

Master vs. Sifu: Titles in Chinese Martial Arts

By John Kang

In a journey through the martial arts section of your local yellow pages, you will undoubtedly discover a long listing of instructors with the title of Master, and



some with the even loftier title of Grandmaster. To the Western mind, which still has a residual tendency to ‘exotify’ Asian cultures, the concept of Mastery might conjure up the image of unparalleled physical and mental prowess. Coupled with claims of martial “purity,” “authenticity,” and “tradition,” this unquestioning acceptance of Mastery can lead to subtle and overt exploitation.

While I have no doubt that many of these instructors are highly capable and knowledgeable, their use of Master or Grandmaster actually strays from tradition. These titles are a purely Western construct, vestiges of 1950s WWII and Korean War veterans who brought back stories of incredible

martial feats. Neither Chinese nor Japanese martial jargon uses of these terms, eschewing them in preference for the more modest Sifu and Sensei (1) – both just simple words for “teacher” (disclaimer: since I only know Chinese and Japanese, I cannot speak for other Asian languages). Master and Grandmaster are simply erroneous translations that found their way into martial arts culture when it was transplanted to America.

In the case of a Chinese martial arts instructor, the term Sifu (shi-fu) (2) is the combination of two characters: “teacher” and “father.” From this terminology, we see that martial arts school, or kwoon (wu-guan) is viewed as an extended family unit with the Sifu at the center. The Sifu’s teacher is the Sigung (shi-gong), or “teacher grandfather.” The Sifu’s wife is the Simu (shi-mu), or “teacher mother.” Male students who began training before you, and are thus senior, are your Sihings (shi-xiong), or “teacher older brothers;” female seniors are your Sije (shi-jie), or “teacher older sisters.” Students junior to you are your Sidai (shi-di) and Simei (shi-mei), or “teacher younger brother” and “teacher younger sister,” respectively. Your Sifu’s own Sihing are your Sibak (shi-bo), or “teacher older uncle”; his Sidai are you Sisuk (shi-shu), or “teacher younger uncle.” His Sije and Simei are your Sigu (shi-gu), or “teacher aunts.” There are extended relations such as cousins, great uncles, and so forth; however, these terms are not used as often.

This familial view stems from Confucian thought, which played an integral role in the development of Chinese culture. Just as Confucian values extolled the virtues of respect for elders, parents, and teachers, we find clear lines of respect toward seniority and instructors within a Chinese martial family. However, the various titles do not imply a higher level

of capability. Further, the linguistic names for relationships all use the term shi, or “teacher.” I believe that this tells us that we can learn from any one in our martial family, regardless of their seniority with relation to ourselves.

Of course, there are teachers outside of your own martial family, whom we call Sifu . (Shi-fu). In this case, we use a different character and pronunciation for fu, which also means “teacher.” It is a title of respect, from which the English term Master probably arose. Ironically, many professions use this Sifu, including taxi drivers, cooks, and the like. Some teachers, who are widely recognized for their ability within their own martial style and in the martial arts community, might posthumously be referred to as Josi (zong-shi), which literally means “ancestral teacher.” Perhaps the term for Grandmaster stemmed from this term. Yet another similar concept is that of Sijo (shi-zong), which is Josi flipped backwards. It refers to the founder of a specific system. For example, Sijo Bruce Lee is considered to be the Sijo of Jeet Kune Do.

Traditionally, a student might have two different kinds of relationships with his Sifu. Regular students are called Siuto (xue-tu), which translates to “student.” These are the various people who join the class; some stay for two classes, some stay forever. It does not really matter, just as long as they learn or at one time learned from the teacher. This relationship is based on Confucian respect: Once a teacher, always a teacher – Even if you get better than your own teacher! In fact, it reflects very well on your teacher if you surpass him. Traditionally, you can only have one Sifu, though nowadays, people are constantly switching and changing their instructors.

Another, deeper relation between Sifu and student is the Todai (tu-di), which is often translated as “disciple.” After a formal Tea Ceremony, where everyone dresses up in their Sunday’s best and the Todai kneels while serving his Sifu tea, he is virtually considered an adopted son. This requires a lot of dedication and responsibility. Traditionally, it meant jobs such as keeping the school clean, collecting tuitions, and other similar duties. Then and now, it creates a lot of room for abuse from an unscrupulous Sifu, who may often hold out the potential of learning secret or advanced technique – for a fee.

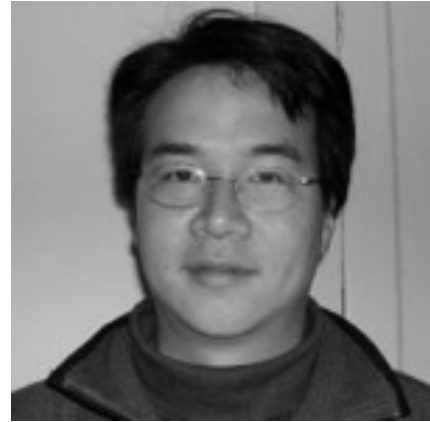
Because of these potential abuses, and also 50 years of rejecting traditional Confucian culture, modern mainland China embraces a martial culture similar to that of Japan. Instead of using familiar relationships, a teacher is simply called laoshi — which can be translated as “teacher” or “coach.” Even so, regardless of whether your instructor is your Sifu or your Laoshi, the Chinese mind never views him as your Master. Such terms are reserved for religious leaders, saints, and the like.

NOTES

1. Sensei literally means “born first;” the same characters in Chinese read “xian-sheng” and simply mean “Mister.”

2. Since workers from South China first brought Chinese martial arts to America, Cantonese terms were used. I therefore use Cantonese descriptions, with standard Mandarin Romanization in parenthesis.

Coming from a family with several Western Medical Doctors and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) practitioners, John Kang was exposed to acupuncture and herbal treatment during his teens. At that time, his uncle and current advisor Hsiung-Fei Kang had immigrated from China and showed John the use of moxa treatment and herbal medicine. While living in Taiwan, Chang started an acupuncture apprenticeship with Doctor Betty Lung and had his first chance to treat patients for common ailments such as headaches, back pain, insomnia, and others. He began formal study of TCM in 1999 at the Meiji College of Oriental Medicine in Berkeley, CA. Kang also has a passion for martial arts. He began studying Yang Taiji when he was 10. After a long hiatus, he resumed formal training in Shaolin martial arts in college. Since then, he has continually learned several different styles such as Shorinji Kempo, Chen Taiji, Western Boxing and Wrestling, Thai Kickboxing, Yang Taiji, Xing Yi, and Water Boxing. However, his main love is Wing Chun Kung Fu , which he learned from Sifu Lo Man Kam (the nephew of Bruce Lee's teacher, Grandmaster Yip Man). With Sifu Lo's blessing, John started teaching Wing Chun in 1999. Chang currently runs the 'Traditional Asian Health Center' in Richmond, Virginia.



© 2011, IMOS Journal. All rights reserved. Please contact the author directly for permission to re-use this material in any other medium or location.