



The History and Evolution of Soo Bahk Do – Tang Soo Do

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When we tie our belts and step onto the floor, we are not simply practicing punches, kicks, and forms—we are stepping into a living tradition that stretches back hundreds of years, through Korea's history, and into the present day. To understand Tang Soo Do and Soo Bahk Do, we must begin with the roots of Korean martial culture.

Ancient Foundations

The earliest records of Korean martial arts go back nearly 2,000 years to the **Three Kingdoms period** (37 BCE–668 CE). In the murals of ancient tombs from the **Koguryo Kingdom**, we see warriors in dynamic postures—kicking, striking, and grappling [1]. Martial training was not only a matter of survival but also a matter of spirit. The elite warrior class, the **Hwarang** of the Silla Kingdom, trained in martial skills, strategy, and ethics. Their code emphasized loyalty, honor, and respect—values that remain central to our practice today [2].

During these times, one of the names used for martial practice was **Soo Bahk**, meaning "hand strike" or "hand strike method." It is this term that later becomes important in defining our modern art [3].

Decline and Dormancy

For centuries, Korea's martial arts thrived. But as firearms and political upheaval changed warfare, traditional martial practice declined. By the Yi (Joseon) Dynasty (1392–1897), martial training became more ceremonial. The art of Soo Bahk was recorded in the **Muye Dobo Tongji** (the Comprehensive Manual of Martial Arts) in 1790—preserving techniques of open-hand combat and weaponry [4]. Yet, by the late 19th century, much of Korea's native martial tradition had faded into obscurity.

The Japanese Occupation (1910–1945)

This was a dark period for Korean culture. During Japanese rule, the practice of Korean martial arts was largely suppressed, along with the Korean language and traditions [5]. Many young Koreans, however, were exposed to Japanese martial arts such as **Karate, Judo, and Kendo** [6]. Some studied abroad in Japan and China, training in different styles. When the occupation ended in 1945, these practitioners returned to Korea with a vision: to revive Korean martial arts and blend them with what they had learned abroad.

The Birth of Modern Tang Soo Do

In the years immediately following liberation, martial schools—called **Kwans**—began to emerge. Among them were Chung Do Kwan, Moo Duk Kwan, Song Moo Kwan, Ji Do Kwan, Chang Moo Kwan, and several others [7]. Each Kwan reflected the experiences and influences of its founder.



Of these, **Hwang Kee (1914–2002)** stands out as a pivotal figure. Trained in both Chinese martial arts and exposed to Japanese Karate, he sought to bring back the ancient Korean art of Soo Bahk [8]. In 1945, he founded the **Moo Duk Kwan** (“Institute of Martial Virtue”) [9]. His system blended Karate’s linear techniques, Chinese fluidity, and the historic foundation of Soo Bahk. He initially called it **Hwa Soo Do**, then **Tang Soo Do** (“Way of the Tang Hand,” recognizing cultural ties with China) [10].

From Tang Soo Do to Soo Bahk Do

As the art grew, political tensions arose within Korean martial arts. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Korean government pushed for unification of the various Kwans into a single national art—what eventually became **Taekwondo** [11]. Many schools joined, but Hwang Kee resisted, determined to preserve the integrity of his system and its heritage [12].

In 1960, after years of research into the Muye Dobo Tongji and Korea’s martial history, Hwang Kee renamed his system **Soo Bahk Do**—reviving the ancient name as a distinctly Korean identity [13]. While the name Tang Soo Do remained in use, particularly in the United States and abroad, the art carried forward under both banners: Tang Soo Do (emphasizing its mid-20th century identity) and Soo Bahk Do (emphasizing its deeper Korean roots).

A Living Lineage

The spread of Tang Soo Do to the United States was not just through books and demonstrations—it came through direct transmission. **Sa Bum Nim Carl Clarizio, Jr.** trained personally under Founder Hwang Kee while stationed at **Osan Air Base in Korea** [14]. Carrying with him the Founder’s teachings, he became one of the first Americans to bring authentic Moo Duk Kwan Tang Soo Do back to the United States.

One of his direct students, **Dr. Michael R. Foley**, became Sa Bum Nim Clarizio’s **first-generation Black Belt**. This makes Dr. Foley a **second-generation Black Belt from the Founder himself**—a living link in the Moo Duk Kwan lineage [15]. In 1991, Dr. Foley founded Foley Family Tang Soo Do which eventually became **The Center for Humane Living (CHL)** in Phoenix, Arizona. CHL has since become a unique and lasting expression of Tang Soo Do philosophy—an institution committed not only to martial excellence but also to leadership, compassion, and the application of martial values in daily life [16].

Global Growth and Legacy

Through the dedication of Hwang Kee and his disciples, Tang Soo Do spread worldwide in the latter half of the 20th century. American servicemen stationed in Korea during the 1950s and 1960s brought it home, where it flourished [17]. The art became known for its high, powerful kicks, deep stances, and emphasis on discipline and respect [18].

Today, Tang Soo Do and Soo Bahk Do are practiced by thousands around the world. Some lineages emphasize the Tang Soo Do identity, reflecting the art’s post-war origins. Others embrace Soo Bahk Do, aligning with Hwang Kee’s historical vision. Both, however, share the



same roots: the warrior traditions of ancient Korea, the struggles of the occupation, and the vision of modern masters [19].

The Spirit of the Art

What has endured through all these centuries is not only technique but philosophy. Soo Bahk Do—Tang Soo Do—is about much more than self-defense. It is about cultivating balance of mind, body, and spirit. It is about living with respect, humility, courage, and compassion [20].

When you train at The Center for Humane Living, you are carrying forward a story that began in the tombs of the Koguryo kings, was preserved in the scrolls of the Joseon dynasty, survived the trials of occupation, and was reborn in the hands of masters like Hwang Kee. That lineage flows through Sa Bum Nim Clarizio and Grand Master Foley and into the students at The Center for Humane Living. You are the next chapter in this living tradition.

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