

Five Animal Frolics in Taiwan: Nourishing Health on a Beautiful Island

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On the Prowl

“Lions, and tigers, and bears... Oh my!” — This famous quote from the 1939 movie classic *The Wizard of Oz* is a very fitting response when one first sees the Five Animal Frolics (五禽戲 *wuxinqi*) being practiced in Taiwan. This system of exercise—said to be the earliest form of medical qigong—is based primarily on the movements of five animals: the ape, bear, crane, deer, and tiger. A famed Chinese physician, Hua Tuo, is credited for developing these exercises around 200 C.E. by observing animals and applying his knowledge of anatomy, acupuncture, moxibustion, and medicine.

There is some information available in Western countries regarding Hua Tuo and the Five Animal Frolics, primarily about the exercise as practiced on mainland China. This article focuses on the exercises as they developed in Taiwan. We will look into the leading figures responsible for bringing the practices to Taiwan and also discover how and why the Five Animals Frolics are beneficial as a method of rehabilitation and, more importantly, as exercises for nurturing health and preventing disease and infirmity.

Bearer of Gifts

Following the civil war on mainland China (1927-1950), approximately two million people fled the Communist takeover and migrated to the island of Taiwan. Many were military men, including some notable martial art masters. One of these stellar figures was Zhang Jingying (張鏡影 1899-1980). During the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), Zhang knew an official who was shot in the leg and doctor's felt it best to amputate due to the wound's severity. Luckily a Daoist was called in to see if a traditional method of healing would work. It did, inspiring Zhang to study healing methods—including the Five Animal Frolics—with Daoists on Qingcheng Mountain in Sichuan Province. Zhang became a 77th generation master in this system and the first person to teach Hua Tuo's art in Taiwan.

Over the centuries, the Five Animal Frolics have been passed on over generations by secret transmission. On the mainland, the Communists had suppressed old traditional practices, even executing noted martial art and qigong masters. In Taiwan, there was great concern for preserving the ancient traditions, especially the health-related modalities. Zhang Jingying, starting teaching the Five Animals to a small group at the Legislative Yuan (parliament) in 1956. More than eighty people began studying the original 125-movement version. Most could not master this lengthy series of subtle exercises. Only two were successful. Zhang Jingying made a rule that the number of apprentices must not exceed five. His talented disciples included Yu Zhongyu, Wang Huazhong, Hu Guofan, Deng Fuyu, and Guo Tingxian: representing the 78th generation. Most of the men who were trained by him were martial artists.

One of the five disciples under Mr. Zhang Jingying was Mr. Guo Tingxian (郭廷獻 1925-2003). It is to his credit that the Five Animals popularity spread throughout Taiwan. He and his disciples started an institute to research and teach his system. Mr. Guo devised abridged routines based on Zhang Jingying's original version, making it easier to promote.

Guo had also studied with a number of martial art masters. In 1956 he became a disciple of one of the leading martial artists in Taiwan, Master Xiong Yangye (熊養和1889-1981). Guo had Xiong's support and encouragement for teaching the Five Animal Frolics. Many of Xiong's students learned from Guo. Branches of Guo's institute later opened in other locations.

Another close friend of Master Xiong was Mr. Li Qinghan (李清漢), who also studied the Five Animal system under Zhang Jingying. Li taught some of Xiong's students too. His students include: Cai Xiuhua, Chen Qingzeng, Lin Jianhong, Liu Xiaofu, Luo Qingxiang, Shen Maoxuan, Wang Jifu, and Ye Jinan. Li taught four versions: (1) one following the original by Zhang Jingying; (2) another with some of the repeated movement removed; (3) a concise routine, and (4) a simplified version.

Blending Exercise with Medical Theory

In Hua Tuo's time, Chinese traditional medicine had already been well established in theory and practice. The foundation of Chinese medical practice is based on an understanding of the body and its relation to the movement of inner energies. Thus, the Chinese practical application of the Five Elements (*wuxing*) and energetic meridians were likewise employed in design of the Five Animal Frolics practice. The Five Elements are symbolic of the five organs of the human body. All the animals move differently and so each human replication effects the body in different ways. When the animal gestures are imitated by a human, the movements stimulate corresponding inner organs. Some movements stimulate yin organs and other movements stimulate yang organs (*zhang/fu*).

Animal Frolic	Element	Yin Organ	Yang Organ	Emotion
ape	fire	heart	small intestines	joy
bear	earth	spleen	stomach	worry
crane	metal	lung	large intestines	sadness
deer	water	kidneys	bladder	fear
tiger	wood	liver	gall bladder	anger

Practice Method: Become the Animal

The exercises are performed by physically imitating the movements of each animal. Some may even imitate how they breathe, move spontaneously, or emit sounds that correspond to a particular animal. Most masters teach standard forms of movements although schools have their variations. It is the same phenomenon seen in taijiquan with its varieties, manifested according to the skills and insights of the teacher.

The peculiarities of each animal movement can be understood by their unique effect on the body: loosening particular joints, stretching specific tendons and muscle groups, pressing on selected organs, and pumping blood, oxygen, and qi through passages to invigorate the system. With the intestines massaged by movement, digestion is improved. Hand gestures activate energy flow as does the touching of particular acupoints and tracing meridians as part of specific movements. Gulping down breath effects respiration. Gentle bending and extending of the limbs make the spine more flexible.

University studies in Shanghai show that practitioners demonstrated improvements in immunity function. An article in the *Journal of Physical Therapy Science* states that the Animal Frolic exercises exemplify a method of reducing lower back pain. In all, the dynamic Animal Frolics certainly put one's body through postures on par with those found in static yoga. Such an array of movement has great effect on the all the bodily systems.

The mental aspect involved in these exercises plays a large role in gaining results. A practitioner utilizes relaxation and "intention" to guide qi to pass through the 72 major joints as the movements facilitate the energy flow. As the Animal Frolics are usually taught within a traditional teacher-disciple relationship, a knowledgeable teacher may provide valuable instruction that goes beyond common practice.

Some practitioners try to absorb character traits of the individual animals, be it a deer's grace, a tiger's dignity, a bear's strength, a bird's freedom, or an ape's liveliness. The actual effect here is mostly subconscious. The degree varies according to each individual's capacity to manifest the animal characteristics in their personalities.

As in taijiquan, the Five Animal exercises calm the inside with slow movements, quieting the nerves and soothing the breath. Unlike taijiquan, however, the prime goal of the Animal Frolics is different. Taiji was originally designed for combat where the extension of movements are purposefully not executed to the extreme. For example, an overly outstretched arm or leg can easily be broken by an attacker. Also, a body that is twisted to an extreme can be easily toppled. The great value of the Animal Frolics is that they were designed not for self-defense, but for nurturing health. The animal movements go to extremes by stretching and pulling to body in a variety of positions, loosening the joints, and lengthening the muscles (the very definition of *daoyin*).

Variants on the Theme

Although Hua Tuo is credited for creating the Five Animal Frolics, we cannot know for sure exactly how they looked originally. There are some ancient illustrations that have survived the centuries that serve as a reference. An early publication containing clear woodblock images is the *The Cinnabar Book of Longevity* written by Gong Juzhong during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).



Five Animal images from the *The Cinnabar Book of Longevity*.
 Courtesy of the Wellcome Collection.

A version being taught by Lin Jianhong (林建宏), the present President of the Hua Tuo Five Animal Frolics Association in Taiwan, contains a total of 84 movements in eight sections. It is a complex routine of successive movements, requiring that the practitioner move slowly with deep relaxation. For overall health, the full 84-movement sequence can be performed. If this seems overwhelming, only one section or a few sections can be done in repetition. From the health perspective, a practitioner can select specific animal movements for specific needs. It would be best to seek advice of someone who is very familiar with the Frolics for such specifics.

Hua Tuo's Five Animal Frolics represent a gem of Chinese physical culture, packaged in a joyful exercise modeled on playful animals. Learning is fun with many benefits to give incentive for the practitioner to train regularly. Plus, there is no need to fear "lions, and tigers and bears!"

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Lin, Jianhong: <http://blog.xuite.net/sstaichi/twblog>
Taipei City Hua Tuo Five Bird Frolics Sport Association: <http://www.huatuofap.org.tw>
Tsou, Jeff: <http://jefftsou.pixnet.net/blog>
Taiwan Heritage of Hua Tuo Five Animal Frolics: <http://www.chk888.com>

LINK: Lin Jianhong demonstrating the Five Animal Frolics full routine.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bh1munRYSEo>

AVAILABLE ILLUSTRATIONS:
Master Lin Jianhong in a variety of Five Animal Frolic postures.





Hua Tuo
from Wikimedia.

The author with Master Lin Jianhong
in Taipei, November 2017.

All photos except Hua Tuo:
Courtesy of M. DeMarco