

# KOREA'S LIVING LEGEND:



## **Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan's Great Grand Master HWANG KEE**

**By Bob Liedke**

***Grandmaster Hwang Kee was recently in the United States to attend a National Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan Federation event. He graciously consented to this rare informal interview in which he speaks of past, present and future goals of Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan.***

The founder of Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan, the great Grandmaster Hwang Kee, first became interested in the fighting arts in his early childhood. By the time he was 15-years-old, he had become a master of Soo bahk do, a crude but effective native fighting art. At 22 years of age, he mastered Tae Kyun (another Korean fighting system unrelated to Tae Kwon Do). It was during this period, 1909-1945, that the Japanese invasion forces occupied Korea. In an attempt to control the population, the resident general of the Japanese forces forbid the practice of Korean martial arts and imprisoned all who defied the ban. Although Hwang Kee continued to train secretly in his art, he soon attracted the attention of the Japanese secret police. Packing his few belongings, he set out on foot for Manchuria.

Arriving in Manchuria, he found scenes of lawlessness and destruction everywhere. While in Manchuria, he journeyed into the hills and camped for several days with a group of bandits who had also fled Korea when the Japanese forces arrived. It was during this period that the Chinese revolution was in full bloom. Mao Tse-tung and General Chaing Kai-shek were fighting for control of China. The Grandmaster recalls that a lot of Manchuria was still under the occupation of the Japanese. The southern wall of the Great Wall of China was heavily guarded by Chinese soldiers and

the whole society was very unstable. After having spent several days with the bandits, Hwang Kee decided to leave Manchuria and travel to China where he would live the next 20 years studying the Chinese martial arts.

In 1945, Korea was liberated and the fighting arts of the country again became popular. Having founded Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan, the Grandmaster then set out to spread his unique martial art.

Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan (a brotherhood and school of stopping inner and outer conflict, and developing virtue, according to the way of the worthy hand) is both a hard and soft system. Its hardness comes in part from Soo bahk; the soft movements from the Northern Chinese systems. It is a classical martial art, and its purpose is to develop every aspect of the self in order to create a mature personality who has totally integrated his or her body, emotions, intellect and spirit. This total integration helps to develop a person who can deal with the outside world in a mature, intelligent, forthright and virtuous manner.

Over the past 20 years, thousands of Americans have studied Tang Soo Do in Korea. Korean instructors have been sent worldwide to teach the art of Tang Soo Do. There are now major Tang Soo Do organizations in more than 16 countries, and of the 200,000 students worldwide, 20,000 are dan holders.

One of the oldest surviving martial artists, the 75-year-old Hwang Kee has become a living icon to his many followers. Radiating humility and inner peace, this descendent of ancient Korean and Chinese martial art forms, has molded a powerful nation of Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan practitioners to promote his ideals of mind, body and spirit harmony.



**Above:** New England and Minnesota Form Teams with the Grandmaster and Minnesota coach Larry Seiberlich and Connecticut coach Charles Ferraro. **Below Right:** The Grandmaster with his loyal followers.

**Bob Liedke:** How did you first become interested in martial arts?

**Hwang Kee:** When I was about seven or eight years old, I witnessed a group of hoodlums roughing up a shopkeeper at a local bazaar. They were forcing the shop owners to give them some kind of tribute or they would beat them up. Although I didn't respect what they were doing, the martial art techniques they used attracted me.

**BL:** Why did you leave your homeland and live in China for 20 years?

**HK:** Basically, I went to China because of the Japanese occupation of Korea. I didn't have the freedom that I needed. I had to train secretly in my art because Korean martial arts training was banned by the resident general who was in charge of the Japanese forces



**Richard Kopf of Oxford, CT, receiving a Perpetual Trophy from Grandmaster Hwang Kee for the Team Form event.**

**HK:** I climbed the wall at night. I was in excellent physical condition at the time and there were parts of the Great Wall that were lower than others. I ran up the side of the wall two or three steps and then grabbed at the top. Once on top, I distracted the soldiers guarding the other side by throwing rocks away from where I climbed down.

**BL:** What was life in China like at that time?

**HK:** Once you were outside of the cities, law and order as we know it didn't exist. Crime and drugs like opium were everywhere.

Training in the martial arts was still going on, but the teachers would only train a few students that they trusted.

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After I had made my way into China, I was introduced to the Yang family. Master Yang taught me the Northern Yang style kung fu (Nei-ga-ryu) which is stronger and more passive than the Southern style and can be used defensively in close quarters. The Southern style (Wei-ga-ryu) is faster and more active and can be used in a more open environment. You seldom heard the term "Kung Fu" used at all. The general term for martial arts was "Wushu" in Chinese and "Kuk Soo" in Korea. Both terms mean "national art." Although I trained with various Chinese masters during the 20 years that I lived in China, I received most of my training



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from Master Yang.

**BL: How did you begin teaching the Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan system?**

HK: I was working for the Korean Ministry of Transportation after the second world war ended in 1945. I started teaching several of my co-workers at the Ministry. Then the Korea war began. Due to the situation at the time of the war, martial art study was not active; most students lost contact.

I began teaching again in Pusan, Korea, because it was the only city that wasn't occupied by the communists. I found a small place to train through the Ministry of Transportation, and I recruited five new students.

**BL: Why did Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan grow so quickly?**

HK: The system grew rapidly because of the important contacts that I made between the Chinese, Korea and Japanese martial arts during the International event that I sponsored after the war. Also my contacts with the United Nations military spread the art to other countries worldwide. And, of course, U.S. servicemen stationed at Osan Air Force Base in Korea also took the art home.

**BL: I understand that the Korean government offered you the Presidency of the Taekwondo Association...**

HK: I didn't believe that the government really wanted to offer me that. I know that now. It was just a political move on their part. At

**"They had a lot of political power and they tried to destroy the Moo Duk Kwan. The president of the Taekwondo Association isn't even a martial artist. He's a politician."**

that time, my Moo Duk Kwan was the largest organization of its kind in Korea. No other style was as big. They wanted others to believe that they offered it to me, but they really didn't want me to have it. They said that I denied the Presidency of the Taekwondo Association and that I was very hard to work with. Again, just a political move. There was a lot of political moving around between the government and the military at that time. They had a lot of political power and they tried to destroy the Moo Duk Kwan. The present president of the Taekwondo Association isn't even a martial artist. He's a politician.

**BL: What do you feel is your greatest contribution to the martial arts?**

HK: First, organizing my art. Second, developing the system of postures and techniques so that an individual could adapt to them and; third, to develop personal character in the individual. Those are the basics. I have always emphasized a strong foundation in my followers. So I am never hesitant to give them what they need. I try to be available for them and to set an example for them.

Also, I sponsored the first International Goodwill event in Seoul, Korea, in 1955. It was held in the Citizen's Hall. It was a very meaningful event for me. Chinese, Korean and Japanese martial artists demonstrated their arts to the public. I feel it was one of my most important accomplishments on an international level. I continued to meet with both China and Japan to sponsor similar gatherings to promote goodwill through the martial arts.

**BL: In your opinion, what is the most important characteristic a martial artist should possess?**

HK: First, they must understand the Do. There has to be a balance in each individual concerning conscientiousness, good judgement and a strong will. In the Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan system, it is necessary to study *Neh Gung* (internal power), *Weh Gung* (external power) and *Shim Gung* (spiritual power). The three have to come together (in order) to be a good martial artist.

**BL: While Tang Soo Do is a punching and kicking art, it does have soft movements that resemble Jujitsu or Aikido. How did this come about?**

HK: The actual techniques come from my Chinese instructors.

Even in some of the forms there are applications of soft self-defense. I feel very good about my art and the philosophy that I have developed. In Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan training, we can all be brothers and sisters regardless of nation, race or sex. In this way, Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan contributes to world peace and harmony.

**BL: It is my understanding that testing for "Masterbelt" (fourth degree and above) requires a full week of testing.**

HK: Frankly, even a week is not enough. I wish it could be longer. I would like them to train in the mountains, but this isn't always possible. So we try to meet with everyone's satisfaction.

**BL: Why is the test so difficult?**

HK: When a student reaches this level, they will be an instructor that represents Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan and myself. During the week, we standardize training and discipline—with harder training. By training harder, they again become a student. When they return home, they will better understand their students because of this experience. We want to be very positive in our art.

**BL: Will you ever allow musical forms in your competition?**

HK: I believe that music is a very important part of an individual's life. Some music will lift your spirits and relax you. However, I don't



The Grandmaster with his son, Master Hyun Chul Hwang. The photo was taken at the hotel during the interview with Bob Liedke.

agree with musical forms. Any noise at all when you're training will break your concentration. In Korea, we would often go into the mountains to train in silence. In that way you can develop your self-image. I believe the self-discipline and character can be destroyed by music in the forms. It breaks the focus of the mind and body. I don't see it being used at this time.

**BL: One final question. Why is the trim on the black belts uniform blue?**

HK: The color black signifies death and unhappiness. Because Tang Soo Do-Moo Duk Kwan adheres to the principles of nature, blue represents life and growth potential. Black stays black with no potential. ■

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Bob Liedke is an internationally published writer and photojournalist. He is an Aikido instructor based in New Haven, Connecticut, and has more than 25 years of martial art experience. Mr. Liedke is a TKDT Contributing Editor.

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