

PAPER TRIPS



He man: One of the statues representing kung fu cries

HOLY WARRIORS

THE FIGHTING MEN OF CHINA'S SHAOLIN MONASTERY

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CHINA

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN, HAVING EXHAUSTED ALL OTHER immediate modes of transportation, with hardly enough money to get from here to there, you hitchhike. There are also times when you find yourself in Henan Province in central China. On occasion these moments coincide, and at that point you climb into the back of a truck driven by a farmer riding with his 2-year-old son, and trouble them to drop you off at the foot of Shaoshi

Mountain, the entrance to the Shaolin Monastery and birthplace of China's martial arts. "Have you been before?" the man asked, downshifting what looked to be a raw pipe. "It's all right. Not bad, really. A lot of those kids are pretty strong. What country are you from?"

"America," I answered.

"Ha. You know, watch out there. They can snap your neck with a single chop, American girl. No problem. *Thwack! Thwack! Thwack!* OK, here you are."

And there it was. The mountains of Dengfeng County, tiered and divided for the cultivation of rice and some absurdly big cabbages, opened up to the valley below. A huge, black statue of Bodhidharma, the Indian prince and bodhisattva (saint) who brought Buddhism to these mountains, stood surveying the whole valley, his hands drawn in the relaxed pose of a kung fu warrior. His image is far more fierce than any of the thousands of equally large Mao statues that litter the nation.

Bodhidharma is said to have walked from South Asia, arriving in the sixth century A.D., when he chose these rolling mountains as his base for what is known here as the Chan sect of Buddhism, a precursor of Zen. Legend has it that he demonstrated his commitment to the introspective path to enlightenment by sitting in a local cave for nine years, which people swear permanently cast his shadow on the stone. The techniques of kung fu are said to have developed out of the monk's need to stretch and keep limber. It was at the monastery that kung fu evolved and was codified.

How these skills progressed into one of the most lethal martial arts is still in dispute, but true to their roots, the monastery's students continue to practice "contemplating the wall," Bodhidharma's style of intensive meditation. There's also their very balanced motto: "In defense, like a virgin; in attack, like a tiger!"

From the grand entryway, I walked about 1,000 meters to the first gate of the monastery. Though the Shaolin Monastery is still in full swing, it has also become something of a tourist dive among kung fu movie addicts, both Chinese and foreign, who want to see where the first-ever flying lotus punch was thrown. Women selling hot sweet potatoes abound, as do numerous Chinese tour guides. With the promise that I would see all things kung fu, I gladly paid one woman guide's price of 20 yuan (about \$2.40), and we were off.

The complex is a combination of kung fu practice grounds and buildings restored after the Cultural Revolution (the ancient structures took a hit from the maniacal Red Guards). The chants of Buddhist monks pervade the monastery buildings, which stand alongside the students' dining hall, dormitory, and practice grounds. In the sacred Pilu Pavilion's stone floor, 400 years' worth of high kicks practiced in the exact same spot have dug holes known as the Kung Fu Foot Depressions. The monastery also holds two huge statues of *ha* and *he*—the guttural sounds made when performing kickass martial arts, here represented as blue and red warriors, respectively.

Present practice at the monastery brings its history to vibrant life. The Fighting Monk Delegation, the prizefighters of the monastery, whose prowess gains them room and board while they study—as well as a better shot at future kung fu glory—was just gearing up for a performance as I wandered by its meeting

hall. These guys, at an average of 15 years old (though many start as young as 4), redefine hardcore. Using an assortment of whips, spears, swords, and the odd kitchen bowl, they proceeded to demonstrate stunningly lethal abilities. The central fighters paced briefly before launching into action, drawing their palms together in typical *qigong* repose and breathing deeply. Then the lead student burst out "Zou!" loosely translated as "Go! Do it! Kick ass now!" And with whip-smart precision, limbs went flying while maintaining perfect synchronicity. Three students leaped in the air, bringing feet together before them and slapping the top of them with one hand, cocking the other behind the ear. Flying about in a move called "sweeping an army of thousands," they slammed their bamboo staffs on the floor with timing to rival digital breakbeats. They executed detailed fighting sequences with alacrity, each making startling if inconsequential contact on the others. Then the games ended, and the Fighting Monk Delegation delved into some of its greatest moves.

It is not easy to witness an act that would kill most people, but as the monks brought out two long, sharp spears, I realized this is what I faced. Positioning the points at one monk's throat, the other monks steadied the base of the spears so they wouldn't budge. The monk then leaned into the two points. The spears bent back. He kept going. When they looked nearly at the snapping point, concentrated entirely at his throat, another group of monks brought out a slab of concrete. Laying it on their peer's back, they reached for a sledgehammer and smashed the whole thing. He remained standing. In the end, the spears were bent beyond use, the concrete was destroyed, and the monk stood smiling with only two small indentations at his throat.

This was followed by a sort of two-man sandwich of swords and nails, and again, a third monk used the sledgehammer, destroying a cluster of bricks on the top man's stomach. As soon as it ended, everyone walked away, mulling over ways to do it better, discussing focus and performance. I had stopped breathing. Shi Lanlu, the chief coach of the fighting monks, looked despondent. "He is always reticent to praise, quick to find flaw," whispered Shen Xizou, a third-year student. Shi oversees all from his guarded position on one side of the practicing students, his status marked by his dark ruby robes and long strands of Buddhist prayer beads.

Given China's 1980s explosion of kung fu movies and its hundreds of chopping, kicking stars, local masters have opened a glut of institutions copying the original Shaolin Monastery. The surrounding mountains are dotted with these Soviet-style buildings and even more so, with dry, flat fields pounded daily by thousands of students who hope to follow in Shi Xiaolong's high-kicking footsteps. Shi has been in nearly every important Chinese kung fu movie since he was discovered at Shaolin in 1993 at age 13. The day I was in town, he was on location in Zhengzhou, though they gave me his number. (I guess security isn't necessary if you can crack a man's skull with your foot.)

All the schools in the valley are open to both Chinese and foreigners, provided the applicant is driven to punch air for hours and has about \$240 for the one-year tuition. Live through it and you will attain not only kung fu prowess, but also fluent Mandarin Chinese (English is not spoken at the monastery). I, however, caught a public bus back to Luoyang, and then found only hard seats left on the slow train back to Beijing. But after witnessing what the Shaolin kids go through every day, 14 hours on a bench with 580 of my best friends spitting, coughing, and smoking like fiends seemed pretty tame. ★