

## The Battle to the Top

Julius Allen (2022)

‘Xiao, I’ve been thinking. I started martial arts training to control my anger, but ever since the Sekai Tekai tournament was announcement, our sensei has been pushing us to be merciless and aggressive. He doesn’t have any flexibility for other styles, and I have less control over my temper.’

Xiao stopped in his tracks. After a pause, he said, ‘Are you questioning our teacher? Wang, you’re my best friend, but I would never betray my master.’

Wang nodded and when he looked at his friend, he said, ‘I wouldn’t expect you to. Forget I mentioned it. Let’s run the last kilometre.’

After walking through the timber-lined dojo, Wang and Xiao were greeted with new photographs of past tournament achievements.

‘I’m going to go ask Master something. See you in a bit,’ Xiao said.

Before the class began, Wang thought he saw Master glance at him as he discussed the upcoming tournament.

‘In the Sekai Tekai, you must win at all costs. That means playing unfair and not waiting for the opponent to attack. Is that understood? No one is to disgrace my dojo.’

‘Yes, Sensei,’ the class yelled in unison, but Wang mimed the words, as his heart refused to agree with the sensei.

Wang and the other students trained under Sensei’s watchful gaze, but Wang wouldn’t implement the underhanded techniques his sensei required, and he sensed his master’s growing anger.

While Wang was struggling against Xiao, his master summoned him, along with Sinwon for a sparring demonstration. Sinwon, the master’s top student, had a blazing fire in his eyes. After a quick respectful bow, Sinwon sent a kick followed by an elbow, knocking Wang to the floor. Wang, whose vision was blurry, saw Master nod at Xiao and turn away.

Later that day, Wang was sitting in a shady park, avoiding the midday sun, pondering long and hard over why Xiao and his master would betray him. He reflected on the day’s events. Yes, he had been betrayed, which meant his feeling for his master and school were well-founded. While he was questioning their actions, the trees swayed, and the leaves rustled, the faint crashing of waves made him content.

As he lifted his head and drew a deep breath, he noticed a martial art group practicing in the distance. He studied their unusual Kung Fu techniques, confounded but intrigued Wang's curiosity got the better of him and he walked over to better study them. After many moments, Wang addressed the sensei.

'Excuse me, what style of martial art is this?'

'We have no specific style. We take the best out of every style and combine it. Now, if you would excuse me, my class has ended.'

'Sorry, sir,' Wang said, disappointed.

'However, I am teaching this class later this afternoon if you would like to join my students.'

By the time the class returned, Wang had made up his mind. 'Master,' he said, bending into the lowest bow he could. 'Please accept me as your pupil. I have had many years of training beforehand.'

'Stand,' the sensei said. Wang stood and the old man considered him for many moments. 'Can I see your abilities against my top student, Lee?'

Wang bowed deeply before entering his fighting stance, as the student approached.

'Begin,' the sensei said.

Lee's fighting position was unlike anything Wang had ever seen, He followed his old training and struck first, sending a barrage of punches towards Lee's head, but Lee slid to the side and effortlessly caught Wang's punch and tripped him over. Wang realised Lee was testing him as he didn't strike him while he was on the ground but walked away.

Anger rose in Wang, and he sent several kicks to Lee's head. Lee grabbed his kick and threw him to the ground.

'Enough,' the sensei said. Lee held out his hand to help Wang up. 'You have talent, young one. What is your name?'

'Wang.'

'I believe with the correct training you will become great once you learn to harness your temper. If you join my dojo, you will have to relearn the fundamentals of martial arts, which has little to do with strength and everything to do with the discipline of the mind.'

'Thank you, Master. For the first time in my life, I am seeing a new side of Kung Fu.'

'Good. Everyone, please welcome our newest member, Wang.'

The next morning, Wang's master offered him a private lesson, which was the philosophy of their Kung Fu. 'You must empty your mind. Be water,' Master Chen said.

‘Master, what is this supposed to mean? The Sekai Tekai is coming up soon. Should we not prepare for that?’ asked Wang in a hopeful voice.

‘If you do not want to learn our style’s philosophy, you cannot hope to learn how to fight. Let us continue.’

After four more lessons, Wang was invited to join a class with the rest of the dojo, and he began to train his body and mind in the new style. As he trained, he befriended Lee and, at the end of each class, he and Lee stayed behind to perfect their new skills.

‘You have improved incredibly,’ Lee told him at the end of their sixth lesson. ‘But there are a few more lessons you must master. I fear you may not have time, as we are leaving for the Sekai Tekai tomorrow. You must control your anger, allow the opponent to come to you, and wait for an opening to strike,’ Lee said.

Exhausted, Wang bowed and responded, ‘Thank you. You’re a great mentor.’

The morning of the tournament, Wang and his fellow martial artists went to Beijing for the tournament. Wang and Lee did well until the semis when Wang was called up to the stage to fight his old friend, Xiao. This would be the first time they had met since Wang left the dojo.

Wang felt apprehensive about fighting an old friend, but his new techniques served him well against Xiao, and he won the match, placing him in the finals.

As he rested after the fight, Lee sat down beside him. ‘You will face Sinwon in the last match. He is not an honourable fighter,’ Lee said, his voice filled with contempt.

‘I know,’ Wang replied.

As the finals started, Wang’s heart pounded. He’d never been able to land a hit on Sinwon. They bowed, and as Wang calmed his mind, Sinwon pounced with tremendous force, leaving Wang no time to evade an unpredictable kick, giving him the first point.

Wang refocussed.

This time, Wang met his opponent halfway. Sinwon, who was not expecting this, threw a wild punch. Wang evaded, swept the leg, and scored his first point. Wang saw Sinwon’s eyes fill with fire.

‘This is the final match. Next point wins,’ the referee yelled.

Without warnign, Sinwon jumped with a kick to Wang’s face, which he avoided with immense difficulty. Wang gazed at Sinwon and remembered his master’s first teachings.

‘Harness your anger. Be water.’

And he understood what he meant. Not to hide his anger, but to control how he used it, to be free and flow into any circumstance.

The fighters circled each other. Sinwon struck first with a barrage of punches. Wang flowed behind Sinwon, grabbed his arm, and flipped him over his back with all the force he could muster, landing the final point.

He bowed and offered his hand to Sinwon, as Lee had done to him.

After the match, Xiao pushed his way through the cheering crowd and hugged Wang.

‘Wang, you were right. I’m sorry. I failed to see it, and I would love to join you in your new dojo. Please accept my apologies.’

Wang lifted Xiao out of his deep bow. ‘Of course,’ Wang said, and grinned.