

Journal of Interview with Huang Chien Liang

Chinese Martial Arts

Summer 2001

中國武術

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**Special Bonus
Interview with
Chow Tze Chuen**

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Author's note: *I had taken vacation in Hong Kong with my friend Brian McDonald. We were met by my friend Master Buick Yip, whom I owe a debt of gratitude for all of his help in making this interview possible. I had met Grandmaster Chow the first day that I arrived in Hong Kong at the Ving Tsun Athletic Association. He was sitting with the other Grandmasters while Grandmaster Chu Shong Tin was giving a lecture. When the lecture was over, some in attendance began working out and I observed Grandmaster Chow doing chi sao with some of the students. It was interesting to watch his quick and precise techniques. I eventually had an opportunity to meet him and made arrangements to go to his school the following week to conduct this interview.*

I had been in Hong Kong for about a week when we traveled to Grandmaster Chow Tze Chuen's school. Our journey included a subway trip and a long walk through a rough-looking neighborhood in Kowloon. (I was really happy to have Master Buick with us since we could not have found the school without him.) There were several students working out in the school and I had a twinge of guilt for taking up some of their Sifu's time.

We were made welcome and provided with a good refreshment, and introductions were made. Master Donald Mak, a very senior disciple, would serve as my interpreter.

Grandmaster Chow was a very gracious man with a spirit and energy that is very apparent for his age. At 76 years old, he demonstrated long arm and kicking techniques that really amazed me. The speed at which he was able to move from one side to the other performing techniques was truly something to appreciate. I was most interested when he showed me how he would deal with a tall long arm person (which I am, standing at 6'4"). His techniques were performed with pin-point accuracy and, thankfully, he pulled his techniques. When Grandmaster Chow asked me to do a particular technique I would oblige (but with respectful speed and energy, since after all, he is a Grandmaster and 76 years old). But once he demonstrated his techniques I was glad that I used restraint in my aggressive movements. You see, for the most part, the harder you try to hit someone in Ving Tsun, the harder you are hit back, as your technique creates their technique while your energy is borrowed and turned against you. I was told later that not everyone is as mild as I was when they visit. That left me wondering what may have happened to those who came here before me.

An Interview with Chow Tze Chuen

by Darrell Jordan

DJ: When did you become involved in Ving Tsun?

Chow: I started in 1955. From there, I never stopped learning Ving Tsun, from Siu Nim Tao, to don chi sao [single sticking hand] up to chi sao [sticking hands].

DJ: You were never shown pak sao [slapping hand] or lop sao [grabbing hand]?

Chow: Yes, from Siu Nim Tao to don chi sao. I learned Siu Nim Tao for six months, and then after that don chi sao, and then rolling hands. There was no pak, or lop taught at that time.

DJ: Can you tell us why?

Chow: Yip Man Sifu taught differently to different people according to their level, how they commit, and how they learn. So there was no fixed learning, or fixed curriculum to learn pak sao, or lop sao, and those other things. It all depended on the people. Yip Man asked me to demonstrate kicking techniques with him. So I learned a lot from Yip Man about kicking because he had me do demonstrations.

DJ: So some students got pak sao, and lop sao, and others would get different things?

Chow: Yes. Some students would be taught differently. Since I am the same height as Yip Man, he liked to use me for kicking techniques. So I would show footwork while Yip Man would go off and show other things. (Grandmaster Chow stands straight up on one leg from a sitting position and begins to rotate his chambered leg in a circle. He then does a few terrifically forceful kicks from the chamber. Obviously, he is still powerful and athletic at his age.) According to Lok Yiu, he says he only does straight punches and that's enough, and that he doesn't have to do many foot techniques. But for me the demand of Ving Tsun is that you are supposed to work your feet so that they are as flexible as your hands, which means that the hands and the feet are equal. Naturally the feet are more difficult to work on. What is the purpose of

learning good Kung Fu? It's not just for self defense or beating people up. It's for self development, and I just demonstrated this to you at my age. I am not trying to boost myself, but I just want to show you because you came all the way from Florida.

DJ: Do you teach Ving Tsun professionally?

Chow: I never teach Ving Tsun as a profession. Maybe I am a half-Shifu (*we all laughed dutifully*). I have my own daytime job at the bus company which gives me support. I started teaching Ving Tsun in 1962, but not as a profession. Yip Man Sifu always used to tell us that if you have a job that can support you, that is enough. You do not need to rely on kung fu as a profession because if you teach as a profession, this means that your students are clients. So if the relationship is dissatisfying, then sometimes you cannot teach equally. Maybe some students are lazy but they are rich. You cannot teach the good students equally. It is not fair. For example, traditionally to start learning the dummy form, we give a red pocket. Some other sifus might charge \$100 (HK\$) per movement on the dummy. So maybe they put in a few more movements.

DJ: Movements or sections?

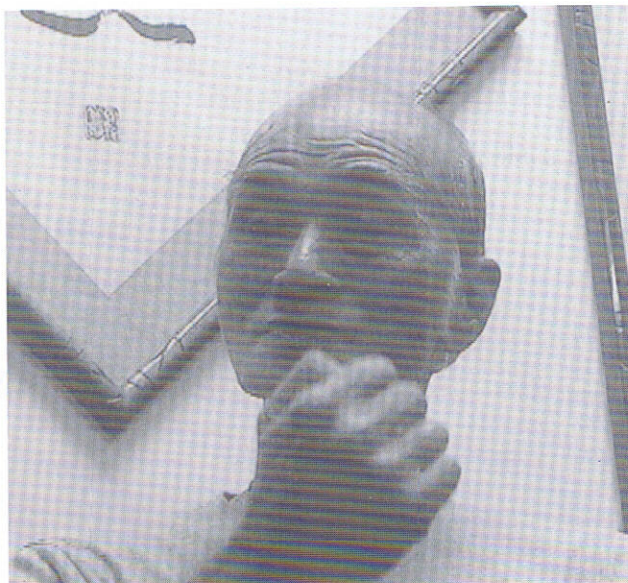
Chow: Yes, movements. Let's look at the Batt Jom Doa [eight chopping knives]. Not many people learned Batt Jom Doa directly from Yip Man Sifu. Just myself, Chu Shong Tin, and a couple others. At the time during Chinese New Year, Koo Sang came to visit Yip Man Sifu. So, I came to visit and Koo Sang answered the door and said that Yip Man was not there. But Yip Man Sifu heard my name and asked me to come in and sit down. After a while, Yip Man Sifu asked Koo Sang to leave first, and then he asked me to do the whole dummy form for him.

DJ: Do you recall what year this was?

Chow: Yes, it was in the late 60's.

DJ: What does training in Chi Gerk consist of?

Chow: Our way of chi gerk is not with holding of the hands. We start using one leg and we must balance the body. All the techniques are: bong gerk, tan gerk, and fuk gerk.



Grandmaster Chow making a point



**At the school of Chow Tze Chuen
Pictured from left to right:
Donald Mak, Grandmaster Chow, Darrell Jordan**



At a luncheon in memory of Moy Yat, hosted by Lee Moy Shan.
 Pictured from left to right: Siu Yuk Man, Chu Shong Tin, Lee Moy Shan, Chow Tze Chuen, Donald Mak

DJ: Do you recall who the most aggressive chi sao player in the class was?

Chow: Wong Shung Leung. No doubt about that. When I was an assistant instructor for Yip Man Sifu, I came across many kinds of hands, many kinds of energy, with different people. At the time, I and a couple others used to take care of the class.



Chow penetrating lower rib area with leopard hand

DJ: Can you mention what the strong point of Ving Tsun is, in your opinion?

Chow: Now I think Ving Tsun is more technical or is more useful to attack while you are withdrawing. So if someone is attacking you, you can attack while backing up. Yip Man Sifu said that if you can learn retreat and attack, this is more difficult, more technical, but good. So, Ving Tsun is very good for attacking while withdrawing, so, retreat and attack. Also, the long bridge. Everyone says that Ving Tsun is short bridge, but it has very good long bridge work too. Although I am shorter, I can do long bridge to defend. (Grandmaster Chow asked me to stand up and to throw a punch at him. Now I have to tell you, when the Grandmasters ask me to do these things, it can be a little nerve-racking. So, I throw a punch at him and, all of a sudden, my arm is smacked away and he is not in front of me, but to the side of me with his two fingers pressed into my neck. This all happens in the blink of an eye. He has me throw another punch and now he is on the opposite side with his hand pressed into my side. This was truly a learning experience. Grandmaster Chow was so quick and agile, but yet quite capable of controlling his strikes. He also demonstrated inch punch power on Brian, sending him flying.)

DJ: Can you explain more on kicking techniques?

Chow: Because you are tall or thick, it is difficult to defend against these kicking techniques. Please stand up and I will demonstrate. *(Uh oh. Here we go again! He asks me to throw a punch and, all of a sudden he knocks my arm away as he moves to the side and my knee is collapsed and his fingers have stopped just short of my eyes. I was thinking just then, "Dear Lord, I'm already going blind. Don't let any accidents happen." When I refocused from his fingers to his face, he was smiling with a big grin, looking at me with amusement. I really think he was enjoying himself.)* You have to be at a high level to do demonstrations at this level. Not everyone is as mild as you, so you must always be able to perform these techniques.



Chow side-steps and parries my attack with a Wu Sao, simultaneously kicking to my knee

DJ: When you were learning chi sao, were there any formal chi sao techniques taught?

Chow: No fixed curriculum, as I said before, but according to your level and then just doing your techniques, one or two movements. Not like tan da, lop da. They were not taught consistently like that. Just bring our one or two techniques.

DJ: So, Yip Man didn't have a formalized method of teaching techniques in chi sao either?

Chow: That's right. He taught you according to your ability, so there was no fixed teaching method.

DJ: Is your sensitivity developed to a point where you don't have to worry about your centerline anymore?

Chow: Please stand up, I will show you. *(Here we go again. He has me throw several various techniques directed toward his centerline. He moves very slightly, without any effort, and simultaneously attacks my soft areas,*



Chow shooting two fingers into the neck on both sides of the windpipe

eyes, groin, throat.) Also, don't chase the hands, chase the body. Chasing the hands is no good. At the advanced levels, you don't need to worry about the centerline. But in the beginning you must first learn to protect the centerline.



"...Chow smacks my attack away and shoots underneath, going for my throat."



Chow side-steps and Pak Saos, while shooting his toes at my groin, stopping just in time



Chow demonstrating long arm skills, his fingers are penetrating author's neck

DJ: In your opinion, sir, what do you feel is the essence of Ving Tsun?

Chow: In my opinion, the essence of Ving Tsun lies in inch power, footwork, and kicking techniques, especially good techniques. The legs must be as flexible as the hands. There is no perfect superman; everybody will have a chance to be defeated. Bear in mind that there is no limitation to learning. Learning has no limitations. Never be ignorant, never think that you are perfect. You learn and you teach.

DJ: I have taken up enough of your time. I have one more question if you don't mind.

Chow: Please.

DJ: Is there any advice that you could impart on the best way to develop your Ving Tsun?

Chow: It is difficult to give any advice. But for people to have good Ving Tsun, and to put it into you, to develop it into yourself, first, you must like Ving Tsun. It is difficult though, if you are lazy. But my example to you is me. Being an old guy at 76 years old, I still can kick, still can chi sao, and I am still healthy because of my Ving Tsun. I still practice all of the time; I never stop.

DJ: Thank you, sir. It has been an honor.