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**James
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Woo
Kung-Fu's
Best
Forgotten
Master**

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San Soo's
Hidden
Fighting
Forms**

**EXCLUSIVE!
Paulie Zink
Breathes Life
Into the
Monkey!**

James Wing Woo

**GRID WARRIORS!
Martial Arts
Can Make You a Tiger
In the Trenches!**



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James Wing Woo

Kung-Fu's Unknown Pioneer

By Lilia I. Howe

James Wing Woo never set out to make his name a household word in martial arts circles. Yet he was among the first to bring and openly teach Chinese martial arts in the United States. If recognition eluded one of America's true martial arts pioneers, it was more by design than neglect. "Martial arts was always considered a hobby," says Woo, laughing as he reflects back on his 30 years of teaching in Southern California. "Even when I was a boy, training in China. It was never considered a way of earning a living, and I certainly never thought I'd end up teaching kung-fu." In his 30-year silence, Woo has, in his opinion, seen his art twisted, distorted, prostituted and completely blown out of proportion. Now he feels it's time to set the record straight, and explain to millions of American practitioners why he holds these opinions.

The early years

"I come from a family where my father was a Tong member," Woo admits. "This was in San Francisco. I honestly never got to know my father too well. He just passed away a few years ago.

"We moved back to China in 1928, which was where I trained. I had returned to the United States years later, and hadn't planned on exploiting my martial arts knowledge. What happened was I met a guy in Northern California who induced me to move south to the Hollywood area. He wanted to write a book with me. The guy ended up taking my work and running with it—I never got any credit—but the students all wanted to study with me.

"I opened a school in 1961. This was called the 'Academy of Karate/Kung-Fu.' A few years later I moved to a new location in Hollywood and changed the name to the 'Chinese Martial Arts Association.' Several

years later, my students built me a 1,500 square-foot kwoon with a 16-foot ceiling in my backyard, and I've been here ever since.

"From the start, I taught a certain way," he explains. "People would just come in and be interested in fighting. Kung-fu wasn't just a matter of 'If he does this, you do that.' I would teach the forms and about proper

health habits—try to get them to stop smoking and drinking and begin eating better. The training would condition the body to move properly. That's the real art in kung-fu. You learn proper body motion, posture and speed and the body will actually fight for you. Your instincts know what to do."

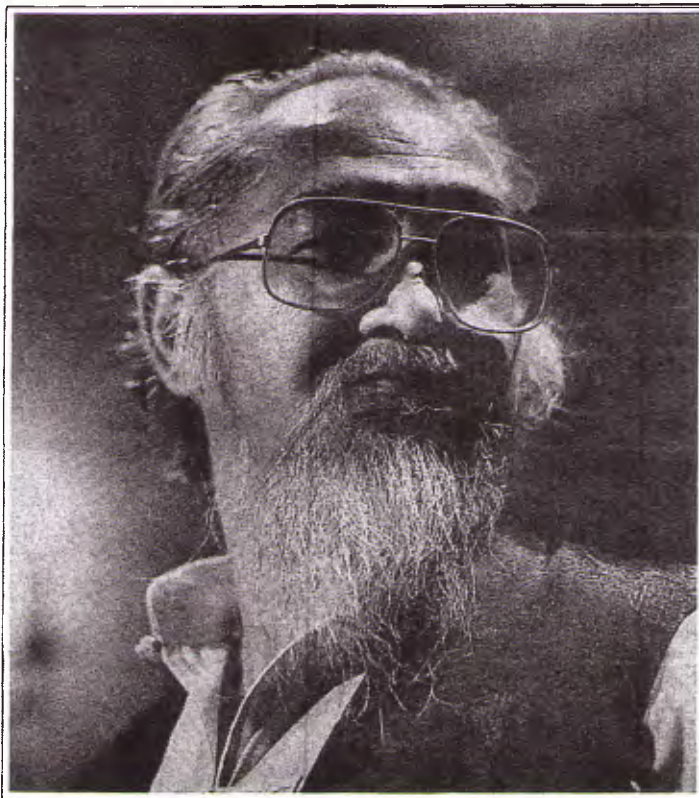
Misconceptions

Over the next three decades, Woo watched grow numerous misconceptions. One of the most intriguing aspects of his art is that he doesn't profess to teach a specific style, but rather, as a staunch traditionalist, was probably the first teacher in America to advocate the "absorb what is useful" approach.

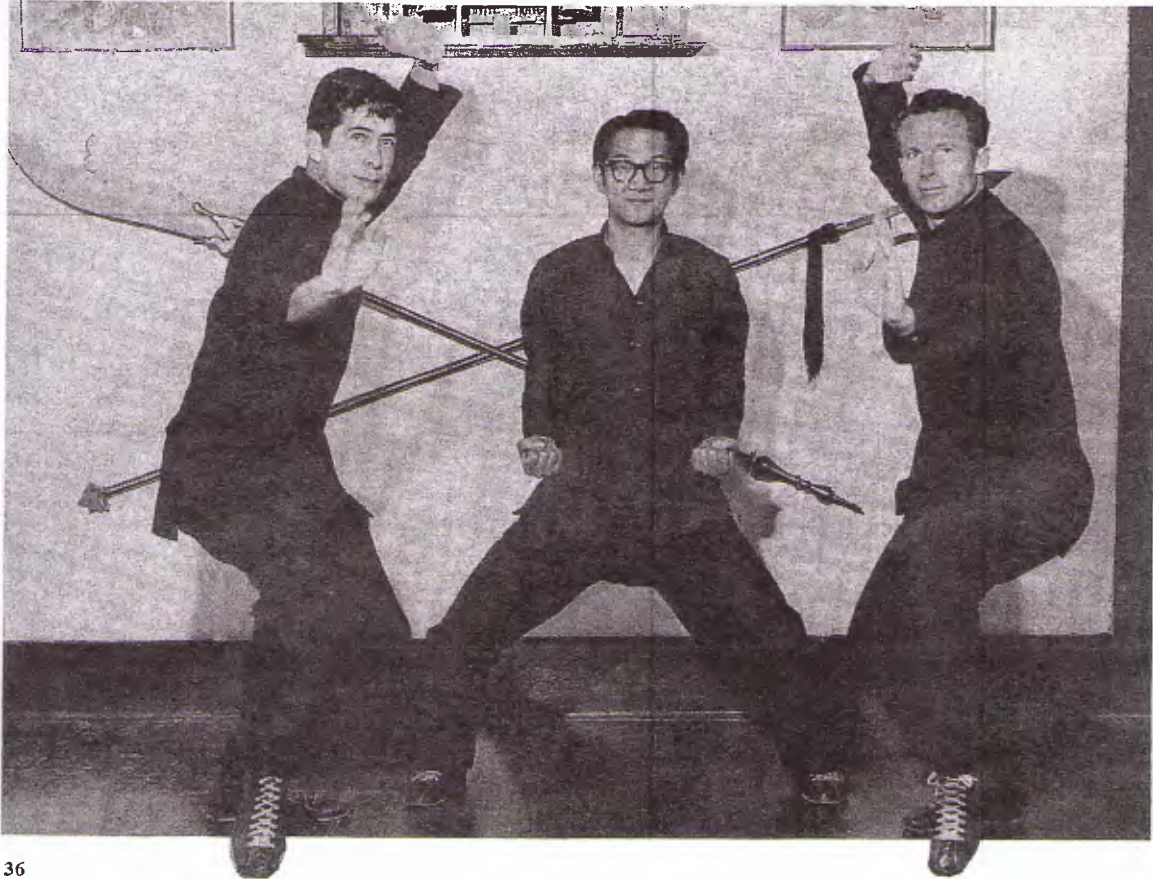
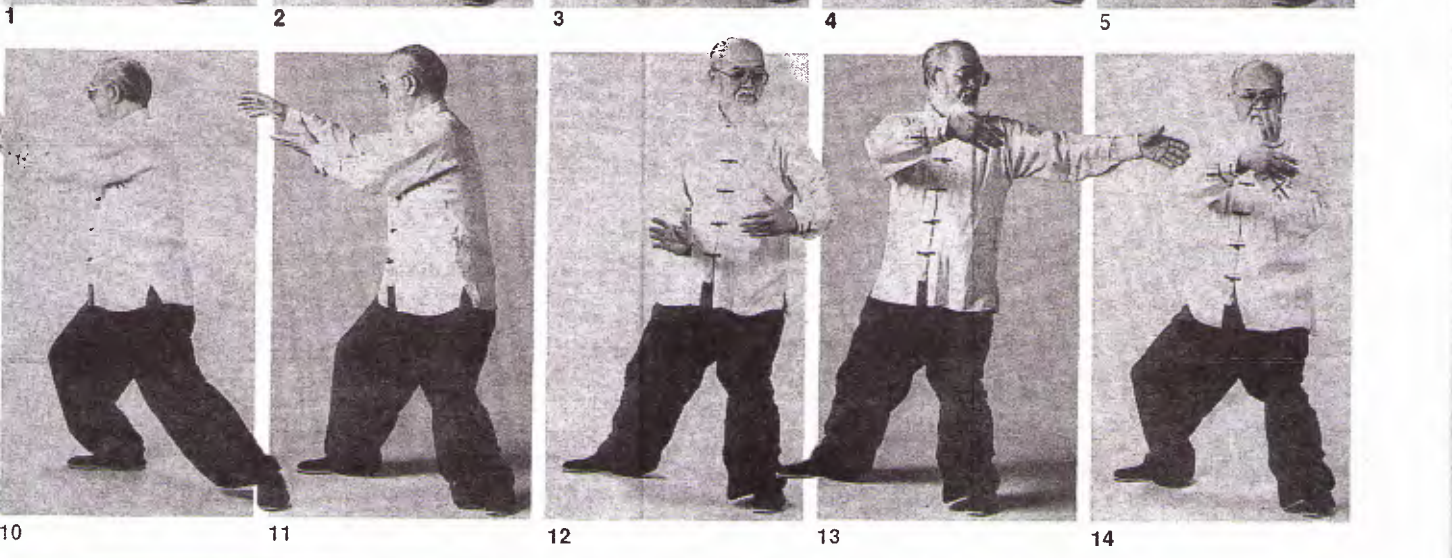
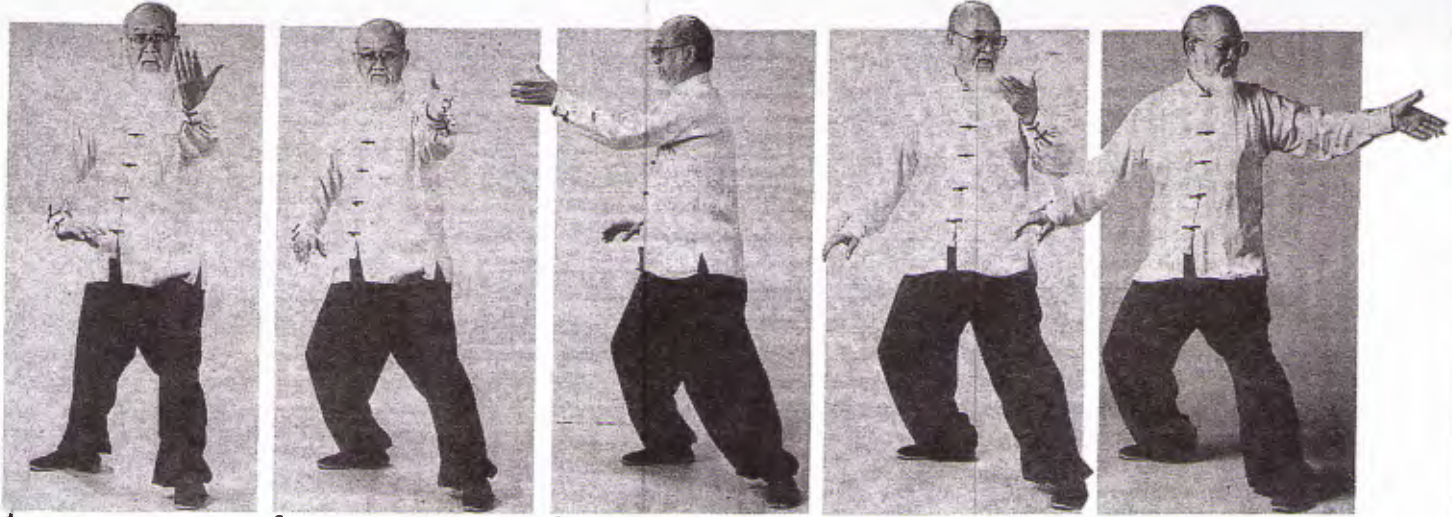
"Americans all think the different styles are styles of fighting," says Woo. "In fact, they're styles of teaching. I studied a lot of styles in China: hung gar, choi lai fut, southern mantis, northern shaolin to name a few. I also learned Yang tai chi, which I love. Tai chi can keep you young.

"The styles are all just ways of conditioning the body and the reflexes to act automatically. Sure, they have different approaches and different methods and strategies, but they're all just means to the same end. So when I teach, I really don't say I teach a specific style. I gear the training to the individual.

"What I see these days is all these guys coming out and specializing in theatrics. They say that they teach fighting, and make it look good for entertainment value, but unfortunately that's not training."







James Wing Woo (center) with two top students in 1962. They are Rick Flores (left) and Rich Montgomery.



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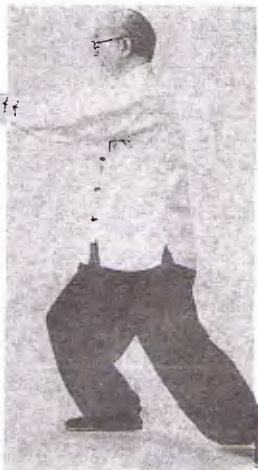


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9

- Single-hand ward off tai chi set
1. Extend left hand
 2. Lift back and raise palm
 3. Left horizontal circle
 4. Continuation of form
 5. Left arm straight
 6. Arm halfway in, palm cupped
 7. Open palm
 8. Move into next posture
 9. Carry the ball
 10. Double-hand ward off
 11. Shift weight back and pull
 12. Prepare to throw
 13. Throw
 14. Crossing the waist for press
 15. Scissor and opening
 16. Shift the weight and neutralize
 17. Press
 18. Push



15



16



17



18

Ron Edwards, one of Woo's students since 1973, echoes his teacher's sentiments. "To give you an adequate description of Mr. Woo, I would have to compare him to what's out there. And compared to what's out there, the unique thing about Mr. Woo is however advanced you think you might be as a student, whatever you know, when you come here, you start out at the basics.

"What we've noticed over the years is too many shortcuts, and a building is only as strong as its foundation. Without basics, you have nothing. The individual may come in here and say, 'I want to be able to whip three people in six months.' Well, here you have a man who's taken 64 years to get where he is, and it's a little unrealistic to expect to get 64 years' worth of knowledge in six months.

"What I've personally seen happen," continues Edwards, "is a lot of so-called masters have tried to streamline their teaching for commercial reasons, and in so doing have deleted everything that made them what they are."

The subject of "masters" is another one which causes Woo great amusement. "These days, everybody's a master. In China, it didn't work like that. You just trained and did it, you didn't have titles. Whoever got there first and studied the longest was the teacher, everybody else was the student."

Three generations

Having been one of the unknown kung-fu pioneers in America, it is natural that Woo would now have several generations of students. "Three generations, to be exact," he says proudly. Some of my early

students' children trained with me, and now their grandchildren are training with me."

Ron Edwards adds: "I've seen people who have been training with Mr. Woo for over 20 years, and I see them training next to people who just started that night. Mr. Woo will just sort of float around the room and every student will be working at exactly his or her own level. Every single student's needs are met. I've never seen that in any other school, and I've seen a lot of schools."

Woo believes that the current trend for commercialization may soon be ending. "You've seen some business successes. Schools with hundreds of students. But today's economy may soon be putting an end to that. Rent prices are going up, enrollment is down in martial arts, and instructors just can't meet the overhead. It may be a good thing because you'll see people teaching because they want to, not because they're out to make a buck."

Even today, Woo still considers his teaching a hobby, and derives most of his income from appearing in commercials. "I just take my time, teach people, and that's it. I get students and lose students; they come and they go. But, surprisingly, most of my students who leave and explore what's out there eventually come

back.

"Unfortunately, today, people are going in for flashy things and tournaments. The external ways of doing things and theatrics have cheapened the arts. I try to instill the concepts of complete body motion in my students. But what's funny is that, in 30 years, I haven't got one who

"Americans all think
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are styles of fighting.
(Actually) they're styles
of teaching."



1. Double-knife form
2. The swallow dip block, a tai chi pose
3. Front bow stance with upward block and pierce
4. Front cross-over path with both hands down
5. Cat stance while spreading the twin knives
6. Kneel stance and poke



White crane spreading its wings

1. Carrying the ball
2. Carrying the ball left
3. Extend the arms
4. Spread the arms up and down
5. White crane spreads its wings



does what I want him or her to do. I have some going part way, or some going halfway, but none who have gone all the way. "Then again, maybe I should say that. It took me 50 years to get it."

Finding a good instructor

Over the years Woo also has been very critical of martial arts media. "You generally find all these magazines and videos out there telling you who's good and who's not. You really can't learn much from the printed page. You have to find a good instructor."

The question then arises as to how one goes about finding a good instructor. "Well, the whole idea is you're supposed to have sense enough to know what you want. A lot of people complain about instructors and they themselves are the problem—they don't really know what they

want. Then you look at the instructor and how he teaches. But, most importantly, you look at the students and how well they move. That's the true test of how well an instructor teaches."

Perhaps the ultimate testament to these philosophies is James Wing Woo himself. Woo, soon to be 68 years old, boasts a face completely free of wrinkles, and the spry good health of a man half his age. He attributes it all to his attitudes toward health and his martial arts training.

"Like I always say," he smiles, "keep working; keep moving."

About the Author: Lilia I. Howe is a Torrance, California-based freelance writer who contributes frequently for Inside Kung-Fu.