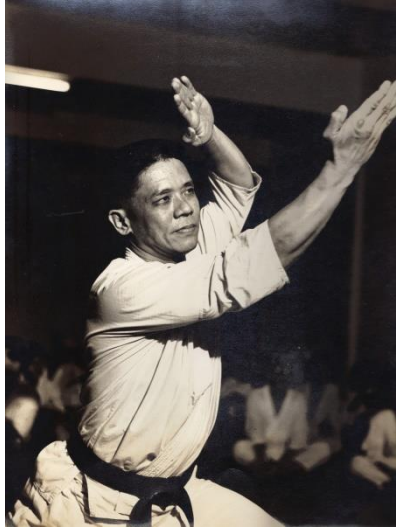


Grand Master Low Koon Lin (1927 – 2024)

Malaysian Taekwon-Do Pioneer

A Tribute



Today, the 21st day in December of 2024, my father passed away. He was 97. I only recently returned from Malaysia having spent time with him, talking about the early years of Taekwon-Do in Malaysia, where he played an important role in the promotion of the art. We have lost a father, a grandfather and a great grandfather. We have also lost a pioneer. This tribute to my father is reproduced from an earlier article in 2020.

Taekwon-Do was my father's life's work and he dedicated more than 50 years to sharing General Choi's legacy with many thousands of people. In a letter written for the 1978 2nd Malaysian Taekwon-Do Championships, General Choi referred to GM Low Koon Lin as his "... most loyal and dedicated pupil ...".

It filled me with sadness to see my father grow old, lose strength, independence and sense of purpose. Yet he remained grateful to the end, for Taekwon-Do had enabled him to raise a family and live a long and healthy life. My father loved to teach Taekwon-Do and only stopped in his mid-80s. The reason why Taekwon-Do has meant so much is grounded in his personal history.

GM Low Koon Lin was born on April 13th, 1927 in a town named Bentong, in Pahang, Malaysia. My grandfather worked hard to provide for his family as life was difficult, but not extremely so. However, this changed drastically with the Japanese occupation of Malaysia in 1941. At this time my father was only 14 years of age and during the occupation he experienced and witnessed much brutality and suffering. I believe that it was during this time that my father learned to recognise and take advantage of opportunities and became resilient in the face of hardship.

The war put a stop to his formal education and by the time it had finished, he was a young man with different priorities and responsibilities. My father worked with my grandfather for a few years before he met and married my mother, Tan Siew Fong. Then they started a family and my father began working as a clerk at Lever Brothers. However, there had been no future in that position and his lack of higher education limited his career options. The war had impacted the economy significantly and life for many Malaysians was difficult. Then one day in 1962, at the age of 35, he found Taekwon-Do and his life changed forever.

My father remembered that day vividly, 62 years ago, as he returned home, very excited, describing a demonstration he had witnessed in Kuala Lumpur of something called Taekwon-Do. Days earlier he had seen an advertisement in a newspaper about a martial arts demonstration at a Chinese temple along Peel Road in Kuala Lumpur. Among a number of amazing feats of physical ability, he mentioned, now Grand Master Kim Bok Man kicking and breaking a flowerpot held 9 feet in the air. This demonstration so impressed and inspired him that he decided to visit the Korean Embassy to find out more. He was at the time, a black belt in Judo.

A short time after witnessing the Taekwon-Do demonstration, my father met with General Choi, the Father of Taekwon-Do, and expressed his wish to become his student. This is how General Choi, then Korean Ambassador to Malaysia (1962-1964), became my father's first instructor and my father, his first Malaysian student.

“One day a young man named Low Koon Lin came to my office and asked, ‘What is the exercise you practice?’” General Choi in Taekwon-Do and I: 2 The Vision of Exile, p.26

General Choi told my father that if he wanted to learn Taekwon-Do he would have come to the Korean embassy every day at 5:00 a.m., except weekends. At first General Choi was my father's only instructor. As time went by, General Choi would both teach and oversee the training by now GM Kim Bok Man and Woo Jae Lim. Other instructors who taught my father were now GM Nam Tae Hi and Lee Byung Moo.

After work, my father would again attend the evening Taekwon-Do class. This regime of twice daily training continued into 1964. The training was rigorous and free-sparring was *not* light contact. In addition to this, my father would often train at home, where my brother and I would watch him practice fundamental movements and would ask him why he ‘wiggled his bottom’ during some movements. We found this very amusing at the time. Later on we came to understand the theory of power in action and the importance of concentrating the entire body and mind on a single target by moving the bigger muscles around the hip and abdomen first, then channeling that power to a point beyond the intended target.

In July of 1963, my father was part of the 1st Malaysian Taekwon-Do Exhibition Team at Merdeka Stadium. In this same year the Malaysian Taekwon-Do Association was born. Malaysia was one of the original member nations of the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF), later formed in March 22nd 1966. My father achieved his 1st degree black belt in 1964 and when he was 2nd degree, founded his own club, the International Taekwon-Do Academy in 1966, in Petaling Jaya.

1964 onwards was a period of growth and consolidation during which several Korean instructors, including Yun Young Ku, Rhee Chong Chul, Rhee Chong Hyap, Choi Kwang Jo, Choi Chang Keun, Kim Jong Chan and Rhee Ki Ha, now Grand Masters, played a vital role in spreading Taekwon-Do throughout Malaysia and surrounding countries. General Choi also asked my father to travel with him to help spread Taekwon-Do, but my father did not want to leave his family and he felt that there were better and younger men, to fulfill that role.

The 1st Asian Taekwon-Do Championship was held in Hong Kong in 1969, September 26th to 28th. My father, who was 3rd degree at the time, was the Malaysian Team Captain at that tournament. He still has the championship banner and medal with the championship date on them (*see attached*). The second Asian Tournament was held in Malaysia, March of 1971, the year I moved to Australia.

The following years saw political turmoil in Korea leading to a split in Taekwon-Do with the ITF moving its headquarters to Canada in 1972 and the World Taekwon-Do Federation (now WT) basing itself in Seoul, South Korea, in 1973. My father mentioned that around this time there was considerable pressure on Taekwon-Do instructors to join the WTF. By the early to mid-1970s many of the early pioneer Korean Instructors had left Malaysia to spread ITF Taekwon-Do throughout the world. This was a sensitive time for ITF in Malaysia. Nevertheless, my father stayed true to General Choi and his legacy. My father continued to promote and grow ITF Taekwon-Do in Malaysia. In 1972 he was appointed Chief Instructor in Malaysia by General Choi. He held this post until 1978.

In 1974 my father, now 5th degree, was vice-president of MTF and General Choi was living in Toronto, Canada, the official base of ITF. That same year my father travelled to Montreal, Canada for the 1st ITF World Championships, where he was appointed as one of the referees. This was the first World Championship outside of Korea. Over this time period my father, accompanied by one or two of his senior students, among them GM Cindy Armstrong, also travelled extensively throughout Malaysia working to promote and build Taekwon-Do. His trusty green Volvo took him to such places as Penang, Pahang (Kuantan), Perak (Ipoh) and Trengganu.

The first Malaysia Taekwon-Do Tournament was held on October 18th 1975 commemorating the foundation of the Malaysian Taekwon-Do Federation, with my father as Chairman of the tournament committee. A few years later, in 1978, he travelled to Oklahoma City, U.S.A. for the ITF World Championships. This same year my father achieved his 6th degree black belt.

Around this time my father chose to leave the Malaysian Taekwon-Do Federation, due to differences within the national governing body. From this point onwards and for the rest of his teaching life, he focused only on the art of Taekwon-Do and his love of teaching. Over the next decade and beyond, my father grew and strengthened his own clubs, building his own Taekwon-Do family in Malaysia, remaining loyal to General Choi, his legacy and to the 'Do' of Taekwon-Do. What my father enjoyed most, was teaching. Early on he also adapted to teach Taekwon-Do in different settings, such as small community groups, in corporate environments and even in people's homes. He did whatever he could to share General Choi's legacy with others.

During his Taekwon-Do career he organised national tournaments and seminars, participated in international tournaments and attended International Instructor and Umpire Courses. General Choi awarded my father his 7th degree in 1989, for his dedication and his patience; making him the first Malaysian ITF Taekwon-Do Master. In 1997, my father and I attended the World Conference in Toronto with General Choi Hong Hi.

My father long ago reminded me of the letter he received from General Choi in the 1996, asking him to rejoin the Malaysian Taekwon-Do organisation. My father declined and said to General Choi, that it was the art that mattered and that was all he needed. Nevertheless, General Choi awarded my father his 8th degree in 1996, in recognition of his dedication and contribution to Taekwon-Do. Then, in 2006, he was awarded his 9th degree by then President, Professor Dr. Chang Ung, who is now our Honorary Life President. My father's 9th degree was a fitting tribute to someone who has dedicated his life to Taekwon-Do since his first meeting with General Choi all those years ago.

Malaysia is often referred to as 'the second home of Taekwon-Do' and my father, GM Low Koon Lin, was recognised by General Choi as his first Malaysian student. He proudly showed me his plaque, which is numbered 15, a testament to the years of dedication to Taekwon-Do. A number of Grand Masters today would also name my father as one of their instructors. For example, GM Leong Wai Meng, GM Cindy Armstrong, GM Yeow Chang Watt, GM Tam Fook Chee, GM Mohd Aswan Khoo and GM Tan Eng Kiat. Many instructors throughout the world would also name my father as their teacher. One such is New Zealand pioneer, Mr Norman Ng, whom my father remembers first meeting in 1966 in Petaling Jaya. Masters Nicholas and Damian Jayamaha in Australia also trained under the instruction of GM Low Koon Lin. My father was also an instructor to both my brother, Master Low Leong Tuck and I.

Over the years many of my father's old students visited him in Malaysia, including GM Leong Wai Meng and GM Cindy Armstrong. It made him very happy to be remembered and to know that Taekwon-Do continues to shape the lives of so many, as General Choi's legacy lives on into the future and future generations.

My father lived a rich and meaningful life. I sincerely hope that this short tribute will give a little insight into my father, GM Low Koon Lin and his contribution to ITF Taekwon-Do, as a pioneer in Malaysia.

Meeting General Choi was a memorable and defining moment for my father. It was a moment that determined how he would live the rest of his life. His respect and deep affection for General Choi has never wavered. Sharing the gift of General Choi's legacy has been my father's mission in life. If I could describe my father's life and contribution to Taekwon-Do, it would be this – An unconditional loyalty to General Choi and lifelong loyalty to his legacy.

GM Low Ming Tuck.