

# **Examining the Shaolin Fighting Lineage: History and Function of the East Asian Martial Arts Tradition**

## **Introduction**

Fighting, and the fighting arts, have been practiced and explored by people in every part of the world, and the history of these martial styles is extensive. Various cultures develop different fighting styles, most of which come about for purposes which are purely practical. When looking at the fighting traditions originating in East Asia, it is clear that the overwhelming emphasis within these fighting styles was placed on practicality and application in real-world situations. However, at some point in China's history, after the introduction of Buddhism around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, a fighting style developed in the rural area around modern day Deng Feng city in Henan Province. Here, at the legendary Shaolin Temple, Buddhist monks developed a fighting style that was markedly different from other styles circulating at the time. While undeniably practical and applicable to real world situations, this fighting style also operated as a means of holistic exercise intended to give the monks a well-trained mind and body in preparation for seated meditation. Through the centuries, the martial arts practiced at Shaolin became increasingly more famous, and tales of the monks' exploits spread throughout China. Ultimately the monks at Shaolin gained legendary status, and the stories associated with their Gongfu practice slowly

began to include elements of the supernatural, emphasizing both the monks' martial prowess and their commitment to Buddhism. Tales began to circulate of unbeatable styles, or of unbeatable martial artists, who were able to become nearly invincible through their deep understanding of these mysterious practices. Eventually, any Chinese martial arts school wishing to maintain credibility had to emphasize their connection to the Shaolin temple through direct lineage, even if no true lineage existed.

Through an analysis of available sources both classical and modern, I will show that two dominant viewpoints concerning East Asian martial arts exist. The first viewpoint holds that East Asian martial arts are somehow directly spiritual/religious in nature. The second viewpoint stresses the importance of the practical application of East Asian martial arts, i.e. the effectiveness of these styles in real-world applications. I argue that neither view of East Asian martial arts is acceptable. Instead, I offer an explanation that categorizes the martial arts of East Asia as being neither inherently religious/supernatural or overtly practical; instead, these traditions serve both as a form of cultural preservation and as a means of personal character development and holistic exercise. Additionally, this paper will answer some of the more obvious questions concerning these martial arts, such as why these Buddhist monks are training how to fight and maim in the first place.

In order to explore this issue I will be drawing upon scholarly sources dealing both with historical sources surrounding the legendary Shaolin Temple as well as sources focusing on the development of East Asian martial arts as we know them today. Through synthesizing primary sources with modern secondary

critiques, I intend to show that the issues being presented by this topic are not entirely new; it would seem that the monks themselves have at some times questioned their own involvement in the fighting arts.

This paper will include three chapters, which are outlined below. Chapter One includes an overview of the evidence surrounding the earliest known connection between the Shaolin Temple and martial arts. In addition, this chapter will also briefly touch on the significance behind the myths surrounding the origins of Gongfu at Shaolin. Also, this section will include an overview of Buddhist Chan religious roots in its older Indian context—as well as in terms of the tradition’s introduction to China itself. This overview will establish a foundation to begin exploring the religious and philosophical implications of Chinese Gongfu as developed through the Shaolin lineage. The history surrounding the origins and developments of the Shaolin Temple is obscured by an incredible amount of legend, making the process of discerning credible information regarding the actual religiosity of the martial arts as practiced in Shaolin very difficult. However, it is important to understand some of the myths surrounding the temple’s origins, as myth carries cultural considerations that I feel are relevant to the understanding of the topic at hand. This chapter will deal with the history of the development of Gongfu at Shaolin Temple in two sections. The first section includes an overview of how the Chan (禪) sect of Buddhism developed in China. The second section deals with the significance of the myths and legends associated with the Shaolin Temple in relation to the development of Chinese martial arts. The third and final section of this chapter examines scholarly historical articles regarding late-Ming evidence of

martial practice at Shaolin in order to clearly define the dichotomy between the mythical and historical representations of these martial arts.

Chapter two focuses on the guiding philosophies behind these martial arts. In this chapter I will explore the philosophical and religious significance behind the practice of these martial arts, introducing and explaining the way in which fundamental Buddhist ideas have been adopted and subsequently expressed through practice. The topics covered in this section will include the Buddhist notions of non-thinking and non-self as utilized and demonstrated by East Asian martial arts.

For my third and final chapter, I will be conducting a set of interviews with contemporary Taiwanese Gongfu Masters, in order to ground my research at a practical level with the people who are currently carrying on the East Asian martial arts tradition. In addition, this section will focus on the way East Asian martial arts functions today in East Asia, as a means of cultural preservation, a form of holistic exercise, and as a means towards personal character development.

Hopefully this paper can shed some light on a fighting tradition that is often misrepresented solely as a means to beat someone else in a fight. Through a combination of a rich history, religious implications and a brutal ethos, East Asian martial arts have developed into one of the most fascinating areas of East Asian studies, to which I hope my paper may make some small contribution.

## Chapter One: Chinese Gong Fu: A Look into Shaolin's Religious Roots



—Chinese silk painting of Bodhidharma

In order to begin exploring the religious or spiritual dimensions of Chinese martial arts, an understanding of the history surrounding the earliest known records of martial arts in China is needed. However, this topic is much too vast to be addressed in its entirety for the purposes of this paper. Instead, I will be focusing my analysis of Chinese martial arts specifically in regards to its connections with the ancient Chan (禪) Buddhist Monastery Shaolin Si (少林寺<sup>1</sup>). This chapter begins

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<sup>1</sup> The etymological origins of the Temple at Shaolin are as follows: The character *Shao* (少), often misinterpreted to mean “small” or “young”, actually refers here to the holy mountain of Shao Shi (少室山, one of the many peaks that form the famous Mt. Song area), upon which Shaolin temple is

with an overview of the history of Chan Buddhism in China. In addition, this chapter will briefly touch on the significance behind the myths and legends surrounding the origins of Gongfu (功夫) at Shaolin. Finally, the last section includes an overview of the historical evidence surrounding the earliest known connection between the Shaolin Temple and the martial arts practiced there.

### ***Brief History of Chan Buddhism in China***

It is important to stress that the entirety of the Gongfu created at Shaolin was developed through the religious institution of a Buddhist monastery.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, as one of China's first Chan monasteries, this section will include an overview of the Indian roots of Chan religiosity as well as a summary of Chan's introduction to China. This overview will establish a foundation for exploring the religious and philosophical implications of Chinese Gongfu as developed through the Shaolin lineage.

The Chinese Chan tradition, like all of China's Buddhist lineages, stems from India. The word Chan (禅, originally Chan Na, Chinese: 禅那) was an early Chinese transliteration of the Indian concept of *dhyana*, which denotes the existence of deep states of meditation that can be explored by a practitioner. In its early Indian context, the attainment of upper levels of *dhyana* meditation when combined with

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situated. The character *Lin* (林) means forest, denoting the small hillside forest which still exists on the temple grounds today.

<sup>2</sup> As such, the majority of myths regarding the creation of the martial arts as practiced and developed at Shaolin carry strong religious connotations, which will be discussed further in the second section of this chapter.

the insight garnered through *prajna* (roughly translated to wisdom) could lead one to experience enlightenment, or nirvana.

Chan Buddhism in China developed out of and in response to the highly scholastic monastic community operating as early as 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, which was largely concerned with a) translating an enormous corpus of Indian Buddhist sutras and concepts into working Chinese and b) supporting themselves as a monastic institution in the face of widespread criticism by people who viewed Buddhist philosophy as incompatible with traditional Confucianist values. The Chan School established its first Chinese roots in the midst of the academia surrounding the early point of Buddhism's introduction into China. In response to this academic implementation of Buddhism, the Chan Buddhists were quite radical in their open and seemingly negative viewpoint on the overemphasis of an academic understanding of Buddhist principles. Consequently, the Chan school emphasized an approach that favored the direct experiential knowledge that comes from a deep and personal examination of one's own consciousness, and they held fast to an idea that the higher teachings of the Buddha could not be understood in terms of discourses or language.

The traditional Sino-Japanese story associated with the foundations of Chan Buddhism is located in the Flower Sermon (Chinese: 拈花微笑<sup>3</sup> lit. "grasp flower,

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to understand the connotations of the Chinese word 拈, which include "to nip", "to grasp (with the fingers)," or "to fiddle with (the fingers)." These meanings all serve to highlight the intended hyper-subjectivity associated with written discourses or treatises rooted in the Chan tradition. In addition, it is easy to see how origin stories such as "The Flower Sermon" serve to reinforce the troubling association of Chan with mysticism. Lastly, the tactile connotations of the Chinese 拈 serve to de-emphasize any notions of mental cognition, instead replacing them with the very direct and experiential stimulus of touch. Source—[www.mdbg.net](http://www.mdbg.net)

smile subtly”). In the story Śākyamuni Buddha<sup>4</sup> gathers his students for a sermon. After all of the monks have sat down, the Buddha simply sits before them in perfect stillness. After a considerable amount of time, the Buddha suddenly plucks a flower from the ground beside him and carefully holds it in his fingers. Upon seeing this gesture, the Buddha’s student Mahākāśyapa was said to have smiled quietly to himself. The Buddha recognized this smile as an expression of Mahākāśyapa’s direct cognition of the ineffable *prajna* essential to enlightenment.

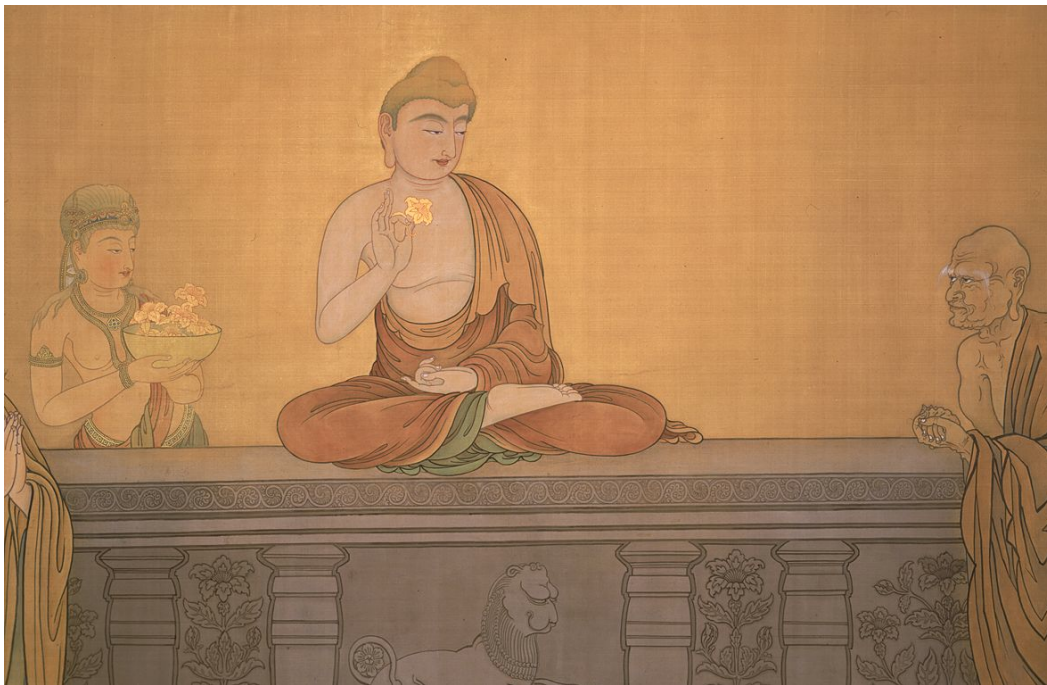


Figure 1: A Japanese Painting Depicting the Flower Sermon from the Meiji Period by artist Hishida Shunso, dated 1897. Source—Tokyo National Museum Collection

Interestingly, the kind of “direct transmission” depicted in the Flower Sermon is emphasized by other Buddhist traditions, most notably in the Dzogchen tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. It is these kinds of religious descriptions of Chan that often lead

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<sup>4</sup> Śākyamuni, lit. “Sage of the Śākyas”, is the Sanskrit term used to denote the Buddha of our era, also known as Gautama Buddha.



to an association of Chan with mysticism and folklore. Early Chan Buddhists feared that an overemphasis on the importance of analysis of Buddhist scriptures could lead practitioners to use language and discourse as a crutch instead of as a tool towards deepening one's understanding. It is important to note that Chinese Chan Buddhism owes much of its own philosophical models and religious behavior to earlier schools of Chinese Daoism, to which the development of Chan is inexorably linked. Many of ideas and attitudes expressed by Chinese Chan practitioners mirror the language of the Daoist Classics, most notably the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi*, which also outline the pitfalls of language when considering more esoteric teachings.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, through radical responses toward earlier forms of Buddhism paired with a deep connection to Daoism, Chan Buddhism earned itself a reputation as being steeped in mysticism, the esoteric, and the arcane. It should be clear that the institution of Chan Buddhism in medieval China was quite radical during its own time. I argue that this close historical association of Chinese Chan with early Chinese Gongfu encourages the ill-informed viewpoint that East Asian martial arts are somehow inherently religious or spiritual in nature.

### ***Origins of the Shaolin Temple: Identifying and Examining the Significance of Myth and Legend***

The history surrounding the origins and developments of the Shaolin Temple is obscured by an incredible amount of legend and myth, making the process of

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<sup>5</sup> The opening to the early canonic Daoist work entitled the "*Dao De Jing*" attributed to Lao Zi (老子) serves as testament to the early Daoists' tendency to exercise caution when dealing with written words: the opening lines read, "The Way which can be talked about is not the true Way" (Laozi, 1).

discerning credible information regarding the actual religiosity of the martial arts as practiced in Shaolin very difficult. However, it is important to understand some of the myths surrounding the temple's origins, as myth carries cultural considerations that I feel are relevant to the understanding of the topic at hand. This section will analyze some of the more popular myths associated with Shaolin Temple in order to show the significance these stories have regarding the development of Gongfu.

The most popular myth is that of the legendary founder of the Shaolin Temple, Bodhidharma (Chinese: Damo), and his relation to the Five Holy Peaks (Chinese: Wuyue) of China, which served as holy mountains and protectors of the state.<sup>6</sup> Of importance to this particular myth is the Shaolin Temple's geographic proximity to the Mt. Song mountain range. By as early as 110 BCE, these mountains had already gained legendary status by means of the emperors and imperial cults that performed holy rites there.<sup>7</sup> Also, by the time Buddhist temples began to be established at Mt. Song as early as the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Daoist temples (including the famous Daoist Temple of the Central Peak, Chinese: Zhongyuemiao) had already been functioning for centuries. So, as the Buddhist influence began growing in this region of China, so did the steady appropriation of Mt. Song as a holy Buddhist site. Part of this appropriation, or "Buddhist Conquest,"<sup>8</sup> required the newly established Buddhist institutions to link the Chinese Mt. Song with the Indian religion which they were promoting.

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<sup>6</sup> These five peaks were defined in accordance with the Five-Phases Cosmology, which labeled a north-facing mountain (Mt. Heng), south-facing (Mt. Heng), east-facing (Mt. Tai), west-facing (Mt. Hua), and center (Mt. Song). It should be clear that the fame of Mt. Song had long since been established prior to the foundation of the Temple at Shaolin.

<sup>7</sup> Shahar, 12

<sup>8</sup> Zürcher

In order to accomplish this task, the newly established Chan school of Buddhism had to create a history for itself. One of the defining traits of the Chan school of Buddhism stresses the importance of direct transmission. Essentially, the idea of direct transmission encompasses the belief that the Ultimate Truth discovered by the Buddha could be passed directly from master to disciple, without the need for books or scriptures. Thus, the early Chan Buddhist practitioners were required to provide a lineage of direct transmission extending all the way back to the original Buddha of India, Śākyamuni, if they were to legitimize their religion. The link they chose to connect India to China revolved around the mysterious Bodhidharma, regarded as the founder of the Chan School. While much remains unknown about Bodhidharma, most scholars accept “the historicity of this Indian (or, according to another version, Persian) missionary, who arrived in China around 480 and propagated the Dharma in the Luoyang region until ca. 520...However, scholars are skeptical as to Bodhidharma’s role in the Chan School (which emerged at least a century after his death).”<sup>9</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, the importance of the Bodhidharma myth stems from his connection to Mt. Song. By the late-seventh and early-eighth century, Mt. Song had quickly become one of the most well established and important centers of Chan discourse, with masters such as Faru (638-689) and Huian (?-709) living inside the Shaolin Temple. It was during this time that the Chan masters began connecting Bodhidharma to the holy peak Mt. Song, claiming that it was on Mt. Song’s slopes that Bodhidharma first transmitted the ineffable Dharma to the

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<sup>9</sup> Shahar, 13

Chinese-born Huike<sup>10</sup> (ca. 485—ca.555) via direct transmission. In this way Mt. Song along with Bodhidharma became the symbolic stepping-stone between India and China.

It wasn't until around 710 CE that the Shaolin Temple was explicitly connected with Bodhidharma. In the classic Chinese composition *Precious Record of the Dharma's Transmission* (Chinese: Chuanfa Baoji), Bodhidharma was said to have spent several years facing a wall meditating within Shaolin.<sup>11</sup> However, evidence of Bodhidharma's association with the Shaolin Temple doesn't only extend to scriptures; indeed, by 798 a stele from the Temple grounds existed with the following inscription:

After nine years had passed, Bodhidharma wished to return to the west, to India, so he commanded his disciples saying, "The time is near; each of you should say what you have attained." At the time the disciple Daofu replied, "As I see it, the function of the Dao consists in not attaching to scriptures and not being apart from scriptures." The master said, "You have gotten my skin." The nun Zongchi said, "my understanding now is that it is like the joy of seeing the Buddha-land of Akśobhya: it is felt at the first glance, but not the second glance." The master said, "You have gotten my flesh." Daoyu said, "The four elements are at root empty, and the five skandhas have no existence; from my point of view, there is not a single dharma that could be attained." The master said, "You have gotten my bones." Finally Huike, after making a prostration, just stood at his place. The master said, "You have gotten my marrow."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The legend of how direct-transmission took place between Bodhidharma took place goes as follows: Hui Ke went to Bodhidharma's cave on Mt. Song and asked for his help along the Buddhist path. When Bodhidharma refused, Hui Ke spent all night sitting outside his cave, and in the morning he was up to his ribs in snow. When Bodhidharma saw this, he asked Hui Ke why he was still there. Hui Ke replied that he wanted a teacher to "open the gate of universal compassion to liberate all beings". Bodhidharma refused, saying, "How can you hope for true religion with little virtue, little wisdom, a shallow heart, and an arrogant mind? It would just be a waste of effort." Unphazed, Hui Ke proceeded to cut-off his left arm and present it to Bodhidharma as proof of his resolve. After he had offered up his arm, Hui Ke said to Bodhidharma "My mind is anxious, please pacify it." To which Bodhidharma responded, "Bring me your mind, and I will pacify it." Hui Ke responded, "Although I've sought it, I cannot find it." To this Bodhidharma replied, "There, I have pacified you mind." At that moment Hui Ke attained enlightenment.

<sup>11</sup> Shahar, 13

<sup>12</sup> From Griffith Foulk's translation in his "Sung Controversies Concerning the 'Separate Transmission' of Ch'an," p. 246.

The metaphorical raking of the students by Bodhidharma becomes clear; Hui Ke earns the marrow or the “essence” of his master’s teaching. In time, this famous stele inscription took on a new meaning entirely. As the martial tradition of the Shaolin Temple garnered more and more fame, some monks began to interpret the inscription as a reference to a hidden secret manual—the *Marrow-Cleansing Classic* (Chinese: Xisui Jing)— that Bodhidharma was purported to have given Hui Ke. According to Shahar, because the monks at Shaolin, “Treasur[ed] the Saint’s arcane gymnastics, this treatise had remained hidden for more than a millennium. Then during the seventeenth century it miraculously emerged to influence the late imperial martial arts.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to this famous stele, an amazingly detailed temple was built about a half-mile north west of Shaolin Temple called Chuzu An, or “First Patriarch’s Hermitage” in 1125. Today the hermitage is considered to be a masterpiece of Song-dynasty stone carving. As the Shaolin Temple continuously developed the stories associated with its founding in conjunction with the stunning development of the temple itself, Shaolin quickly became a famous pilgrimage destination. By the time of the Song Dynasty, Chan, along with the Shaolin Temple, had become the most influential school of Chinese Buddhism.

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<sup>13</sup> Shahar, 15



*Hui Ke Thinking*, by Chinese painter Shi Ke (ch. 石恪), Song Dynasty, ca. 10<sup>th</sup> century

As the significance of Chan in China grew, so did Bodhidharma's importance within the Buddhist pantheon. And, as Shaolin Temple had already established extremely close associations with the Indian mythic, so grew the fame of the Shaolin Temple itself. The temple's strong ties with Bodhidharma succeeded in heightening the sacred connotations surrounding Shaolin. In addition, the temple's close proximity to Luoyang, one of the main Chinese capitols from the Eastern Han to the Tang Dynasties, ensured plenty on imperial patronage and wealth, which further expounded the fame acquired by Shaolin.

It should be clear that the way in which the legendary history surrounding the Shaolin Temple developed set the stage for the martial arts that evolved out of Shaolin to be viewed in highly mystical and religious ways by both early western scholars and native Chinese alike. I argue that the martial arts that grew out of

Shaolin carry such a heavy legendary or religious connotation due to the temple's own incredible history. In addition, while the majority of evidence regarding actual martial practice at Shaolin is almost completely restricted to manuals and letters originating around the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, the abundance of mythical significance placed on the temple serves to reinforce an ill-informed viewpoint that categorizes the martial arts practiced at Shaolin as being inherently spiritual or religious in nature. In order to examine any actual occurrences of martial participation by the temple in less biased ways, it becomes necessary to examine historical accounts of such activity, which is the objective of the succeeding section.

### ***Origins of the Shaolin Temple: Historical Analyses of Tang and Late-Ming Evidence of Martial Practice***

I will begin my historical analysis of martial arts as practiced at Shaolin first with the Tang Dynasty (唐朝), and later with the late-Ming period, the “earliest period regarding which we have solid evidence of regular military training at the monastery”<sup>1415</sup>. From the inscriptions found on several steles still located on Temple grounds, Shaolin monks are known to have fought on at least two occasions. Once was around 610 CE, when monks fought off an attack by bandits, and a second time was in the spring of 621 CE, when the monks assisted future Tang Emperor Li

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<sup>14</sup> Shahar, 360

<sup>15</sup> However, it is important to note that through a synthesis of many religious, political, and geographic factors surrounding the Shaolin Temple and its immediate vicinity, the monastery itself had garnered considerable amounts of fame and prestige predating the emergence of Ming-dynasty evidence regarding this topic. Various factors including the Temple's location near Mt. Song (嵩山), regarded as one of the “Five Holy Peaks” (五岳) to the ancient Chinese Emperors, to which they were supposed to pay homage. Additionally, Shaolin Temple's proximity to Luoyang secured many centuries of imperial patronage for the monastery.

Shimin (李世民) in securing a victory against Wang Shichong (王世充) near Luoyang<sup>16</sup>. Upon Wang Shichong's defeat, both the monks and the monastery were rewarded well by the Tang Court, which even appointed one of the monks to assume the position as the General in Chief (Chinese: Da Jiangjun, 大将军) of Li's army. However, while it is clear that the monks fought, there is no reference to specific training or technique, and there is no evidence surrounding the origination of these techniques until the introduction of a multitude of late-Ming documents concerning the issue appear<sup>18</sup> (ca. 1550-1644 CE). These documents show that by the late-Ming, martial arts had become so imbued within the structure of the monastery that the monks started to create entirely new Buddhist lore just to justify the practice within Temple walls.

References to the Shaolin monastery can be found in a large sampling of different kinds of Chinese writing stemming from the late-Ming. Military encyclopedias, geographical compositions, and even fiction in both its classic and vernacular idioms were all circulating throughout China regarding the sometimes-legendary exploits of the Shaolin Temple and its formidable monks. In addition, there were also a slew of martial arts manuals being produced at this time, many of which claimed to develop directly from Shaolin. Other manuals instead chose to

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<sup>16</sup> Shahar, 363

<sup>17</sup> See Map 1, source—*Ming Period Evidence of Shaolin Martial Practice*

<sup>18</sup> According to Shahar, "at least forty extant sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources attest that by the late-Ming period Shaolin monks had been practicing the martial arts" (pp. 364)





Map 1. Some Henan sites associated with the martial arts. Taijiquan originated at Chenjiagou village, Chang Naizhou compiled his martial-arts manuals at Sishui, and the Funiu-Mountain monks received military training at the Shaolin Monastery.

define their particular brand of Gongfu in opposition to the established Shaolin School; both examples serve to highlight the spotlight attention the Shaolin monastery achieved by as early as the Ming Dynasty (明朝). It is important to note that while the popular contemporary opinion of Shaolin might coincide with the temple's portrayal in these texts, the intended audience of such works was undoubtedly those who belonged to the upper echelons of society. Thus from the evidence provided it can only be extrapolated that the fame of the Shaolin Temple and the martial arts practiced by its monks was more or less a product of the interests of the elite ruling class in China. In opposition to the evidence stemming

from the Tang, which does not make any specific references to forms or techniques being used by the monks, the late-Ming evidence shows references to precise techniques or practices, and the earliest mention of a specific form of unarmed combat, or *quan* (拳), can be found as early as the sixteenth century<sup>1920</sup>. What becomes clear from an examination of these historical texts is that by the time of the late-Ming, there was already a discussion among the martial artists of the day regarding the validity of the origin of specific forms. Indeed, Cheng Zongyou (程宗猷) in regards to his treatise on the “The Original Shaolin Staff Method,” or “少林棍法阐宗”, attempts to show that his techniques were “the authentic Shaolin techniques, as distinct from the numerous methods that—even as they carried the monastery’s name—were far removed from its original meaning.”<sup>21</sup> It becomes clear that by as early as the seventeenth-century, authors such as Zongyou were compelled to emphasize the *original* nature (expressed by the Chinese word *zong* or 宗 in his title) of the martial arts style being explored; here, original denotes the degree to which the style was associated with the Shaolin Temple.

However, it wasn’t just the elite Chinese literati who were interested in the supposed military prowess of the monks at Shaolin. By the late-Ming, government officials and generals had developed an interest in the Shaolin Temple, as evidenced

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<sup>19</sup> Shahar, 365

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted, however, that in many texts surrounding the late-Ming popularity of Shaolin Gongfu, the form that garnered the most attention was the Shaolin Staff Fighting Style, found in its earliest form as “The Original Shaolin Staff Method,” or “少林棍法阐宗”. This distinction for the purposes of historical investigation is small, however, and the academic writings revolving around the issue of martial arts as depicted in the late-Ming will be condensed into its most essential forms and philosophies, of which I believe references to the staff method fit rather well.

<sup>21</sup> Shahar, 369

by the slew of encyclopedias and military treatises which arose during this time which referenced the fighting monks. Some of these authors, such as one Wu Shu, allude to the possibility that certain styles of combat practiced at Shaolin have ancient roots predating any Ming period evidence. He states that, “The Shaolin Staff Method has enjoyed fame from ancient times to the present,” and another General, Yu Dayou states that, “the Shaolin monks have lost the ancient secrets of their art.”<sup>22</sup> Assuming these generals are correct in their assessment of the temple’s history, invariably a question arises—why the sudden onslaught of texts referencing the Shaolin Temple by generals and government officials during the late-Ming? The answer lies in the late-Ming decline of military might. By the mid-sixteenth century, the Ming army was in such shambles that “the defense installations of the empire, along with their logistical framework, had largely vanished.”<sup>23</sup> As a result, pirates, known as *wokou* (Chinese: 倭寇, lit. “Japanese Bandits) consisting of a mix of both Chinese and Japanese began to raid large expanses of China’s southern and south-eastern coasts. Along the Jiangnan coast attacks were particularly severe, to the point where the walled city of Songjiang (Chinese: 松江) was sacked and the city’s magistrate executed. Seeking resources, the desperate generals along the Jiangnan region mobilized the Shaolin monks to fight alongside their troops as support regiments. While there are four verifiably documented battles involving Shaolin monks, only which took place on July 21, 1553 helps us understand the specifics of how the monks actually fought:

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<sup>22</sup> Shahar, 380

<sup>23</sup> Huang, 159

The monks scored their biggest victory in the Wenjiagang battle... where 120 fighting monks defeated there a group of pirates, chasing the survivors for ten days along the twenty-miles route southward to Wangjiazhuang 王家莊. There, on July 31, the very last bandit was disposed of. All in all, more than a hundred pirates perished, whereas the monks suffered four casualties only. Indeed, the monks took pity on no one in this battle, one employing his iron staff to kill an escaping pirate's wife.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly, these monks were not concerned with their commitment towards respect for all living things, which is problematic in its own right. However, the significance of the preceding description lies in the monks' martial ability, which clearly elaborates on their skill. The general who led the attack on the pirates, Tianyuan (Chinese: 天圓) studied at Shaolin, and was considered to be a strategic genius. General Zheng Ruoceng's account of Tianyuan's martial expertise mirrors that of the aforementioned Shaolin monks in this description below:

When eighteen Hangzhou monks challenged his command of the monastic troops, Tianyuan said: "I am real Shaolin (Chinese: *Wu nai zhen Shaolin ye* 吾乃真少林也). Is there any martial art in which you are good enough to justify your claim for superiority over me?" The eighteen [Hangzhou] monks chose from amongst them eight men to challenge him. The eight immediately attacked Tianyuan using their hand-combat techniques. Tianyuan was standing at that moment atop the open terrace in front of the hall. His eight assailants tried to climb the stairs leading to it from the courtyard underneath. However, he saw them coming, and struck with his fists, blocking them from climbing.

The eight monks ran around to the hall's back entrance. Then, armed with swords they rushed through the hall towards the terrace in front. They slashed their weapons at Tianyuan, who hurriedly grabbed the long bar used to fasten the hall's gate, and struck with it horizontally. They tried with all their might, but could not get into the terrace. On the contrary, they were beaten by Tianyuan.

Yuekong 月空 [the challenger's leader] surrendered and begged forgiveness. Then, the eighteen monks prostrated themselves in front of Tianyuan and declared their submission.<sup>25</sup>

The description of Tianyuan's fight with the eighteen monks sounds like it could have come straight out of the pulp-fiction martial arts novels and movies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, the motif of the martial artist hero-monk who through his deep

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<sup>24</sup> Shaha, 383

<sup>25</sup> Zheng, 8b. 18a.

dedication to Buddhism and the secrets of his temple's sacred Gongfu is able to single-handedly defeat a large group of armed opponents is commonplace, even in martial arts films today. However, these types of stories were presented as fact and subsequently used by generals such as Zheng to help convince government officials that the use of monastic armies would benefit China as a whole.

It seems that while the Shaolin Temple undeniably has a real history of involvement with the martial arts, the extent of the validity of this claim is far from certain. What becomes clear is that through the proliferation of stories and accounts such as Zheng's, the martial arts as practiced at Shaolin derive two distinct connotations: first, that the martial arts practiced by the monks is directly applicable to real-world fighting situations, and second, that the monks are able to be so successful in fighting due to their connections with Buddhism, i.e. Gongfu is somehow inherently spiritual or religious in nature. I argue that neither viewpoint is acceptable. However, there is no denying the connections between Chan Buddhism and the development of Gongfu. This issue is discussed in detail in the following section.

## **Chapter Two: The Philosophical and Religious significance within East Asian Martial Arts**

*“In this light, fighting isn’t just a skill—it reveals a state-of-mind, a way of relating to others. We not only speak and act with sincerity—we do our opponents the courtesy of committing ourselves, body and mind, to the fight.”<sup>26</sup>*

It is clear from this history that Chan Buddhism was connected to Chinese martial arts from the beginning. In this chapter, I will explore the philosophical and religious significance of the practice of Gongfu itself. The practice of Martial Arts, like that of Chan Buddhism, is a study seemingly filled with contradictions. How can a Buddhist monk, someone who has vowed to live a life of non-violence, honestly study the different ways of breaking somebody’s arms? How can the physical act of fighting be viewed as an arena to express Buddha-nature, on par with the peaceful tranquility of seated meditation? Through an exploration of the underlying philosophy grounding these fighting styles, from sources both ancient and modern, I hope to show the ways in which East Asian martial arts have adopted and utilized ideas surrounding Buddhist religiosity.

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<sup>26</sup> Priest and Young, 9

### *无心: Non-Thinking, Non-self, and Martial Arts*

In order to illustrate the underlying philosophies expressed through martial arts, I will first offer a portrait of an encounter between two students of Gongfu. Imagine this situation: As a beginning student of Chinese Gongfu, your Master (Ch. 师父) instructs you to prepare for a sparring exercise. As you get up to ready yourself for the fight, you notice that your Master has chosen Brutus, the student with the most training in this group, to be your sparring partner. Not only is Brutus the most-practiced member of your group, but he also happens to outweigh you, as well as being a good deal taller than you. As you bow to each other, you remember what your Master taught you, "When your opponent reveals an opening, there must be no hesitation! Your fist must strike all by itself." Also, despite your calm outer appearance, you notice a tickling sensation by the base of your spine: you are scared. Before you know it, the fight has begun, and suddenly all your other thoughts vanish. Instead, they are replaced with the kind of intense focus that ultimately reveals itself when someone is actively trying to hurt you. Watching all of his moves carefully, you see Brutus draw his right arm back, reading himself to punch. In an instant, you also register that by doing this, Brutus has revealed his ribs, a weak spot that you might exploit. So, you consciously decide to try and attack Brutus during this brief window of opportunity, only to find that by the time you made up your mind to strike, you are lying on your back, head ringing, seeing stars, and Brutus is looking down at you. You take a second to gather yourself, sit up weakly, and muster a painful bow

directed towards Brutus, thanking him for his instruction. Finally, bruised and battered, you retake your seat with the rest of the class, your ego limping along beside you. What has happened in this situation? How can an experience such as this be included in a discussion of Buddhist philosophy? The answer revolves around the Buddhist conception of no-mind, or 无心.

Martial Arts, as the name suggests, is an activity that deals largely with ideas of action. One must act in order to fight, so in order to understand the concept of no-mind, we must first clarify what it means to act. Usually when one understands an action, they see action as inseparable from intent (i.e. one acts in order to accomplish something). For our situation with the sparring exercise, our student acted out the counter-attack of Brutus' ribs with the intent of stopping Brutus' attack altogether. In other words, the *reason* our student began to counter-attack is that he *wanted* to eliminate the threat of the opposition. In the words of Donald Davidson, this type of explanation of action is a Causal one. A Causal series of action is essentially denoting a specific case where action was caused by intention<sup>27</sup>. In turn, this intention is a combination of *desire* (I want to hit Brutus in his ribs) and *belief* (If I counter-attack quickly enough, I will hit Brutus in the ribs). For Davidson, "an intentional action is caused both by a desire and belief—when combined, they are an intention."<sup>28</sup> The early Buddhists, who were very concerned with ideas of causality and desire, also addressed this topic. They believed that there was something else at work in this situation, something that brings the desire and the

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<sup>27</sup> Donald Davidson, *Essays of Actions and Events*, Clarendon, 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Finnigan and Tanaka, p.26



belief together. For the Buddhists, this something was the deeply-rooted sense of self. To the Buddhists, it is the self that clings to the idea that “In order to successfully counter Brutus’ attack, *I* must synthesize desire (hit Brutus in the ribs) and belief (*I can* hit him in the ribs) through thinking (If I act right now, I can effectively hit Brutus in the ribs).” Of course, this patterned way of thinking also embodies the idea of choice, that is, the “you” doing the thinking must choose the appropriate action best suited to carry out your intention. By this point, it should be clear that in the infinitesimal amount of time that it took for our student to get knocked to the floor, there was a minor hurricane of mental activity that took place.

For Chan Buddhists, and the Martial Artist, it is this “mental hurricane” that lies at the root of our student’s inability to strike Brutus. In the situation above, our student’s mind was rooted in many things: fear (of Brutus, embarrassment, failure, etc.), desire (to win, to stay safe, to impress Master, etc.), and thoughts of potential action (how do I go about striking Brutus?). For the Martial Artist, these mental occupancies served as hindrances, both to one who is striving towards enlightenment and to the Martial Artist. But then where is one supposed to place their mind during fighting, or meditation for that matter? The Buddhist answer is the same in both situations. One of Japan’s most famous Zen practitioners, Takuan Soho, took it upon himself to explore the question of where one should place their mind when engage in martial practice. In letters written to some of the best swordsmen of the time (Yagyū Menenori, Miyamoto Musashi), Takuan wrote that, “If you put your mind in the movement of your opponents body, your mind will be taken up by the movement of your opponent’s body. If you put your mind in your

opponent's sword, your mind will be taken up by that sword. When your eyes at once catch the sword of your opponent moving to strike you, if you think of meeting the sword in just that position, your mind will stop at the sword, you lose your movements and you will be struck by your opponent."<sup>29</sup> Takuan had an alternative to this kind of mentality. For Takuan, the mind of the one engaged in fighting should not place his mind *anywhere*. Instead, Takuan suggested that the mind reside in the inherent emptiness of all phenomena, a Buddhist concept known as Śūnyatā,<sup>30</sup> which was finally translated into Chinese as 空 (lit. empty or air).<sup>31</sup> So in this way Takuan's idea of no-mind is that of a fluid mind, focused not on one particular thing but on the entire relevant situation. In addition, it is clear that Takuan's no-mind concept lacks reflective thinking processes. Yet here lies a potential pitfall: doesn't the no-mind ideology do away with intention? In a word: yes. For Chan Buddhists, at the base of one of the religion's most essential teachings is the conception of non-self.<sup>32</sup> The ideology is radical to say the least, and for the historical Gautama Buddha,

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<sup>29</sup> From *The Unfettered Mind*, trans. Kodansha, 1986

<sup>30</sup> The term Śūnyatā refers to the Buddhist concept of "emptiness" or "voidness." It represents one of the highest teachings and attainments within the Buddhist tradition. This term should not, however, be misinterpreted with the western connotations surrounding emptiness, i.e. that of nihilism. Indeed, many of Buddhism's opponents have throughout history criticized the religion's concept of emptiness as nihilism, though this largely represents a misunderstanding. However, it is important to note here, that Buddhism as a tradition was particularly aware of the dangers of slipping into a nihilistic state, and the Chan/Zen School especially dealt with this issue head on. In particular, Zen master Dogen was credited as having warned against the opposite extreme of nihilism, which is eternalism, by instructing his students not to "just try to practice by thinking yourself into the idea that everything is Awake Awareness. There is a saying, 'If you penetrate one thing, you penetrate all things.' Penetrating something is not a matter of opposing or removing how something appears in its unique character. And don't try to cook up some state of non-opposition because this is just another form of grasping" (Dogen, *GenjoKoan*)

<sup>31</sup> From Mdbg

<sup>32</sup> It should be noted, however, that the Buddhist concept of non-self, or Anatta in Sanskrit, does not denote any kind of western interpretation of Nihilism. As one eminent contemporary Chinese Chan master, Nan Huaijin, puts it, "When the Hinayana speaks of no self, it is in reference to the manifest forms of presently existing life; the intent is to alert people to transcend this level, and attain Nirvana.

deep insight and understanding of this concept gave him the tools to finally reach enlightenment. Within Buddhist doctrine, the outline of the non-self can be described very briefly as such: we as people create and then subsequently attach our desires to an illusionary and ultimately non-existent construction of self. Belief in a permanent, unchanging self is in the eyes of a Buddhist rooted in ignorance and a desire for stability within a world constantly in flux. For the Martial Artist, and Takuan, residing in or fighting with any lingering trace of a sense of self is both dangerous (for the fighter himself), and ineffective.

It should be noted that this particular Buddhist idea of non-self is specifically Chan (Zen) in nature. Early Chan Buddhists operating in China must have appeared quite radical in their seeming disregard for “centrist or absolutist connotations attached to the concepts of emptiness, Buddha nature, and no-mind in the Tathagatagarbha texts.”<sup>33</sup> It is within this same idea of early Chan practitioners as “radicals” that author Nathan Johnson makes a sweeping claim regarding the spiritual nature of Gongfu. He argues that “the Zen (Chan) Shaolin way of China was not designed to defeat anything other than the aspirants’ own fears and delusions. Created out of Zen wordless gesture, as an adjunct to other meditation methods, the empty hand art taught how to seek and find the middle way, by physically letting go and not contending with any force, physical and mental. As stated earlier, it is

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But when this flowed into the world of learning, especially when it was disseminated in the West, some people thought that the Buddhist idea of no self was nihilism and that it denied the soul, and they maintained that Buddhism is atheistic. This is really a joke” (Nan Huaijin, *Working Toward Enlightenment: The Cultivation of Practice*. York Beach: Samuel Weiser. 1993. P.139.

<sup>33</sup> McFarlane, 406

important that you do not see this as a means of giving up or giving in.”<sup>34</sup> Later, Johnson references Patrick McCarthy, hailed by many to be one of the world’s foremost western karate historians, who said the following:

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The most successful *spiritual* factions within man’s ancient communities effectively cultivated remarkable doctrines that provide illuminating paths upon which followers *through methodical self-diagnosis* discovered the source of human suffering. In an effort to protect their spiritual beliefs and maintain a robust health, spiritual recluses cultivated herbalism, physical exercise and self-defense to protect their beliefs. The legendary place that cradled this unique synthesis is reputed to be China’s Shaolin Monastery. Yet when introduced outside its monastic sanctuary, the moral and spiritual elements of Quan Fa (Gong Fu or Kung Fu) became detached and reduced to a ritual of lip service. This resulted primarily because its defensive techniques were often sought after by secular disciples many of whom placed little or no importance upon its *moral or spiritual purpose*... It would be ludicrous to even consider that self-defense methods did not exist in ancient China prior to the advent of the Shaolin order, however, the advent and subsequent development of a codified self-defense system with *spiritual characteristics* and a moral philosophy with which to govern the behavior of those who mastered its secrets, remains purely a cultural phenomenon *cradled in the confines of austere Chinese monastic sanctuaries*.<sup>35</sup>

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Here, McCarthy touches on an idea that is central to the understanding of Gongfu and its ties to Chan Buddhism—although these martial arts are not directly spiritual or religious in nature, what makes them unique and separate from other forms of fighting is their moral and spiritual *characteristics* which resulted from their development out of the rich and colorful Chan Buddhist tradition.

From these first two chapters, it should be clear that Gongfu has operated as more than just a fighting tradition; it has survived for thousands of years within China, and it continues to function today not only in China itself, but in other

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<sup>34</sup> Johnson, 9

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, 11

countries such as Taiwan, the UK, and the United States. The third and final chapter of this paper will deal with the way in which these fighting arts operate in the present day in order to fully understand the modern function of Chinese Gongfu.

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### Chapter 3: Synthesizing Philosophy with Practice: Interviews and Experiences with Taiwanese Gongfu Masters



As I began to understand the function and spiritual characteristics of Gongfu through my research, I was unable to find any texts or sources that began to answer my question of how Gongfu operates presently in modern society. Additionally, I wanted to more fully understand McCarthy's statement that categorizes Gongfu as a "moral philosophy with which to govern the behavior of those who mastered its secrets."<sup>36</sup> Hoping to find the answers, I traveled to Taiwan in order to interview contemporary Gongfu Masters regarding these questions.

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<sup>36</sup> Johnson, 11

My first participant, Mrs. Wang Shuji, an elderly Gongfu and Taiji Quan master, helped me understand the current cultural significance behind the practice of Gongfu. Discussing the topic the spirituality of martial arts, I asked her whether or not it was fair to draw connections between Gongfu and Buddhism. She replied by saying:

No, it's certainly fair, but I don't think you can say that Chinese Gongfu is somehow inherently religious. It was influenced by Buddhism, and it shares some big ideas and concepts from Buddhism, but I feel that Gongfu is really just a part of Chinese culture, and the people like me who still study and practice it help keep it alive, just like Peking Opera performers.

This was the first instance where I began to understand the way in which Chinese Gongfu operated as a means of cultural preservation. In the above statement, Mrs. Wang draws a connection between Gongfu and Peking Opera, an art form originating in China around 1790 that currently functions as a major form of cultural currency in modern China. After the horrific events of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), where the majority of China's religious or artistic objects were destroyed, the small island country of Taiwan remained as one of the few places where traditional Chinese arts and religions could survive. I then asked Mrs. Wang if she worried that these traditional martial arts might be eventually lost or devalued in both the wake of the Cultural Revolution along with the rapid westernization of East Asia. She responded by saying:

I think many people have this fear in the back of their mind. But for me, I don't share this fear. I feel that Gongfu is always changing. You know, first it was just for monks, and then it kept spreading, until now its available to everyone, and it's deeply connected with our culture, and its certainly not just about fighting. So, the function of Gongfu changes as the culture changes. I mean, people always talk about tradition and Gongfu. Like, *this* style is more traditional than *that* style, etc., but I feel that this is just the skin of Gongfu, not the real stuff. In the end, Gongfu helps you become a better person, and I think it always has, and I don't think that that will change.

Although I was delighted to hear the optimism of Mrs. Wang's comment, what really stood out to me was her statement that, in the end, "Gongfu helps you become a better person." Fortunately, the second Master I interviewed, Mr. Yeh, further developed the idea of Gongfu as a means for both character development and cultural preservation.

During the course of our interview, I asked Mr. Yeh, "When you studied Gongfu at school, was the emphasis placed more on the movements and forms, or more on the underlying philosophies behind Gongfu?" he responded my saying:

At first, in the beginning, as a student you only focus on being able to fight, like a skill. But after you've trained for a long time, you start to become less interested in *how* you move and more interested in *why* you move. When we first started training with our master, I always felt like he didn't want to teach us, like he didn't like us! I mean, for the first year he hardly ever even looked at me! He was so mean because he wanted us to leave the school. If we stayed then he knew that we genuinely wanted to learn. He pushed us so hard because he wanted us to develop good manners, right behavior, which you must develop in order to learn Gongfu. If you don't have the good manners or right behavior, you cannot learn Gongfu. So, the first thing you learn is how to fight well, and how to fight others. But later on, you learn how to become not just a better fighter, but how to become a better person too, and you change. I mean, as you do Gongfu more and more, you learn that there is *always* somebody who is better than you, who can beat you in a fight. And, I mean, there are guns nowadays, so why even learn this? But you learn that Gongfu is not just physical training; it's also training for your mind.

Here, Mr. Yeh describes "good manners or right behavior." I take this comment to mean what I call character development. Intrigued, I asked Mr. Yeh about the ways in which Gongfu trains your mind. He responded by saying:

Well, Gongfu training is always very difficult. Not just physically, but mentally also. Sifu (master) always forces you to examine your own behavior, feelings and thoughts. In this way, I feel like Gongfu is more like education than just simply physical training. I mean, nowadays, the educational system in China and Taiwan is not so different from the States. The languages are different, yes, but the style in which we teach is becoming more and more alike. As a result of this, many of the kids going through school are not learning that much about their own culture, and so for many kids, Gongfu classes are these kids' only chance to learn about their Chinese heritage.



Again, the idea of Gongfu as a form of cultural heritage and preservation is presented. In the face of rampant westernization of East Asian Countries such as China and Taiwan, culturally rich activities such as Gongfu are serving as priceless staples of cultural education among youths. Additionally, it becomes clear that teachers such as Mr. Yeh are worried about a perceived lack of cultural education within modern Taiwanese society. Pressing on, I asked Mr. Yeh whether he felt Gongfu could be viewed a tool used in becoming a better person. He responded by saying:

Absolutely. A lot of students come to learn Gongfu, and all they want to learn is how to fight. But the techniques we teach are really more like tools, and the only way to truly understand how to use them requires students to change their attitude. I mean, as a master, I hold the secrets of how to do Gongfu correctly, and well. And you can only learn Gongfu from masters. So, as a master, I make the decision of whether or not a student is ready, you know, if their attitude is correct, to be able to learn these things. If the students don't demonstrate that their character is changing, you know, for the better, then I can't teach them Gongfu. So, as masters, we constantly test the students to see if their morals are good. For example, let's say I want to test the students' honesty. So, one day during practice, I put some coins in the corner of the studio. And then I watch, but not obviously, it's more like spying. If I catch one of the students trying to take the coins, it shows me that he is not yet ready to learn the deeper aspects of Gongfu. However, maybe a student takes the coins and gives them to me, because he wants me to return them to whoever lost them. Then I know his character is improving, and slowly he will learn more and more about Gongfu. This reminds me of my old Sifu. He was very old and very mean to all of us. I remember when I was younger, my classmates and me were training with Sifu after lunch, and after he showed us a form he asked us to all practice for a while. So, he goes off and pretends to take a nap. But actually he is watching us to see who is slacking and who is studying diligently. So in this way, he knows which students to teach more thoroughly. These kinds of things always happened while I learned Gongfu. This is why I believe that Gongfu can change somebody. It's not the Gongfu itself, but the process of learning something so difficult that changes you, and helps you become a better person.

For Mr. Yeh, one of the most attractive aspects of the practice of Gongfu was the way in which tools for becoming a better person were seemingly imbedded within the practice itself. In Gongfu practice, a student is not only tested on their proficiency of

certain styles or forms; indeed, aspects of a person's character such as honesty are emphasized greatly.

By this point during my interview with Mr. Yeh, I was convinced that the idea of character development was central in order to fully understand Gongfu. In order to more fully understand this concept, I asked Mr. Yeh to explain why the idea of character development was emphasized to such a great degree. He responded by saying:

Well, I feel that in the past, hardly anyone knew how to defend themselves, or how to fight in any kind of systematic way. So, the few people who did know things like Gongfu were really quite powerful, and depending on the person, this power could be abused, you know? I mean, in those days, someone very skilled in Gongfu has the potential to hurt just about anybody. So if you learn Gongfu, but your attitude and manners are incorrect, then you become someone who is very dangerous. This is why the master/student relationship is so important in Gongfu, because if a certain master doesn't care as much about the students' character, then that person will probably never learn what it really means to be a martial artist. They are connected, you know. You can never be a true martial artist unless you understand how to be a good person also. You see, Gongfu comes out of the Shaolin Temple, out of Chan (Buddhism), and so if take away the fighting aspect of Gongfu, then what is left is just like that religion, and if you take the religion out of Gongfu, then all that is left is fighting, you know, like gorillas! So, Gongfu isn't just fighting, and it isn't just Chan, it's a balance.

When I traveled to Taiwan, my understanding of Chinese Gongfu was littered with misconceptions and half-baked ideas surrounding the function of these martial arts. However, after studying with and interviewing these Masters, I was able to take away two main ideas regarding the function of Gongfu in Taiwan: First, that Gongfu is a form of cultural currency which must be protected due to its perceived educational value, and second, that Chinese Gongfu functions as a means of character development for those who practice it.

## **Conclusion**

As a “Western” scholar of a fighting tradition that originated in the “East,” two things should become clear. First, like many westerners, my first exposure to Chinese ideas and concepts came through the form of a slew of martial arts movies produced in Hong Kong starting in the early 1960’s, which as a youth I enthusiastically watched with delight. Second, as a budding undergraduate scholar of Asian Studies, I incorrectly assumed (consciously or not) that these fantastical movies were somehow representative of Gongfu as a whole. I hope that through reading this paper it becomes clear that the way in which Gongfu is depicted in these kinds of media does indeed stem this tradition’s complicated history growing out of the Shaolin Temple. Moreover, I hope that readers of this paper are given the foundation to begin to understand that while this ancient tradition is so often portrayed as somehow inherently religious/spiritual, or simply as a system of fighting one another, neither viewpoint correctly summarizes Chinese Gongfu. Instead, it is my aspiration is that those who read this paper walk away with an understanding of why Gongfu has so often been misrepresented, both historically and currently, along with an understanding that Gongfu currently functions as a means of personal character development and cultural preservation. Hopefully, this paper will leave you with the tools to demystify this ancient tradition, and leave you with clearer understanding of Gongfu.