

Warriors of Light

Though some Christians denounce all forms of martial arts because of ties to Eastern religion, others use karate, tae kwon do, tai chi and jujitsu to reach seekers with the message of Christ.

Grandmaster Pui Chan, founder of the Wah Lum Kung Fu Temple, insists his Chinese martial arts school is not a religious institution—it just appears that way. The green-roofed, redbrick building set amid bamboo trees on a site in Orlando, Florida, could be mistaken for a Buddhist temple.

Two lion statues guard its entrance, and statues of Buddha and other gods perch over a main room inside. Before classes start, students bow at an incense bowl and an altar adorned with photographs of dead Chinese kung fu pioneers.

“The temple is not about religion,” Chan maintains. “I’m Buddhist, and my wife goes to Catholic Mass weekly, but we don’t teach religion here. It’s about health and fitness.”

Chan, 65, is a well-known figure in the martial arts. He immigrated to the United States in 1968 and brought with him a personal expertise in Wah Lum, a kung fu discipline that originated in China almost 400 years ago. He opened his school—the first of its kind in America—in 1980. Today he has more than 30 similar schools worldwide.

His Orlando temple is an anomaly, according to Keith Yates, a Christian martial artist whose graduate thesis at Dallas Theological Seminary examined the spiritual aspects of martial arts. Yates points out that the majority of martial arts schools are secular.

“Are the martial arts intrinsically spiritual? The way most Americans practice it, no. It is simply another form of exercise or sport,” says Yates, 52, who holds the highest attainable 10th degree black belt in tae kwon do. “On the other hand, the Asian founders of the martial arts certainly did think there was a spiritual aspect to their art and practice.”

Warriors for Truth

Whether spiritual or secular, martial arts have mushroomed in popularity in American culture since the early 1970s when they rose to prominence with the TV show Kung Fu. More than 5 million Americans and as many as 1 billion people worldwide practice karate, kung fu, jujitsu or other self-defense styles, according to Frank Silverman, executive director of the Martial Arts Industry Association. Nationwide, he says, there are more than 30,000 martial arts schools.

Legions of young fans have been inspired to pursue the arts through realistic video games that have resulted in spin-off TV shows and action figures. Hollywood has boosted the mass appeal of martial arts with a long list of high-profile films and actors, including the late Bruce Lee and current martial artist stars Jackie Chan and Jet Li.

Coinciding with its rising popularity among the general public, the sport has been embraced by many churches and Christians who have launched ministries that they say reach an untapped segment of society.

“There are many people who will come to a karate demonstration who will never come to a church service,” says David Clinard,

40, president of 600-member Fellowship of Christian Martial Artists (FCMA), an organization in Charlotte, North Carolina, that emphasizes evangelism and discipleship training.

Jesse Vaughn, 45, an FCMA member and a Christian who has been involved in martial arts for 33 years, says he has organized evangelistic martial arts outreaches at which people have responded to an altar call to receive Christ.

“People are really captivated by martial arts,” says Vaughn, who has started a martial artists group called Warriors of Light. “But they don’t always see a live display of martial arts. They’ll watch you, and if you don’t talk too long, they’ll listen to you.”

Jeff Naayers, 41, a close friend of Vaughn’s who started Wah Lum Kung Fu and Tai Chi of . in Columbus, Ohio, which has about 250 students, says the opportunity to use the arts as a gospel tool is unique. In the last three years more than 70 students at his school have received Jesus or rededicated their lives to Christ.

“It’s the only thing that is in every culture. Every society in the world practices some form of martial arts,” says Naayers, who attends a charismatic church in Columbus. “Because of that it gives us a commonality and a vehicle to share the gospel.”

James Sang Lee, a black belt in kung fu and tae kwon do who has a self-defense workout video series, says he has been able to lead many people to Jesus through his martial arts skills.

“It has served well as an icebreaker,” says Lee, a 31-year-old

Chinese American who has performed martial arts stunts for several movies, including Lethal Weapon 4 and Blade, and is on staff with Northland, A Church Distributed, a 6,500-member nondenominational congregation in the Orlando area.

“It has also helped break the language barrier because martial arts is visual and needs no English to share as an activity to connect with people,” he told Charisma.

Reclaiming a ‘Taboo’ Art

The growing number of Christian-run martial arts groups and schools, as well as the debate over using secular activities to draw converts, has caught the attention of The Wall Street Journal and the San Francisco Chronicle—which noted that the trend has “taken off like wildfire in small towns across the country.”

Burton Richardson, 41, a contributing editor for Inside Kung Fu magazine for more than 12 years and a martial arts instructor in Hawaii, told Charisma that “it is fascinating to see the absolute explosion of Christian-based martial arts.”

Uniquely enough, he cites a full-time pastor in Florida—Christian Harfouche—rather than a professional martial artist as a top example today of a Christian who has had widespread influence in the martial arts. Harfouche is senior pastor of 1,700-member Miracle Faith Center in Pensacola, Florida, a full-gospel congregation with a martial arts school of about 200 students.

“He not only integrates mind and body, but spirit also through the teachings of the Bible,” Richardson says. “This is a trend

that has come to the forefront very recently as more and more Christians look for martial arts training but are wary of looking into a school because of the fear that they will become indoctrinated into a mystical approach that contradicts their faith.”

Harfouche has been a martial artist for 34 years and founded the International Christian Karate Association three years ago in Pensacola as an evangelistic ministry. He has been featured several times in Black Belt, Inside Kung Fu and Martial Arts Contact Sports magazines.

He is perhaps one reason Christian martial artists say the sport arts have come a long way from being traditionally dismissed by churches based on several assumptions, including that they are tied to the occult and false religions and advocate violence for believers who are taught in the Gospels to turn the other cheek.

“For years the body of Christ has shied away from utilizing the avenue of martial arts to minister to people,” says Harfouche, 46, who was licensed and ordained by the Lester Sumrall Evangelistic Association.

“We kind of called it taboo. Much like during the early days of rock ‘n’ roll, the body of Christ thought that the arts were not going to help for evangelism and discipleship. ... It’s a platform that has been vacant. But now it’s being occupied. ... God’s breathing on our ministry and on other ministries like it.”

Harfouche holds black belts in jujitsu, tae kwon do, kung fu and several styles of karate, and is also the founder of

Victorious Hands Karate, a self-defense style that uses a series of control holds. Videos demonstrating the technique, which is taught in 107 martial arts schools worldwide, are popular with law enforcement officers, bodyguards and military personnel.

“God wants to show Himself victorious in every arena of life,” Harfouche told Charisma. “The anointing of God combined with the discipline and fitness of the art form is producing great results in the lives of our students.”

He notes that many students have become Christians and grown spiritually through his karate association. “Young people have been turned on to the Lord through our revival meetings and martial arts school,” says Harfouche, who with his wife, Robin, established a Bible-training center in 1994 called International Miracle Institute.

“Martial arts has kept their fire of commitment,” he adds. “It gives them an opportunity to be around a support group of their peers who are committed to God. It’s like iron sharpens iron.”

Echoing the views of other Christian martial artists, Harfouche says the disciplines have biblical roots.

“The Lord called me in 1979 to preach, so for several years I laid martial arts down,” he says. As a teenager in Beirut, Lebanon, he began studying karate from a book that was handwritten in Arabic. “The Lord spoke to me about using the arts as a means of evangelism for young people.”

He then began to research the scriptural ties of martial arts.

“I discovered that the Assyrian and Persian armies from the Old Testament were called military arts, which is where the word martial comes from,” he notes. “Also in the Bible, King David’s mighty men were utilizing martial techniques on the battlefield. The nation of Israel had its own military arts, but they were serving Jehovah.”

According to the Gospel Martial Arts Union, one of several Bible-based martial arts organizations in the country, a careful reading of Judges 6-7 “shows the foundational principles of martial arts techniques in Gideon’s most notable battle.”

Christian martial artists today also say the arts don’t promote violence—a belief that further contradicts the notion that practicing the disciplines is unbiblical.

Neither do they agree that the skills used go against the biblical injunction to turn the other cheek.

“We don’t use our martial arts skills unless it’s absolutely necessary,” Vaughn, a member of First Assembly of God in Deland, Florida, says. “They’re for self-defense or for defending someone else, and not for fighting.

“As far as the New Testament verse regarding turning the other cheek, that passage doesn’t have a lot to do with being slapped. It has to do with turning the other cheek concerning an insult.”

Secular vs. Spiritual

What about concerns by Christians that the disciplines are associated with Eastern spirituality? Leaders of martial arts ministries maintain that the majority of martial arts schools do not offer any sort of spiritual program.

“The trend is going more secular,” Vaughn told Charisma. “The last 10 years, martial arts schools are teaching good family values, respect, diligence, self-control and self-confidence, but they’re not necessarily saying these are Christian values. They’re promoting good things.

“They’re developing good citizens out of their students,” he adds. “But they’re sincerely headed in the wrong direction. You’ve got a good, nice kid coming out the door, but he’s still going to hell because the gospel is not preached. They’re making good citizens, but it’s just as misleading as teaching straight-out Buddhism.”

Vaughn and Naayers—who are sifus, or master kung fu instructors—are longtime students of Chan’s, who in addition to founding the country’s first Wah Lum temple brought the Shaolin Buddhist Monk tour to America in 1991 for the first time. Both men are keenly aware of the religious undertones of the kung fu system, which draws from philosophies taught by three major Asian religions: Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism.

“The temple’s Buddha statues are supposed to be spiritual guardians of the school,” explains Vaughn, who has trained under Chan since 1981. “They burn incense and bow, which is borderline ancestor worship, but he doesn’t teach Buddhism.

“As a Christian, I see people who are not affiliated with any

religion, but who follow what he does," Vaughn adds. "They follow along like sheep. I've told him from the start that I will not bow to his altar, and he's fine with that."

Downplaying the spirituality of his style, Chan claims bowing and incense burning are mere gestures of offering respect to his deceased martial arts instructors.

Chan now primarily teaches tai chi, which is rooted in Taoism, a Chinese mystical philosophy. Chan's temple, which numbers more than 300 students, displays yin and yang signs—the black-and-white, round Taoist symbol that represents cosmic principles from a Chinese dualistic philosophy.

"It's like you going to a cemetery and putting flowers on a grave," Chan told Charisma. "It's to show respect."

However, Justin Galanto, an assistant instructor at the temple, says his Catholic family would likely have a problem with the bowing and incense burning at the school.

"If I was a strict Roman Catholic, I couldn't bow before the altar," Galanto, 22, whose family is from the Philippines, told Charisma. "But I don't see it as spiritual. My grandma probably wouldn't approve of it."

Frances Byrnes, 57, one of four women who attended a class in January co-taught by Galanto at the temple, told Charisma that she "absolutely has no problems" with the bowing and incense burning, as well as the religious statues and symbols.

"I'm not a Buddhist. I'm Anglican," says Byrnes, a London native who noted that she goes to the school because of its

“spirituality” and “peaceful” atmosphere. “I understand there are religious differences. I respect the temple and the way I’m being taught. Their values are mostly my values.”

Tu Truong, a sifu at the temple, says the school attracts people from all faiths. “We don’t teach religion, but we teach them how to be a good, humble person,” says Truong, 31, who has been one of Chan’s disciples since 1982.

“It’s not just about kicking and punching. A person who is good, but is cocky and arrogant, that’s not a good martial artist,” adds Truong, noting that one of the Chinese-language signs at the school says: “Learn humility, respect and kung fu.” “But a person who is good in martial arts, and also humble and helps other people, that is a good martial artist.”

Naayers has been a student of Chan’s since 1983. His Wah Lum school in Ohio doesn’t feature bowing and incense burning, he says, but some Eastern religious items are used for “backdoor ministry.”

“We have a red table with pictures of dead Chinese kung fu masters, but we don’t call it an altar,” says Naayers, who has kung fu schools in Pittsburgh and Denver, as well as three studios in Columbus. “It’s a historical display. We use it to provoke questions and thought about spiritual matters. It works for opening the door to the gospel.”

Naayers—who has formed Warriors of Truth, a parachurch organization that develops, instructs, performs and propagates Christian martial arts—says there’s a reason why he and Vaughn have not broken their ties with Chan, despite the heavy Eastern religious influence of his kung fu discipline. He says

they have “prayed and pleaded the blood of Jesus,” while visiting the Shaolin Temple, located near Zhengzhou, China.

“I definitely know that I have not been released by God from [Wah Lum],” Naayers told Charisma. “Jesse and I have not been kicked out for our beliefs. I believe through prayer that there’s something down the road that is going to happen in the Wah Lum system.”

Christian Martial Arts Organizations

Christian Black Belt Association

e-mail: cbbaskki@

Web:

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Gospel Martial Arts Union

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International Christian Karate Association

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Web:

Warriors of Truth Ministries

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Web:

Eric Tiansay, an associate editor with Charisma, visited the Wah Lum Kung Fu Temple in Orlando, Florida, to write this report.