The "secularization" of Zen in Martial Arts – The example of the Greek Shaolin

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In Edward Zwick's movie *The Last Samurai* (2003), we're watching Captain Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise) exercise himself to the Japanese sword with the tough samurai Ujio (Hiroyuki Sanada). The stubborn American captain is defeated in all his efforts against the samurai until Moritsugu Nobutada (Shin Koyamada), a young samurai, observes in broken English: "too many mind". Initially, the American is stupefied, and then the Japanese guy offers the following explanation: "mind to sword", "mind to people want", "mind to enemy", and "too many mind", and ends by saying: "no mind". Then, Nathan Algren seems to have had a sort of epiphany, undergoing a deep spiritual transformation, as he manages to stand as an equal against Ujio during their last confrontation. Nobutada's advice, though short and in broken English, was pretty enough to lead Algren into the path of illumination, which was expressed via his instant understanding and direct assimilation of the art of Japanese swordsmanship [kenjutsu]. In addition, Algren experiences a sort of "spiritual transformation", activated through the avoidance of thought. At the same time, Algren, though in all probability Christian, proves to be equally receptive to a religious process with salient "Far Eastern" qualities, without affecting his identity.

In the scene mentioned above, Algren represents an abstract image of a "West" that has lost its identity and its self-confidence; in their turn, Ujio and Nobutada symbolize the two facets of an equally abstract "East", as Ujio appears to be strict and demanding, while Nobutada is the one who

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offers a solution "for all the problems available" – the kind of Zen that supports (and is supported by) non-thought. Finally, *kenjutsu* is nothing more but the means through which the "Western man" might be able to experience a kind of "spiritual rejuvenation". Therefore, this scene represents the aspirations that many martial arts practitioners have from their training in them. Contrary to the usual forms of exercise, martial arts are known for their "spiritual background" and the changes that can bring about not only the "body" of their practitioners but also their spirit. This concept of "spirit", as it is often presented within the martial arts context, usually adopts elements from Eastern Religions, especially from Buddhism and Taoism.

One of the "Diffused New Religiosity's" qualities is its tendency to reject the characterization of a practice as religion. This tendency can be called "secularization". In the present article, we will delve into an aspect of this approach – more specifically, a "case study'' focused on the Chinese martial art of Shaolin Buddhist Monastery in Greece. There are two reasons for which we've chosen this particular martial art: firstly, it is a form of bodily exercise, particularly well-known through films, and secondly, because it is the most culturally "molded" martial art, as its relation to Buddhism is more than obvious. After having interviewed many of its practitioners, one can see that Buddhism is not always perceived as a religion. Even though the Greek practitioners of Shaolin Kung Fu are used to the image of the Buddha and carry out their training wearing traditional Buddhist uniforms, they perceived Buddhism rather as a philosophy than a religion.

Before going to talk about the Greek Shaolin, though, it would be useful to examine the wider context within which this particular phenomenon can be explained and understood. According to the conceptual framework of the "Diffused New Religiosity"[1], as has been exposed by Stylianos Papalexandropoulos, religiosity can be detached from the various forms of institutional organization and "diffused" into the wider cultural and social beliefs and world views of modern societies. There are manifold ways through which religious ideas are "filtered",

1. St. Papalexandropoulos, «Ἡ Διάχυτη Νέα Θρησκευτικότητα», *Θεολογία / Theologia* 94, 1 (2023), pp. 11-22.

thus becoming functional and viable within modern secular societies; one of them is related to the notion of "self-transformation", which can be expressed through practicing martial arts – an example of it is *The Last Samurai*. "Self-transformation" refers to someone's conscious, deliberate, and independent decision to evolve, to "transform" into something "superior to the common man". At this point we could add that the "common man" is nothing else but the situation that precedes the "self-transformation" that a subject has achieved, or believes to have achieved. Usually, this change is related with a physical and mental "improvement" that a person can experience after a period practicing martial arts.

That doesn't mean, of course, that the practitioners of the martial arts adopt in toto such perceptions or "self-perceptions", as they do not constitute a single social or cultural group, while the motivations that lead them to engage in martial arts vary according to their personalities, individual experiences and social background. In addition to that, training in martial arts is primarily a form of physical exercise, which takes place independently of any cultural dimension. Despite the above, the Asian martial arts' introduction to the West was accompanied by the corresponding introduction of various cultural elements from East Asian countries[2]: the established uniforms (judo-gi, hakama pants, etc.), the meditation practices that in some schools are part of the training routine, the ritual movements (e.g., Japanese seiza sitting position, Kneeling bows to the founders of the martial arts in Karate, Judo, Aikido, etc.), special greetings among the trainees ad among the trainees and their teachers/trainers (such as bowing from a standing or/and kneeling position in the Japanese martial arts and the left open palm tangential with the right fist in the Chinese martial arts), an elementary vocabulary that is repeated in the respective languages during the training sessions, combined with –among other things– with a lot of objects who are often decorating the related schools or training centers, such as Buddha figurines and the Yin-Yang, the Taoist symbol of cosmic harmony. Nevertheless, we should add that, neither those symbols are always religious nor that martial

2. In the present article we are dealing with only one Chinese martial art, yet in general terms we are referring to the martial arts of China, Japan, Corea, Mongolia etc.

arts are characterized by religious references. Some of these are already Olympic sports, like Judo, Tae-Kwo-Do, and more recently Karate, while Japanese Jujitsu is taught in many Police Academies. It cannot also be disputed that, while the venues that are used for training in Basketball, Volleyball, Swimming, etc. are modest and not symbol-ridden (with perhaps the exception of the trophies that the corresponding teams have won), in the spaces that are used for the training in the traditional Karate and various Chinese martial arts the aesthetic that accompanies them is characterized by symbols and references to the history and religion of the East Asian countries, while at the same time dealing with a certain kind of "martial arts philosophy" is influenced from either Buddhism or Taoism; both are perceived as "philosophies" rather than "religions". In other words, Buddha is understood rather as a "philosopher" than a religious figure, Taoism is perceived rather as a "self-help" method than a religion, while meditation is more about an effort for "relaxation" before intensive training than personal communication with "God" or any other "divinity" similar to that of prayer. As far as teachers and practitioners are concerned, learning Asian martial arts often constitutes a simple physical exercise and a study of the culture (material and spiritual) of the countries where they originated. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to argue that some martial arts include particular cultural elements, often of a religious character, which they lose within the new context.

As we shall see, the correlation between religiosity and martial arts is integral to the wider study regarding Buddhism's reception in Western countries. However, this article's basic reasoning presupposes approaching martial arts as a single and independent cultural entity. Even from the empirical point of view, it is easy for someone to discern abundant religious symbols in martial arts practice spaces. However, various attempts to highlight the martial arts as unified cultural entities concern historical and religious aspects of the different countries of each martial art rather than those of the East and the West as two solid entities. The multiplicity in question does not mean that any discussion concerning the religious implications of martial arts is fruitless. Martial arts remain a very interesting "medium" through which Western

countries are exposed to cultural elements from the Far East and adopt religious ideas and concepts. On the other hand, this "blurred" conceptual landscape continues to motivate scholars and researchers in their quest for meanings regarding the martial arts' religious (or philosophical, as they are usually called) dimensions.

For example, Tao Thykier Makeef's postgraduate research[3] is a remarkable attempt to identify the relationship between martial arts and religiosity. More specifically, Makeef proposed three ways through which this relationship can be understood: Firstly, the "intrinsic" connection of the martial arts with various forms of religiosity concerns the "*sui generis*" relation of certain martial arts with their corresponding religions – for example, the Japanese Budo (a code name covering all martial arts originated in Japan) and Japanese Zen. Secondly, the "auxiliary" connection of the martial arts with religiosity concerns the "superficial" adoption of elements of one "cultural system" by the other Finally, the "osmotic" connection of the martial arts with religiosity concerns the identification of various elements that both the martial arts and the religions (or religiosities) that accompany them share between and are often experienced unconsciously.

Makeef's research is dedicated to a comparison of the Chinese martial art Tai Chi and the Russian martial art Systema, with their corresponding connections with Taoism and Orthodox Christianity respectively. The terminology proposed by Makeef has to do with a two-way relationship between the two "cultural systems" rather than with a one-dimensional interpretation that would "characterize" rather than explain a phenomenon. This means that elements of martial arts can be traced back to various forms of religiosity and vice versa. The terms (intrinsic, auxiliary, and osmotic) can prove to be useful for the study of the "Diffused New Religiosity" as they offer three interesting ways of approaching the religious phenomenon in a historical period

3. Tao T. Makeeff, *Martial Arts and Religion: A Study of Constructions of Identity based on Case-studies in Chinese and Russian Martial Arts and their Relationship to Daoism and Christianity*, https://www.academia.edu/30001522/Martial_Arts_and_Religion_A_Study_of_Constructions_of_Identity_based_on_Case_studies_in_Chinese_and_Russian_Martial_Arts_and_their_Relationship_to_Daoism_and_Christianity [25.10.2023].

marked by frequent cultural mixing and sociocultural fluidity. However, although this research is particularly noteworthy in terms of constructing the above conceptual tools, it fails to explain its initial premise, which concerns martial arts as a "cultural system" semantically equivalent to the corresponding "cultural system" of religion. Although, as has already been mentioned above, the "deepest longing" of many trainees in martial arts is to present them as an independent spiritual entity, any cultural references that might characterize them refer to the national and religious context they represent. Therefore, while we could approach the "ways" with which martial arts as "cultural systems" can be connected with religiosity, the content of these cultural systems that make them susceptible to the connection between one and the other cannot be approached with clarity.

The usual answer is the hypothetical and extremely abstract dichotomy between "East" and "West", which is used ad nauseam in the relevant discussion. The dichotomy, although it may seem particularly attractive, from the moment that leaves abundant room for associations and daydreams about the content of the concepts "West" and "East", and is helpful to the degree that encompasses the cultures of countries such as China, Japan, Korea without requiring a specialized study of the history of each country, has nevertheless provoked a series of debates, which also highlight the limits of the two concepts in terms of understanding the two cultural dimensions and, of course, the religious dimensions that characterize them. Colin Campbel's hypothesis related to the "Easternization of the West", is particularly interesting[4] The writer, by focusing on religion, exquisitely presents the mosaic of differences between the two conceptions of the divine.

More specifically, Campbel acknowledges the one-sided nature of truth in God "as a person" as opposed to the multifaceted and open nature of the truth in Eastern mysticism, as well as the separation of the divine from the secular level as a feature of Western religious thought as opposed to the Eastern one, which wants the divine world to be identical with the earthly one. These differentiations are related to the formation

4. C. Campbell, "The Easternization of the West" in: B. Wilson & J. Cresswell (eds.), *New Religious Movements Challenge and Response*, Routledge, London 1999, pp. 35-47.

of the hypothesis of "Easternization", not only as an importation of elements from the geographical region of the East to that of the West but mainly in the shift of Western religious thought from the external environment, both in the social and transcendental sense, towards a supposed eastern conception which focuses on individual introspection on the one hand and the organic identification of the transcendental with the terrestrial on the other.

At first sight, the reasoning seems to be about the adoption by the West of an "Eastern" conception of human existence. If this adoption is taken literally, two problems arise: Firstly, the perception of the concept of East and West as unified systems of thought, and secondly, the lack of sufficient documentation on the conversion of "Western societies" to the social values and cultural characteristics of "Eastern societies", respectively.

Campbel uses the concepts "Eastern" and "Western" having in mind two consecutive studies that separated these cultural categories. The first was written by Albert Gilgen and Jae Hyung Cho, at the end of the 1970s; in it, the two writers tried to define in general the Eastern thought as a monist one, common to both Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism, and the Western thought as a dualist one, which is identified as common both to Christianity and Judaism, as well as to a large part of (classical) Greek thought.

The premises that defined the general patterns of Eastern and Western thought were[5]:

5. C. Campbell, "The Easternization of the West", op.cit., pp. 35-47.

Eastern Thought	Western Thought
1. The man and nature are one.	1. Man has characteristics that set him apart from nature and the world.
2. The spiritual and the material are one.	2. Man is separated into three parts – body, mind, and spirit.
3. Man must recognize his basic unity with nature, the spiritual and the mental, rather than analyze, label, categorize, manipulate, control, or consume the things of the world.	3. There is a personal god who is above man.
4. Because of the unity with the whole of existence, man should feel "at home" in all places and with all persons.	4. Man must control and manipulate nature to ensure his survival.
5. Science and technology, at best, create an illusion of progress.	5. Emphasis should be placed on rational thinking and an analytical approach to problem-solving.
6. The "Illumination" involves achieving a sense of oneness with the universal. It is the state of things where all dichotomies disappear.	6. Science and technology have given us a good life and are promoting our basic hope for an even better future.
7. Meditation, a special state of silent contemplation, is essential for the attainment of illumination	7. Action and a competitive spirit must be rewarded.

The second research the results of which used by Campbel was the one by David Krus and Harold Blackman, who, in the same spirit, carried out yet another typology on the East-West distinction[6]:

East	West
1. Synthesis	1. Analysis
2. Absoluteness	2. Generalization
3. Completion	3. Differentiation
4. Abstraction	4. Induction
5. Subjectivity	5. Objectivity
6. Dogmatism	6. Intellectuality
7. Intuition	7. Logic
8. Anti-science	8. Science
9. Personal	9. Impersonal
10. Ethical	10. Legal
11. Absence of transgression	11. Positive
12. Connection	12. Power
13. Ecstasy	13. Class / Order
14. Irrational	14. Rationality
15. Imagination	15. Critical

In the present article, we do not intend to focus strongly on the critical philosophical treatments that could be carried out about the above typologies. According to Campbel, the frameworks mentioned above have created a fluid historical landscape between these two vast geographical areas, with the East prevailing over the West. Referring to the influences of the theologian Paul Tillich, as a representative of German idealism in Christianity, and the later influences of Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt School on Marxism and Socialism, Campbel argued that in the first case, there was a shift from the "up there" of God to the "down here" of the natural world, which, as mentioned above, is perceived as a unified whole. In the second case, traditional

6. Ibid., p. 43.

Socialism's "soteriological" perception passed the baton to the belief in "self-perfection". In the last case, Psychoanalysis's influence contributed to this turn of Socialism; possibly without understanding it, the latter was identified with Eastern thought. In its turn, the latter's strength was not only shown in the shift of Western theologians towards its particular values but also its resilience in the face of an increasingly powerful Western science on the cognitive level (something that Western religious thought has failed to achieve)

As Campbel puts it:

> The extreme individualism, the anti-dualism, the claims for the relativization of truth, all make it [the Eastern paradigm] comparatively invulnerable to rational and scientific attack. Indeed, Eastern mysticism tends to use the secular humanistic attack on traditional religion to its advantage, while also exploiting the uncertainties and conflicts within science to develop mystical claims[7].

The above statement is of particular interest, as it highlights the social dimension of the "Easternization" process. Irrespective of the problems that Campbel himself points out, such as the insistence on comparing the East with the developed part of the West and the development of Islam which encourages a return to "traditional forms of Christianity", this hypothesis remains important, as it highlights the cultural nuances of a more general trend that has been exhibited, from the collective identities of classical modernity to the individualized paths of social self's formation.

The connection between individualization and Easternization frees the analysis from the similarity-difference dipole[8] and describes a clear reclassification of cultural and ethical elements between two general cultural forms. The terms "shift", "conversion", etc., mentioned above to define the process of reshaping Western culture through the incorporation of features from the Far East, do not refer in Campbel's argument to a specific event, or series of events, forming a clear process; instead, they are indications of convergence of developments in a broader analytical context. The contradictory elements listed in the above tables, defining

7. Ibid, p. 43.
8. R. Jenkins, *Κοινωνικὴ Ταυτότητα*, Greek transl. by Katerina Georgopoulou, Savvalas Publications, Athens 2007, p. 26.

the ideological confrontation between Central-East Asia and Western Europe, can be brought into a real conciliation with each other through the more general developments of Western societies in the last three decades of the 20th century.

The bypassing of materialistic, industrial culture and the pursuit of direct contact with nature, under the prism of an individual ideological choice and the pursuit of the "integration" of the self through a process of never-ending introspection, via meditation practices, can be seen not only as an adoption of Eastern ideas by Western societies but also as alternative responses of Western societies to the historical developments of late modernity. The aspects of these developments are many and create a great mosaic of new ideologies and movements, from the new currents of the feminist movement to ecology and from the development of the consumer society and the subsequent cultivation of consumer identity to the formation of new religions. In any case, these developments have been centered on individuality.

The replacement of the old collectivities by the reconfigured identity or by consistently individual terms was a key feature of the transition from mature to late modernity. Simultaneously with these transitions, the broadening of economic, political, and social activities, by relativizing the dynamics of national borders, implied the development of cultural exchanges at the individual level. Westerners did not need the British Empire to learn about foreign cultures when they could do so themselves. Thus the "turn to the East" could be the cultural expression of the "turn towards the self".

Campbel's argumentation is excellent in presenting "the agony of the West" to redefine itself in the aftermath of the post-Second World War era. The "turn to the self" through the adoption of religious ideas coming from Eastern Asia is nothing else but the expression of this ideological individualism expressed by the Beatniks and the Hippies during the 1950s and the 1960s respectively[9]. At this point, Buddhism acquired a new dimension in the Western cultural context, as Zen was

9. St. Papalexandropoulos, «Ζέν: Ἀπὸ τὴν Ἀληθινὴ Πραγματικότητα στὴν Καθημερινότητα», in: Chr. Konstantopoulos (ed.), *Ὄψεις τοῦ σύγχρονου πολιτισμοῦ. Ἰαπωνικὲς ἐπιρροές*, Papazisis Publications, Athens 2017, pp. 53-61.

connected with the rise of a new individualistic culture. In particular, the idea of a certain direction of Zen, which concerned the conception of reality as a condition in which truth is identified with the world of cognizable phenomena and therefore can be experienced directly either through meditation or through the acceptance that the "natural world" is both "naturally" real and "naturally" good, was to have a decisive influence on several artistic currents[10] and social movements; although they constituted a great mosaic in the modern history of the West, they had a common denominator: the "turn to the self". In other words, a religious idea originating in East Asia was transformed into the most secular idea of Western civilization: individualism and the secular spirit.

It is at this point that Steve Bruce's argument came to counterbalance notions of "Easternization of the West", as he sought to redefine the religious influence of the "East" on the "West", focusing more on how the Western world is readjusting Buddhism while integrating it. His research focused on the United Kingdom, where Buddhism flourished until the 2011 census. Bruce focused on Buddhist ideas and practices and their use to enhance "well-being". In particular, he refers to the use of meditation methods and "esoteric martial arts", as well as to the suggestions in some psychology journals for the creation of small "shrines" with "spiritual elements from the respective cultures of the readers"[11]. Although he does not call it by that name, Bruce refers to Buddhism as being a part of the "Diffused New Religiosity". According to his reasoning, the West is undergoing a long historical period of rapid and unfettered secularization. This results to the marginalization of organized forms of religiosity. Thus, any elements borrowed from Eastern religions necessarily take on a "secular" rather than "religious" character. This does not mean that they lose their original religious content; what changes is the role they are called upon to play in the Western world's secular cultural environment. In other words, if a religious element can enhance rather than alter our individuality, it is more than welcome. However, one question remains: how is

10. Ibid, p. 56.
11. St. Bruce, *Secular beats Spiritual: The Westernisation of the Easternisation of the West*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018, p. 99.

Buddhism (or, more broadly perhaps, Eastern religions) so susceptible to secularization? Because, of course, we can debate (as is often the case in both every day and academic discussions) whether Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy while the same debate about Christianity or Islam would have seemed absurd. The reason is twofold: on the one hand, the historicity of the Buddha as a person and, on the other, the perception of the Absolute (the Divine) as a state rather than a person. If Buddhism's founder was born, enlightened, and died, and the divine element has more to do with individual introspection than with church attendance, then the religion in question inevitably becomes open to eligibility practices, whereby some elements can be adopted by and large, while others cannot. In many cases, the Buddha statuettes and Buddhist "rosaries" are considered interior decorations rather than religious objects. Therefore, Buddhism is perceived as a philosophical system distinguished by its particular aesthetics, which can be selectively adopted by Westerners, without altering their secular identity.

In this process, it is not surprising that the transmission of Buddhism to the West has not necessarily taken place through some kind of missionary work, but also through the cultural industry. Here one can discern a series of films, decorative objects, and "self-help" books inspired by interpretations of Buddhist teachings, etc., which, although they represent Buddhist ideas, are not vehicles of some kind of immediate conversion.

Still, in this process, what is the role of the martial arts and Shaolin monastery? The main channel for the martial arts' promotion in the West was the cinema. The martial arts constitute a particular genre of cinema, which, although extremely popular, has nevertheless not attracted the interest of film specialists. Films depicting the "martial arts world" boomed in the 1980s and nowadays are still developing. Although aesthetically as a genre they have faced harsh criticism, due to the poor quality of the respective scripts and the particular emphasis given to the "hand to hand" combat scenes[12], they have undoubtedly been one of the

12. V. Pinel, *Σχολές, κινήματα καὶ εἴδη στὸν κινηματογράφο*, Metaixmio Publications, Athens 2004, pp. 40-41.

"channels" through which the "West" became acquainted with Eastern religions – the film *The Last Samurai*, to which we've referred at the beginning of our article is an example of this. Within this context, the case of Shaolin Monastery is no exception. The monastery did not enjoy much fame until the 1980s, when the film *Shaolin Temple* (1982) created a great wave of interest in it, extending the chain that links cinema with martial arts promotion. A martial arts practitioner and protagonist of the film linked his name to China-US diplomatic relations by demonstrating his skills inside the White House. The trainee was named Li Lianjie and became better known as Jet Li.

In the 21st century, the Shaolin Monastery has acquired a global reach. Several Shaolin monks, having emigrated to the U.S.A. and Western European countries, have opened Shaolin Kung Fu schools, maintaining a dual identity: that of the Buddhist monk, with all that implies in terms of their recognition as "spiritual" (religious) persons, and that of the Western secular "subject", enjoying the material and non-material goods of Western consumer society. This development reorganized the Shaolin Monastery, which was now a religious site and an exportable cultural product originating from China and Chinese Buddhism. It is also worth mentioning that the Shaolin Monastery complex is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and an extremely important source of wealth for the whole of Henan province – the largest province in China. Part of the Monastery's income is how one can represent the Shaolin Monastery as a "monk". Shaolin Monastery is just one of the many "past reconstitution" cases. A particular type of Buddhism, which can be found in many East Asian countries and which became particularly characteristic within the monastery through the development of martial arts, has been revived through cinema[13] nowadays, it has managed to represent par excellence all the different East Asian traditions regarding the martial arts.

The monks who participate in the "export" of the martial arts of the Shaolin Monastery, Chinese or otherwise, in Greece are called "secular

13. It must be mentioned here that the TV series "Kung Fu", starring David Carradine, was particularly well known to Greek audiences and became a point of reference for many trainees in the martial arts.

apostles"[14]. This "paradox" title is particularly interesting. We call it "paradoxical" not because of any inconsistency regarding its content but because of how it encompasses these two aspects of the Buddhist religion, the secular and the religious, which nowadays strives to promote. As a result, in Buddhism's influx into the West, one can identify religious elements perceived in a secular way or secular motives expressed in a religious way (e.g., the Buddha's teachings as a philosophy rather than a religion and its adoption to achieve a certain "self-improvement"). These phenomena will be better understood later on when we present the findings of our investigation; it is, however, necessary at this point to clarify the context in which the latter was carried out.

During our research on the promotion of Shaolin Kung Fu in Greece, we conducted a series of interviews that resulted in interesting and illuminating discussions related to the peoples' motivations to engage with the practice of martial arts and the possible beneficial effects that can be acquired by them. In this process, the martial arts appeared to be the "cultural system" rather than the religion of Buddhism. More specifically, our research has shown that the "Shaolin culture" is divided into three parts: a) The "Wu", which concerns "the art of war", i.e. the set of codified fighting techniques; b) the "Yi", which concerns the non-martial practices (such as eating habits and meditation); and c) the "Chan", which concerns "philosophy", i.e. the familiarization of practitioners with the Buddhist teachings and the degree of knowledge they have about them. Each practitioner follows this "path" at a different pace and according to his or her needs and abilities, since, according to some practitioners, Shaolin Kung Fu constitutes a framework for the individual identity's format.

14. The categories of monks who resided in the monastery are four: a) the ordained Buddhist monks or "fully ordained monks": they stay in the monastery, strictly following the monastery's dictates as to the organization of their daily life; b) the "combatant" Shaolin monks: they have attended the temple's martial arts program and usually pursue a military career; c) members of demonstration groups; and d) ordinary disciples who have attended martial arts classes but have not been involved with Buddhist teachings.

The trainees chose Shaolin Kung Fu wishing to get into touch with a historically and culturally "purer" form of the subject-constitution via the martial arts. The martial arts of Shaolin Monastery are not perceived as merely a set of physical exercises but as a set of practices and concepts aiming at the "understanding of the Chan"; they cover all everyday life facets and are expressed in eating habits and frequent exercise which leads to "self-observation", that is to the identification and treatment of personal physical and mental "weaknesses". In this way, the human body is understood as a spiritual and mental element of our identity rather than our material dimension. The trainee can achieve his or her "self-improvement" by observing the evolution of his body through practicing Shaolin kung fu and consequently integrating this "practice" into his or her spiritual cultivation.

Often, this holistic understanding of the three aspects of Shaolin is concerned with avoiding the ways that the West tends to imaginarily frame the martial arts. As mentioned before, the body turns itself into a means of spiritual cultivation, which defines daily habits in a specific way, according to the principles of a given system of ideas, and not so much by the exclusive cultivation of a sound and healthy body. In addition, the need for digging deeper into the field of martial arts practice stems from the lack of information, passing from Shaolin's promotion through the mass cultural industry to the individual immersion in the cultural qualities of the Shaolin Monastery and eventually to the identification with this field through integration and practice within its boundaries. The practitioner often makes long journeys lasting up to two days to practice at the Shaolin "source" in order to be identified and connected with the Monastery. The time-consuming and arduous journey emerges as proof of someone's will and personal determination to learn the martial art of Shaolin, which is described as "authentic". The connection with the "source" concerns the discovery of an authentic condition for learning martial arts, which is related to the exploitation of the possibilities for self-determination in the search for a new, more authentic, and genuine cultural good.

Of course, the search for authenticity could be both a religious and secular quest, something we have seen it happen in various historical

periods. In our case, authenticity concerns a particularly interesting process. The trainee seeks an authentic condition within the context of martial arts (not Buddhism) in a Buddhist monastery, wearing Buddhist garments, and following a series of Buddhist (not secular) rituals; finally, he is certified as a "secular apostle" and formally qualifies to participate in a "mission" for spreading the art abroad. Yet, at his point, a question arises: What was the situation before he acquired Shaolin's original art?

Individual choices, which in many cases determine the subject's formation during adolescence and pre-adolescence, are transmuted into an ideological framework for self-formation. From particular individual preferences regarding everyday diet to the adoption of a moral stance towards the environment, which is linked to a post-materialist approach to the relationship between humans and animals, a transition is made to a more systematic positioning within a philosophical context. Sports and body training are embraced by Shaolin's cultural and moral parameters. Of particular interest is the issue of health, which appears as the result of a person's choice for improving their physical well-being. Vegetarianism is reinforced as an element both to promote physical wellness and harmonization with the cultural framework of the Shaolin Monastery, as it is expressed through the "Yi", which (as we have seen) is the set of the trainees' non "martial" practices. The teacher's role becomes central to health cultivation, as he adopts the role of a training guide, thus paving the way to managing personal affairs in life. Psychologically speaking, the concept of individuality appears in terms of the emotional influences derived from the involvement with Shaolin, an engagement that offers joy, light-heartedness, and tranquility. Additionally, the downgrading of this engagement as leisure time is related to the weight of the importance attached to it in the context of the formation of subjectivity and the emergence of cultural identity. In other words, if Shaolin Kung Fu is perceived as a mere "hobby", then some of the benefits it can confer on the practitioner will inevitably be lost; therefore, the practitioner must experience Shaolin in its totality.

The personal changes that occur through the training enhance the sense of individual choice; thus, the trainees believe in or observes their self-improvement. Undoubtedly, the truth can only be found in the words

of the people who experience these changes, as they are, ultimately and partly, defined through them. This process is often experienced as the trainees "discover" something new about their psyche. The "boundaries of the self" that are transgressed and the "self-essence" discovered or experienced are ideas often referred to in this context. Practitioners often interpret the inevitable psychological and physical changes occurring through the various practices as "self-discovery" – a part of themselves that they have ignored and found out through their involvement with Shaolin Kung Fu. This idea is presented as a philosophical approach related to daily life; its similarity with Zen Buddhism's idea, that Buddhism is something inherent in man and is revealed through meditation, cannot be ignored.

This representational relationship with the self is a form of controlling the individual interiority. The insistence on practicing with specific patterns of bodily kinesiology leads to separating the bodily abilities into acquired skills and accessible possibilities. The perception of self-limits that are transcended within the context of practicing the (mainly) combative techniques of Shaolin Kung Fu functions as a constant redefinition of the relationship with the practitioner's body. On certain occasions, this relationship between the body and the mind is perceived through the concept of discipline, which enables the practitioner to experience control first of his body and then of his daily life.

This transformation experienced through Shaolin's "cultural system" is two-fold: its assimilation as a way of life on the one hand and the emergence of discipline as a form of self-improvement on the other. The individual's integration within the framework of Shaolin's rules leads to the structuring of everyday life according to these rules. The connection with the dynamics of cultural discipline is clear; the individual's ultimate reward is the feeling of calmness while the connection between the internal and external context of self-perception is also important in a cultural context that conceptually and experientially links these two aspects of individual existence. However, discipline, as presented here, is not that much about the behavior required to achieve a collective goal, but about controlling impulses and behaviors that would lead to undesirable behaviors. Thus, one might conceive of self-control as a means to improve the quality of life. One could nurture the idea that

self-control (or the restraint of desires) can lead to a better life, an idea extremely close to the Buddhist relationship between nirvana and desire control.

All of the above are related to Shaolin Kung Fu's individualistic dimension. If we broaden the discussion to include the religious and broader cultural dimensions of this system, then we can make some very interesting observations. In particular, the "secular apostles", although "secular" as individuals, within the institutional framework also adopt a Buddhist name, which begins with the words "Shi", meaning a follower of the Buddha, "Yan" (indicating the clan to which the monk belongs) and another word which is the name given by the Shaolin Monastery to the "secular apostle" in question. Thus, we have Christian trainees staying for some time in the Shaolin Monastery, who then return to their homelands without having changed their Christian identity. On the other hand, Chan Buddhism is often presented as syncretic, i.e. as a religion that could incorporate Christian elements, while both religious identities remain unchanged if the practitioner wishes to do so. The moral imperative of "good" is presented as the common denominator between the two religions; Buddhism Chan (the Chinese name for Zen) is presented as a cultural system within which all religions can be incorporated.

The connection between Christianity and Buddhism in terms of the essential moral concept of "good" leads to a conception of religion that is straightforwardly hybrid. Chan's capacity to incorporate other religions, related to its open attitude towards them, highlights two levels of perception of the transcendental, which concern Christianity as a "closed" religion and Chan as an "open" framework for accepting moral norms that bring the concept of "goodness" into focus. However, it is interesting to note that some practitioners have been treated "with fear" by Greek society. The connection between martial arts and the practitioners' "life path" is presented as a guiding principle, for their course within the Shaolin system. Here, a rather striking element made its appearance, when one of the practitioners (the only one who declared himself to be a Buddhist by religion and a "fully ordained monk[15]") remarked that,

15. With this term the interviewee defined his role as a representative of the Shaolin Monastery.

although Buddhism Chan is unknown in Greece and has often met with suspicion regarding the teachings of Shaolin Kung Fu, he has not encountered similar reactions from Greek Orthodox monks, who, he said, have treated him with great kindness and acceptance.

The differentiation of Buddhism from Christianity at the level of experience and reality is interesting in terms of the relationship between individuality and social context. The eligibility mentioned at the beginning concerns the possibility of religious self-identification, which implies the former status's loss and is carried out according to secular criteria emphasizing experience over tradition. Differentiating the subject from the collective cultural context leads to provocation or preconceived phobic feelings. In addition, the convergence with the Orthodox monks highlights the importance of asceticism as a point of convergence and differentiation from the "secular social context". For other ascetics, Buddhism was rather perceived as a "way of life" than a religion. Wu, Yi, and Chan frequently referred to highlight Shaolin Kung Fu as a conscious lifestyle choice, with little reference to Buddhist identity, while other people's Orthodox Christian identity remains unchanged, although they choose practices such as chi kung, which has to do with the management of some form of energy inherent in the human body and controlled through the spirit (a practice known in China, carried out within Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism). On this point, we can observe an attempt at the formation of a hybrid identity that incorporates elements of two distinct religious systems. Nevertheless, the question remains open as to whether the two systems are functionally harmonized. The answer still has to do with the individual's self-improvement and Chan Buddhism's potential to contribute in this direction, irrespective of any religious influence.

At the same time, another interesting aspect was the Shaolin Monastery's "historicity"; many trainees referred to the parallel course of the Greek and Chinese people as martial peoples, with the martial arts acting as a common denominator. This, of course, is nothing more than an imaginary historical connection between Greece and China in terms of their ancient military history. The Greeks are perceived as an inherently warlike people and are linked to China's martial traditions.

The peculiar hybridism involving two distinct ethnic cases presupposes the strengthening of the national identity and the emergence of the so-called "warrior identity" – the identity that connects those involved in "war'' regardless of nationality, religion, etc. In addition to that, the differentiation between Christianity and Buddhism discussed earlier, defines the relationship between the teachers/secular apostles and the disciples, who choose the warrior part (Wu) over the whole (Wu/Yi/Chan). The same unifying factor defines the common history, with a sense of injustice as far as the country of origin is concerned, from the moment that is unable to justify its historical dimension; this results in the expression of martial arts being localized in the cultural choices of China. In other words, if Greece does not fully preserve its martial arts traditions, but China can do so for its own culture, then the martial arts practitioners may find a way out in the second option.

The ethnic dimension was particularly interesting since national histories were presented as the "common denominator" for this cultural exchange. While the religious dimension had to do with differences in interpretations of the nature of Buddhist Chan and its conceptual framework, the ethnic dimension was rather concerned with a particular "cultural exchange of war stories". Religion is a "cultural system" obviously much more malleable and prone to the formation of hybrid identities than the nation. In the first case, a religion such as Buddhist Chan, which (as we have seen) has been interpreted in various ways during its arrival in the Western world, is subject to a process of "disassociation" from its religiosity, while retaining its symbols and religious ideas. On the other hand, while Shaolin Kung Fu forms an integral part of China's history and culture, also constitutes a cultural loan based on Greece's and China's "parallel" histories.

As we have seen above, some Shaolin Kung Fu trainees are commonly perceived as having distanced themselves from the religious dimension of Chan. Although they know about Shaolin Monastery's religious dimension and some of them are identified with it, we can also observe the dissociation of Chan from its religious content. In particular, although Buddhism and its general doctrinal schools (Theravada, Mahayana, Vajrayana) are recognized as a religion, Buddhism's acceptance as a

religion stops in Chan. In this case, it is argued that Chan Buddhism is a "philosophy", i.e. a "secular" concept with no clear characteristics and always open to new interpretations and approaches. Buddhism is perceived as a set of ideas and practices that one can choose, use, adopt, or believe in, rather than a set of teachings that prescribe a particular way of thinking and acting. The Shaolin Monastery is considered to be the birthplace of Chan Buddhism (it is traditionally associated with the Indian monk Bodhidharma –in Chinese, Ta Mo), who introduced Chan to China); furthermore, the ways Buddhism is perceived have to do: a) with the martial arts, which at this point are considered as Buddhist tradition's integral part; b) with the "philosophy" concerning individual choice and attitude towards all the Shaolin Monastery's cultural dimensions; and c) with Buddhism itself as a religion, which involves the full adoption of Buddhist teachings and practices.

As it becomes obvious, Buddhism here is relatively expressed. Philosophy, as a more "denervated" and legitimized term, more closely associated with individual choices of self-realization, emerges as the content of Zen/Chan.

Many times, the "secular" character of Shaolin Monastery is highlighted with regard to the habits of the trainees coming from the West, as there are references to those who are either dressed following Western standards or wearing religious objects coming from other religions, such as crosses, as well as to the equality that characterizes the relations between the trainees, regardless of whether they are men or women and the degree of their integration in the new environment. In addition, practitioners at Shaolin Monastery can eat meat and marry if they wish, as long as they belong to the "combatant" monks and not to the "normal" ones. This is an interesting thing to observe, from the moment that brings to the surface the "secular" aspects of the institution. The monastery offers many ways through which Chinese and international practitioners may integrate in order to promote its special characteristics. Then, the "secular apostles" receive corresponding certifications to open and operate Shaolin Kung Fu schools, without any connection to Buddhism and its teachings being a prerequisite. On top of that, there are no restrictions in accepting people from other countries, as long as they are willing

to practice hard Shaolin Kung Fu. This attitude highlights the monks' tolerance towards individual choices. The monastery is perceived as a fertile ground for the development and protection of one's individuality. At the same time, elements of Western identities are considered to be kept intact and therefore function as traces of individuality and alterity rather than as structural elements of self-constitution.

Shaolin Kung Fu as a "cultural system" seems to have started and spread while maintaining the principles of tolerance and acceptance of difference. However, its "transplantation" into the cultural mosaic of modern Greece appears to be much more complex. Both teachers and students referred to the mistrust with which Greeks have treated them. Shaolin Kung Fu seems to be perceived by society as a manifestation of Buddhism and Asia in general, which has little or no relation to the country and its culture. The public is more or less ignorant of Buddhism, characterized by its phobic reactions to it. But what do the trainees know, while the wider public is completely unaware of them? The answer concerns the very specificity of Buddhism Chan, which gives particular emphasis to reality itself. Much emphasis is given to the fact that Buddha was a historical person, who was born, grew up, and died, while his "philosophical'' teachings are considered far removed from those of other religions. The phrase "Buddhism is not a religion" constitutes a "commonplace" among Shaolin Kung Fu's trainees, with some of them being somewhat more receptive to the idea that it may be "a religion". In many cases, their statement that Buddhism is not a religion was followed by the phrase: "I don't care", while the absence of any reference whatsoever to "miracles" overstated Buddhism's (or simply Buddhist Chan's) "secularism".

This "De-religionization" of Chan Buddhism represents a natural consequence of the individualistic approach towards Shaolin Kung Fu – a practice that, from its inception in Shaolin Monastery itself to its reception in countries outside China, is carried out without reference to the particular historical and religious conditions that have characterized it, culturally shaped it, and continue to survive within it. However, the way they appear in the activities of even the most asserted "deniers" of Buddhist religiosity (Chan or not) is fragmented, creeping, and pervasive.

The trainees' motives remain unquestionably secular, not only because their preoccupation with Shaolin is a personal choice and it is invested with individual meanings, or the undeniable economic dimensions that lie behind their decision, but because this preoccupation covers a deeper need for the search for meaning, which scientific discourse even in our days struggles to meet. The trainees showed a remarkable convergence of opinions when the discussion focused on aspects like well-being, physical and mental self-improvement, and other benefits they have gained by practicing Shaolin Kung Fu. Also, although most (with one clear exception) agreed that Buddhism, in our case identified with Chan, is not a religion, others think that Buddhism is not only a religion and can be studied and understood at will. The connection, however, between Buddhism as a religion and the processes, concepts, and ideas that were elements of everyday coaching and in many cases of general daily life, did not seem to come to the fore. This is a phenomenon that can be explained through the conceptual framework of the "Diffuse New Religiosity" and in particular the disassociation of religious ideas and practices from their institutional matrices and their diffusion to various cultural fields.