

Death of the Sifu

An Investigation of Rank and Lineage Claims

The origin of the traditional martial arts is shrouded in mystery and myth. At the fountainhead of the history of martial arts, and in the majority of martial art systems, is the story of a great teacher. This great teacher, or sifu, is the martial arts warrior, or sage, who is credited with creating the body of knowledge that late, becomes a martial art system to be passed down through oral tradition and rigorous training to successive generations of students.. Occasionally, written materials such as a master training manual were also passed down through traditional lineages. In addition, when the lineages were broken, the knowledge of that martial art system was lost. For individual martial art students, the sifu likely served as a father, teacher, trainer, priest, and role model.

This article investigates the traditional lineage system for the transmission of martial arts knowledge through the sifu, and addresses the question of whether or not the role played by the traditional sifu still serves the needs of individuals who are training in contemporary martial arts.

Every nation and cultural group in history has had their heroes and all cultures have romanticized and exaggerated the abilities and exploits of these heroes. From the heroic stories of Greek mythology, we have heroes like Hercules, Achilles, Jason, Odysseus, Perseus, Theseus, and the Amazons. In the recorded chronicles of their lives and exploits, there is found a history of civilization, war, love, philosophy, myth, whether fact or fiction, interwoven within the fabric of a single story. In more contemporary times, we have grown up with stories about heroes like Robin Hood, Davy Crockett, and Daniel Boone.

In Asian historical literature, we find a similar blending of fact and fiction, perhaps to an even greater degree. Western readers usually expect that the books they read are classified as either fiction or non-fiction. In Asian literature; however, this distinction is usually not made, especially in works of ancient and modern literature that pertains to the martial arts. Just as Western historians blended fact with fiction in the stories of great civilizations and heroes, Asian historians and writers have done similarly throughout recorded history and, in particular, over the past two or three centuries.

Before the Tang dynasty (617-907) the Chinese literary tradition made no clear distinction between the modern categories of fiction and non-fiction, although elements of what we would call fiction were present.(1)

To say that the traditional martial arts were confused by the merging of fact and fiction would be an understatement as the written manuscripts and oral traditions led to major disagreements among the martial artists. To understand the scope of the problem, different people reading the same material would draw different conclusions depending on whether they felt the information was fact or fiction.

The combining of fact, myth, and superstition within the martial art literature was further confounded by the general lack of written historical information. Detailed information about key historical figures in the Asian martial arts was missing, which led some historians to “fill in the blanks” on their own. Many of the “historians” of the martial arts were also martial artists, studying with a “sifu” and this makes their accounts and conclusions less objective. Their research was likely biased and frequently lacking in scientific rigor. In addition, poor verbal and written Asian language skills, a lack of knowledge about Asian history, and a lack of awareness about the cultural and social milieu of Asian nations, especially the caste system, were complicating factors.

Another major issue that plagued the validity of the existing body of knowledge and prevailing opinions derived from the Asian martial art literature was the falsification of records, and the premeditated destruction of the historical records for political and financial gain.

Noted contemporary martial artist and author Harvey Kurland commented that:

The senior students of Yang Shao-Hou, who did not become disciples of (Yang) Cheng-Fu, were written out of the Yang family lineage after the death of (Yang) Shao-Hou and for that reason are not as well known.(2)

So far, the discussion has been focused on the issue of an overall unreliability of the Asian martial arts historical literature. Since much of the contemporary Asian martial arts literature is based on historical accounts, both written and oral, its reliability is equally suspect. Numerous examples from modern martial arts literature illustrate how the same fiction and mythologies are passed along from earlier historical accounts.

From a practical point of view, one might ask how the continued transmission of fiction and myth adversely affects training in the martial arts? If a student begins studying the martial arts as a purely recreational or leisure activity, without intending to use its martial applications, one could argue that it is unimportant that the student is learning baseless skills and information. In fact, some students seem to relish this kind of knowledge and practice. If, however, other students are soldiers or law enforcement professionals who might need to apply their skills in defense of their life or the lives of others, then what they learn and how they apply that knowledge becomes crucial for the protection and preservation of life.

At the center of all martial arts learning and for the continued transmission of knowledge, is the sifu, who is usually the primary source of information and training. Because of the nature of the student/teacher relationship, students trust that the information they receive is true and effective. In the traditional Asian martial arts; however, this may not be the case. Although the purpose of this article is not to disparage any teacher or system of martial arts, the facts reveal several common failures of the traditional sifu system of training:

1. The “curriculum” of traditional Asian martial arts is based on fiction, myth, and superstition and the sifu often perpetuates this false information and training.
2. A sifu’s claim to rank and lineage is often fraudulent, or misrepresents the sifu’s training and ability.
3. Some sifu’s attempt to inculcate a relationship of dependency and control over the lives and affairs of their students.
4. The traditional Asian martial arts are composed of many different systems of martial arts that have different techniques and training methods. No universally agreed upon standardized training technique or method of practice exists to ensure the safety of students. Thus, students are at increased and unnecessary risk of injury due to poor or improper training methods.

Some sifu’s make greatly exaggerated claims about their abilities and promote psychic and metaphysical beliefs to impress and manipulate their students. As a result, a sifu may achieve personal recognition and fame and benefit financially. Due to modern information sharing, that is both rapid and transparent, the credentials and claims of some ranking martial artists have been shown to be fraudulent. Such fraudulent claims commonly include false claims about studying with noted teachers, claiming to have an unearned rank or lineage, and exaggerations about the number of years studying with a particular teacher, or within a system or style of martial arts.

Some of the fantastic and exaggerated claims made by martial arts teachers have included: the ability to render opponents unconscious without physically touching them; the ability to psychically transport a body from one location to another; the ability to levitate; and the ability to dodge bullets or to become impervious to gun fire. Numerous examples of these claims have been produced by past and current martial artists. Indeed, many modern students of the martial arts believe that a goal of their training is to be able to perform these supernatural feats.(3) From the perspective of diagnostic psychology and psychiatry, individual martial artists who have made such exaggerated claims would appear to be suffering from various forms and degrees of narcissism, paranoia, and delusion.

In the article, “*Dangers of self-proclaimed masters*,” martial artist and author Don Cunningham, a debunker of supernatural, fraudulent, and delusional claims made by martial artists, refers to the psychiatrist Dr. Mariam Cohen who stated: “It’s possible they feel powerless, weak and frightened in most other areas of their lives, and therefore are attracted to the image of power.” Dr. Cohen further states: “There is also the image of the ‘master’ who is capable of defeating all enemies and has incredible wisdom. If you’re struggling with ‘inner demons’ and fears of your own weakness, this is an incredible image to connect to, to hope to be perhaps.”(4)

Within the lineage system, myth, superstition, metaphysical and occult practices are inculcated and transmitted via an unhealthy system of dogmatic “blind faith”. After all, the lineage student is charged with retaining the system’s “knowledge” intact from the masters who preceded him. Certainly, if the body of knowledge is based on scientific

principles of training and conditioning, and proven methods of combat, then retaining this knowledge is valuable, but if the system is permeated with superstition, metaphysical beliefs, and occult practices, the system will be without merit.

The hierarchy of the lineage system in the Asian martial arts raises several questions:

1. Is the lineage student the best of the master's, or the best student in the system? The history of certain martial arts suggests that this was not the case.
2. Is the "master" of a system (the person from where the lineage originated) necessarily the best practitioner or teacher of that system?
3. Are all of the great martial artists known?
4. Were some martial artists unconcerned about being famous?
5. Did some great martial artists choose not to teach or publish their work and thus remain unknown?
6. Is the lineage system the best method for transmitting knowledge to *future* martial artists?

Chinese martial artist Tang Hao (1897-1959) addressed many of these questions and called for reform. From his published opinions he was attacked for his 'heresy' and several attempts were made to arrest and imprison him.(5) Many familial and societal pressures were placed on students of the martial arts that restrained them from being free of dogma and superstition. Even among the few who broke from the dogmatic traditions of the prevailing martial arts and created new and innovative approaches, some created new "lineages" or mythologies to explain the origins of their knowledge and abilities. For example, in the martial art baqua, its founder Dong Hai Chuan is claimed to have related the origin of this martial art to a mythical Taoist immortal.

In 1844, the invention of the telegraph by Samuel Morse brought the arrival of a new era in global human communication, and along with it came the death of the sifu. The first message sent via telegraph was, "What hath God wrought?" Indeed, over the course of several centuries, the sifu had been the singular source of knowledge for the martial arts. With modern communications and the multitude of communication devices which have appeared in the last 150 years, historical records and documents, copies of original manuscripts, translated words of the founders of martial arts systems, are available through rapid large-scale global data searches. With the introduction of film, video, digital media, and other online media techniques, most forms and systems of martial arts are available to students of the martial arts in an unprecedented abundance in the new era of information access.

Knowledge is essential for so many human activities and values, including freedom, the exercise of political power, and economic, social and personal development.(6)

Was the role of the traditional sifu supplanted by the availability of information in the age of technology and communication? Certainly the technological advances have enhanced the ability of martial arts students to access information and to communicate directly with teachers and other students online. Web and video conferencing can even allow students and teachers to communicate verbally and visually through webcams, so that training sessions can be conducted online. Moreover, this high level of access and communication has facilitated the investigation of teacher claims about their work, publications, rank, lineage, and history, etc.

If we strip away the esoteric, psychic, metaphysical, occult, superstitious, and fictitious elements of the traditional Asian martial arts, what is left? In most cases, the central theory, which allows for advancement and the evolution of a particular martial arts system, is the remaining element. In baqua, for example, the central idea was to use continually changing postures and positions, accompanied with moving behind the opponent, which led to the system's fighting concept as seen today.

Why are the contemporary innovators and creators in the martial arts community denigrated and criticized? The answer seems to stem from the ignorance about the unsubstantiated, conflicted, and shaky history of the martial arts. Over time, falsities and facts have become blurred in the minds of the ignorant or gullible. The abilities of teachers became exaggerated or were moved into the realm of the supernatural. As a consequence, these kinds of beliefs make it impossible for living breathing men and women to live up to the fiction.

Due to the problem of exaggeration and falsification of rank and lineage within the martial arts the modern student of the martial arts needs to exercise extreme caution, whether in regards to a choice of martial arts literature, in the selection of a martial arts teacher, or in the style of martial arts chosen to study and practice. Unfortunately, when it comes to honesty and validity the martial arts community still has not heeded the advice of Tang Hao.

Definitions of terms:

Baqua (Pakua): is considered one of the three great internal martial art systems of China along with Tai Chi Chuan and Hsing Yi. Baqua incorporates principles of continuous movement, and the changing of postures and hand positions along with the intent of moving into the weakest areas of an opponent's defense, including to the rear of the opponent. The baqua are also the eight trigrams described in the I Ching; the combinations of whole and broken lines represent the ever-fluctuating elemental forces of the universe.

Mixed Martial Arts: are a full contact combat sport that allows a wide variety of fighting techniques, from a mixture of martial arts

traditions, to be used in competitions. The rules allow for striking and grappling techniques, both while standing and on the ground.

Modern Martial Arts: are those which have been largely developed over the last 100 years and include combat and tactical fighting arts, as well as contemporary sports martial arts such as mixed martial arts.

Traditional Martial Arts: are those having both an internal and an external system, that date back to the earliest history of martial arts, or martial arts that reflect the same formal structure of master and lineage transmission, but may only be two or three centuries old. Examples include Chinese Kempo, Tai Chi Chuan, and baqua.

References:

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