

The Roots of Shuri-ryu: T'ung Gee Hsing



T'ung Gee Hsing
(ca. 1900 – 1955)

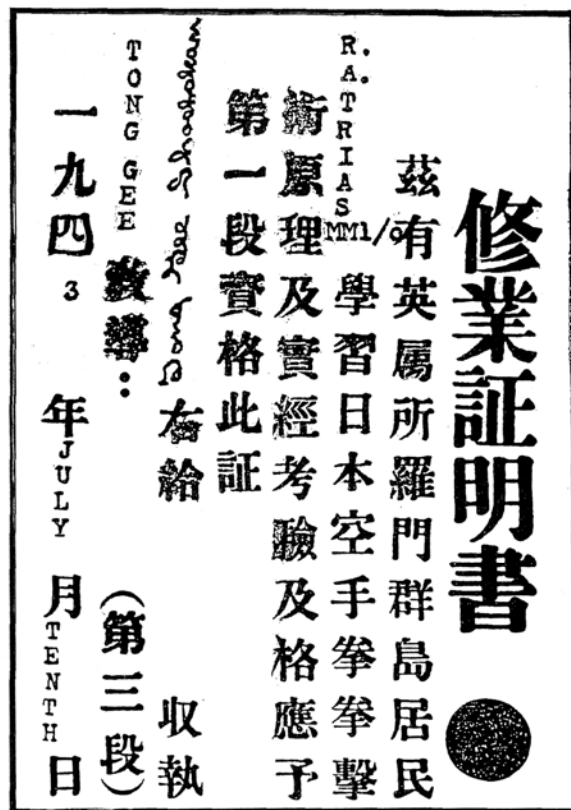
Shuri-ryu karate is actually a combination of Okinawan karate and Chinese boxing or kung fu. The early Okinawan masters were certainly heavily influenced by Chinese kung fu, especially the southern Chinese hard-style White Crane school. But in the case of Shuri-ryu there is a late-stage component directly attributable to a 20th-century Chinese master from Canton who created his own amalgam based on various Chinese styles and Okinawan karate taught to him by the famous Okinawan master Choki Motobu around 1937-1941.

The style was brought to America by **Robert Trias**, who was first exposed to it while stationed at Tulagi in the British Solomon Islands in 1942. He was at that time training to contend for the middleweight boxing championship of the United States Navy, and his daily training activities attracted the attention of a Chinese Buddhist missionary, also stationed there, by the name of T'ung (or Tong) Gee Hsing (or Hsiang)*. Trias described the fateful encounter in an interview published in *Black Belt* magazine:

There was this little Chinese missionary named T'ung Gee Hsing who always came to see me work out. One day he came up and told me he had been learning and imitating my footwork, and that he liked American boxing. I just brushed him aside. He kept up coming back, though, until one day he pestered me to

practice with him. He was just a tiny little guy, and I didn't want to spar with him, but he kept on persisting until I said yes. I called all my friends over to see me kill this little man. I asked him if he wanted to spar with gloves, and he said it really didn't matter. Well, before you know it he was giving me the biggest thrashing of my life, and I was really embarrassed. He kept on pointing out how he could easily kill me if he wanted to. And right then and there I asked him to teach me.

It was a revelation that changed Trias's life. He gave up American boxing and devoted himself totally to studying karate under T'ung. One year later, on July 10, 1943, T'ung awarded Trias the rank of first-degree black belt, presenting him with a white silk certificate written in Japanese. The swiftness of the promotion was no doubt in recognition of Trias's many years of training in, and mastery of, American boxing. The certificate reads "DIPLOMA. Here in the British-owned Solomon Islands, resident R.A. Trais has studied Japanese karate with a respectful attitude, seeking after the true principles, and has satisfied the requirements for the rank of first dan certificate. Authorization by Tong Gee (third dan), 1943 July tenth."



Robert Trias's rank certificate from T'ung Gee Hsing

Trias moved on, studying further under the Cantonese master **Hoy Yuan Ping** at the Hock Keng Temple in Singapore, and then returning to America in 1945 to later open the country's first karate school in 1946. Nothing more seems to have been heard from Master T'ung. It is said that he later instructed Master "Meishou (CMS) Chen, 1935-

1975?” This was probably Tai Chi Ch’uan Master Man-Ch’ing Chen (1902-1975), a director of the Chinese Medical Society. T’ung is believed to have died in Taiwan in 1955. Grandmaster Trias retained only a single snapshot of him taken in 1942; no other photos are known.



Sun Lu T’ang
(1859-1932)

Although little is known about Master T’ung personally, a fair amount is known about his martial arts genealogy (see chart). T’ung was raised from childhood by his uncle, **Shang T’sao-hsiang**, a revered fighting master. Shang passed on to T’ung an enormous body of knowledge acquired primarily at the Hai Chiwang Sze Temple under the famous masters **Li T’sun-Yi** (1849-1925) and **Sun Lu T’ang** (1859-1932). Shang is said to have mastered both the “internal” systems (Chuan-fa, Hsing-i and Pakua) and the “external” systems (Shaolin-chun and Hung-kun) of Chinese boxing; although he and T’ung are generally regarded as having been masters of Hsing-i (pronounced “shing-ee”), they obviously had a much broader background.

While stationed as an emissary to Okinawa in the Chinese settlement of Kume Mura, T’ung made the acquaintance of Okinawan Shuri-te master **Choki Motobu** (1871-1945) in 1940. As was T’ung’s habit when meeting a master of another system, he proposed that they trade knowledge. Motobu, just back from 15 years of teaching karate to beginners in Tokyo, was happy to work with another master and readily agreed. T’ung was so impressed with Motobu’s Kosho Shorei Kempo fighting style that he learned it as thoroughly as he could and incorporated into it his own Hsing-i and Pakua techniques. Katas such as Gopeisho (originally called Hopeisho, from Hopie Province, China), Danennsho and Tekatana, as well as the five animal forms and other exercises, came directly from T’ung’s Hsing-i and Pakua. Katas such as Naihanchi came from the Okinawan tradition via Choki Motobu. Other Okinawan katas were probably acquired by

Trias later from various masters, including several Gojo-ryu katas (Sanchin, Seipai, Kururunfa, Gekisai). Trias also assimilated some jiu-jitsu and components of shokotan karate. Ultimately this blend, referred to for a time as Shorei-Goju, was formally renamed Shuri-ryu.

Li T'sun-Yi, one of Shang's instructors, was a native of Hopei, and a champion fighter in the Hsing-i and Pakua (pronounced "ba-gwah") styles. He became famous throughout China, and at one time his students in the city of Peking numbered over 5,000. He was also in business for himself as the head of a convoy bureau, providing bodyguards and security for merchant caravans. Li claimed to be a direct student of Master Tung Hai-ch'uan (1798-1879), considered to be the father of modern Pakua; however, he is not listed among the students engraved on Tung Hai-ch'uan's tombstone. He almost certainly studied instead under Tung's student, Ch'eng T'ing-hua.

Ch'eng T'ing-hua, also a native of Hopei, was nicknamed "Invincible Cobra Ch'eng." He ran a shop in Peking selling spectacles, which was apparently the origin of his nickname since spectacles were then known as "eyeglass snakes." He is said to have killed one of his own senior students who attacked him while he was in bed.

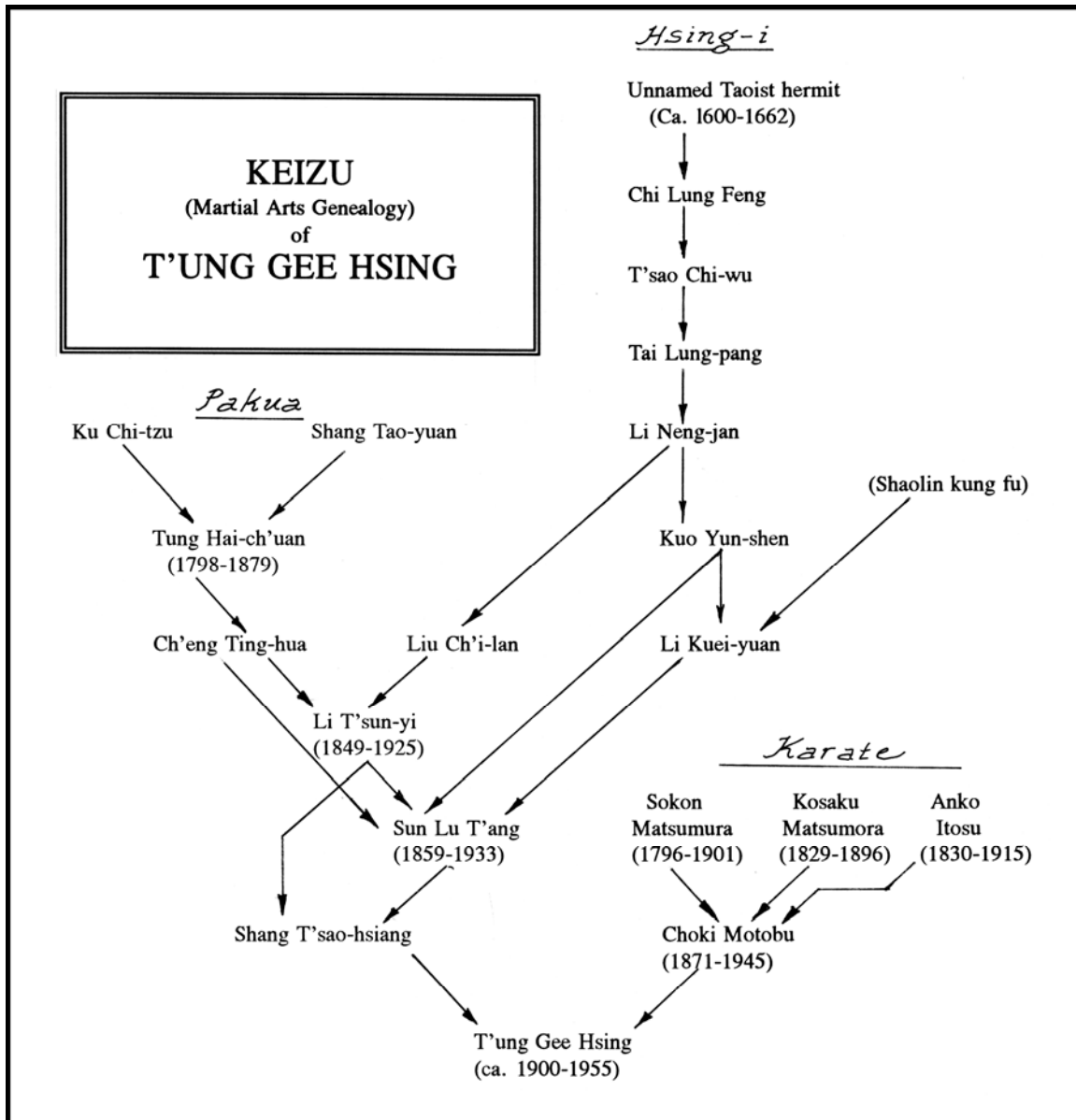
Ch'eng T'ing-hua's teacher, the famous **Tung Hai-ch'uan** (1798-1879), had been a poor boy from Hopei province who, after getting into some fights in Peking, had journeyed to Mount Omei in Szechwan Province. There he met two Taoist monks, **Ku Chi-tzu** and **Shang Tao-yuan**, who instructed him in Pakua over an eleven-year period. He returned home to Hopei and then on to Peking where he is said to have taught a number of students. His fame eventually earned him a challenge to fight Kuo Yun-shen, a master of Hsing-i. They fought to a draw over two days, but on the third day Tung gained the upper hand and soundly defeated Kuo. Nevertheless, they each gained a deep respect for each other's styles, and became fast friends. They signed a brotherhood pact requiring all their students to train in the other's system as well. As a result, Pakua and Hsing-i have remained coupled and complementary up to the present day.

A peculiar and amusing story has come down regarding Tung's death at age 81. Certain that he had passed away, his family placed his body in a casket, and some of his students serving as pallbearers attempted to lift the casket but could not budge it. They tried several times in vain, but the casket seemed to be riveted to the floor. Then a voice came from within, saying "As I've often said, none of you has even one-tenth my skill!" Then he passed away for good, and the casket was lifted easily.

Li T'sun-yi learned his Pakua from Ch'eng T'ing-hua, as already mentioned. But, according to the pact between Tung Hai-ch'uan and Kuo Yun-shen, he was also obliged to learn Hsing-i. His master for this style was **Liu Ch'i-lan**, a student of Kuo Yun-shen's teacher, Li Neng-jan.

Li Neng-jan (or Lao-nan) was for many years just an impoverished farmer living a meager existence on his small farm near T'ai-ku in Shansi Province. He heard about two brothers living nearby who were masters of Hsing-i. The brothers, Tai Ling-pang and **Tai Lung-pang**, kindly gave him a demonstration, and Li was unimpressed until he actually attempted to fight one of them. He was defeated so easily that he decided to study under Tai Lung-pang, at the age of 37, and within ten years became a highly skilled boxer who could not be defeated. It was said he could jump 8 feet in the air, and was so incredibly skillful that people referred to his style as "divine boxing." He taught a great

many students, including Liu Ch'i-lan and Kuo Yun-shen, before dying at over 80 years of age.



The Tai brothers had learned their Hsing-i from **T'sao Chi-wu** of Shansi Province, the top student of the purported founder of Hsing-i, **Chi Lung-feng**. Chi is the earliest recorded master of Hsing-i, and little is known about him save that he was from Shanghai and was skilled in the use of the spear. He is said to have learned his fighting art from a Taoist hermit living in the Chung-nan Mountains of Shansi Province in 1637-1662. Legend has it that the Hsing-i style actually originated with an early military hero of the Sung dynasty, General **Yueh Fei** (1103-1141); but this is probably mythical because Hsing-i became suddenly popular under Chi Lung-feng, and seems unlikely to have been transmitted secretly for the previous 500 years without becoming known. In any case, its

early period of development remains unknown, but it probably originated with Taoist monks.

Kuo Yun-shen, the star pupil of Hsing-i master Li Neng-jan, was nicknamed the “Divine Crushing Hand.” Early in his life he had given up studying the classics and had gone to Shansi Province in order to learn boxing from Li. He became a formidable expert, and traveled widely thereafter in search of other masters who could teach him more. In a match in Hopei he killed his opponent with a single punch, and as a result was sent to prison for three years. While in prison he practiced hard, and following his release was even stronger and quicker than before. His advice was always to analyze your opponent carefully beforehand to determine his weaknesses; then, if you must fight, end it with one punch. Kuo lived more than 70 years, and apparently had relatively few students; his best pupil was Li Kuei-yuan.

Li Kuei-yuan was a native of Lai-Chui Hsien in Hopei Province. He was already highly skilled in Shaolin kung-fu when he met Kuo Yun-shen later in life. However, after studying hard for several years he eventually became Kuo’s best Hsing-i student. His own best student was Sun Lu-t’ang.

Sun Lu-t’ang (1859-1932) was a native of Hopei Province who became very famous for his martial skills. He is said to have mastered Pakua, Hsing-i and Tai Chi, the three main “internal” styles, and was never defeated in a match. He learned his Hsing-i from Li Kuei-yuan and Luo Yun-shen (mainly the latter), and his Pakua from Ch’eng T’ing-hua and Li T’sun-yi. He wrote two books on Hsing-i, one on Pakua and the Pakua sword, and one on Tai Chi.

The extraordinarily diverse nature of T’ung Gee Hsing’s martial arts genealogy includes the Chinese styles of Hsing-i, Pakua, Tai Chi, Chuan-fa, Hung-kun, Shaolin kung fu and Okinawan Kosho Shorei Kempo and Shuri-te. No wonder Robert Trias was so impressed. We are fortunate indeed that so much of his knowledge has come down to us through Trias, especially considering that T’ung seems to have trained hardly any students in his lifetime. Little did he imagine in 1942 that the American serviceman he was training would ultimately spread the knowledge across the United States to thousands of students, and would become a pivotal figure in 20th century martial arts.

* Orientals traditionally go by their family name first; his “last” name is T’ung, his “first” name is Gee, and his “middle” name is Hsing. Therefore he is correctly referred to as “Master T’ung,” not “Master Hsing.”

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(email: minrecord@comcast.net)

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