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Hwa Rang Do®

SGM Joo Bang Lee



Today we bring to the pages and front cover of our magazine the Supreme Grand Master Joo Bang Lee, a strong pillar of Korean Arts and without whose participation, one could never understand their evolution in the West. Filial tribute, of course, but also a magnificent episode of Martial Arts recent history; example of life of our elders, of their sacrifices and determination in the transition from modern times to postmodernity.

Encounter between past and future, this article, which for its interest and extension will continue in future editions, will take us by the hand of GM Taejoon Lee to meet his father, living legend of Korean Arts, in a way and with some details that, probably, nobody will ever be able to match.



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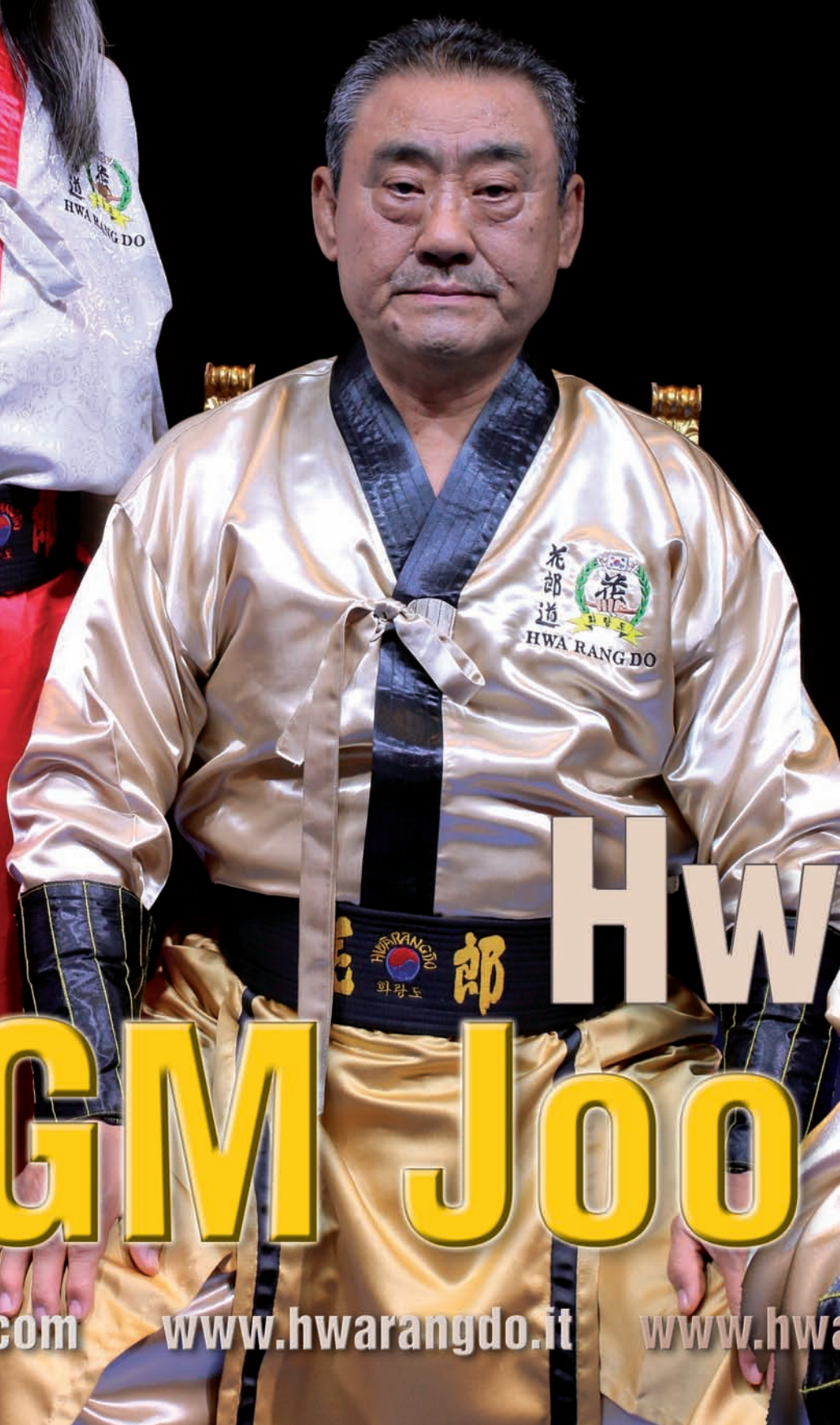
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Also, as he himself confesses, he never thought he would speak of his parents in such a close and open manner, and we deeply appreciate his trust by granting us the privilege of publishing it.

In a time of so many cardboard and papier-mâché heroes empty of contents, in the vacuous era of Instagram where the image is what matters, the solid examples of the strength and the character of the past are more than ever necessary as inspirers for the new generations that are already here, and those which will keep coming, and whose poor human color palette has more to do with posing than with being. Real heroes like SGM Joo Bang Lee, are beacons in the dark that will always illuminate with the example of their lives; lives that marked the history of Martial Arts.

Alfredo Tucci



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Hwa Rang Do®: A Hero's Journey
"Coming to America" (part 1)

By: Grandmaster Taejoon Lee

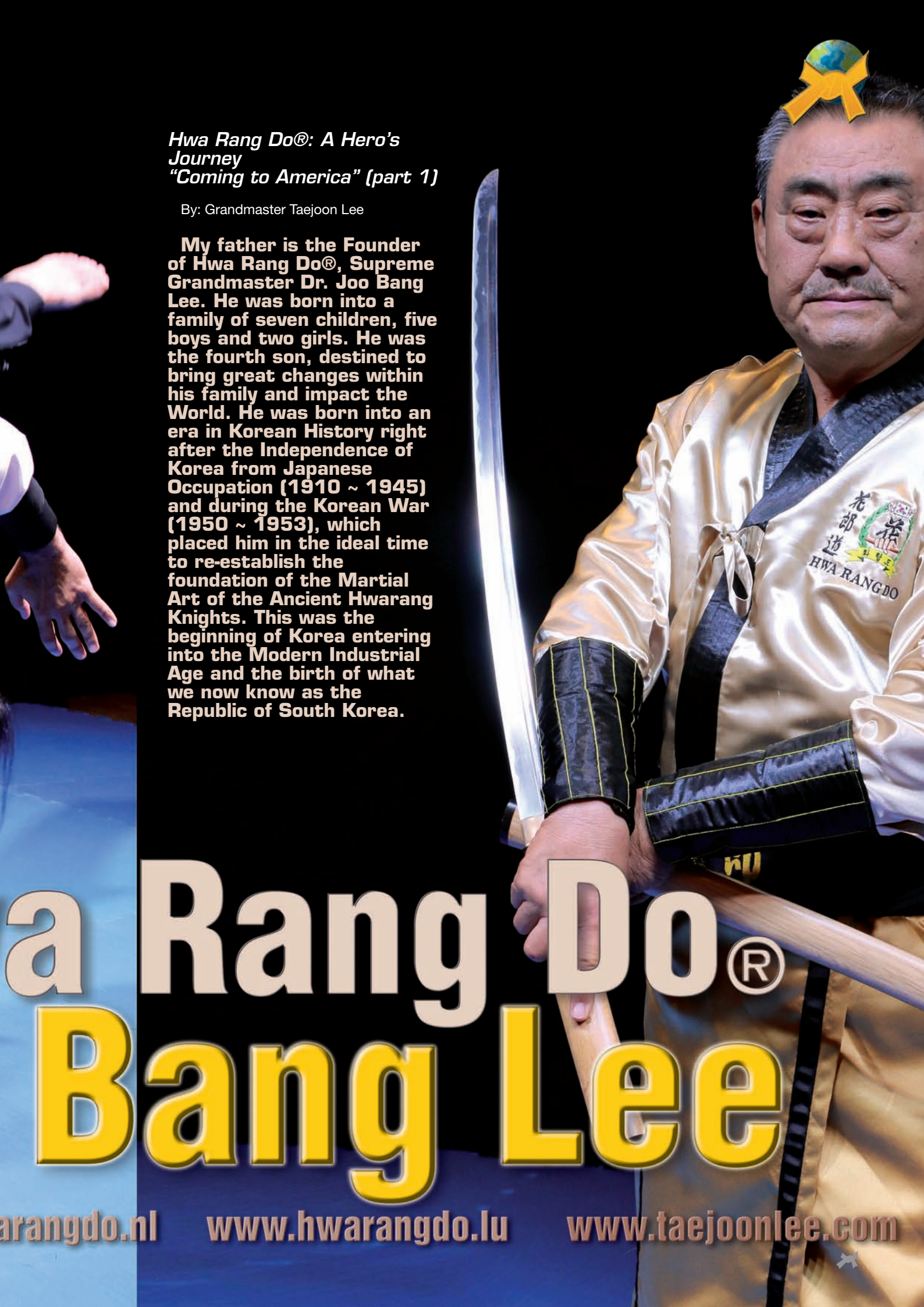
My father is the Founder of Hwa Rang Do®, Supreme Grandmaster Dr. Joo Bang Lee. He was born into a family of seven children, five boys and two girls. He was the fourth son, destined to bring great changes within his family and impact the World. He was born into an era in Korean History right after the Independence of Korea from Japanese Occupation (1910 ~ 1945) and during the Korean War (1950 ~ 1953), which placed him in the ideal time to re-establish the foundation of the Martial Art of the Ancient Hwarang Knights. This was the beginning of Korea entering into the Modern Industrial Age and the birth of what we now know as the Republic of South Korea.

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The entire nation was busy rebuilding its war-torn nation from ashes to one of the most powerful international economic powers of today. Being robbed of its heritage, traditions, language, and cultural identity from the attempted cultural genocide that the Japanese inflicted during its occupation, the people of Korea were eager to rediscover its identity as a nation.

This climate also brought many opportunists, taking advantage of the regained freedom and renewed nationalism. It was very much like the roaring 1920's and the depression of the 1930's of American History. The law of the jungle prevailed and the streets were overrun with small bands of gangsters as the people rallied

against them by defending themselves with bare-knuckles and whatever weapons were available. Even today, firearms are illegal for public possession in Korea. It is from this need, martial arts became a necessity for survival for the common people. One of these men who not only developed the most successful chain of martial art schools in Seoul, but also protected the public from unruly street thugs was my father, Dr. Joo Bang Lee. He was like "Robin Hood" and the people in the community respected him and all of his instructors. Our lapel pin with the Hwa Rang Do crest, which was worn proudly by Hwa Rang Do Black Belts, became a symbol of strength, honor, and justice and anyone who wore it was looked after by the community.



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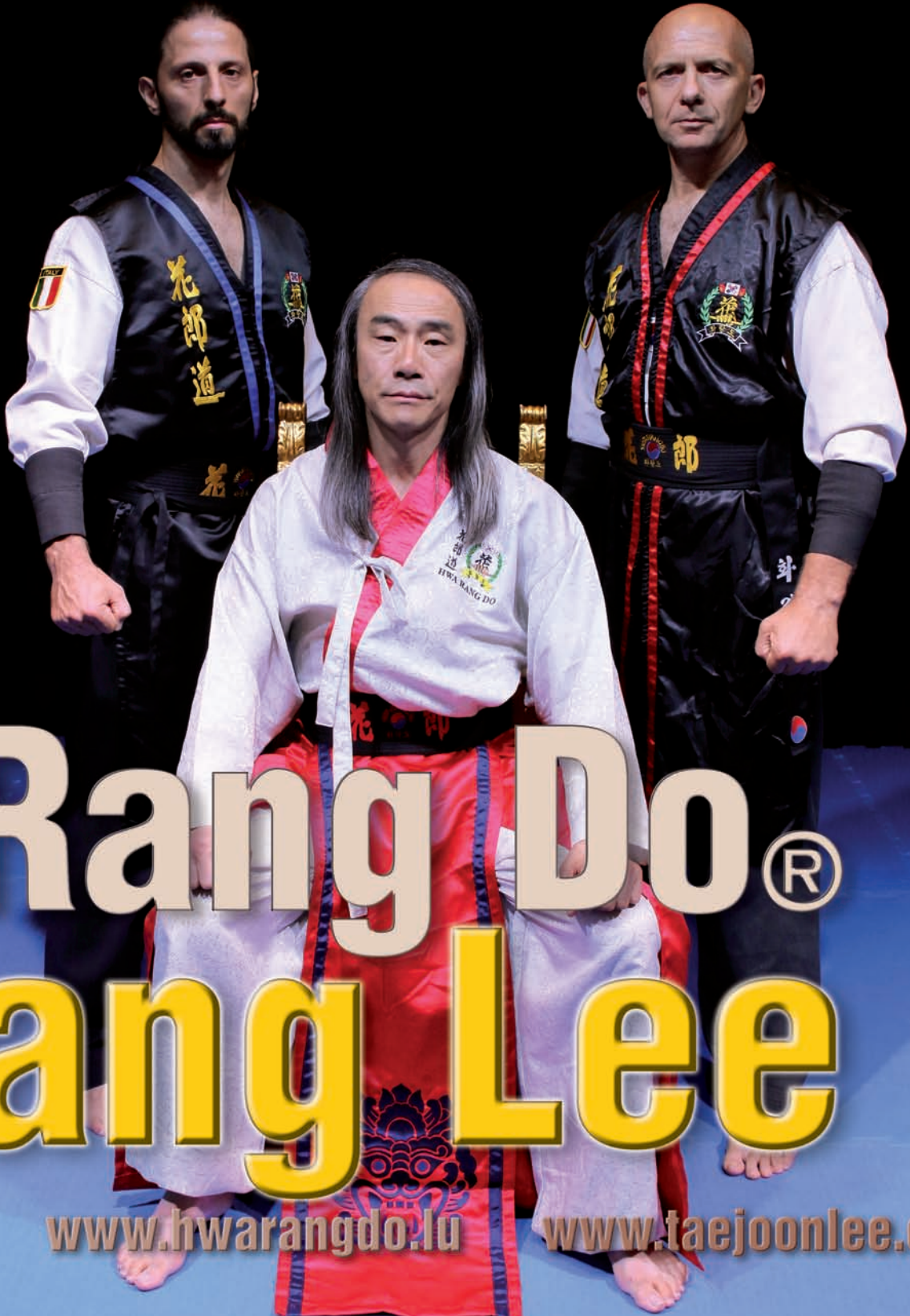




It is important to remember that the late 1950's and early 1960's in South Korea was truly a time of the survival of the fittest in its extreme, where actions truly spoke louder than words. It was a time where a few government officials had the power to arrest and imprison or execute whomever they chose, accusing them of being a communist and committing treason.

One must also understand the social-economic environment of that time. The entire nation was basically centered on one city (Seoul) and the other - the undeveloped countryside and villages, which were decimated by the Korean War, was everything else. The

epicenter of all the politics, social activities, intellectual studies, trend-setting fashion and lifestyles, technology, industrial revolution was all within the borders of the Capital of Seoul. And, it was during this time in Seoul, where my father, before Taekwondo became a National Sport, established a chain of Hwa Rang Do schools, totaling almost 30. No other styles came close. It is my honor and pleasure to share with you some of my experiences with this great man and a living martial art legend as my teacher, mentor, and father as seen through the eyes of a boy, a student, and a son.



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My father's martial art journey began with my grandfather. He was a very strict and righteous man to his children, but from my memory as a grandson, he was always kind and generous. Most definitely he ran his family as a martial artist, as a warrior, a disciplinarian. He was educated in Japan, during the Japanese occupation of Korea. Needless to say, Japan had the best educational institutions at that time. And, while he was in Japan, he

was introduced to Kendo, Judo, as well as western boxing. He gained the value of the martial discipline, the "Samurai-Bushido" mind and with this interest in the martial discipline; my grandfather started teaching his children as soon as they could walk. Seeing that two of his sons my father and his older brother possessed the best potential, he enrolled them into the nearby So Gwang Sa Buddhist Temple by the age of five years old. They were taken under



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the tutelage of Suahm Dosa, a hermit monk who was the 57th generation inheritor of the knowledge of the ancient Martial and Healing Art of the Hwarang Knights and as fate would have it, the Hwarang were the predecessors of the Samurai. Although, he practiced hermitage and lived alone he was under the auspices of the So Gwang Sa Temple. This was originally in the mountains of North Korea and as the country was divided in two after the Korean War, my grandfather and his family as well as Suahm Dosa relocated to South Korea. Suahm Dosa took residence at Yang Mi Ahm Temple where my father and his brother continued their training.

Korea as a geographic region is 75 percent mountainous, which renders it ideal for the practice of hermitage as many Buddhist monks isolate themselves away from other people and devote themselves fully to mediation and following the Buddhist 8-Fold Path towards enlightenment. It was a very simplistic way of living with minimalism and detachment from worldly goods at its core. It must have been a very difficult situation for my father, as he also had to tend to all the daily chores of cooking, cleaning, and maintaining the modest dwelling, which was without electricity or any other modern comforts. It was basically a traditional wooden Korean home with one little room for living with a small-detached kitchen, an outdoor

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water well, an outhouse, and the training was all done outdoors throughout all weather conditions.

My father told me that Suahm Dosa never spoke a word and that he was shown a technique only once and if he didn't do it right, he would get a whipping. One of the stories, which caught my attention as a young boy was that Suahm Dosa was able to teach my father through his dreams. Once, he remembers having a dream when he faced up against a tiger and had to defend himself from the tiger's attacks. He told me that it seemed so real and that when he woke up, he could remember every movement, every technique, which he continued to practice and develop. When he shared his dream with Suahm Dosa, he gave a look as though he already knew and in that moment my father realized that his master had projected his will into his subconscious. Stories like this were fascinating and captured my imagination, which only supported my mythic, god-like, superhero view of my father as most children do when they are young, but mine was definitely real.

Even my imagination could not do justice to the intensity and the extent of my father's training with Suahm Dosa, especially at such a young age. Even if it were told, it would be hard to believe. However, only through great trial, great sacrifice, when the spirit and the depths of our heart are tested can there be true greatness. Although in Korea, during those times, it was common for adults to expect more from their younger children as they were given much responsibility sooner. I remember when I was young, six /seven years old, I used to walk miles to school alone and even during the cold winters in the snow. I also took public buses to school and at one time even got lost, but somehow found my way back home. This would be unheard of today in our modern society.

My earliest memories of Korea during my childhood were filled mainly with Hwa Rang Do. My father owned a three-story building. The first floor was rented out; second floor was our school, and the third floor was our residence. So, I was practically born and raised in the dojang (martial art school). I remember many students and masters training all the time. As soon as I could walk, I was walking around trying to mimic them as they tried to show me a technique or two. I used to see footprints on the ceiling and wondered how they got there until one day, I saw my father teaching a class where he leaped into the air, spinning 540 degrees in a ferocious whirlwind then touching the ceiling ever so gracefully, leaving another of his footprint on the ceiling. I promised myself that one day I would leave my footprint on that ceiling next to my dad's, but our migration to America would rob me of my childhood dream; however small and

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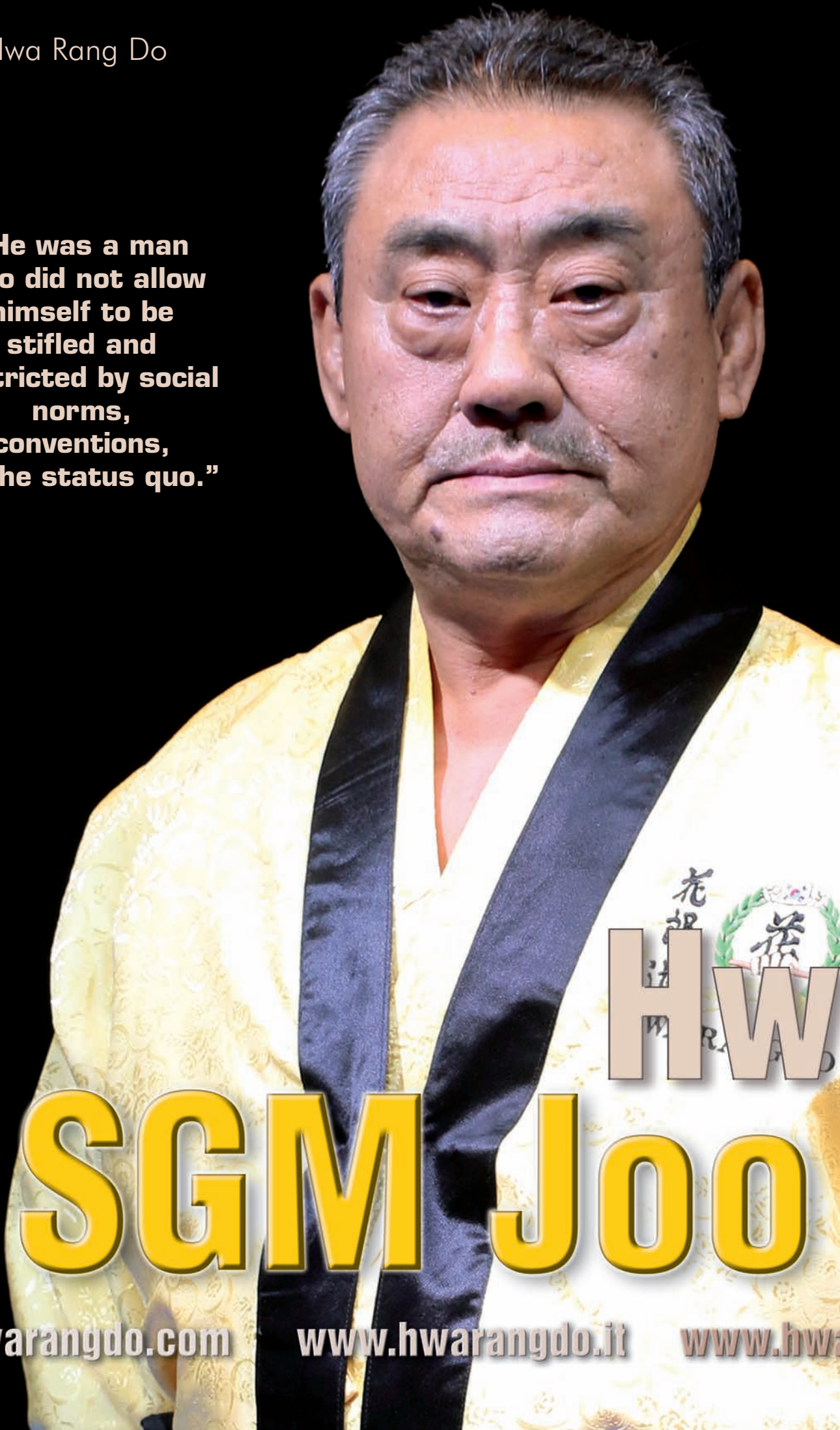
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**“He was a man
who did not allow
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or the status quo.”**



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**“Being too young,
having no money
or status,
which are the most
common excuses and
complaints for most
people who have
failed with
resentment and
regret of unfulfilled
dreams,
never prevented my
father from aspiring
for greatness and
persevering through
resistance.”**

seemingly trite, it fueled my desire for Hwa Rang Do, for knowledge, for greatness like my father.

I was privileged to see many things that ordinary students would never encounter, even how my father trained and disciplined his masters. It is common in dojangs of Korea to have live-in instructors, and so we had several of them. One late night I heard a commotion downstairs in the dojang, so I quietly sneaked down the stairs to peek at what was going on. My father was disciplining two of his instructors because they came in very late and were drunk. It is often customary for students to invite the instructors after class for dinner and drinks. However, my father frowned against this practice and was very angry with his instructors who disobeyed. He had them go down in push-up position, holding a large stick in one hand he walked in between them. Suddenly, he snapped his wrist effortlessly and was able to hit both of them on their buttocks with lightning speed. The strikes were powerful enough to draw blood as I saw blood seeping through their white dobok (uniform) pants. It was fairly common for me to witness this kind of discipline, corporal punishment, as I also received them when I disobeyed. So, for me the discipline was not what was most surprising or shocking, but how my father was able to do what he did with one hand is what impressed me the most.

Most of what I hear about my father's exploits during his youth comes from my mother and it is very rare for my father to actually tell me about his past experiences, his past hardships and struggles. However, it was clear to me that in those days, he was quite young yet very talented and was respected by both the young and the old. In Korea, being a Confucian culture with strict adherence to age and seniority, earning the respect from people older than you is very difficult, but my father was very well respected by both his peers and seniors. He was a man who did not allow himself to be stifled and restricted by social norms, conventions, or the status quo. Being too young, having no money or status, which are the most common excuses and complaints for most people who have failed with resentment and regret of unfulfilled dreams, never prevented my father from aspiring for greatness and persevering through resistance. He had also raised me, instilling the same qualities by putting me in challenging situations such as starting a year earlier in school, being youngest to hold a master title, in America always moving away from the invasion of Asians and Koreans to all-white neighborhoods. These were all things, which at the time I was not happy with and was angry towards my father, questioning why he would put me in these uncomfortable situations where I was always the smallest, the youngest, the minority. I had no choice, I had to prevail as he has engrained into me at an early age that failure was never an option and

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as long as one perseveres, success is inevitable. In hindsight, I can appreciate why my father did what he did and I am truly grateful.

With his immense determination and intense passion for Hwa Rang Do and with the help of his brother Joo Sang Lee, he was able to create one of the strongest martial art groups in Korea during the early 1960's with Hwa Rang Do as well as being a major influence in the unification efforts and development of Korean Martial Arts in the Postmodern Era.

These were their golden times. When they opened their first major school in Seoul, they had many students, teaching from 6 am until late into the night. All the classes were packed and they were very successful, enough so to purchase their own building. However, this success did not come over night and in my opinion there were two main factors that aided in their success, my father's unrelenting determination to succeed and the meeting of my mother. My father's life can be summed up as a love story, the love for his one passion and the love for his one woman.

Now it's getting a bit more personal and it is of matters, which you would never hear anywhere else and by anyone else. My parents first meeting while they were still in high school where they literally fell in love at first sight is also a story that is heroic, mythic in nature. My father was helping a friend who requested his assistance in collecting a debt. In searching for the culprit, they ended up at a popular sun bathing spot on the beachside of a nearby river, during one hot humid summer day. They found the person whom they were looking for with a group of people all sun bathing together. Next to the person in question was a beautiful woman who happened to be a cousin of the culprit and when my father and my future mother to be locked eyes, the rest is history. All matters were resolved and forgiven yet another scuffle broke out with another group, which lead to the rescue of my mother by my father and they ended up missing the last bus back into the city. They had to walk back home, only the two of them and as my mother had told me, "It was many kilometers which took hours, but it felt so short, so brief."

My grandfather made a fortune manufacturing and replacing glass windows for the trains in his hometown in North Korea, near Manchuria. As the trains would go from the south and travel to the freezing cold through Siberia, the glasses of the windows on the train would constantly crack and break. My grandfather exclusively replaced the glasses, which made him a very rich man. When the Korean War broke out, my grandparents with their seven kids attempted to escape to the South and as though they were all going on a picnic with one large picnic basket full of cash, they got into a boat to escape. Hot in pursuit, they tried to transfer to another boat and as they did, my grandfather dropped the basket into the ocean and there went his fortune, estimated to be a million dollars at the time, which would have been of an incredible value today. When they arrived in South Korea, they had nothing and I have heard stories of my grandmother picking weeds and grass from the dirt field and making a soup out of it, feeding her seven children. My father would tell me that when he was a child, he never saw my grandmother ever eat. There was never enough food and she always fed the children first, leaving nothing for her. Eventually they got back onto their feet yet life was still hard for them. Being a witness to



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this, my father left home at sixteen and promised that he would not come back home and eat another meal from his mother until he can make it on his own.

He never stepped back home until he succeeded with his dojang.

It was during these times that my father met my mother. He was struggling, hungry, yet always training and studying. My father in high school was a student police, which is comparable to a MP (Military Police), who patrolled the school in uniform with an armband, having the authority to catch and discipline students breaking the rules. There are many tales of my father in high school, but the one thing that characterizes his authority and leadership throughout his school career is illustrated by the students who were senior to him carrying his bags. In Korea, especially during that era, the school system of seniority and hazing was severe. Each classmen had their place and had to do all that they were told from the senior classmen. And, in those days they had to carry all their books from all subjects to school and back home, which meant the bags were very heavy and hard to carry. So, the senior students would subjugate the junior classmen, especially the freshman to carry their bags. And, it was these shameless seniors that my father schooled and punished them by carrying his own bags



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“With his immense determination and intense passion for Hwa Rang Do and with the help of his brother Joo Sang Lee, he was able to create one of the strongest martial art groups in Korea during the early 1960's.”

while he was a freshman himself, giving them a taste of their own medicine. The strong desire for justice is another underlying trait of a hero and because of this my father would help to save and seek justice for many people.

When they first started their venture together to establish Hwa Rang Do in Seoul, it was very hard for them. One of the stories that my parents shared with me as I opened the first Hwa Rang Do school in Los Angeles in 1994 where I also lived on a loft above the matted training hall behind a draped curtain that separated my private chambers, was when they first tried opening a school when they had little to no money. They rented a small worn-down building where my parents actually lived in the back and had a small area in the front for training. They hung a small drape to separate the dojang floor from their living space. They told me that there were large rats running around in the middle of the night as they tried to sleep and that my father took the opportunity to practice knife throwing, trying to exterminate the infestation, reminding me that compared to how they used to live, that my current dwelling was a palace.

From their humble beginnings, my father's prowess and skill caught on and with the encouragement and support of my mother they eventually grew and were able to purchase a three story building and that's how they created our first Korean Headquarters. After succeeding in establishing his Hwa Rang Do Schools throughout Seoul, he eventually helped to support his parents as well as his siblings. Although they were high school sweethearts and each other's first love, they could not marry as it is customary for the older siblings to marry first and he had three older brothers. One by one they helped his brothers get married, then finally came the day that they would wed. He was always bound by duty: duty to his parents, duty to his siblings, duty to his master, his students, to the art, and to his own family. His life would be an endless journey to uphold his duty, honor, and loyalties, another important foundational trait of a hero.

The way my father talks about those times are filled with excitement, being highly motivated, very active, and charismatic. Although he worked rigorously, he was always very close with his family. I remember many times we used to take picnics to the Jang Choong Park that was near the city where we lived. It was a very nice, large park, and I remember frequently having family picnics there. Actually, when we came to the United States is when we did not do so many family activities together and it was in the States that I really didn't get to see my father often at all. It is ironic that the reason to immigrate to America was to have a better life, yet that better life meant the sacrifice of my father. In Korea, he was highly motivated to change the history of Korean martial arts and in America he wanted to introduce Hwa Rang Do to the World. He has never retreated and always charged ahead, taking from his own quote, "...when a fish is in a cup, the cup seems to be the whole world." And, he chose from swimming in a cup to swimming in the ocean.

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