



Hierarchy and Rank in Ancient China

by Adrian Chan-Wyles

The acquisition of rank in ancient China was firmly based, at least theoretically upon the concept of 'de' (德), a character that is written to convey the meaning that a path is followed which strengthens and uplifts the mind/heart. The term is often translated into English as 'virtue', but also implies quite firmly, the earning and establishment of a moral authority. There is a direct link here, between inner calmness and clarity, and outer behaviour. A person's virtue is obvious from their actions.

In this context, virtue is created through self-study. A process of refinement that includes the mind and body, trained in symmetry. The great scholar Confucius (孔夫子 551BC-479BC), extolled self-education which included the reading and contemplating of ancient

'wisdom' texts, and the practising of martial arts. Martial practice for Confucius is archery – and to be a 'man of the middle' (中道), that is, to be perfectly balanced in mind and body, and to act in harmony with change (易-yl), is to 'hit' the centre of the target every time, without undue effort. In human affairs, this translates as the ability to bring harmony in all circumstances, so that the common good might be maintained. The Chinese character '中' (as in 'Zhongguo', [Middle kingdom] or 'China') is written as an arrow shot from a bow, that pierces the centre of the target.

Today, in modern China, the term 'shifu' is written as '师傅' and translates as 'teacher-tutor'. It is a term that can be used to refer to anyone with a skill or a service offered to the general public. This is not the original rendering. In ancient feudal society, the term for 'teacher' is also pronounced 'shifu', but is written as '師父' and literally translates as 'teacher-father'. Traditional Chinese martial systems tend to use and preserve this rendering.

The character 'shi' (師) is interesting from a martial perspective. It has two particles; the left hand particle is a 'banner', whilst the right hand particle is the symbol for a 'city'. Taken together, the particles form the ideogram 'shi', which has the common usage of 'teacher'. How does the meaning of a 'banner in a city', evolve into that of 'teacher'? Rather interestingly, the term 'shi' (師) is used to refer to a regiment of 2,500 men in the 'Zhouli' (周禮) or 'Rites of Zhou', a book believed to date back to about the 3rd century BC. The term is also found in a far older book (believed to have been written down around 900BC, but in reality, probably far older) the 'Yijing' (易經) or 'Book of Change', where chapter 7 is simply entitled '師' (shi), and translated into English as either 'army' or 'soldiers'. From ancient times, the military connotation is clear, and

probably refers to the mastery required for a regiment to protect its banner, and the city. For this to happen successfully, the art of war (兵法) has to be thoroughly understood and correctly applied – there can be no mistakes. Such mastery is a valuable attribute, and requires transmission to others. The process of transmission, is of course 'teaching' and 'shi' (師) as a word, became associated with 'teaching' in general.

The character 'fu' (父) is essentially the character that separates the modern reading from the ancient, and serves to demonstrate the 'family' orientated nature of traditional Chinese martial arts. Fu literally translates as 'father'. But significantly is written to represent a man holding the stick of authority. He brings order to the family, by showing the correct path to be taken. Things are distinguished in regard to the 'five relationships' (wulun-五倫) – that is correct and courteous behaviour, or filial piety (xiao-孝), between ruler and subject, father and

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師父

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son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother and friend toward friend. A martial arts student, taken into the family, would become subject to the discipline of the teacher-father. A man (and sometimes a woman), who has martial knowledge and skill, and is able to impart this skill to others – hence the term '師父' (shifu). Generally speaking, the members of a family with a martial father, would all participate in the practice of the family-clan art, with each member of the family, whether male or female, often participating in the transmission of the art. Therefore, a strict relational hierarchy of student body to teacher, and the teacher's family is maintained to enhance the efficiency of the teaching process.

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shifu therefore, is the embodiment of both virtue and light.

A teacher possessing the wisdom of age, that is, an 'old teacher' (老師-laoshi), is used to describe a person with white hair. Over the years, the seasons come and go, and knowledge matures into wisdom. The 'shi' (teacher) becomes old (lao). This is a natural process of virtuous ascendancy. Whether a 'shifu' (teacher-father-師父), a 'zhu' (master-主), or a 'laoshi' (old teacher-老師), all these designations refer to a definite role of 'leadership'. This is a role of great concern and responsibility. As a leader is one that stands-out from others, and is clearly seen to be in a powerful position. Referred to in Chinese as 'shou' (首), the ideogram for 'leader' is written as a face or head, with a top knot of hair. The accomplished person who has risen to power. In ancient times, the leader stood alone, and staked his life on following his will. The leader is the wise scholar who knows what to do, and what direction to take (指-dao, the leader's hand on a road or path). A solitary guiding light, such is the responsibility of the traditional definition of 'ji' or 'leader', and a blue-print for a teacher of martial arts.

As virtue and mastery go hand in hand, the concepts of leadership all point to the same method of 'to organise the self', so that 'others may be organised'. This is not an arbitrary appointment or a temporary undertaking, but rather the product of a long period of apprenticeship. The teacher guides the behaviour and thought processes of the student and thereby moulds the character and enhances the physical ability. In this context, and in this way, the student is being taught from day one what it is to 'serve', so that the knowledge of what it is to lead is fully understood and firmly conveyed.

