

# Kung-Fu Styles

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## THE THREE MAIN “INTERNAL” STYLES

Certainly there were well-developed martial arts in the Chinese military for centuries before the time of Bodhidharma. However, the seed which grew into the majority of Asian martial arts today was **Shaolin Temple Boxing** (*Shaolin Ch'uan fa*, “Way of the Shaolin fist”) which originated around the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Succeeding Shaolin masters of Ch'uan (Zen) Buddhism refined and expanded the fighting art until it became known throughout China. Taoist priests were also attracted to it because of its philosophical emphasis on peace, inoffensiveness and meditation. Developing it in their own way to emphasize balance and muscular control, which in turn enhance health, peace-of-mind and longevity, they created the style known as Tai Chi Ch'uan. David Chow and Richard Spangler (*Kung fu History, Philosophy and Technique*, 1982) have reviewed the history of Kung-fu and its various styles in detail.

### T'ai Chi Ch'uan

An obscure Taoist priest, Chang San-feng, is credited with creating the **T'ai Chi Ch'uan** (“Grand Ultimate Fist”) exercise system. He lived during the Sung, Yuan or Ming dynasties (historians are unsure), and was reputed as being tall, robust and heavy-bearded (a sign of vitality in China). Chang's overriding personal philosophy was: “My own destiny depends upon myself and not upon heaven.” Therefore his primary pursuit was to find ways of protecting and enhancing health and prolonging life. He left his native province of Liao Tung in northern China on a long search for useful methods and techniques. He spent ten years at the Shaolin monastery learning Zen meditation and Shaolin Kung-fu, becoming a fighting master in his own right. Self-defense, after all, was clearly necessary to preserve health and life.

Still unsatisfied, however, Chang retreated to the verdant Wu Tang Mountains in Hupeh Province, a traditional favorite hermitage of reclusive Taoist monks. His contemplations there were interrupted one day by the sight of a battle between a predatory hawk and a venomous snake. The powerful bird struck and grabbed repeatedly at the snake, but through circular twisting and winding motions the snake managed to evade every attack, until the bird became so fatigued that it became momentarily unbalanced. In that second the snake struck back with a whip-like motion and killed the hawk. Chang saw this as a perfect example of a yielding force defeating a superior strength. He remembered the ancient Taoist saying: “What is more yielding than water? Yet it returns to wear down the rock.”

Chang developed T'ai Chi from the movements of the snake, the bird, the clouds, the water, and the trees swaying in the wind. Utilizing also the Yin-Yang principle of cooperative opposites, Chang incorporated the full stretching of muscles before they are contracted, one movement blending into the next. T'ai Chi is considered to be the first physical therapy program to promote health. Only after years of training and practice does it acquire effectiveness for self-defense purposes, but when it does it is actually one of the fastest, most effective fighting systems known. Proper breathing and the building or accumulating of ch'i (*ki*) energy are the primary goals. T'ai Chi can also be viewed as a kind of moving meditation. Taoist sages have maintained that “meditation in activity is 10,000 times superior to meditation in repose.”

## **Pa Kua Ch'uan**

T'ai Chi is the first and foremost of the so-called "internal" styles; the other two major branches are Pa Kua Ch'uan and Hsing-I Ch'uan. **Pa Kua** (pronounced "bah-gwah") emerged into public view in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as one of the "soft" systems of Chinese boxing. It emphasizes circular evasion and palm-heel strikes, through the utilization of eight basic postures and revolving, rotating actions said to represent the motions of the dragon, tiger, horse, ox, elephant, lion, bear and ape. Strangely enough, Pa Kua contains no specific "fighting" techniques as such, and places no emphasis on kicking or punching. Rather the goal is to develop elusive, defensive body movements supported by a minimum amount of violent aggression.

## **Hsing-I Ch'uan**

The short forms of the compact and flowing **Hsing-I** style first became known publicly in China during the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Tradition maintains that General Yueh Fei developed the system during the Sung dynasty, but he is probably mythological. Hsing-I is clearly the most aggressive of the three leading "internal" styles of boxing, utilizing forms characterized as "pounding," "crushing," "drilling," "splitting," and "crossing." It emphasizes the harmonizing of mind and body through practice of the five forms combined with proper deep breathing. Each of the basic forms is thought to benefit certain organs, resulting in a healthy way of life. Oblique movements are preferred, throwing off an attacker's center of gravity. Closed-fist punches and below-the-waist kicks are utilized efficiently, and selected animal forms are emphasized in different branches of Hsing-I.

## **OTHER KUNG-FU STYLES**

Shaolin Kung-fu proliferated over the centuries, reaching every province of China, developing styles suited to the typical physique, terrain and climate characteristics of each region. Over 300 different styles are known, each with its own specific focus, emphasis and specialties. Many ancient masters concluded, however, that almost all of these styles in their most advanced manifestations are really quite similar, united by the fundamental demands of self-defense and the mechanical similarity of all human bodies. Balance, speed and coordination are essential in all styles, and ultimately determine the result of any conflict. A few of the major stylistic branches are discussed below:

### **Northern Shaolin**

The original Shaolin temple in northern China was destroyed centuries ago, and its monks scattered to the four winds. The current style most representative of the area is **Northern Shaolin** Kung-fu. Because the residents of northern China tend to be relatively tall, this system emphasizes kicks over hand techniques. Low horse stances are not much used because the Northern Shaolin fighter is moving all the time, with a constant flow of spins, back flips and other acrobatic moves used to confuse an opponent. Among the many weapons used, the long staff and spear are most favored.

### **Dragon Style**

The **Dragon** style of Shaolin Kung-fu is said to have been originated by a Shaolin nun named Wu Mui. She is reputed to have been one of the last members of the original temple before its burning and destruction in 1570. The Dragon style has since been further refined into Northern and Southern variants. The Southern Dragon system emphasizes big zig-zag movements,

floating and sinking movements, and powerful thrusts and snap kicks. Withdrawing from an attack until the opponent has overreached himself is a favored tactic, as are various grasping and twisting techniques. Breathing with a hissing sound is favored, the lungs always releasing air as a punch impacts its target.

### **White Crane Style**

Perhaps the most elegantly beautiful Chinese style is **White Crane** Kung-fu. One theory holds that this style was introduced into central and southern China only about 150 years ago, after having been developed by a Tibetan lama named Ordartor during the Ming dynasty (about 500 years ago). He is said to have been inspired by a fight he witnessed between a large white crane and a mountain gorilla. After much trial and error, Ordartor (already a master of other fighting systems) succeeded in adapting the fighting strategies of the crane for human use. He created eight fundamental techniques based on the crane's natural flowing movements while pecking, clawing and flapping. These are utilized in four main strategies: "to hurt," referring to an instantaneous, non-stop attack, "to evade" rather than block, "to penetrate" an opponent's area of weakness, and "to intercept" an attack at the moment it is launched. Unlike the much simpler Dragon style, White Crane Kung-fu is a long and complex system.

### **Wing Chun**

**Wing Chun** Kung-fu originated around the time of the American Revolution. A Shaolin Temple nun named Ng Mui, residing in the Pah Noh Temple, is said to have modified standard Shaolin techniques in ingenious ways for use by women. Shaven-headed Buddhist nuns were often also well-trained fighters in those days.

Ng Nui's style received its first test when an infamous Yunan Province rogue and bully demanded to marry a local girl, Yim Wing Chun, even though she was engaged to someone else. The girl's family agreed but contrived to postpone the wedding for one year while Yim Wing Chun studied intensively under Ng Mui. When the time for the wedding drew near, Yim's father announced that his daughter would only marry someone who could defeat her in hand-to-hand combat. The bully laughingly agreed, and was subsequently beaten and humiliated. Yim then married her original fiancé, but continued her martial arts training as Ng Mui's chief disciple. Yim categorized Ng Mui's teachings into three katas (Sui Lim Tao, Tzum Kiu, and Biu Gee). She also taught the style to her new husband, Leong Bok Chao, who became a prominent master in his own right, with many talented students including Leung Yee Tai, whose student Leung Tzan later became very famous in Southern Chinese Kung-fu circles. Leung then taught the art to Chan Wah Soon, who instructed the late Yip Man, Bruce Lee's first martial arts teacher. Lee went on to found his own system, **Jeet Kune Do** ("Way of the Intercepting Fist"), a highly flexible, eclectic and adaptive fighting system which is unusual in its total lack of katas.

Wing Chun is characterized by a combination of straight-line and interception techniques with deflecting arcs. Wing chun is structurally a very aggressive, close-quarters fighting style which avoids traditional block-and-punch combinations. Training relies heavily on the art of "sticky hands" (*Chi Sao*), a kind of psychophysical exercise where an opponent's intent is sensed in advance through touch. In addition to the three basic katas, Wing Chun involves systematic training against the wooden dummy (*Muk Jong*), eight slashing sword techniques, and techniques for use with the long staff. It is a compact system in which the novice can learn to defend himself within one year.

## **Hung Gar Ch'uan**

Five of the most important Kung-fu systems in southern China were each developed by a family *gar* (“clan”) and are known by their family names: Hung, Lau, Choi, Lee and Mok. The best known of these, **Hung Gar Ch'uan** (“Hung Clan Fist”), was created by an 18<sup>th</sup> century Fukien tea merchant named Hung Hei Goon, who developed a reputation as “The Southern Fist.” The Hung family style evolved from the Shaolin Tiger system taught to Hung Hei Goon by the Shaolin monk Jee Sheen at the Shaolin Temple in Fukien.

The Tiger system was designed for extremely close-quarters fighting in the narrow alleys and streets of Ch'ing-dynasty cities. The stances were only about 14 inches wide, and an entire kata could be performed in only 4 square feet.

Master Jee also taught the White Crane system to Hung Hei Goon's wife, Fong Wing Chun (no relation to Yim Wing Chun), because she was on a quest to avenge the murders of her family by bandits. Hung combined the Tiger system, White Crane system, and selected features of the Dragon, Leopard and Snake katas, with the Shaolin “Five Element Fists” techniques (also found in Hsing-I) to create his new style.

Hung Gar training traditionally began with a grueling three-year program of nothing but front punches from the low horse stance, working up to 3 hours of this per day. Modern training limits it to a half hour per day, plus empty-hand and weapons kata practice. Specialties of the system include an extremely powerful thrust punch, knife-hand strikes, a side kick, the tiger claw strike and slashing blows. Philosophically, Hung Gar stresses basic morality, honesty, right-living, chivalrous behavior and extreme will-power.

## **Praying Mantis Style**

The most revered insect in Chinese martial arts culture is the praying mantis, not because of its seemingly pious posture but because of its ferocious personality. The style known as **Praying Mantis** Kung-fu originated around 1630 with a sword master named Wang Lang. Wang had challenged the Shaolin Temple monks to combat and had been defeated by a young novice monk. Humiliated, he retreated into seclusion in the mountains where he trained intensively in swordsmanship while constantly exercising to build his strength, and to understand Shaolin Kung-fu.

Returning to the monastery again, Wang renewed his challenge and the monks once again accommodated him. This time Wang defeated the lower-ranking monks but was soundly beaten by the headmaster of the monastery. Battered and disappointed, he sought refuge again in the forest and meditated on the problem. There he observed a praying mantis locked in combat with a large cicada; the mantis defeated the larger insect and ate it. Fascinated, Wang tested the mantis himself by poking at it with a straw from all directions and noting its response. The mantis had an effective defense and offense in any direction. Wang was so inspired that, at length, he carefully developed an adaptation of the mantis's techniques for humans.

Returning again to the Shaolin monastery, Wang this time defeated and amazed even the highest ranking monks. Word of his victory and his peculiar new system spread rapidly, and he soon had hundreds of eager students of his own. During his lifetime, Wang's Praying Mantis school of self-defense became the most prominent in all of China.

Following Wang's death during the Ch'ing dynasty, four of the highest ranking students each claimed to have made superior innovations in the system and requested permission of the headmaster to found their own separate schools. The headmaster agreed, specifying that they should name their systems after markings on the back of a praying mantis personally captured by

each. Thus the four new sub-systems were called Yin-Yang, Plum Blossom, Seven Stars, and Bare (unmarked) Praying Mantis. Eventually the Yin-Yang Mantis school, founded by Liang Tsu Shan, was acknowledged as superior to the other sub-systems.

Praying Mantis fighting strategy involves always keeping one hand up as a guard at face level, the other hand remaining free to block or strike. The guard hand can block and grab; elbow strikes, and upper-cuts and jujitsu-like leg-hook take-downs are commonly used techniques. Elusive footwork and waist-high kicks are also important techniques in the system. The intricate Praying Mantis katas actually do resemble the postures and movements of a mantis.

### **Monkey Style**

Two systems of Kung-fun were originated in the 1840's by one man, Kau See, a ground-fighting expert. As the story goes, a Ch'ing dynasty conscription officer went to Kau's home in Beijing and informed him that he was being drafted into the Chinese army. Kau refused to go, and when the officer attempted to drag Kau to the Manchu military headquarters, Kau killed him. Depressed at having unexpectedly committed such a crime, the normally peaceful Kau turned himself in to authorities and was promptly thrown into prison.

Chinese penal authorities in those days commonly surrounded their prisons with forest inhabited by monkeys or chimpanzees as "watchdogs." Should a prisoner escape, the monkeys would loudly raise the alarm, alerting the Chinese army guards. Kau was able to observe the monkeys through his prison window, as his only pastime. He studied their hunting and fighting moves, and practiced imitating them in a desperate effort to remain physically fit and mentally alert during his long incarceration. He identified the leader of the troop, and imitated his every move during battles with other monkeys and predators. This daily monkey-fighting practice kept Kau sane and fit for nearly ten years, at which time he was pardoned and released.

Kau took up teaching his new fighting style, **Monkey** Kung-fu, and became widely known as the "Monkey Master." The style involves unusual hopping and squatting movements and other low-to-the-ground techniques requiring extensive strengthening and conditioning of the legs. Precision kicks and foot-sweeps executed suddenly during twisting and turning moves combine with clawing, poking and scratching hand techniques to make a surprisingly effective (though comical-looking) system.

### **Drunken Style**

Kau See made another accidental observation in prison which led him to develop an interesting and clever variation on the Monkey system: **The Drunken Style**. An intoxicated man had been drinking near the monkey trees, and finally passed out. The monkeys were naturally curious, and finally one of them jumped down, snatched the unconscious man's wine bottle, and drank it down. The result was a drunken monkey, who was screeching and stumbling around erratically. Other monkeys saw the opportunity to settle some old scores and tried to gang up on him. However, despite his wobbly condition, the drunken monkey succeeded in defending himself fairly well. Kau See realized that giving the *appearance* of drunken helplessness could be used as a deception technique when danger threatens, causing a potential attacker to be careless and overconfident. This shrewd style is very effective against an unsuspecting antagonist.

## **Choy Lee Fut**

Among the most aggressive and effective styles of Kung-fu is **Choy Lee Fut**, a long-range, high-speed style pioneered in southern China as a response to the Manchu occupation.

A youth by the name of Cheung Yim had come with his uncle to visit friends in the small village of Chan, where lived a Hung Gar master named Chan Heung. Chan had been a student of two Shaolin monks, Lee Yau San and Choy Fook, and had returned home to join the resistance against the hated Ch'ing dynasty.

Cheung Yim was accepted into the master's school, but only as a clean-up worker. Yearning to learn the fighting arts, he watched the students work out and practiced their movements in private. Eventually he was found out by Master Chan, who sympathized and taught him now and then privately. But when the master was gone one day the students teased Cheung into a fight and he injured several of them. The parents of the young students were outraged at Master Chan for teaching the secret village art to an outsider, and demanded that Cheung be expelled. Chan conceded to their request by sending the boy into the Pa Pai Mountains to train formally under an old teacher of his, a Grandmaster named Ching Tzo Wo Shuen, who was a refugee from the destruction of one of the Shaolin Temples by the Manchus. This was in 1831.

Ultimately Cheung returned as a master in his own right, and was given new respect in Chan's village. Master Ching had changed Cheung's name to Hung Sing (meaning "Triad Victory" over the Manchus).

Chan Heung and Hung Sing pooled all of their knowledge of fighting techniques to produce a system that would have maximum efficiency in the fight against the Manchus. They named it after their former masters, *Choy Fook*, *Lee Yau San* and *Ching Tzo*. The ascetic Master Ching had advanced to become a "Buddha of Enlightenment" prior to his death, and *Fut* means "Buddha."

Choy Lee Fut was first officially taught in Gung Mui County in 1836, during the training of patriotic rebels. Thus Choy Lee Fut began as a secret style of military training for use in the Chinese Civil War. It is highly aggressive and brutal, emphasizing lightning attacks, deceptive footwork, knuckle jabs, uppercuts, roundhouse punches, hammer fists, back fists, and the whip-like "Buddhist palm," an advanced technique. Powerful hip/waist movements and a strong, low horse stance give the punches great power even at very close range. A whole battery of kicks is practiced, including high and low side kicks, snap kicks, hook kicks, thrust kicks and spinning kicks. Intercepting and jamming are favorite tactics. (Some of the techniques bear a striking resemblance to Western boxing.) Choy Lee Fut guerillas also wielded a range of weapons including the long staff and the Chinese broadsword.

The rebels ultimately won their Civil War, with the help of other historical events. Choy Lee Fut still remains an extremely popular martial art in China, hardened in the forge of battle and strengthened by a revolutionary spirit.

## **Chin Na**

A Chinese battlefield grappling art similar to jujitsu originated during the Ming dynasty about 380 years ago. Known as **Chin Na**, it is uncommon in the West but elements from it have found their way into practically every style of Kung-fu. Twisting locks, holds, counter-holds and escapes are included. Locks and holds target the wrist, throat, elbow, and nerve points.

Rooted in ancient Chinese wrestling and pressure-point fighting, Chin Na ("capture/hold") evolved in the early 1600's as a police technique for capturing and restraining criminals without

killing them. Chin Na eventually became part of the basic training program for the Chinese police and also the Chinese military.

Short-range kicking, punching and striking techniques are also included in Chin Na, probably adapted directly from Kung-fu. Chin Na, however, has no katas. In application it functions on a principle of *measured response*, making the opponent suffer proportionately to whatever resistance or violence he attempts to employ. An assailant will end up on the receiving end of whatever he initiates. Detailed anatomical studies substitute for kata practice, so that the Chin Na fighter will know all of the weak points of the human body.

In modern times the Grandmaster most responsible for the popular emergence of Chin Na was Tung Tsung Nee, born in 1880 in Wu Pei Province. Grandmaster Tung, a Taoist, made a living providing security for caravans around the turn of the century, joined the military in 1912, and was promoted to commanding Officer for Martial Arts Training Headquarters for the entire Chinese Army in 1919. In 1924 he became Commander General of the Chinese National Guard, and in 1927 was put in charge of martial arts training at the Chinese Military Academy. He retired from the military in 1934 to become Chairman of the National Martial Arts Association in Shanghai, which position he held until his death in 1971, at the age of 91.

**[To be continued ...]**

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