



SOUTHERN SHAOLIN DRAGON FIST: EVOLVING FIGHTING SKILLS AND METHODOLOGY FROM THE MYTHICAL TO ACTUAL REALITY

Dedicated to Sifu Peter Ziboce

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Abstract:

Chinese Kung Fu has a long history, dating back to ancient times of China. Shaolin tradition is very connected to Chan Buddhism, its philosophy and way of living. Early ancestors of Shaolin Temple did many observations on nature and developed some Wushu forms imitating animals (leopard, praying mantis, tiger, eagle, snake, Etc.) Although their most animal forms are based on real, physically available animals they did not hesitate to create forms on mythical creatures as well, such as dragon. The dragon form studied in this article is considered as a part of Southern Shaolin Kung Fu. However, there are many dragon forms in the North and South and it is better to realize this plurality while conducting research. This form is a sample of these various forms, even styles are named after the mythical animal of dragon. The form is comprehensively explained with enough visuals and this is an easy to follow instructional narration for each level of martial arts practitioners.

Keywords: Southern Shaolin Kung Fu, Dragon Fist, Traditional Wushu, Taolu, Chinese Martial Arts

1. Introduction

Chinese Kung Fu was an important part of China's ancient civilization during history, after spread of Buddhism by Bodhidharma Chan (Zen) and Chuan (Fist, Wushu) were unified. Narrations on his *"life are largely legendary, and historical sources are practically nonexistent"* (Stefon). However in official history of Shaolin Temple Bodhidharma is considered as the founder of the Temple and also Shaolin Kung Fu (Shaolin Temple). Chan word *"was originally transliterated from Indian Dhyana and translated as meditative state, and it is also known as Zen"* (Japanese word). Chan Buddhism as provided by Bodhidharma *"points directly to one's mind and does not stand upon words"* and

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emphasizes “special transmission outside scriptures”. In China’s Buddhist history with “the efforts of second Patriarch Huike, third Patriarch Sengcan, fourth Patriarch Daoxin, fifth Patriarch Hongren and sixth Patriarch Huineng, Chan tradition finally turns to be the largest Buddhist school in China” and “Bodhidharma was honored as the first Patriarch of Chan Buddhism and Shaolin Temple renowned as the origin of Chan Buddhism” (Chan Origin, Shaolin Temple). Where and when Western scholars see myths or legends can be the history of any religion, culture or tradition in their own way of understanding.



Image 1: Bodhidharma (Shaolin Temple)

In this article, we are going to focus on one of Shaolin Kung Fu forms, particularly considered in relation to Southern Shaolin Temple. The form is called as “Sothern Family Dragon Fist”, a dynamic example of Taoluⁱⁱ full of fajinⁱⁱⁱ potential,

ⁱⁱ Taolu is “the set routine (form) practice component of wushu. Taolu routines comprise of a continuously connected set of pre-determined techniques, choreographed according to certain principles and philosophies which incorporate techniques and stylistic principles of attack and defense”. IWUF (International Wushu Federation), <http://www.iwuf.org/wushu/2014/0926/181.html> Retrieved: 03.11.2018

ⁱⁱⁱ Fa has the meaning of “to dispatch, emit, or issue” and jin “means power, strong, tough, or unyielding. Fajin is commonly translated as “explosive power” or “issuing power”” (Ching, 2013).

effective strikes, active footwork and functional blocks. Martial artists and academics / scholars of Chinese martial arts would have the possibility of “locating” Southern Dragon Fist form into the right place in their understanding, after review the detailed explanations and instructions here. In our contemporary communication environment many intellectual discussions are going in a very interactive way on global level. Therefore, the author of this text is very keen for this kind of interaction and exchange of knowledge.



Image 2: Shaolin Temple^{iv}

Before going further, it is better to clarify two points here: first, the form studied in this research is not a part of the style called Lung Ying Kuen.^v Dragon imitation / symbolization is widely used in many different styles (arts) and forms (routines) of Chinese Kung Fu, not only in Shaolin-related arts of the North and South, also in Wudang and other schools as well. Second, this Southern Dragon Fist is incorporated in the style of Chinese Wushu I teach (Siu Lam Hark Lung Mun) with the name of Hark Lung Kuen (Black Dragon Fist, 黑龍拳). Hark Lung Kuen and the form called Southern Shaolin Dragon Fist or Southern Family Dragon Fist^{vi} are just identical, the same. Hark Lung Kuen naming has been done recently by me in order to express its difference from other forms in our curriculum and it is among intermediate forms of our kwoon^{vii}

^{iv} Xinhua, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/photo/2017-01/21/c_136002626.htm Retrieved: 03.11.2018

^v Lung Ying Kuen (龙形拳) “or Dragon Style Kung Fu, is a Hakka martial art originating from the Huizhou area (Dongjiang - East River) of Guangdong province in Southern China.”
<http://www.taipinginstitute.com/courses/lingnan/lung-ying-kuen> Retrieved: 03.11.2018

^{vi} Southern School Dragon Fist (南派龙拳, with Pinyin: Nan Pai Long Quan)

^{vii} Kwoon is "a hall of training" in Chinese Kung Fu, like "dojo" for Japanese arts. Historically "Kwoon was a family oriented atmosphere. To this day traditional Kwoons are run this way: like a family, a

(Kowloon Traditional Kung Fu School, Turkey). After reviewing the form in this article and watch performance in Kowloon Traditional Kung Fu School's Youtube Channel^{viii} you can decide what are the differences or similarities of the routine to other forms you already know and practice.

2. Southern School (Nan Quan), Its Way and Dragon Fist

Nan Quan or Nan Pai (Southern Fist, Southern School) include Kung Fu styles have emerged in Southern parts of China. It is an umbrella concept "including Hong (Hung Gar), Li (Lei Gar), Liu (Lau Gar), Mo (Mok Gar), Cai (Choy Gar), Wu Zu Quan, Yong Chun Quan (Wing Chun) and others." Nan Pai has lower stances with less kicks and focuses on "short, powerful arm strikes". Emphasizing "on a solid stance and stability, Nanquan has relatively fewer acrobatic techniques, but rather concentrates on generating extremely powerful techniques with intricate and highly developed hand techniques. It is a fierce and powerful style whose practitioners exude a strong spirit."^{ix} All these different arts are collected under the frame of Nan Quan.



Image 3: Southern Shaolin Temple^x

brotherhood if you will, where people all share the same desire to learn, experience, and refine the mind, body and spirit. The Kwoon is a friendly place, where people meet people and share the training experience. Learning of all the methodological, ideological, and philosophical aspects of the arts making the learning process that much more fascinating." American Center for Chinese Studies,

<http://www.kungfu.org/faqkwoon.shtml> Retrieved: 03.11.2018

^{viii} <https://www.youtube.com/user/kungfueurope>

^{ix} International Wushu Federation (IWUF), <http://www.iwuf.org/wushu/2014/0926/181.html> Retrieved: 03.11.2018

^x Source: <http://www.accesschinatravel.com/photo-p5045-v394-southern-shaolin-temple-trip.html> Retrieved: 03.11.2018

Southern family Chinese martial arts are seen as originated from Southern Shaolin Temple. According to some scholars of Chinese martial arts and history Southern Shaolin Temple was built in 6th Century, few decades after the construction of first Shaolin Monastery, as a continuation of its Chan Buddhism in the South. Southern Shaolin Temple in Fujian was destroyed during 3rd Qing Emperor Yongzheng's reign (1723-1735) (Canzonieri, 1996). However, its arts have continued until today through different lineages and transmissions.

There are many Shaolin Kung Fu schools around the world whose lineages can be traced back to Southern Shaolin Temple (Kit, 2012: 37). In practice of Shaolin arts one needs to follow "five demands". These are: "first, be serious; second, be conscientious; third, the Spirit should conform the Will; fourth, take care of one's honor; fifth, strictly follow the methods" (Zhong, 2004: 37). These principles are compatible for all real traditional martial arts actually.

Southern Shaolin Temple or "Fujian temples" with profound influences "became the birthplace for the Hung Gar, Lau Gar, Mok Gar, Li Gar, Choy Gar, Wing Chun, Fut Gar, Choy Li Fut, Southern Mantis, White Crane, and many other styles that are now collectively known as the Nan (southern) Quan styles." After the destruction and closing of Southern temples "these styles were spread throughout Southern China, especially Fujian and Guangdong provinces. The martial arts styles practiced at the Fujian temples were many and varied" (Canzonieri, 1997). As for routines created and practiced as a part of these various styles or through their influences, there are hundreds of them. Southern School Dragon Fist which we will analyze here is one of them and today we have no historical clue regarding its traces of transmission.



Image 4: Southern Family Dragon Fist, Instructional VCD Cover

In Asian philosophy dragon is the symbol of *“wisdom and knowledge”*; as mentioned by Master Stefan H. Verstappen: *“Both terrifying and benign, the dragon wields the ancient elemental forces of earth, water, thunder and lightning. The dragon is often portrayed chasing or clutching in his claw a radiant pearl - the pearl of wisdom. The Dragon thus bridges the duality of emotion and instinct; the forces of nature, with reason and intellect; the pearl of wisdom”* (Verstappen, 2016: 73). Also, *“dragons are majestic divine creatures bringing peace and prosperity”* (Kit, 2012: 320). Therefore, dragon symbolism is not only related to power, also to knowledge and wisdom, balance between nature and human reason.

As a mythical animal *“dragon is an amalgamation of the other animals”* and in Kung Fu, *“it can change its fighting strategy to suit the particular threat. This is known as the tactic of combining tactics; the ability to use several strategies simultaneously, traps within traps, schemes within schemes”* (Verstappen, 2016: 309). Because of this strategic dragon character, practitioner of Southern Shaolin Dragon Fist form has to be flexible, easily changing and adapting learnt techniques to various practical situations rather than literally follow what is taught here. This can be done in two ways: one, combination and mixture of learnt techniques; two, on practical basis modify application (stance, order, angle, Etc.) as required.

Shaolin Kung Fu's Dragon Fist represents *“internal and spiritual training, the dragon may live in the ocean or fly down from the heavens to provide the elemental benefits of water, metal, wood, earth and fire. Its mission is larger than life, always noble and full of wisdom”* (Burk, 2011). This mindset needs to be maintained while practicing Dragon Fist. Another point we should remember is that dragon palms, claws, fists and their ways of doing may differ from art to art, style to style, even from sifu to sifu in the same system. So, what you will see in the next section visually is one of the possible ways of doing dragon fist. The spirit and being *“noble and full of wisdom”* are more important than how you punch.

3. The Routine and External / Internal Meanings

Shaolin Dragon Fist represents a rare methodology and techniques of Chinese fighting arts compare to other animal imitation forms. Its characteristics are power, intelligence and unpredictability. Quick kicks, fists, palm and forearm strikes are typical for dragon way of martial science. Dragon fist has ability to flow from a soft and smooth way of action to harder attacks. Muscles are relaxed but practitioner is ready to initiate fajin (explosive power) incorporating qi (internal energy). As it is said in Shaolin tradition: *“Dragon fist trains the spirit”* (DeMasco, 2011). Hence dragon training is beyond being merely a physical activity, incorporates intellectual and spiritual aspects as well.



Image 5: Black Dragon Symbol

The routine is existing of various punches, elbow strikes, palm strikes, blocks and interceptions. Footwork is solid and stable, enabling powerful fighting stances, entering and escapes possible. The form provides techniques for confrontation with multiple attackers as well. Effective breaking techniques are also included in the routine. We can start explaining each step of Southern Shaolin Dragon Fist form. This instructional explanation can be a possible way to understand it more profoundly and see its functionalities.

3.1 Opening

Southern Shaolin Dragon fist starts with opening posture: a straight stance, heels are touching each other, feet are apart in 45 degree and facing forward. Both hands are on the sides, chambered as fists and fingers are looking upward. This posture is a combination of fullness and emptiness, yin and yang. It is empty but fists are ready to generate power. This can quickly turn from emptiness to fullness.

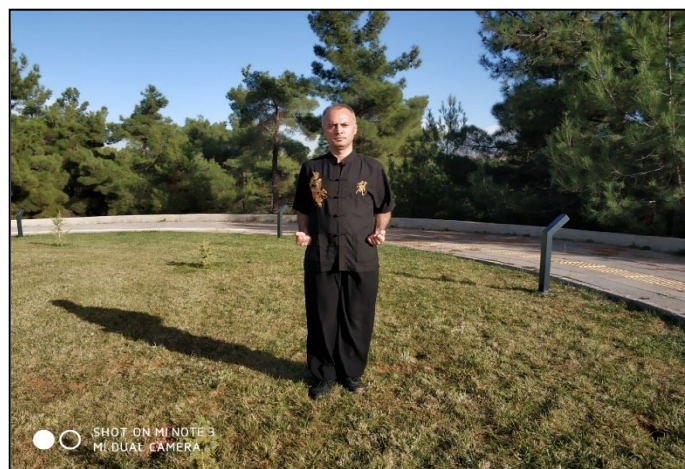


Image 6: Opening^{xi}

^{xi} Photos of the routine are taken by Satuk Buğra Ayan. Special thanks to him.

3.2 Right Punch Forward^{xiii}

In this movement, right fist punches forwards, hitting inside left palm and left palm stay afterward on right bicep. Stance is xu bu (empty stance or cat stance). Face looking forward. Tips of right toes touch ground, but weight of the body is on back foot (left). This stance can be perfectly a fighting stance, ready to attack and defend in several ways.



Image 7: Right punch forward

3.3 Double Back Hand Block

This technique is double hand block done with the back of both hands downward. It is performed on ma bu (horse stance). When practitioner passes on ma bu s/he does it as moving rightward with right foot. Weight equally divided on both feet. In real life applications and sanda all techniques of the form can be different as required by the situation. When reality necessitates it can be used with single hand in different angles as well.



Image 8: Double Back Hand Block

^{xiii} As we practice in Kowloon Traditional Kung Fu School techniques of the routine is named as simple, explanatory as possible in our understanding (in English and also in Turkish). For Chinese naming and its direct English translation you may refer to Southern Family Dragon Fist VCD: <https://www.plumpub.com/images/VCD4/vcd1599.jpg> (Bilingual: English / Chinese).

3.4 Double Palm Block

After deflecting the first attack with back hand blocks (most probably kicks), now we can defend against the second attack as well with double palm block. Usually kicks are coming in combination, so serial blocks are very functional for following attacks. These blocks are done downward with both hands. Stance is the same, ma bu.



Image 9: Double Palm Block

3.5 Double Dragon Hooking

Now the routine is turning leftward. With this double hooking we can catch and intercept to a received punch, kick and even some weapons like stick, staff, spear, Etc. The stance is Ban Ma Bu (half horse stance). Both hands are bent downward from wrists. Practitioner is ready for follow up after deflecting opponent's attack with these hooks.



Image 10: Double Dragon Hooking

3.6 Dragon Head Fist (Left)

Half step forward, still left foot front and move to gong bu (bow stance). At the same time left hand punches forward with dragon head fist. Right hand is ready for next strike on the side of waist.



Image 11: Dragon Head Fist (Left)

3.7 Dragon Head Fist (Right)

After the previous fist, right hand follows the same way forward with dragon head fist. Left hand is staying on the left side of waist. Feet do not move and remaining the same bow stance.



Image 12: Dragon Head Fist (Right)

3.8 Right Elbow Strike Upward

Right arm is coming downward 90 degree. At the same time right foot move forward for next gong bu. When stepping completed, simultaneously right elbow strike is initiated as well upward, going back the way of 90 degree distance.



Image 13: Right Elbow Strike Upward

3.9 Dragon Head Fist (Left)

After elbow strike stance does not change (right foot front bow stance). Right fist go to the right side of waist. Left dragon head fist punches forward powerfully.

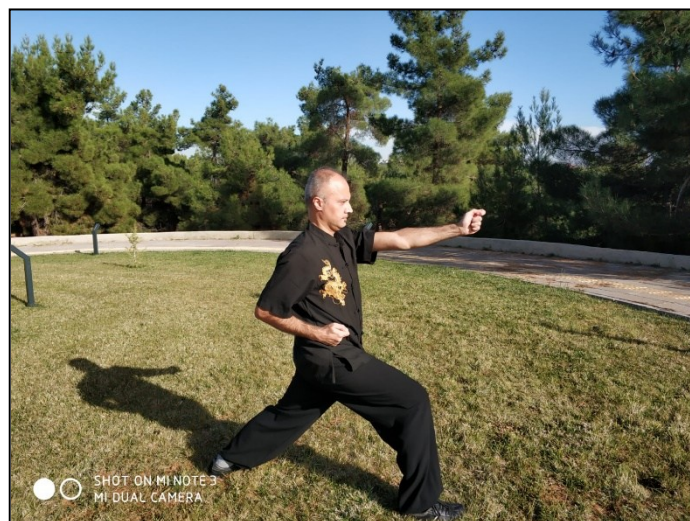


Image 14: Dragon Head Fist (Left)

3.10 Dragon Head Fist Strike to the Middle Part

Right hand is chambering on the right side of body. Meantime left hand with open palm (fingers looking upward, palm is facing to right side) is coming over it. Body is on empty stance, right foot front and weight is on left foot. With a fast and strong attack practitioner move forward, punches middle part of opponent with right dragon head fist. At the same time the stance turns into qi long bu (dragon riding stance, right front).

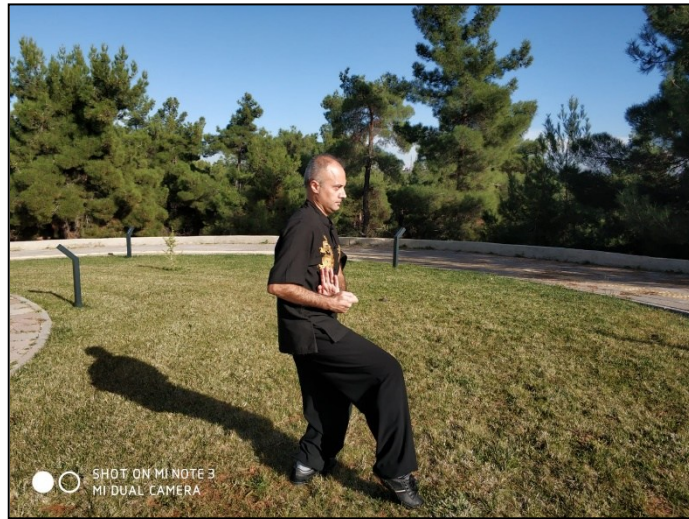


Image 15: Dragon Head Fist Strike to the Middle Part (A)

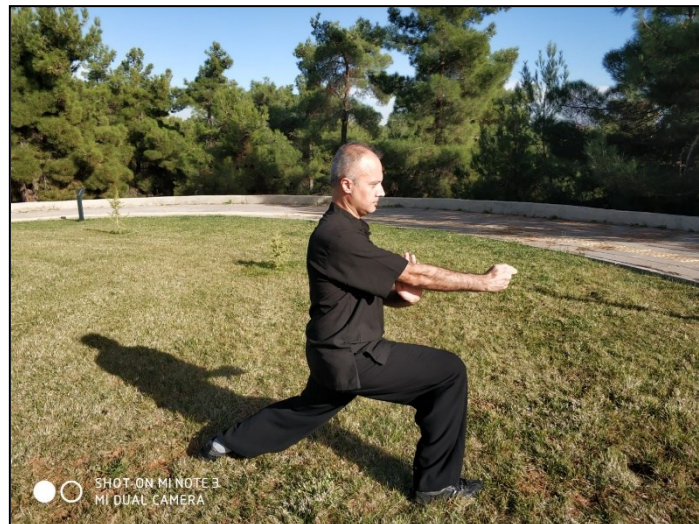


Image 16: Dragon Head Fist Strike to the Middle Part (B)

3.11 Double Dragon Palm Strike

Attack forward with both hands in dragon palm shape. Before the strike hands meet in middle dantian and initiate powerful attack with the inner energy (qi) taken there rather than arms' strength. With this strike issuing power body move half step forward. Still in the same stance (qi long bu, right foot front).



Image 17: Double Dragon Palm Strike

3.12 Leopard Fist^{xiii}

Turn back (toward left) 180 degree, move to gong bu (left front) and right leopard fist to solar plexus of opponent. Left palm stays on inner side of right bicep.

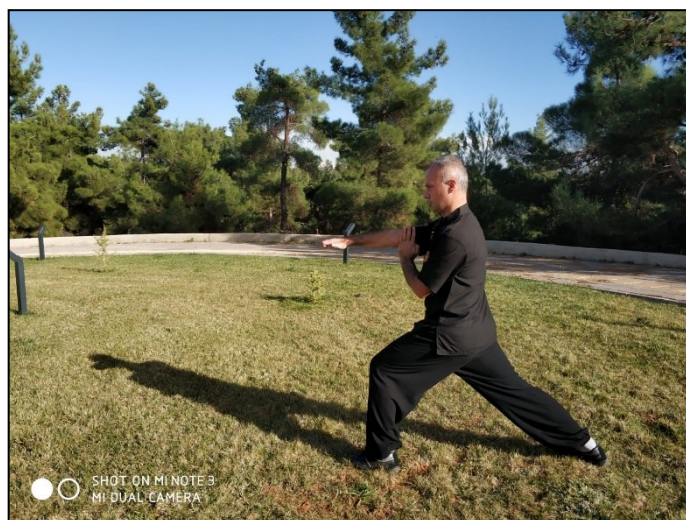


Image 18: Leopard Fist

3.13 Circling Punch Upward

Step forward to right foot front bow stance. Simultaneously circle right fist backward and complete 180 degree with the punch upward. When punch is initiated left palm slap upper right bicep from top.

^{xiii} This technique is among few differences of the form as practiced in our style at Kowloon Traditional Kung Fu School.



Image 19: Circling Punch Upward

3.14 Breaking

From previous technique stance does not change. Right punch is moving up one hand span. Left hand is turning into punch and going towards left down (45 degree). This is actually applicable as a breaking technique against opponent's arm.



Image 20: Breaking

3.15 Dragon Claws

In this technique of the routine, first right and then left dragon claws are initiated forward. In the second one (left), right hand catch target and pull backward towards waist level rightward. Stance is turning into xie bu (rest stance).



Image 21: Dragon Claws

3.16 Three Elbow Strikes

Stance changes to gong bu (left foot is at front). Three consecuting elbow strikes are initiated (right, left, right). This movement is very fast, imitating agile attacks of a dragon. Elbows are coming from over each other. Not striking elbow is closely below for protection.



Image 22: Three Elbow Strikes (A)



Image 23: Three Elbow Strikes (B)



Image 24: Three Elbow Strikes (C)

3.17 Left Block, Right Hook Fist

Turn back and simultaneously left block upward and right hook fist. Stance is gong bu (left foot front). Right punch is targeting body rather than head.



Image 25: Left Block, Right Hook Fist

3.18 Right Hook Fist

From previous stance step forward. Bow stance again, this time right foot is front. At the same time left punch is going to the chambering position on left, right hand initiate the same hook fist again inward.



Image 26: Right Hook Fist

3.19 Reverse Middle Punch

Stance does not change. Right fist remain in the previous position. Left punch (reverse) hitting through under the right forearm. Target is solar plexus.



Image 27: Reverse Middle Punch

3.20 Dragon Palm Strike to the Head

Left foot is coming near right foot. Both are bent on knees. Right forearm is near right ear, parallel to ground and palm looking outward reverse. Left palm close to right wrist. Left foot steps forward toward gong bu. Right dragon palm attack to opponent's head from side. Left palms stays near elbow level. This technique requires internal concentration and energy explosion to external effect. Power comes from dantian.



Image 28: Dragon Palm Strike to the Head (A)



Image 29: Dragon Palm Strike to the Head (B)

3.21 Upper Block and Reverse Middle Punch

Turn the other side 180 degree (from the left). Left foot front bow stance again. Right hand is blocking up. Left reverse punch to middle part of opponent's body.



Image 30: Upper Block and Reverse Middle Punch

3.22 Elbow Strike

Step forward to right foot front bow stance. Initiate a powerful right elbow strike supported by left arm's strength as well.



Image 31: Elbow Strike

3.23 Reverse Middle Punch

In the same stance, left middle punch is initiated to opponent. In this technique and all other ones of the routine target can change in accordance with requirements of situation in application.



Image 32: Reverse Middle Punch

3.24 Spinning High Jump and Splitting Fist

This spinning high jump requires 360 degree rotation aloft and is conducted for several reasons: closing the gap between you and opponent, collecting more power and effect, attacking downward for a very strong splitting fist. After jump, when landing the stance is ban ma bu (half horse stance), left foot is front. Both hands strike downward, left hand is in the front and right back. After strike stay in this hand position as guarding.

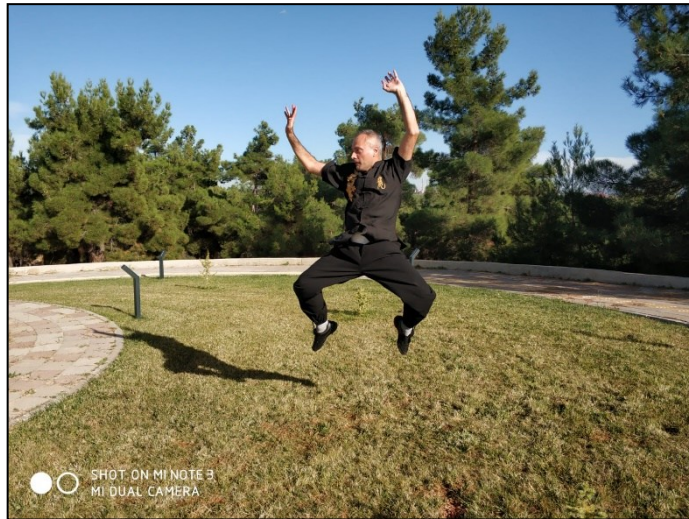


Image 33: Spinning High Jump and Splitting Fist (A)



Image 34: Spinning High Jump and Splitting Fist (B)

3.25 Double Hand Block (Left)

180 degree turning backward (from left side). Left hand is leading, both arms are parallel for an effective, strong block. It can be attack in some cases. Stance is gong bu and left foot is on the front.



Image 35: Double Hand Block (Left)

3.26 Double Hand Block (Right)

Right foot steps forward. Both hands block rightward powerfully. Right hand is leading.



Image 36: Double Hand Block (Right)

3.27 Double Dragon Palm Strike

With half step forward stance turns into qi long bu (dragon riding stance). Right foot is still in the front. Both hands with palm strikes attack to middle part of opponent. As mentioned before, this technique provides fajin possibility.



Image 37: Double Dragon Palm Strike

3.28 Lower Crossing Hands Block (Left)

After previous position step backward and come to gong bu (left front). Both hands block downward as crossed for a lower kick or possible weapon attack.



Image 38: Lower Crossing Hands Block (Left)

3.29 Lower Crossing Hands Block (Right)

Since this kind of attacks may come in combination blocks need to be in the same way as well. Step backward once more, come to right foot front bow stance and block again down with crossed hands.



Image 39: Lower Crossing Hands Block (Right)

3.30 Stop Opponent with Foot and Dragon Claws

When opponent attack left foot bottom stop him. This is not kick, stopping. Simultaneously right dragon claw thrusts forward. But of course both (foot technique and dragon claw) may turn into a powerful attack in application rather than just stop. After this left foot is going back and down, turning into a sort of gui bu (kneeling stance). In this process left dragon claw strikes forward, right one go to the right side of waist.

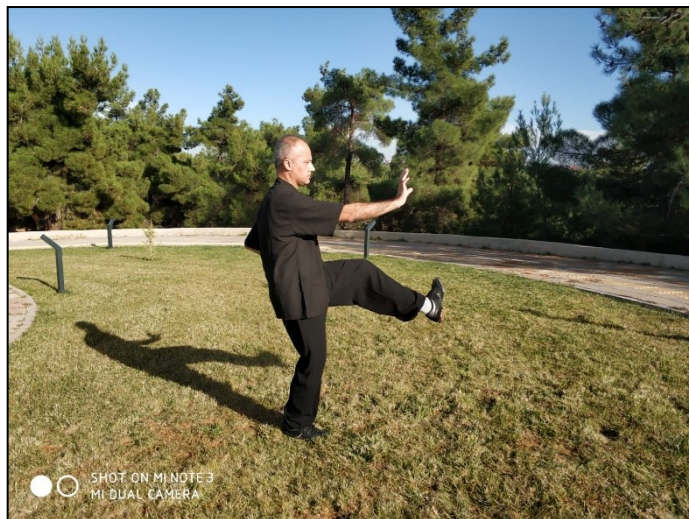


Image 40: Stop Opponent with Foot and Dragon Claws (A)



Image 41: Stop Opponent with Foot and Dragon Claws (B)

3.31 Forward High Jump and Splitting Fist

Next jump high and initiate a splitting fist downward to opponent. This is not a jump only upward, then it would waste a lot of energy against gravity. This is not just a leaping forward. It would be weak and not so effective. In this technique there is a half elliptic jump targeting opponent. Landing and crashing split fist at the same time. Final position is half horse stance (left front).

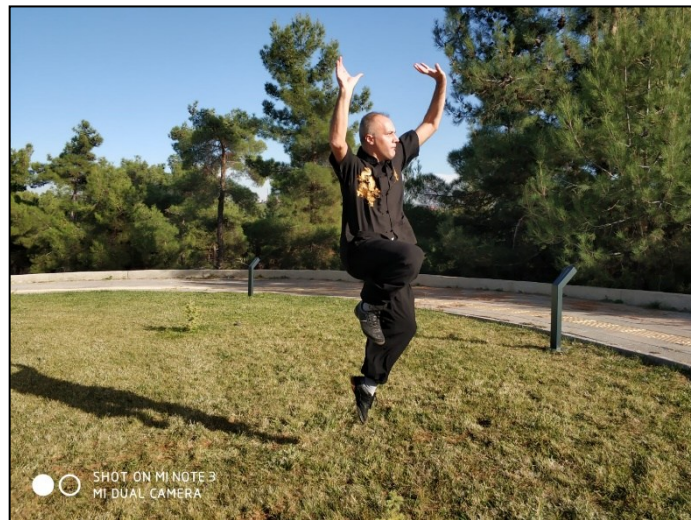


Image 42: Forward High Jump and Splitting Fist (A)



Image 43: Forward High Jump and Splitting Fist (B)

3.32 Dragon Claws

Feet turn into xie bu (rest stance). Right dragon claw forward is done. Under the right armpit left dragon claw is getting out and initiated as well to the target. There is a pull back technique to the right waist with right hand. This is a dragon imitating movement.

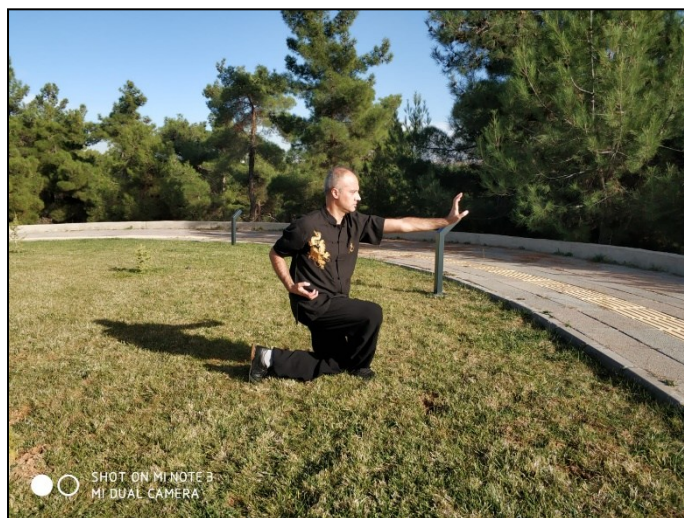


Image 44: Dragon Claws

3.33 Elliptic Dragon Claw

From previous position (xie bu) move to ma bu rightward. Right hand is forming a half elliptic movement also to the right side with dragon claw. Left hand is resting in front of belly in dragon claw shape, palm looks upward.



Image 45: Elliptic Dragon Claw

3.34 Double Back Hand Block

Stay in the same stance (ma bu), two hands block done downward. It is a functional block for lower kicks. In real life applications stance is not obligatory and any technique can be initiated from any proper fighting stance suitable to practitioner.



Image 46: Double Back Hand Block

3.35 Double Palm Block

Horse stance continues. Double palms block downward. The function of this block is the same with previous technique. However, this is much stronger. We can say that the first one (back hand) can be the block of a half fake entering kick. Second one (palms block) is the block of real powerful following kick. It can be used as single palm when necessary.



Image 47: Double Palm Block

3.36 Closing

Southern Family Dragon Fist (Nan Pai Long Quan or as evolved into our school with the name of Hark Lung Kuen) closes with the same position like opening. Fronts of each foot is separated 45 degree, heels touch each other. Body is in straight line up. Both fists chambered in the sides of waist, facing upward. Head looking forward. This is the end of the routine.



Image 48: Closing

4. Conclusion

Chinese Kung Fu is a cultural heritage of thousands of years. Although it was originated in China in its long history, it has been common value and treasure of humanity universally. Today Kung Fu is widely practiced in every part of the World.

Northern Shaolin Temple is the place considered where Chan Buddhism and Shaolin Kung Fu started. Soon after this tradition spread South and Southern Shaolin

Temple (or Fujian temples) was constructed. As we know from history, it had been destroyed and reconstructed several times.

A lost temple... A destroyed temple of the arts has an inner symbolism and can be understood on a philosophical level. Reconstructing the temple is like an ideal to strive for as a metaphor of perfection, purification and fulfillment.

The ancient, destroyed Southern Shaolin Temple will never be and exist again in the same way it existed in the history of Chinese civilization. However, its arts, continuing in historical lineages, emerging via inspirations, appear in visual arts and literature, as a balance of originality and innovation have never lost power. In this sense, on cultural level, "construction of the temple" continues; and this form, Southern Shaolin Dragon Fist can be seen as one symbolical brick in the elevating walls of the temple.

Acknowledgment

The techniques mentioned here are analyzed for cultural preservation and academic research of martial arts. Author has no responsibility of misuse of anything written or shown here. Martial arts require to be learnt and trained under qualified instructors. For teachers in your region please contact IMAS Headquarters.

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