

Lee Joo Chian's

Explosive Flying Crane

The crane system practiced by the famous Lee family features firm stances and quick, evasive footwork.

By Alex Roslin

There are many eye-opening moments in the study of kung-fu, bolts from the blue that change your take on things. Lorne Bernard experienced one of those rare moments in the town of Sibü, in eastern Malaysia.

The year was 1989. Bernard had been practicing Fukienese white crane for seven years in Montreal, Canada. He was in Malaysia for five months to study and live with Lee Joo Chian, the youthful patriarch of the flying crane branch of the style.

Following his return to Canada, Bernard became the first Caucasian instructor in the style's history and later wrote the first book about white crane. But we're getting way ahead of ourselves here.

Lee, at the time only 31, was the fourth-generation descendant of a line of famous kung-fu grandmasters. They traced their lineage to the legendary woman who created Fukienese white crane 200 years ago, Fung Chi-Niang.

"Lightning Fast"

Bernard was astonished when he saw Lee's kung-fu.

"The first time I saw master Lee do a form, I didn't even recognize it until 60 seconds into the form. That's pretty scary. It was so different, it was crazy," he said. "His stance was very low. He was very fast, lightning fast."

Lee's father, the late grandmaster Lee Kiang Ke, was a legend in his own right. The elder Lee was in his mid-80s when Bernard visited Sibü. His kung-fu also was an eye-opener.

"He was telling a story and did two punches," said Bernard. "He was faster than I was while sitting down."

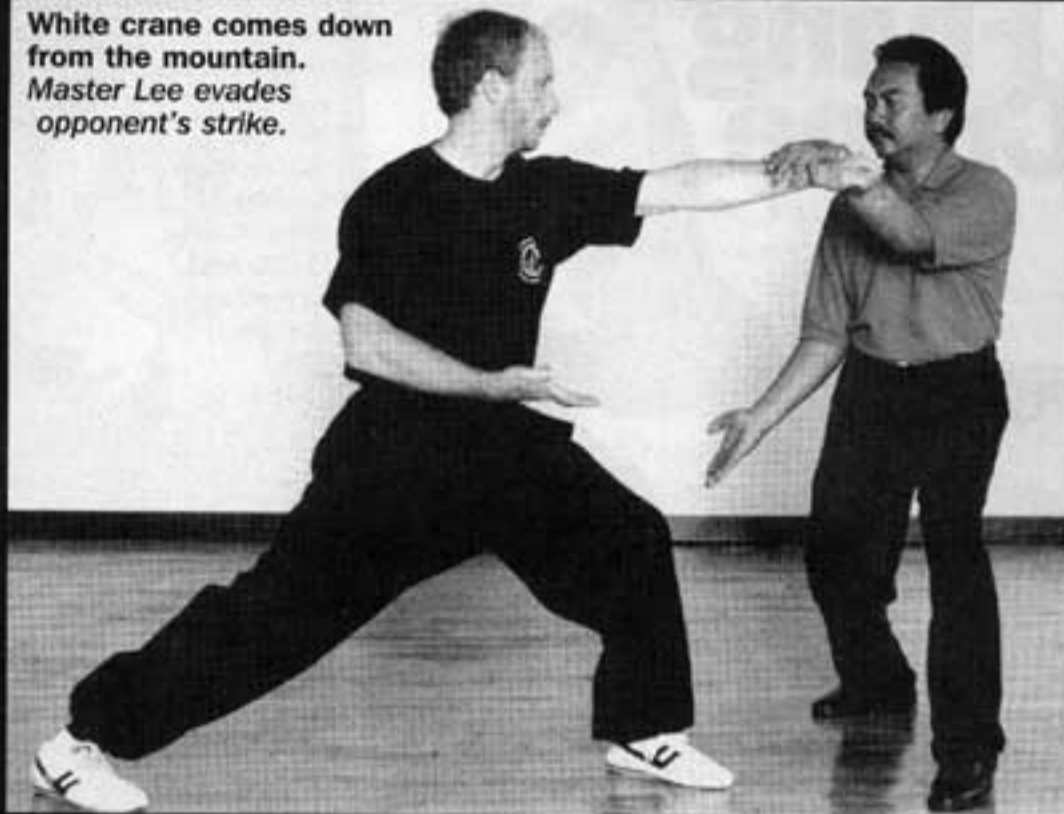
On Bernard's return to Canada, he became one of North America's leading instructors of white crane kung-fu. In 1993, he wrote the book, *White Crane Kung Fu*, and included the memory of the grandmaster, who died in 1992. (The book was dedicated to Bernard's sifu, Augustine Ngu, who brought white crane to Canada.)

Bernard also kept close contact with the Lee family, returning to Malaysia a few years later. He also hosted the younger Lee in Canada twice on extended visits.

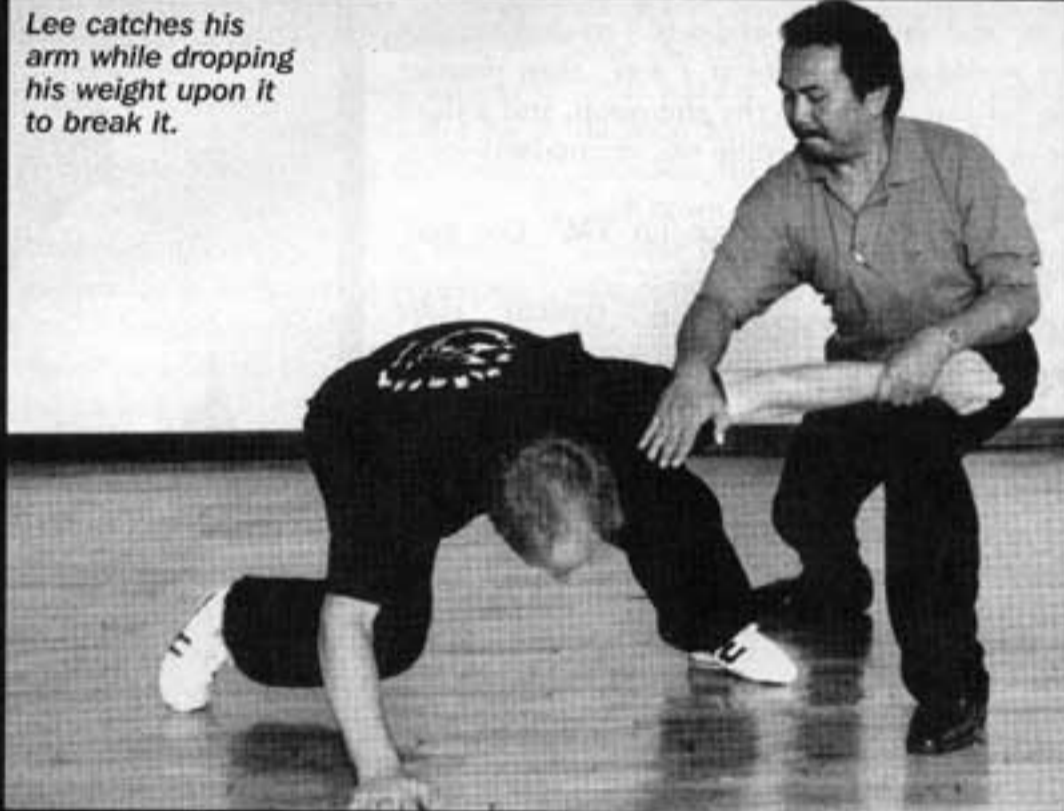
Grueling Schedule

Lee spent three months last year in Montreal to perfect Bernard's skills and help teach students at the

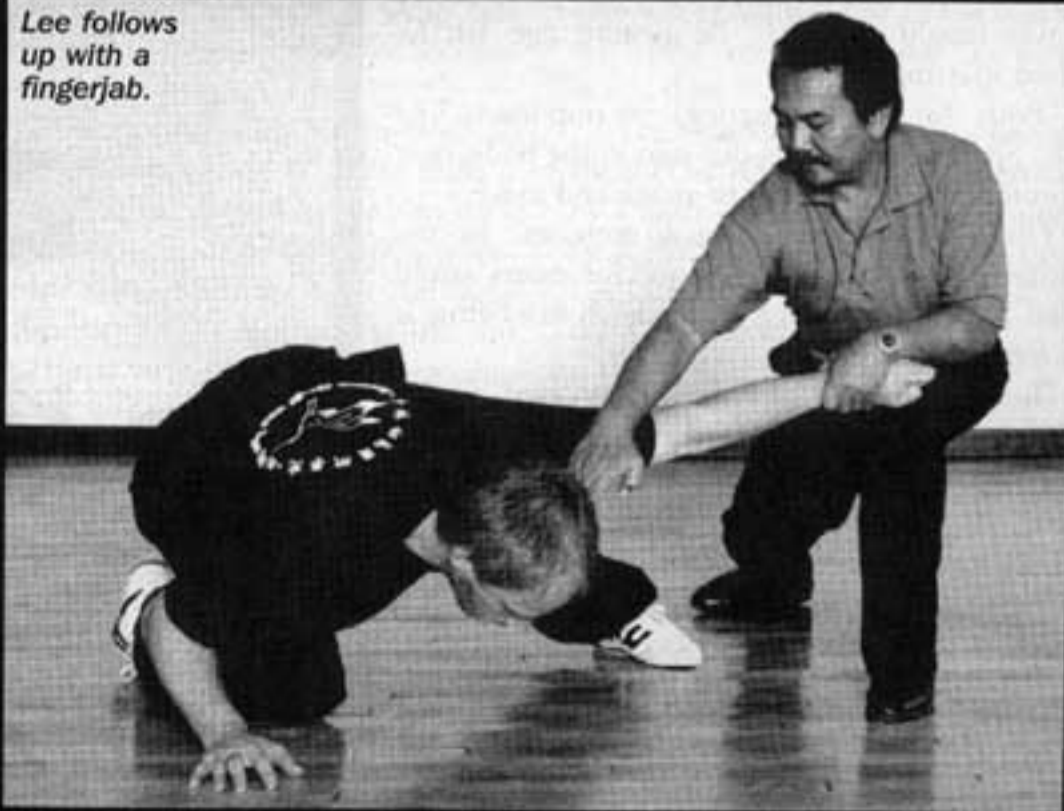
White crane comes down from the mountain. Master Lee evades opponent's strike.



Lee catches his arm while dropping his weight upon it to break it.



Lee follows up with a fingerjab.



Flying Crane



Academie Shaolin White Crane Kung Fu of Montreal, where Bernard teaches white crane, wing chun and cha chuan.

Lee said he started learning kung-fu from his father at age five. He and his three sisters had a grueling schedule. Their first class of the day began at 4 a.m. and lasted two-and-a-half-to-three hours. They would go to school at 7 a.m., then practice again for just as long in the afternoon, and a third time at night. This schedule was maintained seven days a week.

"At that time, there was no TV," Lee said. "Kung-fu was my TV."

"Hard, external strength only lasts so long...keep it cool, don't make it hard and angry."

A typical class would start with a half-hour of basic forms (there is no warm-up because Malaysia is so hot). After a short rest, there would be more basics for 30 minutes, then 30 minutes of set fighting (two-person

forms), a half-hour of applications and another half-hour of free sparring.

Lee spent six months learning just the first set of the 22-set basic form. It was three years before he was taught the staff. At around age 10, he started sparring.

"Both (forms and sparring) are important," he said. "Sparring is training our stance, the body, how to protect yourselves, how to attack and move."

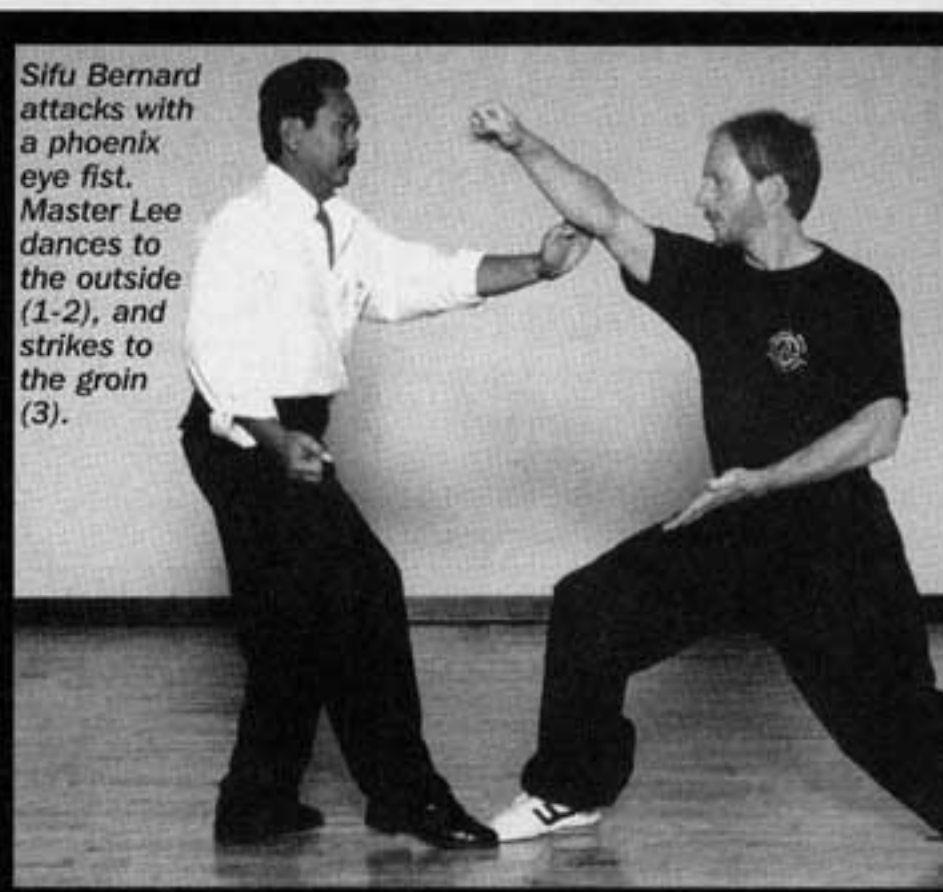
There were some unusual exercises. In the mornings as the sun rose, Lee and his sisters would spend 15 minutes staring at the dawn sun before it got too strong.

"It trains you to keep your eyes open. Crazy, huh?" he says with a laugh. "If you do sparring and the guy punches you and you close your eyes, you cannot see the punch come to your body. You cannot turn your body to move the stance," he explains. "You have to practice your whole body, including everything."

The Beginning

In 1970, when Lee was 12, his father, Lee Kiang Ke, opened the White Crane Martial Arts Courage

Sifu Bernard attacks with a phoenix eye fist. Master Lee dances to the outside (1-2), and strikes to the groin (3).



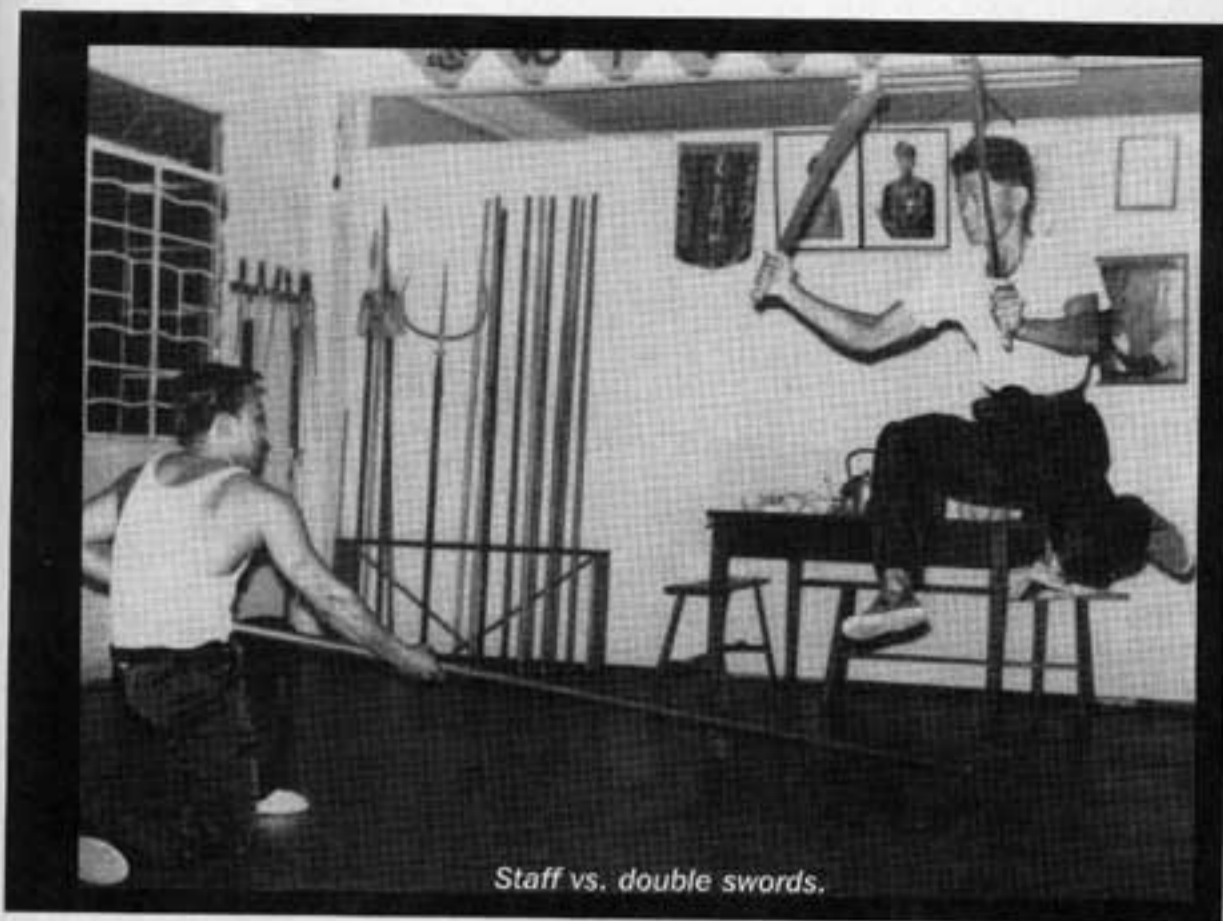
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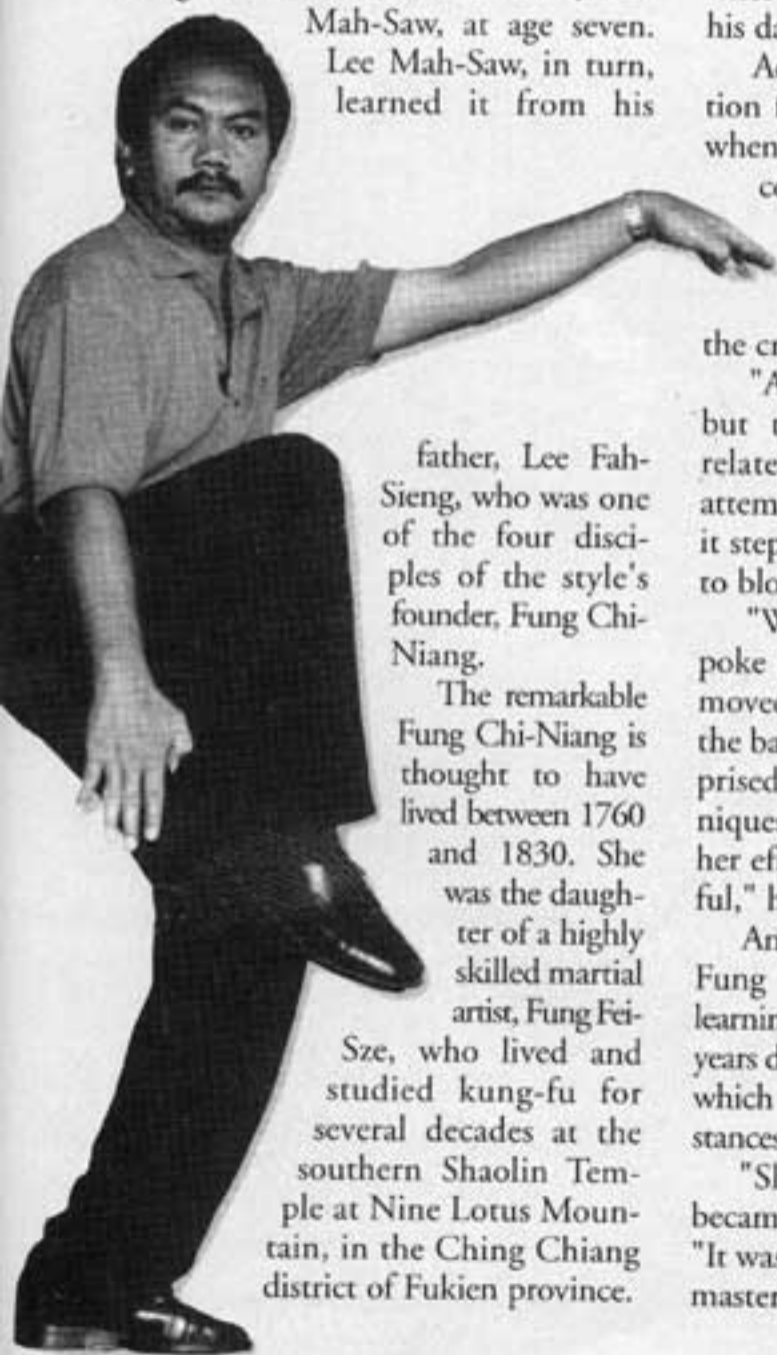
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Staff vs. double swords.

School (Sekolah Pendidikan Jasmani White Crane, in the Malay language) in Sibu, Malaysia. The elder Lee, then in his 60s, was born in the Chow Ann district of Fukien province in 1903.

Grandmaster Lee began learning kung-fu from his own father, Lee Mah-Saw, at age seven. Lee Mah-Saw, in turn, learned it from his



father, Lee Fah-Sieng, who was one of the four disciples of the style's founder, Fung Chi-Niang.

The remarkable Fung Chi-Niang is thought to have lived between 1760 and 1830. She was the daughter of a highly skilled martial artist, Fung Fei-Sze, who lived and studied kung-fu for several decades at the southern Shaolin Temple at Nine Lotus Mountain, in the Ching Chiang district of Fukien province.

Fung Fei-Sze reportedly was among the fortunate few to escape when Chinese Emperor Chieng Lung destroyed the temple in the late 1700s.

Subsequently, Fung Fei-Sze moved to the Sah Liang Temple near Foochow, where he spent his spare time refining his daughter's Shaolin kung-fu.

According to legend, the inspiration for the crane style came one day when his daughter saw a huge crane come down from the roof and eat some grain she was drying. Fung Chi-Niang decided to use a bamboo stick to chase the crane away.

"At first, she tried to strike its head, but the bird was evasive," Bernard relates in his book. "Then she attempted to hit the crane's wings but it stepped to the side and used its claw to block the attack.

"When Fung Chi-Niang tried to poke the bird's body with her staff, it moved back and used its beak to peck the bamboo. Fung Chi-Niang was surprised. She continued to use the techniques her father had taught her but her efforts were completely unsuccessful," he writes.

Amazed by the crane's fighting skill, Fung Chi-Niang devoted herself to learning its movements, and over many years developed the unique crane system, which became celebrated for its firm stances and quick, evasive footwork.

"She had many students and became very famous," Bernard notes. "It was unheard of for a woman to be a master at the time."

Lethal Strikes

The style relies on the phoenix eye fist and thrusting fingers to deliver pressure point strikes. It also includes chin na, an abundance of weapons sets and, at the highest levels, 36 lethal pressure-point strikes.

Fung Chi-Niang devised four separate branches of the style: flying crane, resting crane, crying crane and eating crane. The Lee family tradition embraced the flying crane (fei he), known for its single-leg, flying crane stance and extremely difficult flying combination forward-thrusting kicks.

In the early part of this century, the flying crane style's patriarch became Lee Kiang Ke. At a young age, he was already the chief kung-fu instructor and medical practitioner in his community in Fukien province. At 28, he moved to Malaysia to practice medicine and teach kung-fu.

It was Lee Kiang Ke who made the decision to release the family style to outsiders, thereby ensuring its survival.

Known for his vast knowledge of Chinese herbology and mysticism, Lee was also famous for his iron palm. He soaked his hands in Chinese medicine every day until they were numb, then shot them into small rounded river pebbles.

"His fingers were like iron nails," Bernard maintains.

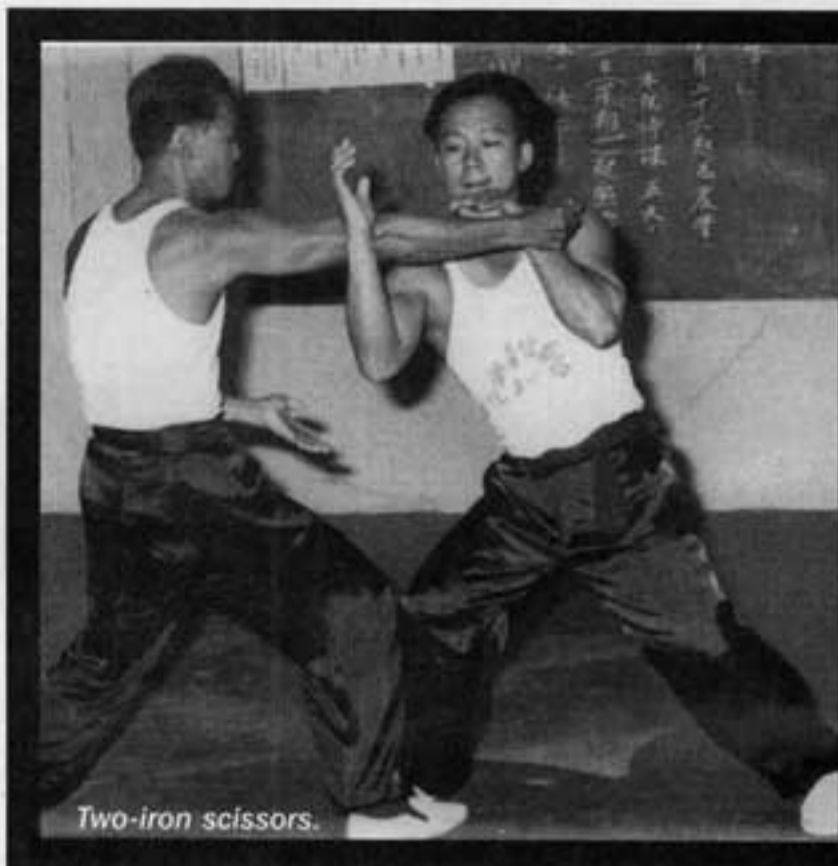
In those rough-and-tumble days, Lee was challenged often, but had a reputation for never losing. In one famed incident, students came looking for a fight from a school across the street. They all took turns kicking him in the stomach, but it had no effect. "He was smiling. They all ran out, saying sorry," recalls Bernard. Lee was 65 at the time.

Lee's students also made a name for themselves. One student was attacked by a knife-wielding challenger, another by a challenger with a Samurai sword. Lee's students, who were unarmed, successfully defended themselves.

Change in Attitude

In 1978, grandmaster Lee retired after 50 years of teaching and passed his school in Sibu to his son, Lee Joo Chian. While visiting Montreal, the younger Lee, now 43, gave students the same kind of epiphanies that their sifu had in Sibu.

"He really changed my perspective on martial arts," admits Claude Rose, one of Bernard's disciples. Lee made an



impression with his explosive staff and unarmed techniques, powerful stances and aggressive fighting attitude, but also with his friendliness.

"As a person, he's down-to-earth and fun to be around. He buddies around a lot and tells jokes. He doesn't only talk about martial arts," adds Rose.

Lee isn't a member of any martial arts association and says he prefers practicing to gossiping about kung-fu politics or putting down other schools. His first and last competition took place in 1973, when at age 15 he took second place with a staff form in the South East Asian Kung Fu tournament. (His kung-fu brother from another school won first place.)

"My father didn't like associations. He just wanted to teach," Lee explains. "In my mind, to become a good sifu, you don't talk too much about being the best. All kung-fu is the same. If you practice kung-fu a lot, even if your teacher is not good, but the student practices hard, you will be good."

Lee's philosophy is simple: be humble and modest, practice, don't talk.

Also important, he said, is chi kung. Each morning, before his students arrive, Lee said he does 30 minutes of white crane chi kung.

"When you learn chi kung, you know how to move," he insists. "If you learn kung-fu and you don't know chi kung, it means it's nothing."

Lee quotes a Chinese proverb: "*Lien gong bu lien chi dao lao i chang kong*," which he translates as, "If you practice external forms but not internal forms, later in life you will have nothing."

"Hard, external strength only lasts so long," he claims.

Lee's advice to beginner students: don't use kung-fu to fight without cause, and "keep it cool, don't make it hard and angry."

"When you know the (pressure) points to kill people, you stop fighting and you only exercise to help people protect themselves and to keep the body strong," he adds. ☯

Alex Roslin, a writer from Montreal, Canada, studies wing chun at the Academie Shaolin White Crane Kung Fu of Montreal. Sifu Lorne Bernard is president of the Eastern Canada Chinese Martial Arts Federation. For more information about the academy, see www.whitecrane.mainpage.net