

THE DYNAMICS OF SWORDPLAY

THE ESSENCE OF SAN TS'AI CHIEN

by Hal Malmud

It is commonly believed that the *san ts'ai chien* sword form originated from the *hsing-i* system, as it was popularized by *hsing-i* practitioners who tended to give the form a *hsing-i* flavor. Still, the other weapons sets in *hsing-i* are far less complicated than *san ts'ai chien*. The form may in fact have been taken from another system, quite possibly from *ch'ang ch'uan* (the long fist style). At any rate, the *san ts'ai chien* as now taught by Adam Hsu in San Francisco, can definitely be traced back to a man named Kuo Fu Chu, dean of the Chinese Government Kung Fu Academy located in Nanking during the 1930s. Chu and his three brothers all learned *hsing-i* from Yu-tang Ma, though it is not known whether Ma also taught them the *san ts'ai chien*.

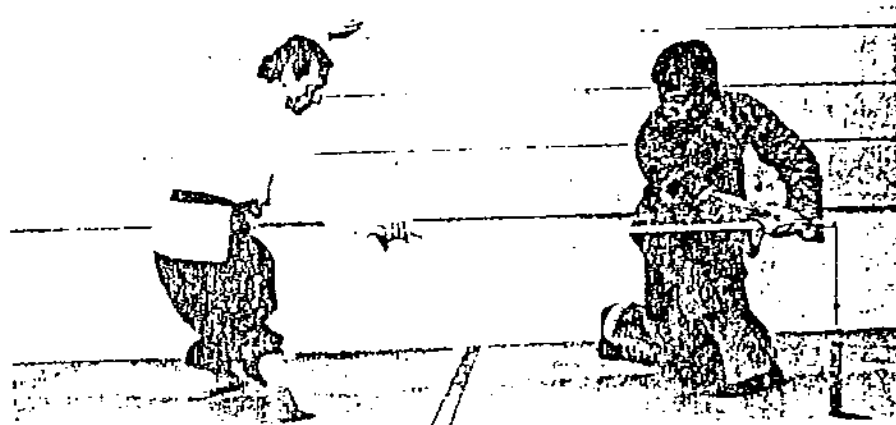
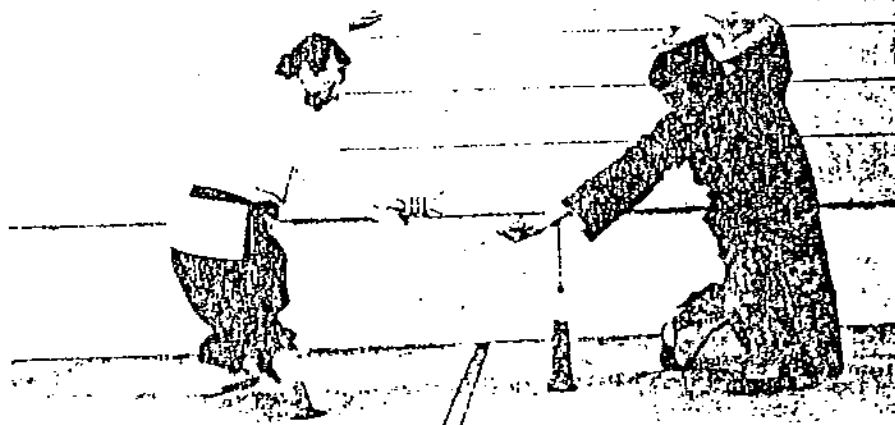
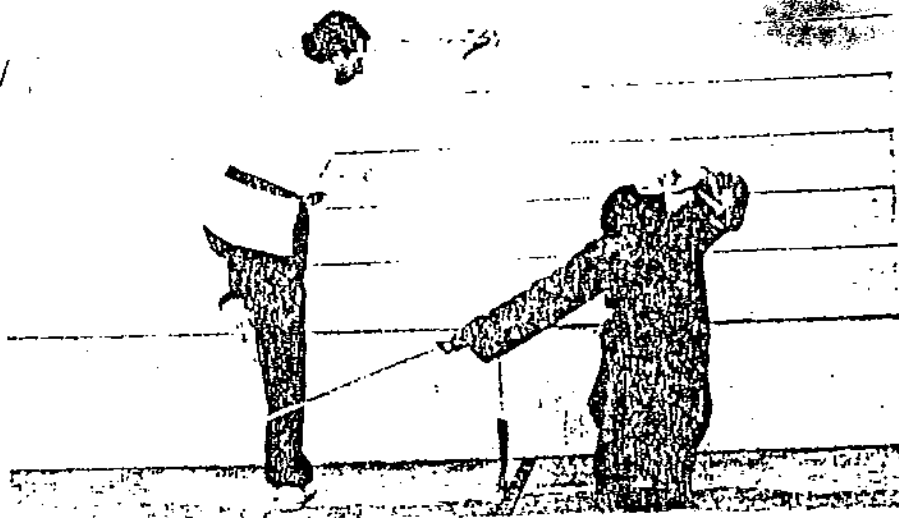
As dean of the Academy, Chu required that all Academy students learn the *san ts'ai chien* form as a mandatory course for graduation. And, as is typical of required classes everywhere, students often paid little attention to obtaining a correct understanding of the form. The result is that we now have as many different versions as people who learned it, depending on individual practitioners' expertise and love for the *san ts'ai chien* they studied.

One of the students Chu taught was Ching-t'ang Han, who graduated in first place in the first class at the Academy. Han was widely known for his skill in *ch'ang ch'uan*, *chin-na* and the *miao dao*, and it is he who taught the *san ts'ai chien* form to Adam Hsu, who now teaches it as his basic kung fu sword set.

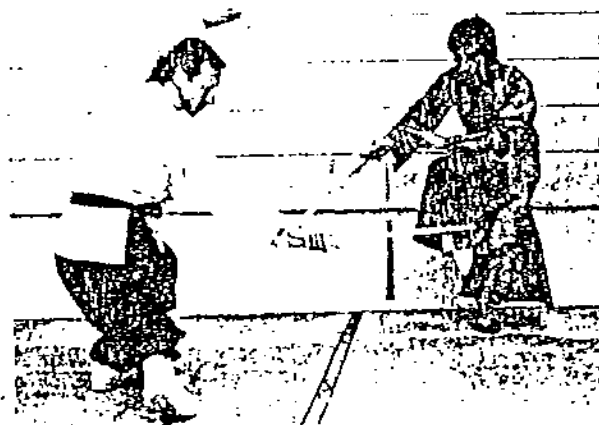
Historically, of all the Chinese

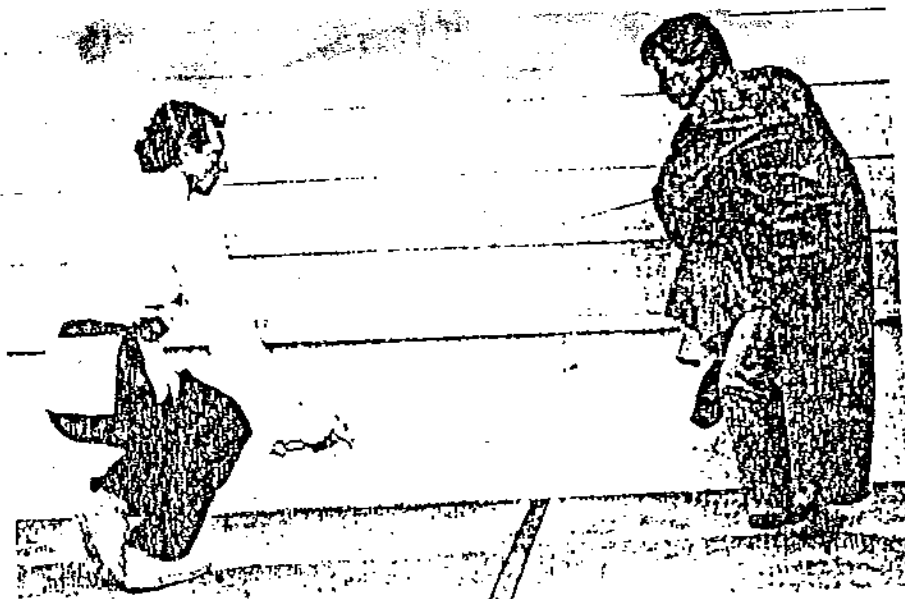
weapons, the sword was the one most quickly to lose its martial arts application, because of its widespread use in entertainment. The graceful and beautiful movements typical of sword forms suited them well for adaption in Chinese opera, folk dance, and other less strictly martial varieties of Chinese culture, so that many sword forms today have lost their original combal significance. The *san ts'ai chien*, however, still teaches the student basic techniques of defense and attack, retaining the martial arts application of the sword.

Proper use of the Chinese sword has been disputed for centuries. Even as far back as the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), a very famous martial arts book called *Shou Pei Lu* (The Arm Record), written by Su Wu, mentioned that the true technique of the sword had been lost. Su Wu by chance met an old man who trained him in correct usage of the sword, but the man made him promise never to reveal these techniques. Su Wu, according to his book, found himself confronted by a serious dilemma. If he didn't pass on what he had learned, the real sword techniques might be forever lost. On the other hand, he had to respect his teacher's wishes. He resolved the problem by including in *Shou Pei Lu* two poems describing the correct handling of the sword. Yet the poems were purposely made obscure and difficult to understand, so that only the most qualified of persons could tap their wisdom. In contrast to this, the *san ts'ai chien* provides an accessible method of learning Chinese sword-fighting tech-



From top to bottom: At-
tacking high creates a
"leak" at the li (earth)
level, which is fixed by
dropping low and slashing
at the opponent's wrist.
This is solved by with-
drawing along the diago-
nal, then stepping back
and countering with an-
other wrist slash.





niques, however little is known of the form's possible antiquity or origins.

The student should concentrate on three basic concepts while learning san ts'ai chien. One is called *chao wan*, or "finding the wrist" with the sword. This principle is integral to the circling and hiding-away techniques found in the form. Second, the student must learn to use the varying stances and steps to enable him to change positions and angles of attack and defense. And lastly, all parts of the body must move as a coordinated unit, maximizing technique and strength.

Literally, the name san ts'ai chien refers to the three levels: heaven (*t'ien*), man (*jen*), and earth (*ti*). These levels also correspond to the three possible levels of attack and defense—that is, high, middle, and low. The character for "king" in Chinese (王 *wang*) can further illustrate the significance and relationship of the three levels. The top line of the ideogram, according to traditional Chinese interpretation, represents heaven, the middle is man, and the lowest is earth, the king himself being represented by the line that connects the three. As the leader of his people, the king should integrate, understand and apply the wisdom of each level, creating and maintaining a harmonious unity.

By understanding the ways of man, the king encourages people to live and cooperate in a peaceful, productive manner.

By knowing the earth, he understands the planting of crops and the ways of fish and game.

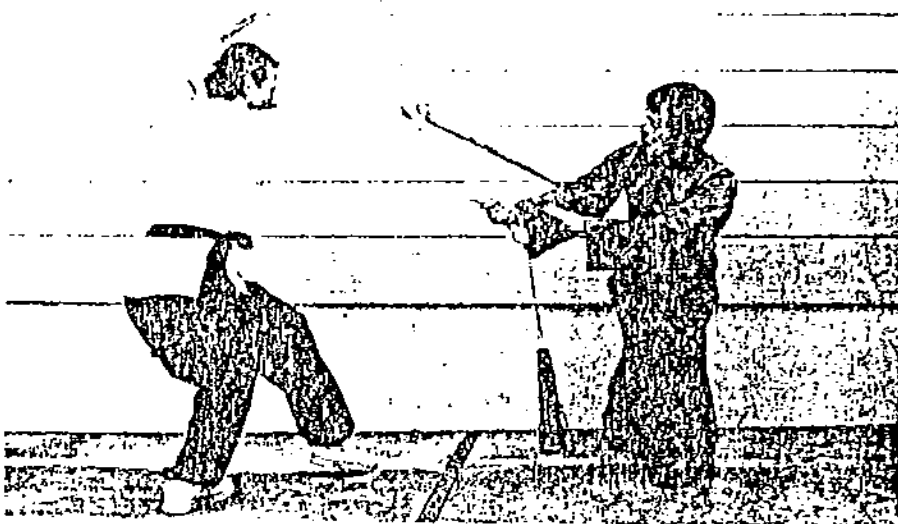
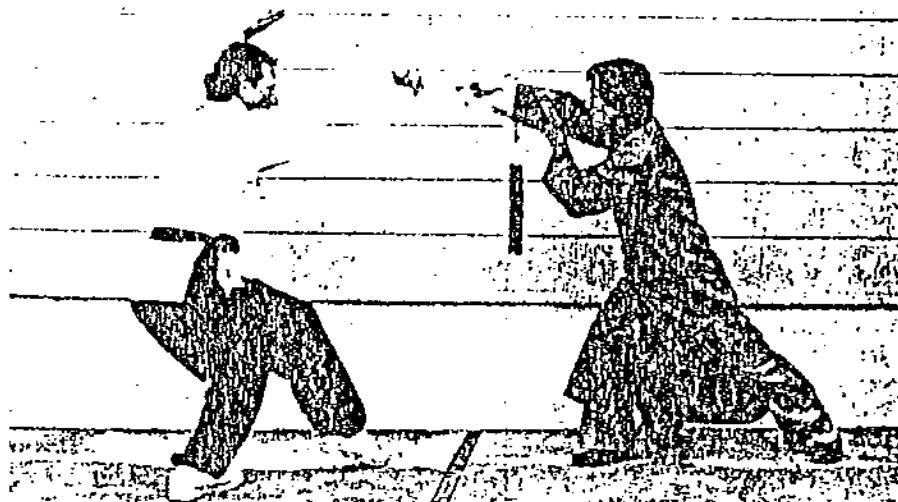
And by knowing the ways of hea-

ven, he gains insight into the Tao, the Way of life.

Thus, by understanding each level thoroughly, it is possible for heaven, earth and man to be in balance together. These are the attributes that justify the rule of the king in Chinese tradition. Applying the concept to kung fu, one sees that each level of attack or defense must be thoroughly grasped by the student. Yet the practitioner himself (as the "king" of the sword form) must come to harmonize and integrate all three.

While attacking, one must have the quality of being just like rain or water; anywhere there is an opening you must immediately attack, as water rushes in to fill up space. In Chinese this is referred to as *chao lou* or "looking for the leak" (opening). In defense, you must divide your attention equally over the three areas. Yet when you emphasize protecting one area, you become stagnant and lose your adaptability, so that the other two areas become "leaks." Keeping this from happening is called *pu lou* or "fixing the leak." San ts'ai can also mean attending to these three areas simultaneously, another reminder that by concentrating too much on any one area you create openings in the other two.

Yet ultimately we no longer distinguish between these areas. Instead, by treating the body as a whole and going beyond the knowledge and experience gained from separating the different levels, we no longer are limited in our movements and our thinking. This represents the highest level of kung fu. X



From top to bottom: A direct thrust at the jon (man) level creates a leak at the wrist, so the defender backs away diagonally, slicing upward to l'ien (heaven). The response is to change direction and return the attack at the same level, forcing the defender to withdraw.

