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Might for Right: Martial Arts as a Way to Understand the Black Panthers

Richard Raya

INTRODUCTION

One of the most salient identifying characteristics of the Black Panthers is their militant nature and prominent usage of guns. Popular discussion surrounding the Black Panthers from mainstream, dominant sources propagates the idea that the Panthers were a savagely violent national security threat, as contrasted with more palatable non-violent organizing groups of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s-1970s. Scholarship on the Black Panthers can often be classified into two general types: discussion that laments the Panthers' relationship to self-defense and weaponry, blaming that violent image as large part of their downfall, and other scholarship that chooses instead to give context and background to the Panthers, highlighting some of their other initiatives and characteristics. Together, these separate strains of thought illustrate much of the history of the Black Panthers—a however, neither of these strains delve deeply enough into the spirit and intent of the Panthers and the epistemologies and traditions under which they were formed and operated. I contend that these traditional ways of speaking about the Panthers limit their legacy and our understanding of their mission, and that we can further illuminate aspects of the Black Panthers that holistically encompass seemingly paradoxical and opposing accounts. I will examine the Panthers' stances, policies and actions through a lens that is very intuitive and quite personal to me: Tiger-Style Tae-Kwon-Do, a style the Black Panthers practiced, and a style I am trained in as well. Tiger Style, unlike Olympic or World Tae-Kwon-Do, is a unique, non-certified style developed by Grandmaster Yun upon his arrival in California. How can the history and epistemology of Tiger Style Tae Kwon Do help us better understand and theorize about the Black Panthers? It is my belief that one can situate the Panthers as descending from the histories of Tiger-Style; as the continuation of traditions and epistemologies across space and time, in a

reincarnated context and circumstance. Viewing the Panthers as “descendants” in this way can encompass their history in its entirety and complexity, unified as it is when situated in the genealogy of Tiger-Style.

METHODS:

In my analysis I will employ archival and historical materialist methods. Primary sources are mostly archival in that they consist of footage, sound clips, and compiled interviews with the Black Panthers, as well as a diary of a Black Panther that chronicles some of the presence of martial arts in their epistemologies. Additionally, I will present historical context of various martial arts styles that, when displayed in tandem with the Panthers, will disrupt the traditional narratives surrounding the Black Panthers in a historical materialist fashion. Foucauldian excavation will be a major theory component, as we read in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, concerning the recurrent themes and contexts that allow for the continual collusion of forces that give rise to a martial-arts presence and consciousness. There are also transnationalist and decolonialist elements to the paper, as my analysis has an eye toward the imperialist/oppressive conditions present in both ancient Korea and in 1960s Oakland, California, that gave rise to (or perhaps exposed) certain revolutionary martial artist epistemologies, and to how those same conditions, reborn, are visible within the Black Panthers.

POSITIONALITY

Since my project focuses on The Black Panthers, the Bay Area, and martial arts/martial arts philosophy, there are several ways in which my positionality affords me something of an “insider” perspective, as well as numerous other ways in which my positionality renders me “outsider.”

As a man of color I can empathize somewhat with the struggles faced and causes championed by the Black Panther Party . Yet I am

aware that the Black Panther Party was created for Black political power, and that in many ways Mexican-Americans afforded more privilege than Black Americans. While I possess something of a framework to understand, analyze and empathize with the experiences of these Black Americans (the Panthers), I need to bear in mind that my racial background comes with a different set of challenges and privileges.

I am also limited in that I am comfortably upper-middle class and don't have a history in organizing or activism, necessarily, which can hamper my intuitive understanding of the underlying philosophies and problems associated with the Panthers. This also influences the types of research questions I reach for and am willing to answer.

My background as a martial artist will perhaps be of the most influence to my project. A longstanding passion for martial arts has influenced my decision to pursue this research topic in the first place and has facilitated my accumulation of what knowledge I already possess that is relevant to this topic. I acknowledge the concern that I might rely too heavily on my personal martial arts training and experiences as evidence, or to explain some of the intricacies of martial arts philosophy, practice or history. Nevertheless, I do not really see this as detrimental, since, given a shared geographic location, the style of martial arts I am heavily trained in and the style practiced by some of the Panthers is the same. This is not to say that my Tiger Style training ipso facto grants me more insight, but that the creeds and theoretical underpinnings I have studied through 10 years of training and reflection enable me to conceive of and hunt for historic and philosophical links between the foundations of Tiger TKD and the martial arts/martial philosophy/conception of identity present within the Black Panthers.

In short, I hope to bring to bear personal experiences and pre-existing knowledge that to shed light on the Panthers, while also recognizing

my inherent distance. I aim to push back on the idea that the violent/militant and nurturing/peaceful efforts of the Panthers are ideologically irreconcilable. By connecting the similarities in the histories/experiences of people responsible in creating Tiger Style to the experience of the Black Panthers, I hope to highlight how the many aspects of the Black Panthers exist as manifestation of one unified philosophy: "The right to exist unassailed."

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many view the Panthers' weapon-wielding as a complex political lightning rod that garnered public attention, polarized opinion, and ultimately proved to be their undoing; few view the presence of weapons and emphasis on self-defense as something inherently good or useful in and of itself. Moreover, accounts that focus on the destructiveness of the Panthers' violence and works that instead choose to focus on the non-violence-oriented aspects of the group are not necessarily mutually exclusive; often, one scholar will speak in both styles in one work. These are merely the two different tones or voices often employed to speak about the Black Panthers, or the two ostensibly divergent ways in which scholars or analysts can conceive of the Panthers.

Scholar Curtis J. Austin, author of *Up Against the Wall*, contends that violence, as an integral aspect of the Black Panther Party's identity and formation, ultimately led to their demise as an effective organization. Austin writes that the Panther's stance on weapons, police monitoring, and aggressive self-defense led to inevitable violent clashes that did more harm than good for the party and its reputation. The Panthers' intimidating and attention-grabbing "method of getting things done were widely dispersed by television and other media coverage, making it a prime target for government infiltration and police attack."¹ Austin writes that the use of violent self-

¹ Curtis J. Austin, *Up Against the Wall*, University of Arkansas Press, 2006, p 336

defense in rhetoric, in demonstration, and in practice left the panthers open to devastation in multiple ways. The language adopted by the Black Panthers, especially by more outspokenly violent members like Eldridge Cleaver (nicknamed El Rage for his temper and demeanor), made coalition building more difficult than expected. Austin records former Communist Party of the USA activist Dorothy Ray Healey's observation that "not only did this all-or-nothing stance alienate black workers, but 'people who had any degree of roots in their community were not about to simply pick up a gun and start shooting.'" Additionally, Austin alleges that this "all-or-nothing" stance on maintaining a vigilance on violent self-defense with guns placed Panther party members in lose-lose situations with the police, often with debilitating repercussions afterward. Austin identifies the arrest of leaders and founders Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale as a key example of the dilemmas the Panthers' relationship with guns created. Huey Newton issued an Executive Mandate to all party members, decreeing that "all members acquire the technical equipment to defend their homes and their dependents and shall do so. Any Party Member having such technical equipment who fails to defend his threshold shall be expelled from the Party for Life."² Faced with threats on all sides, Austin writes that many party members felt compelled to simply engage in a shootout with police rather than risk potential arrest and messy and costly trials. This, of course, exacted great physical tolls upon the members of the Party, depleting their ranks and altering their relationships with each other, the police, and community members. Austin further writes that, given no-win situations such as the one just described, in which Party members nearly always lost credibility, support, or their lives, the power shifted to those forces that appeared reasonable and placatory; the police, the FBI, and the mainstream media. This

created a cycle detrimental to the Panthers. Their opposition gained enough ammunition, due to the violent confrontations of the Panthers, to dictate the terms of battle through media, thus fracturing leadership and hampering efforts to drum up more support. The Panthers, meanwhile, suffered from lethal shootouts with the police.

Austin, as well as other authors, question the efficacy and integral nature of this aspect of the party's activities, contrasting it with the non-violent work the Black Panther Party did to improve its communities. Such sentiment is also present in the compilation edited by Charles E. Jones, *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]*. Jones seeks to bring heretofore unacknowledged histories (by the mainstream media/dominant narratives) to the fore in an effort to better understand and explain the Black Panthers. This book, among others (including Austin's *Up Against the Wall*), mentions the programs the Black Panthers ran that Huey Newton termed "survival programs," local community assistance programs intended to "help the people survive until their consciousness is raised, which is only the first step in the revolution to produce a new America ... during a flood a raft is a life-saving device, but it is only a means to get to higher ground."³ These survival programs are often written of and spoken about in contrast to the combat-oriented efforts/exploits of the party, and are almost considered an entirely different facet of it, politically divorced from the violence and coming from a different revolutionary core or spirit. The Black Panthers engaged in many programs that were resolutely non-violent, especially those oriented toward children. They organized free breakfast programs, grocery distribution programs, free health clinics that combated a variety of threats (including sickle-cell anemia testing), assistance for the elderly, and the Oakland Community School, an elementary school that catered to the needs of poor blacks of the

² *So Let This be Done*, Huey P Newton, 3/1/68, <http://assets.zinedistro.org/zines/pdfs/127.pdf>

³ *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]*, Charles E. Jones, Black Classic Press, p 179

community. An interview with former Black Panther Jimmy Slater illuminates some of the complexities and impacts of these survival programs, as well as campaigns to get black people and Party members elected to office. Slater asserts that he hopes the legacy of the Black Panthers can consist of memories of programs like the free breakfast program and the Community School, and that they were the “cornerstone” of the Black Panther Party.⁴ He also laments the undisciplined and wildly militant nature of leader Eldridge Cleaver, and the interview overall points to something of a distinction between “militant” or “violent” versus “political.”

In dividing history and conception of the Panthers in this way, it is my belief that we are missing out on critical understanding of the Panthers’ actions and underlying philosophies that can unify the seemingly disparate aspects of their group and mission. This is not to discount Slater’s and many other Panthers’ opinions of behavior such as Cleaver’s being “counter-revolutionary,” as Slater put it, or to say that the effects of gun violence and outright warfare between Panthers and police was not hugely detrimental. It is simply to say that the links between the non-violent and violent arms of the party can be unified under lens influenced by the martial arts theory present within the Party—that one can conceive of both the Panthers’ violent action and their community programs as in a sense necessarily linked. Austin writes that Panther Party members such as David Hilliard were more interested in the community-oriented survival programs than outright violence and confrontation, but Hilliard himself states in his autobiography that he is “not against fighting, violence, war. I’ve always liked a fight. Fighting clarifies things, resolves problems that can’t be put to rest any other way. And I believe we need to defend ourselves against the police.”⁵ How are

conceptions of aggressive and violent self-defense integral to the revolutionary spirit of the Panthers? How can Party Members like Hilliard straddle the line between the two types of activity the Panthers engaged in, resting in seeming contradiction? And how can the behavior of members like Cleaver indeed be counter-revolutionary? By bringing to bear philosophies derived from a martial art practiced by the Panthers in the Bay Area, Tiger Tae Kwon Do, as well as my own experiences with the art form and my own experiences concerning self-defense and violence through the experience as a man of color, it may become more apparent that there exists less contradiction within the Panthers than previous writings may indicate, and that while violence within, by, and against the party may have been highly detrimental to its cause, it may be valuable to widen/alter the scope from which we view the topic, and see how perhaps violent self-defence was neither good or bad, politically speaking, but philosophically a necessary component of the Panthers’ spirit.

HISTORY/CONTEXT

It is important to take into account what martial lifestyles were practiced by the Black Panthers, including the actual unarmed traditional martial arts overtly administered through their various training and schools. However, the main subject for analyses will be the stated stances and philosophies of the Panthers as a whole, with martial arts theory serving mainly as a lens and tool to understand and unify the Black Panther position. Thus, I will limit relevant martial art philosophy to the martial arts known to be practiced by the Panthers, explain the history and philosophy of those arts, and, by casting them adjacent to Panther sentiment and testimony, go through and understand the corresponding themes and principles at play.

The martial art practiced by the Black Panthers is a variant style practiced widely throughout Berkeley and Oakland: Tiger style Tae Kwon Do, a system developed by Master Ken

⁴ *The Black Panther Party [Reconsidered]*, Charles E. Jones, Black Classic Press, p 153

⁵ *This Side of Glory*, David Hilliard and Lewis Cole, 1993, p 185

Youn. Tae Kwon Do is revered among other martial arts styles as a style with the most ferocious kicks; a common tale passed among martial arts studios is that a true Tae-Kwon-Do practitioner can unseat a rider from their horse with a jump kick, as the ancients did. Master Ken Youn, after witnessing conditions present in street fights (not the controlled and systematic fights typical in studios), as well as after suffering injuries which inhibited his kicking capabilities, broke with the prescribed Tae-Kwon-Do system and modified it to create Tiger Tae-Kwon-Do, a style that incorporated multiple hand techniques as well. James Noel of the San Francisco Theological Seminary notes that Tiger Tae-Kwon-Do incorporates techniques reminiscent of Wing Chun Kung Fu, a Chinese martial art with interesting origins itself.⁶ Wing Chun, the first style of the legendary Bruce Lee (who himself had an influence on how the Panthers theorized about martial arts), was created by and for women (itself a fact of note, given some of the feminist criticisms of the Panthers). Thus, to fully understand Tiger Style, it is necessary to delve into the history of both Tae-Kwon-Do and Wing Chun.

Tae Kwon Do is a Korean martial art with a long and storied history, with roots dating back to 50 B.C.⁷ Understanding this history, with its periodical silences and resurrections of the art, is essential to understanding the significance of the martial art in the form we now know it today. At this time, Korea was divided into three kingdoms—Silla, Koguryo, and Baekche, and while Taek Kyon, the predecessor to Tae-Kwon-Do, is found earliest in Koguryo, it is Silla, the smallest and most vulnerable kingdom, that popularized the spread of the art. Silla, situated on the coast, faced constant attack by Japanese pirates. When aided by troops from Koguryo (tempered by constant conflict with

China⁸), select Sillan troops were introduced to Taek Kyon, and eventually established the Hwarang warrior society. Translating to “the way of flowering manhood,” Hwarang, young men skilled in philosophy, poetry and combat, traveled the land, spreading and popularizing Taek Kyon. Although the Hwarang were a warrior society, their emphasis and practice pertained less to actual warfare than it did to fostering a certain type of disciplined and fruitful lifestyle. Here is one of the first visible emergences in the long genealogy that will eventually include Tiger Style—the manifestation of ideals of self-defense and counter-colonialism, a self-defensive struggle born of desires for uninhibited autonomy.

Over time, though, the focus of the art shifted, becoming less about other arts like poetry and more combat-oriented, and was called Subak. The next important milestone in Tae-Kwon-Do’s genealogy was the Yi dynasty (1397-1907), in which two important events occurred: one, the first books on Subak became available to the public, and two, a cultural and governmental shift from militancy to a focus on political and scholarly pursuits made Subak fall out of fashion. Due to these events the role of practicing and maintaining Subak shifted from the military nobility to the common people, and thus faded from the dominant accounts of culture and history.

The true impetus for Tae-Kwon-Do in its current form to arise came in 1909, as the Japanese began their invasion and occupation of Korea, which lasted until 1945. Under this occupation, a great number of Korean cultural practices were banned, among them Subak. However, this repression ignited an interest and revalorization of Korea’s indigenous fighting arts, and Subak was practiced in secret at Buddhist temples, in people’s homes, and even in other countries. As soon as the Japanese left in 1945, the fractured cultural practice of Subak began to be

⁶ Dr. James A Noel, *Tiger Style Tae Kwon Do #3: Theory and Practice*, San Francisco Theological Seminary, http://www.sfts.edu/faculty/noel/taekwondo/tiger_style.asp

⁷ *Tae Kwon Do*, Yeon Hee Park, Yeon Hwan Park, Jon Gerrard, 1989, *Facts on File*, NY, page 2

⁸ *Taekwondo*, Sung Chul Whang, Jun Chul Whang, Brandon Saltz, 1999, *Broadway Books*, NY, p3

taught by members of the Korean military in schools all over Korea, eventually being re-unified into one coherent fighting art (with elements now obtained from martial artists who spent exile in China and Japan) in 1953 under the name Tae-Kwon-Do. Viewing the entire timeline of Tae-Kwon-Do like this, it becomes apparent that, despite various fractures and obscurantism, the fighting style resurfaces in times of need and crisis, often against an oppressive and colonial foreign enemy. It also becomes apparent that, over time, the art from which Tae-Kwon-Do emerges is steeped in nationalism, pride, and a spirit of subversiveness and self-defense, all elements present in the fighting style today.

Examination of the genealogy of Tae-Kwon-Do harkens to Foucault's genealogy as a means of approaching history: "an examination of descent also permits the discovery, under the unique aspect of a trait of concept, of the myriad events through which— thanks to which, against which— they were formed... it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations... that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us,"⁹ to trace the ancestry of things left oft occluded while allowing room in the record for the unexpected and the unwanted. Tae-Kwon-Do's history is a history of nationalism, pride, self-defense and decolonialism, a history that, I will show, links across time and space to 1960s and 1970s Oakland and the Black Panthers.

The history of Wing Chun is important insofar as that in the history/genealogy of Tiger Tae-Kwon-Do, it acts as an "emergence," according to Foucault's conception of genealogy. Wing Chun has a history less influenced by military clashes and occupation, instead having roots in the unique state of oppression experienced by women. The principles of the fighting style to be known as Wing Chun were developed by Buddhist Monk Ng

Mui during the Ching Dynasty (1662-1722).¹⁰ After the destruction of her temple, Ng Mui took refuge on Mt Tai Leung, where she met the 15-year-old Yim Wing Chun. Yim Wing Chun was in danger of rape from a local landowner, Wong, and so to protect her, Ng Mui took in the girl and, in seclusion in the mountains, taught her the as-yet-unnamed fighting style. In a mutually beneficial relationship, master and pupil helped each other perfect the style, and after Yim Wing Chun returned to her village and defeated Wong in personal combat, the style was named in her honor. Wing Chun embodies dualistically soft (yin) and hard (yang) principles, and is known as a clever and dynamic style. Wing Chun emphasizes speed and instinctive cerebral fighting, constructed as it is to battle opponents who are stronger, physically and often socially (male landowners, etc). While Tae-Kwon-Do has its athletic and powerful kicks, Wing Chun features blindingly fast hand techniques and a knowledge of physiology and pressure points.

What is interesting about Wing Chun's relationship to Tiger Tae-Kwon-Do is that there is not, necessarily, a direct link between the two styles and histories. Ken Youn, creator of Tiger style, did not ever study Wing Chun or in China, as far as anyone knows. As Dr. James A. Noel says, "these forms and techniques resemble some of the techniques found [in] Wing Chun Kung Fu... but they are not derivative."¹¹ Something about the conditions of a male Tae-Kwon-Do practitioner in 1969 who was coping with the limits of his abilities, as well as an immigrant status, allowed Youn to arrive independently at techniques first theorized and practiced by women defending themselves against violence in 1600s China. In some murky, intangible way, the circumstances of both were

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, 1977

¹⁰ *The Ultimate Book of Martial Arts*, Fay Goodman, 1998, Lorenz Books, NY, p 148

¹¹ Dr. James A Noel, *Tiger Style Tae Kwon Do #3: Theory and Practice*, San Francisco Theological Seminary, http://www.sfts.edu/faculty/noel/taekwondo/tiger_style.asp

similar enough that Wing Chun's descent emerged in the body and mind of Ken Youn, giving birth to Tiger Style. Tiger Style is not a culmination of either "parent" (or ancestor) style, but simply the continuation of the spirits contained within both, neither a beginning nor end: "it is wrong to search for descent in an uninterrupted continuity, we should avoid thinking of emergence as the final term of an historical development ... Emergence is always produced through a particular stage of forces... it is in this sense that the emergence of a species [here, Tiger Style] and its solidification are secured 'in an extended battle against conditions which are essentially and constantly unfavorable.'"¹² Wing Chun, then, is emergence as theorized by Foucault, "is thus an entry of forces, it is their eruption, the leap from the wings to center stage,"¹³ as played out in the body, mind, body and spirit of Ken Youn, hailing as he did from a heretofore solely Tae-Kwon-Do epistemology.

CONNECTIONS

So what does all of this have to do with the Black Panthers? Superficial answers are simple: the Black Panthers, as part of their total self-defense training, practiced martial arts, both to instill the skill and the discipline of mind that comes with it. One can imagine that martial arts practice and lessons were a common part of the Black Panthers' routine since near its inception; however, the first documented hint I can find is from 1969, as Alex Rackley, a Party member who was murdered in 1969, functioned primarily as a martial arts instructor in New Haven, Connecticut.¹⁴ Steve McCutchen, a party member from Baltimore, Maryland, relocated to the Oakland chapter in 1972, and given that by 1975 he had achieved his red belt (the rank beneath black belt), one can infer he began his direct tutelage under Master Youn

¹² Michel Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, 1977, p149

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, 1977, p150

¹⁴ Bass, Paul, "Black Panther Torture "Trial" Tapes Surface," *New Haven Independent*, 2/21/13

not long after he arrived.¹⁵ Tiger Style Tae-Kwon-Do is documented as having been incorporated into the curriculum of the Community School by 1975, indicating that the Party had determined the skills and spirit one gains from studying Tiger Style were valuable not just for the rank-and-file but for community children as well.

However, I believe that this topical connection only serves to provide the "physical," or as Foucault would put it, "sustained" link of genealogy between the epistemologies that created Tiger Style and the Black Panther Party. This actual factual connection is only an indicator, a signpost pointing to a deeper connection with broader implications. I contend that just as Tae-Kwon-Do was the vessel for the emergence of the counter-colonial spirits of Taek Kyon and Subak in the modern era, and that Tiger Style represented the emergence of the history of Tae Kwon Do and the subversive/autonomous spirits of Wing Chun, as read through the body and mind of Ken Youn, so, too, is the Black Panther Party the site of emergence and rebirth of Tiger Style and, with it, all subsequent histories and themes that the art embodies. The Black Panthers and their actions and philosophies were neither beginning nor end, not a final culmination but the ripening of a fruit on the long vine of the genealogy that has roots in Korea, China and the Bay Area, roots in the revolutionary spirits of all of those arts, steeped in centuries of counter-colonial and nationalist traditions. Parallels can be drawn between the circumstances surrounding the various births and rebirths of martial arts leading up to Tiger Style and the conditions that led to the birth of the Black Panther Party, pointing to the Party as a point of continuing descent in the long-running genealogy that Tiger Style is a part of and represents.

The history of the Black Panthers'

¹⁵ I got my red belt after about 6 years of intermittent study under Mr. Baker; given the harsher severity/more exacting standards with which Master Youn trained his students, achieving a red belt would take at least a few years, even with constant, sustained training.

beginnings, the conditions from which they arose, can be linked to conditions that inspired the birth of martial arts responsible for Tiger Style. In an interview in the documentary *Black Panther—San Francisco State on Strike*, Black Panther founder Huey Newton spoke about the conditions in Oakland that led to the necessity of the formation of the Black Panthers, citing rampant and systemic poverty, racism, and strained relationships with government, police especially. Referencing the current state of warfare of the United States in Vietnam, Newton, speaking from a jail cell, likened Black America to a colony, a war zone: “The black people are treated very much like the Vietnamese people, or like any colonized people... [the police] occupy our community as if in a state of warfare... as a foreign troop occupies territory.”¹⁶ Newton makes the connection that police’s main concern is to protect property, and as the Black community owns no property, the police’s presence in these neighborhoods is not to protect or foster community but to prey on what little resources the community has, and to harass the vulnerable members of the Black community. Newton notes that police follow orders to harass and detain Black people, “the way troops follow their orders.” Indeed, as explained in Dean Spade’s *Normal Life*, the disproportionate amount of Black people affected by the penal system is the continuation of a very intentional American tradition of Black subjugation: “imprisonment of communities of color is an extension of systems of chattel slavery ... Angela Davis has described the historical trajectory that formed the criminal punishment system as a response to the formal abolition of slavery,”¹⁷ citing the Thirteenth Amendment’s important caveat that involuntary servitude be incorporated into criminal punishment, serving as a proxy to slavery, and creating a way to keep Black people enslaved. With this description of life in Black America, the scene is set for the beginning of connections to be made between the Panthers

¹⁶ *Black Panther/San Francisco State on Strike*, California Newsreel, 1969

¹⁷ Spade, Dean, *Normal Life*, South End Press, 2011, p 54

and their Tiger Style-related forerunners. In the Black communities’ relationship to the police of the state, one can see echoes and parallels to the tiny, struggling kingdom of Silla, facing constant invasion by foreign pirates, or of 20th century Korea struggling under the boot of Japanese imperialism. We can already see how circumstances are realigning to allow for the rebirth of the fighting styles and spirit of the past, simply in another place, another time.

Statements by the Panthers regarding the decision to adopt self-defense as a mode of resistance, and the underlying logics behind those decisions, can be seen to coincide with Tiger-Style modes of logic surrounding self-defense and violence. Newton and co-founder Bobby Seale often quoted Malcolm X: “We should be peaceful, law-abiding, but the time has come to fight back in self-defense whenever and wherever the black man is being unjustly and unlawfully attacked,” as well as X’s other trademark slogan, “By any means necessary.”¹⁸ David Hilliard clarified on CBS news in 1969 the intent of the Party, citing a Party newspaper whose content was called into question by the anchor: “We do not ask for violence ... there is nothing in this paper that says kill the pigs. We only advocate killing those that kill us... you try to make us all violent and you people all civilized and peaceful, but what we understand is that it is all right to use violence if you are using violence for a change, a change for the better.”¹⁹ Tae-Kwon-Do practitioners follow the 5 principles of the Hwarang Code, and its fifth principle, *Sal Saeng Yoo Taek*, or the practice of justice, parallels what is spoken by X and Hilliard: “Avoiding conflict is no sign of cowardice. It is a sign of wisdom ... However, *Sal Saeng Yoo Taek* by no means forbids force. Once it becomes clear that you are in danger, or that someone who depends on you for safety is in danger, you must fight as if your life

¹⁸ Philip S Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak*, Da Capo Press, 1995, p xxvi

¹⁹ Philip S Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak*, Da Capo Press, 1995, p 134

depends on it.”²⁰ Tae-Kwon-Do philosophy echoes the Panther’s conception of combative capabilities both as a practical tool and a symbolic/political weapon: “The student of Tae-Kwon-Do gradually develops a sense of inner harmony and discipline that prevents panicking in a dangerous situation. This inner peace comes from the understanding that he is not helpless ... By not allowing the bully to intimidate him, the student is able to avoid a violent confrontation ... However, if your positive spirit is not enough to avoid such a confrontation ... you must make certain that he does not have the opportunity to harm you.”²¹ These sentiments coincide with one another, and serve to cast violent self-defense as both contingent and necessary: contingent upon threatening injustices, and yet inevitable and swift when there is no other option. Steve McCutchen, martial arts instructor at the Oakland Community School, notes that Tiger-Style is invaluable because of the mixed hand-foot techniques and because Master Youn has an “understanding of actual street fighting conditions in the Black community,” and that what is taught at the Community school is “an application of Bruce Lee’s jeet kune do philosophy to tae kwon do.”²² Bruce Lee had many theories, both on technique and the essence of combat. One particularly relevant quote as it pertains to the necessity and inevitability of self-defensive violence goes: “When the opponent expands, I contract; and when he contracts, I expand. And when there is an opportunity, ‘I’ do not hit, ‘it’ hits all by itself.”²³ Lee, whose first training was in Wing Chun, pushed the epistemology of his art even further, identifying a point where his epistemologies flowed into and converged with that of Tae-Kwon-Do and Tiger

Style— Lee identified the inextricably linked nature of opposing forces, and that no action occurred without an equal, opposite, and immediate reaction, a principle that he asserted held true everywhere, from physics to fighting and beyond. This quotation can help to describe the epistemologies in which Tiger-Style is rooted, in its counter-colonial, counter-oppressive histories and traditions, that when the Silla, Yim Wing Chun, and the Black American community were “contracted,” the logical progression was for those oppressed people to adapt, with the “hit” happening almost by itself, so necessary was the progression— “what was once hard (the assailant’s attack) becomes soft (non injurious), and what was soft (the defender’s passivity) becomes hard (an effective way to counter a potentially dangerous assault), allowing balance to return.”²⁴

The link between Tiger Style and the epistemologies that led the Panthers to rise up and declare armed self-defense is somewhat intuitive, given the conceptualization of struggle, subjugation, and combat itself as a continual search for equilibrium between opposing yet linked forces (yin and yang, hard and soft, passive and combative). Still, how can Tiger Style explain the Panther’s community programs, those aspects of their mission that are often viewed as tangential or additional to their focus on violence, not necessarily of the same spirit or thought process? To start, I would like to remind us again of the Hwarang, who, in addition to being skilled Taek Kyon warriors, were also skilled in wide variety of arts and studies such as dance, song, poetry and philosophy. Taek Kyon practice and warfare were merely one component of an order which was tasked to travel the land to promote cultural, national pride, albeit the component most well suited to defending that culture and nation: “becoming good fighters was not sufficient ... their destiny was to develop themselves into complex

²⁰ *Taekwondo*, Sung Chul Whang, Jun Chul Whang, Brandon Saltz, 1999, *Broadway Books*, NY, p21

²¹ *Tae Kwon Do*, Yeon Hee Park, Yeon Hwan Park, Jon Gerrard, 1989, *Facts on File*, NY, page 168

²² Black Panther 13 no. 19: 1-28 (June 30, 1975), SPORTS: “BLACK BELT” MAGAZINE ON MARTIAL ARTS AT THE COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTER: “READING, WRITING AND FIGHTING IN THE OAKLAND GHETTO”

²³ Bruce Lee, *Enter the Dragon* (1973) and other writings

²⁴ *Tae Kwon Do*, Yeon Hee Park, Yeon Hwan Park, Jon Gerrard, 1989, *Facts on File*, NY, page 185

and enlightened individuals, exemplary citizens.”²⁵ The commitment, then, is to craft a fully realized self internally, as well as a benevolent community presence, beginning through the medium of fighting techniques, by “three way unification” of “body, mind, and spirit”— “through practice, thought and action can become unified as one, and the thought of a technique can become that technique in reality.”²⁶ Tae-Kwon-Do is fueled by the revolutionary epistemology that yearns for an uninhibited and fruitful life, that seeks to alter the material world, to make the ideal, the incorporeal, real; thought into action. Fighting, then, is only a means to find this perfect world, to find the strength to exist as an unassailed individual and community. During my training under Mr. Baker, I was made to memorize the Student Creed, in which we pledge to foster not only “Strength in the body” but “Knowledge in the mind, Honesty in the heart” to build “true Confidence,” to “keep Friendship with one another and to build a Strong and Happy Community. / Never fight to achieve selfish ends But to develop Might for Right.” This student creed, credited to master Jhoon Rhee (a friend of Bruce Lee but a man who, as far as anyone knows, had no direct contact with the Panthers), bears a striking resemblance to the *Black Child’s Pledge* that ran in *The Black Panther*, the party newsletter. In part, it reads, “I pledge allegiance to my Black People. / I pledge to develop my mind and body to the greatest extent possible... I will train myself never to hurt or allow others to harm my Black brothers and sisters... These principles I pledge to practice daily and to teach them to others in order to unite my People.”²⁷ In these pledges we see the shared epistemologies of Tiger Style and the Panthers emerging, the spirit that at once embodies

nurturing and protecting your community as part of the same mission, the same will to live and prosper. As Eldridge Cleaver wrote, programs such as the Breakfast for Children and the Community School programs were “liberation in practice” because they disrupted the detrimental routine of children who have been “organized into poverty,”²⁸ the same way that fearlessness and self-defence interrupts a culture of terror and suppression by the police in the Black community.

Understanding Tiger Style can even help us understand the flaws of the Panthers. A common criticism of the Panthers is their refusal to equally valorize Black women, relegating them to a second behind the plight of the Black man. Furthermore, Newton and Seale were greatly influenced by Frantz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* and its implications for freedom and masculinity: “By fighting back, the black man would assert his dignity as a man.”²⁹ What does it say that the Hwarang viewed their unique mix of militancy coupled with intellectual and community pursuits as specifically masculine, the personification of “flowering manhood”? What does it say that scholars of Tiger Style have taken great care to disidentify with any possible Chinese, specifically Wing Chun, influences, as Dr. Noel did earlier when asserting that Tiger techniques that resemble Wing Chun are “not derivative” of the uniquely female hard work and innovation that gave us the temple jab and gatling punch? I myself do not possess the answers, but one can begin to see that a constant factor of the continuing epistemology of which Tiger Style and the Panthers are descendants continually shunts women to the side. In what ways did the Panther’s emphasis on traditionally hyper-male revolutionary epistemologies overlook pre-existing modes of revolution populated by women; which types of activism taking place during the

²⁵ *Taekwondo*, Sung Chul Whang, Jun Chul Whang, Brandon Saltz, 1999, *Broadway Books*, NY, p14

²⁶ *Taekwondo*, Sung Chul Whang, Jun Chul Whang, Brandon Saltz, 1999, *Broadway Books*, NY, p24

²⁷ Shirley Williams, *The Black Panther*, October 26, 1968, <http://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/black-panthers/>

²⁸ Eldridge Cleaver, “On Meeting the Needs of the People, *The Black Panther*, August 16, 1969 (from *The Black Panthers Speak*, Philip S. Foner)

²⁹ Philip S Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak*, Da Capo Press, 1995, p xxvi

time of the Panthers were ignored as “too weak,” “feminine,” or not radical enough, as simply being passive or seclusionary, in the tradition of Ng Mui’s and Yim Wing Chun’s flight into the mountains to live, train and grow in peace?

To my mind, the Black Panthers’ emphasis on men and Tiger Style’s dissociation with Wing Chun are examples of how violent masculinity can pervade and dominate even those spaces that strive for radical justice. Women made valuable contributions to both of these entities, in terms of ideology and raw labor— but because these contributions become coded as “female,” they are divorced from their sources of origin by male leaders who worry about appearing “weak,” but still wish to make use of these vital contributions.

CONCLUSIONS

Viewing the entire matrix of thought and philosophy of the Panthers as a long genealogy connected with Tiger Style allows us to also understand how the Panthers could speak of “killing pigs” and “feeding children” in the same breath, with the same unified spirit and logics. The apparent disconnect in thought process between practicing armed struggle and in nurturing the growth of a community dissolves when one bears in mind the epistemologies at play of duality, of action and reaction, of autonomy and self-unification. Indeed, through looking at the genealogy of the Panthers, one can even see

echoes of that which the Panthers and Tiger Style itself occluded, shining through despite popular perception, struggling still to be seen, for their own epistemologies to be valorized— the contributions of women to the Panthers’ organizing and to the world of martial arts. As Dr. Noel says, “if we are executing a technique that is based on the linear/horizontal principle of movement we have to also appreciate how such movement may also contain or suggest a circular motion as its dialectical opposite. The reverse punch, for example, begins with the fist held beside the waist and turned upward. The punch ends with the fist extended with the knuckles facing downward.”

Tiger Style as a lens to understand the Panthers does not simplify them— in some ways, it complicates the image— but elucidates the quite intentional intricacies of the actions and logics of the Panthers, the ways in which they emerged to continue the genealogy of the Silla, the occupied Korean, and even Yi Wing Chun. Although Silla, the Black Panthers, and Yim Wing Chun all faced different challenges— in different places, at different times— there exist common narratives and themes in each setting: people who express desire to live, free of imperialist oppression, and who possessed and the courage to take steps to fight for and protect that community, that life.

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