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RANK, GRADE AND LEVEL OF ACHIEVEMENT IN THE MARTIAL ARTS.

By WILLIAM LUCIANO

WHAT IS RANK, GRADE OR LEVEL IN THE MARTIAL ARTS?

Rank is a position within the hierarchy of a martial art organization or society. Grade or level in a martial art is a step or a stage of martial training. It is an acknowledgement of achievement in a martial curriculum.

Training in a martial art can be a difficult endeavor; you will be pushed physically, mentally and be expected to devote time and energy to your practice. Your 'Level' should also reflect the time and effort (kung-fu) that you have put into your martial training. This means that your grade or level is not only quantity based (how much of a curriculum you know), it is also quality based (how well you know and can apply the parts of the curriculum that you have learned). In most cases, as a practitioner's level raises, so does their rank, or standing within their martial organization. This has led to these three terms being used in a somewhat synonymous manner. Earning rank is an honor, to be respected by students and instructors.

Today most martial art associations, systems and schools employ some method of grading/ranking. As such, each school will have a specific set of standards or criteria on which the grading process is based. Because each system, method or school of martial arts is different, rank in a particular art applies to that art only.

This article will be broken into two parts. Part one will cover a general history of rank, and what methods were employed by the various branches of the Pai Family Arts. Part two will cover the anatomy of a ranking system.

PART ONE: HISTORY

Before we discuss what the different levels mean, or how rank is currently used in the martial

arts, you need to understand a little about how it has evolved.

Rank, position, titles, and teaching certification in Asian martial arts, as we know them today, are primarily products of two major sources; Chinese and Japanese traditions. These cultural traditions have been mixed together somewhat around the world. The end result having too many variations to completely cover here. In the following sections we will give a general history of classical (pre-1911) and modern (post 1911) Chinese ranking methods. This will be followed by a general history of classical (pre-1883) and modern (post 1883) Japanese ranking methods.

CHINESE MARTIAL CULTURE BEFORE 1911

Chinese martial arts did not use a numeric rank or grading system until late in the 20th century. Before that, one was simply part of a group. One's stature or position in that group was determined by affiliation, time training, skill level and being accepted as a student by a teacher.

Historically, position or rank, in Chinese martial arts, is based on the student-teacher relationship and is familial in nature. As in much of Chinese culture, the traditional thought about this relationship is based on the teachings of Confucius (551- 479 BC, AKA 孔夫子, K'ung Fu-Tzu, Kong Fuzi) that pertains to social order. The roles of teacher and student, though independent of each other, are clearly defined and interdependently linked. Teachers teach, lead students through the learning process and look out for the well being of their students. Students learn, look out for the well being of the teacher, train hard, and honor the family, method and traditions of their teacher.

Teachers and students are referred to in a respectful, family manner. There is the school/system founder or head of the family (Zu-Shi 祖師 or Sijo 師祖: Literally Grandparent/Ancestor Teacher), who may also be the head teacher (Shi-Fu/Sifu 師父, teacher-father)

followed by the teacher's senior, inner circle students or disciples (Tu-Di 徒弟 or Di-Zi 弟子), and then junior or outer circle students. Traditionally there is only one Shi-Fu in a particular family or school of martial arts. Students refer to each other as older or younger brother or sister. To inner circle students the teacher is Shi-Fu 師父 (teacher-father). In cases where the head teacher is female, the term Shi-Mu 師母 (teacher-mother) is used. This term is traditionally used for the wife of the Shi-Fu, however, in modern times it is not unusual for the head teacher of a school to be female. Outer circle students would also refer to the teacher as Shi-Fu, but this Shi-Fu 師傅 (teacher-instructor) is a general term for teacher/instructor regardless of gender.

DISCIPLES

A student receiving a formal lineage becomes a disciple of the teacher, literally Ru-Men Di-Zi 入門弟子 "One who is permitted through the inner door".

Disciples are taught the inner teachings and secrets of their system. Martial systems and all of the responsibilities of being the head of their school or family, were handed down to the senior disciple. On occasion, a teacher may have many disciples. A teacher may designate any number of them as head of their own branch school based on their teacher's method, making them the head of their own family or method.

CHINESE MARTIAL CULTURE AFTER 1911: THE CHING-WU ASSOCIATION

After the boxer rebellion (1900) martial arts were generally looked down upon by many Chinese. In 1911 with the fall of the Ch'ing Dynasty and founding of the Republic of China, there was a push to modernize and strengthen China.

One of the primary reasons for a renewed interest in the martial arts of China during this period of time was the Ching-Wu Association.

The Ching-Wu Athletic Association (精武體育會, Jingwu ti-yu hui) was founded in Shanghai, China in 1910. It was the first Chinese martial organiza-



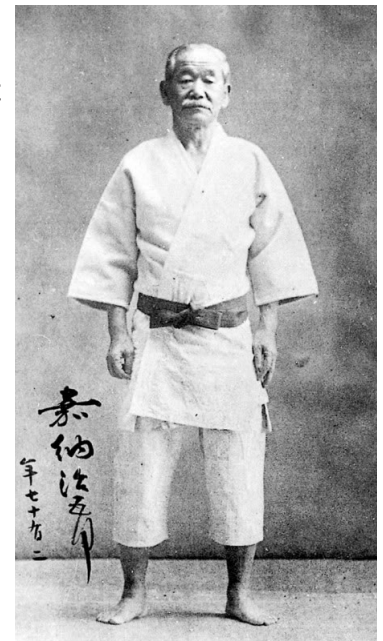
ORIGINAL TRAINING UNIFORM ADOPTED BY THE CHING-WU ASSOCIATION. THE FIRST 'STANDARD' UNIFORM USED IN CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS.

tion to teach Chinese martial arts to the general public, the first to employ standardized curriculums (and issue certificates of completion for courses of study in various Chinese martial arts) and the first to use a standard training uniform. These innovations became the norm in many Chinese arts. Similar martial organizations, such as the Nanking Central Kuo-Shu Institute, began to open up all over China. Most of today's Chinese martial arts and martial traditions are products of, related to, or influenced by these organizations.

JAPANESE MARTIAL CULTURE BEFORE 1883

Japanese culture is very regimented. In any Japanese art there is some type of grading system that will identify where one fits in a particular art.

Early grading methods used in martial arts were known to use licenses, this system was known as the Menkyo system. The first license was known as kirikami; this signified that a student had been accepted by his school as a serious practitioner. The student would then be presented with a mokuroku: a written catalog of the techniques found within the system. After a number of years a student may receive a menkyo: a license to teach. This license may also specify a specific title and/or the student's position within the system. The top license that was awarded was a menkyo kaiden, this license was awarded to students that had mastered every aspect of the system. In most cases, only one menkyo kaiden was issued by a system's headmaster to their chosen successor.



DR. JIGORO KANO, FOUNDER OF KODOKAN JUDO, WEARING AN EARLY VERSION OF A KIESO-GI (TRAINING UNIFORM) AND OBI (BELT). TODAY, VARIATIONS OF THIS UNIFORM IS USED BY MARTIAL SYSTEMS ALL OVER THE WORLD

JAPANESE MARTIAL CULTURE AFTER 1883:

THE KYU-DAN SYSTEM

The kyu/dan grading system is a series of steps and levels of achievement. It was first used in the 17th century with the Japanese game "go". Eventually, many other areas of Japanese society used the kyu/dan system ie. tea ceremony, flower arranging, and calligraphy to name a few.

Dr. Jigoro Kano was the the first person to implement this grading system in the martial arts.

Dr. Kano began using this "new" grading system in 1883 to standardize ranking achievements in his art, Kodokan Judo. Dr. Kano divided his students into two groups; students without rank, Mudansha 無段者 (not having a dan grade), and those with rank, Yudansha 有段者 (having a dan grade). Three years later he incorporated the use of a black sash to designate the Yudansha, Mudansha wore white sashes. It was not until 1907 that the formal keiko-gi (training uniform) and obi (belt) were introduced. Soon, Mudansha consisted of six kyu (steps) before Yudansha (black belt), which consisted of ten dan (grades). It wasn't until much later that colored belts were used to designate the different kyu.

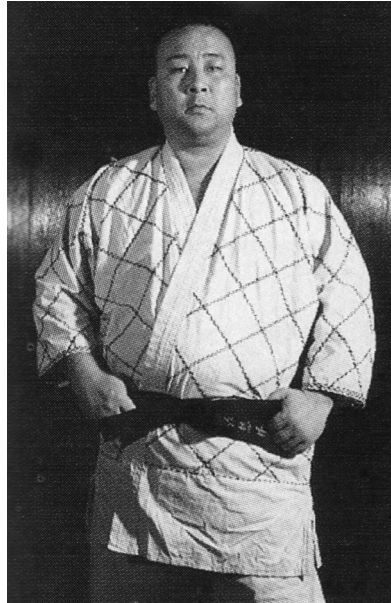
In 1895 the Dai Nippon Butokukai (Japan Great Martial Virtues Association), an association created to oversee, standardize and promote the various Japanese traditions, adopted Dr. Kano's kyu/dan method for grading certification and license issuing. Soon, other Japanese martial arts associations adopted different variations of this method.

Gichin Funakoshi, founder of Shotokan Karate, became the first Okinawan teacher to adopt the kyu/dan ranking method in 1924. By the mid 1930's many schools of Okinawan Karate began to adopt this grading system. It was not until the formation of the Okinawa Karate Federation in 1956 that the kyu/dan system was universally accepted on Okinawa.

The Federation of All-Japan Karatedo Organizations (FAJKO) was formed in 1964 and in 1971 created standards of usage for ranks and titles used in association with Japanese (and Okinawan) martial arts. These standards were generally accepted worldwide although there were still minor variations from style to style. This federation eventually became the Japan Karate Federation (JKF) and is the national body for karate in Japan.

MODERN USAGE OF THE KYU/DAN SYSTEM OUTSIDE OF JAPAN

Starting in the early 1950s, variations of the kyu/dan ranking method were also being implemented by the Korean arts, and to a lesser degree, a handful of Chinese and Chinese based arts in Taiwan, Hawai'i and North America.



FAMOUS INTERNAL ARTS PRACTITIONER AND TEACHER, HUNG I-HSIANG (1925-1993), HAS USED JAPANESE STYLE UNIFORMS AND GRADING METHODS IN HIS TAIWAN BASED MARTIAL ART SCHOOLS FOR MANY YEARS.

A good example would be Hung I-Hsiang, a very famous internal arts teacher from Taiwan. After taking a trip to Japan he was very impressed with their organization and systematic approach to martial training. As a result, he implemented Japanese style training uniforms (Keiko Gi), belts (Obi) and grading methods in his Tang Shou Tao (唐手道) training halls.

In the nineteen fifties and sixties, most Karate and Kempo schools in North America were using white and brown belts for the kyu grades and black belts for the dan grades.

Around 1962, the Tracy brothers, students of the late Edmund K. Parker, began using different colored belts to fill out the kyu ranks. The colors were white, yellow, orange, purple, blue, green, and brown. This color scheme was soon adopted by Mr. Parker's Kempo Karate studios. From this point on many systems began using different variations of colors and stripes on their obi for a whole variety of reasons.

By the early nineteen seventies, the standard used at most karate competitions broke down the student divisions as White/Yellow Belts (beginner), Green belt (intermediate) and Brown belt (advanced). The advanced /instructor division was called the Black belt division. Today, there are too many variations to accurately list and cover.

CURRENT GRADING SYSTEMS IN THE CHINESE ARTS

Most of the Chinese martial arts around the world still use the familial system for designating position or stature within their particular methods. However, there is a growing number of styles using kyu/dan type ranking systems along side the older, more traditional methods.

In order to promote the martial arts of China on an international level, many of the major martial art associations in both Taiwan (Republic of China) and Mainland China (People's Republic of China) have adopted grading systems based on the Japanese kyu/dan method.

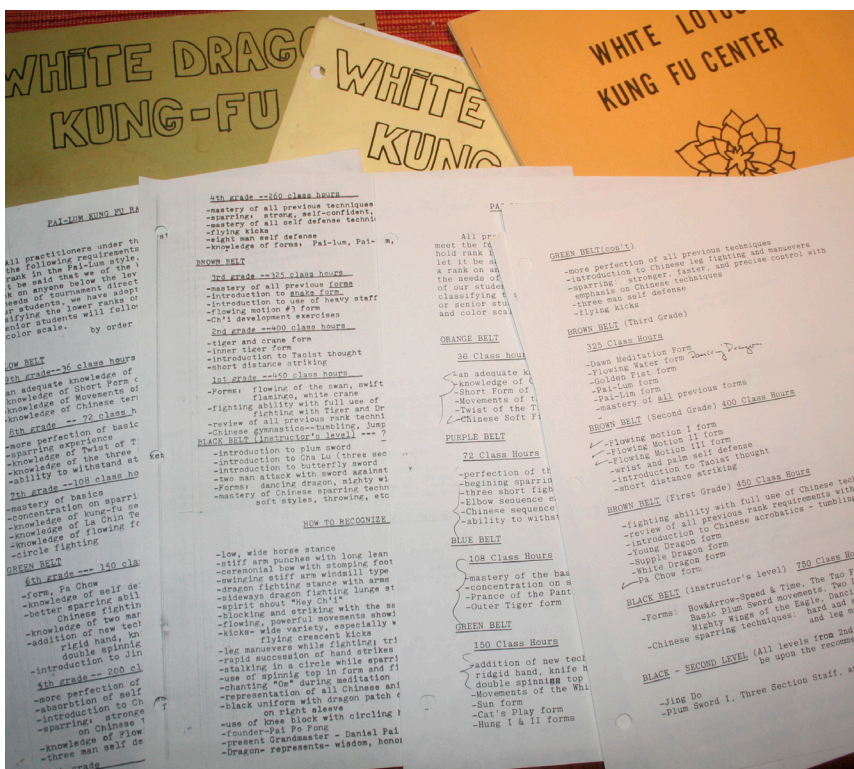
In 1982 Chang Tung-Sheng's International Shuai-Chiao (Chinese Wrestling) Association, officially implemented a modified version of the kyu/dan belt ranking system. This system consisted of six lower grades called Ji 級 (grade) and ten higher grades called Deng 等 (rank/grade).

Taiwan's World Kuo-Shu Association has also implemented a comprehensive system that has six Ji 級 (grade), and ten Duan 段 (step, stage or segment).

JAPANESE TERMINOLOGY WITH CHINESE ARTS

Outside of China it is common, though not correct, to hear Japanese terminology associated with Chinese based arts. This is particularly true of arts that trace their lineage to Hawai'i. Part of the reason for this is that Japanese arts were taught publicly in the west before their Chinese counterparts. As a result Chinese arts were often viewed from a Japanese perspective. Chinese striking arts were referred to as "Kempo" (sometimes spelled Kenpo) by Japanese martial artists. In fact, both Chinese and Korean martial arts were publicly referred to as "Chinese Karate" and "Korean Karate" respectively.

While many Chinese arts do not actually use the wearing of belts to show rank, it is common-



place to use the terminology associated with the Japanese arts. So it is normal to hear instructors referred to as 'Black Belts' even if they do not wear belts.

GRADING SYSTEMS EMPLOYED IN THE PAI FAMILY ARTS

In the various Pai Family Martial Arts (hereafter referred to as Pai-Lum) branches and training halls the subject of rank can be confusing because of the many grading methods that have been employed over the years.

While there are some branches of Pai-Lum that do not issue rank, most of Pai-Lum uses a rank structure that is a combination of the Chinese family structure and Japanese kyu/dan method. There have also been a number of variations of how rank or level is shown (belt, sash, uniform, dragon ring etc.), especially for the student levels. The actual grade structure, as it was used in the now defunct Pai-Lum Association and a large number of Pai-Lum training halls today, has consisted of ten lower levels (in descending order) and ten upper levels (in ascending order) since the early seventies.

Up until the late sixties, Grandmaster Daniel K. Pai primarily taught Okinawan Karate or Kempo with some elements of Kung-Fu. It is my understanding that a standard kyu/dan grading system was used at that time. In the late sixties and early seventies his focus of teaching shifted toward the Chinese methods. It was around this time that the Pai-Lum Association was started and the curriculum began to expand. As the organization grew and more schools opened up the grading structure went through

PAI-LUM KUNG FU RANKING QUALIFICATIONS

All practitioners under the system of the White Dragon must meet the following requirements in order to justly and authentically hold rank in the Pai-Lum style. To those who might misunderstand, let it be said that we of the White Dragon normally do not confer a rank on anyone below the level of instructor. However, to meet the needs of tournament directors and others who need classification of our students, we have adopted a Japanese-type method of classifying the lower ranks on a ten step scale. The upper ranks, or senior students will follow the traditional Chinese hexagram and color scale.

by order Grandmaster Daniel K. Pai, Ph.D.

THE PARAGRAPH ABOVE WAS USED IN MOST OF THE PAI-LUM TRAINING MANUALS FROM THE 1970S.

many changes.

In the early Pai-Lum training manuals it was stated that there were four distinct levels in Pai-Lum: Student, Disciple, Master and Grandmaster. This is typical of what could be considered a traditional Chinese rank structure. The manual then states that a Japanese type grading method was adopted to classify the student levels to meet the needs of tournament directors.

The student curriculum was divided into 10 levels; white belt, three levels of yellow belt, three levels of green belt and three levels of brown belt.

Pai-Lum and White Lotus training manuals from around 1975 show that there were a large number of self defenses added to the curriculum and the student levels adopted the Kenpo belt colors (White, Yellow, Orange, Purple, Blue, Green, and Brown). All of the higher levels listed in these manuals are referred to as black belt levels.

Coinciding with the rank structure in these manuals were charts listing sash and trim colors for each rank. (Sashes that designated rank, grade or level were used for demonstrations, tournaments, official events and ceremonies. Sashes used for training purposes are made out of a heavier, stiff material and were usually black or dark blue). Lower levels wore black sashes with the appropriate color fringe or trim for their level. Higher level sashes were white, blue, yellow, orange and gold with the appropriate trim color. Grandmaster Pai, being the head of the system, wore a red Sash with Gold trim. Sash colors used are also considered to be healing colors; most of them are also found in association with the five elements (it is unclear if this was intentional or not).

By the late seventies, higher level rank began to be shown on the uniform. This was done in the form of trim color, shirt color and/or chevrons on the bottom of pant legs.

Because there were so many changes being made in both curriculum and grading structure during the 1970s and 80s, many schools associated with the Pai-Lum system did not implement all of the changes. This is part of the reason why most Pai-Lum schools do not share the same

curriculum and grading structure.

PART TWO: ANATOMY OF GRADING SYSTEM

A grading system is a way of organizing all the elements of a martial art curriculum. It is a way of categorizing all of the material that needs to be learned in a manner that facilitates both the teaching and learning process. This "curriculum" is often broken down into into different groups and individual levels. Each of these levels require a student to show proficiency in learned material in order to progress to the next level. Each step, or level builds upon previous material while adding new information.

This process is not unlike our education system here in the west. Lower levels or kyu, are set up like our K-12, and higher levels or dan are set up in a similar fashion to our college/university system.

Student, or novice, curriculums are designed to teach fundamental skills, principles of movement, and basic theories of attack and defense. The most important part of the training at this stage, is learning how to learn. This process is generally curriculum and time based. Enough time has to be allowed for the student to learn and begin the process of understanding while honing their skill. So there are minimum time requirements that must be met before a student is tested for the next level. This process is meant to be both systematic and efficient.

Advancement from the lower levels (novice or student) into the higher levels (practitioner or instructor) is a critical step in the grading process. At this point a student should have a good, working knowledge of the student curriculum and be ready for higher level learning. Many martial artists think of this stage as a new beginning, the point in the training that a student is finally ready to learn!

In the Pai Family Arts, because of our history, curriculums and grading methods can be vastly different from school to school. What method used in a particular school will depend on when and where the chief instructor trained or what school/branch of the Pai Family they are associated with.

Understanding the meanings and terminology pertaining to rank, grade or level in the various martial arts can be quite confusing, especially for the newer students.

DEFINING RANK, GRADE AND LEVEL

The terms rank, level and grade are used to determine your place in both the curriculum and hierarchy of your

particular school or system of martial art.

Rank is defined as a position or standing in a social structure or hierarchy of a particular group or organization. So your rank is where you fit in your school or system relative to the rest of your classmates and instructors.

Grade, as it is used in the martial arts, is a step or stage in a course of learning. It can be used to define a class of persons of the same relative rank or a single division of a school classified according to the progress of the students.

Level, like grade, is a step or stage in a course of learning.

DEFINING THE LEVELS

Lower levels are considered novice or student levels, and higher levels are practitioner and instructor levels. Both groups consist of four divisions and ten individual levels.

STUDENT LEVELS

Student levels range from a person that just begins training (10th Lower Level) to a person who has become proficient with the use of, and understanding of basic technique and fundamental theories (1st LL).

Student levels are divided into four sections:

PROBATIONARY PERIOD - 10th LL

(Shi Yong Qi)

BEGINNER LEVEL - 9th - 7th LL

(Chu-Ji 初級)

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL -6th - 4th LL

(Zhong-Ji 中級)

ADVANCED LEVEL - 3rd - 1st LL

(Gao-Ji 高級)

In the modern Japanese grading system these would be the Kyu grades. Each of these levels should be set up to cohesively build a solid martial foundation.

PRACTITIONER LEVELS

Practitioner and instructor levels range from 1st Higher Level to 9th Higher Level, 10th higher level is reserved for the Founder or Grandmaster.

Practitioner levels are divided into four sections:

SENIOR BROTHER/SISTER - 1st & 2nd HL

(Shi-Xiong 師兄/Shi-Jie 師姐)

INSTRUCTOR-LOWER GRADE - 3rd HL

(Shi-Fu Chu-Ji 師傅初級)

INSTRUCTOR-INTERMEDIATE GRADE - 4th HL

(Shi-fu Zhong-Ji 師傅中級)

INSTRUCTOR-HIGHER GRADE - 5th HL - 9th HL

(Shi-fu Gao-Ji 師傅高級)

Once a student graduates into the practitioner levels they should be physically prepared to begin the long journey of perfecting their art. In the modern Japanese grading system this would be the Dan grades.

SUMMING IT UP

When learning a martial art it does not matter what grading method, if any, is used because the important part is the training. If your school does have a ranking system, a little bit of research can help you to understand a lot about what it is designed for and what tradition (or traditions) it is based on.

In today's martial art world, a ranking system is simply a tool for managing and acknowledging the progress of students in a martial art school and setting up a hierarchy among the practitioner/instructor levels.

GRADING STRUCTURE CHART

On the next page is a chart with five different methods of grading that have been used in Pai-Lum. The chart allows you to cross reference ranks within the five different methods. For example, if you are currently a 4th Lower Level in Pai-Lum, you would be an outer circle student of an Intermediate Level, roughly equivalent to a Green belt in the kyu/dan system.

PAI FAMILY MARTIAL ARTS GRADING STRUCTURE CHART

TRADITIONAL	GENERAL GRADING SYSTEM	NUMERIC GRADING SYSTEM	JAPANESE KYU / DAN BELT SYSTEM	PAI-LUM SASH COLOR SYSTEM
Novice/Student: (Outer Circle) General Members Student Instructors	Shi Yong Qi (Probation) 試用期	10th Lower Level	White Belt (Jukyu)	Black Sash
	Chu-Ji (Beginner) 初級	9th LL	Yellow Belt (Kukyu)	Black Sash - Orange Trim**
		8th LL	Yellow Belt (Hachikyu)	Black Sash - Yellow Trim**
		7th LL	Yellow Belt (Nanakyu)	Black Sash - Lt. Green Trim**
	Zhong-Ji (Intermediate) 中級	6th LL	Green Belt (Rokkyu)	Black Sash - Dk. Green Trim**
		5th LL	Green Belt (Gokyu)	Black Sash - Red Trim**
		4th LL	Green Belt (Yonkyu)	Black Sash - Blue Trim**
	Gao-Ji (Advanced) 高級	3rd LL	Brown Belt (Sankyu)	Black Sash - Brown Trim**
		2nd LL	Brown Belt (Nikyu)	Black Sash - White Trim**
		1st LL	Brown Belt (Ikkyu)	Black Sash - Gold Trim**
Practitioner: (Inner Circle) Assistant Instructors Instructors Disciple*	Shi-Xiong, Shi-Jie (Male) (Female)	1st Higher Level	Black Belt (Shodan)	White Sash - White Trim***
		2nd HL	Black Belt (Nidan)	White Sash - Gold Trim***
	Shi-Fu (Chu-Ji)	3rd HL	Black Belt (Sandán)	Lt. Blue Sash - White Trim***
Master: Senior Instructor Teacher Disciple*	Shi-Fu (Zhong-Ji)	4th HL	Black Belt (Yodan)	Lt. Blue Sash - Gold Trim***
	Shi-Fu (Gao-Ji) or Lao-Shi (Elder Teacher)	5th HL	Black Belt (Godan)	Pale Yellow Sash - White Trim***
		6th HL	Black Belt (Rokudan)	Pale Yellow Sash - Gold Trim***
		7th HL	Black Belt (Shichidan)	Lt. Orange Sash - White Trim***
		8th HL	Black Belt (Hachidan)	Lt. Orange Sash - Gold Trim***
9th HL	Black Belt (Kudan)	Gold Sash - White Trim***		
Grandmaster	Zu-Shi	10th HL	Black Belt (Judan)	Red Sash - Gold Trim

* Higher level practitioners may or may not be Disciples/Inner Door Students of their teacher.

**This use of sash and trim color is how it was originally written in the earlier manuals that it appeared in. Some schools have implemented the use of this color scheme with colored sashes instead of black sashes with colored trim. This color scheme could also be implemented using colored belts.

*** Higher level sash colors are listed in the chart the same way they are listed in training manuals from the late seventies on. Many of the higher level sash color combinations have not been used, particularly those over 3rd higher level. The reason for this is that most practitioners that reach this level have become Disciples/Inner Door students of their teacher. Sash colors for Disciples/Inner Door Students reflect the color of their teacher's level. For example, in Pai-Lum, if the Disciple's teacher wears a Red Sash with Gold Trim (This is the Sash color worn by Grandmaster Pai or a current, first generation head of a Pai family branch), then the disciple's sash would be the same colors in reverse. Gold sash with Red Trim.

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2. *Organization of the Pai Shou Athletic Assoc., April 1981*
3. *Pai-Lum Training manual (early 1970s)*
4. *White Lotus Training manual (late 1970s)*