

GENERAL FEATURES

No-Nonsense Kung-Fu



Written by David Rogers

Hap gar has been among China's most-effective fighting style for more than 300 years. "Hap gar gained a reputation in Canton for being a no-nonsense practical style of kung-fu."

The roots of hap gar date back to the mid-19th century, when Wong Yan-Lum brought his Tibetan crane style of kung-fu to south China. The style gained a reputation in Canton for being a no-nonsense practical style of kung-fu, because it adheres to a set of specific methods and principles.

Natural Movements

All humans are born with instinctive movements (e.g., throwing a stone, flinching, retracting from a hot object, etc.) These are known as *sin tien* (pre-heaven). Movement which is not instinctual and has to be learned is known as *hou tien* (post-heaven). In Western terms, these would be the concepts of "nature" versus "nurture."



Under extreme stress, people resort to natural movements.

This explains why many martial artists with years of training turn to swings, tackles and movements out of character with their style when engaged in real fighting or hard sparring.

Rather than training unnatural movements, hap gar refines the existing reaction and makes it more effective. Therefore *sin tien* and *hou tien* can exist in harmony.

Powerful Strikes

Rather than teaching complex, intricate movements, hap gar first teaches the student to develop power from the waist, and then uses that power in devastating long-range punches that can be learned quickly. Along with generating power, the turning movements of the body increase reach and present a smaller target for the opponent to hit.

Yee pai, a training tool traditionally used to develop power in hap gar, are weights made of stone or wood that are swung in various movement patterns. When I started teaching these moves 20 years ago, people who hadn't tried them thought they would be better off using modern training devices. Now, many athletes and martial artists use kettlebells and realize that the core strength and dynamic power coming from "swings" is amazing.

Actually, some think *yee pai* is even better than the kettlebell for developing punches, because at the end of the swing the fist and wrist have to be tightened to lock the weight into position in alignment with the arm. This develops strength in the forearm that prevents the wrist from buckling, while helping ensure the fist is tightened on impact.

A Complete Fighting System

Years before the advent of mixed martial arts competitions, my sifu, Deng Jan Gong, gave me a Chinese fan. On the gift he included this calligraphy: "To be a complete fighter, you must train in *tek, da, sut, na, dit.*"

1. Tek or Kicking: Hap gar trains a variety of low and high kicks and knee strikes.
2. Da or Striking: Trained are long-range swinging blows (open hooks, overhands, backhands), close-range punches, elbows, shoulder bumps and headbutts.
3. Sut or Wrestling: Techniques from Mongolian wrestling, including leg seizing, body locking, hooking, etc., plus defense against those same techniques.
4. Na or Seizing: Chokes and jointlocks.
5. Dit or Falling: This includes breakfalls, plus trips and sweeps.

Like MMA combatants, hap gar practitioners have realized that best fighters train as complete fighters. However,

there are differences to their MMA brethren:

1. *Submission*—In self-defense there is no submission; the purpose of a lock is to damage bones or tendons. Some techniques that would cause a person to “tap out” in competition may not stop him in a life or death battle.
2. *Injury First*—When executing a takedown, priority is given to throws that will cause injury. Wherever possible, the hap gar fighter tries to remain standing. In an environment where weapons and multiple opponents may be present, the key is to remain mobile and look for an escape.
3. *Attacking vital points*—The targets deemed illegal in a sport match are the primary targets for self-defense. Tiger claws to the face and throat, seizing and kicking to the groin, and attacks to the eyes and joints must be trained and also their defences have to be instinctive.
4. *Weapons*—Traditional kung-fu includes weapons training. Learning how to use them is useful both in terms of being better able to defend against them, or being able to pick up or improvise a weapon in an emergency.

Hap Gar Fighting Principles

The student is taught five key words in the *Deng* family hap gar. These describe the vital attributes needed to prevail in an all-out self-defense encounter:

1. *Faai* or Fast

In the open phase of fighting (before the fighters have closed to grappling range), speed usually determines the winner. If you can hit first, and keep hitting, you stand a good chance of winning the fight. Most hap gar forms are performed at full speed.

2. *Jun* or Accurate

If your opponent is bigger and stronger, fast blows will do no good if they are not landing on vulnerable areas. You must continually train your strikes for accuracy. For example, put small marks on punch bags, focus mitts and dummies so that in fighting you are always aiming at specific targets rather than simply flailing away.

1. *Ging* or Power

If you are faster than your opponent and your strikes are accurate, it is possible to beat somebody who is more powerful than you. But you still need enough power to damage the targets at which you are aiming. In a real fight, power is a huge factor; you need a considerable difference in skill to offset a difference in power. This is why there are weight categories in combat sports.

Power is gained by weight training the *yee pai* and iron rings, practicing with heavy weapons, hitting bags and pads, and by specialized chi kung exercises.

1. *Ngan* or Hard

According to my sifu, “When metal meets wood, metal wins.” That means when the limbs of two fighters clash, conditioning is more important than style. A professional cage fighter or Thai boxer would go through a recreational kung-fu practitioner like a hot knife through butter, because he is conditioned to hard impact.

Hap gar features a large number of exercises for toughening the body, including partner striking and blocking drills, wooden dummy, iron palm and hitting the body with bags filled with progressively harder substances.

1. *Hun* or Cruel

If you want to understand fighting, it is important to watch actual fights, not just choreographed movies. The inescapable fact is that a real fight is brutal and ugly. If you try to use your kung-fu in a deliberately stylized way, or fight without intent to injure your opponent, you will surely lose to a stronger, more aggressive foe

Hap Gar Today

When you perform your movements with the vicious intent they require, you will find that many defensive moves that work really well in sticky hands or play sparring are next to impossible to apply for real. Hap gar emphasizes moves that work against a vicious, cruel attacker. Thus, students practice their forms with the same spirit.

Hap gar is a complete, traditional kung-fu style that encompasses hand and weapon forms, chi kung, lion dancing and the cultural aspects inherent in all Chinese styles. Hap gar gained its reputation for superb fighting, because the practitioners used it on a regular basis. Today, protective equipment makes it feasible to train techniques more realistically, but safely. Using modern mats, face masks, MMA gloves and padded weapons help practitioners gain a feel for what techniques work at full speed and power. At least students know that in the

event of an attack, they have the skills necessary to fight back. Plus, their reaction will be to use practical, pressure-tested techniques, rather than movements that they have only practiced against an imaginary opponent. This keeps hap gar alive and well in the modern era.

Bionote:

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