

Grandmaster Chang Dung Sheng: The "Fancy Butterfly" Of Chinese Wrestling

By Daniel Farber



Chang dung sheng, the "fancy butterfly" of baodin shuai chiao.

There are few martial artists who can be called "grandmaster." In recent times it is difficult to find any sifu who have thoroughly mastered their art. Practitioners are often unable to complete the rigorous training or find genuine masters who are willing to teach or possess the kung fu training methods necessary to develop the highest level skill in a martial art.

One martial artist who has truly earned the title of "grandmaster" is Chang Dung Sheng. He is acknowledged throughout the world as an authentic grandmaster of shuai chiao, (or suai chiao) the ancient art of Chinese wrestling. Chang holds a 10th degree belt in shuai chiao. As a young man, Chang traveled throughout China, defeating all challengers. In 1933 he became the China National shuai chiao champion. Grandmaster Chang also won the championship again in 1948 before leaving Mainland China for Taiwan, never having tasted defeat in competition.

Grandmaster Chang recently visited the U.S. for the third time this spring, and for the fourth time this summer. He gave clinics and demonstrations of shuai chiao to various universities, police departments, and kung fu organizations. At 73 years of age, he is still able to demonstrate the skills that have made him an invincible opponent.

Chang was introduced to kung fu at a young age, following a family tradition well established in the martial arts. When he was 12, Chang began training in shuai chiao with Chang Feng-yen. Chang Feng-yen was the number one disciple of Pin Jin-yi, who was the head disciple of his master. Grandmaster Chang devoted himself to shuai chiao, spending long hours each day perfecting his kung fu skills. He became the main disciple of his teacher and married Chang Feng-yen's daughter, as was the custom in this tradition.

He also studied under many other shuai chiao experts. When he heard that a particular Chinese wrestler was famous for a

specific technique, he would seek him out in hope of learning his unique skill. For example, Chang heard of a master who was greatly respected for one technique—*chao wa*, "to penetrate the nest." This Chinese wrestler was a blacksmith by trade. Chang paid respect to this master by assisting in the blacksmith shop, working the bellows to feed the fire. For over a year he assisted the master in his work, never asking questions. Chang's perseverance and attitude impressed the master, and he finally began to teach the essence of his art to Chang. Eventually Chang's dedication to his art became a way of life, a philosophy that gained him respect wherever he traveled.

Chang's reputation followed him to Taiwan. For over 30 years he was instructor of shuai chiao at the Central Police Academy in Taipei. He has instructed thousands of students, some of whom are now teaching in the U.S.

Shuai chiao is one of the oldest martial arts, and has been improving generation by generation up to the 20th century. Before the Republic (circa 1900) there were no weight class divisions in shuai chiao tournaments. Under these circumstances, the less powerful kung-fu fighter could compete against larger opponents, depending on technique to overcome the weight class difference. Today, shuai chiao competitions are more sporting, applying rules to minimize injury.

Shuai chiao, as a fighting system, stresses the use of technique more than raw power. There are three major styles of shuai chiao that were developed in different areas of China. These styles are Peking, Tienstin, and BaoDin. Peking style shuai chiao emphasizes smaller movements, trying to keep the opponent at a distance. In Peking shuai chiao, the uniform fits the body tightly, making it difficult for the opponent to get a firm hold. Tienstin style shuai chiao emphasizes a kind of swing motion with the arms, testing and feeling the opponent until an opportunity to apply a holding technique presents itself.

Chang is from the BaoDin tradition. BaoDin style shuai chiao is perhaps the most famous of the three major styles. BaoDin style is known for its larger movements and the devastating power and speed of its techniques. As soon as contact is made, the practitioner immediately tries a technique or quickly changes to another strategy. There is more emphasis on the *ba*, "hold," in BaoDin shuai chiao. This is an effective method used in controlling the opponent by applying hand techniques. Grandmaster Chang is most famous for one "hold" technique, *szu*, or "tearing." This technique is the source of grandmaster Chang's nickname—"fancy butterfly." It not only refers to the extraordinary grace and agility of his movements, but also describes the appearance of the *szu* technique—two bodies seemingly like the fluttering wings of a butterfly as Chang effortlessly approaches and throws his opponent.

The leg techniques, or "steps", are also an important aspect of shuai chiao usage. In order to apply a hold or neutralize an attack, one must approach or elude the opponent, create a situation in which the bare hands, kick, or throw can be utilized. Actually, the hand technique is more important, a more secret aspect of shuai chiao. In shuai chiao there is an expression—"if you can hold the correct place, you succeed 70 percent of the time"—meaning once you have attained the proper "hold," the opponent's demise is certain.

Most students can learn the correct hand "position." However, the real art of the hold or bare hand technique involves creating the advantageous situation in which the hold can be applied.

In the 18th century shuai chiao was extended to Japan, where it became the basis for judo. Judo does not emphasize technique, as in shuai chiao, relying more on raw power to defeat an opponent.

