

---

# ANCIENT MILITARY MANUALS AND THEIR RELATION TO MODERN KOREAN MARTIAL ARTS

MANUEL E. ADROGUÉ, LL.M.<sup>1</sup>



## INTRODUCTION<sup>2</sup>

In the 1960s and early 1970s, when Korean martial arts first started having an impact in the Western hemisphere, many martial art students turned to books in order to obtain additional information to that provided by their teachers. Today, many of these books are considered classics. Such books were mainly “manuals,” most of them available in English, as those written by Choi Hong Hi, Son Duk Song, Sihak Henry Cho, Rhin Moon Richard Chun, and Hwang Kee. Spanish speaking readers will also probably remember Lee Won Il’s book. Students in those days could also refer to specialized publications dealing with Korean-style forms (among the first, Jhoon Rhee’s “Chon Ji” series, and Kim Pyung Soo’s “Pal Gwe” series). Most of the classic manuals, as well as the majority of those written since that time, echoed and helped to foster among martial artists an acceptance of a number of historical affirmations as facts, despite their being devoid of any verifiable connection with the Korean history as described by other sources. Among the clichés used as evidence for the pretended antiquity of today’s Korean martial arts were the following:

- 1) The combat fierceness and dexterity of Hwarang and Sonbae warriors.
- 2) The promotion in rank that the king gave to military men taking into consideration their fighting performance in championships and festivals.
- 3) The archeological remains illustrating guardians or “strongmen” (k., *ryuk sa*; ch. *li shi*), as found in drawings, murals, and stone sculptures.
- 4) The successful repulse of the Japanese invaders in the 16th century.
- 5) The military texts that included combat training without weapons.

### \* EDITOR’S NOTE:

IT IS THE JOURNAL’S EDITORIAL POLICY TO USE “TAEKWONDO” AS THE GENERAL SPELLING FOR THIS ART. SOME PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS PREFER USING “TAE KWON DO.” BECAUSE OF THE AUTHOR’S PREFERENCES, WE HAVE USED THE LATER SPELLING.

Nowadays, lack of interest in martial arts history is used by the industry’s establishment to make up fables that only people unacquainted with Korea’s historical facts can believe. On the one hand, there are leaders of technically young martial arts (Tae Kwon Do,\* Tang Soo Do, Hapkido) who claim an antiquity for their styles of at least a thousand years; on the other hand, there



are people who say that they have personally created what clearly existed before them. In other words, any person claiming that the tire is ancient and pretending to back up this assertion by showing old drawings of wheels is actually wrong, and anyone who affirms that he has invented the wheel because he has improved the tire design is giving himself credit he doesn't deserve.

Whereas historical ignorance is the rule in today's general martial arts environment, academic-related circles (spearheaded by the *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*) have made important progress. During the last five years, many authors have made some previous "ancient myths" of the martial arts bite the dust, and many interesting findings have been unearthed.

This article attempts to update and summarize the more recent scholars' work and their relation to individual efforts by a few of today's martial art grandmasters to rescue Korea's forgotten martial past, with emphasis on the way in which item 5 above has influenced the modern disciplines of Tae Kwon Do, Tang Soo Do, and Ship Pal Ki.

*All photos courtesy of  
M. Adrogué, except where noted.*

---

## A SYNOPSIS OF KOREAN HISTORY

From a schematic point of view, the history of Korea can be divided into a legendary period, three classic periods, and two “modern” periods.

### PRE-HISTORIC OR LEGENDARY PERIOD

It is believed that about 7200 BCE twelve tribal groups may have founded a league called Han Kuk in the Korean peninsula and the surrounding areas. There is archeological support indicating that by 3898 BCE Han Kuk consolidated as the small state of Bakdal formed by the Dong Yi ethnic group from which the Koreans, Jurchen (Manchu), Mongols, Kithans and Xiongnu (Huns) descended. In 2333 BCE, Dan Gun, said to be the son of the eighteenth king of Bakdal, formed the Choson dynasty.<sup>3</sup> Since that time, Koreans have believed that Dan Gun, mythic founder of their nation,<sup>4</sup> was begotten by the divine son of the solar deity, Hwan Ung, and a bear-turned-into-a-woman. These beliefs were fostered and intensified during nationalistic periods, and the Dan Gun name was used by the Korean sovereigns in the state-city of Choson who performed religious and political functions in the surroundings of Pyong Yang (modern North Korea’s capital city) until 194 BCE, when important political changes occurred.

### THE THREE KINGDOMS PERIOD (57 BCE–935 CE)

In addition to Choson, other “state-cities” located in the area now occupied by both Korea and Manchuria started to organize themselves into independent realms. Koguryo (37 BCE-668 CE), Paekche (18 BCE-663 CE), and Silla (57 BCE-935 CE) were the most important kingdoms, although there were other minor realms such as the Kaya league. The three principal kingdoms fought against each other, and Silla entered into an alliance with the Chinese Sui (581-618) and Tang (618-907) dynasties in order to prevail. A timely breaking of the alliance by Silla when alien forces had already occupied a great part of the territory allowed Silla’s king, Moon Moo, and his warriors to succeed in expelling Chinese forces from the peninsula, which prevented the Korean people from becoming extinct by 700.<sup>5</sup> In those days, Buddhist doctrine had already entered into the Korean peninsula, as the monk Sundo had introduced it into the Koguryo kingdom by 372 CE, and the monk Won Hyo had achieved its popular acceptance within Silla by 686 CE.

### KORYO PERIOD (918–1392)

The Koryo period occurred as the unification and consolidation of Korea as a nation matured (this period gave its name to “Korea”).<sup>6</sup> Along with the flourishing of the fine arts and the reorganization of the state, it maintained a strong military presence in view of the permanent conflict in the period between the Sung (960-1279) and the Qing (1644-1912) dynasties within neighboring China.

In 1230, after disruptions within Koryo’s dynastic succession, Genghis Khan’s Mongol hordes subjugated all Asia and established the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) in China. They dominated Koryo with extreme cruelty, including

---

forming lines of enslaved children with ropes passing through their hands.

With respect to martial arts during this time, the Korean royal court adopted some Mongol habits, such as methods of horsemanship, archery, and wrestling. Lacking naval experience, the Mongol's drive to conquer the Japanese isles at the eastern extreme of Asia relied on Koryo's expertise. The Mongols forced Koryo to provide a military base for their plans to invade Japan in 1274 and 1281. The first invasion was initially resisted by the Japanese and was later halted due to severe climatic conditions. The second was frustrated by a typhoon which was considered by the Japanese as a "divine wind" (j. *kamikaze*). In the following decades, Koryo overcame this domination and asserted its sovereignty against the dictates of the Yuan (1279-1368) and the early Ming (1368-1644), until an internal coup ended the Koryo dynasty in 1392.

#### THE CHOSON (Yi) PERIOD (1392-1910)

An intellectual elite came to power and tried to put an end to the blemishes in the previous administration of the country by adopting Neo-Confucianism as the basic state philosophy. Such doctrine was led by an intelligentsia which esteemed intellectual effort and endeavors and despised manual labor and military affairs, trying to establish a meritocracy geared towards popular welfare. This caused contempt for the Buddhist clergy and the military men, who were deemed responsible for all the political vices of the previous years. During this period, many of Korea's Confucian scholars believed their country should culturally submit to China, the cultural center of the Eastern world.

The positioning of Korea under the cultural dictates of China coincided with the abandonment of military preparedness with the remarkable exception of King Se Jong (1419-1450), a tireless genius who spread an independent and genuinely national culture among the people. Besides his fame for creating the Hangul phonetic "alphabet," King Se Jong was a driving force behind the military use of gun-powder which had been extensively employed by the Chinese.<sup>7</sup> However, his efforts were not enough to stop the disdain of following rulers for all military matters.

In 1592, Japanese naval forces invaded Choson by surprise. The Koreans were clearly lacking in military readiness. With few resources, the Korean military and rural militias organized by monks heroically repelled the attack with some effective support from the Ming Chinese. Five years later, a second Japanese invasion found Choson duly prepared, and Korea achieved a sound victory.

Other than isolated compilations such as the *Muye Dobo Tong Ji*, the following centuries were times in which the military and clergymen's contribution during those war years were forgotten, and Choson sank into an imprudent decline in military preparation. Across the Eastern Sea for centuries, Japan's military steel was tempered by permanent wars between feudal lords, which shaped their society into a warrior culture. In contrast, Korea would pay a heavy price for being militarily weak during the 20th century.

During initial contacts with the West, while Japan was opened to trade with America and Europe, Korea decided to isolate itself and became known as "the hermit realm." This situation represented another disadvantage for the (then renamed) kingdom of Choson.

**Complete Illustrated  
Martial Arts Manual**  
(*Muye Dobo Tong Ji*)

---

## JAPANESE OCCUPATION (1910-1945)

In 1907, the expanding Japanese Empire found a weak Korea lacking international support. Upon the basis of a fake “Protectorate Treaty,” Japan occupied Korean territory and in the following years turned it into a colony. Western countries preferred to remain distant. Their sanguinary treatment of people—including tortures and abuses of the civilian population by Japanese soldiers, their insistence on the adoption of Japanese names and habits, the prohibition of the use of the vernacular language, and the expatriation of 500,000 men to work in Japan as slaves for the pre-war heavy industry—were part of an attempt to eliminate all traces of Korean culture. Such actions irremediably destroyed a great part of the past’s relics. All these happened notwithstanding numerous resistance movements in international forums as well as guerilla resistance. Japan’s defeat by the Allies with the atomic bombs of 1945 marked the end of this horrendous period.

## RECONSTRUCTION (1945 TO TODAY)

A few years after Korea gained its independence, the peninsula turned into the first battlefield in the international confrontation between capitalism and communism. The bloody Korean War (1950-1953) counted up to four million casualties dead and wounded, and arbitrarily divided a country that had not yet been able to find its feet. Since then, after successive military governments, the democratic system has gained some strength in South Korea during the last decade, but in North Korea a pitiless Stalinist regime still oppresses its people. Still, many South Koreans view a gradual withdrawal of U.S. military forces from their country as a precondition for the full political maturity of the divided peninsula and the achievement of unification. Not a matter to be solved easily, the threat of North Korea’s nuclear power seems to call for a strong military “dissuasive” presence in the region, which the U.S. government feels obliged to provide.

## IMPORTANT ANCIENT MILITARY MANUALS

With the general sketch of Korean history as presented above, we can now take a closer look at important military manuals that have had an impact on Korean martial arts as viewed today. There are some historic references that indicate that by the time of the Three Kingdoms—that is, much before General Qi’s *New Books of Effective Methods* (*Ki Hyo Shin Su*)—Koreans practiced a combat form called *Su Bak* (k.), probably related to the Chinese *Shou Bu* (ch., “hitting hand”).

## THE CHINESE *NEW BOOK OF EFFECTIVE METHODS* AND GENERAL QI

Due to persistent raids by Japanese pirates who devastated Chinese coasts, in 1559, Chinese General Qi Jiguang (ch.; k. Chuk Kye Kwang) was appointed to put an end to the problem. He was put in command of 10,000 men and he warned them that any soldier’s cowardice in battle would mean death for all his battalion. He also promised monetary rewards to every soldier bringing an enemy’s head. According to British specialist Harry Cook (1998),

Qi trained his men with long weapons (spears, halberds and staffs) instead of depending on projectile weapons, such as the bow and arrow or the harquebus—the latter was less reliable because it frequently exploded in the hands of those who used it. Employing 12-man formations with special combat tactics based on the different function of each member of the group in accordance to his assigned weapon, Qi prevailed against the enemy. In the following years to meet other military challenges, Qi developed new battle tactics using war carts and different types of response to Mongol attacks coming from the north (one tactic consisted of spearmen attacking riders while other foot-soldiers annulled their mobility by cutting the horses tendons). In 1561, during his stay at the coast, General Qi wrote a troop training manual, the *New Book of Effective Methods* (ch. *Jixiao Xinshu*; k. *Ki Hyo Shin Su*). It consisted of eighteen chapters divided into six sections, including a chapter on barehanded combative training under the title of “Boxing Methods.” The author considered that, although this type of training had little value for large-scale battle, it was nevertheless useful training for body flexibility, reflexes, hand speed, quick yet solid footwork, and jumping capacity—all of which were very valuable for a warrior. In his brief comment on combat without weapons, General Qi mentioned classic Chinese boxing methods as the Six Steps Style, Monkey Boxing, Eagle Claw, and, among the weapons he referred to, was the Shaolin staff.

***New Book of Effective Methods***  
(ch. *Jixiao Xinshu*; k. *Ki Hyo Shin Su*)

#### INTRODUCTION OF THE NEW BOOK OF EFFECTIVE METHODS IN KOREA

The first big Japanese invasion of Korea was in 1592. On April 13th, the forces of Hideyoshi Toyotomi disembarked with 200,000 men at the port of Pusan. Although the local forces were unprepared, things would have been worse if it were not for the courageous deeds of the rural people who were trained and organized by the monks Choi Hyong Ung and his disciple Sa Myong Dang.<sup>8</sup> After an ill-omened beginning, Korea received military support from China. The 300,000 soldiers sent by the Emperor Ming had been trained according to General Qi's *New Book of Effective Methods*, and they successfully repelled the invasion.

In 1597, Han Kyo, a governmental official considered to be an impelling force for martial arts in Korea, was put in charge of the Department of Martial Arts Training. Following a suggestion of Chinese Admiral Nak Sang Ji (k.), he prepared a course on combat technique, assisted by Chinese Master Jang Kuk Sam (k.) and ten other experts. This course trained 70 selected military men in battlefield combat technique—mainly, the use of saber, lance and multiple-headed spear—to turn them into combat instructors. Present day martial art authority and president of Korea's Ki Do Hae, In Sun Seo (1999), considers this to be the first martial arts training hall ever recorded in Korea's history.

