

There is much confusion about the origins of Tang Soo Do as a Korean martial art. If one were to read the various books available on the subject of Tang Soo Do, one would quickly come across conflicting stories depending on who wrote the book, and for what organization. Quite often Tang Soo Do, like its younger sibling Tae Kwon Do, is presented as having its origins in ancient Korea. Many claim it has its roots in three dynasties, the Koguro Dynasty (37 to 668 A. D.), the Silla Dynasty (688 to 935 A. D.) and the Koryo Dynasty (935 to 1392 A. D.).¹ Unfortunately, there is no historical, critical or objective evidence linking Tang Soo Do, or any modern day Korean martial art, to any of these dynasties. This is not to say that sophisticated martial arts were not practiced during these periods; they undoubtedly were, but no direct link has been objectively established between current day martial arts and those of ancient Korea.

“All of Tang Soo Do’s basic forms, stances, strikes, and blocks leading to the rank of Chodan are rooted in Karate-Do...”

In Tang Soo Do, Grandmaster Hwang Kee studied a 300 year old text titled the *Moo Yei Do Bo Tong Ji*. This is the oldest existing martial arts text from Korea.² Grandmaster Hwang Kee studied this text not only to enhance his own understanding of martial arts but also to rekindle in Korea a cultural historical

appreciation for Korean martial arts. What he learned from these texts he incorporated into his moo do, his martial way, but this is not to say that current Tang Soo Do is derived from this historical document.

Upon examination of Master Chinchin Funakoshi’s Karate-Do, which he brought from Okinawa to Japan in the early 1920’s, it becomes clear that a significant portion of what we know as Tang Soo Do has a foundation in Okinawan Karate-Do. All of Tang Soo Do’s basic forms, stances, strikes, and blocks leading to the rank of Chodan are rooted in Karate-Do, and what later became known in Japan as Shotokan Karate. How this developed is quite simple, many Korean nationals studied Karate-Do in Japan during the Japanese occupation of Korea, and they brought this martial art, as well as others, from Japan back to Korea at the end of World War II.³ In Korea, these forms were re-packed and modified,



HWANG KEE



CHINCHIN FUNAKOSHI

TANG SOO DO

HISTORY
Understanding Its Past

By Reverend Wilfredo Benitez

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especially where kicking is concerned (Korean kicking is far more varied than Okinawan and Japanese kicking and is probably derivative of an art known as Tae Kyun dating back to the Yi Dynasty some 600 years ago).⁴ The name “Tang Soo Do” is a direct translation of the Okinawan “Karate-Do” originally meant “the Way of the China Hand.”⁵ Sadly, during



WON KUK LEE

the occupation of Japan in Korea, Koreans were not permitted to practice any form of martial art that was native to Korea.

The name Tang Soo Do was first used in Korea by Grandmaster Won Kuk Lee, founder of the Chung Do Kwan, who himself studied Karate-Do in Japan. Hwang Kee had contact with Won Kuk Lee and decided to adopt this name for what he previously

called “Hwa Soo Do, the way of the flowering hand.”⁶ There are rumors that Hwang Kee studied kata under Won Kuk Lee, but Hwang Kee does not state this in any of his writings; instead he claims that his knowledge of Okinawan Karate-Do came from books. Hwang Kee acknowledges having studied Chinese martial arts from a teacher in China named Master Kuk Jin Yang, but other than that, he is not very explicative in his writings about where he gained his vast knowledge of martial arts.⁷ It is also known that while Hwang Kee worked for the Japanese Railroad in Manchuria, he met Master Gogen Yamaguchi (the Cat), a leading teacher of Goju Ryu Karate in Japan, who was then an intelligence officer for the Japanese in China. Yamaguchi



GOGEN YAMAGUCHI

was only one teacher away from Itosu Yasutsume, the Okinawan creator of the Pinan Kata, upon which Tang Soo Do’s Pyong-ahn forms is based.⁸ It is reasonable to assume that some knowledge of kata and basics could have been exchanged between the two.

There is an air of mystery surrounding Hwang Kee’s training in martial arts but evidence suggests that he was mostly self-taught. This may be considered by some as a weakness since current day martial arts often claim long lineage. Despite this, Grandmaster Hwang Kee’s influence and contribution to the world of Korean martial arts cannot be dismissed. To get an idea of how vast Hwang Kee’s legacy spread, Chuck Norris, the famed Tang Soo Do stylist, was a student of Korean Grandmaster Jae



JAE CHUL SHIN



CHUCK NORRIS

Chul Shin. Master Shin was the 600th student in the Moo Duk Kwan family tree promoted to Chodan by Grandmaster Hwang Kee.⁹

Since the early days of Moo Duk Kwan, much has happened in the world of the martial arts in Korea. Understandably, there was great anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea after the occupation of Korea by Japan. The formation of Tae Kwon Do was directly linked to this anti-Japanese sentiment. The founder of Tae Kwon Do, General Choi Hong Hi (yet another Karate teacher who learned Karate-Do from Master Funakoshi in Japan) spearheaded the Tae Kwon Do reformation. General Choi created the name Tae Kwon Do as a purely Korean name. It had no association with anything Japanese, as was the case with Tang Soo Do.¹⁰ One of the ironies, however, is that upon examination of the basics and forms of Tae Kwon Do, under the International Taekwon-Do

“...some Tae Kwon Do schools still maintain their Tang Soo Do legacy and continue to teach the Pyong-Ahn forms and Bassai.”

TANG

Aiten Ryu Tang Soo Do

At the Aiten Ryu Tang Soo Do (Love of Heaven School, Blessed Sacrament Martial Arts Association) where I attend, we have no grandiose notions of being the bearers of an unblemished tradition. Our school has no formal ties to any major martial art organizations. We have no direct grandmaster to which we swear loyalty; however, our school lineage goes back to Grandmaster Hwang

"We recognize the uniqueness of Korean martial arts, call it Tang Soo Do or Tae Kwon Do, but we see no value in denying the major role Karate-Do has played..."

Kee through Sensei Richard Kern. Sensei Kern was one of the first Americans to teach martial arts in the United States, assisting Grandmaster Jhoon Rhee when he first established himself in this country. He was sensei to our own Episcopal Priest, Father David Baumann.

Through our Tang Soo Do training, we become followers of the Do, which for we Christians is epitomized in Jesus Christ. What we

seek goes far beyond martial aptitude. As followers of the Way in Aiten Ryu, we strive to bring together practitioners from the various schools and camps in the wider martial art community. This is evidenced when we have black belt examinations and we invite black belts from other styles to participate as judges and sparring partners. This is our ministry of reconciliation.

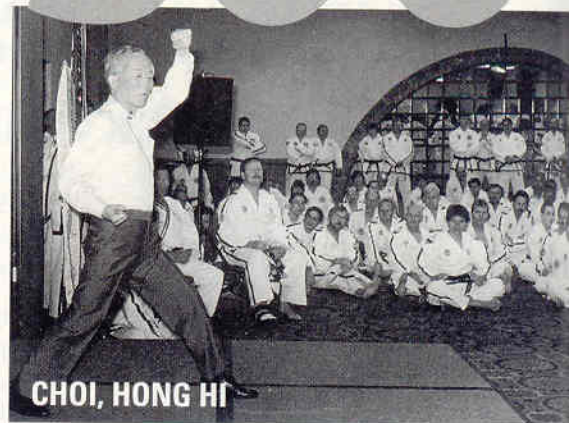
Since our ultimate aim as Budoka is our own inner transformation (redemption) to overcome our fears and self-imposed limitations, establishing a direct lineage to the past is not of any great consequence. We recognize the uniqueness of Korean martial arts, call it Tang Soo Do or Tae Kwon Do, but we see no value in denying the major role Karate-Do has played in these modern martial arts.

The Aiten Ryu offers training in traditional Tang Soo Do but has a clear Japanese philosophical current. This is the result of Mr. Kern's training in both Korea and Japan. The Aiten Ryu is also a martial art school for the "community of baptized," persons actively engaged in being the Body of Christ. Prayer and meditation are done at every class, and through martial arts training, we deepen our own Christian spirituality and roots. In our context, Jesus is the "Do."

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SOO



CHOI, HONG HI

Federation which General Choi founded, the Karate-Do/Tang Soo Do influence is still evident.

General Choi was successful in establishing Tae Kwon Do as the official martial art of Korea in 1965, and many former Tang Soo Do black belts made the move to the Tae Kwon Do camp. In effect, this coming together of the heads of the major kwans in Korea created Tae Kwon Do. One day a teacher was a Tang Soo Do master, the next day he was a Tae

Kwon Do master; it was that simple. A case in point is Jhoon Rhee, known to many as the father of American Tae Kwon Do. Grandmaster Rhee was the first Korean



JHOON RHEE

to use the term Tae Kwon Do in the United States. He did this after a visit from General Choi. Before that Mr. Rhee still used the name Tang Soo Do for the martial art he introduced from Korea to the U.S.A.¹¹ It is noteworthy that some Tae Kwon Do schools still maintain their Tang Soo Do legacy and continue to teach the Pyong-Ahn forms and Bassai.

Back in Korea, Hwang Kee fought and won a court battle to retain the use of the name he later adopted for his traditional Korea martial art "Soo Bahk Do."¹² To this day, there is some bitterness between the various camps, and the world of Tae Kwon Do itself is no

DO

longer unified under an international federation. In the world of Tang Soo Do, divisions also exist and there are various organizations and camps as well. One can conclude by these events that there is no pure and true Korea martial art. One could take this a step farther and conclude there is no pure and true martial art anywhere in the world; all styles borrow from each other (Even the Karate-Do that Funakoshi introduced to Japan has changed significantly by the time of his death through the formation of Shotokan).¹³

Divisions and rivalries are vast in the world of


“One day a teacher was a Tang Soo Do master, the next day he was a Tae Kwon Do master...”

martial arts, and these, sadly, contradict the spirit of the “Do,” the “Way.” The historical circumstances leading to divisions are genuine. The rift caused by imperialism and war is extremely difficult to heal; however, in the end, we are people of the Way, called

to rise above the divisions of the past. It is up to us, the practitioners of the Way, to make Tang Soo Do a genuine budo or moo do; and it is our calling not to spread confusion, but to bring it into harmony. In the words of

Morihei Ueshiba: “In true budo there are no opponents, no enemies. In true budo we seek to be one with all things, to return to the heart of creation.”¹⁴

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- 2 Hang Kee, The History of the Moo Duk Kwan (Springfield: U. S. Soo Bahk Do Moo Duk Kwon Federation, 1995), 4-7.
- 3 Harry Cook, Shotokan Karate, A precise History (England, 2001), p. 84.
- 4 Hwang Kee, Tang Soo Do, Soo Bahk Do (Springfield, Sung Moon Sa, 1978), 12/
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- 6 Gichin Funakoshi, Karate-Do My Way of Life (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd, 1975), 33.
- 7 Hwang Kee, The History of the Moo Duk Kwan (Springfield: U. S. Soo Bahk Do Moo Duk Kwon Federation, 1995), 24-27.
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- 9 John Hancock, “Quest for the Truth, the Origin of Tang Soo Do Forms,” Black Belt Magazine, April 1999, 130.
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- 11 He-Young Kimm, “General Choi Hong Hi, A Tae Kwon Do History Lesson,” (Tae Kwon Do Times, January 2000), 44-58.
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- 13 Hwang Kee, The History of the Moo Duk Kwan (Springfield: U. S. Soo Bahk Do Moo Duk Kwon Federation, 1995), 38-49
- 14 Harry Cook, Shotokan Karate, A Precise History (England, 2001), 171.
- 15 John Stevens and Walther V. Krenner, Training with the Master, Lessons with Morihei Ueshiba Founder of Aikido) Boston: Shambala Publications Inc., 1999) 3.



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