



Keeping the Faith With Tang Soo Do

by Renardo Barden

Imagine the scene. Pusan, Korea, the chief U.N. supply port during the Korean War, a city of some 400,000 people whose lives have been variously destroyed or disrupted by a cold war turned suddenly hot. One day in 1953, Pusan's population was increased by one seven-year-old stowaway. There was no Charles Dickens alive to write about it, but the boy who disembarked there, Jeong Sook Lee, was, in preparing to take some of life's hard knocks, about to learn how to give back a few. The boy was not exactly an orphan (as so many were),

but a surprisingly willful exile, a kid on the lam from a maternal aunt with whom he'd had differences.

The boy would live on the streets for three years, sleeping in abandoned buildings, pilfering food from skimpy marketplaces, surviving, nurturing a pride that is with him still, getting to know something first-hand about the privations of war and the Korean people, and, when the opportunity arose, climbing up into an open window to stare down into a dojang alive with drilling, sparring martial artists.

"I just watched them," Jeong Sook Lee remembered. "They opened the window and I climbed up. They asked me to leave and I ran off. But it was fascinating. I came back there again and watched them again. I kept coming back for four months. Finally, I asked if I could join them."

This was how Lee was to become acquainted with tang soo do founder, Grandmaster Hwang Kee, his sole instructor for 25 of his 33 years. And though the boy was ultimately rounded up by a paternal uncle, his fate seemed to decree that he should continue studying under his master, for at about the time Lee was discovered by his uncle, Grandmaster Hwang Kee, his instructor, likewise returned to Seoul.

"My father had come to the United States on a student visa for higher education," Lee reported. "Only he was eligible. He couldn't bring his family. My mother died shortly after my father had left. It was then I went to live with my aunt, and it was then—I was about six—a very stubborn kid—it was then I walked down to the harbor and got on a ship to Pusan."

Independence at so early an age is said to leave its mark. "It hurt sometimes," Lee admitted. "I didn't live my normal childhood, but I think it was good. I know how hardship feels. There were no jobs. After all, at seven years old, who would hire you? I'd go down to the market, stealing watermelons, dried fish."

At 33, Lee is handsome, reticent only when it comes to discussing his personal life, animated only when it comes to discussing the martial arts; it is almost as if the boy's need for family, community and discipline coincided with the first time he was shooed away from Grandmaster Hwang Kee's open dojang window.

Ultimately brought to America to rejoin his father who had become a doctor, Lee was to keep the faith with what he had learned under Grandmaster Hwang Kee. After four years' training, Lee was awarded his blue belt in 1957.

"My uncle found me in a railroad station," Lee said. "I was glad. It was a relief, a warm place to stay. But I still studied under Grandmaster Hwang Kee. He had moved from Seoul to Pusan during the Korean War, but it was temporary. After the war, he moved back."

In the custody of his uncle, life for the young Lee became a bit softer. "I wasn't working," he said. "My uncle was rich. He had a construction business. Also, he was active as an intelligence officer during the Korean War."

From the time he was 12 until he was 22, Lee lived with his uncle, studying martial arts, going to school, and making occasional return visits to Pusan. "Then I came here as an immigrant," Lee explained. "My father had become a United States citizen—a doctor. He used to work in the school for the handicapped in the Mt. Rainier School of Psychology. He lives in Colorado now. He's a psychologist, but I haven't seen him now for four years. We have differences.

"He wanted me to be a doctor, but that's not in me. I went into premed, took a degree in chemistry from the University of Washington. The differences I had with my father were about education. I was going to New York, but I stopped in Idaho and never got to New York. You see, I studied the martial arts; I believed in the martial arts. Looking after tradi-

tion seems more important to me than becoming a doctor."

Graduating from college in 1971, Lee had been teaching tang soo do since his arrival in America in 1967. After leaving the University of Washington, where, ironically, he was enrolled just after the time Bruce Lee was, the restless young Korean soon left Washington for Idaho. A stop enroute to New York to visit a friend, Eugene Lee, and the disenchanted premed student was soon hired as chief self-defense instructor for the Idaho State Police Academy. Instructing at the police academy, Lee soon found himself involved with a local YMCA and the Parks and Recreation Department. But he became discouraged teaching police cadets.

"You don't have much time," Lee explains. "In order to learn technique, you have to allow for lots of repetition. There, we had to go through too much technique in too short a period. Also, the environment was different. The course was mandatory, for one thing. When students come into a studio, their intention is to learn, but in Idaho the attitude was different. They had to be there; yet they didn't have enough time to really learn it well."

Eventually, a combination of restlessness and ambition possessed the young tang soo do instructor. "I was looking for a





Opposite, below: Jeong Sook Lee makes gentle alterations in the blocking form of white belt students. Above: Lee, as disciple and translator, assists Grandmaster Hwang Kee across the language barrier in an effort to put across a point about the nature of tang soo do.

better opportunity," Lee said, "to have more students, more financial security. Someday I would like to own my own studio." When Lee continued, there was a trace of pride in his voice. "Besides, I felt my students were ready to teach, and I gave them that responsibility. They had a lot to learn still, but they were ready to instruct."

Having left his Idaho school under the tutelage of a promoted blue belt in Idaho, Lee visited several locales in the Pacific Northwest before finally settling on Santa Barbara, California, a small, affluent city about 100 miles north of Los Angeles.

When warranted by organizational growth and made possible by circumstances, Grandmaster Kee invited his former student Lee to assist in governing the growing Moo Duk Kwan Federation of tang soo do. Since its 1975 inception in the United States, the organization has mushroomed from 100 to more than 2,500 dan members.

"I am a member of the Board of Directors," Lee said, "involved in California, Oregon, Washington, Hawaii and Nevada." Asked about his duties, the Santa Barbara instructor put it this way. "People have problems—some business, some promotional. I am like a representative. Someone might have a problem in advertising, need publicity in some way. An instructor might need someone to educate the public or bring an idea to the Federation. He would come talk with me. Then I would present his ideas at the next board meeting." Additionally, Lee is a regional examiner. "I am responsible for dan testing—I oversee that. Also, I inspect the studios, try to make sure instructors are teaching properly. If they are doing a different block and so on, I try to correct it—try to keep the one-hundred-percent true forms intact."

Jeong Sook Lee is keeping the faith. For some people, keeping the faith is more a matter of words, a matter of being seen with the right people at the right time, as much a matter of appearances as realities. "Some people," Lee said, "have a different job at the same time they are trying to teach martial arts. They have their own right, their own way, but teaching part-time, no matter how serious you try to be, you can't be as devoted."

Some two-and-a-half years ago, Lee moved to Santa Barbara, California and began the slow task of putting together

the studio and students necessary to the success of any martial arts school. Here, keeping the faith entails a much greater emphasis on instruction than on business principles. So deeply is Lee committed to traditionalism and teaching that the business aspect of his school has been given rather short shrift. Asked about his difficulties in starting a new business, Lee admitted that he was not getting rich in a hurry.

"It's been very tough," he said. "I haven't made any money yet. Some students I do not charge. Some I charge twenty dollars, some twenty-five dollars, some thirty dollars. Some of my students just don't have any money to pay. So what do they do? You know, a paperboy, a Mexican kid—they're trying to make a new way of life here."

Lee does not feel that his students are inclined to take advantage of him. "I think they're sincere, both about wanting to study and about telling me what they can afford to pay. I try to find out what kind of job they have, how many hours they work, how large a family they have. Then I make a judgment. If they make three dollars an hour and have a family of four to support, then I say, 'Okay, pay, just this much or that much.' But, if they're making \$800 for the same people, then, no, they have to pay or not sign up."

But lest we excite a squadron of bargain hunters into making the move to Santa Barbara in search of cheap martial arts instruction, it should be noted that life under the Korean-trained teacher is anything but a picnic.

"Americans have too much freedom," Lee thinks. "What I demand from my students—six hours a week minimum—is not too much. They have to come to a minimum of four hour-and-a-half classes per week. If you have a hard time because you have no patience or endurance, you overcome that."

No doubt, one of the reasons why Lee does not think he requires too much of his students has to do with the hours he himself invests in teaching week in and week out. For six days a week and six hours a day, Lee is inside his dojang, drilling, instructing, making sure that his students are showing signs of progress.

"In the beginning," Lee owns, "the students have adjustment difficulties, but they understand. The environment is different, and people adapt to the environment very fast. When I came to the United States eleven years ago, I looked around and thought how the people all looked funny. Some of them had all curly hair and big eyes, but I adjusted to that. In the school, I provide the environment. In the beginning, students are uncomfortable, but they look around at other people, see they are disciplined, and because they are strangers, they adapt."

Perhaps because he is not commanding top dollar for his instruction, Lee is able and willing to exert a good deal of influence over his pupils.

Tony Zimmer, a graduate student whom Lee was training at his Santa Barbara dojang, was kicked out of school for three months because Lee was worried about Zimmer's academic standing. "He knew I wouldn't make the decision," Zimmer said, "so he made it for me. Then a couple of weeks later, he phoned me and asked me out to dinner, at which time he gave me a hundred dollars to see me through that hectic time."

One of the more obvious ways to increase the public awareness of tang soo do is through the quality of instruction. Jeong Sook Lee, as a board member of examiners in the Moo Duk Kwan Federation, is doubly concerned about the way tang soo do is taught.

"I like to emphasize how my students are being prepared to teach," Lee explained. "That's the difference between my school and other schools." Insisting that students reflect the quality of instruction they've received, Lee elaborated on the



The teacher poses outside his Santa Barbara dojang. The art work on the window, of which the teacher seems especially proud, was done by a student of Lee's.

thought. "If I leave a good image of the martial arts with them, then they are likely to feel inspired to pursue the same approach when they've advanced to instructor level. It depends on what the instructor emphasizes. Martial arts consists of self-defense as well as mental training—the philosophy and the spiritual aspects. I say, 'Okay, if you want to go into tournaments, to compete and get the experience, that's fine. But at the same time that you learn self-defense, I want you also to become a better person. I want you to learn the philosophical aspects.' I ask them all that, and I think they understand."

According to Lee, "Teaching is a way to learn about yourself, to find out where you are. I look to my students and it reminds me of the past, where I was. Teaching the martial arts—I live with this, sleep with this—I do it twenty-four hours a day. I enjoy it, but at the same time, it's a lot of responsibility."

Lee added that he felt a special sympathy for his minority students. "A lot of people think the Mexican people are not reliable," he said, "but I have a different image of the Mexican people—that they are sincere and very hard-working. Also, I think they're more closely related to the people in Korea because of the way they think, their culture, even their food. For instance, I can give Mexicans hot Korean food and they like it; they like hot, spicy food."

One of the things keeping the faith means for Jeong Sook Lee and his family is a lack of vacations. "I think Master Lee wants to put out a better quality student," explained one of Lee's pupils. "We would probably have a larger school, but many people can't take the discipline. A lot of people are here for a short time and find out it's just not what they want. He definitely deserves a vacation, because he's in here all day long. But when one of us teaches, even for one class, you can see that people won't do it for us the way they'll do it for him."

Over and above the student's observations about the devotion of Lee's students, there may be another reason why Jeong Sook Lee doesn't pack up his car and take off for a two-week stay at some Wyoming campground. It may be that he realizes that once there, even in the wilderness, he'd be likely to meet somebody with a martial arts background. If his past is any guide to what he'd do in such an eventuality, he'd probably start the first open-air campfire dojang in the Rockies.



TANG SOO DO IN A NUTSHELL

Tang soo do is an outgrowth of the experience and thought of Grandmaster Hwang Kee, who had been teaching a style of karate called soo bahk do. He founded the Moo Duk Kwan Federation in Korea in 1945 as an association of instructors and students influenced by his particular art. Then, in 1960, when Korea began making efforts to unify Korean karate under one name, an endeavor that ultimately

gave birth to tae kwon do, Grandmaster Hwang did not feel he could permanently join with the tae kwon do forces. "I tried to cooperate, tried to get along with everyone in tae kwon do," Grandmaster Hwang Kee has said, "but soo bahk do is a martial art and only a martial art. It's not like the sports organization of tae kwon do."

A son of tang soo do's founder, H.C. Hwang, recently explained something of tang soo do's philosophy by describing how tang soo do's belt system has been organized.

"The four belts represent the four seasons," Hwang said. "The white belt of the new student represents win-

ter, when everything is covered by snow The spring comes as the snow melts. Leaves turn green, which can be compared to our green belts whose potential is starting to show Like summer, the red belt shows more growing potential After that, the experienced move to blue belt, which is like the blue sky in autumn." Continuing along these same lines, Hwang elaborated that black is associated with death in funerals in Korea, explaining that although the blue belt of mastery may be dyed a deeper blue, even his father, the grandmaster of tang soo do, does not wear black.

One particular difference

between tae kwon do and tang soo do, as stressed by Jeong Sook Lee, Grandmaster Kee and Kee's son, H.C. Hwang, has to do with what these men view as the history and future of both styles.

Asked if a karateka could belong simultaneously to both tae kwon do and moo duk kwan organizations, Jeong Sook Lee's response was blunt.

"Can you be a citizen of two countries? For me, I couldn't join the World Tae Kwon Do Federation because it's an international sport Tae kwon do is a modern, international sport. But tang soo do is a martial art."