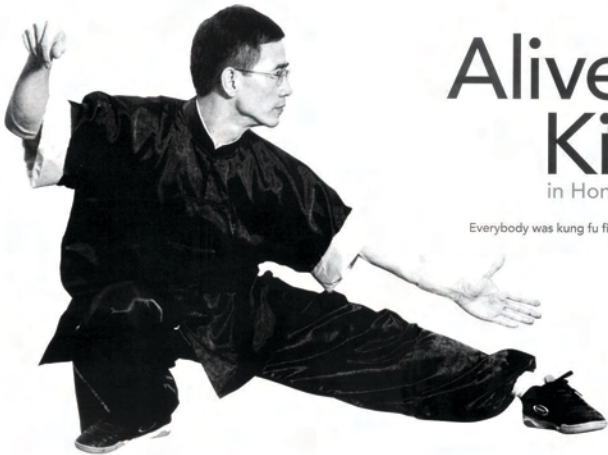


# SILKROAD

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Inflight Shopping Guide Inside

  
DRAGONAIR



# Alive & Kicking

in Hong Kong

Everybody was kung fu fighting

Those cats were fast as lighting

A

Tuesday night at the Kennedy Town docks on Hong Kong island. A good backdrop of barges, cranes and pulleys a slight, yet muscular Chinese man in spectacles leads two much taller Western guys in a series of martial art manoeuvres. Barking out commands in Cantonese, he guides them through an array of steps, stances, kicks and punches.

Meet William Wan Kai-fo, kung fu master and expert in Northern Shaolin, choy lay fat, tai chi, chi gung (or Golden Bell) and other exotically named martial art techniques. Tonight, he is training two students from England who refer to him as *sifu*, meaning "master". After several hours in Wan Sifu's company, it is easy to understand why he commands such respect. According to Phil Duffy, who studied WTF taekwondo in England for over 10 years, coming to Hong Kong and encountering Wan Sifu's kung fu skills was a revelation: "He is the real thing. Simply awesome. In a different league to anyone I've trained with before."

Wan Sifu's reputation is spreading and recently parties

of kung fu students from England and New York have made trips to Hong Kong just to see and learn from him.

Earlier I met Wan in a photo developing shop where he works. After a few minutes chatting, he switched from being a modest shop-keeper to martial arts expert — an almost Superman-style transformation — and demonstrated a few examples of his prowess inside the cluttered shop. First he held a chunky wooden chopstick against his Adam's apple with one hand and used the other to deliver a forceful blow that caused the chopstick to splinter. This was just a warm up. Next he produced a sharp metal sword and invited me to hold it pointed upwards, with the pommel braced against my hip. Catching the point with his Adam's apple, arms outstretched, he pushed against it with sufficient force to make the sword bend, and this writer's stomach to turn over. Wan seemed delighted by my discomfort. Remarkably, his only injury was a small indentation on his throat. Adding to the surreal quality of all this, a caged parrot in the corner of the shop kept chipping, "kung hei fat choi", a greeting given at Chinese New Year meaning "wishing you good fortune".

Wan is one of a handful of genuine masters who are keeping alive the kung fu tradition in Hong Kong. During the era of Bruce Lee, when movies like *Fist of Fury* and *Enter the Dragon* became international hits, kung fu enjoyed a heyday. In recent years, however, it has had to compete with sports such as soccer and tennis, and the instant gratification quick in which many young people prefer the quick thrills of snooder bars, video games and discos to the hard work and slow rewards of this most demanding discipline. Indeed the very name kung fu means "time and effort".

Traditionally, kung fu was taught in private houses known as mo keoons, where students lived with aifu for many years to perfect their fighting skills. Such devotion does not sit easily with the demands of a modern lifestyle. And teachers such as Wan have helped kung fu survive by moving it out of the mo keoons and into mainstream sports centres. Wan himself began exercising at age four and serious train-

ing at eight, learning from renowned Hong Kong masters Liu Gam-dung and his son Lau Wai-ying who have a direct lineage back to some of kung fu's most revered figures. Though only 37 years old, Wan has a vast knowledge of Chinese fighting styles and the philosophies integral to them.

The spiritual home of kung fu is the fabled Shaolin Monastery in China's Henan province. According to legend, an Indian Buddhist master, Bodhidharma (or Da Mo as he is also known) visited China in the distant past. After many travels he finally came to the Shaolin monastery but was refused entry. Undeterred, he meditated in a nearby cave for nine years before being recognized as a spiritual leader and invited to head the monastery. Perplexed at how the monks could not stay awake during meditations, Bodhidharma taught them a series of physical exercises and a system of breathing exercises or chi gong designed to focus internal powers. These techniques from India crossed with existing Chinese fighting styles to form a martial art system that the Shaolin monks practiced and refined over the centuries.

The philosophy of Taoism also played a part in the evolution of kung fu. The tai chi exercises with which millions of Chinese start the day were perfected by Shaolin monks and have their origins in Taoist teachings — in the notion that an opposing force can be overcome by yielding to it, and that the very strength of your opponents can be turned against them and used to defeat them.

Today, tai chi is mainly practiced as a form of meditation and physical exercise, but it is actually a highly effective fighting system. Its fluid movements are a combination of feints and advances, moving backward and forward in response to an opposing force. This beauty and elegance helps distinguish kung fu from martial arts such as karate and taekwondo that often seem more rigid and courtly aggressive.

Back on the Kennedy Town waterfront, Wan performs a complete tai chi sequence emphasizing its fighting character. The display is mesmerizing to watch, as graceful and choreographed as a ballet performance.

Over the centuries, kung fu developed into a bewildering number of



During regular training sessions, Wan is able to expertly send other styles of martial arts opponents flying. Insects working out at the shop for its survival and vitality, one of several places in Hong Kong that teach traditional kung fu.

styles and schools. Choi Yit-fai, the southern Chinese style that Wan mainly teaches, is inspired by the physical characteristics and behaviours of five animals: the snake, crane, monkey, leopard and tiger. Wan Sifu demonstrates the monkey. Crouching low and hopping from one foot to another, his movements are comic, almost clown-like. Until, that is, he advances and unleashes a volley of lightning-fast hand movements that whip the air around my face and body. The experience is like standing next to a whirling machine that moves with terrifying speed, power and precision.

Wan believes in developing both the outer and inner chi, the vital energies that are at the heart of Chinese martial arts and medicine. There is a profound relationship between fighting and healing. Wan is an expert at targeting the pressure points that can cause serious injury or death, and an adept physician, able to heal the body by manipulating the same points — which he is occasionally called upon to do if someone gets accidentally hurt while practicing.

Developing the chi is what gives kung fu its mysterious powers. According to Wan, the Golden Bell technique is about concentrating chi to protect the body's vulnerable points and enables him, for example, to bend a sword with his throat. Another important term is ging, referring to the energies unleashed by chi.

Wan invites me to experience ging at first hand, quite literally. Holding out my palm, he lightly hits it from less than a foot away with his open hand. It is like being clubbed by a sledgehammer or zapped by a stun gun. How can anyone



generate so much force in such a short, casual slap? Wan grins in delight. "That's ging. Can you feel the energy? Can you feel it?"

Some kung fu exponents claim to be able to double targets without making actual physical contact, though the force of the chi alone. Fanciful perhaps, but after this demonstration I am not quite so sure.

Hong Kong is still one of the world's best places to learn kung fu in its purest forms. If you want to develop your chi and learn the beautiful but deadly fighting techniques of the Shaolin monks, masters like Wan can show you the way, regardless of your age, sex or race. The only requirement is that you uncomplainingly put in years of practice and hard work — for of course, kung fu is all about "time and effort". Dragonair's network covers 28 destinations across the Asia-Pacific region.

#### WHERE TO LEARN KUNG FU IN HONG KONG

• Sifu Wan Kai-ho (Wan Kai Ho Martial Arts Institute), tel: 2872 6226

And though it was a little bit frightening  
They fought with expert timing