

## The 'Long Arms' of Hap Gar

The roots of Hap gar date back to the mid 19th Century, when WongYan-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. In a previous article we looked at the different skill sets within the system, now we will focus on one of the most characteristic features of the style: The use of long range swinging type punches.

### Powerful swinging arms

Inspired by the flapping wings of the white crane defending her nest from a predatory ape- the long range strategy of the style is "To keep the opponent at a distance with long punches and kicks, use evasive footwork rather than blocking, and to aim all strikes at vulnerable points"

If your goal is to defend yourself- then long range fighting gives you the most opportunity for escape. In a street situation the fight may begin or rapidly move into close range, so Hap Gar also has an arsenal of short range strikes, throws and defenses against grabs etc. In this article we are concentrating on the long arm techniques, but realize that they are only one piece of a complete self defense method.

In the Kung Fu styles of South China, especially Canton, several styles use the 'long bridge'. The Hap Gar, Lama and White Crane systems as well as the Choy Lay Fut style use them as their main method. Other systems such as Hung Gar have incorporated the long bridges to compliment their own techniques, as in the famous 'Tiger and Crane' form, for example.

The motion of the long arm strike is a swing rather than a thrust. The fist moves in a long arc on the way to the target. Think of a slingshot with the fist as the stone. The arm is relaxed and the force is generated from the hips turning. The long arm punches are thrown from a variety of angles, both forehand and backhand and usually in combinations. They often come from outside the opponents line of vision, making them difficult to defend against.

This kind of strike would not be efficient in Western style boxing because the rules and large gloves favour a tight defensive stance, and this stance is better suited for thrusting type punches. However, in 'no holds barred' type fights, the defense cannot be so tight firstly because without large gloves, a bare fist or MMA glove can get around a boxing type defense and secondly because the fighter also has to worry about kicks, takedowns and clinches.

Some boxers have criticized MMA striking for its 'swings' and 'hay makers' but actually this is a valid way to strike if the rules allow punch, kick, grab and wrestle. When my Sifu originally explained this to me- and before I had found out the truth of it for myself in hard sparring- I found it a little difficult to appreciate. Now you can see the truth of this for yourself: Watch a 'left hook' or an 'overhand right' in boxing then in MMA: It's not the same technique. The range, power generation, stance and set up are all different. In the chaos of a street self defense situation, where there are no rules; the strikes will often look pretty much like Hap Gar strikes. This is

because these movements are very primal. They are a natural way to create an 'exclusion zone' around the body and generate a lot of power.

Consider the Thai round kick: This is one of the most feared blows in martial arts yet it is:

1: 'Telgraphed' by a turn of the foot and a shift of the body before delivery

2: Thrown in a big swing, making it slower than the 'snappy' kicks of Taekwondo or Karate.

On paper it doesn't seem so good, does it? So why is this kick a staple of every 'full contact' fighter? In a word: POWER.

The same with the 'Long Bridges': If you try them in *chi sau* or play fighting, your opponent can often counter them rather easily. Yet, if you throw them with full power, and the 'ruthless intent' that they require- your opponent will usually be too worried about keeping his head on his shoulders to counter!

So what is the difference between mere untrained flailing, and the scientific application of the 'Long Bridges'?

### **Firstly, balance:**

An untrained person who swings a wild punch will often lose their balance if they miss. For a Hap Gar stylist, correct use of the hips and stance maintains balance, often by counterbalancing with the non striking arm or shortening of the striking arc. This takes some practice.

### **Secondly, conditioning:**

If you are untrained, swinging your arm at somebody with full power will probably hurt your arm more than your opponents head! The key is systematic conditioning of the striking surfaces of the fist and forearm, which is achieved by striking pads, dummies and partners in various conditioning drills.

### **Thirdly, 'set up':**

By their nature, these strikes would be considered 'telegraphic'. No real opponent is going to stand still while you wind up and fire a big swing at them! There are two solutions to this: One is to shorten the blows, so you learn to deliver power in a shorter movement, thus making it hard for the opponent to see it coming. This is the 'Short Bridge' method. The 'Long Bridge' method takes another approach: Instead of trying to throw the strikes non-telegraphically, the strikes are thrown in such a way that each strike incorporates the 'wind up' for the next. The strikes are blended within the continual motion of the arms, where the attacking and defensive motions seamlessly connect, and the arms strike from a variety of angles, making them difficult to defend against.

The key for achieving this lies in the footwork: The stance is never placed directly in front of the opponent where straight blows would prevail. Rather, the body is

continually shifted from side to side, attacking the opponent from his 'side doors' and using 'triangular stepping'.

In a real fight, as opposed to sparring or competition, there is no 'pacing'; feeling the opponent out with jabs etc. The goal is to finish and get out as quickly as possible- this kind of 'barrage' attack does exactly that.

### **Basic Long Arm strikes:**

Here we will look at six of the most common 'swinging' blows. I have divided them into three pairs : Diagonal, horizontal and vertical.

Firstly, there is a special fist formation used with the long strikes. The more common fist with the thumb across the index and middle finger would result in the thumb becoming injured on contact. So the thumb is tightly pressed to the top of the fist.

#### 1. Kup Choi. (Covering punch)

This is an overhand strike connecting with the inside knuckles. The arc begins from behind the back and ends with the wrist at the opposite hip. The target is in the middle of the arc and the rest is a 'follow through' motion.

#### 2: Gwa Choi. (Hanging punch)

This is a backhanded strike thrown at a 45 degree downward angle, striking with the back of the fist. The arc begins from the opposite hip and finishes behind the back- the opposite of the 'kup Choi'.

#### 3: Lam Choi. (Hugging punch)

This is a horizontal inward swing, striking with the inside knuckles. The arc begins from behind the back and ends with the forearm across the abdomen.

#### 4: Bin Choi. (Whipping punch)

This is a horizontal backhand swing, striking with the back of the knuckles. The arc begins from across the abdomen and finishes behind the back- the opposite of 'Lam Choi'

#### 5: Pow Choi. (Throwing punch)

This is an uppercut strike and may be performed palm up or down. The palm up variety strikes with the inside knuckles, beginning below the waist and finishing higher than the head.

#### 6: Pek Choi. (Chopping punch)

This is a downward strike, striking with the back of the fist. The strike begins from above the head and finishes below the waist- the opposite of 'Pow Choi.'

### **Exercises for developing long arm power:**

The first thing to understand is that power comes from speed, and the looser the shoulder joint, the more 'whipping force' will be generated.

The first stage is to stand in a bow stance and swing the arm forwards and backwards rapidly in a complete circle. The bicep should brush close to the ear. Keep the hand open and relaxed. If you perform this exercise correctly you will feel the blood rush into your fingers. Start with about 20 circles each direction then switch stances. Aim to gradually build up the speed and repetitions to about 100.

The second stage is the 'Yee Pai' weights. You can use a dumbbell, but the traditional weight is better because it also strengthens the wrist and fingers. There are many exercises, but here one simple exercise is shown: Turning the waist, swinging the weight and catching it at the top. This will strengthen the 'core' muscles, enabling the transmission of power from the legs into the fist.

The third stage is using a sandbag. Now the student has a flexible shoulder and powerful waist turn, its time to add a 'plyometric' element to add explosiveness to the strike. Instead of a medicine ball, Hap Gar uses a cloth bag filled with sand. The advantage of this is that you can practice the forehand and backhand throws. Perform the six basic strikes and try to throw the bag as far as you can, or against a wall as hard as you can. A fun game is to practice with a partner, catching and throwing to each other.

The fourth stage is hitting the pads. I think a modern 'focus mitt' is best for this. Most people tense up too much for these strikes, so a good idea is to start by using an open hand to slap the focus mitt with a 'heavy' feeling in the arm. Then make a fist but keep the arm loose until the moment of contact. The fist is squeezed tight for a fraction of a second, then the whole arm is loose again. Gradually increase the speed and power of the strike, but keep the loose, heavy feeling. Within a surprisingly short time of practice- a great deal of power can be developed.

### **Conclusion:**

Now you have a sense of the long arm strikes and how to develop power in them, the next step would be training them in combinations and adding the footwork. This would be the subject of a future article.

About the author:

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Photos:

1: Kup Choi a: David seizes John's wrist and pulls him at an angle to off balance him.



2: Kup Choi b: David follows with a Kup Choi.



3: Gwa Choi a: Moving to the outside of John's punch, David throws a 'Gwa Choi' which both parries the attack-



4: Gwa Choi b: and strikes in one motion.



5: Lam Choi a: The principle of 'countering the straight with the curved' is seen in this 'Lam Choi'



6: Lam Choi b: Here you can see the 'follow through' of the punch.



7: Bin Choi a: The spin is set up with a low 'hook sweep' kick.



8: Bin Choi b: The kick's momentum continues into the 'Bin Choi' strike.



9: Pow Choi a: John's punch is parried to the outside-



10: Pow choi b: The left 'Pow Choi' fires straight up the middle.



11: Pek Choi a: The downward chopping punch simultaneously defends the body and attacks the opponent's arm in this application.



12: Pek Choi b: The 'follow through' which opens the opponent up to a continual barrage of strikes.



13: Pad exercise a: Practising 'Kup Choi' on a focus mitt.



14: Pad exercise b: You can see the follow through and how much the pad is moved by the strike.



15: Sandbag exercise with a partner. 5kg of sand strengthens the grip and develops explosive power in the arms.



16: Pow choi exercise with the 'Yee Pai' weights: The weights are alternately swung and held stationary at the top. The weights weigh from 5 to more than 25kg.

