

5 Animals Kung Fu

“Yat, Yi, Saam, Sei, Ng”, as Robert counted “One, Two, Three, Four, Five” aloud in Cantonese, all the students followed him and started the day’s practice with warm-up exercises. After 3 minutes of warming up, their practice session started.

I am interested in kung fu (Chinese martial arts) and I used to practice it when I was living in Hong Kong. Though there was no formal high school curriculum on kung fu, I joined an elective class and practiced it every weekend. A few years ago, I was lucky to get to know one of the popular Hong Kong kung fu judges. Through this class, I learned the ‘real’, traditional Chinese martial arts. After coming to study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), I stopped practicing kung fu, not because I lost my interest but because I was not aware of any club practicing formally on campus. I happened to know a group called ‘5 Animals Kung Fu’ a few weeks ago, but I was neither excited nor interested because I thought it would be just a group that practice something of a blend of informal martial arts and wrestling. Nevertheless, in order to write this ethnography, I decided to visit this group to observe their meetings.

As a gesture of politeness, I asked the club chairman, Mr. Robert Putman, for permission to visit and observe their meetings. Robert was so kind that he allowed me to visit as many times as I wished, but he also mentioned that their group was having some conflicts¹ at that time and so I should expect a smaller group than usual. ‘5 Animals Kung Fu’ has regular meetings on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at 6pm at the Channing Murray in the form of a kung fu class. There were three instructors and four learners present in each class on average. Channing Murray is a small, old house at the intersection of Mathews Avenue and Oregon Street on the east of the main quad. Though its location was clearly described on the web, I still had trouble finding it. For one thing,

¹ The conflicts I mentioned were schedule conflicts, not conflicts between group members. I could have been more explicit though, apparently Vincent thought I meant the latter. - Putty/Rob Putman

the words ‘Channing Murray Foundation’ were carved inconspicuously on a wooden panel above the main entrance. For the other thing, the house appeared old and fragile. As kung fu practices consist of a lot of movement, everyone would assume the practice place to be an open space or the hall of a large building. From the appearance of the house, though it was built with stone and cement and is still in good shape, ferns growing extensively on the outside wall made it look old and frail. When I opened the wooden door and stepped in, the creaking sound surged a fright through me as I thought of a strong kung fu fighter standing in the middle of a collapsing old house. I started to doubt whether such an old building could withstand the strong forces of a group of martial arts practitioners. But my doubt vanished immediately when I figured out a sensible explanation: As these people did not know how to generate forces efficiently, their kung fu actions were weak and the building could therefore stand it.

From the moment I knew about group conflict, I have already had a feeling that this group was not a coherent one. The old outlook of their meeting place reinforced my bad impression that their practices were not serious too. When I finally stepped into the building, I was surprised to see four people, three dressed in yellow and one in black kung fu uniforms, doing warm-up and stretching exercises in a room with an old church setting. In my knowledge, uniforms and warming up exercises are only essential in very intense and formal kung fu practices and in performances. Even my instructor in Hong Kong, who was one of the kung fu judges, did not require us to wear kung fu uniforms in our practice sessions. Actually, I received my kung fu uniform only half a year after I joined the class, when I finally had the opportunity to make an appearance in a kung fu performance. The uniform of the group began to change my impression on their seriousness. It is indeed not common to find a group on campus wearing uniform in regular meetings (They wear uniforms on every normal practice session on Mondays and Wednesdays, but not on Fridays when they have sparring practices). Wearing uniforms to kung fu practice sessions means that they are really serious in their practices, and the practices would be really intense. As Robert mentioned in his interview, their practice sessions were meant to be intensive. So it was important for everyone to wear something that facilitated their body movement. Mr. Lucas Cook, a beginner learner, also mentioned that he liked the uniform because he could move freely during practice. From

my observations during their kung fu practices, I noticed that they never had to pull their uniform to straighten them even after violent hits and kicks. Furthermore, their actions never seemed to be affected by their uniforms. Perhaps the comfort the uniforms gave them was what made them love the uniform. However, to me as an outsider, the uniform does not only facilitate movement during kung fu practice, but it also identifies members of the group, though none of the group members ever admitted this. I started to understand why the group promised to give a free kung fu uniform to all new learners on their website. It is a symbol of being a group member to me. Other than this, Robert also mentioned that it looked more formal to wear a kung fu uniform in practices because it preserved the tradition of kung fu. I totally agree with Robert's view, and this is actually a reflection of the group's seriousness to kung fu too. If the group is not serious about the kung fu they are practicing, they would not bother about wearing uniforms to make kung fu practices more similar to that in olden China. The uniforms, and the seriousness to kung fu behind, are something unique to this group. Although Lucas and another learner, Mr. Kurt Studer, did not consider their uniforms self-identifying, to me, it is something that defines this group and binds the group members together.

Apart from their uniforms, rituals during practice sessions also reflect their coherence as a group. At the beginning and end of each session, the two instructors and all learners face Robert, the head instructor, to perform the greeting stance. With their right legs bent and left legs touching the floor on their shoe tips, they greeted their 'See Fu' (teacher or master in the past) by putting their left palm over their right fist. The greeting stance is a simple gesture, but practicing this 'ritual' is a great way to preserve the spirit of the Chinese tradition – an emphasis on respect and politeness. In traditional China, greetings were made when people met anyone they respected, even before fights. It was one of the most important things students had to learn from their 'See Fu'. Greeting their 'See Fu' also represented their discipline, obedience and respect. As Kurt mentioned in his interview, one of the things that was special about this group was the discipline and respect between all group members. Although he didn't mention explicitly anything that maintained their discipline and respect, I would reckon it to be the effect of the ritual of greeting before and after classes.

Robert had once mentioned about group conflicts to me. Nevertheless, during my visits, I could only find harmony and friendship between learners and instructors. The atmosphere was serious when the instructors suggested improvements on the learners' performances. However, the atmosphere was still relaxing as there were always laughter and chats between instructors and learners. The relationship between instructors and learners was more like that between the leaders of a club and the members than that between a professor and a student. The pleasant atmosphere made everyone, including me as an observer, to feel comfortable and enjoyable. As Lucas mentioned during interview, he enjoyed going to the meetings not only because he liked to learn and practice kung fu, but also because he could meet his good friends at the meetings. It is this comfortable atmosphere that makes the members interact and the group coherent.

Although the atmosphere was relaxing, the group's practices were never slack. The main focus of this group is to learn a style of Chinese kung fu called Choy Lay Fut. Choy Lay Fut is a style that blends both northern and southern styles into an aesthetic and potent hybrid (<http://www.fiveanimalsclf.com/index.html>). From my knowledge and experience in kung fu, I understand that northern kung fu consists mainly of whole limb movements such as full kicks (kick until the knee is straight) and long punches (a hit made when the whole arm is straight), while southern kung fu is more conservative and emphasizes in short and fast attacks such as fast and short punches and short-range defense stances. Choy Lay Fut, however, combines the two and use the relaxed power of swings to increase the momentum of each hit. Famous action film actor Bruce Lee had even commented Choy Lay Fut as "the most effective system that I've seen for fighting more than one person, and is the most difficult style to defend against" (<http://www.fiveanimalsclf.com/index.html>). From the motions of the instructors and the learners, I could see that their steps were firm and strong, and their postures were in the regular northern or southern Chinese kung fu forms. Their skills were much better than I expected. Furthermore, the group is so serious about kung fu skills that they include San Shou, another Chinese kung fu aimed at practical fighting, into their practices. San Shou is a martial art that was originally developed by the Chinese military. As a combat sport, it emphasizes in the efficient use of hand and leg power in punches and kicks. In the practice sessions, learners were paired up with

instructors to practice San Shou. The practice could either be a focused one such as repeating a sequence of kicks and punches, or a creative one when the instructor decided how the targets (blue, thick cushions) were to be positioned for the student to hit. Before the observations, I have never realized the relationship between San Shou and other Chinese kung fu. Now, I understood the complementary nature of San Shou with many kung fu styles such as Choy Lay Fut. As Kurt mentioned, San Shou and Choy Lay Fut were helping each other out. They were complementary in that Choy Lay Fut and San Shou made learners master the skills faster if both were practiced together. Practitioners can gain a feel of the force and shape when they practice San Shou, and at the same time understand the practical San Shou more by repeatedly practicing an example of San Shou, a particular Choy Lay Fut stance, so that their skills could be polished. Realizing the complementary nature of the two was a great work of the founder of this club, and as Robert mentioned, he was proud of his club because it was the only club on campus that could balance the practice of combats and forms (stances) well, which is essential to achieve a high level of kung fu. From the intensive practice of kung fu, and the balanced practice between combats and stances, the club is really serious towards their kung fu technique.

Besides actions, the language they used during practices was also interesting. Members of the group generally communicate in English. However, when it came to specific terms, such as a particular punch or kick, they preserved the tradition by using the original Cantonese terms. For example, the group called the attack by a spearing hand 'tsun' and a strong punch 'tsui'. Even finer classifications of the techniques also have Cantonese names such as 'gua tsui' for punching with a back fist. The instructors are called 'See Fu', and Cantonese was used in counting in warm-up exercises. As my first language is Cantonese, I was so surprised when I recognized it during the warm-up exercises. Robert mentioned during interview that he purposely preserved the use of the original Cantonese terms for all techniques so that the kung fu practices seemed more real and natural. The two learners I interviewed also said that they enjoyed such use of language even though they did not understand Cantonese fully. The use of such a special and meaningful language, the language used in the origin of Choy Lay Fut, really demonstrates that the group takes their kung fu practice seriously. In order to preserve

the tradition and not to lose the meaning of terms in translation, they do not mind taking the trouble to use a language that is completely new to them. At the same time, the group members enjoy it and try their best to understand it. This shows that the group is really serious and at the same time enjoying kung fu. Besides, to Lucas, using Cantonese also identifies him as part of this group as Cantonese is not a common language and nobody on campus would understand it except Hong Kong students like me. It is a kind of 'secret' language between the group members. The use of Cantonese unifies them as a group, and identifies them as a special group that takes kung fu practice very seriously.

'5 Animals Kung Fu' is not a very large group. According to Robert, there are a maximum of 20 members. However, from the group's rituals, practices and language, it is the most coherent and serious kung fu organization I have ever seen. Despite the strong hits and smashes in kung fu practices, everyone is friendly and kind to each other, and this atmosphere made the friendship between members strong and the group coherent. As Lucas mentioned in his interview, he enjoyed being part of this group because he liked the sense of community and the recreational atmosphere. Besides its coherence, this group is also the most serious kung fu group on campus. The group members may not notice the rationale behind the uniforms, practice of rituals and use of Cantonese. However, from my perspective, I can see that these are the essentials that define this group's seriousness towards kung fu. They are the key elements that make the '5 Animals Kung Fu' distinguished from others as the most serious kung fu group on campus.

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Reference:

Five Animals Kung Fu Choy Lay Fut <<http://www.fiveanimalself.com/index.html>>