



By Gene Ching  
and Jeff Lin

# The Legacy of Grandmaster Ku Yu-Cheung and Bak Sil Lum

Shaolin Kung Fu encompasses a wide spectrum of different styles. Nowadays, most people think of bald robed monks from the original Shaolin Temple on Songshan mountain range in Henan, China. Shaolin's warrior monks began touring the world and disseminating their Kung Fu in the mid-'90s, and over the last two decades the Kung Fu of the Shaolin Temple of China, also known as Songshan Shaolin Kung Fu, has spread exponentially. However, with over a millennium-and-a-half years of history, there are many other styles that originated at Shaolin Temple, distinct from what the monks promulgate. These styles rightfully bear the name. For several decades prior to Shaolin's globetrotting monks, *Bak Sil Lum* was the dominant style representing Shaolin outside of China. *Bak Sil Lum* (北少林) literally means "Northern Shaolin" in Cantonese. Kung Fu enthusiasts who were around before the first Shaolin monks left China know *Bak Sil Lum*. It is a traditional style of Kung Fu that upholds fundamental strategies consistent with the principles held sacred by Songshan Shaolin Kung Fu, yet untainted by the acrobatics of Modern Wushu.

## The Southbound Tiger

Attentive readers will notice something curious about *Bak Sil Lum*. Why is "Northern Shaolin" labeled in Cantonese, the language of the south? This is due to the most prominent master of *Bak Sil Lum*, Grandmaster Ku Yu-Cheung (1894–1952 顧汝章). In recent years, Grandmaster Ku has also been referred to by the Mandarin version of his name, Gu Ruzhang, part of the general shift towards pinyin romanization for all Chinese names. It's a niggling trend because for that senior generation of English-speaking Kung Fu practitioners, the precedent translation has already



Grandmaster Yim Seung Mou, 3rd from left in 1st row; Master Gary Lam, 2nd from left in 2nd row; Master Johnny So, 5th from left in 2nd row, Master Wing Lam, far right in 2nd row.

been established. Some such swaps are just too late. By the same notion, Kung Fu should be "gongfu" and *Bak Sil Lum* should be "bei Shaolin." And although the Yale system for romanization of Cantonese is a standard, that was seldom used. Under that, Kung Fu would be "gung fu" and *Bak Sil Lum* would be "baak siu lam." Ku Yu-Cheung would be "Gu Yu Jueng." For the sake of this article, Yale will be used with occasional defaults to popular spellings.

Grandmaster Ku is credited as the main proponent of *Bak Sil Lum*; some believe he was actually the founder of it. *Bak Sil Lum* lineage goes all the way back to a Shaolin Monk named Chiu Yun (Mandarin: Zhao Yuan 朝元和尚). According to legend, Monk Chiu taught Gam Fungchi (甘鳳池), an 18th century rebel who resisted the oppression of the Qing Dynasty (1636–1913 CE).



Ku Yu-Cheung

Grandmaster Gam is better known by his Mandarin name of Gan Fengchi and his heroism has been romanticized in folkloric tales, somewhat akin to Wong Fei Hung (1847–1924 黃飛鴻). Gam is also attributed as the founder of *Huaquan* (Flower Fist 花拳) due a book credited to him titled *Essence of Hua Fist* (花拳总讲法). Kung Fu origins frequently point to semi-historical figures that have been embellished by myth; such creation tales are often apocryphal.

Despite the lineage, Grandmaster Ku is believed to have been the synthesizer of *Hua* Fist and other elements to form the present *Bak Sil Lum* curriculum. Grandmaster Ku was also an expert in taam tuei (flicking leg a.k.a. *tan tui* 彈腿) and came from a martial family that ran an armed escort business. Armed escorts were much in demand at the end of the Qing Dynasty. Banditry was prevalent so Grandmaster Ku had real-world street combat skills. He was famous for his Iron Palm and there's a popular story about how he killed a war horse with one slap.

In the wake of the Qing Dynasty, the Republic of China sought to propagate Kung Fu by establishing the Central Kuoshu Institute (中央國術館) in Nanjing. In 1928, the institute held two national examinations, the first in April in Beijing and the second in October

in Nanjing. These examinations attracted hundreds of masters and were staged in the brutal tradition of Chinese military exams. In Nanjing, there were serious injuries and two alleged deaths. Grandmaster Ku was one of the champions and leaders of the Central Kuoshu Institute, so he cross-trained with many other noted masters who were involved there. In 1929, Ku was invited by the governor of Guangdong to establish a southern branch of the Kuoshu Institute, alongside four other notable grandmasters: Fu Chensung (1872–1953 傅振嵩), Wan Laishen (1903–1992 万籁声), Li Shanwu (1906–? 李先五), and Wang Shaozhao (1892–1984 王少周). Guangdong Province is home to Guangzhou, its most populous city formerly known as Canton.

This quintet of grandmasters were known as the Five Southbound Tigers (五虎下江南).



At the core of *Bak Sil Lum* is ten empty-hand forms. These sets are numbered as follows: 1. *Koy Moon* (Open the Door 開門), 2. *Leng Low* (Guiding Road 領路), 3. *Jow Mah* (Sitting Horse 座馬), 4. *Chum Sam* (Pierce the Heart 穿心), 5. *Mo I* (Martial Craft 武藝), 6. *Tun Da* (Short Strike 短打), 7. *Moi Fah* (Plum Flower 梅花), 8. *Bot Bo* (Uprooting Step 拔步), 9. *Lien Wan* (Continuous Ring 連環), 10. *Sik Fot* (Style Law 式法). There are additional empty-hand forms as well as a large arsenal of weapons, but these ten forms are the staple of the curriculum. They are intricately connected, each form feeding into



Grandmaster Yim Seung Mou seated in center with Master Gary Lam standing 3rd from right, in 1970.

### Bak Sil Lum Lineage

- Chiu Yun Woseung (Monk Chiu Yun 朝元和尚)
- Gam Fungchi (Mandarin: Gan Fengchi 甘鳳池)
- Maan Bongchoi (萬邦才)
- Yim Degong (嚴德功)
- Yim Saamsing (嚴三省)
- Yim Geiwan (嚴機溫)
- Ku Yu-Cheung (顧汝章)
- Yim Seung Mou (嚴尚武)

the next, to create a magnificently sophisticated system. This is what many Modern Wushu exponents miss. Traditional systems like *Bak Sil Lum* are complete and integrated so each form informs the next. Modern Wushu is piecemeal for the most part. There are empty-hand forms like *Changquan* (long fist 長拳), but no real connection to other forms beyond the fundamentals. Traditional Songshan Shaolin has some connected forms like *Xiaohongquan* (small vast fist 小洪拳) and *Dahongquan* (large vast fist 大洪拳), *Qixingquan* (seven star fist 七星拳) and *Changhuxinyimen* (long guard heart intention fist 長护心意门) and the *Luohan* Fist forms (罗汉拳). When forms are paired together as such, they are referred to as Mother-and-child forms (*muzi* 母子). But having ten interconnected forms is exceptional. This interconnection is the hallmark of authentic traditional styles.

### The Western Hidden Tiger

Southern Chinese from Hong Kong and Guangdong were the first to immigrate to the

Americas, preceding the Shaolin Monks from central mainland China. Most of the prominent *Bak Sil Lum* grandmasters in the Americas, such as Chan Kwok Wai (陳國偉), Kwong Wing Lam (林光榮), Johnny So (蘇源), and Wong Jack Man (黃澤民), all emerged from the same Hong Kong school. Their master was Grandmaster Yim Seung Mou (1882–1971 嚴尚武), a direct pupil of Grandmaster Ku. These students of Grandmaster Yim all had a significant impact upon Kung Fu in the western world today, but they weren't the only ones. Master Gary Lam (林啟明) was there too. Now almost seventy, Master Lam doesn't practice *Bak Sil Lum* anymore, having converted to Wang Family Water style Taijiquan (王氏水性太極拳 see "*Wang's Water Style Taijiquan*" by Jeff Lin in the previous March+April 2018 issue). But he still has fond memories of his years training under Grandmaster Yim.

"I started to learn Kung Fu from Grandmaster Yim Seung Mou at the



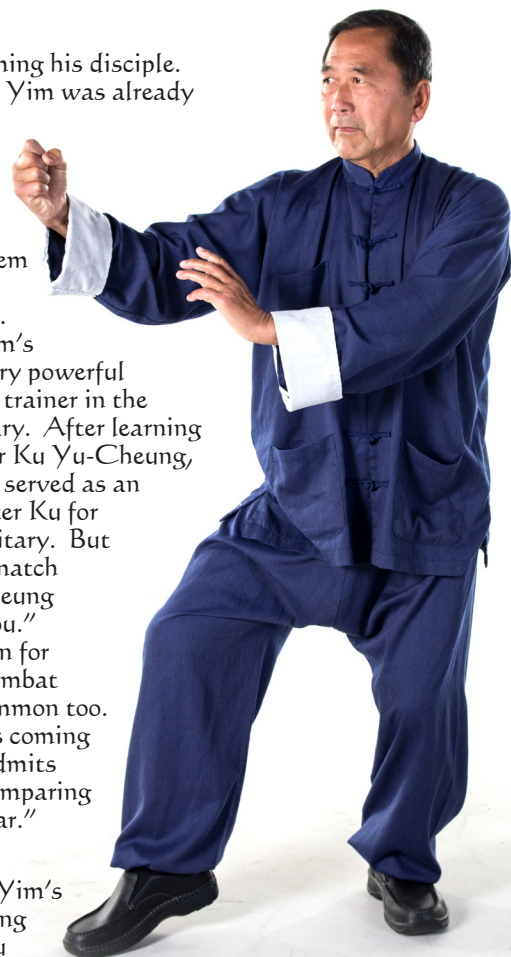
Grandmaster Yim Seung Mou seated in center with Master Gary Lam standing behind him in the center, in 1970.

to Ku before becoming his disciple. Fueling this story, Yim was already a master of the famous Southern style of Kung Fu known as Hung Gar (洪家), the same system that Wong Fei Hung propounded.

"Grandmaster Yim's Hung Gar was very powerful and he served as a trainer in the Guangzhou military. After learning from Grandmaster Ku Yu-Cheung, Grandmaster Yim served as an

assistant trainer with Grandmaster Ku for the Guangdong and Guangxi military. But I have not heard of the challenge match between Grandmaster Ku Yu-Cheung and Grandmaster Yim Seung Mou." Back in those days, it was common for Kung Fu masters to be military combat trainers. And challenges were common too. "Definitely there were challengers coming to Grandmaster Yim's school," admits Lam, "But after competing and comparing skills, he became even more popular."

According to Lam, Grandmaster Yim's school was quite successful in Hong Kong due to his excellent Kung Fu



age of sixteen," reveals Master Lam in Chinese. "I was introduced to Grandmaster Yim through a friend of mine and later on I learned that he was the disciple and inheritor of Grandmaster Ku Yu-Cheung, the originator of *Bak Sil Lum* Kung Fu. I was trained under the careful tutelage of Grandmaster Yim until he passed away in December of 1971. I was twenty-one years of age then."

Grandmaster Yim was actually several years older than Grandmaster Ku. That's not unusual, but it has led to a rumor that Yim lost a challenge match

## KU YU-CHEUNG BAK SIL LUM 顧汝章 北少林拳 (不分級)

The KU YU-CHEUNG BAK SIL LUM Champion is a specific lineage of Northern Shaolin from Grandmaster Ku Yu-Cheung of Guangdong. The Ku Yu-Cheung Bak Sil Lum Champion is restricted exclusively to the 10 Hand Forms practiced by the Ku Yu-Cheung Bak Sil Lum lineage, specifically 1. Koy Moon (開門), 2. Leng Low (領路), 3. Jow Mah (座馬), 4. Chum Sam (穿心), 5. Mo I (武藝), 6. Tun Da (短打), 7. Moi Fah (梅花), 8. Bot Bo (拔步), 9. Lien Wan (連環), 10. Sik Fot (式法). Competitors in this division must be able to provide their lineage linking them to Grandmaster Ku.



The KU YU-CHEUNG BAK SIL LUM Champion serves the ongoing community of Bak Sil Lum schools in the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as the longstanding community worldwide.

One winner will be declared as the 2018 KU YU-CHEUNG BAK SIL LUM Champion and will receive custom trophy and spotlight in Kung Fu Tai Chi magazine. Second and third place competitors will receive a silver and bronze medal respectively.

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and teaching ability. Lam says there were few other competing Kung Fu schools in Hong Kong at the time. "Grandmaster Yim's Hong Kong school was in a space that was about two-thousand square feet, located on Temple Street. His school was open all day from morning to night. There were over one hundred students divided into different classes and in each class, on average, there were about thirty students. He taught with patience, correcting students to the right movements and postures. His teaching curriculum included many training forms, over a hundred total. There were many forms from different styles and weapons were included.

"The main core was the Ten Forms. Other training forms I remember included *lin bou kyun* (practice step fist 練步拳), *taam tuei*, single broadsword (*daandou* 單刀), eyebrow-height staff (*chai mei gwan* 齊眉棍), eyebrow-height eight-diagram staff (*chai mei baat gwa gwan* 齊眉八卦棍), three-section staff (*saam jit gwan* 三節棍), nine-section steel whip (*gau jit gong bin* 九節鋼鞭), *hungsao yap baak yan* (bare hand joining pure knife 空手入白刃), and *chaak kyun* (ripping fist 拆拳). I liked Grandmaster Yim's three-section staff and nine-section steel whip very much."

excellent and he abided strictly to the traditional Chinese martial arts disciplines. He was willing to spend lots of time each day with students. He also mastered traditional Chinese medicine and bone-setting to help his students maintain their health while practicing Kung Fu."

Today, Master Lam is delighted to see that *Bak Sil Lum* has spread to America which he now calls home. "I did stay abreast of *Bak Sil Lum* curriculums here in the United States and they are fine. My fellow apprentice, Master Johnny So, has opened and ran a *Bak Sil Lum* Kung Fu school in Los Angeles for many years. The school was popular so he expanded."

The grandmasters of the last century have become legend. And there are still masters who got to witness them firsthand. For Master Gary Lam, his teacher's lessons still resonate. "Grandmaster Yim said often, 'Practice fist a thousand times. Always be natural (*Kyun da chin pin, san faat ji yin* 拳打千遍, 身法自然).'" There was a complementary couplet in his school, "Seung Mou spirit, Long life and peace, Inherit Ku's door, Long profound history (*Seung mou jing san, gei dau che hong, gum un yi but, yun yun lau cheung* 尚武精神, 既壽且康, 顧門衣鉢, 源遠流長)." ☯



## The Legacy of the Southbound Tiger

Master Lam feels very privileged to have studied with Grandmaster Yim. Even though he's left *Bak Sil Lum* for Tai Chi, Lam still treasures his martial upbringing in Hong Kong and credits Yim for building a strong foundation. "Grandmaster Yim was my mentor," he claims. "Grandmaster Yim was a very sincere teacher. When he taught, he told you everything he knew about it. He was also a very demanding teacher. He wanted every student to be

Jeff Lin, a retired hi-tech executive in Silicon Valley, has trained Taijiquan including Yang and Chen styles for more than 20 years. He currently studies Wang's Water Tai Chi from Master Gary Lam.



Grandmaster Yim Seung Mou and Master Gary Lam



Master Gary Lam at age twenty