'It can be a religion if you want': Wing Chun Kung Fu as a secular religion

George Jennings
St Mary’s University College Twickenham, UK

David Brown
University of Wales Institute Cardiff, UK

Andrew C. Sparkes
Liverpool John Moores University, UK

Abstract
Drawing on data generated from a six-year ethnographic study of one Wing Chun Kung Fu Association in England, this article explores the ways in which this martial art is constructed as a form of religion and functions as a secular religious practice for core members of this association. Two key features of this process are identified. The first involves the ways in which Wing Chun evolves from an everyday secular practice into something that takes on sacralized meanings for participants while the second focuses on the development of a Wing Chun habitus over time. The article closes with a discussion of how the findings relate to broader discussions of martial arts practices, religion and spirituality in Western cultures.

Keywords
martial arts, secular religion, body, identity, habitus, sensual solidarity, collective effervescence, sacralization

Well, Sifu¹ said years ago, he said, ‘It can be a religion for you if you want it to be’... I said to myself ‘that’s a bit strong isn’t it?’ Wing Chun is good and everything else, but it’s not going to rule my life like a religion. And, five years later, I’m solely focused on a life evolving around Wing Chun. It’s a religion. Your life is dictated to you by Wing Chun... because it’s ruling such a huge amount of my life, and my brain and my

Corresponding author:
David Brown, School of Sport, University of Wales Institute Cardiff, Cyncoed Campus, Cyncoed Road, Cardiff CF23 6XD, UK
Email: dbrown@uwic.ac.uk
Themes of personal change plus spiritual and religious sensitization often appear in biographical accounts by martial arts practitioners. Celebrated examples of this genre include Polly (2007), Powell (2006), Preston (2007) and Twigger (1997). Each contains narratives of Western men embarking on Orientalist inspired journeys to become expert martial artists. Millman’s (2000) best-selling novel, *Way of the Peaceful Warrior*, extends this theme into the self-help genre with a fictionalized account of his own self-transformation and spiritual growth via Aikido training. More formal writings on martial arts and issues of religio-spirituality are also available (Herrigel, 1979; Hyams, 1979; Lowry, 1995; Nicol, 1975). The prevalence and enduring popularity of these texts indicate that there is a large audience who remain fascinated by the relationship between martial arts and religio-spiritual concerns. Such texts are, however, open to criticism from a post-colonialist perspective as being Orientalist in nature. For Said (2003: 333–4), Orientalism is a system of thought that approaches a:

heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint; this suggests both an enduring Oriental reality and an opposing and no less enduring Western essence, which observes the Orient from afar and, so to speak, from above. This false position hides historical change.

For him, this Orient-versus-Occident opposition is both misleading and highly undesirable. Furthermore, many of the relationships between martial arts and religions in these kinds of texts are idealized reconstructions of an imaginary past. This said, the content and form of these reconstructions provide an analytical vantage point to better understand the evolution of martial arts practice in the West.

Having acknowledged the dangers of Orientalism and its post-colonialist critique, we choose to retain the terms East and West in this article for the purposes of analytical description. We also acknowledge the point made by McFarlane (1991) regarding the plurality and diversity of ways in which martial arts have been practised during different historical periods in the East and West which makes it inaccurate to suggest that a spiritual or religious ethos are necessarily determinative or normative for martial arts in general. For example, in a historical study of how martial arts were practised at the Chinese Shaolin Monastery in the Late Ming period, Shahar (2001) notes that throughout the 17th century the Shaolin literature does not associate the martial arts with the search for Buddhist enlightenment. Nor do Late Ming authors suggest that martial practices would lead to spiritual perfection or that such perfection would enhance martial
skills. In this respect, he suggests, the relation between Buddhism and the Shaolin martial arts differs from the one that evolved in Japan. Such connections, according to Shun (1998), are necessarily social constructions as invented traditions that increasingly span both Eastern and Western martial art cultures. In this regard, McFarlane (1991: 357) comments:

From a cultural and historical point of viewpoint, the borrowing of concepts and motifs from Buddhist, Taoist and other traditions and their conflation and confusion into ‘mystical’ syntheses and new social and religious movements is fascinating, important, and not to be dismissed. It is clearly an ongoing process, in both East and West, and cannot be ignored.

McFarlane (1991: 356) further argues that future research into martial arts cultures should ‘include a serious consideration of the cultural contexts where these practices are pursued in the West, as well as the values, behaviours, and assumptions of the practitioners’. Building on the pioneering work of authors such as Goodger and Goodger on Judo (1977), James and Jones’s (1982) study of Karate-do in the UK, and Kleinman’s (1986) analysis of Karate-do in the USA, there has been a steady increase in such socio-cultural studies (e.g. see Brown et al., 2008; Cohen, 2009; Cynarski and Obodyński, 2007; Delamont and Stephens, 2008; Donohue, 1994; Downey, 2005, 2007; Jones, 2002; Kohn, 2003, 2007; Samudra, 2008; Stephens and Delamont, 2006a; Theeboom et al., 2008; Villamón et al., 2004).

Despite this emerging literature, research that addresses the relationship between Asian martial arts and religio-spirituality in the West remains sparse. Notable exceptions include the work of Goodger (1982) on ‘Judo Players as a Gnostic Sect’, and McFarlane (1989, 1990, 1991) analysis of martial arts and Eastern religion in the West. More recently, Campbell (2007) includes some discussion of martial arts practice in his influential thesis on the Easternization of the West. Elsewhere, Ryan (2008) places the religio-spiritual relationship at the core of her investigation of the transmission of Taijiquan to Britain. In a different vein, Cohen’s (2006) analysis of somatic codes in Japanese martial arts makes strong connections between Kime, self, others, and spirituality. Against this backdrop, in this article we seek to make a contribution by focusing on one British Wing Chun Kung Fu Association to illuminate the processes by which some of its practitioners come to define their martial art as a form of religion.

**Background to the art of Wing Chun**

Wing Chun Kung Fu is a Chinese martial art. It comes from the Chinese tradition of arts that are known as Chinese Kung Fu (also Gong or Gung Fu) which is often translated as *achievement through great effort* or simply *virtue*. While Wing Chun’s history is fragmented and subject to many interpretations, Chu et al. (1998) suggest that a range of versions of Wing Chun developed alongside one another, drawing
on other martial arts, in China, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Singapore and elsewhere in East Asia. Its migration to the West was influenced by the young Bruce Lee who learned Wing Chun (around 1954–7) with the Hong Kong GrandMaster Yip Man before moving to the United States. There, he developed his own martial art system of Jeet Kune Do that technically and philosophically used the Wing Chun system as a base.

Wing Chun is now a transcultural practice. Its early growth is a good example of Giddens’s (1991) description of globalization as a multidirectional flow of socio-cultural and institutional change, a cultural feature of which is reverse diffusion (Guttmann, 1991). Following Giulianiotti and Robertson (2007), Wing Chun is developing rapidly outside and often independently from its original Eastern setting, with many local varieties of the art emerging. However, like other martial arts practised in the West, many Wing Chun associations still look to the East for their mythopoesis, lineage and cultural identity. What unites Wing Chun practitioners is the distinctive set of biomechanical, psychological, and moral principles that frame their art and the interpretations of what it is across generations. Central to this are key principles which presuppose the systematic formation of a specific bodily awareness between the practitioner’s body and their training partners (and potential opponents).

Wing Chun as a system is characterised by its simplicity, directness, and subtle use of economy of motion and effort. It avoids the use of sheer muscular strength. And to counter strong, forceful attacks it uses subtle body shifting through footwork, along with deflecting and intercepting moves. Nearly all Wing Chun techniques involve the generation and focusing of power at the specific point and at the instant it is required, and the reverting immediately to a relaxed ‘soft’ state. (McFarlane, 1989: 241)

Wing Chun is not, however, a unified institutionalized martial art like many Japanese and Korean martial systems have become over the past 50 years (Theeboom and De Knop, 1997; Villamón et al., 2004). Instead, there are many associations that are informally structured with the main organizational dynamic being the allegiance to a particular practitioner lineage. This derives from the interpretation of the art’s principles as embedded in the bodies and minds of its Master practitioners. As Chu et al. (1998) note, these body lineages are the source of much debate within the Wing Chun community.

**Study description and methodology**

The data presented in this article are drawn from a six-year (2004–09) ethnographic study of one British Wing Chun Kung Fu Association called Bridge’s Wing Chun Association after its founder member and head teacher called Sifu Bridge (all names are pseudonyms). During this time, the data collection sites consisted of two of the principal trainings halls (Kwoons) of this association that were situated
in the southwest of England and were known as Chapel Kwoon (the main branch) and School Kwoon (a satellite branch).

The first author (George Jennings) is a white, able-bodied male, in his mid-20s, studying for a doctorate. He is an established member of Bridge’s Wing Chun Association where he has studied since 2002. George now holds a black sash and is a qualified instructor in this system. This background and experience facilitated his entry into the research setting and enabled him to quickly establish rapport and trusting relationships with practitioners across all levels of the association including the Sifus involved in the Kwoons. Sifu Bridge is a respected practitioner of this art with an international reputation for knowledge, technical ability, and fighting skills. He runs a full-time martial arts academy at Chapel Kwoon. Sifu Steve at School Kwoon is one of Sifu Bridge’s most senior students, with over 10 years of experience, and due to his high skill levels he commands considerable respect within the association. Another key figure in the association is Sifu Terry who is a seasoned street fighter from a notoriously violent area of a large English city, and is the most senior student at Chapel Kwoon with almost 20 years of experience as a student of Sifu Bridge.

During the study, George adopted the role of overt participant observer as described by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) in both Chapel and School Kwoons. Following Lofland and Lofland (2004), detailed fieldnotes were gathered, many of which were openly written up in the setting, during brief interludes in the class, or written directly after returning home from the club training sessions. This approach, rather like Samudra’s (2008) thick participation, provided details of the multi-sensorial nature of Wing Chun practices in the Kwoons. George also conducted a series of life story interviews with Sifus Bridge, Steve and Terry and interviewed a range of the other ‘core’ members who trained under them.

The second author (David Brown) is a white, able-bodied male, in his early 40s who is a university lecturer and doctoral supervisor of George. He is a practitioner of Wing Chun with five years’ experience who has regularly trained with George as a student in his class, and with one of the Sifus involved in this study. He is familiar with both Chapel and School Kwoons but now studies with another association in the area. Their collaboration in this study closely parallels that outlined by Stephens and Delamont (2006b) in their study of capoeira. Here, the initial relationship was that of David as teacher and George as student in an academic context. However, as Wing Chun practitioners the teacher–student relationship was reversed with George being the experienced teacher and David being the student. This shifting relationship and the insights it generated over time echoed the views of Stephens and Delamont that ‘a two-handed ethnography, combining participation and non-participation, with continuous reflexive dialogue, generates different insights not only about capoeira but also relevant to any embodied activity’ (p. 321). This was particularly so with the relative distance from the field of George and David.

Early in the study, it was recognized that due to his interests and long-term involvement in Wing Chun, there was the potential for George to ‘go native’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), which would affect his ability to engage
analytically with the field. While David was able to complement George’s perspective, the increased distance from the field that he occupied enabled him to ask probing theoretical questions of the data generated and the interpretations provided by George. This said, David was still immersed in the practice of Wing Chun and was the main supervisor for George’s doctoral study. As such, there was a worry that this would shape their interactions and lead to aspects of the field along with themes in the emerging analysis being taken for granted. This was particularly so with regard to their discussions of the raw data (fieldnotes and interview transcriptions), and the preliminary analysis they undertook that involved the coding of emerging categories and themes. As a consequence, the third author (Andrew Sparkes), a white, impaired male, and university professor in his mid-50s who does not practise Wing Chun or any other contact sports but who has an interest in body-self relationships and physical culture, was incorporated from the start into the research team to act as a critical friend. In this role, he operated as a theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, alternative explanations and interpretations as they emerged in relation to the data gathered by George and David.

As part of this dialogic process, both George and David were required to make a defendable case to Andrew that the available data supported their categorization of themes and structural definitions. This approach should not be confused with more formal procedures to obtain inter-subjective reliability that involves a consensualist conception of truth. Such an approach, according to Kvale (1996), may ‘lead to a tyranny by the lowest common denominator: that an interpretation is only reliable when it can be followed by everyone, a criterion that could lead to a trivialization of the interpretations’ (p. 181). In contrast, the notion of presenting a defendable case acknowledges that while there can be agreement, not all those involved in the process need to define the meanings of a particular data set in the same way as they can be positioned differently in relation to their theoretical interests, research experience, and power resources. Here, the different perspectives offered by critical friends are used as a resource for challenging and developing the interpretations made by any one researcher as they construct a logical, coherent, informed, and theoretically sound argument to defend the case they are making in relation to the data generated in a particular study. Despite disagreements, therefore, a case can be seen as defendable and the interpretation offered can be accepted as plausible. Importantly, this acceptance acknowledges that other plausible interpretations of the data can exist that are also defendable but are not being utilized in a particular study.

One of the plausible themes to emerge during the analysis was that of Wing Chun Kung Fu as a form of religion for its practitioners. Of course, in conventional academic terms, this martial art is clearly not a religion. A central concern for us, however, was to explore how the participants in the study used this term, what meanings they imbued it with, and how these meanings connected with others to allow them to sustain the notion of Wing Chun Kung Fu as a religion. According to Ashforth and Vaidyanath (2002: 359), the term ‘religion’ is often used as a
‘casual metaphor’ by people in late modern societies and confers a sense of ‘gravity and deep devotion’. However, they note that in general usage the term ‘religion’ is often more than a mere metaphor and becomes a literal description of a way of life. Ashforth and Vaidyanath suggest that we might view these *sacralized* metaphorical descriptions of (modern) life as forms of *secular religion* that can be defined as follows.

The notion of ‘secular religion’ represents an effective compromise for our purposes because it refers to a system of beliefs and practices that address fundamental questions about the meaning of life and one’s role in the world (where ‘one’ may be an individual, group, or society) without necessarily invoking a supernatural being or power . . . A secular religion provides an overarching cosmology, defining who one is (identity) and who belongs (membership), what matters (values) and what is to be done (purpose), how and why things hang together the way they do to constitute ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ (ideology), how one is embedded in that reality and connects to what matters and what is to be done (transcendence), as well as how one’s history – particularly one’s origin – connects to these sacred principles.

For us, this definition is useful as it attempts to understand secular religion both functionally (in terms of what it does) and substantively (in terms of what it is). Accordingly, in what follows, we develop and apply this notion of secular religion as a means to understand the practitioner accounts of the function and meaning of Wing Chun Kung Fu as a religion in their lives.

**Contextualizing Bridge’s Wing Chun**

The following extracts from fieldnotes contextualize the social spaces of Bridge’s Wing Chun and the ritual practices surrounding a typical club training session. The first focuses on the training space in Chapel Kwoon which is the material heart of this Wing Chun association. Part of the real name of this Kwoon is a word that means ‘place of worship’ and previously it was a chapel, hence our choice of the pseudonym.

The focal point of the hall is the Buddhist shrine located at the far centre of the room, above which is a portrait of the late Great Grandmaster Yip Man and two elegant photographs of Master Yi (pseudonym, Sifu’s teacher) and an early photograph of his Sifu. This establishes the immediate lineage of our family, which is extremely important in Chinese martial arts. Beside the shrine on either side are two filled weapons racks and two Muk Yan Yong (wooden training dummies) – very strange looking pieces of equipment to an outsider – which represent the human body. A careful inspection of the wooden beams supporting the tall ceiling would discover flags from martial arts schools from various parts of the world. This illustrates how well traveled Sifu is, and how many contacts he has. The perimeter of the hall is lined by freestanding punch bags on one side, and kicking shields and focus mitts on the other.
These modern pieces of martial arts equipment have only been in use for about 40 years, in contrast to the dummy, which has been around for several centuries. The floor comprises wooden panels (with occasional loose nails!) with a bold, black yin/yang design in the center, which would be more obvious from a bird’s eye view. (Fieldnotes, 17 March 2005)

In this Kwoon religious connections to Wing Chun’s past are evident in the presence of Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist symbols while Wing Chun is constructed as a secular religion through depictions of a lineage that connects the Sifu’s body with those of past generations of Wing Chun masters. The specific and generic training equipment marks out this space as one dedicated to the practice of Wing Chun. Students (other than non-graded beginners) must wear appropriate attire. This includes their coloured sash, with the knot aligned at the right hip, and a shirt with the Bridge’s Wing Chun logo adorning the left breast. In contrast, Sifu Bridge wears a different top to the rest of the group. His has bold red Chinese characters, which distinguishes him as the one with the authority and the greatest fighting prowess.

The second extended extract illustrates a typical club training night:

Sifus Terry or Jimmy call for everybody to ‘line up’. Like most martial arts classes, Wing Chun starts and finishes in a formal pattern with a designated hierarchy. The more advanced students stand at the back, whilst the beginners stand nervously at the front. This is so they can see what the instructor is doing. Beginners are encouraged to do all they can. The warm up concludes with a short set of 90 punches in different directions, accompanied with the instruction, ‘don’t put any power in your punches’, and followed by limbering and stretching exercises, paying particular emphasis to the hamstrings. Everybody follows the leader, and I have never encountered anybody who questioned directly what we are told to do. This is probably due to the authority commanded by the higher grades. We are then permitted to (quickly) have a drink of water.

The first form of Wing Chun, Siu Lim Tao⁶ is performed. This is at a much faster speed than is expected of students in their home training, and emphasis is made on sinking into the stance and mimicking the pace of the black sash at the front. After the form the basic punches and stances are drilled, remaining in the rows of bodies formed in the warm up. All students will face the same way during the stance drills, as the left guard motion is always performed first, which minimizes confusion and enables a smooth flow of technique. This is concluded with another quick drinks break, during which the black sash asks Sifu (usually still in the foyer) what to do next.

The main Wing Chun classes centre on partner training. After the drills, Sifu uses a high-grade student, often myself, to demonstrate one of the basic defences or drills. The students gather around Sifu in a circle, attempting to get the best possible view of the technique(s). ‘Any questions? No? Carry on!’ Sifu jovially utters in a rapid fashion.
so none of us can respond. This normally causes quiet laughter from his students. High grades are partnered with beginners or low grades to maximize the less experienced martial artists’ understanding through direct bodily experience. After constant repetitions on ‘both sides’ of the body for both partners. Sifu calls us to stop and watch again. They observe in complete silence, with only the higher-grade students offering comments or questions to their teacher. The technique is often reviewed again, this time using a new approach, adding realism, and energy. Control is expected from all participants as drills are usually performed with no protective equipment. Partner drills allow a certain amount of casual conversation, especially when Sifu and the higher grades are not looking. The beginners class finishes at 9.30pm, restricting the practice of all the techniques that Sifu wants us to go over. A short and concise conclusion is presented to reinforce the topics covered earlier and to maximize understanding of Wing Chun techniques. We then line up in a similar fashion to the beginning of the class and bow out.

The accelerated learning class now begins. Typically, only six to eight students remain for this class, which means greater attention from Sifu Bridge. Partner exercises, particularly chi sau\(^7\) are drilled in a serious and professional manner. We swap partners at frequent intervals so that we all experience different energies and approaches to the technique. Now, I am tired and less eager to train, but I am spurred on by my fellow martial artists’ enthusiasm. The accelerated learning class often ends later than its scheduled deadline of 10:30pm, especially when Sifu is training a set of techniques that are rarely looked at, such as the kicks. The class is concluded by Sifu facing us in front of the shrine, as we stand alert in attention waiting for the chuen call for the ceremonial bowing, which is performed swiftly and simultaneously. (Fieldnotes, 17 March 2005)

**Bridge’s Wing Chun as ‘secular religion’**

Secular religion is a way in which we can understand meanings of everyday social life when it is *described in religions terms* or alternatively when everyday social life is considered a medium *through which* religion is expressed (Bailey, 1988). The lifestyle led by Sifu Bridge in his teenage years was far removed from that of most martial artists by its sheer intensity and devotion. Besides training at a club he also embarked upon an intense personal training regime.

> My garage became my shrine. That’s where I was training. Solitary training by the way, just by myself. I used to get home from work, at five o’clock, and I used to come out of the garage at about nine o’clock. The only time I used to come out of that garage was when I needed the toilet, or make a cup of tea. Because that was my tipple, a cup of tea. I would do at least an hour of meditation, that’s deep meditation, every night. I’d physically train my techniques in front of the mirror over and over again. I had my dummy in there, my bags in there, and I worked, and I worked, and I worked. I used to have a couple of mates come round and train with me a couple of nights a
week. I used to go out for a run every night, it was not martial arts, but it was part of
my physical routine. It helped put me into the zone... to get me ready for my physical
training.

My Dad’s mate was there, and he took him round, proud as any father, and he said,
‘Come see what my lad does.’ And the man says ‘I bet he hasn’t got a girlfriend.’ ‘No,
he couldn’t have, could he? He wouldn’t have time for anything else.’ And that’s the
sacrifice of Wing Chun. To become good, I had to sacrifice many other things. (Sifu
Bridge, interview transcript, 6 March 2008)

The space that is occupied by dedicated and regular Wing Chun practice is critical
for making sense of how it becomes sacralized with spiritual and religious senti-
ments. In this regard, Sifu Bridge’s story resonates with Wacquant’s (2003: 60)
description of committed boxers as being involved in monastic devotion.

The most striking character of the workout is its repetitive, denuded, ascetic quality:
its different phases are infinitely repeated day after day, week after week, with only
barely perceptible variations. Many aspiring boxers turn out to be unable to tolerate
the ‘monastic devotion’... [the] absolute subordination of the self that this training
demands.

Such monastic devotion is a necessity that is turned into a valued disposition within
Bridge’s Wing Chun where the religious metaphor focuses on a belief emerging
from a secular physical practice. Furthermore, as McFarlane (1991: 261) points
out, ‘Many people, particularly in the West, have been drawn to Zen and other
forms of Buddhist practice through an initial interest in the pursuit of Eastern
martial arts.’ This process is evident in Sifu Bridge’s description of his emerging
interest in the philosophical aspects of martial arts:

As I stayed in the martial arts longer and longer, I started to realize that there’s a little
more to it. There’s a lot of philosophy that goes with it, a lot of principles... I started
looking into theology. I was attracted to Eastern philosophy... I realized that I could
have a school of hard knocks, champions, good fighters... and in the end, there would
be about four or five, and that would be my class. At the end of the day, I couldn’t
justify even running a hall and paying for it with just four people. So, I started to
realize that this has to be the wrong method. So I switched teachers, and I found a
certain teacher that started teaching me the philosophical side... and he started taking
me though a study course in theology... I found that, all of a sudden, not everybody
is coming into the gym purely to learn how to fight. (Sifu Bridge, interview transcript,
10 January 2006)

Sifu Bridge expresses this shift in emphasis by calling on a secular religious meta-
phor as indicated in the following fieldnote extract from 28 February 2008: ‘Now I
used to have a small church. But, I want a big church. So I changed my style of
teaching. Wing Chun has something to offer everyone.’ This connection is further apparent in the transmission of knowledge by his own teacher, a known Master in the art who had a strong impact on his understanding of what the art can be.

What he started telling me made complete sense. You could actually teach Wing Chun at three different levels. The way I teach it is on the physical, the emotional, and the spiritual levels – a trinity. He said that trinity is in all systems... There are three major influences on Chinese culture and martial arts. That being, Buddhism... the way they learnt is through sutra, or if you like, taking text studies of what people have done before and learning from their knowledge... That can be related to learning Wing Chun, through learning the mechanical areas, etc. Then he related it to the Daoist - [Taoist] way... which again, refers to the natural way. Once you’ve learnt something, then you should be able to do it naturally. However, he said you need a third level, and this is Confucianism... a way of governing people, which is a system of politics set up in the country. (Sifu Bridge, interview transcript, 10 January 2006)

While the details of Sifu Bridge’s account of these relationships are historically contested (Chan, 2000; Yamada, 2001), it is a good example of how the transmission of martial arts culture has a strong narrative dimension. His account also illustrates the popular practice of reinvention that is not peculiar to Western traditions. As McFarlane (1991: 357) notes:

The conflation of Buddhist, Taoist, and other fundamental Chinese images and concepts with martial arts traditions and practices took place in a largely unsystematic manner. The adoption of Buddhist and Taoist symbols in Chinese and Japanese culture, literature, and entertainment, and their conflation with martial arts theory, lore and motifs is a long-established practice, in some respects similar to the process of mystification and ‘obfuscation’...in the West.

If McFarlane is correct, then Sifu Bridge is actively constructing at least two possible secular-religious relationships when he says ‘It can be a religion if you want it to be’. The first is of Wing Chun as a medium in which a connected religion (e.g. Taoism) is expressed. The second is that of Wing Chun as a religion in its own right. As Sifu Bridge recognized, both are possible. Therefore, in both cases Bridge’s Wing Chun comes to stand as a secular religion because the space it occupies in people’s lives, and its core practices, begins to shift from the profane activity of a practical street-fighting system to a sacred practice in which combat artistry takes on legitimized sacramental meanings for those who seek them. As Ashforth and Vaidyanath (2002: 365) note, ‘a secular religion – like any religion – provides a basis for valuing and therefore for morality and behaviour. Secular religions are thus powerful things.’ This viewpoint is shared by a number of practitioners including the following who commented: ‘I really do think martial arts are like a religion, they keep you on the straight and narrow’ (Jamie, fieldnotes, 2
February 2005); ‘I never knew it, but I’ve been searching for Wing Chun all my life. It’s as if my entire existence was empty without it’ (Aidan, fieldnotes, 3 November 2004). For these men, the regular practice of Wing Chun not only occupies a central space in their lives and fulfils a number of needs, it also influences many other aspects of their everyday existence. As Sifu Steve stated:

If it was not for Wing Chun, I wouldn’t be in Busham (pseudonym) today. Nothing else kept me in Busham apart from Wing Chun. That’s a decision that’s ruled my life. A whole turning point has been made, and the way I am is because of these decisions. Because of Wing Chun, the decision had been made. So that is a spiritual thing because of the power that rules my life. It’s changed my life. Everyday, I might not have the Wing Chun physically…although there’s always something in my mind about Wing Chun, an interaction, conversation, a text message, it doesn’t matter. It’s constantly there beside you, which is what people liken God to… I just came out of university, and I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life. I had Wing Chun. With Wing Chun being with me all the way…and that is a huge thing to think about… I have to make decisions based around Wing Chun. I can’t do things because of Wing Chun… I can do things because of Wing Chun, you know what I mean? So, spiritually, decisions are made… a transcendental path, spirituality… the experience of spirituality is to try to be at one with the Universe, or whatever it is… I’m quite interested in that. (Sifu Steve, interview transcript, 18 March 2006)

Over the years, Sifu Steve has strongly re-storied the nature of his participation in the art towards a sacred identification with the Way or Path of Wing Chun that can be seen as an immersion into a way of life that comes to be expressed as a religion. This is also a secular religious practice in that fragments of religious spirituality are expressed through it. Wing Chun, along with many Eastern martial arts, reconstructs connections to religions through the metaphor of the Way or Do. Here, certain spiritual cultivations normally associated with Taoism and Chan (or Zen) Buddhism are considered achievable through the dedicated practice of everyday activities. In acknowledging these emerging connections in our own study, we are reminded of the point made by Ashforth and Vaidyanath (2002: 363) that ‘the secular and sacred should be viewed not as independent and mutually exclusive but as similar and interpenetrated in some fundamental ways’. This interpenetration relies upon a process of connecting the profane embodied activities of Wing Chun to the sacred. This process of sacralization will now be focused on in detail.

Sacralization of the Bridge’s Wing Chun habitus

Ashforth and Vaidyanath (2002: 364–5) summarize the process of sacralization as follows:

What were once means to an end may become ends in themselves… and the reverence vested in the ends may devolve to the means. This is the process of sacralization, of
rendering something sacred. Indeed, the more transcendent and ethereal the ends, the more individuals tend to sacralize the means; the distant glory of the ends is approximated by glorifying the means. It is no accident that many religious rituals are minutely choreographed and that houses of worship are often incredibly ornate: Faith needs totems.

To better appreciate the sacralization process in Bridge’s Wing Chun, it is necessary to convey the difficulty of achieving the ends of self-defence in martial arts in general as these ends evolve from what might be considered a core problem that, in our view, is inherent in a combat situation. The ends of a self-defence martial art are extremely difficult to demonstrate without altering the art or risking serious injury. The real world act of self-defence is to respond to an unprovoked attack quickly and effectively with minimum damage to all parties involved. The ultimate form of self-defence is often expressed philosophically in martial arts culture. For example, Ming and Weijia (1994: 101) state, ‘The highest aim of the martial arts using fighting techniques is to “defeat the enemy without doing battle.”’ This is quite different from the goal of street-fighting or combat arts. Alternatively, to demonstrate ability one must either convert the art into a sport as many have done, which involves altering and limiting the techniques, or demonstrate the effectiveness of the art through real street challenges. Both of these options are dissonant with the principles and practices of self-defence arts as they involve seeking out violent encounters for their own sake. To remain consistent with a self-defence philosophy the only real option is to believe in the effectiveness of the art and its development through the practice of specific exercises within the art itself. This belief is often bolstered through the testimonies of practitioners who have used their martial arts skills to good effect in real life. In this way, the ends (self-defence proficiency) become sacralized through the means (exercises and techniques).

The centrality of the body in Wing Chun, therefore, is not simply as a mechanical fighting object to be ‘conditioned’ and ‘programmed’ with martial skills. Rather, as McFarlane (1989) argues, it is a medium for ‘non-discursive bodily awareness and sensitivity’ to one’s own and others’ bodies. At the heart of the Wing Chun system of martial arts is a specialized and highly prized habitus as defined by Bourdieu (1998), and which we use here to refer to the specific embodied schemes of dispositions acquired through the diligent and long-term practice of Wing Chun. The concept of habitus has proven very useful for describing the body, mind, and society complex resulting from socializing practices in a range of combat and martial arts. For example, Wacquant (1992: 224) proposes the development of a puglistic habitus in boxing that he refers to as, ‘The specific set of bodily and mental schemata that define the competent boxer’. More recently, Delamont and Stephens (2008) draw on Wacquant’s work along with Wainwright et al.’s (2006) notion of a balletic habitus to propose an emergent British diasporic capoiera habitus that they suggest is being constructed through the spread of this Brazilian art form at both the individual and institutional levels. Delamont and
Stephens (2008: 59) define habitus as follows:

The habitus is both a state of mind and a bodily state of being. At the individual level, a person’s biology, and biography, gives him or her a unique habitus. Simultaneously, however, that person is also shaped by the collective history of any group(s) to which he or she belongs. Thus, education and occupational socialization contribute to the individual habitus.

The body pedagogies of many martial arts have a direct parallel with those in boxing as described by Wacquant (2003: 60) in which ‘the function of pedagogical work is to replace the savage body...with a body “habituated,” that is temporally structured and kinetically remodelled according to the specific demands of the field’. In the delimited field of Bridge’s Wing Chun, this habitus is a street self-defence instead of sporting orientation. Within this habitus, there appears to be a scheme of dispositions comprising the following: a concern with technical proficiency in the specific techniques of the art; a practical knowledge of their application; a committed attitude towards training these skills; a compliance towards training to develop the skills of others9 as well as one’s own; a preparedness to use these skills if necessary (in a principled manner); and a commitment to the continuation of the art form. Collectively, this schemata becomes an unquestionable faith (or illusio) in the Wing Chun system. Each member of the Wing Chun Association possesses varying degrees of this habitus, and its acquisition and possession are central to the whole raison d’être of the martial art. Although the members come from different backgrounds, and possess different interests, they share a common goal which is the pursuit of the Wing Chun habitus. As such, this secular and profane scheme of dispositions becomes sacralized with its main manifestation being found in Sifu Bridge who is the defining form of Wing Chun habitus in Bridge’s Wing Chun. As Sifu Steve stated:

He’s got a certain way about him... I suppose you could consider him as a Kung Fu person just by looking at him, you would know that something was going on, just by his presence. Once you get to know him, it makes perfect sense that he’s a Kung Fu teacher... John’s - [Sifu Bridges] unique in many ways. He’s highly intelligent but not through a classically structured way of learning... And he knows a great deal about stuff. He could talk to me about pretty much anything, and he knows a great deal about it. You find him interesting on a level which is not just martial arts. He’s got a lot to say. (Sifu Steve, interview transcript, 18 March 2006)

However, in terms of the Wing Chun habitus, there is one defining disposition that Sifu Steve readily acknowledges: ‘That man is the best-kept secret in Wing Chun in Britain. No one can beat him, except Yi (his teacher) and that’s a fact. We’re so lucky to have him as a Sifu!’
Sacralization as shared experience

To an essentially corporeal and little-codified practice, whose logic can be grasped only in and through action, corresponds an implicit, practical, and collective mode of inculcation. The transmission of pugilism is effected in a gestural, visual, and mimetic manner, at the cost of a regulated manipulation of the body that somatizes the knowledge collectively held and exhibited by the members of the club at each level in the tacit hierarchy that runs through it. In this respect, the Manly art offers the paradox of an ultraindividual sport whose apprenticeship is quintessentially collective. And, paraphrasing Émile Durkheim, one can go so far as to assert that the gym is to boxing what the church is to religion: the ‘moral community,’ the ‘solidarity system of beliefs and practices’ that makes it possible and constitutes it as such. (Wacquant, 2003: 100, emphasis in original)

Wacquant’s (2003) analysis offers clear pedagogical parallels to what was observed in Bridge’s Wing Chun Kung Fu Association, with the important exception that the outcomes are not individual sporting achievement and thus interpretations of practice need to look beyond this for what motivates involvement and retention. The embodied and performative possession of the habitus as previously described is the central basis for the hierarchical organization at Bridge’s Wing Chun with Sifu Bridge at the top. Next are his senior students and then a series of sashes (grading levels, indicated by a coloured silk sash) going down from black to the beginners.10 While this observation is neither surprising nor atypical of other traditional martial arts structures, it is worthy of more detailed exploration in relation to the sacralization of the Bridge’s Wing Chun habitus as a shared experience, and how it operates to reinforce the art as being, or potentially becoming, a secular religion for many of its practitioners. This involves an intricate ritualized process, where the drill and the Sifu’s ability to perform it become sacralized over time through the production of a collective effervescence. Shilling and Mellor (1998: 196) describe this phenomenon as ‘stimulated by assembled social groups that harnesses people’s passions to the symbolic order of society’. They add that it is ‘experienced mentally and physically’, and is usefully understood as a ‘social “force” at its birth; when embodied humans feel themselves and are transformed through an emotional structuring of their sensory and sensual being’. In the Wing Chun groups operating in both Chapel and School Kwoons, it seems that such a collective effervescence through embodied practice serves to unite, bind, and inspire the committed practitioners, reaffirming their belief in the values of this Kung Fu system and the ability of their Sifu to use it and pass it on effectively. For example, Sifu Bridge’s reflections on the true meaning of belts appears to be more concerned with self and moral development than pure fighting skill:

The way I teach, as you know, I give a grading because I have a personal relationship with the person I teach ... And we do base it on the individual, so we’re not basing it
on who’s the best fighter, who’s the best technician. We’re looking at other factors, such as who’s helpful, who puts time in, who puts effort in, who’s helpful to other people in the group. Manners. And basically, what the individual can achieve (Sifu Bridge, interview transcript, 6 March 2008)

Interestingly, even for Sifu Bridge such knowledge is only possible between the student and their immediate teacher. In the sense articulated above, the Wing Chun habitus appears to be approaching the status of a sacred state of embodiment. Following Mellor and Shilling (1997), it is possible to view this as a collective process of sacralization (the Wing Chun habitus) with the development of sensual solidarities emerging both in and through this sacralized habitus. Mellor and Shilling (1997: 161–2) define the term sensual solidarities as follows:

The elaboration of an internally differentiated relationship between human embodiment and the sacred which is tied to the divergent development of banal and sensual forms of sociality... That advanced forms of sociality are characterized by a ‘recovered sensuousness’ which reflects a developing consecration of the profane world.

On the surface, learning street-oriented self-defence skills typify the world of the profane, being banal in terms of the technical ends-led practical activity of street combat. However, a closer scrutiny reveals that, paradoxically, real street combat (and by dint of this, street self-defence) is a highly sensual form of sociality even though its motives, means and outcomes can be extremely shocking and unpleasant. Mellor and Shilling (1997: 176–7) acknowledge this, pointing out that:

The sacred can be nasty, unpleasant, and terrifying, as well as glorious and salvational. If life is generally brutish and short, then intimations of the totality of life, through the collective effervescence of the sacred, are likely to reflect that reality.

In this regard, the Wing Chun habitus reflects that reality by taking this highly sensual but profane form of sociality and turning it into a sacred embodied art form. This sacralization process is evident in the way in which the skills embedded in the bodies of Sifu Bridge and his senior students, developed over years of hard training, are afforded a sacred value by other members of the group. The following extracts that focus on a partner drill, known as chi sau (sticking hands), performed between George and Sifu Bridge, and between Zack (intermediate student) and Sifu Bridge, reveal the process of sacralization in action.

Yet again, he made the drill more challenging and rapid. His back guard hand was often deliberately brought forward to ‘tease me’. I took the bait, attempting to take the line from the wrong hand. He instantly responded with a well-controlled, rapid strike to the chest, which I had no chance of defending. This tactic was repeated frequently within the brief thirty seconds we stood opposite each other. He laughed as I continued to fall for his tricks. I felt slightly embarrassed and humiliated in front
of the beginner whom I was meant to be teaching. ‘Alright’, he concluded with a slight smile on his face, walking away to find another student to test. I turned back to see an astonished Tony, who exclaimed, ‘so fast!’ I replied: ‘That’s him going slowly, trust me!’ (Fieldnotes, 16 March 2006)

- Zack recalled the first time he stuck hands with Sifu Bridge, after several years of training in another school:

As soon as we stuck hands, I realized there was nothing I could do. I couldn’t put a hand on him. I couldn’t do anything. He started talking to me about the different energies of chi sau. I had no idea what he was talking about at the time. ‘Do you know the eight energies of chi sau?’ Which I had to proclaim I didn’t. He said, ‘Right. This is the first energy.’ Then he went to the second energy. Not being able to unlink my arms, not being able to step around, not being able to disconnect. Just being backed from one side of the hall right against the wall. I just managed to step around... It was just unbelievable. Unbelievable... he smiled and winked, and said I had a lot of work to do, but it was not bad... After that, I was pretty much smitten... I could see that Sifu’s skill was better than anyone’s skill I had ever experienced in any of the schools that I’d been to. Regardless of style... regardless to the length of time the teachers had been training and teaching for. It’s something I hadn’t encountered... So pretty much from there, I realized I had found correct Sifu. (- Zack, interview transcript, 15 March 2008)

Chi sau as a ritualized partner practice is designed to develop sensitivities to an opponent’s body and their movements. For this to be possible there needs to be constant contact between the bodies of the participants, so that this energy can be felt, read and responded to but without the impediment of thought. The brief drills performed with the Sifu’s body are an act of bodily exchange, where the Wing Chun habitus in its highly developed form is shown to the lower orders of students. This develops sensual solidarity, and is akin to an act of bodily communion through practising drills that are refined to isolate key principles of the arts own solution to the body problems posed by street combat. However, one of the lessons these combat rituals are intended to convey involves the harm to the body of others that the real world use of these techniques can bring about. The aggressive, direct nature of this art often involves strikes to the throat, groin, and eyes, which could kill or maim a person. Both Sifu and the black sashes like to add realism to the techniques practised. Beginners are often surprised at the apparent brutality of the system, and the approach of their teachers to it. Principles such as ‘chain punch the throat’ and ‘apply the neck crank to break his neck’ sometimes surprise people entering the Kwoon, especially those whose biographies do not contain practical experience of street conflict and fighting.12

As Sifu Bridges’s most senior student and teacher, Sifu Terry admits: ‘I never start fights. But if anyone starts with me, they’ve lost all their rights as a human being. I have no morals when it comes to these matters.’ As a role model, Sifu
Terry’s attitudes to the violence necessary in defending himself are transmitted to other members of the group through his pedagogy, legitimized through his status in the hierarchy, and immortalized via the many stories told of his exploits on the street over the years. All this not only adds to the sacralization of the Wing Chun habitus and the system itself but also enhances the other dispositional qualities of the bearers of these skills. This is evident in the comment from Terry regarding his approach to teaching:

I don’t go for all this ‘Do and don’t’. Because, in my opinion, you’re the judge of the moment. If you think it’s necessary, I’m happy about that. If you think it’s necessary to walk away, then fine. If you think it’s necessary to shove your hand into his Adam’s apple, then that’s fine. That’s the way I try to teach you, clinically not with the emotion in it, because emotion clouds everything. I know for a fact that in the cold light of day, Wing Chun’s hands will win. (Sifu Terry, interview transcript, 12 February 2008)

The faith in the effectiveness of the system illustrated by Sifu Terry is indicative of Mellor and Shilling’s (1997: 174) notion of sensual solidarity in action since, for them, ‘It is more usual for sensual solidarities to emerge from the immanence of the fleshy body with situations of co-presence and interdependence.’ As indicated, the Bridge’s Wing Chun practitioners talk in similar terms of collective effervescence emerging from practice and of the ways this produces a sensual solidarity through the close, personal nature of the Wing Chun drills. This is further illustrated by Sifu Bridge’s account of an ideal chi sau experience:

You’re both in the same zone... If one person isn’t, then you can’t achieve that. If you’re actually teaching chi sau to a person who has not reached a level of energy, feel, or competence, then you won’t be in that zone. You won’t be in a meditative state. It’s only when people reach a certain area in their training where you can both train equally, you can feel that meditative state... I suppose really, psychologically somewhere, it must be a hell of a turn on, mustn’t it? For you to be stood there hours on end, doing it, and really enjoying it. (Sifu Bridge, interview transcript, 6 March 2008)

Sifu Steve also reflects on this sensual solidarity by explaining the closeness that many members of the group share in Wing Chun practice:

It’s the closest you can get to somebody without being in a relationship with them. We spend a lot of time holding, touching, placing a hand on people’s bodies. Whereas in normal society you would never just walk up to somebody and say ‘Right, put your hands on my chest.’ Whereas a total stranger would walk through the door, and you would say ‘You’ve got to put your hand on my chest.’ You’ve instantly broken down the barriers, the physical being that we’re all born with, and sort of deal with on a day-to-day basis. The physical side of things... it is important... On a social level, it
makes people come together... because you’re training the sensitivity of touch, and the sensitivities of interaction. (Sifu Steve, interview transcript, 18 March 2006)

A final meaning that leads to the sacralization of the profanities of martial practice is the commonly held belief that the Wing Chun habitus is taken to be something that is constantly evolving, can be improved with practice over time, and can defy (or at least defer) the effects of the ageing process of the performing body. Within the broader Wing Chun community, there are a number of prominent past and present examples of Masters practising into their 80s and maintaining high levels of speed and skill.13 The effect of this narrative is that the Wing Chun habitus becomes a pursuit of bodily martial perfection where perfection is defined in terms of techniques, body structure, timing, strategy, and so on rather than just physical force. This is a reinvention of the original translation of the term Kung Fu, and is a further possible reason for its sacralization through everyday solo and regular partner practice. Accordingly, understanding the Wing Chun habitus is central to making sense of how this martial art functions as a secular religious practice.

The process of sacralization seems to take place through an embodied binding and bonding through the sensual practices of Wing Chun. It is this that constitutes an emerging act of faith in the system, or at least core components of it. As such, the Wing Chun habitus becomes the desired state of attainment that might emerge from it. This faith, or illusio in Bourdieu’s (1998) terms, becomes necessary to make progress. To question the body system and/or to constantly intellectualize the techniques of Wing Chun would instigate a powerful cognitive dissonance that would impede the development of mastery.14 Such questioning of the faith is a taboo topic within Chapel and School Kwoons unless Sifu Bridge raises the question himself. Sifu Bridge thus becomes an embodied conduit and a belief in him is a material manifestation of belief in the system. If Bridge’s Wing Chun is a secular religion then Sifu Bridge is its high priest.

Reflections

In this article we considered how, for a group of dedicated practitioners, the martial art of Bridge’s Wing Chun Kung Fu acts as a secular religion. Two key features of this process were identified. The first involved the ways in which Wing Chun evolves from an everyday secular practice into something that takes on sacralized meanings for participants while the second related to how a Wing Chun habitus develops over time. In closing we would like to offer some reflections on how our findings might connect to broader discussions of martial arts practices, religion and spirituality in Western cultures.

A question we might consider is how secular religious interpretations of the practices we have described in the Chapel and School Kwoons connect with Heelas and Woodhead’s (2005) subjectivization thesis that attempts to explain the shift from religion to spirituality in the UK via the movement from the collective to the individual. One possible explanation could emanate from the work of
Pierre Bourdieu. However, this approach is not without its drawbacks for the study of religion, spirituality and subjectivity because, as Verter (2003) notes, we might need to use Bourdieu against Bourdieu in order to elaborate his tools of habitus, capital and field. For Verter, a more permeable and dynamic notion of social fields would help to explore the inter-penetration of habitus and practice acquired in different life contexts and begin to explain how a martial arts habitus might convert to forms of religious or spiritual capital for different individuals. He also questions how these forms of habitus might translate to other fields that individuals can occupy, and how these dispositions are increasingly permeated by the commercialization and commodification of these movement art forms (Brown and Leledaki, 2010; Carette and King, 2004).

The manner in which practitioners of Bridge’s Wing Chun described themselves as a family is also worthy of note as it suggests that they see themselves as part of a moral community that resembles a form of sectarian sodality. For Meadows (1999) this enables the practitioners to function as a non-residential special interest group with a martial focus that seeks to demarcate itself as different, and ultimately superior, to other martial arts groups that may challenge its legitimacy. For us, the interpretation of Wing Chun Kung Fu as a secular religion organized around a sacralized habitus in the form of a family is indicative of what Mellor and Shilling (1997: 176) consider to be one of the effects of sensual solidarities that act as ‘a process of “sacred binding” in which “people keep warm together” within localities and against the impersonality and “cold winds” of modernity’.

The identification of Wing Chun acting as a secular religion in the lives of practitioners also raises the issue of it performing a soteriological function. This involves a form of secular salvation and centres around the transformation of what were, for some, quite violent and ‘deviant’ lifestyles prior to their martial arts involvement into different and more positive lifestyle patterns according to the Way. On this issue, future research might take account of the growing body of literature on the nature of violence in late modern societies and within the martial arts (Downey, 2007; Žižek, 2008).

The socially constructed meanings of a martial art within Bridge’s Wing Chun Association and, we suspect, other martial arts associations in the UK, are permeated with dimensions of social class and gender. These, as well as age, ability, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, are likely to combine to form strong dispositional antecedents for the continuation of the art given the intensity required to become one of its members. These features are also likely to play a significant role in the reasons why many practitioners (including those at the intermediate and advanced levels) drop out and the influence this has at both the personal and organizational levels. Related issues of identity change and transition seem to connect strongly with Turner’s (1969, 1975) writing on community ritual, symbolism, and liminality, all of which provide possible future avenues for conceptualizing identity transformation through martial arts as communities of transformation. Similarly, the requirement to pass on the art form from body to body remains a fascinating dynamic that further reinforces the notion of Wing Chun as a secular religion.
Despite the growing presence of instructional books and DVDs, this whole movement culture, with all its sectarian nuances, still revolves around an oral tradition and the direct sensual transmission of the habitus. Therefore, who is selected to carry on Bridge’s Wing Chun, and why and how this process unfolds over time, is an important topic for further ethnographic consideration.

Finally, the issue of Wing Chun Kung Fu as a Way in which more established religions are expressed also needs closer attention as our findings suggest that the art is, for some, a medium for making contact with and developing connections to Buddhism and Daoism. Indeed, just how practitioners access and integrate information on philosophical and theological issues into their martial art and everyday lives are processes worthy of further analytical attention.

With regard to our findings, we are aware that there are undeniable parallels between our work and that which makes comparisons between sport and religion (Hervieu-Léger, 2000; Wacquant, 2003). Certainly, these parallels warrant a comparative analysis in their own right. Likewise, the themes and issues raised in our analysis require further investigation in order to better appreciate how, and why, the globalized and transcultural practice of martial arts is taken up, embedded within, and moulded to new social contexts in ways that not only shape individual identity construction but also allow for both continuity and change in the martial arts themselves.

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the Sifus and members of Chapel and School Kwoons for enabling this study to take place and for sharing their experiences with us. Thanks also to the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on an earlier draft of the article.

Notes

1. Literally translated as ‘teacher’ or ‘master’. Depending on context there are also possible connotations of Master–student (apprenticeship) relationships, as well as the idea of ‘father’. The term is widely used in Chinese martial arts practised in the West and in Bridge’s Wing Chun where most students never address John Bridge by his real name.
2. Grandmaster Yip Man is a ‘legendary’ figure in the martial arts and Wing Chun world. Many students claim to have a direct lineage to him.
3. No interviews with women practitioners were conducted as none remained in the group for more than three years (which was the minimum amount of experience required for the interviews). This gender absence is acknowledged and calls for future research to investigate women’s experiences of practising Wing Chun.
4. Examples of this in relation to sport and religion are abundant. An overview is provided by Mathisen (2006).
5. The ‘Wooden Dummy’ or Muk Yan Yong is a training aid. It is traditionally made from Chinese oak, and represents the human body, with a leg, a lower arm (for lower defences) and two upper arms (for mid- to higher defences). There is another dummy form, which is taught only by Sifu John Bridge himself in private lessons to his more advanced students. It is designed to develop an awareness of distance, to teach further applications of techniques, and act as a form of power and rhythm training (a traditional dummy on a frame springs back and forth like a human being receiving blows).
6. A form is a solo sequence practised continuously in order to embody certain principles for partner work and application training. This form, Siu Lim Tao, is the first Wing Chun form and is taken to contain all the basic movements and principles of the system. It is practised regularly by all grades, and often performed in meditative silence. It can take in excess of 20 minutes to complete. Although the Eastern concept of chi is not explicitly stated in Bridge’s Wing Chun Association, the idea of Siu Lim Tao as a form of meditation is shared by many of its members.

7. Chi sau is a two-person exercise unique to Wing Chun designed to develop sensitivity, inter- and intra-body awareness, reaction time, positioning, distance, timing and coordination. It acts as the bridge between the solo forms and real fighting. Initially, it is very static and slow, but at later stages of training it becomes very fast. It can be performed blindfolded, and acts as a form of sparring. At later stages, chi gerk (sticky legs) is also taught in order to develop a whole body sensitivity.

8. To be considered a Master in a martial art one must have received considerable cultural recognition and normally be deemed the foremost authority of this particular lineage or style.

9. In partner based arts, it is widely accepted that a practitioner’s development is limited by the skill of the partner. Therefore, to develop one’s own skills one has to encourage the development of training partners.

10. There are a number of graded colours from beginner to black. Post-black belt there are a number of further levels of attainment. To preserve anonymity we cannot be more precise due to the varied colour rankings between schools.

11. ‘Take the line’ refers to a key technical principle of the art that involves controlling the centreline which is an imaginary straight line between the two participants. This allows faster and most direct strikes to be applied to the most vulnerable parts of the body that lie mainly down its centre. In this school, this principle is taught through a series of drills with a partner that acts as a foundation for chi sau.

12. ‘Be ferocious when clashing. Aim to finish the fight quickly’ are part of a lengthy maxim for Bridge’s Wing Chun Association. These principles, among others, are applied in the lessons each week.

13. Yip Man’s sons, Grandmasters Yip Chun and Yip Ching, are notable examples.

14. In the long term it is normal for advanced practitioners to raise such questions with a view to developing the art.

References


