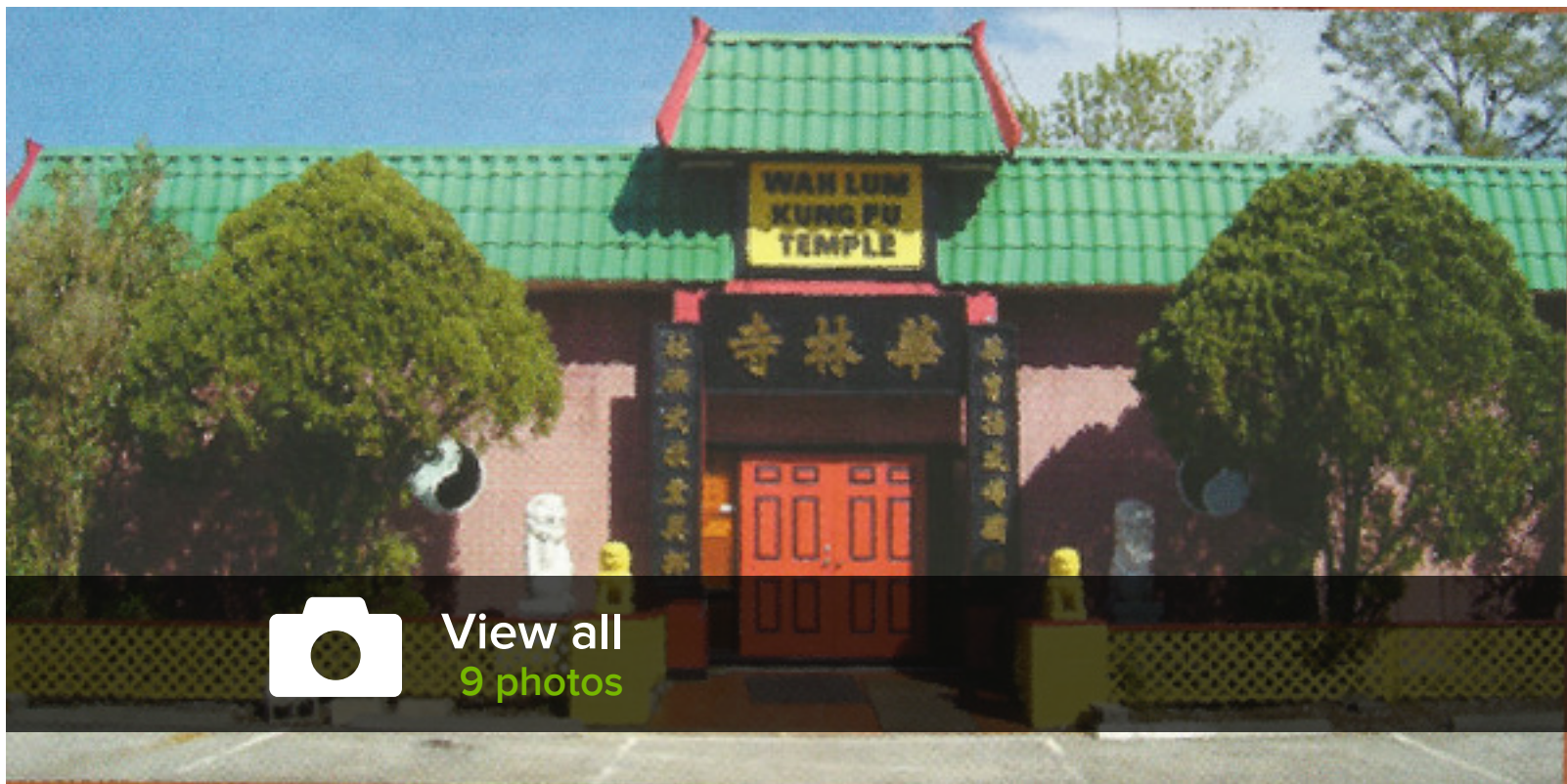


# Grandmaster Pui Chan: the pioneer of Kung Fu in the U.S.A.

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Three years ago, at [Kung Fu Tai Chi Magazine's 25th Anniversary Gala](#), there were a couple dozens of the most outstanding Chinese martial artists from all over the world. They performed and provided an eye feast of astonishing martial arts. At age 74, Grandmaster Pui Chan was the most senior; nevertheless his performance was no less if not better than some other masters who were decades younger than him. I was utterly speechless watching him crouch down flat on the floor and spring right back in a split second.



The front door of Wah Lum Temple, Orlando, FL  
*Wah Lum Temple*



*Wah Lum Temple*

Recently, I was in Orlando, Florida for a family reunion. I did not want to pass on a great opportunity to meet the legend face-to-face. He invited me to meet with him at his school, [Wah Lum Temple](#). He had a dental appointment in the morning and just finished up lunch when I showed up. I suggested that he rest for a while before we talked. The 77-year-old grandmaster shook his head energetically and led me through three large Kung Fu studios and a koi pond. There wasn't any class during the lunch break but a few diligent students practiced Tai Chi (Taiji) and Kung Fu on their own. Finally, we entered Wah Lum Cultural Center, which was a ranch style building completed last year housing grandmaster's office, three exhibit halls, one auditorium, and storage rooms. Grandmaster Pui Chan fondly told me that his students were handy and volunteered to build the center.

Born in 1938 in Canton, China to a well-to-do family, Pui Chan was active as a youngster. His father, the head of their village, thought it would be good for him to get disciplined and learn martial arts to protect the village when needed –China was tumultuous then and people had suffered from the fighting among different warring factions, the Japanese invasion, and bandits. With his exceptional athleticism, Northern Praying Mantis Grandmaster [Lee Kwan Shan](#) accepted the six-year-old Pui Chan as his last and also the youngest disciple. Pui excelled and was assigned by his teacher to perform in public just a few months later. Pui also studied intensively with his oldest Kung Fu brother [Chan Wan Ching](#).

Communists took over China in 1949. Martial arts were banned on various grounds. Chan's family was plagued because his father was a landlord. The old Chan was beaten and humiliated and jailed for a couple of years. The young Chan was forbidden to continue his formal education at the third grade. Starting at age 12, Pui had to work to support his family, first to raise ducks then to harvest oysters. With no hope on the horizon for his future, he decided to flee and sneaked into Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, he continued his Kung Fu instructions from Chan Wan Ching and worked as a non-skilled labor. But something was calling him. He became a seaman. His journeys on cargo ships took him to the

Southwest Asian countries, South Africa and eventually the United States of America. Pui proudly claimed that he was a good swimmer and swam miles from a boat docked outside of the [Statue of Liberty](#) to Manhattan. He worked in his uncle's restaurant first. Gradually, others discovered his Kung Fu skills and sought after his teaching. He did not officially establish Wah Lum School until 1970 in Boston though.

There were tall tales of how Chinese martial art masters guarded family secrets and did not share outside of the family members. However, Chan was a pioneer who taught non-Chinese back in the early 70's.. His motto was a Confucius' saying that "You Jiao Wu Lei" (or "teaching all without discrimination"). When he moved to Orlando in 1980, he trusted his American student Master [Bob Rosen](#) to run the Boston school. Another Chinese martial art tradition is that one should faithfully practice and teach his inherited art and nothing else. Owing to the insatiable taste for [Chinese martial arts](#), Chan stepped out of the boundary and learned other Kung Fu systems. With his diligence and superb skills, he was accepted by Shaolin Temple as a 33rd generation disciple. He encouraged his family and students to learn other systems as well to broaden their knowledge. His wife Suzy Chan, a cancer survivor, studied with a Chen Style Tai Chi master to revive her health. Chan's passion for Chinese martial arts knows no limit. To promote Kung Fu, he was among the first invited masters from China to teach at his schools and to judge in tournaments, including [Jet Li's](#) coach Wu Bin. He brought the first Shaolin Monk Tour to the U.S. in 1992. Once or twice a year, he led his students to China to learn different systems. He teamed up with Chen Style Tai Chi Grandmaster [Chen Xiaowang](#) to Germany and Fu Style Wudang Grandmaster [Bow-Sim Mark](#) (Master [Nick Gracenin's](#) teacher and [Donnie Yen's](#) mother) to Great Britain to teach. In 1972, he put on the first premium Kung Fu show at John Hancock Center in Boston. It was a bold move but a successful one. In 2000, he hosted probably the largest international Kung Fu tournament outside of China with 1,700 contestants from all over the world in Orlando and donated proceeds to the St. Jude Children's Hospital.

He has trained tens of thousands and many became instructors. There are over 50 schools authorized in the U.S., Brazil, Germany, and Switzerland under the name of Wah Lum. Grandmaster Chan has been featured in magazines and documentaries numerous times including Discovery Channel's *Secret of the Warrior's Power*, *Living Legends of Kung Fu (Vol. I)*, *Warrior Within – Inside the Martial Arts*, and various interviews and articles with *Kung Fu Magazine*, *Inside Kung Fu*, and *Journal of Chinese Martial Arts*. Chan has received honors such as Instructor of the Year and Martial Artist of the Year by Inside Kung Fu Magazine and Black Belt Magazine along with many others. He is a 2003 inductee to the highly selective [US Kuoshu Martial Arts Hall of Fame](#). Last year, Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer issued a proclamation and designated November 1 as Wah Lum Cultural Center Day. An awarding winning documentary [Pui Chan: Kung Fu Pioneer](#) (2012) has captured his strength and spirit. You can watch a trailer accompanying this article.

The mission of Wah Lum Cultural Center is to educate Chinese cultures and traditions, in a hope to

shape the future by preserving the heritage. Grandmaster Chan patiently walked me through some of the rare artifacts. The center was like a who's who in contemporary Chinese martial art. Grandmaster Chan was a walking-talking wikipedia and had an incredible memory and recalled many events right down to the exact date with details. He talked fast with interesting stories and tidbits. I regret that I did not record my two-hour interview with him. What I remembered most was not the beautiful [Wing Chun wooden dummy](#) made in gold gifted to him by [Ip Man: the Final Fight](#) movie producer Checkley Sin, his photos with [Chuck Norris](#) and [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#), weapons used by the [Taiping Heavenly Kingdom's](#) rebels (1850-64), volumes of classic Chinese martial arts, but the sparkle in Grandmaster's eyes when he talked about martial art heroes and heroines. To pass on the baton, he quit teaching on a regular basis. Now Master Mimi Chan is the chief instructor at Wah Lum Temple in Orlando with either other instructors. When I asked whether he still practiced, he did not say anything but slowly raised his right leg and knee to chest high in perfectly straightened form and balance. Actually, he does basic Kung Fu drills and Tai Chi daily.

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**Violet Li**

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