

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Learning to Let Go

Charisma, Habitus, and the Semiotic Battery in a Chicago Kung Fu School

By

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Introduction

“Energy can’t really be explained; It’s the final part of Wing Chun to understand,” I was often told by the sifu¹ of this Chicago kung fu school. These martial artists refine a sense for detecting and projecting forward force up through their bodies from their heels to their arms while tensing the muscles in their arms as little as possible. The energy concept, as they use it to test and train one another, is that sensation of stalled or released forward momentum they detect, test, and manipulate in themselves and each other. Sensitivity to one’s own and others’ energy is the final, infinitely refinable element of their techniques, and demands encountering one another's bodies in a pseudo-sparring game they call *chi sau*.² In pursuit of personal improvement, they must encounter one another physically and socially, and the resultant social corporation which facilitates this is referred to alternately as their school or their kung fu family. This social configuration centers on one teacher, the sifu, from whose instruction in the Wing Chun tradition flow the physical and moral lessons the imparting and reinforcement of which are the locus of relation between members of the school. For the sifu and those twelve or so members who make up their most devoted followers and consistent attendees of the school, the dual projects of physical and ethical refinement obtain an auratic appeal. These projects are missions, worthy in and of themselves. This is not to say that the other more sporadic followers of the sifu do not align themselves with these goals, only that they attested to me a lesser degree of enchantment with the mission.

My informants’ pursuit of physical refinement in the techniques of this kung fu tradition invites elaboration, but the reader’s preconceived notions will be sufficient for the time being.

¹ 师傅, “master and teacher of a skill.”

² 黏手, “sticking hand.”

The moral education is the critical element for understanding the argument of this paper, and so will be explicated immediately. A certain form of self-denial, often manifest in a contempt for the antisocial consequences of pride, is taught by the sifu, himself an adult convert to Buddhism. The higher calling of the sifu's teachings and the organizing social object for the community, the composite image of a Wing Chun tradition which is assembled around those teachings, is then the escape from the depredations of radical individualism—but the separate, pragmatic social object of this school is an infinite process of individual self-improvement. Their transcendence, or at least attempt at transcendence, of American liberal individualism through terms which are legible within that individualism is an ideological paradox which puzzled me, though neither the students nor the sifu attested any sense of this seeming contradiction. In this article, I will attempt to leverage social theory to explain that the contradiction which I, the ethnographer, encountered was merely the mirage of an outsider. In so doing, I invite the reader to consider with me that within American cultural subjectivities lie the semiotic resources of their own metamorphosis. And, since such a comment is hardly more advanced than doctrinary Boasianism, I will begin a suggestion that chronotopic alterity is the semiotic basis for some or all Weberian charismatic authorization, taking this as a particularly clear case. In other words, I will make two arguments. First, that these martial artists create a communitarian alternative to radical individualism by recombining resources of meaning from within American liberalism, putatively through foreign meanings and practices. Second, they create an authoritative vision of tradition by imagining two separate time-spaces, one immanent and one both desirable and distant; one is their immediate American context in which activity is future-oriented towards anticipated violence and one which blends personal and legendary history to create a perpetual and pure entity, Wing Chun tradition, which transcends time.

Methods and Confidentiality

Having anticipated the argument, I will digress to the conventions and decisions I have implemented in the presentation of evidence here. Each of these decisions has been made to one of two ends: first to streamline evidence to be wieldy for the reader and second to protect the identities and interests of my generous hosts. The ethnographer's duty to protect and respect his informants has not seriously impacted my analysis of the present question, but I personally value it so much that I will proceed with an abundance of caution.

Only when an individual's personal biography and traits are illuminative of evidence attached to them will he be identified as a particular character. The sifu, the most recurrent such character, will retain only his title; others will pseudonymously receive the untranslated homeric epithets of Ulysses. This artistic choice emerges first from the parallel romance of martial heroism in the American imaginary of both sinitic and classical stories, second from my own position as a recovering classicist; the winding direction and ethnographic interests of the *nostoi* genre are familiar to the anthropologically inclined, so I would invoke their last remnant, *The Odyssey*. This will be done with both the anonymity of the informant and the school in general in mind.

Cantonese loan words, which are critical to this community's daily practice, do not belong to the Chinese dialect with which I am familiar. Where reference materials contradict my informants' preferred spellings, I have elected to employ my informants' selection over the

reference's. The sifu teaches their students to read Sun Tzu, not Clausewitz: their martial practice is art, not science. All formulae with which I attempt to describe the career-cycle or other social patterns of the community are the imposition of averages by the scientist onto a body of actual situations. While I use averages to render this community more legible to you, reader, we will both do well to remember that no human life is lived on average; stars don't share a boatswain's concern for constellations.

Brief Background Information

I will try to briefly summarize several pertinent features of the school and its ordinary functions. The school is open for 3 sessions of 3 hours each week; set in a studio which occupies most of the teacher's home, it is normally attended by between 6 and 18 students who arrive and leave as they please. The teacher is a white native of the greater Chicago region who traveled regularly to train with a master in Hong Kong for nearly two decades. Students practice either individually or by inviting one another to one of 9 partner exercises of increasing intensity. In this unstructured atmosphere, students often break to chat and half the teacher's time is spent in conversation with students. He will, for the other half, observe the students from their desk and intervene to advise or teach when consulted or when he sees an opportunity to improve a pair of students' practice. This advice is delivered through demonstration, swapping into the practice as a partner, or through a small lecture. More senior students mimic this activity with juniors and are occasionally directly asked to do so by the teacher. Whenever they enter or exit the school, students shake everybody's hand one by one. Students refer to each other by first names, but the teacher is always called sifu. The techniques, exercises, and forms are only referred to by

traditional Cantonese names; the technical vocabulary of the school is entirely composed of 192 Cantonese loan phrases. Every training session overruns its time by between 15 and 75 minutes, and the close is never formally announced.

These represent the quotidian essentials of social life and practice during the school's open training sessions. Two other common arenas of encounter must be borne in mind as auxiliary sites. The sifu frequently takes appointments to open the school for private lessons with one or two students. In these sessions, the student(s) practice for one or more hours under the direct supervision and advice of the sifu; senior students are the most common participants in these private sessions, and are never enlisted to teach private lessons for their juniors. The category is the meal. Either during their roughly quarterly training camps, or sporadically following an ordinary session, the present students, the sifu, and occasionally the sifu's wife eat together. My informants have consistently pointed to these events as evidence of the familial quality of their community, as their social bonds are demonstrated to exceed the confines of kung fu as an orienting social object. These two comprise the community's anticipated situations which are extraordinary to the ordinary functions of their institution.

Theory

This paper will set, with help from others, three social theorists in a conversation about the organization of social groups. Starting with concepts from Maximilian Weber's structuralist theory, Sigmund Freud will remind us of the internal experience of the social individual and Pierre Bourdieu can illustrate that the ingrained and embodied ideological knowledge reconciles

Weber's social abstracts to Freud's feeling individuals. We will also find an argument that the quality of otherness is an important meaning-making resource for persuasive social visions. To do so, we will combine Edmund Leach's work on symbolic inventories of persuasion among the Kachin, Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the intercommunication of alternative narrative time-space, and an adaptation of the first thesis to William Mazzarella's vision of the charismatic experience as the inflection between the immediate and the transcendent.

First I will introduce an interpretation of Edmund Leach's analysis, which represents this paper's novel offering. My discussion of the assembling of meanings in this kung fu school hinges entirely on one of Leach's key insights. Where he dealt with the malleability of ritual communication in cycles of political formation in the Kachin hills, we will be interested in martial artists assembling malleable meanings out of a battery of maxims and bodily movements. Both cases are what I will call a **semiotic battery**—in Leach's words, “a language of signs in terms of which claims to rights and status are expressed, but it is a language of argument, not a chorus of harmony.”³ Establishing and maintaining a set of complex and opaque meanings is a critical element of this kung fu school's situation and the concept of the semiotic battery will serve our analysis greatly.

The first section of the case study will be concerned with seven key concepts. From Weber: Tradition, Charisma, and Authorization. From Mazzarella, Transcendence and Immanence. And Aura from Walter Benjamin. **Authorization** and **Authority** to direct the proper

³ Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, 278.

social order⁴ are, for Weber, contingent on narratives of legitimacy because “no system of authority voluntarily limits itself to the appeal to material or affectual or ideal motives as a basis for guaranteeing its continuance. in addition every such system attempts to establish and to cultivate the belief in its legitimacy.”⁵ He offers three grounds of legitimacy for authority, of which we are concerned with only two: **tradition** and **charisma**. The former are those “resting on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of the status of those exercising authority under them”⁶ and the latter “resting on devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him.”⁷ It is also critically important that, in Weber’s conception, charisma decays into one of the other types over time through **routinization** as it “take[s] on the character of a permanent relationship forming a stable community ... [as] in its pure form charismatic authority may be said to exist only in the process of originating.”⁸ Mazzarella formulated the particular definitions of semiotic immanence and transcendence for a reading of the other founding sociologist, Emile Durkheim, but here they will serve to enlighten a reading of Weber. **Immanence** and **Transcendence** are, respectively, “the latent resources of energy and Imagination that reside in a collective and the material and symbolic structures through which those resources can be actualized and given form, thus also spinning off new potentialities.”⁹ Last in this section comes aura and auraticism. In Benjamin’s original essay, he was concerned primarily with the aura of art objects. To paraphrase, the **aura** of an entity is the

⁴ For our case study, the simple authority to make taste, to choose what is and isn’t Wing Chun, what is and **Good** Wing Chun, and to transmit that taste to others suffices, while the theory is generally applied to larger and graver phenomena.

⁵ Max Weber, *Theory of Economic and Social Organization*, 325.

⁶ *ibid.*, 328.

⁷ *ibid.*, 328

⁸ *ibid.*, 364.

⁹ William Mazzarella, *The Mana of Mass Society*, 63.

quality of its unique existence in a tapestry of overlapping schemes of meaning, “traditions” Benjamin calls these, which creates a psychological distance between it and the person or people comprehending it.¹⁰

Next we set out for psycho-analysis. The key terms used here for interpreting Freudian theory will be his term **ego ideal** and **idealization**. The ego is the psychological self which understands and acts in the context of images of the world. But the ego ideal is that image which “Gradually gathers up from the influences of the environment the demands which that environment makes upon the ego and which the ego cannot always rise to.”¹¹ It is the personal correspondent to legitimate authority in the social order, the narrative of the legitimately extant individual ego. The composite image of the ego ideal internalizes ideology as psychological impulse when we encounter the second key phenomenon of section two, idealization. Here the image of a second object of attraction is set up as the ego ideal itself, and “gets possession of the entire self-love of the ego.”¹² For Freud, the composition of group identities hinged on multiple individuals idealizing a shared object into at least a partial place of an ego ideal.¹³ That communal description and uptake of an idealized object is an ideological project, which sets the stage for section three.

The third section will take account of five key concepts: chronotopes, voicing, interdiscursivity, recontextualization, and habitus. For Bakhtin, the literary theorist, **chronotopes** are archetypes for “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, 6.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 52.

¹² *ibid.*, 57.

¹³ *ibid.*, 60-1.

artistically expressed in literature.”¹⁴ For our purpose, we will extend them to be narrative archetypes for segmenting the relationship between time and space. The ideological dimension of arguments through differently organizing space-time are the primary concern for the chronotope concept in this article. **Voicing** is the aspect of any particular meaningful performance that it is a recombination of preceding assemblages of its same class and, critically, the “who speaks and under what conditions he speaks ... determine(s) the word’s actual meaning. Here we will be interested in the voicing not only of bits of language—words, but of bodily movements which have been rendered interpretable through language. This concept is highlighted by Richard Bauman’s work on the limited transferability of meaningful segments, which gives us the next two key concepts. **Interdiscursivity** is the quality of particular performances of a meaning-bearing segment of activity to be reminiscent of, influential on, and influenced by other instantiations and **recontextualization** is the process of meaning-bearing performances actually being readapted to new contexts to which they have been removed.¹⁵ Let us bring those concepts down to earth with an example. The *pak sau*¹⁶ movement in Wing Chun has the same basic bodily movement any time it is used: the arm drives an open palm forward along the shortest available path. In any particular context, pak sau can be recontextualized in the ‘text’ of the fight to deflect a strike from one’s vitals with the palm, parry a strike with the forearm, collapse an opponent’s stance by pushing a compromised joint, or as a palm strike to the ribs, solar plexus, or head. But the pak sau emerges from all of these contexts in its null practice form, in which it has only a ritual meditative role. The composition of that movement owes to the fact that it exists interdiscursivity between all those actual contexts of use, all of the actual instances of the

¹⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 84.

¹⁵ Richard Bauman, *A World of Others’ Words*, 3-11.

¹⁶ 拍手, “slapping hand.”

predecessors who developed it, and the ritual practice of drilling solo forms. Such is the nature of technique.

Habitus, for Bourdieu is the “system of schemes perception and thought which cannot give what it does give to be thought and perceived without *ipso facto* producing an unthinkable and an unnamable;”¹⁷ in other words, the unassailable structures of ideologically making sense of the world which we acquire from our experiences. Because of the not-consciously-examined dimensions of the habitus, doxa as he calls them, we find the “correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organization [and] the natural and social worlds appears self-evident.”¹⁸ This working ideological knowledge into the subconscious is taken further by Loïc Wacquant, whose work on boxing adapted habitus to the martial arts. It is, for Wacquant, the pedagogically reproduced and incarnate form of the habitus concept which allows us to assess the trained body as an ideologically permeated object.¹⁹ Ways of acting and knowing do become ingrained in the most basic assumptions we as living animals turn subconscious as a function of our intellectual existence, but so too with our corporeal reflexes. We need for this argument a concept of embodied and body-ful knowledge. Now, with an arsenal of fourteen key concepts, we can enter into the case study.

Authority, Charisma, and Tradition: Learning to Feel

¹⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 18.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 164.

¹⁹ Loïc Wacquant, “Habitus as Topic and Tool,” in *Fighting Scholars: Habitus and Ethnographies of Martial Arts and Combat Sports*, 24-5.

When I entered the field, I intended to investigate the semiotics of agency in charismatic authorization, in the sense of charisma which Weber introduced in *Economy and Society* and the lecture “Politics as a Vocation.” Charisma in this conception is the phenomenon in which people feel the call to adopt new modes of action through the revelatory encounter with the extraordinary, often a person of extraordinary character. Of course, whatever is ‘extra-’ to the ordinary is dependent on that particular form of ordinary. The experience of charisma is troublesome for the ethnographer in that it is necessarily auratic, in the Benjaminian sense: it disintegrates outside of its time and place. Anyone who has frustrated him or herself pursuing true love or sluicing it through imagistic metaphor after it has grabbed hold of him knows the experience of the ethnographer questing after charisma as an absolute social force. Weber’s whole discourse on the routinization of charisma presages that only a mediated form of charismatic appeal is both stable and observable enough to be the object of ethnographic quest. My task then was to investigate how the followers of a charismatic leader make sense of their social relationships to the resulting community and figure the personhood of the leader. That project receded and became folded into this one, but the place of Weberian authorization makes for a great outset point in the communal accomplishment which is our present object of analysis.

With a topic in hand, I went in search of a particular field site. Every kung fu school only runs if students pay to keep the lights on and the teacher fed. Students only attend to teachers whose instruction promises them more than the money with which they part. Any teacher with a stable operation will have a long-term circle of these true-believers, and in a society which makes an eccentric hobby of kung fu training, these true believers can only be called to their path by encountering an inspirational model. Because, as I will develop, the core of activity in this

kung fu school is an encounter with a transcendent social object, tradition, the charismatic function of the sifu resembles a religious character. Stanley Tambiah's work on Thai forest saints and the followers they instruct in religious meditation provides an interesting complication to Weberian Charisma which is useful here. Tambiah's vision of a Buddhist charisma reconciles the charismatic individual's need to prove himself to maintain his claim to institutions because his "personal qualifications are achieved by relating his effort to an institutionalized and formalized vocation."²⁰ Therefore, because of the transcendent quality of the concept of the Wing Chun tradition, the charismatic authority of the sifu is not necessarily subjected to a deeper stage of Weberian regulation as these martial artists' veneration of tradition could suggest. In whatever state of regulation, I hardly imagined encountering Weber's extreme case of charisma operating in a market economy. I predicted that any sifu would be, as a precondition of their profession, a person possessed of the extraordinary powers of personality and influence through whom charismatic calls are embodied in a person and emanate outward to others.

Instruction is consciously decentralized at the particular school I entered, though the sifu has the social capital to evaluate, correct, and advise students in their martial development. While the sifu's sole judgment determines when a student may take another step into the system, a journey which seems to take about 15 years, students will practice individually, with their seniors and, eventually, with their juniors the vast majority of the time. As they practice, students use the forms to cooperatively analyze their techniques and recycle advice which through great repetition may correct disincentivized bodily habits. This means that the lessons are directions which are taught by the sifu to be anticipated and received hundreds of times over through reiteration with one's fellows. If the authoritative structure of this volitive institution is a

²⁰ Stanley Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*, 332.

charismatic sort, it clearly cannot be housed solely on whatever talents or extraordinary aspects the school's proprietor possesses, as it is diffused throughout the family.

An example is in order. Wing Chun traditions, as a general rule, hold that minimizing excessive movement maximizes the efficiency of the body in combat, a desirable outcome. Because of this, Wing Chun practitioners orient their strikes by tracing the straightest, shortest possible movement for the elbow joint. In what I am told was a common experience, I found my natural inclination when striking is to arc, such that my hips may be easily engaged. This violates the rule of maximally efficient movement, as keeping the elbow closer to the center-line of the body is a shorter, straighter movement. Every single student I practiced with, from the very new to the very practiced, had to advise me to tuck in my elbow, and I myself advised such of students somewhat my senior on occasion. The originary point of every instance of that piece of advice is, in one reading, the sifu of the school. The right to advise being so diffuse that, of the hundreds of times I heard it, only twice did it come from the central teacher would surely derive from the fact that the rule originated from that teacher, right?

Not so. My informants trace the chain of uptake and recitation back far beyond their own sifu. The sifu encourages this by continually reciting stories from his own formative years in the practice; he reinforces to his students that he has always been and will always remain in the position of the learner just as they will. He is particularly fond of a historical tale of when a Wing Chun master was convalescing on his deathbed and declared he finally understood *siu nim tau*.²¹

²¹ The first elementary "form" (sequence of choreographed techniques for ideal practice conditions) of the whole martial system. It took 45 hours of practice for me to consistently perform it correctly enough to begin noticing and correcting mistakes beyond mere choreography.

Especially for the more junior students, he points to their *sigung*²² or *sitaigung*²³ as the originators of particular, sound pieces of advice, both of whom he believes to have a deservedly illustrious reputation in the international Wing Chun scene. And this would make for an interesting case of routinizing charisma developing into a traditional authority. By this, I mean an authority to decide what the correct meaning of an interpretation of a traditional movement or maxim and the incumbent responsibility to preserve the spirit of the tradition, which authority then can leach down through every student of the school as an inherited peer, making sifu merely the first among equals. But this is not so. Sure they own and operate the communal training space, but the sifu's unilateral powers over access to the institution are not merely material. They retain an honorific title, while the cantonese sibling terms for co-students have not been adopted. They are given the communal deference for frequent storytelling. And he has spent more time training with the old masters in Hong Kong than any of the students. The deference paid to him is consciously set out as of a different sort. As one junior student, whom I will call Polytle,²⁴ told me late one evening, comparing this to other martial arts schools she had attended, "you just can't find somebody like him anywhere; he has such a way with telling stories ... and stories from his life and from history which are really unique; he's different." The source of direction and appropriate models of habit is not, in an ultimate sense, the sifu of the particular school. Nevertheless, the sifu must be an attractive candidate for an elevated social position.

My informants explicitly pointed out to me the actual resting place of direction and authority many times before I understood that social fact for all its gravity. Roughly once a

²² 师公, "Sifu's sifu."

²³ 师太公, "Sigung's sifu."

²⁴ Πολύτλη, "much-enduring [fem]."

quarter, a training camp is hosted at the school where students currently in residence and old students who have moved away are invited back for focused training on a Saturday and Sunday. Each day has a morning session, a lunch, and an afternoon session; and on Saturday a potluck dinner is hosted. After training together throughout the Saturday morning session, the sifu's final lecture before lunch concluded on this very sentiment. He told his students that, yes, he is their teacher, but that they all shared one common teacher: Wing Chun itself. From the venerated sigung and sitaigung, to the more mytho-historical figures of whom the senior students and sifu were able to tell me, the Wing Chun tradition was a personified interactant to whom all shared access and, crucially, responsibility. As best I can tell by practicing at this school, they do not mean that any particular person is possessed of the personification of Wing Chun and enacts it, consciously or unconsciously. Rather, doing the moves with the right understanding makes Wing Chun seep into your nerves, sinews, and bones. As you feel the movements getting more perfect, your understanding of them deepens and you learn the meaning of subconscious movements you couldn't identify before. The forms in conversation with each other, if one does not move mindlessly, reveal more secrets of bodily movement the more deeply ingrained they become. So the personification of Wing Chun is, on the bodily level, the growing habit of body itself. By metaphorical connection, the compounded memories which make up this reflex in the individual body are mapped onto a long chain of instruction in the tradition, which causes the bodily and abstract Wing Chun to be identified as the same. The end result is that a social field of experience in the abstract form is allowed to be imagined as a united and singular social object: the Wing Chun tradition.

Leaving the nature of that obligation aside for the time being, I must reiterate that the Wing Chun tradition, as my informants figure it, is a primary interlocutor against whom they judge their own practice. Of course they recognize that Wing Chun is not literally a person, but the incorporeal body of principles and practices has a way of collapsing all of the instants of actual reception down into one, composite whole against which one's technique can be checked. Students regularly remarked to me that Wing Chun speaks to everybody slightly differently because everybody's body is different, but so too were there bodily differences in all of the sifus in whom the tradition lived before they received it. The aggregate advice of more than two²⁵ centuries, continually enacted by all of the practitioners, applied to practices for isolating and studying particular bodily movements turn the tradition into a type of puzzle kit. Practicing Wing Chun alone or with a partner is a process of learning to listen to a silent teacher.

As a student stews in mantras, of which the first learned and the most important, according to the sifu and his senior students, is "stay with what comes; go with what leaves; when the way is open, charge forward," and practices moving their body, he will encounter inefficiencies in their movements which can be polished out. Since they hold, as the sifu teaches, that the system of practice and analysis contains all of the tools with which to perfect one's bodily habits, all students have equal access to the tradition-as-teacher. When they advise one another, they do it as the most recent voice in a phantom chorus of the chain of sifus and their students who all had a hand in developing the interpretation and practice of each particular

²⁵ It is not clear how long Wing Chun had existed with its present, distinctive principles and may even have developed entirely in the Qing Dynasty. But it cannot have existed for less than two centuries. While I think a 400 to 600 year history is probable, too much conjecture merely compounds rumor without adding to the present study.

movement. This is the second, abstract Wing Chun for which the bodily Wing Chun is metonymously interpreted.

Let us return briefly to our opening anecdote, the energy concept. Proper control over one's own and an engaged combatant's mix of muscular relaxation and tension makes or breaks actual applications of Wing Chun, but it is also reflected in one's relative facility in the chi sau game, which is their primary partner exercise. This game has nine versions of increasing intensity, but the ideal type is the sixth. Here, the two partners face each other and assume *yee jee kim yueng ma*,²⁶ an (at-first quite taxing) training form of the variant of horse stance which gives Wing Chun its distinctive pigeon-toed aesthetic.²⁷ They touch forearms and perform a rolling motion called *poon sau* or *luk sau*²⁸ by shifting through three of the eighteen "hands" of the Wing Chun system. One participant, normally the junior in my observation and virtually never the sifu, breaks the predictable pattern of movements on one or, ideally, both sides at once by launching some kind of attack with one of the eighteen hands. The other partner defends themselves on that side with an appropriate hand technique while launching an attack in response. Depending on the experience of the participants, the pair may pause for more or less time to assess possible responses to particular attacks and allow junior partners or observers to propose or attempt multiple solutions. One of the simple calculations which students are expected to internalize over time is that defending oneself in a particular instant is better than not; attacking with one hand while defending with the other is better; choosing a defensive technique which allows both hands

²⁶ 二字掛羊馬, "goat straddling stance."

²⁷ Wing Chun's training stance requires the toes to be turned inward in such a way that the hip abductors, among other muscles, are trained for endurance. The form of the stance for actually fighting is not pigeon-toed like this and is much less strenuous, allowing the proper core, glute, and abductor position to be held for long durations.

²⁸ 碌手, "rolling hand."

to counterattack at once is best. Refining the body towards reflexively selecting ideal counters with greater frequency requires the serious development of Bourdieusian habitus, but more on that in a moment. The other element of drastic habituation which is critical to this game²⁹ is learning to sense energy in oneself and others in these moments of practice. Becoming aware of the degree of the “relaxed but with forward intent,” to quote the sifu, aspect in oneself and others is the truest mark of experience, as it can only be increased by thinking through bodily sensations within the linguistic-ideological framework provided by the Wing Chun tradition. The sifu and one’s fellow students can awaken you to the existence of Wing Chun’s lessons, but bodily dialogue with the tradition-object itself, merely mediated by the teachers’ acts and words as memories, is where the student develops their sensitivity to energy. Therefore, the social object which promises to originate and authorize models of physical comportment³⁰ is the Wing Chun tradition. I must add what I mean by tradition-object here. I use tradition-object to mean the battery of semiotic resources which composes the abstract Wing Chun tradition and the embodied compound of reflexes, both of which make up the personification of Wing Chun. It is of interest because it can be conceived of and interacted with as a distinct social object, as Sigmund Freud used the term ‘object’ to refer to the entity upon an image of which mental activities can be performed. The tradition-object, which is itself a compound of a habitus and a social field, is that complex whole referenced in one of the sifu’s statements at the training camp: “Wing Chun teaches us how to learn from it.”

So, we have a tradition as Weber describes it—a system of authorization for which “legitimacy is claimed for it and believed in on the basis of the sanctity of the order and the

²⁹ And, in fact, to the proper practice of the solitary forms.

³⁰ —and, as the “Wing Chun Ethical Code” posted by the school entrance attests, moral conduct

attendant powers of control as they have been handed down from the past, ‘have always existed.’”³¹ A tradition from which authority, in a limited form, can and does flow to boot! So the traditionalizing charisma route of analysis, as with so much in the encounter between theory before the field and reality in it, needs to be discarded. The peculiar egalitarian structure of power can now be explained by having ongoing interaction with the revealed tradition, this insight which results from being the correlate of legitimized authority. So what “order” has “sanctity” and what are the “attendant powers of control?”³² The order here is not a dominating social order of everyday life, but one of lesser magnitude. The order which service to the tradition sanctify and realizes is the taking of fraternal bonds with other practitioners, the treatment of the sifu as the first of equals, and the elevation of the Wing Chun tradition as both the source of proper teachings and an entity to be served unto itself. The only power of control in this sub-society is shunning, for the state retains all legitimate powers of violence in Chicago. I will investigate an illustrative example of this power in the next section, but it will suffice to say now that the sifu, as the chief agent of the tradition and also the proprietor of the institution has absolute power to eject students who violate the sanctity of the fraternal bonds and the obligation to the field-object of tradition. These martial artists already admit some innovation. While all of my interviewees and most students I spoke with held some veneration for the tradition itself, unspoilt preservation in its most exquisite form has never been attested to me as an objective.

Instead, recall that the transmission of the tradition is figured as incorporating the bodily variations of the previous generations of teachers. Further, the sifu and three of the senior students, most enthusiastically a key informant I will call Polytropos,³³ informed me that sifus

³¹ Max Weber, *Social and Economic Organization*, 341.

³² Max Weber, *Social and Economic Organization*, 341.

³³ Πολύτροπος, “many-turn.”

have a responsibility to purify the system for their students by modifying it to be more fully in line with the underlying principles of the tradition. With each passing generation, it is figured, the tradition will become more itself, more aligned with its goals of efficiency and relaxed energy. While this particular sifu has not yet made a signature alteration within the lineage, he has in recent years begun to practice and teach his own sifu's innovation, a final open hand form which combines movements from all three open hand forms, the wooden dummy form, the staff form, and the knife form. I propose that what we find here is in fact a periodic charismaticization of tradition, a phenomenon Weber obliquely admits of but does not discuss at length. While the tradition remains the auratic object, the sifus are by both the right of their greater refinement and by their demonstration of extraordinary attraction, embody and modify tradition over time. The auras of the tradition, which gives all participants the right to helpfully hone one another's practice, and the charismatic sifu, who can attract followers and embody the timelessness of the tradition despite innovating because of their personal influence, are obliquely melded into a single authoritative structure through which the school functions. There is a need from within the ideological framework of infinite refinement for there to be singular practitioners, but there is also a need in a new cultural context, centuries and an ocean away from the early development of this communicative chain in Chinese village secret societies, for the persuasive individual to make the tradition immanent. The charismatic is an adaptation of and auxiliary to the tradition, which has become, and may have either always or never have been, a transcendent object. This hybrid authorization structure is developed as William Mazzarella describes charisma to be the condition of possibility for the nomos-eros dialectic: the point of relation between immanence and transcendence.³⁴ In the erotics of the kung fu school, this distinction is above all temporal. Where the tradition-object rears is envisioned is the link between the extremely immediate

³⁴ William Mazzarella, *Mana of Mass Society*, 160-1.

context, perhaps only as long as a minute muscle twitch, and the extremely abstract co-spatiality of millions and millions of moments, recorded in the fast twitch nervous system, in the chain of transmission in education, and in the stories of the forebears. So the many encounters between the practitioner and Wing Chun as tradition-object carry with them and imbue the authority of that object's charisma. This is responsible for the cohesion of the consciously decentralized field of interaction which is the school.

So, in a round-about way, approaching the question of authorization in this kung fu school revealed a charisma of tradition dynamic which falsified my earliest hypothesis. But it also demonstrated that there is a(n occasionally personified) social object of the Wing Chun tradition with which members of this community can develop a relationship. The art itself 'has' expectations not only of the physical refinement of the students, but also the refinement of their character. I will next try to illustrate that the communal vision of the tradition's ethical imperatives reinforces itself as an ego-ideal oriented around the abandonment of pride and self interest. This is then taken up, to a greater or lesser degree, by the students and the sifu alike.

Ego Alignment: Losing the Self Together

So, the desired tradition-object is a social reality in this community, especially for the close circle of the most dedicated students, who make up about three fifths of the total population. But how does a constructed and communicated object like this come to arrange a sense of fellow feeling which this 'kung fu family' experiences? I would like to recall the Freudian concept here: alignment with the ego ideal. The Oedipal narrative with which it is

framed aside, Freud proposed that there is a type of volitive social group formation which occurs when “A number of individuals who have put one and the same object in place of their ego ideal ... consequently identif[y] themselves with one another in their ego.”³⁵ The ego ideal, the aspired to state of self-perception, for these martial artists, at least as it relates to their practice, is not only influenced by but is shaped as the embodiment of the tradition-object. The desirability of coming into line with that object motivates several undertakings by the members of this kung fu family which I will present here briefly. Most basically, it is the generally accepted drive to continue practicing alone and together. As one junior but extraordinarily devoted student I will call Megaletor³⁶ is fond of saying, “you’re never done getting closer, but that’s kind of the point. That’s why I love it.” The most explicit display of this communal project to reform the ego to accord with the venerated tradition-object are the sifu’s stories. A consummate and constant storyteller, the sifu performs one genre of story which is concerned primarily with the fallen and despoiled nature of people who are driven by their own pride or greed, especially when and where it disrupts the sanctity of a kung fu tradition. We will return to this genre later, but in this section I will point to one recurrent story which is set within the community itself, the student who left in disgrace. After that, we will discuss one student’s, the aforementioned Polytropos’, unique relationship to tradition and an incumbent desire from that especially close relationship. Then I will discuss Megaletor’s position relative to the tradition, who seems to form the perfect opposite of Ptoliporthois. This is all to illustrate that the moral-ethical side of this community’s attraction to students as an organizing principle, sublimating and defeating the impulse towards

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 61.

³⁶ Μεγαλήτωρ, “great-hearted.”

selfishness, is an effective social force, an Weberian enchantment, and not an ideologized false-consciousness.³⁷

The sifu often dispenses his lessons through stories, either historical or personal. Very often, the climax of training sessions takes the form of students spontaneously gathering around to listen to a story the sifu is telling to one pair group until the whole school has elected to pause practicing to listen in unison. Only rarely does the “corrupted by self-regard” genre of story occupy this central position; these are normally delivered to smaller groups in practice or during pre or post practice chatting. One story which never occupied that central place is that of a former student whom I shall call Ptoliporthois.³⁸ He was a talented student of Wing Chun at the school for many years, one of the sifu’s earliest students, and also studied other martial arts. In this school, sparring is shunned as unnecessarily dangerous in favor of chi sau. The sifu tells his students that chi sau, the traditional way of practicing with another’s body, is a more effective training tool because it reduces the risk of injury, invites cooperative contemplation, and allows encounters to be drawn out much, much longer than an actual fight. Ptoliporthois met regularly with other martial artists outside of the school for a mixed martial arts fight club. Interested in developing the most effective suite of techniques however possible, he began to pollute the system of movements and economy of motion which Wing Chun techniques are refined towards with external techniques. Feeling this tactic of mixing techniques in order to become as proficient in violence as possible as quickly as possible, he developed a sense of pride in his own power to harm others, and came to disregard the internal principles of any particular martial arts

³⁷ For devoted marxist ideologues, whose reading of an obscure master’s thesis is quite unlikely, I ask that you indulge my conceit that there are desirous social ideologies which amount to more than mere fetishism. “More things, dear Horatio,” and so on.

³⁸ Πτολιπόρθιος, “city-sacker.”

tradition as restrictive. The Wing Chun tradition was no longer an end in and of itself. Not being in love with the tradition with its coherent system of bodily movement and codes of personal conduct, he began to act out in antisocial ways against the kung fu family. This culminated in him, while playing chi sau with a very new student, using a leg-sweep to knock the junior down. While at advanced levels Wing Chun provides means to protect oneself against leg-sweeps, this student was far too new to know about or employ them spontaneously. And what's more than the blatant display of domination over a younger brother, the Wing Chun system itself never employs leg sweeps as a technique. Ptoliporthois had violated his obligations to the community and to the tradition-object at the same time.

Now, this is the way the sifu related the events to me. I spoke to the young student from the story, now one of the most senior students in the school, and they corroborated the details of that particular event. I will say, though, that for the purposes of this article the reality of the events is irrelevant; but that this story is told by the sifu with this particular moral, and is taken up by the students is the demonstrably real phenomenon of interest. Ptoliporthois' violation of the communal bond and the sacred obligations to the Wing Chun tradition are obliquely connected as resulting from one another. Their common cause, however, is always pointed out to be his "ego."

The tale continues that the sifu pulled Ptoliporthois outside of the school space beyond a closed door and dressed him down for violating his social obligations to the tradition, to the young student depending on him, and to his own honor as his teacher. It was fine that he pursued his own prerogatives by practicing many arts for increased combat effectiveness outside of the

school, but he had a responsibility to separate himself from that goal when he was with this community. He could not think only of himself here. The reprimand concluded, Ptoliporthois faced the final opportunity to renounce his pride and realign himself with the community and the principles of Wing Chun. But his ego was too strong. He raged against the sifu for holding back his students in observation of an arcane tradition and for daring to scold him for being rid of it. He renounced the community and, as the story was told to me twice, left in disgrace with much hatred in his heart and even more self-regard.³⁹ After this primary traumatic exile, the sifu tells me, they began to interview every prospective student. At this school since then, the sifu meets to assess the character of every aspirant before granting admission. Any who are found to be too proud, to seek violence, or to be too faint of heart to have a chance to remain in training for the lengthy process⁴⁰ are turned away.⁴¹

It is my contention that the Ptoliporthois story is preserved and retold as the ethical antimodel for individual community members. A less personally charged version of the story with the same themes and a similar plot is a historical form told about Bruce Lee set in Hong Kong with the famous Wing Chun teacher Ip Man. The story of Ptoliporthois receives more serious uptake because of its grave nature, as roughly half the students still harbor an affection

³⁹ *Nota Bene*, I report here the common shape of the narrative as I received it. The narrative and its structure are the evidence of chief interest rather than the historical reality of the events and actors in it. Presumably Ptoliporthois' relationships with the school and Wing Chun took some other form from the orthodoxy I describe, thus the exile.

⁴⁰ The sifu has not yet taught the entire system to a student such that they could be found worthy to take on students of their own and honorably inherit the lineage, though several have come close.

⁴¹ I was provided an exception to the last rule on the grounds that the Wing Chun tradition deserves the honor of being considered by scholars seriously and my treatment of the community would prosper the project of preserving Wing Chun. My obligation to anonymize my informants prevents me from promoting the particular lineage I was invited into, but it is my hope that the current project pleases my informants in exchange for their generosity.

for Bruce Lee, though I have been asked not to give any indication as to who the Lee apologists are. I will return to why exactly the antimodel has to be set in Chicago instead of Hong Kong in order to be effective later when I discuss two major Bakhtinian chronotopes that are necessary for understanding this community, but for now suffice it to say that Ptoliporthois' story is the clearest illustration in the negative that a proper adherent to the authoritative social object of the Wing Chun tradition's alignment of their ego ideal with that social object does, in fact, seek to sublimate the venal self.

Now, with venal self interest established as the anti-object, we have a tradition whose affective call for ego alignment occurs entirely in the negative space of avoiding evil. The avoidance of evil, however, leaves space to develop projects of sustaining or developing the good. The students and sifu who would, in a relationship to their kung fu family and their tradition abandon their venal self interest, the project of personal refinement which the practice offers on the surface cannot and will not suffice. The longer students remain in training, the less time they spend working on new skills with their seniors or their peers. The close circle of the three most senior students at the school will play chi sau with another of such advanced stature perhaps once in a week, if even that frequent. Rather, advancement in the art and seniority in the community carry an ever increasing share of responsibility to one's juniors. The culmination of this, of course, is a sifu whose own sifu is deceased and who is very distant from their equals such that practice with them is rare and precious. The sifu of this school fits that bill. I say this to illustrate that the one positive project which transcends the self is the focus on beneficence to the immanent fellows who make up the kung fu family. In its most immanent form, the community

replaces personal development as one is seen to come into closer communion with the tradition, to have drawn closer to realizing the ego ideal which is the community's organizing principle.

However, there is another project which develops for those most dedicated to the Wing Chun tradition as an ego ideal, and it grows out of the familial model of their social structure, the fact of aging, and the treatment of the ageless chorus of bodies as a distinct entity: preserving the tradition. Perpetuating the family and the tradition by passing on the system of bodily movements and the corpus of advice which illustrates its underlying principles, both ethical and physio-mechanical, is able to replace infinite self-perfection as the ideal outcome of practice. Over time, the personal honing which makes up the practice on its surface level gives way to a centering on the community and the abstract object. All of the most senior students have attested to me that they share their sifu's devotion to this end and it seems that the more experienced a student is the more fervently they believe in this mission. Two particular cases of concern with the fate of the lineage come to mind as particularly illustrative, those being Polytropos' and Megaletor's.

Polytropos is one of a few students at the school of Cantonese descent. Born in Chicago's China Town to immigrant parents, they left another martial art to study Wing Chun, as it originated in the same Chinese province as their own ancestry. He is one of the most senior students at the school. He espoused to me, on these grounds, a special degree of concern for the Wing Chun tradition. Polytropos himself reminded me late one evening, that the school and the tradition as it is preserved there exists in the United States. The people who make it up are Americans, not Chinese, and however faithfully they join the chorus, it will be with American

accents. For Polytropos, his sense of heritage was critical both in the attraction to this community and its tradition-object at the outset of their career and also to their ongoing obligation to that abstract organizing object. In an interview, he told me that he admired and believed in the collective mission to preserve and perpetuate Wing Chun as a tradition and an art; further, he was concerned about the particular lineage which this school represented. Polytropos' sigung was a great master of the art who preserved it to the greatest degree of purity possible, even developing that fourth open hand form as a concentration of all the forms he inherited. Running a school in Hong Kong, he taught the whole system to many students over his long life, of whom several have carried on the lineage by becoming sifus themselves. The sifu at the school I studied, however, has not yet completed the extremely long process of passing the complete system down to a student who was young enough to have a long career as a sifu himself or herself. Playing the numbers and given how long it takes to be completely confirmed in the tradition, Polytropos felt in our interview that his sifu was running out of time to perpetuate his own lineage. His anxiety around preserving not only Wing Chun in general, but the particular lineage which he can confirm first hand completely honors it in a pure form, may result in part from his position in between the geographic and cultural spheres which this very lineage straddles. For him, the lineage of this school demonstrates that Wing Chun can be transplanted in a form, true to its transcendent character, of exceeding the close boundaries of nearby space and time, from Guangdong province to Chicago, which parallels the story of his personal heritage. The transcendental quality of Wing Chun for Polytropos refers to its state of abstraction and the ability to transform or alter the people who are open to encountering it. It is figured to still work as a disembodied interlocutor between cultural contexts. So, service to the abstract social object, the tradition as an ego ideal which organizes this community is instantiated (Polytropos' is

simply the most illustrative case I heard) as a particular practical concern for the perpetuation of their own community's legacy in the great chain of transmission. Here the transcendent concern becomes immanent in this relatively calm, but striking anxiety.

More striking to my mind, as I pondered the prospects and stakes behind perpetuating their individual lineage in addition to the whole Wing Chun tradition, was the figure of Megaletor. A young student still in the early years of their training career, Megaletor is possessed of the same warm charm and force of personality which seems to mark the sifu out as the worthy charismatic avatar of the auratic tradition-object. Unique among all the junior students, he espoused to me a fervent belief in the project of conserving the spirit of the tradition every bit as devoted as the sifu's. He is ecstatic in the responsibility of transmission, has a talent for the physical practice, and is enthusiastically receptive of the ethic of selflessness which organizes the ethical dimension of their Wing Chun education. He was at first, to my eyes as the outsider, the ideal answer to Polytropos' anxiety about the sifu producing at least one successor to perpetuate the lineage. He is young, talented, and fully receptive to the social processes which call people to the role of sifu. While I asked Megaletor if he harbored ambitions of becoming a sifu himself when their own teacher nears retirement, his answer is strictly confidential. I remained puzzled that such an ideal candidate, even this early in a career, would not become a source of hope and with it security in the project of perpetuating the tradition. Speaking with another senior student later, I was told of a pattern that kung fu careers have a tendency to burn bright and then stop suddenly before the training is complete. The traumatic example of Ptoliporthois, which was brought up in my interview with Polytropos, is a prime example of talent culminating in disappointment. So the congruence is most likely the dramatic phantom of the ethnographic

observer, and is not, publicly at least, accounted in community itself. This same senior student told me, however, that he had never seen a youngster with that much enthusiasm exceed the normal sixth month plateau, so Megaletor remains an extra-ordinary case.

So what? What does the situation of this particular school's personalities and project of honoring its tradition through perpetuating their lineage show us? It shows how the transposition of the social object of tradition into the communal ego ideal becomes a real force in the social life of this community. It motivates the artists to consider their practice and one another in particular ways, namely ones which uphold the ethical principle of selflessness to others and selflessness to the disembodied chorus. This is the transformational point. Here the auratic object can actually transform a practice of self-perfection into a pursuit of self-denial. By beginning with immediately practicing techniques for pragmatic purposes, individuals can pursue their own internal optimization for the daily concerns. But when the mechanism for that self perfection allows them to communally encounter an abstract object, part of the incipient project becomes getting away from their own ego. The radical, western individualist has received a language through which to be liberated from the depredations of self regard—salvation.

Repetition and the World: Doing and Being

In this section, I will employ a few disparate social theories to analyze the phenomenon on which this paper focuses. The aim is to demonstrate that there are ongoing chains of continuous uptake and recontextualization which use this community's ideological accomplishment of reversing self-orientation towards prosocial ends. I begin with a chronotopic

analysis of the East-West opposition which the family members use to make sense of their tradition-object and its place as an epistemological transplant across the Pacific Ocean.

Afterwards, I turn to Richard Bauman's work on interdiscursivity and recontextualization to make the case that the physical practices of this kung fu school creates a bodily form of the Bakhtinian voicing concept which allows participation in the transcendent tradition-object to immanentize within the body, below conscious consideration. This last point relies on and leads into taking up the Bourdieusian *habitus* concept, with which I hope to argue that the ultimate realization of the anti-ego ego ideal is realized⁴² through the unconscious knowledge of the body, returning at last to the energy concept with which the article started.

The last section ended on a denigration of our cultural construction of 'the west'⁴³ which I heard repeated consistently across my time in the school. To assess the place of the East-West dichotomy in this school, I will take up Mikhail Bakhtin's chronotope concept: a narrative time-space which can be inhabited or considered as an organization of reality. While Bakhtin, the literary theorist, proposed the chronotope as a theoretical tool explicitly for the analysis of long-form narration, I am following the tendency in anthropology to adopt the concept of the great dialogist as organizing social life as well, depending on the premise that human sense-making takes, in a fundamental way, narrative form.

The sifu and his senior students consistently invoke an east-west distinction in their project of moral education. The Sifu's explicit formulation of Eastern and Western chronotopes receives significant uptake on the part of students, especially the most active and enthusiastic

⁴² Literally made physically real

⁴³ Represented most acutely as the immediate present condition to which all members of the school belong.

ones. They are normally enlivened in semi-regular events of telling. The sifu will, at different points in the practice session, begin intoning an illustrative story for a particular lesson he is giving to a practicing pair of students. Often, others gather around as these stories continue and occasionally the whole school will forgo practicing to listen at once. These events are always spontaneous.

For this scheme, “the West,” let us say the setting of Chicago specifically, is characterized by modern, equal individualists whose happinesses are frustrated by their pride, greed, or ignorance. The ideal-type of violence the artists are preparing for, the commercialized institutions decried as corrupt in the sifu’s stories, and Ptoliporthois all inhabit this narrative ideological point. The opposition of the Present-West to the Historical-East forms one chronotope centered on a point of differentiation. But it is not only presentness which defines this conception of the West’s relationship to time. Rather, a sense of anxiety pervades it. Every moment is anticipatory of the next in a way which harms people. The demand for progress and profit, for endless growth, poisons the false presentness of this narrative time-space. “Chinese Culture” or “the East,” the sifu uses the terms more or less interchangeably, form an ideological assemblage of anti-modern subjects ensconced in relationships of responsibility to one another and to tradition whose authentic⁴⁴ lives are freed from commerce and characterized by humility and patience. The nature of time in this mytho-historic zone is critically different. Students in the stories that make this space up are very few and carefully selected for their ability to remain at any stage of training for any amount of time without growing impatient. The pressures of the market to ‘get one’s money’s worth’ are absent, and the relationship to time is never anxious. Not

⁴⁴ Authenticity, as my informants use it, carries the double meaning of self-honesty and fidelity to tradition.

only is there allowed to be a remote past in the mytho-history of this Wing Chun lineage in China, but each particular moment in that past is free from the anticipation of progress. The sifu talks about this freedom from time specifically as a virtue of the 'old way' of teaching. That dimension of time attaching to space raises the ideological subpoint of the East-West by Past-Present chronotopes to the status of a chronotope of its own. The 'authentic' Eastern ideological node is taken as a now unrealizable ideal and the Western setting to which it is opposed is a fallen condition which must be escaped to whatever extent possible.

These martial artists imagine a chronotope of the East which their sifu encourages them to emulate despite their inescapable position as Western subjects; maintaining the imagined irreconcilability to their place as Americans, they practice a liberal egalitarianism of free individuals which abrogates several of the trappings of the tradition they attempt to receive. For example, the artists use proper names for one another instead of the traditional Cantonese terms with which co-students address one another as siblings, except the sifu, who retains an honorific. The charismatized traditional authority of the sifu would seem to be limited by this adaptation away from his own ideological assemblage of the East into the West, but it does not. This is because the critical ideological distinction is delivered and reinforced narratively through persistent emergent performances of narratives. His personal propensity for storytelling happens to aid this process. But because the ideological distinctions of east and west I have laid out here live in stories, they are realized through narrative means. This is why it is so critical that the single overarching chronotope permits the two sub-chronotopes. The temporal structure of the stories reifies the ideological distinction being drawn and allows an alternative vision of the time-space relationship to become an ever-receding ideal. The demands on how one relates

periods of time in contemporary Chicago are different than the sifu and students' historical imagination of such demands in rural early modern China. Coming to terms with the incommensurability of narrative time as it relates to the two ideological nodes eases the admission that the pure ideological position which aligns with the Wing Chun tradition is not practically accessible, while allowing the striving towards it to remain a beacon of hope.

In this space of chronotopic interplay, the sifu and their students have developed a way to make sense of the transplant status of their tradition and maintain its position as a communal ego ideal as well as an authorizing object, without damaging its function. The confines of American, liberal individualism has been transformed into means both for identifying antisociality and for overcoming it. In what can be believed by participants to be purely an act of cultural reception, the semiotic resources at hand have been refashioned to address the some of the social grievances of modern alienation, within a cultivated space and, as the ambition of energy sensitivity improving conflict management skills would indicate, within the quotidian lives of the community's members.

This paper has gradually transitioned from the immanence of the body to transcendent objects like tradition, transcendence, and East-West chronotopes—and will now rapidly return to those more earthly concerns of the body. If the auratic, elevating experience of the kung fu tradition-object is especially concentrated in the sifu, we should remember that it is also emergent in the social life and bodies of their students, as their decentralized mode of instruction demonstrates. The reason for this is the immanent emergence of that tradition from within the body, growing ever more evident as trainees advance in the art. I mentioned earlier the way in

which innovation across subsequent generations of sifus as well as the adaptation to varying body frames is conceptualized in this community. I discussed how this further constructs the tradition-object as a century-spanning chain of expression, interpretation, and reexpression. I would like now to describe this as a particularly vivid somatico-lingual example of interdiscursivity as conceptualized in Richard Bauman's *World of Others' Words*, or recontextualization. Picking up Bakhtin's work in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*,⁴⁵ interdiscursivity is the aspect of any particular performative action (though originally conceived of only as the communicative performance of words) of having been modeled as a recreation of countless other instantiations, themselves recognizable imitations of another example. In this way, recognizable kinds of activity, as all such activity is performative even when it is also pragmatic, can emerge in social life.

The process of recontextualization is, in Bauman's simplest formulation, the "process ... Of extracting ready-made discourse from one context and fitting it to another." Here kung fu becomes both regulated and transferable. The 18 hands I mentioned before, like vowels, measurably are never performed in exactly the same way twice. The technique is instead in imitation of all such performances before engaged. Wing Chun physio-mechanical practice tends to make a percussive use of the palm and fist, while the forearm is used primarily for parrying. They conceptualize this as allowing external hostile energy slide off of the centerline of the body where it can damage both vital organs and the balanced posture which allow the Wing Chun techniques to strike with seemingly disproportionate force. For this purpose, the forearms are primarily employed. So every one of the 18 hands is built to be recontextualized as either a parry, a strike, or (as I am told is the ideal circumstance) both. They take advantage of the power of

⁴⁵ "We live in a world of other's words;" Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 143.

recontextualization by allowing one practiced movement, for which reflexes and energy sensitivity can be developed, to suffice where an art with a larger repertoire may employ separate tools.

This forms the basis of an integral part of the practice: the facility to rapidly conceptualize, employ, and name a technique go hand in hand. The chi sau game, as one of the most essential forms of practice, only works at its early stages when practitioners have a mastery over the language of the ideal types of strikes, the 18 hands and two kicks. Part of the training process in this community is the recall memorization of the Cantonese names of these techniques. When the practice of chi sau constructs a puzzle which the participants together attempt to solve, or else which the senior poses to the junior to solve, they use these lexical items to discuss the merits of particular courses of action. The use of language to communicate here is not an ancillary phenomenon. Of course, in an actual application no one is expected to declare the name of one optimal bodily movement. But the conceptualization of the movement as a lexical item allows it to be manipulable and to be set in semiotic relationships to other bodily movements to ease discussion. Connecting these items to the original language, despite the transplant status of the tradition-object, is a way of reestablishing the spatial and temporal collapse which recontextualization partially achieves.

Recontextualization of bodily movements becomes both the means of transmission and an integral part of the efficacy of the system. The practice itself furthers the ideological metabolization of interpersonal relation as taking into the body the communal whole, which

spans both time and space. So, how do we take up this inscribing into the body the deeds and words of others.

Finally, we come to the incarnation of the transcendent. This ultimate charismatic feat becomes quotidian as it is inscribed into the nervous system of the individual martial artists. Reimmanentizing into the individual body the ego ideal of the tradition-object through its recognized signs, the techniques which index it, allows the selfless ethic of the tradition to be reinscribed and transform the bodies, and ideally the essences, of the practitioners themselves. To describe this phenomenon I return to the Bourdieusian concept of *habitus* or, in a certain sense, second nature. The social patterns anthropologists seek to study emerge, Bourdieu says, from this type of subconscious knowledge making. These martial artists take conscious control of adjusting the body's inscribed knowledge through their training artifice.

The habitus, the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus.

Within this lies the key to the artists embodying and, at least in short bursts, achieving the ego ideal of the selfless individual. Creating the semiotic bridge between the higher ethical principle of anti-radical individualist selfishness and the perfection of the individual's body allows these martial artists to achieve, as a community, the considerable feat of leveraging the semiotic resources of American liberal individualism towards the defeat of its own depredations. They find familial bonds of reciprocity and obligation as well as more esoteric orienting bonds to the

tradition object itself as immanent phenomena, visible through a charismatic tradition, and then incarnate relevant meanings in the actual sinews of their body. The connection between the immediate and the transcended self requires, as its intermediary, the very institutional community which can perpetuate this ideological position. What they can achieve, as a self conscious transplant of a tradition-object is to make what would seem like a paradoxical impossibility their immanent social reality.

Conclusion

What I have attempted to demonstrate through the employ of disparate social theory is a cultural achievement on the part of this small kung fu family of Americans living in the city of Chicago. They have inverted western concepts of individualism to generate social bonds both immanent and transcendent which solve their feelings of real social problematics. I hope that I have also begun to demonstrate that within this system of relation certain charismatic appeals to authority function by nature of elevating ideological and chronotopic alterity, that the search for the other as an object for transforming the social body is a crucial element of the battery of semiotic resources humans can use for shaping our social lives. To adapt Leach's work on the pliability of ritual to what I have demonstrated of the pliability of habitus, I would rephrase an earlier quotation. The meanings we ensconce in our tales and bodies are "language[s] of signs in terms of which claims to rights and status are expressed."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, 278.

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