

9 October 2006 is the 10th anniversary of the death of Master Vic Gnash, who was killed during a Kong Sau fight in California. Kong Sau contests are real and active today. Fighters get killed in them and even those that win get hounded for more fights as they attract a 'gun-slinger' type reputation.

The Introduction of Five Pattern Hung Kuen into Great Britain

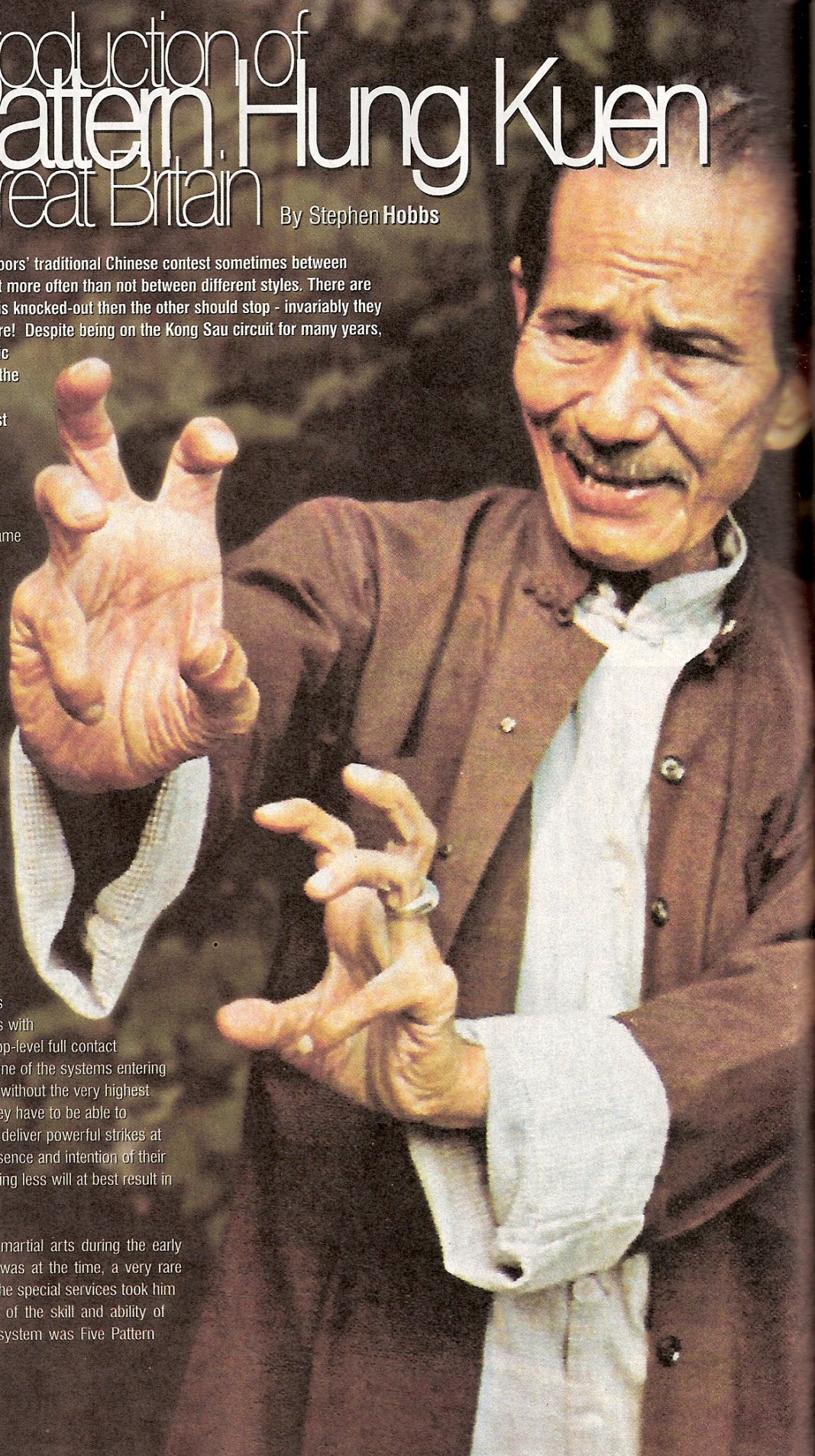
By Stephen Hobbs

Kong Sau is a 'behind closed doors' traditional Chinese contest sometimes between fighters of the same system but more often than not between different styles. There are almost no rules. If one fighter is knocked-out then the other should stop - invariably they use the opportunity to make sure! Despite being on the Kong Sau circuit for many years, having only lost once before, Vic was caught off guard and paid the price. His opponent was a traditional Chinese martial artist who had waited a number of years to do what he did.

It has to be reinforced that these Kong Sau contests are not the same as 'cage fighting' or other such semi-controlled fights. The fighters are at the very pinnacle of the martial arts world, particularly in terms of skill and ability. There are no spectators, no referee, no gloves, no protection and as far as the fighters are concerned - no rules. Eyes, throat and groin are only a few of the legitimate targets.

Following Kong Sau, the loser of a contest is usually in a pretty bad way; broken arms, legs and ribs being common - sometimes dead. Kong Sau is not for the faint hearted and being a good street fighter is simply not good enough. Fighters have to be trained for the contests with the ability to deliver and receive top-level full contact techniques as a starting point. None of the systems entering their masters and students do so without the very highest level of internals (chi control). They have to be able to disperse pain, shield themselves, deliver powerful strikes at breakneck speed and feel the presence and intention of their opponent from a distance. Anything less will at best result in being hospitalised.

Vic Gnash started his career in martial arts during the early 1960s when he achieved, what was at the time, a very rare black belt in Jujitsu. His time in the special services took him to Hong Kong where he learned of the skill and ability of Grandmaster Yuen Yik Kai. The system was Five Pattern





Hung Kuen and as illustrated so graphically by Grandmaster Leung Ting, Yuen Yik Kai was one of the top Grandmasters in China. The system is based on the fighting styles of the Dragon, Crane, Tiger, Leopard and Snake.

Vic was not initially welcomed into the club in Kowloon due to being a Westerner but following his involvement in the rescue of Yuen Yik Kai's 2 kidnapped nieces, the Grandmaster had an obligation to him and the torturous training began. Training in Five Pattern Hung Kuen is arduous at the best of times but when the instructor is of such a highly respected ranking and is teaching reluctantly, the training is far worse. Yuen Yik Kai's approach was to make Vic's training as difficult as possible. He was left in low stances for the whole duration of the lesson; he was kicked around the room repeatedly by the senior students and frequently knocked out by the Grandmaster when demonstrating a technique to the more favoured students.

The teaching techniques employed by Yuen Yik Kai were designed to force Vic to leave the club and release him from his obligation. Perhaps not realised by the Grandmaster at the time but his approach would have two possible outcomes: First, Vic would leave, second, Yuen Yik Kai would create one of the most vicious fighting machines ever to come out of his school. This was enhanced by the fact that Vic was an intelligent perfectionist with a passion to be the best at anything and everything he put his time into.

Bearing in mind that Vic already had quite a reputation within the special services and his ability in martial arts from his earlier days had already shaped a very capable soldier with a strong will to win. Vic's thirst for knowledge drove his initial research to find the best of the



best Grandmasters. Having persuaded Yuen Yik Kai to teach him, he wasn't going to give up until he had perfected everything there was to learn. This included the martial, weapons, spiritual and healing sides of the system. It's worth noting that Yuen Yik Kai himself earned a reasonable income from the healing of other injured martial artists and ailing Chinese businessmen.

To help matters, Vic learned to speak Chinese, which made his lessons somewhat easier and led Yuen Yik Kai to realise that Vic was serious about his intentions - slowly, an amount of respect was creeping in.

As Vic's ability increased he was put against better and better students of the school until he was finally considered to be good enough to compete in a Kong Sau contest and represent the school. Needless to say, Vic won but there was almost no congratulatory support. He was a Westerner and considered an outsider - he was known as 'gwai loh' (foreign devil).



Over the next few years Vic had many contests, he kept fighting and winning in such a destructive way that his reputation was prominent on the circuit, it was he that represented Five Pattern Hung Kuen and he was proud to do so.

Having returned to the UK, Vic opened a club in London where in 1973 Mike Jolliff and Ian Taylor were to become his students. Vic's approach to Mike and Ian was not dissimilar to the reception he had received at the Kowloon club in Hong Kong. He had to prove himself. From Vic's side, he couldn't be bothered with time wasters. If new students weren't going to cope with the physically demanding training and full contact techniques - Vic wanted to know up front and save them both the trouble. As on the Kong Sau circuit, Vic attracted a reputation and had many so called potential students. However, a lot of them were local yobs wanting to topple Vic's reputation - he was merciless.

Vic's favourite technique was 'Cranes Pacifying Wing', a strike to the side of the throat and he had no hesitation using it on a complete beginner whom he believed to be there for trouble. The result was never less than a knock out, sometimes for more than 2 minutes. Vic's attitude was simple - 'put-up or shut-up and if you're going to put-up, you had better be good'.

During Vic's teaching time in London, up to 1983 when he moved to California, he would return to Hong Kong once a year for 3 to 4

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Five Pattern Hung Kuen

months at a time, where he trained all hours under the Grandmaster to learn as much as he was able. His time back in London was to be used to develop on what Yuen Yik Kai had taught him and progress not only himself but also the Five Pattern Hung Kuen system.

By the late 1970s, Mike had trained and developed sufficiently to enter the Kong Sau circuit himself. He was successful in defeating one of the up and coming Chinese students from the Kowloon school and became the new representative for the system, this gave Vic the chance to step down from the circuit, or retire.

Mike was very successful under the strict tuition of Master Gnash, however, there were similarities in their characters; both were perfectionists, both had opinions and neither liked being wrong. Vic was not used to being questioned about his judgement and on occasions where Mike would challenge Vic's opinion on a

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technique, Vic would prove his point - normally to Mike's expense and pain. He showed no more mercy for his senior students than anyone else when push came to shove.

By 1983, Mike had established himself as the representative of Five Pattern Hung Kuen, having successfully won every Kong Sau contest he entered - at this stage 8. Mike's training focused on effectiveness, he was not bothered about 'looking good', he wanted to win and win fast. Not one of his challengers had lost without severe injury. One unsuccessful fighter was knocked out whilst on his feet and both collarbones and the top section of ribs broken before his body hit the ground; such was the speed and ferocity of the strikes.

Towards the end of the year, Vic had decided to move to California where, along with Ian, they focussed on teaching private self-defence

addiction for the circuit. Whether it was the thrill of winning, satisfying a self-doubt, or even a body-generated drug, his body couldn't give it up and this would eventually lead to his untimely death.

During Mike's student days, Vic taught in exactly the same way that he was taught - traditionally Chinese. There were only 3 levels - White Sash, Black Sash and Master. There were 7 levels of grade at white and 3 at black but these were based on what the Master decided to teach. Mike argued that to attract normal Western students, they would have to create a structured grading system. Vic was vehemently against it. If the traditional structure was good enough for Yuen Yik Kai, Vic Gnash and Mike Jolliff - it was good enough for anyone else. Vic's opinion was that if students weren't prepared to put up with the hardships, they

weren't worth bothering with.

lessons. The income was lucrative and provided for a good lifestyle. However, Vic found it impossible to completely give up the Kong Sau circuit. When in the UK, Vic would travel with Mike across Europe and even to China to supervise Mike's fights. Vic had involvement and this seemed to quell his enthusiasm and thirst for the circuit. When he moved to California his involvement had stopped but not his craving - he would later re-enter himself. Vic had generated an

The debate lasted almost a year but during one of Vic's more relaxed moments, Mike managed to wear him down and showed Vic that standardised grading levels with a syllabus as the core could work. Mike's concept was that each level of the syllabus would have a set list of patterns and techniques, as with many martial arts, the student would then show their understanding of the techniques by creating and performing their own variations. A student can be asked to produce up to 5 variations for 1 syllabus technique. The concept was close enough to the traditional system to satisfy Vic so together he and Mike set about structuring the sequence of teaching the patterns and techniques to give the right development of internals at the appropriate level for the techniques. It was important that a student should learn to defend their body with internals as well as be able to strike with it. Vic's insistence was that the student should learn the system without becoming predictable - a fighter must have their own individuality and not become a clone of their instructor. The system was titled, and is known today as, British Five Pattern Hung Kuen.

Just prior to Vic moving to the US, Mike was helped to develop what can only be



described as the highest level of internals - 'Dragon's Breath'. Whilst Vic could perform this technique, the development in Mike had to be 'kick-started' inside his body. The catalyst necessary was higher than Vic could perform so it would be the Grandmaster and one of his close friends, a monk, who were needed to bring on this higher state. It was this technique that Mike had used during the contest where he had broken both collarbones and the top section of ribs - the technique worked.

Whilst Mike had total respect for Vic, Mike's ability to perform the Dragon's Breath technique raised a serious question in Vic. Had he accomplished his duty to train Mike to be better than he was himself? The only way to satisfy the question in Vic's mind was to face each other in an internal contest. The result was not what either had expected - Vic lost with a broken arm and 2 broken ribs. It was only a few weeks after this that Vic and Ian moved to California.

Shortly after the agreement of the grading structure between Mike and Vic, a club started in Exeter and later in 1985 another in South Wales. Both clubs have produced black sash students but only 4 in total. Training takes 10 years to achieve a junior black and another 10 years to achieve senior black (1 so far) - Vic's legacy! Another of Vic's no-compromise legacies is that despite all of the hard work and pain to achieve a grade, students only wear their sash to bow-in before a training session or grading. That is, during training no sashes are worn - it's down to ability.

In addition to the standard training evenings, Mike and his senior students run special workshops - fund raising for the clubs. These have included many 'ladies self defence' sessions with the Hung Kuen students volunteered as would-be assailants (or punch bags) along with several weapons workshops teaching not only Chinese weapons but also the Japanese Katana and Tanto.

Mike no longer participates in the Kong Sau contests, as far as he knows (hopes) he has retired. Mike's last fight was in 2003 when he defeated a challenger who had waited more than 10 years until he felt good enough to compete. Mike has now successfully won 11 Kong Sau contests and is in the process of writing a book about his history in martial arts, including Karate and Aikido, but in particular his Kong Sau experiences.

The Kowloon club closed shortly after Grandmaster Yuen Yik Kai died in 1984 and although Grandmaster Leung Ting refers to another club in Macau in his 2 books that describe Five Pattern Hung Kuen, it is uncertain if the club is still open. The author of this article recently visited Hong Kong and has spent a long time researching any descendents from either of the clubs - so far unsuccessfully.

Sadly Vic never met any of Mike's students so he was unable to judge for himself if the British Five Pattern Hung Kuen students were up to his standard - Mike is adamant that they are and continues to coach in his own outspoken and often controversial way. It's evident that many years of put-up or shut-up training with Vic reinforced by undefeated success on the circuit has forged a hard earned confidence. His knowledge and ability are quite remarkable and he is an outstanding head of the system.

Details of clubs and forthcoming events can be found on www.exeterkungfu.co.uk

