

Chinese Martial Arts

Many of us in the western world view the martial arts as either a basic sport or a means of self-defense. The depth of our knowledge is based on what we've seen in Hollywood films. In reality, the martial arts are varied among eastern countries, with roots that can be traced back thousands of years.

The Chinese martial arts are considered to be the most advanced and the most varied. Chinese martial arts draw inspiration and philosophies from animals, birds and reptiles. Every one of the Chinese martial arts is unique, with movements that are absolutely astonishing.

Through thousands of years of practice, the Chinese martial arts have maintained their originality and their vigor. While each one has its own distinct characteristics, they can broadly be classified into the following categories:

Wushu

These ancient and fluid martial arts forms are based on rapid jumps and kicks. This is a huge category, with literally hundreds of schools and styles. Most, however, can be arranged in several groups:

* Southern Shaolin Temple

Styles: Hung Gar, Nanquan, Wing Chun, and Choy Lay F are all examples of southern styles of Chinese martial arts. The people of the provinces south of the Yangtze River (Chang Jiang) were shorter, so the martial arts styles developed here focused mostly on upper body strength and speed.

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Northern Shaolin Temple Styles: It is believed that these styles originated in Henna, and other provinces in northern China. History holds that the northern population of China was taller, and used fluid movements, kicks and jumps to fully make use of their longer limbs. The sword and broadsword routines called Changquan, used in contemporary Wushu competitions, originate from these schools.

* External styles: This

is the style most often perceived to be synonymous with Chinese martial arts. External styles focus on agility, physical strength, stamina and explosive movements. To train for external styles requires concentration on speed, muscular power and application. During advanced training levels, these styles generally integrate their qigong aspects after the desired levels of physical hardiness have been reached. External styles include most types of Wushu, except Baguazhang, Taijiquan, Xingyiquan and Liu He Ba Fa.

* Internal or Soft Styles: Soft styles of martial arts focus

using internal elements such as energy flow and spirit to build power. These styles rely on relaxed leverage, rather than brute force. Theorists believe that differences between internal and the external styles lie in their focus on the philosophy of martial arts. Internal stylists are viewed as philosopher-fighters, spending more time on developing the soul. External schools are those that focus more on the difficult aspect of developing physical prowess.

While internal schools are based on mind, spirit and energy, they do involve physical training. In this style

of Chinese martial arts, movements and postures are slow as opposed to fast and explosive. The philosophy is to stay relaxed while involving the entire body in every motion. A martial artist practicing internal school styles will keep his or her breathing deep and controlled, and will coordinate the motions of the body to the breathing. All of this should be done while maintaining perfect balance. Baguazhang, Liuhexinyiquan, Taijiqian, Xingyiquan, Liu He Ba Fa and Yiquan are all internal styles.

Buddhist

Most

Buddhist styles were created within temples by Buddhist monks, and later taught to laymen. Buddhist styles of Chinese martial arts incorporate Buddhist philosophy, imagery, principles and numbers. Famous styles of Buddhist martial arts are White Crane, Shaolinquan, Luohanquan, Hung Gar and Wing Chun.

Daoist

Developed within Daoist temples by

Daoist ascetics, this group of Chinese martial arts utilizes Daoist principles, imagery and philosophy.

Muslim

Chaquan,

Xinyiliuhequan, and Qishiquan are examples of Muslim styles of Chinese martial arts. These were practiced by the Muslim Hui minority in China, and are based on Muslim principles and imagery.

To say that one

is a student of the martial arts is a gross understatement. It could take a lifetime of study and training to fully understand the ancient and varied areas of Chinese martial arts.