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Religion in Austria is peer-reviewed
Religion in Austria

Volume 7
Published with support from
the Research Center “Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society”

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Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.dnb.de

ISBN 978-3-7069-1187-0

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http://www.praesens.at
Vienna 2022
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Contents

Hans Gerald Hödl and Lukas K. Pokorny ix
Preface

Articles

Joseph Chadwin and Lukas K. Pokorny 3
“A Shared Passion and Love for the Light of the Buddha”: A History of Fóguāngshān in Austria

Lukas K. Pokorny and Martina Anissa Strommer 37
Buddhist Religious Education at Schools in Austria

Lukas K. Pokorny and Gabriella Voss 101
“Coming Home to Oneself through the Body”: The Holistic Dance Institute in Austria

Joseph Chadwin 139
Religiously Apathetic, Hybrid Christians, and Traditional Converts: An Ethnographic Study of How Chinese Immigrant Children in Vienna Engage with Christianity

Joseph Chadwin and Lukas K. Pokorny 179
Shàolín Buddhism in Austria: The Case of Shaolin Chan Wu Chi

Rocco Leuzzi and Dirk Schuster 209
The Popular Piety Display of the Lower Austria Museum’s Haus der Geschichte and Its Classification in Cultural Studies
**Sources**

*Lukas K. Pokorny with Hubert Weitensfelder* 233
“To Preserve the Teachings in their Original Simplicity and Purity”:
An Annotated Translation of the Correspondence between Anton Kropatsch and A. A. G. Bennett, 1955–1956

**Resources**

*Lukas K. Pokorny* 377
Religion in Austria: An Annotated Bibliography of 2021 Scholarship

*Lukas K. Pokorny* 469
Religion in Austria: Master’s and Doctoral Theses Submitted at Austrian Universities 2021

**Book Reviews**

*Lukas K. Pokorny* 495
Alois Musil. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf eine vielschichtige Persönlichkeit (Benedikt J. Collinet, Ludger Hiepel, Martina Veselá, and Michael Weigl)

*Lukas K. Pokorny* 509
Annotated Legal Documents on Islam in Europe: Austria (Richard Potz)

*Gabriella Voss* 515
Das Leben deuten. Eine praktisch-theologische Studie zu Freier Ritualbegleitung (Teresa Schweighofer)

*Hans Gerald Hödl* 521
Eva Holder
Die Evangelikale Bewegung in Österreich. Grundzüge ihrer historischen und theologischen Entwicklung (1945–1998) (Frank Hinkelmann) 527

Manfred Hutter
Die Geschichte der österreichischen Bahá’í-Gemeinde (Second Edition) (Alex A. Käfer) 537

Yuval Katz-Wilfing
Die vierte Gemeinde. Die Geschichte der Wiener Juden von 1945 bis heute (Evelyn Adunka) 555

Julian Strube
Doing mandir, doing kōvil. Eine empirische Rekonstruktion hinduistischer Tempelpraktiken in der Schweiz und in Österreich (Katharina Limacher) 561

Gabriella Voss
Islamistische Radikalisierung. Biografische Verläufe im Kontext der religiösen Sozialisation und des radikalen Milieus (Ednan Aslan, Evrim Erşan Akkılıç, and Maximilian Hämmerle) 567

Hans Gerald Hödl
Kirche, Religion und Politik in Österreich und in der Tschechoslowakei im 20. Jahrhundert (Miroslav Kunštát, Jaroslav Šebek, and Hildegard Schnoller) 577

Dominic Zoehrer
Mächtig–Männlich–Mysteriös. Geheimbünde in Österreich (Heiner Boberski, Peter Gnaiger, Martin Haidinger, Thomas Schaller, and Robert Weichinger) 591

Marta Domínguez Díaz
Muslim Women in Austria and Germany Doing and Undoing Gender: Making Gender Differences and Hierarchies Relevant or Irrelevant (Constanze Volkmann) 601
Hans Gerald Hödl
Postmoderne Freikirche in Österreich heute. Exemplarische wissenschaftliche Untersuchung (Hella Hagspiel-Keller)

Lukas K. Pokorny
Praxis für die Zukunft. Erfahrungen, Beispiele und Modelle kooperativen Religionsunterrichts (Mehmet Hilmi Tuna and Maria Juen)

Lukas K. Pokorny

Lukas K. Pokorny
Religion – die letzte Freiheit. Religionsausübung im Strafvollzug (Ursula Unterberger)

Franz Winter
Sondermodell Österreich? Die islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich (IGGiÖ) (Maja Sticker)

Lukas K. Pokorny
Unser Mittelalter! Die erste jüdische Gemeinde in Wien (Astrid Peterle, Adina Seeger, Domagoj Akrap, and Daniella Spera)

Robert Wurzrainer
Wenn Bildung mehr sein muss. Der Beitrag muslimischer Jugendorganisationen zur Bildungsarbeit (Kevser Muratovic)

Contributors
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—Fóguāngshān (Buddha’s Light Mountain). 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 Buddhismische 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 Hèngxīn). 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 Wǔjí; 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 Shàoshi (Shàoshíshān), that is, the western peaks of Mount Sōng (Sōngshān) in Dengfeng County, northern Hénán Province. The monastery was built in 495, during the Northern Wèi Dynasty (386–535).

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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. Shàolínsì’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 bodhisattva 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 monks were 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 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 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 (Tiāndìhuì), 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 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 wǔxiá (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 (internationally, The Shaolin Temple), a Hong Kong production sponsored by the PRC govern-
ment, shot at the original monastery, and starring the Chinese wūshù champion Jet Li (b. 1963). Shàolínshì 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 Wūshù Team (Shàolín Wūshù Duì)—it was under Shi Yongxin (b. 1965) that it became a globetrotting sensation, manned by both monks from the original monastery and befriended Shàolín gōngfū schools. Shi Yongxin took the reins of Shàolínshì when abbot Shi Xíngzhèng (1914–1987) passed away. The latter had been the first abbot formally recognised by the authorities since the seventeenth century. Although Shi Yongxin received his official inauguration as thirtieth abbot of Shàolínshì 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 Wūshù 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”), which is performed internationally by the SWMC to this day.

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

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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) Shi Yongxin personally inaugurated the Shaolin Europe Association (SEA; Ōuzhōu Shàolín Liánhé Hui) 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 Shàolínshì, 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 Shàolínshì, there exist numerous schools operated by independent Shàolín monks who received their training either directly at Shàolínshì 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 Shi 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:

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\(^5\) 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 Shi Héngyì 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 Héngyì had no means of actually learning gōngfū readily available to him. However, a turning point came a year later when his cousin visited Héngyì’s parents and told them that a gōngfū master was currently visiting a village close to their home. Héngyì 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 Héngyì 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, Héngyì was allowed to meet this master—Kāng Shènhé—who agreed to take on Héngyì as his student.

From the age of seven to fifteen, Héngyì 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 Shi Héngyì on July 28, 2022).

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

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\(^6\) It should be noted that Héngyì, 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 chāoji yīngxiōng 功夫超级英雄.
master. Shi Yánmíng had defected to the United States alongside a fellow monk, Shi 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 Shi Yánmíng is a strident critic of what he deems a ritually ossified tradition fostered in China. The same year his brother defected, Shi Yánxiāo opened his own Shàolín school in Xīncài which Héngyì also joined in 1995, reportedly constantly travelling between the two schools (Interview with Shi Héngyì 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 Shi 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 Shi Yánmíng’s USA Shaolin Temple.8

It was under Shi Yánxiāo that Héngyì 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 Shi Héngyì on July 28, 2022).

Having successfully achieved the rank of master (shīgōng), he moved to Vienna in November 2003 at the suggestion of Shi 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

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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, Héngyì 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 Shi Yǒngxin.
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 qǐgōng 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 Hass 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, Hass 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 Hénnán, 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 Shi Héngyì on July 28, 2022).

During his time in Vienna, Héngyì 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 Héngyì 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 Héngyì on July 28, 2022).

The conceptualisation of the dual religious/non-religious nature of Buddhism reflects Héngyì’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 Shi Héngyì 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 Shi Héngyì on January 10, 2023).

Héngyì’s “modern” approach can most readily be seen at the end of every single class during which Héngyì 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 Shi Héngyì on July 28, 2022).

This flexibility has even altered the specific gōngfū movements that Héngyì teaches. Following in the footsteps of Shì Yánmíng, Héngyì 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 Shi Héngyì on January 10, 2023).

However, unlike Shì Yánmíng who considers what he teaches to be “global” and not “Buddhist philosophy” (Jacobs 2019: 38), Héngyì 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 Shi Héngyì on July 28, 2022).
Thus, one finds that seated meditation is a crucial component of Héngyí’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 (Héngyí 2022a).

Offering a dedicated meditation session every Saturday as well as private instruction to several of his students, Héngyí 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 Shi Héngyí 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 (Héngyí 2022a).

Another important component of Héngyí’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 Shi Héngyí on July 28, 2022).
Although referring to life as a “depressant”—by which Héngyì 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 Héngyì 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, qīgōng, and sànshóu.9

Héngyì 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” Héngyì 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 (Héngyì 2022b).

By “gōngfū for the body” Héngyì simply means his own distinct practice of non-violent Shàolín gōngfū. Although many of the forms taught by Héngyì initially seem identical to the traditional Shàolín ones, Héngyì 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” Héngyì 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 Shi Héngyì on July 28, 2022).

Héngyì 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 Shi Héngyì on January 10, 2023).

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9 Sànshóu 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,” Héngyì’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. Héngyì 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 Héngyì assigned them their own Buddhist name in Mandarin. Héngyì 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 [Héngyì] 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 [Héngyì] 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 [Héngyi] 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 Héngyi, fully attributing their commitment to Buddhism to him.
4.2. Non-Buddhist Buddhist Practitioners

Héngyi 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 [Héngyi] 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 Shi 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 Héngyì 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 Héngyì, 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,” Héngyì 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 Shi Héngyì on July 28, 2022).

The fact that a sizable portion of his students self-identify as Buddhist is not immediately apparent and Héngyì’s lessons themselves often do not incorporate overt Buddhist terminology. However, upon further inspection it becomes clear that Héngyì 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 Héngyì 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 Héngyì 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 Héngyì playfully exclaimed: “No violence! Make the Buddha happy!” (Participant observation carried out on August 19, 2022).

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

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

> Master [Héngyì] often brings Buddhism into our regular training sessions. During the normal training sessions, he rarely lingers on it for long but he,
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, Héngyì 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, Héngyì 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 Héngyì 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, Héngyì 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 Héngyì. 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 Héngyì. 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 Héngyì 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 [Héngyì] 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 [Héngyì] is a Buddhist encounter itself (Interview with Katharina on September 28, 2022).

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

Just being in the presence of a true Buddhist master is important to disciples of Buddhism. It’s not like Master Héngyì 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 Héngyì 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 Héngyì 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 Héngyì’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 Héngyì 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 Héngyì 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 Fòguāngshān 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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Hè Huáqiáng 贺华强
Kāng Shènhé 康胜和
Liú Péng 刘鹏
Shì Guólín 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 Yǒngxin 释永信
Shìjìámóuní 释迦牟尼
Zháozhōu Cóngshěn 趙州從谂

Āmituófó 阿弥陀佛
Ānhuī 安徽
Cáodòng 曹洞
Chán 禅
Dēngfēng 登封
dòngzuò chán 动作禅
fǎlún 法轮
Fóguāngshān 佛光山
gōng ‘àn 公案
gōngfū 功夫
Hénán 河南
kōan 公案
Míng 明
Ōuzhōu Shàolín Liánhé Huì 欧洲少林联合会
qìgōng 气功
Qīng 清
sànshǒu 散手
Shàolín 少林
Shàolín Chán Wǔjí 少林禅武极
Shàolín Wénhuà Zhōngxīn 少林文化中心
Shàolín Wǔsēng Tuán 少林武僧团
Shàolín Wǔshù Dui 少林武术队
Shàolínsì 少林寺
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