The Willow-Leaf Saber

Chinese Expression on the King of Sabers

by Daniel Farber

Photos courtesy of Daniel Farber.

The saber is considered one of the major weapons of Chinese martial arts, along with the spear, the sword (or jian) and staff. Reflective of the Chinese language, succinct expressions are often used to convey ideas about kung fu. The following article examines some of these traditional Chinese expressions regarding the saber in general and the willow leaf style saber in particular.

"The saber is the ancestor; the staff is the roots."

The saber is traditionally called the "ancestor" due to both its ancient origins and its use as a good weapon for the kung fu beginner. The staff and saber also help to develop a solid foundation for kung fu training. This process is compared to the "roots" of a tree extending deeper into the ground in order to feed the upper branches, strengthening the entire body. The basic movements of the saber and staff, like chopping or slicing, and the transitions between movements, are dynamic, but require less skill than the more precise techniques of the sword and spear.

In general, the saber is a curved, single-edged blade, developed from farming or hunting tools. In ancient times, most citizens were farmers who became hunters during periods of war. Crude implements were refined over the centuries into more effective weapons, indicative of the rural culture. Variations of the saber are named according to the similarity between the shape of the blade and patterns in cultural landscapes. Among these different sabers are the miao dao (the grain leaf saber) and the yen ling dao (goose feather saber). The most popular variation of the saber is the liu yeh dao (willow leaf saber) whose origin remains something of a mystery. Although the Chinese saber is ancient, some of the techniques associated with the willow leaf saber are relatively sophisticated, suggesting more recent refinements. The willow leaf saber's blade is not merely a pretty shape, but aerodynamically designed for maximum speed and efficiency in use. The slightly curved handle (usually made of a metal such as iron or copper) allows for more effective handling of the weapon and is used for close-in fighting. The guard is slightly raised to protect the hand in blocking and maneuvering, and to prevent slipping in locking and controlling techniques.
In ancient times, a piece of cloth, usually red, was attached to the end of the saber handle and used to clean the weapon after an encounter. During a fight, the cloth was easily removed to avoid the possibility of the cloth impairing vision. In modern times, the cloth piece, or "tassel," has a decorative function, featuring a variety of colors and styles. This type of non-detachable, ornamental design is useless in martial arts practice; however, in long weapons such as the spear, the tassel is used to confuse the opponent's vision and keep the shaft clean during combat.

It is difficult to find a reference to any specialists in the willow leaf saber cited prior to the 20th Century. In modern history--from the end of the Qing dynasty to the beginning of the Republic of China (c. 1900)--there are few masters who excelled in this art. Among the known masters of the willow leaf saber is the lineage beginning with Zhang Yao Ting: mizong quan, tai zhu quan and yeh tzan dao.

Zhang taught Sifu Liu Yun Chiao, who mastered mizong quan, baji quan, pigua zhang, tai zhu quan, pigua dao and yeh tzan dao.

Sifu Liu taught Sifu Adam Hsu, who learned baji quan, pigua zhang, and pigua dao.

Other famous willow leaf saber forms include: yen qing dao, pi san dao, ba gua dao, and liu he dao. Each form, derived from a particular style, may give special emphasis or techniques to the weapon, but it does not change the fundamental techniques or usage that characterize the willow leaf saber.

"The saber is like a fierce tiger; the sword like a dancing phoenix; the spear like a swimming dragon."

This expression distinguishes the particular of the saber from the sword and spear. The saber, "fierce like a tiger," refers to the external appearance of the saber in action--aggressive, explosive, a dangerous powerful fighter. The sword is compared to the feng, an imaginary creature in Chinese mythology, sometimes translated as "phoenix." The feng has a more refined nature than the tiger, projecting the appearance of beauty, pride, graceful precision in movement. The spear is compared to the long, often translated as "dragon." In Western culture, the dragon is thought of as an evil creature, a sign of bad luck. But in Chinese culture, the long represents good fortune--a portent of success. The long has an outward appearance of versatility, cleverness and adaptability in usage. The spear appears to be a rather simple weapon, but like the character of the long is multi-faceted and has the potential for much high level technique.
"The saber acts black; the sword acts blue."

This expression also refers to the character or flavor of the saber in contrast to the sword but emphasizes the inner spirit rather than the outward form. The color black suggests danger, bravery, ferocity--like the tiger, a fearless inner nature that is necessary to capture the essential flavor of the saber. The inner spirit underlies the outer appearance, generating the distinctive character of any weapon.

In Chinese philosophy, colors are assigned to correspond with the wu xing (five elements). Blue and green, for example, correspond to the wood element and the east; black corresponds to the water element and the north. The spirit of the color blue characterizing the sword is calm, fluid and proud, like the dragon in spirit as well as appearance. This contrast does not mean the spirit of the sword is not fearless or capable of anger--only less fiery, more restrained than the saber, as evidenced by the fundamental differences in technique.

"Sacrifice to use the single saber; spare life to handle the spear."

This expression, like a Chinese riddle, challenges the practitioner's skill in interpretation. What does it mean to "sacrifice" using the saber? Or "spare life" with the spear? The essential meaning in this expression deals with the application of weapons. In using the saber, the practitioner must be able to retain the qualities previously expressed--the fierceness of a tiger and the fearless spirit; and be willing to place oneself in a dangerous position in order to draw out the opponent. In combat, this involves approaching the opponent, exposing oneself in order to "open the enemy's door," and then moving in, aggressively attacking and controlling. Once inside, it is possible to complete numerous techniques, coordinating the body and saber together like a tiger finishing off its prey. In one such technique, chan tou guo nao (coiling around the forehead, wrapping behind the head), the blade is kept close to the body for protection and speed, utilizing the whole body to support the blade and increase power in blocking and attacking while moving in on the opponent.

The spear, on the other hand, is said to "spare life," as spear techniques were developed to utilize the long weapon, and to keep the opponent at a safe distance, leaving the "door closed."
"With the single saber, watch the hand; with the double saber, watch the steps; with the large saber, watch the guard."

This expression does not prescribe that the practitioner must watch the hand, step or guard in the different sabers, but refers to a method of evaluating ability to use the saber. Skill in the large saber can be judged by watching the way both hands move on the handle. The rear hand slides along the handle toward the guard to add power and control to the blade.

With the double saber, footwork may indicate genuine skill. Since both hands must coordinate the two sabers, skillful footwork allows for maneuvering into position to effectively block and attack with the sabers.

With the single saber, especially the willow leaf saber, there are many techniques that utilize the bare hand. The bare hand supports the blade, controlling the action of the blade, as well as adding power to the technique. The bare hand can also be applied to using the guard and handle more effectively.

Disappearing Art of the Willow Leaf Saber
In recent times, the willow leaf saber has come to represent the entire range of Chinese sabers. Although techniques and usage of the willow leaf saber have originated in Northern China, Southern systems of kung fu have now adopted the willow leaf saber for their own use. This popularity stems from the dynamic forms practiced in a variety of kung fu systems. Sifu Adam Hsu, an expert in the Chinese saber, explains that although willow leaf saber forms contain the most refined, advanced techniques in the Chinese saber, skill in usage is neglected in modern times. It is no longer necessary to understand weapon usage, or engage in actual combat with these archaic weapons. As a result of this cultural development, most forms have lost their authenticity.

In his life of martial arts experience, Sifu Hsu relates that he has met only one and a half martial artists who demonstrated genuine mastery of the willow leaf saber. The "one" of this figure is Sifu Liu Yun Chiao.

When Sifu Liu was nineteen years old, his baji quan teacher, Sifu Li Shu Wen, brought him from Hebei to Shandong province. They were invited to stay at the residence of General Chang Xiang Wu, commander of the 5th Army. General Chang was also an expert in kung fu (a senior student of Sifu Li Shu Wen) and vice president of the Central Government Kung Fu Academy. He resided in Huang county, close to the city of Long Kou. The chief of the Public Kung Fu Academy in Long Kou was Sifu Chang Tz Yang. Sifu Chang was about thirty-five years old and an accomplished martial artist, expert in the willow leaf saber. Sifu Liu went to visit him in Long Kou, where they initially met and conversed. Although much younger than Chang, Liu had already mastered many kung fu systems and was experienced in the handling of the willow leaf saber. Chang’s demeanor was very confident and proud. He doubted Liu could actually use the willow leaf saber and believed him to be exaggerating about his expertise. Both were aware that very few can expertly use the willow leaf
saber--so they decided to have a brief test of each other's skill.

When they held their sabers in preparation for contact, they immediately sensed one another to be skillful in the willow leaf saber. Both used the guard to quickly approach, aggressively moving in. Adhering to Chang's saber at the guard, Liu then used the handle to lock Chang's wrist. As Chang tried to neutralize the locking maneuver by changing his position, Liu followed his counter movement by adhering and pulling the saber toward his body to maintain leverage and control of Chang. Sifu Liu followed this maneuver by stepping in and pressing the back of the saber blade forward, and disarming Chang to finish the attack.

Sifu Chang was quite surprised by the young man who defeated him in first contact, and came to respect Sifu Liu's superior skill.

Perhaps the level of skill required for the willow leaf saber is too high for most practitioners. Another aspect of this problem is the fact that there are few sifus who know the authentic techniques and usage willing to teach the essence of their art. Whatever the case, the student who desires to know the real willow leaf saber must look beyond the kind of flashy forms that have popularized the saber in modern times and seek out the true "king" of the sabers.