

M. Gantuya, R. Dao

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF BUDDHIST SHAOLIN MARTIAL ARTS: FROM THE SUI DYNASTY TO THE MING ERA

This study examines the historical development of Shaolin martial arts from their formative origins in the Sui dynasty through their institutional consolidation in the Ming dynasty. It explores how the Shaolin Temple, originally a Buddhist monastic center, evolved into a dual religious and martial institution in response to shifting political dynamics and military exigencies. During the Sui and Tang dynasties, imperial patronage and the temple's active support of Tang forces established its foundational reputation as a defender of both the Dharma and the state. In the Song and Yuan periods, Shaolin monks intermittently engaged in military actions, with records indicating the formation of organized monastic troops and integration of civilian martial knowledge. The temple also maintained privileged martial status under Yuan rule despite widespread prohibitions on martial training. The Ming dynasty marked a period of systematization, during which Shaolin martial techniques were codified into distinct styles and weapon forms, gaining spiritual and symbolic dimensions rooted in Chan Buddhist thought. By the late Ming, Shaolin martial arts had crystallized into a formalized tradition, widely practiced and influential beyond the temple's confines. This historical trajectory highlights the unique role of Shaolin martial arts at the intersection of religion, politics, and Chinese martial heritage.

Keywords: Shaolin Monastery / Temple, Chan Buddhism (Zen Buddhism), monastic military unit, monastic self-defense, temple protection.

М. Гантуя, Р. Дао

ЭВОЛЮЦИЯ БОЕВЫХ ИСКУССТВ БУДДИЙСКОГО МОНАСТЫРЯ ШАОЛИНЬ: ОТ ЭПОХИ СУН ДО ЭПОХИ МИН

В данной статье рассматривается историческое развитие боевых искусств монастыря Шаолинь, начиная с их зарождения во времена династии Сун и заканчивая институциональным укреплением в эпоху Мин. Исследуется, как монастырь Шаолинь, первоначально бывший буддийским религиозным центром, в ответ на меняющуюся политическую динамику и нестабильность превратился в религиозно-военный институт. В периоды династий Суй и Тан императорское покровительство и активная поддержка монастырем войск империи Тан заложили основу его репутации защитника как Дхармы, так и государства. В периоды Сун и Юань монахи Шаолиня периодически участвовали в военных действиях, о чем свидетельствуют записи о формировании организованных монастырских войск и интеграции гражданских боевых знаний. Храм также сохранял привилеги-

Гантуя Магсаржав – доктор философских наук, профессор, ведущий научный сотрудник Института философии Академии наук Монголии (г. Улан-Батор, Монголия). E-mail: gantuyam0924@gmail.com.

Дао Рина – докторант кафедры философии и религиоведения, НУМ (Внутренняя Монголия, КНР). E-mail: 1757391623@qq.com.

рованный военный статус при правлении династии Юань, несмотря на широко распространенные запреты на боевую подготовку. Эпоха Мин стала периодом систематизации, в течение которого шаолиньские боевые техники были кодифицированы как отдельные стили и формы оружия, приобретя духовные и символические измерения, укорененные в буддийской философии Чань. К концу периода Мин шаолиньские боевые искусства оформились как полноценная традиция, широко практикуемая и имеющая влияние далеко за пределами храма. Эта историческая траектория подчеркивает уникальную роль шаолиньских боевых искусств, возникших на стыке религии, политики и китайского боевого наследия.

Ключевые слова: монастырь Шаолинь, чань-буддизм (дзэн-буддизм), монашеское воинское подразделение, монашеская самооборона, защита монастырей.

I. Shaolin Martial Arts in the Sui and Tang Dynasties

The origins of Shaolin martial arts can be traced to the early Sui dynasty (581–618 CE), a period marked by significant state interest in Buddhism as a unifying spiritual and political force. Emperor Wen of Sui, recognizing the social and religious importance of Buddhism, granted approximately 100 hectares of land to the Shaolin Temple located on Mount Song in Henan province. This generous imperial endowment transformed the temple from a modest religious retreat into a major monastic and socio-political institution [Zhao et al. 2003: 13]. The temple's expanded grounds allowed for increased monastic activity, agricultural development, and the establishment of a stable community that could support itself economically. The imperial patronage also conferred protection, allowing Shaolin to flourish during a tumultuous period characterized by frequent warfare and social instability. By the end of the Sui dynasty, the temple served not only as a spiritual sanctuary but also as a refuge for starving peasants and displaced rebels fleeing the chaos of collapsing regional powers, thereby intertwining Shaolin's religious mission with practical social functions.

During a period of considerable upheaval and rebellion, the Shaolin Temple itself became a target and was attacked by rival forces, resulting in its near-total destruction, with only a single tower surviving the devastation. This violent episode underscored the vulnerability of religious institutions in times of political turmoil. In response to these threats, the resident monks – some of whom had already developed rudimentary martial skills primarily for physical conditioning and self-defense – organized themselves into a more coherent force for protection. One of the most significant historical moments from this era involved thirteen Shaolin monks who aligned themselves with the future Tang emperor Li Shimin during the struggle against the warlord Wang Shichong. These monks demonstrated their combat capabilities by capturing Wang's adopted son, Wang Renzhe, and handing him over to Tang forces, a pivotal contribution that aided the Tang dynasty's consolidation of power [Wu, Liu 1982: 57]. This alliance between Shaolin monks and imperial authority elevated the temple's status in the eyes of the ruling elite, who subsequently bestowed honors and privileges, thereby institutionalizing the temple's dual identity as both a spiritual center and a martial institution.

This historical event was later immortalized in Chinese literature and poetry, exemplified by Ming dynasty poet Fu Mei, who celebrated the martial achievements of the Shaolin monks with the verse: “The land stems from Liang and Wei dynasties, and the monks’ martial arts are renowned from the Sui and Tang dynasties” [Wang 1981: 31]. This verse not only honors the martial prowess of the monks but also situates Shaolin within the broader continuum of Chinese historical and cultural development. Philosophically, the inclusion of martial training in monastic life was consonant with Chan (Zen) Buddhist teachings that emphasized active engagement with the world through the principle of “forbidding evil” and protecting the Dharma (the Buddhist teachings) [Ji 2004: 83]. While the martial practices of this period were not yet systematized or codified into formal styles, the reputation of the Shaolin monks as capable fighters who could defend both their community and Buddhist ideals was firmly established, laying the groundwork for future martial development.

II. Monastic Combat and Shaolin Martial Arts in the Song and Yuan Dynasties

During the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127), the Shaolin Temple's religious stature was solidified as a patriarchal seat of Chan Buddhism, marking it as a key spiritual institution in Chinese Buddhism. However, this heightened spiritual focus corresponded with a relative decline in documented martial activities during the early Song period, as the temple's priorities shifted more toward religious scholarship and meditation. The scarcity of martial records from this time suggests that the temple's military role was somewhat subdued, possibly due to political stability and the centralization of imperial power. However, by the late Song period, China faced serious threats from northern invaders, particularly the Jin dynasty, and this precipitated a resurgence of martial practices within the monastic community.

Historical texts such as the *History of the Song Dynasty* recount that a monk named Yin Fang Jishu organized a monastic military unit known as the “Zunsheng Troop” to resist the Jin incursions. Yin Fang was closely connected with the Shaolin Temple, and his troop is believed to have been composed primarily of monks trained in Shaolin martial arts [Wu, Yao 1984: 57]. This organization illustrates a continuity of Shaolin's role as both a spiritual and defensive institution, reflecting a long-standing tradition of monks acting as protectors of the realm in times of crisis. Their military involvement underlines how Shaolin martial arts were not only for individual or spiritual cultivation but also had a practical application in national defense.

Beyond official historical records, later Qing dynasty martial arts manuals elaborate on Shaolin's martial connections, suggesting that the temple was a hub for martial knowledge exchange. For example, the *Shaolin Boxing Methods* describe instances where Shaolin monks invited civilian martial artists to the temple to exchange techniques during the early Song period, which contributed to the enrichment and diversification of Shaolin martial curricula [Wu, Liu 1982: 57]. Such exchanges facilitated the blending of indigenous martial traditions with monastic practices, allowing Shaolin styles to evolve and adapt. Similarly, the *Classics of Boxing (Quan Jing)* asserts that Emperor Zhao Kuangyin, the founder of the Song dynasty, was adept in Shaolin bo-

xing and passed down the style known as Taizu Chang Quan (Long Fist of Taizu) [Wu Tunan 1984: 45]. Though direct contemporary evidence is sparse, these narratives emphasize the cultural prestige of Shaolin martial arts and their perceived centrality in the formation of Chinese martial traditions.

During the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), which was established by the Mongols, Shaolin received official recognition as a loyal and stabilizing Buddhist institution within the imperial framework. The Yuan court granted Shaolin privileged status, reflecting the temple's continued importance in maintaining social order during foreign rule. Despite martial practices being prohibited for the general population under Yuan laws – likely to prevent rebellion – the Shaolin monks were uniquely permitted to continue their martial training for purposes of self-defense and temple protection (Zangyun Record, cited in Ji 2004: 83). This exception highlighted the temple's semi-military role, balancing religious duties with pragmatic concerns. The Qinggong Stele inscription dated 1318 CE documents the leadership of Master Xue Ting and his monks in organizing defensive actions against local rebellions, confirming the temple's active role in regional security [Wu, Liu 1982: 57].

Furthermore, during the Yuan era, Shaolin monks were granted official bureaucratic ranks such as Tidian and Du Tiju, indicating an institutional hierarchy that combined religious authority with paramilitary responsibilities [Cai 2003: 124]. These ranks likely formalized the command structure within the monastic community, enabling more organized martial training and coordinated defense. Toward the end of the Yuan dynasty, Shaolin was drawn into conflicts with rebel groups like the Red Turban Army. The temple's defense against these forces became the subject of legend, including tales of a “Red Turban King” who wielded flaming staffs to protect the monastery [Henan Wushu Association 1984: 63]. Though these stories are steeped in folklore, they serve as symbolic representations of Shaolin's enduring martial spirit, resilience, and its role as a bastion of resistance during politically volatile times.

III. The Relationship Between the Mongol Emperors of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) and the Shaolin Monastery: Official Recognition Without Deep Religious Attachment

During the Yuan dynasty, founded by the Mongols under Kublai Khan, the relationship between the imperial court and the Shaolin Monastery was characterized by official recognition and conditional support. However, this relationship lacked the deep religious attachment that the Mongol rulers reserved for Tibetan Buddhism, particularly the Sakya school. While the Shaolin Temple was respected for its religious, social, and martial functions, it did not occupy a central position within the spiritual or ideological framework of the Yuan imperial elite [Shahar 2008: 123–124].

Imperial Religious Policy and Shaolin's Status

The Mongol emperors implemented a remarkably tolerant and pragmatic religious policy, shaped by the ethnic and religious diversity of their vast empire. Under Kublai Khan (r. 1260–1294) and his successors, the Yuan government officially recognized and supervised various religious traditions, including Han Chinese Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, and even Nestorian Christianity [Rossabi 1988: 130–132].

Kublai Khan's court favored Tibetan Buddhism, especially the Sakya sect, and declared it the imperial religion. The Tibetan monk Phagpa Lama (1235–1280) was invited to the Yuan court, granted imperial titles, and appointed Imperial Preceptor (Dishi 帝師), wielding both religious and political influence [Elverskog 2006: 98]. Tibetan Buddhism offered the Mongols a theology of divine kingship and karmic legitimacy, which resonated with their steppe traditions and helped justify their rule over non-Mongol subjects.

In contrast, Han Chinese Chan Buddhism, represented by institutions like the Shaolin Monastery, received official recognition but not imperial favor. The Shaolin Temple, located in Dengfeng, Henan province, retained its status as a regional Buddhist center, but remained peripheral to the religious interests of the Yuan court [Shahar 2008: 118]. While it was included in the state's religious registration system, Shaolin did not enjoy the lavish support or spiritual elevation seen in the case of Tibetan lamas.

Shaolin's Semi-Military Role and Special Privileges

Despite this relatively limited religious status, the Shaolin Monastery continued to serve important social and political functions under the Yuan regime. A key aspect of Shaolin's distinctiveness during this period was its retained right to practice martial arts, which stood in contrast to the general ban on martial training among civilians imposed by the Mongol authorities. This restriction was part of broader efforts to suppress potential rebellions and centralize military power under Mongol control [Wright 2001: 87].

Shaolin monks, however, were permitted to continue martial training, primarily for purposes of temple defense and regional security. This special privilege demonstrates that Shaolin was viewed by the Yuan court as a trustworthy and disciplined monastic institution, rather than a potential threat to imperial authority. The temple was effectively treated as a quasi-military body, capable of contributing to local order and defense in times of crisis [Shahar 2008: 129–130].

Concrete evidence of this role is provided by the Qinggong Stele inscription, erected in 1318 CE. This inscription records that Master Xue Ting (雪庭) and the Shaolin monks organized defenses against rebellious forces in the early 14th century. This event illustrates that Shaolin's martial organization was either sanctioned or tolerated by the Yuan government and serves as historical proof of its semi-military function [Ji 2004: 83; Wu, Liu 1982: 57].

Monastic Bureaucracy and Government Integration

Another indicator of Shaolin's integration into the Yuan administrative system is the conferral of official ranks and government titles to certain monks. Sources indicate that some Shaolin clerics were appointed as Tidian (提点), meaning administrative overseer, and Du Tiju (都提举), or military inspection officer [Cai 2003: 124]. These ranks placed the monks within a religio-bureaucratic hierarchy, suggesting that the Yuan state viewed temples like Shaolin not only as religious centers but as auxiliary organs of governance and regional control.

This process reflects the Yuan dynasty's broader practice of co-opting religious institutions into its political structure. By assigning monks civil or paramilitary roles, the

Mongol administration ensured loyalty while benefiting from local administrative capabilities. In Shaolin’s case, these ranks helped formalize the temple’s ability to maintain internal order and contribute to regional stability, especially in an era marked by peasant uprisings and banditry [Ji 2004: 83].

Reasons for Limited Religious Patronage

Despite their practical support for Shaolin, the Mongol emperors never embraced it as a central spiritual institution. The primary reason was their ideological and religious preference for Tibetan Buddhism, which they viewed as offering not only esoteric wisdom but also cosmic and political legitimacy. Through its rituals, lineages, and teachings, Tibetan Buddhism provided a theological model for divine kingship, which helped the Mongol rulers unify their empire and justify their sovereignty [Elverskog 2006: 97–100].

By contrast, Shaolin’s Chan Buddhism, with its emphasis on meditative introspection, non-ritualistic practice, and individual enlightenment, lacked the ceremonial and hierarchical structure that appealed to Mongol political sensibilities. Moreover, as a symbol of Han Chinese religious culture, Shaolin did not fit comfortably into the imperial narrative of Mongol rule over a multiethnic empire. In fact, privileging Shaolin might have undermined the court’s strategy of distinguishing itself from its Chinese subjects by favoring non-Han religions and elites [Rossabi 1988: 135–136].

Finally, the Yuan emperors’ support for Shaolin was ultimately shaped by pragmatism rather than piety. They recognized the monastery’s loyalty, discipline, and martial utility and thus permitted it to function with relative autonomy and state support. Yet Shaolin was never elevated spiritually within the Yuan religious hierarchy. It was treated as a strategic local institution, useful in times of social unrest but not spiritually central to the empire.

Table

The Mongol Emperors’ Connection to the Shaolin Monastery

Aspect	Mongol Emperors’ Position
Religious Devotion	Minimal; strongly favored Tibetan Buddhism over Chan Buddhism
Political Relationship	Supportive; Shaolin was viewed as a loyal and useful institution
Martial Role	Permitted to train in martial arts for temple defense and regional order
Bureaucratic Integration	Monks granted official ranks, indicating integration into state structures
Cultural Importance	Respected locally, but not central to Yuan imperial or religious culture

In this way, the Mongol emperors of the Yuan dynasty viewed the Shaolin Monastery as a strategically valuable institution that could be trusted to maintain local order, defend against unrest, and administer monastic affairs responsibly. While they did not deeply engage with Shaolin’s religious teachings or elevate it spiritually, their pragmatic support ensured the temple’s survival and facilitated the continued development of its martial traditions. Thus, Shaolin emerged from the Yuan period not as a court-

centered religious institution but as a regional pillar of both spiritual and defensive resilience, whose legacy would flourish in subsequent dynasties.

IV. Consolidation and Systematization in the Ming Dynasty

The Ming dynasty (1368–1644) marked a turning point in the history of Shaolin martial arts, as the temple's martial techniques entered a period of formal consolidation and systematization. Unlike previous eras, where martial skills were practiced more informally or sporadically, the Ming period saw the development of distinctive schools and codified styles within the temple. These included Shaolin Luohan Quan (Arhat Fist), characterized by precise, powerful hand techniques; Shaolin Taizu Chang Quan (Long Fist of Taizu), emphasizing extended, flowing movements; and various specialized weapon forms such as staff, spear, and sword techniques, which became standardized within monastic curricula.

First-hand travel accounts from this era provide valuable insights into the public nature and growing sophistication of Shaolin martial arts. In 1608, Jin Junshi, a noted scholar, recorded in his travelogue *Travel to Songshan Shaolin Temple* that “Shaoshenjun invited the Shinan city monks to demonstrate horn techniques,” which likely referred to ritualized sparring or staff combat displays [Jin 1608, cited in Wu, Liu 1982: 57]. These demonstrations were not only training exercises but also ceremonial events that showcased the temple's martial prowess and attracted public interest. Yuan Hongdao, a renowned poet and official, similarly observed hand-to-hand combat performances during his visits, reflecting how martial arts had become an integral, visible part of monastic life, blending both discipline and artistry.

During the Ming period, the spiritual dimension of Shaolin martial culture deepened and became more explicitly articulated. For example, the staff – known as *Yasha* – was symbolically linked to the Buddhist guardian King Kinnara, a celestial protector figure, and was imbued with spiritual meaning as a representation of the path to enlightenment (Supreme Bodhi) [Yu, n.d., cited in Ji 2004: 83]. This synthesis of martial practice and religious symbolism provided a theological foundation that legitimized martial training within the Buddhist framework, transforming physical combat into a form of spiritual cultivation and moral discipline.

By the late Ming era, Shaolin martial arts had been widely disseminated beyond the temple walls and were increasingly institutionalized as formal schools, contributing to the broader landscape of Chinese martial arts. According to scholar Meir Shahar (2008), this period marks the “crystallization” of the Shaolin tradition, during which martial knowledge was systematically compiled, categorized, and integrated into both monastic training regimens and secular martial culture. This development not only preserved Shaolin's martial heritage but also facilitated its transmission to lay practitioners and regional martial communities, setting the stage for its enduring global influence.

Conclusion

The evolution of Shaolin martial arts from the Sui dynasty through the Ming dynasty reflects a dynamic interplay between religion, politics, and military necessity. Initially emerging as a form of self-defense during times of war and social chaos, Shaolin's martial practices gradually became a central feature of its institutional identity.

The temple's ability to adapt to shifting political landscapes – serving as a refuge in the Sui, a military ally in the Tang, a defender of national sovereignty in the Song, and a semi-militarized religious institution under the Yuan – demonstrates its resilience and strategic significance in Chinese history.

While the Shaolin Monastery did not receive deep religious patronage from all dynasties – particularly the Yuan, whose Mongol rulers favored Tibetan Buddhism – it maintained a position of regional and cultural importance through its martial capabilities and loyal service to the state. This pragmatic support, especially from the Yuan court, allowed Shaolin to survive and develop even when not spiritually central to imperial ideology.

By the Ming dynasty, Shaolin martial arts had matured into a sophisticated, codified system deeply integrated into both monastic training and broader Chinese martial culture. The fusion of spiritual discipline and martial skill not only legitimized Shaolin's practices within a Buddhist framework but also helped transmit its legacy far beyond the temple walls. Ultimately, Shaolin emerged not only as a symbol of Chinese martial prowess but also as a unique embodiment of how religious, political, and cultural forces can shape and sustain an enduring institution.

Bibliography

Cai Baozhong. Monograph on the History of Chinese Martial Arts / Baozhong Cai. – Beijing: People's Sports Publishing House, 2003. – 318 p. 蔡宝忠：《中国武术史专论》，北京：人民体育出版社，2003年，318 p.

Cai Naigong 蔡乃功. Shaolin Si Wushu Shi 少林寺武术史 [A History of Martial Arts at Shaolin Temple] / Naigong Cai. – Zhengzhou: Henan Renmin Chubanshe, 2003. – 184 p. 蔡乃功：《少林寺武术史》，郑州：河南人民出版社，2003年，184 p.

Compiled by the Henan Wushu Association. Shaolin Wushu. – Zhengzhou: Henan Science and Technology Publishing, August 1984. – 584 p. 河南省武术协会编：《少林武术》，郑州：河南科学技术出版社出版，1984年，584 p.

Elverskog J. Our Great Qing: The Mongols, Buddhism and the State in Late Imperial China / J. Elverskog. – Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006. – 264 p.

Ji Xianglin. The Shaolin Temple of China: Volume of Inscriptions / Xianglin Ji // Shaolin Kung Fu Collection. – Hong Kong: Shaolin Book Company, 2004. – 316 p. 季羨林：《中国少林寺·碑刻卷》，《少林功夫文集》，香港：少林书局，2004年，316 p.

Ji Zhi 郝志. Shaolin Wushu Jianshi 少林武术简史 [A Brief History of Shaolin Martial Arts] / Zhi Ji. – Beijing: Renmin Tiyu Chubanshe, 2004. – 275 p. 郝志：《少林武术简史》，北京：人民体育出版社，2004年，275 p.

Rossabi M. Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times / M. Rossabi. – Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. – 322 p.

Shahar M. The Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion, and the Chinese Martial Arts / M. Shahar. – Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008. – 281 p.

Wang Shixiang 王世襄 (Ming Dynasty). Guang Ji Yi 广记逸 / Shixiang Wang. – Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1981 edition, 18 册. – 3400 p. (明) 王世襄：《广志绎》，北京：中华书局 1981 年，18 册，3400 p.

- Wright D. C.* The History of China / D. C. Wright. – Greenwood Publishing, 2001. – 264 p.
- Wu Gu.* Collection of Materials on the Shaolin Temple / Gu Wu, Zhixue Liu. – Beijing: Bibliographic Literature Publishing House, July 1982. – 436 p. 无谷、刘志学：《少林寺资料集编》，北京：书目文献出版社，1982. 436 p.
- Wu Gu.* Continuation of the Shaolin Temple Documentation Collection / Gu Wu, Yuan Yao. – Beijing: Bibliographic Literature Publishing House, October 1984. – 653 p. 无谷、姚远：《少林寺资料集续编》，北京：书目文献出版社，1984, 653 p.
- Wu Tunan.* An Introduction to Chinese Martial Arts / Tunan Wu. – Beijing: China Bookstore Publishing, 1984 edition, 144 p. 吴图南：《国术概论》，北京中国书店，1984年，144 p.
- Wu Tunan, Liu Huaifu.* Shaolin Quanfa: Zhongguo Wushu Yanjiu Congshu 少林拳法：中国武术研究丛书 / Tunan Wu, Huaifu Liu. [Shaolin Boxing Methods: Studies in Chinese Martial Arts].192. 吴图南，刘华福：《少林拳法：中国武术研究丛书》，192 p.
- Zhao Guochen et al.* A Zen Journey to Songshan / Guochen Zhao et al. – Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, December 2003, 158. 赵国成等：《嵩山访禅记》，北京：中华书局，2003年，158 p.