

Too Many Masters?

by Ken Fish

A friend of mine recently asked me how many Pa Kua and Hsing-I teachers there were in the U.S. today. A tournament promoter thinking of holding an internal martial arts tournament, he was visibly confused by my answer. "Three, maybe four Pa kua teachers, perhaps four or five Hsing-I teachers. In China maybe a couple dozen of each." When he regained his composure, my friend began to reel off the names of teachers whose names or articles regularly appear in print. He felt sure I must have omitted them by mistake. At this point I realized we were not speaking in the same terms, and proceeded to explain what I meant. What follows is the essence of a rather lengthy discussion.

For practical purposes, Pa Kua and Hsing-I are on the brink of extinction. The flowering of articles on both written by numerous authors might seem to refute this, but what we are really seeing is a case of good money being driven out by baser currency. By this I mean that there are many who claim to teach both, and who do indeed teach Pa Kua and Hsing-I forms (good, bad, and indifferent), but for the most part they are without any real skill or understanding. As these teachers become accepted as the standard bearers of Pa Kua and Hsing-I, the real arts, never broadly taught, become harder to discern through the confusion. In some cases even these teachers, whether by self delusion or indoctrination, are convinced that the form is the sum of the art. I encountered the latter case when speaking to a mainland China wushu coach. I had stated my belief that there was a qualitative difference in physical and mental development when a student trained with the goal of acquiring fighting skills, as opposed to training for competitive public performance. The coach was adamant that there was no difference, and no illustration of concrete examples could convince him otherwise. He had been indoctrinated this way by the powers that be in China, and was not about to question this line of reasoning.

The situation here is in some ways just as tragic. Lacking access to teachers, frequently having only read about Pa Kua or Hsing-I, Americans (and many Chinese) accept what is taught unquestioningly, no matter how divorced from common sense. Some even attempt to teach themselves or create their own systems, complete with faux lineages, and then go on to teach others. As Lenin said "What is to be done"? Obviously, some criteria for discerning true from false.

In a nutshell, one should know the mechanics of Pa Kua and Hsing-I, and not have to settle for some metaphysical paradigm of what one's body is doing. Traditional boxing teachers were generally poorly

educated, and taught mostly through example. One knew a teacher was teaching if he allowed the students to touch his body in order to feel which muscles were doing what. Considerable time and effort was spent placing student's bodies in the proper positions. In this way, most of the content of the system was taught in a few years, not the decades long apprenticeships one hears about here.

A teacher should also be able to demonstrate the applications of the art in a realistic manner. Defense requiring several moves for each of the opponent's moves are nothing but a dance. Closely tied to this should be explanations of power development, levels of physical development, and different qualities of force learned and applied at each level. Any resort to cosmic concepts should be taken as a sign of either ignorance or unwillingness to teach, usually the first. Again, explanations should begin with what joints are doing what, in what sequence, powered by what muscles.

At first blush the above reads like a prescription for rational instruction of any martial art, and in fact it is. How then, are Pa Kua and Hsing-I unique? Both of these arts emphasize unified body motion (moving as a single unit in a horizontal or vertical plane), power and stability derived from flexing, extending, and rotating major articulations of the axial skeleton, control over small muscle groups not usually fully enlisted in other martial arts (or even other activities), and an emphasis on structural strength derived from proper alignment rather than brute strength. In addition, the concept of movement with intent is stressed to a greater degree than in most other martial arts.

A good teacher should not only fully understand all of the above, he or she should be able to communicate these essentials clearly and effectively (although not necessarily verbally, as I indicated above). How many Pa Kua and Hsing-I teachers have this kind of depth and clarity? How many can communicate what they know? I know of only a few.

The astute reader will have noticed that I have avoided mentioning terms such as "internal" and "external", and the first appearance of the term "ch'i" is in this sentence. I will leave these issues for future columns.

Kenneth J. Fish spent over a decade in Taiwan, where he received a Chinese middle school and University education. While there he had the good fortune to learn from several well respected teachers of the older generation. His Hsing-I and Pa Kua teacher was Chang Chun-Feng.