



THE SECRET, OF SHAOLIN'S PRAYING MANTIS

Understanding the forms of the Shaolin Temple

PART 1

STORY BY BRETT RUSSELL • IMAGES BY CLIVE GIRDHAM

Before it was all but destroyed in 1928, China's famous Shaolin Temple housed 728 different systems of combat, or *wu yi*. Today, some 250 systems are still taught in this 1500-year-old stronghold of martial knowledge nestled in the mountains of Hunan province. In the first of this three-part series exploring the famous fighting forms of Shaolin Temple, master of Shaolin kung fu Shifu Brett Russell explains the theories and application of the *Tung Lung Chuan* – or Praying Mantis Fist – of Great Master Shi Su Xi.

In the later part of China's Song Dynasty (960–1280), at the Shaolin Temple in Songshan, a warrior monk by the name of Zheng Heng created *Tung Lung Chuan* or Praying Mantis Fist. Zheng Heng was formerly trained in the traditional Lohan systems at the temple, but as the legend goes, after many years of watching the praying mantis in its natural habitat battling its foes, the monk began to develop techniques that mimicked the insect's own defence and attack system. This was then passed to the monk Gou Chingfang, who travelled to Shandong province and taught many secular students.

The Praying Mantis system subsequently became very popular in this region, and most of the renowned masters had direct lineage to the Shaolin Temple monk Gou Chingfang.

One of these masters was the now legendary Wang Lang, who from a young age concentrated on *Tung Lung Chuan*. He would capture the insect and battle with it using chopsticks, to enhance his understanding of the species unique defence strategy.

Wang Lang was known

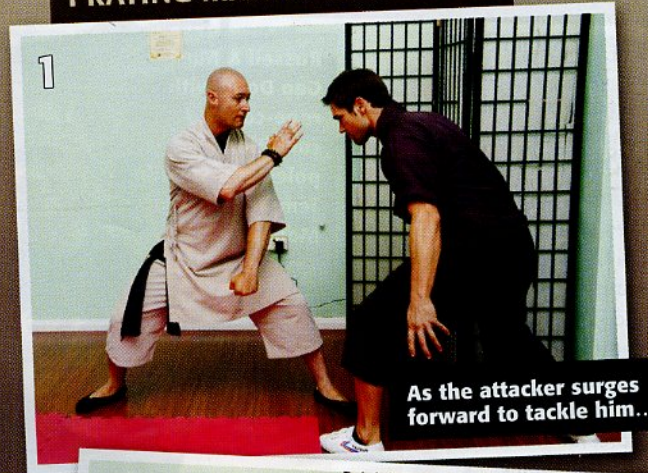
as the best martial artist in Shandong province. After earning this title, at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (1280–1649) he decided to travel to Hunan province to test himself against the famous *wuseng* (martial monks) of the Shaolin Temple.

Once at the Shaolin Temple, Wang Lang was asked to demonstrate his *Tung Lung Chuan*. The monks were so impressed by his skills that they invited him to stay and pass on his knowledge to them, thus bringing the system full circle and back to its original birthplace.

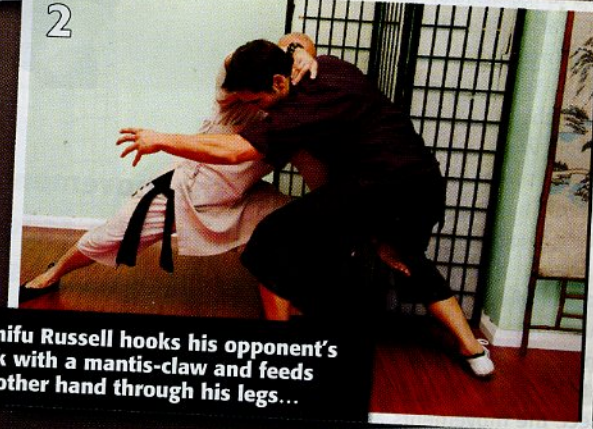
In 1936, a young boy entered the Shaolin Temple, aged 12, to start his journey into Chan Buddhism (which involves kung fu/chi kung/tai chi practice and meditation). His name was Geng Jinzhu, but he was given the 30th-generation Shaolin disciple name of Shi Su Xi. The boy went on to become the greatest living master of Shaolin Temple kung fu in our era, having gained his knowledge from the last of the Qing Dynasty (1650–1911) masters of *wu yi*.

One of many systems that Great Master Shi Su Xi learnt was Praying Mantis, which was passed to him by Great Master Shi Zhen Shu (29th-generation

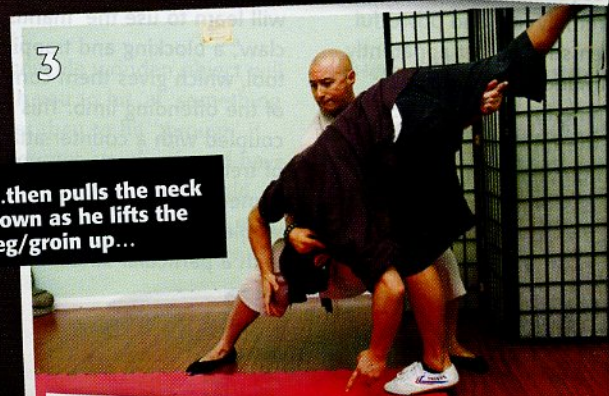
PRAYING MANTIS VS TACKLE



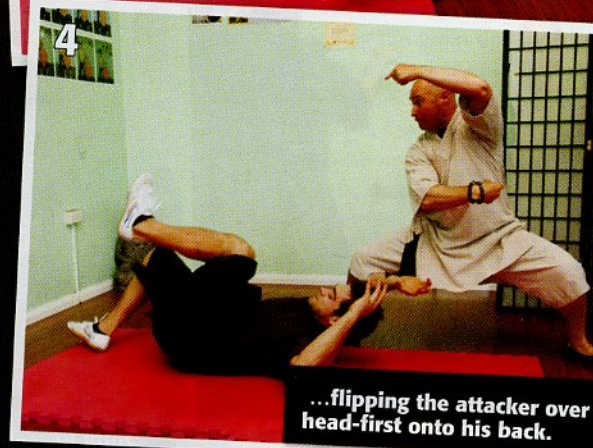
1 As the attacker surges forward to tackle him...



2 ...Shifu Russell hooks his opponent's neck with a mantis-claw and feeds his other hand through his legs...



3 ...then pulls the neck down as he lifts the leg/groin up...



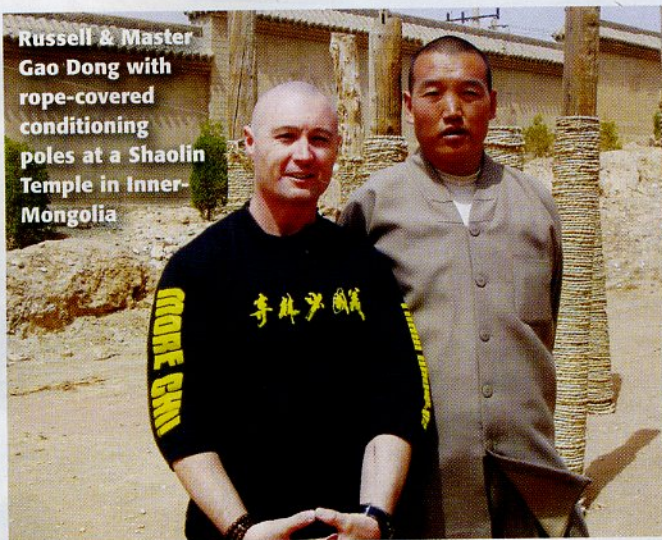
4 ...flipping the attacker over head-first onto his back.

disciple of Shaolin). This special Tung Lung Chuan form consisted of two main styles. First and foremost is the Seven Stars (*Qi Qing*) Praying Mantis, which incorporates quick monkey-style footwork with a whipping power (*jang*) that emanates from the torso. The second is the Secret Door (*Yin Mi*) form, which is one of the most complex and is comprised of low stances with powerful and forceful movement for close-range attack.

Great Master Shi Su Xi taught many disciples at the Shaolin Temple, including my teacher, Great Master Shi De Fon, who mastered this hitherto secret Shaolin Temple form of Tung Lung Chuan, and in turn taught it to me.

Shaolin Tung Lung Chuan consists of 75 movements, which are arranged into 25 combinations for self-defence. Just like the praying mantis insect, the movements are extremely fast and powerful when striking, yet apparently calm and peaceful when waiting for an attack.

The movements in the combinations mimic the actions of the mantis – and once a mantis strikes, they never let their attacker go.



Russell & Master Gao Dong with rope-covered conditioning poles at a Shaolin Temple in Inner-Mongolia

The movements in the combinations mimic the actions of the mantis – and once a mantis strikes, they never let their attacker go.

When blocking, the student will learn to use the 'mantis-claw', a blocking and trapping tool, which gives them control of the offending limb. This is coupled with a counter-attack of tremendous speed, while sometimes launching the whole body into the attacker with a particular strike. Fast

footwork with the *Qi Qing* monkey-style stances will be taught so the offender won't prematurely get away.

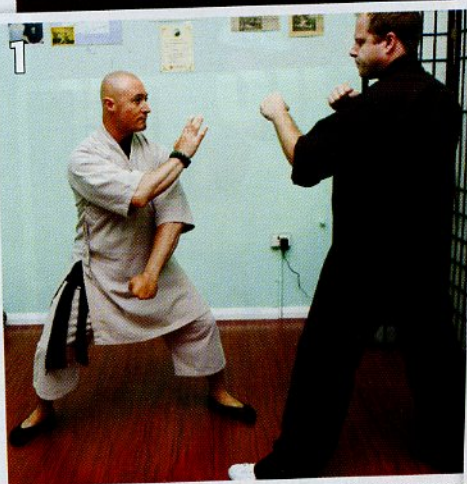
In addition to the mantis-claw, the striking tools of the Praying Mantis method include the fist (impacting with the front two knuckles), knife-hand, ridge-hand, front-kick

(impacting with the ball of foot), turning-kick (again using the ball of the foot), spear-fingers, wrist and forearm-strikes, and the hammer-fist.

Training begins with learning the form, during which process the student will start to condition the areas of the body used for striking – the primary ones being the fingers and wrists. Initially the student will hold a push-up position on the fingertips (the very tip of the finger, not the pad) and then on the wrists. After a couple of months they would start push-ups on these areas, aiming for 20 reps. As with all systems of Shaolin Temple kung fu, the student will also learn certain *chi kung* (breathing and tensing) techniques to condition the body.

Once all this has been completed, the student can start learning the form's practical application through the 25 combinations. To develop the speed, distance and timing needed to make the moves work in the real world, the student will initially learn the combinations so they are part of their muscle memory. They will then practise the techniques with a partner, covering different scenarios

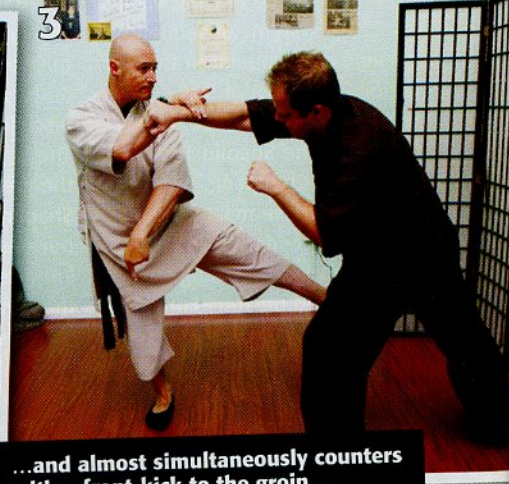
PRAYING MANTIS VS PUNCH



As the attacker moves in to punch with a right hand...

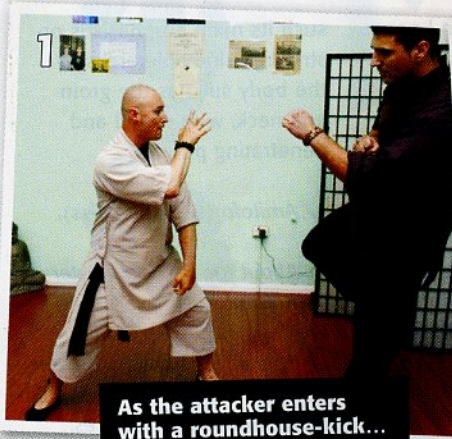


...Shifu Russell parries and evades to the outside...

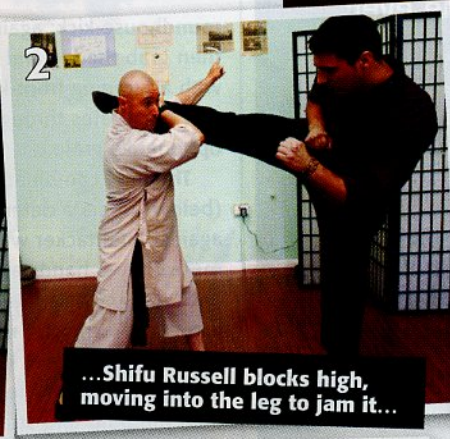


...and almost simultaneously counters with a front-kick to the groin...

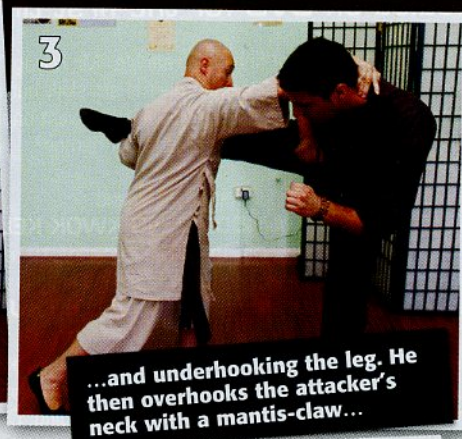
PRAYING MANTIS VS HIGH ROUND-KICK



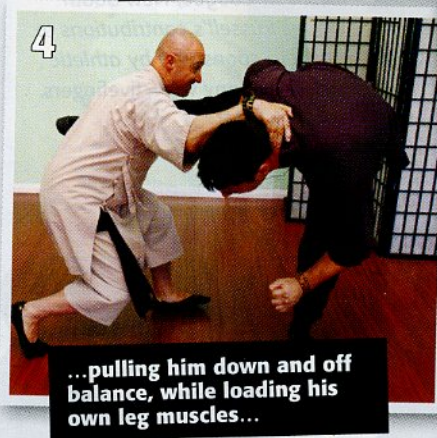
1
As the attacker enters with a roundhouse-kick...



2
...Shifu Russell blocks high, moving into the leg to jam it...



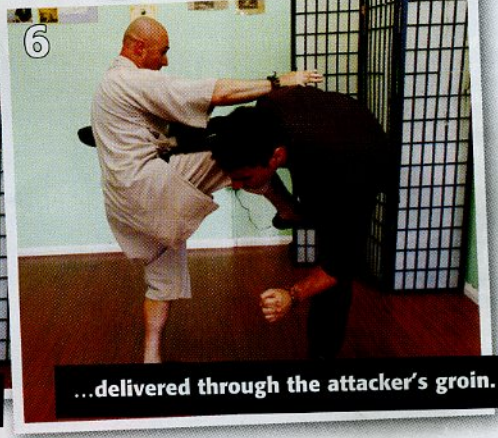
3
...and underhooking the leg. He then overhooks the attacker's neck with a mantis-claw...



4
...pulling him down and off balance, while loading his own leg muscles...



5
...to leap into a jumping front-kick...



6
...delivered through the attacker's groin.

such as defence against punching, kicking and grabbing.

The student should also then practise with focus-mitts, kick-shields and bags to learn to follow through with their technique – for example, if you are aiming to kick up

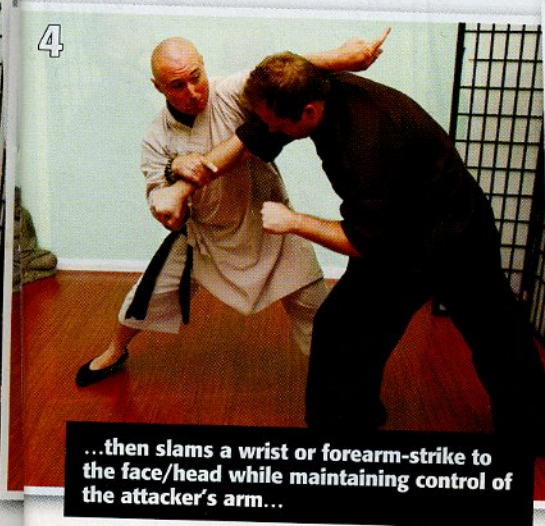
into the groin, you must follow through to the torso. In Shaolin kung fu, wooden conditioning apparatuses are not used for learning striking technique, but to condition the limbs for defence and to acquire muscle memory, because an

immovable wooden object will teach you to hit 'at' something rather than to hit 'through' it. All counter-attacks should have follow-through – as the old saying goes: you train the way you fight, and you fight the way you train.

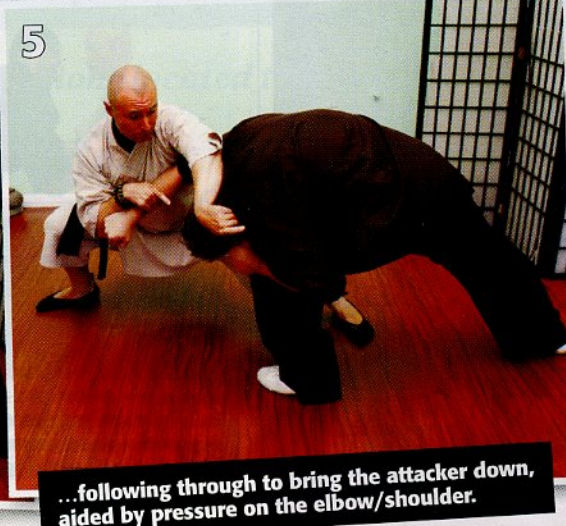
Here, I have demonstrated one attack for each combination, each of which can be used against a grab, punch or kick respectively. The first combination (on page 37) is used, in this instance, against an attacker who tries to grab me around the waist; I use the mantis-claw and grab around his groin and neck, pulling the neck down and simultaneously pulling the groin up (ouch!) to flip the attacker onto his back.

The second combination (left) is used to defend against an attempt to punch me: I block, then use a front-kick that penetrates into the groin (using the ball of the foot), then follow with a wrist or forearm-strike into the attacker's cheekbone or eye socket.

The third combination (above) is applied against an attacker coming in with a



4
...then slams a wrist or forearm-strike to the face/head while maintaining control of the attacker's arm...



5
...following through to bring the attacker down, aided by pressure on the elbow/shoulder.

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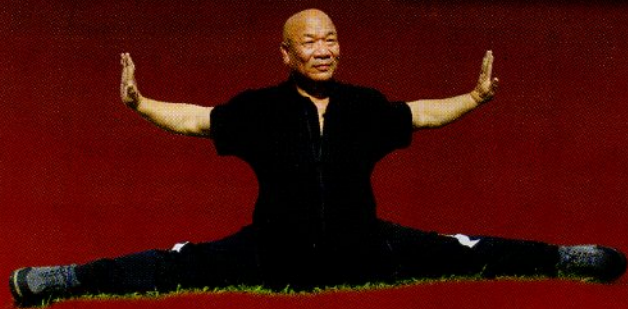
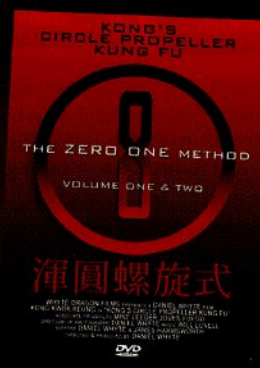
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roundhouse-kick: again I parry, then grab the leg and counter with a jumping front-kick that penetrates through the opponent's groin.

The final combination (below) offers a defence against an attacker who grabs me with two hands around the neck or lapels. As the hands come into contact, I use two mantis-claws to lock the wrists and pull down on the arms, then jump up and strike at the attacker's cheekbones/face with my wrists or forearms.

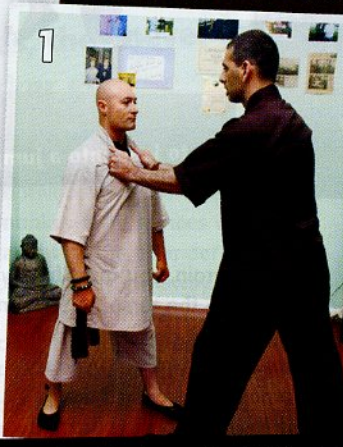
Shaolin Temple Tung Lung Chuan was developed for practical self-defence, and as

such its main emphasis is on striking vulnerable areas of the body such as the groin and neck, with speed and penetrating power.

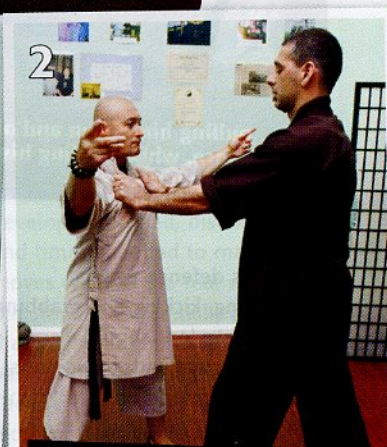
Amitofo (Buddha bless).

About the author: Master Shifu Brett Russell (Shi Xing Wu) is a 32nd-generation disciple of Shaolin kung fu. He is the chief instructor of Shaolin Monk Martial Arts Centres, based in Coogee, New South Wales. Russell's contributions to Blitz are sponsored by athletic shoe company www.fivefingers.com.au **BLITZ**

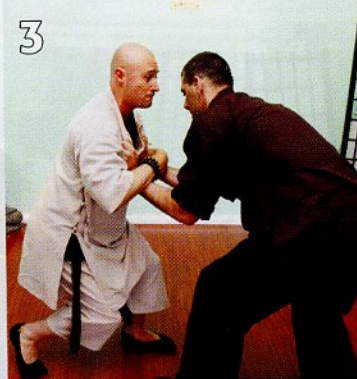
PRAYING MANTIS VS NECK-GRAB



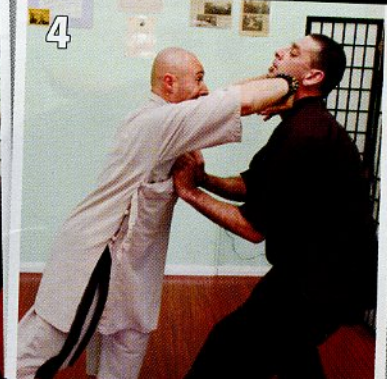
As the attacker grabs Shifu by his lapels...



...Russell immediately brings his arms over in a circle...



...and drops his weight down on the attacker's wrists with double Mantis-claws, forcing the attacker down too...



...then leaps into a double wrist or forearm-strike aimed at the attacker's jaw/cheek bones.

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