

KOREAN KARATE HISTORY: WHY ALL OF THE CONFUSION? An Interview With Grandmaster Kim Pyung-Soo

By: Robert McLain

It seems that Korean martial arts are bombarded with various conflicting histories. A simple search on the internet can result in several versions about the background of Taekwondo. Unlike karate in Japan, which has clear lineage and communication about their martial arts family tree, taekwondo history is often clouded and unclear. So, how do you tell which version is correct?

I decided to interview Grandmaster Kim Pyung-soo on the subject. Grandmaster Kim began his informal training with Mr. Won during the Korean War in 1951. In 1952, Grandmaster Kim formally enrolled at the Changmoo-Kwan (one of the five major dojangs following WWII) under the guidance of Lee Nam-sok. Grandmaster Kim Soo became the first correspondent to Black Belt Magazine (1964-68) and was the first to establish a professional dojang in Korea [The Korean Taekwon-Karate Academy (1964)]. Grandmaster Kim immigrated to Houston, Texas on January 16, 1968 where he continues teaching and researching today.

RM: What did your first instructor tell you about the art you were learning?

GMKS: No one really talked about it. Everyone was just interested in learning some new block, punch, form, etc. The classroom environment was different than today. In those days, the instructors would demonstrate the technique then the students would imitate the movement. Students were expected to repeat the movement and figure it out on their own. Questions to the instructors were frowned upon. A student asking questions was seen as “troublesome,” and they would get whipped with a stick. Or if they asked too many questions they might get beat up and chased away. This was the old-days way of teaching martial art.

RM: So, no student really knew the background of what they were learning?

GMKS: No. I don't think many people really cared. They just wanted to kick, punch, learn self-defense, spar, etc. Nobody continued training very long; 3 months, maybe 1 year was all. But, I never quit and was curious about where our martial art came from. I knew that Master Lee Nam-sok learned from Yoon Byung-in, but that was all. So, I used to go to the old bookstores and try to find as much information as possible. I would save my pocket change to purchase books.

At first, I went to the bookstore to find information about Tae kyun. There was no Tae kyun remaining or being taught in those days after the Japanese occupation. Just my neighbor Song Duk-ki had any experience with it. I found an old book that had a poem by a Yi Dynasty poet named Mei Hwah Sun. He wrote about a friendly competition called “Tae kyun” held during the Dan Oh Festival during the month of May. That was the first thing I found at the bookstore.

In 1958, I found a small book written by Toyama Kanken in Japan around 1953. In this book it listed Yoon Byung-in as a 4th Dan and the Chosun YMCA representative. Also listed was Yoon Ui-byung (Yoon Kwe-byung) as a 4th Dan and the Jido-Kwan representative. I thought, “Wow! There is Master Lee Nam-sok’s teacher (Yoon Byung-in). So, we must be related to Toyama Kanken’s Shudokan karate somehow.” This discovery really planted the seed to find out more.

RM: Did you mention this to Master Lee Nam-sok?

GMKS: When I found this book in 1958, I had already transferred to the Kangduk-Won under Master Park Chul-hee and Master Hong Jong-pyo. They were both students of Yoon Byung-in too. But, the same method of teaching (no questions) was used and it was difficult to discuss this with them. Sometimes after a hard training session Master Park and I would stop and have a meal on the way home. We would enjoy a meal and talk about various things. I asked him if he knew where our techniques came from and he thought we might be related to Shotokan (Funakoshi Gichin). I mentioned about the book I found, but Master Park didn’t respond. I couldn’t ask much because questioning an instructor about things they don’t know was seen as rude.

RM: Did you have friends that trained at other kwans (schools)? Did you discuss the history with them?

GMKS: Yes, I had many friends. I was very open-minded and loved martial arts. So, I had the chance to visit many places and see what they were learning. All of the kwans were learning the same forms: Kibon Hyung (Kicho Hyung), Pyung Ahn, Bassai Tae, Chulki Cho Dan, etc. But, they might be practicing a little different because of their teacher’s interpretation. Only the Changmoo-Kwan/Kangduk-Won had some different forms such as Dan Kwon, Doju San, Palgi Kwon, Jang Kwon, etc. But, later in my research I found out those came from Chinese chuan-fa. I didn’t know that then. Nobody knew where the forms came from or their lineage in those days.

RM: You mentioned the chuan-fa form, “Jang Kwon.” I’ve read that Mooduk-Kwan taught this form, but somehow instructors have forgotten it and are trying to find it again. Do you know anything about this?

GMKS: I’ve received some e-mails and letters asking about this over the past few years from instructors at the Mooduk-Kwan. Back in Korea when I visited the Mooduk-Kwan down by the railroad station they were always sparring. I never saw them practice Jang Kwon or any forms. I know that Hwang Kee was an acquaintance of Yoon Byung-in (YMCA Kwon Bop Bu). You can find them together in some old group photos.(2) One of those photos is on the Taekwondo Hall of Fame website. So, Hwang Kee may have watched Yoon Byung-in and learned the form that way. Maybe Hwang Kee taught it to his students for awhile.

RM: Why do you think students weren't taught the history about what they were learning?

GMKS: The first generation of instructors (instructors that opened the first kwans following WWII) only taught a few years before the Korean War started and the kwans temporarily closed. Some of the first generation instructors disappeared, such as Yoon Byung-in and Chun Sang-sup. So, the top students of the various kwans may have only 3-5 years of training under the first generation. There wasn't enough time to really discuss the background because of the classroom environment of "no questions." Also, because of the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1909 to 1945, the second generation of martial artists hated the Japanese. Connection with anything Japanese, karate for example, was frowned upon. Even though karate was from Okinawa, most kwan founders studied karate taught in Japan during college.

In 1960, I would frequently visit the Korean Taesoo-Do Association office. During one visit, a kwan head instructor got very angry with me because I wrote some history about his organization that included a connection to karate through Japan. I knew he had a reputation of assaulting people when he was mad at them, instead of talking or arguing. He was a "hit first, ask questions later-type person." Luckily, the Vietnam Taekwondo delegation was visiting the Taesoo-Do Association that day. So, the kwan head instructor had to calm down because of the witnesses. This is an example of the feeling many people held for the Japanese.

RM: What did students call their martial art during those early days?

GMKS: Most people called it Tang Soo Do, Kong Soo Do or Kwon Bop. General Choi Hong-hi called his system, "Tae Kwon Do."

RM: General Choi Hong-hi created Tae Kwon Do?

GMKS: In the early days he was teaching the same karate forms as the other kwans, such as Pyung Ahn, Bassai Tae, Kon Sang Kun, etc. Then in the late 1950's he came up with a story about martial arts links to Korguryo dynasty, Silla Dynasty, 2000 years of tradition, etc. He created new forms and gave each form a name related to something in Korean history, such as a scholar's name or a famous Korean patriot's name. He called his system, "Taekwondo." He was trying to get away from the connection to the Japanese - trying to make something patriotic. He wanted everyone to follow this new line and give up their previous training.

RM: How did General Choi Hong-hi do that?

GMKS: It was everyone's duty to serve in the Army. General Choi had an important position in the Korean Army and used it to promote his Taekwondo system. Anyone with previous training would come before him and be asked to forget their old training and follow his new system. In return, he would be sure they received a good, safe position away from the DMZ (Demilitarized Zone at the 38th parallel). I served in the

Army too. He found out I was a high-ranking black belt from the Changmoo-Kwan/Kangduk-Won and tried to offer me a good position if I switched to his system. He brought in one of his black belts to demonstrate one of the new forms to help convince me. General Choi said, “Look how great this new form is. You need to join me and promote this.” Of course, I didn’t want to give up what I had learned. So, without his protection I was sent to the DMZ by the Army. That was the first of three times he asked me to join his system.

After Choi Hong-hi was out of the Army he acted as an Ambassador for Korea. He would offer people that joined his system good positions and opportunity to travel, but they had to give up their own kwan identity/education and follow Taekwondo. He sent people to Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, and European countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands. This was a great deal for people in Korea because most everyone was poor during this time and everyone wanted to get out of Korea. It was a really sweet deal to have the opportunity to travel. So, most people followed him and Oh Do Kwan Taekwondo.

RM: When did he ask you to join him again?

GMKS: The second time was when I was writing for Black Belt Magazine in Korea. He thought I would be a good asset for his organization since I was a correspondent for Black Belt, which was the only International magazine for martial arts. Choi Hong-hi said he would send me to Europe as his representative. But, I refused.

The third time was in 1973 when I already established my dojang in downtown Houston, Texas. He even brought my teacher, Master Lee Nam-sok. They both walked into the training area wearing their shoes. My students were very shocked. Choi Hong-hi told me, “Look, even your teacher has joined my organization, you should too. Houston will be the largest city in the world by 2000 and you can be my right-hand man here.” He also knew I had a degree in Russian Literature & Language, so he added, “One day, Russia will be an open country. You can be my representative there.” But, I firmly refused again. He gave me a nice piece of calligraphy done by himself as a gift. I still have that hanging in my dojang today.

RM: I would like to step back in time a bit. What did you do after service in the Army?

GMKS: Before I went in to the Army, I was studying at Han-kuk University of Foreign Studies. But, it was my duty to serve in the Army. When I returned to civilian life from the Army, I decided I wanted to teach martial arts at the International level. There was too much pressure to teach Taekwondo in Korea and give up my prior studies. So, I started learning as much as I could in preparation to leave Korea. I continued training and teaching, plus I re-enrolled at Han-kuk University of Foreign Studies. I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Russian Languages and Literature. I started the kwon bup club at the University before I went into the Army and resumed teaching there when I returned. I was the only instructor to teach martial arts professionally at that time. All other instructors worked a job then taught in the evening or something. I had to teach at

many places to make a living. I taught for the U.S. Army, at my own dojang (The Korean Taekwon Karate Academy), the University kwon bup club, and private lessons. It was so difficult to make time, but I continued to study and research.

RM: Did anyone or any school get territorial if another instructor was teaching nearby?

GMKS: Yes. One time a gang of plain-clothed guys came after me and Master Park Chul-hee when we were preparing for class. At the time, Master Park had moved the Kangduk-Won and established some temporary training space at a vacant lot across from his house in Shinsul-Dong, East Seoul Korea. I remember he had an Army tent set up on the lot and we would train on the dirt. We were preparing a stove/fireplace for warmth in the tent, when the gang approached and surrounded us. Everyone in that gang carried some sort of weapon: a metal pipe, a knife, a saw, a broken bottle. (Grandmaster Kim laughs) "I was like a Bruce Lee movie." It was a really bad situation. We didn't have any police force during that time, it was still military controlled. Some MPs (military police) showed up firing their rifles in the air to break it up. I found out later the gang was actually a group of students from a nearby Mooduk-Kwan school. They were worried we would open a competing school near them. Later in America, I recognized one of those guys at a meeting. I don't think he recognized me though.

When I was planning to establish a school in the United States in the 1960's, I made sure to choose an area when there were no other instructors. There were several well-known instructors already in the United States; Jhoon Rhee was established in Washington D.C., Henry Cho was on the East Coast, and Sensei Nishiyama was on the West Coast. So, I chose Houston, Texas to avoid interference with anyone.

RM: It seems that some of the Korean martial art history you mentioned during this interview can be found on the internet.

GMKS: I saw that too. Yes, today the truth is coming out. Still some people try to make up some mysterious stories - claim their art is 2000 years old or from a monk in the mountains or something. But, if people are educated about history and lineage, they cannot be fooled. I believe Korea, like many other countries, had some type of martial arts being practiced before the 20th century. But after the Japanese occupation of Korea (1909-1945), indigenous martial arts were gone and influences from other places (Japan, Okinawa, China) were being taught.

This is the same as if someone's father is a farmer, but tells everyone his father is a doctor. You should show respect for your father and let people know who he is, not make up some strange story. The same is for martial arts lineage. Your direct instructor is your martial arts father; his teacher is your grandfather, etc. This is your family line in the martial arts. It doesn't matter where the art comes from. Martial art belongs to the people that practice and preserve it, not to "this country or that country."

RM: So, you are still researching now?

GMKS: Always I'm researching and learning. It has taken me 54 years, but finally I found out what happened to my instructors' teacher, Yoon Byung-in. I had the chance to meet with Yoon Byung-in's his family in December 2005 and learn about his life. So, the mystery has been solved for this lineage. I had an article written and placed it on our website. Hopefully, people will read about it. Information about Yoon Byung-in and the YMCA Kwon Bop Bu/ Changmoo-Kwan/ Kangduk-Won lineage would be lost if I hadn't continued training and researching. The important lesson is to never give up, always seek the truth, and give credit to those in your lineage.

References:

1. McLain, Robert. Interview with Kim Pyung-soo. Rec. July 16, 2006. Digital recording.
2. Taekwondo Hall Of Fame. <http://www.lacancha.com/jido1948.html>

About Robert McLain:

Robert McLain is a 4th Dan Black Belt under the direct instruction of Grandmaster Kim Pyung-soo. Mr. McLain established the Arlington, Texas branch of The International Chayon-Ryu Martial Arts Association in 1994. He graduated with a Bachelor Of Science degree from The University Of Texas At Arlington and held an adjunct faculty position at the University for 2 ½ year while still an undergraduate student. He directed the for-credit "Self-Defense for Women" program through the Kinesiology Department which consisted of 200 students per semester. Since then, he has contributed articles to Black Belt Magazine, been appointed as "Special Correspondent & Photographer" for Taekwondo Times Magazine, and has worked in the film industry as a fight choreographer. Mr. McLain may be contacted at robertnmclain@yahoo.com