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Shàolín Buddhism in Austria: The Case of Shaolin Chan Wu Chi

Joseph Chadwin and Lukas K. Pokorny

1. Introduction

Chinese Buddhism in Austria is largely divided into two very different areas. On the one hand, groups that chiefly centre on an ethnic Chinese (i.e., specifically Taiwanese) membership, such as—most prominently—Fòguāngshān (Buddha’s Light Mountain).¹ These groups’ effective outreach scarcely go beyond the diasporic community. On the other hand, Shàolín *gōngfū* providers, who—in varying degrees—also serve as contact points and brokers of (Chinese) Buddhism. Elsewhere we have briefly outlined key providers of what we call “Shàolín Buddhism” in contemporary Austria (Chadwin and Pokorny 2021). In fact, the Shàolín current is rooted in Chán (Japanese: Zen) and does not represent a distinct doctrinal tradition. Yet, the mode of expressing Buddhism is distinct after all. Shàolín Buddhism refers to the wedding of the “Shàolín arts” (involving not only *gōngfū* but also auxiliary disciplines such as *qìgōng* and *tàijí*) with Chán and how the latter thus idiosyncratically spells out especially in the laic encounter. Within this encounter, the religious tenor of Buddhism is usually notably dimmed and may in some instances be hardly recognisable. Even if only latent, the religious dimension—permeating the very fabric of the Shàolín self-understanding—is there, being variously carried into effect and received. In the Austrian context, the majority of those at the receiving end (as well as, effectively, also the majority of teachers) do not belong to the ethnic Chinese community—hence, another striking difference (next to the religious explicitness) between this and the other chief area of Chinese Buddhism present in Austria, namely, the clientele’s composition. Both features inform a third salient difference between the two, that is, why individuals join in the first place.

Austria is home to a sizeable community of Shàolín Buddhist providers. Accordingly, one finds the full spectrum of the religious sound level at play.

¹ See the related chapter in this volume.

From sportive sober-mindedness to (self-claimed) Chán proselytising. The latter manifests most tangibly in the form of *Shaolin Tempel Österreich* (Shaolin Temple Austria), established in 2011 and located in Vienna's fifth district (Bacherplatz 10/3). A branch temple of the original Shàolín Monastery (Shàolínsì) in China, Shaolin Tempel Österreich was incorporated as an association under the name *Shaolin Kulturverein* (ZVR number: 370805731) and subsequently (2012) became an official order/dharma group within the Austrian Buddhist Religious Society (*Österreichische Buddhistische Religionsgesellschaft; ÖBR*)—the only Shàolín group in Austria to do so. Led by Chinese Shàolín masters, Shaolin Tempel Österreich is presently the largest Shàolín group in the country, a status initially held by the Vienna-based *Shaolin Tempel Austria* (not to be confused with *Shaolin Tempel Österreich*) operated from 2002 to 2018 by the Austrian master Wolfgang Gall (alias Shì Héngxīn).² For many years, Gall was assisted by a Chinese monk, Shì Héngyì (b. 1980), who, in 2012, established his own group, Shaolin Chan Wu Chi (Shàolín Chán Wǔjī; literally, highest Shàolín Chán martial arts), now located in Vienna's third district.

This article takes Shaolin Chan Wu Chi as a case study of a Shàolín Buddhist provider that is positioned somewhat in the middle of the aforementioned spectrum, where the Buddhist and training contexts are outwardly separated (while being inherently intertwined in a varying fashion). The article largely focuses on the practitioners of Shaolin Chan Wu Chi. Drawing on participant observation spaced out between January 2020 and August 2022 and a number of semi-structured interviews, we interrogated two aspects: (1) which role does Buddhism play for them and (2) how do practitioners encounter the Shàolín Buddhist dimension in Shì Héngyì's Shaolin Chan Wu Chi. The following section briefly outlines the Shàolín tradition and its global expansion. Section Three introduces Shaolin Chan Wu Chi and its master Shì Héngyì, particularly addressing his own Shàolín Buddhist philosophy. Sections Four and Five centre on the two research questions.

2. The Shàolín Tradition

The Shàolín tradition derives from the eponymous monastery Shàolínsì, located at the foot of Mount Shǎoshì (Shǎoshishān), that is, the western peaks of Mount Sōng (Sōngshān) in Dēngfēng County, northern Hénán Province. The monastery was built in 495, during the Northern Wèi Dynasty (386–535),

2 *Shì* (short for Shìjiāmóuní, that is, Śākyamuni) is an honorific title adopted by monks and nuns upon ordination. What follows is the individually bestowed dharma name.

to accommodate the Indian monk and its subsequent first abbot Bátuó. It soon turned into a hub of Buddhist education and translational activities. Shàolín's location "above a government center" also served a strategic purpose and formed the "background for the Shaolin monks' earliest involvement in warfare" (Shahar 2008: 19). Sources indicate that from its earliest days Shàolín monks might have committed to martial training (cf. Filipiak 2001: 34–35)—in later centuries under the "divine tutelage" of the warrior bodhi-sattva Vajrapāṇi. Notably, their military engagement in the formation of the Táng Dynasty (618–907) bestowed them long-lasting imperial recognition and support. Moreover, in the late seventh and particularly the eighth century, Shàolín'si was made the epicentre of the Bodhidharma myth, rendering the monastery the ancestral site of the Chán tradition. The connection between the Chán figurehead Bodhidharma and Shàolín'si was emphatically promoted across the centuries. During Míng (1368–1644) and Qīng times (1644–1911) Bodhidharma gradually adopted a second patriarchship, namely, that for the Shàolín martial tradition.

Earlier, during the Yuán Dynasty (1279–1368), Shàolín'si had become the centre of the Cáodòng lineage and to this day represents one of the chief religious sites in China. Shàolín combat skills were especially appreciated by Míng rulers who frequently employed them in their military pursuits. With the Manchu takeover and the establishment of the Qīng Dynasty, the Shàolín military engagement was silenced. The Qīng authorities feared the monastery's wide-ranging martial networks and potential endorsement of subversive activities (Shahar 2008: 193–194). Indeed, to many anti-Manchu organisations, specifically the largest and most powerful of them all, the Heaven and Earth Society (Tiāndihui), the Shàolín tradition was "a source of ethno-national identity" (Lu 2019: 257) fomenting the idea of rebellion.

The chaos of the early Republican Period (1912–1949) had Shàolín'si become entangled in raging military-political feuds with one warlord putting it to the torch in 1928—not the first time in its more than 1,500 years history. A rising wave of *wúxiá* (martial hero) novels and movies as well as the proliferation of Shàolín *gōngfū* manuals greatly popularised the Shàolín tradition at the time. The former served nation branding purposes, bolstering Shàolín as a "symbol of indigenous virtue and strength" (Lu 2019: 257). Shàolín's increasing popularity came to a halt shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) but it was resumed in the 1970s. Once again, Shàolín *gōngfū* was marshalled as a traditional cultural icon, utilised by Hong Kong's movie industry, vesting the tradition with global visibility. A watershed was the release of the 1982 film *Shàolín'si* (internationally, *The Shaolin Temple*), a Hong Kong production sponsored by the PRC govern-

ment, shot at the original monastery, and starring the Chinese *wǔshù* champion Jet Li (b. 1963). *Shàolínsì* garnered worldwide attention and became the year's highest-grossing film in the PRC. It facilitated a veritable Shàolín boom rendering the monastery a major tourist site and paved the way for the Shàolín economic enterprise to come. A cascade of Shàolín *gōngfū* movies hit the market thereafter and dozens of Shàolín *gōngfū* schools were established in close vicinity to the monastery. The monastery received several international and domestic recognitions, culminating in the status of UNESCO World Heritage Site (2010). Four years earlier, Shàolín *gōngfū* was listed as national intangible cultural heritage by the PRC government (Su 2016: 941–945).

Whereas the monastery already launched a Shàolín *gōngfū* performance troupe as early as 1979—the Shàolín Wǔshù Team (Shàolín Wǔshù Dui)—it was under Shì Yǒngxīn (b. 1965) that it became a globetrotting sensation, manned by both monks from the original monastery and befriended Shàolín *gōngfū* schools. Shì Yǒngxīn took the reins of Shàolínsì when abbot Shì Xíngzhèng (1914–1987) passed away. The latter had been the first abbot formally recognised by the authorities since the seventeenth century. Although Shì Yǒngxīn received his official inauguration as thirtieth abbot of Shàolínsì only in 1999, he is the mastermind behind the commercialisation and globalisation of the Shàolín tradition since 1987. A key instrument in this endeavour was the Shàolín Wǔshù Team, renamed Shàolín Warrior Monk Corps (SWMC; Shàolín Wūsēng Tuán) in 1989. The same year, the troupe embarked on international performances with the declared aim to promote Chán Buddhism and Shàolín culture. Notably, from 1995, the SWMC was internationally marketed by the Austrian event manager Herbert Fechter (b. 1947), who reportedly organised some six thousand SWMC shows across five continents attracting more than six million viewers ever since. The year Fechter took over, Vienna's *Stadthalle* served as the kick-off venue for the show “The Mystical Powers of the Shaolin Monks” (or, alternatively, “The Mystical Powers of Shaolin Kung Fu”),³ which is performed internationally by the SWMC to this day.

Soon after he was appointed abbot, Shì Yǒngxīn created the second pillar of his internationalisation programme—the overseas Shàolín Monastery network involving branch temples and cultural centres (Shàolín Wénhuà Zhōngxīn).⁴ The first such branch temple was opened in Berlin in July 2001, serving as the European head temple. The Vienna temple was established ten

3 German: *Die mystischen Kräfte des Shaolin Kung Fu*.

4 The term “Shàolín (overseas) cultural centre” is also used to comprise both institutions.

years later in 2011. A year earlier (September 2010) Shì Yǒngxìn personally inaugurated the Shaolin Europe Association (SEA; Ōuzhōu Shàolín Liánhé Huì) in Vienna's Hilton Hotel. SEA presently maintains temples and cultural centres in thirteen countries.⁵ The difference between these two institutions is that the former are headed by monks in residence sent directly from Shàolín sì, whereas the latter are not (Liu et al. 2022: 2). Presently, there are reportedly more than fifty Shàolín branch temples and cultural centres worldwide.

Apart from Shàolín *gōngfū* providers affiliated with Shàolín sì, there exist numerous schools operated by independent Shàolín monks who received their training either directly at Shàolín sì or at any of the nearby Shàolín *gōngfū* schools. Adding to these are, on the one hand, non-Chinese Shàolín masters who were chiefly educated at overseas Shàolín institutions within or outside the Shàolín Monastery network, and, on the other hand, individuals belonging to non-mainstream (such as, prominently, Southern Shàolín *gōngfū*) and self-tailored Shàolín lineages. The most influential Shàolín organisation unaffiliated with the Shàolín Monastery network is the New York City-based USA Shaolin Temple led by the well-known Shàolín personality Shì Yánmíng (b. 1964), which operates branches in Austria, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, South Africa, and Trinidad and Tobago (see next Section).

3. Shì Héngyì and Shaolin Chan Wu Chi

At the very heart of Shaolin Chan Wu Chi is the figure of Shì Héngyì, a thirty-fifth generation Shàolín master. This section will briefly outline Héngyì's life based on two formal interviews conducted with him on July 28, 2022 and January 10, 2023, as well as several conversations between January 2020 and August 2022.

Héngyì was born Hè Huáqiáng in 1980 in Tàihú County, Ānhuī Province, into a low-middle class family. His father was a carpenter. From as early as he can remember, Héngyì's uncle on his father's side would tell him *gōngfū* stories, namely, fantastical tales of the amazing feats and adventures of *gōngfū* heroes. This reportedly sparked in Héngyì a sense of both fascination and desire:

⁵ These include: Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Italy, Lithuania, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Switzerland, and The Netherlands.

In those days, my hometown was not a safe place at all. People were attacked all the time and I remember seeing it happen from a very young age.⁶ When my uncle told me about *gōngfū*, it made me think that this is what I want. This is what I need. I saw people being attacked and I wanted to save them! So one day, with firm resolve, I went to my parents and told them “I want to be a *gōngfū* superhero”⁷ (Interview with Shì Hényì on July 28, 2022).

However, the legacy of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) could still very much be felt and the practice of *gōngfū* was still regarded as controversial in his social environment. The then six years old Hényì had no means of actually learning *gōngfū* readily available to him. However, a turning point came a year later when his cousin visited Hényì’s parents and told them that a *gōngfū* master was currently visiting a village close to their home. Hényì wanted to immediately become this master’s student but, whereas his father was convinced, his mother had strong reservations; with the recent memory of the Cultural Revolution, she was worried about the religious implications of *gōngfū* and the path her son would be setting out on. However, she was allegedly forced to relent when Hényì took his work stool home with him from school on the very next day. This gesture was symbolically seen as a way of permanently leaving school. Thus, Hényì was allowed to meet this master—Kāng Shènghé—who agreed to take on Hényì as his student.

From the age of seven to fifteen, Hényì travelled the country with Kāng and devoted himself fully to the study of *gōngfū* and Buddhism. He said of this period:

I must admit that at first I did not understand why I had to study Chán. I could feel myself getting stronger every day the more I studied *gōngfū*, but the Buddhist training did not make sense to me. I wanted to become a *gōngfū* superhero and I didn’t understand what Buddhism had to do with this. However, I was fully dedicated to my master so I listened to his every word and did my very best to follow everything that he taught to the letter. So even though Buddhism was not, at this point in my life, truly in my heart, I was certainly studying it diligently (Interview with Shì Hényì on July 28, 2022).

When Hényì reached the age of fifteen in 1995, Kāng recommended him to the Shàolín Monastery in Hénán province. The same year Hényì ordained as a monk at the Shàolín Monastery. He also became the student of Shì Yánxiāo, whose older brother, Shì Yánmíng, Hényì credits as his second

⁶ It should be noted that Hényì, for the most part, conversed in English. However, he would sometime, especially when quoting, switch to Mandarin. In the cases when he employs Mandarin, we have added the original version in the footnotes.

⁷ *Gōngfū chāojí yīngxióng* 功夫超级英雄.

master. Shì Yánmíng had defected to the United States alongside a fellow monk, Shì Guǒlín (b. 1965), when he was a member of the first Shàolín troupe travelling the country in 1992. He eventually took up permanent residence in New York City where he founded the USA Shaolin Temple, which is not affiliated with Shàolínsì. Rather, to this day Shì Yánmíng is a strident critic of what he deems a ritually ossified tradition fostered in China. The same year his brother defected, Shì Yánxiāo opened his own Shàolín school in Xīncài which Hényì also joined in 1995, reportedly constantly travelling between the two schools (Interview with Shì Hényì on January 10, 2023). To this day, the Xīncài school is connected to USA Shaolin Temple, which maintains several international branches, such as, formerly, Gall's Shaolin Tempel Austria (and up to now Shaolin Chan Wu Chi). A former Linz-based businessman, Gall had been a disciple of Shì Yánmíng at the USA Shaolin Temple. Upon his return to Austria, he established the very first branch temple, personally inaugurated by his master in October 2002 (the temple had opened to the public already on September 2). Occupying the spacious 500m² attic of a former factory building in the third district's Markhofgasse 19, the temple was for some time the largest Shàolín temple in Europe with some 250 to 300 students during its heyday. Gall also expanded temporarily to other Austrian cities, including Graz (September 2007–January 2019; Billrothgasse 47, later Karlauerstraße 44) and Bruck an der Leitha (Schloßmühlgasse 44). He shut down his temple in September 2018. Earlier he had formally disassociated the group from Shì Yánmíng's USA Shaolin Temple.⁸

It was under Shì Yánxiāo that Hényì reportedly underwent a Buddhist transformation:

It wasn't a sudden realisation or anything like that, but my master taught me to see the true beauty of Buddhism. He also taught me to stop seeing Buddhism and *gōngfū* as two separate things. Because I was so blessed to have this master as my teacher, I was able to slowly realise that Buddhism was my entire life (Interview with Shì Hényì on July 28, 2022).

Having successfully achieved the rank of master (*shīgōng*), he moved to Vienna in November 2003 at the suggestion of Shì Yánmíng to assist Gall with his Shaolin Tempel Austria, where he remained for some nine years before formally establishing (and incorporating as an association with the ZVR

⁸ Being a representative of the Shì Yánmíng lineage and his USA Shaolin Temple international network made Gall and his Shàolín enterprise a pariah in the eyes of the official Shàolín Monastery international community, even involving court cases brought against him. In the same vein, Hényì is regarded a Shàolín dissenter, as is virtually everyone else who is not connected to or on amiable terms with the Shàolín Monastery network under Shì Yǒngxīn.

number 173181220) Shaolin Chan Wu Chi at the ninth district's Grundlgasse 1 in April 2012. He taught at Grundlgasse for six additional years before opening a larger establishment in the third district's Invalidenstraße 5–7 in May 2018.

Today, Shaolin Chan Wu Chi has approximately 200 students including some eighty children. The gender ratio is very even with approximately half of the members being female and the other half male. The age of members is varied with the current youngest one being four years old whereas the oldest is eighty-nine. Members are predominantly Austrian, but there are also a small number of other nationalities (Chinese, Taiwanese, American, British, French, and German). The school is open Monday to Saturday: Monday to Friday sees lessons in *gōngfū* and *tàijí*, whereas Saturdays are given to *qìgōng* and Chán meditation. Classes are divided between children and adult lessons, with each being subdivided into two levels (beginner and advanced). These classes are usually attended by twenty to twenty-five students.

The school also shares a partnership with *Shaolin Tempel Steyr* (www.shaolinsteyr.at/) and *Kung Fu Quan* (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100036468947337>). The former is a school based in Steyr (Damberggasse 2) and is run by Oliver Haas (alias Shì Miàojiè). Héngyì reportedly met Haas while the latter was a student at Shaolin Tempel Austria (Interview with Oliver Haas on September 18, 2020). Since establishing Shaolin Tempel Steyr in 2010, Haas has maintained close ties with Héngyì (Chadwin and Pokorny 2021: 133–135): the two schools frequently organise joint ventures such as a yearly summer programme in which the two schools come together for a week of training. Kung Fu Quan is based in Colleferro (Italy) and is run by Liú Péng. Having previously met in 1999 while they were students in Hé-nán, Héngyì and Liú maintained close contact and began organising joint events in 2015 after Liú started teaching in Italy.

3.1. Héngyì's Teachings

Héngyì understands Shàolín as the perfect combination of *gōngfū* and Buddhism, the latter “bringing stillness” and the former “bringing style. When combined, you get Shàolín.”

Buddhism *is* a religion. It is my religion and that religion is my entire life. When you ask me “are you religious” my answer is “I am a Buddhist.” So yes, Buddhism is a religion. But at the same time, Buddhism is not a religion. I teach Buddhism to all of my students and I want to make sure that all of my students do good Buddhist practice. But not all of my students are Buddhists.

Actually, you can be a Christian or any religion and still be a Buddhist. So in that way, Buddhism is not a religion. [...] “Buddhism” is just a name. Name is not important. It is just a picture. It doesn’t really matter if I call myself a Buddhist. What matters is that I do good Buddhist practice. [...] Buddhism means being a good person for yourself but also for everyone and everything around you. Buddhism teaches us how to do the most good in every second of our lives (Interview with Shì Hényì on July 28, 2022).

During his time in Vienna, Hényì developed his own take on Shàolín, which he refers to as “life of Shàolín.” He believes that Shàolín, when applied correctly, should permeate every second in one’s life:

Absolutely everything can be Shàolín *gōngfū*. “Life of Shàolín” is when you are able to make every single moment, both awake and asleep, a moment of Shàolín (Interview with Shì Hényì on July 28, 2022).

He illustrated this philosophy by using the example of eating:

Eating is both very simple and very complicated. Babies know how to eat straight away without even thinking. This is very simple. However, when done *right*, eating can become medicine. When done *wrong*, eating can become poison. Life of Shàolín is when you are able to eat the *right* way. This doesn’t just mean eat healthy. Eating the *right* way means knowing *when* to eat. It means knowing *how* to eat. Yes, everyone knows how to eat, but Life of Shàolín turns that how into being fully present when you eat. Life of Shàolín is also eating with the *right* energy. This way, something as simple as eating becomes a complicated Shàolín practice (Interview with Shì Hényì on July 28, 2022).

The conceptualisation of the dual religious/non-religious nature of Buddhism reflects Hényì’s broader flexible view of Buddhism that he applies as a teacher. He reportedly believes that flexibility lies at the very core of his teachings, namely, that each of his students requires different teaching methods. Moreover, he is adamant that teaching Shàolín to a modern audience requires modern methods. Thus, although he is cautious about speaking ill of other schools, he acknowledges that

[w]hen you look at the Shàolín Temple in China, the way they teach Buddhism is not modern at all. The way they teach Buddhism is the same as when the temple was first built. This way of teaching definitely works for some students. But I don’t think this way of teaching works for every student especially in a country like Austria. I try to make my teachings more modern (Interview with Shì Hényì on July 28, 2022).

When asked how he thinks it is possible to modernise Buddhist teachings, he responded:

Chán is free. The way it is taught at the Shàolín Temple is the right way of teaching it and the way that I teach it is the right way of teaching it (Interview with Shì Hényì on January 10, 2023).

Hényì's "modern" approach can most readily be seen at the end of every single class during which Hényì exclaims "*Āmítuófó!* Train harder! Merry Christmas! Happy New Year! Happy Birthday!" When asked about this, he responded:

It's true that you would never hear this in China! Because I teach in Austria, I feel as though my lessons need to reflect this. I say "*Āmítuófó!*" because I teach Shàolín. I say "train harder" because I teach *gōngfū*. I say "Merry Christmas! Happy New Year! Happy Birthday" because I teach in Austria and I want my students to see that I am not just a strict Shàolín monk (Interview with Shì Hényì on July 28, 2022).

This flexibility has even altered the specific *gōngfū* movements that Hényì teaches. Following in the footsteps of Shì Yánmíng, Hényì readily believes that one should not apply the traditional teaching of Shàolín in a Western context:

The monks who invented Shàolín lived in a very different world to the world of my students. The traditional teachings of Shàolín are violent and they are that way because it was needed at the time. However, violence goes against the teachings of Buddhism. In today's world, you hardly ever need to actually resort to violence, and Buddhist monks are no longer at risk of being attacked. They do not need to protect Buddhism anymore. That's why the way I teach Shàolín is different (Interview with Shì Hényì on January 10, 2023).

However, unlike Shì Yánmíng who considers what he teaches to be "global" and not "Buddhist philosophy" (Jacobs 2019: 38), Hényì very much teaches Buddhism. Indeed, it is the core of his school. He thus alters *gōngfū* forms to make them harder to apply in a combat setting:

What I teach is not combat. What I teach is Buddhism and there are two different ways of actually cultivating. *Zuò chán* [i.e., seated meditation] is the more classic way of practising Buddhism. It's what you think of when you think of the Buddha, while *dòngzuò chán* [i.e., action meditation] is what Shàolín brings. I teach both (Interview with Shì Hényì on July 28, 2022).

Thus, one finds that seated meditation is a crucial component of Hényi's school. He describes meditation thus:

In many of us, our inner self surges like a storm, a raging roar of thoughts and feelings that swirl around us, taking away our peace and complicating our lives. Meditation teaches us to let them be and let go. To let go again with each breath. By sitting and meditating, focusing on the breath, our inner self becomes quieter and quieter over time, allowing us to see further and more calmly. We recognise the patterns we move in and the pitfalls we fall into. Over time, we learn to expand the patterns and avoid the traps. The mind calms, the waves begin to smooth, and the world widens again (Hényi 2022a).

Offering a dedicated meditation session every Saturday as well as private instruction to several of his students, Hényi places an enormous emphasis on the importance of meditation. Although he does not actively tell his students to engage in seated meditation practice, he is very quick to tell them the benefits should they choose to practise. When asked about the relationship between “seated meditation” and “action meditation,” he explained:

Both are Chán and both are wonderful. However, I think that “seated meditation” is more helpful for training the heart and learning how to live your life in a good Buddhist way, whereas “action meditation” is more helpful for training the body and learning how to control the body in a way that you can live with as much compassion as possible. I think that it is best to use both (Interview with Shì Hényi on July 28, 2022).

He elaborated on “seated meditation” further:

The world is mirrored on the still water [...]. In meditation we learn to be this mirror and see the world. Through mindfulness and concentration exercises, your mind calms and gathers. Meditation is the key to the universe and thus to the substance of everything. You meet the nature of your heart and thus achieve inner peace and harmony for more serenity in everyday life (Hényi 2022a).

Another important component of Hényi's teaching of Buddhism is his own term “the beautiful life.” He described this thus:

Living is a depressant. I teach people to accept this and be normal about this. The beautiful life is being able to live knowing that life is a depressant and being at peace with it. It is being able to make your heart flat, not being happy and not being sad (Interview with Shì Hényi on July 28, 2022).

Although referring to life as a “depressant”—by which Hényì means that living in of itself makes everyone depressed—is not particularly unusual for a Buddhist; it is unusual for a teacher of Shàolín. Indeed, the heavy emphasis Hényì places on Buddhism is rather out of the ordinary for a *gōngfū* school in Europe. The school logo (a dharma wheel or *fālún*) lists “Chán Buddhism” and “meditation” alongside *gōngfū*, *tàijí*, *qìgōng*, and *sànshǒu*.⁹

Hényì divides his teaching itself into three components: “I teach Chán philosophy for the mind. I teach *gōngfū* for the body. I teach Buddhism for the heart.” By “Chán philosophy for the mind” Hényì means teachings specific to Chán. He describes it thus:

Chán is one of the most wonderful things. It is not just any thing, everything cannot go outside its environment. It contains everything, at the same time it makes nothing out of everything [...]. Since the existence of space and time, Chán exists universally in a boundless space and in an infinite time. Chán is an art of wisdom of life. It teaches people to devote themselves to the present life, especially in a hectic and tense modern society. Chán can sprinkle coolness and sunshine into your tired and restless heart and let you taste the joy of freedom and contentment after waking up (Hényì 2022b).

By “*gōngfū* for the body” Hényì simply means his own distinct practice of non-violent Shàolín *gōngfū*. Although many of the forms taught by Hényì initially seem identical to the traditional Shàolín ones, Hényì pointed out that the subtle differences—such as turning a fist into a flat palm—turn the once violent forms into “action meditation.” Finally, by “Buddhism for the heart” Hényì means more general Buddhist teachings, particularly the Four Truths (*sìdì*) and non-violence. He elaborated thus:

The Buddha’s greatest teaching was the teaching of compassion. I teach Buddhism for the heart in order to cultivate this compassion. When you are able to see the suffering of life and are able to live a life of true compassion, then your heart will be free and you will no longer suffer (Interview with Shì Hényì on July 28, 2022).

Hényì further elaborated that these three teachings are interconnected:

We use *gōngfū* to understand Chán and we use Chán to lead our practice of *gōngfū*. Buddhism is at the heart of everything here. You use Buddhism to see your heart and to help see your true existence. All three are beautiful (Interview with Shì Hényì on January 10, 2023).

⁹ *Sànshǒu* is a modern fighting style that was developed by the Chinese military by combining traditional *gōngfū* with modern fighting techniques such as kickboxing.

Wishing to emphasise that “my school is open to everyone,” Hényì’s teachings are placed in a realm of Buddhist devotion mixed with a flexibility brought about by the geographic (Western) location of the school.

4. Practitioners of Shaolin Chan Wu Chi

The some 120 (young) adult students who make up Shaolin Chan Wu Chi can be divided into three categories: (1) those who self-identify as Buddhist; (2) those who practise Buddhism without self-identifying as Buddhists themselves; and (3) those who attend the school for the purpose of fitness. This section will briefly explore the beliefs of three representative students from each category. Hényì has requested that the students remain anonymous and therefore we have assigned aliases for each interviewee. Gender and age group are given.

4.1. Buddhist Students

Approximately forty-five of the (young) adult student population make up this group. Of these, half have undergone an official Buddhist naming ceremony in which Hényì assigned them their own Buddhist name in Mandarin. Hényì made it very clear that students are by no means under any obligation to undergo this ceremony, but he readily keeps the option available for students who wish to do so. Jakob, a man in his mid-twenties, is one such student. He described his conversion to Buddhism thus:

When I first joined Chan Wu Chi, I was totally an atheist. I joined because I thought it would be really cool to learn kung fu. Actually, to be honest with you, one of my favourite films is Kung Fu Panda. It actually kind of made me want to learn [...]. After going [to lessons] for a few months, I felt myself start to change. Master [Hényì] is the most amazing person I have ever met and I began to feel like I wanted to be like him. I started to ask him all of these questions about life and he started to teach me about Buddhism. Before I knew it, Buddhism kind of became my life and Master even gave me my own Buddhist name (Interview with Jakob on May 3, 2022).

Asked to describe his Buddhist beliefs and practices, Jakob reported:

As corny as it sounds, I honestly believe everything that Master [Hényì] has taught me [...]. These days I meditate at least twice a day. I do Chán meditation just as Master taught me.

Asked about his initial encounter with Buddhism, Jakob explained:

I had obviously heard of Buddhism before joining Chan Wu Chi but I didn't really know anything about it. Master taught me everything I know about today. I also sometimes watch YouTube videos but really most of my encounter with Buddhism, actually *all* of my encounter with Buddhism, is through Master.

Beate, a woman in her early thirties, paints a somewhat similar picture to Jakob, but, unlike him, she was already interested in Buddhism before joining the school:

I was no expert, but I had read a lot about Buddhism online and I had done a few mindfulness courses before joining [Shaolin Chan Wu Chi]. Master [Héngyì] really changed things for me, though. Buddhism went from being something I was interested in to being something that I couldn't live without (Interview with Beate on May 20, 2022).

Like Jakob, Beate has also undergone the Buddhist name ceremony. She described it as follows:

It was one of the most important days of my life. It was the day I finally accepted my Buddhist path.

Christoph, a man in his mid-thirties, also self-identifies as Buddhist, but has not undergone the naming ceremony. Nevertheless, since joining the school, Buddhism has become a central part of his life:

I had certainly heard of Buddhism before joining the school. It was part of why I joined but certainly not the only reason. I mostly just wanted to get in shape and learning about Buddhism just seemed to me like a nice added bonus. But after learning under Master Hengyi, I decided to become a Buddhist myself. I had actually been going through a pretty bad time in my life. When Master taught me about suffering and how to use kung fu and meditation to deal with this suffering, it just helped (Interview with Christoph on April 18, 2022).

It was clear that Buddhism was of great importance to all three of these students. Moreover, it was likewise evident that each of them placed enormous value on Héngyì, fully attributing their commitment to Buddhism to him.

4.2. Non-Buddhist Buddhist Practitioners

Héngyì teaches all of his students to implement Buddhism in their lives. This group of students, comprising approximately forty-five individuals, although not self-identifying as Buddhist, do report that they readily utilise Buddhism in their lives. Anna, a woman in her early forties, is one such student:

I am not a Buddhist myself. Actually, I was raised to be Christian and I still believe in God. But I do really like Buddhism and that actually really surprised me. I joined Chan Wu Chi because of a stupid New Year's Resolution to be more healthy. It seemed like a fun way of doing that. The Buddhist side of things really pulled a fast one on me! I enjoyed the Master's meditation lessons so much, I started meditating in my own free time (Interview with Anna on May 9, 2022).

Asked about whether she has adopted any Buddhist beliefs, Anna reported that

I guess I sort of have. Compassion is a lovely teaching and the Master talks about it all the time. Then again, Christians have compassion so I don't really know if I can call it Buddhist.

Markus, a man in his mid-thirties, has somewhat stronger views:

I wouldn't call myself a Buddhist but that's only really because I don't like labels. Master [Héngyì] even spoke to me about how calling yourself a Buddhist really isn't important and I am totally with him on that. I try to live a kind of Buddhist life, though. Karma just makes sense, reincarnation makes sense when you think about something like water turning into ice or evaporating [...]. I agree with just about everything Master has taught me and I could not be more grateful to him (Interview with Markus on April 26, 2022).

When asked about his initial encounter with Buddhism, Markus claimed:

It was totally through Chan Wu Chi. I obviously knew about Buddhism but most of what I knew was from popular media. I used to think the Buddha was really fat. My first true encounter with Buddhism was when I joined the school.

Louise, a woman in her mid-twenties, has a somewhat different outlook:

I am not a Buddhist but I have always been super spiritual. I joined Chan Wu Chi to help my spirit grow (Interview with Louise on April 25, 2022).

When asked about Buddhist belief and practice, Louise reported:

I have meditated for a very long time, so Master [Héngyì] did not teach me how to do it. He did teach me how to do Chan meditation, though. It's not my approach to meditation at the moment, but I really enjoy it whenever I go to his sessions [...]. I totally try to live my life filled with love and kindness and Master has really helped me to train both my spirit and body. I kind of agree with all of his teachings, it's just that I also have a lot of my own beliefs as well. I guess you could say that I am a spiritual person who also practises a bit of Buddhism.

As with the students who self-identify as Buddhist, the non-Buddhist Buddhist practitioner students reportedly owe a great deal to Héngyì. Similarly, Buddhism seemed to be of great importance to each of these students despite none of them actually self-identifying with the religion.

4.3. Non-Buddhist Fitness Students

This is the smallest of the three groups (approximately thirty individuals). These students do not place any worth on Buddhism and related practice. A large portion (seventeen) of this group are women who participate in Héngyì's women's self-defence classes. Héngyì speaks about these classes thus:

This is the closest I get to teaching something violent. I want to give women the power to be able to protect themselves. However, I do not teach them how to fight. I teach them how to defend. I teach them how to get away (Interview with Shì Héngyì on July 28, 2022).

Monika, a woman in her late twenties, is one of the participants. Regarding Buddhism, she stated:

I joined the school because I wanted to feel safe walking alone at night. Buddhism has nothing to do with why I joined and it has nothing to do with my own beliefs (Interview with Monika on March 28, 2022).

Gabriella, a woman in her early thirties, also attends Héngyì's classes in women's self-defence. Although seemingly more interested in Buddhism than Monika, she similarly views it as something completely separate from what she practises:

I would say that I am at least interested in Buddhism and I like Master Héngyì very much, but I go to learn self-defence from him and not Buddhism. If I

wanted to learn about Buddhism, I would go to a Buddhist temple or something (Interview with Gabriella on March 28, 2022).

Peter, a man in his late teens, also does not self-identify as Buddhist and claims to be uninterested in learning about Buddhism:

I learn kung fu because I want to get strong. It's a cool exercise. I can see why some people who practise kung fu would also practise Buddhism, but religion really isn't for me (Interview with Peter on April 21, 2022).

Thus, this group of students, unlike the first two groups, do not see their attendance of Shaolin Chan Wu Chi as inherently intertwined with Buddhism. Instead, they attend the school exclusively to learn self-defence.

5. Encounter with Buddhism

Given the importance Hényì grants to Buddhism overall and Chán in particular regarding the identity of Shaolin Chan Wu Chi, the school constitutes a contact point for (Chinese) Buddhism in Austria. This section examines the specifics of this encounter. Although this has already been to some degree addressed above, this section seeks to more specifically explore how Buddhism itself is conveyed—that is, how a desire for Buddhism is established and nurtured—at the school and how it is subsequently received. The section draws upon the personal testimony of Hényì, interviews with eighteen of his students, and participant observation.

5.1. The Transmission of Buddhism

Despite his reported “classical training” in which he was taught “a very specific way of practising Buddhism that is fully synonymous with Shàolín,” Hényì is very flexible in his teaching of Buddhism:

When I was still a student myself, I was taught how to practise Buddhism the Shàolín way. My teachers were amazing and wiser than I can understand today and I am deeply grateful to them. But the way I learned Buddhism and the way I learned Shàolín is not the way that I teach Buddhism and Shàolín. Buddhism is so so big and I think that there are many many different ways of teaching it. Every student is totally different so I try to make my teachings totally different. I don't think that my way of teaching is better than that of

my old teachers, it's just different. They used the one Shàolín way of teaching whereas I try to use many ways (Interview with Shì Hényì on July 28, 2022).

The fact that a sizable portion of his students self-identify as Buddhist is not immediately apparent and Hényì's lessons themselves often do not incorporate overt Buddhist terminology. However, upon further inspection it becomes clear that Hényì does in fact punctuate several of his lessons with brief Buddhist lessons. A typical example was when he exclaimed during a training session: "Keep your balance! Keep centred! Just like balancing your karma" (Participant observation carried out on August 17, 2022).

Although this initially seemed like a very brief and fleeting remark, at the end of the class Hényì explained in detail what it means "to balance one's karma," existing in perfect equanimity, and how one can use Shàolín to achieve this. Another example could be seen when Hényì helped a student reposition their body to make their movements less violent being mindful of Buddhist teachings. The student later explained:

Master corrected me because the way I was moving was more like fighting than Shàolín. The Buddha teaches us that we should inflict no harm to any living creature and Master was making sure that I keep this value (Interview with Katharina on September 28, 2022).

A somewhat similar instance was when Hényì playfully exclaimed: "No violence! Make the Buddha happy!" (Participant observation carried out on August 19, 2022).

Yet another, albeit more overt, example was when Hényì referred to a *gōng'àn*.¹⁰ The *gōng'àn* in question is attributed to the Chán master Zhàozhōu Cóngshěn (d. 897) and Hényì alluded to it before leading a meditation, stating that Shàolín is the means by which one undertakes the carrying out of nothingness.¹¹

Similarly, Anika, a woman in her early twenties, describes:

Master [Hényì] often brings Buddhism into our regular training sessions. During the normal training sessions, he rarely lingers on it for long but he,

10 More commonly referred to by the Japanese name *kōan*. Typically a short dialogue, story, question, or statement that are utilised within Chán Buddhism as a means of attaining insight.

11 The *gōng'àn* in question is even currently featured on the Shaolin Chan Wu Chi official website (<https://shaolinspirit.at/en/chan>):

"A student once asked him, 'If I have nothing in my head, what should I do?'"

[Zhàozhōu Cóngshěn] replied, 'Throw it out.'

'But if I don't have it, how can I throw it out?' continued the questioner.

'Well,' said [Zhàozhōu Cóngshěn], 'then carry it out.'

you know, just teaches us enough to make it clear that it's important. He also sometimes gives extra classes where he goes more in-depth (Interview with Anika on September 12, 2022).

These extra classes constitute the most overt way in which Buddhism is transmitted in the school. Occasionally, Hényì gives classes in basic Buddhist philosophy. These sessions are usually introductory, covering subjects such as the Four Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the basics of the Chán tradition specifically. On top of these occasional classes, Hényì also gives short private lessons to his students upon request:

If a student tells me “I want to learn about Buddhism, then I invite them to the school and we can have a cup of tea to talk about it. I try not to push it on anyone but if they come to me then I will teach (Interview with Shì Hényì on July 28, 2022).

Subsequently, although he begins each class by prostrating before a Buddhist statue, he does not require this of his students (the majority, however, do choose to prostrate). He thus, unsurprisingly, makes it clear that he regards each of his students as an individual case:

When teaching *gōngfū*, when teaching Shàolín, Buddhism will always come naturally. Therefore, when I teach Shàolín, Buddhism is at the same time totally important and totally unimportant. The way I do it just depends on the student. For some students, I only teach them *gōngfū* routines. These routines will naturally lead them to Buddhist practice. Other students, I will teach Buddhist philosophy, too. For some students, I will use the strict way that I learned Shàolín, while others I teach with a much lighter hand. I think that flexibility is the most important because every student needs to learn in different ways. The end result is always the same. All of my students learn how to practise Shàolín and how to be a good Buddhist even if not all of them actually call themselves good Buddhists.

When asked how he decides the manner in which he teaches his individual students, Hényì explained:

I use my heart to teach Buddhism. I use my heart to see what my students need and what will feed their heart in this moment.

Imparting (practical) knowledge of Buddhism is important to Hényì. Yet, he is cautious about too vigorously pushing a Buddhist narrative onto his students. Instead, he strives to carefully accommodate the intensity of his Buddhist message, adjusting to individual needs and contexts. The Buddhist encounter of his students is split down the middle between those who initially

encountered Buddhism by themselves prior to joining the school, and those who encountered Buddhism fully through Hényì. The following sections explore these two groups.

5.2. Initial Buddhist Encounter Outside the School

This group made up the majority of the eighteen students, with twelve falling into this category. All but one of these students self-identified as Buddhist with the odd one out identifying as “an atheist who heavily incorporates Buddhism philosophy into my life” (Interview with Stefan on September 24, 2022). In contrast to the students who experienced their initial encounter with Buddhism at the school, these students experienced a very different Buddhist encounter that was encapsulated by Alexander, a man in his late twenties:

I study Buddhism by myself, so I don’t come to Chan Wu Chi to learn about Buddhism. I *do* come to learn movements that enhance my own Buddhist practice, but I totally don’t come to learn about, say, nirvana. What I find most important is that I can be in the presence of a true master. That’s pretty rare in Austria (Interview with Alexander on September 15, 2022).

It became quickly apparent that simply being in the presence of Hényì coupled with their learning of “movements that enhance” their Buddhist practice was at the very core of these students’ Buddhist encounter. When specifically asked about how she came into contact with Buddhism at the school, Katharina, a woman in her mid-twenties, stated:

When I learn Shaolin from Master [Hényì] I am totally encountering Buddhism. I can feel it. It’s a different way of meditating and getting step by step closer to enlightenment. It’s kind of like when you meditate. You can just feel it. Also just being with Master [Hényì] is a Buddhist encounter itself (Interview with Katharina on September 28, 2022).

When asked to elaborate on how she experienced Buddhism specifically through Hényì himself, she said:

Just being in the presence of a true Buddhist master is important to disciples of Buddhism. It’s not like Master Hényì sits down and is like “this is how to practise Buddhism” but by learning kung fu from him and even just by being with him, I’m able to see exactly what I’m aiming for. It’s like that one story when the Buddha visited this village who didn’t know what teacher to follow and he told them to look at the teacher themselves. Look at their actions. Look at who they are. If that’s what you want to be then that is the teacher you

should follow. It's the same for me. When I see the person Master Hényi is, it shapes my own Buddhist practice as I try to be more like him.

Luna, a woman in her late twenties, similarly stated:

What makes my master so incredible is simply because he embodies the principle “be a good person” which to me is the true essence of Buddhism and what I aspire to be in my own life (Interview with Luna on September 13, 2022).

Similarly, Mario, a man in his forties, asserted:

I have been a Buddhist for nearly twenty years so I don't think I have learned anything new about Buddhism here. Well, obviously except for how to practise Shàolín which *is* Buddhism, but I think you know what I'm getting at. I guess what's important for me is that this a place where I can go and *be* a Buddhist. I guess you could say that I encounter Buddhism just by going to the school and being with a true Buddhist master. When I step through the doors and enter the training hall, and I can see all of these Buddhist statues around me, I just get the feeling that this is where I am supposed to be. Just like when a Christian enters church and feels closer to God just by being there. It's the same thing, really. I feel closer to Buddhism when I come here (Interview with Mario on September 18, 2022).

This Christian analogy was actually used by five others. Olivia, a woman in her mid-thirties, for example, explained:

Before converting to Buddhism, I was a Christian. I would go to church to be with God and I would talk to my priest because he was someone I felt knew God very well. It's just the same with this school. I come here to feel closer to enlightenment. I learn from Master Hényi because I think that he is someone who has actually already achieved it (Interview with Olivia on September 26, 2022).

Julia, a woman in her late thirties, also expressed a similar view:

I encounter Buddhism every time I come to the school because I am surrounded by people like me and we all come to learn from a Buddhist master. I think “encounter” is a very interesting word because I have been encountering Buddhism since I was a teenager and it's been important to me for a long time. But now that I think about it, it was at this school, during my naming ceremony that I first properly *encountered* Buddhism. I started calling myself a Buddhist when I was sixteen but I became a Buddhist at this school (Interview with Julia on September 20, 2022).

Thus, one finds that those who experienced their initial encounter with Buddhism outside of the school feel as though they encounter Buddhism through simply being in the presence of a perceived Buddhist master (namely, Héngyì), learning specific movements that enhance their own Buddhist practice, and by being in a place that is dedicated (visually and reportedly) to Buddhism itself.

5.3. Initial Buddhist Encounter at the School

The remaining six interviewed practitioners fell within this category. Four self-identified as Buddhist and two stated to be agnostics who heavily incorporate Buddhist teachings in their lives. Similarly to the previous group, these students also reportedly encountered Buddhism in a spatial sense—namely, by simply being in a space wholly dedicated to the practice of Shàolín. The key difference lies in the fact that these students primarily encounter Buddhism at the school by learning about it. Samantha, a woman in her early twenties, stated:

This school was totally my first encounter with Buddhism. Before the school I had nothing to do with Buddhism. The school definitely shaped me here and I'm very thankful it did. Every time I visit, I feel like I get a tiny bit closer to being the perfect Buddhist follower (Interview with Samantha on July 27, 2022).

Similarly, Alan described his conversion process thus:

A couple of years ago, I had never even heard of the Noble Eightfold Path. Today, I try to follow it in absolutely everything that I do. I still remember when Master Héngyì first taught me about it. Everything just seemed to fall into place and I knew instantly that this is the path for me (Interview with Alan on September 27, 2022).

Thus, one finds that these students' encounter with Buddhism took the form of a more classic teacher-student relationship of actively attending school to learn about something.

Where the crossover lies between the two groups is the status of Héngyì as something of the ideal Buddhist role model that one should aspire to. Bianca, a woman in her early twenties, described this thus:

It was pretty instant. It's clear that the man has this deep and profound understanding of the world and I totally wanted to have that understanding too (Interview with Bianca on September 25, 2022).

Similarly, Anika stated:

For me, it's just the feeling of learning from a real, genuine living breathing monk. I mean, this man is basically a walking fountain of Buddhist wisdom and he lives in Vienna (Interview with Anika on September 12, 2022).

She further elaborated:

I had totally heard of Buddhism before. Everyone has. But meeting the Master just made things different for me. Not only did he introduce me to what Buddhism actually *is*—you know, an actual way of living your life without hurting others and more than just the mindfulness things you always hear about—he also made me *want* to learn from him. He made me want to *be* like him. Not in the way that I want to be a monk but in the way that I want to be a good Buddhist.

Even without, in his words, “forcing” Buddhism upon his students, Héngyì has, perhaps unwittingly, created a setting in Vienna in which students feel as though they are experiencing a genuine Buddhist encounter by simply being in his presence. These students were, for the most part, similar to those who had experienced their initial encounter with Buddhism outside of the school insofar as the majority of those who initially learned about Buddhism from Héngyì went on to conduct their own research. Alan, for example, although clearly initially encountering Buddhism from Héngyì, acquired most of his knowledge about Buddhism via his own private research. Although Héngyì remained the ideal Buddhist role model for him, he supplemented everything he learned at the school with his own reading:

After Master Héngyì taught me about Buddhism, I knew that I had to become a true student of the Buddha. I started to read stories about the Buddha himself and learn about everything that a Buddhist is supposed to do. The more I learned, the more I saw that Master Héngyì was basically living the perfect Buddhist life! He is like the perfect role model for me to apply everything I read to (Interview with Alan on September 27, 2022).

There were, however, exceptions to this. Some students reported experiencing their initial encounter with Buddhism via Chan Wu Chi and subsequently deciding that further research pertaining to Buddhism is not required, most notably Sabine, a woman in her late twenties. Since enrolling as a student at Shaolin Chan Wu Chi, she began to self-identify as Buddhist:

The Master is entirely the reason I am a Buddhist today. That's why I don't really see the point in going anywhere else to learn about Buddhism. Sure, I get why people do their own reading. I know a lot of students here do it. But

I just don't see the point. Christians who go to church every Sunday don't *need* to do their own research. I kind of feel like I am in the same boat. I come here to learn about Shàolín—the way I can live Buddhism—and I learn it from an expert. This is basically a Buddhist school. I mean, it even says Buddhism on the school's logo (Interview with Sabine on April 19, 2022).

Similarly, Anika spoke of the difference between desire and need:

I only read about Buddhism in my spare time because I want to. I don't think I need to. The Master says it's not necessary and he's the one I want to learn from. I know he teaches us everything we need to know about Buddhism (Interview with Anika on September 12, 2022).

Thus, one again finds something of an inadvertent Buddhist cult of personality built up around the figure of Héngyì. Although students were for the most part proactive in their learning about and engaging with Buddhism, the majority saw Héngyì as a Buddhist role model to be replicated and Shaolin Chan Wu Chi as a school in which one cultivates a Buddhist practice.

6. Concluding Remarks

Somewhat surprisingly, the vast majority of (young) adult Shàolín *gōngfū* practitioners at Shaolin Chan Wu Chi either self-identify as Buddhists or at least deliberately apply Buddhist principles and ideas in their daily life. The third cohort of practitioners who attend the school entirely for the purpose of fitness while largely ignoring the Buddhist context is chiefly limited to young adults and short-term members. Upon first sight, Shaolin Chan Wu Chi's religious colouration occupies middle ground. However, despite its outwardly religious restraint, Shaolin Chan Wu Chi very much constitutes a contact point and promoter of Chinese Buddhism. The exposure to a Buddhist life-world unfolds slowly but steadily—Shì Héngyì being the guarantor of this process. In line with the findings of Johanna Lüdde (2008: 37–38; 42) in her study of *Shaolin Tempel Deutschland* (Shaolin Temple Germany), the very presence of a perceived Shàolín master seems to open up a powerful experiential space enabling the spiritual growth of the practitioners. More often than not Shaolin Chan Wu Chi practitioners assigned to their master a genuine charismatic authority which would encourage them to naturally enter his personal Buddhist trajectory. They could partake of his sapiential aura within or outside the training. Their Buddhist encounter at Shaolin Chan Wu Chi is linked to Shì Héngyì. The master serves as the spiritual role model. Practi-

tioners especially appreciate his unpretentious adaptability in teaching Buddhism. Shì Hényì's Chán is deemed by them plain and unostentatious, regardless whether he performs Shàolín *gōngfū*, utters spiritual maxims, or more systematically teaches Buddhist core tenets. He offers a simple spiritual framework well malleable for practitioners to make their (religious) mindset fit and endow it with a sense of direction and coherence.

In Shàolín Buddhism one's body represents the spiritual canvas. Training practice instils tranquillity and balance, thus capacitating the practitioner to embrace Buddhist notions, that is, body work prepares the mind to appreciate the Chán idiom. Shàolín *gōngfū* is embodied Chán, which, subsequently, fleshes out experientially in self-reflexion that is informed by the master's religious charisma and the distinctive training environment—cherished by many also due to its communal spirit.

For most Shaolin Chan Wu Chi practitioners Shì Hényì acted either as a first mediator of a Chán philosophy of life or an amplifier of one's already existing Buddhist self-image. Shàolín Buddhism at Shaolin Chan Wu Chi is essentially not about systematic nor focused Chán instruction. Rather it employs a “learning by doing-cum-observing” approach invoking Chán nomenclature. Buddhism is served by Shì Hényì in an easily digestible fashion in which the experiential eclipses the doctrinal understanding, catering to a clientele that is inclined to use Chán as a prism to readjust and develop their spiritual self-conception. In contrast to Fógūāngshān and similar diaspora-centred Buddhist providers, Shàolín Buddhism offers a loose and saliently mouldable Chán *weltanschauung*.

Presently, an estimated up to 1,500 individuals practise Shàolín *gōngfū* across Austria with continuous fluctuation of practitioners. This figure is several times higher than that of the total membership of all Chinese ethnic Buddhist providers and is evidence for the important role of Shàolín Buddhism as contact point and broker of Chinese Buddhism in Austria and beyond.

List of Abbreviations

ÖBR	Österreichische Buddhistische Religionsgesellschaft (Austrian Buddhist Religious Society)
PRC	People's Republic of China
SEA	Shaolin Europe Association
SWMC	Shàolín Warrior Monk Corps
ZVR	Zentrales Vereinsregister (Associations Central Database)

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Glossary

Bátuó	跋陀
Hè Huáqiáng	贺华强
Kāng Shèng hé	康胜和
Liú Péng	刘鹏
Shì Guǒlín	释果林
Shì Héngxīn	释恒心
Shì Héngyì	释恒意
Shì Miàojiè	释妙戒
Shì Xíngzhèng	释行正
Shì Yánmíng	释延明
Shì Yánxiāo	释延萧
Shì Yǒngxìn	释永信
Shìjiāmóuní	释迦牟尼
Zhàozhōu Cóngshěn	赵州從諗
<i>Āmítuófó</i>	阿弥陀佛
Ānhuī	安徽
Cáodòng	曹洞
Chán	禅
Dēngfēng	登封
<i>dòngzuò chán</i>	动作禅
<i>fǎlún</i>	法轮
Fóguāngshān	佛光山
<i>gōng'àn</i>	公案
<i>gōngfū</i>	功夫
Hénán	河南
<i>kōan</i>	公案
Míng	明
Ōuzhōu Shàolín Liánhé Huì	欧洲少林联合会
<i>qìgōng</i>	气功
Qīng	清
<i>sànshǒu</i>	散手
Shàolín	少林
<i>Shàolín Chán Wǔjī</i>	少林禅武极
Shàolín Wénhuà Zhōngxīn	少林文化中心
Shàolín Wǔsēng Tuán	少林武僧团
Shàolín Wǔshù Duì	少林武术队
Shàolínsì	少林寺

Shǎoshìshān

少室山

Shì

释

shīgōng

師公

sìdì

四諦

Sōngshān

嵩山

Tàihú

太湖

tàijí

太极

Táng

唐

Tiāndìhuì

天地會

Wèi

魏

wǔshù

武术

wǔxiá

武俠

Xīncài

新蔡

Yuán

元

Zen

禪

zuò chán

坐禪