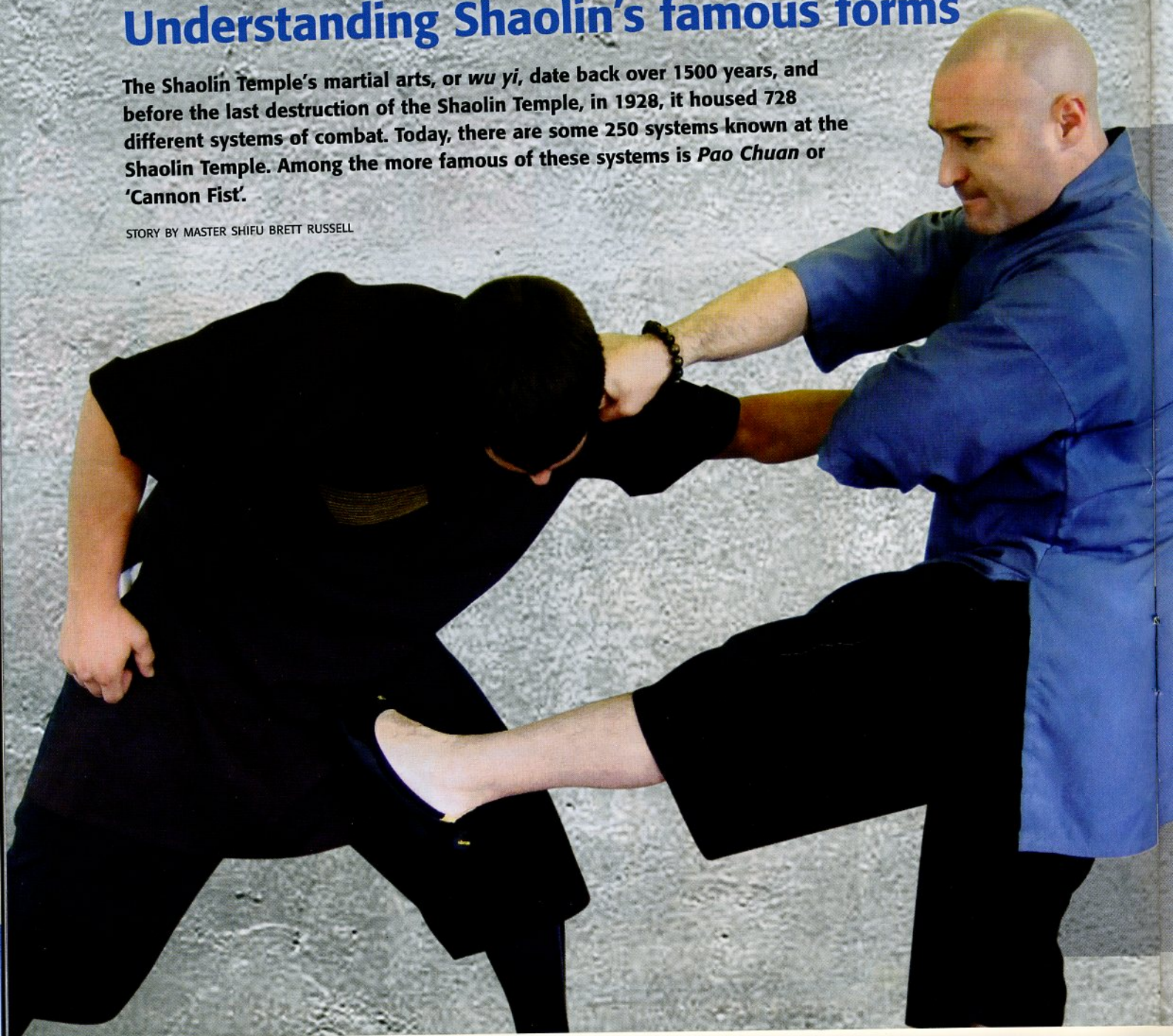


CANNON FIST OF SHAOLIN

Understanding Shaolin's famous forms

The Shaolin Temple's martial arts, or *wu yi*, date back over 1500 years, and before the last destruction of the Shaolin Temple, in 1928, it housed 728 different systems of combat. Today, there are some 250 systems known at the Shaolin Temple. Among the more famous of these systems is *Pao Chuan* or 'Cannon Fist'.

STORY BY MASTER SHIFU BRETT RUSSELL



The Pao Chuan form of kung fu came to the fore during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).

According to historical reports, a group of Shaolin monks demonstrated the Pao Chuan system to the newly installed Tang Dynasty Emperor, and this resulted in the Emperor's guards being taught the system to use in protecting the Emperor. During the Qing Dynasty, the Pao Chuan system also influenced the development of Chen-style tai chi, with many movements having reference to Pao Chuan. The Cannon Fist style itself was originally developed from *Hong*

Chuan (Iron or Red Fist), which was one of the original Shaolin Temple systems developed in the Song dynasty (960–1279).

For Shaolin Temple monks, 'Cannon' means 'Great Treasury of Scriptures' (i.e. the Chinese Buddhist Canon), which is the total body of Buddhist literature that is deemed canonical in China. This literature includes sutras from many different sects of Buddhism, such as Agama, Vinaya, Abhidharma and Mahayana. The Shaolin Temple was originally built to translate all Buddhist scriptures. Cannon Fist can therefore be translated as 'Buddhist Fist'. As this form

is characterised by forceful techniques, the name is also taken to mean 'having fists like mighty cannons'.

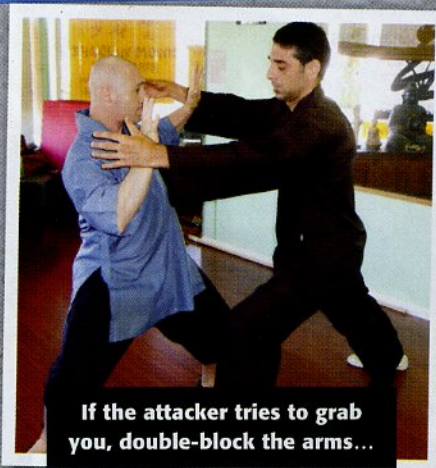
Pao Chuan consists of two sets of movements (forms or katas), one being *Xiao* Pao Chuan (Small Cannon Fist) and the other *Da* Pao Chuan (Big Cannon Fist). The Pao Chuan system is just one of the many methods that are taught at the Shaolin Temple, and it would usually take two years to learn this one system.

The Small Cannon Fist form (the first taught) consists of 24 movements and has eight combat combinations, with as many variations for varied

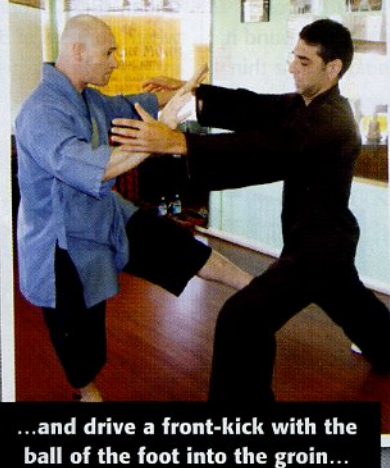
attacks. Essentially, the form is like a dynamic textbook that explains how to defend against grabbing attacks, punches and kicks from all directions. The counter-attacks within Pao Chuan are quite vicious, with most aiming for the neck, groin, ankles and ears in an explosive manner. Many of the monks' bodily weapons are employed in striking these blows, including elbows, fists (specifically, the front two knuckles), palm-strikes, feet (using the ball of the foot), tiger-claws (open palms coupled with fingers, delivered in a raking action) and spearing fingers.

Training for the Small Cannon Fist set starts with the

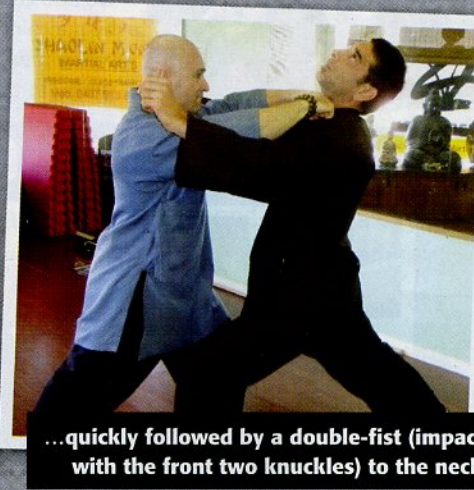
SMALL CANNON FIST: COMBO #1



If the attacker tries to grab you, double-block the arms...

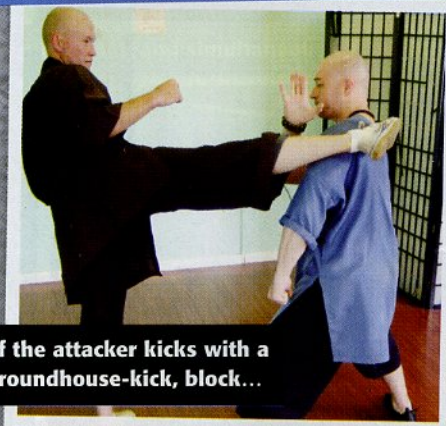


...and drive a front-kick with the ball of the foot into the groin...

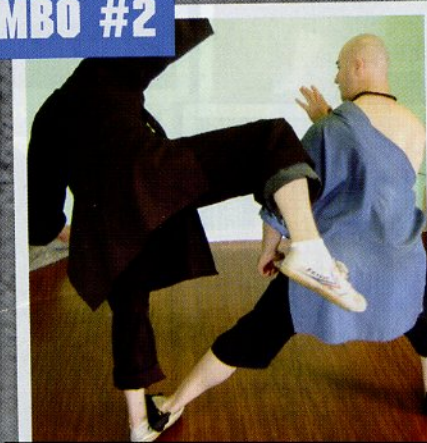


...quickly followed by a double-fist (impact with the front two knuckles) to the neck

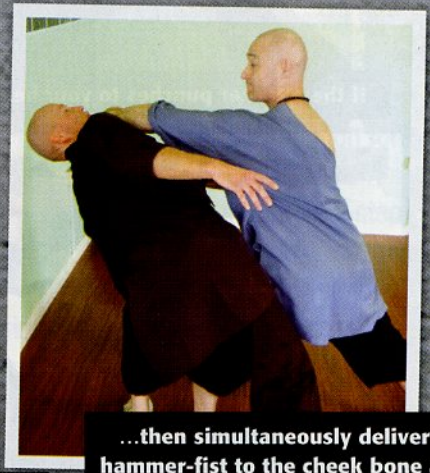
SMALL CANNON FIST: COMBO #2



If the attacker kicks with a roundhouse-kick, block...



...and use a side-kick aimed at the ankle or top of the foot (using enough force to break the ankle or bones in the foot)...



...then simultaneously deliver hammer-fist to the cheek bone and a punch aimed at the sternum

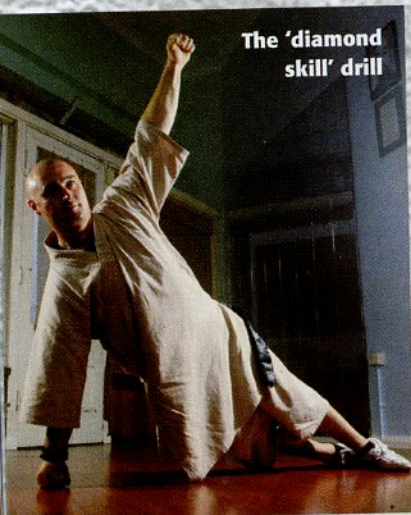
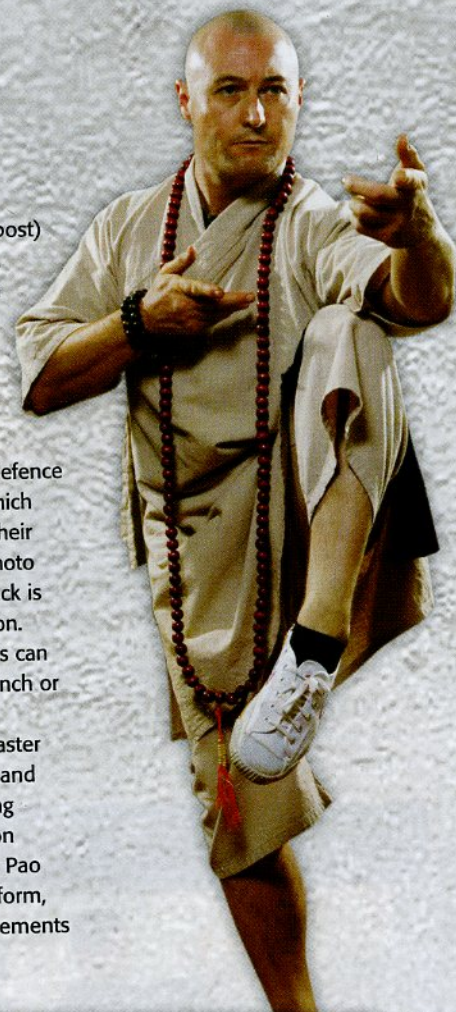
learning of the form. During this period, the student must also begin the conditioning process for the specific areas of the limbs required for the defence and counter-attack. If the practitioner's body is not

sufficiently conditioned, all the movements are next to useless, as there are no gloves and protective equipment available on the street to ensure a body part is not broken through bone-on-bone impact, which is always a possibility. The Pao Chuan system thus requires conditioning of the legs/stance, fists, wrists and upper body. First and foremost, we practise *mabu*, or horse-stance, nice and low to build strength in the legs and to solidify the stance. For fists, wrists and upper body, we practise the *jin gong* or 'diamond skill' exercise: front two knuckles on the ground, other arm in the air, while holding the body up on its side. We also condition the knuckles by punching a block of wood with a towel wrapped around it, similar to the *makiwara* (a thin

striking pad on a wooden post) used by Japanese karateka.

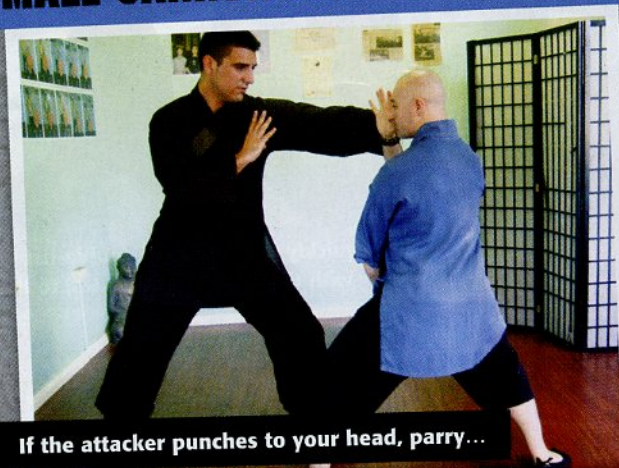
Once the form has been learnt and conditioning is well under way, the student then learns to apply the movements for real-life self-defence scenarios, by learning the defence combinations – each of which are illustrated, along with their applications, here in the photo sequences. (Note: one attack is shown for each combination. Each of these combinations can be used against a grab, punch or kick respectively.)

A student must first master the Xiao Pao Chuan form and corresponding conditioning methods before moving on to the more advanced Da Pao Chuan (Big Cannon Fist) form, which consists of 55 movements in 16 combinations. Its

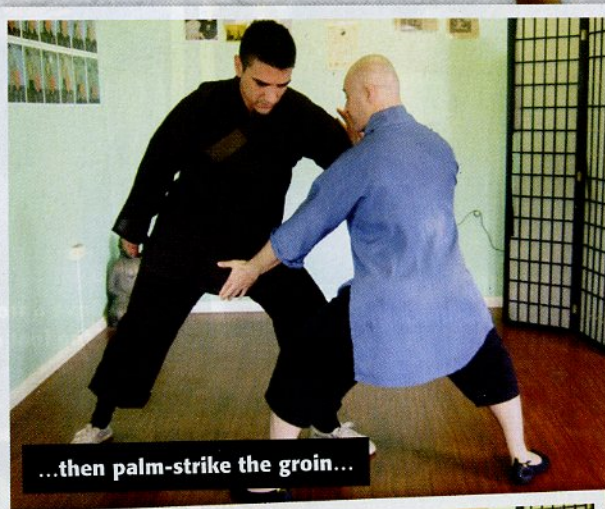


The 'diamond skill' drill

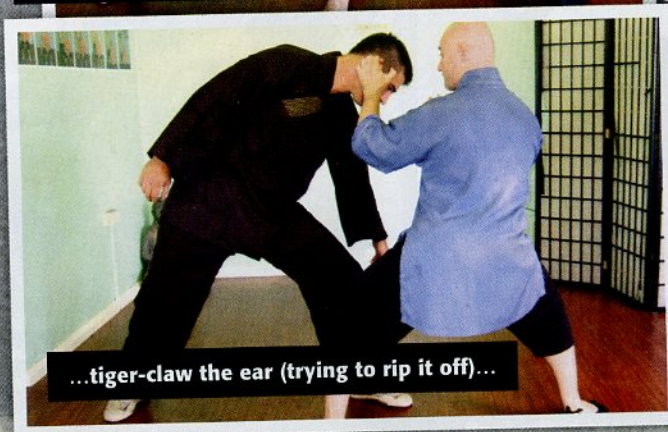
SMALL CANNON FIST: COMBO #3



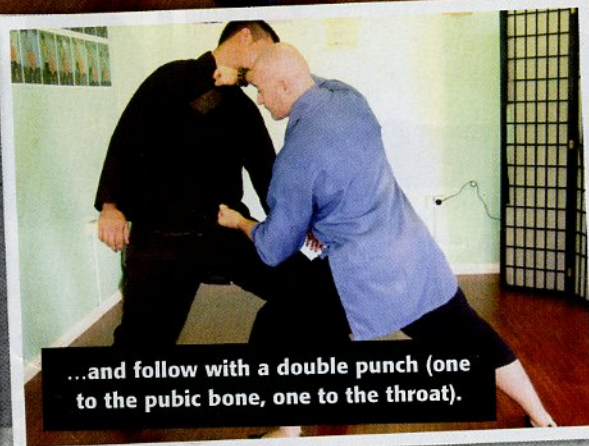
If the attacker punches to your head, parry...



...then palm-strike the groin...



...tiger-claw the ear (trying to rip it off)...



...and follow with a double punch (one to the pubic bone, one to the throat).

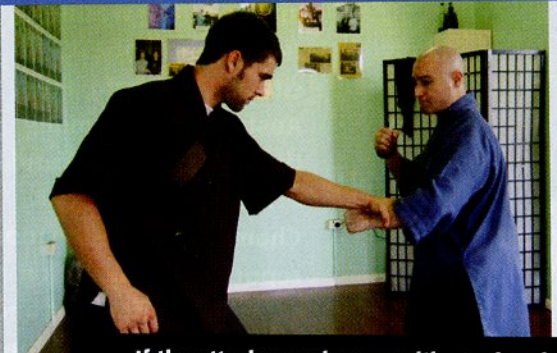
movements are not only bigger, but the defence techniques are for application at a longer range.

Pao Chuan is a traditional Shaolin Temple combat system that focuses on surviving real, violent attacks, and thus it teaches students to aim to strike hard at an opponent's vital areas, such as the groin, neck, ankles and ears. You are taught to finish an attacker with two or three movements — after all, the system was developed not for

sport nor for performance art, but for war, back when battles was waged face-to-face with fists and hand-held weaponry.

About the author: Master Shifu Brett Russell is a 32nd-generation disciple of Shaolin kung fu. He is the chief instructor of Shaolin Monk Martial Arts Centres, based in Coogee, Sydney. His training shoes are supplied by Fivefingers.com.au **BLITZ**

SMALL CANNON FIST: COMBO #4



If the attacker grabs you with one hand...



...pull him in and simultaneously front-kick his groin...



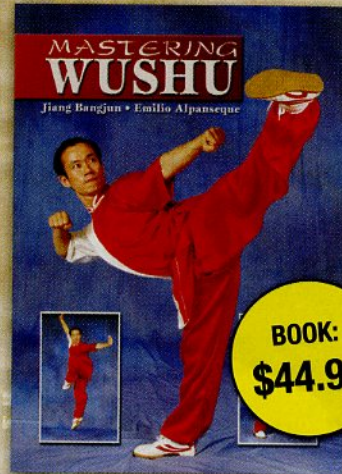
...then snap out an inverted, front two-knuckle punch to the eye socket (to break the orbital bone or cheek bone).

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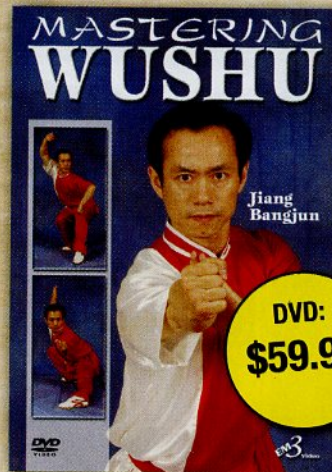
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