



Flying high: Roe practises every day on his own. — Photos courtesy of Augustus John Roe

English teacher fighting to learn

By Lê Hồng

Traditional Vietnamese martial arts can reveal more about local history, culture and language to foreigners daring enough to try them.

Augustus John Roe, from Brighton, the UK, is certainly daring.

Over the past nine years, he has lived in Viet Nam, fathered two daughters in his happy family, found a stable job as an English teacher at an international school in Hanoi and gathered a comprehensive stock of knowledge on Vietnamese martial arts and culture. Roe first came to the country in 2010 to visit a friend, who worked as an English teacher and practised Tai Chi. He started to study, too.

Roe has tried various styles of Vietnamese martial arts over the years, including vovinam, Binh Ninh regional martial arts, traditional wrestling, Nhát Nam style, Nam Hong Sơn style and Seven Mountains region martial arts.

"They all have interesting and unique aspects but my favourite style has to be the one I learnt from my master - a Buddhist martial art from the Seven Mountains region in An Giang Province called Bôu Sơn Phái Môn Quyền which translates as 'Dharma Mountain Martial Arts'," he told *Viet Nam News*.

"I trained intensively with my teacher for six years, before he moved with his family to the USA, so now I continue to train and teach on my own."

While learning different styles of martial arts, Roe realised that although numerous and varied, there was very little information about them available, and



Toe to toe: Roe (left) spars with a student of traditional Vietnamese Wing Chun.

virtually nothing in English.

He decided to compile a book, *The Martial Arts of Vietnam - An Overview of the History and Style*, which took him nearly two years to finish.

The main difficulty he faced when writing the book was during the initial research phase was the lack of English materials on the subject. Often he would have just the name of a village or person, then he would go there and ask around until someone could point him in the right direction.

The book looks at Vietnamese styles based on three regions, the north, central and southern region.

"Historically, there have been lots of different influences in each region so the diversity in practices from location to location is very interesting," he said.

Roe found that Vietnamese martial arts are unique for several reasons.

"Firstly the environment has played a big role in their development, due to aspects like the mountainous terrain and thick forests, movements often appear less-linear than in other styles of Chinese or Japanese martial arts," he said.

"Secondly, the physicality of the practitioners has been an important fac-

tor. Vietnamese styles are often very dynamic with a lot of high jumps and low stances. This makes things more difficult for practitioners like me who have a weight advantage but don't have the speed of a smaller body-type.

"Finally, the cultural and historical aspects of Vietnamese martial arts are different - patriotism and religious aspects all combine to create a unique martial culture," he said.

Roe drew the lessons based on his experience practising various martial arts such as judo and taekwondo at a young age.

Then at university he continued with some Chinese styles of kung fu.

Roe said he practises every day on his own, teaches self-defence classes for young women and regularly joins competitions and sparring exchanges to keep his skills sharp.

"One of the most important things I have learnt through studying martial arts is patience," he said. "I used to be quite short-tempered when I was young, so learning to be calm and collected was a challenge for me at first. Other important aspects include dedication, focus and just learning to stay healthy and in good

shape."

Roe said he loves living in Hanoi, but the pollution and disregard for the environment are problems.

"Although things are improving at a tremendous speed and with many new programmes focused on the environment, I hope this is something that can be implemented on a society-wide scale," he said.

Vietnamese nature is one of his favourite aspects of the country, followed closely by the coffee culture.

"I love nothing more than being in the mountains or the countryside on a sunny day," he said. "I am also very interested in the history of Viet Nam - particularly the warrior spirit - that remains strong and permeates many aspects of Vietnamese culture today."

Roe said he hopes to continue his training in Vietnamese martial arts and keep spreading the practices.

"I am also going to release an action-adventure novel called *Where Tigers Roam*," he said.

"It is set in the border-highlands of Viet Nam and China and features martial arts as an important theme of the story - hopefully, this will inspire readers too!" — VNS

UPCOMING EVENTS



Music from shy and sophisticated souls

The shy and sophisticated electro-acoustic composer Lồng Huệ Trinh will present her ethereal and vibrant music during a concert on Saturday at Hanoi Rock City.

The concert will also feature young music talents including Tiny Giant (vocal-electro), Hải Thu Hằng (zither), Nguyễn Thuý Dung (zither), and Jet Ilagan (sound artist), who will take the audience on a journey with rich, interesting sounds that will expand your imagination.

The concert will start at 9pm at Hanoi Rock City, 27/52 Tô Ngọc Vân Street, Tây Hồ District. Ticket at door is VNĐ70,000.

Sweden's Gustaf Sjukvist Choir in Hanoi

One of the best chamber choirs in Sweden – the Gustaf Sjukvist, will put on a special performance at Hanoi's Cờ Bạc Church next Tuesday.

Founded in 1994 in Stockholm, Gustaf Sjukvist Chamber Choir (GSKK) is an independent choir consisting of 33 singers. Known for its sound, which is described as typical "Nordic", the choir has since been a significant part of Swedish musical life. The choir is devoted to contemporary music and has over the years built up a wide repertoire in this field. Their repertoire features not only works by famous classic composers such as Bach, Mozart and Brahms, but also folk music and jazz. The choir's maestro Gustaf Sjukvist passed away in 2015, and from 2018 Florian Benfer is the artistic leader. The ensemble has made several tours in Scandinavia, Europe, Africa, North America and Asia.

FVH workshop gets crafty

The Friends of Vietnam Heritage (FVH) will host a craft-making workshop on Sunday.

Vietnamese people have long made wall and door decorations from paper for special events, including the *Tết* holiday. Workshop participants will be guided on how to make New Year decorations for doors, windows, walls and tables, combining different patterns such as flowers, leaves and animals using kirigami.

Kirigami is the Japanese art of paper cutting, a variation of origami, which is favoured by many people around the world. Kirigami includes cutting the paper rather than just folding, and utilises different techniques.

The workshop will take place at *Tôi Chim Xanh* (Bluebirds' Nest Book Cafe), No 13, Alley 19, Ngang Dung Street, Ba Đình District, Hanoi, from 1:30 to 4:30pm. The cost will be VNĐ250,000 for each adult and VNĐ100,000 for each child under 15. The maximum number of participants is 15. RSVP can be made via email at phuonganhnguyen15@gmail.com.

The instructor is an elderly maths teacher who is skilled in the art of paper cutting and traditional crafts. He will instruct in Vietnamese, and English translation will be provided.

Saxophonist Katsura Yamauchi to perform

Saxophonist Katsura Yamauchi will perform from 6pm to 8pm on March 16 at Salon Saigon on 6d Ngõ Thôi Nhiêm Street in HCM City's District 3.

Katsura picked up his first saxophone in the early 1970s and was quickly drawn to modern jazz, avant-garde and free improvisation.

Before 2003, he was relatively unknown, but has now shown himself to be one of the most unique musicians in Japan.

He has toured the US and Europe, and performed at many festivals such as Musique Innovatrices 2005, Castello Canalis 2007, Beppu Contemporary Art Festival 2008, Ftarri Festival 2008, Amplify Festival 2008 and Asian Meeting Festival 2009.

Tickets are from VNĐ200,000 to VNĐ300,000. — VNS



Expats Corner is a space where expats can share their experiences of Viet Nam or events for the calendar and reach out to one another in the thriving expat community, so please email your stories or listings to life@vnsmail.com by Wednesday. The stories will run every Thursday.