

# **FUNDAMENTAL IRON SKILLS**

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**TEMPERING BODY AND LIMBS  
WITH ANCIENT METHODS**

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戰鬥鐵  
沙掌鐵  
衫功協會

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DR. DALE DUGAS



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Spring House, PA USA

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Edited by Arnaldo Ty Núñez

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# FOREWORD

Dale Dugas and I met 20 years ago in a Vietnamese restaurant in Boston's Chinatown. He was living in the area and studying traditional Chinese medicine and acupuncture and I was martial arts editor at Tuttle Publishing, recently relocated from their Tokyo office to their Boston office. We met for Pho and café sua da, and discussed kung-fu. We had a common friend between us, Renee Navarro, whom we talked about, too, and I found Dale to be full of energy and passion for the arts.

Jump forward to 2013 when I decided to start Tambuli Media. After the first book was published, *Mastering Eskrima Disarms*, I was in a martial arts supply shop and asked the owner what types of books would sell best. Immediately he said, "We need a comprehensive book on iron training." In an instant, my old friend Dale Dugas came to mind.

I reached out to Dale, who has been making quite a name for himself in the iron palm circles and making strides in selling his own brand of Dit Da Jáu, and asked him if he'd be interested in writing a book for Tambuli. He said yes, and in no time I had an outline in hand and we were on our way. A year later, with the editorial assistance of *Kung-Fu Tai Chi* magazine contributor, Arnaldo Ty Núñez, the book was completed and ready to meet its audience.

What I appreciate most about Dale is the common sense he brings to the subject of Iron Skills. The myth of iron palm training from kung-fu movies has finally met its match in his comprehensive book. No secrets! No mystical mumbo jumbo! Just a great manual for all serious practitioners of iron skills.

—Dr. Mark Wiley  
Publisher, Tambuli Media  
[www.TambuliMedia.com](http://www.TambuliMedia.com)



戰鬥鐵  
沙掌鐵  
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# FOREWORD

After having spent four decades in the Chinese martial arts community, I have known both students and masters of various styles, systems, traditions and lineages. Considering this background, I have found Dale Dugas to be an exceptional individual. It is a pleasure to call him a friend and an honor to write this foreword for him.

Chinese martial arts are unique in their vast diversity. Technically, they encompass the four essentials skills of kicking, striking, wrestling and joint locking. In addition, authentic Chinese martial arts require an understanding of both the external and the internal. While today it is becoming disjointed; traditionally, Chinese martial arts were also linked to the vast Chinese healing arts tradition. To be a true master of Chinese martial arts requires decades of study and a wide breadth of knowledge. There are very few men that meet these requirements.

Dale is one of those men who have dedicated his life to Chinese martial arts. He has studied both the external and the internal; he understands their differences and their important commonalities. He is dedicated to the traditional but with an eye on progress and innovation. Perhaps most importantly, Dale's training in Chinese medicine and herbology makes him one of those rare men today who remain both a martial arts master and a master healer.

In the old days, a potential student would abandon their lives and travel miles to find a man like Dale Dugas. Those of us who were willing to do this are fewer and fewer these days. Luckily for the reader, in the modern age this is perhaps no longer necessary. In your hands, you have much of Dale's wisdom, without ever leaving your home.

—Sifu David A. Ross  
NY Sanda and Lama Pai  
[www.SifuDavidRoss.com](http://www.SifuDavidRoss.com)



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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my parents, George and Nancy Dugas, for putting up with me when I was younger as I began my fervent training in the martial arts. It could not have been easy for them as I took to the arts like a fish to water. I wore white pajamas while jumping around and yelling a lot. My poor parents; they thought it was a fad!

To my brothers, Jon Dugas and Dana Dugas, thank you for being my first training dummies.

Dr. Mark Wiley, owner of Tambuli Media, thank you for giving me a chance to share the knowledge that was shared with me!

Thank you must go to: Sensei Gary Young, my very first Uechi-ryu karate teacher, Sensei John Sullivan, and Sensei Jack Summers (RIP) who all taught me Uechi-ryu karate, judo/jujitsu, and boxing very well.

Thank you, Shifu Lee Yon for introducing me to Hung-gar kung-fu.

Thank you to Shifu Roger Hagood, who has helped me and many others to better understand Kwongsai South Mantis kung-fu. I am honored to know you and learn from you, sir.

Thank you to Shifu Richard Gamboa for being not only a close friend but also teaching me.

A special thank you to Ethan Brack, who posed for the application shots for me. Thank you, for eating the floor.

Thank you Dr. John Painter, Shifu Robert Castaldo, Shifu Andrew Garza and Shifu Alan Marshall, who all taught me much about Jijulong Baguazhang, Xingyiquan and Taijiquan.

A huge thank you goes to Gene Ching, Associate Publisher of *Kung Fu Tai Chi Magazine*, for publishing my first article on iron palm for MMA Training.

Shifu David Ross gets a huge thank you for giving up his precious time and allowing us access to his school for most of the photos illustrated in the book as well as writing the introduction. Thank you, sir! It is an honor to be your martial arts brother.

Shifu Arnaldo Ty Núñez, thank you for all the work on the book and advice on how to be a better writer. You are the best editor to have in my corner. Without you, this book would not have happened. Salute!

Thank you Sensei Russ Smith for opening your Burinkan Dojo for our first photo shoot. Although those photos did not make it into the book, I am grateful nonetheless.

I also need to thank all my teachers and training brothers/sisters in Japan, China and Taiwan, living and deceased, for all they taught me in Chinese medicine and martial arts.

The countless acupuncture, Chinese herbal medicine, martial arts teachers/practitioners I have met on my path have helped me become the acupuncturist and martial arts teacher I am today. I salute you all!

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# INTRODUCTION

Most individuals in the West may not be familiar with the term “Iron Skills” or the Iron Palm. However, they have been exposed to facets of it via demonstrations of individuals breaking pine boards or slabs of granite at local martial arts tournaments or even on late night television and in film. Then there is a certain segment of the population that is familiar with the term, whose words would quickly resonate with various connotations depending upon the age group.

Some may recall the lovely Uma Thurman as “The Bride” in Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill Volume 2*, being instructed in the art of iron hand by the reclusive Pai Mei, which was played by the renowned Gordon Liu. But others would fondly recall the movie, which initiated the kung-fu craze in the West, *King Boxer*, and better known as, *The Five Fingers of Death*, which introduced the notion of “iron hand” to the masses. However, Mid-America’s exposure to iron hand without being conscious of it was via the art of breaking in the late ‘70s with the appearance of an American Combat Karate master, Richard Barathy (1947-1996) on “The Tonight Show” starring Johnny Carson, “The Mike Douglas Show,” and others. Barathy’s most memorable appearance was the one on Carson’s “Tonight Show,” decked out in an American flag karate *gi* (uniform). He stood there, before 13 slabs of granite, which he lit on fire and in the process of breaking them he burned his arm; forever being enshrined in the annals of television lore.

However, the fans of kung-fu cinema are familiar with the notion of Iron Palm and Iron Body training and its devastating ability, which rings strongly throughout countless movies to the point that it has become the pinnacle turning point in the story. Usually, the plot of these movies consists of: A young man, who is the movie's hero, seeking revenge for the murder of a loved one; eventually he comes across an elderly monk or kung-fu master, who possess extraordinary fighting skills and lives in seclusion. The hero begs to be trained in the deadly arts of iron palm to avenge the death of his loved one. Through trial and tribulation the master concedes and instructs the hero in the secret art of iron palm, which later serves him in attaining his vengeance.

The training is typically depicted with the protagonist striking some sort of ridiculously huge training bag or worse, thrusting his hands into a wok filled with hot sand or even molten metal. The wok is naturally sensationalized by being superheated to a red color and underneath lies a roaring fire to give it that added touch of drama, which the hero grunts in pain, while penetrating the wok with his fingers. Then the student starts to condition his body by swinging heavy bags onto his chest or back and then striking a wooden post with his forearm or the shin of his leg.

Later on in the movie, as the hero engages in battle with the villain and at that climactic moment, when the hero is close to being defeated, he uses his hard-earned skill of iron palm to strike a particular part of the villain's body, causing massive hemorrhaging and instant death, which concludes the movie.



These vivid depictions of Iron Skills have caught the fancy of some individuals to the point that they have engaged in the training of Iron Palm or Iron Body without proper supervision; others have engaged in the art of breaking, again with no formal instruction, which can be physically and mentally harmful.

### **Real or “Wow Factor”?**

One has to take into account that the art of Iron Palm, Iron Body, and breaking skills are a demanding process that takes proper training and sufficient time to make certain no crippling injuries occur to the practitioner. But, unfortunately, the media has taken this attribute as being the pinnacle skill that a martial artist can achieve. To the point; individuals like motivational speaker Tony Robbins, has used the skill of breaking as part of his life coaching seminar to empower others with the belief that breaking a board would assist them in breaking through their personal limitations and fears. An interesting fact is that Mr. Robbins is actually a Taekwondo black belt under world renowned Jhoon Rhee, who is considered the “Father of American Taekwondo.”

At the same time, we need to be conscious that some individuals use the skill of breaking as a “wow factor” to gain fame or to embellish their prowess as martial artists. In spite of these extraordinary feats of strength, many of these individuals are not actually breaking for real. Some may wonder what this means.

The fact is, many who do breaking for demonstration to achieve the “wow factor” are actually striking objects that have been altered in some manner or other. For example, by using vinegar to degrade the

cinder block's strength; baking the brick in an oven until it is brittle, so it can crumble easily with the slightest of touch; or simply using huge spacers between the striking medium. The spacers would facilitate an easier break because of the domino effect; breaking one slab or board creates a chain reaction that breaks the rest. It is much harder to break slabs of concrete or wood stacked one directly on top of the other.

In stark contrast to kung-fu movies and the media's portrayal, the art of Iron Hand consists of training with materials that are rather mundane compared to the superheated woks with raging fires beneath them. Real Iron Skill training was developed to preserve the body, strengthening and conditioning it to deal with the hardships of time. However, even though we are not technically preparing for the battlefield, the art of Iron Hand training still grants us benefits, especially for those individuals who are involved in pugilistic pursuits.

## **Beyond the Hand**

Iron Palm training is actually one component of a larger canon, which is Iron Skills training—the subject of this book—which conditions the entire body for combat. This includes specifically, the hands, fingers, fist, forearms, torso, and legs.

Some may have seen Iron Body skills portrayed in the cult-classic film from 1978, “Five Deadly Venoms.” One of the “venoms” was actor Gao Ji, portraying “The Scorpion” and possessing iron body skills—the ability to absorb impact to all parts of his body. In reality, such a skill is a crucial component of actual combat; be it in

the ring or the streets. Simply put: you need to be able to absorb an opponent's impact in any encounter.

## Essence of Iron Skills

In essence, the concept of Iron Skill and its training methodologies were designed to strengthen and preserve your anatomical weapons, which in this case are the hands, the torso, forearms, and shins. However, such training must be performed correctly, so as not to damage them to the point they become little more than useless nerve-damaged appendages.

The breaking of pine boards, cinder blocks, or even coconuts or a bat on one's shin is not the apex for training in Iron Skills; nor should this be considered anything but a simple pressure gauge within one's own Iron Skills training path.

The essence of Iron Skill training is a twofold:

- 1) To condition the body without getting hurt; be it for striking or absorbing a hit.
- 2) To develop penetrating ability when striking an opponent's soft body tissue or pressure points, especially at close-range.

The art of Iron Skills has been shrouded in secrecy—and worse, in ignorance—for so long that it has led to countless myths and apocryphal legends. However, in the chapters that follow we examine the methodologies that grant us the ability of Iron Skills without all the pseudoscience and ambiguity that foreshadow it for so long.

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## CHAPTER 1:

# BRIEF HISTORY OF IRON SKILLS

From the dawn of time, humanity has been forced to fight for their survival and in the process has developed various methods to train and condition the body to confront these adversities. One of the few civilizations that have survived since antiquity to the present has been the Chinese culture. It possesses a rich tradition in hand-to-hand fighting and the art of conditioning the body for combat. Several individuals have received, developed and passed along the ancient transmission of Iron Skills. We will discuss a few of them here, as they have direct influence on this author.

### Gù, Rǔzhāng

Within the annals of Chinese's hand-to-hand combat stands out an individual, who can be considered the father of Iron Palm training in the Age of Modernism. His name is Gù, Rǔzhāng (1894-1952), and his notoriety came to be one autumn day in the newly inaugurated Capital City of Nánjīng, China, where he partook in the First National Guóshù Exam.

At the time China was still defining itself in the Age of Modernism (1890-1945). The political unrest that came from the end of Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) monarchy was still lingering. However, The Republic (1912-1949) was looking forward towards the future by

balancing the old with the new, or in this case merging Western Culture with Eastern belief.

The youth quickly acclimated to Western culture; be it fashion, technology, sports, or calisthenics. However, individuals like Xú, Yībīng, Chén, Tiěshēng, Zhāng, Zhījiāng, and others were proponents of the idea that China's rich martial art heritage could be used to strengthen the body and spirit of China's youth.

These ideals gave birth to the Jīngwǔ Association (1910-present), which has been venerated within movies with its depiction in Bruce Lee's *Fist of Fury* (aka, *The Chinese Connection*), and three decades later by Jet Lee in two films, *Fist of Legend*, and *Fearless*.”



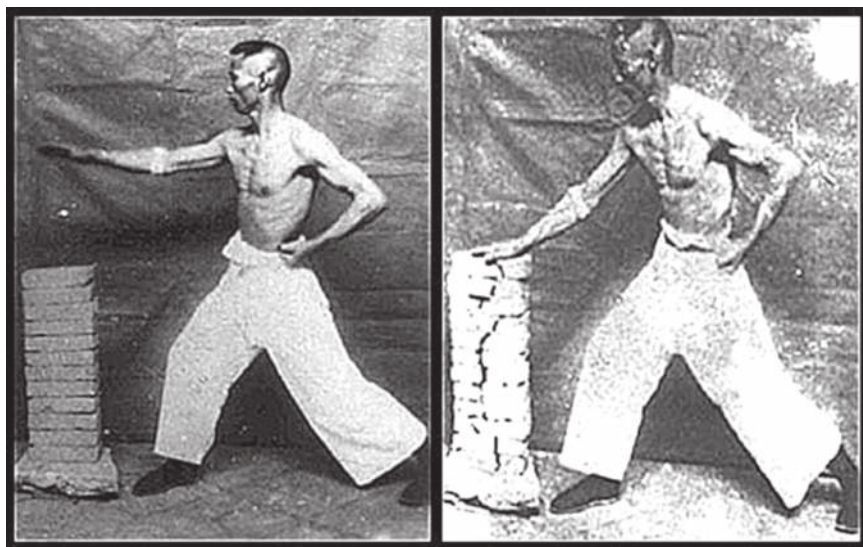
*Jīngwǔ in Shànghǎi, China, circa 1909.*

Over two decades after the formation of the Jīngwǔ Association the Guóshù Institute was founded to spread the same ideology of strengthening the youth with martial arts. Shortly afterward they decided to organize a national exam with the objective to integrate the notions from past imperial military examinations, provincial lèitái challenges, and contemporary competitive spirit into one grand event to boost the warrior spirit of yesteryears.

Therefore, the First National Guóshù Exam was held in 1928, from October 15<sup>th</sup> through the 19<sup>th</sup>, in the newly inaugurated capital city of Nánjīng. An estimated 300 plus martial artist arrived in the capital city to participate in this one of a kind national exam. The first three days consisted of various demonstrations of hand-to-hand combat routines; displays of ancient weapon skills; oral examinations, which were akin to the imperial exams; and the finals consisted of lèitái matches (full-contact fighting on elevated platforms with no safety ropes). At the end, only 15 contestants survived these fierce matches and one of them was Gù, Rǔzhāng, who received the title of “guóshì” or national warrior.

Due to his achievements as a pugilist, Gù would go on to have a successful career as a professional martial art instructor throughout Southern China to the point he would be immortalized by two particular photographs illustrating his feat of Iron Palm. In them he is seen standing bare-chested in front of a stack 12 bricks and then breaking them with a slap of his palm.

By doing this, Gù became one of the first individuals who allowed himself to be documented displaying the Iron Palm skill, which was typically a kept secret of the shīfus. For those who are not



*Legendary Iron Palm master Gù, Rǔzhāng, breaking 12 slabs*

familiar with the term *shīfu*, it is a title of respect given to a master in various occupations. It consists of two Chinese ideograms: one, 師, which is pronounced *shī* and refers to the concept of a master. Second, the ideogram 父, which is pronounced *fù*, which means father or teacher. Therefore, this title is customarily used to refer to an individual with mastery in various occupations; be it a chef or in this case an instructor of martial arts. Indirectly, the phrase possesses the connotation of a surrogate father teaching a person a livelihood. For that reason, many of the older generation *shīfu* in China and abroad did not teach these skills easily nor openly and rarely ever taught it to non-Chinese. It was for family members.

This attitude radically changed in the late 1950s, when a certain *shīfu* at the time crossed the racial barriers and began teaching his skills of hand-to-hand combat to non-Chinese and one of the skills that he taught was secretive Iron Skills.



## Ark Yuey Wong: Jim Anastasi & Ron Shewmaker

The first documented individual to break down these bamboo walls was a mild-mannered individual who ran an herb shop in Los Angeles, CA. His name is Ark Yuey Wong (1900-1987).



*Ark Yuey Wong*

Wong Shīfu came to prominence for being a pioneer in teaching Chinese martial arts and running a traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) clinic in the early 1920s in the United States; first in the San Francisco Bay Area and later in the City of Los Angeles. It was in Los Angeles, where he would teach the art of Shaolin Five Family Fist, better known by its Cantonese (Guangdongese) pronunciation, Siu Lāhm Ngh Gà Kyùhn, which he openly taught for over 50 years. However, Wong would fondly be remembered as the first documented shīfu to teach publicly what is now commonly referred to as "kung-fu" to non-Chinese; first by instructing Mr. Jim Anastasi in 1958 and shortly thereafter Mr. Ron



*Ark Yuey Wong striking a heavy bag.*



*Jim Anestasi, Ron Shewmaker, Ark Y. Wong, Chet, Paul J., Ralph Shun, circa 1962.*

Shewmaker in 1959. They both would persuade Wong Shīfu to open his first public Móuh Gwún (Wáh Kiùh), which is Cantonese for martial (art) school. Prior to this Wong Shīfu taught privately out of his herb shop or in an adjoining parking lot.

One of the most unique attributes that Ark Wong would share with his students was the well-guarded secret and art of iron skills. He strongly believed that the art of iron skills was an integral



*Ark Yuey Wong practicing the direct method of Iron Hand.*

part in mastering Shaolin Five Family Fist, because of this sincerity and openness to teach others his art has become an enduring legacy that still continues to flourish throughout the United States, Mexico and abroad with numerous practitioners spreading his legacy in teaching others the art of iron skills and most of all Siu Lähm Ngh Gà Kyùhn.

**Tim Yuen Wong:  
James Yim Lee & Jim Novak**

Beside Wong Shīfu, other Chinese would start teaching their respected arts to the Chinese community within the United States; one of those being Shīfu Wong, Tim Yuen, who would introduce a version Siu Lähm Faht Gà Kyùhn <sup>1</sup> or Shaolin Buddha Family Fist to the city of San Francisco.

In 1957, one of Shīfu Wong’s students, James Yim Lee’s (1920-1972), self-published the first English language book detailing the art of Iron Hand. The book was titled, *Modern Kung-Fu Karate: Iron Poison Hand Training, Book 1 (Break Brick in 100 Days)*. This individual’s claim to fame, however, would not stem from this landmark publication, but rather from his association with the legendary martial artist and movie star Bruce Lee. However,



*One of the first English-language books on the art of kung-fu.*



*James Yimm Lee demonstrating the art of breaking.*

Wong, Tim Yuen, where he would be introduced to the art of iron hand, which he would later document in his book titled. The book would remain as a testament of Lee Shīfu's instruction, which was progressive and safe, taught in a sequential way and included the use of liniments to protect the hand from incurring damage.

Emerging at the same time would be another remarkable individual; just like Jim Anestasi and Ron Shewmaker, he would also be documented as one of the earliest known non-Chinese to learn Chinese martial arts, and especially the skill of iron palm. He was Mr. Al Novak (1942-2011).

he should be remembered for his personal achievements in promoting Chinese martial arts and the skills of iron palm, which he introduced to Bruce Lee.

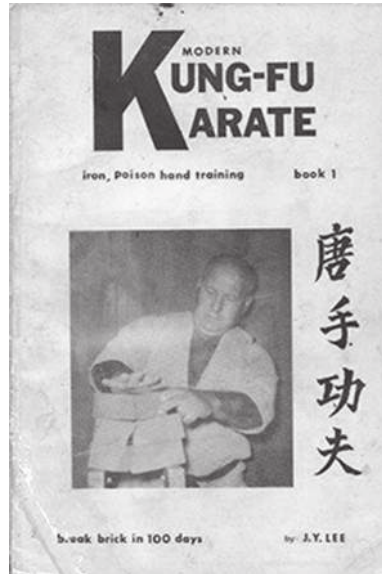
Lee's journey in Chinese martial arts started in the early '50s when he enrolled in The Kin Mon (Kihn Māhn) Móuh Gwún under the supervision of Shīfu



*Al Novak demonstrating the art of breaking.*



*James Yim Lee and Al Novak demonstrating techniques.*



Like James Yimm Lee, Novak began his training of Chinese martial arts at Kin Mon Móuh Gwún, which he later continued under the tutelage of James Yimm Lee, who in time would introduce him to the art of brick breaking. After a while, Al would assist in promoting James' book to the point where he appears in *Karate Gi* breaking a stack of bricks.

Eventually Al Novak would be recognized as an inspirational and knowledgeable shifu who openly shared the knowledge that he had acquired throughout the years, including iron palm.

Without being conscious of the fact, these remarkable individuals would be the first to shed light on a secretive practice that has taken root on American soil from the time of the California Gold Rush (1848–1855). Their persistence and dedication has made these

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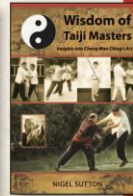
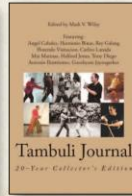
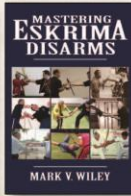
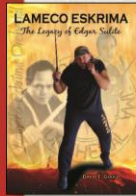
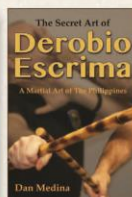
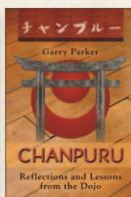
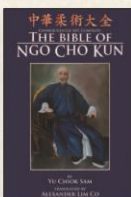
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Welcome to Tambuli Media, publisher of quality books on mind-body martial arts and wellness presented in their cultural context.

**Our Vision** is to see quality books once again playing an integral role in the lives of people who pursue a journey of personal development, through the documentation and transmission of traditional knowledge of mind-body cultures.

**Our Mission** is to partner with the highest caliber subject-matter experts to bring you the highest quality books on important topics of health and martial arts that are in-depth, well-written, clearly illustrated and comprehensive.

**Tambuli** is the name of a native instrument in the Philippines fashioned from the horn of a carabao. The tambuli was blown and its sound signaled to villagers that a meeting with village elders was to be in session, or to announce the news of the day. It is hoped that Tambuli Media publications will “bring people together and disseminate the knowledge” to many.



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