

The History and Philosophy of Wing Chun Kung Fu

*Thesis for Level Ten Grading
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History

In the Beginning...

The deep nature of our own species, and those that preceded us in evolution, includes competition, violence, and killing. Prehistoric men no doubt fought one another for dominance, food, mating rights, and survival. The dawn of a structured or scientific approach to fighting no doubt occurred with the first primitive man to pick up a stick with which to strike an enemy or prey.

Conflict and warfare form pivotal events in human history. Arguably, many ancient rituals, sports and ceremonies are reenactments of battles in one form or another. The Olympic Games held by the ancient Greeks were regarded as a religious festival, during which war was suspended.

The Epic of Gilgamesh, written down in about the eighteenth century B.C. in Mesopotamia, one of the earliest centres of civilisation, shows that most weapons of war had been invented by then, the major exception being explosives, which were to be invented by the Chinese almost 2800 years later.

Gilgamesh, a hero of Uruk in Babylonia, fought with axe, sword, bow and arrow, and spear. His contemporaries used battering rams against enemy cities, and rode to battle in chariots.

The concept of a martial art or science of combat no doubt developed along with civilisation. Organised warfare required trained and disciplined soldiers, and generals and instructors to command and train them.

The earliest accepted evidence of a martial art exists in two small Babylonian works of art dating back to between 2000 and 3000 B.C., each showing two men in postures of combat.

Whilst there is almost no other evidence to support the hypothesis that martial arts originated in Babylonia and Mesopotamia, and were carried eastward to India and China, there is evidence that trade took place between the Harappa culture of Northern India and the Mesopotamians as early as 2500 B.C. Also, there is evidence that a particular design of bronze axe was in use over a vast area including parts of Europe and China around 1300 B.C. There is also evidence that the performances of acrobats from India and the eastern Mediterranean regions were enjoyed by the Chinese. The martial arts and performing arts have had a long tradition of association in the East, mirroring the similarity between the movements of acrobats and martial artists.

While the case for the origin of martial arts in Mesopotamia is speculative, there is no doubt that they first appeared in the East in a primitive form, and it was in India and China that their development into the intricate and sophisticated systems of recent times took place.

Martial Arts in China

The development of martial arts in China is inextricably linked with the development of Chinese medicine, and of the major religious and philosophical systems which underpin all aspects of life in historical China.

The martial and healing arts have always had a close relationship, of necessity when the wounds resulting from combat required healing, and in the use of medical knowledge to develop more effective targeting and striking techniques. Martial arts through the ages were practiced as much for health and longevity as they were for aggression and defence, and indeed the Shaolin arts were based on movements originally developed for health reasons.

Nearly five thousand years ago, the three legendary emperors laid the ground work for a nationalised system of Chinese medicine for the populace. Emperor Fu Hsi first proposed such a system; Emperor Shun Nung developed a classification of herbs for use in healing; and Huang-Ti, the Yellow Emperor, sent healers out to care for the people. The "Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine" a book on the principles of Chinese medicine, attributed to Huang-Ti but more likely written by others much later, is still regarded as a standard text by many contemporary schools of acupuncture and Oriental healing.

Around this time, mention is made of a form of ritualised wrestling called Go-Ti, in which two men wore horns on their heads and attempted to gore each other. The sport became popular, and spread throughout the land, and was passed down through generations. Go-Ti is performed today, with less blood spilled, traditionally at festivals in Honan and Manchuria. It is theorised also that Go-Ti was exported to Japan during the Tang Dynasty (610-907 AD), and evolved into the modern sport of Sumo; this would be the earliest documented export of Chinese martial arts. The originators of the great Chinese philosophies all lived around the same time. Lao Tzu, the developer of Taoism, was born in Honan around 604 BC. Confucius was born around 550 BC, and the Buddha around 506 BC.

Legend has it that Lao Tzu worked in the imperial palace during the Chou Dynasty as custodian of the imperial archives. Like many of his compatriots, he became disillusioned by the existing political tyranny, and at age 160 (according to legend) he left the kingdom on a wagon drawn by a black ox. When he reached Han-Ku pass, the gatekeeper, Yin-Hsi, asked him to leave a record of his teachings. The result was a short but enormously profound and influential document of 5,280 Chinese words called the Tao Te Ching (The Way and the Power). It taught a philosophy of living harmoniously with the ways of nature, returning to one's essence and of acting only in accordance with the Way.

(The philosophical basis of the teachings of Lao Tzu, and those of Confucius and the Buddha, will be discussed more fully in a later section.)

Confucius was born to a noble family in the state of Lu in what is now Shantung. His father died when Confucius was three, and the family fell on hard times. Though self-educated, he devoted himself to teaching and a quest to eliminate illiteracy; however, his major purpose in education was to teach and develop a way of harmonious living and interaction with one's fellows, through rules and standards of propriety and behaviour. At age 51, he became Minister for Justice in Lu, but his attempts to spread his doctrines were met with indifference or disdain by his superiors, resulting in his starting a thirteen year ministry attempting to disseminate his political, social, and philosophical beliefs. At age 68, unsuccessful, he began to write the classic documents such as the Spring and Autumn annals, the I Ching (book of Changes) and the Analects, which were to have a huge impact on Chinese culture.

Some historians dispute the authorship of these documents (i.e. maybe Confucius didn't write all or any of them), but their fundamental role in Chinese culture is indisputable.

The Buddha, also called Guatama or Siddhartha, was an Indian Prince, born approximately 506 BC. As a youth, he lived a rich and pampered life in the splendour of palaces and courtyards, surrounded by the luxuries of the time, unaware of the often desperate and miserable circumstances in which the vast majority of his subjects dwelt. One day he ventured into the city, and was confronted with the disease, starvation, suffering and death which filled his kingdom. The streets were filled with starving beggars and littered with the bodies of the dead or dying. Shocked to the bone by what he saw, he spent days alone (five days beneath the Bodhi tree), attempting to come to terms with this shattering revelation. He found himself unable to accept his experiences as reality, and from there came he formed the basis of his teachings, that human existence is an illusion, and nothing is real. He left the palace and travelled widely, teaching.

His teachings and doctrine proposed a disregard for self and materialism, instead emphasising subsequent lives and the eventual deliverance from the eternal cycle of life and suffering which is human existence.

While the seeds of higher philosophies were being sown, warfare itself continued. Before 500 BC, China did not exist as a nation. The territory now known as the People's Republic of China was made up of a large number of minor, independent states, generally operating under feudal rule.

War was seen as an occupation of the nobility, with skirmishes being fought between local warlords, perhaps with small armies of peasants. The lords would be driven to the battlefield in chariots, to fire arrows on the peasant armies of their rivals. Occasionally warlords would resort to single combat before their armies to decide a particular issue.

War was a highly ritualised activity, prohibited in certain seasons or circumstances, such as after the demise of a particular leader. Soldiers might languish for days or weeks while oracles were consulted or a favourable omen awaited prior to an attack.

Gradually the smaller states were assimilated by larger ones, and larger cities were formed, with populations as large as 750,000. Trade flourished between these centres, with tools and weapons of high quality iron among the items exchanged. Around the time of the Warring States period (490-221 BC), a low-grade steel was perfected, allowing the rulers to equip their soldiers with weapons made in foundries and stored in arsenals.

The expansion of the bureaucracy of government at this time allowed for feasible equipping, feeding, training and deployment of much larger armies. This changed warfare from an occupation of the ruling class to a professional activity undertaken by professional soldiers and officers. New specialist skills, such as engineering, signals, and mapmaking became viable occupations for these career soldiers. Sun Tzu was the most famous of these; a brilliant tactician and strategist, whose work *The Art of War*, which was written around 350 BC, is said to have influenced Mao Tse-Tung, and remains a standard text for military officers, as well as being widely read by ambitious people in other walks of life.

But combat was not solely the province of the rulers and the military. The Chinese countryside was rife with gangs of bandits and outlaws. Merchants enticed by the large profits possible from interstate trade would have employed bodyguards to protect themselves and their wares. The small scale close combat encountered by such bodyguards would have suited a career martial artist perfectly. The itinerant life of such bodyguards would have brought them into contact with others in the same profession from all over the country, allowing for a constant interchange of martial ideas and techniques.

During the Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD), Pan Kuo (32-92 AD) wrote the *Han Su I Wen Chih*, or Han Book of the Arts. This work contained chapters on governmental aspects of occupation (during war), battlefield strategy, principles in nature, and a chapter on fighting skills, including hand, foot, and weapon techniques.

Meanwhile, the doctrines of Taoism spread and flourished, with the Taoist monks practising various types of exercise, breathing, and meditation.

During the closing years of the Han Dynasty, Dr Hua To, a famous surgeon, made a major contribution to the development of martial arts, introducing a series of exercises based on the movements of animals, to promote blood circulation, freedom from sickness, and the prevention of the symptoms of old age.. In his book, Shou Pu, Hua To described a system of exercises he called the Frolic of the Five Animals, based on movements of the tiger, deer, bear, monkey and bird.

Bodhidharma and the Shaolin Temple

The first Shaolin Temple was built in approximately 495 A.D., in Honan Province near Mount Sung. It was built by Emperor Hsaio Wen, for the purpose of housing Buddhist monks who were charged with the task of translating the Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit into Chinese, in accordance with the wishes of the Emperor, who sought to make the scriptures available to the people in their native tongue, as a means of achieving Nirvana for himself.

Around 520 AD, an Indian Buddhist monk named Bodhidharma journeyed from India to China. He was the son of an Indian King, and an excellent warrior in superb physical condition. He visited Emperor Wen, but disagreed with him that Nirvana could be achieved by good deeds (the translations of the scriptures) performed by others in the Emperor's name, as noble as such a project might be. Bodhidharma's method instead involved meditative practices, seeking enlightenment through direct experience.

After leaving the emperor, Bodhidharma then went to the Shaolin temple. The head abbot, Fang Chang, at first viewed him as a foreign meddler and upstart, and refused him entrance. Bodhidharma instead took up residence in a nearby cave, where he reportedly sat facing a wall for nine years, "listening to the ants scream". Legend has it that the intensity of his gaze bored a hole in the cave's wall.

The monks were soundly impressed with his religious discipline and commitment, and he was welcomed into their ranks in the Shaolin Temple. One painting of Bodhidharma dating from the thirteenth century has one of the monks cutting off his own hand as a symbolic gesture of sympathy for Bodhidharma's spiritual commitment during his stay in the cave.

The monks at the temple were most interested in his teachings, but due to their sedentary lives and poor diet and physical condition, were often unable to stay awake during his lectures. To improve their health and assist their meditation, Bodhidharma devised three sets of exercises, emphasising correct breathing and bending and stretching of the body. The monks, who were in constant physical danger from outlaws and robbers, but who were forbidden by their religious code to carry weapons, modified many of the exercises to form systems of weaponless self-defence, becoming the systems of Kung-fu and other Asian martial Arts we practise today.

Further legend has it that Bodhidharma once fell asleep while meditating, and became so enraged that he ripped off his eyelids, casting them to the ground. From them immediately sprang tea shrubs, whose leaves were used by the monks to keep them awake.

As with many episodes in the history of Kung Fu, there are doubts among historians regarding the truth of the stories about Bodhidharma, and indeed, whether he actually existed. Detailed accounts of his exploits only started to appear in the eleventh century, although there were Buddhist historians of prodigious written output around the Temple much earlier than this, such as Hsuan-Tsang in the seventh century, who make no mention of him.

However, the story of Bodhidharma is seminal to the history of Buddhism, the Shaolin Temple, and Kung Fu.

At the height of its prosperity, around 700 BC, the temple had a complement of around 1500 monks, including 500 fighting monks, together with the land and buildings to support.

The Emperor T'ai Tsung of the Tang dynasty first endowed the temple with the right to train a fighting force of monk/soldiers. In danger at one time, he asked for help from the temple and thirteen monks went to his aid.

The grateful emperor attempted to persuade the thirteen to take up positions in his court, but the monks declined, stating that their martial arts' primary purposes were to promote the monks' health and to protect the Temple and its surrounding society. As there was now peace, they were no longer required, but that if the need arose again they would make themselves available.

The emperor then permitted them to increase the size of their fighting force to 500.

Over the next thousand years, the martial arts expanded and evolved, interest in them based to a large degree on the heroic exploits of the Shaolin monks. The military and merchant classes also added to the spread and evolution of the art. Other temples were built, and often became havens for anti-dynastic and revolutionary activity of various sorts, as China's rule remained in the hands of competing groups and dynasties. Temples were subjected to numerous sackings and burnings, with monks fleeing to other areas, and building or rebuilding temples, spreading their knowledge as they went.

This state of affairs continued up to the fall of the Ming Dynasty in the seventeenth century A.D.

Wing Chun

(Note: It is almost impossible to determine a definitive history of Wing Chun Kung Fu. The circumstances leading to the marriage of Yim Wing Chun and Leung Bok Cho have been described in several different ways by different

members of the WWCKFA, including lectures by Sifu Rick Spain, the writings of Grandmaster William Cheung and writings purported to be those of Grandmaster Yip Man.

I discuss alternative versions of events to those set down here in Appendix A.

The enigmatic Ng Mui is used by a number of styles of Kung Fu besides Wing Chun to explain their origin, and she may be as much a legendary as a real figure. She figured extensively in the lore and performances of the Red Junk Opera Company, through which Wong Wa Bo, Leung Bok Cho and Jee Sin play a pivotal role in the art's development. It is perhaps prudent to remember that, as operatic artists, they were skilled in dramatic storytelling, and that many of the best stories have their basis in fact.

It may also be prudent to remember that the cultural basis of humanity's greatest endeavours is based on grand myths, fables and legends - often, based on real individuals and events - rather than on the smaller details of objective fact.

I write this assuming that the truth of history lies as much in each historian's interpretation as in the objective events.)

The Manchus invaded China in 1644, ending the Ming dynasty, and beginning the Ching (Qing) dynasty. The occupation force, as a minority of the population, introduced a number of repressive measures to control the indigenous Han population. These included forbidding the Hans to carry weapons, restricting their opportunities within the civil service, and the practice of binding the feet of women, rendering them totally dependent on their husbands and menfolk, who were thus also restricted in their actions and ability to undertake revolutionary activities.

The Shaolin Temple, which as a Buddhist institution was revered and regarded with religious awe by the invaders, became both a sanctuary for Ming rebels and a centre for revolutionary planning and training. Ming soldiers and sympathisers donned monk's robes and shaved their heads, but trained for war within the temple grounds and plotted the overthrow of the Manchus.

The combat systems then taught in the temple were based on animal movements and required the progressive mastery of tens and hundreds of long, intricate forms, taking fifteen to twenty years. The Shaolin grandmasters recognised that this approach was unsuitable for the rapid development of a fighting force. They began to develop a new system of Kung Fu based on human biomechanics rather than the movements of animals, distilling the enormous and disparate variety of techniques, some only marginally useful, of the animal systems into an essential core of techniques which would turn an average trainee into a skilled fighter in five years rather than twenty-five. As the Manchus had outlawed the carrying of weapons by the populace, the butterfly swords, which were easy to conceal in knee-length boots, were chosen as the system's only weapons.

The system was called Wing Chun, named after the Springtime (Wing Chun) training hall in the temple. Some accounts have it that the system was named after Yim Wing Chun, but it seems she may also have been given that name, after that of the training hall, by Ng Mui, the alternative meaning of the name being "Hope for the Future"). The Manchus heard of the revolutionary role of the Temple, and surrounded it, while a traitorous monk set fires within. The monks fought bravely, but were heavily outnumbered. Only five escaped - Bak Mei, Fung Do Dak, Mui Min, Jee Sin and the nun Ng Mui. The five went their separate ways.

Ng Mui took refuge in the distant White Crane Temple in Yunnan. Periodically, she would journey to a nearby village for provisions including bean curd (tofu), which she bought from a shopkeeper named Yim Yee (or Yim Say) and his daughter, Yim Wing Chun.

Yim Yee and his daughter had fled Fatshan province before impending wrongful arrest by the Manchus, and settled in this remote area, selling the bean curd for a living. However, their lives were not yet free from trouble. One day Ng Mui entered the shop to find the young girl in tears.

Wing Chun was a beautiful young woman, and had attracted the unwanted attentions of a brutal gang leader, who had sworn to take her as his wife.

Ng Mui's immediate inclination was to fight off the gangster herself, but realised that such action was likely to attract the attention of the Manchus, from whom she was still a fugitive. Instead, Ng Mui undertook to teach the girl combat techniques, thus allowing her to defend herself and her honour.

Wing Chun told the gangster that she would fight him in one year, and that if he could defeat her, she would be his. The gangster, a master of Eagle Claw Kung Fu, saw this as a fait accompli and agreed, laughing.

Ng Mui took Yim Wing Chun back to the temple with her.

With only months in which to train Yim Wing Chun, Ng Mui concentrated only on the most essential, direct and effective techniques and training methods in her instruction. The techniques would need to allow Wing Chun to overcome the gangster, who was bigger, stronger, and more experienced than she. As the 108 dummies of the Shaolin temple no longer existed, Ng Mui developed a single dummy on which all 108 dummy movements could be practised. Yim Wing Chun trained day and night, and, when the gangster returned, she was ready. Soundly beaten, the disgraced gangster left and never returned.

Shortly thereafter, a salt (or silk) merchant from Shangxi named Leung Bok Cho visited the area. Leung Bok Cho had been a student of Kung Fu at the Honan Shaolin Temple. He stayed at an inn next to Yim Yee's shop, and witnessed Wing Chun practising her Kung Fu beside the tofu grinders. He fell in love with this beautiful and skilful young woman, and soon, with Yim Yee's approval, they were married.

Ng Mui eventually left the White Crane Temple, travelling far and wide. Before leaving, she made Wing Chun promise to adhere to the Kung Fu traditions, to continue to develop her Kung Fu after her marriage, and to help continue the struggle against the Manchus to restore the Ming dynasty.

Wing Chun and Leung Bok Cho moved back to Shangxi, but soon moved on to northern Guangdong to escape constant fighting between bandits and soldiers. Then they moved to Siu Hing, where they would eventually encounter members of the Red Junk Opera Company.

Meanwhile, Ng Mui's fellow grandmaster at the temple, Jee Sin, was also travelling the country. Among other styles, he was a master of the dragon pole. He sought suitable students to train in his continuing quest to assist the overthrow of the Manchus and the restoration of the Ming dynasty. Like Ng Mui, he was hunted by the Manchus and, to evade detection, he disguised himself as a dishevelled beggar. It was in Guangdong that he heard of the Red Junk Opera Company, and its prized performer, Wong Wa Bo.

The Red Junk Opera members were trained in the performing and martial arts from an early age, and Jee Sin reasoned that, with such backgrounds, they could quickly be trained to become formidable fighters. Jee Sin went to see a Red Junk performance, watching Wong Wa Bo very closely. He was impressed with Wong Wa Bo's considerable skills and enormous strength, but noticed a few technical faults which he felt he could correct.

As the performers were packing up to travel on to a performance in Guangzhou, Jee Sin approached them and asked for passage. The poler of the ship, seeing only a filthy tramp in rags, informed him that the Red Junks were not passenger ships, and that the only way that Jee Sin would get to Guangzhou was by walking. The opera staff continued their packing, ignoring Jee Sin, and then boarded the boat, preparing to shove off. The poler saw Jee Sin take up a stance, one foot on the shore and one on the boat. The poler decided that the foolish beggar was overdue for a surprise bath, and began to push with his pole as hard as he could.

Try as he might, he could not move the boat. He summoned the others, who also thrust poles into the river bed, but the boat remained unmoved. Finally, in desperation, the poler summoned Wong Wa Bo, the best poler of all, still sleeping after an unusually long performance the previous evening. Even he was unable to make a difference.

The disguised Jee Sin began to laugh, and with his foot, began to rock the boat, threatening to flood it. Wong Wa Bo realised that the man in rags before him was no beggar, but a man of exceptional power and skill. He respectfully invited Jee Sin aboard and begged to be taught the master's skills. Jee Sin taught the Red Junk Opera members his Kung Fu, which they called Weng Chun Kuen ("Everlasting Spring Boxing") to disguise its Shaolin origins. Wong Wa Bo became his prized student, one of very few to learn Jee Sin's six-and-a-half-strike pole technique.

Meanwhile, Leung Bok Cho sought a worthy student to whom to pass on the Wing Chun system. He had heard about his nephew Wong Wa Bo's reputation as a performer and martial artist, and went to a Red Junk performance to see for himself. Leung Bok Cho and Wong Wa Bo got together after the show, and it was agreed that, if Leung could beat Wong in a friendly match, the Wing Chun butterfly swords against staff, that Wong would become Leung's student and be taught the art of Wing Chun.

The match was fought on the stage of the Red Junk, Wong with a twelve foot Dragon Pole against Leung's pair of eighteen inch butterfly swords. Wong figured he had the advantage, and invited Leung to attack first. Wong found it very difficult to defend against the swift, tight techniques of the swords, and was forced to the edge of the stage. In desperation, Wong used the most deadly techniques of the pole, blocking Leung's double slash at his head with an upward bon kwun, then jabbing low at Leung's leg. Despite the almost simultaneous block and attack, Wong's strike missed, and he felt the cold steel of Leung's butterfly blade against his wrist. He had no choice but to drop his pole and concede defeat, begging Leung to teach him the superior techniques of Wing Chun.

Leung knew from the fight he had chosen well. Wong mastered the art of Wing Chun, and integrated its principles into the technique of the six-and-a-half strike Dragon Pole, thus making that weapon part of the Wing Chun system. Next in the lineage was Leung Lan Kwai, a herbalist by profession, who introduced the Iron Palm training into the system. Leung Lan Kwai passed his knowledge to Leung Lee Tai, who then passed it on to Leung Jan, a famous herbal doctor in Fatshan. Leung Jan was famous for his Iron Palm technique.

Leung Jan had chosen his sons, Leung Bak and Leung Chuen, as his successors. However, a neighbouring money changer, Chan Wa Soon, was greatly interested in Leung Jan's Kung Fu and began to spy on Leung Jan and his sons while they were practising. Leung Jan became aware of this very early in the piece, and intentionally modified the techniques he taught to his sons to reduce their effectiveness whenever Chan was watching.

Eventually, Leung Jan became impressed with Chan's keen interest, accepting him as a disciple. However, he continued to teach only the modified version of Wing Chun to Chan, because he feared that Chan would dispute the grandmaster titleship of Wing Chun with his sons after his (Leung Jan's) death.

This fear manifested itself after the deaths of Leung Jan and Leung Cheun, with Chan, a much larger and more powerful man, driving the surviving son, Leung Bak, from Fatshan. Leung Bak went to Hong Kong.

Chan began to teach the modified version of Wing Chun to selected students. Despite his reputation and popularity as a Kung Fu exponent, he only accepted eleven students. Then Yip Man, twelve years old at the time, came to Chan with three hundred pieces of silver, seeking acceptance as a disciple. Chan assumed the boy had stolen the coins from his parents, and marched him home to confront them. There he discovered that Yip Man had indeed saved the money on his own. Impressed with Yip Man's commitment, Chan accepted him as his final disciple.

After four years of study with Chan Wa Soon, Yip Man became a skilled fighter with a considerable reputation. After Chan's death, Yip Man moved to Hong Kong. Through some martial arts colleagues, he was introduced to an eccentric old man renowned for his Kung Fu ability. Yip Man, with the impetuosity of youth, challenged the old man, only to find himself soundly beaten.

The old man was Leung Bak, the hitherto lost surviving son of Leung Jan. Leung Bak explained to Yip Man the story of the modified Wing Chun system which was taught to Chan Wa Soon, and then accepted Yip Man as a student of the Traditional Wing Chun system. He stayed with Leung Bak for four years, and then returned to Fatshan, challenged and defeated his seniors, and declared himself grandmaster of Wing Chun Kung Fu. While respected throughout China for his Kung-fu skills, Yip Man took no students.

The communist uprising forced Yip Man to flee Fatshan for Macau, leaving his fortune behind, as did many of his contemporaries. Leung Shan, a master of Pak Mei (White Eyebrow) Kung Fu found Yip Man living there in impoverished circumstances, and took him to Hong Kong.

Leung Shan ran a Kung Fu school on the premises of the restaurant workers' union in Hong Kong. Yip Man was put up in a small apartment there, and would occasionally watch the classes, occasionally criticising the techniques taught by Leung Shan, without intending offence.

One night in 1951, Leung became annoyed by Yip Man's criticism, and challenged him. Though Yip Man was older and less powerful than Leung Shan, the latter could not match the techniques of Wing Chun and was easily overcome.

Yip Man then revealed himself as the grandmaster of Wing Chun, and took Leung Shan as the first of a small number of disciples, who included the late Bruce Lee and the current Traditional Wing Chun grandmaster, William Cheung Cheuk Hing.

Philosophy

Philosophy and Reality

Kung Fu without its traditional and philosophical basis would be little more than a brutal and inhuman science of injury, death and destruction.

However, it needs to be understood by the student that Kung Fu's primary purpose is self protection. In ancient China as well as in large cities today, real fights may end in injury or death. Philosophising over respect for one's opponent or strict adherence to Buddhist or Taoist principles in the middle of a streetfight is likely to earn the practitioner a ride in an ambulance. As Sifu David Crook wrote, "Anyone who believes in the [Marquis of] Queensbury rules in the street had better be fully insured."

A mugger or other assailant is unlikely to share your Taoist and Buddhist principles, or any sense of fair play. While club sparring and tournaments are conducted under rules and within limits, all such assumptions are off in a streetfight. There are no rules and no guarantees. Real and improvised weapons (chains, knives, iron bars), biting, clawing and gouging, group attacks and group stompings are all very real possibilities.

The training in a Kung Fu school goes only part of the way to prepare a student to deal with real world attacks.

While we learn efficient fighting techniques, and practise these in various drills, with varying degrees of contact, these only go some of the way to preparing us for the enormous emotional and physical duress of an encounter with someone wishing to damage us. Streetfights are not stopped because one of the combatants cuts or injures themselves, or because they run out of breath. Streetfights stop when one side is unable to continue - helpless, unconscious, severely injured or dead. The winner(s) may stop short of kicking the loser to death when he is down, but this will be a matter of luck as much as anything else.

To win a streetfight demands that you meet the attack on your person with equal, preferably greater, ferocity, that you overcome your fear and pain in a violent attack, often best done by flooding your system with adrenalin, and that you are prepared to act immediately to render your opponents unable to continue their attack, by any means necessary, fair or unfair, and with complete ruthlessness. Any second thoughts or philosophical principles that restrict your tactics in a streetfight will be giving your opponent an advantage. If your life is potentially at stake, you cannot afford your opponent ANY advantage.

The fundamental purpose of our art, fighting for survival, cannot be ignored or overlooked. Indeed, to do so would be to prostitute it. But the potential for misuse of the capability for violence of Kung Fu requires that we use it as a last, rather than a first, resort. Any other course also prostitutes the art. It is for use when we or others are under threat of violence, not as a means to intimidate or coerce others.

Proper training provides us with means for the reduction of stress through physical activity, and breathing and meditation exercises. We learn to deal with combat, fear, aggression and pain in a controlled environment, and develop discipline and tolerance.

So most martial arts, with Kung Fu being no exception, involve discipline and attempt to instil their devotees with a grounding in the traditions and related philosophies of the art.

In the case of Kung Fu and Wing Chun, we must look more closely at the underpinning philosophies of Chinese culture, starting with the teachings of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism.

Taoism

The doctrine of Taoism is concerned with living in harmony with nature, or more precisely in harmony with the natural laws of the universe. Salvation and enlightenment are to be found, not in the achievements and endeavours of the society, nor the doctrines and dogmas of education and organised religion. One lives in harmony with the Tao, not by resisting or trying to overcome the world, but by accepting and yielding to the forces around one. Where a powerful but rigid oak tree may be split by a hurricane, a blade of grass bends with the wind and survives undamaged. The experienced waterman survives dangerous seas not by fighting against a current stronger than he, but by swimming with it, unresisting, until he is out of danger. The Wing Chun fighter does not oppose a stronger force directly, but redirects it to his own advantage.

Taoism promotes the concept of the "Un-carved Block", depicting man in his natural state of existence, unspoiled by social conditioning. Years of education, social and religious rituals, cultural forces, and, in modern times, media hype, condition our attitudes, perceptions and beliefs. Taoism contends that such a state is unnatural, that fulfilment and peace are forever beyond us unless we free ourselves from our conditioned responses to the stimuli of the world and return to our true nature.

Taoism also promotes the concept of Wu Wei, or non-action. This is not a philosophy of indolence, nor of turning the other cheek, but rather of doing nothing which is contrary to the nature of things. Rather than confronting a superior force, yield to it, thus allowing it to unbalance itself, after which the natural order will be restored. This was a difficult concept for most of Lao Tzu's contemporaries to understand during the time of the Warring States, with persecution of the masses an everyday occurrence.

I too find Wu Wei a difficult concept, though a particular Taoist parable seems to point in the right direction, particularly for those of us involved with confrontations and violence.

Imagine a boatman, steering a small craft down a difficult waterway. A boat manned by another drifts directly into his path, and the boatman is unable to avoid a collision which damages his craft and his belongings therein. The angry boatman hurls abuse at the foolish, inept pilot of the other boat.

Now imagine the same boatman on the same river. This time an empty boat drifts into his path. Once again, he is unable to avoid a collision; but this time there is no one to blame.

Living in accordance with Wu Wei and the Tao is to become like the empty boat.

Buddhism

The Buddha's teachings and doctrine proposed a disregard for self and materialism, instead emphasising subsequent lives and the eventual deliverance from the eternal cycle of life and suffering which is human existence.

The foundations of his teaching are "The Four Basic Truths of Buddhism", or "The Four Noble Truths", which are:

- All life is suffering - life is an endless, illusory, unreal cycle of pain, unhappiness, and suffering, birth, existence and death. This cycle of birth, death and rebirth is called Samsara, and we are bound to it by the consequences of our actions (karma).
- This suffering has a cause - put simply, ignorance, ego, and desire - though some sects of Buddhism have spun this out into a complex web of predestination and cause and effect, with various actions incurring various credits and debits to a karmic account which must be paid off in future lifetimes. While all of these have basic needs, these are generally simple and easily met. Not so desire - if we allow it to remain uncontrolled, it will control us; we will be constantly diverted from our higher goals due to the profusion of attractions all around, which we chase blindly, forgetting our original destination. And, unlike our needs, desire can never be satisfied; even if we have everything, we still want more.
- Liberation from suffering is possible, by renouncing desire, attachment, and the illusion of self, stepping off the wheel of Samsara and entering the state of Nirvana.
- A way exists to attain this liberation and the state of Nirvana - called the Eightfold Path.

Its eight aspects are:

- Right view - seeing the world and ourselves as they really are, abandoning expectations, hope, and fear, viewing life simply, without prejudice.
- Right intention - If we can abandon our expectations, our hopes and fears, we no longer need to attempt to coerce or manipulate others to meet our expectations of the way things should be. We work with what is. Our intentions are pure.
- Right speech - if our intentions are pure, we need not be guarded about our speech. We need not lie, bluff, or put on airs and graces in an attempt to impress or manipulate. We say what is necessary, simply and genuinely.
- Right discipline - we need to renounce our tendency to complicate issues. We have a simple straight-forward relationship with our job, our house and our family. We give up all the unnecessary and frivolous complications which complicate our lives and relationships, practising simplicity.
- Right livelihood - we should earn our living, and perform our jobs properly, with attention to detail. We look for a simple relationship with our work, dispensing with the image or social status with which our

profession may be regarded in society. Our work is important, and we must form a simple honest relationship with it, not allow it to define us.

- Right effort - we approach spiritual training not as a struggle, with evil inside ourselves which must be conquered, but with simple, constant practice. We work with things and ourselves as they are, not as evils to be rejected or overcome.
- Right mindfulness - we cultivate awareness of everything we do, speech, attitude, the way we work. We are mindful of the tiniest details of our experience. We cultivate precision and clarity.
- Right concentration - normally our minds are absorbed with all manner of internal chatter, desires, speculation, self-preoccupation and self-entertainment. Right concentration means that we are completely absorbed in things as they are, right here, right now. Only a discipline such as seated meditation can give us a way to silence our internal chatter and concentrate on simple, unadorned reality.

Confucianism

Unlike Taoism and Buddhism, which advocate detachment from the mundane ways of the social world and attuning one's spirit with loftier principles, Confucianism wholeheartedly embraces human relationships, social structures, and commerce. It concerns itself with standards of social behaviour, morals and virtues in copious low level detail, contrasting again with the principles and truths of Buddhism and Taoism, which are small in number but transcendental in scope.

The teachings of Confucius are set down in a number of classic texts, most notably the Spring and Autumn annals and the Analects of Confucius, the latter being a large collection of aphorisms on all aspects of life, including government, politics, morals, and religion.

The teachings emphasise virtue and morality in government, righteousness, respect within families, and proper conduct in social situations. Elaborate and lengthy rules for conduct in social situations typify the teachings.

Undoubtedly the etiquette we practise in the Kung Fu school derives a great deal from the teachings of Confucius.

But also we must consider the moral environment under which such skills are taught, and the emphasis placed on the correct image of the martial arts and the proper conduct and discipline of its exponents in daily life.

Confucius is also thought by many historians to have written lengthy commentaries on the I Ching, or Book of Changes. Indeed, some believe him to be the author of the I Ching itself. On the other hand, there is no indisputable evidence that he actually wrote any of the texts attributed to him, and their authorship remains a hot topic in historical circles.

Despite the grander scale and loftier rewards offered by Taoism and Buddhism, Confucianism was more easily grasped and therefore more readily accepted by the masses. Largely illiterate, and used to rituals and conformity in religion and under feudal rule, it was easy to exchange one set of rituals for another. Also, Confucianism's emphasis on chivalry and other more macho concepts had greater appeal than did the more feminine, yielding ideas of Taoism.

Confucianism came under attack in the early half of the twentieth century in some sections of Chinese society after they came off second best in several major confrontations with more technologically advanced Occidental and Japanese invaders. The followers of Mao Tse-Tung in particular denounced Confucianism as an obstacle to technological advance, and therefore social evolution.

The Doctrine of Yin and Yang, and the Principles of Chinese Medicine

The ancient Chinese, like their modern counterparts, sought a way to understand and explain the world around them, principle and purpose in the changing pattern of events around them, and order in the chaos of existence.

The most powerful principle used to explain the cause and effect of events was that of the interplay of Yin and Yang, two opposite but complementary forces whose relationship and mutual ascendancies are continually changing.

Yin is negative, passive, weak, receptive; Yang is positive, active, strong, creative. Neither can exist without the other, and each, even at its most abundant, contains the seed of the other.

As Yin and Yang compete and cooperate in the manifestation of all things, so events occur in cycles, with various attributes and tendencies gaining ascendancy, and then diminishing. It was the legendary Huang-Ti, the Yellow Emperor, who first documented the cyclical nature of existence and its manifestation in the Five Elements: Metal, Water, Wood, Fire, and Earth. He noticed at various times the ascendancy of different types of life, and their associated colours; at one time, earthworms and burrowing insects were abundant, the force of Earth being strong; later, grass and trees were abundant, the force of Wood in full ascendancy. Later, metal blades appeared in the waters of the palace, and so on.

This concept of five elements or types applies to all types of things and ideas. For example, with each element is associated a colour (metal - white, water - black, wood - green, fire - red, earth - yellow), a direction (in order, West, North, East, South, Centre), a taste (acrid, salt, sour, bitter, sweet), and similar related categories for every imaginable attribute of reality - emotions, animals, senses, foods, etc.

Simplistically, Chinese Medicine is based on the five elements and their balance or harmonious interaction. Each element corresponds to a Yin organ (lung, kidneys, liver, heart, spleen) and Yang organ (colon, bladder, gall

bladder, small intestine, stomach). In a person in good health, ch'i or internal energy flows through meridians, or invisible energy channels, to nourish all parts and organs of the body. Illness results from blockages or imbalances in the flow of ch'i, leading to an overabundance or deficiency of the energy corresponding to a particular element or elements.

Ch'i is an intrinsic energy, or life force. While invisible and intangible, it permeates all living creatures, and is inseparable from life itself. Almost all Eastern martial arts include exercises to develop, cultivate, store and channel ch'i. An adept practitioner can channel his ch'i to vastly augment his/her strength, endurance, and destructive power. Simplistically again, the smooth flow of ch'i is regulated by two cycles.

- The Sheng cycle produces and augments the different types of chi within the body. In esoteric terms, metal melts to produce liquid, or water; water in turn nourishes plants (wood); wood adds fuel to the fire; and from fire comes ashes, or earth.
- On the other hand, the Ko cycle causes the mutual retardation of the different types of energy. Metal cuts down wood. Water destroys fire. Wood overruns the earth. Fire melts metal, and earth soaks up water.

Diagnosis of a patient's maladies involves an external examination, including the quality of the pulse etc., but may also involve evaluation of the person's emotional state, colour of their complexion etc. A flushed complexion and temperature may mean an overabundance of fire; a cold sweat on the other hand may mean too much water (or a deficiency of fire). Further complexities will determine whether an apparent abundance of one state is caused by an overactivity of one element or the lack of another (the lack of one element allowing another to manifest itself unchecked).

Treatment, like diagnosis, is a holistic process; it may involve dietary recommendations or an alteration to one's routine, as well as herbal treatments to affect specific types of ch'i, or the use of acupuncture, massage, or moxibustion (the application of heat) to specific points on the meridians to increase or impede the flow of ch'i. Knowledge of Chinese medical theory and the location of specific acupuncture points is of great value to the advanced Kung-Fu practitioner, as it allows him to control or damage an opponent with far greater efficiency by attacking the acupuncture points. The use of such points is known as Dim Mak; its effective use requires serious study and a certain amount of hand, etc. conditioning to be able to strike with the power and accuracy necessary to cause the desired effect. The use of Dim Mak techniques to cause delayed damage or death is the subject of many Kung Fu stories. While many such stories are certainly the subject of enormous embellishment, there is no doubt that strikes to certain areas of the body may result in only mild pain at the time, but result in severe injury or death later; certain skull fractures may not cause immediate apparent trauma but may result in death later as cerebra-spinal fluid gradually seeps from the skull.

As many of the acupuncture points also coincide with places where the nerves are close to the skin or unprotected by muscles, etc. it is possible to cause significant pain with accurate point strikes or claw techniques to these areas. Many of the Kung Fu masters of old were also medical practitioners; Dr Leung Jan was one.

The Philosophy of Wing Chun Kung Fu

Traditional Wing Chun has its own philosophical creed:

He who excels as a warrior does not appear formidable.

One who excels in fighting is never aroused in anger.

One who excels in defeating his enemy does not join issues.

One who excels in employing others humbles himself before them.

This is the virtue of non-contention and matching the sublimity of heaven.

My analysis of these maxims follows.

He who excels as a warrior does not appear formidable.

A warrior understands that a dominant or frightening persona will not generally assist him in meeting his goals. A person of calm disposition and unremarkable appearance has greater opportunity to move in a variety of circles without attracting unwanted attention.

Generally his life will be more fruitful and less stressful, as others will be more comfortable in dealing with someone who looks and acts like a calm, rational being, rather than an attack dog or steroid monster.

Cultivating an overly imposing appearance or aggressive personality may evoke fear or resentment in others, and provoke attack rather than submission. However, a skilled and experienced opponent will be unaffected by appearance or demeanour; he will be unimpressed by your Special Forces T-shirt and belligerent facial expression, only with your fighting techniques and strategy. He will be watching your elbows and knees, not your snarling teeth or death-head tattoos.

If a combat situation arises, the warrior of non-threatening appearance may be able to take advantage of an enemy's complacency, where an opponent of more belligerent appearance may provoke a more ferocious initial attack, or even a massive preemptive strike. If one presents as a person of violent bent, one may find oneself the first target in a brawl.

He who excels as a fighter is never aroused in anger.

I have already discussed the true nature of combat, its potentially fatal risks, and the potential need for massive and total retaliation in the face of a truly lethal threat.

The excellent fighter realises the true nature of combat. Realising the risks involved and the potential costs - pain, injury, criminal charges, remorse - he seeks to avoid it wherever possible. He will try to resolve potential conflicts using his brain rather than his fists, to use psychology on an opponent rather than smashing his face in. To do so requires awareness, confidence, and self control.

Anger is the enemy of control. Anger causes overreaction, resulting either in rushing in, creating openings which can be exploited by a calmer, thinking fighter, taking on an opponent or opponents due to wounded pride that in a more lucid moment we know we should run from, or in losing control of ourselves and causing unjustified pain or injury, resulting in guilt and remorse at best, criminal charges or violent retribution at worst. Strategy and tactics demand the ability to analyse the situation rapidly, which is impossible when we are burning with anger, out of control.

While a skilled fighter generates and recognises emotion, adrenaline, and the fight or flight reaction within himself and allows them to carry him through, the point is to consciously channel the emotions to achieve victory, not to allow oneself to become consumed by them.

He who excels in defeating his enemy does not join issues.

The practice of martial arts and its underlying philosophies (Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism) teach us respect for others. Buddhism also advises us to practise detachment.

Human interaction often involves conflict. Conflict is not necessarily violent; conflict of a sort arises when two people who live together want to watch different television programs at the same time. Conflict can often be resolved through negotiation; often, everyone involved can win. We watch one program, and tape the other.

Respecting others includes allowing them to carry out their own affairs, and giving them the opportunity to resolve their own conflicts. People learn and grow through fighting their own battles. To involve oneself unasked in the affairs of others is patronising.

Kung Fu is for defence, for situations where body and soul are under threat. While we should attempt to conduct our affairs in harmony with its philosophies, it is not for us to impose our will and desires on others using our fighting skills as an inducement or threat to force submission. To do so is to trivialise our art and our training. Freedom of thought, opinion, and association is the foundation of a free society. We must respect the opinions and wishes of others, even if we disagree.

However, we are morally bound to use our art in the defence of others. This is a complicated ethical area, even more so than when we are personally attacked. One of the urban myths of martial arts, with enough real instances to back it up, is the practitioner attempting to break up a fist-fight between husband and wife by attacking the husband, only to have the enraged wife attack her would-be rescuer (after which the husband joins in as well).

When one comes upon a fight in progress, neither its cause nor the guilt or innocence of any involved parties is usually apparent, and wading in full bore against one side or the other while ignorant of the facts may later prove to be a mistake. No doubt both sides of the conflict would argue (and probably believe) that theirs was the just cause. It may be better to act to defuse the overall level of violence rather than to take sides - try to talk the combatants down, showing disapproval towards violence from either side, but indicating approval of rational action and discussion. Block and restrain the aggressors rather than flattening them. This probably takes more than one person. If you are outnumbered or outgunned, common sense indicates a withdrawal. If a brawl is in progress, even the most proficient martial artist would be better getting out of there, and calling for reinforcements, the police usually being the best bet.

The martial artist is not a superhero and, usually, not an officer of the law. You and others have a right to defence, but not to punish others. Guilt and punishment are matters for the law.

He who excels in employing others humbles himself before them.

A good leader recognises the contributions of others, the value of their ideas and the contributions of their labour. An atmosphere of mutual respect is the only environment in which effective communication is possible. One who rules through fear or authoritarian methods may find that his employees, subjects, etc. may hide or distort information he needs to act and decide effectively, through their fear of bearing bad news, or through resentment. Respect given to subordinates by a boss does not imply informality or over-familiarity. An effective working relationship requires boss and employee to respect each other's person, but also the nature of the relationship and their roles within that relationship.

Friendships between bosses and subordinates certainly may arise, as they get to know each other on a personal level; but if the friendship and the working relationship should conflict, one or the other may well suffer, probably leading to a breakdown in both.

It is important that a boss or Sifu recognise and subordinate as necessary his own personal traits and preferences to lead effectively, be they a dominant tendency leading to the stifling of his subordinates, or a desire to be liked, leading to ineffective management of the work at hand.

Humility before one's employees certainly does not mean acquiescing to their whims and desires, nor an abrogation of one's role as leader and decision maker.

Rather, humility means that an employer puts the welfare of the group and of the enterprise as a whole before his own wishes for power over others, or for their approval, and to act accordingly.

This is the virtue of non-contention and matching the sublimity of Heaven.

Until recent times, the majority of Chinese were as involved with war, whether perpetrator or casualty, as they were with culture. Survival was a continual preoccupation. Students of Kung Fu were taught skills of violence for the protection and survival of themselves and their society; common sense indicates that in times of lethal conflict, provoking fights (contention) is not a recipe for long life.

Confucianism teaches benevolence and the way of civilised interaction; indeed, even in Europe the rules of social etiquette were originally developed as a set of conventions for interacting with real or potential rivals without resorting to violence.

Buddhism teaches respect for all sentient beings, and detachment from desires and Samsara, the illusory world of conflict and emotion.

Taoism teaches the oneness of all things, the union of opposites, and the virtues of non-action (non-contention), living in harmony with the Way and the natural order of things.

Philosophy then, as well as practicality, indicates that a path of non-violence leads to a long and peaceful existence.

Appendix A

The following variations to the history detailed in my thesis have been mentioned by one reporter or another.

Rather than there being five masters who escaped the burning of the Shaolin Temple, some have five masters developing the Wing Chun style within the temple to train a revolutionary army, with Ng Mui being the only survivor after the Manchu attack. This theory clashes with that of the role of Jee Sin teaching Dragon Pole to Wong Wa Bo.

Ng Mui is also credited by some as having developed the White Crane (Pak Hok) style of Kung Fu, passing it on to a descendent named Mui Min. A story is told of Ng Mui witnessing a battle between a crane and a snake (some say a fox), with the snake's darting and coiling moves evading the crane's beak, while the crane swept the snake's strikes away with skilful use of its wings. Legend has it that Ng Mui based the Bon Sao (wing arm) on the crane's movement, and the Fok Sao (bridging arm) on the snake (or the paw of the fox). Other stories have it that Yim Wing Chun was the witness of the fight between the two animals.

Some versions have Yim Wing Chun's father as a Shaolin-trained practitioner, and say he taught the art to her and Leung Bok Cho.

Rather than the unnamed gangster being the catalyst for Ng Mui teaching Yim Wing Chun combat arts, some say that Yim Wing Chun made a living as a professional fighter, wagering her hand in marriage (she was a woman of uncommon beauty) against an adversary's money. Leung Bok Cho was smitten by her, and took up the challenge. Some say he was beaten, but that Wing Chun was as smitten by him as he by her, and she married him anyway. It is said also that the fight took place on a small raised platform, providing the more compact and direct art of Wing Chun with an advantage over the Northern Chinese styles which used wider stances and larger, more acrobatic movements. Leung Bok Cho was said to be a master of a Northern style.

Others have it that Wing Chun, having fallen in love with Leung Bok Cho, intentionally allowed him to defeat her. When she later revealed this to him, he laughed at the notion, but Wing Chun invited him to fight again and beat him convincingly, demonstrating that she spoke the truth. She then taught him the Wing Chun system.

Jee Sin is also credited with teaching Kung Fu to Hung Hay Gung, from whom descends Hung Gar style ("Hung Family Boxing").

Some say that Jee Sin was related to Wong Wa Bo and the Dragon pole was passed to him as a normal family heritage, rather than being initiated via the encounter on the Red Junk. Another version says that he had joined the Red Junk earlier, disguised as a cook.

One account has it that the modern dummy was invented on the Red Junk with the mast forming the body of the dummy, with the arms and leg detachable so they could be hidden from prying Manchu eyes while the Junk was in port. This story also has it that the dragon pole's original form was that of the oars or poles used to guide the Junk.

Appendix B

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