

Man of the Year

Ted Wong

by Teri Tom, M.S., R.D.

It's the stuff of legends, really. A story of serendipitous privilege and great personal anguish.

In 1967 Ted Wong was living in Los Angeles' Chinatown when a friend tipped him off about a class at Bruce Lee's Jun Fan Gung Fu Institute. Acceptance to the class had been by invitation, and members were expected to have prior training. Wong snuck into the class with no experience, and when Lee saw him, he asked, "Who are you?"

Wong thought he'd be given the boot, but instead, the two struck up a conversation in Cantonese. Lee made an exception and let Wong stay.

Wong wasted no time making up for his lack of experience, and before long he was training in Lee's backyard, having become his most frequent sparring partner. From July 27, 1967 to October 14, 1971, Wong studied under Lee at least 122 times. According to Lee's own appointment books, Wong spent more time receiving private instruction than any other person. You'd be hard-pressed to find a martial artist who's more qualified to teach advanced *Jun Fan jeet kune do*—which is why Wong was certified by Lee himself.

M. Uyehara, author of *Bruce Lee: The Incomparable Fighter*, agreed. He wrote: "I still think Bruce considered Ted Wong as his protégé before his death. Wong was his constant companion for the last few years. Besides working out on Wednesday nights, Wong also came to see Bruce on weekends. When Bruce needed a sparring partner, it was Wong he selected."

But that period wouldn't last. With Lee's death in 1973, Wong found himself without a teacher. What followed is a story of great pain, moral integrity and self-reliance. While others were quick to capitalize on their association with Lee, Wong threw himself into 15 years of seclusion. There was still so much to learn, so he went back to the origin: the writings his teacher had left behind. He tracked down the sources that influenced those writings, books that had been in Lee's library. He relied on his photographic—or, more precisely, his "filmographic"—memory to draw connections between what he'd seen Lee do so many times and the principles outlined in his writings.



PHOTO BY ROBERT W. YOUNG

When he lost his instructor, Wong faced the same temptation we all do: to look to outside sources—different masters, different styles. He chose to do the opposite, and it wasn't an easy path to follow. But Wong had all he needed: the road map left by his teacher and the benefit of many hours spent with one of history's greatest martial artists. In the 15 years that followed, Wong developed a solid understanding of what Lee had tried to teach him. Wong didn't supple-

ment his arsenal with techniques from other arts. The only thing he added to Jun Fan jeet kune do was an understanding and analysis designed to enable future generations to benefit from Lee's lifework.

In the 15 years it took Wong to connect the dots between his training and Lee's writings, others misinterpreted those writings and misrepresented their teachings as JKD. Although reclusive by nature, Wong couldn't remain silent. The damage propelled him out of the shadows in the early 1990s. After decades of turning down requests for interviews, he found himself in the spotlight. Still, he refrained from adopting a traditional approach.

While he could have turned a handsome profit by opening a school, Wong didn't go that route. Maintaining the integrity of the art was more important. Even now, he privately teaches only a half-dozen students in the Los Angeles area. Instead of running a school, he's taken his act on the road. He's planted JKD seeds in countries around the globe, including Japan, Hong Kong, Puerto Rico, Sweden, Holland, Scotland, Italy and Spain, as well as across the United States. He's made regular trips to those locations for years and built a small army of loyal students. Without a facility to run, he can pick and choose his students based on their character and interest in the art.

In his spare time, Wong serves on the board of the Bruce Lee Foundation, where he contributes his time as an adviser and instructor. For his selfless contributions to the foundation, the legacy of Bruce Lee and the art of Jun Fan jeet kune do, *Black Belt* is proud to induct Ted Wong into its Hall of Fame as 2006 Man of the Year.

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