Peaceful Buddhist Monks' Transformation into Martial Arts Masters: An Examination of the Development of Martial Arts at the Shaolin Monastery

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Jackie Chan and Jet Li have captivated Western movie lovers with their quick fists and agile movements. Both of these famous actors have led to an augmentation in interest towards martial arts in the twenty-first century. However, martial arts are not just a series of violent movements which can be utilized in combat, but rather they are ancient Asian techniques containing “performance, religious, or health-promoting” applications. Various types of martial arts have developed throughout Asia, including karate in Japan, taekwondo in Korea, and kung fu in China. Popularized by films, such as the Shaolin Temple released in 1980, the Shaolin monks are known worldwide as the masters of Chinese martial arts. Fighting skills developed at the Shaolin Temple have developed a reputation, which draws people from around the world to be trained at the storied Shaolin Monastery.

Buddhism was founded in India around the 5th century B.C. and a thousand years later the religion was introduced to China. The figure that established Chan Buddhism in China, Bodhidharma, resided in the Shaolin Monastery, and was known to encourage the monks to participate in physical activity. The term Shaolin is most likely derived from the location of their famous temple: in the lin (grove) of Mount Shaoshi, one of the hills that comprise Mont Song within the Henan province, an important geographic formation for Chinese culture. The first documented skirmish involving Shaolin monks took place in 610. According to steles, ancient stone slabs, located at the Shaolin temple, the Buddhist warriors were able to defend their monastery from attacking bandits. A decade later, Shaolin monks would successfully assist Li Shimin in his campaign to establish himself as Emperor of China. The Buddhist warriors were able to kidnap the nephew of Li Shimin’s opponent, Wang Shichong. These two victories, especially the capture of Shichong’s nephew, initiated the perception that Shaolin monks were an influential and impactful group of martial artists in China. In return for their service, Emperor Li Shimin granted the Shaolin faith “confirmation of its rights to the land and water mill in question and later with a certain measure of imperial protection from official harassment.” The victory allowed the monks to participate in martial arts at a period when the government was curtailing organizations that practiced fighting. The increased clout in fighting skill and creation of the Shaolin Monastery as a political sanctuary led to a heightened awareness of the Shaolin faith during the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

It is interesting to consider that the Shaolin faith was able to create martial arts, despite the fact that their organization is rooted in Buddhism. The most important precept of the religion is the restriction from killing any living organism. This sin is associated with “excommunication and definite expulsion from the Shaolin Monastery.”

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monastic community." Since the foundation of Buddhism restricts the slaughter of living organisms, monks cannot consume meat or use any product that is descended from an animal. In fact, a monk cannot possess objects whose purpose is to be utilized in the butchery of an animal, such as knives, fishing nets and hunting lassos. Other religious decrees prevent monks from engaging in theft, sexual promiscuity, lying, and consumption of alcohol. These rules form the Buddhist code of ethics and influence the decisions of monks daily.

It may seem ironic that a peaceful Buddhist group can develop and perfect a series of violent maneuvers; an irony which has always puzzled historians and has led to a debate surrounding the motives behind the creation of martial arts. Some historians, such as Meir Shahar, believe that the hostile economic and social circumstances that enveloped the monastery in the last years of the Sui dynasty (581-618) forced the monks to militarize. The poor economy in China led to the formation of numerous insurgent groups, who would often rebel. In order to protect their monastery, Shahar felt the monks developed their form of martial arts, practicing and honing their skills inside the temple walls. Historian, Mark Edward Lewis demonstrated in his book Sanctioned Violence in Early China, that there was an "evolution of a number of linked violent practices connected to changes in political authority and social organization." In contrast, historian Peter Lorge does not believe that the Shaolin monks learned combat techniques, but rather that the people who defended the monastery were hired militants. Some historians agree with Lorge's viewpoint believing that combative monks learned their fighting skills outside the Shaolin Monastery walls. Perhaps, the Chinese government trained the Shaolin clergy as sometimes "monastic leaders had themselves held military positions before becoming Buddhist monks." A few historians contend that the lack of documentation on martial arts training represents the fact that military preparation was not taught at the Buddhist sanctuary. However, the fighting techniques were transferred from one generation to the next orally. Another possible source of martial arts derive from the meditative advantages presented by the various movements. Monks use the training as another method to connect to their body and mind. In fact, the monks themselves "claim that their martial regiment is a form of spiritual training." Contrary to all of the ideas presented previously, the development of martial arts at the Shaolin Monastery stem from the Buddhist background of the organization. This paper will examine aspects of the Buddhist religion, which promoted the creation of martial arts, specifically in the Shaolin branch of Buddhism. The deities and Buddhist fables will be examined for their connection to violence and warfare. Also, the symbol of the staff in Buddhism and how it is utilized in Shaolin fighting techniques will be analyzed. Finally, an investigation into other violent Buddhist backed groups will demonstrate how Buddhism led to the combative nature of these organizations.

The physical and combative appearance of the Buddhist deity, Vajrapani, reveals the violent undertones from which the martial arts originated. Vajrapani began his life as a demon; however, his conversion to Buddhism caused him to hunt down the evil spirits. Eventually, Vajrapani became the protector and "guardian spirit" of Buddha. Numerous artistic depictions of the divine warrior illustrate a large figure with grotesque features. Most show Vajrapani as having three eyes and long finger and toenails, characteristics of an intimidating creature. Often in the background of the portrait of the Buddhist warrior is bright, red, fire, a symbol of warfare and destruction. At times the Buddhist

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9 Jerryson, Buddhist Warfare, 18.
10 Jerryson, Buddhist Warfare, 21.
11 Jerryson, Buddhist Warfare, 17.
12 Shahar “Ming-Period Evidence,” 362.
13 Lorge, Chinese Martial Arts, 29.
god is presented, dressed in a tiger skin, however, this would break the first Buddhist Precept, murder of a living organism. Other artists portray Vajrapani as wearing “light clothes, revealing his sinewy physique,” which has been created through numerous hours of martial combat. In his hands, the Buddhist deity holds two items. In his left hand, he has a rope that Vajrapani uses, as legend goes, to capture demons. In the other hand, the protector of Buddha holds vajra, a small thunderbolt scepter. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1398), the Shaolin clergy would replace the vajra with a staff; a weapon mastered by Shaolin monks. Empowered by the staff, Vajrapani would be appointed the Shaolin Temple’s guardian spirit, a position often held by the deity Guangong in the Buddhist faith. However, Vajrapani was founded in Buddhist lore, whereas Guangong prominence grew from being an influential warlord during the late Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD).

Illustration of Vajrapani

Source:
http://www.exoticindiaart.com/artimages/wrathful_vajrapani_with_wisdomfire_aureole_tp64.jpg

Buddhist monks used the image of Vajrapani to explain two phenomena. The first, martial arts need to be studied by Buddhist learners to establish a full understanding of the religion. By relating martial arts to a Buddhist deity, the idea of a “technique originated in heaven” is generated, providing a motive to teach combative maneuvers. Second, the killing of living beings and thus disregard for the first Buddhist Precept is accepted, if participation in combative activities is necessary. This can be seen as Vajrapani wears the skin of a tiger around his waist and holds a lasso in his left hand. Although, these two objects are forbidden for a monk to possess, the protector of Buddha is allowed to use them. Thus, the Buddhist precepts may be broken, if in defense of Buddha or the Buddhist state. The attribution of a god with violent characteristics and disregard for Buddhist regulations would legitimize Shaolin monk’s case for studying martial arts. “Buddhist iconography reveals to us an unexpectedly violent aspect of the faith.”

The ascription of the staff to Vajrapani is connected to another Shaolin legend, Jinnaluo. Originating in the sixteenth century, the story of Jinnaluo is the alteration of a historical event regarding the sacred Shaolin temple. In 1350, the Shaolin monastery was attacked by a group of bandits known as the Red Turbans. Buddhist lore depicts the guardian spirit, Vajrapani, defending the temple by taking bodily form. Vajrapani became Jinnaluo, a modest monk, who “emerged from the kitchen and wielding a divine staff repelled the aggressors.”

“That day, when the Red Turbans approached the monastery, the Bodhisattva wielded a stove-poker and alone stood mightily atop the lofty peak. The Red Turbans were terrified of him and escaped,

19 Shahar, The Shaolin Monastery, 37.
21 Shahar, “Ming-Period Evidence,” 403.
22 Shahar, The Shaolin Monastery, 90.
26 Shahar, The Shaolin Monastery, 83.
whereupon he disappeared. People looked for him but he was seen no more. Only then did they realize that he was a Bodhisattva displaying his divinity. Thereafter he became Shaolin’s protector of law, and occupied the seat of the monastery’s guardian spirit.”

However, this tale is very different from what actually occurred at the Shaolin Temple in 1350. No divine power stopped the Red Turbans, who successfully conquered the monastery and forced monks to abandon their home. The metamorphosis of a basic Buddhist monk into a being capable of superhuman feats was a form of propaganda used by the monks to rationalize engaging in warfare. He is often depicted in modern literature as being clad in rags and having disheveled hair. However, a minor Buddhist directive specifies that monks must shave their heads; thus

Jinnaluo represents another Buddhist deity, who violated Buddhist laws. The tale of Jinnaluo is a powerful story, enhancing the prestige of the monks’ fighting method as divinely transmitted, “while coloring it with a Buddhist aura as befitting the monastery.” In modern times, Jinnaluo has replaced Vajrapani as the image to rationalize the study of martial arts. Literature during the Song (960-1279) and Yuan (1271-1368) Dynasties provide references to new Buddhist lore being created to justify martial practice, which had become an integral component of Shaolin monastic life.

From the 12th to the 16th century, the inhabitants of the Shaolin Monastery were known to specialize in staff combat. Most Buddhist instruction was not written, with teachings delivered verbally. Two Chinese military experts documented the Shaolin staff method of combat, with differing conclusions. The first, chronologically, was Cheng Zongyou, who spent ten years within the walls of the Shaolin Monastery, endeavoring to uncover the secrets behind the monks’ success in staff warfare. His writings began with a physical description of the monks’ staffs, which he denoted were constructed from either wood or iron. Most were fabricated from wood, as the material was readily available in the forests surrounding the monastery; however, in comparison to iron, the wood staff in battle inflicted substantially less damage. Historian, Cheng Dali concurs, that the staffs “power to kill and injure is far inferior to those of the broadsword, the sword, and other metal sharp weapons.” While the wooden staff is not as obvious a killing weapon as a sword or gun, it fits well within the Buddhist philosophy of non-violence. Next, Cheng Zongyou examines the various staff positions, establishing five ‘methods’ or combinations, which he designates Little Yaks Spirit, Big Yaks Spirit, Hidden Hands, Pushing Staff, and Shuttling. None of the position names infer violent techniques; in fact yaksas are non-

27 Shahar, “Ming-Period Evidence,” 392.
28 Shahar, “Ming-Period Evidence,” 393.
29 Shahar, “Ming-Period Evidence,” 396.
33 Shahar, The Shaolin Monastery, 59.
violent fairies from nature. Cheng believed that the staff techniques originated and were taught inside the monastery walls. His personal ten-year investigation into the Buddhist staff techniques revealed pacifist roots in all aspects of the monks’ staff training.

In 1560, another military expert, Yu Dayou, travelled to the monastery to be trained in martial staff techniques. He claimed that the monks did not know any of the staff methods and he “ended up teaching the monks his own martial techniques.” Therefore, both historians differ drastically in their depictions of staff combat procedures in the Shaolin Monastery. Cheng concluded that the monks’ maneuvers were self-taught, while Yu determined that outside military experts must have instructed the Shaolin monks, as had been his own experience. Most historians and military experts agree with Cheng, and all consider the Shaolin monks distinguished staff fighters. Cheng’s writings carry more weight in history given his ten-year residence with the monks. Cheng antithesis Yu: spent only one day with the warrior monks and therefore would not have absorbed the complete monastic routines, behaviors and motivations of the inhabitants of the Shaolin Temple. The staff was an influential symbol in the Shaolin faith and was one of the eighteen belongings that every monk should carry as decreed by monastic law. Military expert, Mao Yuanbi, alleged, “all fighting techniques derive from staff methods, and all staff methods derive from Shaolin.” The Shaolin monks’ fame and renown originated from their superior proficiency in martial staff techniques.

The Shaolin monks were not the only Buddhist based organization to be involved in military combat. The Buddhist religion had branched off from its origins in northern India and numerous sects arose in various Asian states, such as Japan, Tibet, and Mongolia. The Shaolin Temple’s enemy in the 14th century was a Buddhist-inspired group called the Red Turbans. This sect plundered and even destroyed some of the monasteries. Violent competition between Buddhist groups has been ubiquitous throughout history. Various branches of the Buddhist religion battled over land, money and power, with successful military campaigns generating recognition and clout to their respective clergy. In order to control these insurgent warriors, the Chinese government needed an effective military led by a strong, inspired Emperor. One such leader was Zhu Yuanzhang, who grew up as a Buddhist disciple achieving prominence as head of the Red Turbans. Following a successful northern offensive throughout the 1350’s, Zhu established the Ming Dynasty. He ruled with an iron fist, eliminating all other contenders for power. “Zhu would prove to be one of the most violent, paranoid, and murderous rulers in Chinese history.” His early Buddhist training did little to mitigate the violence he displayed during his reign. Buddhist monastic troops were also prevalent in other regions of Asia. The lack of unity between the religious sects in Japan caused massive social unrest. Rivalries developed between branches, and violence was one of the products of this competitive state. In Tibet and Mongolia, Buddhist monks did not follow the decreed vegetarian diet, instead acceding to the violence of killing animals for their meat. This illustrates that Buddhism within Tibet and Mongolia did not adhere to the strict precepts observed in China. Violence infiltrated most Buddhist regions, leaving the sole commonality encapsulating all branches, the fundamental tie to their religion. Throughout the years, Buddhist roots and the competition it bred caused monks to engage in violent affairs.

“Ming authors considered Shaolin monastic troops the best, Funiu fighting monks ranked second, and the Wutai ones third.” The event, which ultimately designated the Shaolin Monastery as the finest soldiers in China, was the Piracy Crisis in 1553. During the middle of the 16th century, ruthless pirates participated in

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34 Shahar, *The Shaolin Monastery*, 64.
37 Shahar, “Ming-Period Evidence,” 393.
numerous raids upon China's eastern and southern coasts. During one such raid in 1554, the Wokou pirates captured the city of Songjiang and put its magistrate to death.\footnote{Shahar, "Ming-Period Evidence," 381.} The decline of the Chinese military and the inability to eradicate the violent robbers from Chinese ports, forced the government to hire monastic troops from across the country to defeat the pirates. The military unit of monastic soldiers was comprised of monks from various temples around China; however, Tianyuan, a monk trained at the Shaolin Monastery, led the company.\footnote{Shahar,  The Shaolin Monastery, 69.} There is an interesting myth surrounding Tianyuan garnering the position of leader. Legend has it that, he was able to single-handedly defeat eight monks from the Hangzhou Buddhist temple.\footnote{Lorge, Chinese Martial Arts, 171.} This strengthened the impression of premium training at Shaolin, while also dispelling the notion of Buddhists resolving differences through peaceful means. Monastic troops were utilized in four distinct battles during the Piracy Crisis. The most influential victory came at the battle of Wengjiagang, where one hundred and twenty monks defeated a substantial group of pirates. “More than a hundred pirates perished, whereas the monks suffered four casualties.”\footnote{Lorge, Chinese Martial Arts, 171.} The success at the battle of Wengjiagang immediately legitimized the Shaolin branch of Buddhism as having perfected martial arts. Military analyst Zheng Ruoceng believed the monastic units should have been utilized more frequently in the defense of China.

“...In today’s martial arts, there is no one in the land who does not yield to Shaolin...Our land is beset by bandits inside and barbarians outside. If the government issues an order for (these monks’) recruitment it will win every battle.”\footnote{Shahar,  The Shaolin Monastery, 70.}

Zheng Ruoceng was among many who perceived the Buddhist monks as the most elite fighting force in China, which could “subdue the enemy without a fight.”\footnote{Huo Jianying. "The Martial Monks of Shaolin." China Today. China Academic Journal Electronic Publishing House. May 2006. http://www.cnki.net.} Yet, some Chinese elites were wary of a military group not under the control of the government. One such elite, Wang Shixing, believed that the fighting monks were susceptible to corruption by bandits.\footnote{Shahar, "Ming-Period Evidence," 386.} However most feel that the monks fully demonstrated their loyalty to China and their desire to bring peace to the nation, by their defense of the state against the pirates.

The current influx in popularity of the mixed martial arts has led to a rediscovery of the origins of each branch of warfare. In the search of the root of martial arts, many people begin with the Shaolin temple. The monastery was a shrine for the Buddhist faith and martial arts. Buddhism led to creation and development of violent techniques, which comprise kung fu. The Buddhist deity, Vajrapani, and his human form, Jinnaluo have been depicted as defenders of the monastery in Buddhist fiction. These figures not only engaged in warfare, but also had violent characteristics such as three eyes and a tiger skin robe. The monastic warriors of the Shaolin faith employed staffs as their primary weapon. Cheng Zongyou and Yu Dayou examined the famed Shaolin staff method. Cheng illustrated the importance of martial arts training in monastic life; however, Yu thought that the fighting skills of the monks were learned outside the walls of the monastery. The main proponent of Buddhism as a cause of violent actions can be seen from the numerous Buddhist sects that were involved in warfare. The Chinese piracy scandal and the Red Turbans are two examples in China when Buddhist based groups engaged in martial actions. Other examples of violence from Buddhist clergy could be seen in Japan, Tibet and Mongolia. On the surface, the Buddhist religion serves as a mask to hide the violent and martial characteristics of the Shaolin monks.
Bibliography


