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Mastering the Art of Business

Unlike other forms of martial art, Systema is more about principles than technique

communism. While its motto – strength, courage, humility – resembles those of more testosterone-fuelled martial arts, Systema focuses mostly on humility.

Trickle-Down Knowledge

Certified in Moscow, Mr Litalien started training seven years ago under Canadian instructor Emmanuel Manolakakis in Toronto. "I'd long been interested in martial arts. After looking at a few types, someone recommended Systema. I had no idea what it was, but after the first class, I knew I was home.

"The school had an exceptional atmosphere, which I hope to re-create here, where people are not here because of ego but to work out and have fun.

The experienced ones work alongside the novices, so knowledge trickles down well."

Having worked previously as a fraud investigator for a Canadian bank for 10 years, the Quebec native decided to move to Hong Kong in 2010 to redirect his career. He started holding Systema classes in Kowloon Park with like-minded enthusiasts for about six months before moving into a small studio.

He formally set up the present centre with a Hong Kong business partner in September 2010. The studio has about a dozen male and female students, aged 13 to 50. Along with another Hong Kong instructor, classes are held at the studio in Kowloon four times a week. Since opening, the centre has also held three seminars conducted by instructors from Moscow and Toronto, including one last month by Daniil Ryabko, whose father, Colonel Mikhail Ryabko, "helped put Systema on the map."

A System that Works

The movements are slow and spare, with participants mainly working with their partners' tension and moves. Welcome to the world of Systema, a centuries-old form of Russian martial arts. An official centre was opened in Hong Kong by French-Canadian Janik Litalien, who had a hunch that Systema was a good fit for Hong Kong.

"Martial arts is a tradition in Hong Kong, where Bruce Lee and Jet Li made their names" Mr Litalien said. "There's got to be a percentage out there who will be tired of the same old, same old."

Unlike more mainstream forms of martial arts, Systema has no levels or belts. It's mostly defensive in nature, "waiting for your partner to give you something to work with and teaching your body to anticipate and react while staying relaxed.

Despite its 1,200-year history, Systema was integrated into Russia's elite Special Forces unit only recently, after decades of suppression under



Janik Litalien (left) with Russian instructor Daniil Ryabko, who was invited to conduct a Systema seminar in Hong Kong last month

Mr Litalien said Systema has been catching on in the last few years because "people want to try something different, and it's a system that works."

He said that while there were only a handful of schools worldwide when he



The centuries-old Russian martial art focuses on working with the opponent's tension and moves

first started seven years ago, "now, every time I open Facebook, I see a new school has popped up." He estimates that there are currently more than 150 Systema schools around the world. Mr Litalien also sees potential demand on the Chinese mainland in the future.

But for now, his focus will be on expanding the business in Hong Kong and "making sure it's on a solid footing." He's intent on keeping it a "low-key centre, focused solely on Systema.

Mr Litalien gets the word out through social media networks and by distributing flyers. "We're a niche market, but it is growing, thanks in part to social media.

"If we can give that feeling of leaving your problems behind as soon as you walk through the door, the job will already be half done. Let's not forget that you want to do this to disconnect from the world. Hong Kong is a city with enough stresses already. People get into yoga, massage – this incorporates everything."

"Incredible Education"

Running the business is another story. "It's a learning experience every day trying to move this business beyond start-up," he said. "Operating a business is an incredible education on human nature." He noted, in particular, the freedom but long working hours that comes with running a business. "But as they say, 'find something you love to do, and you'll never work a day in your life.'" Setting up his business in Hong Kong was "fairly easy," said Mr Litalien, who admits to having already developed a strong affinity for the city. "Every day I go out and see something new; it makes me like this place even more."



Experts practice alongside novices, allowing knowledge to "trickle down"

Multicultural Hong Kong

One of the best aspects of Hong Kong, he said, is its multiculturalism. "I smile at the fact that a French-Canadian such as me is teaching Russian martial arts to a Chinese audience," he said, noting that an Australian-Brazilian martial arts teacher and a Filipino-Israeli martial arts instructor are also teaching in Hong Kong. "It just reflects the international nature of Hong Kong."

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Systema

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