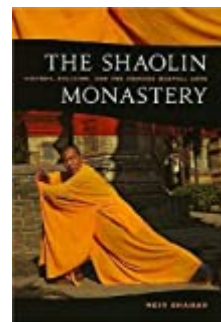


Meir Shahar. *The Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion, and the Chinese Martial Arts.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008. xi + 281 pp. \$54.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-3110-3.



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Published on H-Buddhism (October, 2008)

Commissioned by Dan Lusthaus (Harvard University)

Shaolin History

During the past two decades, Meir Shahar has undertaken path-breaking research on the links between Buddhism, literature, and society. The initial results of his research were published as an article on the monkey god Sun Wukong 孙悟空, [1] and he also served alongside Robert P. Weller as co-editor of the volume *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China* (1996). Subsequently, Shahar's first book, *Crazy Ji: Chinese Religion and Popular Literature* (1998), made a major contribution to our understanding of Chinese religious cultures by combining the methodologies of literary studies and social history to produce an account that confirms earlier scholarship about the multivocal nature of China's religious traditions while also challenging readers to reconsider the history of Chinese Buddhism.

Shahar's recent book-length study of the Shaolin Monastery (Shaolin si 少林寺) considers the economic, political, and religious factors that caused its monks to disregard the Buddhist prohibition against violence and instead create fighting techniques that by the twenty-first century have spread throughout the world. Based

on an interdisciplinary approach combining historical research and fieldwork (shaped in large part by Marc Bloch's idea of conducting historical investigations from the present to the past), Shahar convincingly demonstrates that there was a very real need for monks to learn martial arts in order to protect themselves and monastic resources, particularly in the case of sacred sites located in strategically important areas. This book is also noteworthy for its judicious use of a wide range of sources, including works of fiction and drama but especially epigraphic texts (stele and funerary inscriptions), including some 200 inscriptions preserved at the Shaolin Monastery.

The Shaolin Monastery is divided into three main sections. Part 1 ("Origins of a Military Tradition [500-900]") opens with a description of Mt. Song (Songshan 嵩山) and Bodhidharma's (Damo 达摩) links to this mountain, as well as early records of imperial patronage. This is followed by a detailed account of how Shaolin monks fought in support of Li Shimin 李世民 (599-649; who later became the first Tang Dynasty Emperor, Tang Taizong

少林 (Shao Lin, r. 629-49), who subsequently provided imperial support for the Shaolin monastery while also commanding the monks to peacefully resume their previous occupation (*ge'an jiuye* 少林還俗). Shahar also examines the links between monastic violence and the veneration of the violent Buddhist divinities like Vajrapāṇi (Jingang 閻魔王), which can be seen in a fascinating anecdote by Zhang Zhuo 張樞 (ca. 660-741) that describes the god as encouraging (and even forcing) Shaolin monks to eat sinews-flesh in order to gain sufficient strength (pp. 35-37). This chapter also features data from the world of fiction, namely stories of martial monks like Lu Zhishen 魯智深 who were also meat eaters. Shahar makes the important point that not all monks were vegetarians, especially wandering specialists often referred to as “crazy monks” (*dianseng* 瘋僧), with some movies portraying Shaolin monks as eating dog meat (pp. 42-45, 51).

In part 2 (“Systemizing Martial Practice [900-1600]”), Shahar points out that while we cannot be sure if Tang-dynasty monks practiced their own fighting techniques, this was certainly the case by the Ming dynasty, when they gained widespread reputes for their staff (*gun/bang* 槍/棒) fighting techniques. Shaolin monks are mentioned in Ming military manuals, as well as the writings of generals like Qi Jiguang 戚繼光 (1528-88), who deployed them to fight pirates. These monks proved to be fierce fighters, and one is said to have killed a pirate’s wife with his iron staff (pp. 68-69). While many of these monks ended up being annihilated by Li Zicheng 李自成 (1606-45), the presence of fighting monks at Shaolin, Funiu 嵩山 (also in Henan) and Wutai 五臺 became so widespread as to arouse intense criticism in some monastic circles. Shahar also considers the extent to which such trends impacted Chinese Buddhism, using epigraphic and iconographic evidence to show how Vajrapāṇi became armed with a staff and gradually transformed into a staff-wielding deity known as Kinnara (Jinnaluo 緊那羅) (pp. 83-89). In addition, part 2 discusses the importance of fictional staff-wielding monks like Lu Zhishen and Sun Wukong (pp. 92-100), and concludes with an examination of the place of the staff among the Buddhist *sangha*, particularly the metal ring staff (*xizhang* 鐵杖) (pp. 102-106).

Part 3 (“Fist Fighting and Self-Cultivation [1600-1900]”) treats the development of hand combat and kicking techniques by at least the sixteenth century, based largely on Ming-Qing military manuals, many of which describe acupuncture and the use of Buddhist *mu-dras* (pp. 114-132). Shahar also presents a lengthy analysis of the increasing overlap between the martial arts,

healing, and self-cultivation, which may be reflected in the emergence of famed techniques like Taiji Quan 太極拳 and Shaolin Quan 少林拳 during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that appear to have been influenced by ancient Taoist gymnastics traditions known as *daoyin* 導引 (pp. 133-137, 140-147). According to Shahar, this era witnessed a synthesis of ancient gymnastics and martial arts traditions, especially in handbooks like the *Yijin jing* 易筋經, as well as the delineation of a parallel structure between Buddhism (Bodhidharma; Mt. Song) and Taoism (Zhang Sanfeng 張三丰; Mt. Wudang 五嶽山) (pp. 176-180; see especially the neat illustration on p. 179). The remainder of part 3 is devoted to examining the tense relationship between the Shaolin Monastery and the Qing court, which suspected this sacred site of having links to the Triads (also known as the Heaven and Earth Association or Tiandi hui 天地會), whose leaders referred to the monastery in some of their foundation myths.[2] Shahar’s analysis might have benefited from considering Qing suspicions of the Shaolin Monastery in light of that dynasty’s religious policies,[3] but he does deserve credit for extending his research to include this sacred site’s prosperity today, as well as pointing to future research topics such as the growth of modern physical education and the impact of the mass media.[4]

The Shaolin Monastery represents a major breakthrough in its blending of historical, ethnographic, and literary sources to produce a compelling narrative that is eminently readable yet also overturns mythologized accounts of China’s martial arts traditions while also enhancing our appreciation of the role of violence in Chinese culture.[5] Shahar also deserves credit for calling our attention to the diversity and fluidity of the Shaolin community, drawing on Gene Ching’s four-part typology that encompasses: 1) Buddhist-ordained clerics who reside inside the monastery; 2) Shaolin-ordained martial monks who leave the monastery to set up their own schools; 3) professional martial artists who are not ordained monks but wear monastic robes when performing (often referred to as “fake monks” or “performance monks”); and, 4) lay disciples (*sujia dizi* 少林弟子) who have trained at the monastery but are not Buddhist clerics and do not don monastic robes (see pp. 45-50). Only the first type of specialist practices strict vegetarianism, and some types (especially types 3 and 4) did come into contact with rebellious groups (pp. 185-186), thereby leading to tensions between these specialists that extended from the late imperial era to the present day. *The Shaolin Monastery* is also noteworthy for its sensitive exploration

of the complex relationship martial monks had with the state, with warrior monks fighting both in support of the state and in messianic rebellions as early as the Northern Dynasties.[6] Shaha's data reveals that while many emperors were not averse to deploying martial monks in battle, they also feared the long-term threat such monks could pose.

Most importantly, Shahar convincingly demonstrates that in Chinese religious culture the achievement of physical strength was often viewed as an integral component of the quest for spiritual perfection. Based on this discovery, he neatly resolves the apparent contradiction of why members of a supposedly nonviolent religion like Buddhism would acquire expertise in combat techniques. Moreover, Shahar successfully places his data in the broader context of Chinese history during the Ming and Qing dynasties. His research reveals that the eclectic religious environment of that era allowed the blending of Buddhist fighting techniques with Taoist gymnastics and breathing exercises, while its frequent upheavals sparked literati interest in military affairs and caused the martial arts to play an increasingly important role in the religious life of local communities. Thus, his research on the Shaolin Monastery is more than a fascinating case study; it answers the larger question of how and why the martial arts developed into a key component of Chinese culture.

Perhaps the book's sole weakness is its surprising neglect of possible Quanzhen Taoist influences on Shaolin martial arts tradition, which seems particularly odd in light of the fact that many of Jin Yong 金庸 (b. 1924)'s novels (and subsequent movies and TV series) portray these Taoists as martial heroes. The question of Quanzhen and the martial arts is a very tricky one, while the supposed links between Taiji Quan and Zhang Sanfeng (assuming he ever existed) are hotly debated even today. Nevertheless, we do have evidence of Quanzhen (and other) Taoists having military backgrounds and practicing martial arts from the Jin-Yuan through Qing eras, which suggests that this topic deserves the attention of future researchers.[7]

Notes

- [1]. "The Lingyin si Monkey Disciples and the Origins of Sun Wukong," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 52, no. 1 (June 1992): 193-224.
- [2]. Barend ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads: Creating an Identity* (Leiden: E.J. Brill,

1998); David Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

- [3]. For more on this topic, see Vincent Goossaert, "Counting the Monks: The 1736-1739 Census of the Chinese Clergy," *Late Imperial China* 21, no. 2 (2000): 40-85.
- [4]. See for example Andrew D. Morris, *Marrow of the Nation: A History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2004).
- [5]. Avron Boretz, *Martial Gods and Magic Swords: The Ritual Production of Manhood in Taiwanese Popular Religion* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, forthcoming); Barend ter Haar, "Rethinking 'Violence' in Chinese Culture," in *Meanings of Violence: A Cross Cultural Perspective*, ed. G  ran Aijmer and Jos Abbink (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 123-140; and William T. Rowe, *Crimson Rain: Seven Centuries of Violence in a Chinese County* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

- [6]. Liu Shufen 刘淑芬, "Ethnicity and the Suppression of Buddhism in Fifth-Century North China: The Background and Significance of the Gai Wu Rebellion," *AsiaMajor* 15, part 1 (2002): 1-21.

- [7]. For more on the social history of Quanzhen, see the papers presented in “New Perspectives on Quanzhen Taoism: The Formation of a Religious Identity” (edited by Vincent Goossaert and Paul R. Katz), *Journal of Chinese Religions* 29 (2001): 91-231, as well as those presented at the “International Conference on Quanzhen Daoism in Modern Chinese Society and Culture,” UC Berkeley, November 2-3, 2007. Leading individual studies include Stephen Eskildsen, *The Teachings and Practices of the Early Quanzhen Taoist Masters* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004); Monica Esposito, “The Longmen School and Its Controversial History during the Qing Dynasty,” in John Lagerwey, ed., *Religion and Chinese Society* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press; Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2004), 621-698; Vincent Goossaert, “La création du taoïsme moderne. L'ordre Quanzhen” (PhD diss., École Pratique des Hautes Études, 1997); and Mori Yuria æf©±âöä, “Identity and Lineage: The *Taiyi jinhua zongzhi* and the Spirit-writing Cult to Patriarch Lǎn in Qing China,” in *Daoist Identity: Cosmology, Lineage and Ritual*, ed. Livia Kohn and Harold D. Roth (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 165-184.

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Citation: Paul Katz. Review of Shahar, Meir, *The Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion, and the Chinese Martial Arts*. H-Buddhism, H-Net Reviews. October, 2008.

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