Kuk Sool
Carries on the Age-Old Tradition

by Jane Hallander
The Korean martial arts are often thought to be composed of mostly kicking and punching techniques. Taekwondo, ilim soo do and hapki do immediately come to mind. Westerners often forget that other prominent Korean fighting styles teach much more than kicking and punching—and they are thriving. One of these arts, kuk sool, is said to encompass much of Korea's martial arts history, including more weapons techniques than you could shake a stick at.

One of the preferred weapons of kuk sool practitioners is the sword, a fighting implement that has played a crucial role in Korea's history. That's because no country that is squeezed between two superpowers like China and Japan could have hoped to repel armed invaders and maintained its sovereignty with just its people's empty hands. This forced Korean society to develop along martial lines, and those have always seemed to focus on the sword.

Cutting Through History

The sword, which Koreans call a gum (also spelled geom or kum), was so special to the nation's martial arts that during the Three Kingdom period (57 B.C.-A.D. 668), swordsmen were honored and respected by the populace. Many of the country's generals and leaders were skilled practitioners.

Korea's first metal swords are described in writings from the Paekche dynasty (18 B.C.-A.D. 668), a ruling power in ancient Korea that had substantial contact with Japan. It was at that time, some scholars argue, that steel and bronze swords found their way from Korea to Japan to feed the island nation's thirst for metal fighting implements.

Over the centuries sword-making techniques were perfected in Korea, and many martial arts families passed the knowledge down from generation to generation. The modern-day descendant of one such family, Suh In Hyuk, was lucky enough to learn some of those ancient sword-making and
sword-wielding skills. He went on to found the traditional Korean martial art known as kuk sool, which is now one of the most popular systems in the world.

Many kuk sool instructors and practitioners have learned some of those sword skills from Suh and created their own weapons in the image of traditional Korean blades. One such person is Barry Harmon, a Houston, Texas-based instructor who started his kuk sool training during the 1970s while stationed in Korea. One of Suh’s first American students, Harmon has become one of the highest-ranked kuk sool instructors in the world—and an avid fan of swordsmanship. He routinely demonstrates advanced sword techniques at kuk sool exhibitions and is renowned for his historical and technical knowledge of the favorite weapon of the martial arts world.

Unique Look

Unlike in Japan or China, where swords were crafted according to a set pattern and shape based upon their in-
tended use, each Korean blade evolved as a mirror image of the swordsman who would own it. Many Korean martial artists made their own swords, thus creating blades of all sizes and shapes. The weapons varied so much that it seemed as though there was never a standard pattern for them.

Swords ranged from short knife-like blades to the more common long weapons. One famous Korean admiral, Yi Sun-shin, who lived in the late 1500s, had perhaps the longest of all: a 77-inch, 12-pound giant of a weapon. A common design in Korea was the double-edged straight sword; it was similar to the Chinese straight sword but with a thicker, heavier blade. Two other frequently seen designs were the curved single-edged blade and the straight single-edged blade, which could be wide like Chinese swords or narrow like Japanese swords. Obviously, modern claims that all Korean swords belong to the straight-sword category or that they were merely replicas of Japanese swords are incorrect.

Several significant differences between Japanese and Korean sword techniques can help an observer determine whether a martial artist is teaching Japanese methods and calling them Korean, or actually teaching Korean swordsmanship.

"Because of Korea’s long history, there were many different types of techniques,” Harmon says. "As a rule, Korean swords were designed to be carried in the swordsman’s hand, rather than in his belt as the Japanese carried their sword. Korean swordsmen carried their sword with the cutting edge facing down, rather than facing up like the Japanese. Japa-

The Japanese sword-drawing method, as demonstrated by Barry Harmon, differed from the Korean method. The sword was drawn from a cutting-edge-up position (1). It was raised overhead (2), where the swordsman’s second hand was applied to the handle (3). Finally the sword was moved diagonally downward to cut (4).

The Korean sword-drawing method often started with the practitioner in a kneeling position. Barry Harmon prepares to unlock the blade with his right thumb (1). As the blade exits the sheath, he makes an upward offensive or defensive move (2). With both hands gripping the handle, Harmon is then ready to fight (3).
The basic grip also differs. When drawing the sword, Korean swordsmen positioned their rear hand approximately three fingers’ distance from the top of the scabbard, while Japanese swordsmen grabbed near the top of the case. In both types of swordsmanship, the rear hand (usually the left) steadied the scabbard and the thumb unlocked the blade from its sheath.

Traditionally when drawing the sword in a two-handed fashion, Korean stylists placed their right hand next to the sword guard, with their left hand tight against their right. Japanese swordsmen had a more open grip with space between their hands. However, Harmon explains, as the sword grew in length over the years, the Koreans also started using a more open grip for better control, and that gripping method is still frequently used.

While traveling, Korean swordsmen sometimes carried their weapon strapped across their back. While riding horseback, they often strapped it to the back of their waist.

Unfortunately the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945) witnessed a huge decline in the practice of Korean sword skills and sword making. Many treasured weapons and traditions that had been passed down for generations were destroyed by the Japanese. Those few weapons that survived the occupation were controlled by law, and even now in Korea, a special permit is needed to own one.

**Sword Types**

The swords that were used in Korea fall into eight categories:

- The *weol* do had a long, broad blade connected to a thick, staff-like handle. It was reserved for generals and high-rank-
Although the single-edged sword was the most commonly seen weapon, Koreans also used double-edged blades of varying lengths.

ing statesmen. This weapon was called a kwan do in China, where it was also used by generals. The wool do was primarily used by men on horseback. From a secure position on a galloping horse, the wielder could easily slash his way through even the most tightly packed formation of soldiers.

- The san soo do was a straight sword with a 50-inch-long blade, with the actual cutting edge approximately 39 inches long. It was one of the most common Korean military swords and laid the foundation for many modern weapons.

- Ssang gum means “double swords” and refers to a set of matched blades. Its smaller brother was the wae gum, a set of mid-sized swords that were larger than daggers but shorter than the full-sized ssang gum. The wae gum were popular within Korea’s royal palace and court, since they could be easily concealed within a robe.

- While the average soldier might use a san soo do or ssang gum, those who relied entirely upon their sword for battlefield defense preferred the ah do. Strictly a military weapon, it had a groove running the length of its 39-inch-long blade for added strength. Both edges were sharpened near the tip, and the main cutting edge was sharpened its entire length.

- The hyup do weighed approximately 5 pounds and measured some 51 inches in length. Its curved single-edged blade was suitable only for the strongest of men.

- The je dok gum was another military sword that gained popularity in Korea during Japan’s first invasion attempt in 1592. At the time China was an ally of Korea, and some

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scholars argue that the Chinese warriors who helped the Koreans ward off the Japanese took the je dok gum back to China, where it influenced the development of Chinese swords.

- The last notable military sword was the yeok do. It had a slightly curved 39-inch-long blade and a 35-inch-long handle. As such, the bearer of this blade certainly had enough leverage to cut through just about any object.

Four types of swords were available to Koreans who were not in the military. The name of each one described a weapon and a set of techniques peculiar to it: Jeong gum refers to a sword that was used with a linear motion; yeok gum refers to a sword that was used in an inverted position (with the cutting edge up); jang ssang gum refers to a set of long swords that were used together, and dan ssang gum refers to a set of short swords that were used together.

Preparation for Training

Prior to actually training with the sword, kook sool students prepare by learning five basic principles that apply to all martial techniques. These five principles, called ja se, help students develop control, calmness and effectiveness. Without such training, swordsmanship can never be mastered.

Although ja se literally translates as “posture” or “stance,” it actually defines the martial artist’s position in relation to the events around him. It can include a series of defensive and offensive movements relating to the situation, or it can be training in meditation and ki (internal energy) development. The term can also refer to each movement within a hyung (form). Essentially, ja se means that each body position—external and internal—has a definite purpose at the moment it is used.

The first component of ja se is the eyes, which should focus the spirit outward. The second is the spirit, which should reflect calmness and quiet. The third is the body, which should be kept low, smooth, soft and supple. The fourth is the feet, which should move slowly and precisely. The fifth is the hands, which should be swift, agile and precise.

By first learning proper ja se, sword practitioners develop their ability to control their body and weapon. This, in turn, develops the physical reflexes and mental attitude. Ancient Korean warriors were required to learn ja se before they were allowed to make decisions regarding the life or death of an enemy, Harmon says.

The next step in learning the kook sool sword arts is jung shin (also spelled jeong shin). Jung shin includes concentration of mind and spirit, but it is far more than that. It is also an accumulation of proper training in etiquette and manners.

By combining all the esoteric teachings of jung shin, kook sool practitioners are able to channel their concentration and wisdom into a never-give-up attitude, which is essential to mastering traditional swordsmanship. Many believe that jung shin is so important that it can enable a martial artist to defeat an opponent who has superior technique.

The next component of sword mastery is meditation. Designed to help the mind and body become one with the weapon, it is practiced before, during or after sword training. The theory is that the effectiveness of any weapon is increased if the practitioner’s mind and body are not separate from the weapon. In addition to developing the student’s ki, which can ultimately be transferred into the sword, meditation improves the ability to grip the sword and move it smoothly.

Sword Techniques

Once the student has been physically and mentally prepared, Harmon explains, he proceeds to stage three, the sword techniques themselves. In kook sool, those techniques are called gum sool.

The first sword principle taught in kook sool—the one that forms the basis for all sword training—is jeong gum. As mentioned above, the term means “straight sword,” but it does not refer to the shape of the blade. Instead, it defines the action and movements made by the swordsman. Jeong gum techniques include straight-line slicing, chopping and thrusting actions. They are not taught until a kook sool student reaches black-belt level.

The Korean sword can be wielded with one or two hands. When two are used, the intent is to generate as much striking power as possible. Two-handed techniques include straight slices that can be angular, horizontal, downward or upward. Power comes from the swordsman’s muscles and from a knowledge of the angles at which the joints function. This helps the body function as one unit and moves the limbs at the exact angles at which the muscles operate most efficiently.

Two-handed sword techniques can include spinning and cutting actions that require the swordsman to turn the weapon at great speed. In ancient Korea, these techniques were useful for cutting the neck of several enemies at once while protecting the swordsman’s own head.

Low slicing motions directed at the opponent’s ankle are also popular jeong gum techniques. In the days of actual combat with bladed weapons, it was sometimes easier to attack an enemy’s foundation than to attack his upper body. Low cuts may be either two-handed or one-handed, depending on the swordsman’s body position at that instant. If performed with one hand, power must be generated from the wielder’s joints and transferred to the blade.

Korean sword techniques also include one- and two-handed stabs. Kook sool’s jeong gum form teaches both options. A single-handed straight stab was useful when the swordsman’s free hand was used to block an enemy’s attack. The scabbard was sometimes used to augment the block.

Inverted sword techniques, called yeok gum in Korean, are in a class by themselves. Taught after the jeong gum principles, they involve the use of the sword with the sharp edge facing up. In olden days, yeok gum was a valuable method of close-range fighting that began as a defensive action but could be converted to an offensive technique. The movements are circular and make use of the swordsman’s wrist, elbow and shoulder to produce cutting power.

Although a few double-handed yeok gum techniques are practiced, most require the use of only a single hand to wield the sword. The cuts are primarily poking (to the rear or downward) and slicing techniques. Since the movements are circular and cover a large area, they don’t require the accuracy and precision that jeong gum techniques do.

Benefits

Although the sword is not a practical weapon in the modern world, the forms and techniques do have practical martial arts applications. For instance, sword forms teach physical precision and mental concentration—traits that a martial artist can apply to other aspects of his training.

In the past the sword was primarily a weapon of death. Nowadays, it is an instrument with which a martial artist can prepare himself to meet the challenges he will encounter in life.

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