

PUMPING THE KUA

“Sung Kua”

From the beginning of my Tai Chi studies back in 1967, I had heard and reheard the ever recurring maxim “sung kua.” Based upon my early lack of experience and understanding, I, as most others, had always interpreted the expression as “relax the hips.” Only after studying the Hun Yuan Chen style of Grandmaster Feng Zhiqiang, under Master Zhang Xue Xin (of San Francisco), did I become aware of a much more specific meaning for this important concept.

Many Tai Chi practitioners, upon hearing the admonition to “sink the kua” or “relax the hips,” responded by lowering their body by bending their knees, tucking their tail bone under and using more hips. But there is a big difference between using the hips to lead the movement, and “loading up” the joint crease where the lower front of the torso and the upper leg meet.

To “sung kua” one does lower the body, but not by just bending the knees and letting the knees come forward as in a typical low “horse stance.” I eventually came to see that even the so-called “External Arts” do not do this. See for instance the photos of the Shaolin Master in horse stance in Robert Smith's 1964 book *Secrets of Shaolin Temple Boxing* or his 1969 book with Don Droege on *Asian Fighting Arts*. Many of us also saw the movie *Iron and Silk*, where Master Pan corrects his student's upright, square horse stance by pushing him in the chest and watching him fall backward. To adjust, Master Pan had his student sink into the hip crease and lean forward slightly. This resulted in a slightly forward leaning posture, and firmly rooted the brunt of Pan's push directly into the stance's alignment to the ground and created immovable stability.

As for the Internal Arts, sinking into the kua has three functions: (1) to firmly root and align the body down the base leg(s) and directly into the ground; (2) it provides an additional “power spring” from which force can either be compressed downward or released upward; and (3) it can also aid and assist in shifting and/or turning the torso and hip area from side to side. In the first two functions, it is as if the kua were performing the sinking and releasing functions usually accorded to the knee. Proper sinking into the kua and tucking the tailbone under the torso also takes a lot of unnecessary pressure off the knee and allows the power of the stronger muscles of the thighs, hips, and the lower torso to come into greater play.

I recall the words of Master Zhang Xue Xin, one of our country's leading Chen Masters and senior U.S. disciple of Grandmaster Feng Zhiqiang, stating that, “Americans only know how to use the hips, and not the kua.” While of course the hips are important and should be involved in compressing, torquing and guiding the release of force, the kua joints are the major movable joints and “powerbooster” in enhancing this activity. In practicing initially, it is even helpful to minimize the movement of the hip in order to make a real kua connection and to actually feel for oneself the augmented power of the kua.

One does not need to look far in the sports world to find evidence of the natural use of the “sunken stance” utilizing the sinking of the body into the kua. Almost every sport utilizes the sunken stance to create stability, store power and increase total body power. Think of the tennis player's sunken (although also continuously shifting from side to side) position while awaiting the opponent's serve. Watch the baseball player holding the bat while waiting for the pitch. Wrestlers are continuously in this stance when confronting their opponent in the standing position. Boxers whose punches are weak because they are primarily using arms to punch are told to “sit down” on their punches. All great “punchers” in the boxing world have the ability to use the weight transfer and “stand up” power from a crouched position. “Sung kua” is by no means a foreign concept for athletes who excel in their various sports.

Locating the Kua

The kua is referred to anatomically as the “inguinal canal or groove.” Through the interior of this pelvis area are muscles which connect the lower back with the upper thigh bone. Also this area is unique because it contains the largest collection of lymph nodes which are part of the body's immune system. The joint referred to as the kua is normally responsible for the turning out or turning in of the leg and assists in raising and lowering the body. This area also cushions the spine from the jarring impact of running, jumping and kicking.

Imagine if one could have two knees on each leg instead of just one. One would be more powerful and more flexible in each leg. Well the kua can be thought of as a second knee on each leg. By sinking into the kua, the actual knee, if properly aligned, suffers less stress and the body, waist and torso can access greater ground power. Instead of primarily bending the knee, the sinking into the kua compresses the leg like a giant shock absorber spring. Instead of feeling pressure in the knee, the pressure by-passes the knee and is felt as the pressure of the sole of the foot on the ground.

In order to gain the extra flexibility and power of the kua, one must sit more deeply into one's stance without allowing the knees to extend further over the toe. When done properly, a crease appears between the upper leg and lower torso, along the leg line which would be covered by the elastic leg opening of a pair of "jockey" shorts. (I wear "boxers" myself.) One could hold a pencil in the kua crease and usually a person's pants will also visibly crease as one sinks or turns into the kua.

In the rear weighted stance, the kua of the base leg would crease or "close" and the forward non-weight bearing leg kua would open. Upon sinking into the kua, one will feel more firmly rooted to the ground, as if the body actually weighs more. The body's weight will pass through the knee of the leg rather than being supported by the knee.

This stance is like the "pouncing" position of a "cat about ready to pounce on a rat." One will be firmly rooted and ready to explode forward with greater power. Now the leg fires its power in three connected stages: (1) the push off of the foot on the ground; (2) the straightening of the knee; and (3) the pumping upward of the kua. Try this while pushing or punching against the heavy bag and one will immediately notice the difference.

Developing the Kua

Try to isolate the kua. One can raise and lower the body while standing with the weight on one leg by sinking and standing up, using the kua alone. Isolating and pumping the kua will make the leg seem stronger and the torso more powerful. Direct the sinking of the kua until one feels more heavily rooted to the ground. Pump the kua and send more leg power into the lumbosacral "ming-men" area and ultimately into the upper back, arms and hands. Later, try to coordinate this power further by opening and closing the chest and back area. (See my article on the "Thoracic Hinge.")

Always be sure to keep the knee properly aligned. An excellent reference on this subject is Jay Dunbar's article on Knee Safety in the August 1992 issue of *T'ai Chi Magazine*. The knee should not extend outside or inside the power line of the base leg. When done properly, one will see instantly the wisdom behind the Classics admonition to "sung kua" or to sink/close into the inguinal crease. When walking up the stairs or when kicking, access the pumping of the kua. When sinking before issuing any power first sink deeply into the kua and then use the "kua pump" to explode outward. Using the kua will also assist in developing a faster and more powerful push in "pushing hands" practice. It will also store and release more power in lunging forward to cover more ground or to "close the gap" with an opponent.

It doesn't make any difference which style of Tai Chi that you study. The use of the kua has been mentioned by the Taiji Classics, but not often understood. The Chan Szu Chin exercises of the Chen Style are designed to help develop the kua. Outside of the Chen Style, the only other teacher I have seen stress this kua power is Master William C.C. Chen, my first Taiji teacher from New York. Regardless of style or activity, one will notice a qualitative difference, which will improve the results of one's intended efforts. Also, by pumping the kua, we are stimulating the lymph nodes located therein, activating the immune system, thereby deriving greater health benefits. One is also learning to cushion and protect the spinal column from the impact of lower body movement. Whether for martial, health or ergonomic work related purposes pumping the kua will "Pump you Up!"

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