Benjamin N. Judkins and Jon Nielson

The Creation of Wing Chun: A Social History of the Southern Chinese Martial Arts.

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This outstanding book is the first scholarly examination of the history of a modern Chinese martial art in a Western language. While many of the modern Japanese martial arts have been documented and described, no similar work exists for the myriad of modern Chinese martial arts. Perhaps more importantly, *The Creation of Wing Chun* is a social history that places the formation and development of the internationally known martial art of Wing Chun in a time and place. Judkins and Nielson have managed to produce a history that is an enjoyable read built on a sound historical foundation. It is a story that says as much about twentieth and early twenty-first century China as about a particular school of fighting. At its root is the history of the development of a Guangdong and Hong Kong identity in the form of a particular martial arts style. That identity formed in contrast to a monolithic Chinese nationality. Wing Chun was distinct and so was the region and culture that produced it.

The book also places the history of Wing Chun at the center of a broader story about the place of martial arts in late imperial and twentieth century Chinese society. As the wider, modern, Western world intruded into southern Chinese society, the role of “hand combat” in that environment was called into question. (Judkins and Nielson use the term “hand combat” to describe those martial arts primarily concerned with unarmed fighting, though Wing Chun did acquire several distinctive weapon skills.) The various hand combat styles of martial arts were civilian practices with questionable utility. Very few Chinese outside of the military trained in combat skills of any kind, and fewer still would have regarded training in the martial arts as either primarily for self-defense or self-cultivation. Indeed, most martial arts practitioners were looked down upon as violent thugs, a problem that would persist in Hong Kong well into the twentieth century.

It was only retrospectively that Wing Chun and martial arts gained any positive cultural capital among educated Chinese. Very few people, in fact, practiced martial arts at all. In a sub-section titled “The Imagined Past” the authors point out that, “In the mid-1950s, when Bruce Lee was learning Wing Chun from his teacher Ip Man, there were probably less than a (*sic*) 1,000 practitioners of the art in all of Hong Kong. When Ip Man learned the style from his teacher (or Sifu) in Foshan at the turn of the twentieth century, it seems likely that there were less than two dozen students of the art in total.” (3) Given the similarly tiny numbers of students that the founder of Judo, Kanō Jigorō, reported when

he was learning Jiu Jitsu in late nineteenth century Japan, it seems likely that martial arts outside of the military was never a major cultural phenomenon in pre-modern Asian society.

No good martial arts history can avoid exploding popular myths, and this work is no different. The most fundamental myth of Wing Chun is that it was created by a Buddhist nun, Ng Mui, after Qing dynasty forces destroyed the Shaolin Temple in the early eighteenth century. Appended to this founding myth is a similarly mythical lineage of teachers leading to Yip Man. As Judkins and Nielson point out, the Wing Chun founding myth is similar to those of a number of other southern martial arts. Yet not only was the Shaolin Temple not burned down by the Qing, the first mention of Ng Mui as a heroic founder dates to the 1930s. The myth of the destruction of the Shaolin Temple has become a touchstone of modern Chinese martial arts, perpetuated through the Hong Kong cinema. Perhaps our set of martial arts myths would have been different had the influential martial arts film industry not been in Hong Kong.

Judkins and Nielson chose to focus on Yip Man's Wing Chun because it is one of the best documented of the modern martial arts. Other "branches" or lineages of Wing Chun have also laid claim to the art, though their "histories" are recent creations. Yip Man's lineage has a documentable past in nineteenth century Foshan, and a clear line of transmission to Hong Kong. That lineage, in turn, connects to the rest of the world through his student Bruce Lee. It was Bruce Lee who made Wing Chun internationally famous, not necessarily through the explicit demonstration of Wing Chun per se, but as an extension of his own fame. In many respects, it is only in the recent movies about Yip Man starring Donnie Yen that viewers have been presented with a stylistically distinct performance of Wing Chun, albeit in a superhuman, dramatized form.

Yip Man himself sought to demystify Wing Chun and the martial arts, moving away from confusing and intentionally obscure training terms and explanations. There were several motives for this demystification. Yip Man needed to find paying students in a modern urban environment. At the same time, the martial arts were associated in the minds of the authorities and society as a whole with violent troublemakers. While the movies played up the mysticism, Yip Man moved to make martial arts more scientific and more like sports. Martial arts techniques worked through basic physiology and were therefore modern. Ordinary urban workers in early to mid-twentieth century Hong Kong were not seeking a connection to traditional China through martial arts. Like many modern part-time martial artists, modern urbanites were looking for some exercise with a bit of self-defense capability thrown in. Martial arts was one of a number of choices among other physical activities.

Yet as Judkins and Nielson also point out, there were class implications to the different styles. These distinctions were accidental but nonetheless significant. Wing Chun gained a middle-class connection, while styles like Choy Li Fut were more lower class. There was nothing inherently class-conscious about the arts themselves, it was simply a matter of which parts of society happened to connect with a particular teacher. Of course, the young men of one school proceeded to get into fights with the young men of other schools. This troubled the authorities and confirmed in the minds of many the association of martial arts with troublemakers and violence. Yip Man tacitly encouraged this behavior, while publicly reaching for respectability. He cultivated the manner of a traditional Chinese gentleman.

There is no substitute for reading this wonderful book. It is a treasure trove of insightful information on Wing Chun, martial arts, modern Chinese history, and modern Chinese culture. It is also a great micro-history of a particular physical practice, and a great local history of Hong Kong. The Hong Kong of today is not the Hong Kong of the early twentieth century, and the martial arts landscape is radically different. More subversively, this is a history of one Chinese identity among many. The history of Wing Chun undermines much of the nationalist rhetoric of the current Chinese government.

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