

The Legacy of Lo Yan Chu

By Daniel Go

RAPID Journal, Vol. 4 No. 4, 2000

Late in the afternoon, at the old building along Misericordia St. (known today as Tomas Mapua St.) a group of boys took a flight of steep and narrow steps up the gym of the Kong Han Athletic Club, one of the oldest kung fu clubs in the Philippines.

Entering the reception area, they came upon walls displayed with banners and pictures of the different activities of the school. The gym, which at that time looked big, was about one-third the size of a basketball court with large circular posts located near the center. The afternoon breeze was blowing through the windows from one side of the gym filled with rows of weapon racks containing wooden sticks. On the opposite side were mirrors and a door leading to the dressing room. In front of the gym stood an altar with the painting of a respectable old man in traditional Chinese dress. At the far end of the gym was an enclosed room containing many strange weapons, forks, swords, big knives, spears and one remarkable weapon, a stick with a metal hand-shaped end holding a sharp pen. Adorning the dark room was the Five Ancestor altar with two green-faced lions guarding and ever watchful of any trespassers.

It was the seventies, Bruce Lee had just passed away and the martial arts euphoria was at its peak. During summer, young schoolboys would flock to a handful of kung fu gyms in Chinatown to learn the moves of their favorite kung fu star. Many left after a few sessions; more after three months and few remained for a couple of years until they had to stop and enter the world of merchant life. As the years progressed several of these kung fu schools stopped operation due to competition with video games, competitive sports and other leisure games which were more appealing to the youth of this generation. The young boys who used to train in these gyms, now successful businessmen could only lament about the current situation and reminisce about the good old days.

As one of the kids who visited the gym that afternoon, the experience gave me a lasting impression. Aside from the unusual weapons back in the dark room, what aroused my interest was the old man behind the altar. Who was this man to whom everyone paid their respect by lighting an incense and bowing before each practice session? What was his role in this martial arts gym? Later on, I found out that he was the founder of the school, the legendary Lo Yan Chu. To the thousands of students who trained in the gym, Lo Yan Chu was just a name they saw in the billboard outside the gym. You can count by the fingers people who knew about him and most of them are in their 80s. Every year the club commemorates his death anniversary, but the memory of his life and exploits continue to fade with each passing year. This article documents the life and times of Lo Yan Chu and his contribution to the Filipino-Chinese community, with the establishment of Philippine Kong Han Athletic Club.

The Early Years

Lo Yan Chu (Lu Yen-ch'iu), was born in the city of Ch'uan Chou in 1878. His father, *Lo Yung-sheng*, a native of Chin Chiang Prefecture in Fujian Province was a farmer by profession. After moving to the city of Ch'uan Chou, the elder Lo opened a tobacco shop and steadily rose to become a prominent merchant. Later, he expanded into other business ventures by opening a candle store and a small inn inside the city. Sometime during the latter part of the

19th century, the political and economic stability of the area began to worsen. Bandits were abound and Lu Yung-sheng's business began to falter until he finally closed shop.

Lo Yan Chu was the youngest of three brothers born to Lu Yung-sheng. The young Lo was known for his good moral character and upright behavior. Like many sons of well-to-do merchants he entered school at a young age and began studying the traditional Four Books and Five Classics. But tragedy struck, when Lo Yan Chu reached the age of thirteen his father suddenly died and their family business had fallen into hard times. He had to quit his studies to help in farming and doing house chores.

During those hard times, his mother pondered the future of the younger Lo. She was in a dilemma whether to let his son continue his studies or to take the martial path. The perception of society then was to look favorably on intellectual achievements rather than martial careers, but financial difficulties made it harder to come up with a decision. One night, she dreamt of a powerful man crossing the skies and wielding a Green-Dragon Halberd. Upon waking, she proceeded to the *Kuan Yu* temple nearby to pay her respect and ask for guidance. In the divination, she picked the advice of *Chiang T'ai Kung*, the great military strategist during the Warring States Era (475-221 B.C.). From then on, she decided to have the younger Lo take the martial path. It marked the beginning of the martial arts career of Lo Yan Chu.

Pursuit of the Martial Path

At the age of fourteen, his first master was *Chuang Tan*, a master from the city who taught him the rudiments of boxing. After a couple of years, master Chuang died and passed on the responsibility teaching to Lo Yan Chu. He became instructor of the school and showed his loyalty and respect for his late teacher by remitting the fee taken from his students to the teacher's wife. Later, he learned of the famed *Chuang Chan*, alias *Kong Po Chiam*, the well-known teacher of Five Ancestor Fist and continued his training with the master. He would later establish contacts with the great grandmaster *Ts'ai Yu-ming* and his students, such as the famous *Lin Chiu-ju*, *Ch'en Ching-ming* to name a few. In 1897, at the age of nineteen Lo Yan Chu opened his first school at Wei T'ou village. Aside from teaching martial arts, he continued studying traditional Chinese medicine, healing sick people and working for his family's farming and fishing business.

Lo Yan Chu was well known for his martial virtues. Often he would take up the cause for the poor and the oppressed. On one occasion he single-handedly defeated a group of men who wanted revenge due to a previous quarrel. On another occasion as he was heading back to Ch'uan Chou city on a ferry boat, Lo encountered pirates about to rob the passengers. Armed with a steel container, Lo sprang up and defeated the pirates soundly. As a gesture of gratitude the captain of the boat, a British national offered him some money. Lo refused to accept it and instead distributed the reward to his companions.

From 1899 onwards, the twenty-one-year old Lo Yan Chu set on a journey to the south in search of better opportunities abroad. First, he traveled to Burma and continued his healing and practice of martial arts for about half year. In 1901, he went to the Southeast Asia in Penang, Malaysia. In 1905, he set out to Surabaya, Java and Hong Kong to teach martial arts. Two years later, he again set sail to Singapore to maintain his studies and healing profession. The following year, he traveled to Vietnam on a medical mission. Finally in 1909, Lo settled down and married *Chang Fan-niang*. He also became religious and pursued the teachings of the Tao. He became a member of a Taoist sect based in *Omei* Mountain in *Szechuan* Province and began to study meditation. He was set to lead a simple life in the village, but because of his reputation as a

morally upright person, the villagers requested him to head a charitable institution and Ch'uan Chou's branch of the Taoist sect.

Tiger Emerges from Its Lair

In 1910, two years before the establishment of the Republic, Lo Yan Chu ran into several altercations with abusive Manchurian soldiers. In one instance, due to a family feud a boxing brother was wrongfully accused and arrested. The officials and soldiers receiving bribe from the opposing party immediately sentenced the man to die by execution. Upon hearing this, Lo Yan Chu, together with some friends plotted to save their brother. As the convict was about to be taken to the execution ground, Lo and his friends blocked them at the crossroads. In spite of the firepower of the soldiers, Lo was able to use his darts to counter their superior weapons. Armed with a *sai* and a whip, Lo fought with a ferocity of the tigress protecting her cub for three hours. His exploit soon earned him the nickname *Hu Mu Ch'iu* (Tiger Ch'iu). Years later, after he traveled to the Philippines his friends would still call him by that name. As reinforcement arrived, Lo and his companions quickly escaped through the narrow streets. Soon a bounty was put on his head and he escaped to another village and assumed another name. After a few months, he left for Rangoon, Burma where he associated with fellow countrymen sympathetic to the revolutionary movement. After the collapse of the Manchu dynasty in October of 1911, Lo Yan Chu remained in Rangoon practicing his healing profession.

The following year, Lo Yan Chu returned to his native village. Due to his reputation as a skilled martial artist and a man possessing martial virtue, he was often called to mediate in village disputes. In provincial martial arts competitions, he was invited as judge or consultant in such events. He was made chief instructor in one of the largest martial art school in the city, the *Ch'uan Chou Kuo Shu* Club. Later he rendered his service as a martial art instructor and medical doctor in the 183rd division of the 19th Route Army and served as instructor in the army in different places, such as *Ch'ao Chou*, *Kuang Chou*, *Shao Kuan* and many others.

Founding of Kong Han Athletic Club

In 1937, the Japanese forces occupied the city of *Xiamen*. In an effort to save their master, the students of Lo Yan Chu arranged for his departure. He arrived in the Philippines in November 1938. In Manila, he set up a clinic to continue his medical practice. Many of his visitors knowing his skill in martial arts would often ask for lessons. Encouraged by this outpour of enthusiasm and following the advice of fellow boxer Ch'en Ching-ming, master Lo Yan Chu opened an informal club located at No. 329 Ilang-Ilang Street in Binondo. Due to the favorable response of practitioners, master Lo transferred to a new location at No. 631 Tomas Pinpin Street and officially established the *Chung Hua Kuang Han Kuo Shu* Club, better known as Kong Han Athletic Club.

In order to maintain the standard of his school, master Lo designated strict rules and regulations with regard to enrollment. An applicant should have good moral character and must be recommended by a member of the club. The person will then go through an interview by a committee, which will establish the eligibility of his application. This standard set by the founder is still in use today. Applicants are to be recommended by at least two members or he should be accompanied by parents during the interview. Once a violent incident occurs inside or outside the school, the offender is immediately dismissed from the club.

Master Lo taught the art of the Five Ancestor Fist in his school and soon gained wide support from the community. As more people from his native village immigrated to the

Philippines, his former students began to show up and resume their training with him. In 1940, his eldest son **Lo King Hui** (Lu Ch'ing-hui) formally entered the club to assist his father. On that same year, the Cantonese Athletic Association was formed and to mark its establishment Master Lo sent a delegation to participate in its celebration. It was one of the earliest exhibition of Chinese martial arts and it left a lasting impression on its audience. Later that year, the Chinese-Filipino community in Dagupan requested for an instructor to teach their students. Master Lo sent his son King Hui to supervise activities of a new school. In 1941, the first branch was born in Dagupan City; it was named Kuang Hua (Kong Hua). This particular branch started out with ten or so students and later ballooned to more than a hundred. Soon the student population in Manila was also steadily growing forcing Master Lo to establish a second branch which was located at Jaboneros Street in Binondo. **Hsu Ch'iu-yao**, one of Master Lo's earlier student in China was put in charge as the chief instructor for this branch. On December 1941 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and World War II began.

Escape from the Enemy

In January 1942 Manila was declared an open city and the Japanese forces entered triumphantly. Kong Han and its branches continued to operate despite Japanese occupation because many of the students felt that they needed the training so that they could be of use to the anti-Japanese movement. In fact, they had the nerve to even set-up a third branch, **Kuang Hui** in Sampaloc with **Hsieh Ch'un-hsing** as chief instructor. Before long the Japanese through informants learned of Master Lo's prowess in martial arts. Master Lo was arrested and detained in the army barracks and asked to accept a job instructing Japanese troops his brand of martial arts. Master Lo refused to give in citing his old age and poor health. The Japanese officers did not give up and threatened him with torture if he did not give in to their request. In the end, Master Lo stood by his principles and his tormentors were forced to release him.

By now many of his students had joined the underground movement and guerrilla units in the mountains. Fearing a reprisal from the Japanese, Master Lo's students begged him to leave Manila. In 1944, the main school of Kong Han was destroyed by bombings. Fortunately, Master Lo and his son were unharmed, but they had to move to another student's residence in Gandara Street. The Japanese continued to monitor his movements and the situation was becoming untenable due to pressure exerted by the American liberation forces. Eventually, his students convinced him to leave Manila for Manaoag in Pangasinan. Two weeks before the American liberation, Master Lo died of heart failure at the age of 66.

Post War Problems

As World War II came to an end and so did the career of the great Master Lo Yan Chu. After attending to his burial, his son Lo King Hui immediately returned to Manila. The survivors and former student of the master gathered together with plans to bring back the old school. The first twenty-seven-member committee was established in charge of rebuilding Kong Han. In March of 1945, contributions poured in and the old club was revived. In a matter of months, membership rose to about seven hundred students.

With the founder gone, some students began suggesting changes in administrative policies. Whereas before club administration was controlled by master Lo Yan Chu himself, they remarked that it must now be handed to a group of elected officials. Due to overwhelming odds, young headmaster Lo King Hui reluctantly agreed to these changes. The power struggle and policy changes made by these officials soon plunged the club into disarray. There were even

plans to change the name of the school erasing the memory of the club founder. For nine years, activities of the school remained stagnant due to lack of planning, indecisiveness and division among its leaders.

Old Flame Revived

In July of 1954, they finally revived the old administrative system and moved to a new location in Misericordia Street. The rituals and designations of the former headmaster were brought back paving the way for Master Lo King Hui to assume his rightful position as the new headmaster of the club. Committees were formed to take charge of various activities within the school. A series of activities began to take place over the years, which greatly improved the club's stature and reputation in the Filipino-Chinese community.

In 1955, to celebrate the 17th anniversary of the school, they mounted a grand martial arts exhibition in downtown YMCA gymnasium. On that same year, they erected a memorial at the Chinese Cemetery for Master Lo Yan Chu and seventeen former club members who died while engaged in underground and guerrilla activities during World War II. In 1960, Kong Han set up its fourth branch located in Soler Street. Later on, the fifth and sixth branches were established in Quezon City and Cebu, respectively. This flurry of activities marked the high point in Kong Han as the largest and most active Chinese martial arts school in the Philippines.

The arrival of the late Master *Han Ch'ing-t'ang* in 1964 to conduct a series of exhibitions greatly influenced revival of Chinese martial arts in the 60s. His one-year stint in the country encouraged the different martial arts association to come together for local demonstrations and eventually to form the Alliance of Filipino-Chinese Martial Arts Association. In 1965, in a bid to expose Chinese martial arts to the general public, Kong Han accepted an invitation to perform at the Asian Martial Arts Festival and Karate Championship sponsored by the Philippine Journalist Association. In 1967, the club organized a 96-member entourage to tour the island of Taiwan where they performed in twenty-one venues for more than two weeks. They became one of the first international martial arts group to send a delegation to perform and entertain troops for its anti-Communist campaign. More than a hundred thousand people witnessed these exhibitions, which took place from the northern part, in Taipei down to the southern region in Tainan.

From 1968 onwards, Kong Han had participated in numerous international competition and activities. In 1968, they were invited to the Chinese Martial Arts Exhibition Competition in Taipei where they garnered the overall championship award and numerous individual first and second placers. In 1969, to celebrate the 150th founding of Singapore, the Singapore government organized the First Southeast Asian Sparring Competition. Despite the odds, Kong Han participant *Tseng Kuo-min* garnered a bronze medal in the heavyweight sparring division. In 1970 and 71, they participated in the Overseas Chinese Martial Arts Championships in Taipei and again garnered several first and second place in bare hand, weapons and sparring divisions.

Passing On the Torch

In the late 1970s, the Philippines formally established political ties with China. From 1978, Master Lo King Hui made more than ten trips to his native land to visit his relatives and to renew his ties with fellow Five Ancestor Fist practitioners. He has acted as head of the Kong Han delegation to places such as Hunan in 1978, Fu Chou in 1979, Beijing in 1980, Nanjing in 1981, Wu Han in 1982, again in Fuzhou in 1983, Xian in 1984, Tianjin in 1985 and in 1986 headed a 50-man delegation to perform the traditional Five Ancestors Fist as taught by the late

master Lo Yan Chu. These trips opened the eyes of Chinese mainlanders to the existence of traditional martial arts in other parts of Asia.

Master Lo King Hui was born on January 19, 1921. At the age of 7 began his formal studies in the traditional Chinese school and also began his lessons in martial arts. In 1934, moved to Hong Kong to take up secondary school, but had to stop schooling at the age of 13 due to financial difficulties. He arrived in Manila in 1939 and continued his studies in private evening classes while taking lessons in martial arts and medicine under his father. The following year he officially joined the Kong Han Athletic Club. Since the 1960s he has been instrumental in training the third generation of students who have performed brilliantly in international competitions

Master Lo King Hui was considered as one of the elders in the Chinese martial arts circle here in the Philippines. Aside from his skill in martial arts and healing capabilities, he was much respected by people in the community. Like his father, he has acted as mediator in quarrels between members of rival clubs that were frequent during the 70s. He would often walk the streets of Chinatown and those who saw him were surprised by his physique, which resembled that of a robust 30-year-old when in fact he was already in his sixties. He was also a strict traditionalist who advocated training in the traditional manner as against the popular stylized form of wushu practiced today.

In the late 1980s, a large number of members broke away from the club after being rebuffed by Master Lo on their suggestion to include wushu in Kong Han's repertoire. His refusal to include this popular form was out of respect for his father's legacy and his firm belief in the benefits and effectiveness of the traditional form of Five Ancestor Fist. His desire to promote this art was so great that he spearheaded the creation of an international organization for Five Ancestor Fist practitioners. His dream finally came into fruition in 1990 when the International Southern Shaolin Five Ancestor Fist Association was established with an initial membership from fourteen countries. As its first chairman, Master Lo was responsible for initiating several projects aimed at research, preservation and promotion of Five Ancestor Fist. Today this association has 22 member nations and continues to work for the propagation of this unique martial art.

In 1995, Master Lo died at the age of 75 and the mantle was passed on to his son **Lo Sze Ming** (Henry Lo). Henry, a seasoned martial artist like his father has proven his skill a few years back in a martial arts competition held in Zhengzhou, China where he got a silver medal in the sparring division. Like many of the old martial arts schools, the young headmaster is faced with the problem of dwindling enrollment. With the introduction of different recreational activities the present generation are more inclined to engage in extreme or fast-paced sports and games. The virtues of patience, perseverance and hard work deeply embedded in traditional ways are slowly being replaced by a yearning for instant gratification and constant satisfaction in this digital age. But like the earlier generation the task of the present headmaster is to be able to adapt and survive in this environment and still leave intact the essential attributes of traditional practice. It is also imperative that concerned people advance and support this cause in order to preserve the legacy of Lo Yan Chu and Kong Han Athletic Club which has become an important cultural institution in the Filipino-Chinese community □