

Strathcona fans popularity of kung fu

Martial artists have taught at community centre for 25 years

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Martial arts instructor Amy Pon holds a fan, one of 53 weapons used in Choy Lee Fut kung fu.

Photograph by: submitted, Vancouver Courier

When Amy Pon talks kung fu with people who know little about martial arts, she asks if they've seen any movies.

Inevitably, these same people — her prospective students — reference Bruce Lee, considered the most influential martial arts pop culture icon of the 20th century.

"Depending if I was trying to recruit them, I would stress getting a good work out and working on flexibility," added Pon. And there's much more to the practice, she said. The discipline can tap physical and spiritual depths, promote health and respect, plus give more backbone to an individual's self-esteem.

"The benefit would be learning how to hit and kick to defend yourself and improve your self-confidence," she said. "You feel powerful if you're a woman and that's always important."

Lee developed Gun Fan Gung Fu, a form of kung fu that takes his name. Pon practises Choy Lee Fut kung fu, a martial art that combines styles from northern and southern Chinese systems, including techniques from the Shaolin animal forms along with extended, circular body movements and nimble footwork.

"I like that it has a variety of moves, short fists and long fists, different kinds of kicks," Pon said of Choy

Lee Fut kung fu. “I know a few styles that are just limited to a few moves and some weapons, so it’s broad-based. There are more areas you can focus on if you want to.”

The kung fu Pon teaches was established over 200 years ago through different sources and continued through a lineage of sifus, or master instructors. It also incorporates 53 different weapons, including the cane, single and double sword, knife, spears, staff and fan.

The fan is used closed and can be brutal.

“It’s more for striking, hitting pressure points,” said Pon, adding with a laugh, “only after you finish smacking the guy a few times, then you can use it to cool down.”

Pon teaches at Hon Hsing in Chinatown and will soon start classes in Burnaby at Metrotown. Her sifus included Peter Wong and Matthew Wing, with whom she teaches Choy Lee Fut at the Strathcona community centre, where kung fu has been taught for at least 25 years. Pon and Wing teach one system at Strathcona while George Yung teaches another, My Jung kung fu.

Strathcona’s recreation supervisor Harvey Eng said different martial arts clubs brought their disciplines to the community centre nearly three decades ago. They may teach and practise different styles, but the kung fu community in Strathcona and Chinatown is close-knit although membership has slowly declined.

“Both have been in the community centre for along time,” said Eng. “When they started, there were different forms [of kung fu], like most martial arts. They’ve created their own kingdoms and they can manage it that way.”

Pon and other instructors will host a kung fu demonstration at the Chinatown Night Market on June 28.

“Many styles and many institutes all gather together to help for big events like the Chinese New Year parade,” she said.

Martial arts could break through to an even broader international stage if wushu, a broad term for standardized Chinese martial arts, is selected as an official Olympic sport.

Wushu and kung fu differ in important ways, said Pon. “They’re not interchangeable. Wushu has more flowery, acrobatic moves [...] but kung fu is more a fighting style.”

Choy Lee Fut appealed to Pon when she was in her early 20s. Now in her 40s, she continues to compete — she won first place in the national trials and was selected to Team Canada in 2006 — and also judges bouts.

A regional black belt champion, Pon has not been tested outside of training or sparring. “I have never had to use skills to defend myself,” she said. “And I’d kind of like to keep it that way.”

mstewart@vancourier.com

[Twitter.com/MHStewart](https://twitter.com/MHStewart)