

Even though he's 83,
students are drawn to cha
quan master Xu Gong Wei
by his skill and passion for
Chinese martial arts.

Master
Xu Gong
WEI:
A Teacher's
Teacher

By Alex Roslin



Everyone remembers his first meeting with master Xu Gong Wei. For me, it came when I signed up for a class in chin na — Chinese jointlocking techniques — taught by the elderly kung-fu master in Montreal, Quebec. At the time, master Xu (pronounced "Shu") was 80 going on 35, a vigorous man with fierce eyes, smooth skin, a thick mane of hair and a limber body.

It wasn't long before I saw his power and skill. He frowned disappointedly when my partner and I couldn't get a move right, then stepped over and took hold of my hand with two fingers, twisting ever so slightly. I weighed at least 50 pounds more than he did, but there I was, forced to one knee by an exquisitely applied wristlock. His face was just as quick to light up with a brilliant smile when we finally got the technique right.

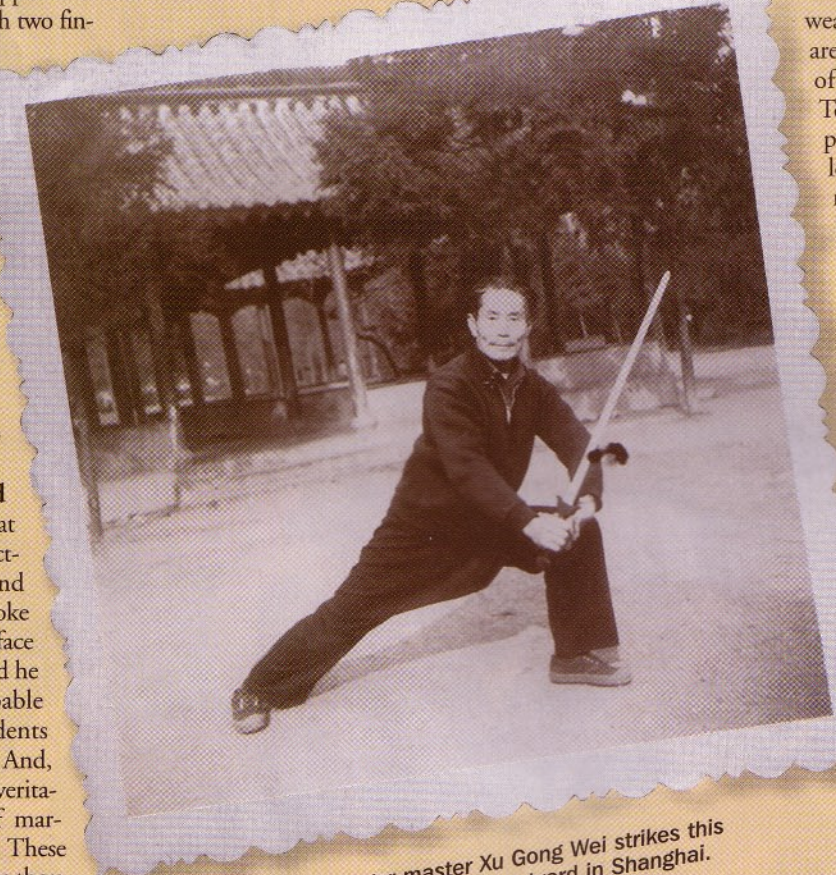
Words Not Needed

He was like that — precise and exacting, yet warm and encouraging. He spoke no English, but his face was so expressive and he was such a capable teacher that students soon barely noticed. And, above all, he was a veritable encyclopedia of martial arts knowledge. These are the same qualities thousands of students around the world have come to love ever since master Xu started teaching wushu (which at the time meant all martial arts) in Nanjing more than 50 years ago.

In 1933, the year Hitler rose to power in Germany, a young Xu Gong Wei was already showing signs of the bold spirit that would see him through the turbulent times ahead. While attending school and studying wushu in Shanghai, he found time to open a candy store at the age of 17. Soon, World War II engulfed China and the rest of the world. Xu moved to Nanjing, where he started teaching wushu in 1944 at age 28.

Today, like many war survivors, master Xu doesn't talk much about those dark years. The one memory he shares from time to time with friends is about how he was almost killed during the Japanese invasion of China, but was saved by a Japanese person.

Most of master Xu's advanced wushu knowledge came from two famous teachers. From 1939-1959, he studied with Yu Zhen Sheng, the head instructor at Chinese Nationalist leader Chang Kai-shek's Hoang Poo military academy in



A younger master Xu Gong Wei strikes this pose in a public courtyard in Shanghai.

Shanghai. Yu Zhen Sheng was renowned for his skill in cha quan, a classical northern kung-fu style that dates back to before the 1500s and was practiced by China's small Muslim community. Yu Zhen Sheng also taught cha quan to Ku Ju-chang, one of the most eminent Chinese martial artists of the 1920s and one of the famed Five Tigers of Northern China.

Preferred Style

Master Xu's other teacher was Zhao Eyi Fan, a former member of the elite Imperial Guard under the Empress Dowager. He was known for his skill in tai chi, hsing-I and paqua. Both he and

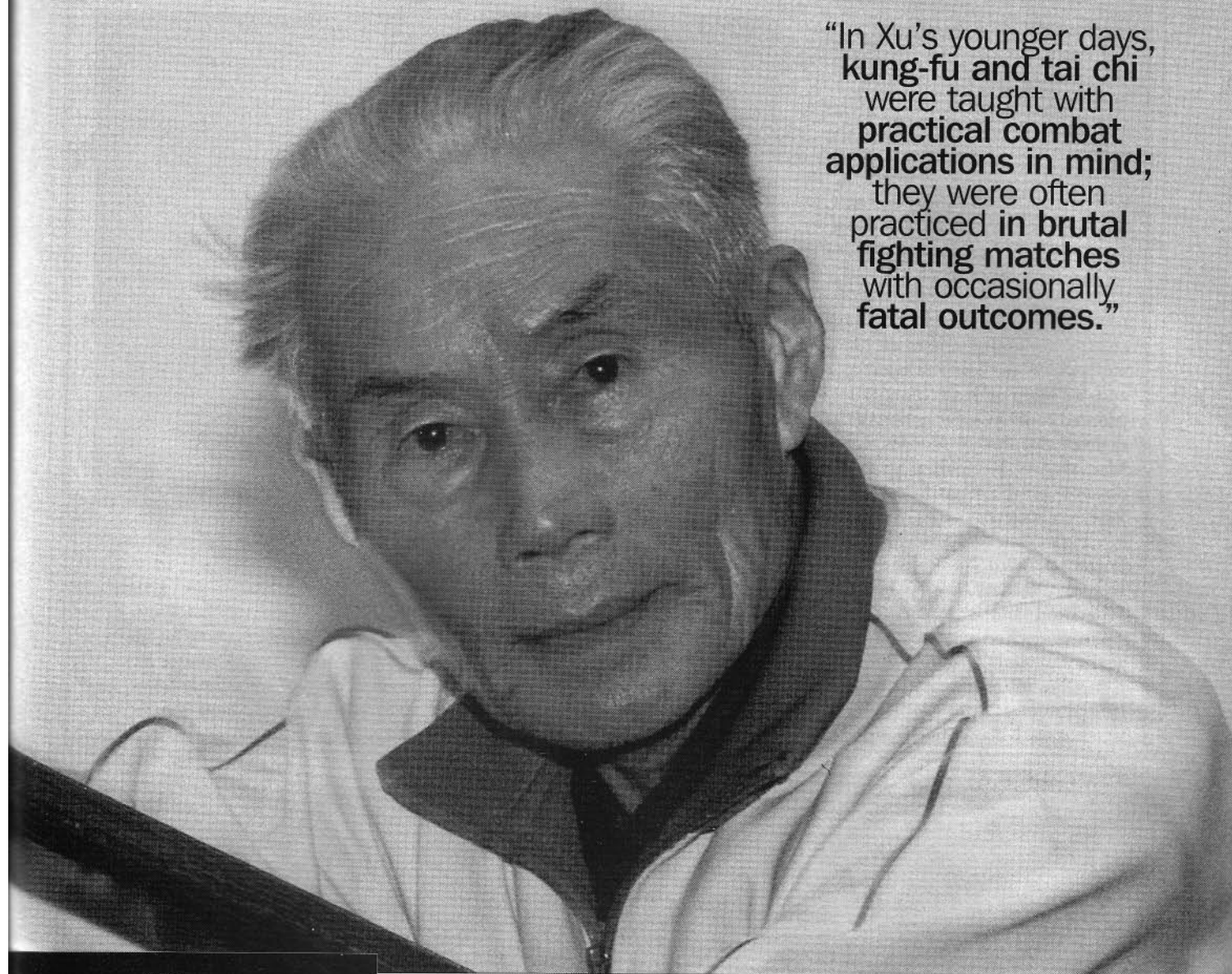
Yu Zhen Sheng were Chinese doctors skilled in acupuncture, which they taught Xu as well. In the 1950s, Xu also studied with Yang Fu Chun, who was a student of Sun Lu Tang, the founder of the Sun tai chi style, one of the five main tai chi systems.

But cha quan was master Xu's preferred style. Famous for its kicking techniques and quick footwork, the style teaches ten hand forms (or tam tui), followed by ten cha quan forms and four set fighting forms. It also makes use of most traditional weapons. Its techniques are the roots for much of modern wushu. Today, when wushu practitioners want to learn a fighting style, many study the set fighting of cha quan.

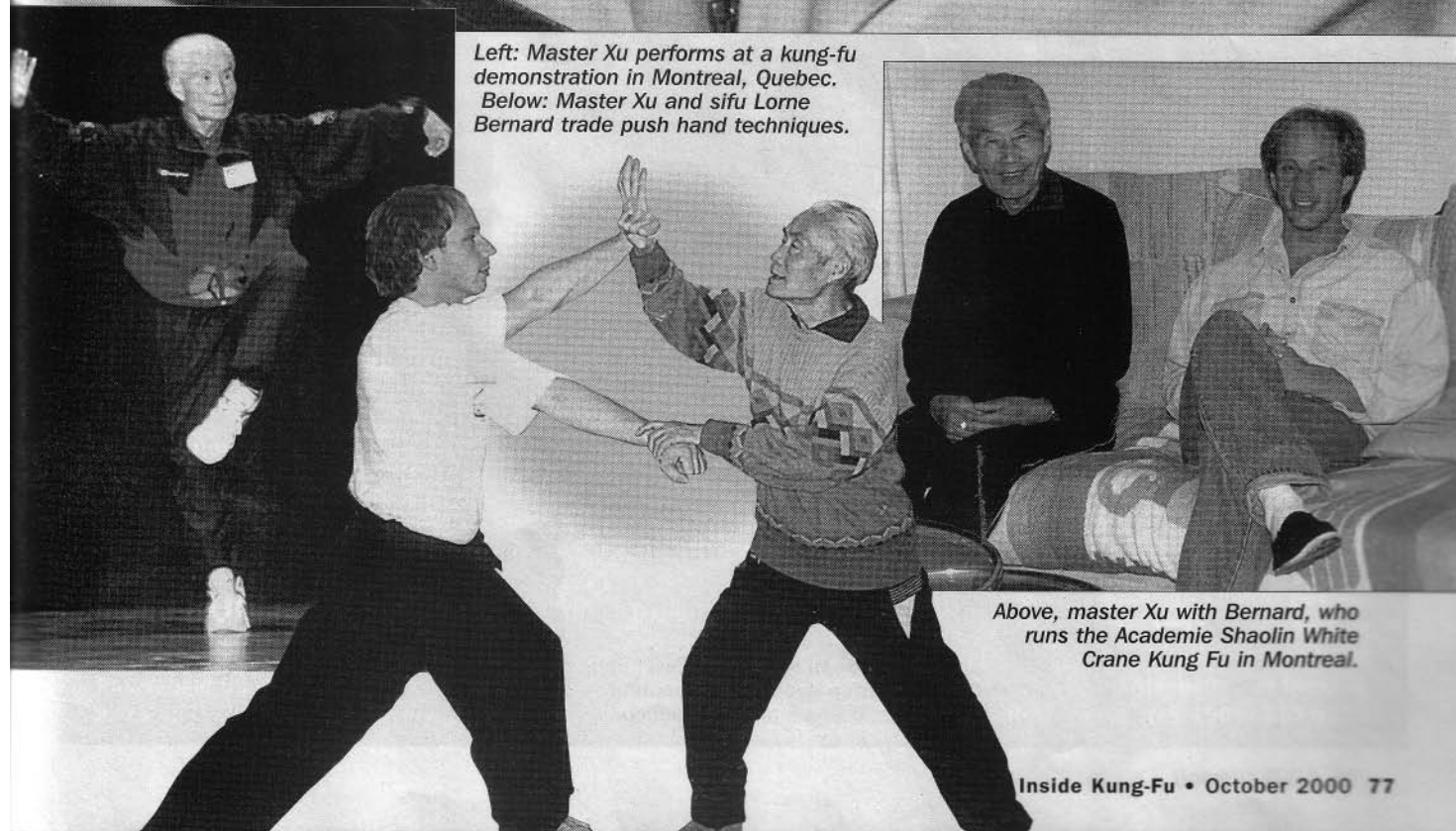
In master Xu's younger days, kung-fu and tai chi were taught with practical combat applications first and foremost in mind, and were often practiced in brutal fighting matches with occasionally fatal outcomes. Xu also engaged in such matches, but with typical kung-fu modesty he reveals only that he didn't get hurt.

If the war years were tough, the Communist Era that started in 1949 was not much better for many wushu teachers and students, who were seen as potential security threats. Some were tortured, others had their rations cut off and starved to death. Master Xu also suffered in the repression, but again it's not something many survivors like to talk about. In the midst of the persecution, however, he managed to open a massage and acupuncture clinic in Nanjing in 1955 and two years later became education director of the Nanjing Wushu Association.

In 1961, master Xu was named head coach of the wushu faculty of Nanjing University, a post he held until he emigrated to Canada in 1988.



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Left: Master Xu performs at a kung-fu demonstration in Montreal, Quebec. Below: Master Xu and sifu Lorne Bernard trade push hand techniques.

Above, master Xu with Bernard, who runs the Academie Shaolin White Crane Kung Fu in Montreal.

He was chief judge in city and provincial wushu competitions for nearly 30 years and was voted the province's outstanding coach of the year in 1984 and 1986.

A Hit In Vancouver

After a lifetime of teaching in China, master Xu remained eager to share his knowledge after moving to Vancouver as an elderly man. He started teaching classes in tai chi and also gave private lessons, which he continues today at 83. Many of his students are sifu themselves. Word of his skill and passion for kung-fu soon spread and he received many honors in his adopted country. He is honorary chairman of the Eastern Canada Chinese Martial Arts Federation and is also director of the Canadian Qi Gong Research Society.

"He's a teacher's teacher," said sifu Lorne Bernard, president of the Eastern Canada Chinese Martial Arts Federation and a teacher of white crane, wing chun and northern shaolin at the Académie Shaolin White Crane Kung Fu in Montreal. Bernard has invited master Xu to Montreal several times to teach classes in cha quan, chin



In cha quan, kicks are often blocked by a downward fist strike. Master Xu was 82 years old when this photo was taken.

na and qi gong.

What stands out about master Xu as a teacher? "He loves to teach," Bernard explained. "There is also the fact that he knows what he's talking about." And then there is his strict attention to detail.

"He refuses to let a student do it wrong, out of pride. His attitude is that

if you learn from me, you've got to do it right," Bernard said.

Julien Valiquette, an assistant instructor at Bernard's academy, had been practicing white crane for four or five years when he met master Xu at a seminar. He was immediately impressed. "The most obvious thing was his age and what he was able to do," he recalled.

"He was able to do lots of kicks and other moves that are hard even for a young person.

It was amazing to see him do all these moves.

Whenever he grabbed me, I could feel a very strong grip. Every move he made we could see the grace. And he remembered all these forms!"

Ageless Wonder

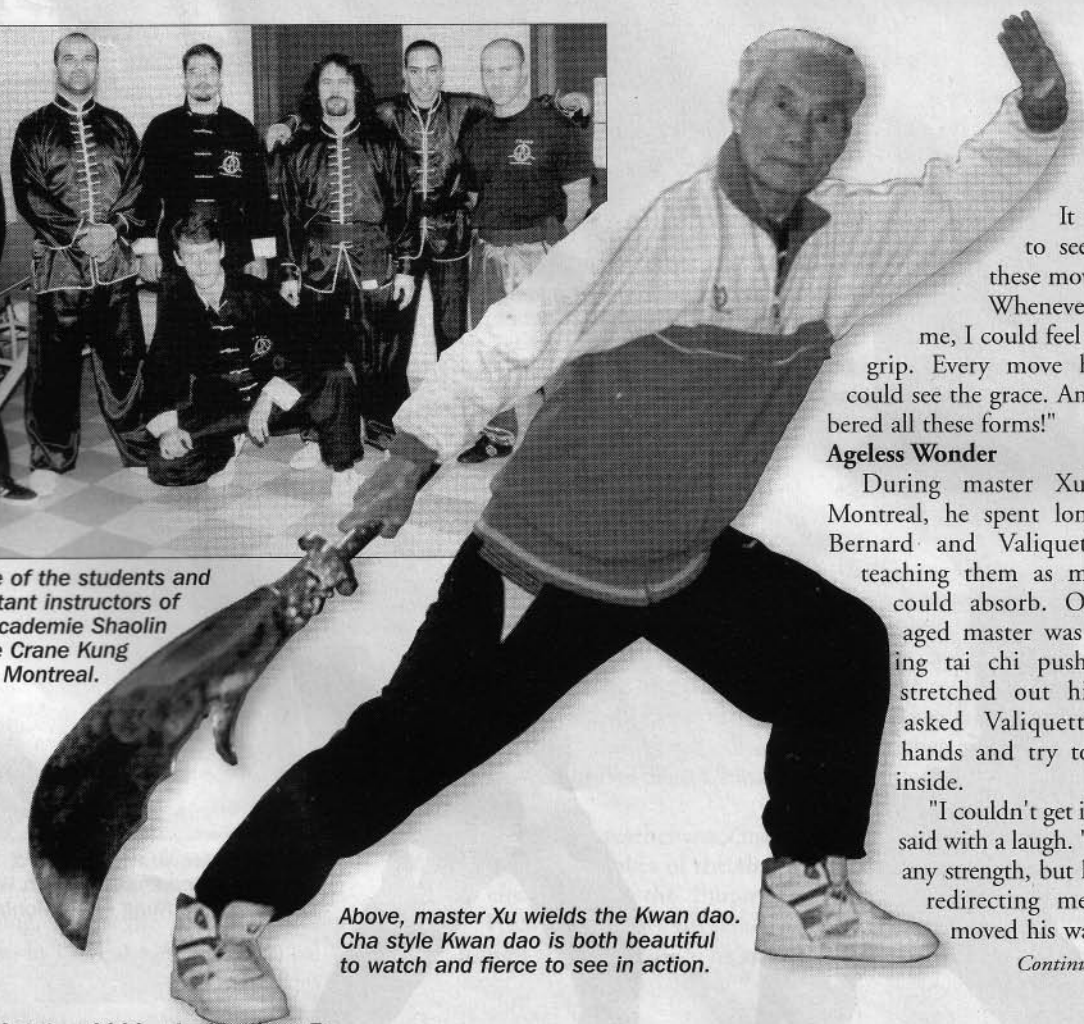
During master Xu's visits to Montreal, he spent long days with Bernard and Valiquette tirelessly teaching them as much as they could absorb. One day, the aged master was demonstrating tai chi push hands. He stretched out his arms and asked Valiquette to touch hands and try to get on the inside.

"I couldn't get in," Valiquette said with a laugh. "He didn't use any strength, but he was always redirecting me. He barely moved his waist. That was

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Some of the students and assistant instructors of the Academie Shaolin White Crane Kung Fu in Montreal.



Above, master Xu wields the Kwan dao. Cha style Kwan dao is both beautiful to watch and fierce to see in action.

A Teacher's Teacher

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very amazing." Eventually, Valiquette had learned enough to start teaching cha quan himself. He now leads a weekly class in the academy with 15-to-20 students, overseen by Bernard.

Master Xu was also invited to teach in Toronto by sifu Augustine Ng, vice president of the Canadian Chinese Kung Fu Federation and a teacher of white crane and wing chun at the All-Master Martial Arts Centre in Mississauga, Ontario.

"(Master Xu) has always been very generous and active. For someone who is beyond retirement age, having been through the Cultural Revolution and persecutions, to me that is really honorable. He is someone to be respected to the highest degree," Ng said.

"Most people would have quit or lost their lives," Ng adds. "(But master Xu) never spoke bitterly about his persecution. He still maintains a positive attitude."

"Everything Made Sense"

Gio Leung, a tai chi and qi gong teacher in Vancouver, met Xu shortly after he first arrived in Canada. At the time, Gio had been doing Yang style tai chi for about 30 years, but he was stuck on a technical question — How do you return the energy to the dan tien? Xu gave him the answer.

"It was the first time anybody could show me how it's done," Gio said. "As soon as I saw somebody who could do it, I knew I had to learn it. I asked to study with him. Then everything came together. Everything made sense. I learned a lot of things from him."

In an interview conducted in Mandarin and translated by sifu Ng, Xu recalled the grueling training he went through when he started learning kung-

fu from his two principle masters. For two years he learned only the basic forms. It was only after four or five years that they started teaching the "essential" or "real" forms. The idea was to make sure students had mastered the fundamentals first.

Master Xu said that kung-fu — his only true profession — has been a source of health and great joy in his life.

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

every day, one is very healthy. I personally get great benefits from training every day." In his eight years in Canada, he said he had never been ill. "Except four years ago, I got a fever," he said.

Master Xu described his many students who've won international awards as "my greatest rewards." Asked to define the "principle" behind learning wushu, he replied that it is simply "to achieve good health and to gain happiness for oneself. My two masters' main advice was to be an honest person and to respect the ethic of wushu." ☯

Alex Roslin is a writer in Montreal, Canada, who studies wing chun kung-fu.

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