

KUNG FU'S FORGOTTEN WAY

THE TRADITION OF MASTER & DISCIPLE

In most Western martial arts schools these days, the greatest show of commitment to one's instructor is probably the signing of a direct debit form without a cancellation date. But in China, there still exists an old tradition of bonding master and student together in commitment to one another, and to the development and propagation of their kung fu. This *bai-si* ceremony began many of the chop-socky films that Canberra's Sifu Danny Hajdukovic watched as a kid, never realising it would become his reality. Here, the Practical Wing Chun instructor shares his story and reveals what it means to become a kung fu disciple in the modern era.

STORY BY DANNY HAJDUKOVIC

The *bai-si* tea ceremony is an achievement that's less about fighting skills and more about great tradition, honour and self-discipline within Chinese kung fu.

To put the significance of this ceremony into perspective, here's a brief overview and history:

It is documented that tea is considered one of the 'seven necessities' of Chinese life, along with rice, oil, salt, vinegar, soy sauce and firewood, and as a result, the Chinese have many long-standing traditions and ceremonies involving the drinking of tea as a source of formal ritual or acceptance.

The *bai-si* ceremony is where a kung fu master accepts an individual into his inner circle

by means of a ritual where the sifu is served tea by the disciple. *Bai* means 'to honour or worship' and *si* is short for 'sifu'.

Within traditional kung fu circles, this ceremony is considered to be one of the highest distinctions for the student, as they can only be accepted by invitation from their master and through completing the *bai-si* ceremony will become an adopted family member of the sifu. This is what sets the disciple apart from the regular student, as the sifu who follows this tradition will only impart all of his or her kung fu knowledge to those formally accepted and trusted to carry on their legacy.

To get an understanding of my own experience with this, let

me first take you back to 1980 and a scene where four pimple-faced youths are crowded around a (now primitive) VHS video machine, all eagerly anticipating the afternoon viewing of five rare kung fu movies, which had been specially ordered from Chinatown in Canberra. Back then, no other local video stores carried such rare gems — most store owners didn't even know what they were, nor did they care. But we did. We cared very much, because in our minds we were 13-year-old, deadly, top-secret ninja spies and, for us, salvation could only come via the magic of Shaw Brothers and Golden Harvest. Hollywood just

couldn't cut it when it came to a 'proper' kung fu flick and instead we immersed ourselves in Hong Kong's finest chop-socky productions. I can distinctly remember one outstanding feature of this genre and culture that stuck in my head, even as a young lad. It was the repeated

scenes in most of these films where a young, unskilled man would try to better himself by pleading with a revered kung fu master to accept him as a 'closed-door' disciple. This man would put himself through all types of physical rigours and sometimes humiliating situations just to prove his worthiness to the sifu, in the hope of one day being accepted into the kung fu family.

Those scenes filled me with wonderment and fired my imagination. As a result, my young thoughts and daydreams would often escalate to scenes where I would be transformed into this regal kung fu hero whose skills and noble deeds would have his master look upon him with pride.

I never thought of any such thing as a potential reality though — it was just me as a young kid with some harmless fantasies — and I just kept on learning and training. Fast forward to the evening of 25 April 2010. The scene is now set in Hong Kong and yours truly is wearing a modern Chinese ceremonial outfit and

about to kneel before my sifu and partake in the *bai-si* tea ceremony to be accepted as his first foreign closed-door disciple.

This was not a movie; it was very real and happening to me. Here I was, pinching myself, almost in disbelief at my good fortune.

Thinking back on it, by the time of my ceremony, I had already been training in martial arts for more than 30 years. My main style for over 20 years was Wing Chun kung fu. I had been learning and cultivating my skills with various teachers of alternate lineages and disciplines, and I was quite content until 2004, when I was in Hong Kong and formally introduced to Grandmaster Wan Kam Leung and his style of Practical Wing Chun.

What can I say? His skill seemed flawless, his power endless and the knowledge, maturity and kindness he showed were truly inspiring.

From that moment, I decided to wipe the slate clean and dedicate myself to Wan Sifu, as I knew that I'd found my mentor — a true 'kung fu father'.

It was after I became a certified instructor that my sifu asked me (through Sandy Cheng, his right-hand man and translator) over dinner one night about my future dreams and aspirations. I felt as though my subconscious took over because I replied very quickly with the suggestion of becoming his disciple. It was a bold but honest answer and, considering Wan Sifu hadn't taken on any disciples in the 40-plus years he'd been teaching thus far, I didn't like my chances.

After a long pause for thought, my sifu calmly nodded, asked me for my birth date and left it at that. I soon returned to Australia and got right back into teaching.

A month or two later, I received a call from Cheng advising me that Sifu had sought out spiritual advice regarding me and that I was considered a good match for sifu, which had something to do with our

birth dates aligning as well.

The upshot was that I'd been successful in my request and that my sifu was formally inviting me to take part in the first induction ceremony, along with five other kung fu brothers and one sister.

I couldn't believe it. I was absolutely ecstatic, somewhat overawed and yet humbled by the offer at the same time.

When the big day arrived, I had my wife, Leisha, and several students over in Hong Kong with me to celebrate. The mood was happy and festive as we all prepared and groomed ourselves for the evening ceremony, for which a restaurant was booked out and lavishly decorated.

Several martial arts dignitaries were there to oversee proceedings and formally recognise our induction, giving it an official blessing and some authentic traditional flair.

When my turn came, I was invited to perform the *bai-si* ceremony by kneeling before my sifu and his wife — my *simo* — who were seated before me.

I recited my pledge and the school code to Sifu Wan, who then accepted my pledge and I bowed to him to show the highest form of reverence. It's important to note here, though, that this pledge does not impose blind obedience from student to master, but instead speaks of a mutual bond and loyalty between oneself and one's teacher. In the same way that I pledged my complete loyalty, dedication and lifelong commitment to my sifu and his family system, Sifu Wan also pledged to unreservedly pass on his kung fu knowledge to me.

A ceremonial official then handed me a cup of tea to drink, then another two cups for me to offer my sifu, while bowing, and my *simo*.

Sifu Wan accepted me as his disciple by drinking the tea and I then offered my sifu — now my kung fu father — a gift in a red envelope as an offering of good fortune, health and prosperity, which he accepted before returning the same



To be a disciple, sacrifices must be made: Hajdukovic on the receiving end of Sifu Wan's demo

gesture with a gift to me.

This concluded the formal proceedings, then it was time for bountiful celebrations long into the night, with endless food, wine and good cheer.

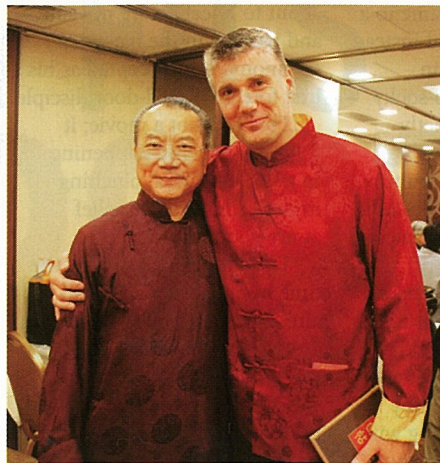
After the initial celebrations had passed, I had a chance to ask my sifu why I was among his chosen disciples. He told me that I had demonstrated the type of character that would uphold the proper moral foundations of his teachings and he was confident that I would never bring my reputation and that of his school into disrepute.

That's a gift of trust from my sifu that I accept with the utmost pride, yet at the same time it's hard to explain how this honour has humbled me. It clears the mind of any potential notions of arrogance and vanity to realise that what's been placed in my hands is an entire martial system; a great man's legacy that must be preserved and handled with honesty and integrity.

Since becoming a disciple, I can also say that just about everything to do with my training, teaching, relationship with Wan Sifu and general mental outlook has changed.

When I initially started training under Wan Sifu in Hong Kong, most of the other senior students (some of whom are now disciples) were always friendly and courteous, but they weren't exactly jumping over each other to get to know me better or to lock hands with me. They would be looking across the room at this clumsy, box-headed, six-foot-five, 110-kilo Wing Chun bogan from Australia who, despite lacking any refined skill, could still cause considerable structural damage to things he hit.

Many years later, after the bai-si ceremony, I've never in my life felt more accepted and respected by my peers. We always look out for one another and I now have a large support network of family whose bond is rock-solid. Our students also benefit from the cross-pollination of knowledge and teaching



Clockwise from above: Hajdukovic reads the oath to his sifu; with Sifu Wan after the ceremony; exchanging gifts; the Aussie with his sifu, simo and fellow Wing Chun disciples after their induction; and performing the first of Wing Chun's three forms, *Siu Lim Tao*, at the ceremony.



among the group as well.

The teaching I receive is different, too. In the past, my sifu was always generous and patient when teaching me, but he now exudes a level of warmth and passion toward my training, personal development and the wellbeing of myself, family and all those I love that really hits the heart strings.

When I now visit Hong Kong, Sifu Wan spends almost every spare moment ensuring I'm looked after. I get endless hours — days, even — of private lessons covering the most intricate technical details.

I've been told by other disciples that Sifu refers to me with a lot of pride and will vouch for me in such a way

that I'm always greeted by his family, friends and peers with big smiles and open arms. There are continuous lunches and dinners with his family, friends and confidants, and we now rejoice in very private tales of sifu's younger days with the great Wong Shun Leung, Bruce Lee, etc.

My students also now receive a lot more attention and they get to see their teacher being treated with great respect, which has no doubt lifted my profile in their eyes.

The effect discipleship has had on my own training is also profound: I now approach it with a lot more determination in acquiring a greater level of quality and finesse that's more

befitting of the title 'sifu'. I've discovered a greater depth of knowledge and understanding of the critical interrelationship between the advanced forms, techniques and drills, and remastering the basics.

I'm also a lot more aware and in tune with carefully balancing my students' needs and requirements.

Above all, I feel an increased level of maturity has crept into my psyche and has filtered through in a positive way in all my undertakings, be they martial or other. I have no desire to be the 'McDonalds' of Wing Chun; it's lasting quality, humility and inner peace that I'm now cultivating. I don't feel the need to shout achievements

and accolades from the rooftops; instead I choose to 'tread softly but carry a big stick'.

The question that might logically arise from here, then, is whether I want to also carry on this Chinese tradition with my own Practical Wing Chun students here in Australia.

Taking a broad perspective, though, I currently don't see a desire among younger Australians for a traditional ceremony that doesn't offer some immediate secret 'death touch' skill or other physical pay-off. I can't blame them for this mindset, really, because this tradition has not been strongly encouraged and promoted over here, and with the escalation of horrible violence in modern-day Australia, the focus within many martial codes has shifted

art) are looking only for what they can see: six-pack abs, bulging biceps, pitbull tenacity and the claim to a name like Dan 'The Destroyer'.

As for me, I'm unashamedly old-school when it comes to the martial arts and its time-honoured traditions, and I believe in teaching and promoting both internal and external aspects of kung fu. My goal is to lead by example in an attempt to put my students on a noble path toward humility and respect for themselves and others.

I could roll with the modern times, but that's just not my style and wouldn't be true to myself or my sifu.

In saying that, if I try to imagine myself explaining the beauty, importance, relevance

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more toward simpler, more aerobic training and 'reality-based' methods. Of course, the martial arts scene in the West is also now dominated by a new entity that's given the younger generations a new hero... enter the MMA fighter. I'll give MMA its dues: it promotes impressive physical athletes and, when coached well, teaches the 'external' aspects of martial arts quickly and concisely.

However, the majority of commercialised Mixed Martial Arts programs seem to focus only on the physical, leaving aside teachings of spirituality, harmony and life balance. And this void goes unnoticed, for many who seek training in MMA (or indeed, any martial

and lifelong commitment of the bai-si ceremony to a young student Down Under, I can almost hear myself having a little chuckle. Therefore, I intend to buck modern trends and honour Sifu Wan's teachings by looking out for those students who choose to cultivate an honourable character and self-discipline alongside the kung fu skills.

I hope to one day be a sifu who's worthy enough to have one or more of my own students give me the honour of partaking with them in the bai-si tea ceremony, and accepting them into our inner kung fu circle and family.

There I go again...young or old, still dreaming. ■

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