



ORIGINS

Over the years, more than a few critics have characterized the striking arts of Korea as nothing more than “repackaged Japanese karate.” In response, a few practitioners of *taekwondo*, *tang soo so*, *soo bahk do* and other styles have offered accounts of the origins of their arts that aren’t fully grounded in reality. However, concocting revisionist histories is unnecessary because a strong case can be made that the Korean striking arts are uniquely Korean.

Korea’s striking arts are unique even though they share basic physical techniques and forms that are part of fighting systems found throughout Asia, including those generically referred to as “karate.” By most accounts,

How “Korean” Are the Korean Striking Arts?

by Mark P. Fancher



the Asian striking arts originated in India. The explanations suggest that the fighting techniques were brought from India to Shaolin Temple in China by a monk named Bodhidharma. From China, they purportedly made their way to Okinawa. According to the accepted story, Gichin Funakoshi shared the Okinawan techniques with Japan. Korea enters the picture around the time of World War II, when many Koreans who'd spent time in Japan returned home with a knowledge of karate.

It's inaccurate to suggest that the styles that emerged in post-World War II Korea were basically Japanese karate if for no other reason than Japan was not the point of origin for this fighting system. If the Japanese learned karate from Okinawa, logic requires that the martial art be called "Okinawan karate." Then again, because the Okinawans are supposed to have learned their techniques from the Chinese, perhaps it's more accurate to refer to it as "Chinese karate." But if we want to be precise, we must remember

The indigenous Korean kicking art of taekwon influenced the development of several modern Korean systems, the author claims.

that Bodhidharma, an Indian, brought karate to China. Maybe all forms of karate should be called "Indian karate." In fact, the art might best be called "African karate," given that the earliest known depictions of martial arts practitioners have been found at Beni Hasan in Egypt, and some speculate that those fighting techniques made their way to India and ultimately the rest of Asia.

Because of the unique cultures found in every country where karate has been practiced, each one can legitimately assert a national claim to its respective martial art. Regardless of how a striking art was practiced when it entered a particular country, as locals worked with the techniques, they imbued the art with their own cultural essence that in practically every case fundamentally transformed the fighting system into something that was unique to that nation. Korea was no exception.

The easy conclusion drawn by many





Hwang Kee claimed to have modeled the advanced forms taught in the Moo Duk Kwan after the movement sequences depicted in the ancient *Mu Yea Do Bo Tong Ji* text.

is that because of long-term suppression of the martial arts in Korea, orchestrated first by Confucian leaders and later by Japanese occupiers, Koreans lost much of their ancient, indigenous arts and adopted foreign styles. However, very old Korean fighting methods such as *tae kyon* and those recorded in *Mu Yea Do Bo Tong Ji*, an ancient military manual from Korea's Yi dynasty (1392-1910), survived and influenced key Korean masters such as Hwang Kee during the modern era. In addition, many techniques and forms that Korea adopted from other countries were so heavily impacted by Korean culture and philosophy that in most cases the borrowed methods took on a new identity.

Perhaps the first and most important way in which Korea fundamentally transformed any borrowed generic karate techniques into elements of a uniquely Korean art was by giving them a philosophy that has ancient and deep Korean roots—specifically, in the peninsula's Silla dynasty (668-935). An elite group of scholars and warriors called the Hwa-

rang followed a five-element code, which was a blend of Confucian and Buddhist principles. They were required to remain loyal to their sovereign, demonstrate filial piety, honor relationships with friends and comrades, never retreat in battle, and honor and protect life by refraining from killing unless it was unavoidable. A number of Korean martial arts associations adopted philosophies derived from those principles, each of which has considerable implications for how practitioners must approach not only the martial arts but also life in general.

To be specific, a sincere adherent to these tenets is likely to seek peace, carry himself with humility, and demonstrate loyalty and quiet respect for others in society. Casual observers of the martial arts may assume that any form of karate will encourage that type of behavior. However, plenty of martial artists have unfortunately been taught to relate to others with nothing more than aggression.

On a physical level, Korea's martial artists revolutionized karate with never-before-seen spectacular kicking techniques. Since ancient times, a foot-fighting method called *tae kyon* was prevalent in Korea. In many parts of the

country, the use of the feet for purposes of unarmed combat seemed as natural as the use of the fists does in North America. So even if Japan-trained martial artists introduced a reverse-punch-oriented style to Korea, the Koreans themselves chose to fight like Koreans and place a heavy emphasis on kicking. This ultimately influenced many practitioners of non-Korean arts who also began to employ high spinning kicks.

Additional support for the idea that Koreans were kicking pioneers can be found in ancient Chinese and Okinawan forms. Many such forms rarely involve anything other than the most basic front and side kicks, and they're usually kept low. That's significant because the traditional forms are believed to have been designed to incorporate the most important techniques of the martial arts. They may be the most reliable record of how the arts were practiced in ancient times. If they are, they show that the Chinese and Okinawan martial arts pioneers were not routinely using the head-high, swirling kicks that are so prevalent in the Korean styles.

H.C. Hwang, son of the legendary Hwang Kee, oversees the Korean striking art of *soo bahk do*. It teaches numerous kicks that are more dynamic and intricate than those used by ancient Okinawan and Japanese practitioners.

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Although we now take high kicks and jump-spinning kicks for granted because of movies and nontraditional forms competitions, only a few decades ago, Korean masters were dazzling and inspiring audiences with kicks that were novel at the time. For example, during the 1970s, the flying split kick became the virtual signature of Ki Yun Yi of New Jersey, a tang soo do practitioner. This suggests that the Koreans were not so much imitators as innovators.

It's important to understand that because of human nature, whether the Koreans made innovations or not, no foreign system of fighting could have taken root in Korea if the techniques conflicted with indigenous methods. In Korea's case, even a casual look at *Mu Yea Do Bo Tong Ji* reveals that the stances, blocks and strikes used during the Yi dynasty are very similar to those used in modern styles.

The Korean striking arts continue to evolve in ways that make them even more Korean than they already are. Certain taekwondo systems have de-emphasized or abandoned the ancient Chinese and Okinawan forms in favor of routines of recent vintage created in Korea. Hwang

Taekwondo is often disparaged as "repackaged karate," but even if it was influenced by the Japanese art, it evolved into a distinctly Korean style, the author says. (For illustrative purposes, Young Bo Kong is shown.)

Kee, the late founder of the Moo Duk Kwan, created master-level forms based on the empty-hand techniques shown in *Mu Yea Do Bo Tong Ji*.

The real lesson in all this is that cultural and historical differences don't suggest inferiority or superiority. They mean only that every nation has something special to contribute, and that makes us all richer. Whether it's Korea, China, Japan, Okinawa or any other country, we're all better off if there's universal respect for the diverse contributions made to a discipline that, on the most basic level, binds all martial artists. ✕

About the author: Mark P. Fancher is a lawyer and freelance writer who has a fifth-degree black belt in tang soo do from the International Martial Arts Association.