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Korean Sword

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EXPERT
BARRY
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EXPLAINS ITS
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**EVOLUTION
OF THE
SHIDOKAN
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TOURNAMENT**

**HAPKIDO VS.
THE BLADE**

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Black Belt Korean Swordsmanship

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KOREAN CIVIL

*Kuk Sool
Carries on the
Age-Old
Tradition*

by Jane Hallander

Houston, Texas-based kuk sool instructor Barry Harmon is an

COMMANDERSHIP



The Korean martial arts are often thought to be composed of mostly kicking and punching techniques. *Taekwon-do*, *tang soo do* and *hapkido* 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.

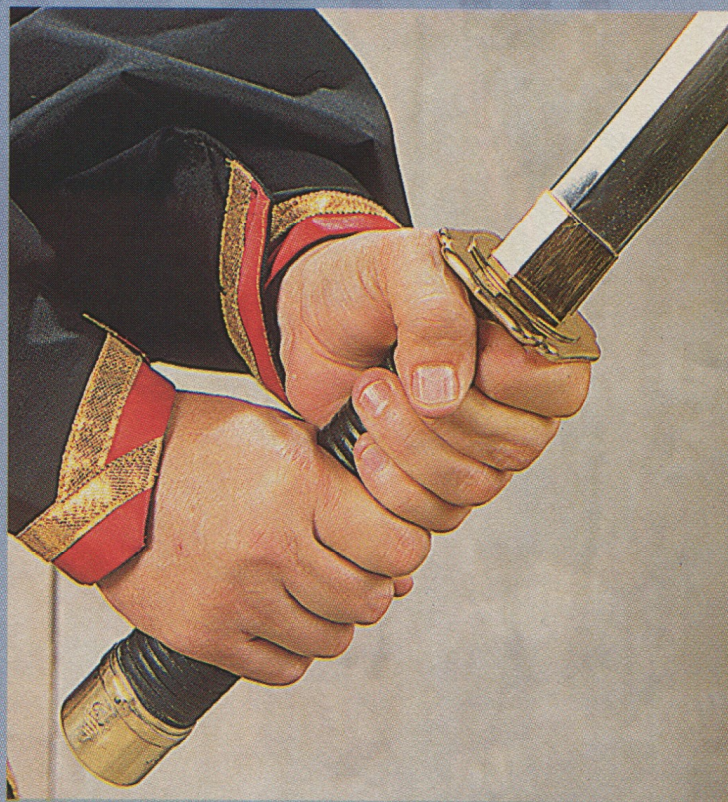
One of the preferred weapons of *kuk sool* practitioners is the sword, a fighting implement that has played a crucial role in Korea's history. That's because no country that is squeezed between two superpowers like China and Japan could have hoped to repel armed invaders and maintained its sovereignty 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

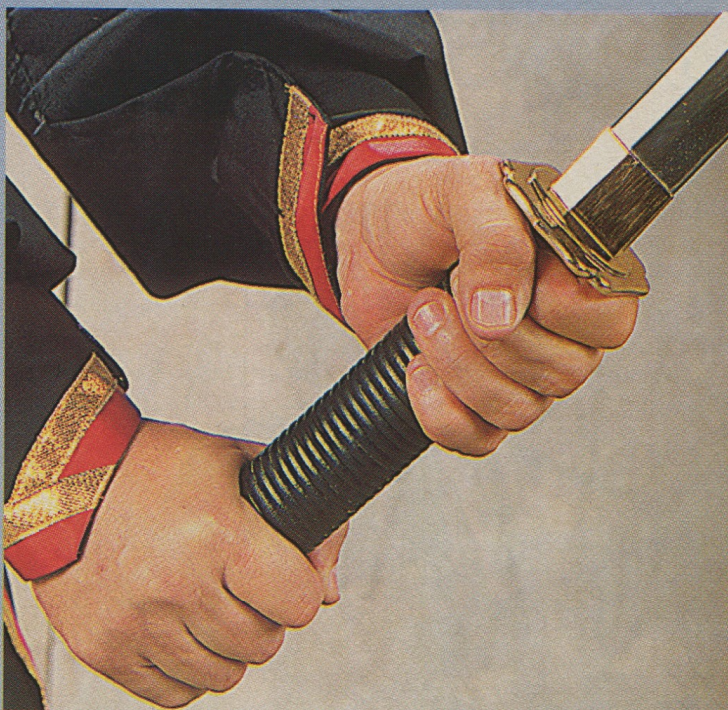
The sword, which Koreans call a *gum* (also spelled *geom* or *kum*), was so special to the nation's martial arts that during the Three Kingdom period (57 B.C.-A.D. 668), swordsmen were honored and respected by the populace. Many of the country's generals and leaders were skilled practitioners.

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 descendent of one such family, Suh In Hyuk, was lucky enough to learn some of those ancient sword-making and



In ancient times, Korean swordsmen held their weapon with their hands close together (above), but the use of longer and heavier swords necessitated a wider grip for added control (below).





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 Sunshin, who lived in the late 1500s, had perhaps the longest of all: a 77-inch, 12-pound giant of a weapon. A common design

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).

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 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).



To demonstrate the effectiveness of the upward cut shown above, Barry Harmon (left) slices through a pine board.

nese fighters were more interested in drawing the sword and cutting the enemy in one powerful action, whereas Korean swordsmen used their drawing stroke as a more defensive

Even when Korean swordsmen carried their weapon behind their back, they were able to access it quickly. Barry Harmon pulls the sword from its sheath (1) and raises it overhead (2). He then grips it with both hands (3) and slices downward (4).



upward stroke which was done with one hand. 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 *wool do* had a long, broad blade connected to a thick, staff-like handle. It was reserved for generals and high-rank-



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 *weol 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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