



The Kum Kang Ryuk Sa sculptures stand guard outside a temple at Mt. Toham in Kyungju, Korea.

This two part history was originally written in 1966 when Korean karate was practically unknown in the United States. Kim Soo was the first Korean correspondent for Black Belt Magazine and this was his first major article for them.

---

Part 1: Korean Karate - The Foundation

## **The Monks Were Afraid of Bandits and Wild Beasts**

by (Then) Master Kim Pyung Soo

**Korean karate is one of the oldest in the world. In this three part series we will discuss its development and growth in Korea.**

Korea's contributions to karate are varied and fascinating, and the art has had a rich and colorful history in that land. Yet Korean karate is probably the least known in the United States of the four major versions. The average budo fan is much more up on how the art developed in China, Okinawa and Japan.

This is true especially of the Japanese styles of karate which have had such a big impact in the United States. Yet from the standpoint of age, Japan is strictly a newcomer to the art, having taken it up only in the 20th century. Okinawans have been around the karate field longer, and can trace their history back some 400 years.

But the ancestry of Korean karate can be traced back to the period of the Three Kingdoms founded more than two thousand years ago. Not long after its development in China, the early version of the art showed up in the Korean peninsula. In those days the art was called Kwon Bop, a name which lasted until recent times

Even today, Korean karate remains in some ways more faithful to Chinese versions than do the Okinawan and Japanese. Karate came to Japan, for instance, after having been filtered through 400 years of turbulent history on Okinawa, which had adapted the original Chinese versions to its own styles.

Little is known about the early history of Kwon Bop except that it spread into all parts of the peninsula of what is now Korea. Depending upon the province, the art went by different names: Suba, Yusul, Sanghak, etc.

One of the best pieces of graphic evidence we have of Kwon Bop showed up in the middle of the eighth century in the two beautifully executed statues on these pages. By this time Kwon Bop had developed into a flourishing fighting art, as can be told by an examination of the statues.



The two works are the best preserved of any major pieces of art on the early development of Chinese-style fighting techniques. There are some wall sculptures discovered in China from a century earlier, but certainly these are nothing in comparison to the finely wrought beauty of these two sculptures with their fine detail in expression and technique.

These two sculptures stand guard outside a temple at Mt. Toham in Kyungju, flanking the entrance to where a large stone Buddha sits staring impassively at the art treasures surrounding him. The two sculptures are called Kum Kang Ryuk Sa, and the forms they are demonstrating could be considered the same as those of the Palsek (photo at left) and Sipsu (right) forms of today.

### **No Slaves to Tradition**

The courageous and hostile expressions of these two fighting men, together with their challenging poses, stand in distinct contrast to those seen in almost all other sculptures which emphasize the gentle in the Buddha and his disciples. The protruding breast muscles and the expression of power shown in the clenched fists, together with the girded robes, are all part of the sculptor's efforts to express the dignity of a face contorted with anger.

Both sculptures show hand techniques in the tradition of the Chinese boxing style which is the historical taproot of Korean karate. But while the Koreans remained faithful to basic Chinese styles art, they were not slaves to that system. They subtly modified techniques even in those early days, a process that has continued until our own time. The result has been a style of karate that, while heavily indebted to the Chinese, has been adapted to the Korean character to produce a unique Korean style.

For instance, the use of foot techniques, which later came to be the distinguishing feature of Korean karate, was first developed in the southern provinces in a system called Taik Kyon. Another ancient technique that is still used is one called Pakchiki, which was developed in the Northwest provinces. In Pakchiki, the forehead is used for butting an opponent. In its more vigorous application, a man will fly through the air, forehead extended, to strike his opponent in the nose or chest, much in the manner of a soccer player going for the ball with his head.

It became a great national joke in Korea after World War II that when the Russians temporarily moved into North Korea, they quickly became afraid to engage in close conversation with the Koreans for fear of getting knocked cold by a fast pakchiki to the head.

This process of change started early. In ancient times, what is now Korea was divided into three separate kingdoms, and each of them added their embellishments to Kwon Bop. The Kingdom of Koguryo ruled in the north, Silla in the southeast, and Paikche in the southwest. After a long series of wars, Silla emerged victorious over its neighbors and in 668 A.D. formed a unified kingdom. The Silla period lasted until 935 A.D. It was overthrown in turn by the warlord Kyonghum, who

founded the kingdom of Koryo from which the western term, Korea, was derived.

While it lasted, the Sillan kingdom was a high point in Korean history. The period of its unified rule was a golden age in Korean development, and there were great achievements scored in science and the arts. The great stone fighters guarding the temple of Suk Kul Am were sculptured early during this period. Later numerous figures illustrating Kwon Bop techniques were sculptured along the eaves of the National Museum at Kungju, ancient capital of Silla.

### **Bandits and Wild Beasts**

The development of Kwon Bop in Korea bears two striking parallels to the history of the martial arts in China and Japan. Similar to what happened in China, the Buddhist monks were to be extremely important in the early growth of Kwon Bop in Korea. And as in Japan where the code of bushido arose, so in Korea, a code of principles was developed that was to give Kwon Bop its moral armor plating.

Buddhism was introduced into the northern kingdom of Koguryo in the fourth century as part of a general Chinese cultural invasion of the Korean peninsula. The Buddhist monks were quick to adopt the Kwon Bop fighting styles. As in China, the art flourished in temple grounds. The monks saw in it a way to train both their body and spirit.

But there was also a practical aspect. Koguryo at that time was a turbulent area, infested with bandits and wild beasts. The monks did a great deal of travelling, and to protect themselves on the open road many took up Kwon Bop.

The monks also had the time to train in the art and they perfected and refined many techniques. Living by themselves alone in the mountains, they could train quietly and with the intense concentration demanded by Buddhism.

It's an interesting footnote to history to observe that the Kwon Bop developed in Koguryo laid stress on free-style sparring 1500 and more years before it was extensively practiced elsewhere. The only remaining sculpture of Kwon Bop we have left from the Koguryo kingdom shows two fighters standing face to face with spear hands upraised. One is poised for offense and the other for defense in the style of Nalchiki still used today. The sculptures from the Silla dynasty, in contrast, shows only single fighters doing forms.

This emphasis on free-sparring is another great hallmark of Korean karate. Koreans today engage in numerous free-sparring practices and participate in tournaments on a scale as in no other country.

The Tae Kwon Do association, for instance, holds 10 nationwide tournaments each year and four promotional meets to select a national champion. Koreans also don't believe in holding back but attack with

enthusiasm. They wear chest protectors and make hard contact with each other.

It was during the Silla dynasty that there arose the other great development that affected Kwon Bop. This was the establishment of the Hwarang-do, a patriotic group dedicated to cultivating the spirit and the health of Silla's youth. Infused with the spirit of Buddhism, the Hwarang-do laid down a moral code that bears many resemblance's to the code of bushido formulated in Japan.

The five major commandments of the Hwarang-do were (1) loyalty to the throne, (2) devotion and duty to one's parents, (3) faithfulness to one's companions, (4) the prohibition of any retreat from the battlefield, and (5) a bar against killing any living creature except for defense or survival.

### **Prepared to Give Their Life**

The requirements for entering the Hwarang-do were strict. One had to be of noble birth, learned, and pure in mind and spirit. The organization did much to shape the future life of its members and set the moral tone of the age.

The mode of life of the Hwarang-do was moral improvement. The Hwarang (members of the organization) made pilgrimages throughout the country, noting the beauty of the majestic mountains and rivers as they trained their bodies and emphasized the spirit of knighthood. They considered their life to be as nothing and were prepared to give it on the battlefield in an instant.

It was only natural for such an organization to be attracted to the study of Kwon Bop, and many of its members were devoted to the art. Thus Kwon Bop became part of the official training of the Hwarang-do.

The greatest period of Kwon Bop came after the establishment of the Koryo kingdom in 935 A.D. The kingdom was strongly militaristic in spirit, a fact necessitated by the need to defend the country against foreign enemies on many occasions. Founded by a warlord, the soldiers of the Koryo dynasty were among the finest the country had ever produced, and their martial spirit and bravery has been an inspiration ever since.

The soldiers were enthusiastic practitioners of the art. One of the most ardent lovers of the art was King Chung Hae, a daring military figure who was perhaps too bold a man to be unduly concerned about the moral side of Kwon Bop but who was unstinting in his approval of the physical aspects. Every Spring and Fall, the king organized competitions which were held in his presence.

The soldiers of Koryo carried to its furthestmost extreme the practice of toughening up their hands, and the possession of powerful fists was highly prized. They slammed their fists into blocks of wood and wooden walls. According to legend, some struck with such force that their

hands stuck in the walls. It was said that the sole reason that two giants of their time, Lee Yi Min and Kyong Sung Du, were appointed as premier by the king was because of their powerful fists.

[\(Continued in Part 2\)](#)