

THE MAN WHO CH



CHANGED THE WORLD

How Bruce Lee Continues to Influence the American Martial Arts • ***by Jerry Beasley, Ed.D.***

Few would argue that Bruce Lee was not the world's most influential martial artist.

More than 30 years after his death, students are still implementing his techniques and teachings in training halls around the globe, and his accomplishments continue to be a positive force that guides us toward truth in combat.

Lee was also the quintessential martial arts movie star. Most American practitioners over age 12 have seen him in a movie or documentary, and his most popular film, *Enter the Dragon*, has achieved cult status. His cinematic work is the reason most often given when practitioners are asked why they decided to take up the martial arts in the first place.

How could one man pave the way for so much change, progress and development? To answer that question, this article will examine the effect Bruce Lee has had on the martial arts community during the past four decades.

THE 1960s

Proud of his art and secure in the kung fu skills he learned from *wing chun* founder Yip Man, Lee traveled to Los Angeles in August 1964 to perform at the Long Beach International Karate Championship. It was the most prestigious event of the day, and its organizer, Ed Parker, was the man who pitched to Hollywood producers the idea of capturing Lee's skill on film. Lee wooed the audience with his moves and sowed the seeds that would sprout into a martial arts legend.

During the '60s, Lee supervised three schools: Taky Kimura's Seattle (Washington) *kwoon*, James Lee's Oakland (California) academy and Dan Inosanto's Los Angeles/Chinatown operation. In those early years, Lee did not yet call what he taught *jeet kune do*. "[That term] was probably coined in 1967," Inosanto said. "He was just

PHOTO COURTESY OF WARNER BROS.

Bruce Lee became a cult hero after the release of *Enter the Dragon* in 1973. It and *Game of Death* (left) gave moviegoers a chance to see him in his martial arts prime.

driving in a car and said that he believed to stop the attack and intercept was high combat, so he said 'jeet kune do,' the way of intercepting."

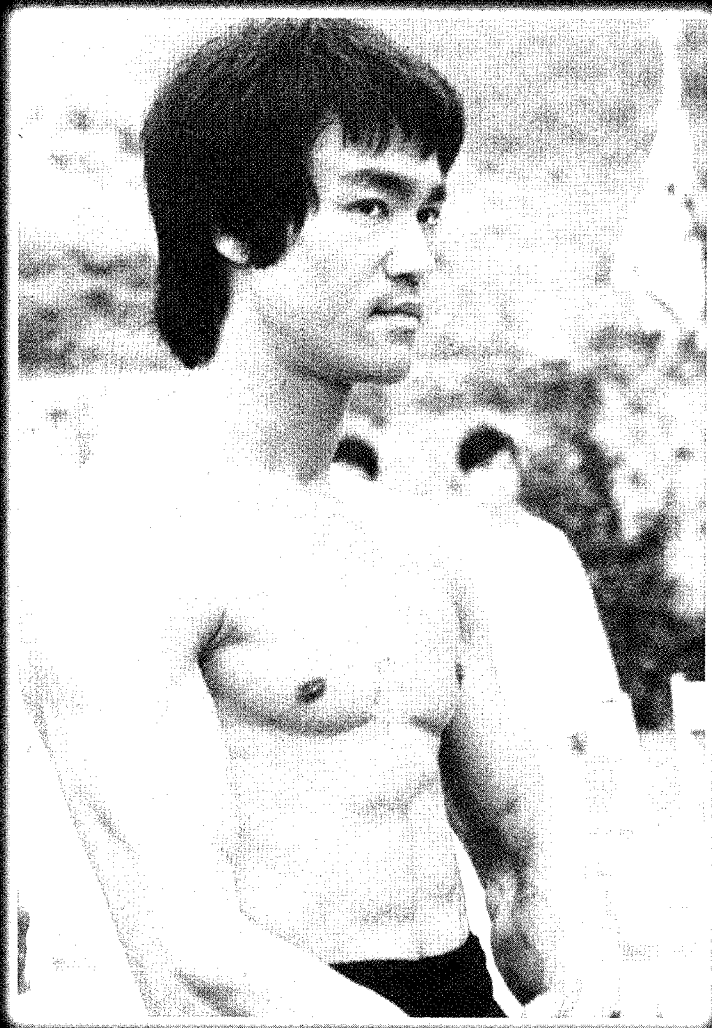
Inosanto recalled that early JKD workouts consisted of "a lot of tool development and attribute training, and a lot of sparring—light sparring which was three-quarters power to the body, and with the legs a little bit lighter maybe. We did heavy-bag work, we did speed-bag work and focus-glove work, and that was the extent of the training."

The concept of attribute and tool development contrasted with the typical karate class of the 1960s, where rank and *kata* practice were considered more important.

Depending upon whom you speak with, the Chinatown JKD program developed from organized wing chun to a more loosely constructed, anything-goes curriculum that incorporated kickboxing, grappling and weapons training. Therein lay the beginnings of an international movement

PHOTO COURTESY OF WARNER BROS.

Students of Bruce Lee claim his Chinatown workouts emphasized kicking, punching, grappling and weapons. His fight scenes in *Enter the Dragon* mirrored that inclusive approach to training and fighting.



The JKD Connection

Whether you are into *jeet kune do* or the mixed martial arts, you must learn to "float in totality," as Bruce Lee used to say. Totality refers to the sum of all the techniques (from all styles) you have mastered. Floating in totality means you do not make a choice. You simply respond like an echo.

An echo offers precision because it does not involve conscious decision. When you choose which art to use, you must recognize its limitations. JKD has no limitations; therefore, you must simply respond. An echo can-

that would culminate in cross-training and the mixed martial arts.

By 1969 Lee had been successful in making students of the top tournament champions, including Chuck Norris, Joe Lewis and Mike Stone. Almost immediately, all three champs began spreading JKD training methods across the United States, both in tournaments and in schools. In the meantime, Lee established his screen persona as a kung fu expert in *The Green Hornet*. People were drawn to him. As Lewis said, "He was a very charismatic guy."

THE 1970s

By 1970 Lewis had combined his JKD skills with boxing and karate to create the sport of kickboxing. In a year's time, he fought 10 opponents and knocked out each one before the end of the second round. People saw that JKD worked.

It is important to understand that in the '60s and early '70s, karate was still the most respected martial art. Karate champions were glorified as the ultimate fighters of their day. But Lee and Lewis thumbed their noses at traditional karate, and in so doing both teacher and student became "anti-heroes" of sorts. People wanted to see them lose, and because they kept winning—Lewis in tournaments and Lee in movie roles—their reputations became legendary.

In 1971 Lee elected to close his JKD schools and travel to Hong Kong, the city in which he was raised, to become a movie star. He headlined in several features, including *The Big Boss*, *The Chinese Connection* and *Return of the Dragon*. Back in the United States, the TV series *Kung Fu*, starring David Carradine as Shaolin monk Kwai Chang Caine (a role for which Lee was rejected), premiered and became a hit, leading many new students to enroll in martial arts schools.

In the summer of 1972, President Richard Nixon opened relations with China, and seemingly overnight, Americans were obsessed with Asian philosophy and the martial arts. Among the exports from China were kung fu films. Dubbed "chop socky" classics, movies such as *Five Fingers of Death* were followed by the aforementioned Bruce Lee vehicles.

not think about how it will sound; it simply responds. As a JKD or MMA fighter, you must not be burdened by the necessity of associating an art or style with your personal expression.

You must be free to use “no way as way”—another phrase Lee coined to describe an essential fighting concept. You respond not as a kung fu stylist or a karate practitioner, but as yourself. It is the individual, not the art, that wins—and endures.

—J.B.

By the time *Enter the Dragon* opened in August 1973, America's interest had reached a fever pitch. Lee had become the most sought-after martial arts star of the day. It was a reputation he would not live to enjoy.

“After Lee died, I heard a film producer in Hollywood say his death was like a \$2 million publicity campaign,” Lewis said. Explanations for his passing, which happened on July 20, 1973, ranged from a *dim-mak* delayed death touch to a drug overdose to a reaction to medication. By the end of 1973, he had become bigger in death than he could have imagined in life.

Lee's reputation shifted quickly from controversial rebel to the fastest, strongest, deadliest kung fu fighter ever to walk the earth. He was now the standard by which all other martial artists were judged, whether they were competitors, instructors, grandmasters or movie stars. As of 1973, the late Bruce Lee was king.

Meanwhile, in America's traditional martial arts community, the boom of 1973 quickly led to the bust of 1974. In part because of the oil embargo (people couldn't get gasoline to travel to karate schools), Lee's death, the decline of interest in *Kung Fu* and a bumper crop of poorly trained instructors who simply failed to deliver the goods, America's infatuation with kung fu, karate and other arts fizzled.

Magazine editors pleaded for another Bruce Lee. Contests were held to find the man who would follow in his movie-making footsteps. For others, however, things were not quite so dismal. Lee may have been gone, but his art still existed. Problem was, only a few individuals—perhaps fewer than 20—had received enough training from him to adequately present his teachings. Most JKD students went underground, reserving Lee's art for those who enrolled in their backyard workouts.

At the time, most instructors did not recognize the fact that Lee's influence on the development of the arts in America had already taken root. In 1973 Lee's friend, Jhoon Rhee, developed protective gear that en-

abled competitors to make hard contact. Lee-fan Mike Anderson (who billed Linda Lee as a special guest at many of his promotions) produced a magazine and organized a tournament circuit that proved to be a laboratory in which Bruce Lee's theories of contact training were tested.

Lewis, well-versed in JKD theory, wrote articles emphasizing the new training methods and stepped into the ring in 1974 to secure the heavyweight title in the fledgling sport of full-contact karate. More important, Lee's other champion, Chuck Norris, began a TV and movie career, thus filling the void that had opened on that day in 1973.

THE 1980s

At the end of the '70s, the anything-goes-as-long-as-you-stand-up-to-do-it style of kickboxing was replaced by a less-violent, follow-the-rules-and-kick-at-least-six-times-around form of Professional Karate Association full-contact fighting. In the early '80s, superstars like Benny Urquidez

PHOTO COURTESY OF 20TH CENTURY FOX-GREENWAY

In The Green Hornet, Bruce Lee (left) played Kato, while Van Williams portrayed the title character. The series introduced America to Lee's brand of kung fu.





PHOTO COURTESY OF ABC

were winning in Japan, Thailand and the United States under all types of rules. Martial arts experts from around the world came to America for economic opportunity and a chance to spread their arts. The United States became a melting pot.

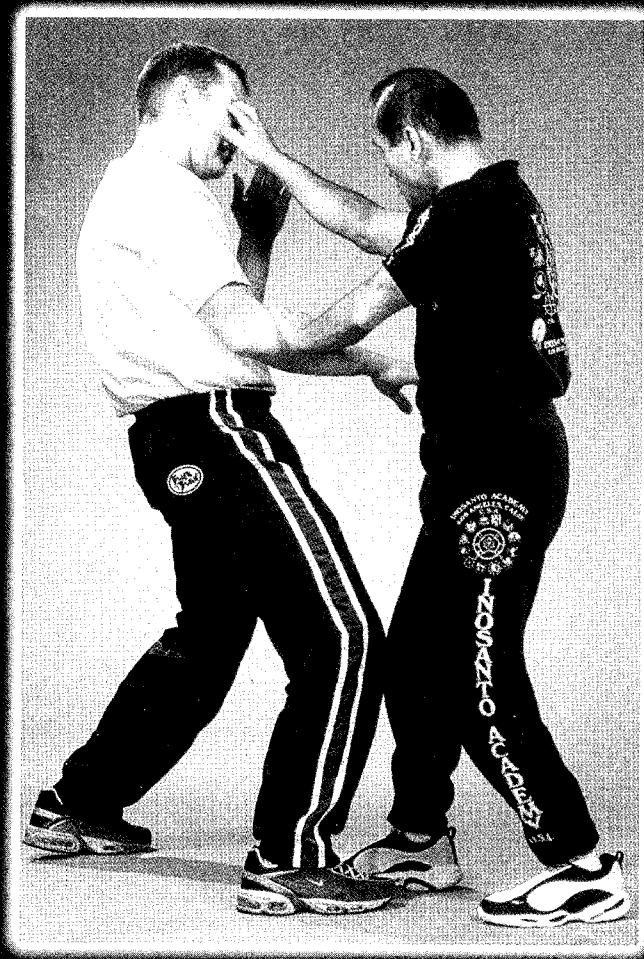
Inosanto, Lee's top pupil and teaching assistant, had advanced the art of JKD in the years following his master's death and embarked on a full-time career teaching "JKD concepts." But JKD had to compete against an obscure Japanese art called *ninjutsu* for media dominance. The *ninja* won—but only for a short time. By 1985, the stealthy warriors had disappeared, only to show up from time to time as villains in cheap movies. Interestingly, *ninjutsu*'s emphasis on weapons complemented the JKD-concepts approach, which was similarly weapons-oriented.

The American infatuation with jeet kune do continued. A "JKD society" composed of former Lee students was formed in the

attention was being directed toward Bruce Lee and his art that infighting threatened to separate practitioners based on which interpretation they preferred.

The controversy reached a zenith when two categories of JKD students, the "original school" and the modern "concepts school," vied for acceptance as the true interpretation of Lee's genius.

In its September 1971 issue, *Black Belt* published Lee's most important article, "Liberate Yourself from Classical Karate." In it, he wrote: "It is conceivable that a long time ago, a certain martial artist discovered some partial truth. During his lifetime, the man resisted the temptation to organize this partial truth. ... After his death, his students took 'his' hypothesis, 'his' postulates, 'his' inclination and 'his'



Dan Inosanto (right) began training under Bruce Lee in the 1960s. The Southern California-based master has since become the premier proponent of jeet kune do concepts.

The martial arts boom of the early 1970s was in part precipitated by the Kung Fu television series, in which David Carradine was chosen over Bruce Lee to play a wandering Shaolin monk.

late '80s to oversee the progression of the art. Paul Vunak, a student of Inosanto's, introduced a series of JKD/*kali* videos that went on to mold a generation of enthusiasts.

THE 1990s

Some 20 years after his death, Lee once again became the single most influential martial artist ever to have lived. *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*, starring Jason Scott Lee (no relation), played to packed audiences around the planet. So much

method and turned them into law." It was almost as if Lee was writing about his own future.

Just as Lee had influenced the level of contact in competition in the mid-'70s, a new event called the Ultimate Fighting Championship was destined to carry that torch. The opening scenes of *Enter the Dragon* showed a muscular Lee engaged in a style of combat that allowed kicking, punching and grappling. Now, 20 years later, promoters had organized the sport of no-holds-barred fighting, which pitted practitioners of different styles against one another in an anything-goes environment. In response to critics who claimed that the UFC was not actually a martial arts competition but a sporting event, co-promoter Art Davie argued that it was exactly what Lee would have wanted. He was right.

The popularity of NHB events gave rise to a new interpretation of fighting referred to as "mixed martial arts." With no styles or uniforms, it stresses—just as Lee would expect—truth in combat. One could argue that JKD and MMA are basically the same. Essentially, MMA is a 21st-century attempt to liberate oneself from the limitations of the classical martial arts.

JKD NOW

Jeet kune do currently exists as both the art of Bruce Lee and the philosophy of liberation that is independently experienced by MMA practitioners. People want to believe that it is controlled by one teacher or a group of teachers. It is not. One person can show another where JKD has led him, but he can never take him there. In other words, no two people can experience the same journey.

When a student first experiences the liberating joy of discovering a new technique or movement, he has touched JKD. When an aged master feels a sense of freedom in a new interpretation of a kata, he has—if only for a few minutes—experienced JKD. What Lee discovered almost 40 years ago is still influencing the way we practice, and it seems safe to say it will do so forever. ✕

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About the author: Dr. Jerry Beasley teaches jeet kune do and other martial arts in Radford, Virginia. He is also a professor of exercise, sport and health education at Radford University. For information about his books and magazine articles, visit <http://www.aikia.net>.

Before making it big in the United States, Bruce Lee starred in several Hong Kong movies, including *The Big Boss*, *The Chinese Connection* and *Return of the Dragon* (below, with Chuck Norris).

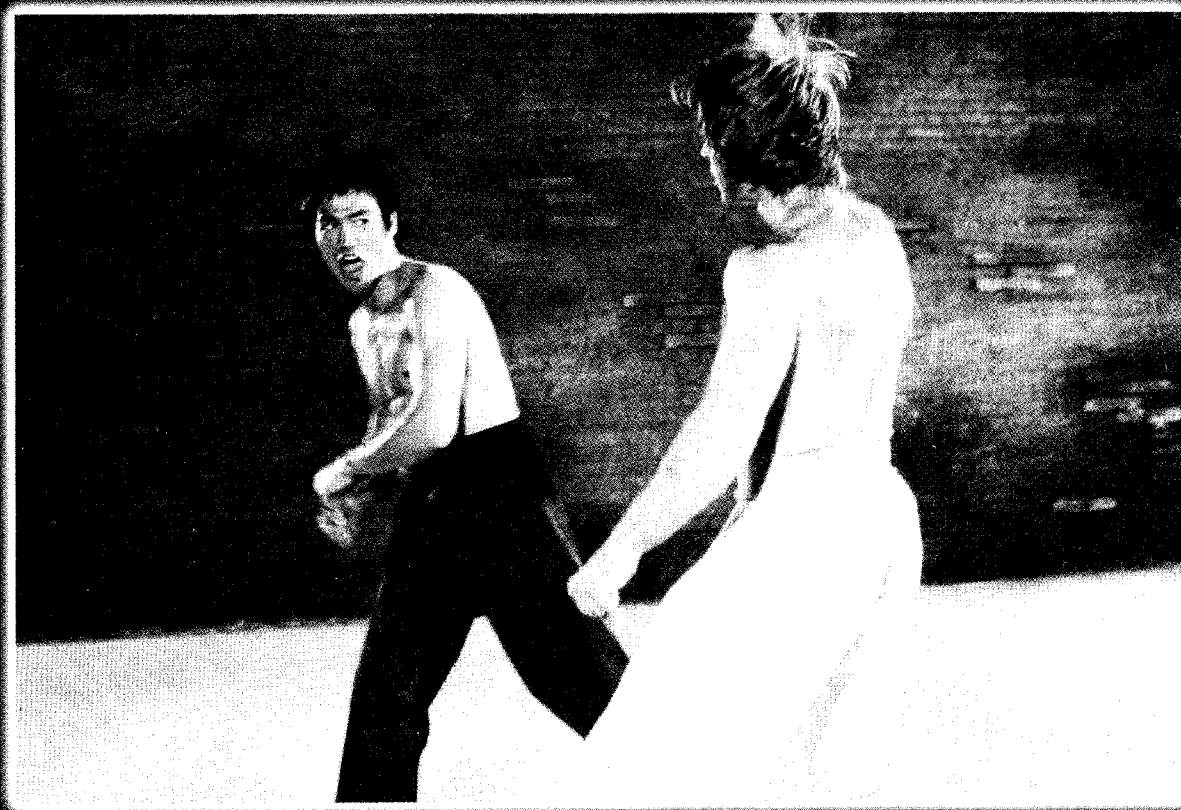


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