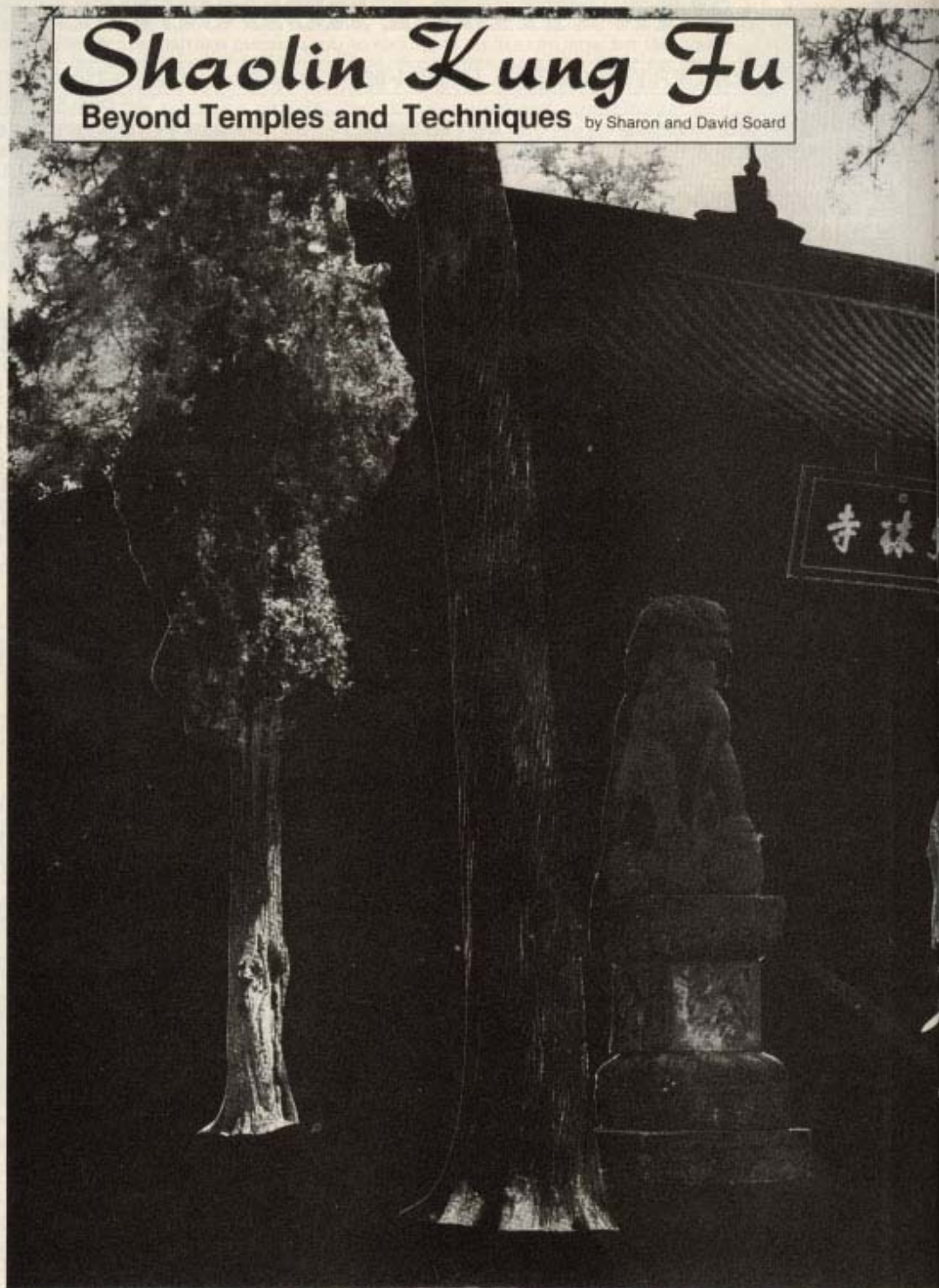


# Shaolin Kung Fu

Beyond Temples and Techniques by Sharon and David Soard





Of all the styles of martial arts known today, the one whose history and origin is most shrouded in mystery is that of the legendary Shaolin monks. Much of the misunderstanding and confusion is due to the lack of written records available in China because of its tumultuous past.

The confusion within the history of the Shaolin is also due to its great legacy of so many martial styles throughout more than 1,500 years of evolution. As recently as 1974, archaeologists in China have begun unearthing the tomb of China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang. Qin ruled China during the Qin (Chin) Dynasty (221-206 B.C.) over 2,200 years ago, and within the tomb, terra-cotta warriors labeled "Shaolin Temple boxer" have been discovered.

For how long the art of shaolin has been practiced throughout China is not known, but one thing is sure: The Shaolin monks, their skills and their exploits, have been legendary throughout most of China's written history.

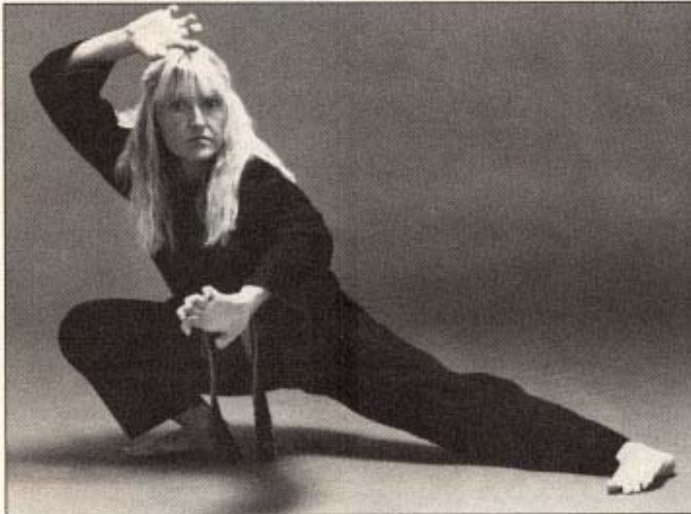
#### Shaolin Temples

The first of what later became six Shaolin Temples was located in the now-famous Honan province. At this temple in A.D. 500, Ta-Mo (Boddhidharma or Dharuma) brought to China the beginnings of breathing and meditation known as Chan (Zen) Buddhism, as well as many other forms of chi kung training and development. Becoming the essence of shaolin training from this point forward, meditation and breathing exercises were performed, such as the famous *i chin ching* (muscle change classic) and are used today by current students of the shaolin art. These exercises develop one's external abilities, as well as *chi* (internal power) to increase energy, vitality and strength.

The Shaolin monks at the Honan Temple were best known throughout China during the Tang Dynasty (A.D. 900). They helped the Tang Emperor ward off Mongolian invaders from the north and Japanese pirates at the coast. Thirteen monks with staves showed such skill against the Mongolian armies that the emperor granted them posts within the capitol and great wealth. Because they were monks, however, they requested nothing and returned to the temple to train.

Within the Shaolin Temple during its early years the monks trained to master art, calligraphy, poetry, martial skills and meditation. But as China's history

# Shaolin Kung Fu



Sharon Soard demonstrates shaolin kung fu's golden tiger stance. Her strong, flexible legs allow her to crouch low and spring in many directions when facing an attacker.



Sharon and her husband David perform common shaolin stances. Sharon assumes a monkey position while David does a praying mantis stance.

Chi focusing is important in many shaolin styles. Here, David performs a chi-focusing exercise with a straight sword. ▶



became more tumultuous, the martial aspects began to take greater precedence. Later, in that same dynasty, the generals and politicians for the Tang emperor began to fear the Shaolin monks. Assuming that the Shaolin

monks would become politically involved, they destroyed the temple, burning it to the ground.

At this time, the legend surrounding the development of the other five Shaolin Temples began. These temples were lo-

cated in Hopei (Wu Tang mountain), O-mei, Kwangtung, Fukien and Shan-Shi (Hua mountain) provinces. It is understandable that the founders of these temples would keep their existence silent, since the emperor attempted to destroy shaolin training in the north.

Each of those temples was unique in training and development. In fact, each created such a wealth of styles and training that the shaolin system stands alone in its diversity and richness within the martial arts. Within the Honan Temple such styles as black tiger, monkey, praying mantis, ground dragon and eight immortals boxing were developed. Each style consisted of numerous forms and included special methods of body conditioning.

Also within the Honan Temple, weapons such as the spear, staff, straight-edge sword, broadsword, three-sectional staff and chain whip were introduced. Each had numerous training forms. At the Hopei Temple, the shaolin inherited such styles as tai chi chuan (developed by Chang San-Feng, a skilled shaolin master), pa kua chang and hsing-i chuan and tai chi sword.

Within the temple at O-Mei Mountain, the styles of white crane, eagle claw and white swan were developed and practiced. The temple in Kwang Tung province is where the style of tiger crane and the fist of the cha fighting system arose. The Fukien Temple, the second most legendary of the Shaolin Temples, was known for the development of iron-bone training, white monkey style and short-distance fighting techniques, such as wing chun.

At the last temple, located at Hua Mountain (Shan-Shi province), styles such as chang chuan, fist of hua and iron shin/palm training were developed. This list of fighting styles and the accompanying methods of training developed within the various Shaolin Temples is not meant to be comprehensive, but instead serves to illustrate the richness and diversity which now exists after 1,500 years of development within the shaolin system.

During Chang Kai Shek's Northern Expedition into China from 1927-28 and the subsequent Communist takeover, the last remaining Shaolin Temple at Fukien was burned, and only a very few of its legendary Shaolin monks survived to flee China and seek refuge in other areas of Asia. One of these monks was Le Chang Ming, who trained in the Fukien Temple until its destruction. He taught the art of shaolin kung fu to the current chief instructor, Sin Kwang The, who traveled to the west to offer instruction to dedicated students.

# Shaolin Kung Fu



David demonstrates a traditional posture with a straight sword. To expertly execute such a position takes many hours of practice.



In a traditional high stance with a spear, Sharon shows the balance and readiness that is part of every well-trained shaolin martial artist.

## Thorough Training

Within the shaolin system, the learning of forms and weapons would be incomplete without intensive internal and external training as students advance from one level and area of study to the next. The students train in these classes to develop the strength, sensitivity, coordination and skill required to perform each of the areas of study with great proficiency. Classes vary from breathing and meditation, to chi and its utilization. Students also intensively free spar to develop skill and application when facing other styles of martial arts.

Within China, there is a well-known saying about those who study the martial arts, but only imitate the forms instead of developing the actual skill and ability necessary to master the art: Flowery arms and embroidered legs. Intensive training and conditioning, both internally and externally, is the essence of the true spirit and skill of legendary shaolin kung fu. ●

*About the Authors: Sharon and David Soard run the Chinese Shao-Lin Center for Martial Arts in Denver, Colorado. This is their first contribution to KKL.*