

NOTES ON THE FIRST MASTERS OF ITF TAEKWON-DO (Oh Do Kwan / Chang Hon / ITF line)

(by Manuel Adrogué, published on FB on April 13, 2024)

A few days ago, a practitioner asked me why GM Nam Tae Hi was not awarded the 9th Dan by Gen. Choi, and who was the first Argentine GrandMaster ("GM").

Here is a long answer that may be of interest to you.

The topic of promotions, especially within the "ITF world," is interesting if one looks at it deeply.

Any very brief answer will be simplistic, as it will take for granted many highly debatable things that escape the knowledge of most people who practice Taekwon-Do. Remarkably, despite how limited that information is, their stances on these issues are often categorical, leaving no room for doubt.

I am going to share how many Korean masters over 80 years old, with whom I have had the pleasure of dealing, view things, and how they are seen in other parts of the world outside the major organizations. This answer is also a simplification and omits details, but it aspires to be balanced.

Taekwon-Do was a general movement led by instructor leaders in Korea from schools where they had generally learned karate (Chung Do Kwan, Moo Duk Kwan, Song Moo Kwan, YMCA kwon bop Chang Moo Kwan, Yon Moo Kwan). Choi Hong Hi was one of a group of fewer than ten influential leaders, and there were some older than him (the founders of the aforementioned 5 "original kwans"). There were major disputes among them, with many ups and downs. At one point in 1955, Choi had the ingenuity to propose the name Taekwon-Do to replace "Tang Soo Do" and "Kong Soo Do." Because it sounded like the old Taekkyon and received the President's approval, it was welcomed by all schools, and in 1959 he was elected president of the Korea Taekwondo Association ("KTA"). When he left his role to be appointed ambassador to Malaysia, the leaders of other groups felt Choi was assuming too much authority and proposed changing the name to Tae Soo Do, a name that lasted for a very short time (from 1961 to 1965).

At that time, Choi presented himself as one of the founding and organizing members of TKD (I emphasize, one of them, not "the" founder).

Since Choi was undoubtedly a person with more vision and education than his peers (in addition to having a driving, highly controversial personality because he sometimes steamrolled others' opinions), he formed an international organization, the ITF, when everyone in Korea was exclusively focused on their own country. The KTA never accepted the forms he designed with a couple of his disciples, keeping the Japanese forms until a committee developed the Palgwe forms and the Koryo series. The definitive break occurred when Choi had to go into exile for political reasons in January 1972, and the government closed the 70 gyms that depended on Choi in Korea.

When Gen. Choi went to Canada, he relocated the ITF, beginning the second era of the ITF.



Gen. Choi, Hong Hi
ITF Taekwon-Do



Park
Jung Tae

Nam
Tae Hi

Park
Jong Soo

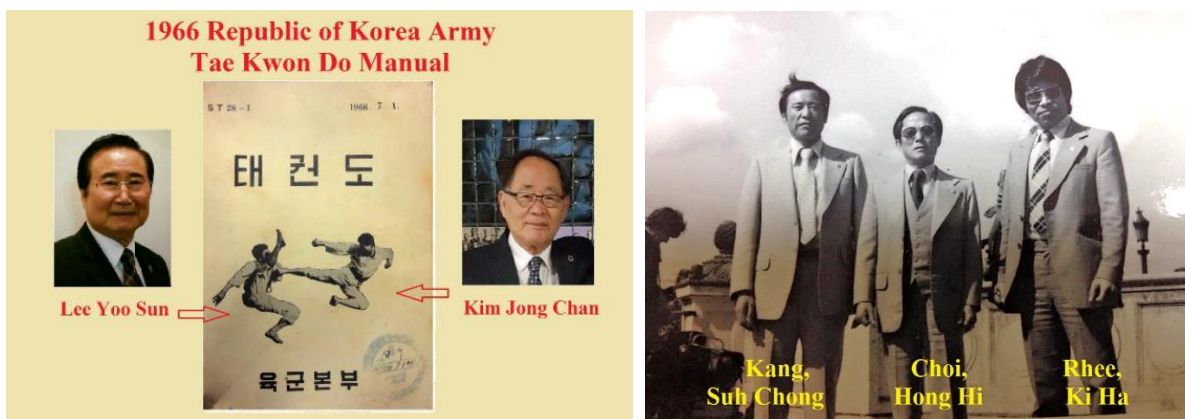


南泰熙 大尉 (跆拳道館長)
Col. Nam, Tae Hi

The first era of Gen. Choi's group spans from the early 1950s until 1971 and is starred exclusively by Koreans who already knew TKD (or Korean karate, because it was the same thing) and joined him as collaborators. The entire history read today that emphasizes the dates of 1955 "birth of TKD" and 1966 "foundation of the ITF" is the product of a partial reassembling that perhaps conceals other important aspects of history.

The truth is that at the very beginning, Gen. Choi's right-hand men were Nam Tae Hi and Han Cha Kyo. They were like "partners" to Gen. Choi.

Why did they side with Gen. Choi if they were almost certainly better martial artists? Because Gen. Choi was a brilliant person with a university background (he was "almost" a lawyer and spoke English), highly creative, with a lot of political leverage, international exposure, who loved the martial art, and surely what he was planning was going to be very good. That is why they joined and supported him.



Later, other masters began to gain prominence, helping to build the ITF forms. Subsequently, Kim Jong Chan (known as JC Kim, #5 on the list) arose as someone fundamental in designing the ITF emblems, the tree on the back of the dobok, and other elements, besides being the most prominent technical driver of the ITF style throughout the 70s. I dare say that outside of Gen. Choi, no person has been more identified with the ITF or has contributed as much as JC Kim (perhaps Park Jong Soo and, in the late 80s, Park Jung Tae come close).

I insist that all of them had trained in Korean karate, and although they accepted being "disciples" of Gen. Choi, they were all excellent black belts before meeting him; they did not train under him from scratch. However, they refined the style, experimented, and helped Gen. Choi develop his technical ideas until the ITF style became completely defined in the mid-1980s.

This is the list compiled by JC Kim with the names, ordered by seniority, of the 15 most important pioneer masters in the history of ITF TKD:

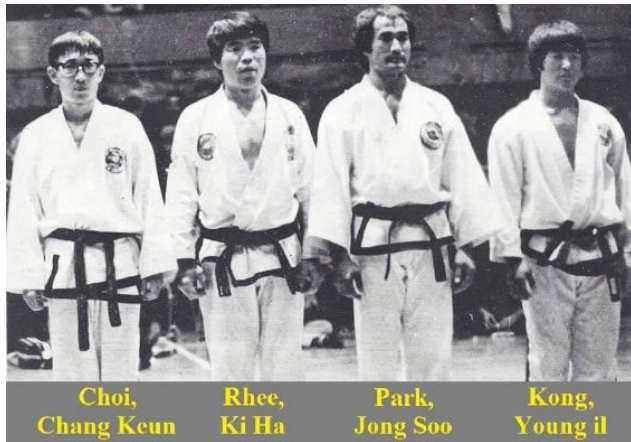
1. GM Baik Joong Ki
2. GM Lee Sang Ku
3. GM Kim In Mook
4. GM Hong Sung In
5. GM Kim Jong Chan
6. GM Choi Chang Keun (CK Choi)
7. GM Lee Byung Moo
8. GM Kim Bok Man

9. GM Yoo Hong Sun
10. GM Park Jong Soo
11. GM Lee Jun Jae
12. GM Lee Yoo Sun
13. GM Rhee Ki Ha
14. GM Kong Yong il
15. GM Hwang Kwang Sun



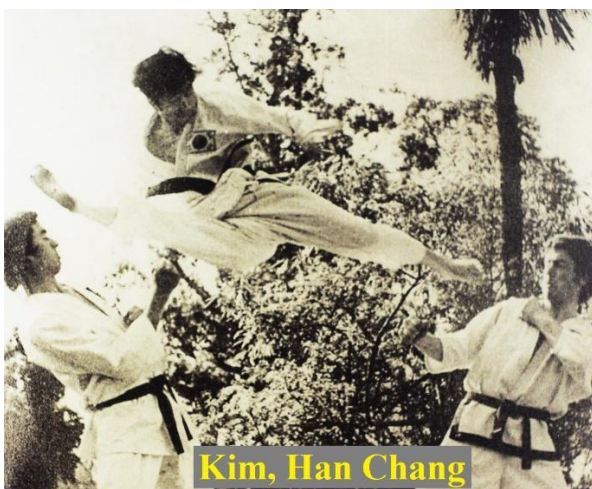
Each of those masters possessed incredible technical, combative, and physical ability. This list is very important because the person who compiled it is probably the most authoritative figure in the world, and it shows that Koreans do not value rank as much as who is "senior" (older in practice) to whom. Seniority is determined by the date someone is promoted to black belt. In fact, it is notable to see that everyone on the list appears as "GM," even though only 4 of them were promoted to 9th Dan by Gen. Choi. This is because until the late 90s, the only 9th Dan in the ITF was Gen. Choi, and he only awarded that rank to others in his final years (I refer to this below). Those on JC Kim's list are the highest echelon in the ITF world. These masters were typically 6th or 7th Dan by the mid-to-late 1960s and were called "masters" (the convention of using that word starting from 7th Dan was invented in the 80s). To put things in perspective, I note that they already had at least 20 years of practice when the current Western "Grandmasters" had not even taken their first steps in Taekwon-Do.

I highlight again that Nam Tae Hi and Han Cha Kyo belong to the era prior to the very existence of the ITF, which is why they do not appear on the list (Kang Suh Chong might have been in an intermediate position). Nam Tae Hi has risen to fame among Westerners due to Alex Gillis's book, but he should not be the only one taken into account.



Given that over time, and especially during the second era of the ITF when Gen. Choi decided to approach North Korea, (South) Koreans had to distance themselves from the ITF, the organization began to lean on Westerners. Unfortunately, a great deal of wealth in knowledge and experience was lost. Consequently, several of the oldest Korean masters remained linked to the KTA (the first organization to exist in TKD, whose first president was Gen. Choi) and received high ranks from that organization or their original schools, and from its international successor, Kukkiwon. This means that many of Gen. Choi's greatest disciples hold a 9th Dan awarded by Korean entities, even though they decoupled from the ITF for legal reasons; many remained loyal to the style although unknown to most practitioners of the ITF style.

IN ADDITION to JC Kim's list, one should add the pioneers who spread the ITF style worldwide during the 1960s, such as Rhee Chong Chul and Rhee Chong Hyup in Australia, Kim Han Chang in Argentina, Cho Sang Min in Brazil, Lee Kwan Young in France, Cho Soo Se in Turkey, Kwon Jae Hwa in Germany, Park Sun Jae in Italy, Choi Won Chul and Lee Won Il in Spain, and a very long etcetera (close to 20 or 30) across various parts of the world.



Very few Koreans remained with (or reunited with) Choi Hong Hi in the 1990s, and before his death, Gen. Choi promoted only seven people to 9th Dan (Rhee Ki Ha, Chuck Sereff, Hwang Kwang Sung, Park Jong Soo, Van Binh Nguyen, Duc Dang, and Jung Woo Jin), only three of whom were members of the list of 15.

I insist that, regardless, those who appear on JC Kim's list, even if they did not receive the 9th Dan from Gen. Choi, are hierarchically superior to current 9th Dans. Proof of this criterion is that when Koreans gather, the top spots are reserved for the most senior. It is also noteworthy that of those seven—I have practiced with two of them—the last one does not even teach what we understand today as the ITF style. It was Gen. Choi's way of thanking him for his invaluable help.

The concept of "Grand Master" as synonymous with 9th Dan in the ITF is relatively new, about 25 years old. And the method of accessing that rank is also subject to different viewpoints.

In martial arts, the federative phenomenon is relatively recent and intersects with the traditional one.

There is a "personal" criterion and an "institutional" one. Someone could argue that ranks are always received from a superior who holds at least that rank (although except for Yoon Byung In, none of the Korean founders of the first "Kwans" received high degrees from their masters). I understand that rankings have little application when we talk about the prominent ITF / Oh Do Kwan pioneers before 1970. For example, for me, it is an immense honor to have received the 7th Dan from GM Park Jong Soo and the 8th Dan from GM Lee Yoo Sun. In the case of Western GMs (and GM Tran Trieu Quan, and Phap Lu), several of them, except for Chuck Sereff, were promoted to 9th Dan by institutional decisions of a committee of masters who were not 9th Dan. That is a way to fill the absence of Gen. Choi when institutional reasons prevent receiving the promotion from someone more senior.



Park Bu Kwang, Ik Mu Kang, Lee Suk Hi, Park Jong Soo, Kim Jong Chan

This is where an apparent conflict arises between the vertical and hierarchical system native to a martial arts school and the institutional and federative system. But that is a separate topic... This commentary does not intend to dismiss the contribution of Westerners, who over decades effectively contributed to the development and solidity of the ITF worldwide—here I recall the Spanish GM Mario Pons as an example—preventing the organization from being affected by the pressures of the South Korean government, which were impossible for Korean masters to escape.

Who were the first Argentine GMs? They were GMs Hector Marano and Pablo Trajtenberg, promoted after Gen. Choi's death by one of the main branches of the ITF (the one headquartered in Spain). I refrain from entering the topic of which branch of the ITF is the legitimate one (should the will of Gen. Choi be respected? Should the organization's bylaws prevail? Does legal legitimacy automatically validate martial primacy? Does one of these organizations being considered "legitimate" erase the

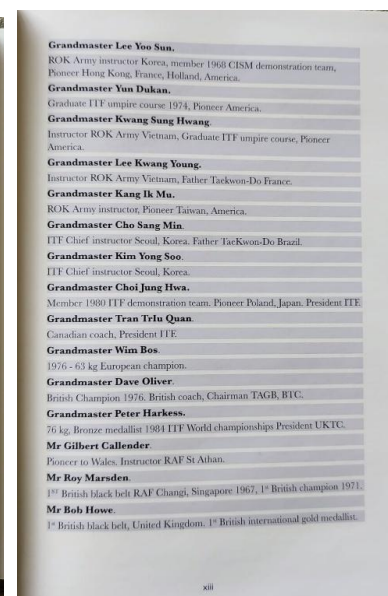
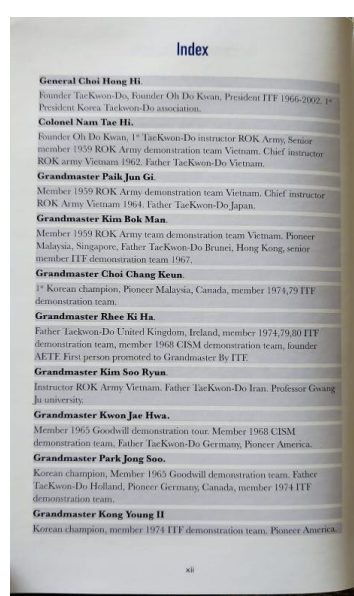
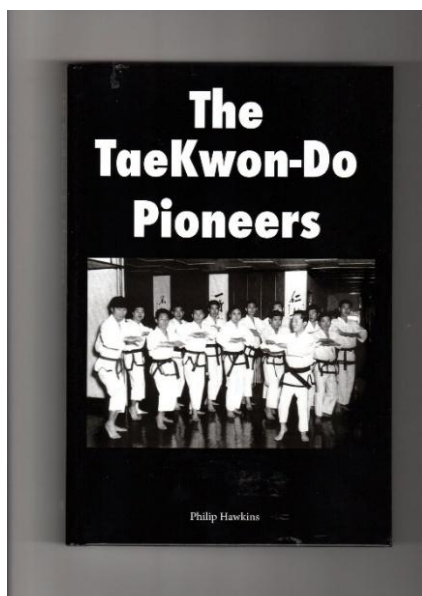
experience and knowledge of those outside it?). GMs Marano and Trajtenberg belong to the oldest batch of TKD practitioners in Argentina, along with Enrique Eiriz, Pedro Florindo (my sabom), Javier Dacak, Carlos Angel Mattos (my dear friend), Miguel Nasini, Adolfo Villanueva, Ramisch, Armando Grispino, Ricardo Desimone (and a few others). All other Argentine 9th Dans belong to newer generations. Several of those Argentine masters have made a remarkable contribution to the development of ITF TKD at an international level.

So far, I have spoken about rankings, seniority, and history. But the most important thing is practice. There are very important veteran PRACTITIONERS in almost all branches. And some, moreover, have become major international benchmarks (GM Nestor Galarraga serves as an example). With practice comes knowledge, experimenting, and continuing to learn and discover the truth. Without practice (THE ONLY THING THAT GIVES TRUE AUTHORITY), everything is reduced to marketing and a trade of certificates.

I am interested in continuing to learn and follow Gen. Choi's guidelines not out of respect for him, but because he provided a series of correct methodological and technical directions, which I share. But that does not mean that, as a style inspired by allegedly scientific criteria—trial and error, critical analysis, etc.—it is not necessary for different masters to arrive at different conclusions and proposals to continue its refinement. Halting its development goes against what Gen. Choi sought, and rigidly unifying criteria is not how science operates.

I close this response by highlighting that GM Han Chang Kim arrived in Argentina in 1967 as a 4th Dan certified by Gen. Choi (along with him, Nam Sung Choi, 3rd Dan, and Chung Kwang Duk, 1st Dan, graduated from other schools but immediately incorporated into the ITF) after a year of practice at Gen. Choi's house alongside many of the masters on the list. None of the current Argentine GMs were even white belts at that time. Regardless of the fact that GM Kim's 9th Dan was awarded by the Chung Do Kwan—the school where Gen. Choi served as interim director in the 1950s—and not by the ITF, his rank and seniority make him the first Grand Master for all of Argentine Taekwon-Do (ITF and KKW).

Post Scriptum 1: Gen. Choi studied law at Chuo University, Japan, but did not graduate because in October 1943 an imperial decree forced him to return to his place of origin (Korea) to enlist in the Imperial Army.



Post Scriptum 2: A few months after writing this article, Philip Hawkins (a dedicated ITF practitioner and follower of its golden age) published a wonderful book, “The Taekwon-Do Pioneers,” featuring unmissable interviews with many of the greatest masters from the early eras of ITF / Oh Do Kwan Taekwon-Do. It is an extraordinary piece of work, a gem prepared by an expert that serves as a tribute to the pioneers and reveals many unknown aspects of the original Taekwon-Do.

Post Scriptum 3: In 2025, I had a conversation with GM Lee Yoo Sun about his rank, which I found very interesting because it was an example (among so many we will never know) of the relationship between the pioneers and Gen. Choi in his final years.

In 1992, Lee was living in Houston, and Gen. Choi would be travelling there to give a seminar, with Van Binh Nguyen officiating as host, and also attended by Park Bu Kuang and Park Jung Hi. Gen. Choi called Lee to meet with him. On May 20, 1992, Lee went to the hotel indicated by Gen. Choi, where they reunited after more than ten years without seeing each other. Choi asked his disciple if he really believed the General was a communist (as was rumored in the US), to which he replied no, that he considered him a patriot and his master. Then the General pulled from his briefcase a calligraphy piece he had prepared especially for Lee, handing it to him and telling him that he was granting him the rank of 9th Dan. The calligraphic work of art (soie jakpum 서예 작품) seen in the photo below was made especially by Gen. Choi Hong Hi for GM Lee. In the central part, it reads 見利思義 건리사의 “*Seek what is right before benefits*” (extracted from the Analects of Confucius, 14:12). On the right side descending, it reads: 一九九三年三月二十日 – 태권도 개척 공로자 이유선 축제삼을 위해, the translation of which is: “*March 20, 1993. In recognition of Lee Yoo Sun's merit for his contribution as a pioneer of Taekwon-Do.*” In this calligraphy, Gen. Choi recognized the loyalty that GM Lee maintained with him over so many years. They stayed talking until 6 in the morning, and the general instructed him to complete the form and submit it to the ITF offices. Lee never did, as the connection with North Korea and the serious problems it represented for him as a Korean resident in the United States still existed. In 1995, Uhm Woon Kyu (director of Chung Do Kwan, his first Sabom who had attained that position with Gen. Choi's support in 1959) awarded him the 9th Dan, and he was immediately examined at Kukkiwon. It was a particular examination, not without some friction because he only performed ITF forms, and he was reproached for the level of heavy contact he applied during sparring. Under those conditions, he was awarded the 9th Dan by Kukkiwon. This never altered his style or sense of belonging, being a rara avis who, right inside Kukkiwon, does not hide his pride for Gen. Choi and his legacy, although that has always brought him difficulties “*seeking what is right before benefits.*” I first met GM Lee at Kukkiwon itself; GM Han Chang Kim introduced us. Lee handed me his card featuring the fist of Gen. Choi's 29th Division. We looked at each other, I smiled, and told him “I do ITF too.” We were not in our territory. I didn't realize that our story was beginning right there.



Created TaeKwonDo in Seoul, Korea 1953-1955
Grand Master. Yoo Sun Lee

- 1962. 26사단 태권도개척교관
- 1964. 서울회경 태권도오도관개척사범
- 1966. 국제태권도연맹수석사범
- 1966. 홍콩 태권도개척사범
- 1968. 네덜란드 벨지움 태권도개척사범
- 1969. 불란서 태권도개척사범
- 1984. 북미 태권도협회초대 회장역임
- 1996. 태권도 공인9단
- 1998. 한국인권문제연구소 휴스턴지회 회장역임

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