

RESEARCHING THE ORIGINS OF WING CHUN

Researching the history of Chinese Kung Fu is very difficult. This is due to a general lack of written records. For every Kung Fu clan, clan history was passed down orally from teacher to disciple. In due course, the disciple himself became a teacher, and taught his own disciples according to what his teacher passed down to him. History was thus passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. This process involved some who were poorly educated, or had poor memories. There were also those who were not very interested in history, and were half-hearted in passing it down. Much was lost here. Some people borrowed from heroic characters in popular Chinese novels. They invented and exaggerated, and gave an air of myth and mystery to their founding fathers.

After several generations, the facts of history will be lost to hearsay and legend. Look at Southern Kung Fu clans. They padded their founders with fable, so all the founders either came from Siu Lam or Mo Dong. They were all Buddhist monks or nuns, or Taoist priests. So, suddenly, the glamour and hype of martial arts history was forced upon these peaceful places and fine people. It became a joke.

There are legends about the origins of the Wing Chun Kung Fu clan, retracing the period

from Grandmaster Leung Jan. These are legends because there are no comprehensive written records. The general story goes like this:

Wing Chun was founded by Yim Wing Chun. Yim Wing Chun studied under Ng Mui of Siu Lam. This means that Wing Chun originated in Siu Lam. Yim Wing Chun married Leung Bok Chau, and she followed him back to his home town in Siu Hing, Canton. Wing Chun Kung Fu was passed down to Leung Jan through Leung Bok Chau. There are two different stories here. One says that Leung Bok Chau taught the techniques to Leung Lan Kwai, Wong Wah Bo, Leung Yee Tei and others. Wong Wah Bo and Leung Yee Tei then passed them on to Leung Jan. The other story says that Leung Jan and the others studied together under Leung Bok Chau. These stories about the origin of Wing Chun are consistent with an article by the late Grandmaster Yip Man on the origin of Wing Chun and also with a 1972 article I wrote for the 'Hong Kong Contemporary Martial Arts Circle'. They are also broadly in line with the general story on the origin of Wing Chun.

In 1982, I was in Fatshan, and paid a visit to Pang Nam (Blackface Nam). Pang Nam can be said to be a very senior member in the Fatshan Wing Chun Kung Fu clan. He was senior in

years, rather than in the hierarchy. He was already eighty. Our discussion turned to the origin of Wing Chun, and Pang said, 'Wing Chun was brought to Fatshan from the North by a person called Tan-Sau Ng (Palm-up Arm Ng – a nickname). Yim Wing Chun is only a storybook character.' He sounded very sure.

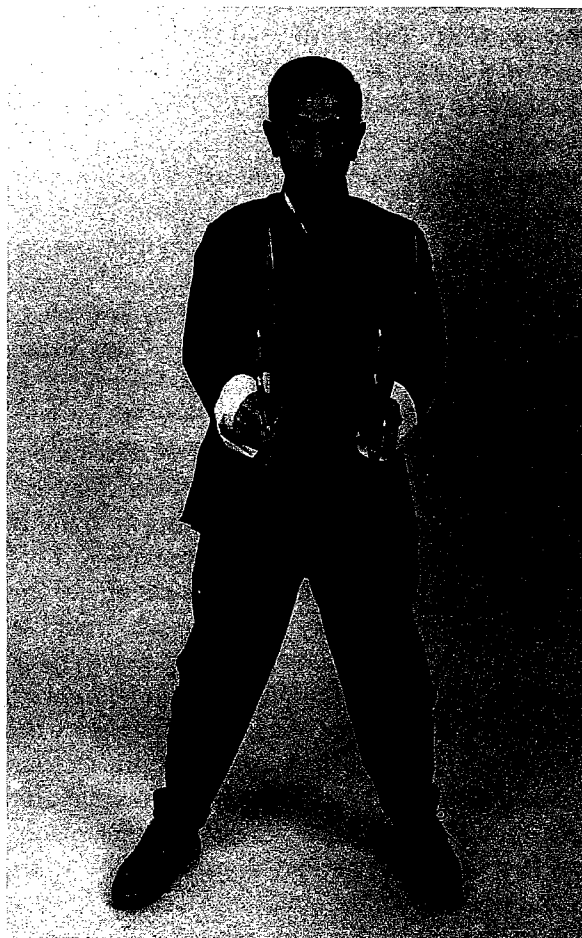
Later, I unexpectedly unearthed some information about Tan-Sau Ng, recorded in old literature on the history of Chinese opera. This in-

formation is closely connected to the origin of Wing Chun.

There was a book by one Mak Siu Har – *A Study on the History of Cantonese Operas* (now kept in the Hong Kong City Hall Library). In it there was one paragraph, roughly as follows:

Before the reign of Yung Cheng (Manchu emperor, 1723–1736), the development of Cantonese opera was very limited. This was due to defective organisation

Jum dao



Baat Cham Dao – Eight cutting broadsword techniques. This form consists of 108 movements in eight sections, each section dealing with defence and counter against long, short or medium range weapons.

The knife form training complements the empty hand training as well as the wooden dummy techniques. It coordinates the movements of the stance, footwork, waist and upper body. Frequent practice develops energy in the elbow and wrist. The footwork and stances of Baat Cham Dao train the stepping, angling, weight distribution and body positioning

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and unclear division of labour. In the years of Yung Cheng, Cheung Ng of Wu Pak, also known as Tan-Sau Ng, brought his skills to Fatshan and organised the Hung Fa Wui Koon (now the Chinese Artist Association). From there, Cantonese opera made great progress.

The book also records:

Besides being very accomplished in Chinese opera,

Cheung Ng was especially proficient in martial arts. His tan sau was peerless throughout the martial arts world.

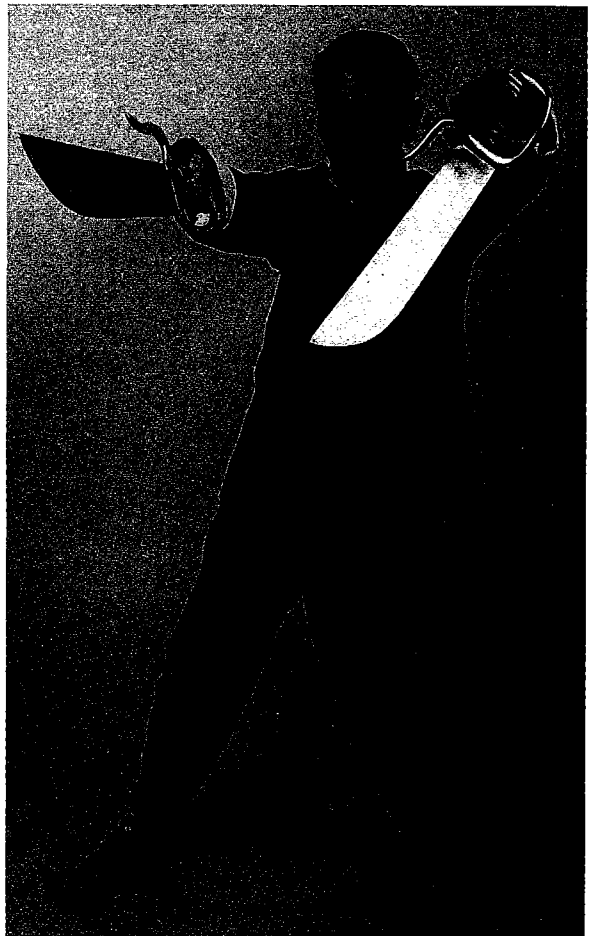
Another piece of information appears on page 631, Volume III of the book *A History of Chinese Opera*, by Mang Yiu, first published by Chuen Kay Literature Publishers in 1968.

For some reason, Cheung Ng could not stay on in the

'Trapping the spear'



Kau dau/Cham dao

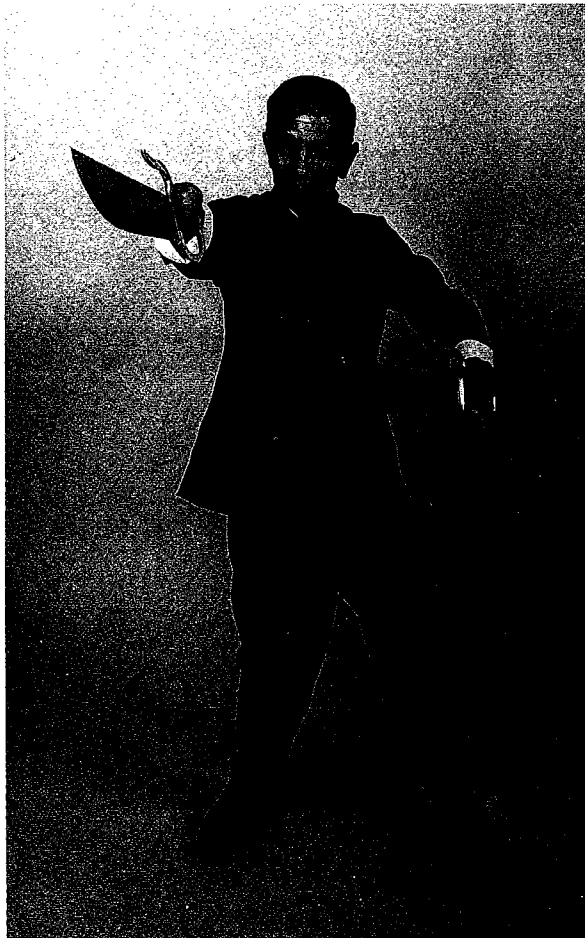


capital, so he fled and took refuge in Fatshan. This was during the reign of Yung Cheng. This man, nicknamed Tan-Sau Ng, was a character 'unsurpassed in literary and military skills, and excellent in music and drama'. He was especially proficient in the techniques of Siu Lim. After settling down in Fatshan, he passed on his knowledge in traditional opera and martial arts to the Hung Suen (Red Boat) followers, and established the Hung Fa Wui Koon in Fatshan. Today, Cantonese opera groups revere him as Jo-Si (Founding

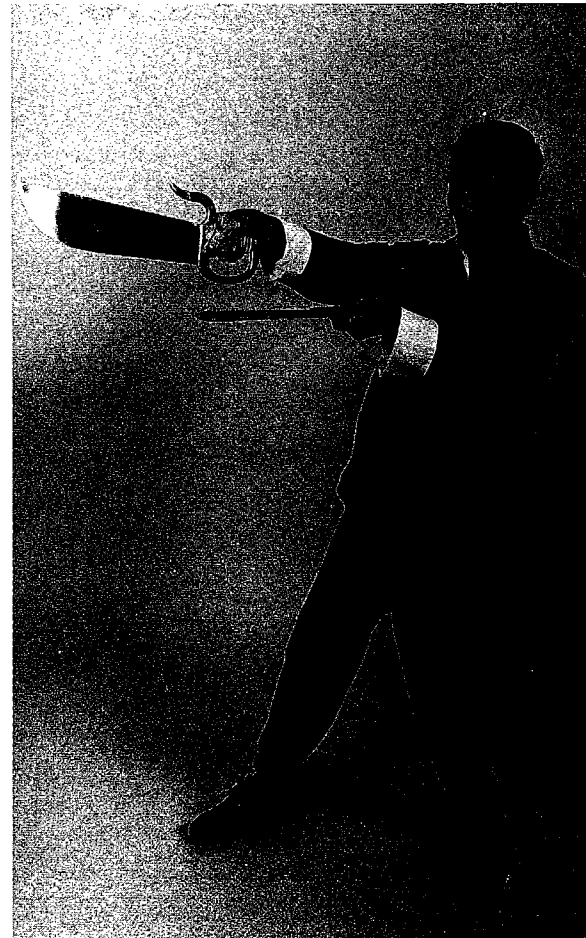
Master), and refer to him as Master Cheung. From the two passages above we learn: Cheung Ng, also known as Tan-Sau Ng, not only excelled in martial arts, but actually taught the techniques himself. He was dubbed 'Tan-Sau Ng' because of his 'tan sau . . . peerless throughout the martial arts world.'

Comparing the legend of Yim Wing Chun with the information on Tan-Sau Ng, I consider the latter more acceptable in our examination of

Lap dao/Cham dao



Tan dao/Cham dao



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Wing Chun's origins. The reasons are as follows:

- 1) Cheung Ng brought his skills to Fatshan during the reign of Yung Cheng. This was forty to fifty years before the great fire of Siu Lam during the reign of Kin Lung (1736-1795). It was almost a hundred years before the legend of Yim Wing Chun, which fell within the Ham Fung (1851-1861) and Dao Kwong (1821-1850) years.
- 2) Tan sau is a technique unique to Wing Chun.

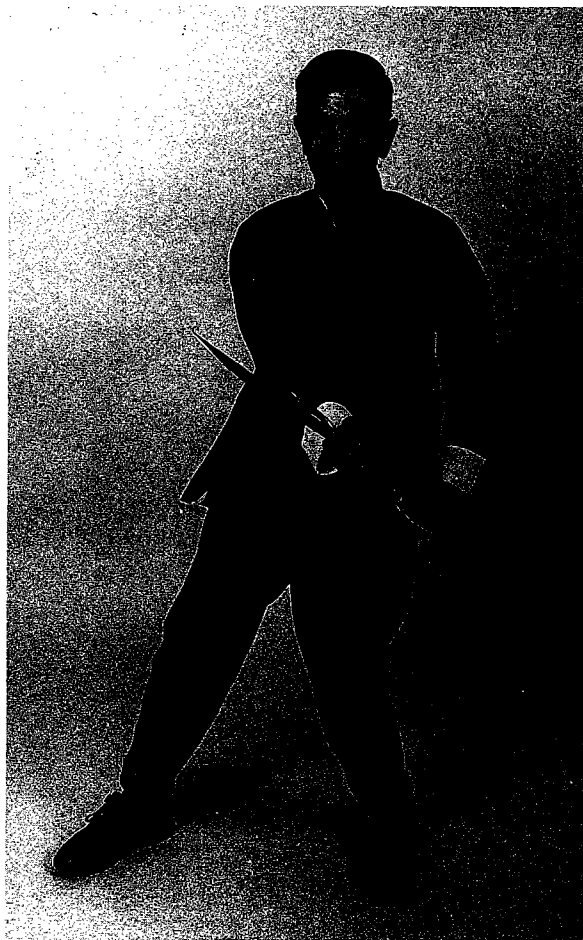
Cheung Ng was famous for his tan sau. Cheung Ng actually taught martial arts in Fatshan Hung Suen (Red Boat). And Fatshan was the breeding ground of Wing Chun.

- 3) Some years ago, my Kung Fu clansman Pang Kam Fat told me that the Wing Chun stance is best used on boats for stability. Looking further, the various sets of martial arts strokes and practice areas are closely related to practice on narrow boats.

Gang dao



Yat dao



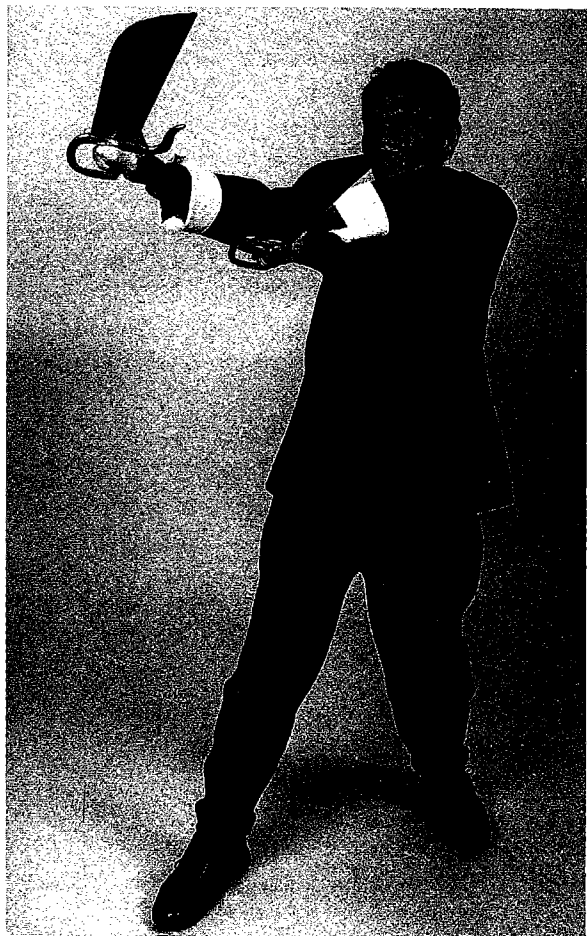
- 4) Before the skills were handed down to Leung Jan, the people connected, including Leung Lan Kwai, 'Painted Face Kam', Wong Wah Bo and Leung Yee Tei, all belonged to the Hung Suen (Red Boat).

Yet it is very difficult to verify the origin of Wing Chun with so little material about Cheung Ng. So, before we find more information and proof, we can perhaps make the following assump-

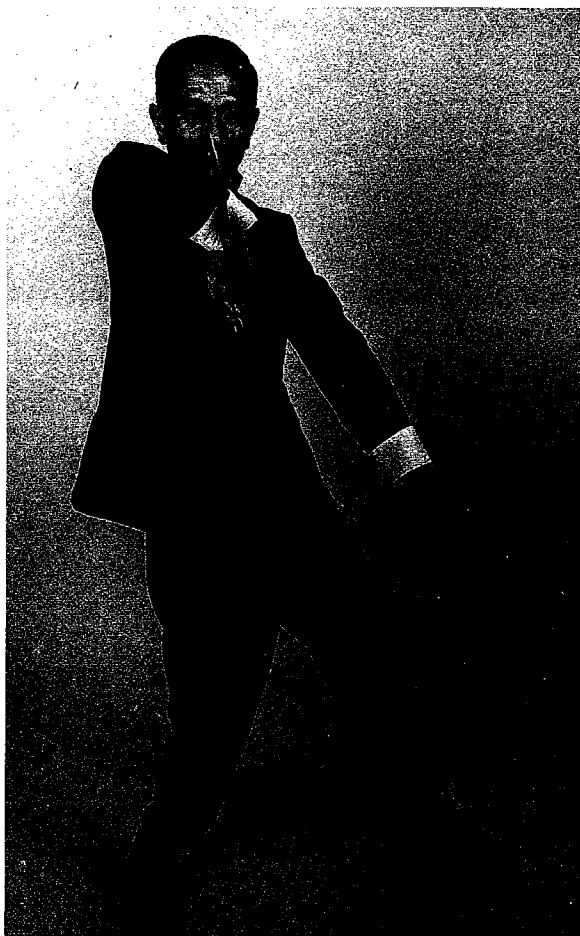
tions:

During the reign of Yung Cheng, Wu Pak actor Cheung Ng, also known as Tan-Sau Ng, for some reason fled the capital and went to Fatshan. He organised the Hung Fa Wui Koon at Tai Kay Mei, Fatshan. Apart from teaching traditional operas, he also taught the techniques of martial arts, and was called Master Cheung. The martial arts skills he taught already had the principles and techniques of Wing Chun martial arts.

Mun dao



Kup dao



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Perhaps they can be called incomplete or inadequately practised Wing Chun martial arts. A hundred years passed in dissemination (mainly in Hung Suen) and development. Much effort was made by Yim Wing Chun, Leung Bok Chau, Wong Wah Bo, Leung Yee Tei and others. Wing Chun became a complete and mature set of martial arts, which spread and flourished under Leung Jan.

The above assumption eliminates the mythical

padding to Wing Chun, and presents an orderly progress of events. It also provides a trail which can be followed by people interested in the history of Wing Chun.

Double lan dao



Fak dao/Lan dao

