

# Finding Thunder:

## Exploring the White Crane Kung Fu of Liu Chang I

*By Christopher Caile*

It started with an e-mail from my first karate teacher, Hanshi Phil Koeppele (founder of the US Karate Do Kai).

*"Christopher: Over the last 3 years I have had the opportunity to host Sifu Liu Chang I...third generation Feeding Crane (a style of White Crane Kung Fu) Master. Chris, he is something else. .. strong, fast and with tremendous internal strength. .. and willing to teach anyone willing to learn his family Feeding Crane concepts which are an important influence on Okinawan karate....You might be interested in meeting him and writing an article for ... FightingArts.com I have told him of you and one of his representatives should be getting in contact."*

Koeppele's e-mail also contained a mysterious reference, that Sifu Liu's technique also produced "thunder." "What's that?," I said to myself. I had never heard the term. So I was interested.

I was aware too that White Crane had influenced the development of Goju Ryu Karate as well as several Shorin Ryu styles (including Hohansoken heritage). Having some experience in these arts I thought it would be interesting to see the similarities of technique, strategy and power generation with that of Feeding Crane. These I point out in the article, but leave greater detail to the footnotes.

Several weeks later I attended a weekend long seminar on Feeding Crane. I also was able to talk at length with Sifu and interview him and several of his students.

### **History of Feeding Crane (Bai He Men Shi He Quan)**

Sifu Liu Chang I is the lineage head of the Liu family Feeding Crane passed on from his grandfather to his father to him. The art was introduced to Taiwan and his grandfather in the early part of the 20th Century from Fuchow, China where it had already developed through nine generations of head masters. Today it is practiced unchanged from how it was taught within the Liu family. Feeding Crane is part of the Crane family, sharing lineage with Bai He (White Crane), Ming He (Singing Crane), and Wing Chun, among others.

### **Feeding Crane (White Crane) As A Fighting Art**

Feeding Crane is not showy. If you are looking for low, deep stances, spectacular high kicks and gymnastics, this is not your art. But what Feeding Crane lacks in grace it makes up for in brutal efficiency. It is also unique. It is a time capsule of old fighting technique -- technique tested in combat and passed on to us over 12 generations through turbulent times. It is not always as pretty as Wushu (modern Chinese martial arts) but its techniques are very applicable to both self defense and street situations. Weapons are not included within the curriculum. Feeding Crane as taught by Sifu Liu contains only empty hand self-defense technique.

Of all the Chinese martial arts I have seen, or studied, Feeding Crane seems the closest to old style Okinawan karate. It represents a link to the past, to Okinawan self-defense before modern karate, before styles and sport karate.

### **Power Generation**

"As for Sifu Liu's "thunder." You can hear it in his body -- a sort of "kaplunk" sound that shadowed Sifu Liu's hand and arm techniques. It is part of what Sifu Liu calls "Short Power" (within the shoulders and arms). It is also one of the defining aspects of Sifu Liu's Feeding Crane.

Where the "thunder" comes from I am not sure, but my guess is that it is the result of muscles suddenly contracting over a short distance, then relaxing again at such intensity that the muscle mass ricochets out and then back into a relaxed state. The sharp contraction of the muscles in the chest also make a sort of drum out of the chest cavity, together creating a very pronounced sound. I have never heard before. When developed it signifies generation of tremendous power in a space of only inches.

This same "thunder" was reputedly also exhibited by Chojun Miyagi (founder of Goju-Ryu karate) and other Okinawan karate masters of the past. It is perhaps another component of old Okinawan karate lost to modern exponents of the art. Michael Calandra, a New York area senior Isshin-Ryu Karate teacher told me that his teachers had talked about Tatsuo Shimabuku's (their teacher and the styles founder) short range power. "To me, seeing Feeding Crane," Calandra said, "is a confirmation of my own karate heritage. It also tells me that I am on the right path."

Another components of Feeding Crane power and energy come from the use of body mass, such as moving forward, dropping weight or rising up behind a technique. The "rise, sink, spit, swallow" ideas common to Goju Ryu and a variety of southern Chinese systems. More important and also central to Feeding Crane, however, is "Shaking Power" - a back and forth, short twitching movement of the hips, lower abdomen and upper thighs. It can generate short waves of energy upward through the abdomen to the shoulders and arms. This is a powerful mix.

This type of power generation was once used by many early Okinawan karate masters (an internal type power) but over time it has been largely lost to modern practitioners. "Shaking Power" is very different from power generation now used in most modern Japanese karate, boxing and Muay Thai (Thai boxing using low kicks and knees). But some on Okinawa and elsewhere still cling to the older ways of power generation similar to Feeding Crane's "Shaking Power," adding too their own variants. Examples include old forms Shorin-Ryu karate, including Kishaba Juku Shorin-Ryu Karate and Hohān Soken's White Crane karate lineage and others. There are also others within Goju-Ryu and other Okinawan karate groups.

Commenting on the importance of power, Sifu Liu says: "Power is just as important as kata. Without it you can't make (kata) applications work. But it takes time to develop it, especially 'thunder' power. It can take years, but the biggest step is the first one per cent because it indicates your body is starting to learn how to create it. Also power is not just brute force. It also includes yielding and 'shaking' power."

## **Body Conditioning**

Feeding Crane stresses body conditioning, especially of the lower body. "It's an important part of training," says Sifu Liu. "In the old days on Taiwan people walked to get around, often along paths in the hills where you were vulnerable to attack and robbery. So the way of self-defense was within you. We had no guns. You learned to harden your body against attack and make yourself strong."

Conditioning the body and legs in Feeding Crane is a process of body adjustment. Slapping and progressive harder hitting gradually harden the body. Deep horse stances are also used. So are low shin round kicks to a partner's legs and thighs. "These exercises should hurt a little," says Sifu Liu, "but not too much. A lot of pain is too much, but without some pain you get nothing."

Slapping and body hitting are also found in Goju-Ryu's (and other karate styles) sanchin kata testing (shime) -- the kata designed to build proper body alignment, technique, power and stamina. Similar techniques are also part of hard Chi Kung (Qigong) -- used in many Chinese martial arts to develop a type of internal energy (chi or qi) to fortify the body against attack.

## **Feeding Crane Technique**

In technique, Feeding Crane is soft and hard, often softness followed by hardness. Softer circular movements are used to block, intercept and control attacks. The principle is to control the first attack and the attacker, not just to avoid, evade and counter. This is also the guiding tactical principle of most Okinawan kata. But unlike modern karate, Feeding Crane uses natural stepping and postures guided by function as opposed to rigidly defined stances used by most of karate today.

These same soft, rounded open hand interception techniques are found in much of Okinawan karate, most directly in many old Shorin-Ryu karate kata but also in Goju-Ryu and Uechi-Ryu karate.

Once an attack is intercepted Feeding Crane often turns hard using quick powerful breaks and joint dislocations powered by quick (almost spasmodic) violent body action (known in the Chinese arts as "fa jin" or "jin" -- an explosive whip-like full body intense action). Targets are the opponents eyes, elbows, wrists, fingers, shoulders, ribs, collar bone -- anything that can be injured with emphasis joint injury, dislocations, strains and breaking. It reminded me of Hawaiian Lua. Breaks are less emphasized in Okinawan karate kata. In Goju-Ryu kata breaks are more numerous, but they can also be found disguised within Shorin-Ryu kata.

Unfortunately, most modern karate, especially sports karate prohibit, these techniques as dangerous -- thus cutting off the depth of old Okinawan karate. But Sifu Liu brings many of them alive again. I recognized many of the techniques. They jumped out at me from my own kata -- that old knowledge lost to most modern karate practitioners.

In Feeding Crane there are also powerful counter strikes using every part of the body, such the fist, elbow, forearm, shoulders, waist, one following the other in staccato fashion. They are aimed at weak points on the body. Attacking techniques to these areas often use "Short Power" and "Shaking Power," combined with body dropping or rising. These last two components of power have been largely bleached out of modern kata performance.

Kicks and knee techniques are also part of Feeding Crane's arsenal, all low and powerful aimed at vulnerable targets (vital points). They include foot stomps and pins, short front kicks and low leg round kicks, and knees to the inside of the legs and drop knees to the top of the thigh. There are no high kicks, spinning or other fancy kicks.

In Feeding Crane a flurry of weapons, such as fists, elbows, foot techniques and knees, are often combined in quick succession. A punch can be followed by an elbow or forearm, followed by a same side shoulder strike with foot stomp, or knee added, culminating in a dislocation or break after the opponent is controlled and his center taken over. Similar combinations are the hallmark of traditional

Okinawan karate kata but are little understood.

Feeding Crane does not use fragile parts of the body such as finger tips and toes for striking. In this respect it differs from Okinawan karate which utilizes finger thrusts and toe (usually the big and second toe) kicking techniques. Sifu Liu states, "It is unfortunate if you get injured by your opponent in a fight, but more importantly you should avoid injuring yourself."

This prohibition also extends to what is known in karate as "keiko," or the "Chicken beak hand" -- striking with the finger tips clenched together, fingers extended, wrist bent. Most karate practitioners associate this weapon hand with White Crane, and many Okinawan karate masters practiced it. But in Feeding Crane it is not used. Instead, Sifu Liu uses the bent wrist for blocking (a block known as koken in karate).

This bent wrist open hand position is also used for capture and control. It is found in the arm posture, "Crane Hand," also associated with White Crane. It is seen Goju-Ryu, Uechi-Ryu and other karate kata and is thought to be some kind of block -- two arms positioned vertically in front to each side of the body, wrists bent, hands open and fingers bent downward. In Feeding Crane one application for this position is for defense against a two arm chest shove or grab -- your bent wrists angled inward or outward and draped over the attacker's arms to control or off balance.

## **Learning To Control**

Feeding Crane teaches a practitioner through applications how to control an opponent's arms, legs and balance. It also teaches the ability to sense and control an opponent's center. This is developed through push hands, a practice method most people know through Tai Chi.

Feeding Crane also adds a two arm variety where opponents face each other using their hands and arms to push, pull, off balance and throw an opponent. It resembles a type of standing wrestling or judo where two people grab each other and tussle and fight to control the other. A similar practice is also found in some styles of Chen Tail Chi. These exercises are largely missing from modern day karate, although a variation of single hand push hands known as kakie is found in Goju-Ryu Karate and some styles of Shorin Ryu karate. A similar of type body control is an integral part of muay thai (Thai boxing) used to create openings for close range knee kicks and elbows to the head. In terms of control antecedent parallels might be made with early sumo, or Mongolian wrestling.

Within karate kata, however, pulling, pushing, body control and off balancing techniques are very prevalent. Added to this mix are jujutsu-like arms and body manipulations, known as Chin Na in the Chinese arts. But in Feeding Crane Chin Na is secondary. Sifu Liu told me that, "We don't include this in basic practice, but we teach a little in advanced practice. We don't, however, stress this type grabbing and body manipulation." In Feeding Crane, one does not try to control an opponent through pain compliance or by locking them up. Instead, joints are targeted for quick breaking or dislocation, to incapacitate the opponent as quickly as possible.

## **How The System Is Practiced**

The system of Feeding Crane is practiced through basics, two person drills, and kata (21 forms). The second kata in the system is Sam Chien, or San Chin (three battles), a well known karate kata's name, but one that differs in many respects from its counterpart in Goju and Uechi Ryu as well as other Naha Te influenced styles like Seido Karate, Kyokushinkai and others. The total curriculum is complex, including Chi Kung (Qigong or internal energy work and development), body hardening, herbal medicine and other traditional practices.

When you finish practicing Feeding Crane your body feels different than after karate, taekwondo or boxing. With these arts you feel it in your muscles, but Feeding Crane is different: you feel it in your tendons and ligaments. I had a similar experience after training in some other forms of kung fu as well as a few old school forms of karate, such as those of Hohan Soken and old style body dynamics of Shorin-Ryu karate.

At the end of my training with Sifu Liu I ask Fred Lohse (a well known Goju-Ryu teacher from Boston who had studied extensively with Sifu Liu Chang I for several years) how he would characterize Sifu's Feeding Crane. Lohse replied, "It is blunt force trauma to your opponent using your body's most sturdy parts." Well said.

## **Thunder Leads Sifu Liu To The US & Europe**

If it hadn't been for "thunder," Sifu and his style might never have reached the US and Europe. Sifu told me that Kimo Wall (a famous US Goju-Ryu practitioner) while visiting Taiwan had sought his father out to find thunder. His father had passed away, however, but Sifu offered to demonstrate his kata. "When he first heard it," said Sifu "he was quiet, almost dumb struck." Kimo then told Sifu that he had been told by his Goju Ryu teachers that Miyagi Sensei (founder of Goju-Ryu karate) and other old Okinawan masters had exhibited that same sound. But after years of fruitless searching for someone with this ability on Okinawa, he had just assumed "thunder" was just another romantic story.

Kimo Wall himself added a little detail. As a child he studied Goju-Ryu in Hawaii with several teachers who had studied with Miyagi

on Okinawa. Later he lived on Okinawa (stationed as a Marine) training under the Goju masters Higa Seiko and Touguchi Seiicki (both senior students of Miyagi) who went on to found their own Goju Ryu organizations.

"A number of the old Okinawan karate masters including Miyagi were known to have thunder," said Wall. He related that he was told that in the past several Okinawan karate students had traveled to Taiwan and elsewhere trying to gain this knowledge. "I had heard of Sifu Chang I's father, Liu Yin Shan, and sought him out. But I was told he had passed away, but his son offered to show me his art. I was so impressed that I convinced Sifu Liu to come to the US with me to teach seminars." For several years Kimo conducted these seminars with Sifu Liu around the US. More recently Sifu has continued to teach seminars across the US.

Fred Lohse (a student of Sifu and Goju Ryu teacher) told me a funny anecdote about Sifu Liu Chang's "thunder." A few years back a well known martial arts production company made a high quality video and sound recording of Sifu Liu's technique and kata for a DVD of his Feeding Crane. But repeatedly during recording the sound equipment kept registering unexplained sounds, something that was attributed to technical problems. Numerous adjustments and fixes, however, didn't seem to rectify the situation. Finally things were explained when technicians were told those extra sounds were the "thunder" associated with much of Sifu Liu's technique.

## Final Comments

It was almost a year ago when I last saw Sifu. In one of our last conversations he commented on the loss of so much of ancient kung fu knowledge. "As to Feeding Crane," he said, "I am the only one left, as far as I know, besides my younger brother, teaching my art. I am the last direct descendant, father to son, father to son until it came to me. I am afraid it is going to get lost. That is why I am teaching you and others in the US and elsewhere: to preserve my art, my tradition, its knowledge and the old way."

I have been practicing Sifu's "short power" exercises for almost a year now. At last I am beginning to feel the snap-back of my muscles and I think I hear, ever so softly, the "kaplunk," the beginning of my own thunder emerging from my body. I will be seeing Sifu again soon in New York and hope to continue my progress.

## Acknowledgements:

I want to thank Sifu Liu Chang'I for his hospitality and openness in discussing and demonstrating his art. He is a true gentleman, humble and open. I also want to thank Michael Calandra Sensei (Isshin-Ryu Karate) from New York and Fred Lohse Sensei (Goju-Ryu) from Boston who are experienced students of Sifu and who annually have hosted his seminars. They were kind enough to give advice and suggestions on this article.

## Footnotes:

- 1- Unfortunately most sport orientated karate (as well as Taekwondo and Kung Fu) today prohibits grabs and body control technique. Free fighting thus conflicts with the principles of kata -- it stresses movement, evasions and avoidance to control space (not interception to control the attack and the opponent).
- 2- Rigidly defined stances with specific names are a by-product of the Japanization of karate, a culture's standardization imprinted on the adopted art. On Okinawa old teachers often told me that in the old days teachers would show a student and say "stand like this." Stances were not so precise, but fitted the need and the individual. The Japanese process of standardization also worked to change kata. Movements that looked approximately the same, but may have served different functions, were modified to fit the same pattern and then named. What is now called an upper block could have been in its kata context something very different and also performed differently.
- 3- Very similar open hand intercepting arm techniques are also found in older Okinawan versions of Shorin-Ryu kata, such as Rohai, Shinto, Gojushiho and Passai. Goju and Uechi Ryu karate exhibit similar open hand intercepting techniques, but so does the karate taught by Hohan Soken Sensei. See footnote 4. Soken also taught these open hand interception techniques as part of his tuidi (a separate class of grappling and body manipulation techniques which are separate from kata).
- 4- Lua is best known for its brutal attacks and bone/joint breaking that renders the opponent's body totally destroyed and disjointed.
- 5- Breaking techniques are definitely found in most of Okinawan karate. They are definitely found in Isshin-Ryu karate and its kata, says Sensei Michael Calandra (a NY area senior Isshin-Ryu teacher). In the Goju-Ryu curriculum there are many examples. In kata, such as, seipai, seiyunchin, sanseru, kururunfa and suparinpei include body breaking techniques. They are more disguised in Shorin-Ryu kata, such as gojushiho (korogojushiho), wanshu, passi, chinto and others. Breaking is also found in the more basic pinan or heian kata, especially pinan three, four and five. But as a group Okinawan kata seem to put less emphasis on breaking joints and body segments than Feeding Crane. Shorin-Ryu kata seem to give more emphasis than Feeding Crane body and head control techniques (jujutsu-like techniques), takedown and throws.
- 6- Dropping the body or rising power were often components of old Okinawan karate. The Pinan kata, for example, created in the early 1900s by Anko Itosu for teaching karate kata in the Okinawan school system, employed these principles. While some systems still employ rising and dropping power, Japanese karate often stress keeping movement on a plain so as not to drop or rise.
- 7- This is not to say that Okinawans did not know how to unbalance and control a grappling opponent. In almost every village and towns, however, boys and young men on Okinawa practiced in stand-up grappling contests known as Tegumi. In fact, Okinawan sumo arose from tegumi. In Charles C. Goodin's article on FightingArts.com entitled "Karate and Okinawan Sumo" he writes that tegumi, "when practiced for self-defense, and with the addition of the Chinese techniques of striking (particularly vital point and nerve attacks known as kyosho jutsu), blocking and kicking, tegumi became karate. In fact, the characters for the old name "karate" or "tote," meant "China" (for the Chinese arts) and "Hand" (for "tegumi") .

8- White Eyebrow kung fu is characterized by its fast whipping movements (and non- generation of power from the hips). Somewhat similar to this feeling is found in some forms of old Shorin Ryu karate, such as Hohan Soken's technique.

9- Many Uechi Ryu karate techniques also resembled those in White Crane. White Crane Kung Fu influenced the evolution of Miyagi's Goju Ryu karate. Miyagi also practiced with a White Crane exponent, Go Kenki, after the death of his primary teacher, Higaonna, in 1915. White Crane technique and kata were also an integral part of the karate taught by Hohan Soken sensei. See footnote 4.

10- These arts use a type of circular, external generated power driven from the legs, up through the rotated hips, abdomen, and shoulders, each segment rotated as a whole to extend power and speed to target. Various karate books often depicting each segment as a fixed rotational whole. The method can be powerful, but is very different from methods as used in Feeding Crane that utilize fluid movements within body segments to produce a whipping power.

11- Soken was a great Okinawan karate master who taught White Crane as part of his karate and who also exhibited a type of "Shaking Power." I see it in his students, including my aikido teacher, Roy Suenaka Sensei, who still teaches Soken's karate (Seito Matsumura Shorin-Ryu) in Charleston, SC. Soken traced his White Crane heritage back through his uncle to Bushi Matsumura (a diplomat and body guard to the king of Okinawa) who was a well spring of much of modern Shorin-Ryu karate. If this lineage is correct much of Shorin-Ryu karate was at least influenced by White Crane. Other Shorin-Ryu masters also exhibited similar "Shaking Power," especially, among masters from Tomari (an Okinawan seaport near the old capital). One such person is Siegi Nakamura a senior teacher from Tomari who taught in Shoshin Nagamine's Matsubayashi headquarters dojo on Okinawa. He also trained with Hohan Soken. See footnote 3. Kishaba Juku Shorin-Ryu Karate on Okinawa have attempted to develop the old ways of body dynamics into a teaching curriculum. Other's from Okinawa also use this power method including some Goju-Ryu exponents associated with the Jundokan organizations. My research also suggests that Kenwa Mabuni (founder of Shito-Ryu and early pinoneer of Japanese karate) also ulitized this type of power generation.

#### **About The Author:**

Christopher Caile is the Founder and Editor-In-Chief of FightingArts.com. He has been a student of the martial arts for over 50 years. He first started in judo. Then he added karate as a student of Phil Koeppel in 1959. Caile introduced karate to Finland in 1960 and then hitch-hiked eastward traveling through over 50 countries. Ending up in Japan (1961) he studied under Mas Oyama and later in the US became a Kyokushinkai Branch Chief. In 1976 he followed Kaicho Tadashi Nakamura when he formed Seido karate and is now a 7th degree black belt in that organization's honbu dojo. Other experience includes aikido, diato-ryu aikijujutsu, kenjutsu, kobudo, Shinto Muso-ryu jodo, kobudo, boxing and several Chinese fighting arts including Praying Mantis, Pak Mei (White Eyebrow) and shuai chiao. He is also a student of Zen. A long-term student of one branch of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Qigong, he is a personal disciple of the Qigong master and teacher of acupuncture Dr. Zaiwen Shen (M.D., Ph.D.). He holds an M.A. in International Relations from American University in Washington D.C. and has traveled extensively through South and Southeast Asia. He frequently returns to Japan and Okinawa to continue his studies in the martial arts, their history and tradition. Caile is the author of over 500 articles on martial arts and its history, Japanese art and Chinese medicine. He also edited several books on karate and Zen, contributed chapters on Qigong to books on alternative medicine, and served as a contributing writer to the Holistic Health Journal. In his professional life he has been a businessman, newspaper journalist, inventor and entrepreneur.