

Master Rhee Jhoon-goo, 'pioneer of taekwondo wave'

'Made significant contributions to globalization of taekwondo and U.S.-Korea sports diplomacy'

Selected as one of '203 most successful and famous immigrants in U.S. history' in Washington, D.C.

Godfather of American taekwondo who taught Bruce Lee and Muhammad Ali

The Overseas Koreans Agency (Commissioner Kim Kyung-hyup) has selected the late taekwondo master Rhee Jhoon-goo (1932-2018) as its Overseas Korean of the Month for January, in recognition of his significant contributions to the globalization of taekwondo and Korea-U.S. sports diplomacy.

Rhee is recognized as the figure who first established taekwondo in American society, playing a decisive role in developing it beyond a mere martial art into a medium for cultural, diplomatic and sports exchange. Dubbed the "Father of American Taekwondo," he garnered attention from the early days of taekwondo's spread through his innovative approach.

Master Rhee Jhoon-goo was born in Asan, South Chungcheong Province, in 1932 and first encountered taekwondo at the age of 16 at Cheongdogwan. Later, while majoring in civil engineering at Texas State University in 1957, he founded a taekwondo club and began teaching the art to American students, taking the first step in spreading taekwondo within the United States.

A life dedicated to popularizing taekwondo

In 1962, at the request of the U.S. Department of Defense, he relocated to Washington, D.C., and opened the Jhoon Rhee Taekwondo Institute. Later, after reading about Congressman James Cleveland's robbery victim story, he introduced taekwondo to U.S. lawmakers by teaching them, which led to the opening of a taekwondo dojang within the U.S. Capitol, spreading taekwondo throughout American political circles and society at large. Beginning in 1965, he established the U.S. Congressional Taekwondo Club, teaching lawmakers free of charge and contributing to taekwondo's presence on the political and diplomatic stage.

Rhee opened over 60 taekwondo schools across the United States, significantly contributing to establishing taekwondo as a popular sport. His schools were so influential that by the 1980s, 11 were operating in the Washington, D.C., area alone.

Taekwondo pioneer with designated Jhoon Rhee Day on June 28

Rhee Jhoon-goo's activities extended beyond the United States



May 23, 2023: Fifth Anniversary Memorial for Master Rhee Joon-goo -- Jhoon Rhee Memorial Project Launch Ceremony held at the National Assembly Library

to the entire world. He sent letters to embassies of various countries within the U.S., recommending taekwondo to the children of diplomats. At the request of diplomats returning home after completing their terms, he paved the way for dispatching taekwondo masters overseas. This became a crucial turning point in the globalization of taekwondo. Notably, starting in 1991, he entered the former Soviet Union (now the Commonwealth of Independent States). He persuaded high-ranking officials at a time when martial arts were illegal, leading to their legalization. He also gathered karate instructors to hold seminars, contributing to the legalization and spread of taekwondo within the former Soviet Union. As a result, over 65 Jhoon Rhee Taekwondo Schools were established in regions, including Russia.

Rhee taught taekwondo to world-renowned figures like Bruce Lee and Muhammad Ali, elevating taekwondo's global stature. He imparted kicking techniques to Lee and learned hand techniques from him, even co-starring in the 1973 film "When Taekwondo Strikes." He also taught taekwondo techniques to Muhammad Ali, helping facilitate Ali's visit to Korea, thereby playing a significant role in expanding international exchange through sports. Furthermore, he created a martial arts form called "Martial Ballet," choreographed to music, and incorporated it into the dojang curriculum.

Developing safety-enhancing protective gear

After a student suffered serious injury during a match, this instructor, concerned about enhancing taekwondo's safety, personally developed protective gear for the head, chest, shins and elbows. This became the prototype for the protective equipment used in today's world taekwondo competitions, contributing to the simultaneous advancement of both safety and competitiveness in the sport. This invention is regarded as a paradigm-shifting innovation in martial arts training, as protective gear was virtually nonexistent in martial arts at the time.

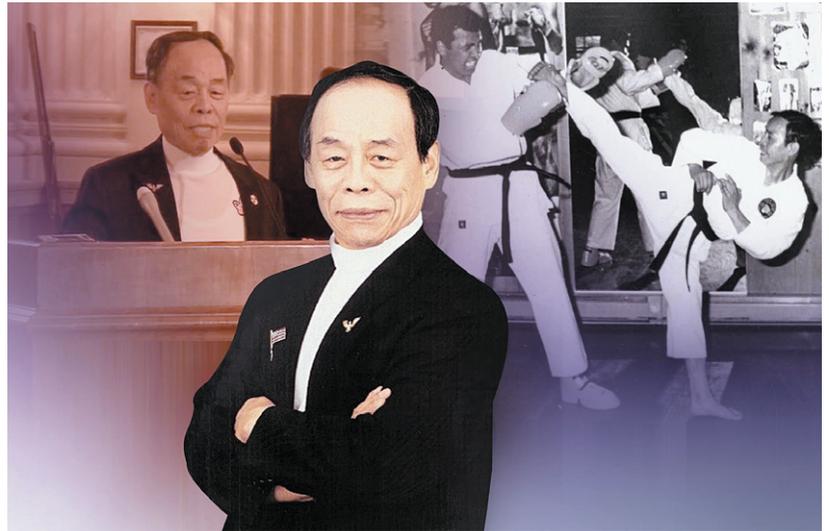
Master Rhee visited South Korea with over 30 U.S. taekwondo officials to attend the Korea-U.S. Taekwondo Friendship Training Tournament. During this visit, he met with former President Kim Dae-jung, alongside four U.S. Congressmen. He later served as an adviser to the "Congressional Taekwondo Federation," laying the groundwork for enhancing Korea-U.S. friendship and sports diplomacy through taekwondo.

In recognition of his achievements, Washington, D.C., designated June 28 as Jhoon Rhee Day in 2003. In 2000, he was selected as the sole Korean American among the "203 most successful and famous immigrants in U.S. history." In 1992, he was recognized by President George H.W. Bush with the "Daily Points of Light" award, and in 2009, he received the South Korean Order of Civil Merit, Magnolia Medal.

2009 recipient of Mugunghwa Medal of Order of Civil Merit

"Master Rhee Joon-goo is the godfather of taekwondo and the originator of the Korean Wave, having devoted his entire life to taekwondo and promoting its value throughout the United States and around the world," OKA Commissioner Kim Kyung-hyup said. "We selected him as the Overseas Korean of the Month for January so that his passion and dedication may be widely known and remembered for generations to come."

Meanwhile, the OKA identifies compatriots who have contributed to the development of the Republic of Korea or enhanced the status of Koreans in their countries of residence, selecting and announcing them monthly as the Overseas Korean of the Month. Previous recipients since March last year include Kim Pyeong-jin (former president of the Jeju Development Association in Japan), Hong Myeong-gi (former chairman of the M&L Hong Foundation), Im Cheon-taek (independence activist), Park Byeong-heon (former head of the Korean Residents Union in Japan), Park No-hak (former president of the Return of Detained Sakhalin Koreans Association), Lee Ui-gyeong (independence activist), Dr. Seo Se-mo, Chairman Seo Gab-ho, professor Lim Deok-sang in the United States and Oh Gi-mun (former president of the Korean Women's Association in Japan). 



Master Rhee Joon-goo, selected as Overseas Korean of the Month in January



Master Rhee Joon-goo demonstrates a wooden board break with a water cup balanced on his head during his 80th birthday celebration at the Cannon Building of the U.S. Congress on Sept. 30, 2010.



Master Rhee Joon-goo demonstrates a kick to Muhammad Ali (L), the 1976 World Heavyweight Boxing Champion.