



**Choi Hong-Hi** was born a sickly child on November 9, 1918 in the northern part of the Korean peninsula in what was then a unified country occupied for a decade by Imperial Japan who had annexed Korea as a colony in the Japanese Empire.

As a teenager his father sent him to learn calligraphy under the tutelage of Mr. Han Il-Dong, a famous master calligrapher, who was also reported to be knowledgeable about Taek Kyon. This was an ancient folk game that promoted kicking to knock your opposing player down. Mr. Han told his young frail apprentice stories about Taek Kyon and introduced him to some basic moves in order to bolster his morale.

A couple of years later Choi Hong-Hi went abroad to Japan to further his academic education. While there a fellow Korean by the name of Kim Hyun-Soo introduced him to the martial art of Karate. So while attending high school in Kyoto he also trained at the school's Karate club. After completing this level of education, Mr. Choi moved to Tokyo where he continued as a law student at Chuo University as well as his study of Karate. He eventually achieved enough proficiency to teach Karate at a local YMCA.

By 1943 the tide of WWII was now turning against the Japanese in the Pacific arena. As a result Japan was forced to conscript more Korean men to fight in what was becoming their lost cause. Eventually Mr. Choi was conscripted against his will into the Imperial Army of Japan. Some time later he engaged along with other Korean student soldiers in a plan to join the Korean underground resistance movement. When the Japanese authorities uncovered the plan, Choi and others were arrested and thrown into a prison located in Pyongyang. To keep physically and mentally fit he trained in Karate within the confines of his cell and prison yard. His sentence ended on August 15, 1945 when Japan surrendered unconditionally to the Allied Forces.

Once released Mr. Choi heard of a self governance movement that was taking hold in Seoul. He went south and joined the Student's Soldiers League which was formed by volunteers to help maintain order in a Korea now without any governance. The USA taking a lead role under the administration of the UN, oversaw the transition period towards Korean self rule. In January of 1946 they established the first Korean Military Academy which graduated Choi Hong Hi from its initial class as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant, making him one of the 111 founding member of the ROK Army.

This fledging new Army allowed opportunities for fast promotion which eventually led to Lt. Choi attaining the rank of a 2 Star Major-General. Gen. Choi eventually formed the 29<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division on JeJu Island in 1953

towards the tail end of the Korean Civil War. Gen. Choi gave them the nickname of the “Fist Division” as his troops were taught the martial arts. When the Fist Division moved to the Korean mainland after its training ended in 1954, Gen. Choi, along with whom he described as his right hand man, Col. Nam Tae Hi, then a Lieutenant, opened the military gym which they called the Oh Do Kwan. This name translated as gym of my way, was used as a neutral term to mean any soldier could train there, regardless of where their previous training, if any was learned, as this was now their gym.

Gen. Choi, holding a powerful position in the ROK Army as a General, afforded him the opportunity to become the honorary head of the largest civilian gym, the Chung Do Kwan (gym of the blue wave). This came at the request of their founder Master Lee Won Kuk, who due to political oppression moved back to Japan. These circumstances led to Gen. Choi becoming a player on the civilian martial art side as well. In December of 1954 he used his political power to convene a board of prominent military, civilian, business, some martial art leaders and politicians to discuss Korean martial arts.

At this meeting the new name Tae Kwon Do was proposed by Gen. Choi and accepted unanimously. It was then suggested that the name be sent to the ROK President Rhee Seung-Man for official approval. The name was approved on April 11, 1955. Taekwon-Do a Korean Martial Art of Self Defense has come to be practiced by an estimated 50 – 60 million people in over 190 nations of the world. This Martial Art was developed under the leadership of Gen. Choi, as its principle founder, who also oversaw many early efforts of promoting and spreading the Art worldwide. Gen Choi continued this work personally until his passing on June 15, 2002 in his beloved homeland of Korea, the birthplace of Taekwon-Do, Korea’s greatest gift to the world. Taekwon-Do students around the globe owe Gen. Choi and the Taekwon-Do Pioneers a debt of gratitude that starts by remembering the history of their contributions, which after all has made possible their training today.