

FU HOK SEUNG YING KUEN

(Tiger and Crane Fist)

AND GUNG JI FUK FU KUEN

(Taming the Tiger)

THE PILLARS OF HUNG GA

By Alberto Biraghi

The true story of Wong Fei Hung—considered one of the fathers of modern kung fu—has little in common with the one told in the more than 70 films about him. In fact, he probably wasn’t as heroic as the protagonist of Once Upon a Time in China, or even as invincible.

But he certainly was passionate and knowledgeable, and his role in the real world of Hung ga and Chinese martial arts was at least as important as that of the fictional character bearing his name, brought to screens around the world by Jet Li.

Actually, Wong Fei Hung did not invent anything new, but he assembled and organized different ancient martial practices in an admirable way, defining in light of his medical and martial experience a school of Chinese boxing destined to be among the most famous in the world: the Hung ga kung fu.

Before Wong Fei Hung, the Southern Chinese martial arts were a stew in constant evolution, originated in the monasteries of Shaolin, and spread throughout the territory after their destruction, constantly susceptible to contamination and loss of identity.

But the systematisation of the discipline and the codification of the main forms made by master Wong and by his most famous and esteemed descendants (my "si-gung" Lam Sai Wing and my master Chan Hon Chung sifu) are the basis of the success of Hung ga worldwide and its defense against any contamination.

Wong Fei Hung defined four forms with bare hands during his martial career: Gung ji fuk fu kuen, Fu hok seung ying kuen, Ng ying kuen, Tit sin kuen. Today we deal with the first two, which represent the technical pillars of the Hung school.

Gung ji fuk fu kuen

This form is attributed to Jee Sin Sim See, the legendary monk of Shaolin who eventually passed it on to Hung Hei-Gung, considered the progenitor of the Hung Kuen school. The history is obscure and undocumented, due to the Chinese tradition of passing down martial arts only orally, but there are no doubts about its ancient roots—it is practiced almost identically in the various descendants of Wong Fei Hung active in our day, unlike other forms in which there are significant differences between one family and another.

The name Gung ji fuk fu (in Chinese 工字伏虎) is composed of two concepts: the first part is "gung ideogram" (工字), where "gung" is "hard work on a human scale." It should be noted that the reference to the ideogram "gung" (工) also indicates the pattern the practitioner follows during execution. The second



Arousing a doubt with a finger

part, "fuk fu" (伏虎), means "taming the tiger."

Some read this dichotomy in the name as evidence of a composite origin of the form, which would be the result of the union of two shorter forms. This theory is supported by a clear division appearing about halfway through the execution, and by the presence of a shorter form (Fuk fu kuen), in some lineages of the Hung ga school.

On the other hand, some others (including the writer) consider the form to be unified from birth, possibly fixed in the version arrived at in our day by Lam Sai Wing, the senior Wong Fei Hung student who definitively canonized the style. In support of this theory there is the appearance of the same routine, in like form, in both sections, completing each other in a fluid, rich, and coherent sequence.

Whatever the origin, it should be noted that Gung ji fuk fu kuen is characterized by a perfect mix of richness, quality, and comprehensiveness, a feature almost impossible to find in other schools. In particular:

- it contains almost all the techniques of Hung ga, in a more or less obvious form, with increasing difficulty;
- it contains references to the "12 bridges" that are developed and explained in the Tit sin kuen form;
- it is very long—almost 200

movements—therefore challenging and excellent training;

- if well taught, it makes the student clearly perceive the profoundly conceptual meaning of Hung ga;
- it emphasizes in most of the steps the alternation of "hard" and "soft," the two basic bridges of every martial art, and helps build understanding of the use of the center of gravity and the body as a whole;

- it is not totally symmetrical, but pays attention to symmetry;

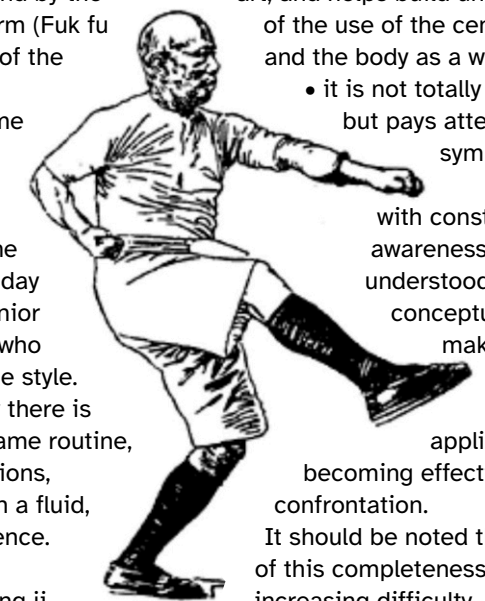
- if practiced with constancy and awareness, and understood

conceptually, it makes explicit its combative application, becoming effective in a real confrontation.

It should be noted that because of this completeness and increasing difficulty, until the early 1960s Gung ji fuk fu kuen was the first form taught to beginners, when the shorter Mui fa kuen, Lau gar kuen, and eventually Wu dip cheung had not yet been included in the program.

Gung ji fuk fu kuen opens with an expanded routine of the classic Hung ga greeting, the first mention of the isotonic work that characterizes Tit Sin Kuen.

The first section is for the most part symmetrical, with the movements



repeated in a specular way on the right and left, giving the practitioner the opportunity to become familiar with the basic positions and drills, using the movements to “fill” the body and bring energy into the techniques. The section continues with a series of magnificent techniques until “turning the horse,” a 180-degree rotation that concludes it.

The second section is less symmetrical, less schematic, more varied, and more dynamic. This is the part of Gung ji fuk fu kuen in which the most interesting and complex techniques appear, including projections, levers, and searches for vital points. The suggestive names of the techniques (“supporting the sky with one finger,” “cutting the iron bridge,” “bringing the horse back to the stable,” “cutting the pearl bridge,” “transforming into a dragon,” “waving the tiger’s tail,” etc.) could make one think of a ballet. But this happens only at a superficial glance: In reality, the assiduous, critical, and conscious practice of the almost 200 movements that make up the Gung ji fuk fu kuen guarantee the Hung ga practitioner a technical background that is also effective in real combat.

In conclusion, it can be said that Gung ji fuk fu kuen is such a complete form that it summarizes the entire martial path of a practitioner: Greeting, basic positions and techniques in the first part; proprioception and advanced techniques, in a progression of complexity in the second part; reaching the peak with the “black tiger” that closes the form. A true martial masterpiece.

Fu hok seung ying kuen

Fu hok seung ying kuen (for brevity from here on Fu hok), “the double form of the tiger and the crane,” is relatively young. Codified by Wong Fei Hung at the beginning of the 20th century, it is a cornerstone of the

Hung Kuen school. Before the inclusion of the shorter forms in the program, which took place at the beginning of the 1960s, Fu hok was the second sequence to be taught to new students, after Gung ji fuk fu kuen.

It is a very suggestive form and also, thanks to its beautiful choreography, enjoys great consideration in the world of martial arts, where it is also widely practiced in schools of Southern disciplines in parallel to Hung ga. Composed of over 200 movements, it declares its composite origin: Wong Fei Hung was very good at identifying what he believed to be

valid in the disciplines he encountered and synthesizing those elements into the techniques of his school. Fu hok is a striking example of this talent of master Wong.

The conceptual similarities with Gung ji fuk fu kuen are many and deep, demonstrating Master Wong’s rootedness in the Hung ga of

the time, which he received from his father, a doctor himself and respected member of the “Ten tigers of Guandong.” Fu hok develops along a progression of increasing complexity, in which two chapters can be identified: A first one more didactic and schematic; and a second one richer and more creative. The sequence accompanies the practitioner along a path of reading, understanding, and internalizing the functions of his own body that goes far beyond the martial aspects.

As in Gung ji fuk fu kuen, the traditional Hung ga greeting of Fu hok is enriched by a didactic part that includes a brief quotation of the “dragon” (propaedeutic to Tit Sin Kuen) followed by a study of the basic position sei ping ma (for clarity. “horse-stance”) both in a static condition and in the translation towards the ji ng ma



(advanced position). The study continues with various symmetrical sequences, repeated on both sides, that add complexity to what was previously trained in the stances. The study and understanding of this section allow the practitioner to become familiar with the typical Hung ga method of movement, based on the constant height of the pelvis and control of the center of gravity as the driving force behind each action.

The first part of Fu hok ends with one of Master Wong Fei Hung’s masterpieces: the ten tigers, a figurative fight against six adversaries, defeated using only the techniques inspired by the animal symbol of the Hung ga school, the tiger. Little more than mentioned in Gung ji fuk fu kuen, the tiger is one of the highlights of Fu hok and reveals to the attentive practitioner some fundamental principles of Hung ga (principles that are common to every good martial school), including:

- the conceptual nature of the gestures;
- the importance of expanding into

the aggressor’s space;

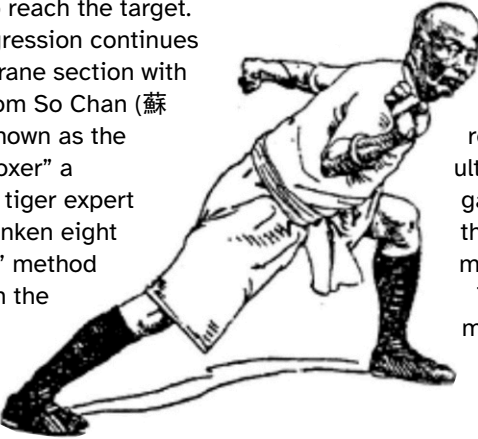
- the barycenter as the origin of every movement;
- the coincidence of defense and counterattack: get rid of the blocks, go to the target;
- the value of guard changes to find a passage to the target;
- the importance of an endless action, where each technique is the origin of a subsequent technique.

The “ten tigers” section alternates between the two main tiger methods: “single claw” and “double claw,” and is mainly symmetrical, a principle dear to Wong fei Hung, who as a physician knew the importance of training the body in a harmonious way. The tiger section closes the first chapter of Fu hok. The second part opens with some interlocutory techniques (but by no means of lesser importance) that introduce the section dedicated to the other animal that gives its name to the form: the crane.

Most scholars of the Chinese martial arts history agree that the crane method did not appear in the old Hung ga handed down by Wong Fei Hung’s father and was probably introduced by Wong Fei Hung himself, as already noted constantly interested in understanding and making his own the most effective techniques of other schools.

The choreographic aspects of this section are certainly important, but its real value lies in the principles it highlights: The endless action, the change of guard as a strategy to get out of the opponent’s line of attack, take away his space, change the distance and exploit the gaps in his defense to reach the target.

The progression continues after the crane section with a quote from So Chan (蘇燦), also known as the “Beggar boxer” a Guandong tiger expert in the “drunken eight immortals” method included in the closing stages of Fu hok.



The most interesting aspect of this method is the use of the center of gravity, which is moved far outside the base of support to give unpredictability to the movements.

The final part of Fu hok is spectacular and contains the best-known method among those attributed to Wong Fei Hung, the “shadowless kick.” Beyond the cinematic elaborations, the shadowless kick is a whirlwind of distracting actions and feints—“the shadow of the moon” in the picturesque traditional narrative—that pave the way for a combined kick and punch technique (“dragon hides and the tiger makes a leap”), followed by other techniques in continuity of action for maximum effectiveness.

In the end, the two last movements of Fu hok that precede the salute may appear a banal sequence of parry and counterattack but, in reality, they contain an ultimate synthesis of Hung ga, in which is summarized the strategic approach to martial combat. The first of these two movements is “piercing with a bridge and returning to the cave.” The control of

the situation is regained in a condition of active relaxation that corresponds to the bridge (lau 留), with an apparent retreat that hides the expansion of one’s own zone at the expense of the opponent’s zone. The second movement to follow, “the dragon creeps out from the sea,” focuses on two basic Hung ga principles: The use of the center of gravity as the engine of every action and the method of defense without parry, based on invasion of space and attack, in spite of the opponent’s initiatives.

The greeting (“the roar of the tiger and the shriek of the crane”) closes the form.

Conclusion

Gung ji fuk fu kuen and Fu hok seung ying kuen are the pillars of modern Hung ga. Codified in their final form by Wong Fei Hung and refined by Lam Sai Wing, they have come down to the present day to testify to the value of the martial tradition of South China. The study of these two forms is precious also for the followers of other martial schools and traditions, who can draw important insights to improve their practice. However, like all martial arts, Hung ga requires attention, constancy,

reflection and awareness to be understood and practiced in its real martial value. It is therefore important to find a reliable and authoritative source, so as not to waste your time studying moves more similar to a ballet than to a martial art.

Notes

- 1. The romanization of Cantonese used in this article follow the Yale rules.
- 2. The definition Hung ga (the family of Hung) is used as an alternative to Hung Kuen (the “Fist of Hung,” or the “Fighting Art of Hung”).
- 3. The nature of Hung Kuen is dynamic, each gesture is a consequence of the previous one and the beginning of the next, without a solution of continuity. The images accompanying this article should always be considered a dynamic moment of a sequence fixed by the click of the camera.

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