

IS BRUCE LEE'S JEET KUNE DO

Lee's Protege Ted Wong Comes to JKD's Rescue



BLACK BELT photos

You hear a lot about the martial artists who trained with Bruce Lee: men like Dan Inosanto, Daniel Lee, Larry Hartsell and William Cheung. But one you hear very little about, and one who Lee may have been closer to than any of his students, is Ted Wong.

Wong was perhaps Lee's best jeet kune do student, and perhaps his best friend as well. But because the now 52-year-old martial artist shunned the lime-

light in respect for his sifu, he has gone unnoticed while others have attempted to capitalize on their association with Lee.

Wong has come out of hiding recently because he believes the real jeet kune do—Lee's JKD—is disappearing, and he feels it is his responsibility to restore the art before it is lost completely in others' interpretations of the style.

In the following Black Belt exclusive, Wong, in his first-

ever full-length interview with any publication, defines Lee's jeet kune do and explains why he has gone public. He offers insights into Lee's personality and fanaticism in regard to training. And he reveals for the first time the role Linda Lee, Bruce's wife, played in the "Little Dragon's" success. It is must reading for any Bruce Lee fan. —Ed.

The Big Three: Bruce Lee (center) is flanked by his two closest jeet kune do brothers, Ted Wong (left) and Dan Inosanto (right).

BLACK BELT: You've been kind of reclusive since Bruce Lee's death, wouldn't you say?

TED WONG: Yeah, I just sort of stayed back and continued practicing the martial arts after Bruce Lee passed away, but not publicly.

BB: Why did you keep such a low profile?

WONG: I think that's my nature, and also Bruce didn't want to really publicize or commercialize the martial arts, and I wanted to fulfill his wish after he was gone.

BB: It seems that lately you've made yourself more available to the martial arts community.

WONG: Yeah. For the last two years, the martial arts have really been changing and taking on a new direction, and I want to do more teaching just to preserve the art of Bruce Lee.

BB: How did you meet Lee?

WONG: Through my roommate. He told me this guy named Bruce Lee was in the *Green Hornet*. So I started watching it and said "Wow, this guy is really something." I had never seen anybody move like that. I used to watch a lot of martial arts movies where they always speed up the motion and the fights drag on so long, but Bruce would go boom, boom—two moves and the guy was down, so quick. That's what impressed me—his quickness.

BB: How did you gain an introduction to Lee?

WONG: After I saw the *Green Hornet* I kept asking my roommate "Where can I meet this person?" Bruce had not opened

Photo by Doug Churchill



"Bruce would go boom, boom—two moves and the guy was down. That impressed me."

DISAPPEARING?

Interview conducted by Jim Coleman

Photo by Doug Churchill



a school yet; he was working out with Dan Inosanto and another student named Tony Humm behind a pharmacy in (Los Angeles) Chinatown. And my roommate used to go there—that's how he knew Bruce. So he told me about that, and I went down there and talked to him. Then one day my roommate told me Bruce had opened a school in Chinatown, so right away I went down there. At that time, the school was not open publicly, only privately, and most of the students were from Ed Parker's *kenpo* system.

BB: What was your first impression of Lee?

WONG: Just that he *really* was good, and he really opened up my mind. He had the speed, that intensity, but at the center was relaxed.

BB: Lee had a lot of students, yet you were considered one of his favorites. What was it that caused him to grow so close to you in particular?

WONG: I think the cause of it was that we both came out of the same cultural background and were able to speak Chinese. That made it easier for him to communicate with me. Plus, I think he saw I had potential.

BB: You have been characterized by some people as Lee's protege. Do you feel that

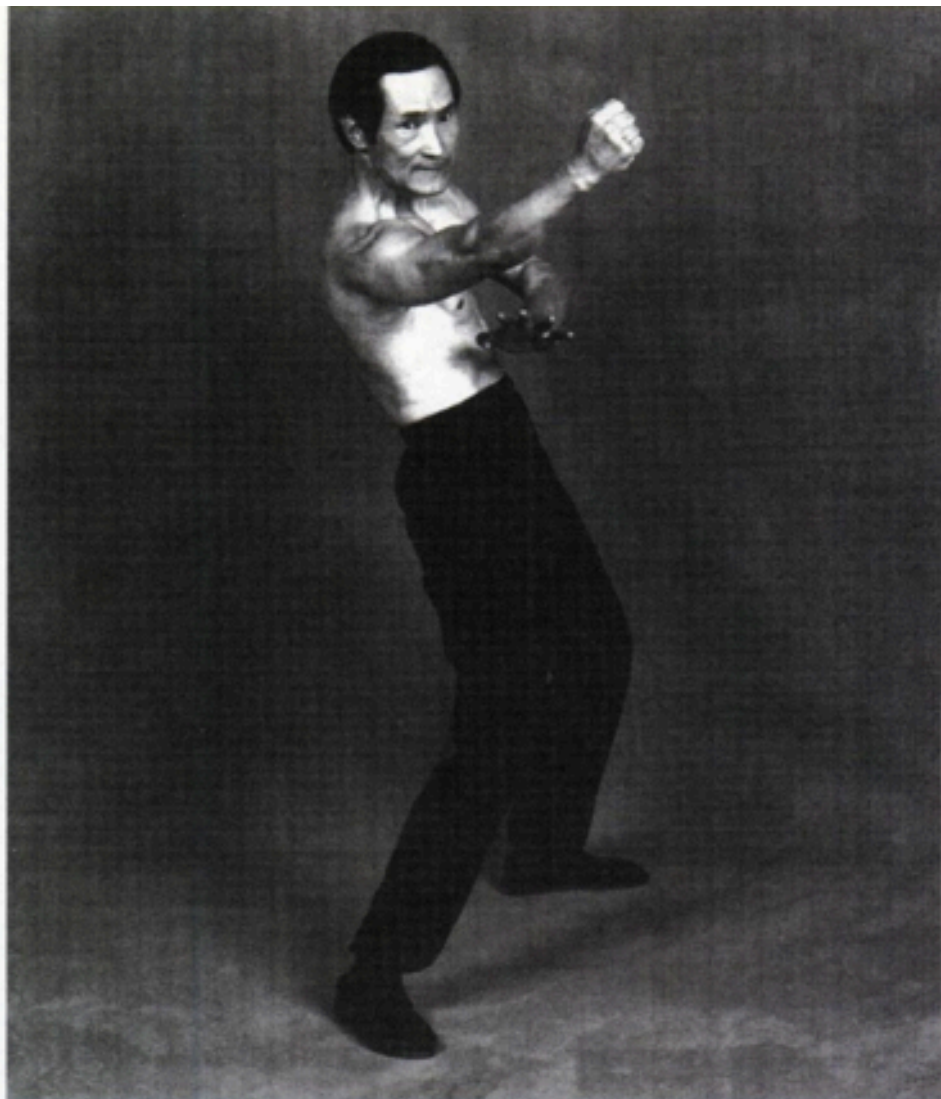


Photo by Doug Churchill

Photo by Doug Churchill



“Bruce was always experimenting with something. For him, martial arts was a 24-hour job.”

is an accurate assessment?

WONG: I don't know if I'm a protege or not, but I felt that I was close enough (to his level) that I learned how to stop his technique. But I could not go on the offensive on him or score on him.

BB: What was Lee like as a person?

WONG: He was a very sensitive person, but he would not show it. He was a philosopher and was able to put things in proper per-

spective and in proper order. Talking to him was very educational. You could bring up anything. I learned a lot from him, not just martial arts, but how to be a better person.

BB: They say Lee had a great sense of humor.

WONG: Yeah. One time we went to a

Although 52 years old, Ted Wong stays in excellent shape by stretching, lifting weights, and working out on the heavy bag.

theater and he bought a ticket while pretending to be blind. He did things like that.

BB: Did you spend a lot of time with Lee away from the martial arts?

WONG: Yes. A lot of times we would go to a bookstore. He liked books and magazines; he had a lot around. He also liked some of those Japanese sword-fighting movies; we'd go there a lot. We went with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar a couple of times. He liked to see kung fu movies.

BB: Did you ever see Abdul-Jabbar work out with Lee?

WONG: Yeah. A few times we worked out together in Bruce's backyard. He's so large, but also very agile and very quick because of his athletic background in basketball. His kicks were incredibly strong.

BB: Lee was said to be a training fanatic, and that everywhere he went he would be working out in some way.

WONG: Oh yeah. We'd be walking down the street, and he would turn around and—boom—kick at me, very quick, and just



Bruce Lee's martial arts prowess in the *Green Hornet* (above) so impressed Ted Wong that he sought Lee out for instruction.

startle me.

BB: So you had to be on your guard when you were with him.

WONG: Yeah, right. He was always experimenting with something. I think for him, martial arts was a 24-hour job. He even dreamed about it.

BB: Did you admire him for that, or did you think maybe he overdid it just a little bit?

WONG: I don't think he overdid it, but I

don't think he had a lot of hobbies. Martial arts was his hobby, and it was his way of life.

BB: You're in amazing shape for a 52-year-old. What do you do to stay in such excellent condition?

WONG: Bruce always emphasized conditioning was number one. At the very beginning, he introduced me to weight training to make me stronger. Right now, as I get older, the majority of time I devote to conditioning: working with weights, working on the bag, stretching. Stretching is the number-one priority for me, because when you get older, you must maintain your flexibility. I spend more time on conditioning than doing martial arts.

BB: How do you define the term *jeet kune do*, Lee's concept of the martial arts?

WONG: To me, jeet kune do is just expression in fighting, is just freedom of expression and a way to look at things objectively. It's not being confined to one method of fighting and looking at combat from all possible angles and all different ranges. The philosophy part of it is to try to do things in simplest way—simple and direct. Bruce came up with the term jeet kune do just for sake of identifying what he was doing.

BB: As a board member for the Jeet Kune Do Society, you're probably aware that some people have referred to jeet kune do

stylists as snobs because they think they're so much better than other martial artists. Do you feel jeet kune do practitioners are snobs?

WONG: I don't think so. Lately there's a lot of politics involved. I try to stay away from it and be careful what I'm saying. But I don't think they're snobs.

BB: So the society members don't necessarily consider themselves better than, say, a *shotokan* stylist or a *tae kwon do* practitioner? They're just like everybody else?

WONG: I look at it that way, but I don't know if some other people do. Bruce never criticized people's ability. He respected a person's ability even if he was very clumsy. He always respected a person who worked hard. I don't think he told his students that jeet kune do was better than any other arts. I never look at other arts as inferior. It's not the martial art, it's the person's ability. There's been so many things written about jeet kune do over the years. People get the wrong impression.

BB: What exactly is the purpose of the Jeet Kune Do Society?

WONG: The purpose is to monitor who's allowed to teach jeet kune do and to try to certify these people.

BB: Do you think the society is successfully fulfilling its purpose?

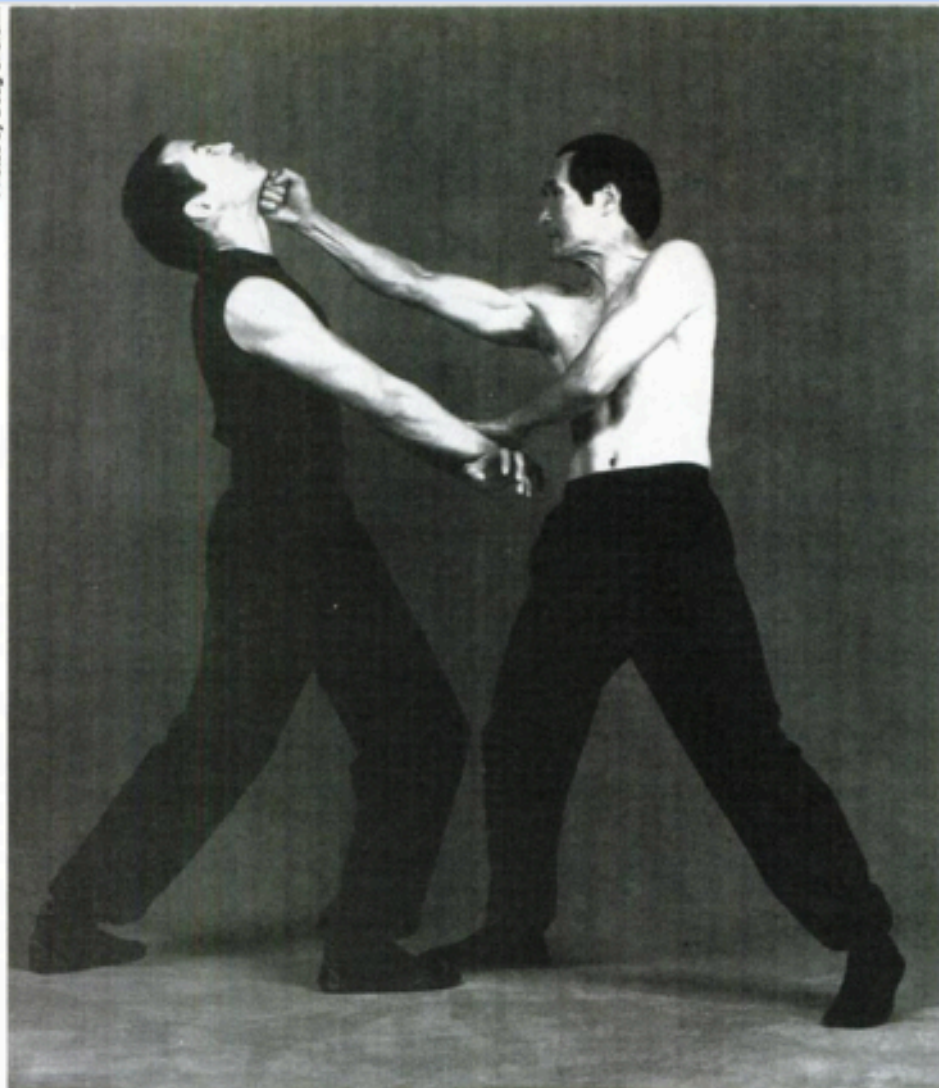


According to Ted Wong, Bruce Lee attributed the bulk of his film success to his wife, Linda (above), who helped support him during the hard times.



Photo by Doug Churchill

"Bruce never criticized people's ability. He respected a person even if he was very clumsy."



She would always go off and take a job, support the family, and at that time Bruce would just train and read books and do nothing. Linda never said "Why don't you go out and get a job." She never complained. He knew what he wanted and he knew that one day he was going to be successful. And he was. I think a lot of credit should go to Linda.

BB: Did your relationship with Lee change after he became a successful film star?

WONG: Every time he came back to the States he'd always call me. We'd go over to see Dan Inosanto, and Bruce would share his adventures, share his knowledge. He never changed.

BB: So success didn't affect him?

WONG: It didn't affect him at all. In fact, he'd say "Wow, it's good to come back here and talk to you people." I guess he didn't trust people over in Hong Kong.

BB: You mentioned earlier that you returned to the public eye because you wish to preserve Lee's jeet kune do. Why is that so important to you?

WONG: You have to preserve his art at some point to prevent it from completely disappearing. Otherwise, he's just a name; he died and he's gone. So right or wrong, that's my desire—to preserve Bruce's jeet kune do. I'm doing it to honor him. ✕

WONG: I don't think so.

BB: Are there a lot of jeet kune do frauds?

WONG: Still a lot, yeah.

BB: How do you feel about that?

WONG: Not much you can do about it. This kind of thing happens not just in jeet kune do. Tae kwon do's the same way, kung fu is the same way. There's not much you can do. We cannot threaten or tell people not to teach jeet kune do. They can do anything they want.

BB: Let's suppose for a moment that Bruce Lee is still alive. What do you think he would say about the status of the martial arts today?

WONG: I think he'd see it coming along the way he thought it would a long time ago.

BB: Would he be bothered by the current movement toward sport martial arts?

WONG: I think that he'd be bothered by it. He didn't emphasize things like that. At his school, the rule was hit low or wherever. To him, martial arts training was anything goes.

BB: Where were you when you heard about Lee's sudden death?

WONG: I'd just come home from work and my wife told me. I said "No, it can't be." That evening I watched the news and they

announced that Bruce Lee had passed away. Still I couldn't believe it. The next day I called (Lee's wife) Linda, and she told me what happened.

BB: Are you still close with the Lee family?

WONG: Still very close. Most people don't realize how much Linda had to do with Bruce becoming successful. On two occasions, Bruce told me how fortunate he was to have Linda as his

wife. After he made his second movie in Hong Kong, he came back for a short time and he told me "Ted, I want you to know that I feel very fortunate to be successful today. Plus, I feel really fortunate to have Linda as my wife, because all these years, she never complained." When he was burdened financially, Linda never complained.



"Right or wrong, that's my desire—to preserve Bruce's jeet kune do. I'm doing it to honor him."