

## Bruce Lee's Combat in a Nutshell: an analysis of the strategic contributions of his edited works

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### Abstract

This research examines Bruce Lee's martial arts philosophy, with a particular focus on his unique approach to jeet kune do, to address the scientific rigour gap in the analysis of his martial arts methodology. The study adopts a case study research strategy and employs content analysis using MaxQDA v.11 software. A selection of Lee's official literature, prioritising unchanged writings and those reflecting his direct thought, forms the research sample. The key findings highlight Lee's development of five ways of attacking, demonstrating an intricate knowledge of timing, distance, and rhythm. His emphasis on adaptability in combat emphasises the dynamic interplay between offensive and defensive manoeuvres. Lee's preference for parrying over blocking, his focus on evasion, and strategic concepts such as seven stars and three fronts emphasise the importance of protecting vital body areas. In summary, Bruce Lee's martial arts philosophy is characterised by adaptability, strategic decision-making, and efficient technique execution. His approach, constantly evolving and rejecting preconceived combat outcomes, is underpinned by principles of simplicity, economy, fluidity, and spontaneity. This comprehensive system integrates both offensive and defensive strategies, reflecting his commitment to refining the martial arts into a practical and responsive discipline.

**Keywords:** Martial arts; combat sports; Bruce Lee; combat; decision making; strategy.

### El combate de Bruce Lee en pocas palabras: análisis de sus aportaciones a la estrategia a través de sus obras

#### Resumen

Esta investigación examina la filosofía de las artes marciales de Bruce Lee, con un enfoque particular en su método único de jeet kune do, para abordar el vacío de rigor científico en el análisis de su metodología marcial. El estudio adopta una estrategia de estudio de caso y emplea el análisis de contenido utilizando el software MaxQDA v.11. Una selección de la literatura oficial de Lee, priorizando escritos inalterados y aquellos que reflejan su pensamiento directo, conforman la muestra de investigación. Los hallazgos principales destacan el desarrollo por parte de Lee de las cinco vías de ataque, demostrando un complejo conocimiento del tiempo, la distancia y el ritmo. Su énfasis en la adaptabilidad en combate resalta la interacción dinámica entre maniobras ofensivas y defensivas. La preferencia de Lee por la parada sobre el bloqueo, su enfoque en la esquiva y conceptos estratégicos como las siete estrellas y los tres frentes subrayan la importancia de proteger las áreas vitales del

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#### Resumo

Esta pesquisa examina a filosofia das artes marciais de Bruce Lee, com um foco particular no seu método único de jeet kune do, para abordar a lacuna de rigor científico na análise da sua metodologia marcial. O estudo adota uma estratégia de estudo de caso e utiliza a análise de conteúdo com o software MaxQDA v.11. Uma seleção da literatura oficial de Lee, priorizando escritos inalterados e aqueles que refletem o seu pensamento direto, compõem a amostra da pesquisa. Os principais achados destacam o desenvolvimento por Lee das cinco vias de ataque, demonstrando um conhecimento complexo do tempo, da distância e do ritmo. A sua ênfase na adaptabilidade em combate destaca a interação dinâmica entre manobras ofensivas e defensivas. A preferência de Lee pela interceptação em vez do bloqueio, o seu foco na esquiva e nos conceitos estratégicos como as sete estrelas e as três frentes sublinham a importância de proteger as áreas vitais do corpo. Em resumo, a filosofia das artes marciais

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cuerpo. En resumen, la filosofía de las artes marciales de Bruce Lee se caracteriza por la adaptabilidad, la toma de decisiones estratégicas y la ejecución técnica eficiente. Su enfoque, en constante evolución y rechazando resultados de combate preconcebidos, se sustenta en principios de simplicidad, economía, fluidez y espontaneidad. Este complejo sistema integra estrategias ofensivas y defensivas, reflejando su compromiso con el refinamiento de las artes marciales en una disciplina práctica y reactiva.

**Palabras clave:** Artes marciales; deportes de combate; Bruce Lee; combate; toma de decisiones; estrategia.

de Bruce Lee é caracterizada pela sua adaptabilidade, tomada de decisões estratégicas e execução técnica eficiente. O seu enfoque, constantemente evoluindo e rejeitando resultados de combate preconcebidos, baseia-se em princípios de simplicidade, economia, fluidez e espontaneidade. Este sistema complexo integra estratégias ofensivas e defensivas, refletindo o seu compromisso com o aperfeiçoamento das artes marciais numa disciplina prática e reativa.

**Palavras-chave:** Artes marciais; desportos de combate; Bruce Lee; combate; tomada de decisões; estratégia.

## 1. Introduction

Bruce Lee is widely regarded as one of the most significant and recognisable figures in martial arts and action cinema. His legacy extends beyond cultural and temporal boundaries, inspiring countless individuals worldwide (Guo et al., 2017; Little, 1999). However, in addition to his renown as a martial artist and actor, Bruce Lee served as an intellectual, philosopher, and trailblazer in developing his martial arts philosophy: jeet kune do – JKD (Lee, 2011).

JKD is the product of Bruce Lee's individual quest for efficient and unbridled combat expression. It is not a rigid, fixed style (not even a style in the strictest sense), but a fluid and adaptable concept founded on the principles of simplicity, movement economy and spontaneity. The influence of Japanese martial arts and western science on their kung fu is notable, integrating elements from different backgrounds and disciplines (Guo et al., 2017). JKD is not limited to a single discipline or source of knowledge, but integrates elements from various martial arts such as wing chun, western boxing, fencing, judo, or taekwondo, as well as other sciences and philosophies such as biomechanics, psychology, or Taoism (Jennings, 2019).

The objective of JKD is to foster each practitioner's ability to acclimate to any combat scenario while disregarding rules, patterns, or traditions. To this end, Bruce Lee proposed a series of strategic concepts that guide decision making in combat, such as distance, timing, or angle, which in turn coincide with those that have come to be considered interesting in the state of the art in the study of combat activities (Borysiuk & Cynarski, 2009; Estevan et al., 2013; Falcó Pérez et al., 2013; Fernandes et al., 2011; Hristovski et al., 2006; Martínez de Quel et al., 2011).

However, despite the historical importance and originality of JKD as a fighting method, there is a lack of academic studies that analyse it from a scientific and rigorous perspective. Furthermore, recent studies have analysed how Bruce Lee's ideas align with theories in the acquisition of movement skills, highlighting his adaptive approach (Myszka et al., 2023). However, this approach has been subject to further criticism and analysis, which questions some of the assumptions of ecological dynamics in the acquisition of martial arts skills (Collins et al., 2023). The scholarly literature has examined Bruce Lee's impact on human self-improvement, his portrayal as an exceptional athlete (Hurley, 2021), his influence on world literature, and his role as a cultural bridge (Chang, 2022). Most studies on Bruce Lee and JKD focus on biographical, anecdotal, or technical elements (Bowman, 2010, 2011, 2013; Chiao, 1981; Hu, 2008; Ongiri, 2002; Pobratyn et al., 2017; Prashad, 2003; Shu, 2003), but only a few, such as the work of Rodríguez-Sánchez (2019), elaborate on the conceptual and strategic contributions of such a method.

Therefore, this research aims to contribute to the scientific knowledge of JKD as a fighting method through the content analysis of Bruce Lee's written and audiovisual works. The aim is to identify and describe the strategic concepts Bruce Lee proposed about fighting and to highlight these contributions in relation to the current framework of study of the phenomenon of fighting.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research design

From the constructivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), the case study was chosen as the research strategy (Creswell, 2007, p. 73; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This paradigm assumes that reality is constructed through social interaction and that knowledge is generated through this interaction,



thus emphasising the importance of context. In particular, an instrumental case study, that is, “the researcher focuses on an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue” (Creswell, 2007, p. 74) was conducted, as Bruce Lee’s career and contributions to martial arts and combat make him a particularly relevant case for studying this concept.

## 2.2. Sample

The present research uses a purposive sampling method based on the identification of works that most accurately encapsulate Bruce Lee’s thought. The inclusion criterion was that the primary sources faithfully reflect the ideas conveyed by Lee without any alteration. It is important to note that the documents analysed are primarily in English, the language Bruce Lee often used in his writings.

Under this premise, the works of the writer John Little, a biographer authorised by both Linda Lee-Cadwell (Bruce Lee’s wife) and Adrian Marshall (Bruce Lee’s legal representative), are of particular importance. This is because Little was one of the few people who had direct access to Bruce Lee’s original notes and personal library. It is also important to mention other important works such as *Chinese Gung Fu: The Philosophical Art of Self-Defense* (Lee, 2008), published during Lee’s lifetime, and *Tao of Jeet Kune Do* (Lee, 2011), a work compiled by his wife Linda Lee-Cadwell and editor Gilbert Johnson. Table 1 details the coding of the units of analysis, both primary and complementary, used in this study.

**Table 1.** Coding of the main and complementary units of analysis.

Code	Main Analysis Units
CGF	Lee, B., 2008. <i>Chinese Gung Fu: The philosophical art of self-defense</i> , 4th ed. Black Belt Books, Burbank, CA, USA.
ToGF	Little, J.R. (Ed.), 1997. <i>The Tao of Gung Fu: A study in the way of Chinese martial art</i> , The Bruce Lee library. Tuttle Publishing, Boston, MA, USA.
BLFM	Lee, B., Uyehara, M., 2008. <i>Bruce Lee's Fighting Method: The complete edition</i> . Black Belt Books, Valencia, CA, USA.
ToJKD	Lee, B., 2011. <i>Tao of Jeet Kune Do: New expanded edition</i> . Black Belt Books, Valencia, CA, USA.
CotMW	Little, J.R. (Ed.), 1997. <i>Jeet Kune Do: Bruce Lee's commentaries on the martial way</i> , The Bruce Lee library. Tuttle Publishing, Boston, MA, USA.
Code	Complementary analysis units
BB_1967_5_10	Pollard, M., 1967. Is the Green Hornet’s version of gung-fu genuine? <i>Black Belt Magazine</i> 5, 14–18.
BB_1968_6_1	Lee, B., 1968. Bruce Lee talks back. <i>Black Belt Magazine</i> 6, 23–25.
BB_1968_6_2	Lee, B., 1968. By the way. <i>Black Belt Magazine</i> 6, 63.
WfaM	Little, J.R. (Ed.), 1999. <i>Bruce Lee: Words from a master</i> , The Bruce Lee library. Contemporary Books, Lincolnwood, IL, USA.
WotD	Little, J.R. (Ed.), 1997. <i>Words of the dragon: Interviews 1958-1973</i> , The Bruce Lee Library. Tuttle Publishing, Boston, MA, USA.
LotD	Little, J.R. (Ed.), 1998. <i>Letters of the dragon: An anthology of Bruce Lee's correspondence with family, friends, and fans, 1958-1973</i> , The Bruce Lee Library. Tuttle Publishing, Boston, MA, USA.
AoEtHB	Little, J.R. (Ed.), 1998. <i>The art of expressing the human body</i> , The Bruce Lee Library. Tuttle Publishing, Boston, MA, USA.
AoL	Little, J.R. (Ed.), 1999. <i>Bruce Lee: Artist of Life</i> , The Bruce Lee library. Tuttle Publishing, Boston, MA, USA.

## 2.3. Techniques and tools

For the data collection of the sample, the documentary review technique was used, as described by Marshall and Rossman (2011). This methodology involves the collection of information from textual, audiovisual, or auditory sources, which is then subjected to a detailed analysis process.



Given the written and visual nature of the sources selected for this study (text and pictures), it was determined that conventional content analysis, as described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), was the most appropriate analysis strategy. MaxQDA software, version 11, was used to process and analyse the information collected.

#### 2.4. Procedure

This study follows a methodological approach similar to that of Rodríguez-Sánchez (2019). By adopting this established framework, this study aims to provide a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the conceptual and strategic aspects of Bruce Lee's jeet kune do. Thus, the content analysis procedure adopted in this research is based on the model proposed by Krippendorff (2004, p. 86). Furthermore, the coding and data treatment guidelines outlined by Saldaña (2016, pp. 67-68) were adopted to carry out the data analysis procedure. This author outlines a data treatment model structured in two different cycles: The first includes a lexicometric analysis to support the development of an initial or provisional coding, while the second focusses on a more targeted or final coding. Table 2 details the coding techniques used in both cycles, as described by Saldaña (2016).

**Table 2.** Coding techniques used in the cycles proposed by Saldaña (2016).

<b>First cycle techniques</b>
<i>Structural Coding:</i> Attribution of authorship of the analysed content (Bruce Lee vs. others).
<i>Attribute coding:</i> Identification of the year in which the content was written; the typology of the document is also identified.
<i>Provisional coding:</i> The coding system was developed after lexicometric analysis and prior sample scanning.
<i>Simultaneous Coding:</i> Application of several codes to the same unit of meaning.
<b>Second cycle techniques</b>
<i>Pattern Coding:</i> Grouping of codes and subcodes according to common patterns.
<i>Focused Coding:</i> Constitution of categories.

#### 2.5. Trustworthiness

With regard to the criteria of rigour for this research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four key terms (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) to define the criteria of scientific rigour typically associated with quantitative research, but here applied to qualitative research. Krefling (1991, pp. 217-221) builds on this by outlining strategies for achieving these criteria. In this study, these criteria were met through several strategies: prolonged engagement with the data, triangulation using multiple data sources, the participation of multiple researchers, and the establishment of the researcher's authority through familiarity with the phenomenon, intense interest in the subject of the study, capacity for interdisciplinary approaches and expertise in similar research. Other strategies included providing a detailed description of the research design, allowing time for rest between the first and second coding cycles, providing a comprehensive explanation of the codes and categories used, and ensuring that sample data were publicly available.

### 3. Results and discussion

#### 3.1. Data generated by content analysis

After applying the techniques of the two coding cycles proposed by Saldaña (2016), the content analysis of Bruce Lee's work identified a main code, "decision making", which refers to the decision-making process in combat. This code is composed of nine subcodes that represent different aspects or dimensions of decision making in combat, namely: "strategy\_general", "strategy\_attack", "strategy\_defence", "strategy\_targets", "strategy\_technique", "strategy\_stance", "strategy\_timing", "strategy\_distance", and "strategy\_mobility". Table 3 shows the operational definition of each subcode and some examples taken from the analyses. The frequency of coding of each subcode in the main and complementary works is shown in Table 4. The most frequent subcodes were "strategy\_attack", "strategy\_general", and "strategy\_technique", while the least frequent were "strategy\_time" and "strategy\_distance".



**Table 3.** Coding and subcoding system after applying the two-coding cycles technique (Saldaña, 2016) to the units of analysis.

Main code	Subcodes	Description
Decision making	Strategy_general	Strategic considerations orientated to combat that are not strictly offensive or defensive in nature.
	Strategy_attack	Strategic issues of a strongly offensive nature.
	Strategy_defence	Strategic issues of a strongly defensive nature.
	Strategy_objectives	Offensive strategic considerations related to vulnerable areas of the body.
	Strategy_technique	Strategic considerations related to the execution and techniques of combat actions.
	Strategy_stance	Strategic considerations related to the position of the upper and lower extremities to facilitate action during combat.
	Strategy_time	Factors related to the timing of the combat.
	Strategy_distance	Factors related to distance from combat.
	Strategy_mobility	Considerations related to body movement during the fight.

**Table 4.** Frequencies of subcodes found in the analysis of Bruce Lee's work.

Subcodes	Main units of analysis					Total <sub>main</sub>	CUA	Total
	CGF	ToGF	BLFM	ToJKD	CotMW			
Strategy_general	77	70	0	48	38	233	31	264
Strategy_attack	1	21	0	113	189	324	13	337
Strategy_defence	0	13	0	24	45	82	4	86
Strategy_objectives	15	9	72	4	22	122	2	124
Strategy_technique	20	19	93	57	17	206	7	213
Strategy_stance	0	12	11	14	15	52	1	53
Strategy_time	1	0	0	13	10	24	5	29
Strategy_distance	0	0	0	3	15	18	2	20
Strategy_mobility	0	6	4	18	25	53	0	53

Note. CGF = *Chinese Gung Fu: The philosophical art of self-defense*; ToGF = *The Tao of Gung Fu: A study in the way of Chinese martial art*; BLFM = *Bruce Lee's Fighting Method: The complete edition*; ToJKD = *Tao of Jeet Kune Do: New expanded edition*; CotMW = *Jeet Kune Do: Bruce Lee's commentaries on the martial way*; CUA = Complementary units of analysis.

Considering these data, it is possible to describe the main characteristics of each of the five main units of analysis:

- *Chinese Gung Fu: The Philosophical Art of Self-Defense* emphasises a broad understanding of the martial art, as evidenced by the predominance of “strategy\_general” ( $f=77$ ). Although technique and target identification are relevant components, with “strategy\_technique” ( $f=20$ ) and “strategy\_objectives” ( $f=15$ ), the book only superficially touches on offensive tactics, “strategy\_attack” ( $f=1$ ), and briefly references to time, “strategy\_time” ( $f=1$ ), highlighting a perspective that values strategy and planning over direct confrontation.
- *The Tao of Gung Fu: A Study in the Way of Chinese Martial Art* balances the general strategic considerations, “strategy\_general” ( $f=70$ ) with a focus on offensive, “strategy\_attack” ( $f=21$ ) and defensive “strategy\_defence” ( $f=13$ ), thus integrating martial theory and practice. Focusing on “strategy\_objectives” ( $f=9$ ) and “strategy\_technique” ( $f=19$ ) indicates interest in specific tactics and technical precision, although to a lesser extent than the more holistic and offensive strategies.
- In *Bruce Lee's Fighting Method: The Complete Edition*, his emphasis on the practical application of fighting techniques is highlighted by the high frequency of “strategy\_technique” ( $f=93$ ). This work also deals with the identification of critical areas of the opponent, as shown by the considerations



in the “strategy\_objectives” ( $f=72$ ). Furthermore, the attention paid to “strategy\_stance” ( $f=11$ ) emphasises the importance of adopting a correct stance, strengthening the meticulous and functional combat methodology imparted by Bruce Lee in this compendium.

- *Tao of Jeet Kune Do: New Expanded Edition* shows a clear preference for attacking with “strategy\_attack” ( $f=113$ ), highlighting the importance of controlled and strategic aggression. The emphasis on “strategy\_technique” ( $f=57$ ) and “strategy\_stance” ( $f=14$ ) emphasises the commitment to technical prowess and optimal physical positioning. Furthermore, considering “strategy\_time” ( $f=13$ ) and “strategy\_distance” ( $f=3$ ) highlights the nuanced understanding of timing and spatial management that is essential in combat.
- Finally, with a strong focus on “strategy\_mobility” ( $f=25$ ) and “strategy\_distance” ( $f=15$ ), *Jeet Kune Do: Bruce Lee’s comments on the martial way* emphasise the fluidity of movement and the importance of strategic positioning in combat. The high frequency of “strategy\_attack” ( $f=189$ ) and significant consideration of “strategy\_defence” ( $f=45$ ) and “strategy\_objectives” ( $f=22$ ) reflect a methodology that promotes a holistic fighting stance, valuing offensive initiative and defensive reactivity, and exploiting the weaknesses of the opponent.

Next, we deepen on these results and discuss our findings for the main code and the nine subcodes found in this research.

### 3.2. Decision making: Generalities

One of the aspects that Bruce Lee always emphasised was the importance of adapting to the opponent in combat, using flexibility rather than resistance. In his 1962 essay, “The Tao of Gung Fu: A Study in the Way of the Chinese Martial Art” (Little, 1999, p. 8), he explained that this is achieved by fluid, fast, and direct action, combining attack and defence, and avoiding waste of energy (Little, 1997b, p. 91). For this, it is necessary to pay attention to the reactions of the opponent: whether they prefer to hit, if they are frequently deceived by feints, etc. (Little, 1997a, p. 259). The big mistake, Bruce Lee said, is to anticipate the outcome of the fight (Lee, 2011, p. 16). This adaptability and focus on the relationship between the performer and the environment have recently been analysed from the perspective of ecological dynamics in the acquisition of movement skills, highlighting the importance of variability and adaptation in martial arts practice (Myszka et al., 2023). However, this approach has been criticised by Collins et al. (2023), who argue that certain assumptions of ecological dynamics may not be fully appropriate for understanding martial arts practice and training.

To achieve this adaptability, Bruce Lee changed his martial approach from 1965 onwards (Little, 1998, p. 44) and began to deepen the concepts of *rhythm*, *timing*, and *distance*, which Sieber et al. (2007, p. 47) emphasise as essential for fighting. He took wing chun as a base and supplemented it with what he called *five ways of attack*, which consisted of different strategies developed below (Lee, 2011, pp. 205-207): (1) *Simple Angle Attack*: A direct attack from any angle when you are sure that you are at the correct distance; (2) *Immobilisation Attack*: An attack performed after trapping an opponent’s limb, taking advantage of the space left free. Can be combined with the other types of attack; (3) *Progressive Indirect Attack*: An attack that begins with a feint to deceive or distract the opponent, followed by another offensive action; (4) *Attack by Combination*: An attack consisting of a series of varied strikes that make the opponent’s defence more difficult; and (5) *Attack by Drawing*: An attack that is executed after the opponent is lured to attack by leaving a vulnerable area in a controlled manner. It can be accompanied by any of the other attack methods and requires the mastery of the basic forms of offensive defence (*four gates*; developed in more detail below).

As already proposed by other authors, such as González de Prado (2011) in taekwondo, Kronlund (1984) in fencing, Petrov (1977) in wrestling, or Saucedo and Martínez de Quel (2000) in karate (adapted from fencing), Bruce Lee also schematised the factors involved in fighting (Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2019), as can be seen in the letter he wrote to his friend Taky Kimura in 1967 (Little, 1998, p. 100) and in the book *Jeet Kune Do: Bruce Lee’s Commentaries on the Martial Way* (Little, 1997a, p. 95). This scheme emphasises timing, distance, speed, and rhythm as key elements.

In terms of strategic options, three scenarios can be considered: *attack*, when the initiative is taken, *counterattack*, and *offensive defence*, when the opponent takes the initiative. In the case of an attack, the five ways of attack mentioned above apply, leading to three final offensive concepts:

*renewed attack, recovery, and defence.* The renewed attack is the ability to take advantage of a parried blow by the opponent to attempt another blow with the same limb that defended (Lee, 2011, p. 196). If this renewed attack is not successful, recovery (the ability to return to the original position after an unsuccessful attack) and defence (the use of other limbs to cover the space created by the unsuccessful attack) come into play. In the case of counterattack, Bruce Lee (2011) defines it as the “subtle art” of taking advantage of an opponent’s action to damage him. To do this, the opponent’s attack must be intercepted with another attack, considering timing, distance, and rhythm. Bruce Lee distinguishes three counterattacking situations: the *stop hit/thrust*, when the opponent attacks unprotected and you hit him before his blow arrives (Little, 1997b, p. 95, 1997a, p. 93); the *time hit/thrust*, which seeks to intercept the opponent’s attack with an impact that arrives before his own, is advisable to protect the target area from the opponent’s blow during the counterattack (Little, 1997b, p. 95, 1997a, pp. 93-94); and *counter-time*, when the opponent uses counterattacking as a strategy and you are tricked into counterattacking with a feint on his counterattacking attempt (Little, 1997a, p. 130). In the case of offensive defence, it is a matter of protecting the “four gates” with eight possible defensive actions, four for each arm and one in each direction (up-down-left-right). Two types of action can be derived from this offensive defence: the *yielding parry*, when one of the eight defensive actions are used and then an attack could be made; and the *riposte* (Lee, 2011, p. 194), a fencing term that consists of converting a parry into an attack, taking advantage of the space left by the opponent when he deflects or withdraws his blow (Harris, 2010).

### 3.3. Decision-making: defensive strategy

One of the defensive aspects that Bruce Lee addressed was the difference between *parries* and *blocks*. Both are moves that consist of preventing or deflecting an opponent’s blow with a body part. However, Bruce Lee preferred parries, which deflected the blow with minimal contact (Lee, 2011, p. 148) to blocks, which stopped the blow with greater resistance. According to him, blocks could cause imbalance, prevent counterattacks, and leave gaps in the guard (Lee, 2011). Another defensive aspect that Bruce Lee dealt with was *dodging*. These movements consisted of avoiding the opponent’s blow by shifting the body. These actions require a good adjustment of timing and distance and allow both hands to counterattack (Little, 1997a, p. 167). Dodging actions were common at the time when Bruce Lee incorporated elements of western boxing and fencing into his approach to fighting (Rodríguez-Sánchez, 2019).

In addition to defensive movements, Bruce Lee also explained some strategic concepts to protect against the opponent’s attacks. In the same way as Hagemann et al. (2010) reported on the determining points of the opponent where fencers fixate, Bruce Lee referred to the concept of the *seven stars*, which referred to the seven body zones that the opponent could use to strike and to which attention should be paid: hands, feet, elbows, knees, shoulders, fists, and head (Lee, 2008, p. 26). Another strategic concept was the concept of the *three fronts*, which referred to a virtual segmentation of the body at three heights (head, trunk, legs) to facilitate the identification of the opponent’s actions (Lee, 2008, p. 27; Little, 1997b, p. 49). A third strategic concept was the *theory of the centre line*, which assumed the existence of an imaginary vertical line running through the body that had to be always protected (Little, 1997b, p. 41). In January 1968, in the question-and-answer section of *Black Belt Magazine*, Bruce Lee mentioned the classical concept of the *centre line* and referred to it as the “core” (Lee, 1968a, p. 24). Furthermore, the importance of using trajectories in addition to the straight line, based on the Euclidean geometric principle that the shortest distance between two points is the straight line, began to be considered; in this sense, works such as those of Abraham et al. (2001, p. 160) or Waşık et al. (2023, p. 14) show that the front kick is executed with greater speed and has a shorter duration than the side or circular kick, supporting this principle.

Two other theories concerning the positioning and movement of the forward arm in the guard were derived from the centreline theory: the *theory of fixed elbow* and the *theory of the four gates* mentioned above. The theory of fixed elbow (Little, 1997b, pp. 43-44) stated that the forward arm elbow should be kept about three inches from the body and not below the imaginary line of the navel. This avoided gaps in the guard and made it easier for the arm to parry or strike. The theory of the four gates (Little, 1997b, pp. 44-45) suggested that the body could be divided into four regions (upper and lower, inner and outer), which could be covered by both arms through eight different defensive positions.



### 3.4. Decision-making: offensive strategy

Bruce Lee believed that in addition to using hands, it was necessary to learn to use other body parts beyond traditional fists and feet, such as the head, knees, and elbows, as well as techniques like stomping, to have more options in a fight (Little, 1999, p. 24). However, Bruce Lee felt that weapons limited the fighter's options, so he did not give them much importance in his training (Little, 1997a, pp. 22-23).

*Feints* were another strategic device that Bruce Lee used to confuse the opponent and provoke a false reaction. Feints consist of false movements that simulate a real attack and could be accompanied by gestures or body expressions to increase deception (Sieber et al., 2007, p. 47). To be effective, the feints must be deep and wide in order to create an opening in the opponent's defence that would allow for a subsequent attack (Lee, 2011, p. 143).

In a 1962 essay entitled "Teach Yourself Self-Defence" (Little, 1999, p. 23), he stated that if he had to choose, he would always attack with a kick because it has more range and power than a punch. However, he also recommended the use of low kicks to avoid imbalance and unnecessary jumps (Little, 1997b, p. 83). Regarding punches, Bruce Lee considered the vertical punch (as opposed to the classic horizontal punch with the fist parallel to the ground) crucial because it followed a straight line between two points and reached the target earlier than circular punches (Little, 1997b, p. 59). To increase the effectiveness of punches, Bruce Lee recommended relaxing the muscles and only tensing them at the moment of impact, which should be outside the target to displace it and throw it off balance (Little, 1997b, p. 61). He also used a technique called *straight blast*, which consisted of consecutive and quick punches (Little, 1997b, p. 65). This technique was useful in attacking close to the opponent and forcing him into a defensive position, creating opportunities for secondary actions.

Over time, Bruce Lee began to question the theory of the centre line and incorporate actions off the centre line with irregular rhythms. In a letter to his friend Fred Sato in 1966 (Little, 1998, p. 75) he expressed interest in exploring other strategic possibilities based on timing, distance, and cadence. He also rejected passive blocking and defended the idea that attack implies defence (Little, 1997a, pp. 65-66). To this end, he proposed using the longest distance strike on the opponent's nearest target and using feints and irregular rhythmic patterns to penetrate the opponent's defence and interrupt their rhythm of action (Little, 1997a, p. 68).

Attacks must therefore have two purposes: to penetrate the opponent's defence and to interrupt his rhythm of action (Little, 1997a, pp. 65-66), which, in turn, is the most complex and creates opportunities to hit him. To do this, Bruce Lee insisted that there are no tricks, but to perform the actions as simply as possible, avoiding the temptation to use a repertoire of "favourite punches" (Little, 1997a, p. 99).

### 3.5. Decision-making: strategic objectives

In terms of offensive action, Bruce Lee placed particular emphasis on targeting the opponent's vulnerable areas. In his essay "The Tao of Gung Fu: A Study in the Way of the Chinese Martial Art" of May 1962 (Little, 1999, p. 7), he stated that even if there are more sensitive areas to attack, they should not be the only targets of attacking actions, as this would limit and condition decision making in combat, seeking an objective to be reached but not pursued. In some collected notes, he made an inventory of sensitive areas, including the eyes, neck, jaw, solar plexus, crotch, knees, and shins (Little, 1997b, pp. 53-54). Later, he would also refine and incorporate some considerations about the use of specific zones in attacking actions. He argued that in all martial arts except western boxing, attacks on the lower body were allowed, so there were two important elements: the waist and knees. The waist did not present a high risk of attack because it had sufficient musculature to withstand blows and was easy to protect with the arms and legs. However, the knees were effective attack zones due to their structural conditions and their importance in displacement. The same principle had to be applied to the fighter's own defensive strategy. Another sensitive area was the shinbone, especially the inside, which was full of nerve endings. A blow there could be very painful or even incapacitating (Little, 1997a, p. 265). In an interview he gave to the sports section of the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* in December 1966 (Little, 1997c, p. 70), he commented that the long-distance kick to the shin should have the same importance in combat as a boxer's jab with the hand

in front of the guard. In the article, "Is 'The Green Hornet's' Version of Gung-Fu Genuine?" (Pollard, 1967, p. 14) about his kicks, "... in real gung-fu they are not high, but low, to the shin and groin". He concluded this study of sensitive strike zones with an analysis of how to strike a downed opponent (Lee, 2011). The data in these suggestions largely align with the forensic findings by Strauch et al. (2001), particularly regarding the targeting of vulnerable areas such as behind the ear and the base of the skull, areas susceptible to serious injuries like skull fractures and cerebral haemorrhages as noted in their research (p. 167). The extent of internal injuries described by these authors underscores the lethal potential of Lee's techniques, such as stomps to the knee and falling knee drops to the solar plexus, which coincide with reported severe thorax violence and neck injuries from kicks and stomps in real street fight scenarios.

### 3.6. Decision-making: strategic aspects about technique

Bruce Lee criticised the predominant role given to preceding technical sequences when discussing his understanding of the preparation and development of a fight. In his letter to Taky Kimura at the end of 1967 (Little, 1998, p. 98), he explained how technique responds to three progressive phases of learning, involving synchrony with oneself, with the opponent, and all under the conditions of the duel, with one underlying idea always: *economy of movement*. The idea of the absence of fixed and closed techniques did not mean that there were no principles to optimise the execution of actions in combat (Lee, 2011, p. 18). In a reply published in the Letters section of the *Black Belt Magazine* in February 1968, he pointed out that the best technique was one that was simple and correctly executed (Lee, 1968b, p. 63). Bruce therefore strongly recommended the systematic and planned practise of sparring with other fighters in training situations (Little, 1997b, p. 25). Technical learning therefore had to be contextualised in opposition situations as a priority: If it was worked on without regard to its function in combat, it was emptied of content and became an end in itself (Pollard, 1967, p. 19).

### 3.7. Decision-making: strategic aspects about time

Proper use of time was a key issue for Bruce Lee as he left traditional martial arts systems. In his letters and notes, he related rhythm and timing to time management in combat. His style was to concentrate on the *broken rhythm* and intercept the opponent's rhythm as efficiently as possible. He explained these concepts in a letter he wrote to Taky Kimura in February 1965 (Little, 1998, p. 43). The irregular rhythm aims at reducing the opponent's ability to perceive the actions being taken against him. Bruce Lee suggested that the speed of execution is not sufficient if it does not adapt to the rhythmic patterns of the opponent, nor does it break one's own uniform rhythmic patterns. This was expressed in another letter to Taky Kimura dated 18 April 1966 (Little, 1998, pp. 72-73). Another concept associated with rhythm was *cadence*, which allowed one to quantify the time intervals in which combat actions occurred. If it were also possible to impose one's own cadence on the opponent, a great advantage would be achieved in the development of the fight (Little, 1997a, p. 89). Timing was considered in both offensive and defensive actions. A good fighter used his timing correctly, conditioning his opponent's rhythm and anticipating his actions. Timing was also important to parry at the last moment, to discard deception, and to take advantage of the opponent's failed attacks (Little, 1997a, p. 128).

### 3.8. Decision-making: strategic aspects about distance

According to Bruce Lee, *distance* was one of the key elements in martial arts, as it determined the exposure to the opponent and the possibilities of attack and defence. In a letter he wrote to Taky Kimura in February 1965 (Little, 1998, p. 43), Bruce Lee stated that distance always depended on the exposure of the fighter's body to the opponent and that the constant changes that occurred between two fighters in a fight were aimed at increasing the chances of hitting the opponent and decreasing the chances of being hit (Lee, 2011, p. 155). To explain the concept of distance, Bruce Lee used geometrical metaphors such as the *fighting circle* (Little, 1997a, p. 132). By this concept, he meant the arc that could be traced by extending the front leg forward and moving it to the left and right: As kick is the attack action that can reach the greatest distance from a static position, the leg-traced arc is the furthest zone that striking actions can reach without any displacement. It is obvious that any opponent who penetrates this distance is susceptible to being hit, at least by a kick. This concept is



directly related to the one proposed by Parlebas (2001, p. 150), which is the minimum distance between two opponents in the initial fighting position according to the rules of the sport.

Lee also considered (but did not use) weapons in combat and how they might modify the concept of distance. Except for short weapons (such as the knife), whose function is not to increase range but to increase damage, the strategic advantage of an armed opponent over an unarmed one is to increase his combat radius, to be able to hit his opponent while remaining out of range. This necessarily implies that, in order to have sufficient skill in the use of a weapon, it is not enough to know the different types of angle of attack that can be used, but that the distance must be controlled in order to be advantageous.

As far as the explicit application of the concept of distance to combat is concerned, Bruce Lee made some recommendations on how to take advantage of distance in both offensive and defensive situations. In offensive situations, he suggested using the longest distance strike, not “telegraphing” the movement, correcting the guard position so as not to hinder the action, using constant movements with irregular rhythm, taking advantage of the opponent’s fatigue or distraction, making unexpected entries into the opponent’s fighting circle, and measuring the distance well to allow explosive penetration into the opponent’s distance (Lee, 2011, pp. 156-157). In defensive situations, he recommended making good use of displacement to stay away from the opponent; anticipating the opponent’s possible attacks and being prepared to respond; that the guard position should not restrict movement or leave vulnerable areas; and using weight tilts without displacement to avoid blows from the opponent (Lee, 2011, p. 157).

### 3.9. Decision-making: strategic aspects about stance

The *guard's stance* is the starting point for strategic decisions in combat. The guard maintains a neutrality that is broken and conditioned by the offensive and defensive actions taken from it (Avelar-Rosa & Figueiredo, 2012, p. 49). For this reason, the evolution of Bruce Lee’s comprehensive fighting paradigm also implied an evolution of the guard position.

Bruce Lee’s guard position changed throughout his study of fighting. At first, he followed the wing chun stance, based on the centre line and fixed elbow: head straight and chin low; trunk relaxed and turned inwards; waist low and centred; hips not twisted or bent; legs firm but not stiff, with weight distributed 70% (rear leg) - 30% (front leg); shoulders and elbows relaxed and low; forearm slightly bent and back arm with the hand parallel to the elbow of the other arm (Little, 1997b, pp. 39-40). The evolution of the guard position was based on adapting to the conditions of the fight and the opponent’s decisions, seeking a comfortable and offensive position through a simple, semi-flexible guard that favoured mobility, balance, and constant alertness (Little, 1997a, p. 182). The main elements of the guard are: head forward and chin protected by the shoulder; the torso turned inward, offering a smaller target and facilitating kicks; the front arm relaxed and moving, ready to attack; the back arm down and front, covering the solar plexus; the legs narrow and with weight distributed in 40% (rear leg) - 60% (front leg); the feet resting on the metatarsus and heel of the rear leg raised like a trigger (Estevan et al., 2013, p. 1818; Lee, 2011, p. 36; Little, 1997a, pp. 185-187). He considered the half-crouch to be perfect for fighting because it allowed attacking, defending, and counterattacking without preliminary movements that would reveal intentions; he defined it as a “small phasic bent knee stance” (Lee, 2011, p. 36).

### 3.10. Decision-making: strategic aspects about mobility

There are two types of movement action: *displacement* and *tilting*. Displacement is the translation of the body into space using the lower limbs. It involves a change in the position of at least one of the feet. Tilting is a change in the weight of the lower limbs without a change in the position of the feet (i.e., without translation). These actions could be an approach or an evasion, depending on whether they shortened or lengthened the distance from the opponent. Bruce Lee did not classify them as offensive or defensive, as they could have both intentions depending on the situation (Lee & Uyehara, 2008, p. 380).

In his early days and as a direct legacy of wing chun practise, Bruce Lee explained that all movements into or out of striking distance in combat should be made with short, quick steps,

accompanied by appropriate hand movements (protecting the moving centre line) to maintain the correct distance from the opponent; while maintaining a correct position of the body (Little, 1997b, pp. 49-51). He suggested that movements should start with the foot of the front leg sliding forward in the guard, about 10 inches, and then pulling the back leg, also by sliding, to achieve a final guard position equal to the initial one. The front leg had to face the opponent to defend the centre line and use the attack and defence actions effectively. Sometimes, lateral movements were necessary to maintain focus, but without leaving the genital area unprotected. To do this, Bruce Lee recommended crossing the legs: If the sidestep was to the left, the right leg was crossed to the left, and then the back leg was pulled; if it was to the right, the left leg was crossed behind to the right, and then the right leg was placed (Little, 1997b, p. 52). Later, due to changes in his understanding of combat, Bruce Lee elaborated on the importance of mobility and balance in combat. He pointed out that the function of movement was to prepare the fighter to be more efficient than his opponent in terms of mobility, to maintain distance from the opponent, and to be able to quickly attack any gap the opponent creates in his guard (Little, 1997a, p. 186). As can be deduced, distance control and the ability to make transitions from long distance to short distance were elements that Bruce Lee considered fundamental to enable these elements (Little, 1997a, p. 87). For distance control, he suggested that the fighter should always be out of the opponent's reach and in constant movement, alternating the speed and length of his own steps to prevent the opponent from identifying patterns and using them to elaborate his attacking actions (Little, 1997a, p. 190), although he stressed that this did not justify jumping around him endlessly (Little, 1997a, p. 202).

Bruce Lee considered mobility a critical aspect of the defensive facet (Lee, 2011, p. 158). He understood that the better a fighter's mobility skills were, the less effort he would have to put into using express defensive actions (such as parries) to avoid the opponent's punches and kicks, resulting in an economy of actions and energy that could be transferred to the execution of counterattacks. In addition to mobility, balance was another critical aspect in Bruce Lee's evolved conception of combat during his later years. He pointed out that mobility and balance were the fundamental bases that made it possible to advance or retreat (Lee, 2011, p. 160). Balance depended both on the correct position of the body and the centre of gravity of the body. The correct position of the body was where the joints were kept aligned and relaxed to allow greater freedom and fluidity of movement; while the centre of gravity was the point where all the body weight was concentrated and whose position varied according to the movements of the body. Finally, Bruce Lee definitively integrated tilting (he had worked on it exceptionally before) in his modifications to the way he approached combat, especially from 1965. The origin of this was the incorporation of elements from other western fighting systems, which found its most fundamental justification in boxing: This system worked very well with the orientation of the body's torso as a complementary action to the movements, especially at close range, because through subtle actions it was possible to avoid the opponent's attacks and take advantage of opportunities, as can be observed in *Tao of Jeet Kune Do: New Expanded Edition* (Lee, 2011, p. 208).

#### 4. Conclusions

An in-depth analysis of Bruce Lee's martial arts works reveals a system deeply rooted in adaptability and flexibility. His methodology, characterised by fluidity and directness, emphasises the dynamic interplay between attack and defence, eschewing preconceived notions of combat in favour of a responsive and variable approach. This philosophy aligns with the principles of ecological dynamics, which advocate variability as a critical component in the development of martial expertise. Lee's work from 1965 onwards represents a pivotal shift in his martial approach, where he delved into the intricacies of rhythm, timing, and distance, significantly expanding on the foundation laid by wing chun. The five ways of attacking that Lee developed exemplify a sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of combat that places paramount importance on timing, distance, speed, and rhythm.

Lee's strategic framework encompasses a spectrum of combat scenarios, from initiating attacks to counterattacking and defensive offence, leading to advanced concepts such as renewed attack, recovery, and defence. His nuanced view of the counter-attack as an art form that capitalises on an opponent's movements demonstrates his mastery of incorporating timing and distance into his fighting style. Furthermore, Lee's preference for parries over blocks due to their minimal contact and efficiency, along with his evasive manoeuvres and the strategic concepts of the seven stars and



the three fronts, underscores his focus on protecting critical body areas from attack. In the realm of offensive strategy, Lee's methods transcended conventional striking, advocating the use of various parts of the body and stomping techniques, emphasising the use of kicks for their superior range and power while maintaining balance and avoiding unnecessary movement.

Lee's stance and guard evolved throughout his practice, initially adhering to the principles of wing chun before transitioning to a more versatile stance that emphasised mobility and balance. His later work emphasises the importance of mobility and balance and incorporates the concept of tilting, reflecting his integration of elements from western martial systems, to enhance close combat effectiveness. This evolution of the guard from a static defensive stance to an adaptive and offensive stance exemplifies Lee's commitment to refining martial arts into a responsive and practical discipline.

As practical implications of the findings of this research, the study of Bruce Lee's martial philosophy offers valuable applications for researchers and practitioners. Firstly, adaptability and flexibility in combat, central aspects of Lee's teachings, can be applied to develop a more dynamic and responsive approach to martial practice. Strategies such as Lee's five ways of attacking provide a framework for understanding how to vary offensive techniques based on distance, rhythm, and timing. Specifically for researchers, this study highlights the need for a scientific and rigorous approach to martial arts analysis and suggests that techniques such as content analysis may be valuable for future research in this area. This research also has limitations, such as the scarcity of primary sources available on Bruce Lee and JKD, the possible loss or distortion of information in the editions of his works, and the difficulty of accessing his original notes. As future research lines, it is suggested to deepen the conceptual and strategic analysis of JKD from a scientific and rigorous perspective, using other techniques such as factor analysis or network analysis. It is also suggested to compare JKD with other martial arts or styles, both traditional and modern, to assess their similarities and differences. Such comparative studies could explore the balance Lee sought between aggression and protection and how his approach to combat problems represents a complex system where adaptability, strategic decision-making, and efficient execution of techniques are fundamental.

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