

## ANTHROPOLOGY & HISTORY

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## Korean Wrestling (*Ssirŭm*): Historical Records and Transformation

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### Abstract

**Background.** Various wrestling activities have been practiced all around the world by most societies and cultures throughout the ages. In the Far East, Japanese *sumō* and Mongolian wrestling are well-known, but this article intends to investigate the origins and transformation of the lesser known wrestling culture of Korea. At least in terminology, most Korean researchers acknowledge Korean wrestling's ancient origins in Chinese wrestling activities, although possible Mongolian influence is for the greatest part neglected, perhaps for a lack of sources.

**Problem and aim.** Some form of wrestling activity was definitely already performed during the Koguryŏ period on the peninsula. During the Koryŏ period, wrestling seemed a popular pastime of the kings. However during the Chosŏn period, it seems that the Confucian elite increasingly thought of wrestling as a lower class activity, connected to violence and unruly behavior. Toward the end of the Chosŏn period, Korean wrestling transformed entirely into a folk game for commoners, performed outdoors most likely during festivities connected to harvest and seasonal changes.

**Method.** The methodology of this article is an extensive literature review of the primary Korean texts, secondary Korean sources, and a single available book in English.

**Results and conclusions.** Within the last century, Korean wrestling has evolved from a traditional 'folk game' to a more organized and systemized national 'folk sport,' and only officially designated by the name *ssirŭm* about a century ago.

**Note on Romanization:** The Romanization of words was conducted according to the McCune-Reischauer system for Korean, the Hepburn system for Japanese, and the Pinyin system for Chinese.

### Introduction

Various wrestling games have been practiced all around the world by most societies and cultures throughout the ages. Young boys naturally challenge each other physically, and striking and grappling are natural activities

for young boys, however, grappling seems more common because of less potential for injuries. Distinctive wrestling games have been developed in Africa, Europe the Middle East, and Asia. In ancient China, India, and Mesopotamia wrestling was already popular and widespread. The ancient Greek and Roman societies had very

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sophisticated and well-documented wrestling and boxing training methods and competitions. The ancient Greeks also featured *pankration*, which was a kind of prototype of the modern so-called mixed martial arts. The ethnic Turkish people, who have been occupying vast parts of Asia, from Mongolia to Turkey, developed, especially, a sophisticated wrestling culture over the centuries. Many of the wrestling games in different countries and regions often bear similarities throughout the ages. In many societies, wrestling games were frequently performed during festivities related to religious celebrations and seasonal changes. In addition, wrestling was also often a training activity for militaries to physically strengthen their warriors and soldiers [Poliakoff 1995; Lehmann 2020].

Among the Far Eastern wrestling styles, Japanese *sumō* and Mongolian wrestling (*bökh*) are probably best known around the world, and they are also rather well-documented in popular literature [for example, Katsuharu 2017; Joshua 2020]. This article, however, intends to investigate the origins and transformation of the lesser-known wrestling culture of Korea. In the distant past, Korean wrestling was referred to by a variety of names. However, the modern name, which has been in common use only for about a century, is *ssirüm*. A variety of studies on the topic have been conducted in Korean academia [for example, Hong, Chung 1992; Kim 2003; Kwak 2007; Min, Ok 2009; Na 2017];<sup>1</sup> however, given the lack of reliable information on *ssirüm* in the English language, this article aims to introduce the Korean wrestling tradition and culture to a broader international audience.

The South Korean martial arts community has been aggressive in its attempt to gain legitimacy and international recognition for a variety of different martial arts-related activities. The most famous among the Korean martial arts is taekwondo (*tægwōndo*), which was declared by the late President Park Chung Hee (Pak Chōng-hūi, 1917-1979) the nominal ‘national sport’ or ‘*kukki* (國技 ‘national’ taekwondo’ of South Korea in 1971 [Moenig, Kim 2017]. More recently, taekwondo was finally declared by the South Korean National Assembly the official ‘National Sport’ of South Korea, in 2018 [UNESCO]. The lesser-known Korean fight-like activity *tækkyōn*, which displays mostly the attributes of a folk game using mainly the legs to push, sweep, or through down the opponent, is another example of promoting so-called Korean martial arts internationally. Even nowadays, the Kukkiwon, the so-called World Taekwondo Headquarters claims that “Taekwondo can be considered closely related to Taekkyeon” [Song *et al.* 2022,

52], something the *tækkyōn* community rejects. Only the modern Korean martial arts community, first by taekwondo leaders and more recently also by the various *tækkyōn* associations, created the narrative that *tækkyōn* was an ancient Korean martial art. In reality, *tækkyōn*’s modern portrayal as an ‘ancient martial art’ appears mostly to be an ‘invention of tradition’ [Cho *et al.* 2012]. In fact, *tækkyōn* is often mentioned or portrayed along with *ssirüm* during folk festivities in the past, resembling folk games and not military or martial arts for battle. In the case of *ssirüm*, which is also considered a nominal South Korean ‘national sport,’ the historical narrative is less disputed or controversial than in the cases of taekwondo and *tækkyōn*.

Prior to *ssirüm*, *tækkyōn* was designated by UNESCO in 2011 as an Intangible World Cultural Heritage, becoming the ‘first martial art’ recognized in such a manner; thereby, the invented martial arts narrative gained legitimacy. The taekwondo community contemplated inclusion by UNESCO as an Intangible World Cultural Heritage as well, but seemed to have abandoned such an attempt, due to its controversial historical past. Contrary to official claims that taekwondo is an ancient Korean martial art, it is a well-documented fact that it originated primarily from Japanese karate [Kim 1990; Capener 1995; Madis 2003; Moenig 2015]. In any case, the Korean martial arts community and public long for recognition and seek legacy and international acknowledgment. This is the case for both South and North Korea. As a result, UNESCO was lobbied to include *ssirüm* in the “Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, on the basis of a joint application” by the appeal of both Koreas, the South and North, in 2018 [UNESCO n.d.; UNESCO 2018]. Consequently, more background knowledge of the heritage and origins of Korean wrestling needs to be produced and analyzed.

Initially, this article will analyze the possible origins of ancient Korean wrestling, followed by an investigation of more recent developments. The most important sources, such as ancient murals, paintings during the last centuries, and a great number of references in a variety of existing texts will be discussed. Subsequently, this study will describe the origins and transformation of modern Korean wrestling or *ssirüm* during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) into a modern folk sport. Moreover, this article will briefly discuss *ssirüm*’s present-day circumstances. Lastly, this study will examine Korean wrestling in relation to wrestling activities in other cultures.

## Material and methods

*Ancient mural paintings, illustrations, and references to Korean wrestling activities*

Presumably, wrestling was performed during the early days of Koguryō (37 BCE –668 CE). The earliest writ-

<sup>1</sup> Apart from a Korea Ssireum Association-sponsored publication [Sparks *et al.* 2014], no academic study about Korean wrestling has been produced in English. Even though the Korea Ssireum Association-sponsored publication appears fairly well-researched, it sometimes lacks a critical approach, since the book represents mainly a promotional work. Moreover, the book, which is not widely available, contains some faulty historical information.

ten reference to Korean wrestling comes from a Chinese source, the *History of the Later Han* (後漢書 *Huhansö*), which was composed by Fan Ye in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The text, accompanied by an illustration of wrestling-like grappling, describes a visit to the eastern Han by the king of the Buyö people, one of the assumed founding tribes of Korean culture. During the farewell ceremony, eunuchs played drums and the flute during a wrestling match. The fact that wrestling was mentioned and illustrated in the record proves the early existence and a certain cultural significance of wrestling to both people, the Chinese and Koreans [compare Sparks *et al.* 2014: 21-3; Chöng, Chi 2000].

A tomb mural from the Koguryö period (37 BCE–668 CE, supposedly established by a Buyö prince) located in present-day Ji'an City (集安縣), Jilin Province (吉林省), Northeast China, assumed to be built in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> century, portrays a painting showing two protagonists in fight-like grappling positions looked on by an old man possibly judging the match (see Figure 1). The location was the old capital city of the Koguryö dynasty [compare Min, Ok 2009; Sparks *et al.* 2014: 23].



**Figure 1.** Koguryö wrestling painting on the right-side wall of the Kakchö-chöng.

Source: Public domain image.

Initially, when anthropologists discovered the tomb in 1905, they interpreted another image in the tomb as dancing and named the burial site, “Dancers’ Tomb.” Later on, Korean martial arts researchers generally interpreted the “dancing image” as a striking activity assumed to be *subak* (手搏 ‘hand fighting’), which is the Korean transliteration of a term used for ancient Chinese boxing, *shoubo*. The activity portraying the grappling image was thought to be *kakchö* (角抵), a term which was used for ancient Chinese wrestling, pronounced *jiaodi* in Chinese [Moenig, Kim 2016: 36]. Nowadays, the North Koreans call the tomb, “SsirümTomb,” and in South Korea the tomb is referred to as “Kakchö-chöng” (角抵塚 “Wrestling Tomb”). The tomb proves both that some sort of wrestling activity was also performed during the Three Kingdoms period (57 BCE-668 CE) and that it had relative significance to the people.

Another tomb from this period believed to be built during the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century contains another wall painting depicting a wrestling image outdoors, surrounded by people doing acrobatics, playing music, dancing, and other activities [Sparks *et al.* 2014: 23].<sup>2</sup> This demonstrates that wrestling was an activity during public festivities already in ancient times in Korea. Just as the Kakchö-chöng, Tomb No. 1 (一號墳) is also located in the nowadays Jilin Province of China, Ji'an City, Huangbaiyan (黃柏鄉), in Changchuan village (長川村). Very similar mural paintings were also discovered in other parts of China, originating from the era of the Chinese Han (206 BCE–220 CE) and the Tang (618-907) periods (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Depiction of a Dunhuang (敦煌市) frescoes of Western China of the Tang Dynasty.

Source: Public domain image.

Assuming the activities portrayed in the Koguryö murals actually represented distinguished wrestling and striking activities, ancient Korean wrestling and striking methods probably originated or were likely very similar to ancient Chinese systems. However, as discussed earlier, there exists no clear proof that wrestling and striking were clearly distinct activities during that time, and some scholars asserted that *kakchö*, which they assume was interchangeable with the term *sangpak* or “hitting each other,” represented more of a kind of prototype of “mixed martial arts,” allowing both grappling and striking [An, Song 2011].

*Written references to Korean wrestling activities during the Koryö (918-1392) and Chosön (1392-1897) periods*

During the *Chosön* period a great range of wrestling terminology appeared in various sources, such as *kakchö* (角抵 “blocking horns” or “pushing and fighting against each other,” such as in a bull contest), *kangnyök* (角力 “fight for strength”), *kakhüi* (角戲 “playing horns”),

<sup>2</sup> Sparks *et al.* assume that both images are located in the same tomb. In fact, the images are located in different tombs.

'*kaki* (角抵 "blocking horns"), *kangnyök-hüi* (角力戲 "playing fight for strength"), *kakchö-hüi* 角抵戲 "playing run and fight each other"), *kakchi* (角支 "supporting horns"), *ch'iu-hüi* (蚩尤戲 Ch'iu represented a legendary Chinese person and the term was very common in China), *sangpak* (相撲 "hitting each other"; Japanese: *sumō*), and *chaenggyo* (爭交 "fighting"). Most of these terms are found in the *Koryösa*, the *Chosönwangjo Sillok* and the other sources which will be discussed in this section. The terminology is mostly based on ancient Chinese wrestling terminology.

Many of the names bear similarities using the prefix, *kak-* (角), which means "grasping the horns," and is a reference to horned animals, such as bulls, challenging each other's strength for physical dominance, as in bull fighting. Therefore, the term stands for quarrelling, fighting, wrestling, competition or "competing against each other" [Hong, Im 1992; Min, Gwang 2009]. Incidentally, the award for a winner has also been an ox in more recent *ssirüm* competitions of the early and mid-twentieth century. Moreover, the often used suffix, *-hüi* (戲), refers to "playing" or "competing."<sup>3</sup> The suffix was also used in connection with archery and horse riding. Therefore, it seems that wrestling was considered more of a competitive, game-like activity, challenging athletes' strength; it was almost certainly not perceived as martial art for battlefield application.

No wrestling artifacts, such as mural paintings, from the Koryö period have been discovered. Among the earliest dated written references in Korea to wrestling are in the *Koryösa* (高麗史 *History of Koryö*), composed by Chöng In-chi and Chöng Ch'ang-son, which describes the history of the Koryö period. However, the *Koryösa* was composed almost a century after the Koryö period, during the reign of King Sejong (r. 1418-1450) of the Chosön period, in 1451; therefore, the text's accuracy is uncertain and could be influenced by neo-Confucian bias toward physical, fight-like activities. The text refers five times to wrestling, using the Chinese grappling term, *kakchö-hüi* (角抵戲 "playing wrestling"). The term *kakchö* was already used during the Han dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) in connection with Chiyou (蚩尤), one of the legendary founding fathers of China, who wore horns on his body. Next to horse riding and archery, people competed for strength, performing *kakchö* during the Han period [King Sejong the Great Memorial Association 2001]. In contrast, the striking term, *subak*, is mentioned nine times in the *Koryösa*. Therefore, the striking activity was possibly as popular as wrestling at that time, assuming that these activities did not overlap or were essentially similar.

Most of the records about wrestling are found in the *Koryösa* in vol. 36, in the year 1343, during King Ch'un-

ghe's reign, which was toward the end of the Koryö period. Accordingly, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the king accompanied by his brave soldiers watched wrestling (*kakchö-hüi*) and at night the king got drunk at the North Palace and lied down. The second reference is from Mai, when Princess Sinmyo moved to Yöngyöng Palace, the king held a drinking party to comfort her, and they watched *kakchö-hüi* at night. The last reference is from November when the king went out to a pavilion on the main street to watch *kyökku* (擊毬 literally "striking," but also refers to a Polo-like game on horses) and *kakchö-hüi*, and the king gave countless sacks of textile to the brave soldiers. Another reference to wrestling in connection with King Ch'unghye is from 1330 and one more mentions King Kongmin. According to excerpts in the *Koryösa*, King Ch'unghye liked to have a good time and, especially, when feasting, enjoying watching wrestling.

In the *Chosönwangjo Sillok* (*Annals of the Chosön Dynasty*, 1392-1865) many references to wrestling exist, using a variety of wrestling terms, such as *kakchö*, *kakchö-hüi*, and *kangnyök*. For example, according to the record in the *Sejong Sillok* (*Annals of King Sejong*), vol. 4. [first year of King Sejong's reign, June 15], 1419, the king enjoyed himself and danced, and after the sunset, he watched *kakchö-hüi* on the riverside. In vol. 32 [eighth year of King Sejong's reign, April 2], 1426, two envoys climbed Mt. Mongmyök. They shot arrows and ordered the strongest warriors to wrestle. Another example, in vol. 60 [15<sup>th</sup> year of King Sejong's reign, Mai 14], 1433, the king watched his warriors performing a variety of martial arts-related activities, among them also *kangnyök*.

Sparks *et al.* [2014: 25- 26] assume that the role and importance of wrestling was diminished during the Koryö dynasty and the subsequent Chosön dynasty. As the reason, they cite that the prior non-Confucian cultures were more militaristic and wrestling was also associated with shamanistic and possibly Buddhist rituals, which the Confucian scholars despised. Confucian culture looked down upon violent activities; they were considered low-class and not appropriate for scholars. As evidence they cite some anecdotes in the *Koryösa* and the *Annals of the Chosön Dynasty*.<sup>4</sup> On the other

4 According to Sparks *et al.* [2014: 25], King Ch'unghye was "reprimanded for ignoring his royal duties in favor of practicing ssireum [actually, it was not called *ssirüm* at that time] with an errand boy inside the palace grounds," which is albeit a flawed translation. The actual content is as follows [*Koryösa*, vol. 36]: "In March, the king entrusted the important affairs of the country to the deputy chiefs, Paejeon (裴佺) and Chuchu (朱柱). Every day, the king was wrestling with the eunuchs, and the manners of upper and lower disappeared." See the original text in the *Annals of the Chosön Dynasty* [1430, vol. 50, 12<sup>th</sup> year of King Sejong's reign, December 17], the *Annals of King Myöngjong*, and the *Annals of King Hyöngjong* [see 1560, vol. 26, 15<sup>th</sup> year of King Myöngjong's reign, Mai 6].

3 In *Hanja*, the Sino-Korean character writing system, the character refers more to "playing," whereas in original Chinese, it refers to "fighting."

hand, this study infers that wrestling was still a popular pastime for the kings and soldiers alike during the late Koryŏ dynasty and early Chosŏn period. According to the records from these periods, many kings and their soldiers seemed to enjoy wrestling during festivities and gatherings, often along with alcohol and music. During the Koryŏ period, wrestling was not negatively portrayed at all and King Ch'unghye, especially, was very fond of it. It was only toward the end of the Chosŏn period that wrestling became exclusively a pastime of the lower classes, and it is not mentioned anymore in connection with the king and nobles. However, it is not apparent exactly when wrestling developed a negative image among the Confucian elites.

There are more existing references to wrestling in a variety of texts from the past centuries; for example, in the *Chaemulbo* (才物譜), a text, which was written by Yi Man-yŏng, in 1798. A passage mentions *kakchŏ* and *kangnyŏk* and describes the wrestling activities as originating from the Han dynasty. The text also mentions “*chaegyo* (梓校), *chilgyo* (迭校), and *hwan'gyo* (還校) [which] are *ssirŭm*-like wrestling arts,” based on Chinese style wrestling [as quoted in Cho *et al.* 2012: 349].

Another written source, which mentions wrestling, is the *Namwŏn'gosa*, a text compiled between 1864 and 1869, by an unnamed writer. The text [4:74 a, written in old *han'gŭl*, without any Chinese characters, the original book is owned by the French Oriental Language School] describes a dialogue between incarcerated commoners, who were arrested for brawling while drunk, employing *ssirŭm*. The text also refers to *t'aekkyŏn* [Cho *et al.* 2012: 352]. This text demonstrates that during the period of the late Chosŏn dynasty, wrestling became mostly an activity for the lower classes and the Confucian elite, the *yangban*, possibly tried to suppress it. The *yangban* looked down upon violent, physical activities and considered them as a corruption to the order of society. Despite this shift in sentiment, Korean wrestling remained very popular among the commoners and survived into the twentieth century.

The possible earliest Western reference to *ssirŭm* originates from the American anthropologist Steward Culin who wrote the book, *Korean Games with Notes on the Corresponding Games of China and Japan* [1895: 39] motivated by the Korean mission to the Columbian Exposition Fair, in 1893. In the text, Culin explains about “*ssi-reum-ha-ki*” (“*ssirŭm-hagi*” or “doing *ssirŭm*”), which he considered a traditional Korean folk game. Although having never been to Asia, Culin gathered the information for the book through interviews with Asian nationals living in the United States and his privately accumulated artifacts [Cho *et al.* 2012: 353-354]. Next to written references to Korean wrestling during the Chosŏn period, several paintings survived which allow speculation about the technical features of Korean wrestling at that time.

#### Existing wrestling paintings of the late Chosŏn period

When wrestling was passed over from the Koryŏ Dynasty to the Chosŏn Dynasty, wrestling became possibly more systemized over time, since the existing illustrations are very detailed and appear very similar to modern *ssirŭm*. The existence of the wrestling painting *Kangnyŏk-do* (角力圖 “*Kangnyŏk* painting”) in the *P'ungsokto hwachŏp* (風俗圖書帖 *Sketchbook of traditional cultural landscape paintings*), which is a painting compilation of different genres in book form, supports this theory (see Figure 3). The wrestling painting, which illustrates great technical detail, is sometimes also referred to as *Sangpak-do* (a term discussed before). The painter was Kim Hong-do (estimated 1745 – 1806), whose exact year of death is not known. Considering that Kim Hong-do was a famous artist of the late Chosŏn Dynasty, we can guess that wrestling was widely practiced among commoners during that time.



Figure 3. *Kangnyŏk-do*.

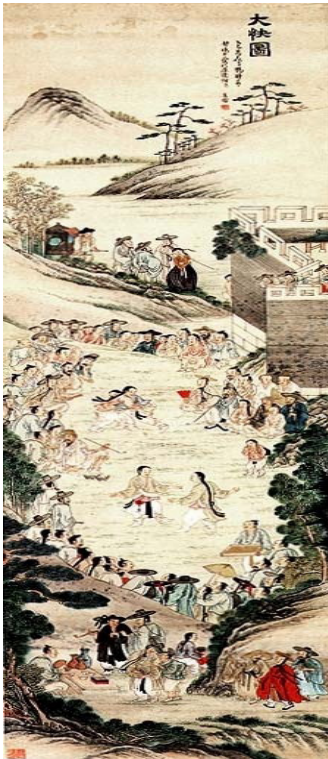
Source: Public domain image.

According to some sources [for example Cho *et al.* 2012: 346-348], Sin Yun-bok (1758-unknown), a famous painter during the end of the Chosŏn Dynasty, created the painting *Taek'wae-do* of 1785.<sup>5</sup> The depicted activities in the painting are generally interpreted as *ssirŭm* and *t'aekkyŏn* (see Figure 4). However, there is no inscription regarding the activities portrayed in the *Taek'wae-do*. Another less detailed painting of wrestling by Sin exists dated 1813, called *P'ungsokto byŏng* (“Folding screen of traditional paintings”).

A reproduction of the *Taek'wae-do*, painted by Yu Suk (1827-1873) in 1846, exists as well. The only difference in the painting by Yu Suk is that the inscription is on the opposite side of the painting, and he omitted

<sup>5</sup> However, it is also often disputed whether Sin Yun-bok actually created the painting.

the “sedan chair parade” in the upper center part [Cho *et al.* 2012: 351].



**Figure 4.** Taek'wae-do by Sin Yun-bok (1785), National Museum of Korea. [See Korea 100 2018]  
Source: public domain image.



**Figure 5.** Segment of Taek'wae-do by Sin Yun-bok (1785), wrestling illustration. National Museum of Korea.  
Source: public domain image.

Lastly, another very detailed wrestling painting was produced by Kim Chun'-gun at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (the exact year not known), called *Kisan p'ungsokto* (“Ki San’s [his pen name] traditional painting”; see image

at Songp'ungsuwöl 2014). In all these paintings, the athletes are clearly depicted wearing a *sat'pa*, a belt-like cloth around the hip and/or the thigh that the opponent grabs [Choi 2007]. In Figure 5, the *sat'pa* is clearly visible on the right athlete’s left leg thigh, which the opponent is grabbing. The *sat'pa* is still used in modern *ssirüm*; although in modern *ssirüm*, athletes wear only shorts. In comparison, throughout the Chōson dynasty, athletes wore their daily attire while wrestling [Choi 2007].

Throughout history and societies, wrestling games have been widely performed during public celebrations related to religious, ritualistic, and cultural events. In Korean culture, these events are related to performing ancestral rites and offerings, sometimes accompanied by playing folk games in connection with seasonable transformation in accordance with the Chinese lunar calendar. Various elements of shamanism, animism, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism are blended in these festivities. *Ssirüm* has been performed on important traditional holidays in Korean culture, such as Ch'usök (the Korean harvest festival), the Tano festival, which is a kind of spring festival at the end of the sowing season and a day of spiritual rights and festivities to pray for good harvest and to exorcise evil spirits (scheduled on the 5th day of the fifth month of the Korean lunar calendar), and a few more celestial days, all following the lunar calendar. Until the present, during all of these occasions, *ssirüm* competitions have been traditionally performed in public, as a form of entertainment for spectators. In modern times, they have been broadcast. The painting Taek'wae-do, especially, could portray such an occasion. Various spectators, commoners and *yangban* (Korean aristocrats) alike are enjoying the festivities and watching the games [Cho *et al.* 2012: 346-348]. Another common feature of the early illustrations and paintings is that wrestling was performed outdoors often in nature. Naturally, wrestling was a folk activity, probably only performed during festivities by commoners during the late Chōson dynasty, and without any designated or existing facilities. Koreans did not have any concept of modern, let alone professional, sports yet.

With the turn of the century and the Japanese colonial occupation (1910-1945), the Korean society was turned upside down. The Japanese brought suppression but also introduced wide-ranging modernization reforms. And traditional Korean folk wrestling was not spared from this shift, when wrestling transformed gradually into a modern competitive sport named *ssirüm*.

*The emergence of modern ssirüm and sporting competitions during the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945)*  
*Ssirüm* is the modern name for Korean wrestling, widely used only since the 1920s, but there exists no definite historical or linguistic evidence about the origins of the term. The term is a genuine Korean word, which is not written in Chinese characters but only in *Hangül*, the

indigenous Korean alphabet. There exist a variety of different theories about the origins of the word *ssirŭm*. The most plausible is that it comes from the verb "*ssirunda*," which is an Yŏngnam dialect and has the meaning of something like "to stand up and compare each other" [Min, Gwang 2009: 16]. The theory that the term *ssirŭm* originates from the verbs "*ssauda* 'to fight,' or *saruda* 'to repeat a vigorous motion,'" seems also a possible explanation [Sparks *et al.* 2014: 20].

During the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Christian missionaries were the first to introduce Western sports to Korea as a means of recruiting followers and converting to Christianity. Japanese colonialism was the second force in the modernization process of the physical education culture of Korea [Gwang 2007: 19]. Next to introducing kendo and judo to Korean police training, the military academy and sometime later, during the 1920s, to the curriculum of the general Korean school education, the Japanese introduced also a variety of Western sports and the concept of modern sports competitions [Moenig, Kim 2019]. In this atmosphere, claims that *ssirŭm* was not suppressed by the Japanese colonial administration, because of its similarity to Japanese *sumō* and its "non-threatening" character [Sparks *et al.* 2014: 29-30], are unfounded. Similar baseless assertions of suppression of Korean martial arts activities, such as *taekkyŏn* and other supposedly but actually non-existing forerunners of taekwondo, by the Japanese authorities have been widely made by the Korean martial arts community. In fact, the Japanese helped to introduce martial arts to Korea; first judo and kendo, then during the end of the colonial period karate, which transformed over the decades into modern taekwondo [Moenig 2015].

Prior to the Japanese occupation, student wrestling activities were recorded at governmental and private schools in Hansŏng (the old name of Seoul), in 1899. However, the first organized *ssirŭm* competitions were first held in 1912 in the Tansŏngsa theater organized by the Yugakkwŏn Club,<sup>6</sup> which was perhaps the earliest modern Korean sporting event. In 1915, another wrestling event was performed in the Kwangmudae Theater. The event was considered a great success. These competitions were held annually but did not represent real, modern sports competitions yet. Once several teachers returned to Korea after receiving modern physical education training in Japan, they started working as physical education teachers at high schools in Seoul in 1927. Only then did modern physical education training begin as did the modernization of *ssirŭm* [Min, Gwang 2009: 21; Han'guk minjok munhwa taebaek kwa sajŏn n.d.]. The Chosŏn Ssirŭm Association was formed in the same year, and the first National Chosŏn Wrestling Tournament

was held in Seoul, co-sponsored by the Korea Sports Association, which was the first nationwide, modern wrestling competition. In addition, the Chosŏn Ssirŭm Contest was sponsored by the Central Christian Youth Society and held annually from 1929. Moreover, the Chosŏn Shipbuilding Competition, sponsored by the Chosŏn Athletic Federation, was held from then until the organization was dissolved due to Japanese oppression [Min, Gwang 2009: 21].

However, during the early 1920s, the first football and baseball competitions were among the most popular sporting events with Korean audiences. In addition, the Japanese colonial government in Korea organized a multi-sport competition in 1925 for the first time, but did not become a national event until 1933, accordingly, named the *Chŏson Chŏyuk-hwe* (*Chŏson Sports Festival*), featuring football, baseball, athletics, marathon, and other events [Gwang 2007: 238]. *Ssirŭm* was first introduced to the event in 1929 and represented the only indigenous Korean sports activity among exclusively Western-based sports. This advance was remarkable, considering the Japanese martial arts, judo and kendo, were only introduced later to the sporting event, in 1935 [Han'guk minjok munhwa taebaek kwa sajŏn n.d.; Sparks *et al.* 2014: 30-31]<sup>7</sup>. The event was likely modeled after the 'Meiji Shrine Games' (明治神宮競技大会 *Meidjijingū Kyōgi Taikai*), held in Japan from 1924 to 1943. However, the Japanese event included a greater variety of sporting events than its Korean counterpart. Subsequently, the Korean sports festival was dissolved in 1938, and only reintroduced in 1948, after Korea's liberation. The event was reorganized into a competition event among cities and provinces and renamed, the *Chŏnguk Chŏyuk Taehoe* (全國體育大會 'National Sports Festival'). This event remains one of the most important sporting events in Korea today. Likewise, after the Japanese defeat in the Second World War, the Japanese event was reintroduced under a new name in 1946, now called *Kokumin Taiiku Taikai* (国民体育大会 National Sports Festival of Japan) [Japan Sports Association n.d.].

#### *Ssirŭm in present times*

The Chosŏn Sports Association, which was dissolved by the Japanese, was re-launched after Korea's liberation under the name the Korea Sports Association. In addition, the Chosŏn Ssirŭm Association joined the Korea Sports Association in 1946 and was consecutively renamed the Korea Ssirŭm Association in 1947. Moreover, the competition rules were overhauled, and wrestling became a demonstration event at the 28<sup>th</sup> National Sports Festival, in 1947, becoming a formal event the following year. There existed also regional differences in wrestling styles, as for example, depending on whether the *sat'pa* was worn on

6 The club's name was a combination of the first characters of the martial arts-related activities of *yu-do* (judo), *kak-ki* (wrestling), and *kwŏn-t'u* (boxing).

7 Sparks *et al.* claim that *ssirŭm* was added to the 10th National Sports Festival in 1923, which is certainly misinformation.

the right leg or the left leg [Han'guk minjok munhwa taebaek kwa sajön n.d.; Min, Ok 2009].

In traditional *ssirüm* competitions, no weight classes existed. However, after the Korean War (1950-1953), in 1955, *ssirüm* matches were divided into heavy class (over 71 kg) and light class (less than 71 kg) divisions. In 1967, the weight classes were further subdivided into five weight classes and the name of the weight classes was also revised. From 1968 to 1974, the weight classes were further readjusted [Min, Gwang 2009: 22].

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Korean economy grew exponentially, which also had a positive effect on professional sports. The first televised KBS (Korean Broadcasting System) Cup National Grand Championship, under co-sponsorship of KBS, turned out to be a great success. After several associations merged, a professional league was created, the Korea Folk *Ssirüm* Committee, and the Korea *Ssirüm* Association were established for amateurs in 1983 [Min, Gwang 2009].

*Ssirüm* also exists in North Korea, but with slightly different competition rules and terminology. Moreover, North Koreans use a variety of different terms for *ssirüm* [Hong, Chung 1993], and there exists some regional diversity in style as well [Shim 2018]. Sparks *et al.* [2014: 42, 93] also mention one of the most famous South Korean *ssirüm* wrestlers, Ra Yun-ch'ul, who “around the early 1950s...travelled to North Korea...[where he helped] standardization...and developing unified technical terminology.” This is a rather questionable portrayal, since nobody from South Korea just ‘travelled’ to North Korea, especially, during that time. Ra simply defected. In any case, detailed knowledge about North Korean *ssirüm* is limited, although both Koreas, the South and North, joined in an application to include *ssirüm* into the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, as discussed in the introduction.

Overall, nowadays, *ssirüm* is much less popular in South Korea than it used to be. Competitions are still broadcasted during holidays, such as Ch'usök, when the tournaments are traditionally performed. However, young Koreans seem to be less interested in *ssirüm*. Instead, a variety of modern combat sports, such as MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) and Brazilian jiu-jitsu, are flourishing. Moreover, tentatively, international *ssirüm* competitions, such as Asian and World Championships, have been introduced [Kang 2021], but *ssirüm* remains mainly a local, national Korean folk sport.<sup>8</sup>

*The relationship of ssirüm to wrestling styles of other cultures*  
The Chinese martial arts distinguished clearly between “grappling” and “striking” only from the 7<sup>th</sup> century on.

<sup>8</sup> Compare this with Spark *et al.* [2014: 71-73; 138-153], who portray the state of affairs of present-day *ssirüm* more positively, naturally, since the book is sponsored by the Korea *Ssirüm* Association.

Prior to this, there exists no written documentation, which would definitely prove this division [Moenig 2015: 15]. Even nowadays, for instance in Japanese *sumō* wrestling, grappling and striking in so-called wrestling styles are sometimes blended to some degree. *Sumō* (相撲) literally means “striking one another” and athletes can slap their opponents, although only with open hands and not with fists. Thus, it is not clear when Korean wrestling and striking activities became clearly distinct activities or if there was some possible overlap in the past.

Korean grappling and striking activities, at least in terms of terminology, were originally named after Chinese definitions, and early Japanese grappling terminology bears similarities as well [Henning 2000; An, Song 2011; Na 2017]. However, Korea did not have an indigenous alphabet before the 15<sup>th</sup> century but relied on the Chinese writing system. As a result, it is not clear whether Korean wrestling was actually based technically on Chinese wrestling styles or if they merely used Sino-Korean terminology for lack of a writing system [Sparks *et al.* 2014: 20]. Mongolian influence on Korean wrestling is also likely, because of the regional proximity of both nations and the great ethnic, cultural, and linguistic similarities between the people of Mongolia and Korea. Moreover, invasions by the Khitan people, a Para-Mongolic nomadic tribe, in 1216, were followed by a progression of invasions by the Mongolian Empire (1231-1259), which resulted in a vassal state status of the Koryō Kingdom (918-1392) at that time. Overall, the Koryō Kingdom was dominated by the Mongolians from 1270 to 1356 [Henthorn 1963]. Moreover, modern Korean *ssirüm* bears also some resemblance to Mongolian wrestling, as both wrestling styles share wider similarities with the various wrestling games performed by the broader ethnical Turkish tribes and people, who are spread out from Mongolia to Central Asia into Europe. In general, these cultures, as part of the Ural-Altaic language family, share linguistic, cultural, as well as ethnic similarities, and an affinity for wrestling is part of these shared traditions.

In a variety of ancient cultures, such as Egypt, Greece, Iran, and India, some form of “belt wrestling” existed [Na 2017], which *ssirüm*, using the *sat'pa*, is part of. In China exists a very similar style of wrestling among the “Korean-Chinese and the Hui people,” which is an East Asian ethno-religious group mainly composed of Chinese-speakers with an Islamic background, using a thigh band during wrestling as well. In comparison, the basic posture of athletes during wrestling is more upright among the Han Chinese and Mongolian wrestling styles compared to the styles of the Korean-Chinese, and the Hui people, who are using a much deeper saddle stance due to the use of the thigh band [Lee, Kim 2016]. However, there are often many regional differences in all these countries and cultures, as for example, South Mongolian wrestling borrowed heavily from Turkish styles using



leather jackets [Joshua 2020], although no olive oil is poured over athletes as it is customary among the Turks to make it harder to grab the opponent. In any case, all forms of belt wrestling, as in modern *ssirŭm* and Japanese *sumō*, follow ancient traditions and belt wrestling is widespread among many cultures and regions around the world [Black, Green 1992: 187].

Regarding competition rules, victory in modern *ssirŭm* is accomplished by any part of the body above the knee of the opponent touching the ground, which is in principle also similar to Mongolian styles and Japanese *sumō* competition rules [Sparks *et al.* 2014: 116; Joshua 2020; “The Rules of Sumo” n.d.]. Earlier Korean wrestling rules had likely some similarities to modern rules, but fine points likely also often changed over the centuries and regions. In general, competition rules in modern sports are precise and emphasize the safety of athletes, which were likely not central focuses of past folk wrestling.

As to the venue, Korean wrestling was performed outdoors in nature in the past, as was with so many wrestling styles in Mongolia and Turkey. Nowadays, modern *ssirŭm* competitions are performed in stadiums and the matches are held in elevated “sand pits” (*morae-p’an*), slightly different from *sumō* rings which consist of elevated blocks of clay, although both competition areas are basically similar in shape and size [Sparks *et al.* 2014: 113; Korea Ssireum Association n.d.; “The Rules of Sumo” n.d.]. Moreover, the blue and red belts worn by the opposing athletes to distinguish them during *ssirŭm* matches are similar to colors used, as for instance, in taekwondo. This color arrangement was likely adopted from the Japanese martial arts, as the same colors have been used in judo and certain karate styles for a long time. Rituals, such as sprinkling salt around the competition area before matches in order to “purify themselves and their space” [“Wrestling” 2021], are shared traditions in *ssirŭm* as well as *sumō*. In Japanese *sumō*, the ritual originates from religious Shintō beliefs and in *ssirŭm* from shamanistic traditions. In any case, modern *ssirŭm* did not develop in a vacuum. Overall, modern *ssirŭm* shares similarities and traditions with the wider central Asian, Chinese, and Japanese wrestling cultures but also developed distinct Korean rituals and customs.

## Results

Unlike other Korean martial arts or fight-like activities, such as taekwondo and *taekkyōn*, at least the recent history of Korean wrestling is relatively well-documented and generally presented with less nationalistic and chauvinistic biases. Most authors acknowledge ancient origins in Chinese wrestling activities, at least in name, although possible Mongolian influence is for the great part neglected, perhaps due to a lack of sources. It

is highly likely that some form of wrestling activity was already performed during the Koguryō and Koryō periods. During the Chosŏn period, the Confucian elite increasingly thought of wrestling as a low-class activity, associated with violence and perhaps shamanistic and Buddhist traditions, rejected by neo-Confucianism. However, wrestling was still popular among many kings as a pastime activity and as entertainment during gatherings and festivities. Moreover, the military seemed to value wrestling as a method of physical strength training for soldiers.

The rules and techniques of the Korean wrestling style or styles likely transformed and progressed over the centuries. A thigh band is not visible in the ancient Korean mural paintings; therefore, it is not clear when some form of belt wrestling was introduced or adopted to Korean wrestling. The thigh band is only visible during the late Chosŏn period in various paintings. Moreover, apart from ancient Chinese wrestling terminology, the exact relationship of Korean wrestling to Chinese and Mongolian styles and its possible origins or influences is not established.

More recent historical references and sources confirm that Korean wrestling transformed increasingly into a folk game for commoners during the end of the Chosŏn period. During the late Chosŏn period, more detailed paintings of Korean wrestling activities appeared. These paintings reflect great technical similarities with modern *ssirŭm*, at least in posture, although wrestling was not a modern sport yet but still a folk game performed outdoors by commoners likely during festivities connected to harvest and seasonable changes. Modern Korean wrestling or *ssirŭm* bears some similarities with the various wrestling games or sports of China, Japan, and Mongolia, but developed also a distinctive Korean cultural character.

Most authors describe *ssirŭm* as a ‘folk game’ and/or a ‘national sport’ [see for example, Kwak 2007: 2], but many authors describe ancient Korean wrestling in the periods before the Chosŏn dynasty as a ‘martial art’ [Hong, Chung, Lim 1992; Hong, Chung 1993; An, Song 2011]. Indeed, in ancient times, various wrestling activities, including Korean wrestling, were often training activities for soldiers and warriors to improve their physical strength, which, however, does not necessarily qualify these activities as “martial arts.” Western wrestling activities are usually simply portrayed as “sports” or sometimes “combat sports.” In fact, classifications, such as “martial arts” and “sports,” are often relative definitions, varying widely among authors. However, one could argue, if the term “martial arts” implies practical application for battlefield use, which most unarmed fighting methods fall far short of [Moenig 2015: 191-192], wrestling, then, certainly does not fall into this category. It appears the fictional narrative of unarmed Asian fighting methods used in real battles in the past is merely a

modern invention of the Hong Kong and Hollywood film industries. This study rejects the notion of associating *ssirüm* with martial arts, rather, it suggests that Korean wrestling transformed from a traditional “folk game” to a more organized, and systemized national “folk sport,” only officially designated with the name *ssirüm* about a century ago. Moreover, from an actual historical point of view, *ssirüm* is much more representative of a legitimate national sport of Korea than taekwondo, which features a fictional historical narrative.

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## Koreańskie zapasy (Ssirŭm): Zapisy historyczne i transformacja

**Słowa kluczowe:** koreańskie zapasy, *ssirŭm*, koreańskie sztuki walki, koreańskie gry ludowe, nominalny sport narodowy Korei

### Streszczenie

Tłó. Różne aktywności zapaśnicze były praktykowane na całym świecie przez większość społeczeństw i kultur na przestrzeni wieków. Na Dalekim Wschodzie japońskie sumō i mongolskie zapasy są dobrze znane, natomiast niniejszy artykuł ma na celu zbadanie początków i transformacji mniej znanej kultury zapaśniczej Korei. Jeśli chodzi o terminologię, większość koreańskich badaczy znajduje starożytne początki koreańskich zapasów w chińskich działaniach zapaśniczych, chociaż możliwe wpływy mongolskie są w większości pomijane, być może z powodu braku źródeł.

Problem i cel. Z pewnością jakaś forma aktywności zapaśniczej istniała na półwyspie w okresie Koguryŏ, a zapasy wydawały się popularną rozrywką królów. Jednak w okresie Chosŏn wydaje się, że konfucjańska elita coraz częściej uważała zapasy za rodzaj aktywności niższej klasy, związanej z przemocą i niesfornym zachowaniem. Pod koniec okresu Chosŏn koreańskie zapasy przekształciły się całkowicie w grę ludową dla zwykłych ludzi, wykonywaną na świeżym powietrzu, prawdopodobnie podczas uroczystości związanych ze zbiorami i zmianami pór roku. Metoda. Metodologia tego artykułu to obszerny przegląd literatury pierwotnych tekstów koreańskich, wtórnych źródeł koreańskich i jednej dostępnej książki w języku angielskim. Wyniki i wnioski. Zaledwie w ubiegłym wieku koreańskie zapasy ewoluowały od tradycyjnej gry ludowej do bardziej zorganizowanego i usystematyzowanego narodowego sportu ludowego, oficjalnie nazwanego *ssirŭm* około sto lat temu.