

## **The history of Taekwon-Do**

The modern day art of Taekwon-Do has had a long & turbulent history. The art that we practice today maybe a comparatively new innovation compared to some other styles of martial arts, as it's inception to the world was only in 1955, but the substance of this Korean fighting art was based on many years of refined fighting techniques, honed on the battlefields of the Korean peninsular.

Not only have the physical skills of fighting been passed down through the generations of martial arts masters, but so has a philosophical code, a way of life –the *Do*.

Man has always struggled to overcome his rivals since the dawn of time, whether to protect his family, his home or to seize power & land from others. This quest for domination sowed the seeds for the development of the fighting arts. Our ancestors, through trial & error, formulated scientific principles in an effort to subdue their enemies. This ultimately led to the development of these primitive fighting skills into refined martial arts complete with philosophical values.

The purpose of this article is to give the reader an insight into the heritage of the modern art of Taekwon-Do, from both a physical & a philosophical point of view. From the early roots of Korean foot-fighting through to the development of modern Taekwon-Do in the 1940's by General Choi Hong Hi.

### **Beginnings of martial arts in Korea**

The exact beginnings of a separate Korean cultural identity is lost in the mists of remote antiquity. There is archaeological evidence of an ancient people occupying the Korean peninsular which dated over 30,000 years ago. The literary records that are available document the traditional beginnings of Korea's history go back to over 4000 years ago where myth & history blend together to describe the establishment of family & tribe into a people or nationality.

The first myth dates the foundation of a specific cultural identity to 2333 B.C. with the establishment of the Ko-Chosen (Ancient Korean) state.

The history of the Korean martial arts can be documented to around 50 BC. During this time Korea was divided into three kingdoms. This was the period

in Korean history that was known as **The 3 Kingdoms period**, which lasted from 57 B.C. through to 668 A.D.

**Silla**, was the first of the tribal people, to mature into a kingdom, it was founded in 57 BC by the Chin Han people & was originally the least developed state. The kingdom eventually grew to prosper and become the most powerful kingdom in the Korean peninsular, and the Silla dynasty reigned over the unified peninsular for nearly 300 years (668 to 918 AD). **Koguryo** was founded in 37 BC by the Pyon-Han tribes & was initially the largest and most powerful of the three kingdoms.

The third kingdom, **Paekche**, was founded by the Man-Han tribes, around 18 BC.

The 3 Kingdoms period was a very turbulent period in the Korean history with territorial battles with each other & political control being sought by neighbouring countries, especially by the Chinese & Manchurian Emperors. The Koguryo nation developed into a very warlike & aggressive people due to the country's borderline being consistently being invaded.

During the reign of **Great Queen Sondok** (632 to 647 A.D.) the foundations were laid for the ultimate unification of the 3 Kingdoms. The wise Queen realised the importance of the **Hwarang**, the highly trained & skilled warriors of the Silla Dynasty, & she developed the Hwarang into a formidable fighting force.

At the peak of its glory, membership was not restricted to those of noble lineage, but commoners could strive to enter its ranks by the merit of their mental & physical abilities, as well as dedication to the Hwarang code.

The 3 Kingdoms battled against one another for domination & it wasn't until Silla defeated Paekche in 660 A.D. & in finally conquering Koguryo in 668 A.D. that the peninsular was unified.

In 676 A.D. the Sillans had driven out the Chinese, who had supported the Silla Kingdom in unifying the Country in a manoeuvre to seize political control of Korea & enforce Chinese rule.

This period was known as **The Unified Silla Dynasty period** (668 to 918 A.D.). This was a time of great advancement in cultural development, peace & prosperity. During this period martial arts enjoyed great prestige & was a

regular feature of state festivals & athletic competitions as well as remaining a part of the education of the young & the training of the military. This period of great advancements was made only possible by the dedicated spirit of the Hwarangdo. They were responsible for the introduction of foreign culture without the loss of the Korean peoples spirit.

Early in the 10th century there was a great change in the political climate & there was a transfer of power from the Silla Dynasty to the **Koryo Dynasty** (918 to 1392 A.D.), the Koryo Dynasty was founded by Wang Kon who reigned under the reign title of King Taejo.

During this period Koryo suffered regular invasions from foreign powers, this was due to the strategic position that the Korean peninsular holds in the Far East. The most devastating invasion came from the fiercest & most powerful military force the ancient world had ever known; the Mongols.

After nearly 100 years of Mongol rule, their power started to wane & Japanese pirates started to raid the Korean coastlines & the Koryo Dynasty started to crumble. From the dying embers of the dynasty rose a great leader called **Yi Song Gye**, who managed to suppress the Japanese raiding parties, defeat the Manchus raiding the northern borders & consolidate the country. In 1392 he founded the **Yi Dynasty** (1392 to 1910 A.D.).

During this period there was a backlash towards martial arts which resulted in the arts losing popularity & they fell into decline.

This was due to the monasteries & semi-fuedal military estates which flourished in the Koryo Dynasty, while acting as centres for training in the martial arts, had been given special status & had now become powerful forces that was now viewed as weakening the authority of the government. The emphasis of cutting back on the military strength of the country was to prove to be a inadvisable policy. In 1592 a Japanese force under **Hideyoshi** decided to conquer China by way of Korea. Three armies landed & with no standing forces to engage them the Japanese pushed their way to the capital, Seoul, in just 15 days.

Even without official sponsorship, the martial arts had been kept alive by the people. They formed guerrilla bands known as "Righteous Armies", these bands of freedom fighters attacked & halted the Japanese invaders. They eventually forced the Japanese to retreat to Pusan & with the rising of one of Korea's greatest heroes, **Admiral Yi Sun Sin**, the Japanese were defeated.

After this war the Yi Dynasty closed its borders to all foreigners in the hope of creating some semblance of peace (earning the nickname "**The Hermit Kingdom**"). During the 18th century there was a gradual recovery from the devastation of war. The Yi offered strong support for Confucian values, which

had a bias of civil authority over the military & this led to the official discouragement of the martial arts & once again the martial arts fell into decline.

In 1894 Japan fought China for possession of Korea resulting in a Japanese victory. The Japanese moved in her troops, strengthening them in preparation for the Russo-Japanese war in 1904. In 1910 Korea was formally annexed by Japan.

The period of the Japanese occupation was known as the **Chosun period** (1910 to 1945), this was the ancient name of Korea which was used during the Yi Dynasty. It means "**Land of Morning Calm**".

The past lack of support of the military was bitterly felt by the Korean people & once again the tradition of the martial arts, which had been kept in the hearts & minds of the people, were to play an important part in the resistance to the occupying forces. From local areas arose resistance armies (or "independence Armies") from Buddhist monasteries & schools where they had trained in the ancient martial techniques of Korea.

The Japanese occupying forces were determined to eradicate the Korean cultural identity & replace it with their own. The traditions of the Korean people were forced underground & were practised in secret, this included the martial arts. Reprisals for anyone found practising these were severe. The Japanese influence of the martial arts were inherited by the Korean martial arts masters as many of them chose to train in the Japanese martial arts, while still practising the forbidden Korean martial arts underground. This can be seen in the similarity of the more modern Korean forms of the fighting arts.

After World War 2 (in 1945) modern Korea was still divided & this resulted in the Korean War (1950 to 1953) after Communist Chinese & Russian forces invaded the country. After 3 years of fighting with United Nations forces, a stalemate was reached & the country was divided along the 38th parallel, forming North & South Korea.

It was in this period after WW2 that the Korean people demanded the re-emergence of a new cultural identity. This came in the shape of Taekwon-Do, a martial art that was based on traditional Korean values & the ancient martial arts of Korea.

## Evidence of martial arts practice in ancient Korea

Paintings on the ceilings of the Muyong-Chong royal tomb from the Koguryo Dynasty, have given evidence of the practice of martial arts. These are dated from 3AD to 427AD and show men performing stylised fighting techniques. Further evidence of an indigenous Korean martial art is present on the tower wall of (what later became) a Buddhist temple in Kyongju, the capital city of the ancient Korean kingdom of Silla. Here there are carved two figures in traditional fighting stances. The temple is 2,000 years old, and gives us a time marker for the earliest known record of a Korean martial art.

At the entrance of the Sokkul Am, a small Buddhist cavern temple, is a stone carving of a famous Korean warrior-monk called Kungang Yuksa in a fighting posture. This carving was completed during the reign of King Hye Gong (765 to 780 A.D.).

One very important influence on the modern art of Taekwon-Do was the ancient fighting style of **Taekkyon** (Korean foot fighting). Before the 6th century Taekkyon was habitually practiced by ruling classes and from the 9th to 12th century became very popular amongst the common people. A Korean history book written in the 15th century, called the Koryusa, records that the practice was widely encouraged and practiced from the King himself to farmers. This trend continued until the early stage of the Chosun (Yi) Dynasty. But as the Korean society moved toward a system that encouraged only literary arts and one that held the military arts in contempt, after the 13th century Taekkyon was more favoured as a folk custom & lost popularity as a martial arts practice.

During the Yi Dynasty, the ruling & aristocratic classes, known as the Yangban, officially discouraged the practice of martial arts & archery was the only officially recorded martial art practised by the soldiers of Chosun.

Literary records exist which record the deeds carried out by some of the many Hwarang heroes, one of these, the **Sam Guk Sagi** dates from 1145 A.D. & contains deeds of warriors using empty hand techniques on the battlefields. A further document, the Hwarang Segi was lost during the Japanese occupation, but was said to have contained the deeds of over 200 Hwarang warriors.

Further documentation of martial arts practice were recorded in 1790 under the instruction from King Jungjo. This was called the **Muye Dobo Tongji**. This is an ancient Korean martial arts manual, compiled to serve as a training manual for the soldiers of the palace guard. This contained all the known material on the practices of martial arts. This was itself based on a Chinese text given to the King which was written by Chuk Kye-Kwang of the Ming dynasty (1368 to 1644 A.D.), this text was called the Kihyo Shinsu.

The text contains all manner of warfare including archery, fighting from horseback, the long-spear, swordmanship, the flail, the staff & the empty hand art of **Kwon bup** ("fist method"). There are mentions of other unarmed combat forms such as, Yo bup ("throwing method"), Su bup ("hand method" -n.b: this could be an alternative spelling of Su bak) & Jok bup ("foot method").

It is also recorded that the King of the Cho dynasty observed contests involving **Su bak** (fist fighting), archery & a contest of Kee mun, or palm striking -also called Kwon pak. In the notes it is also recorded that Su bak is a martial art contest of wrestling. It also denotes that Kee mun is used to grab & release an attackers weapon.

The document also records that certain techniques were derived from the **Shaolin temple** methods from both external, or hard forms ("waega") & from the soft schools ("naega"). This included running, jumping & locking techniques.

It was noted that because the system of martial arts were usually transmitted verbally, many skills were lost & then intermittently revived by masters, so it was deemed important that they were to be documented.

The section on Kwon bup records a system of vital points & death points which were divided into 3 types; those for killing, those for inducing a coma & finally, paralysing techniques.

## **The importance & development of the Hwarang**

It is from one of the unique institutions of the Silla Dynasty, the Hwarang, that the spirit of Taekwon-Do is derived. Many of Korea's heroes were members of the Hwarang & the courageous leadership & valour on the battlefields that the Hwarang possessed played a crucial role in the final unification of the three ancient Kingdoms of Korea.

In the middle of the 6th century **King Chinhung** (ascending the throne in 540 A.D.) wished to establish a system for selecting the most promising leaders from the leading families, in order to conduct the administration of the

country. This resulted in the creation of the **Wonhwa** (“original flower”), the predecessors of the Hwarang.

The Wonhwa were a group of 300 followers led by 2 beautiful & strong spirited women. However the 2 leaders, Joon-jung & Nam-mo, became jealous of one another & this led to the untimely end of the institution. Their desire for domination resulted in the death of the leaders & the disbandment of their followers.

The King did not give up on his idea & the second attempt proved eminently more successful. He singled out young men of upstanding character & of noble bearing, who were trained according to a very strict regimen. The newly found order of young men was named the Hwarang (“flowering youth”). This “flower of youth” was so named to reflect the promise of the nation, the hope of the future.

The Hwarang were taught dance, literature, arts & science plus arts of warfare, charioteering, archery & hand-to-hand combat. The hand-to-hand combat was based on Um-Yang (Yin-Yang) principles of Buddhist philosophy & incorporated the blending of hard & soft, linear & circular techniques.

The code of the Hwarang, the **Se Sok O Gye**, were derived from the indigenous culture & religious beliefs of the Silla nation. They combined Confucian teachings, Taoist doctrines & Buddhist beliefs to develop the “**5 secular commandments**” of the Hwarang from which the **Tenets** of modern day Taekwon-Do are derived.

The priest & scholar who most uniquely left his mark & influence of the Hwarang code was the Buddhist monk **Wonkwang**, who denoted the 5 commandments which were received by the Hwarang in 602 A.D.

### **Se Sok O Gye –the code of the Hwarang**

#### ***Sa koon yi choong –loyalty to the King & Country***

The Hwarang were an elite warrior class charged with the unquestionable duty of protecting their society. If necessary they would lay down their lives to protect their homeland & many examples of their heroic acts throughout Korean history are recorded in Korean texts. A great number of Kings were famous Hwarang warriors & their exploits were documented in the aforementioned texts, the Hwarang Segi & the Sam Guk Sagi, the official documents of the Hwarang.

These principles were not undertaken lightly, as the following example clearly demonstrates;

In the year 603 A.D., a small band of Hwarang under the command of General Muun, were ambushed & the general fell from his horse. Two of his soldiers, Kwi-San & Chu-Hang, came to his aid & attacked the enemy. After helping the general to escape on one of their horses they continued to battle with the pursuers, killing a great number of the enemy before succumbing & dying "bleeding from a thousand wounds".

The ancient code of the Hwarang can still be observed by modern practitioners of Taekwon-Do. As martial artists, we gain so much from the practice of our chosen art form, we also owe a debt of loyalty to that one place that contributes so substantially to our physical, mental & spiritual well being; the Dojang.

### ***Sa chin yi hyo* –Respect & obedience to parents & elders**

In Korean society, elder siblings are responsible for looking after their younger members of their family. In return the younger siblings acknowledge this by showing respect for their elders. This takes its root from the Confucian influence in the Korean society.

The Hwarang had a commitment to the social order & showed concern & compassion for the people, this was coupled with the high regard for women in the society. This was a feature almost lacking in the Japanese Samurai's code of **Bushido**. The Hwarang had a feeling of responsibility for the protection of communal interests & they held a responsible role in society, which was far removed from the contractual relationships to be found in Bushido.

Once again, this principle can be applied in today's Dojangs. The role of the Sabumnim, or teacher, is to teach a way to live, a way to behave & a way to approach the world, in addition to teaching techniques, coaching, giving advice & generally supplying the students with Taekwon-Do. It would therefore be unimaginable not to show respect for the Sabumnim's role.

### ***Kyo woo yi shin* –Trustworthiness amongst friends**

The notion of trustworthiness encompasses a number of related qualities; dependability, fidelity, integrity. The one concept that best sums up all these qualities is honour.

Honour was an important concept to the Hwarang. They lived by their code, much the same as the Samurai who observed the code of Bushido (as an interesting note, the Hwarang code preceded Bushido by around 600 years). The Hwarang were held in high regard by both the Kings & ruling classes of ancient Korea & also by the general populace. They were also respected & feared by their enemies. The Hwarang were noted as not being so brutal, or as harsh, as the Samurai in adhering to the code of Bushido.

Modern martial artists should also observe a code of honour. By representing yourself truthfully & not being afraid to reveal your own thoughts & feelings about matters, takes courage & earns the trust of others. By doing this & showing respect to others, you achieve honour & others can come to depend on you. This, in turn, builds self-respect, an important quality that some seek all their lives.

### ***Im jeon moo tae –Courage in battle***

The many exploits of the Hwarang warriors produced a great number of legendary heroes. This can be credited to their fierceness & courage on the battlefields, in the defence of their homeland against their immediate neighbours & invading foreign forces.

Many of the most famous Hwarang generals & warriors are still remembered for their courage & accomplishments. Some of these were immortalised by General Choi Hong Hi, when he created the Taekwon-Do patterns & named them after them in their honour. Some of the most famous were; Kim Yoo Sin, Yi Sun Sin, Yong Gae Somoon, Ul Ji Moon Dok & the great Warrior-King, Moon Moo.

Living courageously requires the ability to distinguish between the reckless & the risky, & to decide on a course of action that achieves results. To overcome obstacles requires the belief in one's own capabilities & the ability to determine where one's strengths & weaknesses lie & then to face them with the self-confidence that your training has developed.

### ***Sal saeng yoo taek –Do not take life unjustly***

The Hwarang lived with the constant shadow of death hanging over them & they accepted that they might die in the course of carrying out their duty, &

this they faced with great courage. Because of this realisation that life could so easily be lost, the Hwarang came to treat all life with great reverence. This factor was greatly influenced by the Buddhist teachings that the Hwarang observed & from this the Hwarang developed a balanced understanding of the need for justice. The Se Sok O Gye dictated that all life must be viewed as sacred & that the taking of another's life must be justified.

Obviously in the modern day context, most of us are not in the business of taking others lives, but the principles behind the meaning of Sal saeng yoo taek remains the same. The use of Taekwon-Do's powerful techniques & the self-defence skills that we have acquired, require considerable judgement.

As we can clearly see, the lives & deeds of the Hwarang illustrate a level of courage, honour, wisdom, culture, compassion & impeccable conduct that few men in history have demonstrated. The dedication & self-sacrifice of the Hwarang were clearly based on principles much stronger than ego & self-interest.

This code of the Hwarang has influenced the moral values that permeates through the teachings of Taekwon-Do. The 5 Tenets of courtesy (*Ye Ui*), integrity (*Yom Chi*), self control (*In Nae*), perseverance (*Guk Gi*) & indomitable spirit (*Baekjul Boolgool*) all reflect the values taught to the Hwarang.

The Encyclopedia of Taekwon-Do, written by General Choi, quotes many of the values that a true practitioner of the martial arts should possess such as humility, justice, respect, humanity, righteousness, wisdom, trust, to have peace of mind & to be of strong conviction & of strength of mind in your undertakings. These are all values that have been passed down from generation to generation of martial artists.

It is these codes that gives such an enduring quality to a military art that had it's beginnings in ancient times, yet still exists in a very practical way today in the form of Taekwon-Do.

