

## English Translation of *China Matters* podcast episode with Shaolin Master Shi Yandi

**[J]** Today, we are very pleased to welcome Master Yandi to the China Institute at the University of Alberta in Canada.

**[Y]** Yes, that's wonderful. Being able to come here to exchange and share Shaolin culture is something we truly enjoy doing. As disciples of Shaolin, spreading Shaolin culture is our responsibility, as well as our philosophy and aspiration.

**[J]** You started practicing martial arts from a young age, and at the age of eight, you entered Shaolin, which means you've been living and practicing there for over twenty years. For many of our listeners, your journey is quite legendary. Could you provide a brief introduction for everyone?

**[Y]** I started practicing Shaolin kung fu when I was around five years old. At that time, I practiced in a courtyard in our village, which used to be an old storage yard for grains. People used to store their grain there, but when it was no longer used for that purpose, it transformed into a Shaolin martial arts school. This school was established by the abbot of Shaolin Temple, who is also my master. He wanted to provide a path for more rural children to have opportunities. So, they could choose to practice martial arts and possibly have a way to leave the countryside, explore broader horizons, and access more opportunities.

When this school was founded in our village, I was the first to enroll among the initial batch of children. After practicing there for a few years, we got the chance to enter Shaolin Temple. The temple would select outstanding disciples from schools affiliated with Shaolin disciples and those sponsored by the temple. Every year, these selected students from different age groups would go to Shaolin Temple for an examination. Those who passed the exam were allowed to stay at the temple for training. After a few years of study, I went to Shaolin Temple myself.

When I arrived at Shaolin Temple, I was eight years old. I gradually progressed in my life and studies there, and this journey continued until I came to Canada.

**[J]** So, you've lived and studied at Shaolin Temple for many years, over twenty, in a very unique developmental environment. As such, you are the 34th generation successor of Shaolin Temple.

**[Y]** Yes.

**[J]** And your master, Venerable Yongxin, he is the 33rd generation successor of Shaolin, correct?

**[Y]** Yes.

**【J】** So, this lineage and tradition are extremely important to Shaolin. Could you please provide a brief explanation of the history and traditions of Shaolin?

**【Y】** Our generation is determined by the genealogical record of Shaolin Temple, which consists of seventy characters. In our lineage, my name "Yandi" corresponds to the character "延" (Yan), which is the thirty-fourth character in the record. My master's name starts with "永" (Yong), and the lineage has progressed to "德、行、永、延、恒" (De, Xing, Yong, Yan, Heng). Over eight hundred years ago, Shaolin Temple established this system of genealogical lineage, which solidified the transmission of Shaolin's teachings and made the succession more organized. The one who established this genealogical record back then was the abbot of Shaolin Temple during that period, Master Fuyu. This tradition has been followed ever since, passing down one character at a time. So now we have progressed through these seventy characters, right in the middle. Below us, there are generations named after the character "恒" (Heng) and the character "庙" (Miao).

**【J】** So, Shaolin Temple is a significant center of Chinese Zen Buddhism and the birthplace of Chinese martial arts. Its establishment dates back over a thousand years, around 1500 years ago. Could you please provide a brief explanation of the origins of Shaolin?

**【Y】** The establishment of Shaolin Temple was in alignment with the times. It was founded over 1500 years ago in the year 495 AD. The establishment of Shaolin Temple occurred during the reign of Emperor Xiaowen of the Northern Wei Dynasty. He was a wise and beloved emperor among the people. At that time, Emperor Xiaowen welcomed a prominent Indian monk named Bodhidharma (referred to as Damo in Chinese). Bodhidharma was already an accomplished monk in India and was sent to China by his master.

Bodhidharma's master believed that China (then known as Zhen Dan) had a strong foundation for the Mahayana tradition and suggested that Bodhidharma go there to spread the teachings, believing it would be highly meaningful and might establish a new realm of spiritual exploration. After arriving in China, Bodhidharma initially stayed at the imperial palace and later at an inn. However, the emperor believed that living in the palace wasn't suitable for a monk of Bodhidharma's stature, and living at an inn didn't live up to the expectation of properly hosting such a revered monk.

So, a plan was devised to establish a temple that would both provide a place for Bodhidharma and create an environment fitting for him. It was observed that Bodhidharma often enjoyed meditating and wandering around the area of Mount Song. Someone proposed the idea of building a temple modeled after the imperial palace and using it to honor and accommodate Bodhidharma for residence and teaching. This way, Bodhidharma could stay in China. Emperor Xiaowen embraced this suggestion and founded Shaolin Temple at the foot of Mount Shaoshi, in the region of Mount Song. This marks the initial origin of the establishment of Shaolin Temple.

**【J】** Indeed, there's another highly significant figure closely associated with the later tradition of Shaolin Temple, also a revered monk who came from India. He is essentially considered the pioneer of Shaolin martial arts and practices. Could you please share the story of this individual?

**【Y】** Ah, you're definitely referring to Patriarch Bodhidharma. Patriarch Bodhidharma is the legitimate heir of the Buddha's teachings. He is the 28th generation descendant of Gautama Buddha. Bodhidharma's master instructed him to travel to the East, as the future prosperity of Buddhism was foreseen in that direction. Hence, Bodhidharma embarked on a journey from India to China. Upon arriving in China, he first reached Nanjing. Bodhidharma's presence in China led to many legendary stories, many of which are documented in various historical records.

One well-known tale involves Bodhidharma's time in Nanjing. The emperor of that era was Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty, Emperor Xiaowu (Xiao Yan). He was a devoted Buddhist who had even ordained as a monk multiple times in his life. He promoted vegetarianism for monks in China. Upon hearing of Bodhidharma's arrival, Emperor Wu invited him to the imperial palace to personally welcome him. Emperor Wu had engaged in numerous virtuous deeds during his life, helping the poor and supporting many monks, as well as constructing numerous temples. There was a dialogue between Emperor Wu and Bodhidharma, where Emperor Wu asked how great his merit was considering his extensive contributions. However, Bodhidharma directly responded that he had no merit. Emperor Wu was taken aback by this response, feeling puzzled and asked how it was possible that his contributions were not meritorious, considering the benefits they had provided.

Bodhidharma explained that what Emperor Wu had done were essentially blessings for humans and gods. He noted that indulging in the pleasure of these deeds would actually diminish their significance. He emphasized that true merit wasn't about personal rewards or comfort. For Emperor Wu, who enjoyed the luxuries of being an emperor, including the best materialistic lifestyle, the focus should be on transcending attachment rather than clinging to worldly achievements.

While Bodhidharma's intention was profound, Emperor Wu became displeased with the dialogue. Feeling his efforts were belittled, he grew irritated. Bodhidharma left after realizing that the conversation wasn't productive. After some time, Emperor Wu contemplated the deeper meaning of Bodhidharma's words and suddenly understood the depth of his message. He realized his attachment to achievements and comforts had distracted him from spiritual growth. Regretful, he sought to invite Bodhidharma back to continue their dialogue. However, when they went to find Bodhidharma, they only saw his departing figure from a distance, and he was nowhere to be found.

The story of Bodhidharma contains numerous remarkable episodes. In the future, we can delve deeper into Bodhidharma's legendary journey, how he founded the Chan (Zen) tradition, and his nine-year wall-gazing meditation in the back mountains of Shaolin Temple.

**【J】** Absolutely, a truly fascinating story. Thank you, Venerable Yandi, for sharing. So, it seems that the Chan (Zen) tradition and martial arts converged harmoniously at Shaolin Temple. There's the concept of uniting meditation and martial arts. Could you please explain why this idea of combining Chan and martial arts emerged and how the martial aspect developed within Shaolin Temple?

**【Y】** Shaolin culture encompasses Chan (Zen), martial arts, traditional medicine, and the arts. Following the essence of Chan, all these aspects, including martial arts, medicine, and arts, were created with the purpose of spiritual cultivation. For example, in the realm of martial arts, after Bodhidharma arrived in China, he observed that living beings were prone to illness due to their mortal bodies. This was especially pronounced in the deep mountains, where clothing was scarce, and the damp, cold climate prevailed. Monks, while engaging in extensive meditation practice, accumulated various health issues due to their long hours of sitting and seeking the path to enlightenment.

Bodhidharma recognized that while Buddhism pursued liberation and should not be attached to the physical body, the body was still the tool available in the present moment. If not properly cared for and utilized, it would not be able to sustain one's journey to enlightenment or support the goals of spiritual practice. In response, Bodhidharma developed a series of health-enhancing exercises, most notably the Yijin Jing (Muscle/Tendon Changing Classic), which later led to the development of exercises like the simplified Ba Duan Jin (Eight Brocades). From that point onward, monks gradually adopted and evolved these body-conditioning practices devised by Bodhidharma.

The Shaolin tradition further integrated these practices with the daily labors of the monks, such as working in the fields, farming, chopping wood, carrying water, cooking, and cleaning. By blending these activities into their routines, they realized that these daily tasks weren't just mundane activities; they were also an opportunity for spiritual cultivation. This integration of spiritual practice into everyday life extended even to their work. This approach underscores the notion that the ultimate goal of spiritual practice is to seamlessly integrate it into every facet of life, rather than compartmentalizing it into special times or specific practices. This way, spiritual practice becomes a continuous, ongoing aspect of life, and not just confined to specific moments or activities.

**【J】** Exactly, walking, sitting, lying down- they are all aspects of Zen, right?

**【Y】** Exactly. As a result, Shaolin kung fu continually evolved throughout history, being refined, selected, and integrated. Eventually, the monks developed a tradition of martial arts practice. Through this process, the purpose remained centered on Zen meditation. Hence, the integration of Zen and martial arts became a remarkable aspect. Zen serves as the inner core of Shaolin kung fu, while martial arts serve as its external expression, a manifestation of the pursuit of Zen. Thus, the synthesis of Zen and martial arts within Shaolin formed a unique characteristic of their practice, uniting the two disciplines into a single path.

**【J】** Indeed, thank you for your insightful explanation. Now, Shaolin has established its presence in various parts of the world, with cultural centers and martial arts schools teaching Shaolin kung fu. In today's society, what role does Shaolin hope to play? How does it aim to promote its spirit, extend its influence, and ensure that the essence of Shaolin's culture and tradition continues for the next 800 or even 1000 years, or even longer?

**【Y】** That's an excellent question. Every Shaolin disciple has a responsibility to continue the legacy of our ancestors and promote the over 1,000-year-old Shaolin culture. Shaolin culture has undergone refinement and distillation over 1,500 years, evolving into what we see today, as my master, Shaolin Temple's Abbot Shi Yongxin, mentioned. After becoming the current abbot of Shaolin Temple, my master organized a grand celebration for the 1,500th anniversary of the temple's establishment in 1995. During that event, my master shared a profound statement that has continuously empowered me and set the direction I strive for. He said that Shaolin Temple has endured and passed down for 1,500 years until today, and as the chosen abbot of this time, he aims to work and pass on the tradition for the next 1,500 years. Although this statement sounds simple, the weight of extending a legacy from 1,500 years to another 1,500 years is incredibly immense.

Shaolin culture is often summarized in a simple phrase: a holistic way of healthy living. Our goal is to serve the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of all humanity. The practice of meditation, martial arts, healing, arts, all aim at cultivating a state of balance in the body, mind, and spirit. Our mission has led us to engage in numerous international exchanges and dialogues over the past few decades. We have disciples stationed in various countries, collaborating to establish Shaolin cultural centers and institutions that share the valuable teachings of Shaolin for the betterment of people's physical, mental, and spiritual health. Additionally, we continue to nurture new carriers of Shaolin culture, individuals who will carry forward the teachings and practices of Shaolin kung fu, as well as other aspects beloved by people.

In the context of cultural and religious exchange, Shaolin Temple maintains an open attitude, embodying the compassionate spirit of Buddhism. We engage in dialogue with various ethnic groups and religious traditions, being adaptable and transforming ourselves into different forms and approaches to facilitate meaningful exchanges. This aligns with the Buddhist concept that Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have the ability to manifest in countless forms. By responding to the needs of beings and society, we can manifest different appearances to communicate and disseminate teachings, compassion, and charitable actions.

**【J】** You explained it very well, and I appreciate your insightful sharing. In today's society, there are many global challenges such as environmental and climate changes, biodiversity loss, and major disease outbreaks like the recent pandemic. These are all worldwide issues. However, at the global level, there seem to be increasing barriers between nations, and cultural divisions are becoming more pronounced. There are even regional disputes and conflicts. Given this global

context, what role do you think the spirit and tradition of Shaolin, as well as the connections between Shaolin and people of various countries around the world, can play?

**【Y】** In today's world, we all know that countries face various challenges, environmental challenges, challenges related to cultural integration, and many others. From the perspective of a Shaolin disciple, or even as a Buddhist monk, I think these challenges aren't unique to our current times or society. Throughout history, human civilization has faced significant challenges in every era, some of which even threatened our survival. However, there's something we firmly believe in – we've overcome every challenge, and we've managed to prevail.

Looking at history on a larger scale, I have confidence in the future, and I have confidence in humanity. From our perspective, challenges come and go, but with unity and a willingness to discuss and embrace differences, as well as with the compassion inherent in human nature, we can resolve any issues. Shaolin, in its own way, aims to influence a certain group of people and make a positive impact. We don't seek to have a massive impact or achieve specific goals. We simply persist in what we do, and we believe that by doing so, we will surely see positive outcomes.

While at times we might feel discouraged and wonder why we're not seeing immediate results despite our efforts, as monks, we understand that it just means we need to continue our efforts. When we accumulate enough spiritual merits, the results will naturally manifest. This is a natural law of cause and effect. Therefore, we hold hope for the future and maintain positive expectations.

**【J】** So it's about each individual putting their heart into everything they do, and slowly accumulating efforts like grains of sand forming a mountain, right? In the end, we can hope to make our world a better place. So, here's a final small question: Since you have lived and practiced at Shaolin for many years, as a millennia-old monastery, and I haven't had the chance to pay my respects there, is there a particular place or corner at Shaolin that you find most appealing? And why?

**【Y】** Actually, if I were to talk about a place I like the most, it might be a bit difficult to pinpoint. This is because before I left Shaolin and came to Canada, I didn't find Shaolin Temple particularly special. Growing up here, I didn't see it as extraordinary. It was only when I ventured out, interacted with others, and gradually understood how people perceive Shaolin and its significance, that I realized the place it holds in people's hearts and the preciousness it embodies. It's only now that I comprehend how great the place where I've always lived actually is and how many miraculous aspects it holds.

Naming a single specific place within Shaolin that left a profound impression on me is somewhat challenging. In Shaolin, our daily life revolves around recitation of scriptures, meditation, communal meals, cultural classes, and martial arts training, so these activities take place across various parts of the temple throughout the day. All the different aspects of Shaolin have

remained memorable for me. This place was my childhood dream, where I've achieved my aspirations, and where I hope to return in the future. I suppose this is where my original intention lies.

**【J】** Great, thank you very much to Master Yandi for visiting China Institute today and sharing these wonderful insights. Thank you very much.

**【Y】** Good, thank you. Amitabha.