

More Than Just a Dance Kuk Sool Won's Geom Mu Hyeong

By Daniel Middleton

Geommu, or 'sword dance,' is a popular folk dance in Korea, noted for its elegance and grace, colorful flowing costumes, and the use of twin kal (replica knives) in the hands of the performers as they dance and twirl to the sound of the janggo, a small hourglass-shaped drum. But its origins belie its graceful appearance, and the story on which geommu is based is one of intrigue and assassination, and the killing of a Baekje king.

Hwangchang was only 17 and a Hwarang, one of the Silla Dynasty's warrior elite. He was renowned for his skill with the twin swords, so much so that word of Hwangchang's prowess reached as far as the royal court at Baekje, a rival kingdom to the west. Hearing of his skill and anxious for a demonstration, the king invited Hwangchang to perform, an offer the boy readily accepted. He performed flawlessly, as expected, but Hwangchang had come for more than a demonstration and, choosing his moment carefully, the young Hwarang suddenly turned on the king without warning and killed him with the swords.

Hwangchang was seized immediately and executed, but in Silla the people were moved by the boy's daring, and showed their respect by creating a dance in imitation of Hwangchang's skill, their faces adorned with masks resembling the dead boy's face.

Over time, as will happen with folk traditions, the dance went through many changes, the masks were discarded and more martial aspects of the dance abandoned, and the swords replaced by blunted replicas by the kisaeng, female performers in the royal court, who had adopted the dance. Sometimes called Hwangchangmu in remembrance of the young boy's bravery, it is today more commonly known simply as geommu, or 'sword dance.'

Still performed today in festivals and exhibitions throughout Korea, geommu's popularity and historical roots led the South Korean government in 1967 to declare Jinju geommu (the sword dance performed in the Jinju region) as that country's

12th 'Important Intangible Cultural Property' (Jungyo Muhyeong Munhwajae).

But while the South Korean government preserved the story of Hwangchang in traditional dance, another organization worked to remember the more martial aspects of the story, preserving the technique itself.

Geom Mu Hyeong: Sword Dance Form

Represented by the World Kuk Sool Association™ (WKSA™), Kuk Sool Won is a traditional Korean martial arts system rich in that nation's martial history, containing within its syllabus traditional forms, weapons, and techniques important not only in self-defense, but in the preservation of the rich martial culture of the Korean nation.

One of these traditional forms is called Geom Mu Hyeong, or Sword Dance Form, a name reflecting a connection to the story of Hwangchang of Silla and to the traditional dance of the same name. But there the similarities end: Geom Mu Hyeong is not a dance, but a precise and intricate series of martial techniques, attack and defense providing its own link to Korea's past, times in which weapons were forbidden and training forced underground. The form itself represents fighting techniques based on the twin swords, and patterned after another form in the Kuk Sool curriculum, Danssang Geom Hyeong, performed with twin short swords.

DANSSANG GEOM: Twin Short Swords

One of the weapons unique to Kuk Sool is the danssang geom, or 'twin short swords.' Twin because the swords are always used in pairs, the danssang geom of Kuk Sool Won represent a type

of weapon and technique practiced in the Korean royal court, primarily by royal court and female bodyguards who favored the weapons because they were unobtrusive and easily concealed.

Often confused with the Chinese butterfly swords (húdié shuāng dāo) because of their physical similarities—they are used in pairs and the wide handguard designed both for striking and to protect the wielder's hand—in actual fact the Korean danssang geom are decidedly different in form and function. While the butterfly sword is classified as a dao, and so a single-edged weapon designed primarily for cutting and hacking, the dangeom (short sword) was often double-edged, like a dagger, and designed for stabbing as well as cutting.

An important traditional weapon, the twin short swords are represented in the Kuk Sool Won curriculum with both a dedicated form, Danssang Geom Hyeong, and by a two-person sparring set, long sword versus short swords, called Geom Daeryeon. Nevertheless, it is the empty hand Geom Mu Hyeong that will be examined here, not only as precursor and training aid for the twin short swords, but also as a highly effective stand-alone form for training and self-defense, containing as it does a number of unique empty hand techniques.

WHERE ARE THE SWORDS?

It's a question often asked by students when they are introduced to the form the first time, in class or in demonstration, and their confusion is certainly understandable. If the name of the form is sword dance form...then where are the swords?

Easy. The swords are in the mind of the practitioner, and while a bit of imagination is required when performing the empty hand set, Geom Mu Hyeong, the correspondences become obvious when seeing the same form alongside its 'sister

form' Danssang Geom Hyeong, often with point-for-point similarities from one form to the next.

The following are just a few examples. (Note: As the principal reference, the sword technique will be described first, followed by a comparison technique from the empty hand form.)

1. Rolling High Cover and Stab

From a neutral position with short swords crossed, the student steps in with a right high cover, blocking her opponent's sword near the guard and then immediately 'checking' it with her left sword [photo 1]. Holding the check in place, she finishes by stabbing in under the cut, at the same time sinking her weight to give the strike more stability and power [photo 2].



The empty hand application is fairly straightforward, in this case a defense against a punching attack. As her opponent punches, the student deflects the attack with a high rolling cover [photo 3], at the same time stepping quickly into a twisted stance and counterstriking with a palm strike (pyung su) to the solar plexus [photo # 4].



2. X-Cover, Twin Diagonal Cut
This next technique brings the blocking and cutting aspects of the twin dangeom into play, again against a downward sword cut. As her opponent steps in with the cut, the student steps up into a right crane stance (hagjase) and stops the sword near its base with a raised x-cover [photo 5]. The block is followed



immediately by raising the rear leg into a post stance [photo 6] and dropping immediately into a horse stance (gimal jase) to add weight and force to twin diagonal cuts across her attacker's chest and trunk [photo 7&8].

The empty hand application of this series is slightly different, pitting the student this time against three opponents, one in front and one to either side [photo 9]. Not waiting for her opponents to initiate the attack, the student raises her knee sharply into the man in front while simultaneously striking him in the neck and throat with crossed hands [photo 10], dropping down immediately into a horse stance and striking simultaneously to both sides, hitting the remaining attackers in the middle ribs (SP21, or taepo) with twin knife hand strikes (ssangsudo) [photo 11].



3. Diagonal Block Lower Quadrant, High Cover and Stab

In a horse stance (gimal jase) as her opponent steps in with a cut to the legs, the student cuts/blocks down diagonally with both swords held parallel, blocking the attack at two points of contact for added strength [photo 12]. As her opponent recovers and cuts straight down at the head, the student slides the left foot in, moving her body in close under the sword while executing a 'rolling high cover' similar to Technique 1 [photo 13]. She finishes with a straight stab with the right while continuing to cover her opponent's sword with the left [photo 14].

In the empty hand version, one possible application might be against a combination kicking and punching attack. Again beginning in a horse stance, the student executes a low strike to a pressure point in her opponent's kicking leg (SP6, or samumgyo) [photo 15]. As he recovers and steps in to punch, she deflects the strike with a rolling cover [photo 16] and finishes with a right middle knuckle strike (jungjigwan) to the solar plexus [photo 17].

MORE THAN A 'SWORD DANCE'

While probably inspired by the popular tradition of Hwangchang skill with the twin swords, Kuk Sool Won's Geom Mu Hyeong is much more than simply an empty hand 'copy' of a double sword form and contains many techniques unrelated to the swords: animal style techniques, such as mantis (samagwi) and tiger (horangi), specialized kicking, and even mimed techniques of the throwing knife (tugeom sul).



Disclaimer: Weapons training of any type can be dangerous and should only be practiced with proper instruction and under the supervision of qualified instructor. None of the techniques described in this article should be attempted without proper supervision.

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__Geom Mu Hyeong is the final form in the WKSA™ underbelt curriculum, a complex and demanding form, a form with roots in Korea's martial history and a young Hwarang whose dedication and skill left an enduring legacy on the culture and traditions of his people.

A fitting portal to black belt training. **T&D**

