

# AGENDA

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Smashing display may focus attention on temple proposal

# You, too, can be a Shaolin master

Ambrose Leung

**H**E wears gold-rimmed glasses, is 50 years old, and only 1.75-metre tall. But martial arts master William Lau Wai-sip is a lethal weapon. The sort of man who would be confident walking down the darkest alley in the toughest part of town.

Watching him is an education in the ancient art of Shaolin, a discipline involving both physical and mental power, an art popularised by Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan. Now, with the proposed opening of Hong Kong's first Shaolin temple on Lantau, more may be armed with these combat skills. "It will be a bigger attraction than Disneyland," says a spokesman for the United World Chinese Association, the group behind the project.

Subject to SAR and Beijing approval, the temple will be a base for the millions of followers of Shaolin, practising any number of its hundreds of variations. If all goes to plan, monks from the two mainland temples, in Zhongshan and Fujian, will open the doors to the philosophy within two years.

Lau is keen to show the people of Hong Kong the benefits of Shaolin kung fu, which focuses on health rather than power. He demonstrated the 1,000-year-old martial art in breathtaking fashion at a recent ceremony in memory of his father. With his head on a stool, he stacked three red bricks on his temple. A young man then struck the pile with another brick, scattering chips in all directions. Rather than being knocked out by the blow, Lau stood spritely, brushed the dust away and smiled - not a mark on his face.

Despite what some choose to believe, there is nothing magical about this feat, Lau says. It requires nothing more than practice and discipline. Unlike other forms of qi, some of the training of internal organs through breathing and

movement), some of which are religion-based or claim to tap into something other than human abilities, Shaolin focuses on the body.

"There is nothing supernatural about our qi gong," Lau says. "It is just normal exercise, but it is practised in a special way that involves the moving of a person's internal qi, or, put simply, their breath." According to Lau, who instructs in Hong Kong, anyone can endure having bricks smashed against their head, if they are taught properly and prepared to train. Following an ancient system, Lau teaches a variety of external and internal martial arts movements, better known as "Chung Hop Pai" meaning "comprehensive school".

His own school, Lau Wai-sip Chinese Martial Arts Association, was originally founded by his late father Lau Kam-sung.

Lau senior was a prominent master, a student of Ku Yu-chang, a mainland martial art legend at the turn of the century. According to martial arts lore, Ku, who was born in Jiangsu province in the late Qing dynasty, was a leading follower of the Shaolin Temple masters in Zoumshan, Henan, where many believe Chinese martial art originated.

"A lot of people here in Hong Kong are, I understand, very interested in the idea of traditional Chinese martial arts," Lau says.

"But I also know many of them do not know how and where to start. And there are so many different styles and schools, which mix superstition with martial arts. I think these so-called qi gong can only cause harm to practitioners."

According to Kong Pui-wai, chairman of the umbrella group Hong Kong Chinese Martial Arts Association, there are about 200 schools giving martial arts lessons in the SAR, but only half that number teach Shaolin, the accomplished warrior.

Traditionally, external training developed combat fighting styles, whereas internal training



**MIND GAMES:** martial arts master William Lau demonstrates the power of Shaolin, withstanding the blow of bricks, left, while his student William Wan snaps chopsticks by ramming them into his throat, below. Photos: Oliver Tsang

sought to improve health. While following a famous master in the old days, it was not uncommon for students to devote years to learning - living with, and working for, their masters.

Today's lifestyle grind, with most people working at least eight hours a day, sometimes six days a

week, has obliged masters such as Lau to reconsider such a lengthy and arduous learning process.

Improving one's health and learning a few moves for self-defence takes "just 20 to 25 minutes a day," Lau says.

"A normal person above the age of 15 can have his or her inter-

nal organs strengthened, and most illness healed, by practising Chinese qi gong.

"With the guidance of a good master, after two to three months of step-by-step practice you will feel the strengthening of your body. In time, it can be developed to a degree that the body can withstand external force," Lau says. Just to be demonstrated with the brick. Or as his student, William Wan Kei-ho, displayed, holding the points of a pair of bamboo chopsticks to his throat and striking the other end with full force. Rather than piercing the throat, both sticks snapped and Wan's only red mark.

Novices are advised not to try this at home.

"Buddhist martial arts such as those from Shaolin are designed to improve health and develop a righteous mind," says Kong, of the Hong Kong Chinese Martial Arts Association.

normal strength is the outcome of internal qi gong training but not the ultimate aim. Serious harm could be done to the mind and body if the practitioner is not clear on what direction to take."

Lau also warns that those in search of six-pack abs might come away disappointed. "The difference between exercise and internal qi gong is very big. With physical exercise, you train your muscles thus resulting in a strong and healthy body. But internal qi gong is the training of your internal organs with external movement. It is very abstract and cannot be explained easily, since there is no way to show what you have practised inside your body, except by demonstrations such as brick breaking."

And with just those sorts of awe-inspiring displays, Lau may focus enough attention on the art of Shaolin to warrant the immediate rubber-stamping of the Hong Kong's very own Shaolin temple will be a bigger attraction than Disneyland.

injury was a slight red mark.

