

Kuk-gung

Traditional Korean Archery

By Gregory C. Brundage

During the summer of 2007 I found myself teaching English in a small elegant town nearby Korea's central military headquarters. Driving around, I saw a Kuk-gung range. I started training there and had the fortune to meet Master Byun Hyun-tae, a fourth-dan in this unique art and sport. Though I had done Kuk-gung for a couple of years, Master Byun refined my technique enormously.

Archery is an ancient tool for hunting and war. South Korea's traditional style of archery is called "Kuk-gung" which literally means "Korean national bow."

Kuk-gung is substantially different from Olympic style archery in many ways. For example, Olympic targets are a paltry seventy meters (about 230 feet) away, compared to Kuk-gung targets which are to be found at a whopping 145 meter distance (about 476 feet) from the shooters. At this time it is a thriving sport and passion for men and women of all ages. It is also rapidly growing as an international sport.

Bows

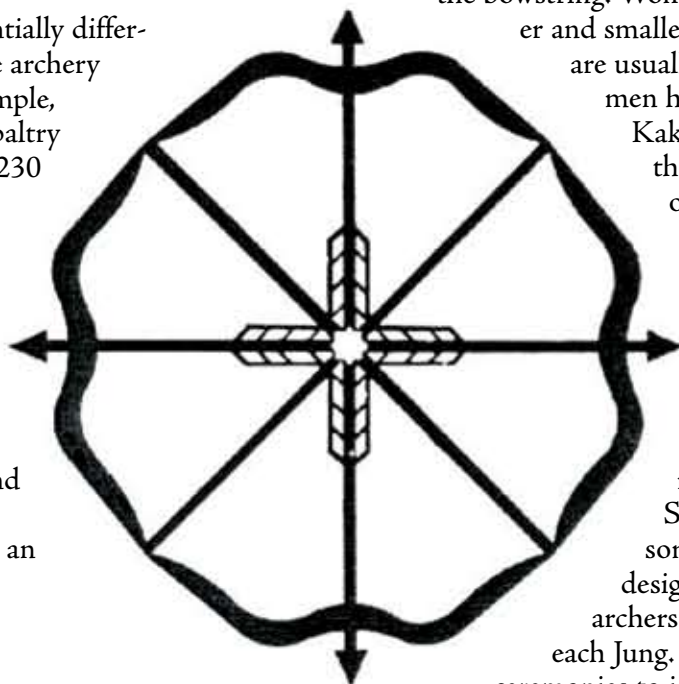
Traditional Korean bows are different from modern bows in that they are handmade from natural materials including bamboo, horn, sinew, black locust, birch bark, and oak. Modern bows for Kuk-gung are made from a variety of laminates.

Arrows

Traditionally these were made from bamboo and some Korean archers still use bamboo arrows with pheasant feathers, but most use carbon fiber arrows with plastic feathering.

The Thumb Ring

Korean Kuk-gung, like the Mongolian style of archery, uses a thumb ring or "Kakji" to pull back the bowstring. Women's Kakji tend to be lighter and smaller, while those used by men are usually longer and heavier. Some men however, use a women's Kakji, while some women use the male version. The choice of Kakji is very individualistic. The Kakji is a kind of trigger for Korean traditional archery.



The Jung

A "Jung" is a Kuk-gung range. Many of the Jung in South Korea truly are awesome in age and architectural design. Most Korean traditional archers believe there is a spirit in each Jung. A majority of Jung have ceremonies to initiate new members. This ritual usually includes bowing in front of the targets and pouring a little traditional rice wine or "Makoli," on the ground. Most people can feel the profound beauty and power in traditional Jung. Kuk-gung tradition is definitely one of the most

honorable descendants of the Korean race. Jung culture is a worthy topic for an entire book. Upon entering many of the more traditional Jung, members are expected to bow to the spirit of that Jung. Almost all Jung expect members to bow to the targets before the first shot. New Jung are opening around the U.S. at a surprising rate.

The Target

Kuk-gung targets are two meters (almost seven feet) wide and two and two-thirds meters (about nine feet) high. They usually have a microphone placed on the back with speakers set behind the archers to help them know when they hit the target. Few things are more satisfying than the "tock" sound of a solid hit on target!

Stance

The left foot points two or three-degrees to the right of the target, while the right foot is one-foot distance behind at a 90-degree angle. "Gi" ("chi" in Mandarin, "ki" in Japanese and sometimes transliterated in Korean) flows up from the earth through the soles of the feet. Simultaneously, gi flows down from the atmosphere through the top of the head. The ascending and descending gi flows meet at the "tan-chien" ("tan-tien" in Mandarin, "hara" in Japanese, or center of gravity, in English, about two inches below the navel). The legs, buttocks, hips, and upper body "lock" during the shooting process. Thus, the shooter is emerged in a universal flow of gi.

Grip



Most right-handed people hold the bow with the left hand. Middle, ring and little fingers wrap around the

front of the bow handle. The index finger is curled up on the front of the bow. The thumb wraps around the back of the bow. The arrow rests on the thumb during the shooting process.

Dominant Eye

Master Byun had a fascinating method of determining a person's dominant eye. Take a piece of paper and tear a hole in the middle. Hold it up in front of the new shooter's eyes and ask him or her to look at the bull's eye. Then, ask the shooter to close the left eye. Can he or she still see the bull's eye? If the answer is "yes" the shooter is right eye dominant. If no, the shooter is left eye dominant. "Things in nature come in pairs," Master Byun explained, "In each pair there is a dominant and a recessive. For shooting, you need to know your dominant eye."

Competition

During competition archers line up and take turns shooting. Usually 15 to 25 arrows are shot. The winner is determined by the sum of the hits. Tournaments are routinely held all over South Korea. The atmosphere is friendly and generally very informal. There is complete silence during shooting, so it's a good idea to turn off your cell phone during a tournament!

Ranks

The first goal for a novice Kuk-gung archer is hitting the target even once, not an easy task given the distance to the target. The next goal is to make a "molgi" or hitting the target five times in a row with no misses.

To earn a first-dan in Kuk-gung the archer must make 25 out of 45 shots; a second-dan requires hitting 28 shots, third-dan 29, and fourth-

Shooting Sequence

The shooting sequence must be part of a rhythmic, seemingly effortless cycle, timed to breathing. It takes years of practice to master this sequence.

dan requires hitting the target 30 out of 45 attempts. A ninth-dan requires a hit record of 39 out of 45 shots!

A dan rank is a very honorable ('Myong-ye-seu-rop-ke') title given by Korea's National Archery Association. In addition to the dan ranks, an expert archer can also be awarded a special title called, "Myong-gung."

Mind

In Kuk-gung, as with many East Asian martial arts, all is mind. The bow, arrow, target, and shooter are all of one mind. Meditation, relaxation and mind are all important. "Gi" or universal energy flows through the archer from the earth and the sky, out through the instrument of the bow and into the heart of the target.

Read the history of Kuk-gung and find additional sources of information on the art by visiting taekwondotimes.com and clicking on our bonus section! **TKD**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Gregory Brundage started Tae Kwon Do in 1969 and practices to this day. In 1973 he was Wisconsin State High School and State Junior Olympic Gold Medal winner in Judo. He also has a second-dan in Kempo-Goju Karate, practices Kendo, and loves mountain jogging, weight training, sea swimming and dancing. He's currently working as an English language lecturer at Konyang University in South Korea and also writes freelance articles about all styles of martial arts. He's traveled through and lived in 23 countries. He says he likes South Korea because it's clean, rich and peaceful, and the food is good.

