

Interview with General Choi Hong Hi

Founding Father of Taekwon-Do, President of the International Taekwon-Do Federation

Interview by Maria Heron, (The Times)



On Friday 12th November, 1999, General Choi Hong Hi, the founder of Taekwon-do arrived in the UK at the invitation of the British United Taekwon-do Federation to conduct a seminar of Taekwon-do for the Federation's members.

Obviously opportunities to meet, let alone interview, the General are extremely rare, so when Master Choy, chairman of the BUTF, suggested that just such an interview might be possible, BUTF.COM immediately jumped at the chance to cover the event.

The venue was the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Heathrow. Master R. Choy, Master T. Wolf, Master T.Y. Au and Grandmaster Rhee Ki Ha, who had also been invited by the BUTF, were present at the interview.

Surprisingly, upon meeting General Choi for the first time one may be forgiven for not believing that this modest, polite &, apparently, gently spoken elderly gentleman not only spawned a martial art which is now practiced by millions in all corners of the globe, but also led a student revolution in his teenage years, rose to the rank of General in the Korean Army, was appointed as an Ambassador for his country and not least, was this year nominated for the Nobel Prize for Peace.

It does not, however, take but a few moments, to realise that the General is extremely competent and forthright, not a bit 'gently spoken' and remains to this day, as enthusiastic about his beloved Taekwon-do as he was on 11th April 1955, the day he named & presented the Art to the world:

Over the last 45 years, Taekwon-do has enjoyed unprecedented worldwide growth. This according to the General is entirely due to the development of Taekwon-do's 'scientific' execution and explanation of technique:

"Easy to teach, easy to learn! A person with no martial training can see if a technique is performed correctly because Taekwon-do is scientific and it's techniques are based on basic principles of Physics."

This is the General's rationale, and one that would be difficult to dispute!

"I will supervise the future development of Taekwon-do from my grave!" He says with a grin. – We don't doubt him for a second!

The Interview

Q. What is TAEKWON-DO?

Taekwon-do is a version of unarmed combat for the purpose of self defence. It is however, not just that. It is a scientific use of body that has gained the ultimate use of its facilities through intensive mental and physical training, that is of TAEKWON-DO

Q. What were your ambitions for TAEKWON-DO?

My concept of the art is that by developing an upright mind and strong body we will acquire the self-confidence to stand on the side of justice at all times. We shall be family in common brotherhood with all men. We shall deliver diligence, & shall dedicate ourselves to building an ideal world in which morality, justice, religion, philanthropy and trust will always prevail.

Everything is governed by Yin and Yang. Oriental philosophy is full of moral teachings. This was my motivation.

Q. How did the patterns of TAEKWON-DO come about?

When the Japanese invaded Korea they tried to remove the Korean nationality. You could not go to school and be educated if you were not Japanese. I was left a man with no country and therefore no national pride.

The Patterns of TAEKWON-DO represent the history of Korea from time in legend to this century. The propagation of TAEKWON-DO throughout the world has also enabled, through the patterns, a small part of Korean history to be learned by its practitioners. A part of Korea therefore now exists across the whole world and Korea's nationality and history can never be removed by oppressors again.

Q. How long did it take you to develop the patterns into the form we know them today?

I began my research in March 1946 into what was to be named TAEKWON-DO on April 11, 1955. My research ended in 1983. The patterns represent my study of the Art in this period.

Q. There was a pattern many years ago for 2nd degrees called Kodang, why was this pattern replaced by Juche?

As new techniques were developed they needed to be represented in the patterns. The pattern Kodang was replaced simply because it represented the latest Korean history, basically last in first out.

Q. How would you describe the perfect training session

The most important thing in training sessions is that the instructor is fully qualified to teach that which he purports to teach. If the instructor is not qualified, the session cannot be perfect because it will become infected with imperfections of technique. A student can only learn what an instructor teaches. If the instructor is not able to explain the true meaning and purpose of every movement he teaches, the student will never master what is being taught.

Q. Do you still practice the art each day.

I have followed a routine of training every day for the last 55 years which lasts approximately 60 & 70 minutes. I will probably continue this regime even in my grave.

Q. Do you follow a special diet

Yes, I eat everything my wife cooks for me. If you train regularly and correctly, and your health allows, there is no need to follow any special diet or take nutritional supplements.

Q. Can you foresee a time in the future when genuine (ITF) Taekwon-Do will replace WTF TAEKWON-DO in the Olympics.

The Olympic Games were originally contested by naked male competitors. It has, over the years been forced to accept social changes. It is my greatest pride that TAEKWON-DO has been included in modern Olympic Games, in my lifetime. It is unique that the founder of an Olympic discipline survives to see such global recognition of his work. It is unfortunate however, that due to the efforts of Korea to distance themselves politically from me, that the Olympics do not represent true TAEKWON-DO, but that of an inferior and removed style.

Q. What efforts are being made by the ITF for the inclusion of TAEKWON-DO in the Olympic Games.

(Grand Master Rhee answers) I believe that martial arts are different to other sports and should not be categorised together. A basketball player needs to be extremely tall, whilst a jockey, ideally, needs to be small. A student of TAEKWON-DO does not need to be bound by physical limitations. I therefore have had discussions regarding a possible separate Olympic event much like the separate Winter Olympics. This event should include, and be representative of all Martial Arts and would therefore be a celebration of the Arts.

Q. You obtained your black belt in Karate, what did that mean to you?

I originally learnt Karate when I first went to Japan because a man in my village, back home in Korea, had challenged me to a fight and I needed to know how to fight him. After I gained my first black belt, I immediately realized that Karate did not offer all the answers. I found it lacking in many aspects and I was not confident to return to my village and face my challenger. This is when I embarked upon my research into martial arts which was possibly the birth of TAEKWON-DO.

Q. You have recently been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Do you feel your recent nomination for the prize will help the ITF Olympic cause?

Whilst I am extremely honoured to have received such a prestigious nomination, I never expected to receive the award in the knowledge that possibly many more deserving candidates were also nominated. The true significance of this honour is that I have been unequivocally recognized as the Founder of TAEKWON-DO, and therefore the ITF is the only authority for genuine TAEKWON-DO

Q. Why is ITF headquarters now in Vienna and you, as its head, in Canada?

This decision was made by the ITF Congress to promote TAEKWON-DO in the Eastern Block countries. Geographically Vienna is central both to West and East. Because of the political changes in Central Europe and the East we felt that moving the Headquarters to Vienna would be beneficial and assist in the integration of the ITF in these countries.

Q. Who else in the martial arts community, not just TAEKWON-DO, has had an influence on you personally?

No one.

Q. Do you feel that the tragic death of a fighter at last year's United States Open WTF Full Contact Championships reflected on TAEKWON-DO as a whole, or just on those doing full contact sparring.

Firstly, that was not a true TAEKWON-DO event, because they do not understand that sparring is a tiny part of the true Art. They have attempted to glamorise sparring and allowing full contact is only part of that glamorisation. True TAEKWON-DO sparring should be non-contact, allowing the practitioners to demonstrate their skills and abilities without risk of bodily injury.

Q. TAEKWON-DO has always distanced itself from other martial arts by being continually developed and improved, what recent ground breaking changes have been made and on what science have they been based.

As I said, my research ended in the mid 80's, & I will make no more advances in my lifetime, the legacy of the development of TAEKWON-DO for the future remains with the Masters of the Art from now on. I have entrusted the development to them.

Q. ITF New Zealand, claimed that you signed their guest book on their web-site. Did you?

What is a web-site?

Q. As we approach the dawn of a new millennium, what are your hopes and aspirations

I hope that TAEKWON-DO will continue vehemently to grow along the philosophy of no discrimination between race, religion, politics, age and sex. I have already achieved more in my life time than one man could ever have hoped for. My dreams and aspirations have been fulfilled.

Q. You have always been the figurehead for TAEKWON-DO, how long do you consider you will be remain president of the ITF.

People cannot live forever, so I know my time is getting short maybe in a couple of years I may be retiring from my presidential post. Congress will elect a new one, but I will not take my hand off TAEKWON-DO. I will supervise from the graveyard.

Q. Has it already been decided who will succeed you?

As I said, the next president of the ITF will be democratically elected by the ITF Congress.

Q. And finally, as Christmas is just around the corner what would you like

Everyone in the world to learn TAEKWON-DO!

<http://butfdev.co.uk/InterviewwithGeneralChoiHongHi.htm>

<http://www.bluecottagekd.com/general.html>