

The Craft and Geometry of Martial Arts

Juan Acevedo

Prince's School of Traditional Arts, London, 11 March 2015

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the PSTA and particularly Emma Clark for having made this event possible.

I bring you greetings from Taipei tonight. I spoke yesterday to Master Su Yu-Chang, from whom I have been learning for many years, and he was very pleased to know that some aspects of his teachings can be made available to a new audience.

It would be good to make clear from the start that if I speak in this way, somewhat as a spokesman of a particular Master or school, this certainly does not mean that I am expressing something like a personal view of this subject, just as I mean in no way to come here to express any views of my own. In a traditional school of martial arts, every link in the handing down of knowledge tries simply to flow along and transmit faithfully what has been received. It is a little like Socrates, when he was blamed for always talking in the same way and he replied: "Yes, and also about the same things." So if anyone came here expecting to hear some wild new original ideas, I am really sorry.

Another important consequence of the traditional transmission is a certain degree of unanimity among different schools, and for you as the interested audience, tonight, this means that what I am going to say is pretty much common to all traditional schools of martial arts, not just valid for the teachings of Pachi Tanglang International or Master Su.

I will start by briefly going over some of the main terms we will need in order to speak about Chinese Martial Arts. Then, if you allow me, I will take the liberty of reversing the order of the title and speak first of the "Geometry" and only after that of the "Craft" of martial arts. The use of quotes means that I intend to make a rather symbolic, flexible use of these two words.

Terms

There are different ways of transcribing Chinese. Nowadays the most common method, and the official in mainland China is the one called *pinyin*, which you see on the left in those examples.

*Beijing=Peking, Yi Jing=I Ching,
Dao De Jing=Tao Teh Ching, Zhuang Zi=Chuang Tzu,
bagua=pakua, xing yi=hsing i,
qigong=chikung, gongfu=kungfu*

The pronunciation, allowing for regional variations, is the same, and the Chinese characters are the same but, as you can see, in our alphabet the differences

can be great. Some of the terms we need to use have already been familiar in the West for decades in the older transcriptions which sometimes are also more intuitive for readers of most European languages. I will try to stick to those familiar forms, avoiding the use of diacritics or tone markers. I must ask Chinese speakers in the audience to be patient with my tones, and I hope I will not be inadvertently saying any swear words.

When we speak of martial arts, we are translating the Chinese 武術 *wǔshù*, and it is quite a close translation. I have some Chinese friends, like our uncle in the school, Master Adam Hsu, who have been surprised at the use of the word “arts”, having in mind primarily the meaning of “fine arts”, but I think that is not a problem if, as is the case in this school, the understanding of “art” is closer to craftsmanship and less to fanciful novelties.

If there were something to object to that translation it would perhaps be “martial”, which is a little unfortunate, because “martial” is what is related to Mars, the Graeco-Roman god of strife and conflict, of the rush of the military action, of violence. In Greece and Rome they had a deity who presided over war and combat in a much more sophisticated way: Athene or Minerva. It might have been more appropriate to translate *wushu* as “Minervic Arts” or “Athenaic Arts”... but we let’s not go into more details this way. Nowadays, the expression *wushu* is often reserved for exhibition martial arts, when people perform for purely aesthetic or competitive reasons.

功夫 *Kung Fu*, a very familiar term, is especially important for our talk because it means simply “proficiency”. You can have *kungfu* in any discipline: drawing, woodcarving, gardening. We will come back to this in more detail later.

氣功 *Chi Kung* is also a name that has become very popular. You will notice it has the same 功 *kung* as Kung Fu, meaning work, and the *chi* here is what sometimes is called “vital energy”. So *chi kung* can be translated as “work of the energy”. It usually refers to Chinese traditional exercises to improve and maintain health, and sometimes also to treat specific diseases or develop a particular strength.

Tonight I will be using the terms *Kung Fu* and *Wushu* as synonyms, meaning traditional Chinese martial arts in general, and including also *chi kung*, because in real martial arts, sometimes called “higher martial arts” (武藝 *Wu Yi*), there are no merely decorative movements; every movement carries *chi*, being thus therapeutic and also related to consciousness. This has to do with the traditional conception of the body, which far from being a mere machine or instrument, is yet another level of consciousness, forming part of this unfathomable world in miniature, the *microcosmos* which we call a human being.

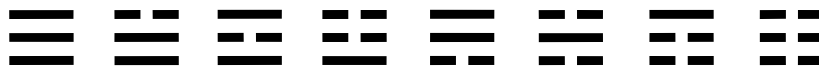
Geometry

When we start studying *Kung Fu*: we are told things like “align your feet”, “hands at the level of your shoulders”, “straighten your spine”, “step forward at 45°”, “forearms parallel to the floor”... All these instructions indicate at once the two main sources of geometry in martial arts: the body itself and space, meaning by “space” also, symbolically, the form of the cosmos.

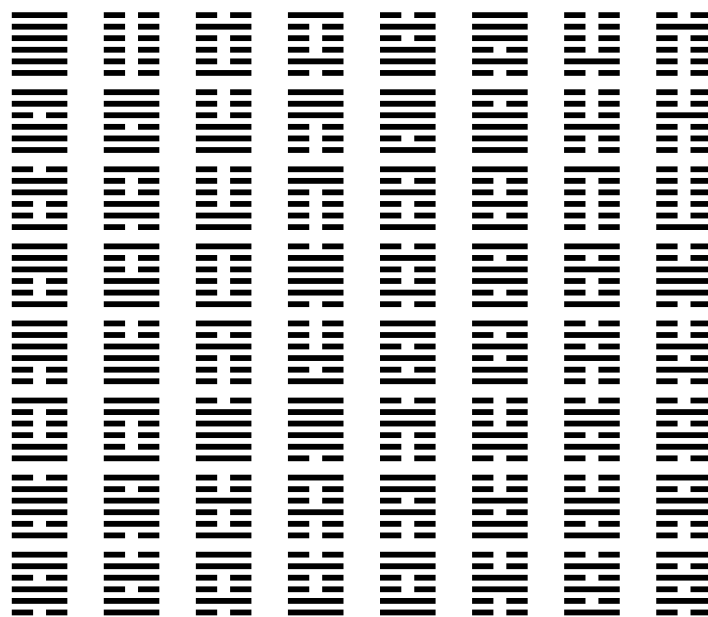
I will use the word geometry in a rather wide sense, somehow with the implications that had that famous sign at the entrance of Plato's Academy, ἀγεωμέτρητος μηδεὶς εἰσίτω, "let no one enter here who has no geometry," meaning a knowledge of what we would probably call mathematics, or more fundamentally, a Pythagorean certainty that the universe is intimately, mysteriously related to number, to proportion, to ratio, what in Greek is called λόγος *lógos*.

Now, even more directly relevant tonight is another saying of Plato, ἀεὶ ὁ θεὸς γεωμετρεῖ, "God always geometrizes," because, as I was saying, the geometry of Chinese martial arts corresponds directly to two manifest realities, the form of the cosmos and the form of the human body. You see, geometry is found in martial arts not because someone sat down with a compass and a square and started devising fancy movements, but because martial arts, as every traditional art, are the human response, within a particular domain of action, to the geometrical beauty and perfection of the universe. This means that the geometry of martial arts is the same geometry of other traditional Chinese disciplines: painting, geomancy, medicine, calligraphy... they are all derived from the source of Chinese civilisation, namely the trigrams and hexagrams that constitute the core of the *Classic of Changes*, the *Yi Jing* 易經, which you can see here.

八卦

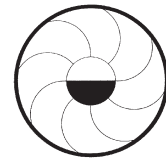
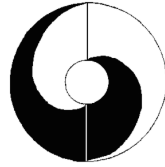


The eight trigrams first, all the possible combinations of three lines broken or plain lines. These 8, according to Chinese wisdom would suffice to understand reality, that is, we could analyse any situation using this eightfold pattern, but because we are a little dumb, we are "not-natural" in Taoist terms, the 64 combinations should help us understand.



In *Kung Fu*, advanced students learn sometimes the 64 techniques of a given style, meaning that there won't be any situation that is not accounted for in the training.

These hexagrams enable us to study in a static way the interaction between the two principles of the universe, *yin* and *yang*, but this interaction can also be seen in a dynamic form, as in the famous diagrams of the *Tai Chi*, the Great Pole, the Great End, meaning the transcendent union of *Yin* and *Yang* from which the cosmos evolves.



In reference to the third diagram on the right here, let me read the commentary made about it by its author, Master Liu Yun-Chiao, who is one of the grandfathers of my school:

With Regard to the Martial Arts, there must always be an Internal and External Component. The concentric circle of the center represents *Tai Chi* (the infinite, ultimate). The upper and lower, white and black portions of the circle represent *Liang Yi* (the two ideas, *Yin* and *Yang*). The curving lines radiating from the center symbolize the 8 trigrams. The mutual relationship between the black and white colours represent heaven and earth, form and no form, substantial and insubstantial, empty and full, hard and soft, heavy and light, advance and retreat, etc.

Movements in nature or with nature, and the movements of martial arts are yet another way, a living way of studying this interaction, the “changes” between Heaven and earth. It is all about circles, triangles, squares in *Kung Fu*, or rather about spheres, cones, cubes and spirals, for we are working on several planes simultaneously all the time.

Let me show you now a short introductory form of Pakua Chuan which is called *Liang Yi Chang*, the Palm of the Two Minds, referring to *yin* and *yang*, the two aspects of *Taichi*. This form is also called *Kai Men*, the Gate Opener.

<八卦小開門拳>

Craft

When we start studying *Kung Fu*: we are told things like “relax your shoulders”, “let go of your arms”, “relax your shoulders”, “breathe naturally”, and again “relax your shoulders”... yes, there is indeed a great deal of stiff shoulders around! All these instructions indicate at once the main effort required from a beginner in *Kung Fu*, the effort of surrendering the will, all our petty motives and justifications and

hesitations and false modesty and shallow fear, to let the Form take over and shine through. It is also as if we had to make an effort to forget our selves, to forget deliberately, and at the same time to remember what is worth remembering. You could sum up saying that *Kung Fu* is an art of forgetting and at the same time an art of remembering.

It is always beautiful, as a teacher of martial arts, to see how when people start practising regularly, the stiffness and the rigidity start wearing away and letting the form of the style appear; it usually takes a few months of weekly practice, varying with the student and the dedication.

There is without doubt a great deal of effort we need to put into keeping the stances and learning the basics and the forms. We need to sweat, as if simply exercising, but the great difference is that we are sweating with a clear aim and following the pattern, a symbolic diagram somehow, laid by the tradition.

It is worth opening a brief parenthesis to point out how abnormal the contemporary concept of “exercising” is. This idea of “exercise” per se is based on the idea that the body is completely separate from the mind, from all our faculties. It is like when people think of “burning fat”, a very popular concept nowadays. And what is the sophisticated notion of the body behind “burning fat”? I would say it has to be a frying pan. If we don’t make a conscious effort, and a sustained effort, against the 24/7 invasion of propaganda in a myriad ways, we all tend to treat our bodies as if they are frying pans, or in the best cases a microwave oven or a computer. We would easily think our eyes are like very sophisticated cameras, but the difference between the most sophisticated camera and a living eye is, strictly speaking, infinite. Exercise in the form of games or physical activity aimed at something, like tending a garden, and the exhilaration it brings is certainly a legitimate human joy, but there is a thin line there, drawn by the intention in the mind, which can turn our efforts against our real needs and real desires. This is not unrelated to the degeneration of sports, but this is again outside our theme tonight.

Returning to our subject: the effort, that sweat I mentioned is what we call, going back to the Chinese meaning, *Kung Fu*, which is often translated simply as “time and dedication”.

So let’s go deeper into why *Kung Fu* is an art: human nature is such that every sustained effort of concentration on a true discipline will become, given time and the right conditions—which include guidance—“unitive concentration”, something beyond mere technical concentration, where our senses and our skill are like wrapped up into a whirlwind of creation, performance, execution... and this in turn brings about, inevitably, death, a real death whereby we cease to be the stiff shouldered people we were and acquire, in technical terms a “*Kung Fu* body”. In other words, and in fewer words: dedication to a true technique under the right guidance inevitably opens the way to alchemy.

The way of *Kung Fu*, like that of every traditional art, is always this alternation known to European alchemy by the Latin words *solve et coagula*: “relax, release, let go” then “struggle, make your effort, build up tension”, and then again and again this same process, until the *Ars Magna*, the Great Art is accomplished and the Philosopher’s Stone is obtained, or the Golden Child or the Panacea, depending on the aspect envisaged.

The aim of all schools of traditional martial arts is to acquire the body of a saint, or of a *luohan*, *arahat* or *immortal* or *boddhisatva* if we want some more spicy terminology. When we practice *Pakua* in a circle, the centre is, simply put, “the Saint”, or “our real Self”.

Let me show you now a form of *Pakua* where the rather geometric form I showed you before is mixed with many animals and becomes a circle. It is said that during the practice of this and other similar forms, if a transversal view of one of the limbs could be had, we would see something resembling one of those *Taichi* diagrams above.

<八卦四形八掌拳>

The transmission of martial arts is warranted through an initiatic chain, that is an unbroken lineage of masters and disciples in which each link carries, at least potentially, all the tradition. The relation with a master is yet again a point in common with the transmission of our “arts”, for as you know, it is one thing to study a career in arts, passing exams, doing projects and getting a degree, and a different thing altogether to study under the strict and loving glance of a *shifu*. *Shifu* 師父, the formal way of address for a master of martial arts, means literally “teacher-father”.

An ordinary teacher imparts knowledge, gives information, corrects technical mistakes. A master, in the sense of *shifu*, shares his realisation, transmits truths and rectifies the soul.

I once had the opportunity to know and frequent a true master painter and engraver, Angelo Foong (of Chinese origin as it happens), and even though I never was his disciple (painting has never been my *kung fu*), rarely a few days will pass without giving me occasion to recall the beneficial impact of his presence in my life.

Yesterday, as I was on the telephone with Master Su discussing all these ideas for the talk, he told me the following: “The important thing is the lineage, and in order for the spirit of the teachings to go unchanged through time, it is necessary for there to be love between masters and disciples. This is also necessary for the energy of *Kung Fu* to be not only destructive, but to release its beneficial and healing potential.”

Real art can always be a deadly weapon. How many regimes have been toppled by the power of art? And how many lives are still wrecked every day by the irresponsibility of artists who have bad intentions, or more often, simply unexamined motives, and the deep effects of their work? I remember a story about a novelist who ended up in hell and complained when he saw that an infamous murderer was only dipped in the cauldron once a day while he had to be permanently in. They explained to him that the murderer had killed his victims and that was all, and most of his victims went to Heaven, but that through the people who kept reading the novels he had authored, many more people were constantly finding their way to Hell. Sticking to a lineage, to a tradition of art where the main motives are symbolic, that is they are directly connected to the transcendent Source, gives a protection against such crimes. Having a true discipline is, in medieval terms, like having a shield against the devils who always want to hijack human endeavours.

There is an essential relation between Chinese martial arts and religion, most naturally the “Triple Religion” (三教 *sanjiao*), the Chinese unified way of Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, whereby the religions protect the heart of *wushu* and *wushu* protects the forms of the religions. In general, when martial arts disciples advance, they receive methods of contemplative practice, like a mantra and meditation techniques. In this picture you can see the lineage displayed in the altar of a school, where at the top of the central pane are seen emblematic references to the three doctrines: Taoism, with a *Pakua* and *Taichi Tu*, Confucianism with characters corresponding to the “five relations” (天地君親師 Heaven, Earth, Prince, Parents Master), and 佛 *fo* the character for Buddha.



Conclusion

At first sight, art and *Kung Fu* look very dissimilar: one is for beauty, the other for killing. In addition to all the points of convergence I have mentioned, I would like to suggest that they are alike in generating—here is a new word: eutaraxy, εὐταραξία, a Greek term coined by the late Prof. Briceño-Guerrero on the pattern of the Stoic ἀταραξία, ataraxy, or absence of commotion or distress.

Ataraxy, roughly speaking, would be when we are impassible, detached. Eutaraxy, literally a “good commotion”, refers to the commotion produced by a great work of art, not in a Dada sense of *épater le bourgeois*, but rather to shock what is vain in us, all the shell and the rubble, to shake it off and let us free to conform to the Norm.

On this note, let me show you a short basic form of Pachi Chuan, an archaic style of Kung Fu, little known outside China, which is as eutaraxic as Kung Fu gets. This form, by the way, is also called *Kai Men*, the Gate Opener, and it is interesting to compare the different ways of opening the gate. Also of note is that this form is said to work on a triangular projection of energy, so you can try to look out for that triangle.

<八極開門拳>

Now to really come to an end, thinking of this unusual occasion (I am assuming you don't have exhibitions of *Kung Fu* here very often): encounters between students of apparently unrelated disciplines yield their best fruits when we gain insights that allow us to develop and perfect our own art.

Martial arts benefit from visual arts in being reminded of the necessity of beauty and a meticulous attention to the senses: a performance of martial arts has to be beautiful as a complex mandala, no matter how martial, fast or physically demanding it may be, and training in martial arts has to bring about a deepening awareness of all the qualities around us, be they colours, melodies, perfumes, flavours or textures.

Visual arts benefit from martial arts in being reminded of the necessity of a combative determination: putting the pen or the brush on the paper and letting the ink flow, or making an incision in the wood, are decisive, irrevocable acts. They decide our fate. They are about either dying yet again in false life or coming to life in true death.

Thank you.



Pachimen · Pachi Tanglang Martial Arts Institute

•
The Matheson Trust

For the Study of Comparative Religion