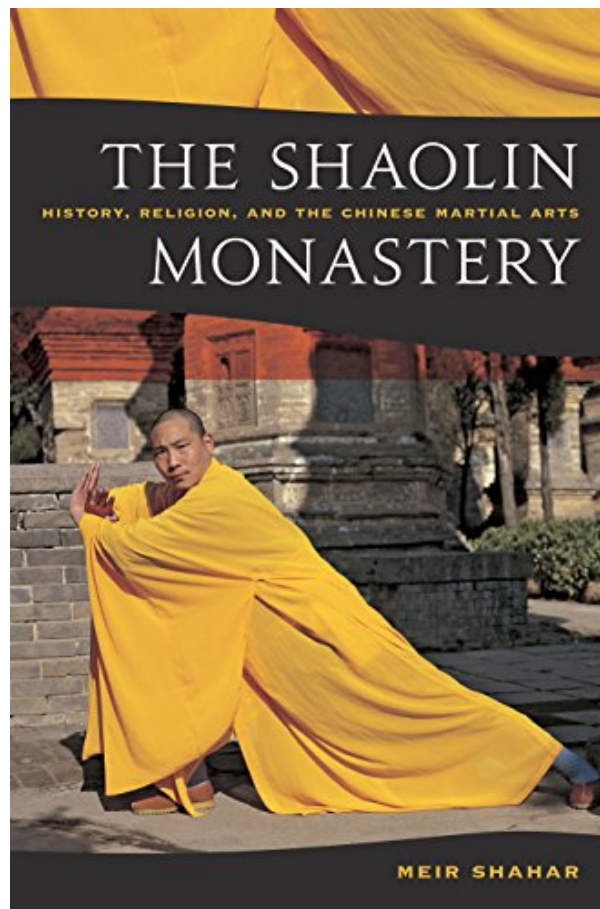
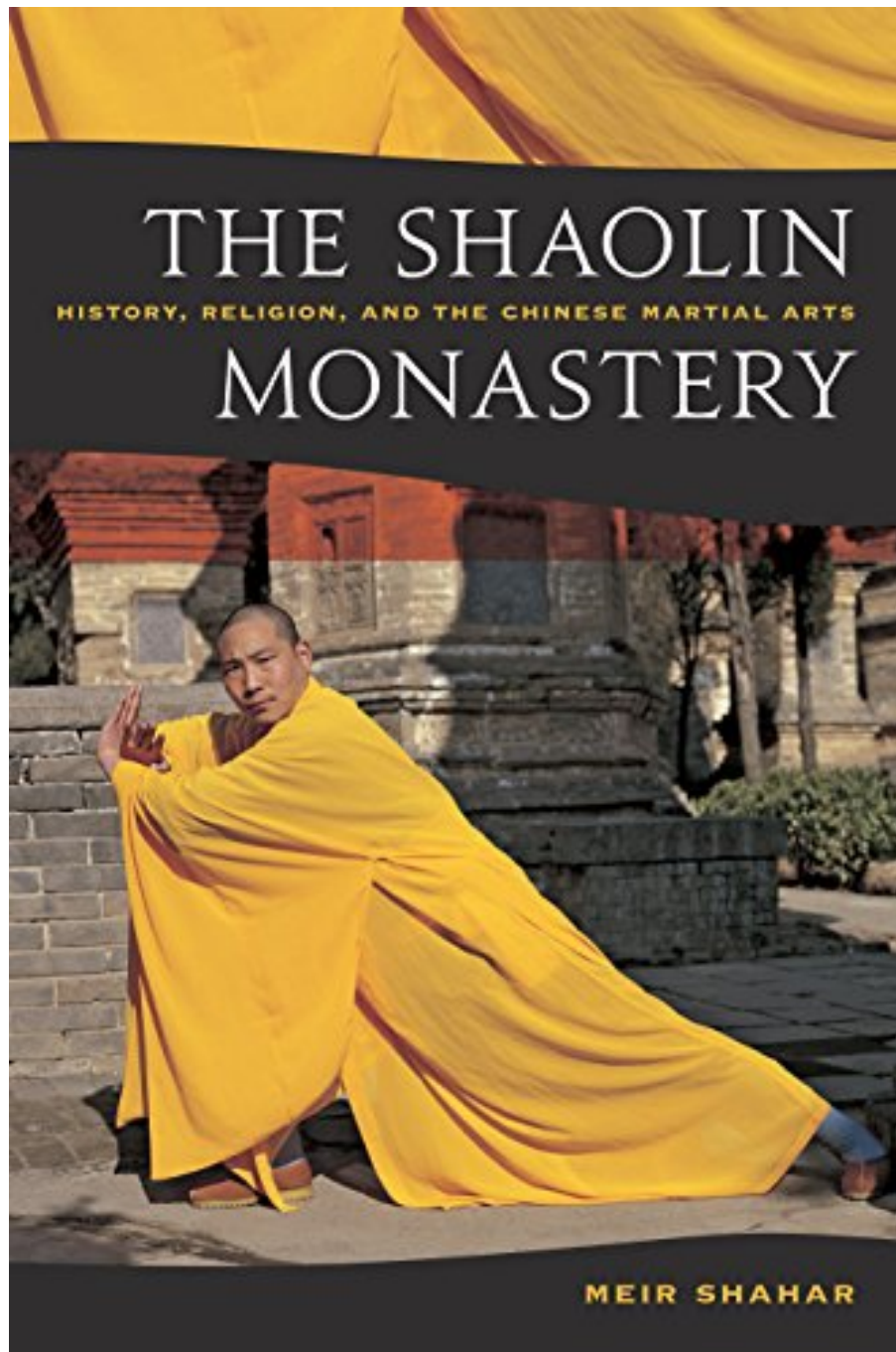


THE SHAOLIN MONASTERY: HISTORY, RELIGION, AND THE CHINESE MARTIAL ARTS BY MEIR SHAHAR



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Review

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- Sales Rank: #790116 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-08-29
- Released on: 2015-08-29
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Learning to Shoulder the Baggage of Shaolin

By Andrew Shinn

While the writing is at times rather dry, this book definitely belongs on the shelves of anyone with a serious interest in any of the Chinese martial arts. Whether you are just learning about Chinese martial practices, or you are heavily involved in them, the fame of Shaolin is a major piece of baggage that you have to learn to shoulder. This is true regardless of whether the art you study has claims to Shaolin ancestry, as the power of the Shaolin legend is so strongly cross-cutting.

There are lots of legends around Chinese martial arts and the place of the Shaolin Temple in their development. This book offers an accessible overview of many available sources that can help find the links between legend and history. I personally find my practice enriched, rather than diminished, by understanding

the historical development of these legends. I find this preferable to accepting at face value the stories that some find inspirational, only to become severely disillusioned when faced with historical investigation. These arts are very real and very human and their history is reflective of human foibles as well as human strengths.

Although this book centers on the Shaolin Temple, there are actually some very important sections for anyone who has ever considered the distinction between the so-called internal and external schools of Chinese martial arts. If you are a student of taijiquan (Tai Chi), this book also examines the creation of the Zhang San Feng myth, and the relationships between taijiquan, Shaolinquan, and other martial arts that have been and are currently practiced.

Aside from uneven readability (some chapters just flow much better than others), my primary complaint would be the amount of pure speculation the author allows himself, without always acknowledging the tenuous nature of some of the connections he draws. The other thing I find lacking is a treatment of some of the historically documented arts that precede the development of Shaolin as a center of martial practices. Particularly I'm thinking of shuaijiao, which is both a striking and a throwing art, and was practiced in military circles long before Shaolin.

All in all, this is a great study, and it does point the way to further research.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

... what is written about Shaolin is just mythology at best, or modern western Orientalist fantasy at worst

By Henry McCann

I had almost decided to just not get this book because so much of what is written about Shaolin is just mythology at best, or modern western Orientalist fantasy at worst. One night in a moment of Amazon weakness I did order the book and it was a good thing I did. Professor Shahar does a fantastic job at analyzing the actual verifiable history of Shaolin, and its contribution to hand combat arts as well as weapons arts in China. What I appreciate most is that Shahar includes copious endnotes and clearly documents his research. As such, this book is a valuable addition to any martial artist's library (as long as they want a clear view of the real history of this famous monastery). Aside from martial artists this book is also valuable to students of therapeutic Chinese movement arts (such as Qigong and modern Taijiquan), and students of Chinese Buddhism. For example, Shahar delves into the question of how Shaolin monks, as Buddhists, could play a part in military ventures, something clearly prohibited by Buddhist ethics. Shahar also explores the development of modern martial arts as a mix of self-defense, exercises for health, and vehicle for personal and spiritual development. In summary, the book was a great read and I plan on reading it more than the once I have already.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Truest Shaolin kung fu history you'll ever read

By Ericevils

I liked it but he could have provided the reader with a chronological order or at least a timeline. I thought he might have been a history student earning his PhD but he's a professor so it was odd he chose to write a history book like this.

Also he should have went over Chinese Buddhism and Taoism first before diving unto the particulars. It assumed the reader had the same knowledge up until the same point.

It's a great read though. Kung fu guys need to read it to understand why their martial art isn't effective for fighting. The author delicately points out that Shaolin monks didn't practice weaponless martial arts to be able to fight.

Other interesting points:

Their staff style was legit, then it withered, it was revived by an actual military general but had died out

before the open hand style replaced it.

The temple didn't have an abbot for over 300 years.

Shaolin monks along with other monks were constantly recruited to fight wars for the government. Shaolin was known to have the best soldiers.

Boddidharma never taught martial arts to the monks, that's a myth.

Shaolin open hand kung fu was primarily for health and spiritual development since open hand fighting was considered worthless at the time due to real weapons including guns.

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