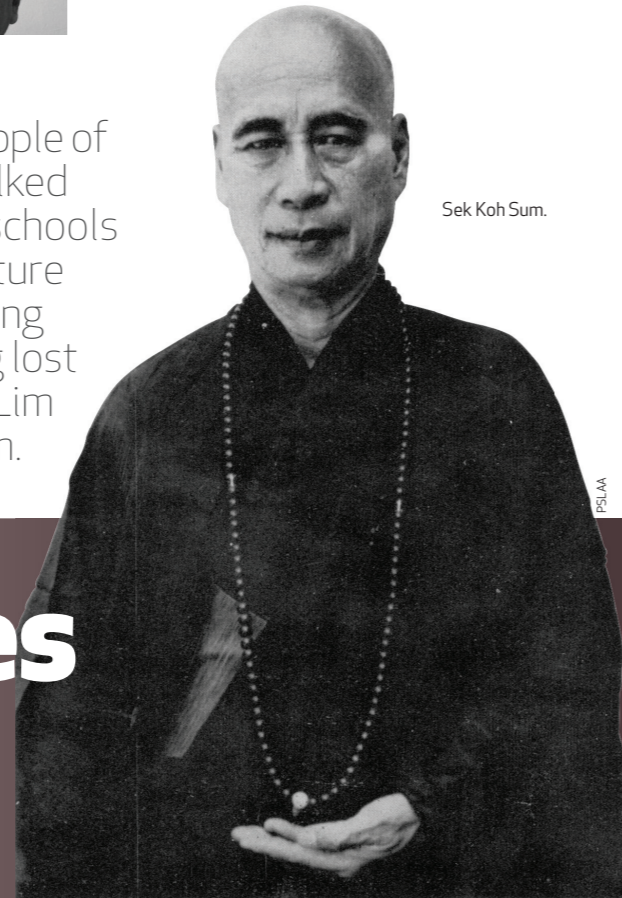




Kung fu exercises a fascination for the people of Penang – young and old – that is seldom talked about. However, the long tradition of the schools that exist in the state, and the exacting nature of their arts put it beyond doubt that Penang remains a guardian for skills that are being lost elsewhere, even in China. The Penang Sao Lim Athletic Association (PSLAA) is one of them.

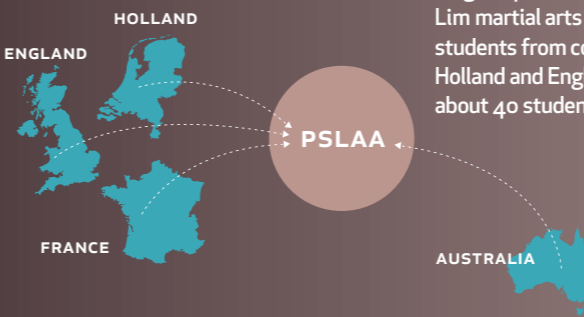


Sek Koh Sum.

PSLAA

Sao Lim comes to Penang

By Yong Check Yoon



P'ng's reputation in traditional Sao Lim martial arts drew in more than 400 students from countries such as France, Holland and England since 1972, with about 40 students from Australia alone.



Left: The Shuang Qing Zhu Lin Si Vihara Temple at Upper Perak Road.

Below: The PSLAA's training centre in Muntri Street, before its recent renovation.



MANY PENANGITES GREW UP WITH some connection to some martial art. But few realise that there are more than 50 Chinese martial arts schools to be found in the state. Most of them still teach martial arts that are truly traditional, which are quite different from the modern style *wushu* (Mandarin for “martial arts”) which comprises more acrobatic and explosive movements that we often see in movies. With *wushu*'s growing popularity, however, Penang has become a destination for martial arts enthusiasts from various countries wanting to learn the fast disappearing traditional forms.

The Penang Sao Lim Athletic Association (PSLAA) is such an institution.

Even the name “Sao Lim” is given as pronounced in the Hokkien dialect in contrast to the mandarin pronunciation of “Shaolin”. Furthermore, the origins of this school can be traced to Quanzhou in Fujian province, China. It was a monk from China, Reverend Sek Koh Sum, who first introduced the art to Indonesia, Singapore, then to Penang. Much has been written about Sek whose prowess in Sao Lim martial arts earned him the nickname *Fei Tian Bao* (Flying Leopard).

A now defunct martial arts magazine once described physics-defying feats performed by Sek, such as running on mud without staining the soles of his shoes.

The late PSLAA Master Datuk P'ng Chye Khim explained that “those feats only belong to the movies as there are limits to what a person can do and certainly [this does not include] what this magazine described.”

P'ng was the chief instructor there for more than 50 years, until he passed away in December 2010. He explained that Sek came to Penang in 1955 to repair and manage a relatively small temple, the Shuang Qing Si at Perak Road.

“At Shuang Qing Si he taught Lam Kuan Hood Kar Phai (literally translatable as ‘the Southern Buddhist Family Sect’) and Chinese medicine to a small group of students.”

P'ng was a teenager living on Perak Road, close to its junction with Free School Road. From 1958 onwards, he commuted about 1.6km from his house to the temple to learn Sao Lim under the strict supervision of Sek. In his pursuit for knowledge about fighting arts, P'ng also studied other Chinese martial arts systems such as Chin Na, Bagua

and Hsing-I Quan and he even took up western boxing. For Tai Chi Chuan, he studied under a senior student of Prof Cheng Man-Ch'ing, Yap Siew Teng, in Taipei, Taiwan, in the 1970s.

“Martial arts were learned for self-protection in those early years because life was tough then,” P'ng said. “As society prospered and people became civil to one another, they learned martial arts for health promotion instead.”

Despite his age – he was in his 70s when he died – Sek shuttled between the various temples that he supervised in Medan, Singapore and Penang. In 1956, he handed Shuang Qing Si over to a new management committee to have time to formally establish PSLAA at 42 Muntri Street. Sek died during his sojourn in Singapore in May 1960. He was cremated and his ashes were scattered at sea.

One of Sek's senior students, Ch'ng Kek Hock from Fujian Province, China, was the chief instructor at PSLAA for about two years after its establishment before he too departed for Singapore. P'ng was then appointed the chief instructor, a position he held until his demise in 2010.

In 1974 PSLAA bought the double-storey building which had been its main training centre since its inception. Meanwhile, Shuang Qing Si was demolished to make way for a three-level temple named Shuang Qing Zhu Lin Si Vihara.

“Sao Lim flourished in Singapore as in Penang but in Indonesia, due to the unfavourable political environment there, it withered and died a natural death,” P'ng said.

Despite the short stint that Sek had in Penang, he trained his apprentices well in the Sao Lim martial arts, through strict discipline. His efforts were not in vain because P'ng was much respected and one of the most popular Sao Lim instructors in Penang. All in all, he had 5,000 students.

Besides teaching Sao Lim martial arts, P'ng practiced as a Chinese physician and acupuncturist, and had his office at the training centre.

His reputation in traditional Sao Lim martial arts drew in more than 400 students from countries such as France, Holland and England since 1972, with about 40 students from Australia alone. Over the years, Sao Lim has also been introduced as part of

school curriculum in more than five schools in Penang.

“Most of these foreign students were recommended by word of mouth and they often came here for intensive training over a few months, refining their techniques and application skills,” P'ng said. “We also conduct end-of-the year training sessions to coincide with holidays, and foreign students stay upstairs so that they are able to train as often as they want.”

For his contribution to society, P'ng was conferred several titles by the state and the last carried the title “Datuk”. P'ng left behind a legacy of traditional Sao Lim to be propagated and in the early years even his instructions were given in Hokkien. In recent years Mandarin and English were included in response to the needs of the present generation. He co-authored the book *Shaolin, An Introduction to Lohan Fighting Techniques* with Donn Draeger in 1979. This volume has been well received and went in reprint in 1984.

Among the surviving senior instructors from the generation trained in Penang by “the last of the fighting monks” Sek Koh

Sum are Ong Kim Chooi of Penang Seow Seet San Health Culture Association, and Koay Ah Kean and Goh Boon Leong of PSLAA. Although P'ng has passed away, the Sao Lim martial arts and its philosophy he taught have found worthy students to take them to a new level. ☉

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