

SHAOLIN

Temple in my heart

Shi Yongxin



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“As the successor of the Shaolin culture, my mission is to work tirelessly to perpetuate what our predecessors had left us, and to pass on the Chinese Ch’an lineage from one generation to another. On this matter, I admit that I am a staunch conservative because our tradition contains wisdom that can creatively respond to the realistic problems of individuals, society and nature.”

—Shi Yongxin



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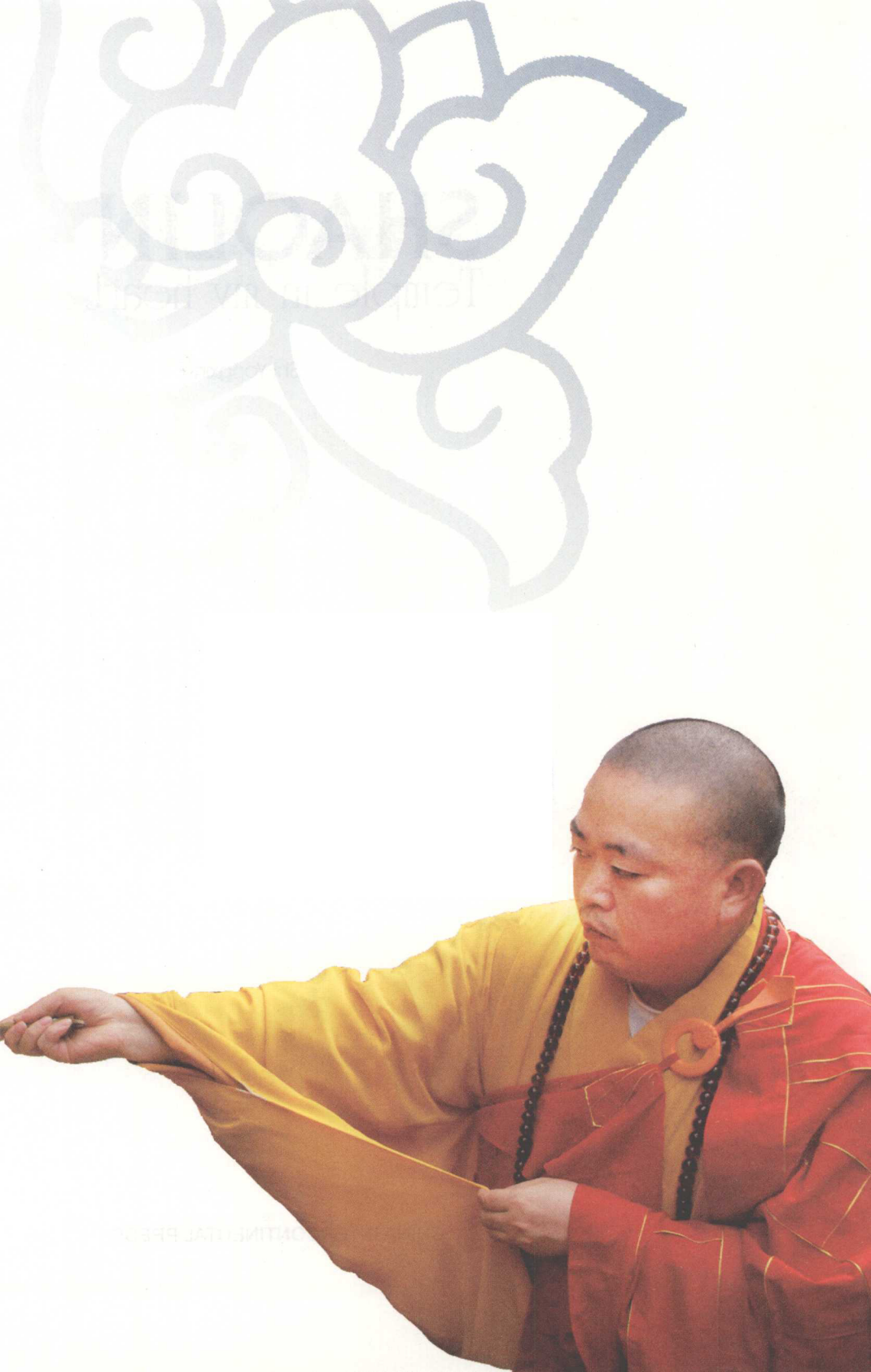
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CONTENTS

- 1 An Ordinary Start / 7
- 2 My Master, Abbot Xingzheng / 15
- 3 Devotion to Buddha; Doing Solid Work / 25
- 4 My Kungfu Practice / 37
- 5 Shaolin Kungfu: The Union of Wushu and Ch'an / 45
- 6 "Shaolin Temple" The Film / 57
- 7 Restoring the Original Imperial Monastic Appearance / 65
- 8 Ancient Monastery Hidden Deep in Mountains / 75
- 9 Making Out All Efforts to Reach a Goal / 85
- 10 Shaolin Culture Steps into World / 93
- 11 Leading a Visiting Delegation to Taiwan / 103
- 12 "Shaolin Temple Day" in the United States / 107
- 13 History of Shaolin Temple's Relations with Japan / 115
- 14 President Putin's Visit to Shaolin Temple / 123
- 15 Shaolin Cultural Centers Overseas / 133
- 16 Eternal Dhyana / 141
- 17 Restoring the Past Glory of Ordination Platform / 151
- 18 Awakening Wisdom, Lighting Lamp of the Soul / 161
- 19 "The Four Immeasurables", Hopes for Future / 171

- 20 Buddhism Brings Non-Worldly Benefits / 179
 - 21 Move the Body, Not the Mind / 187
 - 22 People's Deputy from the religious Circle / 199
 - 23 Finding a Sustainable Model for Shaolin's Preservation / 205
 - 24 Standing Firm on Principles / 215
 - 25 The Shaolin in My Mind / 221
- Chronology of Shaolin Temple / 225**

CHAPTER 1 AN ORDINARY START



I lived with my family ever since I was a child. My grandparents and parents were all lay Buddhists. We also had Buddha statues and books in our home, and we always kowtowed and offered incense during New Year and other festivals. Such frequent encounters naturally led to my familiarity with Buddhism.

Also, there were many storytellers in the rural villages of the Northern Anhui areas where we lived. In particular, during summer when frequent flooding and the drizzles of the “plum rain” season were commonplace, there was very little that we could do except to fill our days listening to their stories for weeks on end. Likewise, there was little to do during winters, so we also spent our days listening to

stories. Storytellers often talked about the lives of monks, and I started to wonder whether I too could take the monastic vow and become a monk, living a carefree life of coming and going like the cloud and the fog - just like the immortals as described by the storytellers. I was innocent then, and yearned for this way of living.

In those days, my father was working for the Fourth Engineering Bureau under the Ministry of Water Resources and Electric Power; my mother led me and my four siblings to tend to farming. I am the third child, with two elder brothers, one younger brother and one younger sister. Our home was designated a commodity grain household (this was a designation used during the days when the purchase and sale of food was centralized; it meant ours was a non-peasant household), which meant we did not have problem getting enrolled in school or finding a job. Nevertheless, I still chose the path of monkhood.

In 1981, at the age of sixteen, when my family was traveling after Chinese New Year, I took some money and a few pieces of clothing and headed to Shaolin Temple.

I have been drawn to two places ever since I was a child: one was Wutai Mountain, the other was Shaolin Temple. During those days, I had not even heard of Jiuhua Mountain or Putuo Mountain. The storytellers often talked about the large number of monks at Shaolin Temple, and how exceptional their kungfu was. I had decided to first go to Shaolin Temple, and if they refuse to admit me, I would then go to Wutai Mountain. Since Shaolin Temple was near my home, my first choice was Shaolin Temple.

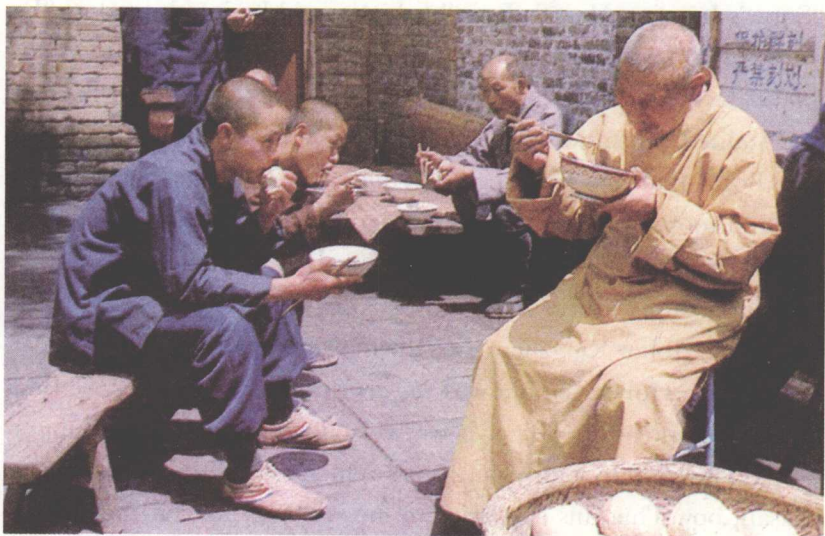
After many twists and turns, I found the then current abbot, the Elder Xingzheng. He asked why I had wanted to be at Shaolin and I told him I wanted to become a monk and study martial arts. Frankly, I knew of no other reason.

The old abbot asked a few simple questions about my family situation. I told him that all of us offered incense and were vegetarians

at home. He then asked me what kind of work I could do. I said that since I am from the rural village, I knew how to do all kinds of chores and was not afraid of hardship. He listened, nodded his head and said, “You have a strong connection to Buddha”, and then agreed to accept me as a disciple but asked me to return home and provide a letter of introduction.

Naturally, my entire family objected. My parents sought out many elders in our village to take turns to persuade me not to become a monk. However, I was single-minded in becoming a monk and they failed to dissuade me in the end. My parents realized that I was quite resolute and finally agreed.

Shaolin Temple of those days had undergone the “Ten Year Catastrophe” and it lost its appearance as the royal court’s monastery. The worship halls were dilapidated, the monks had scattered, and incense offering had dwindled to almost none. Shaolin Temple in front of me was no more than an old run-down monastery with just over



Shaolin Temple in old times, the Buddha hall was dilapidated and monks lived austere lives, pictured in 1985.



Bronze Statue of Patriarch Bodhidharma, enshrined in Ch'an Meditation Hall of Shaolin Temple.

twenty monks and twenty-eight Mu a Chinese unit of area, 1 Mu equals 666.66 square meters of marginally agrarian land that could not even produce enough to feed the monks, who were given a maize paste twice a day, and a ration of two steamed buns per person for lunch. Many people thought that I had chosen monkhood so that I would be fed well at the monastery. The truth was our lives at the monastery were much worse than at home and a far cry from what I had in mind. But despite all this, I always felt that the spiritual energy of Shaolin Temple was intact.

My refuge ceremony took place at the Lixue Pavilion behind the abbot's room.

The Lixue Pavilion is also known as the Bodhidharma Pavilion. Inside the pavilion is a Buddha altar, and hung high up in the center is a plaque on which Emperor Qianlong inscribed four characters: "Snow's Imprint, Heart's Jewel" (which could be interpreted as "Essence of Dharma Imprinted in Snow"). This was the site where Ch'an Buddhism's Second Patriarch, Hui Ke, amputated his arm and stained the snow with his blood to show his determination to seek Bodhidharma's teachings. Therefore, taking refuge at the Lixue Pavilion took on an extraordinary significance. Perhaps because of special karma, Abbot Hai Fa of the White Horse Temple was visiting Shaolin Temple at the time and became the master for my refuge ceremony; Abbot Xingzheng was the tonsure master.

White Horse Temple was the first monastery built after Buddhism had spread to China. It was very uncommon that two important monasteries to jointly perform a refuge ceremony for a common peasant boy. That this happened to me was not only karmic but also a responsibility for me to fulfill. During the ceremony, Abbot Xingzheng formally accepted me as his disciple, and conferred upon me

the dharma name of Yong Xin.

I still vividly remember the solemnity and respect that I was experiencing for the very first time. It was a sense of worship and reverence for our predecessors, which came from deep within my heart. Only many years later did I realize my master had taken on grave risks by agreeing to my request to enter monkhood and accepting me as disciple. After the Cultural Revolution and before the restoration of policies on religion, monks dared not put on their monastic attire, let alone take on disciples. It was exactly for this reason that I was even more resolute in my devotion to Buddhism and my conviction to continue my master's work.

In the monastery, I cooked, grazed the cows, tilled the land, collected manure, and acted as caretaker. I was industrious and studious, and before long, I was receiving praises from some of the old monks.



Lixue (Standing in Snow) Pavilion, also known as Bodhidharma Pavilion. The current hall was built in the seventh year of Zhengde Reign of the Ming Dynasty (1512 AD) and afterwards renovated many times.

Furthermore, I gained the fondness of Abbot Xingzheng.

Taking on monkhood is not like what most people had imagined with their many stories and legends. At bottom, we rely on our faith for support, and faith is something that is abstract and indescribable yet perceivable to the faithful.

It was in the process of my practice that I gradually realized my purpose for taking monkhood: it was to resolve the questions of life and death, and where we came from, and where we will go. It is precisely through monkhood that we validate our lives. For this reason, monks must see through the illusion of life and death. It is only when we are detached from life and death that we could reach the great achievement, transcend life and death, and resolve life's most fundamental questions.

When we talk about "Liao Sheng", we do not mean to terminate life. For us, it means to understand life, what it means to live through our entire life, and to understand the truth of our existence.

When we talk about "Tuo Si", we do not mean we will not die, as all of birth, aging, sickness, death, destruction and emptiness are all but natural phenomenon. Buddha dharma teaches us not to be fearful of death.

After becoming the abbot of Shaolin Temple, in addition to resolving my personal questions on life and death, I also had to consider the question of Shaolin Temple's life and death. Shaolin Temple's living conditions were difficult at that time. Other than the ground on which the monastery stands and the 28 Mu of hilly area outside the walls of the monastery, Shaolin Temple had no forest or land which could provide adequate sustenance for the monks.

Over these years, I have been constantly in search of a development pattern: given the circumstances of our reality, how could we be more effective in propagating dharma for the benefit of sentient beings and propagate our lineage? In other words, what is the path of sustainable development for Shaolin Temple? This is the crux of

the issues - Shaolin Temple is a case study on Buddhism in contemporary China. Although we now have favorable policies on religion, it is futile to wait for the confluence of so-called suitable timing, location, and support from the people because no one will offer anything without wanting something in return. Waiting can only adversely impact on this historical opportunity, even ruining the future of Shaolin Temple and even Buddhism. After China Central TV host Wang Zhi finished the production of CCTV's "Face to Face" special episode on Shaolin Temple, he requested that I write down my thoughts in a single sentence. Instead, I wrote two Chinese characters: "Shi Ji" (Reality). Wang Zhi understood the profound meaning of these two characters, which are often indiscriminately referred to in their more common connotations. We often say that the ideal state of Shaolin Kungfu is one where "the body moves while the mind maintains equanimity." Expanding on this point, our ways of "making a living" have progressed with the times, yet Shaolin Temple's basic way of living has not Changed and our faith in Buddhism strengthens steadily. This is because the history and actual progress of Shaolin Temple allow more and more people to experience for themselves the eternal vitality of the teachings of Buddha Dharma. This is what is referred to as "remain unchanged amid outside conditions; remain unchanged but always act in accord with outside conditions." It would truly be a crime if we permit the decline of Shaolin Temple with its one thousand five hundred years' old history because we are overly cautious and indecisive. This was never our original intention.



Venerable Master Xingzheng, the 29th Abbot of Shaolin Temple and Shi Yongxin, who stood to the right, pictured in 1984.

CHAPTER 2

MY MASTER, ABBOT XINGZHENG

My master Abbot Xingzheng came from a poor family and was abandoned at Shaolin Temple. The 1951 great drought in Henan province left the land cracked, parched and barren. Shaolin Temple could not escape the drought's impact which left no one in charge of the monastery as many monks had left. My master was in charge of managing the monastery's finance and food storage. Under the circumstances, he stepped forward and took charge of the monastery until he passed away in 1987.

My master led all of us through the toughest decades in Shaolin's history. As a result, he commanded great authority and influence. Shaolin Temple of today would not exist had it not been for my master's hard work. I would not be who I am if it was not for my master's teachings and exemplary deeds. I truly believe I am doing exactly as my master had wished.

My master, Abbot Xingzheng, was an extraordinary person. He became a monk when he was six years old, and was practically blind by the age of nine. He could barely make out the profile of someone sitting across from him and was not able to see his face or identify the person. Needless to say, it was not easy for my master to take care of all the important or minor matters of the monastery given his physical condition.

Despite his visual impairment, my master had an extraordinary memory. When meeting someone for the first time, my master would ask for the person's name and place of origin. He would then commit the person's response to memory and start to have a chat. When