

What Was Before

Return to meaning in martial tradition

Luo Guang Yu Seven Star Mantis Kung Fu @ 2004 - 2022 Copyright

An Exploration of Core Elements and Principles in the Martial Tradition of Praying Mantis Kung Fu

Traditional Praying Mantis Kung Fu has legendary origins in the tradition of Shaolin dating back four hundred years. Born at a crossroads in Imperial Era China marking the end of the Ming dynasty and the beginning of the Qing, it was a brutally pragmatic combat practice that further integrated elements of meditative health practices with Neo-Confucian philosophy. The synthesis of these three elements lead to the emergence of a new martial tradition called Praying Mantis Kung Fu.

Once legendary origins catch up with recorded history, intergenerational transmission can be traced seven generations to Li San Jian (c.1821) which provides us with a form of rich cultural inheritance and continuity with the past. Its early history within China is one marked by continuous states of upheaval, war, famine, revolution, invasion and near chaos. It was a remarkable testament to the spirit of venerable masters that martial traditions continued to not only survive but thrive. It further speaks to the value and meaning derived from the tradition and is fitting given that this art is about the mastery of violence and the mastery of self-becoming.

This essay will explore the defining features of martial tradition in Praying Mantis Kung Fu introducing its three core elements and seven goal-based principles. Core elements include: 1) late Ming dynasty martial practices, 2) Eighteen Luohan Qigong health practices, and 3) mature Neo Confucian philosophical practices. Its seven core principles include authenticity, excellence, sustainability, personal-development, moral responsibility, social-engagement and leadership.

Ultimately, martial tradition in Praying Mantis Kung Fu is a tradition of practice (not mere scholarship), of which its true meaning can only be actualized through a whole-hearted commitment to the self, to the values of the system and to learning through praxis. Only within this context can the practitioner develop their capabilities and grow as a person which in turn allows the tradition to continue on and flourish.



Nathan A. Wright
王瑞轩

This essay was inspired by my teacher Kai Uwe Pel who embodies the marital tradition of Praying Mantis Kung fu with authenticity in his everyday life.

ONE FAMILY

Wang Lang
王朝

Sheng Xiao Dao Ren
生肖道人

Li San Jian
李三箭 (c.1821)

Wang Rong Sheng
王荣生 (c.1854)

Fan Xu Dong
范旭东 (c.1841)

Luo Guang Yu
罗光玉 (1888-1944)

Lin Bo Yan
林伯炎 (1903-1990)

Zhao Zhi Min
赵志民 (1901-2002)

Xu Jin Ge
徐金阁 (1949-)

Li Jin Rong
李锦荣 (1947-)

Kai Uwe Pel
裴凯 (1964-)



Master Luo Guang Yu
罗光玉 1888-1944

A. The Nature of Tradition

Traditions are an important aspect in all cultures with some traditions enduring, some changing, and some going extinct. Some simple examples of traditions can include festivals like the Spring Festival, sporting traditions like the Olympics, philosophical traditions in liberalism, legal traditions in common law, political traditions in representative democracy, economic traditions in capitalism, religious traditions Buddhism, and martial traditions in Praying Mantis Kung Fu which we will explore today.

Working Definitions

According to Shils (1981), traditions include practices, beliefs, customs, rituals, objects, and memories that collective groups engage in. They are a source of continuity with the past and a form of cultural inheritance in which knowledge is transmitted intergenerationally into the present. Traditions can evolve over time with the introduction of new variants, while invariant core elements remain unchanging and intergenerational. In order for traditions to be transmitted and repeated there is a necessity for the elements to be genuine in nature, or at least appear that way, in order to be accepted.

Soares (1997) explains: “a living social tradition requires a distinct social group with a common identity derived from an interpretation of its past, whose collective memories have some objective expression in the material environment, and whose activities are guided by a spirit of continuity.” (1997: 16) He views traditions as a reservoir for the living’ (1997: 15) and is considered the most dynamic approach to understanding the nature of traditions. In this perspective, the past provides values and solutions that can be mobilized to deal with today’s problems.

Both Shils (1981) and Soares (1997) give explicit attention to the role of custodians in preserving and enhancing traditions. Custodians are exemplars or practitioners of a given tradition linked by collective knowledge. Custodians value their inheritance and ‘feel a sense of custodianship for the tradition’s present and future prospects’ (Soares, 1997: 14).

Martial Traditions

Borrowing from Shils and Soares we can broadly define a martial tradition as some set of combative practices, beliefs, customs and rituals that constitute a given martial art system, with its knowledge and practices being rooted in the past and transmitted intergenerationally through the teacher-student relationship.

From the book Luo Guang Yu Seven Star Praying Mantis Kung Fu: A Traditional Chinese Martial Art (2020), my kung fu teacher Kai Uwe Pel and kung fu brother Andy Best do an outstanding job of laying out the historical development of martial traditions and the technical elements of Seven Star Praying Mantis Kung Fu. They also include an insightful historical account of Shaolin Kung Fu in which they characterize the ‘tradition of Shaolin’ as an intersection where:

“the early roots of Kung Fu represent the coming together of fighting techniques, yogic techniques (Luohan Gong) and meditation to form a complete system of the body, energy and mind that, philosophically, is a distinct product of Imperial Era China....



Master Kai Uwe Pel

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“...therefore we venture that when we use the term Shaolin Kung Fu or Kung Fu in this document we are referring to Chinese fighting arts that come from the Shaolin tradition that combines Buddhist philosophy and yogic meditation with combat techniques and movements. Shaolin Kung Fu is not a style itself, but a tradition from which styles evolved.” Luo Guang Yu Seven Star Praying Mantis Kung Fu: A Traditional Chinese Martial Art, 2020 (pg. 22)

Further borrowing from Pel and Best (2020) I make the claim that in order for Chinese kung fu to be considered ‘traditional’ it must meet five prerequisites: 1) it must be born of Imperial Era China (pre 1911), 2) it must be grounded in a system of combative practices - both empty hand and weapon, 3) it must include a system of mind-body health practices in the form of qigong, 4) it must be grounded in a philosophical framework consisting of some combination of the Three Teachings (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism), and 5) it must be transmitted intergenerationally visa-vi a direct teacher-to-student relationship.

B. Core Elements in Martial Tradition

First Element: Combative practice

Martial tradition in Praying Mantis Kung Fu is a combative practice. Its coherence can best be understood through function, structure and process. In its early inception it was most likely used by organized militia fighting the Qing government (empty hand and weapons) and battling bandits on the Shandong Peninsula. Later on in its evolution it was widely used by caravan guards for the protection of goods transported inland on trade routes. In the early 1900s Master Luo Guangyu on behalf of his teacher Fan Xu Dong brought Seven Star Mantis to the Shanghai Jingwu organization providing a national platform where the martial tradition could gain a wider audience.

In our modern-day world, Praying Mantis Kung Fu continues to function for the purpose of civilian self-defense. Self-defense is the universally accepted principle that a person may protect themselves from harm under appropriate circumstances, even when that behavior would normally constitute a crime. It is the natural, moral and legal right to prevent an attacker from committing violence against you, or another person, or the perceived threat of such, through the use of reasonable counteracting force.

Form follows function. Structure in Mantis hand-to-hand combat refers to the unique mix of interrelated fighting techniques that includes kicking, striking, stand-up grappling, and throwing methodologies. It's techniques and the properties of such must be practical and work in the real world. Process similarly follows function and connects structure. It is the dynamic relationality of ‘how’ structures come together to form new emergent properties. Inter-related techniques come together to form patterns called fighting tactics. Inter-related fighting tactics come together to form conceptual patterns categorized as fighting strategy, tactical theory and principles.

Process is also related to ‘how’ we train called training methodology. Conceptually it is a reservoir of knowledge based on the accumulation of four hundred years of training practices making it a rich resource pool. More practically speaking it is also where the rubber meets the road in terms real skill development and genuine learning through the merits of physical training. Training processes and practices must be purposeful with the goal of increasing functional combative capabilities.



Kai Uwe Pel's Luo Guang Yu
Seven Star Praying Mantis
Kung Fu: A Traditional
Chinese Martial

十八家拳法
太祖的長拳起首韓通的通背為母
鄉恩的纏封尤妙溫元的短拳更奇
馬籍的短打最甚孫伍的猴拳且盛
黃祐的靠身難近綿盛的巴掌飛疾
金相的磕手通拳懷德的摔打硬崩
劉典的勾撲採手譚方的滾漏貫耳
燕青的拈拿跌法林冲的鴛鴦腳強
孟甦的七勢連拳崔連的高裏倒捶
楊濠的棍探直入王朗的螳螂總敵

Eighteen Families Sonnet

Second Element: Mind-Body Health Practice

Martial tradition in the style of Praying Mantis Kung Fu is a tradition of mind-body health practice. It incorporates ancient yogic like movements called the Eighteen Luohan Xinggong with the goal of improving health through the cultivation of internal energy and ultimately increasing longevity. Internal energy is expressed in the Chinese language as Qi. These exercises are first accredited to the Northern Indian prince and founder of Chan Buddhism, Da Mo (Bodhidharma), who is described in legend as imparting these practices on the Buddhist monks during his travels to Mount Song and Shaolin between 471AD and 534AD.

“In Yang Xuanzhi’s book *Memories of Luoyang’s Temples* he recalls 1367 religious buildings around the city. This book, written around 547 A.D., also provides us with the sole credible, independent reference to Bodhidharma. Yang mentions that Bodhidharma was a famous monk of the time who visited the largest temple in Luoyang and commented that he’d seen nothing like it on his travels through India. This would place Bodhidharma’s mythical visit to Song Shan and Shaolin between 471 A.D. and 534 A.D. when the city was ruined by a failed forced abandonment under Gao Yang. Cotterell himself directly refers to Bodhidharma in his book. He states that his legendary meditation session spanning years of facing a blank wall is likely to have taken place in Luoyang. Kung Fu folklore has him in a cave at Song Shan. Bodhidharma was later enshrined as the creator of Zen Buddhism (Chen, Chan) and many more stories about him are available to the interested reader. “Luo Guang Yu Seven Star Praying Mantis Kung Fu: A Traditional Chinese Martial Art, 2020 (pg.24)

The Shiba Luohan Xinggong was documented by Master Fan Xu Dong (c. 1841) in his Shaolin Authentics boxing manual (*Shaolin Yi Bo Zhen Zhuan*). Within the spectrum of qigong practices it is considered as a type of external qigong practice called Wai Gong or Wai Dan, as compared to internal methods called nei dan. Through the dynamic integration of physical movement, focus of breathe and intentionality of mind, the practitioner is taken through 72 sequential flowing postures that increase blood flow, increase joint flexibility, massage the organs, and systematically build up Qi in different regions of the body, from which it flows through the twelve meridian channels. As part of this process the body relaxes, the mind calms and the practitioner gains a heightened sense of mind-body awareness which more profoundly includes an exploration of ‘the space between ones thoughts’.

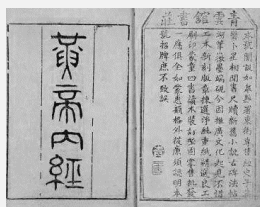
The Eighteen Luohan Xinggong was further integrated with indigenous knowledge in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) which had already been in existence ~500 years before the time of Bodhiarma’s legendary arrival. Concepts of Jing, Qi, and Shen were documented in the *Huang Di Neijing*, the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic in 168 B.C.E. This was the earliest authoritative medical book of ancient China covering the theoretical foundations of TCM inclusive of dietary health practices and acupuncture therapy.

Third Element: Philosophical Practice

Martial tradition in Praying Mantis Kung Fu is a tradition of philosophical practice. Primarily based in Neo-Confucian philosophy (Dao Xue) it is the synthesis of mature Ming dynasty Confucianism with secondary influences from Buddhism and Daoism. It is a self-based ethics practice centered around the ‘art of being’ and more importantly the ‘art of becoming’. It features a well developed set of metaphysical, epistemological and ethical assumptions with a pragmatic utilitarian focus on the pursuit of self-realization through learning and praxis.



“Monk In Chan Meditation”
from *Luohan Qigong, Shaolin Authentics* (沙林衣钵真传)



“Jing, Qi, and Shen was first written about in the *Huang Di Neijing*, or the *Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic* - the main classical medical book of ancient China dating back circa 2600 BC - and describes the Three Treasures (San Bao).”

It assumes a naturalistic view of the world positing that we are autonomous agents embedded in a dynamic ecosystem (cosmos, earth and man). It focusses on the individual (the self) living within a social hierarchy in the pursuit of an exemplary life. This is uniquely distinct from Daoism which attempts to free the self from society and realign it with a more natural order, and Buddhism which strives to ultimately liberate the self by dissolving any and all order in the pursuit of the other-worldly (samsara).

Leading an exemplary life implicitly requires an understanding of human nature. Neo-Confucianism assumes a ‘glass half full’ perspective positing that we are beings-for-itself with innate goodness. We are ‘passional’ (rational and emotional) social beings capable of peace as well as conflict. We have normative behavioral propensities for compassion, love, and pro-social behavior that can manifest in meaningful personal development and social cohesion. Likewise, we also have deeper evolutionary instincts based in desire, emotion, competition, and aggression that left unchecked can result in imbalances manifesting in self destructive behavior and conflict.

Virtues are a central feature in Neo Confucianism and considered noble traits that one should strive to embody as a means to self-realization. The Five Constants accredited to Kong Zi date back more than 2,000 years and includes the virtues of compassion, normative behavior, integrity, wisdom and trust. Martial virtues in Praying Mantis Kung Fu are an evolution of these constants that includes five external virtues of conduct (respect, humility, honesty, fairness, and loyalty), and five internal virtues of mind (will, endurance, perseverance, courage and patience). Together these form the backbone of the San He Wu De framework.

C. Essential Principles in Martial Tradition

Praying Mantis Kung Fu has a number of higher level goal-based principles that are foundational to the martial tradition. These core principles include authenticity, excellence, sustainability, personal growth, moral development, social engagement and leadership. Like virtue-ethics, these principles must be embodied and pursued with a depth of conviction and spirit that enables the practitioner to develop their capabilities and grow as a human ‘becoming’. Only when this happens can the tradition continue to live on and flourish.

Praying Mantis Kung Fu

Core Elements	‘Art of Violence’ Combative Practices	‘Art of Longevity’ Health Practices	‘Art of Becoming’ Philosophical Practices
Goal-Based Principles	Exemplary Life Self-Realization Authenticity	Excellence Personal Development Moral Development	Sustainability Social Engagement Leadership
San He Wu De Framework	Right Mind	Right Virtues	Right Effort



孔子

Kong Zi (c. 551 – 479 BCE)

武德
外行內行
尊敬意
謙虛毅
誠實忍
正實勇
忠誠誠心

Authenticity

Authenticity is the root of all virtues and is about truthfulness to the self - being real inwardly and outwardly. It requires honesty in self examination and a willingness to investigate the depths of your emotions, thoughts, motivations and biases. In action it is loyalty in the pursuit of your interests and goals which gives birth to passion, conviction, growth and self confidence. Ultimately it is a bridge to self-actualization.

Living an authentic life is about a whole-hearted commitment to the values you believe in. In the martial tradition of Praying Mantis Kung this means embracing the core elements of the practice and the virtue-ethics it represents. Paying mere lip service to these, intentional or not, is disingenuous.

Engaging the external world with authenticity is about making truthful representation of your intentions and acting on such in good faith. Reciprocally it also requires making a whole hearted effort to understanding others which is the hallmark of perspective taking and problem solving. This is the benchmark you expect from others and one that you should give in return.

The last aspect of authenticity is that it requires a whole-hearted commitment to your role and responsibility as a moral agent. This is about actively engaging with the world creatively and purposefully in a manner that is both value enhancing and sustainable. Moral agency is grounded in the concept of self autonomy which is constituted by:

“the ability to observe and understand the world, make representations, interpret the representations of others, and make decisions to carry out actions based on the will and intent of our own accord. This interaction is not merely a passive one but more importantly a distinctively proactive one. We have the ability to affect change on the world, including affecting other individual agents, as well as being affected by the external environment and others. The consequences of such can be positively value enhancing and sustainable, or value diminishing and unsustainable.

Simply put, in the negative form, we have the ability to hurt and the ability to be hurt. This in turn has important implications for the role of moral agency (ethics) as a going concern. Individual autonomy when taken to its natural conclusion imparts a profound and practical need for moral agency (ethics-based obligations and duties) and its reciprocal component in human rights. This is moral agency and the unity of responsibilities and rights.” Foundational Concepts and Legal Principles in Self Defense (pg. 5)

Relationship of Principles to Authenticity

If Authenticity is the root of the tree, then Excellence and Sustainability are the trunk providing structural foundation from which the branches of personal growth, moral development, social engagement and leadership grow. Each of these goal-based principles bears fruit in the form of meaning, purpose and happiness.

Excellence represents the internal theme of self-discovery and the pursuit of becoming the best version of yourself (a human becoming). This is represented by self-cultivation and moral development. Likewise, Sustainability represents the interaction of the self with the external world in a harmonious value enhancing fashion. This is represented by social engagement and leadership. Both excellence and sustainability are born of authenticity and form an interdependent relationship in which they causally effect/affect each other.



Concluding Remarks

In today's essay I explored the concept of martial tradition in Praying Mantis Kung Fu. In the first section I provided a number of working definitions on 'tradition' including a precise definition on 'traditional' kung fu. In section two I introduced the three core elements of martial tradition in Praying Mantis Kung Fu which includes combative practices, longevity practices and philosophical practices. Each of these forms an essential component of the system and its coherence can be understood through an exploration of function, structure and process.

In the last section I introduced an outline of the seven core principles of martial tradition, which can be best understood as goal-based principles that include authenticity, excellence, sustainability, personal growth, moral development, social engagement, and leadership. I further outlined in detail the first principle of Authenticity which is considered the root of all virtue-ethics and self discovery. In a follow up article I will introduce the remaining six core principles.

If you believe you are following a traditionalist martial lifestyle you must remember that Praying Mantis Kung Fu is a tradition of practice - not mere scholarship or something that you pay lip service to - and that its true meaning can only be actualized through a sincere and whole hearted commitment to the self, to the values of the tradition and to learning through action. Only within this context can the practitioner develop their capabilities and grow as a person which in turn allows the tradition to continue on and flourish.

Be authentic, be kind and train hard!

Nathan A. Wright
December 1, 2022

Footnotes

1. M.T. Dacin, P. Dacin, 2007. Traditions as Institutionalized Practice: Implications for De-Institutionalization, Queens University
2. Soares, J. A. 1997. A reformulation of the concept of tradition. International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy. 17(6): 6-21.
3. Shils, E.C. 1981. Tradition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
4. Pel and Best, 2020, Luo Guang Yu Seven Star Praying Mantis Kung Fu: A Traditional Chinese Martial Art
5. N. Wright, The Realities of Violence, February 25, 2021
<https://www.luoguangyu.com/shanghai/the-realities-of-violence-part-1-of-4/>

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Who We Are

We are a diverse group of people dedicated to the transmission and promotion of traditional Seven Star Praying Mantis Kung Fu (Qi Xing Tang Lang Quan). We represent the proud family lineage of Master Luo Guang Yu, who made the style famous in the Shanghai Jingwu Association in 1919. In 2019 we celebrated the 100-year centennial anniversary of Seven Star Mantis in Shanghai.

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