



# Staying Fit in Mind and Body

*Traditional Chinese Martial Arts: Wushu*

BY SUE DE PASQUALE

Eric Chen was 19 when he first witnessed the Chinese martial art of wushu. The year was 1974 and the national team of China had come to perform in the United States as part of President Nixon's attempt at "Ping-Pong Diplomacy"—using sports as a bridge between the two countries. Chen was mesmerized. The beauty and athleticism of the martial art, often

known in the West as "Kung Fu," was like nothing the Californian had ever seen.

"Wushu is considered China's national sport. It has been passed down for over 3,500 years, through wars and upheavals," says Chen. "I realized that the only way to learn this art would be to go to China."

Chen made his first trip in 1981 to begin training in wushu and has returned every year since. Today he is considered one of the United States' leading experts in the sport. He has trained most of the American medalists at the World Wushu Championships and he is director of the National Wushu Training Center in California, where students of all levels and ages take classes. Many martial arts stars of the silver screen (including Ray Park and Michael Jai White) have also trained there.

Originally conceived as a means of military training, wushu today "still adheres to its mission of beauty, quality and difficulty to truly bring forth the best human spirit and physical capacity," says Chen. It can be practiced solo, paired or as a group—barehanded or armed with ancient Chinese weapons.

Practitioners of wushu see immediate gains in health and fitness, according to Chen, and once they start training, they often can't get enough. "You acquire a lot of strength and flexibility, and you are mentally and spiritually challenged," says Chen. "It's not repetitive like running or swimming. Wushu makes you want to practice because you are constantly being challenged to perfect a more difficult or more beautiful

### What is Wushu?

In an effort to revive the glory of China's great martial arts tradition, the communist government created wushu (literally "military art" or "art of war") after 1949, as both an exhibition and a full-contact sport. Wushu is a more precise term than the widely used "kung fu," which can mean either martial art or "skill."

It is now China's national sport, advanced by working committees at the national, provincial and district levels, and has spread across the globe, thanks to the efforts of the International Wushu Foundation. At the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games, China will organize a Wushu Tournament.

Many well-known martial artists of movie fame are or were wushu practitioners, including Jet Li (five-time national Wushu champion of China), Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, Jacky Wu and Ray Park.

move.” What’s more, he says, “It’s a very complete form of exercise. There is no area that you neglect.”

Chen recommends taking three 90-minute classes each week. Students who follow this course can advance from beginner to master level in four to five years. Here’s how a typical 90-minute wushu class at Chen’s training center breaks down:

#### **Cardiovascular exercises (5 minutes)**

Goal is “to warm up the blood.” Chen likes to make it fun, with a game of “tag” or “chase.”

#### **Stretching (10 minutes)**

Students work through stretches of every joint and muscle group, pushing each time to gain more flexibility than the session before. Within about six months some beginners are able to do forward and straddle splits, and to bend backward into a “bridge” position, with feet and hands on the floor and stomach facing the ceiling.

#### **Basics (30 minutes)**

Instructors devote about 10 minutes to teaching each of the wushu basics: various techniques for hands (open and closed), stances and kicking.

#### **Forms (30 minutes)**

Similar to the floor exercises that gymnasts do, “forms” are choreographed series of techniques or movements, performed alone or as

“fighting” sets between two sparring partners. In wushu, the focus is less on combat (how hard you can kick an opponent), however, than on fitness and athleticism (how high you can kick; how beautifully you can perform a move), says Chen, noting that this differentiates wushu from many other martial arts. Forms build strength and flexibility, speed and stamina; teach balance and coordination; and help students remember the many techniques they learn.

Some forms are done with “empty hands,” while others are performed with weapons. Beginners start by using a simple staff or stick, then advance to sabers, steel whips and other more exotic weapons.

#### **Physical Conditioning (15 minutes)**

Wushu’s high jumps, kicks and flips require rock-hard abdominal and leg muscles. Chen puts his students through a series of calisthenics, including 40 to 60 reps of “V” sit-ups, and a “Superman”-style exercise that strengthens the lower back; exercises aimed at strengthening the knees, ankles and toes to protect against landing shock; and short, powerful sprints that help build explosive speed and jumping ability.

Many of the students who have trained at the National Wushu Training Center have traveled with Chen to China to train in Beijing and to compete. The benefits of such travel are far-reaching, he says. “Wushu is a very culturally fulfilling sport. Westerners who take it up learn that they like the Chinese language, the food, the calligraphy, the music. You can make a lot of friends.”



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