



Meeting the Masters: William Cheung & William C. C. Chen

Over 50 years of training in budo, I have been lucky enough to meet or train under many notable martial artists. This year, I want to share my impressions, some deep set, some fleeting, about the men and women I met on the way.



In the 1970s, second only to Bruce Lee, the most famous Wing-chun practitioner was William Cheung, who was known for his fighting ability as a student of Yip Man. In Australia, where he settled, the tale that preceded him was that he had fought off 15 sailors in a ship's cabin on the way there.

Coming from Hong Kong and living in Australia, Sifu spoke English, of course, so there was little barrier to asking him questions. He had probably heard them all before—too many about Bruce Lee, in my opinion—but he tolerated them and was direct about the technical questions, as well. I had been exposed to quite a bit of his Wing-chun already, probably because of the many books and articles that had been published about him due to Lee's popularity. For example, in sparring Sifu Cheung concentrated on his unique stand-sideways-and-slide-in entry. I thought I had invented this when determining how to handle a visiting karate-ka who was much faster than I, but perhaps I had caught the idea peripherally while reading an article about Cheung. At any rate, I could duplicate it without a problem. *Chi-sao* (sticky hands) was quite another matter, however. Nearly everyone in the seminar found it challenging, and I was no exception, but I have to say that that modicum of experience, even if frustrating, set the stage for my using a modified chi-sao in our Seiken Budo system.

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One of my aiki students had been studying Yang T'ai-chi in Boston under an instructor who was studying under William C. C. CHEN in New York. Chen visited for a t'ai-chi-practitioners-only seminar, but I was allowed to attend simply because of my time-in-grade (and because my student asked permission). Chen was known not only for his having studied under CHEN Man-ching, but also for instructing professional boxers (and sparring with them) when he was in his fifties. "Oh, sure," said I to myself sarcastically, "the guy is about 5'6" and has a single hair sprouting 10 inches out of his chin, and I am supposed to believe he spars with pro boxers." O ye of little faith!

He taught 3 short seminars: Form, Push-hands (*Tui-shou*) and Practical Sparring. I stumbled through the form section, but had less trouble with the push-hands. Although I was not great at it, my aiki experience allowed me to adjust to pushes and pulls, and not to automatically oppose them, so I was about as skilled/unskilled as was the average t'ai-chi student. I did not get to spar him in the third seminar, but I did watch carefully as he donned boxing gloves and took on opponents half his age. From my point of view, when someone tried to hit him, he was not there and simultaneously used his avoiding angle and energy to counter.

The result was as if the attacker were hitting himself, or walking into a turn-style backward only to be banged unexpectedly by his own movement. If that wasn't impressive enough, Sifu Chen was also able to perform the same feat against several of the rapid-fire boxing combinations that his opponents threw at him. He was never hit.

When he saw that I was able to adapt to the drills he taught (probably due more to my aiki and boxing experience than to my Shotokan), Sifu Chen publicly noted, "Those who have studied a long time, regardless of their art, often discover t'ai-chi principles on their own." He hadn't pointed me out, but I felt it was both an indirect complement and a source of great inspiration for my ongoing studies.