



Hung Kuen Kungfu

My years of learning with master Chan Hon Chung

By Alberto Biraghi



I screamed my first “kiai” in September 1971 in a Shotokan karate gym. Those were the years of the first Shaws Brothers’ movies and I was thrilled by kungfu. I wanted to learn it, but there were no kungfu teachers in Italy, so I had to fall back on the only widely available martial art at the time: Shotokan karate.

Four years later I was studying and training for my second “dan” when I met an Hong Kong guy who was studying in my hometown, Milano. I found out that he knew Chinese kungfu, so I asked him to teach me some movements, learning the first form (Mui Fah Kuen), the basic stances and thrusts. Compared with my Shotokan karate the movements of this Chinese martial art were better looking, more creative and above all could be used in a sparring contest.

managed to put together a good amount of money, which supplemented by my father’s Christmas present allowed me to reach the budget to buy a coach plane ticket for next August.

My girlfriend and an old friend came with me, looking forward to being tourists while I was learning my kungfu. Benjamin took care of finding a low budget accomodation, booking two rooms at the infamous Chungking Mansion. It was a seventeen stage building on Nathan Road in the Tsim Sha Tsui area containing numerous independent low budget hotels and shops, mostly run by Indians. Being already dilapidated at the time I find it incredible that the building is still there!

We landed in Kai Tak Monday 1, August 1977 after a long flight via

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My Hong Kong friend was a nice guy, but his kungfu skills were no big deal and in less than a year I had learned everything he knew. It wasn’t much, but enough to understand that there was a world to discover, so I decided to go to the origin.

Benjamin (this was the name of my Chinese friend) had told me that his master, his name was Chan Hon Chung, was a highly esteemed and respected person for his social commitment in Hong Kong, but above all he was recognised as the most authoritative “grandson” of Wong Fei Hung, a national hero in the Chinese martial world, although at the time still not as famous as nowadays thanks to the movies.

In late 1976 I was still attending the university and I was low on cash, as any student is, so I started working during my free time as a delivering boy, to collect the money for the trip to Hong Kong. In a few months I

Bangkok. Landing was the first of many emotions of that trip, with the plane skimming the skyscrapers and stopping a few meters from the sea (eventually Kai Tak airport was dismantled in 1998).

Getting out of the plane with 40 degrees and 97% humidity was not pleasant, but entering our room at the 12th floor of Chungking Mansion was even worse, infested as it was by the huge red cockroaches that plagued Hong Kong in those years. The only way to drive them away was keeping the old and noisy air conditioner always on.

Between cockroaches, air conditioner and jet lag it was not easy to sleep the first night, but the problem would be solved soon: when it was time to go to sleep the next day I was so tired that I would have fallen asleep even in the middle of cannon fire.

Tuesday morning at 8.30 I grabbed

a taxi, showing a piece of paper where Benjamin had written in Chinese characters “Nathan Road crossing Mongkok road”.

The Hon Chun Gymnasium was close to the corner, occupying a small building at 729 of Nathan Road (the main road that runs through Kowlook north to south, from Tsim Sha Tsui to Sham Shui Po).



The entrance of Hon Chung Gymnasium was closed with a metal shutter until 9 AM, but I came in much earlier and found only a small door open.

At the entrance there was a tiny shop selling ties, pens and lighters, as everywhere in Hong Kong any available space was occupied by any kind of business. I walked through a large room that was occupied by a tailor’s shop (Chan Hon Chung was a businessman, running various activities) and reached his studio, where Benjamin was already chatting with the old master.

When I walked through the glass door the guy looked at me, smiled and stood up. He wore a medical white coat directly over his undershirt. Bald and quite short (I would say less than 170cm), he looked incredibly energetic. His hand felt like steel, but the squeeze was gentle and the smile friendly.

The office was crammed with plaques, cups, photographs, memorabilia, souvenirs, ceramics and other assorted paraphernalia. Large jars of liquids and ointments used in

his practice as a traditional orthopedic doctor impregnated the air with the scent of the essences.

Benjamin told him something in Chinese, master Chan nodded, pointed to a door on the side of the office and moved in that direction.

Chan Hon Chung was the only Chinese martial artist honored by the Queen during colonial Hong Kong, being awarded in 1973 with a medal for his leadership and contribution to the Chinese martial arts community. He knew perhaps five words of English, but in spite of this he had the extraordinary gift of being perfectly understood without speaking. Thanks to his incredible communication skills, Chan Hon Chung (army trainer, dancer, actor, producer, businessman, bonesetter and kungfu teacher) managed to become one of the most respected men of his time in Hong Kong, holding a series of institutional and honorary positions of great prestige.

I was lucky enough to spend a lot of time with him, for some reason he had developed a liking for me that made me proud and often invited me to join him whenever he was attending a lunch or dinner. I had a savoir faire, so he liked showing off his Italian pupil on every official occasion. I am still amazed when I remember his extraordinary communication skills. We almost always had “dim sum” together very early in the morning, just the two of us, and we could actually conduct a dialogue, in spite of lacking a common language. Amazing.

I followed master Chan through the door giving access to the gym, a small room furnished with all the required stuff: the small temple of General Guan Yu, a punching bag, the weapons rack, the wooden dummy, lion heads and the inevitable small table with a teapot of the “po nei” tea that became part of my life since.

He pointed at the center of the room and moved his finger, indicating to show him what I had learned, so I performed Mui Fah Kuen, trying to be convincing with extra low stances and hard thrusts.

When I finished he nodded, then



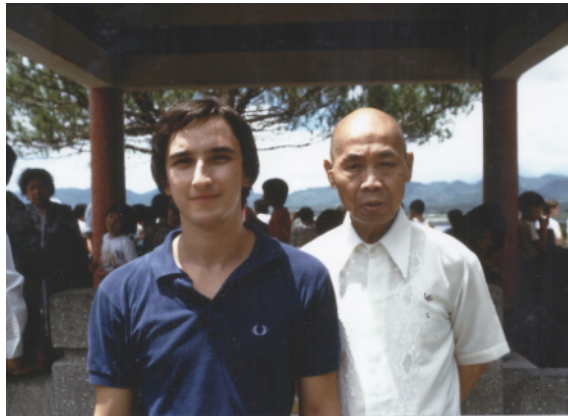
The only clear shot of master Chan's office I have. I am sitting at his place, but this picture can give an idea of the collection of gadgets, souvenirs, paraphernalia, plaques, certificates that he collected throughout his life.



Master Chan Hon Chung poses in the headquarter of the Hong Kong martial arts association that he founded in 1969 with his oldest active student at the time, Cheung Yee Keung, today a well known and respected Chinese doctor and kungfu teacher.

stood in front of me and assumed the beginning stance, making clear that I was supposed to follow him. His movements were smooth and his stances were not as low as I was expecting, but he looked incredibly efficient. I tried to imitate him, but it was immediately clear that if I wanted to learn the real thing I had to start again from scratch and work very hard. And I did.

In the martial arts schools of the last century the learning process was informal: there were no timetables, courses, exams, degrees. The only official program was based on the forms, while sparring and physical preparation were entrusted to the free initiative of the students. Chan sifu appeared occasionally to teach or



Master Chan was pleased that I accompanied him on the occasion of the meetings of the innumerable associations in which he held positions. Here we are at the annual meeting of the association of those who bear the surname Chan, of which he was honorary president.

correct, but the older “brothers” (“sihing”) were always available to help. I take this opportunity to say that neither I or others have suffered the need to kneel, hand out cups of tea to master Chan or perform any other bizarre acts of submission. To say that this pantomime - today normal especially in the Western kungfu environment - was not contemplated in the Hon Chung Gymnasium. Respect was always two-way, nobody had to kneel to anybody.

I immediately learned that the gym hierarchy was not tied to technical knowledge, but to the seniority, the universal and indisputable parameter in every traditional kungfu school. Contrary to what happens today in the martial world, the amount of technical



Master Chan did not teach often, but he had developed sympathy for me and did, especially early in the morning when his office was not yet open to patients.

baggage had no relation with the hierarchy.

For this reason learning the forms was not subject to limits: particularly enthusiastic students could complete



The elder brothers were always available to help. Here I discuss sparring with Kong Pui Wai, today Chairman of the association that brings together Hong Kong's leading martial arts schools.

the entire set in a short time. However, knowing more forms was not considered a value per se in the traditional Chinese kungfu school, there were no degrees to achieve, the goal was the human and martial growth and the internalization of the founding principles and values of the school.

Used as I was to the structured system of the Shotokan gym that I had attended in the recent past, I was surprised to learn that elder brother Kong Pui Wai (today a highly respected teacher and chairman of the Association) knew just the founding forms and didn't care much for the weapons (in fact master Chan occasionally reproved him affectionately on this subject). In spite of this, together with the other senior student Cheung Yee Keung, brother Wai was the point of reference when master Chan was absent. His skills were (and still are) amazing, a tremendous fighter, still gentle and generous in everyday life.

In the Hon Chung Gymnasium there was an objective recognition of an achieved martial maturity, having the access to the last two bare hands forms - Sap Yin Kuen ("the form of the ten styles") and Tit Sin Kuen ("the form

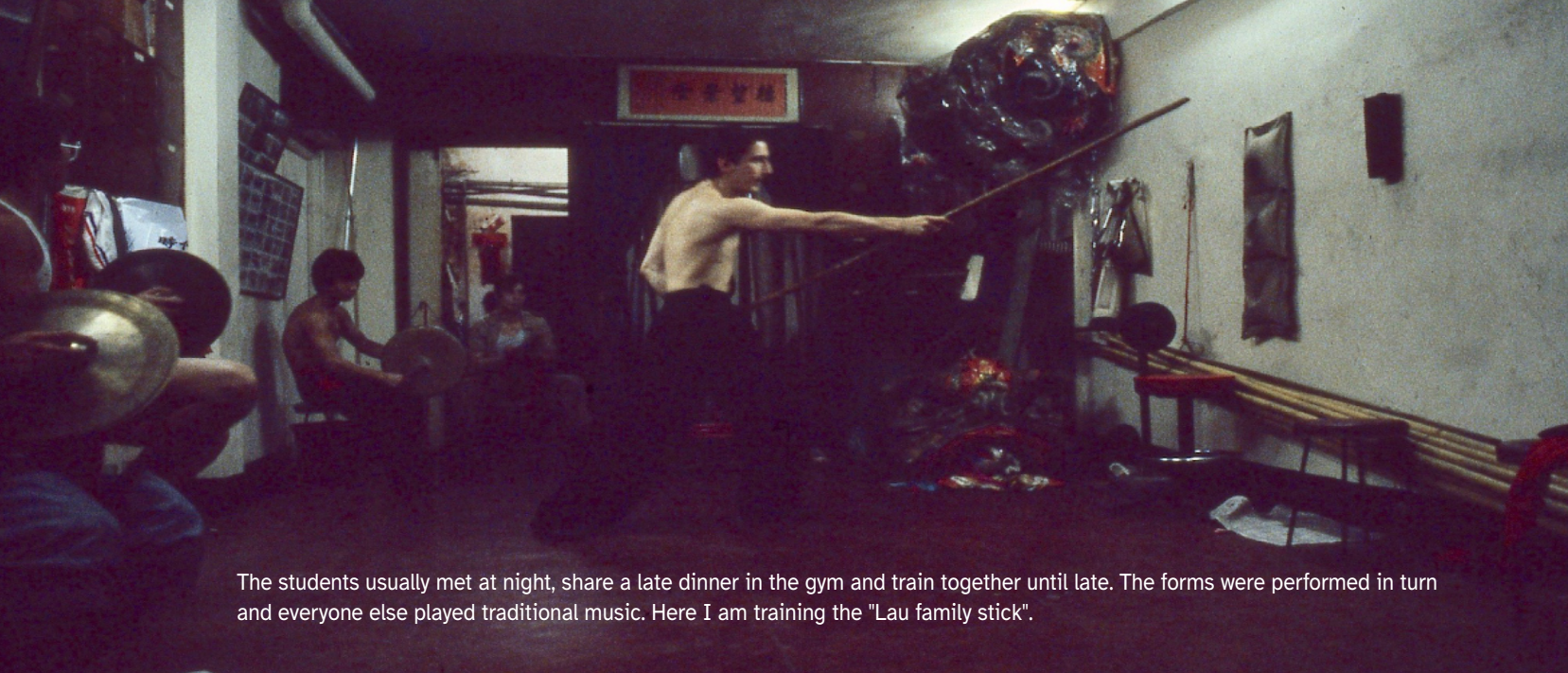


The author performing a demonstration of form Lau Gar Kuen during a karate tournament in 1978 in Milano, Italy

of the wire") - which could be taught only with the approval of the master.

It is interesting to underline that this aspect is at the origin of the picturesque narrative for which they could be “harmful to health” if performed by a beginner. In reality the matter is much simpler: to be correctly executed these forms require a good acquisition and internalization of the basic concepts of the Hung Kuen school, of which they represent the ultimate synthesis.

Ok, but what kind of martial art is “Hung Kuen”? Who would search on Wikipedia would find the following



The students usually met at night, share a late dinner in the gym and train together until late. The forms were performed in turn and everyone else played traditional music. Here I am training the "Lau family stick".



Master Chan Hon Chung and the author attending a "Chan family meeting" in 1978.

definition:

The hallmarks are deep low stances and strong hand techniques. Traditionally, students spent anywhere from several months to three years in stance training, often sitting only in horse stance from half an hour to several hours at a time, before learning any forms. Each form could then take a year or so to learn, with weapons learned last. [snip] Hung Ga is sometimes mis-characterized as solely external—that is, reliant on brute physical force rather than the cultivation of qi—even though the student advances progressively towards an internal focus.

Well, none of these statements matches my long experience with master Chan Hon Chung and my decades of studying this style. Yes we train the stances, and yes we train the “force”. But in the Master Chan’s gym there was no “internal” and “external” categorization, no program schedules, any student who had learned the basics could approach whatever form or weapon he liked with the appreciation of the master and of the elder brothers.

But most of all, an aspect escapes most of the Hung Kuen practitioners who have not been able to study with a master of Chan Hon Chung's worth: unlike the large majority of other widespread oriental martial disciplines, the nature of Hung Kuen is not structured, on the contrary is



Master Chan Hon Chung explains the concepts underlying the "double tiger claw" technique, which together with the "crane beak" characterize the Hung Kuen style.

purely conceptual and functional.

In spite of the choreography and of the poetic images, the movements that make up the forms are not a sequence of fragmented actions aimed to be applied in precise situations, but a way to understand and internalize an idea of control and efficiency.

When we train the “tiger” or the “crane” or perform the “dragon” moves, in fact we do not experience them as reaction movements to a pre-established, pedantic (therefore artificial) action of the opponent (such as “he strikes to my face, I block with the left claw, he throws a kick, I block

and counter strike with the right claw, bla bla bla...”), but as conceptual paths to get to focus on the consciousness of our whole functional system in a combat situation. Paths to conquer the opponent's space, to maintain a constant active tension to the target, to enter his guard and disturb his center of gravity, etcetera.

These conceptual paths that underlie the single movements are summarized in the "twelve bridges", the real foundation of Hung Kuen, although misrepresented by many. The “twelve bridges” will be the subject of a future discussion.

The above mentioned new, pedantic approach, based on fragmentation of

the movements, brought to a significant alteration of the style over the years. While a conceptual approach guarantees an uncontaminated transmission of the school through the generations, the fragmentation of the forms in sets of frozen movements undergoes the adaptations unconsciously applied by every single instructor to match his skills and physical structure. So more and more often we get to see movements that can look fancy in a demonstration where the opponent strikes upon request, but totally useless in a real situation.

This uselessness jumps to the eye when watching a session of sparring. In 1973 master Chan On Chung defeated four robbers using the skills he had mastered. A few years later Fung Kiu (Benjamin’s elder brother) won the first South Asian tournament using a move from the “Fu Hok” form. But most of today’s Hung Kuen practitioners, even the advanced ones, tend to look like mediocre Western boxers when sparring, unable to use frozen techniques that cannot cope with the unpredictable chaos of the real action. 🤖

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