

Interview: Liu Chang I

Feeding Crane Gung Fu

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Those of us who had grown weary over the years of the theatrical and generally pathetic demonstrations of alleged Gung Fu, were delighted to discover recently a very talented Chinese instructor teaching the original form of Feeding Crane Gung Fu.

When Liu Chang I of Tainan, Taiwan, made his first teaching tour of the U.S. last year with the noted Kobudo and Goju Ryu instructor Kimo Wall, seminar attendees were amazed by his speed and power, and his ability to hit his opponents with almost any part of his body, very hard!

Invited to produce a video with Tsunami Productions during the taping studio technicians picked up on their equipment a sort of rumbling, drumming sound that occurred when Mr. Liu performed techniques. "Oh! that's my gong li (ki)," explained Mr. Liu to the astonished sound engineer who was wondering what was wrong with the radio microphone he had attached to the instructor. The mic was removed, taping continued, and an extraordinary video was recorded that will stun collectors of Tsunami videos when it is released.

Liu Chang I was interviewed by Dragon Times just before returning to his homeland recently. His views are interesting, as a person he is quite delightful, and his fighting method is both elegant and practical. Moreover, his martial arts pedigree through his father and grandfather is impeccable, and it is therefore difficult to imagine a better qualified ambassador or Chinese Gung Fu in general and feeding crane style in particular.

Dragon Times: We appreciate you coming to our office for this interview. Please tell us a little of the background of your style.

Liu Chang I: Our style is very old and comes from Fuchow in Southern China. It's actually part of a line of progressively more complex set of styles which make up the White Crane Gung Fu family.

First there is Flying Crane which teaches basic self-defense. Then there is Sleeping Crane which helps the student to develop a very strong stance. Next comes Singing Crane which is studied to develop internal energy, and finally Feeding Crane with its emphasis on aggressive, offensive technique.

The training becomes increasingly difficult as the student progresses so only the most dedicated make it to the Feeding Crane stage.

Dragon Times: Is it true that the style was founded by a woman?

Liu Chang I: That's the tradition. They say that when the Shaolin Temple was burned down by the Ching regime the monks fled and went into hiding anywhere they could. One of them, Fang Wai Shi who was a master of the Shaolin Lohan Fist school took refuge in the Sand Lotus Temple near Fuchow, and it was here that the style developed.

Dragon Times: I have seen illustrations of a girl fighting a crane with a bamboo pole. What is that exactly?

Liu Chang I: I'm sorry I should have mentioned that, I took it for granted that you knew the story. Fang Wai Shi's daughter, Qi-Niang was a very good boxer (martial artist) having been taught by her father. One day, in the temple compound, while she was hanging out the washing on a bamboo pole as was the custom, she became concerned about a large white crane perched on an adjacent roof. Fearing the

bird would dirty the freshly laundered clothes she attempted to drive it away with the pole, and by throwing stones at it with no success.

When she attacked its head it dodged to the side, spread its wings and trapped the pole. When she hit at the crane's wings it parried vertically and attacked her with its claws. When she thrust at its body, the crane shrank back, pulled its wings around its body, and counter-attacked with its beak.

Realizing that the crane was in fact her superior in some ways she studied its method closely and came to marvel at its effectiveness. At this moment the concepts that underpin our style were realized. By adding to them what she had learned from her father, and then adding the stepping method known as "kunya-pan" she created Pai Fu, White Crane Kenpo.

Dragon Times: I believed originally that Feeding Crane had died out in mainland China, and then Morio Higaonna the Goju Ryu teacher told me that during the research for his book on the history of Goju Ryu karate, he visited Fuchow and was introduced to a Feeding Crane teacher.

Liu Chang I: It had died out in mainland China and the person he met was actually my uncle. Li Yi Duan the chairman of the Fuchow martial arts association originally asked my father to re-introduce Feeding Crane to the mainland, but instead he sent his brother. From 1989 he has taught in Fouchow for three months at a time. I am sure that this was the teacher Higaonna Sensei met, he is the only Feeding Crane instructor in Fuchow at this time.

Dragon Times: How did your family become so closely associated with Feeding Crane Gung Fu.

Liu Chang I: In the early 20s Rei Shifu was teaching Gung Fu in Taiwan. When he returned to the mainland he told others of the desire of the Taiwanese to learn Gung Fu. Consequently four instructors arrived from the mainland to work and also to teach. All were from Fuchow and all were students of Tsai Gong Son. One was a carpenter, another a builder, the third a goldsmith, I'm not sure about the other one.

In Minkoku 16 (1927) my grandfather, Liu Gou, heard that the carpenter, Lin, Toku-Jun, who was working at that time in a sugar refinery in Kagananjo, Tainan Province, was a very expert boxer and asked him to become his personal teacher. He paid him a considerable sum of money wrapped in crimson paper to show his respect for the master. So that they could concentrate exclusively on training, grandfather also provided him with a house and servants-in fact he made him wealthy. For about five years they trained together very intensely.

Dragon Times: What became of him?

Liu Chang I: At that time Taiwan was a prefecture of Japan and as the war against China had already started, the Japanese authorities were wary of anyone from the mainland.

The Japanese military and police suspected master Lin Toku-jun of plotting against the Japanese government. As an act of revenge incurred from being unbeaten, rival stylists reported master Lin as a spy to the Japanese officials. They tried to capture master Lin several times. However, since his martial skills continued were extremely well developed, they could not subdue him. Finally, he was captured at gun point and was later administered a large dose of anesthesia to facilitate sending him back to Fuchow. However, he was given far too much sedative and as a result, this famous master never recovered consciousness fully and died onboard ship.

My grandfather subsequently became well known as a teacher. My father followed in his footsteps, as I did in his.

Dragon Times: So you are the third generation?

Liu Chang I: That's right. In fact our family name is so closely associated with the Feeding Crane style now that in Taiwan it is referred to as Liu family Feeding Crane

Dragon Times: How is Feeding Crane taught.

Liu Chang I: Much the same as any other style I believe. The student is taught in stages and not allowed to progress until he has mastered the level he is studying.

In any martial art, form is normally the first thing taught. In each school and sect of Chinese martial arts you learn basic posture and movement such as stepping form, stepping methods, hand form, hand methods, body form and body methods, and then you learn pre-arranged forms (kata). In Feeding Crane we emphasize the use of natural form and movement. When you practice kata over and over again using natural movement, "kung" (energy, work, power) develops naturally. The Feeding Crane school is constructed on the practice of kata which leads to the development of "kung."

At first I teach basic movements, stances, the five hand movements (gold, wood, water, fire, earth), and basic kata like Gao Jan and San Zen, (sanchin). Our style places emphasis on internal power, so the student is introduced to this concept early in his or her training. To supplement formal training the students do exercises to strengthen their arms but no weight training as we feel that this can slow movement. Depending on their natural ability the student he will spend about one year at this level.

In the next stage, providing the student has developed sufficient internal power, we start to teach kata in earnest; we have a total of twenty one. The best students can learn all the kata in about three years and also develop strong internal power.

Sparring begins as the skill of the student improves, and he learns how to strengthen his body against pain. First the body is rubbed, then slapped, and finally beaten until the student reaches the point where it causes him little if any discomfort or pain. To help students reach this level we apply a preparation that was reputedly brought from the Shaolin temple and that helps strengthen weak areas and combat the pain.

After years of dedicated training the student reaches the final level. He can control pain completely and direct his internal power (gong li) at will. When he fights he does so with his whole body, without the need for conscious thought, using every part of it to strike his opponent, hands, wrists, elbows, palms. At this stage an interest in strategy, philosophy, use of internal power and other related subjects tends to develop.

Dragon Times: I know that you are an acupuncture therapist and herbalist. Does this interest spring from your training?

Liu Chang I: Yes it does. All instructors are expected to have a knowledge of the vital points for offensive and defensive reasons. For example, there are seven points on the body which, if struck, can cause injury from which it is difficult to recover. Actually there are about 4,000 vulnerable spots but only around three hundred are used routinely by doctors.

A knowledge of acupuncture, traditional medicine, and even poisons has been passed down with our art from the founder. Feeding Crane is a complete fighting method.

Dragon Times: I know that your father did a great deal of work in Japan to promote your style, and now you are travelling around the world continuing the work. What is your ultimate aim?

Liu Chang I: Of course I would like to spread feeding Crane Gung Fu widely, but I realize at the same time that I should not make it too popular, otherwise it's value could decline. It is a complete martial art that requires a great deal of effort to learn but one that is tremendously effective and that retains, if you like, the secret power of boxing, Gong Li.

I hope that the video I have made will open people's eyes to our ancient art. If it does, they will be able to learn something very valuable and useful, understand a little more about the culture of the Chinese people, and also perhaps, expand their knowledge of traditional Chinese medicine.

