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## Enter the wushu dragon

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Oakland Ross

If Timothy Hung had a more imposing frame, he might not be where he is today – Canadian men's champion in a sport called wushu, competing for international gold.

"I'm a small guy," the slim but remarkably fit Torontonion explained Sunday, "and my mom didn't want me to get picked on at school."

And so, at the age of 11, he began training at the Sunny Tang Martial Arts Centre in Scarborough.

Hung managed to keep the bullies at bay, and now, at age 20, he is part of a Canadian team that's taking on the rest of the planet at the 10th World Wushu Championships.

With more than 600 competitors from 72 countries, the event is the largest sporting contest to be held in Ontario this year, and it's continuing till Thursday at the Ricoh Coliseum. It's the second time the sport's premier competition has made its way to North America and the first time it has been in Canada.



Canadian Timothy Hung, 20, competes Sunday in a men's event at the 10th World Wushu Championships being held at the Ricoh Coliseum.

RICHARD LAUTENS/TORONTO STAR

"I just love the sport," Hung said as he prepared to compete in his discipline, a noncombat martial art called taolu. "You meet people from all over the world."

The word wushu simply means "martial arts," and if that doesn't evoke a clear image of the sport, then try to picture a combination of gymnastics and boxing – a marriage of grace and power, on the one hand, with physical mayhem, on the other.

"Hong Kong action movies are all wushu," said Jackson Pellatt, a Canadian coach attending the championships this week.

The sport was effectively born in 1949, when the new, revolutionary government of the People's Republic of China sought to meld more than 300 martial arts disciplines into a single coherent athletic pursuit, a sport that now goes by the name of wushu.

In the form on display in Toronto this week, however, there are really two pursuits: one, taolu, which does not involve fighting, and another, sanshou, which does.

Just ask the Peruvian competitor Sunday who went up against a heavily favoured Chinese fighter.

One thudding kick to the side of the head, and it was lights out in the Andes. The South American went down like a stone, and they carried him off on a stretcher. Out cold.

The Peruvian subsequently regained consciousness, before medical workers transferred him to a downtown hospital for a precautionary CT scan.

"Now you know why it's 18 to 35," said Eileen Fauster, president of Wushu Ontario, referring to the allowable age range for sanshou fighters.

In taolu, it's different. A demonstration sport in which the athletes compete individually, the discipline bears considerable resemblance to floor exercises in gymnastics, only with a lot more grunting.

There seems to be no lower age limit in taolu.

Nalei Chang, an 11-year-old taolu specialist representing Estonia, gave a spirited performance when his turn came, unleashing flips, twirls and spins, all the while brandishing a long, flashing sword, as his coach roared approval.

But the judges handed the boy a mark of just 6.65 out of 10.

"They don't understand!" the coach raged, meaning the judges. "No good!"

Still, he gave his rather disheartened-looking protégé a big hug and bore him off on high, just as you would carry a champion.

Although they may begin young, taolu specialists don't tend to remain in competition much beyond their mid-20s, a result of the sport's punishing physical stress.

Asian countries dominate both the combat and noncombat aspects of the sport, but Canada is a strong contender among non-Asian countries.

"In North America and South America, we're number 1," Fauster said.

For a sport that did not have an international governing body till 1990, wushu has grown fast and travelled far.

"It's in the top five sports in Iran," said Ibrahim Fathi, a taolu specialist from that country, who was watching his teammate, Shamim Mahrdipoor, deliver an almost miraculous performance in a women's taolu event called taijiquan, better known as tai chi.

Clad in yellow robes and wearing a white head scarf, Mahrdipoor seemed to float across the floor.

The judges gave her a score of 9.55, and both she and her teammates seemed pleased.