



Bruce Lee and the Master Mark Connection

Praying Mantis
Master Mark Gin
Foon Remembers
Teaching a Young
Bruce Lee

By Martin Eisen

Master Mark Gin Foon is the fifth generation master of Kwong Sai Jook Lum Praying Mantis Kung Fu. He comes from a family of four generations of high ranking Kung Fu experts. His instruction in Kung Fu began at the age of five under the supervision of his uncles and grandfather. At nine he was admitted to the Shaolin Temple at Chum San. He received instruction in Si Lum, White Crane, Eagle Claw, Leopard and Tiger. He also studied Tiger Claw in the Hoi Jung temple and Praying Mantis in the Jook Lum monastery. In these monasteries, Master Mark was schooled in Ming Kung, self defense and the healing arts, Shin Kung, spirit kung fu and Chi Kung, the use of internal power for martial arts and health. He continued his studies of Southern Praying Mantis in the United States under Lum Wing Fai for ten more years. When Master Lum retired, he designated Mark to be his successor in accordance with established tradition.

Sifu Mark's home state, Minnesota, considered him such a noteworthy figure that he was elected to their Living History Museum. This entailed producing a carefully researched videotape about his life to be shown in public and secondary schools. In this videotape Master Mark revealed that Bruce Lee was one of his early students. The following interview was conducted to discover more about their relationship.

Bruce Lee needs no introduction. Years after his death he is still known and admired by anyone with the slightest interest in the martial arts. However, when he met Master Mark he was unknown, had recently arrived from Hong Kong and had studied Wing Chun for a few years.

Bruce Lee in New York

M.E: How did you meet Bruce Lee?

G.F. Mark: Bruce was in New York

visiting his father, who was an actor in the Chinese theater. A mutual acquaintance of his father and me brought him to my Kwoon.

M.E: When did this meeting occur and how old was Bruce?

G.F. Mark: It was in the late 1950's. Bruce seemed to be about 18.

M.E: How did the person who brought Bruce know about your Kwoon? In those days the location of Kwoons was often kept secret. Visitors were forbidden. Usually, only members of the Chinese benevolent society sponsoring the Kung Fu master were taught.

G.F. Mark: Most Chinese at that time thought that foreigners could not understand the true philosophy and use of Kung Fu and so it was dangerous to teach them. I disagreed with this viewpoint. I believed that all people were the same and so taught every decent human being.

M.E: Was Bruce Lee interested in Praying Mantis?

G.F. Mark: No. At that time Praying Mantis was considered an inferior art in Hong Kong and there

were no outstanding practitioners. Furthermore, Bruce thought that all the good masters were in Hong Kong.

M.E: Then, why did Bruce come to your school?

G.F. Mark: Bruce was young and interested in fighting. The person who brought him told Bruce that I was a formidable fighter.

M.E: How did he know that?

G.F. Mark: At that time I was well-known in New York. Many people here and in China thought I was too young to be a Sifu. Consequently, I received many challenges and met them successfully. I wanted people to know my art, so I demonstrated at many Karate and Martial Art competitions. My students competed in the first Karate versus Kung Fu contest in California. I was one of the first genuine Sifus to demonstrate openly in the United States.

M.E: What did Karatekas think about your Kung Fu?

G.F. Mark: They had never seen anything like it. Their attitude was similar to that of Chuck Norris. He thought it was pretty, smooth and flowing, but not useful for combat because the techniques had no power. One of my students asked him if he would like to try my hands. He eagerly accepted and launched a powerful reverse punch. I immediately executed a light Praying Mantis' deflection of the punch followed by a flicking technique, snapping him on the eye and ending the demonstration. His eye swelled up. I said it's a good thing I don't have any power or else your eye would be lying on the floor.

Lee and Praying Mantis

M.E: Was Bruce Lee impressed watching your students practice?

G.F. Mark: I don't think so. Not many people have seen or understand this rare system. The power in the techniques is hidden. Bruce remarked on the similarity between Praying Mantis and Wing Chun. He wanted to have a match with one of my students, to which I readily agreed.

M.E: What happened?

G.F. Mark: Neither Bruce nor my student could gain any advantage; it was a draw. Bruce asked me how long the student had studied. I replied about a year. Then, I demonstrated some advanced techniques and weapons. I asked him if he would like to try my hands. He declined, out of respect, and said he was interested in studying with me.

M.E: What do you think impressed him?

G.F. Mark: My short power, especially in using weapons. Unlike many other systems, the weapons are used just like empty hands techniques, without large swinging motions. Most people don't have short power, because they don't practice short power enough. My instructors didn't show me any weapons forms for six years. Instead, I had to practice cutting bamboo, melons, potatoes, etc.

M.E: What did you first teach Bruce Lee?

G.F. Mark: I changed his horse and footwork. The Praying Mantis horse is different than the Wing Chun horse. Bruce held his hands too close to his chest. I had him extend his hands out further, with his strongest hand leading like a southpaw. I showed him how to use and generate short power.

M.E: After studying awhile, what did Bruce Lee think about your system?

G.F. Mark: He became very interested, because he noticed that it contained all the Wing Chun techniques and ideas: economy, directness, control of the center, sticky hands, etc. He liked the way the techniques were executed - each technique flowed into the next turning the opponent's strength against him.

M.E: What did Bruce Lee think about Wing Chun?

G.F. Mark: He thought it was a very good system. However, it specialized in close in fighting. Its footwork was not varied enough and there was not

enough kicks. He considered modifying Wing Chun to include these elements.

M.E: Praying Mantis is a southern system. Does it have many kicks?

G.F. Mark: Praying Mantis has as many kicks as most northern systems or Taekwondo. The kicks fascinated Bruce. In fact, the sweeping front kick to the opponent's lower leg appears in many of his movies.

Realistic Techniques

M.E: What else did Bruce Lee like about your system?

G.F. Mark: Most systems practice techniques in one way and use them in another. For example, in the first Wing Chun form the fists are held at the sides of the chest to execute straight punches. However, when fighting, these punches are executed differently, with the hands held in front of the chest. Praying Mantis was invented for fighting. Every technique is practiced exactly the way it is used. Bruce liked the realistic way in which the forms and techniques were practiced. He learned the 3-step arrow formula.

M.E: Didn't Bruce Lee think that practicing forms would turn you into a "classical mess" and ruin your



fighting ability?

G.F. Mark: Yes. Many classical forms are pretty like flowers, but useless for fighting. Even practicing the Praying Mantis' forms will not make you a good fighter.

M.E: Then, why didn't you reject all forms like Bruce eventually did?

G.F. Mark: The forms teach you certain basics, flow, body shifting, combinations, etc. Some of the advanced forms are martial Chi Kung exercises, which build inner power. I don't think Bruce was aware of this aspect of internal systems. Of course, all of these things could be taught in drills. However, I wanted to preserve the system. Hence, I retained all the forms.



Two-Man Drills, Dummies

M.E: What was your method of producing good fighters?

G.F. Mark: I devised two-men drills based on my fighting experience. They were designed to teach people to remain soft and relaxed in actual combat. These drills were based on interception, deflection and using your opponent's power. Each formula had an associated two-men version to show how the techniques could be used in actual combat. Besides these longer two-men drills, there were many shorter drills for training sight, feeling and reflexes.

M.E: What did Bruce Lee think about these drills?

G.F. Mark: He had never seen such practical drills in a classical system and realized that I had made an important contribution to Praying Mantis.

M.E: Bruce Lee knew about the Wing Chun fighting sequence practiced with a dummy. Why were your two-men forms so different?

G.F. Mark: Dummies are dead. They can't move or react. Real fighting is continuous. You attack; your opponent counters; you counter the counter and so on. The two-men forms teach timing, rhythm, distancing, control, using your opponent's strength against him, etc. You can also practice with different sized opponents. The Wing Chun dummy is mainly for close quarters fighting. Besides close and middle range forms, my drills contain long range forms, which teach you how to bridge the gap. Chin Na requires a partner. It is not realistic to train by trying to unbalance or throw a dummy.

M.E: Wouldn't Bruce Lee still criticize your two-men forms, since they are just a fixed sequence of moves?

G.F. Mark: Even Jeet Kune Do seems to have drills. The forms which are practiced depend on the practitioner's skill. When their skill increases, different drills are used. The drills must be practiced until they can be done without thinking. Ultimately, the whole system becomes formless. There are no techniques, just Yin and Yang. You react spontaneously and instantly to an opponent's attack. Without thinking, you turn his force against him.

M.E: Couldn't you achieve the same result by just practicing free-style sparring?

G.F. Mark: Beginners tend to become tense and use force against force. This may be all right in a hard-style system but not in a soft-style system, in which you are trying to become soft like water. You must begin by practicing slowly and softly, learning to turn your opponent's strength against him. It takes a great deal of practice to become soft. After reaching this stage, you can start free-style sparring, beginning slowly and later speeding up.

M.E: Aren't some of your two-men forms similar to Wing Chun sticky hands?

G.F. Mark: Yes. However, we practice softer, have more techniques and utilize small circular motions to turn the opponent's power against him. Bruce studied Western fencing and remarked that some of these forms resembled fencing with the hands. Wing Chun could be called "hard arm Kung Fu" while our style is "soft arm Kung Fu."

M.E: Bruce Lee believed that weight training, dummies and other special devices were essential. Does your system have a similar view?

G.F. Mark: We had a lot of auxiliary equipment in our Kwoon when Bruce was a student. He was keen on using this equipment. I had many discussions about training devices that I had used in the temples with Bruce. Bruce wanted to become a good fighter and produce good fighters quickly. Therefore, he wanted to use weights and other equipment right away. I wasn't in a hurry to produce good fighters. In a soft style system, you must become very soft before you start to use weights. If you start to use weights when you first start, it is very difficult to become soft.

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Outstanding Aptitude

M.E: How long did Bruce Lee train with you?

G.F. Mark: About a month. He learned much more than the average person could in that short time, because he was in good condition and has learned similar techniques in other systems that he had studied. Besides that, he was enthusiastic to learn, practiced a lot and had an outstanding aptitude for Kung Fu. Bruce was really impressed by my philosophy of fighting.

M.E: What do you mean by that?

G.F. Mark: He agreed with nearly everything I said when we discussed fighting theory. For example, as mentioned previously, the limitations of forms, becoming like water, reacting instinctively to an attack, etc. Any good fighting system, like Praying Mantis, should have the following attacking methods: attack by combination, drawing, hand immobilization, foot immobilization; progressive indirect

attack, simple direct and angular attacks. These were denoted: ABC, ABD, HIA, FIA, PIA, SDA, and SAA, respectively, later in Jeet Kune Do. Bruce liked the variety of weapons used in our style and the weapon's drills. The exercises involving an unarmed versus an armed person and two people using different weapons were his favorites.

M.E: Why did Bruce Lee leave?

G.F. Mark: He was only visiting his father and had to return to California. He wanted me to come to California to instruct him and be a consultant for his films. However, Bruce was relatively unknown at that time and I didn't think that he would be able to pay my salary. I had to support my family, so I decided to stay in New York.

M.E: Which do you think influenced the development of Jeet Kune Do more, Praying Mantis or Wing Chun?

G.F. Mark: I think Jeet Kune Do's philosophy is closer to Praying Mantis than to Wing Chun. Look at my free-style movements and compare them with those of a Wing Chun Sifu. Then, judge for yourself which resembles Jeet Kune Do more.

M.E: What was your contribution to Jeet Kune Do?

G.F. Mark: Jeet Kune Do is not a branch of Praying Mantis. Bruce studied many other systems and modified and incorporated them into his system. However, when I see Bruce's movies or hear about his formless form, I believe he understood my lessons about changing conditions in real self defense situations. Combat is alive and requires a constantly changing art and not a dead one. ☯

Martin Eisen is a martial artist and writer based in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

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