



Stone pagoda with figures carved on its faces of men posed in various fighting stances to ward off enemies.

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.

[\(Continued from Part 1\)](#)

Part 2: Korean Karate - The Present

The Hands Are For Hypnotizing

by (Then) Master Kim Pyung Soo

Almost lost as an art after more than 1500 years, Korean karate is undergoing a splendid revival. Heavily influenced by Japanese techniques now, the art nonetheless retains its rough and tumble Korean flavor.

The development of Kwon Bop, the ancestor of modern day Korean karate, reached its zenith during the period of Chung Hae, a roistering, daring soldier king of powerful build who had to be restrained from entering the yearly competitions he staged. The Koryo dynasty of military kings of which the colorful Chung Hae was a part lasted for more than 500 years, but went into decline toward the end of the 15th century.

In this period a fundamental turn was taken in Korean history which was to affect the pattern of events right down to our time. And this new development was to have a disastrous effect on the fortunes of Kwon Bop.

When the feudal era of the warrior princes drew to a close, it was supplanted by a new dynasty that placed a high premium on learning and scholarship. This new dynasty was the Yi dynasty, which established Confucianism as a state religion. In the fluid situation that prevailed at the time, it was the civil officials and bureaucrats who rose to power, and the military officials suffered a drastic decline in influence.

With the emphasis on culture and learning, the old military arts were looked down on. And since Kwon Bop was first and foremost encouraged by military leaders as part of the training of their soldiers, Kwon Bop received short shrift from the haughty new group of officials in power.

The situation in Korea bears a striking parallel to what happened in Japan roughly about the same time. There, too, a neo-Confucianist group moved in to take power away from the old samurai clans. But in Japan, a powerful voice rose in support of the samurai. That was Soko Yamaga, the man who brought together the old virtues and teachings

of the samurais and first formulated them into the famous Code of Bushido.

But Yamaga was also flexible enough to join the spirit of the times. While emphasizing the martial virtues of the samurai, he also strongly endorsed learning and culture as part of samurai training, believing that in this way the samurai would be the best rounded man to take a role of leadership in government and society.

By Yamaga's transformation of the samurai class into one of leadership in education and scholarship, he gave a new lease on life to the samurai and extended his usefulness another two centuries.

Final Death Stroke

But in Korea, no Soko Yamaga arose to champion the cause of the old martial leaders; As a result, Kwon Bop became a casualty of the new order. The art went into a long decline, and by the beginning of the twentieth century had been almost extinguished.

The final death stroke was delivered in 1910 when a victorious Japan took over rule of the country from an enfeebled bureaucracy, the descendants of the class of civil rulers that had assumed power at the beginning of the Yi dynasty. Now more than four centuries later Korea was to pay the price of the Yi dynasty's legacy of antimilitary activities by falling easy-prey to the conquerors from Japan.

Japan instituted a thoroughgoing occupation of the country and tried to stamp out all vestiges of national distinction in Korea. As part of this policy, it forbade the practice of Kwon Bop, a situation which has its ironic side when it's remembered that 36 years later the victorious American army was to forbid the practice of the martial arts in Japan itself for a period after World War II.

During the period of the Japanese occupation of Korea only two faint sparks remained alive as a reminder of the past glories of Kwon Bop. These were the Kwon Bop styles of Taik Kyon and Pakchiki, both practiced to a small extent by common people in rural areas. The various forms of Kwon Bop were no longer the exclusive practice of the upper classes, and in the cities the art had been virtually snuffed out.

The Taik Kyon style is a form of foot fighting popular in some southern provinces. Pakchiki is practiced in northwestern provinces of the country, and is characterized by a form of butting with the forehead, which can be both very effective and very painful for one's opponent - a fact learned the hard way by Russian soldiers who occupied the country briefly after World War II and who made the mistake of engaging in conversation at close quarters with some of the more daring young bucks who used this method to inform the Russians they weren't welcome.

But if the Japanese occupation gave the coup de grace to a dying Kwon Bop, the country's 36-year colonial bondage provided the

impetus to the growth of modern Korean karate. During the years of Japanese rule, many young Koreans left home and went to Japan and China to study and work. Once in these countries, the young Koreans became exposed at first hand to different forms of karate, first in China to kenpo, and then after the 1920's in Japan.

When World War II ended, many Koreans abroad flocked home and brought with them the results of their karate study. The end of the war had brought an outburst of patriotism and nationalism in Korea, and there was a fervent effort on the part of the citizens to restore old Korean ways and principles. As part of this national movement, there was an upsurge of interest in the old Korean foot fighting and self defense methods.

Kwon Bop was revived once again. But this time it was infused with some of the new methods learned in Japan and China. While similar in many ways to Japanese karate, the Korean style has its own distinctive flavor. For one thing, Koreans rely much more on footwork and kicking. About 80 percent of Korean karate uses foot techniques, and only about 20 percent is involved with hand techniques.

Essentially, the hands aren't used primarily as offensive weapons, except for occasional blows with a clenched fist or a knife hand. There is little of finger techniques or eye gouges, for instance. The hands mainly are used either to block or to confuse an opponent, to try almost to hypnotize for an instant, so that he can be open for a swift kick.

This spare use of the hands stems from ancient Korean habits and psychology. A man's hands were always considered very valuable, and so the hands were to be protected and not to be demeaned by striking an enemy. Instead, the feet were considered the proper weapon against an opponent, their use signifying a looking down on or contempt for an opponent.

Korean Kwon Bop originated from ancient Chinese arts of self defense, and so the Chinese kenpo techniques could be expected to find favorable response in modern day Korea. Many of the movements are quite graceful, and the Korean system retains many of the soft elements of the Chinese. In Korean karate, many of the stances are soft ones, and foot sweeps are used a great deal.

This use of foot sweeps has proven highly effective when used against opponents who specialize in the hard approach. For instance, in the ready stance in styles which use a hard approach, the weight is usually placed on the front leg to give sturdiness and balance in the stance. But to Korean karate men, trained in foot techniques, this hard stance of an opponent has proven a tempting target in competition. They have used foot sweeps against the stance with great effectiveness, catching their opponent's out thrust leg and dumping him.

In their foot techniques, Koreans tend to shy away from the big flashy techniques, like the side jump kick and the side flying kick. They like the straightforward no-nonsense type of footwork. The big techniques may look good, they feel, but they don't consider them too effective and

feel they can be easily blocked. The Koreans prefer to stick with such techniques as a fast front kick, roundhouse kick, and inside and outside foot sweeps.

Bruising Contests

But lest anyone think that Korean karate is only soft and dance like, he need only attend one of the country's numerous competitions to learn otherwise. Korean karate is a wide open type of art where the opponents wear chest and groin guards. And with good reason. The Koreans don't believe in holding back except in blows to the face. Elsewhere, they let fly and make contact.

The old traditions of Kwon Bop holds true in these exhibitions, and at times like these it is easy to see that they are the descendants of the soldiers of the fearsome King Chullg Hae. Their style of competition is bruising and many of the contestants are sent spinning or knocked to the floor. To the Korean, this exertive type of competition is all part of the building of character and determination.

Another characteristic of the Korean system is the heavy indulgence in competitions. The Korean karate man's tournament diet is a full one. Not only are there numerous local competitions yearly, but there are no less than 10 nationwide tournaments each year. These national competitions are first preceded by regional tournaments, the winners then going on to compete nationally. As if this isn't enough, there are also four promotional contests held yearly at which the country's top karate men also appear.

The use of tournaments is felt to be an asset to increasing skill and to building courage by competing against others frequently. It's understandable also in looking back over the long history of Kwon Bop. Koreans engaged in this type of competition long before any other country. For instance, it's only been a matter of some 80 years since tournament competition was introduced to Japanese karate. But it's been a matter of 1,200 years, and more, that Koreans have been holding competitions.

Korean karate has had its problems since the close of World War II, just like in any other country. There was the inevitable political split, of course. But the task of building karate in the country was complicated by the fact that it had to be done from scratch, taking a defunct Kwon Bop and welding Chinese and Japanese techniques to it. But the Koreans approached the job with energy, and with some stern direction from the country's highest political leaders.

With the end of the war, such karate experts as Yun Ui-Byong, No Pyong-Jik and Ui Hwang-ki opened dojos or gymnasiums. And from China came Yoon Pyong-In to teach Kwon Bop at the YMCA gymnasium and Chun Sang Sup who taught Kwon Bop at the Yun-Mu Kwon gymnasium. (Karate in Korea has never been called by the term

"karate." It has gone by such names as Kwon Bop, Tang Soo Do, Taik Kyon, etc.)

The early postwar years saw the unification of the various styles into the Korean system now practiced. Choi Hong-Hee, one of the most prominent of the postwar karate men, helped unify the system by undertaking the task of establishing 90 distinct Korean forms - such as Hwarang and Chung-Moo—based on the original Taik Kyon techniques.

There are a bewildering number of names which Korean karate groups go by, and some explanation is needed. In the United States, especially, there seems to be a great number of different Korean karate names, and there is a lot of confusion and misconceptions, even among practitioners of the Korean style, over what is meant.

The first postwar national karate organization to be consolidated was called the Kong Soo Do association, and it was headed by Cho Ryon-Chu, president of the Korean Residents Association and Korean Youth Association in Japan. Under this organization, the various forms of Kwon Bop were consolidated and the art advanced rapidly.

But dissension set in and by 1955 the Kong Soo Do association broke up. The organizations that composed the Kong Soo Do split into their own separate groups, or "gymnasiums" as they are called in Korea. (At present there are 16 gymnasiums in the country, linked together under the five main gymnasiums: Chungdo Kwan, Changmoo-Kwan, Songwoo Kwan, Moo Duk Kwan, and ChidoKwan.)

But with the takeover of the military government in 1961, orders quickly came down from on high to band all karate groups in one organization. This was officially promulgated in Governmental Decree No. 6. The organization that was founded was called the Tae Soo Do association. This organization was then given official recognition by the government, by the country's athletic associations and by the army, which made karate a part of official training for all soldiers.

However, shortly after its inception, there was a split in the ranks. Whang Kee, one of the directors of the Moo Duk Kwan association, and Yoon Kue Pyong, a director of the Chido-Kwan, pulled out of the organization with some of their branches in a dispute over the organization and direction of the promotional boards. (Whang Kee was one of the early founders of a karate gymnasium after the war. He organized the Moo Duk Kwan in 1947. Soo Bak Do is another name for the organization he heads. Another name used by some Moo Duk Kwan affiliates is Tang Soo Do, a term by which Kwon Bop was sometimes called in the last century.)

However, most of the Moo Duk Kwan instructors and Yoon and those from the Chido-Kwan remained anxious to consolidate into a national organization. Many of them did affiliate with the Tae Soo Do association, especially after the association re-examined all black belt

holders throughout the country in 1962 to ascertain their levels of ability and to set nationwide standards.

In 1965, the Tae Soo Do association accepted the suggestion of many of the Moo Duk Kwan and ChidoKwan groups to change the association's name so that it would make it easier for them to join. This suggestion was adopted, and the organization was rechristened the Tae Kwan-Do association, the group officially recognized by the Korean government and the name by which Korean karate is now most known throughout the world.

The Tae Kwan Do claims to have some 1,900,000 members registered with it, which would make this by far the largest karate organization in the world. (Gogen [the "Cat"] Yamaguchi, who heads up the goju system in Japan, contends he has the largest karate organization in his country with 600,000 members claimed.)

The name change brought in a number of the old dissenters. Today, the most prominent holdout remains Whang Kee and the Moo Duk Kwan groups he still influences.