HUNG GAR KUNG FU

Around A.D. 520, so the story goes, Tamo the Buddhist monk came to China from India and began teaching at the temple known as Shaolin. His pupils, apparently, were nothing like the "Shaolin monks" we think of by that term. They couldn't seem to concentrate, they fell asleep during meditation, they had emaciated themselves by fasting. So Tamo (or Bodhidharma, as he was also known) decided on a simple cure—he instituted a program of regular exercise at the monastery. The 18 exercises he devised, along with other still more ancient, indigenous breathing and medical disciplines, became the basis of what we now call kung fu.

The system was expanded in the 16th century by a wealthy young monk named Kwok Yuen, who was well-versed both in boxing and in the use of weapons. Yuen, dissatisfied with the level of martial arts knowledge at the temple, compiled everything he knew, added it to Tamo's exercises, and derived a total of 72 techniques. But knowing himself to lack final knowledge in the field of combat, he then disguised himself and went on a search throughout China, looking for the most accomplished fighters in the land. With the help of these men, he increased the original number of movements to 170 and classified them into the five distinctive animal styles—the tiger, crane, leopard, dragon and snake. Soon the five separate styles were improved and unified into a single system, called the five-formed fist, and for over a hundred years the Shaolin monks were trained in the most advanced and rigorous system of martial arts in China.

With the advent of the Ching Dynasty, however, the Shaolin accomplishment appeared for the first time to be seriously threatened. The monks had built up close ties with the rulers of the preceding Ming Dynasty, and now the ousted rulers took up residence at the temple, plotting revolution. The Ching armies invaded, destroyed the temple, and did their best to extirpate the line of warrior monks. Only a single monk, according to legend, managed to survive and pass on the Shaolin teachings.

The destruction of the temple, of course, by no means stopped the development of kung fu in China. In fact, there has been a profusion of styles and teachings since then, to the effect that both "kung fu" and "shaolin" have become catch-all concepts, lending authority to almost any martial art that chooses to use them in its name. Kung fu has also evolved in innumerable directions, including both internal and external styles: t'ai chi, pakua, hsing-i, wing chun, sil lum, fujow, choy li fut, and hung gar, to name the major systems. Meanwhile, "shaolin" has come to mean almost any temple where martial arts are taught.

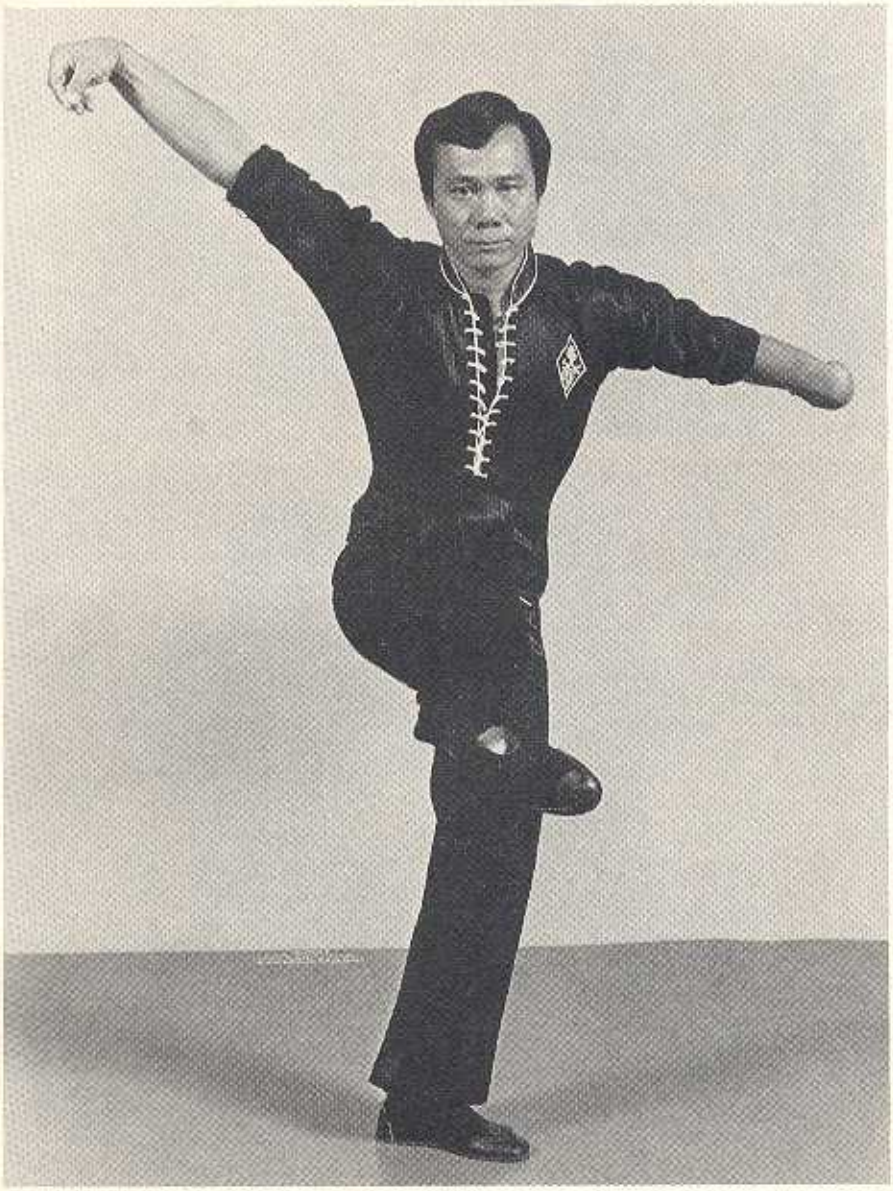
But the original tradition is not completely out of reach. Although today no one can know for certain precisely what the 170 first techniques actually were, or exactly how they were performed, there are two conceivable methods of isolating what remains of the five-formed fist Shaolin system. One would be to study all the main branches of modern kung fu and boil them down to a common denominator. The other would be to study one system that advances the most credible claim to having preserved the tradition. Either one of these methods would be a lifelong task. There is a man who has dedicated his life to both. He is Bucksam Kong, chief instructor of the Sil Lum Pai Gung Fu Association, foreign advisor for the Hong Kong Martial Arts Association and the Hong Kong Choy Li Fut Association, and co-author of two books on hung gar kung fu (*Hung Gar Kung Fu: Chinese Art of Self-Defense* and a volume on the tiger and crane systems, yet to be released by Ohara Publications). Kong is a renowned expert in hung gar, has studied numerous other systems, and is a BLACK BELT Hall of Fame member. He has recently moved to Los Angeles after spending 20 years teaching in Hawaii.

"The one monk who escaped from the Sil Lum (Cantonese for Shaolin) temple was named Gee Sim Sun Si, and he taught five students. But instead of trying to teach each one the whole system, he adapted the system for each one of his students. Five of them were trained under the same instructor, but the instructor taught them all differently because their bodies were different. The students were named Hung, Lau, Mok, Choy and Li, and each of them founded his own style of kung fu. At first, they all learned the same amount. But then the styles changed, people added new things and combined the styles, and so on. Choy li fut came from taking elements out of Choy's, Li's and Hung's styles, and many new styles came from the old. Only the one student, the one disciple—Hee Gung Hung—consciously tried to keep his knowledge the same as it was. The system he founded is called hung gar."

In fact, hung gar kung fu is sometimes referred to now as the five-formed fist system, and is generally understood to be one of the most complete branches of shaolin kung fu. Its training concepts are rigidly traditional, it is one of the most popular styles of kung fu in China, and its body of knowledge appears to be self-contained. While it is not necessarily the "best" or the "true" variety of Chinese martial art, it may well be the closest to the original.

"The basis of hung gar is still the five-formed fist, the five animal styles," Kong says. "Hung called his school 'tiger/crane,' but all the animal styles are equally important,

Perpetuating the Tradition of the Five-Formed Fist



The hanging-horse stance can be surprisingly useful in conjunction with crane attacks, but its main value is for defense.

even though the name is shortened, because each animal stands for a different aspect of the human body. The tiger stands for bone development and pure strength; the crane for sinews and flexibility; the leopard has speed and agility; the dragon is twisting movement and spiritual development; and the snake is stamina and inner strength, or chi. These styles are not separate from each other. A student may learn them separately at first, but they are all part of the same system, and you switch from one to another in a fight."

Associated with each animal style of hung gar is a distinct type of hand attack, a single "fist" of the five-formed fist system. The tiger uses short, powerful thrusts and lunges, with the hand open, fingers clenched in the shape of a raking tiger's claw. The most typical kind of tiger attack is a straight palm-heel strike, followed by a ripping motion with the fingers.

The crane is generally a softer, more fluid style, the arms spread to imitate the wings of a bird. The crane's beak is his main weapon, so the fist for this style is formed by pressing the thumb tightly against the fingertips in a "beak" shape, allowing sharp attacks from a fairly long range to vulnerable areas such as the eyes, throat or groin.

The leopard fist, patterned after the flat paw of the cat, strikes with the foreknuckles, often to relatively small targets, in short, explosive movements. The attacks of the snake are also short and quick, but more selective than the leopard's, with the hand flat, the first two fingers outstretched to represent the snake's forked tongue, which darts at the opponent's eyes or throat.

And the dragon makes use of two main varieties of attack, one copying the sweeping movement of the dragon's tail and the other imitating the stream of fire from a dragon's mouth. The hands are used either for grabbing and pulling or, with all the fingers outstretched, in a long, straight, stabbing motion.

The stances used in hung gar are lower than in most kung fu systems, requiring a great deal of leg strength and training but capable of providing an almost unshakable stability. One tradition (which Bucksam Kong discounts as purely legendary) has it that Gi Sim Sun Si, once he had escaped from the Ching armies, remained in transit and taught his students in a small boat—the rocking and swaying of the boat, it is said, made

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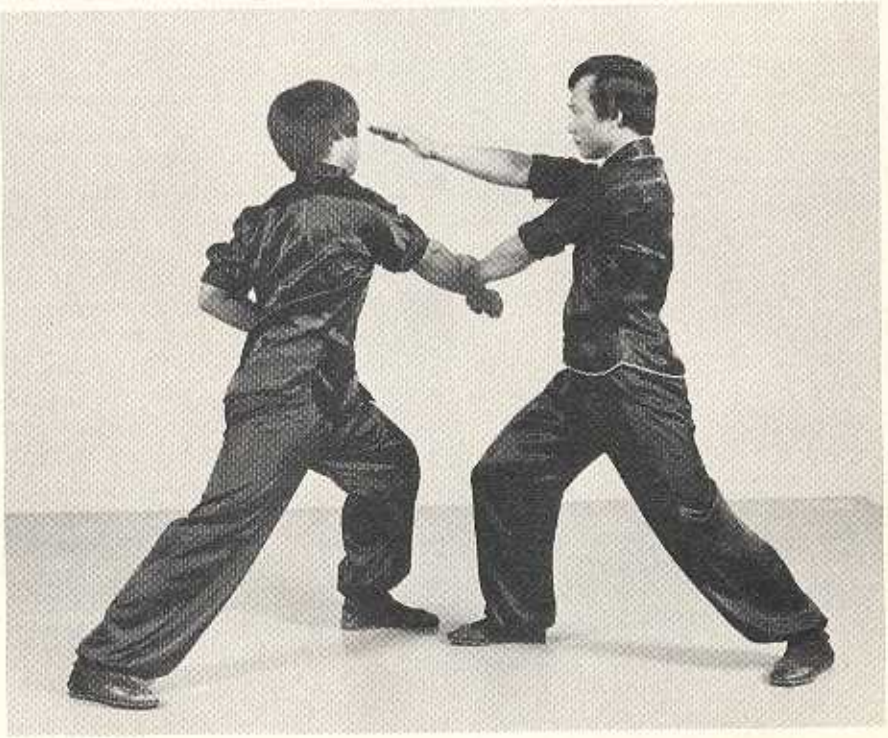

balancing very difficult and caused the master to teach unusually low, strong stances.

Hung gar stances are not intended to be natural or easy to assume—they often prove quite painful until the legs become accustomed to the strain. This is because each of the five major stances is designed, not for comfort, but for a particular function related directly to fighting. Thus, the horse-riding stance, with the legs spread about twice shoulder-width, the thighs parallel to the floor, the back straight, is almost impossible for the beginner to maintain for more than a few minutes (ancient training methods were more rigorous though, requiring hours of stance practice per day). The horse-riding stance is the most important in hung gar, and with the bow-and-arrow stance makes up the basic position for most attacks. The bow-and-arrow is also extremely low, with the back leg fully extended and the front knee bent 90 degrees to provide a maximum extension of reach. While the horse-riding stance is the most powerful, the bow-and-arrow gives the longest range.

The cat stance, primarily a defensive position, exposes very little of the body to attack while providing a tremendous amount of versatility for kicking, advancing, retreating or changing into other stances. Ninety percent of the body's weight is supported by the rear leg in this stance, with the thigh again held parallel to the floor. The front foot is pointed straight ahead, heel held off the ground, and the body is kept in a low, crouching position, arms poised defensively and shoulders aligned with the front knee.

A stance designed primarily for swift movement, particularly for lateral movement, is the "scissors," so-called for the fact that the legs are crossed in a scissor shape, with the arms held wide apart. (This posture also lends itself to the twisting, unbalancing dragon attacks.) The front thigh should be parallel to the ground, supporting 75 percent of the body weight, while the rear knee is held behind the calf of the front leg, almost at the ground. None of these postures would be especially recommended for a novice's self-defense purposes, but to the expert trained in hung gar they become second nature, and once the legs are sufficiently strong the advantages become apparent.

Only one of hung gar's five main stances, the hanging-horse, is com-

Bucksam Kong demonstrates the five stances and animal styles. Postures (clockwise from upper left) are: a crane attack from the hanging-horse; a dragon move from the scissors; a leopard fist from a rising cat stance; a tiger attack from the horse-riding position; and a lunging, full-handed snake strike from the bow-and-arrow stance.

"The saying is 'Southern hand, Northern foot,' and it is true that hung gar uses fewer kicks."

pletely upright. This one-legged posture, which can be used in crane attacks or for kicking, is essentially defensive, intended to provide maximum protection from kicks and leg attacks. All the weight of the body is on the back leg, with the front leg drawn upward to protect the groin and the lower body.

But does this mean that the original Shaolin monks also used such exceptionally low, difficult postures, or that most other kung fu forms have degenerated, perhaps for the convenience of generations of lazy students and careless teachers?

"No," says Bucksam Kong. "Nobody is claiming that hung gar is the complete Shaolin system. It is the version that Hung learned, and it has not changed since then. But it is basically a Southern Chinese style, so it is still very different from the Northern styles. Just as Gi Sim Sun Si taught all his students differently because of their different needs, the different parts of China have their own needs from a self-defense art, which explains their differences. The saying is, 'Southern hand, Northern foot,' and it is true that hung gar uses fewer kicks than *bok pai,* or the Northern system. Also, we never kick higher than the chest, but the Northern styles do a lot of high kicks, jump kicks, and something just like a tae kwon do back wheel kick.

"You see, the martial art has to be adapted to the way of life. Up North, the weather is cold, people wear shoes all the time, people are taller, and they ride horses more than in the South. If you wear heavy gloves to protect you from the weather, you get clumsier, you can't use all the finger techniques that you can use in the South. That way, your leg becomes relatively more flexible, and the foot is not that much clumsier than the hand. If you wear boots or shoes the leg also becomes a more powerful weapon. Besides, because of diet or something, the Northern people are quite a bit taller than people in the South, so they take advantage of their leg-reach. If you are only five-foot one or two and your opponent is six-foot four, it's very hard for you to get your foot up to his head.

"In the South, people go bare-

"Hung gar has not changed very much from the time it was taught to Hung himself, and the five-formed fist system has remained much the same."

The scissors posture allows quick lateral movement, as well as sudden twists and turns. It is ideal for dragon attacks, especially when used by a trained practitioner who can easily raise or lower his position.

foot all the time and there is a lot of water on the ground. So the idea in the South is to get closer to the ground and have a strong grip on it, a good sturdy balance. Then you can hit your targets better and the opponent has a harder time hitting you. But if your opponent is riding a horse you want to be able to reach him, so in the North they have a different concept of range in general. You see, these are different needs that people have in the different parts of China. These kinds of differences are very old, too, so we don't really know when the styles of kung fu became different. But hung gar has not changed very much from the time it was taught to Hung himself, and the five-formed fist system has remained very much the same."

One of the major characteristics of hung gar, aside from its exceptionally low postures and careful preservation of the different fist styles, is the system's stress on the use of great strength. "A hand attack should have sufficient force to knock an opponent down with one blow," Kong claims. But this strength is not understood entirely as external, or purely physical. True, hung gar adepts do a form of weight training, in which they condition select groups of muscles for some of the less natural striking motions. They also do finger-strengthening exercises, to facilitate the stabbing or clawing techniques of the various animal styles. But equally important is *gin lek*, or internal strength, which comes from training in mental and breathing techniques.

"Hei lek, or natural body strength, is important in fighting. But gin lek, or power of concentration, is what gives truly extraordinary power. Size and muscle have nothing to do with that, because it comes mostly from breath and spirit. Each motion when you go through it has a different way of breathing, and also a different sound, or tone. We have many breathing exercises in hung gar, which have a very calming effect on the nervous system. You focus your energies in the *tan tien*, the lower abdomen, and the breathing comes from the diaphragm, not from the chest. This way, the focus of the body is lower, the weight is closer to the ground. You become immovable. Through the breathing exercises you become more conscious of the whole body, until you can feel and see every breath you take. Then you can also direct gin lek from the lower abdomen up through the body, into the arms and hands,