



MARTIAL SOUND

Drumming Empowerment in
Diasporic Chinese Kung Fu and Lion Dance

COLIN P. MCGUIRE

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This book is dedicated to Master Paul Chan [*Chàhn Syuhyuk Sífú*, 陳樹郁師傅] (1932–2012) and Master Jim Chan [*Chàhn Janmàhn Sífú*, 陳振文師傅] (1929–2016), the co-founding instructors of the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club [*Hōng Lohk Móuhgún*, 康樂武館]. Please refer to Figure 0.1 to see a photograph of them near the ends of their lives. It is my sincere hope that these pages will contribute to their goal of preserving and promoting traditional Chinese martial arts. May they rest in peace, and may their lineages endure for 10,000 years.



Figure 0.1 Master Jim Chan and Master Paul Chan (left and right) preparing the lion dance team for Hong Luck’s fiftieth-anniversary celebrations

Credits: Colin P. McGuire

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Notes on Language

I conducted fieldwork for this book in both English and Cantonese, which requires some explanation in terms of how I incorporate Chinese words into this text. Cantonese is the prestige dialect of Yue Chinese, one of the major branches of the Sinitic language family. The centre of the Yue homeland is Southern China's Guangdong Province, but it also extends into the eastern portion of the neighbouring Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, northern Vietnam, and the Hong Kong and Macau Special Administrative regions. Variants of Yue predominated in North American Chinese communities from their beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century through to the twentieth; I did most of my fieldwork in just such a community. Scholars working on Chinese topics, however, have increasingly defaulted to using romanized Mandarin (a.k.a. Putonghua) in their texts because it is the national language of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Notwithstanding that the PRC promotes Mandarin as the official version of Chinese, I default to romanized Cantonese in this book to reflect the linguistic identity of my fieldwork sites in Canada and Hong Kong. My preference is for the Yale system of transliterating Cantonese in roman script, which is common among learners of Cantonese as a foreign language, despite being relatively unknown to native speakers. Both the School of Continuing Studies at the University of Toronto and the Chinese University of Hong Kong's Yale-China Chinese Language Centre used Yale romanization when I studied Cantonese with them.

Unfortunately, the situation is not as simple as picking a romanization system and sticking with it. Some naturalized Chinese words are already in good English dictionaries or are in widespread colloquial use. In such cases I will conform to what I observe to be the most common spelling—regardless of dialect or romanization system. For words that have not yet made their way into English dictionaries or common practice, but can be effectively translated, my preference is to use English translations. These will be followed by the Yale romanization and Chinese characters in brackets as necessary. In some cases, I have directly translated Chinese character-pairs and four-character phrases rather than converting them to a more elegant choice of word or expression. I have left these translations intact in the text

because it marks them as being non-English through their non-idiomatic reading. It is my hope that translations will reduce the linguistic burden on readers who are unfamiliar with Chinese.

Whenever possible, I have also included Chinese characters in this book to make the text more inclusive to those who are familiar with Chinese script, but not with Cantonese or Yale romanization. Although there are significant differences in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary among the various Sinitic languages, they share a common character-based writing system. Written Vernacular Chinese [*Baahkwahmàhn*, 白話文] was developed in the early twentieth century based on representative contemporary literature as well as the style of Mandarin spoken in Beijing, the capital of the PRC. It gives literate Sinophones a modern, unified, text-based language—regardless of their spoken tongue. This universality is somewhat complicated by the use of two overlapping sets of ideographs: “traditional characters” [*fàahntái jih*, 繁體字] are preferred in Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan, and the established diaspora, versus the more recently created “simplified characters” [*gáantái jih*, 簡體字] that are used in the PRC and Singapore, as well as among recent migrants from those countries. I will default to traditional characters, as preferred by my fieldwork consultants, unless otherwise specified. In the case of direct quotes from Cantonese, I will give the characters as spoken, rather than converting to Written Vernacular Chinese, and so there will be some non-standard characters. When citing sources written in simplified characters, I will leave them as written.

For Cantonese words that have no effective English translation and are not yet found in an English dictionary, I will romanize in the Yale system. These will be in italics (including diacritical tone marks), followed by Chinese characters in brackets on first occurrence. After the initial appearance of a word thus transliterated, I will use the romanized word in italics but without diacritics or characters, unless repetition would improve clarity. For the names of people, the typical order in English is given-name(s) followed by family-name, whereas in Chinese it is the reverse. In the main text, I will default to the English order if a person has a non-Chinese given-name or the Chinese order if their full name is transliterated. The Chinese ideographs for people’s names (where available) will follow the Chinese order of putting the surname first, as will romanizations thereof. For place names, I will use the current officially recognized romanization.

One final consideration concerns the word *Cantonese* itself. Guangdong and its capital city Guangzhou were historically both referred to as *Canton*

in English, and so the word *Cantonese* has a certain amount of ambiguity. While there are more distinct terms in Chinese, English usage typically elides the differences among several meanings. *Cantonese* can encompass the Yue language [Yuhtyúh, 粵語] in general, which would include various dialects. For example, Yue includes Taishanese [Tòih sānwá, 台山話], a rural vernacular from Guangdong Province that once predominated in North American Chinatowns. Perhaps more often, Cantonese refers specifically to the prestige Yue dialect of Guangdong Province [Gwóngdūngwá, 廣東話] that originated as the vernacular in the provincial capital, Guangzhou city [Gwóngjāuwá, 廣州話]. *Cantonese* can also stand for people originating from the Greater Yue region [Daaih Yuht yàhn, 大粵人]. In this book, I use the word *Cantonese* specifically for the prestige dialect of Yue, not the entire language family. In a more general sense, I also use it as an ethno-linguistic moniker referring to the people and culture of the Yue language region (see Figure 0.2 for a map) and its diaspora.



Figure 0.2 Map of Sinitic Languages, by Wyunhe, used under CC Attribution 3.0
Credits: Colin P. McGuire

Prologue

Rhythm is essential in both music and martial arts. While there are, of course, differences between the ways patterns and timing work in these two areas, there are also interesting parallels, connections, and homologies between them. Since ancient times, authors have been observing and commenting on the intersections of musical sound with fighting movements and warrior spirit. China's most famous treatise on military strategy, *The Art of War* [*Syūnji Bīngfaat*, 孫子兵法], advised that percussion rhythms should be used to both direct and motivate armies (trans. Cleary 2003:124–127). On Chinese battlefields of yore, gongs and drums were used to signal troop movements, as well as to bolster the morale and energy of soldiers. Significantly, the Chinese character for *drum* also means “to rouse” [gú, 鼓]. In Plato's *The Republic*, Socrates postulated that only two types of music were fit for his ideal state (trans. Cornford 1972:85–88). One of these two encouraged bravery in times of war or danger. Socrates' ideal music deployed rhythms, words, and scales/modes thought to fuel a warrior's courage and vigour. In contemporary times, many martial arts around the world still feature musical accompaniment, including, but not limited to: Brazilian capoeira, Indonesian/Malay *pencak silat*, muay Thai, Senegalese *laamb*, Trinidadian *kalinda*, Persian *zurkhâneh*, and Sikh *gatka*. Scholars, however, have only recently begun to address the interdisciplinary field of music and martial arts, perhaps because of an underlying academic aversion to violence.

This book centres on the sound and practice of drumming, accompanied by gong and cymbal playing, in Cantonese martial arts and lion dance. Many Southern Chinese styles of “kung fu” [gūngfū, 功夫], as these armed and unarmed systems of hand combat are colloquially known, use a “gong and drum” [lòhgú, 鑼鼓] ensemble to accompany performances. Their repertoire includes rhythms for “lion dancing” [móuhshī, 舞獅] featuring two martial artists who animate a papier-mâché head with attached cloth body. They also have percussion repertoire for accompanying choreographed sequences of fighting movements known as “forms” [toulouh, 套路]. Since the end of the twentieth century, there has been an increasing amount of scholarly work on Chinese martial arts (Farrer 2011; Frank 2006; Henning 1999; Holcombe

2002; Judkins and Nielson 2015; Lorge 2012; Ma 2003; Shahar 2008; Zhou 2003). The Chinese lion dance has also received academic attention (Chan 2001; Feltham 2009; Hu 1995; Johnson 2005; Liu 2011; Slovenz 1987; Young 2006). However, until now there has been no book-length study that encompasses a balance of both kung fu and lion dancing or that integrates detailed discussion of Cantonese martial percussion in an interdisciplinary fashion.

According to my research consultants, investigating the sound, concept, and behaviour of this type of percussion separately from hand combat and lion dance would be missing the point. In fact, rather than listening to their gong and drum ensemble musically, they hear it as a type of martial art, which suggests a distinctive way of thinking about humanly organized sound. The questions of how and why they hear percussion rhythms as what I am calling *martial sound* form the refrain of this book. I undertook the primary research for this monograph during eight years of fieldwork in a Chinese Canadian kung fu club between 2008 and 2016. It is augmented by complementary research with two martial arts groups undertaken during a nine-month visit to Hong Kong in 2011/2012 and interviews conducted with female lion dancers in 2017.

Martial sound encompasses both the musical aspects of martial arts as well as ways of hearing hand combat as musicking. Distinctive combinations of timing, sound, and movement are central to the embodied being of Chinese kung fu, as well as martial arts more generally. Through considerations of embodied knowledge and heroic display, the following pages reveal martial sound's place alongside fighting skills and lion dance in Southern Chinese kung fu. Far from glorifying violence, this book engages with issues of empowerment, resistance, community, and identity in diaspora that are brought into sharp focus by a warrior ethos and are of pressing global concern in the emergent post-modern era. Despite a diverse membership and multicultural location, my consultants asserted the fundamental Chinese-ness of their practices, which leads to another research question for this book: how does the confluence of movement and sound construct a resistant identity in a diasporic community?

Prelude

The acrid smell of burning gunpowder fills the cold afternoon air as an ear-splitting cacophony of explosions echoes off the buildings lining a broad side street in Toronto's Chinatown. Loud bangs rip from a long string of firecrackers and form a ragged aural chain. But there is also the rhythmic pounding of wood beating skin, supported by pulsing crashes of metal on metal and wood on metal, which blast forth from a small-but-mighty ensemble of gong, drum, and cymbals. The unsynchronized counterpoint of explosives against percussion is exciting in its sheer sonic intensity.

Although it is the dead of winter, the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club is undeterred; Chinese Lunar New Year celebrations are getting started. The ruckus takes place in front of the club's building as its lion dance crew prepares to embark on a parade through their local Chinatown neighbourhood. A crowd of onlookers has gathered around the source of this uproar but is held at bay by a group of armed men forming a circle using staves and pole-arms to make a barrier around the performance space. Partly obscured by a cloud of smoke from the detonating firecrackers, a pair of red and black beasts are thrashing about and rending the air. Pairs of kung fu practitioners animate these Southern Chinese "lions," and their martial arts training is evident in the way they "fight" with the explosions. Their powerful stances are the base from which they launch attacks as they step, leap, crouch, and kick, all while energetically shaking the lion heads and biting at the firecrackers.

Once the pyrotechnics finish, the drummer plays a rhythmic cadence and the lion dancers respond immediately with synchronized choreography, showing both their attentiveness and their level of training. Coordinated with each other and the percussion—despite being able to see neither from beneath their costumes—the lion dancers shoot their mask-heads into the air while doing a quick cross-step before yanking the heads back down as they drop into a low squat. Having completed the opening ceremonies, the group begins its parade in earnest. Members of the kung fu club march down the sidewalk on a route that will take them around the whole neighbourhood. The percussion will stay continuous for the next four to five hours, during

which time Hong Luck's lions will go door-to-door, offering short individual performances to the shops, restaurants, and associations in Chinatown.

When a multi-ethnic group performs a Cantonese custom for diverse patrons in the Chinatown of a cosmopolitan Canadian metropolis, the meanings are bound to be multiple, overlapping, and emergent. In many ways, the lion dance parade will construct Chinatown, and make a geographic place into a lived space. For some traditionally minded supporters, lion dancing at Lunar New Year is a ritual for a liminal calendrical period that will disperse negative energy and ensure their good fortune for the coming year. During the parade, Hong Luck will take extra care when lion dancing for such patrons. Increasingly, however, people see—and hear—lion dance as an entertaining spectacle that celebrates identity. Many Chinese Canadian patrons and performers will enjoy the day's lion dances as a symbol of their cultural heritage and take a more lighthearted approach to it. Non-Chinese will also be involved as a way of participating in Chinatown and supporting Hong Luck. Such participation allows a European Canadian lion dancer (like myself) or a South Asian Canadian shopkeeper to act as part of the local community. From the perspective of the kung fu club—and informed audiences—the lion dance also embodies the fighting spirit of Chinese martial arts through the vigour of movement. Fuelled by the commanding sonic presence of bellicose-sounding drumming, Hong Luck's lions will make their way through the neighbourhood, using their kung fu to create martial art that is both powerful and empowering. In fact, Chinese Canadian lion dance is all these things and more, which speaks to its enduring popularity in a land far away from where it began.

1

Entering the Field of Music and Martial Arts

Introduction

In Toronto, Canada, the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club's three-story building is a landmark in Chinatown, boasting a half-century in that neighbourhood.¹ The organization's name is emblazoned in eye-catching red-and-gold relief on the façade using both Chinese characters and English script (see Figure 1.1). After moving to Toronto in 1998, I walked past the place many times and could not help but notice the sign. On several of those occasions, I heard powerful percussion rhythms coming from inside the club. However, the large glass windows were always covered by curtains, which created a sense of mystery about the pounding beats within, as though the instruments were a secret. I knew that many Southern Chinese kung fu clubs have lion dance teams that are accompanied by an ensemble consisting of a large barrel drum complemented by a hanging gong and pairs of hand-cymbals. Nonetheless, the rhythms that I heard coming from Hong Luck seemed different: more aggressive and more powerful.

When I started a doctoral program in the fall of 2008, I had been practising the Wing Chun style of Chinese kung fu [*Wihng Chēun kyùhn*, 詠春拳] for the previous eleven years and had another fifteen years of training in a variety of other martial arts. Interested in connecting my long-time fascination with hand combat to my academic studies in ethnomusicology, I wanted to investigate the intersection of music and martial arts. I decided to explore the percussion associated with kung fu and the lion dance. It was my Wing Chun teacher, Master Henry Lo [*Lòuh Gin-hùhng Sífú*, 盧建雄師傅], who recommended that I look to the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club as a fieldwork site,

¹ The Greater Toronto Area has several urban Chinatowns as well as majority Chinese ethnic suburbs. Hong Luck is located in the Spadina/Dundas neighbourhood, which is in the downtown core and is the city of Toronto's main Chinatown.



Figure 1.1 Hong Luck's building at 548 Dundas St. West
Credits: Colin P. McGuire

saying they were not only the most “traditional,” but had the best drummers in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The group also had a well-established reputation in the local martial arts scene, and so I decided to explore the possibility of doing fieldwork there.

I walked into Hong Luck for the first time on a Tuesday night in early September 2008. It was shortly before the start of a beginner class, and several students were already on the floor stretching, shadowboxing, or chatting. I was pleased to note that the back of the training hall was lined with the big masks used for lion dancing, and I could see several drums sitting among the racks of weapons and miscellaneous pieces of training equipment. The gritty atmosphere was impressive; everything in the place looked well worn, as though from hard use. A teacher greeted me when I came in and casually fielded my questions. He barely raised an eyebrow when I told him that I was looking to do research at Hong Luck, which surprised me. I later learned that the club’s street-level location attracts a lot of attention from passers-by, but few people who show interest actually join up—even fewer persevere longer than a month or two. The teacher answered my initial queries about drumming, telling me that the best way to understand it would be by learning to do it myself. He also informed me that—just like everybody else—I would have to start with basic training in Hong Luck’s martial arts. The privilege of learning anything else is based on students’ effort in, dedication to, and progress with kung fu. The teacher invited me to watch the class that night, and then I filled out some forms, bought a uniform (logo tee-shirt and black cotton waist sash), paid a registration fee, and became a *de jure* member of the club.

As I discovered upon my initial inquiry, Hong Luck’s drummers understand their beats through drumming. While that may sound like a circular explanation, a deeper examination reveals the embodied knowledge that becomes audible in practice. I soon discovered that Hong Luck’s drumming is, to borrow a phrase from Timothy Rice (2003), *learned but not taught*; there is no formal curriculum for the percussion. Instead, the pedagogical environment bears similarities to what Jonathan Stock has observed about Shanghainese opera apprenticeship in the early twentieth century, where singing “was not so much taught to new apprentices as learned by them” through immersion and observation (Stock 2002: 22). At Hong Luck, prospective drummers first become familiar with the rhythms through lion dancing, which is accompanied by the percussion in both training and performance. Similarly, learners start experiencing the percussion patterns for accompanying choreographed martial arts demonstrations through

performing such kung fu demos themselves. It is up to would-be drummers, however, to translate their embodied knowledge onto the drum. Similarly, students learn lion dance through martial arts. The lion dance relies on the footwork of Hong Luck's hand combat system, and even the ability of the percussionists and lion dancers to synchronize with each other is thought to be acquired through drilling fighting techniques. Hong Luck builds drumming on a foundation of lion dance, and lion dance is undergirded by martial arts. All the full-fledged drummers I spoke with at Hong Luck confirmed this semi-autodidactic transmission process; they surely received comments and criticism from members of their community of practice but essentially had to teach themselves to drum based on their embodied experience with the rhythms.

The brief interaction that first night not only initiated my fieldwork researching the connections between music and martial arts, but also helped to establish an epistemology and methodology. My path to becoming a drummer and understanding the drum rhythms was laid out for me by the transmission process. I would need to become proficient in an unfamiliar style of kung fu as well as learn to lion dance. Only then could my own body become a fieldwork site for the embodied knowledge that undergirds this drumming, but is only incompletely verbalized by practitioners. During eight years of study, training, performing, and eventually teaching at Hong Luck (2008–2016), I was the only person who went all the way through from neophyte to regular drum performer. Nonetheless, there were established and prospective drummers around who provided the essential socio-cultural context, and intersubjectively anchored the transmission process. I was fortunate to have had two main lion dance teachers and to have become a disciple of one of the club's two founding masters, but even non-drumming members contributed to my development. More often than not, they showed me what was important rather than told me. Given the relatively limited verbal discourse about music at Hong Luck, the effort to externalize my own embodied experience of drumming is a key aspect of this book, thus making the research a form of performance ethnography. At the same time, I also provide thick description of teaching, learning, and performing martial arts, lion dancing, and percussion that is based on participant observation and ongoing discussions with Hong Luck members. I will return to the issues raised by these methods shortly, but first I shall introduce my findings.

Studying martial arts to learn percussion in the context of a Chinese Canadian kung fu club gradually brought three key themes into

focus: empowerment, community, and identity. These themes are important components in the ways that drumming intersects meaningfully with martial arts in the life-worlds of Hong Luck members and their patrons. A bit of history will help illustrate this point. Despite having established communities early in Canada's history (1858), migrants from China and their descendants have remained a minority.² They have historically struggled for acceptance from European Canadians, who have been both more numerous and politically dominant. Put plainly, Chinese Canadians have long suffered racial discrimination as a result of white supremacy (Gillborn 2006). Their tribulations have had a lasting effect on Chinatown communities, particularly in the form of mutual-aid associations as central social institutions. Hong Luck was founded in 1961 as just such an association, which was during an era when ethnically motivated violence was still all too common. On the one hand, the founding masters taught self-defence skills to their local Chinese Canadian community, so that people could resist physical racism. On the other, Hong Luck has been open to non-Chinese Canadians since its early days, thus using kung fu strategically to build bridges between Chinatown and other communities. The club has also explicitly sought to preserve and promote Chinese culture in Canada through martial arts, lion dance, and percussion, which extends the idea of self-defence to protecting values, meanings, and beliefs. Combining defence of self and culture with community building is crucial to the way that Hong Luck has contributed to the ongoing (re)construction of Chinese identity in diaspora.

This book presents an ethnography of Hong Luck's martial drumming and argues that these sounds auralize an empowered community identity. The realities of lived experience in a multicultural and multigenerational context, however, are not as neat and tidy as my thesis might suggest. Hong Luck contains, connects, and borders on a variety of communities. The identities of Hong Luck members and patrons are neither singular nor fixed, but rather they are multiple, intersecting, dynamic, emergent, negotiated, and contested. Despite these noisy communities and boisterous identities, the club also fosters a remarkably inclusive solidarity. What I am pursuing here is not a minutely qualified set of sub-identities as points of stabilization; I seek an understanding of the processes and relationships that are at

² The first Chinese people in Canada arrived on the West Coast in 1788. They were brought over by Captain John Meares to work as shipbuilders, but did not establish a permanent settlement. Chinese migration to Canada began in earnest with the gold rush of the 1850s.

work. I contend that Hong Luck inculcates discourses of Chinese-ness and resistance to oppression through their transmission process. In performance, the percussion rhythms that accompany kung fu demonstrations and lion dancing act as a catalyst for manifesting this embodied knowledge to audiences. Given that practitioners stress the Chinese-ness of their arts, the diverse membership and multicultural context point towards a flexible ontology of what it means to be Chinese in diaspora. Hong Luck is a producer of sonic and bodily culture for overseas Chinese, Canadian-born Chinese, and non-Chinese Canadians alike, while also negotiating the variety of subject positions, stances, and identities the practitioners carry with them before, during, and after training. As the club navigates its sixth decade, it is also a product of the processes that have been transmitting a specifically Cantonese, martial way of being-in-the-world within the pressure cooker of a cosmopolitan metropolis. The rest of this chapter will provide an overview description of Hong Luck's practices, establish a framework for thinking about martial sound, and engage with issues of research methodology.

Practices of the Hong Luck Kung Fu Club

The combination of fighting skills, lion dancing, and percussion rhythms at my primary fieldwork site draws together several of the major styles of Southern Chinese martial arts. As a result, I consider Hong Luck to be a school of kung fu not only in the sense of a teaching institution, but also as a distinct lineage. Over the course of the forty-seven years before I started training there in 2008, successive generations of students learned a group of related but distinct types of Southern Chinese martial arts. Different styles had priority at different points in the club's history according to the evolving practice of head and assistant instructors, as well as visiting masters. Several senior Hong Luck members have remarked to me that they feel their lineage is more than the sum of its parts; it is a style unto itself. While practitioners still differentiated between the stylistic origins of choreographed sets or characteristic techniques from the constituent hand-combat systems, my consultants also reflected on the considerable cross-influence between the individual styles. Hong Luck's syncretism is most evident in three areas: combat, lion dance, and percussion. Practitioners rarely differentiated between the stylistic origins of their fighting, dancing, or musicking, but rather experienced and applied them as integrated within