo that Grandmaster Choi Hong Hee was promoting Taekwondo worldwide; North Korea just happened to be part of that world.

Though Master Han speaks some English (Uzbek, Russian and Korean as well) we generally communicated through a translator and I didn't catch everything he said, but I believe the gist of it was that all Taekwondo people worldwide hold Grandmaster Choi Hong Hee in the highest regards as the founder of Taekwondo and great humanist in regards to his desire to share Taekwondo all around the world.

Point well taken, I asked about how many ITF teachers there are in Uzbekistan. "We have four 6th Dan and above, he said, and 40, 3rd Dan and above. Master Han is a 7th Dan. When I referred to him as a Grandmaster, he said with a laugh that he wasn't a grandmaster yet, he had to earn a 9th Dan for that. I asked when he might be promoted, he answered that he has to 1) have a certain number of years at a level before he can be promoted to the next, and 2) attend certain seminars and take tests for that honor, and recently he's been too busy for that but he will advance! Of that I'm sure.

He went on to tell me about a seminar in Tashkent scheduled for September 22nd where there will be three grandmasters in attendance: Master Marano from Argentina, Master Lang Ung from Germany and Senior ITF VP Paul Wieler from Germany.

In regards to his own martial art history and training he said:

“Before in Central Asia we had only Karate and it still has a strong presence. For example, there are five Karate Federations in Uzbekistan. The Japanese government is very supportive of Karate. Here in Uzbekistan Taekwondo is developing very quickly and has for the last 20 years.”

He’s been chairman of the Board of the ITF Federation for five years now and judging by the look of him he’s just getting warmed up.

Every year he visits Queens New York for the Traditional ITF New York Cup. Last year their team won their 6th Gold Medal.

During my 30-year journalism career I tried to always find out at least a little bit about the person behind their image, job, etc. because I really don’t like two-dimension portrayals of people that make them look like work robots.

So, I asked about his hobbies and was not too surprised when he said “Taekwondo.” In Asia perhaps more than anywhere else, masters live their arts. But I also know there is always more behind the man than mastery of their art. So, I told him why I asked as mentioned above. Master Han is what we call a “quick study,” and he instantly understood.

“In the university I started studying art and painting; in fact, at an arts college for one year, before going on to become a railway engineer. But art was and still is my passion. When I have time, I travel and visit museums, like the Museo Del Prado in Madrid, museums all over the world actually, London, Rome, Florence, St. Petersburg, Moscow, most of the world’s capitals in fact.”

I asked if there was one museum, he wants to see but hasn’t and he said: “The Louvre. Not the Louvre yet.”

He went on: “Most masters have hobbies.” Several I know like to play cards, and some even lost a lot of money.” He laughed at this in such a way that suggested cards aren’t his thing. “One master I know loves classical music and follows it all over the world.”

What about movies? Well, turns out he’s met a lot of stars, including Jacky Chan, and even the cast of the 1989 classic martial arts movie: “Best of the Best” about an American Taekwondo team’s effort to win against a North Korean team.

I asked him about the meaning of his name, “Han” and he mentioned that “South Korea,” in Korean is “Hanguk,” with the “Han” meaning “One” which in Korean is “Hanna.” “Choguk” he also mentioned means “Motherland” and is used in North Korea.

I was very curious about his background, given that he’d mentioned that he was born and raised in Uzbekistan. “How did that happen?” I asked.

Well, this history turned out to be fascinating.

Master Han’s great, great grandfather back in the 1860s was part of a Korean community that lived near the border of Russia. “They just paid taxes,” he said, “but there were no borders back then and slowly over decades they built a village.”

“One day the Gubanator (provincial governor) found out about this Korean community that was living along the Amur River, the border between Russia and Uzbekistan. That’s a 3,000 km border,” Master Han mentioned. “The Gubanator then sent a special Russian Cossack troop to investigate and they subsequently reported to the Tsar. Fortunately, the Tsar had no problem with the Korean community living there and allowed them to continue doing so as long as they continued to pay taxes. Some years later however, Stalin ordered the Korean community to move to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan,” and that’s how Master Han’s family came to live in Tashkent.

Other little-known trivia about Uzbekistan Master Han told me about is that during WWII, the Russian army sent Japanese to Prisoner of War camps they had built in Uzbekistan, and continued holding them in those camps until 1950 (five years after the war’s end according to my reckoning).

After relating these stories Master Han happened to mention that his office is in a Korean community center in Tashkent. Hearing his stories made me think how interesting multi-generational Korean expatriate communities can be and how well they preserve their histories and culture. I have the feeling there must already be books on this subject, and the Central Asian family history of Master Han should be in one of them at least.

2020 Note: Searching for such a book, I found this short series of articles:

<https://thediplomat.com/2016/06/lost-and-found-in-uzbekistan-the-korean-story-part-1>

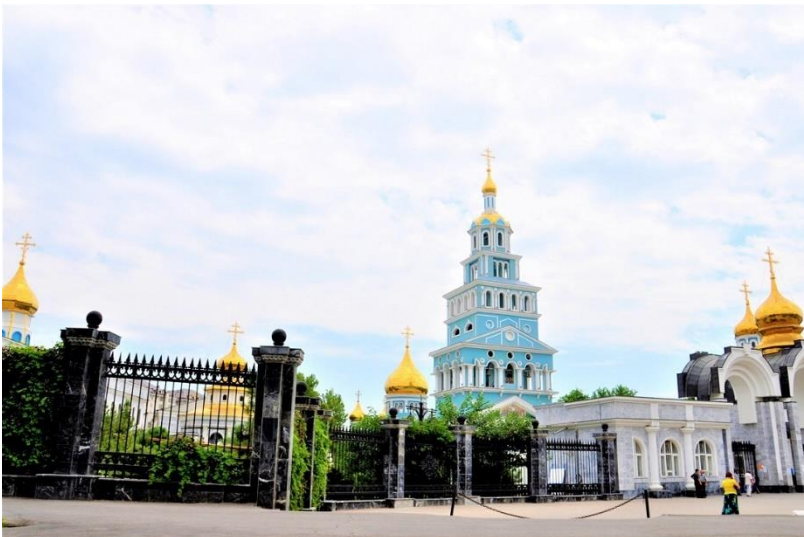
But, the tone of those articles appears quite different from the story of Master Han! What made the difference? I can’t say for sure, however Taekwondo does have a way of cultivating highly disciplined people who overcome all odds to attain success.

Also present with Master Han at this interview was one of his sons; a graduate of law school in Moscow. His current interests have turned more towards the IT industry and he's currently debating where to go next to further his education. Though Master Han's English is basic, his son's is quite good.

After the interview we chatted for a while outside by the pool and I got to know him, his son and ITF in Uzbekistan a bit better.

It was a delightful afternoon and I'd love to attend some of their master's classes the next time I visit Tashkent, though I'm not entirely sure I could keep up with them! In any case Master Han even volunteered to assist with my visa issues, but as I'd already made reservations to fly back to Beijing it was unfortunately too late. In any case he revealed himself to be not just a Taekwon-Do Master, but also a gentleman with a good heart and family.

Tashkent is one of the world's most historically rich, diverse, beautiful and colorful cities.



The Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin or Dormition Cathedral is the Russian Orthodox cathedral of the diocese of Tashkent in Uzbekistan since 1945. The cathedral was built in 1871 and enlarged in the 1990s.



Minor Mosque, Little Ring Road, Tashkent, Uzbekistan opened in 2014 and is constructed out of white marble in traditional Uzbek style. This mosque also has a unique circular prayer hall complete with an intricately decorated mihrab.



Lunch at the Buddhist Temple in Tashkent

I very much look forward to my next visit to Uzbekistan!

Silk Road Taekwondo Quest Part 3 Tashkent Revisited

Uzbekistan's Masters of Jhoon Rhee and WTF Taekwondo

Interviews with Mirzahid Mirdjalalov, Vice President of Jhoon Rhee Taekwondo of Uzbekistan, WTF GMS Event Assistant Sarvar Shamusarov, Dr. Abbas Latipov, Secretary General of the Uzbekistan WTF Association, Farrukh Usmanov, Director of the Academy of Art of Uzbekistan International Caravanserai of Culture of Ikuo Hirayama, and Sheyko Constantine, Chief Supervisor Archeologist of Silk Road sites in Uzbekistan working out of the Uzbekistan International Caravanserai of Culture

February 1, 2016 Though my trip to Tashkent last summer was very nice it was all too brief as I know there's a lot going on there in the world of Taekwondo. So, I continue my Silk Road tour where I left off early last August, in beautiful Tashkent Uzbekistan.

Jhoon Rhee Taekwondo and Master Mirzahid Mirdjalalov

Monday, February 1, 2016, Tashkent, Uzbekistan - This morning started early specifically 6:00 am at my \$15 a night but none-the-less most excellent hostel here in Tashkent. I woke, fried a few eggs, warmed some *nan* (flat bread) and chowed it down with some Uzbek traditional cheese made from yogurt called *Qurt* in Uzbek and *Kypt* in Russian, as both languages are commonly used here. At seven Mirzahid Mirdjalalov, Vice President Jhoon Rhee Taekwondo of Uzbekistan arrived at my hostel to take me to see and participate in one of his classes which started at 8:00.



Mirzahid Mirdjalalov on left, Silk Road traveler on right



When I visit new clubs, I always offer to lead a stretching routine I adapted for martial arts from Yoga. It's surprisingly painless and actually fun. I've found students and martial art masters tend to trust me more when I lead a warm-up and "slightly challenging" kicks – as I love high kicks too!

I was not surprised when we arrived at a large public school as many or most martial arts clubs in China and Central Asia are located in regular public schools. We wove our way to the martial arts room there and found about 15 elementary school students waiting. I'd brought my old Taekwondo pants and belt earned in South Korea and was tying my belt when Mirzahid surprised me by giving me a new uniform of his school called "Club Lucky." I'm going to be wearing that a lot when I get back to Beijing. Nothing against the traditional white with black trim uniform, but travel has its benefits and Jhoon Rhee Taekwondo – also sometimes called American Taekwondo is respected worldwide due to the astonishing talent of its founder the honorable Jhoon Rhee; the excellence of his students, the innovative training methods of his schools, and now I might add to that a rather stylish uniform given to me by my new best friend Mirzahid!

I led the stretching warm-up and some basic kicks and punches then turned the class back over to him while I trained with the kids as a regular student. It was great fun, losing myself in the basic techniques of TKD that are so essential at all levels. After nearly 90 minutes were up a couple of his students did some forms demonstrations to classical music and then Mirzahid did a demo of his extreme precision kicks. Wow! Jhoon Rhee TKD rocks!

Super Silk Road Research Center

After class we went to have brunch, and then he ever so kindly drove me to my next destination the Academy of Art of Uzbekistan, International Caravanserai of Culture, sponsored by Ikuo Hirayana. I'd read on the internet that it was also the National Silk Road Research Center.



At first, I was a little disappointed as the books in the library were all in Uzbek, Russian and other languages I didn't know, but a few minutes later I met the Farrukh Usmanov, Director of the Academy. I told him I was looking for old Silk Road maps. He kindly asked his assistants to find some in the books in the library. Before long they showed me a few which I dutifully photographed with great fascination as I've always loved maps.



Left to right Mirzahid Mirdjalalov, writer G. Brundage, Farrukh Usmanov Director of Academy of Art of Uz and Master Chief Archeologist Sheyko Konstanteen

Then, a couple of minutes later he introduced me to Sheyko Konstantin. With the help of translations by Farrukh and Mirzahid I found out Konstantin is the Chief Manager of the archeological sites in Uzbekistan. Before long he escorted us downstairs where they have a small museum of artifacts gleaned from various sites organized by time periods. It is a breathtaking collection spanning nearly 3,000 years, almost rivaling the National History Museum of Uzbekistan which houses many artifacts found by Dr. Sheydo Konstantin's archeological teams. I enthusiastically photographed everything while he explained the histories as we moved from the rise and fall of one civilization after another in the small museum.



Next, he escorted us into his office where he showed Mirzahid and I photos of the various sites his teams were working on around Uzbekistan, and then, to my supreme delight he copied a few files to my USB. To me archeology is one of the most exciting endeavors in the world and his collection of photos – priceless!



I also found out that each of his teams only has about six archeologists and that they do about five or six expeditions a year. Termez (in the south of Uzbekistan near Afghanistan) is one of the most exciting and fruitful, also one of great significance to Buddhists and Muslims alike. It was for example a stopping point of the early Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang, who made a 17-year overland journey to India and back in order to collect the Sutras of the Greater Vehicle (Buddhist holy books) for the Chinese emperor. Xuanzang is also the moral center of the classic Chinese literary work *Journey to the West*, a fantastic novel of martial arts, magic and adventure.

All too soon we had to leave. I can only hope some large well-funded university archeology professor reads this and can form a sister relationship with the most excellent teams of Dr. Sheydo Konstantin as there is so much more work to be done here in Uzbekistan's treasure troves of history.

After this Mrizahid ever-so-kindly drove me back to my hostel. He is a remarkable person, a Taekwondo Master, greatly admired teacher, very good translator and friend. After his warm kindness I can only think of him as the brother I never had before I met him. He made me feel at home here in Tashkent.

Then I called the Uzbekistan WTF headquarters, got a friend here at the Hostel to call a taxi and was off for another series of interviews.

World Taekwondo Headquarters – Tashkent



Driving there I quickly realized we were on the edge of town and the fantastically beautiful WTF headquarters are located in a quiet suburban area next to a large park.



Walking inside I was greeted by WTF Global Membership Systems (GMS) Event Assistant Sarvar Shamusarov. We went to his office and he soon brought me up to speed in regards to WTF in Uzbekistan. I found out that there are at present approximately 15,000 WTF TKD students in Uzbekistan, divided into 14 regions. I found out that TKD is one of the priority sports in Uzbekistan receiving both public and private funding. In 2011 the WTF appointed five regional centers, Azerbaijan, China, Iran, Uzbekistan and Russia. The Tashkent WTF training center is located a spacious three-hectare location. At present they have a hostel for National Team members, however a much bigger hotel will open March 21st, 2016, a regional holiday called Navros, New Years on the Persian calendar. They also are planning to sponsor various seminars and mini-competitions after the upcoming Olympics in October and November (2016). Curious about his background and excellent English, I found out that Sarvar Shamusarove graduated from King Saud University in Saudi Arabia, and the Institute of Oriental Studies in Tashkent, specializing in International Economic Relations. Wow! Wish I had those on my resume!

Pretty soon after this I was invited to meet Dr. Abbos Latipov, Secretary General of the Uzbekistan WTF Association. A distinguished looking gentleman greeted me at the head of a beautiful conference table and our interview was supported by two master translators.

Though I hate to “parade my ignorance” around in such an obvious way, I felt compelled to start the interview with what seemed to me to be the most obvious question: “Can you please tell me what kinds of things the Secretary General of the Uzbekistan WTF does?”

With rapid-fire assistance of the translator he answered: “First, I am responsible for finding sponsors to provide financial support our organization, which means from both government and private sources.” Judging by the beautiful forested grounds and new-looking beautiful buildings, he’s been doing a very good job at that. He soon filled in the blanks in regards to this: “We’re currently operating on a budget of around \$10 million; we have the largest number of employees compared to other sports federations in Uzbekistan. He also expressed thanks to Uzbekistan WTF Association president Botir Parpiev who has been serving in that role since 2003, also the year Dr. Abbas Latipov began serving as Secretary General.

I asked him what kind of sponsors he’d gotten and he mentioned a few, including a few large Korean companies in Tashkent. In response to a question, he told me that at present sponsorship is about 70% government and 30% private.

In response to another question, he said that Iran was their chief competition in the region. When asked why, he said they received large public and government support. “For example,” he said “they have two million Taekwondo practitioners in Iran, with each paying \$5.00 annually for membership fee. “Of course,” he added, “they have great athletes who are also very highly motivated to win, for example winners are rewarded with big money, cars, flats and houses. Taekwondo is highly regarded in Iran and they have longstanding support. In comparison, broad support for Taekwondo has really only just started here in Uzbekistan. On the bright side last year for the first time our National Team won a gold medal and two silvers at the World Taekwondo Championships in Chelyabinsk, Russia.”

I asked about how many international events their national team competed in every year and he said about 13 – 14. I also found out that judo was the second sport in Uzbekistan after Taekwondo in regards to number of medals won in all international competitions.

Curious about his own background in martial arts I found out that like many of the masters in Central Asia Dr. Abbos Latipov started with Karate, specifically Shotokan.

I mentioned that in China when one wants to cheer on one's team in a sporting event fans yell: "Jai-yo!" and in Korea they shout: "Fighting," then asked him how Uzbek fans give support to their athletes and found out the expression is: "Olgha" which means: "Go!"

Before long Uzbekistan WTF Association Secretary General Dr. Abbos Latipov had to get back to work, and I remain very thankful to him for taking so much time to interview with me. He's obviously done an incredible job as their headquarters are extremely impressive.

Next, I was invited to meet the head coach of the National Team and watch them training for their upcoming Taekwondo and Para-Taekwondo competition in Turkey. Escorted by Team Manager Ester Grigoryan, who also served as the lead translator, we walked over to the training gym.



Left to right UZ National TKD Team head Coach Kim Alexander, writer G. Brundage and Team Manager Ester Grigoryan

On the way I found out that they have about 18 athletes on the senior men's team.

Upon entering the gym with closer to 30 or more athletes engaged in light sparring, we were soon greeted by Head Coach Kim Alexander. He explained it was their first day back in training after a short break. Soon after Coach Kim and Ms. Grigoryan pointed out some of their most promising competitors.



Shokin Dmitriy: Gold Medal winner at the World Taekwondo Championships



Rafalovich Nikita – Silver Medal winner at the last World TKD Championships



Baykuziyev Jasur – Silver Medal winner at the last World TKD Championships

Got to say there were many spectacular TKD fighters working out there with supremely high-level technique and enthusiasm.



After some photos of their training Ms. Grigoryan and her co-translator/International Relations Specialist Sabina Akramadjanova, accompanied by Uzbekistan TKD Referee Chairman Dmitriy Kim escorted me around the campus, giving me a tour of the soon-to-open hotel for visitors which was/is very elegant, spacious, modern, and inviting. I wanted to move right in.



I'd gotten the phone number of the taxi driver that brought me there and soon was on my way home, with home being wherever I happen to sleep, even if they don't have martial arts.

But before the taxi came Ms. Grigoryan remembered that I mentioned I was going to Samarkand and then Bukhara within the next day or two and she very kindly got me the phone numbers of WTF contacts there. Wow! Fantastic organization and thoughtfulness. I like these people!

It was a long day but the kind of “living the dream day” people like me live for. Special thanks to my new brother Mirzahid for making me feel like one of the Jhoon Rhee Taekwondo family, driving me around and translating at the International Caravanserai of Culture; the gracious and ever-so-kind Farrukh Usmanov, Director of the Academy of Art of Uzbekistan, International Caravanserai of Culture of Ikuo Hirayama, and, Sheyko Constantine, master archeologist of Silk Road sites in Uzbekistan for sharing hours of his time and photos with us; highly informative and helpful WTF GMS Event Assistant Sarvar Shamusarov, and certainly the financial genius behind the rapid rise of the WTF in Uzbekistan Dr. Abbos Latipov, Secretary General of the Uzbekistan WTF Association, as well as the multi-talented Uzbekistan WTF National Team Head Coach Kim Alexander, Uzbekistan WTF competition Team Manager and master translator Ester Grigoryan and her co-translator/International Relations Specialist Sabina Akramadjanova, and Uzbekistan TKD Referee Chairman Dmitriy Kim, and especially all the great Taekwondo athletes there who dare to dream the great dream of being world champions in one of the world’s most popular and hotly contested sports: Taekwondo!

Tashkent – City of Wonders

Anyone who visits Tashkent would have to be blind and stupid to not travel around the city and appreciate the grandeur and magnificence of this city. To put in succinctly: Tashkent is a wonder of the world, reflecting the ancient incredible history of Uzbekistan itself.

Uzbekistan was the site of one of the world's oldest civilized regions. The ancient Persian province of Sogdiana, it was conquered in the 4th cent. B.C. by Alexander the Great. Turkic nomads entered the area in the 6th cent. A.D. It passed in the 8th cent. to the Arabs, who introduced Islam, and in the 12th cent. to the Seljuk Turks of Khwarazm. Jenghiz Khan captured the region in the 13th cent., and in the 14th cent. Timur made his native Samarkand the center of his huge empire. The realm was much reduced under his successors, the Timurids, and began to disintegrate by the end of the 15th cent.

Throughout these turbulent times, the cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent, situated on major trade routes to China, India, Persia, and Europe, were centers of prosperity, culture, and fabulous luxury.

http://umich.edu/~turkish/links/turkic_indrep_uz_brhist.html

In regards to Tashkent itself:

“It started as an oasis on the Chirchik River, near the foothills of the Golestan Mountains. In ancient times, this area was the principality of Chach, whose main town had a square citadel built around the 5th to 3rd centuries BC, some 8 km south of the Syr Darya River.

By the 7th century AD, Chach had over 30 towns and a network of over 50 canals, forming a trade centre between the Sogdians and Turkic nomads. The region subsequently came under the sway of Islam in the early parts of the 8th century.

“Hsien-tsang (Xuanzang) mentioned the name of the city as Che-shih. The Chinese chronicles Sujshu, Bejshu and Tanshu mention a possession called Shi or Chzheshi with a capital with the same name since the V c. AD” [Bichurin, 1950. v. II].

“Under the Samanid dynasty, the city came to be known as Binkath. However, the Arabs retained the old name of Chash, pronouncing it Shash instead. The modern Turkic name of Tashkent (City of Stone) comes from Kara-Khanid rule in the 10th century.

“The city was destroyed by Genghis Khan in 1219, although the great conqueror had found that the Khorezmshah had already sacked the city in 1214. Under the Timurids and subsequent Shaybanid dynasties the city revived, despite occasional attacks by the Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Persians, Mongols, Oirats and Kalmyks.”

<https://www.cs.mcgill.ca/~rwest/wikispeedia/wpcd/wp/t/Tashkent.htm>

Like the Phoenix rising from the ashes, Tashkent not only survived, but surpassed its former glory, earning its way to becoming one of the seemingly immortal cities and wonders of the world. Few cities in the world hold such a place of romance and legend as Tashkent. This is a testimony not only to the people of the region, but also to the restorative power of the Silk Roads as a holistic, harmonic living entity. Those who trade, share, communicate and learn, survive; those who don't? Well, more often than not they are swept away in the seas of time, and sooner rather than later, forgotten.

State Museum of the History of Uzbekistan Tashkent

Founded in 1918, the State Museum of Arts of Uzbekistan is one of the largest museums in Central Asia. Despite being a writer, I have to acknowledge words are little things and can never come close to grasping the totality of life. So below I share only a brief mosaic of the truly ancient, celestial artifacts of Uzbekistan to be found in the State Museum of History in Tashkent.



Community of the wise ancients



Buddha with monks. I-111 Cent. AD Fayaztepa. Old Termez









Fragment of wall image of ambassadors, 7th Century from Afrosiab

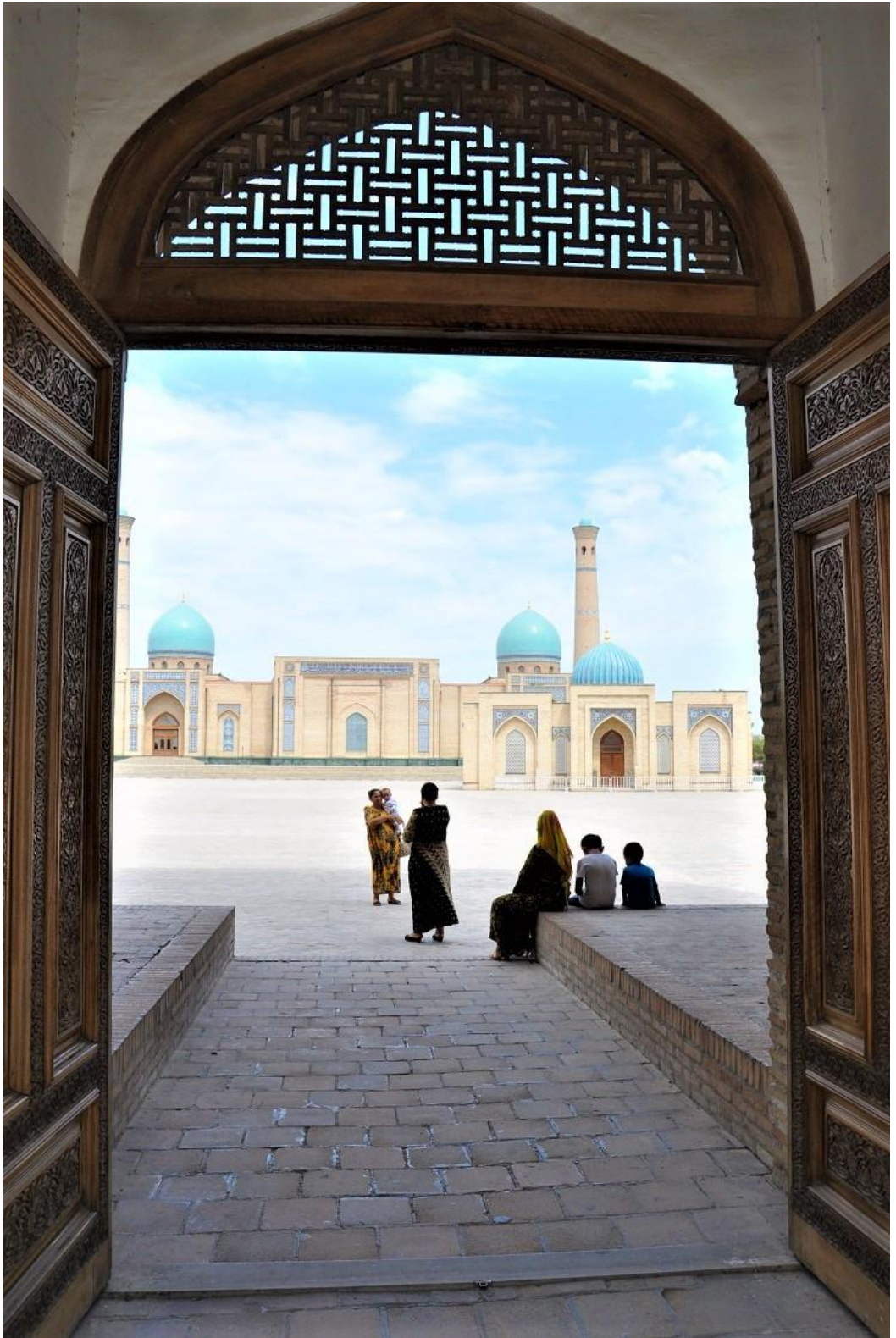
Barakh-khan Madrasah, Tashkent



Inside the dome of the Masjid of Barakh-khan Madrasah



Writer in Barakh-khan Madrasah – experiencing timeless serenity, though it seemed about a million degrees outside. That ancient style architecture however creates a wonderfully cool interior. NEVER underestimate the wisdom of the ancients.



Chorsu Bazaar – The heart of old Tashkent

A bazaar or souk, is a permanently enclosed marketplace or street where goods and services are exchanged or sold. The term bazaar originates from the Persian word bazar. The Chorsu Bazaar was and, in many ways, still is the heart of Tashkent.



This is only one part of the complex of buildings that makes up the Chorsu Bazaar



Superfood!

Topchan hostel

Before departing Tashkent, I gotta give a shout to the good brothers at Topchan Hostel. That was my home for a week or so there – not so different from an ancient caravanserai. It would be an understatement to say: “I didn’t want to leave,” both the hostel and Tashkent.

A “topchan” by the way is a raised platform used in Central Asia for relaxing and reclining both outdoors and indoors. It is used as a table, and/or a bed, and often has a smaller table on it for socializing, meals or tea and snacks. They are usually made of wood. Often there’s a Persian rug, woven reed mat or thin blanket on it along with pillows for reclining during conversations. Really quite comfortable! Traditional restaurants in Central Asia usually have one for each group of people.

There was/is something about Tashkent that will bring me back. The people, the weight and beauty of history, the spirituality, the sports, the food...! It’s a wonder of the world.

After Tashkent I went to Samarkand, another absolutely incredible wonder of the world!

Alas, I didn’t find martial arts in Samarkand. Still, nobody can “roll through” that ancient Silk Road capital without stopping at least for a while to commune with the ancients and appreciate the grandeur of human endeavor harmonized with the divine.

Samarkand



Registan Square Samarkand

It's impossible to describe the total experience of such exquisite attention to every detail and from a distance it blurs into the merely "grand." But the craftsmanship that went into every facet of the architectural design, construction and finishing artwork is beyond description, and testimony to a truly transcendent level of artistic/scientific skill.

What's really remarkable is how most of this ancient wonder of the world has been rebuilt only in the past 60 years.



Ruins of Bibi Khanum Mosque originally built by Timur (Tamerlane April 8, 1336–February 18, 1405) Above photo from 1959, Harrison Forman, photographer. Repository: American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries (Public Domain)

And yet, much work remains to be done.



Above and below are parts of the inside of Bibi Khanum Mosque when I visited in 2015



The Mihrab, prayer niche in the Qibla (direction of Mecca) wall of Bibi Khanum Mosque

It is good to note one can at least vaguely make out the original artwork of the interior main prayer hall.

The end result I think, will be magnificent again if other reconstruction works are any indicator.



Strolling around the historic sites one is repeatedly awakened to the fusion of arts, sciences and transcendence presented in layers codified over centuries and recreated only in the past half-century.



I so wanted to stay longer, perhaps five or 10 years, but my vacations from school were getting ever shorter every year and I had such a long way to go to reach the western shores of the great land Silk Roads. Though I don't make much mention of it, most of these visits are connected by various lengths of bus rides which by themselves were fascinating adventures in inter-cultural communication and generally just plain fun for a social guy like me that enjoys communicating in languages I don't speak. How to do that? Some things are universal and finding those areas of commonalities can bridge any gaps. Also having some Bugs Bunny cartoons on my notebook computer helped entertain some of the kids I sat next to on the long rides.

Afrasiyab – Ancient archaeological site of Samarkand

The habitation of Afrasiyab began in the 7th-6th century BCE. It was a major crossroads of Sogdian culture and trading.

Afrasiyab is the oldest part of the ancient and medieval city of Samarkand. It was located on high ground for defensive reasons, south of a river valley and north of a large fertile area which has now become part of the city of Samarkand.



Remains of some ancient walls of Afrasiyab, photo compliments of <http://world.meros.uz/en/wonder/view?id=32>

Exploring around the outside edges of Afrasiyab I found some ancient gateways forgotten by time.



Oh how I wish I had the time and archeological expertise to explore this ancient wonder more fully, and better yet build a half dozen perfect duplicates of this city from different eras in time adjacent to the ancient site. It is one of the conundrums of archeology that to find the oldest levels one has to dig through the newer ones, yet professional archeologists map and record everything perfectly so as to leave the ancient sites seemingly untouched.

Where to eat

Lastly before leaving Samarkand, I would be terribly neglectful to not mention where the locals go to eat the finest food. I only found this place because I stopped in a local market and asked the real inhabitants of this magical city where they eat – where authentic Samarkand food was to be found. And, here was the answer:



Kafe Borbur, located behind Bibi Khanum Mosque



Oh yeah!

Silk Road Taekwondo Quest Part 4 Bukhara, Uzbekistan



Kalyan Minaret on left – Symbol of Ancient City of Bukhara

Furkat's and Umida's Taekwondo - Love in Action



On left World Class Taekwondoka and super-champion husband Furkat, on right is Uzbekistan's ITF World Champion (X 2) and Asian Champion (X 5), 4th Dan Umida

February 4, 2016

Due to tight timelines, I'd only spent one day in Samarkand and arrived at Bukhara in the mid-afternoon. The first thing I did after getting off the train was call "Umida" as she'd been recommended by Nelli, Uzbekistan ITF President Master Han's assistant in Tashkent. Umida speaks a little English but she passed me over to Furkat, her husband of four years. He in turn offered to pick me up at my hotel about an hour later, at 5:00 pm.

Five o'clock rolled around and indeed Furkat showed up right on time. A bit taller than me and quite handsome I was delighted to find he speaks excellent English (and French, and three or four other languages).

He asked me what I wanted to do. My first thought of course was: Taekwondo! This ancient city of Bukhara Uzbekistan has been here for a few thousand years at least, and would wait until tomorrow.

So, Furkat drove us to one of his and his wife's clubs located in a large public school. When we arrived and went inside, I was a bit surprised at the size of the class as there were at least 50 students training hard. Most were children but there were also a few adults participating and several coaches helping keep everyone's technique clean and smart. The gym was obviously quite old, maybe 30 years at least, and the floor was that soft old wood that is just great for sports.



Umida – Taekwondo superstar - ITF World and Asian Champion many times over

At first, I sat down with Furkat who told me a bit about his wife Umida's competition career. In 2004 she won the ITF World Championships in Spain. Then, in 2006 she won the ITF World Championships again in Malaysia and in 2009 she won a silver medal in the World Championships in Kyrgyzstan. She was Asian champion five times. That's a heck of a career!



Later on in an interview I found out she started Taekwondo training in that very same gym when she was 10 years old. I asked her what got her going and she said she saw it and immediately knew: this-was-for-her. Her first teacher was Igor Badaliyan, 5th Dan, who is now back in Russia and his teacher was Nikolay Galishnikov, 5th Dan. I asked her how many days a week she teaches and she said six. I also found out she's teaching around six hours a day. During the next couple of days, I spent a lot of time with them as they ever-so-graciously showed me around the truly unbelievably incredibly ancient and fabulous city of Bukhara.

At that first interview I found out that less than half of the students actually pay for classes as they make a lot of exceptions to provide instruction to students that have the desire to learn. I also learned out the ITF pays about half their salary and tuition fees covers the rest. Tuition fees are pretty low I think so I've got the feeling they're not getting rich by any means, but they love what they do, teach the kids with passion, discipline and love, so it seems like they have a pretty good life. They also have a baby at home who luckily is cared for by grandma when they're teaching.

Furkat is also an experienced martial artist with a diverse background, and an instructor at some other schools, in addition to being a full-time university student. So, they're a busy couple but enjoying the good life that is clearly found in Bukhara.

I asked if they could lend me a Taekwondo jacket as I didn't bring mine, which they did. As usual I volunteered to lead the class in stretching for 15 minutes or so, plus a warmup with few kicks.



Then I went to the back of the class to participate Umida's class. One shouldn't visit any martial arts class carrying a full cup.



Watching her teach for even a few minutes it was obvious Umida has extraordinary Taekwondo technique and a classic straightforward Taekwondo teaching style. After about 20 minutes of large group work, we broke into pairs and I practiced some kick combinations with my partner holding a clapper pad. About 30 minutes later the students started light sparring and I asked one of the adult black belts if he'd be willing to do some slow-motion sparring with me. He wasn't really familiar with that, but agreed. I also asked him to break it up so I could just do attacks for a couple of minutes, then he just do attacks for a couple of minutes. This simplified the sparring process for me as I get the chance to see what kinds of defenses and attacks, he's likely to use, without the "heat" of battle.

We traded off and on attack and defense for about half an hour and all I can say is: Wow! That guy was great. Lucky for me I'd asked for slow motion because I'm pretty sure he could have wiped the floor with me if he'd wanted. Instead, he demonstrated good-natured control and it was really, really fun. I also asked him to show me his winning tournament combinations and man that guy's got great kicks, especially his tornado kicks that seemed to break the speed of light. And, he was just one of Umida's many extremely talented students.

About 7 or so it was dark and parents were showing up so I bowed out and started changing just in time for the end of class.

Afterwards I went to dinner with Umida and Furkat. They took me to a great restaurant called Caravan where we had Shashlik (one of Uzbekistan's top three national dishes), nan (great flat bread known all around Asia), and several different ultra-delicious salads. We traded stories about this and that.



I'm always interested in Taekwondo love stories and theirs was a bit unusual. Furkat told me this story: "We met in a hip-hop dance club in 2011. Her brother was always going and this time she came with him. I saw her... It was a Christmas party and all the dancers in the class played a game. There were four girls and four guys. One guy chooses one girl. If she likes, she can kiss the guy, or she can hit him in the face."

Furkat stopped his story for a moment with a smile on his face. So I stammered: "Yes, and what?"

“Oh, she kicked me in the face so hard!” After that I asked her, ‘Why didn’t you choose me for a kiss?’ She answered: ‘All the other girls wanted to kiss you, so I thought a kick was better!’” We all laughed uproariously. No fiction can beat real life for color, imagination, and high impact. That will go at the top of my list for truly romantic Taekwondo love stories.

Furkat went on: “She is great for me because we both really love sports. In the morning she wakes up and lights a candle. Then she puts it out using kicks, again and again and again. Then she wakes me up and says: ‘common, let’s train!’”

I also found out the Taekwondo schools of Umida and Fukat are only one of four main ITF branches in Bukhara. Furkat also told me some background information about different cities and languages in Uzbekistan. For example, I found out he and Umida usually speak Tajik language with each other. In Samarkand and Bukhara about 80% of the people speak Tajik while everybody speaks Uzbek language. In Bukhara about 80% of the people also speak Russian he said. He told me about three cities in Uzbekistan named Fergana, Andijan and Namangan that are close to each other and are part of an autonomous region. He said they mostly speak Turkish and Uzbek. Tajik, I found out is a huge language around the region which has historically had something of a moving mosaic of national borders. For example, I found out back in the days of the USSR, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan were all part of one country called ‘Turkistan’ and Tashkent was the capital. I really must confess to great ignorance regarding this part of the world, and great admiration for these people who all seem to speak at least three or four languages and in some cases five, six and more.

Not long after this Furkat was ever-so-kind again to give me a ride back to my hotel, and on the way, we made plans for a tour of this fabulous ancient city tomorrow.

February 5, 2016

I woke early as usually and had the complimentary breakfast at the small hotel where I'm staying right on the edge of the old city. Then, I started typing notes and so on before my 11:30 appointment with Furkat and Umida.

My hotel's location was just right so we headed off on foot... Simply put no words or even photos can hope to do justice to this wondrous Silk Road city preserved amazingly well through the two plus millennium. Even Genghis Khan left parts intact so impressed was he by the awesome majesty and soft surreal beauty.



I'll only mention a couple of sights. Our first ironically, was a modern iron statue of Nasridin Afandi riding a donkey, or perhaps ass, I'm not sure which. "He," Furkat told me, was a mix of Charlie Chaplin and Robin Hood – with a Zen-like wisdom that could not be denied.



There were/are so many mind-boggling huge and beautiful places I can't possibly describe them. But, one place in particular reminded me of a novel I read by James Michener called: *The Source*. This was a story about an archeological dig and the people from the different historical eras as the dig dug deeper and deeper, backwards through time and preceding civilizations all in one spot. Well, the Magoki-Attari Mosque in Bukhara would be one great place for such stories to be told because in the artwork on, and archeological digs underneath this ancient mosque have been found strong evidence of Zoroastrian religion, fire worshipping, Buddhism and Islam. Ah! If walls could talk!

With archeology, history and even a little imagination the ancient stories can indeed come alive again.



Magoki Attori Masjid – the silent repository of many ancient civilizations – basking placidly in the afternoon sun as it has for thousands of years.



Walking through ancient city is time traveling through a series of ages of great enlightenment, and remarkable progress in education, arts, sciences, and in the case of ancient bath houses, health and some degree of healthy pleasure as massage is often part of the Turkic hot bath experience.



Above is part of the reconstructed ancient bathhouse in Bukhara. I was surprised (but happy) to find in several archeological sites the bathhouses were located in the very center of the ancient cities.

At around 4:00 Furkat and Umida had to leave for class, whereas I had to type notes and upload over 400 pictures to a mailbox. Usually, I have to spend time cropping photos and, in some cases, fix lighting, but Bukhara is so perfect and so perfectly beautiful I didn't really have to do any of that with the 300 or so photos I took.

February 6, 2016

Woke early as usual with plans to visit the Citadel of the Art, the museum therein, and Zimdan, the medieval Amir's gruesome prison behind the Citadel, and make one more visit to Umida's Taekwondo school for a last class.

I agreed to meet with Furkat and Umida at the Citadel around 3 pm but got there an hour earlier as Furkat told me they have free guided tours for foreigners. Arriving at the ancient Castle of the Ark I felt dwarfed by its austere majesty. The sheer size, scope, gravity and extreme history - the marvelous forces leading to the original construction of a splendid palace and the need to fortify it; the grandeur of its interior life over some 2,000 years, and its near total destruction in 1920 from the Russian army's bombardment were mind boggling.



The scale and grandure of the Castle of the Ark cannot be understated.

After buying a ticket I was introduced to the free English-speaking guide named “Dilafruz,” or something like that. She first led me up through the Chief Minister’s quarters, explaining how in traditional culture there were inner and outer sections of a house and the reasons for this; how there were winter and summer quarters situated on north and south ends of the courtyard to take advantage of and refuge from the sunshine; the different materials used in the construction of those different quarters, and so on. I also found out the Citadel of the Ark has its own full-time master historian that is an expert in every pebble, every brushstroke of every painting, the relationships of major figures that would have occupied the Citadel, the rituals that took place there-in, and so on.

Suitably impressed she took me through the exhibits that are organized along the timelines of the different major historical eras of Uzbek history. There were convenient maps explaining the cultural/tribal/national border areas and she explained how changes occurred resulting in major historical shifts from the Bronze Age to the 20th Century.

This was all quite amazing and I rather wish I had a book; in fact there was bookshop but I was told everything was in either Uzbek or Russian. *Se est la vie*. So, I just took photos of almost everything and listened carefully to her lectures. It was all fascinating and highly dramatic.

Near the end of the tour Furkat and Umida appeared and we then went around behind the Citadel of the Ark to “Zindan,” the ancient prison of the Emirs. OMG! Sufficient to say, nobody would ever want to be a prisoner there.



Zindan - the ancient prison of the Emirs – Which goes to prove, “The wages of sin are death,” or something far, far worse: Zindan!

True, the Debtor’s Cell didn’t look too hideous, but the BUG ROOM definitely was. It was a hole in the stone floor leading to a medium size cell underneath, with of course iron bars at the top. It doesn’t take much imagination figure out what it would be like to be thrown down there and cuddle up with millions of bugs. Though some might be shocked at all this, as a child I’d spent years touring in Europe including their castles and their dungeons were absolutely no picnic either.

There were all kinds of photos in the prison exhibit, as well as manacles, gruesome whips and so on. The photo collection there was really quite amazing.



An ancient magistrate. Tis best to be good in ancient Uzbekistan. Notice how the fellow in the purple robe is always looking at you, no matter where you are. Notice also, he does not seem to be smiling.



After that we drove back to the same Taekwondo school as a couple of nights earlier and I photographed all parts of the class. As the evening was drawing to a close, Furkat and Umida squared off for a big fight. How totally excellent! Couples of the world should all take Taekwondo because there is no better bonding.



Note: They do seem to be enjoying themselves!

Though they both displayed supreme control, both clearly wanted to win. True, Furkat has excellent technique, is bigger and stronger, but Umida has more international competition experience and more than a few tricks up her sleeves!



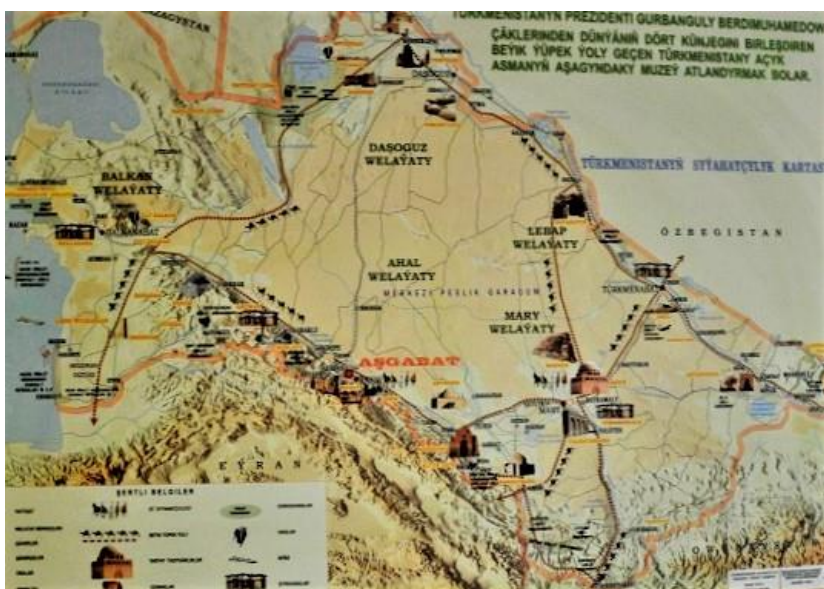
...well mostly! (Those without a sense of humor, please do not enter here.)

After the dramatic battle of the loveliest couple I ever met, we went out to dinner again.

I really didn't want to say goodbye. They gave me a couple of gifts too and I went back to my hotel for an early sleep so-as to get up early to go to the Farab border crossing with Turkmenistan before the rush. Honestly though, everyone here in Bukhara was so nice, the city so amazing and beautiful, I didn't want to leave. Bukhara is real Silk Road. Whereas a few other ancient Silk Road cities have been reconstructed, Bukhara still has the spirits of the ancients untouched. I could spend a lifetime here happily time traveling through the millennia. This would be a good home I thought – I will miss this place and these people. Ah! That's the real life of a martial arts wanderer. Just as I start to feel at home, it's time to go! And yet, tomorrow is another day and another grand adventure!

Silk Road Taekwondo Quest Part 5 Mary/Merv, Turkmenistan

Interview with ITF 7th Dan Atabayev Aydogdy (Master Ayhan)



February 7 - 11, 2016 Fabulous ancient oasis city in the Karakum Desert, major stops along the Ancient Silk Roads, and interview with the ITF Master of Mary

Border Crossing

Following the directions of Rizo the friendly taxi driver from Bukhara, Uzbekistan after exiting the taxi near the border, I walked a short distance to a minibus. After a short ride costing 4,000 Som (\$1), I went through a passport checkpoint, then had to fill out a currency statement upon exiting Uzbekistan like I did last summer at the airport. A word to the wise, keep that currency statement you have to fill out when entering Uzbekistan. It's important. Then I took another mini bus, paid another 4,000 Som to the driver, and then walked to the Immigration station for Turkmenistan.

At customs they wanted to check my bags carefully, very concerned about the possibility of my having cigarettes (which are illegal everywhere in Turkmenistan except in international hotels and inside people's homes) and were rather curious about the beef jerky I'd brought with me from China (I suppose it might of looked like Heroin or something, I don't know for sure). I opened one plastic wrapped beef jerky slice and offered it to the customs official who didn't seem to want to try it. So, I took a bite, and he tentatively smelled it finally agreeing it really was beef jerky. Smiles and nods all around. I thought I was finished, but... no they kept going further through my old red backpack until the security personnel saw my Taekwondo black belt earned in Korea some 10 years ago. Suddenly the light went on. They smiled. I smiled. Everybody smiled. The search stopped. Taekwondo saved the day and we were brothers of the Dojang. I was feeling a bit nervous there for a while but suddenly a kinship had formed – the international brotherhood of Taekwondo.

Then after this early morning inspection I got my entry visa stamp on my passport. A note here is in order. Turkmenistan is not a big tourist center partly because of very strict immigration policies. I considered myself very lucky to have been allowed to enter this amazing ancient and modern nation.

Then there was another minibus to the pickup point where I'd finally meet my guide, but not before another passport check. While waiting about three minutes for the minibus to show up I found out the guard at this last border stop liked TKD too and had practiced for several years. And this is the true story of my crossing the land border from Farab Uzbekistan to Turkmenistan, and once again being helped by the fraternity of Taekwondo. By the way, nobody mentioned WTF or ITF. Taekwondo is taekwondo and “we-are-fam-i-ly...” as the old song goes.

This last minibus let me off at the pickup point and I met my guide “Guvanch.” We were to become good friends over the next 9 days. A guide and driver by the way are required in Turkmenistan. It’s really a rather handy arrangement given that I understand and speak no Turkmen language and not so many people here speak English. Having a professional guide is really very convenient in more ways than can be recounted here.

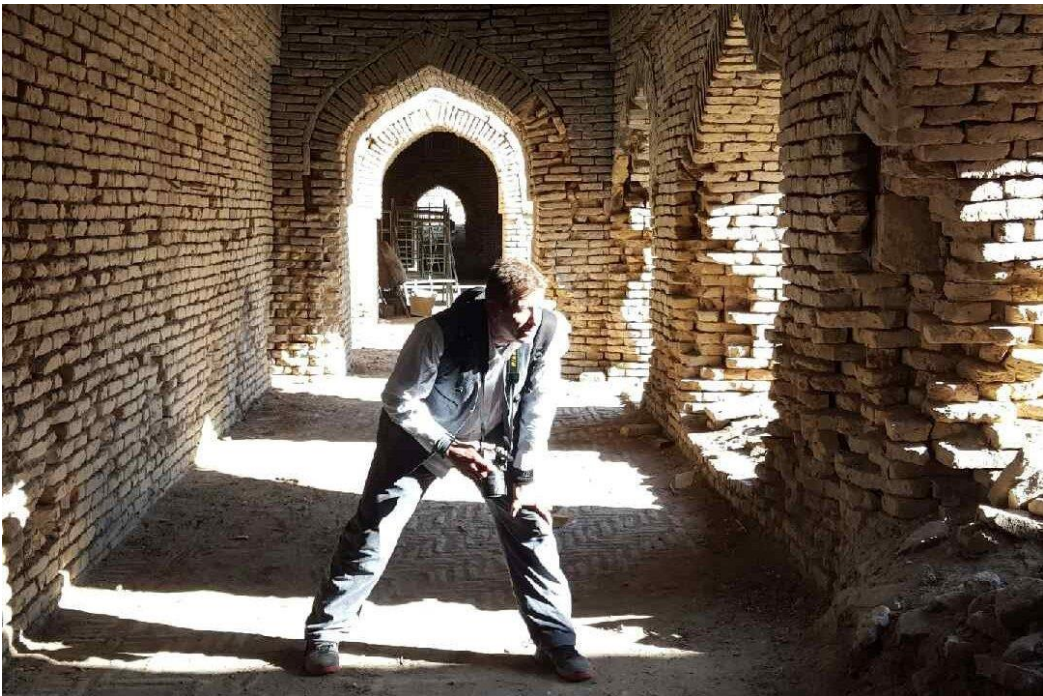
Ancient sites in Turkmenistan

First, we went to my very nice hotel in Turkmenabad and shortly after went to visit the most authentic and untouched ruins of an ancient Caravanserai – Silk Road trading center and “hotel” – I’ve ever imagined. Called “Dayahatyn” about a three- or four-hour drive north of Turkmenabad, it definitely needs a team of 50 archeologists working day and night for about five years to stabilize and excavate the ruins, but even as it was, it was magnificent - a dream come true for a Silk Road aficionado like me.



Dayahatyn ancient Caravanserai – Silk Road trading center, fortress, hotel and party house. It doesn't look like much from the outside, but inside? It's a universe of life; a time portal of infinite dimensions.

True, it might not look like much from the outside, but inside it's bustling with 1,000 years of life if one can see through the veil of time. If the truth be told, I've been completely "unstuck" in time from childhood following my father around Western Europe where we visited every major palace, castle, cathedral, church, chapel, library, and graveyard. He brought history to life for me. So, visiting Dayahatyn I didn't have to close my eyes to see the camel caravans coming in from weeks walking through the burning desert to find cool shade, water and companionship, food, comfortable lodgings, soft straw beds and the elixir of life itself within Caravanserai – a capital of profitable trade.



We strolled around and I took pictures for hours exploring the rooms and corridors, the different levels, inside and out, and inside and out of the outer wall some distance away. I love that place. It's the real Silk Road with no artifice, looking virtually undisturbed for the past several hundred years except the front gate had been restored.



If there were an archeological team here at Dayahatyn, I would joyfully spend years exploring and restoring this gem of an ancient Silk Road trading center. Then, I wouldn't leave, but rather go into business teaching martial arts, operating a small restaurant and trading gemstones.

On the way back we stopped at Gosha Gala IC, twin fortress, which didn't survive as well, but was awesome none-the-less. One "trick" archeologists use to preserve ancient ruins is they rebury them. Did I mention the ancient treasures, gold, silver and gems that are likely to be buried or hidden with around such ancient locations? Leaving Gosha Gala IC, Guvanch and I saw a couple of young men ride up on motorcycles with small shovels and it appeared they were treasure hunters. I would love to have spent more time there too, yet, time marches on and by necessity, so do I.

Waking the next morning in Turkmenabad again we were in for another several hour drive to Astanababa Mausoleum – Akmuhammet Isan Madrassa and other locations rich in history that though not as old – a mere 800 and 900 years or so - had generally been well maintained. Astana-baba is an 11th and 12th Century mausoleum which subsequently became a "zyurat" pilgrimage site for believers over the past 800 years.



Does the reader ever feel a bit stressed out by the modern world? If yes, this is the place for you. The Astana-baba complex contains the mausoleums of Zed-Ali and Zuveid Ali. Astana-baba is considered a holy place with remarkable healing power. Thousands of sick people travel great distances to this location for its widely reported curative powers. The well there still has water and I drank some, cold, fresh and yes, I believe quite restorative! After that we drove to the Akmuhammet Isan Madrassa, another major Silk Road stop for true believers with awesome historical significance. If someone wants to get the feel for the real Silk Road they have to get out of the big cities and visit these ancient crossroads which at least here in Turkmenistan remain untouched by the modern world.



Friendly restaurant owner on the road to Astana-Baba. He wouldn't let us pay for lunch. We are sitting on a Topchan – note the table on top. The people here are kind and sincere.



Coffee anyone? This is the traditional Turkman way to heat water.

The road somewhere is just as important as the destination in my humble opinion.

Returning that evening to Ashkhabad we had to wait for a few hours for a train, during which time the driver, a big humorous guy named Kakajan invited us to his farm. He has a beautiful place and family, and what a kind hearted guy to bring a stranger from afar to share dinner. I also met his brother who is a school teacher, speaks some English and rather likes computers. Its friendly gestures like that that endears a nation and culture to travelers like me. No pretense, artifice, or money involved, just real people being kind to a traveler. That's real Silk Road hospitality.



Besides the delicious dinner, they also gave me a tour of their farm. Wow! They have some really beautiful cows and really splendid healthy peaceful life and family.

The train that night was a sleeper train and we woke the next morning in Mary/Merv, location of one of the oldest advanced civilizations on earth.

MARY/MERV

Talk to a local in any city in the world and one can easily find martial arts clubs. They are easy to find. Stop in for a moment and chat with the teacher and one can very quickly get the phone number for the national director of that martial art or at least very close to him. This kind of “bottom up” research is one of my favorites and I’ve done it in innumerable cities and countries looking for the masters of various martial arts. But before that I had to explore the seemingly infinite depths of this archeological paradise.

In this case it was in a picturesque little city called Mary in Southeast Central Turkmenistan, which is adjacent to the ancient Merv Oasis, once known as Margush in an inscription of the Persian King Darius the First, close to the ancient caravan route leading from Babylon to the city of Hamadan. The State of Margush in the Bronze Age almost 40 centuries ago was regarded as the birth-place of Zoroastrianism. Over time it also was a center for Buddhism, Christianity and then Islam.

Today Merv/Mary is the home of one of the world’s largest collections of awesomely huge ancient fortresses and places of worship, and is recognized by UNESCO as the location of many world heritage sites. I spent my first day there in a terrific snowstorm photographing the ancient ruins. Eighty percent of Turkmenistan is in the Karakum Desert, one of the driest deserts in the world with less than half an inch of precipitation a year. So, the locals were quite happy with the snow that started upon my arrival and several joked I brought it with me. Ha! In spite of gale force winds and snow, the ruins were spectacular and perhaps my photos are somewhat unique bathed in pure white snow.



The Great Kyz Kala, or “Maiden's Castle,” is largest ancient monumental koshk (castle mansion) in Central Asia. It would take a team of a hundred archeologists 50 years to begin to restore it, but that would be well worth the investment in my opinion!

These ancient metropolises were the throbbing hearts of a continental trade system that stretched from China in the east to Turkey, Greece and Rome in the west, and from Russia in the north to India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in the south. They were the beating hearts of the world.

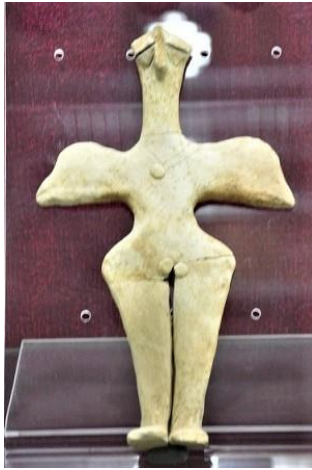
Nearby is Gyaur Kala (Pagan Fortress) the second oldest surviving city-state from the 3rd Century BCE. Each side of walls is 2 Km. It was Zoroastrian, then Buddhist and finally Nestorian Christian. Again, a team of archeologists is desperately needed! Why do people spend money on things like absurd movies when the real grandeur of history sleeps forgotten? It makes no sense to me. Beyond any doubt there were more mysteries, romances, loves, losses, battles, and wars, more great enlightenments, sports and babies born in these magnificent ruins than all the movies ever made put together! And, these ancient secrets are there for anyone with the skills to unlock and bring them back to life. Ah! What wisdom we modernists can learn! What horrid

errors can we avoid? All of them. Of that there is no doubt. Instead, we modernists live in plastic societies that reshape themselves every ten minutes cloistered within hallways of mirrors reflecting and celebrating only the transitory prettiness and industrial scale violence of life instead of its true eternal grandeur.



Gyaur Kala – If the reader would like to know some real Silk Road histories stretching back at least 3,000 years, research this site. How many lives were lived here? Uncountable.

The local history museum too has a collection that is the rival of the world's best when it comes to truly ancient artifacts.



The sign reports this artifact to be 4,000 years old, which I believe. It's also reported to be a man, which I somewhat doubt due to the wide hips. A goddess perhaps?



Spearheads circa 2,000 BC

In spite of their great empires, please recall these are Turkmen, who by nature were horsemen. And in Turkmenistan one can find graves of their most beloved of horses.



Replica of horse remains found in the Bactria-Margiana Archeological Complex in Gonur Depe. The museum signs indicated there was a Bronze Age Horse Cult from 2,300-1,700 BCE

Gonur Depe site lies in South-eastern Turkmenistan deep within the Karakum Desert. It was the ritual center of the ancient kingdom/state of Margush. There is a palace with a citadel in the center of four temples, the Temple of Fire in the east, the Complex of Communal Eating in the north and the Temples of Sacrifice in the west and south. People, rams, goats, dogs, horses, donkeys, and bulls were also ritually buried.

These ancient horsemen also loved their music, dance, and most especially - their freedom.



Before hooking up with the very active Taekwondo scene in Mary, I happened upon a kickboxing club and spent a couple of fantastic hours working out with them. Traveling is of course awesome, but life without workouts? Terrible! So, it was with great pleasure I trained with them, worked with their bags for a while and just had fun in general.





MASTER AYHAN 7th Dan in Mary, Turkmenistan

After exploring the ancient ruins, and my fun at the kickboxing club I went in search of Taekwondo and happened upon a Taekwondo teacher named Orazmyrat Charyev.



Taekwondo teacher Orazmyrat Charyev who kindly gave me the phone number for ITF Master Ayhan who is the national coach in Turkmenistan. He chose Mary to train the national team.

It was young master Charyev who gave me the phone number of his Master, Aydogdy Atabayev, known as Master Ayhan, who just so happens to be Vice President of the Turkmenistan International Taekwondo Federation, a 7th Dan master no less, coach of the Turkmenistan National Team which also trains in lovely Mary, and an Internationally recognized and licensed Class “A” Taekwondo umpire/referee.

And, just to prove how lucky I can occasionally be, he turned out to be free for a short chat on his way to a city council meeting. Proving what a kind hearted gentleman he is that truly loves Taekwondo, he graciously stopped by my hotel, saving me the effort of finding my way around which is sometimes a challenge. People in most of Central and East Asia don’t usually use addresses, but rather proximity to larger more famous places, helpful at least to those who know the “hood.”



His Taekwondo odyssey began in 1989 in Tashkent when he came upon Master Kan Pen Mei, then 5th Dan, now 7th. I found out his ITF has about 500 students in Turkmenistan, and held the Turkmenistan ITF Championships in Mary February 13th and 14th of this year. Turkmenistan by the way has a total population of around 5 million, less than a quarter of Beijing.

Asked why he's made Mary such a center of Taekwondo when Ashgabat is after all the capital city, Master Ayhan said Mary was his birthplace and he likes it there. He also mentioned that he'd lived in Ashgabat for ten years, and though it's a great city, he prefers the town of Mary. Having spent a couple of days in Mary I could easily understand his sentiments. Ancient places radiate a certain aura of peace and serenity and are perhaps more conducive to concentrated study than big capital cities with their infinite distractions. Thus, it was not a great surprise that he'd moved the entire national ITF team to Mary for training.

Looking about 35 or so I was surprised to find out he's actually 52. He'd only become a 7th Dan in 2014, and a 6th Dan in 2005 while in Australia. He explained that 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Dan are assistant instructor degrees, while 4th, 5th, and 6th Dan are International Instructor ranks, while a 7th Dan can be called a Master, an 8th Dan is a Senior Master, and 9th Dan, Grandmaster. Chatting about mutual acquaintances I wasn't surprised to find out he knew Umida in the also very ancient but simultaneously very different city of Bukhara, Uzbekistan, as well as Master Han in Tashkent and ITF President Vitalii Oleinichenko in Bishkek_Kyrgyzstan.

After chatting for half an hour or so, Master Ayhan had a meeting to attend and after exchanging e-mails we bid farewell.

Next stop Ashgabat, capital city of Turkmenistan

The overnight train to the capital city of Ashgabat didn't leave till very early the next morning so we walked around for a while. Shortly after sunset I heard the sounds of sports and we walked over and found some young men playing football inside a local gym. Exploring around I found a weight room and a pleasant young man training hard.

So, I joined him, starting with some bench presses. I found out his name is Maksat Nuryyev and that he'd won gold in a national powerlifting competition, with his specialty being squats. On the rack he'd been using for training was about 250 kilos. Phew! He invited me to try, but thinking I might need my body functioning for something in the future, I politely declined. I also found out that he absolutely loves Shotokan Karate. Guvanch, I and he spent a very pleasant hour and half working out with weights and talking with young master Maksat.



Bidding farewell we were off to a fabulous outdoor chicken “shashlik” BBQ grill that also had great mixed vegetable salads I’d discovered the day before right next to the train station where we had 2:00 am tickets for a sleeper train to Ashgabat, the capital city of Turkmenistan.

After quite a pleasant hour talking with locals and taking a couple more pictures, it was about time to go to the train station as it was getting quite chilly out. Finally, 1:50 am rolled around and we boarded the sleeper train for the capital.

I promised myself to return to Mary/Merv someday as I did my sightseeing during blizzard like conditions and I really need to come back in the spring, summer or fall to see the amazing beauty of this rugged ancient land and fortresses dressed in the many shades of desert green as it was and remains a timeless life nurturing oasis in the Karakum Desert of Central Asia at a critical junction in the ancient Silk Roads.



The Karakum Desert - landscape along the road from Mary/Merv to Ashgabat

Besides all that, the people were friendly and nice, the food was great and there is that special something about the spirits of the ancients. And, I'll bet I could get a darned good Taekwondo workout here too.

Silk Road Taekwondo Quest Part 6 Ashgabat, Turkmenistan



Ashgabat at night – view from my hotel window

Harmony of Ancient and Modern in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan – This National WTF Taekwondo Team’s Rocks!

Visits to the National Museum of History and Ethnography of Turkmenistan, Interview with Master Gurbanov Yazmyrat President of National Taekwondo WTF Center of Turkmenistan and Coach of the Turkmenistan National WTF Team and, visit to the Turkmenistan National Junior Kurash (traditional wrestling) Team

Feb 12, 2016 – This marvelous day started with a visit to the National Museum of History and Ethnography of Turkmenistan, a spectacular tour through Paleolithic (2,500,000 B.C.), Mesolithic 50,000 B.C.), and Neolithic (5,000 B.C.) ages unearthed in Western Turkmenistan. Particularly fascinating is the room of Margiana – a Greek word for the ancient city of Margush located in the Merv Oasis and unearthed by Professor Viktor Sarianidi, who heads the Margiana Archeological Expedition. Sound familiar? Yep, at the National Museum I learned more about the ancient city I'd explored in a blizzard: Mary/Merv my last archeological stop of this Silk Road Taekwondo Quest journey (and where I also interviewed ITF 7th Dan Master Ayhan for Taekwondo Times Magazine – Published February, 2017).

This unique civilization dates back at least to the Bronze Age 2,000 BC and is located in the former delta of the Murgab River in the Karakum Desert adjacent to and on the north side of the present idyllic town of Mary.



Thousands of years ago the land of Margush existed with powerful towns, fortresses and monumental houses of worship. The Margush sites had a close relationship with Bactria in present day northern Afghanistan. These were major crossroads along the ancient Silk Road. Professor Sarianidi presents a convincing case that the Bactria-Margiana complex was a major center of ancient civilization and may be the birthplace of Zoroastrianism, a fire worshiping religion and one of if not the oldest very wide-spread religions at that early period in history. There are also those who believe Zoroastrianism is the root monotheistic (One God) religion from which Judaism, Christianity and Islam later emerged.



One of the oldest visual representations of Zoroaster - found in Mithraic Togoloc 21 Temple National Museum of History & Ethnography of Turkmenistan

The advancement of arts and sciences at even 3,000 BC in this region is breathtaking.



Ancient fertility God

Luckily, I went to the National Museum because many of the precious artifacts from Merv/Margush/Margiana not in the Mary Museum are here in the capital city of Ashgabat.

Merv, by the way, is only one of several archeologically super-rich areas in Turkmenistan which can boast of being the location of some of the oldest civilizations on earth and major crossroads in the ancient Silk Road.



National WTF Taekwondo Center of Turkmenistan

After that telescoping travel through the ages my guide Guvanch had arranged for me to meet with Master Gurbanov Yazmyrat, President of National WTF Taekwondo Center of Turkmenistan and coach of the Turkmenistan National Junior WTF Team.

Guvanch and I arrived at the National Junior Team Training Center a little before 7:00 pm. A younger kids' class was just finishing and another – the Junior National Team was about to begin. I was a bit surprised when Master Gurbanov put on some real funky techno music. “That’s what they’re doing in South Korea now,” he said with a big smile. From here on I’ll refer to Master Gurbanov as “Coach Gurbanov” because he came across as such a very modest and regular kind of guy.

“You’re lucky,” he said. “Tonight is our sparring night.” And, wow was he right. His team looked and fought liked seasoned professionals. I was awed. Even the littlest when paired with another kid twice his size fought with the vigor and precision of a very well trained and seasoned martial artist. And, this was Coach Gurbanov’s Junior Team. Wow. Those were/are some of the finest junior athletes I’ve ever seen. For an hour and half they rotated sparring partners with only one short rest in the middle. It was awesome to see. Their technique was pure Taekwondo, with very precise kicks and punches and sophisticated strategies. If only my photography was as good!





Coach Gurbanov's WTF National Team doesn't train in one of the many beautiful National Olympic Training Centers in Ashgabat already built, in anticipation of the 2017 Asian Games to be held there in September, 2017. Instead, his class is in a large gym an older public school. It's what he likes and where he feels comfortable with his team.

After this breathtaking class I had a chance to talk briefly with him. I found out he had quite a competition career of his own. He started training in Ashgabat in 1989 and entered his first international competition in 1990 in Tver, Russia winning a bronze medal. His subsequent international tournament career was nothing short of spectacular.



He started teaching in 1993. In 2002 he first visited South Korea for a Taekwondo camp sponsored by the embassy. So, given his background I understood how his team got to be so fantastic. And, I think the music helps too. His fighters have rhythm. They know timing, distancing, playing the angles, all kinds of feints and combinations and bridged the gap like pros. They have beautiful control too, knowing just how much power is needed to score solid points without anybody getting really bashed. That's one thing I love about real martial arts. It takes a master to totally win, and not hurt the other person.

He told me there are 500+ WTF students in Turkmenistan, which might not seem like so many, but as mentioned in the previous installment of this Silk Road Taekwondo Quest series, the total population of the entire country is only about 5 million.

Coach Gurbanov also mentioned that he's got about 23 students on his international team. Be that as it may, pound for pound his students are some of the best Taekwondoka I've ever seen in the world. Boys and girls train together and their flexibility, overall technique, speed and control are excellent.

And I gotta add these young ladies are not to be trifled with.



After class everyone stood in a circle chatting for a while and I found out Coach Gurbanov is really loved by his students. He has a terrific sense of humor and knows how to relax and enjoy some time with them and me. He's the kind of coach people love because he's been there himself, knows the ropes, the stresses, the demands, the hopes and dreams of his students. Gotta say I really like the guy. He's human, and a very talented Taekwondoka and trainer.



It was around 9:00 pm and I was pretty sure everyone was a bit tired, but I fired ‘em all up anyways for some group photos, passed out a couple of my name cards and everyone changed quickly and hit the road, for tomorrow will be another interesting day!



February 13, 2016

This was to be my last full day in Turkmenistan, and last stop on this winter segment of my Taekwondo Quest tour. Ashgabat was the sixth city I'd visited and in each city I'd tried to see a Kurash (traditional Turkic wrestling) team training. City after city I'd struck out, till today when Guvanch announced he'd gotten us an invitation to meet with the Turkmenistan National Junior Kurash Team, which was very lucky because they were leaving for an international event in Turkey this very same afternoon.

This team trains in one of the really modern beautiful buildings built for the Asian Games.



I was warmly greeted at 11 am and found out the team had showed up in uniform just to meet me. That in itself was quite an honor.



The coach Hemra Nurmammedow was there too and gave me a quick crash course on this fascinating ancient traditional sport unique to Central Asia, with Turkmenistan having its' own unique style.



With Guvanch translating I was able to get the idea that it basically takes two points to win. One point can be gained when any part of the opponent touches the floor other than the feet of course, e.g., a hand, knee or elbow. Two points and clear victory can be gained if one opponent can throw the other on his back.

Coach Hemra also explained differences between Turkmenistan's Kurash and others, as this sport is widely loved and practiced around Central Asia. Though I'm not sure of all the details, I did get that in Traditional Turkman Kurash a (unique traditionally designed) belt is loosely tied around the waist.

The contestants step onto the mat and are formally introduced by the presiding Judge on the side, and then the contestants go to the center of the mat area, shake hands and then take proper holds.



The right-hand wraps under the belt and around the outside to ensure a proper grip and the left holds the opponent's belt around or behind the hip. Once the grip is secured by both contestants, they bend down somewhat and are ready to begin when the signal is given.

Coach Hemra had the young men demonstrate several throws and takedowns. It was similar to Judo in some ways, e.g. they had something that looked a lot like *o-goshi* (major hip throw), *harai-goshi* (sweeping hip throw), etc. and foot sweeps, *okuri-ashi-harai* (sliding foot sweep), *o-uchigari* (inner leg sweep), etc.



But, their methods, e.g. footwork, grip, and general set-ups were very different. Also, there were some throws quite outside the usual that perhaps might be used in Sumo or Sambo. The unique belt grip also opens the possibility of many techniques not used in Judo. One can safely assume that Traditional Turkmen Kurash is a whole lot older than judo which was “invented” in 1956 by Jigoro Kano, a derivative art of Jujitsu. In any case the speed and fluidity of this Junior National Team’s technique clearly demonstrated these young men were masters of this uniquely Central Asian, and even more unique Turkmen wrestling art.

When I first arrived, I mentioned to Coach Hemra that if they had an extra jacket, I’d be happy to try light wrestling with one of their team, and to my surprise he gave me a traditional Turkmen Kurash jacket and belt. Wow! Super kind people here!

After I’d seen some of their basic techniques and had some idea how to win, Coach Hemra asked me if I’d like to try Turkmen Kurash with one of their team. I immediately jumped at the opportunity.

I waited till we were properly introduced, then walked to the center area and with a little help managed to get the proper grip.



Now how exactly am I supposed to grab this belt?

Then, the signal was given and we were off! I decided a good offense is the best defense, but wanted to test his willingness to move from the middle of the mat first so strategically moved him off center a couple of steps before flying into one of my better judo throws. To my great surprise he just let it happen, and I knew they were being extra careful with this distinguished guest of enormous age, such as I am. Everyone cheered at my great throw. After helping the very kind young man up, I did my little victory dance and everyone laughed. Anyways, they're great guys with a sense of humor, love of their immensely powerful traditional art and warm-hearted generosity to a traveler from afar.

By the way, Turkman National Teams tend to do rather well in wrestling, belt wrestling, and the broader Kurash wrestling competitions. An internet search revealed a few articles which showed they often win big in international events. For example, according to an article from November, 2014, titled: “National team of Turkmenistan wins first place in team event of Belt Wrestling and “Goresh” National Belt Wrestling World Championship,” they: “...won the first place in the team event by a wide margin in terms of medals scored. Turkmen wrestlers won 45 medals (16 gold, 14 silver and 15 bronze). The national team of Russia came second with 16 medals (5 gold, 3 silver and 8 bronze). The third place went to the national team of Ukraine with 9 medals (2 gold, 3 silver and 4 bronze). Russian and Ukrainian wrestlers are no joke by any measure and to win by such a margin these guys have to be simply amazing.

This is not really surprising in some ways. Turkman history is one of extreme martial endeavor. Though politically neutral and peace loving these days, their ancient history is one of relentless conquest; horse riding warriors of valor and supreme excellence whose empire once stretched from Western China to the Black Sea on the Eastern edge of Europe.

Knowing they were leaving that afternoon for an international event I couldn't keep them any longer, so we bid farewell, but will always keep a warm place in my heart for their great kindness and genuine respect for the fine art, science and sport Turkmen Kurash.



Conclusions

On this segment of my Silk Road Taekwondo Quest adventure, I traveled about 2,058 kilometers, or 1,278 miles over 17 days From Tashkent Uzbekistan to Ashgabat Turkmenistan to meet, interview and in many cases train with the masters of different martial arts. In fact, I also visited Kung Fu masters, some kickboxing clubs, and other sports venues as well. Hopefully this summer I'll continue through Iran and Turkey, finally reaching what was once called Constantinople and is now called "Istanbul," Turkey. That is the end of the land Silk Road and beginning of the Maritime Silk Road. From there, who knows?

Finally, when and wherever I travel I always try to experience some of the local indigenous martial arts as it's only polite to get to know, and respect (*jon gyung*) the local cultures one visits.



World peace through sports? *Cha ryuht! Kyung nae.* You never know. But it definitely starts with respect.

Silk Road Taekwondo Quest Part 7 Tbilisi, Georgia ITF



Silk Road TKD Quest Part 7 - Interviews with Georgian International Taekwondo Federation President Mr. Levan Tsaretashvili and founder and General Secretary of the Israel Taekwon-Do Association Leo Oros Duek, and visits to the Georgian National Museum and Mtskheta, Georgia's former capital city

July 17, 2016 Beijing - I'd hoped to pick up my Silk Road Taekwondo Quest tour in Ashgabat where I'd left off this past February (2016), but due to heightened security concerns in Turkmenistan and Iran, I couldn't get visas for those countries at that time. None-the-less determined to continue I searched the ancient and modern Silk Road maps I've collected and found that the lovely country of Georgia was a great place to pick up the trail again. Making this easier is the fact that Georgia is an unusually friendly country offering visa free entry to people from over a hundred foreign nations.

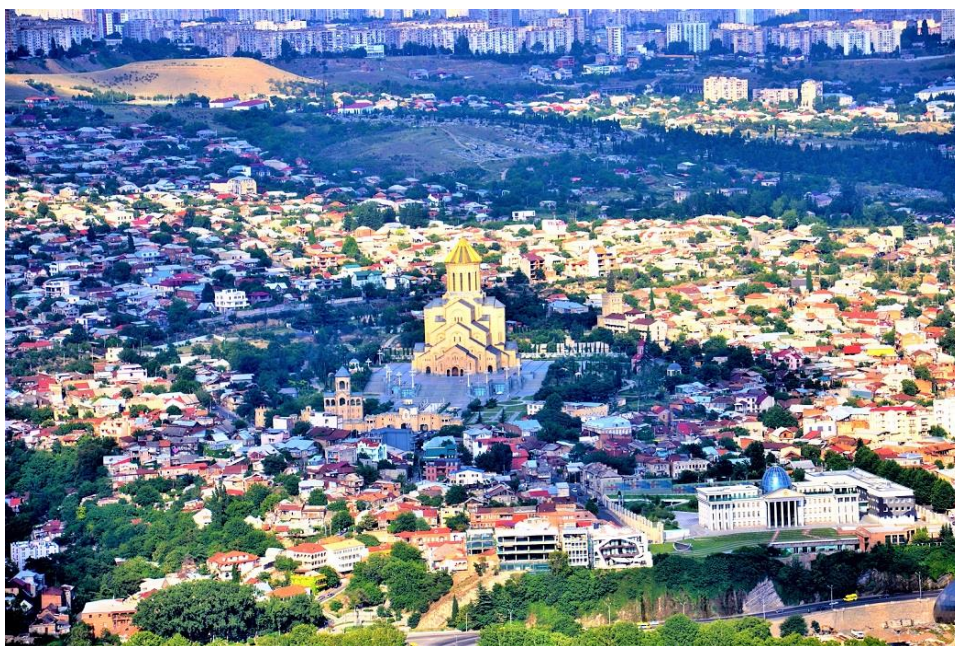
I wrote to the presidents of the ITF and WTF and both responded the same day, however Mr. Levan Tsaretashvili the ITF president went to far as to offer to help pick me up at the airport and show me around and true to his word he was there at the airport.



Writer with Georgian International Taekwondo Federation President Mr.
Levan Tsaretashvili

I was also happy to note that Georgia is not like so many other countries I visit. There was no mob scene of taxi drivers at the airport. Instead, it was peaceful, beautiful, and calm.

With a population of only four million Georgia isn't a big country, but what it doesn't have in size it makes up for in heart and history. In some ways it is like all ancient Silk Road countries, extremely pluralistic yet, very unique, with Christians, Jewish, Muslims, and just about every other religious group all living harmoniously together. Though most people can speak Russian, they prefer speaking Georgian usually, being very patriotic. So, after getting off the plane in Tbilisi, the capital city of this very green and beautiful country I met Levan and off we went on a fabulous tour of this fascinating ancient city.



Near the end of day 1, we stopped for lemonade, and I got a chance to find out about his personal story, and ITF in Georgia. The first and most natural question is usually: “How did you find Taekwondo?”

“I was 12 or 13 at school one day, and some guy came in and told us that he was going to offer free Taekwondo classes. At that time nobody really knew what Taekwondo was, say compared to karate. It was free at least for the first few months back in 2001, 15 years ago. After four years I earned the black belt. One teacher I especially liked was Lasha Jologua, a Second Dan. There was a bit of confusion at that time, with many people claiming to have won international championships and have high ranks but usually it wasn't true. This was during the time of former president of Georgia ITF Aleksander Gongadze. This failure inspired Lasha and I to change things and do more for our country like for example to really travel to foreign competitions. We started in 2006 in Azerbaijan, but that wasn't a really big competition.

“Lasha and I were the first from Georgia to go to a big international ITF competition – the Esenge Cup - in 2009 in Ukraine. I took 3rd place.”

“Were you happy with that?”

“Oh yes! It was my first real international competition.”

“Then, in 2009 we went to Uzbekistan for an International Instructor Course, the IIC. In Ukraine I also met the president of the Russian ITF, Lazos Tsiflidis, and Oleg Solovey vice president of Ukraine ITF. In 2010 I went to Uzbekistan. After that our team went to compete in the Russian Federation – called the ‘Moscow Challenge.’ My students placed, and I was really happy about that too.

“After that I was invited to a summer camp in the Ukraine in 2011 and went to Tashkent. There was a seminar with the son of the founder of Taekwondo General Choi Hong Hee. At that time my Russian and English languages were really terrible so it was a little difficult. This was a really important time of transition in my life.

“Oleg was the first International instructor I had and he taught me the steps I needed to prepare for a life of real international competition and after this camp Oleg showed me a better way to build a federation here in Georgia, because without a good federation nobody in our country will be successful.

“Later that year in, 2011 he also connected me with Polish Taekwondo Federation master Tadeusz Loboda, the Polish ITF President and former and current President of the European TKD Federation. This is a well-established foundation dating back to 1979. He sponsored me and made a special management course for me to help make a real national federation for Georgia.”

By this point in the interview, I was very impressed, doubly so because at age 27 he’s still a very young man.

Since then, he’s personally competed in, and brought his team to dozens of ITF international competitions all over Asia and Europe. He’s a “people person,” in that he makes a lot of friends wherever he goes, and works as a judge and referee in addition to being a competitor, and team captain for the Georgian National ITF. For example, browsing the internet one can find things like this on the All-Europe Taekwondo-do Federation Website:

“On Thursday, 14th January 2016 Mr. Levan Tsaretashvili visited the AETF HQ. Mr. Tsaretashvili, who is probably the youngest president of a national association of AETF, is currently traveling to Wroclaw for the International Taekwondo Seminar to be held on 16th and 17th January 2016...”

At the most recent European cup in Romania in June 2016, Levan’s team won two gold, and four silvers in the individual competition, and two silvers in team competition, which is nothing less than amazing with such a new federation and a total national population of only four million.

“I don’t think of myself so much as a competitor today as a manager; after four years I have a pretty good grasp of how to organize a national sports federation. In Georgia now we have about 400 ITF students and 15 officially registered ITF instructors. To be an official instructor you have to pass an exam, get a certificate and official documents to open an ITF school. Every instructor has an official ID number that can be checked on the ITF site. Therefore, nobody can open fake clubs with fake credentials like even five years ago.”

Asked what he’s working on now, Levan said “I’m working hard to get some support from the government and sponsors to help us grow. We’ve recently joined the Georgian Martial Arts Federation led by Kakha Basilia, an 8th Dan in Shotokan Karate. He’s also very active in the World Karate Federation.”

Asked if he or his team members would consider competing in WTF for say a position on the Georgian Olympic team, Levan said: “Why not? If for example I went to a karate competition and won – as an ITF fighter – that’s good for the ITF, no? The same with WTF. I see the doors are all open – to any style and to every country. I speak many languages and have friends everywhere. Maybe life is like water in a cup, and we are like the water. Swirl the water around fast enough and it will become free – life outside the cup! Wow! I don’t see the walls, I can’t think about money. My thinking is bigger, what we – together – ITF, WTF and other martial arts and sports people can do in two, or five or twenty years.”

Later that week we met again and I visited one of his clubs – specifically his national team. Levan is an extraordinary trainer and has a truly talented team. Besides being very, very highly skilled they are fun people.





One of several competition photos Levan shared with me

I met Levan again for lunch on my way back from Azerbaijan on the way to Turkey a couple of weeks later. Levan was really a most excellent friend and guide on this third segment of my Silk Road Taekwondo Quest.

July 19, 2016

Leo Oros Duek and the founding of the Israel Taekwon-Do Association

Today I met with Levan and with him was Leo Oros Duek, General Secretary to the Israel Taekwon-Do Association and his lovely wife and two boys. They told me they were going to Mtskheta, the former capital of Georgia and very kindly asked me if I'd like to come along.

On the way there I had a few moments to briefly interview Leo. First, I found out he was born in Uruguay and moved to Argentina when he was six in 1982. He started Taekwondo training at the age of 10. "Why?" I asked. Well, it turned out his mother had recently passed away and the school director said he should be either be sent to a psychologist or enroll in martial arts classes. Fortunately for thousands of his Taekwondo students in Israel he chose the latter and a legend was born. Leo also mentioned that later on in college he chose to study psychology, which having been a psychology major in the university myself, seems like a good idea for everyone.

Then in 2002 there was an economic crisis in Argentina and he moved to Israel which was made easier by the fact that he's of Sephardic Jewish heritage. He started teaching Taekwondo in the Kibbutz where he lived, and then branched out with several smaller clubs leading to his founding of The Israel Taekwon-Do Association ITF in 2003. Though he told this story in a casual way, I've got the feeling there were bumps along the road and a heck of a lot of hard work and sweat, but that goes with the territory and Leo seems like the kind of man to get the job done.

Our first destination was Mtskheta, Georgia's former capital city and specifically the ancient Jvari Church/fortress which rests majestically atop the highest nearby hill, symbolizing the quintessential importance of the church in Georgia, a Christian bastion in this European country between Muslim Central Asia, Turkey and Europe. The ancient Svetitskoveli Cathedral was built on the remains of a Zoroastrian temple, emphasizing Georgia's conversion to Christianity in 337. It's the largest ancient structure in Georgia and inside contains authentic frescos untouched by the ages.



Svetitskoveli Cathedral in Ancient Georgian Capital of Mtskheta

This remarkable place of worship was used down the centuries for coronations and as a burial location for the monarchs of Georgia. There were at least double high stone walls with towers at the corners surrounding this sacred place, identical to fortifications typical of castles. The ancient town below is situated next to the merging of two great rivers, the Aragvi and the Mtkvan, one from the mountains which is very blue, and the other from the plains which is richer in silt. Mtskheta was a major Silk Road site for a thousand years.



Left to right: Levan Tsaretashvili Georgian ITF president, writer and Leo Oros Duek, General Secretary to the Israel Taekwon-Do Association



The merging of two great rivers, the Aragvi and the Mtkvan

Then we all had an authentic Georgian dinner of simply out-of-this-world Beef Kalakuri, a bit like large Chinese steamed beef dumplings, with salad and bread dipped in some bean like porridge which was all super-good!

After a short drive back to Tbilisi I bid them farewell and was off to my hostel with a lot of typing to do and photos to download and edit.



Fellow travelers Yuva Vande Putte and Vincent Damen from Belgium at Hostel in Tbilisi. Given a choice between a fancy hotel and hostel, I'll choose a hostel every time. Why? They have a more casual atmosphere; friendly regular people and you can often or usually cook your food.

On the way back to the hostel I walked through the party area of Tbilisi's Old Town and a party town it is as people from all over the world come here for vacation, so it's definitely got an exciting very active night life in addition to its' fabulous history.

Walking around all parts of the city, and even climbing a mountain yesterday I got to see all kinds of people, obviously Christian, Jewish and Muslim openly expressing their religious affiliations while harmoniously interacting in this open free society. It's really quite beautiful, an oasis of peace at the crossroads of the ancient Silk Road, at least since the 4th century, and still very much so today. Many thanks to Levan for being a most excellent host and friend, and he certainly earned my deep admiration and respect for the way he helped clean up and organize on a national level the International Taekwon-do Federation in Georgia. A most impressive young man! Also thanks to Leo for the time we had together and wonderful dinner. For those who may doubt, Taekwondo is a world-wide family making travel genuinely fun, healthy and educational. Many thanks also to the innumerable other people from all walks of life who helped make my stay in Georgia quite delightful!



Narikala Fortress

Silk Road Taekwondo Quest Part 8 Tbilisi, Georgia

WTF

Interview with WTF National Team and Trainer Ioseb Osidze in Tbilisi Georgia, and visits to their National Museum, Narikala Fortress, Black Sea and the Mother of Georgia, Kartlis Deda



Georgia WTF Junior Nat Team with Trainer Ioseb Osidze on right

July 18, 2016 – Tbilisi Georgia

This afternoon I was fortunate to have the opportunity to meet with a legend of WTF Taekwondo in Georgia - Trainer Loseb Osidze and at least part of their Junior National team.

I started the interview by asking about his own Taekwondo background and found out National Team Trainer Osidze had a very impressive Taekwondo career indeed:

- 2009 Iran Fighter (gold)
- 2010 Korea (gold)

- 2010 Egypt Alexandria (silver)
- 2013 Turkey Open International tournament (gold)

... which is especially impressive considering that Georgia's entire population is less than 5 million people, while Istanbul alone has a population of some 14 million people, and Iran I've been told has at least a million people practicing Taekwondo.

Between 2005 – 2014 Ioseb Osidze was the Georgian number 1 gold medal winner.

Until 2009 Head Trainer Osidze was the Captain of the National Team, but these days he's "just" the trainer, which is perhaps a bigger responsibility than one might think.

"Before I was just a competitor, and for me fighting no problem. Being a trainer is a lot more complicated, but I enjoy the challenge." he said.

Fortunately, size isn't everything as their WTF team has proven again and again in international competition.

The week before my interview they were in the Luxemburg Open Championship - a G1 ranked tournament and won one gold medal and two bronzes. In February 2016 in the Ukraine they'd won 2 gold medals and in March they were in Bela Rousse where they won 3 gold and 2 Silver medals.

Being a part of the European Taekwondo Federation, their competition is extremely tough with teams like Great Britain (2nd in overall Olympic medal count with 27 gold medals), and Germany (5th in medal count, and so on) to contend with. But that doesn't slow Head Trainer Osidze down one little bit as he's used to beating the odds and taking on all the competition (this in fact neatly summarizes the whole history of Georgia).

During our interview I found they have 45 official trainers around Georgia with some 1,500 registered students in the Georgian World Taekwondo federation which was founded in 1993.

The junior national team has about 15 regular competitors, while the adult team has around six regular competitors.

When I asked about some of their brightest stars, Head Trainer Osidze mentioned Meskhi Tornike, Paksashvili Badri, Kyrakosyan Arshak, Gamkhitashvili Giga, Kavtaradze Beka, Geldiashvili Luka and Toronjadze Lika.

The President of the Georgian WTF Sulkhan Babuadze was very helpful in setting up this interview on very short notice, and General Secretary Avtandil Mikadze very helpful in communications.

An entire book could be written about the martial arts career of General Secretary Avtandil Mikadze who holds a 5th Dan in Jiu Jitsu, 5th Dan in Hapkido and a 5th Dan in Taekwondo. He started his martial arts training in 1970 with Greco-Roman wrestling and then in 1995 started his training in Asian martial arts, making him a national icon in the Georgian and European constellation of martial arts. He started the Georgian Jiu Jitsu Federation in 1991 and earned his 2nd Dan in 1996. “Sensei Mikadze” is the official representative for the World Elite Black Belt Society (W.E.B.B.S.), former president of the Georgian Taekwondo Federation and president of the East European Jiu Jitsu Community for the country of Georgia.

The Federation President Sulkhan Babuadze is a 3rd Dan who started Taekwondo in 1993, the same year Taekwondo was founded in Georgia. He started as a sportsman, and then became a trainer and now he’s the Federation President. During his time as Federation President Taekwondo has grown enormously in popularity in Georgia, the skill level has improved dramatically and it’s largely due to his inspired leadership I was told by several independent sources.

A bright light that recently joined the Georgian team in Tbilisi is Maria Merkouri, a WTF Best Referee Award Recipient 2014 and licensed Georgian International Referee. Originally from Greece, Maria holds training seminars and camps for referees and coaches all around Georgia, awarding certificates to successful attendees and she's also seeking Georgian citizenship so great is her love for Georgia, and especially her Taekwondo people! The team is very excited to be joined by such great international talent.

The day I showed up at the national training center was a busy one for the team as that morning they'd had a TV film crew doing a special on their team, and right after our interview they had to leave for another international competition.



Still, there was a little time for fun!

The life of a WTF National Team is a busy one and they all had to go and make final preparation for their travel.

During my time in Georgia, I also visited many of the cultural and historic centers, including Georgia's totally picturesque former capital called Mtskheta (briefly described in Part 7 of this series), the Georgian National Museum, the awesome 4th Century castle Narikala Fortress, and gazed upon the fair face of Kartlis Deda, the most famous woman in Georgia, also known as the Mother of Georgia.



Being 20 meters tall, made of aluminum and standing quite near Narikala Fortress high atop a hill overlooking Tbilisi, the Mother of Georgia is hard to miss. Designed by sculptor and Tbilisi native Elguja Amashukeli in 1958 to celebrate Tbilisi's 1,500th birthday, Kartlis Deda symbolizes Georgian hospitality as she's holding a cup in one hand to greet her friends and guests while in the other hand she holds a sword for those who might not be so well intentioned upon arrival and have some devious plan to infringe upon Georgia's God given and hard fought for liberty.

For me visiting Georgia was quite fantastic, especially given that it was the first time I've been in a Western country in the last 15 years. Georgia isn't just Europe, it's in some ways the best of ancient Europe married to the modern world in unusual and fantastic ways, like the beautiful "Freedom Bridge that joins the Old City and the new. But to even try to tell this story one must start at the beginning which in terms of Georgian history was sometimes around the 8th millennium BC, with the brilliantly preserved artifacts one can see in the Archaeology collection of their National Museum.

For the "martially minded" the National Museum's collection of ancient weapons reflects the whole history of the evolution of human war technology from stone knives and axes, mace heads and axes made of horn, bronze, iron and steel swords, and armor, and shields from the beginnings of history right up to the late 1800s when guns became the dominant "peacemaker" of the age.





1st Millennium BCE



Early 1900s

For fans of Greek and Roman art and culture Georgia is a treasure trove.



2nd – 1st Century BCE

Between the 1st Century BC and 7th Century AD parts of Georgia were part of what later became the Eastern Roman Empire, which one might recall lasted vastly longer than the Western Roman Empire though territory in the Caucasus was batted back and forth in a series of conflicts called the Roman Persian Wars. Consequently, one can also find at least some Persian Art in their National Museum as well.



A sign at the entrance of the museum states that the chroniclers of ancient Greek, Roman, Byzantium, Arabic, Turkic, Persian and Armenian nations all acknowledged the fame of Georgia's excellent warriors. Georgia's outstanding martial valor and skill almost always won against vastly superior numbers. Their warriors are legends in the region.

Georgia was one of the first countries in history to adopt Christianity. This conversion is attributed to St. Nina of Cappadocia, the only daughter of Roman General Zabulon who was a relative of St. George the martyr and Susanna, sister of the Patriarch of Jerusalem. Christianity was officially declared the state religion by King Mirian III in 327, and in 334 he commissioned the building of the first Christian church where now stands Vetiaskhoveli Cathedral also known as the Cathedral of the Living Pillar which is located in Mtskheta.



Their National Museum's large collection of Byzantium art includes many well-preserved frescos which bring to life the ancientness and piety of this nation and its culture. So influential was Eastern Orthodox Christianity on their history in some ways their National Museum is like a Cathedral. Strong Greek and Roman influences on early history can be seen through all the museums I visited on this trip in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey.



One of the oldest wooden carts in the western world. Imagine showing up at your future bride's house in one of those snappy wagons!

Probably my favorite display at the National Museum wasn't a weapon, but rather the rather large four wheeled ancient wooden carts from the first half of the 2nd Millennium BC, found in the Sabidakhcha Burial Mound. Though undoubtedly primarily used by farmers to transport grain and vegetables to markets, the cart could have been used for transporting the whole family and all one's most valued worldly possessions to safer places in time of war. If objects could talk those old carts would have some amazing tales to tell. The owner of this particular cart so loved it he had it buried with him, some 4,000 years ago.

Narikala Fortress floats atop the current capital city of Tbilisi and at night its undulating walls are bathed in a golden light. It's easy to find one's way around the old town of Tbilisi because one can always orient one's self by that ancient castle.



Built in the 4th Century this grand monument was destroyed and rebuilt many times yet has the look and feel of the ages upon it. The view down upon the city from the fortress is one of the best. After a tour of Narikala one evening, I walked back through the Old Town center and was reminded what a popular international tourist spot this is, as one will hear languages from a hundred countries with all enjoying the beautiful evenings in outdoor cafes, restaurants and other drinking spots. For centuries people from all over the continent have come here to relax and soak up the atmosphere of this picturesque capital city, and also visit the Black Sea resorts which are not far away. Some of the black sands on the Black Sea beaches are known to be magnetized and many believe help relieve arthritis and other physical ailments. The Taekwondo and other sports federations in Georgia often hold summer camps at Black Sea resorts as they are really great places to visit and get terrific cross-training benefits, including of course those challenging kicks and punches in the sea.

I spent a week in Georgia and it was really a beautiful time. It's easy to get to know people in Tbilisi as they have a traditional way of life that is a lot easier going and more relaxed than most capital cities. It's easy to make Georgian and international friends there because it just doesn't move at the hyper-pace that seems to pervade more and more of the modern world. They have their own peaceful rhythm in harmony with the surrounding nature, and vibrations of the whole Silk Road still resonate through the streets, ancient buildings and friendly people.

In their National Museum I saw some of the oldest human skulls dating back some 1.8 million years and witnessed some of the earliest development of tools, arts, weapons, musical instruments and Christianity. In addition, I at least briefly met some of their young Taekwondo superstars and their illustrious Head Coach and Trainer Ioseb Osidze and got to photograph them training.

Tbilisian society is, like the Silk Road city it has been for the past 1,500 years or so, very pluralistic. In Tbilisi one can find Jewish quarters with a splendid ancient synagogue and Muslim quarters with a splendid old masjid. Walking the streets today one finds people of many faiths and no faith, openly expressing their cultures and interacting in natural and peaceful ways. Indeed, Georgia in general and Tbilisi in particular are models of pluralistic harmony.

Georgia is unquestionably one of the friendliest places on earth offering free visas to people from over a hundred countries. That just in itself tells a lot about this free and open country.

Before closing this story I must say a huge thanks to “Tako,” the fantastic translator that helped enormously during my visit to the WTF headquarters in Tbilisi Georgia.

Finally, I will bid Kartlis Deda, the Mother of Georgia a fond farewell as she still stands aloof watching silently high above her city and simultaneously I wonder if perhaps she’s saying some wordless but powerful prayer for peace and freedom that can be understood by all her people in that fair and beautiful land.



Above Mtskheta Georgia one can find Jvari Church fortress

Silk Road Taekwondo Quest Part 9 Baku, Azerbaijan



Beautiful Baku as seen from the top of Maiden's Tower

Interview with Azerbaijan's WTF International Relations Chief and National Team Manager Jalal Safarov and a brief tour of the Azerbaijan National Museum of History and the Old Town "Icheri Sheher."

July 28, 2016

The WTF headquarters in Baku Azerbaijan may be found just behind the picturesque Qafqaz Park Hotel, which features the neo-classic architecture characteristic of Baku Azerbaijan, and is located next to a park. The Qafqaz Park Hotel I later found out is the domicile of the Azeri National Taekwondo Teams when they are in training, as well as visiting teams when they get together for training camps here in Baku.



Jalal Safarov, in front of the Qafqaz Park Hotel



This morning I had an 11:00 appointment at the Azerbaijan Taekwondo Federation and was fortunate to first meet with Jalal Safarov, International Relations Department Chief and National Team Manager.

Inside the beautiful training hall building, Jalal first showed me their trophy room which is - shall we say - very impressive, practically blinding with the brilliance of this Federation's competition achievements.



Back in the day of course I had my own collection of trophies and medals, but even the greatest of them couldn't compare with the least of these, specifically so many wins at World and European Championships as well as National championships.

Suitably impressed I walked with Jalal to his office where we sat so I could take pen and notebook in hand and get up to speed on WTF in Azerbaijan.

First of all I found that one of his many responsibilities is to take care of the logistics involved in the travel arrangements for their four teams: Senior, Junior, Cadet and Para-Taekwondo, which as all travelers knows is no easy task, visas, hotels, transportation, food, and hundreds of other details most people wouldn't dream of till they've traveled some and more.

Their foundation was founded in 1992, by Suleyman Mammadli who went on to become the first Azerbaijan Taekwondo president. In 1999 Kamaladdin Heydarov who is also the ‘Minister of Emergency Situations’ in Azerbaijan was asked to become the federation president. “When he took over the federation moved into high gear and has kept up a remarkable growth rate for the ensuing years,” Jalal said.

“Since the year 2000, when Taekwondo was admitted to the Olympic roll-call, taekwondo’s popularity in Azerbaijan has skyrocketed and is one of the top five sports federations in the country along with Judo, wrestling, and karate. Azeris seem to really like individual sports.”

According to Jalal Safarov their national team has 16 core members, and adding reserves totals around 25 players. “At this time the WTF here has 12 international referees for World Championships, and 35 national referees.”

I asked him who was the highest-ranking Taekwondo person in Azerbaijan now and he answered: “That would be Oh Kwang Cheol, Technical Director of the Federation who has a 7th Dan. He will also be an international referee in Rio in 2016.” I also found out that the Taekwondo players in Azerbaijan average about 75% male to 25% female.

About this time, I turned the conversation towards the upcoming Olympics and found out that Azerbaijan Taekwondo players earned four licenses for Rio, with two being for males and two for females. That’s the maximum amount any country is permitted I found out.

I also found out that in 2013 the Olympics adopted a new system for selection for participation in the Olympics. The first qualifying procedures involved Grand Prix Tournaments, with three series and one final. The highest ranking and top 6 in each weight category can go to Rio.

After that there are continental tournaments, with the finalists getting licenses. But each country is limited to four licenses, with two being male, and two female based on their personal records so the competition is tough indeed.

“Our Azerbaijan Teams have never gotten an Olympic medal yet, so we’re really training hard now. Of course, World and European Championships, but the Olympics is something special and we’re hopeful.

“When will your teams leave for the games?”

“Probably on August 11th or 12th.”

As mentioned earlier in this article, other nation’s teams come to Baku for training camps, and I found out that’s because this is a regional center for the World Taekwondo Federation. “Which countries specifically?” “Most of our neighbors, like Georgia, Turkey, Russia, Kazakhstan, and many others.”

At this point I mentioned I understand how it is when sparring with teammates who know all your tricks, and Jalal said: “Yes, we had one player who won the Junior World Championship, but all his friends on the team could beat him.”

Next, I asked for some background of their four Olympic medal hopefuls.

“First, we have Radik Isaev in the (80 Kg. +) division. He was World Champion in 2015 and European Champion in 2014, as well as the winner of the European Games in 2015.



Radik Isaev, (+80 kg) gold medal at the 2016 Summer Olympics awarding ceremony. Photo by Ilgar Jafarov, Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International

“Then, there’s Milad Beigi Harchegani, again 80 Kg.+ who also was European Champion in 2016, and winner of the European Games in 2015.



Milad Beigi Harchegani during my
visit in Baku



Milad Beigi scoring big time at the 2016 Summer Olympics -
80 kg. division. Photo by Javid Nikpour for Tasnim News
Agency, CC-BY-4.0

And, for the ladies, there's Patimat Abakaroja (under 49 Kilos), who was a Silver Medalist in the European Championships in 2016, Bronze medalist in the European Games and Rio Olympics that same year.



Patimat Abakarova after training during my visit.



Patimat Abakarova, (Women's -49 kg.) at the 2016 Summer Olympics awarding ceremony, photo by Ilgar Jafarov, CC BY-SA 4.0

And, last, but not least, is Farida Azizova who grew up doing Taekwondo, like European Champion Cadets, 2008, World Junior Champion, 2012, European Seniors bronze medal, 2014, World Champions Seniors, bronze 2013 and silver medal in this most recent European Games.



Farida Azizova (Women's -67 kg) ranked 5th in the Rio Olympics.

No doubt Azerbaijan Taekwondo Federation President Kamaladdin Heydarov, Jalal Safarov and all Azerbaijanis were more than a little happy with their final showing at the Rio Olympics:

First, Azerbaijan won a record number of 18 medals in this year's Olympics.

In Taekwondo they won three medals, one gold and two bronzes:

- Radik Isaev 80+ Kg. Gold - Two kicks to the head of Niger's Abdoulrazak Issoufou Alfaga won him the gold medal in a 6-2 victory.)
- Milad Beigi Harchegani Men's -80 Kg. Bronze
- Patimat Abakarova Women's -49 Kg. Bronze medal

In other words, Jalal predicted quite well how their best players would do, and to leap from no medals to 18 is something they had to work really hard to earn.

I asked about their training and found out like most national teams they train two hours in the morning, and two in the afternoon, with workouts varying between straight Taekwondo, and time in the gym, doing weights, sprints, and so on.

After this interview, Jalal invited to give me a tour of the training facilities. I had just missed the head coach, Reza Mehmandoust, but did meet the Second Head Coach Elnur Amanov, who was the European Champion in Rome, 2008 and at that time was also team captain.



Second Head Coach Elnur Amanov

After thanking him, the coach and players, I was heading out when I met a distinguished gentleman who greeted me in Spanish, my second language. We chatted for a while and he introduced me to another gentleman Hafiz Qaribov, who turned out to be the Head Manager/Director of the hotel in front of the WTF headquarter training facility. They cordially invited me to lunch, which was... wow, out-of-this-world delicious, several salads with steak and potatoes, as well as other side dishes, and sparkling mineral water on the side. By the way, all of our conversation was in Spanish.

Just out of curiosity I asked if regular visitors (like me) could stay in their hotel. They laughed and said sure, all are welcome. Bracing myself for a shock, I asked how much a single room cost, and was quite surprised it was only 60 Manat (like \$40) or something, which is about half the price of my current hotel which is pretty far from the city center. In all fairness to my current hotel, where I now sit typing on the outside veranda, the staff here has been solid gold, helping me get connections, finding things and so on... Azerbaijan is a place where people try harder, I found out – somewhere they make that extra effort to ensure guests feel at home and happy.

After lunch the gentlemen asked where I was going and I said the train station to purchase a ticket for the evening train back to Tbilisi, before moving on further west to Ankara. They graciously offered to give me a ride, which I wasn't about to refuse. While waiting in line, one of them asked if I had my passport. Oops! When I registered at my hotel they'd kept my passport... oh no! Anyways, Hafiz kindly drove me back to my hotel, and then to the train station again, though I tried very hard to talk them out of it. But, there is no stopping the generosity and kindness of the people I've met here in Azerbaijan.

All in all I have to give Baku Azerbaijan, and the Azeri WTF Jalal and all the players I met my highest respect and most sincere gratitude for their thoughtfulness and generosity.

While in Azerbaijan I also went to the Azerbaijan National Museum of History and learned some pretty amazing things. For example, I found a sign that said:

“In ancient times people believed that the world was ruled from the Caucasian Mountains. According to myths, Prometheus discovered a fire (culture in fact) in the mountains of Caucasus and brought it to humans; he was tied up to rocks and executed for disobedience to deities. Extant legend of Prometheus is confirmative of suppositions of the world scientific community that the Caucasus is a cradle of civilization. Anthropologists are prone to define the European race as Caucasian. Thus, a man and culture initially sprang up in Caucasus, including Azerbaijan as its integral part.”

For those not familiar with the local geography, the Caucasus is the region between Asia and Europe, specifically between the Caspian and Black Seas. Looking at a topographical map of the region it is immediately obvious why Azerbaijan and Tbilisi Georgia would be the major stops along the Silk Road, as they lay in the fertile lowlands just south of the long rugged Greater Caucasus Mountains, and north of the Lesser Caucasus Mountains. This geographically is a “cradle” with plenty of water and protection from the extreme cold to the north (Russia) and heat to the south (Iran, Armenia, Turkey) offered by those mountains.

Consequently, this fertile Caucasus region was the place everyone wanted to control, as “fertile” means things like food grows there in abundance, and it’s also the key transportation route between Asia and Europe. Naturally their martial history, and the collection of swords, spears, maces, axes, and other weapons, shields, and armor in the Azerbaijan National Museum of History is truly exquisite.



One can clearly see the meticulous designs in weaponry and armor, as if weaponry were one of if not the highest of art forms, for indeed it is when one lives in the most cherished land in the known world at that time.



Swords from the 13th - 8th century BCE



A small section of shield



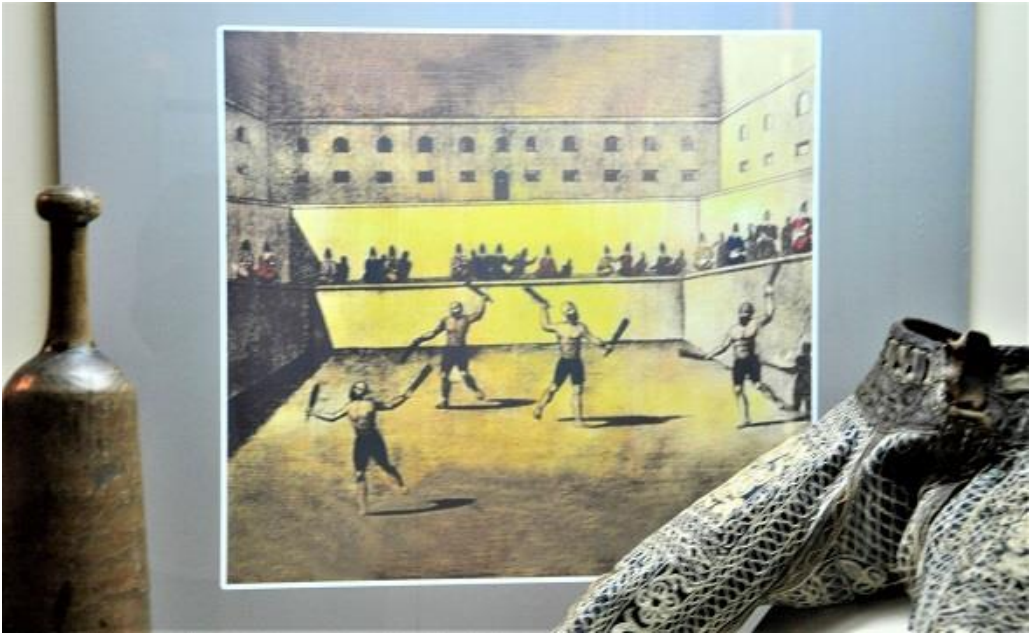
Turkey, the western most end of Asia is huge, but that relatively narrow ribbon of land that now constitute Azerbaijan and Georgia was the artery connecting Asia and Turkey that everyone wanted to dominate. Consequently, here more than anywhere, all are the children of war, and also the children of some of the most beautiful and ancient lands on earth.



Also in the Azerbaijan National Museum of History I happened upon what looked like the heaviest battle shield I've ever seen, and I've seen a lot of them having toured most of the museums of Western Europe and Central and East Asia. That thing must weigh 100 kilos at least. So, quite curious I read the sign and quite a fascinating story emerged.



The shield (above) it turned out is from the Zorkana, the House of Strength and Power, essentially martial art training centers that sprang up all around Azerbaijan and Iran after Arabs conquered this region – for the purpose of fighting against those new colonizers. The Zorkana were pivotal in preparing for the Abbasid Revolution which overthrew the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750) leading to a multi-ethnic and egalitarian Abbasid Caliphate which lasted from 750-1258, slightly more than 500 years. In comparison the term “British Empire,” used after 1685 was pretty much finished by the end of World War II.



Also, in Baku I visited several Caravanserais in the Old Town called “*Icheri Sheher*.”



A painting I wish I could have bought at an outdoor art market in *Icheri Sheher*. But alas, the shop owner was nowhere to be found. I've tried several times since the to find the name of the painter, but again, no luck.

The Old Town of Baku is a lovingly preserved very large area in which thousands of people still live. One day during the week I was there I stopped at the Buxara Restaurant which is in the ancient Caravanserai Buxara, in *Icheri Sheher* and there I had a fabulous lunch.

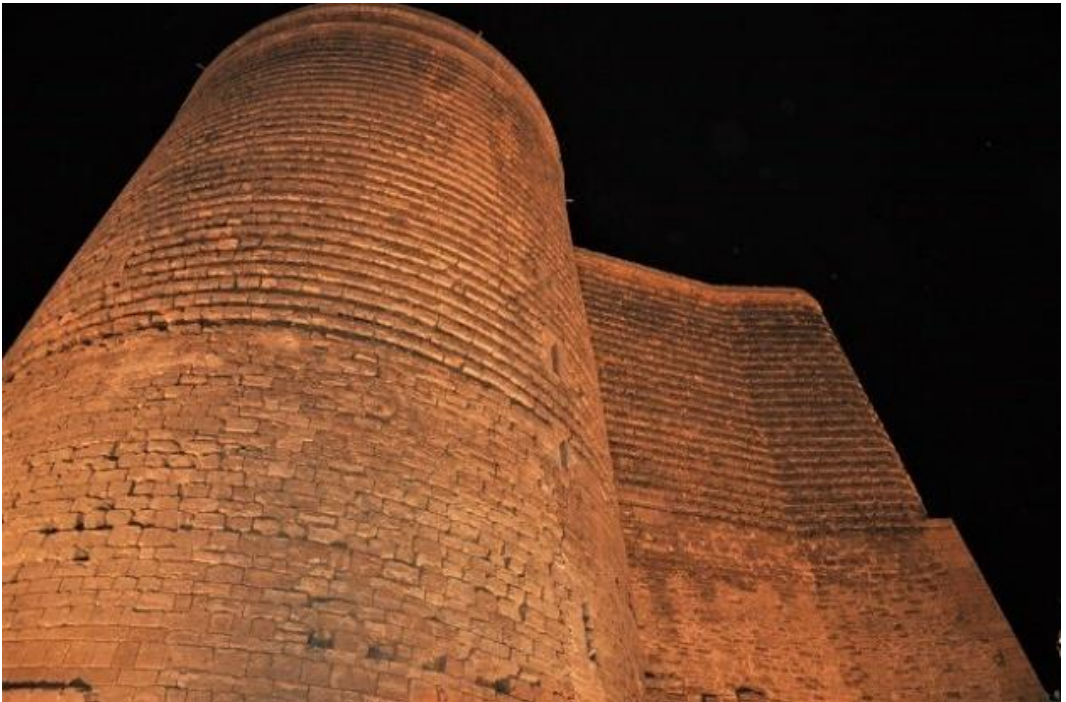


Splendid repast at Caravanserai Buxara

After lunch I got to talking with the waiter and other staff and was invited by a new friend I met there named Mustafa to go to one of the Caspian Sea beaches. I was of course delighted because it's always hard for a foreigner to know which beaches are better and having a local friend to help is really great. So, I visited real Silk Road sites, soaked up local culture, made lots of new friends everywhere I went, and got to go swimming in the Caspian Sea guided by a most excellent new friend. I might add on the way back we got in a taxi with the most amazing sound system and made a music video featuring the music of contemporary Azeri hip-hop fusion music with the exotic colorful background of ancient, classical and modern Baku. It was a great time.

To quote UNESCO: "The Walled City of Baku represents an outstanding and rare example of an historic urban ensemble and architecture with influence from Zoroastrian, Sassanian, Arabic, Persian, Shirvani, Ottoman, and Russian cultures." But that isn't the half of it as it is uniquely Azeri.

The visitor to Baku also must make a stop at the mysterious Maiden's Tower, the symbol of Baku believed to have been built around the 6th – 7th Century BC though it could be much older. It's an ancient Zoroastrian fire worshiping temple that is astonishingly tall and well preserved. In there I think I met the Maiden, and was thunderstruck for some time after. The view from the top is amazing and it's really quite an astonishing affair altogether, right there in the middle of "*Icheri Sheher*."



The Maiden's tower. It doesn't look so large from the outside, but inside it's huge; there's even a museum inside and the view from the top is spectacular. It's altogether quite amazing.

One of the most amazing places I visited in Baku was the Palace of Shirvanshah. For those not familiar with the Shirvanshah Dynasty, it lasted some 700 years from the 9th to the 16th Centuries. Though not a large palace – at least today – it's made of white marble and absolutely beautiful with a most excellent view of the Caspian Sea. It's like an island of ancient peaceful tranquility there in the Old City of *Icheri Sheher* surrounded by the unseen modern world. I was enraptured. Marble is an amazing stone; besides its beauty it's a cool stone even on the hottest days.



Front door of the Palace of Shirvanshah



The view out one of the back windows, or what might have been a balistraria (shooting hole) is really quite lovely. Even a great king might just need a little swim now and again.

After my tour I sat around with some young guides – tourism majors at a local university – and spent a lovely couple of hours chatting in the shade of some trees there in front of the Palace of Shirvanshah. It was really quite idyllic.



In sum, I love Baku and applaud their remarkable Taekwondo organization, coaches, and athletes, and outstanding rise in the Olympics. I very much look forward to visiting again.

Next stop? First, Tbilisi.

After Baku it was a train back west to Tbilisi Georgia where I had lunch with Levan, and then on a bus to Ankara which is 1368 km or 850 miles further on. If driving non-stop that's about 18 hours, but fortunately busses stop now and then as nature does call from time to time and people need to eat.

Nearing the border, I caught a large white minibus to the Georgian side of the Turkish border crossing called Sarpi, before another short bus ride to the Turkish Immigration Station and naturally another entire spectrum of exciting new adventures!

All that aside one must appreciate the modern world. On a camel it would have taken weeks.

Silk Road Taekwondo Quest Part 10 Ankara, Turkey



Happy, healthy, welcoming and superbly trained WTF Team in Ankara

On the bus after the border crossing, I heard about a lovely small town called Erzurum just a couple of hundred kilometers inside the Turkish border. Given the long ride ahead to Ankara I decided to stop there a night which turned into more than a day and a night. Why? It's a perfectly lovely ancient town, with kind people of all ages. I just loved it there and naturally didn't want to leave.



I felt at home here. A sense of family. The way life should be.



While there I also visited the Erzurum Fort, and stopped for a few minutes in the Ali Aga Camii (Masjid) in Erzurum Fort.



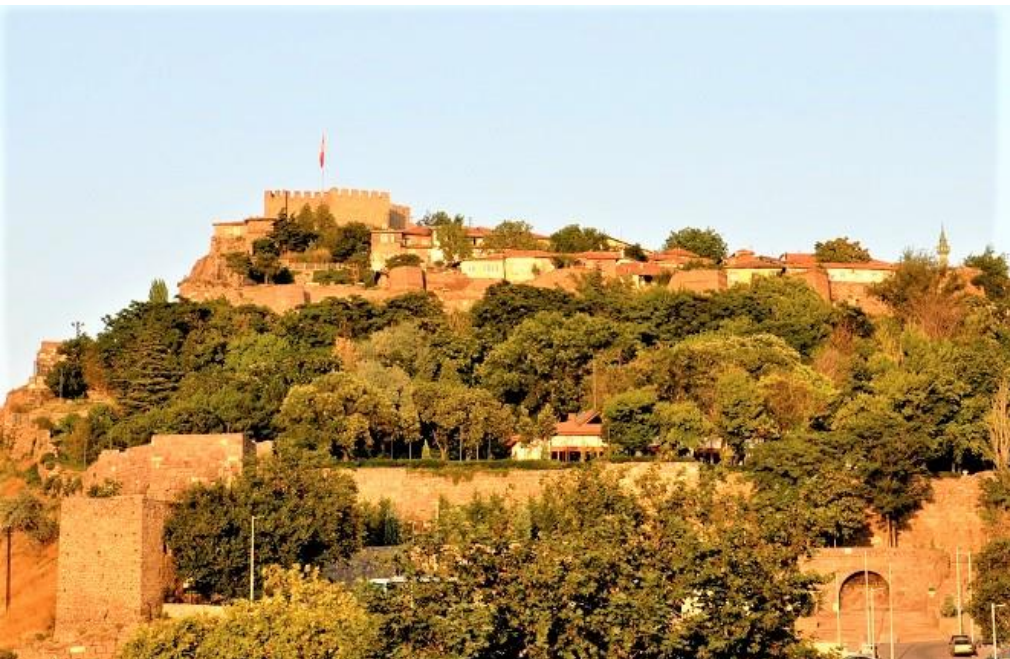
I can't account for what appears to be the ultra-violet light, except to say I didn't see it with my eyes. Only the camera picked it up.

Erzurum has the distinction of being one of the most fought over pieces of real estate on earth going back to the beginning of recorded history and it could be the ancient prayer hall in this ancient fort has stories to tell that would last a hundred lifetimes just to hear. In any case, it was cool and holy, a sacred place in an ancient land with a timeless history.

It would be an understatement to write I've had a tumultuous life, and remarkable how at peace I felt there in Erzurum. None-the-less I was absolutely determined to travel to the western end of the continent, the land mass of Asia, which is Istanbul and the next day it was back on the bus.

My first day in Ankara I made some calls and got an appointment to meet with WTF representative Ali Sagirkaya the next day, and then went out touring some of the more famous ancient locations in Ankara.

My first stop was the ancient Ankara Castle founded in the 8th century BC by the Phrygians and rebuilt in 278 BC by the Galatians. In other words, its roots are at least almost 3,000 years old.

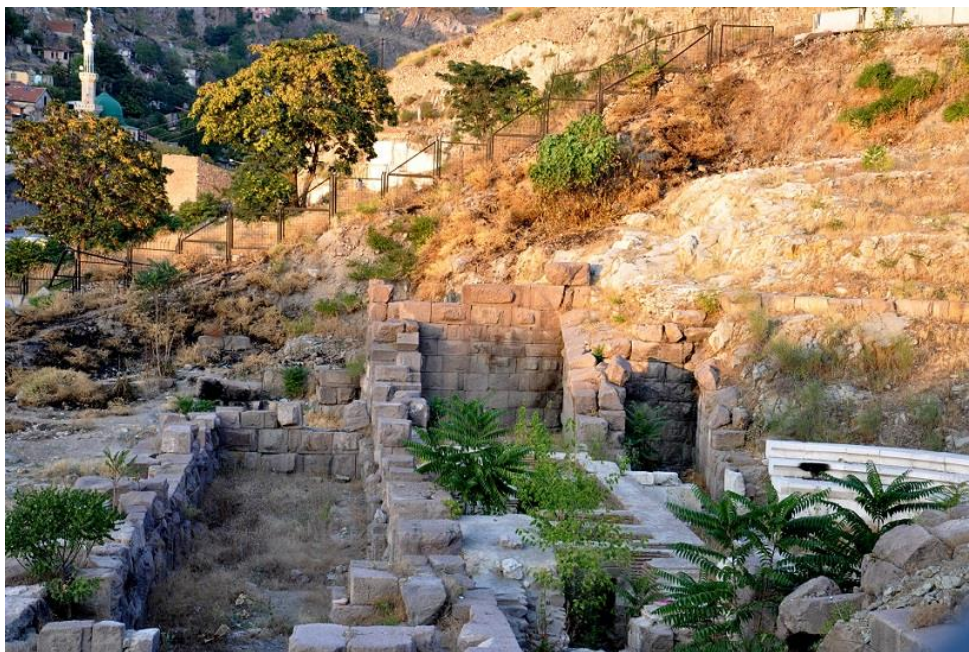


Ankara Castle from below

The castle was renovated several times during the Roman, Byzantine, Seljuk, and Ottoman eras, which means it's seen more than its fair share of battles over the millennia. Nowadays is a romantic getaway for couples and groups of students to view the sunset and fly kites, and itinerant martial arts reporters such as myself. I hung out with just such a group of university students to view the sunset over Ankara and it was lovely indeed.



Somewhat familiar with its general history I looked carefully as I approached the hill upon which it peacefully resides to see signs of earlier civilizations and was not disappointed.



Front and center right one can clearly see at the base of the Ankara Castle hill the remains of what could be as old as the Hittite occupation 1,700 – 1,200 BCE, or possibly something only about 2,000 years old such as Roman ruins.



Also, on the way up to the castle I made a number of new friends, including this gentleman. Most of the people I met around there were university students on holiday.

Interview with Turkish WTF representative Ali Sagirkaya in Ankara and an Interview with Professor Gregory McMahon

For those who don't do much international traveling all I say is you haven't really lived till you've tried finding a few addresses in foreign countries where you don't speak the language and street signs are nearly always absent or in foreign languages, or just don't seem logical to the average western mind.

Anyways, I found the offices of the WTF here in Ankara in a modern relatively tall building by asking the taxi driver to take me to Zafer Carsisi and then found the right building and door to the left of and behind the Giyim Dunyasi, where-in I walked - through rather tight security, trading my passport for an ID, and proceeded to the 9th floor which had a suite of very modern offices fully staffed and working arduously. No doubt about it, this WTF headquarters is busy and totally up to speed.

I was shown into the office of Ali Sagirkaya, who introduced himself. I presented my Beijing school name card, my International Sports Journalist card, and my Taekwondo Times Press ID to shock and awe him with my prestigious credentials. He then presented me with his card, which I couldn't fully assimilate because it had a somewhat unusual job title for him: "WTF Auditor" and "ETU Exco Member." Suitably impressed with each other we sat and began our discussion.



Mr. Ali Sagirkaya, WTF Auditor and ETU Exco Member

First, I was curious who he was and what he did, and he explained that he's a WTF Executive Board Member, along with the President, Vice President, Treasurer, Secretary General and one other Auditor. Knowing that WTF is an unbelievably huge organization with branches in 209 countries, I was really shocked and awed, because the auditor for all practical purposes sees all and knows all.

I found out that the Turkish Taekwondo Federation started in 1981, and has more than 500,000 members nationwide. In regards to the relative size of the Turkish Taekwondo Federation, I found out that it's second only to football amongst the sports federations in this great, ancient and amazing nation.

I learned that two of their national team members have already left for Rio, specifically male, -68 kilo division, Servet Tazegul and the female -67 kilo division competitor named Nur Tartar (who went on to win a bronze medal). I found out in previous Olympics they've won 1 gold medal, 3 silver and 2 bronze medals. I asked about their World WTF championships and he said they've won more than 10 gold medals, and in regards to European Championships he said he wasn't sure, somewhere between 50 and a hundred gold medals. This is impressive by any measure.

“The Turkish Taekwondo Federation President Dr. Metin Sahin was European Champion twice and won a silver medal in the Olympics,” Ali added.

I asked about the “Dr.” in the Turkish President's WTF title, and was told he's a professor that teaches at the University of Selchuk in the Sports Academy.

In regards to Ali's own Taekwondo background he said: “I started Taekwondo in 1981, and shortly after I returned to Turkey in 2004 Turkish WTF President Sahin asked me to come and work with WTF, which I did in 2005. We went to school together and know each other quite well, so working together is made easier.” Curious as to where he'd been previous to 2004, I found out he'd lived for many, many years in Long Island which didn't surprise me too much because his English is fluent American.

I found out that Ali's interests are wide, for example he's a trader in "forage seeds," which I found out means food for grazing animals like cows and sheep. I've got the feeling he's been very successful in this business because his interests and activities around the world are very wide, e.g., when looking through some pictures on his MacBook Air, I noticed there were some of him skydiving, and other rather exciting things in faraway places, not to mention several of him with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at one or another function. And I learned Ali has traveled in some 60+ countries, which makes my 33 or 34 or whatever seem rather minimal in comparison.

Curious as to how he could become so very successful I asked about his father and found out that Ali grew up in Ankara and his father owned a convenience store. Continuing my quest to understand him, I asked about his personal philosophy to which he responded: "You only live every day once, so enjoy it as much as possible."

With that thought in mind, I turned the conversation back to Taekwondo by asking him who he thought were the major powerhouses in the European Taekwondo Federation, to which he responded: "Russia, Spain, the UK, Germany of course, sometimes Italy, Serbia, Croatia, and certainly Azerbaijan."

I asked if he had anything else to say about his role in the WTF, both internationally and here in Ankara, and he said: "It's an honor for me to serve them and to be part of the Taekwondo family." Amen to that!

Finally, I asked him where the National Team was training and if I could visit them. He graciously gave them a call and set it up so I can visit tomorrow, Wednesday, August 3rd. He also gave me some souvenirs of the Turkish WFT Federation. I sincerely thanked him and expressed hope we meet again in the near future, which is not entirely unlikely as the world just seems to shrink every day, at least in my experience and the WTF is a family, after-all.

Getting back to the hotel I overheard some guests speaking in English, but wasn't entirely surprised because the desk manager told me yesterday that a team of American archeologists was arriving for a week or so.

Not being a shy sort of fellow, I walked over and introduced myself, as I'm not just any wandering Taekwondo Quest sort of person, no indeed, I'm the Silk Road Taekwondo Quest reporter, and have a profound responsibility to learn and share all I can about the roots of this amazing Silk Road city and nation.

It wasn't more than about a hot minute before I was sitting with them asking about their projects here in Turkey, and the true age and history of the Ankara Citadel and the ruins that I'd found yesterday at the base of the high hill overlooking the entire capital of this splendid nation.



Far left is Professor Yilmaz Selim Erdol. Center is Professor Gregory McMahon

“Well,” began Professor Gregory McMahon, of the University of New Hampshire, Department of History, “probably around the time of the Hittites, or 1,700 – 1,200 BC,” or in other words around three thousand years old at least. Also one can find Roman marble reused in later times...”

Professor McMahon had the highest regard for the Museum of Anatolian Civilizations located on the south side of the Ankara Citadel. He explained that one major reason the founder of the modern nation and first president of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk chose Ankara to be the capital was because of the ancient roots of this city. The museum I found out consists of the old Ottoman Mahmut Pasa Bazarre storage building, and the even older Kursunlu Han.

Professor McMahoan then asked if I knew what a “Han” was. “You know what a Caravanserai is right?” “Well, sure,” I responded, “I’ve visited many during the past couple of years along the Silk Road.” “Then as you know caravanserai were trading centers and hotels, so to speak, located usually in remote areas. The ‘*han*’ however were the terminal points in cities where caravans sold their goods.” “Wow!” I thought, I didn’t know that. A good professor scatters gold dust all around him sparkling with fascinating information and at times even wisdom. People of all walks of life can open innumerable doors and windows to other astonishing worlds, but professors often or usually form matrixes of information that click things together in ways one might never have imagined.

“Caravanserai are or were waystations, but the Han were the endpoints located in cities, and the Kursunlu Han, located at the Great Museum of Anatolian Civilization is one such terminal endpoint for the caravan traveling the ancient Silk Road.”

The good professor also informed me that “*ka-le*” is Turkish for Citadel, which made sense because I’d bought a detailed Turkish map of Ankara the day before and it called the Citadel/Fortress “Ankara *Kalesi*.” “It was the *han*, and the *kale* together that helped Ataturk choose Ankara as the capital city,” the professor added.

This also made sense, as they established solid Ottoman roots for this city. The Ottoman Empire was founded in 1299 by Oghuz Turks and the Ottoman Sultanate was later transformed into a transcontinental empire and inheritor of the caliphate that ended the Byzantine Empire with the conquest of Constantinople by Mehmed the Conqueror in 1453. This however was far, far from the first or last of the racial/cultural/religious “folding” of this nation whose written history dates back to at least the Akkadian Empire during the rule of Sargon of Akkad in the 24th Century BC!

Since then, it was dominated by Assyrians, Hittites, Neo-Hittites, Arameans, Luwians, Neo-Assyrians, Cimmerians and Scythians, Greeks, Achaean/Mycenaeans, Christians (Byzantine), and Muslims. It is interesting to note in view of current events in Turkey, that the last Byzantine stronghold in Anatolia was Philadelphia, which fell in 1390 almost exactly a hundred years after the fall of the last crusader city in the holy land, Acre in 1291. Interesting also that the Islamic cleric Fethullah Gulen widely blamed for the attempted military coup in Turkey just before I got there was living in Philadelphia (USA).

Which brings us back to the Great Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, built upon the old Ottoman Mahmut Pasa Bazaar storage building and together with the Han, and Kale, was bought to form a confluence of histories and basis of this truly historic great museum.

Between 1938 and 1968 the buildings were remodeled and repaired, ultimately opening as the Ankara Archeological Museum.

Professor McMahon also mentioned the Konak family houses that still remain within the greater Ankara Citadel/fortress area and have since been turned into beautiful small hotels for visitors. I saw them last night and was awed at the obvious age and care with which they've been maintained, though I'd also seen some really run-down abandoned houses, with others falling in between, inhabited by families living within the ancient fortress. They were very friendly family people and even volunteered to take pictures with me, sharing, in the tradition of the ancient Silk Road, a bit of the pleasant summer evening with a stranger from afar.



Residents of Konak family houses on the hill
crowned by Ankara Castle

I asked Professor McMahon more about his own archeological projects in Turkey, and found out his major site was located in Cadir Hoyuk, in Yozgat Province, which has been tentatively identified as the site of the ancient Hittite city of Zippalanda and is exactly in the center of Turkey. I googled this information and found a fascinating article which is referenced at the end of this story.

I'd mentioned briefly at the beginning of this most enlightening conversation about my Taekwondo Quest journey, and he then told me another astonishing fact: "If it's the Silk Road you're interested in, you really have to visit Bursa, the true ancient terminal point and *han*, of the Silk Road.

Discussing this observation further with Professor Yilmaz Selim Erdol, Professor and Doctorate of Physical Anthropology I found out my best plan for coming to the terminus of my Silk Road Odyssey, or Quest as it were, would be to go from Ankara, to Bursa, Iznik, Yalova, then take a ferry across the Sea of Marmara, and finally arrive in Istanbul!

Later that evening I typed “Bursa Turkey Silk Road” into Google Scholar and found a fascinating article titled: *Formation of the Historical Commercial Center in Bursa, the First Capital City of the Ottoman Empire*, by Ozlem Koprulu Bagbanci, and published in *World Applied Sciences Journal*, which sounds pretty respectable to me.

Then I found an article titled: “*The End of the Silk Road: Implications of the Decline of Turkish Sericulture*,” by Charlotte A. Jirousek which states: “Bursa in North Western Turkey was for centuries the terminus of the trade route known as the Silk Road. A local silk industry grew up around this city located in the midst of rich agricultural land just of the south of the Sea of Marmara and the Imperial capital Constantinople (Istanbul)...” (P. 201) Yep, the good professor McMahon had his facts straight.

A curious person might well wonder at this point, why the Sea of Marmara? Well, I researched it and found out that the Sea of Marmara “straddles one of the greatest of the natural routes between Europe and Asia. Along this route, it might be expected passed the movement of objects and materials, the trade and transference of ideas, the migration of people between Anatolia and the Aegean and Balkan worlds...” (D.H. French, *Prehistoric Sites in Northwest Anatolia*, 1. The Iznik Area, Anatolian Studies, Vol. 17, 1967, P. 49) Also there’s the fact that I never heard of the Sea of Marmara, and that makes it pretty attractive too. Imagine swimming in three rather distant seas in a single month (Caspian, Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara). That’s what I did.

But, not before spending a few more days in Anara.

Incidentally August 2nd is also my birthday and I thought the day had turned out splendidly first by meeting the distinguished Mr. Ali Sagirkaya, and then the kindly and oh-so-very-well-informed professors at my hotel! What more could a person ask?

The next day I Visited the national team.

The next day I visited the training center of their national team and was greeted by a senior coach Cihat Kutuca who told me about some of the Taekwondo players warming up in the gym, including Elif Oltabak (female, age 13 from Riza), who had started Taekwondo at age 6 and since has won four gold medals in the Turkish Championships 2014 – 2016, Ikra Kayir (female, age 15 from Ankara) who had also won gold 2014 – 2016 in the Turkish Championships and Talha Shirin (male, age 19 from Ankara, nicknamed: Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan and the “Flying Taekwondoka”) who was a silver medalist in Poomse in the Turkish Championships. He is well named because every single photo of him I took showed nothing but a blur. He is a most unusual young man. First, he can fly, second, he’s so fast I never could get a good photo of him.



The blur there is Talha Shirin, moving a lot faster than my Nikon shutter speed.

Later I found out that Coach Kutuca had won gold medals in many championships including the World Championships in 1995. I also learned that he's the coach for the hearing-impaired Taekwondo athletes for the Para-Olympics. In addition, I met and got to know young Coach Gokhan Nazli, who was very helpful in translating, as was Elif.

After watching their initial warmup, I walked around the gym talking with these splendid young athletes and had a great time taking photos. Then I gave my camera to Gokhan who also took some great shots. Another real character I met certainly worthy of mention was gentle giant Erdal Tore, age 29 who displayed marvelous technique, while retaining the playful fun spirit of this enthusiastic team.



Left to right: Ikra Kayir (age 15), Erdal Tore (age 29) & Elif Oltabak (age 13)

On August 4th it was off in search of Hans, and was ever-so-delighted at what I found; at least some of the true terminal ends of the land Silk Roads, and in fact some of the most famous Hans in Turkey.



The inauspicious entrance to a time-portal!

With Suluhan being one of the most illustrious.



Walking in the entrance to Suluhan



One of the back gardens in Suluhan

I also visited several other Han that day and evening. Some were huge multi-story affairs and had been totally remodeled harmonizing ancient and modern, while others retained 99% of their original charm.

Also, in Ankara I absolutely had to visit the Museum of Anatolian Civilization – which is not just any old time-machine, but the time machine connecting more ancient civilizations than I had every imagined before.





Orthostats of Herald's Wall 900-700 BCE





Fight of the bull and lion, 8th C. BCE



Bronze Cyprus Type Dagger 2500-2250 BCE

Please recall what Professor mentioned about the Museum of Anatolian Civilization:
“The Great Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, built upon the old Ottoman Mahmut Pasa Bazaar storage building and together with the Han, and Kale.



The above interconnected arches and dome structure appeared to me rather similar to, for example Dayahatyn Caravanserai in Turkmenistan.

This ancient museum looks in all directions and one can also find artifacts of the greatest antiquity from Egypt, Greece, Rome, and everywhere else that had civilization during the past 4,000 years.



Bronze Dionysus believed to be of Roman origin though the origin of his name goes back to the 13th century BCE. He is in Roman mythology also referred to as Baccus, a god of wine and ecstasy.

Anyone looking for martial art instruction need look no further than here.



For here in this museum one can find even some of the great gladiators of the ancient world.



...referring to the Funerary Stela of Gladiator Chrisampelos, 2nd C. ACE there in the middle, of course.

The above is only the tiniest sampling of the great wonders of the Museum of Anatolian Civilization in Ankara.

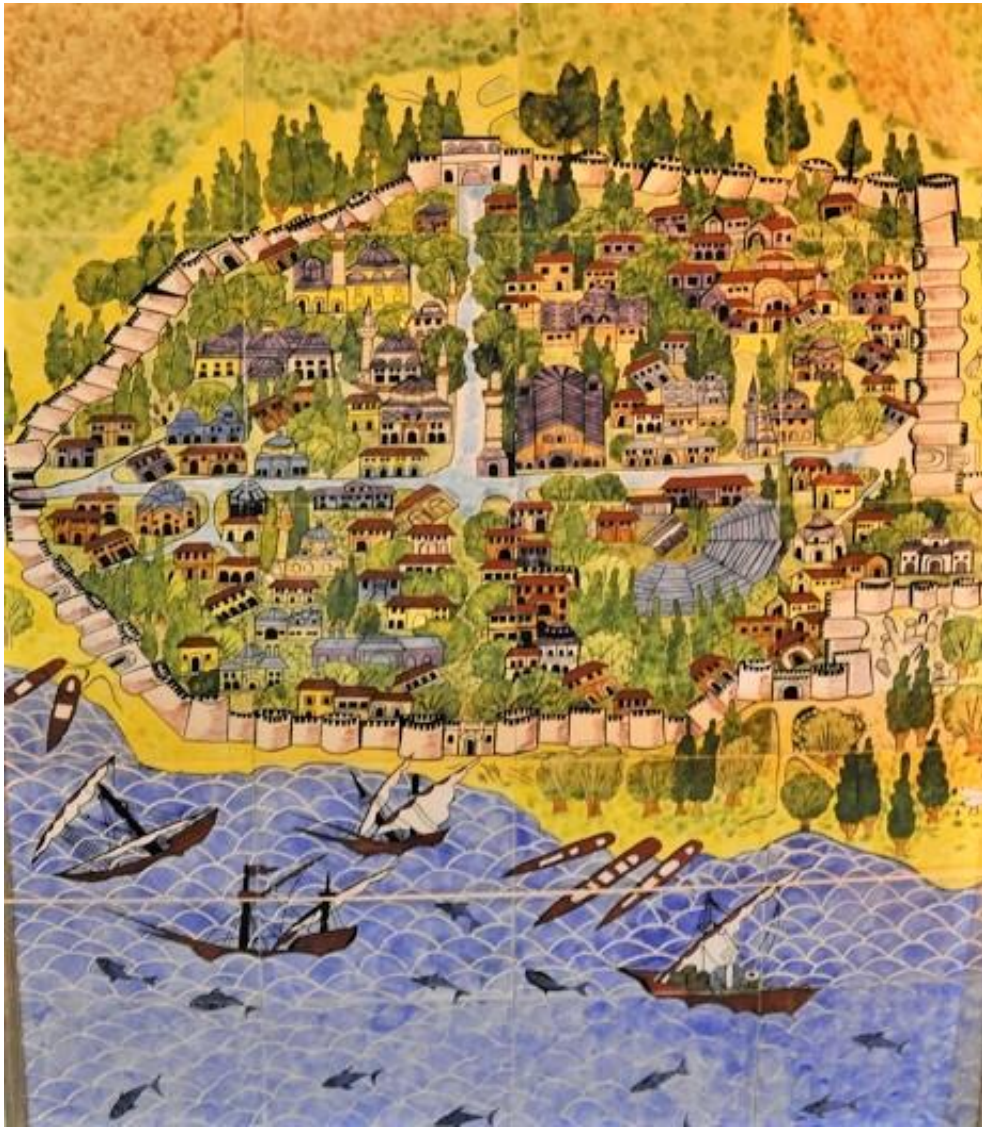
After that it was off to Bersa!

And is there Taekwondo in Bursa? You bet there is.

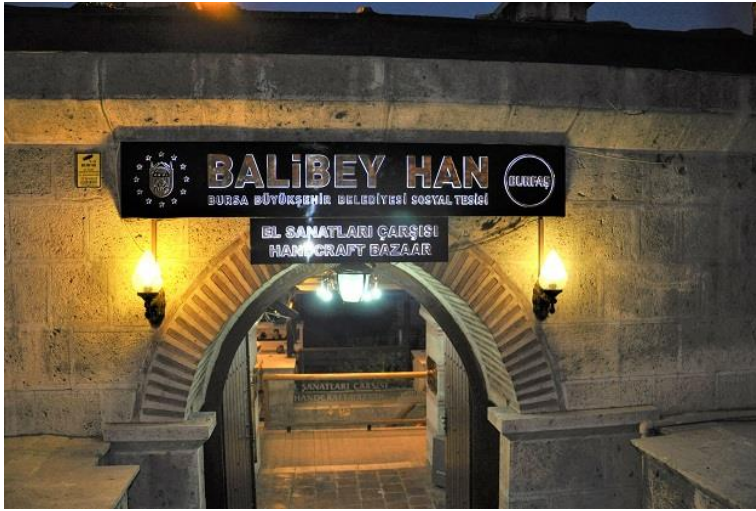


Ancient Bersa Fortress/castle, yes, with apartment buildings inside

In Turkey they don't waste history, they live in it.



Bersa in antiquity



One of many restored Han in Bersa

I spent a lovely morning in Koza Hani in Bersa and made many new friends there.



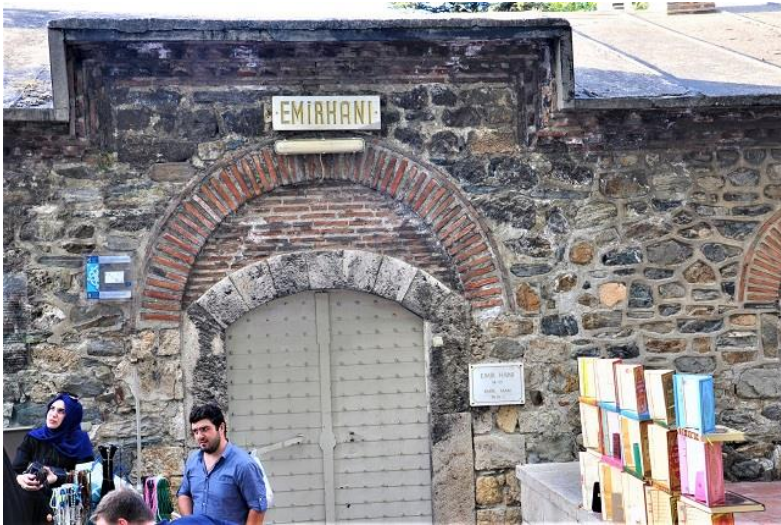


Old masjid inside Koza Han



Gentleman in Koza Han
selling silk worms.

And at least photographed what Hans in Bersa I could get into, and even those I
couldn't get into.



There was also a vitally important stop at the Tombs of Osman and Orhan Gazi, as they were the original founders of the Ottoman state during one of the most exceptional phases of Turkic history. Imagine going to Rome and not paying tribute to Romulus and Remus and “La Lupa Capitolina,” the Capitoline Wolf that suckled them? Unthinkable!

Also, I had to stop at the Turkish Islamic Art Museum, as I’m quite a fan of the Janissaries who were elite infantry units formed the Ottoman Sultan's household. In other words Bersa was awesome for someone interested in the history of civilization and ancient warrior groups.

To make a long story short, I spent a couple of days in Bursa, didn’t make it to Iznik because of time constraints and then took a fast boat across the Sea of Marmara for a week in Istanbul.



Istanbul which has been the crucible doorway between east and west more-so than any other city on earth and with its population of 14 million is also one of the world's capital cities for taekwondo.

The boat to Istanbul was exciting, effortlessly gliding across the Marmara Sea, examining the shoreline and realizing there were hundreds of ideal locations for ports and smaller shipping docks.

In Istanbul of course I visited the Blue Masjid, the coast (where I swam out of the Golden Horn, around Sarayburnu into the Marmara Sea), the Spice Market, Ismail Aga, The Basilica Cistern, Topkapi Palace, the Grand Bazaar, Hagia Sophia, the Istanbul Archeological Museum, Turkish and Islamic Museum, the Egyptian Obelisk, Greek Serpent Column, yes, the remains of the Hippodrome where the Eastern Roman empire - which lasted a thousand years longer than the Western roman Empire - celebrated the "Games" including of course chariot races and gladiatorial fights to the death.

I could try to describe for example the Hagia Sophia supported by columns collected from innumerable pagan temples and located on what was a pre-Christian temple of some kind, built over a 16 year period by 14,000 workers under the supervision of 400 masters working day and night according to the designs of two Anatolians, the architect Antemios of Tralles and the mathematician Isidore of Miletus, into an Orthodox Cathedral and seat of the Patriarch of Constantinople starting in 537, which it remained for 667 years until 1204 when it was converted into a Roman Catholic Cathedral by the Fourth Crusaders under the Latin Empire of Constantinople, however a mere 249 years later in 1453 when Constantinople reverted to its indigenous owners the Anatolian/Turks, the Hagia Sophia was converted into an Ottoman Masjid – but words cannot begin to describe the truths of it all.

Or, I tell the story of Ibrahim Pasha who was the son of a sailor in Parga, northwest Greece, who as a child was abducted by pirates and sold to the Manisa Palace in Western Anatolia where the Ottoman crown princes were being educated and how he met crown Prince Suleiman who was the same age and the deep friendship they forged resulting in his first royal position as the Sultan's falconer, and how he graduated through the ranks as diplomat and successful commander acquiring numerous titles and awards, but ultimately how he sided with the wrong side of a succession argument and one of Suleiman's wives successfully plotted against him and had him strangled in the Topkapi Palace one night and mention, of course that Ibrahim Pasha's former "pleasure" palace has stood silently above the steps of the Hippodrome facing the Walled Obelisk and Serpent Column for the past 600 plus years and is now the quite nicely refurbished Turkish and Islamic Museum – but again – mere words against the wildly-colored richly woven tapestries of history.



Turkish Islamic Art Museum, former pleasure palace of Ibrahim Pasha, which faces the hippodrome.

The Hippodrome is the must see stop for visitors to Istanbul. That is where the gladiatorial games and chariot races were held.



Artist's rendition of the Hippodrome during its days of glory

Today it looks quite a bit different.



A long view of the Hippodrome

None-the-less, searching around the neighborhood one can find ruins of the original structures above and below ground.



Underground passageways to the Hippodrome uncovered 2012-2014 when excavating behind the Turkish and Islamic Museum

In observing the above underground passageway, please recall that through those tunnels walked gladiator slaves of the Eastern Roman Empire on their way to life and death matches for the amusement of the crowds exactly the same as the Coliseum in Rome. Also please be aware that the Eastern Roman Empire eventually forbade gladiatorial matches and instead only permitted chariot races. Finally, one should note the Eastern Roman Empire headquartered there in Constantinople, now called Istanbul lasted 900 years longer than the Western Roman Empire headquartered in Rome. Why? Several reasons including the fact it was better organized, not as expansion oriented and did not generate the hatred associated with endless conquest as typified the Western Roman Empire. Outlawing gladiatorial games is but one example of the somewhat more humane attitudes towards life exhibited by the Eastern Roman Empire.

Still, there was no doubt plenty of blood spilled upon the sands of the Hippodrome in its day. For the record, the word “arena” comes from the Latin language for “sand,”

that sand upon which the gladiators fought for life, honor, and sometimes wealth, for all of them were not slaves. That the above passageway to the Hippodrome was found under the former pleasure palace of Ibrahim Pasha is interesting. I found it by accident as it was not in any guidebook. Instead it was out through a forbidden back door of the Pasha's palace.

The histories of Istanbul stretch back to the beginnings of civilization and around the entire world.



The Obelisk of Theodosius in the Hippodrome, Istanbul, Turkey

To quote Wikipedia: “The Obelisk of Theodosius is the Ancient Egyptian obelisk of Pharaoh Thutmose III re-erected in the Hippodrome of Constantinople known today as *At Meydani* or *Sultanahmet Meydani*, in the modern city of Istanbul, Turkey by the Roman Emperor Theodosius I in the 4th century AD.”

Just the story of the “acquisition” of that fabulous monument and logistics of transporting it is worthy of a multi-volume set of books.

On the subject of fantastic stories from ancient Istanbul I would be unforgivably neglectful to not mention Topkapi Palace, the “New Palace” where the Sultans of the Ottoman Empire resided in splendor and opulence for a couple of hundred years in the 15th and 16th Centuries. It was briefly mentioned in the Ibrahim Pasha story above.



Writer in front of Topkapi Palace



Inner central garden in Topkapi Palace



Entrance to the Harem of the Sultan



Apartments of the Queen Mother in Topkapi – The large marble rooms are delightfully cool in summer



And what's to say even a Sultan might not like a little dip after a hard day's work? If so, there was this adjacent to Topkapi Palace.



One might think the above is a simple old-fashioned cooking pot, but in fact it was a lot more than that. When the Janissaries felt they were not being paid sufficiently, they threatened to overturn the cooking pot. This is it. Even Sultans felt need to keep their elite of the elite bodyguards and warriors happy.

In conclusion, about 13 months ago I ventured out on the ground from Beijing to Xian, Turpan, Urumqi, Almaty, Bishkek, Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, Turkmenabad, Mary/Merv, Ashgabat, then flew over Iran for the time being, continued on the ground in Tbilisi, went east to Baku where I swam in the Caspian Sea, then back west again to Tbilisi, and on to Kobuleti where I swam in the Black Sea, and from there crossed the border into Turkey at Sharpi, went to Hopa, Erzurum, and Ankara before visiting Bursa and finally Istanbul where I swam from the Golden Horn into the Bosphorus as it mingles with the Marmara Sea, interviewing as many of the Taekwondo masters as I could, visiting as many of the Silk Road sites as possible, and fully exploring every major museum along the way.

So far during the three segments of this Taekwondo Quest Tour I've traveled some 10,347 kilometers or 6,428 miles on the ground.

For Taekwondoka who've never traveled all I can is: "Go!" (...as soon as the COVID-19 pandemic abates.)

Those people who say Taekwondo is a world-wide family are right. Go to any taekwondo school in the world and you will find yourself feeling at home, and more new brothers and sisters than you can imagine. It's a beautiful feeling being a part of this great family and I truly understand Turkish WTF Representative Ali Sagirkaya when he said: "It's an honor for me to serve them and to be part of the Taekwondo family."

Lastly, the above is only a tiny fraction of the amazing sights, events and adventures I had during my time in Turkey. On my last day before heading to the airport I went to an ancient Hamami, or Turkish bath and wow – great massage!

That particular Hamami had been visited by Harrison Ford and many other very famous people. So many beautiful and excellent experiences await those who venture into the wider world, and that travel is made a lot easier and more fun if one is part of the international taekwondo family.

Now that've visited the terminal western ends of the transcontinental Silk Roads, and the Hans where the most valued treasures of the ancient world were bought, many for export to Rome, Greece and further west, my next stops will be some of places along these great land Silk Roads I didn't have time to visit along the first trip. Also, I'll visit many maritime Silk Road countries, including Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Qatar to name but a few.

These roads incidentally go on forever and whatever the obstacles and delays, I intend to continue these great adventures until I'm at least 100 years old. WWII may come and go, and if so, I hope to still be wandering along these fabulous roads of mystery and wonder without end.

Silk Road Taekwondo Quest Part 11 Islamabad, Pakistan



Silk Road Taekwondo Quest Part 11: Interview with Pakistani Taekwondo Federation President Lt. Col. Waseem Ahmed Janjua in Islamabad, Visit to their National Junior Team Training Center & Silk Road Sights in Pakistan

On the evening of Sunday December 25th, 2016, I flew into Islamabad's Benazir Bhutto International Airport accompanied by quite a group of new Pakistani friends I'd made back in Beijing, one of whom ever-so-kindly gave me a ride to my quite luxurious hotel – not my usual humble hostel, but set up by the Pakistani tour company I'd hired to make arrangements for me. This Silk Road trip – my fourth is by far the easiest, only one country. Piece of cake!

Monday morning accompanied by my huge and humorous driver/guide and new friend Murtaza we set off for the ancient megalopolis of Taxila, but I'll describe that later. After this I firmed up an appointment the next day with the Pakistani Taekwondo Federation President Col. Waseem, who ever-so-graciously invited me to his home for the interview. This was a first and a rare honor, so I was extremely happy.

On Tuesday afternoon around 3:00 pm I met with WTF President Lt. Col. Waseem (Retired) and got to find out about the history and activities of this great organization in Pakistan.

Colonel Waseem warmly greeted me outside his modest yet quite lovely home in a suburb of Islamabad and led me inside.

During our interview I found out he'd visited the U.S. several times for varying lengths of time and his jeans, loose shirt and relaxing manner put me at ease and led me to feel quite at home right away.

I started this interview with his background and how he came to discover Taekwondo.

“In this belt of cities around Islamabad when I was young there were not many opportunities so many of us joined the military.” I found out his family history includes an illustrious military background including a maternal grandfather that was a WWII prisoner in Japan. In addition Col. Waseem served as a UN Peacekeeper in Mogadishu Somalia in `1994, and that there are around 50,000 Pakistani peacekeepers currently working worldwide. That's respectable by any standards, especially given that Pakistan is not a rich country.

What's his sports background like? “I played hockey and cricket since my schools days and after that represented (military) services teams, winning three gold medals on the national level.”

With this experience he was assigned to be the coach of the army cricket team.

Due to his proven organizational skills in 2004 he was tasked to help organize the South Asian games held here in Islamabad.

Again, due to his very successful completion of that job he was then assigned to help develop Taekwondo here in Pakistan. In 2005 he was sent to the acclaimed South Korean Kyunghee University with 4 athletes to learn the ABCs of Taekwondo and in his case also the administrative skills that are needed to help develop a National Federation.

Pakistan's National Team went to quickly win 1 gold, 5 silver and 1 bronze in international competitions. In 2006 he was promoted to become the Secretary General of the Pakistan Taekwondo Federation and in 2014 he became President.

Now they have around eight or nine gold, 18 Silver and 35 bronze medals in different international competitions around the world though mostly in Asia.

The Pakistan WTF Affiliation officially began in 1977 and began affiliation with the Pakistan Olympic Association in 1982. Mr. A.Q. Raja was the founder and first Secretary General of the Pakistan Taekwondo Federation.

Asked about funding for his National Teams he said: "Honestly I've been struggling for the last 12 almost 13 years. The government budget doesn't even begin to pay all the bills involved in sending teams to international events and so far we've competed in over 60 countries." I asked how much the government was helping on an annual basis and he said, "Around 22 thousand dollars."

“Excuse me, did I hear that correctly? Surely you’re joking.” It turns out most of his funding comes from private sponsors, most of whom I found out were friends of his – other retired military officers who had gone into business and been at least reasonably successful. I also found out one his sponsors is the Korean Embassy in Islamabad.

“In 2016 alone we competed in India, the UAE & Qatar, Thailand, Malaysia, Russia, USA and China.

“We also sent nine international referees to China, one to Russia, another to the USA, and yet another to Korea, again just this year.”

During our interview I found out his job includes some rather unusual complexities. “We tried to go to Stockholm Sweden for the 91st International Kyorugi Referee Seminar January 12-15, but unfortunately the embassy was closed during the time we needed to apply for the visas.”

I asked if he had problems getting visas and he told me: “There are fake people posing as sports federations that apply for visas, they get them and then don’t leave; consequently, this makes it quite difficult sometimes for the real sports federations, including here in Pakistan to get visas. Also, this coming January we’re hoping to go to the U.S. Open Championships to be held in Las Vegas. We’re now waiting to see the response of the US Embassy. Those who do this are not only spoiling the name of country but also block the real players from getting the real skills they need to learn at European, American and oh so many other international competitions.”

“In Asia including China we’ve never had any difficulties getting visas. But I don’t blame the Western countries for some of the difficulties we’ve had; we blame ourselves.

“True, we’ve competed in about 70 countries but there are many examples where we couldn’t get the visas. The 2016 WTF World Taekwondo Junior Championships were held in Canada last month, November 16-20. We sent the passports of our team for visas, but couldn’t get the visas. Sometimes it does happen. Of course every country has its own problems and certainly here in Pakistan we’ve had our share of them too.”

During our interview I found out Colonel Waseem has visited the U.S. many times including Delaware for in 2015 - 2016 for a 10 month course funded by US Olympic Committee and the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) International Coaching Enrichment Certificate Program (ICECP). The course I found out was taught in four locations including Delaware and Virginia, after which they return to their home countries and engage in research. Once that’s completed they go to IOC headquarters and present the research. I asked about his research project and found out it involved development of Taekwondo in Pakistan at the “grassroots level,” which involved going to many, many WTF schools around Pakistan and finding out about the opportunities, challenges and so on that they have. “I was quite happy to get honors (an award) from the IOC for my research,” he said.

“But, this isn’t the full measure of what I need to do here,” Col. Waseem went on. “Unfortunately the Pakistani Taekwondo National Team didn’t qualify for the Rio Olympics and my job is to bring home the gold, so we’ve got a long way to go. Of course, the qualification systems for each sport are quite different and we just didn’t meet them for Rio. In swimming for example there’s a ‘universal card’ and two athletes from each country must go. Taekwondo is quite a bit different. In any case we’ll do better next time. I retired from the military about a year ago and now Taekwondo is my one and only job and one and only passion. My aim is that we should qualify for the Tokyo Olympics in 2020.

There are currently about 50 members of the Pakistan Senior National Team, 30 or so on the Junior Team and about 15 Cadet National Team members.

They do get some other support however. “The government supports national junior and senior Taekwondo camps where they provide food and facilities. They also might give tracksuits, shoes and things like that.” I asked if the national team members were paid, and he said, yes, \$1 per day.

“What we really need here in Pakistan now are some Taekwondo icons. That helps a lot to generate public support.”

At this point I mentioned that the Iranian Taekwondo Federation has tremendous public and government financial support. Col. Waseem agreed wholeheartedly.

“Back in 2007 one of their female athletes qualified for the World Championships. Two or three companies gave her gifts including a new car, another entrepreneur gave \$10,000, and a third person gave her a house. In Pakistan this kind of public support is happening with cricket, but not other sports. So, we have to try harder.” Iran is really great in four or five sports and that emphasizes how important it is to have icons and of course government support.”

I asked the number of Taekwondo practitioners in Pakistan at this time and Col. Waseem said there are about 50,000 – 60,000 practitioners nationwide in 4 provincial associations. Also, there are army, navy, and other teams.

I asked how much Taekwondo teachers in Pakistan earn and he said they mostly practice in private schools with 60% of the tuition going to the Taekwondo teachers in those schools. I also found out the Pakistan Taekwondo Federation charges only \$5 for the Black Belt Certification. I chuckled at that remembering the cost of Black Belt Certification in South Korea where I got my 1st and 2nd Dan was a whole lot more expensive than that!

During our conversation his high school son joined us for a while. Like his father he spoke excellent English and seemed to be preparing for overseas education.

As the night was coming on Col Waseem graciously asked me if I'd like to attend a training session of their national junior team the next day, Thursday. I happily agreed and found out the time was 3-5 pm and the training to be held in the Pakistan National Sports complex.

He kindly walked me out to the car and I must say I was and am hugely impressed at the kindness and acumen of this Pakistani World Taekwondo Federation President Lt. Colonel (Retired) Waseem Ahmed Janjua.

Wednesday, Dec. 28, 2016

I just love to visit national teams and today was the day. Upon entering the large older gym I noticed they were training fast and furious, like Spartan gladiators going through the paces at lightning speed with polished precision.

Very soon I was honored to meet Coaches Muhammad Hanif and Najia Khan, both with distinguished Taekwondo careers. Muhammad Hanif for example is a 5th Dan earned at the Kukkiwon in Seoul and a whole lot of medals in national and international competitions including Gold in Iran in 2002, which um, isn't exactly easy. Likewise Coach Najia Khan earned a 4th Dan from the Kukkiwon, Bronzes in the Commonwealth Championships in India 2011, and Korea Open, Silver and Bronze in Qatar and was the national Gold medal winner in Pakistan for nine years consecutively, 2007 to 2016.



Left to right Coach Najia Khan, Taekwondo Federation President Col. Waseem, writer G. Brundage, Coach Muhammad Hanif

I don't really know how to describe this junior team except I spent two weeks in Pakistan traveling and to be honest - this country can be rough. It's a struggle to survive in a poor country with a high population and very, very few enjoy the kind of privileged life the average American enjoys. To fight one's way to become even a provincial champion has got to be an extremely tough challenge; I suspect one needs The Flash-like speed and titanium indestructability - yet these young athletes also demonstrated perfect Taekwondo technique and etiquette, clean, precise and controlled in addition to good sportsmanship and passion for their art. All in all, highly impressive and affirming the high-quality coaching they receive from Coaches Muhammad Hanif and Najia Khan.



Bidding farewell to new friends is never easy but that's the travelers' life. On the other hand, there was an entire amazing country waiting for me, alongside an astonishingly ancient history and culture.

SILK ROAD SITES

Of major interest to me are the greatest of ancient civilizations along the Silk Road – or what remains of them, and the treasures contained within which are mostly these days housed in major museums at the sites and national museums.

Ancient Metropolis of Taxila

First, I visited the ancient metropolis of Taxila located 30 kilometers northwest of Islamabad. This is not one of the oldest Silk Road sites I've visited dating back to only about the Sixth Century BC, however was for around a thousand years the junction of three major Silk Roads, north to Kashmir, west to the Persian Empire and beyond ultimately including Rome and Greece, and east to China. Fortunately the early January the sun was warm and I met a guide early on that had previously worked with archeologists there and knew the sites and histories quite well.

Probably the most distinguishing characteristic of the metropolis of Taxila in my opinion is that it was the major center of Buddhist teaching in the region, having hundreds of Buddhist monasteries in the area, which peacefully co-existed with the full range of other religions including Zoroastrianism (fire worship), Jainism (a philosophy based on non-violence), Sun worship, Christianity and many others.



Chinese Pilgrim Xuanxang (602 – 664 CE) Stupa in Taxila, Pakistan



Family resting a moment in the ancient Temple of the Sun.



Remains of the Church of St Andrew in Taxila

The museum there was quite amazing and had many large Buddhas and other religious artifacts.



Of the many statues of Buddha I saw in Pakistan the above rather large statue caught my eye. Note the Hellenic long, straight and narrow nose. In about 326 BCE Alexander the Great and his army arrived in what is now Pakistan. That conquest led to the creation of a new form of art called Greco-Buddhist art or Gandhara art. There are those who argue making images of the Buddha in India prior to Alexander's visit was prohibited, however became fashionable if for no other reason than for Buddhism to compete in the crowded marketplaces of religion.

In terms of martial relics not much was to be found except some very ancient double-edged iron swords.



The museum did however have vast treasures of the daily living artifacts of the citizenry there, including coins, household utensils, bridals and stirrups for horses, early medical equipment, jewelry and so on.



The intricacy of the artwork at such early periods of history was truly astonishing. Note the front half of the above animal appears to be a horse, while the back half appears to be a dragon.

Also, in the museum there was a replica of the 3- or 4-thousand-Year-old Dancing Girl from Mohenjo Daro, and other ancient Silk Road site I visited later on. The original however is in India.



This visit to ancient Taxila metropolis was well worth my entire trip to Pakistan in terms of getting the real feel of an ancient Silk Road civilization. It was/is beautiful and the government has done a good job of preserving and protecting this invaluable UNESCO World Heritage Site.

After that visit I returned to Islamabad, did some interviews and a few days later took a bus to Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city.

Lahore Fort



To appreciate Lahore Fort one must first have some appreciation to the Mogul Empire – which to summarize in a single sentence lasted from 1526 to 1857, was a Muslim dynasty of Turco-Mongol origin stemming from the Chagatai line of Genghis Kahn, yet Persian in terms of culture; it was the second largest Empire in Indian history covering more than 5 million square kilometers and though it was vast and had such “rugged” roots, it was in fact an empire characterized by religious harmony wherein the rulers did not interfere in local social systems, but instead focused on balance, diversity and inclusivity.

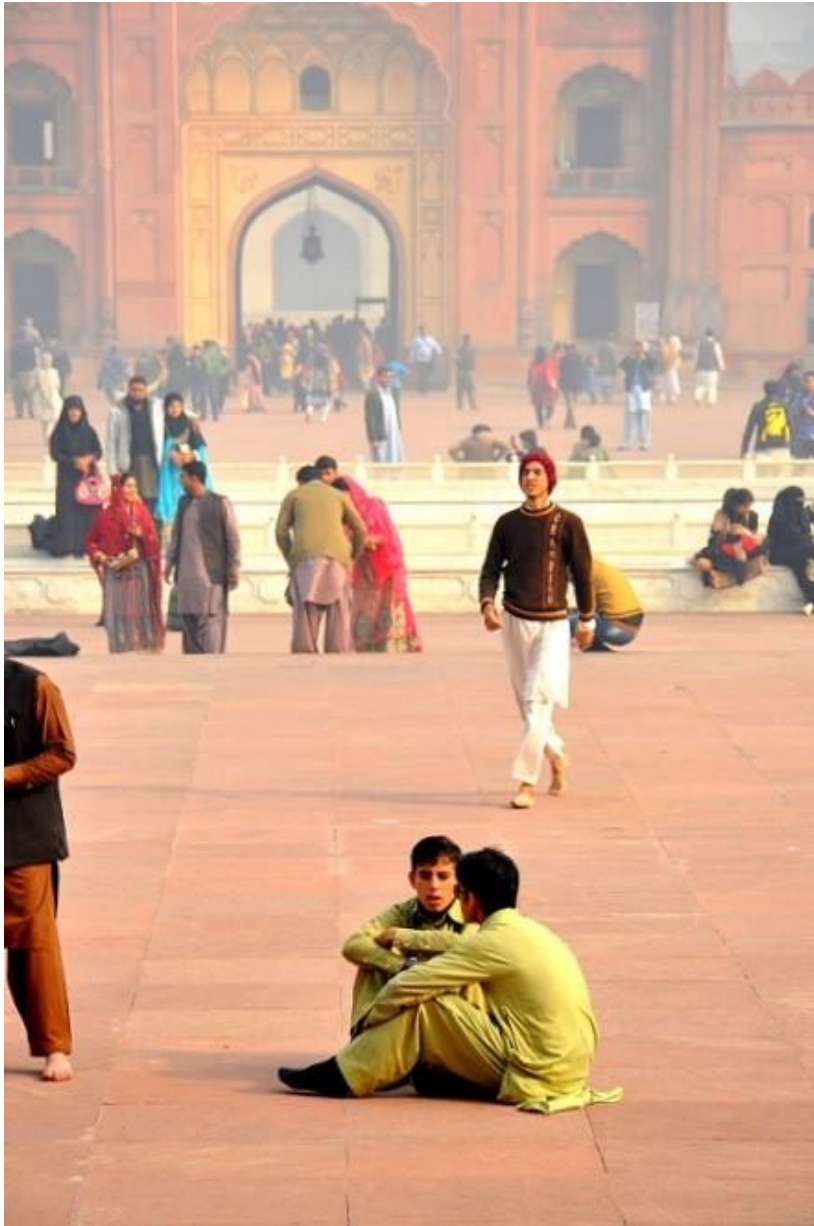
The term “rugged” above refers to a couple of things. One, Islam is, like Judaism a deep desert religion reflecting the harsh realities of the region in ancient times where murder and rape etc. were so common as to be banal. Thus a very strict and indeed jealous, unified God was required to stabilize those communities. Two, though the Mongolian Empires generally matured into excellent administrative organizations, their initial assaults on new territories were nothing less than apocalyptic for the inhabitants of those new territories. India at that time however was not a “deep desert” and the people appeared to respond well to the gentler side of its diverse roots.

Thus, we have the Mogul Empire in India being a generally enlightened era in which arts and sciences flourished. That of course included military arts.



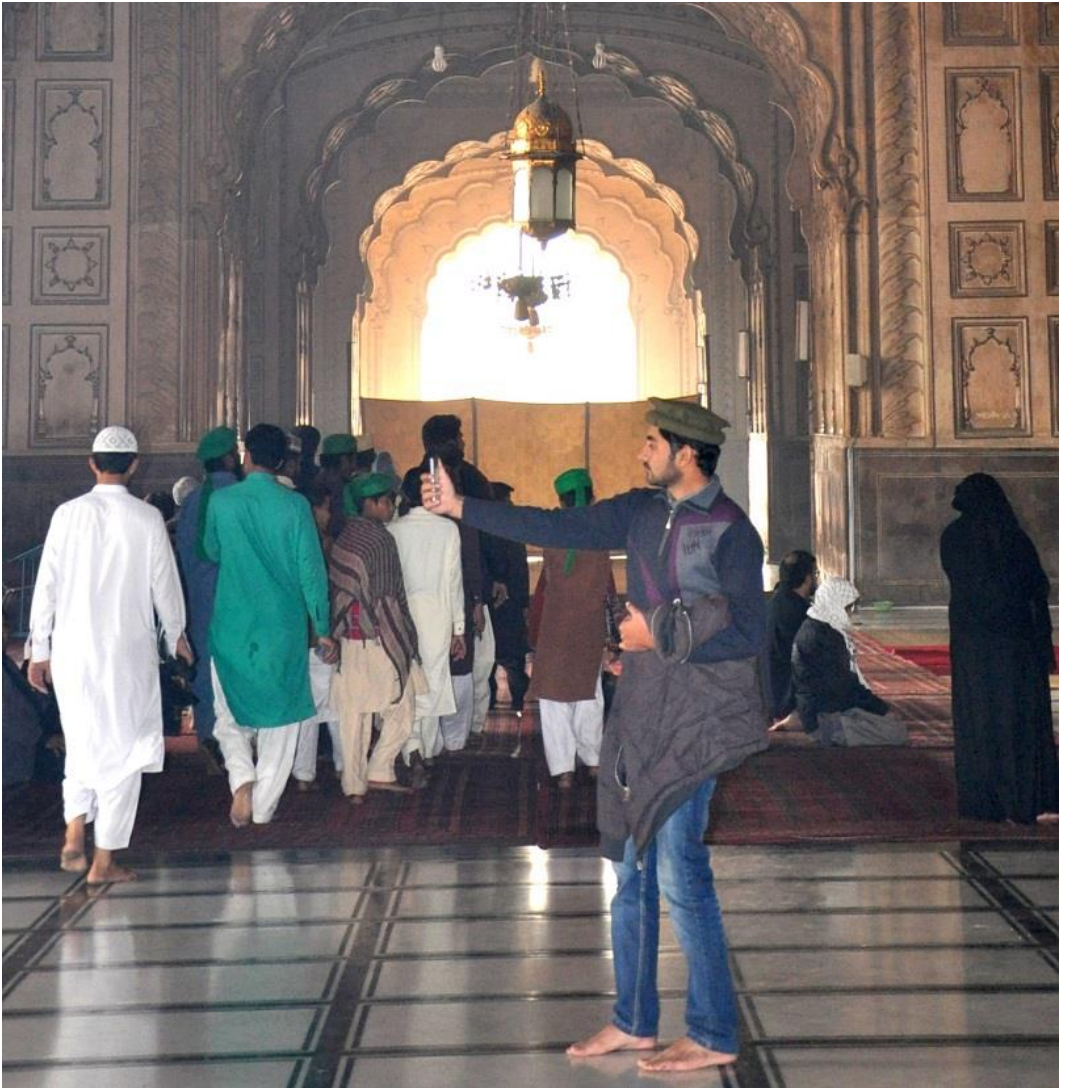
Being a military fort, it's not surprising the weapons displays were very impressive as well.

Visiting Lahore Fort one can clearly see Persian and Arabic influences on the elegantly ornate architecture and building facades. Persia - current day Iran - is an ancient great empire dating to at least 550 BC wherein the primary religion was Zoroastrianism (fire worshipping religion) until the 7th Century AD with the Arab Muslim conquest. Classic Mogul architecture reflects a harmonious blend of Arab/Persian/Indian styles characterized by large domes usually within a walled square or rectangle with four slender minarets at each corner, huge halls and gateways with splendidly detailed ornamentation often utilizing classic Arabian three dimensional geometric and flowery designs. Lahore Fort is typical of this style though each classic architectural structure is hugely unique.

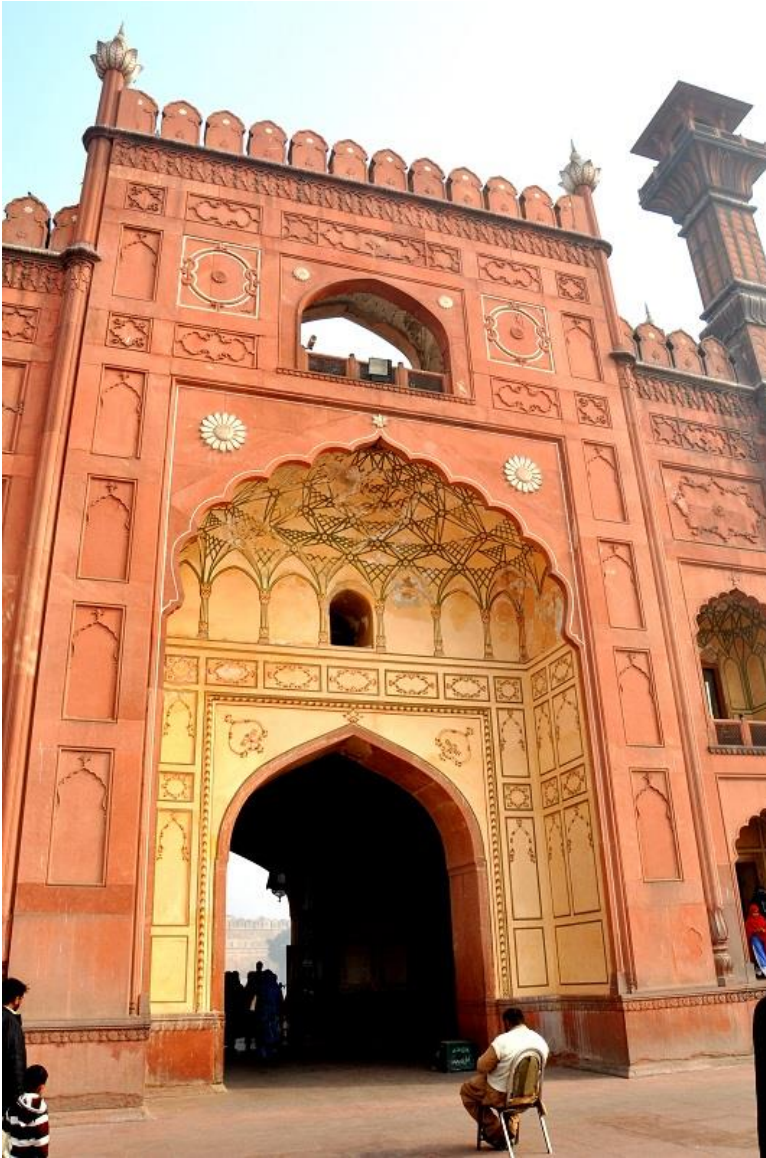


For example, when inside Lahore fort one new friend pointed to the minarets and told me they were angled outward such that in case of an earthquake they would fall outside the square. One particular place I enjoyed at Lahore Royal Fort was the Kings' "elephant parking lot" just inside the front gates. Though not ornate, there was a certain austere grandeur about the wide courtyard. Most of the great royal palaces I've visited along the Silk Road have had exquisitely designed harem areas and Lahore Fort is no exception. The flowing water system within was brilliantly designed.





Visiting Lahore Fort I saw three main structures, one, the Royal Fort traditionally inhabited by the royal family, harem, and servants, secondly there was the military fort, and third the Badshahi Mosque.

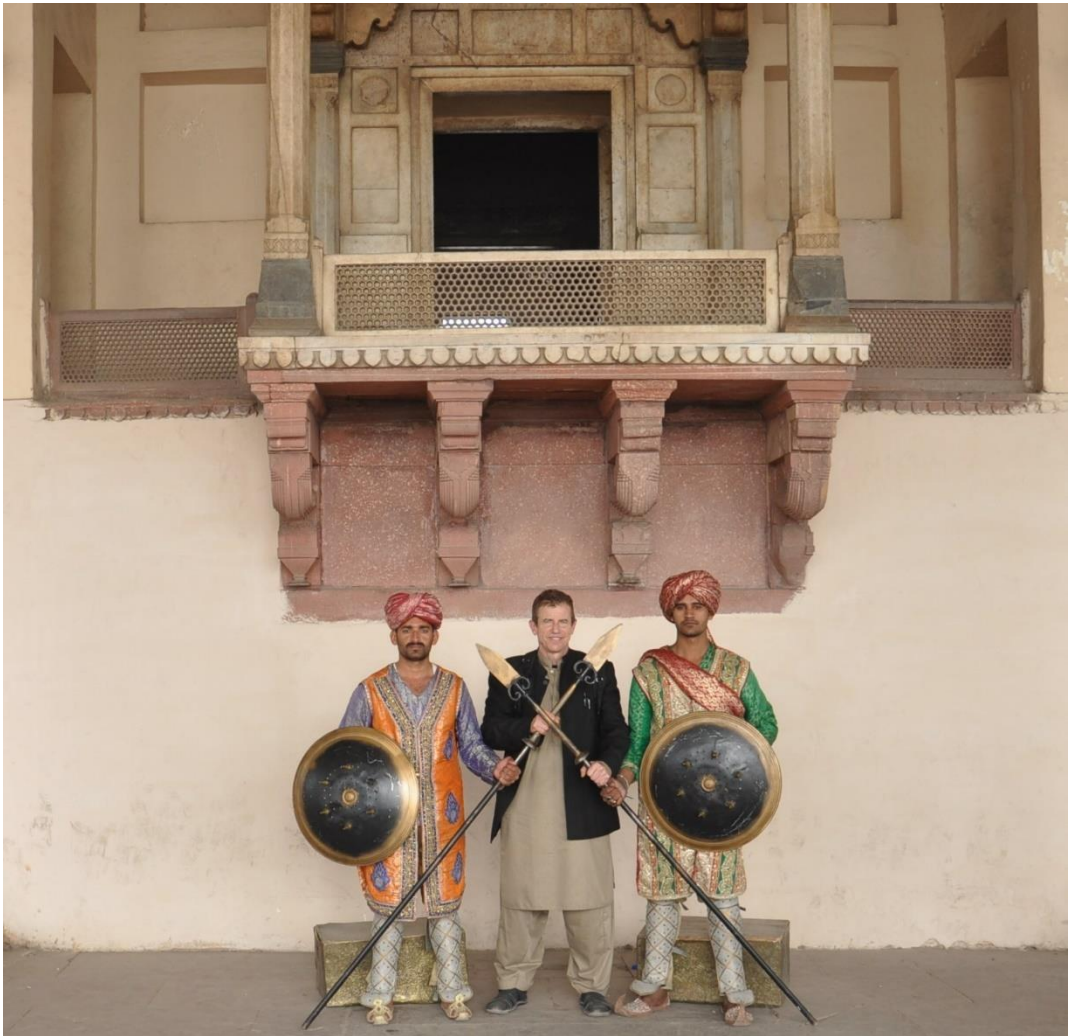




The beautifully cool Iqbal Park is adjacent to the Fort and makes for a wonderful stop before and after touring this colossal gem of history.



After a few days in Lahore, it was time to start the journey to the much older Mohenjo Daro archeological site, but nothing is so easy in far and distant lands. Indeed, the route there passed through the very rural town Sukkur where I spent one lovely evening at the only hotel for foreigners, the inter-Pak Inn, once grand and elegant, now perhaps showing her age a bit, but clean with very helpful and friendly staff.



I did apply for a security guard job there, but after wrestling these guys for their spears, after a while I gave up and let them keep them. Who needs one anyways? Like Buckingham Palace guards there was nothing I could do make them smile.

Mohenjo Daro



Artist's rendition of Mohenjo Daro in its heyday

Whereas Taxila was ancient, Mohenjo Daro is really, really ancient inhabited continuously from 2,500 BC to around 1,700 BC though it could be much older. It was one of the oldest (along with Harappa – also in Pakistan) and largest city-states of the Indus Valley Civilization coexisting around the same time as ancient Egypt, and Mesopotamia. No one knows exactly why it was abandoned. Sometimes the reason given is a conquering army, while at others it is disease, drought, or even a nearby river changing its course. Changing weather patterns and drought seem to be the most accepted explanation.



Looking at the ruins is really only observing the upper levels.
Beneath the ground one will find the first and second stories.

What struck me as unusual about this ancient city is that a very large bath is found in the very center.



The great bath in Mohenjo Daro

There are extremely advanced water and sewage systems here including covered drains throughout, public and private freshwater driven toilets.



Ingenious water system

Many of the buildings were two and three stories high, and most of the streets were quite straight. This latter observation flies in the face of conventional thinking on ancient city planning that attributes straight roads in ancient Silk Road cities to Greek innovations. Mohenjo Daro is vastly older than Alexander's "visit" to the region, though more or less contemporary with the ancient city of Knossos on present day Crete.

The remains of Mohenjo Daro were discovered in 1911 and excavations started in 1922. Artifacts show they had trade relations with the Gulf countries and advanced writing script, though experts disagree as to the base language and translations have not been made.

Because it was abandoned around 1700 BC Mohenjo Daro technically wasn't part of the Silk Road, which most considered to have really begun between the second and fourth centuries BC at least 1,200 years later. But was it really totally abandoned and did it spring back to life at some point?

While walking around I saw a sign that said: "*Buddhist Stupa and monastery of Kushan period dating back to 2nd Century were constructed about sixteen centuries after the downfall of the Indus civilization...*" The Buddhist stupa is on a hill overlooking Mohenjo Daro thus would have been easier to find than other ruins there...



Remains of very famous Buddhist Stupa. The total monastery was quite large. For example, numerous monks' quarters have been clearly identified.

The Kushan Empire lasted from about the year 30 to 375; in its early period it was Buddhist reaching its apex under Kanishka the Great, though later on in history it was composed of a Hindu majority. In any case someone was living by the ruins of Mohenjo Daro during the Silk Road period, and the roads haven't changed even if apex cities and civilizations have. Thus, Mohenjo Daro most certainly was a Silk Road site, even if little more than wayfarers stop along the way.

This would not be surprising as Buddhist monasteries, like those of other denominations, as well as churches, mosques and madrassas were outposts of civilization, serving as hospitals, libraries, schools, restaurants, and hotels for the weary wayfarer and sometimes trading posts as well. What caused this sudden reemergence of civilization 1,200 years after it was presumably abandoned? It could have been something as simple as finding water by digging a new well, or perhaps Buddhist missionary work as assigned by an early Kushan King. I stayed till after sunset and left a part of my heart in the lost but not forgotten civilization of Mohenjo Daro.



Karachi

Driving into Karachi I immediately knew this is a big, big modern city – maybe the third largest in the world I found out later and by far Pakistan’s most secular, urban, modern and populous city. Wow.



Dolman Mall Karachi

Karachi is a mix of the old and new, traditional and modern.

Though I consider myself to be a son of nature, mountains, the seas and oceans, and even deserts, it felt good to be back in a big city. Just about everywhere I go I visit the Museum first to get in touch the with the ancient spirits of the land. The Karachi Museum was particularly awesome.

I toured this museum in about an hour photographing everything from several angles and afterwards was very fortunate to get a meeting with the director, Muhammad Shah Bukhari.



Hanuman - A monkey-thief and the mythical leader of a large troop of ape-like creatures. His exploits are related in great detail in the Ramayan, but scantily in the Mahabharata. His chief role being as the ally Rama in his war against Ravana the demon king of Lanka. The god is holding arrow and bow and standing in warrior posture. Karachi Museum



Goddess Lakshmi holding lotus bud Karachi Museum

Before meeting him, I was told that Director Bukhari was a learned and wise man, a Hafiz in fact, that is someone who had memorized the Quran. When I met Director Bukhari with his jolly sparkling gray blue eyes, easy going manner and excellent American English I was a quite happy.

Not a moment later he was quoting “Uqman Ibn ‘Anga Ibn Sadun,” a Nubian slave extolled for his wisdom in the time of the Prophet Mohammad (and about whom an entire chapter or Sura in the Quran is written). “When asked what raised Uqman to his highly respected status he answered: ‘Oh my son: let your speech be good and your face be smiling; you will be more loved by the people than those who give them provisions.’ And he said: ‘Kindness is the head of wisdom...’”



During the next hour or so we had a wonderful chat about 100 subjects and I learned among other things he used to train in Kyokushinkai Karate, along with one other gentleman in attendance. I also found out that he traveled extensively around the US.

I learned that the oldest mosque around Karachi is about 60 kilometers to the east and was founded by the Companion Ali as evidenced by an inscription in the Kufic language.

I learned that the oldest port around is called Makran in Baluchistan Province which was visited by Alexander the Great, and from which some of Xerxes the Great's army that fought at the battle of Thermopylae came. Earlier yet it was the home province of Cyrus the Great, founder of the Achaemenid Empire, and I found out ancient Babylonians used this port to sail to India. The name Makran comes from the older word Makar which means sea dragon, so-called because of the whale sharks and humpback whales frequently seen in the Arabian Sea (where I'm going swimming tomorrow). Gwadar town/beach and port by the way is in the Makran region and the ancient port there is key terminus of the land Silk Road. Unfortunately building the huge deep-water port there has covered much of the ancient remains, if indeed there were any. The development of this joint Pakistani/Chinese port project presents a huge opportunity for economic development in Pakistan and few will disagree that economic development is seriously needed here.

I learned that there is a hadith (companion texts to the Koran) stating that parents should teach their children archery, swimming and horseback riding, which sounds perfectly good to me as I very much like all three. I asked for a specific reference and he said it was Hadith Bukhari, which I suspect he knows rather well as his name is Muhammad Shah Bukhari, after all.

Following this most stimulating conversation we took some photos and he walked with me for a while. After that I also had some time to chat with Anwar Hussain, the museum's Production Officer who told me that if I come and visit Pakistan again, he will have a gift for me. I can't wait, especially given that I found out he also makes replicas. Anwar also showed me a display area I'd somehow missed that had the coolest weapons of the Islamic Era in the museum. Wow! How did I miss it before?

After all this it was definitely lunch time and I went with my newest driver Mr. SanAulla to a real traditional restaurant with normal regular everyday Karachi people. That was most excellent and cheaper than some of the places I'd been brought to before. Hats off to SanAulla! (Actually, all the food in Pakistan was GREAT! But the prices did vary a lot.)

Shopping Malls, Swimming in the Arabian Sea, Gem Shops, Mosques, Port Grand and New Friends

After a bit of a tour of the city I needed to return to my hotel to finish typing some Mohenjo Daro notes while the memories were fresh, then had dinner and called it a day.

To make a long story short, for the next few days in Karachi I visited shopping malls, went swimming in the Arabian Sea, rode a camel, hung out at tea shops and restaurants, bought a couple of gems for a friend, visited several amazing mosques and on my last night went to Port Grand where I made several wonderfully kind new friends.



The roads from Islamabad to Taxila and back, and then to Lahore, Sukkur, Mohenjo Daro and all the way to Karachi were great, and entering the large modern city of Karachi was certainly nice. I spent a few days there, visiting the National Museum and interviewed Director Muhammad Shah Bukhari, did a little shopping in old markets like “Empress Mall” and new malls like Dolman, went to Port Grand, and for a swim in the Arabian Sea but most importantly made a lot of new friends. It was all good and a happy finale to another amazing Taekwondo Quest along the ancient Silk Road.

Note to travelers: If you've never traveled in the developing world before, Pakistan could be a bit of a shock. It's crowded, traffic swirls chaotically like nothing you've ever imagined. If you don't speak Urdu, Pashtun or any other local language, it's a really good idea to contact Col. Waseem before you come. He can provide travel and accommodation advice and so on. I had a purely wonderful time there and can't wait to visit again. Many thanks to everyone along this length of the great and ancient Silk Road. Finally, I have to say Pakistan touched me deeply – it's a nation with warm-hearted, caring and inclusive people – just an amazing place.



Silk Road Taekwondo Quest Part 12 Doha, Qatar



Visit to the Qatar Taekwondo, Judo and Karate Federation, Korean Taekwondo Center and Many Other Amazing Places in the Ancient Mysterious Land of Qatar

July 22, 2017 It was with no little anticipation that I entered the Dojang called Korea Taekwondo Center last evening around 7:00 in lovely seaside Doha, the capital city of Qatar on the Persian Gulf in the Middle East. Across the Persian Gulf to the east one finds Iran, adjacent to and to the west of Qatar one finds Saudi Arabia, to the northwest one find Bahrain, and to the southeast one finds the UAE. I'm "slightly" expanding my Silk Road travels this time to include the Maritime Silk Road, of which Qatar is a major player historically.

I've been here a week and first found this Dojang looking for Taekwondo on Google Maps. They've also got a great Facebook page I later found out.

I'd called earlier in the day and talked with a Mrs. Shin, and then in the evening took a taxi to the school. It was easy to find as it's in a big well known building complex on a big well-known street, with a nice sign out in front. Ahh! Were it always so easy. It's not surprising really, because Qatar with a GDP of approximately \$124,930 per person is by most measures the richest country in world as of 2017, according to the IMF. In addition to that during my visit they were in a booming construction extravaganza designed to enhance its tourist industry. So, getting around Doha the capital city was easy. It's ultra-modern with lots of friendly English-speaking taxi drivers and all around beautiful and amazing.

Entering the Korea Taekwondo Center I met Master Jae Kun Shin, the head instructor, 7th Dan from Jeonju South Korea. His English is good and together with his lovely wife we chatted for a while and I got to hear his story. First of course we had to share stories about Jeonju where I l also lived for four years - it's a history/culture/arts city of about a million people and simply a lovely town with a picturesque small river meandering through it making it an easy to get around by bicycle.



Korea Taekwondo Center, Master Jae Kun Shin, the head instructor, 7th Dan from Jeonju South Korea and lovely wife

After this I found out Master Shin has had an illustrious TKD career. In Korea he was a national coach 1997-1998, and from 1996 to 2002 he was master coach at KOGAS Company, which sponsors one of the two top company teams in South Korea, with Samsung being the main competition. He's been in Qatar off and on for some 19 years, has learned reasonably good Arabic which is no easy task, and has managed this school since 2003. At this time, he has about 450 students now hailing from 50 different countries making his school kind of like a mini-United Nations, except everybody gets along! This, as paradoxical as it may seem, is the martial way – the spirit and company of the sage warriors.

Understanding a bit more about Qatar helps to figure out his students. Qatar is a relatively small country with only about two million people, of which only about 270,000 at most are actually indigenous Qataris with everyone else being foreign workers, trainers, engineers, accountants, architects, teachers, etc. Typically, he told me they stay 5 – 10 years, and so he loses many of his best students over time as they return home. Still, he reports having more than 70 black belts training at his club. I asked him how many are actually Qataris and he said around 50. That's really quite good as Qataris kind of have a reputation here for being pretty relaxed people, having the highest GDP in the entire world. Great place!

I expressed admiration for his remarkable abilities, including being a 7th Dan, no easy task. His wife then mentioned that “he should have a higher rank as he got his First Dan in 1970 but he preferred sparring to Poomse and that slowed down his promotion track by several years.” Omg! That's why I'm only a lowly 2nd Dan after... well excuse me but I'm not saying how many decades.

Though I'd intended to just take photos of his classes it was at about this time his adult class started and I tried to resist participating, I really tried but... I just caved in, quickly changed into my uniform which I had brought and joined the class. Luckily, I'd gotten some photos of the younger class first, and fortunately my senses returned near the end of the adult class so I managed to get some nice group photos.



All the instructors there were world class. One young man, Yi Jul Yul for example had trained and traveled all over the world, including such far flung places as Cameroon, Papua New Guinea and Malaysia, as well as having competed widely in the Western world. In addition to that, when he hit the kicking bags the whole Dojang thundered with the impact and even echoed afterwards. Like most Koreans he has a top-notch sense of humor and brotherly affection for everyone around, so though I don't usually like labels, none-the-less I would label him as an exceptional Taekwondo (young) Master. Indeed, those in the martial world know the strongest masters are virtually always also the kindest and the gentlest, something to do with the Ying Yang philosophies perhaps. Or maybe it's the confidence that comes from mastery that allows a person to show their more human side. Who knows?



Most East Asian martial art classes, at least those from Korea and Japan begin with meditation.

In any case every member there was friendly and humorous and though the classic Taekwondo very high level of discipline and skill permeated the class, there was a constant under-theme of happy warm feelings everywhere.

Another thing about this club. They can fly upside down and very precisely kick things. Not too many people can do that really.



I'll be here for another couple of weeks and I'll come back here, not for a story, but just to train with this excellent group. Master Shin has about four Korean instructors here teaching most of the day-to-day classes, and they have powerful clean precise technique harmonized with a friendly easygoing manner. So, the Korea Taekwondo Center in Doha Qatar is a Five Star Club in this Silk Road traveler's (seasoned) opinion.

Interview with Mr. Eid Ali Al-Muraikhi – General Secretary of the Qatar Taekwondo, Judo and Karate Federation



Writer G. Brundage is honored to meet with Mr. Eid Ali Al-Muraikhi
– General Secretary of the Qatar Taekwondo, Judo and Karate
Federation



Before and after the interview with Mr. Eid Ali Al-Muraikhi
I chatted with Zuhair, the logistics master. I felt at home in
the company of these good brothers.

August 2, 2017 – Taekwondo, Judo and Karate are combined into one federation in Qatar, and their large busy suite of offices is located in the Al-Bidda Tower one of the most noticeable architectural wonders in this city of architectural wonders. Instrumental in getting this interview was a true gentleman named Zuhair from Sudan who is a coordinator and translator there at the Federation.



After introductions I was introduced to Secretary General Al-Muraikhi, who offered tea and then he anticipated my first question by filling me in on the background of Taekwondo in Qatar. His English is quite good but occasionally Zuhair helped out.

“Taekwondo was here long before the federation, at least since 1970. In the mid-1990s we established the Self Defense Federation and entered many international competitions like the Asian Games. In 1988 we won some medals. Please keep in mind Qatar is a small country and there are only about 270,000 Qatari citizens. So when we win medals in international competition, it’s a pretty big thing here.

“In 2001 we separated Judo into a separate federation, and put together Karate and Taekwondo. There were some more organizational changes over the years but in 2016 we put the three together into one federation. At this time there are 12 training centers, and about 10-15 private clubs. Since about 2005 we’ve had around 2,500 to 3,000 Qatari participants in Taekwondo. Our National Teams have 15 registered athletes who, well starting today are preparing to get ready to try to qualify for the 2020 Olympics. As you know of course, just qualifying is a challenge and we have 2018-2020 to get that ranking. They just came back from a month of training in South Korea and while they were there our team participated in the Open Korean Championships.”

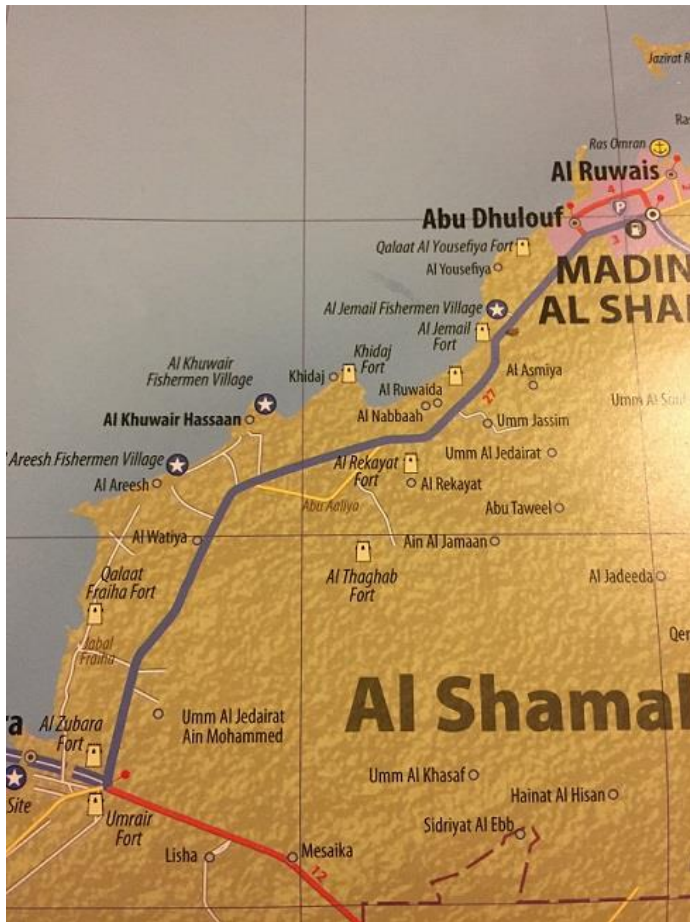
I asked General Secretary Al-Muraikhi about his role in this development of their federation and he said he was General Secretary of Judo in 2001 and after Karate in 2008 and in 2016 General Secretary of the three martial arts combined. I also inquired about his own sport background and found out his expertise “back in the day” was athletics, with marathon being his favorite. I also found out he still works out one hour every day, five days a week. His responsibilities extend beyond the martial arts as he’s also Assistant General Secretary at the first and foremost of the football clubs in Qatar called Al-Saad. He’s also head of the GCC Taekwondo Committee and a member of the West Asia Karate Federation.

I asked him about the general development of sport here and he said things are progressing, for example they're recently introduced a national sports day on which everyone is encouraged to engage in some sort of sport or physical activity at least. He has talked with the Minister of Youth and they are in agreement about the need to do more to help further engage young people to participate in sport.

We chatted on for a while about this and that there in Qatar and the Taekwondo world which he knows well, but as a genuine super-VIP in Doha Qatar – one of the world's most happening capital cities, duty pulled him away and I was off on another adventure around beautiful Qatar!

Background on Qatar

During my first week in Qatar, I explored the Northwest coast which is where the ancient fortresses are to be found. Life in the deep desert has always been fiercely competitive but along the coasts are especially dangerous.



Map of the northwest coast of Qatar, the site of many ancient forts which is probably an indicator as to which of their neighbors historically tended to be more aggressive.

I started this journey by taking an air-conditioned bus - accompanied by mostly foreign workers - to the far north peak of this lovely nation and found “Al Ruwais,” an ancient town abandoned in the late 1700s, but now one of the largest archeological sites in Qatar with a large fortress, palatial residence, two wells, warehouses, a mosque, a ship repair shop, a walled tomb, and the remains of other temporary structures. I was searching for the ancient port when I was very lucky to meet a young Qatari man - a Sheik no less I called Sheik Fahad which was very lucky because people can literally fry to death out in the desert, and his huge white air-conditioned SUV was something of a blessed relief.

Being a local with an interest in history and archeology Sheik Fahad knew the ancient forts and many splendid oases there in the desert. He knew the plants and their medicinal qualities, and the ancient stories of every herb, well, castle, rock, and building there as far as I could tell so he was a most splendid friend and guide.



Among other things Sheik Fahad impressed upon me that during nine months of the year the desert there in Qatar actually teems with life, flowers bloom and grasses grow, mainly because they're so close to the sea. The eco-system there is rich with a vast complex web of life.

The word "oasis" brings to mind lush garden like places in the desert, but nothing can describe the heaven-like feeling of entering one from the deadly harsh heat of the desert. The smells of water, and flowers, the bird songs, the rich greenery, and most importantly - the coolness inspire poetry and transcendence to all who enter.



Sheik Fahad seemed to know all the oasis. After literally cooking in the desert for even a few minutes, entering the divine oasis was like ascendance into heaven.

Sheik Fahad's family owns small fruit farms in a couple of the oasis we visited, as well as several other palatial buildings in various towns and some more modest compounds along the coast. He really was an excellent instructor because I learned from him that families in the Arabian Peninsula aren't like "mom and pop and a few sibs maybe," instead they are dynastic tribes going back centuries, loaded with political intrigue, fabulous wealth in many cases and lightning speed rises and falls, twists and turns in fortune.

After Al Ruwais we journeyed southwest along the coast to Qalaat, Al Yousefiya Fort, Al Jemail Fort, Khidaj Fort, and Qalaat Fariha Fort. Some were visible, some were pretty much re-buried as archeologists know that the salt air and winds can dissolve almost anything to dust in that environment.



Khidaj Fort, I think. The ol' noggin doesn't work so well at those temperatures.

The only well preserved and reconstructed fort I saw was 250-year-old Al Zubarah in which archeologists found pottery from Europe, China and even Japan.



Writer in Al Zubarah Fort



It had been mostly abandoned after battles in 1811 and completely abandoned in the early 20th Century. The story is pirates from nearby countries often attacked this fort and it was too remote to protect. What happened to the defenders? My guess is the desert is a pretty good place to disappear into when outnumbered by an attacking sea force that was primarily after loot. In any case the Silk Roads - land and maritime – could and still can be dangerous places at times.

After the old fort we stopped briefly here:



Wayside along the road. Visitors are invited to leave notes of the poster honoring Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani (born 3 June 1980) the Emir of Qatar

Though I would love to have spent a month or two at each of the archeological sites looking for ancient treasures, alas, it was blast-furnace hot with 100% humidity most of the time and Qatar has so many places to discover - so - I had to bid farewell to Sheik Fahad and the desert - a no-man's land where life is stark and death swift if one doesn't know the ways of it.



Sheik Fahad - a man with a kind heart in an unforgiving landscape

Souk Wakif



Front entrance to Souk Wakif just before sunset

My first day in Qatar I found what turned out to be my favorite place in the country, the ancient but elegantly rebuilt traditional marketplace of Souk Wakif, complete with winding small streets and alleyways, hundreds of small shops, restaurants, coffee and tea houses and so on.





This ancient marketplace has people from all nations and cultures strolling along and working there. There are Qatari people, distinctive because most Qataris wear long white traditional Arab Gulf clothing, as do some of the immigrants, hailing primarily from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Philippines, Uganda, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and a few other places, about half of whom wear their own traditional clothing so usually it's pretty easy to guess where people are from. And of course, some people wear jeans and t-shirts making a statement about being modern. It's all fine in the marketplace where anyone can be what they want. During the day it's pretty quiet there as few people venture out in the heat of the day, but at night it really comes alive.

It's a potpourri of the world with the shops and other attractions highlighting traditional Arab culture. Though I made friends at a couple of restaurants and coffee shops, my best friends in Qatar work in a traditional sword shop there. In traditional cultures sitting around sipping tea and chatting is the only way to make friends, and their sword shop just felt comfortable to me.



Shamsan Algebahy from Yemen, easy-going manager of magnificent sword shop

They'd make a phone call, and two minutes later tea invariably arrived. My friends there were two gentlemen, Shamsan Algebahy from Yemen, and Salah from Syria. They always wear traditional Gulf style clothes and after a couple of weeks hanging out with them Shamsan went with me to get my own -

- Thobe - long white tunic or robe
- Sirwal - loose white pants worn underneath
- Thagiyah - skullcap
- Ghuthrain - headscarf, and
- Agal - black cord to hold the Ghuthrain in place

...at a tailor shop near their sword shop.



Oh! What a marvelous experience. Me - the wandering martial arts traveler - dressed to the nines as a Sheik of Arabi! How totally excellent! Afterwards walking around the marketplace, I felt a little self-conscious for about one minute then realized I fit in perfectly with everyone else. Talking with people throughout Central and West Asia I've found out over the years (three decades actually) my blue-eyed Irish-American mug appears Iranian to a lot of people in these parts. Ah yes, life is full of amazing things. Simultaneously I can pass for Afghan, Syrian, Turkish, and a lot of other nationalities along the ancient Silk Roads, which were collectively the cradle of post-agrarian (10,000 BC) civilization. No wonder I feel so at home here. I also noticed out on the street that to wear the Gulf gentleman's clothes is also to earn a great deal of respect. Dressing like the sports guy I am I appear perhaps - a little shabby to the rank-and-file workers. But, dressed like a gentleman of the Gulf I commanded respect. Wow.



Salah and I in front of sword shop

While in Doha I often went swimming at the beautiful beaches there and made friends with the mostly African life and security guards, visited several huge malls, and most mornings got up before sunrise to jog along the spectacularly beautiful Persian Bay coast only a few hundred meters from my hotel. The Museum of Islamic Art was also along that road and they have a library I visited several times.



Museum of Islamic Art – That fuzziness not a special effect, but rather steam that forms on the camera lens as soon as the cap is removed.





Medieval Islamic knight



السيف الذي في يمينك وخذ يسارك العنان ثم اخرج يمينك بالسيف في
 باسطه وردد باية سيفك الايسر تحت ابطك الايمن وداية سيفك



صورة فارس يده سيف في يمينه وداية على كفه الايسر ورجل
 يده اليسرى سيف وداية تحت ابطه اليماني

تحت ابطك الايسر وقاعدك مع يدك علي متسك الايمن وشرابا في الموكب
 كله حتى ينتهي الى الميسره ثم اعز على الموكب وافتح السيف الذي في يمينك في
 الموكب فتحة باسطه ورده من فوق كسفنك الايسر على السيف الذي في يدك
 اليماني حتى يصل القاعم على متسك الايمن وداية كماله من فوق وردد راس فرسك
 شمالا موازيا للموكب كله حتى ينتهي الى اليمينه ثم ولى الموكب وسئل يدك
 اليمينه بالسيف فانظر من تحته ثم اضرب صربه ثقيله من اذن الفرس اليماني الى اقله

A page from *Al Fusiyya* – a textbook for warriors of the ancient world





Looking at all of the art on display, especially the painting I got the impression Qatar may historically have been closer in some ways to it's eastern neighbors, including Persia than its westerly neighbors.



I also visited the Museum of H.E. Sheik Faisal Bin Qassim Al-Thani.

The collection of artifacts and art was likewise, breathtaking.



Shield



Always leading a caravan is the guide who walks



Painting of ancient caravan traveling from Cairo to Mecca





Dhow – Traditional boat of Qatar





Those artifacts look like they've seen some action



Qatar has many friendly people from my experience there.



Besides Taekwondo and Wushu Kung Fu I also enjoy many other martial arts including kickboxing. So, driving by THE CAGE, Thai Boxing, Jiu Jitsu and MMA club, well I had to stop there! The manager was very nice and even gave me a T-shirt!



I was in Qatar for about three weeks and the last night was in some ways the most special. With advice from Shamsan I found out the traditional sword dance of Arabia can be seen at weddings and one of the young men that visited his shop to buy a sword was going to be married. Thus, I got an invitation to participate in this ancient tradition and learn the steps and a little basic sword technique that inculcated the style of that tribe.

Walking into the large palace-like wedding hall, dressed in my Gulf men's best fashion I started chatting with an elderly gentleman who I later found out was a super-VIP. Entering the hall, I was quickly invited to pick a sword from the rack, and join in the festive dance alive with drum music and merriment all around. The joy and pleasure of this experience really can't be described - one simply has to mix in and do it.





It may look like a very serious thing, and I'm sure it is for some, but most people seemed to be very much enjoying themselves. I took some videos with sound recording as photos does not do this ceremony justice. There were at least 100 people in the huge hall and there were at least five of those huge halls, and wedding ceremonies going on that evening.

One of, if not the greatest hardship of a traveler's life is saying goodbye to everyone, so I never do that. Instead, I say: "See you later my friend," to those whom I'm closest to though there's never enough time to hook-up with all my best friends in those hurried last days. Certainly Zuhair and Mr. Eid Ali Al-Muraikhi – General Secretary of the Qatar Taekwondo, Judo and Karate Federation were wonderfully kind, and Master Jae Kun Shin is a brother and master of the martial way, as is Yi Jul Yul and the other instructors there at Korea Taekwondo Center, Sheik Fahad - the master of the desert, Qatari culture and history, and of course the gentlemen swordmasters Shamsan and Salah. "Yes, I must return, God willing, yes, yes, before too long. *Khuda Hafiz!*" (Middle Persian for God or *Ahura Mazda*, and *hafiz* from Arabic *hifz* "protection." This phrase is a loanword from Persian into the Kurdish, Sindhi, Urdu, Hindi, and Bengali languages and really means 'May God be your protector.')

For a look into the perceptions of a British officer in the Persian Gulf in the early 1800s, you can download a book titled: '*Diary of a journey across Arabia from El Khatif in the Persian Gulf, to Yambo*

in the Red Sea, during the year 1819. By Captain G. Forster Sadlier, of HM's 47th regiment.

From the Qatar Digital Library at:

https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100023676254.0x00001f

From this book one can learn that the politics of this region have always been rather colorful and "complex," if nothing else.

For a book on the martial arts of the region in the early 14th Century you can download:

A Mamluk manual on horsemanship, military arts and technology by Muḥammad ibn ‘Isa ibn Isma‘il al-Hanafi al-Aqsara’i d. 1348, Damascus), from:
https://www.qdl.qa/en/archive/81055/vdc_100000000044.0x0003ca

Trans-Saharan Taekwondo Quest Ethiopia - Part 1



Photo of painting in Ethiopian National Museum, Addis Ababa

Wedē ītiyop'iya inikwani dehina met'u! Welcome to Ethiopia!

Introduction to this series

Life, as the old saying goes, is strange. For the past three years I've traveled the ancient Silk Roads interviewing the masters of Taekwondo (and Kung fu) in all the countries I've visited (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan) during my summer and winter vacations from school. The last two summers were a bit strange however, like for example in 2016 I'd planned the semi-last leg of that land journey from Azerbaijan to Turkey, only to have an attempted military coup take place in Turkey just before I got there. Fortunately, everyone was very nice to me and I had no problems of any kind, but last summer, 2017 I'd planned on visiting Qatar - my first visit to the Middle East - only to have an economic blockade by their western neighbors occur - just before I got there. So, this summer I decided to go somewhere with good news happening and read in the newspaper about a new peace agreement between Ethiopia

and Eritrea ending their long-standing war just a couple of weeks before my summer vacation so I said: “Yep, I’m going to start a new trans-continental Taekwondo Quest Friendship Tour, this time in Africa, starting in Ethiopia!”

August 2021 Book Publication Update

I regretfully report since my visit to Ethiopia in July and August 2018, serious conflict has erupted. Around midnight of 3–4 November 2020 in the Tigray Region of Ethiopia a civil war began. Readers of the following article will note I have friends there, dear bothers in fact, and there are times all we can do is pray for peace. Ethiopia, in this humble writer’s opinion is a holy land and the people there – at least mostly – devout, kind-hearted and genuinely good people.

Ethiopia Background



Ethiopia is a deeply spiritual country; it became a Christian country in the 4th Century, that is before Roman Emperor Constantine and has a devoutly religious philosophy usually called Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Christianity though about 19% of the people belong to other Christian denominations principally Protestant.

While in Addis I went to a religious festival and saw thousands of people, mostly dressed in white cotton on their way to church to pray. Spirituality is just a way of life here.



About 34% of the people here are Muslim with most being Sunni. Really all three major Abrahamic religions have deep roots in Ethiopia, though most of the Jewish community left around the founding of the modern Israel.

Though Rastafarianism (also considered to be an Abrahamic religion) started in Jamaica it became quite popular in Ethiopia during the reign of the still popular Emperor Haile Selassie (1930 - 1974) in spite of the peasant's revolution that eventually overthrew his government. Wow! Life is pretty complicated, but like the Chinese perhaps, Ethiopians seem to be able to see both sides of things and people. Incidentally Rastafarians are given free residency cards here. Ethiopia is a truly diverse and amazing place!

August 2018 - In past articles I started my Silk Road Taekwondo Quest stories with Taekwondo stories and then in the second half of the stories wrote about the country's historical and cultural background. In this story however I'd like to start with the background before the interviews and visits with the Taekwondo players. Why? Mainly to clear up some intercultural misunderstandings so the readers can meet the masters with a wider understanding of this ancient noble land and culture, free of the many biases the modern world inculcates in most of us westerners.

To even begin to understand Ethiopia I think it's best to just forget everything you've ever heard or read about this country because just about all of that is the product of modern geopolitics and a few devastating droughts which combined have overshadowed the absolutely brilliant foundations of this unbelievably beautiful land and people whose ancient wisdom and arts have done a lot more to shape our world than most people could ever imagine.

Before the Greeks Ethiopia was known as the Land of Kush by the ancient Egyptians and the Ethiopian kings are the grandsons of the Biblical Warrior King David, through his son Solomon and his liaison with the Ethiopian Queen of Sheba.

Kush according to the Bible was the eldest son of Ham, who was a son of Noah. He was the brother of Canaan, Mizraim (Egypt) and Phut (land of Libya), and the father of the Biblical Nimrod referred to in Genesis 10:6 and I Chronicles 1:8.

According to biblicalstudies.org, Kush could be either Sudan or Ethiopia or more probably both. On one hand “Kush” means black, and the Nubian Sudanese are blacker than the “Habesha” Ethiopians who intermarried more with Arab traders. Thus, both probably seem like the correct answer. Most Ethiopians refer to themselves as Habesha, even though technically speaking it’s more the Northern Ethiopians.

The difference between Being an Ethiopian and Being Habesha by Nagn Nyang, Feb 17, 2009

“The Habesha history goes back to the Axumite Empire in the first century A.D. It was documented that around first century A.D., some Hamitic-Semitic peoples (Sabaeen traders) from South Arabia came into contact with native people and intermarried. Their off-springs were referred to as “Habesha”, which means “people of mixed blood”. Their land (Tigray, Begemdir, Gojam, Northern Shewa, and Welo) was later termed Abyssinia.”

<http://www.sudantribune.com/The-difference-between-being-an,30208>

It was actually my trusted friendly taxi driver here in Addis Ababa who introduced me to the word “Habesha,” in reference to his skin color, a lighter shade of brown (compared to many of the Sudanese for example most of whom are really black), and then used it referring to all Ethiopians, which tells me the word here is used quite broadly, not just in the technical sense referred to in the above article.

The Kushite Empire predates the Egyptian and Persian Empires by several thousand years and had great influences on them, e.g., burial practices, firing of pottery, domestication of animals, cultivation of grains, philosophy, architecture and so on. The much later Greek historian Herodotus was primarily influenced by Egyptian and Persian influences which have their roots in the Kushite Empire!

Thus, the argument can legitimately be made that the ancient ancestors of Ethiopians and Sudanese educated the world. We all know the names of many famous Ethiopians but few of us realize it.

For example, an ancient book called the *Kebrä Nagast*, or Glory of the Kings (of Ethiopia), a storehouse of legends from the Old Testament and later Rabbinic writings, as well as Egyptian, Arabian, Semitic and Ethiopian sources, makes a very strong argument that the kings of Ethiopia were the progeny of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Certainly, all scholars don't agree as some say the Queen of Sheba was Yemenite, however it was common for great queens in the Northern Axumite province of Ethiopia to reign with dignity and a great deal of freedom, unlike some other kingdoms. Historians frankly speaking are a bit confused in interpreting Psalm 72-10:

“The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts.” Psalm 72-10 (King James Translation)

At any rate the story goes that the pagan Queen of Sheba, named Makeda, the virgin queen of “Seba” heard about the Wisdom of Solomon, an ancestor of Christ, and that he was the custodian of the Chariot of the Tabernacle of the Law of God.

Naturally she had a lot of questions for him as to her Solomon was like a God. So, she decided to visit.

They married, she “became with child by him,” returned home delivering upon her

arrival. Her son, Manyelek later became the father of a line of Kings of Ethiopia that lasted for more than a thousand years (with a gap of 354 years - between 914 and 1268 - due to a somewhat mystical woman named Esther, or Judith depending on which stories one chooses to believe). When Menyelek grew up, he traveled to Jerusalem to meet his father Solomon, and for a variety of reasons, with the tacit approval of Solomon and “under the protection of God,” brought the Ark of the Law from the Temple of Jerusalem home to the Axumite Empire in the Tigray region, north Ethiopia where it - according to legend, remains to this day. Please keep in mind that the Covenant of the Ark is like a blueprint of the Kingdom of God. Also remember that the Garden of Eden is believed to have been in the Horn of Africa, e.g., Ethiopia and surrounding countries.

And this, for all its glory is only a tiny fraction of the amazing history of Ethiopia!

World Taekwondo Federation in Ethiopia

Taekwondo has been widely practiced in Ethiopia for decades but didn't become officially affiliated with the WTF until 2003 which happened due to the efforts of an amazing Taekwondoka and national teach coach, Adisu Hurgessa.



Ethiopian WTF National Coach Adisu with Olympic hopeful Solomon Tufa

National Team Coach: Adisu Hurgessa

Born in the Kolfe District of Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia Adisu's life could have taken so many possible paths but for the fact his house was next to a military base and he got to watch the soldiers daily training in high intensity ITF Taekwondo and from outside the fence without being noticed he trained with them. These lessons, informal to be sure were supplemented by movies starring Bruce Lee and Jean Claude van Damme.

His more formal martial arts training began a few years later when he joined a Kung Fu club taught by the legendary Wondumu Belu, the grandfather of Kung Fu in Ethiopia. Adisu trained with this extraordinary master for two years.

His life journey changed course again when playing in a swimming pool one day and he saw an extraordinary Korean master practicing forms.

This master turned out to be internationally famous Park No Won, now 9th Dan President of the International Tukong Musul Federation (also spelled "Teukgong Moosool").

For those not familiar with this extraordinary martial art, Teukgong Moosool is a martial art originating from South Korea and is the official martial art practiced by the South Korean Special Forces. Teukgong Moosool is a combat martial art which emphasizes extremely quick attack and submission of opponents. It has also been adapted for training bodyguards, police, law enforcement personnel and individuals interested in an effective method of self-defense.

Adisu quickly became one of his most ardent students and a close bond formed as usually happens between master and student. "Now when I go to Korea I live in his home," Adisu said during our interview here in Addis Ababa.

Adisu also has a good relationship with Taekwondo Master Moon Un Jae at the Korea University of Physical Education and now holds a Sixth Dan rank hoping to achieve 7th Dan next year in 2019. He also is a 2nd Class International referee (a very high rank) and is a 3rd Class International instructor.

Coach Adisu earned a diploma in marketing, a BA in Psychology and MS in Sports Science at Addis Ababa University, successfully completed the Advanced Coaching program in 2012 - with honors. For those not familiar with this Olympic sponsored program, he attended programs in Delaware University and then Colorado Springs, followed by a research project back home in Ethiopia, and completed it with a presentation of his research results in Switzerland. This education was supported by a scholarship.

In spite of his extraordinary qualifications, he is paid practically nothing to work as the National Coach. In addition to being the coach, he was also the founder of the Ethiopian WTF organization. To support his own family, he teaches Taekwondo at three locations. For ten years he was National Coach being paid nothing. He tried to quit and in fact did, but so loves Taekwondo and his players he had to come back.

For those who don't know the life of a national coach, he trains his team members three times a day, six days a week. It's more than a job, it's more like a vocation for which one must have infinite energy and passion, transcendent level Taekwondo skill and truly inspirational leadership qualities.

At the time of this interview Adisu had just returned from the 3rd Africa Youth Games which took place in Algiers, Algeria from July 18 to 28. More than 3,300 athletes attended from 54 African countries. Algiers was awarded the games by the National Olympic Committees of Africa in 2014. Adisu's team of seven youths came home with four medals: one gold, two silver and one bronze. That's a pretty good showing considering the small team they sent and the extremely limited funding their team receives.

The Rising Star of Solomon Tufa



Writer with Solomon after lunch in Addis Ababa

Solomon Tufa, age 20 was born in the village of Arsi Bekoji, the same hometown of Kenenisa Bekele holder of the men's world record for the 5,000 meter run with a time of 12:37.35, and Tirunesh Dibaba the women's world record holder for that same event with the time 14:11.15. Solomon's older sisters are also on the Olympic team. And knowing his speed they really, really want him to run. But he loves Taekwondo!

Solomon is the youngest in his family with six older brothers and three older sisters. He was raised by his mother, a homemaker he said. His family has been supported by his older brothers and sisters. He started Taekwondo in his hometown in 2012 following his older brothers to a competition and found what he saw to be “quite amazing,” he said in our interview July 28, 2019.

He trained in Taekwondo for two years with his first teacher named “Kiya,” a 4th dan, entering his first competition in 2013 - the Adama Open - and winning gold. That same year he first came to the capital city Addis Ababa for the National Junior Championships and again took home the gold. It was at this competition he caught the eye of Coach Adisu. His next competition was the National High School Championships, and again he won all matches to earn him the gold again.

Solomon is a quiet young man, coming across a bit shy actually, but he’s got a great smile and does speak some English. Selected by Coach Adisu to join the national team he was able to move to Addis Ababa where he stayed in the Addis Sport Academy for a while, and later rented a single room he shares with a teammate.

In 2014 he went to the 2nd African Youth Games, with expenses paid by the Olympic Committee accompanied by his team with two other boys and three girls. Between the six of them they brought home five gold medals and one bronze, placing 1st in all Africa.

This is about the highest honor any athlete and coach can achieve.

In 2015 Solomon competed in his first senior international competition and not surprisingly he was eliminated. All competitive athletes who know the ropes also know the leap from the juniors to the seniors is a big one so he didn’t do that well in the Russian World Senior Championships, and had a similar experience at the All-Africa Games in the Congo that same year. In 2016 he had a knee injury and didn’t compete, but come 2017 at the age of 19 he managed to place in the quarter-finals at the World Championships in Muju, South Korea.

In late March 2018 in Morocco there were back-to-back competitions, the 2018 Africa Senior Championships in Agadir, followed by the 2nd WTF Presidents Cup-Africa. The President's Cup was a World G2 rated competition and Solomon Tufa fighting in the -54 Kg. division won golds in both and consequently a huge gold cup for being the Grand Prix winner. This grand slam victory earned him 40 points and a world ranking of #11.

His though is a heart-breaking story now. Due to financial issues the Ethiopian Taekwondo Federation wasn't able to afford to enter him in the upcoming Grand Prix in Rome and Russia, making the probability of his earning enough points to qualify for the 2020 Olympics slim indeed. The way the Olympics qualifying points system works only those ranked 1-6 directly qualify and that probably isn't going to happen simply due to a lack of funding. To get in the top one has to compete and do well in every possible competition leading up to the Olympics, with emphasis on the higher ranked world competitions.

August 2021 Update: Solomon made it to the Tokyo Olympics and the quarter-finals after defeating Japanese Suzuki Sergio in the round of 16. Unfortunately, he sustained a leg fracture competing against Tunisia's Mohammed Khalil. Despite this setback he's only age 22 and appears to have a long successful career to look forward to.

A Double-Handicap for Taekwondo

Soccer is unquestionably the most popular sport in the world by far, and in Ethiopia Taekwondo is ranked third behind soccer and athletics in national priorities. The national soccer team hasn't had good results in international competition, but its soccer so they're well-funded anyways.

Track and Field, called “athletics” is ranked second in terms of national priority and they have done exceedingly well in international competition winning Olympic gold for example, and though Ethiopia’s international Taekwondo teams have done quite well, it’s just not a priority and barely funded at all.

In addition to funding issues, they also have been severely limited in their ability to get visas for European championships because three of their competitors ran off once at a competition in Europe and consequently visas for the Ethiopian teams are now very difficult or impossible to get. Though Adisu didn’t mention it, I would like to note for the record that “collective punishment” is illegal in international law - even in war - and believe those immigration departments that don’t issue visas to athletes from African countries for international events are simply afraid of the competition!

Thus, young Solomon Tufa, despite many years of intense training, being extraordinarily gifted and masterfully trained is struggling under a double burden of an underfunded national federation and rather blatant discrimination when it comes to being permitted to compete in Europe. The day after my meeting with the Ethiopian National Taekwondo’s Team Coach Adisu, he and the Federation President Dawit Asfaw were planning to meet with Solomon Tufa and try to persuade him not to move back to his hometown of Adama - 900 kilometers away from Addis Ababa where he planned to get a regular job, which he feels he has to do to support his family as Taekwondo simply isn’t helping to feed his family.

Competing in Tokyo is all he dreams about and to do that he has to have funding (and be issued visas for European countries).

These kinds of issues are really holding Taekwondo back in Ethiopia and no doubt other African and Asian nations also.

During my short few weeks in Ethiopia I first interviewed Mr. Dawit Asfaw President of Ethiopia Taekwondo Federation who told me there are more than 500 Taekwondo clubs in Ethiopia. Interviewing Adisu a few days later I found he'd promoted more than 5,000 students to black belt level, but most have left the art mainly because there just isn't enough money in the sport to support them and their families.

Ethiopia has had more than its fair share of other challenges too, including severe droughts and war.

On the bright side, the new Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and the Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki signed a "Joint Declaration of Peace and Friendship," in early July of this year (2018) ending a long-standing war between their nations and people on both sides of the border are very hopeful that national priorities can now shift to internal development which naturally should include greater emphasis on sports like Taekwondo!

There is no doubt whatsoever that Ethiopians are blessed with extraordinary heart and their nation has allowed around a million refugees from mostly neighboring countries to find shelter in their nation. For many, Ethiopia, despite its own challenges is a place of peace and safety, a harbor in the storms that too frequently rampage through African nations primarily because those nations are rich in natural resources and/or deemed geo-politically important.

Other Stars of the Ethiopian Taekwondo Team

Another up-and-coming superstar trained by Adisu is Tariku Girma. At 17 years of age and under 63 kilos he's a whopping 195 centimeters tall and has displayed brilliant Taekwondo technique winning gold again and again, most recently in Algiers. He plans on training in Europe as a professional where he has attracted the attention of some top coaches. From a rural background in Ethiopia, Taekwondo, hard work and top coaching have opened the world for him.

Beyond being a great Taekwondoka, Quanjanmin and National Team Coach, Adisu is also a creative thinker with amazing creativity, drive and has a keen eye for talent. How so? One day in mid-2017 he was watching TV and saw a young disabled man on TV who, absent arms had trained his legs to do everything ordinary people take for granted - that is, he was completely independent and truly remarkable in his abilities. “When I saw that I went the next day to the University’s Disability Center and got his contact information,” Adisu said.

A second-year university student with only 45 days of Taekwondo training Girma Mokonnen took the gold in the Africa 2017 African Para Taekwondo Open in the - 61 Kilo in Morocco. According to Adisu he stands above average chance of qualifying for the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo.

In this most recent African Youth Games in Algiers three of Adisu’s female team members also came up with medals, specifically two silvers and one bronze. With thirty-two nations competing Adisu’s junior team did astonishingly well.

“Still, we need to get 5 or 6 million Birr (\$1 = 27 Ethiopian Birr) in order for our teams to compete internationally just for one year, and that’s got to happen if they’re going to have any chance at attending the Tokyo Olympics in 2020,” Adisu said.

Ethiopian WTF President Mr. Dawit Asfar

During my interview with WTF President Asfar I learned they're concurrently developing five teams, Junior, Senior, Paralympic, Cadets (under 13 years of age) and a nascent Poomse Team. They have four coaches all together including two lady assistant coaches named Marshet & Mihiret, both 4th dan. They have a training center secured by Adisu and share the space with the Ethiopian Karate and Boxing teams. Many countries of course have Olympic Training Centers where the athletes can live and receive the top coaching, nutrition and so on. In Ethiopia the WTF team one can only hope additional financial resources from somewhere becomes available soon, acknowledging that truly vast resources will be needed to lift this country up to where it should have been absent geopolitics and droughts.

Like most sports federation presidents who usually are successful businessmen that can help bring in private funds to the federation, so too is Mr. Asfar, however unlike most federation presidents he is also a real Taekwondoka too.

With a background as a successful soccer player he switched to Taekwondo in 1998 and started training with - guess who? Yes, Coach Adisu. Now at 54 years of age he continues to train in Taekwondo with friends, runs his own business and works very, very long days doing everything he can to support his rapidly developing branch of the world-wide Taekwondo family here in Ethiopia.

Journey to the North Ethiopian province of Tigray

Mekelle – Great Kingdom of North Ethiopia

*Incredible history, beautiful culture and people and the educational capital of this
fair land*

A couple of days later I took a bus up to a town in the far north of Ethiopia called Mekelle, the capital city of Tigray Province, and economic, cultural, and political center of northern Ethiopia.

The population there is about 200,000 and they speak an ancient language called Tigrinya.

By African standards it's quite a new town dating back to only the 13th Century, when it was known as Enda Meseqel.

Mekelle was actually quite comfortable without the hustle and bustle of the capital city Addis Ababa. Instead, it's a peaceful small/medium sized university town with clean streets and a well-educated relatively modern population.

Nejashi - Oldest Islamic Settlement in Africa

From there I took a bus to Wukro, about 45 km. away and then a taxi to Nejashi to visit the Nado Adi Masjid, the home of the most ancient Muslim settlement in Africa.

Upon arrival I met Idriz a local guide that speaks English and also some Turkish engineers and workmen that built an exquisite small masjid near the site of the ancient one, and constructed a highly decorative mausoleum housing the tombs of 15 of the original settlers, and were in the process of building other structures for a more complete community.



New Masjid in Nejashi

Upon meeting the Turkish engineers, I asked them if they knew of the location of the original masjid.

They didn't know.

Then I asked the local tour guide I met there explaining that I was sure it was somewhere around there.

At first, he didn't understand, but then the light went on and he led me into the hills behind the new masjid and showed me the original.



Remains of the original Masjid at Nejashi

This was one of those spiritually defining moments in life. The guide seemed to know quite a bit about the original Muslim settlement some 1,500 years ago, and then showed me the living quarters for the Sahaba (Companions of the Prophet Mohammed SWT) in the hills beyond the remains of the ancient masjid. Incredible!

The town around this ancient Muslim settlement is 95% Christian these days, but the people of these different faiths have lived harmoniously together for over 1300 years. Ethiopia has been a model of religious harmony at least since companions of the Prophet Mohammad were granted sanctuary here in the 7th Century ACE.

On the bus back to Mekelle I met a young Ethiopian American lady that had just finished a two-year Peace Corps stay in Nejashi where she'd worked as a teacher.

She filled me in on the life of the regular people there as she'd lived as a regular person, e.g. without electricity and associated amenities, and consequently like the regular people - only eating meat on holidays.

She is a truly admiral lady indeed - and happy I believe to return home to the USA. How fortunate most westerners are to have such an option.

Axum – Ancient Capital at the Heart of Ethiopia

Back in Mekelle I stayed one more night and visited one more museum and then headed to the bus station where I decided to try a “big bus” instead of the ubiquitous white minivans one sees all over the country.

What I didn't know is that the big busses are much older and cheaper. So, I got the feel of the real Ethiopia sitting alongside regular people, none of whom spoke English, except the young man I happened to sit next to named Filimon, who I quickly learned is a student at Mekelle University.

He speaks excellent English, came across as quite bright and studies engineering. To compliment this good luck, he's really from Axum and knows the history, for this ancient city was once the capital city of a great ancient empire on par in many ways with Greece, Rome and Egypt in regards to arts, culture, science and trade volume.

Its origins date back to about the 1st Century BCE and it reached its zenith between the 4th and 7th Century A.C.E.

The bus ride was through lush green mountainous territory virtually all of which was cultivated farm land, in many cases with terraced irrigation systems to preserve the rainfall - essential in Sub-Saharan African which occasionally does suffer from droughts.

What I saw was simply beautiful. Along the roadsides I also saw village and farm people walking often with donkeys and wooden carts not different in any way from a couple of thousand years ago, except perhaps one in a hundred of the people there might have a smart phone which were pretty much useless anyways as there was no signal anywhere around. Good riddance to all that (!) I thought.

When we arrived in Axum Filimon and I were met by his friend KB Miller, his longtime buddy who is another brilliant young man and student at Mekelle University except he studies IT. For the next few days these gentlemen were my best friends and tour guides to the stunning history and contemporary culture of this historically fabulously rich town.

Places we visited include:

- St. Mary of Zion Church Complex - the most important church in Ethiopia and said to be the home of the Ark of the Covenant. Inside the circular dome are brightly colored murals, brilliantly illuminating the original ancient Ethiopian Tewahedo Orthodox (Christian) Church histories, and one can see locals praying in the traditional way.



St. Mary of Zion Church

It was interesting to note Ethiopian Christians pray mostly on the floor in a way not so different from Muslims, e.g., touching forehead on the ground. This is not so surprising because Ethiopian Christianity came directly from the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth, not via Rome.



Across from the church is the building housing – many believe the Covenant of the Arc.

They shall make an Ark of acacia wood," God commanded Moses in the Book of Exodus, after delivering the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. And so, the Israelites built an ark, gilding it inside and out. And into this chest Moses placed stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments, as given to him on Mount Sinai.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/keepers-of-the-lost-ark-179998820/>



Small chapel behind St. Mary of Zion Church believed to house the Covenant of the Ark

The story is told in the *Kebra Negast* (Glory of the Kings), Ethiopia's chronicle of its royal line: The Queen of Sheba, one of its first rulers, traveled to Jerusalem to partake of King Solomon's wisdom; on her way home, she bore Solomon's son, Menelik. Later Menelik went to visit his father, and on his return, journey was accompanied by the firstborn sons of some Israelite nobles—who, unbeknown to Menelik, stole the ark and carried it with them to Ethiopia. When Menelik learned of the theft, he reasoned that since the ark's frightful powers hadn't destroyed his retinue, it must be God's will that it remains with him.

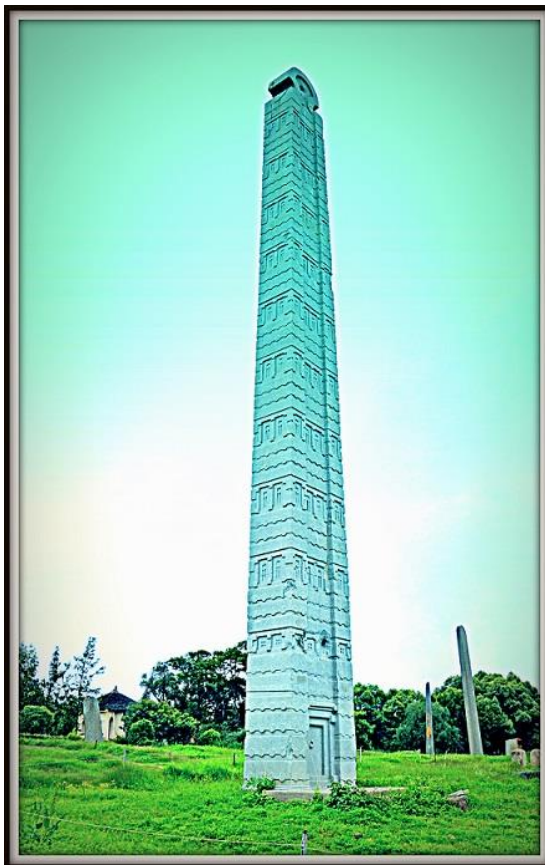
ibid

In Addis Ababa I bought a copy of the *Kebra Negast* and found they present several different sets of circumstances under which Menelik brought the Ark back home to Axum. It's a fascinating series of adventures under all circumstances.

In another version God told Menelik to take it himself, and in another he took it in defiance of God and Solomon.

There is a lot to see in Axum and it deserves a lot more attention as a capital of the ancient world. The following are just a few of the places my friends showed me.

- Ancient Obelisks at the Northern Stelae Field right across from St. Mary's, under which are or at least were secret tunnels my friends told me which once led to the Palace of the King of Sheba





Writer and K.B. Miller in the Stele Field

- Palace of the King of Sheba



This is just a small part of the formerly huge Palace of the King of Sheba

- Several underground tombs in which one may explore, also King Balkan's Tomb said to have been one of the 3 Wise Men at Jesus' birth
- The incredible Ezana Stone, named after King Ezana who ruled the Kingdom of Axum from 330 to 356 ACE, with script in Ethiopian Semitic Ge'ez, South Arabian Sabaeen, and Greek, and is in some ways rather like the Rosetta Stone. This same

King Ezana was converted to Christianity by his slave tutor Saint Frumentius, and later on King Ezana went on to bring down the ancient Kingdom of Kush. The writings on the Ezana Stone are praises to God and commemoration of victories in battles against the Nubians.



Filimon and writer in front of the Ezana Stone

I stayed in Axum for three days and Filimon and KB were most excellent companions. In addition to the above most famous places they also took me to a small alleyway café where the lady roasted the beans for each cup and made coffee in the true traditional way. It was an absolutely heavenly brew!



They also showed me some videos they'd made at their university, one of which was shown at the 9th All Africa University Games 2018 hosted by Mekelle University July 1 - 8. (Oh! Just missed it!) Their video was masterfully done for university students and hysterically funny so I'm including a link at the end of this story to the YouTube location where it can be found.

There are Taekwondo clubs in Mekelle but I had 2,000+ years of history to catch up on in this capital city of an ancient empire and only a few short days to grasp it all so alas I didn't hook up with them. If anyone wants to find TKD clubs anywhere in Ethiopia just contact Master Tofik as he's one of the main coordinators with the Ethiopian Wushu Federation. His contact information can be found at the end of this story.

This is a huge country and it has so much to offer, wonderful people, delicious foods, places to see and things to do. But alas my time there was so limited and so I flew back to Addis from Axum Airport.

Back in Addis Ababa

Downtown – There are older and newer downtown areas in Addis Ababa. I was rather happy to stay in an inexpensive hotel near the new downtown area. This is a view across the intersection.



There was a large private school in a fenced off forested area across the street, shopping malls, large and small grocery stores, a couple of gyms, and all the comforts of home really.

The African Union headquarters are located in Addis Ababa in a huge compound that also houses a lot of - but not all of the United Nations offices.



Headquarters of the African Union

Due to my wide interests, I also visited one of the UNHCR offices and OCHA (Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs).

In Addis the National Museum of Ethiopia is a “must see” location.



Therein one can visit many of our pre-human ancestors including the highly acclaimed Lucy resting peacefully near quite a number of other ancient links along the long dusty road to humanity.



Rest in Peace grandmother



It is a large collection that includes some of the first photographs taken in Africa, as well as traditional and contemporary art.



A visit there is a journey through the entire history of humankind.

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Author's note

August 2021 - Due to the COVID-19 pandemic unfortunately the Trans-Saharan Taekwondo Quest adventure is on hold. Hopefully, like other pandemics this one will just burn out soon.

Chapter 2 Taekwondo Stories from Korea and China

The following are not all the Taekwondo stories I've published, but instead just a sampling of some of my favorite stories.

Part 1 South Korea's Gulgulsa Temple and Sunmudo Martial Arts



Zen and Sunmudo martial art training at Gulgulsa Temple in South Korea

February, 2006 Zen in Korea

Zen (“*Seon*” in Korean language) has a long and distinguished history in Korea.

The official introduction of Buddhism to Korea occurred in 372 as part of a diplomatic transaction from Emperor Fu Chien of Ch’in, one of the 16 kingdoms in North China. King Song (523-553), one of the great kings of the Korean Paekche dynasty (one of three kingdoms into which ancient Korea was divided before 660) encouraged the import of Confucian and Buddhist cultural materials from the Liang dynasty, then ruling South China. Official sanction was given to Buddhism in Korea under the rule of King Pophung in 527. (1)

Ch’an (Chinese for Zen) entered Silla kingdom of the Korean peninsula in about the middle of the 7th century. However in Korea, as in China, *Seon* Buddhism didn’t come into vogue until the 9th century. In Korea this coincided with Unified Silla Dynasty (698 - 936) Buddhism’s shift from cities to more scenic environs, as a corollary to provincial growth in political and economic power. *Seon* was the last phase in sectarian Buddhism. In contrast to other Buddhistic schools, *Seon* relied entirely upon intuitive meditation as the one and only way to achieve enlightenment.

The basic method in this endeavor was called “*chwason*,” or “sitting mediation.” *Seon* found the Buddha-nature to be inherent in human nature and rejected the majority of religious rituals which had grown under the umbrella of “Buddhism.”



Between the middle of the 9th and the early 10th centuries nine different *Seon* schools emerged in Korea. They were known as the “Nine Mountains of *Seon*.” Never having been laterally organized each group started its independent monastic existence under a patriarch, seven of whom had received “*sunim*” a kind of spiritual certificate from Chinese Ch’an masters. The great *Seon* patriarchs formed the core of an elite intelligentsia around whom thousands of *Seon* students gathered.

During the *Goryeo* (936-1259) period Master Jinul (1158-1210), known as *Bojokuksa*, founded *Songgwang* Temple on Mt. Jogye, which remained the headquarters of the *Seon* sect for over 300 years. The Nine schools of *Seon* were unified by Master Taego (1301-82) under the name of “*Jogye*,” which has remained the main sect to this day.

To grasp the ultimate reality, Seon masters emphasized psychological purification via liberation from all mundane concerns which hindered the mind from penetration into the Buddha mind. Its anti-scholastic attitudes were balanced by a high level of intellectualism and complete submission to authoritarian discipline. These characteristics may have contributed to its longevity. (*Ibid*)

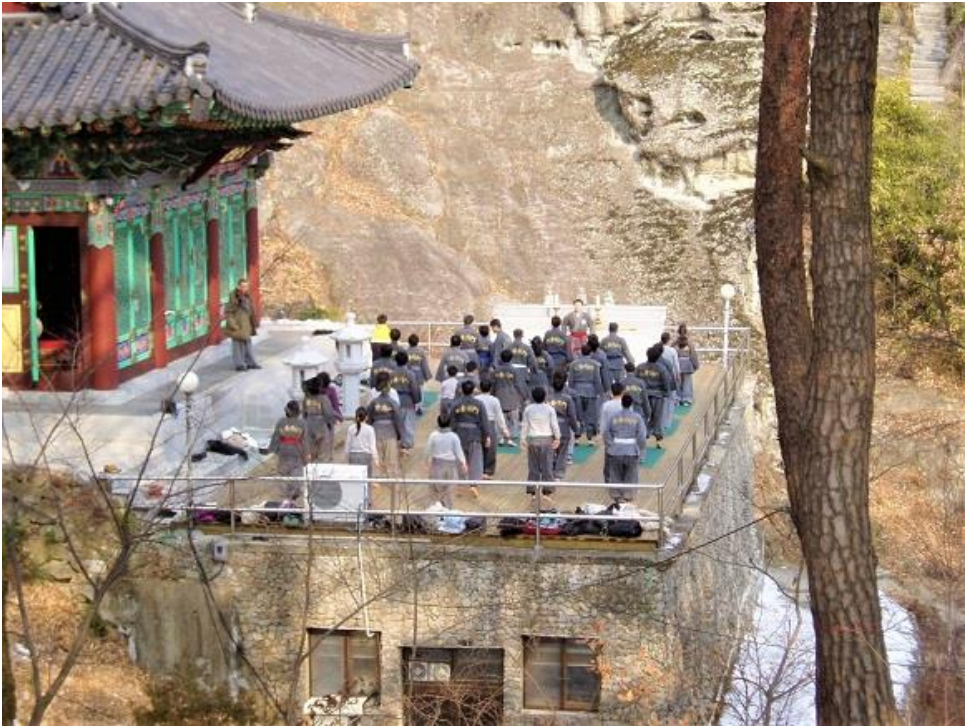
The influence of *Seon* philosophy in Korean history cannot be understated. For example, Kim Eung-ryeom, who later became King Gyeongmun, ruling from 861 to 875, was recorded in a dialogue with well-known Seon Master Muyeom (801-888) as follows:

“The king asked: ‘It is said that to think about staying in reality and defending the void at the same time is to further aggravate the prejudiced theory. I rather want to reach the True Foundation, where the domain of *Prajna* (the intention within us to live from a true heart) ends. Can you tell me what the ending of the domain means?’ Master replied: ‘The domain has already ended. Reason is also the Void and nothing more. The Seal (of Seon self-cultivation) is to be realized in silence only.’”(2, 3)

“True nature is always elusive,
Only the heart of no-heart
can grasp it.
Up in the mountain,
the burning jade stays brilliant.
And in the roaring furnace,
lotus blossoms keep their fragrance.”

Ngo An, Korea, circa -1090 (4)

Golgul Temple



Golgulsa (Stone Buddha) Temple is located 20 Km. east of the ancient Korean Silla Dynasty capital city of Kyongju in Southeastern Korea. In the Golgulsa temple area can be found the oldest historical Buddhist ruins on Mt. Hamwol and the only cave temples in Korea.



The original temple was built out of solid rock during the 6th century by Saint Kwang Yoo and his companions, Buddhist monks from India. This temple contains a sculptured *MayaTathagata* Buddha (Buddha was known as the “*Tathagata*”; his mother was “*Maya Devi*”) and twelve rock caves.

Recently ex-Master Monk of Kirimsa (Kirim Temple), Seol, Jeog-un, constructed a road while simultaneously renovating the Golgulsa Temple.

Sunmudo Martial Art



The formal name of Sunmudo is “Bulkyo Geumgang Yong Gwon.” A word for word literal translation of this means: “Buddhism, diamond, mind/spirit, to see.” This can be interpreted to mean: “to see with a Buddhist diamond mind and spirit.” It is a training method designed to extinguish worldly pains and attain enlightenment. The goal of this training is harmonization of mind and body united with breathing.

The antecedents of Sunmudo came to Korea from China during the early years of the Silla Kingdom and heavily influenced “Hwarangdo.” It was under the leadership of King Chinghung (540-575) that the youth organization called “Hwarangdo” originated. Literally meaning “flower youths” these groups trained children in military, philosophy, arts, as well as government and social institutions. As adults they become elite troops and government leaders.

Following Silla Dynasty, the *Seon* martial art was handed on to soldier monks (승병 -“*Sung Pyong*”) during the *Goryeo* Dynasty (918-1392).



The *Joseon* Dynasty (1392 to 1910) was the final ruling dynasty of Korea. The founder of *Joseon*, General Yi Seonggye intentionally changed Korea from a Buddhist to Confucian nation. Though Buddhism survived, it did so in diminished form.

For practical purposes however, until the *Kabo Kyongjangor* Reform of 1894 during the twilight years of the *Joseon* Kingdom, Buddhist monks were encouraged to practice the *Seon* martial art.

In the late 16th century a legendary Japanese commander named Toyotomi Hideyoshi unleashed a massive attack consisting of 200,000 battle hardened soldiers on the Korean Peninsula.

Overwhelmed by the numbers, Koreans were on the verge of defeat until a priest by the name of Sosan and his disciples rallied more than 5,000 monks from their monasteries in the mountains. They eventually drove the Japanese off Korean soil.

The ferocious reputation of the monks lived on in the minds of the Japanese for many decades. For this reason the monks were forced into keeping their martial art, *Geumgang Yong Gwon*, a secret.

Centuries later the movement largely disbanded along with the collapse of the *Joseon* Dynasty and Japan's annexation of the peninsula in 1910, which forced the monks to flee into even greater obscurity in ever more remote hills.

In 1970 a young man named Seol Jeog-un decided to change tradition. The son of a master swordsman he started training at 10 years of age, and dedicated his life to the Buddha's teachings.

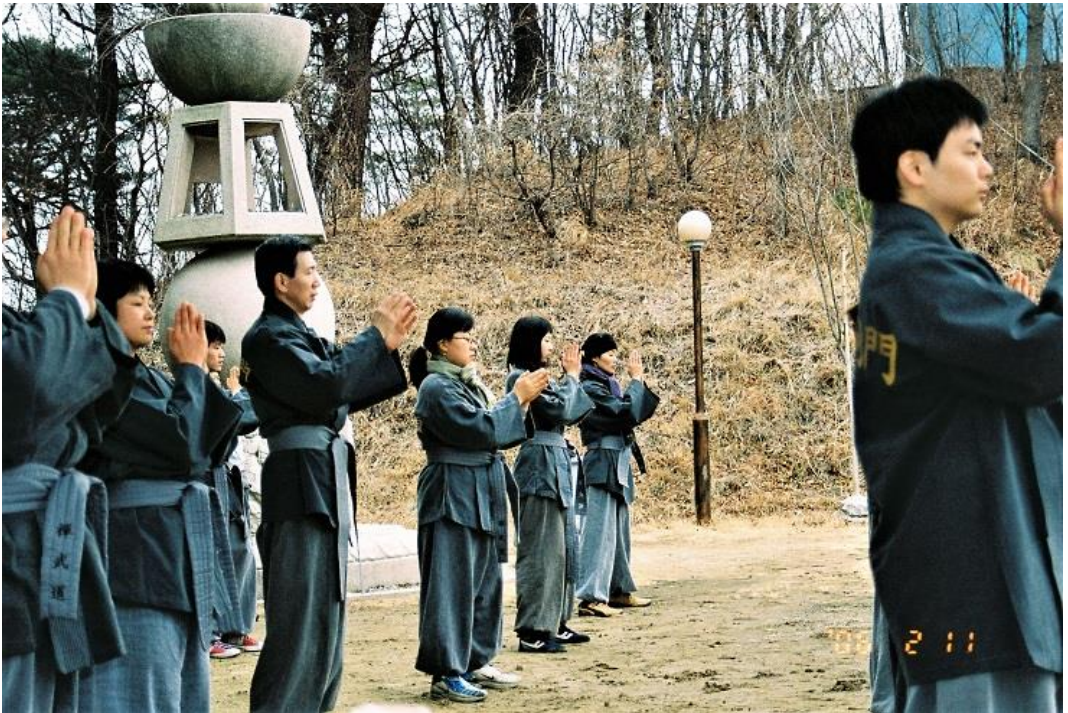


Seol Jeog-un realized the art could be used as a means of promoting wellness and a healthy lifestyle. Consequently, he sought the approval of fellow monks to teach the art to non-monks outside the gates of the temple. In time he became the Abbot of Gulgulsa, the sister temple of Kirimsa, and with the blessings of his peers he was named Grandmaster of “*Sunmudo*,” or “Seon Martial Way.” (See Sidebar 1 for interview with Grandmaster Seol Jeog-un.) The temple has 108 steps. In *Seon* this number symbolizes the myriad of sufferings with which humans are plagued.

The name, *Sonmudo* was given to the *Seon* martial art by Chok Un Sunim in 1984. (“*Sunim*” means “monk” in Korean language.) “*Son*,” (*Seon*) is the way to attain an intuitive illumination of mind and spirit through meditation, “*Mu*” means “martial” and “*Do*” comes from the Chinese word “*Tao*” and refers to “the way,” or “natural path.”

For Buddhist monks martial art practice is seen as one of many paths to enlightenment. Diligent training leads to harmonious integration of mind, body and spirit, a rediscovery of the original mind, the Buddha mind. An old Chinese adage states to the effect that “meditation in movement is a thousand times better than still meditation.”

Though having started as an internal style similar to Tai Chi or moving meditation, *Sunmudo* techniques also contain hard-style techniques. The animal forms are based on the movements of the tiger, crane, bear, dragon, hare and turtle.



Different Poomse emphasize different kinds of skills. Some are remarkably dance-like. Often kicks are held at full extension, a difficult test of strength and balance. There are both linear and circular movements. There are many jumping kicks and foot sweeps. Watching the forms (poomse) practiced one reminded of Tai Chi, Hsing-i and Pa Qua, White Crane and Shaolin. This is an ancient style with multiple internal and external roots.



TODAY

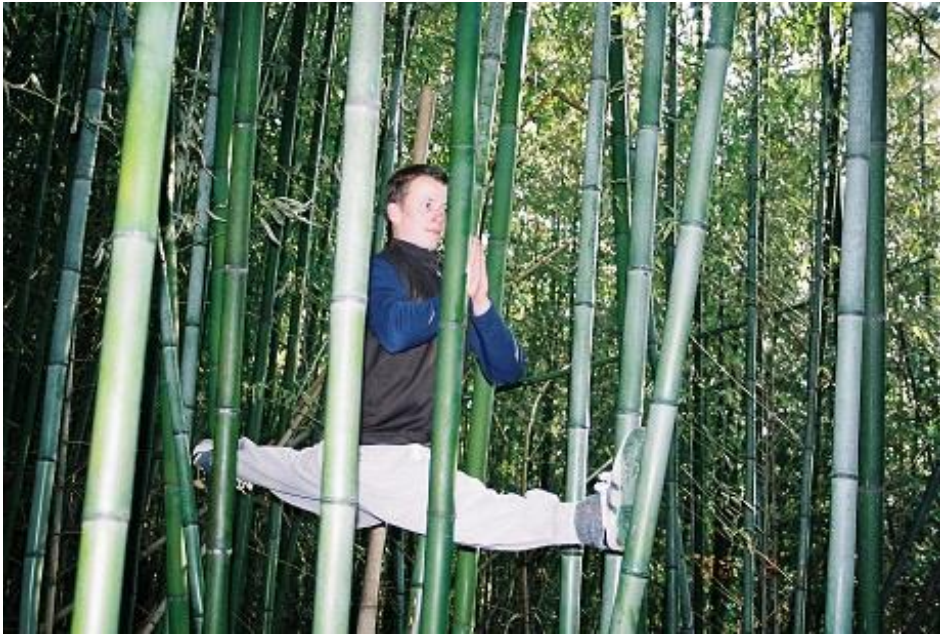
The schedule at the Golgulsa Temple is as follows:

- 04 AM Temple Day begins
- 04:30 AM Chanting and sutra reading
- 05 AM Seon Meditation
- 06 AM Jogging or walking
- 06:50 AM Breakfast
- 08:30 AM Cleaning around temple site
- 09 AM Sunmudo Training
- 11 AM Chanting
- 11:50 AM Lunch

02 PM	Work (“ <i>ul-ryuk</i> ”)
05 PM	Break time
05:30 PM	Dinner
06 PM	Evening chanting
07:00 PM	Sunmudo training
09 PM	Temple Day ends
09:30 PM	Bedtime

To keep things lively, this schedule does occasionally change a little. For example, special trips are sometimes arranged. The beach is only a few miles away. Unusual training methodologies are woven into the fabric of life at Golgulsa Temple.

In Korea a “Temple Stay” is a cultural-experience program designed to help people better understand Buddhism. Temple stays offer various kinds of practicing methods, such as *Yebul* (ceremonial service involving chanting), *chwason*, (sitting mediation), *Dahdoh* (tea ceremony) and *Balwoo Gongyang* (communal meal practice). Participants can find their “true self” harmonized with nature while staying at a temple.



Monks and visitors to the temple are woken with the sound of a wooden block (*moktak*) which greets the new day at 4 a.m.

Then adherents go to the temple to read Buddhist scriptures with the *Sanga* (Buddhist family). This is followed by sitting meditation.

After that there is practice training “*Ip-gwuan*” and walking or jogging meditation which takes place between the Five Chakra hills and the “*Il-Ju*” gate. This allows time for reflection and preparation for the day ahead.

Communal Meal Practice (*Balwoo Konyang*) consists of many parts. Through this practice adherents reflect on themselves and how each individual has the potential to awaken to a pure life. This is an active *Seon* meditation that nurtures the understanding of the need for order, harmony and ultimately respect within the temple. This in turn fosters a deeper sense of compassion for the people who have made the meal possible. “*Paru Konyang*” is a unique and special way of eating in Korean temples. At this communal meal practice food is eaten in total silence, and not a single grain of rice is wasted.



Tea Ceremony (*Dahdoh*) is one of the practices of some Buddhist sects. Koreans say that there are several ways to enjoy a good tea. One should start by enjoying the sounds of the water boiling. Then, relax with the soothing aroma of the tea and seeing the soft and subtle colors. Lastly, one can feel the warmth of the tea radiating through the cup and slowly savor the taste.

”*Yebul*” is a devotional chant of praise to Buddha. This solemn procedure is held three times a day: in the morning, midday and evening, helping to clear the mind. The Diamond Sutra is often chanted.

One basic exercise is the practice of 108 bows to the Buddha. During this *Seon* practice adherents reflect on their lives, acknowledge mistakes and strengthen resolve to live truly.

For Buddhists in Korea the number 108 is of some importance. First and foremost is the idea of 108 “*bon-nay*”, or the 108 agonies. They believe that there are 108 afflictions for humans, encompassing both that which we consider as “good” and that which we consider as “bad.” In a somewhat related manner, if a Buddhist feels “unbalanced” in some way, they will often perform a ritual 108 times, for example 108 bows or 108 steps.

Sunmudo also contains a “*Poomse*” (prearranged sequence of attack and defense movements) that contains, not coincidentally, 108 movements.

After lunch monks, Sunmudo Instructor trainees and visitors work for about two hours. Jobs include cleaning, repairing and farming.

To a *Sunmudo* master every movement and thought is an expression of mind. By purifying and harmonizing body, mind and breath, one may enter into perfect spiritual concentration (*Samadhi*) and ultimately, Nirvana.

Golgulsa temple has run Sunmudo training programs since 1992 for those who would like to experience the traditions of Korean Seon Buddhism including Sonmudo.

The Breath of *Seon*

Sunmudo training is composed of: “still training,” which includes “*chwason*,” or sitting meditation, yoga like exercises, and Chinese Gi-gong, as well as “active training,” which includes gymnastics and martial arts. There is usually “still training” in the morning and “active training” in the evening.



“Anapansati” is part of the training. It is a traditional training method in Yoga and Buddhism. It is the way to attain spiritual enlightenment by harmonizing body, mind and breathing. *“Ana”* means breathing in, *“pana”* means breathing out and *“sati”* means mindfulness.

Golgulsa Temple occupies half a mountain and actually contains several temples, administrative building, training hall, several dormitories, dining hall, and so on. It is definitely worth a visit for those interested in Buddhism, martial arts or Korean history and culture.



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(This quote is from “*The inscription on the monument of the Stupa of the Hidden Light of the Bright Moon*, dedicated to the monk, posthumously given the name of “*Daenanghye*.” Translation by Choe Chi-Won.)

3) Translations of numerous Silla dynasty documents including other quotes by King Gyeongmun can be found at:

<http://www.hwarangdo.com/hwarang.htm#wonhwa>

4) Ngo An, Korea, *Mind Moon Circle Quarterly*, Summer 1984, pp.7

Can be found on the Internet at <http://www.gardendigest.com/zen/quotes6.htm>.

5) Materials provided by Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

6) Materials provided by Golgulsa Temple, including its web site found at:

<http://www.golgulsa.com> and <http://www.sunmudo.com>, and interviews with Golgulsa Abbot Seol, monks and students February 10 & 11, 2006.

Many thanks to Canadian Grey Mills who accompanied me on one Temple Stay at Golgulsa

Part 2 Kuk-Gung Korean Traditional Archery



An interview with Master Byun Hyun-tae

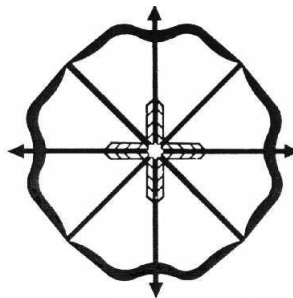
Nov. 2007 During the summer of 2007 I found myself teaching English in a small elegant town nearby Korea's central military headquarters. Driving around I saw a Kuk-gung range. I started training there and had the fortune to meet Master Byun Hyun-tae, a 4th Dan in this unique art and sport. Though I had done Kuk-gung for a couple of years, Master Byun refined my technique enormously. Below are excerpts from his teachings.



<http://www.koreanarchery.org/classic/oldpics.html>

Introduction

Archery is an ancient tool for hunting and war. South Korea's ancient traditional style of archery is called "Kuk-gung" which literally means "Korean national bow."

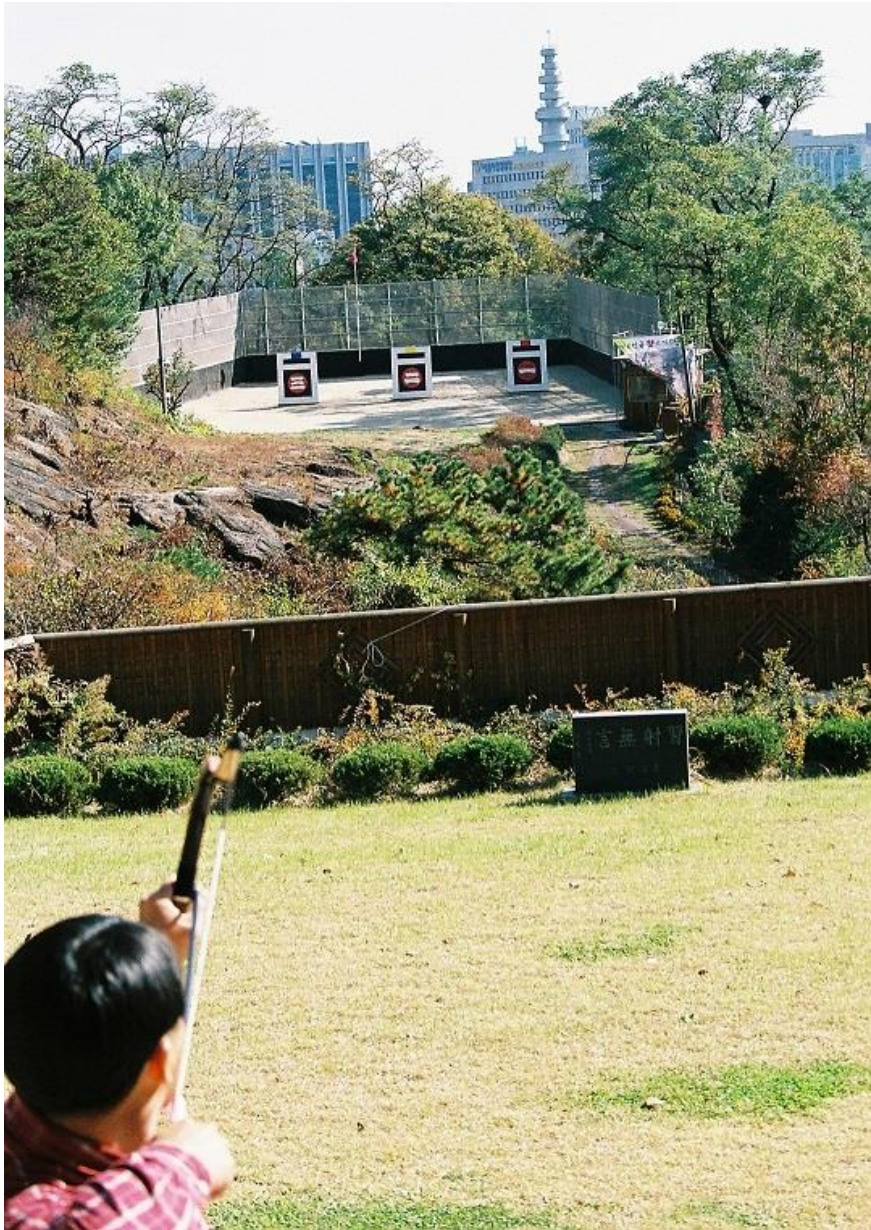


National symbol of Korean archery

Kuk-gung is substantially different from Olympic style archery in many ways. For example, Olympic targets are a paltry seventy meters away, compared to Kuk-gung targets which are to be found at a whopping 145-meter distance from the shooters.



Consequently, it should not be a surprise South Koreans tend to do quite well in Olympic archery competitions.



At this time it is a thriving sport and passion for men and women of all ages. It is also rapidly growing as an international sport.

Brief history

It's difficult to determine the exact age of Kuk-gung in South Korea, however it appears to date at least as far back as 37 B.C. when King Chumong, first “*Taewang*” or Supreme King of Korea, founder of the Koguryo dynasty and an expert archer, mandated all government officers be skilled in Kuk-gung. Korean legend has it that at the age of one month he began to speak. He complained to his mother that flies were biting his eyes. He asked that she make him a bow and arrows and so she did. Chumong took the bow and with every arrow he shot, he hit a fly. As a young man he became a magnificent hunter, and later, warrior.

Consequently, for the next 1500 years, Kuk-gung was primarily practiced by soldiers and government officials, however King Sunjo who reigned from 1567 to 1608 opened the first public Kuk-gung range for regular people, called “*Ounjung*,” which means “five clouds” in English. This was a natural reaction to events of the day. In 1592 about 200,000 Japanese soldiers invaded Korea starting the Choson war.



Screaming arrow - used to signal soldiers during wars

A couple of hundred years later, King Kojong who ascended the throne at age 11 in 1863, revitalized the art by opening a spectacular public archery range, called “Hwang Hak Jung” in 1889, which survives until today near Namsam or “South Mountain” in Seoul. Though presiding over a very chaotic period in Korean history, King Kojong recognized the great value of Kuk-gung to promote mental and physical fitness in the Korean people.

In 1894, during the Korean military’s “Kapo” Reform Enactments, Kuk-gung was officially retired as a weapon of war, replaced by firearms. Thereafter, Kuk-gung became purely a sport

In 1962 Olympic archery was included as an extra-curricular activity in Korean schools and continued to be extremely popular through the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul. Since that time, Koreans have won a disproportionately large number of Gold medals in men’s and women’s divisions, while simultaneously, Kuk-gung has re-emerged as the dominant archery sport in Korea. In 1992 there were 258 clubs in South Korea whereas in 2002 there were 320. At this time there are over 30,000 Kuk-gung practitioners in South Korea.

The bows

Traditional Korean bows are different from modern bows in that they are hand made from natural materials including bamboo, horn, sinew, black locust, birch bark and oak. Modern bows for Kuk-gung are made from a variety of laminates.



Arrows

Traditionally these were made from bamboo and some Korean archers still use bamboo arrows with pheasant feathers, but most use carbon fiber arrows with plastic feathering.

The Thumb Ring

Korean Kuk-gung, like the Mongolian style of archery uses a thumb ring or “Kakji,” to pull back the bow string. Women’s Kakji tend to be lighter and smaller, while men’s are usually longer and heavier. Some men however, use a women’s Kakji, while some men use women’s. The choice of Kakji is very individualistic. The Kakji is a kind of trigger for Korean traditional archery.



The Jung

A “Jung” is a Kuk-gung range. Many of the Jung in South Korea are truly awesome in age and architectural design. Most Korean traditional archers believe there is a spirit in each Jung.



Hwanghak Jung

Most Jung have ceremonies to initiate new members. This ritual usually includes bowing in front of the targets and pouring a little traditional rice wine or “*Makoli*,” on the ground. Most people can feel the profound beauty and power in traditional Jung. Kuk-gung tradition is definitely one of the most honorable descendants of the Korean race. Jung culture is a worthy topic of an entire book. Upon entering many of the more traditional Jung, members are expected to bow to the spirit of that Jung. Almost all Jung expect members to bow to the targets before the first shot. Simply put, Jung are DEEP! New Jung are opening around the U.S. at a surprising rate.

The target

Kuk-gung targets are two meters wide and two and two thirds' meters high. They usually have a microphone placed on the back with speakers set behind the archers to help them know when they hit the target. Few things are more satisfying than the “tock” sound of a solid hit on target!

Stance



The left foot points two or three degrees to the right of the target, while the right foot is one foot distance behind at a 90 degree angle. “Gi” (“Chi” in Mandarin, “Ki” in Japanese) flows up from the earth through the soles of the feet. Simultaneously, Gi flows down from the atmosphere through the top of the head. The ascending and descending Gi flows meet at the “Tan-chien” (“Tan-tien” in Mandarin, “Hara” in Japanese, or center of gravity, in English, about two inches below the navel). The legs, buttocks, hips and upper body “lock” during the shooting process. Thus, the shooter is emerged in a universal flow of Gi.

Grip



Most right-handed people hold the bow with the left hand. Middle, ring and little fingers wrap around the front of the bow handle. The index finger is curled up on the front of the bow. The thumb wraps around the back of the bow. The arrow rests on the thumb during the shooting process.

Dominant eye

Master Byun had a fascinating method of determining a person's dominant eye. Take a piece of paper and tear a hole in the middle. Hold it up in front of the new shooters eyes and ask him or her to look at the bulls' eye. Then, ask the shooter to close the left eye. Can he or she still see the bulls' eye? If the answer is "yes" the shooter is right eye dominant. If no, the shooter is left eye dominant. "Things in nature come in pairs," Master Byun explained. "In each pair there is a dominant and a recessive. For shooting, you need to know your dominant eye."

Shooting sequence

The shooting sequence must be part of a rhythmic, seemingly effortless cycle, timed to breathing. It takes years of practice to master this sequence.

Ready position prior to shooting



Assume the correct stance.

1. Notch the arrow on the bow string.
2. Raise the bow to mid-height, with the bottom of the bow centered at the “Tan-chien” level. Focus the dominant eyes on the center of the target. Take a cleansing breath, slowly inhale and exhale.



3. Inhale while raising the bow and notched arrow above the head pointing at the sky, keeping the dominant eye on the target.



Smoothly draw the bow while simultaneously bringing it down to shooting position.



4. Aim by lining up the arrow at the top of your imaginary triangle focused on the target's top rectangle, and gracefully release the trigger.



The trigger hand continues its movement backwards after release.

Competition



Writer G. Brundage in competition

During competition archers line up and take turns shooting. Usually, 15 to 25 arrows are shot. The winner is determined by the sum of the hits. Tournaments are routinely held all over South Korea. The atmosphere is friendly and generally very informal. During shooting silence is maintained, so it's a good idea to turn your cell phone off during a tournament!

Ranks

The first goal for a novice Kuk-gung archer is hitting the target even once, not an easy task given the distance to the target. The next goal is to make a “Molgi” or hitting the target five times in a row with no misses.

To earn a 1st Dan in Kuk-gung the archer must make 25 out of 45 shots; a 2nd Dan requires hitting 28 shots, 3rd Dan 29, and 4th Dan requires hitting the target 30 out of 45 attempts. A 9th Dan requires a hit record of 39 out of 45 shots!



Four flowers – symbol of 4th Dan rank

A Dan rank is a very honorable (‘Myong-ye-seu-rop-ke’) title given by Korea’s National Archery Association. In addition to the Dan ranks, an expert archer can also be awarded a special title called: “Myong-gung.”



Mr. Shin Sang Woon at HwangHakJun

Mind

In Kuk-gung, as with many East Asian martial arts, all is mind. The bow, arrow, target and shooter are all of one mind. Meditation, relaxation and mind, are all important. “Gi” or universal energy flows through the archer from the earth and sky, out through the instrument of the bow and into the heart of the target.

If you would like more information on this ancient and beautiful art and sport, you can join a Kuk-gung internet ring at goongdo@yahogroups.com. They can answer just about any question you may have. They can also give you information on how to purchase the one book I know of in English about Kuk-gung, written by Thomas Duvernay, who started Kuk-gung in 1993. He has been teaching at Handong Global University, in Pohang, South Korea for about 15 years. His website is located at: <http://www.koreanarchery.org/>

A Korean language web-newspaper can be found at:

<http://archery.news-paper.co.kr/>

Nonsan City, South Korea

Part 3 18th World Military Taekwondo Championships



May, 2008 - Paradoxical as it may seem, the finest Taekwondo fighters from the militaries of 37 nations came together in May to fight for peace, or something like that.

Hard fighting was the norm at the 18th World Military Taekwondo Championships held May 21st to 29th in Seoul, South Korea, which brought together some 437 athletes who are active military personnel from four continents of the earth.

Newly appointed Korean Defense Minister Lee Sang Hee welcomed the athletes at the beginning of the opening ceremony Friday.

Taekwondo was designated an official event of the Military World Games in 1979 by the 130-member nation “International Military Sports Council,” (CISM) which holds the Olympics-like events every four years. Six of the events have been held in Korea over the past 29 years.

This event was hosted by the Korean Ministry of National Defense and organized by KAFAC or Korean Armed Forces Athletic Corps.

All together there were eight different weight classes for each gender and each division began and finished on the same day. The organization was splendid, as was the food and accommodations, according to many athletes.















RESULTS

In terms of the number of Taekwondo gold medals won, Korea took first place in this tournament, taking home 5 Gold and 2 Bronze medals.

However, in terms of total medals won, China took home eight medals, 3 Gold, 1 Silver and 4 Bronze. More than half of their 14-person team won medals. Not a bad showing for this up-and-coming Taekwondo powerhouse at the Olympics.



Definitely however, it was the Korean men's Taekwondo team that won, as all but one of their Gold medals were won by Korean men. With equal certainty, one can say that the Chinese women's team won too as five of their eight medals, including two Gold medals were won by Chinese women.

Italy also put on a smashing good show, with 3 Gold and 4 Silver medals. The Italian women's team took second in the Women's team competition. Germany did passably well with 2 Gold and 1 Bronze medals.

Iran, which always seems to put forward a very strong team in International Taekwondo went back home with five medals, 2 Gold, 1 Silver and 2 Bronze. The Iranian men's team took Second in this competition. The U.S. team brought home 1 Gold and 1 Bronze medal. Certainly, Greece and Saudi Arabia also deserve honorable mention, taking home 1 Silver and 3 Bronze, and 1 Silver and 1 Bronze respectively.

The Saudi Arabian team was given a special award for "Fair Play." The Iraq team was given a special award for "Fighting Spirit."

MVP awards were given to Park Kyong Hun (Korean men's heavyweight) and Helena Fromm (German Women's Welterweight) who fought with passion and precision.

Outstanding Coach Award was given to Ma-Shuguang from China (See Sidebar 1, Interview).

Outstanding Referee Award was given to Abdulrahman Al-Neami, of Qatar.

CHINESE Coach, Team & Taekwondo in China

The Chinese coach Ma-Shuguang, began to practice Taekwondo in 1996, participated in the national games in 1997, and won Gold medals in the national games four times from 2001 – 2003. He stepped down from competition in 2004 because of injury. From then on he has been a Taekwondo coach.

This team is one of the CPLA delegation teams and belongs to the Beijing Military Area Command. It was appointed to participate in the 18th World Military Taekwondo Championships for their outstanding performance in domestic games. This is the first time they have participated in international competition.

The most famous athlete on this team is Zhu Guo, who won 5th place in the 78 KG division in the 2007 World Championships and won the Silver medal in the 2008 Asian Championships. He is now preparing for the 2008 Olympic Games.

All members of the Chinese team hold, 1st Dan Black Belts.

Chinese people began to practice Taekwondo 10 years ago, yet won 3 Gold medals in two Olympic Games demonstrating Taekwondo's rapid development in China. To enhance this very steep learning curve, the Chinese government attaches great importance to training coaches, giving them regular opportunities to improve themselves, communicate with top foreign coaches and analyze the experience.

(Translation by Deng Kui, Nankai University, China)

AMERICAN Coaches & Team

The American team was coached by 1988 Olympian and 1991 World Military Champion Patrice Remarck of Alexandria, Virginia and Marine Corps finest Missy Cann of Cherry Point, North Carolina who was also a World Championship Coach for the Ivory Coast team.

The ladies

Jaime Houston - Bronze Medal

On the first day of the competition, 23 year old Women's Flyweight Jaime Houston picked up a Bronze Medal using a flurry of precision guided high kicks. Hailing from Brooklyn NY and trained at Kang's Elite Taekwondo, she started Taekwondo training at the age of 5. During her matches she radiated Yoda like calm and determination, making it look easy. Holder of a 3rd Dan, she is an E-3 in the U.S. Navy.

Tina Chong, age 23 has been practicing Taekwondo for 15 years. She's a 3rd Dan, member of the U.S. Army and is from L.A.

The Gentlemen

David Bartlett - Gold Medal Welterweight. Mr. Bartlett is 28 years old and has been in the army for 10 years and will soon be an E-7. He has been training in Taekwondo for roughly 23 years and is married.

Jonathan Scherquist – Mr. Scherquist fought in the lightweight Division, is a member of the Air Force, is 29 years old and has a 3rd Dan in Taekwondo. He has been practicing Taekwondo for 17 years. This was his first CISM. He won his first match against Romania 5-2, but lost to Saudi Arabia, 5-2. The Saudi fighter went on to take a Silver medal.

Ascenzo Bonitati - Bantamweight, age 26 and holder of a 4th Dan, has been practicing Taekwondo for 15 years.

Quinton Beach - age 25 has been a Taekwondo practitioner for 14 years, holds a 1st Dan in Taekwondo and 3rd Dan in Tang Soo Do. He fights in the Middle weight Division.

Steven Ostrander - Heavyweight, age 25 has practiced Taekwondo for 22 years.

Jamie Lee Toyota – Men’s flyweight division.

GERMAN Coach & Team

The Coach

It’s not terribly surprising that Germany put forward a strong team given that the coach/trainer Georg Streif has been both competitor and coach dating back to at least 1981 when he was national sports trainer for Taekwondo and Karate in Germany. His list of national and international sports participation is nothing less than awesome, including World Cup (’87) European Cup (’89), World Games (’89), Olympics (’88, 2000, 2004) and this isn’t half of it.

The Team

The German team had eight competitors, with everyone winning matches. Gold medals were won by Helena Fromm (Women's Welterweight) and Nildem Kayas (Women's Flyweight), Silver won by Daniel Manz (Men's Featherweight) and Bronze won by Sumeyye Galec (Women's Fin-weight) and Robert Hofmann (Men's Middleweight). (Helena Fromm's star is expected rise even higher in this Summer's Olympic games!)

Part 4 10th World Taekwondo Festival & Korea Classic



Two Historical Events at the 10th World Taekwondo Festival & Korea Classic Open, July 1 – 6, 2008

WTF & ITF unification took a giant step forward this July by competing together at the 10th World Taekwondo Festival & Korea Classic Open 2008 held at Chung Cheong University in Cheongju City, South Korea.



Fighters from 60 nations attended this historic event. Previous World Taekwondo Festivals have been held in Korea, Taiwan and Malaysia.

“The WTF and the ITF have made conspicuous developments in their own styles for some time now but have decided to come together for this festival to play a role in uniting the world into one. Despite us being two organizations, I think the opportunity in which we can forge strong, lasting links has been won through the historic World Taekwondo Festival that we are holding jointly for the first time ever, transcending political, ideology, race, religion, and age,” said Choi, Jung-Hwa, President of the ITF at the opening ceremony Tuesday, July 1st.

Dr. Oscar Oh, Chairman of the Organizing Committee noted that: “The WTF and the ITF, the two main Taekwondo Organizations, have the same root, but have not always worked in harmony with each other, which regrettably has been a hurdle to prevent Taekwondo from becoming a truly global sport...”



Dr. Oscar Oh Chairman of the Organizing Committee

“The World Taekwondo Festival has been steadily seeking harmony, friendship and peace among the people of the world and aiming to enhance the education of the youth, on the basis of the principal spirit of “We are one through Taekwondo,” he added.

Taekwondo is currently practiced in 180 countries by an estimated 60 million people. Unification of these two organizations would create the largest single sport organization worldwide.

Rules for this competition were based on a standardized Taekwondo system: one point for delivered attack to trunk, two for delivered attack on the face, and an additional point awarded when a contestant is knocked down and the referee counts. Match score is the sum of points in each of three rounds.

The finals were held Friday, July 04, 2008. Not surprisingly, Korea came in first in the Gyorugi (WTF full-contact sparring) competition with a whopping total of 71 medals, 19 Gold, 18 Silver and 34 Bronze.

Australia and Kazakhstan about tied for Second place in the Gyorugi competition. Australia won a total of 30 medals, with 8 being Gold, 12 Silver and 10 Bronze. Kazakhstan won a total of 28 medals, 11 Gold, 5 Silver and 12 Bronze.

Russia was the undisputed champion of the Matsogi (ITF style sparring) divisions bringing home an even twenty medals, seven Gold, seven Silver and six Bronze.

There were 11 Gyorugi weight categories, male and female, junior and senior; thus there were 44 divisions. Consequently, there are too many stories to tell in a single article. However, some come to mind. Mathew Beach, of New Zealand and winner of the Men's Heavy Weight Gyorugi Division is ranked top 16 in the world and is pegged to compete in the Olympics in Beijing. His opponent in the final match, Anton Stevens, fighting for Australia, is really a Kiwi too, having moved to Australia some years ago. This was Anton's first international competition. He trains at Halls Taekwondo in Melbourne and holds a 1st Dan, though his main martial art training was at Chan's Martial Arts in New Zealand, a Kung Fu school.

Another great success story at this competition was the Malaysian team. They brought home 17 medals between Gyorugi and Matsogi combined, 6 Gold, 2 Silver and 9 bronze. The National Taekwondo Association of Malaysia was only reregistered two months ago after a two years deregistration by the sports commissioner of Malaysia. Thus the National team and the clubs team did very well in this championship with a government grant. They train at the National Sports Complex of Malaysia at Bukit Jalil in Kuala Lumpur. The Coach, Master Rassiah Dhanaraj, holder of a 6th Dan (Korea) should certainly be proud of his young team.

An Uzbek team put on a smashing good show considering the modest size of their team, with Anna Soroka winning gold in Gyorugi Fin weight division, and the rest of the team winning 13 medals in the Matsogi competition. This group coming out of Tashkent, Uzbekistan truly demonstrates that Taekwondo is one family, in the form of Evgeniy Pak and Dmitry Pak, who are brothers and coaches for WTF and ITF respectively. ITF was the first in Uzbekistan back in 1989, with WTF following two years later. In 1993 Inna Hegay was the first Uzbek to stand in the winners circle in world Taekwondo competition when she won Second Place in the Matsogi division. They currently are planning on sending three competitors to the Olympics in Beijing this summer. September 17 to 21 they will be hosting an international ITF Taekwondo competition in Tashkent, inquiries can be made to K.I.T.INNA@mail.ru or kvon92@mail.ru

A Hong Kong team with 54 competitors – the second largest group to attend - came to this festival guided by Master Ricky Chan. Most Taekwondo in Hong Kong has traditionally been WTF, with a smaller ITF group. Taekwondo has been popular in Hong Kong for more than 30 years.

Japan (8 medals in Gyorugi, 3 in Matsogi, coached by Hiroshi Kanai), Kyrgyzstan, Morocco and Kenya also deserve honorable mention.

On Saturday morning and afternoon, a variety of smaller competitions, including Poomse & Tul, Kyukpa, Taekwondo Aerobics and Free Performance were held.

In Korea one can find many cross ITF/WTF individuals. Mr. Cho Yeong-deok, ITF-Korea National Demonstration Team Director was a member of the internationally famous Kukkiwon's WTF Demonstration team back in 1996. Asked who did his teams choreography, he responded: "My wife." His wife, Jung Eun-ja, was previously also a choreographer and member of the famed Korean Kukkiwon WTF Demonstration Team. Incidentally, of the 13 members on his team at the festival, four brought home Gold, and two Silver.



Korean Demonstration team Cho Yeong Deok Korea National Demo Tour
Director at right

MMA Vs TAEKWONDO

Saturday evening another historic event took place with a MMA Vs. Taekwondo “Special Battle” and Free Fighting Event. MMA Fighters from Korea’s premier Mixed Martial Art organization, “Spirit MC” combated against some of the world’s Taekwondo fighters from Japan, Argentina, Korea and Italy.

Call me crazy, but I’ve always felt that cross style competitions are the most exciting, and this Saturday nights at the fights was some of the most exciting I’ve seen. When the smoke cleared and all was said and done at the end, the score was Korean MMA Spirit MC 4, Taekwondo 3, victory to Spirit MC! In all fairness to Taekwondo, most of the Spirit MC fighters also had a background in – Taekwondo!

Before the fights, I had a chance to briefly interview Mr. Pak Hwang-hyun, CEO of Spirit MC. Asked who he predicted to win the evening, he very diplomatically responded: “I believe we’re going to make better martial artists from this competition this evening.” This answer typifies the spirit of unity found throughout the entire festival this week in Cheongju, South Korea.



ITF Protective pad



MMA Protective pad

The rules varied according to the fight. The first match between Japanese Taekwondo man Hiroki Horikome and Korean Spirit MC fighter Jong-hyun Koh used K-1 rules and resulted in a victory for Horikome who won on points earned mainly punching. Though his punching style resembled Karate-do, he also used a variety of well practiced Taekwondo kicks.



Japanese Taekwondo man Hiroki Horikome
and Korean Spirit MC fighter Jong-hyun Koh





It was a hard-fought match

The second match between Spirit MC fighter June-hee Oh and Korean Yong-ho Shin resulted in a victory by Mr. Oh from ferocious flurries of well-timed kicks and punches. This match followed ITF rules.



Spirit MC fighter June-hee Oh and Korean Yong-ho Shin



Spirit MC fighter June-hee Oh and Korean Yong-ho Shin



The third bout pitted Spirit MC fighter Woo-sung Yoo against Argentina's Ariel Alemanno, who lost on submission following MMA rules.



Ariel Alemanno shooting side kick at Korean Woo sung Yoo

In the fourth match, another Argentinean, Matias Ramos won against Spirit MC fighter Hyung-ryul Kim following ITF rules. At first this looked like a mismatch, with Ramos having height and weight advantage, but Kim's amazing energy and skill nearly won him the match, till he committed a foul that almost ended the fight. Ramos came back with renewed vigor and won on points.

This was followed by a spirited bout between Spirit MC fighter Chang-Seol Lee and Taekwondo fighter David Osullavan of Ireland. Lee dominated from the beginning and never let up ultimately winning with a spinning back fist punch.



Spirit MC fighter Chang-Seol Lee and
Taekwondo fighter David O'Sullivan of Ireland

The sixth match found another Argentinean Taekwondo Fighter, named Garcia Cristian fighting Mu-bae Choi. Again, the MC fighter dominated, winning with an armbar submission.

The final event of the evening followed ITF rules and demonstrated spectacular levels of skill by Spirit MC fighter Na-young Son of Korea and Taekwondoka Silvia Farigu of Italy. Though Ms. Son fought valiantly, the clean, precise, artistically perfect Taekwondo skills of Ms. Farigu won in the end. Her turning and back kick combinations, followed with straight punches won her the evening and roar of the crowd.



Ms. Farigu of Italy hook kick to stomach of Ms Na Young Son of Korea



Silvia Farigu Victor

After this competition there was a wonderful party hosted by Chung Cheong University. Competitors, coaches and officials delighted in some relaxation, conversation and sharing of e-mail addresses and phone numbers. Everyone agreed the university had done a fine job providing facilities, organization and other amenities. Distinctions such as ITF, WTF and MMA were forgotten in the spirit of unity found within the global Taekwondo family.

Part 5 Mount Gyeriong Buncheong Pottery



Yiso Doye Gallery, South Korea

Paging through some Taekwondo Times magazine stories I was pleasantly surprised to notice that in addition to Taekwondo stories, they also occasionally published articles on other Korean arts as well. Because I had such excellent and educational experiences at this arts village, I thought I'd share them with the readers of Taekwondo Times Magazine.

Rare iron and silicon rich, slightly magnetic clay produces a hard-durable pottery with a rich history.

August 10, 2008



Majestic Mt. Gyerionsan

Nestled in the foothills of the magical and mysterious mountain called Gyerionsan, lies an idyllic refuge of an ancient art – a fusion traditionalist/modern village speckled with wildflowers and inhabited by those who lovingly make pottery.

Inspired by the nature surrounding and infusing it, Mt. Gyeriong Pottery Art Village began in the winter of 1993 – when the dream first sprang to life lifted on the visionary wings of Master Ceramist Song Ho Lim.



Master Ceramist Song Ho Lim

Pottery has a long and honorable history here. Gyeriong Buncheong Ware flourished from the late 15th through the 16th Centuries, though there has been a revival during the past 20 years thanks mainly to the efforts of Master Lim, founder of the Yiso Doye Center, the first such revivalist center in what has evolved into a small but thriving arts village.

Gyeriong Mountain is located in the west central part of the peninsula, and is revered in South Korea as a sacred mountain with more “qi” or “intrinsic energy” than any other location in the nation. It is centrally located between Gyeriong, Daejon, and Gongju cities. King Yi Song Gye, founder of the last dynasty in Korea (Choson, 1392- 1905), on the advice of his geomantic Shamans (similar in some ways to Chinese Feng Shui) started to build his capital city at the foot of Mount Gyeriong, however changed his mind and instead located it in what is now called Seoul. The modern Gyeriong city was originally built as a military town and is adjacent to the Korean equivalent of the Pentagon.

ORIGINS AND QUALITIES OF BUNCHEONG CLAY

Very difficult to find, and even then only in limited quantities, Buncheong clay is found exclusively in Gyeriong Mountain. It comes in four colors: black, brown, ivory and white. Because of its rarity, unusual strength and illustrious history, Buncheong Pottery is held in the highest esteem by Korean people. The white and ivory clays are even rarer than the black and brown clays, softer and more elastic as well, at least in part due to slightly lower iron content.

Each of the ceramists at Mt. Gyeriong Pottery Art Village dig their own clay and keep the locations where they find Buncheong clay secret, even from each other. Master Lim however, did give some clues as to where it might be found. He said at or near the base of the tall rocky mountain, nearby a valley stream or river, can be found soil that has “matured” enough to make fine, rich Buncheong clay. He mentioned that white Buncheong is exclusively found on the Gyeriong City side of the mountain, and black Buncheong is more commonly found on the Gongju City side of Gyeriong Mountain.

Mature clay he said is more elastic and has a better mix of iron. “Buncheong clay is stronger; it will not be broken easily, and is more powerful when cooked at high temperatures. Other clays even with the same color, like Ongki Clay, are easily broken.”

Black and brown Buncheong clays are iron rich and slightly magnetic. He mentioned that clay found in Kangwangdo (Eastern Korea) has a reddish color and a formula of Fe_2O_3 compared to the darker Gyeriong Buncheong clay that has a formula of Fe_3O_4 . Master Lim also mentioned that Buncheong clay has a higher than average silicon content of about 76%. He said two kilos of Buncheong clay contains only about 1.5 ml. of water. Sometimes he mixes clays to get the right working consistency. He does this by adding water to the different clays, sieving it with a fine net and then putting it in the sun to evaporate for about a week. But, he stressed, other clays are for making soft pottery, only mature Buncheong clay has the right mix of iron and silicon to make great pottery.

Because Buncheong clay is so rare and precious, it is not found on the world market.

FIRING THE CLAY

Asked about how he fires his pottery, Master Lim said when he uses his LPG gas kiln, the temperature is slowly brought up to 1,250 degrees centigrade, baked for 12 hours and allowed to cool for 6 hours. His village also has a communally owned very large traditional wood fired kiln that reaches about 900 degrees centigrade. In this traditional kiln, pottery is typically baked for two nights and one day.

GLAZE

Master Lim usually uses a glaze made of 40% oak tree ash and 60% “Changsok” (feldspar) which are powdered, mixed and baked at 1,240, centigrade. He mentioned that sometimes in this process he uses “Witan Won” charcoal and all holes in the kiln are sealed to make it an absolutely air tight procedure. Once the glaze is prepared,

he dips his “soft” pottery into it and it is “baked-again” (“jay-in” in Korean language). During this second baking process the pottery is slowly raised to a medium heat of 600 - 700 degrees centigrade, and then the temperature is raised to 1,000 – 1,240.

Again, he blocks off the chimney “so no oxygen gets in and the carbon comes out.” This he said makes it really hard and creates a speckled black pigmentation in, and solid black pigmentation under the surface of the glaze.

After a very slow cooling process, he sorts out any imperfect pieces and burnishes the unglazed bottoms. Some pieces go to the gallery and others to be sold. He also said he records the results of each firing so as to ensure he has thorough and complete records of all his work.

PIGMENTS

His pigments come from a variety of sources and he travels extensively around Asia to find new materials and colors and compare them with his stock. He reported that he currently uses about 300 pigments in his work.

His doctoral dissertation contains an analysis of a spectrum of mineral particle sizes (controlled by sieve mesh), baking temperatures at neutral and reduction atmospheres and how these factors result in different shades and luster effects in black pigment.

OTHER ERAS OF KOREAN POTTERY

Master Ceramist Song Ho Lim also makes a Goryeo dynasty (10th to 13 Century) style of pottery with a light jade colored glaze called “Chongja,” and a white color pottery from the Choson dynasty called “Paekja,” in addition to his Buncheong pottery.

DONG YEH VILLAGE and MASTER LIM

At this time there are about 12 gallery/shops in Dong Yeh Village, enjoyed by many thousands of visitors every year.



Gallery Shop near Yiso Doyea

Collectors outnumber tourists here for one obvious reason. This is the home of masters, in one of Korea's most sacred locations, not a place with cheap tourist reproductions. (It's not exactly easy to find, either!) Master Ceramist Song Ho Lim is currently completing his dissertation in Materials Science & Engineering at Myungji University in Kyonggki Province, near Seoul.

Numerous Korean media including weekly magazines and newspapers have published stories about Master Lim and his art, with “Monthly Pottery Magazine” keeping regular stories about his life and work at the forefront of Korea’s attention. He also holds annual exhibitions.

Though modestly claiming to have “no special skills,” Master Ceramist Song Ho Lim did reluctantly admit to having a creative nature. His wife is also a uniquely talented ceramic artist. They have two children and live in Banpo Village, Gongju City, Chungnam Province of South Korea. Curiously, Master Lim is Catholic, his wife is Buddhist and the children are Presbyterian.

No one during the interview process for this story referred to Song Ho Lim as “Master.” He’s a plain spoken, unpretentious kind of guy. But this reporter would be less than honest to refer to him as anything else.

Contact information

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(This address is slightly misleading, Yiso Doye is out in the countryside, not in Gongju City proper.)

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(Master Lim does not speak English, though he has some friends that do.)

Part 6 Taekwondo Scene in Beijing



“Yi Ru” Taekwondo Dojang in Changping District of Beijing

2011, August

The earliest historical records of Beijing date back to 1045, though it didn't become a cultural and political center until 1215, the time of the invasion by the great Mongol warrior Genghis Khan and his massive armies who marked this transition by burning the city to the ground. Today, Beijing is one of the great capital cities of the world, intensely dynamic; ultra-modern in some areas and truly ancient in others.

In brief, Taekwondo in Beijing is massively popular.

There are literally hundreds of Taekwondo schools scattered around Beijing and in the suburbs. Taekwondo schools can be found at many universities, schools, health clubs and community centers, however there are not so many “stand-alone” private academies as are found in the U.S. and South Korea.

Chinese people in Beijing are in love with foreign martial arts, especially Taekwondo. Curiously, most of the Wu-Shu I've seen here during the past year have been reflective of Southern styles, utilizing mostly punches with few kicks, generally all quite low, which reflects the well-known Chinese adage: "Nan quan, bei tui," which means: "South fist, north leg." Consequently, Taekwondo seems to be the leader in high-kick fighting arts taught here in Beijing at this time.

Most of the Chinese WTF Taekwondo instructors I met here Beijing earned their Dan ranks either at Shichahai Sports School in Beijing or overseas. Established in 1958, Shichahai Sports School is located just north of the Forbidden City and is the school Jet Li graduated from. It offers many martial art programs including Taekwondo, Wu Shu, Sanda, and boxing. It's a key National Advanced Sports Talents Training Base, so naturally it's quite large, and more like a university campus than an ordinary school. Also, it has a fine 3-Star hotel, foreigner restaurant and other amenities. Luckily, they cater to long- and short-term training programs and are happy to meet the needs of foreign visitors.





A major hub for ITF Taekwondo is located at Beijing University. The instructor, Mr. Ri Myong Chul is an 8th Dan from Pyongyang. I worked out with their class and it reminded me of Taekwondo I learned in the U.S. during the 1970's before the WTF transitioned to continuous action sparring. Quanjangnim Ri is a traditional teacher: serious, firm and precise during class, but relaxed and friendly after. The Taekwondo school at Beijing University has its' own building, called "Taekwondo Hall," a beautiful older two-story stone classic.

I visited after the end of final exams so the class was smaller than usual, but it was – like Taekwondo everywhere – a great workout and really, really fun.



A (small) part of the Beijing University Taekwondo club

Recently I called the secretary for the ITF in Beijing, Ms. Choi Chun Yu, a Korean Chinese lady, with a couple of questions. She mentioned that there was going to be a “Taekwondo wedding” the next day, a Sunday. I went with Beijing ITF Taekwondo Quanjangnim Ri Myong Chul, Jo Kyong Ho and Ms. Choi, and had a truly wonderful time. Chinese, Koreans, and I, an American celebrated the happiness of a young Chinese couple marrying that are part of the world Taekwondo family. This branch of the ITF has clubs in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Hebei, Shangdong, and Fujien. Ms. Choi happened to mention that five “Taekwondo couples,” had come from her school in Beijing.

Many community centers around Beijing also have Taekwondo programs.

A classic example is “Yi Ru” Taekwondo Dojang in the Changping District of Beijing.



Seven days a week one can see kids walking the streets proudly wearing their Taekwondo uniforms. Probably the biggest Taekwondo school in the main commercial downtown area of this district is “Yi Ru.” It’s located next to the starting point of the 2008 Olympic Triathlon Course, with large gardens nearby, and a beautiful stadium across the street.

Led by 4th Dan Ma Zun, this WTF Taekwondo Dojang opened in 2001 and now has some 600 students and six or seven instructors.

A graduate of the famous Shichahai Sports School in Beijing, Ma “Laoshi” (“teacher” in Chinese) has a lot to be proud of. His students are world class kids with a passion for Taekwondo. Waiting for the advanced class to begin I was lucky to meet and interview one of his advanced students, Miss Jiang Jin Jiao. It was especially lucky because she was one of only two students that spoke English.

In her third year of high school (a senior in the Chinese system), she is 18 years old and plans to enter the university next year and major in Physical Education. Starting Taekwondo in 2004, she has already earned her 2nd Dan and is looking forward to her 3rd Dan test.

When asked how many tournaments she's entered, she said she didn't know, "Maybe about 10." How was her fight record? Like most Chinese she's very modest and said "Maybe 50/50."

Why does she study Taekwondo? "I really like it," she said with a big smile.

After university what would she like to do? "Be a P.E. teacher," she replied.

Though winning only one Gold Medal in Taekwondo during the Beijing Olympics in 2008, it appears the future of Taekwondo in China is very, very bright indeed.

Taekwondo Wedding in Beijing – Bringing worlds together



Many people think of China as “this” or “that.” An ancient nation, a strange far-away nation - a communist nation. But I’m an old-fashioned idealistic kind of guy and think more about world peace through sports than any specific ideology. Call me naïve, or whatever, I don’t care. Today I went to a wedding. There was a happy beautiful young couple. They weren’t “this” ideology or “that,” just a young couple in love that wanted a life together.

I was invited by Taekwondo Qujangnim Ri Myong Chul I met last week at Beijing University, because the groom had been one of his students for 9 some years. It was beautiful, to be sure. I was treated like a guest of honor, mainly I suppose because I was with Qujangnim Ri, and/or a foreigner, and/or maybe because I was representing Taekwondo Times magazine. I got to sit at the table of the groom’s family members, a place of high honor. There must have been 500 people there. Ripples of happiness and warmth flowed through the room. And oh, the food was out-of-this world! The duck, beef, oyster, shrimp, and vegetables were incredibly awesome.

But, the real treat wasn’t the food, but rather the feeling; the feeling that cannot be defined, the feeling of family, of oneness, of sharing; sharing the joy of family, community, and love. Those who’ve never been there cannot understand.

Though I’ve been in Beijing for a year now, this was the first time I’ve felt true community. It wasn’t a communist or capitalist thing. It was a human thing - a strange thing that only soft hearted - true humans can understand.

World peace through Taekwondo? I don’t know, but human relations revolve around trust, and love; and relationships between people, like student and teacher, husband and wife, are sacred at least here in Asia.



A wedding in Beijing. It seems inconsequential. But, to me, it was a beginning of understanding – of China, and life in this strange but beautiful, ancient, new land.

The groom is Zhang Yan Peng. He was an organizer with the Beijing Olympic Games Committee, and afterward went to work for the Beijing Development Committee. The bride, is Zhao Jing Jing. May they know happiness and true love forever.



Taekwondo in Beijing? It's happening. "This" and "that?" Forget them. Harmony exists when people of like mind wish it so.

About the writer

I started formal training in judo during the spring of 1969 and Taekwondo that summer, both at the downtown YMCA in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My Taekwondo teacher was Mr. Lee, a classic “old school” 6th Dan Master and I can never forget the one time he praised me: “Good-ah tech-a-ni-que-ah!”

In the 1970s some people called me a “Dojo bum” because I studied many different martial arts and changed schools fairly often. This is definitely “taboo” in martial arts circles, but in my case was necessitated by the fact that I was always a student, had very little money and usually couldn’t afford classes at any one place for too long. *Se est la vie.*

I was however a regular at many kinds of martial art tournaments, including Judo, Taekwondo, Karate, and Kung Fu, mainly in the midwestern US, with most of the best of those tournaments held in Chicago in the 1970s though I sometimes competed in regional and national tournaments. My record? Ha! I never kept one, but did amass quite a collection of trophies and medals. In about 1984 or so I had to stop regularly fighting in competitions mainly because I started Graduate School which was quite demanding, and like usual, I was still pretty darned poor. In any case I’d had a 14-year competition career, felt pretty good about myself and knew from practical experience in the real world I could take care of myself.

At that time, and still today I never cared about the politics of Taekwondo (except to express my profound respect for Grandmaster Choi Hong Hee), and I’ve covered ITF, WTF and Joon Rhee Taekwondo indiscriminately down through the decades.

In 1972 I spent the summer in Columbia South America and continued my Taekwondo training there as well, with my favorite school being “Club Taekwondoka” in Cali. That was a perfectly lovely city, half-way up a mountain so it was never hot or cold. The city was filled with flowers and happy people. Whereas others might have pursued less healthy habits, I got my buzz through hard training, as Taekwondo always is.

Back in the USA I continued training at different clubs. One of my favorites was run by a true master named John Carini who could kick just about anyone from just about any angle at just about any time. He had a great team of black belts and that’s where I really made the leap from martial art student to reasonably competent competition fighter. What identified Master Carini as a true master in my opinion was, he had seemingly perfect control and never hurt anyone.

Another true master I trained with was named Guy Stowell who also taught Yoga and Tai Chi. I have him to thank for my continued flexibility up until today. Having traveled through so many countries over the decades I’ve gotten sick a few times, and Yoga stretches synchronized with breathing always seemed to help pull me out of the worst of it. The psychological aspects of Yoga, focusing on relaxation and peaceful imagery are important components of that system. Amongst martial artists TKD practitioners usually have the greatest flexibility and Yoga really helps that. Enormous thanks to Guy Stowell and the great Yoga masters of distant ages.

I lived in South Korea from 2001 to 2009 and focused mainly on Taekwondo during that time while also training in Korean Kendo, called “Kumdo,” Korean archery (which uses a Mongolian style bow due to its extreme power, range and accuracy), Hapkido and kickboxing.

In 2009 I moved to Beijing and continued to scout out and occasionally train with different Taekwondo teams, a few of which I wrote about for an article published in Taekwondo Times magazine May 2010 titled: *Taekwondo Scene in Beijing*.

My favorite Korean martial art movie? 바람의 파이터 (Param ui baita – Fighter in the Wind) a somewhat fictionalized account of the story of Choi Bae-dal – a Korean that went to Japan during WWII to become a fighter pilot but his destiny led him along a very different path. That guy just wouldn't give up! The real character upon which the movie is loosely based later became known as Mas Oyama, founder of Kyokushin style Karate-Do. “Kyokushin” means “Ultimate Truth,” in Japanese.

I'm no Choi Bae-dal, but have done a massive amount of real-world fighting starting at age six, mainly because I went to schools in different countries and learned the meaning of “prejudice” the old-fashioned way. “Reality is,” as Bruce Lee said: “a punch in the face.” Luckily, learning Taekwondo and other martial arts put an end to most of the more overt forms of physical bullying I've had to deal with in my life.

I hope this book encourages all martial artists to travel more and have fun with it. Life shouldn't be an endless zero-sum game of eat or be eaten, but rather a grand adventure that includes sharing, caring and friendship. That's how I've managed to stay in the martial arts game for 50+ years and hope to keep going for another 50 years.

Lastly, a sincere “Thank You” to all the great masters, coaches, teachers, hotel managers and staff, shop keepers, bus drivers and friends who shared their arts, roads and wisdom with me. Also, heartfelt and eternal gratitude to Miao Hui back home in Beijing who was always there to provide logistic and moral support during these and other long journeys. To be a traveler in space and time, one does need an anchor somewhere and sometimes.

And very soon now, off on another adventure! One World, One Dream. It is possible.

Not the end.

October 8, 2021