

Thank you for your letter of 16 February. Though my research has been on Evans Carlson and his style of leadership, I will try to answer your question about the origins of gung ho.

Mandarin Chinese, from which gung ho is taken, is a language that is spoken using a limited number of sounds. Each sound can have several meanings; context is used to resolve ambiguity. If one sees a Chinese phrase in characters it usually can be easily understood.

When one doesn't have ideographs (characters), and is forced to rely on an "out of context" romanization of the ideographs (such as gung ho), one is at a disadvantage. Looking at a popular Chinese dictionary under gung I see 21 different ideographs, each standing for a different word or concept. If all I had to work with was the romanization gung ho I would probably be incapable of determining the meaning of the phrase. I will explain how I arrived at an understanding of Evans Carlson's gung ho.

At first, I took Carlson quite literally. I knew that gung ho meant "work together." The character for work is:

工 (gung)

Second, the character for with, or together, is:

和 (ho)

So, initially, I saw gung ho as meaning "work with" as expressed by:

工和 (gung ho)

Subsequently, I rejected the above interpretation. My first understanding, I decided, was too literal. I never saw it anywhere, in any Chinese literature I read, and decided that my understanding was wrong because of something I read in Michael Blankfort's book on Carlson. In Blankfort's book (see page 185) I was led to believe that gung ho was (at least part of) a colloquialism, and was not a standalone concept expressed by two characters.

That led me to think that Carlson's gung ho was part of the phrase: Zhong hua ren min gong he guo (note I have spelled gung ho as gong he, which is a different style of romanization). The above phrase looks like this:

中華人民共和國

and it is the phrase used to represent "The People's Republic of China." In this phrase, gung ho is:

共和 (gung ho)

and it stands for "unity," or "cooperation" --- in the sense of what I think Carlson meant.

Finally, I concluded that all the above was wrong when I saw the movie "Gung Ho!" which starred Randolph Scott. According to Michael Blankfort (see page 322 of his book), Carlson was a technical advisor to the movie--- so the movie would have been as accurate as possible, given the concerns of wartime censorship. The key to the gung ho puzzle lies in the start of the film.

As the film begins, with lead-ins, credits, and other Hollywood trappings, we see yet another set of Chinese characters for gung ho on the screen. In the movie they were:

工合 (gung ho)

Which translates to "work in accord," or "work in harmony." I would say that it is safe to conclude that the above version of gung ho is the correct one.

If you plan to do something with those characters I suggest that you track down a calligrapher to give you a stylized version--- stylized characters are the ones most often seen on works of art, which is what I believe you are looking for.

Finally, you might want to run this whole question by retired Brig. Gen. Samuel Griffiths. Griffiths is himself a Raider, as well as a renowned expert on Chinese military history. I have the greatest respect for Griffiths; because he is a Chinese historian himself, and because he may have known Carlson and his concept, it is quite possible that there is an entirely different version of gung ho. If Griffiths has an interpretation different than mine, I would defer to him.

I am happy to be able to help you. If I may be of further assistance you can contact me during the work [REDACTED]

Semper Fidelis,
[REDACTED]