

The Case for *Bunhae*

Hyung Application for Korean Stylists

Introduction

Nearly every traditional martial system includes some sort of structured, patterned movement, or “form”. This can be seen in the *kata* of Japanese karate and ken-jutsu, the *poomsae* of Taekwondo, and the Chinese *kuen too* (Cantonese) and *guan tao* (Mandarin) which appear in certain styles of both Northern and Southern Kung Fu. Even certain forms of Judo and Aikijujutsu practice certain *kata* as partner drills. Ideas about the role of forms within the scope of training vary widely; where some schools consider their forms to be the most fundamental and essential expression of their martial identity, others consider them only as a secondary element of their training regimen.

Each martial system is built on a particular philosophy of training, which are typically predicated on the implementation of specific martial theories. Many of the form-centric styles tend to adhere to one of two theories regarding forms training, which can be essential in shaping the training philosophies of practitioners of any style. The theories discussed in this document represent the polar regions of philosophies of form training, and most practitioners will find that their school exhibits elements of both theories.

This essay aims to address these two polar theories and to present an argument for the implementation of *bunhae* for practitioners on both ends of the doctrinal spectrum.

Terminology

For clarity and consistency, this essay will utilize the following Korean terminology:

Hyung (형) – “Form” – a patterned series of martial movements to be executed in a technically specific way; synonymous with Japanese *kata*.

Bunhae (분해) – “Application” – the breakdown and analysis of each movement of *hyung* for the purpose of technical application; synonymous with Japanese *bunkai*.

Theory No. 1: Forms as Actual Combat

This theory asserts that forms are a series of martial techniques which promote technical effectiveness through repetition and perfection. All movements in a given form should be considered from the perspective of executing or defending against a serious, real attack. From this standpoint, the perfection of a particular movement ensures an effective application in actual combat, where being defeated could mean serious injury or death. The need for application-based training among those who adhere to this doctrine is quite apparent. But while forms can teach the technique, they cannot teach timing and distance. Each of these elements (timing, distance, and technique) being equal, solo forms represent only a third of the necessary requirements for this doctrine to be effective; *bunhae* eliminates this deficit by providing the stimulus most closely related to actual combat: human contact and interaction.

The problem with this theory is simple and resolute: not all of the motions in forms are applicable in actual combat. The evidence for this is apparent through a basic examination of the movements. Consider as an example the [horse-stance](#) that is prevalent in many styles: this stance works to build and improve strength and conditioning in the lower-body, but would leave multiple vital targets exposed in a real confrontation. In this case, and others, the technique itself is often far less important or useful than the *principle* it teaches; a given movement in a form can certainly be treated from the standpoint of application, but one should strive to understand the *principle* that is being emphasized. Many of these principles only become apparent only after diligent practice of *bunhae*.

Theory No. 2: Forms as Conditioning

This theory is based on the idea that forms are meant as a method of physical and psychological conditioning rather than as a representation of actual combat. This theory typically seems to coincide with an approach to forms as breathing exercises or *ki* conditioning. Another element of this approach is the idea that one of the most useful benefits of forms is the physical conditioning that comes as a result of diligent training. Certain movements and indeed entire forms can be quite taxing physically, often by design. During testing at some schools, students are asked to complete their forms multiple times as a means to test physical and mental endurance. This theory, then, also revolves around the idea that forms provide an opportunity for mental and psychological conditioning by means of perseverance in the face of an obstacle (fatigue), as well as through focus and concentration in the face of distraction (muscle pain).

Extreme outliers will often take this theory a step further by asserting that forms are fundamentally and essentially about breathing and the development of *ki*, and that forms should be thought of as a type of moving meditation. Contemplation on this idea can lead one to understand that in this mindset, the applicability of a movement is irrelevant. This creates a bit of a paradox, though; the idea is self-contradictory in that the forms are moving meditation, specifically meditations on martial techniques. Understanding the premise for the movement is essential in understanding the essence of the movement, the “nature of the thing.” This paradox is eliminated when students understand the specific martial technique being executed, a state achieved most effectively through *bunhae*.

Conclusion

Most practitioners will find that their philosophy of *hyung* training is informed by aspects of both of the theories discussed above. To find a school that teaches only one theory or the other is rare, and an instructor who fails to recognize the applicability of both theories will inevitably find their students with a pronounced deficit of some sort. Dedicated practitioners will find that the essence of all forms can be discerned only through varied and balanced training. Regardless of a practitioner’s training philosophy, the regular incorporation of *bunhae* provides a great deal of insight into any form. Partner practice through *bunhae* allows practitioners to examine a form through the lens of their partner’s perspective and will therefore allow a greater understanding of a form’s essential nature.

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