

True Stories of Fights in 1970's Chinatown, San Francisco

by
Peter Ralston

Let me start with some back story. I studied with Wong from age 19 to about 31, in a Chinatown basement, 880 Pacific Ave., until it closed down. For many years I was the only white student there; the rest were Chinese. A few of my Chinese fellow students that were there at the time are still alive and can validate this. Also, Mrs. Wong, Chia Man's wife, heard of me quite a bit from him, since I am the most famous of Wong's students, being the first Non-Asian to win the full-contact World Championships in 1978 held in the Republic of China. To be clear, although in private sessions Wong contributed significantly to my skills, I went far beyond his teachings to create the skills that made me world class.

During my early mid-twenties, I went around to the Chinese martial arts teachers in San Francisco, Chinatown, and asked if they would participate in a tournament of just the teachers. They all refused. When I told them that Wong said he would "be the first one up," one said: "of course he would, he'd win!" So, that settled it for me about which teacher was best.

A few years later I myself challenged all the teachers in the Bay Area I knew of, most said no, and some were clearly frightened when they saw me enter their schools—I had built up quite a reputation and was easily recognizable. Only two took me up on it. One, a karate teacher in Albany, who ended up a bit damaged because he crossed a line (another story), and the other was in Chinatown and this fight changed the course of quite a few people's lives. This was Gate Chan, a self-proclaimed "street fighter" from Hong Kong.

Before going to Chan's school that night, Wong took me aside and said "knock him down." I protested, and said I just wanted to test my skills not hurt anyone. Wong repeated, "knock him down, or he will lie about it." The thing is at that time I didn't know a thing about Wong and Bruce Lee or what had happened there. Wong didn't share much.

Normally, I arrived at Wong's school at 3pm when he opened and didn't leave until around 10pm, so we often had time alone together. After training for several years with him, he said "You are better than Chinese"—and if you know the Chinese culture that is beyond praise. He also said, "You are like a professional." And so he privately taught me Ch'uan Li (rationale of the fist), real fighting principles that he had never taught any other student, before or since. He said, "My teachers didn't give it to me easy, and I don't give it away easy." Another time he confided, "In 21 one years (of teaching) you are the only one."

With each teacher I challenged, I said I would like to meet them after their classes were over and without students. Mostly, I didn't want to embarrass them in front of their students or push them to fight harder because their students were watching. With that request laid out, I arranged to meet Chan at his school after hours.

When I arrived, accompanied by my significant other, Debbie Goetz, Gate still had a couple students there. I was asked to fight his top student first. Chan did Wing Chun and some T'ai Chi, neither of which have any real kicking skills. Wong did Lo Han and Northern Sil Lum—to name only two of the arts done at Ching Mo—and they involve the most elaborate kicking arts. I was particularly good with kicking, and so when I fought the student, at one point, with one foot I kicked his groin, snapped up from there to his head, and down again into his groin (something I also did in the World Tournament later) in the blink of an eye. After that match the student was defeated, and was bleeding from his mouth.

Chan, having watched this, before he and I fought said that 'he wasn't going to use kicks so nobody got hurt.' A very clever manipulation. I fell for it, and so said nobly, then I wouldn't use kicks either. He gave up nothing and got me to give up what he saw he couldn't have handled. Anyway, we wore small fingerless gloves and fought for some time. When we were done, Gate had welts all over his body (he had no shirt on) and I had none anywhere. I felt fine about the outcome, and we left.

When I got back to Wong's school the next day, one of the students there told me stories about what was being said by Chan, not outright saying he won, but implying something like that. I became angry and the young man asked me not to hit the messenger. Then it got hairy.

At this time, there were three Tongs (young martial men in triad gangs), and they were extorting merchants and warring with each other. People were killed. For example, one restaurant refused to pay extortion money, I think the name was the Golden Pheonix or some such. It was on Washington street across from Portsmouth Square (which looked different back then). The Tong shot it up with machine guns killing some patrons. This would have been in the 70's, not sure of the exact date.

One day, after parking my VW bug in Wayne Place (a little alley up the hill from the school, where I stuffed my car—it was not legal but I only got one or two tickets over the years so figured it was a good deal), as I walked down to Wong's school there was a dead body on the sidewalk. It was the grandmaster of Hung Gar, who's school was on Powell Street, just around the corner from 880 Pacific Ave. Apparently, I was told, the Wah Ching (one of the Tongs) had used him to keep their money, but he refused to give it back, so they sent in a 13 year old to shoot him, which he did. The teacher chased the boy out into the street for a bit before he died. I saw his body lying there, and assumed it was the Tong.

I relate these anecdotes to give a sense of the atmosphere at the time, since it relates to what happened next at the school. That same evening, when I was told Chan and his student were lying about what had happened, I was confronted by Frankie, a captain of one the Tongs. These guys trained at Wong's place and made up about half of the student body. Wong never endorsed or approved of them, to him they were just students.

Frankie was yelling at me that I was stirring up trouble in Chinatown, that the other teachers thought Wong had sent me; and that I didn't know what I was doing (true). I told him I didn't care, they can think what they want, it has nothing to do with me. We

were standing by the bar—the space was originally an old night club turned into a school; and Wong was sitting in his chair reading a book in the "kitchen" area behind and to the right side of the bar, which he very often did. We used to stretch along the bar putting our legs up there (looking a little like a row of men lined up at a urinal. :)

Our argument got very heated. As Frankie and I were about to come to blows, Bobby Louie (not with the gang), who was practicing with a set of double hooked swords came over and, bravely I thought, placed his body between us, laying the swords on the bar saying something like 'now guys.' This gave us the space to part. As I left I struggled with whether or not I should return. I quickly decided I would, since my commitment was to learn not to be popular or even accepted.

When I came back the next day all of the Tong boys were gone! I asked someone, who had been there after I had left, what happened. He said, that after I left the Tong were gathered there at the bar area talking about what to do with this Ralston character. Wong, who always kept to himself and didn't get involved in student's drama, sitting in the kitchen, looked up from his newspaper and said to them: "Peter could play with you like children." Apparently, this was too much for the Tong boys, a huge loss of face, and they left, never to come back.

It wasn't very much longer after that that Linda Lee wrote her first book. Wong was very upset with what she said about the fight with Bruce. This is when I was first told what had happened. The parallels to my own fight with Chan was uncanny.

According to Wong both he and Lee were lied to by a guy named William Chen, who wanted to see them fight. Wong said he went over to Oakland and asked Bruce if he said those things. Bruce said no, so Wong said OK, and was about to leave, but Lee said 'let's fight anyway.' As they talked about parameters, Lee asked for no kicking, and they agreed not to hit the groin, throat, etc. As they went to shake hands, Lee immediately went from there to punch Wong in the face. Wong dodged enough only to be grazed across his right temple. He pointed out that that was the only mark on his whole body, but Lee had welts all over his.

They fought for a long time, perhaps 20 minutes, and twice Wong claims he had Lee by the head and could have "killed him," but let him go. Also, Lee began going for the groin, throat, etc. and immediately started to kick, trying to kick Wong in the groin—unsuccessfully. Wong never kicked Lee. I asked him why? If Bruce broke his word and started kicking, why didn't you? Wong said, Lee broke his word, but that didn't mean I would break mine.

During the days following the fight, he said Lee lied and suggested without mentioning names that he had won a recent fight. Wong said he was working as a waiter at the time and showed up at work the next day, and "everyone could see the only mark on me was the crease on the temple." But Lee didn't show his face for weeks. Wong was very upset and said he took out a full-page ad in the Chinatown Times saying that he would fight anyone at any time in public so everyone can see, and he would destroy them! Years later a few people took him up on that and it didn't turn out well for them. Soon after the ad in the paper, Lee moved to Los Angeles. (It turned out to be a good move for him, career wise.)

Also, Wong said Linda wasn't in the room and couldn't speak Chinese so she never saw or heard what went on. By the way, one of the false reasons stated for the fight was that Wong didn't want Lee teaching white people. Well, I'm proof that's not true! It is also interesting that in the early years the reverse was true. I lived with a Chinese friend as a teenager in the 60's and we were both interested in martial arts. We would spar and I was a little better but it was close. He moved to Utah and studied karate there because that was all they had. The next time we met I was so much better than he, he dropped to the ground and wept. In an attempt to save some sort of dignity I guess, he said to me "Well, I could study with Lee because I am Chinese, but you can't." Because I was white. Interesting juxtaposition, isn't it?

Wong wanted to sue Linda Lee for lying, and he asked us (Debbie and I) who was the best lawyer around? (He had told me: always study with the best, even if they cost more they will save you so much time in the end.) At that time, the most famous lawyer was Melvin Belli, so we hired him. We went to court, but Melvin said it was very unlikely we could win, because we were really dealing with hearsay.

At one point in the process, out in the hall, Linda Lee offered Wong \$25,000.00 to settle out of court. Melvin, Debbie, and I, all advised him to do so, it was the best outcome we could hope for. It proved Linda couldn't defend her statements. But Wong insisted, "She must say she lied!" We told him that wasn't going to happen in court, she wouldn't do that, but Wong insisted he didn't care about the money. He said, "It's not just for me, it is for you and my students, so you don't have to live with this lie." He wouldn't budge.

We tried to convince him that it wasn't about the money, it was a tacit confession, and in this way correction would be made. What else would have happened is Linda, et al, would never have been able to say anything in the future. But once she won in court, which she did, since defamation was impossible to prove, it was open season on Wong and his reputation. So, the worst thing happened. More and more stories and lies occurred in movies representing Wong as some evil villain. Because, of course, the legend of Bruce Lee couldn't be smudged with a loss (sarcasm).

Wong didn't deserve that. As I have asserted, he refused to kick Lee even when Bruce broke his word and did kick, simply because as he said "I gave my word;" as well, he refused the \$25,000 because she lied and he insisted she must correct this. This and many other examples have revealed, to me at least, that Wong was an honorable man, and didn't lie about such things.

I studied with many top teachers in the world, and went beyond them all, while I was still pretty young. When in 1975 I toured Asia, looking for someone worthy to study with, Wong told me, "you won't find anyone, the good ones all moved here." He gave me a letter of introduction to the last living disciple of Sun Lu Tang, who I visited. Although there were many interesting encounters and tales during that trip—more stories for another time—I didn't find anyone.

I studied with William CC Chen in New York (not the same Chen that lied to Bruce and Wong to get them to fight). When I told him I was going to fight in the full-contact World Tournament, Chen said "you'll do well." But when I told Wong, he obviously

took it for granted I would win, and said, "It won't do for you what you think." He was correct about that. No one in this country really knew or cared about such things, especially in the 70's.

Eventually, someone made a movie that presented Wong in a positive view, *The Birth of the Dragon*, thankfully before Wong died. In the movie there was a white guy who studied with Wong, which I assume was loosely based on me, but he studied with Bruce and had a Chinese girlfriend, and I never studied with Lee and my girlfriend was white. But the whole movie was fiction, very loosely based on events. Almost none of it actually happened, but that's Hollywood.

They did depict in the fight Lee's sneaky attack creasing Wong's head, and Wong having Lee around the head once, but the rest is fantasy. Especially ridiculous in this fantasy movie was Wong and Lee working together to destroy the Tong. Never happened! But at least they positively connected Wong to Bruce rather than making him the evil man as in previous depictions. Wong invited me to the opening, but since I live so far away I declined.

Throughout Bruce's life he never said anything bad about Wong after their fight. Wong was waiting for him to come back, but he never did. After the fight, Lee went from the small art of Wing Chun to much broader fighting studies, including what he became famous for with those big kicking techniques—what Wong was a master of. Lee even learned and performed in several movies routines taken right from sets taught by grandmaster Wong (I think I did these techniques better than Bruce, but it is an obvious imitation of the man he had supposedly beaten easily). In the movie originally called *Fists of Fury*, Lee also played the top student of the founder of Ching Mo—Wong was the grandmaster of Ching Mo. Only after Bruce died was anything negative said about Wong, when Linda wanted to present Bruce as an infallible legend.

After the Bruce's first three movies had come out, at one time they were shown all together down the street at the Star theater. Wong, who hadn't watched any of them until then, went to and saw them all in one sitting. When he came back, he told me, "he's not *that* good." Wong said Bruce was talented and could play with most martial artists like children, but wasn't as good as the movies made him out to be.

There's more, but that should be enough for now.

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