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A Night At Bok Lei Po

The details from that night are a bit hazy, but I remember that it is night time and all I see are flashes of light around me. It is like one of those establishing shots of New York in the movies, where they show the neon signs in Times Square and all the headlights of the taxis are blurry. My next image is of Mott Street in Chinatown, my dad parks his car down the block and I hold on to his hand as we begin to walk towards a store front with a red sign with Chinese writing and a man doing a Kung Fu crane stance. We enter the martial arts supply store, what I now know is called Bok Lei Po Trading, and I immediately run to the display near the entrance with all the patches. There are ones from almost every style: Black Shotokan Tigers, USA Goju Fists, ones with stereotypical Asian people doing random moves that just say Kung Fu or Karate, and ones with ITF and WTF Taekwondo logos. Even at 4 or 5 years old, I am a martial arts nerd. I have heard of all these styles, but don't really have a concept of what they look like in practice. I see the same patch with a bonsai tree that I have on the back of my own black Taekwondo gi.

As we move into the store, I see the weapons behind the counter on the left. Big Kung Fu broadswords, bo staffs, and other blunt, but real-looking Kung Fu weapons hang on display on the wall. I beg my dad to buy me one of the weapons, any one of them would have sufficed, but he says no. We move on to the back of the store by the uniforms and Asian "gifts" section. I am probably pointing out all sorts of things to him, totally in my element. Finally, I convince him to buy me a Kendo shinai and a Qing Dynasty-style skullcap with a fake ponytail attached to the back. Wildly inappropriate today, but the '90s were different.

I think, at the time, it is one of the happiest nights of my life. I had no idea that this kind of store existed. I was absolutely obsessed with anything Asian and enamored by the martial arts, I still am, so being able to go to a store that combined both things blew my little mind away. The last image of that night is being strapped into the backseat of the Thunderbird with the skullcap on my head and holding the shinai, which is still in the closet in my room, with both hands. I look up and out the back window and see the blurry lights of New York City surrounding us again.