Lion Dancing in the time of COVID

Kung Fu school adapts as pandemic rages on

Originally Published February 1, 2022: https://www.fox13now.com/news/local-news/lion-dancing-in-the-time-of-covid

SALT LAKE CITY — As Utah's Asian community celebrates Lunar New Year, which began on Tuesday, some traditions have had to adapt to survive during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One such tradition is the Lion Dance, where performers don a lion costume and mimic the movements of a lion in order to usher in good fortune for the new year. Due to the acrobatics involved, it is a tradition closely linked with Chinese martial arts.

"You actually use a lot of your Kung Fu basics under the lion," said Sifu Damien Snyder of the Sil Lum Kung Fu Kwoon. "You use your stances, you'll balance on one leg for the various tricks… it's just of matter of trying to make sure the lion is energetic. Trying to add emotion to the lion… that's actually the most difficult part."

Located in the Chinatown plaza at 3370 South State Street, the Sil Lum Kung Fu Kwoon trains its students in four specific styles of Chinese martial arts: Hung Gar, Wing Chun, Hsing-I, and Tai Chi. These styles form the foundation upon which the lion dance training, which focuses on the Southern Lion style, is built.

Like many other businesses, they have had to adjust as the COVID pandemic wreaked its havoc on the community. As restaurants in the state struggled to keep their doors open, the demand for Sil Lum's lion dances dwindled.

"A lot of the places that we perform at… either the restaurant has flat out closed, or their lobby is not open and they're just doing take out," said Snyder. "We would have anywhere between 30 and 40 shows, and this year we have 12."

In addition to doing fewer lion dances, the pandemic has also forced the students and instructors to modify their training methods. Students are required to wear masks in classes and are kept six feet apart. This makes things difficult for students studying Wing Chun, a style focused on close-quarters combat.

"We can only do forms, learn the defense techniques, and combinations," said Snyder. "[We] haven't been doing them two-person, which makes it hard to make it practical."

In spite of the difficulties of the past couple of years, Sil Lum soldiers on, with spirits remaining high.

"We're just trying to keep things going [and] positively influence everybody as best as we can," said Snyder. "Even though times are hard, Kung Fu can also be kind of a release, a way to work out some stress."

Sil Lum Kung Fu Kwoon has eight lion dances that are open to the public, starting Tuesday. The full schedule of events can be found on their Facebook page.