

Ip Sigong's Birthday

By Darryl Moy

Imagine when you are 85 years old that you are fit and healthy, lead an active interesting life and when you celebrate your birthday, 500 people from all around the world come to celebrate with you!

Almost twenty years ago I remember sitting in a restaurant in Manchester's Chinatown enjoying dim sum with my Sifu, Master Michael Tse, and some of my Kung fu brothers and sisters. Sifu told us that our Sigong, Grandmaster Ip Chun, would be coming over to give some seminars on Wing Chun. That was such exciting news, but at the time I did not realise how important an occasion this was and what a profound impact it would have.

That first meeting was unforgettable, but the thing that makes me smile the most is the fact that Sigong chuckled at me and said I was the most nervous student there and smiling said, "I am just a normal person". Since then over the years I have come to know Sigong more and whilst my nervousness is long gone, my respect for him as a person and awe of his amazing skill has grown.

When Sifu asked me, "Are you coming to Sigong's 85th Birthday?" I paused before replying, "Yes." Normally I would not have paused, but life has changed dramatically for me with the recent arrival of a baby daughter (I find I pause before making any decisions now). I think Sifu knew what was on my mind as he laughed and said, "Good! I already told Sigong you were coming." Of course, I knew it was Sigong's 85th birthday this year, but when the invitation arrived to attend his celebration I felt a sense of excitement and privilege. How could I not go?

So another adventure to the Far East was about to start. Only six senior students were making the trip this time, Mike Baker, Rick Charles, Shahriar Sepangi, Martin Gale, Peter Diesner and Darryl Moy, so it was a smaller, more casual affair compared to the large expedition of 2008 when nearly 30 students went to Hong Kong and China with Tse Sifu. However, it was similar in that Simo, once again scoured the Internet to find the best airfare and a meeting point and time was arranged. We even wore the same blue Wing Chun Ancestor Rules t-shirts, which were made especially for our last trip. Once again Sifu and Simo were travelling separately to us, and once again everything went smoothly.



A dry moment in Mong Kok

At 12.20pm on Thursday the 10th of September 2009 our flight took off, bound for Hong Kong. We arrived at little bleary eyed twelve hours later and headed straight for the airport train to Hong Kong Island and from there on to the MTR to Prince Edward station in Mong Kok. On our last trip, Hong Kong and Southern China was experiencing its coldest weather in living memory (it was colder than at home in the UK!). This time it was a little different, it was the end of the summer and the rainy season so it was 35 degrees and 80 percent humidity. Exiting the MTR station was

like walking straight into a tumble drier - and it was raining. Having lived in Manchester for 20 years, I am used to rain, but hot rain is something else altogether, and I never quite get used to it. The sights, sounds and smell of Kowloon, no matter how often you experience them, always take a while to get used to as well. But given the downpour that had begun we did not pause to take to in our surrounding too long.

We quickly headed for our hotel and piled into the icy, cold air-conditioned lobby, which was like walking to a fridge. Over the trip, this was something we had to be a little bit careful of, ironically, catching a chill from being inside! Once checked into our rooms, our stomachs dictated what to do next, so we all headed for one of our previous regular eateries which was conveniently just over the road from our hotel. We ordered a spread of noodles, rice and vegetables and hungrily devoured the lot. We also ordered our favourites drinks, which were hot watercress (Choy Muht) and honey or hot lemon and honey (Ling Muht). Once our hunger had been satisfied, our energy seemed to head south to our stomachs and so we all headed back to our rooms for a few hours rest.

As we headed back a text message from Sifu arrived informing us that his plane was delayed. So we decided to try and find out when it would be arriving. Armed with a laptop and an Internet cable we began to search flight numbers and airline websites, but for some reason we could find no trace of Sifu and Simo's flight. Then finally on Hong Kong Airports own website we found some news. It was not good news, just two ominous words, "flight cancelled". What an earth were we going to do now? It's a good job Wing Chun teaches us to relax and be calm when facing adversity, the worst thing we can do is over react and panic. When we Chi Sau, if we cannot go forwards, then we should be patient and wait and find another way. There was nothing we could do but keep our phones on and wait. After three hours sleep, there was still no news from Sifu. Sifu was to arrive at 9pm anyway, so we decided to stick to our original plan after resting and that was to go shopping.

Shopping in Kowloon is a unique experience. There are so many people and the hustle and bustle never seems to stop. Even in the hot, wet and humid temperature there were still literally millions of people getting on with their daily lives. We seem to have developed a tradition when in Hong Kong and this is that someone always wants to buy a new digital camera. A couple of the guys had had their eye on something back home and wanted to check out the deals in Hong Kong.

It seems that the credit crunch has been felt quite hard in Hong Kong as well as the rest of the world, as many of the camera shops that we had visited previously were gone. Fortunately, our previous favourite (at least the one where we got the best deals), was still trading and so the "candy box was opened." However, the deals were not sealed straight away as we thought a little more browsing was in order. At least we had our benchmarks to compare against.

We then headed for the Ladies Market on Tong Choi Street. Amongst all the stalls, the heat and humidity seemed to increase. The vast array of clothes, shoes, bags and gifts is always mind-boggling but, again, the heat and humidity did not seem to deter anyone from looking for a bargain. Who did it favour when haggling for a price, buyer or seller? It's hard to say. At the end of the day the day, if the buyer is happy and the seller is happy then what more can you ask for? Personally I found one pass through the market enough for me.

Then it was back to the camera shop as one of our members had decided on the camera he wanted and what he wanted to pay for it. So with purpose we all marched back down Tong Choi Street (stopping at an air-conditioned Starbucks along the way). However, another of our party was stuck between the dilemma of wanting a new camera but not needing a new camera. When has asked us what we thought, all our advice in favour or against just seemed to make matters worse. I guess there are some things you have to decide for yourself.

One camera was purchased quickly and effortlessly. However the "big decision" had still not been made. Then to make matter worse the shop assistant suggested another model which in his opinion was virtually the same but a good deal cheaper! By now it had begun to get dark and we all decided to eat and think about it.

Over Char Siu Faan (barbeque pork and rice) we tossed the question back and forth (and to be honest teased the purchaser endlessly) but in the end, he finally decided he would get it.

So paying the bill we raced out of the restaurant and headed back. It was getting late and the lights were all shining brightly and in our haste we passed by the shop completely. We retraced our steps only to realise the reason we had walked past was that the shutters were already down and the shop was closed! Fate it seems cannot be beaten.

However, not to be out done the others wanted to head off to the Night Market. Personally I was all shopped out (and I had not even bought anything) and something inside me was saying, "Go back to the hotel". Just as I arrived at the hotel, to my great relief Sifu and Simo were just coming out. "You got my message?" Sifu asked. I shook my head and told him nothing had come through on my phone. He smiled and then pointed to his forehead, his Sky-Eye.

I gave him an update on the day's events and we arranged to meet in the lobby at 7.45 in the morning to go and practise in a nearby park. The plan the next day was to go and practise in the morning, then we would then meet up with Sifu's family for lunch and then it was Sigong's party in the evening. Knowing Sifu and Simo had arrived safely, I fell to sleep very quickly and slept very well.

The morning came quickly, but as I had had a good nights sleep, I felt great. The others, however, were a little slower to get going. Apparently they had had another adventure all of their own. They went the wrong way, got lost, missed the market as it had closed and walked for miles until finding an MTR station. All of them, at one point in the day said to me, "I wish I had gone back to the hotel with you." On the way to the park we stopped to get some Daan Tat (Egg tarts) –another little ritual that Sifu had instituted last trip, and some drinks and then continued to our training spot we had found the year before.

As we drew near, something was not quite right - it did not look the same. Then we could not believe our eyes. "Our" basketball court had been turned into a croquet pitch! I did not even know they played croquet in Hong Kong. At least it had not been built on! So we had to find another spot. The only place we could find was behind a small power substation, the only problem was that the surface was tiled and in the damp humid conditions it was very slippery. So we gingerly did our warm up and followed this with Siu Lim Tao and Tsum Kiu (Wing Chun's first and second form). We then did some Chi Sau being careful not to slip over; at least it was a test of our footwork and stance. An hour and a half flew past and then it was time to go. By then a few locals had stopped playing chess and were watching us keenly.

We decided we did not need breakfast as we were fuelled up on Daan Tats so instead we went back to the café for a drink but we could not resist sharing a couple of plates of French Toast (Si Dor) Hong Kong Style (we were on holiday after all). Then it was back to the hotel to freshen up before heading off for lunch with Sifu's family.

On the way to the restaurant we passed through the Flower Market, Sifu joked that this was a Hong Kong style garden centre. That is one interesting thing about Kowloon. All the shops are in specific areas. There is one area where all the pet shops can be found, one for shoe shops, one for DIY shops and of course, one for electrical and camera shops. Picking our way through all the plants and flowers was actually quite tricky (though fragrant) and slowed us down quite a bit. Finally we made it through and found where we were heading for. It was a shopping centre (of which there seem to be an endless number in Hong Kong) and the restaurant was on the top floor. Waiting in the restaurant was Sifu's mother, sister and eldest niece. Soon after, all his brothers and their families arrived with their children, including two new babies in the family. We had a really nice time and got to catch up with Sifu's family whom we have gotten to know over the years.

The restaurant was also quite interesting as they had some new and different dim sum dishes that none of us, including Sifu's family had tried. Some were good and some were "interesting". The deserts, however, were delicious.

All too soon it was time to go. We took photos, said our goodbyes and waved as the lift doors closed to take us back down to the heat outside. It had not rained all morning and the sun was now very hot. As we made our way back, we were on the opposite side of the street to the flower shops and so we got back much more quickly than going out. This gave us some extra time and some people decided to wander around a bit more, whilst others decided to go back to their rooms to rest, but before splitting up we arranged what time to meet up and also to get all our gifts for Sigong together.

Five o'clock came very quickly and soon it was time to go. The restaurant was very close by, so we did not need to worry about that. There was some question about the dress code for the evening, but having been to Sitai's (Sigong's wife) birthday in the past, I knew it would not be black tie and so smart casual wear was the order of the evening. Also Sigong does not like very formal things. By now it had started to rain again, but as the distance we had to go was literally a stones throw away we did not worry about getting our party clothes ruined. A quick dash across the road and up some steps and we were once again inside a shopping centre and once again the restaurant was on the top floor. Finding the lifts proved trickier than finding the building, but soon we were heading for the top floor.



Tse Sifu enjoys a joke with his Kung fu brother

The doors slide back to and several familiar faces met us, as some of Sigong's students were waiting to greet the guests. It was quite traditional with a table covered with a red tablecloth and a big card to sign. After passing through the reception area and into the entrance, there was a large photo of Sigong and Sitai in front of a statue of Grandmaster Ip Man. It was great to see many familiar faces as Sigong's students waved and greeted us. We were then given a copy of a special brochure produced to celebrate Sigong's

birthday. We had already prepared a special birthday message for Sigong for this and Sifu had written an article in and it was nice to see that it had come out so well. Sifu had also written an article for it in Chinese, which was also great to see.

We were then shown the table plan, and it dawned on us how big this party was going to be. There were over 50 tables with ten people per table, which meant over 500 people. Talking to Leon, one of Sifu's younger Kung Fu brothers, he told me that they unfortunately had to turn some people away as there was not enough room. What a pity, but again it meant that we were even more privileged to be there. Leon led us to our table, which was number 13. Thirteen in Chinese is a lucky number and so that was a good sign.



Over 50 tables!

The room itself was very large. At one end there was a table all laid out in red, and this was obviously for Sigong and his family. Behind this was a small stage area and there was a camera set up facing this. All around the room were large flat screen TVs showing the camera's view. As the room filled up the noise, the atmosphere grew. We went to say hello to the people we knew and were also introduced to some we did not. Sifu was talking to one man and then told us that he had



Lee Hoi San poses with the author

been the Wing Chun advisor on the famous Wing Chun movie



Tse Sifu & Master Chu Shong Tin

"Prodigal Son". Also, just behind us was, Lee Hoi San, the actor who had played one of Leung Jan's (played by the famous actor Yuen Biao) bad teachers in the same movie. Sifu introduced us to him and he kindly let us take a photo with him. There were also some of Ip Man's students sitting close by including Chu Shong Tin, Duncan Leung and, of course, his younger brother Ip Ching.



Ip Sigong & Tse Sifu

Then Sigong arrived. We went to say "hello" and wish him a happy birthday. He greeted us with his usual smile and wave and asked how we were. Sifu had a quick chat with him and then we left him to meet all his other guests. But he told us we would have time to take some formal photos with him later.

The room was now packed, but having acclimatised to the crowded streets of Hong Kong, it did not seem so bad. People were already enjoying themselves and raising their glasses to one another.

Then more quickly than we had anticipated it was time for the photos. First of all Sigong had some photos with his senior students and, of course, Sifu was called up as one of them. Then different groups in turn were called up. They came from many different places from Hong Kong, from the UK including our group, Australia, Singapore, Beijing, etc. We all had a chance to wish Sigong happy birthday once more. With so many guests you can imagine that the photos took some time. Suddenly the birthday cake was brought out and everyone sang happy birthday. Sigong's smile beamed and he waved his usual wave, almost embarrassed by all the attention. Then he cut the cake to great applause.

The food then started to arrive. It was a traditional Chinese banquet. Each course was brought out one by one and they included:- Suckling Piglet, Shark's Fin soup, Abalone on Choi Sum, Jar Gee Chicken, Steamed Fish, large garlic Tiger Prawns etc, it just kept coming and, of course, it was delicious. Some of Sigong's students were going round the tables making toasts and challenging them to "Yum boi" (drink a cup or down in one). It was a very lively, noisy and happy affair. As well as this, each person was given a set of raffle tickets and every now and again, between courses, a prize draw was made (our table actually won the first prize drawn out but there were a lot of prizes to be won).

Then Sigong made a speech. He thanked everyone for coming and said how happy and honoured he was to see everyone and that so many people had come from all over the world. Then room darkened and the video screen sprang to life. Different students had made video messages to wish Sigong a happy birthday and thank him for all he had done for them. Some were done in a more formal way and some were done in a casual and funny way, including a mini-film by some of his students who are also part-time actors. However, all showed how much they respected and appreciated their Sifu.



Siaona cuts his cake

When the lights came back up, as is tradition at a party like this, Sigong went around the room and visited each table in turn and everyone toasted his birthday and wished him good health.

More food then appeared and this time it was noodles and fried rice. These are compulsory dishes at a party as they symbolise long life (by the length of the noodles) and luck (the name of the dish means 'lucky'). Following these were lotus seed buns decorated to look like a peach and these again symbolise long life. These dishes also indicate that the banquet had almost finished. The penultimate dish was sweet red bean soup and the very last dish was

fresh fruit. Those who had paced themselves managed to finish their red bean soup, but I believe much of it went uneaten.

One of Sigong's students then passed something to Sifu. For a moment Sifu sat looking at it before showing it to Simo. It was obviously something very important. Then Sifu turned it round so we all could see. It was a certificate from Sigong which said, due to the long dedication and loyalty shown by Michael Tse, together with the high level knowledge, in both theory and practise, he was made a full and permanent Sifu by Master Ip Chun. This was a big honour and showed that dedication and more importantly loyalty is recognised and appreciated.

Today loyalty is something very rare. Loyalty should be unconditional and has no end. It can only be broken when behaviour so bad, such as illegal or immoral acts are committed. Most people today are only loyal when it suits, when everything is convenient for them and this is not true loyalty. Time proves everything. At that moment we felt greater pride in being students of Master Tse and I hope that we can also show the same loyalty, dedication and respect he shows his teacher.



A group photo with Sigong

A banquet like this takes a long time and it was now late into night, some people were already starting to leave and so Sigong went to see them off. We stayed and chatted for a while but soon jetlag started to get the better of us and so it was time for us to leave as we had an early morning coach journey over the border into Guangzhou, China the next morning. We went around saying our goodbyes to our Wing Chun relatives and found Sigong waiting near the reception table and we said our farewells. He

looked very happy, and chuckling he asked me how my wife, Sarah, was and how our new baby daughter was. I could not resist showing him a photo of her that was on my phone and he smiled and nodded.

On the way down in the lift I reflected on the evening. My Sifu and my Sigong are my heroes as I grow older I try to be more like them. When I am 85, if I can have the same level of health, skill and good human nature, and have so many people happy to see me, then I know I will have led a good and positive life.