

**Female Influences in Martial Arts**  
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This paper is an attempt to describe some of the historical contributions that women have made in martial arts. I have always wondered if martial arts were only created by a male society, or did women also have an impact? What would martial arts look like without the female influence? Would it look different at all? Although the information is not easy to find, I was able to locate instances where women played a major role in the creation and continuance of these art forms. This paper highlights a few of the contributions women have made.

## Wing Chun

Wing Chun, the martial art made popular by Ip Man, Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee, is said to have been created by a woman. Although specific details of the history are conflicting, most people do agree that Wing Chun was created by Ng Mui around the 17th century.



We don't know a lot about Ng Mui, but we do know that she was born to an imperial family in China during the Ming Dynasty. According to history, it was Ng Mui's father that began her training in martial arts. One detail that we have about her training explains that she would use upturned logs to balance on while she practiced.

Instead of marrying and committing to a life of carrying for her husband and children, Ng Mui chose to join a convent and continue her studies in martial arts. Ng Mui joined the convent at the Shaolin Temple located in the north eastern part of China. This temple is famous still today for the monks' skills in martial arts. It was here that Ng Mui continued her studies in martial arts and attained the rank of abyss.

The temple had attained great wealth and was attacked many times during its existence. Around 1723 the Shaolin Temple was destroyed by the Qing army. It is said that Ng Mui was one of the famous 5 elders that escaped destruction of the temple.

It was after the destruction of the temple, that Ng Mui created Wing Chun. She wanted a style that could be taught quickly, that did not rely on a person's strength, but more on their speed and efficient use of personal space. It seems like she wanted to create a style that would highlight the abilities of a woman instead of a man.

It is said that Ng Mui was walking through the woods when she came across a crane and a snake fighting. She observed how the crane used its wings to deflect the snake while simultaneously using its beak to attack. It was from this image that Ng Mui founded the core concepts of Wing Chun:

- The shortest and fastest distance between two points is a straight line.
- The essentialness of control and striking along the centerline (the plane between the center of one's body and that of an opponent's).

- Executing 2-3 techniques simultaneously rather than one. Receiving what arrives, following what retreats, and striking when open.

The first student to whom Ng Mui taught this new style was a young woman, named Yim Wing Chung. This young lady was being terrorized by a local warlord who wanted to marry her. Ng Mui taught Yim Wing Chung her new style. Since the style focused on deflection and multiple moves at once, instead of size and strength; Yim Wing Chung defeated the local warlord. She was able to marry the man whom she loved, Leung Bok Chow. Yim Wing Chung taught her new husband the style of martial arts that she used to defeat the warlord. Leung Bok Chow named it after his wife and began teaching others.

Ng Mui is also credited with the creation of other forms of martial arts. Those styles include: Ng Mui Style, Dragon Style, White Crane Style and Five Pattern Style. Her contribution to martial arts is significant and her legacy lives on through those that still practice her styles.

## **Naginata**

In 11th century Japan, a weapon appeared that was specifically made for women. This weapon had a specific purpose -to defeat male warriors. This weapon, the naginata, consists of a wooden pole that is 3-4 feet long and holds a long blade at the end. The blade can be anywhere from 1-3 feet long.

This weapon was used by women who needed to defend themselves when their Samurai husbands were off at war. Since the wooden pole is so long, it was very effective in defense against an enemy from a distance. It was also used to cut the legs of a horse while the warrior was riding on top. The naginata is no longer needed to defend against Japanese warriors, but it has evolved into a female martial art.

One of the most prominent martial arts that uses the naginata is Tendō-ryū. This Japanese martial art was founded in 1582 by Saito Hangan Denkibo Katsuhide, and uses the naginata as one of its principal weapons. (Women Warriors of Japan, <https://www.koryu.com/library/wwj1.html> )



Here we can see a Tendō-ryū school in the early 1900's, led by Headmistress Mitamura Takeko. Her and her husband, Mitamura Kengyo, were leaders of this art in Japan. This martial art continues today, with male and female students.

As we can see from these 2 images taken about 100 years apart, the weapon has not really changed. The uniform still consists of long flowing pants and a tighter fitting shirt.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yx1DloLGSXE>



## Kim Su Hi

One historically interesting video shows students of Grandmaster Hwang Kee practicing in Korea in the late 1950s or early 1960s. The video is grainy and much of it is difficult to see. However, for students of Moo Duk Kwan Tang Soo Do, forms and techniques can be easily recognized.

If you pay close attention, there is a woman among the men in the video. She is just as strong and just as talented as the men in the video. I would love to know her story. How did a Korean woman end up as an expert in a Moo Duk Kwan video? What was her role under Grandmaster Hwang Kee? The only information that I know about her is her name, Kim Su Hi, the text is fading away, but written on the video footage.

Kim Su Hi can be seen at minutes 18 and 22:50 on the CMK Vintage Tang Soo Do video.

<https://youtu.be/T5DOGKO4qvo?t=1076>

<https://youtu.be/T5DOGKO4qvo?t=1363>



Would martial arts be the same today without the female influence? Of course they would not be the same. Without the female influence, some styles of martial arts would either not exist, or look a lot different from how they work now. Wing Chun may

never have been invented. If women did not need the naginata to defend their families, perhaps Tendō-ryū would be absent from the list of martial arts. We also have to remember the women that forged the way for modern martial artists: Kim Su Hi, Headmistress Mitamura Takeko and Ng Mui.

In my research about the female influence in martial arts, I discovered that much of the information is either myth, or cannot be backed up with evidence. The story of Ng Mui has a few different time periods when it could have happened, and a few different details to the story. Most accounts do agree that Wing Chun was created by a woman. There are other stories that tell of strong female warriors and Samurais, but those are few and far between. I have found that the history of martial arts is based on the male influence, with some female contributions intertwined.

In more recent times, women have become a stable influence in martial arts. The highest ranked woman in Taekwondo holds the rank of 9th Dan, Grand Master Myong Sok Namkung-Mayes. There are several actresses that portray masters of martial arts in film. Michelle Yeoh portrays a formidable fighter in Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon. There are also many fierce female martial art actresses in Kill Bill: such as Uma Thurman and Vivica A Fox. Even though these women are not formally trained martial artists, their roles support the idea that women can be formidable fighters in the world of martial arts.

Today, more women seem to be taking their place among martial artists. When our school has testing, I see almost as many females as I do males. It seems that the female influence is present, if not immense. Today, we can see more female martial artists practicing beside males. As more women study martial arts and raise their girls as strong young women, I hope that the upward trend of female participation continues.

### Works Cited

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For citations of videos, please refer to links embedded in paper.