詠春拳

In the depths of a London church, one man is quietly combining faith with motion to open up the ancient world of martial arts. Syeda Onjali Bodrul speaks to Sifu Mckenzie, the new Muslim master of Wing Chun, about carrying forth a timeless legacy.

ENTER THE SIFU

MCKENZIE

ABDUL MALIK

馬嘉力

Abundance of Power

Servant of the King

As I make my way down into the basement of a Christian church in Stamford Hill, London, an area known for its Orthodox Jewish community, to meet a Muslim Sifu (Kung Fu Master) specialising in the Chinese art of Wing Chun, I am reminded of a saying by philospher Martin Buber – that "all journeys have secret destinations of which the traveller is unaware." The symbolism of this area which seems so effortlessly to entwine different faiths and peoples for the pursuit of knowledge, is in fact fitting for the experience I am about to undergo; because over the next few hours, all preconceptions, all Hollywood-induced notions and prejudices about this form of combat so intrinsically linked to that mystical land of the East, are going to be firmly put to rest.

Contrary to being greeted by a hall full of Karate-Kid-style robed men giving off high-pitched shrieks as each imagine themselves to be this decade's answer to Bruce Lee, I am instead met by silence. The air is filled with only one sound: that of clenched fists slicing through the air, timed to the rhythm of exhaled breathing. Before me lies a hall filled with men and women of every colour and creed, dressed in simple black T-shirts bearing the historical insignia of Wing Chun – the Viper and the Crane. And before them stands one figure: Sifu Garry McKenzie, otherwise known as Abdul Malik (Servant of the King) by fellow Muslims, or Ma Ga Lik (Abundance of Power) to those in China, clad in a bright yellow T-shirt and white Islamic cap, calmly observing the students that so strenuously look to him for guidance and approval.

Waiting in the sidelines for the class to finish, I find myself mesmerised by the powerful yet graceful art that is Wing Chun. Mental and physical discipline, precision, balance and flexibility without compromise, all combine to form this counter-attack system that has, like an underground secret, journeyed across time and continents to make its way into the scene that stands before me. Based upon a principle of centreline attacks that target the core of the human body, blocks that redirect an opponent's strikes, and fighting with a mathematical directness, the appeal of Wing Chun seems to lie in honest simplicity. Fighting

photography Steven Lawson

is not a decorative sport here; it is purely a means to survival. To survive is to succeed, and to succeed, Wing Chun tells us we must "receive what comes, follow what goes, and strike when there is emptiness." But from where does Wing Chun stem? And how did such a form of combat, usually passed only from masters to selected disciples as a means of preservation, make its way from ancient China to a church basement in Hackney?

The answers lie not only with the Sifu himself, but in the emblem emblazoned upon each of his students' T-shirts. Wing Chun, or 'Ving Tsun' as it is known, literally means "Eternal Spring", highlighting the infinity of knowledge and the capacity to learn which is within the human spirit at all times. The legend that surrounds its very creation is as mysterious as it is unique; for unlike most other forms of martial art, the origins of Wing Chun are attributed to two women: first and foremost, Yim Wing Chun (Beautiful Eternal Springtime), and secondly her teacher, a Buddhist nun by the name of Abbess Ng Mui.

It is said that whilst fleeing the destruction of her monastery by Qing forces, Abbess Ng Mui, already a formidable expert in the art of Shaolin kung fu, stopped to observe a fight between two creatures: the snake and the crane. Marvelling over the precise and striking moves of the viper and the dance-like fluidity of the winged bird, she gradually began to incorporate them into her own knowledge of kung fu, but it was not until the Abbess met Yim Wing-Chun that the new form of combat took on a far more forceful stance. Desperate to escape forced marriage to a local warlord, Yim Wing-Chun had accepted a challenge to fight for her freedom, and sought help from the Abbess to perfect her boxing and combat skills. The Abbess conceded to teach her everything she knew, and gradually, the simple theories upon which Wing-Chun are now based were formed. Yim Wing-Chun went on to win her fight against the warlord, marry the man she loved, and together, they passed on their unique fighting techniques to those they felt would guard its purity.

From those first days of its creation, Wing-Chun transcended the tests of time to reach the Great Grand Master Ip Man in 1949: the very same man from whom Bruce Lee

learnt his most fundamental and now internationally renowned fighting skills. The legacy of Ip Man remains to this day, for not only has Sifu Mckenzie travelled to Hong Kong to complete the Ip Man Ving Tsun training, considered to be the most distinguished level a Sifu can reach, but he did so under the tutelage of Grand Master Ip Ching, the son of Bruce Lee's own Ip Man.

"That was God's will," recalls Sifu Mckenzie. "In 1994 I began a Cantonese course that lasted four years and would prepare me for making contact with the real Sifus of Hong Kong. During that time, I was lucky enough to bump into the Grand Master Ip Ching at a restaurant in London following a seminar, and although he couldn't speak English, I was able converse in Cantonese. The Grand Master invited me to train with him and I accepted, so I've been going to Hong Kong regularly now for the past 12 years."

Wing Chun however, was not Garry Mckenzie's first love. "Like any six or seven year old, I grew up on Kung Fu TV," he admits with a slight grin. "It appealed to me because I had a particularly hot temper as a child, and enjoyed fighting – in fact, I enjoyed fighting so much, my parents sent me and my elder brother off to learn all about judo. But it just didn't live up to what I had seen on TV. I wanted to learn a style of fighting where the strength of the opponent is not just resisted, but combined with yours, and then used as a force against that same opponent. I wanted to learn kicks and strong techniques, but at that time Chinese martial arts classes had yet to be widely taught. So I moved on to the next best thing: the Korean art of Tae Kwan Do." By the time Sifu Mckenzie was 15 years old, he began entering a variety of competitions but found himself being disqualified a number of times for using too much force. Then, after an "unfortunate incident", he realised that something more was needed to suit his own personal and physical needs, so he moved onto amateur boxing.

The "unfortunate" incident in question is one that would cause any teen to seek a commanding form of self-defence. "After leaving a friend's house, five skinheads began to verbally abuse me," recalls the Sifu. "I answered back, not understanding what their problem was – big mistake. They began chasing me. I ran into a pub for safety but for some reason the landlord kicked me out too, so I was completely exposed to these boys. They broke one of my ribs and caused a fair few other injuries. So from that moment, it was goodbye Tae Kwon Do, and hello boxing."

But the restless nature of the Sifu meant that by the age of 17, even boxing was insufficient for his needs. So once again, he turned to that realm of discovery, the television, for inspiration – and this time he found exactly what he was looking for. "I joined a Wing Chun class in 1982 after watching the BBC documentary "Way of the Warrior". I was lucky enough to be taught by the teacher who was actually used in the programme, and despite having appeared as the subject matter for a television show, it somehow seemed unofficially exclusive." The sense of belonging, of having finally found something that met his physical demands and yet challenged him on an intellectual level, meant that before long, the soon-to-be Sifu had reached the top of his class. "A hierarchy existed within the Wing-Chun class that at first seemed unfair. Non-Chinese students seemed to be there only to make up the numbers and usually

lined the last row. Being pushed to the back, I didn't get the attention I deserved, but my attributes and hard training allowed me to climb up the ladder to become assistant instructor. That was when I began representing the academy in demonstrations and seminars in the UK and overseas."

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When asked what it is about Wing Chun that he finds so appealing, Sifu Mckenzie looks up calmly, and simply states, "It balances you. Between the mental and the physical, is a middle level, a gap that must be filled. It teaches you to train and understand yourself – to know what you can do, to realise your limitations and push that boundary. Only when you are fully aware of your own capability, can you control and handle any situation. As my Sifu once said, 'A wise man can act the fool. A fool can never act the wise man'."

Wing Chun for Sifu Mckenzie, cannot be limited merely to the physical dimension: it becomes a reflection of the mind. "Martial arts is more than just a form of self defence, it is knowledge too. You are trained not only to fight, but to diffuse a situation by verbal communication and body language – to frame the entire scenario in the event of an oncoming attack, and most importantly, to never show just how much you know. Just like the Prophet Muhammad demonstrated, when it comes to warfare, despite one's vast knowledge and power, one must appear to be nothing more than what one is perceived to be."

The Sifu's alignment of Wing Chun not only with the general human state but more fundamentally with his faith, is an intrinsic force which is central to the formation of his character and standing as a teacher. Rarely to be seen without an Islamic cap upon his head, his conversion to Islam seems to have brought with it an underlying humility which is rare to find. "I became a Muslim five years ago – before that I was a Jehovah's Witness. They are the only Christian sect that do not believe in the Trinity, but despite being Unitarian, still believe in a son of God. In a conversation one day with a student of mine I suddenly found myself being told that I believed in the very same things the followers of Islam believed. At that point however, I was still stuck on the notion of Jesus being the son of God: the actual push came much later – in the form of a video by Ahmed Deedat. It answered all my questions about the concept of God having a son and the flaws such a 'fact' entailed, so I became a Muslim right there and then." Despite being a teacher of combat and a master of what some would deem to be a theory of violence, Islam has it seems, also allowed the Sifu to successfully reconcile his career with his faith. "The Jehovah's Witnesses are against any form of physical combat so it was a continuous struggle to resolve my faith with my work as a martial artist. However, Islam encourages us to defend ourselves, to condition the body and maintain its fitness."

From the fact that his classes encompass both male and female students of all ages and backgrounds, including a significant number of Muslim women in hijab, it is clear that the Sifu applies his belief in Islam's decree of self-defence to everyone. "If a sister pushing a pram is attacked, should she get on the mobile and call her husband or brother to save her? By the time he reaches her the

ordeal would be over. Learning defence is obligatory in Islam for both men and women, in the same way as praying is: so teaching self defence is an Islamic duty for me and in turn, influences the way I teach."

Having witnessed the Sifu with his students before the interview, it is clear that like any great teacher, there is an understanding and mutual respect between master and pupils that rarely requires words. There is no shouting, no 'bullying' tactics, no need for the harsh words I had expected to hear and which inevitably stemmed from my own childhood diet of kung fu movies. In fact, at times, one would be forgiven for believing the Sifu to be nothing more than an active observer. "Between a good teacher and a good student, there must always exist a continuing understanding and the willingness to learn from each other. Bruce Lee said 'Come with

an empty cup, receive tea, not half full, not diluted, just pure', meaning unlearn what you have learnt in the past. Someone coming to Wing Chun with an agenda will not work. Learning Wing Chun is a privilege, not a right. Students from other martial arts have to start with a clean slate and start from the beginning, just as I had to do when becoming a Muslim. It's the only way."

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Seventeen years have passed since the day Sifu McKenzie first opened the doors to his own Wing Chun school. Since then he has not only watched it branch out across the nation and grow in popularity, but has himself been awarded with a series of accolades and honours for his ever-strenuous efforts to perfect his schools, and his own abilities. Having been the only Muslim Sifu to have opened the Ip Man Tong (Hall Museum) and to be featured on Channel 5's "Combat Club", I have no doubt that the Sifu is a role model, if not a hero, to many of his own students, both Muslim and non-Muslim alike. So what about him? Who does he aspire to be like? The answer is, as I have come to expect from the Sifu, one that leads back to faith. "Bruce Lee is of course a legacy that endlessly inspired me as a child, but my true ideal is the Prophet Muhammad: he was a family man, father, husband, friend, counsellor, statesman and on the battlefield, a lion. But he only fought when ordained to do so by Allah for a just and noble cause. You cannot beat that."

Watching Sifu Garry Mckenzie/Abdul Malik/Ma Ga Lik walk back to face a new class of eager-eyed pupils, I suddenly realise that like his names, Sifu Mckenzie is a man who strives to represent for a range of different audiences, a living, breathing link between the ancient world of Wing Chun and newer, younger generations. Be it an English, Muslim, or Chinese pupil, he is open to all without compromising what or who he is. And as I climb up the church stairs and step back into the real world, I feel truly honoured for having witnessed an art form which upholds and teaches the very values upon which Islam is based: the ethos of knowledge and learning from the past, using the mind and body for the procurement of peace and protection, and above all, the courage to be direct and true to one's self. Through Sifu Mckenzie, Wing Chun's history, like that of Islam, lies not in the decaying enclosure of perishable pages, but within a guarded, sacred and active knowledge being passed down to those deemed capable of guarding its essence.●

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