



Episode 343 – Won Kuk Lee | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)



**Jeremy Lesniak:**

Hey how's it going everybody? Welcome to [whistlekickmartialartsradio](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com), this is episode 343. Today were talking about a historical figure from the martial arts, Won Kuk Lee. If you're new to show you may not know my voice, I'm Jeremy Lesniak I'm your host for the show, I'm the founder at [whistlekick](http://whistlekick.com) and I love my job because I get to talk about martial arts meet martial artists and help design martial arts products. If you want to see any of those products head over [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com). You can use the code `podcast15` and save 15% on anything over there. We also have products on Amazon but you're not gonna get that code there, whatever works for you check it out. If you want show notes, [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com) is the place to go including transcripts, were getting better. Transcript are hidden pretty close to when the episodes are released and were still going back and transcribing old episodes.

Let's talk about today's subject, Won Kuk Lee. Won Kuk Lee is the founder of Chung Do Kwon one of the first nine schools that taught tangsoodo in the 1940s he was also a student of the Shotokan karate founder, Gichin Funakoshi. Lee was born on April 13, 1907 in Seoul South Korea. During that time Korea was under Japanese rule. There were many prohibitions imposed by the Japanese and one of them was teaching or practicing martial arts of all sorts. It was illegal. So those who wanted to do martial arts had to leave the country and go to either China or Japan. One day when Lee was still young he met a man named Mr. Kim who was in his 60s. The old man told him that front years prior to the Japanese occupation, people used to train in a Korean martial art called taekyon. However, people with bad



## Episode 343 – Won Kuk Lee | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)

intentions like gangs had used the martial art unlawfully hence the government ordered people to stop. Wealthy Korean families during that time usually center children to Japan to study at the best universities with the intention of expanding the connections for better chances of success in their lives. In 1926, Lee had the privilege to travel to Tokyo. He first attended high school and afterwards attended Chuo University one of the most prestigious institutions in Japan. There he got a chance to know Gichin Funakoshi and his son Gigo Funakoshi. Lee trained under the Funakoshis in Shotokan karate, and was able to achieve the highest rank among all practitioners who were not Japanese nationals. After Lee graduated from Chuo University he went on traveling to martial arts centers including Okinawa and Shanghai, China.

It never occurred to Lee that Korea would attain independence from Japan. In 1944, one year before the independence Lee managed to return to his homeland with the help of some high-ranking Japanese officials. He even got a position at the Ministry of transportation. Lee realized that the original Korean martial arts were being forgotten and just becoming part of history. So in the same year Lee sought permission from the government to teach tangsoodo, or Korean translation of karate-do in Korea. The government rejected his request twice. But on his third attempt, the government finally approved his petition and he started teaching at the Yung Shin school gymnasium in Seodaemun, district in Seoul. He named his very school, Chung Do Kwan, literally translated as school of the blue wave. When Korean independence came on August 15, 1945, the entire country was in turmoil. There were riots among political groups and some of them use tangsoodo against each other. This caused the government to release an order prohibiting the use of the martial art in any government facilities. Due to a series of unfortunate events, Lee was forced to move the school to the Sichungyo church located in the Kyunji-dong in Seoul. Lee did not have any sponsors or financiers back then, so he used his own money and some small contributions to promote and teach tangsoodo. Eventually the art became popular in the applications to a school increase greatly. As Lee knew that not all people could use the martial art in a good way, he became very careful in selecting a student. He picked only those who showed seriousness. He did not want the image of tangsoodo to be ruined again because of gangs. He made it clear the tangsoodo's objective was to instill discipline and to serve as a moral guidance to its practitioners.

It took him a year of teaching for the government to recognize the many benefits of the martial art. He finally got financial support again from public institutions. He was also able to teach in various government institutions such as the Korean Police General Headquarters and the Korean Army. From then on, tangsoodo became significant in the eyes of the government. Lee's Chung do kwon became very popular in a short period of time and it reached around 5000 registered members. President Syngman Rhee requested Lee that all these members become part of the Korean Republican Party. The President even offered Lee the post of Minister of internal affairs as a return for that favor. However, Lee felt uncomfortable with this he thought the present might have a hidden agenda as the Chung Do Kwon members are all capable of fighting. His instinct proved to be correct, when he was accused by the government of leading a group of assassins when he declined the offer. More than just false accusations



## Episode 343 – Won Kuk Lee | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)

Lee his wife and some senior members of the school were beaten and tortured. Some were even killed according to Lee, but still he strongly stood by his principles and did not succumb to the government's desires. Finally the Country was liberated in 1950.

Lee was more than happy for their liberation but it was also the time of the war broke out between North and South Korea on June 25, 1950. Kim Il Sung led his communist forces against Pres. Rhee. To avoid the conflict in the capital, Lee and his family fled far down south to the Busan City South Korea. They had no choice but to leave their home that was worth millions of dollars and never go back again. Soon after in the same year, Lee and his wife arranged a flight to Japan and declared themselves political refugees. One day he received news from the Russian Ambassador to South Korea, that tae kwon do was greatly accepted in North Korea this was because of Yong Jeun Yoo, one of his head instructors who disappeared in North Korea but appeared later on. You promoted the art in the North then return to South Korea after the war. When Yoo learn that Lee was still alive he sent lee photos of his students proving that he was successful in teaching art. He even entice Lee to join him in North Korea. Most importantly, Lee received a personal invitation from Kim Il Sung himself to immigrate to the north. But Le didn't accept any of these because he was strongly against the idea of communism. During the late 1940s and the early 1950s, many martial arts schools were established by Koreans who study in Japan and learned karate. Lee was among the first Koreans, if not the very first, to establish martial arts school teaching karate. They called the martial art Korean karate. Lee preferred to use the Korean pronunciation or translation of karate-do which is tangsoodo that means the way of the Chinese hand. The very first tangsoodo schools taught the original kata from Okinawa with maybe some hints of taekyon thrown in according to some accounts that were most likely developed by Gichin Funakoshi himself. Accordingly when he was put exile's, his students perform a demonstration for president Syngman Rhee. The president referred to their art as taekyon however, the students felt a new name should be thought of to erase that negative connotation of the art being related to gang members. They consulted a cream dictionary and eventually came up with the words tae kwon do. Lee explain why he named a school Chung Do Kwan, this is a quote: I was sitting at a bench in Korea looking at the waves crash upon the shore, suddenly it came to me the name blue wave Chung Do and and I thought it would be a great name for the school. I didn't want to name my school Shotokan, because a son should have a different name from his father. Lee was the first master of the school in 1944 before he stepped down from his position in 1950. The successor was Duk Sung Son from 1950-1959 was also a cofounder of tae kwon do. Son's efforts made Chung Do kwon the largest school in South Korea. However due to internal conflicts with the original students, Song was replaced shortly by Gen. Choi Hong Hi.

Wun Kyu Um became the next master from 59 to 2017. Grandmaster Um passed away June 10, 2017 at age 88. At first Lee strongly believe the tae kwon do should not be practiced as a sport nor ever be included in the Olympics. Lee was worried that the attitude of the competitors might deviate from the true martial arts spirit. He didn't want the competitors think only of winning no matter the cost while ignoring the moral principles of tae kwon do. However, Lee thought that if the charging would be fair in the art could maybe be a sport. He hoped executing the basic techniques perfectly would be a huge



## Episode 343 – Won Kuk Lee | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)

factor in the way they were judged. Chung Do kwon obtained a nationwide popularity and reached 50,000 participants at its peak. New schools were also established teaching the same martial art in the late 40s and the early 50s and many of those were directed by Lee's students. According to the world tae kwon do Federation, taekwondo practitioners now a number more than 70 million people around the world. Overall Lee promoted six students to black belt they were the first generation to be promoted by the Chung Do Kwan. Duk Song Sun, Su Chung Kang, Hyu Jong Myun, UHM Woon Kyu, Yong Taek Chung, LEE Yong-woo. Now in the second generation were promoted by Duk Song Sun, I've got a number of names but there's one that is important and that's Choi Hung Hi, the founder of ITF or to some the founder of tae kwon do and he was awarded honorary 4th Dan in 52 and named the honorary chief the school.

When Lee retired from being the master of the Chung do Kwan, he continued to promote the art by acting as a judge in tournaments ranking promotions and participating in various events. He was known to criticize any changes made to the art. In his free time he is to visit his old students who later became masters in their own right. Lee also influence other Masters such as Yung Pyong Yin of YMCA kwon Bop club and Hwang Kee of Moo duk Kwan. Lee and his wife immigrated to the United States in 1976 the help of Gen. William Westmoreland. Gen. Westmoreland was a student of Lee in the 1960s when Lee served as an instructor to the U.S. Army. When Lee first apply for an immigrant visa, he got rejected because of his arrest record in Korea. The general made immigration possible by contacting the American Embassy and then Lee's visa was approved right away. Lee settled in Arlington, Virginia together with his wife they spent his last years in calligraphy and acupuncture and welcomed interviews in different occasions. On February second 2003, Lee died of pneumonia in the hospital of Arlington. He was 95 years old.

I find the stories of martial arts founders and I suppose it's subjective whether or not we consider Won Kuk Lee the founder or a contributor to tae kwon do, to tangsoodo however you want to look at it. But what is important, what is clear is that this man, through his own personal sacrifice advanced the martial arts. He had a hand whether large or small in crafting what became taekwondo. He had a hand in teaching others who helped advance the arts and I think it's important that we understand as much as we can of the people who learned martial arts when not only was it not popular but illegal and to go through the things that they went through, I wouldn't still be teaching martial arts if the government came and beat me and my family, would you? I doubt very few people today would. But, here's a man who believes so strongly in the arts and passing them on that he was willing to do that. As I said in the opener, if you want to check out the transcript with all the names that I butchered you can find those [whistlekickmartialartsradio.com](http://whistlekickmartialartsradio.com). Don't forget if you are shop our products [whistlekick.com](http://whistlekick.com) you can use the code `podcast15` to save 15%. Uniform, sparring gear, all kinds of great stuff. You can email me at [jeremy@whistlekick.com](mailto:jeremy@whistlekick.com) and find us on social media we are [@whistlekick](https://www.instagram.com/whistlekick). That's all I've got for you now. Hope you have a great day. Talk to you soon. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day.





Episode 343 – Won Kuk Lee | [whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com](http://whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com)