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Replacing a Martial Arts Legend

Se-Ming Ma, grandson of the famous Ark Y. Wong, wants to create his own identity, but not at the expense of the grandmaster's legend.

By Alexander S. Holub

About two weeks prior to the end of 1986, grandmaster Ark Y. Wong suffered a stroke and was taken to the hospital in a coma. During that time and prior to his passing on Jan. 11, 1987, he regained consciousness for only about three days. During that time he said he did not want the *wah que kwoon* or the five-family system of kung-fu to die with him. Ark Wong left no doubts in anyone's mind as to who his successor would be.

Se-Ming Ma is Ark Wong's grandson and successor. He was born in Mainland China and lived there for the first six years of his life. The family moved to Hong Kong, where he became interested in kung-fu through the early kung-fu movies. But he never trained in Hong Kong. It was not until he came to the United States and discovered his grandfather was a master that he was bit by the kung-fu bug.

Se-Ming's training was rather strict and traditional. There were the long hours of horse stance and hand training. There was the understanding of the basic herbal medicines. There was the knowledge of healing of training injuries. All taught by the master; Ark Wong knew that Se-Ming someday would take his place and he wanted him to be ready.

Besides the standard traditional training, Ark Wong taught Se-Ming some of his own personal knowledge. Wong was quite familiar with dim-mak (the death touch) and taught this to his grandson. Wong's personal favorite style was the tiger style and he emphasized this training along with the traditional hard-hand training, chi gong and his fighting techniques. Consequently, Se-Ming is well-versed in the five-family system and is the best possible choice to carry on as Ark Wong's successor.

Besides the five-family system, Wong had familiarized Se-Ming with other styles. These included choy li fut, wing chun, hung gar, tai chi, paqua, praying mantis and white crane. Se-Ming was taught how to distinguish each of the styles to defend against them and to gain knowledge concerning the training used in each. Wong taught Se-Ming not only how to recognize the styles, but also their strong and weak points. He taught him the best of the training procedures from each and what each style stresses in the training. Hence, Se-Ming is well-versed in many different areas of kung-fu training and fighting.

There is a story Wong told about an experience Se-Ming had while he was in junior high school. It seems that Se-Ming got into an argument with several rather bigoted students and a fight began. Se-Ming naturally defended himself quite well and defeated his assailants. When the administration of the school found out about this he had Se-Ming bring the person responsible for teaching him how to fight to the vice principal's office. In typical school administrative fashion, the vice principal said

that he thought that it was unfair that Ark Wong had taught Se-Ming to fight. Wong, in impeccable logic replied, "Do you think that it's fair that three boys attack him?" With that the vice principal had to agree and the incident was closed.

Since taking over the school two years ago, Se-Ming has brought back the more traditional style of training. For the past few years Ark Wong had concentrated most of his efforts on the healing arts and less on the martial arts. The emphasis now as in years back is more toward a building of the kung-fu man from the ground up. There is more stress laid on the basics which, as Se-Ming states, are boring. But these are the most important part of kung-fu training. Without a strong horse stance, the rest of the moves will likewise be weak. This will in turn effect endurance and breathing. Consequently, making sure that each student has a strong stance is the first order of business.

When Se-Ming assumed control it came as no real surprise to his students or those who had studied under Ark Wong. "People expected certain things of me in regard to the training. They thought that my grandfather had kept many of his secrets only within the family and that I had them. My grandfather did pass on many of his secrets to his devoted students. So, I wasn't able to show them things they didn't know . . . except maybe some forms."

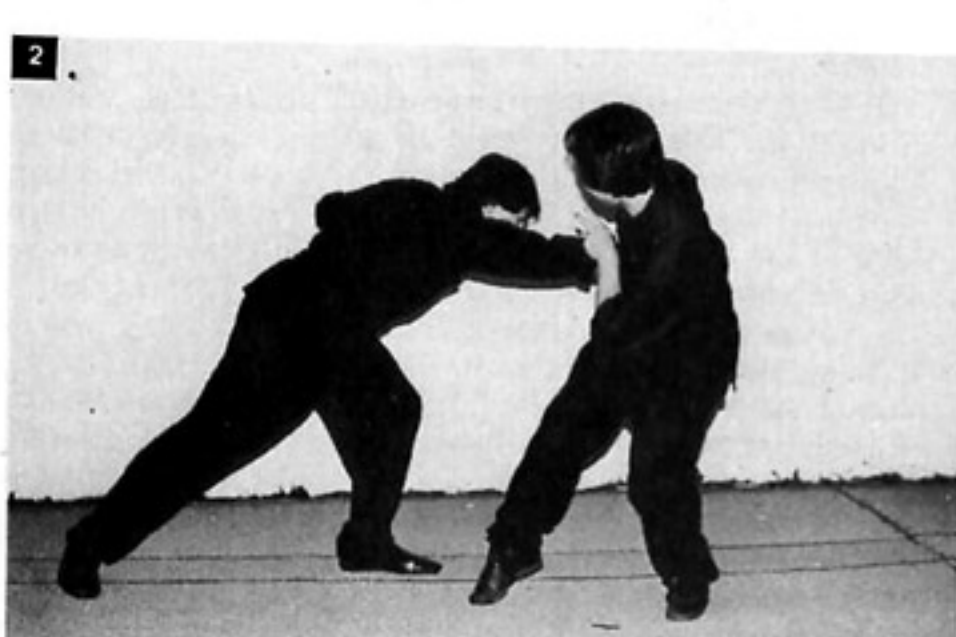
In the years that Ark Wong had taught kung-fu he had many prominent people under his training. Jimmy H. Woo of san soo, Dan Inosanto of arnis and jeet kune do; Jim Kelly of tae kwon do; Tiny Lefitti of lima lama; and Douglas Wong and Albert Leong. There were even some stories going around that Bruce Lee had studied with him for a period and that David Carradine was initially trained by him prior to the "Kung Fu" television series and that originally the studios wanted Wong as technical advisor for the kung-fu scenes. Wong reportedly declined in favor of his students.

Wong had also been one of the most respected masters in the world. Not only did he grow up with Chang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-Tung, but other martial arts masters would pay their respects to him when they were in town. It was not uncommon to see masters such as James Yee, Brendan Lai or Bucksam Kong visiting his studio. Some years back when the Taiwan acrobatic troop was at the Shrine Exhibition Hall in Los Angeles, it came to his studio and gave him an invitation to its performance. And prior to the performances it came over and saluted him.

Se-Ming didn't feel much pressure in taking over from a man such as his grandfather; he had been teaching for almost 20 years. He was certainly proud of his grandfather and had a great deal of respect for him, but Se-Ming had seen the changes in the martial arts during that



Se-Ming is attacked with a snake spear (1). He defends by pushing it aside with the bottom of the kwan-do (2). The snake spear is then pushed down (3). The attacker tries to come back (4) with an overhead thrust, but Se-Ming defends with the blade of the kwan-do. The attacker pulls back the spear as Se-Ming keeps it at bay with the blade of the kwan-do (5). Pushing out the spear (6), Se-Ming continues controlling the weapon. Turning the blade around (7), Se-Ming keeps his opponent from effectively pulling back his spear. Se-Ming then lifts (8) the spear up and out to pull the kwan-do across his opponent's chest (9).



Se-Ming is attacked with a two-hand push (1). He steps to the outside (2) and grabs and pulls the right arm. He kicks (3) to the ribs and crescent kicks (4) across the head.

time. He has seen it through the beginnings of interest in the 1960s, its peak with the Bruce Lee phenomenon, and now with its many really dedicated practitioners carrying on the traditions. "People have more styles to choose from and have an opportunity to become more knowledgeable about many different styles," says Se-Ming. This is a unique opportunity and Se-Ming encourages his students to learn as much as they can.

Another primary aspect of kung-fu training being stressed is that of hand training. It is important that the hands be strong and move in the correct way, whether it is a block on an incoming punch or kick, whether it is a punch itself, a cut, a hit to a meridian or nerve point or even a grab. The correct movement of the hands is necessary.

Along with horse training and hand training is the movement of the body. As Ark Wong used to say, "You move hand, body, leg." In other words, each movement becomes a flow of both physical and internal energy. When everything moves in a coordinated way the power naturally flows. This can only occur with proper training and the more traditional styles emphasize this to a greater degree.

With the emphasis much more on the basics, Se-Ming has further brought back the harder workouts. But the stress is still placed on quality over quantity.

While this may sound as though Ark Wong wasn't concerned with his students in the latter years, this not true. He remained concerned but he just expected that the individual student take more initiative and responsibility in his own training. He would still correct wrongly performed moves and he would still show students fighting techniques; he just didn't get as deeply involved in the teaching as he once had. And those students who did take the initiative and responsibility turned out to be quality students.

Se-Ming's personal teaching method is more along the traditional lines, modifying the old Chinese belief that whatever you get on the first showing is what you're capable of doing. He spends more time correcting and encouraging each student. His desire is to get the best from each individual and to help him to develop both physically and mentally. All this begins with the mastery of the basics. Once one is proficient in the basics, then it becomes quite a bit easier to learn the accompanying forms and techniques.

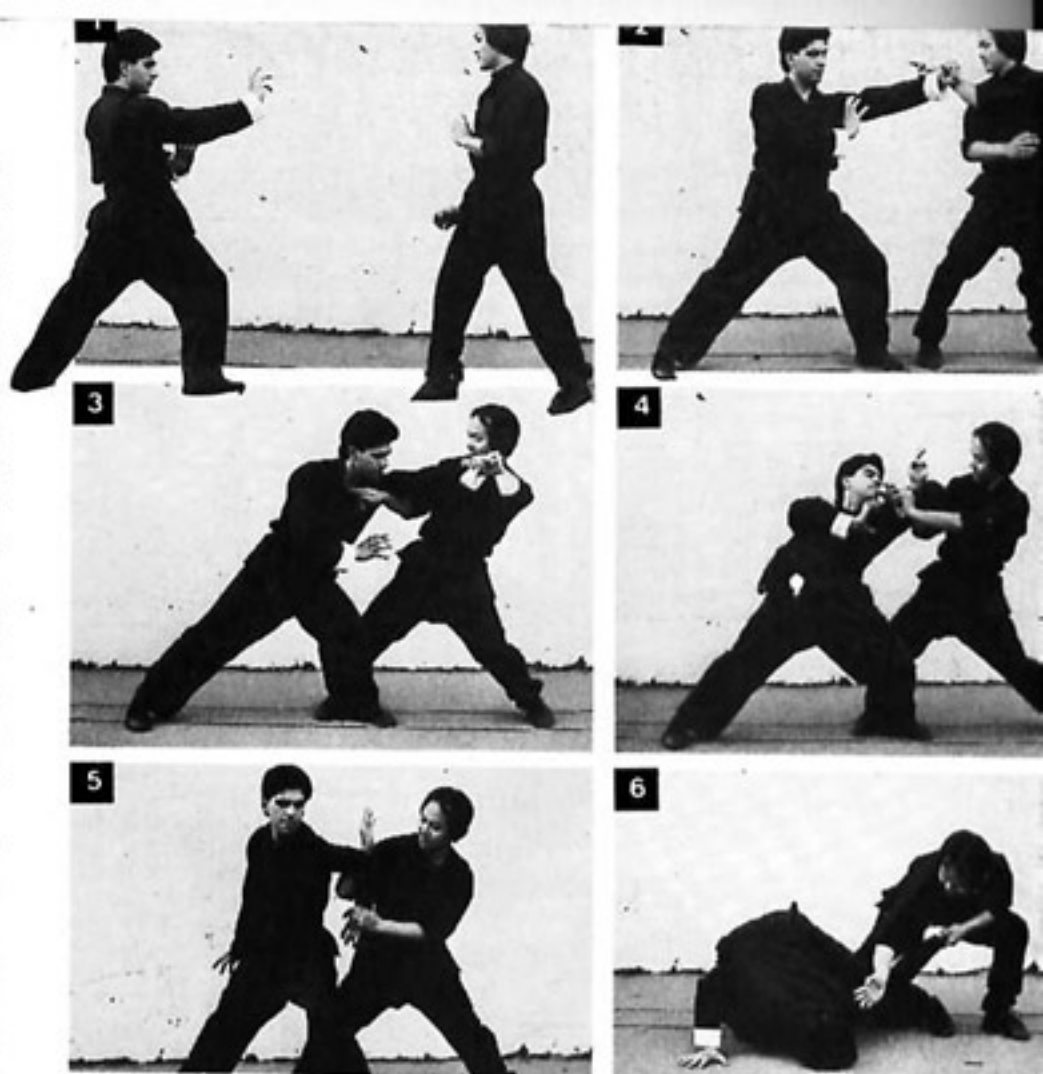
As a new student one could expect more strictness in the classes than was previously encountered. Se-Ming expects that each student show respect to the school, its founder and to the designated instructors. This is done in the traditional way with the bow and salute.

As was previously mentioned, a new student can expect the first few months of training filled with the basics. Little meat is taught, but an important lesson is gleaned at this time—patience. This is essential for the student to understand for it will effect every aspect of his life both inside and outside the school.

Se-Ming is familiar with many kung-fu styles. The style his grandfather passed on to him is a unique style as well as being old and traditional. The five-family style is not fancy and it is not for everyone interested in kung-fu. There's no gymnastics, no high kicks, no fancy footwork. It is straightforward and effective. It is for those who are devoted to the more traditional or classical systems. It must be remembered that this classical system has undergone over 2,000 years of testing. The reason that the five-family style is still around is because it's efficient, effective and practical. It makes the best use of space, power and movement as well as the whole body of its practitioner. Not only based on the movements of the five animals (snake, tiger, crane, leopard, and dragon), it also is based on the natural circular movements of the body as well as the movement of the chi. This makes it not only an excellent means of self-defense, but also a system of healthful exercise.

At some point Se-Ming hopes to gather together Ark Wong's older students, especially those teaching in other areas, to form a Five-Family Style Association. The main reason is to insure that the system is being correctly passed on and that his grandfather's name is kept alive. He would like to see the five-family style promoted and taught in more areas around the country and around the world.

Se-Ming says his training has just begun. Since his grandfather's passing he has been going through all the films Ark Wong had made in the past 30 years. He's making sure that his teachings follow Ark Wong's doctrines, while studying forms which his grandfather had placed on film many years ago. Some of these forms may not have been taught. He is looking for more techniques which he can incorporate into his



Se-Ming stands ready for his opponent's attack (1). He is attacked (2) with a punch to the face and defends with a snake to the outside of his enemy's punch. Grabbing his opponent's arm (3), he shoots to the throat. Pulling back, Se-Ming hits his opponent's inner elbow, bending his arm (4). Se-Ming then breaks (5) the arm by twisting it downward. Throwing his opponent to the ground (6), Se-Ming cuts to the shoulder, thus inflicting further damage.

teaching and his personal repertoire. Further, he feels it is important that he learn more about herbal medicine; this is an important part of traditional kung-fu training. Although he does practice his chi gong breathing exercises for health and power development, Se-Ming still says he has plenty to learn. Once learned, Se-Ming will be more than willing to pass this on to students who are devoted to the five-family style and the memory of grandmaster Ark-Yuey Wong.

Se-Ming's personal teaching philosophy is taken from the training he received from his grandfather. Some of the key ingredients include: Do not fight unless your life is threatened; do not show off what you have learned; always have respect for yourself and others. This latter point is the most important.

As Ark Wong taught, if you must fight, try to push away the attacker. If he comes back, you hit him to hurt him. If he still comes, then you may have to break a bone. If this doesn't work then knock him out. And as a last resort, if he is trying to kill you you may have to kill him. These are part of the martial arts teachings of Ark Wong. They are part of the training which he passed on to his grandson and his students. These will be passed on to Se-Ming's students.

Along with Ark Wong's teaching philosophy, Se-Ming has his own personal philosophy of training. First and foremost, the student must learn patience. Without patience the understanding and performance of the finer points of the five-family style will be lost. Second, it is his responsibility to produce quality kung-fu practitioners—from the correct basics to the understanding of how the forms are dissected and used as fighting techniques. This will reflect not only the on style itself, but also on the school and the instructor. Finally, and probably most important, is to be yourself. This goes along with the concept of self-respect. This also includes not attempting those things which are above your level (have patience) and the understanding of your own talents and abilities. The more you are truly yourself, the more you will like who you are. And the more self-confidence you have and the more you can accomplish both within the martial art and in your life.

Se-Ming Ma is Ark Wong's successor. As Se-Ming has said, "I knew that someday I'd take over the school. But I hoped that it would have been by my grandfather's retirement." Well, the Old Tiger is gone and Se-Ming, the Young Tiger, is here to carry on. Long live the Young Tiger.

About the Author: Alexander S. Holub is a Southern California-based martial artist and free-lance writer.

