

THE INVENTION OF TAEKWONDO TRADITION, 1945–1972: WHEN MYTHOLOGY BECOMES ‘HISTORY’

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Taekwondo’s popular, historical narrative presents an excellent example of nationalistic attitudes in South Korean society toward portraying historical accounts in a favorable light, regardless of empirical evidence. This article explores various historical accounts regarding the origins of taekwondo, as presented by early taekwondo pioneers. After Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule, taekwondo’s earliest and most central historical source became the hwarang myth, which dominated, due to its promotion by the government as a symbol of South Korea’s military might, martial traditions, and nationalism. Only over time, did a variety of additional events result in an ‘official’ martial arts narrative for taekwondo. By 1971, the accounts became consolidated and unified with taekwondo’s emergence as an internationally known Korean national sport, with all references to foreign influences omitted from the official record. This article demonstrates how the creation of taekwondo’s historical narrative represents a classic case of, ‘the invention of tradition.’

Keywords: taekwondo history, invention of tradition, *hwarang*, martial arts, Korean nationalism

Taekwondo [*t’aekkwōndo*] may have arguably, contributed more to Korea’s universal, cultural recognition and image than any other single item or event. In the early 1960s, when South Korean taekwondo instructors were first sent to Vietnam to train South Vietnamese soldiers in hand-to-hand combat, the South Korean government acknowledged taekwondo’s value and potential as a tool to raise awareness about Korea.¹ About two decades later, due to the South Korean

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¹ The Korean military dispatched a total of 657 taekwondo instructors to Vietnam between 1962

government's continuous financial and political support, the World Taekwondo Federation (WTF) was recognized by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), in 1980. Consequently, taekwondo was first included into the Olympics as a demonstration sport in the 1988 Seoul Olympics and the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. Finally, taekwondo was contested as an official Olympic sport, during the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Subsequently, the Korean Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Sport designated taekwondo as a key element of traditional Korean culture.

Thus, as an Olympic sport and highly recognizable cultural representative of Korea, the history and origins of taekwondo should be of general interest to the public. However, great discrepancies appear between the 'official' portrayal of taekwondo history as described by the taekwondo establishment, notably the World Taekwondo Federation, and a few relatively recent publications, in the form of academic journal articles and books.² Modern Korean studies often aim to support the official, popular narrative portraying taekwondo as an indigenous martial art, with roots about two thousand years old in 'ancient' fighting methods. In contrast, some recent publications acknowledge taekwondo's origins in Japanese karate during Korea's colonial period (1910–1945).

This situation is largely the result of the ambivalent and complicated attitudes of Koreans toward the Japanese, their colonial period and history, and the role Koreans played within this context. On the one hand, Japan represented (and still represents, albeit to a lesser extent) for Koreans a model for successful development, modernity, and primacy in Asia; on the other hand, Japan has also been seen as an aggressor and enemy that chronically humiliated the Korean nation during the colonial period from 1910 to 1945. When Koreans reflect on this era, they typically portray themselves as victims suffering under the yoke of Japanese aggression, perpetrated by evil Japanese villains, a position which represents a very simplistic view in light of the fact that many Koreans cooperated, profited, and even devoted themselves to the Japanese cause.

Steven D. Capener, a scholar on Korean issues, recently argued in the *Korea Journal* that differentiation and critical self-reflection on historical causes and events is not encouraged in Korea, but, to the contrary, frequently suppressed by "public sentiments," a biased press, and a complicit academic community. In this sense, the case of taekwondo represents an excellent example to highlight some underlying Korean social and academic "anti-intellectual and anti-empirical,"

and 1973 (Kang, and Yi 1999: 14).

² See for example, Capener 1995; Kang, and Yi 1999; Madis 2003; Moenig 2015. Compare to the official and common portrayal of the World Taekwondo Federation 2013, or the Korea Taekwondo Association 2007.

nationalistic attitudes and sentiments. Despite the overwhelming empirical evidence of taekwondo's roots in Japanese karate, the Korean taekwondo and academic establishments almost universally insist that taekwondo is the result of ancient, indigenous Korean martial arts, since the repetition of this narrative proved to be useful in constructing an ethnocentric, nationalistic ideology. In addition, the position helps to enhance Korea's relative advantage in its relationship with Japan on the international stage (Capener 2016).

Lately, the topic of taekwondo has been highlighted again, because of the Korean taekwondo establishment's announcement, in March 2016, that it would aim for taekwondo's inclusion in UNESCO as a 'Human Intangible Cultural Heritage,' and as a 'First National Intangible Heritage of Korea' (Yi Sök-che 2016).³ Thereby, the questionable popular narrative of taekwondo's history would be solidified and gain further legitimacy, authority, and world-wide recognition. Additional critical discussion on this subject is necessary.

It will be argued that the established narrative of taekwondo's history is largely a construct of very recent times, gradually crystallizing in the decades following South Korea's post-colonial period until the early 1970s. It should be emphasized that all of the founders of taekwondo, except Hwang Ki (Hwang Kee), studied at Japanese universities where they also first learned karate in university clubs. After their return to Korea, the original leaders of what later became taekwondo established the five so-called 'founding *kwan* of taekwondo' in the Seoul area, between 1944 and 1947.⁴ *Kwan* (館) literally means 'hall' or 'house,' but refers to a

³ This was proposed at the first 'Taekwondo Forum with Global Leaders' on March 27, 2016, at the Taekwondowon in Muju, which was sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism. The Korean *t'aekkyōn* community followed a similar path earlier, and provided a precedent with the inclusion of *t'aekkyōn* to UNESCO as an Intangible World Cultural Heritage in 2011, with the very questionable portrayal of *t'aekkyōn* as a 'traditional' Korean martial art. See Cho, Moenig, and Nam 2012; Moenig 2015: 18–28.

⁴ All of the founders of taekwondo came from fairly well-off families, who could afford to send their sons to study in Japan. As a result, these individuals would have been likely considered as pro-Japanese by the North Korean Communists and, therefore, did not settle in the North (Moenig 2015: 39–45; 55). In general, communist regimes in Asia, as for example, the Chinese communists, looked upon the traditional martial arts with mistrust and considered them as outdated and "ideologically opposed" (Lorge 2012: 225–6). Therefore, karate or taekwondo-like martial arts activities did not exist in North Korea until Ch'oe Hong-hŭi (Choi Hong Hi) introduced his ITF-taekwondo (International Taekwondo Federation), in 1980 (Moenig 2015: 53). This development was the result of Ch'oe's relocation from Seoul to Canada in 1972, because he felt persecuted by the Park Chung Hee regime. After Ch'oe's exile, he fell increasingly into financial distress, because he lost many of his internationally-established, affiliated schools, when they switched to the South Korean government-supported WTF. As a result, Ch'oe was persuaded to switch his alliance to the North, since North Korea promised financial support. In the process, Ch'oe introduced taekwondo to North Korea (see Gillis 2008). Thus, this study is not concerned

martial arts school or group of affiliated schools in this context. During and after the Korean War, many more *kwon* emerged, often due to missing leaders, or because of disagreements between members.⁵ As a result of their disunity, the various *kwon* used a variety of different names for their martial art styles. The most popular martial art names were *tangsudo* (唐手道, ‘way of the Tang hand’; ‘Tang’ referring to the Chinese Tang Dynasty) and *kongsudo* (空手道, ‘way of the empty hand’), which are the respective transliterations of the Japanese term *karate-dō*. The first character in both sets of characters has the same *kun* reading in Japanese; therefore, the commonly pronounced name, *karate-dō*. The former set was used in Japan from the late nineteenth century to the mid-1930s, and the latter was generally used after that time. However, Koreans kept using both sets of characters after introducing karate to Korea toward the end of the colonial period. Another popular term used in Korea during that time was the China-based name, *kwōnbōp* (C. *quanfa*, 拳法, ‘fist-method’), which represents a former common generic term for Chinese boxing methods. In addition, during the late 1950s, the term *subak* (C. *shoubo*, 手搏), describing also unarmed ‘hand fighting’ or Chinese boxing in ancient times, was added to the list of martial arts names. Furthermore, the term *t’aekkyōn* became prominent during that period as well. *T’aekkyōn* represents a pure Korean word and is described, depending on the author, as simply a folk game or an indigenous Korean martial art. After a long period of struggle to agree on a unifying martial arts name, the *kwon* leaders decided on the term, ‘taekwondo,’ coined in 1955, but not universally accepted until 1965, under the umbrella of the Korea Taekwondo Association (KTA). It was only during the late 1970s, that the KTA was able to fully dissolve the individual *kwon* and their power structures. Only the leaders who moved abroad kept their original *kwon* and organizational affiliations. Some of them, such as Hwang Ki, never adopted the term ‘taekwondo’ for their martial art styles, but kept some of the former names (Moenig 2015: 13–56).

The main aim of this study is to trace the formation of the popular narrative or, in other words, to deconstruct the process of ‘invention of tradition’ in taekwondo’s historical narrative,⁶ by analyzing the various historical accounts presented by early taekwondo pioneers regarding the origins and evolution of taekwondo. Only gradually did a variety of focal points crystallize, describing the supposed origins of taekwondo. The earliest and most popular claim for the roots

with North Korea, which had no influence on the evolving historical narrative of taekwondo during the time frame of this article.

⁵ For detailed accounts of the history of the various *kwon*, see Kang, and Yi 1999; Madis 2003; Moenig 2015.

⁶ For the hypothesis of ‘invention of tradition,’ see Hobsbawm, and Ranger 1983.

of taekwondo was the *hwarang* of the ancient, Korean Silla kingdom. In association with this assumed ‘warrior group,’ the martial arts of *hwarangdo*, *t’aekkyōn*, *kwōnbōp*, and *subak* were stated by various accounts to be the prototypes of modern taekwondo. In addition, Korean martial arts were often associated with Chinese martial arts traditions. This article will initially focus on the *shaolin* legend and the *hwarang* myth, as these mythologies were strongly related to Korean martial arts after Korea’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule. The subsequent discussion will focus on the claims of taekwondo’s origins from *t’aekkyōn* and *subak*. The following section will be an analysis of tangible artifacts. Lastly, this study will examine the period when these accounts reached their present day maturity during the early 1970s.

THE MOST POPULAR FICTION OF THE ORIGINS OF MARTIAL ARTS IN EAST ASIA: THE *SHAOLIN* LEGEND

Until recently, the bulk of martial arts publications consisted mostly of practical, instructional manuals for the purpose of teaching the use of fighting techniques for self-defense, although many of these manuals often contained introductions with a variety of brief historical accounts, philosophical principles, and ethical guidelines as background information. The principal historical accounts of the evolution of East Asian martial arts from ancient times to the present often follow similar narratives across a variety of different disciplines. In East Asia, they are believed to have originated in ancient India and been introduced to China by Bodhidharma (K. Talma), a semi-legendary monk. Moreover, the legend associates this event with the birth of Zen (K. Sōn; C. Chan, 禪) Buddhism. Therefore, many martial arts authors and enthusiasts during the latter half of the twentieth century have claimed that martial arts and Zen Buddhism were interrelated (Herriegel 1936/1953; Draeger 1973; 1974; Funakoshi 1935/2005: 7). In connection with this legend, the significance of the Shaolin Monastery remains a general topic of Chinese martial arts tales, mythology, and traditions (see for example, Shahar 2008; Lorge 2012: 170–5), which also features strongly in Japanese karate texts (Bittmann 1999: 250).

Funakoshi Gichin (1935/2005: 7–8), often called the ‘father of *karate-dō*,’ authored the first comprehensive karate books in which he spelled out the *shaolin* saga and connected it to modern karate. Some of Funakoshi’s books were already available in Korea during the Japanese occupation years. For instance, Hwang Ki (1995: 9–18), the founder of Mudōk-kwan,⁷ admitted to having studied karate out

⁷ Mudōk-kwan (Moo Duk Kwan) was established by Hwang between 1944 and 1947, and is considered to be one of the so-called five original *kwan* or schools of taekwondo.

of manuals, which were likely Funakoshi's books that were available in the library of the Chosŏn Railway, where Hwang worked (Moenig 2015: 73). All the Korean accounts describing the connection between *shaolin* fighting arts and Korean martial arts traditions adopted Funakoshi's narrative in one way or another, such as the Indian origin, Buddhist connection, and Bodhidharma narratives (compare Funakoshi 2005/1935: 7; and Hwang 1949: 27; Ch'oe Sŏng-nam 1955: 11; Son, and Clark 1968), thereby reproducing each other's tales over the years. Yet, only Hwang Ki and figures connected to Yi Wŏn-guk (Lee Won Kuk), who was a loyal student of Funakoshi and the leading and most senior martial artist in Korea shortly before and after Korea's liberation, cited these Indian and Chinese martial arts narratives regarding martial arts origins (see also Appendix, Table 1).

The *shaolin* (K. *sorim*, 少林) myth is generally less pronounced in Korean martial arts publications than in Japanese karate books. Although the legend features in one form or another in the majority of Korean martial art manuals until the late 1960s,⁸ the Korea Taekwondo Association (established in 1965) and the World Taekwondo Federation (founded in 1973) entirely dropped all references to the China-based myth. Overall, many Korean authors identified less with the Chinese *shaolin* tradition, but focused more on the ancient *hwarang* of the Silla Dynasty, which developed into their main martial arts narrative regarding history and origins.

THE 'HWARANG SPIRIT' AND THE *BUSHIDŌ* ETHOS

In academic literature, the term *hwarang* (花郎) is often translated as 'flower boy,'⁹ but there are other possible translations for the term based solely upon language. *Hwarang* could mean assorted men of good standing, gentlemen, or perhaps well-born young men associated with the royal court. The 'boy' translation refers to some extent to 'promising young men.' Several authors have pointed to the *hwarang*, a vaguely defined group during the Silla Dynasty (669–935 CE), as having connections to various religious beliefs, such as Shamanism, Daoism, and Buddhism. They are portrayed as an elitist and/or youth group, often associated with diverse military and martial arts activities. Moreover, there are references to the *hwarang* that were interpreted as transgender-like behaviour, possibly related to Shamanistic folk traditions, in which beautiful young boys wore makeup and dressed as women. The various services that they performed allegedly ranged from singing and dancing to some suggestions of homosexual activity. Lastly,

⁸ See for example, Funakoshi 1935/2005: 7; Hwang 1949: 27; Ch'oe Sŏng-nam 1955: 8-11; Yi Kyo-yun 1965: 14; Yi Wŏn-guk 1968: 39; Son, and Clark 1968: 1-2; Cho 1968: 17.

⁹ For example, Rutt (1961: 7) thinks that the translation 'flower boy' is the best.

wandering in the mountains is a recurring topic in association with the *hwarang* (see for example, Yi Sŏn-gŭn 1949; Rutt 1961; Tikhonov 1998).

A majority of these descriptions are based on two prominent sources: the *Samguk sagi* (三國史記, Historical records of the Three Kingdoms), probably compiled between 1149 and 1174 by the scholar and statesman Kim Pu-sik, and the *Samguk yusa* (三國遺事, Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms), supposedly written between 1281 and 1283 by the monk Iryŏn, whose name was Kim Kyŏn-myŏng. While the *Samguk sagi* represents a historical collection of earlier but lost sources, albeit possibly interpreted according to the author's personal preferences for "Chinese taste," the *Samguk yusa* is a type of anthology of informal tales and anecdotes (Rutt 1961: 15). Both sources were compiled several centuries after the disappearance of the *hwarang*, well past the conclusion of the Silla Dynasty. In addition, a variety of other brief contemporary and successive references to the *hwarang* survived, but many of the citations show similarities and were possibly borrowed from the two sources described above (Rutt 1961: 14; 28–31).¹⁰ Furthermore, another text, which was lost, *Hwarang segi* (花郎世記, Chronicles of the *hwarang*) of the Silla period, was allegedly rediscovered and copied by Pak Chang-hwa (1889–1962) during the 1930s, while working as a "part-time employee in Japan for the colonial government" (McBride 2005: 236). The document was first made public only in 1989, after Pak's death. However, its authenticity is in doubt, because the book is regarded by many scholars as a fictional account or even a forgery (McBride 2005). In fact, the account presented, fictional or real, discredits the individual *hwarang* who are engaged in military activities by portraying them as rather unsophisticated. Moreover, references to the practice of incest and other sexual debaucheries by certain *hwarang* gave the work an infamous reputation (Pak Chang-hwa 1996).

As the late scholar-missionary Richard Rutt (1925–2011) stated (1961: 65), "the material available on the *hwarang* still leaves us with more questions unanswered than we would like, and therefore with the temptation to interpret the evidence to suit our own predilections." Given the incomplete and fragmented references to the *hwarang*, Rutt's observation, then and today, remains relevant, since much of what is written about the *hwarang* is, to a great extent, speculative in nature. Moreover, regarding their historical importance, the *hwarang* were actually never mentioned in any contemporary or later Chinese sources dealing with Silla, such

¹⁰ Other noteworthy documents that mention the *hwarang* during that time are, for example, *Haedong kosŏngjŏn* (Lives of eminent Korean monks, 1215) by Kakhun; *Tongguk Yi Sang-guk chip* (The collection of writings by the chancellor Yi of the Eastern State) by Yi Kyu-bo (1168–1241); *Tongyugi* (The records of travels to the East), Yi Kok (1298–1351); and a few other sources of minor importance.

as the dynastic history records. However, while the *hwarang*'s significance and authority may appear questionable (McBride 2005: 233; Rutt 1961: 14), this article neither aims to argue about their principle purpose or activities, nor does it intend to discuss their overall status in Korean history. Rather, this study will focus on the actual existing references about the *hwarang* in association with martial arts training activities.

Although it is reported that certain individual *hwarang* had served in the military during times of war, and some of them reached prominence through their military activities, there is no evidence that any independent *hwarang* military organization, institution, faction, or training units were ever created (Tikhonov 1998: 337). In connection with any martial arts training activities of the *hwarang*, there exist only a few brief references. One account in the *Samguk yusa* mentions a certain Kim Yu-sin who joined the *hwarang* in his youth, and learned *keömsul* (劍術, 'sword skill') at the age of eighteen. Later in life, Kim became a *kuksön* (國仙), a term reserved for the *hwarang* leader (Kim Kyön-myöng 1281–1283/1993: 35; 122), but also bears "religious overtones," referring to a "hermit-sage" (仙) (Rutt 1961: 10–1; 38). However, the reference does not suggest that Kim's martial arts training in sword fighting was related to any *hwarang* military organization or training program. The protagonist of the story, Kim Yu-sin, also features in the *Samguk sagi*. In the passage dedicated to him, Kim went to the mountains to pray to the gods for protection against invasion. During prayer, his sword became "illuminated," which is the only reference to any weapon or combat method in the *Samguk sagi* (Kim Pu-sik 1149–1174/1997: 345).

Additionally, in a passage about the *hwarang* in the *Samguk yusa*, an indirect reference to martial arts training appears in the mention of the "[f]ive Constant Virtues..., the Six Arts (六藝),...[and others, which] were spread through the land" (translation by Rutt 1961: 18).¹¹ Although it is not exactly clear which group or institution spread these teachings, the passage likely refers to some government policy or body rather than to a specific *hwarang* task. The 'Six Arts' consisted of ritual (禮), music (樂), writing (書), and mathematics (數), but also two martial arts related activities, namely archery (射) and charioteering (御). However, apart from this indirect reference to two martial arts activities, not a single reference (direct or indirect) to any unarmed combat activity in association with the *hwarang*, either as a training routine, or of using any such method in combat has yet been found. Moreover, Ruth (1961: 29–30), who analyzed the content in regards to references to the *hwarang* in detail, stated that subsequent references to the *hwarang* during the Chosön Dynasty neither stress nor mention any specific military role for the

¹¹ See the original text in Kim Kyön-myöng 1281–1283/1993: 18.

hwarang. In fact, the prominence of the *hwarang* in Korean history, and the tale describing them as primarily a military organization is a fairly modern narrative. According to Rutt (1961: 30):

Later [Korean] history books, even those written as early text books in the modern style before the Japanese annexation in 1910, never say more and usually say less than this about the *hwarang*. Many Koreans now middle-aged are scarcely aware of having heard of *hwarang* until after the liberation in 1945. The tradition of the historians was limited, and it is most noticeable that the idea of *hwarang* as a military cult does not become prominent until the days when the Japanese are promoting the idea of *bushido*... Either from imitation or emulation, it is at that time that the *hwarang* are presented as primarily military.

An early Korean nationalist historian, Sin Ch'ae-ho (1880–1936), already stressed the importance of a presumed “*hwarang* spirit,” an attempt to associate the *hwarang* with martial virtues (Tikhonov 1998: 319, see footnote 2). However, it was the work of Yi Sŏn-gŭn (1905–1983), titled *Hwarangdo yŏn'gu* (Research on *hwarangdo*, 1949), which portrayed the *hwarang* as being primarily a warrior group. His instantly popular publication greatly influenced South Korean ideology, politics, and historiography. Yi was educated at Waseda University in Japan, majoring in history. Following graduation, during the late 1930s, he became an executive director at a Japanese industrial company in Manchuria. After Korea's independence from Japanese colonial rule, Yi turned to scholarship. In tribute to the founding of the Republic of Korea in 1948, he composed *Hwarangdo yŏn'gu*, which Yi thought would provide the appropriate patriotic spirit and ideology, in addition to historical legitimacy and pride, for the Korean nation. Later, during the Korean War, Yi served as a colonel in the South Korean military and was, as Director of Troop Information and Education, responsible for the ideological indoctrination of young soldiers. Subsequently, he served as Minister of Education for the Rhee Syngman administration from 1954 to 1956. During his life, Yi was affiliated with, or worked for, a great variety of major institutions of Korean higher learning.¹² Moreover, he held several positions at various cultural organizations and foundations responsible for constructing a “shared national past.”¹³ Due to Yi's

¹² Yi was, variously, affiliated as professor, dean, president, and other positions at the following Korean universities during his career: Seoul National University, Dong-A University, Sungkyunkwan University, Kyung Hee University, Dongguk University, and Yeungnam University.

¹³ For ‘the invention of tradition’ by the Munhwajae Kwalliguk (Office of Cultural Properties) under the Park Chung Hee regime, see Sintionean 2013. Yi Sŏn-gŭn was the Chairman of the Committee of Cultural Heritage (Munhwajae Wiwŏnhoejang) from 1969 to 1981, which advised

manifold, powerful positions, he became one of the most influential ideologists in South Korean history, with a legacy lasting into present times. Regarding his political resume, Yi turned from being a Japanese collaborator into a nationalistic, anti-Japanese scholar and official.

Rutt (1961: 1) judged the content of Yi Sŏn-gŭn's *Hwarangdo yŏn'gu* as follows: "This work is of...more in the nature of an essay on the spirit of *hwarang* as it appealed at the time of publication to Korea's burgeoning nationalism. Much of the book is frankly speculative about the legacy of *hwarang* ideals in later centuries." However, following Yi's publication, the portrayal of the *hwarang* as primarily a military group became very fashionable and influential among a variety of chauvinistic historians, official institutions, the military, and private groups. Thereafter, a central topic became the noble '*hwarang* warrior spirit,' which appears to be a direct imitation of the Japanese '*bushidō* ethos.' Since the imperial *bushidō* (武士道, 'the way of the warrior')¹⁴ virtues, such as militarism, cultural chauvinism, and loyalty and self-sacrifice to the emperor and nation (Benesch 2014), were also widely propagated in Korea during the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), they were naturally adapted to the nationalistic, Korean *hwarang* ideology, promoted by Yi Sŏn-gŭn. The emperor-centered, imperial *bushidō* was largely a creation of the bigoted, imperial times following the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905 (Benesch 2014: 3). Prior to this development, the formerly *samurai* elite had become an idle ruling class during the Edo period (1603–1868), increasingly rejected as anachronistic, and losing their privileges in the process; on the other hand, toward the end of the Edo period, their 'virtues,' genuine or imagined, became romanticized and idealized, and also often presented as a sort of counter-culture against modernization and westernization (Benesch 2014: 82). Subsequently, during the Japanese imperial era, warrior ideals, such as loyalty, honor, bravery, self-sacrifice, discipline, and obedience, had been exploited for nationalistic purposes, and distorted as tools for military education, propaganda, and warfare (Draeger 1974: 105; Bittmann 1999: 36).

Following Korea's independence, the *bushidō* ethos was revived in Korea as the '*hwarang* spirit' of the Silla warriors. Subsequently, the myth of the *hwarang* spirit and ethos was also adopted by the South Korean government under Rhee Syngman. The Rhee regime propagated the *hwarang* ethos in the military in a variety of ways. For example, the Korea Military Academy was named "Hwarangdae" (花郎臺, "Hwarang Base"), the Eleventh Division was created and called the "Hwarang Army Unit," and the military cigarette brand was labeled "Hwarang"

the Munhwajae Kwalliguk.

¹⁴ '*Bushi*' (warrior) is usually interchangeable with the term '*samurai*'.

(Ch'oe Kwang-sŭng 2014: 243). Initially, the Park Chung Hee regime did not focus on the *hwarang*, but in speeches to the soldiers of the Tiger Division (Capital Mechanized Infantry Division) on October 12, 1965, and the White Horse Division (Ninth Infantry Division) on August 27, 1966, at ceremonies before their departure to Vietnam, Park referred to the soldiers as “descendants of the *hwarang*” (Ch'oe Kwang-sŭng 2014: 244). The *hwarang* ethos of Silla and Admiral Yi Sun-sin of Chosŏn emerged as symbols of “overcoming national crisis” and became a central topics of the regime’s search for an “ethnic identity” (Pak Sŏng-hyŏn 2015: 65–74). Moreover, in association with a focus on Silla’s military prowess, the Silla kingdom became a symbol for Korean unification. Silla’s conquest of Paekche and Koguryŏ, which resulted in a unified Korea, became a model for South Korea’s preferred resolution in regards to its relationship to the Communist North.¹⁵ Naturally, the *hwarang* mythos was embraced by the newly emerging South Korean martial arts community.

THE TAEKWONDO LEADERS EMBRACE THE *HWARANG* MYTH

Among the most prominent authors of early Korean martial arts manuals was Hwang Ki, who wrote *Hwasudo kyobon* (花手道教本, *Hwasudo* textbook, 1949). After Korea’s liberation in 1945, he started calling his martial arts style *hwasudo* (花手道, ‘way of the flower hand’), which is a reference to the *hwarang*. Hence, Hwang was, to some extent, already familiar with some patriotic notions about the *hwarang* before Yi Sŏn-gŭn published *Hwarangdo yŏn’gu*. Hwang and Yi’s works arrived the same year; therefore, we can only speculate if Hwang was aware of Yi’s publication. However, Hwang’s conspicuous references suggest familiarity with Yi’s ideas. Moreover, some of Hwang’s passages (1949: 19) also reflect knowledge of the text in the *Samguk sagi*.¹⁶ Regarding the origin of unarmed fighting systems, Hwang (1949: 17–25) claimed that during the Silla Dynasty a martial art called *hwarangdo* was the prototype of modern Korean martial arts. Similarly to Yi Sŏn-gŭn, Hwang, and as so many later, thought the suffix ‘*do*’ represented the same character as the common suffix used in the modern Japanese *bu-dō* (武道, ‘martial way’) arts, such as in *ju-dō* (柔道, ‘gentle way’ or ‘flexible way’), *ken-dō* (剣道, ‘way of the sword’), and *karate-dō* (空手道, ‘way of the empty hand’), and which was also later adopted by *taekwon-do* (跆拳道). However, in this manner, the suffix *do* (J. *dō*; C. *dao*, 道, ‘way’ or ‘method’) was never mentioned in connection with the *hwarang*,

¹⁵ The Rhee Syngman and Park Chung Hee administrations considered unification by military force at various times, which the United States prevented.

¹⁶ The section in which Hwang talks about individual *hwarang* warriors is very similar to the accounts in the *Samguk sagi*.

or for that matter, in any document dealing with Korean martial arts before the twentieth century. The use of the suffix *do* was only representative for the modern Japanese *budō* sports, and occasionally, the traditional Japanese martial arts. Evidence of any usage of the term *budō* does not emerge earlier than the thirteenth century in Japanese documents. Besides, the term was probably interchangeable with other names, such as *bujutsu* (武術, ‘martial skill’) and *bugei* (武藝, ‘martial art’), which likely had no distinct meaning at that time (Friday, and Humitake 1997: 7). The suffix *do* was also never used in Chinese martial arts names, and associations between Daoism and Chinese martial arts did not appear before the late Ming (1368–1644) or early Qing dynasties (1644–1912) (Lorge 2012: 5–7; 195–202; Shahar 2008: 3; 200). In Chinese and Korean cultures, the concept of *dao* or *do* was largely associated with metaphysical and esoteric beliefs, in contrast to surviving Japanese sources, which points to a more secular view in regards to the *dō*, considering it a practical guide or ‘way in life’ (Draeger 1973: 24; Friday, and Humitake 1997: 59–61; Breslow 2015). Given the fact that existing Korean martial arts activity records and terminology before the twentieth century constantly show strong influences by Chinese prototypes and names (Henning 2000; Moenig 2015: 2014–7; 26), the suffix *do* is not found in extant materials.

One exception, however, does exist in Korean documents regarding the use of the suffix *do* for martial arts names during the times of the *hwarang*, namely, in the *Hwarang segi*, which was allegedly rediscovered by Pak Ch’ang-hwa, as previously discussed. Pak’s *Hwarang segi* (1996: 110; and 35 respectively), mentions a Korean sword art called *kōmudo* (J. *kendō*, 劍道), a practice for Daoist sages, called *sōndo* (仙道, ‘way of the *sōn*’),¹⁷ as well as *mudo* (J. *budō*, 武道, ‘martial way’) as a general term to describe the warrior’s ‘way.’ Yet, this is another compelling indication that the document in question is probably a forgery. As discussed above, martial arts terms with the suffix *do* were never used in the Korean or Chinese martial arts before the twentieth century. However, during Pak Ch’ang-hwa’s time in Japan, its use had already become customary for all the modern Japanese martial arts and combat sports. In addition, the term and related philosophical ideas were attached to a variety of other activities in Japan, such as *chadō* (茶道, ‘way of tea’) or *kadō* (華道 or 花道, ‘way of flowers’). In similar fashion, the concept was introduced by Japanese to colonial Korea. For instance, newly established western sports in Korea were typically plagued by quarrels among “athletes, organizations and supporters.” As a result, the Japanese colonial government decided to propagate the notion of *undongdo* (運動道) (Gwang 2007: 233), which can be translated as ‘the way of fair play in sports,’ or simply ‘sportsmanship.’¹⁸ Therefore, for Pak, the use

¹⁷ See also the discussion about the meaning of the term ‘*Sōn*’ before.

¹⁸ However, in regards to martial arts, Gwang repeats the ‘official’ narratives presented by the

of *do* was only natural, since it was so commonly used in Japanese society and language, and also so widely assimilated into Korean culture at that time, especially, in connection with martial arts and sports.

In regard to the very common, ordinary, and widely used character *do* (道) appearing in the *Samguk yusa*, it was attached to the term *p'ungwöl* (Kim Kyön-myōng 1281–1283/1993: 122). *P'ungwölto* (風月道) “literally [means], ‘the way of the wind and the moon,’ and suggests poetic romanticism” (Rutt 1961: 12), but might also refer to a certain group in the passage of the *Samguk yusa*. Yi Sōn-gūn (1949: 3), rightly or wrongly, equated the *p'ungwölto* with the *hwarang*. In any case, *p'ungwölto*, which bears no relationship to martial arts, is related to poetry and fine arts. The use of the suffix *do* in this context may have contributed to its association with the *hwarang*. Adding to the confusion, the *hwarang* were often referred to as *hwarangdo* (花郎徒), which translates to ‘fellows of the *hwarang*,’ with the suffix *do* (徒) referring to a ‘crowd or group of followers.’ These linguistic confusions certainly contributed, intentionally or by mistake, to the claim of the existence of an ‘ancient’ Korean martial art called ‘*hwarangdo*’ (花郎道, ‘way of the *hwarang*’).

Hwang Ki not only described *hwarangdo* as a simple craft for combat, but also as a method to cultivate one’s mind and moral character, ideas which were also borrowed from the Japanese *budō* arts or sports. In Japanese martial arts history, the strong emphasis on self-cultivation and moral character building in martial arts training was only properly articulated by the late judo founder Kanō Jigorō (1860–1938) during the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. In Kanō’s sense, the *dō* (道) is understood as an ethical ‘way to follow in life.’ Training *dō* in all actions and walks of life became Kanō’s underlying martial arts philosophy (Kanō 2005; Bittmann 1999: 34–7). Subsequently, the principle was adopted by all the modern Japanese martial arts and combat sports, including *karate-dō*, which was introduced from Okinawa during the early 1920s (Draeger 1974; Kim Min-ho 1999: 171–86); similar ideas became associated with taekwondo, later.

Despite unsupported historical foundations, the *hwarang* myth has been elevated into a symbol of South Korean military might, martial tradition, and nationalism. Likewise, in the martial arts community, references to the ‘*hwarang* spirit’ became a common mythos in taekwondo literature (see Appendix, Table 1), seminars, and speeches.¹⁹ The *hwarang* spirit, which represents Korean vigor, martial arts

Korean martial arts establishment, without any critical discussion.

¹⁹ References to the ‘*hwarang* spirit’ are common during most gatherings, seminars, and symposia by the taekwondo community. See for example the keynote speech by the President of the Asian Taekwondo Union, Lee Dai-Soon (Yi Tae-sun), titled “Realization of Olympic Value through

proWess, and national unity, became one of the fundamental values of taekwondo's historical and ideological presentation. However, the alleged connection between taekwondo and the *hwarang* seems to be a modern, comforting myth, gradually invented and presented by taekwondo leaders as 'taekwondo tradition.' As a result, unless corroborating evidence to the contrary is discovered, the existence of a martial arts training activity, performed with weapons or bare-handed, called '*hwarangdo*,' during the Silla Dynasty, appears to be entirely fiction. Likewise, the often evoked '*hwarang* warrior spirit' can be seen as little more than the product of modern Korean nationalism, inspired by romantic Japanese *samurai* legends, and the nationalistic *bushidō* doctrine.

THE T'AEKKYŎN CLAIM

*T'aekkyŏn*²⁰ was not mentioned in Hwang Ki's 1949 publication, the earliest existing document about Korean martial arts in the post-colonial period. Hwang (1949: 25–6) tried to explain in detail the origin of martial arts and described *kwŏnbŏp*, *tangsudo*, *kongsudo*, *yusul* (J. *jujutsu*, 柔術, 'gentle skill'), judo, and modern firearm methods among others. In addition, he cited *ssirŭm*, the traditional Korean wrestling game, but failed to mention *t'aekkyŏn*. Both, *ssirŭm* and *t'aekkyŏn*, were traditional Korean folk arts or games with very similar attributes, and performed during the same festivities, such as Ch'usŏk or the Tano Festival.²¹ Moreover, *ssirŭm* and *t'aekkyŏn* were several times depicted together in historical records, for example, in the painting *Taek'waedo* or the documentary record *Nammŏn'gosa* (Cho, Moenig, and Nam 2012: 347–8; 352). However, since *t'aekkyŏn*, in all likelihood, had already vanished during Hwang's youth,²² he probably had no knowledge of it; as a result, he did not refer to *t'aekkyŏn* in his first publication. In his following work, *Tangsudo kyobon* (唐手道教本, *Tangsudo* textbook), however, Hwang (1958:

Taekwondo," (in Taekwondo Promotion Foundation, *Future Roles and Directions of Taekwondowon*, 2013, 15–6) made during the Seventh International Taekwondo Symposium in Muju, Republic of Korea, November 27, 2013. References to the *hwarang* are also common in other Korean martial arts, such as *hapkido*.

²⁰ Modern *t'aekkyŏn* is a stand-up striking art, using mostly kicking techniques and leg sweeps. It is nowadays portrayed as a traditional Korean martial art by the *t'aekkyŏn* and taekwondo communities, but the traditional martial arts narrative seems also an invention of tradition. See Cho, Moenig, and Nam 2012; Moenig 2015: 18–28.

²¹ Ch'usŏk is the Korean harvest festival, and the Tano Festival is a festival celebrated on the fifth day of the fifth lunar month.

²² *T'aekkyŏn* became, for whatever reasons, extinct between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. For an exact discussion, see Moenig 2015: 18–28; and Cho, Moenig, and Nam 2012. Hwang was only born in 1914, and therefore, had likely no exposure to *t'aekkyŏn*, contrary to his later claims.

11) claimed that he created his style by combining *t'aekkyōn*, Chinese *kuk-sul*,²³ Okinawan *tangsu*, and others. In the same year, another reference to *t'aekkyōn* appeared in a manual, by Pak Ch'ōl-hŭi (1958: 16), the co-founder of *Kangdōk-wōn*, one of the influential, second generation *kwān*. Pak claimed that modern Korean martial arts were a fusion of Chinese *kwōnbōp*, 'empty hand methods' (a thinly disguised reference to karate), and *t'aekkyōn*, resulting in a new type of *kwōnbōp*. In contrast to a decade earlier, the general martial arts community was now familiar, at least in name, with an activity called '*t'aekkyōn*.' However, the alleged origins of Korean martial arts during that period appeared more like a hodgepodge of diverse styles and fighting methods, representing claims without any sound foundation.

As discussed before, since the *hwarang* myth was often connected to Silla's military conquests, the *hwarang* served as a role model generating the appropriate spirit for South Korea's military in regards to the Communist North. Therefore, Ch'oe Hong-hŭi (Choi Hong Hi), a general in the South Korean army, was also fond of connecting taekwondo to the *hwarang* legend and glories. Ch'oe, the principle name-giver of 'taekwondo,' perhaps, turned out to be the most influential individual in the Korean martial arts world of the 1950s and 1960s. In his first publication, *T'aekwōndo kyobon* (跆拳道教本, Taekwondo textbook), (1959: see foreword; 29), Ch'oe stated that taekwondo was already practiced by the *hwarang* about 1200 years ago, but only mentions very briefly, without any details, that taekwondo was called *t'aekkyōn* during that time.

In Ch'oe's following work, *Taekwon-do: The Art of Self-defence*,²⁴ which is also the first taekwondo manual in English, Ch'oe upgraded the narrative. According to Ch'oe (1965: 22), "*T'ae-Kyōn*, the ancient name of Taekwon-Do, was as old as the history of the Hwarang-Do. There was a primitive activity known as *T'ae-Kyōn* in the Silla Dynasty about 1,300 years ago." In addition, Ch'oe (1965: cover note; and 22) proclaimed himself to be a "master" of *t'aekkyōn* and Japanese karate. The former emphasized kicking techniques and the latter utilized mostly hand techniques. However, Ch'oe declared having "synthesized" them in developing taekwondo. He also mentioned that the hand techniques were introduced from China and Japan, and that Song Tōk-ki (1893–1987) carried the legacy of *t'aekkyōn* from the Chosōn era into present times. By 1972 (19), Ch'oe gave stunning accounts of Chosōn kings who recruited *t'aekkyōn* experts to advance their armies. Due to his central position in the taekwondo community of that time, Ch'oe

²³ *Kuk-sul* is the Korean transliteration of the Chinese term *guoshu* (國術 or 国术, literally 'national skill'). The term was introduced and used as a generic term for Chinese martial arts by the Chinese nationalists between the late 1920s to about 1950.

²⁴ The Korean version was published under the title *T'aekwōndo chib'im* [Taekwondo guide].

greatly contributed to the myth that *t'aekkyōn* had been the forerunner of taekwondo. The origin of Ch'oe's motivation in connecting *t'aekkyōn* with taekwondo can be traced to a 1954 *tangsudo* or *karate-dō* exhibition performed by Ch'oe's military members in front of the first Korean president, Rhee Syngman (1875–1965). Watching the performance, Rhee referred to the demonstration as “*t'aekkyōn*.” However, the probably oblivious and harmless comment by the late president, who had possibly some vague memory of such an activity from his childhood, provided the momentum for taekwondo's *t'aekkyōn* roots. Thereafter, Ch'oe felt compelled to provide a legitimate, historical narrative for his martial art, for the staunchly anti-Japanese and nationalistic Rhee. Consequently, under ideological pressure from Rhee, Ch'oe received the idea of coining the term ‘taekwondo,’ which was officially chosen as the name for Korea's newly emerging martial art a year later. Clearly, the similarity in sounds provided the main rationale (Han 2003: 191; Gillis 2008: 42–3; Moenig 2015: 48). Later, in 1958, Song Tōk-ki, often referred to as the ‘last *t'aekkyōn* player of the Chosŏn Dynasty,’ gave a public *t'aekkyōn* performance on the occasion of Rhee's birthday. Ch'oe stated that he met Song once personally (as cited in Han 2003: 193),²⁵ which could have been during this event.

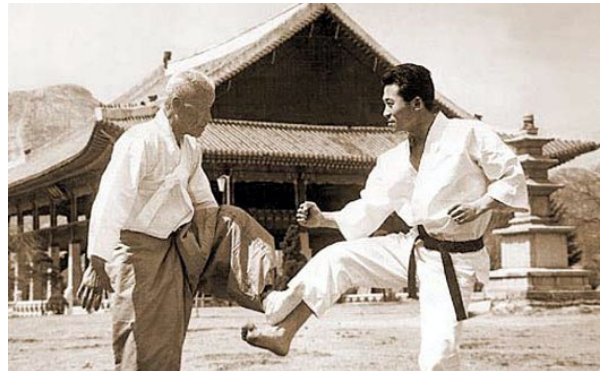


Figure 1
Song Tōk-ki (left), together with Kim Pyōng-su (Kim Soo, right), took some photographs in the interior area of the Kyōngbok Palace complex in 1958, which were published by the American martial arts publication, *Black Belt Magazine*, in 1964. Song's depictions and appearances, together with *tangsudo* or taekwondo practitioners in publications and at martial arts events, contributed to the myth that taekwondo originated from *t'aekkyōn*.
Source: Public domain image

²⁵ However, Ch'oe did not state in the interview when and where they met.

These happenings and circumstances inspired Ch'oe, although at first tentatively, to claim that *t'aekkyŏn* was the forerunner of taekwondo, while other martial arts leaders started to announce similar claims about the origins of their respective styles. Moreover, in connection to his personal martial arts resume, Ch'oe began to declare that he had practiced *t'aekkyŏn* in his youth. As a lasting consequence, taekwondo has been associated with *t'aekkyŏn* ever since. However, in regards to the claims about *t'aekkyŏn*'s 'long history,' the oldest known reference mentioning an activity called '*t'aekkyŏn*' (spelled *t'aekkyŏn* only in the twentieth century) dates only back to a book of poems, *Ch'ŏnggu yŏngŏn* (靑丘永言, Songs of the green hill), compiled in 1728.²⁶ However, it is not known when the poems were written by Kim Ch'ŏn-t'aek. Moreover, neither Ch'oe's nor any of the other early martial arts manuals describes or displays a single *t'aekkyŏn* technique or posture, since the few *t'aekkyŏn* elements present in modern taekwondo were only introduced much later (Moenig, Cho, and Kwak 2014; Moenig 2015: 67–78). Lastly, the *t'aekkyŏn* community has never stated that *t'aekkyŏn* had any connection, historical or otherwise, with taekwondo.²⁷

In contrast to Ch'oe, the WTF's historical descriptions censored almost all references to Japanese karate, but embraced and nurtured the *t'aekkyŏn* myth. Once more to the credit of Ch'oe (1918–2002), in an interview in 2001, shortly before his death, he admitted that he had actually never learned any *t'aekkyŏn*, adding that he had enjoyed playing soccer in his youth and later studied karate. Moreover, he conceded that he had simply invented the *t'aekkyŏn* narrative to convey legitimacy which taekwondo lacked due to its Japanese karate traditions (as cited in Han 2003: 193).

THE *MUYE TOBO T'ONGJI* AND THE *SUBAK* NARRATIVE

Among the Korean martial arts authors after Korea's liberation, the first martial artist who possibly had access to the *Muye tobo t'ongji* (武藝圖譜通志, Comprehensive illustrated manual of martial arts) was the earlier mentioned Pak Ch'ŏl-hŭi in his 1958 (16) manual, Pak listed twenty-five of the more than forty *kwŏnbŏp* positions, which were described and illustrated in the section about *kwŏnbŏp* in the *Muye tobo t'ongji*, although he does not mention the book by name.²⁸ Pak (1958:

²⁶ The *Ch'ŏnggu yŏngŏn* is in the collection of the National Library of Korea (Kungnip Chungang Tosŏgwan).

²⁷ However, there exist a variety of different *t'aekkyŏn* associations. See for example, Korea Taekkyon Federation, "History of Taekkyon," last modified 1999, <http://www.taekkyon.or.kr/en/>.

²⁸ The order is also slightly different. Moreover, Pak could possibly have acquired the terms from

16) also first cited a martial art called *subakhŭi*. He alleged that *subakhŭi* was somehow similar to *kwŏnbŏp* and was performed, accompanied by music, during the Koryŏ Dynasty. This claim was probably inspired by modern-day traditional Korean festivities, which often feature folk bands during all kinds of performances. Moreover, modern *t'aekkyŏn* performances were also often accompanied by music from folk bands. A decade later, in 1968, Yi Sŏn-gŭn illustrated one of the drawings of the *kwŏnbŏp* section of the *Muye tobo t'ongji* in a newspaper article about taekwondo; however, he also did not refer to the book by name.

It appears that Hwang Ki did not have any knowledge of *subak* in 1958, since it was not mentioned in his publication of the same year. This fact seems to contradict Hwang's often made claim that he 'discovered' the *Muye tobo t'ongji* in the Seoul National University Library, in 1957, and subsequently, adopted the term *subak* (Adrogué 2003: 21). Moreover, the narrative appears suspect because the term *subak* was not even mentioned in the *Muye tobo t'ongji*; only the term *kwŏnbŏp* was stated. By 1960, however, it seems that Hwang had knowledge of, and was convinced about *subak* representing a genuine, traditional Korean martial art. When Hwang split from the first Korea Taekwondo Association (1959–1961), he created the Korea Subak Association and started to refer to his martial art as "Soo Bahk Do" (*subakto*) (Kang, and Yi 1999: 31). The term, next to "Tang Soo Do" (*tangsudo*), has been continuously used by Hwang's followers until present times. Hwang (1970: 78–150) was also the first to mention the *Muye tobo t'ongji* by name and entirely illustrated the *kwŏnbŏp* section in his very voluminous *Subakto taegam – tangsu*. Moreover, Hwang confused or groundlessly assumed that *kwŏnbŏp* and *subak* are identical, which became a lasting legacy.

The terms *subak* and *subakhŭi* appeared first describing an early twelfth-century chronological account of the Koryŏ Dynasty (918–1392) in the *Koryŏsa* (高麗史, History of Koryŏ),²⁹ composed during the reign of King Sejong (r 1418–1450). The term *subak* was adopted from Chinese martial arts terminology and represents the Korean transliteration of the Chinese term *shoubo* (手搏). The term was already in use during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 BC) (Song 2008: 89), perhaps as a generic term for unarmed Chinese martial arts, because the "distinction between wrestling and unarmed striking [at that time] was far from clear" (Lorge 2012: 46). First evidence of an emerging distinction between striking and wrestling methods exists from the seventh century, in China, where in a few anecdotes describing

some Chinese practitioners, since Korea had a small Chinese community which maintained ties to Taiwan.

²⁹ The term *subak* is mentioned three times, *subakhŭi* four times, and *obyŏng subakhŭi* (五兵手搏戲, 'five soldiers *subakhŭi*,' a possible team variation of *subakhŭi*) one time in the *Koryŏsa* (Song 2005: 90).

scuffles, boxing skills are referred to as *shoubo* (Lorge 2012: 46–7). Therefore, *subak* was likely based on, or at least influenced, by Chinese boxing methods and did not represent an indigenous Korean martial art. The suffix *hŭi* (戲), which was sometimes attached to *subak*, means to ‘play’; consequently, many researchers thought of *subak* as a game-like or possibly contest-like activity. Indeed, exhibition matches for entertainment are also mentioned in the *Koryŏsa*. Unfortunately, Korean *subak* instructions or illustrations have not survived, and the art is only known by its name. Moreover, there exists no evidence as to how *subak* might have affected subsequent Korean martial arts activities. Only during the late 1950s did an unknown member of the modern Korean martial arts community become familiar with the term. Consequently, *subak* has been associated with all sorts of imaginary Korean martial arts traditions, ever since (see for example, the homepage of the World Taekwondo Federation 2013).

The *Muye tobo t’ongji*, published in 1790, was based on two earlier publications, the *Muye chebo* (武藝諸譜, Illustrated martial arts records, 1598), and the *Muye sinbo* (武藝新譜, New martial arts records, 1759), although the latter has been lost. However, all of these manuals were principally based on an earlier Chinese military manual. Whereas the *Muye chebo* is a Korean handwritten reproduction of the Chinese text *Jixiao xinshu* (紀效新書, New book recording effective techniques), the *Muye tobo t’ongji* was significantly modified and several sections, among them Japanese sword methods in anticipation of Japanese attacks, were added (Kim Sang H. 2000: 12). Moreover, Japanese sword fighting was likely highly regarded because of its sophistication. However, the book still resembles, in many parts, the Chinese work and cannot be considered an independent Korean composition (Pratt 2000). The *Muye tobo t’ongji* illustrates and explains the use of a variety of weapons, but one small section, titled “Kwŏnbŏp po” (拳法譜, Fist-method documentation), is dedicated to an unarmed combat style called *kwŏnbŏp* (C. *quanfa*). The illustrations of the “Kwŏnbŏp po” reflect, unmistakably, Chinese boxing, and the illustrations, including the descriptive text, are not greatly modified from the Chinese prototype. A few parts are fully identical in illustrations and descriptive content. However, the author of the *Muye tobo t’ongji* added more fighting positions and a small section describing partner exercises. The work displays over forty positions compared to the original Chinese work of only twenty-four,³⁰ and the author also changed the sequence. Moreover, the

³⁰ The exact number of positions described in the *Muye tobo t’ongji* is not clear since a few of the positions are described with a partner, and the text is also very vague. Most researchers assume that there are forty-two positions described, but the number could be higher. In regards to the *Jixiao xinshu*: the reproduction that the authors of this article analyzed displayed twenty-four positions, but there are researchers who cite higher figures, possibly because of different

instructive text is generally shorter and often lacks descriptive detail. Most puzzling, the introduction consists of a great assortment of fragmented bits of phrases of martial arts wisdom from various Chinese sources, which do not make any sense as a combined text. On the other hand, the author even maintained the attire and bare-chested appearance of the trainees illustrated.³¹

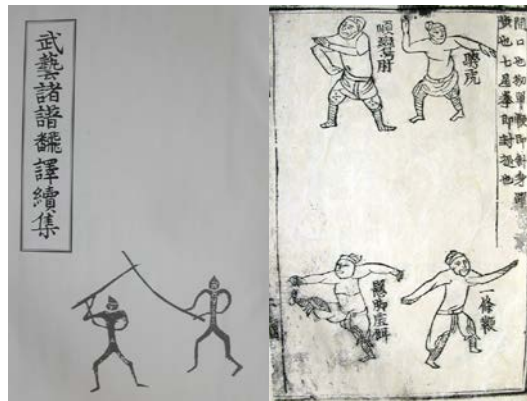


Figure 2
Muye chebo pōnyōk sokch'ip, kwōnbōp instructions
 Cover page, and page three (written in right to left direction).
 The *Muye chebo pōnyōk sokch'ip* of approximately 1610 is a reproduction of
 the *Muye chebo*.³²
 Source: Courtesy of Keimyung University Dongsan Library

There appears to be no apparent connection between *kwōnbōp* and any indigenous Korean martial arts. Following the release of the *Muye tobo t'ongji*, no records regarding *kwōnbōp* activities have been found in Korea. Only after Korea's liberation in 1945, *kwōnbōp* resurfaced again. The fact that *kwōnbōp*, which was also not greatly modified from the time of the publication of the *Muye chebo* to the

reproductions.

³¹ Only the cap of the characters is slightly modified. Compare the *Jixiao xinsbu* (Qi 1560/1991: 453–64) and the *Muye tobo t'ongji* (Yi Tōng-mu, et al. 1790/2003: 331–75). Other researchers came to similar conclusions regarding the similarity of the *kwōnbōp* section; see, for example, Pratt 2000: 33; Henning 2000: 11; Pak Tae-sōn 2007. Compare also to the pages 2–27, describing *kwōnbōp*, in the *Muye chebo pōnyōk sokch'ip* (approximately 1610).

³² The *Muye chebo pōnyōk sokch'ip* (武藝諸譜讖譯續集, Series of illustrated martial arts records) was compiled by Ch'oe Ki-nam, a government official, because of two consecutive, linked Japanese invasions from 1592 to 1596 and from 1597 to 1598. It was published around 1610, and also provides information on the Japanese army. The book is the only extant reproduction of the *Muye chebo* in South Korea. It is in the collection of the Keimyung University Dongsan Library.

Muye tobo t'ongji, a period of almost 200 years, only occupied a small section in all of the books, confirms that unarmed combat did not play a great role in the Chosŏn military. This is obvious, since unarmed combat methods never had any real battle function in past militaries which, naturally, fought with bows and arrows, swords, spears, clubs, or any other available deadly instruments or weapons (Lorge 2012: 5; 45). Moreover, during the time of the publication of the *Muye tobo t'ongji* most of the traditional martial arts described were already obsolete, because of the introduction of firearms by the Chinese and Japanese.

In modern times, the first evidence of Koreans coming into contact with *kwŏnbŏp* again was recorded in connection with two of the founders of the early five *kwŏn*, or schools. Yun Pyŏng-in, the founder of the YMCA Kwŏnbŏp-pu (YMCA Kwŏnbŏp division), reportedly learned *kwŏnbŏp* from a Chinese instructor while growing up in Manchuria (Kang, and Yi 1999: 9).³³ In addition, according to Hwang Ki's own statements (1995: 12), he acquired some rudimentary knowledge of *kwŏnbŏp*, possibly, while working in Manchuria between 1935 and 1937; however, his statements lack verification.

Although the overall influence of *kwŏnbŏp* on taekwondo activity remained negligible, the name *kwŏnbŏp*, as an alternative term to *tangsudo* and *kongsudo* (namely *karate-dō*), was popular with several of the early *kwŏn* in referring to their martial arts. The name was mostly used for nationalistic reasons, to obscure the Japanese karate tradition (Moenig 2015: 44–5). In regards to *subak*, it possibly no longer existed during the time of the introduction of the *Muye chebo*, containing *kwŏnbŏp* instructions. So, it represents a great leap of faith to claim that *subak* was the same as the then newly transferred *kwŏnbŏp* from China. In addition, neither were Chinese *shoubo* (*subak*) instructions passed down, nor was *shoubo*'s connection to later *quanfa* (*kwŏnbŏp*) recorded or explained. However, arguably, the *kwŏnbŏp* illustrations in the *Muye tobo t'ongji* provided, unconsciously or manipulatively, the attractive, derivative, imaginary visual image for 'ancient' Korean martial arts in present times.

TANGIBLE ARTIFACTS AS 'EVIDENCE' OF TAEKWONDO'S ANCIENT ORIGINS

Two stone carvings from the Silla period, the *Kūmgang yŏksa* (金剛力士, 'Diamond strong man')³⁴ of Kyŏngju, are held out as popular proof for the existence of

³³ They offered various sports at the YMCA and karate was one. Even though, they referred to the activity as *kwŏnbŏp*, they mostly trained karate (see Moenig 2015: 41–2; 74–5). The YMCA Kwŏnbŏp-pu was one of the five original 'taekwondo' *kwŏn* or schools.

³⁴ *Kūmgang yŏksa* is the Korean name for the Sanskrit name 'Vajrapani,' a bodhisattva in Mahayana

‘ancient’ taekwondo. They were presented by the martial arts community as the ‘Silla taekwondo warriors of Kyōngju.’ The statues were cited and illustrated as evidence for the first time, by Ch’oe Sōng-nam in his 1955 manual. Ch’oe (1955: see photograph and description in the foreword) asserted that one of the stone carvings displays a position from the *sipsu hyōng* (J. *jute kata*, 十手型, ‘ten hands form’). However, the *sipsu hyōng* is an Okinawan karate *kata*, which was introduced by Ch’oe’s teacher, Yi Wōn-guk, to Korea from Japan after learning it from Funakoshi Gichin. Later authors described the positions often as *kūmgang makeki* (‘*kūmgang* block’) (see for example, Yi Chong-u 1972: 19). On the other hand, it has been pointed out that similar statues with identical postures are found at the entrances of Buddhist temples across East Asia. The statues did not represent ‘ancient taekwondo warriors’ but simply two of the fearsome temple guardians protecting Buddhist monasteries and the Buddha (see for example, Kim Yong-ok 1990: 60–1). Although the taekwondo community’s claim about the carvings has been thoroughly discredited multiple times, and the WTF finally decided to remove the statues from their ‘taekwondo records,’ the taekwondo warrior narrative is still popular and often cited, when suited, as evidence of taekwondo’s ancient lineage.³⁵



Figure 3
Sökkuram Grotto, near Pulguksa temple
The two *Kūmgang yōksa* statues are located next to the right and left of the arch.

Buddhism, who represents the protector and guide of Gautama Buddha.

³⁵ For example, the organizers in Kyōngju city for the 2011 Taekwondo World Championships depicted the *Kūmgang yōksa* as the main theme for advertising the event. Huge, inflated plastic statues were in front of the competition venue, and exhibited throughout the city.

Taekwondo literature never illustrates the whole grotto with the Buddha statue in the center, but merely focuses, without context, on the *Kimgang yōksa* stone carvings.

Source: Courtesy of Munhwajaech'ōng (Cultural Heritage Administration)

Another often quoted ‘proof’ for the existence of ‘ancient’ taekwondo is a tomb mural from the Koguryō period (37 BCE–668 CE), which depicts two protagonists in fight-like positions (first cited by Yi Sōn-gŭn 1968: 26). The addition was welcomed by taekwondo leaders, who could now claim an even more ancient taekwondo lineage, which is usually generously rounded up to 2000 years, in most popular publications (see for example, Gilles, and Choue 2010: 4).³⁶ Subsequently, during the early 1970s, the ancient murals were added by the book’s authors (Hwang 1970: 37; Yi Chong-u 1972: 17–23) to the ‘list of proofs’ for taekwondo’s ‘long history.’



Figure 4
Koguryō tomb mural in Jian City, Northeast China
Muyong ch'ong (舞蹈塚, ‘Dancers’ tomb’)
Source: Public domain image

The mural, which is located in present day Jian City (集安縣), Jilin Province (吉林省), Northeast China, and is believed to have been created in the fifth century, also shows great similarity to a mural from the Chinese Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 BC). Initially, the activity portrayed in the Koguryō mural was interpreted as dancing by the anthropologists who discovered it; hence, the name ‘Dancers’ Tomb.’ Despite the absence of any written records, most subsequent researchers posited that the depicted activity represented a striking art, and many suggested

³⁶ Choue Chungwon (Cho Chōng-wōn) is the current president of the World Taekwondo Federation.

that the illustration portrayed *subak* (see for example, Song 2008: 89–91). Another mural in the same tomb shows a distinctive position, with two protagonists grappling with one another, which is usually described as *kakchŏ* (C. *jiadi*, 角觝, ‘wrestling’). However, the real nature of the activities remains only guesswork, because, as previously discussed, a clear division between grappling and striking in early martial arts probably did not exist. Very likely, the activity was simply considered to be unarmed or hand-to-hand combat, in all its variety. Moreover, even in some modern grappling arts, such as *sumo* (Japanese wrestling), the distinction between grappling and striking is not always clear, since opponents also tend to slap each other. Distinctive terminology, based on Chinese classifications, appeared in Korea only in the *Koryŏsa*, compiled during the fifteenth century (Song 2008: 108–9). Therefore, since there is no further evidence regarding the portrayed activities in the murals, all interpretations are open to discussion. Existing analyses are not much more than speculation and the activity depicted might represent dancing after all.

More recent historical descriptions of taekwondo also often cite a similar mural, named ‘*Anak 3 ho pun*’ (安岳 3 號墳, ‘*Anak* no. 3 tomb’), believed to have been constructed in 357, which was discovered in present-day North Korea, Hwanghae Namdo, Anakkun, Ogungni, in 1948. With regards to Yi Sŏn-gŭn, after already indirectly influencing taekwondo history with the *hwarang* myth by providing the martial arts community with an ideological and historical base, Yi manipulated taekwondo’s historical narrative a second time by presenting tangible heritage as ‘evidence.’

THE EARLY 1970s, THE INVENTED TRADITION MATURES: THE MODERN PORTRAYAL OF THE ORIGINS OF TAEKWONDO

In the foreword of Ch’oe Hong-hŭi’s 1959 book, Yun Po-sŏn, the president of South Korea from 1960 to 1962, stated that taekwondo was a traditional Korean martial art. Yun went on to express his desire to promote it as a national sport. During the late 1960s, the politically and ideologically, highly influential Yi Sŏn-gŭn (1968: 26) also advocated the same cause in a newspaper article. Finally, in 1971, the Park Chung Hee regime elevated taekwondo to the status of a nominal Korean ‘national sport.’ As a result, taekwondo’s historical portrayal needed to be streamlined and an ‘official’ version presented.

In 1968, Yi Sŏn-gŭn, by then a former Minister of Education and highly regarded scholar, threw his full academic weight behind taekwondo’s cause. For the first time, Yi summarized the different narratives of taekwondo’s supposed origins in a newspaper article for the *Chugan Chosŏn* (週刊朝鮮, 1968: 26), “Koryŏ

insam kwa t'aekwōndo.” Oddly, the first part of the article talks about ginseng and its health benefits, since Yi regarded ginseng and taekwondo as representative of Korean culture. In connection with taekwondo, Yi discussed the following topics: the *Kūmgang yōksa* stone carvings and the Koguryō martial arts murals as proof of taekwondo’s origin; an illustration of one *kwōnbōp* position from the *Muyē tobo t’ongji*; a mention that during the Koryō period *subak* was performed; a statement that *subak* and *t’aekkyōn* were practiced during the Three Kingdoms period; and a proclamation that during the Three Kingdoms period *hwarangdo* was similar to *musado* (J. *bushidō*, 武士道). In fact, Yi brazenly claimed that during the Three Kingdoms period, *musado* and martial arts were transferred from Korea to Japan. In this context, he asserted also that judo originally came from Korea. While there might be a grain of truth in his claims, namely, that fighting methods in Japan probably did not develop in a vacuum, but likely were introduced by settlers, or were transferred at some point in history from China and/or via Korea to Japan. In addition, Japanese martial arts most likely borrowed, incorporated, and further developed combat methods from foreign systems over time. However, historical records and evidence from this period regarding the issue are scarce, and inconclusive in regards to unarmed fighting methods. Moreover, judo was only developed during the late ninetieth century; likewise, the invention of the *musado* or *bushidō* ethos is a product of modern Japanese nationalism, as discussed earlier. Regarding the origins of taekwondo, Yi credited Ch’oe Hong-hūi for unifying *tangsu*, *kongsu*, *kwōnbōp*, *t’aekkyōn*, and others, to form modern taekwondo.

In the same year, in 1968, the Korean Ministry of Education gave Ch’oe Hong-hūi a research award for his contributions to taekwondo. However, Kim Yong-gye, the head of the Korea Taekwondo Association (KTA) at that time, accused Ch’oe of plagiarizing Japanese textbooks. Kim demanded the cancelation of the award, and threatened to violently disrupt the ceremony with a group of a hundred black belts (“T’aim aut”1968: 4).³⁷ This episode was an expression of the rancour which had developed within the general taekwondo establishment toward Ch’oe, who was forced out of the KTA in 1965, due to his numerous disagreements with leaders at that time. However, Ch’oe still had great influence on the general direction of taekwondo during the late 1960s, and he still received some support from individuals in the educational and academic community, such as Yi Sōn-gūn.

After taekwondo became the nominal South Korean national sport in 1971, the historical narrative was one more time slightly modified by the KTA. As the

³⁷ Ch’oe’s publication of 1965 actually largely resembled Nishiyama Hidetaka, and Richard C. Brown’s book, titled, *Karate: The Art of “Empty Hand” Fighting* (1960). See the discussion in Moenig 2015: 74.

Chairman of the Technical Committee of the KTA, Yi Chong-u³⁸ published a manual titled *Taekwondo kyobon* in 1972. The manual represents, principally, the first modern taekwondo textbook. It only illustrates the newly created *p'algwae* and *t'aegük p'umsae* (forms), and does not show *karate kata* (forms) any longer, as was the standard practice in previous textbooks (Moenig 2015: 67–71). Moreover, Yi (1972: 18–23) comprehensively adopted Yi Sŏn-gŭn's key points of taekwondo's evolution, but omitted any references to *tangsudo*, *kongsudo*, or *kwŏnbŏp*, which are well-known Japan- or China-based martial arts terms. Instead, Yi Chong-u claimed that taekwondo originated from *subak* and *t'aekkyŏn* only. Moreover, Yi omitted such embellished claims that *musado* (or *bushidō*) was transferred from Korea to Japan. Lastly, Ch'oe Hong-hŭi was completely excised from the historical record of the KTA and ensuing WTF. Ch'oe lost most of his backers and had to settle in Canada the same year, because of fear of prosecution by the Park Chung Hee regime, which he opposed throughout his career. From this time on, the Korean taekwondo establishment, represented nowadays by the WTF, the KTA, and the Kukkiwon,³⁹ has kept very close supervision and control over Yi Chong-u's narrative to the present day.

CONCLUSION

Many historical descriptions about Korean martial arts give more content and detail to ancient history than recent history, and most simply ignore the post-war period after Korea's liberation from Japan. After Korea's independence, a variety of different historical accounts regarding the origin of Korean martial arts were presented, with an 'official history' gradually emerging over the years (see Appendix, Table 1).

Describing the *hwarang* as the origin of Korean martial arts was the earliest and

³⁸ Yi Chong-u (Lee Chong Woo) was highly influential in developing Olympic-style taekwondo. He was former Secretary General and Vice President of the World Taekwondo Federation, and a former Vice President of the Kukkiwon.

³⁹ These three institutions represent the traditional taekwondo establishment and power-base of Olympic-style taekwondo. All three have been sponsored, financed, and at times influenced to some degree by the South Korean government. The WTF is the world governing body for sport taekwondo and is connected to the Olympic movement. The KTA is the national Korean governing body for taekwondo. The Kukkiwon (Kukkiwŏn) houses the World Taekwondo Academy, the organization responsible for taekwondo standards, training, and certification. See its homepages for the 'official' portrayal of taekwondo history: Korea Taekwondo Association 2007; and Kukkiwon, "Taekwondo History," accessed March 3, 2016, http://www.kukkiwon.or.kr/front/pageView.action?cmd=/eng/information/history_taekwondo. However, the WTF took all history descriptions out of its homepage during the summer of 2016, possibly because of the ongoing controversial discussions regarding taekwondo's history.

most central narrative until the 1970s. This legend was connected to the elevation of the *hwarang* myth by nationalistic academics, institutions, and government organizations. In great part due to Yi Sŏn-gŭn's chauvinistic publications, the *hwarang* became a central symbol for South Korean military might, martial tradition, and nationalism. Moreover, the South Korean regime tried to project legitimacy through the *hwarang* myth in its struggle with the Communist North. Naturally, the martial arts community embraced the narrative. Although the *hwarang* mythos was accepted by all early martial arts authors, the details of their accounts diversified over the years. They all agreed that the *hwarang* was a military organization that trained in some kind of unarmed martial arts combat method, which was generally described as a prototype of modern taekwondo. Moreover, it was widely accepted that modern taekwondo derived its 'noble spirit' from the *hwarang* warriors. The idea of the *hwarang* and their martial spirit was in great parts inspired by the Japanese *samurai* and the *bushidō* ethos. The promotion of the *hwarang* as a warrior group has been remarkably successful, despite the fact that there are no related, existing tangible artifacts, such as weapons, armor, paintings, or documents, when compared, for example, with the historical record of the Japanese *samurai*.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, other accounts of taekwondo's alleged roots were gradually formed, such as the *t'aekkyŏn* or the *subak* narratives, but not in a uniform fashion. Over the years, Ch'oe Hong-hŭi became greatly responsible for promoting the *t'aekkyŏn* narrative, whereas Hwang Ki was central for the elevation of the *subak* tale. In regards to foreign origins of Korean martial arts, references to *tangsudo* and *kongsudo* were common, but mention of their Japanese origins were—and still are—usually avoided. On the other hand, authors often emphasized that *tangsudo* and *kwŏnbŏp* originated from China. The *shaolin* myth in particular was popular. However, it appears that these tales mostly emulated Funakoshi Gichin's narratives. Only when taekwondo became increasingly institutionalized were the various accounts integrated and streamlined. When taekwondo became the nominal, South Korean national sport in 1971, shortly after, in 1972, a unified narrative was presented, with all foreign (Japanese and Chinese) references omitted. From this time on, taekwondo was presented as an entirely indigenous and 'pure' Korean martial art.

In the last two decades, taekwondo's historical claims have been universally questioned, but still, the tales of taekwondo's indigenous origins from Korea persist. The narratives have been propagated by the taekwondo establishment and popular culture as taekwondo's tradition for such a long time that it is difficult to correct the storyline. Moreover, Korea's sensitive political relationship with Japan, which is tied to historical and territorial disputes, nationalistic sentiments, and

national pride, makes it almost impossible for the Korean taekwondo community to change the narrative and finally acknowledge taekwondo's roots in Japanese karate.

Although the portrayal of taekwondo's history by the World Taekwondo Federation, the Korea Taekwondo Association, and the Kukkiwon owes much to the imagination, it appears to be more convenient for these organizations to hold on to the established fictional history, than to initiate a balanced historical discussion. Moreover, a chauvinistic scholarship has developed within Korean academia, which generally supports the 'official' storyline. As historians Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger have pointed out, if rituals are repeated often enough, they tend to become tradition; and, if narratives and myths are told over and over again, they have the potential to become history. In the case of taekwondo, the tales of taekwondo's 'ancient' roots have been repeated so many times and for so many years that these accounts have actually become 'history' for a large number of world-wide, taekwondo practitioners and followers. Under scrutiny, however, taekwondo history and tradition, as presented by the taekwondo establishment, comes perilously close to being little more than fiction.

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APPENDIX

Table 1: Historical topics of early Korean martial arts publications

	Hwang Ki Founder of Mudök-kwan	Ch'oe Söng-nam Member of Ch'öngdo-kwan	Pak Ch'öl-hüi Member of YMCA Kwönböp-pu, and founder of Kangdök-wön
Year of publication	1949	1955	1958
Name of author's martial art	<i>hwasudo</i>	<i>kwönböp</i>	<i>kwönböp mudo</i>
Claims of ancient origins of Korean martial arts	<i>hwarangdo</i>	<i>shaolin</i> , <i>hwarangdo</i>	Koryö Dynasty, Chosön Dynasty
Major topics, or important points	<i>hwarang</i> , <i>tangsudo</i> , <i>kwönböp</i> , Bodhidharma	<i>shaolin</i> , Funakoshi,* <i>hwarang</i> , <i>Kümgang yöksa</i>	<i>hwarang</i> , <i>kwönböp</i> , <i>t'aekkyön</i> , <i>subakhüi</i>

	Hwang Ki Founder of Mudök-kwan	Ch'oe Hong-hüi Founder of Odo-kwan	Ch'oe Hong-hüi Founder of Odo-kwan	Yi Kyo-yun Member of Chosön yönmu-kwan, and founder of Hanmu- kwan
Year of publication	1958	1959	1965	1965
Name of author's martial art	<i>tangsudo</i> , <i>hwasudo</i>	taekwondo	taekwondo	<i>taesudo</i>
Claims of ancient origins of Korean martial arts	Chinese <i>kuksul</i> , <i>t'aekkyön</i>	<i>hwarang</i>	<i>hwarang</i> , <i>t'aekkyön</i> , karate	<i>shaolin</i>
Major topics, or important points	<i>hwarang</i> spiritit, <i>tangsudo</i> , <i>hwasudo</i> , <i>t'aekkyön</i> , Chinese <i>kuksul</i>	taekwondo, <i>t'aekkyön</i> , <i>kongsudo</i> , <i>kwönböp</i>	taekwondo, karate, <i>t'aekkyön</i>	<i>t'aesudo</i> ,** <i>kongsu</i> , <i>tangsu</i> , <i>kwönböp</i> , taekwondo, <i>subakto</i>

	Son Tök-söng Successor at Ch'öngdo-kwan	Yi Wön-guk Founder of Ch'öngdo-kwan	Hwang Ki Founder of Mudök-kwan	Yi Chong-u Successor at Chido-kwan
Year of publication	1968	1968	1970	1972
Name of author's martial art	Korean karate, taekwondo	taekwondo	<i>subak, tangsudo</i>	taekwondo
Claims of ancient origins of Korean martial arts	<i>hwarangdo</i> , China	<i>shaolin, kwönböp</i> , Chosön <i>t'aekkyön</i>	<i>subakbúi, hwarang</i>	<i>subak, t'aekkyön</i>
Major topics, or important points	taekwondo, karate, <i>kwönböp</i> , Indian and Chinese monks, Funakoshi*	<i>shaolin, t'aekkyön</i> , Yi learning <i>kongsu</i> from Funakoshi*	<i>hwarang</i> , tomb murals of Koguryö, <i>Kümgang yöksa, Muye tobo t'ongji</i>	<i>hwarang</i> , tomb murals of Koguryö, <i>Kümgang yöksa, Muye tobo t'ongji</i>

* Yi Wön-guk was proud of learning karate from Funakoshi Gichin. As a result, his students (Ch'oe Söng-nam, Son Tök-söng) portrayed Funakoshi in some way in their publications.

** *T'aesudo* was a unifying, official name for Korean martial arts from 1961–1965, but the name taekwondo preceded it for a short while from 1959–1961.