

## Shaolin Temple, Songshan.

I wound up in the Shaolin Temple by a process of serendipity. Right from the time I first went to China I was attracted by a website advertising a Shaolin training centre in Siping, North China. One could go there for a minimum of two months and learn gongfu<sup>1</sup> and qigong<sup>2</sup> and possibly taijiquan<sup>3</sup> as well. This centre seemed to be chiefly directed towards foreign students, with tuition being given in English. Fees were high for China but not high by western standards. The daily routine was quite demanding, starting at 5.30 in the morning, in typical Shaolin style.

This fantasy kept recurring. I was torn between doing something extreme like this and just looking for a taijiquan teacher. What interested me about the Shaolins was not that I would expect to gain any real proficiency in gongfu but that Shaolin gongfu and qigong represent the historical source of all forms of taijiquan and gongfu and its importance in Chinese culture is paramount. There are huge numbers of stories, films and television dramas which revolve around the Shaolin Temple and Shaolin monks, even an American made Kung Fu TV series, complete with wise bald abbot and red hot smoking urn. So I thought it would be interesting if I could go there once and examine Shaolin training at first hand. But as I was now over fifty maybe this was just too silly. I alternated between thinking “why not?” and “get real!”.

The outcome was that the last time I went to China I decided to do three months Chinese classes and then go for two months to the place in Siping, supposing it could be organised. During the period of the classes I mumbled a lot to various teachers and classmates about my plans to go “somewhere” in the north where I could learn some “taijiquan and stuff”. I still wasn’t sure if I had bottle enough to do it. I was very comfortable in Beijing and the little flat I was staying in was very warm, the winter was getting colder and I was developing a taste for Gong Bao chicken and the Beijing beer. After the classes ended I didn’t really want to go 11 hours northwards by train and plunge into a gruelling training regime but I felt compelled to. After all, I had decided to and more or less told everyone I was going. I now had to call my own bluff.

I failed, however, to make the arrangement with the people at Siping. First of all I emailed them via their website saying I wanted to go and visit, my intention being to go and have a look and then negotiate a stay if I felt the place was okay. I received a curt reply from someone in America saying “please write in English”. So I wrote in English. He then promptly and courteously sent me the email address of the school headmaster so I could contact the school direct. So far so good but the days dragged on and the headmaster failed to respond. About this time also I had a strange dream, I dreamed I went to a gongfu training centre and it was all staffed by English Reiki massage masters

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<sup>1</sup> Shaolin gongfu (otherwise known as Kung Fu) is an elaborate martial art involving much stretching and dance like and animal like movements. The literal meaning of gongfu is just “hard work of an artistic nature” so other martial arts and acrobatics can be regarded as gongfu.

<sup>2</sup> Qigong literally means “energy work” and is a system usually involving breath control, movement and sometimes visualization designed to enhance and unlock energy.

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes known as “Tai Chi”, taijiquan means “super powerful fist” though taijiquan is mainly practiced nowadays for health and relaxation.

with pinafores serving cream teas and I was the only student (my mortification in this dream can easily be imagined). I started to think maybe I should go to Henan province where the original Shaolin Temple is located. My son Tom had been in that area the year previously and taught English in a gongfu school somewhere; apparently there were a huge number of such schools of every conceivable size and complexion. Perhaps I could find a school somewhere near the Temple and learn some taijiquan? As soon as I started mentioning this plan to my Chinese friends they all brightened up, they all had stories about the Shaolin Temple and they all revered the Shaolin monks<sup>4</sup>. My friend Spring Swallow told me her parents lived in Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan and a short bus ride from the Temple. Her father would probably know what was going on there and be able to help me.

So it felt as though the decision had been made and I was being pointed in the direction of Henan. Just a mere seven hours by train (no distance at all in China, many people can spit further than that).

Spring Swallow's father met me at Zhengzhou station and treated me to a guided tour of some Yellow River beauty spots and a nice meal and put me in a hotel for the night. He offered to drive me to Dengfeng the next day but there really wasn't any point as there were regular buses. My plan was to go to Dengfeng (nearest town to the Temple) and look around for a school and stay a night there in any case. But when I got to Dengfeng I couldn't see much going on. I was pursued from the bus terminus by a motorcycle taxi who wouldn't take no for an answer, just kept showing me a brochure of a posh hotel and offering to take me there. Eventually I had to shout at him and he finally got the message. I just wanted to walk and get a feel for the place. I made a mental note of where the flophouses were, and I ate a plate of spicy noodles. The local intonation was very strange and not much to my liking but the noodles were pretty good. Dengfeng seemed to me like a Wild West town must have been. Everyone looking flat broke and sitting on doorsteps, everywhere tiny hardware shops selling little stoves and lengths of chimney pipe, brushes pots woks and skillets, stallholders selling cakes and bitter inedible mandarin oranges. Nowhere did I ever find a shop selling digestive biscuits. The temple turned out to be about 12 kilometres away so I decided to go over and have a look rather than waste time in the town. I hailed a lady with a motorcycle taxi who quoted what I now know to be an outrageous price and climbed in the covered wagon at the back and we ground, roared and shuddered over to the temple.

It had always been somewhere in the back of my mind that I might stay in the temple itself but it seemed very unlikely. Rather I had the idea that I might make some contact there or ask around for a suitable school. A friend had given me the contact number for one school and I thought I might find my way there eventually. What I expected from the

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<sup>4</sup> I've tried quite a lot to find a parallel in our own culture for the Shaolin Temple, but I can't. In some ways it's like the Vatican in the sense that it is almost an independent state, but it lacks the feeling of wealth and privilege and did I say baloney? associated with that state. In some ways though it is more of a location, an ancient monument having importance mainly for historical reasons. This may be partly because the Shaolin traditions are not quite discontinuous, the original monks all left in the 1920s when the Temple was burned to the ground for the third time and currently the monastery is somewhat under the control of the government.

Shaolin Temple was that it would be tremendously bright and clean and well organised with the monks all standing with crossed poles at the front gate and seven levels of form filling and scrutinisation before anyone could actually enter their portals as a novice and train in their sacred arts. But in China nothing is ever what one expects it to be. I was dropped off in the Shaolin Temple village, the taxi driver obviously having a deal going with a local hotelier who immediately tried to rent me a room. I declined the offer for the present as I wanted to see the temple first and there was at least the possibility that I might find a place in a school. To approach the temple it was necessary to buy a ticket for the “Shaolin Temple Scenic Spot” which included the temple and surrounding area. As I approached the ticket office I was myself approached by a woman who offered to get me in without a ticket. She was quizzing me. Had I come to study gong? How long was I planning to stay? I answered curtly and non-committally. Yes I might study a bit of gong if the fancy took me and if so I would stay around two months<sup>5</sup>. I didn’t require her help to get into the Temple. I bought a ticket. Nevertheless she shadowed me up to the Temple and inside. Once inside she somehow took control and before I knew what was happening I was in a small yard at the back being given an entrance exam by the headmaster of the gongfu school. The entrance exam consisted of two questions. “Mister, do you speak Chinese?” and “Do you have American dollars?”. To my immense gratification I scored one hundred percent (though I later discovered that fifty percent would have ensured a pass). The next thing I knew I was sitting in a little room with a number of Buddhist pictures and a small electric ring of the type that went out of fashion here in the fifties, a sort of white pottery with a bare coiled heating element sitting on a half brick. The school headmaster was warming his hands over this ring and debating with a man in a monk’s dress about how much I should pay to stay for two months. The monk seemed disgusted that I was only staying for two months. They suggested eight hundred US dollars. Was that okay? Actually it was a lot less than I would have had to pay to go to Siping so I felt quite pleased. But as it was China I didn’t know whether or not I ought to bargain. On the one hand people are expected to bargain for everything so I didn’t want to look like a greenhorn. On the other hand my Chinese qigong teacher in England says that “one should not raise objections to one’s teacher’s fees”<sup>6</sup>. So I mumbled something about being conscious of the great honour of being in the Shaolin Temple but times were tough, something or other I forget now. Whereupon the monk leapt up and insisted that I was getting a great bargain, I would get my own room and my own personal trainer and my clothes and all my food and he should think it was a great honour indeed! So that was it and we agreed. I said I would come back on the morrow when I had cashed some traveller’s cheques. No fear, they weren’t letting me out of their sight. They bundled me into a van and drove me straight into the bank in Dengfeng where I changed traveller’s cheques and handed over the fee. Then we went back to the Temple where they kicked a novice out of his room and installed me. The novice told me it was the warmest room in the temple. I apologised for having him kicked out. “No problem” he said.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> All my Chinese friends warned me to be very careful in the South as everyone would be trying to rip me off. This might have made me unnecessarily paranoid, especially when I first arrived.

<sup>6</sup> He would, though, wouldn’t he?

<sup>7</sup> In China “No problem” means there is a problem. “No problem, no problem” means there is a big problem and “No problem, no problem, no problem” means a disaster.

## ***The environs***

The general environment of the temple at Songshan is a typically economically deprived South China peasant farming area. The nearest sizeable town is Dengfeng, from where one can take a bus or taxi 12 kilometers to the temple. Along the route to the temple are slogans exhorting population control “Birth control, responsibility lies with the husband” and “Population quality not quantity”. Also some slogans opposing illegal land use. These are signed by the Shaolin Temple, but these kinds of slogans are anyway common in China. There are several large wushu<sup>8</sup> schools. There is a large graveyard, several stonemasonry works with ranks of carved lions and griffins with chests thrust forward as though waiting proudly to be marched off by new owners. There is a large lake, a reservoir perhaps. At the entrance to the Shaolin Village there is a large and imposing statue of a Shaolin protection<sup>9</sup> monk as though on sentry watch. In the village itself there are numerous gongfu schools, many with huge outdoor practice areas and large Dharma halls where students can also train under cover. Aside from the normal range of village shops, grocers, hardware stores and small restaurants, there is a proliferation of shops selling swords, poles, boxing gloves, punchbags and also training clothes, monk’s hats and yellow pumps in a characteristic Shaolin style. At the entrance to the “Shaolin Scenic Spot” there is a barrier where tourists are distinguished from locals and the former made to buy tickets. To get past this barrier you either have to have a ticket or look familiar or be carrying a large quantity of vegetables or otherwise be able to blag your way in. Once inside there is a walk of perhaps a half kilometer to the temple itself. On the right side of the road are many caves dug in the earth. People live in these caves and can be seen sitting outside them resting or boiling food in little pots. I was later told that the caves are quite comfortable because they protect the inhabitants from the extremes of climate in that region. Apparently the earth is packed hard and doesn’t collapse. Or doesn’t collapse often, I wasn’t sure which.

Behind the temple is a steep hillside at the top of which is a large white stone sitting Buddha figure marking the site of Bodhidharma’s cave. Further up the valley there is a pagoda forest, which is a series of steles marking the tombs of successive abbots of the temple. I believe abbots are no longer buried there. Opposite that there is a large car park which presumably can fill up in the warmer months, on one side of it there was a succession of dozens of small covered stalls selling ornamental swords, punchbags, Buddha statues and even some Tibetan memorabilia such as prayer wheels. Even further up the valley there is a large covered aviary with many rare birds, and two cable car stations from which cable cars can be taken to the tops of the mountain opposite the temple and also the large peak at the end of the valley. These cable car lines were not very active except right towards the end of my stay when the weather started getting better. A few other religious sites were clustered around the temple, on the path up to Bodhidharma’s cave was a small convent housing maybe a dozen nuns. On the mountain

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<sup>8</sup> “wushu” means military skill and is mainly applied to the modern form of gongfu.

<sup>9</sup> The Shaolin monks were granted the title “protection monks” after thirteen monks armed with poles saved the future Tang Dynasty emperor from imprisonment by the ruling Sui Dynasty.

peak opposite the temple was another small priory where some young men seemed to be living.

People's living conditions were very primitive, most of the houses we would describe as sheds, being four brick walls and a flat roof. Older houses were made of mud, some still inhabited though I found several uninhabited which had clearly been used at times for camping. Many people also lived in tents made of striped plastic sheeting, some of these tents were set up by the main gate of the temple and served dumplings and noodles. Some superior housing was under construction on the hillside opposite the temple and I will describe this development later as I made a friend there who was to add quite a bit of colour to my experience.

Although there were a few foreigners living in and around the Shaolin Temple seeing a foreigner was still sufficiently remarkable for people to say "foreigner" wherever I went, so I got used to hearing "laowai, laowai" continuously at the edge of my hearing. This got quite tedious. Indeed on one occasion I walked some way into the country and was sitting quietly in a field when a bird came over. "Laowai, laowai", shrieked the bird. I was continually advised to be on my guard against being overcharged because I was a foreigner. Some people tried to overcharge me and some didn't. Typical were the small buses from the Shaolin Village into Dengfeng. The fare was 1 kuai, but they would generally try and charge a foreigner 2 kuai<sup>10</sup>. On one occasion I boarded the bus in Dengfeng and a woman was giving instructions to the ticket seller. "This fellow is 2 kuai". I said "No I'm not, I'm 1 kuai." The other passengers thought it was very funny. But it did get on my nerves after a while and made me feel reluctant to travel. I could understand and sympathize with them but in this question I could only take the advice of my Chinese friends which was not to pay over the odds. This wasn't the only reason to feel reluctant to travel. The road to the temple was quite poor, in places narrow and in one section passed through a tunnel. The standard of driving in that part of the country was unspeakable. Drivers wanting to overtake would simply swing out and if there happened to be a vehicle coming in the opposite direction the horn was used and if there wasn't space on the hard shoulder for the oncoming vehicle to pull off there would either be a shunt or one vehicle would go off the road<sup>11</sup>. On a couple of occasions I came upon accident scenes, in one case a large lorry had been run off the road into a field where it was lying on its side with coca cola bottles scattered around it which the locals were casually harvesting like rice. Also the buses were very unpredictable, they had no fixed schedules and generally a bus would not leave until the driver felt he had enough passengers. If short of passengers he would generally turn the bus around and head back into the village and the ticket girl would shout out of the windows "Going to Dengfeng? Going to Dengfeng? Why not? Go on – go to Dengfeng, only one kuai!" and so on. If a member of the public was converted by this spiel they would as often as not say, "Fine, only I just have to pop into this house / shop for a moment to get a few things / my mother in law / a haircut" after which the bus could be sitting there for anything up to

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<sup>10</sup> One kuai is about 8 new pence.

<sup>11</sup> I am convinced that a diagram of a motor vehicle in China would have only two captions, "HORN" and "(other bits)".

half an hour causing other passengers to start moaning and / or disembarking and the driver to start employing vocabulary not to be found in any of my dictionaries.

### ***The place***

Before I went to the Temple I knew nothing about it except that the monks studied gongfu and had some relationship with Buddhism. I had seen television dramas which featured the Shaolin Temple, most notably “Fang Shi Yu”, a tale about a renegade Shaolin monk at the end of the Qing dynasty at the time of the second burning of the temple. I had no idea that the Shaolin Temple was actually the first Chan (Zen) Buddhist Temple in China, and the site from where Zen Buddhism spread throughout China, Korea, Japan etc. The temple itself was founded in 495 AD by an Indian monk called Batuo. He was busy founding monasteries in nearby Luoyang and walked over to Songshan and saw the site nestling in between towering peaks “like a blue lotus flower in bloom”. He persuaded the Emperor to build a temple there, which was named “Shaolin” meaning “Young Forest”. Later, in 527 AD another Indian monk called Bodhidharma came to China. He wanted to live in the Shaolin Temple but the disciples of Batuo wouldn’t admit him so he went up and lived in a cave on the hillside behind the temple where he is reputed to have meditated for nine years facing a wall. Eventually the monks were so impressed with his dedication that they admitted him to the Temple where he taught them Mahayana Buddhism and his own form of meditation.

Today the temple occupies a medium sized compound (I don’t know the exact area but it takes twenty to thirty minutes to walk the perimeter I guess). The compound is built on sloping ground so that as you walk up through the temple you ascend a series of stone staircases. There are three gates, a small service gate at one side I never saw opened, the main (mountain) gate and an iron service gate with a door in it which is used by the inhabitants outside opening hours. A security man lives permanently by this gate in a little room with a TV and a bed. To get in this gate you either have to look familiar or be carrying a large quantity of vegetables or otherwise be able to blag your way in. Once inside there is a paved service track which ascends gently behind the fire room and the practice yard to a large piazza at the top behind which are monk’s rooms which I never explored. Local people can come and go via any gate without a ticket. The main gate is very famous since lots of photographs and video sequences have been taken outside it. To the right of the gate is written in large letters. “Mahayana landmark place” and to the left “Ancestral home of Chan Buddhism”. There is a large exterior plaza here dotted with trees where people can sometimes be seen practicing gongfu forms. Also two large metal pillars bearing plaques with the sign of the broken cross<sup>12</sup>. Inside the main gate is a courtyard with lots of stone tablets covered with inscriptions. Doors lead off to the right and the left. On the right I couldn’t explore as they were renovating, on the left was another courtyard surrounded by plaster of Paris sculpture tableaux depicting various important aspects of Shaolin history and culture up to and including the present. Passing

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<sup>12</sup> This broken cross symbol appears sinister to modern eyes since it was famously reversed by the Nazis to form the swastika. However it is much older than Nazism and appears on many Buddhist figurines and relics. Curiously (though unrelatedly) there was a broken cross above the door in Rilke’s house at Muzot.

upwards through the temple compound there is a doorway through a hall with large wooden statues of two terrifying warriors from which one passes into the main courtyard with a drum tower on the left and a bell tower on the right. These buildings are tall and magnificent and like all the buildings in the temple have the traditional concave roof tiles with dragons and griffins at the corners. It is said that when the great drum and the great bell sound together they can be heard from a distance of 16 kilometres. However even though I was there over Chinese New Year, I never heard them sounded, possibly the drum tower was under repair. There was a large bell beside the bell tower which was occasionally sounded, it had a weird note which seemed to change as it rang and with an overtone on the interval of the sixth<sup>13</sup>. Further up there are more courtyards and magnificent stone turtles. There are a series of Buddha halls with various features. In one there is a series of paintings of the twelve filial pieties. Although this is Confucian and so strictly shouldn't be there it is tolerated, I was told, because the links between Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism in China are very close<sup>14</sup>. Another hall has 48 depressions in the stone floor which are said to have been made by monks in former times practicing gongfu while standing on the spot. There is a restaurant where visitors can eat, reputedly very expensive. The boys who work in the restaurant get cut price training in the gongfu school, as do some of the boys who work in the kitchen. To both sides of the public area of the temple are service areas, monk's dwellings, kitchens. Behind the restaurant is a largish step yard with a couple of dormitories, a couple of kitchens, some private eating rooms and a large expanse of wooden boards usually covered with a tatty old red carpet where the boys generally had their gongfu class. Also a small room serving as an office for the school, inhabited by a character called Wu You who had some function in registering students and keeping an eye on things in that yard. Everything seemed primitive. The wiring and electrics looked out of date, a large round pin bakelite plug in my room I couldn't find a replacement for anywhere in Dengfeng, it seemed to be from another era altogether. The wiring was higgledy piggledy and many of the fuse boxes uncovered.

### ***The people***

There were about one hundred and fifty people in the temple proper, of which sixty or so were monks and the rest laymen. The majority of the laymen were gongfu students, mainly children between about eight and eighteen (though there was a younger child there some of the time). Then there were laymen who lived in the temple and perhaps were considering becoming monks. Then there were trainers, cooks, the hairdresser and his wife, a lavatory cleaner who slept in a little room beside the public (tourist) lavatory<sup>15</sup>. The monks proper were known as "chu jia" (left home) people, home in this context being the tightly organised Chinese family system. They observed various restrictions, no killing, no meat, no alcohol, no sex being the main ones. The restrictions were observed

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<sup>13</sup> I spent many hours trying to figure out what decided when this bell was rung and what system governed it. Eventually I discovered the system. It was rung whenever anyone felt like ringing it.

<sup>14</sup> And also, more to the point, because it's already there and no-one knows how to move it.

<sup>15</sup> In China it is very common for people to sleep in the shop, office or facility where they work.

gradually, and certain of them might on occasions be lifted<sup>16</sup>. As far as I could determine there was no organised meditation, the monks decided themselves when to meditate. But there was a regular routine of chanting, which began at 5.30 in the morning and was done again at lunchtime and afternoon sessions. Chanting was done in Sanskrit. The sessions were announced by a man wandering throughout the monastery beating a wooden board with a characteristic rhythm, first at 5.30 am two slow beats followed by two fast ones which presumably meant “get up and go to morning prayers”, then a little later by a rhythm of rapid strokes which presumably meant “Come on, you bastards, this time I really mean it!”<sup>17</sup>.

The monks varied in age from early twenties to more or less infinity as far as I could see. The younger ones seemed cheerful and pious, though the older ones often looked depressed. Then there was a contingent of extremely old monks who used to sit in armchairs in one particular yard when the sun was out, and who had some kind of old monk’s club in one of the buildings there. One old boy was very cheerful and would occasionally walk past me or one of the other foreigners when we were eating and tip the contents of his bowl into ours. He once asked me whether I played chess, at least I think that’s what he said. I mentioned this to Kuang Sheng who said that the old boy was reckoned to have lost his marbles but that in his day he had the best gongfu in the temple. The monks went about their routines very efficiently and didn’t pay much attention to the scholars. Occasionally one would be practicing and a monk would walk past and demonstrate a kick, once I was practicing in a yard and a young monk rushed into the yard on an errand and seemed to run up the wall in front of me like a cat. Their movements were always very directed and fluid. One time a couple of monks were practicing a pole routine in the public area of the temple but to see them practicing was quite rare. Another time a young monk wandered through the temple singing “Ah Mi Tuo Fu”<sup>18</sup> in a fine mellifluous voice. Yet another time I was sitting on a rock at the top of the temple after dark. The courtyard was silent. Suddenly a group of about a dozen monks walked across the courtyard below me. There was a short pause then “pop pop pop” last straggler came along behind on a motor scooter.

I didn’t have a great amount of contact with the monks but I had a lot of contact with the boys. I called them the gongfu kids. They were unfailingly cheerful, curious, polite and humorous, despite the extremely spartan conditions in which they lived. Everyone had a different level of skill, but nobody was selfconscious about it. They were interested in any form of physical skill and applauded it to the skies<sup>19</sup>. Some of them had to work in the kitchens or the restaurant to pay their way in the school. They all lived in dormitories and went home at the end of term like any boarders. However there was another class of young people, those who had actually lived in the temple from infancy and were

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<sup>16</sup> Though not for the purposes of having fun. The Shaolins were historically particularly prone to lift the restriction on killing when circumstances dictated. Also a monk can apply to have the restrictions lifted if he wants to leave the monastery and get married.

<sup>17</sup> The monks rise at 5.30 every day of the year with no exceptions. I don’t know whether every individual monk gets up at that time every morning, presumably even monks get taken ill sometimes.

<sup>18</sup> “Amanita the merciful”, these syllables often intoned by the Shaolin monks.

<sup>19</sup> The only thing I could do that they couldn’t do was stand on my head, which amazed them although it didn’t take them long to get the hang of it themselves.

presumably expected to become monks. Some of these young people seemed to be less cheerful.

Kuang Sheng, the headmaster of the gongfu school, was particularly courteous and helpful. Tall slim and elegant with high cheekbones and narrow eyes and wearing a silk jacket and winklepicker shoes, he could almost have stepped out of a scroll painting. He radiated enthusiasm, good humour and energy. He had come to the temple after doing his army service in Beijing and had been there for ten years and obviously loved it. I never got any great impression of piety from him (or indeed from anyone there), but I suppose he was a Buddhist. Although most of his time was spent in administration and dealing with hassles as they arose, on occasions when the trainer was absent he could take a gongfu class, leaping effortlessly four feet off the ground and kicking and slapping the tops of his winklepickers.

### ***The fire room***

The first room I stayed in was in a small “step yard”<sup>20</sup> next to the fire room. The fire room was the main kitchen in which food for the monks and laymen living in the temple was cooked. It had a very high ceiling, somewhere up in the ceiling was a defunct electric fan. The walls were caked with grime. A single tap in the middle of one wall served as water supply from which water was splashed through a hose wherever needed. The food was cooked in large iron vats over two coal fires stoked through holes in the back wall. Every morning at about 6 o’clock a man with a wide brimmed hat looking a little like Charles Bronson would light the fires and coax them into life with an electric blower. Between seven and seven thirty the students and laymen tried to gain admittance to the fire room and get some breakfast, with varying degrees of success depending on how the grandmaster was feeling<sup>21</sup>. Afterwards water was thrown into the now empty food vats for washing up. Everyone had two bowls and a pair of chopsticks and washing up just meant swilling some water around in the bowls. Normally at mealtimes the laymen had to wait until the monks had been served and the mealtime chant chanted and the gong sounded. The monks’ refectory was opposite the fire room and as the mealtime approached various monks would come over to the fire room and collect the food in galvanised buckets. The gongfu kids were very sneaky and Oliver Twisty and likely to help themselves if the cook’s back was turned so as the mealtime approached (especially if the monks were a little late) the atmosphere could get quite agitated. And of course there were favourites, and boys who worked in the kitchen and so on. There was also a clique who seemed to be able to get extra food out of the restaurant kitchen in the next courtyard above.

The diet was generally rice and vegetables or sometimes noodles boiled with vegetables. Also “mo”, which is a large white steamed bun, almost tasteless although I was advised to eat it as it would give me energy. The “mo” was steamed in large bamboo steamers

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<sup>20</sup> They seem to call the yards “step yards” to mean that they are for practicing gongfu steps.

<sup>21</sup> In the Shaolin Temple monks are formally addressed as “Shifu” which can be translated as “master”. The cook is addressed as “Da shifu” which can be translated as “Grandmaster”.

piled up in a stack, and preparing it looked like the most tedious task of the cook's day. There would generally be some plain rice soup or other gruel also. I got to like the food with the exception of breakfast which was generally a few beansprouts or chopped cabbage and some gruel. Breakfast also was a problem because for reasons beyond my control I wasn't always able to get there very early so the food could be cold, or gone, or both. The cook also occasionally provided treats. Once in a while there was a bit of meat (though I assume the monks were not served meat). Occasionally also there were delicious concoctions of aubergine in a very tasty sauce. A particular treat was fried "mo", really delicious. And there was usually plenty to eat. The worst problem with the food was that everyone in the temple hawked and spat almost continuously, this habit being much worse in the South than in Beijing (and it's bad enough there). People would happily spit on the kitchen floor. This used to turn my stomach and was possibly the only thing in the place that I never got used to, in fact I found it worse as time went on. However I could always take the food away and eat in my room if I felt sensitive. Otherwise we used to eat in the small yard outside the fire room, or sometimes the food would be brought in buckets and steamers to the practice yard. When this happened the boys would queue in a very orderly fashion, but if I tried to join the queue they would say "no, no, go to the front" and push me up to the front. This happened a couple of times so after that I gave up trying to queue until one day an enormous and very fierce looking monk saw me walk to the front of the queue and said "You – get to the back!". "They won't let me" I shrugged and walked to the back of the queue to demonstrate whereupon none of the gongfu kids said a word. The bastards. And after that they did let me queue.

This diet was generally quite adequate, I supplemented it with coffee and biscuits which I kept in my room. No fruit was handed out and after about six weeks I developed a touch of scurvy. I went and bought apples and oranges and in a couple of days it cleared up.

The small yard next to the fire room was where I began my training sessions and it became the place I liked to retire to and practice when I got tired of being gawped at by tourists so I will describe it a little further. Like most of the yards it was surrounded on four sides by one story buildings with tiled roofs. Looking uphill with the main gate behind me, in front of me were three or four rooms. One was occupied by the monk who admitted me, though he soon went to Beijing and the old Shifu moved in. Others were occupied by various cooks and gongfu residents, not monks. To my right was the fire room and a food store. To my left was the monk's refectory and a water tower and also a trough with two taps where one could draw water, if the water was running. In fact the water was frequently not running. It could be cut off in any of the yards or all of them or even the whole temple depending on the reason. Usually the reason was frozen pipes but over New Year all the water in the temple was off for three days running because of a fault in the main which no-one wanted to fix<sup>22</sup>. The cooks dealt with this by siphoning water out of the water tower into buckets. If the water tower failed the gongfu kids were issued with vats and sent out of the temple to fetch water from wherever they could. At such times requests for water for luxury items like making coffee, personal hygiene, washing eating irons etc. were met with brusque refusal. Behind me was the bathroom, a bedroom (the warm one I stayed in for my first three nights) and a small room with a

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<sup>22</sup> All the toilets were squat toilets and if not flushed for three days on end the result was not pretty.

stovepipe poking out above the door from which a wizened old fellow occasionally emerged to filch burning coals from the back of the fire room. This I later discovered was the hairdresser, who lived with his wife together in a tiny partition in the back and shaved monk's heads in the front. I believe they were the only married couple in the monastery. They were very pious Buddhists and on special occasions were allowed to walk at the back of the procession and chant with the monks.

### ***The bathroom***

The bathroom served the whole community of monks and laymen living in the monastery. Next to it was a coal fired heating plant and all the rooms in that particular yard had radiators fired from this plant, on which account they were the warmest rooms in the monastery. Theoretically the bathroom was open four or five days a week but it was almost impossible to get in there, either the man who ran it wasn't there, or he wouldn't open the door, or if it got about that he was there and was actually letting people in only the very fleet of foot stood any chance of admission before it was full and locked and barred again. I managed to get in there once near the end of my stay, when one of the cooks I was friendly with managed to get a key from somewhere. There were four baths and three large whittled wood bathplugs so I had to make do with a flannel stuffed in the plughole. At least there was plenty of hot water. Otherwise I washed in my room using a bowl and a flannel. I remember one time when I was practicing in the small yard by the bathroom an extremely beautiful young nun came looking for a bath and got into conversation with one of the lads working in the kitchen.

“Lady, do you know gongfu?”

“No.”

“You're kidding me!”.

### ***My accommodation***

As already stated I paid eight hundred American dollars for my two months stay and I was promised a room of my own. They did ask me if this amount of money was a problem for me, and probably would have been flexible if necessary. The gongfu kids paid about this much for a year's tuition, or maybe it was less. Other foreigners paid less but were put in dormitories which wouldn't have suited me because I have lived alone for the last ten years and I would have found sharing a room very exhausting. After the first three days I was moved to a room in the practice yard behind the restaurant. The room appeared to have been recently vacated. Like most of the rooms it had a bamboo strip screen hanging in front of the door, which I assume was to keep insects out when the hot weather came. There was a high ceiling and the flooring was glazed tiles<sup>23</sup>. There were several scroll paintings including one just of a large character “Chan”. There was a kind of altar with a large porcelain Bodhisattva and a couple of smaller porcelain figurines of a boy and a girl. In front of the altar was a kneeling stool used to make homage to the figurines. There was a supply of incense and they told me I could make homage to the figurines if I wanted to. I didn't, but occasionally I lit a stick of incense. Later someone

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<sup>23</sup> The high ceilings may be to accommodate scroll painting. The glazed tile floors are probably designed to be easy to clean after guests have spat on them.

showed me that the incense is always lit in threes, one stick for the past, one for the present and one for the future. There was a desk with a couple of locked drawers, and there was a bed which like every bed I saw in South China just had wooden boards covered with a thin quilt under the sleeper. There were two fluorescent tube lights and a funny thing like a chandelier which was operated by a pull switch which needed one pull for off and two or three pulls for on depending on how it was feeling, and which sometimes would come on in the night of its own accord which was eerie and unsettling to say the least<sup>24</sup>. High in the back wall of the room there was an airconditioning unit which could be tuned to emit tepid air so that after about an hour's operation the temperature in the room became noticeably higher than outside. However, even with the fan heater I can safely say I have never been so cold in my life. The cold was oppressive, even though I was wearing long johns and padded shoes. I generally got into bed and pulled two quilts over me whenever I wasn't out and about, I was warm enough under the quilts and I usually slept ok.

There were a few bits of clothing in the room, a monk's robe and hat, a nylon gongfu suit and a pair of monk's slippers. There was also a small amount of money and some letters and a few books. I thought no more about it and assumed these things had been discarded and even started wearing the hat and the slippers. But one day after I had been there for about three weeks a key suddenly turned in the lock and a large man came in. "Who are you, this is my room, these are my things!", he said. I explained who I was and offered to vacate the room, but he calmed down and said I could stay as he was off to Canton for the New Year. Thereafter from time to time a gongfu kid or the man from the office would come and collect some item or other that this monk required. And occasionally I would see him round the temple. I was told he had the power of seeing into men's souls, but I asked them not to tell me whatever he might have seen in mine!

As time went on I improved the room by the addition of a large electric kettle.

### ***Clothing***

Before I went to Dengfeng I bought long johns and a vest as my friends advised. Chinese almost invariably wear long underwear anyway but I normally manage without in Beijing. The standard gongfu training gear is bright orange nylon trousers and jacket, the jacket is pulled across and tied with a sash like a judo jacket, and the trousers are laced round the shins with elastic thongs which gives a rather strong, classical even spartan appearance. If you've seen Shaolin monks performing or seen pictures you will know how effective this looks. Sometimes in performance one side of the chest is bared, this is supposed to be in imitation of Bodhidharma who is often represented thus.

However, not all the trainees liked the nylon gear, so a proportion of them elected to train in ordinary loose sports trousers and trainers. The monks wore robes, padded in cold weather, also padded artificial fur hats. I was promised nylon gear but as I started training and discovered how pathetic I was I came to feel I would rather wear my own clothes. Twice they tried to get me a gongfu suit, the first time we turned up at the tailor's and

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<sup>24</sup> Depending on what blasphemous or unworthy thought was passing through my mind at that moment.

shouted outside the gate for half an hour and gave up, the second time two suits were delivered to me and then after about an hour taken back again. It seems that the temple had been unable to agree a price with the tailor. So I wore my own clothes. Washing of clothes and bedclothes was always done by hand and the washing hung out to dry anywhere convenient, usually under the balconies around the small step yard by the fire room.

### ***The training sessions***

I think it's more sensible to talk about "training sessions" rather than "training" since I could hardly claim to have mastered any of the skills for which the Shaolins are famous. On admission to the monastery, as I said, I was put in a small room next to the fire room. This room, if a little gloomy, was very warm because of the water heating system attached to the bathroom. I naturally thought I was there for the duration. I was quite nervous and disorientated when I arrived, the woman who introduced me came to visit me with her husband and tried to organize me to go for a meal with her but I was too suspicious that they wanted money from me. I found their local dialect very hard to understand and I refused. There was a large mirror in the room with an engraving of a sailing boat and an inscription wishing me a "favourable wind"<sup>25</sup>. The man I had displaced was called Xing Shan<sup>26</sup> and he had been living in the temple all his life as far as I can make out. I guess he was in his early twenties. He was to become my first teacher. He told me to rest and that we would draw up a training schedule the next morning and start training me in the afternoon. I had a discussion with Kuang Sheng about what I wanted to learn and we established that I wanted to learn forms<sup>27</sup>. Xing Shan started putting me through some basic gongfu drills. First there is a lot of warming up and stretching to be done. Particularly hard for me was the leg pressure routine, which aims to help the student get the kicks up higher and higher. This involves putting the foot on a windowledge and pressing down on the knee. However I couldn't get my foot on the windowledge so I had to put it on the water trough, or jam my foot against a wall which was very uncomfortable<sup>28</sup>. The hairdresser's wife, who must have been about sixty, could get her foot on the windowsill with no trouble at all. After the leg pressure, which went on for an uncomfortably long time, there were a series of other stretching and bending exercises. After that came basic gongfu, which was mostly kicks. Kicks had to be done with arms outstretched and the back leg straight which felt unnatural and uncomfortable and was certainly very fatiguing. I had to keep going until Xing Shan told me to stop and he drove me quite hard. After that Xing Shan tried to teach me the

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<sup>25</sup> "shun feng" or "favourable wind" is a common expression used when someone is embarking on a journey or other undertaking, except a journey involving air travel.

<sup>26</sup> "Xing" is pronounced "Sing" (more or less), but I am using the standard modern pinyinization (alphabetic spelling).

<sup>27</sup> Gongfu mainly revolves around the study of forms which are known as "quan" (as in tai ji quan). "Quan" means "fist", but the meaning here is a set of movements, a routine. A form can be considered as in some respects similar to a dance routine or a piece of music that is learned once and then repeated often. Pronounced "chuan".

<sup>28</sup> On my second or third day there I tried to use an old bedhead propped against a wall, but when I wanted to take my foot away it came away from the wall unbalancing me so that I fell heavily onto my left wrist, this injury still has not quite healed almost five months later.

simplest beginner's quan but when he discovered I couldn't do the splits he went off in disgust.

Kuang Sheng came looking for me and said they had decided to give me a new teacher. His name was You Peng and although he was only eighteen he had been training for eight years and his gongfu was very good. You Peng made me go through the same sorts of routines as Xing Shan but he wasn't as fierce, and he successfully taught me a quan called "small mighty form" as far as I can translate. I was training for two hours in the morning from 8 till 10 and then two hours in the afternoon, maybe 1.30 till 3.30. The method of learning the quan was to learn two or three moves and then practice the form as learned so far over and over until You Peng was satisfied. Gongfu, unlike taijiquan, is done very fast and with great energy and I was worried that I might overdo it. Douglas Adams had died not long before I arrived in China and I was mindful of the fact that suddenly starting intense physical training in middle age can be risky. Going through the quan two or three times fast made my heart thump with uncharacteristic vigour and I had the impression that if I wanted to I could probably drive myself into a danger zone before I actually felt pain. Rather than try and explain this I adopted a strategy of coming to the session with a jar of water which I put by the water trough. When I felt my heart rate was getting too fast I walked over and took a sip of water which my trainer didn't object to and which gave the heart time to slow down. I enjoyed the training with You Peng most of all the four trainers I had, he was a very gentle and intelligent teenager. He usually turned up for the session wearing a garish T shirt and flexing a sword or a chain decorated with coloured flags and streamers so that while I was going through my form he would be leaping around the place practicing his sword or whizzing the chain around his head.

For the first nine days I found the training sessions very hard. Although I rode a bike in Beijing and climbed the Fragrant Hills to look at the red autumn leaves without any trouble, I can't say I was in any sense physically fit. My muscles were very stiff and the stretching was hard. Afterwards my muscles ached, although it was always a nice feeling finishing the training and going for a wander round the temple or its environs. But the worst part was starting in the morning. I used to sit and watch the minute hand of the clock inching towards 12. Ah, another three minutes, bliss. Ah, no problem, two minutes to go. Ah, no problem no problem, one minute to go. Oh, no problem no problem no problem here we go. And I think this was mainly on account of the cold. I have never been so cold in my life. I am sure the temperature must have been twenty below zero at times. Many mornings all the water in the whole temple would be frozen up and before the sun came out it was bitterly cold so that all the muscles were twice as stiff as they would have been on a warm day. Indeed You Peng explained that the reason for the long warm up before practicing the quan was just for this reason, that the body being cold would otherwise injure itself. When the sun did come out, which it did quite often, things improved and as long as I was in the area touched by the sun's rays I was a lot more comfortable.

Whilst I was with You Peng a gentleman came from Hong Kong with the intention of staying for six months. After three days he pulled a muscle and stopped coming to train.

He actually wanted to learn qigong, and he managed to find someone in the temple to teach him and developed his own solitary training routine. His discomfort was quite acute because he had very poor English and also very poor Mandarin. He did seem to be able to communicate with the monk who originally admitted me (perhaps he knew Cantonese), but this monk went off to Beijing soon after we both arrived. Added to this he was living in a very smelly dormitory with a couple of cooks and a trainer who drank and played games. My room was next to his dormitory. An additional cause of aggravation for him was that the yard we were in belonged to the restaurant kitchen and so it had a gate that was usually locked until 7.30 in the morning. He wanted to go and practice in the early morning which was thus usually impossible. There were times when I wanted to go and practice early, or go running, but there was no real way to get out. This may have been a bonus for me as I am not sure I would have been able to cope with a 5.30 start as some other students were. But it was an uncomfortable feeling lying in bed till 7 or 7.30, the room was just too cold to do anything else. Eventually he went back to Hong Kong, the Shaolins promised him if he returned later they would find him a room. He was hampered by the fact that the only person he seemed to be able to communicate with had gone to Beijing and nobody knew when he would be back.

Other foreigners also had accommodation problems. A little while later an Iranian came to stay for six months and was accommodated in an empty dormitory outside the temple, and later still a South African girl came and was accommodated in a cold shed outside the temple without light water or heat. So I considered myself to be very lucky to have my own room.

As I trained in the small step yard by the fire room various people would come and go and make encouraging remarks. One of the cooks would struggle by with a huge basket of cabbage or cauliflower florets, or the lad who was working his training in the kitchen would wander by in his orange trousers and give me some advice or aim a friendly kick at my head. Amongst these passers by were a couple of sweet young girls with pigtails who were studying quans somewhere in the temple and would occasionally come to use the bathroom. At other times lads would come maybe to see a teacher and would pass through the yard and stop and chat. And on one occasion a resident returned to the monastery after a demonstration tour and a bunch of them sat out in the yard playing cards and smoking<sup>29</sup> and throwing orange peel around the place. He was very friendly and said he had traveled to Germany and Switzerland giving demonstrations. The people who did the demonstration gongfu often seemed more like dancers or artists than monks, and it should be stressed that the remarkable feats achieved by the gongfu adepts are not the result of superhuman toughness but of particular technique and training, “man man lai”<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Most of the gongfu trainers smoked, one of them told me it gave him energy. There is not much consciousness in South China that smoking is bad for health, but in any case they don't smoke obsessively like modern urban peons.

<sup>30</sup> “man man lai” literally means “slow slow come” and is a frequently repeated phrase meaning take it slowly, little by little.

It seemed to be a feature of the training that one's teacher might inexplicably not turn up or turn up late. Although the discipline was quite strict the main requirement for anyone in the temple was that they should be trying as hard as they could. Laziness was the main crime. The monk's routines seemed to be almost a part of the architecture, but the training routines set up in the school were subject to continual variation, I would go to the boy's practice yard and they would simply not be there having been sent to climb a mountain or something. One or one and a half days a week there would be rest time, sometimes training time was used to reorganize the dormitories and so on. While I was there quite a lot of building work was going on. The boys were moved from the practice yard where my room was into a dormitory outside the temple, about five minutes walk away. Also after I had been there about three weeks they started renovating the fire room so all the cooking was moved into the restaurant kitchen near my room. The renovation of the fire room involved adding an extra fireplace and building a new chimney and also tiling the whole kitchen with white tiles, which seemed like a great improvement. The lad who worked in the kitchen was transformed into a building worker and his baskets of cabbage exchanged for barrows of cement. I got talking to him one day after lunch. He asked me how old I was. "Fifty three" I said, "how old are you?". "Eighteen", he said, and turned around and skipped across the yard deftly flicking his chopsticks into a hedge.

After I had been there for a week or so I went for a walk one lunchtime. I knew the monks sometimes ran to the top of a hill somewhere and I was trying to find out where it was. I walked up a track on the hill opposite the temple. A little way up there were some people outside a plastic tent who hailed me so I went over to chat. They were building workers working on a new housing project facing us across a narrow gorge. I asked them if they weren't cold living under plastic, but they had a little stove and seemed happy enough. They got me to demonstrate a little gongfu and then one of them tried some himself but forgot the quan in the middle. Then they started hailing a lad on the other side of the gorge who was carrying two pails of water on a pole across his shoulder. At first he seemed reluctant, but then he came over. "This guy is really good", the builders told me. This was Yang Zhan Xin. He gave a demonstration which involved a lot of moaning and whooping, quite unlike the forms I had seen the boys practicing in the school. I went back to his house with him. The house was in a complex called "New Shaolin Village". The houses were still uncompleted<sup>31</sup> and he lived in an upstairs room in a house which was still missing several window frames and had the upstairs story supported by a large jack. All the same the facilities were pretty good, proper wiring, television and a comfortable looking double bed. Walls covered with pictures of gongfu stars and pin-up girls. He told me he practiced traditional gongfu. He said the monks' gongfu was not necessarily the best although some of the monks were good. He was not impressed by tricks like breaking bricks with the head and so on. We watched a video disk of a bearded man doing taijiquan and he showed me a lot of paintings which he had stashed in a dresser, some of them painted by his brother. He invited me to call any time I wanted. As I left the house a large pig ambled past me and into the house<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> The village was a private co-operative development on land provided by Dengfeng council.

<sup>32</sup> Or perhaps it went behind the house. The Chinese character for "home" is a roof with a pig under it reflecting the close relationship between the Chinese and their domestic animals.

When You Peng had been teaching me for about ten days he suddenly stopped coming. I continued to practice the same hours as before but two or three days went by and he didn't turn up. Then somebody else told me that I had completed learning the "small mighty form". I was very pleased to have learned a whole form. About that time I was told I was to have a new teacher. This guy I suppose was aged about sixty. He was pointed out to me. They told me he was "lihai", a word which means something like "strong" but has an implication of danger as well. I and this old Shifu (who's name I never did manage to get) nodded at each other. I felt distinctly nervous. For a day or two I carried on practicing in the little yard and waited for a word from him. He was now living in a room in that yard. One day he asked me if I'd like a cup of tea, so I went into his room and we watched in silence while his kettle boiled and then we drank tea, or hot water actually. He turned out to be a very sweet guy. He taught me a couple of traditional forms which were less athletic than the modern forms but somewhat nastier. Kuang Sheng said they didn't teach these things to the boys because "children squabble and get into fights". One of these forms I didn't really like or understand very well, but the other one was pretty good. I had some trouble understanding his dialect but we managed to communicate adequately. He didn't push me as hard as the other trainers, which I regretted in a way. But he moved me to the practice yard to practice next to the gongfu kids which I found a bit embarrassing as they were pushed so much harder than I was. Most of their training was basic gongfu, not only going up and down the mat doing basic kicks and punches but also flying kicks and somersaults, the most astonishing of which is the no hands somersault. Not all of the boys could do all of the techniques, if not they just did their best, went halfway or whatever. After the Iranian came he also practiced with the boys as he was fit enough to keep up with them, just about.

Time to give the Iranian a name. The Iranian's name was Mohammed. He had come to Songshan direct from Iran with a short stopover in Beijing. He was severely culture shocked. I had to provide some kind of translation for him because he knew a few words of English but hardly enough to make a difference. "My room, no good! The food, no good! I am Shaolin student, I should live in Shaolin Temple!". He was very unhappy at first. He had been put in an empty dormitory outside the temple, full of abandoned bunks and mess and old broken swords and other juvenile bric a brac left by a bunch of gongfu kids I suppose. He had warm clean bedding and that was about it. I don't think there was even a lock on his door. There was certainly no heat and window panes were broken, it was like a shed. He motioned to me to come and have a look, so I went over with him and had a look, which seemed to calm him a little. I did manage to find an electric point that someone had rigged and suggested to him that he might buy a kettle, but communication was hard and not much went across. Later on when they started renovating the dormitory in my yard they moved the boys over to Mohammed's room and he cheered up a lot. The boys loved Mohammed and vice versa. He used to play punching games with them and they'd say "Wah, tell him not to hit us so hard!"

Mohammed intended to stay for six months. He didn't like the food, hated the cold. He didn't speak a word of Chinese and I couldn't understand for the life of me why he didn't spend some time attending class in Beijing before he came to at least give him a start on the language. Without the language it was almost impossible to teach him. One day his

teacher was shouting at him “look at your sword, look at your sword”. The more the teacher shouted the more Mohammed looked at the teacher. If he had had some English I could at least have translated for him. But he was a sweet guy. He and his brother ran a gongfu school in Iran with over a hundred students. When he arrived the old Shifu told me “He knows nanchuan”, which I didn’t understand, I thought it meant the rice flails, but one day someone came running over and said “Come and have a look at this”. Mohammed was leaping around on the red carpet, throwing himself onto his back and leaping up again, gouging out imaginary eyes in a most impressive manner. Apparently he knew the forms from the Southern Shaolin Temple<sup>33</sup> which the assembled company didn’t know. They clapped and cheered and the trainer shouted “Teach us, teach us”. Mohammed was still trying to sort out his problems when I left, he had got to the stage of offering to pay more money if he could have his own room. I don’t know what happened. I do know that he would have learned a lot more if he’d spent three months on the language first.

The boys at this time were under a trainer called Sun Xun<sup>34</sup>. Sun Xun was most remarkable for having a completely round head like the Michelin Man. I first saw him when a French woman came to the temple with a couple of men wanting to spend a night there. She had trained karate in France for thirteen years and been in the national championships and so on and of course the Shaolin Temple was a sort of pilgrimage for her. Like all the foreigners who came there she was quite nervous<sup>35</sup>. Kuang Sheng said she could stay a night, but she wanted her men to stay also so a room was arranged for them and a fairly steep price agreed<sup>36</sup>. Fair enough considering it took several hours to move some boys and organize bedding for them. She decided she would like to learn a Shaolin pole routine and the slightly sinister Sun Xun was deputed to train her. He looked very splendid in his monk’s clothes. I went out and had a pleasant enough evening with these three but she was very freaked out by the conditions in the temple, the cold, the spitting, the cost, it didn’t fit with her preconceptions. And like most people she blamed the temple rather than her preconceptions. After she had trained for a day and a half she asked if her boyfriend could make a video of the pole routine so she could take it away and practice it. The sinister Sun Xun went into conference with various other brothers and the outcome was that this would be allowed but only on payment of about 25 quid to the Buddha. Whereupon she abandoned the notion and went away thoroughly disillusioned.

It was shortly after this that Sun Xun started training the boys. He was a big bloke and quite fierce and as already pointed out somewhat sinister (especially when trying to be cute). He was married and lived with his very charming rather pregnant wife in a room near the external dormitories. He could be quite tough with the boys. One morning I was in my room at 7.30 in the morning and about to go looking for breakfast when Sun Xun stormed in in a towering rage. He made a sign which I took to indicate that he was

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<sup>33</sup> The Southern Temple was founded by monks who went south to fight against a band of Japanese pirates who were harassing the local population.

<sup>34</sup> I’m not sure how to write this, but that’s how it sounded, like “sun sun”.

<sup>35</sup> There was one notable exception to this as we will see.

<sup>36</sup> About 80 pounds sterling for the three of them which is a lot for South China.

looking for a stick, but which might have meant “get up you lazy bugger”. Then he went into the cook’s dormitory next door. By the time I did go out he had all the gongfu kids, including Mohammed, lined up on the red mat and he was railing at them. I went out to get food and met a lad who was coming in late. The lad looked shaken. “He’s beating people”. I asked him why. “I don’t know”. He turned and walked away but when I got back from my breakfast he had screwed up his courage and gone in. Sun Xun kicked him and boxed his ears quite painfully. Then the boys were interrogated. It seems they had been told to do a mountain climb and some of them had skived off as boys will do. One by one they were asked what they had been doing. Some of them were made to get down on the mat and press up on their knuckles and were then beaten across the backside with a large pole. He broke the pole on one kid. They took it stoically aside from the boy who was beaten up who was very upset. He was anyway a relative newcomer and I think he was very shocked. He may have left, I’m not sure because this was about the time when people were going home in dribs and drabs for New Year anyway.

This was the second time I had seen boys beaten. I found it very scary though I don’t think there was much likelihood of them beating me. The more scary aspect was the question of what to do. Should I go out there and try and intervene? But I felt I had been dropped into another century. It was not logical for me to try and impose my standards on these people in their own context. The boys were not being injured. So I just watched, feeling very uneasy. A couple of days later the boys were all back in Sun Xun’s room watching Bruce Lee<sup>37</sup> videos. I think they expected to be treated like that and I suppose it was traditional. After all they were training to be warrior monks. And towards the end of my time there I started to feel there were a lot worse things in the world than being whacked on the backside with a stick. I did overhear Kuang Sheng and the old Shifu discussing this incident and they both seemed to be of the opinion that the boys shouldn’t have been beaten so I suppose it was a decision taken by the trainer, rather like a prefect beating in an English public school might have been fifty years ago.

Whenever a foreigner of any description came to the temple I was sent for. A gongfu kid would come running over and we would walk or run back to the office together. One boy said “run” and I started running and he said “on your toes” so we ran on our toes all the way back which is a good and satisfying way to run. Usually the foreigners turned out not to want to train. There was an Australian man travelling with his wife. He actually had read that the temple was a cheap place to stay overnight, of which notion I was easily able to disabuse him. They asked if he wanted to train and he said no thanks, his health wasn’t very good. “If you let me train you for a few days your health will get a lot better” said the slightly sinister Sun Xun. Another man was a Korean who came back to the practice yard and was grabbed by them. They asked if he wanted to study gongfu. When he said yes they told him he would have to pay whereupon he said no and ran away. I now think he misunderstood and that what he meant by “study” was to watch the gongfu kids practicing. His English was very poor. There was also a tiny Frenchwoman who came to the temple because she had paid in advance for a week’s wushu but didn’t have

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<sup>37</sup> The Shaolins admire “Lee little dragon”. They think he did good things for China’s reputation. They admire his gongfu also, but Yang Zhan Xin said his breath control was wrong and that this was probably why he died.

the address of the school she was supposed to go to. The administrators were very kind and patient and got the telephone number of the agent from her and managed to sort out where she was actually supposed to go. Oddly enough this same woman returned a few days later in the company of some rather surly looking Chinese who maintained that she wanted to come to the temple and study wushu. When we explained that we knew her and that this was certainly not her intention they got very aggressive and started demanding taxi fare and ticket money and all kinds of things. We asked the French woman why she got in their car and she pointed to her dictionary “forcer”. It was at this point that I realised that the local people could obviously earn a percentage by bringing foreigners into the temple, which explained my own experience.

### ***Two Ancestors Priory and the Three Emperors Fort***

The countryside in the vicinity of the temple was beautiful and strange. Many recent demolitions were evidence of the Chinese Government’s determination to move some of the proliferating wushu schools out of the area of the temple with a view to preserving the environment. As I already mentioned, mountain peaks surrounded the temple on three sides. Cable cars ascended two of them. During my leisure time and on my days off I started to explore the environs. There were many spectacular gulleys, some of them lined with white stones. There were little paths winding up the sides of these gulleys where trees leaned crazily off small ledges over the waters below. I discovered on these walks several old mud houses, uninhabited but some showing signs that people had camped there, or burnt incense there. Some mud houses were still inhabited of course. Here and there were large round flat millstones, not still in use. In one place a family had set up an encampment in a quiet place on the edge of a field. There were one or two small gongfu schools also dotted around the area, with Chinese characters and pictures of wrestling boys. On the mountainside the pylons for the cable cars were dotted about., the older one ascending to the Two Ancestors Priory fairly straightforward but the newer one which soared into the distance towards the legendary Three Emperor’s Fort had pylons embedded in huge rocks high up on the mountainside in places where it was hard to imagine a goat climbing let alone a team of construction workers. I never rode either of these cable cars, firstly they only started operating towards the end of my stay, and secondly because discretion is the better part of valour, but I was curious to see where they went. I early on discovered a stone staircase winding up the side of one mountain to the Two Ancestors Priory<sup>38</sup>. The climb took about an hour and a half I suppose, and I could only marvel at the amount of labour that must have gone into hauling the stones for this staircase in the sky, which was clearly a lot older than the cable cars. At the top was a small convent or priory, nearby were inhabited outhouses from which a radio could be heard blaring, a few chickens ran here and there and a vegetable patch was plainly inhabited. The priory itself seemed fairly neglected, I didn’t go in but looking in through the gate I saw one of those urns with two high sidepieces that are often associated with

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<sup>38</sup> Er zu an. “An” actually means convent but I was told there was no restriction on boys living there as indeed there were, which is certainly not allowed in a convent.

the Shaolins<sup>39</sup>. Most striking was the scenery facing the priory. A sheer cliff soared above, the rock of a white colour like limestone, but dotted everywhere with brown scrubby trees. Light drifted across the face of the cliff from an eye in the clouds overhead breaking up and reforming in waves. It was an awe-inspiring aspect. I returned there from time to time, on one occasion I met some young men who seemed to be living there. I never saw other visitors there, but evidently visitors came up the cable during the warmer months.

Kuang Sheng told me that the view at the Three Emperor's Fort, the top of the other cableway was a lot more spectacular but that to go there needed a whole day. He said he would take me. On the allotted day the weather was bad. But later I got talking to a warrior monk called Xing Guang and he said he'd like to go there, so at eight O'clock the next morning I went and called on him as we had agreed. He seemed a bit doubtful about the weather, which was a little overcast. But I, thinking this was just another mountain climb like the Two Ancestors, was keen to go so we set off. The mountain climb was quite similar to the other one, maybe half an hour longer. Snow had recently fallen and though thawed in the valley there was still quite a lot up on the mountain top. We arrived at the cable car station without too much trouble. I looked around for the Three Emperor's Fort but Xing Guang took me along a small path. Soon be there, I thought, but I was wrong. This small path took about two hours to negotiate. It wound round the backside of the mountains, cutting down and up sheer cliffs. In some places there was a handrail, or chains to hold onto, in other places not even that much. In some places the steps were built on a foundation, in some places cut wedgewise into the cliff face, in one place there was just a concrete ledge jutting out from the cliff face with a few reinforcing bars underneath. As we were edging along the cliff a howling wind was rushing over us. Every few yards Xing Guang would pause and think. Should we go on or should we go back? I was wearing a leather greatcoat and was especially worried in case a gust of wind caught it. After a while the wind would drop, or we would gain fresh courage and go on a few more yards. After all, going back wasn't that much of a prospect either. In one place we crossed a small foot suspension bridge which swayed violently from side to side. Our journey took us down one cliff into a valley and then zigzagged up the side of the cliff opposite. To imagine what it must have been like to construct that path was completely beyond my powers. They must have worked dangling from ropes on the sheer cliff face. They must have barrowed materials down that tiny path yard by yard as they built it. The ingenuity with which they negotiated and visualized solutions to such a series of problems defied imagination.

The end of this journey, which was the scariest journey I ever made, was a small temple high on a mountaintop. A couple of Buddha halls, one priest and a few old women. We asked for food, but all we could get was some dry pot noodles which we munched like

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<sup>39</sup> This characteristic urn is depicted in much literature and drama about the Shaolins, including David Carradine's "Kung Fu" and also "Fang Shi Yu". Legend has it that the urn was filled with burning coal and the monk had to lift it with his forearms. This is depicted in the opening sequence of "Kung Fu". After lifting the urn the monk is a graduate. This story probably has some origin in fact though I do not know it. Another legend has it that in order to leave the monastery a monk had to fight his way to the mountain gate defeating all the other monks in the temple, but apparently this test was only applied to monks aspiring to high positions in the military.

potato crisps. The Buddha, as always, had plenty of interesting looking cakes and fruit heaped in front of him and, as always, smiled serenely at it but didn't eat it since he was made of wood and his mouth was painted. While we were there some people came via another route to pay their respects. They burned incense and a priest gave one woman a fortune telling session using a book and some wooden spills<sup>40</sup>. Xing Guang and I debated for quite a while whether to go back the way we had come because the wind had if anything got worse. On the other hand the alternative route, though easier on the mountain, dropped us at the end of a 14 kilometer road to Dengfeng on which it was uncertain whether we would find transport. Eventually we decided anything but go back the way we came and we descended by the alternative route. This path terminated in a staircase of maybe two hundred steps. As we reached the bottom Xing Guang turned and looked up it and asked me whether I could run all the way up in one breath. I said no, but I didn't mind waiting if he wanted to. Neither of us did. We set off towards Dengfeng on a most beautiful and immaculate newly made road with not a single vehicle on it. After we'd been walking for about three kilometers a blue pickup came along and picked us up. Xing Guang explained the price would be high because I was a foreigner. We agreed forty kuai. The driver drove us to the outskirts of Dengfeng where he took fright presumably on some grounds concerning the legality of his vehicle and switched us to another vehicle. As I disembarked I slammed the passenger door and the wing mirror fell off. Being a foreigner I had to pay for that too.

As we were in Dengfeng Xing Guang asked if I would like to visit the Daoist Central Mount temple, which we did. It seemed a lot bigger than the Shaolin Temple and, being nowhere near as famous had nowhere near as many visitors. Xing Guang told me it was four times bigger than the Shaolin Temple and nine hundred years older. It had a pleasantly dilapidated air although the buildings were generally in good repair. At the back of the compound was a library for housing sacred Daoist scriptures, but there were no scriptures there, the scrolls having been removed to a more salubrious location. There was lots of grass and shrubs, nature seemed to be making herself at home. In one place there were some ancient iron statues which had the reputation of healing. One had to touch the part of the statue corresponding to the illness or injury on one's own body. At this place I met the large man who inhabited my room at the Shaolin Temple, seemingly he was not in Canton but living with the Daoists for a while. He was very friendly and gave me a disquisition about the architecture which I didn't understand much of. The Daoist priests look quite unlike the Buddhists. They wear black silk jackets and have their hair long piled up on the top of the head in a queue. The queue is coiled inside a black hat in an inverted cone shape, without a top so that the hair is visible or pokes out from inside. The Daoists do a lot of healing and fortune telling. Also people bring icons and statuettes to be blessed. I watched a priest blessing statuettes. One or two people recognized Xing Guang who said that when he was a boy he had often come there to practice gongfu in the yard. The layout of this temple was very remarkable and as a historical site it seemed in many ways more interesting than the Shaolin Temple. I have no idea whether they would tolerate foreigners living there. Xing Guang said they don't practice martial arts but do some kind of internal qigong. I believe the priests are allowed to marry, unlike the Buddhists. They seemed more cheerful than the Buddhist priests.

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<sup>40</sup> The method appeared similar to that used to throw the "Yi Jing", whether it was the Yi Jing I don't know.

## ***The foreigners***

Mohammed was generally able to cope, although he had periodic crises when no-one could really understand what he wanted. On one occasion we spent about half a day trying to sort out a three way conversation with an Arab friend in Beijing who spoke English and Mandarin. We did get through to the guy briefly, but the connection was lost. Eventually we just had to give up. Another time I took Mohammed into Dengfeng to change money and the bank wouldn't change Iranian notes so he was left with no money. He wouldn't take a sub from me, but allowed me to change a small amount of Iranian money which I still have, apparently it cannot be exchanged anywhere. One time I felt sorry for him so I took him into the hills to meet Yang Zhan Xin. Mohammed was thrilled and asked a lot of questions that neither of us could really understand. I think the gist was that he wanted to meet Yang Zhan Xin's teacher, but Zhan Xin was not keen, most probably he would have preferred to do the teaching himself. The language barrier precluded any definitive resolution of this question. After I had been there for five weeks a woman called Tarryn arrived who occupied a lot of my time and energy and rather derailed my training efforts<sup>41</sup>. Because she was female she couldn't be put in a dormitory so they put her in her own room in the dormitory complex outside the temple. There was electricity there for maybe one or two nights after which it failed and they never got it working again. The female lavatories were locked and the room was freezing. As she was South African and had up until this point been living in a centrally heated apartment somewhere to the North, she was quite unable to cope with these conditions. Kuang Sheng suggested she leave her eating irons in my room so as not to have to carry them back and forth at mealtimes, so I gave her a spare key and she used to come to my room at breakfast time and use it as a base pretty much until the evening when the yard was locked and I wanted to sleep anyway. She had a leg injury, which meant she couldn't run and had to be careful not to do anything too violent in her practice. She had some kind of herbal medicine which she wanted to use to soak her leg and she used to soak her leg in my room in the evenings. She also took to bathing in my room every couple of days or so and washing her hair in the courtyard which caused the cooks to run back and forth with pails of hot water in a complete panic<sup>42</sup>. She smelt like a Tesco's perfume counter during happy hour<sup>43</sup>. A lot of the students and monks thought it was rather strange that I had a woman in my room and I felt distinctly uncomfortable about it, especially in the evenings. I offered to swap rooms with her as a possible way out of the situation, but Kuang Sheng asked the monks and the monks were adamant that although she could train in the temple she could on no account sleep within the monastery compound. She was allocated to Xing Guang for her training. I started training with her in order to provide translation, and also because she was learning a taijiquan form which interested me. Xing Guang

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<sup>41</sup> Tarryn was the only foreigner arriving at the temple who didn't seem terrified, mainly because she had previously been to visit and had been sweet talked into training by the slightly sinister Sun Xun.

<sup>42</sup> They were convinced that if she washed her hair in cold water she would catch cold and die.

<sup>43</sup> One of the earliest inhabitants of the Shaolin Temple was a princess who had come to seek refuge after an intrigue at court. Three years later the problem was solved and the Emperor sent a delegation of courtiers bearing gifts of perfume and rouge. The princess declined to leave the temple and instructed the courtiers to scatter the gifts in the lane outside the temple which is still to this day known as "Rouge Alley".

came into the room a couple of times in the evening while she was there, asking questions about her health and about life in South Africa. I could see he was quite upset. Tarryn was a good-looking woman and her strategy was to use her charm to ease her way in life. "Men always want to do things for me", she innocently said, as though this were an observed fact of nature having nothing whatever to do with her own behaviour. Getting her to do anything for herself however was entirely another matter. In normal society this situation doesn't cause a great problem but in a monastery it can be a source of considerable unease. Added to which is the effect aggressively unmarried western women can have on Chinese men. They know that westerners can have love affairs. Anyway, Tarryn had quite an effect on the monks, monks who had never been known to smile in living memory started walking two inches off the ground, and on one occasion I had to translate a proposition from a warrior monk trainer who wanted to know if she wanted a Chinese boyfriend<sup>44</sup>. I had the distinct impression that Xing Guang had fallen in love with Tarryn, if one can fall in love with someone with whom one shares no common language<sup>45</sup>. This made the classes a little uncomfortable since Xing Guang would often walk around kicking his heels as if in agony and his temper was very unpredictable. Tarryn seemed blissfully unconscious about all this, since in her eyes Xing Guang's behaviour was just "The Shaolin Way" and since he was destined for the monkhood he couldn't possibly have any feelings of that nature now could he? Many people who go to a place like the Shaolin Temple see only what they want to see, even if they can speak the language of the place, let alone if they can't. I rather tentatively tried to open a conversation with Xing Guang about this but he wouldn't discuss it. I had no idea how dangerous it might be to try and press the issue. I was aware that the line between the conscious (i.e. that which can be spoken about) and the subconscious (that which cannot be spoken about) was on a different projection in this time and place than in my own. Xing Guang had been in the temple since the age of five, a full fifteen years. He seemed to be to be bored and looking for a way out, perhaps this was why he showed an interest in us foreigners. Tarryn asked him at one point whether he was going to become a monk. He seemed troubled. He said he had not yet made that decision but there was plenty of time and that eventually maybe he would "go inside" and take the vows. I had the impression he would have liked to have some more freedom and some more experiences first. And here one comes up against the twenty first century factor. Traditionally life in that region and in rural China generally would have been so hard that the life of a temple monk would seem like an attractive option. There was in any case no freedom option. One would either get married or become a monk. In fact some of the nuns in the convent were there for precisely that reason, that they saw their mothers being mistreated and decided they didn't want to marry. For a girl in a South China village not to marry is not an option. So they became nuns. Nobody thought this a strange motive for taking monastic vows. But in the modern world the boys know things are changing. I had the impression that the young men living in the temple from childhood and reaching the age of around twenty were suffering a painful crisis of sexual identity. Once they took the

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<sup>44</sup> According to him he was not subject to the no sex-life restriction. I never had cause to believe that monks acted in contravention of their rules (except perhaps those rules exhorting unfailing patience and good humour and the like).

<sup>45</sup> One can, in my opinion. In fact in certain cases it is a distinct advantage not to be able to decode the loved one's repetitive prattle.

vows the young monks seemed much more relaxed. They gave an impression of piety, clarity and lucidity if one can imagine these properties being combined.

### ***Chinese New Year (and after)***

I hadn't calculated when I entered the temple that I would be there over Chinese New Year, but this is how it fell out. A lot of people left the temple to return home for a spell of about two weeks at this time. The gongfu kids went home, so Mohammed was left once again alone in his dormitory. Kuang Sheng and the old Shifu went home. Xing Guang drew the short straw and was left to teach the remaining foreigners. As New Year approached I visited Yang Zhan Xin in the hills a few times, and met also the man from the taijiquan video, Chen Yin Xu<sup>46</sup>. On one occasion I went to Yang Zhan Xin's house and the pig was hanging nose down outside the front door. Yang Zhan Xin on this occasion gave me a splendid demonstration of how to do a complex gongfu form standing on one spot in a small room. When I left this house the pig had been sliced in two right down the middle. We were both sad to see her go. Later I was invited for a meal at his house though I can't say I enjoyed the food very much and having been formerly on grunting terms with it didn't help either.

I had hoped that the Shaolins would have a magnificent New Year celebration and particularly that they would have a Lion Dance or Dragon Dance team. However they didn't, although there were a lot of fireworks on and around New Year. On New Year's Eve the laymen who were left in the temple had a feast which included lots of meat and Chinese white wine<sup>47</sup>. Everyone got extremely pissed<sup>48</sup>. Afterwards there were three days rest. Soon after this I decided to leave the temple. I had planned to stay for two months. When it was good that meant two calendar months. When it was bad, eight weeks. Although the weather was getting better and I was accustomed to the training, I was having problems dealing with Tarryn and the various jealousies and resentments the situation was generating. Added to which Xing Guang was teaching us very slowly and often failed to turn up. We clearly weren't going to finish learning either the taijiquan form or the Bodhidharma sword form we were studying even if I stayed another week. So I decided to leave after eight weeks and see if I could learn some taijiquan somewhere else. When the day came I slipped out of the temple at seven thirty as soon as the gate was opened in order to avoid goodbyes. As I walked down towards the barrier gate I saw a familiar figure in a red track suit running ahead of me. When he reached the gate he stood on the traffic island in front of the ticket check and started practicing gongfu, thrashing his fists and shouting and moaning. It was Yang Zhan Xin. We wished each other farewell.

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<sup>46</sup> After I left the temple I went to Zhengzhou to visit Chen Yin Xu and stayed in his house for a little over a week and learned a Chen style taijiquan form. Chen was the inventor of taijiquan and Chen Yin Xu is a Chen family member and disciple of Chen Zheng Lei, 19<sup>th</sup> generation inheritor of the style.

<sup>47</sup> Not comparable to any western drink, rather like a flavored vodka at best, or paintstripper at worst.

<sup>48</sup> When you see this phrase, read "I got extremely pissed". If I am extremely pissed how do I know how pissed anyone else is?

## ***Conclusions, impressions, enduring memories.***

It's hard for me to know where to store these memories and impressions, since they come from such a different time and place than the one in which I have hitherto lived and found my own context. Eight weeks is not a long time, but as the time went on I experienced many changes. I had the impression that the monastery was governed by some sort of spiritual roulette that I couldn't determine. The only thing I could predict was that whatever I predicted or expected wouldn't happen. At times the whole illumination of the scene would suddenly shift as though the sun had come out, or gone in. As I persevered with the physical training a lot of physical sensations became much more intense. Hunger and sexual desire particularly. After a few weeks I had a couple of inches to spare in the waist of my trousers and a bunch of people crowded round and complemented me on how much fitter I was looking and one of the cooks punched me quite hard in the stomach as a mark of respect.

The main emphasis in the training was to try one's hardest. I originally feared that they would expect the impossible, but the reverse turns out to be the case. Their expertise in training and their knowledge of the limits of human physiology is very advanced. Everything is carefully prepared. What they expect is not that the student will be able to do any particular thing, but that the student will be trying his or her damndest. The ethos is an ethos of dedication and extreme hard work. I can't pretend that they pushed the foreigners as hard as they pushed themselves, but the ethos certainly was extended to us. Historically Shaolin training was probably tougher, and also some of the more advanced techniques which I didn't see demonstrated are very demanding and still practiced by Shaolin students somewhere<sup>49</sup>. The effect of the training on the trainee is to increase physical energy and improve mood. I met some American boys in the Shaolin village and I knew as soon as I looked at their faces that they were in training. They were shining with energy and life.

In my youth I was very interested in Zen Buddhism and used to read DT Suzuki's essays, in particular "The Zen Doctrine of No Mind" which mainly deals with personages and stories from the era of Chinese Zen Buddhism. At that time China itself seemed to be a closed and mysterious country, it was believed that Zen Monasteries still existed there but where and in what form I didn't know. So going to the Shaolin Temple reawakened some of these questions for me, and this was unexpected because as already stated I didn't know in advance that it was the ancestral home of Zen. One thing which impressed me watching the training, and also reading about the meditation and qigong, is that a lot of the techniques are purely derived from Indian yoga. Another thing that impressed me was that the Japanese seem to have done to Zen what they did to many originally Chinese cultural institutions, namely rigidified and formalised it<sup>50</sup>. I remember a quarter of a century ago going to a special exhibition of Japanese tea ceremony utensils in the British Museum. I looked over the various kettles and whisks and the heavy black teacups (some

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<sup>49</sup> These include the "sand hand" and even throwing energy at a distance of up to a hundred meters which some Shaolin monks are still able to do.

<sup>50</sup> Aside from tea ceremony and Zen the Japanese took the game of Weiqi (Go in Japanese) and amended the rules so that contrary to the natural run of the stones a draw between the players is not possible.

of which can cost as much as Stradivarius) with interest but no real emotion. Then as I had a few minutes to spare I decided to walk through the Museum and look at the other exhibits. On the first floor in a case at the back of the exhibition hall was some pottery and my eye fell on a Chinese Ming dynasty tea bowl. I experienced a strong flash of emotion, I could feel a sense of freedom and light in the pottery, a sense as though the potter had captured a large chunk of the sky he had crafted it under. And I also had the sense that if a modern potter was to duplicate the bowl even down to the smallest distinguishable detail, that sense of the sky would not be there. It was uncanny and I've never forgotten it.

I have enduring memories of the beauty of the landscape, of climbing a mountain path and finding myself facing a series of white chalky cliffs dotted with trees, with the isolated buildings of the Second Ancestor Priory far away on a plateau over to the right of me, shouting, and hearing my voice come back in a weird shrieking multiple echo like an Edvard Munch in sound. I have memories of stumbling out of my room at night wanting a piss and finding the gate locked and so pissing in the ashes behind the kitchen<sup>51</sup>. I have many many memories of walking the little service road after dark and looking up and seeing old, friendly Orion leaning over the monastery wall. No place known to Orion can ever be too strange to me. I have memories of the friendliness, curiosity and humour of the gongfu kids. And there were startling moments too, such as walking through the temple with a sword and a young monk stepping out of the shadows,

“Are you practicing the sword?”

“Yes, do you know it?”

“A little bit, drunken sword”, and him taking the sword from me and staggering around like a drunk for a few steps and then suddenly the sword flashing through the air, moving around his body and between his hands in a virtuosic pyrotechnic display for a couple of seconds and then being back, useless, in my hands<sup>52</sup>.

I have an enduring memory of seeing the boys from all the village gongfu schools running past the temple gate at about six thirty in the morning. Thousands and thousands of boys, all in step, rhythmically chanting, “right right right right, left left left left, gongfu practice means hard work” like a huge centipede, a river of life. I couldn't help but feel envious of these boys, and feel that if they got through that training nothing in life would ever be able to faze them<sup>53</sup>. And of being taken by Yang Zhan Xin to visit a gongfu teacher in a small private school where we drank tea and the teacher told me “I'm forty seven and never grown whiskers”. (This was on account of his having been a child prodigy and training hard all his life).

An uncanny musical experience when I was listening to the monks chanting just before New year. Suddenly a familiar melody emerged, I strained my memory to find where I

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<sup>51</sup> I was told this was the approved practice.

<sup>52</sup> Drunken gongfu is a style in which the practitioner feigns intoxication. There are drunken pole and fist routines also.

<sup>53</sup> That is nothing within reason. But – see Tarryn (above).

had encountered this melody before. It was in the Rachmanninov Vespers. How that melody got from China to Russia, or from Russia to China I can't imagine<sup>54</sup>.

But perhaps the strangest experience was the last day before I actually left the temple. As I mentioned before I didn't have a lot of contact with the monks, but on this day a young monk walked over to me when I was resting and we sat on a log and talked for about half an hour. He told me that all this gongfu was silly, kid's stuff. Gongfu was infant school. Qigong was secondary school. But meditation was the university. There were many different kinds of meditation, one could heal sickness, predict the future, tell the weather and so on. It was better to do this when one was young, but still worthwhile when one was older. And it was better to take monastic vows, but not altogether necessary. He wrote in my notebook an exercise for me to practice. I haven't tried it yet.

**May 2002**

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<sup>54</sup> Although in reality there's no reason why the monks shouldn't have listened to Rachmanninov. I could have asked questions but it was tedious. Another time, perhaps.