

A BRIEF HISTORY FROM ASIA TO AMERICA AND THE A-KATO

You'll find many accounts of the history of the martial arts in books, articles and on the web. Often they are biased in favor of the particular style of the author-- for example some Tae Kwon Do histories claim that their art is "over 2000 years old." Although Korea has a long history of martial practice, as do other Asian nations, TKD is actually a style created in the 1950s after the Korean War.

So, it is hard to piece together a truly accurate historical account because victorious societies and powerful organizations usually write their histories to put themselves in the best light. Still, we can try to present a simple picture of the development of the martial arts over the centuries.

CHINA

China is usually considered the birthplace of the martial arts. But again, records are rare and legends abound. The most popular story centers on an Indian Buddhist monk named Bodhidharma (Daruma in Japanese) who is said to have traveled to China around 525 AD and began teaching a system of physical and mental exercises at the Shaolin Monastery. Over the decades Kung Fu (a collective term for Chinese arts that is, interestingly, not used in China itself) developed into a refined but very diverse collection of styles. Traveling monks introduced their methods into other countries which further modified the arts into native systems.

JAPAN/OKINAWA

Okinawa is actually a group of islands off the coast of Japan. Karate was born here in the 17th century from the influence of those Chinese monks. The fighting arts were originally known simply as "Okinawa Te", or "hand" but soon they became known as "China-hand" or "kara-te." Some of the Okinawan schools added use of farm implements as weapons since the government had outlawed use of swords and knives. So the sai, nunchaku and bo became part of the Okinawan curriculum (today called "kobudo" or "old warrior way.")

Because Japan had occupied the islands for hundreds of years before finally annexing them in 1856, Karate had no doubt been taken to the Japanese mainland. However empty-hand and simple weapon fighting was considered lower-class by the highly trained samurai with their elaborate sword skills.

About 1916 an Okinawan Karate teacher named Gichin Funakoshi traveled to Japan to demonstrate his art. It is said that he is the one who changed the translation of kara-te to "empty hand" in order to make the art more acceptable to the Japanese. His school became known as Shotokan and Funakoshi is often credited as being the "father" of modern Karate. Today there are many styles of both Japanese and Okinawan Karate.

Generally the Okinawan styles are softer and more traditional in their approach and the Japanese schools are more sport-oriented. However the individual teachers have much to do with the school's emphasis, much like Karate in the United States.

KOREA

As we said, the roots of Tae Kwon Do reach far back into ancient history. 1300 years ago the Hwa Rang warriors (young soldiers often compared to the Japanese Samurai) developed an unarmed fighting art known as Subak and later, Taekyon. The fighting arts eventually became less popular and at one point were actually banned and survived only by being practiced in secret.

In 1910 Japan overran Korea and outlawed Korean customs and martial arts. Many Koreans left the country to try and find better conditions in China or even in Japan itself. They were exposed to other fighting arts such as Chinese Kung Fu and Japanese Ju-Jitsu and Karate. At the end of World War II Korea was liberated from the Japanese occupation by the USA and her Allies. Thousands came back home to openly practice both the traditional Korean systems and the other Asian styles. New martial arts schools sprang up.

In 1955 the leading masters met to try and unify the many schools under one name. Korean army general Choi Hong Hi suggested the name Tae Kwon Do (the "way of kicking and punching") and it was eventually accepted by many Korean teachers. Some schools refused however and continued to practice under their previous names—most notably Tang Soo Do (the "way of the China hand"—the Korean translation of the original name of Karate).

The late General Choi (pronounced chay) also made up the first Tae Kwon Do training patterns or hyungs (also known by the Japanese term, kata).

COMING TO THE USA

In 1946, Robert Trias, a returning American serviceman who had studied Karate in Okinawa started the first Karate class in the USA in Phoenix, Arizona.

In 1956, a South Korean named Jhoon Rhee arrived in Texas and introduced America to the Korean martial arts. He taught the aforementioned Tang Soo Do. But since no one in this country had ever heard of the Korean arts Mr. Rhee used the more popular name Karate. (This is one reason the Korean arts became known as "Korean Karate.") Mr. Rhee soon started using the term Tae Kwon Do and in 1962 moved to Washington D.C. where he still teaches and is recognized as the "Father of American Tae Kwon Do."

Rhee's first American black belt was a Texan named Allen R. Steen who built the Lone Star state into one of the first strongholds of Karate in the USA. Steen opened the first Karate school in Texas in 1962 in the Snider Village shopping center close to SMU in Dallas. Mr. Steen's reputation as a champion and instructor of champions in the '60s and '70s was rivaled only by California's Chuck Norris (whom Steen defeated to earn the 1966 International Karate Championships.)

THE AMERICANIZATION OF THE MARTIAL ARTS

Steen, Norris and the other pioneers of American Karate did what the Japanese and Koreans themselves had done only a few years before. They took bits and pieces of

different styles and molded them into a uniquely American system of martial art.

Not only were there different groups springing up in the USA in the 1960s and early '70s but in South Korea as well. General Choi's International TKD Federation (known as the ITF) was forced to leave South Korea by his political rivals. The World TKD Federation (WTF) replaced the ITF in South Korea and they devised a new set of training patterns to distinguish themselves from the old organization. Although the WTF is the group officially recognized by the South Korean government, many instructors in America do not belong to it. Through this government-sponsored organization Tae Kwon Do has been included as a permanent event in the 2000 Olympics.

To make Tae Kwon Do different from Karate, the South Korean/Olympic-style (often referred to as "kuki taekwondo" has de-emphasized hand techniques to feature kicks — especially head-high kicks. In fact punches to the head are not allowed in Olympic Tae Kwon Do. Most American stylists however, prefer a more balanced and realistic approach with a equal combination of hands and feet. In fact, American "open" tournament rules allow for hand and foot strikes to all target areas.

Americans often just call their approach "American Karate" whether they come from a Chinese, Okinawan, Japanese or Korean background. While it is confusing to have so many different kinds of Karate and Tae Kwon Do it does promote new ideas and philosophies as all of the martial arts continue to develop both in America as well as back in Asia.

THE AMERICAN KARATE AND TAE KWON DO ORGANIZATION

By 1976 Allen Steen had retired from teaching the martial arts and Keith Yates formed the Southwest Tae Kwon Do Association (after Mr. Steen's original organization which had been called the Southwest Karate Black Belt Assoc.). In 1996, on the twentieth anniversary of the STA, Mr. Yates changed the name of the association to the American Karate and Tae Kwon Do Organization because the group had grown to include several styles and schools in several states. See the styles and family tree page for a complete listing. Although Mr. Yates's system is American Nam Seo Kwan Tae Kwon Do (see below) not all A-KaTo students practice this style. But no matter the style, all A-KaTo schools maintain a traditional but eclectic approach to their martial practice. That means that while discipline and respect are paramount, an openness to new techniques and methods is also inherent.

-The American Nam Seo Kwan System

Like many traditional stylists, Keith D. Yates, one of Allen Steen's original black belts (see Mr. Yates' bio [here](#)) was concerned as TKD moved from a martial "art" to a martial "sport" during the 1980s. With the modern Olympic TKD movement the emphasis in some schools shifted from the traditions of self-defense and individual self-improvement to tournament strategy and a competitive sports mentality.

From Gichin Funakoshi and Jigoro Kano to Jhoon Rhee and Ed Parker, American and Asian masters have often created their own systems based on their own expertise. This is not a task to be taken lightly nor to be embarked upon by those with less than decades of experience.

After Mr. Steen had retired from teaching Mr. Yates sought out instruction from other sources. His training led to exposure to other organizations and



www.akato.org - the american karate and tae kwon do organization