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THE SECRETS OF SHAOLIN'S IRON FIST

Understanding the Shaolin Temple's fighting forms

The home of China's famous warrior monks, the Shaolin Temple in the Hunan mountains was once home to a mind-boggling 728 different systems of combat, or wu yi. Although many have been lost since this 1500-year-old stronghold of ancient combat knowledge was razed in 1928, the rebuilt temple's monks and its numerous connected martial arts schools still teach well over 200 fighting styles. In the second instalment of this three-part series exploring the famous fighting forms of Shaolin Temple, master of Shaolin kung fu Shifu Brett Russell explains the theories and application of Shaolin Hong Chuan — translated as 'Iron Fist' or 'Red Fist.'
During the Sui Dynasty, in the year 600AD, a young monk by the name of Fu Sheng started his martial arts training at the Shaolin Temple in Hunan Province, at the foot of the Songshan Mountains. He started learning the Lohan (Arhat) Chuan (Buddha Fist) system, which is, according to Shaolin lore, the first system developed and taught at the temple. Legend has it that this system was developed by Bodhidharma, the wandering Indian monk credited with creating Chan Buddhism at the Shaolin Temple in 497AD. Although by this time combative arts had already been developing for thousands of years in China and most historians reject the notion that Bodhidharma had much to do with the development of China's indigenous fighting methods, his mythical status in Shaolin suggests the Indian spiritual figure did have some influence there.

Either way, Fu Sheng's legend begins 100 years after Bodhidharma's time. As the story goes, Fu Sheng trained very hard and within three years he had learned the Lohan system and was its top student. He then started to learn the Hong Chuan system, which was developed from the Lohan Fist. It consists of a small and large form and is considered a higher level system.

Many years later, in 621AD, the Emperor of the Tang Dynasty, Li Yuan, was still in battle with the old Sui Dynasty. He had his estates seized and his son, Prince Li Shi Ming, taken hostage by a warlord for the old Emperor. On a daily trip to the local town of Dengfeng, near the Shaolin Temple, Fu Sheng found the imperial stamp of the Prince, Li Shi Ming, lying on the ground. The monks notified the Emperor straight away, and sent search parties around the local reign to locate the Prince.

It was soon discovered that the Prince had been taken to the nearby city of Louyang, and the warlord had fortified the town with bandits.

On Emperor Li Yuan's request, the monk Fu Sheng led 12 other wuseng (marital monks) to Louyang and in the early hours of the morning, the monks systematically fought their way through the bandit's barricade, with monk Fu Sheng using his newly learnt Hong Chuan (Iron Fist) to defeat the warlord and find Prince Li Shi Ming.

Prince Li Shi Ming, although shaken by his abduction, was in good health and was amazed by the fighting skill of Fu Sheng and the 12 other monks from the famed Shaolin Temple. So happy was he with his son's return, Emperor Li Yuan rewarded the Shaolin Temple by setting up a stone tablet with the names of the 13 monks who saved the Prince. He also gave the Temple an extra 40 Qing (600 acres) of land with grain and, to protect the crops, he allowed the Shaolin Temple to train up to 8000 warrior monks, which led to the amazing development of martial arts at Shaolin.

The Emperor also held a banquet in honour of Fu Sheng and his fellow Shaolin monks, declaring at the event that martial monks are allowed to eat meat and drink wine (how this fits in with the tenets of Buddhism, however, depends on which brand you practise).

Li Shi Ming became Emperor on 4 September 626AD. His official title was Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty and his reign was called the 'Golden Age', as China flourished economically and militarily under his rule.
News of the Shaolin monks' victory in battle spread far and wide, thanks to the new Emperor's endorsement, and the Iron Fist system used by Fu Sheng thus became famous as a method that had prevailed under extreme life-or-death circumstances.

Hong Chuan consists of 28 movements and 15 combinations for self-defence/combat, but as with all Shaolin methods, when learning Hong Chuan, the student begins with training the form first. Hong Chuan employs a lot of fist and back-fist strikes, combining powerful arm-strikes with strong stances.

DaHong Chuan (the advanced form, or ‘Big iron Fist’) has 30 movements and 18 combinations for self-defence/combat. It includes the same striking methods as Hong Chuan, but Da Hong Chuan also features elbow-strikes and devastating side-kicks, stomping kicks and crescent-kicks, all aimed at sensitive areas (the groin, top of the foot and cheek bone, respectively).

During the form training for Hong Chuan, the student starts the process for Iron Fist conditioning. Breathing and tensing techniques (chi kung or gung) are used for the fist, as well as striking with the fist (the front two knuckles) on padded bags. Jin gong (‘diamond skill’, which involves holding push-up/plank positions on one's knuckles) is also used. If you condition your fist this way, you will not hold back on your punch and will strike through the target every time.

Following this conditioning period, students learn the combinations, applying them on a bag or focus-mitts with a
MASTER WING CHUN

The Keys To Ip Man's Kung Fu
By Grandmaster Samuel Kwok

SU LIU TAO (LITTLE DRAGON) - The correct hands and arm positions for attack and defense. Development and use of energy are the focus of Su Liu Tao training. The form is done by Ip Man, and gives you the key to training the foundation of the Wing Chun as well as training the dynamic application of the techniques learned in Su Liu Tao training and use both hands to defend and attack simultaneously.

CHUIM KIU (SEEKING THE BRIDGE) - Chuim Kiu teaches stepping and footwork, and also Wing Chun's specialized finger techniques. The Chui Kiu form is taught in the Ip Man training manual. Grandmaster Kwok also demonstrates and explains the theory behind Wing Chun's devastating short-range power.

BUI GEE (THREATENING FINGERS) - Bui Gie, the main thrusting-finger form, is the last hand form taught in Ip Man's training manual. It is the key to learning to absorb and deflect the power of the opponent's strikes. The use of the two hands enables you to control the opponent and effectively use continuous strikes.

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Vol. 4 - OH-SAO
All classic drills and trapping theories are investigated with explosive applications of basic hand drills, footwork, body-during and more. Through reacting and countering, you can develop your own personal style of Wing Chun. You'll learn how to create openings in which to attack and counter.

Vol. 5 - WOODEN DUMMY
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As the attacker moves to grab his shirt, Shifu Russell moves forward...

To stomp down on the top of the attacker's foot, as he loads both arms...

To deliver powerful Palm strikes to the jaw, knocking his opponent down.

Throwing his arms up to cover as he steps through, and chambering his leg...

Iron Fist VS Grab...
The photo sequences shown here, I have demonstrated four combinations from the Hong Chuan syllabus; the first is from Hong Chuan and the other three are from Da Hong Chuan.

The first is a counter to a tackle: I grab the attacker’s head – or a fistful of his hair – then pull his head down and back-fist his jaw, cheekbone or eye socket (the back of the neck is the traditional target area, but can be lethal), and finish with a rear-leg knee-strike to the head.

The second sequence deals with a head-punch: I block the strike, follow with a forearm to the back of the attacker’s head while simultaneously elbow-striking his neck, then roll his head backwards to take him down (being careful not to break the attacker’s neck).

Sequence three shows a counter for when an attacker grabs you with one arm: throw my arms up and at the same time stomp on the top of the attacker’s foot (the aim being to break the thin layer of bone covering many nerve endings atop the foot), then break his jaw with a snapping double palm-strike.

The fourth scenario (above) deals with a roundhouse-kick: I block the kick and counter with a front-foot snap-kick to the groin then grab the attacker’s head and send an inside crescent-kick to his cheekbone/jaw area.

Like all traditional Shaolin Temple way, Hong Chuan has been employed in mortal combat throughout the ages and as such is designed to end a physical encounter in no more than three movements. The Iron Fist philosophy is to employ maximum power/chi to end fights in minimal time, hence the importance of hardcore conditioning and well-targeted technique.

About the author: Master Shifu Brett Russell (Shi Xing Wu) is a 32nd-generation disciple of Shaolin kung fu. He is the chief instructor of Shaolin Monk Martial Arts Centres, based in Coogee, Sydney. Russell’s contributions to Blitz are sponsored by athletic shoe company www.fivefingers.com.au