

KUNG FU COMEBACK

NEWS

Kung fu
master Xu
Gong Wei
seeks to
preserve
ancient art

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Thousands of years before tai bo and kayak skiing, there was an extreme sport that would never go out of style.

Practiced by millions and considered the highest expression of an ancient culture, not only was it the height of coolness; this sport could give you a long, healthy life and propel you to great wisdom. It was so empowering and popular it was banned for 300 years by governments afraid of their own people. Now, the world's oldest extreme sport is becoming the latest craze again.

Kung fu is making a comeback. It is glorified in American movies like *The Matrix*, *Blade* and *Lethal Weapon*

Chan and Jet Li are becoming as big in Hollywood as they've been for years in Hong Kong. Negotiations are proceeding to make *wushu* (another name for kung fu) an Olympic sport.

But the kung fu renaissance would be just another passing fad if it weren't for people like Xu Gong Wei. Far from the public spotlight, grandmaster Xu (pronounced *shu*) has devoted his life to studying this 6,000-year-old Chinese cultural treasure and passing it on to tens of thousands of students in China and Canada.

Originally from Nanjing, but now residing in Vancouver, he is in Montreal for six weeks seeking to preserve kung fu by offering courses to the public.

At 84, Xu is a picture of fitness and dexterity, graceful movement and physical vigour. He says he owes his excellent health to a lifetime of study in kung fu, which he has taught for the past 50 years. A man of good humour and fierce eyes, Xu has hardly a wrinkle on his face and a thick mane of hair. He says that since moving to Vancouver in 1988, he has yet to catch even a cold. "Except four years ago, I got a fever," he confesses.

He has mastered 100 styles of kung fu, which is amazing considering most dedicated practitioners spend their whole life learning just half a dozen. Despite his age, he can immobilize an opponent with just a slight touch to a pressure point.

"He's considered a teachers' teacher," says Lorne Bernard, head instructor at the Académie Shaolin

White Crane Kung Fu, which invited Xu here. While in Montreal, Xu is teaching *chin na*, the Chinese system of joint-locking techniques that is the foundation of Japanese arts like *jujitsu*, *judo* and *aikido*. He is also teaching a rare classical style called *cha chuan*, which was devised by the Muslim Hui people of northern China and is known for its ferocity and kicking techniques.

But Xu also has a soft side. He is skilled in what are known as internal or "soft" styles of kung fu like *tai ji*, which he says are behind his good health and humour. "I am always happy," he says. "This is due to my teaching kung fu as well as training myself."

Xu is teaching two internal styles of kung fu: *qi gong* and *xing-yi*. *Qi gong* is a discipline that seeks to develop one's health and spirituality to an exceptional level. Based on the same Chinese healing science as acupuncture, it consists of daily practice of meditation, breathing techniques and harnessing one's "life energy," known as *qi* (pronounced *chi*). *Qi gong* practitioners believe it improves longevity, allows you to cure yourself and others of ailments like baldness, depression and cancer, and can even give birth to supernatural powers.

Xu tells the story of an older man who came to him complaining of chronic back problems that no doctor could cure. Xu taught him a simple ten-minute *qi gong* routine, and the man was cured in six months. One of Xu's own teachers, a master of *qi gong*, lived to the age of 116.

"It leads to very good health," says Leung Gio, 57, one of Xu's students in Vancouver. "It gives you a clear outlook in what you want to do in your day-to-day life. When you meditate, your body is in a state of clearness and transparency."

Leung says that, after years of study, a *qi gong* practitioner may "enter another state of being. At a certain level of spirituality, you could surpass the third or fourth dimension. Time and space would not be the same as what we know in our world." ■

For more information,
call the Académie Shaolin White Crane
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