

Frolics of the Five Animals

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

In the Chinese martial arts, imagery of the Five Animals (Chinese: 五形; pinyin: wǔ xíng; literally "Five Forms") - Tiger, Crane, Leopard, Snake, and Dragon—appears predominantly in Southern styles, especially those associated with Guangdong and Fujian Provinces.[1]

The Five Animal martial arts supposedly originated from the Henan Shaolin Temple, which is north of the Yangtze River, even though imagery of these particular five animals as a distinct set (i.e. in the absence of other animals such as the horse or the monkey as in T'ai Chi Ch'üan or Xíngyìquán) is either rare in Northern Shaolin martial arts - and Northern Chinese martial arts in general—or recent (cf. wǔxíngbāfǎquán; 五形八法拳; "Five Form Eight Method Fist").

The Legend of the Five Animals

Shaolin first became famous because the Tang Dynasty (618–907) saw fit to favor the monastery with its patronage as thanks for the role its monks played in the Battle of Hulao. The sudden renown of the Shaolin martial arts attracted pilgrims who came specifically to study its fighting methods. However, the more people that sought training at the temple, the smaller the proportion of them that had the time or the inclination to truly dedicate themselves. Some regarded the Shaolin imprimatur as a kind of talisman that rendered years of training unnecessary. Others only wanted to fight well and cared little for esoterica like qìgōng, erasing over centuries the difference between the Shaolin martial arts and those crude methods on which it was supposed to improve.

Another was Jueyuan, who in the 13th century started from first principles with the 18 Luohan Hands, the original 18 techniques of the Shaolin martial arts. Like those before him, Jueyuan used the original 18 Luohan Hands as a foundation, expanding its 18 techniques into 72. Still, he felt the need to seek knowledge from outside the confines of the temple.

In Gansu Province in the west of China, in the city of Lanzhou, he met Li Sou, a master of "Red Fist" Hóngquán (洪拳). Li Sou accompanied Jueyuan back to Henan, to Luoyang to introduce Jueyuan to Bai Yufeng, master of an internal method.

They returned to Shaolin with Bai Yufeng and expanded Jueyuan's 72 techniques to approximately 170. Moreover, using their combined knowledge, they restored internal aspects to Shaolin boxing. They organized these techniques into Five Animals: the Tiger, the Crane, the Leopard, the Snake and the Dragon.[3]

Jueyuan is also credited with the Northern style "Flood Fist" Hóngquán (洪拳), which does not feature the Five Animals but is written with the same characters as the Southern style Hung Kuen, perhaps the quintessential Five Animals style. Moreover, as in the Southern Hung Kuen, the "Hóng" character (洪) in Hóngquán actually refers to a family name rather than its literal meaning of "flood." However, the two styles have nothing in common beyond their shared name.

Moreover, in Mandarin, "wǔxíng" is the pronunciation not only of "Five Animals," but also of "Five Elements," the core techniques of Xíngyìquán, which also features animal mimicry (but of 10 or 12 animals rather than 5) and, with its high narrow Sāntǐshì (三体式) stance, looks nothing so much like a Fujianese Southern style stranded in the North.

Although the technique is mainly associated with the tiger, dragon, snake, crane and leopard, many other animal styles have been developed, including panther, praying mantis (northern and southern styles), horse, cobra, bull, wolf, deer, bear, boar, eagle, python, scorpion, elephant, lion, frog, duck, dog, crow, tiger cub, chicken, hawk, turtle, swallow, lizard and a host of others.

Five-animals exercises in present-day qigong

The "frolics of five animals" (五禽戏, Wu Qin Xi) are a set of qigong exercises developed by the Chinese physician Hua Tuo in the 2nd century. There are two exercises per animal, corresponding to the five yin and five yang internal organs in Chinese medicine.[4] However, simplified forms with only one exercise per animal also exist.

The five animals in the exercises as currently taught are the bear, tiger, monkey, deer, and crane.[5] They are said to improve functioning of the lung (tiger), kidney (bear), liver (deer), heart (crane), and stomach (monkey), respectively.