

Introduction to Chinese martial arts:

Dear students,

My name is Mark Murphy, and I am delighted to be teaching you this short course on Chinese martial arts. The objectives of this course are to introduce you to the distinctive nature of Chinese martial arts along with their rich heritage. Furthermore, I want to show you the diverse styles that originate from the different provinces in China, along with the mythologies that are connected to these martial disciplines, and to also look at the current status of Chinese martial arts today. To start with, and before we meet, I think its important to become familiar with a few basic terms. To that end, I want to give a few introductory excerpts surrounding definitions of Kung-fu (Gong Fu), Wushu and the centrality of the Shaolin Temple, which is probably the most famous place associated with Chinese martial arts. To that end, I am giving you an excerpt from **Mikhailov, D., 2012. *The History and Philosophy of Kung Fu*. 1st ed. London: Philosophers' Circle**, and **Shahar, M., 2008. *The Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion, and the Chinese Martial Arts*. University of Hawaii Press**. I am also providing you with some YouTube videos to watch, which will be found just underneath the text.

What is Kung fu?

Text introduction from Mikhailov, D., 2012. *The History and Philosophy of Kung Fu*. 1st ed. London: Philosophers' Circle. Pp 17-19, 20-21:

“In the West, the term “kung fu” has been used to describe the many hundreds of styles of Chinese martial arts ever since its popularisation by Bruce Lee in the 1960s. However, when students start to practise a particular style, they quickly learn that each style has its own name, usually followed by the word quan, or “fist”. So they practise Bai He Quan or Pigua Quan or Shaolin Quan, and use “kung fu” as just a collective name for all the different styles taken together. In China, on the other hand, the collective term for all the different styles is “wushu”, literally translated as “martial arts”, and the term “kung fu” is used very differently. In China, “kung fu” is used to denote the quality of inner strength that you achieve through years of foundation training and that gives the particular movements of your style their potency. Therefore, your kung fu is dictated by the strength and flexibility of your joints, the speed of your muscles and, perhaps most importantly, the power of your qi, the Chinese term meaning

both “energy” and “breath”. Tellingly, one of the worst insults to a wushu stylist in China would be to say that his kung fu was not good. It would be the equivalent of saying that he was all show and no substance. That is why the swordsman in the first scene above can be said to practise wushu, but when we talk about how well he is able to employ his wushu skills, we talk about the quality of his foundation training and the power of his qi, so we talk about his kung fu. As the second scene indicates, the term “kung fu” can also be used in China to describe a master’s level of proficiency in art forms other than the martial arts. It is still possible to come across people in China today saying that a calligrapher or a player of the Pipa has good kung fu, though increasingly only a scholar or an expert in the art would know to do so, as in everyday language the usage would be considered archaic. When used that way, the term “kung fu” does not mean the master calligrapher or Pipa player also practises martial arts, but that the foundation training within their particular art has reached a certain level of potency or skill. This makes sense when you consider that the literal meaning of “kung fu” in Chinese is quite simply: “hard work”. Looking beyond the literal meaning, we can say that the term describes the effort that goes into mastering any given skill and the changes in the practitioner’s body, mind and spirit that take place through that effort. It is these physical, mental and spiritual changes which allow the kung fu practitioner to move with the sublime level of skill visible to and appreciated by even uninitiated observers. And it does not matter what is involved in the movement, whether it is a sword, a fist, or a calligrapher’s brush sliding on paper. With this literal meaning of the words in mind, we can begin to define “kung fu” as ***“the achievement of physical, mental and spiritual self-transformation through the practice of a skill.”*** “

“We can see then that the terms “kung fu” and “wushu” do not mean the same thing. Kung fu as a term is broader than the martial arts, though of all its usages by far the most common is the one associated with martial arts practice. In the martial arts context, following our definition above, kung fu can be defined as “the achievement of physical, mental and spiritual self-transformation through the practice of wushu.”

The Significance of Shaolin Temple. Its mythology and history.

Text Introduction from Shahar, M., 2008. *The Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion, and the Chinese Martial Arts*. University of Hawaii Press. Pp 1-4

“At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Shaolin Monastery has arguably become the most famous Buddhist temple in the world. The reason lies neither in its contribution to Chinese Buddhist evolution nor in its art treasures that have been accumulated in the course of its

fifteen-hundred-year history. Not even the legends associating the monastery with the mythic founder of Chan (Zen) Buddhism, Bodhidharma, are the source of its renown. Rather, the Shaolin Monastery is world-famous because of its presumed connection to the Chinese martial arts. The Westward dissemination of Chinese fighting techniques is among the intriguing aspects of the cultural encounter between China and the modern West. Featuring a unique synthesis of military, therapeutic, and religious goals, the Chinese martial arts appeal to millions of Western practitioners. Often presented as if they had originated at the Shaolin Monastery, these fighting techniques spread the temple's fame among large populations not necessarily familiar with the Buddhist faith. Moreover, nonpractitioners have been exposed to the Shaolin myth as well; beginning with Bruce Lee's (Li Xiaolong) (1940–1973) legendary films in the 1960s and culminating with Li Lianjie's (Jet Li) (b. 1963) spectacular features, the Shaolin Temple has been celebrated in numerous kung fu movies, which have played a major role in the propagation of its legend. Is Shaolin's fame justified? Did its monks ever practice the martial arts? If they did, their military practice would give rise to numerous questions: religious, political, and military alike. The Buddhologist, to start with, would be struck by the obvious contradiction between monastic military training and the Buddhist prohibition of violence. How could Shaolin monks disregard a primary tenet of their religious faith that forbade warfare? Didn't they feel uneasy heading to the battlefield? Did they try to vindicate their transgression of Buddhist monastic law?

It could be argued, of course, that individuals and collectives alike have always found ways to justify violating their professed ideologies, in which sense the *contradiction* between Buddhism and martial practice is less interesting than the *connection*. Are the Shaolin martial arts inherently related to Buddhism? Nowadays, Shaolin monks emphatically claim that their martial regimen is a form of spiritual training. Shaolin's Abbot Yongxin (b. 1965) refers to his monastery's military tradition as "martial Chan" (*wuchan*), meaning that the physical exercises are a tool for the cultivation of religious awareness. Some practitioners argue further that it is possible to perceive a Chan logic within the Shaolin fighting method (as distinct from other Chinese martial styles such as Taiji Quan). The Shaolin sequence of fighting postures, they explain, creates patterns only to destroy them, thereby liberating the practitioner from preconceived notions. Such claims should not be belittled; on the contrary, the historian should trace their origins. Other connections between Buddhism and military practice may also exist. As early as the medieval period, the Shaolin Monastery owned a large estate, which in chaotic times needed military protection. Shaolin martial training might have derived, therefore, from

economic necessity: the safeguarding of the temple's property. Practical needs might have been sanctioned by divine precedents. It is striking that a religion as intent on peace as Buddhism arrived in China equipped with an entire arsenal of military gods. Buddhist iconography flanks the Buddha with heavily armed, ferocious-looking deities who trample demons underfoot. Such guardian deities might have provided a religious excuse for monastic violence; if the world-honored one required the protection of martial gods, then his monastic community certainly needed the defense of martial monks. No investigation of Chinese monastic martial practice would be complete without reference to the possibility of native influences. Gymnastic and breathing exercises, coupled with techniques for the internal circulation of vital energy (*qi*), have been practiced in China as early as the first centuries BCE. Considered useful for longevity and spiritual self-cultivation, these exercises were incorporated during the early medieval period into the emerging Daoist religion, where they became an integral element of the faith's search for immortality. It is possible that this ancient tradition of religiously oriented gymnastics influenced Shaolin fighting techniques, in which case the Chinese Buddhist martial arts could be interpreted as yet another example of the sinicization of Buddhism. The implications of Buddhist martial practice are not merely religious; monastic armies might have played a political role as well. Chinese imperial regimes of the past, like their contemporary Communist successors, have always been suspicious of the presumed rebellious intents of religious organizations. How could they tolerate monastic military training? The political historian would investigate, therefore, whether the state attempted to suppress Shaolin martial practice, or, on the contrary, employed fighting monks for its own military ends. As the following chapters demonstrate, the answer varied from one period to another. Whereas Shaolin monks rendered loyal military service to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), for which they were handsomely rewarded with state patronage, their relations with the Qing (1644–1911) were ambivalent. Qing officials feared—probably not without reason—that some Shaolin affiliates would join sectarian revolts. Practitioners and martial arts historians alike would be more interested in the evolution of *techniques* than in their religious or political implications. When did the Shaolin martial arts emerge? To address this question we must distinguish between military *activities* and fighting *techniques*: As early as the Tang dynasty (618–907), Shaolin monks engaged in warfare, but there is no evidence that at that time they specialized in a given martial art, let alone developed their own. The monks presumably carried to battle common Tang weaponry, practicing the same military tactics as other medieval soldiers. As to the monastery's own martial arts, they evolved in two stages that lasted several centuries each. In the first phase, which likely began around the twelfth century and reached

its apogee in the sixteenth, Shaolin monks specialized in staff fighting. By the late Ming, their techniques with this weapon were considered the best in China. In the second phase, from the sixteenth century to the present, the monks have been perfecting their unarmed techniques, which gradually eclipsed the staff as the dominant form of Shaolin martial practice. By the twenty-first century, the Shaolin method of hand combat (*quan*) has spread all over the world. It needs be emphasized that throughout the monastery's history, the monks have also practiced fighting with swords, spears, and other sharp weapons, which in real battle were more effective than either staff or hand combat. Beginning with Tang Hao's (1897–1959) pioneering research in the 1930s, significant progress has been made in the study of martial arts history. Nevertheless, the evolution of Chinese fighting techniques is not yet fully charted, and important lacunas remain to be explored. The development of Shaolin fighting could potentially shed light on martial arts history in general. Significantly, Shaolin hand combat emerged during the same period—the late Ming and early Qing—as other familiar bare-handed styles such as Taiji Quan and Xingyi Quan. As shown in the following chapters, the Ming-Qing transition was a pivotal period in martial arts history, in which Daoist gymnastic and breathing techniques were integrated with bare-handed fighting, creating a synthesis of fighting, healing, and self-cultivation. Arguably, this unique combination of military, therapeutic, and religious goals has been the key to the martial arts' appeal in their native land and the modern West as well. This book is concerned then with these problems: military, political, and religious. However, before they could have been addressed, a fundamental question had to be answered: Did Shaolin monks practice fighting, and if so since when? During the late imperial period an enormous body of legends grew around the Shaolin Temple. The Chinese martial arts were wrapped in an elaborate mythology that ascribed them to Buddhist saints and to Daoist immortals. Propagated the world over by training manuals, as well as by novels and movies, this mythology has become part of our own. To examine the evolution of Shaolin fighting, it was necessary therefore to separate—as far as possible—myth from history. The result is a chronological account that spans fifteen hundred years, from Shaolin's founding in the late fifth century through the monastery's Tang military campaigns, the military services it rendered the Ming dynasty, the evolution of its staff techniques and later its bare-handed techniques, and its uneasy relations with the Qing, which lasted through the nineteenth century. Any attempt to investigate the history of monastic fighting is confronted by the reluctance of Buddhist authors to record it. Even though some eminent monks criticized monastic warfare—providing us important information on it—the typical Buddhist response has been silence. In the vast historiographical corpus of the Chinese canon, no reference is

made to Shaolin military activities, which contradicted Buddhist monastic law. In this absence, epigraphy has proven to be an invaluable source. The Shaolin Monastery boasts dozens of inscriptions, which shed light on its military activities from the seventh through the nineteenth centuries. Whereas Tang and Ming steles record imperial gifts, which were bestowed on the monastery in recognition of its military services, Qing inscriptions warn the monks not to engage in rebellious activities. Other information was also recorded in stone. The burial stupas of Ming-period Shaolin fighting monks are inscribed with epitaphs that list individual battles in which the clerics had participated. Whereas all through the fourteenth century, epigraphy is our most important source of Shaolin military activities, beginning in the mid-Ming the situation changes dramatically; the Shaolin martial arts are lauded in every genre of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Chinese literature, and fighting monks figure in dozens, if not hundreds, of late Ming and Qing texts. There were probably several causes for the burst of late Ming interest in monastic fighting, which lasted through the ensuing Qing period. The first reason was the decline of the hereditary Ming army, which forced the government to rely on other military forces, including monastic troops. The late Ming was the heyday of monastic armies, the martial arts being practiced in temples across the empire. Fighting monks were drafted for numerous military campaigns, and their contribution to national defense was recorded in official histories such as the *Ming Veritable Records* (*Ming shi lu*) and the *Ming History* (*Mingshi*). The bravery and fighting skills of clerical troops—Shaolin’s and other’s—were similarly lauded in chronicles of individual battles. The contribution of monastic armies to the sixteenth-century piracy campaign, for example, was repeatedly praised in treatises on coastal defense. A second cause for the wealth of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources on Shaolin fighting was the publishing industry’s growth. The Shaolin martial arts were featured in new genres, which were first printed during the late Ming, as well as in old ones, which proliferated in that period. They figure in military treatises and martial arts manuals; local gazetteers and monastic histories (which, unlike general histories of Chinese Buddhism, did mention fighting monks); household encyclopedias, travel guides, and memoirs; as well as a great variety of fiction in both the classical and vernacular idioms. The Manchu conquest of 1644 furnishes a third important factor in the historiography of Shaolin fighting. The humiliating defeat turned the attention of the literati elite to the popular martial arts, which had been earlier considered unworthy of documentation. Renowned literati such as Gu Yanwu (1613–1682), Huang Zongxi (1610–1695), and the latter’s son Huang Baijia (1643–?) acknowledged becoming interested in folk fighting techniques because their scholarly Confucian education had failed in the nation’s defense. These scholars were not motivated by

a naïve belief that bare-handed fighting could overthrow the foreign conquerors, but rather looked for the martial arts as a means for restoring national confidence, not unlike nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chinese attempts to restore the nation's political body by invigorating the corporal bodies of individual citizens.

The great medievalist Marc Bloch has commented that knowledge of the present is necessary for an understanding of the past. On several occasions contemporary Shaolin practice has illuminated for me aspects of the temple's history. This is especially true as regards the fluidity of the Shaolin community, of which resident monks constitute no more than a core minority. In addition to ordained clerics who dwell inside the temple, numerous Shaolin practitioners—monks and laymen alike—have been trained at the monastery but have left it to pursue an independent career, often opening up their own martial arts schools. These Shaolin alumni often disregard monastic regulations (especially the dietary law prohibiting meat), just as their late imperial predecessors might have joined in sectarian revolts. During the Qing period, government officials censured the criminal activities of the itinerant Shaolin community rather than blame the monastery itself for seditious intents. The Shaolin Temple was suspect not because of its own insubordination, but because of its intimate connection to an unruly and fluid martial community, which *was* deemed potentially dangerous. Thus, where the elucidation of a historical problem requires reference to contemporary conditions, I have ventured into ethnographic observation. Nevertheless, Shaolin's modern history will have to await another study. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Shaolin's martial evolution has been intimately related to the fate of the modern Chinese martial arts. The traumatic encounter with the modern West...; the emergence of the modern media—newspaper, film, and television industries—and their respective roles in spreading the martial arts; the promotion of standardized martial arts sports in the People's Republic of China and the government's attempt, on which national pride hinges, to include them in the Olympic games—even though I have commented on them, these topics will require the attention of the specialist in modern Chinese history.”

YouTube Video on Shaolin Temple:

The Kung Fu Shaolin: Episode 1

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDR31_nh70Q&t=2206s

Things to think about while watching this video:

1. What problems of 'authenticity' can you perceive here?
2. Should we be thinking of the historicity rather than history of Shaolin?
3. Why do you think Shaolin Temple is so attractive in Western Minds?