



The monks' tale

By Justin Bergman

From its base in central China the ancient Shaolin temple, home to the world's most formidable martial artists, has embraced modernity to promote its unique philosophy.

Growing up a disciple at China's Shaolin temple, Shi Yanran spent up to eight hours a day studying martial arts and meditation in near-total seclusion to become part of a long line of exalted warrior monks. It proved good preparation for a very different sort of life, however: these days the 32-year-old Master Shi is a globe-trotting ambassador for Shaolin, helping the temple take its message overseas and build what is rapidly becoming an international brand.

Shaolin history stretches back more than 1,500 years in central China but it is only recently that the rest of the world has started to take notice, thanks in part to kung fu action films and mass tourism. Rather than shut its doors to safeguard its spiritual way of life, Shaolin has taken the opposite approach and welcomed practitioners from all over the world.

Shi has been an integral part of this process. He has travelled to 46 countries to perform in martial-arts shows promoting Shaolin and seven years ago founded the Shaolin Temple Culture Center in San Francisco, the first of four he runs in the US that offer classes in kung fu and qigong, an ancient Chinese practice combining slow, graceful movements, breathing and meditation.

"During my travels I realised we had enthusiastic audiences but I felt people could only really appreciate Shaolin kung fu off-stage," he says. "That planted the seed for my decision to come to the US to establish cultural centres where people can try it out for themselves."

There are now more than 40 Shaolin Culture Centers around the world, offering martial-arts and meditation classes to students young and old. In some ways the Shaolin establishments serve a similar role to Confucius Institutes, which have sprouted globally over the past decade to boost China's soft power through culture and language. But unlike

the Confucius Institutes, which have encountered opposition at some US universities recently, the Shaolin Culture Centers' message of spiritual well-being is only gaining in popularity.

Shi's workshops are in great demand among tech companies all over Silicon Valley, where he has been invited to give training sessions at Google, Yahoo and LinkedIn. "More people are seeking out ways to relieve stress, to promote balance between work and life," he says.

Shaolin is also drawing a wide range of students to its original temple in the foothills of the sacred Songshan Mountain in China's Henan province. Every year about 2,000 foreign students arrive for training courses lasting from one to six months.

With a one-month course costing CNY6000 (€780), training is not cheap and, in 2011, the temple began subsidising long-term training for a handful of African students who could not afford the fees. Separately, the Chinese Ministry of Culture pays for another 20 Africans to study for short periods. There are no Shaolin Culture Centers in Africa yet but the goal is for students to spread Shaolin's "culture, compassion, love, health and peace" on their return, says foreign-liasion officer Wang Yumin.

While Shaolin's outward, business-oriented approach is promoting a more benevolent side of China abroad, some worry that the temple is becoming overly commercialised and losing touch with its core values. Many monks now carry mobile phones, the temple has its own Twitter-like Weibo account and recently sought a media director to build a new social-network platform.

But Shi argues that Shaolin is concerned with sharing, not selling, its culture. "It's not a product like a cup of coffee at Starbucks – you pay for it and it's done. It's nothing like that," he says. "We are promoting a positive energy." — (M)



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- 01 Master Yanran (centre) with monks Hengqing Shifu (left) and Hengwu Shifu (right) of the Shaolin temple in San Francisco
- 02 Matthew Lau (foreground) learning staff-form basics
- 03 Silvia Yuan practising the straight sword
- 04 Nathaniel Teng performs an aerial cartwheel
- 05 White-belt student Edward Roper with staff
- 06 In the Shaolin qigong class students' ages range from early teens to 70
- 07 Stretching is part of the warm-up up before class
- 08 White-belt Shaolin kung fu student Dylan Anze
- 09 Rory Ramsay practising Shaolin Tiger Fist
- 10 Beginner and white-belt Shaolin kung fu classes

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