



4,000 YEARS OF HISTORY

Martial arts connect diaspora youth to their culture and community

| FRANKLIN KUO

Chinese martial arts embody tradition and resilience, serving as a symbolic force that weaves together strength, cultural heritage, and spirit during the Lunar New Year. From the mesmerizing dragon dances to the performances of martial forms, these shows are believed to bring good luck and blessings.

Contrary to what many think, kung fu doesn't just have one meaning — it has three. Besides martial arts, it also signifies possessing exceptional skills in a particular area and dedicating time to master a craft.

According to China Culture, Chinese martial arts originated over 4,000 years ago. Tradition says the Yellow Emperor, who ascended to power in 2,698 B.C., introduced the earliest fighting systems to China. Throughout the centuries, martial arts have evolved into the styles we know today through the influence of many generals and philosophers.

"Traditional kung fu is intertwined with many aspects of Chinese society, including even medicine. Many movements

follow the yin and yang to create balance and utilize the body and inner chi to make the forms," said martial arts master Yan Hong Jie, whose students refer to her as Shifu Grace. Shifu is a Chinese word that means teacher and is used often for an instructor of martial arts.

Shifu Grace co-founded Pure Shaolin Kung Fu Academy, a Chinese martial arts academy in San Mateo, with her husband in 2005. One of their overarching goals is for their students to lead proper lives and interact respectfully with others.

"The most important values and lessons I've learned from martial arts are persistence, determination, and teamwork. These impact my life because they help me push through many obstacles that would have been impossible without the determination that I have today," said Brandon Shen, a freshman at Carlmont and a student at Pure Shaolin Academy.

Shen is a part of Pure Shaolin Academy's black belt team, an elite group of around 10 students at the studio who perform at competitions and events.

The team has lots of freedom on what they want to perform because their shifus want them to be more independent. This freedom invites close collaboration between the students.

"The fact that we spend hours choreographing, training, and figuring out what to do brings our group closer together, especially since we've been training for two years together now," said Aaron Chun, another student at Pure Shaolin Academy and a junior at Carlmont.

They are working on the next big performance for a significant Chinese holiday: Lunar New Year, which is on Feb. 10, 2024.

"Our studio attends Tiger Claw, an annual event for the Lunar New Year where studios from all over the Bay Area perform each year. Having so many people come together to celebrate unites the martial arts community together," Shen said.

Many at the studio have eagerly anticipated this event, and instructors will drill the performance routine into the students through weeks of practice.

Besides the performance, the academy hosts a potluck to celebrate the beginning of spring and a new year.

"Almost a hundred families usually come, and each family brings a homemade dish. As is the custom, we share Chinese desserts and roll dumplings like one happy family," Shifu Grace said.

In essence, Chinese martial arts preserve both ancient traditions and unite individuals by giving them a shared purpose. It is also a sport or hobby that anyone can enjoy.

"What inspires me to continue martial arts is that it is fun to do, and the adrenaline rush I get before a sparring match or performance is what I enjoy most," Chun said.

What's the difference?

武术
Wushu is a newer term that generally refers to more modern martial forms.

vs.

功夫
Kung fu describes more traditional martial arts.

Photos by Alana Wacker