

THE CHINESE ART OF SELF-DEFENCE

by R. T. H. Chen

AS in all forms of fighting skill, the Chinese system is as much an art of self-defence as it is one of man offence, and as dangerous, if not so than any other of its kind ever devised by the mind of man. For it can maim or kill, if an opponent versed in the art, even though unarmed, so wills it.

Ours is an intricate system indeed, capable of almost infinite evolutions, embracing, as it does, all the skill, imagination, agility, mental alertness, physical strength and endurance of the boxer, the wrestler, and the Judo expert combined. It is not enough merely to master the various stances or postures and vital "manoeuvres" or tactical movements to facilitate delivery of the "punches," "thrusts," "holds," and "throws" peculiar to the system. One should also cultivate at least a general knowledge of anatomy, for, as an authority puts it, "one needs to know the vital spots to be able to administer swift and effective defeat, particularly in a rough-and-tumble where more than one assailant is involved, armed and out for one's life, skin or purse."

As if in corroboration, Rikidozan (力道山), the current "all-in" wrestling champion of Japan, laid claim not so long ago to having mastered an extremely dangerous Chinese self-saving device to use only in such emergencies as when to break a murderous hold by an opponent or to save his own life, but what would happen to the fellow he did not reveal but left to our imagination.

With us there is no such thing as a code of rules to follow as in western style boxing and wrestling, since Government frowns upon staging of public bouts although it countenances instruction and public exhibitions by exponents of our system, perhaps because of its deadliness and consequent past abuse at the hands of the wrong persons, if for no other reason. Untrammelled by considerations

of rules or scruples, therefore, one may, with impunity, hit below the belt, kick, clapperclaw, pull the hair, attack from behind or with the teeth, nails etc. etc. ! In a nutshell, anything goes, and all being fair in love and war, it would be considered crass stupidity on the part of anyone to think it would not be cricket to resort to what would be foul play by western standards, especially if the other fellow should not hesitate to do so.

People not too familiar with the Chinese art of self-defence describe it as "Chinese Boxing" or "Chinese wrestling," neither of which is, of course, adequate description. In point of fact, it is a combination of "all-in" boxing, rather than Queensberry, "all-in" wrestling, rather than Graeco-Roman or catch-as-catch-can and Jiu-jitsu, or, more commonly, Judo. (Jiu-jitsu was originally a Chinese art developed centuries ago by Buddhist monks in the north of China as self-protection against brigands on lonely roads. It was subsequently adopted with certain modifications by the Japanese.)

The Chinese art is an ancient one, dating back to many centuries. How many centuries no one exactly knows in the absence of even the barest skeleton of a record of its inception. However, according to an article published by a Japanese who made a study of the subject in the 1890's, it was first developed about 1,000 to 1,500 years ago, while some of our experts supposedly in the "know" are inclined to claim for it an antiquity of some 2,000 years, which would carry it back to the declining period of the Han Dynasty. That it has a long history is an undisputed fact, but it is certainly not the oldest, as Greek pugilism is known to have existed about 3,500 years ago, originating in ancient Crete as far back as c. 1,500 B. C.

There are two schools expounding the

art, that is, the Northern and Southern. Exponents of these two schools have, it is claimed, their own distinct styles. The difference, as far as one can see, lies in the fact that, whereas the Northern style permits raising the arms and legs parallel to or above the shoulders, thereby ensuring perfect freedom of movement, the Southern restricts lifting the arms from just above the hip to parallel to the shoulders and the legs to no higher than hip, although the principle of defence-offence remains fundamentally the same. Those who have taken courses of both schools are almost unanimous in their opinion that it is an art that requires years of constant, faithful and arduous practice to cultivate.

When, how and why two schools of the art came about is not known, for here again no record is available, but, imaginably, serious divergences of opinion must have led to the division. There was, naturally, the inevitable rivalry that ensued, with each school claiming to be better than the other, and this sometimes gave rise to misunderstandings and undesirable physical violence to prove its superiority.

Just as there are two schools of exponents, so there are two branches of the art: 1) the "Hua Ch'uan" (花拳), i. e. the Flowery or Theoretical Style, and 2) the "San Ch'uan" (散拳), i. e. the Mixed or practical Style. The "Hua Ch'uan" is epideictic and very widely employed in public exhibitions, in which sometimes two exponents take a hand as "combatants" in a make-believe. It being what it is, is harmless, consisting, as it does, of a whole series of unbroken, graceful movements which only the aesthetic can appreciate. It is, in a sense, not unlike "shadow" boxing in execution, and it takes an average of 30 minutes to run one whole series.

There are, of course, numerous types of this class, and each particular type is characterized by the name it bears. For instance, the North has "The Eight Topsy Immortals" (醉八仙) of mythological fame, in allusion most probably to their celebrated encounter with the Dragon kings of the Four Seas (四海龍王), or "Tai Chi Ch'uan" (太極拳), that is, the Grand Ter-

minus or Ultimate of Chinese Cosmogony. To the Southern School belong "The Method of the Eight Trigrams" (八卦拳), "The Monkey Method" (猴拳), "The White Crane Method" (白鶴拳), and so forth.

The "Hua Ch'uan" of the North, at least for the past forty years, if not since the turn of the present century, has been more popular than its Southern counterpart, which, whatever its virtues of merits, would appear to have sunk into a thing of the past. One does not have to look far for evidence. Witness the current popularity of the "Tai Chi Ch'uan" among enthusiasts in our midst. Today, one no longer hears of the "Method of the Eight Trigrams," which once reigned supreme in the South (most probably an answer to the Northern "Tai Chi Ch'uan") or "The Mnokey Method," almost a monopoly of the Hakkas (客家人) not only in Kwangtung but in Malaya and Indonesia, wherever there was a Hakka community, some thirty years ago, as was "The white Crane Method" which made a brave but Wavering "come-back" in Canton not long after the end of the Pacific War, only disappear from the scene again.

As evidence of the ascendancy of the Northern School over the Southern, there were, before the War, clubs established all over the country under one single name "Ching Wu Hui" (精武會), open to both sexes, young and old alike, disseminating the Northern branch of the art by staging publicity exhibitions. The instructors themselves were Southerners, many being converts to the Northern School, as were quite a number of the throngs of followers that enrolled for membership.

The "Hua Ch'uan" derived its name from the epideictic style of its execution, and in the opinion of many an expert, serves no practical purposes other than for exhibition, it having been originally devised as a form of systematic exercises, especially for the sedentary man. It is the "San Ch'uan" that the expert has recourse to in a rough-and-tumble.

All that was best in the "Hua Ch'uan" was, after necessary modifications, assimilated into the "San Ch'uan" to emerge as an effective practical system of self

defence, incorporating over the years not inconsiderable improvements in the form of new and dangerous methods evolved by exponents, and it is the "San Ch'uan" rather than the "Hua Ch'uan" that one has in mind when speaking of the Chinese art of self-defence.

Naturally, for this particular system there are exercises designed to develop strength and power in the arms and legs and stamina. They are not necessarily free-hand, for they also include breathing exercises and weight-lifting with primitive barbells of granite hewn into various sizes and weights in the form of "plates" permanently attached to the ends of hardwood bars of strong bamboo poles, like their modern adjustable iron counterparts. One can imagine the number of such barbells one would have to use as one progressed to heavier poundages. Kettlebells and dumbbells are not known to the experts. The matter of physique, or the "body beautiful" is relegated to secondary importance, the main thing being, as already said, to develop physical strength. "Nerve-Force" Control is also practiced through meditation to achieve mental poise. Muscle Control is also reputed to be still taught today but under another name, and of course not the kind expounded by Maxick and Saldo, the world's greatest exponent of this form of physical culture.

The "San Ch'uan" is a secret art, jealously guarded, and its teaching, therefore, esoteric, not, as one would imagine, open to all and sundry, all disciples when accepted, would receive instruction only in the "Hua Ch'uan." No teacher would attempt to analyse or explain the various secret "manoeuvres," perhaps because of the danger involved, or lest the disciple, particularly if he were an unknown quantity or a new admission, should abuse his knowledge and thus sully his fair name. If a teacher should eventually be influenced or willing to initiate

a disciple into the secrets, the most vital part would without doubt be withheld, in case disciplinary action against a particularly recalcitrant disciple should be necessary to inculcate respect for the teacher, as disciples have been known to turn against their preceptors, an often enough occurrence in the past. In the old days, applicants were admitted under oath to play the game and subject to a very rigid code of honour, which was, unfortunately, only very loosely adhered to in the majority of cases.

Experts in the art are credited with a knowledge not only of osteopathy but of medicine, that is Chinese herbs, specially for treating external and internal injuries. Apart from the inevitable plasters, the medicament usually takes the form of a concoction of medicinal powders prepared from herbs, and rice wine, for oral and external administration. Putative experts may sometimes be seen with their "wares" laid out on the ground in the open air, haranguing the crowd that gathers round them on the virtues or merits of their medicines, followed always by a solo demonstration of the "Hua Ch'uan" and some mediocre acrobatics.

Public bouts, as in present-day boxing and wrestling, were legalised and freely staged once upon a time by exponents of the art, often under the aegis of influential and wealthy patrons. Monetary prizes were awarded to the winner but not necessarily the main motive, as it was the fame which would accrue to him that was the attraction, particularly from championship bouts between contestants of high calibre. Such bouts were held usually on a covered scaffolding or stage erected for the occasion in wide open spaces, and never failed to draw huge crowds. For one thing, the spectators could enjoy a free show but they had to witness the fight standing in the open, and, for another, anyone was free to accept a challenge.

However, as the danger to loss of life was a very real one, a contestant was required, before the commencement of a bout, to sign a contract called a "life-and-death agreement," expressly to procure for the party concerned absolution from all blame or responsibilities in the event of death and consequent legal prosecution by the family of the dead man.

In days still within living memory, at all important festivals, particularly in the rural districts on the mainland, exhibition matches were held, where novices and experts alike participated in a most friendly spirit, to celebrate the anniversary of the deity to which the sacrifices were offered. At such festivities, after the usual repast the experts regaled the company with adventure stories of ancient or contemporaneous vintage, and sometimes, mellow with wine, they would trade newly-discovered "tricks," which they illustrated with chopsticks and wine cups on a table, a physical demonstration being considered bad form.

Before the war, pedlars of Shantung silks from the mainland travelling all the way by steamer to Vietnam, Thailand, Malaya, Singapore, present-day Indonesia, and other places in the South, were reputed to be past masters in the art. These peripatetic salesmen of sturdy build with their silks in bundles slung over their shoulders and in one hand a yard-measure believed to serve also as a weapon, trudging confidently and nonchalantly along from one "Kampong" (village in Indonesia and Malaya) to another to sell their goods to native housewives, were a common sight, cynosures of admiring fellow-countrymen, swayed no doubt by the romantic tales of prowess woven around them. When questioned, they usually disclaimed a knowledge of the art, out of modesty perhaps.

I once witnessed a fight in Malaya between a seemingly frail, old man and some twenty thugs, whom he kept at bay with only a hand-towel as a weapon! Strange as it may seem, none of his adversaries that came within reach of his towel, which now he twirled, now he flicked, with lightning rapidity, aiming at the eyes, noses, ears, and other vulnerable spots, escaped uninjured! The fight, lasting no more than a half

hour came to an end with the arrival on the scene of a detachment of police. Whether he could have lasted longer due to his age had a delay developed in the despatch of the guardians of the law, is a matter of conjecture, but the fact remains that a knowledge of the art, especially in a case like this, is assuredly an asset.

A friendly trial of skill held on the quiet that I saw more than thirty years ago took place in a Javanese "kampong" between a Chinese expert of the Southern School and five Javanese friends, exponents of the own system, whom he took on single-handed without so much as a flicker of an eye-lid. It may be of interest to know that the Javanese system was more or less patterned after the Chinese "Hua Ch'uan" introduced into Java, I imagine, in the hegemonic days of the Sung Dynasty (960-1280), when Java among others in the South paid tribute to China. Well, the upshot of it was, the Chinese expert made short work of his five Javanese antagonists!

Be that as it may, the Chinese system of self-defence, although it has won official recognition as the National Art, is rapidly disintegrating into a shadow of what it was in its pristine glory, without enthusiasm for it being decidedly on the wane and what with no attempts being made to revive it. This may, perhaps, have been the product of the bigoted uncommunicativeness of the teachers, or of its futility in these days of death-dealing weapons, or of the innate peaceableness of the Chinese people. There may be a variety of other reasons, but I am inclined to attribute it to the all-out switch to modern sports.

The present popularity of the "Taichi Ch'uan" is by no means an indication of its revival. One does not hear of people talking a bout the art any longer. All the interest that is evinced today exists only between the covers of novels of knight-errantry and deeds of derring-do in times gone by, told with the authors' individual "expositions" of the art, all too far-fetched to be within the realms of possibility, and therefore, so much cock-and-bull.

By the look of things, the lethargic interest in the art today may herald the

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 correction, but the days of our once po-
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 mbered. In time to come, and it is not
 very distant either, old fellows like me
 Will meet and talk about the good old ti-
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without being mandarin, I am sure I sh-
 all be among the first to shed tears of
 farewell to an art which has brought me
 so many friends over the years. Lest you
 should jump to conclusions, let me tell
 you at once that I am, like you of the
 present generation, a layman I am not
 being modest about it, like my Shantung
 friends, for, unlike them, I have taken
 no more than an academic interest in the
 art.

本期封面

創刊號的封面我們會公開向同學徵求
，結果收到將近十幅作品，或為含意深遠
，或為堂皇富麗，均為精心佳作。經編輯
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