

Excerpt. “Kung Fu”. An unorthodox etymology.

We left the tea house and walked down to the main road and turned to head north. As we walked I couldn't help noticing how Shun Yuan moved. In his walking I could clearly see hints of what the old man doing Taiji in the park had been expressing. There was such fluidity about his motion that he appeared to be made of liquid.

He walked quickly; enough that I had to make an effort to keep up, despite the fact that he was a lot shorter than me. When we crossed at the junction of a small alleyway and he stepped off the kerb and then up again on the other side, it was as if he had floated across the gap. His head did not appear to bob up and down as I knew mine did, but seemed to float along always at the same level. I looked closely at his feet, wanting to make sure that he was not in fact floating along and felt foolish when I saw his foot plant firmly on the floor with each step.

I was just framing a question in my mind about his walk and whether it was part of his practice when we arrived outside a shop, the sign above proudly announcing that this was “The Brothers Li Noodle Paradise”.

Shun Yuan turned to me and softly said, “Before we go in Rob, I want to let you know why I've brought you here. Just now at Mrs Lim's, when you were talking about the things you were hoping to learn, you quickly drifted away into a very abstract description. I've brought you here to begin trying to help you find the answers you are looking for, while keeping your feet firmly on the ground.”

That said Shun Yuan walked in and loudly called out for one of the Li brothers, who came and greeted him as an old friend and complained at the length of time since the Adept had last visited. We were shown to a table right next to the

open kitchen area where the brothers made their noodles. "You are studying chi-kung Rob," Shun Yuan said.

"If you want to know about the real meaning of gungfu, keep your eyes peeled. Don't look away and try not to blink" he concluded smiling.

The younger of the two Li brothers had picked up a huge blob of dough and rolling it briefly on the table he created a long dough-snake, about the thickness of my arm and at least twice as long. This he started to twirl and spin in his hands in various ways, so that the dough-snake continually twisted and wrapped around itself, occasionally displaying patterns such as I had seen when girls braided their hair.

It was an interesting display but I was just beginning to wonder what the point was when all of a sudden, the dough-snake transformed into perfect strands of noodles hanging from the outspread fingers of younger Li's two hands.

The metamorphosis from a single gloopy rope to dozens of beautifully formed thin noodles was so immediate and so complete that it felt watching a magic trick.

Shun Yuan looked over at me and asked, "What's the first thing that comes into your mind watching that?"

"I thought it was like magic," I replied.

Shun Yuan nodded.

"Like magic, ok" he said. "Do you know the saying that a technology far enough advanced beyond the level of an observer would appear to be magic?" I nodded in reply and he continued, "It's the same thing with skill Rob. What you are looking at is something very concrete and mundane. He's making noodles out of a blob of dough. His skill is so good however, that it appears like magic to your eye, and to mine I might add. The point I'm making here is that you needn't drift off into some vague fantasy realm to experience wonder. The things you are reading about, the

Tao which has so captured your imagination is rooted in the ordinary and the real; it is all around you all the time if you only look.”

I sat silently taking this in while Shun Yuan went on. “Much of the time, the work of practitioners of Tao or other ways which might be labelled esoteric or mystical, are branded as magical simply because the lay people observing those works have no other means to explain them or even discuss them. What’s more, if you were to ask younger Li how he just did that, I guarantee he would not be able to tell you. He might be able to teach you the steps that he took in learning how to eventually come to his current level of skill, but to him these days, he simply wills the noodles to come out of the dough. His focused intent is paramount in achieving his goal. The mechanics of what he is doing with his body, how his arms move, how he twists his wrists, how his fingers wriggle in just such a way have all become less significant to him. Of course they are still important, but only in so far as they are a vehicle or a tool for translating his intent into physical action. It is his mind that creates form out of formlessness, noodles out of a blob and that is exactly why it feels magical to you and me.”

He stopped for a moment, leaning over the table and reaching into a bowl of flour, then scattered a handful on the table top in front of us.

“I know you are a Chinese scholar, so don’t take offense at what I’m about to do. I’m giving you something which I hope will help you with your development, I’m not giving you a lesson in etymology ok?”

I nodded in agreement and he proceeded to write the characters “gung” and “fu” in the flour on the table. My mind instantly raised images of Bruce Lee in “Enter the Dragon”, David Carradine in the TV series “Kung Fu” and

countless other images and tales which had all been woven together in creating my understanding of this term.

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“This word,” he said pointing to the character “gung”. “What does this mean to you?” I gave him the regular meaning of “achievement” in reply, which he agreed with but asked if I would elaborate. I talked about the connotations of effort and skilled work, which appeared appropriate given the demonstration we had just witnessed and he was happy with this.

“So the ‘gung’ character” he said, “means an achievement that we have made by the application of our efforts through some skilled means.” Then he pointed again and asked,

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“Then what is this ‘fu’ all about?”

I sat and looked and for the life of me I couldn’t come up with anything which seemed to fit the lesson that I thought Shun Yuan was trying to get across. I resorted once again to the dictionary meaning with which I was most familiar.

“Well ‘fu’ means man” I said, “or perhaps mankind, so maybe the whole thing is talking about human achievement?”

Shun Yuan rubbed his hand over the flour, erasing the words he had written and wrote four other characters.

人大天夫

These were “Ren” meaning man, “Da” meaning great, “Tian” meaning heaven and lastly “Fu” also meaning man. Written this way from left to right there appeared to be a development in complexity of the characters, with each building on the one before. I swallowed down my immediate reaction, which was that this was not what I had been taught in Chinese class and it didn’t fit the way the Characters were formally written and tried to understand the point he was trying to make.

Shun Yuan confirmed this progression I had noticed to be the point he was making.

“By the application of his efforts” he said, “through some skilled means, man becomes great.” As he was saying this he drew a line from the first to the second character.

“In time his greatness will come to equal the heavens,” he continued, drawing a line from the second to the third character.

“Eventually, the achievements of man will transcend the very heavens themselves” he said, pointing at the last character, which I agreed did look very much like a tiny spark ascending above the character for heaven.

I had never heard such a description of the meaning of gungfu before and I took his unorthodox explanation as a further driving home of his message that the wondrous was rooted in the everyday and that one of the keys to discovering it for yourself was in being persistent.

“Human achievement indeed,” continued Shun Yuan, “if we are using that term in the sense of pushing the boundaries of human achievement and really exploring human potential!”

Just then older Li came over and stood at the table next to ours, chatting with the customer who was sitting there. He held a large ball of dough in his left hand and a strangely shaped cutting implement in his right and while carrying on his conversation, without even looking at what he was doing, he made small chopping actions with the cutter which caused little “bullets” of noodle dough to fly off and land in a wok full of steaming broth. In just a few seconds he had reduced the large ball of dough to a third of its original size and did not miss the wok with a single dough bullet.

Shun Yuan looked at me and shrugged and said “What a show off!” then laughed loudly and slapped me on the back and warned me not to take things too seriously.