

The Martial Arts Library

by Liam Keeley

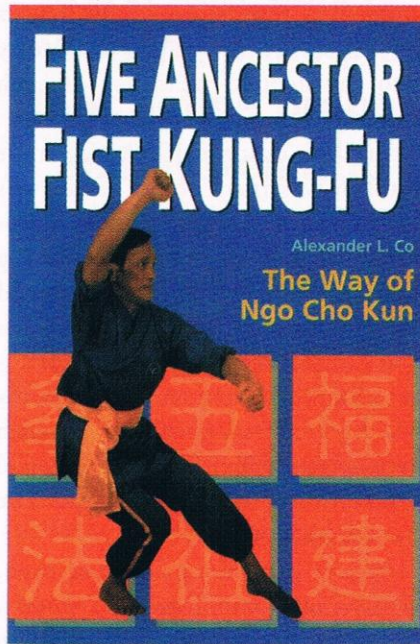
"The Martial Arts Library" is a monthly review of books and videos on martial arts and related topics. If you would like your book or video reviewed, please send us two copies care of Mr. Keeley.

Five Ancestor Fist Kung-Fu: The Way of Ngo Cho Kun

by Alexander L. Co
(Tuttle Publishing, 1997)

As far as I know, this is the first book on five ancestor fist kung-fu to be published in English, and I think many of those who practice Okinawan karate, particularly Uechi-ryu and Goju-ryu, will find it of great interest. Even a cursory glance will establish many points in common with Okinawan karate: the *sam chien/sanchin* stances and forms, the technique known as "holding the shield" in ngo cho and as "tiger mouth" or *tora guchi/mawashi uke* in karate, and the use of the weapon known as the *sang te pi* in ngo cho and the *sai* in karate, to give just a few examples.

Mr. Co tells us that the art of ngo cho kun is a "Shaolin" martial art from Fukien province, China, and we know many famous Okinawan masters traveled to Fukien to study Chinese martial arts, among them Higashionna Kanryo, and later his pupil Miyagi Chojun (who later found Goju-ryu), as well as Uechi Kanei of the Uechi-ryu. The author states that Miyagi probably settled in the central or southern region of China, where he studied ngo cho kun. As far as I know, Miyagi Chojun never actually spent much time in China. He is believed to have visited Fukien in an unsuccessful attempt to



make contact with Higashionna's teacher, and to have visited the Tsing Wu Athletic Association in Shanghai, which was founded by the legendary Huo Yuan-chia. I, too, have heard the story that he was exposed to pa kua, and like Mr. Co, I tend to discount it. Mr. Patrick McCarthy, in his recently published *Bubishi*, states that he believes that Higashionna's teacher, Ryuru Ko, was a shoemaker named Xie Zhongxiang and the founder of whooping crane gongfu.

I have also heard it suggested that Ryuru Ko practiced tai cho (grand ancestor boxing), and an elderly Chinese practitioner of tai cho interviewed in Penang, Malaysia in 1979 by the International Hopology Society's field research team gave a genealogy which seemed to confirm this. I personally believe that there was probably a fair amount of overlap involved, in that the same person may

well have practised several styles, either consecutively or simultaneously. Cross training is nothing new, and styles from a certain area may well have shared many characteristics in common, as the result of local customs and culture, not to mention the physical environment itself.

According to Mr. Co, ngo cho kun is derived from five different styles (including white crane and grand ancestor boxing) and consists of 44 empty-hand forms, 12 weapons, strength and conditioning training, pre-arranged fighting drills, and free-sparring practices. Later he explains that the forms are divided into two categories; either *chien* (tension) or *kun* (fist) forms. (A similar division exists in Goju-ryu karate, between *sanchin* and *tensho* on the one hand, and the other traditional forms).

The book shows a representative form from each category. On the technical side, the most interesting thing that I noted was the use of a waist twisting movement in the *sam chien* form, presumably done so as to lend more power to the subsequent strike. I have not encountered this movement in my practice of Goju-ryu, nor have I observed it in Uechi-ryu—though since my knowledge of Uechi-ryu is limited, I suppose I could have missed it. But this is, I think, a point of technical difference. My whole image of Goju-ryu and Uechi-ryu is of styles which keep the upper body facing toward the opponent. I'd be interested to learn more about the rationale involved here.

As for the weight training exercises, the iron or stone weights known as *chio so* seem to be the exact equivalent

of the Okinawan *sashi*. A list of the weapons used in ngo cho kun is given, and there are photographs of some of the weapons. The *sai/sang te pi* is shown, as are a variety of staff weapons, the straight sword, and the plum spear, as well as a weapon with the intriguing name of the horse cutting knife, which seems to be the equivalent of the Japanese *nagamaki*.

To sum up, this book would probably be of most interest to those practicing Okinawan karate or perhaps a related Fukien province fighting art. It certainly helps fill a gap in our knowledge of the fighting arts which originated in Fukien, among which clearly we can count Uechi-ryu and Goju-ryu.