

SWORDS SABERS HOOKS & DAGGERS

A Look into the
Bladed Weapons of
Choy Lee Fut

By Emilio Alpanseque
(photos by Rodrigo Sánchez)

Short and efficient, the Butterfly Swords fully integrate all the Choy Lee Fut's short range combat principles.





Chan Heung, also known as Din Ying and Daht Ting, was the founder of the Choy Lee Fut system.

Traditional wushu weapons come in all shapes and sizes and their composition and classification can be a complex task, particularly when only fragmented documentation is available. As we know, there are many distinct schools and styles and each has its own unique flavors and traditions; however, very few hold the wealth of content and information that Chan Family Choy Lee Fut offers. In this article, we will attempt to illustrate some of the main characteristics and principles behind the bladed weapons of the style.

The origin of edged or bladed weapons can be traced back to primitive times when men learned to use sharp stones or bones as knives to fight against wild animals and other men. In China, bronze sword production started in the Shang Dynasty (1766-1050 BCE) and reached its peak during the Qin Dynasty (221 BCE – 206 BCE) when swords made of steel started to be manufactured and used for many centuries. Much later, near the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), swords and other cold weapons gradually lost their military value as firearms took over; however, many kinds of swords, sabers, hooks and daggers continued to be used by martial arts societies and revolutionary clans during that period.

Preserving Traditions

Founded in 1836, Choy Lee Fut (蔡李佛) is a traditional wushu style that shows the influence of an era marked by constant conflicts and rebellions. Its founder, Chan Heung (陈亨), spent over 20 years learning his craft from three mentors: Chan Yuen Wu (陈远护), Lee Yau Shan (李友山) and the Buddhist monk Choy Fook (蔡福). Combining their teachings into one effective and comprehensive system, he eventually returned to his natal village of King Mui (京梅), in the province of Canton, to open a martial arts school called Hung Sing Gwoon (洪圣馆) and a medical clinic called Wing Sing Tong (永胜堂). Eventually, the style of Chan Heung would spread

throughout Canton and several other provinces of China and ultimately abroad.

Today, the fifth generation father-line descendant of the founder, Grandmaster Chen Yongfa (陈永发), is the current custodian or *jeung mun yan* (掌门人) of his family style. GM Chen learned his craft directly from his grandfather and his father, even during the years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) when martial arts practices were suppressed and the various implements and weapons they used for practice had to be dug up, used, and then re-buried every day. GM Chen also inherited ancient scrolls and manuals of the Choy Lee Fut system written by his ancestors with detailed descriptions of all theory and methodology of the style, including nearly a hundred routines that specialize in single, double and combined use of bladed weapons.

Swords: Straight or Curved?

In the English language, the word "sword" is usually defined as "a weapon consisting of a long, often straight or slightly curved, pointed blade, having one or two cutting edges, that is designed for thrusting or cutting." However, in Cantonese there are two distinctive words to refer to each type: *dou* (刀 - knife) and *gim* (剑 - sword). Each word actually defines a group or family of bladed weapons. The *dou*, often called broadsword or saber, refers to swords that

have a slightly curved single-edged blade, whereas the *gim*, often called straight sword, refers to swords with a straight double-edged blade and a sharp tip.

The broadswords are great for cutting, chopping and slashing with great speed and hard power. Since they are only sharp on one edge, wrapping and coiling around the head with the weapon is possible as well as using the idle hand for extra support on certain movements. The single broadsword or *darn dou* (单刀) or the nine ring broadsword or *gau wan dou* (九环刀) are just two examples of the many types of broadswords in Choy Lee Fut. The Western cavalry sword, which is by definition a type of *dou*, is also included in Choy Lee Fut's arsenal, as western



GM Chen Yongfa moved to Sidney, Australia in 1983 with little more than a gim, a few uniforms and some of his family's manuals. Today, his style is practiced by thousands of students across the globe.



Raul and Marcel Toutin, directors of the Choy Lee Fut Wing Sing Tong office for Latin America based in Santiago, Chile.

troops invaded southern China and Choy Lee Fut disciples had to learn how to defeat them with their own weapons.

The straight sword, by contrast, has been a symbol of nobility within Chinese culture and its usage is very refined, based on precise control of the wrist and emphasis on soft power in techniques such as flicking and poking specific targets. The Chan family further subdivides the straight sword into hard and soft categories. Examples of hard straight swords include the green dragon sword or *ching lung gim* (青龙剑) and the Bodhidharma sword or *tat mo gim* (达摩剑), while the plum flower sword or *moi fah gim* (梅花剑) represents a straight sword within the soft category.

Linear, Circular and the Eight Directions

Since the basic principle for weapon training is to consider the weapon an extension of the practitioner's body, the process of weapon training in Choy Lee Fut revolves around the same structure of the bare hand skills training. However, prior to engaging in any weapon training, several stages of learning are required. Students must be proficient in the first two fundamental routines of the style, namely the Five Wheel Horse or *ng lun ma* (五轮马) and the Five Wheel Fist or *ng lun choy* (五轮捶). These routines involve repetitions of basic movements; the former introduces all main stances and transitions while moving in linear

direction, while the latter brings in hand techniques and quick stepping that are circular in nature.

Furthermore, as students advance in their practice, they are introduced to the Eight Trigram or *baat gwa* (八卦) concept, another fundamental principle of Choy Lee Fut that identifies eight different directions and angles in which techniques can be executed. For example, a downward slash can be performed straight down, but it can also be performed obliquely at a 45-degree angle from the left to the right or vice versa; by simply adjusting the wrist of the wielding hand and collaborating with the idle hand, one can quickly alternate between various techniques and/or different directions. Apart from the 8 directions, there are three different planes representing three different target heights, providing a myriad of different combinations.

The Idle Hand, Not So Idle!

Generally speaking, when brandishing a broadsword, the idle hand—the hand not holding the weapon—takes the shape of a palm or a tiger claw. Conversely, when using a straight sword, the idle hand becomes a sword-finger hand using the index and middle finger to point and the thumb to press down the other two fingers. Among Chinese martial artists there is an old saying: "The single broadsword depends on the hand, the double broadsword depends on the steps" (*darn dou hon sau, sheung dou hon chau* - 单刀看手, 双刀看走).

Usually adorned with a tassel, the elegant Straight Sword is the ultimate hero's weapon.

The straight sword, by contrast, has been a symbol of nobility within Chinese culture

Here, the word 'hand' refers to the idle hand and "steps" to the footwork. But why are these two so important during weapon play?

The Choy Lee Fut system is known for quick circular waist movements and flexible footwork used in unison to generate power for each movement. Despite the fact that the broadsword uses more elbow and shoulder movements to slash, cut and slice while the straight sword uses more wrist movements to poke and deflect, the collaboration of the idle hand as a counterweight becomes crucial in order to keep the harmony between the two limbs and the body, allowing the practitioner to generate the appropriate ballistic force behind each technique.

Expanding Your Reach

The *dou* and *gim* are middle-range weapons. Many other bladed weapons are designed for the long range. First, within the *dou* family there is the long-handled broadsword or *buk dou* (扑刀), and the General Kwan broadsword or *kwan dou* (关刀), which consists of a heavy blade mounted on a long wooden or metal pole with a pointed metal counter weight used for balance. Another example is the spear or *cheung* (枪), essentially a pole with a double-edge blade attached to its top, which incorporates many of the *gim* stabbing and slashing techniques. Choy Lee Fut has a wide range of spears such as the tassel spear or *jing cheung* (缨枪), the snake spear or *seh cheung* (蛇枪) which has a longer snake-tongue-shaped blade, and the halberd or *gik* (戟) which is a spear with one or two crescent-moon cutting blades attached to its pole.

Extremely versatile, the exotic Tiger Head Double Hooks can be used in a multitude of ways and ranges.



Moreover, several bladed weapons that were adapted from farming or fishing tools also fall into the long-range category. Some of these are the nine teeth rake or *gau ngaa pa* (九齿耙), iron shovel or *jung chaan* (重铲), the wolf teeth mace or *long ngaa pang* (狼牙棒), several types of forks or *cha* (叉), and many more. The founder of Choy Lee Fut, Chan Heung, also created a unique weapon for the style that combines many of the above weapons. It is called the nine dragon fork or *gau lung cha* (九龙叉). This exotic weapon is a long and heavy metal pole with a trident on top and the notable addition of two sets of four double hooks positioned against each other covering the four different angles: front, back, left and right.

Double the Weapons, Double the Fun

Lastly, the Choy Lee Fut system has numerous forms for double weapons, which are usually used for short- and mid-range application and can be paired or combined. Examples of short-range paired weapons are the double daggers or *sheung pei sau* (双匕首) and the butterfly knives or *bart chaam dou* (八斩刀). Both are small weapons allowing easy concealment, and they are great at close quarters. Middle-range paired weapons include the double broadswords or *sheung dou* (双刀), the double straight swords or *sheung gim* (双剑), the double axes or *sheung fu tou* (双斧头) and the exotic tiger head double hooks or *fu tau sheung gau* (斧头双勾) that combine the body of a sword with a crescent moon cutting blade in front of the guard, a dagger below the hilt and also a hook link on the tip. Paired weapons usually work in a symmetrical way in terms of technique—slash, block, cut—constantly exchanging defensive and offensive functions of the hands. For example, a slash to the front with the left while binding the head with the right followed immediately by the same movements but inversed.



Complex to perform, the Yin Yang Swords combine the dynamics of two very different weapons together as one.

CHAN FAMILY CHOY LEE FUT LINEAGE CHART

CHAN HEUNG - 陈亨 (1806-1875)

Founder 1st Generation

CHAN KOON PAK - 陈官伯 (1847-1920)

Son of the founder and custodian of the 2nd Generation

CHAN YIU CHI - 陈耀墀 (1888-1965)

Grandson of the founder and custodian of the 3rd Generation

CHAN WAN HON - 陈云汉 (1919-1979)

Great-grandson of the founder and custodian of the 4th Generation

CHAN WING FAAT (CHEN YONGFA) - 陈永发 (1951-Present)

Great-great-grandson of the founder and custodian of the 5th Generation



The imposing Kwan Dou is named after General Kwan Yu of the Three Kingdoms era of China (220-280).



Contrary to what some may believe, the Broadsword and Shield allow offense and/or defense with either weapon.

In contrast to paired weapons, the usage of combined weapons is not always as symmetrical if the weapons chosen are very different in nature; therefore, one weapon may defend while the other one attacks, or one weapon may be used for actions within a certain range while the other is used as a complement. Examples of middle-range combined weapons



Since civilians were not allowed to own weapons in some eras, they learned to use whichever farming or fishing tools were handy, like a Trident.



With the Tiger Head Double Hooks you can catch your opponent's weapon with one hand and finish him with the other.

include the broadsword and shield or *darn dou dip* (单刀碟), the broadsword and chain whip or *darn dou bin* (单刀鞭) and the intricate yin yang swords or *jam joeng dou gim* (阴阳刀剑), a combined routine of a left-handed *gim* and a right-handed *dou*, which is unique to the style and very hard to master.

Chinese Culture, World Heritage

Beyond any doubt, the amount of knowledge available within traditional Chinese martial arts is endless. Some may argue that learning about medieval weapons may no longer be useful in modern society, but the list of benefits through their practice can be very long. Apart from the self defense implications, regular use of heavy or long weapons will improve balance in stances and strengthen muscles. Using intricate or complex weapons helps develop timing and coordination. Using sharp or risky weapons will raise focus and concentration, which over time will improve the harmony between mind, body and spirit.

Now, learning all the weapons described in this article may be impractical or perhaps only attainable by those most dedicated disciples. What GM Chen Yongfa has successfully achieved is to provide a unique groundwork for preserving these methods and techniques which otherwise could be lost. This not only expands our knowledge of earlier times but it also refines our thinking about the needs and behaviors of Chinese ancestors. The Choy Lee Fut system was born in China but belongs to the world! 🌍



The fearsome Nine Ring Broadsword has a longer hilt allowing two-handed techniques as well as one-handed.

For more information on Chen Yongfa, visit Choyleafut.org. Emilio Alpanseque currently resides in Point Richmond, California and can be reached at MasteringWushu.com.