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SSIREUM APPROACHING KOREAN WRESTLING THABATA CASTELO BRANCO TELLES AND CRISTIANO ROQUE ANTUNES BARREIRA

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to present and discuss the practice of *ssireum*, or Korean wrestling. The practice is a short-range combat sport where fighters are linked through a belt (*satba*) that each holds in order to throw the opponent down. Our study employs a method based on phenomenology to comprehend the experience of practicing *ssireum* through *intertwinement*. It also considers its history and definition, as well as the descriptions of a technical research visit carried out in South Korea in 2019. Descriptions were made considering perceptual processes and also gender issues that arise from practical experiences with *ssireum*. We claim that *ssireum* should be replicable in non-Korean environments, and could be developed as an important tool to promote engagement in fighting activities and broaden cultural diversity through embodied knowledges.

INTRODUCTION

Since democratization in the 1980s, Korean culture has spread all over the world. This includes not only its well-known technology brands, such as Samsung, Hyundai, Kia and Daewoo, and the cosmetics industry, but also popular culture, including K-pop music and film. Korean culture has also contributed to science and philosophy, for instance with Byung-Chul Han's famous academic work on contemporary culture and society. However, in other respects, Korea remains a place or a culture yet to be discovered by non-Koreans. It is difficult to access for those who cannot speak or read Korean, as many important cultural texts are not translated to English. This includes most of the literature related to martial arts. It follows that introducing more information about Korea culture is indispensable to understanding or discussing traditional Korean fighting systems.

Ssireum is a Korean martial art, along with better known styles like taekwondo, taekkyeon, hapkido and kumdo/gumdo [Green & Svinth 2010]. Although Korea is not as globally well-known as Japan and China in the realm of martial arts, there is still much to be said about this topic. First, it is essential to mention that the only UNESCO International Centre devoted to martial arts is located in South Korea (in the city of Chungju). The International Centre of Martial Arts for Youth Development and Engagement under the auspices of UNESCO (hereafter 'ICM') was launched following an agreement between the Government of South Korea and UNESCO in 2015. According to the centre's website:

The main objective of ICM is to contribute to youth development and engagement by using the philosophy and values of martial arts, contributing in cultivation of positive attitudes and personal development characteristics. In order to fulfil its mandate, ICM promotes research and knowledge sharing, organizes capacity building programs, collaborates to develop a clearing house on martial arts and fosters North-South cooperation.
[ICM 2020]

These aims are aligned with the UN's SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) which include equitable participation of women in different levels of martial arts domains, and a promotion of non-violent environments, self-control and respect, especially for cultural diversity. Striving to promote this engagement and development through martial arts, this centre organizes several activities, such as the MARIE Program, from where this research on ssireum originated. This funding and research program stands for Martial Arts Research Initiative for Experts and its aims are: (1) to encourage research on martial arts by young scholars; (2) to broaden the scope of martial arts research; (3) to

enhance the methodological competencies of martial arts researchers; and (4), to promote research and knowledge sharing on the positive values of martial arts. It consists of a program which includes research on martial arts as well as practical and theory classes on topics related to martial arts. Regarding practical classes, the 2019 session was focused on Korean martial arts, namely taekwondo, taekkyon and ssireum – the latter being the focus of this paper.

Ssireum can be considered a traditional fighting modality located in both North and South Korea. It has been classified by UNESCO as an example of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) since 2018. Despite this status, it remains little known outside of the Korean peninsula. There are certainly few studies in English, which suggests scope for more research into and awareness of the practice.

The request for recognition of ssireum as an example of ICH by UNESCO did not occur in a similar way to other processes in the same situation. It was facilitated by an unprecedented agreement between North and South Korea, which made a joint request for the recognition of the sport in this category. Accordingly, in this article the term 'Korea' is used interchangeably to refer either to South Korea or to the whole peninsula. Where specific reference is made to it, the term North Korea will be used.

After a short discussion of methodology, the following text will be divided into: a brief history and definition of ssireum; descriptions derived from a technical visit carried out in 2019, focused on perceptual processes and gender issues; and finally a discussion and reflection on possible contributions of this practice, especially considering it in non-Korean environments.

WRESTLING WITH PHENOMENA

When approaching Asian martial arts, it is vital to employ a critical approach and adequate methodology. This is nowhere more apparent than when one comes from a different continent and culture. Regarding Japanese and Korean martial arts, Moenig and Kim note:

The popular discourse about Asian martial arts has often been surrounded by an aura of mysticism, esotericism, and romanticism, which is so 'pervasive' that it even influenced the academic discussion to some degree. Moreover, the application of nationalistic motives and politics in promoting certain martial arts narratives often prevails [...] in essence, reinforcing what many people 'want' to believe that martial arts are.
[Moenig and Kim 2019: 1-2]

In an effort to examine these hegemonic narratives, and uncovering them in both reflexive and pre-reflexive domains, we employ a phenomenological point of view. Phenomenology helps us to grasp how these martial arts are practiced through the lived experiences of their practitioners, which is important: comprehending fighting practices in both reflexive and non-reflexive ways is necessary, as practitioners' constantly moving fighting bodies experience little time for reflection in the moment [Telles, Vaitinen & Barreira 2018].

Inspired by an 'emersiological' approach [Andrieu 2016], we also consider the experience of the immersion of the researcher. Emersiology seeks to be a reflexive science derived from the conscious emersion of the lived body. When immersed in an activity, the living body is aware of its movements and the situation through an embodied perception. However, it is only possible to think and reflect about what happened afterwards. In movement practices, we consider both immersion and the emersion process (after the immersion, when we go back to our daily reality), in order to describe the activity and our impressions towards it.

When we describe and discuss such experiences, we consider the importance of verbal communication, as this involves trying to put acts and experiences into a common language [Stelter 2000]. This comprehension considers the importance of understanding both reflexive and pre-reflexive processes, and it consists of a reflection about the unreflecting [Barbaras 2008].

These considerations derive from phenomenology, especially the work of Merleau-Ponty in *Phénoménologie de la perception* [1945] and *Le monde sensible et le monde d'expression* [1953/2011]. From this perspective, a movement is not only related to what we think about the world, but also to what we can do in it (and through it). This phenomenological understanding implies that a movement is never randomly executed, but that, on the contrary, it is always related to an object and to the world, even if we are not conscious of it. We do it, always engaged in a specific situation.

We subscribe to the position that a phenomenological approach can be seen as extremely relevant to studies not only of martial arts and combat sports but also to the study of all situations where bodies are engaged in movement. In embodied practices, culture, history and society appear through common gestures, rituals and shared experiences. As a combat experience, ssireum is approached here as a *corporal fight*:

In corporal fighting, the goal is to restrict the operative mobility of the corporal subject, the opponent, as well as to frustrate his or her identical intentions, thus determining the

phenomenal and operative dimensions of corporal fighting, by different kinds, uses, and styles of displacement, blocking, grappling, submission holding, kicking, and striking.
[Barreira 2017a: 362]

Neither the field experience nor the material to which we had access inform us of a specific elaboration of ssireum's ethical elements beyond its norms. Even if we grasp the aesthetical element, 'reflected in the motor-operative capacity to restrict the mobility of others' [Barreira 2017a: 368], due to our language limitations, we may still miss its ethical aspect, which is made by a typification of a 'cultural code of conduct that is necessarily reflected in combat attitudes' [2017a: 368]. However, without interpreting ssireum strictly as a 'martial art', it should be acknowledged that the field experience of ssireum as a corporal fight confirms the demand for voluntary efforts that strengthen a sense of self and honour, as reflected in the following 'phenomenon description':

respecting a wide myriad of experiences and intensities, something materialises out of corporal fighting that necessarily constitutes a process of self-knowledge. This process has martial arts as an existential model of confrontation. It is guided by the emulation of a sense of honour, encompassing a sense of self-value, which, in its turn, is about the attitude assumed during a fight. Once fighting's essential experiences have been developed, every martial art must be grasped as an existential tradition.
[Barreira 2017a: 363]

Considering this existential aspect, the following aims to approach ssireum through its history, definitions in the literature, and the data collected during a field trip, in South Korea, in July 2019. These sources are presented and discussed as being intertwined and complementing each other, in order to present a more rounded and rich account of the experience of ssireum.

SSIREUM: HISTORY AND DEFINITION

According to the Korea Ssireum Association, 'Ssireum is known as a Korean form of grappling practice, as a Korean-style belt wrestling in which wrestlers attempt to topple their opponents starting from a standard grip around each other's waist'. They continue:

Ssireum is connected with Korean history as a traditional sport. The way we play Ssireum is by kneeling, grabbing belts, standing and playing until someone's body from the knee up touches the ground. Men, women, and children can all freely enjoy Ssireum. Historically, Ssireum was a key part of consecration rites, festivals, public function, and any major social or national event. Whenever Korean people have gathered to celebrate something they have played Ssireum as a way to build and strengthen community ties.

[Korea Ssireum Association 2014: v]

From its history as a traditional practice, we argue that ssireum is always tied to social bonding through fighting. This is not something new, as it can also be found in other fighting practices around the world, such as capoeira or other types of indigenous wrestling in Brazil (such as the *huka-huka*), and also the *galhofa* in Portugal.

The Korean Ssireum Association [2014] claims that there has never been any serious effort to develop ssireum outside Korea. However, with Korea's increasing openness to the Western world, especially since the 1980s, the globalized sportive model seems to have been widely adopted within the peninsula. As such, ssireum is now considered a national sport, developed during the country's modernization in the early 20th century, but also reflecting its origins as an ancient folk game. According to Sparks:

Ssireum's history prior to the 20th century is scattered and piecemeal, but available archaeological and historical evidence suggests that it has been played in Korea for at least two thousand years. It is also clear from the same evidence that Ssireum has been played quite differently over time. Contemporary Ssireum is based on the selective retention and interpretation of some of its previous forms along with the addition of novel, modernized features. Much of what Ssireum is popularly said to represent at present is based on homogenizing local views of history in the Korean peninsula. For example, the rule structure that prohibits strikes and kicks extends the metaphor of Ssireum as a nonviolent contact sport in accordance with the portrayal of Korea as a peaceful nation. Ssireum became an extremely popular national sport during

Korea's modernization, but an international financial crisis all but destroyed it in the late 1990s. Industry leadership has continually sought ways to redevelop Ssireum. At present, this includes exporting Ssireum to foreign countries in order to create a global league. [Sparks 2011: 5]

Globalization has affected ssireum's organization as a sport from the end of the 20th to the beginning of the 21st century. Its popularity had waned, seeing a once prosperous professional league collapse. However, it is still seen as a sport to be played at various levels throughout the public education system in addition to semi-pro and amateur leagues [Sparks 2011].

From these discussions we can see that ssireum's social status seems to flow between that of a sport and tradition. There are many questions regarding the emergence of ssireum on the Korean peninsula, making an exact historical acknowledgement of its origins impossible. It is certainly difficult to know why different people have practiced ssireum at different times, their motivations and feelings about it, etc. Moreover, the origin of the term 'ssireum' also remains unclear. One suggestion is that it came from the word 'ssauda', meaning 'to fight'; another suggests 'saruda', meaning 'to repeat a vigorous motion'. But ssireum is widely considered to have one foot in the modern world and another in an older, traditional, agrarian society. It – or practices like it – is certainly believed by many to have been practiced in similar places in many different periods, albeit adapting according to social changes in Korean society [Korean Ssireum Association 2014]. Needless to say, its image as ancient does no harm to its cultural value, for many stakeholders.

Regarding its practical definition, ssireum is said to be 'not just pushing, pulling, and balancing'. Rather, it is 'a philosophy of human movement' [Sparks 2011: 19]. Indeed, the term 'ssireum' has been used to refer to a kind of *struggle and communication* – as an action and a verb (not a noun) – in which *someone 'ssireums' with something*. So, ssireum evokes 'a hands-on feeling of being worked over while at the same time struggling to come out on top' [Sparks 2011: 22]. Given this, although we use 'ssireum' interchangeably as a noun and a verb in the following discussion, we believe it is more accurate to understand the term as a *way of moving*, or as a *kind of action*.

APPROACHING AND EXPERIENCING SSIREUM

You can't understand anything without sand on your feet.
[Sparks 2011: 28]

Over a period of five weeks in July 2019, technical visits and training in various Korean martial arts were carried out through the 3rd MARIE Program (ICM/UNESCO), including taekwondo, ssireum, and taekkyeon. Regarding Ssireum, the researchers had both a theory and a practical class and also participated as observers in a festival where we watched competitions. Both the theory and the practical classes were held at the Korea National University of Transportation, in Chungju, South Korea. Practical classes were divided into two different sessions, both led by a coach from the Yeungnam University Ssireum team.¹ The first period was inside the sport facilities, on a mat, where we could learn the basic movements. The second was in an outdoor area which included a ssireum arena. This was a round, slightly raised, space covered with clean sand.

The coach and the athletes who participated in the class cautiously examined the sand to make sure it was clean and that there were no sharp objects that might interfere in the ssireum practice or hurt the practitioners and students. Two athletes from the Yeungnam University ssireum team participated in the practical activities, helping us to learn and improve the movements and techniques of ssireum wrestling.

After we learned the basic ssireum moves, we were invited to try it in a more activity-specific environment, on the sand. There we could experience not only the rules but also enjoy our attempts to fight in a match. Ssireum is also practiced with a specific belt, named *satba*. The fighters wear it around their hips and one of the thighs. Their official colours are red and blue, one representing each side of the fight.

During our activity we were allowed to choose our opponents as a way of making the practical training more comfortable and enjoyable. After selecting the contestants and putting on the belts, both entered in the arena and moved to its centre to start ssireum.

Figure 1:
The first author in a sand arena in Chungju, South Korea



Figure 2:
Sand arena in the Korea National University of Transportation's facilities

1 This paper is part of research approved by a university ethics committee (EEFERP-USP / CAAE 26940419.0.0000.5659). Regarding confidentiality, we have authorization (term of consent) from ICM/UNESCO, Korea National University of Transportation and Yeungnam University Ssireum team to use their names, images and the information that appear in this paper.



Figure 3:
The first author of this paper, the coach
and one of his athletes



Figure 4:
The coach with two Ssireum athletes

Little attention has been paid to the process of starting a fight in the literature of martial arts and combat sports [Telles, Vaittinen & Barreira 2018]. However, we regard this as an important feature because it shapes the subsequent movements. We corroborate Csordas' [1993] discussions on embodiment and somatic modes of attention (although they are not related to the fighting practices field), regarding the way in which positions, gestures and body movements are culturally incorporated.

As can be seen in Figure 3, there is a basic ritual to start ssireum: both fighters bend in front of each other and then grab the other's belt. After bending and holding the opponent's *satba*, they both follow the judge's command to stand up still holding the other's belt, which is never released until the end of the combat. Understanding the process of starting a fight also suggests something about how the match itself functions as a ritual facilitated by contact with, and an awareness of, the opponent's body.

Once the wrestlers are up, they both start moving and each tries to throw the other down. The player who first touches the ground (with any part of the body above the knee), loses. Ssireum fights are usually quick and it is not rare for them to last only a few seconds. We observe that accurate perception is needed for victory. However, this perception must be understood as a skilful bodily activity, not as an exclusively mental process [Noë 2006].

This way of moving also relies on awareness, proprioception, body scheme and learning processes, to name just a few factors. When considering perception as an action we consider it a process constituted by sensorimotor knowledge which is active, embodied, and environmentally situated. As Noë puts it:

Perception is not something that happens to us, or in us. It is something we do. [...] The world makes itself available to the perceiver through physical movement and interaction. [...] Perceptual experience acquires content thanks to our possession of body skills. What we perceive is determined by what we do (or what we know how to do); it is determined by what we are ready to do. In ways I try to make precise, we enact our perceptual experience; we act it out. [Noë 2006: 1]

The question is how players comprehend the perceptual experience of ssireum. After only a brief orientation, the body learns to fight maintaining a very short distance from the opponent. It is essential to mention that one must never let go of the other's satba, and all of the techniques involve trying to throw the opponent down using the belt (as can be seen in Figure 5). By comparison to other forms of wrestling, in ssireum there is little strategy other than keeping close to your opponent, because of the importance of the satba. This is vital not only to the performed techniques, but also in terms of maintaining a constant psychological bond with the opponent.

Of course, in the end, someone falls onto the sand. The fighter is in close contact with the opponent through the satba, but s/he is also in close contact with the environment (specifically, the sand) – both, through tactile perception. One literally touches the other and the ground during the whole fight. According to Noë:

Touch acquires content through movement. Touch is intrinsically active. It is, in effect, a kind of movement. And movement is intrinsically spatial in the sense that it unfolds in space and is thus mediated by space. [...] the only way immediately to encounter spatial qualities like distance in perception is through movement.
[2006: 97]

Although we also use vision and hearing, wrestling practices are characterized by their intimate connection with the opponent. Even though the other is also seen and heard, little can be done if s/he is not felt and touched. In terms of perception, one's tactile perceptions must be continuously considered when considering ssireum.



Figure 5:
the coach with two ssireum athletes

UNCOVERING GENDER ISSUES THROUGH A SSIREUM PRACTICE

For many reasons, including those just mentioned, wrestling might pose challenges for mixed-gender training. Gender issues are frequently encountered in martial arts and combat sports, as these are often male dominated [Holthuysen 2011; Telles 2018]. Ssireum requires tactile interactions, and this could represent a barrier for mixed-gender training. To better understand how gender issues manifest in ssireum, this section examines our own training during the research trip.

In the practical classes there were six students, three men and three women. As there were odd numbers, the primary researcher (female, and also first author of this paper) let the other two women practice together. This was because, on the one hand, there were cultural and religious considerations (one of the other women was a Muslim, and mixed-gender short range fighting raised issues of acceptability for both of the women). On the other hand, the main researcher is a Brazilian jiu-jitsu practitioner who is used to training extensively with both women and men. The experience was recorded in the field diary:

The other girls paired up together and then I paired up with a guy. The coach brought a few Ssireum belts, but there weren't enough 'official' ones for all of us. He decided to use a regulation belt with the guys, while the girls used the other ones, thinner ones. Honestly, I was a bit disappointed with this decision because I felt it had something to do with gender issues. However, I said nothing and respected the coach to see where it would end.

Later on, I felt I was really getting into the class and I loved trying Ssireum! Somehow it was familiar but different at the same time, as I needed to throw the other down holding their belt. It was a challenge I was eager to take. I was able to understand the basic moves and to succeed in most of them. Suddenly I realized there was an official belt left and I asked the coach to change mine, then I could keep training with the guys. Actually, it wasn't only a gender issue, but the weaker belt I was using seemed uncomfortable comparing to the ones men were using. Mine was thinner and it was hurting me a little bit. The coach agreed and one of his athletes came to put the official belt on me. I've paid attention but it seemed very difficult to tie (one day, I'll learn... – I thought). I kept training and before going to the sand area, I shared with the coach how much I'd enjoyed it. I realized he was really glad; it seemed this is something not so common for people (especially non-Koreans) to say about Ssireum, maybe because it is not as well-known as other MA&CS [martial arts and combat sports]. He replied that he could see it by the trainings that I'd liked it, telling me he'd observed I could do some moves that people usually spent weeks to get. Then he not only encouraged me to train by myself (and share a bit of Ssireum with the people in my country) but he also gave me two official satbas (the belts) to take home with me: a red one and a blue one. I couldn't be happier!

Through the experience described above, it appeared that the coach seemed to be slightly gender biased in the beginning of the activity, as he decided to give the official belts only to the men, while the thinner ones remained with the women. However, we highlight that he was very attentive to all the students, and he was also open to the fact that someone was doing good moves and was very interested in that practice, regardless of whether it was a man or a woman.

From such experiences and descriptions, we underscore the importance of increasing the notion of *sensible norm* [Barreira 2017b] in such embodied movement practices. This concept relies on these activities as intersubjective phenomena, which can either lead to sporting excellence or attitudes towards violence. The empathic experience of both opponents, along with the referee's presence, become powerful tools shaping the sensible affectivity that arises in such situations. Nor does use of the term 'norm' mean that we consider the fighters to be purely static objects. On the contrary, 'norms of sensitivity are constituted and modulated empathically without surrendering to pure conventionality, since it is the sensitive nature of the body itself that informs the subjects of the limits that can be mutually recognized' [Barreira 2017b: 291].

A sensible norm involves a constant intercorporeal agreement, which is not settled before fighting but accompanies the whole practice. Moreover, this idea relies on pre-reflexive processes, as the moving body has little time to think. Decisions are made based on habits and previous learned acts, and on the perception of the situation in relation to and with the other. If someone makes decisions based on rigid norms, s/he would not be able to change spontaneously during practice. From the example of the practical class, the coach could have been rigid, denying that woman could train with men and using a different kind of belt, for example. Moreover, a sensible norm is understood as a mouldable and fluid norm. The experience described above demonstrates how lived culture depends on relationships and is transformed by them. As Barreira notes:

The challenge faced by the fighter to correspond to the self-placed expectations will be modulated and optimised by personal tendencies which come out as lived experiences. As the practice of a martial art presumes the existence of a community, the experiences in question are intertwined with the culture of this martial art and with the fighter's peers, especially his masters, who are models for his self-placed expectations.
[Barreira 2017a: 362-363]

Considering the modulations between individual and sociocultural understanding, an initiative allowing non-Koreans (six people from six different countries and four continents) to practice traditional

Korean wrestling is extremely important to those seeking to develop a global perspective on martial arts and combat sports. Throughout this program, the main topics we could work on were youth development and gender equality. It was realized that we could not only explore such matters in our personal projects, but also through embodied practices, such as ssireum. It is also important to mention that such remarkable experiences would not have been possible without the empathic leadership of the coach.

Along with the practices we have just described, we also went to a ssireum festival, in Mungyeong, South Korea. Although we knew there were both female competitors and tournaments, we did not have the opportunity to observe any of them on the single day we went to the festival. However, we could see a lot of women supporting the athletes:

There was a gymnasium with a sand arena in the center. College and university teams would compete between themselves. It seemed Ssireum was a very important thing not only to the athletes, but also to their families. It was common to see parents helping their kids to carry bags full of Ssireum belts. Moreover, they got really involved with the fight, shouting and supporting their sons. I don't understand Korean, but it seemed they knew Ssireum and that they could talk about the techniques with them. I also saw them carrying a lot of food to give them during the fight intervals. For me, it was very similar to a Brazilian mother or father of a young fighter or player.
[field diary]

This excerpt exemplifies the importance of comprehending social experiences through non-verbal processes, as the researcher could neither understand nor communicate using a verbal language. However, visual and auditory perception were extremely helpful to the experience of such a situation, and being able to describe it further.

From a phenomenological point of view, perception is an ordinary act, as it is our first way to access the world. It is also relevant to mention that one usually apprehends the objects and the situation through profiles, as we can never understand something entirely [Merleau-Ponty 1945: 1953/2011]. Although we are not able to see the entire object, we can recognize it as a relief, which enables our actions. According to this perspective, we can usually perceive something or someone once we can put together the apparently separated information from what we see, hear or touch. This involves not only perceiving the object, but also a specific situation and how to be able to do something in a certain time and space. In this case, although martial arts and combat sports are often male-dominated fields, and so we suppose is ssireum, it does not mean it is a necessarily hostile place for women, at least from what we have seen at the festival and from what we have experienced in the practical classes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION THE RELEVANCE OF SSIREUM IN NON-KOREAN ENVIRONMENTS

Embodied movement practices are continuously related to culture, history and society. These nuances may be recognizable not only through reflexive acts (especially verbal communication), but also via pre-reflexive processes. The main purpose of this research was to introduce ssireum to non-Koreans, rather than to engage in a discussion of the gendered aspects of its performance from the beginning. However, as the main researcher is a woman, this topic was intertwined with her practice and research.

Her approach to ssireum intersected with this issue, as through phenomenological perspectives our experiences flow from universal to singular approaches, as they are also guided by our perceptions and vice versa. Despite the fact that social standards for women all over the globe often do not include fighting, attentive perception and sensible norms can enable these gender issues to be better addressed. Hence, we decided to highlight a respectful and successful experience instead of listing the well documented problems women still face to engage in martial arts and combat sports. These are numerous and the literature has already covered several important ones. However, less attention has been paid to remarkably positive experiences. As Channon points out: 'mixed and undifferentiated training can give rise to mutual understandings of the shared physical possibilities of the sexed body in ways which segregated training cannot' [Channon 2013: 7]. We agree that such initiatives can grow globally, especially through a sensible norm [Barreira 2017b].

Finally, we raise the question of the relevance of ssireum in non-Korean environments – especially in Brazil, where the authors reside. This country already has a rich variety of traditional wrestling practices, many deriving from indigenous peoples of the Amazon and Xingu region. Moreover, grappling modalities are already well known among Brazilians, for two reasons. The first is that Brazil is known as having the largest Japanese community outside of Japan itself. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, judo and jujutsu (or jiu-jitsu) are present throughout the country. The second – related – reason is the prominence of Brazilian jiu-jitsu, not only in Brazil but also all over the world. Brazilian jiu-jitsu emerged from branches of judo and jujutsu practices in Brazil, especially those coming from Mitsuyo Maeda (1878-1941), derived from Jigoro Kano's (1860-1938) Kodokan system. It is also important to add that Brazil has also developed its own style of modern wrestling, called 'Luta livre' or Catch wrestling. We are also aware of the growth of these activities around the globe, with numerous variations and varieties across different regions and countries, including those of Portugal with the galhofa and Spain with *lucha leonesa*.

Our concluding contention, nonetheless, is that the more such practices there are for people to encounter, the more people will be able to broach different kinds of embodied interactional experiences and cultural practices, crossing boundaries including but not limited to those of gender [Telles 2020]. In this regard, ssireum amounts to a powerful potential tool to enable cross-cultural exchange. It is replicable in non-Korean environments and may broaden the cultural diversity of embodied knowledges. Ssireum is likely to be well received in places like Brazil where grappling modalities are widely familiar and generally popular. In addition, Ssireum is cheap and simple to practice. One only needs two belts, clean sand and openness to an interesting experience.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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