

THE SOUTH KOREAN FLAG – THE TAEGUKGI: A STORY OF MANY LAYERS



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During gradings, I often look at the Australian and Korean flags hung side by side. Growing up in Australia, many of us know a lot about the significance of the British union jack and the southern cross constellation on our national flag.

The Korean flag, or the Taegukgi, designed in its current form in the 1880s, also tells an amazing story, and every part of it means something, and in some cases many things. According to some, **it represents not only the South Korean nation, but the Korean people, wherever they may reside.**

To start with, the background of the Korean flag is white – it's the colour of **purity and peace**. That alone could provide hours of meditation as a starting point, without adding the other elements.

Then there's the Taegeuk (태극- the red and blue symbol) – it looks like the Chinese yin and yang symbol. In Korean these are called eum and yang. The Taegeuk represents **the universe, along with harmony and balance**, with the red side representing positive cosmic forces, and the blue side negative ones.

Surrounding the Taegeuk, are four trigrams (괘 or kwaes/gwaes in Hangul, the Korean language). As a side note, 8 kwaes represent the first 8 poomsae patterns (also called Taeguk patterns) learned to achieve black belt status, 4 of these are the same kwaes as are on the Korean flag (I'll be writing an article on these kwaes and the first 8 poomsae patterns in more detail). As you can see, **taekwondo is very closely connected in meaning and symbolism with the flag and the Korean people.**

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I've included the kwaes and the various things they mean in the table overleaf (borrowed from the internet). The kwaes are divination signs and spring from Korean Taoist philosophy and belief. Another interesting side note – the flag of the Joseon dynasty, prior to the 1800s, included all 8 kwaes and a different version of the Taegeuk.

The first kwan is the top left, represented by ☰. This kwan is called “geon” (pronounced I think a little like gun or guhn, like when you say “huh” but without the “h”). It represents many things, including **heaven, justice, and the virtue of humanity.**

The second kwan is bottom left, represented by ☷. This kwan is called “ri”. It presents the **sun, fire, fruition, and the virtue of righteousness.**

The third kwan is bottom right, ☵, or “gon”. It represents the **earth, vitality, and the virtue of courtesy.**

Lastly, the fourth kwan, ☱, or “gam” (pronounced “garm” not a short “a” sound), represents **the moon, water, wisdom, and the virtue of intelligence.**

Its amazing to see how this fits together, with heaven and earth face each other across the Taegeuk, and so do the sun and moon. The virtues represented are humanity, righteousness, courtesy and intelligence (all things that truly mark the learned person, or the black belt). And the meanings of the symbols themselves include justice, fruition, vitality and wisdom, also something that marks **a people of culture and maturity.**

So I hope next time you look at the Korean flag in our dojang, you see a story with many layers and meanings, steeped in philosophy and belief, that illustrates a noble people and a way of looking at the world.

Its about peace, harmony, balance, the elements, and a virtuous life – much like Tae Kwon Do training when we work our way to black belt and beyond.

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Trigram	Korean name	Celestial body	Season	Direction	Virtue	Family	Natural element	Meaning
☰	<u>geon</u> (건 / 乾)	heaven (천 / 天)	spring (춘 / 春)	east (동 / 東)	humanity (인 / 仁)	father (부 / 父)	heaven (천 / 天)	justice (정의 / 正義)
☲	<u>ri</u> (리 / 離)	sun (일 / 日)	autumn (추 / 秋)	south (남 / 南)	righteousness (의 / 義)	daughter (녀 / 女)	fire (화 / 火)	fruition (결실 / 結實)
☵	<u>gam</u> (감 / 坎)	moon (월 / 月)	winter (동 / 冬)	north (북 / 北)	intelligence (지 / 智)	son (자 / 子)	water (수 / 水)	wisdom (지혜 / 智慧)
☷	<u>gon</u> (곤 / 坤)	<u>earth</u> (지 / 地)	summer (하 / 夏)	west (서 / 西)	courtesy (례 / 禮)	mother (모 / 母)	<u>earth</u> (토 / 土)	vitality (생명력 / 生命力)

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_South_Korea