

# The Rhythm of Combat: Understanding the Role of Music in Performances of Traditional Chinese Martial Arts and Lion Dance

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*Abstract: Toronto's Hong Luck Kung Fu Club has promulgated martial arts, lion dance and percussion music since 1961. Drawing on my fieldwork there, this paper argues that these practices structure—and are structured by—a combative approach to rhythm. Students begin with martial arts and train without music, but percussion accompanies public demonstrations, creating an unfamiliar situation that I position as a distinct phase of the transmission process. Martial arts performances are both fuelled by musical energy and challenged by the requirement of remaining asynchronous to it. Lion dancers, however, treat drum patterns like signals coordinating manoeuvres on the performance battlefield.*

*Résumé: Le club de kung fu Hong Luck de Toronto met de l'avant, depuis 1961, les arts martiaux, la danse du lion et la musique à base de percussions. À partir du travail de terrain que j'y ai effectué, j'avance dans cet article que ces pratiques structurent—et sont structurées par—une approche combattive du rythme. Les étudiants commencent par les arts martiaux et s'entraînent sans musique, mais les percussions qui accompagnent les démonstrations publiques créent une situation inédite que je situe comme une phase distincte du processus de transmission. Les performances d'arts martiaux sont alimentées par l'énergie de la musique en même temps qu'elles sont contrariées par l'exigence de rester asynchrones à celle-ci. Par contre, ceux qui effectuent la danse du lion se servent des schémas rythmiques comme de signaux pour coordonner leurs manœuvres sur ce champ de bataille qu'est la représentation.*

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In the fall of 2008, I walked through the door of Toronto, Canada's Hong Luck Kung Fu Club (康樂武館) and expressed my desire to study the gong and drum music (鑼鼓) used to accompany lion dance (舞獅) and martial arts (武術).<sup>1</sup> The teacher running the small beginner class that night accepted my agenda with little more than a raised eyebrow, but then informed me that I would have to start by training in the basics of Chinese kung fu, just like everyone else. This simple exchange marked the

beginning of my fieldwork at Hong Luck. It also provided my first insight into a transmission process where kung fu training is both the physical foundation and core context for a group of interrelated disciplines. These practices include both choreographed sequences of combative movements and free sparring, as well as lion dancing and percussion music. Although I had studied various martial arts since I began training at the age of six, and had already achieved advanced proficiency in the *Wing Chun* style of kung fu (詠春拳), this was the first time I had encountered such an interdisciplinary system. Southern Chinese lion dance is usually accompanied by a gong and drum ensemble. It is somewhat rarer, however, to see demonstrations of kung fu accompanied by live percussion, and there is a lack of scholarly work on this phenomenon. This paper introduces the overall transmission process at Hong Luck in order to show the way it constructs the role of percussion music in accompanying performances of lion dance and demonstrations of martial arts. I argue that training in fighting skills as a foundation for dance and music fosters a combative relationship to rhythm that is embodied in performers' continuous negotiation of synchronization.

The Chinese word *kung fu* (功夫) connotes martial arts, but its more literal translation is skill achieved through hard work. The broader application of this word could also include things like calligraphy or tea ceremonies, which also take years of focused practice to achieve expertise. Encompassing both meanings of kung fu, the emphasis at Hong Luck is on diligent training as the key to progress in martial arts. Lion dance is no less demanding in the amount of physical effort required to learn it, but builds on the foundation established by basic kung fu exercises. In fact, lion dance—and the percussion music used to accompany it—takes on a distinctively martial character through Hong Luck's transmission process, which informs the way performances are organized.

The teaching and learning of music remains an important topic in ethnomusicology (e.g., Rice 2003; Wong 2004; Nettl 2005; Wrazen 2010), to which I contribute a kung fu perspective that builds on the subarea of musical martial arts epitomized by Greg Downey's (2002) work with the Brazilian dance-fight-game, *capoeira*. Studying this type of music requires a careful consideration of the training process because systems of physical cultivation do more than just teach people how to move; they inscribe the body with ideas, values and beliefs. Susan Leigh Foster has discussed this in regards to dance, while also extending her analysis to include sport, etiquette and other "physical-culture pursuits" (1997: 236). Although she does not cite him, I suggest that there are parallels with Bourdieu's well-known concept of *habitus* (1977 [1972]), as well as Tomie Hahn's (2007) work on the transmission of

*sensational knowledge* in Japanese dance.<sup>2</sup> Foster argues that the body exists through its physical organization, spatial positioning and temporal activity. Processes of corporeal instruction like dance or martial arts are long term, intensive and repetitive, which teach a practitioner to embody the essential discourses or tropes of a particular movement style. Foster maintains that “The daily practical participation of a body in any of these disciplines makes of it a *body-of-ideas*,” and she proposes first analyzing the methods used to form bodily consciousness and then situating this corporeal awareness within a specific moment (*italics added*, 1997: 236). As I will explain, Hong Luck’s kung fu training casts the physical, conceptual and rhythmic foundation of their drumming as a department of the martial arts.

The practical logic that undergirds economical, durable and non-conscious dispositions in Bourdieu’s structuring-structures (1990 [1980]) is a useful theoretical tool, but has also been critiqued for its potential to be treated as monolithic and/or static (Spencer 2009; Downey 2010). This criticism is particularly salient in situations where people take up a practice (like martial arts) that requires them to actively change an already-formed habitus. Downey (2010) has drawn on a neuroanthropological approach to investigate the heterogeneous and uneven progress of bodily enculturation in capoeira, and Dale Spencer has called a mixed martial arts fighter’s habitus a “lived-through structure-in-process that is continually subject to change through the learning of additional body techniques” (Spencer 2009: 120). Both of these interventions are in line with Sara Delamont and Neil Stephens’ work on diasporic capoeira that nuances how “a person’s biology, and biography, gives him or her a unique habitus” while also being “shaped by the collective history of any group(s) to which he or she belongs” (2008: 59). I follow these scholars in recognizing the value of Bourdieu’s practice theory, but also opening it up to the emergent qualities of lived experience.

Adopting Foster’s method, I begin by introducing the training processes for martial arts and lion dancing, which both discipline the body with rhythm. They do so in distinct ways, however, inflected by divergent ideas about rhythmic synchronization in combat versus those in dance. A kung fu body must control the rhythm of a physical confrontation for strategic purposes, whereas lion dancers’ movement is dictated by musical patterns. Rhythmic knowledge thus inscribed on practitioners’ bodies is manifested in martial arts demonstrations and lion dancing, accompanied by percussion, where violence and performance, confrontation and cooperation merge. In this paper, I argue that Hong Luck’s transmission process structures—and is structured by—the rhythm of combat, which provides a guide for understanding the role of music in their performances.

## Kung Fu as a Blurred Genre and Methodological Guide

The term *martial art* can be used in a general sense to indicate a wide variety of human combative behaviour, but tends to imply systems that include elements other than fighting skills. Before proceeding with my discussion of Hong Luck's practices, it is therefore necessary to clarify some terminology. The broader usage of the compound word *martial art* includes things like the US Marine Corp Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) and mixed martial arts (MMA) cage fighting competitions like the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). These could more specifically be called military combatives (Svinth 2003) and combat sports (Downey 2007), respectively. I will use martial art in a narrower sense to refer to "systems that blend the physical components of combat with strategy, philosophy, tradition, or other features that distinguish them from pure physical reaction" (Green 2001: xvi). This puts *art* on more equal footing with *martial*, which can further be explained as "stylized behaviours that relate to war," but that encompass "combat, ritual, and performance" (Jones 2002: xi-xii).

*Choi Lee Fut* (蔡李佛) and *Do Pi* (道派) are the two main styles of martial arts practised at Hong Luck, and they encompass more than just fighting techniques. They both have their origins in China's Guangdong province, but were founded during the late Qing dynasty (1644-1911 CE) and early Republican era (1912-1949 CE) respectively. At my fieldwork site, there is considerable overlap between them, so I will deal with them as a unit. These styles of kung fu, like many Southern Chinese systems, incorporate combat skills, martial performance, lion dance ritual and percussion music into a cohesive whole. Studying the musical aspect of Hong Luck's interdisciplinary practice thus benefits from an inclusive approach. The concept of *blurred genre* applies here, as introduced by Geertz (1983) in regards to the blurring of academic disciplines and genres, but adopted first by J. Lowell Lewis (1992), and then by Greg Downey to describe capoeira's "combining elements of dance, folklore, martial art, sport, ritual, and training for unarmed (and sometimes armed) fighting" (Downey 2002: 490). Approaching Hong Luck's practices as a blurred genre is also consistent with other research that examines interdisciplinary and style-crossing practices (Rasmussen 1997; Sala-Boza 2007).

Not all kung fu systems are as broadly based as Hong Luck's, but others are even more diverse. As a result, scholars have variously attempted to categorize the Chinese martial arts as fundamentally combative (Henning 1999; Lorge 2012) or as religion-infused drama (Holcombe 2002). Given the diversity of extant kung fu styles—and China's long, recorded martial history—a blanket, agreed upon, normative characterization is virtually impossible. In

the specific case of the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club, the ideal practitioner can fight both empty-handed and with an array of melee weapons; demonstrate choreographed martial arts routines; perform the lion dance as entertainment and as ritual; play the instruments used to accompany the aforementioned demos and dances; and instruct others in all of these practices. Not everyone has the interest, aptitude or energy to participate in everything, however, so Hong Luck members often end up specializing in one or more areas, which can change over time for those who continue training over decades. The important point is that the club as a whole provides a context that presents Hong Luck's various practices as a single blurred genre.

My research methodology has been strongly influenced by the well-established, interdisciplinary curriculum at my fieldwork site, and I have participated in all aspects of Hong Luck's practices. As mentioned in the introduction of this paper, I went there to study drumming, but becoming an apprentice drummer occurs over a period of years, and requires a foundation built by arduous physical training in kung fu and lion dance. To give an idea of the timescale involved, it was not until I had been training there for almost five years that I began to be given regular opportunities to play the drum for classes and performances. Meanwhile, I began playing the supporting instruments for gigs in my first few months, started performing the lion dance in my first year and was called on to demonstrate kung fu at banquets beginning in my second year. On the road to achieving bi-musicality (Hood 1960), participant-observation thus gave me ample time to develop a kung fu habitus through training. I was also steeped in the experience of the drumming through performance ethnography (Wong 2008; further to Denzin 2003) long before I ever got to play the drum myself. As a result of this progression, my interpretation of Hong Luck's music is wrapped up in my experience of the transmission process. It is also informed by my previous background in other martial arts, my formal education as a musician and my own bias towards a balance of aesthetic and combative concerns. Notwithstanding any idiosyncrasies in my subject position and the emergent nature of habitus—kung fu or otherwise—my embodied knowledge has been deemed acceptable by my seniors and elders at Hong Luck. As evidence of this, by late 2013, I had been invited to be a junior instructor for kung fu, lion dance and drumming.

## Martial Arts Training: Building a Warrior Body

In 1961, Master Paul Chan (陳郁師傅) and several associates formed the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club in Toronto's downtown Chinatown. Their initial focus was

on self-defence, and they worked together to strengthen themselves against the racial discrimination that was common in that era. Their mandate eventually grew to include preserving and promoting traditional Chinese martial arts.<sup>3</sup> The organization now has over 1000 members from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds. While only 40 to 60 people are active on a weekly basis, the annual anniversary parade and banquet in August regularly attracts up to 500 juniors, seniors, elders, alumni and affiliates. The club occupies a narrow, three-story building at 548 Dundas Street West, with the street level being dedicated to kung fu and the upper floors providing a meeting place for the elders. Although Master Paul Chan passed away in 2012, Hong Luck continues to offer classes six days a week under the guidance of co-founding Master Jin Chan (陳振師傅) and a group of senior students.

Combining Choi Lee Fut with Do Pi has resulted in an extensive curriculum where choreographed martial arts routines called *forms* (套路) occupy a privileged position. There are reputed to be over 100 such sets within the combined repertoire of the association's membership, though only about 20 are typically being transmitted and practised at any given time. These patterns of fighting movements are taught, and subsequently practised, either solo or in pairs, and either empty-handed or with an assortment of archaic weapons. The purposes of forms training are several. On the one hand, they constitute a type of foundational training, and repetitive drilling is used to build endurance, strength, flexibility and self-discipline. In this sense, these routines act as an encyclopaedia of postures, techniques and combinations that—once ingrained in students bodies—become the basis of Hong Luck's kung fu syllabus. On the other hand, these same forms are used for public martial arts demonstrations where they become performative acts that turn training routines into combative displays.

During my time at Hong Luck, the thrice-weekly beginner classes have featured a mix of basic stances, punches, kicks, blocks and choreographed martial arts forms, in comparison to the weekly advanced class that tended to focus primarily on forms alone. Senior students took turns teaching the beginner classes, though a teacher named Quang Thang consistently taught the Tuesday night session. He was largely responsible for the foundational training that remoulded my body for success at Hong Luck. Quang's gruelling workouts proceeded at a methodical pace, as he verbally counted out repetitions of basic techniques and anywhere from five to fifteen sweaty students strived to perform them to his satisfaction. At first, training proceeded with one move for each count to make it easier for students to drill in time together. Beginner class was—and remains—dedicated to foundations training, but actually included people with various levels of proficiency (not just novices).

When there were new people in the class, the flow of practice was thus often disrupted by clarifications and demonstrations. As learners became more experienced, and there was less need for explanation, Quang's spoken counting set a more regular pulse.

This keeping together in time promotes what William Hardy McNeill (1995) calls *muscular bonding*. In his study of dance and drill, he found that physical synchrony makes shared exertion more pleasurable by promoting social cohesion, such as with work songs sung by chain gangs in the southern US, or the cadence calls used in military bootcamp. McNeill argues that this sort of rhythmic drilling not only organizes the physical processes, but also helps to develop *esprit de corps* and even a sense of euphoria. As a beginner, I found Hong Luck's basic training quite painful, despite my background in other martial arts. It was difficult holding deep stances, working through hundreds of repetitions of techniques and struggling to catch my breath when the air was filled with smoke from incense burning on Hong Luck's altar. Sometimes my struggle was literally to the point of agony, but that forged self-discipline through having to use willpower to continue despite protests from my muscles, joints and lungs. Quang's classes could also be euphoric, however, when there was a group of people who knew the drills, followed the spoken count precisely and worked at a mutually beneficial pace.

The movements of choreographed forms were practised in the same way as basic techniques, broken down move-by-move. Yet as we became more experienced, Quang's spoken counting for these routines began to outline not only a pulse, but also groupings of techniques that suggested rhythmic possibilities. Once we had developed a certain level of physical fluency, Quang told us to combine movements into small phrases that subdivided the flow into several moves per verbal count. At that stage of training, there was a natural push away from group synchronization inside each combination as practitioners of differing ability started together, but then performed the small sequences of movement at their own individual pace. This was followed by a pull back to renewed togetherness on Quang's next count. The push-and-pull hinted at a tension between the organized timing of group training and the eventual necessity of maintaining an independent tempo and pattern for not only combative applications, but also martial arts demonstrations. I will deal with the issue of timing in combat now, and will return to the issue of (a)synchronicity in performance later in this paper.

The rhythmic character of martial arts training became both more obvious—and more urgent—for students who joined the sparring class, where we were taught to apply techniques in semi-free practice. These two-hour sessions did not contain any choreographed forms, but instead

focused on drilling short combinations of attack, defence and counterattack that built on the skills acquired in beginner class. Learners therefore had to have their basic martial art abilities recognized by one of the teachers before they were allowed to join the sparring sessions. We primarily practised techniques by shadowboxing in the mirrors and applying full-power strikes to hanging sandbags or hand-held pads. We also trained in pairs using pre-arranged reaction drills, and occasionally donned protective gear to engage in controlled-yet-free fighting.

Adrian, the sparring coach and a Canadian national *sanda* (散打) kick-boxing champion, emphasized the combative significance of rhythm for these exercises. He often used vocables or physically demonstrated ways of varying the temporal organization of a combination of techniques, which he said made an attack more likely to succeed by being unpredictable. While Adrian did not use terminology from music theory in his teaching, he encouraged me to do so in writing as a way of clarifying his embodied knowledge. As an example, a common, three-punch combination (lead backfist, rear straight and lead overhand) within a single span of combat-time could be: arranged evenly as a triplet, syncopated as 16th-8th-16th, grouped as an 8th followed by two 16ths, embellished as a grace note on the first of two 8ths, or rushed into a flurry of three 16ths (sometimes even three 32nds). In Fig. 1, I have transcribed these patterns in music notation. The notes above the line indicate the lead hand and those below are for the rear hand.

Verbal counting in sparring class was rare and we students had to find our own internal tempo. The sights and sounds of training, however, combined

backfist-straight-overhand combos

The figure shows five musical staves, each labeled 'Punches' on the left. The title 'backfist-straight-overhand combos' is centered above the staves. Each staff contains a rhythmic sequence of notes on a single line, representing punches. The notes are: 1) a quarter note above the line, a quarter note below the line, and a quarter note above the line, followed by a quarter rest; 2) a quarter note below the line, a quarter note above the line, and a quarter note below the line, followed by a quarter rest; 3) a quarter note above the line, a quarter note below the line, and a quarter note below the line, followed by a quarter rest; 4) a quarter note above the line with a grace note above it, a quarter note above the line, and a quarter note below the line, followed by a quarter rest; 5) a quarter note below the line, a quarter note above the line, a quarter note below the line, and a quarter note below the line, followed by a quarter rest.

Fig. 1. ChoiLee Fut punching combination transcription.

to manifest the rhythm of combat through strikes landing, attacks being defended, footwork and breathing. Tempo during drills was fairly regular, but in antagonistic partner training, it tended to fluctuate as people sped up to take advantage of an opening or slowed down to conserve energy. In cooperative partner drills, we synchronized our timing to practise defence, so that each strike was met with a



homorhythmic evasion or block. When practising offence or counterattacks, however, we learned to use asynchronous attacks that were out of phase or syncopated against the opponent's defence. The ultimate application came in free sparring, where we got first-hand experience with the rhythm of combat. Significantly, the fundamental kung fu training that served as the basis for these combative applications was also the foundation for the lion dance.

## Lion Dance and Percussion: Martial Music through Movement

Scholars like Wanyu Liu (1981), Madeline Slovenz-Low (1994), and William C. Hu (1995) have all discussed the relationship between lion dance footwork and martial arts stances, as well as the manifestation of a kung fu club's spirit in the lion. A lacuna in this work remains surrounding the music used to accompany kung fu demonstrations, which involves an extension of lion dance drumming. Martial arts precede lion dancing in Hong Luck's curriculum and learning to lion dance is actually the first step in studying the percussion. Understanding the order of this transmission process is crucial for studying Hong Luck's music, because drumming is considered one of their most advanced skills. To be a successful drummer requires a thorough grasp of both kung fu and lion dance.

As shown in Fig. 2, the Southern Chinese lion features two performers: the first animates a mask with a long cape that drapes over the back of the second person to form the body. The lion head itself is made from papier-mâché over a bamboo frame and is large enough to entirely cover the upper torso of the lead dancer. It does not look like a natural feline, although in the hands of a skilled performer the moveable mouth, eyes, and ears can contribute to a lifelike appearance. Lions are not actually native to China and were known mostly through stories, so the Southern lion's countenance is fanciful and easily mistaken for a dragon. The construction of the mask includes a horn and a mirror embedded in the forehead, while the bold colour schemes are enhanced with metallic paint, strips of fur and sequins of various sizes. The dance is a ritual used to dispel nefarious *chi* energy (邪氣) for occasions such as lunar New Year, store openings and weddings, though in a modern, diaporic context, it is also a public identity marker and form of entertainment. A percussion ensemble provides the musical accompaniment and consists of three instruments: a large, single-sided, barrel drum struck with a pair of stubby, wooden sticks; a small, flat, hanging gong struck with a short, knobbed, wooden stick; and one or more pairs of small, knobbed, concussive hand-cymbals.



Fig. 2. A Hong Luck lion dance team.

Similar to what they do in the sparring class, learners must demonstrate a sufficient level of basic martial arts ability before one of the teachers will give them permission to join the lion dance class. As new students, we began with “empty-handed” lion dance practice as we attempted to mimic both the footwork and the motions used to animate a lion head, without actually using the mask. The vehicle for this practice was the traditional routine, which contains approximately twenty minutes worth of choreography, but is typically abbreviated for performances. Hong Luck’s lion dance team leader used vocables to speak the drum rhythms as he demonstrated the movements and we followed along. Once we learned a phrase of movement, he played the same rhythm for us on the drum, which we then attempted to embody in our dancing. Gradually, these sections were strung together to build the traditional routine. Meanwhile, we began to use the lion head and also started learning to play the role of the tail. While studying lion dance, we also started playing the percussion, starting with cymbals and then the gong.



David, a senior lion dancer and skilled drummer, often emphasizes the martial orientation of Hong Luck's tradition. In fact, he considers the ability to physically follow a drum rhythm to be a martial arts skill, rather than a question of dance ability or musicianship. For example, in the winter of 2013, a new lion dance student was experiencing difficulty matching his movement to the drum rhythms. David's evaluation was that this person's kung fu was not good enough, and the solution to these rhythmic difficulties lay in remedial training in the beginner martial arts class. This assessment suggests the deep integration of rhythm within Hong Luck's curriculum, and the martial orientation of all training processes. The ability to move in time together with an external time source—whether the teacher's counting or the drum—is thus constructed as a kung fu skill by nature of how it is learned and/or developed.

In addition to the defensive applications of rhythmic synchronization that I have already mentioned, Hong Luck's lion dance teachers ground it in historical military traditions. This type of percussion is capable of formidable loudness designed to cut through the din of battle. In an ancient Chinese book of strategy called *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu wrote that gongs and drums should be used to control troop movement and to bolster soldiers' morale while intimidating the enemy (trans. Cleary 2000: 124-127). I know from experience that being under the lion head severely restricts my sightlines and, given that it is considered bad form to break character by peering out from under the mask, I rely on the drummer to give me sonic guidance during performances. Consequently, signals from the drum are indispensable for delivering the ritual sequences at the correct time, according to conditions that I cannot visually perceive. It is also crucial when more than one lion is performing at the same time, because following the music allows dancers who cannot see each other to move in harmony. Learning to lion dance at Hong Luck fosters a corporeal sensitivity to the percussion music that is undergirded by a foundation of kung fu training and explicitly positioned as a martial skill. Seen through this lens, playing the role of a kung fu lion embodies a military approach to rhythm as performers respond to the call of the drum. Just as soldiers on the battlefield count on signals from a commander with a better view of the whole scene, lion dancers rely on sonic directions from their drummer.

## Martial Arts on Stage: Performing Combat

Most of the training at Hong Luck occurs weekly, but kung fu being accompanied by drumming happens only a few times a year. The result is that there is a bifurcation between martial arts training, which is rhythmic but not

exactly musical, and lion dance training, which is where people get most of their experience with the percussion instruments. This duality between the implicit rhythm of combat and explicit musical rhythms is highlighted when Hong Luck members give demonstrations of choreographed kung fu forms accompanied by drumming. The primary occasion for such demos is the anniversary banquet in August, though they sometimes occur at other events such as the local Chinatown festival. The anniversary is particularly important because it brings together not only teachers and current students, but also many other people affiliated with the club, and provides an opportunity to showcase the results of another year's worth of training. It is usually a full-day event that begins with a lion dance parade through Chinatown and ends with a banquet that features more lion dancing, kung fu demos, speeches and karaoke. Despite the rarity of these occasions—or perhaps because of it—they are significant.

Notably, the Chinese character for *drum* (鼓) also means *to rouse* and several senior Hong Luck members have told me that their pulse quickens as soon as they hear kung fu drumming. The sheer power of the percussion (as much as 105 dB and 200 beats per minute), and the relative rarity of its use in regular martial arts training, both add to a heightened emotional atmosphere. The drum thus acts as a sonic marker of elevated performance, where students get to show their kung fu skills to the public. In this sense, the addition of drum, gong and cymbals helps to differentiate public performance from the hundreds—or even thousands—of repetitions of a choreographed form that occur in training. In the week or two before the anniversary, there is usually an opportunity to have a dress rehearsal with the percussion. This helps performers to get used to the accompaniment, and also gives them a taste of the energy that it can provide, without letting them get too comfortable with it. Especially for new students, the percussion music presents a challenge because kung fu demos are not meant to follow the insistent rhythms. Performance thus combines the drumming-fuelled adrenaline rush of being on stage with the difficulty of maintaining and manifesting a combative rhythm that is independent of the musical accompaniment. This situation sets up some of the intense feelings and rhythmic exigencies of fighting, which help to simulate the experience of combat.

In general, all of the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club's practices have either a benefit for training, combat or both. In the case of kung fu forms with musical accompaniment, I can attest from experience that the goal of remaining asynchronous to the rhythms of the percussion ensemble is actually quite challenging. Master Jin Chan is fond of reminding his students that good kung fu makes audiences (and opponents) feel the immanence of

violence. In bringing to bear my combat training on choreographed martial arts performance, I therefore attempt to interpret the routine in a way that makes sense for fighting. This means using the body-of-ideas (Foster 1997) acquired during beginner class's group training to connect individual moves to make combinations, which I then develop with tempo and rhythm from sparring class in order to express the movement's potential for causing bodily harm. The feeling of performing a routine that I have worked out like this is that of fighting my own fight by imposing my rhythm and not being sucked into the beats of the unrelenting percussion. I am aware of the music, but only enough to be able to weave my movement through it, without being caught up in its patterns or tempo. Martial arts demos thus pit musical rhythms against the antagonistic rhythms of combat, such that the percussion can in some ways act as the sonic representation of an invisible adversary. This is not the only approach to performing kung fu with music, but the result has been commended by my peers and, in keeping with the judiciousness of praise in Chinese pedagogy, has escaped chastisement from Hong Luck's elders, while even earning the occasional "not too bad" or "OK."

Students are given the explicit instruction not to follow the drum, though this was not explained to me as being a question of combative practice. When I asked my sparring coach Adrian, however, if performing forms without following the drum was a type of training for fighting he replied, "Absolutely," as though it were self-evident and went without saying (personal communication, December 3, 2012). He also remarked that demonstrating martial arts while avoiding synchronization to the beat was not the most efficient way to train combat rhythm skills, but that it could be made more beneficial by focusing on the combative aspect during performance. When Hong Luck members perform kung fu with percussion accompaniment, their struggle to remain asynchronous to the beat can be an iconic reflection of the need to remain independent of an opponent's rhythm during combat. As Adrian's comments reveal, the practitioner's intentionality has a direct influence on how deeply they engage with this antagonistic relationship to the music.

### Exceptions Prove the Rule: Martial Dramaturgy and Leading Lions

When the relationship of motion and music in Hong Luck martial art performances departs from what I have described above, it usually does so for dramaturgical purposes. The movements of kung fu demonstrations are not continuously out of sync with the musical accompaniment, but rather asynchronicity characterizes the main part of the performance. Gestures

of respect in the form of elaborate bows frame choreographed martial arts routines by bookending the display of combat skills with a show of gentility. At the beginning and end of a form, drummers adjust their playing, and performers modify their movement, in order to exhibit synchrony for these bowing sections. In a typical routine called Small Plum Flower Boxing (小梅花拳), for example, rhythmic entrainment accounts for around 35 per cent of the demonstration. The introductory bows are more ornate and roughly five times longer than the short, concluding bow. That leaves about 65 per cent of a minute-long performance with a contrast of combat rhythm against musical patterns.

More rarely, there are theatrical elements within the main body of martial arts routines that also call for rhythmic synchronization. In a weapon form called General Kwan's Halberd (將關大刀), the drummer needs to be able to drop into sync with certain actions, such as when the performer "sharpens" the blade on the ground and then "tests" it with a "hair" plucked from their own head, or dramatically pauses to stroke their long "beard." This sonic accentuation of staged action is similar to the relationship Haisheng Yao (1990, 2001) has discussed between Peking opera's martial-acrobatic arts and percussion music.<sup>4</sup> General Kwan's Halberd is slightly longer than Small Plum Flower Boxing at approximately one minute and twenty seconds. Despite the theatrical movements interspersed throughout the body of the form, only about 25 per cent of the routine is synchronized, partly because the bows at the beginning are much shorter.

I have discussed the lion dance as embodying the legacy of military percussion used in ancient China to signal troop movements, but there are some situations where the lion's movements lead the music. This is most evident in a section of the routine called plucking-the-greens (採青). As an example, I will discuss the most basic lion dance ritual, which occurs during Chinese New Year parades in Chinatown when patrons hang small red packets containing paper money from their doorways.<sup>5</sup> These crimson envelopes are usually attached to a leafy green vegetable, which the lion "eats" and then "spits" back out as the highlight of the performance. The ritual symbolism of this act is to spread good fortune because the different Chinese characters for *vegetable* (*choi*, 菜) and *wealth* (*choi*, 財) are homophonous, though a small orange is sometimes used instead because the word for *tangerine* (*gat*, 桔) sounds like the word *lucky* (*gat*, 吉).<sup>6</sup> The whole routine lasts about a minute and is completely choreographed to specific drum rhythms, except for the all-important plucking-the-greens sequence.

While the lion is approaching the red packet, the musicians play a continuous roll and use small crescendos to emphasize the dancers'



movements. Once close enough to “eat” the prize, lion dancers often make a preliminary snap of the mask’s mouth just short of their target, which the drummer accents with a single stroke before returning to a roll. After taking the red packet and vegetable into the lion’s mouth, the lead dancer carefully removes the money-filled envelope and breaks up the veggie in order to prepare it for an auspicious dispersal. Meanwhile the musicians patiently wait for a cue from the lion before playing the rhythms for a sequence where the dancers once again follow the drum and dramatically “spit” out the veggies, symbolizing good fortune. Depending on how long lion dancers drag out the eating section, it typically occupies about 25 per cent of a basic routine, although the whole ritual can vary considerably according to the requirements of patrons.

As much as the development of combat skills is important, the needs of public performances still constrain Hong Luck’s martial arts demonstrations. Some performers favour platform graces and drama in the way they execute choreographed kung fu routines. The result is often an exaggeration of movements that makes them clearer to audiences, despite the resulting largesse of gesture and extended limbs not being conducive to proper defensive posture. Similarly, some people perform martial arts with less concern for remaining asynchronous to the percussion and, as their movement embodies a slightly more musical or dramatic approach, their kung fu can take on dance-like qualities. A little bit of this goes a long way, however, and a martial arts demo that is too synchronized would be considered a dance by Hong Luck’s seniors, and therefore incorrect. The solution seems to be to line up some strikes with rhythmic cadences or accents to emphasize their power, rather than continuously juxtaposing the rhythm of combat against the music.

Drummers can also privilege performance over displaying martial qualities when they change their beats to accommodate performers. A common example occurs when lion dancers miss a step or fail to perceive a drum cue for a new section. At that point, the idea of giving signals to the troops goes out the window and musicians play in a more co-operative way. Similarly, drummers adjust the intensity of their beats to support, rather than overwhelm, both lion dancers and kung fu performers. This can be helpful for lion dancers, but slowed tempos and simplified rhythms can enhance the rhythmic pull of synchronization on martial artists. This is, however, preferable to an inexperienced performer being sonically overpowered by aggressive drumming and stopping mid-routine, which I have observed on several occasions during dress rehearsals and at least twice in performance. Notwithstanding the exceptions I have noted, the majority of Hong Luck’s kung fu demonstrations juxtapose the internal rhythm of the performer



against the drumming, while lion dancers usually move in time with the beat and follow musical signals. The considerations described in this section serve as marked cases against the club's normal rhythmic practice.

## Discussion: Choreomusicology and the Rhythm of Combat

In this paper, my research on kung fu and music sits at the intersection of two approaches to rhythm and motion, both of which present avenues for expansion in future research. The first of these is choreomusicology, which Paul Mason has broadly defined as, “the study of the relationship between sound and movement within any performance genre” (2012a: 5). Much of the work in this area has been focused on the convergence of 20th century Western art music and concert dance (Hodgins 1992; Fogelsanger and Afanador 2006; Jordan 2011; Mason 2012a), which is a rich field when researching shifting directions in choreomusical connection. As identified by Allen Fogelsanger (2005), contrasting examples on either end of a spectrum include the close ties between music and dance in collaborations between composer Igor Stravinsky and choreographer George Balanchine, versus the independence of Merce Cunningham's dances from the sounds of John Cage. Work that explicitly identifies as choreomusicology and focuses on non-Western practices, such as Mason's (2014) study of self-accompanied and musician-accompanied dance practices in Brazil and West Sumatra, is also beginning.

Studying movement and music together is not a new phenomenon in ethnomusicology (e.g., Chernoff 1979), but by meshing the previously separate academic disciplines of choreology and (ethno)musicology, a range of established theories and techniques are made available in choreomusicology for disentangling the web of connections between motion and sound. At the same time, changing the focus of analysis to what Stephanie Jordan (2011) calls *intermedia* has stimulated the development of new tools. An example that could prove useful for discussing Hong Luck's lion dance in further depth is offered by Paul Hodgins (1992), who divides choreomusical relationships into overlapping categories of extrinsic (archetypal, emotional/psychological and/or narrative) and intrinsic (rhythmic, dynamic, textural, structural, qualitative or mimetic). Regarding kung fu demonstrations with music—or other martial arts with similar choreomusical relationships—audio-visual capture could stimulate useful analyses. Allen Fogelsanger and Kathleya Afanador (2006) have discussed capture in terms of the way that auditory and visual stimuli often each influence the way the other is perceived when occurring simultaneously, even if they are intended to be separate.

The second broad area that my work touches on is the rhythm of combat, which I identified in both Hong Luck's sparring class and kung fu demonstrations. Rhythm has occasionally been discussed in the martial arts (Lee 1975; Miyamoto 1982 [1645]; McGuire 2010), but I contend that it is a central concern, albeit one that is rarely articulated in language. Systems of fighting skills that incorporate music thus present a point of entry for talking about the rhythm of combat in more depth. Capoeira is a prime example of musical martial art because, as Lewis states, "There can be no capoeira without music" (1992: 133). The various Indo-Malay martial arts grouped under the names *silat* or *silek* are as blurred a genre as kung fu and capoeira, and they have also received some scholarly attention (Pauka 1997, 1998; Farrer 2009; Mason 2009). Not all styles of *silat/silek* use music, but among those that do, it is typical for the sound to follow the movement or for them to be independent, with only a few styles where the movement follows the music (Mason 2009). This choreomusical diversity of relationships contrasts with capoeira, where motion and music are in "a relation of interdependence" (Lewis 1992: 133). In at least one style of *silek* (from the Minangkabau region of Sumatra), it appears that there is a purposeful asynchronicity of movement to music that is similar to Hong Luck's kung fu demonstrations, and suggests a comparable relationship to the rhythm of combat (Mason 2012b). In capoeira, however, Downey has observed that "rhythmic variations heard in the music should motivate each one of a player's aggressive and evasive maneuvers" (2002: 501), which is quite a different strategy.

My intention with this brief discussion is not to provide a complete summary of either choreomusicology or the rhythm of combat in martial arts. Instead, I am drawing attention to how my own work speaks to these two areas. I am also suggesting that opportunities for future research are abundant in the area of music and martial arts. It is possible that bi-musical ethnomusicologists who use participant-observation and performance ethnography in their studies are uniquely well prepared to contribute to this endeavour, but, bias aside, the interdisciplinary nature of the topic is also amenable to approaches from anthropology and dance ethnography. A survey of music and martial arts is urgently needed, but for now I will only present a partial list of styles that could be included. In addition to kung fu, capoeira and *silat/silek*, there are also Thai, Khmer and Burmese methods of kickboxing; Manipuri *thang-ta* and Sikh *gatka*; Nigerian *dambe* boxing, Senegalese *laamb* wrestling and Bakweri wrestling from Cameroon; Iranian *zoor khane*, Georgian *chidaoba* wrestling and Turkish oil wrestling; *ladja/damyé* from Martinique (strikingly similar to capoeira), *kalinda* stick-fighting

from Trinidad and *kokomakau* stick-fighting from Curacao; and Maori *mau rākau* and Hawaiian *lua*. Not all these styles are as integrated and permeated with music as capoeira, but that in and of itself is an interesting point to investigate.

## Conclusion

The Hong Luck Kung Fu Club's mandate to preserve and promote Chinese martial arts is a key for interpreting their performances. Their training regime develops fighting skills, but does so in an interdisciplinary context that incorporates aspects of dance, ritual and music. The club's distinctive transmission sequence provides a lens for seeing the combative significance of embodied rhythm. In this paper, I have described the rhythmic aspects of Hong Luck's practices in order to show how martial arts training sets the stage for lion dance as the inheritance of battlefield troop signals, and kung fu demonstrations as an exposition of fighting ability. By describing how performers relate to music in terms of the rhythm of combat, I have shown how military and combative skills are manifested in performance.

My explanation of the transmission sequence of martial arts and lion dance training at Hong Luck has been accompanied by an interpretation of how music can push and pull practitioners. In one sense, the sound of the vigorous percussion provides energy, motivation and support to elevate performances beyond what can be achieved in the training hall. The sound of the drum encourages lion dancers' efforts and structures the lion dance's choreography; it also pushes kung fu performers to exhibit more powerful demonstrations of fighting skills. In another sense, the music creates a context for practising the ability to remain asynchronous from an opponent, and acts as a rhythmic pull that must be avoided in order to signify a successful attack. The practical function of kung fu is combat, which provides the primary discourse surrounding the transmission of Hong Luck's holistic curriculum as a blurred genre. By showing how their training program builds a specific body-of-ideas (Foster 1997) into a habitus, I am illuminating the corporeal discipline of traditional Chinese martial arts training as the embodiment of the rhythm of combat. ❀

## Notes

1. Where necessary, I have used colloquial Romanization of Chinese words and supplemented them with traditional Chinese characters because this follows the standard practice at Hong Luck. In most other situations I have favoured English translations followed by Chinese characters. This method reduces the linguistic burden on non-Sinophones, while making the terms intelligible to readers of Chinese—regardless of what dialect they speak (e.g., Mandarin, Cantonese, Taishanese, etc).

2. Foster cites Michel Foucault's ideas on discipline and Marcel Mauss' *techniques of the body*.

3. The word *traditional* is used here in regard to Hong Luck's practices (as well as in the title of this article) because that is how my consultants describe themselves. Regardless of inherent problems with that concept (see Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), they intend it in the conventional sense of things that are passed down from generation to generation. Hong Luck members explicitly conceptualize a kung fu "generation" as being 10 years, and their club has been active for over 50 years, so students who join in the second decade of the 21st century are considered to be 6th generation.

4. Yao's name has been Romanized as both Haishing and Hai Hsing.

5. The Hong Luck Kung Fu Club is a registered not-for-profit organization. Paid lion dance performance in general, and the Chinese New Year tradition of door-to-door lion dance rituals in particular, are important sources of income for the group, which could not survive on student tuition alone.

6. NB although the words for *vegetable* and *wealth* are homophonous in Cantonese, they are aurally differentiated by the use of different tones. The words for *tangerine* and *lucky*, however, are exactly the same.

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