

# Korea's Traditional Weapons

Muye Eship Saban (Moo-yeah Ee-ship Sah-bahn), literally translated as 24 Technique Martial Art, is made up of the 24 arts of the Muye Dobo Tongji. In 1789, King Jungjo, ruler of the Yi dynasty, ordered General Yi Duk-moo to compile an official textbook on all martial art forms then present in Korea to preserve them for future generations. The result, the Muye Dobo Tongji, is the only surviving classical text on the Korean arts of war. Based on the earliest known Korean martial arts treatise, the Muye Chebo written in 1599, the Muye Dobo Tongji clearly shows the influence of the neighboring Japanese and Chinese armies.

Through hundreds of wars and invasions, Korean soldiers adapted battlefield skills and tactics from their enemies, creating a unique system of their own. Organized into 24 distinct disciplines comprised of empty hand fighting, weaponry and horsemanship, this book is an accurate historical snapshot of the warrior arts of the hermit kingdom in the late 18th century. The 24 arts of Muye Eship Saban are:

## **Jang Chang**

The jang chang is a five foot long spear made from the wood of the yew tree. It can also be made from a similarly soft wood, including bamboo in the right climate. It was considered the most effective conventional weapon on the battlefield due to its flexibility and length. The jang chang was widely used in the battle to retake Pyong-yang Fortress during the 1592 war between Chosun (Korea) and Japan.

## **Juk Jang Chang**

The juk jang chang is a twenty foot long spear made of bamboo and tipped with a four inch long blade. The primary advantage of the juk jang chang on the battlefield was its length and sharp blade, making it suitable for fighting many enemies simultaneously.

## **Kee Chang**

The kee chang is a flag spear, a nine foot long staff with a nine inch long blade at the end. The colored flag, attached at the end of the spear just below the blade, was used to create confusion in battle. Troops surrounded the enemy and waved the flags vigorously during an attack. It was also used to encourage the troops, like a rallying cry, in battle. The strength of the kee chang was its ability to make deceptive attacks and sudden directional changes to attack the center of the enemy's line.

## **Dang Pa**

The dang pa is a triple bladed spear, sometimes called a trident. It is between seven feet, six inches and eighteen feet long and has either an iron or wooden tip. The dang pa was a fundamental defensive weapon that was sometimes used to launch fire at enemy troops.

## **Nang Sun**

The nang sun is a fifteen foot long spear made of either bamboo or iron. It has nine to eleven branches extending out from the main shaft, each studded with small metal hooks. This deadly weapon was invented by Chuk Kye-kwang during the 1592 war with Japan.

## **Ssang Soo Do**

The ssang so do is a six foot five inch long sword from Japan. It is so powerful, that it can cut or break another sword upon striking it. Japanese gunmen also used this sword as a sidearm for close range combat. The ssang so do is also known as the jang do, yong gum or pyung gum.

## **Ye Do**

The ye do is a short sword, four feet four inches in length, that is also known as a dan do. It was used for training soldiers in swordsmanship.

## **Wae Gum**

Japanese swordsmanship was clearly recognized as superior to that of the sword techniques of China or Chosun in the 16th century, so King Sukjong ordered Kim Che-gun to acquire the techniques and text books of the Japanese. Four styles of 16th century Japan are recorded in the wae gum section of the Muye Dobo Tongji: Toyu Ryu, Woonkwang Ryu, Chunryu Ryu, and Ryupee Ryu.

## **Kyo Jun**

Kyo jun is a Japanese method of practicing swordsmanship with a training partner. In the original Japanese text book, techniques were documented with a double bladed sword, but Chosun soldiers practiced with the single bladed sword to prevent injury.

## **Je Dok Gum**

Je dok gum, literally translated as the Admiral's sword, is a method of sword combat developed by Chinese Admiral Yi Yu-song. Admiral Yi was a descendant of Korean lineage and was stationed in Korea during King Sinjong's reign. The je dok gum was characterized by spinning movements, which were used to break free when a soldier was encircled on the battlefield.

## **Bon Kuk Gum**

The bon kuk gum is a native Chosun sword style as proven by its mention in the legend of Hwang-chang, a Shilla Hwarang warrior. There is evidence that both Japan and China adapted some of the techniques of the bon kuk gum.

## **Ssang Gum**

The ssang gum are single-bladed twin swords of any length (most commonly short swords, like the yo do). The original swords were two feet, ten inches long, but in later years, there was not a specific type of sword prescribed for practice. The ssang gum were used in such a way, that one sword could be used to block an opponent's attack while the other was used to attack with a counter-strike.

## **Wol Do**

The wol do is a nine foot long crescent sword. Its blade is moon shaped, with a small blade projecting below the main blade. The smaller blade has a feather tied to it. Although a fearsome looking weapon, it was used primarily for practice among infantry soldiers, having been considered too weak for use in battle.

## **Hyup Do**

The hyup do is a spear sword with a three foot long handle. It resembles the wol do but with a single, thinner blade. It was rarely used in battle, because it was considered, like the wol do, to be too weak.

## **Deung Pae**

The deung pae is the sword and shield art. The sword, used for attacking, was primarily a short sword, such as the yo do. The shield was three feet seven inches in diameter and was most commonly made of woven wisteria branches (in the south) or willow branches wrapped in leather (in the north). It was used by the infantry to defend against a variety of weapons including the dart spear and bird gun.

## **Kwon Bup**

Kwon bup is the only empty handed fighting method of the twenty-four. It was practiced as both an empty handed self-defense skill and as preparation for learning the more complicated sword arts. There were both external and internal styles of practice.

## **Kon Bang**

The kon bang is a seven foot long stick with a two inch wide duck bill shaped blade at the end. It was used to stab (like a spear) or strike (like a stick) enemies and was especially effective against the deung pae.

## **Pyun Gon**

The pyun gon is a flail, an eight foot long staff with a two foot long club attached to the end of it by a chain or metal ring. The pyun gon looks similar to a nunchaku except that one segment is much longer than the other whereas the nuchaku's sticks are equal in length. It was often used to club enemies attempting to scale the walls of a castle or fortress.

## **Ki Chang**

Ki chang is the art of using the jang chang (long spear) on horseback. The spear is fifteen feet long and the cavalry troops often practiced for combat by thrusting the spear into rice straw dummies or participating in duels.

## **Masang Ssang Gum**

Masang ssang gum is the use of the twin swords on horseback. Dan dos, short swords carried as side arms, were used. The famous warrior, Jin An, used seven foot long swords in combat on horseback but he was an exception.

## **Masang Wol Do**

Masang wol do is the use of the crescent sword on horseback. In the 16th century war with the Japanese, the masang wol do was instrumental in repelling the Japanese invaders. After the war King Shinjong built a monument in Seoul in memory of General Kwan Woo who was credited with the first use of the wol do.

## **Masang Pyun Gon**

The pyun gon used on horseback has a longer chain than that used by the infantry, allowing the mounted combatant to strike enemies on the ground. The stick at the end of the chain is studded with iron nails or other sharp protrusions to inflict fatal wounds on impact.

## **Kyuk Koo**

Kyuk koo is a game similar to polo. Contestants on horseback use long handled mallets to strike a small leather ball. It was used to train soldiers and horses for mounted combat and to test the skills of the riders. Kyuk koo games were often surrounded by a great deal of ceremony and attended by royalty.

## **Masang Jae**

Masang jae is a system of acrobatic techniques on horseback. The skills were primarily used to deceive the enemy in combat by hiding the body under the horse or playing dead. Other skills were used to allow the rider to attack the enemy, such as standing on the saddle to shoot the enemy with the three muzzle gun. The techniques were originated by Suk Ho-ui who was said to be as agile as a monkey riding a horse.

The arts of Muye Eship Saban are kept alive today by the masters of the Kyungdang demonstration team and the Baekje Cultural Martial Arts Institute. Both groups frequently perform at cultural events in Korea.