

CULTURAL TOURISM

STEFANIA SKOWRON-MARKOWSKA

ORCID: 0000-0001-7356-3697

Institute of Classical, Mediterranean and Oriental Studies of the University of Wrocław, Wrocław (Poland)

e-mail: stefania.skowron-markowska@uni.wroc.pl

Experience of learning Chinese martial arts at Shaolin monastery by students coming from Europe

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Abstract

Background. Chinese martial arts and monasteries of fighting monks have become a permanent part of the traditional and cultural landscape of China. At present, Shaolin Monastery has become a specific laboratory where Chinese martial arts traditions confront international martial arts tourism.

Problem and aims. Through ethnographic research, the author tried to better understand the expectations of European martial arts practitioners coming to Shaolin Monastery in China for training and practice. The second important issue is practitioners' on-site experiences, so the author tried to investigate how expectations and experimentation meet in reality. The author also examined how important the role of the “living carriers” of the Shaolin martial arts tradition – the monks, who teach foreigners Chinese Gong Fu – is. Finally, the way in which trainees find themselves more deeply immersed in Chinese culture while undertaking the practice of martial arts was researched.

Methods. The author applied participant observation during her stay in Shaolin Monastery in July and August in 2019, practicing together with and interviewing two groups of foreigners from Europe, Polynesia and Taiwan. The theoretical perspective is based on the anthropology of martial arts.

Results. The author analyzed 10 personal stories from European students and used the findings to develop a model of foreigners seeking education in Shaolin monastery. This model includes such variables as motivation, the level of knowledge of Chinese culture, and previous experience in martial arts of people practicing in Shaolin.

Conclusions. Those who come to Shaolin Monastery for training purposes are increasingly well prepared for this challenge. Many of them know exactly what they want to achieve there, both in terms of spiritual development and training progress. However, there are also those who come to the monastery and ‘get carried away’ by this place. Both groups try to ‘absorb’ the atmosphere of this place and ‘to immerse’ in Chinese culture.

Introduction

Chinese martial arts and monasteries of fighting monks have become a permanent part of the traditional and cultural landscape of China. Today we can observe the golden revival period when many martial arts practitioners arrive at Shaolin Temple to immerse in the atmosphere of the ancient tradition of teaching martial arts. Visiting Shaolin Monastery is not only about the martial arts, but also Buddhism and practicing the Dhyana (Chan) philosophy in their martial arts. This practice has distinguished Shaolin Gong Fu from other types of Chinese Gong Fu. Shaolin Monastery, a conglomeration of Buddhism and Gong Fu, is commonly

recognized as a representative of Chinese culture’ [Hung Kam, Xiaotao Yang, Philipp Wassler, Dan Wan, Pearl Lin and Zhaoping Liu 2016: 145]. Today, Shaolin Monastery is a specific laboratory where old traditions are mixed with new trends. Shaolin Monastery is a high-status national heritage, as the development of Chinese martial arts has taken place there since ancient times. Today, the martial arts of China are protected by the state. The monastery acquired great fame after the movie called *Shaolin Temple* was released in 1982, which caused a wave of enthusiasts coming to the temple to learn Chinese martial arts. According to Lu Zhouxiang, the author of *A History of Shaolin: Buddhism, Gong Fu and Identity*—“It is safe to say a small number of foreign visitors traveled

to Shaolin in the mid-1980s and by the early 1992 more foreign tourists and students arrived' [Lu Zhouxiang, personal communication, 06/15/2020].

As a national heritage, martial arts in Shaolin have played an important role and served as a beacon of change. According to the theory of G. Ramshaw and S. Gammon, Chinese martial arts in the category of sport can be treated as heritage whereby the martial arts have broadened social, cultural and political implications [Ramshaw, Gammon 2016: 3]. Sports can be a heritage and are often used as an expression of culture, identity and nationalism. Martial arts, as the heritage of sport, are used for various contemporary purposes, including the commercialization of gong fu phenomena [Ramshaw, Gammon 2010: 248].

Still, many people come to Shaolin to touch and experience the philosophical aspects of martial arts. Martial arts practitioners from around the world come to China to take part in the daily training of monks, take pictures under the famous gates of the monastery, or even breathe in the air saturated with history and the charm of this place. There is also a large group of individual martial arts tourists who come to the temple to achieve their training goals and develop spiritually through meditation. They want to belong to the unique, even legendary culture of fighting monks for at least a moment because 'All martial arts under heaven arose out of Shaolin Monastery' [Hung Kam *et al.* 2016: 145]. This narrative suggests that the source of all martial arts is Shaolin Monastery. The monastery itself is advertised in a such or similar way on its official website: 'Shaolin Kungfu is a huge and well-developed technical system as opposed to the many schools or 'Quan styles' of other martial arts. According to historical records, Shaolin Kungfu is the one school among a myriad of Chinese martial arts schools which boasts a long history, a complete system and the highest level of skills (shaolin.org.cn/kungfu/overview, accessed from 27.05.2020). This suggests that many people are lured to go to Shaolin by the promise of the elitism of a place that wants to be considered the cradle of all martial arts. This is contradicted by historical facts, but the strength of the legend is vital.

It is not only tourism for the purpose of entertainment, but also self-realization tourism [Cynarski, Swider 2017: 24], being part of the physical culture where the predominant purpose is self-realization and education [Cynarski 2017: 31]. Participation in physical culture is an integral but specific part of participation in culture generally, and physical culture is a social phenomenon that shapes, fulfills and develops human needs: the biological ones, the psychological ones and the social ones. The present study focuses on the latter two needs. Psychological needs refer to any psychical activity that may be a means of shaping or expressing the personality. The social needs indicate that physical culture is a channel for socialization and enculturation, a factor for group

integration [Cynarski 2012: 136]. Modern martial arts warriors traveling to the Shaolin Monastery fit well with the pilgrims' motif. The phenomenon of the martial arts pilgrimage is now common and noticeable especially in a place such as Shaolin Monastery. *American Shaolin* by Matthew Polly is the best-known book that resulted from this kind of trip. It is also worth mentioning the article of Cynarski and Swider [2017] and their insights during the trip to Shaolin and the paper by Lauren Miller Griffith who described an interesting event that deviates from the routine visit to Shaolin Temple [Griffith 2017]. The situation described by Griffith shows that the hero in her paper was an expert in martial arts who with his skills surprised the masters from the temple. The masters then invited him to train in a monastery which was for the foreigner the greatest form of appreciating his skills. However, the hero could not stay in the temple for long and declined the offer [Griffith 2017: 1-4]. This article indicates the existence of another group of trainers at Shaolin Monastery. They are people who have received the invitation of the monastery or who have concluded individual agreements with the abbot. These trainers undertake many years of training in Shaolin in exchange for permission to open schools under the affiliation of Shaolin Monastery. They often take the religious name and protection of the temple. The present study does not analyze such cases because the author focuses on individual tourism and martial arts 'pilgrims'. The term *pilgrim* is used for anyone who uses travel in an identity-building project. As part of the apprenticeship, the pilgrim travels to the place, where he and his community are saturated with holiness because it is the place of birth, the most known or remarkable center of practice [Griffith 2013: 229]. Griffith combines the concept of apprenticeship pilgrimage which she believes is a conceptual bridge between secular pilgrimage studies and sports tourism. According to Griffith, an apprenticeship pilgrimage includes the feeling that a pilgrimage to the traditional center of the social field is compulsory for those wishing to develop clearly (i.e. title) or greater respect in the eyes of practitioners [Griffith 2013: 229]. Chinese martial arts practitioners also feel obliged to visit Shaolin Temple. The practice of martial arts and Buddhism in Shaolin automatically ennobles members of the training community in their home country: "The compulsion to visit the source of the art one practices is common, especially among Westerners practicing arts associated with non-Western cultural tradition" [Griffith 2017: 1].

Aims and Methodology

Using the ethnographic methodology, I was trying to better understand the expectations of European martial arts practitioners coming to Shaolin Monastery for training and practice. Also, the mismatch between practitioners' expectations and the actual on-site experience

Tab.1. Statistics of a research group.

Respondents	Region	Country	Sex	Age > 25 years	Training > 3 years	Research group	
2 groups 10 persons each (the author was the 20th person)	Europe - 10	Italy - 4	3x M	1x YES	YES	YES	
				2x NO	YES		
			1x F	YES	NO		
				NO	YES		
		Germany - 2	2x M	NO	YES		
				YES	NO		
			Sweden - 1	1x F	YES		NO
				Denmark - 1	1x M		NO
			France - 1	1x M	NO		NO
			Poland - 1	1x M	YES		YES
Asia - 9	-	8x M 1x F	2 children 8 adults	-	NO		

was examined. The trainers who come to Shaolin have their expectations and vision of the monastery, which is often a product of a mix of general knowledge and accounts of those who visited this place. The legend of the monastery also plays a big role in their vision. Also important for research is the way in which trainers find themselves more deeply immersed in Chinese culture while undertaking the practice of martial arts.

The research used the qualitative methods approach as the most appropriate to the analysis of the individual experience of people training in the monastery. This perspective allowed to take a closer look at the phenomenon of ‘martial arts pilgrimage’ of individual practitioners. The concepts of carnal sociology were also helpful in understanding and describing the phenomenon of training Chinese martial arts in the indigenous cultural context, which is Shaolin Monastery because ‘carnal sociology is concerned with the active role of the body in social life’ [Spencer 2013: 172].

The author is a Chinese and Japanese martial arts instructor. She prepared for research during her stay at Shaolin Monastery in 2007, 2012 and 2017, respectively, during which she observed groups of foreigners training at the monastery. Also, the author observed the African classes which included nationals from Nigeria, Togo, Congo, Ivory Coast, Chad, Gabon, Rwanda, and Cameroon [http://www.shaolin.org.cn/templates/, accessed from 15.06.2020]. The story of ‘African Class’ was mentioned and described by Lu Zhouxiang [2019, i.e. location: 6542, 6548, 6901, 6938, 6820, 6823]. In 2015, she also conducted research among *muay thai* practitioners in Bangkok and Surin Province, Thailand. One of the main tools was the author’s stay and training at Shaolin Monastery in August and September 2019. During her stay, the author took part in training for foreign students from Asia (but not Chinese and Taiwanese), Europe, the United States and Polynesia. The trainings were organized for individual martial arts tourists who were the main subject of the research. The author was particularly interested in the motiva-

tions and expectations of individuals who undertook ‘their own journey’ with knowledge and training. Their thoughts, expectations and feelings related to the active practice of martial arts at Shaolin Monastery will be presented in the RESULTS section.

Individual tourists are not the only beneficiaries of teaching in the monastery. It is necessary to mention organized group trips (e.g. a group of 30 from the Canary Islands, from the branch of Shaolin Monastery), and multi-day trips to Shaolin for parents with children (learning Tai Chi and Gong Fu individually or in a group). There are also people who come cyclically, such as parents bringing children during the holidays for training in Shaolin on a half-day basis. The children are the primary students, parents are just for company and they do not practise. There is always an option to hire a Gong Fu/Tai Chi/Qigong master for hours, so one can enroll in such classes at any time. Of course, people who only want to see the legendary place come to the monastery, but do not want to train here. They are leisure-oriented visitors [Hung Kam *et al.* 2016: 145]. Organized groups were not included in the research, but in the future, it is also worth investigating this topic because it is definitely a more commercialized offer addressed to specific recipients. At Shaolin, the aspect of the commodification of certain monastery services becomes very visible, and on a large scale, it can even be harmful. Commodification is typically defined as tourism that transforms a culture of heritage into a commercialized product, which is packed and sold to tourists for their consumption. Similarly, commercialization involves rendering tourists sites available for profitable purposes. As Gammon mentioned, the commercialization of the past has become an accepted practice of the tourism industry [Gammon 2002: 63]. Both concepts are believed to diminish authenticity and ultimately reduce the value of a tourism product [Hung Kam *et al.* 2016: 147]. This does not mean that the offer addressed to individual tourists is less commercial. In the case of group trips, due to the often busy schedule of the trip, it is easier to fall into a routine tour of places

chosen for tourists, which significantly affects the feelings and experiences of visitors. An individual tourist has more time management options and thus can design his own journey or stay.

Circumstances of interviews

Most of the interviews were conducted in Denfeng, a city 11 km away from the monastery, where hotels and supply facilities are available for practitioners. Because the trainees could not stay at the monastery: only monks can stay there overnight. The monastery's office accommodated them in hotels in Denfeng. Students went daily to classes by bus sent by the office. In Denfeng many stores selling weapons, outfits of all Gong Fu, kickboxing, San Da, and other martial arts equipment are found. Foreign participants can buy the monks' outfits from the stores to wear during the practice sessions in Shaolin and they do it willingly. Sometimes they wear training clothes brought from home, but usually, they prefer to do some clothes' shopping. Shops or mobile stands that sell the famous footwear brand, Feiyue, for training are located mainly around martial arts schools. At large schools, the training venues stretch almost entire streets, providing equipment and outfits for those who enroll in these schools. It is worth mentioning that the prices of equipment and outfits for Gong Fu in Denfeng are incomparably lower than those of the same products at Shaolin, which is why the trainees are happy to buy the necessary products there.

Some interviews were conducted in the monastery during the training breaks. The set of questions prepared for the interview consisted of three main areas. The first of these concerned the very place they visited, Shaolin Temple. The most important aspect of this part was obtaining information on the individual understanding of this place by visitors, determining the purpose of coming to the temple. Respondents were asked about the expectations of the temple (including training), their ideas of this place, which they created based on the sources available to them, such as literature, the Internet and movies. This fragment of the interview was intended to set the conversation in order to describe a specific vision of the place where they planned to travel. This served in the final part of the interview to confront the expected image with the existing reality. The second part concerned training and monastic life. Here, the focus was mainly on questions about the organization and conduct of training, the day plan, and training challenges of a physical and mental nature. Questions about Chinese martial arts teachers were particularly important. The perception of Chinese teachers by European students and the training methods they used were examined. They were also asked to compare martial arts training in their respective countries with training in Shaolin.

A standard interview with one person lasted one hour to one hour and thirty minutes. Interviews were conducted in English. Respondents' opinions are quoted literally, without grammatical corrections introduced by the author of manuscript.

Results

Motivation and sources of inspiration

One of the key issues is motivation and the reason why martial arts practitioners decided to come to the monastery. One of the respondents decided to come alone because he could not participate in a group trip organized by his martial arts teacher. Encouraged by those who were on this trip, he came alone, combining a trip to the monastery and learning martial arts with plans for sinology studies at Beijing University. For all the participants it was very important to capture something more than just classes in Gong Fu - the special atmosphere of the place. One respondent replied that '(...) he was wondering to come here and train with the masters and breathe the air of the temple Buddhism, because for doing the martial arts that is called Shaolin Gong Fu, and then visiting Shaolin 20 years after that's going to be a waste of time so I have to be there'. Thus, he pointed out that visiting Shaolin Temple when you are a student of styles derived from this place is something obvious. Other responses also appear to have a similar tone. A Danish respondent referred to the legend of the monastery here, which means that this place continues to become a magnet for those who seek values anchored in the traditional teaching message:

'I think that one of the reasons is that when you speak Gong Fu, you cannot speak about nothing higher than Shaolin Temple. It's the Place, it used to be and even now as well. The schools there round the cities they want to train at the temple because it is the best. I don't think that you can get anywhere where the Gong Fu is better'.

The Italian martial arts student had a similar opinion. She drew attention to the fact that staying in a monastery is an important event in the life of a person training martial arts, but martial arts itself can be learned in your country without the need to travel thousands of miles. For her, traveling and training at Shaolin is part of the important process of learning martial arts, as it is a journey in itself, inside yourself. It is a science in a broader aspect, opening people to a new way of perceiving themselves through contact with a new situation, including training: '(...) also the fact that everybody there is beyond my skills, so even the kids 6 years old can clearly beat me in any aspects, teach you humility and also give perspective they are making time for you so you have to give the best effort you can put, not even remotely good,

that's your best form, does it? Because when you go to school in Europe anyone expects you to be at the level, and they can push you but the approach is different. (...) It's a life lesson.

The expectation of demanding training and achieving the assumed training goals at Shaolin Temple are also visible in the following fragment of the interview with an Italian respondent:

'So, the first time when I heard about Shaolin was when I saw a documentary on YouTube. It was a very interesting documentary. Shaolin monks were training all day, and that was really important thing, because I was really into train, I wanted to do something like real strong stuffs, tiring staff, and all day train in full immersion, and all kind of drill that makes stronger, like, you know, Iron Fist, climbing up to the mountain, and doing forms that makes you faster, becoming stronger these were my objective, so I said Shaolin Temple is where I want to go because there are the best masters and where I can find a real training I want to do so I came here.'

Respondents attached great importance to spiritual practices that they believe should accompany martial arts. Almost everyone indicated their willingness to participate in Qigong practices, meditation or prayer meetings. Unfortunately, as it turned out, despite the assurances of the monastery office that such meetings would be available to groups of individual practitioners, there were far fewer than promised and were available only to men. Women from groups of individual tourists were not allowed to participate in meditation in the temple. This aroused the opposition of both women and men in the research group. However, they understood that the principles of the temple must be respected.

The training aspect is of course one of the most important for martial arts practitioners. The monks that I call 'living carriers' of the martial arts teaching tradition, were also particularly important. Respondents pointed out that being in a temple they would be able to observe monks in their daily lives. So one can speak about the 'living carriers' in the 'natural environment', which is the temple reality. In the study group, only one respondent admitted that the purpose of her stay was Buddhist studies and the associated Qigong practice. Martial arts practice was an additional option for her. She came to Shaolin monastery expecting mainly spiritual development and development opportunities in Buddhist teachings and meditation. 'Authenticity is a concept more in the mind of a Western social theorist than in the mind of most tourists or natives' [Bruner 1991: 240]. The search for the element of 'authenticity' at Shaolin Monastery in Gong Fu and its message is emphasized by all respondents. Many of them tasted it while learning Gong Fu from their Chi-

nese teachers, but this only strengthened their desire to come to the monastery itself. For them, Shaolin's authenticity was the combat system associated with the entire cultural context. It is not only the martial art forms but without "the rest" – monks, language, Chinese culture, Shaolin Temple, Chinese language they are just the "exercises". 'Authenticity' was a kind of feeling for them: the Chinese masters teaching outside China was the first step, but visiting the temple was a priority. For most, Shaolin's original 'authenticity' was primarily associated with the isolation of the temple and monastery from the rest of the world. By 'authenticity' they also understood the traditional transmission of martial arts by monks, who are the natural successors of Shaolin legend. They knew that the traditional continuity of the gong fu transmission was interrupted in the 20th century but they believed that this is part of the temple's history that had to be accepted. The respondents were aware that they themselves were creating this commercial sphere of 'authenticity' by 'buying' learning opportunities in this place. They knew that they were 'customers' of a monastery, which for a fee they were sold a sense of 'authenticity' of art from Shaolin Temple. They were fully aware of the ironic situation that they came for their dream vision of the temple and martial arts, while the temple sold their vision of 'authentic' Gong Fu. These 'authentic Shaolin Gong Fu' are also the result of observing and studying the expectations of tourists who come here from all over the world to train. So it can be assumed that the expectations and visions of both sides meet somewhere in the middle. The monastery 'shares' its knowledge, and martial arts practitioners 'buy' its authenticity while accepting the large 'conventionality' of authenticity that is given to them.

Respondents built the vision of the monastery, the monks and the martial arts teaching based on various sources. The basic ones were accounts of other people who had already visited the monastery e.g. during group trips in previous years and shared their experiences and impressions with other trainees. This recommendation was important for 5 respondents. Respondents (4 from Italy and 1 from Sweden) as their main source of knowledge about the monastery gave their teachers who are either monks from Shaolin monastery and Chinese *Gong Fu / Wushu* teachers. Thus, the role of direct communication between learners and teachers who were or are his friars in the monastery is noticeably large. Various stories believed to be classically related to Shaolin (the story of Bodhidharma and his many years of meditation in a cave, legends about monks about the origin of individual *taolu* forms) or historical events told by Chinese teachers were (defense of Shanghai against Japanese pirates in 1553; burning monastery in 1928) considered the most encouraging and inspiring to visit the monastery by students. In second place among sources of knowledge about the legendary temple and its inhabitants are

historical materials (6 respondents), books (3 respondents), information found on the Internet and Wikipedia (8 respondents), and documentaries and short videos on YouTube channel posted by other trainers and Shaolin Temple itself (6 respondents). It is interesting for the author that the book of Meir Shahar, *Shaolin Monastery* that was published in 2008, was not mentioned. One of the people confessed that she did not gain knowledge about the monastery and the surrounding areas in a typical way of reading and searching for the information she seemed to rely on the instinct of spontaneous discovery:

‘For me it’s important to know how the people live, what they do, how is the monastery, how is the sanggha, how they live there, how they prey there, how they make their life there. But I don’t think like reading books. So I watch, I look around, I can discover by myself. So thanks to it I learn a lot of things. It’s nice to use, I need it to use, so it’s good experience’.

Therefore, the key to this person was the experience without the influence of other sources of information, discovering and experiencing undisturbed by the interpretation and point of view of other people. This was related to the intensive Buddhist practice of the respondent.

‘I’m here to train.’ Training in the temple

For practicing Chinese martial arts, the training aspect is undoubtedly very important. It is also one of the basic reasons why many people take the trouble to reach Shaolin Temple and begin training there. Some come to Shaolin with a specific purpose to learn a specific form with a weapon, Qigong training, or just for “training in a temple”. Due to the fact that the monks who teach foreigners very often specialize in a particular style or type of weapon, therefore, finding a teacher who ‘meets the expectations’ of a student can be difficult sometimes. Among the foreigners who have visited the monastery several times before, the common belief is that it is good to know what we want to learn in the temple. So if a person wants to know the form of a spear, for example, they should tell the Chinese teacher. Of course, not everyone will be immediately admitted to such training. The teacher will first check if the person has the basics learned which are necessary for training a given style, form or weapon. If a learner does not pass this basic qualification, the master will decide what he or she should learn in the time planned for self-practice during morning and afternoon training. This approach of Chinese teachers allows ‘sorting’ students during classes whenever possible. It also allows to save time for each student during classes. It is worth mentioning that all respondents clearly expressed their opinion about starting training from basics in the monastery on individual trips. Everyone agreed that this is a waste of time and money and, above all, a source of

frustration for the beginner himself. Acclimatization to new conditions and lack of good fitness preparation makes it difficult to keep up with more advanced students. Embarrassment and excitement by the fact that they are in a legendary place of martial arts often causes the beginners not to be able to correctly assess their abilities; as they try too hard. This often causes injury, which can definitely end their training¹.

Shaolin Monastery gathers lovers and practitioners of various *Gong Fu* styles, not just those considered pure ‘Shaolin’, but also modern forms, like *Wushu*. Hence, sometimes a large discrepancy in basic forms (*taolu*), and various types of “routines” is found. This fact was noticed and commented on by 5 respondents. One of them noticed, however, that this is really not surprising, because the transmission of these forms may change e.g. due to geographical distances. Hence, there may appear variations of techniques or forms, but as long as the idea and goal of “routine” / *taolu* is maintained, it is still the same form. All respondents agreed that students’ involvement in practice is the key. The lack of commitment when coming to the monastery, or sometimes bordering on total dedication, is a very serious mistake, according to the respondents. The ‘European’ attitude, understood by respondents as the expectation of teaching from a master without students’ involvement, is wrong. ‘I pay, so I demand’ approach is pointless. A similar situation was described in the text about capoeira, where a student’s lack of involvement in the education for which he paid the teacher is very badly seen by the masters and teacher [Griffith 2013: 230]. The following fragment of the statement of one of the respondents the author decided to include in the article, despite the fact that the respondent did not come from Europe, but from Tahiti. Due to his three years training at Shaolin Monastery his experience can serve as a reference for further analysis:

¹ The author during her stay in Shaolin observed two such cases, when two adult men, one with visible overweight, came to the monastery to start training. The overweight man planned to stay in the monastery for a month. Both men left after a few days because they did not meet the basic training requirements. The second important reason is demanding training. While younger people (at student age), who are in good physical condition are able to cope with it, overweight people or older people who have no previous preparation, are simply unable to cope with training requirements and give up. The beginners more often decide to come in organized groups as members of a martial arts school, or buy individual lessons with a Chinese teacher. Only after such conditioning preparation they return the next season to train in more advanced groups. There are also adults who treat training at Shaolin as part of the diet reduction process. They hope that through intensive training they will be able to lose weight. However, they quickly give up because of too much intensity of training.

'There is difference outside China, I mean western country, the student needs the teacher to give. Give knowledge. As a student, You know, you feel, that this master is good, because he gives me a lot, so he is good. Here is different. The student has to give to the master. The student has to show that he is able to train hard, to listen any kind of small things the master says. Not waiting to tell him, do this, do that ... Here the master says one time. If you do, it's good, he will teach You more. If You don't do, he will not care about You. He will wait for you to realize that day he says You have to do your form one hundred times, then he comes to check. He can see that you didn't do. So he doesn't teach you if you don't work. You have to be worthy to teach you.'

The first three months [of training of hard *qigong* in Shaolin, authors note] I had a big problem to understand, because master was never here, I was feeling like abandoned, you know, just go here and train. I asked him: Yeah, but do what? He said: Do this. Ok, I did it. Now what? Do this. Continue. Yeah, I do that every day so... I was feeling that all this guys just want my money. But one day I was talking with someone who came, he was experienced in Gong Fu. And I started tell him what I'm doing here, complain to him, I do this, and that. And he said: My friend, You don't realize what You are doing. This is really hard qigong, he told me what was this exercise, it's real Shaolin! And I started realize. If nobody explain You, how it works, You will not like it. We have trouble, it's a cultural difference.'

The specific approach of Chinese teachers and the training formula for individual trainees make the participants of these classes divided into two groups. The older age group (participants over 25 years of age) accepted any form of training, even if it was basic exercises, routines, or independent stretching, using them to the maximum. Like the Polynesian respondent, they recognized this form as a pre-test before each major part of the training, during which the teacher estimated the participants' involvement in the training. A group of younger trainees (under 25 years old, mainly men) thought that trainings are not difficult. When they committed themselves to the trainings, they expected more difficulties, a greater load of discipline in the training:

'(...) And talking about the training, there is complete not, yhhh, no discipline. I thought that discipline is the first thing in a training, in any training in any sport. And here, a Shaolin monk, and as a master, and not demonstrating discipline in a training, means you are not even respecting him and his experience.'

Three Italian respondents pointed out that training in the martial arts schools in which they studied were often more demanding in their own country. Both groups, however, were aware that they were really assessed by teachers during these introductory exercises

in the main training. One Italian respondent expressed an interesting doubt pointing out the commercial and financial aspects:

'(...) Sometimes it's like being on vacation. I think that in my opinion they do not press too much on this site, because we are foreigners, so they do not want to create problems, maybe problems with wages, and make our stay here more convenient, and not ruin the vacation for foreigners. But that means we shouldn't be tourists, we should be students. The master should be the master.'

The view that foreigners came for short-term (up to three months) training is specially treated by Chinese teachers and was known to everyone with whom the author spoke. Indeed, teaching foreigners comes down to contactless, not sparring, and thus theoretically less traumatic forms. Trainings are held twice a day for 2 hours, which is also not very exhausting. 4 hours of training is the standard time for the training of foreigners. Monks usually practice for around 6 hours, including morning run to Buddha's Cave and self-training. For many foreigners, this is a significant increase in the routine training. Most of them usually train 2-3 times a week for 1.5-2 hours. Therefore, at the beginning it is tiring for them. In addition, the high temperature in summer (when I was researching and training) causes fatigue faster. Sometimes, on particularly hot days, students train in the monastery's chambers. It is an additional attraction for them. It also happens that some foreign students feel unsatisfied with training and fill the time between classes with their own training. A total of 5 people did this during my stay.

Chinese masters do not teach short-term students the more dangerous elements of *ging fu*, including the so-called hard Qigong which requires very rigorous body and mind training. They avoid teaching foreigners about things and techniques that may result in an injury or permanent injury. Hence, the forms of *Taolu* are most popular because they can be safely taught. They fear that this may have a negative impact on the number of people coming here.

According to respondents, fear of training tourists is also noticeable. One should not forget that the monastery also depends on tourism financially. A similar situation was described by Matthew Polly in *American Shaolin*, where he noticed that special relation between foreigners (*laowai*) and the Chinese masters:

'After thirty minutes of working on basics movements, Cheng Hao (Chinese Gong Fu master) started to teach me Shaolin's beginners Form, *Xiao Hong Quan* – Small Red Boxing. Most of Shaolin's beginning Chinese students study the basic movements for six months, before moving to forms. But, Cheng Hao explained, the monks speed the process up for us *laowai* who have less

time, less patience for basics, and a greater need for external markers of our accomplishments. The monks knew that even before we were good at one form, we wanted to start learning the next. They had studied us closely' [Polly 2007: 82].

Since most of the students come here for a limited time, it is obvious that they want to learn as many interesting new things as possible. Chinese teachers are aware of this. They know that long-term training of the basics is too monotonous for foreigners and they do not have time for it. They repeatedly explained to me that Western students are not Chinese, "they would not be able to" train like them. Sometimes they pointed to the lack of patience or simply the mentioned lack of time for foreigners to undergo traditional training. However, it is possible if you come for a longer period of several years. The trainers themselves realize it. But they want to get the most out of teaching in Shaolin. They believe that by coming here they already have certain basics thanks to which they will be able to learn new things. Also 'less time, less patience' and usually more advanced age of foreign practitioners direct the behavior of monks who want to quickly teach something to their short-term apprentices. The concept of 'pay to pray' [Hung Kam *et al.* 2016: 146] described by the Kam Hung team can therefore be extended to 'pay to pray and train'.

'Living carriers': Chinese teachers

Chinese masters were highly rated; mere contact with them, the opportunity to talk (often limited to basic topics, due to the basic knowledge of English among monks, and lack of knowledge of Chinese among trainees. In the author's group, two people spoke Chinese with teachers), and observing them during demonstration techniques was very important for trainees. Often trainees pointed out that even without knowing Chinese, they are able to benefit a lot from such learning by observing and imitating the teacher:

'Actually, Chinese teachers are all competent, and they have huge amount of experience, and they really can do demonstrate movements, so they know a lot, and you can see that, You can see the way they explain the exercise. They know, how to treat you when You are a kid and when You are an adult, they know very well how to with everything so I really appreciate them. But first, we are foreigners, so they keep distance, but not in a bad way, just because they don't want to go to much, they don't want to make a mistake, you know, kind of pushing too hard and someone is going to say: Chinese teachers are pushing too hard, I don't know why'.

Respondents pointed out that Chinese teachers did not say much. Unlike European instructors who attach great importance to detailed explanations of the princi-

ples of performing exercises, Chinese teachers in groups of individual tourists are mainly limited to showing exercises or parts of the sequence. There are several reasons for this. In groups of individual tourists very often the majority of trainers are people with a certain training experience whose coordination and ability to remember slightly more complicated combinations are simply bigger. It is also often the case that in the 'Chinese style' the teacher corrects beginners who join the group, leaving it to more experienced students, both Chinese and non-Chinese. The limited language skills of teachers and participants are sometimes another matter. Both sides are aware of this. One of the trainers summarized these limitations as follows:

'(...) The language: I think they could give us and express so much more, if we only knew Chinese properly. We all Yeah, like sometimes he teaches You something, but You see that he could give you hundred times more, if you only could speak to him. We could better understand each other'.

Among foreign learners, there are few people who speak Chinese well. During the study, in each group of foreigners training in Shaolin there was at least one person speaking fluently Chinese who served as a translator for the rest. Also students from Taiwan or Malaysia, for example, were happy to help in translating. Often the translator was also a technically advanced person in training, which shows that sports passion increasingly goes hand in hand with the desire to deepen the knowledge of Chinese culture by studying the language. Chinese speakers' knowledge of foreign languages is usually modest. For Chinese teachers who go abroad to the branch of Shaolin monasteries, knowledge of English or German is often sufficient to conduct training, point out mistakes or make corrections. Sometimes they use a mix of languages (German, Chinese, or English) while conducting classes.

Another, perhaps the most important issue is the traditional Chinese way of training, which the respondents pointed out. They emphasized that in Chinese culture, the student must first and foremost trust the teacher. This involves imitating the master, sometimes from an uncritical point of view. The student should not push for knowledge intrusively. It is the teacher who knows how much he should convey to the student at a given moment, whether the student is able to do it physically, or he/she should wait. As one of the respondents rightly pointed out, Chinese teachers pay attention to the elements that the trainees should improve and do not use praise or motivation for exercises in the Western sense. But Chinese teachers emphasize their function in which they occupy a higher place than the students during training such as sitting on a chair on a raised platform or on a rock if the classes are in the field.

Sometimes classes are run by older Chinese students who do not have the official status of a master yet, but a substitute for an absent teacher who had to leave for a few days to Shaolin branch or seminars overseas (e.g., in Europe). According to the respondents, the trainings then lose quality because students are often left alone if they do not know their *taolu*. It is also visible that there is a lack of some teaching program, obligatory for all teachers, which would help in such situations. Most often, the practitioners manage by learning from each other and apply only for basic corrections. It may also happen that due to the multitude of *taolu* taught, the substitute teacher does not know the *taolu* taught by the principal teacher. Then the student either learns from other students or has to start learning a new sequence in order not to waste time.

Monastery - meals with monks

Shaolin students can eat together with the monks in a canteen connected to the kitchen in the same place as the object originally built there during the Tang Dynasty. For all respondents, this is an important element of monastery training. Preparation for a meal has the features of a ritual. Foreign students share the rules of the meal with new groups of foreigners. It is also a kind of introduction to training life a form of *rite of passage* and inclusion in the community of trainers in the monastery. As Spencer indicates, this form of meal also serves to neutralize tensions that arise over the course, usually of sparring and clinch work [Spencer 2013: 181]. The ‘new’ students observe and imitate the ‘experienced’ students. Immediately after entering the pavilion with a dining room and passing through the vestibule, they put down their training weapons in a separate place. Foreign students take seats at the very end of the room on the left in the last or penultimate row of benches, having provided themselves with bowls and chopsticks in the cupboards on the sides of the dining room. The monks themselves arrive around 11 am [morning training usually ends just before 11 am]. Everyone waits for the oldest of them and for the abbot. Sometimes he appears and occupies a central place on the platform. When everyone takes their seats (and sometimes there are also children’s camps, special guests, beggars, etc.), the older monks begin the sung prayer. This is a signal that younger monks who wait on the left side of the dining room are starting to distribute meals from large containers. There is silence during the monks’ praying, so students need to signal with their hand whether they want the dish. It is not proper to take more than you can eat so that it does not go to waste. Of course, vegetarian cuisine applies. Dishes are mainly vegetables prepared in various ways – stewed and cooked. The dishes are simple but nutritious. After eating, students and monks go outside the dining room where there are long sinks with taps, where they should wash their bowls and chopsticks. It should be done care-

fully because when we take the bowl and it turns out dirty, it shows badly its previous user.

Joint meals with monks are also an important background for the further implementation process of training newcomers to the community. During the meals, after the prayers, various discussions and storytelling take place. It is often the only time when trainers from various groups (also organized) can meet and share their impressions. There are often stories based on the memories of other practitioners, which serve as an example of various situations and of an intercultural nature. Fairley and Gammon [Fairley, Gammon 2005: 192] called it ‘nostalgic memories’ and noticed the integral role of them in the ongoing socialization. According to the authors, participants of a trip/expedition discuss some memories together, and share stories with each other and also with new participants. ‘So they can start replacing past trips as a substitute and at the end of the journey, new arrivals can vividly tell stories from previous journeys they were not on, and often use these stories as a basis to compare the journey they had. Telling stories and folklore from previous travels serves not only to socialize new arrivals, but also strengthens nostalgic memories in the heads of group members who tell these stories to other existing group members.’ Such stories additionally serve to develop a belief in belonging to a certain group, take over and accept its history as part of their own training process. Most people who train with monks take it very seriously. It is for them the opportunity to commune with the living culture of the order, but also to share everyday life with the monks of the legendary place. There are few cases of frivolous behavior but group pressure is strong.

Conclusions

Shaolin Monastery invariably attracts martial arts tourists. Those who come to Shaolin for training purposes are increasingly well prepared for this challenge. Many of them know exactly what they want to achieve there, both in terms of spiritual development and training progress. However, there are also those who come to the monastery and ‘get carried away’ in this place. They want to experience their journey spontaneously, without developing expectations about what may happen to them there. They learn the secrets of meditation with monks or want to devote themselves to Buddhist studies. Those who carefully plan their stay in Shaolin most often have specific training expectations, focusing on intensive development and acquiring skills under the guidance of Chinese teachers. They do not neglect the spiritual aspect of exercise, but training is a priority. This is increasingly conscious participation, often resulting from a short stay in a monastery and therefore the need for such a participant to make the most of the time he or she can spend at this place. They try to ‘absorb’ the

atmosphere of this place, and 'to immerse' in Chinese culture. They want to make the most of their contact with "living carriers", believing that by immersing in their "natural environment", which is Shaolin temple, they will understand better and acquire more knowledge about Shaolin martial arts. But acceptance of training is especially problematic for foreigners. This is because mastering effective, complex systems requires a good technical foundation and longer training time. For advanced learners, it is possible to learn new, more spectacular and technically advanced sequences. In the case of short-term stays, Chinese teachers are not able to teach the basic and advanced techniques, so such students may get the impression that the teacher does not care about them. Such an impression can be further enhanced by the formula of classes, especially the part of individual training, where students practice the given sequences or 'exercises' themselves. Teachers devote less attention to people who are not involved in training or have a big problem mastering the basics, because their task is 'push further'. In the Chinese teaching tradition, students first need to master the basics through hours of training with little teacher's involvement, from a European point of view, this system excludes unmotivated people and leaves those who are ready to work very intensively adapting to the Chinese way of thinking in teaching. This is important especially with frequently substantiated allegations that Shaolin Monastery approaches the teaching of foreigners very commercially.

Individual training groups are international in nature and often become the beginning of various types of adaptations and cultural variants to new situations. One may be tempted to say that individual martial arts tourists are people applying for or already having higher education (all Europeans in a tested group). This makes them come to Shaolin with certain knowledge and expectations, and at the same time, awareness of how much they can and need to learn. Both trainees and teachers are aware that this is really a mutual exchange of experiences, especially since often students and teachers are of similar age. Chinese teachers are usually highly respected because of their skills and willingness to share them with others. Practitioners often stress their commitment to teaching, as the larger the commitment the more the student tries. The language barrier is also a smaller problem. The Chinese are increasingly speaking foreign languages (e.g. English, German), while more and more foreigners also understand that they will benefit more from studying in a monastery if they are able to communicate in Chinese at least to a basic degree. Of course, they are aware of the commercialization of this place, as they observe the changes introduced by Abbot Shi Yongxin in order to increase the tourist attractiveness of the monastery and at the same time to preserve it as a historical place of teaching Chinese martial arts.

But 'most tourists are (...) upset if what is presented to them is an outright fake, but otherwise they are quite content with a theatrical suspension of disbelief. (...) Tourists are willing to accept a reproduction, as long as it is a good one, or (...) as long as it is as "authentic reproduction' [Bruner 1991: 240]. The foreign students are looking for an 'authentic' Shaolin monastery, while accepting the fact that this authenticity they are dealing with today is a different quality. They all want to have contact with something indigenous; coming from this place, having the characteristics of a phenomenon on a global scale. For everyone, however, this is a private experience, for the 'historical moment' of confronting dreams with reality. Every moment of experiencing training, of joint meals with monks, of discussions in a group of foreigners, or of climbing to Damo cave [according to famous legend, after arriving at Shaolin Temple, Bodhidharma - Dame lived in the cave in seclusion and meditated there for nine years. The cave is near Shaolin Temple] is for them another component of the significant experience of training and self-fulfillment in a very important place for martial arts practitioners. Many of them plan to return to the monastery in the following years to visit the key place of Chinese martial arts from time to time.

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Oczekiwania studentów pochodzących z Europy w nauce chińskich sztuk walki w klasztorze Shaolin

Słowa kluczowe: świątynia Shaolin, chińskie sztuki walki, *Gong Fu*, turystyka sztuk walki

Streszczenie

Wprowadzenie. Chińskie sztuki walki i klasztory walczących mnichów stały się nieodłączną częścią tradycyjnego i kulturowego krajobrazu Chin. Obecnie klasztor Shaolin to specyficzne laboratorium, w którym stare tradycje mieszają się z nowymi trendami. Wiele osób przybywa tutaj, aby dotknąć i poznać chińskie sztuki walki.

Problem i cele. Poprzez badania i analizy etnograficzne autor zamierzał zbadać, jakie oczekiwania wobec treningu i praktyki w klasztorze Shaolin mają przybywający tu Europejczycy praktycy sztuk walki. Drugą istotną kwestią jest ich doświadczenie na miejscu, a więc próba zbadania, w jaki sposób oczekiwania i doświadczenie konfrontują się. Istotnym dla badań jest też sposób, w jaki odnajdują się trenujący w głębszym zanurzeniu w kulturę chińską, towarzysząca praktyce sztuk walki.

Metody. Autorka zastosowała obserwację uczestnika podczas swojego pobytu w lipcu i sierpniu 2019 r. W Shaolin, ćwicząc razem z dwiema grupami obcokrajowców z Europy, Polinezji, Tajwanu i przeprowadzając wywiady ze stażystami. Perspektywa teoretyczna oparta jest na antropologii sztuk walki.

Wyniki. Autorka uzyskała 10 prywatnych historii od europejskich studentów, które pozwoliły stworzyć model osób poszukujących edukacji w klasztorze Shaolin. Model ten obejmował takie zmienne, jak motywacja, poziom wiedzy o chińskiej kulturze i wcześniejsze doświadczenia w sztukach walki osób ćwiczących w Shaolin.

Wnioski. Odwiedzający klasztor w celu odbycia szkolenia są coraz lepiej przygotowani na to wyzwanie. Wielu z nich dokładnie wie, co chciałoby tutaj osiągnąć, zarówno pod względem rozwoju duchowego, jak i postępu treningu. Są jednak i tacy, którzy przyjeżdżają do klasztoru i 'dają się ponieść' temu miejscu. Obie grupy starają się 'wchłonąć' atmosferę tego miejsca, 'zanurzyć' się w chińskiej kulturze.