

Wing Chun Kuen: A Revised Historical Perspective (Part 1)

Abstract

Wing Chun Kuen (Beautiful Springtime First), more commonly known simply as 'Wing Chun' has steadily gained international recognition, originally due to the popularity of Bruce Lee, although more recently over the past decade with the films 'Ip Man', 'Ip Man 2', 'Ip Man 3', 'The Legend is Born: Ip Man' and 'The Grandmaster'.

It is purported that Wing Chun was developed by a nun from the Southern Shaolin Monastery, Ng Mui, who progressed to teach Yim Wing Chun, from where the style received its name. Given that Wing Chun is a pragmatic combat system where speed and simultaneous attack and defence, adhering to principles of physics, the need for size, strength or flexibility is limited, a possible reason why the 'myth' that Wing Chun was developed by a woman has remained.

In this article, the myth of Ng Mui and the Southern Shaolin Monastery is questioned as a basis for providing an alternate historical argument and justification for the development of Wing Chun.

Introduction: The link between Wing Chun, Triads and the Southern Shaolin Monastery

According to various authors, establishing the authentic and accurate history of Wing Chun is challenging due to the predominant oral tradition within the martial arts (Belonoha, 2004; Chu et al, 1998; Lewis, 1998). The historical version portrayed in most of the widely available Wing Chun texts reports that Wing Chun was inextricably linked to the Southern Shaolin Monastery through the nun, Ng Mui (e.g. Gee, Meng and Lowenhagen, 2003; Gibson, 1998; Ritchie, 1997; Wong, 1982).

An overview of Wing Chun's development is that Ng Mui was one of five survivors to have escaped the destruction of the Southern Shaolin Monastery by the Qing imperial troops. Each survivor is purported to have developed their own unique style of martial art. Ng Mui taught her skills to a young woman, Yim Wing Chun from which the name of the style derives. Yim Wing Chun in turn taught her husband, Leung Bok Chau, before the style was transmitted to others through a variety of lineages (Belonoha, 2004; Chu et al, 1998; Gee et al, 2003; Gibson, 1998; Ip and Tse, 1998; Kernspecht, 1987; Yip and Connor, 1993).

However, this account has been questioned by Chu et al (1998) who proposed that the origin of Wing Chun was closely aligned to the development of political sects, such as the Tiandihui, or 'Society of the Heaven and Earth', more commonly known as the 'Triads'. Unfortunately, Chu et al (1998) did not provide academic support to substantiate their claim, consequently this article will analyse available academic sources in an attempt to corroborate or refute their assertion through the adoption of an hermeneutic approach which attempts to analyse and interpret the meanings generated within an historical text through a modern perspective (Braud and Anderson, 1998; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007; Haslam and McGarty, 2003; Kincheloe and Berry, 2004; Robson, 2002).

Given the assertion by Chu et al (1998) that there is a relationship between Wing Chun and the Tiandihui, there is one source that unites their heritage which can be explored further: that both Wing Chun and the Tiandihui have both claimed to have originated from the Southern Shaolin Monastery. The destruction of the Monastery by the Qing Empire being the catalyst for the development of both Wing Chun and the Tiandihui.

While Wing Chun's history is poorly documented, and as previously discussed, has been transmitted orally which may lead to embellishment, the historical accounts of the Tiandihui are far stronger (Bolz, 1995; Booth, 1999; Murray, 1994; Overholt, 1995; Ownby, 1993; ter Haar, 1997). Due to the strength of the historical accounts of the Tiandihui, a logical argument may be proposed adhering to the *modus tollens* (or 'the mode of taking') structure, whereby if the evidence for one element is stronger than the other element, but that both share similarities, then the argument can be accepted for the weaker element. Although this is confusing to follow, Weston (2000) summarises the structure as: 'If p then q, and not q, therefore not p'. To illustrate this, the argument is summarised below:

- If Wing Chun originated from the Southern Shaolin Monastery, then so would the Tiandihui (if p then q).
- The Tiandihui did not originate from the Southern Shaolin Monastery (not q).
- Therefore, Wing Chun did not originate from the Southern Shaolin Monastery (therefore not p).

Conversely, there is a further argument structure, *modus ponens* (or 'the mode of putting'), which can be applied (Weston, 2000). This is summarised as: 'If p then q, p, therefore q', or more simply, p implies q. If p is true, therefore q must also be true. Consequently, if historical accounts of the Tiandihui can verify the existence of the Southern Shaolin Monastery, then the claim for Wing Chun deriving from the Southern Shaolin Monastery is significantly strengthened.

From this, the two arguments centre on ascertaining whether any credible evidence exists for the Southern Shaolin Monastery, and given that historical accounts for the

Tiandihui are stronger than Wing Chun, it is necessary to analyse the accounts from the Tiandihui.

The link between the Tiandihui and the Southern Shaolin Monastery

The Tiandihui operated as a fraternity in a time of political turmoil. As such, it could be viewed as a 'cooperative' or mutual support organisation. Central to Tiandihui lore is the importance placed upon historical background and lineage. When a candidate progresses through the initiation ceremony, they are told of the history of the Tiandihui, which is known as the 'foundation account' or the 'Xi Lu Legend' (Booth, 1999; Murray, 1994; Overholt, 1995; Ownby, 1993; ter Haar, 1997).

This narrative of the Xi Lu Legend provided a justification for the Tiandihui's existence and their associated cause. Unfortunately, establishing accurate historical confirmation of the evidence for the Xi Lu Legend has been problematic.

While Tai Hsuan-Chih (1977) suggested that the Tiandihui mythology has remained unchallenged by scholars due to the subject being considered unworthy for serious academic investigation, an additional problem is that there are at least seven different versions of the foundation account (Booth, 1999; Murray, 1994; Ownby, 1993).

A leading academic of Chinese history, Professor Dian Murray, has provided an overview of the Xi Lu Legend:

In all versions, the plot is much the same. The monks of the Shaolin temple go to the aid of the emperor in quelling an invasion by the Xi Lu 'barbarians,' After returning to the capital in triumph, the monks refuse all forms of

monetary reward or investiture as officials But the emperor's gratitude turns to wrath when the monks are accused... of plotting rebellion, and their monastery is reduced to ashes...eighteen manage to take flight. Thirteen of them succumb to the hardships of the road, leading a band of only five to devote themselves to revenge against the Qing and the subsequent founding of the Tiandihui...In every version of the legend, the monks' endeavours are encouraged by the sudden appearance of a white incense burner, which floats either to the surface or to the edge of a body of water and is inscribed with the words 'Fan-Qing fu-Ming'. (Murray, 1994: 153-4).

The seven versions of the foundation account have been summarised in **Table 1**, although as Murray (1994) has discussed, each account has become progressively more elaborate over the years: although the plot generally remains consistent, inconsistencies arise between characters, place names, dates, actions, etc.

Table 1: A summary of the seven Chinese versions of the Xi Lu legend (adapted from Murray, 1994:197-227).

	Doc 1	Doc 2	Doc 3	Doc 4	Doc 5	Doc 6	Doc 7
Version	Yao Dagao	Yang Family	Gui County	'Xi Lu Xu' or Shouxion	'Xi Lu Xu Shi' or Narration	'Xi Lu Xu' of Preface	Hirayama
Year cited	27 th June, 1811	1820s or 1830s	Early 1830s	1851 – 1861	1851-61 or 1862-74	1851 – 1874	Late 19 th /early 20 th century
Xi Lu Invasion	Kanxi period	No mention	No mention	16 th year of Kangxi reign (1677)	Jiawu year of Kangxi reign (1714)	Jiawu year of Kangxi regin (1714)	Kangxi period
Location of Shaolin Monastery	Gansu	No mention	No mention	Jiulian Mountain, Fuzhou prefecture, Fujian province	No mention	Jiulian Mountain, Pulong county, Fujian	Jiulian Mountain
Number of monks	128	No mention	108	128	128	128	No mention
Betrayed by	Treacherous official	No mention	Ma Erfu	Zhang Lianq	Deng Sheng	Jianqiu Zhang & Chen Hong	Ma
Reason for betrayal	No mention	No mention	Broke a valuable lamp and subsequently expelled	No mention	Jealousy of being favoured by emperor	No mention	Seduced a monk's (Zheng Junda) wife and sister
How many escaped	18	No mention	18	18	18	18	18
How many survived	6 teachers and 1 pupil	5	5	5	5	5	5
Names of monks	No mention	No mention	No mention	Wu Zuotian, Fang Huicheng, Zhang Jingzhao, Yang Wenzuo, Lin Dagang	Liu , Guan, Zhang	Cai, Fang, Ma, Hu, Li	Cai Dezhong, Fang Dehong, Ma Chao-xing, Hu Dedi, Li Shikai
Escape aided by	No mention	No mention	No mention	Zhu Guang & Zhu Kai (turned into a bridge)	Zhu Guang & Zhu Kai (turned into a bridge)	Zhu Guang & Zhu Kai (turned into a bridge)	
Date of oath	25 th day of 7 th month of jiyin year	25 th day of 7 th month of jiyin year	25 th day of 3 rd month of jiyin year (1674)	No mention	25 th day of 7 th month of jiyin year	25 th day of 7 th month of jiyin year	25 th day of 7 th month of jiyin year
Place of oath	No mention	Gaoxi Temple,	Gaoxi Temple	No mention	Gaoxi temple of	No mention	Red Flower

		Gaozhou prefecture			Shicheng county, Haizhou prefecture, Guangdong		Pavillion
Name of brotherhood	Hong family	Honglian shenghui (Vast Lotus Victory Society)	No mention – but the three dot revolution 'to exterminate the Qing, restore the Ming and to share happiness, prosperity, and peace with all under Heaven' (Murray, 1994, p.203)	No mention	Tiandihui	No mention	Hong family
Date Wan Yunlong killed	9 th day of 9 th month	No mention	No mention	No mention	9 th day of 9 th month	9 th day of 9 th month	9 th day of 9 th month
Wan Yunlong Buried at	Unknown	No mention	No mention	No mention	Five Phoenix (Wufeng) Mountain	Twelve Summit (Shi' erfeng) Mountain	Ding Mountain

In returning to the fundamental reason for highlighting the Tiandihui history, if there is one decisive piece of evidence within the Xi Lu Legend that verifies the existence Southern Shaolin Monastery, then this strengthens the argument for Wing Chun similarly originating from the Monastery.

Although the Southern Shaolin Monastery is central to the Xi Lu legend, arguably there are two inextricable linked aspects to consider in verifying the authenticity of the Monastery:

- i) whether the Monastery existed, and
- ii) its geographical location.

In relation to the location for the Monastery, Murray (1994) highlighted how the different versions of the Xi Lu Legend (summarised in Table 1), differ. If the versions of the various accounts could be triangulated to verify the same location, the authenticity would be strengthened for similarly verifying the Monastery's existence. Unfortunately debate has continued as to the exact location of the Monastery, with three locations that appear most feasible being Putian, Quanzhou and Gaoxi.

Putian

In support of the Putian claim, the Putian Government comment that,

It is a great discovery that the remnants of the Southern Shaolin Temple has been found and been confirmed. On April 25, 1992, with the approval of the People's Government of Fujian, the Putian City Government held a press conference in the People's Great Hall to announce that they would rebuild Southern Shaolin Temple. (Putian Government, 2006: online)

Regrettably the Putian Government did not provide any evidence which confirmed the existence of the discovered Temple. Although Gee et al (2004) have supported the Putian claim, they have similarly failed to discuss what contributed to the archaeological evidence, except their personal testimony (Gee et al, 2003).

Quanzhou

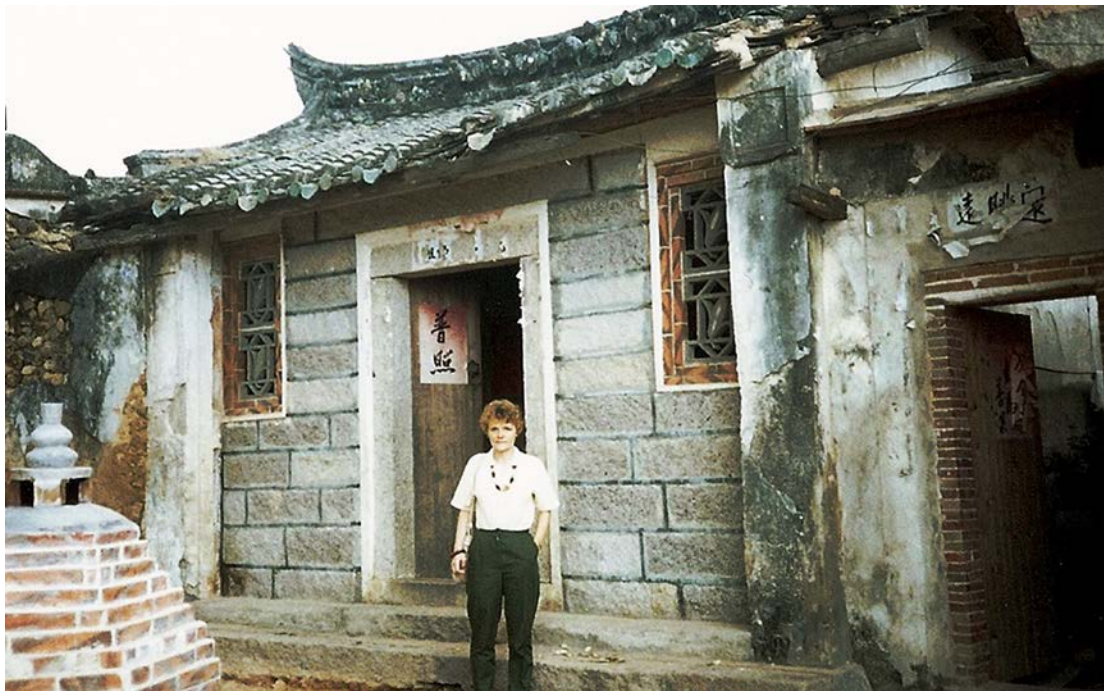
Although the Putian claim lacks any evidence to date, the alternate Quanzhou claim appeared stronger, with the evidence relating to written historical reports. ter Haar (1997) discussed the discovery of the 'Mixed Records from the Western Mountain' (xishan zazhi) written by Cai Yongjian (1776-1835), whereby a Southern Shaolin Monastery may have been located next to the Eastern Machmount Temple. However, ter Haar (1997) questioned the authenticity of the document, suggesting that it may have been a duplication from the late-Qing novel 'Wannianqing qicai xinzhuan'. As such, one text may have been copied from the other, alternately both texts may have evolved from a third historical source. Consequently, ter Haar suggested that further research would be required due to the Tiandihui's foundation account of the Southern Shaolin Monastery varying considerably to the 'Mixed Records from the Western Mountain'. ter Haar (1997) concluded that towards the end of the eighteenth century, stories about the destruction of a real or mythological Southern Shaolin Monastery were circulated widely. These stories were subsequently adopted by Tiandihui and martial artists for their own purposes.

Gaoxi

One location that is strongly associated with the site where the Tiandihui was established is the Guanyinting (or 'Goddess of Mercy Pavillion') in the Gaoxi township, Zhangpu county, Zhangzhou prefecture, Fujian (Murray, 1994). Murray asserted that the Tiandihui were established in 1761 or 1762 and has provided credible sources to support her research. Although this location may have been the

inaugural location for the Tiandihui, the Pavillion is little more than a remote, roadside hut and is therefore unlikely to have been the location for the actual Southern Shaolin Monastery (see Picture 1, Picture 2)

Picture 1: Prof. Dian Murray outside the Guanyinting in the 1980s (Photo used with permission from D. Murray).



Picture 2: Prof. Dian Murray inside the Guanyinting in the 1980s (Photo used with permission from D. Murray).



From Picture 1, the Guanyinting, or 'Goddess of Mercy Pavillion' is little more than a small place for roadside worshippers: it does not have the magnificence of the historically verified Northern Shaolin Monastery to which the reader may be more familiar.

Alternate explanation

From analysing the historical accounts of the Southern Shaolin Monastery, there are strong similarities with the established Northern Shaolin Monastery. Indeed, it is suggested here that accounts of the Southern Shaolin Monastery were based on established historical events from the Northern Shaolin Monastery, specifically in relation to the Northern monks' involvement with the military campaigns to support the Tang Dynasty (Murray, 1994; Ownby, 1993). These military campaigns are

historically documented through a record of 'donations' made to the Northern Shaolin Monastery (Twitchett, 1956). One such donation is recorded by Twitchett (1956: 130) below,

'...the best known of such donations is the Instruction from the Prince of Ch'in dated 626ii, describing the Pai-ku-wu-Chuang to the Shaolin Ssu which is quotes in the 'Huang T'ang sung- yüeh shao-lin Ssu pei' an inscription dated in 728.'

Furthermore, Twitchett (1956) discussed that the best example of such an inscription is referred to as the 'Shaolin Monastery Stele' which consisted of seven texts/inscriptions authored between 621 and 728. Shahar (2000: 30-1) elaborated further on the final stele, 'Text 7: The List of Thirteen Heroic Monks' which highlighted the service in of the following:

- Dean (shangzuo), Shanhu
- Abbot (sizhu), Zhicao
- Overseer (duweina), Huiyang
- General-in-Chief (da juangjun), Tanzang
- Monks: Puhui, Mingsong, Lingxian, Pusheng, Zhishou, Duoguang, Zhixing, Man, and Feng

The importance of Twitchett's research is highlighted here in that his discussion of such inscriptions were due to his historical interest in various Chinese Dynasties and pre-date the popularity of the martial arts in Western culture. It may therefore be suggested that Twitchett's account of the steles would lack any bias in interpretation for strengthening any martial art association or fabricating the association between

Shaolin and combat, perhaps in a way that the television series 'Kung Fu' and a range of other films have.

Indeed, the explicit link between monks and their fighting prowess was documented far earlier by the scholar Du Mu (1450-1525) who recorded, 'As early as the medieval period some Shaolin monks were renowned as warriors... monks assisted the campaigns that led to the founding of the Tang dynasty (618-907)' (Shahar, 2000: 16).

From the historical discussion of both Shaolin Monasteries, there are significant parallels between the verified recorded history of the Northern Shaolin Monastery and that of the Southern Shaolin Monastery through the Xi Lu Legend:

- Thirteen monks appear in the Tang history, evidenced by the stele
- Thirteen monks appear in the Xi Lu Legend
- Both accounts highlight that the monks assisted the existing emperor (or the emperor-in-waiting)

While the Northern Shaolin stele (Text 7) reported the involvement of thirteen heroic monks in support of Li Shimin (the future Tang emperor), the Xi Lu Legend discussed the escape of thirteen monks from the Southern Shaolin Monastery's destruction after having assisted an unknown emperor. Although the relationship between the Monasteries is limited, a question may be asked: if the actions of the monks from the Northern Shaolin Monastery has been systematically recorded and verified, why is there such an absence of historical or archaeological evidence to support a Southern Shaolin Monastery?

Indeed, Gee et al (2004) reported that it was actually Li Shimin (the Tang emperor) who rewarded the monks with the Southern Shaolin Monastery after their support, yet the academically verifiable evidence forwarded by Twitchett and Shahar detail that Li Shimin awarded additional lands to the Northern Shaolin Monastery to supplement and fortify their original site. (Twitchett, 1956; Shahar, 2000).

A couple of suggestions are hereby offered to explain the lack of corroboration in verifying one established location for the Southern Shaolin Monastery. For example, perhaps the Monastery was so systematically eradicated by the Qing empire. Undeniably, throughout China's turbulent history, monastery burning has been commonplace (Draeger and Smith, 1980). As such, according to *The Order of Shaolin Ch'an* (2004: 36) the Northern Shaolin Monastery was destroyed by fires in 1570, 1647, 1735 and 1744, therefore is it reasonable to espouse the belief that the Southern Monastery has been so systematically destroyed resulting in no remaining archaeological evidence or historical documents to corroborate its actual existence?

An alternate suggestion by ter Haar (1997) is that the name 'Shaolin' did not relate to the name of a specific monastery but to any monastery involved with the Ch'an tradition. Additionally, ter Haar (1997) suggested that the martial art traditions which present themselves as 'Southern Shaolin' may have originated independently of any specific monastery while eventually becoming associated with a specific monastery, an assertion corroborated by Henning (2001), who commented that martial arts developed for military and civilian purposes externally to the Shaolin Monasteries. However, given the scarcity of historical evidence for a range of Shaolin Monasteries, this assertion is currently unfounded.

In summary, although there are claims for the existence and location of the Southern Shaolin Monastery, this is questionable: this Monastery appears to have developed

through fiction and associated fabrication based on the exploits of the Northern Shaolin Monastery during the Tang dynasty. Parallels are evident between what can be ascribed to historical fact of the Northern Monastery against the doubtful fiction surrounding the Southern Monastery. Consequently, Booth (1999) concluded that the Southern Shaolin Monastery cannot be positively verified despite a number of locations vying to support a specific claim. Indeed, ter Haar (1997) commented that,

This struggle for recognition is much more than a scholarly dispute, because the location which becomes accepted as the 'true' monastery can be exploited for touristic and maybe even more general commercial purposes.

From the argument forwarded in this article, it is implied that with the continued popularity of the martial arts, continued globalisation, greater ease of travel, alongside increasing tourism within China, the actual verification of the Southern Shaolin Monastery has been, in-part, fabricated in order to provide the tourist with what they want...a place in which the legend of Shaolin is embodied, akin to such places within the United Kingdom that maintain to be linked with the legend of King Arthur's Camelot.

From the discussion, although the Tiandihui's historical records are more detailed than those for Wing Chun, the Southern Shaolin Monastery remains elusive, with the assertion that it developed through fiction and associated fabrication, based upon the recorded of the Northern Shaolin Monastery during the Tang dynasty. Consequently, the *modus tollens* argument would strongly appear to be validated, i.e., as the Tiandihui did not originate from the Southern Shaolin Monastery, neither did Wing Chun. Subsequently, an alternate historical account requires exploration for the origin of Wing Chun. This will follow in the second article.

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