THE CURIOUS ART OF CUONG NHU

Vietnamese Style is a Combination of Shotokan, Wing Chun, Judo, Tai Chi and More

by Jason Vail

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Cuong nhu *is a combination of, among other things, wing chun kung fu (1), tai chi chuan (2), and shotokan karate (3).*

The karate that high school students practice today is not the same karate that was practiced even as recently as ten years ago, and it is a long way indeed from the karate that I learned when I was a child in Okinawa.... Try to adopt what is meritorious in the work of others.

—Gichin Funakoshi

When the king of Vietnam founded the Giang Vo Dong, the national martial arts school, in Hanoi in 1253, he had in mind preservation and cultivation of native Vietnamese fighting arts and the education of warriors to ensure the country's independence. The king certainly never envisioned a future marriage between the martial arts of his country, which were heavily influenced by the Chinese, and those of other countries, equally touched by the heritage of the Middle Kingdom.

But it happened in Hue, South Vietnam, in 1965, when two distinct but distantly related martial lineages—*shotokan* karate and *vovinam*, a Vietnamese fighting art—were melded together in a new and unique martial style called *cuong nhu*.

Cuong nhu means "hard" *(cuong)* and "soft" *(nhu)*. The style's creator, Ngo Dong, at the time a professor at the University of Hue, chose the name to symbolize the wedding of hard and soft techniques into a new and highly flexible martial art. "Cuong nhu's philosophy stresses the harmony or balance of the two extremes: the hard and the soft," Ngo said.

Photo courtesy of Jason Vail

Cuong nhu *founder Ngo Dong (right) demonstrates how shotokan karate's rising block can be used as an arm bar to the neck in conjunction with a grabbing technique.*

Although shotokan karate forms the foundation of cuong nhu, karate is only the "hard" extreme, balanced by a "soft" or yielding side to make a complete, effective fighting art.

Ngo's style was immediately popular, and his Hue-based school grew rapidly. Within a few short years, he had 3,000 students.

In 1971, Ngo took cuong nhu to the United States, where today there are no less than 49 branch schools from Miami, Florida, to Berkeley, California. Ngo has promoted more than 200 American black belts.

The technical base of the style is extremely broad, embracing traditional hard-style shotokan karate, Vietnamese martial arts, Western boxing, judo, *aikido*, and *tai chi chuan*. Ngo has not been shy about

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borrowing liberally from other styles when a technique or an approach appeals to him.

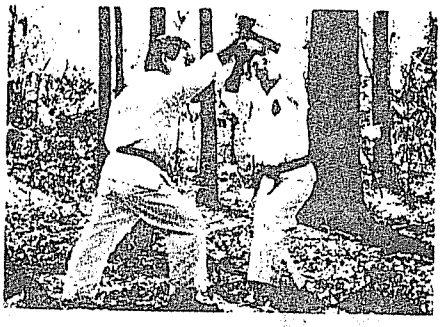
Ngo is the youngest of six brothers, and his martial training started early. At age four, his brothers had boxing gloves on him, and Ngo took his lumps in bi-weekly bouts.

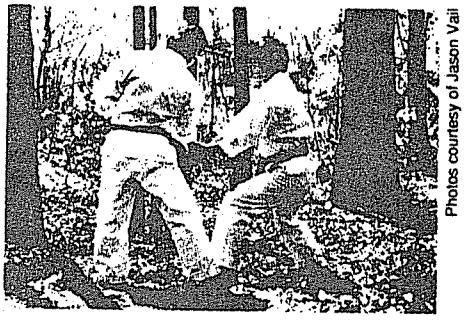
Because of Ngo's boxing training, cuong nhu students learn to increase the power of their hand techniques by twisting the trunk, shoulders and arms as a single unit. Ngo was also impressed with boxing's mobility and footwork, and thus, cuong nhu students today practice ducking and bobbing to avoid head strikes, and gain torso mobility to effectively yield to punches and kicks, lessening their force.

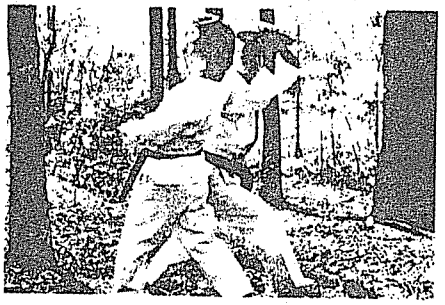
Ngo also stresses the importance of being able to take a telling blow, yet keep on fighting, a point he undoubtedly picked up in the ring. Modern karate "touch-sparring" involves so little actual contact that students often overlook this.

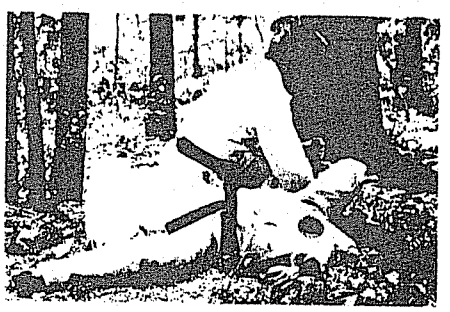
Ngo began *wing chun* kung fu training with his two eldest brothers at an early age. Classic wing chun has only three forms, and although Ngo practiced the style for three years, he learned only two of them. However, the principles Ngo absorbed from wing chun form an important part of cuong nhu. Ngo regards wing chun as having both hard and soft characteristics, which he believes is essential in

In the* cuong nhu *defense against a knife attack, below, Instructor Lap Hoang (right) redirects (1) the weapon-wielding arm and swings it (2&3) around in an aikido technique known as* shiho-nage, *forcing (4) his attacker to the ground while disarming him.









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any effective combat method. Ngo likes wing chun's economical blocks, parries and attacks. Wing chun also stresses the value of the centerline, the direct line between the attacker and defender, and cuong nhu students learn early on to dominate that line. Ngo was impressed with other features of wing chun, and his students practice "sticky" hands and trapping hands techniques, as well as sideways mobility.

Ngo also sees value in wing chun because it emphasizes close-range attacks. Many fights, while perhaps starting at long range, eventually move in close, and an infighting style suits smaller people by teaching them to neutralize the advantages of taller opponents. Modern karate techniques, by contrast, seem designed for fighting at longer ranges.

In 1950, at age 15, Ngo got his first detailed exposure to native Vietnamese martial arts. As in China, there were many different fighting styles in Vietnam. The one Ngo studied was called *vovinam*, a contraction that meant simply "martial arts of Vietnam." The style had only recently been systematized by grandmaster Nguyen Loc, a roguish character who collaborated with the Japanese during World War II and who dabbled in the drug trade during the 1950s, according to Ngo. Ngo practiced vovinam with a group on the soccer field of a Hanoi elementary school for three years, where they used a sandbox to practice throwing and grappling. A subsequent grandmaster later changed the style's name to *viet vo dao* (Vietnamese martial ways), introduced a code of ethics, and saw the style established as part of the curriculum of South Vietnamese high schools. But that was after Ngo had moved on to other studies.

Vovinam, like other Vietnamese martial styles, was heavily influenced by Chinese fighting arts. For example, it incorporated animal movements from the serpent, crane, tiger and monkey. "It is based on animal forms to make you stronger than a lay person," Ngo said. "Animals have more concentration; they focus more. Animals use 200 percent."

Despite the emphasis on building strength and focus, two hard-style characteristics, vovinam is predominately a soft art, emphasizing elusiveness "because the Vietnamese are smaller than the Chinese and the Koreans," Ngo said. "You try to be a smart fighter, develop the mind of the matador, and the power of the bull. You try to frustrate the opponent by letting him kick and hit at the air."

Vovinam strives for economy in its techniques. "It is very efficient in the way it saves power, in the way it attacks weak points—the groin, the knees, the eyes, the throat," Ngo said.

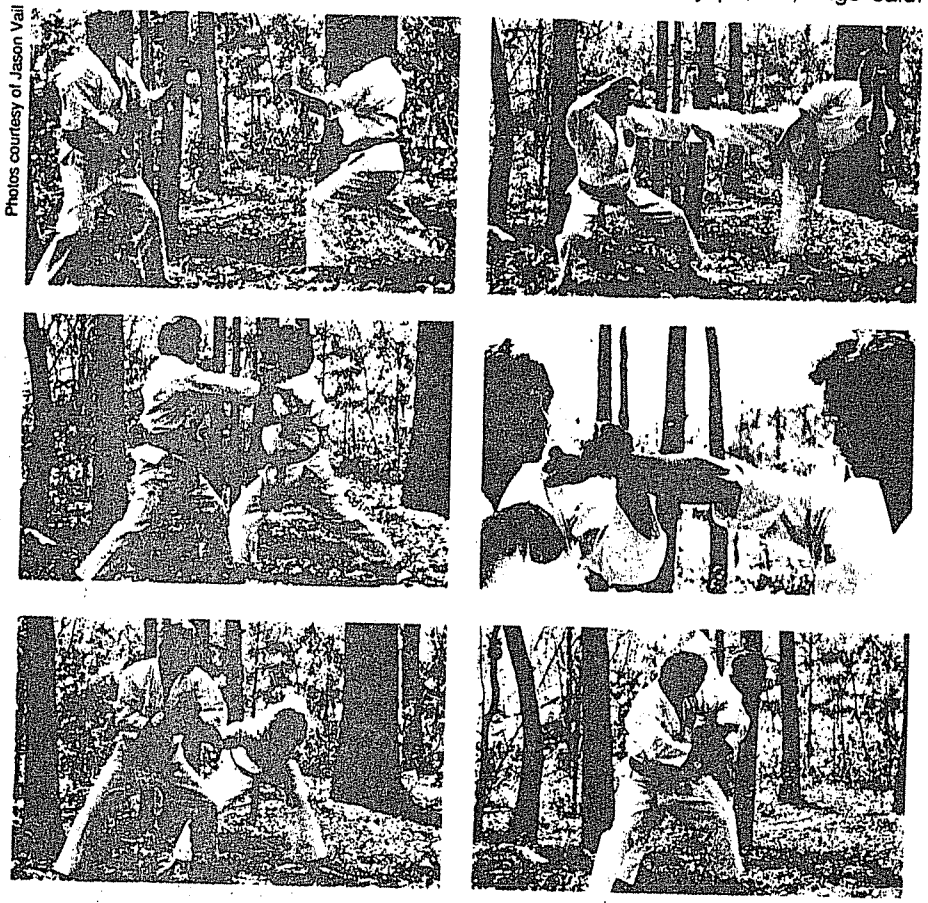
Vovinam also emphasizes simultaneous blocks and counterattacks; i.e., being offensive and defensive at the same time.

Cuong nhu students begin training in vovinam techniques at the green belt level. They are introduced first to softer crane-style blocks, where the parrying hand meets the incoming arm or leg and grasps and redirects it rather than simply knocking it aside, as in a karate block. In sparring, students practice what Ngo calls "machine-gun" techniques—a fast flurry of blows—partly derived from vovinam's use of continuous strikes, rather than the classic one-punch knockdown of karate. They also train in mobility and evasiveness. Deflecting and sliding blocks come next, and students begin practicing simultaneous block-attack by using an ingenious two-person blocking drill Ngo devised.

Despite the practical emphasis on vovinam's techniques early in training, the art's forms do not appear in the cuong nhu curriculum until black belt level. Candidates for third-degree black belt, for example, have a choice of whether to learn *hau quyen*, the monkey form, or *bach hac quyen*, the white crane form. Snake and tiger forms are taught at still higher levels.

While Ngo was learning vovinam, a series of important events took place that would have a significant impact on his outlook on life and his martial art. Ngo and his brothers were idealistic upper-class teenagers (their father was attorney general of one of the northern provinces), and during the early 1950s, Hanoi had a nasty criminal underworld. Ngo and two of his brothers decided to take the law into their own hands and clean up the gutters and dives of Hanoi. Stuffing several copies of *Life* magazine inside their shirts as crude armor against knives, Ngo and his brothers frequented bars and teahouses. Their aggressive behavior put them in positions where hoods would start fights with them, and the brothers would beat up the thugs

Photos courtesy of Jason Vail



Illustrating cuong nhu's interplay of hard and soft techniques, Lap Hoang (left) faces off (1) with an attacker and deflects (2) a side kick before countering (3) with a hard-style punch that is blocked. Hoang parries (4) a punch with a soft crane block that flows into an arm lock (5). The assailant pivots and attempts (6) a back elbow strike, but Hoang flows with the motion and drops his opponent with an aikido-style takedown (7).

him under house arrest.

Upon taking power, the North Vietnamese immediately outlawed the practice and teaching of martial arts, including cuong nhu. Official opposition to martial arts practice and house arrest did not thwart Ngo's perpetual curiosity, however. During the two years he was in South Vietnam after the communist takeover, he managed to indulge an interest in tai chi.

In 1977, Ngo escaped by boat, an ordeal he doesn't talk about much because he still has relatives in Vietnam. When he returned to Gainesville, he resumed leadership of cuong nhu in the United States. In his absence, it had grown, with satellite schools in Miami, Tallahassee and elsewhere.

Ngo has not been able to resist making changes in the style. He began a separate training sequence he called the "soft style," a mixture of aikido, judo and tai chi that focuses more on the yielding arts and chi development than does the original, harder course. Cuong nhu students can now choose one or the other, or both sequences.

"Cuong nhu belt exams can take more than ten hours to complete."

Meanwhile, Ngo has intensified and expanded the testing requirements for black belt, adding a number of weapons, empty-hand and modified tai chi forms, as well as written tests on cuong nhu history and philosophy. Some cuong nhu black belt exams have been known to take more than ten hours to complete.

* * *

The future of cuong nhu is wide open; there is no telling where it will go. At 52, Ngo is sure to be in charge for a long time, and his innovative streak could take him and his followers in any direction. "We are traditional in our spirit and philosophy," Ngo said, "but technically liberal in order to enrich our Oriental heritage in the martial arts. Cuong nhu's growth includes all nationalities, races, religions, and cultures. It is a melting pot of all humanity."

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to teach them not to pick on people.

That youthful vigilantism backfired, however. One random street encounter brought a gang of vengeance-seeking thugs to Ngo's house. In the fight at the doorstep that followed, Ngo's two brothers were stabbed and seriously wounded.

Ngo learned an important lesson, though. "I learned you win over people by ideas, by love, by caring," he said, "not by force."

This is an attitude Ngo has tried to live by and impart to his students. He views the practice of martial arts less as a means to prepare for combat and more as a tool for self-improvement—through hard work in overcoming obstacles, dedication in pursuing excellence, and living by an eight-part code of ethics Ngo wrote for his students.

After the defeat of the French in 1954, the communist Viet Minh took over northern Vietnam and Ngo's hometown of Hanoi, so the family moved first to Saigon and then in 1956 to Hue. The next year Ngo began his study of shotokan under a former Japanese soldier named Choji Suzuki, who had stayed on in Vietnam after World War II. Ngo was a dedicated, almost fanatical student. He paid Suzuki double fees and worked out 90 minutes a day—sometimes twice a day—five days a week, advancing to black belt in two years. By the time Ngo was a brown belt, he was helping his *sensei* (instructor) teach.

Shotokan karate forms the bones and marrow of cuong nhu. Students first learn basic shotokan forms, the *taikyoku* and *heinan* series, and all the basic hard-style blocks and strikes before softer vovinam and wing chun maneuvers are added. But the shotokan forms are the main part of the curriculum into the black belt ranks.

Ngo decided to stress a hard style first before adding the leavening of softness because "they are the simplest, scientific and easiest styles to teach, to learn." For instance, cuong nhu students learn six or seven different kicks in six months, while *chi* (internal energy) development, a central feature of soft styles, takes years.

Ngo has always been open-minded about the martial arts, an includer rather than excluder as far as technique goes. While Ngo was studying and teaching shotokan during the 1960s, he encountered another martial style that eventually found a place in cuong nhu. In 1962 he began an intense study of judo, and achieved a black belt in two years.

A year later, at age 29, he decided to found his own style. He was dissatisfied with the lack of emphasis on the moral side of martial arts training and the absence of technical variation. "There was no code of ethics in other styles," Ngo said. "None had the whole picture of martial arts—they were too traditional, too narrow. You must have a style that incorporates all variations."

In this* cuong nhu *defense against a choke, Lap Hoang is grabbed (1) by the throat and immediately clutches (2) the assailant's sleeves. Hoang pivots (3) under his foe and throws him to the ground, finishing (4) with a punch.

That is, Ngo said, a style that teaches both hard and soft principles. That way, there will be something for everyone, since hard styles don't necessarily suit women and smaller or older people, while soft arts will.

So Ngo coined the term "cuong nhu" to exemplify the basic premise of his school, and began teaching. Before long he had hundreds of students at the University of Hue, where he had become an instructor of zoology.

Ngo likens his style to an incomplete canvas, to which a new element can always be added. For example, Ngo's study of vovinam had not included instruction in the rich weapons heritage of Vietnam. But after he began cuong nhu, he encountered a student with a background in Vietnamese weapons and, in return for cuong nhu instruction, Ngo learned the short and long sticks. These two weapons form the foundation for cuong nhu's weapons program, which later was expanded to embrace the double-edged sword, broadsword, spear, *sai* and other implements. Originally taught at the black belt level, weapons training is now given to lower-ranking students.

During the mid-1960s, Ngo studied aikido under American serviceman Eddie Cates, and many aikido techniques and principles now augment the soft joint attacks of vovinam.

Until 1971, cuong nhu was strictly a Vietnamese phenomenon, but in March of that year, after a six-month crash course in English, Ngo came to the University of Florida at Gainesville to study for his Ph.D. in entomology. When he arrived, teaching Americans cuong nhu wasn't high on his agenda. But persuaded by one of his professors, he began teaching classes in September, 1971, as part of the university's intramural program. Within two years, he had the largest such class on campus.

In June, 1974, Ngo returned to South Vietnam, leaving the American branch of cuong nhu to govern itself through a newly incorporated board of directors. In Vietnam, Ngo was appointed president of Quang Da College in Hue, where he served until March, 1975, when the North Vietnamese overran the city and placed