

TIT SIN KUEN

The Iron jewel of Hung Ga

By Alberto Biraghi



According to the legend, the form Tit Sin Kuen (literally “The Method of the Iron Wire”) was codified at the end of the 19th century by Leung Kwan, better known as Tit Kiu San, a formidable martial arts expert and one of the “Ten Tigers of Canton,” an association of the most valiant warriors of Guandong. A member of the Ten Tigers was also the father of another kung fu hero, Wong Fei Hung, the founder of modern Hung Ga kung fu made famous by countless films. Wong Fei Hung learned the form from his father, then expanded it according to his martial experience and included it in the program of his Hung Ga method as the last set to be learned.

Following Wong Fei Hung’s heritage, in the traditional Hung Ga schools Tit Sin Kuen marks the completion of the Hung Ga study path. The student can access it only after completing the entire program, a condition necessary yet not sufficient, because the final approval of the master is also needed.

At a first sight, Tit Sin Kuen looks different from all other Hung Ga forms. This uniqueness contributed to boost its mythological aura in a mystical narrative that does not do justice to the quality and martial value of the form.

“Handed down” Rather than Taught

As I pointed out in my past articles, teaching was loosely structured in traditional Hung Ga schools. There were no courses or classes, there were no belts or grades, and the only recognized ranking was seniority of membership. The student trained in the gym when he could, and he practiced what he knew. Whenever a more experienced student was present, the junior student had the opportunity to be corrected or to proceed in the study of a new form. The role of the master was mainly one of motivation and supervision. Because he appeared only occasionally, most of the teaching activity was in charge of the older students.

Chan Hon Chung



Chan Hon Chung (1909 - 1991) is perhaps the most famous direct student of Lam Sai Wing and "martial grandson" of folk hero Wong Fei Hung. In his youth he was assigned to coach the Chinese swordsman troops who fought against the Japanese invasion in 1936. In 1938 he opened the Hon Chung Gymnasium in Kowloon at 729 Nathan Road, where he practiced traditional Chinese medicine and taught Hung Ga kung fu.

From the late 1940s to 1950s he worked as producer, choreographer and actor in the making of the movie series about his "sigung" Wong Fei Hung starring Kwan Tak Hing. In 1969 he was a founding chairman of the Hong Kong Chinese Martial Arts Association he then led almost until his death. Being engaged on the cultural and social front, master Chan was so popular in Hong Kong that he was the only martial arts teacher to be received by Queen Elizabeth II when Hong Kong was still a British protectorate.

Tit Sin Kuen was an exception to this tradition, following a different learning protocol of unwritten but universally respected rules:

- The student did not explicitly ask to learn the form. At most, he launched the topic using the diplomatic, Chinese method of subtle allusions, for instance asking questions about *Sap Yin Kuen*, “The Form of the Ten Methods” that precedes Tit Sin Kuen in the program and whose beginning part is propaedeutic to Tit Sin Kuen.

- Tit Sin Kuen was not “taught,” but “handed down.” This subtle difference stems from the thought that Tit Sin Kuen is not something new to the advanced Hung Ga student, but rather a synthesis and rationalization of what has been

learned previously.

- The student received the form directly from the master; no exceptions. The senior students in possession of Tit Sin Kuen (when present) could eventually help the student with suggestions and adjustments, but they never added new parts, a prerogative reserved for the master. During my years at Hon Chung Gymnasium, the only senior student in possession of Tit Sin Kuen was my *si-hing* (senior brother) Cheung Yee Keung, who was an enormous help to me during my study, but he focused only on what I had already received from Master Chan.

- Tit Sin Kuen was not shown to anyone who did not know it, nor was it performed in public. In my case, given the very social character of the Hon

Chung Gymnasium, with people coming and going and different activities, the observance of this rule involved daily trips between Mong Kok and the New Territories, where Master Chan Hon Chung had a cottage and it was possible to train privately.

Kung fu Déjà-vu

Modern Hung Ga is the result of the orthopedic expertise of the school’s forefathers, Wong Fei Hung and his father, who were both traditional Chinese bonesetters. They developed a technical platform that, if correctly performed, does not impose excessive loads or traumas on the locomotor system. The constancy of training boosts the proprioception ability, inducing a mechanism of automatic improvement consistent with the physical and athletic characteristics of the practitioner. And it should be so—in fact, “kung fu” means “hard work, [but] on a human scale.”

In the student’s imagination, Tit Sin Kuen is something new and different from what he has learned previously. Slow movements, long contractions, different stances, screams, and hummings. But as soon as he accesses the first moves, the novelty mixes with a clear feeling of déjà-vu. The more one trains this form, the more one understands how it is in fact a synthesis of the entire technical structure of the style, evolved and harmonized in a sequence that contains the entire Hung Ga method.

We can therefore say that Tit Sin Kuen is intended to bring to awareness the results of everyone’s martial path. This aspect can be clearly seen analyzing the stances. Some use for the Tit Sin Kuen primary stance the same name of the main Wing Chun stance (二字 羊 *ji6 zi6 kim4 joeng4 maa5*). Although there are obvious similarities, in reality the stances of Tit Sin Kuen are a different world, being the ultimate evolution of the canonical positions revealed in their



Raising up arms covering the breast while expelling the impure 氣 hei (AKA "chi").



Covering the sky with both arms.



Press on the bridge.

Can Tit Sin Kuen Harm Our Health?

A common misconception considers Tit Sin Kuen dangerous for the health if poorly practiced—perhaps by a beginner that does not have a good martial background. Well, this consideration makes sense, but it can be applied to any martial art. Unnatural positions, excessive muscular tension, incorrect angles on the joints, and pressure generated by forced

breathing, over time damage those who perform these actions.

Those who choose to learn Tit Sin Kuen on their own by exploiting videos on the Internet, before having a solid knowledge of the art, are more likely to perform the movements incorrectly. This could possibly cause some physical damage, but worse the unsupervised study would be a wasted effort. You can parrot Tit Sin Kuen’s moves, but if you don’t back it up with a solid, technical, Hung Ga foundation, you won’t have a chance to grasp even a fraction of the value of the form.

Internal and External: Two Sides of the Same Coin

The Hong Kong movies that spread in the West at the beginning of the 1970s generated an enormous interest in Chinese kung fu, in a martial world that until then was monopolized by Japanese culture. This sudden notoriety, grafted on a poor knowledge of the language and traditions of China, produced not a few misconceptions. The most popular one is the subdivision of Chinese martial arts into “external” and “internal” categories, according to which there are external schools based on hard techniques and solid positions and internal schools based on fluid movements and flows of somehow mysterious, inner energy.

In reality, however, different martial arts are simply different ways to achieve the same goal: deep self-knowledge and self-perception, the best possible control of the body both in relation to oneself and to the surrounding space, and the ability to react quickly and efficiently to events.

In this sense, Tit Sin Kuen is a clear denial of the reductive “internal vs. external” dichotomy, being a perfect mix of the qualities of slowness, fluidity, jerks, changes of muscular tension, and center of gravity shifts, etcetera. All these qualities are indissolubly connected with the breath, in harmony with the two main bridges “hard” and “soft.” The interpenetrating opposites are a cornerstone of the interaction that



Making the golden bridge stable.

characterizes every aspect of Chinese culture.

Can I Train the Bridges?

“Bridges” are methods of relationship aimed at managing the distance with the opponent, infiltrating his defense, controlling him, and reaching his vulnerable points. Not specific techniques—such as punches, kicks, stances, etc.—so they cannot be trained *per se*. Rather, they indicate different ways of understanding and training one’s techniques.

In the Hung Ga tradition there are 12 bridges, the basis of the method, forming the poem presented below. Tit Sin Kuen is the only form in which we find references to all 12 bridges of Hung Ga. Please note that each ideogram implies complex concepts that would require a more in-depth discussion that would, however, go beyond the objectives of this article.

剛 *gong1*: Hard. 柔 *yauh4*: Soft. The first two bridges express the basic foundation of Hung Ga, the alternation between strength and fluidity, solidity and dexterity, a concept that in the collective imagination recalls the image of the Yin and Yang symbol. All the other ten bridges also refer to these two.



The fierce tiger climbs the sand dune.

逼 *bik1*: Search the short distance. It indicates the expansion into the opponent’s field to take away space from him, modifying angles and distances to defuse the effectiveness of his attacks. This bridge is frequently combined with others, i.e., to increase the reachable distance in the following bridge.

直 *jik6*: Long, straight. It indicates a long-distance, penetrating action such as a straight punch. Interaction with the 逼 *bik1* bridge increases the range of the technique.

分 *fan1*: Divide, open with energy, i.e., penetrating the opponent’s guard along the center line and expanding like a wedge, nullifying the opponent’s weapons and creating space for the counterattack.

定 *dihng6*: Make one’s condition stable. Simplifying, we can say that this bridge is in some ways similar to the Japanese concept of *kime* (決め), indicating the energy concentration on the weapon of choice for maximum effectiveness.

寸 *chuen3*: Short, fast. This bridge indicates all short techniques based on explosive force. For instance, the “one-inch punch” that was made famous by Bruce Lee in the 1970s. The strikes based on this bridge usually spring from a swing performed around the 丹田 *daan1 tin4* (the center of gravity of the body

in a Western view; the center of energy in an Eastern view) to gather energy.

提 *tai4*4: Lifting. When the opponent's attack is diverted up and misses the target. There's never a violent impact; rather, a sliding of the opponent's weapon along one's own limb used as a guide.

留 *lau4*4: Place oneself in active relaxation. The ninth bridge has two writings of the same pronunciation, a result of the oral tradition within which the Chinese martial art was handed down (alternative, 流 *lau4*4: divert the opponent's strength). In Chan Hon Chung's school the correct writing was considered to be 留, literally "reserve." This bridge indicates both the "active relaxation" that precedes the action, a necessary condition to express energy with fluency and naturalness, and the instant of total relaxation following the explosion of energy in a strike. It's the moment when the expansion of lungs, diaphragm, and abdominals generate air intake.

運 *wan6*6: Exploiting the strength of the adversary to one's own advantage (as happens in judo, when the opponent's momentum is diverted to unbalance or to control him).

制 *jai3*3: Controlling the energy. From none to maximum, a progressive and continuous increase of muscular tension, modulated on the opponent's action.

訂 *dehng6*6: Get down and concentrate the force. Lower the 丹田 *daan1 tin4* to enter the opponent's defense and send his attack off target.

The poem ends with the ideograms "day" and "night," added for poetic symmetry with the beginning of the poem, to reconfirm the necessity of always bearing in mind the interpenetration of the opposites.

Breathing

In Tit Sin Kuen (but I can say in all the Hung Ga of the Chan Hon Chung school), breathing is always a consequence of the action, which is structured to allow a correct rhythm of inhalation and exhalation. Every



Making the golden bridge stable.



Hands split horizontally.

movement originates in the 丹田 *daan1 tin4*. The rotational movements of anteversion and retroversion of the pelvis, in harmony with contractions and de-contractions of the abdominal wall and diaphragm, compress and decompress the lungs, producing exhalation and inhalation.

It should be emphasized that in Tit Sin Kuen there is never a muscular contraction during inhalation, nor any actions unaccompanied by an exhalation. The flow of air follows the movement, exiting during the action and entering with the relaxation at the end of the action. For this reason, the advanced practitioner does not focus on breathing itself, rather on the movements that produce it.

Sounds

During execution of the form different sounds are produced for various purposes: psychological (focusing one's attention and scaring the opponent), physiological (helping a full air outtake), and healthful. This last aspect has unexpected points of contact with some forms of holistic medicine widespread in the West. In particular, in the therapeutic chant practiced by Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical movement, there is a similar use of vowels and of the



The hungry eagle soars over its prey.

mute sound "ng," that is identical to the one emitted when performing some circular movements of Tit Sin Kuen.

It is also interesting to observe that even when performing Tit Sin Kuen at highest intensity, an oxygen debt is never produced.

Eastern and Western traditions agree in assigning therapeutic power to the vibrations produced by these sounds, with a beneficial effect on different organs in relation to the different frequencies produced.

In Conclusion: Style and Method

Hung Ga is a style of martial art, identifiable on the basis of the

aesthetic characteristics of the stances and on the actions inspired by animals and elements, all immediately recognizable.

But Hung Ga is also an effective martial method based on strategies, principles, and tactics. This second aspect gives Hung Ga the substance and credibility that have made it one of the most widespread methods of traditional Chinese kung fu in the world.

Tit Sin Kuen is an unmatched jewel of the Chinese martial tradition, the ultimate synthesis of Hung Ga, but this can only be understood by those that have devoted an enormous amount of time and energy to study, understand, and process the method.

Final Notes

1. This article is based on my long experience in the school of Master Chan Hon Chung, with whom I had the privilege and honor of being a student from 1977 until the closure of his historic Hong Kong gym at 729 Nathan Road. Master Chan strictly followed the tradition of Lam Sai Wing and Wong Fei Hung. It is possible that different models and opinions are followed in other schools

of different lineages.

2. The romanization of Cantonese used in this article follows the Yale rules.

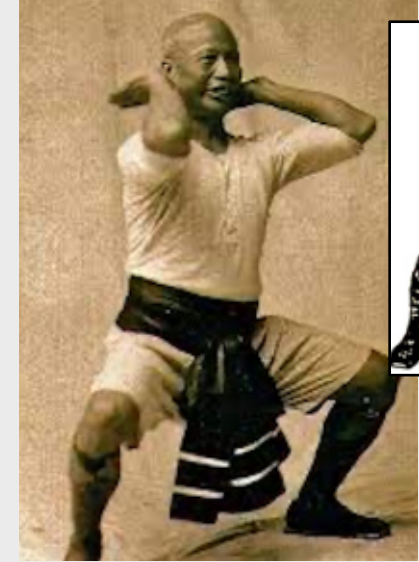
3. The definition Hung Ga (the family of Hung) is used as an alternative to Hung Kuen (the "fist" of Hung, meaning the "method" or the "fighting art" of Hung).

4. 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 within a sequence, fixed by the shutter of the camera.

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The names of the positions in the captions are taken from master Lam Sai Wing's manual published in 1957 that Master Chan gave me after I had completed Tit Sin Kuen. There were no translations of this handbook at that time, so I turned to an Italian sinologist who translated it not without difficulty because of the sometimes imaginative language. The translation was later edited and corrected the following year together with my brothers from Hon Chung Gymnasium.



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