Tang Soo Do or Tang Soo Do is a traditional Korean martial art. The name itself literally translates to "Way of the T'ang hand" or "Way of the Chinese hand" specifically referring to the Tang Dynasty and the empty handed fighting styles practiced at the time in China. However, there may be other more subtle meanings behind that reference that include such traits as "Worthiness", "Skillful", and "Strong". Since the name does not translate well today, many people are content with the definition "Way of the empty hand".

Origins

It is generally accepted among practitioners that Tang Soo Do was a Koreanized version of Japanese Karate, and that the Moo Duk Kwan style originated as a combination of three major styles: Yang Tai Chi Chuan, Northern China and Southern China Kung Fu, combined with the Okinawan/Japanese discipline of Karate and its modified Forms by Grandmaster Hwang Kee (황기 / 황기) (1914 - 2002), although that all Kwan leaders refute this claim.

Name

Tang Soo Do is the Korean pronunciation of the Hanja characters 唐手道 (in Japanese these characters mean Karate-do but it in contemporary Japanese Karate-do is written as 空手道. The Japanese pronunciation of both sets of characters is the same, but the newer version means "Way of the Empty Hand" rather than "Way of the T'ang Hand".)

The first recorded usage of the term "Tang Soo Do" in contemporary history was by Chung Do Kwan founder, Won Kuk Lee. Prior to the unification of the "Kwans" under the Korea Taekwondo Association, most of the major Kwans called their style Tang Soo Do, or Kong Soo Do. The Chung Do Kwan, along with the rest of the Kwans ceased using the name Tang Soo Do, and Kong Soo Do when they unified under the name Taekwondo (and temporarily Tae Soo Do). The Moo Duk Kwan, being loyal to Hwang Kee, pulled out of the Kwan unification and remained independent of this unification movement, and continued to use...
the name Tang Soo Do. The majority of Moo Duk Kwan members followed Hwang's senior student, Chong Soo Hong to become members of a unified Taekwondo. Their group still exist today and is known as Taekwondo Moo Duk Kwan (Moo Duk Hae) and has it's office in Seoul, Korea.

In 1995, the late Hwang Kee officially changed the name of the Moo Duk Kwan style to Soo Bahk Do.

Most schools of Tang Soo Do uses the transcription "Tang Soo Do". However, scientific texts apply the official transcription "tangsudo" (written as one word). Some authors write "Tang Soo Do" and they give "tangsudo" or "dangsudo" in the parenthesis.

Founder

Unlike most contemporary martial arts, it is not possible to pinpoint any one person as being the "founder" of Tang Soo Do. One could argue that Won Kuk Lee "founded" the style, being the first (known) person to use the name; that argument would be dubious, at best. However, the Moo Duk Kwan style of Tang Soo Do (where nearly all modern Tang Soo Do stylists trace their lineage) can be traced to a single founder: Grandmaster Hwang Kee. Hwang Kee claimed to have had learned Chinese martial arts while in Manchuria, however, all other Kwan seniors say there is no proof for this claim. He also claimed influence by Japanese Karate, and the indigenous Korean arts of Taekkyon (태권) and Subak. However, the Korea Taekkyon Association Grandmaster Yong Bok Lee states these claims are not true. He also claimed to have been highly influenced by an old book about martial arts called the Muye Dobu Tongji (1790). Won Kuk Lee the founder of Chung Do Kwan has Hwang Kee listed in his records as a 5th Geup, about green belt level. He states Hwang came to him to learn the correct movements of Karate, as Hwang found a Karate book by Gichin Funakoshi, who was Lee's teacher. Hwang organized the Korean Soo Bahk Do Association in 1945. In 1968, Master Jae C. Shin, who studied directly under Grandmaster Hwang Kee, founded the United States Tang Soo Do Federation which later became The World Tang Soo Do Association in 1982. (무예도보통지).
The ancestral art of Korean Soo Bahk Do can be traced back to the period when Korea was divided into three kingdoms:

Goguryeo was founded in 37 BC in northern Korea. The Silla Dynasty was founded in 57 BC in the southeast peninsula. The third kingdom, Paekche was founded in 18 BC.

Finally, after a long series of wars, the Silla Dynasty united the three kingdoms in 668 AD. During this period, the primitive martial arts (one of these martial arts was known as Soo Bakh) were very popular as a method of self-defense in warfare. This is evidence in the many mural paintings, ruins, and remains, which depict Tang Soo Do in those days. Among the three kingdoms, the Silla Dynasty was most famous for its development of martial arts. A corps composed of a group of young aristocrats who were called "Hwa Rang Dan" was the major force behind the development of the art. These warriors were instrumental in unifying the Korean peninsula under the new Silla Dynasty (668 AD - 935 AD). Many of the early leaders of that dynasty were originally members of the Hwa Rang Dan. Most Korean martial arts trace their spiritual and technical heritage to this group. In fact, the names of some martial arts such as Hwa Rang Do or Hwa Soo Do, still reflect this origination.

The united Silla Kingdom was ultimately overthrown by a warlord, Wang Kun, in 918 AD. The new kingdom, "Koryo," lasted for 475 years (918 AD - 1392 AD). In 1392, the Yi Dynasty succeeded the Koryo kingdom. The Yi Dynasty remained intact for 500 years. During the 1000 year period of the Koryo Kingdom and the Yi Dynasty, what we today know as Tang Soo Do was increasingly popular with the military. More importantly however, the art also became very popular with the general public. During this period, Tang Soo Do was referred to as Kwon Bop, Tae Kyun, Soo Bahk, Tang Soo and others. The first complete martial arts book was written at this time. This most important book is called "Mooyae Dobo Tangji." It was written in 1790 and contained illustrations that substantiated the theory that Tang Soo Do (formally called "Soo Bahk Ki") had quickly developed into a very sophisticated art of combat techniques.

Modern Changes

During the Japanese occupation of Korea (1910-1945), many Koreans were exposed to Japanese versions of Chinese martial arts such as Karate. As the Japanese moved deeper into the continent, Karate was adopted and mixed with more traditional Korean martial arts such as Taekyon, as well as traditional Chinese martial arts studied by Koreans in Manchuria and
China.

Around the liberation of Korea in 1945, five martial arts schools under the name of Kong Soo Do or Tang Soo Do, called Kwans, were formed by men who were mostly trained in Japanese Karate. The Kwans and their founders were the Chung Do Kwan (LEE, Won Kuk), Jidokwan (CHUN, Sang Sup), Chang Moo Kwan (YOON, Byung In), Moo Duk Kwan (Hwang Ki), and Song Moo Kwan (ROH, Byung Jick).

Around 1953, shortly after the Korean War, four more annex Kwans formed. These 2nd generation Kwans and their principle founders were; Oh Do Kwan (CHOI, Hong Hi & NAM, Tae Hi), Han Moo Kwan (LEE, Kyo Yoon), Kang Duk Kwan (PARK, Chul Hee & Hong Jong Pyo) and Jung Do Kwan (LEE, Young Woo).

In 1955, these arts, at that time called various names by the different schools, were ordered to unify by South Korea's President Syngman Rhee. A governmental body selected a naming committee's submission of "Taekwondo" as the name. Both Sun Duk Song and Choi Hong Hi both claim to have submitted the name. The name sounds like the ancient Korean martial arts of Taekkyon. However, Taekwondo has no direct relation to Taekkyon in the techniques.

In 1959, the Korean Taekwondo Association (KTA) was formed in an attempt to unify the dozens of the kwans as one standardized system of Taekwondo. The first international tour of Taekwondo, by General CHOI, Hong Hi, and NAM, Tae Hi founder of the Oh Do Kwan (founded, 1953-4), and 19 black belts, was held in 1959. In 1960, Jhoon Rhee was teaching what he called Korean Karate (or Tang Soo Do) in Texas, USA. After receiving the ROK Army Field Manual which contained martial arts training curriculum under the new name of Taekwondo, from General Choi Hong Hi, Rhee began using the name Taekwondo.

Despite this unification effort, the kwans continued to teach their individual styles. The Korean government ordered a single organization be created and, on September 16, 1961, the kwans agreed to unify under the name Korea Tae Soo Do Association (which changed its name back to the Korean Taekwondo Association when Choi became its president in August 1965).

Current state
With the change of the Tang Soo Do Moo Duk Kwan style to Soo Bahk Do, Tang Soo Do Moo Duk Kwan technically ceased to exist. However, Tang Soo Do continues to flourish under numerous organizations, that have at some point in time separated from the Moo Duk Kwan. Today, there are more 'Tang Soo Do' schools in the United States than anywhere else when you factor in the various eclectic branches, some of which are three generations removed from their connection to the Moo Duk Kwan. Tang Soo Do continues to evolve and grow, and in the last two decades has emerged from Taekwondo's shadow to become a well known, and well respected Martial Art in its own right. Moo Duk Kwan Taekwondo still exist in Korea as a friendship club and holds its annual celebration every year in Seoul, Korea where both Tang Soo Do and Taekwondo Moo Duk Kwan members gather from all over the world.

Song Moo Kwan is still quite small, located mostly in Minnesota, with the main gym being near Lake and Lynnwood in Minneapolis, run by the founder's son and current grandmaster of the style, Noh (or Roh) Heessang. The Song Moo Kwan style is also called the "North American Taekwondo Federation", and teaches three different sets of poomsae at the gup level, including both the palgye and the taekuk, adding Founder Roh's poomsae, the Jungbom poomsae, which show a distinct Northern influence with more circular moves. Founder Roh was from a small town north of Kaesong in what is now North Korea.