

A comparative study of WTF taekwondo and KATA karate techniques

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Abstract: WTF Taekwondo and KATA Karate are sports rooted in Chinese martial arts, adopting almost opposite approaches to technical development, yet both have gained worldwide promotion and recognition. This paper conducts a comparative study of these two sports from the perspectives of fighting stance, attack techniques, target areas, and forms (patterns), summarizing the differences between the two martial arts technical systems and the impact of these differences on their development, providing reference for the development of Asian martial arts, particularly Chinese Wushu.

Keywords: WTF Taekwondo, KATA Karate, Technical system, Comparative study

1. Introduction

This paper is an academic research study on the technical comparison between WTF Taekwondo and KATA Karate. The article systematically compares these two East Asian martial arts—sharing common origins yet diverging in development—from four dimensions: fighting stance, attack techniques, target areas, and forms (patterns). The study finds that: WTF Taekwondo underwent a "specialized and refined" transformation for Olympic inclusion, emphasizing kicking techniques and head strikes, with a streamlined technical system but high competitive intensity; KATA Karate, conversely, adheres to the traditional "sundome" (stopping an inch before contact) principle, retaining comprehensive techniques including punches, kicks, and throws, emphasizing control and the martial spirit of "one strike, certain kill." Although the two follow opposite technical paths—one selectively abandoning, the other comprehensively inheriting—both have achieved success in Olympic globalization and worldwide promotion. Through this comparison, the paper provides important insights for the technical system reform and innovative development of Chinese Wushu: the balance between shaping project characteristics, enhancing spectator appeal, and preserving tradition is the key to the modern transformation of martial arts sports.

2. Basic technical characteristics of taekwondo and karate

Karate originated in China. In 1922, Funakoshi Gichin transmitted it to Japan after studying martial arts in China, and it was renamed Karate in 1936 [1-2]. There are four main schools in Karate: Shotokan, Goju-ryu, Wado-ryu, and Shito-ryu. Karate techniques are mainly divided into two categories: one is "Kata" (similar to Wushu routines in China) techniques, and the other is "Kumite" (similar to Wushu Sanda in China) techniques. The "Kata" techniques, including footwork, hand techniques, body movements, and complete sets of movements, all draw upon the style of Southern Fist (Nanquan) from China—steady and solid, with a tough and forceful approach. In competition, the standardization of movements is of utmost importance; every move must be authentic and original. The "Kumite" techniques use punching as the conventional method, while kicking and attacking a downed opponent are highly encouraged but difficult to execute. In Kumite competition, the rear hand punch is the most important technique, while the high-section roundhouse kick has a relatively low success rate [3]. With the development of Karate, Kumite competitions show a trend toward strengthening kicking combinations and continuous attacking capabilities, with greater attention also being paid to high-scoring auxiliary techniques such as foot sweeps and throws [4]. In the Karate technical system, the "Kata" sub-system maintains an ancient style, preserving tradition in every single move without any alteration; the "Kumite" sub-system embraces "kicking, striking, and throwing"

comprehensively, with well-rounded combat skills, high competitive intensity yet good safety, and high spectator value.

General Choi Hong-hi, the founder of modern Taekwondo, studied Shotokan Karate in Japan during his youth and later returned to Korea, where he combined it with modern Hwarangdo to create and develop Taekwondo. In 1973, Kim Un-yong established the WTF (World Taekwondo Federation) in Seoul, South Korea, which was recognized by the International Olympic Committee in 1980 and became an official Olympic sport at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Taekwondo techniques are renowned for their kicking, featuring great power and long attacking range, and have developed unique techniques such as the axe kick and back kick. The axe kick has a relatively short attacking distance, is difficult to defend against, and has a high scoring rate, making it a characteristic kicking technique of Taekwondo [5]. With the development of Taekwondo, the frequency of back kick and spinning back kick techniques has generally increased, and spinning kicks are increasingly valued by high-level athletes [6]. In the Taekwondo technical system, although the "Poomsae" sub-system does not contain extensive content, its requirements are high, maintaining a fashionable style—even giving rise to "Taekwondo Dance" with Poomsae as its main content. The "Kyorugi" (competition) sub-system basically retains only kicking techniques, with relatively single combat skills, high competitive intensity, certain risks, and high spectator value.

3. Comparative analysis of taekwondo and karate combat techniques

3.1. Comparison of fighting stances

The fighting stance is the fundamental technique in martial arts technical systems, serving as the starting and ending point for all offensive and defensive movements. The fighting stance fully reflects different schools' understandings and emphases regarding their respective disciplines.

Table 1 Fighting Stances of Taekwondo and Karate

	Taekwondo	Karate
Center of Gravity	Slightly forward and higher	Slightly backward and lower
Front Hand Position	Approximately shoulder height	Approximately nose height
Rear Hand Position	Near the chin	Waist/abdomen area

As can be seen from Table 1, the WTF Taekwondo fighting stance generally involves placing the feet shoulder-width apart in a front-back position, with the heel of the rear foot slightly raised and the weight supported on the forefoot. Both knees are slightly bent and remain flexible, while the hands are held in a half-clenched fist, with elbows bent and positioned in front of the body, or the arms are naturally extended and placed at the sides. The KATA Karate fighting stance features a more upright torso with the chin slightly tucked. The forearms are slightly bent to protect the ribs, with the front hand held vertically along the centerline at a height equivalent to the nose. The rear arm is bent, and the rear hand is positioned near the solar plexus. The feet are set wider apart, and the center of gravity is slightly shifted backward. This fighting stance embodies the KATA Karate principles of "karate never strikes first" and "one strike, one kill," emphasizing defensive counterattacks and proactive responses. In competition, it allows for the effective coordination of all four limbs.

The WTF fighting stance, with its slightly forward-shifted center of gravity, facilitates kicking techniques, particularly powerful attacks from the rear leg. The higher center of gravity also enables faster footwork and more effective use of kicking techniques. The positioning of the arms emphasizes defense against middle and upper-level attacks [7]. In contrast, the KATA fighting stance features a slightly backward-shifted center of gravity, which allows the front hand to defend and the front foot to step forward quickly. This not only prepares for defensive counterattacks but also effectively counters sweeping kicks and takedown techniques. The placement of the forearms not only blocks the opponent's punching lines but also enables side blocks, while the rear hand can directly execute offensive punches after defending. These

critical technical details in both fighting stances reflect their adaptation to competition rules and highlight the key directions of their respective tactics and techniques.

3.2. Comparison of attack techniques

The techniques permitted in competition serve as a primary hallmark of a martial art style and a key feature that distinguishes it from other martial art traditions.

Table 2 Permissible Techniques in Taekwondo and Karate

Target Area	Taekwondo Techniques	Karate Techniques
Head	Kicking techniques	Kicking techniques, Punching techniques
Torso	Kicking techniques, Punching techniques	Kicking techniques, Punching techniques
After being downed	Not permitted	Punching techniques, Kicking techniques

As can be seen from Table 2, the techniques permitted in WTF Taekwondo include attacks using the front-fist and strikes with areas below the ankle bone [8]. The front-fist is the only punching technique allowed in WTF Taekwondo competitions, and it can only target the torso areas covered by protective gear, whereas kicking techniques can freely target either the torso or the head. KATA Karate generally encompasses three types of techniques: punching, kicking, and throwing. Punches and kicks can target both the torso and the head. However, under the competition requirement of "non-contact" (sun-dome), strikes to the head must be precisely controlled without making full contact, while attacks to the torso must demonstrate striking power. Throwing techniques serve as auxiliary skills in KATA Karate and do not score points themselves, but subsequent attacks on a downed opponent can earn a high score of three points.

In order to highlight its competitive characteristics and integrate into the Olympic family, WTF Taekwondo prohibits the use of throws and grappling techniques, greatly reduces emphasis on punching, and elevates kicking techniques. High scores are awarded for strikes to the head and rotational difficulty moves, advocating for large-scale, high-intensity, and powerful kicking competitions. KATA emphasizes the systematic application of combat techniques, highlighting the core role of punching and kicking within its technical system. At the same time, the competition rules stress "non-contact," reflecting the central importance of "control" in its technical philosophy. In comparison, WTF's competitive combat techniques are more specialized yet refined, while KATA's competitive techniques are comprehensive, systematic, and place greater emphasis on self-control.

3.3. Comparison of permissible target areas in taekwondo and karate

The permissible target areas not only reflect the openness of the discipline's attack technique system but also indicate the selective development of combat techniques as guided by the competition rules.

Table 3 Comparison of Permissible Target Areas in Taekwondo and Karate

	Taekwondo	Karate
Head	Permitted (kicking techniques only)	Permitted
Torso	Permitted	Permitted
Lower Limbs	Not Permitted	Not Permitted

As can be seen from Table 3, permissible target areas in WTF Taekwondo include: the torso, except the spinal area of the back, which may be struck using punching or kicking techniques, and the head above the collarbone, which may be attacked using kicking techniques only [8]7-8. Attacks to the back of the head and below the waistband are prohibited. Permissible target areas in KATA Karate include the head, face, neck, abdomen, chest, back (excluding the shoulders), and the sides of the chest and abdomen [9]. Attacks to the lower limbs are forbidden. WTF encourages powerful attacks, having relaxed technical restrictions on head strikes through rule adjustments and incentivizing them with high scores, which increases the suspense and entertainment value of matches. Athlete protection relies mainly on protective gear (punching techniques

are prohibited for head strikes). Attacking a downed opponent with any technique is strictly prohibited. KATA emphasizes powerful yet controlled attacking techniques. Strikes to the head are required to be executed with "non-contact" precision, while attacks to the torso are delivered with full force. The variety of attacking techniques enhances the entertainment value of matches. Athlete protection primarily depends on technical proficiency and the competitor's own resilience to strikes. Attacking a downed opponent is permitted. The primary target areas in both sports are concentrated on the head and torso. Regarding head attacks, WTF emphasizes powerful strikes to achieve a knockout victory, whereas KATA requires controlled, non-contact precision. This highlights the significant difference between the two technical systems, each rooted in a distinct martial philosophy.

4. Comparison of pattern techniques in taekwondo and karate

Individual pattern practice holds a significant position in martial arts and serves as a primary means of transmitting and expressing the essence of the discipline. Practicing individual patterns not only enhances the practitioner's athletic abilities but also allows for repeated experiences to understand and perceive the athletic philosophy and humanistic spirit conveyed through the movement techniques. In WTF Taekwondo, patterns are referred to as "Poomsae." The main Poomsae include the eight Taeguek forms, as well as Koryo, Geumgang, Taebaek, Pyongwon, Sipjin, Jitae, Cheonkwon, Hansoo, and Ilyeo [10]. Taekwondo Poomsae are distinguished by their "performance lines." The "performance line" refers to the direction and angles of movement executed on the ground while performing the pattern. For instance, the eight basic forms represent the eight trigrams, and practice follows the symbolic meaning and movement paths of the corresponding trigram. Poomsae cannot be altered during practice, demonstration, or competition and are considered standardized forms. In KATA Karate, patterns are referred to as "Kata." The four major Karate styles encompass numerous Katas, each with distinct characteristics. The fundamental Katas of the Shotokan style alone include Heian Shodan to Heian Godan, Tekki Shodan to Tekki Sandan, as well as Enpi, Jion, Jitte, Hangetsu, Wankan, Unsu, Kanku Dai, Kanku Sho, Bassai Dai, Bassai Sho, Nijushiho, among others [11]. Each of the four styles—Shotokan, Shito-ryu, Goju-ryu, and Wado-ryu—selects two Katas as "designated Katas," which must be performed in competitions. In Kata competitions, athletes first perform a "designated Kata" and then a "free-choice Kata" [7]. For the free-choice round, athletes may select any Kata from their style that is not a designated Kata. Regardless of whether it is a designated or free-choice Kata, the content of the Kata is strictly prohibited from any modification.

Table 4 Pattern Techniques in Taekwondo and Karate

	Taekwondo	Karate
Quantity	Relatively Few	Numerous
Internal Schools	None	4
Competition Content	Pre-set Forms	Pre-set and Free-choice Forms

As can be seen from Table 4, WTF patterns primarily focus on fundamental movements. The choreography is relatively natural, and the total number of movements is not extensive, which facilitates learning and memorization. KATA patterns are numerous and divided into four distinct schools. Their movements involve greater variations in dynamics and are categorized into mandatory "designated forms" and self-selected "free-choice forms." It is evident that WTF's individual pattern practice emphasizes foundational skills, as well as the formal expression of patterns within theoretical frameworks such as the "Eight Trigrams" and "Heaven and Earth." KATA's individual pattern practice places greater emphasis on combinations of offensive and defensive techniques, as well as the rhythm and intensity of power and spirit.

5. Conclusion

WTF Taekwondo and KATA Karate, as two martial arts traditions originating from East Asia, share certain historical roots. Their differing understandings and interpretations of martial arts are inevitably reflected in their technical characteristics. The technical system of WTF Taekwondo emphasizes practicality and spectator appeal. In its integration into the Olympic family, it underwent significant

modifications, essentially focusing on kicking techniques to create a lower-body combat sport with a distinct "specialized and refined" style. WTF Taekwondo prioritizes striking effectiveness, encouraging the use of challenging techniques and head attacks, thus balancing practicality with entertainment value. KATA Karate, adhering to the traditional principle of "control before contact," emphasizes authentic combat techniques and practical application. It allows powerful strikes to the torso while mandating non-contact control to the head, reflecting a dual emphasis on high-intensity combat and technical precision. This approach upholds the philosophy of "one strike, one finish" while ensuring head protection. Both WTF Taekwondo's Poomsae and KATA Karate's Kata strictly preserve traditional content, allowing no modifications. In the modern era, where entertainment often takes precedence, some martial arts have adapted their techniques for artistic appeal, sometimes prioritizing "artistic form" over "combat functionality." WTF Taekwondo and KATA Karate's adherence to traditional forms ensures the continuity and integrity of their core combat principles. Highlighting unique features, enhancing competitive appeal, and promoting fitness are key trends in sports development, fundamentally rooted in the design of technical systems. While martial arts derive their essence from cultural traditions, their broader appeal relies on entertainment and fitness value. Both Taekwondo and Karate, though rooted in traditional Chinese culture, have evolved distinct technical systems. Karate's "non-contact" rules and comprehensive techniques enrich its competitive process, while Taekwondo showcases intricate kicking exchanges. Both significantly enhance spectator appeal and highlight their unique characteristics. Whether through Karate's comprehensive preservation or Taekwondo's selective refinement, each has made distinct choices in its technical evolution. These approaches provide practical insights for the innovation and reform of China's Wushu technical system.

6. References

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