

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: NEW YORK UP CLOSE; Crouching but Not Hidden, Kung Fu Master in Hit Film

By EUN LEE KOH (NYT) 505 words

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Call him Master, but please, do not call him a movie star.

Gao Xian is the actor and martial arts expert picked by the director Ang Lee to train the stars of "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," a film just nominated for 10 Academy Awards, including best picture. He was the one who breathed deftness and grace into the actors' kicks and jumps. Not that Mr. Gao, by all accounts a modest man, would ever say this himself, or mention that he also appeared in the film, as Bo, a guard.

Mr. Gao, 42, fell in love with kung fu at the age of 7, and has taught that martial art for more than 20 years in China and the United States. He has several national and international titles and has starred in more than 30 martial arts movies in China.

Mr. Gao, who lives with his wife and daughter in Port Jefferson Station on Long Island, has taught kung fu at his three schools -- at 133-09 41st Road in Flushing, 43 White Street in Chinatown and in Port Jefferson Station -- without much fanfare for the last five years. To his 200 students, he is Master Gao, not Mr. Hollywood.

In fact, he is so modest about his role in "Crouching Tiger" that many of his students did not know he was in the film until they saw the movie.

"I actually didn't say very much about the film at first because I thought my scenes could get cut out," he said, laughing. "But really, I am not a star in any sense of the word."

Oscar Carrion, a 25-year-old student, thinks highly of his teacher nonetheless.

"He is authentic, the real thing," Mr. Carrion said. "You are not going to get anyone who is as real in both skill and spirit as he is."

For Mr. Gao, films like "Crouching Tiger" are just a way of promoting the sport he loves.

"Kung fu is not just a sport," he said. "It's art, and it tells you so much about Chinese culture. People will learn about Chinese culture because of this movie."

Since the release of the film, Mr. Gao said students have been showing up at his schools, all known as Gao's Kung Fu Academy, in droves, which has led him to start searching for a bigger space.

"To me, kung fu is a connection of mind and body," Mr. Gao said last week as he conducted a lesson in his small Flushing studio. "It maintains health, builds self-esteem and confidence. I want my students to have that." EUN LEE KOH

Photos: Gao Xian in "Crouching Tiger," top, and in the studio. (Richard Lee for The New York Times); (Sony Pictures Classics)