



Nasser Butt

# 師傅

*and/or*

# 師父

*Shifu or Sea Food?*

師傅 and 師父, are both Chinese terms referring to a 'Master'. Although both are pronounced identically, Shifu ( sounds like 'Sure foo' - there is an 'R' sound in there not so obvious from the Mandarin romanization) the words are distinctive and different in usage, and can be broken down into the following:

師 = Teacher in both cases.

傅 = Tutor

父 = Father

Taking the above into account we realise that the term 師父 is dualistic in nature and can be more accurately described as 'teacher father' and/or 'master father,' whereas 師傅, was generally used as 'master' referring respectfully to a general tradesman and his skill!

The former, since it was also used to refer to Taoist priests, could further be loosely ascribed as 'spiritual father/teacher'! Thus confirming a linear relationship between a student/disciple and a teacher of religious instruction and/or martial arts! I, myself, would add here perhaps, even, the relationship between a father and son!

Whichever way we look at it, the word 'Shifu' takes on a monumental meaning and responsibility. I have often wondered how many of those who throw this word around so cheaply, actually understand its true significance?

Firstly, most martial arts schools and martial artists pronounce the word incorrectly as 'She foo,' using the Cantonese romanization - 'Sifu' and almost sounding like 'sea-food' without the 'd' at the end!

Secondly and far more importantly, martial artists, particularly in the West, have almost totally failed to grasp its relevance - spiritually and philosophically - and wear it as an egotistical title on their t-shirts and jackets just like a Premier league footballer, with an equivalent swagger!

Can you imagine Yang Lu-ch'an walking down the street with "Yang the Invincible" or "Yang of the Eight Lords" written on the back of his shirt or a holy man sitting atop a mountain with the legend "Holy Man" engraved down the side of his robes? No!

In my 30 plus years or so of walking the martial path, I have lost count of the endless number of 'Sifus' I have come across, who were not 'Shifus' (or Sensei) in either sense of the word!

To be a 'Teacher/Father' was to take on a formidable task. It wasn't a title to be worn or demanded, as is often the case today, but rather a term of genuine respect and endearment offered by a student/disciple, who saw his 'Shifu' as his true guide in all matters spiritual, philosophical, worldly and skill. In other words, it was no different to how a child may see his own father in terms of love, security, knowledge and guidance in at least his or her formative years!

And the would-be "Shifus," when addressed as such, would also have to contemplate if they were truly deserving of that title and whether they could genuinely offer all said guidance.

Yet, in the modern world, far from looking after their welfare and offering true guidance and in a lot of cases even genuine skill (as the martial arts industry is littered with bogus 'Masters') - most said 'Sifus' regard their students in monetary terms and treat them like a business plan! They only place a commercial value upon their students, such as

the fact that, they MUST and are only allowed to purchase merchandise from them, with their names engraved on their backs, becoming no more than an advertising board for the 'master'! In some cases, as was once pointed out to me by a friend about a school in London, the 'Master' even forbids any social contact amongst students, themselves, and or their 'teacher' unless expressly invited to do so by him! According to this school, the 'master' is not their friend but rather a person to be revered, alongside the 'ancestors'! This usually is a sign of weakness, of someone who has very little confidence in his system and fears that his students may leave, hence the control! Or, there are those who insist students sign up to monthly or annual standing orders for making payments to the 'master' who then fails to even preside over the lesson!

I have had the good fortune of meeting some genuinely good teachers on my journey but can honestly say have only met one person deserving of the 'Teacher/Father' title in its actual sense!

What's more, I never had to call him 'Master' or 'Shifu' or had to approach him via an intermediary or had to bow to him seven times and then crawl backwards out of his presence. Nor did I have to undergo the elaborate 'Bai shi' or discipleship ceremony and buy him extravagant gifts. Ours was a ceremony of standing together side by side, smiling outside a loo in Germany!

Yet, it was all there...

A warm smile and hug upon meeting. A genuine concern for myself and the well-being of my family. Correspondence ending with a simple "love to all the family". A gentle guiding hand on the shoulder in training. A complete sharing of knowledge and skill! A "We missed you" call or email, if I failed to turn up to training and not - "You'll still have to pay me, mister!"

Yes, it was all there and I was and still am fortunate and blessed to have had such a guide for sure. But, I say to you look carefully.

Certainly respect your 'teachers' yet ask the question when certain demands are made or if insisted that you call your teacher, "Sifu". Respect is earned through one's actions not demands. And no wise man will refer to himself as a "Wise Man"!

In Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, these great 'Teachers/Fathers' (Sufis) referred to themselves with genuine piety as "Idiots". That is because, coincidentally, the Arabic for 'Saint' (Wali) has the same numerical equivalent as the word for 'Idiot' (balid).

Here too, we see a dualism of meaning.

These great non-linear thinkers or 'Idiots', left us an amazing amount of knowledge in the guise of stories, used as tools for teaching. I'll recount one here entitled, 'The Knife':

*A wandering dervish ran to where a Sufi sat deep in contemplation, and said:  
"Quick! We must do something. A monkey has just picked up a knife." 'Don't worry,' said the Sufi, 'so long as it was not a man.' When the dervish saw the monkey again he found, sure enough, that it had thrown the knife away.*

*(Kardan)*

Taken from 'Wisdom of the Idiots' by Idries Shah

To the student then, know what calling someone a 'Shifu' means. To the would-be Shifu, know what being one requires. Otherwise, you may just discover that your 'Shifu' is merely 'Sea Food'!