

*Interview Conducted  
by John Kirkwood*



# Hee Il Cho

## *Three Score Years & Ten*

Grandmaster Hee Il Cho has a Worldwide following of thousands of students and has inspired many thousands more through his life of teaching Taekwondo. He is a man of unshakeable determination, great martial art spirit and someone who truly lives and breaths his art.

He has accomplished more than most in his lifetime, and as an author of over 11 books, producer of over 70 instructional videos and despite being featured on more than 70 magazine covers, he is humble and unassuming. And for a man nearly 70 years of age he shows now signs of slowing down any time soon!

I recently had the privilege to interview this living legend and gain a greater insight into this man, a man who is "Taekwondo's Man of Contrast".

***You have studied Taekwondo for many years, who or what has been the biggest influence in your journey and what have you learned from them?***

**GM HE IL CHO:** The difficult, poverty-stricken circumstances of my life caused me to be more of a maverick than anything else. The driving force during these formative years of my life was hunger, the basic need to survive and help my family proved to be most influential, even in my decision to pursue Tae Kwon Do. To be involved in the martial arts professionally was not really looked upon as something of prestige, and it was actually quite unpopular as I was growing up. As such, there was a lack of inspirational figures that I could look up to within this field.

However, I do remember one person in particular who during my youth was and still remains a martial artist for whom I hold deep respect, namely Mas Oyama. Mas Oyama was the founder of Kyokushinkai karate and was of Korean descent. I remember hearing him speak during one of the martial arts exhibitions he held in Korea. I felt an instant connection to how he voiced his personal struggles that also affected by the tribulations of Japanese occupation in Korea. My "encounter" with Mas Oyama's ambition, determination, and clear spirit was brief but it left an unforgettable impression that encouraged me in my journey in the martial arts.

***What benefits would you say can be gained from studying Taekwondo?***

**GM HE IL CHO:** The benefits of Tae Kwon Do (and in fact all martial arts) are vast and can help anyone reach holistic health by furthering them physically, mentally, and spiritually. The physical advantages of Tae Kwon Do training

are the most obvious, as it conditions the entire body through both anaerobic and aerobic drills while developing flexibility and strength.

If you choose to study it deeply enough, to understand the spiritual aspect of the art, a student will inevitably embark on the martial artist's lifelong journey towards achieving balance between the intellect, physical self-control, and character.

***When and how did AIMAA come into being?***

**GM HE IL CHO:** It was in the early 1970s when I first began to dream about founding an organization/body that would work towards unifying all martial arts styles through the basic principles that would hold them all together. My intention was not to create one universal martial art, but merely to bring more focused attention to one of the core tenets of the martial arts - harmony. I aspired for a harmonious understanding between martial art styles, where a mutual respect could help each build on one another's strengths and ultimately have an even more profoundly positive and powerful impact on the community. This dream was manifested eventually through the founding of the AIMAA in 1980.





### ***How does AIMAA differ from other forms of Taekwondo?***

**GM HE IL CHO:** The AIMAA has no intention to set itself so far apart as to be considered a separate form of Tae Kwon Do. Though our organization is primarily based on the ITF style of Tae Kwon Do, the AIMAA's identity is rooted in a sense of open-mindedness toward innovation and change that parallels a steadfast stronghold to tradition. The AIMAA has been through many highs and lows over the years, but as its founder I can say with confidence that the AIMAA has never made any compromise toward this mission and has been able to successfully uphold the otherwise complex balance between change and tradition.

The AIMAA would never have been able to achieve this if it did not unite like-minded martial artists who believe in the same principles enough, to make the necessary efforts to actualize AIMAA's vision in practical application. Due to the talents, ideas, and skills brought forth by our Masters, instructors, and student members, we have been able to keep our technical curriculum progressive whilst remain dedicated to the traditional roots of the martial arts, especially its virtues of loyalty, humility, and honour. We cannot grow unless we accept change; nor can we grow without our roots.

### ***Do you think it is important to cross train while studying Taekwondo?***



**GM HE IL CHO:** All sports and physical recreation can benefit immensely from cross training. It was believed that weight lifting could hinder certain physical activities until it was scientifically proven to improve one's overall strength and physical performance. It is the same with a plethora of other physical activities like jogging or yoga. Every student will have different physical conditions and needs, consequently they would need to explore a variety of activities that can complement their Tae Kwon Do training. Yoga and breathing exercises can help improve a person's flexibility and stamina, whilst jogging can improve sparring and drill performance utilizing aerobic breathing.

### ***You have a daily training program that most 20 year olds would struggle to keep up with and you are nearly 70 years young, how do you keep up that sort of program, what motivates you?***

**GM HE IL CHO:** I don't think people realise that exercise is my life and has been a part of my life since I was very young. This is the only reason I can keep up with and sometimes even surpass those who are younger than me, because training is my life. I simply cannot separate my life from my workouts. Constantly and consistently working out is a very difficult discipline to achieve and maintain, especially if you have a late start in your training. Even though my physical training has become such a defining and integral part of my daily life, I struggle as well to keep up, especially at my age and the medical conditions that come with it. My motivation to keep pushing through my pain is simply my sense of ambition and my efforts to attaining goals I feel that I have yet to achieve. People need dreams and goals and a sense of purpose in order to keep going; I am no different. I keep pushing, because I feel my limits can still be pushed a little farther.

### ***You have achieved so much in Taekwondo, do you still have many ambitions that you have still to achieve?***

**GM HE IL CHO:** Yes, as I've just been explaining, I feel that I have many unfinished ambitions. Unfortunately, now that I am approaching 70 years of age, I am not as confident as I was before about achieving these dreams within my lifetime. The one dream I still have is to build a martial arts college where both the quality of academics and physical training will be competitive and can be achieved in a unique and beautiful manner, an environment in which students can pursue a variety of martial arts styles. I feel my time is shortening, and this may be difficult to accomplish realistically. However, I still choose not to give up on my dreams and remain hopeful of being able to achieve even more.

### ***As you still teach on a daily basis, what is your daily schedule?***

**GM HE IL CHO:** I teach six days a week, two classes a day. My teaching schedule will end up running over two hours a night, while my personal workout sessions will take up 3-4 hours a day. My daily workout routine has evolved much since my heart surgery and other physical injuries. Whereas, I used to workout for even longer periods of time with elaborate bag workouts, jump roping, and heavy lifting. I now mostly jog and have heavily lightened both my bag workout and lifting program.



***You are conducting an International Testing in Ireland in September; what do you think are the most important qualities in a student achieving Black belt?***

**GM HE IL CHO:** Most people tend to set the achievement of a Black Belt on a pedestal, and Black Belt students are nearly idolized at times. The core to a true Black Belt achievement is in becoming a better person. Physical achievements become merely the backdrop to the development of one's mind and character. This is why, during our Black Belt examinations, I always ask the student: "What have you learned from Tae Kwon Do?" I have read thousands upon thousands of theses/essays in which students try to express the deeper impact martial arts has had on each of their lives. It is through these that I can see the true Black Belt qualities of discipline, morality, and humility.

***Your trip in September to Europe is to hold International Seminars in Scotland and Ireland to over 1,000 students. What will the students gain from this experience?***

**GM HE IL CHO:** The AIMAA events are always characterised by a strong family-like atmosphere, something I have come to dearly cherish about our organisation. I feel that my visit to Europe this September is something that has been somewhat long-awaited as well as one that may be one of my last, due to my age. It would be my personal pleasure simply to see our family of students again, especially the younger ones who will become the future generation of the martial arts community. More than anything, I hope to impart a helpful amount of my knowledge gained from my many, life-time experiences, to nurture wisdom and enlightenment to the seminars' participants. My hope is that physical excellence will also inspire intellectual and spiritual motivation.

***AIMAA was founded by yourself to unify all martial artists; do you think it will continue to grow within today's "Mixed Martial Arts" culture?***

**GM HE IL CHO:** I have no doubt that the AIMAA will continue, so long as there remains practitioners who work towards preserving traditional martial arts. The mixed martial arts culture is just another style, almost like another genre of music or film. Each style has had its moment "in the light," usually influenced by popular media, and MMA is now enjoying its time. However, popularity of MMA or any other style does not have to detract from the historically rich and rooted traditional martial arts that will always remain consistent throughout the generations. Different fads and trends that the general public picks up on, merely reflect the broad spectrum of styles that come and go, yet the tree's roots are always stronger than its branches.

***You have Masters representing you Worldwide, what do these representatives bring to AIMAA?***

**GM HE IL CHO:** I cannot express enough how the AIMAA would not exist as it does today if it were not for the unique and dedicated contributions from each and every one of its members. Our organisation is especially blessed with outstanding leaders who commit themselves in unparalleled ways to passing on the core spirit of the martial arts to their students. During the last 30 years, the AIMAA has produced only six Masters - Master Philip Ameris (USA), Master John Darcy (Ireland), Master Wendy Cheung (USA; only female Master produced but no longer active), Master Peter Byrne (Ireland), Master John Kirkwood (Scotland), and Master Amir Kalcutt (England). This not only reflects our commitment to upholding traditionally competitive standards and guidelines, but more importantly, it shows the depth of loyalty and dedication of the handful that have made the martial arts their lifelong journey. Each of the



AIMAA Masters brings unprecedented talents that uniquely impact the entire organisation's technical curriculum and traditions. More than anything I am grateful for their selfless dedication to carrying out what I alone would never be able to fully achieve. I am at peace, knowing that these Masters will not compromise the principles I have worked so hard to teach throughout my entire lifetime and I hope will inspire generations of students to adhere to the true spirit of the martial arts.

***It's been a while since Combat caught up with you and lot has happened over the last 5 yrs or so, so what have you personally been up to?***

**GM HEIL CHO:** The last five years have certainly seen tremendous change globally from the economy, to culture, to politics. This is now certainly a new era for the martial arts field too. The martial arts is almost a commercial entity in its own right and as such, has never been more open to the public, from the very young to the very old. In the past when global culture was riddled with war and political upheaval, the martial arts culture reflected itself through an emphasis on full-contact training and self-defence. The need for self-defence is not as pressing in a civilized, and more financially abundant modern society. Now, martial



arts curriculums are heavily based on character development and even academic achievement, and we can see a huge influx of enrolment by preschool-aged children.

My own teaching methods have evolved tremendously to accommodate the growing changes of my students and their needs. I have been working heavily with young children and honing our school's own early childhood curriculum, which is also what I hope to discuss in September, during my seminar visits to Ireland and Scotland.

***As you are and always been forward thinking, where do you see AIMAA as an association in the next five years?***

**GM HEIL CHO:** Nobody knows what the future holds. Especially now, I am faced with accepting that my age and health can become an issue affecting the chances of my traveling to AIMAA schools around the world. There are certainly still many goals left to achieve, and I hope to see the AIMAA continue to grow and spread more widely into the global martial arts community. We will definitely continue to promote our various events such as our summer camps, tournaments, and instructor courses, etc. I know our organisation will, above all, continue to grow strongly as a family, with friendships overseas bonding more strongly. As far as the organisation itself, the AIMAA will remain flexible and open-minded as possible, staying true to our original mission.

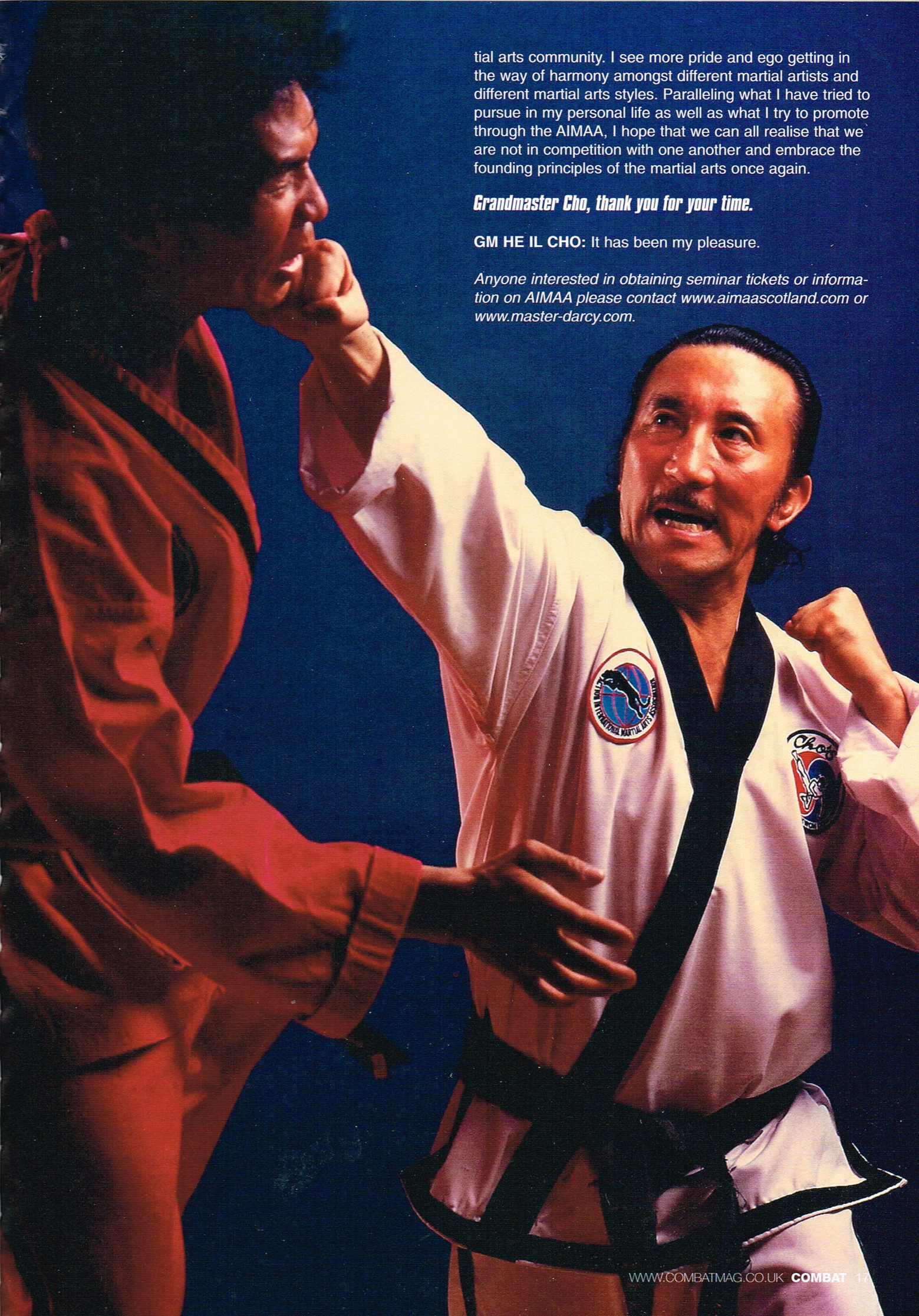
***Next year the AIMAA World family will gather for your bi-annual summer camp in Washington DC. I believe this will be a celebration of the 30th anniversary of AIMAA, as well as a celebration of your 70th birthday. What are you personally looking forward to at the summer camp?***

**GM HEIL CHO:** I always deeply love to see our AIMAA members, our summer camp events especially as they always resemble a family reunion and time spent with our members is always an opportunity to enjoy great company. Our upcoming DC Summer Camp, will (as always) be open to non-AIMAA members, and having students of other styles and practices join us only enhances the quality of everyone's experience. Our summer camps are always made up of a good time and of hard training, so sweat and sore muscles are a guarantee. However, our next camp will be one to especially enjoy, as we will be holding a great celebration for our long standing, 30 years and aptly at our nation's capital. Our AIMAA Technical Director Master Philip Ameris will also be testing for his 8th Degree, which will mark yet another achievement for our organization.

***Finally, do you have anything you would like to say to Combat readership and the martial arts community?***

**GM HEIL CHO:** I believe we are all facing a very difficult time in our lives, especially with the World's current economic situation. It is my hope that everyone perseveres through and remembers that there is nowhere else to go but up, once you are at your lowest low. As martial artists especially, the fighting spirit within us should encourage us to build up our strengths. After going down from a hit, instead of staying down, get straight back up and straight back into the fight.

I am also deeply concerned with what I observe to be an increasing spirit of disunity and disrespect in the mar-



tial arts community. I see more pride and ego getting in the way of harmony amongst different martial artists and different martial arts styles. Paralleling what I have tried to pursue in my personal life as well as what I try to promote through the AImAA, I hope that we can all realise that we are not in competition with one another and embrace the founding principles of the martial arts once again.

***Grandmaster Cho, thank you for your time.***

**GM HE IL CHO:** It has been my pleasure.

*Anyone interested in obtaining seminar tickets or information on AImAA please contact [www.aimaascotland.com](http://www.aimaascotland.com) or [www.master-darcy.com](http://www.master-darcy.com).*