Origins of the

HAKKA PEOPLE

By Adrian Chan-Wyles

Yang snake creeps down

and Their

MARTIAL ARTS

Phoenix defence close up

Who Are The Hakka?

Before we explore the unique historical and cultural characteristics of this ethnic group from China, we must first consider the exact meaning of the name that is used to refer to them, and indeed which they use to refer to themselves. The anglicized term "Hakka" should more correctly be written "Hak-gaa" which reflects how it is pronounced in the Cantonese (*Guangdonghua* 廣東話) dialect of southern China. The literal meaning of the word roots are as follows:

1) Hak = "Guest" (i.e., someone unknown who is passing through and will not stay 客)

2) Gaa = "Family" (i.e., those bound together by a common bond of blood 家)

Taken together, the name refers to an unknown group of people who enter (or migrate to) an area where they were previously unknown to the indigenous people.

All Hakka origination stories claim a northern Chinese heritage. The stories relate how various historical events (normally incursions or inter-ethnic violence) forced the Hakka people to migrate to central China and then finally to southern China, before leaving the mainland of China and travelling the world, via Vietnam, Indonesia (where, from the late 18th through most of the 19th century, the *only* Hakka kingdom outside of China existed – the Lan Fang Republic), Africa, Europe and the Americas. Hakka history is written down in the *Tuqhuor Jok Bouz*, the terms translating as "Clan Book." Each Hakka name has a book of its own, with an originating village somewhere on the Mainland. These villages have a stone tablet with the family name and clan poem engraved upon it. Anyone with a specific family name is encicled to the heritage and history of that clan. The clans were originally much larger tribes, but through fragmentation due to migration and geographical separation, they later became the name clans. Many of these names trace their origins to the names of States, or ruling houses. Indeed, many Chinese names are considered Hakka: Chen, Li, Lim, Wong, Chu, Sung, and many more. The Hakka language has undergone many recent changes. Wherever Hakkas reside in China (e.g., Sichuan, Guangxi, Guangdong, Fujian or the North), the Hakka language (which is similar to Guanyu, or old Mandarin) has mixed with local dialects, giving the Hakkas in that area a distinctive local accent and dialect. Hakkas in the Wuai, for instance, tend to be very proud of the area that their recent ancestors came from, be it the New Territories, Fujian or Sichuan!

Due to the hard life of the average Hakka of old, a culture emerged based upon 3 basic principles:

1) Confucian education.
2) Farming.
3) Martial arts.

What Are Hakka Martial Arts?

Hakka people, within their own culture, tell stories of how they originated in northern China. Various academic studies carried out in recent times confirm that the Hakkas did, in fact, migrate southward from north China in at least five waves occurring over the last two

Chan Family Temple (Banana Village, Sai Kung)

Chan Family Stone Tablet (Banana Village, Sai Kung)

The early Hakka were fierce mounted warriors of the nomadic people referred to as *Hiongnu* (Fierce People).

Yang Tong Bei whip

Praying Mantis about to strike

Hakkas are tough, hard-working and fight like tigers!

Chen single whip

Chen drop split

thousand years. The early Hakka were fierce mounted warriors of the nomadic people referred to as *Hiongnu* (Fierce People). They entered China thousands of years ago, and slowly, over time, took on aspects of Chinese culture while spreading their own. It is believed that the Hakka (number at least one dynastic of ancient China, namely the Qin Dynasty, 221BCE-206BCE, and the Han (206BCE-220CE). Today, there are various Chinese names associated with Hakka ancestry, including Lee (李), Chow (周), Chu (朱), Ah Yeung (亞陽), Yin (尹), Yau (邱) and Chen (陳).

Hakkas are tough, hard-working and fight like tigers! However, a tradition stressing correct behaviour makes Hakka communities very well ordered. Hakka kung fu is collectively referred to as Hakka *Kuen*, or Hakka Fist (the term Hakka being Cantonese for "Coast People" and *kuen* meaning fist). Hakka is what the Cantonese called the original tribal migrants from the north, and it seems to have stuck! Hakka kung fu styles include:

1) Phoenix Eye Fist
2) Praying Mantis
3) Iron Ox Praying Mantis
4) Longfist
5) Dragon Style
6) Taishan Wing Chun
7) Chen Taijiquan

A Hakka martial art may be defined in three distinct ways:

1) Any style developed in south China by migrating Hakka — referred to as *Hakka Kuen* (Coast Family Fist).

2) A style in its original northern form, practiced by Hakka people and passed on within Hakka Families. Some of these styles were brought south by migrating Hakka and served as the basis for the southern *Hakka Kuen* styles, which is a more recent development. Those styles clearly of northern origin may be referred to as Northern *Hakka Kuen* so as to distinguish them from the southern counterparts.

3) Any martial arts style practiced and passed on by Hakka people and Hakka families. This would include styles taught to a Hakka ancestor and then practised by Hakka people. Although not strictly "Hakka" in origin, these styles have been preserved, molded and brought into the modern world while in Hakka care.

The original purpose of Hakka martial arts was *communal defense*. To this end, the Hakka (*mandarin: Ke Jia*) evolved, designed and developed both lethal and practical martial arts systems for the defense of static communities — be they cities, towns or villages. Before this, however, the nomadic ancestors of the Hakka people employed a highly mobile form of warfare that involved attacking settlements — to acquire those resources they could not grow or trade for themselves. The Hakka ancestors rode Steppe ponies that were sturdy and tough, and which can still be seen in that region today. Hakka warriors would sweep into settlements — seemingly out of nowhere — take what they needed and leave before the enemy could orientate themselves to what was happening. These pony-back attacks employed surrounding the enemy in its enemy, so that none could escape, no could reinforcements get in. The Hakka warriors would then ride off, disappearing into the mist or lose static communities in north China — becoming inter-mixed in the process. As these groups migrated southward over time, they lost their ponies and adapted their martial arts to suit their new situation. Now fighting on the ground, but maintaining the

same essential enveloping strategy, they gave rise to many northern Chinese martial arts styles — including the famous Longfist. The Hakka ancestors had always been able to fight on the ground, but now it became essential for their very survival. These descendents found themselves in static communes that needed defending from outside forces. This tradition of communal defense came all the way down through time to the 20th century — particularly in and around the New Territories, where Hakka martial arts are still taught in a communal manner. My early experience (in a Hakka village) was just that — namely, when we practiced martial arts, we also drilled in standing formations around the edges of the villages, as if preparing to meet an invader. Men and women alike participated (the women tied their young children to their backs). The *Hakka Jaarnga* (leaders) always stood in the front line; they were the best martial artists, and their job was to taunt the enemy into attacking and being crushed by Hakka fighting spirit! When they were killed, the next generation of leaders would move forward to take their rightful place at the front of the Hakka force. In Hakka tradition, this is a great honor reserved only for the best martial arts teachers. One favoured weapon for this kind of defense was the six foot *chong* or spear. The Hakkas would form three lines, each holding the spear at a particular height and angle. Communal courage was just as important as individual bravery.

Today, Hakka martial arts are often referred to as "southern" in origin – particularly the Southern Praying Mantis (*Tong Long Kuen*, famous for its *tong* rang or "Phoenix Eye" strike, whereby the second knuckle of the finger nearest the thumb is held in such away as as to resemble a phoenix eye and is used to devastating effect in striking pressure points). In fact, many associate Hakka martial arts ONLY with this style. Both these ideas are misconceptions, and are the understandable result of a general lack of knowledge of both Hakka culture and Hakka history. As the Hakka people did not originate in southern China, it is a logical conclusion that Hakka martial arts (as entwined with Hakka culture in general) must have developed at a far earlier date than the 17th century, the approximate date of the Hakka migration into south China.

The southern Hakka styles were essentially modifications of already existing northern styles that the migrating Hakka brought southward with them. So why were the styles changed? The answer is that not all styles were changed. Some where changed and became well known in their modified version. When the Hakkas migrated to southern China, they faced aggression and alienation from the indigenous peoples of those areas. They were forced to live in very small areas of poor farming country. Space was of a premium. Housing was built in these small areas and there was not much room to practice the northern forms with their long stances and elaborate forms. Up until then, Hakka arts had always had two distinct training aspects: external and internal. Both involve various training systems and years of practice. In the south, however, the Hakkas had to adapt to new situations. Inter-ethnic fighting meant that there was warfare on a regular basis, so young men and women (Hakka women did not bind their feet, they fought side by side with their men, often with their babies tied to their backs) had to be trained very quickly. The need for good fighters at a rapid rate, combined with the lack of space, led to the development of the southern styles. Stances were shortened due to lack of training space, and the external and internal training systems were combined into one user-friendly system. It must be stated, however, that ALL Hakka systems emphasize the internal over the external, as mastery of the former is far more difficult. Northern Hakka styles did not die out, but became rare, usually practiced only by the immediate families of clan leaders.

Hakka women did not bind their feet, and fought side by side with their men, often with their babies tied to their backs.

Close-up shot of Phoenix Eye Fist

Phoenix Eye application 1

Phoenix Eye application 2

Single Jian with sudbard

Double Jian

The nomadic ancestors of the Hakka people employed a highly mobile form of warfare that involved attacking settlements — to acquire those resources they could not grow or trade for themselves.

Eagle swoops down

The ancestors of these arts reflects the nomadic ancestry of the Hakka. Nomads would ride into battle, encircling their enemies and cutting off their escape. As there were no stirrups in ancient China, those riding the steppe ponies would kick downward from the saddle and often dismount to fight on foot, then leap back mount again and ride off in quick fashion. The enemy would be encircled and confused by fast, precise and highly disciplined attacks from every quarter. This blueprint was presented for the development of northern Hakka fighting arts. As Hakkas settled in north China, they gave up their ponies; as a consequence, their fighting styles became ground-oriented. Various forms of Longfist (*changquan*) were developed and passed on. In the north of China, the Hakkas were on the offensive, but in southern China they found themselves very much on the defensive. This change in circumstance is reflected in the structural changes made to their martial forms.

The development of Taijiquan is very interesting from a Hakka point of view. A well-known Hakka name is "Chin" and is written in Chinese as *Zi Zhong* 子重, which literally means "Listening to the East." It is written with the characters for "Ear" and "Ear" and is pronounced "Chen" (陳) in mandarin. However, experts interpret this ideogram as referring to a migration of the Chin clan from west China toward the east, following the Yellow River. This migration happened during the Zhou Dynasty (1046BCE-256BCE). In modern geography, this would represent a region from Gansu to Henan. The Chin clan, when they entered China, were not yet called "Chin," but were by the name of "Cui." The Cui migrated eastward and settled in the land of Zhou. Being loyal subjects of the Zhou, they were awarded with their own state – called "Chen" in mandarin. When the Chu invaded and destroyed the state of Chen (approx. 478BCE), the Cui clan changed their name to "Chen" so that they could remember their own kingdom. Chen is pronounced "Chin" in the Hakka language. The Chen family of Chen Ju Gou (Chen Village) in Henan – founders of Taijiquan in its modern form — are descendents of the Hakka Cui clan that entered China thousands of years ago. Even in southern China, many descendents of Chen still practice various forms of Longfist – and it must be remembered that one alternate name for Taijiquan is in fact "Longfist," as its movements appear to flow "like a river."

Everything has a history, and the Hakkas are no exception to this rule. If we take time to look beneath the surface of Hakka culture, we find an interesting array of contradictions and development. Hakka history is partly linguistic, cultural, martial and genetic. Today, Hakka people live all other the world. A number of historians make the point that there are distinctly "Hakka" family names. These name lineages, if traced, go all the way back to north China – to the point of origin, and possibly the entry of the Hakka ancestors.

Adrian Chan-Wyles has inherited a northern form of Hakka martial arts that did not undergo the changes in the south that many other styles had to do.