

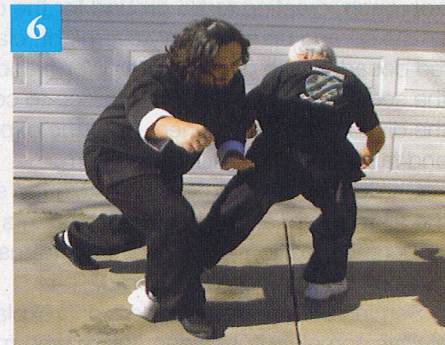
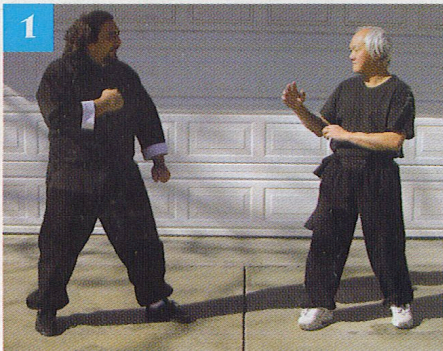
# Alive and Well



NG GA KUEN, THE  
ART GRANDMASTER  
ARK Y. WONG MADE FAMOUS, REMAINS ALIVE AND WELL  
AND PRIMED FOR A 21ST-CENTURY COMEBACK

By Mario Figueroa and Francisco Aguilar





**Seming faces his attacker with a right hand ready (1). The attacker opens with a left circular block, attempting to grab Seming's forward hand (2). Seming pulls in his right hand to avoid the grab (3) and leans to escape the attacker's right forward knuckle wrap. Seming rotates to his left and delivers a left backkick (4). He follows with a left circular back strike (5) and a left leg strike to the enemy's forward leg (6). The attacker's balance is disrupted (7).**

**N**g ga kuen or five family style was the first kung-fu style taught to non-Chinese in the United States. From the 1960s through the 1980s this style, also known as five animal kung-fu, defined kung-fu and influenced thousands of would-be martial artists around the world.

After the death of its famous and charismatic leader, grandmaster Ark Y. Wong, in 1987, the style began to lose visibility and with the closing of the famous Wah Que studio in Los Angeles' Chinatown, in the early 1990s, the style vanished from public view. With the passing of time, the style was virtually forgotten by the Chinese martial arts community and the martial arts world at large.

### KEEPER OF THE STYLE

Ng ga kuen, however, is alive and well and being carried on by grandmaster Wong's grandson and the current authority on the style, Ma Seming, who inherited the style from his grandfather and continues to maintain its identity and traditions. A humble man, Seming does not use titles and does not assert his position in the system. Instead, Seming follows a philosophy that can be described as a blend of simplicity, Chinese kung-fu tradition and Western pragmatism.

He does not seek students or openly publicize the system, preferring instead to have students seek him out. For those who find him, he is friendly, kind, sharing and informal, but once training begins he is tough and demanding, yet calm and patient.

Fiercely loyal to the tradition he inherited, Seming upholds the teachings of ng ga kuen and the moral principles that are the backbone of all Chinese martial arts—respect, honor, humility, honesty or as he calls it, the "Code of Chivalry." Respect your country, follow its laws, respect your parents and be obedient, respect your elders and learn from those before you, and respect others and be of service to your community. In the past, few students were interested or receptive to the moral code of ethics that is intertwined with kung-fu training. Neither was there much interest in the cultural aspects that are also inseparable from kung-fu.

Students were interested in learning how to fight. Today, more and more students want to learn the deeper aspects, to get the complete picture. Seming believes that students can truly benefit from learning these traditional aspects of kung-fu to build personal character, establish firm moral principles and promote social values.

Seming's leadership style has not been without its difficulties. The strong presence and direction that ng ga kuen once had under grandmaster Ark





*Seming faces his attacker in a side-standing pose (1). The attacker moves in with a right kick (2) and Seming intercepts the strike with a short left bridge block and quickly hooks the leg to trap (3). He then strikes the shin with the right dropping bridge hand (4). The attacker continues with a right circular backfist (5). Seming raises his right hand to meet the attack (6) and moves in with a left palm slap to the side of the head (7). Seming grabs and locks the fingers of the left palm block (8) and adds a tiger palm and rake to the face (9).*

Wong was replaced by Seming's unassuming and passive approach, creating fertile ground for the opportunistic. Martial artists sprang up seemingly overnight, claiming to have studied decades with grandmaster Wong and to have been given the secrets of the style. With no one to contest them, some of the dishonorable flourished, all at the expense of the name and fame of the ng ga kuen system.

Challenges also came from within the style as well, when the all-too-familiar story of elder students laying claim to the leadership position and appointing themselves as the leader or inheritor of the style occurred.

Seming shrugs his shoulders and explains, "The truth always comes out; besides, those who matter know who I am." He does not engage those who detract him, nor does he try to bring down those who make false claims.

### TRADITION MEETS INNOVATION

Seming prefers to use truth and fact to counteract misinformation about the style. A true technophile, he uses the Internet and his personal Web site to post authentic knowledge and information about ng ga kuen for all to reference. He also uses the Internet as the medium to train students remotely through his "Internet Correspondence Program," which works via streaming-video lessons. The remote student will then film and post his progress, which Seming critiques and then films detailed corrections. Of course, face-to-face training is a part

of the program and is scheduled as often as possible, but the core of the program is the remote training via streaming video.

A unique part of Seming's distance training program is what he calls "virtual sparring." In virtual sparring students and Seming exchange attacks and defenses, and anyone can respond to the other's last move. Virtual sparring is Seming's brainchild and while created merely as a fun experiment, is demonstrating to be of value, generating much discussion and fast becoming an integral element of the overall program. Sections have been added where participants are required to use specific methods and techniques from their ng ga kuen training, and there is a "No Rules" section where anything goes.

Seming is happy with the initial results of his distance-learning program, as it allows the ng ga kuen system to reach interested students who would not have otherwise have been able to train under his direct guidance. While still under development and in the early stages of deployment, participants from Canada, Mexico and across the United States already are benefiting from this unique program.

### KUNG-FU IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Over the years, Seming has developed a theory about the relevancy and adaptation of kung-fu training to the needs of modern society. Kung-fu practice can and must be associated with desirable benefits in today's world. All serious kung-fu practitioners know that training helps enhance other



physical and mental activities. This concept is commonly generalized and alluded to in the advertising and promotion of individual martial arts schools. However, more in-depth and detailed research and testing must be done to show concrete evidence of the advantages that kung-fu training provides.

Kung-fu training generates improved strength, balance, flexibility, stamina, reflexes and speed, as well as enhanced breathing, calmness of mind and even improved mental capacity and memory. Shouldn't this translate into improved performance on the football field, the tennis court, the courtroom and the classroom?

"It does," Seming notes, "but it needs to be proven and accepted as fact." Once this happens, kung-fu will gain a valuable position in today's society, as it had in centuries ago but for other reasons.

"If you know that kung-fu training will help your career, your ability to make a living, to be a success in society, then you would be motivated to train," he adds. "It makes kung-fu training practical and real, and makes it worth the investment of time and effort." Seming has developed methods of training ng ga kuen utilizing modern sports such as football, baseball and soccer, which clearly show the connection between kung-fu and improved performance in contemporary sports.

"In the future," he says, "kung-fu could be part of the regular training of professional athletes and eventually should be part of K-12 school curriculum."

## PRESERVING THE IDENTITY

Although he promotes creativity and innovation, Seming is passionate about maintaining the true identity of ng ga kuen. Over the years, there have been those who have made changes that are incompatible and have altered the spirit and essence of the style. This is where Seming draws the line. He is not opposed to creativity and, in fact, encourages innovation within the style as long as the system's concepts and methodology are maintained.

"That is how a system continues to improve," he says. "Understand the style, make it your own and then you can use the art to create, but it will still be ng ga kuen." Thoughtless additions from other styles or incorporating forms from incompatible systems, however, only serve to water down the original teachings and can make a style unrecognizable.

"It's like learning the alphabet and grammar and then writing a wonderful book," he insists. "But if you don't even know the whole alphabet, do you mix Chinese characters in and then try to write a book? You get garbage. First learn the alphabet and then you can write your book."

Because of this potential loss of identity, Seming has documented the standard curriculum for the style and is actively pursuing proper use of the ng ga kuen system name as well as the use of his grandfather's name, Ark Yuey Wong. Here, Seming is taking a firmer stand. The curriculum shows the core of the style. Practitioners, instructors and students can determine if what they are practicing is ng ga kuen or some-

thing else. If it does not follow the core curriculum, if it has forms or methods that are different, then it is not ng ga kuen. This information empowers practitioners involved in the style to compare and, if differences are noted, ask questions.

## SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

Over the years, many misconceptions and inaccuracies about the style have surfaced and continue to be propagated. This has caused confusion and has forced some to question ng ga kuen as a legitimate style of kung fu. Here are clarifications to some of the more common misconceptions:

- **Ng ga kuen is derived from choy li fut.** The five family style, ng ga kuen, is not choy li fut, which some erroneously put in their lineage charts. It is a system composed of selected techniques from each of the five family styles of fut ga, hung ga, choy ga, lee ga and mok ga.

- **Ark Wong taught the five animal style.** Ng ga kuen style contains some of the most extensive animal forms of any style in existence, but it is not correct to call it the "five animal style." The five animal forms are part of the system but do not make a system on their own. In fact, the system contains forms from 10 animals in the curriculum and has additional animal forms and techniques that are supplementary.

- **It is only external.** Ng ga kuen is a complete system and contains internal methods, meditative practices, conditioning, weapons, wooden dummy, plum blossom pole training, sensitivity training, chin na, dim mak and much more, but it is first and foremost a combative system of kung-fu.

- **Ark Wong made up the style.** Ng ga kuen was not made up by grandmaster

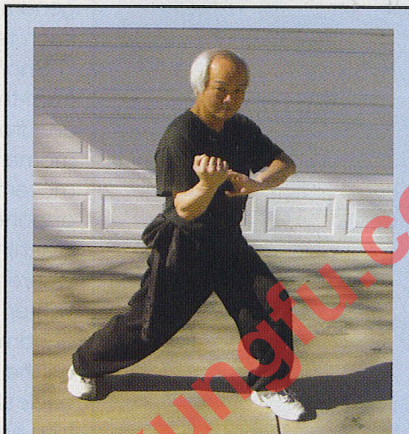
Ark Wong, but was taught to him as a specific style by his teachers in China.

- **It is the same as ng cho kuen or kung-fu san soo.** Ng ga kuen is not the same style as five ancestor fist (ng cho kuen) and is not related to kung-fu san soo, which has a different five family heritage.

## A COMBAT STYLE

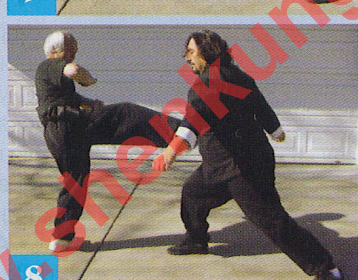
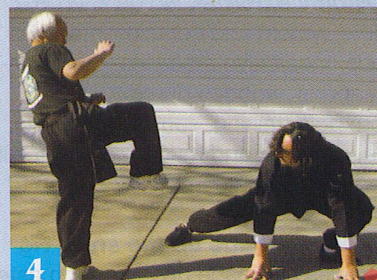
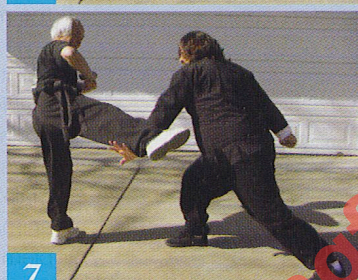
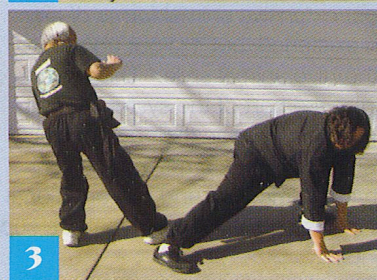
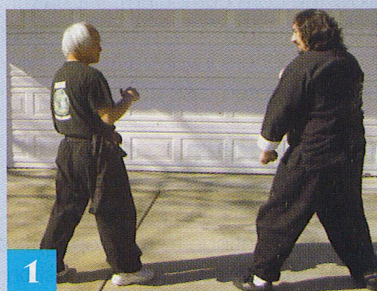
Seming does not consider ng ga kuen to be a visually attractive style, but anyone who has seen the system's crane set or any of the other animal forms will attest that this is a visually stunning system. "Maximum power and efficiency with the least amount of exertion," notes Seming, is the system's trademark. The style is rich in exercise routines that stress the basic stances, footwork, breathing and power generation.

Conditioning of the body is also stressed and the style includes conditioning drills for virtually every part of the body. Forms are taught slowly and in great detail to emphasize the many different applications that can be derived from each movement. Patience is needed, since it can take months or even years at the higher levels for a single form to be completed. Sparring stresses the myriad applications encoded in

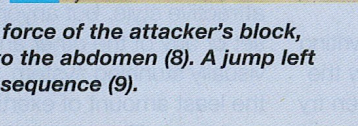
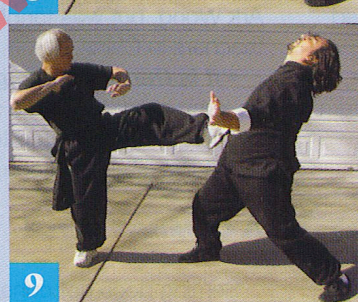


**A trademark of ng ga kuen combat, the kiu sao or bridge hand extends to the elbow and can be used as a thrusting move (chum kiu) to disrupt an incoming attack or as a closing movement to cover multiple attacks.**





**The attacker approaches Seming (1) and fires a left punch to the face (2). Seming leans away (3) and avoids a left back sweep by lifting his front leg (4). The attacker continues his forward momentum and unleashes a left hook to the head area (5). Rather than block the strike, Seming uses his right to push in the same direction (6). Seming sends a quick kick with his forward leg (7), which the attacker blocks with his right arm. Using the force of the attacker's block, Seming goes over the hook to kick to the abdomen (8). A jump left kick toward the face completes the sequence (9).**



the forms, but now in a real-time, random manner. Focus is placed on the difference in how the applications play out in combat versus programmed training.

"Practice is practice but fighting is real," Seming maintains. Students must understand and recognize the difference. While training is demanding and physically draining, safety is always a primary consideration.

"What good is learning kung-fu if you get hurt while train-

ing?" Seming asks. This does not mean that contact is discouraged. On the contrary; realistic fighting is emphasized and even though control is expected, proper safety gear reduces the chance of injury.

One of the advanced concepts of the style is to master the forms, internalize them thoroughly and then forget them. At the very highest levels the movements are short and the stances are high and relaxed. Head movement, leaning and short back steps are used to avoid and evade oncoming attacks quickly and with reduced movement and projection. This makes the ng ga kuen fighter quick and stealthy and minimizes his telegraphing of movements. These same side, back and turn movements are used to create momentum and generate power as they flow into other movements, each feeding on the last.

Short strikes and snapping power also come from the flicking movement of the hips and waist and from sinking in the stances at the precise moment. Bumping or intercepting the opponent's movement with the hips or the legs causes the opponent's movements to be cut short before reaching peak power and momentum. In situations where other stylists would step back, the five family fighter will step in at an angle to break up the oncoming attack before it is fully developed. When on the defensive, grabs, pinches, knuckle wraps, back slaps, finger jabs, elbows and palm strikes turn each defense into a painful attack meant to discourage the opponent's intent and to disrupt his timing and flow. And while this may not look like the forms and techniques of the style, all these short movements are embedded in the style. Their effective use is only achieved after consistent training of the style's forms and techniques.

## CONCLUSION

For almost 20 years, while Seming has been quietly and unassumingly continuing his grandfather's legacy, he has been using his own way to promote those aspects of Chinese kung-fu he believes are most important and relevant for current times. The utmost authority and perhaps the only one that fully realizes the depth and greatness of the ng ga kuen style, he goes with the flow and teaches those who want to learn. Doing this with no ego and little reward, he remains an example of modesty, humility, simplicity and patience. For almost 20 years, the style has been underground yet many continue to seek instruction. With sifu Ma Seming, the style retains its authentic essence, its original identity yet improves with a good dash of Seming's flavor, with his innovative thinking and his creative spirit. Ng ga kuen, the art grandmaster Ark Y. Wong made famous, remains alive and well and primed for a 21st-century comeback. 🐼

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