

Kung Fu The History

The term 'Kung Fu' does not relate to any specific form of martial art, but rather translates as 'skill' or 'ability'. Scholars believe that the use of Kung Fu to describe the Chinese martial form originated in Hong Kong and Kwangtung province. There are records of the Jesuit priest, Pere Amiot, writing of the 'peculiar exercises' practised by the Taoist priests of his region which he called 'Cong Fou'.

Wu Shu is traditionally the term widely used to describe the traditional Chinese martial arts, though other descriptions such as Kuo-shu, Kuo-chi, Chien-shu and Tao-fa have also been used from time to time. (Wu Shu is the term currently used for Chinese martial arts by the People's Republic of China).

Exactly when Kung Fu first sprouted is unknown, with historians stating that Chinese martial forms most likely predate recorded history. Since the dawn of time there have been battles between man and animal, warring tribes, etc. during which conflicts combative techniques were executed and accumulated and passed down from generation to generation.

What is particular about the Chinese martial forms is that many schools or styles were created by imitating the fighting techniques of animals such as monkeys, lions, tigers, snakes, bears, etc. The adaptation of animal techniques stems from a belief that in order to survive in their harsh natural environment, all animals (even birds and insects) were naturally endowed with skills for fighting.

Hence techniques were born from the tiger's pounce, the eagle's sharp claws and the elusiveness and unpredictability of the monkey. Still, it is difficult to attach a precise date to the true birth of Kung Fu. Some traditional historians date it as far back as the Shang Dynasty (16th century BC). Others place it in the period of the Contending States (475 - 221 BC) and the Yellow Emperor, Huang Ti. Indeed, it would appear that modern Kung Fu has adapted and evolved from the warring experiences of China's past, with distinct traces of Mongolian, Tibetan, Indian and other cultural ideologies exhibited in many styles. If there is one common reference point in tracing Kung Fu's history, it is the Shaolin Temple and the journey of Buddhism from India to China.

Buddhism reached China during the period of the Eastern Han Ming Emperor (58 - 76 AD) and soon flourished. It is estimated that by 500 AD there were more than 10,000 Buddhist temples in China and many emperors became devout Buddhists. In 495 AD the Shaolin Temple was constructed by the order of Emperor Wei Xiao Wen (471 - 500 AD). The Temple was built to house the teachings of a Buddhist monk named Batuo, who came to China for Buddhist teaching in 464 AD. As such Batuo can be considered the first Shaolin Temple monk, though there is no record of how or what (471 - 500 AD). The Temple was built to house the teachings of a Buddhist monk named Batuo, who came to China for Buddhist teaching in 464 AD. As such Batuo can be considered the first Shaolin Temple monk, though there is no record of how or what Batuo passed down by way of religious Qigong practice, just as there is no record of how or when he died.

The most influential person in the study of Kung Fu's history through the Shaolin Temple is an Indian monk named Da Mo (or Ta Mo). Da Mo, also known as Bodhidharma, had been a small prince of a Southern Indian tribe. He followed the Mahayana school of Buddhism and was revered as a bodhisattva - and enlightened being who had renounced nirvana so as to save others. The legends of Da Mo in Chinese mythology are elaborate, to say the least. One legend has Da Mo sitting in a cave where he stared at the wall for nine years in meditation. After accidentally falling asleep, he became so angered with himself that he tore off his eyelids and threw them on the ground. Tea shrubs grew from the ground beneath the discarded eyelids and monks have used tea ever since to deter sleep.

Dao Mo was invited to China by the Emperor Liang Wu. He arrived in Canton in 527 AD but when the emperor disliked his preaching. Da Mo withdrew to the Shaolin Temple. Upon arriving at the Temple, Da Mo found many of the monks to be sick and weak. He pondered this problem for nine years (his nine year seclusion) and when he emerged wrote two classics: Yi Jin Jing (Muscle/Tendon Changing Classic) and Xi Sui Jin (Marrow/Brain Washing Classic). The classics taught the priests how to build their Qi to an abundant level and use to it improve their health and change their physicality to one of super strength. When this training was combined with martial forms, the priests found a marked improvement in the strength and power of their martial techniques.

It is believed that Da Mo may have authored the series of 18 exercises contained in a manuscript, the I-Chin-Ching, outlining the Shaolin method of Chinese boxing. The method that emerged from the Shaolin Temple, which is representative of the northern Chinese styles in general, was called wai-jya (wai-chia) or external family of Chinese boxing. Shaolin strove the increase speed, strength and elasticity. It was vigorous and calisthenic and became the basis from which Karate in Okinawa and the Korean martial arts were derived. The Xi Sui Jin was hard to learn and as such was passed down secretly only to a few disciples in every generation. Sadly Da Mo passed away in the Shaolin Temple in 536 AD but what he had started would live on for centuries.

Very quickly the Shaolin Monks would become revered for their fighting prowess. During the period between the Sui dynasty and the Tang dynasty, in the 4th year of Tang Gao Zu Wu De (621 AD), Qin King Li Shi-Ming had a momentous war against Zheng King Wang Chi-Chong. With Qin King in trouble, 13 Shaolin monks came to his assistance against Zheng. When Li Shi-Ming later became the first emperor of the Tang dynasty (618 - 907 AD) he rewarded the Shaolin Temple with approximately 600 acres of land. He also granted the Temple the right to train its own soldiers.

Such were the riches of the Shaolin Temple that martial arts training became a necessity to protect its wealth from bandits. The responsibility of defending the Temple was given to the soldier monks known as Seng Bing. For three hundred years the Shaolin Temple enjoyed a golden period in which it legally owned its own martial arts training organisation. The Temple also remained open to outside martial influences, absorbing what it could and incorporating these techniques and training methods into its own system. During this period one of the most famous Shaolin monks was Jueyuan. He travelled the country learning martial arts techniques and working with other famous martial artists. When in Lan Zhou he met the famed martial artist, Li Sou, who in turn introduced him to, Bai Yu-Feng and his son. Later all four men returned to the Shaolin Temple and studied together. After ten years, Li Sou left the Temple but Bai Yu-Feng and his son stayed on and became monks. Bai Yu-Feng's name changed to Qiu Yue Chan Shi and, according to the book of Shaolin Temple record, it was he who developed the then 18 existing Buddha Hands techniques into 173 techniques. He also compiled the existing techniques contained with Shaolin and wrote the book The Essence of the Five Fist, which discussed the methods and applications of the Five Fist (Animal) Patterns. This is proof that animal patterns had already existed for some time in the Shaolin Temple.

The Shaolin Temple would also be responsible for spreading the Chinese martial arts to Japan. In the year 1312 AD the monk Da Zhi came to the Shaolin Temple from Japan. He studied the Shaolin martial arts (barehands and staff) for 13 years and returned to Japan to spread Shaolin Gongfu to Japanese martial arts society. In 1335 AD a Buddhist monk named Shao Yuan ventured to Shaolin from Japan. During his stay he mastered Gongfu and returned to Japan in 1347 AD.

The golden era of the Shaolin Temple ended when Manchuria took over China and became the Qing dynasty. In order to prevent the Han race (pre-Manchurian) Chinese from rebelling against the government, martial arts training was outlawed between 1644 and 1911 AD. In order to preserve their teachings, the Shaolin techniques were passed onto layman society. Martial arts training in the Temple was carried out in secrecy and the Shaolin monk soldier decreased in number from thousands to a couple of hundred. In 1911 the Qing dynasty fell in a revolution led by Dr Sun Yat-Sen. The value of Chinese martial arts was re-evaluated and for the first time the secrets of Chinese martial arts were permitted to be openly taught to the public.

During the Chinese civil war, Chiang Kai-Shek tried to unify the country. The battle spilled into the Shaolin Temple in 1928 and the Temple was burned for the last time by Warlord Shi You-San's soldiers. The fire lasted forty days, destroying all major buildings and priceless books and records. In order to preserve the Chinese martial arts, President Chiang Kai-Shek ordered the establishment of the Nanking Central Guoshu Institute at Nanking in 1928. The traditional name Wushu was renamed Zhong Guo Wushu or simple Guoshu. For the first time in Chinese history, by rule of the government, all the major martial arts powers in China came together to share their knowledge. Unfortunately, at the commencement of World War II, all training discontinued. China was taken over by Communists following the Second World War. All religions and all Shaolin training was prohibited under Communist rule. Wushu training was established at the National Athletics Institute. However this was not pure Wu Shu, but rather performance based with major portions of martial training and technique application eradicated by the government to discourage possible unification of martial artists against the government. It was not until the 1980s (unfortunately after several of the traditional masters had died) that the Chinese government realised the value of traditional martial arts training and so encouraged it. KFS

About the Author

<http://www.martialarm.com/history/kungfu.html>

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