

FITNESS AND HEALTH

Mind over matter

Martial arts have kept 82-year-old teacher strong and fit

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It is impossible not to be impressed by the appearance of Xu Gong Wei. At 82, he is a picture of fitness and dexterity, graceful movement and physical vigour.

Grandmaster Xu (pronounced Shu) is in Montreal this month to teach five unusual forms of kung fu to the public in hopes of keeping this ancient Chinese cultural treasure alive.

Xu says he owes his excellent health to a lifetime of study in the art of Chinese kung fu, which he has taught for the past 50 years. He says that since moving to Vancouver from Shanghai a decade ago, he has yet to catch even a cold. "Except four years ago, I got a fever," he said. "My son and wife had been having a fever for 20 days and so I was infected."

A man of good humour, fierce eyes and great strength — both outward and internal — Xu has hardly a wrinkle on his face and a thick mane of hair.

He is proficient in 100 forms of Chinese kung fu, an incredible number considering that it can take the average kung fu practitioner 10 years to learn a dozen forms. He can paralyze an opponent with just a slight touch to a pressure point.

"He's considered a teachers' teacher," said Lorne Bernard, head instructor and owner of the Shaolin White Crane Kung Fu Club of Montreal, which invited Xu here.

Xu's love of kung fu cost him dearly during China's Cultural Revolution. Acutely aware of the role kung fu schools played as bastions of rebellion throughout Chinese history, Mao's Communist government banned the teaching of martial arts. Some kung fu teachers were killed, others were jailed. Xu himself suffered during the repression, an experience he prefers not to talk about.

When in Montreal Xu will teach several kung fu forms devised by the Muslim Hui people of northern China. The forms, which come from a style known as cha chuan, are rarely seen outside China because most Chinese emigrés came from the southern provinces, where the style of martial arts is very different. As an oppressed minority in China facing better-armed government soldiers, the Hui developed fighting styles known for their ferocity.

But Xu has a soft side. He is also skilled in what are known as internal or "soft" styles of martial arts like tai chi and chi kung, which he says are responsible not only for his good health but the good sense of humour he is known for.

"I am always happy," he said. "This is due to my teaching kung fu as well as training myself."

He acquired most of his knowledge from two famous masters of kung fu who were in their 70s and 80s when they taught him. One teacher lived to the age of 116. Another was a member of the Imperial Guard under the

Empress Dowager, the last effective monarch of China. The empress, who started out as a concubine, was notorious for killing her way to the top. In one famous incident, she is said to have imprisoned the previous emperor's favourite concubine in a vase.

Both of Xu's teachers were doctors skilled in chi kung, a Chinese healing discipline that can be described as a cross between tai chi and acupuncture. It consists of daily practice of meditation, breathing techniques and study of the body's energy flows. Practitioners believe it can be used to improve longevity, cure a wide range of ailments from depression and premature hair loss to heart disease and cancer, and even gain supernatural powers.

Last summer, the chi kung association Xu heads in Vancouver invited a specialist to give a seminar. Xu says that afterward, at a dinner party, the man took a bottle of wine and asked someone to taste it. The chi kung master then held the bottle in his hand for several minutes. When he was done, he asked the same person to taste the wine again.

"Surprisingly, the bottle of wine became a bottle of water," Xu said. "Not a little taste of alcohol was left in the bottle."

✦ Xu Gong Wei's courses are being held daily this month, the times depending on the discipline. Martial-arts experience is necessary for most of them. For details contact the Shaolin White Crane Kung Fu Club at 813-5177.



MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, GAZETTE

Xu Gong Wei wants to keep the tradition of kung fu alive.