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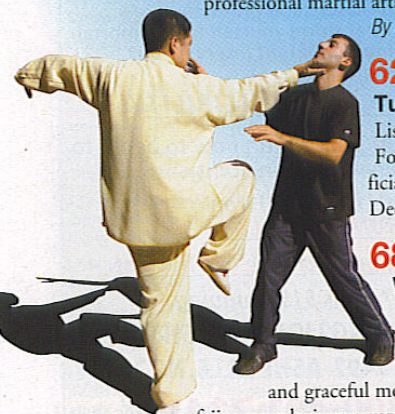
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Ng ga kuen Instructors (from left): Sifu Alejandro Flores, Sifu Francisco Aguilar, Sifu Gustavo Buendia and author Mario Figueroa.

KUNG-FU INVASION

NA GA KUEN REMAINS ONE OF THE FEW TRADITIONAL CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS TO CROSS MEXICO'S BORDERS

By Mario Figueroa

Ahhh, Mexico. White-sand beaches, margaritas, Mariachi music and... kung-fu? Yes, kung-fu, in particular a branch of legendary grandmaster Ark Yuey Wong's ng ga kuen kung-fu that migrated to Mexico in the 1970s and that has made its home there for more than 30 years.

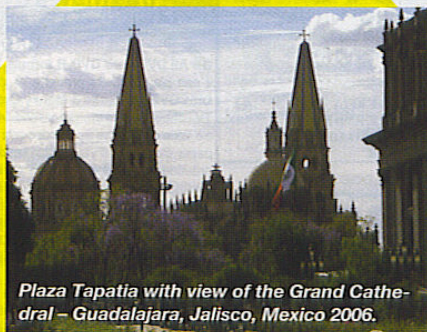
This author recently visited Mexico to retrace the original migration of Wong's ng ga kuen kung-fu, to examine the current state of ng ga kuen and traditional Chinese martial arts, and to follow a new band of na ga kuen missionaries seeking to resurrect the style to its former glory.

Far from being critical, this is a case study of how kung-fu adapts and survives even under difficult conditions. Ng ga kuen's migration to Mexico demonstrates that traditional kung-fu will always find fertile ground to grow and develop.

A KUNG-FU MISSIONARY

In the early to mid-1970s, a karate instructor from Mexicali, Mexico, named Jesus Manuel Cisneros traveled to Los Angeles, Calif., where he discovered and began training in the ng ga kuen style of kung-fu. His teacher was master Ralph Shun, considered by many to be grandmaster Ark Yuey Wong's top

disciple. It is not known how long he practiced with Shun or exactly when Cisneros began teaching this style of kung-fu in Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico. What is certain is that enrollment in what became known as "cinco animales" or five animal style grew enormously and by the late 1970s instructors under Cisneros began spreading the art to other parts of Mexico. The legendary first school in Mexicali, called "Dragon Rojo" or Red Dragon, soon became the head-



Plaza Tapatia with view of the Grand Cathedral – Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico 2006.



Dragon de Fuego School in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. Led by sifu Carlos Casas with assistance from instructor Enrique Ayala.

quarters for the Red Dragon Association.

Then, for reasons unknown and beyond the scope of this article, the great Red Dragon Association was dissolved. With the break-up of the Red Dragon Association, countless schools were left without a support system. Some did not survive the break-up; others went on to seek the support of other styles and lineages, yet most went forward, carrying on to the best of their abilities the teachings they received.

MEXICO'S CINCO ANIMALES KUNG-FU

Kung-fu descendants of the Red Dragon Association have a strong sense of pride and are fiercely loyal to their kung-fu heritage. Their respect and honor for Ark Y. Wong is inspiring and commendable. However, it is Ralph Shun who is revered as their true patriarch and the root of

"With the break-up of the Red Dragon Association, countless schools were left without a support system."

their kung-fu. It is widely accepted that theirs is not Ark Wong's ng ga kuen, but is instead the five animal style derived from the teachings of Ralph Shun. And while ng ga kuen is a southern style of kung-fu, the belief in Mexico is that they practice a northern derivative. In fact, in Mexico the style is performed with the very wide stances, low stretching postures, high kicks, splits and aerial maneuvers more common of northern-influenced styles. Yet there are movements that evidence a kinship to southern ng ga kuen. These similarities and differences are believed to come from the teachings of Shun, who taught ng ga kuen but who some believe also practiced and taught northern kung-fu.

A MASTER OF SOUTHERN KUNG-FU

According to ng ga kuen grandmaster Seming Ma, Ark Wong's grandson, Ralph Shun, was a great teacher and his grandfather's most accomplished student. Seming was a close personal friend and acknowledges Shun as not only his si hing, or senior kung-fu brother, but also as a mentor. Seming has maintained contact with Ralph Shun's family over the years. Aside from those who knew him, there is little much information available about master Shun.

It is known that Shun first studied southern fut gar in Hawaii under grandmaster Lum Dai Yung before moving to the mainland and joining Ark Wong. There is no evidence that Shun ever taught anything but southern kung-fu. The general consensus is that after meeting and training with Ark Wong, Shun dedicated his teaching to ng ga kuen. So, the supposed northern influence and the deviations from ng ga kuen cannot be attributed to the teachings Shun passed on to Cisneros.

KUNG-FU IN MEXICO

Regardless of what forces or influences were involved in shaping five animal kung-fu in Mexico over the last 30-plus years, the style has not only survived but grown since the

break-up of the Red Dragon Association. Moreover, this tradition has continued with little oversight and technical assistance. Likewise, the origin and reason for the introduction of changes and additions to the style are no longer important. What is important is the resilience of the style and the dedication of its instructors who have kept it alive.

Teachers and practitioners maintain a strict code of conduct and discipline. Being a kung-fu practitioner and a member of your school is a source of pride but also viewed as an important responsibility. At a majority of the schools we vis-



(Left to right) Master Cisneros with then-advanced student Gustavo Buendia and his instructor, sifu Amarillas in the mid-1980s.



A forms competitor displays flexibility skills at the 2006 Dragon De Fuego (Fire Dragon) tournament headed by sifu Carlos Casas in Guadalajara, state of Jalisco.



Immortal Dragon School in Guadalajara led by sifu Jose Guillen. Note the number of female students in the group.



Ng ga kuen instructors (right to left): Author, Mario Figueroa (San Diego, CA); Francisco Aguilar (Guadalajara, Mexico); Alejandro Flores (Monterrey, Mexico); and Gustavo Buendia (Guadalajara, Mexico).

ited, classes were run at a feverish, exhausting pace. Toughness of character is expected and honed by the exceedingly demanding training. Formality reigns in the training floor with instructors transforming from friendly mentors to military-like authority figures during class time.

Punishments are dished out for the most minimal lapse of attention, missed repetition or pause to catch a much-needed breath. Students, young and old alike, are pushed to perform the most difficult of exercises, to keep up with the pace of the instructor and to go beyond their normal limits of endurance and resistance. Amazingly, while this type of approach would empty most American schools, in Mexico students show up early in clean uniforms and with smiles on their faces.

What accounts for this difference? Culture. The warrior spirit is deeply engrained in Mexican culture. World-class competitors abound in other martial arts such as traditional judo, karate and tae kwon do. And who can deny the success of Mexican boxers in the world arena? Kung-fu is widely considered to be an elite warrior art among the many martial disciplines represented in Mexico.

Competition is an integral part of kung-fu training in Mexico. Students are required to participate in tournaments. Sparring matches are fierce; there are few official rules. Protective equipment is optional yet injuries are relatively rare, because of the generally high level of sportsmanship along with the constant emphasis placed on the execution of controlled technique.

In more recent years, other styles of kung-fu have made inroads into Mexico. One example is hung gar kung-fu from master Buck Sam Kong's lineage,

which has been well received and has enjoyed widespread acceptance and growth. Wing chun, particularly vung tsun from grandmaster Leung Ting's organization, can also be found in different parts of the country. In the capital, Mexico City, the choice of kung-fu styles is as vast as anywhere in the world, with schools and organizations from abroad establishing their foothold. In recent years, modern wushu, mainly disguised as Shaolin Temple kung-fu, has grabbed a firm foothold in the nation's capital and is making inroads into the rest of the country.

FERTILE GROUND FOR KUNG-FU

Mexico is indeed fertile ground for Chinese kung-fu. Yet aside from the ng ga kuen/five animal style, there is relatively little traditional Chinese martial arts for a country of this size, but more importantly with a population and culture that readily accepts kung-fu's martial philosophy and that holds the warrior ways in high esteem. So why haven't more styles and schools established themselves?

Operating in most of Mexico requires adopting the language, the diet, the standard of living, its lifestyle and its customs. This difficult task keeps all but the most enthusiastic of foreign martial arts missionaries from venturing there. And although Mexico is a wonderful country with nice, friendly, hospitable people, plus a rapidly growing middle-class economy, it remains a difficult and strange environment for the unfamiliar.

Yet those brave kung-fu missionaries who travel to Mexico will find a hunger and enthusiasm for traditional kung-fu that is wonderful to experience and reminiscent of Chinese martial arts' formative years in America. The vast majority of Mexico remains a land of opportunity for traditional Chinese martial arts.

A NEW WAVE

As mentioned above, the break-up of the Red Dragon Association left schools throughout Mexico without a support system. One option considered by many was to travel to

America to get support directly from Shun or from Ark Wong (while they were living). However, to Mexicans, the United States is also a strange and hostile environment that few dare to enter. In 1998, sifu Ruben Vargas, head instructor of the Tigre Negro (Black Tiger) group of schools from



Late 1970's picture of master Cisneros (center in black) with members of his Karate-Do School in Mexicali, Mexico.



Advancement exam conducted in Culiacan, Sinaloa, Mexico.



Women sparring competitors - Fierce!

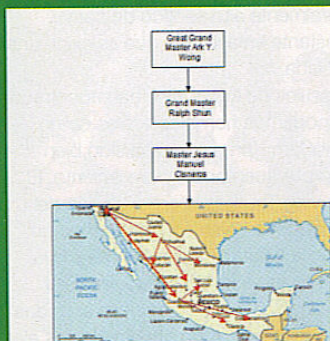


Lion dance at Tigre Negro of Culiacan, Sinaloa, Mexico.



Tigre Negro parade appearance - Culiacan, Mexico.

"The vast majority of Mexico remains a land of opportunity for traditional Chinese martial arts."



Origin and dispersion of Ng Ga Kuen Kung Fu in Mexico.



Great grandmaster Ark Y. Wong and Grandmaster Ralph Shun demonstrating ng ga kuen technique applications in the 1970s.

Culiacan, Mexico, made the long trek to find support from the root of five animal style, the Wah Que Studio in Los Angeles' Chinatown, which was then under the direction of Seming Ma.

Vargas would be the first of a new wave of ng ga kuen instructors hoping to re-establish the traditional ng ga kuen style in Mexico with a direct connection to the root of the style and a firmly established line of support and technical backing.

The first to reconnect with the root style in America was sifu Francisco Aguilar, who heads up the recently inaugurated Ng Ga Kuen De Mexico organization based in Guadalajara. Francisco and his partner and long-time training brother, sifu Gustavo Buendia, traveled to America in the late 1980s to train with Seming, with the goal of bringing the style back to Mexico. They trained for several years before they were forced to abandon their plans. Several years later, Francisco resumed his training in ng ga kuen with sifu George Castro and sifu Richard Vera, both direct students of grandmaster Wong, before rejoining Seming to complete his training.

During our stay in Guadalajara, we were also met by another ng ga kuen pioneer, sifu Alejandro Flores from Monterrey, in the northeastern state of Nuevo Leon, Mexico. Alejandro is the head instructor of the six-school-strong Dragon Mexico organization. Sifu Alejandro sought out Seming last year and is the newest representative of ng ga kuen in Mexico.

These experienced sifu are working to promote and advance the ng ga kuen style across Mexico. They are all products of the original migration of ng ga kuen via master Cisneros and the Red Dragon Association. Thus, they understand the differences and variations that the style has experienced. More importantly, under the direction of Seming, they come with a full understanding of the detailed workings of the style and its guiding principles.

CONCLUSION

Mexico is a land full of opportunity and promise for kung-fu practitioners of all styles. It is a vast country with a relatively low availability of Chinese martial arts. However, ng ga kuen is making great strides throughout the country and under Seming's direction, appears set to take a major step in establishing itself as a major kung-fu force in Mexico. 🐉

Mario Figueroa is a freelance writer and kung-fu practitioner based in Vista, California. He can be contacted at www.shenmartialarts.com/smacontact.html.



Sifu David Moreno of the Grand Dragon 5 Animal School in Calexico, Calif., in dark uniform in the center. Author Mario Figueroa standing fourth from left. Photo courtesy of Calexico Kung Fu Academy and sifu Alex Lee (standing, first from right).



Sifu Alejandro Flores (center standing) surrounded by instructors from Dragon de Mexico in Monterrey, NL, Mexico.



Group of kung-fu instructors and advanced students at the Introduction to ng ga kuen workshop led by sifu Francisco Aguilar (first row, third from left).