

The Fan

An International Symbol

By Master Guy Edward Larke



The fan...

According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* it is: "an instrument for producing a current of air. Also a device that is held in the hand and moved back and forth to cool a person and that is usually shaped like a segment of a circle and composed of material (as feathers or paper) mounted on thin rods or slats moving about a pivot so that the device may be closed compactly when not in use."

As a noun and a verb it is a part of our everyday language. Most of us don't even stop to think of its actual history or how many cultures share the same device.

Where did the fan actually originate? Likely it's one of those ideas that didn't start in one exact civilization. The interesting thing is how they became synonymous with being cultured or having some kind of power. They can be elegant, mysterious and captivating. However, in the Far East they became far more than a fashion statement.

In China, it had martial applications in systems such as *Taiji* and *Ba Gua*. It was called a *shanzi*. In Japan, the *tessen* was used in combat but also as a leader's symbol to lead his troops into battle. In the Japanese fighting arts *tessen-jutsu*, it is one of the most esoteric and rare weapon forms available. In neighboring Korea, the *bucchae* enjoyed its own unique history and symbolism. The practice of *bucchae-sul* is seen in various Korean arts, with *Kuk Sool Won* being the most obvious system.

Other countries throughout the globe all can lay claim (humble or not) to their own history of fan use and fan making. The one sad truth is like most other ancient crafts around the world, real fan making is dying. In Korean history it likely dates back well before the Three Kingdoms era and like most cultural art forms it evolved with time.

The pinnacle of fan design occurred during the Joseon dynasty. As women (especially





upper-class and nobility) had numerous accessories, men seemed badly off. The fan became a subtle, yet stylish symbol of class and position. It was even carried in the winter. Some were adorned with additions such as turtle shell, mother of pearl or tassels to show one's wealth. The fans when closed actually were not straight. They resembled a woman's figure. Many men had their fans buried with them as if they were akin to a concubine. They were too personal to be passed down. This is one of the many reasons there are few in existence in this day and age.

Another obvious reason for the decline of the traditional fan was the Japanese Occupation. They wanted to erase as much of Korea's identity as possible. The fan masters slowly disappeared.

As has been stated numerous times, Confucianism frowned upon men and women having close contact. After age seven, boys and girls were often separated (mostly upper class) so a fan was often used as a kind of shield from viewing one another. Also, for the artistically inclined, the paper could show a variety of designs and writing depicting the gentleman's character. Lastly, the fans could be used in a life or death situation, as swords were usually not worn except by the military.

After the Japanese Occupation came the Korean War and a long, hard period for the South Korean people. A young man, Ju-Won Uhm sought to be an apprentice under a fan master by the name of "Moon" to learn a trade, but also just to eat. Later, when South Korea began to flourish, the government designated Master Uhm as an Intangible Cultural Asset. His work became in extremely high demand. With great pride he began to train his son Jae-Soo in 1983. Master Uhm's dream of reviving all of the traditional styles of fans failed as his health grew progressively worse. Fortunately, his son (who inherited his father's title) managed to fulfill his father's dream. Now his fans can be seen in the offices and homes of important businesspeople, dignitaries and politicians all over the world, including President Obama.



The special fan you see on the first page is called a *hap-jook-sun* (two pieces of bamboo glued together with isinglass/ fish glue to make a fan). China just uses one piece. Each one is handmade by Master Uhm himself. As there are no two snowflakes alike, the same can be said for these cultural treasures. The fans Chief Master Ott is wielding are reinforced to withstand the demands of martial arts training and still retain their unique beauty. **TKD**

Anyone outside Korea interested in these works of art (and many other unique Korean martial arts items) can contact Chief Master Robert J. Ott via his website: www.certainvictory.com or me through e-mail. A video will be appearing on the *Taekwondo Times* website in the near future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Guy Edward Larke sabumnim has dedicated his life from a young age to the pursuit of the martial arts, Asian culture and hopology. It led him to Korea in 2000 and has lived there since. He lives in Seongnam city with his wife Gi-Ryung and son Alexander. He holds black belts in Taekwondo, Hapkido, Taekkyon, Bon Kuk Kumdo, Korean kickboxing, Karate-do, Wushu, Cheonji-muye-do, and Hosin-sul. Currently he teaches Taekwondo, Karate and Cheonji-muye-do full time in addition to writing for various magazines and running Kisa-Do Muye & Marketing. He can be contacted at kisa_do_muye@yahoo.ca.