INTRODUCTION

The origins and histories of the Korean martial arts have long been subjects of heated debate. Proponents of nearly every style claim theirs is the one historical art of the Korean people, but very few can prove their lineages reach more than fifty or sixty years back into the nation’s history. Instead of offering tangible proof or logical argument to support their stories, modern Korean masters rely only upon oral histories passed from teacher to student. When one considers Korea’s fierce nationalism and its general attitude that Korean culture is superior to all others, especially that of Japan, reliance upon word-of-mouth does not suffice in these matters.

Although Korea has valiantly struggled to retain its own identity while enduring the cultural onslaught of neighboring China and Japan, many more cross-cultural influences have occurred than most Koreans will ever admit. A great deal of Korea’s culture, including much of its martial arts prowess, originated in China. Additional mainland influences came to the peninsula early in the thirteenth century when Mongolian armies invaded and occupied Korea for more than 150 years (Han, 1970:179). When the Mongols left, many of their customs and military technologies stayed behind. Among the lesser known Chinese and Mongolian influences are the Buddhist martial arts, Mongolian wrestling, and Mongolian archery (Lee Y. B., 1988, interview).

Contrary to what is generally believed in the West and vehemently argued in Korea, most so-called Korean martial arts are not original creations. A few owe their existence to skills imported from neighboring China during the past several hundred years, but most grew out of Japan’s turn-of-the-century occupation (Lee Y. B., 1992, interview). Concerning Korean martial arts during the post-World War II developmental period, Y. H. Park writes, “For many years, a variety of Korean martial arts styles existed throughout the country. These styles varied from one another according to the influence each had absorbed from the numerous Chinese and Japanese styles . . .” (1989:4). Seo In-sun writes that, after World War II, “Korean martial artists tried to revive Korean martial arts . . . but due to the heavy influence of the Japanese, many of these arts basically imitated Japanese movements and names” (1987:44). These writers are the exception; most other Koreans refuse to admit any Japanese influence whatsoever.

Far left: The famous "Dae Kwae Do" painting from the Seoul National University Museum collection. It was created by Hyesan Yosuk in 1846, shows sirum wrestlers and tae kyon practitioners performing for spectators.

Photos courtesy of R. Young
A few martial arts scholars in Korea defy mainstream opinion and openly postulate that subak (soo bahk), the only fighting art mentioned in Korea's oldest records, was an ancient, comprehensive system with roots in northern China. Evidence supporting the contention that subak originated outside Korea is provided by Chinese records that list sho buo (Chinese pronunciation of subak) as an ancient martial art in the northern part of the country (Xu, 1989, interview). Probably within the past two thousand years, subak spread into Korea and found rapid acceptance first in the military and then in the populace. Once established in Korea, the system became divided into striking skills called tae kyon and grappling skills called yu sul (yoo sool), and the two subsets eventually formed separate martial arts. Evidence suggests that yu sul may have influenced the development of Japanese jujutsu (yu sul and jujutsu are written with the same Chinese characters) but then died out on the Korean peninsula (Draeger & Smith, 1969:76). Tae kyon survives as the only fighting system descended from the ancient art of subak.

MARTIAL ARTS IN ANCIENT KOREA

During the millennium from about 500 B.C. to about A.D. 500, great advances in human thought and civilization took place: Lao Zi and Confucius philosophized in China, the Buddha taught in India, and Jesus Christ preached in the Middle East. Not coincidentally, masters of most Korean martial arts claim their style’s history dates from this period of great human creativity. As soon as one style puts forth such a historical statement, other arts are forced to do the same, for to say otherwise would be to admit that a competing style is more traditional, and, in the eyes of the public, more legitimate.

In his authoritative text titled Su Bak Do Dae Gam, Hwang Kee, founder of modern subak-do/tang soo do, captioned a full-page photo of Baekdusan, a volcanic mountain on the border of North Korea and China, with the statement that Tan’gun, the ancestor of the Korean people, had taught young Koreans kwon bak, a forerunner of subak (1970:14). Scholars generally believe, however, that Tan’gun never even existed. Historian Han Woo-keun calls Tan’gun “the mythical progenitor of the Korean people” (1970:12). Author Robert Nilsen wrote that the legend of Tan’gun tells of the ancient ancestor’s birth in 2333 B.C. after a god changed a bear into a woman and impregnated her.

That Hwang, respected author and head of a worldwide martial arts organization, could make such a statement illustrates an important aspect of the Korean character and its penchant for making exaggerated historical statements. We can see how absurd claims are pushed further and further back into history, in this case more than 5,300 years, in an attempt to outdo the competition. All assertions regarding the history of martial arts require tangible evidence for corroboration or, at the very least, testimony from people who are not promoting their own martial arts. From this perspective we will examine Korean martial arts throughout the ages.

It should be noted that many Korean writers use the terms subak and tae kyon somewhat interchangeably when describing martial arts prior to the Yi Dynasty. In reality, subak is the correct term for the martial art of this period because the name tae kyon was not recorded until the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Over the centuries, subak has been called subak-hi, subak-ki, and subyeok-ta; tae kyon has been known as tak kyeon, gak-hi, gak-sul, and bigak-sul (Song, 1983:19). Further illustrating the way some Koreans imprecisely apply one style
name to other martial arts is Hwang Kee’s use of the term subak-ki to describe
the martial arts of historical Korea, Japan, Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia,
Laos, India, and China. The English translation of his book uses the term tang
soo do because that appellation is more popular in the West. In this article, the
term subak will be used until the period when historical records specifically name
tae kyon.

**KOGURYO DYNASTY**

Researchers generally believe subak was first practiced in Korea
in the northern regions of the Koguryo Dynasty (37 B.C. - A.D.
668). The territory, extending hundreds of miles north of the
Yalu River, now forms part of Chinese Manchuria. Early in the
twentieth century, Shin Chae-ho (1880-1936), a Korean scholar
exiled to China, wrote that Koguryo people practiced subak, swordsmanship, spear-fighting, and horse-
riding (Lee Y. B., 1990:38).

In 1935 archaeologists discovered proof of ancient martial
arts in several burial mounds near the town of Jian in China’s Jilin
province. It is now believed the tombs were erected by Koguryo-
dynasty Koreans between 3 and 427. The oldest physical evidence
of martial arts in Korea is painted on the walls of three of these tombs:
Gak Jeo Chong, Sam Shil Chong, and Mu Yong Chong (Oh, 1991:7).
Richard Chun writes that the murals indicate that people of the
Koguryo Dynasty practiced subak as a martial art (1975:10). Y. H. Park agrees:
“Evidence of the practice of tae kyon [subak] has been found in paintings on
the ceiling of the Mu Yong Chong, a royal tomb from the Koguryo dynasty” (1989:
1). Choi Hong-hi, the father of modern taekwondo and a noted scholar of Korean
martial arts, writes that the mural in Gak Jeo Tomb was painted during the reign
of the tenth king of Koguryo and showed subak sparring (1972:18).

Despite depictions in tomb art and occasional mentions in government
records, scholars have been unable to determine exactly what techniques or
fighting methods comprised subak. Records of the Koguryo Dynasty, most of
which were not written until the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910), suffer from a lack of
detail. Tomb paintings show generic poses and primitive techniques not easily
identified as part of any modern martial art (Song, 1983:17). The evidence indicates
empty-hand fighting arts were practiced in Koguryo, but we cannot know for certain
what they were or how closely they are related to modern styles.
SILLA AND UNITED SILLA DYNASTIES

The Silla Kingdom (57 B.C.-A.D. 668), located in the southern portion of the Korean peninsula, received its first taste of northern subak from a battalion of soldiers and advisors sent by Koguryo. Park writes:

After Silla appealed for help against the continual harassment by the Japanese pirates, King Gwanggaeto, the 19th in the line of Koguryo monarchs, sent a force of 50,000 soldiers into neighboring Silla to help the smaller kingdom drive out the pirates. It is at this time that tae kyon [subak] is thought to have been introduced to Silla’s warrior class. (1989:2)

The citizens of Silla developed a great affinity for subak and refined the skills into a more effective military art. It was embraced by the military and widely taught throughout the kingdom. Park continues:

These tae kyon-trained warriors became known as the Hwarang. They adopted tae kyon [subak] as part of their basic training regimen. The Hwarang . . . were encouraged to travel throughout the peninsula in order to learn about the regions and people. These traveling warriors were responsible for the spread of tae kyon [subak] throughout Korea during the [United] Silla dynasty, which lasted from A.D. 668 to A.D. 935. (1989:3)

The Hwarang (Flowering Knights) were a group of aristocratic teenage boys selected for their physical beauty and bodily strength. Han described their development as a “survival of the youth bands of tribal times . . . dedicated . . . to preparing to serve the state in war” (1970:60). When the Hwarang were not engaged in ritual song and dance, they drilled in the arts of war, primarily swordsmanship, archery, and spear-fighting. Secondary training included empty-hand striking and grappling techniques. The eventual unification of the three kingdoms—Silla, Paekje, and Koguryo—into the United Silla Kingdom attests to the warriors’ combat efficiency.

No records specifically describe the martial arts of the Hwarang fighters. They probably called their empty-hand striking and grappling skills subak, just as Koreans had for the previous several hundred years. It is uncertain if they had a special term to denote their weapons techniques. Lee Yong-bok asserts that it is ridiculous to believe that the Hwarang relied mainly upon empty-hand martial arts in battle, as many Korean masters argue. Empty-hand skills would certainly have been but a minor adjunct to their military training and battlefield survival (Lee Y. B., 1988, interview). Therefore, we cannot say subak was the martial art of the Hwarang; most likely it was merely one portion of their combat repertoire.
The Hwarang’s greatest contribution to the fighting arts was more spiritual than martial. Before the Hwarang’s existence, Korean fighting skills lacked a philosophical dimension. Their dedication to Mireuk Buddha (Sanskrit: Maitreya), the Buddha of the Future, caused this to change (Cowell, 1982:96). Han writes, “Quite often Buddhist monks were instructors of the Hwarang. The monk Won Gwang, in fact, was the author of the famous Sesok Ogye, or Five Tenets” (1970:61). Composed around 602, this work constituted the Way of the Hwarang:

Serve one’s king with loyalty.
Look after one’s parents with filial piety.
Treat one’s peers with trust.
Withstand enemy attacks with courage.
Terminate life with discrimination.

The Five Tenets spiritually strengthened the knights and, by augmenting their fighting skills with Buddhist philosophy and moral precepts, transformed them into true martial arts. Some argue that only then did subak and the various weapons systems cease to be merely methods for destroying enemies and become true martial arts with philosophical value and an attitude of charity and compassion. Choi Hong-hi agrees: “It appears that the warriors of Hwarang added a new dimension to [subak] by... infusing the principles of the Hwarang-do. The new mental concept... elevated foot fighting to an art” (1972:18).

Another often-cited example of Korean martial arts during the Silla dynasty is the Kumkang Yuksa Buddhist images. In a chapter about Korean fighting arts, authors Draeger and Smith write, “The statues of Kumkang Kwon at the entrance to the Sokkul-am... show typical fighting postures” (1969:74-75). Likewise, Choi Hong-hi writes, “The statue of Kumkang Yuksa, a famous warrior, [stands] in Sukulam, a stone cave built in the age of Silla. Notice the similarities in form between the Kumkang Yuksa and present day taekwondo” (1972:17). Even Hwang Kee includes in the English version of his textbook under a photo of Kumkang Yuksa a caption reading “Statue of a General from the Shin Ra [Silla] Dynasty practicing subak-ki” (1970:11).

In reality, the Kumkang Yuksa statues have no relationship to martial arts. Archaeologists have discovered these relatively common images across Buddhist Asia, from India to China to Korea. They actually portray Buddhist guardian deities, called Vajradhara in Sanskrit. Lee Yong-bok writes, “The In Wang statues [Kum-kang Yuksa] are from China and India; they are not evidence of Korean martial arts.” Lee explains that both guardians originally held a spear in their hands, but when the images were transplanted to Korea, artists did not replicate the weapons. The resulting clenched hands resemble closed fists, thus appearing as empty-hand martial arts poses (1990:47). Had the spears been reproduced, those who argue that the statues are in martial poses might not be so insistent. Even if die-hard proponents insist the carvings are actual martial poses, their documented presence in China and India would indicate that Silla-dynasty fighting arts had originated in one of those countries, not in Korea.
KORYO DYNASTY

As the United Silla Dynasty gave way to the Koryo Dynasty (935-1392), subak continued to fare well among members of the Korean military. Numerous historical records in the Koryo Sa (History of Koryo) briefly mention subak while describing official court functions and military training (Song, 1983:17, 29; Oh, 1991:7). Another historical text reported that, during the twelfth century, a man named Eui Mu was skilled in subak and loved by the sixteenth king of Koryo. Because of his martial arts ability, Eui Mu was promoted to general (Hwang, 1970:40).

According to Hwang, another book records that King Chung Hye (r. 1339-1344) watched a subak performance as part of a military celebration (1970:40). The soldiers so impressed the king that he sought out the most skilled instructors and began to practice the art. Shortly thereafter, popular empty-hand fighting competitions pitted five-soldier teams against each other. These events, called o-byong subak-hi, helped make subak better known among government officials who had the opportunity to observed these spectacles (Lee Y. B., 1990:52).

Subak’s popularity did not last long, however, for the next king, Chung Mok (r. 1344-1348), outlawed its practice by civilians. He was motivated by the high incidence of onlookers wagering outrageous prizes, including money, houses, even wives on subak matches. Chung Mok set the penalty for betting on subak matches at one hundred strikes across the buttocks with a wooden paddle. Recipients of the beatings often died of infection (Lee Y. B., 1990:52).

Koryo Dynasty soldiers practiced subak as a compulsory supplement to weapons training. For this reason, it is not surprising that the focus of the art shifted towards quick and lethal attack methods. The military organized national competitions to motivate troops to develop their combat skills and fitness levels and to evaluate them for promotion (Choi H. H., 1972:19).

Researchers have discovered no specific records of any other martial arts in the early Koryo Dynasty, so we can assume that subak still included all its original kicks, punches, joint-locks, throws, and pressure-point strikes. Even though evidence indicates the art spawned the grappling sport of ssirum as early as the Koguryo Dynasty, subak training in the Koryo Dynasty still consisted of striking and grappling (Kim J. R., 1990:20).

Yet during the later Koryo Dynasty, or possibly during the early years of the Yi Dynasty, masters specializing in various aspects of subak went their separate ways. Park writes, “Subak as an art became fragmented and diffused throughout the country, and its practice continued to decline until only incomplete remnants remained” (1989:3). Sources indicate that yu sul, a soft art ultimately derived from the same Chinese art of sho buo (subak), became popular in the twelfth century, then became extinct early in the nineteenth century (Draeger & Smith, 1969:76). In 1945, historian An Ja-san wrote a text titled Chosun Mu Sa Yeong Ung Jeon in which he details the lives and exploits of military heroes of the Chosun (Yi) Dynasty. According to Choi Hong-hi, An’s book states, “The yu sul school was known under the name of subak-ki . . .” (1972:19).

Sometime after yu sul separated from the subak repertoire, the subset of remaining subak skills, which contained mostly striking techniques, became known as tae kyôn. At times, pronunciation of the same two Chinese characters varied to tak kyôn, but both meant “push shoulder” (Chung, 1990, interview). In the English version of his text, Hwang succinctly describes the origin of the kicking art: “Tae kyôn developed from ancient tang soo do [subak]” (1970: 13).
Contrary to some historical accounts of the development of the Korean martial arts, subak/tae kyon was never called tang soo, kong soo, or tae kwon. Those arts actually developed independently and quite recently and were based mostly upon the Japanese interpretation of Okinawan karate (Lee Y. B., 1989, interview).

YI DYNASTY

Scholars cannot pinpoint the exact date on which the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910) text titled Man Mul Bo (a.k.a. Je Mul Bo) was written, nor can they verify that Yi Seong-jí, the suspected author, was actually responsible for those four volumes of Chosun Dynasty lore (Oh, 1991:7). However, they have examined in detail the work’s contents (history, law, medical learning, etc.) and found a short entry under tak kyon. It may have been the first time the fighting art’s name was rendered in Hangul, the phonetic script created in 1446 by King Sejong. Before that, the name had always been written in Chinese as subak (Lee Y. B., 1990:68-69).

As the Yi Dynasty progressed, specific references to tae kyon began to occur more frequently. Historical documents tell how the third king of the dynasty (r. 1401-1408) recruited experts in tae kyon, ssirum wrestling, and archery to help organize the army (Choi H. H., 1972:19). The thirty-second volume of Tae Jong Shil Lok records that, in beginning in 1410, the court organized several military parades which featured tae kyon demonstrations. Centuries later, such a performance may have inspired Kim Hong-do, a popular eighteenth-century Korean folk artist, to create his royal palace grounds painting of a crowd of aristocrats observing a tae kyon sparring match (Taekwondo, 1989:29).

A better-known Korean folk painting dating from the later Yi Dynasty again shows tae kyon and even refers to it by name. Its title is Dae Kwae Do, or competition painting, and it now hangs in the Seoul National University Museum. Painter Hyesan Yusuk, who lived from 1827 to 1873, is thought to have created the work around 1846 (Oh, 1991:34, 52). Dae Kwae Do depicts two men sparring and two others grappling, while a group of yangban, or aristocrats, looks on. The painting’s legend specifically names the arts as tae kyon (spelled tak kyon) and ssirum wrestling.

The Chosun Wang Jo Shil Lok, a historical book detailing the lives of Yi Dynasty kings, often mentions tae kyon (Oh, 1991:7). It describes how, in the middle and later parts of the dynasty, soldiers’ examinations included spear fighting, archery, and tae kyon, and how front-line soldiers were sometimes selected from among winners of tae kyon fighting competitions (Lee Y. B., 1990:59-62).

One of the world’s oldest martial arts instructional manuals was reportedly authored around 1759 by a Korean named Cheok Gye-gwang. Titled Mu Yea Do Bo Tong Ji, it describes and illustrates in exact detail every fighting skill Cheok could research. Although one chapter focuses on empty-hand fighting, most of the book discusses weapons techniques, including broadsword, sabre, spear, halberd, trident, and others too obscure to name (Kim G. S., 1990:10-11).

Nearly all modern Korean arts claim Mu Yea Do Bo Tong Ji as proof of the historicity of their styles. Yet many researchers point out that most of the weapons discussed are distinctly Chinese and that even the empty-hand techniques resemble the Chinese way of fighting. In his book, Song Duk-ki called Cheok Gye-gwang a Chinese national and discredited citation of Cheok’s work as proof of Korean martial arts (1983:18). Song’s assertion gains support from


a Chinese book which says, "Qi Ji Guang [Chinese pronunciation of Cheok Gye-gwang], a well-known general, compiled a book dealing with sixteen different styles of bare-hand exercises and another forty of spear- and cudgel-play, each with detailed explanations and illustrations" (Chinese Martial Arts, 1987:4). Both the Korean and the Chinese works feature nearly identical drawings and were written using Chinese characters, but neither mentions subak or tae kyon. Instead, empty-hand skills are called kuwon beop, pronounced chuan fu in Chinese (Xu, 1989, interview). For these reasons, Mu Yea Do Bo Tong Ji, whether an original Korean work or an early example of plagiarism, cannot be reliably cited as historical evidence for subak/tae kyon or any other style.

**DECLINE OF TAE KYON**

The introduction of firearms initially suppressed martial arts practice as guns replaced swords, bows, and spears both in military training camps and on the battlefield. Officers could see little need for their men to practice seemingly antiquated empty-hand fighting skills when more advanced weaponry was becoming available. But later, when guns could not be produced in sufficient quantities and never became available to the masses, tae kyon enjoyed a slight resurgence in popularity (Lee Y. B., 1988, interview).

Much more devastating was the pressure exerted against martial arts when Neo-Confucianism, a resurgence of the social guidelines and values taught by the Chinese sage Confucius, grew during the latter half of the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910). Just as tae kyon was beginning to find increasing popularity among the general population, Neo-Confucianism brought about a drastic decline of all martial arts practice outside the military. As the phrase “favoring the arts and despising arms” came into vogue, scholasticism and civil service received official support, while physical and combative activities were disdained (Lee Y. B., 1980:191).

In an account in Chosun Sang Go Sa, Shin Chae-ho confirms that tae kyon, once famed throughout the Koryo Dynasty, nearly died out during the Yi Dynasty (Lee Y. B., 1990:71; Song, 1982:17). In Chosun Mu Sa Yeong Ung Jeon, An Ja-san also intimates that tae kyon was waning (Oh, 1991:7). In spite of these pressures, the art did not succumb. Park writes that tae kyon, facing Neo-Confucianism’s effect on the government and military, was able to survive only because of its popularity among the general public (1989:3). A large number of
practitioners spread across the peninsula insured the art’s survival, if only in remote locations. In his writings about the later Yi Dynasty, Shin noted that archery and tae kyon contests were still held in some locations to test the skill and strength of soldiers (Choi H. H., 1972:18).

Hwang Kee speculates that another reason for the art’s near downfall may have been that tae kyon acquired a less-than-honorable reputation (1970:41). He says that, after returning from Manchuria in 1939, he heard from elderly Koreans stories in which young people learned tae kyon for criminal purposes and often formed street gangs. He writes that tae kyon was looked down upon because it did not teach discipline and that it only contained non-specific offensive-defensive techniques called gong bang beop. It is difficult to determine exactly how much of Hwang’s account is fact and how much is merely an attempt to promote his own subak-do/tang soo do style by discrediting tae kyon in the public eye. Although tae kyon’s criminal connection remains a possibility, no other researcher has mentioned it.

**Tae Kyon After 1910**

Imperial Japan established a foothold in Korea during the end of the nineteenth century, then formally occupied the nation from 1910 to 1945. To comply with orders to suppress all aspects of Korea’s cultural identity, they restructured Korea’s educational system to parallel their own, gave Japanese names to Korean citizens, and decreed that Koreans speak only Japanese. All native Korean fighting arts, which the Japanese felt were likely to foment rebellious, anti-Japanese feelings, were naturally prohibited. Those who disobeyed the new laws were often rounded up and executed.

During this time, tae kyon’s existence was tenuous. Koreans desperately wanted to preserve this important aspect of their heritage, but by doing so they risked death. In 1925 King Kojong, the last Yi Dynasty monarch, decided to help save what he judged a valuable piece of history. He confidentially ordered Hong Mong-hwa to formulate a tae kyon instructional book. Four tae kyon practitioners traveled to the city of Chungju to demonstrate their techniques, and Hong began writing and illustrating. Unfortunately, Korean scholars do not know what happened to the manual; they know of its creation only because Hong’s son witnessed the process and later recounted it to Lee Yong-bok (Lee Y. B., 1990:77).
Although Japanese troops greatly contributed to the waning of an already weakened art, their occupation of Korea did inspire a few people to persevere in their practice. Several tae kyon practitioners scattered around the country continued to train, but the men most responsible for the art's continuance in the twentieth century lived in Seoul (Lee Y. B., 1990:60). Because of the Japanese patrols, the men always trained at night or in remote locations. Lee Yong-bok says little evidence exists to support claims that tae kyon was used in organized guerrilla warfare against Japanese forces (1988, interview). However, at least one account has been confirmed: Kim Gu, resistance leader and head of the Korean Independence Party, writes in his autobiography that he was a tae kyon expert and that he often fought the Japanese in hand-to-hand combat matches (Lee Y. B., 1990:75).

Three main tae kyon schools existed during this time: the Ğurigae dojang under Pak Mu-gyeong, who began practicing tae kyon in 1880; the Chongno dojang under Im Ho, who also began in 1880; and the Wangshimni dojang under Pak Tul-baek, a student since 1845. Each master taught essentially the same tae kyon skills. Students were few because of the Japanese prohibition. In 1900 Kim Hong-shik began learning tae kyon from Pak Mu-gyeong and later succeeded him as head of the school. Likewise, Shin Jae-young, who had begun to learn the art in 1880, replaced Pak Tul-baek in the Wangshimni dojang. Under Im Ho, at least eleven students trained; the senior was Song Duk-ki (Oh, 1991:22). [See Lineage Chart, p. 59]

Song was born in Seoul on January 19, 1893, and began studying tae kyon when he was twelve (Song, 1983:8, 21). Evidently, Song never had time to absorb all the skills of his instructor during their six years together, for, in a later conversation with student Lee Yong-bok, he admitted he did not learn all that Im Ho knew and regretted that part of tae kyon died with Im. Song never enjoyed the position he later inherited as the savior of tae kyon; he wished only to practice without interruption from Japanese police (Lee Y. B., 1988, interview). Yet soon he would become one of the two most important tae kyon masters of modern times.

Korea was liberated from colonial rule at the close of World War II, and Koreans were finally free to teach whatever martial arts they wanted. Interest in tae kyon and other arts did not immediately increase because people were preoccupied with their newly found freedom and with the rigors of trying to rebuild their country. Because so many tasks demanded attention, tae kyon practice would have been a luxury for most people. Song Duk-ki was one of the few who found time to train (Song, 1983:9).

Political tensions rose during the late 1940's and early 1950's until war finally broke out in 1953. Once again, the nation fell into chaos, disrupting whatever plans tae kyon masters had for the art's revival. Song said that, during the tumultuous 1950's, he was only able to meet and practice tae kyon with Kim
Hong-shik on several occasions (Oh, 1991:8). No records tell of the lives of the other tae kyoon students and masters during the Korean War.

The first recent tae kyoon demonstration in public occurred during a national police martial arts competition on March 26, 1958, the birthday of former President Syngman Rhee. Rhee greatly enjoyed the special demonstration organized by Im Ho and Kim Seong-hwan but felt sorry that tae kyoon was dying out in its homeland (Song, 1983:21). A presidential bodyguard who knew Song Duk-ki personally later told him how the president desperately wanted the art to continue for future generations. Song began looking for a more qualified tae kyoon master to fulfill Rhee’s request, but he could find none. As far as Song knew, only he, Kim, and the elderly Im Ho continued to practice tae kyoon.

In 1971, a newspaper article about Song appeared in the Hanguk Ilbo (Oh, 1991:21). The article introduced tae kyoon and Song to a public that was mostly unaware of the traditional style and caught the attention of Shin Han-seung, who had been practicing tae kyoon sporadically since he was fourteen. He immediately departed for Seoul to meet Song (Oh, 1991:164). The two developed a cordial relationship, and for the next six months Shin traveled back and forth from Chungju to Seoul to learn additional tae kyoon skills he had not acquired from his former instructors, Kim Hong-shik and Shin Jae-young.

Born on May 9, 1928, Shin had trained in amateur wrestling and judo in his youth. Therefore, he was well acquainted with the teaching methodologies of combative arts. In 1971, he decided to systematize into an easily taught curriculum all the tae kyoon skills he had learned from his three teachers. Later the same year, he and Song applied to the Korean Cultural Property Preservation Bureau to become In Gwan Mun Hwa Jae, or Human Cultural Assets.

June 1, 1983, brought victory to Shin and Song as the government of the Republic of Korea named them Human Cultural Assets because of their unique tae kyoon skills and efforts to preserve the art. The titles were automatically rescinded when both men died in 1987 (Oh, 1991:35). Tae kyoon’s claim to be Korea’s first martial art was also acknowledged when the government officially recognized it as Intangible Cultural Asset #76. No other Korean martial art, before or after, has attained this status.

Since tae kyoon became an Intangible Cultural Asset, two groups in Korea have vied for control of the style: the Pusan-based Korea Traditional Tae Kyoon Research Association, founded by Lee Yong-bok in 1985 and the Korea Traditional Tae Kyoon National Headquarters under Chung Kyeong-hwa in Chungju. Both organizations are endeavoring to make the art more widely known in Korea and eventually around the world.

Until now, however, efforts to propagate tae kyoon have met with limited success. The phenomenal growth of taekwondo, aggressively promoted by the Korean government and military, has eclipsed the lesser-
known tae kyon. Additionally, tae kyon authorities have regularly refused to organize tournaments on the grounds that, though it might help popularize the style, it could relegate tae kyon to the status of merely another Korean martial sport.

In 1991, the Pusan-based tae kyon organization succumbed to the pressure and organized its first team-sparring tournament. However, they managed to create a system of rules quite different from those used by other Korean martial arts. The event met with enough success and media coverage to persuade the organizers to hold tae kyon tournaments annually, in hope of gaining more exposure.

To affirm in the public eye tae kyon’s differences from the many Japanese-influenced Korean martial arts, modern tae kyon authorities refuse to adopt the Japanese-style gi (Korean: dobok) worn by students of other Korean styles, including tae kwon do, tang soo do, hap kido, kuk sul, yudo, and yu sul. Instead, tae kyon students and teachers wear white hanbok, the traditional Korean work clothes, and jipshin, sandals made of woven rice straw.

Modern tae kyon practitioners also avoid the Japanese system of colored rank belts. Tae kyon does use rankings, but only those who attain the level of first dong, the traditional Korean equivalent of the Japanese dan, wear a belt. Students under the rank of first degree belong to jjae levels instead of the more common geup (kup) rankings of tae kwon do. Once a student attains the first degree ranking, he dons a blue sash, knotted on the side and worn under the uniform blouse.

**ARGUMENTS AGAINST OTHER “ANCIENT” KOREAN MARTIAL ARTS**

When one is searching in Korea for modern descendants of ancient subak, the only system for which historical evidence exists, it is necessary to examine those other styles claiming to have inherited subak’s skills and techniques or to have been associated with the Hwarang warriors. Only when those arts have been eliminated from consideration can one logically maintain that tae kyon is the only existing martial art descended from the ancient form of combat. Those contemporary martial arts to be examined include subak-do/tang soo do, tae kwon do, kuk sul, hwarang-do, and yu sul.

**SUBAK-DO**

In Seoul, Korea around 1945, Hwang Kee founded modern subak-do, better known in the West as tang soo do. He claims to have based the style on Chinese kuk sul, which he says he had learned in Manchuria starting in 1936. Hwang’s use of the term kuk sul (or kuk sool) (national skills), a generic Chinese term for martial arts, in no way refers to the style currently taught by the Korea Kuk Sool Association or the Korean Kuk Sool-Hapkido Association, for Hwang’s stay in Manchuria occurred long before Seo In-sun and Suh In-hyuk formed Kuk Sool Won in 1961 (Seo, 1987:4).

Among the reasons Hwang gives for traveling to Manchuria, one of the most important was to practice martial arts without interference from Japanese troops. Yet he seldom mentions that the Japanese Imperial Army had moved into Manchuria in the 1890’s, defeated the Russians in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, and immediately seized the Russian territory. They took the rest of Manchuria in 1931, renamed it Manchukuo, and established a puppet regime under figurehead Emperor Puyi (Schirokauer, 1989:449, 502, 526-528). It is
doubtful the Japanese forces in Manchuria would have been any less oppressive
than their counterparts in Korea, who strove to stamp out every aspect of
indigenous culture and national identity. Only with great difficulty can one
imagine Hwang learning traditional Korean martial arts or even Chinese *kuk sul*
while under the watchful Japanese eye.

Magazine writer Sohn Tae-soo interviewed Hwang Kee in 1991 and
uncovered a number of previously unknown facts about the creation of modern
*subak-do*. He writes that Hwang’s "serious training in martial arts started when
he began to work for a Japanese railway company in Manchuria after graduating
from high school" (1991, October 5, 26-27). Hwang was evidently unable to
learn much about traditional Korean arts before he departed his homeland, and
once in Manchuria, he closely associated with the Japanese on the job.

Sohn reports that Hwang was reassigned to Korea in 1939 and then
established the Moo Duk Kwan school in Seoul. He writes that Hwang

> named the martial art *tang soo do* [**way of the China
> hand**] for a practical purpose. Written in Chinese
> characters, the Korean name of *tang soo do* could be
> read the same as Japan’s karate. With traditional
> Korean martial arts all but dead under the colonial
> suppression of Japan, he says he had no choice but
to make his martial art sound similar to a Japanese
> one and thus make it familiar to the public. Then he
> changed the name to *subak-do* in 1955. [1991:27]

Although he references different years, Park gives a similar account that
begins after an unsuccessful attempt in 1953 by Hwang’s Korea Tang Soo Do
Association to join the Korea Athletic Association. He writes, “In June 1960,
Korean Soo Bahk Do Association, named after the traditional Korean martial art,
was formed by Hwang to replace the Korean Tang Soo Do Association”

Thus it seems that Hwang Kee originally chose to name his martial art *tang
soo do*, either because the name was written the same as *karate-do*, the art he
probably studied in Manchuria, or because he wanted to evoke mental images of
a Japanese style in Korea. Later, perhaps then to avoid being associated with the
Japanese and to facilitate recognition by the government, Hwang resurrected the
historical Korean name of *subak*, but added the “do” suffix so common among
Japanese style names (e.g. *karate-do*, *kendo*, *judo*, *budo*, *kyudo*). Researcher Seo
In-sun writes that use of the “do” suffix for martial art names originated in Japan
and that Korean historical texts list no fighting art names ending with “do.”
Instead, Koreans used “*ki,*” “*sul,*” or “*yea*” suffixes, and records always refer to
Korean martial arts as *mu sul* or *mu yea* (Seo, 1987:43).

Furthermore, the resemblance between Hwang Kee’s *subak-do/tang soo do*
and Okinawan karate continues to draw attention. Chris Thomas examined
several modern Korean arts and concludes *tang soo do* “bears the greatest conformity to
*shotokan*” (1988, November:30). Although the evidence indicates that Hwang learned Okinawan karate from the Japanese in Manchuria and then
adopted the name *subak-do* as an afterthought, he refuses to reinforce his claims of
learning Chinese/Korean rooted martial arts by naming his instructors or
explaining how they influenced the development of *subak-do/tang soo do*. Sohn
writes:
Instead, he says it is not an appropriate time to talk about such issues. "What I can tell you at the moment is I had no one to teach me subak-do. I revived subak by doing research alone while touring around the nation." A breakthrough in his research came when he came across a book on martial arts in Seoul National University's library in 1948. (1991:26-27)

Here, Hwang clearly admits to having had no subak instructor. He claims to have learned the style from a book written by an eighteenth century Korean scholar who wished to describe a fighting art supposedly founded five thousand years ago (Sohn, 1991:27). Yet Hwang will not produce the book to back up his story. These facts, coupled with the aforementioned observations about Hwang's life and his martial art, leave little reason to accept his claim that subak-do/tang soo do is a direct descendent of ancient subak.

**TAEKWONDO**

Most taekwondo masters maintain their style originated in Korea more than two thousand years ago, and to prove it nearly every taekwondo text includes photos of the aforementioned Koguryo Dynasty tomb paintings, the Kumkang Yuksa statues, and even the Dae Kwae Do painting. Koreans are adamant that the roots of taekwondo, their national martial art, are purely Korean. Any attempt to argue otherwise is met with disbelief, disapproval, or outright anger.

Very few Koreans will admit how great an influence the Japanese had on taekwondo's development. Choi Hong-hi, widely regarded as the father of the art, created in 1972 a comprehensive text titled Taekwondo: the Korean Art of Self-Defence. In it, he writes of taekwondo, "This style is primarily based on tae kyon, subak, and karate . . ." (p. 20). Corcoran and Farkas researched the art and concludes, "Modern taekwondo is a combination of the hyung (patterns) of its ancestral combative arts, tae kyon and subak, and the kata (formal exercises) of the Okinawan Shuri and the Naha schools of karate" (1983:130). Tae kyon experts deny that taekwondo has incorporated any tae kyon techniques but are reluctant to publicly say so in Korea because of the negative repercussions of mud-slinging (Chung, 1990, interview). However, Corcoran's assertion that taekwondo includes Japanese techniques currently enjoys more support among researchers and comparative martial artists.

Choi Hong-hi never revealed just how much of his style was derived from karate. Regarding his own martial arts training, Choi says he was sent to Japan in 1937 to further his education. In Kyoto, he " . . . met a fellow Korean, Mr. Kim, who was engaged in teaching the Japanese martial art, karate." After practicing for two years, Choi earned the rank of first-degree black belt. About these karate skills, Choi writes, "These techniques, together with tae kyon (foot techniques), were the forerunner of modern taekwondo" (1972:513). Choi claims to have learned tae kyon from a famous calligraphy master named Han Il-dong prior to creating taekwondo (1972:19, 513). Yet tae kyon researchers Lee Yong-bok and Chung Kyeong-hwa both confess that their efforts to locate dojang records of Han have failed (Lee Y. B., 1990, interview; Chung, 1990, interview).

Kim Soo, a taekwondo grandmaster who resides in the U.S.A. and teaches at Rice University and the University of Houston, is one of the few outspoken Korean researchers willing to elaborate on the history of his art. In an interview conducted by Tae Kwon Do Times magazine, he said:
I do know, however, that it is fair to say that the modern era of Korean martial arts, 1945 to present, has been most heavily influenced by Okinawa and Japan. This is because the Japanese prohibition of martial arts during their occupation of Korea all but extinguished the styles which had been practiced in Korea. After the liberation of Korea at the end of World War II, the martial arts instructors who began teaching in Korea were primarily Korean nationals; some who had learned Shotokan karate, and some who had learned Shudokan during their stay in Japan. It is these styles which are the genesis of modern taekwondo.

Some researchers contend that the similarity of the terms taekwondo and tae kyon proves a causal relationship. Yet it is only when transliterated into English that the name taekwondo appears similar to tae kyon. In Korean or Chinese characters, there is no relationship whatsoever. Taekwondo comprises “tae,” or kick, “kwon,” fist or punch, and “do,” the way. The term tae kyon is actually composed of “taeck,” meaning push, and “gyeom,” meaning shoulder. Perhaps Hwang Kee best sums up taekwondo's history and development: “Tae kyon is not related to the current taekwondo” (1970:41).

Thus, we see that many aspects of taekwondo’s history attest to the influence of the Japanese and their martial arts. The art’s name is but a convenient term adopted by consensus on April 11, 1955, after General Choi Hong-hi proposed it (1972:515). Its incorporation of the “do” suffix mirrors the Japanese practice of naming arts. After an exhaustive comparison of the hyung (kata) of taekwondo and shotokan karate, Chris Thomas wrote that taekwondo, heavily influenced by the Japanese prior to World War II, was originally “little more than transplanted shotokan [karate]” (1988, November:30). Little reason remains for considering taekwondo a remnant of ancient subak.

**KUK SOOL WON**

A third style, that taught by the Korea Kuk Sool Association, is often claimed to be closely related to Korea’s ancient fighting arts. Proponents say their art dates from far back in Korean history, but like practitioners of other styles, they have failed to produce tangible evidence. Although Kuk Sool Won Chiefmaster Seo In-sun writes that kuk sul comes from a mixture of ancient tribal martial arts, royal court martial arts, and Buddhist martial arts, Kim Il-nam, Chairman of the Korea Hapkido Association in Seoul, dismisses the story. Instead, he argues that kuk sul is a mixture of the self-defense skills of hapkido and the weapons techniques of ship pal gi, a Korean interpretation of Chinese gongfu (Kim I. N., 1990, interview).

Although most kuk sul authorities insist their style has ancient, purely Korean origins, they deny any historical relationship between kuk sul and tae kyon/subak or taekwondo. Barry Harmon, Secretary General of the World Kuk Sool Association in California, writes, “Tae kyon is one of the foundation arts of taekwondo, not of kkk sul” (1990, personal correspondence). Therefore, the possible existence of a relationship between ancient subak and modern kuk sul warrants no further discussion.
Hwarang-do

California resident Lee Joo-bang teaches a martial art Westerners know as hwarang-do, but of which most Koreans have never heard. The comprehensive system includes hand and foot strikes, trapping, grappling, pressure-point usage, weapons techniques, and healing methods. The style purports a history plagued with inconsistencies, one which cannot link it to ancient subak or even the Hwarang warriors.

Supreme Grandmaster Lee Joo-bang, fifty-eighth heir to the title and head of the U.S.-based organization, presides over an art that appears virtually indistinguishable from hapkido and kuk sul. Some minor differences can be found, but the major components of the style—some 3,600 joint-locks, throws, and escapes—are identical. Several Korean martial arts authorities, including Kim Il-nam, state that Lee was a hapkido expert in Korea prior to moving to the U.S. (1990, interview).

Lee's historical claims begin with Won Gwang's development of "a system of martial arts that was in harmony with his concept of the laws of nature" (Lee J. B., 1980:4). He writes that the Buddhist monk taught the martial art to boys who later formed the Hwarang. Yet all other historical accounts of the contribution of Won Gwang stop at his formulation of the aforementioned Sesok Ogye, the Five Tenets; no mention is made of the monk's creation or teaching of a martial art.

Lee provides little additional developmental details besides a few noble Silla Dynasty warrior tales taken from the Hwarang Segi, the Records of the Hwarang (Lee J. B., 1980:6-9). None of the passages in the Hwarang Segi or the Samguk Yusa, another ancient Korean text containing stories of the Hwarang, mentions the name of any fighting style (other than archery) or discusses any specific techniques.

Lee's version of his art's history next jumps to the Yi Dynasty as he explains how Japanese pressure forced practitioners of hwarang-do into isolated Buddhist temples. It was in one of those monasteries, Lee maintains, that he met the fifty-seventh grandmaster of hwarang-do, a monk named Suahm Dosa, and began training. Lee writes:

In 1969 Grandmaster Suahm Dosa died and the position of grandmaster was passed to Joo Bang Lee. This position made Joo Bang Lee the inheritor of the ancient martial art and the Supreme Grandmaster in an unbroken line of succession lasting over 1,800 years.

(1980:192)

Lee first claims that his art was created by the monk Won Gwang (whom the Samguk Yusa lists as having lived in the late sixth century [Ha, 1986:279]). Lee then says he is the successor to an unbroken lineage that began in the second century, leaving some four hundred years of history unexplained. He cites no records mentioning hwarang-do as a martial art, and texts by masters of other styles fail to list hwarang-do as a historical name of any Korean art. Daegeer and Smith write, "Hwarang itself was not a combat technique or fighting art" (1969:72). Because historians of the style cannot argue a link to subak or the Hwarang, hwarang-do cannot at this time be considered a direct relative of any ancient Korean martial art.
Yu Sul

Modern yu sul, as taught by the Korea Yoo Sool Association in Pusan, has so far presented little evidence to support its claim that founder Kim Mu-jin learned the ancient Korean grappling art in Japan because it had become extinct in Korea (Kim M. J., 1988, interview). The art’s similarities to both kuk sul and hapkido tend to support arguments that Kim either studied hapkido under its founder, Choi Yong-sool, or mastered kuk sul before breaking away to form his own organization (Choi J. H., 1988, interview).

Kim’s organization has also kept the name yuawara, which he says is merely an alternative name for yu sul. Yet in Japan, the Chinese characters for yu sul can be pronounced as yuawara, though they most often are pronounced as jujutsu. Although the presence of technical similarities between the joint locks and pressure-point strikes of yu sul and jujutsu has not yet been researched, a cursory comparison points to a great similarity. It seems that, once again, a modern derivative of hapkido, or perhaps even a totally Japanese art, has adopted the historical name of an ancient Korean fighting art for publicity and commercial success.

These arguments disqualify as possible descendents of original subak all modern Korean martial arts except tae kyon. Hwang Kee himself admitted that tae kyon developed from ancient subak while making no such claims about other modern styles (1970:13). Since neither his own art nor taekwondo can be reliably linked to ancient subak and since they closely resemble Japanese karate, they must be disqualified as having Korean roots. Kuk sul, which may be an offshoot of hapkido, makes no claims to have descended from subak, and proponents of hwarang-do, another possible offshoot of hapkido (or of kuk sul), have little historical basis for their claims that this was the art of Silla’s Hwarang warriors. Modern yu sul, whose founder admits to having trained in Japan, cannot now be linked to ancient yu sul, the grappling subset of original subak. Only tae kyon remains as a surviving remnant of the ancient fighting art of subak. It is quite certain that the tae kyon system was not completely transmitted, as Song Duk-ki himself admitted, but it is all we have.

Tae Kyon Theory and Technique

To conclude this examination of the art of tae kyon, it is necessary to discuss ways in which its practice differs from that of other Korean fighting styles. If no significant differences existed, it would be pointless to argue the originality and uniqueness of the style solely upon the basis of name. If, however, major dissimilarities are noted, it will provide further support for tae kyon’s historical claims.
Unlike many hard, external Korean arts which are best suited for younger students, tae kyon can be practiced well into old age. Because all movements are intended to harmonize with the structure of the human body, techniques are natural and minimally stressful. Part of the reason for this stems from the art's abandonment of normal warm-up and stretching exercises. Instead, the basic techniques, interspersed with brief series of hand taps along the length of tight muscles, provide the necessary muscle stretch and circulation boost. Song Duk-ki proved tae kyon's therapeutic side effects by training daily until the age of ninety-four. Shin Han-seung continued until he died at the age of sixty.

Like other martial arts, tae kyon teaches the use of ki, or internal energy, to augment physical power. One method for releasing ki is through a kihap, the forceful exhalation of air at the moment a technique is performed. However, tae kyon's kihap differs from that of all other Korean and Japanese arts. Instead of a short, loud explosion of noise, tae kyon students make a soft but forceful "eekeh" sound which, they claim, comes from the traditional Korean fighting arts. The short, guttural shout used by taekwondo practitioners and other Korean martial artists originated in the Japanese arts, they argue (Lee Y. B., 1988, interview).

A basic principle of tae kyon sparring is to attack hard with soft, and soft with hard. To illustrate, a punch to an opponent's jaw, while undoubtedly effective, will inflict considerable pain on the puncher. It is, therefore, more sensible to strike a hard target with a softer weapon, the heel of the hand, for example. Conversely, tae kyon teaches that an attack to the fleshy mid-section is more effective if the striker uses a hard weapon such as the knee or elbow. Lee Yong-bok explains that, unlike most other fighting styles which advocate performing a linear technique and then completing it at the point of impact, tae kyon teaches students to continue techniques past their potential point of impact. During a tae kyon offensive move, a limb does not strike and return; instead, it travels in a natural arc and returns without having to stop and retrace its path (Lee Y. B., 1988, interview).

In a violent encounter, tae kyon strategy teaches a person to stand directly in front of his attacker and move with a rhythmic motion that allows a quick, evasive slip to either side. In contrast to the linear movements in taekwondo and other Korean arts, the tae kyon student's body constantly moves forward and backward, to the left and to the right. Lee Yong-bok describes this strategy as the first skill of tae kyon: staying away from the attacker's weapons (1988, interview). According to this logic, evasion is superior to blocking because, as long as an opponent's attack fails to make contact, his power does not matter.

(Continued on page 67)
Clockwise: Son Il-hwan demonstrates Tae Kyon's abdominal breathing and Ki-development exercises.
1. **Tae Kyon** also teaches close-range fighting as **Pak Man-yup** demonstrates with a **bak chigi**, or head butt.

2. **Tae Kyon** includes no conventional punching; instead the hands are used for, among other things, the **hangjeong chigi**.

3. Another open-hand strike to the throat is the **teok baegi**.

4. **Chung Kyeong-hwa** executes a **duru chigi**, part of a continuous series of downward chopping kicks to the chest.

5. **Tae Kyon** sparring often includes leg sweeps and take-downs such as the **ogeum chagi mit jumbang geori**.

6. In the **anjang dari geolmyeo deot geori**, a take-down follows a sweep to the back of the opponent’s supporting leg.
Above: Chung Kyeong-hwa performs a Hwalgae Bal Hoe mok Japgi, in which Chung traps Pak Man-yup's front kick, then delivers a Kal Jebi hand strike to his throat.

Right: Son Il-hwan demonstrating the same technique as shown in the photo above.
Tae kyon fighters move with a rhythm which beginning students sometimes learn while traditional Korean drums and bamboo flutes keep time. This rhythmical motion into and out of attack range further differentiates the style from all others (Oh, 1991:15). Similar movements have been found in the tal chum, the centuries-old Korean mask dance (Lee Y. B., 1988, interview). Herein lies another of tae kyon’s differences from other Korean martial arts: during this continuous body motion, the arms constantly move up and down, out and back, and from side to side, confusing the opponent as to exact target locations. When combined with nimble footwork in four directions and occasional evasive jumping, a tae kyon stylist becomes more difficult to hit.

Tae kyon’s kicks have proved so effective that the style does not even include among its hand strikes a traditional jab or reverse punch. These kicks are so legendary that, for hundreds of years, the name of the art was synonymous with foot-fighting. However, the kicks bear little resemblance to the typical spinning and jumping maneuvers glorified in tournaments and film. Instead, tae kyon leg techniques are simple and direct, focusing upon linear moves but including limited usage of circular and spinning kicks. Lee Yong-bok says, “Tae kyon has traditionally emphasized stepping and stamping techniques directed at the opponent’s lower legs and feet” (1992, interview).

In contrast to the intensity of tae kyon when it existed only for combat, modern practice limits the damage that may be inflicted upon fellow students. Lee explains the traditional rules of friendly tae kyon competition, probably developed within the past one hundred years, as follows:

- Custom (greeting and bowing) comes first.
- Pressure-point attacks are not allowed.
- Light to medium contact is allowed.
- Leg-grabbing and take-downs are allowed.
- Kicking above the neck is allowed.
- Trapping with the hands is allowed.
- Jumping and kicking with both legs is allowed.
- Knocking out one leg with a kick is allowed.

(personal interview)

Under the system Shin Han-seung systematized, tae kyon training progresses through three steps. The first is honju ikhigi, or training by oneself in basic movements and techniques. The second is called maju megigi, or practice of more difficult and realistic techniques with a partner. The third is gyeon jugi, or sparring. This last stage teaches what can only be learned in simulated combat when the defender does not know his opponent’s actions or reactions beforehand (Oh, 1991:16).

In conclusion, it seems obvious that tae kyon is the only plausible candidate for the descendant of ancient subak. Its verifiable history of at least one hundred fifty years, during which its name was used in historical records, is far more thoroughly documented than that of any other Korean martial art. It is the only Korean fighting system that cannot be easily connected to modern Japanese and Chinese martial arts, and its skills and techniques greatly differ from those of other modern Korean styles. The evidence presented above persuaded the Korean Cultural Property Preservation Bureau that tae kyon is a unique and historical martial art. Unfortunately, it is doubtful the arguments will ever convince masters or students of competing Korean styles that tae kyon is Korea’s oldest fighting art.
TAE KYON LINEAGE
IN THE 20TH CENTURY

PAK
Mu-gyeong
Gurigae dojang

IM
Ho
Chongno dojang

PAK
Tul-baek
Wangshimni dojang

KIM
Hong-shik
Gurigae dojang

SONG
Duk-ki
1st Generation Human Cultural Asset

SHIN
Jae-young
Wangshimni dojang

SHIN
Han-seung
1st Generation Human Cultural Asset

PAK
Man-yup
Candidate for Human Cultural Asset

CHUNG
Kyeong-hwa
Candidate for Human Cultural Asset

LEE
Yong-bok
Chairman of Tae Kyon Research Association

SON
Il-hwan
Chief of Tae Kyon Research Association
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NOTE

Of the many Korean-English transliteration systems, two are widely used: the McCune- Reischauer system and the Ministry of Education system. Most Korean words in this article were written using the Ministry of Education system. For certain words, including the names of people, cities and well-known martial arts, the most widely recognized spelling has been kept.

According to Chosun Eo Dae Su Jeon, the Great Dictionary of Chosun, taek kyón can be written in Korean as deok gyeon, taek gyeon, tae gyeon, and tak gyeon (Oh, 1991: 13; Song, 1983: 23). In English, tae kyón has been rendered as taekkyon, t'aeckkyon, taekgyeon, and taeck kyón. In this article, it has been spelled tae kyón for the sake of simplicity. The first syllable of the name is pronounced exactly like the English word “take.” The second syllable is pronounced “gyon” ; it rhymes with “fun.”

The Korean Martial Arts Resource newsletter and videotapes of tae kyón and other rare Korean martial arts are available from the author. For a list of titles, send a S.A.S.E. to:

ROBERT YOUNG
P.O. Box 1034
Radford, VA 24141