

A Brief History of Chinese Kung-Fu

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Introduction

Chinese style martial artists in the United States have long tried to make sense out of the many pieces of contradictory information circulated regarding the origins and purposes of their arts. How can one reconcile the inherent contradiction of supposedly educated, cultured and peaceful men (i.e. Buddhist monks, Taoist hermits and Confucian scholars) practicing and perfecting techniques designed to maim and kill? What exactly is the relationship between spiritual enlightenment, ethical training, physical fitness and no holds barred street fighting? Why do some other well-known traditions, such as the open challenge or dueling, seem so starkly out of place?

The picture painted by many is clearly both illogical and inconsistent. Donn F. Draeger and Robert W. Smith, in perhaps one of the most significant attempts to document the true history of martial arts, noted that where China was concerned the literature was "uneven, full of gaps and smothered in places by ambiguities." Many so-called histories contradict the well established and documented realities of Chinese culture. Others are historically impossible. Then there are those which border on pure mythology. Finally, there are those which are purely ridiculous. In short, none would stand up under the scrutiny that true historical works are subjected to.

As Chinese martial arts become increasingly popular in the United States and there is a movement toward the creation of an international structure, instructors and students alike seek to find their proper identity and resolve these contradictions. It is essential to understand the past before we begin to plan for our future. Now is the time to develop a correct history for Chinese martial arts. We must confront the sources of these contradictions.

The simple fact is that, despite the claims of many of today's instructors, martial arts were not primarily the pursuit of Buddhist monks, Taoist hermits or Confucian scholars. In ancient China, martial arts were primarily practiced and developed by the military, members of brotherhoods and secret societies, and those involved in marginally accepted professions such as armed escorts and body guards. As such, martial arts were in fact the product of those classes which most Chinese considered undesirable. This affected both the development of martial arts and the general society's attitudes toward them.

It must be remembered that imperial China was governed by traditional Confucian ideology. Within this context, education was the key to success in China's complex bureaucracy, and physical pursuits were viewed as morally inferior. Under these conditions, significant portions of the population, particularly the illiterate commoner, were marginalized or simply ignored. Thus, those who were neither privileged nor protected by society developed martial arts as the only defense against an often cruel and savage world. For these men, martial arts were neither a sport nor a hobby, but rather a matter of life or death.

The association of martial arts with undesirable elements resulted in a social stigma which is the origin of the contradictions discussed here. All societies, but particularly China's, attempt to control and appropriate what they deem to be socially unacceptable behaviors. In the case of martial artists, the need to do so was made more important by the fact that these individuals were also strongly associated with those groups which traditionally challenged central authority (i.e. regional military units, secret societies, and brotherhoods). The social stigma also prompted many of those who practiced martial arts to attempt to legitimize their practice.

The simultaneous efforts by both those practicing martial arts and the society in general to legitimize and assimilate martial arts (and thus render them harmless) resulted in a gradual but concentrated effort to obscure the true origins of these arts and the creation of a "political correctness." For example, many instructors began (and continue) to focus upon stories of martial arts being practiced within Buddhist monasteries, stressing the use of the arts for promoting health and spiritual tranquillity. Unfortunately, these instructors are simply ignoring two well-substantiated facts.

First, the various stories of martial arts being practiced within Buddhist monasteries, particularly the Shaolin monastery, actually originated with the secret societies. These stories were used to recruit new members but are of questionable authenticity.

Second, Buddhist monasteries were often the sanctuary of undesirables, social outcasts and escaped criminals. If martial arts were indeed practiced within monasteries and (there is significant evidence that they were), they were most probably brought to the monasteries by these refugees seeking sanctuary. These individuals would have practiced martial arts for both protection and, in many cases, as a tool of their marginally legal or outright illegal trades. Thus, martial arts that supposedly originated in monasteries no longer have such a pretty image.

The origins of martial artists as "undesirables"

While the military was perhaps the best possible profession for a trained martial artist, it was by no means an easy path or an ideal life. Traditional Chinese society's disdain for non-intellectual activity and its need to control possibly violent elements had a direct impact upon the management of the military. The military was treated with suspicion, as demonstrated by the saying "one does not make a prostitute out of an honest girl, a nail with good iron, or a soldier out of an honorable man." Great efforts were made to subordinate it to the needs of the society.

During imperial times, the central government administered military examinations, similar to the scholarly civil service exams, at the local, provincial and national levels. Through the use of this system, civilian officials were in complete control of both the selection and promotion of all military officers. In addition, members of the military were institutionally forbidden from rising to a level where they could influence government policy. Thus, while the military provided some opportunities, it never provided complete legitimacy.

Of course, the greater challenge to the social order was that group of martial artists who were unable to advance through the military examination system. First and foremost, the examination system required a degree of literacy that many martial artists simply did not possess. Second, because the examination system restricted the number of military officers, even literate martial artists never passed. While these men could have joined the army without passing the exams, in reality they had no reason to do so. Regular military men were treated brutally by officers and there was no future in it.

These men formed a disgruntled and highly dangerous group. They became part of China's extensive underground society and engaged in marginally legitimate or illegal activities to survive. Regardless of their chosen professions, these men had no loyalty to either the society or the state.

Legal and illegal professions for the martial artist

A martial artist who did not join the military and who chose not to engage in illegal activities had very few options left. Trained fighters might find work as armed escorts but the life was by its very nature extremely dangerous and establishing a successful escort business could take years. They could certainly find work as a body guard but such men had no dignity. They were always subject to their employer's whim, not far removed from being a virtual slave. These two professions were both legal but they brought neither legitimacy nor

public acceptance.

Many martial artists simply wandered, making their living as either traveling medicine men or as street performers. These men were little better off than the common vagabond, having no permanent address and depending upon the mercy of contributors. They also had to deal with constant challenges by other wandering martial artists and local criminals who would try to extort money. Some martial artists joined traveling opera troops. These opera troops provided friendship, regular employment and some protection but were just as socially undesirable as the martial artists themselves.

Martial artists who had no objection to engaging in illegal activity found themselves in high demand. While traditional Confucian society despised the use of violence, the lower segment of society celebrated its use. For example, in the southern provinces of Fujian and Guangdong clan wars were a well-established tradition. Martial artists found frequent employment either as clan instructors or outright mercenaries. These clan wars also contributed to the development of martial arts outside of China as martial artists were hired to fight in clan wars which continued in the overseas communities. Many martial artists of exceptional skill were brought to the United States to train fighters for the Tongs and associations in American Chinatowns.

Many martial artists also involved themselves in the activities of brotherhoods and secret societies. These groups, often indistinguishable from each other, have a long history in China and arose as refuges for non-elite members of the society. They provided friendship, assistance and protection to those who would generally have none. These benefits were naturally attractive to most martial artists. In addition, brotherhoods and secret societies actively sought to recruit martial artists in order to maintain an armed force.

By the end of the 19th century, brotherhoods and secret societies had become a major focal point for the practice and development of martial arts. Martial artists were known as "red poles" and, in addition to acting as enforcers, served as instructors. Many peasants and commoners, who had never had access to sophisticated fighting skills, joined these groups in order to learn martial arts. A particular group might become famous and attract more members with its instructor and method.

Fighting art or performance art?

In the United States, many traditional stylists are highly critical of contemporary

Wu-Shu, arguing that it has been significantly altered for performance purposes and is no longer practical for self-defense. While we will discuss contemporary Wu-Shu in greater detail later in Part 2 of this series, a few brief comments are in order. Contemporary Wu-Shu is most definitely not traditional martial arts. Many techniques have been removed and it has nowhere near the technical diversity of traditional martial arts, particularly the southern systems. Furthermore, for most of its history the study of application and the practice of sparring have been actively discouraged by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Unfortunately, those who criticize its performance elements do not fully understand the history of their own arts. Postures and techniques were indeed altered to make them more pleasing to the eye and acrobatic moves such as the butterfly twist were created (it is not a traditional movement). However, while contemporary Wu-Shu is the most drastic example of technical modification it is not unique. There is a long history of the use of martial arts for performance and the modification of techniques for performance purposes.

For example, the Qing Imperial Court's official performers utilized a wide variety of skills which were derived from traditional martial art practice. Strong men would wield heavy halberds (Gwan Do) and there were demonstrations of the flying fork (Fei Cha) . In addition, strictly military arts such as archery and wrestling (Shuai-Jiao) were both popular court entertainment.

Traditional Chinese opera also made extensive use of martial arts skills for entertainment. The opera recreated great battles, and its performers had to be able to use traditional weapons and engage in elaborate staged fights. For this reason, those raised in the opera received training very similar to that a martial artist received. In addition, as discussed previously, many martial artists also joined traveling opera troops. These men often taught members of the troop martial arts for protection. Thus, in the opera the line between fighting art and performance art was often blurred.

Today, traditional martial arts are still influenced by these performance traditions. The so-called "hard" Chi-Kung tricks such as brick breaking, wire bursting, nail beds, and the bending of spears and swords are all products of the street performance tradition. They require both conditioning and discipline to perform but have virtually nothing to do with real fighting. Many of the tumbling techniques, leaping kicks and balancing moves found in traditional forms are similarly inspired. Some assume that the Chinese public was more familiar with the martial arts and thus more discriminating than western audiences, but in reality the common peasant or laborer was just as impressed by these tricks.

The attempt to legitimize the practice of martial arts

Over a period (18th- early 20th Century) limited employment opportunities and the lack of social acceptance resulted in a movement by some to legitimize the practice of martial arts. Following the example set by herbalists and bone setters, martial artists attempted to establish themselves as members of the "Kung" or artisan class. They began to open schools ("Mo Gwoon" in Cantonese dialect).

One of the first steps was to change the terminology used. Martial arts were no longer referred to as simply "Kyuhn Faat" (or the more familiar "Chuan Fa" in Mandarin dialect). This term meant simply fighting techniques (or literally "fist techniques"). Instructors now used the term "Kyuhn Seut", literally "fist art". These instructors, who were no longer simply vagabonds or commoners, also adopted the term "Sifu" to indicate that they were skilled in a socially accepted art form.

The next step was either to adopt or create practices, ceremonies and rituals and to establish a tradition. Most frequently instructors looked toward traditional Confucian practices and modified them to suit their purposes. For example, they erected altars to pay respect to their "ancestors" (i.e. those teachers who had come before them). In some cases an instructor didn't really know where his style came from or who founded it, so a "Sijo" (founder) and "Jong-Si" (the great teachers within the tradition) were simply created.

Instructors also began to adopt their disciples in an elaborate "Baai Si" ceremony. In this way the teacher could demand the same loyalty and respect from his disciples that a father could demand from his son. Finally, martial artists began to develop a concept of "Martial Virtue" ("Mo Duk" in Cantonese dialect), following the Confucian scholar's example of cultivating virtue.

The establishment of martial arts as an art form, placing instructors within the "Kung" class, and the adoption of Confucian-like practices and terminology resulted in the gain of some social status and respect but not complete assimilation. Most instructors still clung to feudal values and remained sectarian, secretive and deeply divided. Some also maintained their connections with the underworld, resulting in a general suspicion of anyone involved in the martial arts that exists even today.

The best example of the martial artist's refusal to assimilate and conform with society's standards is the open challenge. Even though a would-be instructor

was seeking to legitimize himself and gain general acceptance, he simultaneously desired to maintain the respect of his peers. The quickest and by far the most popular method of doing this was to issue an open challenge and defeat several local fighters before opening one's school. Until it was declared illegal by the Nationalist government in 1928, it was relatively common in southern China to see an instructor fight all challengers in public duels with no rules and no restrictions. These duels often resulted in serious injury or even death but they were viewed as necessary to demonstrate that an instructor was worthy of opening a school.

Another popular method of making a name for oneself was to challenge an already established instructor in hopes of defeating him and taking over his school. It was an extremely risky decision, and some of the largest and most popular schools were the ones where such challengers were frequently beaten senseless and left on the front stairs for everyone to see. Indeed, an instructor who routinely beat such challengers was sought out by all segments of society, the brotherhoods and secret societies, the military, local commoners and rich elite who viewed martial arts as an esoteric hobby (not unlike today's "new age" crowd).

Thus, even a well established instructor still had to prove himself and the effectiveness of his method on a regular basis. As Donn F. Draeger and Robert W. Smith noted, "challenges were a central part of a master's existence and could not be refused". These challenges also had a very direct impact upon the way martial arts were taught. Because instructors relied on their skills for survival, they were not willing to give them away to possible challengers. Students had to demonstrate their complete dedication and the true fighting skills were often taught in secrecy. The end result was that only a select few ever learned the true skills and applications and the complete system. This was especially the case with instructors who maintained their contacts with the underworld, using their schools to recruit new members and train enforcers.

State attempts to control and appropriate the martial arts:

Phase One: Republican China

The virtual collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the establishment of the Chinese Republic did little to change the state of martial arts. While some individual martial artists had gained status and social acceptance, as a group they continued to present a problem to central authority. Martial arts schools produced trained fighters who remained loyal only to their own teachers and traditions. Many still supported groups which openly challenged the newly established government, particularly secret societies. Doak Barnett, a well

known historian who described conditions in Szechuan province during the Republican period, observed:

"There was nothing secret about [secret societies].... The fact that it is outlawed by the central government does not seem to bother anyone concerned, or, it might be added, deter anyone from becoming a member if he is invited."

The Nationalist Party (Guomindang) was aware of the role of martial artists in popular rebellion. In fact, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, the founder of the party, had himself maintained numerous secret society associations and had extensively used "Red Pole" enforcers. Thus, once Chiang Kai-Shek had solidified his position, he turned his attention towards attempts to control and appropriate the practice of martial arts.

In 1928, a year after Chiang Kai-Shek's "White Massacre" in Shanghai had left him the undisputed leader of the Nationalist Party, several steps were taken to exert control over martial artists. First, the government adopted the term "Kuo Shu". This term means literally "national arts" and was an attempt not only to reduce the factionalism among martial artists but also to promote nationalism (and thus loyalty to the state).

Second, the government established the Central Kuo Shu Institute in Nanjing. Martial artists who participated in the institute but remained in China after the communist victory in 1949 have consistently denied any direct government involvement, for obvious political reasons, but in reality its establishment put martial artists under direct government regulation. Teachers in Taiwan are far more forthright, openly acknowledging that the government was involved in "an active program" to reorganize the martial arts. The stated goal of the institute was to "consolidate Kung-Fu by bringing together many great masters." Thus, while the Nationalist Party was less successful, it was involved in a strikingly similar program to the one that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) undertook with the creation of contemporary Wu-Shu.

Finally, open challenges, duels or any kind of public fighting match was declared illegal. The government replaced these duels with state run national competitions. The first national competition was held in Nanjing in 1928.

Attempts to control and appropriate the martial arts, like most Nationalist social programs, was largely unsuccessful. The government lacked a well-developed structure at the grass roots level and corruption was rampant. In addition, many of the most powerful members of the Nationalist Party were themselves martial artists. According to Draeger and Smith, the martial artists

in Taiwan, many of whom were Nationalist Party members and military officers, "were a truly diverse lot: many were illiterate, some took opium regularly, a few were scoundrels."

State attempts to control and appropriate the martial arts:

Phase Two: The Communist Party

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has had a unique relationship with those who practice the martial arts. Ideologically, the CCP has strongly identified itself with those class elements from which the martial arts community originated. For example, during the party's formative years brotherhoods and secret societies (which were heavily composed of martial artists) were valuable allies in their attempts to overthrow the central government. The party maintained contact with and utilized members of these groups as part of their ongoing revolutionary activities and studied their organizational structure, their methods of maintaining loyalty, and their role in popular rebellions.

In addition, the leadership also saw unique benefits associated with the practice of martial arts. Mao Zedong, like many revolutionaries of the period, firmly believed that China had become the "sick man of Asia" because the traditional Confucian society had produced only weak, ineffectual scholars. In 1917, Mao Zedong wrote his first article for the revolutionary paper New Youth. The paper was entitled "A Study in Physical Culture" and would become the official party line on the role of martial arts in society. It observed that the nation was "wanting in strength" and that military spirit had not been encouraged. Mao outlined a program of physical culture, in which martial arts played an important role, for the purposes of making "savagely the body" and promoting "military heroism".

However, this cooperative relationship between the party and the martial arts community did not last. In order to consolidate their position in the countryside, the CCP attempted to remove local power bases and to prohibit those practices which had traditionally fostered regionalism and personal loyalties. This inevitably affected the martial arts community and brought them into conflict with the CCP.

C.K. Yang's examination of a Chinese village during the Communist transition provides an excellent example of the party's attempts to bring the martial arts under state control. Yang describes an "athletic club" in the village which was known as "the Lion's club". According to Yang, the club provided "lessons in the

old military arts of shadow boxing, using swords, knives, spears and other ancient weapons." Clearly, this club was a martial arts school.

While the author saw these techniques as having "no place in modern combat", the CCP saw the situation quite differently. The Communist cadres ordered the club closed, calling it a "military organization" and noting that "their leaders, many of whom were associated with rebellious secret societies, were potential reactionary agents". Thus, the Lion's club was clearly viewed as a political danger to communist power.

State administered programs to appropriate and control the practice of martial arts were expanded following the Communist victory in 1949. That same year the All China Sports Federation was created and extensive discussions began concerning how physical culture could best serve the state. By 1951, all private martial arts schools were labeled "feudalistic" and ordered closed. The next year the State Physical Culture and Sports Commission was created and a number of new regulations regarding the practice of martial arts were introduced. Instructors could no longer refer to themselves as "Sifu" and the Baai Si ceremony was declared illegal. Instructors were now referred to as "coaches".

In 1959 it was announced that a state controlled martial arts program had been created that no longer recognized styles or systems. Instead, all martial arts were divided into five basic categories: "Long Fist" (referring to all empty hand techniques), broadsword, straight sword, staff and spear. After some protests, a category referred to as "South Fist" was also introduced to represent the martial arts of Southern China (based primarily upon Choy Lay Fut, Hung Kyuhn and its derivatives. Of these systems, it features only the most basic and obvious techniques and has none of the techniques found in shorter range systems such as southern praying mantis, white eyebrow, etc.) This state controlled martial arts program is the basis for what is today referred to as "contemporary Wushu".

Ideologically, this new program met both basic requirements. First, it eliminated the elitism traditionally associated with the martial arts and made them accessible to the masses. Second, it provided a program of physical culture for the purposes of promoting "military heroism" as Mao Zedong had called for in 1917. At the same time, it put the practice of martial arts under direct government supervision and eliminated those values which had fostered personal loyalties and divisiveness. Private schools no longer produced men loyal only to their instructors and with deep seated suspicions of outsiders.

On the surface, these developments were a welcome change from the secrecy, inflated egos, constant challenges and random violence that characterized the traditional martial arts community. However, despite government claims to the contrary, contemporary Wushu is not simply martial arts with a new image. While contemporary Wushu is based upon traditional martial arts, it is first and foremost a program designed as physical culture (i.e. to promote health, discipline, etc.) and for performance. Even with its current program of A, B, and C level forms, many techniques have been removed and it does not have the technical diversity of traditional martial arts, particularly where the southern systems are concerned. In addition, in the name of athletics, performance postures and techniques were altered to make them more pleasing to the eye and acrobatic moves such as the butterfly twist were created.

More importantly, the Chinese Communist Party's political agenda had a direct impact upon how the martial arts were taught and practiced. For most of contemporary Wushu's history, the party actively discouraged the study of application and the practice of sparring, claiming that self-defense skills were no longer necessary in the new society and stressing that "comrades should not fight comrades". Thus, those practicing contemporary Wushu frequently did not know which techniques had practical application and which were for athletic or performance purposes. They also lacked the necessary skills to apply those techniques which actually had practical applications.

Recently, there have been some changes in the practice of contemporary Wushu. The new compulsory forms have eliminated the excessive acrobatics that once plagued contemporary Wushu and focus more upon the fundamentals of stance, footwork, kicking, striking, etc. Perhaps more significantly, the practice of free sparring has returned and the International Wushu Federation (IWUF) has begun promoting a new form of competitive fighting known as "San Shou".

San Shou is a type of full contact fighting that strongly resembles both the state run national competitions administered by the Guomindang and the open challenges of the feudal past. San Shou is fought on a platform known as the "Lei Tai", named after the wooden stages that many fighters used to erect upon issuing an open challenge. San Shou competitions are an important development because they allow kicks, punches and full body throws and are perhaps the best way of promoting realistic fighting skills. In fact, in recent interviews with instructors and officials in Beijing they stressed the importance of demonstrating which skills and techniques were practical.

These recent developments have been a direct result of political changes which

have been taking place in China since the early eighties. After the terrible damage done by the Cultural Revolution and under the new leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the CCP has abandoned efforts to exert control over the everyday life of the masses and has dismantled much of its local social apparatus. The new emphasis on modernization and economic expansion has also led to a decreased interest in programs such as physical culture.

Instructors are experiencing a freedom that they have never had before and in some cases this has resulted in a return to feudalistic values. During the recent interviews mentioned above, some instructors expressed a desire to essentially return to the days of open challenges, calling for the removal of protective gear and restrictions on dangerous techniques such as elbows and knees. Thus, contemporary Wushu is in some respects returning to its traditional roots.

[Check out David Ross Sifu's excellent book on Lama Paai Gung Fu!](#)

