

Martial Arts along the Silk Road — from Bodhidharma to Bruce Lee

BY DOUG KIM

As a conduit for religion and commerce, the Silk Road was an important means by which Asian martial arts were nurtured and disseminated.

According to tradition, the process started with Bodhidharma, an Indian missionary who introduced Chan Buddhism to China in the 6th century. Called Damo, Tal-ma, and Daruma in China, Korea, and Japan respectively, this monk from India's warrior caste was the progenitor of Shaolin martial arts — many of which have come to be known as kung fu (*gungfu*). To improve the Shaolin monks' physical and mental ability to endure long meditation sessions, he is said to have taught them 18 exercises, probably derived from Indian yoga practices of the period. These "18 Hands of Lohan" were built upon and expanded into Shaolin "boxing." Shaolin temples, often remote and secluded, evolved into centers of meditation and martial arts training; they also attracted soldiers and professional warriors seeking sanctuary, who added their knowledge and skills to the training. Shaolin boxing strongly influenced indigenous martial arts styles as itinerant monks and Shaolin disciples spread religious and fighting principles throughout China and beyond.

It may seem curious that lethal fighting arts were elaborated and regularly practiced by religious orders. However, study and use of these skills were highly valued by the monks — to improve their ability to focus and meditate in their quest for spiritual enlightenment, and for self-defense against road bandits, would-be temple robbers, and, at various times, government persecution. Shaolin missionaries carrying Chan Buddhism eastward not only influenced Korean and Japanese martial arts but also provided the basis for Zen Buddhism, which itself became a fundamental part of the samurai tradition and bushido (the Japanese "way of the warrior"). Numerous guardian figures in fearsome martial poses can be found at Buddhist temples and shrines along the

Silk Road, clearly demonstrating the intimate connection between Buddhism and martial arts.

Commerce played a crucial role as well in the diffusion of Chinese styles to neighboring areas: monks and mercenaries skilled in martial arts served as escorts for merchants traveling along the Silk Road, providing protection against attackers. The recent award-winning film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* is a classic Chinese tale about such "guards for hire."

Asian martial arts first came to the United States with Chinese immigrants in the mid-19th century but remained largely secret, guarded within their community. Although President Theodore Roosevelt took judo lessons from a Japanese instructor in the White House in the early 1900s, it was almost half a century before Asian martial arts started to attract widespread interest in America — the result of contact between American servicemen and Japanese practitioners during the occupation of Japan and Okinawa after World War II. The floodgates of interest burst open as Bruce Lee's kung fu movies hit the United States in the 1970s. Virtually overnight kung fu, judo, karate, tae kwon do, and wu shu schools, clubs, movies, and competitions became well-established parts of everyday American life. Martial arts techniques traditionally taught only to blood relatives or fellow members of religious orders — and never to non-Asians — can now be acquired openly by anyone who wants to learn. Asian martial arts have become staples of international competition; judo and tae kwon do are Olympic sports, and serious efforts are underway to add wu shu to this list.

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