

## Hwa-Rang History



Named for the Hwa-rang youth group that originated in the Silla Dynasty around 600AD and became the driving force for unification of the three kingdoms of Korea.

During the 6th century AD, the Korean peninsula was divided into three kingdoms: Silla, Koguryo, and Paekche. Silla, the smallest of these kingdoms, was constantly under invasion and harassment by its two more powerful neighbours.

A new order, the Hwa-rang was established by Chin Hung, the 24th King of Silla in 540 AD. "Hwa" meant flower or blossom, and "Rang" meant youth or gentle men. The word Hwa-rang soon came to stand for Flower of Knighthood or Flowering Youth. These Hwarang were selected from handsome, virtuous young men of good families.

The education of a Hwarang was supported by the king and generally lasted ten years, after which the youth usually entered into some form of service to his country. King Chin Hung sent the Hwarang to places of scenic beauty for physical and mental culture as true knights of the nation.

A Hwarang candidate had to be a man of character, virtue, and countenance. The Hwarang trained to improve their moral principles and military skills. To harden their bodies, they climbed mountains and swam rivers in the coldest months.

The youth were taught dance, literature, arts, and sciences, and the arts of warfare, chariot, archery, and hand-to-hand combat. The hand-to-hand combat was based on the Um-Yang principles of Buddhist philosophy and included a blending of hard and soft, linear and circular techniques.

The art of foot fighting was known as Subak and was practiced by common people throughout the three kingdoms. However, the Hwarang transformed and intensified this art and added hand techniques, renaming it Taekkyon. In later centuries, the king of Koryo made Taekkyon training mandatory for all soldiers, and annual Taekkyon contests were held among all members of the Silla population on May 5th of the Lunar Calendar.

The Hwarang punches could penetrate the wooden chest armour of an enemy and kill him. Their foot techniques were said to be executed at such speed that opponents frequently thought that the feet of Hwarang warriors were swords.

Hwarang groups consisted hundreds of thousands of members and after training, candidates were presented to the king for nomination as a Hwarang or Kuk-Son. The leaders of each group, including the most senior leader, were referred to as Kuk-Son. The Kuk-Son were similar to King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table in England around 1200 AD.

From Kuk-Son ranks were chosen government officials, military leaders, field generals, and even kings, who served Silla both in times of peace and war. Most of the great military leaders of Silla were products of Hwarang training, and many were Kuk-Son.

Hwarang fighting spirit was ferocious and was recorded in many literary works including the Sam-Guk-Sagi, written by Kim Pu-Sik in 1145, and the Hwarang-Segi. The latter was said to have contained the records of lives and deeds of over 200 individual Hwarang (Sadly, it was lost during the Japanese occupation in the 20th century). The zeal of the Hwarang helped Silla become the world's first "Buddha Land" and led to the unification of the three kingdoms of Korea. Buddhist principles were so ingrained in the code of the Hwarang that a large number of monks participated in the Hwarang-Do. During times of war, they would take up arms to die for Silla.

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## Hwarang code

The Hwarang code was established in the 30th year of King Chin-Hung's rule. Two noted Hwa-rang warriors, Kwi-San and Chu-Hang, sought out the famous warrior and Buddhist monk, Wong-Gwang Popsa, in Kusil temple on Mount Unmun and asked that he give them lifetime commandments that men who could not embrace the secluded life of a Buddhist monk could follow. The commandments, based on Confucian and Buddhist principles, were divided into five rules;

1. loyalty to the king and country
2. obedience to one's parents
3. sincerity, trust and brotherhood among friends
4. never retreat in battle
5. selectivity and justice in the killing of living things

These principles were not taken lightly, as in the case of Kwi-San and Chu-Hang, who rescued their own commander, General Muun, when he was ambushed and fell from his horse during a battle in 603 AD. Attacking the enemy, these two Hwarang were heard to cry out to their followers, "Now is the time to follow the commandment to not retreat in battle!" After giving one of their horses to the general, they killed a great number of the pursuing enemy and finally, "bleeding from a thousand wounds," they both died.

The code of the Hwarang is similar to the more commonly known code of the Japanese samurai, Bushido. Being established during the 6th to 10th centuries, Hwarang-Do was considered more ancient and refined than Bushido. The practice of Bushido appears to have perpetuated a feudal system in Japan for over 700 years with continual provincial wars, whereas Silla and Koryo thrived under the influence of the Hwarang. Its influence led to a unified national spirit and ultimately the unification of the three kingdoms of Korea around 668 AD. The Korean dynasties, based on Hwarang ethics, remained internally peaceful and prosperous for over 1,500 years while defending themselves against a multitude of foreign invasions. This can be compared to the Roman Empire, which thrived for only 1,000 years. Oyama Masutatsu, a well-known authority on Karate in Japan, has even suggested that the Hwarang were the forerunners of the Japanese samurai.

## First recorded Hwarang hero

Sul Won-Nang was elected as the first Kuk-Son or head of the Hwarang order. However, the first recorded Hwarang hero was Sa Da-Ham. At the young age of 15, he raised his own 1,000-man army in support of Silla in its war against the neighbouring kingdom of Kara. He requested and was granted the honour of leading this force in support of the Silla army attacking the main fort of the Kara in 562 AD. As the first to breach the walls of the enemy fort, he was highly praised and rewarded by King Chin Hung for his bravery. He was offered 300 slaves and a large tract of land as a reward, but released the slaves and refused the land, stating that he did not wish to receive personal rewards for his deeds. He did agree to accept a small amount of fertile soil as a matter of courtesy to the King. However, when his best friend was killed in battle, Sa Da-Ham was inconsolable. As a youth, Sa Da-Ham and his friend had made pact-of-death should either of them ever die in battle. True to his promise, Sa Da-Ham starved himself to death, demonstrating his loyalty and adherence to the code of the Hwarang.

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Another dedicated Hwarang, Kwan Chang, became a Hwarang commander at the age of 16 and was the son of Kim Yu-Sin's Assistant General Kim Pumil. In 655 AD, he fought in the battle of Hwangsan against Paekche under General Kim Yu-Sin.

During this battle he dashed headlong into the enemy camp and killed many Paekche soldiers, but was finally captured. His high ranking battle crest indicated that he was the son of a general so he was taken before the Paekche general, Gae-Baek. Surprised by Kwan Chang's youthfulness when his helmet was removed, and thinking of his own young son, Gae-Baek decided that instead of executing him as was the custom with captured officers, he would return the young Hwa-rang to the Silla lines. Gae-Baek remarked, "Alas, how can we match the army of Silla! Even a young boy like this has such courage, not to speak of Silla's men." Kwan Chang went before his father and asked permission to be sent back into battle at the head of his men. After a day-long battle, Kwan Chang was again captured. After he had been disarmed, he broke free of his two guards, killing them with his hands and feet, and then attacked the Paekche general's second in command. With a flying reverse turning kick to the head of the commander, who sat eight feet high atop his horse, Kwan Chang killed him. After finally being subdued once more, he was again taken before the Paekche general. This time Gae-Baek said "I gave you your life once because of your youth, but now you return to take the life of my best field commander." He then had Kwan Chang executed and his body returned to the Silla lines. General Kim Pumil was proud that his son had died so bravely in the service of his king. He said to his men, "It seems as if my son's honour is alive. I am fortunate that he died for the King." He then rallied his army and went on to defeat the Paekche forces.

The spirit of the Hwarang was present in all of the kingdoms of Korea during this time, and although not as evident as in Silla, it was demonstrated by such great Korean historical figures as Yon-Gye, Ul-Ji, Moon-Duk, and Moon- Moo This spirit was kept alive throughout history by many individuals.

Hwarang and the martial arts fell out of favour during the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910) and adherence to the Hwarang code declined. However, several Koreans did keep the code, notably Admiral Yi Sun-Sin who was instrumental in defeating the Japanese invasions of Korea in 1592 and 1597. The spirit of the Hwarang and their code was kept in Buddhist temples by monks. For example, in the 16th century two monks, who followed the Hwarang code, rallied a Buddhist army that was instrumental in driving the Japanese invasion forces from Korea.

Stories of the Hwarang and their individual feats illustrate the code of the Hwarang, the type of ethics and morality essential to the evolution of the martial arts and the success Silla as a nation. This code has profoundly affected the Korean people and their culture throughout history. The lives and deeds of the Hwarang illustrate a level of courage, honour, wisdom, culture, compassion, and impeccable conduct that few men in history have demonstrated. The dedication and self-sacrifice of the Hwarang was clearly based on principles much stronger than ego and self interest. This basis was the Sesok-Ogye, the code of the Hwarang as set forth by the great Buddhist monk and scholar, Won Kang:

Be loyal to your king.  
Be obedient to your parents.  
Be honourable to your friends.  
Never retreat in battle.  
Make a just kill.