

MY KUNG-FU JOURNEY WITHIN THE TANGLED SILK CURTAIN  
by John F. Di Virgilio (2017)

For nearly three decades, from 1950, it was illegal in Communist China for martial artist to teach their craft. Away from prying eyes and open ears, some skilled martial artist quietly taught family members to pass on their skills. Despite hiding behind closed doors, loose lips ended many of these teachers. The Communist manifesto called for open cooperation for the betterment of all designated good people. There certainly was no place for free thinkers, individualism, property ownership, or intellectual property and professional skill. Despite Marxist condemnation of martial arts practice, the Chinese martial artist mind set continued to live on in the shadows of public life. After all, the new style of government with its wind blowing the leaves of change would in itself give rise to another dynasty. For the individual Chinese mentality of "Me, my family, my clan first" had out lived so many dynasties. The clan first mentality had long permeated throughout Chinese society everywhere including the overseas Chinese. There was little doubt that the roots of this mentality reached back thousands of years where year-to-year survival was a tenuous thing.

By the mid-1970s, the Vietnam war had ended, Communist China began to open its doors to the west. For Chinese martial artist, this period of time was ripe for a great renaissance. The Hong Kong movie star and martial artist, Bruce Lee, established himself in Hollywood and kicked off a worldwide "Kung-Fu" phenomena. Kung-fu became the eastern wind that carried the seeds for personal development and a means to fill the cultural void noticeably lacking in much of the modern western world. The television series "Kung Fu" was a block buster hit that swept through tens of millions of young, middle aged, and even older viewers. Theater and home television mesmerized people and became the primary modality of electronic brainwashing. The resulting psychological make over, driven by "electronic microwave fire" ignited the inner desires of people to renew themselves and in some cases causing a total brain reset. Hence, the "kung-fu tsunami" of the early 70's drove tens of millions of people to seek out Asian martial art teachers to renew their personal lives and well being.

Having just graduated from high school in 1972, I was among the multitudes of people in search of Asian cultural enrichment through a martial art. But which martial art system was better or at least the most interesting to me? The traditional Okinawan and Japanese Karate arts were now joined by the hard hitting Mas Oyama Shorinji Kempo group. In Korea the Korean Tang Soo Do system was now joined by Tae Kwan Do, and Hop Ki Do. Chinese kung-fu teachers were now appearing everywhere promoting their own systems. For a young man like myself in search of a good teacher, it was nearly impossible to screen through the myriad of flashy eye-catching martial art systems. In the end, I choose the art in which Bruce Lee started his martial arts journey, the Wing Chun kung-fu system. While it was not flashy as the other arts, it did not have a burdensome load of sets (forms) too memorized and the techniques looked very practical. Admittedly, I came very close to joining another flashy martial art group. In my search, I wanted a competent Chinese Wing Chun teacher who would accept a mixed Caucasian-Chinese student. A handful of years earlier, Buck Sam Kong (Kong, Bak Shan), began teaching "Hung Gar" to non-Chinese in Hawaii, he was strongly criticism by the Chinese community.

Being of mixed ethnicity, I recalled my younger years when my Chinese grandmother tried without success to enroll me into the kung-fu practice groups in Honolulu. However, the Chinese community held the hardened belief that mixed blood youth were products of a prostitutes and other types of unwanted street trash. This was in stark contrast to the Japanese and Korean teachers who openly taught all people who had the interest, regardless of ethnicity. Finally, in May 1973, I met Robert Yeung in the Nuuanu YMCA. . Having just arrived from Hong Kong 18 months earlier, he quickly became known as a good and well versed Wing Chun instructor. Before accepting me, Yeung sifu made me wait a fairly long period of time, only allowing me to visit and watch the class before accepting me and my brother as students. I was thrilled beyond belief. Many others who sat with me and watched the nightly practices were too impatient and walked out within a week. Immediate gratification was a powerful psychological obstacle for a great many westerners, waiting was unbearable.

By 1974, the sphere of Wing Chun influence reached across continents. Although a number of the late Grandmaster Yip Man's advanced practitioners like Choy Shong Tin, Lok Yiu, Wong Chock, Wong Long and the famed Wong Shun Leung remained in Hong Kong, others traveled aboard and began spreading Wing Chun Kung-Fu knowledge to foreigners. Master Leung Ting left Hong Kong for Germany, master Wong Kiu went to England, master Moy Yat relocated to New York, and master Cheung Chok Hing was living in Australia. Yip Man's nephew, Lo Man Kam, was well situated in Taiwan and Yip Man's sons were not yet on the tapestry of teachers. One advanced practitioner from the late master Leung Sheung, named Cheung Man Ning, started teaching in San Francisco. Later, the long time, closed door student under Yip Man, master Ho Kam Ming, started teaching in Canada. There were a number of lesser known Wing Chun instructors throughout, many claiming to have learned from the late Grandmaster Yip Man, but nearly all had not finished learning the system. Yip Man made a concerted effort to place his personal "Chop" stamp on certificates that he gave to nearly all of his advanced students, as well as a few grand students that he considered competent enough to teach on their own. In the crowd of Wing Chun instructors, few could produce such a certificate with Yip Man's seal of approval.

My practice sessions in Hawaii were extensive and intensive, meeting six times a week. By my second year with Robert Yeung, he started asking questions about my university studies and my athletic experiences from my high school and my ongoing university activities. I openly shared my knowledge of being a high school football coach. Specifically, I coached offensive line attacking and defensive tactics. I coached during the afternoons, while working toward a teacher education degree earlier in the day, and studied Wing Chun at night. It was a very burdensome schedule with no time for a girlfriend or much socializing. My university studies ranged cross biology, military history, and athletic coaching. It was the latter part of my studies, athletic coaching that most interested Yeung sifu. He was especially interested in American football offensive line blocking methods, often asking about alignment, angles of blocking, squaring the shoulders, mobile footwork, and the cohesive use of forearms and palm jamming. These chats, often over tea after practice, lead into deeper conversations about building courage (overcoming fear) and the need for mindful intent to shape ferocity into a manageable tool. Yeung wanted to investigate how structured western coaching methods could be integrate into Wing Chun kung-fu learning progressions. He asked me to take the class through a couple of

structured group drills. Yeung was very impressed with my applied coaching methods as I took the class through several “walking speed” drills to build reflex and proper angles. I choose the pivoting high upward block and punch (Chor Ma Tan Da) and later the centerline slap and punch (Pak Da) to demonstrate how guided partnered practices can lead to applied random hand reflexes.

In the early 1970's modern athletic coaching methods were being developed and scientifically tested. New coaching methods and practices were introduced into competitive sports in high schools, universities, professional sports, and the Olympics. Older coaching methods were scrapped and replaced by newer structured models of training. Practice routines and drills needed to be focused and produce measurable positive outcomes. The new mantras of "proper progression" along with "specificity of exercise" and "circuit training" were now the guiding principles for coaches, teachers, and trainers. Yeung sifu absorbed these ideas and shared his deep concern that he had about Chinese martial arts as a whole. With a great lament, Yeung sifu, believed that the instructional methods utilized by many Chinese martial arts teachers were obsolete. For 12 years, from his younger teenage years, Yeung practiced Japanese Judo. Yeung's young mind and body were shaped by a very structured Japanese instructional system. Colored belt ranks indicated strict benchmarks of skill mastery and provided a tracking system of where the student stood among his/her peers. It was a well-connected system that promoted directional learning and yet allowed for the practitioner to step back to revisiting foundational skills before pushing to the next level of mastery. Most important, Judo was a partnered system of practice. Judo practitioners were allowed to compete several times a year against other clubs, but for the majority of the year, a student's duty was to help other classmates build their skills as they would help you in return. This win-win style of practice with mutual respecting partners under the guidance of a good teacher proved to be the best training method. Indeed the Japanese and somewhat the Koreans had been teaching in the public domain for many years. Robert Yeung highly regarded the structured coaching he received from his Judo teacher.

Through his younger years and well into his own Wing Chun training under master Wong Long Ching, Robert Yeung visited many friends in many different arts. Some of his friends were involved in Japanese Karate, Aikido and Muay Thai. Other friends were involved with other Chinese fist arts. Having visited various martial art schools, Yeung made several striking observations between Japanese and Chinese martial arts. Using his Judo background as a gauge, he observed that the Chinese systems all suffered from inferior or loosely linked teaching methods. They all suffered from "closed door" isolationism and the lacked any type of system headquarters or guiding council of elders. To make matters worse, they held no open sparring tournaments to test the abilities of their students and to examine their own teaching methods. The results were predictable, the closed door Chinese systems lacked systematic integrity. Often Kung-fu instructors of the same system did not trust each other despite having learned from the same teacher. They did not work together well, and wanted their own space. Over many generations, this lack of teamwork and systematic oversight resulted in the collections of unrealistic applications and a lot of false confidence. Furthermore, the long held Chinese mind set of keeping their teachings behind closed doors resulted in the splintering of a vast majority of kung-fu systems into many different subsystems, which in turn produced even more subsystems.

Most Kung-fu systems had become burdened or mired in multitudes of created and collected forms. This lack of integrity and cancerous collection of forms would become a huge obstacle for the newly organized Chinese National "Wu Shu" committee. All this insight from Yeung sifu was too massive for me to digest, taking me a couple of decades to observe and confirm his insights into the various Chinese martial art systems. He was correct!

In my second year with Yeung sifu, at his urging, I started working with him to organized and compartmentalize his Wing Chun knowledge into a standardized curriculum. Following the principle of "proper progression" and utilizing active partner contact methods, a curriculum of 26 core techniques (San Sik or San Da) were selected. The San Sik techniques were extracted from the existing Wing Chun forms and progressed from simple to more difficult in application. The first 16 San Sik were collectively called the "Sixteen Basic Techniques," of which the initial eight San Sik being the inner core techniques. San Sik 17 through 26 were for the more advanced students. For both knowledge and skills testing, a battery of combative testing ensured proper skill level performance. If the practitioner did not perform well enough, they were not promoted and needed to return to a cycle of rebuilding before returning for another test attempt. Later an eight level test system utilizing more advanced students/classmates as attackers was successfully implemented.

With these newly organized testable San Sik tool boxes or skill sets, Yeung sifu's practitioners were able to develop stable foundational skills quickly, which then developed into higher tactical combinations. Also, important, Yeung sifu and his assistant instructors could test an individual student's San Sik performance and knowledge by using simulated attacks in every practice session. It was also predictable, that students would eventually run into a performance sticking points or a learning plateau and become frustrated. Here again, with the help of an instructor using the San Sik benchmarks, the frustrated student could be redirected to slow down and revisit one or more earlier San Sik skills for a couple of weeks before attempting to break through the sticking point barrier and advancing into the next proficiency level. While the old teaching system would require at least five to six years of quality practice with various competent training partners before the practitioner became truly masterful, the new teaching methods produced better practitioners in a shorter amount of time. Yeung sifu watched with great happiness as the new teaching methods with curriculum guided benchmarks reduced the Wing Chun learning time for an average student. He complimented me by saying that you have created a system of teaching that has reduced the learning time to be a competent Wing Chun practitioner from six years down to as little as two years. Yeung words were the highlight of my life, a memory that I will always cherish.

While the results for the new methods were outstanding there were friction factors. As the years passed, there were a number of internal and external hindrances that could not be resolved just by having a good teacher and a great teaching methods. Teaching requires a lot of energy and time! Yeung sifu starting working a second job and I started graduate school along with a part-time job. The one monthly rotating teaching schedules for the assistant instructors became choked with time conflicts that led to irregular teaching continuity with the students. The gym rent went up and the facilities started to demand costly accidental injury insurance. The lawyers in Hawaii State government legislature soon declared that accident/insurance

waivers were non-binding and would not protect coaches or teachers from lawsuits. Hence, the more lawsuits would result in more money in their pockets. With these mounting roadblocks, Yeung's Wing Chun school in Honolulu's Chinatown ended. The school lasted 27 years before disbanding. Today, a dozen of Robert Yeung's advanced practitioners are still teaching privately and his legacy lives on. There are also a growing number of grand students that have started their own practice groups that further spread the Wing Chun system.

Today, Wing Chun Kung-Fu is widespread around the world. The Okinawan Goju-ryu Federation has adapted "Chi Sau" into their art. The strict South Korean government sports and athletic council has recognized and accepted Wing Chun Kung-Fu into their closed realm of traditional martial arts that can be taught inside Korea. Many people have discovered that the Wing Chun system of "tool boxes" or "skills sets" can be openly use to develop their own unique fighting style.

In closing, there was one incomplete training experiment that was only partially explored and remains inconclusive to this date. Due to modern day time constraints, the extreme physical demands, and psychological hardships, the experiment could not be fully explored. The training experiment centered around high intensity, full emersion Wing Chun training. In other words, can an average person, practicing twice a day, with an eight-hour break spaced between practices, for five or six days each week, learning only the San Sik (no forms), Chi Sau, with progressively harder sparring activities, become a very competent basic fighter in two months (80-96 hard practice sessions)? Can the same be said about teaching the Wing Chun parallel short swords or the long staff? I believe the answer is yes, this is not only possible but very probable! It must be remembered that the Wing Chun is in itself not a fighting system, but rather it is a unique system of collected skill sets (tools) from which the practitioner can develop their own personalized fighting system.

In the end, people should know the difference between the instructor (the keeper) of the Wing Chun tool boxes and the resulting free stylist created by the keeper's tools. They are usual not one and the same person as many good fighters are not usually the best teachers and good teachers are not usually the best fighters.

The End.