

Animal-Inspired Forms: Training with Speed, Power, and Spirit in the Martial Arts

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Introduction

Inspired to move with a panther's speed, strike with power of a tiger and accuracy of an eagle, roll and tumble with the playfulness of a monkey, or evade an attack with the tranquility and balance of a crane, martial artists tried to capture the movements and essential character of various animals for centuries. In their admiration of animals' strength, skill, and spirit, practitioners of many fighting systems have imitated animals in their training. Chinese fighting systems, in particular, embraced animals in their training as manifested in the prevalence of animal based forms in many styles of kung fu. The movements and essence of animals are also found in the fighting systems of India (as poses) and Vietnam and the Philippines (as forms). Although fighting systems in other regions of the Orient (e.g., Japan and Korea) are less evidently inspired by animals, some of the stances and strikes used in their forms nonetheless imitate animal traits.

Origin, Purpose, Application of Forms

Forms are typically defined as sequences of individual combat techniques known as *katas* in judo

and karate, *poomse* in taekwondo, *taolu* in wushu, and *junanahon* in aikido. They are an integral part of training in most martial arts, laying the foundation for basic techniques used in sparring and combat situations. Among many explanations to the purpose of forms in training a generally accepted one is to demonstrate the offensive (e.g., hand strikes, kicks) and defensive techniques (e.g., blocks, throws, stances, footwork), as well as balance, strength, flexibility, coordination, and targeting¹.

From thorough research on the origin, purpose, and application of kata (or more generally, forms), jujitsu historian Donn Draeger considers learning and practicing forms a “normal process of ‘walking before running’ in which efficient movements and technique were first designed, tested, improved, and finally standardized through the media of kata”². He concludes that fighting systems were constructed by consolidation of pre-existing forms and fighting techniques.

Animal–inspired Forms

Forming the basis of many fighting styles, forms in most Chinese fighting systems have been derived from those animal movements and behaviors that were considered responsible for an animal’s efficient fighting tactics. In many Asian cultures, animals are thought to possess natural and sometimes supernatural powers, talents, and skills, which they use for fighting. Martial artists were inspired by the aggressive or defensive temperament of animals that allowed them to survive in harsh physical environments, amidst predators and

competitors. It was therefore reasoned that the best way to fight effectively was by imitating animals.³

The history of many fighting systems is not well documented. Stories on how animal-based forms originated are consequently often anecdotal, being passed down orally from master to student. Because the stories regarding how animals inspired practitioners to develop these forms are largely undocumented, many interpretations of the origins of animal-inspired forms are inconsistent and sometimes biologically inaccurate. For example, inspiration for the praying mantis form supposedly came from observations of a cicada and praying mantis engaged in a “death match.” However, cicadas in real life do not eat other animals but instead feed on plant roots. The cicada’s participation in the “death match” with the mantis is hence limited to playing the role of desperate prey rather than a threatening predator.

While the animal being imitated often gives the name to the technique being performed, it is unclear how some of the forms received their animal-based names. Techniques in the form may be named after an animal because they were developed by a practitioner’s observation of that animal’s movements, or because the practitioner resembled the animal while performing the techniques. In either case, animal movements have been imitated in many martial art forms.

Some forms are based on only the movements of an animal (e.g., praying mantis and eagle claw styles); in other forms both movement and behavior of an animal are mimicked (e.g., monkey style). In some forms not only is movement imitated, but also the animal’s spirit is cultivated and exhibited (e.g., snake, crane). The

snake form, for example, develops internal energy, while the crane style exhibits stability and tranquility, manifested by the ability to stand on one leg without shifting weight.⁴ Often fighting systems combine movements and traits from different animals.

Many Chinese fighting systems originated at the Shaolin Temple⁵, situated on the foothills of Songshan Mountain in Henan province of China. The grasslands and forests near the Shaolin Temple were home to many animals known to have inspired martial art forms, such as praying mantis, tigers, white cranes, monkeys, snakes, and panthers. The admired traits of these animals are commonly applied in forms, known by their namesake as strikes (e.g., crane's beak and eagle's claw), blocks and parries (e.g., praying mantis), stances (e.g., crane stance), and footwork (e.g., monkey steps). The following set of figures show several common Shaolin hand forms named after animal traits and widely used in many of the Asian martial arts.⁶

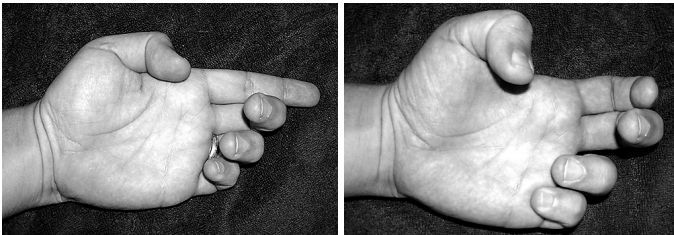


Figure 1: Dragon Claw (two styles)



Figure 2: Elephant Fist and Elephant Head Hand

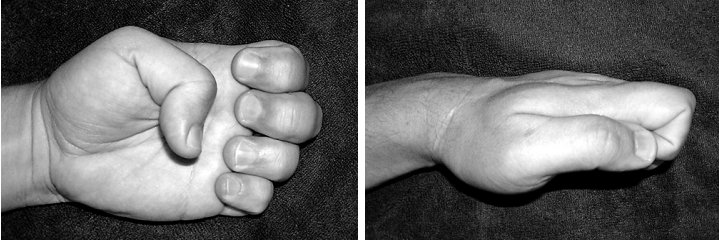


Figure 3: Panther Fist (palm and profile views)

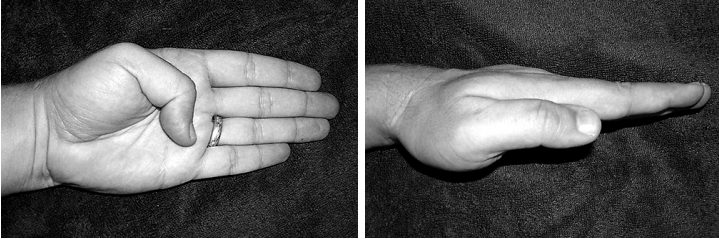


Figure 4: Snake Hand (palm and profile views)

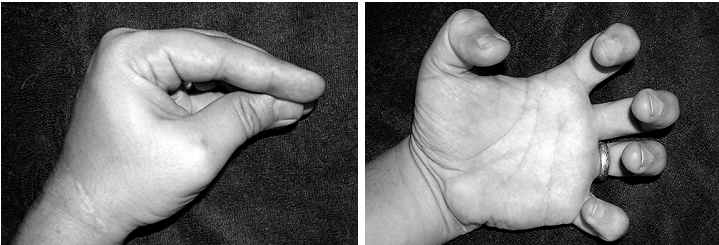


Figure 5: Crane Hand (left) and Tiger Hand (right)

Animal-inspired forms were also created and practiced in Indian, Vietnamese, and Filipino fighting systems. In regions where fighting systems were not directly inspired by animals, such as in Japan and Korea, techniques that imitate animals are nevertheless included in their respective fighting systems. Many taekwondo forms use animal-derived techniques, such as horse, cat and tiger stances, or snake hand, ox jaw and tiger mouth strikes.

Chinese Fighting Systems

Laying the foundation of Shaolin martial arts is the five animal system, based on dragon, tiger, panther, snake, and crane. This system is integral to the Shaolin fighting styles and has influenced many other kung fu styles as well. The five animals represent physical and spiritual traits that are needed for fighting skills to be effective. Shaolin practitioners believed that imitation of the traits of these five animals would contribute to development of inner strength and physical power.⁷



Figure 6: Dragon form

A mythological beast, the dragon, is ranked highest in the hierarchy of animals, with supernatural powers and swift and nimble movements. Yang (1996) summarizes the key traits of each form: The dragon form trains the spirit, exhibiting the ability to focus intent and develop qi. The tiger is known for its strength, its form trains the bones, developing speed and strength. The panther (or leopard) form focuses on cultivating power and speed, while the snake form emphasizes the development of qi. The crane, believed to live long, nurtures life-essence. Its form captures the crane's ability to conserve and protect the essence of the body. The five animal form combines the animals' strength and spirit, establishing internal and external movements of hard and soft techniques.⁸ Executing techniques in these forms allows one to exhibit outward characteristics of the animals such as dragon palm or tiger claw, as well as their inner essence, such as leopard's speed and crane's elegance.⁹

Similarly, one of the supposed origins of tai chi chuan was from observation of the interaction between a bird and a snake. Taoist priest, Jang San Feng, observed that the bird's movements were "sometimes soft, sometimes hard but always quick." These relaxed movements were more in line with his Taoist beliefs than many of the fighting systems that he believed used too much strength and heavy breathing. He developed a system, tai chi chuan, which involves movements that are both soft and hard, both powerful and performed with light relaxed breathing.¹⁰

Likewise, other kung fu forms also imitate animal movements, behavior, and spirit. Among the most popular modern styles are the praying mantis and eagle

claw style, monkey style and crane style.

Praying Mantis Style

The praying mantis system is thought to have been developed by Wong Long, a Shaolin monk, who was inspired by the ability of the predaceous insect to overcome the larger and stronger cicada. Typically, a mantis lures a cicada into striking range and then quickly reaches out with its elongated front legs to grab the hapless prey. Although the original praying mantis system has branched into several styles, they are distinct in imitation of the insect's quick and aggressive fighting tactics, and all include a constantly moving fighting style that calls for changing direction and angle of attack to break the enemy's guard.¹¹

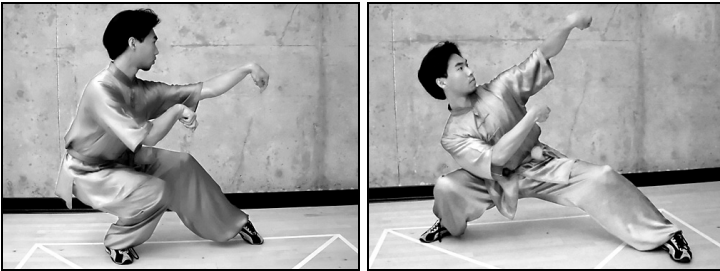


Figure 7: Praying Mantis form

The praying mantis system is based on two fundamental principles: the ability to grab the opponent quickly like the mantis (mantis claw), and agile and balanced footwork (monkey steps) patterned after that of monkeys.¹² The grab was originally done by imitating a praying mantis' front claw, "with the index finger extended forward, supported by the thumb, and the other fingers bent back toward the palm,"¹³ and is used both offensively (e.g., to strike, grab or pull) and

defensively (e.g., in blocks). In lieu of the difficulty of imitating the six-legged footwork of insects, the praying mantis system primarily uses jumping and turning footwork, with strong stances that are patterned after the agile and balanced movements of monkeys to change the angle of attack and close in on an opponent.

Eagle Claw System



Figure 8: Eagle form

Different from many other fighting systems, the purpose of the eagle claw system is not to kill or maim, but to control and temporarily disable the attacker. This system is based on the eagle's cleverness, speed, and strength to trap and hold its prey with its sharp talons. Typically the claw hand (made by folding all fingers into half-clenched position) initially blocks the opponent's attacks, then quickly controls and traps the arms and joints of the opponent into submission. Finally, a strike is dealt to a pressure point somewhere on the body.¹⁴ The kicks involved in this form also center on locking techniques and foot traps. All ten forms in this system are empty-handed and can be applied to disarm and disable a person.

Monkey Style

The monkey style imitates the monkey's speed, agility and playful behavior. Stories on how the monkey form originated vary widely. One anecdote ascribes the form to a martial artist with a short temper, Kao Tse, who was imprisoned for killing a fellow villager during a fight.¹⁵ While in prison, Kao Tse studied a group of fierce monkeys that guarded the exit gates. He observed that each monkey had a different fighting style, and hence developed five different fighting patterns based on these monkeys, one of which is the drunken monkey style. While all monkey forms involve acrobatic tumbling and rolling, this particular drunken monkey form emphasizes acrobatics with low stances giving the appearance of drunkenness. The attacker, deceived into taking advantage of the seemingly drunken monkey, is dodged by the monkey who counterattacks with snap, spring, and thrust kicks or grabbing, locking, and hooking hand work.



Figure 9: Monkey form

The monkey style generally imitates the quick, light steps or short springy steps of monkey's gait.¹⁶ Many of the monkey form techniques are done while lying or rolling on the ground.¹⁷

White Crane Form

Using the crane's sharp beak, powerful wings, and tranquil spirit, the white crane form combines both hard and soft techniques, described by Yang (1996) as "moving the hands soft and reaching the target hard." The crane style is often considered a completely defensive system because the white crane, thought to be a weak animal, never initiates the attack.

Instead, a crane defends itself by dodging and evading an attacker using its ability to jump and fly. Counterattacks utilize the striking power of the wings and accurate, jabbing attacks to vital areas with the dagger-like beak. The footwork of the crane relies on constant evasive movement in low stances with circling techniques. The crane form exhibits tranquility and balance, in imitation of the crane standing on one leg, with wings outstretched, balanced and preparing for an attack. Fists are held like beaks or feathered wing-tips, using one hand to strike and the other to maintain balance or counterattack.

Southeast Asian Fighting Systems

In Vietnamese martial arts, there is a saying, "Enter like the snake, withdraw like the tiger".¹⁸ Like the Chinese forms of the Shaolin monks, the ancient Vietnamese fighting arts known as *vovinam* are also based on animal styles. Vovinam combines five distinct

animal styles into one complete empty-hand fighting system.



Figure 10: A Flying Scissors Kick in Vovinam¹⁹

The animal forms in vovinam are taught in sequence, beginning with tiger, then monkey, crane, panther, and finally snake. Direct movements of power and strength characterize the tiger style. Panther style de-emphasizes power in favor of quick mobility, using many flying kicks. Monkey style utilizes grappling and close infighting techniques, while crane style emphasizes long-reaching circular techniques that include fast parries. Snake style, *xa quyen*, uses fast, deceptive movements emphasizing parries and counters to strike at vital points. The primary technique of snake style is the spear hand, often used to strike the eyes or throat. The snake style of vovinam is distinguished from the snake style of kung fu in that the former style is distinctly characterized by using parries that twist and convert into darting strikes with

a spear hand. Front kicks to the groin and low side kicks to the legs are the primary kicks in the snake style.

Movements of the snake are also found in Filipino martial arts, such as the *Sayawan Apat* form of *kuntaw lima-lima*. Kuntaw is a fighting style in the Philippines that “uses the natural weapons of the body for blocking, striking, kicking, and throwing”.²⁰ In the aforementioned form, the defender exhibits a snake stance accompanied by a knife-hand block to defend against a low snap kick.

Kalarippayattu, an Indian Fighting System

The South Indian martial art, *kalarippayattu*, uses empty-handed techniques to attack, defend, joint lock, and throw opponents. Fundamental to “body preparation” in *kalarippayattu* are exercises that include basic poses, *vadivu*, which are based on the movements and essence of animals. Learning the eight basic poses of animals is a prerequisite to practicing empty-hand combat. The horse pose, *asvavadivu*, emphasizes the ability to “concentrate all powers centrally” while jumping forward with a thrust (e.g. elbow strike). The peacock pose, *mayuravadivu*, demonstrates the ability to balance on one leg, with arms spread like wings, and shifting to the other leg and attack by jumping and flying. The snake pose imitates a snake’s manner of attacking: quickly turning in any direction while standing on its tail firmly planted on the ground. The cock pose develops the ability to use all parts of the body (e.g. wings, neck, legs, fingernails). The essence of the cock is captured in the

description of this pose: “He will lift one leg and shake his feathers and neck, fix his gaze on the enemy, and attack”.²¹

Techniques from Japanese Fighting Systems

Although forms in the Japanese martial arts are not named after animal movements, many hand techniques that use fingers as weapons are nevertheless named after animals. For example, *keito*, or chicken’s beak, of Okinawan Shotokan karate, is a variation of the forefinger spear hand, and is similar to the hooking hand of praying mantis kung fu, though it is used in a stabbing motion as opposed to being dropped down on targets (e.g. collarbone) as done for the praying mantis hooking hand. The middle finger fist, *naka yubi ipponken*, of the *chinte* kata, uses the middle finger as the striking weapon, as done for the phoenix-eye or elephant-nose fist of some Chinese fighting styles.²² Yet another animal-derived technique is the “eagle’s beak hand” of *gojushiho-dai* kata, which is formed when all five fingertips are pressed together to form a striking surface.

Conclusion

Humans have long admired the strength, skill, and spirit of animals that allows them to survive in challenging environments. Martial artists naturally emulated the more effective fighting tactics of animals and incorporated these motions into the techniques of their fighting styles. The exact geographic origins and history of the forms that embrace the qualities of the

animals are often undocumented and controversial. Still, many of the Asian fighting systems have incorporated aspects of animal movements and essence. This is manifested by the prevalence of animal-inspired forms in many of the martial arts. Chinese fighting systems, in particular, have embraced animal movements and spirit in their training as seen in many of the forms named after animals. The Southeast Asian martial arts of India, Vietnam, and the Philippines have also incorporated animal movements in their poses and forms. And to a lesser extent, animal traits have found their way into Japanese and Korean martial arts as strikes and stances in some of their forms.

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Endnotes

- 1 Hung and Klingborg 1999; Yang 1996.
- 2 Draeger.
- 3 Yang.
- 4 Wong and Hallander.
- 5 Yang.
- 6 All photos by Randy Vogel, © 2004.
Thanks to Hao Li for posing for the Shaolin styles.
- 7 Wong and Hallander.
- 8 *Ibidem*.
- 9 Wong, Kit Kiew.
- 10 Hallander, 1985.
- 11 Hallander, 1986.
- 12 *Ibidem*.
- 13 *Ibidem*.
- 14 Hallander, 1985.
- 15 *Ibidem*.
- 16 Xi.
- 17 Ting, 1989.
- 18 Vail.
- 19 Photo courtesy of Vovinam Houston.
- 20 Dowd.
- 21 Zarrilli.
- 22 Lowry.