

Yip Man



At the time of his death in December 1972, Yip Man could not have imagined that his name would be remembered among those of the most distinguished international grandmasters in the annals of martial arts history: Dr. Jigoro Kano, Gichin Funakoshi, Moriehi Uyeshiba. Yip Man's name belongs on that list of immortals.

As the rightful patriarch of the Wing Chun style of kung fu, he succeeded in spreading his obscure but dynamic fighting art first throughout the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong and then throughout the world.

His teaching has become a cornerstone of the modern martial arts era. The bare-boned efficiency of his fighting techniques, coupled

with the knowledge that he was Bruce Lee's instructor, caused millions to regard his art with awed curiosity. Wing Chun means magic to them. Throughout the world, wherever instruction is not readily available, martial artists have at least attempted to imitate the subtleties of the art's sticking and trapping techniques.

Today Wing Chun is the most influential martial art to emerge from 20th century China.

Unfortunately, the art did not achieve international acclaim during Yip's lifetime, so he did not foresee the need publicly to name an heir to his role as leader of the Wing Chun clan. He still held and transmitted much of his art through vows of secrecy. Now that more than two decades have passed since his demise, many glory-seekers will invent intricate tales, misrepresent Yip photographs, and literally fight for the right to become known as his personal disciple and heir. Dozens of second and even third generation practitioners have advanced such counterfeit claims ... a bizarre phenomenon once the facts are revealed that Yip Man did not begin teaching until after his 50th birthday, that he did not like to teach and that he rarely did so.

Yip Man was born in October 1893 in the town of Fatshan in Namhoi County, Kwangtung Province, in Southern China. He was the son of a wealthy merchant named Yip Oi Doh and his wife, Madame Ng. As is still the custom, businesses and corporations in China were often built around family groupings of fathers, sons, sons-in-law, cousins, uncles, granduncles and grandfathers. The Yip family was no exception. Collectively, they owned a large farm and a merchandise exporting business which played an important role in bringing domestic renown to fabrics made from the Fatshan silkworm.

The Yip family lived in some 20 old-style Chinese estates which lined both sides of Happiness and Scholarship Avenue. On one side of the avenue, in the centre of the estates, stood the Yip ancestral temple. Inside the temple, the Yip family permitted Wing Chun master Chan Wah Shun to live and teach a small group of disciples, since Chan's local reputation as a fighter discouraged thieves and highwaymen from attacking the family business.

As a boy Yip Man was tutored in the traditional Chinese classics. He was forced to memorize ancient poems and Confucian philosophy, to learn to paint as well as to write his own poems. But whenever he could escape from the surveillant eyes of his tutors, he would wander over to the ancestral temple and watch Chan Wah Shun drill his disciples in the ways of Wing Chun. Soon the boy's visits became more regular until, finally, when Yip was about nine years old he approached Chan and asked to be accepted as a student.

Chan did not take the boy's request seriously. "Chan Wah Shun was about 60 years old at the time," explains William Cheung, one of Yip Man's oldest and most devoted disciples, "and most of his students were already over 30." Besides, many wealthy families of the day did not want their sons' attention drawn away from academic pursuits by the practice of kung fu, especially after the Boxer Rebellion fiasco in 1900.

So to spare the boy's feelings, Chan diplomatically told Yip that he would admit him as a student as soon as he could pay the tuition price of three taels of silver. Chan did not think that a nine year old boy, from a wealthy family or not, could produce that much money anytime in the near future. "But when my master Yip Man returned the next day," says Cheung, relating the story as told to him by the Grandmaster, "he went up to Chan Wah Shun with 300 pieces of silver. That was a lot of money!

You could have bought a good-sized house in those days for 300 pieces of silver.

"But Chan Wah Shun did not simply accept the money. Instead he thought that this little kid had just pinched 300 pieces of silver to give to him. So he took Yip Man to his parents to try to find out where the silver had come from.

"Then they realized that the 300 pieces of silver were his whole life savings. So once they saw that this boy had such a strong desire to learn Wing Chun that he'd given away all his money, his parents agreed to let him study. And Chan Wah Shun accepted him."

Yip Man became the last of Chan's 16 disciples. He also became the youngest in a direct line of Wing Chun practitioners dating back nearly 200 years to the art's fabled beginnings at the original Shaolin Temple in Honan Province. At that time in Chinese history, the Shaolin Temple was a hotbed of revolutionary activity.

"You see, 400 years ago when the Manchus took over China," recounts Cheung, "about 90 percent of the Chinese people considered themselves to be members of the Han nation. The Manchus, on the other hand, came from the Northern border areas. So in order to prevent the people from overthrowing their government, the Manchus placed a lot of restrictions on the Han.

"They forced the Han men to shave their foreheads and to wear pigtailed so that they could be easily identified. They made the Han women bind their feet so that they became completely dependent on the men. And since the women could not walk very far, the men could not wander off. High positions in the government had to be held only by Manchus, or by Hans who had been made Manchus through a special ceremony. They even limited the number of knives that could be kept in a Han household."

Outside of the government imposed restrictions, the Manchus encouraged the populace to continue with business as usual, engaging in all normal forms of cultural endeavour, including monastic pursuits. Buddhist and Taoist monks were permitted to travel and participate in religious rites virtually unencumbered by the new regime. Thus the Shaolin Temple, with its long-established tradition of martial arts training, became the obvious sanctuary for dissidents, revolutionaries, and secret societies dedicated to the overthrow of the government.

Meanwhile many members of the Han officer corps who survived the collapse of the Ming dynasty re-swore their loyalties and aligned themselves with the new Manchu leadership. These professional soldiers were highly skilled in the martial arts and well-versed in the fighting tactics of the Shaolin Temple. Whenever they were sent into an area of Shaolin activity to enforce the Manchu will, they quickly put a halt to the Robin Hood operations of rebellious monks.

"In those days it took at least 18 years to train a full-fledged Shaolin martial artist," describes William Cheung. "They had to do ten years of a hard physical style, and then eight years of internal style. During that time they also had to practise swords and spears, and various other kinds of weapons.

"So for the revolutionaries to train someone in Shaolin to match the skills of the Manchu soldiers, it would take 18 years ... and even then they were doing basically the same thing (with regard to fighting technique). They had to find a solution to this problem. So about 280 years ago, the oldest and most knowledgeable elders of the Shaolin Temple got together and decided to develop a style which would overcome all the other styles, and which would take a much shorter time to learn.

"Then with that purpose in mind, they met repeatedly and engaged in lengthy discussions. Each elder was the master of his own style. And each master revealed all his secrets. Eventually, they developed a theory from which they derived a set of fighting principles."

The combat theory of the elders was as simple as it was profound. Since their objective was to invent a technically superior system of self defence, they began by examining the two existing types of martial arts. They noted that the hard or external styles - Shaolin, traditional chuan-fa, modern karate - committed the body's placement well before a kick or punch impacted with its target. In this way the technique accumulated maximum momentum, and imparted maximum force. Of course the weakness of the approach was that the early commitment left the hard stylist vulnerable to an assortment of throws and perpetual unbalancing techniques.

On the other hand, the soft or internal styles - tai chi chuan, pa kua, hsing-i - kept the body's weight elusive, and committed only at the instant of impact. But the problem with this approach was that the soft stylist did not strike with enough penetration or power.

The elders reasoned, then, that if they could devise techniques which landed repeatedly with both the unpredictable swiftness of a soft style and the violent penetration of a hard style, then no enemy would be able to plan an effective counter. All styles would be defeated. Consequently the monks agreed that the new fighting art should contain only those techniques which could be thrown with

total commitment, halted abruptly, then instantly re-thrown from another angle with another committed technique.

They called their new approach the theory of interruption.

Next, since close-range techniques are both easier to interrupt and faster to learn, they determined that the new art would tend to emphasize in-fighting. Any attempts on the part of the enemy to use flashy, long-ranged movements such as high kicks and controlled swings, would be frustrated through a system of jams, straight-line hand strikes and quick, interrupted footwork patterns. The new stylist would be able to obtain favourable in-fighting distance safely, and with little effort.

Finally, once the proper in-fighting range was secured, the new stylist would have to be trained to use physical contact with the enemy's limbs to sense the enemy's next technique spontaneously. Then both hands could be used as a team for either interrupted strikes, combined with limb traps or for simultaneous parry-and-open hand with its slaps, grabs, parries, finger pokes and palm strikes, which would be favoured over the closed fist.

This process of interruption would continue with increased fury until the enemy had been vanquished.

The Shaolin elders became so encouraged by the progress of their theoretical discussions that they renamed the martial arts training room in which they met "Wing Chun Hall" or "Forever Springtime" Hall. The words "Wing Chun" expressed their hopes for a renaissance in Shaolin martial arts instruction, as well as for a more effective weapon in their struggle against the Manchus. "But before they could completely develop their system," continues William Cheung, "someone tipped off the government and they raided the Shaolin temple. Everybody scattered.

"The founder of our style, the nun Ng Mui, had been one of the temple elders. She escaped the raid and hid herself in a nunnery on Tai Leung Mountain between Szechwan and Yunan provinces. She spent her time there developing the movements of the new system. When she finished she decided to call it "Wing Chun" after the Wing Chun Hall in which the Shaolin elders had held their discussions."

Says Cheung, "One day when Ng Mui travelled down to the village at the bottom of the mountain, she met the daughter of bean curd vendor Yim Yee Gung. The girl and her father were in a lot of trouble because the town bully wanted to marry her. The bully was the leader of a gang and threatened to ruin Yim Yee Gung's business, so eventually Yee Gung and the girl would have to agree. "Ng Mui told them to play along with the bully, but agree to the marriage only if he could then defeat the girl in a kung fu contest. And since in those days it took several months for a marriage to take place anyway, the bully agreed. Meanwhile, the girl started learning Wing Chun with Ng Mui.

"Six months later, the girl stood on a five foot in diameter platform waiting to respond to the bully's challenge. As he ascended onto the platform, he attacked with a wide roundhouse punch. The girl quickly used a Tan Sao block and palm strike, knocking him to the ground. That was the end of it. She had won!

"After the contest, Yim Yee Gung asked Ng Mui to take care of his daughter. So the girl followed Ng Mui to the nunnery. And then Ng Mui gave the name "Wing Chun" to the girl, since she now became the future of the art. Yim Wing Chun stayed with Ng Mui until she died."

Years later, Yim Wing Chun taught the new art to her husband, a salt merchant named Leung Bok Chau. He in turn taught the art to the herbalist Leung Lan Kwai, who taught the art to a Chinese opera star named Wong Wah Bo. Wong Wah Bo then exchanged kung fu techniques with another member of his opera troupe named Leung Yee Tai. Together, Wong and Leung then added the long-pole techniques to the system. And finally, Leung Yee Tai taught the art to Dr. Leung Jan, who passed it on to Chan Wah Shun.

Yip Man studied with Chan Wah Shun for four years, until the old master's death. Yip subsequently spent another two and a half years training with his senior, Ng Chung So, and Ng's two students, Yuen Kay Shan and Yiu Choi. Sometimes they would strap on jackets padded with horse hair and feathers and spar with full-contact techniques directed to the body. Apparently young Yip developed a passion for realism during these early sparring sessions.

When Yip was 16 years old, his parents sent him to Hong Kong to attend St. Stephen's College. There, he quickly fell in with a clique of classmates who liked to offer and accept kung fu challenges. He welcomed the opportunity to put his Wing Chun training to the real test.

Within a short time, he developed a reputation as a superlative fighter. He had stood up to hard stylists and soft stylists, to instructors and students, and even to a foreign devil or two. Yet despite his small five foot, 120 pound frame, never once had he lost.

Yip discovered, in fact, that he liked to fight. He would accept a challenge on the slightest

provocation. On one such occasion, a classmate named Lai dared Yip to go after an old kung fu practitioner who worked at the silk company of Lai's father. The man was well into his 50s and very eccentric, but, Lai insisted, his kung fu was very good.

That evening Yip Man found the man living on a fishing boat anchored near the typhoon breakers in Hong Kong Bay.

"Hey, old man!" yelled Yip.

The old man did not answer.

Yip Man picked up a stone and threw it in the man's direction. "Hey, old man!" he yelled once more.

"What do you want, youngster?"

"I've heard that you are a great kung fu master and I've come here to find out. I'd like to spar with you."

No answer.

"Old man," Yip said again, "I'd like to spar with you."

The man stood silent. He stared into Yip's eyes, then moved his gaze up and down the boy's length. "I don't know, youngster," he said at last, stroking his chin. "You look pretty puny. I might be wasting my time. I'll have to see you do a form first."

This request irritated Yip Man. "All right, old man," he said, dropping into a pigeon-toed horse stance. "Watch!"

Yip performed the entire Shil Lim Tao form of Wing Chun, with its long isotonic motions which always seemed punctuated by a sudden combative pop. The old man smiled. "Okay, youngster. Come on board. We'll spar."

No sooner had the two squared off than Yip Man raced after the old man in a blaze of punches. The old man met Yip's attack, stepped to the side, then ... SPLASSSHHH!

The old man looked down at Yip in the waters of Hong Kong Bay. "What's the matter, youngster?" he said. "I thought you wanted to spar!"

Yip climbed out of the bay, onto the dock, and back onto the boat. "Don't worry, old man," he said. "I'll show you sparring!": He launched after the old man, a jet on takeoff. A few techniques were exchanged at a furious pace, then ... SPLASSSHHH!

"Hey, youngster! Do you want to spar or do you really want to swim?"

Yip Man could not understand what had gone wrong. He had done so well against other supposed 'masters', but he didn't even know what this guy was doing.

Yip began to visit the old man at every opportunity. He would bring him wine and roast duck. Sometimes he would wash the man's clothes, then leave. But not a word was spoken between the two.

After about a month, the old man confronted Yip. "Look, youngster," he said, "I know that you are a Wing Chun practitioner. And I know that you aren't bad. I also know that you show me all this kindness because you want to learn from me ... Well, okay, I'm going to teach you, rather than let the art pass away. You see, I too am a Wing Chun practitioner. My name's Leung Bik. I am the son of your teacher's teacher."

Leung Bik then explained how his father, Dr. Leung Jan, had withheld key elements of the Wing Chun system from Chan Wah Shun. Chan had been over six feet tall, whereas Dr. Leung's two sons, Leung Chun and Leung Bik, only stood at about five feet. So in order to give his sons a slight technical edge, Dr. Leung did not teach Chan Wah Shun the proper interrupted footwork patterns. Further, he held back many techniques even from the three forms.

After Dr. Leung died, the two sons and Chan Wah Shun argued over who would become the next

grandmaster. Chan challenged the two sons, and because he was so much bigger, he was still able to defeat them. Chan then chased the two sons out of the Fatshan area.

Yip Man studied with Leung Bik for two and a half years. Meanwhile he continued to accept challenges. During one encounter, he badly injured his opponent. The police threatened to prosecute, so Yip fled to Japan for a year until the commotion had subsided.

When Yip Man finally returned home to Fatshan to take a wife and assume his responsibilities in the family business, he was only 20 years old, but already a Grandmaster of Wing Chun. He lived a leisurely life there, practising Wing Chun with either a few select students or on the wooden dummy he kept in his flower garden, until the Communist takeover in 1949. He subsequently fled to Hong Kong, penniless, where he spent the remainder of his life teaching. Today, 90 percent of Wing Chun schools in the world can be traced directly to his efforts.

Ng Mui

Yim Wing Chun

Leung Bok Chau

Leung Lan Kwai

Wong Wah Bo

Leung Yee Tai

Dr Leung Jan

Chan Wah Shun Leung Bik

Yip Man

William Cheung

Alfredo Del-Brocco