

# DISCIPLESHIP CEREMONIES IN THE CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS

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The Chinese martial arts enjoy a long, rich tradition that has caught the attention of the Western eye over the last several decades, and is now a fixture in the lives of many American and Europeans alike. Whether it be for physical fitness, discipline, or to learn self-defense the martial arts are practiced by millions here in the west. But how many of these individuals truly understand the deep cultural roots of the arts they are practicing? How much of the culture is being conveyed outside of kicking and punching? Due to a number of factors, including a substantial language barrier, few Anglos (and many recent Chinese) understand, or are knowledgeable of the traditional role between teacher and student. The concept of dedicating oneself to the art, teacher, and/or school (*guan*) – or in other words becoming a disciple – is completely foreign to many of today's practicing martial artists. I will investigate the discipleship ceremony from a broad range of perspectives, and give a general anthropological study on this secretive, integral aspect of Chinese martial arts.

First I should make a note on sources. There is practically nothing written in primary sources (keep in mind that I did not investigate Chinese sources, for my Chinese reading skills are too basic) on discipleship ceremonies. There are several factors contributing to this. One is simply because many masters were illiterate and would pass information on proper etiquette and procedure through oral tradition. Written information on the techniques of these arts was rare. If it was written it was kept closed from all but the most serious, dedicated disciples. These adoption or discipleship ceremonies were also secretive. This way no rival school or clan would be able to obtain the style's intricacies, important in a time where one's life could rest upon one's skill level. When one was adopted it was considered a personal family affair, of no business of outsiders, much like our ceremonial practices today with marriage or funerals. Therefore, I have relied almost completely on direct interviews of masters, teachers, and practitioners that have had experience with and /or participated in discipleship ceremonies. I have chosen to not focus on any one clan, style, or geographic area within China, but rather show different perspectives from both Northern and Southern traditions, as well as internal and external practitioners. With few exceptions teachers were happy to help by providing information, though a few felt this topic was taboo to share with someone outside of their school.

A brief outline of Chinese martial arts is important since this will be the prevailing context in which I will be writing. In general, the traditional martial arts of China are divided into four categories. The first is a general geographic context of Northern, and Southern schools. The Yellow River is usually accepted as the cutoff line, but this again is a generalization as teachers from Hong Kong have taken their Southern arts to

Beijing, and vice versa. To the beginning student there seems to be many differences in techniques between the Northern and Southern arts, but the more advanced practitioner understands these differences to be arbitrary. The same applies to the differentiation between internal and external styles. Internal styles such as Tai Ji, Xing Yi, and Bagua are said to rely more heavily on developing chi, or internal energy. But again as one advances their understanding there are no significant differences. These distinctions were not even used until Sun Lu Tang coined the term “internal” around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Cartmell). In the larger perspective there are a limited number of ways to break a bone, punch, throw, or injure someone using bare hands, therefore there is a limit to the number of techniques that can be developed. There is little difference in the martial styles of China- to quote the late Liu Yun Chiao: “All ... martial styles are children of the same mother.”

Apart from these factors there are literally hundreds of styles. Traditionally these styles would be kept solely within a certain family, and would not be taught outside of that family. For instance, Song Family Xing Yi Chuan would be taught only to members of the Song family (Cartmell). As time progressed and attitudes changed teachers realized that if they did not teach outside of their family their art would die with them. So they would teach just the village or town they lived in. A major reason for this secrecy was simple survival. Certain areas have become legendary such as Chen village where it is said the best Chen Tai Ji players are. When trade began to flourish with Europe in the middle of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) guns began to be imported into China, but were not commonly used until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Tien, p.56-57). Prior to the introduction of long range weapons such as rifles, martial arts or hand to hand combat-including short-range weapons such as swords, staffs, and spears (which are part of the curriculum of any Chinese martial art) – were the primary means of defense. A given style would have techniques and strategies unique to that school or system, therefore it was imperative to protect this information. It was common for a fighter to visit a school and challenge the teacher. If a rival understood another’s techniques they would lose their advantage. Usually the teacher would have his most senior students fight first, and if the challenger was able to defeat them the teacher would accept the challenge and fight. If the teacher lost it was the end of his career. His reputation would be tarnished and no one would be interested in learning from someone who had been defeated by another school. Often if the challenger beat the teacher he would be entitled to his school and all its students. This is why techniques and theories were so closely guarded. Therefore only the most serious students would become disciples and be taught the inner secrets of the style. The higher level techniques and theories, which often

included Black Hand (fatal) techniques, were strictly reserved for disciples who promised never to show or teach these techniques outside of their school. But once guns became common in China these factors were quickly nullified. Sam Colt said it best: “The gun is the great equalizer of men.”

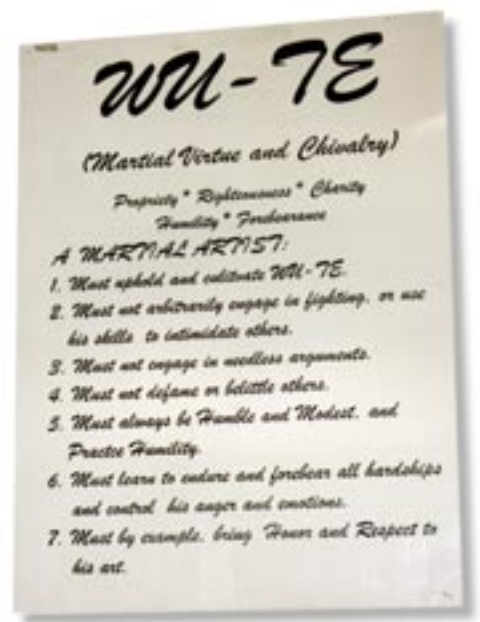
Today disciples play a different role. The most serious students are chosen to carry on the traditions and teachings of the art, and are taught secrets the teacher would not share with just anyone who came in off the street. A disciple must prove their dedication and loyalty, as well as possess a solid understanding of the martial *wu te*. Every interviewee stressed the qualities of loyalty, dedication, and *wu te* in regards to accepting a disciple.

The *wu te* is a general guideline of morals specifically for the martial artist. It is the most common method for judging a student’s acceptance into discipleship – even more important than one’s skill or ability. Though the specific details vary from school to school and teacher to teacher, they are generally broken into two categories: morality of mind, and morality of deed. Morality of mind includes: courage, endurance, will, patience, and perseverance. Morality of deed includes respect, loyalty, trust, righteousness, and humility (Yang, Jwing Ming; p.27-34).

Why the emphasis on these aspects? A teacher of martial arts instructs a student in ways of damaging, and possibly killing, another human being. Therefore a teacher must carefully select a student who will not abuse these teachings. Martial techniques are designed to better oneself, and if need be, used as self-defense. It would be unethical to teach a serial killer how to use his hands to take another’s life, to teach a thug techniques that would give him more power and skill to hurt his victims.

In traditional Chinese martial arts a student is in essence a direct representation of the teacher. For the teacher’s students to be harassing or threatening another would be a loss of face for that teacher. In the Orient this is a most serious offense.

In every school I have visited there has been a visible copy of their *wu te* on the wall. One cannot stress enough the importance of the *wu te* in regards to traditional training and teachers. Once the student agrees



An example of the written *wu te* posted in Corpolongo’s school.  
Photo by author.

to live by this oath it is set in stone. To break it is to nullify the relationship between teacher and student, and usually the student is expelled from the school. “A warrior's word is like an arrow, once released, it can never stray until it strikes its target.” says Gene Ching.

What is a disciple, and why become one? Rites of passage are common and customary in all cultures, from Aborigines and their ‘walkabouts,’ to the squire becoming a knight by taking certain oaths, praying to God, and being touched with a sword three times on each shoulder by a priest (Ehrenreich, p.168).

A traditional warrior lived the life of a soldier – it was not merely a vocation as it is today. He trained all day everyday, as if his life depended upon it, which it did!

A student or scholar of the fighting arts would complete his training and go through some sort of ceremony marking him as a warrior. A modern example is in the United States Army Airborne Jump School when a soldier has completed the requirements he receives a pair of silver “jump wings,” and becomes an official airborne infantryman. To his fellow soldiers he is elite. To christen the event he would put the pin on his uniform without the backings, and each member of his graduating class would come by and punch the pin into his chest. It is a painful rite of passage to be shared with only those in the airborne unit.

Ceremonies such as these are often associated with becoming an adult, and leaving childhood behind (Rosenbaum, p.24-25). War and manhood have had a testosterone-soaked symbiosis since the earliest days of civilization. “Men make wars for many reasons, but one of the most recurring ones is to establish that they are, in fact, real men.” (Ehrenreich, p.127).

In Chinese martial context, a rite of passage was the discipleship ceremony. Pledging support, loyalty, and dedication to a given style, teacher, and/or school were what becoming a disciple was about (Rivera). All of the teachers I interviewed emphasized that it was not necessary for a student to be highly skilled or talented to become a disciple. Many teachers require a certain number of years, usually three or more dedicated to training in a particular school (Castaneda / Corpolongo). All teachers stressed loyalty, character (synonymous with *wu te*), and dedication (Cartmell / Ching / Corpolongo / Hu / Profatilov / Rivera / Romero / Yang) as requirements for discipleship. The student is a male (women will be discussed below), in most cases not affiliated with another school, style, or teacher. He must possess strong discipline, as well as a deep understanding of the responsibilities and consequences involved with becoming a disciple of a teacher. In one lineage it was also customary (with Ilya Profatilov's teacher Ma Han Qin) to be formally introduced to the teacher by one of the

other senior students (Profatilov).

In some cases a student was given to the teacher as an orphan to be raised, cared for, and eventually taught martial arts (Ching). The boy would be raised as if he were the teacher's own: living with the teacher, training everyday, and taking care of menial tasks (Mendel). This created a strong bond between teacher and student.

In modern society this is uncommon, therefore desire to become a disciple takes on a different meaning. Now discipleship is the last effort to connect with a long tradition of martial artists in a skill that is no longer necessary for survival, and will fade away if disciples do not carry the teachings forward.

*“Becoming a disciple forges a unique bond between you and the long line of ancestors who forged your tradition before you.”* (Ching)

Amos states in one of the few English language articles on discipleship, “A Hong Kong Southern Praying Mantis Cult”;

*“Like Chinese secret societies in the past, contemporary Hong Kong martial arts temple cults offer a social background and a body politic in miniature through which martial artists find authority, protection, assistance, kinship, and through ritual, a measure of spiritual contentment.”*

While overall this quote conveys the feeling of discipleship, I disagree with a couple of aspects. The term “cult” is incorrect in reference to these martial groups. This is a bureaucratic slander on the martial arts groups, caused by some schools' association with Triads (organized crime syndicate) groups. Though these schools are rare, they exist and the government occasionally makes high profile arrests of them to ensure the message is conveyed that the government does not like martial groups of any kind. Amos also hints that most martial groups are composed of poor individuals. This may be the case with the one group he observed, but my personal observation shows that discipleship status is common in almost all traditional schools, regardless of monetary or societal status. One aspect Amos does point out is what he calls a “fictive family.” Regardless of blood relations, the student becomes part of a family when he enters into discipleship with his teacher.

Some ethnic groups such as the Hakka, and many Southern schools of Hung Gar (Hung family style) also refer to discipleship as adoption ceremonies (Rivera). The martial class structure is actually molded from the Confucian hierarchy of familial relationships. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into all aspects of Confucianism, so I will discuss only the basic aspects of relationships from the Confucian viewpoint. Book II,

v.7 of Arthur Waley's translation of the "Analects of Confucius" sums up the attitude:

*"Tsu-yu asked about the treatment of parents. The Master said, 'Filial sons' nowadays are people who see to it that their parents get enough to eat. But even dogs and horses are cared for to that extent. If there is no feeling of respect, wherein lies the difference?"*

Confucianism is about respect and proper behavior in regards to one's lifestyle. One should not question the desire of the parent, because they are senior to the child and are therefore due respect and loyalty. The son is obedient to the father (though it is in masculine form in most classical writings, this obviously applies to women also); the younger son is obedient to the older son; the wife is obedient to the husband; the younger friend is subordinate to the older; and the subject of the kingdom is subordinate to the ruler. Confucius' goal was to create a good person, not just good deeds. It was through these relationships he felt this philosophy could be manifested.

In theory the father would be a wise, learned individual who understood life and would guide his kin in the right direction by teaching morality, virtue, and righteousness. Therefore if the child was obedient and faithful to the father's teachings he or she would grow into a wise, learned adult. Following this logic all would learn from the elders out of respect and propriety towards them, not in spite of it.

The martial family is identical the relationships are the same as those of a blood family. The following list of names derives from Cottrell, from Cantonese pronunciation:

*Sidai*: Male classmate who joins after you

*Sihing*: Male classmate who joined before you

*Sifu*: Your teacher

*Sibak*: Teachers *Sihing*

*Sigung*: Your teacher's teacher

*Sijoh*: Teacher of *Sigung*

*Tosuen*: Students of your students

*Si* (or *Sbr* in Mandarin) means to teach. The "*fu*" in *sifu* is the Chinese word for father. Combined into *sifu* "father / teacher". It should be noted that only initiated disciples originally used the term *sifu*. The rest of the students would refer to the teacher as *laoshi*, or teacher (Romero). This transliteration may seem trivial, but if breaking it apart and looking at it from the perspective of a serious martial student it becomes

significant. The *sifu*'s role lies somewhere between a father, leading by example to show the difference between right and wrong, and a teacher guiding the student through the quagmire of ignorance and misunderstanding. Oftentimes students will even look to their *sifu* for guidance in troubles and decisions outside of the martial context. Often these students would be just as close, if not closer than, blood family. When Ma Han Qin died, his students took care of the funeral arrangements and costs, instead of his family (Hu). This special and strong bond is built over years of dedication and diligence.

As stated above there is a hierarchy established in a martial school. A beginning student may not even see the head instructor, but rather receive instruction from elder martial brothers left in charge by the *sifu*. The student is expected to behave just as he would with the *sifu* in the room, regardless of age or maturity. In the training hall a student who started prior would be the senior. The theory is that the younger student would benefit from the older, more knowledgeable student. Of course the *sifu* would have the final say in any teaching. A student with a question would bring it to the attention of your older brother. If they could not solve it, they would approach the *sifu* for the answer.

There are three levels of discipleship (Rivera). First is a student pledging support to the teacher or school. This can be done without the student even taking one class, with the student bowing and offering the teacher a gift, or money (*lycee*) in a red envelope (*hong bao*). Red is the color of good fortune and joy (Williams, p.76). A gift is customary in Chinese culture for any occasion, but specifically when visiting an elder or someone held in high regard.

Second is "Inner Door" disciple, or one who has entered the gates of his teacher, with more commitment and responsibility. "Inner Door" refers to a student being brought into the "inner" or more detailed teachings of the art which are not shared with common students. These teachings often include dangerous or deadly techniques, esoteric theories, deeper understanding of techniques already known, lessons on how to teach, and often times the recipes to their liniments and tinctures. In early generations of Chinese martial arts the teachers were schooled in holistic healing arts as well. Acupuncture, *tui na* (deep tissue massage), and herbology were all once parts of the whole, but have faded in recent generations. These two aspects balance the yin & yang of the art, where one facet is learning to destroy the body, and the



*One of many variations of the red envelope (hong bao) used when giving gift money (lycee).*

other is healing. Often only initiated disciples learn the healing arts.

An Inner Door disciple was expected to carry more responsibility such as keeping the school's books, teaching, caring for the elderly teacher, or financially supporting the teacher and his family (Hu). All students were expected to pay monthly dues, but disciples were expected to care for all aspects of the *sifu's* life, including bills, food, and rent. If the *sifu* was in financial difficulty it was the disciples duty to help out.

The final level of discipleship is an inheritor of the system – this is the most serious and devoted level (Rivera). These students take on all the tasks of the Inner Door disciple, but they also dedicate themselves to propagating the system and teachings of the *sifu* to future generations. These disciples learn the art at the highest level. They may move to where their art is not represented and teach it to those who have never seen their style or system. One reason so many of these wonderful arts have not flourished is because of the lack of this level of commitment. Time constraints, family life, and work are all time consuming, without the additional work of running a martial arts school (which are rarely financially productive). Most individuals train and practice, but will not commit to passing the art down to future generations.

Women find themselves in a quandary in regard to discipleship. While it was common for women to be serious martial artists throughout China's history, few ever became disciples. Keeping to Confucian tradition a woman was required to be obedient to her husband and keep no secrets from him. If she was a teacher's disciple of a given teacher and learned secret techniques or theories, she was required to share them with her husband. If he belonged to another clan or system he could then steal the teachings and learn to defeat them. Therefore the only women allowed into discipleship were nuns, due to their vows of celibacy (Rivera).

I have mentioned the overall responsibilities and duties of a disciple, but they also vary between schools, and teachers. A common thread throughout this study has been the variability between individuals and their lifestyles. If a teacher is a Buddhist or *Hui ren* (Chinese Muslim), for instance, the rules in the written *wu te* may be a bit more strict in the sense of sexual relations, liquor and food (Rivera). In regards to the actual ceremony there is a wide variance in different traditions – everything from the most elaborate to the quaint.

Most teachers referred to the ceremony as *Bai shi* or Kowtowing (a traditional bow of respect, where one kneels and touches one's forehead to the floor three times in front of the teacher). Other names include *Bai men* "Kowtowing to [enter] the gate," *Rumen yishi* "Enter the Gates Ceremony," *Baishi yishi* "Kowtowing to the teacher ceremony," and *Bai shi shoutu* "Kowtowing to the Teacher and Accepting Disciples" (Profatilov). This

paper will refer to the discipleship ceremony as *Bai shi*.

After a student understood what was expected of him, had proven his dedication and loyalty, properly asked for consideration of discipleship (or was asked by the teacher), and was accepted, was the actual *Bai shi* ceremony. An auspicious date such as the school's anniversary, the teacher's birthday, or the Chinese New Year would be chosen for the ceremony

(Profatilov / Rivera). The ceremony would be held infrequently at best – sometimes many years apart (Yang). Occasionally it was for a single person, but usually the teacher would initiate a number of disciples at once. This would reinforce the familial, brotherhood aspect of becoming a disciple. One would become closer to his brothers that he was initiated with, than any others would.

A central object for preparation would be the school's *sun toi*, its



*Another version of a sun toi used in a discipleship ceremony. Note the picture of Liu Yun Qiao, the deceased grandmaster of the wu tan lineage. Photo courtesy Kurt Wong.*

school shrine or altar. Traditional schools have at least one altar offering homage to protective spirits or deities: Buddha or *Kuan Yin* (if the teacher or school is Buddhist), and/or an ancestor altar paying respects to the lineage of the *sifu*. Some schools would display pictures of pictures of dead lineage holders on the left, and living ones on the right. Some would represent only dead teachers. Tony Yang arranges the pictures of deceased teachers on top, and students of the deceased master underneath. Some Southern schools have a shrine for the God of War

or Kuan Yu, as well as a shrine for the Earth Spirit on the floor of the school. Some Buddhist schools have *Kuan Yin*, the Buddha of Compassion, represented in picture or statue form (Rivera).

*Kuan Gong* is an infamous and important deity throughout China representing loyalty, honesty, bravery,



*Initiates kowtowing to the teacher(s). Photo courtesy Kurt Wong.*



*A traditional Buddhist sun toi in a Chinese martial arts school. Note the candles, offering of money, the copy of the I Ching and incense. Photo by the author.*

and the arts of war. Born in 162 BCE, he rose to fame among the common people of China due to his unwavering loyalty to the Han emperor. *Kuan Gong's* military prowess is legendary throughout the martial world. The *Kuan Dao*, or “Kuan Sabre,” is a large horse chopper that is basically a broadsword fixed to a 6-foot staff, wielded unerringly by *Kuan Gong*. In paintings and sculpture *Kuan Gong* is flanked by two attendants, his eyes focused and intentful (Williams, p.211). It was common in some Southern schools for the student to swear oaths to *Kuan Gong* (Belonoha).



*Statues of Kuan Gong are always placed high on the wall of a traditional guan. Photo by author.*

The shrine is red, due to the color's symbolic good fortune and joy. The statue of *Kuan Gong* or another deity may be red signifying a sacred individual (Williams, p.79).

Bats (*Fook*) are a common animal associated with a shrine. They are traditionally associated with luck and longevity (Williams, p.34-35). Cottrell also notes that in Cantonese *Fook*, “bat,” sounds similar to the *Fook*, “luck.”

Three bowls are placed in front of the shrine offering wine, meat, and fruit (Yang). Paper money and candles are also common. Ching states, “...[the altar] is more like a memorial than a religious object. It honors all of the ancestors who originally created the art.” An incense bowl is placed behind the food and money. The rising smoke and sweet fragrance awaken the spirits of the ancestors represented at the shrine. Food and money are offered to those who have passed on (Ching). These offerings had a dual purpose in that they aimed to please the spirits, and in return hopefully the spirits would rain blessings upon those in attendance at the ceremony. “...food and drink offerings afford a certain leverage to engage the deities in reciprocally supportive actions...” (Kohn, p.4). It is common for the teacher to drink the wine and eat the meat after the completion of the ceremony signifying a “binding of contract.”

Bai Shi ceremonies were private affairs, closed to the general public. Relatives, close friends, and martial associates were often invited to speak, demonstrate, and bear witness. The prospects' older brothers would be in attendance, as well as the teacher's family. On mainland China these ceremonies often took place in the teacher's home (Profatilov). A teacher may also invite his fellow brothers or even his teacher (if still living). This assured having witnesses to confirm that the initiates were ready to become disciples. Usually this was just

a formality, for if the student was not ready, or anyone objected to the prospect, the problem would have been dealt with long before the actual ceremony.

The teachers I interviewed stated that some sort of formal clothing should be worn for the ceremony, but in talking with Francisco Rivera I discovered an insight reinforcing the adoption aspect. He stated that male initiates would be bare chested, symbolic of a newborn baby. He was being adopted into the martial family – being born again.

Upon completion the teacher would offer the school uniform, shirt, or a color sash. The sash was usually red, symbolic of luck, combat, as well as the student's victory over his own limitations, and indicative of his commitment and achievement.

Around the turn of the 20th century Japanese Judo founder Jigoro Kano created the belt ranking system that has become so prevalent in the martial arts of today. In China there was traditionally no belt-based ranking system. The teacher taught more when he felt like the student was ready. One's status was determined not by a belt, but rather by skills and technique. Modern teachers have adopted belt ranking system as a means to appease the encouragement addiction of Western society. In discipleship, however, it was not uncommon to be given a red sash to signify becoming an Inner Door disciple. But the belt held no special significance outside of being a disciple.

When the day was determined, the initiate(s) wait patiently outside of the training hall or house to be received. Usually the senior disciple (*sihing*) would lead prospective disciples inside individually, and take them either to a seat or a certain spot on the floor to kneel. They were led in by age, the eldest initiate is taken in first, and placed facing the *Sun Toi* starting on the far right. The teacher was in front of or beside the *sun toi* usually seated facing out. If the teacher's wife (*simu*) was present she sat on the seat next to her husband. The kneeling initiates were on one, or both sides of the *Sun Toi* but never on the same level as the teacher (Profatilov). All initiates remain silent until the ceremony began. Once the students were situated, the *sihing* closed the door and asked the teacher if he was ready to begin (Yang).

This behavior of waiting to be led into a training area, or asking permission to enter, is observed throughout the martial spectrum. It is common courtesy to respect the teacher, his students, and his school by saluting (right fist in an open left palm, bowing the head slightly) and asking permission, or waiting for the teacher to signal you before entering the mat or training space, and signifies submission or obedience to the

senior instructor (Romero).

The teacher started the ceremony with a formal speech. He welcomed everyone, and gave special thanks to visiting teachers or distinguished guests, praised the talent of the initiate(s) and welcomed them to the family. In some schools this came after the initiate(s) had been accepted, and had completed making their offerings to the *Sun Toi* (Profatilov / Yang). Common themes of these speeches were an oral history of the art and lineage, or the initiates' accomplishments within the martial realm, and also including scholarly or business pursuits. The teacher also spoke of the duties and responsibilities of being a disciple (Cartmell). Corpolongo states that after the teacher made his speech, the siblings took turns making short speeches and congratulating the new disciples.

There were often vows that the initiate must also make. The "Entering the Gate Pledge" or *Baimen Tie*, was a short vow to respect the traditions and regulations of the martial arts school, as well as the teacher and brothers. One also vowed never to use the art illegally or to harm others, or to teach techniques to anyone outside the martial family (Profatilov). In some ceremonies this piece of red paper with the vows written on it is cast onto a fire binding the words with eternity.

Within Corpolongo's tradition the initiate must pledge nine oaths, including;

"I shall defend my clan brothers against outsiders who would do violence to, oppress, or falsely imprison them. I shall come to their aid if they are assaulted or scolded and I shall arrange for help from our clan brothers if it comes to my knowledge that outsiders intend to maltreat them. I shall warn them so that they may avoid misfortune."

"I shall treat the relatives of my clan brothers as though they were my own."

"I shall observe the *Wu Te* at all times."

The sense of family and brotherhood shines forth in this passage, as does the importance of the *wu te*.

After the speeches, the teacher took three incense sticks, (one was used only for funerals thusly appeasing just the heaven realm) and bowed placing the incense in the proper bowl. In some traditions the teacher would *kow tow* or bow three times, touching forehead to floor. The student would follow and either light the



*Sifu Kurt Wong offering incense at the sun toi. Also note the offering of fresh flowers. Photo courtesy Kurt Wong.*

incense and *kow tow*, or just *kow tow* before the *Sun Toi* (Yang). Mendel and Profatilov state that there would be a series of nine bows, referred to as *sanguo jiukou dali*. The initiate would perform three deep bows, three medium bows, and three short bows. This physical proclamation of obedience and submission was just what it seemed. In Tony Yang's ceremony the initiates *kow tow* three times to the teacher, then three times to their senior brothers. This was an open declaration of one's commitment and loyalty to one's teacher and family that acted as a bond, forging the relationship of martial father and martial son.

Intermingled in the ceremony is an aspect that should be noted; the giving and receiving of gifts. Gift giving is to the Chinese what handshakes are to the Texan – a sign of friendship, offering, and hospitality. Whenever I visit my teacher I bring a gift for him and his family, and he offers me a gift as I leave.

Every individual I interviewed had some sort of gift exchange within their ceremony. Often gifts would be exchanged when the student *kow towed* to the teacher, or at the end of the ceremony. Gifts could include wine or liquor, cigarettes, tea, or fruits (Profatilov). Not only was gift giving customary, but it also acted as a personal greeting between student and teacher signifying a level of friendship and caring. At this moment the student would be accepted as a disciple. The teacher accepting the gift was symbolic of him accepting the student as a disciple.



*Initiate offering his teacher lycee. Sifu Wong accepts the gift, accepting his student as a disciple. Photo courtesy Kurt Wong.*

A monetary gift was also offered in the traditional *hong bao*, or red envelope. Commonly seen during Chinese New Year celebrations, these little envelopes with money in them are given to children, family, and friends. As the student *kow towed* to the teacher the gift was offered with both hands, the *hong bao* hidden underneath. If no gift was presented then just the *hong bao* was offered with both hands (Rivera). Using both hands was a sign of respect and symbolic that one was not hiding or keeping anything from the individual receiving the offering. In the martial realm this also showed that both of a fighter's hands were occupied, so that no hidden strike or weapon could be employed. Customarily the teacher would also accept with both hands.

The denomination of money followed Chinese number theory of good and bad luck. The numbers two (symbolic of the yin yang duality), three (representing the *san tsai*, or three powers of heaven, earth, and man),

five (in reference to the *wu xing*, five elements), eight (referring to the *Bagua* in the *I Ching*), and nine (the product of three threes) were all common. Four was never used, as the pronunciation (*si*) was the same as for the word death! Denominations such as \$108, or \$99 were considered not only appropriate, but were looked upon as good fortune (Corpolongo / Rivera). Rivera states that the teacher would often give a gift of money to the student, but the student must always give more than what was given.

Bestowing Chinese names to Westerners has become a phenomenon in the west, though many teachers consider giving esoteric Chinese names a sad attempt to fuse with a culture foreign to one's own. Still it is common with many Western teachers. Corpolongo gives the disciple a name when he is adopted, usually based on some observations he has made of the student's personality, or martial nature. Some students were exceptionally fast so they would be named after a snake, dragon, or the mythical phoenix. Some students were powerful, so would have bear, tiger, or horse within their Chinese name. Though not common, an extreme example would have a student take the family name of his teacher (Rivera).

Some traditional schools fashioned their *Bai Shi* after the Chinese Tea Ceremony. Instead of a *Sun Toi* the initiates sat at a banquet table with the teacher at the head, arranged again by seniority. Often, pictures of past masters within the lineage would hang behind the teacher. The *sihing* made the tea, and introduced the disciple to be accepted. The prospective disciple then served tea to everyone present, starting with the teacher and working their way down the table by seniority. The serving of tea by the disciple is symbolic of helping the teacher physically, and empowering your teacher with your own personal vigor (Ching). Note that the Chinese version of the Tea Ceremony is much less formal and precise than the Japanese version. The teacher then made a formal speech accepting the students and praising their accomplishments. Then everyone drank the tea making a bond with the martial family accepting the new disciples (Corpolongo).

Within Corpolongo's tradition, after the student was accepted as a disciple the student would then cast coins and make a reading of the I Ching to devine their role in the martial brotherhood just entered. Still every school and teacher had their own methods for each occasion. Many less formal teachers would choose to have a large celebration dinner in a private room at a local restaurant. The night would start with the Tea Ceremony, then a large meal, followed by drinking and celebrating. The discipleship ceremony was often held in conjunction with New Year's so the party would often last well past midnight. Of course, all expenses and costs were to be paid by the new disciple (Profatilov).

Paolo Castaneda was presented with an interesting dilemma when he was to be accepted as a disciple of Kurt Wong. Castaneda is a strict Christian, and was forbidden to prostrate or pray to any other deities or icons then his own. Through discussions with his teacher they were able to accommodate him by having Castaneda give money, and make an oath without religious references. Castaneda states this is becoming more common with the spread of Christianity in both the West and China.

The Cultural Revolution forbade all martial arts from being practiced, and taught. During this period many teachers taught a few students in secret. Religious iconography and vestments were also forbidden, making it impossible to construct a *Sun Tōi*, nor hold any kind of ceremony. Hu Xi Lin was one of my few interviewees that were alive and living in China during this time period. He stated that when his teacher, Ma Han Qin, accepted him as a disciple he simply told Hu that he was a disciple. No ceremony, *kow towing*, or feast. Ma Han Qin simply said, “You are my disciple” and went on teaching the class. Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century discipleship ceremonies are rare in the Peoples Republic of China due to its current political situation (Profatilov).

For the most part all, traditional, ceremonies had some sort of *kow towing*, gift giving, swearing a pledge or oath, and bonding within their tradition. A few variants such as the tea ceremony were also common, the traditions following the same pattern of demonstrating obedience and loyalty to the teacher and family by swearing an oath and *kow towing* to the teacher, offering oneself as a dedicated student and proliferator of the style, giving gifts to the teacher and promising to help as if he were ones own father, and paying homage to the ancestors represented by the *Sun Tōi* that came before ones generation with offerings of fruit, wine, and money.

To the layperson these gestures may seem obtuse, and even silly, but to the martial artist these rituals form a bridge between generation’s of dedicated men and women that studied, analyzed, and trained over the centuries. This may be a last ditch effort to connect with a warrior culture that has passed, and may never be seen again. The students and teachers form a bond unique to them in their niche in society. Survival of the system and teachings, as well as a high level of seriousness, is ensured in the process as students dedicate their lives and souls to their art. Each teacher tried to leave his mark on the world by sharing, and molding men and women into better people overall. The pugilists of yesterday even formed a code of ethics in the *wu te* that set a standard for all practitioners of the martial arts to live by today.

Despite the variability within these ceremonies, there are a multitude of similarities. The foundation of

paying one's respects, and manifesting one's feelings of loyalty and dedication were prevalent throughout. So many cultural ties, such as the giving of gifts, the adopting of a "son," and making offerings to the spirits lie within these subtle ceremonies. Yet few practitioners of today's Chinese martial systems understand what is contained in these traditions. I hope that in these preceding pages I have been able to shed a little light on the traditional *Bai Shi* ceremony for those who have little experience in the traditions of Chinese martial arts.

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