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A HISTORY OF SHAOLIN

BUDDHISM, KUNG FU AND IDENTITY

Lu Zhouxiang

A History of Shaolin

Shaolin Monastery at Mount Song is considered the epicentre of the Chan school of Buddhism. It is also well known for its martial arts tradition and has long been regarded as a special cultural heritage site and an important symbol of the Chinese nation. This book is the first scholarly work in English to comprehensively examine the full history of Shaolin Monastery from 496 to 2016. More importantly, it offers a clear grasp of the origins and development of Chan Buddhism through an examination of Shaolin, and highlights the role of Shaolin and Shaolin kung fu in the construction of a national identity among the Chinese people in the past two centuries.

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Lu Zhouxiang

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Contents

	List of Figures	vi
	List of Tables	viii
	List of Abbreviations	ix
	Acknowledgements	x
1	Introduction	1
2	The Early Days of Shaolin	7
3	The Song, Jin and Yuan Dynasties	41
4	The Transformation of Shaolin in the Ming Dynasty	75
5	The Development of Shaolin in the Qing Dynasty	118
6	The Republic of China Era: Warlords, Militarism and Nationalism	150
7	Surviving Socialist Reforms	189
8	The Revival of Shaolin in the Era of Reform and Opening Up	219
9	Conclusion	253
	Appendix: Chronology of Major Events in the History of Shaolin	260
	Glossary	263
	Index	291

Figures

2.1 The Shaolin Monastery Stele: ‘Bodhidharma Crossing the Yangtze River’ (Sixteenth Century) 13
2.2 The Shaolin Monastery Stele of 696: ‘Emperor Taizhong of Tang’s Letter’ 17
2.3 ‘Huike Presenting His Arm to Bodhidharma’ (1496) by Japanese Painter and Zen Priest Sesshū Tōyō (1420–1506) 21
2.4 The Snow Pavilion, Shaolin Monastery 22
2.5 The Shaolin Monastery Stele of 683: ‘Poem and Essay by the Empress of Tang, Calligraphy by Wang Zhijing’ 26
2.6 The Shaolin Monastery Stele of 728: ‘The Emperor Tang Songyue Shaolin Temple Monument’ 27
2.7 The Lineage of Chinese Chan Buddhism 29
3.1 The Lineage of the Caodong School of Chan Buddhism from the Tang Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty 46
3.2 The First Patriarch Temple 47
3.3 The Second Patriarch Temple 48
3.4 The Shaolin Monastery Stele of 1209: ‘Saints of the Three Teachings’ 50
3.5 Map of Shaolin 55
3.6 Map of Shaolin Monastery 56
3.7 Statue of Kinnara King, Kinnara Hall, Shaolin Monastery 60
3.8 Nineteenth-Century Shaolin Mural on the Southern Part of the Back Wall of the Guanyin Hall, Shaolin Monastery: ‘Shaolin Monks Fighting the Red Turbans’ 62
3.9 Nineteenth-Century Shaolin Mural on the Southern Part of the Back Wall of the Guanyin Hall, Shaolin Monastery: ‘Kinnara King Fighting the Red Turbans’ 63
4.1 The Shaolin Monastery Stele: ‘Portrait of Lord Guan Yu Outside the Thousand Buddhas Hall’ 77
4.2 The Lineage of the Caodong School of Chan Buddhism in the Ming Dynasty 79
4.3 The Shaolin Pagoda Forest 80

4.4 The Thousand Buddhas Hall and the Statue of Bodhidharma 81
4.5 Murals of the Five Hundred Arhats in the Thousand Buddhas Hall 82
4.6 The Shaolin Monastery Stele of 1565: 'Illustration of the Unity of Three Teachings and Nine Schools' 83
4.7 Cheng Zongyou's *Elucidation of Shaolin Staff Methods* 98
4.8 The Shaolin Monastery Stele: 'Bodhidharma Facing the Wall.' Erected During the Wanli Reign Period of the Ming Dynasty (1572–1620) 101
4.9 Sculpture of Muscle Development Classic Postures, Shaolin Monastery 102
5.1 Main Gate of Shaolin Monastery 121
5.2 *Records of Shaolin*: Map of Shaolin 122
5.3 The Shaolin Monastery Stele of 1750: 'The Qianlong Emperor's Poem for Shaolin' 124
5.4 Nineteenth-Century Shaolin Mural on the North Wall of the Guanyin Hall, Shaolin Monastery 133
5.5 Nineteenth-Century Shaolin Mural on the South Wall of the Guanyin Hall, Shaolin Monastery 134
7.1 A Still from the Movie *Five Shaolin Masters* (1974) 206
8.1 Shaolin Monastery, 2016 224
8.2 Students from a Local Martial Arts School Practising Kung Fu in Front of the Main Gate of Shaolin Monastery (1982) 226
8.3 Shaolin Wushu Stadium 227
8.4 2015 Shaolin Chan Inquiry 231
8.5 Jiang Zemin's Inscription for Shaolin: 'Shaolin Culture, the Legacy of Humankind' 234
8.6 The Shaolin Monastery Stele of 1992: 'Chinese Shaolin Centers USA, led by Masters Sharon and David Soard, Paid Tribute to Shaolin Temple, June 1989 and again, Joined by Grandmasters, in June 1992' 238

Tables

7.1 Important Visitors to Shaolin Between 1956 and 1964 194
7.2 Shaolin Kung Fu Movies Produced in Hong Kong Between 1950 and 1976 205

Abbreviations

ACGE	All China National Skills Exam
ACSF	All China Sports Federation
ARA	Administration for Religious Affairs
ARC	Anti-Rightist Campaign
BAC	Buddhist Association of China
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIPG	China International Publishing Group
CNSA	Central National Skills Academy
CNW	Chinese New Wushu
CWA	Chinese Wushu Association
GLF	Great Leap Forward
KMT	Chinese Nationalist Party
NPC	National People's Congress
NWT	National Wushu Town
PMAA	Pure Martial Athletic Association
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China
RTHK	Radio Television Hong Kong
SANA	Shaolin Association of North America
SARA	State Administration of Religious Affairs
SEA	Shaolin Europe Association
SGR	Shaolin Guard Regiment
SWMT	Shaolin Warrior Monks Troupe
UFD	United Front Department

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1 Introduction

Buddhism was brought to China during the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) by monks from India, via the Silk Road.[1] Over the past 2,000 years, Buddhism has been successfully integrated with Confucianism, Daoism and other traditional Chinese religions, and has grown into one of the most popular and influential religions in China.[2] According to the Buddhist Association of China, by 2012 there were approximately 33,000 Buddhist monasteries and temples in China, accommodating more than 240,000 monks and nuns.[3] A 2011 report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences points out that over 18 percent of the Chinese population claims a Buddhist affiliation.[4]

Today, Buddhism is widely regarded as an important indigenous Chinese tradition.[5] Together with the rise and fall of Chinese dynasties, and influenced by the transformation of Chinese society, various schools of Buddhism developed in China over the course of time, with Chan, Huayan, Pure Land, Tiantai and Vajrayana the most popular forms.[6] The development of Buddhism in China led to the building of renowned statues, monasteries and historical sites, including White Horse Monastery in Luoyang, Donglin Monastery on Mount Lu, Huayan Monastery in Datong, Guoqing Monastery on Mount Tiantai, the Longmen Grottoes in Henan, the Mogao Caves near Dunhuang and Fayuan Monastery in Beijing.

Shaolin Monastery in Dengfeng is considered the epicentre of the Chan school of Buddhism. This ancient monastery is also well known for its martial arts tradition and has long been recognised as a unique Chinese cultural heritage site and an important symbol of the Chinese nation. Shaolin was born during the first golden age of Buddhism in China. It was built around 496 by Emperor Xiaowen (467–499) for the Indian monk Batuo, who had travelled to China to spread Buddhist teachings. Based on the legends of Bodhidharma (?–mid-530s), the first patriarch of the Chinese Chan lineage, and thanks to royal patronage, Shaolin earned great fame as the cradle of Chan and a centre of Buddhist studies.

The perfect combination of Chan Buddhism, martial arts and traditional Chinese culture has made Shaolin unique and noteworthy. Today, Shaolin is widely recognised as a leading religious institution in China

and Shaolin kung fu has become a supporting pillar of Chinese martial arts and a well-recognised brand of Chinese culture.[7] In 1983, Shaolin was named a National Key Buddhist Monastery by the State Council. In 2010, the Monastery was designated a World Cultural Heritage Site by UNESCO. In June 2013, Shaolin was listed by the State Council as a Major Historical and Cultural Site Protected at the National Level.[8] On 17 February 2018, the China International Publishing Group (CIPG) released a report on the 100 most recognised Chinese words in foreign countries—Shaolin tops the list.[9]

Studying Shaolin in the context of the history of Chan Buddhism and Chinese martial arts is of vital importance in understanding the formation of Chinese culture and identity. From the late 1920s, Chinese scholars began to examine the history and theories of Shaolin kung fu, due to its overwhelming popularity. Book chapters, journal articles and monographs were published to this end.[10] Between the 1980s and 2010s, in the context of the revival of Buddhism and the rapid development of Shaolin and Shaolin kung fu, several major historical works on Shaolin were published in China.[11]

In the past two decades, in response to the growing interest in Shaolin kung fu among the general public, an increasing number of books on the topic of Shaolin have also been published in the West, most of which focus on introducing the theory, philosophy and practice of Shaolin kung fu.[12] In 2007, *American Shaolin* by travel writer Matthew Polly, the story of the author's Shaolin kung fu study in China, became a bestseller in the United States.[13]

Meir Shahar's book *The Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion, and the Chinese Martial Arts* was the first scholarly work in English to examine the history of Shaolin and Shaolin kung fu.[14] The book has been widely reviewed in leading academic journals, and very well received by Chinese martial arts enthusiasts and scholars in the West. However, Shahar's work mainly focuses on the evolution of the Shaolin martial arts tradition in dynastic China, notably the development of Shaolin kung fu in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, and therefore does not offer a full picture of the history of Shaolin.

This book explores the history of Shaolin Monastery from 496 to 2016. More importantly, it offers a clear grasp of the development of Chan Buddhism through an examination of Shaolin, and explains the role of Shaolin and Shaolin kung fu in the construction of a national identity among the Chinese people.

Beginning with a discussion of the early days of Shaolin Monastery, the book investigates the beginning of the martial tradition in Shaolin and how it helped the monastery win favourable treatment from Tang dynasty (618–907) rulers.

The following section, on the Song (960–1279), Jin (1115–1234) and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties, studies Shaolin's emergence as the nucleus

of the Caodong Chan orthodoxy amidst the rise of Chan as the dominant form of Buddhism in China.

The sections on the Ming and Qing dynasties explain how Shaolin was transformed from a centre of Buddhist studies into a major player in the martial arts community, and how Shaolin turned into a source of ethno-national identity and came to be associated with the nationalist revolution.

The book then discusses the decline of Buddhism and Shaolin in the Republic of China era (1912–1949) and explores the interactions between Shaolin, Shaolin kung fu and the construction of a national consciousness, illustrating how martial arts, wuxia (martial arts hero) novels and movies helped Shaolin become a symbol of indigenous virtue and strength.

Moving on to the People's Republic of China era (1949–present), the obsolescence of Shaolin in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s is examined in the context of radical Socialist reforms. Finally, the book analyses the revival of Shaolin since the reform and opening up of the late 1970s, explaining how Shaolin monks have played their part in the development of Chan Buddhism and Shaolin kung fu in an era of commercialisation, modernisation and globalisation.

Today, stemming from Chan doctrines and infused with political significance, Shaolin has developed into one of the best-known Chinese martial arts schools and is a source of strength and pride for the nation. As an important religious institution with more than 1,500 years of history, Shaolin has created a legacy of remembrance which serves the formation of the Chinese nation's soul and spiritual principles. In the twenty-first century, facilitated by globalisation, Shaolin is now attracting a worldwide audience.

Notes

1. Jingbao Zhou and Ling Qiu, *Sichou zhi lu zongjiao wenhua* (The silk road and religious culture) (Urumqi: Xinjiang renmin chuban she, 1998), 176–177; Litian Fang, *Zhongguo fojiao yu chuantong wenhua* (Chinese Buddhism and traditional culture) (Beijing: China Renmin University Press, 2010), 26–27.
2. Fang, *Zhongguo fojiao yu chuantong wenhua*, 2.
3. The Buddhist Association of China, 'Introduction to the Buddhist Association of China', The Buddhist Association of China, 24 July 2017, http://51voiphone.com/bhjs1.html (accessed 19 February 2018).
4. Zhiyuan Wang, 'Jiji wenjian de 2010 nian Zhongguo fojiao daojiao baogao' (2010 report on Buddhism and Daoism in China), in *Zongjiao lanpi shu: Zhongguo zongjiao baogao 2011* (Blue book of religions: Report on religions in China 2011), ed. Ze Jin and Yonghui Qiu (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2011), 19.
5. Xuesong Zhang, '2014 nian fojiao yingxiangli fazhihua guanli baogao' (2014 report on the influence of Buddhism and management and legal development), in *Zongjiao lanpi shu: Zhongguo zongjiao baogao 2015* (Blue book of religions: Report on religions in China 2015), ed. Yonghui Qiu (Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2016), 25.

6. Yuan Fo and Xiang Ming, eds., *Dacheng fojiao yu dangdai shehui* (Mahāyāna' Buddhism and contemporary society) (Beijing: Dongfang chuban she, 2003), 55.
7. Kam Hung, Xiaotao Yang, Philipp Wassler, Dan Wang, Pearl Lin and Zhaoping Liu, 'Contesting the Commercialization and Sanctity of Religious Tourism in Shaolin Monastery, China', *International Journal of Tourism Research* 19, no. 2 (2016): 145.
8. Lei Pei, 'Henan Shaolin si, Cao Cao mu guji ruxuan zhongdian wenwu baohu danwei' (Henan's Shaolin monastery and Cao Cao's tomb named as major historical and cultural sites), *Zhengzhou Wanbao*, 6 May 2013.
9. 'Which Chinese words do foreigners recognize the most?' ChinaDaily.com.cn, 18 February 2018, http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201802/18/WS5a88e8eda3106e7dcc13cf91.html (accessed 18 February 2018).
10. Major works include: Zhedong Xu, *Guoji lun lue* (A study of national skills) (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1928); Hao Tang, *Shaolin wudang kao* (A study of Shaolin and Wudang) (Nanjing: Zhongyang guoshu guan, 1930); Chengzhou Gu, 'Shaolin si ji qi sengtu zhilue' (The history of Shaolin and Shaolin monks), *Tiyu* 3, no. 1–11 (1935) in *Minguo guoshu qikan wenxian jicheng* (Collection of national skills journals published in the Republic of China era), vols. 16, 87; 117; 145; 173; 236; 300; 354; 406; 425, ed. Yongxin Shi (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2008); Zirong Shen, 'Shaolin di pai lian quan de shi tiao jie yue' (Ten rules of the direct line of descent of the Shaolin School), *Guoshu zhoukan*, no. 150–151 (1936); Hao Tang, *Xingjian zhai sui bi* (Xingjian Pavilion) (Shanghai: Shanghai Zhongguo wushu xiehui, 1937); Hao Tang, *Shaolin quanshu mijue kaozheng* (A study of the key principles of Shaolin kung fu) (Shanghai: Shanghai shi guoshu xiejin hui, 1941).
11. Major works include: Baojun Zhao, *Shaolin si* (Shaolin Monastery) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chuban she, 1982); Changqing Xu, *Shaolin si yu Zhongguo wenhua* (Shaolin Monastery and Chinese culture) (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Guji Chubanshe, 1993); Yucheng Wen, *Shaolin fang gu* (Explore the history of Shaolin) (Tianjin: Baihua Literature and Art Publishing House, 1999); Hongjun Lu, *Songshan Shaolin si* (Shaolin Monastery at Mount Song) (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chuban she, 2001); Yongxin Shi and Yucheng Wen, eds., *Shaolin wenhua yanjiu lunwen ji* (Shaolin culture studies essay collection) (Beijing: Religious Culture Publisher, 2001); Hongjun Lu and Lei Teng, *Shaolin gongfu* (Shaolin kung fu) (Zhejiang renmin chuban she, 2005); Yucheng Wen, *Shaolin shihua* (Book on history of Shaolin Temple with illustrations) (Beijing: Gold Wall Press, 2009); Derong Ye, *Zongtong yu fatong: yi Songshan Shaolin si wei zhongxin* (Rule by lineage and rule by dharma: Shaolin Monastery) (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chuban she, 2010); Yongxin Shi, ed., *Shaolin xue lunwen ji* (Shaolin studies essay collection) (Beijing: Religious Culture Publisher, 2015).
12. David Carradine, *Spirit of Shaolin* (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1993); Wong Kiew Kit, *Introduction to Shaolin Kung Fu* (London: Paul H. Crompton Limited, 1999); Andy James, *The Spiritual Legacy of Shaolin Temple: Buddhism, Daoism, and the Energetic Arts* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001); Wong Kiew Kit, *The Art of Shaolin Kung Fu: The Secrets of Kung Fu for Self-Defence, Health and Enlightenment* (London: Vermilion, 2001); Wong Kiew Kit, *Complete Book of Shaolin: Comprehensive Program for Physical, Emotional, Mental and Spiritual Development* (Kedah: Cosmos Internet Sdn Bhd, 2002); Order of Shaolin Ch'an, *History, Philosophy, and Gung Fu of Shaolin Ch'an* (Beaverton: Order of Shaolin Ch'an, 2004); Yan Ming Shi, *The Shaolin Workout: 28 Days to Transforming Your Body, Mind and Spirit with Kung Fu* (Emmaus: Rodale, 2006); Yan Lei Shi, *Instant Health: The Shaolin Qigong Workout for Longevity* (London: Yan Lei Press, 2009); Yan

Lei Shi, *Instant Fitness: The Shaolin Kung Fu Workout* (London: Yan Lei Press, 2015).

13. Matthew Polly, *American Shaolin: Flying Kicks, Buddhist Monks, and the Legend of Iron Crotch: An Odyssey in the New China* (London: Abacus, 2007).
14. Meir Shahar, *The Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion, and the Chinese Martial Arts* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008).

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2 The Early Days of Shaolin

> A path between the green mountains,
> Leads to Shaolin Monastery.
> Since the Southern Liang and Northern Wei dynasties,
> Shaolin has been a special and holy place.
> Since the Sui and Tang dynasties,
> The monks have been famous for their martial tradition.[1]
>
> Fu Mei (1565–1642)[2]

The collapse of the Western Jin dynasty (265–316) in 316 resulted in the partition of China along the Yangtze River. The north was occupied by various nomadic groups and entered a chaotic period known as the Sixteen Kingdoms.[3] The Jin court evacuated to the south and started the Eastern Jin dynasty (317–420). By the end of the fourth century, the partition had been consolidated with the unification of northern China by the Tuoba clan of the Xianbei.[4] China entered the Northern and Southern dynasties era (420–589), during which the north and south existed in a state of confrontation. Over the course of the following two centuries, four successive short-lived dynasties were established in the south, while northern China saw the rise and fall of five dynasties. This period witnessed endless rebellions, wars and unrest and was one of the most chaotic eras in Chinese history.[5]

Against this background, Confucianism, the dominant religion and philosophy during the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), declined, as it was no longer seen to bring peace and prosperity to society. Emperors, politicians and the general public turned to Daoism and Buddhism, seeking social stability, spiritual sanctuary and a path to heaven. Consequently, Buddhism started to spread around China and soon gained mainstream acceptance.[6]

After the establishment of the Northern Wei (386–534), the first dynasty in the north, the Buddhist faith was officially supported and promoted by Emperor Xiaowen (467–499) to consolidate the legitimacy of his regime and strengthen the unity of the empire.[7] Funded and supported

by Xiaowen and his successors, a large number of Buddhist temples and monasteries were constructed,[8] jumping from a few thousand in northern China in the early fifth century to 30,000 by the early sixth century, accommodating over 2 million monks and nuns. More than 1,000 monasteries existed in and around the capital, Luoyang.[9] In southern China, Buddhism also received official support and gained mainstream popularity.[10] The religion peaked in the Liang era (502–557), by which time the population of monks and nuns had reached 82,700.[11]

The Northern and Southern dynasties era marked the first golden age of Buddhism in China. It was during this period that the Yungang Grottoes, a UNESCO World Heritage Site composed of 252 grottoes with more than 51,000 Buddha statues, were carved in Datong, Shanxi Province.[12] If the Yungang Grottoes represent the first peak of Chinese Buddhist art, Shaolin Monastery in Dengfeng, Henan Province, is probably the other most important cultural and religious legacy of the era. It is one of the few early Chinese Buddhist monasteries that has survived violent changes of dynasty and witnessed the fusion of Buddhism with Chinese cultural traditions.

The Origins of Shaolin: History, Legends and Myths

Shaolin Monastery is located underneath the Wuru Peak of Mount Song, 15 kilometres northwest of Dengfeng and 80 kilometres southeast of Luoyang, the Northern Wei capital. It was built by Emperor Xiaowen for the Indian monk Batuo, who had travelled to China to spread Buddhist teachings.[13] Batuo had studied Buddhism in India with five friends. His friends all achieved the highest state of enlightenment, and only he was left behind. He discussed his life with his friend and was told that his destiny was linked to China.[14] So he travelled to China along the southern maritime route and was eventually received by Emperor Xiaowen in Datong, Shanxi Province, around 490.

Batuo became famous for meditation and scripture translations. Emperor Xiaowen was deeply impressed by his knowledge and invited him to teach Buddhism. The imperial court carved grottoes for Batuo in Yungang and provided funding to support him and his disciples. A businessman in the city also donated a mansion to him.[15] When the Northern Wei moved its capital from Datong to Luoyang in 494, Batuo followed the emperor to Luoyang and Xiaowen constructed a villa called Jingyuan to accommodate him.[16] Batuo had always loved the beauty and quiet of mountains and frequently visited Mount Song, so the emperor built Shaolin Monastery for him there around 496.[17] In the following years, led by Batuo, Shaolin grew into 'a major centre for translation, scholarship and meditation.'[18]

It is believed that soon after its establishment, Chinese martial arts, also known as guoshu, kung fu, wuyi or wushu,[19] was introduced to the monastery by Batuo's disciples.[20] Over the course of time, the unusual marriage of Chinese martial arts and Buddhism made Shaolin stand out

from thousands of other monasteries in China, giving it a specific and strong image in the national imagination.

The history of Chinese martial arts can be traced back to the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BC), when the practice of combat skills using various weapons became part of military training. By the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BC), military skills had been incorporated into the Confucian education system. Archery demonstrations and martial dances had begun to appear in rituals, ceremonies and celebrations, and were used to serve the construction of the feudal pyramid of power. In the Warring States period (476–221 BC), combat skills developed into a form of art and entertainment.

After the Qin reunified China, Emperor Qin Shi Huang (259–210 BC) banned private ownership of weapons. Jiaodi contests, primarily based on wrestling but also involving striking techniques, and Shoubo (hand-to-hand combat) developed accordingly and became a popular entertainment form. Following the collapse of the short-lived Qin dynasty (221–206 BC), the Han rulers granted civilians the right to own weapons and all males were required to perform military service. This system facilitated the development of military tactics, weapon skills and combat techniques.

By the time of the establishment of Shaolin Monastery, in a context of political chaos and social unrest, martial arts was practised by all social classes as a self-defence skill to respond to possible danger. Manuals on archery and fighting skills began to emerge. Bare-handed martial arts forms, Jiaodi and martial dances flourished.[21] In this period, with the rise of Buddhism, many civilians and retired soldiers who were martial arts practitioners converted to Buddhism and left the lay life.[22] This is illustrated by the biographies of some fifth- and sixth-century monks recorded in *Biographies of Eminent Monks* (Gaoseng Zhuan) by Shi Huijiao (497–554) and *Further Biographies of Eminent Monks* (Xu Gaoseng Zhuan) by Shi Daoxuan (596–667). Below are some examples:

> Shi Huijin . . . was strong and warrior-like when he was young and he always fought for justice. He achieved self-enlightenment at the age of 40 and quit the lay life. . . . He died in 485 at the age of 85.[23]
>
> Shi Zhicheng . . . was interested in horse riding, archery and military affairs when he was a child. He joined the imperial army at the age of 17 and took part in the expedition against the Xianyun.[24] Brutal battles and killings made him feel compassionate and extremely sad. He turned to blame himself and realised that hurting other people to benefit oneself is against humanity . . . he converted to Buddhism . . . he became a monk in Fei Monastery in Shu. . . . He died in 500 at the age of 72.[25]
>
> Shi Falang . . . served in the army when he was young. . . . One day during the northern expedition, sitting by the tree with his halberd, he realised that a weapon is for killing and therefore is the source of bitterness. . . . In 528, he converted to Buddhism in Qingzhou at the age of 21. He then travelled to Yangzhou and

> followed Master Baozhi in the Daming Monastery. . . . He died in 581 at the age of 75.[26]

Some fifth- and sixth-century Buddhist monasteries accommodated martial arts practitioners and held small security forces. According to the biography of Shi Huixiu in *Further Biographies of Eminent Monks*, local officials in Xiangzhou evacuated the city in 621 after hearing that rebels were approaching. Led by Huixiu, more than 20 monks from Yunmen Monastery moved into the city to defend it against the rebels and restore order.[27] The biography of Shi Zhiman in *Further Biographies of Eminent Monks* indicates that monks in the Mayi region had developed a martial tradition and gained fame for their fighting skills. In 622, 2,000 monks from Mayi were summoned by the Tang court to join the army.[28]

Some monks used their martial arts skills to protect their monasteries' land and properties. Shi Minggong from Shanhui Monastery is a good example:

> Shi Minggong lived in Shanhui Monastery in Zhengzhou. . . . He had incredible strength and nobody could challenge him. Shanhui Monastery had a dispute with Chaohua Monastery over a plot of land. Chaohua Monastery gathered more than a hundred people to harvest the rice from the land in dispute. Monks in Shanhui Monastery were very anxious about it. Minggong told them not to worry. He then put six sheng of rice into a huge bell and mixed it with water. He lifted the bell with his bare hands and ate all the rice. He then lifted a huge rock which took 30 people to move. He played with the rock like it was a small stone, and threw it toward the gangs from Chaohua. They were frightened and ran away. . . .
>
> Minggong used to travel alone on the mountain. He ran into a fight between a tiger and a wild boar. The boar was losing the fight, so Minggong asked the tiger to let the boar leave. The tiger refused. Minggong grabbed the tiger by the head and the tail and threw it into the canyon. . . . Minggong died in Shanhui Monastery in 623 at the age of 85.[29]

Some monks were famous for their superior strength and fighting skills. This is illustrated in Shi Fatong's biography:

> Shi Fatong . . . had powerful muscles, and could easily lift up heavy logs and huge rocks. . . . He was respected by the emperor. A wrestler called Dazhuang from the west was challenging people at the north gate of the capital city. Nobody could defeat him. The emperor was very upset and said: 'Can't we find a strong warrior in the great Sui dynasty?' He then asked Fatong to challenge the wrestler . . . the wrestler tried hard to bring him down, but failed. He then tried

> to attack Fatong from behind. Fatong grabbed his arms, and blood poured out from his skin. He fell to the ground and begged for his life. Fatong explained: 'I did not use my full strength. Otherwise your bones would have been crushed.'[30]

It is safe to assume that like the monks in some other Buddhist monasteries and temples, the monks in Shaolin practised martial arts for various reasons.[31] Batuo's disciples Sengchou (480–560) and Huiguang (468–537) are believed to have been the pioneers who started Shaolin's martial arts tradition.

Sengchou was born in Changli, Hebei Province. He became a monk in 507 and studied Buddhism with Batuo's disciples at Jingming Monastery in Julu County. He studied at two other monasteries, on Jiayu Mountain and Zhanggong Mountain, before joining Shaolin. He became a disciple of Batuo and served as abbot of Shaolin for many years. After leaving Shaolin, he travelled around the country to spread Buddhist teachings. He became so influential that Emperor Xiaoming (510–528) and Emperor Xiaowu (510–535) of the Northern Wei built temples for him and invited him to teach Buddhism. In the 550s, Emperor Wenxuan (526–559) of the Northern Qi built Yunmen Monastery outside the capital Ye to accommodate Sengchou and his disciples. He was placed at the top of the Buddhist hierarchy. He died in 560 at the age of 81.[32]

Descriptions of Sengchou's fighting skills can be found in several examples of early seventh-century historical writing. In *Further Biographies of Eminent Monks*, he is portrayed as a saint who could easily fight off bandits and tigers:

> He trained himself to be fearless. There was one time bandits attempted to intimidate him, but he showed no fear. He told them to give up their evil thoughts and destroyed their bows and arrows. The bandits converted [to Buddhism] and went away. . . . Then he was caught in a fight between two tigers. He used his Khakkhara to break up the two tigers and the tigers ran away.[33]

The Tang apocryphal collection *Complete Records of the Court and Commoners* (Chao Ye Qian Zai) by Zhang Zhuo (660–740) describes the early life of Sengchou in a monastery in the Ye region. Although the story is mixed with Buddhist mythology, it reflects the important place of martial arts in monastic life in the Northern and Southern dynasties era:

> There were many young monks in the monastery. They often had wrestling and combat competitions for entertainment. Sengchou was weak. He was easily defeated by others and was humiliated. He felt ashamed. One day he entered the hall and closed the door. He grabbed the feet of Vajradhara and said: 'I am very weak and they humiliated me. This

> is too much for me. I'd rather die. You are famous for your powerful strength. You should protect me. I will hold your feet for seven days. If you don't give me the power, I will die here. I am determined.' He then started the meditation . . . on the early morning of the seventh day, Vajradhara appeared . . . and he said: 'You already have great power. Be faithful, be confident and beware!' Then he disappeared. Sengchou returned to his residence. . . . After the meal, the monks started to play combat games again. Sengchou said: 'I have strength now and you won't be able to take it.' He showed his incredibly strong arm to everyone and said: 'I can show you.' They entered the hall; Sengchou jumped onto the wall and walked along it from west to east for hundreds of steps. He then jumped up and hung on the ceiling trusses by his head. He lifted a few thousand kilos. His punches and kicks were so fast and powerful. Anyone would have been frightened. Monks who had humiliated him before were sweating. They lay prone on the ground and dared not look into Sengchou's eyes.[34]

Shi Huiguang is another famous disciple of Batuo. He was born in Dingzhou, Hebei Province. He moved to Luoyang with his father at the age of 13 and began to study Buddhism with Batuo. He wrote exegeses for translations of Buddhist classics, including the *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, *Nirvana Sūtra* and *Vimalakirti Nirdesa Sūtra*, and eventually became a master of Theravada (Hinayana) Buddhism. He compiled the *Fourfold Rules of Discipline* (Si Fen Lu Shu) and was honoured as the Saint Novice.[35] Huiguang's acrobatic skill is recorded in the biography of Batuo in *Further Biographies of Eminent Monks*:

> Batuo met Huiguang in the city of Luoyang when Huiguang was showing off his shuttlecock kicking skill to the crowd. Standing on the edge of a well, he kicked a shuttlecock more than five hundred times without dropping it. While the crowd was impressed by his incredible skill, Batuo commented: 'This kid has easily mastered [shuttlecock kicking] skills. He should be talented enough to comprehend Buddhist doctrines.'[36]

Based on these stories and legends, some nineteenth- and twentieth-century martial arts practitioners created a myth that Shaolin's martial tradition had been started by Sengchou and Huiguang and later merged with Chan Buddhism, which was introduced to Shaolin by the Indian monk Bodhidharma (?–mid-530s).[37]

Bodhidharma, also known as Damo, travelled to China around the 470s to teach the Chan school of Buddhism and to seek enlightenment.[38] He arrived in southern China first and then travelled up to the north. According to legend, he crossed the Yangtze River on a single reed (see Figure 2.1).[39] He travelled around northern China for decades and visited Yongning Monastery in Luoyang, the capital of the Northern Wei

Figure 2.1 The Shaolin Monastery Stele: 'Bodhidharma Crossing the Yangtze River' (Sixteenth Century).

Source: Photo taken by author, July 2016.

(386–534), around the 520s.[40] He then arrived at Mount Song and settled down in Shaolin.[41]

Bodhidharma's Chan teachings were primarily based on the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (Lengqie Jing), a principal sutra of Mahāyāna Buddhism translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by the Indian monks Dharmakshema and Gunabhadra in the early fifth century.[42] The sutra contains a set of philosophical conversations between Śākyamuni Buddha and Bodhisattva Mahamati, which address the themes of 'inner enlightenment, the erasing of all dualities, the concept of emptiness and the truth of Cittamatra, or "mind only."'[43] It centres on the concept that all forms of objects and experience are nothing but projections of the mind and that 'the knowledge of this is something that must be realised and experienced for oneself and cannot be expressed in words.'[44]

Based on these theories, Bodhidharma developed the doctrine of 'Two Entrances and Four Practices' (Er Ru Si Xing). The two entrances refer to the two basic approaches to entering the Buddhist path and achieving enlightenment: 'Entry by Principle' (Li Ru) and 'Entry by Practice' (Xing Ru).[45]

'Entry by Principle,' also known as the 'Principle of Absolute Reality,' advocates the idea that 'all sentient beings have a Buddha nature, and that one's own Buddha nature can be revealed by "wall contemplation"' (Bi Guan).[46] According to this doctrine, 'Enlightenment is in fact the moment of revelation, when one understands the true nature of phenomenal reality and comes to a realisation of one's own purity.'[47]

'Entry by Practice' refers to the four approaches to practice: 1. retribution of enmity; 2. recognising and following causes and conditions; 3. seeking nothing and eliminating greed; 4. practising in accordance with the dharma.[48]

The *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* and Bodhidharma's 'Two Entrances and Four Practices' laid the theoretical foundations for Chinese Chan Buddhism. 'Two Entrances and Four Practices' was described by later Chan adepts as 'the original inspiration for the Chan notion of sudden enlightenment, or the soteriological approach of sudden awakening followed by gradual cultivation.'[49] Although Chan Buddhism had been introduced to China as early as the second century, Bodhidharma was remembered as 'the first Chan patriarch in the Chinese Chan lineage.'[50]

Kung fu manuals published in the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties describe him as a martial arts master who laid the foundations for Shaolin kung fu.[51] Nevertheless, this is merely a made-up story. While there is no evidence to support the contention that a systematic martial arts training regime had been created and adopted by Shaolin monks to assist Chan practice prior to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), there is little doubt that martial arts was practised by Shaolin monks for self-defence purposes in the early years of the monastery. This is discussed in detail in the next section.

The Sui Dynasty: Getting Involved in Warfare

By the mid-sixth century, the rapid development of Buddhism had convinced Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou (543–578) that religious institutions had become too wealthy and powerful and thus might challenge his rule. He launched campaigns of persecution against both Daoism and Buddhism in 574, and ordered monks and nuns to return to lay life.[52] Like other Buddhist monasteries, Shaolin was closed down. The persecution lasted for six years. After the ban was lifted by Emperor Jing of the Northern Zhou (573–581) in 580, Shaolin was reopened and renamed Zhihu Monastery.[53]

Toward the later years of the Northern and Southern dynasties era, Yang Jian (541–604), an influential figure in the Northern Zhou court, seized the throne and established the Sui dynasty in 581. He then conquered the Southern Chen dynasty in 589 and reunified China, more than 270 years after the fall of the Western Jin in 316. A central government was established in Chang'an and reforms were carried out by Yang Jian, now Emperor Wen of Sui, to improve the administrative structure.

The government promulgated new legal and ritual codes. As a devout Buddhist, the emperor was eager to build up his image as a divinely ordained Buddhist ruler and use the shared Buddhist faith among people in the south and the north to consolidate the unity of the newly established empire.[54] Confucianism and Daoism were also promoted to assist Buddhism in serving various forms of symbolic and ideological propaganda aimed at consolidating the legitimacy of the regime and improving social cohesion.[55] Funded by the government, a large number of Buddhist monasteries were established, and more Buddhist sutras were translated into Chinese. By the end of the Sui dynasty, there were 3,985 Buddhist monasteries and temples, accommodating 236,200 monks and nuns.[56]

Shaolin developed accordingly. Immediately after the establishment of the Sui in 581, the monastery reclaimed its original name. It was hailed by Emperor Wen for the significant role it played in people's religious lives and for its contribution in bringing peace and harmony to the newly established dynasty, and was awarded the Cypress Valley Estate (Baigu Zhuang) of over 100 acres, which lay between the monastery and the Sui dynasty's eastern capital city of Luoyang.[57] Benefiting from reunification and Emperor Wen's political and economic reforms, Shaolin enjoyed a period of prosperity.

However, the peace did not last long. After Emperor Wen died in 604, his second son, Yang Guang (569–618), ascended to the throne as Emperor Yang. The empire was soon drained by his ambitious but unsuccessful military campaigns against Goguryeo, one of the ancient Three Kingdoms of Korea. The wars placed a heavy burden on the people and bred resentment, resulting in rebellions and assassinations that eventually led to the death of Emperor Yang and the collapse of the Sui in 618.

Shaolin Monastery became a victim of this political crisis. It was attacked by a group of bandits in the early seventh century. The monks

tried to resist and held their enemies outside the gate for a time, but the monastery was eventually set on fire, looted and destroyed. This incident was recorded in the Shaolin Monastery Stele of 728 as follows:

> By the end of the Daye period, the Sui Empire had collapsed. Bandits arose and looted everyone, regardless of whether they were clergy or laity. Shaolin Monastery was attacked by bandits. The monks tried to defend it but the bandits set fire to the temples and pagodas, destroying all the buildings. Only the pagoda for Buddhabhadra survived. It was protected by the dragon and the holy spirits of the mountain. A miracle like this had never occurred before.[58]

Although the above text does not indicate that martial arts had been integrated into Shaolin monastic life, as was the case in some other fifth- and sixth-century Buddhist monasteries that accommodated martial arts practitioners and had small security forces, the monks in Shaolin undertook martial arts training in order to protect the monastery's lands and properties.[59] Shaolin's involvement in a military operation in 621 offers evidence of the monastery's martial tradition.

During the last few years of the Sui dynasty, local governors and aristocrats launched a series of revolts, with some declaring independence and establishing small kingdoms. It was during this chaotic period that Li Yuan (566–625), Duke of Tang and governor of Taiyuan, rose in rebellion in 617, seeking an end to Sui rule and the establishment of his own empire. He successfully occupied Sui's western capital of Daxing (Chang'an) in late 617. One year later, immediately after Emperor Yang of Sui was assassinated in a coup led by General Yuwen Huaji (?–619) in Jiangdu (today's Yangzhou) in April 618, Li Yuan declared himself Emperor of Tang.

Upon hearing the news of Yang Jian's death, General Wang Shichong (591–621) and Sui officials in Luoyang declared Yang Tong (604–619), grandson of Emperor Yang, the new Emperor of Sui. A few months later, Wang Shichong took the throne from Yang Tong and declared himself Emperor of the state of Zheng.[60] Meanwhile, led by Li Yuan, Tang troops had defeated the major warlords and several newly established states and were expanding toward the east. In 620, Li Yuan commissioned his son Li Shimin (598–649), Prince of Qin, to launch an expedition against Wang Shichong's Zheng state.[61]

By early 621, Li Shimin had put Luoyang under siege, waiting for the chance to crush Wang Shichong's defence force and capture the city. The Cypress Valley Estate, awarded to Shaolin by Emperor Wen of Sui, was a key strategic point to the southeast of Luoyang. The estate and its fortified town Huanzhou were controlled by Wang Shichong's nephew Wang Renze, posing a threat to the Tang troops that had stationed outside Luoyang. While the Tang army was planning to capture this strategic

point, Shaolin came to assist. Led by Head Monk Shi Shanhu and Abbot Shi Zhicao,[62] the Shaolin monks sided with the advancing Tang armies to recover Huanzhou and helped capture Wang Renze on 23 May 621.

Obviously, the Shaolin monks' decision to attack the fortress town of the Cypress Valley Estate held by Wang Renze was 'motivated by the desire to recover their land and by their hope of ingratiating themselves with the Tang forces who appeared poised to win the war.'[63] Three days later, on 26 May 621, in gratitude for Shaolin's military support, Li Shimin wrote a letter acknowledging their contribution. Li Anyuan (575–633), the Supreme Pillar of State and dynasty-founding Duke of Deguang Jun, was sent by Shimin to Shaolin to present the letter to the monks (see Figure 2.2). The letter reads as follows:

> Prince of Qin Li Shimin (Defender-in-Chief, Chief Imperial Secretary, Governor of Shandongdao and Yizhoudao, Governor of Yongzhou, General-in-Chief of Left and Right Wuhou, Inspector and Governor of Liangzhou, Supreme Pillar of State) to the Head Monk, the abbot and their disciples, military and civilian leaders:
>
> The world is in chaos. People are waiting for the true leader. The world is falling apart. The Buddhist paths of Hinayana, Pratyekabuddha and Mahāyāna' were blocked. Therefore, the Jambudvīpa was overturned and violent wars broke out. The country is like boiling soup in a pot and the devils are rising. The Tang has been

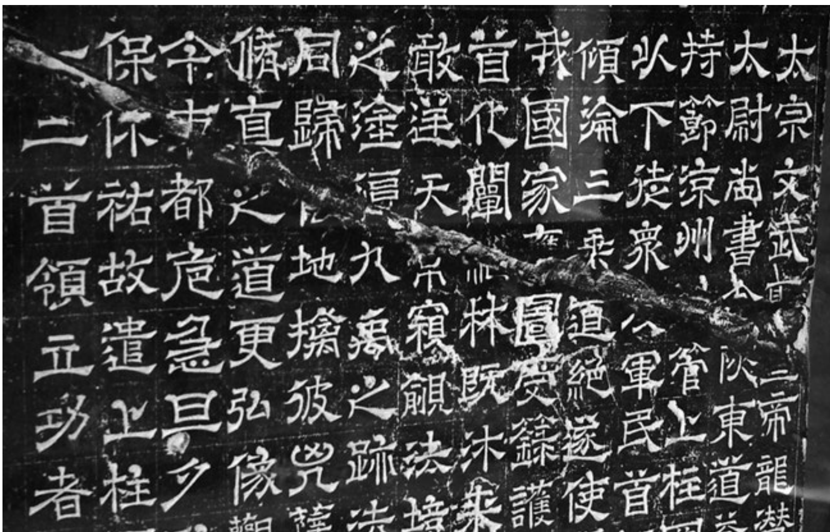

Figure 2.2 The Shaolin Monastery Stele of 696: 'Emperor Taizhong of Tang's Letter.'

Source: Photo taken by author, July 2016.

> blessed and rises to protect the dharma, allowing Buddhist teachings to spread around the country and make the Buddha present. People and the monks/nuns will be inspired and enlightened by the dharma. They will be awakened and blessed.
>
> Wang Shichong stole and occupied Shaolin's property. He dared to act against the will of heaven. He cast greedy eyes on the Buddhist Pure Land and acted recklessly. Now the breeze of holiness is blowing over the Buddhist Pure Land. The light of enlightenment is shining. The Noble Eightfold Path is opening and the Nine Realms have been restored. The master and the monks of Shaolin realised the changes and comprehended karma and vipaka. They made good plans and received good vipaka. They captured the fierce rebel Wang Renze and returned peace to this holy land.
>
> The Shaolin monks followed the will of heaven and showed their loyalty to Tang. They followed dharma and proved the importance of understanding karma and vipaka in the process of achieving Buddhist enlightenment. I have heard that Buddhist nirvana is extraordinary. Buddhist followers are blessed by the Buddha and are well supported. Buddhist doctrines are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges.
>
> The eastern capital Luoyang is in crisis. You have defeated the rebels within one day. I shall reward you for this great achievement and set it as an example for the people. People will be blessed and live peacefully. Therefore I am sending Anyuan, Supreme Pillar of State and Dynasty-founding Duke of Deguang Jun, to Shaolin to present my letter. I can meet one or two leaders who made contributions to the battle of the Cypress Valley Estate. This is all I want to say.[64]

The Tang court honoured the 13 monks who took part in the battle of the Cypress Valley Estate: Head Monk Shanhu, Abbot Zhicao, Duweina Monk Huiyang, monk Tanzong, monk Puhui, monk Minggao, monk Lingxian, monk Pusheng, monk Zhishou, monk Daoguang, monk Zhixing, monk Man and monk Feng.[65] Monk Tanzong was offered the position of Great General of the imperial army. These rewards leave no doubt as to the Shaolin monks' fighting skills and their abilities as soldiers.[66]

The Shaolin monks' contribution to Li Shimin's expedition against Wang Shichong did not guarantee peace for the monastery. On 4 June 621, Wang Shichong surrendered to the Tang. In order to eliminate any possible rebellions by Wang's remaining followers, religious institutions in the territory of the former state of Zheng were closed down. Monks and nuns were dismissed by the authorities. Shaolin and its properties were seized in 622. Shaolin monks made appeals to the imperial court, claiming that their military support for Li Shimin had demonstrated their loyalty to the Tang regime.[67] It was not until August 624 that Shaolin Monastery reopened.[68] On 28 March 625, the imperial court returned

the confiscated land and properties to Shaolin. This was recorded in a letter by Li Shimin's key advisor Fang Xuanling (579–648) to Shaolin:

> Grant Shaolin 40 qing [1,320,000 square metres] of land and a watermill. The land and watermill confiscated by the state when the monastery was closed [in 622] shall be returned to Shaolin.[69]

The Tang Dynasty: Shaolin as a Centre for Buddhist Studies

After recovering Luoyang, the Tang troops gradually overwhelmed other rebel opposition and had established control over Sui territory by mid-620. In 626, Li Shimin assumed the throne and was crowned Emperor Taizong of Tang.[70] He restored the centralised bureaucratic system of Sui and made efforts to limit the power of the aristocratic families in both central and local government.[71] In terms of religious policy, Shimin 'adopted the Sui policy of offering patronage to all three principal Chinese religions and philosophies.'[72] Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism were promoted accordingly.

Although the Tang government provided official support to mainstream religions, decrees and policies were issued to govern and regulate religious institutions and to control their size. A decree issued in 694 stated that all monks and nuns were to be governed by the Ministry of Rites. According to a decree issued in 722, monks and nuns were to be allocated farmland according to the law. Extra land owned by religious institutions was to be confiscated by the government and reallocated to poor farmers.[73] Monasteries with a population of 100 or more could occupy no more than ten qing of land. Monasteries with a population between 50 and 100 could occupy no more than seven qing of land. Monasteries with fewer than 50 monks/nuns could occupy no more than five qing of land.[74]

Under Taizong's rule, Chinese civilisation entered a golden age. Unification brought about stability. People were freed from warfare, and agricultural production increased steadily. New cities and towns were built to accommodate the quickly growing population. Both domestic and foreign trade flourished, and foreign merchants from central Asia began to arrive in larger numbers, which facilitated communication between China and foreign civilisations and gave rise to cosmopolitanism.[75]

Chinese Buddhism benefited enormously from the opportunity for closer contact with Indians and central Asians. Monks travelled to the birthplace of Buddhism to collect Buddhist texts and seek enlightenment. These exchange activities were officially supported by Emperor Taizong and his successors and helped Chinese Buddhism to develop its unique characteristics. Various schools of Buddhism based on Indian counterparts but with unique Chinese characteristics started to rise, including Tiantai, Pure Land (Jingtu), Three Sastra (Sanlun), Huayan, Faxiang, Vinaya (Lü), Zhenyan, Sanjie and Chan.[76]

As Buddhism continued to grow in popularity as a religion and philosophy of life, and due to the Shaolin monks' contribution to Li Shimin's expedition against Wang Shichong, the monastery enjoyed royal patronage. When Shaolin was reopened in 624, it accommodated approximately 120 monks.[77] The letter from Fang Xuanlin, which awarded 40 qing of land to Shaolin, reflected the status of the monastery and the special treatment it received from the Tang government. In the following decades, the monastery gradually developed into a centre of Buddhist studies.

As discussed in the previous section, the Chinese Chan lineage was started by the Indian monk Bodhidharma, who joined Shaolin in the 520s. Historical writings indicate that he died in the early 530s.[78] Bodhidharma's disciple Shi Huike (487–593) is considered the second patriarch of Chinese Chan Buddhism.[79] Huike was born in Hulao (today's Xiangyang, Henan Province) and studied Buddhist and Confucian classics when he was young. At the age of 30, he became a Buddhist monk at Xiangshan Monastery in Longmen, Luoyang.[80] At the age of 40, he travelled to Shaolin to seek further enlightenment. He studied Chan with Bodhidharma for six years and became his principal dharma heir.

After Bodhidharma died, Huike travelled around the country to spread Chan Buddhist teachings. He arrived in Ye, the capital city of the Northern Wei (534–550), around 534. A few disciples of a monk named Daoheng converted and began following the teachings of Huike. Daoheng then attacked Huike in revenge, and cut off his arm.[81] Based on this story, Huike's followers developed a legend which has it that when Huike first arrived in Shaolin, Bodhidharma was practising wall contemplation. He was deeply impressed and determined to follow the path of Chan. During a long night of snow, Huike stood outside the Dharma Hall, pleading to be admitted by Bodhidharma. By the morning, the snow was over his knees, but he did not give up. Finally, he cut off his left arm and presented it to Bodhidharma to prove his sincerity[82] (see Figure 2.3). Around the twelfth or thirteenth century, the Shaolin monks built the Snow Pavilion in commemoration of Huike (see Figure 2.4).[83]

During his travels in the Northern Qi era (550–577), Huike transmitted the dharma to Shi Sengca (?–606) and confirmed him as the third patriarch of Chan. He died during the Buddhist and Daoist persecution of 574–580 launched by Emperor Wu of the Northern Zhou. In this period, Sengcan secluded himself for years on Mount Wangong, Shuzhou (today's Taihu County, Anhui Province) and Mount Sikong (today's Yuexi County, Anhui Province) to avoid persecution. After the revival of Buddhism and Daoism in 580, Sengcan continued to travel in the mountains of Anhui Province.

In 593, a young Buddhist candidate named Shi Daoxin (580–651) became a disciple of Sengcan. He studied with him for years and became the fourth Chinese patriarch of Chan. He then taught Chan Buddhism in several monasteries in today's Jiangxi Province and Hubei Province.