



A monk seeks shelter from a snow shower in the Shaolin Temple.

In a valley just over the Song Mountains, tour buses arrive at the Shaolin Temple. They come from across China—uniformed soldiers on leave, businessmen, retired grandparents on vacation, parents leading children who karate chop the air in excitement—all to see the birthplace of China’s greatest kung fu legend.

Here, the popular myth says, is where a fifth-century Indian mystic<sup>1</sup> taught a series of exercises, or forms, that resembled animal movements. He taught these to monks at the Shaolin Temple. The monks adapted the forms for self-defense and later modified these techniques for warfare. As the Shaolin monks fought, they became more proficient as fighters and their fame grew. Over the next 14 centuries, the monks honed their skills and used them in countless battles. Many of these feats<sup>2</sup> are noted on stone

tablets in the temple and were used as material in novels dating back to the Ming Dynasty.<sup>3</sup>

Although legends might stretch the truth, we do know that the temple was attacked repeatedly during its long history (see Figure 1). The most devastating blow came in 1928, when an angry warlord burned down most of the temple, including its library. Centuries of information about kung fu theory and training, Chinese medicine and Buddhist scriptures—essentially the temple’s soul<sup>4</sup>—were destroyed.

Today, however, temple officials seem more interested in building the Shaolin brand than in restoring its soul. Over the past decade, Shi Yongxin, the 45-year-old abbot,<sup>5</sup> has built an international business empire—including touring kung fu troupes,<sup>6</sup> film and TV projects, and an

<sup>1</sup> *mystic*: person who meditates and communicates with spiritual elements in the universe

<sup>2</sup> *feat*: an impressive and difficult achievement

<sup>3</sup> *The Ming Dynasty*: the rulers of China from 1368 to 1644

<sup>4</sup> *soul*: your mind, character, thoughts, and feelings

<sup>5</sup> *abbot*: the head of a group of monks who live together

<sup>6</sup> *troupes*: groups of entertainers such as actors or dancers

online store selling Shaolin-brand tea and soap. Many of the men working the temple's cash registers—men with shaved heads and wearing monks' robes—admit they're not monks but employees paid to look the part. Over tea in his office at the temple, Yongxin makes the case that all of these efforts help to promote awareness of Buddhism. He argues that using the Shaolin brand name in other countries helps to promote Shaolin traditional culture, including kung fu. "We make more people know about Zen Buddhism," he says. Whether it is for enlightenment or riches, the kung fu renaissance<sup>7</sup> is now in full swing.

Evidence of the renewed interest in kung fu can be seen in the city of Dengfeng, just six miles from the temple gates. The city, with a population of 650,000, now has approximately 60 martial arts schools, with more than 50,000 students. These schools include boys, and increasingly girls, from every province and social class, ranging in age from 5 to their late 20s. Some arrive hoping to become movie stars or to win glory as kickboxers. Others come to learn skills that will ensure good jobs in the military, police, or private security. There are also those who are drawn to the ancient wisdom of kung fu.

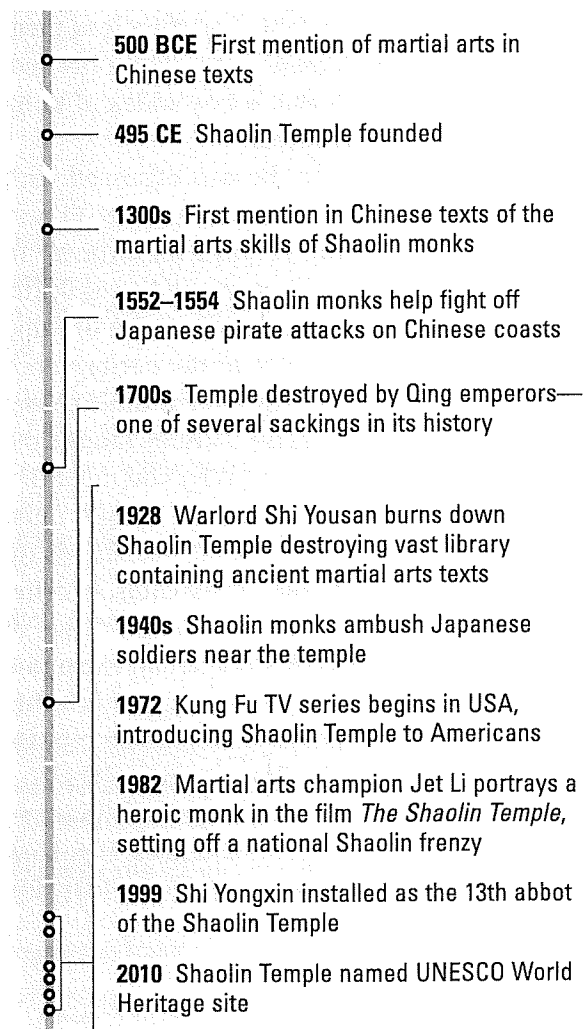
Hu Zhengsheng is a disciple of Yang Guiwu, a Shaolin master. Hu has just received a call that many martial artists spend their lives hoping for: a Hong Kong producer offering him a leading role in a kung fu movie. It's easy to see why. Hu has a boyishly handsome face and projects a confidence won through years of physical and mental testing. Yet he isn't sure whether to accept the offer. He doesn't agree with how kung fu usually is portrayed in the movies. He views the movie version of kung fu as a mindless celebration of violence that ignores the discipline's focus on morality and respect for one's opponent. He is also concerned that Yang Guiwu's other disciples will lose respect for him if he becomes an entertainer. And he worries about the dangers of fame. Humility<sup>8</sup> defeats pride, Master Yang taught him. Pride defeats man.

<sup>7</sup> *renaissance*: a revival of interest

<sup>8</sup> *humility*: modesty; lack of self-importance

On the other hand, a film role would generate publicity and bring much needed money to Hu's small kung fu school. With the blessing of his master, he founded the school eight years ago, in a few cinder-block buildings just outside Dengfeng. Many of the students come from poor families, and Hu charges them only for food. Unlike the big kung fu academies, which stress acrobatics and kickboxing, Hu teaches his 200 boys (and a few girls) the traditional Shaolin kung fu forms that Yang Guiwu passed on to him. Fighting is not the most important lesson of kung fu, Hu explains. His focus is on honor. The skills he is passing on to his students come with great responsibility. In each child, he looks for a willingness to "eat bitterness," an expression that means students welcome hardship and use it to

**Figure 1.** Shaolin Through the Ages



Source: National Geographic Magazine, March 2011

discipline their will and help them to strengthen their character.

At night, his students sleep in unheated rooms. No matter what the temperature is, they train outside, often before sunrise. They hit tree trunks to toughen their hands and practice with other students sitting on their shoulders to build leg strength. During drills,<sup>9</sup> coaches use bamboo to hit the legs of any boy whose form is not perfect or whose effort is considered insufficient. When asked if such harsh treatment could upset students, Hu smiles. “It is eating bitterness. They understand it makes them better.”

Despite the intensity of the school’s training, not many students give up and leave. However, Hu has to continually seek new students to keep up with the rising costs of running the school. Gradually, he has accepted the new teaching trends and has begun offering a few courses in kickboxing and the acrobatic kung fu forms. He hopes to attract new students and then lead them back to kung fu’s traditional forms. From his own experience, Hu knows that a boy’s idea of kung fu can change as he matures.

When Hu was young, he was obsessed with the kung fu films of Bruce Lee and Jet Li and fantasized about taking revenge on bullies<sup>10</sup> in his village. At age 11, he managed to talk his way into the Shaolin Temple, where he became a servant to the coach of one of the performance troupes. Later the man introduced him to Yang Guiwu. Hu says, “He [Yang Guiwu] taught me the theory behind the moves. Why you must flex your arm a certain way. Why your weight must be on a certain part of your foot.” He stands up to demonstrate. A fist strike, he explains, is delivered like a chess move, anticipating a range of possible countermoves. “A student can learn this in a year,” he says. “But to do it like this”—his hands and elbows become a blur as he repeats the moves at full speed—“takes many years.”

Hu explains that “Shaolin kung fu is designed for combat, not to entertain audiences. It is hard to convince boys to spend many years learning

something that won’t make them wealthy or famous.” He seems saddened by the thought. “I worry that is how the traditional styles will be lost.” A boy appears at the office door to report that a student has twisted an ankle. By the time Hu arrives to check on him, the injured pupil is back on his feet, gritting his teeth as he kicks a heavy bag. Hu nods with a teacher’s satisfaction. “He is learning to eat bitterness.”



## BRUCE LEE

Bruce Lee, born in San Francisco in 1940 and raised in Hong Kong, is perhaps the most famous martial artist in recent history. At the age of 13, Lee began learning *Wing Chun*, a form of Kung Fu, with Master Yip Man. At 18, Lee returned to the United States and attended the University of Washington. During this time, Lee opened his own martial arts school, teaching his version of Kung Fu. Later, Lee combined different techniques to create an entirely new martial arts style called “Jeet Kune Do.”

Lee is best known, however, for his screen presence. His roles in the 1966 television series *The Green Hornet* and in such movies as *Enter the Dragon* and *Game of Death* introduced Chinese martial arts to enthusiastic audiences around the world. Unfortunately, Bruce Lee died suddenly in 1973 after complaining of headaches. Although he was so young when he died, Lee has been called one of the most influential people of the 20th century.

<sup>9</sup> *drills*: repetitive practice exercises

<sup>10</sup> *bullies*: people who force others to do things by using fear or strength